The Gradual Qur'ān: Views of Early Muslim Commentators

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THE GRADUAL QUR’ĀN:
VIEWS OF EARLY MUSLIM COMMENTATORS

A dissertation presented
by
Sukidi
to
The Committee on the Study of Religion
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for the degree of
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The Gradual Qur’ān: Views of Early Muslim Commentators

Abstract

This dissertation is the first endeavor to explore the formulation of the gradual Qur’ān in early works of commentaries on the Qur’ān (pl. *tafāsīr*, sing. *tafsīr al-Qur’ān*). It draws upon the hitherto largely neglected genre of *tafsīr* in its early, formative age to argue that the early Muslim commentators sought to formulate and work out the general theory of the gradual Qur’ān through their reading and interpretation of the revealed text.

With impressive knowledge of the Qur’ān and its Arabic language, they were able to derive the theory of the gradual Qur’ān from their reading of the verb in Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form, “*qur'ānan farraqnāhu*—a Qur’ān that We have divided into pieces”, as opposed to the first form of the verb in the consensus-based “majority” reading, “*qur‘ān* faraqnahu—*a Qur’ān* that We made clear”. This choice of reading meant that the revelation of 17:106 was construed as confirming the gradual, piecemeal Qur’ān. This study adduces a new, long list of early and medieval authorities who supported this reading.

The proclamation of the gradual Qur’ān was situated in the context of a polemical milieu. It emerged in Qur’ān 25:32 in a response to unbelievers’ demand for a single complete Qur’ān (*jumlatan wāḥidatun*), a demand based on a preconceived notion of the true revelatory process for monotheistic scriptures as occurring “all at once”. This was contradictory to the responsive, situational nature of the Qur’ānic revelation, which emerged in an ongoing series of prophetic-revelatory events, a *history*, as a collection of divine responses to incidents, situations, and objections in the lifetime of Muḥammad.
Finally, Qur’ān 53:1-18 can be shown to refer to visionary experiences as part of the gradual revelation, since here God swore by the gradual Qur’ān and references his manifesting Himself on different revelatory occasions. The process of visionary encounter can be interpreted as having begun with God standing on the highest horizon, then coming down slowly, drawing near to Muḥammad and finally revealing the Qur’ān to him in piecemeal fashion.
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The full responsibility for the accuracy of this dissertation and any possible inaccuracies that it may contain is entirely my own.
INTRODUCTION

The Problem

An important but neglected topic in Qur’ānic studies is the idea of its revelation by a gradual, piecemeal process over the course of the two decades of Muḥammad’s prophetic career (over against the notion of a single, all-at-once dispensation like that posited in Hebrew tradition for the Torah at Sinai). The precise meaning of the “gradual Qur’ān” is not easily ascertained. It is not self-evident in the texts of the revelation. Read by itself, the Qur’ān gives only limited insight into the idea of the gradual revelation. A key problem is: where, exactly, is the source of the idea of the gradual Qur’ān in early Islam? The present study argues that it is the authority of early Muslim commentators, rather than the text of the revelation itself, that produced a notion of a distinctive quality of the Qur’ān being its gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of revelation.

The Method of Reading the Qur’ān

To investigate the gradual Qur’ān, we must begin with the broader question of method: Is there a clearly discernable, single meaning in all parts of the Qur’ān? Many modern scholars of the Qur’ān affirm that there is indeed a clear meaning to be found in the text of the Qur’ān, since they believe that the Qur’ān itself is the sufficient source of meaning for those interested in the study of the Qur’ān. Their method of searching for the original meaning of the revelation is to read and interpret the Qur’ān in its own right without any preconceptions. This was exactly what a Japanese scholar of the Qur’ān Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993) formulated already in 1964:

We should try to read the Book [i.e. the Qur’ān] without any preconception. We must, in other words, try not to read into it thoughts that have been developed and

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1In asking this question of meaning, I am certainly inspired by the literary work of Stanley Fish, Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).
elaborated by the Muslim thinkers of the post-Qur’anic ages in their effort to understand and interpret their Sacred Books each according to his particular position. We must try to grasp the structure of the Qur’anic world conception in its original form, that is, as it, was read and understood by the Prophet’s contemporaries and his immediate followers.  

It seems clear that Izutsu was the early pioneer in the study of the Qur’ān in its own right, trying to grasp its original meaning without any preconceptions derived from later tradition—“the Muslim thinkers of the post-Qur’ānic ages”. In other words, the views of later Muslim scholars who lived after the time of revelation and prophecy were to be put aside in trying to understand the “original” meanings of the Qur’ān. The Scottish scholar of the Qur’ān, Montgomery Watt (d. 2006), explained why his teacher, Richard Bell (d. 1952), put aside the views of later Muslim interpreters in his effort to read the Qur’ān in its own right:

Bell also made a resolute attempt not to read into any passage more than it actually says. This meant setting aside the views of later Muslim commentators in so far as these appeared to have been influenced by theological developments which came about long after the death of the prophet, and endeavouring to understand each passage in the sense it had for its first hearer.  

It is clear that the reason why later Muslim commentators have been set aside by some modern scholars of the Qur’ān has to do with the preconceptions or prejudgments those commentators brought to the meaning-making process of interpreting the Qur’ān. “This book intends to set aside as much as possible prior judgments about the meaning of the words derived from the Arabic root $k-t-b$,” writes Daniel A. Madigan in his approach to the study of the Qur’ān in its own, internal terms. He takes a closer look at “how the Qur’ān presents itself” and “portrays the process of its own revelation.”  

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the Qur’ān, he used the Muslim commentary only “as a kind of control, to find whether what I am claiming to discern in the Qur’ān text is entirely novel, or whether the Muslim community has recognized something like it before.”

Even the skeptical historian of early Islam, Patricia Crone (d. 2015), approached the study of the Qur’ān “on the basis of the information supplied by the book itself, as opposed to that of later readers.”

Several decades ago, the method of studying the phenomenon of revelation on its own, internal terms was aptly criticized by Wilfred C. Smith (d. 2000), who argued strongly that “if anything is revelation, it is so not in and of itself but only as and when it has some particular recipient.” It has to be approached “not in and of itself,” but rather in relationship to a particular recipient or a given religious community. The inseparable relationship between text and a given religious community is precisely what Smith called the concept of “scripture” as “a bilateral term: it inherently implies, in fact names, a relationship.” As he put it, “no text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into scripture or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way. I suggest: scripture is a human activity.” This central thesis of Smith was a major contribution to an approach to and study of scripture “not in and of itself,” but rather in an interactive, dynamic relationship to a particular community of religious tradition who figured prominently in the transformation of a given text into meaningful and intelligible scripture.

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5Ibid., 81.
In the light of Smith’s “bilateral term,” William A. Graham offered his own method of studying the phenomenon of scripture as a relational concept, for “there is, historically speaking, no text that in and of itself can be called scripture”; therefore, “a text becomes scripture in active, subjective relationship to persons, and as part of a cumulative communal tradition.” His focus on the relational quality of scripture was directed to the immense significance of functions and uses of written scriptural texts as oral phenomena active in the lives of many diverse individuals, groups, and religious communities at varied times and places. This treatment of the specifically oral dimension of sacred scriptures has paved the way for further studies into the reciprocal, dynamic relation of the written scriptural texts with diverse communities of faith in a variety of religious traditions.

I have built my method upon the respective work of Wilfred Smith and his student, William Graham, who argued for a new way of thinking about scripture as a “bilateral” or “relational” concept. That is to argue that the phenomenon of scripture has to be studied, read, approached, and interpreted “not in and of itself,” but rather in “active, subjective relationship” to a particular community of believers. In this study, I attempt to show how Islam’s scripture is frequently unintelligible if it is approached and studied strictly on its own, internal terms. I have for the most part eschewed this method of reading the Qurʾān “in its own right” because it is a highly ambiguous, allusive, and referential text of revelation that is frequently unintelligible by itself and therefore requires interpretation on the part of the subsequent scholarly community of commentators. More importantly, I no more than anyone else can claim to have direct access to God’s revelations to Muḥammad, in whole or in part, in the early seventh century. The nature of

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sacred communication between God and His Prophet in “the prophetic-revelatory event” always
remains inaccessible to any outsider. As Graham has rightly noted,

The prophetic experience of Muḥammad, the revelatory process that produced the
qur’āns that he transmitted and that sustained him in the tasks that he felt were his
to do, was and is fundamentally unobservable except in its fruits: for Muslims, in
the Qur’ān and the prophetic example; for others, in the response that it has
elicited and continues to elicit from Muslims. While the phenomenologist or the
historian of religion is not able to penetrate the mystery of Muḥammad’s spiritual
experience itself, he or she can legitimately seek to discern the Muslim’s
understanding of that experience. It is possible to try to reconstruct from the
classical sources certain aspects of the attitudes in the early Ummah towards the
revelatory process and its concrete products. Of these products, the verbatim
revelations that became the Qur’ān are the most important (but not the only) ones
that have to be considered.11

The present study is focused precisely on the response of the early Muslim commentators to the
idea of the gradual, piecemeal revelatory process of the Qur’ān in the age of revelation and
prophecy. Yet the question can still be asked as to why the early Muslim commentators should
be given precedence in this particular study of “the gradual Qur’ān”?

A Reading of the Qur’ān through the authority of early Muslim commentators

While many modern scholars of Islam have approached and interpreted the Qur’ān in its own
right, I hold that a more productive way of studying the Qur’ān is to read and interpret Islam’s
scripture not in its own right but in “an active, subjective relationship” to the subsequent Muslim
scholarly community of interpretation. The authority of early commentators to interpret and
work out the general thrust of the gradual, piecemeal Qur’ān on their terms is worthy of
scholarly attention for the following reason. They belonged the early scholarly community of
Islam, ranked as “heirs of the prophets”, and they included diverse generations of Muslims,

11William A. Graham, Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam: A Reconsideration of the Sources,
with Special Reference to the Divine Saying or Ḥadīth Qudsi, (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 25.
ranging from the Companions of the Prophet (al-ṣaḥāba), the Successors of the Companions (al-tābiʿūn), and the Successors of the Successors (athbāʿ al-tābiʿūn), to those who came many decades after them in roughly the first three centuries A.H. They were persons of great learning who possessed a deep knowledge of the Qur’ān, its Arabic language, and relative proximity to its original milieu. Thus, in time they naturally became authoritative sources of the Qur’ān’s interpretation. They were those who preserved the fragmentary texts of revelation with integrity, read them with fidelity, and invested them with meaning. They played an essential role in the meaning-making process of interpreting the Qur’ān. The primary activity of these early exegetes was to preserve, read, and interpret what God meant by His revelations that form the Qur’ān. The search for the meaning of the Qur’ān was at the heart of their scholarly activity.

The focus on the interpretive relationship between the Qur’ān and the early scholarly community of interpreters distinguishes my study from the work of Smith and Graham. While both of these historians of comparative religion argued more particularly for either the theological and personal-piety roles (Smith) or the oral performative functions (Graham) of scriptures in diverse religious traditions, I have sought to argue that it was the search for the precise meanings of the Qur’ān, rather than its functional status as theological authority for faith and practice or as oral performative text, that the early Muslim commentators focused on in the formulation of their commentaries. It is precisely the historical writings of tafsīr that I have chosen as the proper source to turn to for any analysis of the early Muslim understanding of the Qur’ān. In post-Muḥammadan tradition, tafsīr offers in particular the history of the early Muslim search for the meaning of the Qur’ān on the interpreters’ own terms. Tafsīr is the primary repository or source of meanings that emerged out of the commentator’s engagement with the text of the Qur’ān.
Towards Early Muslim Theory of the Gradual Qur’ān

As the foregoing indicates, in this study it is the early readers/interpreters, rather than the text of the revelation itself, that serves as the primary authority and source for study of the Qur’ān. The meaning of the Qur’ān is not prior to, but rather a product of the early interpreters’ engagement with the text of revelation. Believing, with Wilfred C. Smith, that “the meaning of the Qur’ān as scripture lies not in the text, but in the minds and hearts of Muslims,”12 I have thus searched for the meanings of Qur’ān 17:106, 25:32, and 53:1-18 specifically as these were understood by the early Muslim commentators on their own terms and expressed in their writings of *tafsīr*.

My thesis is that the early Muslim commentators sought to formulate and work out the general theory of the gradual, piecemeal, and serial revelation of the Qur’ān on their own terms. Early works of *tafsīr* were the primary source for the formulation of the concept of gradual revelation. In their writings of *tafsīr*, the early exegetes contributed to the fleshing out of a theory of the gradual Qur’ān through their readings and interpretations.

*Reading Qur’ān 17:106.* In the most prominent Qur’ānic passage bearing on the question of the gradual Qur’ān, the early interpreters raised the linguistic possibility of reading Qur’ān 17:106 in two different ways, as *qur’ānan faraqnāhu* (“A Qur’ān that We made clear”) and as *qur’ānan farraqnāhu* (“A Qur’ān that We have divided into pieces”). The meaning of the verb *f-r-q* is not inherently embedded in the revelatory text of Qur’ān 17:106, but rather a literary product of the readings of the early readers who were also commentators. The great German scholar Rudi Paret (d. 1983) faced a difficult challenge when he attempted to render the precise meaning of the verb *f-r-q* in Qur’ān 17:106. This linguistic difficulty was precisely why he provided two possible meanings of this key verb in his German translation of the Qur’ān: *(Es ist)*

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This duality of possible readings was a product of the early commentators’ engagement with the Qur’ān in their search for its meanings. The majority of early authorities read *f-r-q* in the first form, *faraqāhu* to mean “a Qur’ān that We made clear,” while a smaller minority preferred to read it in the second form, *farraqnāhu*, to mean ”a Qur’ān that We have divided into pieces/parts”. The division of the early authorities on the reading of this passage into “majority” and “minority” scholarly camps was a judgement recorded in the medieval commentary by a major figure in classical interpretation, Abū Ja’far b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). He introduced and applied the idea of a scholarly consensus of the early authorities to justify his own preference for the truth of the first reading over the second form. In doing this, he sought to argue for the true meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 as referring to the detailed, clear, and certain nature of the revelation. Against al-Ṭabarī, I argue that his consensus-based majority reading was seriously flawed, since he completely neglected a majority of the early authorities before him who preferred the second reading, *farraqnāhu*, as referring to the gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of the revelation. He deliberately omitted them in favor of his own preference for the detailed, clear, and certain nature of the Qur’ān. This neglected reading of early Muslim commentators favoring the gradual Qur’ān began to be preserved and recognized only after al-Ṭabarī in the later, medieval commentaries of Mu’tazilī scholars, i.e., Abū Maṣūr al-Matūrīdī (d. 333/945), Abū al-Layth Naṣr b. Muḥammad al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), Aḥmad al-Wāhidī (d. 486/1076), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), Ibn ‘Aṭiyya (d. 541/1147), and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). In this study, I utilize these later, medieval commentaries to track a large number of the early authorities who chose the second

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form of reading farraqnāhu as referring to the gradual, piecemeal descent of the Qurʾān on their own terms. It was therefore the authority of early exegetes, rather than the text of revelation itself, that interpreted Qurʾān 17:106 as referring to its gradual, piecemeal revelation. This reading provided a freedom for the early interpreters to formulate and work out the vocabulary of the gradual Qurʾān not on its own terms, but rather on their own interpretive terms. That is to say, they held that this sūra 17:106 specifically affirmed the idea that God revealed the Qurʾān to Muḥammad only gradually and in a piecemeal fashion, over an extended period of eighteen, twenty, or even twenty-three years.

Reading Qurʾān 25:32. In their interpretations of a second key passage, Qurʾān 25:32, the early commentators sought to formulate and work out their theory about the gradual descent of the Qurʾān in the specific context of religious polemic. The early Muslim formulation of the gradual Qurʾān was linked with the occasions of revelation for Qurʾān 25:32. The early interpreters used the reports concerning the occasion of revelation in order to put their idea of the gradual Qurʾān in its polemical context. The polemical discourse began with the unbelievers who asked Muḥammad why the Qurʾān was not sent down to him “all at once” instead of gradual, piece by piece. The Qurʾān’s polemical response to the unbelievers was elaborated in more detail through the occasions of revelation attributed to the important early authority in exegesis, namely ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās. It was precisely on the occasion-of-revelation reports that the early commentators interpreted the qurʾānic allusion to the unbelievers as referring not only to the Jews, as John Wansbrough (d. 2002) argued, but also to others who disbelieved in the prophecy of Muḥammad and his gradual Qurʾān, such as the Quraysh, the polytheists, and the Christians. Wansbrough had his own reason for identifying the unbelievers as the Jews over other sectarian

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groups, since he situated the late canonization of the Qurʾān in a narrowly Jewish milieu, while I am trying to be more open to any possible readings bearing upon the identity of the unbelievers.

**Reading Qurʾān 53:1.** In the third and last relevant Qurʾānic passage, the early Muslim commentators derived the theory of gradual revelation from their interpretation of the oath *wal-najm idhā hawā* in Qurʾān 53:1 as referring to the gradually revealed-portions of the Qurʾān over a period of years. In particular, they situated their formulation of the gradual revelation again in a polemical milieu, since they believed that the initial portion of *sūrat al-Najm* was addressed to and disseminated in the entourage of the disputed “companion”, namely Muḥammad, in polemical response to the Quraysh or the unbelievers of Makka who attacked the credibility of the Prophet and the divine source of his revelation. In the end, they formulated and worked out the gradual steps of revelation also in the visionary revelatory encounter between the mighty heavenly figure and the Prophet Muḥammad.

In what follows, I shall take up in three separate chapters each of these three Qurʾānic passages and their discussion by the early, and some later, interpreters—discussions that together form the overall theory and understanding of the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān over the course of Muhammad’s two-decades-long prophetic career. This has been a conception of revelation that Muslims have seen not only as unique to the Islamic case but also as superior to the “once for all” revelations claimed by other monotheistic traditions. It is part and parcel of the Muslim faith in the intimate relationship of Prophet and Divinity that produced God’s final and definitive revelation for humankind.
CHAPTER 1
THE VOCABULARY OF, AND THE REASON FOR, THE GRADUAL QUR’ĀN

Problems in Qur’ān 17:106

Qur’ān 17:106 gives only limited insight into the vocabulary of, and the reason for, the gradual revelatory manner of the Qur’ān itself:

And [it is] a Qur’ān that We have divided (into parts or pieces—farrāqnāhu) (or: made clear—faraqnāhu), so that you may recite it to the people in a slow, unhurried manner (‘alā mukthin, or as you live among them). And We have indeed sent it down successively (Qur’ān 17:106).¹

Read by itself, the meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 is frequently unintelligible to believers, since it does not address three specific things in a clear manner: first, the proper reading of the key verb form, whether farrāqnāhu or faraqnāhu; second, the precise manner of revelation being described; and, finally, the specific reason for the manner of revelation being described. These difficulties in understanding the import of Qur’ān 17:106 on its own terms raise several questions that remain largely unaddressed in the scholarly study of the Qur’ān: What was meant in early Islam by the phrase qur’ānan farrāqnāhu (“A Qur’ān that We have divided into parts/pieces”) or qur’ānan faraqnāhu (“A Qur’ān that We made clear/plain”)? What was the implication of these two apparently conflicting readings for the early Muslim understanding of the gradual or successive revelation of individual segments of the Qur’ān, how this was accomplished, and why? A study of Qur’ān 17:106 on its own terms contains insufficient evidence to address these questions fully because this verse gives barely any suggestion of the Islamic vocabulary of, and the reason for, the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān over the course of Muhammad’s long prophetic career.

¹In this chapter, I have consulted the Qur’ān translation primarily from Rudi Paret, Der Koran: Übersetzung. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1966).
In this study, I have chosen to examine Qur’ān 17:106 through the authority of its early interpreters for two reasons: first, they lived in relatively close proximity to the age of revelation and prophecy and must have possessed reasonably better knowledge of how the Qur’ān was originally read, its Arabic language, and its milieu than later scholars of the Qur’ān down to the present day; second, they gained gradually and largely posthumously status in the discursive tradition of Islam as the early, authoritative scholarly community of interpretation who sought to read, interpret, and work out the meaning of the Qur’ān in their works of tafsīr.

In the present chapter, I draw upon the hitherto largely neglected works of tafsīr in its early, formative stage to argue that the early interpreters sought to formulate and work out, on their own terms, the vocabulary for the revelatory manner of, and, more importantly, the reason for, the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān, as opposed to a single revelation of the whole. The early Muslim formulations of, and their arguments for, the theory of what I refer to here as “the gradual Qur’ān” will be structured in four sections: first, I describe how a large number of early and later, medieval interpreters chose the reading farraqnāhu, instead of faraqnāhu, in Qur’ān 17:106, yielding “a Qur’ān that We have divided (into parts or pieces),” indicating namely a piecemeal, serial revelation of the Qur’ān over many years. Second, I analyze how these commentators formulated the vocabulary of the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān on their own terms as reflected in the multivocal tradition of early tafsīr. Third, I explore how these exegetes produced varied, multiple, and conflicting interpretations of the scriptural reason given in this passage for the gradual, piecemeal revelation of the Qur’ān over an extended period of years: so that you [Muḥammad] may recite it [the Qur’ān] to the people in a style known in Arabic as ‘alā mukthin. The early interpretations of the phrase ‘alā mukthin as referring to the act of reciting the divine word, for some, in a slow, unhurried manner; for others, at an easy, deliberate pace for the
purpose of Qur’ān memorization and comprehension; and still for others, in a gradual fashion, a little at a time, over a long period of years. Fourth and finally, I conclude with some remarks about the early Muslims’ vocabulary of, and their arguments for, the gradual, piecemeal revelatory manner of the Qur’ān in conversation with the scholarly views of several modern scholars engaged in the study of the Qur’ān and its interpretation.

The Conflict of Two Readings

In their works of tafsīr, the early interpreters were not entirely unanimous in their reading of Qur’ān 17:106. Indeed, they differed as to what God meant exactly by His use of the words: And a Qur’ān that We have divided into parts or pieces (farraqnāhu) or made clear (faraqnāhu). Some preferred to read farraqnāhu to refer to the gradual, piecemeal nature of the Qur’ān, while others read faraqnāhu to mean the clear, plain nature of this revelation. In this section, I explore their conflicting modes of reading the qur’ānic phrase and the implications of these readings for the understanding of the Qur’ān in early Islam.

I begin with the historically prominent figure in classical interpretation, Abū Ja’far b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). He was heir to an early Islamic tradition of tafsīr and preserved a wealth of materials from many early interpreters of the Qur’ān who preceded him. Indeed, he was one of the major interpreters through whom segments or portions of the hitherto largely unpublished early, formative works of tafsīr in the first two-and-one-half centuries of Islam were preserved. These he collected in his massive commentary entitled Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta‘wīl āy al-Qur’ān (“The Compendium of the Clarification for the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur’ān”). His remarkable achievement in the field of exegesis has rightly earned him an enviable reputation as “the leader of interpreters” (imām al-mufassirīn), as a learned scholar Aḥmad M.
Shākir (d. 1958), one of two editors of Jāmi‘ al-bayān put it.² The tafsīr of al-Ṭabarī was arguably the first major commentary to preserve the early Muslim variant readings of Qur’ān 17:106 and to classify their differing readings into majority and minority camps. According to al-Ṭabarī, the majority were the reciters of the Qur’ān from the major urban centers of learning (qurrā‘ al-amṣār).³ The qurrā‘ of early Islam were not known exclusively as the readers of the Qur’ān because they did not simply offer a particular reading (qirā‘a), but actively engaged in the interpretation of the Qur’ān (tafsīr al-Qur’ān). For this specific reason, they were also known as the early interpreters, since they were, by and large, careful readers of the Qur’ān with an impressive knowledge of the text and its original readings upon which to base their learned interpretive activity in search of meaning. Al-Ṭabarī argued that the majority of these early interpreters in the major Islamic metropolises preferred to read the verb f-r-q in Qur’ān 17:106 as faraqnāhu, that is to say, form I of the verb. They chose this first mode of reading to mean: And a Qur’ān that We made certain (aḥkamnāhu), detailed (faṣalnāhu), and clear (bayyanāhu).⁴ With this reading, they sought to interpret and work out the revelation of sūra 17:106 solely as a specific reference to the certain, detailed, and clear nature of the Qur’ān, a meaning that is sufficient in itself and needs no further explanation. Contrary to this majority reading, according to al-Ṭabarī, a minority of early interpreters preferred to read farraqnāhu as form II of the verb fa‘ala.

Al-Ṭabarī attributed this minority reading only to the greatest authority among the early interpreters of the Qur’ān: ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās (d. 687/688), a cousin and companion (ṣaḥābī) of

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⁴Ibid.
Muḥammad. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās was perceived in the memory of both the early and later medieval commentary tradition primarily as, in the words of ‘Ikrima al-Barbarī al- Başrī (d. 106/724), mawlā of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās. ‘Abbās and early interpreter of the Qur’ān, “an excellent interpreter of the Qur’ān” (ni’ma tarjumān al-Qur’ān Ibn ‘Abbās).5 ‘Ikrima also reported that the Prophet prayed for his cousin as follows: “O God! Grant ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās wisdom and teach him interpretation [of the Qur’ān].”6 For his closeness to the Prophet and his authoritative status in the field of exegesis, Ibn ‘Abbās was the most frequently cited early commentator in the Tafsīr of al-Ṭabarī. In his exegesis of Qur’ān 17:106, al-Ṭabarī’s citation of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās alone as one of those “minority” exegetes who preferred the second mode of reading farraqnāhu to mean “a Qur’ān revealed in a gradual fashion” reads as follows:

It is reported on the authority of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās that he reads [Qur’ān 17:106] with the double letter “r”, farraqnāhu, to mean, “We sent it [the Qur’ān] down [to Muhammad only gradually and in piecemeal fashion], namely part after part (sha’an ba’d sha’in), verse after verse (āyatan ba’d āyatin), and story after story (qaṣatan ba’d qaṣatin).”7

A reading of this commentary reveals that ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās was the first major early exegete to offer his exegesis of sūra 17:106 as a reference not to the certain, detailed, and clear meaning of the Qur’ān, but rather to the gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of revelation. It appears obvious that, for him, Qur’ān 17:106 speaks about its revelatory manner as consisting in short pieces of revelation, namely, a verse (sing. āya, pl. āyāt), story (sing. qaṣas, pl. qiṣas), and passage of revelation (sing. sūra, pl. suwar). In sum, the short pieces of the Qur’ān were in his view the focal point of Qur’ān 17:106.

The conflict of these two different readings in early Islam, as al-Ṭabarī himself noted in his commentary, leaves several questions unaddressed: Where did he stand regarding his own

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6 Ibid.
7 Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān, 15:178.
presentation of two contradictory readings: *faraqnāhu* or *farraqnāhu*? How did he establish his scholarly argument for the preferability of one reading over another? And how well-attested was his judgment as to the preferred, “majority” reading of the Qur’ān within the scholarly community of both early and later medieval interpreters? To address these questions fully, I seek to put the great commentary of al-Ṭabarī in an extended conversation with other early and later, medieval works of *tafsīr*.

Thus the first question is: Where did al-Ṭabarī stand in the light of his own presentation of two possible but conflicting readings, *faraqnāhu* or *farraqnāhu*? The *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī is definitely the single primary source we can consult to understand where he stood with regard to the conflicting readings of Qur’ān 17:106 and why he preferred one reading over another. In his *Tafsīr*, he makes his position very clear: “In our opinion, the correct reading of the two is the first one” (*awlā bi-al-qirā’at bi-al-ṣawāb ‘indana al-qirā’at al-ūlā*).⁸ This expression of his claim to the truth (*awlā bi-al-ṣawāb*) shows that in the particular case of Qur’ān 17:106 he was seeking to establish the first mode of reading, *faraqnāhu*, as the correct one. That is to say, he preferred reading *faraqnāhu* to determine the intended sense of Qur’ān 17:106: “And We made the Qur’ān detailed, clear, and certain, so that you [Muḥammad] may recite it to the people unhurriedly.”⁹ Thus he interpreted Qur’ān 17:106 as simply emphasizing the detailed, clear, and certain nature of the divine revelation.

I now proceed to address the second question, how al-Ṭabarī established his scholarly argument for the preferability of the first reading over the second, through a careful reading of his own *tafsīr*. This can be simply stated: in his *tafsīr*, al-Ṭabarī based his choice of the first reading entirely upon the consensus of the scholarly community as he understood it. Thus he

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argued: “In our opinion, the correct reading of the two is the first one, since it has been agreed upon by the consensus of the scholarly community (al-hujja al-mujtama’a) and no disagreement [with consensus] is allowed on matters of religion and the Qur’ān.” It is clear that, for al-Ṭabarī, the authority of a majority of interpreters agrees that, by virtue of scholarly consensus, the first mode of reading—faraqānu— is considered “the true or sound opinion” (al-ṣawāb). Once the consensus has been established by the overwhelming majority of interpreters, the truth of the first reading becomes epistemologically authoritative and there is no longer room for any disagreement on the reading (khilāf al-qirā’a), especially when it comes to the fundamental matters of religion and the Qur’ān (min amr al-dīn wa al-Qur’ān). As a consequence, he applies the authoritativeness of scholarly consensus about the truth of the first, majority reading to invalidate the second, minority reading. The latter reading is no longer valid, for it holds a different opinion that goes against the consensus of a majority of scholars. Thus al-Ṭabarī established his theory of consensus in terms of “majority” and “minority” scholarly camps.

Al-Ṭabarī has often been regarded as the first major commentator to demonstrate how the doctrine of consensus was operative not only in the formulation of Islamic law, but also in the interpretation of the Qur’ān. Thus, as both jurist and commentator, he brought the standard of scholarly consensus to the interpretation of Qur’ān 17:106 as his justification of the validity of one mode of reading over another. With his invocation of scholarly consensus, al-Ṭabarī intended to refer not to consensus among the jurists (al-fuqahā’), but rather to consensus among the scholarly community of interpretation, the mufassirūn, or, as he put it, the ahl al-ta’wil. Accordingly, he argued for the preference of the first mode of reading over the second because it was the consensus of a majority from among ‘the party of interpretation’ (jama’a min ahl al-

10Ibid.
It was specifically the consensus of the early interpreters (ahl al-ta’wīl), rather than that of the jurists (al-fuqahā’), that he deliberately intended to serve as his proof (al-ḥujja) for the validity of the first reading over the second. By the term ḥujja, he was referring to “those whom he regards as authorities” (al-ḥujja hunā alladhīna yaḥtajju bihim). Specifically he cited just three early authorities: (1) Ubayy b. Ka’b (d. 21/642), a companion of Muḥammad, “scribe of the revelation” (kātib al-wahy), and “the best reciter of the Qur’ān;” (2) ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, a companion of the Prophet and the greatest authority in the field of exegesis; and (3) al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), a successor (tābi’ī), reciter, and commentator. He used the respective commentaries of these three exegetes to justify his own preferred interpretation of Qur’ān 17:10 as referring to the detailed, clear, and certain nature of the revelation. Thus he tells us that ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās read the phrase qur’ānan faraqnāhu to mean “We made the Qur’ān detailed (faṣalnāhu)”; for Ubayy b. Ka’b, it meant “We made the Qur’ān clear (bayyanāhu)”; and for al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, it meant “God distinguished between truth and falsehood (faraqa Allah bayn al-ḥaq wa al-bāṭil).” These judgments of three early authorities on the meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 were thus offered by al-Ṭabarī as the authoritative proof, or ḥujja for the validity of one reading over another.

I now turn to the third question: How well-attested in reality was al-Ṭabarī’s preferred reading of Qur’ān 17:106 within the scholarly community of both early and later, medieval

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11Ibid.
13For his significant role as scribe of the revelation, there is a historical report that recounts how God asked Muḥammad to mention Ubayy b. Ka’b by name. The report reads: “When God sends [Qur’ān 96:1] down to His Messenger, Recite in the name of your Lord who created, the Prophet, peace be upon him, came to Ubayy b. Ka’b and said to him: ‘Indeed, Gabriel asked me to come to you so that you may write it down and recite it by heart.’ Then Ubayy b. Ka’b asked: ‘O Messenger of God, did God mention me by name?’ The prophet replied, ‘yes.’ See, Ibn Sa’d, al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā, 2:341.
14For a testimony of his excellent recitation of the Qur’ān, Malik b. Anas (d. 179/795), a leading jurist from Medina, reported that the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, said: “the best reciter of my community is Ubayy b. Ka’b.” Ibid., 3:499.
15For the earliest biography of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, see Ibn Sa’d, Ṭabaqāt, 7:156-78.
16Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān, 15:178.
interpreters? I argue that his preferred reading was not well-attested within the early scholarly community of interpretation. Contrary to what al-Ṭabarī argued, if we look further at the sources, the three early authorities whom he cites did not entirely agree with the early majority reading of Qur’ān 17:106. The only early authority who stood firmly behind the first reading, *faraqna*, was al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, while the other two were not entirely unqualified as to their first reading.

Ubayy b. Kaʿb actually fell into both majority and minority camps because, while he is said in one report to have preferred to read Qur’ān 17:106 with *faraqna*hu in the first form to mean “We made the Qur’ān clear,”\(^{17}\) in another report, he is said to have read *faraqna*hu in the second form to mean “We made the revelatory process of the Qur’ān only separately (*mufarraqan*) and in a piecemeal fashion (*munajjaman*).\(^{18}\)

Just like his predecessor, Ubayy, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās fell also into both majority and minority camps because he was reported even within the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī as an authority who preferred to read the verb *f-r-q* in Qur’ān 17:106 in one report as *faraqna*hu in the first form to mean “We made the Qur’ān detailed”\(^{19}\) and, in a second report, as *faraqna*hu in the second form to mean “We sent it [the Qur’ān] down [to Muḥammad in a gradual manner] part after part, verse after verse, and story after story”).\(^{20}\) For this reason, both Ubayy b. Kaʿb and ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās could be grouped in both the majority and minority camps.

The only authority who could be said to represent al-Tabari’s first, majority camp, was al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, because he read Qur’ān 17:106 in the first form, as *faraqna*. However, this is misleading, as he actually interpreted this first-form reading, *faraqna*, as conveying the second meaning; namely the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān over the course of eighteen years. In

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\(^{17}\)Ibid.


\(^{20}\)Ibid.
response to a question posed to him by his interlocutor Abū Rajā’ [‘Imrān b. Taym or ‘Imrān b. Milḥān] al-‘Uṭāridī (d. 105/723-724) concerning the proper reading of Qur’ān 17:106, he interpreted the first form, farraqnāhu, as meaning what the second form, farraqnāhu, usually means. A report on this disagreement of reading between al-Ḥasan al- Başrī and Abū Rajā’ was initially preserved in the tafsīr of al-Ṭabarī, but also gathered and published in the tafsīr of Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as follows:

It was reported on the authority of Abū Rajā’, who said that al-Ḥasan recited the words—And a Qur’ān that We divided into parts or pieces, so that you may recite it to the people unhurriedly [Qur’ān 17:106]—and then commented: God—blessed and exalted—used to send down the Qur’ān in separate parts, since He knew that the Qur’ān would exist and speak to the people and that the time span between the first and the last revelation was eighteen years. One day, I, Abū Rajā’, posed a question that displeased him: O Abā Sa‘īd, wa Qur’ānan farraqnāhu—so Abū Rajā’ read the phrase with a double letter “r”. Al-Ḥasan replied: not farraqnāhu, but rather farraqnāhu—thus he chose to read the word with a single letter “r”. Abū Rajā asked a further question: who has spoken to you about this mode of reading, O Abā Sa‘īd, companions of Muḥammad (aṣḥāb Muḥammad)? Al-Ḥasan responded, if not companions of Muḥammad, who else has talked to me about it! and finally concluded that God sent the Qur’ān down to Muḥammad [only gradually and in piecemeal fashion]—first, in Mecca prior to his emigration to Medina for eight years and then, in Medina for another ten years.21

This exegetical report proves that al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī preferred to read the first form of the verb, farraqnāhu, as having the meaning of the second form, namely as indicating a gradual, piecemeal revelation of the Qur’ān over a period of eighteen years. His commentary on Qur’ān 17:106 as a reference to the gradual revelation is given precedence over his preference for the first reading. Whatever his reading preference, he identified the gist of Qur’ān 17:106 as a clear proof-text for the gradualism of revelation in time and place. Its time span was within the eighteen years of the Prophet’s career and its geographical loci were the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Thus, as the basis for the validity of the first reading over the second, the consensus of scholars on the meaning of clarity as opposed to gradual revelation loses its majority support, for two of its three interpreters could not be said to be solely in the first, “majority” camp. Ubayy b. Ka‘b and ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās could also have been counted in the second, “minority” camp, since both argued in alternative reports for the validity of reading Qurʾān 17:106 in the second form, confirming the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān over a period of several years. The third proponent of the first reading, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, stood firmly for, and became the only early authority to take, the first reading, farraqnāhu, to carry the second meaning, thus confirming the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān over a period of years. As a result, the scholarly consensus on the validity of the first, “majority” reading was not really a consensus, for it was actually only supported by a single early interpreter, namely al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, and in addition, in his interpretation of this reading, he held to the same sense of the verb as that championed by the second, “minority” camp. Thus al-Ṭabarī’s own assessment of the “majority” over against the “minority” reading in his work of tafsīr was not actually justified by his own sources.

The Early Muslim Vocabulary of the Gradual Qurʾān

In this section, I draw upon both a number of early and many later, medieval traditions of tafsīr to show that, contrary to what al-Ṭabarī argued in his work, the number of authorities who stood firmly behind the second, “minority” reading, farraqnāhu, was in fact far more numerous than those whom he held to be in the first, “majority” camp. Specifically, I explore how multiple early and later, medieval interpreters preferred to take the second reading—farraqnāhu—in Qurʾān 17:106 to mean “a Qurʾān that We have divided (into parts or pieces),” namely a text derived
from a gradual, piecemeal process of revelation that took place over a period of years in the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās was the greatest authority among the early interpreters of the Qur’ān who showed his strong preference for the second over the first reading. A study of his exegetical reports in later, medieval works of tafsīr reveals that he read Qur’ān 17:106 consistently in the second form, farraqnāhu, to mean that the Qur’ān was a gradual revelation. The proofs for this were preserved in several reports. Al-Ṭabarī himself preserved three exegetical reports attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās reporting him as saying, in the first report, “the Qur’ān was sent down in a single piece to the lowest heaven (al-samā’ al-dunyā) on the night of power (laylat al-Qadr) and then revealed [to Muḥammad in installments] over a period of twenty years”; in the second report, “the Qur’ān was sent down [to Muḥammad] verse by verse”; and in the final report, “We sent it [the Qur’ān] down [to Muḥammad] little by little, verse by verse, and story after story.”

A careful reading of these reports together shows that ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās spoke of the revelatory process in two-stages. The first stage of revelation involved the heavenly archetype of the Qur’ān preserved in the heavenly tablet (al-lawḥ al-mahfūz, Qur’ān 85:19-22) and then sent down in a single revelation to the lowest level of heaven (al-samā’ al-dunyā) closest to earth. A later major interpreter, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Rāzī b. Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938), recounts in another report a conversation between the early exegete Sa‘id b. Jubayr (d. 95/714) and his master ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās about this first stage of revelation. In this report, Sa‘id says:

I asked ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās about the meaning of God’s words: Behold, We sent it [the Qur’ān] down on the night of power (Qur’ān 97:1), We sent it [the Qur’ān] down on a blessed night (Qur’ān 44:3), and The month of Ramadān, wherein the Qur’an was sent down (Qur’ān 2:185): “Do these passages refer to the revelatory manner of the Qur’ān in its entirety or in part?” In response, ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbās

22 Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān, 15:178.
said: “God sent the Qurʾān down entirely, as a single revelation, from the seventh heaven to the lowest heaven on the night of power and He swore by the setting of the Stars: No! I swear by the setting of the Stars (Qurʾān 56:75). Then Gabriel sent it down [to earth].”

This first stage of the Qurʾānic revelatory process ended thus with Gabriel who, in the second stage of revelation, was instructed, with divine permission, to bring the revealed parts of the Qurʾān down to Muḥammad only in a gradual fashion. A full description of the two-stages of the Qurʾānic revelation was summed up by the early Başran interpreter Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-巴基 al-Qayrawānī (d. 200/816) in a report attributed to ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbās as follows: “The Qurʾān was sent down in a single revelation, all at once, on the night of power [stage one] and then revealed [to Muḥammad] in piecemeal installments (muğman), namely three, four, and five verses, more or less than this” [stage two].

This division of revelation into two stages emerged plausibly from the ambiguous nature of the Qurʾān when it speaks of its own revelatory process, on the one hand, as a single Revelation sent down on the night of power (Qurʾān 97:1), or on a blessed night (Qurʾān 44:3), or in the month of Ramadān (Qurʾān 2:185); but on the other hand, as a piecemeal Revelation, given one segment at a time to Muḥammad at irregular intervals over the course of twenty years (Qurʾān 17:106 and 25:32). In several reports attributed to him, ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbās sought to solve the problem of such seemingly conflicting passages in the Qurʾān by classifying its manner of revelation into two different stages: “all at once” in the heavenly stage and piecemeal in the earthly stage.

This idea of the piecemeal revelation of the Qurʾān over a period of time was precisely what ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbās meant by his reading the verb f-r-q in Qurʾān 17:106 in the second form, as farraqnahu. A later major interpreter, Abū Ishāq Aḥmad, known as al-Ṭa‘labī (d.}

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preserved an exegetical report that recounts how ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās preferred to read Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form as farraqnāhu to argue that “the Qur’ān was not sent down in a single revelation, “all at once” (marratan wāhidatan), but rather in piecemeal installments (nujūman) over a period of twenty years.” The second reading—farraqnāhu—was explained with specific reference to the concept of nujūman, for the Arabic term referred in this instance not, as it does in many instances, to the stars, but rather to the revelatory manner of the Qur’ān that took place only in serial installments over a period of years. All these exegetical reports clearly demonstrate that ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās preferred the second reading over the first because he took the divine word farraqnāhu to argue that the Qur’ān was sent down to Muḥammad in installments of three, four, and five verses at a time over a period of roughly twenty years. Thus the early Muslim formulation of the vocabulary of the gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of revelation emerged precisely from the reading of Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form, as farraqnāhu.

Qatāda b. Di‘āma al-Baṣrī (d. 118/736) was a prominent Successor (tabi‘ī) and the early Baṣran authority on exegesis who also read Qur’ān 17:106 also with the second form, farraqnāhu, to mean a gradual revelation over a period of years. The proofs for his reading preference were preserved in three exegetical reports, as follows:

First, al-Ṭabarî reported how Qatāda chose to read Qur’ān 17:106 as farraqnāhu to mean that “the Qur’ān did not come down [to Muḥammad] in a single revelation, all at once (jamī’an) and the time span between the first and the last revelation was about twenty years.” A reading of this report shows that Qatāda was speaking of the earthly stage of revelation of the Qur’an that was communicated to Muḥammad only gradually over a period of twenty years.

26 In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma in al-Ṭabarî, Jāmi‘ al-bayān, 15:178.
Second, the renowned medieval philosopher, theologian, and interpreter Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) preserved a report that recounted how Qatāda took the second mode of reading, *farraqnāhu*, to mean that “We have cut the Qur’ān into pieces (wa-qaṭṭa’nāhu), one verse after another and one *sūra* after another.” The revelation of the Qur’ān was thus specified in this report as a piece-by-piece revelatory process—occurring verse by verse, *sūra* by *sūra*—over a period of time.

Third, the medieval Egyptian reformer, polymath, and interpreter, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), preserved an exegetical report that recounted how Qatāda preferred to read Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form, as *farraqnāhu*, to mean that “the Qur’ān did not come down in one night or two, one month or two, one year or two. And the time span between the first and the last revelation was twenty years,” and, he adds more specifically, “ten years in Mecca and ten years in Medina.” The Qur’ān was not given to Muḥammad in a short period of time, namely “one night or two, one month or two, one year or two,” but rather over two decades that began in Mecca and ended in Medina. This gradual revelatory manner of the Qur’ān over a long period of time was integrally linked and coextensive with the prophetic career of the divinely-gifted man, Muḥammad, in the two holy cities.

Abū Saʿīd b. al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār al-Ṭamīmī al-Ṭaṣrī, the early Başran authority on scriptural exegesis, also read Qur’ān 17:106 as *farraqnāhu* to refer to a gradual manner of revelation over a period of time. In his commentary on the verb *farraqnāhu*, he argued that “God has divided the Qur’ān into parts, or pieces and sent it down [to Muḥammad] day after day,

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month after month, and year after year, until He reached what He intended [to reveal].”  

In this report, al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār argued for the gradually revealed parts of the Qurʾān over a period of time because God has cut Revelation into parts, or pieces, and sent them down to Muḥammad only in piecemeal fashion, one segment at a time over a continuous period of days, months, and years during the course of his long prophetic career.

Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767) was another early Başran commentator and storyteller (qāṣṣ) who took the second mode of reading farraqnāhu to mean a gradual, successive revelatory manner of the Qurʾān over a period of about twenty years. In his commentary on Qurʾān 17:106, he argued that

> We have cut the Qurʾān into pieces ( qaṭṭaʾnāhu), that is to say, We have divided it between the first and the last [revelation] [over] roughly twenty years in a successive manner. We did not send it down [to Muḥammad] in a single Revelation, ‘all at once’ ( jumlatan wāḥidatan), as the Unbelievers said in the first portion of Qurʾān 25:32: *Why has the Qurʾān not been sent down upon him [Muḥammad] all at once?*

In his explanation of what God meant by His word farraqnāhu in the second form, Muqātil thus used intra-qurʾānic interpretation here, looking to another revealed text, Qurʾān 25:32.

The use of such intra-qurʾānic proof texting in exegesis appeared again in the early commentary of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam, a son of the famous Companion of the Prophet, Zayd b. Aslam (d. 136/754). ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (d. 182/798) was a prominent Successor and an early authority in the field of exegesis who preferred to read farraqnāhu in the second form to mean a piecemeal manner of revelation. In his exegesis of Qurʾān 17:106, he wrote that “God has divided the Qurʾān” [into parts or pieces] and that “the Qurʾān did not come down [to

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Muḥammad] in its entirety, [but rather in pieces].”  

It appears clear that, for ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd, the phrase farraqnāhu in Qur’ān 17:106 means “to come and divide in pieces.” In support of his opinion, he used intra-qur’ānic proof texting by citing also the aforementioned text of Qur’ān 25:32: And the unbelievers say: ‘Why has the Qur’ān not been sent down upon him all at once?’ Thus [it has been sent down in this manner], that We may strengthen your heart thereby, and We have recited it very distinctly (Qur’ān 25:32).

There was no specific reason why Muqātil and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd employed the intra-qur’ānic method of interpreting the meaning of the Qur’ān, or what was defined in the scholarly tradition of tafsīr as “the interpretation of the Qur’ān by the Qur’ān [itself]” (tafsīr al-Qur’ān bil-Qur’ān). It seems plausible to argue that both commentators used the method of intra-qur’ānic proof texting not only to identify a theme shared by two related passages of the Qur’ān that speak of its own piecemeal, gradual revelatory process, but also to illuminate a point by comparing two revelations. The comparison of these two qur’ānic revelations, Qur’ān 25:32 and 17:106, reveals both similarity and difference. One striking similarity is that both passages offer very limited suggestion of the vocabulary of gradual revelation, which is expressed, first, in a negative formulation: The unbelievers said: Why has the Qur’ān not been sent down upon him [Muḥammad] in a single revelatory act, all at once? Thus [it has been sent down in this manner], so that We may strengthen thy heart thereby (Qur’ān 25:32); and, second, in a positive formulation: a Qur’ān that We have divided [into parts or pieces], so that you may read it to the people unhurriedly (Qur’ān 17:106). A reading of these passages shows that a single scriptural passage offers on its own terms limited insight into the vocabulary of the gradual, piecemeal revelatory manner of the Qur’ān, but in conjunction with other passages its sense can be better interpreted.

The early community of interpreters spoke clearly about the vocabulary of the gradual Qur’ān on *their own terms*, which often involved intra-Qur’ānic comparison. The early Muslims’ formulation of the vocabulary of the piecemeal revelation on their own terms emerged from the application of intra-Qur’ānic proof texting in the interpretation of Qur’ān 25:32 and 17:106. This method of intra-Qur’ānic interpretation served to illuminate not only a point of similarity as to the vocabulary of the gradual Qur’ān in these two revelations, but also a point of difference as to the divine reason for the gradual revelatory manner of the Qur’ān. One reason was to strengthen the heart of Muḥammad in a time when he had lost confidence in his prophetic mission and begun to be unsure of his divinely-given function as a prophet of God (Qur’ān 25:32); and the other reason was to command the Prophet to recite the Qur’ān to his people in an unhurried manner. Put differently, one is intended for the sake of the inner/private life of Muḥammad and the other is for his external/public task of prophecy.

Finally, Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī al-Qayrawānī (d. 200/816), an early jurist and commentator, also read *farraqnāhu* in Qur’ān 17:106 as referring to the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān. In his commentary on Qur’ān 17:106, he wrote: “God sent down the Qur’ān [to Muḥammad in installments] over a period of twenty-three years.”32 He preserved the opinions of two early authorities before him, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār, who both stood firmly behind the second reading and interpreted the meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 as a clear proof text for the gradual Qur’ān.

This survey of the early interpreters in al-Ṭabarī’s “minority” camp who showed their preference for the second reading, *farraqnāhu*, reveals a number of remarkable findings: first, they were by no means part of a second, “minority” camp, as al-Ṭabarī argued, since they far

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exceeded in number those in his first, “majority” camp. The clear evidence of *tafsīr* in its early, formative tradition shows that the minority camp consisted of a large number of early authorities who stood firmly behind the second reading. They included, among others, such early figures as Ubayy b. Ka‘b, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, Sa‘īd b. Jubayr, Abū Rajā‘ al-‘Uţāridī, Qatāda b. Dī‘āma, Ismā‘īl al-Suddī, al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam, and Yaḥyā b. Sallām. Second, many of these early interpreters lived predominantly in the city of Baṣra. This is to suggest that there was a clear connection between Baṣra and the proponents of the theory of the gradual nature of the Qur’ān’s revelation in its earthly stage. Third, many of these early commentators in the “minority” camp were largely neglected in the *Tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī, making them too easily forgotten as advocates of the reading of Qur’ān 17:106 with the second verbal form, *farraqnāhu*. In his presentation of those who stood firmly behind the second reading, al-Ṭabarī completely neglected the names of such important early figures as Sa‘īd b. Jubayr, Ismā‘īl al-Suddī, al-Hasan b. Dīnār, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, and Yaḥyā b. Sallām. Among these early authorities, Muqātil b. Sulaymān had the worst reputation in the memory of the scholarly communities because he was accused of being an anthropomorphist, a Murji‘ī, a Zaydī, and, more critically, a fabricator of Ḥadīth.33 His earliest full commentary on the Qur’ān was not cited for more than a century after his time, nor later in the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī. It started to be noted only just after Ṭabarī, from the tenth century onward, when a number of later, medieval commentators, i.e. Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdhī (d. 333/945), Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), Abū Ishāq Ahmad al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035) and his chief disciple Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076), began to recognize, appreciate, and use the exegesis of Muqātil in their own respective commentaries on the Qur’ān. Since then, Muqātil and his early

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commentary have continued to be cited ever more frequently as an early primary source for later, medieval interpretations of the Qurʾān. Fourth, as a criterion for the truth of the first, majority reading, the authoritativeness of scholarly consensus did not, in fact, put an end to disagreement over the proper reading of Qurʾān 17:106 among the exegetes. What happened after the invention of consensus to authorize the truth of the first, “majority” reading was that the validity of the second, “minority” reading still persisted in and after the early period of Islam, and it continued to flourish in the historical memory of medieval communities of interpretation as well.

Indeed, a large number of medieval commentators took the meaning of Qurʾān 17:106 to refer specifically to a gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of revelation. In his recently edited and published commentary on the Qurʾān, entitled Taʿwīlāt al-Qurʾān, Ṭuḥayib al-Matūridī (d. 333/945) wrote that there were two early modes of reading the verb f-r-q in Qurʾān 17:106, faraqnāhu and farraqnāhu. Some interpreters took the first reading—faraqnāhu—to mean, “We made the Qurʾān certain (aḥkamnāhu) and firm (thabatnāhu) so that falsehood comes not to it from any direction, neither from before it nor from behind it” (lā yaʾtihi al-bāṭilu min bayna yadayhī wa-la min khalfihi); while others took the second reading—farraqnāhu—to mean that “We cut the Qurʾān into pieces during the process of revelation—sūra by sūra, verse by verse, on the basis of what was sent down” (wa qaṭṭaʾ nāhu fī al-inzāl, suratan fa-suratin wa āyatan fa-āyatin, ′alā mā unzila). Where did al-Matūridī stand in the light of his presentation of the two conflicting readings? A close reading of his commentary on Qurʾān 17:106 itself does not indicate his preference between the two, but he showed strong preference for the second over the first reading when he interpreted the term faṣṣalnāhu in Qurʾān 7:52 to mean, first, bayyanāhu, “We made the Qurʾān clear,” and, second, farraqnāhu, “We divided the Qurʾān into

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pieces.” It was precisely in his exegesis of fassalnāhu as referring to gradual, piecemeal revelation of the Qurʾān that we see his method of intra-qurʾānic interpretation by looking for another revelation, specifically Qurʾān 17:106, that would clarify the passage (7:52) under consideration.

We have divided the Qurʾān into parts or pieces over the course of its revelatory process and We did not send it down [to Muḥammad] in a single revelation, all at once (jumlatan wāḥidatan), as in God’s saying: And a Qurʾān that We have divided into parts or pieces, so that you may recite it to the people unhurriedly (Qurʾān 17:106), that is to say, We have divided the Qurʾān into parts or pieces over the course of its revelatory process according to certain events or circumstances (ʾalā qadr al-nawāzil) in order that they [the people] know the legal import of each verse according to the event, circumstance, or occasion that prompted the sending down of a given revelation. Or God sent down the Qurʾān in a piecemeal fashion (mufarraqan, lit., separately) because it was easier (ahwan wa-aisar) for the people to comprehend the laws of God if the Qurʾān was sent down in parts or pieces (bi-al-tafārīq), rather than in whole or complete (jumlatan).36

Thus it is evident that al-Matūrīdī stood firmly behind the second reading by taking the form II verb farraqnāhu to refer to “a Qurʾān revealed in pieces.” He argued that the reason for the piecemeal manner of revelation was tied to the Prophet’s task of reciting the Qurʾān to his people gradually so that, first, they knew the legal import of each revelation, none of which came to Muḥammad in an historical vacuum, but rather in a polemical milieu, and, second, by virtue of a gradual, step-by-step revelatory process, they comprehended the laws of God more easily and practically. Had the Qurʾān been sent down in a single revelatory act, they would have encountered problems in understanding their own Scripture even in their native language.

Abū al-Layth Naṣr b. Muḥammad al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983) was a medieval Mātūrīdī theologian, Ḥanafī jurist, and commentator who argued for the only possible meaning of Qurʾān 17:106 as “a Qurʾān revealed in parts.” He goes on to say, “God sent down the Qurʾān, through

36Ibid., 5:362.
Gabriel, in separate parts (*mutafarraqān*), that is, verse after verse and *sūra* after *sūra*.” It is clear that Gabriel was interpreted in this work as the intermediary of Revelation who, according to divine command, brought the Qur’ān down to the Prophet Muḥammad in piecemeal fashion. This fragmented revelation of the Qur’ān took the form of repeated communication of new verses (*āya*) or longer passages (*sūra*) over a period of time.

Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāhidī (d. 486/1076) was another medieval interpreter to prefer the second mode of reading *farraqnāhu* to indicate gradual revelation of the Qur’ān over a period of time. The proofs for this are preserved in his three varying-length commentaries on the Qur’ān: *The Short Commentary* (*al-Wajīz*), *The Middle Commentary* (*al-Wasīṭ*), and *The Large Commentary* (*al-Basīṭ*). In *The Short Commentary*, he offered his commentary on Qur’ān 17:106 as follows: “We cut the Qur’ān into pieces (*qaṭṭa‘ nāhu*), namely, verse after verse, *sūra* after *sūra*, over the course of twenty years.” In his formulation of the gradual Qur’ān, he was fully cognizant of the significance of the early traditions of *tafsīr* as the primary sources of his own, later interpretation. In his *Middle* and *Large Commentaries*, he cited a number of early interpreters, such as: Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714) who wrote, “the Qur’ān was sent down in one piece from the highest heaven to the lowest heaven and then revealed [to Muḥammad gradually] over a period of many years”; Ismāʿīl al-Suddī (d. 128/745) who wrote, “We divided the Qur’ān into pieces, verse after verse, *sūra* after *sūra*, and We did not send it down [to Muḥammad] in a single revelation, all at once”; and Qatāda b. Diʿāma who wrote, “the time span between the first and the last revelation was twenty years.” The views of these three early authorities shaped the

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way in which al-Wāhidī formulated his own understanding of Qur’ān 17:106 as referring to the Qur’an’s gradual revelation over the two-decade length of the Prophet’s mission.

The influential medieval grammarian, theologian, and commentator, Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, known as Jār Allāh, ‘God’s neighbor,’ (d. 538/1144), held also that the revelation of Qur’ān 17:106 was about a gradually revealed Qur’ān. In his commentary, he cited two early authorities: first, Ubayy b. Ka‘b who said that the verse meant, “We made the sending down of the Qur’ān piece by piece (mufarraqan) and in a gradual fashion (munajjaman); and, second, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās who held its meaning to be, “We did not send [the Qur’ān to Muḥammad] in two or three days, but over a long period of time. That is to say, the interval between the first and the last revelation was twenty years.”40 Thus al-Zamakhsharī used these two opinions as authoritative sources for his own interpretation of sūra 17:106 as a reference to the Qur’ān’s being revealed in small parts over a period of twenty years.

Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Atiyya al-Andalūsī (d. 541/1147), a medieval judge and commentator, preserved a long list of the early authorities who stood firmly behind the second mode of reading, farraqnāhu, namely, ['Abdallāh] b. ‘Abbās, Qatāda [b. Dī‘ama], Abū Rajā’ [al-‘Uṭāridī], ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, ['Abdallāh] b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652), Ubayy b. Ka‘b, [Abū ‘Amr ʿĀmir b. Sharāḥil] al-Sha‘bī (d. 103/721), and al-Ḥasan (b. Dīnār, in all likelihood). He referred specifically to the reading by ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd and Ubayy b. Ka‘b of f-r-q in the second form as follows: farraqnāhu ‘alayka li-taqra’ahu, “We divided the Qur’ān [in pieces] for you, in order that you may recite it, which means, We sent the Qur’ān down [to Muḥammad in a gradual fashion], little by little, not all at once.”41 It appears clear that his commentary preserved

40Al-Zamakhsharī, Al-Kashshāf, 2:469.
a long list of early authorities for his later, medieval understanding of Qurʾān 17:106 as referring to a gradual, piecemeal revelation.

Abū ‘Alī al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1154), a medieval Imāmī Shī‘ī interpreter, preferred to read the revelation of Qurʾān 17:106 in the second form, *farraqnāhu*, as referring to the piecemeal descent of the Qurʾān, little by little. In his exegesis of Qurʾān 17:106, he took the reading *farraqnāhu* to mean, as al-Matūrīdī did, *faṣṣalnāhu*: “We have divided the Qurʾān into pieces. And We have sent it down [only gradually and in piecemeal fashion] verse by verse, *sūra* by *sūra*.\(^{42}\) This gradual, piecemeal revelation of the Qurʾān was the focal message of Qurʾān 17:106.

Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), another important medieval philosopher, theologian, and interpreter, also preferred to read Qurʾān 17:106 in the second form, *farraqnāhu*, as a reference to the gradually revealed parts of the Qurʾān. In his exegesis of Qurʾān 17:106, he stated that the Qurʾān was sent down to Muḥammad only in separate parts (*mutafarriqān*), so that, first, he could ponder it, section by section; second, he could recite it to his people in gradual steps; and, finally, he could learn it by heart more easily.\(^{43}\) Had the Qurʾān been sent down in its entirety, he would have faced greater difficulties in memorizing the Scripture. The gradual process of revelation made it easier for the Prophet (and his early followers) to memorize the revelations by heart. To support his interpretation of the verse as referring to the gradual Qurʾān, al-Rāzī cited specifically the views of such early authorities as Saʿīd b. Jubayr, who said “the Qurʾān was sent down in a single revelation on the night of power from the highest heaven to the lowest one, and then divided into pieces over the course of years;” and also Qatāda b. Diʿāma who said “the meaning [of *farraqnāhu* in a given verse] was that We


have divided the Qur’ān into pieces, one verse after another and one sūra after another.”

He used the authority of early interpreters as the primary source for his medieval interpretation of Qur’ān 17:106 as a gradual, piecemeal revelation.

Last but not least, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭūbī (d. 671/1273), an important Mālikī jurist and interpreter who presumably read the Tafsīr of ‘Aṭiyya and then put together a shorter version of the long list of early authorities favoring the second reading, namely, [‘Abdallāh] b. ‘Abbās, ‘Alī [b. Abī Ṭālib], [‘Abdallāh] b. Mas‘ūd, Ubayy b. Ka‘b, Qatāda [b. Di‘āma], Abū Rajā’ [al-‘Uṭāridī], and [Abū ‘Amr ‘Āmir b. Sharāḥīl] al-Sha‘bī. It appears clear that, for him, these early authorities all read farraqnāhu in Qur’ān 17:106 as referring to a piecemeal revelation: “We sent the Qur’ān down [in pieces], little by little, not all at once.”

Thus the citation of early authorities was again pivotal to Qurtubī’s interpretation of sūra 17:106 as a gradual, piecemeal Qur’ān.

The preceding survey of the later, medieval exegetes who stood firmly behind Tabari’s second, “minority” camp reveals a number of new findings: first, they were fully cognizant of the significance of the early authorities as their primary source for their much later commentaries on the Qur’ān. In their exegesis of Qur’ān 17:106 in particular, they preserved, cited, copied, and repeated the words of early authorities in order to make a strong case for the gradual nature of the revelation of Qur’ān. The citation of early authorities was a sign of later scholarly indebtedness to, and recognition of the authoritative nature of, early Muslim interpretation.

Second, they offered a long list of early authorities who, by virtue of their preference for the so-called minority over the majority reading, had been largely neglected in the Tafsīr of al-Ṭabarī. In his presentation of those who were associated with the second, minority reading, al-Ṭabarī

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44Ibid.

Nonetheless, the names of these early authorities appeared frequently in later works of *tafsîr*, and their reading of Qur’ân 17:106 in the second form as *farraqnâhu* paved the way for the dominant medieval argument for the necessity of gradual, piecemeal revelation. Indeed, the major medieval interpreters seemed to ignore al-Ṭabarî’s call upon consensus as a proof for his own preference for the first, majority reading; clearly, they believed that the validity of the second, “minority” reading of al-Ṭabarî was in fact widely attested and indeed the majority reading in the early scholarly community of interpretation. The flourishing of the second, minority reading in the medieval age of commentary was especially popular among those scholars known as Mu‘tazilite commentators on the Qur’ân, namely, al-Matûrîdî, Abû al-Layth al-Samarqandî, al-Wâhîdî, al-Zamakhsharî, al-Ṭabrîsî, al-Râzî, and al-Qurtubi.

**Reasons for the Gradual Qur’ân: The Prophet’s Task of Reciting the Qur’ân to the People ‘alâ mukthin**

We have now seen clearly that the preferability of al-Ṭabarî’s second, “minority” reading over his own first, “majority” reading can be documented among both early and later, medieval interpreters. With this preference, these exegetes sought to interpret Qur’ân 17:106 as referring to piecemeal revelation: *And [it is] a Qur’ân that We have divided into pieces (farraqnâhu), in order that you might recite it to the people ‘alâ mukthin*. This portion of the verse gives only a limited insight into the divine reason for the piecemeal nature of revelation: namely, in order that Muḥammad may recite the Qur’ân to the people ‘alâ mukthin. The meaning of this phrase, ‘alâ mukthin, by itself is not self-evident and requires interpretation on the part of its readers. In the accepted variant readings (*qirâ‘āt*), the orthographic form of the noun’s triliteral root *m-k-th*
(mim-kaf-tha) could be recited in three different ways: as mukth, melk, or mikth. Even though a majority of early and later interpreters agreed to read the best reading as mukth, they still explored diverse, multiple, and often conflicting interpretations as to how Muḥammad may have recited the Qur’ān to the people in a style known in Arabic as ‘alā mukthin, since even in this one reading, the phrase is open to a variety of meanings.

First of all, most early interpreters argued that God’s division of the revelation for the purpose of Muhammad’s recital of its parts ‘alā mukthin could mean (1) ‘alā tu’adatin, “at a slow, deliberate pace,” according to the early Shi‘ī interpreter Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. 120/738); (2) fi tartīl, “in a slow and measured recitation,” according to Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 102/720); and (3), ‘alā tarassul fi al-tilāwa wa-al-tartīl, “as an easy, unhurried utterance in both reading and recitation,” according to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam (d. 182/798) argued for a similar sense by using the method of intra-qur’ānic proof texting, arguing that the meaning of ‘alā mukthin in Qur’ān 17:106 is elaborated upon in another passage, Qur’ān 73:4: And recite the Qur’ān slowly and in deliberate manner (wa-rattil al-Qur’ān tartīlan).

In these commentaries, the majority of early authorities read the phrase ‘alā mukthin as referring to a slow, unhurried style of Qur’ān recitation. The preference for slow over fast recitation of the Qur’ān was reported on the authority of ‘Ubayd al-Mukattib, who posed a question to the early interpreter Mujāhid b. Jabr as follows:

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a man recited both al-Baqara and Āl-‘Imrān and another man recited al-Baqara only—their recitation, bowing and prostration, were all equal—; which of them is preferred? He [Mujāhid b. Jabr] first replied, “the one who recited al-Baqara only,” and then he recited the words from 17:106, “. . . a Qur’ān that We have divided into parts, so that you may recite it to people at a slow pace.”

In this report, Mujāhid b. Jabr showed his strong preference for those who recited the Qur’ān at a slow, deliberate pace, even covering only a single sūra, namely, al-Baqara, rather than those who recited it in a quick manner with more sūra(s) covered in the recitation, namely, al-Baqara and Āl-‘Imrān. Thus his interpretation of the phrase ‘alā mukthin was that it referred to a slow, unhurried, and deliberate manner of Qur’ānic recitation. In another report, he went on to specify how the measured recitation of revelation should be performed in the dialect of Quraysh (‘alā tarassul fī Quraysh), presumably because he believed that the Qur’ān was revealed and recited to the Prophet Muḥammad in his own Meccan dialect of the tribe of Quraysh.

Such early interpretations of the phrase ‘alā mukthin as referring to a slow, relaxed recitation shaped the way later, medieval commentators interpreted the meaning of Qur’ān 17:106. In their works of tafsīr, they cited, repeated, and reformulated those early views of ‘alā mukthin in support of their own arguments for the slow, unhurried manner of Qur’ānic recitation. In his exegesis of Qur’ān 17:106, a major figure of medieval interpretation, al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035), read the phrase ‘alā mukthin as referring to the Prophet’s task of reciting the Qur’ān to his people at a slow and unhurried pace over the course of twenty-three years (ay tu’adatin wa mahlin fī thalāth wa-‘ishrīna sanatan). The interpretation of ‘alā mukthin as a slow, unhurried style of recitation appeared again in the work of the medieval Shi‘ī jurist and commentator Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1066) who argued that the Prophet’s assigned task of reciting the Qur’ān publicly to his early Muslim community should be performed in the manner

52 In a report attributed to Mujāhid b. Jabr in al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān, 15:179.
54 al-Tha’labī, Kashf wa al-Bayān, 6:140.
of ‘alā mukthin, that is to say, ‘alā tu’adatin, “at a slow, unhurried pace; thus you [i.e., Muḥammad] may recite the Qur’ān deliberately (fā-turattiluhu) and read it aloud, clearly (wa-tubayyinuhu) and unhurriedly (wa-lā ta’jal fī tilāwatihi ‘and do not make haste in its recitation’).” It is thus clear that al-Ţūsī recapitulated the early interpretation of the phrase ‘alā mukthin as a reference to the act of reciting the Qur’ān at a slow, unhurried pace; thus you [i.e., Muḥammad] may recite the Qur’ān deliberately (fa-turattiluhu) and read it aloud, clearly (wa-tubayyinuhu) and unhurriedly (wa-lā ta’jal fī tilāwatihi ‘and do not make haste in its recitation’).”

It is thus clear that al-Ţūsī recapitulated the early interpretation of the phrase ‘alā mukthin as a reference to the act of reciting the Qur’ān at a slow, unhurried pace; thus you [i.e., Muḥammad] may recite the Qur’ān deliberately (fa-turattiluhu) and read it aloud, clearly (wa-tubayyinuhu) and unhurriedly (wa-lā ta’jal fī tilāwatihi ‘and do not make haste in its recitation’).

Thus you [i.e., Muḥammad] may recite the Qur’ān deliberately (fa-turattiluhu) and read it aloud, clearly (wa-tubayyinuhu) and unhurriedly (wa-lā ta’jal fī tilāwatihi ‘and do not make haste in its recitation’).”


Al-Zamakhsharī, Al-Kashf, 2:469.


In sum, all these medieval exegetes cited, repeated, or reformulated what the early interpreters had already said in their interpretations of ‘alā mukthin, establishing the idea that the Prophet and his community were instructed not to hurry in their recitation of the Qur’ān.

A second, slightly different interpretation of ‘alā mukthin can be found in the commentary of the aforementioned early commentator, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, who argued that the reason for the gradual nature of revelation had to do with the Prophet’s assigned task of
reciting the Qur’ān publicly to his people ‘alā mukthīn, which he takes to refer to a recitation style designed to aid in memorizing the text: ‘alā tartīl in-ḥifza, “in a slow/deliberate recitation for the purpose of memorization.”"59 In his commentary, Muqātil argued that the gradual process of revelation allowed Muḥammad to recite the Qur’ān to people in a deliberate manner (‘alā tartīl), so that he and his community were able to preserve the revealed portions of the Qur’ān in their individual and collective memories (li-ḥifza). The implication here seems to be that had the Qur’ān been revealed to Muḥammad all at once, in its entirety, rather than in parts, he and his early community would have had a nearly impossible task of Qur’ānic memorization. Thus the purpose of Qur’ān memorization may also offer a second reason for the gradual nature of the revelation, if one sees the unhurried recitation and memorization of successively revealed segments as related to, or even made possible by, the gradual, piecemeal revelation of the sacred text.

If it did offer, as Muqātil’s interpretation seems to have, a reason for the gradual revelation, the early tradition of a slow, unhurried style of recitation intended at least in part for the purpose of memorization paved the way for the development of later, medieval interpretation of the phrase ‘alā mukthīn. A number of medieval commentators repeated, modified, and developed the only early meaning, given by Muqātil b. Sulaymān, of the phrase ‘alā mukthīn as ‘alā tartīl in-ḥifza—at a deliberate pace for the purpose of Qur’ān memorization. Thus, Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983) interpreted the phrase ‘alā mukthīn to mean “in a relaxed and easy way, in order for the people to comprehend and memorize the Qur’ān (‘alā tarassulīn wa-sahlin li-yafhamūhu wa-yahfaẓūhu).”60 For Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), it means “in an easy and unhurried manner, not all at once (‘alā mahlin wa-ṭa’udatin, lā ‘alā faura), so that

Muḥammad may ponder the Qur’ān in a piecemeal way—section by section, may read it to people in smaller parts, and may memorize it by heart in an easier way.”⁶¹ Finally, for the Shafi‘ī jurist and interpreter Abū Sa‘īd Abdallāh b. ‘Umar al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), it means, “in a relaxed and deliberate style of recitation (‘alā mahl wa-tu’adda) intended to be the easiest means of both memorization and comprehension.”⁶²

Thus, in their exegeses of Qur’ān 17:106, the later, medieval commentators repeated and developed the early meaning of the phrase ‘alā mukthin to refer to an unhurried style of recitation that was essential not only for the memorization of a given revelation, as Muqātil had said, but also for the comprehension of meaning. That is to say, ‘alā mukthin means, “in an easy and unhurried way, so that the people are able to understand the meaning of the Qur’ān”: ‘alā tu’adatin wa-tarassulin li-yatadabbaru ma’nāhu, as the medieval Ḥanbalī jurist, litterateur, and commentator Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Alī b. al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) put it.⁶³ In sum, ease of memorization and comprehension were later seen as twin objectives of the slow, unhurriedly recitation referred to in 17:106. More precisely, the gradual revelation helped Muḥammad to recite the Qur’ān to the people unhurriedly and deliberately, and both the piecemeal revelation and the unhurried style of recitation were aids to memorization and comprehension of the Qur’ān.

A third, completely different reason for the piecemeal revelation of the Qur’ān referenced in Qur’ān 17:106 was offered by the major early theologian and interpreter al-Ḥasan al-Ḍarī (d. 110/728). In his view, the phrase ‘alā mukthin is to be interpreted as meaning neither a recitation of the Qur’ān in a relaxed, unhurried fashion, as most interpreters argued, nor a recitation of the

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Qur’ān in a slow, deliberate manner for purposes of memorization and comprehension of a given verse or sūra, but rather as a reference to an active, gradual, and living process of the Prophet’s engagement with his people over an extended period of time. This meaning of ‘alā mukthin can be found in his work of Qur’ān commentary, Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Ḵaṣrī, in which he put forward the argument that “God—blessed and exalted be He—used to send down this Qur’ān [to Muḥammad] one part after another, because He already knew that the Qur’ān would come into existence and occur in the people” (kāna Allāh tabāraka wa-taʿāla yunzilu hadhā al-Qur’ān baʿḍahu qabla baʿḍin, limā ‘alima annahu sayakūnu wa-yahduthu fī al-nās).”64 A reading of his commentary on the meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 reveals that al-Ḥasan al-Ḵaṣrī sought to interpret God’s explanation of His reason for the gradual Qur’ān as being tied to the gradually revealed, living phenomenon of the Qur’ān, since it was interpreted as belonging to a lively, ongoing process of conversation with the Prophet’s community during the time of revelation. The phrase ‘alā mukthin was meant to refer to the divine task assigned by God to His Prophet Muḥammad to proclaim the Qur’ān to his people only gradually, piece by piece, over the course of about two decades, beginning in Mecca prior to his emigration to Medina for eight years and ending in Medina for ten years.65

The early interpretation of ‘alā mukthin as a gradually unfolding process of prophetic recitation over a long period was aptly defined in later, medieval commentarial tradition as ‘alā taṭāwulin fī al-mudda, sha’an ba’d sha’in.66 That is to say, A Qur’ān that We have divided into parts or pieces, so that you may recite it to the people “‘alā mukthin”, meaning, gradually, a little at a time, over a long period of years. In other words, the gradually unfolding process of

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65 Ibid.
66 Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Athiyya, al-Muḥarrir al-Wajīz, 1171.
prophetic recitation over an extended period of time was one of the early meanings of ʿalā mukthin.

In sum, the early interpreters argued that the reasons for the gradual process of revelation revolved around the manner in which the Prophet Muḥammad was instructed to recite and proclaim the Qurʾān to the people: first, in a relaxed, unhurried manner; second, at an easy, deliberate pace for the purpose of memorization and comprehension; and third, only gradually, piece by piece, over a period of many years.

Concluding Remarks: A Reading of the Qurʾān through the Authority of its Interpreters

I have dealt at length here with early and medieval Muslim interpretations of the Islamic vocabulary of, and reasons for, the gradual Qurʾān on their own terms. I want to conclude this chapter by placing their formulations of the gradual revelation in scholarly conversation with the views of some modern scholars engaged in the study of the Qurʾān and its interpretive tradition.

I have searched for the meaning of Qurʾān 17:106 specifically as it was understood in the minds of early Muslim commentators. With an impressive command of the Arabic language, they were able to offer the possibility of reading Qurʾān 17:106 differently—faraqnāhu and farraqnāhu—in their pursuit of its meaning. These two conflicting readings were the literary product of the collective work of early readers. Without their creative reading, one would not able to identify the possibility that Qurʾān 17:106 was open to two contradictory readings in early Islam. Even though Daniel A. Madigan sought to let the Qurʾān alone present itself, its self-image, and its manner of revelation, he finally consulted the commentary of al-Ṭabarī to address a proper reading of Qurʾān 17:106 as follows: “some reciters read farraqnāhu, though the standard text is faraqnāhu. Both could indicate that the Qurʾān was divided into segments,
but the latter also often carries in the commentators’ usage the notion of making clear and distinct.”

Thus Madigan gained the knowledge of two contradictory readings and meanings not from his self-proclaimed reading of the Qur’ān in its own inner-qur’ānic terms, but rather from his engagement with works of tafsīr, especially that of al-Ṭabarī.

In the early medieval tradition of tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī was the most prominent interpreter to classify two conflicting readings of Qur’ān 17:106 into majority and minority camps and to express his own preference for the purported “majority” over the “minority” reading on the basis of consensus. With his consensus-based “majority” reading, he wanted to shape the true meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 through a single authoritative reading of the text as referring to the detailed, clear, and certain nature of the revelation, as opposed to the gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of the revelation. As we have seen, his theory of consensus-based majority reading was deeply flawed for two reasons:

First, al-Ṭabarī based his consensus of the majority of interpreters only upon three early authorities, namely, Ubayy b. Ka‘b, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, and al-Ḥasan al-บาـشـر، who were, in fact, not able to be securely placed in the majority camp: indeed, the only authority who stood firmly behind the so-called “majority” reading (qirā’a) was al-Ḥasan al-باـشـر، while the other two offered also alternate interpretations that put them in agreement with the “minority” camp. Thus Ṭabarī’s idea of the consensus of the overwhelming majority had in fact only limited support from a single authority, namely, al-Ḥasan al-باـشـر، who himself also qualified as a proponent of the “minority” camp because even though he preferred the first reading, he took this form of the verb to mean the same as the second reading form, namely the gradual manner of

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revelation. Thus even consensus as the scholarly legitimation for the latter’s own preference for the first, “majority” reading was in the end not really proven as consensus.

Second, al-Ṭabarî completely neglected most early figures prior to him who stood firmly behind the second reading—‘Alî b. Abî Ṣalîb, ‘Abdallâh b. Mas‘ûd, Sa‘îd b. Jubâyr, al-Sha‘bî, Ismâ‘îl al-Suddî, al-Ḥasan b. Dînâr, Muqâtil b. Sulaymân, and Yaḥyâ b. Sallâm. It still remains unclear as to why most of these early exegetes were neglected in the tafsîr of al-Ṭabarî. It does not seem likely that al-Ṭabarî did not possess the tafsîr manuscripts of most early authorities, for he was known especially for his massive collections of manuscripts of tafsîr works written prior to and during his lifetime. The most plausible reason is that the views of those early interpreters in the minority camp stood against his own preference for the validity of the “majority” over the “minority” reading. A long list of early authorities in the “minority” camp would have obviated his claim for the consensus-based “majority” reading he favored. In the post-Ṭabarî period, the neglected early interpreters in the minority camp did, however, begin to be noticed, recognized, and recorded by the later, medieval commentators such as Abû Ḥâtim al-Râzî, al-Matûrîdî, al-Tha‘labî, Abû al-Layth al-Samarqandî, al-Wâḥîdî, al-Zamakhsharî, ‘Aṭîyya, Fâkhr al-Dîn al-Râzî, al-Qurṭubî, and al-Suyûṭî. Through these later, influential mufassirûn, the early scholarly community of interpreters in the “minority” camp were given their proper due, and in the case of Qur’ân 17:106, recognized as standing overwhelmingly behind the second reading that seems to refer to the gradual revelation of the Qur’ân.

Thus the main thesis propounded here is that the majority of early (as well as later) interpreters read Qur’ân 17:106 with farraqnâhu to refer to the gradual manner of qur’ânic

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revelation. In their commentaries on the meaning of Qur’ān 17:106, they formulated the vocabulary of the gradual Qur’ān not on its own, internal qur’ānic terms, but rather on their interpretive terms. More specifically, the manner of revelation was formulated as having given us the Qur’ān neither in one complete piece, i.e., “a single, whole, complete Scripture,” nor in a short time, i.e., “one night or two, one month or two, one year or two,” but rather only in a gradual fashion, i.e., “little by little, verse by verse, and story after story,” and in piecemeal series of installments, i.e., “three verses, four verses, or five verses” over a long time, i.e., days, months, and years, during the course of the Prophet’s career over some eighteen, twenty, or even twenty-three years.

The formulations of the early interpreters regarding the gradual Qur’ān brought my attention to the late German scholar Rudi Paret (d. 1983), who was fully aware of the difficulty of deciding on the meaning of the verb f-r-q in the verse in question. In his German rendering of the qur’ānic text, he translated Qur’ān 17:106 with two possible meanings: (Es ist) ein Koran, den wir abgeteilt (?) (oder: klar gemacht—faraqnāhu?) haben—(It is) a Qur’ān that We have divided [into parts or pieces] (or: made clear—faraqnāhu?).69 This precise literal rendering of Qur’ān 17:106 as farraqnāhu—“We have divided the Qur’ān into parts or pieces”—in preference to the alternative reading, faraqnāhu— “We made the Qur’ān clear”—came of course from his study of tafsīr because, as William A. Graham has noted, in his translation of the Qur’ān he worked through the major commentaries, especially those of al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī.70 In the companion volume to his translation of the Qur’ān, Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz, originally published in 1971, he recognized the probable meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 as referring to the gradual manner of revelation. As he aptly put it, “the

69Rudi Paret, Der Koran: Übersetzung, 237.
interpretation of the verb faraqnāhu is difficult. Possibly, this means that the Qur’ān has not been revealed all at once, but rather in sections, pieces” (“Schwierig ist die Deutung des Ausdrucks faraqnahu. Vielleicht ist damit gemeint, dass der Koran nicht gleich vollständig, sondern in Abschnitten, Stück um Stück geoffenbart worden ist”).\(^{71}\) In addition to his precise annotation of Qur’ān 17:106 as the proof-text for the necessity of a piecemeal revelation, he offered also the possible alternative that “perhaps the verb faraqa might refer to the term furqān” (“Vielleicht wird damit aber auch auf den Terminus Furqān angespielt”).\(^{72}\) This probable relationship of meaning between the verb faraqa in Qur’ān 17:106 and the term furqān has not been elaborated further in his commentary and concordance. Among other modern studies on the Qur’ān, an early answer to the question was given explicitly by K. Wagtendonk who wrote that “possibly Mohammed associated the concept Furqān with the fact that the Koran was revealed in sections. Cf. 17:106: We have divided it (faraqnāhu) so that thou mayest recite it gradually for the people.”\(^{73}\) Wagtendonk’s inquiry into the meaning of furqān was tied up with the idea that the Qur’ān was sent down to Muḥammad in sections, pieces, so that he might recite it to his people in a gradual fashion. In a recent study of what furqān meant when it referred to scripture, Walid A. Saleh argued convincingly that the word furqān was intended to refer to “the piecemeal revelatory nature of scripture, in particular to the Qur’ān’s manner of revelation,” for it is either a verbal noun from the verb f-r-q that means ‘to divide in pieces,’ or more likely, a plural form of farq (or furq or firq) that means ‘section’ or ‘pericope’.\(^{74}\) The source for his interpretation of the term furqān as a piecemeal revelation was drawn entirely from the commentarial tradition of such later, medieval exegetes as al-Māturīdī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Rāzī, who all argued that

\(^{72}\)Ibid.
\(^{73}\)K. Wagtendonk, *Fasting in the Koran*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 64.
that the Qur’ān was given the name for the Sūra 25 as Fūqān, since it came down only a little bit at a time rather than “all at once.”

The reason for the gradual revelation was closely related to how the Prophet recited the Qur’ān to his followers in a manner named ‘alā mukthin. For most early interpreters, such as Zayd b. ‘Alī, Mujāhid b. Jabr, ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd, the reason for a piecemeal revelatory process was so that Muḥammad could recite the Qur’ān to his people in a slow, unhurried manner. This early interpretation of the phrase ‘alā mukthin as an unhurried recitation of the Qur’ān was common to several medieval commentators, i.e., al-Tha’labī, al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, al-Baghawī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Nasafī, who cited, repeated, and developed what early authorities had already said about it. It comes as no surprise that both Rudi Paret and Tarif Khalidi rendered the phrase ‘alā mukthin in accord with the interpretation of such authorities, namely as “in aller Ruhe” and “unhurriedly”, respectively.

For the neglected early exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān, the unhurried, deliberate style of recitation was intended to assist in memorization of the Qur’ān. This early interpretation of ‘alā mukthin influenced such medieval interpreters as Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Bayḍāwī, and Abū al-Faraj b. al-Jawzī, all of whom argued that the gradual process of revelation made it possible for the Prophet and his people not only to learn the Qur’ān by heart, as Muqātil had argued, but also to understand the meaning of the piecemeal revelations.

Finally, for al-Ḥasan al- Баşrī, the reason for the piecemeal manner of revelation was neither for the unhurried style of recitation nor for the preservation of the Qur’ān in memory, but rather for the gradually unfolding recitation of the Qur’ān. The task of the Prophet was precisely to recite the Qur’ān to his people gradually over a period of eighteen years, beginning in Mecca for eight years and ending in Medina for ten years. It comes as no surprise that the modern

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\(^{75}\)Ibid., 58-60.
scholar of Islam, K. Wagendonk, took the phrase ‘alā mukthin to mean, as al-Baṣrī did, gradually: “We have divided it [a Qur’ān] so that thou mayest recite it gradually for the people.”76 The gradual task of prophetic recitation emerged from a belief that, for al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, God designed the Qur’ān to come into existence and engage with the people gradually over the course of eighteen years.77 This meaning of ‘alā mukthin has been almost entirely neglected in the modern study of the Qur’ān. It started to be noted only in 1962 when Rudi Paret provided his brief literal meaning of ‘alā mukthin as “örtlich im Verweilen,” “literally, lingering over, abiding (with)”. This meaning of ‘alā mukthin is consonant with the verb m-k-th or makatha, meaning to stay, abide, linger, dwell, live, remain, or reside in a place.78 Since the publication of his translation in 1962, almost no modern scholars of the Qur’ān have taken up his rendering of ‘alā mukthin. It was only recently that his reading has been followed and elaborated further by Walid.

In his translation of Qur’ān 17:106, “We divided the Qur’ān in order that you (Muḥammad) will read it the people as you live among them (‘alā mukthin),” Saleh argued that the meaning of ‘alā mukthin was tied to the idea that “the Prophet lives among the people he wants to guide.”79 While Saleh noted the significance of the Prophet having lived and abided among his followers, I have shown how the early interpreter al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī similarly emphasized the meaning of ‘alā mukthin as referring to the living, ongoing recitation of the Qur’ān that comes into existence and gradually becomes a part of the lives of the people during the period of the original revelation. The primacy of the Qur’ān even in relation to its bearer Muhammad reflects the centrality of Islam’s Scripture in the lives of its faithful.

76K. Wagendonk, Fasting in the Koran, 64.
78Arne A. Ambros with the collaboration of Stephan Procházka, A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic, (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), 257.
In the next chapter, I will explore how the early interpreters situated their formulation of the Islamic vocabulary of, and conflicting reasons for, the gradual Qur’ān within the polemical context of a largely monotheistic milieu.
Problems in Qur’ān 25:32

In Qur’ān 25:32, the unbelievers posed a question to Muḥammad regarding the manner of Revelation, namely that of the Qur’ān:

And the unbelievers say, ‘Why has the Qur’ān not been sent down to him all at once?’ Thus [it has been sent down in this manner], that We may strengthen your heart thereby, and We have recited it very distinctly (Qur’ān 25:32).

This verse of the Qur’ān raises several questions that remain largely unaddressed in the academic study of the Qur’ān and its interpretation. Who were the unbelievers? Why did they demand the sending down of the Qur’ān “all at once” (jumlatan wāḥidatan)? What did they assume by this phrase? Why did God not send down the Qur’ān “all at once”? All these questions are explored in the commentaries on Qur’ān 25:32 in the tafsīr literature. In the present chapter, I draw upon a group of works from the early formative stage of the tafsīr genre to argue that the early Muslim interpreters used this verse to build an explicit theory of the gradual Qur’ān, which they saw as inextricably linked to a largely monotheistic milieu of communities with previous revelations prior to that of the Qur’ān. The argument for this early Muslim theory of the gradual Qur’ān is structured in four sections: first, I describe how the early interpreters derived a theory of the gradual and piecemeal revelation of the Qur’ān from their interpretations of Qur’ān 25:32 in good part by reading it in the light of “occasions-of-revelation” (asbāb al-nuzūl) considerations; second, I analyze briefly how these interpreters situated this theory of the gradual Qur’ān in a largely monotheistic milieu, since they took the qur’ānic allusion to the unbelievers to mean “the people of Scripture” (ahl al-kitāb) who used the phrase “all at once” to refer to the revelatory mode of pre-Islamic monotheistic Scriptures; third, I explore how these interpreters produced

their multiple, diverse, and even contradictory understandings of the purpose(s) of the Qurʾān’s gradual revelation as signaled in particular in the last half of Qurʾān 25:32, “Thus [it has been sent down in this manner], that We may strengthen your heart thereby, and We have recited it very distinctly”; and finally, I conclude with a discussion that seeks to put the early exegetes’ reasons for the gradual nature of the Qurʾān in conversation with views of a number of scholars engaged in the modern academic study of the Qurʾān.

The Context of Revelation: The unbelievers and their assumed knowledge of pre-Islamic Scriptures

The early interpreters read Qurʾān 25:32 as polemical in nature. They viewed this verse as part of a polemical discourse between Muḥammad and the unbelievers regarding the manner and authenticity of qurʾānic revelation. In the qurʾānic text, the unbelievers are not identified as to their specific identities. This qurʾānic non-specificity posed a challenge for the early interpreters, in that the first of their several interpretive tasks was to identify who these unbelievers were. They were far from unified in this identification. Some identified them as the Quraysh (al-quraysh), others as the polytheists (al-mushrikūn), and still others as the Jews (al-yahūd). These identifications of the unbelievers in 25:32, as in other qurʾānic passages, were based upon reports regarding “the occasions,” “reasons,” or “contexts of revelation” (asbāb al-nuzūl)—the occasions under which, the reasons for which, or the historical situations in which a specific revelation was given to Muḥammad. The reports bearing on the particular occasion of revelation for Qurʾān 25:32 were all attributed to the greatest authority among the early interpreters of the

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Qurʾān, namely ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās (d. 687/688), a paternal cousin of Muḥammad and a Companion (ṣaḥābī).

In one report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, the Quraysh were identified as the unbelievers who engaged here in polemical interchange with Muhammad:

The Quraysh said: “Why was the Qurʾān not sent down upon the Prophet all at once?” God responded in His Book, “Thus [it has been sent down in this manner], that We may strengthen your heart thereby, and We have recited it very distinctly. That is to say, little by little. We sent it down upon you [Muḥammad] as Revelation, little by little....”

In this report, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās situated the revelation of Qurʾān 25:32 in the context of a polemical exchange with Muhammad’s skeptical Meccan clansmen. The Quraysh wanted an explanation as to why the Qurʾān was not sent down upon Muḥammad “all at once.” In asking such a question, the Quraysh obviously must have had a preconception about the normal manner in which all pre-Islamic revelations had come, namely as texts that had been revealed “all at once”, in their entirety. It was natural for the Quraysh, who would have known Jewish and Christian notions about their own revelations, to claim that the Qurʾān should have been sent down in exactly in the same manner as previous scriptures if it were to have a proper claim to revelatory authenticity. Thus their demand for a complete scriptural text occasioned the revelation of Qurʾān 25:32. The verse itself suggests its original context by beginning with a human question (“the Quraysh asked...”) and end with a divine response (“God responded in His Book...”). The divine response was taken by ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās as proof-text for the divine intent of the gradual Qurʾān, since he believed that God purposely sent the Qurʾān down to His Prophet only piecemeal, over a period of time, that is, “little by little” (shayʿan baʿd shayʿin).

Thus he saw 25:32 as a response to a specific issue or question that arose out of a particular encounter of the Prophet with the Quraysh in Mecca.

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4al-Suyūṭi, al-Durr, 5:128.
It remains unclear from this report precisely what ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās meant by the phrase “little by little,” but a second report attributed also to ‘Abdallāh makes this clearer. In it, the unbelievers are identified more generally, simply as the polytheists who wanted to know why the Qur’ān was sent down only gradually: “The polytheists say: ‘If Muḥammad claims to be a prophet, why does his God punish him? Why is the Qur’ān not sent down to him all at once? Instead, God sends down a verse or two, or a sūra.’ Therefore, God sent down to His Prophet a divine response to what they said.”

In this report, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās recalled an historical moment of scriptural polemic between Muḥammad and the polytheists that occasioned the revelation of Qur’ān 25:32. This typical occasion-of-revelation report was formulated as a human question (i.e. “the polytheists say…” and a divine response (i.e. “God sent down to His Prophet a response to what the polytheists said”). In the context of scriptural polemic, the polytheists were expressing their disbelief in the legitimacy of the Muḥammad’s prophetic mission by using the gradual manner of revelation as evidence for their skepticism. Their argument was based on their preconceived notion of the standard pre-Islamic mode of monotheistic revelations—i.e. that the Torah of Moses, the Gospel of Jesus, and the Psalms of David had been revealed “all at once.” Therefore, they challenged the authenticity of Muḥammad’s claims to prophecy: if he were really a prophet of God like the earlier prophets before him, he would have received also the Qur’ān “all at once.” It was thus in response to the polytheists that the piecemeal, gradual revelation of the Qur’ān was explicitly affirmed.

‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās was apparently the first interpreter to articulate this theory of the gradual Qur’ān by situating it in a polemical context. He argues specifically that God sent the Qur’ān down upon His Prophet only gradually, i.e. “a verse or two, or a sūra [at a time].” The divine

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[re]affirmation of the Qurʾān’s gradual, piecemeal revelation gave the Prophet a divine response to the polytheists’ challenge to the authenticity of both the Prophet’s mission and the scripture he was being given piece by piece.

In addition, there is still a third report attributed also to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, in which the unbelievers are identified as the Jews: “The Jews said: ‘O Abū al-Qāsim [namely, Muḥammad], why was the Qurʾān not sent down all at once, as the Torah was sent down upon Moses?’ Thereupon this verse was sent down [to Muḥammad].”6 In this report, ‘Abdallāh situated the occasion of revelation for Qurʾān 25:32 in the specific context of polemical discourse with the Jews rather than the Quraysh or the polytheists more generally. The Jews were those who, with their preconceptions about scripture and revelation from their own tradition, wanted to know why the Qurʾān was not sent down to Muḥammad “all at once,” as the Torah had been given to Moses. The underlying motive for asking this was presumably again to argue that Muḥammad was not a true prophet of God like Moses, for he was not given the Scripture in a single revelation, “all at once,” as, according to tradition, Moses had received the Torah at Mount Sinai. In response to their question, Muḥammad was said to be receiving the Qurʾān only gradually, one portion at a time, which was the counter-claim for the revealed nature of the qur’anic scripture.

Thus a reading of these traditional reports indicates that ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, a Companion of Muḥammad assumed to have knowledge of the context of many revelations, was taken as the key source for the relevant occasion of revelation of Qurʾān 25:32. Knowledge of this occasion was essential to the interpretation of the meaning of this verse, since read by itself, the meaning is unclear, for it says nothing about the identity of the unbelievers or the context of

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6al-Suyūṭī, al-Itqān, 1:122.
the polemic that is evident here. In all his reports, ‘Abdallāh sought to interpret and work out the meaning of any specific Qur’ān in the light of its occasion of revelation.

In the interpretations of Qur’ān 25:32 attributed to him, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās furthermore formulated three potential difficulties in interpreting Qur’an 25:32 on which knowledge of its occasion of revelation can shed some light. First, Qur’ān 25:32 is in part unintelligible on its own terms, since this verse contains an allusion to the unbelievers without specifying who they are. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās thus naturally had to try to work out who the unbelievers in fact were. In the three differing reports attributed to him, the reference was taken to apply either to the Quraysh, to polytheists in general, or to the Jews. For each of these possible referents of this qur’ānic allusion to unbelievers, ‘Abdallāh is said to have offered a relevant occasion-of-revelation report.

Second, Qur’ān 25:32 is also ambiguous if read only on its own terms, for it says nothing about the historical context of its revelation. In the time of revelation, when the Prophet was still alive, this context may have been clear to those who heard the Qur’ān from him, but it was far from clear to later generations of Muslims. The Qur’ān has been canonized in history as an absolute text beyond any specific context, but it is difficult to understand many of its specific passages that are clearly situational without knowing their original context. In each of his reports, ‘Abdallāh sought to tie the Qur’ān to a specific occasion/reason (sabab) for its revelation, namely that of a polemical situation in which his piecemeal reception of revelations was being challenged by either the Quraysh, the polytheists generally, or the Jews.

Third and finally, Qur’ān 25:32 remains vague if read alone, since it does not speak of the specific manner of revelation but only of the basic fact that it had not been sent down to Muḥammad “all at once.” This divine response, *Thus (kadḥālika*—meaning, “it has been sent
down in this manner”), does not offer any specific idea of gradual revelation. The generality of the reference to the manner of revelation here requires some specification on the part of its interpreters. As an early interpreter of the Qur’ān, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās had thus to formulate and specify the manner of revelation implicit in the very general divine response to the unbelievers’ challenge in Qur'an 25:32. In ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās’s formulation and specification, the Qur’ān was revealed to Muḥammad only gradually and piecemeal, that is, “little by little” or “a verse or two, or a sūra” at a time,⁷ which is his interpretation of the divine response in 25:32 to the unbelievers’ complaint that the Qur’ān had not been sent down/revealed “all at once.”

One might draw various conclusions about the authenticity of three contradictory reports attributed to the same Companion ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, but each is clearly an effort to explain what is at stake in the revelation of Qur’ān 25:32. The occasion of revelation for Qur’ān 25:32 is a key to understand the reason that impelled God to reveal His Qur’ān. It shows God’s concern with Muḥammad and his people during the time of revelation. It seems to be the case that, for some early interpreters, God sent down the Qur’ān in a gradual manner in order to respond to ad hoc issues that arose during the Prophet’s mission. In the case of Qur’ān 25:32, the issue was the challenge of the unbelievers to the authenticity of Muhammad’s piecemeal, rather than “all at once” revelations. With regard to God’s responding to this challenge, an anonymous early interpreter is cited by al-Suyūṭī as saying, “Some of the Qur’ān contains the response to a question and the negation of an opinion uttered or a deed committed.”⁸ This comment suggests that this and other passages of the Qur’ān were sent down “in response to a question” (jawāban li-su’ālin) such as that put to Muḥammad by the unbelievers in Qur’ān 25:32, or to address some act that has occurred or action someone has taken. The responsive nature of the Qur’ān had been

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⁷In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās in Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Tafsīr, 8:2689.
⁸al-Suyūṭī, al-Itqān, 1:121.
already a major concern for our often-cited early interpreter ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbās, who is reported to have said: “Gabriel sent down to him [i.e. Muḥammad] the appropriate response to people’s statements and their actions.” The responsive nature of the Qur’ān was intended by God to address the words of the people and their actions.

In his interpretation of what God meant by His explanation for the gradual Qur’ān in 25:32, the early interpreter ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj wrote that “the Qur’ān was sent down to Muḥammad in response to their [the unbelievers’] statement, in order that he knows that God responds to the people with the truth regarding what they were saying.” This interpretation proves that Jurayj regarded the process of qur’anic revelation as ad hoc, or responsive to particular circumstances/events, for the Qur’ān was sent down only one portion at a time — in this particular case as a God-given response to “the words of the people” (jawāban lī-qawlihim). This responsive nature of the revelation was to reassure Muḥammad that God was present and engaged in his divinely-given mission of prophecy, helping him in dealing with the affairs of his people.

A more detailed interpretation of God’s response to the words of the people comes from the commentary of the early grammarian and exegete Abū Zakariyyā’ Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822). In his endeavor to situate the Qur’ān in a particular context, al-Farrā’ had to reconsider the full text of Qur’ān 25:32, beginning with the question, “Why has the Qur’ān not been sent down to him all at once?” As we have seen, read on its own terms, Qur’ān 25:32 does not tell us who is speaking in this qur’ānic passage. According to al-Farrā’, the answer is neither God nor Muḥammad, but rather the polytheists: “It is said that those statements are part of the

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9 Ibid.
speech of the polytheists.” Al-Farrā’ argues that the beginning of the verse means “The polytheists said: ‘Why has the Qur’ān not been sent down to him all at once?’” However, al-Farrā’ goes on to ask, if this portion of the verse is considered the speech of the polytheists (qawl al-mushrikīn), where is the speech of God (qawl Allāh)? According to him, the speech of God begins with a response to the polytheists, “Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby.” So al-Farrā’ wrote: “God said: ‘Thus We have sent down the Qur’ān gradually (mutafarriqān; lit., in separate segments), O Muḥammad, so that We may strengthen your heart thereby.” By the phrase gradually, he meant “God used to send down a verse [of the Qur’ān] or two [at a time]” over a period of twenty years, and one of these was his answer in 25:32 in response to the question put to Muḥammad by the polytheists. This responsiveness to the unbeliever’s challenge was possible because God customarily sent down His revelations on specific occasions for specific or ad hoc, as well as general purposes, over time.

It appears clear that some early interpreters, such as ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj and al-Farrā’, argued for the responsive nature of the Qur’ān at the time of revelation. That is to say, the Qur’ān did not come down to Muḥammad in an historical vacuum, but rather in a specific temporal and local situation. Indeed, the revelation of Qur’ān 25:32 was situated in a specific historical context during the lifetime of the bearer of revelation, Muḥammad, who spoke on behalf of his God in response to the opponents’ demand for the Qur’ān to be sent down to him “all at once.”

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
The Qur’ān in a monotheistic milieu

A reading of the occasions of revelation supports the idea that Qur’ān 25:32 appeared in a strongly polemical milieu. What is unclear from the text of the verse alone, however, is whether the polemical discourse in it was to be understood as having taken place in a polytheistic or a monotheistic milieu. In their works of tafsīr, most of the early interpreters argued for a monotheistic milieu of both this verse and the gradual Qur’ān itself. Their proof for this is found in their interpretation of what the unbelievers intended with the phrase “all at once.” The majority of the early exegetes took the unbelievers of Qur’ān 25:32 to be “people of scripture” (ahl al-kitāb), the monotheist Jews and/or Christians above all, whose respective scriptures were considered texts revealed “all at once” rather than in parts over an extended period of time. These commentators differed only on the specific pre-Islamic scripture implied by the phrase “all at once,” be it the Torah of Moses (al-tawrāt), the Gospel of Jesus (al-injīl), or both.

Some early interpreters, such as Ismā’īl al-Suddī (128/745),14 ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj (d. 150/767)15 and Abū Zakariyyā’ Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822),16 argued that what the unbelievers were tacitly referring to with the phrase “all at once” was the Torah sent down to Moses as a single Revelation. It seems especially plausible that the unbelievers were the Jews who, based on their understanding of their own revelation, would have demanded that the Qur’ān should have been sent down to Muḥammad “all at once,” just like the Torah to Moses.

Other early exegetes, such as Qatāda b. Di‘āma (d. 118/736)17 and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767),18 argued that the phrase “all at once” referred to the revelatory mode of both of the

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14In a report attributed to al-Suddī in Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Tafsīr, 8:2690.
17In a report attributed to Qatāda in al-Suyūṭi, al-Durr al-Manthūr, 5:128.
pre-qur’ānic scriptures sent down on a single occasion to Moses and Jesus, respectively. The unbelievers thus were presumed to be from among the “people of Scripture,” especially Jews and Christians, who apparently assumed that the qur’ānic revelation, if it were really a divine act, should have also occurred “all at once”. For these pre-Islamic monotheists, the revelation of the Qur’ān was obliged to conform to the established mode of pre-qur’ānic revelation if it were to have any claim to being authentic revelation.

Thus these early interpreters clearly understood the context for the revelation of Qur’ān 25:32 to have been a monotheistic milieu.

The Conflict of Two Reasons for the Gradual Qur’ān

In their works of tafsīr, the early interpreters sought to work out particular reasons why God sent down the Qur’ān to Muḥammad not “all at once,” but only gradually over a period of nearly two decades. In the end, they argued for the divine reasons for the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān referred to in the words, “Thus [it has been sent down in this manner], that We may strengthen your heart thereby”. In many works of tafsīr, early interpreters took “your heart” to refer specifically to the heart of Muḥammad. Thus the reason for the Qur’ān’s being sent down only gradually, instead of on a single occasion, was to strengthen the heart of Muḥammad. These interpreters offered divergent and contradictory explanations as to the meaning of “to strengthen the heart of Muḥammad”: some, e.g. Zayd b. ‘Āli (d. 120/738) and ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj, argued that it was to strengthen the inner spirit of Muḥammad in his ministry as a prophet; others, e.g. Muqātil b. Sulaymān and ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, said it referred to making his learning the Qur’ān by heart easier. Each of these two formulations of reasons for the gradual Qur’ān is explained in more detail below.
**Strengthening the inner spirit of Muḥammad in his ministry as a prophet.** By the inner spirit, some early interpreters referred in their commentaries to the desire to nourish the spirit of strength, courage and resoluteness of the heart as the divine purpose for the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān referred to with “Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby.” That is to say, as one interpreter paraphrases it, “Thus, that We may make strong your heart thereby” (linuqqawwī bihi qalbaka). The gradual process of revelation was intended to help Muḥammad gain a spirit of strength in his heart over a period of difficult years. In his tafsīr, the early Shiʿī interpreter Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. 120/738) argued with slightly more specificity in this regard, namely “that We may thus infuse in you [i.e. Muḥammad] the spirit of courage”. With this spirit, Muḥammad was enabled to carry out his gradual mission of prophecy in the face of opposition and oppression from the diverse ranks of the unbelievers. Aside from his divinely-given spirit of strength and courage, Muḥammad was also imbued with resoluteness of heart and firmness of mind. This was what ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj identified in his commentary as the reason for the gradual Qur’ān, i.e. “Thus, that We may straighten out the resoluteness of your heart and the firmness of your mind and may infuse in you the spirit of courage thereby.” In sum, the reason for the gradual Qur’ān in the view of these exegetes was to strengthen the inner spirit of Muḥammad, specifically the spirit of strength, courage, and resoluteness of heart that he sustained for roughly twenty years.

**Learning the Qur’ān by heart.** Other early interpreters argued that the reason for the gradual Qur’ān was to aid Muḥammad in learning the Qur’ān by heart. In his exegesis of what God meant by His reason for the gradual Qur’ān—"Thus, that We may strengthen your heart

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19Al-Suyūṭī, al-İqtān, 1:121.
thereby”—Muqātil b. Sulaymān wrote: “Thus, that We may make firm the Qurʾān in your heart [that is, the heart of Muḥammad] (linuthabita al-Qurʾān fī qalbika).”22 This paraphrase suggests that, for Muqātil, God sent down the Qurʾān gradually so that Muḥammad was able more easily to memorize the Qurʾān. In a more elaborate manner, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās commented on the divine reason for the gradual Qurʾān thus: “God used to send down a verse to him [Muḥammad] and when the Prophet of God learned it, another verse was sent down in order that He teaches him the Book by heart and steadies his heart thereby.”23 According to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, it was God Himself, rather than His intermediary agent of Revelation, Gabriel, who brought down one verse of the Qurʾān after another, gradually, so that Muḥammad learned it by heart. Thus the later important Muslim art of learning to recite the Qurʾān by heart began with Muḥammad, who was taught to read, recite, and memorize the Qurʾān little by little over the full length of his long prophetic career.

These early Muslim arguments shaped the way in which later, medieval commentators interpreted God’s reason for the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān, "Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby". These latter exegetes would argue that Muḥammad was given the Qurʾān only gradually and in a piecemeal fashion in order that he might be able to commit it to memory precisely because he was “the illiterate prophet” (al-nabī al-ummī, Qurʾān 7:157-8)—unable to read and write. This type of argument appeared in a report from an unnamed later, medieval interpreter who sought to explain "Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby" as follows:

Thus, that We preserve the Qurʾān in his memory. God divided [the Qurʾān in portions] to him in order to preserve it in his memory, for he [peace be upon him] was illiterate (ummī)—that is to say, he could neither read nor write—, in contrast

23 In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās in al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 19:10.
to the [unnamed] prophet other than him, for he was able to write and read. Thus, God enables Muḥammad to preserve the memorization of the entire [Qur’ān].

In this report, the unnamed interpreter argues clearly that the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān was necessary because of Muhammad’s inability to read and write any language: he was given the Qur’ān portion by portion in order that he be able to memorize it a bit at a time, which distinguished him from any previous prophet. In a report attributed to the interpreter Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Fūrak (d. 1015), the previous prophet in question was Moses who received the revelation of the Torah “all at once.” As he put it, “the Torah was sent down all at once because it was sent down to a prophet who was able to write and read, namely Moses, while God sent down the Qur’ān only gradually or in parts (mufarraqan) because it was sent down in an unwritten or oral form (ghayr maktūbin) to an illiterate Prophet (nabī ummī, namely Muḥammad).”

This latter type of argument appears again in the medieval commentary of al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035), who paraphrases "Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby" as follows:

In order that We may make strong your heart thereby, that thus you become aware of the Qur’ān and preserve it in your memory, because the [previous] scriptures were sent down to the Prophets who could all write and read, while the Qur’ān was sent down to the illiterate prophet…

Such later interpreters took the term ummī simply as a specific reference to the Prophet’s inability to read and write, i.e. his illiteracy. For these medieval exegetes, the fact of the Prophet's illiteracy distinguished him from prophets prior to him, all of whom were literate. The prominent interpreter, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), explained this distinctive quality of the illiterate Prophet Muḥammad as follows: “God has no Messenger other than Muḥammad who is described...

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24In a report attributed to a later anonymous interpreter of the Qur’ān, in al-Suyūṭī, al-Itqān, 1:121.
25In a report attributed to Ibn Fūrak, see ibid., 1:121.
with this quality—by which I mean ummi.”

The differing literacy status of the several prophets was thus seen to have affected the manner of Revelation to each of them. The prime contrast was between the literate Prophet, Moses, who received the Torah in written form and in one piece, while the illiterate Prophet, Muḥammad, received the Qur’ān in oral form and in gradual, piecemeal fashion. However, taking the illiteracy of Muḥammad that distinguished him from the previous prophets as the reason for the gradual Qur’ān was not simply a primary concern for the early interpreters. Instead, they also focused on strengthening Muhammad’s heart or learning the Qur’ān by heart.

In summary, Qur’ān 25:32 read on its own terms is ambiguous as to the divine reason for the gradual Qur’ān because it does not offer any clear, fixed, or “original” explanation. It was thus necessary that it be interpreted in the first instance on the authority of early interpreters. In their multivocal traditions of tafsīr, they produced several divergent, even contradictory explanations of the divine explanation for God’s words affirmation of the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān— “Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby.” Some argued this meant straightforwardly that the gradual revelation was to strengthen the inner spirit of Muḥammad in his ministry as a Prophet; and others preferred to read it as a means to make possible or facilitate learning the qur’ānic revelations by heart.

Another Possible Reference in 25:3 to the Gradual Qur’ān: wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan

The early interpreters also offered diverse, multiple and conflicting meanings in their commentaries on the closing words of Qur’ān 25:32: “wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan.” The question is, what do the several possible meanings of the divine words—"wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan”—discussed by the early commentators have to do with the gradual nature of the Qur’ān’s

27al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān, 9:82.
revelation? This expression posed a difficult problem for the early interpreters. In their works of *tafsīr*, they struggled to work out what God meant by these words. Some argued that they referred to God’s interpretation of a given verse(s) or *sūra*(s), others contended that they referenced the piecemeal manner of revelation, and still others said that they referred simply to the slow, deliberate recitation of the Qur’ān. These multiple early Muslim interpretations of these final words of 25:32 can be analyzed as follows.

Some early interpreters argued that the closing words of Qur’ān 25:32 are God’s act of interpreting His words in a very clear and distinct manner. Thus, the usage of the phrase *wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan* should be translated here as follows: *And We have interpreted it [the Qur’ān] very distinctly/clearly*. As examples, Qatāda b. Di‘āma held the expression to mean, “We have explained it [the Qur’ān] very clearly” (*bayyanāhu tibyānan*);²⁸ for al-Suddī, it meant “We have distinguished it [the Qur’ān] definitively (lit., very distinctly)” (*faṣṣalnāhu taʃīlan*);²⁹ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam (d. 182/798) held it to mean, “We have interpreted it [the Qur’ān] very comprehensibly” (*faʃṣarnāhu taʃšīran*);³⁰ and finally, for others, these words should be read simply as referring to “explanation and interpretation” (*al-tabyīn wa-laʃfīr*).³¹ For these early interpreters, the primary function of the divine expression—*wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan*—was to stress that God took interpretative responsibility for making the piecemeal texts of the Qur’ān clear, distinct, and comprehensible in the first instance to the immediate addressees of revelation, namely the Prophet Muḥammad and his early community. God’s activity of interpretation was thus key to making His revelations and their messages comprehensible for the first hearers of revelation (and, by extension, all hearers in all times). The process of divine engagement at the

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²⁸In a report attributed to Qatāda in Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr*, 8:2691.
³¹In a report attributed to other interpreters, see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 19:11.
time of revelation was not limited only to the act of revelation, but also extended to the act of interpretation. It appears clear that God Himself provided “a better explanation or interpretation” (aḥsan tafsīran) for the reason(s) for the gradual Qurʾān (see Qurʾān 25:33).

Other early interpreters argued that with the phrase, wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan, what God was referring to was his use of piecemeal revelation as a means of making the Qurʾānic revelations clear. Therefore, these divine words should be translated as follows: “And We have sent it [the Qurʾān] down in pieces.” The proofs for this piecemeal manner of revelation were drawn from the commentary tradition of the early Ḥanafī jurist and interpreter Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī (d. 96/717) who took the phrase wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan to mean that “He has sent down [the Qurʾān] piece by piece,” or, as cited in another source, “We have divided it [the Qurʾān] into pieces, verse by verse and little by little. And the interval between the first and the last Revelation was roughly twenty-three years.” A reading of his commentary informs us that God has sent down the Qurʾān in a piecemeal, gradual manner; in other words, He has divided it into pieces, parts, or fragments over a period of years. It is unclear from this exegetical report as to why God has done this, however. The early interpreters provided two conflicting reasons. The first one was designed to respond to the concerns of the people, while the second one was to respond to the concern of the Prophet himself. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj were among those interpreters who argued that God divided the Qurʾān into pieces so that He might respond to the concerns of the people during the revelatory process. In his work of tafsīr, al-Ḥasan took the divine expression wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan to mean that

God used to send down one verse, two [verses], and more in response to the people. When they asked about something, God would send it [the Qurʾān] down as a response to them and as an answer from the Prophet.

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32 In a report attributed to Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī in al-Suyūṭī, al-Durr, 5:128.
33 In a report attributed to Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī in al-Thaʿlabī, al-Kashf, 7:132
regarding what they were talking about. And the interval between the first and the last revelation was about twenty years.34

Like his predecessor, al-Ḥasan, ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj held the idea that the phrase li-nuthabita bihi fuʿādaka wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan meant the piecemeal manner of revelation; in his commentary he says, “God used to send down the Qurʿān to him [Muḥammad] in response to their [people’s] words in order that he [Muḥammad] knows that God responds to the people with the truth regarding what they say.”35 Their commentaries show that both of these early interpreters argued about whether or not the piecemeal manner of revelation was meant to respond to the people’s, rather than the Prophet’s concerns. It was [unnamed] people who accused the Qurʿān of not being sent down on a single occasion, in a single dispensation. Thus God revealed Qurʿān 25:32 in response to this objection and asserted firmly that “…We have sent it [the Qurʿān] down in pieces” (wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan). This divine assertion regarding the piecemeal manner of revelation was intended to address a concern of the people during the time of revelation.

On the other hand, such early interpreters as ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj and Muqāṭīl b. Sulaymān argued that the piecemeal manner of revelation was designed to respond to the Prophet’s, rather than the people’s concerns. For these two exegetes, the objection in Qurʿān 25:32 to the piecemeal process of revelation raised a very serious concern for the Prophet himself because he was afraid of being accused of having invented, rather than received from God, the Qurʿān. This accusation had major implications for the authenticity of his prophetic mission and the divine nature of the Qurʿān. Against a backdrop of this accusation, God asserted His preference for a piecemeal process of revelation by saying to the Prophet: “And We have

sent it [the Qur’ān] down in pieces” (wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan). This piecemeal process provided the necessary time for Muḥammad to learn by heart one verse, two, or more, or a sūra of the Qur’ān over the course of his prophetic mission. Thus, in his commentary on wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan, ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj wrote, “We taught it [the Qur’ān] to you [Muḥammad] bit by bit until you memorized it.” 36 This commentary informs us that God Himself taught the Qur’ān to Muḥammad in a gradual, piecemeal fashion, little by little, for the sake of his gradual memorization of the whole. As the human recipient of revelation, the Prophet was responsible for the memorization of the Qur’ān in a faithful manner. The piecemeal process allowed him to memorize it more easily and precisely. Further, as God’s chosen recipient of His revelations, Muḥammad was obliged to recite the Qur’ān to the people (Qur’ān 17:106). In his commentary on Qur’ān 17:106, Muqātil argued as follows: “We have divided it [the Qur’ān into pieces] between the first and the last revelation over the course of twenty years in order that you might recite it to the people at intervals, that is to say, in a slow, measured manner for memorization.” 37 For such early interpreters as ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj and Muqātil, the primary function of the piecemeal mode of revelation was to respond to the prophet’s needs; that is to say, because of it, he was able, first, to preserve the Qur’ān in his heart and, second, to recite it to the people in a series of parts, over time, rather than as a single text all at once.

Finally, still other early interpreters argued that what God meant by saying wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan was the slow and measured recitation of the Qur’ān. This means a translation of these words would be: “And We have recited it [the Qur’ān] in a slow, measured manner.” For this interpretation of the meaning of this closing portion of 25:32, ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Abbās says it means,

“We have recited it [the Qur’ān] deliberately and in measured manner, bit by bit”;38 similarly, Muqātil says it means, “We have recited it [the Qur’ān] in a slow, measured manner, verses after verses” (āyātan thuma āyātin).39 In both commentaries, these early interpreters argued that what God meant by His words wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan was specifically the act of divine recitation and its deliberate manner, since God as the agent of recitation recited His revealed verse or passage of the Qur’ān to Muḥammad without haste, at an easy, measured pace—“little by little” (shay’an ba’d shay’in) and “verses after verses” (āyātan thuma āyātin). This measured manner of divine recitation came to be seen as the ideal-type of scriptural recitation over the course of early Islam.

One further question about the final words of the verse engaged a few early commentators: What, exactly, was the unmentioned but assumed context of the recitation of the Qur’ān enjoined upon the Prophet? Was it in his initial appropriation and learning by heart of a qur’ānic revelation, or in his performance of šalāt either alone or for the people, in group prayer, for example? In their works of tafsīr, some early interpreters discussed how the prophetic recitation of the Qur’ān took place often in the context of šalāt at night (presumably nawāfil, or supererogatory night prayers). In his early prophetic mission in Mecca, Muḥammad was addressed as “the enwrapped one” (al-muzammil), an honorific title said by al-Farrā’ to refer to “the one who has wrapped himself up in his garments and prepared for prayer; and he was the Messenger of God.”40 Being “the enwrapped one” meant he drew on his cloak to perform prayer at night and to recite the Qur’ān in a deliberate, measured manner. On the other hand, some early exegetes commenting on Qur’ān 73:4, which contains the divine command, wa-rattil al-Qur’ān tartīlan, read this as enjoining simply a specific mode of recitation of the Qur’ān. Thus, for

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Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 102/720), it meant, “[recite] some portions [of the Qur’ān] after the others;”\(^{41}\) for Muqātil, “recite the Qur’ān slowly and in measured fashion;”\(^{42}\) and, for al-Farrā’, “read it [the Qur’ān] deliberately and in measured fashion.”\(^{43}\) In such explanations of *rattala tartîlan*, these early interpreters argued simply for reading the term as referring to recitation of the Qur’ān in an unhurried, slow, and measured/regular manner, without reference to any particular context for the recitation.

There is a further admonition in Qur’ān 20:114 that warns Muḥammad not to hurry with the act of reciting the Qur’ān during the process of revelation. Qur’ān 20:114 reads as follows:

> And do not hasten with the Qur’ān before its revelation is accomplished to you (wa-lā ta‘jal bi al-Qur’ān min qabli an yuqḍā ilay-ka wahyu-hu). Read on its own terms, this *qur’ān* says nothing about the reason for revelation, the agent of revelation, or, more importantly, the precise manner of recitation. A reading of the Qur’ān in the light of the *tafsīr* tradition offers a more specific picture. In his work of *tafsīr*, al-Suddī narrated a report regarding the reason for the revelation of Qur’ān 20:114 as follows: “When Gabriel came down to him with the Qur’ān, the Prophet exhausted himself in his memorization of the Qur’ān until he brought trouble upon himself, fearing that Gabriel would ascend [into heaven] while he [Muhammad] had not yet preserved the Qur’ān in his memory, and so he would forget what had been taught to him. Thus God said: *And do not hasten with the Qur’ān....*”\(^{44}\) This report suggests that Qur’ān 20:114 was sent down in response to the Prophet’s act of reciting the Qur’ān in a hurried manner before Gabriel had fully completed the process of revelation. Thus Muḥammad was instructed in this verse not to hurry in his recitation of the Qur’ān until it was fully completed for him over the


course of the revelatory process. This was precisely what al-Farrā’ wrote in his exegesis of Qur’ān 20:114: “When Gabriel came to him with the Revelation, Muḥammad hurried in his recitation of the Qur’ān before Gabriel had completed the recitation of the Revelation. [Thereupon,] he was instructed not to hurry until Gabriel completed the recitation of the Revelation.”

Thus, the intermediary role of Gabriel in this report was not only to recite the Qur’ān to Muḥammad in a slow and measured manner, but also to instruct him not to hurry in his prophetic recitation of the Qur’ān until the process of revelation (or the particular portion being transmitted on a given occasion) has been completed.

Other early interpreters argued for the unhurried, measured manner of the prophetic recitation of the Qur’ān in a slightly different way. In his commentary on Qur’ān 20:114, ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbās is reported to have said: “do not hurry until We have made it [the Qur’ān] clear to you.”

That is, Muḥammad was advised not to be in a hurry (lā ta’jal) until the Qur’ān had been revealed and explained to him in a clear manner. It is not clear from the passage what is meant by the instruction not to hurry, but Mujāhid commented on Qur’ān 20:114 as follows:

 “[Muḥammad], do not recite it [the Qur’ān] to anyone until We have made it clear to you”

Here Muḥammad was advised not to be in a great hurry in his reciting the Qur’ān for anyone else until it was made clear to him. The term wāhy in Qur’ān 20:114—before its revelation is accomplished for you—is here the word usually interpreted as “revelation.” According to Qatāda, the term wāhy in this passage is, however, not “its revelation” (wahyuhu), but rather “its clarification” (bayānuhu). Indeed, it is “the clarification of the Qur’ān” (bayān al-Qur’ān) that was accomplished for Muḥammad during the process of revelation. A later major interpreter, al-

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46 In a report attributed to ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbās in al-Ṭabarî, Jāmi’ al-bayān, 16:220.
47 In a report attributed to Mujāhid by al-Ṭabarî, ibid.
48 In a report attributed to Qatāda by al-Ṭabarî, ibid.
Ṭabarī, offered a slightly different interpretation of the term *waḥy* in his commentary on Qurʿān 20:114: “Do not hurry, O Muḥammad, with [recitation of] the Qurʿān, so you shall make your Companions recite it [namely, the Qurʿān] (*fa-tuqriʿahu aṣḥābāka*) or you recite it for them (*aw taqraʿahu ʿalayhim*), before the clarification of its meanings (*bayān maʿānīhi*) has been revealed to you.”\(^{49}\)

In sum, the early interpreters offered multiple, diverse, and sometimes contradictory explanations of what God meant by His words—*wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan*. Some argued for God’s interpretation of the Qurʿān, others for His piecemeal revelation of the Qurʿān, and others for His recitation of the Qurʿān in a deliberate and measured manner.

**Concluding Remarks: Towards a Theory of the Gradual Qurʿān**

I want to conclude with some remarks about the early Muslim theory of the gradual Qurʿān discussed in this chapter, particularly with respect to the engagement with it by a number of scholars in the modern academic study of the Qurʿān and its interpretation.

I begin with the literary work of John Wansbrough (d. 2002). In his *Quranic Studies* (1977), Wansbrough argued that the Qurʿān emerged as the fixed canon of Scripture only gradually in the sectarian milieu of late 2\(^{nd}/8\(^{th}\) or early 3\(^{rd}/9\(^{th}\)-century Mesopotamia. This late fixation of qurʿanic scripture occurred primarily as the result of polemical discourse between the early Muslim community and other monotheists, notably the Jews.\(^{50}\) Wansbrough applied his literary analysis of Qurʿān 25:32 as a good example of the early Muslim polemics with the Jews, the group named as the referent of "unbelievers". He chose to stress the identity of the

\(^{49}\)Ibid.

unbelievers as the Jews over other monotheist groups, because he sought to situate the emergence of the Qurʾān in a narrowly Jewish milieu. I diverge from Wansbrough in both method and argument. Against his literary reading of the Qurʾān through the prism of the Rabbinic tradition, I have argued for the need to interpret the Qurʾān through the authority of the early interpreters. In their works of tafsīr, they interpreted the qurʾānic allusion to the unbelievers as referring not only to the Jews to the exclusion of other sectarian groups, but rather as a reference that might mean, or possibly include, the Quraysh, the polytheists in general, or the Christians, as well as the Jews — all of which groups rejected the prophetic mission of Muḥammad and the gradual nature of the Qurʾān.

Through his literary method, Wansbrough attempted to prove that the discourse of the gradual Qurʾān had nothing to do with the figure of “the Arabian Prophet” whose “identity was in dispute.” Rather, it was, he argued, the product of the early Muslim community’s polemics against the Jews in early 3rd/9th-century Mesopotamia. According to Wansbrough, the early Muslim polemical confrontation with the Jews shaped the formation of the idea of the gradual Qurʾān. This literary method led him to argue that “the munajjam (i.e. the gradual Qurʾān) concept was after all not exclusively Qurʾānic,” for the Torah was “a product of serial revelation.” In sum, for Wansbrough, there was no novelty in the concept of munajjam, for it was nothing but a continuation and reflection of ‘serial revelation’ that was only much later portrayed by the rabbis as Torah given in toto at Sinai. Rather than accepting his Judaeo-centric interpretation of the Qurʾān, I have chosen to explore how the early Muslim interpreters argued for the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān on their own terms and with the understanding that the Jews and other monotheists in the time of the Prophet conceived of their scriptures as having

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51 Ibid., 36.  
52 Ibid., 64.  
53 Ibid., 37.
been revealed “all at once”, not over time. I have tried to show from the available works of tafsīr that they interpreted Qur’ān 25:32 as proof-text for the emergence of the gradual Qur’ān in its polemical context. Specifically, the discourse of the gradual Qur’ān emerged during Muḥammad’s prophetic career in Mecca in the specific context of his polemical encounter with the unbelievers. In this encounter, the unbelievers asked Muḥammad for the reasons why the Qur’ān was not sent down “all at once.” In 25:32, God countered their objection by emphasizing that He had sent the Qur’ān down to him gradually, even precisely in polemical response to them as unbelievers. The polemical response to the unbelievers was elaborated through the occasions of revelation, namely reports attributed especially frequently to the authority figure of early tafsīr, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās. A reading of the traditional reports suggests that the primary function of the occasions-of-revelation reports were contrary to what Wansbrough, and following him, Andrew Rippin (d. 2016), have argued.

Both of these latter scholars of early tafsīr differed themselves over the primary function of the occasions of revelation in exegesis. According to Wansbrough, the function of the occasions of revelation was primarily halakhic exegesis, based on the Jewish traditions that focus on derivation of law from scripture.54 In his dissertation (1981), Rippin drew upon numerous exegetical reports to argue that the primary function of the occasions of revelation was not halakhic, but haggadic, or narrative exegesis.55 I diverge from both Wansbrough and Rippin, for each gravitated towards a theologically driven theory of one-way influence from the Rabbinic typology of halakhic or haggadic exegesis to the early Muslim concepts of the occasions of

revelation.\textsuperscript{56} I argue instead that the early interpreters were far from being familiar with halakhic and haggadic exegesis. Rather, they used on their own terms three functions of the occasions of revelation in their exegesis of Qur’ān 25:32, as follows.

The first use of the occasion-of-revelation determination was to identify those who were referred to as “the unbelievers.” This function of the occasions of revelation literature, later known in medieval traditions of \textit{tafsīr as taʿyīn al-mubham} (clarification of what is obscure), seeks to identify what God left unidentified or ambiguous in a given qur’anic passage.\textsuperscript{57} In this particular case, its addressee(s) was (were) presumably already familiar with the identity of the unbelievers. In varying reports about Qur’ān 25:32 attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, the unbelievers were identified not exclusively as the Jews, but rather as any one of several groups of “those who disbelieved” in Muhammad’s prophethood and the authenticity of the Qur’ān’s gradual revelation, ranging from the Quraysh, to the polytheists, to the Christians, to the Jews. Each/any one of these groups could have posed the query to Muḥammad to test his credentials as a true messenger of God, but the occasion for the divine response was the same for any or all of them. The challengers believed that if he were really one of the prophets, he would have received the Qur’ān “all at once,” in the same manner as previous prophets had received their scriptures. The demand for the Qur’ān to be sent down “all at once” was thus necessitated by an already-established Near Eastern pattern of pre-Islamic (especially monotheist) Scriptures. By contrast, Muhammad was given the Qur’ān gradually as an explicitly unique aspect of its revelation, distinguishing it from all of the “previous Scriptures” (\textit{al-kutub al-sābiqa}). This distinctive nature of the gradual Qur’ān was seen as peculiar to the new revelations given the Prophet Muhammad.

\textsuperscript{56}Wansbrough, \textit{Quranic Studies}, 37.
A second function of the occasion for the revelation of Qur’ān 25:32 was to put the demand for a single complete Qur’ān in a particular historical context (al-wāqi’). This context was one of inter-religious polemic. This polemical dimension was raised in a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās who said that God sent down Qur’ān 25:32 to Muḥammad not at a random time, but specifically in the context of the latter’s need to respond to the demand of the unbelievers for a single and complete Qur’ān revealed as a unitary whole like other scriptures before it. The context of this scriptural polemic, in the view of most early interpreters, took place in a monotheistic milieu because the phrase “all at once” was interpreted primarily as a reference to the revelatory mode of the Torah in particular.

The third function of the occasion of revelation in this instance was to articulate the gradual manner of Qur’anic revelation in specific terms. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās understood gradual revelation to mean that the Qur’ān was sent down in very small pieces — more specifically, in the form of a verse or two, or a sūra on a particular occasion. The piecemeal nature of the Qur’ān’s revelation reinforced a view that “the pieces were short,” as Richard Bell rightly argued. These short pieces were sent down piece by piece (mutafarriqān, lit., in separate segments) “in response to an incident or event [in the life of Muḥammad] or a question [posed to him] (‘aqiba wāqi’a aw su’āl).” The felt need of early exegetes to situate the fact of gradual revelation in a concrete occasion to which verse 25:32 gave a response is reflected in the story of how a group of unbelievers questioned the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān and then were...

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59According to Burḥān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. ‘Umar al-Ja’barī (d. 732/1331), “the sending down of the Qur’ān was of two types: a type that came down in a spontaneous manner (ibtidā’) and a type that came down in response to an incident [in the life of Muḥammad] or a question [posed to him] (‘aqiba wāqi’a aw su’āl)” (a report attributed to al-Ja’barī by al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 1:82.
responded to an affirmation of the legitimacy of piecemeal, gradual revelation to meet the needs of the day.

The early interpreters made their uses of the occasions of revelation in their exegeses on their own terms. They intended, through their specification of the occasion of revelation for Qurʾān 25:32, to argue that this verse was a polemical assertion revealed to Muḥammad for him to use in his polemical discourse with those who questioned the truth of his claim to prophecy and of his gradual Revelation. It was precisely in the context of the polemical encounter of the Prophet with his interlocutors in a largely monotheistic milieu that God chose to counter the unbelievers by affirming why the Qurʾān was sent down only piece by piece, gradually—Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby, and We have recited it very distinctly.

A key finding in this chapter is that God’s reasons for the gradual Qurʾān were interpreted in the early tradition of tafsīr not uniformly and monolithically, but in diverse ways. As a hallmark of the Islamic scholarly tradition, the multiple, diverse, and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the Qurʾān have come under criticism from some modern Islamicists. In her skeptical study of tafsīr, Patricia Crone argued that “the exegetes hide their ignorance behind a profusion of interpretations so contradictory that they can only be guesswork.”60 I would argue, however, that the primary reason for the profusion of interpretations was not due to the ignorance of the interpreters, who possibly had greater knowledge of the Qurʾān, its language, and its milieu than could most later scholars of the Qurʾān have had. The profusion of interpretations arguably arose from the subjectivity of early interpreters themselves in their search for the meaning of the Qurʾān. It is unthinkable that a highly diverse group of early interpreters would have produced a single, uniform meaning for a

given passage of the Qur’ān, certainly not a passage that is in and of itself not highly specific. A closer look at the early commentarial tradition throughout its formative age reveals that the commentators were far from unanimous in their interpretation of the meaning of the Qur’ān. In the absence of a hierarchical religious authority, they enjoyed the freedom to offer their preferred meanings for verses (pl. āyāt, sing. āya) and passages (pl. suwar, sing. sūra) of the Qur’ān. This autonomy of scriptural interpretation enjoyed by each interpreter resulted in the production of multiple, differing, and even contradictory meanings of qur’anic passages in the early commentarial tradition. These multiple meanings of the Qur’ān were the hallmark of the Islamic scholarly tradition, not only in the medieval exegetical tradition, as Norman Calder and Walid Saleh rightly have argued, but also in the early, formative tradition of tafsīr that has often been neglected and is only today receiving closer attention. In this study of the early commentaries on Qur’ān 25:32, we have seen that the early interpreters produced multiple, diverse, and often apparently contradictory meanings for the revelation in question. This was particularly true of their arguments for the multiple possible interpretations of God’s reason for the gradual Qur’ān, “Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby.”

I am summarizing the early Muslim formulations of diverse reasons for the gradual Qur’ān here to engage with and sometimes revise the works of modern scholars of the Qur’ān and its interpretation.

First, some early interpreters, e.g. Zayd b. ʿAlī and ʿAbd al-Malik b. Jurayj, argued that God sent down the Qur’ān gradually and piecemeal in order that He might strengthen the heart of Muḥammad by this. Resolute in his religious vocation to accomplish his divinely-given mission,

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Muḥammad engaged actively in polemical discourse with ‘those who disbelieved’ in the truth of both his prophecy and his gradual revelation. He was profoundly troubled by their doubts and disbeliefs. More seriously, he lost his confidence in himself and his prophetic mission and began to be unsure of his divinely-ordained status as a prophet of God. Indeed, he was close to the limit of his prophetic endurance. Accordingly, God sent down His Qur’ān 25:32 in late Meccan period to strengthen his heart, namely, to give him the necessary inner-confidence for his assigned task of prophecy and to assure him of his truth-claim to the revelatory nature of the Qur’ān. This divine assurance was a key to his prophetic endurance over a period of many years because he gradually became more resolute in his heart, more firmly fixed in his mind, and more aware of what it meant to be a prophet of God in his multi-religious milieu. This early Muslim theory of the gradual nature of revelation and of prophecy is summarized here to revise what the modern Islamic reformer Abdulkarim Soroush (b. 1945) argued for with his theory of the evolutionary nature of Muhammad’s prophetic experience. In this theory, he argued that Muḥammad was a prophet of God who, over a period of time, “grew steadily more learned, more certain, more resolute, [and] more experienced; in a word, more of a prophet,” so that he became over time ever more familiar with his prophetic mission. With this constant growth of both his inward and outward experience of prophecy, as Sorouh argued, he played an active role in the production of the Qur’ān because “revelation was under his sway, not he, under the sway of revelation.”

Second, other early interpreters, such as ‘Abbās b. ‘Abbās and Muqātil b. Sulaymān, argued that God sent down the Qur’ān only gradually in order that He might preserve His divine word in the heart of Muḥammad. This gradual process surely assisted Muhammad in learning the

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piecemeal revelations by heart. While he still was repeating and memorizing one portion of the Qurʾān by heart, another revelation would come down to him, as suggested in a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās. For his divinely given task as a Messenger of God, he was obliged to pass on the Qurʾān orally to his community of believers and to his “reciters of the revelations” (qurrāʾ, sing. qārīʾ) for their memorization. Thus, memorization was a crucial element in this revelatory process.

The conflict of two reasons for the gradual Qurʾān was the hallmark of the early Muslim traditions of interpretation. They differed sharply from one another in their interpretations of the divine reason for the gradual Qurʾān.

The gradualism of revelation strongly suggests that the Qurʾān was given to Muḥammad in response to a specific situation. Such early exegetes as ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj and al-Farrāʾ argued for the responsive nature of the Qurʾān at the time of revelation. That is to say, the Qurʾān did not come down to Muḥammad in an historical vacuum, but rather in a specific temporal and local situation. Indeed, the revelation of Qurʾān 25:32 was situated in a specific historical context during the lifetime of the bearer of revelation, Muḥammad, who spoke on behalf of his God in response to the opponents’ demand for the Qurʾān to be sent down to him “all at once.” This historical situatedness of the Qurʾān has been rightly noted by Angelika Neuwirth and Nicolai Sinai, respectively, as follows:

As is widely known, the main accusation raised to Muḥammad by his opponents is the question posed in Q 25:32: “Why was the Qurʾān not sent down to him as a single complete pronouncement?” The incompleteness and situatedness of the message were apparently perceived by its audience as a deficiency that set these recitations apart from the familiar manifestations of God’s word and that therefore had to be compensated for by additional certifications that corresponded more closely to the already known models/examples. These had to deal with scripture
because revelation in the Jewish and Christian context was tied to the concept of a written corpus [namely, writing/scripture].

As it seems, the Qur’ān’s ad rem mode of revelation—its frequent references to specific questions, objections and goings-on—no less than its oral mode of delivery were felt to be incompatible with its claim to divine authorship: “Why was the qur’ān not sent down to him jumlatan wāḥidatan, as a single complete pronouncement?” (Q 25:32), Muḥammad’s opponents are reported to have asked. Due to their situatedness and incompleteness, the qur’ānic revelations were apparently viewed as standing in need of being supplemented by something more in line with the phenomenology of Judaeo-Christian Scriptures. From the audience’s point of view, the recitations’ claims to divine authorship, if true, must have presupposed some affinity with things written; revelations must be imagined as 'scriptural.'

The analyses of both Neuwirth and Sinai reinforce the early Muslim interpretation of the reasons why the opponents of Muḥammad demanded the sending down of the Qur’ān “all at once” or as “a single complete pronouncement.” These demands for a single complete Qur’ān were tied to their concept of Scripture and their understanding of pre-Islamic scriptures. They perceived the scripture as a single complete book in written form. When they knew that the Qur’ān was not revealed to Muḥammad as a single complete book, they called into doubt its claim to be divine revelation. Their question contained the veiled but clear accusation that the Qur’ān was a complete fabrication from Muḥammad, not God. Their demand for a single complete book was in fact contradictory to the nature of the Qur’ān as an oral scriptural revelation, for it was still, as Neuwirth and Sinai argued, incomplete and situational during the years of its revelation. The

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Qurʿān was always open to further revelations and revisions, so long as the Messenger of God was alive. And the Qurʿān was situational because it was situated in an ongoing set of events, a history, as a collection of responses to incidents or situations in the lifetime of Muḥammad’s prophetic mission. In sum, the demand for a single complete scripture was contrary to the fundamentally responsive, situational nature of the Qurʿān.

More importantly, the primary reason why the opponents of Muḥammad demanded a single complete Qurʿān had to do with their preconception of the true revelatory process for a scripture as to be received “all at once.” They perceived “the incompleteness and situatedness of the Qurʿān” as a deficiency, as Neuwirth argued, because the Qurʿān did not conform to the established revelatory mode of previous scriptures. Had the Qurʿān been sent down “all at once,” like previous scriptures, they imply that they would have become believers. In fact, the Qurʿān was sent down only gradually in response to changing circumstances. This responsive nature of the Qurʿān has been also noted by Daniel A. Madigan. In his *The Qurʿān’s Self-Image*, he looks at how the Qurʿān speaks of itself, in its own terms. He specifically examines how Qurʿān 25:32 rejects the opponents’ demand for the Qurʿān to be sent down as “a single complete pronouncement” and avers that “the Qurʿān’s response to this [demand] is significant, because it portrays the process of its own revelation as one in which the divine word comes in response to the questions, objections, complaints, and pronouncements of one group or another as the Prophet encounters them.”

It appears that, for Madigan, the concept of the responsive nature of the Qurʿān emerged from his reading of the Qurʿān on its own, internal terms, not through the prism of *tafsīr*. Here, however, I diverge from him on method. I am arguing for reading the Qurʿān precisely through the prism of (especially early) *tafsīr*. In their works of *tafsīr*, the early

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interpreters formulated the concept of the responsive nature of the Qur’ān. In their own formulations, the Qur’ān was sent down “gradually” or “separately,” (mutafarriqān), “little by little” (shay’an ba’d shay’in), and in small pieces of Revelation—a verse or two, or a sūra—, precisely “in response to a question” (jawāban li-su’ālin) put to Muḥammad, or “in response to their [people’s] words” (jawāban li-qawlihim).

The exegetical evidence shows that the notion of the responsive nature of the Qur’ān emerged not explicitly from the text of the Qur’ān itself, but from the collective thinking of the early interpreters. It was, indeed, the community of early interpreters that produced multiple, diverse, and even conflicting interpretations of the divine reasons for the gradual Qur’ān, all stemming from the very general qur'anic statement—Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby.

The interpretative authority of the early commentators that has given later tradition multiple possible interpretations is further strikingly evident in their search for the meaning of what God said in the closing words of Qur’ān 25:32—“wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan.” With regard to this passage, some early interpreters, such as Qatāda and Zayd b. Aslam, argued that “wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan” was to be seen as a divine engagement in scriptural exegesis, for God had engaged on the occasion in question to provide His own interpretation of a given revelation to Muhammad at one particular juncture. The reason for His exegetical engagement was to justify the divine truth of the Qur’ān even though, or even because its verses or passages were revealed in parts over time, not as a once-for-all whole. Thus it appears that, for these early commentators, God Himself has interpreted the Qur’ān very clearly, distinctly, and comprehensibly in order that Muḥammad should clearly understand what was being recited to him of the ongoing revelation. As we have seen, some exegetes interpreted the divine expression wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan to mean
that God Himself bore the sole responsibility for the clarity, distinctness, and comprehensibility of a qur’ānic verse(s) or sūra(s) revealed piecemeal to Muḥammad. This was crucial, since as a divinely-appointed Messenger he was assigned the task of preaching the Qur’ān publicly in a manner intelligible to his listeners.

Other early interpreters, such as al-Nakha’ī and Muqātil, of wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan as the piecemeal process of revelation saw it as very clear that God had revealed the Qur’ān in discrete portions, parts, fragments, or pieces over the entire period of Muhammad’s prophetic career. Their understanding of the expression wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan only to mean the piecemeal and gradual nature of the Qur’ān has been recently recognized by Walid A. Saleh. He argues that “this [divine expression] can only mean a Qur’ān that is coming down in pieces, something that the commentators could not deny.”

In their works of tafsīr, the early commentators did not of course argue only that wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan referred to a piecemeal Revelation; these words were in fact given multiple, even apparently contradictory meanings in the early works of tafsīr. It was the early community of interpreters who argued that the sending down of a segmented Qur’ān paved the way for Muḥammad not only to learn the short pieces of the Qur’ān by heart and to pass them to his “scribes of Revelation” (kuttāb al-wahy) and his Companions with fidelity, but also to recite them to the people in a deliberate and unhurried manner. Thus, the piecemeal nature of the Qur’ān was fundamentally important for the prophetic learning, memorization, and recitation during the long process of revelation.

Finally, still other early interpreters, such as ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and Muqātil, argued that the phrase wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan signified the slow, deliberate manner of divine recitation because God wanted the Qur’ān recited not in haste or even quickly, but at a slow, unhurried

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pace. Being God’s mouthpiece, Muḥammad was thus naturally instructed to perform his prophetic recitation of the Qurʾān in a slow, deliberate, and measured manner.

This measured manner of prophetic recitation has also been noted by William A. Graham. In a 1984 article, Graham draws upon the internal evidence from passages of the Qurʾān in support of his argument for the earliest meaning of qurʾān as the act of reciting the divine Word. He cites, among others, two passages of the Qurʾān in particular:

Surah 20:114 warns Muḥammad not to “hurry” in “reciting” (wa-lā taʿjal bi-l-qurʾān) before the revealing (or “suggesting”: awḥā) to him is completed. Surah 73:4 orders him to “perform the recitation carefully/distinctly” (rattil al-qurʾān tartīlan).68

In both passages, Graham interprets, first, the term al-qurʾān as “reciting” and wahy as “revealing” and, second, al-qurʾān as “the recitation” and tartīlan as “carefully/distinctly.” His interpretation of both passages of the Qurʾān on its own terms is part of his main argument for the earliest meaning of qurʾān having been “the act of reciting God’s words,” especially in a careful and distinct manner (tartīlan). I agree with Graham in his argument for the interpretation of qurʾān as “the act of reciting the divine Word” in a careful and distinct manner because it was attested not only in few passages of the Qurʾān, as he argues, but also in early Muslim traditions of interpretation, as I have shown here.

In the next chapter, I will explore how the early Muslim commentators sought to interpret and work out the general thrust of Qurʾān 53:1-18 as prooftexts for the gradual Qurʾān and more specifically, for the gradual, step-by-step process of the visionary encounter between the mighty figure and Muḥammad.

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Problems in Qur’ān 53:1-18

[Oath]
1. By the Qur’ān when it descends.

[Rebuttal of Accusations]
2. Your companion has neither strayed nor erred.
3. He does not speak from his own desire.

[Divine Origin of Revelation]
4. It is nothing but a revelation revealed [to him].

[First Prophetic Vision]
5. Taught him by one mighty in power,
6. Possessor of strength, He stood straight [or upright]
7. While He was on the highest horizon.
8. Then He drew near and came down
9. Until He was within two bows’ away length or even nearer,
10. And He revealed to His servant what He revealed.
11. The heart did not falsify what he saw.
12. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?

[Second Prophetic Vision]
13. Certainly he saw Him on another descent
14. By the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary,
15. Near which is the Garden of Refuge,
16. When the Lote Tree was covered by that which covered it.
17. The eye did not turn aside, nor did it overstep the bound.
18. Certainly he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.

A reading of Qur’ān 53:1-18 on its own, internal terms raises many problems. The sūrat al-Najm begins with the oath “by al-najm,” a term that is generally taken to mean the star. “By the star when it sets.” What did this oath mean in early Islam? And who was speaking the oath? The oath is followed by verses 2-3 that allude to “your companion” (ṣāḥibukum), whose name is not cited and who evidently is under attack, given the clear rebuttals: “Your companion has neither strayed nor has he erred. He does not speak out of his own desire” (vv. 2-3). Who was exactly this unnamed companion? Why was a portion of the Qur’ān revealed as the rebuttal of accusations against “your companion”? Who is then referred to as those who made accusations about the credibility of this companion?
And what was the nature of his speech at the time of revelation? In verse 4, the speech of this disputed companion is clearly described as truly divine revelation (waḥy): “It is nothing, but a revelation revealed [to him].” This passage remains unclear as to what the term waḥy means in this [or many another] text of revelation.

Verses 5-10 offer a brief description of apparently a particular instance of the revelatory process itself: a mighty [and clearly divine] figure “taught him, stood straight there on the highest horizon, approached, came down, and drew near until He was at a distance of two bows’ length or even nearer, and finally revealed to His servant what He revealed” (vv. 5-10). This distinctive process of visionary revelation leaves a number of questions unaddressed: Who was the heavenly figure imparting the revelation? Where did He reside? How did He communicate with His servant during the process of revelation? And what content was actually revealed to His servant? The phenomenon of revelation is described in these verses as part of a close, intimate relationship of two parties, namely the heavenly figure and His servant. Verse 11 confirms the validity of the first vision in which the recipient of revelation saw the heavenly figure: “the heart did not falsify what he saw.” Still, there remains some ambiguity with respect to both the object and manner of his vision: Who was the mighty figure whom he saw in his first visionary encounter? And what exactly was the manner of his seeing the heavenly figure? There then follows immediately a challenge in the form of a rhetorical question in verse 12: “What! Will you, then, dispute with him about what he saw?” The tone of this verse is polemical, but it is not clear to whom the rhetorical question is directed, for the addressee is only alluded to as “you.”
Verses 13-18 speak about a vision of the same heavenly being on another occasion: “And he certainly saw Him on another descent, by the Lote-Tree of the Ultimate Boundary, near the garden of Refuge” (vv. 13-15). He certainly saw the same heavenly figure on another occasion, but this time specifically near “the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary”. The second account of the vision ends again apparently with a reference to the veracity of his seeing: “Indeed, he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord” (v. 18). Some problems do remain if the text of Qurʾān 53:13-18 is read strictly on its own terms: Where is “the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary”? What “covered it”? What is “the Garden of Refuge”? And what exactly are “some of the greatest signs of his Lord” that he saw during his second visionary experience?

Thus various questions emerge from a reading of Qurʾān 53:1-18 only on its own internal terms. Read by itself, the Qurʾān is frequently unintelligible or at least vague or somewhat obscure to its believers, since it is composed in a highly ambiguous, allusive, and polemical style. The ambiguous style of the Qurʾān appears, for example, in the uncertainty as to what al-najm, which is frequently taken as a name for sūra 53, means, since its meanings range from “the star” to the gradual installments [or “putting in place/establishment”] of the revelation. The allusive character of the Qurʾān is seen especially in its allusion to “your companion” in verse 2 and to several later verses (as “he” or “him”). Finally, the revelatory context of Qurʾān 53 is certainly polemical in nature, since the sūrat al-Najm is revealed clearly as a polemical response to those who attacked both the credibility of the disputed companion and the veracity of his seeing the majestic and mighty figure on two different occasions, the first time on “the highest horizon” and the other time specifically near “the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary”.
A reading of the Islamic Scripture on its own terms clearly leaves many problems unresolved. In what follows, I seek to address the perplexing problems of Qur’ān 53:1-18 not in its own right, but rather in active, subjective relationship to the early community of interpretation. In the present chapter, I take a closer look at how the early commentators sought to interpret the problems of Qur’ān 53 in their works of tafsīr. It was precisely in the early works of tafsīr that the text of Qur’ān 53 was preserved, transmitted, recited, and commented upon. I therefore draw upon hitherto frequently neglected works of tafsīr in its formative stage to argue that the early interpreters sought to formulate and work out on their own terms the general thrust of Qur’ān 53:1-18 primarily as the prooftext for the gradual process of revelation. Specifically, I structure my arguments for the early Muslim formulations of the gradual revelatory process in four sections: First, I explore how many early commentators derived the idea of the gradual revelation from their interpretations of the oath wal-najm idhā hawā (53:1) as referring to the gradually revealed-portions of the Qur’ān over a period of years. Second, I investigate how several interpreters situated their formulation of the gradual revelation in a particular polemical milieu, since they believed that the initial portion of sūrat al-Najm was addressed and disseminated in the entourage of the disputed companion, namely Muḥammad, in polemical response to those who attacked the credibility of the Prophet and the status of his revelation. Third, I describe how many exegetes sought to formulate and work out the gradual steps of the visionary encounter of revelation between the mighty heavenly figure and the Prophet Muḥammad. Fourth, and finally, I seek to conclude with some remarks about the early Muslim formulation of the gradual process of visionary revelation in conversation with many modern scholars of the Qur’ān and its interpretation.
By the Qur’ān when it descends [upon Muḥammad]

Qur’ān 53 begins with the particle wa-, which is a standard Arabic introductory work signaling an oath: ‘[I swear] by…!’ It is followed by the definite article and a noun, wal-najm idhā hawā (Qur’ān 53:1). What was, exactly, the meaning of this oath in early Islam? Read by itself, the meaning of Qur’ān 53:1 is vague, for it says nothing about the speaker of a given oath and the meaning of an oath in historical context. As I have noted frequently in the preceding chapters and the first part of this chapter, when the text of a revelation is ambiguous, it is properly read and interpreted in the light of commentarial tradition, so long as one does not assume that this means that tradition can be relied upon to have recaptured the “original” meaning at the time of revelation. The meaning of this particular oath in the early multivocal traditions of tafsīr turns out to have been not fixed and stable, but fluid, dynamic, and often contradictory. It was very much contingent upon the subjectivity of the early interpreters. In their exegeses of Qur’ān 53:1, they were not entirely of one mind on how to interpret the meaning of the oath. Thus, they produced a polyvalent and often contradictory meaning of the oath: some argued that it refers to the setting of the star (îdhā hawā), others that it refers to the Prophet’s return from his well-known heavenly ascent (mi’rāj), and still others that it involves the gradually revealed-portions of the Qur’ān over a period of many years. In what follows, I explore these differing, even conflicting meanings of this oath in the early multivocal traditions of interpretation.

For some early interpreters, God takes here His impersonal oath by “the star.” As the name for this sūra 53, al-najm is generally interpreted as “the star” and the verb hawā as ‘to set, fall down, drop, plunge, descend.’ It thus follows that the meaning of the oath
is tied to the setting of the star: “by the star when it sets (or drops).” While some interpreters took the oath *wal-najm* to mean “star” in general, others took it to mean a particular star. Thus, for the early preacher and commentator Ismā‘īl b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suddī (d. 128/745), the oath *wal-najm* referred to the star *az-Zuharā* [the planet Venus] in particular, for a group among the Arabs worshipped Venus]; and for Qur‘ān reader and exegete Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 102/720), it meant “the Pleiades (*al-thurayyā*) when they disappeared at dawn.” In a report, the Pleiades were composed of seven stars, six of them visible and only one star dim.3 In sum, God swears by a cosmic phenomenon—*al-najm*—regardless of whether the term *al-najm* itself is meant to be the star in general or the stars *al-Zuharā*, the Pleiades, or the star Sirius in particular.

For other early interpreters, the meaning of the oath *wal-najm* was not about the setting of the star, but rather about the Prophet Muḥammad, whether referring to his heart or his light or his return from heaven. This was exactly what two early mystics and interpreters Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) and Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) wrote in their mystical commentaries on Qur‘ān 53:1. Thus, for Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the oath was taken to mean: (1), “this is the locus of divine manifestation and veiling from the hearts of the knowers”; (2), “*Al-najm* means Muḥammad; when he came down, lights emanated from him”; and (3), “*Al-najm* is the heart of Muḥammad when it is cut off from everything except God;”4 and, for the early Ṣūfī Saḥl al-Tustarī, by the word *al-najm*,

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Muḥammad is intended, and by the subsequent verb hawā his return from the heavenly journey: “By Muḥammad— may God bless him and grant him peace—when he returned from the heavens” (wa Muḥammad, ṣallā Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam, idhā raja’a min al-samā’).

A reading of these exegetical reports reveals that the two interpreters shared one interpretation in common, since both offered the esoteric, mystical meaning, rather than the exoteric, literal description of the oath as a particular reference to the Prophet Muḥammad who came back from his spiritual journey on the night of the ascension. It was precisely on the precious moment of spiritual experience that his heart was cut off from everything other than God. That is, the heart of the Prophet was submitted only to God, rather than his creatures. Thus, God swore His personal oath by al-najm, i.e. Muḥammad, who had just come back from his mystical encounter with the divine Being on the night of the ascension. This mystical interpretation of the oath sworn by al-najm was deemed valid because the historical background of the revelation of Qur’ān 53 was taken to be the Prophet’s ascension to heaven.

Still, other early exegetes argued that the oath wal-najm idhā hawā is to be taken to mean neither “by the star when it sets” nor “by the Prophet Muḥammad when he returned from the heavens,” but rather “by the Qur’ān when it descends or comes down.”

The noun al-najm at the beginning of sūra 53:1 is derived from the verb n-j-m, “to appear, come in sight, set in, follow, ensue, and proceed,” and its plural form nujūm means “installments,” and so nujūman means “in installments.” It follows that sūra 53:1

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speaks about how God swears by the Qurʾān (*wal-najm*) when it descends or comes down (*idhā hawā*) upon Muḥammad only gradually and in piecemeal installments (*nujūman*). The proofs for the early Islamic interpretations of the oath as referring to the gradually revealed parts of the Qurʾān were on the authority of several major early interpreters, namely, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās (d. 68/688), Mujāhid b. Jabr (102/720), Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. 120/738); Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), and Abū Zakariyyā’ Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822). In what follows, I explore how these interpreters argued that the impersonal oath *wal-najm* was intended to mean a Qurʾān revealed to Muḥammad only gradually and in piecemeal installments, one portion after another, over an extended period of years.

As a companion of the Prophet, and according to many the greatest Companion authority on exegesis, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās was the first early interpreter to argue that Qurʾān 53:1 speaks about the gradual, piecemeal revelatory manner of the Qurʾān over the course of twenty years. In a report on the authority of Muḥammad b. al-Sāʾib al-Kalbī (d.146/763), ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās sought to interpret and work out the meaning of the oath—*wal-najm idhā hawā*—as follows: “I swear by the Qurʾān when it descends or comes down upon the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, in piecemeal installments: three or four verses [at a time] and the *sūra*. And the interval between the first and the last revelation was twenty years.”  

A reading of his commentary on Qurʾān 53:1 contains three types of evidence for the piecemeal process of revelation in Islam. First, the meaning of the oath *wal-najm* was defined clearly neither as the falling of the star nor as the mystical figure of Muḥammad but rather as the Qurʾān revealed in

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installments. The proof for the piecemeal installments/institution/establishment of the Qur’ān was tied to the divine authority of the speaker of the oath at the beginning of sūrat al-Najm. In the first verse of Qur’ān 53, the identity of the speaker is implied in the text of the revelation: By the Qur’ān when it descends. Who was exactly speaking of the oath? For ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, the implied nature of the speaker at the beginning of Qur’ān 53 had been interpreted to favor God who was actually speaking of the oath as the first-person speaker: “I swear by the Qur’ān when it descends or goes down upon the Messenger of God in piecemeal installments” (aqsimu bi al-Qur’ān idhā naẓala nujūman alā rasūl Allāh).” The function of this oath by al-najm is to confirm that God swears by the Qur’ān that comes down to Muḥammad in installments. Second, the precise manner of revelation was specifically formulated in the Tafsīr of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās as having occurred in installments of three (thalāth āyāt) and four verses (arba’ āyāt) or, in a longer revealed form, al-sūra—the section or ‘chapter.’ The vocabulary of interpretive tradition, nujūman, was used here to signify the installments. And finally, the gradual putting in place of revelation took place over a longer period of time because the interval between the first and last revelation was twenty years. It was during the course of twenty years that the Qur’ān was revealed to Muḥammad only in installments of three or four verses or a sūra at a time.

Known as a disciple of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and an early successor, Mujāhid b. Jabr was the next authority to argue for the meaning of the impersonal oath “by al-najm” as the descent of the Qur’ān. In his commentary on Qur’ān 53:1, he glossed the meaning of the impersonal oath—wal-najm idhā hawā—as follows: “By the Qur’ān when it
descends or comes down [from the sky].”\(^8\) It is presumably the case that Mujāhid drew an inspiration from his master ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, whose commentaries had a major influence on both early and later medieval interpreters.

Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. 120/738) was an early Shi‘ī commentator who sought to interpret the meaning of the impersonal oath, “by al-najm”, as a reference to the piecemeal installments of the Qur’ān (nujūm al-Qur’ān). He commented upon the meaning of sūrat al-Najm 53:1 as follows: “wal-najm idhā hawā means the piecemeal installation/establishment of the Qur’ān: Gabriel used to send down the Qur’ān to the Prophet—God bless him and his family and give him salvation—in short pieces, namely five verses, or more or less.”\(^9\) The short pieces of the Qur’ān were revealed to Muḥammad only gradually, at different times.

Muqātil b. Sulaymān was a storyteller (qāṣṣ) and commentator who sought to interpret the meaning of the divine oath, wal-najm idhā hawā, as referring to the descent of the Qur’ān in piecemeal installments. He offered his interpretation of sūrat al-Najm 53:1 as follows: “God swears by the Qur’ān, saying: wal-najm idhā hawā, that is to say, [the sending down of the Qur’ān] from the heaven to Muḥammad—may God bless him and grant him peace—just as the word of God, “[No indeed!] I swear by the revelation of the Qur’ān in installments” (falā uqsimu bi al-mawāqi‘i al-nujūm, Qur’ān 56:75). When the Qur’ān descends, it comes down [to Muḥammad] in piecemeal installments: three or four verses, or something similar, and a single sūra or two.”\(^10\) The evidence for his

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\(^8\)Mujāhid b. Jabr, Tafsīr Mujāhid, 2:627.
commentary on the meaning of a given oath as the gradual, piecemeal installments of the Qur’an appeared again clearly in a little more detail in another work of his:

Concerning God’s words: *wal-najm idhā hawā*, that is, installments of the Qur’an (*nujūm al-Qur`ān*) when the Archangel Gabriel brings it down to the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, a verse or two, or a *sūra* or two, or beyond that. And God said in His revelation of *al-Wāqi‘a*: *falā uqsimu bi al-mawāqi‘i al-nujūm* (*sūra* 56:75), meaning: No, indeed! I swear by the revelations of the Qur’an in installments when Archangel Gabriel brings it down to the Prophet, peace be upon him and his family. Abū al-‘Āliya [Rufāy b. Miḥran al-BAṣrī, a Successor from BAṣrā, d. 93/712] said: Learn the Qur’an five verses and then five more because the Prophet, may God bless him and his family, used to receive it from Archangel Gabriel five verses at a time.11

A close reading of his commentary shows how Muqātil b. Sulaymān interpreted the meaning of the divine oath by *al-najm* not as referring to the star, but rather to the Qur’an that was given to Muḥammad in a manner known as *nujūman*, in piecemeal installments. And what was actually being revealed in the revelatory process was named as *nujūm al-Qur`ān*: “portions or installments of the Qur’an.” It thus stands to reason that Muqātil b. Sulaymān sought to formulate and work out, on his own terms, the manner in which God revealed the Qur’an to Muḥammad. Such a revelatory manner was defined as a gradual, piecemeal, little by little installment process of revelation: one, two, three, four, and five verses, or a single *sūra* or two at a time.

The early grammarian and commentator Abū Zakariyyā’ Yahyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā’ was the next authority to argue that, just like his earlier predecessors ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and Muqātil b. Sulaymān, the impersonal oath by *al-najm* was taken to mean the gradual putting in place of the Qur’an over a period of twenty years. In his exegesis of Qur’an 53:1, he argued that the speaker of the impersonal oath by *al-najm* was God Himself: “I

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swear by the Qur’ān because it used to be sent down [to Muḥammad] in installments of one and two verses (nujūman al-āya wal-āyatānī). And the interval between the first and the last revelation was twenty years.”

A careful reading of his commentary in conversation with the respective commentaries of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and Muqātil b. Sulaymān shows that the implied speaker of this impersonal oath was God Himself who swore the oath by al-najm, meaning, by the Qur’ān when it descended upon Muḥammad only gradually and in piecemeal fashion, that is to say, in installments of one, two, three, four, five verses, and a sūra or two chapters at a time over a long period of twenty years. This piecemeal revelation of the Qur’ān did not, however, take place in an historical vacuum, but in a polemical milieu.

The Context of Revelation: The Gradual Qur’ān in a Polemical Milieu

In this section, I investigate how a number of the early interpreters situated their formulation of the gradual revelation in a polemical milieu because a portion of sūrat al-Najm offered a polemical response to those who had attacked both the credibility of the disputed companion and the status of his revelation. I will begin first with a careful reading of verses 2-3 that contain the rebuttal of accusations made against the companion by his contemporaries, and then proceed with the analysis of v. 4, which affirms the divine status of the revelation.

*The rebuttal of accusations.* A reading of Qur’ān/53:2-3 on its own internal terms reveals that the disputed person was accused of being the one who has strayed, erred, and, more critically, has offered words of his own as God’s revelation. A number of questions emerge from a reading of Qur’ān 53:2-3 on its own terms: Who is referred to as those

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who made accusations about the credibility of the disputed person? And who was being accused as an anonymous companion? Read by itself, Qurʾān 53:2-3 provides no answers to these questions, for it says nothing about the context of revelation. The answers to these questions were offered through early exegetical reports regarding “the occasions,” “contexts,” or “reasons for the revelation” (āsbāb al-nuzūl). The early reports bearing on the reason for the revelation of Qurʾān 53 were attributed to the authority of such early interpreters as Muḥammad b. al-Sāʾib al-Kalbī and Muqātil b. Sulaymān. In what follows, I have collected their respective reports to argue that the early interpreters formulated their ideas about gradual, piecemeal installments of the Qurʾān in the context of a polemical milieu.

In a brief report, Muḥammad b. al-Sāʾib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), the great authority in early tafsīr, assigned an interpretive task for himself to establish a specific referent for “your companion” as Muḥammad and then, for those who had attacked the credibility of Muḥammad, as the Quraysh (al-Quraysh).\footnote{In a report attributed to Muḥammad b. al-Sāʾib al-Kalbī, see Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad Al-Waḥīdī, al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ, 25 vols. (Egypt: Dār al-Muṣawwir al-ʿArabī, 2013), 21:7.} In sūrat al-Najm, Muḥammad was addressed in a friendly manner, as ṣāḥīb, a companion, friend, or comrade of the Quraysh. Thus he was neither stranger nor outsider because he belonged to the tribe of the Quraysh. When Muḥammad was reciting the revelatory verses of sūrat al-Najm before a gathering of the Quraysh, they charged that his speech arose from his own desire, not from a divine source. In his explanation of what prompted the revelation of sūrat al-Najm, al-Kalbī wrote that “Quraysh said that Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him salvation, speaks the Qurʾān on his own, spontaneously, and then the verses [of sūrat al-Najm] were
revealed.” An initial early expression of the reason-for-revelation report was formulated as a human statement (i.e., the Quraysh said:...) and a divine response (i.e., then verses of the Qur’ān were revealed”). It was precisely the accusations of the Quraysh against the credibility of Muḥammad and the source of his words that prompted the revelation of Qur’ān 53. In sum, the revelation of sūrat al-Najm was a proof of God’s response to the Quraysh who had accused Muḥammad of speaking about the Qur’ān on his own, spontaneously, rather than by divine command.

In his earliest complete work of tafsīr, Muqātil b. Sulaymān offered the evidence for this “occasion of revelation” report in a little more detail. He identified “your companion” as Muḥammad and those who attacked the credibility of Muḥammad and his source of revelation as “the unbelievers of Makka” (kuffār Makka). The addressees of revelation were the unbelievers of Makka who were warned that one of their companions, namely, Muḥammad, had neither strayed, nor erred, nor spoken on his own, spontaneously. This was the reason Muqātil b. Sulaymān suggested reading the revelation of Qur’ān 53 as having occurred in a polemical milieu, since it was revealed not in an historical vacuum, but rather as a polemical response to the accusations made against Muḥammad and the status of the revelation that he recited before a gathering of the people in Makka.

The polemic began with the unbelievers of Makka posing a critical challenge to Muḥammad regarding the original source of his early qur’ānic proclamations. Qur’ān 53 was the first revealed sūra to be publicly read, recited, and proclaimed by Muḥammad in Makka, and upon hearing of his public recitation of the sūrat al-Najm to a gathering, the

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14Ibid.
unbelievers of Makka said that “Muḥammad speaks this Qur’ān [hadhā al-Qur’ān, that is to say, sūrat al-Najm] on his own, spontaneously, and in it God swears by the Qur’ān: wal-najm idhā hawā.” This early (and typical) occasion-of-revelation report was formulated as reporting human speech (i.e., “the unbelievers of Mecca said:…) and a divine response (i.e., God swears by the Qur’ān). Read in the light of the occasion of, or reason for, revelation, sūrat al-Najm took place not in an historical vacuum, but rather in a specific polemical context, for it was sent down in response to several accusations that emerged out of a particular encounter of the Prophet with the unbelievers of Makka. In His response, God swore by the Qur’ān that Muḥammad had neither strayed, nor erred, nor spoken from his own desire. As Muqātil b. Sulaymān wrote,

> God swears by the Qur’ān, saying: wal-najm idhā hawā, meaning, [the sending down of the Qur’ān] from the heaven to Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, just as the word of God: No! I swear by the fallings of the Qur’ān in installments (sūra 56:75). When the Qur’ān arrives, it comes down in piecemeal installments: three or four verses, or something similar, and a sūra or two. Thus, God swears by the Qur’ān, saying: your companion has neither strayed, namely Muḥammad, nor has he erred. Nor does he speak falsehood (al-bāṭil). He [Muḥammad] does not speak this Qur’ān [sūrat al-Najm], from his own desire, that is to say, of on his own, spontaneously.  

A careful reading of his commentary reveals that Muqātil b. Sulaymān formulated his conceptual understanding of the sūrat al-Najm as a piecemeal installment of the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān was revealed in pieces, because it allowed time to respond to any incident that occurred in the life of the bearer of revelation, namely Muḥammad. In the course of his early mission of prophecy in Makka, Muḥammad endured one of many bad incidents in his prophetic career when the unbelievers of Makka claimed that he has strayed, erred, and voiced the Qur’ān on his own, spontaneously. He was given Qur’ān 53

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16Ibid.  
17Ibid.
in polemical response to such accusations. This responsive character of the Qur’ān was intended to inform Muḥammad that God was present and engaged in his divinely-given mission of prophecy. A specific expression of the divine response took in the form of an oath (al-qasam) and the answer to the oath (jawāb al-qasam). The sūrat al-Najm begins with the impersonal oath: wal-najm idhā hawā. That is to say, God swears by the revelation of the Qur’ān in piecemeal installments. The answer to that oath is the rebuttal of accusations from the unbelievers of Makka by confirming that Muḥammad has neither strayed, nor erred, nor spoken from his own desire. Through the Revelation of sūrat al-Najm, he was authorized as a messenger who has not been communicating the Qur’ān “on his own, spontaneously.” What was then the original source of his own speech? Was the Prophet’s speech a product of divine revelation, or prophetic inspiration, or demonic possession? The answers to these questions are addressed in the early Muslim interpretations of Qur’ān 53:4, which affirms the divine origin of the revelation.

**Affirmation concerning the status of revelation.** As a rebuttal to the unbelievers of Makka who accused Muḥammad of having voiced or recited the Qur’ān on his own, spontaneously, he was finally given divine assurance regarding the nature of the revelation that he proclaimed publicly in a gathering of the people in Makka: “It is nothing but a revelation (waḥy) revealed [to him]” (Qur’ān 53: 4). This verse remains ambiguous if read only on its own terms, for it does not specify what the pronoun “it” refers to and what the term waḥy means in a given text of revelation. The meaning of the term waḥy in Qur’ān 53:4 has to be explored through the prism of its commentary. In their works of tafsīr, several early commentators argued that the pronoun “it” in a given verse referred to the Qur’ān. The identification of the pronoun “it” as a specific reference
to the Qur’ān means that It [namely, the Qur’ān] is nothing but a revelation revealed [to Muḥammad]. It follows that what Muḥammad was reciting as qur’ān in his early prophetic mission was the divine revelation (wahy) being revealed (yūḥā) to him gradually, in a piecemeal manner. If the Prophet’s voicing of the Qur’ān was actually a clear manifestation of divine revelation, there was no contradiction between the word of the Prophet and the word of God because the Prophet only spoke the Qur’ān on behalf of God and at His command, not as texts of his own spontaneous making. In his commentary on Qur’ān 53:3, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq argued as follows:

How could he speak from his own desire, he who pronounced the declaration of monotheism and proclaimed the completion of revealed law with the ethics of command and prohibition? Rather, he spoke only through the divine command and was silent only through the divine command. He was given the divine command as an approach to the Truth. He was given the divine prohibition as a warning and rebuke.\textsuperscript{18}

This commentary shows clearly that, for Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, it was impossible for the Prophet to voice the Qur’ān on his own, spontaneously because the source of his prophetic speech was divine in origin in the sense that he only communicated the revelation on God’s behalf and by His divine command (amr). When God commanded him to speak on His behalf, he was obliged to speak and transmit the revelation to his people. Only by virtue of being the mouthpiece and transmitter of the revelation was he called a ‘Messenger of God’ (rasūl Allāh). In his divinely appointed role as a Messenger of God, he was commanded not only to proclaim public­ly what had been revealed piecemeal to him for his people, but also to complete the law of God (al-Sharīʿa) with the ethics of commanding and forbidding (ādāb al-amr wal-nahy).\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18}Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, Kāmil al-Tafsīr, 159; Idem, Spiritual Gems, 151.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid.
Thus the early Ṣūfī successor, Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, argued for the divine nature of the prophetic speech in early Islam as a clear manifestation of divine proofs. As he aptly put it: “Nor does he speak from his own desire. That is to say, he does not speak any falsehood (bāṭil). His speech was one among the proofs of God (ḥujja min ḥujaj Allāh), so how could [his own] desire and Satan oppose him?”

It appears that, for al-Tustarī, the activity of the Prophet Muḥammad during the early years of his prophetic mission was precisely to speak God’s words. It was precisely in response to the accusations of the unbelievers that the Prophet was authorized as a Messenger of God who spoke no falsehood because the nature of his prophetic speech was divine in origin. In his pronouncing the divine word, he was protected from any human desire or Satanic suggestion.

The commentaries of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq and Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī show that the phenomenon of revelation was marked by the ongoing activity of the Prophet’s speaking, for Muḥammad was not writing, but speaking the Qur’ān orally to his early followers. The source of the Prophet’s speech originated neither from his selfish desire nor from Satanic suggestion, as the unbelievers claimed, but rather with God, who was speaking His revelations slowly through his mouth and tongue. As the mouthpiece, Muḥammad was speaking on behalf of God. Some early interpreters, such as Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq and Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, described the phenomenon of Revelation as a two-person relationship between God and Muḥammad, without an intermediary agent of revelation, while others interpreted it differently, as a three-person relationship:

God → Gabriel → Muḥammad. It thus follows that Gabriel stood between God and

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Muhammad in this revelatory schema, for he acted as the intermediary agent of revelation. As the first recipient of revelation, Gabriel received the Qurʾān from God and, as the intermediary agent of revelation, he transmitted it, with His command, to Muhammad only gradually and in a piecemeal fashion, verse by verse and passage by passage. This phenomenon of mediated Revelation appeared clearly in the early commentary of a sometimes neglected interpreter, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, who interpreted Qurʾān 53:4—It is nothing but a revelation revealed [to him]—as meaning, “this Qurʾān is nothing less than revelation from God (wahy min Allāh) that is revealed through the intermediary agent of the Archangel Gabriel, who brings it down [to Muhammad].”21 The process of bringing down was mediated through the intermediary medium of Gabriel who revealed the Qurʾān to the Prophet Muhammad in gradual, piecemeal installments: one, two, three, four, or five verses at a time.

For Muqātil, the vocabulary of revelation, wahy, in verse 4 of Sūrat al-Najm, referred specifically to the Qurʾān that was revealed to Muhammad in gradual stages. The interpretation of the term wahy as revelation fell into what Muqātil classified as the first meaning of wahy:

The interpretation of al-wahy consists of five meanings: First, al-wahy referred to what Gabriel sent down from God to the prophets. The meaning of al-wahy as revelation appears in several of God’s words: Verily, We have revealed (awḥaynā) to you, meaning the Qurʾān, as We revealed Revelation to Noah and the Prophets after him. Then He mentioned the prophets, And We have revealed Revelation to Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl...until the end of the verse (of Qurʾān 4:163). He said again: And this Qurʾān has been revealed to me that I may warn you thereby (Qurʾān 6:19). There are still many similar verses (of the Qurʾān that speak of al-wahy as referring to the phenomenon of Revelation). Second, al-wahy means inspiration (al-ilhām), just as God’s saying in sūra al-Māʾida, And when I inspired (awḥaytu) the Apostles, that is to say, I inspired (alhamtu) the Apostles: Believe in Me and My Messenger (Qurʾān 5:111); and then

in sura al-Nahl, And your Lord inspired (awhā) to the bee, meaning, He says: And your Lord inspired (alhama) to the bee: take yourself houses among the mountains (Qur’ān 16:68). Third, al-wahy means writing or book (kitāb), just like God’s saying to Zechariah, then he signaled (awhā) to him, that is to say, God says: He wrote (kataba) them a book (kitāb), that they should glorify (Lord) at dawn and evening (Qur’ān 19:11). Fourth, al-wahy means command. Concerning the meaning of al-wahy as divine command, God said in Ḥā’-Mīm al-Sajda, and He commanded (awhā) to each Heaven its command (Qur’ān 41:12), in sura al-An’ām, Satans from among men and jinn command (yuḥī) one another, that is to say, He says: they command (ya’murū) one another (Qur’ān 6:112), and, again, in sura al-An’ām, The Satans command (la-yūḥūna) their friends (Qur’ān 6:121), meaning, they command them (ya’murūna-hum) with temptation and pretense. And finally, fifth, al-wahy means speech (al-qawl), just like God’s saying, For your Lord has talked (awhā) to her (Qur’ān 99:5), meaning, He said (qāla) to her.22

In sum, Muqātil b. Sulaymān interpreted the vocabulary of wahy in verse 4 of Sūrat al-Najm as referring to neither inspiration, nor writing, nor command, nor speech, but rather a revelation, or more precisely, a mediated revelation. The problem needs to be investigated further: How, exactly, was the Qur’ān taught and revealed to Muḥammad in his early ministry? Was it taught and revealed to him by God in a direct manner or rather through the intermediary role of Gabriel? The precise manner of Revelation is addressed through an analysis of a rather specific topic, namely two prophetic visions. Qur’ān 53:5-18 offers a very brief allusion to the phenomenon of prophetic visions. That is to say, the Prophet experienced his visions of the heavenly figure who appeared to teach (‘allamahu) and reveal (awhā) the Qur’ān to him on two different occasions. A key question needs to be addressed: Who did Muḥammad see during his visionary experiences of the heavenly figure? The perplexing problem of the Prophet’s seeing the heavenly figure was indeed at the center of a theological controversy among the early Muslim commentators.

The Prophet’s Visionary Encounters with the Heavenly Figure

Next, I want to explore how the early commentators interpreted Qur’ān 53:5-18 as a prooftext for visionary experiences of revelation in the lifetime of the Prophet. That is to say, Muḥammad received the Qur’ān through his visionary encounters with the heavenly figure on two different occasions, first, “on the highest horizon” (bi-al-ufuq al-a’lā), and, second, “by the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary” (‘inda sidrat al-muntahā). In their works of tafsir, these commentators interpreted the Prophet’s visionary encounter with the heavenly figure differently: some believed that the Prophet saw Gabriel, while others argued that he experienced a vision of God Himself. The conflict of these two interpretations is evident in their discussions of the two prophetic visions in sūrat al-Najm 53:5-18.

The First Account of the Prophet’s Vision. In sūrat al-Najm, the first account of a prophetic vision begins with God’s words: one mighty in power has taught him (‘allamahu shadīd al-quwā). A reading of Qur’ān 53:5 on its own, internal terms gives very limited evidence about the identity of the being who is mighty in power (shadīd al-quwā)—the one who has taught Muḥammad (‘allamahu) the Qur’ān deliberately and in piecemeal fashion. Of course, the identity of this being of mighty power is addressed in the scholarly commentaries on the Qur’ān. It was Abū Jaʿfar b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), a major figure in classical interpretation, who preserved, formulated, and presented the scholarly interpretations of early authorities that regarded the one “mighty in power” as referring to Gabriel rather than God. In support of his own preference for taking Gabriel to be the one meant as the mighty power, he cited the commentary of two early authorities, namely Qatāda b. Di‘āma (d. 118/736) and al-Rabī’ b. Anas (d. 285/898).
139/756), who interpreted the expression—*one mighty in power*—to refer only to the Archangel Gabriel. 23 This indicates that al-Ṭabarī argued for an intermediary encounter as the source of visionary revelation in early Islam, with Gabriel as the intended “one mighty in power” who was sent as the intermediary agent of the divine revelatory act. The divine revelation of the Qur’ān was thus non-direct in form because Gabriel was called upon by God to act as His intermediary agent of revelation. In his status as a divinely-appointed messenger of revelation, Gabriel was entrusted with the task of teaching the Qur’ān to the Prophet in gradual, piecemeal installments, namely one, two, three, four, and five verses, or one *sūra* at a time.

Unfortunately, al-Ṭabarī completely ignored the dissenting opinions of other early exegetes who interpreted “one mighty in power” as referring to God rather than Gabriel. Chief among them was the major theologian, mystic, and interpreter, al-Ḥasan al-Ḥasanī (d. 110/728), who argued that the words *shadīd al-quwā*, *one mighty in power*, could very well refer to God because the qur’ānic term *al-quwā* itself, a singular form of *al-quwā*, was actually an attribute of God (*ṣifāt Allāh*). 24 It is thus understood that God acted as the teacher with intense power (*al-mu‘allim shadīd al-quwā*) who “has taught Muḥammad” (*‘allamahu*) the Qur’ān. This task of teaching the Qur’ān has further support in a reading of *sūrat al-Raḥmān*/55:1-2 where God is described as “the All-beneficent” (*al-Raḥmān*) who “has taught the Qur’ān” (*‘allama al-Qur’ān*) to Muḥammad in a slow, leisurely, and deliberate style.

The early Muslim commentators described how the One “mighty in power” engaged in the piecemeal visionary process of revelation. The gradual steps of the

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24 In a report attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Ḥasanī, see al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘*, 17:86.
visionary revelatory encounter between the One “mighty in power” and the Prophet Muḥammad were formulated and worked out in the early scholarly commentaries on Qur’ān 53:6-18 as follows.

In the initial step, God as the mighty power appeared to Muḥammad in a shape referred to in verse 6 of sūrat al-Najm as dhū mirra, a qur’anic term that is unintelligible if read only on its own. This ambiguous term requires interpretation on the part of commentators. It was again al-Ṭabarī who preserved and formulated the early Muslim interpretations of the term dhū mirra as a reference to an attribute of Gabriel. It was therefore Gabriel instead of God who was said in the revelation of sūrat al-Najm 53:6 to have appeared to Muḥammad in two different forms. Thus al-Ṭabarī wrote in his commentary on Qur’ān 53:6:

The party of interpretation (ahl al-taʿwīl) differed in their exegesis of His expression: dhū mirra. Some said that the meaning of this qur’anic phrase is ‘the possessor of a beautiful stature’. Those who expressed this opinion were: [1] ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās [who] said: ‘one possessing a beautiful appearance’ (dhū manzār ḥasan); and [2] Qatāda b. Diʿāma [who] said: ‘possessor of a beautiful and large stature’ (dhū khalq ẓawīl ḥasan). Others argued that the meaning of the term dhū mirra is ‘the strong one’ (dhū quwwa). Those who espoused this view were: [1] Mujāhid b. Jabr (102/720) [who] said: ‘possessor of strength—Gabriel’ (dhū quwwa, Jibrīl); [2] Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) [who] said: ‘one possessing vigour, forceful’ (dhū quwwa), and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd (d. 182/798) [who] said: ‘the one endowed with power/strength’ (dhū quwwa).25

A reading of these commentaries reveals that the early commentators agreed to apply the phrase dhū mirra as an attribute of Gabriel. They differed only in the manner in which Gabriel manifested himself to the Prophet during his visionary experience of revelation. Some believed that Gabriel displayed a beautiful and large stature during the visionary encounter with the Prophet, while others emphasized that Gabriel showed himself to him

25In reports attributed to these authorities, see al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 27:42-3.
with enormous power and great strength. This mighty angel of enormous power was described in both cases with specific reference to his angelic ability to descend to the Prophets on earth and then to ascend back to heaven instantly, as the famed early storyteller and commentator Muḥammad b. al-Sā`ib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763) reported.\(^26\) In the light of his presentation of two different meanings of the term *dhū mirra* espoused by his early authorities, al-Ṭabarī expressed his own preferred opinion thus: “Of the two different interpreters, the correct one was the one who interpreted the word *bi al-mirra* in the sense of healthy and sound. It is meant as a healthy body (*ṣiḥhat al-jism*) that is free from physical illnesses (*al-āfāt*) and defects (*al-‘āhāt*).”\(^27\) In sum, for al-Ṭabarī, the phrase *dhū mirra* was intended as a designation of the angel Gabriel who was portrayed as being free from any defects in mind and body. In this interpretation of the first prophetic vision in Sūrat al-Najm/53:6, Muḥammad is thus held to have experienced his vision of Gabriel who appeared to him either with his beautiful and large stature and his enormous power/great strength, with the former being the preferred sense.

What was entirely neglected by al-Ṭabarī is any consideration of the term *dhū mirra* as a characteristic of the Divine as “one mighty in powers” (*shadd al-quwā*). If these mighty powers were previously held by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī to refer especially to God’s power, it follows that al-Ḥasan saw God describing Himself here as “Possessor of power and strength.” The reading of the phrase *dhū mirra* as equivalent to “Possessor of power/strength” (*dhū quwwa*) has further support in a reading of Qur’ān 51:58 where God’s expression *dhū al-quwwa al-matīn* [“Surely God is...the Possessor of strength, the ever-Sure”] was better attributed to God than to Gabriel. In sum, God was identified in

\(^{26}\) In a report attributed to al-Kalbī, see al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’*, 10:87.

this context of revelation as the Possessor of power and strength who is Himself in a high station or position.

In the next process of the visionary revelation, the one who was vigorous and forceful (dhū mirra) put Himself in a high position—*He stood upright or straight* [fa-stawā] (Qur’ān 53:6). Read by itself, the meaning of fa-stawā is unintelligible to its believers, since it does not specify clearly the identity of the one who stood upright or straight. This vague qur’ānic term certainly needed to be interpreted through the work of the exegetes. A majority of early interpreters took the phrase fa-stawā to refer generally to the manner in which Gabriel stood upright or straight and appeared to the Prophet in his true shape and nature in a high place. The proof for this majority belief was preserved in the early traditions of *tafsīr*. In his exegesis of the word fa-stawā, the early exegete Sa‘īd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714) argued that “Gabriel settled himself firmly in his own position,” a place where he showed his true nature to the Prophet during the visionary process of revelation. In the first account of revelatory vision, the Prophet saw Gabriel in his original shape on two different occasions, as affirmed in a report attributed to a Companion of the Prophet and the early famous authority in the field of *tafsīr*, ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652):

The Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him salvation, had never seen Gabriel in his true and natural shape except on these two occasions: The first time was when he asked Gabriel to show himself to him in his true form and he appeared to him in his true form and filled the horizon; and the second time was when he, together with Gabriel, was on the night of the heavenly journey. And that is exactly the meaning of the divine words: *While he stood on the highest horizon.*

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This report shows that the expression *fa-stawā* has two different meanings. First, it means that Gabriel held himself upright or straight and ascended to heaven shortly after he had taught Muḥammad the Qur’ān deliberately and in a measured manner. This meaning of *fa-stawā* was attributed to the leading early authority on the Qur’ān, namely Saʿīd b. Jubayr al-Kūfī, who argued that “Gabriel elevated himself to a place in heaven after he taught Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him salvation.” In the process of qur’ānic teaching, the Prophet saw Gabriel in his true form, presumably on earth.

Second, the qur’ānic term *fa-stawā* refers to the visionary encounter of revelation between two persons—Gabriel and the Prophet—both of who stood erect on the highest horizon (*fa-stawā Jibrīl wa-Nabī al-'uṭ iq al-a’lā*). This suggests that Gabriel and Muḥammad ascended together to heaven and settled on the highest horizon during the heavenly ascension. This was precisely how al-Ṭabarī interpreted the meaning of the term *fa-stawā* as referring to both Gabriel and Muḥammad in their ascension to the farthest horizon. In one precious night of heavenly journey, the Prophet experienced his vision of Gabriel again, this time not on earth, but in heaven. A medieval grammarian and commentator al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) argued for the distinctive quality of Muḥammad as the only one of the many Prophets who saw Gabriel in his true, original form on two occasions, once on earth and once in heaven.

In sum, the subject of *fa-stawā* referred generally to either Gabriel or both Gabriel and the Prophet standing erect on the highest horizon. Unfortunately, no single exegetical

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authority of early Islam was cited in the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī to suggest the idea that God Himself might have been meant in the divine statement, *He stood upright/straight*. Al-Ṭabarī seemed to overlook the dissenting view of early commentators who chose to identify the subject of the verb *fa-stawā* as referring to God rather than Gabriel. Foremost among them was al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who argued that the implied subject of the verb “*fa-stawā* is indeed “God [Himself], Mighty and Lofty is He” (*Allāh, ‘azza wa-jalla*); that is to say, *God established Himself over the Throne*” (*istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh*). It appears that al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī preferred to read verse 7 of *sūra* al-Najm—*fa-stawā*—intertextually by looking for another qur’ānic passage, namely Qur’ān 20:5: *The All-beneficent settled Himself on the Throne* (*al-Raḥmān ‘alā al-‘arsy istawā*). For al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the pronoun “*He*” in a given verse *fa-stawā* was in fact God, rather than Gabriel, who settled Himself on the highest horizon. Thus it was precisely in the highest horizon that Muḥammad experienced his first vision of God seated on His throne.

The next question about the visionary type of revelation was concerned with the one who resided on the highest horizon: *While He was on the highest horizon* (Qurʾān 53:7). This expression remains ambiguous if read only on its own terms, for it does not speak clearly about the identity of the one who stood upright on the highest horizon. The pronominal subject “*he*” was identified by a majority of early authorities as Gabriel, who initially taught the Qurʾān to Muḥammad (*‘allamahu*) presumably on earth, then stood upright or straight (*fa-stawā*), and finally resided “on the highest horizon” (*wa-huwa fī al-ufuq al-a‘lā*). The spatial movement of Gabriel, as an intermediary agent of revelation, took place from a lower place—where he taught Muḥammad the Qurʾān on earth—to a higher place where he ascended back to his higher dwelling in heaven, or what was

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34 In a report attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in *al-Qurṭubī, al-Jāmi‘*, 10:86.
named in Qur’ān 53:7 as “the highest horizon.” In their works of tafsīr, the early exegetes offered a slightly different meaning of the term, “the highest horizon”. Thus, for Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 102/720), the phrase means “the place of sunrise;”35 for Qatāda b. Di‘āma al-Baṣrī (d. 118/736), it refers to “the horizon where the day comes from”36 or the eastern horizon; for ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd (d. 182/798), it is “the horizon of heaven” (ufuq al-samā’),37 and, for al-Rābi’ b. Anas (d. 139/798), it means “the highest heaven” (al-samā’ al-a’lā), meaning, Gabriel, peace be upon him, was in the highest heaven.”38 The last two meanings of “the highest horizon” appeared exactly in the work of the later commentator Abū Maṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/945) in his interpretation of Qur’ān 53:7:

Concerning the divine words: While he stood on the highest horizon, that is to say, Gabriel on the highest horizon. Then, it is possible to interpret the highest horizon as the horizon of sky. And it is also possible that the highest horizon means the place of the archangels and their dwelling. The Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, saw Gabriel in his form in his dwelling place.39

It thus stands to reason that, for a majority of early interpreters, the expression—while he stood on the highest horizon—was intended to refer to Gabriel who resided in the highest heaven, since that heaven itself was the dwelling place of the archangels. It was in the highest heaven that the Archangel Gabriel displayed his true shape and nature so that the Prophet was able to see him during his heavenly ascension. Shortly after Gabriel showed his true shape and nature in heaven, he descended from the highest horizon to a lower one and drew closer to the Prophet as human addressee of the revelation.

36In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma in al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi‘ al-bayān 27:44.
38In a report attributed to al-Rābi’ b. Anas in al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi‘ al-bayān 27:44.
What has been entirely neglected thus far by a majority of the later interpreters is a theophanic reading of the words: *While He stood on the highest horizon.* That is to say, the implied subject of the pronoun “He” in *sūrat al-Najm*/53:7 is more properly identified as God than as Gabriel, since He moved gradually from the highest heaven to the heaven of the world. That is, He stood initially on “the highest horizon,” meaning, in the highest heaven (*al-samā’ al-‘lā*), then descended and drew near to His Messenger Muḥammad to reveal the Qur’ān piecemeal to him. At this moment of nearness, Muḥammad believed that God was present very near to him and that he was truly seeing his Lord seated on His throne. This first account of the Prophet’s vision of God was attributed to the early storyteller and commentator al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim al-Balkhī (d. 105/723) in his commentary on Qur’ān*/53:5-11:* 

[The Prophet said:] I asked my Lord to grant me to see Him firmly with my heart so that I enjoyed the fullness of His divine blessing. My Lord fulfilled such request and granted my vision of Him. Thus, I looked at Him with my heart until I was fully aware that He was really present and that I was truly seeing Him. At the time when He removed his veil, He was sitting on his throne in all his dignity, honor, glory, and high...In His dignity, He leaned slightly toward me and brought me to draw near [to Him]. And that is [the meaning of] His saying in the Qur’ān where He reveals how He himself treated me and glorified me—*Possessor of Strength. He stood straight or upright, while He was on the highest horizon. Then He drew near and came down until He was within two bows’ away length or even nearer...And He revealed to His servant what He revealed* (Qur’ān 53:5-10). That is to say, the [prophetic] task that He has decided to entrust to me. *The heart did not falsify what he saw* (Qur’ān 53:11) means my vision of Him was with my heart [namely, a vision of the heart].

In this report, al-Ḍaḥḥāk argued that the import of Qur’ān 53 is about the vision of God. In particular, the Prophet saw God firmly in his heart. This vision of the heart was a product of the divine favor granted especially to him. He was thus a distinctive type of a

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divinely gifted-man who was given the special privilege of seeing his Lord on the highest horizon, namely in the highest heaven. The meaning of this particular revelation—*While He was on the highest horizon,* was taken as referring to God who, seated on his throne, leaned slightly toward His Prophet, and then drew closer to him to reveal short pieces of the Qur’ān to him.

The next, gradual step of the visionary revelation was the descent of the heavenly figure to the plane of the human recipient of revelation—*Then He drew near and came down* (Qur’ān 53:8). Since the verse by itself, like the preceding lines of *sūrat al-Najm,* does not name the agent of revelation being described, it requires interpretation from the commentators. In their works of *tafsīr,* the early interpreters differed on the identity of the agent of revelation in their exegeses of Qur’ān 53:8. A majority interpreted the pronoun “he” in Qur’ān 53:8 as referring to Gabriel, who acted as the intermediary agent of the divine revelation. This majority position is evident later in the commentary of al-Ṭabarī. In the latter’s exegesis of Qur’ān 53:8, he cites five prior authorities, namely, ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr (d. 58/678), ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, al-Ḥasan b. al-Baṣrī, Qatāda b. Di‘āma, and al-Rābī’ b. Anas, as proof that the pronoun “he” in these verses was intended to designate Gabriel rather than God as the one who in the Prophet’s vision of the heavenly figure was on the highest horizon, then descended, from a higher heaven to a lower one, and then drew the Prophet closer to him. One of these authorities, ‘Ā’isha, a daughter of Abū Bakr and then a wife of the Prophet, averred that “he was indeed Gabriel. He frequently used to come down [to the Prophet] in the form of a man, but this time he appeared to him in his true, original form which filled the entire horizon.”

\[41\] The citation of this report by al-

\[41\] In a report attributed to ‘Ā’isha in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:46.
Ṭabarî indicates that the reading of Gabriel as the intermediary agent of visionary revelation had become the consensus view.

It comes as no surprise that only a minority of early commentators were cited in the *Tafsîr* of al-Ṭabarî as arguing for the contrary opinion, that the pronoun “He” in the expression, *Then He drew near and came down*, designated God Himself, rather than His intermediary agent Gabriel. Al-Ṭabarî preserved the exegetical reports attributed to two early authorities, namely ‘Abdallâh b. ‘Abbâs and Anas b. Mâlik (d. 94/712), who argued for the visionary encounter of drawing near between God and the Prophet Muḥammad. In one report, ‘Abdallâh b. ‘Abbâs commented upon Qur’ān 53:8, *thumma danā fa-tadallā,* as meaning: “Then his Lord drew near and still nearer [to the Apostle].” ⁴² This short commentary, or gloss, served as proof that it was God, instead of Gabriel, who drew close and even closer to the Prophet. A further description of the Prophet’s visionary encounter being with God was evident in another report attributed to the Companion of the Prophet Anas b. Mâlik. This report was narrated on the authority of Sharîk b. Abî Namar who said:

> I heard Anas b. Mâlik speaking to us about the night journey of God’s Messenger. Gabriel ascended with God’s Messenger to the seventh heaven, then he ascended with him to a certain place that nobody knows except God, until he [Muḥammad] arrived at the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary and the All-Compeller, the Lord of Glory drew close [to the Prophet] and even closer [to him] until He was a distance of two bows’ length or even nearer from him. Then, God revealed to him what He wished and what He instructed to his community regarding the obligation of fifty prayers every day and night. ⁴³

A reading of these two reports attributed, respectively, to ‘Abdallâh b. ‘Abbâs and Anas b. Mâlik, reveals that in the visionary encounter of revelation it was God Himself, ⁴² In a report attributed to ‘Ā’isha in al-Ṭabarî, *Jâmi` al-bayān* 27:45. ⁴³ In a report attributed to Anas b. Mâlik in *ibid.*
not Gabriel, who appeared as the active agent in the visual encounter with the Prophet, since *He drew near and moved closer to him* in a very intimate manner. The nearness of the two to each other was in fact within two bows’ length or even less. Upon closer investigation, one can see that al-Ṭabarī completely neglected the early commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān who stood firmly behind his preference for the revelatory agency of God over that of Gabriel. Thus for Muqātil, the passage means, “*then He drew near*, that is to say, the Lord drew closer to Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, and *He moved close* [to him]. That [visionary encounter] took place at night when He caused the Prophet to journey to the seventh heaven.”¹⁴⁴ In his commentary, Muqātil expressed his preference for God’s, instead of Gabriel’s, visionary encounter with the Prophet because he took this visionary encounter of drawing near to have begun with the active movement of God Himself who drew near and closer to the Prophet during the heavenly journey. In this visionary type of divine-human encounter, God was the active revealer and the Prophet was the passive recipient, for He was the one who came down and drew closer to the Prophet in order to reveal the Qur’ān to him gradually.

The divine-human encounter appeared further in the early mystical commentaries on Qur’ān 53:8. For Ṣūfī commentators, the visionary encounter took place between God and Muḥammad during his mystical journey. This was perfectly clear in the commentary of the early Ṣūfī and Shi‘ī interpreter, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, who interpreted Qur’ān 53:8 in two different sayings:

In the first saying, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq commented upon the expression *thumma danā fa-tadallā* as proof for the nearness of the visionary encounter between God and His Messenger Muḥammad without any intermediary. The condition of being near between

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the two was formulated in his commentary on Qur’an 53:8: “The manner of how [God drew near to the Prophet and descended upon him—al-kayfiyya] was cut off from the nearness. Do you not consider that God, most high, veiled Gabriel from his nearness to Him and from the Lord’s nearness to him?”⁴⁵ The commentary suggests that, for Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the fact of the nearness of the visionary encounter between God and Muḥammad ought to be accepted without asking how the former drew so extremely close to the latter, for the manner of drawing near was only be reached by those engaged in the visionary experience of revelation. In contrast to His nearness to the Prophet, God veiled Gabriel from the nearness to Him, for he could not go beyond the Lote Tree of the ultimate boundary, a place where Muḥammad reached the peak of his prophetic vision of God.

In the second saying, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq offered a different exegesis of Qur’an 53:8 as follows: “Muḥammad drew near to the gnosis and the faith that had been deposited in his heart. Then, he descended through the tranquility of his heart to what he had come close to. All doubt and suspicion faded away from his heart.”⁴⁶ This commentary differs sharply from the previous one in one regard, namely, the agent of the movement. Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq said in his first saying that God was the active agent of revelation who drew close to the Prophet, while he turned in his second saying to Muḥammad as the active recipient who drew near to the gnosis and the faith—two mystical signs of God’s presence in the heart of His Prophet. If the gnosis had its primordial place in the Prophet’s heart, then Muḥammad drew near or even nearer to God through the tranquility

⁴⁵Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, Kāmil al-Tafsīr, 159.
⁴⁶Ibid.
of his heart. Thus he reached the peak of his tranquility, for God removed all doubt and anxiety from his heart.

It was only in the later, medieval tradition of commentary that the meaning of Qur’an 53:8 was interpreted as the mutual revelatory activity between God and Muhammad. This new meaning of a given verse was strikingly evident in the medieval commentary of Sufi interpreter Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 638/1240) as follows:

The [Prophet’s] vision of the Truth (ru’ya al-Haqq) only takes place in the mutual activity of revelation between an ascent and a descent (munazala bayna ‘uruj wa nuẓūl). The ascent is from us [namely, the humans] and the descent is from Him [namely, God]. [It thus follows that] the activity of ‘drawing near’ belongs to us (fa-lanā al-tadāni) and the activity of ‘coming down’ belongs to Him (wa-lahu al-tadallī) because the process of ‘coming down’ must proceed from the high [place, namely heaven]. It is our human task to ascend (wa-lanā al-taraqqī) and it is His divine task to receive (wa-lahu al-talaggī) those who came to Him."

A careful reading of the commentary shows that, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, the prophetic vision of God occurred only in the form of a mutual, two-way revelatory relationship between God and Muḥammad. This mutual activity of revelation was derived from his interpretation of Qur’an 53:8, a verse that alludes to the vocabulary of ‘drawing near’ and ‘coming down.’ Contrary to those who interpreted the meaning of the expression thumma danā fa-tadallā as referring to either God or Gabriel who drew near and came down to the Prophet during his spiritual journey, Ibn al-‘Arabi contended that the implied subject “he” in the first part thumma danā referred to the Prophet who drew near to God and the implied subject “He” in the second part fa-tadallā referred to God who came down from the high place, namely heaven. Accordingly, a proper rendering of the expression thumma danā fa-tadallā reads: Then he [namely, the Prophet] drew near and He [namely, God] came down. It is argued that the visionary encounter of revelation has to be conceived as a mode of mutual, two-

way revelatory activity between God and Muḥammad during the heavenly journey. The activity of ‘drawing near’ belonged to the realm of the humans, for the human Messenger Muḥammad drew near or even nearer away from God and the activity of ‘coming down’ belonged to the realm of the divine, for God was the direct agent of revelation who came down from heaven to meet His appointed-human Messenger. Both were the active agents of the revelatory process, moved from their respective place, and encountered each other in a close, intimate manner. The Prophet’s nearness to God or Gabriel is then described in the next process of the visionary revelation.

The next, gradual stage of the visionary revelation was the nearness of the Prophet to the heavenly figure: Until He was at the distance of two bows’ length or even nearer (Qurʾān 53:9). The meaning of this particular qurʾānic verse remains unintelligible if read only on its own terms, for it does not offer a specific referent for the implied subject “he was” (kāna). This problem posed a challenge for the early commentators to identify the diverse range of referents for the agency of divine revelation, which was open to diverse and contradictory interpretations. As heir to the early tradition of tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī preserved a variety of contradictory interpretations among the early interpreters: First, some early authorities argued that the implied subject “he” in a given verse referred to Gabriel who was “at a distance of two bows’ length from Muḥammad or even less, that is to say, even nearer to him.”48 Several commentators read the expression qāba qawsayn differently, between qāba qawsayn and qība qawsayn or between qīda qawsayn and qāda qawsayn; all variant readings of this qurʾānic phrase point to the same meaning, that is to say, Gabriel came closer to the Prophet, to within the measure of two bows49 and, as a

48 al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān 27:45.
49 Ibid.
result, became clearly perceptible to him. The nearness itself gave a chance for Muḥammad to see the appearance of Gabriel before him. In a number of the authority-based reports, a Companion of the Prophet and interpreter ʿAbdallāh b. Masʿūd narrated how Muḥammad saw Gabriel who had six hundred wings in his original form. The shape of Gabriel with six hundred wings was at the distance of two bows from Muḥammad. Second, other early interpreters, e.g. Mujāhid b. Jabr, argued that the implied agent of the revelatory activity was not Gabriel, but rather God who drew closer to Gabriel (rabbu-hu min Jibrīl). It was presumably prior to the sending down of the Qurʾān to the Prophet that God drew near to His intermediary agent Gabriel, at a distance of two bows’ length or even nearer. Third, other early exegetes argued that the implied subject of the revelatory activity “he was” referred to neither Gabriel nor God, but rather to the Prophet himself who drew near to God at a distance of two bows’ length or nearer. The proof for this saying was reported on the authority of early interpreter Muḥammad b. Kaʿb al-Quraẓī (d. 118/736) who related that some Companions of the Prophet posed a question: “Tell us, O Prophet of God: Had you seen your Lord? He replied: I had indeed seen Him not with my eyes, but only with my heart twice and then he recited [a verse]: Then he approached and came closer.” A reading of this report shows that it was the Prophet Muḥammad who drew near to his Lord and then came even much closer to Him within the measure of two bows’ length or nearer until he saw Him with his heart on two different occasions. Finally, still other early interpreters argued that the implied agent of revelatory activity in sūrat al-Najm 53:9 was neither the Prophet nor Gabriel, but rather God who drew near to Muhammad, instead of Gabriel. The proof for this saying was not

50Ibid.
preserved in the work of al-Ṭabarī, since he regularly neglected the commentary tradition of many Shi‘ī authorities. Chief among them was Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq who sought to interpret and work out the meaning of sūrat al-Najm 53:9 as referring to the proximity of mystical encounter between God and Muḥammad during the revelatory process. As he aptly put it, “He [i.e., God] drew Himself near to him [i.e., Muḥammad] until He was at a distance of two bows’ length away or even nearer from him. The activity of drawing near on the part of God, the Most High, has no limit, while the drawing near on the part of His servant has limits.”

It appears clear that, for Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the active agent of revelation was God who brought the Prophet much closer to Himself until He was at the very short distance from His servant, namely Muḥammad. The expression “two bows’ length or even nearer” was used idiomatically to signify a close, intimate proximity of the visionary encounter between God and the Prophet during the process of revelation. And the ultimate purpose of such visionary encounter was for the act of divine revelation itself.

The next, gradual stage of the visionary encounter was the act of revelation: Then, He revealed to His servant what He revealed (Qur‘ān 53:10). This passage of the Qur‘ān remains also unintelligible if read only on its own. A number of problems emerged from the method of reading Qur‘ān 53:10 on its own, internal terms. The first problem was the ambiguous reference to the implied identity of the revealer: Who acted as the agent(s) of the revelation—He revealed—either God, Gabriel, or both? The second problem was the ambiguous identity of the term “His servant”: Who was the intended addressee so-called “His servant” (‘abdihī)? Since the thing being revealed (mā awḥā) to “His servant” was not mentioned explicitly in the text of revelation, the final problem emerged: What was actually revealed during the visionary encounter? The answers to these questions are not

53Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, Kāmil al-Tafsīr, 160.
found clearly in the text of revelation, namely *sūrat al-Najm* and this in itself necessitates a task of interpretation on the part of its exegetes. In their works of *tafsīr*, they wrestled with the problem of meaning and produced two diverse, contradictory meanings of *sūra al-Najm* 53:10. In their interpretations of what God exactly meant by His words: *fa-awḥā ilā ‘abdihi mā awḥā*, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said: “God revealed to Gabriel what he then reveals to him [Muḥammad]” (*awḥā Allāh ilā Jibrīl mā yūḥīhi*);\(^{54}\) Qatāda b. Diʿāma said: “God revealed to Gabriel and Gabriel subsequently revealed to Muḥammad” (*awḥā Allāh ilā Jibrīl wa awḥa Jibrīl ilā Muḥammad*);\(^{55}\) al-Rābī’ b. Anas said: “through the agency of Gabriel” (*‘alā lisān Jibrīl*); and `Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd said: “Gabriel revealed to God’s Messenger, may He bless him and grant him peace, what God had revealed to him, that is to say, Gabriel” (*awḥā Jibrīl ilā rasūl Allāh mā awḥā Allāh ilayhī*).\(^ {56}\) A careful reading of these commentaries altogether reveals that the majority of early authorities interpreted the meaning of Qur’ān 53:10 as proof for a vision of Gabriel because they shared a belief that Gabriel was the intermediary agent of revelation, that he was the servant of God, and that he was entrusted to convey to Muḥammad that which his Lord had revealed through him. This majority understanding of revelation in early Islam was in fact contrary to the neglected opinions of other early authorities who expressed their belief in a vision of God through their *tafsīr* writings. In their respective exegeses of Qur’ān 53:10, ‘Abbās b. Abbās said: “[He revealed to] His servant, namely Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, what his Lord had revealed to him [Muḥammad]” (*fa-awḥa ilā ‘abdihi


\(^{55}\) In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Diʿāma in al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi‘*, 17:93.

Muḥammad, ṣalla Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallām, mā awhā ilayhi rabbuḥu;57 Saʿīd b. Jubayr said: “He revealed to him [i.e. Muḥammad]” (awhā ilayhi);58 Muqātil b. Sulaymān said: “Then He revealed to His servant, namely Muḥammad—may God bless him and grant him peace—what He revealed” (fa-awhā ilā ‘abdī Muḥammad, ṣalla Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallām, mā awhā ilayhi);59 and Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq said: “Without intermediary between Him (God) and him (Muḥammad), [He] secretly [revealed] to his [the Prophet’s] heart that no one knows but he himself” (bi-lā wāsiṭa baynahu wa baynahu, sirrān ilā qalbihi. lā yaʿlam bi-hi aḥadun siwāhu).60 It thus appears clear from these commentaries that some exegetes worked out the meaning of Qurʾān 53:10 as proof for a vision of God, since they believed that God Himself acted as the direct agency of revelation, that He intended His servant to be Muḥammad, and that He addressed Muḥammad directly, without any intermediary. In his conceptualization of a direct, non-mediated revelation, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq argued how the nature of visionary encounter between God and Muḥammad was a completely secret, for no one knew what was exactly being revealed to the Prophet except the two of them. The secret mode of relationship between the two of them was neatly summed up by Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq in his further commentary on Qurʾān 53:10: “No one knows that revelation except the one [namely, God] who revealed it and the one [namely, Muḥammad] to whom it was revealed.”61 In sum, only God and Muḥammad knew the revelation, or al-wāḥy, what was being revealed to him, since God sent it down secretly into his own heart (ilā qalbihi), as something that was internal to the Prophet himself.

57In a report attributed to ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbbās in al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān 27:47.
60Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, Kāmil al-Ṭafsīr, 160.
The first visionary encounter of revelation culminated with the prophetic vision of the heavenly figure: *The heart did not falsify what he saw* (Qurʿān 53:11). Read by itself, the meaning of Qurʿān 53:11 is vague, since it does not specify, first, the proper reading of the key verb form, whether kadhiba (“to lie”) or kadhdhaba (“to falsify”); second, the object of prophetic vision, whether Gabriel or God; and, third, the specific manner of his seeing the heavenly figure, whether by the eye or in the heart. The ambiguous language of revelation raises several problems: How was the verb *k-dh-b* read and interpreted in early Islam? Who did the Prophet see during his visionary encounter with the heavenly figure? And what exactly was the specific manner of his seeing the heavenly being? In order to answer these questions, we need to look at how the early community of interpreters themselves confronted the perplexing problems of the Prophet’s visions.

First, these exegetes differed sharply in their reading of the key verb form, whether kadhiba or kadhdhaba. A majority of early readers or reciters of the Qurʿān (*jumhūr al-qurrā’*) in the major Islamic metropolises, i.e., Madina, Makka, Kūfa, and Baṣra, preferred to read the verb *k-dh-b* in Qurʿān 53:11 in the first form as kadhiba with *takhfīf* (“lightening”). With this reading, they construed the meaning of the verse as follows: *The heart did not lie about what it [i.e., the heart] saw* (mā kadhiba al-fuʿādu mā raʾā) (Qurʿān 53:11). Here the pronoun “it” in the verb “what it saw” (mā raʾā) was taken to refer to the heart (al-fuʿād) of Muḥammad. Thus his heart stood at the center of the visionary encounter with the heavenly figure. That is to say, the heart of the Prophet did not deny that it saw this mighty figure. His seeing the mighty figure in his heart means that the nature of the prophetic vision was spiritual rather than physical. A conflicting early interpretation of the prophetic vision as having been instead an actual...
physical encounter can also be found as the result of a second, minority reading. Thus a minority of early reciters of the Qur’ān, i.e. Abū Rajā’ [d. 105/723-724), Qatāda b. Di‘āma (d. 118/736), and ‘Āşim b. al-‘Ajjāj al-Jaḥdārī (d. 128/745), preferred to read the verb *k-dh-b* in Qur’ān 53:11 in the second form as *kadhdhaba* with *tashdid* (“strengthening”). Thus they read the qur’ānic words—*mā kadhdhaba al-fu’ādu mā ra’ā*—to mean that *the heart did not falsify what he [Muḥammad] or it [the eye] saw* (Qur’ān 53:11). The relative pronoun “*mā*” in *mā ra’ā*, “what he/it saw”, was taken to refer not to the heart of the Prophet, but rather to the Prophet himself or to his physical sight. More precisely, the heart of the Prophet did not falsify the authentic vision of his own eyes. It rather confirmed and justified the truth of what he actually saw with his eyes.

Second, the early authorities differed again in their commentaries on the prophetic vision of the heavenly figure. Their divergence of interpretation was especially evident in the exposition of what God exactly meant by His words: *The heart did not falsify what he saw* (Qur’ān 53:11). A majority of them believed that the Prophet saw Gabriel in his true, primordial shape with six hundred wings, while only a small minority contended that the Prophet saw God.

I begin with a majority of early exegetes who have long interpreted the revelation of Qur’ān 53:11 as describing the Prophet’s vision of Gabriel. The proof for this majority view was preserved in the later, medieval commentaries of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Atiyya (d. 541/1147) and Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144).

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As a heir to the early tradition of tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī cited ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd and Qatāda b. Di‘āma as early representative figures who believed that the Prophet saw Gabriel, not God, during his visionary revelatory encounter. In his exegesis of what God meant by His words, The heart did not falsify what he saw, ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd is reported consistently as saying: (1), “God’s Messenger, may God bless him and give him salvation, saw Gabriel with his wings, and he filled the space between heaven and earth;” (2) “I [Muḥammad] saw Gabriel near the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary; his six hundred wings were studded with pearls and rubies that fell from the feathers of his wings;” and (3) “At the farthest Lote-Tree, I [Muḥammad] saw Gabriel with his six hundred wings.”  

A careful reading of these reports reveals that ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd interpreted Qur’ān 53:11 as referring to an angelic vision, for he believed that the Prophet had seen the physical shape of Gabriel with a great number of huge wings. This vision of Gabriel differed entirely from a report ascribed to the early interpreter Qatāda b. Di‘āma. In his explanation of what God said in His words, The heart did not falsify what he saw, Qatāda reported, “I [Muḥammad] saw Gabriel in his true and primordial shape in which he was created.” This report shows clearly that Qatāda b. Di‘āma stood firmly by the opinion that the vision had been one of Gabriel, since he described how Muḥammad saw Gabriel in his true and natural shape.

It seems clear from those two exegetical reports that, for al-Ṭabarī, the majority of early authorities thought that Muḥammad had a vision of Gabriel, who manifested himself in his true, primordial shape with his great wings. This majority belief that the mighty heavenly figure in the Prophet’s vision was Gabriel was summed up by a

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64 For these reports attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd and Qatāda b. Di‘āma, see al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān 27:49.
65 In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma, ibid.
medieval exegete and judge, Abū Muḥammad b. ‘Aṭiyya, in the following commentary on Qur’ān 53:11:

‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, Qatāda b. Di‘āma, and a majority of scholars (jumhūr al-‘ulamā’) held the view that the object of the prophetic vision (al-mar‘ī) was Gabriel, peace be upon him, [whom Muḥammad saw] on two different occasions: once on earth and the other [presumably in heaven] near the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary during the night of the ascension.66

In his medieval work of tafsīr, Ibn ‘Aṭiyya argued that the majority views of early authorities had held for the Prophet’s seeing Gabriel, rather than God. This majority consensus left only a little room for further interpretation. A medieval exegete and theologian al-Zamakhsharī argued for the only possible interpretation of Qur’ān 53:11 as describing the Prophet’s vision of Gabriel:

The heart of Muhammad, may God bless him and give him salvation, did not lie about what he saw with his eyes, namely the shape of Gabriel, peace be upon him …. He saw him with his eyes, recognized him with his heart, and had no doubt that what he saw was true. The Prophet’s heart confirmed the truth that the object of his seeing was indeed Gabriel [who manifested himself] in his true and primordial shape.67

Although the majority of early interpreters argued that the Prophet saw Gabriel in his true and primordial shape with six hundred wings, there were others who contended that he saw God Himself instead. Surprisingly, those who believed in the vision of God were far from a small minority of early authorities, as many medieval exegetes have noted. Rather, they constituted a large number of early commentators who firmly believed that the Prophet experienced a vision of God in a variety of manners.

Third, many early commentators differed in their interpretations of the manner in which the Prophet saw God during his visionary experience of revelation. Some believed

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67 Al-Zamakhsharī, Al-Kashshāf, 4:29.
that the Prophet saw God with his heart, others argued that he saw Him with his eyes, and still others focused on his having seen his Lord in the form of a young man (shābb) or as light (nūr). The early testimonies to the diverse manner of his seeing God were preserved in the memory of the Prophet’s Companions (al-ṣaḥāba), their Successors (al-tābiʿūn), and those who came many decades after them. The Companions and Successors lived in relatively close proximity to the age of prophecy and passed on reports they narrated about the Prophet’s manner of seeing God during his visionary revelatory encounter.

‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, a close Companion and great authority in the field of tafsīr, interpreted the revelation of Qurʾān 53:11 as clearly a vision of God. Thus, he read the words—The heart did not falsify what he saw—to mean that, first, “Muḥammad saw his Lord” (raʾā Muḥammad rabba-hu); second, “he saw Him with his heart” (raʾāhu bi-qalbi-hi);68 third, “Muḥammad saw his Lord twice with his heart” (raʾā Muḥammad rabba-hu bi-qalbi-hi marratayin);69 and fourth, “Indeed, God distinguished Abraham by friendship (inna Allāh iṣṭafā Ibrāhīm bi-al-khulla), distinguished Moses by speech (wa-iṣṭafā Mūsā bi-al-kalām), and distinguished Muḥammad by vision (wa-iṣṭafā Muḥammad bi-al-ruʾya).”70 In all these reports, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās showed that he firmly believed that the Prophet had experienced a vision of God on two occasions and that his specific manner of seeing God was with his heart in both instances. He held further that a vision of God was a distinctive quality of a divinely chosen Prophet, namely Muhammad, who was distinguished especially from two other previous Prophets—Abraham and Moses—precisely by virtue of his visionary encounter with God. Abraham was exalted as a sincere, intimate friend of God (khalīl Allāh) and Moses spoke directly to God, while

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69In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās in al-Suyūṭī, al-Durr, 6:160.
Muhammad saw God with his heart. The Prophet’s vision of God was therefore a distinctive, even unique quality of the prophetic-revelatory event in early Islam.

There is a report from a Başran chain of authorities whereby Ṣabdallāh b. ’Abbās was reported as saying that the Prophet saw God “in the most beautiful form” (fi ḥsanin ṣūratin). His anthropomorphic description of the vision of God was preserved by al-Ṭabarî:

It is narrated on the authority of Ṣabdallāh b. ’Abbās who said: The Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him salvation, said that I saw my Lord in the most beautiful form. He asked me: “O Muḥammad, do you know what the High Council disputes about?” I replied: “No, I do not know, O my Lord!” Then He put His hand between my shoulders until I felt its coldness between my breasts, and I knew what was in heaven and on earth. I said: “O Lord, [they debate about] the degrees (pl. al-darajāt, sing. al-dara), the atonements (pl. al-kaffārāt, sing. al-kaffāra), walking on foot to the congregational prayers (pl. al-jumuʿāt, sing. al-jumʿa), and waiting for prayer after prayer (pl. al-ṣalāt, sing. al-sala).” I said that “O Lord, you had verily taken Abraham as an intimate, sincere friend [Qur’ān 4: 125], had spoken directly to Moses [Qur’ān 4:164], and had done this and that.” Then God replied [to Muḥammad]: “Did We not open your breast for you and relieve you from your burden? [Qur’ān 94:1-2]. Did I not do this and that to you [Muḥammad].” He said: “He communicated things to me [Muḥammad] that I was not given permission to share with you [presumably his early community].” He said: that is what God says in His Scripture that He speaks to you: “He drew near and descended, until He was within two bows’ away length or even nearer, and then revealed to His servant what He revealed. The heart did not falsify what he saw” [Qur’ān 53:8-11]. He placed the light of my vision in my heart and thus I gazed upon Him with my heart.71

This report clearly shows that, for Ṣabdallāh b. ’Abbās, the Prophet experienced the vision of God. And the images of God whom Muḥammad saw during his first visionary encounter of revelation were described in blatantly anthropomorphic terms: God was beautiful, had hands, and enjoyed physical intimacy with His Messenger Muḥammad. It was on this occasion of the high host conversation that God placed one of His hands

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71In a report attributed to Ṣabdallāh b. ’Abbās, ibid.
between the Prophet’s shoulders until he finally felt its coldness in his breast. The report goes on to describe the contents of the high council debate. It began with the Prophet himself who spoke to his Lord that, first, the degrees discussed in the heavenly assembly were concerned with the importance of walking to the Friday prayer by foot and waiting for the prayer at the mosque after the prayer, and second, the divinely-privileged prophets—Abraham and Moses—vis-à-vis Muḥammad. It seems clear that Muḥammad complained to God about His decisions to take Abraham as His close, intimate friend and to speak to Moses directly. He felt that God had done more for these two earlier prophets than for him. As a consequence, he apparently perceived himself far less favorably than his two predecessors. It was precisely in response to his complaint about this that God rebuked him through His revelation: “Did We not open your breast for you and relieve you from your burden?” [Qur’ān 94:1-2]. Furthermore, God distinguished Abraham by friendship, Moses by speech, and ultimately Muhammad by vision. Indeed, He granted the light of vision to the heart of His Prophet and Messenger Muḥammad so that he was able to see Him vividly and truly. The Prophetic vision of God was thus proof for God’s special, distinct relation to Muḥammad.

Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. 32/653) was another Companion of the Prophet and storyteller who argued for the truth of the vision of God. He interpreted the revelation of Qurʾān 53:11 to mean that “the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him salvation, saw his Lord with the heart, as an authentic vision (ruʿya ṣahīha). And God placed the Prophet’s sight in his heart. That is to say, He created the prophetic vision for his heart [namely, “vision of the heart”] so that he saw his Lord with the heart truthfully, as if he
saw Him with the eyes.” In this report, Abū Dharr stood behind the Prophet’s vision of God, since he stated that Muḥammad saw God; that his manner of seeing God was with his heart; and that his vision of the heart was a true vision of God.

There was a further early report ascribed to Abū Dharr, who stated that Muḥammad saw God in the form of light (nūr). This vision of light appeared in a dialogue between Abū Dharr and ‘Abdallāh b. Shaqīq al-‘Uqaylī. As an early scholar of the Ḥadīth from Baṣra, Ibn Shaqīq reported that

I said to Abū Dharr: “If I had met the Prophet, I would have asked him a question.” [Abū Dharr asked:] “What would you have liked to ask him?” [Ibn Shaqīq replied:] “I would have asked him whether he had seen his Lord, the Mighty and Lofty.” Then he [Abū Dharr] said: “I asked him exactly the same question.” And the Prophet answered: “Indeed, I saw only light!”

A closer look at this report suggests two probable visions. It is probable that the Prophet saw God, albeit as light, since He described Himself in terms of the light (Qur’ān 24:35). It is also probable that the Prophet was not able to see God very precisely because the light served as a veil that prevented him from seeing his Lord.

Anas b. Mālik (d. 93/712) was the next Companion of the Prophet in Baṣra who favored the physical vision of God. He interpreted the revelation of Qur’ān 53:11 as proof that the Prophet saw God with his own eyes (ru’ya ḥaqīqa bi al-baṣar). It appears that, for him, a true vision of God was with the eyes. It was only in the second account of the prophetic vision that Anas b. Mālik argued for the Prophet’s seeing God in the most

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72 In a report attributed to Abū Dharr al-Ghiṣfārī in al-Wahidi, al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ, 21:22-23.
74 In a report attributed to Abū Dharr by al-Qurtubī, al-Jāmi’, 17:94.
75 In a report attributed to ‘Anas b Mālik, ibid., 17:93.
beautiful form, as will be explained below in the discussion of the second prophetic vision.

‘Ikrima al-Barbarī al-Baṣrī (d. 106/724) was a client [mawlā] of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and an early interpreter of the Qur’ān in Baṣra who argued for the vision of God. His preference for the Prophet’s seeing God emerged especially in response to a query posed to him by ‘Abbād b. Maṇṣūr: “I asked ‘Ikrima about the divine word, The heart did not falsify what he saw, and he replied: “do you expect me to say to you that he [the Prophet] truly saw Him?” “Yes, he saw Him. Indeed, he saw Him. Then he saw Him until he passed away.”76 In this report, ‘Ikrima sought to persuade his interlocutor by saying repeatedly that the Prophet did see his Lord. A later, medieval commentator and judge Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī cited ‘Ikrima, together with his predecessor Anas b. Mālik, as belonging to a group of early authorities who firmly believed that the Prophet truly saw God with his own physical eyes.77

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), a famed Successor and early interpreter in Baṣra, stood firmly behind the prophetic vision of God. He interpreted the revelation of Qur’ān 53:11 to mean that “he [Muḥammad] saw his Lord, mighty and lofty”.78 ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/827), a Yemeni scholar who settled in Ṣanʿā’ and studied for years with the Baṣran early authority Maʿmar b. Rāshid (d. 153/770), related that “al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī used to swear by God that Muḥammad truly saw his Lord”.79 In another report, the vision was experienced indirectly through the Prophet’s seeing His attributes,

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76 In a report attributed to Abū Dharr by al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi‘ al-bayān 27:48.
77 Ibid.
78 Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, 2:308.
as reflected in his commentary on Qur’ān 53:11: “He [Muhammad] truly saw [God in] His majesty (jalāla-hu), His greatness (‘ażamata-hu), and His garment (ridā ‘a-hu)”.

Al-Rabī’ b. Anas al-Baṣrī (d. 139/756), a Successor and early authority in Baṣra, affirmed the truth of the Prophet’s seeing God with his heart. In his commentary on the object of prophetic vision, he believed that “Muḥammad saw his Lord with his heart”. Thus a vision of the heart was the focal point of his reading Qur’ān 53:11.

Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), a Successor and neglected early commentator who lived for several years in Baṣra, argued for the Prophet’s vision of God with his own physical eyes. In his commentary on Qur’ān 53:11, he said that “the heart of Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him salvation, in no way falsified the truth that he saw God with his physical eyes during that night”. It seems clear that, for Muqātil, the Prophet’s heart did not falsify the authentic vision of his own eyes. It rather confirmed the truth of what the Prophet actually saw with his eyes during the night journey was God Himself.

Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), early Shiʿī authority and commentator, argued for the mutual, visionary encounter of revelation between God and Muḥammad. In his exegesis of Qur’ān 53:11, he wrote, “no one knows exactly what he [Muḥammad] saw except He who appeared [to him] and he who saw [Him]. The lover has come close to the beloved, as a confidant to him, and as a close, intimate friend with him. God Most High said that We raise in degrees whom We will (Qur’ān 6:83)”.

This commentary clearly reveals that, for Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, the precise nature of the visionary encounter of revelation was closed to outsiders, since only participants of the revelatory activity, God and

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80 Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, 2:308.
81 In a report attributed to al-Rabī’ b. Anas in al-Ṭabarî, Jāmiʿ al-bayān 27:49.
Muḥammad, knew and saw each other. The activity of drawing closer to His beloved servant served clearly as proof that God treated Muḥammad with intimacy.

Finally, Sahl ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), a great early Ṣūfī interpreter who studied in Baṣra for years, argued that this passage refers to the Prophet’s mystical vision of his Lord. In his exegesis of Qurʾān 53:11, he states firmly that Muḥammad witnessed his Lord through “his vision of the heart” (*baṣar qalbi-hī*).84

This survey of the early interpreters who argued for the vision of God shows that these commentators were by no means part of a minority camp, as several medieval scholars later noted. They were in fact much greater in number than those in the supposed majority camp who held that the vision was of Gabriel, not God. The clear evidence of Qurʾān commentary in its early, formative tradition shows that the so-called “minority camp” was made up of many of the Prophet’s Companions (*al-ṣaḥāba*), their Successors (*al-ṭābiʿūn*), and those who came in decades after them. They included, among others, such early figures as ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbbās, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, Anas b. Mālik, ‘Ikrima al-Barbarī al-Baṣrī, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Rabī’ b. Anas al-Baṣrī, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, and Sahl ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī. Surprisingly, most of these early interpreters lived in the city of Baṣra, which suggests that in the first generations of Muslims there was a direct linkage between Baṣra and the proponents of the Prophet’s revelatory experience of seeing God.

The gradual, step-by-step process of the first visionary encounter between God, or His intermediary agent Gabriel, and Muḥammad ends with a rhetorical question: “*Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?*” (Qurʾān 53:12). Read by itself, this verse is not clear as to whom the rhetorical question is directed, since the addressee of

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revelation is only referred to as “you”. Again, as we have argued before, when the text of revelation is unclear, the views of exegetes are necessary. In their works of commentary, they read Qurʾān 53:12 as a polemical text of revelation, one recited and addressed as a direct response to the challenge of ‘the polytheists’ (al-mushrikūn) who disputed with Muhammad over his claim to have seen the heavenly figure, whether God or Gabriel. According to al-Ṭabarī, the polemical response of Sūrat al-Najm 53:12 was precisely a challenge to the polytheists of Mecca: “Are you, O polytheists, going to dispute with Muḥammad about the truth of his vision, as God has shown him some of His signs?”

This rhetorical question was clearly a divinely-given defense to the authentic nature of the prophetic vision—the truth that Muḥammad had seen the heavenly figure during his first visionary encounter on the highest horizon.

The Second Account of the Prophet’s Vision. Qurʾān 53:13-16 gives only limited insight into the heavenly being’s identity and also the specific place where the second account places this vision of the Prophet: “And verily he saw Him on another descent, at the Lote Tree of the Boundary, near which is the Garden of Refuge, when the Lote Tree was covered by that which covered it” (Qurʾān 53:13-16). Some familiar problems arise from the method of reading this passage strictly on its own terms. Since the antecedent of the personal pronoun “hu” (wa-laqad raʾā-hu) is not specified, one is prompted first to ask: Who did Muḥammad see during his second vision? He is said to have seen the same heavenly figure on another occasion, but this time specifically “at the lote tree of the boundary”. Where is “the lote tree of the boundary”? It is located near “the Garden of Refuge”. But what exactly is “the Garden of Refuge”? And what was it that covered the

85Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 27:50.
lote tree? All these questions are explored in the exegeses of of early interpreters who preserved the texts of Qur’ān 53 and vested them with concrete meaning.

First of all, the identity of the heavenly figure whom the Prophet saw during his second visionary encounter was a matter of theological controversy among the early authorities. The conflict of two interpretations was manifest in their discussions of the meaning of Qur’ān 53:13. In his interpretation of Qur’ān 53:13, for example, al-Ṭabarī argued that the majority of early interpreters believed that the Prophet saw Gabriel on another descent, while only a single authority, namely ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, contended that this passage refers to a vision of God, not Gabriel. To justify his interpretation as that of the majority of previous interpreters, al-Ṭabarī presented a long list of early authorities who stood firmly behind the reading of this as a second instance of the Prophet’s vision of Gabriel. Chief among these authorities were ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr, ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, Mujāhid b. Jabr, and al-Rābī‘ b. Anas.

‘Ā’isha, a wife of the Prophet and daughter of the Companion Abū Bakr, was the foremost earliest authority to read Qur’ān 53:13 as describing a vision of Gabriel, over against a tradition of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās that it was instead a vision of God. Al-Ṭabarī cites three exegetical traditions from ‘Ā’isha that confirm her firm stance on the Prophet’s seeing of Gabriel not God.

The first exegetical tradition is on the authority of the Kūfan Successor, jurist, and ḥadīth scholar, Masrūq b. Ajda‘ (d. 63/682), who is cited as saying,

‘Ā’isha said: ‘whoever claims that Muḥammad saw his Lord has certainly told a great lie against God’. I [namely, Masrūq] was lying down, then I sat up and told her, ‘O Mother of the Believers! Please, give me time and don’t hurry me. Did not God say; Indeed, he saw him on another descent [Qur’ān 53:13]. And he verily saw him on the clear horizon’ [Qur’ān

86Ibid.
She replied: ‘He was Gabriel whom the Prophet saw [twice]. He saw him for the first time in the nature and shape in which he was originally created. And he saw him another time when he descended from heaven to earth and the great size of his image filled the entire horizon between the sky and earth’. Then she said: ‘I was the first to ask the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him salvation, about this verse [of Sūrat al-Najm]: He [confirmed that he] was Gabriel, peace be upon him’.87

The second exegetical tradition was again a report on the authority of the same Kūfan Successor, Masrūq, who reported that

‘Ā’isha said: ‘whoever asserts that Muḥammad saw his Lord has certainly told an outrageous lie against God’. God states: No vision can comprehend Him, but He comprehends [all] vision [Qur’ān 6:103]. It is not granted to any mortal that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil... [Qur’ān 42: 51]. I [Masrūq] was lying down, then I sat up and told her, ‘O Mother of the Believers! Please, give me time and don’t hurry me. Did not God say, and he verily saw him on another descent [Qur’ān 53:13]. Indeed, he saw him on the clear horizon’ [Qur’ān 81:23]. She replied: ‘I am the first among this community to ask the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him salvation, about that’. Then the Prophet said: ‘I only saw Gabriel in his original form on these two occasions [i.e. on the clear horizon and at a second descent] when he came down from heaven to earth. The great size of his created, original shape filled the entire space between heaven and earth.’88

The third and final exegetical tradition, again given on the authority of Masrūq, was as follows:

I came to ‘Ā’isha and told her, ‘O Mother of the believers! Did Muḥammad see his Lord? She said, ‘praise be to God! What you said makes my hair stands on end’. Be aware that whoever tells you one of the following three things has certainly lied. [1] ‘whoever tells you that Muḥammad saw his Lord has certainly lied’. Then she recited: No vision can comprehend Him, but He comprehends [all] vision. He is the kind, the aware [Qur’ān 6:103]. It is not granted to any mortal that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil... [Qur’ān 42: 51]. [2] ‘whoever informs you that he knows what will happen tomorrow has certainly lied.’ Then she recited the final portions of Sūrat Luqmān: Indeed, God has knowledge of the hour; He sends down the rain; He knows what it is in the wombs. No one knows in what land he shall die

87Ibid.
88Ibid., 50-1.
A look at the three exegetical traditions about ‘Ā’isha shows a number of remarkable things. All three reports came through the same authority of the Kūfan Successor, Masrūq b. Ajda‘, from a conversation with ‘Ā’isha. This suggests that the reference to the early Islamic traditions of the Prophet’s vision of Gabriel was manifestly associated with the city of Kūfa, as opposed to Baṣra. As transmitted through chains of transmission from the Kūfan authority, Masrūq, ‘Ā’isha denounced whoever claimed that Muḥammad saw God. The truth in her view was that he only saw Gabriel, not God.

‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, a prominent Companion of the Prophet and early convert to Islam, was a second authority who argued for a vision of Gabriel. He read Qur’ān 53:13 in particular as proof that the Prophet saw Gabriel resting on green cushions (rafraf, see Qur’ān 55:76), and the great size of his angelic shape filled the entire space between heaven and earth.90 Just like his predecessor, Mujāhid b. Jabr, a Successor and commentator, ‘Abdallāh was another exegete who read Qur’ān 53:5-18 as referring to the Prophet’s seeing Gabriel in his original shape on two occasions.91 In his exegesis of Qur’ān 53:13, al-Rābī‘ b. Anas simply said: “Gabriel, peace be upon him”.92 In sum, the majority of early commentators argued that the Prophet saw Gabriel in his true angelic shape on another occasion.

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89Ibid., 51.
91In a report attributed to Mujāhid b. Jabr, ibid.
92In a report attributed to al-Rābī‘ b. Anas, ibid.
In his unfavorable remark on the “minority camp,” al-Ṭabarî cited only ‘Abdallâh b. ‘Abbâs as a single authority who read Qur’ân 53:13 as referring to the Prophet’s vision of God on another occasion. In his interpretation of what is meant by the divine words—

*he saw Him on another descent*—, he stated that “the Prophet saw his Lord with his heart”. Unfortunately, al-Ṭabarî completely neglected a number of early interpreters who argued that the Prophet saw God on another descent. A century prior to al-Ṭabarî, ‘Abd al-Razzâq (d. 211/827), preserved a number of early authorities, such as ‘Abdallâh b. ‘Abbâs, Ka’b al-Aḥbâr, and Ma’mar b. Râshid, who affirmed that the Prophet had seen God on another descent. Their preference for the Prophet’s seeing God were reflected in the commentary of ‘Abd al-Razzâq:

‘Abd al-Razzâq, on the authority of [Sufyân] b. ‘Uuyayn, on the authority of Mujaḍal b. Sa’îd, on the authority of al-Shâbî, on the authority of ‘Abdallâh b. al-Ḥârith, who narrated that “Ibn ‘Abbâs and Ka’b met together.” He went on to report, “Ibn ‘Abbâs said, ‘As for us, namely sons of Hâshim, we believe and say that Muḥammad saw His Lord twice.’” He reported, “Ka’b began to recite loudly that ‘God is great’ until the mountains echoed it with him” and he added, “God divided His vision and His speech between Muḥammad and Moses. He spoke with Moses and Muḥammad saw Him with his heart.” Mujaḍal reported that al-Shâbî said: “Masrûq told me that he asked ‘Ā’isha, ‘O Mother [of the believers]! Did Muḥammad see His Lord?’ She answered, ‘you have said something that makes my hair stands on end.’ I said, ‘wait a moment!’ and then recited to her, ‘wa-al-najm idhâ hawâ…gâba qawsayn aw adnâ’ [Qur’ân 53:1-9]. She [‘Ā’isha] replied, ‘Wait! how are you being misguided (ruwaidan, ayna yuzhabu bi-ka)? Certainly, he saw Gabriel in his created, original shape. Whoever informs you that Muhammad saw his Lord has certainly lied and whoever tells you that he knows the five mysteries of the unseen has certainly lied.’ [Then she recited these verses]: *Indeed, God has knowledge of the hour; He sends down the rain; He knows what is in the wombs. No one knows in what land he shall die [Qur’ân 31:34].*’

‘Abd al-Razzâq stated, “I mentioned this hadîth to Ma’mar [b. Râshid], and he told me, “In our judgment, ‘Ā’isha is not more knowledgeable than Ibn ‘Abbâs (mâ ‘Ā’isha ‘indanâ bi-a’lām min Ibn ‘Abbâs).’”

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93In a report attributed to ‘Abdallâh b. ‘Abbâs, *ibid.,* 52.
In his exegesis of Qur’an 53:13, ‘Abd al-Razzāq preserved a frequently neglected view on the importance of several early authorities. One of them was Ka‘b al-Aḥbār (d. 32/652) who, just like his predecessor ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, argued that Muḥammad saw his Lord on another time. As an early Jewish convert to Islam with knowledge of biblical tradition, Ka‘b argued for the relative merits of God on the basis of His distinctive relation to the two Prophets: Moses and Muḥammad. That is, God spoke to Moses and granted visions to Muḥammad.

When the idea of seeing God was raised with ‘Ā’isha, she immediately thought that Masrūq b. Ajda‘ was being misled by those who had told him that, for she firmly believed that the Prophet only saw Gabriel, not God. As a consequence of her belief, she denounced those who spoke about the vision of God as liars. Given the importance of this problem, ‘Abd al-Razzāq reported this ḥadīth to his teacher, Ma‘mar b. Rāshid. In his reply, Ma‘mar was skeptical about the exegetical authority of ‘Ā’isha, for she was not more knowledgeable than ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās with regard to the question of prophetic visions. That is to say, a report about the vision of Gabriel attributed to ‘Ā’isha was not more authoritative than a report about the vision of God from ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās. Thus Ma‘mar b. Rāshid aligned himself with the authority of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and argued for the visions in Sūra 53 being ones of God, not Gabriel.

Thus ‘Abd al-Razzāq presented ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, Ka‘b al-Aḥbār, and Ma‘mar b. Rāshid as a few representative early authorities who argued for the Prophet’s seeing God on the two occasions mentioned in Sūra 53. Even prior to the tafsīr of ‘Abd al-Razzāq, a sometimes neglected early interpreter, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, was already keen to follow the tradition of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās by arguing with respect to Sūra 53:13ff.
that “Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, saw his Lord with his heart on another time” (raʾā Muḥammad rabba-hu bi-qalbi-hi marratan ukhrā).95

When the Prophet saw the same heavenly being on another descent, this time it was specifically at *sidrat al-muntahā*, an enigmatic term that is not clear in itself and is in need of explanation. In their exegeses of Qurʾān 53:14, the early interpreters offered conflicting interpretations: some, e.g. Ka‘b al-Aḥbār, argued that *sidrat al-muntahā* is the Lote Tree in heaven near God’s throne and it is the limit of the highest knowledge of any learned person; others, e.g. ʿAbdallāh b. Masʿūd, argued that it is the Lote Tree in the sixth heaven that marks the end for those who ascend from earth or who descend from heaven, by God’s command; and still others, e.g. al-Rābiʿ b. Anas, contended that it is the limit of all who follow the exemplary living tradition of God’s Messenger and his path.96

The identification of the Lote Tree with the heavenly domain appeared again in the early commentary of Muqātil b. Sulayman as follows: “Muḥammad saw his Lord with his heart on another occasion near the Lote Tree of the Boundary, which refers specifically to the Tree (*shajara*) that stands at the right side of the throne of God and above the higher rank of the seventh heaven”.97 The early Muslim understandings of the *sidrat al-muntahā* as referring primarily to the heavenly Lote Tree strongly indicate that the second visionary encounter of the Prophet Muḥammad with the mighty figure took place in heaven during the night journey. In fact, the Lote Tree became a known emblem of the Prophet’s night journey.

When we turn to the qur’anic text, “The Lote Tree of the Boundary” is said to be located specifically near “the Garden of Refuge” (*jannat al-maʾwā*, Qurʾān 53:15), a

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96In reports attributed to these early authorities in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 27:52-3.
vague qur’ānic term that is open to multiple and contradictory interpretations. Al-Qurṭubī preserved five early different interpretations of the phrase jannat al-ma’wā as follows: (1) al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī stated, “the garden of the refuge is the heavenly domain where God-fearing people reside”; (2) ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās said, “it is the heavenly place where the souls of the martyrs stay” (arwāḥ al-shuhadā’); (3) “it is said (wa-qīla) that the garden of refuge is a place in heaven where Ādam stays”; (4) “it is said that this is the heavenly refuge where all the souls of the believers abide”; and (5) “it is reported that this is the heavenly place where Gabriel and Mikhail reside”. Regardless of these differences among the early authorities in their interpretations of those who would reside forever in the heavenly garden, they shared a common belief that “the garden of refuge” was located in heaven and was promised by God for either the first Prophet Ādam, or the righteous, or the believers, or the martyrs, or even the archangels.

The Prophet’s second visionary encounter with the mighty figure took place at the heavenly “Lote Tree of the Boundary” when it was covered by something undescribed in verse 16. The task of the early commentators was precisely to identify what covered “the Lote Tree of the Boundary”. They differed again in their interpretations of Qur’ān 53:16: some, e.g., ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, Masrūq b. Ajda’, and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim, stated that the Lote tree was covered with “carpet or spread of gold” (farāsh min dhahab); others, e.g., al-Rabī’ b. Anas, argued that it was covered with the host of angels (malā’ikat); and still others, e.g., ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and Mujāhid b. Jabr, contended that it was covered with the presence of the mighty God Himself.99

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98In a report attributed to these early authorities in al-Qurṭubī, al-Jāmi’, 17:96-7.
99In reports attributed to these early authorities in al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān, 27:56.
The second visionary encounter of the Prophet with God at “the Lote Tree of the Furthest Boundary” is followed immediately by a testimony to the veracity of his seeing: *The eye did not turn aside, nor did it overstep the bound* (Qur’an 53:17). This verse still remains vague if read strictly on its own terms. According to the father of Qur’an exegesis ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, “the eye of the Prophet did not turn away—right or left, nor did it overreach the bound”.100 This is to verify that the Prophet’s vision of the heavenly figure held firm and straight. He did not swerve away from the truth as regards what he saw during his face-to-face encounter with the heavenly figure. Nor did he go beyond what he was instructed on the night of journey. This was precisely what Muqātil b. Sulaymān expressed in his exegesis of Qur’an 53:17: “mā zaghā al-baṣar means the gaze of Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him salvation, did not turn aside, and wa-mā ṭaghā means nor did it transgress the bound. Rather, it certainly confirmed the truth of what Muḥammad saw during the night journey”.101 In his still earlier commentary, Muqātil b. Sulaymān was one of the early commentators who argued that Muḥammad truly saw his Lord at a second descent during the night journey. Verse 17 is interpreted as a glowing testimony to the veracity of the Prophet’s seeing God. In mystical commentary, this verse has been read in favor of the Prophet’s witnessing and contemplation of his Lord. Thus, the early Şūfī exegete, Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, provided this commentary on Qur’an 53:17: “He [namely, Muḥammad] did not incline to the signs of himself (mā māla ilā shawāhidi nafsi-hi) nor to the witnessing of himself.

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Rather, he witnessed through his contemplation of his Lord and through his seeing the
divine attributes clearly, which required firmness from him in that stage”.  

The second account of the prophetic vision ends apparently with a reference to the
veracity of his seeing: “He certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord” (Qur’ān
53:18). This verse remains ambiguous if read strictly on its own terms, since it does not
explain the import of “the greatest signs of his Lord”. In their exegeses of Qur’ān 53:18,
the early interpreters offered multiple, diverse, and even contradictory meanings of the
greatest signs of the Lord: Some, e.g. ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, stated that “the Prophet saw
the green curtain or cushion (raffraf) that filled the entire horizon [of the heavens]”;
others, e.g., ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd (d. 182/798), argued that “the Prophet saw Gabriel
in his true, original form in heaven”; and still others, e.g., Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, contended
that “the Prophet witnessed the [greatest] signs of love in a way that is indescribable”.  
The mystical description of “the greatest signs of the Lord” was elaborated further in the
commentary of our early Şūfī interpreter Sahl al-Tustarī:

*Indeed, he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* That is to say, [he saw] the divine attributes that manifested through His signs (āyāt).
 Though he saw them [i.e., the signs of God], he neither left the object of
his witness (masyhūd) nor withdrew from the nearness of his object of
worship (ma‘bud). Rather, he only increased in love (mahabba), longing
(shauq), and power (quwwa). God gave him the power of bearing
the divine manifestation (iḥtimāl al-tajallī) and the great lights (al-anwār al-
‘ażīma). That was a divinely-given favor for him over all other prophets.
Do you not see how Moses fell down in a swoon in the face of divine
manifestation? The Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace,
penetrated through his visionary encounter [with God] by the sight of his
heart (kifāhan bi-baṣar qalbi-hi). He remained firm due to the power of

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104 In a report attributed to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam in *ibid*.
his state (ḥāl), the exalted nature of his station (maqām), and his rank (daraja).106

A careful reading of this mystical commentary on Qurʾān 53:18 reveals a number of remarkable findings. First, Sahl al-Tustaṭrī was the first early Ṣūfī commentator to highlight the Prophet’s vision of God’s attributes as the focal point of his mystical experiences. The signs of God were nothing more than simply manifestations of divine attributes. Seeing the signs of God did not necessarily imply that Muḥammad had not seen his Lord. In truth, he was still absorbed in seeing his Lord and in getting near to Him. So close did he come to see his Lord during his visionary encounter that his seeing the signs of God only reinforced his mystical love for, and vision of, the Deity. Second, Sahl al-Tustaṭrī was the first early Ṣūfī authority to interpret the meaning of Qurʾān 53:18 as proof for the distinctive quality of Muḥammad in relation to all other prophets. His vision of God was this distinctive quality. It was indeed God Himself who granted a vision only to him so that he was able to see his Lord when He manifested Himself (al-tajallī) during his face-to-face encounter with him. Third and finally, Sahl al-Tustaṭrī was the first early mystical figure to formulate the gist of Qurʾān 53:18 as the clearest point of distinction between Muḥammad and Moses. In particular, Muḥammad was distinguished from Moses in regard to prophetic visions. While Muḥammad was granted as a divine favor the vision of God, Moses was not. Even though Moses requested a vision of his Lord by asking, “O my Lord, show Yourself to me, let me look at You,” God replied: “You shall not see Me” (Qurʾān 7:143). The polemical objective of such distinction between two Prophets of different traditions was to claim Muḥammad as superior to Moses on the basis of his vision of God.

Concluding Remarks: The Gradual Process of Visionary Revelation

I conclude this chapter with some remarks about the early Muslim formulations of the gradual process of visionary revelation in conversation with some modern scholars of the Qur’ān. As I have noted at several points in this study, a relatively new trend in the modern academic study of the Qur’ān has been to read and interpret Islam’s scripture purely on its own, internal terms. Many scholars have interpreted the meaning of Qur’ān 53 in its own right. That is to say, they let the Qur’ān speak for itself and its own meanings, since it bears the stamp of divine authority. This approach to the academic study of Qur’ān 53 on its own terms leads me to the question of method: Where exactly is the most reliable locus of meaning in Qur’ān 53? For many modern scholars of Islam, the locus of meaning is inherently only available in the text of revelation, based on the conviction that the text itself, and only the text, yields its own meanings. I do not subscribe generally to this purely internal study of Qur’ān 53 as a text yielding its meaning on its own, since it does not speak in specific, clear, and intelligible ways that offer a single possible interpretation. Rather, I have searched for the meaning of Qur’ān 53:1-18 through the authority of early Muslim interpreters. In their works of tafsīr, they sought to interpret and work out, on their own terms, the meaning of Qur’ān 53:1-18—specifically as a prooftext for the gradual process of visionary revelation in early Islam.

My own arguments for the early formulation of the gradual process of visionary revelation and the contribution of Qur’ān 53 to it need to be viewed in conversation with the works of several modern scholars of the Qur’ān and its interpretative traditions. To this end, I begin with the interpretation of the impersonal oath—wal-najm idhā hawā—as referring to the gradual installments of the Qur’ān by reading the text thus: “By the
Qurʾān when it descends [to Muḥammad].” My attempt to shed new light on the meaning of the oath, “by al-najm”, is grounded entirely in the early Muslim commentaries. In their exegeses of Qurʾān 53:1, many early interpreters, such as ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, Mujāhid b. Jabr, Zayd b. ‘Alī, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, and Yahyā b. al-Farrā’, argued that God swore by the Qurʾān when it came down to Muḥammad only gradually and in piecemeal fashion over a period of many years. The early Muslim formulation of the gradual Qurʾān at the beginning of Sūrat al-Najm brought my attention to the late Austro-Hungarian Jewish convert to Islam, Muḥammad Asad (d. 1992), who was perhaps the first modern Muslim scholar to rethink the meaning of the oath “by al-Najm” as referring not to the setting of the star, as modern Islamicists most commonly have done, but rather to the gradual “unfolding” of divine revelation. This appeared clearly in his rendering of the opening verse of Sūrat al-Najm as meaning: “Consider this unfolding [of God’s message] as it comes down on from high”. In his note to his translation of the Qurʾān, Asad explained that,

The term najm—derived from the verb najama, “it appeared”, “began”, “ensued”, or proceeded”—denotes also the “unfolding” of something that comes or appears gradually, as if by instalments. Hence, this term has from the very beginning been applied to each of the gradually-revealed parts (nujūm) of the Qurʾān and, thus, to the process of its gradual revelation, or its “unfolding”, as such. This was, in fact, the interpretation of the above verse given by ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās (as quoted by Ṭabarī; in view of the sequence, this interpretation is regarded as fully justified by al-Rāghib [al-Iṣfahānī], Zamakhsharī, Rāzī, Baydāwī, Ibn Kathīr and other authorities. Rāghib and Ibn Kathīr, in particular, point to the phrase

mawāqi‘ al-nujūm in 56:75, which undoubtedly refers to the step-by-step revelation of the Qur’ān.  

What primarily interests me from this note is that Asad acquired his understanding of the meaning of the term al-najm as referring to “the gradually revealed-parts of the Qur’ān” not from a method of reading the Qur’ān on its own, internal terms, but rather from his engagement with the commentary of al-Ṭabarī. That was exactly the reason why Asad, as al-Ṭabarī did, only cited ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās as a single authority of early Islam who took the impersonal oath, “by al-najm”, to mean the gradual descent of the Qur’ān over a period of many years. This study provided a new list of early commentators who stood behind this meaning of al-Najm as the gradual Qur’ān.

My second argument is one regarding the polemical context of the gradual Qur’ān. That is to say, the context of polemic is my effort to revise what the modern scholar of Islam, Richard Bell (d. 1952), argued for in his classic essay, “Muḥammad’s Visions” (1934).

In Sūrah LIII, as Muḥammad only claims to have seen the figure on two occasions, it is evident that he is not claiming that all his utterances are being conveyed to him verbally. We should therefore take the pronoun “it” in v. 4, not as referring to the Qur’ān, of which there is no mention in the context, but to the fact of Muḥammad’s “speaking”, i.e., the practical line of conduct which he has been following. That, he claims, has come to him by wahy, by suggestion from a heavenly person whom he has actually seen.

Although I have examined the revelation of Qur’ān 53:1-18, as Richard Bell did much earlier, my view on it diverges from him on both method and argument. His preferred method of studying the Qur’ān in its own right gives barely any suggestion of specific referent for, or the revelatory context of, the pronoun “it” in verse 4. In the absence of

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any particular referent for to the pronoun “it”, Bell took on himself the interpretative task, as a modern scholar of the Qur’ān, of identifying the pronoun “it”; for him it has to refer not to the Qur’ān, as divine speech, but to “the fact of Muḥammad’s speaking”, in other words, as prophetic speech. Against his method of reading the Qur’ān on its own, I have argued for the need to interpret and work out the meaning of Qur’ān 53 through the authority of early commentators. In their exegeses, they interpreted the pronoun “it” in verse 4 as referring to the Qur’ān. Chief among them was Muqātil b. Sulaymān who interpreted verse 4 of Sūrat al-Najm—It is nothing but a revelation revealed [to him]—as meaning: “this Qur’ān is nothing less than revelation from God (wahy min Allāh) that is revealed through His medium of the Archangel Gabriel who brings it down [to Muḥammad in a gradual manner].”\(^{110}\) For him, it stands to reason that the Qur’ān was what was intended by the pronoun “it”.

As a result of his approach to interpreting the Qur’ān, Richard Bell failed to take into account the context of revelation. Read in the light of tafsīr tradition, the word Qur’ān was expressly mentioned in the context of polemical discourse with the Quraysh or the unbelievers of Makka. In one report attributed to Muḥammad b. al-Sā’īb al-Kalbī, the revelatory context of Sūrat al-Najm was in response to the Quraysh who had accused Muḥammad of speaking about the Qur’ān from in his own words, spontaneously.\(^{111}\) In another report ascribed to Muqātil b. Sulaymān, it was rather the unbelievers of Makka who attacked the credibility of Muḥammad as a divinely-appointed Prophet and the status of his revelation by saying that “Muḥammad speaks of this Qur’ān [sūrat al-Najm] on his own, spontaneously” and in response, “God swears by the Qur’ān that descends


piecemeal to Muḥammad.”¹¹² Thus both al-Kalbī and Muqātil situated their formulations of the gradual Qurʾān within the context of polemics with the Quraysh or the unbelievers of Makka, who were warned explicitly that Muḥammad had neither strayed, nor erred, nor spoken the Qurʾān on his own, spontaneously. The Qurʾān was not rooted in his own desires. It was indeed a revelation (waḥy) revealed to him in piecemeal fashion.

With an approach to the study of the Qurʾān only on its own terms, Bell interpreted the vocabulary of waḥy in verse 4 as “an inspiration” or “a suggestion, by a heavenly person whom he has actually seen”.¹¹³ My interpretation diverges from his, not least because there are many facets of the meaning of waḥy in the early Muslim traditions of interpretation. That is to say, the meaning of waḥy was interpreted in the early multivocal traditions of commentary not in a uniform and monolithic fashion, but rather in diverse ways. In his work concerning the similitudes and parallels in the Qurʾān, Muqātil b. Sulaymān provided diverse, multiple, and often contradictory meanings of the term al-wahy in the Qurʾān: it can mean either revelation, inspiration, writing, command, or speech.¹¹⁴ In light of such diverse meanings, the term al-wahy in verse 4 of Sūrat al-Najm referred to revelation [of the Qurʾān] given to Muḥammad in gradual stages. More specifically, he received the Qurʾān through his gradual experiences of visionary encounter with the heavenly figure, whether Gabriel or God.

My third and final argument describes the gradual steps of the visionary encounter of revelation between the heavenly figure and Muḥammad as expressed in a large number of early Muslim commentaries on the Qurʾān. It is therefore not entirely true to say that, as Christopher Melchert argues,

a major controversy is scarcely visible in early koranic commentaries, despite an apparently close connection between the Koran and whether the Prophet saw God…. Most of the earliest evidence of these traditions [of a vision of God] is preserved in collections of hadith, not express koranic commentaries.”

This erroneous scholarly assumption arose probably from a widely held belief that a majority of early authorities stood behind a vision of Gabriel as expressed in collections of ḥadīth reports. This was exactly what the modern scholar of ḥadīth Gibril Fouad Haddad noted:

Many sound reports show that the Companions differed sharply whether the Prophet saw Allāh or not. Ibn ‘Abbās related that he did, while Ibn Mas’ud, ‘A’isha, Abu Hurayra, and Abu Dharr related reports to the contrary, stating that the verses of Sura al-Najm and other Suras referred to Jibril.”

Prior to modern exegesis, most medieval exegetes, such as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn ‘Aṭiyya and al-Zamakhsharī, have argued that the majority of early interpreters believed in the vision of Gabriel, while only a small minority believed in the vision of God. The division into such majority-minority camps was, however, on closer scrutiny certainly not the product of early scholarly consensus, but rather a late agreement of medieval Muslim commentators.

Against the widely held erroneous assumptions about the prophetic vision of the heavenly figure, I have drawn upon many early Muslim commentaries on Qur’an 53 to show that a large number of early commentators argued that Muḥammad saw God not Gabriel. They included ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, Ka‘b al-Aḥbār, Anas b. Mālik, al-Ḍāḥhak b. Muzāḥim al-Balkhī, ‘Ikrima al-Barbarī al-Ḫuṣayn b. Ḥasan al-Ḫaṣṣāʾi, al-Rabī b. Anas al-Ḫaṣṣāʾi, Muqāṭil b. Sulaymān, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, Ma‘mar b. Rāshid, and Sahl ‘Abd

Allāh al-Tustari. Many of these authorities lived predominantly in the city of Baṣra. This means that a majority of the proponents of the Prophet’s seeing God had a clear regional character and distribution associated with the city of Baṣra. This regional character of the many Baṣran authorities who preferred the vision of God was initially remarked by Josef van Ess¹¹⁷ and then reinforced recently by Christopher Melchert in his studies on a major controversy over the vision of God in collections of ḥadīth.¹¹⁸

I am indebted to the work of Josef van Ess who sought to address the problem of prophetic visions in Sūrat al-Najm through the authority of early Muslim interpreters as expressed in early Qur’ān commentaries, not in collections of ḥadīth reports, as Melchert has argued. In his discussion of several early commentators, such as ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, Anās b. Malik, and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim, van Ess argued that the anthropomorphic interpretation of Sūrat al-Najm, namely a vision of God, was well accepted in the early years of Islam.¹¹⁹ This interpretation of the early Muslim traditions of anthropomorphic theophany were taken up and advanced further by W. Wesley Williams in his innovative survey of the comparative studies on anthropomorphic theophany and vision of God in the Hebrew Bible, the Qur’an, and early traditions of Sunnī Islam.¹²⁰ This comparative study is well justified, since he argues that “the God of Israel appears to individuals and (occasionally) groups as a divine anthropos”; that “Allāh in the Qurʾān, like Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, is visible and theophanous”; that “both Moses and Muḥammad experienced theophanies”; and that “a defining aspect of

the traditionalist Sunnī ‘aqīda or creed for the first four centuries (9th-12th C.E.) was the affirmation of Muḥammad’s visual encounter with God”. Though indebted to both van Ess and Williams, my study has diverged from theirs in both approach and argument. Both these scholars of Islam applied a deliberate ideological back-projection of the vision of God from later, medieval traditions of anthropomorphic theophany, while I have preferred to approach the early interpretations of the Prophet’s vision of God on the commentators’ own terms. I have used many early commentaries on Qur’ān 53 to reveal that the early Muslim interpreters themselves did not use and apply a later, medieval knowledge of the anthropomorphic theophany to describe their own belief in the Prophet’s vision of God. Rather, they interpreted the general thrust of Qur’ān 53:1-18 as the proofext in support of their belief that God swore by the gradual Qur’ān; that He sent it down to Muḥammad only gradually in the context of polemical discourse with the Quraysh or the unbelievers of Makka who attacked the credibility of Muḥammad as a newly-appointed Messenger and the original status of his divine revelation; and that He finally manifested Himself to Muḥammad through a gradual process of revelation. That is to say, the specifically visionary encounter of revelation between God and Muḥammad took place only gradually: on at least two different occasions, in at least two different places, and primarily through a step-by-step process of revelatory activity.

The gradual, step-by-step process of the visionary revelatory encounter began with God, who initially stood on the highest horizon, or settled Himself upon the throne, then came down gradually, drew Himself very near to Muhammad, and finally revealed the Qur’ān to him in piecemeal fashion. It was precisely during the gradual process of the visionary revelatory encounter that Muḥammad experienced his vision of God for the

121 Ibid., 275-6.
first time on the highest horizon, or on the divine throne (according to a report by al-Ḍāḥḥāk, who, in his aforementioned commentary, related that the Prophet truly saw God who was seated upon the throne).

What primarily interests me is that the Prophet’s vision of God did not take place only in a single revelatory event, but rather in a series of (or at least two different) encounters. Thus, he saw God “on the highest horizon” and again on another occasion, now specifically near “the lote tree of the boundary”. The early Muslim interpreters identified the *sidrat al-muntahā* with the heavenly lote tree, a tree of Paradise located at the right side of God’s throne. It marks the ultimate boundary in heaven, beyond which no one, not even the angel Gabriel himself, is allowed to pass. The Prophet Muḥammad was allowed to pass beyond in order to enjoy a face-to-face encounter with his Lord during the night journey. Despite the fact that the *Sūrat al-Najm* has no reference explicitly to the prophetic tradition of heavenly journey, Muqātil b. Sulaymān argued that the second visionary encounter of the Prophet with God took place precisely in heaven during the night journey. The Lote Tree even became eventually the emblem of the Prophet’s night journey. The early Muslim proposal for the heavenly lote tree is presented to revise what the Islamicists Richard Bell and Nicolai Sinai argued for with their respective identifications of the lote tree with a familiar place in Arabia and “at the far periphery of the Meccan settlement.” Against this widely held view of the earthly location of the lote tree in Makka, Josef van Ess firmly argued that it is therefore not necessary for us to embrace the idea earlier defended by a number of Orientalists (from Grimme and Caetani, to Richard Bell and

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123 Richard Bell, “Muḥammad’s Visions,” 150.
Régis Blachère) who saw the Garden of Repose simply as a plantation near Mecca, perhaps a villa, a kind of Monrepos for well-off city folk, and the sidra tree beyond which no one may pass, as a tree of some sort found on the borderline of the Mecca sanctuary”.

Here van Ess dismisses previous Islamicist interpretation of the lote tree as referring to the earthly tree near the region of Arabia in favor of the heavenly lote tree for Paradise as it was explained in early Muslim commentaries on Qurʾān, and his critique holds for later similar interpretations such as that of Sinai.

The second account of the prophetic vision ends apparently with affirmation of the veracity of his seeing: Muḥammad saw “some of the greatest signs of his Lord”. In his exegesis of Qurʾān 53:18 on its own terms, Nicolai Sinai put forward the idea that “the statement—he saw some of the great signs of his Lord—openly echoes the roughly contemporary Moses narrative from Q. 79:15-20 where Moses is said to have been shown ‘the great sign’, which most likely refers to the confirmatory miracles with which Moses is sent to Pharaoh”. In his analysis, Nicolai Sinai sought to establish a sense of affinity between Muḥammad and Moses on account of their seeing the great signs of God in a different time and place. However, this study diverges from Sinai on a key argument. It appears obvious that he failed to understand what is meant by seeing the great signs of God. He interpreted the gist of Qurʾān 53:18 too literally by looking at a sense of affinity between Muḥammad and Moses on the basis of their seeing the signs of God. In my point of view, the crux of the problem here is still the vision of God, not the seeing of His signs. For Sahl al-Tustarī, seeing the signs of God did not prevent the Prophet from seeing his Lord with the heart. It only reinforced his mystical vision of God in his

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125 Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 54.
heart. Muḥammad was described as being superior than Moses on the basis of his special ability to see his Lord on two occasions, first, on the highest horizon or on the divine throne, and, then, in the heavenly lote tree near the divine throne. He received a divine favor for his vision of God, while Moses did not. Even Moses requested a vision of his Lord by asking, “O my Lord, show Yourself to me, let me look at You”, God replied: “You shall not see Me” (Qur‘ān 7:143). It stands to reason that Sahl al-Tustaṭī sought to distinguish Muḥammad from Moses precisely on account of his face-to-face, visionary encounter with God.

CONCLUSION

The present dissertation has attempted to explore the idea of the “gradual Qur’ān” in early, formative works of *tafsīr*. As the primary source of this study, early *tafsīr* is a direct engagement of the early Muslim interpreters with the text of revelation. The concept of the gradually revealed Qur’ān is not in and of itself something centrally embedded in the text of revelation. Rather, the import of the gradual Qur’ān received its elaboration and emphasis through the authority of early commentators. In their writings of *tafsīr*, they played a major role in the meaning-making process of establishing the idea of the gradual Qur’ān through their readings and interpretations of three particular Qur’anic passages. With their nearness to, and command of, the language of revelation and its original milieu, they read and interpreted the revelations of Qur’ān 17:106, 25:32, and 53:1-18 as prooftexts for the gradual revelatory process through which the Qur’ān came into being within a largely polemical milieu.

In the first chapter, I have shown how the early commentators offered the reading of the verb *farraqnāhu* in Qur’ān 17:106 as referring to the gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of the Qur’ānic revelation, as opposed to the detailed, clear, and certain nature of that revelation. With this majority reading choice, they tried to determine the true meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 in its own terms and original milieu. That is to say, Qur’ān 17:106 was understood by these interpreters to be about the gradual, piecemeal revelatory manner of the Qur’ān during the time of revelation and Prophetic mission. Thus the manner of revelation of the Qur’ān was interpreted and formulated in the early traditions of *tafsīr* as having occurred neither in a single piece nor in a short period of time, i.e., “one night or two, one month or two, one year or two,” but instead in a more protracted, gradual manner, i.e., “little by little, verse by verse, and story after story,” and in piecemeal installments, i.e., “three verses, four verses, or five verses.” This
process occurred over a long period of time, i.e., days, months, and years, during the entire
course of Muḥammad’s prophetic career, a period of between eighteen and twenty-three years.
With their formulation of the vocabulary of the gradual revelation in specific terms, they also
went on to explain why God sent the Qur’ān down to Muḥammad only gradually and in a
piecemeal fashion. The reason was tied to the Prophet’s assigned task of reciting the Qur’ān
publicly to his people in a style known in the Qur’ān as ‘alā mukthin. As the primary reason for
the gradual revelation, the style of prophetic recitation of the Qur’ān, ‘alā mukthin, was
interpreted in the early traditions of tafsīr in diverse ways. Some early interpreters argued for this
referring to the slow, unhurried manner of the recitation; others preferred to see it as referring to
the deliberate recitation of the Qur’ān for the purpose of memorization and comprehension; and
still others believed in the gradually unfolding, living, and ongoing process of prophetic
recitation that met particular needs, coming in short pieces, bit by bit, over an extended period of
many years.

In the second chapter, I have explored how the early Muslim commentators developed
their theory of the gradual Qur’ān as a text revealed in a polemical milieu. That is to say, God
sent the Qur’ān down to Muḥammad “gradually” or “separately,” (mutafarriqān), “little by
little”, and in small pieces of Revelation—a verse or two, or a sūra, precisely “in a polemical
response to a question” posed to Muḥammad, or “in a polemical response to the words of the
people”. Thus the unbelievers asked a question of Muḥammad regarding the revelatory manner
of the Qur’ān: “Why has the Qur’ān not been sent down to him all at once?” In response, God
sent the Qur’ān down to Muḥammad in pieces. I have drawn on the early commentaries on the
phrase “all at once” to argue that the early commentators situated their formulation of the gradual
Qur’ān within the context of monotheistic polemical discourse against the Jews and Christians
and distinguished the gradual manner of the Qurʾān's piecemeal revelation over more than two decades from a one-time, complete revelation of earlier Scriptures such as that of both the Torah and the Gospel. In their interpretations of the divine reason for the gradual Qurʾān—*Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby*—some early commentators argued that the gradual revelation was to strengthen the inner spirit of Muḥammad during his ministry as a messenger of God; and others contended that it was rather to make his learning by heart the short pieces of the Qurʾān easier. The conflict of two reasons for the gradual Qurʾān was indeed the hallmark of the early Muslim traditions of interpretation.

In the third and final chapter, I have examined how the early commentators derived their formulation of the gradual Qurʾān and, more importantly, of separate visionary encounters between the mighty heavenly figure and Muḥammad, from the interpretation of Qurʾān 53:1-18 on their own interpretive terms. In their interpretations of Qurʾān 53, they argued that God swore by the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān—*wal-najm idhā hawā*—“by the Qurʾān when it comes down to Muḥammad in pieces”; that He used to send it down bit by bit in a polemical response to the Quraysh or the unbelievers of Makka who accused Muḥammad of having recited the Qurʾān on his own initiative, not as direct revelations from God; and that He appeared Himself to Muḥammad in gradual stages. Specifically, the gradual stages of the visionary encounter began with God who stood on the highest horizon, or on the throne, then came down slowly, drew near to Muḥammad, and finally revealed the Qurʾān to him in pieces. It was during the gradual encounters of visionary revelation that Muḥammad saw God on two occasions, first, on the highest horizon, or on the divine throne and, then, in lote tree of the boundary. The manner of his seeing God was either with the heart or with his physical eyes.
Thus we can see that the theory of the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān was not one explicitly given in the Qur’ān itself, but one developed in the interpretive work of the early commentators. They were the ones who elaborated the notion of gradual, progressive, and piecemeal revelation and gave it an intellectual as well as religious underpinning in the sacred text itself—the undisputed authority for Islamic life and faith since the beginnings of Islam, but an authority that, like other scriptural texts, was finally read through its interpreters.
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