



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

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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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'ānan farraqnāhu—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 wāḥidatan*), 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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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?¹ 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

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.²

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.³

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.”⁴ As a result of his approach to the study of *kitāb* in

²Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantic of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung*, (Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, first published in 1964), reprinted in 2002:75.

³Montgomery Watt and Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 113-4.

⁴Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4, 62-3.

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.”⁵ 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.”⁶

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.”⁷ 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*.”⁸ 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.

⁵*Ibid.*, 81.

⁶Patricia Crone, “The Religions of the Qur’ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities,” *Arabica*, 57, no. 1-2 (2010): 152; reprinted in her book, *The Qur’ānic Pagans and Related Matters: Collected Studies in Three Volumes*, vol. 1, edited by Hanna Siurua, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), chapter 3.

⁷Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 203.

⁸Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 17-8.

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."⁹ 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 Qur'ān "in its own right"¹⁰ 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

⁹William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral aspects of scripture in the history of religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; reprinted as paperback edition in 1993), 5.

¹⁰Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, (London: SCM Press, 1996), 29.

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 Qudsī*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 25.

ranging from the Companions of the Prophet (*al-ṣaḥāba*), the Successors of the Companions (*al-tābi'ūn*), and the Successors of the Successors (*atbā' al-tābi'ūn*), 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*)

¹²Wilfred C. Smith, "The True Meaning of Scripture: An Empirical Historian's Nonreductionist Interpretation of the Qur'an," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 11, 4 (1980): 505. Reprinted in idem, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 91.

*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?).*¹³ 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, *farrāqnāhu*, 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.¹⁴ 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, *farrāqnāhu*, 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 Maṣṣūr 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 ‘Aṭīyya (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

¹³Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Übersetzung*, (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1966), 237.

¹⁴Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols. (Cairo: Muṣṭafa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1986), 15:178.

form of reading *farraqnāhu* as referring to the gradual, piecemeal descent of the Qur’ān on their own terms. It was therefore the authority of early exegetes, rather than the text of revelation itself, that interpreted Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān to Muḥammad only gradually and in a piecemeal fashion, over an extended period of eighteen, twenty, or even twenty-three years.

Reading Qur’ān 25:32. In their interpretations of a second key passage, Qur’ān 25:32, the early commentators sought to formulate and work out their theory about the gradual descent of the Qur’ān in the specific context of religious polemic. The early Muslim formulation of the gradual Qur’ān was linked with the occasions of revelation for Qur’ān 25:32. The early interpreters used the reports concerning the occasion of revelation in order to put their idea of the gradual Qur’ān in its polemical context. The polemical discourse began with the unbelievers who asked Muḥammad why the Qur’ān was not sent down to him “all at once” instead of gradual, piece by piece. The Qur’ān’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 qur’ānic allusion to the unbelievers as referring not only to the Jews, as John Wansbrough (d. 2002) argued,¹⁵ but also to others who disbelieved in the prophecy of Muḥammad and his gradual Qur’ān, such as the Quraysh, the polytheists, and the Christians. Wansbrough had his own reason for identifying the unbelievers as the Jews over other sectarian

¹⁵John Wansbrough, *Qurānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 148, 36.

groups, since he situated the late canonization of the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 53:1. In the third and last relevant Qur'ānic passage, the early Muslim commentators derived the theory of gradual revelation from their interpretation of the oath *wal-najm idhā hawā* in Qur'ān 53:1 as referring to the gradually revealed-portions of the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ānic 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 Qur'ān 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 *farrāqnāhu*, 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 (farrāqnāhu) or made clear (faraqnāhu)*. Some preferred to read *farrāqnāhu* 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-mufasssīrīn*), 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

²Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, ‘Introduction,’ in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, ed. Maḥmūd M. Shākir and Aḥmad M. Shākir, 16 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1954), 1:6. In Aḥmad M. Shākir’s introduction to this edition.

³Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols. (Cairo: Muṣṭafa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1986), 15:178.

⁴*Ibid.*

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-Baṣrī (d. 106/724), *mawlā* of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘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 Muḥammad 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. *qaṣaṣ*, pl. *qiṣaṣ*), 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

⁵Ibn Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir lil-Ṭibā‘a wa al-Naṣh, 1957), 2:365.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:178.

presentation of two contradictory readings: *faraqnāhu* or *farrāqnāhu*? 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 *farrāqnāhu*? 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’aini 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

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

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-ḥujja al-mujtama’a*) and no disagreement [with consensus] is allowed on matters of religion and the Qur’ān.”¹⁰ 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—*faraqnāhu*— 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 *mufasssirūn*, or, as he put it, the *ahl al-ta’wīl*. 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-*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

ta'wīl).¹¹ 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*).¹² 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-waḥy*),¹³ and “the best reciter of the Qur'ān;”¹⁴ (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.¹⁵ 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-ḥaqq wa al-bāṭil*).”¹⁶ 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

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 2:136, no. 1.

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, *faraqnā*, was al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, while the other two were not entirely unqualified as to their first reading. Ubayy b. Ka‘b 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 *faraqnāhu* in the first form to mean “We made the Qur’ān clear,”¹⁷ in another report, he is said to have read *farraqnāhu* in the second form to mean “We made the revelatory process of the Qur’ān only separately (*mufarraqa*) and in a piecemeal fashion (*munajjama*).”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 *faraqnāhu* in the first form to mean “We made the Qur’ān detailed”¹⁹ and, in a second report, as *farraqnāhu* 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. Ka‘b and ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās could be grouped in both the majority and minority camps.

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

¹⁷*Ibid.*.

¹⁸In a report attributed to Ubayy b. Ka‘b, see al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta’wīl*, 4 vols. (Egypt: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1972), 2:469.

¹⁹Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:178.

²⁰*Ibid.*

response to a question posed to him by his interlocutor Abū Rajā' [‘Imrān b. Taym or ‘Imrān b. Milhān] al-‘Uṭāridī (d. 105/723-724) concerning the proper reading of Qur’ān 17:106, he interpreted the first form, *faraqnāhu*, as meaning what the second form, *farraqnāhu*, usually means. A report on this disagreement of reading between al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī 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 *faraqnāhu*—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, *faraqnāhu*, 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.

²¹Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1992), 2:96. The report concerning the disagreement of reading between al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Abū Rajā' al-‘Uṭāridī was found originally in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:179.

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 Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form, confirming the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān 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, *faraqnāhu*, to carry the second meaning, thus confirming the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān

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 Qur’ān 17:106 to mean “a Qur’ān 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, *farrāqnāhu*, 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.”²² 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-maḥfūz*, 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 Ramaḍān, 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

²²Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:178.

said: “God sent the Qur’ān 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* (Qur’ān 56:75). Then Gabriel sent it down [to earth].”²³

This first stage of the qur’ānic 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 Qur’ān down to Muḥammad only in a gradual fashion. A full description of the two-stages of the qur’ānic revelation was summed up by the early Baṣran interpreter Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī al-Qayrawānī (d. 200/816) in a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās as follows: “The Qur’ān 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 (*nujūman*), namely three, four, and five verses, more or less than this” [stage two].²⁴ This division of revelation into two stages emerged plausibly from the ambiguous nature of the Qur’ān when it speaks of its own revelatory process, on the one hand, as a single Revelation sent down on the night of power (Qur’ān 97:1), or on a blessed night (Qur’ān 44:3), or in the month of Ramaḍān (Qur’ān 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 (Qur’ān 17:106 and 25:32). In several reports attributed to him, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās sought to solve the problem of such seemingly conflicting passages in the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān over a period of time was precisely what ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās meant by his reading the verb *f-r-q* in Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form, as *farraqnāhu*. A later major interpreter, Abū Ishāq Aḥmad, known as al-Tha‘labī (d.

²³Ibn Abī Hātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm: Musnadān ‘an Rasūl Allāh wa-al-Ṣaḥāba wa-al-Tābi‘īn*, ed. As‘ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, 14 vols. (al-Riyād: Maktaba Nizar Muṣṭafa al-Bāz, 1997), 8:2689.

²⁴In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, see Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī*, introduced and edited by Hind al-Shiblī, 2 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2004), I:167.

427/1035), 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 wāḥidatan*), but rather in piecemeal installments (*nujūman*) over a period of twenty years.”²⁵ 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-Ṭabarī 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.”²⁶ 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.

²⁵In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, see al-Tha‘labī, *Kashf wa al-Bayān al-ma‘ruf Tafṣīr al-Tha‘labī*, ed. Abī Muḥammad b. ‘Āshūr. 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002), 6:140.

²⁶In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma in al-Ṭabarī, *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-qatta’ nāhu*), one verse after another and one *sūra* after another.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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 Sa‘īd b. al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār al-Ṭamīmī al-Baṣrī, the early Baṣran 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,

²⁷In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 32 vols. (Beirut: Dār ihyā al-turāth al-‘arabī, 1990), 21-22: 68.

²⁸In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma in Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma’t’hūr*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2014), 4:372.

month after month, and year after year, until He reached what He intended [to reveal].”²⁹ In this report, al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār argued for the gradually revealed parts of the Qur’ān 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 Baṣran commentator and storyteller (*qāṣṣ*) who took the second mode of reading *farraqnāhu* to mean a gradual, successive revelatory manner of the Qur’ān over a period of about twenty years. In his commentary on Qur’ān 17:106, he argued that

We have cut the Qur’ān into pieces (*qaṭṭa ‘nāhu*), 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 Qur’ān 25:32: *Why has the Qur’ān not been sent down upon him [Muḥammad] all at once?*³⁰

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

The use of such intra-qur’ānic proof texting in exegesis appeared again in the early commentary of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam, a son of the famous Companion of the Prophet, Zayd b. Aslam (d. 136/754). ‘Abd 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 Qur’ān 17:106, he wrote that “God has divided the Qur’ān” [into parts or pieces] and that “the Qur’ān did not come down [to

²⁹In a report attributed to al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār in Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī*, I:167.

³⁰Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shiḥātah, 5 vols. (Beirut: Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 2002), 2:555.

Muḥammad] in its entirety, [but rather in pieces].”³¹ It appears clear that, for ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd, the phrase *farrāqnāhu* 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.

³¹In a report attributed to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:178-9.

The early community of interpreters spoke clearly about the vocabulary of the gradual Qur'ān on *their own terms*, which often involved intra-Qur'anic comparison. The early Muslims' formulation of the vocabulary of the piecemeal revelation on their own terms emerged from the application of intra-qur'anic proof texting in the interpretation of Qur'ān 25:32 and 17:106. This method of intra-qur'anic 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

³²Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī*, I:167.

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‘id b. Jubayr, Abū Rajā’ al-‘Uṭāridī, Qatāda b. Di‘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‘id b. Jubayr, Ismā‘īl al-Suddī, al-Ḥasan 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-Māturīdī (d. 333/945), Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), Abū Ishāq Aḥmad 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

³³Abū Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Ismā‘īl al-Ash‘arī, *Kitāb Maqālat al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Hellmut Ritter, (Wiesbaden, 1980), 151-3.

commentary have continued to be cited ever more frequently as an early primary source for later, medieval interpretations of the Qur’ān. 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 17:106 to refer specifically to a gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of revelation. In his recently edited and published commentary on the Qur’ān, entitled *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*,³⁴ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Matūrīdī (d. 333/945) wrote that there were two early modes of reading the verb *f-r-q* in Qur’ān 17:106, *faraqnāhu* and *farrāqnāhu*. Some interpreters took the first reading—*faraqnāhu*—to mean, “We made the Qur’ān certain (*aḥkamnāhu*) and firm (*thabatnāhu*) so that falsehood comes not to it from any direction, neither from before it nor from behind it” (*lā ya’īhi al-bāṭilu min bayna yadayhī wa-la min khalfihī*); while others took the second reading—*farrāqnāhu*—to mean that “We cut the Qur’ān into pieces during the process of revelation—*sūra* by *sūra*, verse by verse, on the basis of what was sent down” (*wa qaṭṭa ’nāhu fī al-inzāl, suratan fa-suratin wa āyatan fa-āyatin, ’alā mā unzila*).³⁵ Where did al-Matūrīdī stand in the light of his presentation of the two conflicting readings? A close reading of his commentary on Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 7:52 to mean, first, *bayyanāhu*, “We made the Qur’ān clear,” and, second, *farrāqnāhu*, “We divided the Qur’ān into

³⁴Al-Matūrīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 18 vols. (Turkey: Dār al-Mīzān, 2005-2011).

³⁵*Ibid.*, 8:374.

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

We have divided the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān that We have divided into parts or pieces, so that you may recite it to the people unhurriedly* (Qur’ān 17:106), that is to say, We have divided the Qur’ān into parts or pieces over the course of its revelatory process according to certain events or circumstances (*‘alā 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 Qur’ān in a piecemeal fashion (*mufarraḡan*, lit., separately) because it was easier (*ahwan wa-aisar*) for the people to comprehend the laws of God if the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān revealed in pieces.” He argued that the reason for the piecemeal manner of revelation was tied to the Prophet’s task of reciting the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 17:106 as “a Qur’ān revealed in parts.” He goes on to say, “God sent down the Qur’ān, through

³⁶*Ibid.*, 5:362.

Gabriel, in separate parts (*mutafarriqān*), that is, verse after verse and *sūra* after *sūra*.³⁷ 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 ‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāhidī (d. 486/1076) was another medieval interpreter to prefer the second mode of reading *farrāqnāhu* 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.”³⁸ 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: Sa‘id 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”; Ismā‘īl 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. Di‘āma who wrote, “the time span between the first and the last revelation was twenty years.”³⁹ The views of these three early authorities shaped the

³⁷Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī al-musammā Bahr al-‘ulūm*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad Mu‘awwad, ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd, and ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Nūbī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1993), 2:286.

³⁸Al-Wāhidī, *Al-Wajīz fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-‘Azīz*, 2 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam & Beirut: al-Dār al-Shāmīya, 1995), 2:650.

³⁹Al-Wāhidī, *Al-Wasīṭ fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-Majīd*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1994), 3:132; id., *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, 25 vols. (Egypt: Dār al-Muṣawwir al-‘Arabī, 2013), 13:503.

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 (*mufarraḡan*) 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. ‘Atīyya 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. Di‘āma], Abū Rajā’ [al-‘Uṭāridī], ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, [‘Abdallāh] b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652), Ubayy b. Ka‘b, [Abū ‘Amr ‘Āmir b. Sharāḥīl] 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-taḡra’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.

⁴¹‘Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Atīyya, *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Atīyya: al-Muḥarrir al-Wajīz fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-‘Azīz*, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 1171.

a long list of early authorities for his later, medieval understanding of Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form, *farraqnāhu*, as referring to the piecemeal descent of the Qur’ān, little by little. In his exegesis of Qur’ān 17:106, he took the reading *farraqnāhu* to mean, as al-Matūrīdī did, *faṣṣalnāhu*: “We have divided the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān was the focal message of Qur’ān 17:106.

Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), another important medieval philosopher, theologian, and interpreter, also preferred to read Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form, *farraqnāhu*, as a reference to the gradually revealed parts of the Qur’ān. In his exegesis of Qur’ān 17:106, he stated that the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān, al-Rāzī cited specifically the views of such early authorities as Sa‘id b. Jubayr, who said “the Qur’ān 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. Di‘āma who said “the meaning [of *farraqnāhu* in a given verse] was that We

⁴²Al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma‘ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 10 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 1997), 6:238.

⁴³Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 21-22: 68.

have divided the Qur’ān into pieces, one verse after another and one *sūra* after another.”⁴⁴ 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-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), an important Mālikī jurist and interpreter who presumably read the *Tafsīr* of ‘Aṭīyya 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 *farrāqnāhu* 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.”⁴⁵ 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 Tabarī’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

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥafnāwī and Maḥmūd Ḥāmid ‘Uthmān, 22 vols in 12. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1996), 10:346.

neglected such early, eminent figures as ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, Sa‘id b. Jubayr, al-Sha‘bī, Ismā‘īl al-Suddī, al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, and Yaḥyā b. Sallām. Nonetheless, the names of these early authorities appeared frequently in later works of *tafsīr*, and their reading of Qur’ān 17:106 in the second form as *farraqnāhu* paved the way for the dominant medieval argument for the necessity of gradual, piecemeal revelation. Indeed, the major medieval interpreters seemed to ignore al-Ṭabarī’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-Ṭabarī 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’ān, namely, al-Matūrīdī, Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, al-Wāḥidī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Ṭabrisī, al-Rāzī, and al-Qurṭubī.

Reasons for the Gradual Qur’ān: The Prophet’s Task of Reciting the Qur’ān to the People ‘alā mukthin

We have now seen clearly that the preferability of al-Tabarī’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’ān 17:106 as referring to piecemeal revelation: *And [it is] a Qur’ān that We have divided into pieces (farraqnāhu), in order that you might recite it to the people “‘alā 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’ān to the people ‘alā mukthin. The meaning of this phrase, ‘alā mukthin, by itself is not self-evident and requires interpretation on the part of its readers. In the accepted variant readings (*qirā’āt*), the orthographic form of the noun’s trilateral root *m-k-th*

(*mim-kaf-tha*) could be recited in three different ways: as *mukth*,⁴⁶ *makth*,⁴⁷ 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);⁴⁸ (2) *fi tartīl*, “in a slow and measured recitation,” according to Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 102/720);⁴⁹ and (3), *‘alā tarassul fi al-tilāwa wa-al-tartīl*, “as an easy, unhurried utterance in both reading and recitation,” according to ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj (d. 150/767).⁵⁰ ‘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)*.⁵¹ 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:

⁴⁶A majority of early readers or interpreters agreed on reciting the phrase as *‘alā mukthin*. See, ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Atiyya, *al-Muḥarrir al-wajīz*, 1171; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 10:346.

⁴⁷An early commentator, al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/723), chose to read *‘alā makthin*. See, *Tafsīr al-Ḍaḥḥāk*, ed. Muḥammad Shukrī Aḥmad al-Zāwītī, 2 vols. (Cairo, Egypt: Dār al-Salām, 1999), 2:538.

⁴⁸Zayd b. ‘Alī, *Tafsīr Zayd b. ‘Alī, al-Musammā Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Taqī al-Ḥakīm, (Cairo: Dār al-‘Ālamiyyah, 1992), 191.

⁴⁹Mujāhid b. Jabr, *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṭāhir b. Muḥammad al-Suārī, 2 vols. (Beirut: al-Manshurāt al-‘ilmiyya, 1977), 1:371.

⁵⁰‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj, *Tafsīr Ibn Jurayj*, ed. ‘Alī Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Ghanī, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1992), 202.

⁵¹In a report attributed to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:179.

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.”⁵²

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*),⁵³ 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*).⁵⁴ 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

⁵²In a report attributed to Mujāhid b. Jabr in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:179.

⁵³In a report attributed to Mujāhid b. Jabr, see Yaḥyā b. Sallām, *Tafsīr Yaḥyā b. Sallām al-Baṣrī*, I:167.

⁵⁴al-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 (*fa-turattiluhu*) and read it aloud, clearly (*watubayyinuhu*) and unhurriedly (*wa-lā ta’jal fī tilāwatihi* ‘and do not make haste in its recitation’).”⁵⁵ It is thus clear that al-Ṭūsī recapitulated the early interpretation of the phrase *'alā mukthin* as a reference to the act of reciting the Qur’ān at a slow, unhurried or relaxed pace. This interpretation recurs again and again in the commentarial tradition. The Shafi‘ī jurist, scholar of Ḥadīth, and interpreter Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn b. Mas‘ūd al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) took the meaning of God’s phrase *'alā mukthin* to refer to the act of reciting the Qur’ān unhurriedly (*'alā tu'adatin*) and distinctly (*wa-tartīlin*) over a period of twenty three years (*wa-tarassulin fī thalath wa 'ishrīna sanatan*).”⁵⁶ For al-Zamakhsharī, it means to perform the recitation of the Qur’ān slowly (*'alā mahlin*), unhurriedly (*wa-tu'adatin*), and contemplatively (*watathabbutin*),”⁵⁷ and for the Ḥanafī jurist and interpreter ‘Abdallāh b. Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 710/1310), it means to proceed in a slow, unhurried (*'alā tu'adatin*), and contemplative manner (*wa-tathabbutin*).”⁵⁸ 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

⁵⁵Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. al-Hasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥabīb Quṣayri al-‘Āmilī, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1990), 6:530-1.

⁵⁶Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn b. Mas‘ūd al-Baghawī, *Ma‘ālim al-tanzīl*, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 761.

⁵⁷Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, 2:469.

⁵⁸‘Abdallāh b. Aḥmad al-Nasafī, *Tafsīr al-Nasafī: Madārik al-tanzīl wa ḥaqā’iq al-ta’wīl*, ed. Shaykh Marwān Muḥammad al-Sha‘‘ār, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā’is, 1996), 2:478.

reciting the Qur’ān publicly to his people *‘alā mukthin*, which he takes to refer to a recitation style designed to aid in memorizing the text: *‘alā tartīlin li-ḥifẓa*, “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 tartīlin*), so that he and his community were able to preserve the revealed portions of the Qur’ān in their individual and collective memories (*li-ḥifẓa*). 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 mukthin*. A number of medieval commentators repeated, modified, and developed the only early meaning, given by Muqātil b. Sulaymān, of the phrase *‘alā mukthin* as *‘alā tartīlin li-ḥifẓa* —at a deliberate pace for the purpose of Qur’ān memorization. Thus, Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983) interpreted the phrase *‘alā mukthin* to mean “in a relaxed and easy way, in order for the people to comprehend and memorize the Qur’ān (*‘alā tarassulin wa-sahlin li-yafhamūhu wa-yahfazūhu*).”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-ta’udatin, lā ‘alā faura*), so that

⁵⁹Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 2:555.

⁶⁰Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī al-musammā Baḥr al-‘ulūm*, 2:286.

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-yatadabbarū 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’an 17:106 was offered by the major early theologian and interpreter al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (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

⁶¹Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 21-22:68.

⁶²Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa Asrār al-ta’wīl, al-ma’rūf bi-tafsīr al-Bawḍāwī*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-‘Arabī and Mu’assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 1998), 3:269.

⁶³Al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī ‘ilm al-tafsīr*, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1994), 5:70.

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-Baṣrī*, 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-ta’āla yunzilu hadhā al-Qur’ān ba’ḍahu qabla ba’ḍin, limā ‘alima annahu sayakūnu wa-yaḥduthu fī al-nās*).⁶⁴ A reading of his commentary on the meaning of Qur’ān 17:106 reveals that al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī 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

⁶⁴Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, 2:96.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Atiyya, *al-Muḥarrir al-Wajīz*, 1171.

prophetic recitation over an extended period of time was one of the early meanings of *‘alā 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān and its interpretive tradition.

I have searched for the meaning of Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 17:106 differently—*faraqnāhu* and *farrāqnāhu*—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 be able to identify the possibility that Qur’ān 17:106 was open to two contradictory readings in early Islam. Even though Daniel A. Madigan sought to let the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 17:106 as follows: “some reciters read *farrāqnāhu*, though the standard text is *faraqnāhu*. Both could indicate that the Qur’ān was divided into segments,

but the latter also often carries in the commentators' usage the notion of making clear and distinct."⁶⁷ 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-Baṣrī, 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-Baṣrī, 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-Baṣrī, 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

⁶⁷Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 66.

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-Ṭabarī completely neglected most early figures prior to him who stood firmly behind the second reading—‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, Sa‘id b. Jubayr, al-Sha‘bī, Ismā‘īl al-Suddī, al-Ḥasan b. Dīnār, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, and Yaḥyā b. Sallām. It still remains unclear as to why most of these early exegetes were neglected in the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī. It does not seem likely that al-Ṭabarī did not possess the *tafsīr* manuscripts of most early authorities, for he was known especially for his massive collections of manuscripts of *tafsīr* 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-Ṭabarī 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 Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, al-Matūrīdī, al-Tha‘labī, Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, al-Wāḥidī, al-Zamakhsharī, ‘Aṭīyya, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, and al-Suyūṭī.⁶⁸ Through these later, influential *mufasssīrūn*, the early scholarly community of interpreters in the "minority" camp were given their proper due, and in the case of Qur’ān 17:106, recognized as standing overwhelmingly behind the second reading that seems to refer to the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān.

Thus the main thesis propounded here is that the majority of early (as well as later) interpreters read Qur’ān 17:106 with *farraqnāhu* to refer to the gradual manner of Qur’ānic

⁶⁸Several medieval commentators, e.g., al-Matūrīdī, al-Tha‘labī, Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, al-Wāḥidī, al-Zamakhsharī, and Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Aṭīyya, have recognized and benefited from the early commentary of often-neglected figure Muqātil b. Sulaymān. See, Mehmet Akif Koç, "A Comparison of the References to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (150/767) in the Exegeses of al-Tha‘labī (427/1036) with Muqātil's own Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* LIII/1 (Spring 2008): 69-101.

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 *faraqnāhu*—“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.

⁷⁰William A. Graham, “In memoriam: Rudi Paret (1901-1983),” *The Muslim World*, 73, 2 (1983): 134.

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

⁷¹Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), 308-9.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³K. Wagtendonk, *Fasting in the Koran*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 64.

⁷⁴Walid A. Saleh, “A Piecemeal Qur’ān: *Furqān* and its Meaning in Classical Islam and in Modern Qur’ānic Studies,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 42 (2015): 65.

that the Qur’ān was given the name for the *Sūra* 25 as *Furqān*, since it came down only a little bit at a time rather than “all at once.”⁷⁵

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-Baṣrī, 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

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 58-60.

scholar of Islam, K. Wagtendonk, 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 “wörtlich 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. Wagtendonk, *Fasting in the Koran*, 64.

⁷⁷Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, 2:96.

⁷⁸Arne A. Ambros with the collaboration of Stephan Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), 257.

⁷⁹Walid A. Saleh, “A Piecemeal Qur’ān,” 41.

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.

CHAPTER 2 A THEORY OF THE GRADUAL QUR'ĀN IN A POLEMICAL 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).¹

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

¹In making my own translations from the Qur'ān, I have consulted primarily, but not exclusively, *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

their multiple, diverse, and even contradictory understandings of the purpose(s) of the Qur’ān’s gradual revelation as signaled in particular in the last half of Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān in conversation with views of a number of scholars engaged in the modern academic study of the Qur’ān.

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

The early interpreters read Qur’ān 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 qur’ānic revelation. In the qur’ānic text, the unbelievers are not identified as to their specific identities. This qur’ānic 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*),² others as the polytheists (*al-mushrikūn*), and still others as the Jews (*al-yahūd*).³ These identifications of the unbelievers in 25:32, as in other qur’ānic 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 Qur’ān 25:32 were all attributed to the greatest authority among the early interpreters of the

²Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma’tḥūr*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2014), 5:128.

³Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 4 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-‘Aṣriyyah, 1997), 1:122.

Qur'ān, 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 Qur'ān 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...*"⁴

In this report, 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās situated the revelation of Qur'ān 25:32 in the context of a polemical exchange with Muhammad's skeptical Meccan clansmen. The Quraysh wanted an explanation as to why the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān, since he believed that God purposely sent the Qur'ān down to His Prophet only piecemeal, over a period of time, that is, "little by little" (*shay'an ba'd shay'in*). 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.

⁴al-Suyūṭī, *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.”⁵ 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

⁵Ibn Abī Hātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm: Musnad an Rasūl Allāh wa-al-Ṣaḥāba wa-al-Tābi‘īn*, ed. As‘ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat Nizar Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1997), 8:2689.

[re]affirmation of the Qur’ān’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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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

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 (kadhālika* —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

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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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’anic 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

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj, *Tafsīr Ibn Jurayj*, ed. ‘Alī Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Ghanī, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1992), 249.

speech of the polytheists.”¹¹ 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.”¹² 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,¹³ 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.”

¹¹Abū Zakariyyā’ Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā’, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2003), 2:230.

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

¹⁴In a report attributed to al-Suddī in Ibn Abī Hātim, *Tafsīr*, 8:2690.

¹⁵‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj, *Tafsīr Ibn Jurayj*, 249.

¹⁶Al-Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān*, 2:230.

¹⁷In a report attributed to Qatāda in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-Manthūr*, 5:128.

¹⁸Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shiḥātah, (Beirut: Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 2002), 3:233-234.

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. 'Alī (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*” (*linuqawwī bihi qalbaka*).¹⁹ 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 Shi‘ī 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*”.²⁰ 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.*”²¹ 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*

¹⁹al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān*, 1:121.

²⁰Zayd b. ‘Alī, *Tafsīr Zayd b. ‘Alī, al-Musammā Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Taqī al-Ḥakīm, (Cairo: Dār al-‘Ālamiyyah, 1992), 227.

²¹In a report attributed to ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj in Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols. (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1986), 19:11.

thereby"—, Muqātil b. Sulaymān wrote: "Thus, that We may make firm the Qur'ān in your heart [that is, the heart of Muḥammad] (*linuthabita al-Qur'ān fī qalbika*)."²² This paraphrase suggests that, for Muqātil, God sent down the Qur'ān gradually so that Muḥammad was able more easily to memorize the Qur'ān. In a more elaborate manner, 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās commented on the divine reason for the gradual Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān after another, gradually, so that Muḥammad learned it by heart. Thus the later important Muslim art of learning to recite the Qur'ān by heart began with Muḥammad, who was taught to read, recite, and memorize the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān, "*Thus, that We may strengthen your heart thereby*". These latter exegetes would argue that Muḥammad was given the Qur'ān 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*, Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān in his memory. God divided [the Qur'ān 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

²²Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 3:234.

²³In a report attributed to 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' 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].²⁴

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 (*mufarraḡan*) because it was sent down in an unwritten or oral form (*ghayr maktūbin*) to an illiterate Prophet (*nabī ummī*, namely Muḥammad).”²⁵

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....”²⁶

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

²⁴In a report attributed to a later anonymous interpreter of the Qur’ān, in al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān*, 1:121.

²⁵In a report attributed to Ibn Fūrak, see *ibid.*, 1:121.

²⁶al-Tha‘labī, *Kashf wa-al-Bayān al-ma‘ruf bi-Tafsīr al-Tha‘labī*, ed. Abī Muḥammad b. ‘Āshūr. 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002), 7:132.

with this quality—by which I mean *ummī*.²⁷ 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 tafṣīlan*);²⁹ ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Zayd b. Aslam (d. 182/798) held it to mean, “We have interpreted it [the Qur’ān] very comprehensibly” (*fassarnāhu tafsīran*);³⁰ and finally, for others, these words should be read simply as referring to “explanation and interpretation” (*al-tabyīn wal-tafsīr*).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

²⁸In a report attributed to Qatāda in Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr*, 8:2691.

²⁹Ismā‘īl al-Suddī, *Tafsīr al-Suddī al-Kabīr*, ed. M. ‘Aṭā Yusūf, (al-Manṣurah: Dār al-Wafā’, 1993), 364.

³⁰In a report attributed to ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Zayd b. Aslam by 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 Qur’ān (see Qur’ān 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 qur’anic revelations clear. Therefore, these divine words should be translated as follows: “*And We have sent it [the Qur’ān] 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-Nakha‘ī (d. 96/717) who took the phrase *wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan* to mean that “He has sent down [the Qur’ān] piece by piece,”³² or, as cited in another source, “We have divided it [the Qur’ān] into pieces, verse by verse and little by little. And the interval between the first and the last Revelation was roughly twenty-three years.”³³ A reading of his commentary informs us that God has sent down the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān] down as a response to them and as an answer from the Prophet

³²In a report attributed to Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr*, 5:128.

³³In a report attributed to Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī in al-Tha‘labī, *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 fu’ādaka wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan* meant the piecemeal manner of revelation; in his commentary he says, “God used to send down the Qur’ān to him [Muḥammad] in response to their [people’s] words in order that he [Muhammad] 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 Qur’ān of not being sent down on a single occasion, in a single dispensation. Thus God revealed Qur’ān 25:32 in response to this objection and asserted firmly that “... We have sent it [the Qur’ān] 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 Muqātil 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān. This accusation had major implications for the authenticity of his prophetic mission and the divine nature of the Qur’ān. Against a backdrop of this accusation, God asserted His preference for a piecemeal process of revelation by saying to the Prophet: “And We have

³⁴Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1992), 2:167.

³⁵In a report attributed to Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj in al-Suyūṭi, *al-Durr*, 5:128.

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,

³⁶In a report attributed to ‘Abd al-Malik b. Jurayj in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 19:11.

³⁷Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 2:554.

“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 *ṣalāt* 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 *ṣalāt* 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

³⁸In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-Manthūr*, 5:128.

³⁹Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 3:234.

⁴⁰al-Farrā’, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, 3:198.

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 tartīlan*, 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 waḥyu-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

⁴¹In a report attributed to Mujāhid b. Jabr in al-Suyūfī, *al-Durr*, 6:442.

⁴²Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:475.

⁴³al-Farrā’, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, 3:198.

⁴⁴al-Suddī, *Tafsīr al-Suddī al-Kabīr*, 348.

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."⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶ 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"⁴⁷ 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 *wahy* 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 *wahy* in this passage is, however, not "its revelation" (*wahyuhu*), but rather "its clarification" (*bayānuhu*).⁴⁸ 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-

⁴⁵al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 2:165.

⁴⁶In a report attributed to 'Abdallah b. 'Abbās in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 16:220.

⁴⁷In a report attributed to Mujāhid by al-Ṭabarī, *ibid.*

⁴⁸In a report attributed to Qatāda by al-Ṭabarī, *ibid.*

Ṭabarī, offered a slightly different interpretation of the term *wahy* in his commentary on Qur'ān 20:114: “Do not hurry, O Muḥammad, with [recitation of] the Qur'ān, so you shall make your Companions recite it [namely, the Qur'ān] (*fa-tuqri 'ahu aṣḥābāka*) or you recite it for them (*aw taqra 'ahu 'alayhim*), before the clarification of its meanings (*bayān ma 'ānīhi*) 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 Qur'ān, others for His piecemeal revelation of the Qur'ān, and others for His recitation of the Qur'ān in a deliberate and measured manner.

Concluding Remarks: Towards a Theory of the Gradual Qur'ān

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

I begin with the literary work of John Wansbrough (d. 2002). In his *Quranic Studies* (1977), Wansbrough argued that the Qur'ān emerged as the fixed canon of Scripture only gradually in the sectarian milieu of late 2nd/8th or early 3rd/9th-century Mesopotamia. This late fixation of qur'anic 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 Qur'ān 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.*

⁵⁰John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 148, 227.

unbelievers as the Jews over other monotheist groups,⁵¹ because he sought to situate the emergence of the Qur’ān in a narrowly Jewish milieu. I diverge from Wansbrough in both method and argument. Against his literary reading of the Qur’ān through the prism of the Rabbinic tradition, I have argued for the need to interpret the Qur’ān through the authority of the early interpreters. In their works of *tafsīr*, they interpreted the Qur’ānic 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 Qur’ān.

Through his literary method, Wansbrough attempted to prove that the discourse of the gradual Qur’ān had nothing to do with the figure of “the Arabian Prophet” whose “identity was in dispute.”⁵² 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 Qur’ān. This literary method led him to argue that “the *munajjam* (i.e. the gradual Qur’ān) concept was after all not exclusively Qur’ānic,” for the Torah was “a product of serial revelation.”⁵³ 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 Qur’ān, I have chosen to explore how the early Muslim interpreters argued for the gradual revelation of the Qur’ān 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

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

⁵⁴On a critique of Wansbrough’s reliance upon Jewish categories of interpretation, see William A. Graham, “A review of *Qur’anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* by John Wansbrough,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 100, 2 (1980): 140.

⁵⁵Andrew L. Rippin, “The Qur’anic *asbāb al-nuzūl* material: an analysis of its use and development in exegesis,” (Ph.D. diss.: McGill University, 1981): 69, 312, 438, 447; idem, “The function of ‘*Asbāb al-nuzūl*’ in qur’ānic exegesis,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, 1 (1988): 3, 19.

revelation.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 *tafsīr* as *ta'yīn al-mubham* (clarification of what is obscure), seeks to identify what God left unidentified or ambiguous in a given qur'anic passage.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, Muḥammad was given the Qur'ān gradually as an explicitly unique aspect of its revelation, distinguishing it from all of the “previous Scriptures” (*al-kutub al-sābiqa*). This distinctive nature of the gradual Qur'ān was seen as peculiar to the new revelations given the Prophet Muhammad.

⁵⁶Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 37.

⁵⁷John Burton, “law and exegesis: the penalty for adultery in Islam,” in G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 269-70.

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.⁵⁸ 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*).”⁵⁹ 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

⁵⁸Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur’ān*, completely revised and enlarged by W. Montgomery Watt, (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, first published in 1970; 1977), 74.

⁵⁹According to Burhān 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-Suyūfī, *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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān, its language, and its milieu than could most later scholars of the Qur'ān have had. The profusion of interpretations arguably arose from the subjectivity of early interpreters themselves in their search for the meaning of the Qur'ān. It is unthinkable that a highly diverse group of early interpreters would have produced a single, uniform meaning for a

⁶⁰Patricia Crone, “Two legal problems bearing on the early history of the Qur'ān,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 18 (1994): 2.

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,⁶¹ 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. ‘Alī and ‘Abd 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,

⁶¹Norman Calder, “Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham,” in G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur’ān*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 103. Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur’ān Commentary of al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004).154.

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.⁶² With this constant growth of both his inward and outward experience of prophecy, as Soroush 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.”⁶³

Second, other early interpreters, such as ‘Abdallāh 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

⁶²Abdulkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, transl. Nilou Mobasser, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 10-11.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 12.

piecemeal revelations by heart. While he still was repeating and memorizing one portion of the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān orally to his community of believers and to his “reciters of the revelations” (*qurrā'*, sing. *qārī'*) for their memorization. Thus, memorization was a crucial element in this revelatory process.

The conflict of two reasons for the gradual Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān.

The gradualism of revelation strongly suggests that the Qur'ān was given to Muḥammad in response to a specific situation. Such early exegetes 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.” This historical situatedness of the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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].⁶⁴

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.'⁶⁵

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

⁶⁴Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: ein Europäischer Zugang*, (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010), 140 (my translation of the following original text:) “Bekanntlich ist der Hauptvorwurf, den die Gegner des Verkünders gegen ihn erhoben, in der Frage in Q 25:32 auf den Punkt gebracht: *lau lā nuzzila 'alaihi l-qur'ānu djumlatan wāḥidatan*, »Warum wurde der Koran ihm nicht in einem Wurf, als eine vollständige Mitteilung offenbart?« Die Unvollständigkeit und Situationsgebundenheit der Botschaft wurde von den Hörern offenbar als Mangel wahrgenommen, der diese Rezitationen von den konventionellen Manifestationen des Gotteswortes abhob und der daher durch zusätzliche Beglaubigungen kompensiert werden mußte, die den vertrauten Modellen eher entsprachen. Diese mußten mit Schrift zu tun haben, da Offenbarung im jüdischen und christlichen Kontext an den Begriff eines geschriebenen Corpus gebunden war.”

⁶⁵Nicolai Sinai, “Qur'ānic self-referentiality as a strategy of self-authorization,” in Stefan Wild (ed.), *Self-Referentiality in the Qur'ān*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 114.

Qur'ān was always open to further revelations and revisions, so long as the Messenger of God was alive. And the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān.

More importantly, the primary reason why the opponents of Muḥammad demanded a single complete Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān” as a deficiency, as Neuwirth argued, because the Qur'ān did not conform to the established revelatory mode of previous scriptures. Had the Qur'ān been sent down “all at once,” like previous scriptures, they imply that they would have become believers. In fact, the Qur'ān was sent down only gradually in response to changing circumstances. This responsive nature of the Qur'ān has been also noted by Daniel A. Madigan. In his *The Qur'ān's Self-Image*, he looks at how the Qur'ān speaks of itself, in its own terms. He specifically examines how Qur'ān 25:32 rejects the opponents' demand for the Qur'ān to be sent down as “a single complete pronouncement” and avers that “the Qur'ān'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.”⁶⁶ It appears that, for Madigan, the concept of the responsive nature of the Qur'ān emerged from his reading of the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān precisely through the prism of (especially early) *tafsīr*. In their works of *tafsīr*, the early

⁶⁶Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 63.

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."⁶⁷ 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-waḥy*) 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

⁶⁷Walid A. Saleh, "A Piecemeal Qur'ān: *Furqān* and its Meaning in Classical Islam and in Modern Qur'ānic Studies," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 42 (2015): 50.

pace. Being God’s mouthpiece, Muḥammad was thus naturally instructed to perform his prophetic recitation of the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān in support of his argument for the earliest meaning of *qur’ān* as the act of reciting the divine Word. He cites, among others, two passages of the Qur’ān in particular:

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

In both passages, Graham interprets, first, the term *al-qur’ān* as “reciting” and *wahy* as “revealing” and, second, *al-qur’ān* as “the recitation” and *tartīlan* as “carefully/distinctly.” His interpretation of both passages of the Qur’ān on its own terms is part of his main argument for the earliest meaning of *qur’ān* 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 *qur’ān* 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 Qur’ān, 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 Qur’ān 53:1-18 as prooftexts for the gradual Qur’ān and more specifically, for the gradual, step-by-step process of the visionary encounter between the mighty figure and Muḥammad.

⁶⁸William A. Graham, “The Earliest Meaning of ‘*Qur’ān*’,” *Die Welt des Islams* 23-24 (1984): 369; reprinted with minor revisions and corrections in *Islamic and Comparative Religious Studies: Selected Writings*, (Vermont: Ashgate, 2010).

CHAPTER 3 THE GRADUAL PROCESS OF VISIONARY REVELATION

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” (*ṣāhibukum*), 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 (*wahy*): “It is nothing, but a revelation revealed [to him].” This passage remains unclear as to what the term *wahy* 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 53:1-18 only on its own internal terms. Read by itself, the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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 proof-text 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 (*idhā 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]¹; and for Qur’ān reader and exegete Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 102/720), it meant “the Pleiades (*al-thurayyā*) when they disappeared at dawn.”² 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 Sahl al-Tustarī, by the word *al-najm*,

¹In a report attributed to Ismā‘īl al-Suddī in Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥafnāwī and Maḥmūd Ḥāmid ‘Uthmān, 22 vols in 12. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1996), 17:84.

²Mujāhid b. Jabr, *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṭāhir b. Muḥammad al-Suwarī, 2 vols. (Beirut: al-Manshurāt al-‘ilmiyya, 1977), 2:627.

³al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘*, 17:84.

⁴Al-Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, *Kāmil al-Tafsīr al-Ṣūfī al-‘Irfānī li-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Alī Zay‘ūr, (Beirut: Dār al-Burāq, 2002), 159. For a recent translation of his *Tafsīr* into English, see *Spiritual Gems: The*

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’*).⁵ 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.”⁶ It follows that *sūra* 53:1

Mystical Commentary Ascribed to Ja’far al-Ṣādiq as contained in Sulamī’s Haqā’iq al-Tafsīr from the text of Paul Nwyia, trans. Farhana Mayer, (Jordan: Fons Vitae, 2011).

⁵Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, (Egypt: Maṭba’a al-Sa’āda, 1908), 145. For a recent translation of this *Tafsīr* into English, see *Tafsīr al-Tustarī: Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur’ān*, trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler, (Jordan: Fons Vitae, 2011), 212.

⁶Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary: The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, (Ithaca, New York: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1976), 945.

speaks about how God swears by the Qur’ān (*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 Qur’ān 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-Farrā’ (d. 207/822). In what follows, I explore how these interpreters argued that the impersonal oath *wal-najm* was intended to mean a Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 53:1 speaks about the gradual, piecemeal revelatory manner of the Qur’ān over the course of twenty years. In a report on the authority of Muḥammad b. al-Sā’ib 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 Qur’ān 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.”⁷ A reading of his commentary on Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān revealed in

⁷In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, see Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad Al-Wāḥidī, *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, 25 vols. (Egypt: Dār al-Muṣawwir al-‘Arabī, 2013), 21:7.

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-mawāqī‘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

⁸Mujāhid b. Jabr, *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, 2:627.

⁹Zayd b. ‘Alī, *Tafsīr Zayd b. ‘Alī, al-Musammā Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Taqī al-Ḥakīm, (Cairo: Dār al-‘Ālamīyah, 1992), 191.

¹⁰Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihātah, 5 vols. (Beirut: Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 2002), 4:159.

commentary on the meaning of a given oath as the gradual, piecemeal installments of the Qur'ān 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'ān (*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-Wāqī'a: falā uqsimu bi al-mawāqī'i al-nujūm (sūra 56:75)*, meaning: No, indeed! I swear by the revelations of the Qur'ān in installments when Archangel Gabriel brings it down to the Prophet, peace be upon him and his family. Abū al-'Āliya [Rufay' b. Miḥran al-Baṣrī, a Successor from Baṣra, d. 93/712] said: Learn the Qur'ān 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'ān 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'ān." 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'ān 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' Yaḥyā 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'ān over a period of twenty years. In his exegesis of Qur'ān 53:1, he argued that the speaker of the impersonal oath by *al-najm* was God Himself: "I

¹¹Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *al-Ashbāh wal-Naṣā'ir fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, ed. 'Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta, 2 vols. in 1, (Cairo: al-Hay'at al-Miṣrīya al-'Āmma li al-Kitāb, 1975), 2:272-3.

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-āyatāni*). And the interval between the first and the last revelation was twenty years.”¹² 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

¹²Abū Zakariyyā’ Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā’, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2003), 3:92.

who made accusations about the credibility of the disputed person? And who was being accused as an anonymous companion? Read by itself, Qur’ān 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” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). The early reports bearing on the reason for the revelation of Qur’ān 53 were attributed to the authority of such early interpreters as Muḥammad b. al-Sā’ib 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 Qur’ān in the context of a polemical milieu.

In a brief report, Muḥammad b. al-Sā’ib 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*).¹³ In *sūrat al-Najm*, Muḥammad was addressed in a friendly manner, as *ṣāhib*, 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 Qur’ān on his own, spontaneously, and then the verses [of *sūrat al-Najm*] were

¹³In a report attributed to Muḥammad b. al-Sā’ib al-Kalbī, see Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad Al-Wahidī, *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, 25 vols. (Egypt: Dār al-Muṣawwir al-‘Arabī, 2013), 21:7.

revealed.”¹⁴ 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*).¹⁵ 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

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:159.

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*.”¹⁶ 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.*¹⁷

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

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

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 (*wahy*) 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 *wahy* means in a given text of revelation. The meaning of the term *wahy* 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, Ja'far 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.¹⁸

This commentary shows clearly that, for Ja'far 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-Sharī'a*) with the ethics of commanding and forbidding (*ādāb al-amr wal-nahy*).¹⁹

¹⁸Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, *Kāmil al-Tafsīr*, 159; Idem, *Spiritual Gems*, 151.

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?”²⁰ 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

²⁰Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsir*, 145; idem, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī: Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur’ān*, 212.

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 Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad].”²¹ The process of bringing down was mediated through the intermediary medium of Gabriel who revealed the Qurʾān to the Prophet Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad 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-Māʿida*, *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

²¹Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:159.

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

In sum, Muqātil b. Sulaymān interpreted the vocabulary of *waḥy* 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 Qurʾān 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*. Qurʾān 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 (*awḥā*) the Qurʾān 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.

²²Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *al-Ashbāh*, 1:168-9.

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 proof-text 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-'alā*), 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 Ja'far 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.

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-Baṣrī (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-quwwa* 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

²³Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols. (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1986), 27:42-3.

²⁴In a report attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, 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-ta’wīl*) 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 manẓar ḥasan*); and [2] Qatāda b. Dī‘āma [who] said: ‘possessor of a beautiful and large stature’ (*dhū khalq ṭawīl ḥasan*). Others argued that the meaning of the term *dhū mirra* is ‘the strong one’ (*dhū quwwa*). Those who espoused this view were: [1] Muḥammad 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, *Jāmi‘ 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 (*ṣiḥḥat 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” (*shadīd 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

²⁶In a report attributed to al-Kalbī, see al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘*, 10:87.

²⁷al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 27:43.

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‘id b. Jubayr (d. 95/714) argued that “Gabriel settled himself firmly in his own position,”²⁸ 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.*²⁹

²⁸In a report attributed to Sa‘id b. Jubayr in Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Māwardī al-Baṣrī, *al-Nukat wal-‘Uyūn*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992), 5:392

²⁹In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd in Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma’thūr*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2014), 6:156.

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 Sa‘īd 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.”³⁰ 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 whom stood erect on the highest horizon (*fa-stawā Jibrīl wal-Nabī al-‘ufuq al-a‘lā*).³¹ 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.³² 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.³³

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

³⁰Sa‘īd b. Jubayr, *Tafsīr Sa‘īd b. Jubayr*, in Aḥmad al-‘Umrānī (ed.), *Mawsū‘a Madrasa Makka fī al-Tafsīr*, 8 vols., (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1960), 6:390.

³¹Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. al-Sarī al-Zajjāj al-Baghdādī, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān wa I‘rābuhu*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 2007), 4:174 and al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘*, 10:87.

³²al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:43.

³³al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta’wīl*, 4 vols. (Egypt: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1972), 4:28.

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 *fā-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 “*fā-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*).³⁴ It appears that al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī preferred to read verse 7 of *sūrat al-Najm*—*fā-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 *fā-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* (Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān to Muḥammad (*‘allamahu*) presumably on earth, then stood upright or straight (*fā-stawā*), and finally resided “on the highest horizon” (*wa-huwa fī al-ufuq al-‘alā*). The spatial movement of Gabriel, as an intermediary agent of revelation, took place from a lower place—where he taught Muḥammad the Qur’ān on earth—to a higher place where he ascended back to his higher dwelling in heaven, or what was

³⁴In 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-Rābī’ b. Anas (d. 139/756), 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 Maṣṣūr 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.

³⁵In a report attributed to Mujāhid b. Jabr in Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa al-‘Uyūn*, 5:392.

³⁶In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:44.

³⁷In a report attributed to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd in al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa al-‘Uyūn*, 5:392.

³⁸In a report attributed to al-Rābī’ b. Anas in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:44.

³⁹Al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 18 vols. (Turkey: Dār al-Mizān, 2005-2011), 8:374.

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-a’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].⁴⁰

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

⁴⁰In a report attributed to al-Ḍaḥḥāk by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-La’ālī al-Masnū’ā fī al-aḥādīth al-Mawḍū’a*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 1996), 3:70.

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-

⁴¹In a report attributed to ‘Ā’isha in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:46.

Ṭabarī 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 *Tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī 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-Ṭabarī preserved the exegetical reports attributed to two early authorities, namely ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and Anas b. Mālīk (d. 94/712), who argued for the visionary encounter of drawing near between God and the Prophet Muḥammad. In one report, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās 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. Mālīk. This report was narrated on the authority of Sharīk b. Abī Namar who said:

I heard Anas b. Mālīk 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 ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās and Anas b. Mālīk, reveals that in the visionary encounter of revelation it was God Himself,

⁴²In a report attributed to ‘Ā’isha in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān* 27:45.

⁴³In a report attributed to Anas b. Mālīk 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.”⁴⁴ 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

⁴⁴Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:160.

the two was formulated in his commentary on Qur'ān 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'ān 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.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

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’ān 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 Ṣūfī interpreter Muḥyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) as follows:

The [Prophet’s] vision of the Truth (*ru’ya al-Ḥaqq*) only takes place in the mutual activity of revelation between an ascent and a descent (*munāzala bayna ‘urūj wa nuḏūl*). 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-tadānī*) 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-talaqqī*) those who came to Him.”⁴⁷

A careful reading of the commentary shows that, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, 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’ān 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-‘Arabī 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-

⁴⁷Muḥyiddin b. al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Bulāq, 1911), 3:117.

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* (Qur’ān 53:9). The meaning of this particular qur’ānic 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 qur’ānic 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

⁴⁸al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ 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 ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd narrated how Muḥammad saw Gabriel who had six hundred wings in his original form.⁵⁰ 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*).⁵¹ It was presumably prior to the sending down of the Qur’ān 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. Ka‘b al-Qurazī (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.*”⁵² 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

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Mujāhid b. Jabr, *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, 2:628.

⁵²In a report attributed to Muḥammad b. Ka‘b al-Qurazī in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:46-7.

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.”⁵³ 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” (*‘abdihi*)? 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. Di‘āma 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, ‘Abdallāh 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*

⁵⁴Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1992), 2:308.

⁵⁵In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma in al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘*, 17:93.

⁵⁶In a report attributed to al-Rābī‘ b. Anas and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd by al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:47.

Muḥammad, ṣalla Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallām, mā awḥā ilayhi rabbuhu);⁵⁷ Sa‘īd b. Jubayr said: “He revealed to him [i.e. Muḥammad]” (*awḥā 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-awḥa ilā ‘abdihi Muḥammad, ṣalla Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallām, mā awḥa ilayhi*);⁵⁹ and Ja‘far 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 ya‘lam bi-hi aḥadun siwāhu*).⁶⁰ It thus appears clear from these commentaries that some exegetes worked out the meaning of Qur’ān 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, Ja‘far 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 Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq in his further commentary on Qur’ān 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-wahy*, 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 ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:47.

⁵⁸Sa‘īd b. Jubayr, *Tafsīr Sa‘īd b. Jubayr*, 6:390.

⁵⁹Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:159.

⁶⁰Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, *Kāmil al-Tafsīr*, 160.

⁶¹Sa‘īd b. Jubayr, *Tafsīr Sa‘īd b. Jubayr*, 6:390.

The first visionary encounter of revelation culminated with the prophetic vision of the heavenly figure: *The heart did not falsify what he saw* (Qur’ān 53:11). Read by itself, the meaning of Qur’ān 53:11 is vague, since it does not specify, first, the proper reading of the key verb form, whether *kadhaba* (“to lie”) or *kadhhaba* (“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 *kadhaba* or *kadhhaba*. A majority of early readers or reciters of the Qur’ān (*jumhūr al-qurrā’*) in the major Islamic metropolises, i.e., Madīna, Makka, Kūfa, and Baṣra, preferred to read the verb *k-dh-b* in Qur’ān 53:11 in the first form as *kadhaba* with *takhfiḥ* (“lightening”).⁶² 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 kadhaba al-ḥuḍūd mā ra’ā*) (Qur’ān 53:11). Here the pronoun “it” in the verb “what it saw” (*mā ra’ā*) was taken to refer to the heart (*al-ḥuḍūd*) 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

⁶²al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:47.

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 ‘Āṣim b. al-‘Ajjāj al-Jaḥdarī (d. 128/745), preferred to read the verb *k-dh-b* in Qur’ān 53:11 in the second form as *kadhhaba* with *tashdid* (“strengthening”).⁶³ Thus they read the qur’ānic words—*mā kadhhaba 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).

⁶³Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Atiyya, *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Atiyya: al-Muḥarrir al-Wajīz fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-‘Aẓīz*, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 1779.

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/it 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.”⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ 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

⁶⁴For these reports attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd and Qatāda b. Di‘āma, see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:49.

⁶⁵In a report attributed to Qatāda b. Di‘āma, *ibid.*

medieval exegete and judge, Abū Muḥammad b. ‘Aṭīyya, 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 ‘Aṭīyya 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

⁶⁶Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Aṭīyya, *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Aṭīyya*, 1779.

⁶⁷Al-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-tābi’ūn*), 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 Qur’ān 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” (*ra’ā Muḥammad rabba-hu*); second, “he saw Him with his heart” (*ra’āhu bi-qalbi-hi*);⁶⁸ third, “Muḥammad saw his Lord twice with his heart” (*ra’ā 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-ru’ya*).”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

⁶⁸Reports attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān* 27:48.

⁶⁹In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr*, 6:160.

⁷⁰In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān* 27:48.

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 Baṣran chain of authorities whereby ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās was reported as saying that the Prophet saw God “in the most beautiful form” (*fī aḥsanin ṣūratin*). His anthropomorphic description of the vision of God was preserved by al-Ṭabarī:

It is narrated on the authority of ‘Abdallāh 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-daraja*), the atonements (pl. *al-kaffārāt*, sing. *al-kaffāra*), walking on foot to the congregational prayers (pl. *al-jumu‘āt*, sing. *al-jum‘a*), and waiting for prayer after prayer (pl. *al-ṣalāt*, sing. *al-ṣala*).” 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 them 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 ‘Abdallāh 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

⁷¹In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh 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 Qur’ān 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 (*ru’ya ṣahīḥa*). 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.”⁷² 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!”⁷³

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.⁷⁴

Anas b. Mālīk (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’an 53:11 as proof that the Prophet saw God with his own eyes (*ru’ya ḥaqīqa bi al-baṣar*).⁷⁵ 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. Mālīk argued for the Prophet’s seeing God in the most

⁷²In a report attributed to Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī in al-Wahidī, *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, 21:22-23.

⁷³In a report attributed to Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī in Abū al-Fidā’ Ismā’īl b. Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1996), 6:451.

⁷⁴In a report attributed to Abū Dharr by al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’*, 17:94.

⁷⁵In a report attributed to ‘Anas b Mālīk, *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. Maṣṣūr: “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. Mālīk, 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-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 211/827), a Yemenī scholar who settled in Ṣan‘ā’ and studied for years with the Baṣran early authority Ma‘mar 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,

⁷⁶In a report attributed to Abū Dharr by al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:48.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, 2:308.

⁷⁹‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad, 3 vols. (al-Riyād: Maktaba al-Rashd, 1989), 2:253.

as reflected in his commentary on Qur’ān 53:11: “He [Muhammad] truly saw [God in] His majesty (*jalāla-hu*), His greatness (*‘aẓamata-hu*), and His garment (*ridā’a-hu*)”.⁸⁰

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”.⁸¹ 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”.⁸² 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.

Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), early Shi‘ī 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)”.⁸³ This commentary clearly reveals that, for Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the precise nature of the visionary encounter of revelation was closed to outsiders, since only participants of the revelatory activity, God and

⁸⁰Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, 2:308.

⁸¹In a report attributed to al-Rabī’ b. Anas in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* 27:49.

⁸²Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:160.

⁸³Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, *Kāmil al-Tafsīr*, 160-1.

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 ‘Abd 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 Qur’ān 53:11, he states firmly that Muḥammad witnessed his Lord through “his vision of the heart” (*baṣar qalbi-hi*).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 Qur’ān 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-tābi’ūn*), and those who came in decades after them. They included, among others, such early figures as ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, 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, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, and Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustari. 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?*” (Qur’ān 53:12). Read by itself, this verse is not clear as to whom the rhetorical question is directed, since the addressee of

⁸⁴al-Tustarī, *Tafsir*, 145.

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 Qur’ān 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?”⁸⁵ 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. Qur’ān 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*” (Qur’ān 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 ra’ā-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, *Jāmi‘ 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.⁸⁶ 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

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

81:23]. 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*

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 50-1.

[Qur'ān 31:34]. [3] 'whoever tells you that Muḥammad has concealed any portion of the revelation has certainly lied.' Then she recited, *O Messenger! Proclaim what has been sent down to you from your Lord* [Qur'ān 5:67]. She said, 'however, he saw Gabriel twice in his original form'.⁸⁹

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 (*raḥraf*, 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.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

⁹⁰In a report attributed to 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 27:51.

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-Ṭabarī cited only ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās as a single authority who read Qur’ān 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”.⁹³ Unfortunately, al-Ṭabarī completely neglected a number of early interpreters who argued that the Prophet saw God on another descent. A century prior to al-Ṭabarī, ‘Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), preserved a number of early authorities, such as ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, Ka‘b al-Aḥbār, and Ma‘mar b. Rāshid, 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-Razzāq:

‘Abd al-Razzāq, on the authority of [Sufyān] b. ‘Uyayna, on the authority of Mujālad b. Sa‘īd, on the authority of al-Sh‘abī, on the authority of ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥārith, who narrated that “Ibn ‘Abbās and Ka‘b met together.” He went on to report, “Ibn ‘Abbās said, ‘As for us, namely sons of Hāshim, 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.” Mujālad reported that al-Sha‘bī said: “Masrūq 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 idhā hawā...qāba qawsayn aw adnā* [Qur’ān 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’ān 31:34].” ‘Abd al-Razzāq stated, “I mentioned this ḥadīth to Ma‘mar [b. Rāshid], and he told me, “In our judgment, ‘Ā’isha is not more knowledgeable than Ibn ‘Abbās (*mā ‘Ā’isha ‘indanā bi-a‘lām min Ibn ‘Abbās*).”⁹⁴

⁹³In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, *ibid.*, 52.

⁹⁴al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 2:252.

In his exegesis of Qur'ān 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” (*ra’ā 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 Qur’ān 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. ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, 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-Rābī‘ 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. Sulaymān 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-ma’wā*, Qur’ān 53:15), a

⁹⁵Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:160.

⁹⁶In reports attributed to these early authorities in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 27:52-3.

⁹⁷Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:160.

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”.⁹⁸ 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

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’ān 53:17). This verse still remains vague if read strictly on its own terms. According to the father of Qur’ān 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’ān 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 taḡhā* 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 Ṣūfī exegete, Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, provided this commentary on Qur’ān 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.

¹⁰⁰In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās by al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 27:57.

¹⁰¹Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:160.

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”.¹⁰²

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 (*raḥraf*) that filled the entire horizon [of the heavens]”;¹⁰³ others, e.g., ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd (d. 182/798), argued that “the Prophet saw Gabriel in his true, original form in heaven”;¹⁰⁴ 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”.¹⁰⁵ The mystical description of “the greatest signs of the Lord” was elaborated further in the commentary of our early Ṣūfī 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‘būd). Rather, he only increased in love (maḥabba), 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-‘azīma). 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 (kiḥāhan bi-baṣar qalbi-hi). He remained firm due to the power of

¹⁰²Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, 145.

¹⁰³In a report attributed to ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd by al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 27:57.

¹⁰⁴In a report attributed to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam in *ibid*.

¹⁰⁵Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, *Kāmil al-Tafsīr*, 161.

his state (*ḥāl*), the exalted nature of his station (*maqām*), and his rank (*daraja*).¹⁰⁶

A careful reading of this mystical commentary on Qur’ān 53:18 reveals a number of remarkable findings. First, Sahl al-Tustarī was the first early Sūfī 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-Tustarī was the first early Sūfī authority to interpret the meaning of Qur’ān 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-Tustarī was the first early mystical figure to formulate the gist of Qur’ān 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” (Qur’ān 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.

¹⁰⁶Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsir*, 145.

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 proof-text 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

Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 53:1, many early interpreters, such as ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās, Mujāhid b. Jabr, Zayd b. ‘Alī, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, and Yaḥyā b. al-Farrā’, argued that God swore by the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān 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,¹⁰⁷ 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 Qur’ān, 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 Qur’ān 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, Bayḍāwī, Ibn Kathīr and other authorities. Rāghib and Ibn Kathīr, in particular, point to the phrase

¹⁰⁷Just to name several works of the Islamicists, see *Le Coran (al-Qor’ān)*, transl. Régis Blachère, (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1980), 560; *The Qur’ān*, translated with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs by Richard Bell, 2 vols., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 2:540; Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur’ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, (London: SCM Press, 1996), 102; *The Qur’ān*, trans. Alan Jones, (Cambridge, England: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007), 488; Carl W. Ernst, *How to Read the Qur’ān: A New Guide with Select Translations*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 100.

mawāqī‘ al-nujūm in 56:75, which undoubtedly refers to the step-by-step revelation of the Qur’ān.¹⁰⁸

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.¹⁰⁹

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

¹⁰⁸*The Message of the Qur’ān*, translated and explained by Muḥammad Asad, (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1980), 812, note 1.

¹⁰⁹Richard Bell, “Muḥammad’s Visions,” *The Moslem World*, 24 (1934): 148.

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 (*waḥy 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’ib 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

¹¹⁰Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:159.

¹¹¹In a report attributed to Muḥammad b. al-Sā’ib al-Kalbī in Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad Al-Wahīdī, *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, 21:7.

piecemeal to Muḥammad.”¹¹² Thus both al-Kalbī and Muqātil situated their formulations of the gradual Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān on his own, spontaneously. The Qur’ān was not rooted in his own desires. It was indeed a revelation (*wahy*) revealed to him in piecemeal fashion.

With an approach to the study of the Qur’ān only on its own terms, Bell interpreted the vocabulary of *wahy* 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 *wahy* in the early Muslim traditions of interpretation. That is to say, the meaning of *wahy* 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 Qur’ān, Muqātil b. Sulaymān provided diverse, multiple, and often contradictory meanings of the term *al-wahy* in the Qur’ān: 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 Qur’ān] given to Muḥammad in gradual stages. More specifically, he received the Qur’ān 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 Qur’ān. It is therefore not entirely true to say that, as Christopher Melchert argues,

¹¹²Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:159.

¹¹³Richard Bell, “Muḥammad’s Visions,” 148.

¹¹⁴Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *al-Ashbāh*, 1:168-9.

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”.¹¹⁵

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”.¹¹⁶

Prior to modern exegesis, most medieval exegetes, such as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn ‘Aṭīyya 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’ān 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. Mālīk, al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim al-Balkhī, ‘Ikrima al-Barbarī al-Baṣrī, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Rabī’ b. Anas al-Baṣrī, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, Ma‘mar b. Rāshid, and Sahl ‘Abd

¹¹⁵Christopher Melchert, “The Early Controversy over Whether the Prophet saw God”, *Arabica* 62 (2015): 460, 476.

¹¹⁶Gibril F. Haddad, “Appendix 3: The Vision of Allah in the World and the Hereafter”, in Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Allah’s Names and Attributes*, trans. Gibril F. Haddad, v. 4, (Michigan: As-Sunna Foundation of America, 1998), 78.

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 Qur'ān, like Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, is visible and theophanous"; that "both Moses and Muḥammad experienced theophanies"; and that "a defining aspect of

¹¹⁷Josef van Ess, "Le Mi'rāğ et la Vision de Dieu dans les Premières Spéculations Théologiques en Islam", in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (ed.). *Le Voyage Initiatique en Terre D'Islam*, (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1991), 39.

¹¹⁸Melchert, "Early Controversy", 459.

¹¹⁹Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 72.

¹²⁰W. Wesley Williams, "*Tajallī wa-ru'ya*: a Study of anthropomorphic theophany and visio dei in the Hebrew Bible, the Qur'ān and early Sunnī Islam", PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008.

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".¹²¹ 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 proof-text 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 Muḥammad, 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-Daḥḥāk, 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.¹²² 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 Arabia¹²³ and "at the far periphery of the Meccan settlement."¹²⁴ 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

¹²²Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 4:160.

¹²³Richard Bell, "Muḥammad's Visions," 150.

¹²⁴Nicolai Sinai, "An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm* (53)", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 13, 2 (2011): 15.

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”.¹²⁵

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 Qur’ān, 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 Qur’ān 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”.¹²⁶ 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 Qur’ān 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

¹²⁵Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 54.

¹²⁶Nicolai Sinai, “An Interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm* (53)”, 15.

heart.¹²⁷ 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-Tustarī sought to distinguish Muḥammad from Moses precisely on account of his face-to-face, visionary encounter with God.

¹²⁷Sahl ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsir*, 145.

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 *farrāqnāhu* in Qur’ān 17:106 as referring to the gradual, piecemeal, and serial manner of the Qur’anic 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 Qur'ān'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 Qur'ān—*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 Qur'ān easier. The conflict of two reasons for the gradual Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān and, more importantly, of separate visionary encounters between the mighty heavenly figure and Muḥammad, from the interpretation of Qur'ān 53:1-18 on their own interpretive terms. In their interpretations of Qur'ān 53, they argued that God swore by the gradual revelation of the Qur'ān—*wal-najm idhā hawā*—“by the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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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