

THE PROPHET'S VISIONS IN SŪRAT AL-NAJM*

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Abstract

The opening verse of Q al-Najm 53, an oath by “the star” (*najm*) and its movement in the night sky, is followed by a relatively lengthy description of two vision experiences of the Prophet. This study aims to better understand the opening oath in the *sūrah* and its relationship to the subsequent visions. I will argue on the basis of evidence from Safaitic inscriptions, the *anwā'* works, and pre-Islamic poetry that the oath by the star refers to the rising and setting of the Pleiades in the night sky, and that these allusions would have been readily understood by the Qur'ān's audience. The appearance and motion of the Pleiades serve to provide a visual analogy to the supernatural visions of the Prophet. Appreciating the relationship between the oath and the subsequent visions then allows us to better understand the visions themselves, and address questions such as whether the object of the vision was God or an angel.

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Introduction

Despite several passages in the Qurʾān exhibiting significant awareness of astronomical phenomena,¹ modern scholarship has not explored the possibility of reading the opening verse of Q al-Najm 53, “By the star (*waʾl-najm*) when it sets (*hawā*),”² as an astronomical event. A significant number of the earliest *mufasssīrūn* did hold that “the star” in the aforementioned verse refers to the Pleiades, which implies that they equated its setting as mentioned in the verse with the night setting of the asterism, but they offered little justification for their view, and did not expand upon what the significance of the Pleiades here may be.³

In this essay, I will argue that *al-najm* does indeed refer to the Pleiades, and that the rest of the first section of Q 53 is a description of the motion of the Pleiades as an illustration of the Prophet’s encounter with an angelic being. In making these arguments, I will draw heavily upon the pre-Islamic poetry tradition⁴ and the corpus of Safaitic inscriptions. Following this introduction,

1. Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), 9, n. 52. He refers, among other passages, to the apparent reference to the retrograde motion of the planets in Q al-Takwīr 81:16, which was also recognized by the *mufasssīrūn*, e.g., Abū ʾl-Fidāʾ Ismāʾīl b. ʾUmar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʾaẓīm*, ed. Sāmī b. Muḥammad al-Salāmah, 2nd ed. (8 vols.; Riyadh: Dār Ṭaybah, 1420/1999), 8.336.

2. Alan Jones’ translation has been used throughout, though freely modified.

3. Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʾAbd Allāh b. ʾAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (26 vols.; Cairo: Dār Hajar, 1422/2001), 22.5–6.

4. I am working from the premise that this body of literature is, on the whole, authentic. On this issue, and the unfortunate neglect of this literature by Qurʾān scholars, see Thomas Bauer, “The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qurʾānic Studies Including Observations on *Kull* and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:31,” in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 699–732, 701–702; Nicolai Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler: Allāh in Pre-Quranic Poetry* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2019), 2–3. See also the review of the latter, Ilkka Lindstedt, “Nicolai Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler: Allāh in Pre-Quranic Poetry*,” *Review of Qurʾānic Research* 6.5 (2020). There is of course the perennial risk of forgery and late interpolation even within a body of generally sound literature. The risk in this case is minimal. As will be seen, the Safaitic inscription record strongly corroborates the evidence from pre-Islamic poetry regarding the state of astronomical lore in Arabia before Islam. Furthermore, far from being forged to provide evidence for some legal, doctrinal, or historical point, the collectors of pre-Islamic star lore in the *anwāʾ* works (see below) tried unsuccessfully to present the philological evidence as pointing to a lunar zodiac system (which latter was in fact an ʾAbbāsīd era borrowing from Hindu civilisation). It would be odd indeed for the deliberately forged philological evidence to fail even superficially to support the thesis for which it was supposedly

I will present some key astronomical concepts that have to be grasped to follow the argument of the present essay, including the state of astronomical lore in Arabia prior to Islam. I will then try to establish that *al-najm* does indeed refer to the Pleiades, and that the reference to its motion in Q 53:1 is to well-defined astronomical phenomena. After this admittedly rather lengthy preamble, we will finally be in a position to see how the opening oath relates to the two visions of the Prophet that the *sūrah* records in vv. 5–18. I will engage with this and several other issues that have exercised interpreters of this passage, medieval and modern, in a verse-by-verse analysis. The question of whether the object of the Prophet's vision in these verses was an angel or God merits a somewhat lengthy discussion, and I will offer my reasons for holding the former opinion in a separate section before the conclusion.

A terminological disclaimer before we commence: I use the term “Arabs” throughout this essay, such as in the phrase “pre-Islamic Arabs,” as a loose but convenient shorthand for the Arabic-speaking dwellers of the Arabian Peninsula within whose broad cultural and linguistic milieu the Qurʾān was proclaimed, without making any claim as to their conscious self-identification as “Arabs” or imagined ethnic unity. Although I do claim that we can know something of the state of pre-Islamic astral lore among these Arabic-speakers, and that this knowledge must have been common and shared *enough* for it to have been employed with a certain degree of uniformity in pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾān, the debate surrounding issues of self-identity and ethnicity are not pertinent to the present study.⁵ (But see below for recent evidence from Safaitic inscriptions that supports the claim of a pan-Arab self-identity among the tribes of Arabia that stretches back several millennia before the rise of Islam.)

The opening verses of the Sūrat al-Najm are given below:

forged. Far more likely is that the evidence is genuine and the conclusions drawn from it are false. On this, see Daniel Martin Varisco, “The Rain Periods in Pre-Islamic Arabia,” *Arabica* 34 (1987): 251–266, 253; idem, “The Origin of the *anwāʾ* in Arab Tradition,” *SI* 74 (1991): 5–28; idem, “Islamic Folk Astronomy,” in Helaine Selin (ed.), *Astronomy Across Cultures: The History of Non-Western Astronomy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 615–649, 622, 624–625. For the history of scholarship on the *anwāʾ*, see Danielle Kira Adams, “Rain Stars Set, Lunar Stations Rise: Multivalent Textures of Pre-Islamic Arabian Astronomy and the Hegemonic Discourse of Order” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 2018), 28, 226, 223–238.

5. For two recent and opposing views on the degree to which a pre-Islamic Arab identity had been formulated and was shared by the various tribes dwelling in the Arabian Peninsula, see Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

- ¹ By the star when it sets/rises,
² Your comrade has not gone astray, and nor has he erred,
³ and nor does he speak out of caprice.
⁴ This is simply a revelation that is being revealed.
⁵ One great in power taught him,
^{6a} possessed of strength.
^{6b} He was level,
⁷ he was on the highest horizon.
⁸ Then he drew near and came down,
⁹ [till] he was two bows' length away or even nearer;
¹⁰ then He revealed to His servant what He revealed.
¹¹ His heart has not lied⁶ [about] what he⁷ saw.

6. Overwhelmingly, as al-Ṭabarī notes, the skeletal text *k-dh-b* in v. 11 is vocalized by the *qurrāʾ* according to the G-stem, *kadhaba* (“to lie”), and only a few reciters use the D-stem, *kadhhaba* (“to deny”). Al-Ṭabarī, *Ḥāmiʿ al-bayān*, 22.26–27. Of the seven canonical recitations, only Hishām ʿan Ibn ʿAmir has *kadhhaba*, while the rest, including Ibn Dhakwān ʿan Ibn ʿAmir, have *kadhaba*. Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Mūsā Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-Sabʿah fī ʾl-qirāʾāt*, ed. Shawqī Ḍayf (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1972), 614, and Abū ʿAmr ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-Dānī, *al-Taysīr fī ʾl-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ*, ed. Otto Pretzl (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1404/1984), 204. Beyond the seven canonical *qirāʾāt*, the *kadhhaba* variant is also reported from Abū Jaʿfar (one of the ten canonical reciters) and other reciters whose readings came to be considered *shādhah*, or non-canonical. See Abū ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Khālawayh, *Mukhtaṣar fī shawādhidh al-Qurʾān min kitāb al-badīʿ*, ed. Gotthelf Bergsträsser (Cairo: Maktabat al-Mutanabbī, 1968), 147. The manuscript evidence is more difficult to utilize, as the *shaddah* is not marked by a distinct diacritic in the earliest manuscripts, making it near impossible to determine whether the script should be read as *kadhaba* or *kadhhaba*. Al-Dānī, however, does note that a letter that has a *shaddah* may be marked by giving it its own appropriate vowel sign. Abū ʿAmr ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-Dānī, *al-Muḥkam fī naqṭ al-maṣāḥif*, ed. ʿIzzah Ḥasan, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Muʿāṣir, 1418/1997), 49. This at first sight seems unhelpful, but when one notes the paucity of vowel signs in early Qurʾān manuscripts, al-Dānī’s observation becomes clear: on the rare occasion one does see a vowel sign on a letter, it *may* be there to indicate that the letter also has a *shaddah*. Bearing this in mind, four of the eight manuscripts listed on the *Corpus Coranicum* website are marked with a dot above the *dh* of *k-dh-b* in v. 11, which represents a *fathah* vowel, and could indicate that it is to be read with a *shaddah*: Saray Medina 1a (= Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi: M 1), BNF Arabe 331, BNF Arabe 346 (a), and Rampur Raza Library: No. 1. However, it seems to me that all four are sufficiently well vocalized for it to be very difficult to conclude that the *fathah* vowel is indicative of a *shaddah*. The dot above the *dh* in BNF Arabe 346 (a) is in any case blurred. An inspection of the page it would have been folded with reveals that the dot may have been transferred through being smudged from the folded page. The manuscript evidence is thus inconclusive. I am grateful to Marijn van Putten for his extensive help with all of these issues.

7. There is some uncertainty in *tafsīrs*, modern translations, and scholarly analyses

¹² Will you dispute with him about what he sees?

¹³ Indeed, he saw him on another descent,

¹⁴ by the *sidr* tree of the boundary,

¹⁵ by it is the garden of refuge.

¹⁶ When the *sidr* tree was overcome by some covering,

¹⁷ his eye did not swerve nor transgress.

¹⁸ Indeed, he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord.

As astute readers will have noticed, I have left the translation of the first verse open: “By the star when it sets/rises (*hawā*).” Although *hawā* in v. 1 is universally translated as “sets” or “goes down,” it is in fact one of the *addād*, or Arabic words that carry antonymous significations; it means both “to go down” and “to go up.” This has long been recognized by Arabic lexicographers; *hawā* is listed in the earliest extant work on the *addād* by Quṭrub (d. 206/821).⁸

of this passage regarding whether the subject of the verb *raʾā* is “it (= the heart)” or “he (= the Prophet).” Thus, for example, Muqātil is clear that the subject is the Prophet himself (or, to be more precise, his *baṣar*, “eyesight”), whereas the narrations in al-Ṭabarī support the subject being the heart. Muqātil’s reading would support a physical vision, whereas al-Ṭabarī’s would make it, for want of a better word, spiritual. See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 22.21–27; Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān* (5 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002), 4.160. Even Muqātil, however, goes on to say regarding the second vision that the Prophet saw “with his heart (*bi-qalbihi*) once more,” so perhaps he does not take *baṣar* to be strictly physical sight after all. As the subsequent verses (12, 13, and 18) clearly suggest that it was the Prophet who “saw,” it seems preferable to make him the subject of the verb here too.

8. Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad b. al-Mustanīr Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-Addād* (Riyadh: Dār al-ʿIlm, 1405/1982), 120. He cites the hemistich: *faʿl-dakwu tahwī kaʿl-ʿuqābi ʿl-kāsirī*, “And the bucket *tahwī* like the wing-tilted (*kāsirī*) eagle,” and glosses *tahwī* (the imperfect of *hawā*) as *taṣʿadu*, “rises.” This is repeated in several subsequent works on the *addād* as an example of *hawā* having the meaning of “rise,” e.g., Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim al-Anbārī (d. 328/940), *Kitāb al-Addād*, ed. Muḥammad Abū ʿl-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Sidon: al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, 1407/1986), 379; Abū ʿl-Ṭayyib ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. ʿAlī al-Lughawī al-Ḥalabī (d. 351/962), *al-Addād fī kalām al-ʿArab*, ed. ʿIzzah Ḥasan, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dār Ṭilās, 1996), 424. Unfortunately, neither Quṭrub nor his successors who quote him provide any information about the origin of the hemistich. Additionally, “wing-tilted” (*kāsirī*) does not have to mean that the eagle is ascending—it can just as easily mean that it is descending. See Edward W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (8 vols.; Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), 7.2612, “*kāsirī*,” s.v. More compelling evidence is provided by Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī (d. 255/869), who cites Abū Zayd (d. 215/830)—a linguist who spent time with the Bedouin and recorded philological data from them (see Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition: From the 2nd/8th to the 12th/18th Century* [Brill: Leiden, 2014], 17)—on the authority of some Bedouin from the Banū Kilāb: *waʿl-dakwu fī itrāʾihā ʿajlā ʿl-huwīyyī*, “And the bucket when it is filled is quick to rise.” See Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī (d. 255/869), *Kitāb al-Addād*, in *Thalāthah kutub: al-*

The significance of this ambiguity will become apparent as we proceed. For now, note that we have an ambiguous oath, carrying two possible interpretations, followed by two visions. As Bint al-Shāṭi' and Angelika Neuwirth have argued, oaths in the Meccan *sūrah*s present observable phenomena as evocative illustrations of a supernatural reality.⁹ Both of them show, for instance, how the opening oath series in Q al-Ādiyāt 100 depicts a dawn raid (vv. 1–5), which by the end of the *sūrah* is transformed to an eschatological upheaval, with the entire cosmos rather than a desert settlement as the object of the divine attack (vv. 9–11). Bint al-Shāṭi' summarizes this progression: “This violent scene after the *waw* oath particle draws attention to what people were familiar with: the sudden dawn raids, and the dispersal, confusion, and piling up that they occasioned. Then comes an unwitnessed scene, which is nonetheless certain to happen: the resurrection suddenly occurs, without expectation, and they are in a state of confusion, dispersal, and piling up.”¹⁰ In other words, in literary terms, we have here an analogy.

Now, it is certainly a tall order to show that the two visions in Q 53, described over thirteen verses (vv. 5–18), are portrayed in the short opening oath, consisting of just four words. I will nonetheless argue that this is indeed the case.¹¹ A significant core of the analysis presented in this essay (namely,

Adḍād li'l-ʿAṣma ʿi wa-li'l-Sijistāni wa-li'ʿBni 'l-Sikkīl (Beirut: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Kāthūlikiyyah li'l-Ābāʾi 'l-Yasūʿiyyīn, 1912), 100–101. However, al-Sijistāni adds that the meaning of ascent is used only in relation to well-buckets. Note Q 53:8, “Then he drew near and came down (*tadallā*),” where the phrase “came down” translates the Arabic *tadallā*, which is from the same root as “well-bucket” (*ḍalw*), and literally means “to be lowered (said of a bucket).” If al-Sijistāni is correct, the *sūrah* may be actuating by its use of *tadallā* the meaning of “rise” in the verb *hawā*. The (otherwise) odd image of the lowering bucket has been noted by Patricia Crone, “Problems in Sura 53,” *BSOAS* 78 (2015): 15–23, 17. But see below for a more plausible explanation of the use of the verb.

9. ʿĀʾishah ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Iḥzāz al-bayānī li'l-Qurʾān wa-masāʾil Ibn al-Azraq: Dirāsah qurʾāniyyah lughawīyyah wa-bayāniyyah*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), 247–252; M. Zakī Ibrahim, “Oaths in the Qurʾān: Bint Al-Shāṭiʿ’s Literary Contribution,” *IS* 48 (2009), 475–498, esp. 488; Angelika Neuwirth, “Images and Metaphors in the Introductory Sections of the Makkan Sūras,” in G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qurʾān* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 3–36, 5–12.

10. ʿĀʾishah ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, *al-Taḥṣīr al-bayānī li'l-Qurʾān al-karīm*, 7th ed. (2 vols.; Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), 103; see also *ibid.*, 119–120. Neuwirth reaches a similar conclusion in “Images and Metaphors,” 6.

11. Several alternative suggestions regarding the significance of the Q 53 opening oath have been made. Nicolai Sinai proposes that it recalls the chronologically earlier, more detailed oath series in the parallel passage in Q al-Takwīr 81:15–25 (considered below), although he refrains from speculating what the connection between the oath

the connection of the oath to the first vision) is based on the early twentieth-century Indian exegete Ḥamīd al-Dīn (penname: ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd) al-Farāhī’s (d. 1930) marginal notes on the Qur’ān, posthumously published in two volumes as *Ta’līqāt fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-karīm*.¹² The *Ta’līqāt* are essentially al-Farāhī’s working notes, and as such it would be unfair to deem anything therein to be his considered opinion. Nonetheless, I have frequently found them to be a valuable source of ideas about the Qur’ān, and hope that the current essay will encourage their more widespread consideration among modern scholars.

Key Astronomical Concepts

Before commencing, some basic astronomical terms and concepts must be grasped. Like the sun, stars also rise in the east and set in the west. Their

series in the latter passage and the subsequent vision might be. “An Interpretation of Sūrat al-Najm (Q. 53),” *JQS* 13.2 (2011): 1–28, 13–14. Angelika Neuwirth suggests that the cosmic phenomena point to a liturgical time, namely, the time for keeping vigils, such as is the case with oaths in other Meccan *sūrah*s. *Der Koran*, vol. 1, *Frühmekkanische Suren* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 651. Nora Schmid notes the direct or indirect connection to eschatology in early Meccan oaths. “Oaths in the Qur’an: A Structural Marker under the Impact of Knowledge Change,” in Marianna Klar (ed.), *Structural Dividers in the Qur’an* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 143–180. Bint al-Shāṭi’, in line with her innovative manner of reading the oaths as sensory illustrations of the unseen reality expressed by the subsequent oath statement (*muṣam bihi*), detects in the descent of the star in v. 1 an illustration of the descent of revelation from God to the Prophet. *Al-Ijāz al-bayānī*, 250. This is fairly close to the view that will be argued for in the present essay. Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī, following his teacher al-Farāhī’s understanding of oaths elsewhere in the Qur’ān as providing evidence for the oath statement that follows them, sees the oath by the falling star as an indication of the latter’s subjection to God’s will, and therefore the evident falsehood of ascribing the Prophet’s divine revelation to the stars, as if he were a common *kāhīn* (“soothsayer”). *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān* (9 vols.; Lahore: Fārān Foundation, 2009), 7.51–51. See also Mustansir Mir, “The Qur’ānic Oaths: Farāhī’s Interpretation,” *IS* 29 (1990): 5–27, 19. As Mir explains, Iṣlāhī attempted to apply al-Farāhī’s theory to those cases that al-Farāhī himself did not directly examine. In fact, however, al-Farāhī does consider this oath in his personal notes on the Qur’ān, posthumously published as his *Ta’līqāt*; see note below.

12. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Farāhī, *Ta’līqāt fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-karīm* (2 vols.; Azamgarh: Dā’irah Ḥamīdiyyah, 2010), 2.295–307. Following his migration to the newly created state of Pakistan, Iṣlāhī obtained all of al-Farāhī’s unpublished notes to aid him in his *tafsīr*. This included two *muṣḥafs* in which al-Farāhī had made copious hand-written notes (which therefore appear to have been what would later be published as the *Ta’līqāt*). See Sharaf al-Dīn Iṣlāhī, *Dikr-i Farāhī* (Lahore: Dār al-Tadhkīr, 2002), 580. In my sporadic reading of *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān* alongside the *Ta’līqāt*, however, it seems that the marginal notes were not utilized at all.

angular elevation from the horizon is a measure of how high they appear in the night sky. As they cross, or “transit” the imaginary north-south line across the sky, called the meridian, they are at the highest point they will reach in their path. The point directly above the observer is called the zenith (i.e., an angular elevation of ninety degrees above the horizon). Not every star’s path will take it through the zenith, however; the highest point a particular star reaches in its path, as it transits the meridian, might still be relatively low on the horizon.

Because of the rotation of the earth around the sun, the time at which any given star rises and sets will gradually change throughout the year—it will rise about four minutes earlier every day.¹³ For those times of the year that a given star rises during daylight hours, we will of course not be able to see it rising above the eastern horizon, and at nightfall we will observe it as already at some angular elevation, or, if its position in the sky is too close to the sun, we will not see it at all for that part of the year.

Heliacal rising refers to a star’s rising from the east just before sunrise. (More technically, it is the first time in the year the star rises in the east just before sunrise.) Therefore, it is visible only briefly before the dawn light obliterates the stars. Conversely, **heliacal setting** refers to a star’s setting in the west just after sunset. In other words, it will set almost as soon as it appears in the night sky, at the beginning of the night. (Again, technically, it is the last time in the year the star thus sets.) **Acronical rising** refers to a star’s rising in the east just as the sun sets in the west; as the sun goes down, the star comes up. Finally, **cosmical setting** is a star’s setting in the west just as the sun rises in the east; as the sun comes up, the star goes down.¹⁴ To facilitate recalling these terms and their signification, note that the adjective “heliacal,” derived from the Greek *hēlios* (“sun”), means “relating to or near the sun.” Heliacal rising and setting, therefore, refer to a star being visibly close to the sun, rising just before it in the former case, or setting just after it in the latter. Similarly, “acronical,” derived from the Greek *akronychos* (“at nightfall”), refers to the position and motion of a star at dusk.

These risings and settings will happen at almost the exact same time every year for any given star, with imperceptible changes from one year to the next noticeable only over the scale of centuries. Therefore, they can be used to refer to particular seasons. For example, in seventh century Western Arabia, Sirius would have had a heliacal rising in mid-July, making this event a good indicator of the beginning of the hottest part of the year.

13. For a more detailed explanation, see Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 65.

14. There is considerable confusion over these terms, as astronomers do not use them consistently. See David H. Kelley and Eugene F. Milone, *Exploring Ancient Skies: A Survey of Ancient and Cultural Astronomy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer, 2011), 40.

Al-Najm

We must begin by establishing whether the “star” of the opening oath in Q 53 does indeed refer to the Pleiades. Such a use of this epithet is in fact widely cited in early Islamic literature. Of the four reports with chains of transmission recorded by al-Ṭabarī regarding the meaning of *al-najm* in Q 53:1, three opine that it means the Pleiades, and one that it refers to the descent of the Qurʾān. Al-Ṭabarī himself sides with the former view, as “the Arabs call it [the Pleiades] *al-najm*.”¹⁵ The lexicons, starting with the very earliest, *Kiṭāb al-ʿayn*, record this meaning for *al-najm* too,¹⁶ and in various *ḥadīths* it is also clear that *al-najm* means the Pleiades.¹⁷ We will not dwell on these genres. Instead, in this section I will mainly consider the *anwāʾ* works and pre- and early Islamic poetry not found in the *anwāʾ* literature. I will also show that Safaitic inscriptions use the cognate of Arabic *najm* to refer to the Pleiades too.

The most important source of pre-Islamic astral lore are the *anwāʾ* (singular, *nawʾ*) works. Our knowledge of the state of the pre-Islamic astronomical system employed by the dwellers of Arabia is based almost entirely on this genre of books,¹⁸ which record poetry and rhymed sayings (*ṣajʿ*) of the pre- and early Islamic Arabs regarding the night sky. The term *nawʾ* in these collected verses and sayings refers, according to the authors of these works, to the heliacal rising of any one of the several stars considered particularly significant to the pre-Islamic Arabs, along with the simultaneous cosmical setting of its counterpart (i.e., a pair of rising and setting stars just before dawn).¹⁹ The

15. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 22.5–6. Al-Ṭabarī also records a third opinion, that *najm* here is a collective noun meaning “stars” generally (ibid., 22.7), which he attributes to some knowledgeable people of Basra, but he does not provide an *isnād*, and comments that none of the people of *taʾwīl*, i.e., the expert exegetes, hold this opinion.

16. Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kiṭāb al-ʿAyn*, ed. Maḥdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrahīm al-Sāmarrāʾī (8 vols.; Beirut: Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, n.d), 6.154, “*n-j-m...*,” s.v.

17. For example, see Aḥmad b. Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, ed. Shuʿayb al-ʿArnaʿūṭ et al. (50 vols.; Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risālah, 1413–1421/1993–2001), 9.55, n. 2, where the editor provides *ḥadīth* evidence both for the use of *al-najm* to mean the Pleiades, and for references to its heliacal rising to mark calendrical events (see the following section).

18. For an introduction to the genre and its major works, see Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 30–42; Varisco, “The Origin of the *anwāʾ*,” 6, n. 3; Charles Pellat, “Anwāʾ,” *EF*, s.v. (1960).

19. Pellat, “Anwāʾ.” In fact, although this view is repeated across the *anwāʾ* genre, the philological evidence suggests that one is more important than the other. Until recently, it was heliacal rising that was considered more significant than cosmical setting for determining which star is a *nawʾ*. See Pellat, “Anwāʾ”; Varisco, “The Rain

most significant of the *anwāʾ* were the Pleiades, which the earliest *anwāʾ* works already concur were referred to simply as *al-najm*, “the star.”²⁰ We should note that although there is widespread suspicion among Qurʾān scholars regarding the reliability of reports in early Islamic literature pertaining to the pre- and formative-Islamic eras, specialists of the *anwāʾ* genre voice no concerns over the broad reliability of these works as representing the state of pre-Islamic knowledge and mythology of the stars,²¹ and certainly no doubt that *al-najm* was routinely used to refer to the Pleiades.

The *anwāʾ* works are by no means exhaustive when it comes to recording the astral lore of the pre-Islamic Arabs. There remain many references to astronomic phenomena in the diwans of the pre- and early Islamic poets that have, to my knowledge, not been given much attention in modern studies of the pre-Islamic astronomical tradition. This is not the place to work through this corpus in any systematic manner, and a few examples may suffice. The purpose of this brief investigation is to provide some independent support for the claims made in the *anwāʾ* works through evidence that the latter do not consider.

There are several verses of poetry in which *al-najm* is given as one in a list of asterisms, indicating that it itself refers to a specific asterism. It is never listed alongside *al-thurayyā*, the proper name for the Pleiades, which is consistent with *al-najm* being an antonomastic designation for the same asterism. For instance, consider these two pre-Islamic couplets:

jāda ʾl-samā kāna bi-qurbānihī
biʾl-najmi waʾl-nathri waʾl-ʾaqrabī
 The sky was beautified by his nearness,

Periods in Pre-Islamic Arabia,” 252; idem, “Islamic Folk Astronomy,” 622. However, Adams has presented an alternative thesis that cosmical setting is the more important. “Rain Stars Set,” 29, 202–212. For our purpose, we do not need to settle the debate, as apart from the *anwāʾ* system, which was used to determine when rain might fall, the Arabs also had a calendrical use for the night sky, in which they referred much more freely to various risings and settings, as we will see below.

20. Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 105–107.

21. The same might be said of pre-Islamic poetry. While Qurʾān scholars all too often summarily dismiss this corpus, specialists in the field are frequently far more confident of being able to derive an understanding of the state of pre-Islamic Arabia from the poetry. See James E. Montgomery, “The Empty Hijāz,” in James E. Montgomery (ed.), *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy: From the Many to the One: Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006) 37–97, 58, 77; Nadia Jamil, *Ethics and Poetry in Sixth-Century Arabia* (Havertown: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2017), 32, 81–82. See also n. 4 above.

with the *najm*, the Sneeze (= Asellus Borealis, Asellus Australis, and Praesepe),²² and the Scorpion.²³

la-ṣaḥawta wa'l-namriyyu yaḥsibuhā
amma 'l-simāki wa-khālata 'l-najmī

Then you would sober up, but the man of Namir thinks her
the uncle of the Sky-Raiser (= Spica/Arcturus) or the aunt of the *najm*.²⁴

In the following verses by the pre-Islamic poet Abū 'Adī al-Namrī, the Pleiades are referred to as *najm al-thurayyā*, literally “the star of the Pleiades.” We do not find the locution, “star of...” for any of the other asterisms associated with the *anwā'*, as far as I have been able to determine. This supports reading “Pleiades” in the phrase “star of the Pleiades” as pleonastic.

idhā 'qallati 'l-qfawāhu wa'stamkana 'l-karā
wa-ḥāna min najmi 'l-thurayyā khufūquhā

When mouths cease to chatter, and sleep overpowers,
and the time has come for the setting of the star of the Pleiades.²⁵

Some verses give an indication as to where this *najm* is located. Thus, the poet 'Abd Allāh b. Subrah al-Ḥurashī (a contemporary of the Prophet according to Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, albeit one who did not himself see the Prophet²⁶) has the following:

idhā shālati 'l-jawzā'u wa'l-najmu ṭāli'un
fa-kullu makhādātī 'l-furātī ma'ābirū

22. Throughout, identification of specific asterisms is based on Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” Appendix: Star Catalog.

23. Al-Aswad b. Ya'fur (d. c. 600 CE), *Dīwān al-Aswad b. Yā'fur*, ed. Nūrī Ḥamūdī al-Qaysī (n.p.: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa'l-'Ālam, n.d.), 23.

24. Attributed to 'Abd al-Masīḥ b. 'Asalah (d. 592 CE?) in al-Mufaḍḍal b. Muḥammad b. Ya'lā al-Ḍabbī, *Al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt: An Anthology of Ancient Arabian Odes*, vol. 1, *Arabic Text*, ed. Charles James Lyall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918), 556. Translation adapted from idem, *Al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt: An Anthology of Ancient Arabian Odes*, vol. 2, *Translation and Notes*, ed. and trans. Charles James Lyall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918), 220.

25. Collected in Muḥammad b. al-Mubārak b. Muḥammad b. Maymūn, *Muntahā 'l-ṭalab fī ash'ar al-'Arab* (9 vols.; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1999), 9.91. I am grateful to Raymond Farrin for assisting me with the translation of this couplet.

26. Abū 'l-Ḥaḍl Aḥmad b. 'Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Iṣābah fī tamyiz al-ṣaḥābah* (8 vols.; Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah), 5.69.

When al-Jawzā' (= Orion's Belt)²⁷ is elevated and the *najm* is rising, so every ford of the Euphrates is a crossing point.²⁸

The poet connects the rising of Orion's Belt with the rising of the *najm*. This again is consistent with the *najm* being the Pleiades, as the cluster is relatively close to Orion's Belt in the night sky. They are separated by an angular separation of approximately thirty-five degrees (out of a maximum of 180 degrees), which means that Orion's Belt rises around two-and-a-half hours after the Pleiades. It will take another four hours for the Pleiades cluster to reach its highest point in the night sky, so it is still rising as Orion becomes visible.

Finally, let us consider evidence from Safaitic inscriptions. These are rock inscriptions found almost exclusively in the Ḥarrah, the basalt desert stretching from southern Syria, through northern Jordan, and just into northern Saudi Arabia.²⁹ Although scholarly articles frequently introduce the inscriptions as dating from the first to the fourth century CE, Ahmad Al-Jallad has strongly cautioned against placing too much store by this upper or lower date limit.³⁰ Once thought to be entirely distinct from qur'ānic Arabic, there is now recognition that in fact the language of the inscriptions is a form of Old Arabic.³¹ Furthermore, recent findings support the notion that the community that left these inscriptions considered itself to be part of a broader Arab ethnicity.³² Therefore, although located significantly to the north of the Ḥijāz, and possibly written centuries before the rise of Islam (although this is difficult to ascertain), they are a witness to the cultural practices of peoples who seemingly self-identify as part of a pan-tribal Arab identity and spoke a

27. For the identification of al-Jawzā' with Orion's Belt, see n. 22 above, and Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 232, n. 87. In fact, there is some uncertainty regarding the identity of some named pre-Islamic asterisms, including al-Jawzā'. See Varisco, "The Rain Periods in Pre-Islamic Arabia," 255. This uncertainty is not significant enough to invalidate any of the arguments presented here.

28. Collected in Abū Tammām Ḥabīb b. Aws al-Ṭā'ī, *al-Ḥamāsah*, ed. 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Raḥīm 'Usaylān (2 vols.; [Riyadh]: Jāmi'at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Su'ūd al-Islāmiyyah, 1401/1981), 1.259, no. 164.

29. Ahmad Al-Jallad, "Safaitic," in John Huehnergard and Na'ama Pat-El (eds.), *The Semitic Languages*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 342–366, 342.

30. *Ibid.*, 342–344; *idem*, "The Linguistic Landscape of Pre-Islamic Arabia: Context for the Qur'an," in Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 112–127, 113.

31. Al-Jallad, "Safaitic," 343.

32. Ahmad Al-Jallad, "Arab, *Aḥāb*, and Arabic in Ancient North Arabia: The First Attestation of (?) *ḥb* as a Group Name in Safaitic," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 31 (2020): 422–435.

variety of Old Arabic. As Macdonald has argued, what this identity entailed is difficult to delineate, but it would almost certainly have included a common language and elements of a common culture.³³ We may then cautiously utilize this epigraphic material at least as supporting evidence for the cultural background to the Qur'ān.

The inscriptions foreshadow the pre-Islamic tradition insofar as they exhibit an interest in heliacal and acronical rising, and, as I will argue, they use a cognate of the Arabic *al-najm* for the Pleiades, namely *h-ngm*. In two recent articles, Al-Jallad has demonstrated the use of the zodiacal system in the Safaitic inscriptions.³⁴ He found that nearly all the well-known signs of the Zodiac appear at least once in the inscriptions. He acknowledges, however, some uncertainty regarding his identification of Virgo as *h-ngm*. Most scholars have held this to be a reference to the Pleiades, which would give us an antonomastic use of the word “star” exactly parallel to Arabic.³⁵ He nonetheless prefers the Virgo identification, because two inscriptions use the phrase *b-h-ngm*, “while in the *ngm*,” which in other inscriptions is the standard way of referring to the sun being in a particular sign of the zodiac, suggesting that the *ngm* is one of the signs of the zodiac too. He then uses one of the possible significations of the Arabic root *n-j-m*, namely the emergence of plants, to suggest a connection between Safaitic *ngm* and the depiction of Virgo using a sheaf of corn in Greek and various ancient Near Eastern zodiacal systems.³⁶

This seems a little strained. Furthermore, there are several problems with the Virgo identification which could be resolved if we took Safaitic *ngm* to refer to the Pleiades instead. First, one of the inscriptions refers to snowfall at the time of *ngm* rising (HaNSB 218). As Safaitic inscriptions consistently show an interest in heliacal and acronical rising, the reference to rising in the inscription must be to one of these two events. For Virgo, neither of these is in the winter, making the association with snow puzzling.³⁷ For the Pleiades, on the other hand, its acronical rising is in late October, when snow is more likely. Second, in some of the inscriptions the name of the asterism has the definite article *h-* before it,³⁸ which is not found with any of the other signs

33. M. C. A. Macdonald, “Arabs, Arabias and Arabic before Late Antiquity,” *Topoi* 16 (2009): 277–332, 296–297.

34. Ahmad Al-Jallad, “An Ancient Arabian Zodiac: The Constellations in the Safaitic Inscriptions, Part I,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 25 (2014): 214–230; idem, “An Ancient Arabian Zodiac: The Constellations in the Safaitic Inscriptions, Part II,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 27 (2016): 84–106.

35. Al-Jallad, “An Ancient Arabian Zodiac I,” 222.

36. *Ibid.*, 222–223.

37. *Ibid.*, 223.

38. *Ibid.*

of the Zodiac, suggesting that this is something different—an antonomastic reference to the Pleiades as “*the star*” would again fit well with this data. Finally, given the importance of the Pleiades in general across the ancient Near East,³⁹ it would not be surprising for its solar conjunction, i.e., the sun being in the zone of the Pleiades, to be a matter of significance, just as the Pleiades is the only asterism for which a lunar conjunction is important in the *anwā*’tradition.⁴⁰

We should note finally that there is a separate term for the Pleiades in the Safaitic inscriptions, namely, *h- km* or *h- kmt*.⁴¹ Needless to say, that does not mean they could not have also been referred to by *h- ngm*. It seems Sagittarius also had two names, for instance.⁴² This also parallels there being two names given to the Pleiades in the language of the pre-Islamic Arabs:⁴³ the proper name *al-thurayyā* and the antonomastic *al-najm*, the latter reflecting the importance of the Pleiades in the astronomical system of the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula.⁴⁴

The Rising and Setting of the Pleiades

The purpose of the *anwā*’system was primarily to determine when to expect rainfall, and many of the *anwā*’were associated with rain rituals.⁴⁵ Indeed, several writers in the genre assert that a *naw*’star is only in fact called a *naw*’if it brings about the rain it is expected to occasion.⁴⁶ It is in this context that the system is mentioned disapprovingly in several Prophetic *ḥadīths*.⁴⁷

As mentioned above, there was also a calendrical use of the various risings and settings. Because any given star will undergo heliacal/acronical/cosmical

39. See Ahmad Al-Jallad, “The Seven Stars, Allāt from ‘mn and Dusares from Petra: A New Safaitic Astronomical Text” (draft, cited by kind permission of the author). See also n. 44 below.

40. Varisco, “The Origin of the *anwā*’,” 20.

41. Al-Jallad, “An Ancient Arabian Zodiac I,” 228 and Addendum.

42. Al-Jallad, “An Ancient Arabian Zodiac II,” 93.

43. In fact, there are many other epithets used for the Pleiades. See Varisco, “Islamic Folk Astronomy,” 631.

44. This accords with other ancient calendars, such as in Sumer-Akkad, where we also find the Pleiades referred to simply as “the star.” See Willy Hartner, “The Earliest History of the Constellations in the Near East and the Motif of the Lion-Bull Combat,” *JNES* 24 (1965): 1–16, 8.

45. Varisco, “The Origin of the *anwā*’,” 24–26; idem, “The Rain Periods in Pre-Islamic Arabia,” 251.

46. Varisco, “The Rain Periods in Pre-Islamic Arabia,” 252–253; idem, “Islamic Folk Astronomy,” 623; idem, “Anwā’,” *ET*³, s.v.

47. Varisco, “The Origin of the *anwā*’,” 22. See also n. 17 above.

rising and setting at specific times of the year, one could determine and refer to any given time of the year by recalling whichever star was rising or setting at dawn or dusk at that time. In fact, whereas for the *anwā'* system it was in particular heliacal rising and cosmical setting that were important,⁴⁸ for calendrical purposes one could use the position of any star at any time of the night—knowing those two variables is sufficient to determine a date range (the more precisely they are given, the narrower the range).⁴⁹

The Pleiades in particular were used with considerable versatility, as the following *saj'* triplet recorded by Quṭrub demonstrates:

idhā kānati 'l-thurayyā qimma 'l-ra ʔ, fā-laylatu fatan wa-fa ʔ.
wa-idhā kānati 'l-thurayyā bi-qabal, fā-laylatu natājin wa-jamal.
wa-idhā kānati 'l-thurayyā bi-dabar, fā-laylatu riḥin wa-matar.

When the Pleiades are at the top of the head, then it is the night of a boy and an adze.

When the Pleiades rise (with the sunset = acronical rising), then it is the night of an offspring and a camel.

When the Pleiades set (with the sunset = heliacal setting), then it is the night of wind and rain.⁵⁰

All three lines clearly depict the Pleiades at the beginning of the night, as the recurring phrase *fā-laylatu*, “then it is (going to be) a night of...,” indicates. Danielle Adams concludes from such citations in the *anwā'* works that “the evening appearances of al-Thurayyā in varying positions in the sky have associated pieces of rhymed prose that are unique to al-Thurayyā (as *al-thurayyā* or *al-najm*) among the sizable body of rhymed prose related to the stars.”⁵¹ As the first line from Quṭrub shows, this includes the appearance of the Pleiades at the zenith. In Arabia, the Pleiades pass almost directly through the zenith as they transit, reaching a minimum angular distance of around two degrees from the zenith as viewed from Mecca, and are thus virtually directly overhead for a period of time. The phrase “the night of a boy and an adze” in Quṭrub’s citation is glossed by him as “a night of gathering firewood (*iḥtūtāb*),” i.e., winter.⁵² This is congruent with the time when the Pleiades appear directly overhead in the evening: mid-January. References

48. See n. 19 above.

49. Adams provides a very lucid explanation of this. “Rain Stars Set,” 65–66.

50. Abū ‘Alī Muḥammad b. al-Mustanīr Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azminah wa-talbiyat al-jāhiliyyah*, ed. Ḥatīm Ṣāliḥ al-Dāmin, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1405/1985), 29. The translation of these lines is from Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 20.

51. Adams, “Rains Stars Set,” 200.

52. Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azminah*, 29.

to the zenith appearance of the Pleiades continue right through to Dhū al-Rummah (d. 117/735) in the Umayyad period.⁵³

As a general rule, we may say that in the absence of context “rising” refers to heliacal rising, and “setting” refers to cosmical setting (i.e., both at dawn), as these were the most commonly referred to events both for the purpose of the *anwāʾ* system and in the calendrical system,⁵⁴ but otherwise it is only the context that determines in what time of night the astral phenomenon described is situated (e.g., acronical rising and heliacal setting in Qutrūb’s final two lines above).⁵⁵ Additionally, although the various risings and settings describe the positions of the stars immediately after sunset or before sunrise, the Arabs might refer more generally to, e.g., a star rising from the east near the end of the night, though not necessarily immediately before sunrise,⁵⁶ or a star beginning to set at any time near the start of the night, though not necessarily immediately after sunset. We may refer to these phenomena as *extended* heliacal risings, settings, etc.⁵⁷ I will argue below that the ambiguity in the opening verse of Q 53 is deliberate, enabling a reference both to heliacal rising and *extended* heliacal setting.

We may use the verses cited earlier to illustrate both extended heliacal setting and rising. For an example of the former, consider again the lines from Abū ‘Adī al-Namrī:

*idhā ʾqallatī ʾl-afwāhu waʾstamkana ʾl-karā
wa-ḥāna min najmī ʾl-thurayyā khufūquhā*

When mouths cease to chatter, and sleep overpowers,
and the time has come for the setting of the star of the Pleiades.

The Pleiades have a heliacal setting for just a few days in the beginning of April. It seems unlikely that the poet is restricting his time reference to just those particular days, however. At sunset from mid-January until April the Pleiades appear at or just past the meridian, and thus begin to set immediately, in the first part of the night. This is their period of extended heliacal setting, which is a convenient way of referring to the winter nights. This seems to be the poet’s intent here.

53. Adams, “Rains Stars Set,” 66.

54. *Ibid.*, 195.

55. Al-Farāhī insists that when the pre-Islamic Arabs referred to the setting of an asterism, in particular the Pleiades, without providing context, it is the beginning of the night (i.e., heliacal setting) that is intended; *Tāʾlīqāt*, 2.306. We do not need to determine the correctness of that opinion for the present purpose.

56. In fact, even in the *anwāʾ* system, a star would remain a *nawʾ* for up to seven days, and thus not just at the very extremes of its rising or setting. See Pellat, “Anwāʾ.”

57. Adams, “Rains Stars Set,” 68.

‘Abd Allāh b. Subrah al-Ḥurashī’s verses provide an example of the use of extended heliacal rising:

idhā shālati ‘l-jawzā’u wa‘l-najmu ṭālī‘un

fa-kullu makhādāti ‘l-furāti ma ‘ābirū

When al-Jawzā’ (= Orion’s Belt) is elevated and the *najm* is rising,
so every ford of the Euphrates is a crossing point.

This is referring to the summer, when the heat causes the Euphrates to dry up. The rising of the *najm*—i.e., the Pleiades—cannot be a narrow reference to their heliacal rising, as they need to rise to about thirty-five degrees above the eastern horizon before Orion’s Belt becomes visible. Once we allow for flexibility in the heliacal rising system, however, we can see that the Pleiades and Orion’s Belt rise near dawn in the beginning of July, at the height of the summer.

It will be useful for the analysis that follows to note, as already mentioned above, that the pre-Islamic Arabs were interested in star pairs of risers and setters, i.e., which star was setting while another was rising. According to Ibn Qutaybah, it was the simultaneous heliacal rising and cosmical setting that determined star pairs, and either one of the pair could be referred to as the *naw’*, with its counterpart called the *raqīb*.⁵⁸ The *naw’-raqīb* pairings described by Ibn Qutaybah and others seem somewhat artificial, as there is limited philological evidence presented to support their systematic use. Indeed, al-Farāhī dismisses the traditional understanding altogether, and instead suggests that the *raqīb* was the star exhibiting a heliacal setting at the *start* of the night, when its *naw’* counterpart was undergoing a heliacal rising at the *end* of the night.⁵⁹ We need not settle the issue, except to note that star pairings, however they might have been established, do seem to have been an important concept, and one that, as we will see, is employed in Q.53.

As a final point, it appears that the heliacal rising of the Pleiades was also important to the pre-Islamic inhabitants of Arabia who left us the Safaitic inscriptions. Consider the three below:

58. Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Muslim Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī, *Kitāb al-anwā’ fī mawāsīm al-‘Arab* (Hyderabad: Dā’irat al-Ma’ārif al-‘Uthmāniyyah, 1956), 6, 10, 12, 109–111, 121; Pellat, “Anwā’.”

59. Al-Farāhī, *Ta’līqāt*, 2.306. On the very next page the editor of the *Ta’līqāt* cites a passage “from the exegeses” of al-Farāhī where the latter seems to support the more standard meaning of *raqīb*. This only serves to highlight that one must be careful not to deem any view in these working notes as al-Farāhī’s final position.

CSA 2.1

By Hmlk son of ʾlh son of S¹ny son of Hmlk son of Ḥrb and he pastured in the desert, {then} he returned to permanent water while the sun was in *h- ngm*, so, O Lt, may he be secure.

C 2572

By Khl son of Ḥml son of Ns²bt son of Ktm and he watched for *h- km*, so, O Lt, may he be secure.

2018 Wādī Ghuṣayn inscription⁶⁰

By Bnḥr son of Mʿz son of Zbd son of Rb and he pastured during (the heliacal rising) of the Seven Stars (= Pleiades) on the herbage following (the season of) abundance but he suffered misfortune and suspected the Evil Eye as he saw its evil and despaired so O Allāt, (who is) from ʿmn, and Dusares, (who is) from Raqmo (Petra), [grant] abundance that he may be secure from misfortune.

The phrase “while the sun was in *h- ngm*” (i.e., the Pleiades—see above) in CSA 2.1 means that the Pleiades were not visible because their location in the sky overlapped with that of the sun. This is the time just before their heliacal rising. The interpretation of the third inscription (without an assigned siglum) as referring to the Pleiades, and moreover to their heliacal rising, is discussed by Al-Jallad in a draft paper.⁶¹ It is possible that the phrase “and he watched for *h- km*” (= the Pleiades) in C 2572 also refers to heliacal rising, especially given the common ending to all the inscriptions, “O Lt, may he be secure,” but here we can only speculate. It does seem clear, however, that the pre-Islamic Arabs inherited not just the practice of calling the Pleiades “the star” from the Safaitic community that preceded them, but also the concern with its night-time appearances.⁶²

Sūrat al-Najm

We come finally to Sūrat al-Najm. I will proceed verse by verse. Much of this analysis is heavily reliant on the preceding discussion, but there are several additional issues that will be considered as we proceed.

60. The inscription lacks a siglum, as it was discovered after the compilation of the OCIANA database. It is discussed and translated in Al-Jallad, “The Seven Stars.”

61. See n. 39.

62. As with the antonomastic use of “the star” to refer to the Pleiades (see n. 44 above), the concern with heliacal and acronical risings and settings is broadly attested to in the ancient Near East. See Hartner, “The Earliest History of the Constellations,” 5–7.

¹ **By the star when it sets/rises (*wa'l-najmi idhā hawā*),**⁶³

Sūrat al-Najm as a whole clearly has an interest in astronomical phenomena. Verse 49 declares that God is the “Lord of Sirius (*al-shi'ra*),” the clearest reference to a specific star in the Qur’ān. The three goddesses denounced in vv. 19–20, al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā, and Manāt,⁶⁴ may have been linked to the worship of Venus.⁶⁵ Based on the analysis presented above, I think we are

63. Christoph Luxenberg’s alternative parsing of the opening two verses (with which Guillaume Dye has also expressed some sympathy), to make “your companion” in v. 2 the subject the verb *hawā* in v. 1, is unnecessary; the syntax of the opening verses as traditionally understood in Islamic and Western scholarship aligns with pre-Islamic Arab and Safaitic astronomical lore. We will further see how intimately this opening oath relates to the verses that follow. See Christoph Luxenberg, “*Al-Najm* (Q 53), Chapter of the Star: A New Syro-Aramaic Reading of Verses 1 to 18,” in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur’ān: The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context 2* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 279–297, 282–284; Mehdi Azaiez et al. (eds.), *The Qur’an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur’anic Passages* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 372. We may thus also reject Guillaume Dye’s view that the opening verse is a later addition to the *sūrah*, as part of the final redaction of the corpus, to make the opening of Q 53 (*wa'l-najm*) dovetail with the close of Q al-Ṭūr 52 (*idbāra 'l-nujūm*). Dye’s view is cited in Paul Neuenkirchen, “Sourate 53: Al-Najm,” in Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye (eds.), *Le Coran des Historiens* (3 vols.; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2019), 2b.1597–1615, 1599.

64. According to al-Zamakhsharī, the name of the pre-Islamic goddess Manāt, mentioned in Q 53:20, is derived from *naw*; Maḥmūd b. ‘Amr al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an haqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl* (4 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1427/2006), 4.319. If this were so, it would create an interesting connection between the second section of Q 53 (commencing at v. 19) and the astronomical phenomena that suffuse the first section.

65. Suleyman Dost, “An Arabian Qur’ān: Towards a Peninsular Theory of Origins” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2017), 40. Although the issue of the so-called Satanic Verses is beyond the scope of the present essay, I will note that by referring to al-Lāt, al-‘Uzzā, and Manāt as *gharānīq*, usually translated as “high-flying cranes” (although see Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017], 61–64, for other possible translations), the Satanic Verses break the astral associations that the three goddesses had. Hence, alongside the several scholarly studies that argue that the Satanic Verses do not fit the style or content of the rest of the *sūrah*, we may add that they would disrupt one of the *sūrah*’s central motifs. See Sinai, “An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm*,” 9–11; Sean Anthony, “The Satanic Verses in Early Shi’ite Literature: A Minority Report on Shahab Ahmed’s *Before Orthodoxy*,” *Shii Studies Review* 3 (2019): 215–252, 241–245; Carl W. Ernst, *How to Read the Qur’ān: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of Chapel Hill Press, 2011), 98–104. Shahab Ahmed, in his posthumously published study of the Satanic Verses incident, touches only briefly on the issue of historicity, and indicates the limitations of the oft-cited criterion of embarrassment for determining the historicity of the incident (i.e., the

entirely justified in siding with the majority of al-Ṭabarī's reporters in considering *al-najm* to be a reference to the Pleiades. Further, their setting and rising (as argued in the introduction, the opening verse is ambiguous)⁶⁶ must refer to astral phenomena of significance to the Arabs. The ambiguity is, I believe, deliberate. It recalls two entirely separate phenomena, a setting and a rising, that respectively underpin the first and second visions in the manner proposed by Bint al-Shāṭi' and Neuwirth.

Regarding the rising, we should take it as occurring at dawn, i.e., heliacal rising, this being the standard use of "rising" in the absence of any context, as argued above. As for the setting, recall that the phenomena depicted in *sūrah*-opening oaths are physical depictions, or analogies, of supernatural events subsequently described in the *sūrah*. As the visible phenomena depicted by the oath and the supernatural vision that follows are analogues of one another (recall the example of Q 100 above), a detail from one can clarify the other. We can thus use parts of the description of the subsequent vision in Q 53 to contextualize the astral movement depicted in the oath. We see in v. 7 that the object of the Prophet's vision—and therefore also the Pleiades, which depict this vision—was on "the highest horizon (*al-ufuqi 'l-a'lā*)"; cf. the phrase "top of the head (*qimma 'l-raʿs*)" in Quṭrub above, and see below for the additional evidence provided by v. 6b, "He was level." It seems to me that this must refer, just as in Quṭrub, to an evening appearance of the Pleiades, with the asterism becoming visible immediately at the zenith at sunset and beginning to decline—i.e., what I have termed an extended heliacal setting. The alternative, that this is a reference to an extended cosmical setting (i.e., the Pleiades passing the zenith and beginning to set in the latter part of the night), does not fit the image of the sudden appearance of the vision above the Prophet, as the Pleiades would have been visible and rising for some time before they reached the zenith and started to set.

² Your comrade (*sāhibukum*)⁶⁷ has not gone astray, and nor has he erred,

³ and nor does he speak out of caprice.

⁴ This is simply a revelation that is being revealed.

argument that it must have happened because Muslims would never have invented such a compromising episode in the Prophet's career). See Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 301.

66. Similar ambiguity is also part of the terminology found in the Safaitic inscriptions: *r'y* can refer to heliacal rising *or* acronical rising. Al-Jallad, "An Ancient Arabian Zodiac I," 217. See also Varisco, "The Origin of the *anwā*," 10–11.

67. I see no good reason to doubt that this is referring to the Prophet Muḥammad, *pace* the doubts raised in revisionist scholarship. See Crone, "Problems in Sura 53," 19–20.

⁵ **One great in power taught him,**
^{6a} **possessed of strength.**

We saw above how Bint al-Shāṭi' and Neuwirth connect the phenomena presented in *sūrah*-opening oaths with the subsequent declarations. As with Q 100, there is a gap here between the oath and the supernatural phenomena it depicts. In the former *sūrah*, the oath series in vv. 1–5 depicts a dawn raid, which is then picked up after an interlude of a few verses in vv. 9–11. Here in Q 53, vv. 2–6a are similarly an interlude.

^{6b} **He was level (*fa'stawā*),**
⁷ **he was on the highest horizon (*al-ufuqi 'l-a'lā*).**

This now is the beginning of the first vision. The being the Prophet saw is described as being “level” (*fa'stawā*, v. 6b), “on the highest horizon” (*al-ufuqi 'l-a'lā*, v. 7). In light of the discussion above on the relationship between the opening oath and the visions, this corresponds to the appearance of the Pleiades at the zenith.

Several scholars have posited a connection between the verb *istawā* and the frequently recurring phrase *istawā 'alā 'l-'arsh*, “He set Himself on the throne” (Q 7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 20:5, 25:59, 32:4, 57:4), as part of a broader attempt to identify the object of the Prophet’s vision as God.⁶⁸ There are two problems with this connection. First, the various *sūrahs* that mention God setting Himself on the throne all appear to be later than Q 53. The latter is counted by Nöldeke among the early Meccan *sūrahs*, whereas almost all the others are late Meccan, apart from Q Ṭā Hā 20 and Q al-Furqān 25, which are middle Meccan, and Q al-Ḥadīd 57, which is Medinan.⁶⁹ Therefore, the original audience of the Qur’ān would not have inferred from the verb *istawā* in Q 53:6 an allusion to God. Second, the verb is used throughout the Qur’ān outside of the theologically charged phrase *istawā 'alā 'l-'arsh* with a range of meanings, e.g., Q 23:28 (Noah *sets himself* onto his ark), 28:14 (Moses *reaches maturity*), and 48:29 (a plant *rises firm* on its stalk).

68. E.g., Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*, trans. Samuel Wilder (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 69.

69. The comparative lateness of the *sūrahs* that have some variant of the phrase *istawā 'alā 'l-'arsh*, relative to Q 53, is also supported by Nicolai Sinai’s chronology, based on increasing mean verse length, which places Q 53 (the twenty-fifth *sūrah* by his reckoning) significantly before the earliest *sūrah* with the phrase, Q 20 (the sixty-first). *The Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 114–117. This is confirmed by Behnam Sadeghi’s modified Bazargān chronology, which has the opening verses of Q 53 in the first phase (out of seven), with the next closest, Q 20, in the third. “The Chronology of the Qur’ān: A Stylometric Research Program,” *Arabica* 58 (2011): 210–299, 282.

Instead, if we recall that the passage is depicting the object of the Prophet's vision using the movement of the Pleiades, we must first consider how *istawā* might be thought to carry over to the Pleiades, on the guiding assumption that the *sūrah* depicts two parallel or analogous movements, an astronomical and a revelatory one. In the case of the asterism, a literal understanding of the verb is instructive. Its various cognates give meanings that are connected to being level, equal, or uniform. For instance, Lane gives “he made it equal ... in respect of elevation or depression” as one of the meanings of *sawwā*.⁷⁰ It seems that what is intended here, as applied to the Pleiades, is elucidated by the immediately following phrase in the next verse, “he was on the highest horizon (*wa-huwa bi'l-ufuqi 'l-a'lā*)”—in other words, he was at the zenith, which is at the mid-point of the sky, not inclined towards the horizon in any direction. Thus, the passage depicts the object of the Prophet's vision as being directly overhead, just as the Pleiades appear at the zenith.

An intriguing consequence of this reading is that the passage gives a strong clue regarding the geographical location of the experience. Given that the appearance of the Pleiades at the zenith is emphasized twice, first by the verb *istawā* and then by the phrase *bi'l-ufuqi 'l-a'lā*, the asterism was clearly at or very close to being directly overhead. In Mecca in the early part of the seventh century, the closest the center of the Pleiades cluster would come to the zenith in its arc through the night sky was an angular distance of approximately 2.5 degrees (i.e., an angular elevation of 87.5 degrees from the horizon, the zenith being at ninety degrees), with the closest visible star to the zenith in the asterism (18 Tauri) less than two degrees removed from the zenith—an almost imperceptible separation. As we move further north, this distance increases, such that by the time we get to Petra, or even further north to the Dead Sea region—both of which have been suggested in revisionist scholarship as alternatives to Mecca for the location of the early community⁷¹—the shortest angular distance of the Pleiades from the zenith increases to about thirteen degrees (an angular elevation of seventy-seven degrees), which certainly is perceptibly removed from the zenith. In short, the Q 53 passage provides us with a geolocation signal that is entirely compatible with Mecca and incompatible with a more northerly location.

70. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 4.1476, “2. *sawwāhu*,” s.v.

71. For the claim that the formative community of believers was located in the Dead Sea region, see Patricia Crone, “What Do We Actually Know about Mohammed?,” *Open Democracy*, June 2008 (https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/mohammed_3866jsp/). For the Petra claim, see Dan Gibson, *Qur'ānic Geography* (Saskatoon: Independent Scholars Press, 2011); idem, *Early Islamic Qiblas: A Survey of Mosques Built Between 1AH/622 C.E. and 263 AH/876 C.E.* (Vancouver: Independent Scholars Press, 2017).

⁸ Then he drew near and came down (*tadallā*),

When the Pleiades appear at the zenith in the night sky, they begin their descent immediately towards the west. As Crone has noted, the use of the verb *tadallā* here, literally “to be lowered (said of a bucket),” seems unusual (see n. 8 above), and requires some explanation. It derives from *dalw*, “well-bucket,” which is also the name of a group of stars—Markab, Scheat, Algenib, and Alpheratz—that form part of the modern constellation Pegasus. Allusions to “the Well-bucket” as a constellation through the verb *tadallā* are also attested in pre-Islamic poetry,⁷² as is the conjoining of the Pleiades with the *dalw* in the sense of an astronomical constellation.⁷³

The Well-bucket is due west of the Pleiades when the latter is at the zenith by an angular separation of around sixty degrees. So, as soon as the Pleiades appear in the night sky at the zenith, they start setting in the direction of the *dalw*. Consequently, we would be justified to take *tadallā* in v. 8 to mean “it (= the Pleiades cluster) went towards the Well-bucket.” (Indeed, there is a report traced back to Ibn ‘Abbās that glosses v. 1 as *al-thurayyā idhā tadallat*.⁷⁴) We have here another illustration of the blurred boundary between the visible phenomenon of the opening oath and the supernatural vision described here: while *tadallā* occurs in the passage describing the first vision, its fullest significance can only be appreciated by recalling the movement of the Pleiades in v. 1.

⁹ [till] he was two bows' length away (*qāba qarwṣayni*) or even nearer;

Recall that according to the writers in the *anwā'* genre, the pre-Islamic Arabs considered heliacal risers and cosmical setters to be complementary pairs, one being the *naw'* and the other the *raqīb*. As I noted above, this reconstruction of their astral system has been challenged, but the basic observation that they paired in some way between rising and setting stars remains widely attested in the *anwā'* genre, and indeed receives a measure of confirmation here in the Qurʾān.

When the Pleiades appear at the zenith and set near the start of the night, Sagittarius is the corresponding heliacal riser at the end of night. This is not, of course, a pairing between a heliacal riser and setter, as the Pleiades are setting after appearing at the zenith, rather than immediately after sunset. Nonetheless, given the abundant evidence for the significance of the Pleiades

72. Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 218.

73. *Ibid.*, 188.

74. Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī ‘l-tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr* (8 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1432–1433/2011), 7.640. I’m grateful to Hussan Mahmood for alerting me to this reference.

being at the zenith in the calendrical system, and in particular, from Qutrub, for the *evening* zenith appearance of the Pleiades, it is plausible that the asterism when in this state would have had a heliacal riser paired with it.

The Safaitic inscriptions record the name “Archer” (*rmy*) for Sagittarius,⁷⁵ and lexicographers record for it the name *qaws*, or “bow,”⁷⁶ which seems to be behind the phrase *qāba qawsayni* (“two bows’ length away”) in v. 9.⁷⁷ The depiction of this constellation as an archer is ubiquitous in the ancient Near East.⁷⁸ We should note that *qāba qawsayni* is considered to be an inversion of *qābay qaws* by many Arabic lexicographers, the two halves of the bow being the *qābān* that make up the single *qaws*.⁷⁹ This completes the depiction of the Pleiades’ movement at the start of the night over vv. 7–9: the asterism appears directly overhead, descends to the earth, and is in close association with another asterism; so the object of the Prophet’s vision—as I will argue, an angelic messenger—appeared directly above, descended to the earth, and was in close communication with the Prophet, the earthly messenger.

¹⁰ then He revealed (*awḥā*) to His servant (*‘abdihi*) what He revealed (*awḥā*).

This is the primary piece of evidence used in favor of the notion that the object of the Prophet’s vision was God rather than Gabriel. I will return to this verse when I consider this question separately below.

¹¹ His heart has not lied [about] what he saw.

¹² Will you dispute with him about what he sees?

¹³ Indeed, he saw him on another descent (*nazlatan ukhrā*)

The insistence on the veracity of the first vision in vv. 11–12 leads naturally to a description of the second vision, commencing in v. 13. Just as in the first vision the movement of the supernatural object was likened to the appearance of the Pleiades at the zenith followed by its setting (what I have termed an extended heliacal setting) as indicated by the more common meaning of *hawā*, “to set,” so I will argue that this second vision is reminiscent of the heliacal rising of the Pleiades in mid-June, in accordance with the second possible meaning of *hawā*, “to rise.”

75. Al-Jallad, “An Ancient Arabian Zodiac II,” 93.

76. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 7.2574–2575, “*qaws*,” s.v. See also Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 302.

77. Other noteworthy explanations include Neuwirth’s suggestion that this is just a poetic alternative to the usual *dhīrā* (“cubit”) as a unit of length, and Adams’ that it refers to the angular elevation of the Pleiades before they set on the western horizon. See Neuwirth, *Frühmekkanische Suren*, 654; Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 219.

78. Al-Jallad, “An Ancient Arabian Zodiac II,” 93.

79. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 7.2574–2575, “*qaws*,” s.v.

Several studies on this passage have noted that, contrary to the traditional Muslim association of the passage with the *miʿrāj*, or heavenly journey of the Prophet, the Qurʾān actually describes the object of the vision as descending, thus suggesting that this is not an other-worldly vision.⁸⁰ Yet the subsequent verses indicate that, although the Prophet may well have been located on the earth, the object of the vision was in a place described as a *jannah* (v. 15), usually used in the Qurʾān for the garden of paradise. Previous scholarship has proposed that this was perhaps a location on the outskirts of Mecca, a view concerning which Van Ess is, I believe, correct to be skeptical.⁸¹ It seems to me to be a rather pedestrian reading of a highly literary passage, especially when, as I hope to show, reading it alongside pre-Islamic vision experiences can resolve some of the tension between the earthly and heavenly nature of the experience. Especially problematic for interpreting *jannah* in v. 15 as a local garden is that it is identified as a “garden of refuge” (*jannatu ʿl-maʿwā*), with *maʿwā* used exclusively elsewhere in the Qurʾān to describe heaven and hell (see in particular Q al-Sajdah 32:19, where the near identical phrase *jannāt al-maʿwā*, “gardens of refuge,” clearly refers to the heavenly abode in the afterlife).⁸²

As we will see, this second vision alludes in several ways to familiar vision experiences of biblical figures as recorded in the Bible, pseudepigrapha, and apocrypha. However, it has been stripped of several features that characterize its antecedent vision experiences, one of which, it seems here, is the deliberate replacement of an *ascent* of the visionary into the heavens with the *descent* of the heavenly vision to the visionary who remains on earth. In fact, there is a precedent for such a variant in John of Patmos’ vision of the descent of the Heavenly Jerusalem in the Book of Revelations.⁸³

As I will argue that this second vision is represented by the heliacal rising of the Pleiades, we must ask how the *rising* of the asterism can depict the *descent* of the vision. The issue can be resolved if we recall that, strictly speaking, a star is said to have a heliacal rising when it first appears in the east *just before*

80. Neuwirth, *Frühmekkanische Suren*, 655; Munʿim Sirry in Azaiez et al., *The Qurʾan Seminar Commentary*, 375; Richard Bell, “Muhammad’s Vision,” *MW* 24 (1934): 145–154, 150.

81. Van Ess, “Vision and Ascension,” 50.

82. I am grateful to Nicolai Sinai drawing my attention to the significance of *maʿwā* in the passage given its use elsewhere in the Qurʾān, especially Q 32:19.

83. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.’” (Rev 21:1–3 NRSV)

dawn, such that it is barely visible before the sunlight begins to cover the sky. Phenomenologically, the asterism does not appear to rise at all, but instead suddenly appears low in the eastern sky close to the horizon, after a period of absence. This is thus entirely in keeping with the description of the second vision.

¹⁴ **by the *sidr* tree of the boundary (*al-muntahā*),**

¹⁵ **by it is the garden of refuge (*jannatu 'l-ma'wā*).**

The *sidr* tree probably refers to one of several species of thorn-bushes that can grow in desert climates. It provides convenient shade for travelers,⁸⁴ especially as some species, such as the *Ziziphus lotus*, produce edible fruit.⁸⁵

Of the several proposals explaining the literary function of the *sidr* tree,⁸⁶ perhaps the best-known is Neuwirth's suggestion for this vision being an echo of Moses' burning bush.⁸⁷ The presentation of the Prophet as the new Moses is amply attested elsewhere in the Qur'ān, including in other early Meccan *sūrahs* (e.g., Q al-Muzzammil 73:15). However, in none of the passages that recount Moses' encounter with God at Mount Horeb is *sidr* mentioned (Q 20:10, 27:7, 28:29–30, 79:16), although admittedly Q 28:30 mentions a *shajarah*, "tree." On the other hand, *sidr* is mentioned in Q al-Wāqī'ah 56:28, another early Meccan *sūrah*, as one of the trees of paradise.⁸⁸ There, it is a source of shade (v. 30) and fruit (v. 32),⁸⁹ exactly as the *Ziziphus lotus* would

84. The association of the thorn-bush with shelter is also attested to in Judg 9:15.

85. Lytton John Musselman, *Figs, Dates, Laurel, and Myrrh: Plants of the Bible and the Quran* (Portland: Timber Press, 2007), 274–276.

86. For a survey, see Neuenkirchen, "Sourate 53: Al-Najm," 2b.1603–1605.

87. Neuwirth, *Frühmekkanische Suren*, 655; eadem, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 407–408; eadem, "The Discovery of Evil in the Qur'an? Revisiting Qur'anic Versions of the Decalogue in the Context of Pagan-Arab Late Antiquity," in *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), 253–274, 258; eadem, "Narrative as a Canonical Process: The Story of Moses Seen through the Evolving History of the Qur'an," in *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community*, 277–305, 290–291; eadem, "Myths and Legends in the Qur'an? An Itinerary through its Narrative Landscape," in *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community*, 385–413, 409. See also Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, 44–45; Sinai, "An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm*," 15–16.

88. In the version of this paper presented at the IQSA Annual Meeting 2019, the thesis presented here regarding the visions in Q 53 was part of a broader argument for Q 50–56 forming a discrete *sūrah* group. I hope to write on this issue in more detail.

89. Musselman convincingly argues that the *talh* in Q 56:29 is not bananas, as it has frequently been understood, but the acacia shrub, which is not fruit-bearing. So while the subsequently mentioned shade in v. 30 can be attributed to both the *sidr* and the *talh*, the fruit is only from the *sidr*. *Figs, Dates, Laurel, and Myrrh*, 40–41. See also Behnam Sadeghi, "Criteria for Emending the Text of the Qur'ān," in Michael

have been for desert travelers, albeit that, as befits the delights promised to the dwellers of paradise, it is now a thornless (*makhḍūd*) version of the earthly tree.

So the *sidr* is *both* a familiar earthbound tree that would have provided shelter in the wilderness to desert travelers in Arabia (cf. the next verse, “By it is the garden of *refuge*”), and it is described elsewhere in the early Meccan Qurʾān as a tree in paradise. This is in keeping with the nature of this second vision: it is both a vision that takes place on earth, i.e., without an ascent experience, yet it is a vision of heaven. The *sidr* tree, with its promise of shade and fruit in the midst of a hostile environment, is the ideal locus of this fusion—this familiar earthbound tree becomes the earthly location for the vision of heaven: the Prophet is looking out over a familiar yet transfigured landscape.

In this second vision, the Prophet’s sight is no longer directed vertically upwards to the highest horizon (i.e., as we saw, towards the zenith) but rather to some horizontally furthest location (*al-muntahā*). The depiction of this second vision by the heliacal rising of the Pleiades would indicate that it is towards the east, which is where any asterism undergoing heliacal rising would first appear. This aligns with biblical (Gen 2:8) and Syriac Christian cosmologies,⁹⁰ both of which place paradise in the east.

¹⁶ **When the *sidr* tree was overcome by some covering,**

¹⁷ **his eye did not swerve nor transgress (*taghā*).**

¹⁸ **Indeed, he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord.**

“When the *sidr* tree was overcome by some covering” (v. 16), it seems that this led the audience to expect that the Prophet’s eye might turn away, yet it “did not swerve” (v. 17), and instead he gazed upon one of “the greatest signs of his Lord” (v. 18). Compare this with the heliacal rising of the Pleiades: the asterism appears on the horizon in the east (cf. the analysis of vv. 14–15 above), just before it is overcome by the dawn light, (cf. “When the *sidr* tree was overcome by some covering,” v. 16), which progresses to sunrise, at which point any observer who had been looking in the direction of the Pleiades would have to look away (cf. “his eye did not swerve,” v. 17) as the sun then rises in the east (cf. “Indeed, he saw of the greatest [*kubrā*] signs of his Lord,” v. 18).⁹¹ The comparison between the heliacal rising of the Pleiades and this second vision is presented synoptically below:

Cook et al. (eds.), *Law and Tradition in Classical Islamic Thought: Studies in Honor of Professor Hossein Modarressi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 21–41, 32–34.

90. Andrew Palmer, “Paradise Restored,” *Oriens Christianus* 87 (2003), 1–46, 37.

91. As evidence of the Mosaic motif of the vision, Neuwirth makes a connection between the phrase *āyātī rabbīhi ʾl-kubrā* (“the greatest signs of his Lord”) and Exod 3:3, where Moses describes the fire he sees as *ha-marʾeh ha-gādōl* (“the great sight”). *Frühmekkanische Suren*, 656. This could be coincidental, or, just as likely as the Exodus

Heliacal rising of the Pleiades	The second vision (vv. 13–18)
The asterism appears at the eastern horizon.	The vision appears low (vv. 13–14) at some horizontally furthest location (v. 14) in the east (v. 15, as suggested by the location of paradise in biblical and Syriac cosmologies).
The dawn light overcomes the Pleiades.	“When the <i>sidr</i> tree was overcome by some covering” (v. 16).
The dawn brightens as the sun starts to appear, which would cause an observer to look away.	“His eye did not swerve ...” (v. 17).
The sun rises.	“Indeed, he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord” (v. 18).

Two problems remain to be resolved. First, if in the imagery in these verses the object of the Prophet’s vision is depicted as the Pleiades, then what are we to make of the increasing brightness as the light of the Pleiades gives way to the dawn, and the dawn gives way to the sun? As shown above, each of these stages in the natural phenomena seems to have a corresponding phase in the supernatural vision. Two solutions suggest themselves. First, perhaps we are not to make too much of the actual distinction between the Pleiades and the sun. Again, phenomenologically speaking, during a heliacal rising the one will transition smoothly into the other. Perhaps this is therefore the vision progressively revealing itself in its full glory.

Alternatively, two of the key components of this second vision, namely: (1) it being a vision of heaven, and (2) the initial vision yielding to ever brighter subsequent visions, are reminiscent of several biblical, pseudepigraphal, and apocryphal apocalyptic visions that involve an otherworldly journey.⁹² A useful comparison is with the vision of Levi in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, who is taken by an angel through a succession of heavens, each one brighter than the previous. Notwithstanding that, as I have already noted,

intertext, the Qur’anic phrase could instead echo the great light that the visionary beholds as he ascends to God’s presence in various Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings (e.g., 2 En. 2:1). I discuss further overlaps with apocalyptic visions below.

92. The resemblance of the Prophet’s vision to those of biblical and post-biblical prophetic visions has been noted in several studies. See Neuwirth, *Frühmekkanische Suren*, 651; eadem, *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity*, 68–69; Neuenkirchen, “Sourate 53: *Al-Najm*,” 2b.1605–1606. Neuwirth brings out some overlaps with (especially) Isaiah’s, Ezekiel’s, and the post-biblical Elchasai’s visions, and Neuenkirchen with the Ascension of Isaiah.

the Qur'ān replaces the ascent experience with a heavenly descent, there is a clear motif of increasing luminosity as the experience proceeds:

And behold, the heavens were opened, and an angel of the Lord spoke to me: "Levi, Levi, enter!" And I entered the first heaven, and saw there much water suspended. And again I saw a second heaven much brighter and more lustrous, for there was a measureless height in it. And I said to the angel, "Why are these things thus?" And the angel said to me, "Do not be amazed concerning this, for you shall see another heaven more lustrous and beyond compare. And when you have mounted there, you shall stand near the Lord. You shall be his priest and you shall tell forth his mysteries to men." (T. Levi, 2:5–11)⁹³

The angel who is accompanying Levi is clearly one of the lower angels, above whom are the archangels, who dwell "in the uppermost heaven," with "the Great Glory in the Holy of Holies superior to all holiness" (T. Levi 3:4). A similar motif is found in 1 En. 14:15–16 and 2 En. 21. In light of this, the being seen by the Prophet, which on this intertextual reading must be an angel, leads the Prophet through to a yet greater vision, which, like visions shown to Levi, outshines the brightness of the angel himself.

The second issue that needs to be addressed is that the verb *ṭaghā* has the meaning of transgressing a boundary (cf. Q al-Hāqqah 69:11). If, as I am arguing, the Prophet is depicted as seeing the heavenly realm while yet on earth, then the usual signification of the verb might appear to be unsuitable: surely the Prophet's vision *did* transgress the usual limits. Yet we can again appeal intertextually to Jewish and Christian apocalypses to shed light on this passage. The above citation from Levi's vision in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs culminates in the vision of God: "At this moment the angel opened for me the gates of heaven and I saw the Holy Most High sitting on the throne" (T. Levi 5:1). Similar visions of God are part of the apocalyptic experiences of Ezekiel (Ezek 1:27–28), Enoch (1 En. 14:20; 2 En. 20:3; 22:1–2, 6–7), John of Patmos (Rev 4:2–3), Sedrach (Apoc. Sedr. 2:5), Isaiah (Mart. Ascen. Isa. 9:37–39), and Paul (Apoc. Paul, pp. 22–23), thus spanning both Christian and Jewish writings, biblical and extra-biblical.⁹⁴ Alongside these visions of God, many of which describe Him in anthropomorphic terms,

93. Translation by H. C. Kee, in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1983), 788. All references to Old Testament Pseudepigrapha are according to the translations in this edition.

94. For references to Old Testament Pseudepigraph, see previous note. References for the New Testament Apocrypha (Ascension of Isaiah [= Mart. Ascen. Isa.] and the Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul [= Apoc. Paul]) are according to the translations in Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson (eds.), *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2,

however, we find texts that explicitly deny that the visionary saw God at all, in particular the Apocalypse of Abraham (Apoc. Ab. 19:4).⁹⁵ Indeed, early Jewish mystical writings record a controversy over whether it is possible to see God.⁹⁶ It would thus be unsurprising that *Sūrat al-Najm*, in describing the Prophet's visions, should address the issue of whether the Prophet saw God directly, which I believe it does in vv. 17–18. We see that his second vision, commencing in v. 13, culminates in seeing the greatest *signs* of God only (v. 18). In conjunction with this, and in light of the intertextual evidence, the insistence that his vision “did not transgress” (*mā taghā*, v. 17) probably refers to his sight not going beyond the signs shown to him to the vision of God Himself, the otherwise frequent climax of such experiences. It is this issue now that I will address directly in the final part of the essay.

The Object of the Prophet's Vision

The Islamic tradition is split both over whether the Prophet's *mi'raj* (or, more accurately, the *isrā'*, the night journey to Jerusalem from where the *mi'raj* begins⁹⁷) was spiritual or physical,⁹⁸ and whether or not he saw God.⁹⁹ Much of the debate centers on the interpretation of the opening verses of Q 53 that we have been analyzing. We have already begun to consider evidence for the object of the vision being an angel rather than God. A few points pertaining to this issue remain to be discussed.

It is certainly true that the general consensus that has emerged in the academy is in favor of God being the object of vision in Q 53.¹⁰⁰ Against this, first, there is the overlap between the progression in the second, heavenly, vision from the Pleiades to the dawn light and then to the Sun on the one hand

Writings Relating to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects, rev. ed. (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1992).

95. Christopher Rowland, “The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 10 (1979): 137–154, 150–153.

96. Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 129–131.

97. On the association of the *isrā'* with the *mi'raj*, see Uri Rubin, “Muhammad's Night Journey (*isrā'*) to al-Masjid al-Aqsa: Aspects of the Earliest Origins of the Islamic Sanctity of Jerusalem,” *al-Qantara* 29 (2008), 147–165.

98. Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyyah*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, and ‘Abd al-Ḥafiz al-Shilbī, 3rd ed. (2 vols.; [Cairo]: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlāduhu, 1375/1955), 1.399–400.

99. Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, 40.275; see also the editors' footnote (*ibid.*, n. 2) for further references.

100. E.g., Neuwirth, *Frühmekkanische Suren*, 654–656. See also n. 109 below.

and the sequence of ever brighter visions of heaven found in the Testament of Levi and several other apocalyptic visions on the other; in the latter, it is an angel who leads the visionary through the heavens, and the overlap suggests that the Pleiades would have to stand in for the angel. Second, the Prophet is said explicitly not to have transgressed the limits set for his vision (v. 17). Given the standard apocalyptic vision narrative, and the debate already evident prior to Islam over whether it is possible to see God in such an experience,¹⁰¹ v. 17 is very plausibly read to mean that the Prophet did *not* see God. Finally, the Prophet's second vision explicitly culminates in seeing the greatest signs of his Lord (v. 18) rather than seeing God Himself.¹⁰²

There remains one other piece of supporting evidence for the claim that the object of the Prophet's vision was an angel, namely the parallel passage in Q al-Takwīr 81:

¹⁵ No! I swear by the [planets] that retreat,

¹⁶ moving and setting,

¹⁷ by the night when it closes,

¹⁸ by the morning when it breathes.

¹⁹ It is indeed the speech of a noble messenger,

²⁰ possessed of power (*dhī quwwah*), secure with the Occupant of the Throne,

²¹ obeyed and to be trusted.

²² Your companion (*sāhibukum*) is not possessed.

²³ He did indeed see Him (*ra'āhu*) on the clear horizon (*al-ufuqi 'l-mubīn*).

²⁴ He is not niggardly about the invisible.

²⁵ This is not the word of a devil that should be stoned.

Like the opening verses of Q 53, this passage begins with an oath, which both the *mufasssīrīn* and modern scholarship have very plausibly argued to be a reference to the planets and their retrograde motion.¹⁰³ Just as Q 53 uses the oath by the movement of the Pleiades to depict the angel's movements vis-à-vis the Prophet, so here the retrograde motion of the planets, which sets them apart from the rest of the stars in the night sky, is used to demonstrate the special place of the angel of revelation among all other angels (v. 21). Even

101. See n. 95 above.

102. This also counters the possibility that v. 17 merely denies that the Prophet saw God in a comprehensive way, such that the possibility of a partial vision is left open, akin to the Sunnī argument that the denial of God's *idrāk* ("comprehension/attainment") in Q al-An'ām 6:103 nonetheless leaves open the possibility of His *ru'yā* ("vision"). See D. Gimaret, "Ru'yat Allāh," *ET*², s.v. (1995). I am grateful to Nicolai Sinai for alerting me to this possibility.

103. Paul Kunitzsch, "Planets and Stars," *EQ*, s.v. (2004). See also n. 1 above.

more strikingly, analogous to the ambiguous opening oath in Q 53 that refers both to the movement of the Pleiades in the beginning of the night and then their appearance at the end of the night, at which latter point they gradually give way to the dawn light, so here we have an oath by the movements of the planets (vv. 15–16) followed by oaths that depict the receding of the night and the onset of dawn (vv. 17–18). In addition, there are several instances of overlapping diction: *dhī quawwah* (“possessed of power” Q 81:20), *dhū mirrah* (“possessed of strength,” Q 53:6), and *shadīdu ’l-quwā* (“great in power,” Q 53:5); *mā ... ṣāhibukum* (“your companion is/has not ...,” Q 81:22 and 53:2); *ra’āhu* (“he saw him,” Q 81:23 and 56:13); *al-ufuqi ’l-mubīn* (“the clear horizon,” Q 81:23) and *al-ufuqi ’l-’lā* (“the highest horizon,” Q 53:7).

Verse 19 makes it clear that this is an angelic vision, one of a “noble messenger.”¹⁰⁴ Scholars who read the Q 53 passage as depicting a divine vision have argued either that Q 81 is a theological corrective to Q 53, or that Q 53 is a theological advance on Q 81.¹⁰⁵ It seems simpler to me, in light of the numerous parallels between the passages, to hold that the two are describing the same thing: the vision of an angelic messenger.¹⁰⁶

Several pieces of counterevidence should be addressed. I have already discussed above why the co-occurrence of the verb *istawā* (“he was level”) in v. 6 and the phrase *istawā ’alā ’l-’arsh* (“He set Himself on the throne”) is very weak evidence for the Q 53 vision describing God. Similarly, although the verb *’allama* is used both in v. 5, “One great in power taught (*’allama*) him,” and is used for God in Q al-Raḥmān 55:2, “He taught (*’allama*) the Qur’ān,” it seems perfectly plausible that the verb could be used for both God and the angel of revelation.¹⁰⁷ This is the case, for example, for *tanzīl*, “sending

104. Crone “Problems in Sura 53,” 16.

105. For Q 53 being a chronologically later theological advance, see Neuwirth, *Frühmekkanische Suren*, 301; eadem, *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity*, 68–70; Sinai, “An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm*,” 8–9. For the opposite opinion, see Van Ess, “Vision and Ascension,” 49–50; Bell, “Muhammad’s Vision,” 149–150.

106. Further reasons to believe that the object of vision was an angel are given by Crone, “Problems in Sura 53,” 16–18, who takes a surprisingly synchronic approach to the issue.

107. Guillaume Dye in Azaiez et al., *The Qur’an Seminar Commentary*, 373; Neuenkirchen, “Sourate 53: Al-Najm,” 2b.1600. Neuenkirchen also notes the overlap between the description of the object of vision in v. 5 as *shadīdu ’l-quwā* (“great in power”) and various other verses that describe God as *qawīyy*, or possessing *quawwah*, or *shadīd*. However, Q 81:20 also describes the messenger angel as *dhī quawwah* (“possessed of power”), and there seems to be no reason to suppose *shadīd* could not be said of the angel too. Indeed, David Penchansky has presented an interesting paper at SBL International 2019 and IQSA 2019 arguing for the deliberate ambiguity of the vision in Q 53, in line with similar angel/God ambiguities in biblical encounters with the divine. “By the Lote Tree’: Call Narratives in Surat Al-Najm and Isaiah 6” (paper

down” (e.g., Q al-Baqarah 2:23 [for God] and 2:97 [for Gabriel]) and *wahy*, “revelation” (e.g., Q al-Shūrā 42:51, where *wahy* is attributed to God and the angel in the same verse). Furthermore, substituting the vision of a powerful angel endowed with quasi-divine attributes for the vision of God is a widely attested late antique Jewish technique for avoiding anthropomorphism.¹⁰⁸

More problematically, v. 10, at the conclusion of the first vision, reads, “then He revealed (*awḥā*) to His servant (*ʿabdihī*) what He revealed (*awḥā*).” Clearly, the possessive pronoun in the phrase “His servant” refers to God, who must therefore, on any natural reading of the verse, be the subject of the two verbs “revealed” (*awḥā*).¹⁰⁹ Thus, we must understand v. 10 as “then He (= God) revealed to His (= God’s) servant what He (= God) revealed.” This suggests that it was, all along, God who was the object of vision. It does seem possible however, especially as this is the concluding verse of the first vision, to read this verse as attributing the revelation of the angel to its ultimate source, God. A similar effect is achieved in Q al-Ḥijr 15:66, where at the culmination of a dialogue between Lot and his angelic visitors, the subject of the verb of communication suddenly switches to God:

⁶¹ When the messengers came to the family of Lot,

⁶² he said, “You are an unknown folk.”

⁶³ They said, “No, we have brought you that about which they have doubts.

⁶⁴ We have brought you the truth. We speak truthfully.

⁶⁵ Travel with your family in a part of the night. Follow their backs; and let none of you turn round, but go where you are ordered.”

⁶⁶ And We decreed that command to him, that the last remnant of those would be cut off in the morning.

Note that v. 66 is not a summary of the previous communication (which might have explained the switch from the angelic speech to God’s), but a description of the next step in the night’s drama that is about to unfold: after Lot escapes,

presentation, International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Rome, July, 2019, and Annual Meeting of the International Qur’anic Studies Association, San Diego, CA, November, 2019).

108. Van Ess, “Vision and Ascension,” 50. See also the previous note.

109. Noted, among others, by several contributors in Azaiez et al., *The Qur’an Seminar Commentary*, 373–375; Van Ess, “Vision and Ascension,” 50; Bell, “Muhammad’s Vision,” 148; Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, 8th ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012), 461. Crone sounds a note of dissent, opining that the being encountered by the Prophet in Q 53 is a high-ranking angel who represents God, and therefore the switch from a pronominal reference to the angel in *awḥā* to God in *ʿabdihī* is justifiable. “Problems in Sura 53,” 18.

the city will be destroyed. Nonetheless, it is suddenly the divine voice rather than the angels who are speaking.¹¹⁰

The second piece of counterevidence is that the two visions are followed by a polemical attack on the Prophet's opponents' objects of worship:

¹⁹ Have you considered (*ra'aytum*) al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā

²⁰ and Manāt, the third, the other?

...

²³ They are merely names which you and your forefathers have bestowed.

God has sent down no authority regarding them. ...

The transition in this second section of the *sūrah* to a discussion of false gods, in particular the repetition of the verb *ra'ā* that was used for the Prophet's visions in vv. 11, 12, 13, and 18, sets up a stark contrast between what the Prophet saw on the one hand and his opponents' objects of worship on the other.¹¹¹ (This contrast is particularly effective in light of the Safaitic inscriptions CSA 2.1, C 2572, and the 2018 Wādī Ghuṣayn inscription cited above, which make mention of the Pleiades, whether by the name *km(t)* or *h-ngm*, and which then go on to invoke the goddess Lāt, suggesting there was some pre-Islamic connection between the two.) The contrast suggests that the Prophet, too, must have seen *his* God, just as his opponents are told to "consider" or, literally, "to behold" (*ra'aytum*) theirs.¹¹² However, the *sūrah* goes on to make clear that the Prophet's opponents considered these beings whom they worshipped to be angels in vv. 26–27. The contrast, then, is between the true angelic vision of the Prophet and the false angels of the pagans. Even if we follow Nöldeke in taking vv. 26–27 to be a later addition to the *sūrah*,¹¹³ it seems highly unlikely they were added in order to alter what was initially a contrast between the true God and the opponents' false gods. Rather,

110. It is true that the switch to the third-person pronominal subject referring to God in Q 53:10 ("He revealed") appears more abrupt than in Q 15:66, as in the former case God has not previously been mentioned in the *sūrah*. There are other instances of God being thus introduced in *sūrah* openings, however, such as Q al-Ḥāqqah 69:7 ("He imposed it on them for seven nights and eight days, consecutively ...").

111. Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 785–786. There are other points of contrast and overlap between the sections: the root *h-w-y* (vv. 1, 3, and 23); *dalla* ("to be astray," v. 2) versus *al-hudā* ("guidance," v. 23); *'allama* ("to teach," v. 5) versus *al-zann* ("conjecture," v. 23), with the two again contrasted in v. 28. I am grateful to Hussan Mahmood for alerting me to these.

112. Andrew Rippin in Azaiez et al., *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, 374.

113. *GdQ*, 1.103. See also Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zu Komposition der mekkanische Suren*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 23, 207; Sinai, "An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm*," 9–13.

whatever the motivation behind the insertion may have been (if indeed these verses are an insertion), they only serve to bring out what the initial contrast was all along. In support of this, note the ample evidence elsewhere in the Qurʾān that the opponents of the Prophet considered themselves to be worshipping angels.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

Despite the opening verse of Q 53 being comprised of just four words, an understanding of Arabian astral lore enables one to unlock the rich imagery that they depict, made all the richer by the deliberate ambiguity in the verse, which allows for two interpretations: one of *al-najm* rising and one of its setting. The remarkable degree of affinity between Safaitic inscriptions, pre- and early Islamic poetry, early Islamic literature, including *tafsīr*, lexicographical works, several *ḥadīths*, and *anwāʾ* works, establish beyond reasonable doubt that *al-najm* in the opening oath refers to the Pleiades and that their rising and setting, given contextual indicators in the *sūrah*, refer to their heliacal rising and setting.

These two sets of images illustrate the Prophet's two vision experiences. Over the course of the analysis, I have also tried to show that the visions are depicted as taking place on earth rather than in the heavens, and that their object was an angelic messenger rather than God. Given the significance of the Pleiades in the ancient Near East, it is fitting that they stand in for the angel of revelation in this way. An interesting consequence of the close reading of Q 53 presented here has been that the location of the visions, based on the Pleiades passing through the zenith, is far more likely to have been Mecca than any of the alternative more northerly locations that have been suggested for the early Muslim community.

The reading of the second vision put forward in this essay and its overlap with pre-Islamic ascension narratives is in line with aspects of the traditional Muslim understanding of these verses, which tie them to the Prophet's *miʾrāj*. This is remarkable indeed. The general consensus in modern scholarship is that the story of the Prophet's ascension as found in the *ḥadīth*, *sūrah*, and *tafsīr* literature was a later invention clunkily hooked on to the Q 53 visions for lack of a better Qurʾānic fit.¹¹⁵ If the analysis here is correct, then the Qurʾān is already drawing on pre-Islamic ascension and vision narratives in Q 53, though with its own relatively idiosyncratic variants on the standard pattern (i.e., the *descent* of the heavenly realm rather than the *ascent* of the Prophet, and

114. Patricia Crone, "The Religion of the Qurʾānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57 (2010): 151–200.

115. Van Ess, "Vision and Ascension," 49; *GdQ*, 1.99.

the absence of a vision of God, though even these features have precedents, as we have seen). This suggests that the later Prophetic ascension legends were an outgrowth of the allusions already recognized as being present in Q 53, a scenario far more probable than independently evolving ascension legends and Sūrat al-Najm coming coincidentally to be associated with each other.

Al-Farāhī's insights on this passage are a testament to the value of his work. Beyond him, I should like to conclude with a word on the relevance of the *tafsīr* genre in general for Qur'ānic studies. Although by the time of the early *tafsīr* writings the connection between the initial oath and the subsequent visions in Q 53 was all but lost, nonetheless snippets of information that could have assisted in at least partially recovering the connection were retained, namely, the fact that *al-najm* refers to the Pleiades, that their descent in v. 1 is related to the later verb *tadallā* in v. 8, and that the second vision, despite the phrase *nazlatan ukhrā* ("another descent") in v. 13, is somehow connected to the manifestation of a world beyond the ordinary empirical realm (even if the visionary is not strictly speaking transported into the supernatural realm manifested to him). The opening of the *sūrah* is thus a paradigmatic case study both of the limitations of classical *tafsīr* in understanding the text of the Qur'ān, but also of shards of genuine historical memory waiting to be recovered from the Islamic sources.¹¹⁶

116. This analysis also serves as a caution against the overreliance on Syriac language and writings (as undeniably illuminating as Syriac texts have been and continue to be for Qur'ānic Studies) when interpreting the Qur'ān. The most far-reaching re-reading of the *sūrah* on the assumption of a Syriac subtext is that of Luxenberg, "Al-Najm (Q 53), Chapter of the Star." But see also Emran al-Badawi in Azaiez et al., *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, 373. For a connection with the religious imagery in Ephrem, see Tommaso Tesei in Azaiez et al., *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, 375.