

Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions

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Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions

Edited by

Christian Lange



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Christian Lange
Utrecht, August 2015

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List of Abbreviations

<i>ANT</i>	<i>The apocryphal New Testament</i> , tr. J.K. Elliott, Oxford 1993
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Babylonian Talmud</i> , ed. and tr. I. Epstein <i>et al.</i> , 36 vols, London 1935–52
<i>EI²</i>	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition</i> , ed. Gibb, H.A.R. <i>et al.</i> , 12 vols, Leiden 1954–2004
<i>EI³</i>	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam THREE</i> , ed. Fleet, K., Kraemer, G. <i>et al.</i> , Leiden 2007–
<i>EQ</i>	<i>The Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān</i> , ed. McAuliffe, J.D. <i>et al.</i> , 5 vols, Leiden 2001–2006
<i>GAS</i>	Sezgin, F.: <i>Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums</i> , vols. i–ix Leiden 1967–1984, vol. x–xv Frankfurt 2000–10
<i>IJMES</i>	<i>International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies</i>
<i>IS</i>	<i>Islamic Studies</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JQS</i>	<i>Journal of Qurʾānic Studies</i>
<i>JRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JSAI</i>	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>Muslim World</i>
<i>OTP</i>	<i>The Old Testament pseudepigrapha</i> , ed. and tr. Charlesworth, J. <i>et al.</i> , 2 vols, Garden City N.Y. 1983
<i>SI</i>	<i>Studia Islamica</i>
<i>WZKM</i>	<i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes</i>

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Introducing Hell in Islamic Studies

Christian Lange

In regard to the afterlife, scholars of Islam in the West have demonstrated a remarkably irenic temper, preferring to give far more attention to paradise than to hell. The Islamic hell, for the most part, has been viewed as no more than the mirror image of paradise, an ugly reflection of the beauties and the joys in heaven. Consequently, it has been considered a phenomenon of secondary logical and ontological order, as well as interest. The few general overviews of Islamic eschatology largely bypass the infernal regions,¹ and the dedicated studies of the Islamic paradise, of which there are a fair number,² cannot be said to be paralleled by the same number of scholarly forays into the Islamic hell.³ While the entry on paradise in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1954–2005) counts eleven columns in the printed edition, its entry

-
- 1 The most widely cited studies of this kind are Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding*, and El-Saleh, *La vie future*, each of whom pays much less attention to hell than to paradise. Also shorter overviews tend in this direction. See, for example, the classic study by Meier, *The ultimate origin*; or the stimulating essay by Reinhart, *The here and the hereafter*.
 - 2 Al-Azmeh, *Rhetoric for the senses*; Lange, *Paradise in the Islamic religious imagination*; Lohlker/Nowak, *Das islamische Paradies*; MacDonald, *Islamic eschatology*—vi; Raven, *A Kitāb al-ʿAzāma*; Rosenthal, *Reflections on love*; Schimmel, *The celestial garden*. See also the numerous studies of aspects of paradise in the Quran, for example Horowitz, *Das koranische Paradies*; Jenkinson, *Rivers of paradise*; Lange, *The discovery of paradise*; Neuwirth, *Reclaiming paradise lost*; O’Shaughnessy, *Eschatological themes*, 76–107; Tubach, *Schönheiten*; Wendell, *The denizens of paradise*.
 - 3 Exceptions include Lange, *Islamische Höllenvorstellungen*; idem, *Justice, punishment*, 101–75; idem, *Where on earth is hell?*; Thomassen, *Islamic hell*. Some studies deal with aspects of hell in the Quran. See Jeschke, *Ġahannam und al-nār*; Radscheit, *Höllensbaum*; O’Shaughnessy, *The seven names*. The only book-length study is the PhD dissertation of Jonas Meyer, *Die Hölle im Islam* (Basel 1901). Meyer’s study, however, is largely a paraphrase of certain hell sections in a medieval eschatological manual, the *al-Takhwīf min al-nār* of Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795/1393), and as such offers little analysis. See also Hamza, *To Hell and back*, which deals specifically with the emergence, in the early centuries, of the theological doctrine of the temporary punishment in hell of Muslim sinners.

on hell is awarded less than one column.⁴ The more recent *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (2001–6) shows a more balanced approach, but still favors paradise (sixteen columns) over hell (twelve columns).⁵ Scholarly symposia and museum exhibits in the area of Islamic eschatology likewise gravitate toward the upper regions of the otherworld.⁶

1 Why (Not) Hell?

There are two reasons, in my view, for this neglect of hell in Western Islamic Studies.⁷ The first is quite simply that hell is not a particularly comfortable space to inhabit, whether for sinners or scholars. The stigma of bad religion adheres to it, as if it were a subject not worthy of the academy's quest for truth and beauty.⁸ In fact, unless the subject is sublimated into philosophical, ethical and psychological discourse, *any* kind of eschatology is regularly met with suspicion by scholars of Islam. "The whole basic view of ultimate origins and the hereafter," wrote Fritz Meier, "is hidden in Islamic literature behind a decorative structure of baroque traditions."⁹ One recognizes in such statements a preference for "profound" rather than "decorative" structures, for taxonomy and categorization, for theological rationalization of the "ultimate." When the literature is found to be internally diverse, or even contradictory (as is the case

4 Gardet, *Djanna*; idem, *Djahannam*. Both entries were published in 1965. The entry on "al-Nār" (1995) deals exclusively with fire as one of the four elements.

5 Kinberg, *Paradise*; Gwynn, *Hell and hellfire*.

6 The symposia and exhibits that have come to my attention are "The Here and the Hereafter: Images of Paradise in Islamic Art" (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 26 March–19 May 1991); "Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam" (Göttingen University, 27–31 May 2009); "Gardens of Eternity: Visualizing Paradise in Islamic Art" (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, forthcoming). As regards art exhibits, the focus on paradise should not come as a surprise, as it seems that we are currently a long way away from an appreciation of the esthetics of the Islamic hell. A 2002 colloquium held in Keszthely, Hungary, was optimistically titled "Paradise and Hell in Islam," but of the 17 contributions to the published proceedings (see Dévényi/Fodor [eds], *Proceedings*), only one is devoted to hell proper (Tottoli, What will be the fate), while another five touch on both otherworldly realms in equal measure, including notably Jones, *Heaven and Hell in the Qurʾān*; and Szombathy, *Come Hell or high water*.

7 Here I repeat, in summary form, an argument that I have proffered elsewhere. See Lange, *Justice, punishment* 115–7; idem, *Where on earth is hell?*

8 For similar comments regarding the lack of interest in popular eschatology in the study of ancient Christianity, see Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell* 4.

9 Meier, *The ultimate origin* 103.

with much of the eschatological literature in Islam), it is dismissed as “baroque” or even, to quote Meier again, “bizarre.”¹⁰ Hell only seems to compound the problem. Lacking the esthetic appeal of paradise, as well as the lofty promise of spiritual ascent, hell is a supremely messy and ugly place. Islamic literary traditions about hell, its inhabitants and their punishments are convoluted, often shockingly violent, and frequently obscene.

There are good reasons for scholars, however, to pay serious attention to religious discourses of pain and violence. Robert Orsi has underscored “the importance of studying and thinking about despised religious idioms, practices that make us uncomfortable, unhappy, frightened—and not just to study them but to bring ourselves into close proximity to them, and not to resolve the discomfort they occasion by imposing a normative grid.”¹¹ Such an approach may in fact reveal that representations that, at first sight, one may find distasteful or even repugnant follow a certain logic of representing human suffering, and projecting it on others. To quote Orsi again, “to work toward some understanding(s) of troubling religious phenomena is not to endorse or sanction them ... but we cannot dismiss them as inhuman, so alien to us that they cannot be understood or approached, only contained or obliterated.”¹² The discourse on hell in Islam is no exception in this regard. As is amply demonstrated by the contributions to this volume, hell occupies an important place in the Muslim religious imagination. As such, the function and the meaning of hell in a variety of Muslim discourses deserve to be studied, not in order to sanction phantasies of violence and pain but to understand the conditions and consequences of their flourishing.

The second reason why hell has been largely absent from the map of Islamic Studies is the common perception among scholars that Islam is a religion of mercy; put differently, that it is a religion in which salvation is easily obtained, a religion in which hell, therefore, has no place. According to Gustav von Grunebaum’s classic formulation, Islam does away with the idea of original sin and reduces salvation to obedience to an all-powerful God, thus making salvation “a door that is easily unlocked.”¹³ Earlier, Ignaz Goldziher wrote about the “pure optimism” of Muslim soteriology,¹⁴ a view that one finds repeated

10 Ibid., 104. Also Carra de Vaux, *Fragments* 5, speaks of the “merveilles bizarres” of Islamic eschatology.

11 Orsi, *Jesus Held Him So Close* 7.

12 Ibid.

13 Von Grunebaum, *Ausbreitungs- und Anpassungsfähigkeit* 15: “... wird Gehorsam das Tor zur Erlösung, ein Tor, nicht schwierig zu erschließen.”

14 Goldziher, *Richtungen* 160.

in the recent scholarly literature.¹⁵ Such perceptions, of course, are not without basis. The absence of original sin, and the minimal requirements for faith stipulated in mainstream Islamic theology, have often been noted by scholars. It bears pointing out, however, that characterizations of Islam as a religion of mercy and ready access to paradise have the unfortunate corollary of reinforcing a stereotypical dichotomy between “difficult” and “easy” religions. In this dichotomy, Christianity is presented as a difficult religion, the line from Matthew 7:14, “for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few,” being used in support of this claim. Conversely, Islam is characterized as a religion that encourages an attitude of self-indulgence. Islam, wrote Riccoldo of Monte Croce (d. 1320 CE), one of the most influential European late-medieval polemicists against Islam, is the “easy and wide road” (*lata et spatiosa via*), quoting Matthew 7:13, “the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.”¹⁶

The precise degree to which the certainty of salvation characterizes the Islamic tradition remains a subject of debate, despite all generalizations to the contrary. As scholars of Islam gradually discover hell to be a topic worthy of their attention, a more nuanced picture will begin to emerge. This volume is conceived as a contribution to this process of putting hell on the map of Islamic Studies and of locating it in a variety of Islamic traditions. In the remainder of this introduction, I aim to provide a brief reassessment of the assumption of absolute salvific certainty in Islam, followed by a general overview of the hell imagery in Islamic traditions.¹⁷ Though covering a broad spectrum of intellectual and literary history in Islam (Sunni and Shi‘i, Quranic, traditionist, mystical, philosophical, modernist, etc.), the contributions in this volume cannot address all aspects of the Islamic hell that deserve study, and they do on occasion presuppose familiarity with some basic givens of the tradition. This introduction, therefore, aims to sketch out this background. In the pages that follow, I shall also highlight certain areas in the infernology of Islam that I consider worthy of further investigation. Along the way, I shall weave in references to the contributions in this volume, even though I will refrain from offering a précis of each of them.

15 Van Ess, *Flowering* 42; Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 81.

16 On Riccoldo and medieval European polemics leveled at Islamic soteriology, see Daniel, *Islam and the West* 177–80.

17 This overview is an updated and, in places, an expanded version of Lange, Hell.

2 Hell and Salvation Anxiety

The Quran stresses both God's heavenly reward *and* punishment in hell. As Navid Kermani remarks, "in the Quran God is represented in many facets of mercy; however, as in the Bible, these facets are inextricably linked with His violence, His malice and His terror."¹⁸ Opinions are divided among scholars as to how much space *exactly* hell claims in the Quran in comparison to paradise. One scholar counts 92 "significant passages" about hell and 62 about paradise;¹⁹ another identifies about 400 verses relating, in a meaningful way, to hell and about 320 relating to paradise.²⁰ Others, however, claim that paradise occupies "significantly more space" in the Quran than hell.²¹

Be that as it may, the imagery of hell is relatively well developed in the Quran.²² It is noteworthy, as Tommaso Tesei shows in his contribution to this volume, that hell in the Quran, like paradise, is conceived to lie immediately ahead; it is *now*, or almost there already. This explains the apparent lack of interest that the Quran shows in the state of souls between death and resurrection. In the Quran there is the notion that souls fall asleep at death, an idea that Tesei traces to a multitude of late-antique, Christian precedents. Indeed, the picture of hell in the Quran is the result of a confluence of several traditions of eschatological thought of Late Antiquity. There is also, as some scholars contend, a gradual development toward a more Biblicized version of hell in the Quran. Thomas O'Shaughnessy, for example, has suggested that in the middle Meccan period, the Quran largely abandons the term *jahīm* to designate hell, from now on using more frequently the more Biblical term *jahannam* (the "valley of Hinnom", Hebr. *gē-hinnōm*, see Joshua 15:8, Jeremiah 7:31, 32:35).²³ Christian Lange, in his contribution to this volume, traces a similar pattern, testing the Nöldekian hypothesis of a gradual development of the Quranic hell

18 Kermani, *Schrecken Gottes* 161; cf. See Neuwirth, *Form and Structure* ii 258a–b.

19 Jones, *Paradise and hell* 110.

20 Lange, *Paradise and hell*, ch. 1 (forthcoming).

21 Neuwirth, *Koran* 439. Tellingly, the index in Neuwirth's study has an entry for "paradise," but not for "hell." Similar statements can be found in Neuwirth, *Reclaiming paradise lost* 333; Madigan, *Themes and topics* 91; Sviri, *Between fear and hope* 323; Andrae, *Ursprung* 234. Michael Sells contends that it is a "standard stereotype about ... the Qur'ān ... that Islam is a religion of fear." See Sells, *Approaching the Qur'ān*, 23. Rosenthal, "Sweeter than hope," 79, leaves the question open.

22 See Gwynne, *Hell and hellfire*; Lange, *Paradise and hell*, ch. 1 (forthcoming). See Murata/Chittick, *The vision of Islam* 211: "No scripture devotes as much attention as the Koran to describing the torments of hell and the delights of paradise."

23 O'Shaughnessy, *The seven names* 451–5.

discourse in four phases, based on an analysis of the terms and ideas used in connection to the punisher-angels in hell. Also Simon O'Meara's chapter in this volume can be read this way, describing as it does a gradual infernalization of the pre-Islamic jinn in the Quran, a process which results in a reconfigured (and appropriately monotheistic) hierarchy of spiritual beings.

In the centuries that followed its proclamation, the Quranic image of hell was greatly elaborated in scores of short narratives traced back to the Prophet or his Companions. These hadiths, from the third/ninth century onwards, were compiled into special eschatological handbooks, from the works of Sa'īd b. Janāh (Shi'i, *fl.* early 3rd/9th c.) and Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (Sunni, d. 281/894) to those of al-Ghazālī (Sunni, d. 505/1111), al-Qurṭubī (Sunni, d. 671/1272), al-Suyūṭī (Sunni, d. 911/1505), al-Baḥrānī (Shi'i, d. 1107/1695–6), al-Saffārīnī (Sunni, d. 1189/1774), Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (Sunni, d. 1307/1890) and Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Aṭfayyish (Ibādī, d. 1332/1917), among others.²⁴ Some of these compilations are devoted exclusively to hell;²⁵ most, however, combine traditions about hell with descriptions of paradise. Mention should also be made of a number of anonymous, popular compilations, in particular the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār fī dhikr al-janna wa-l-nār*²⁶ and the text known as *Qurrat al-'uyūn*.²⁷ It is typical of these popular manuals that they were later posthumously connected to (usually) famous authors. Thus, the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* is variously attributed to Abū l-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), or a certain, otherwise unknown 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qāḍī (*fl.* before 11th/17th c.); the *Qurrat al-'uyūn* is often (and equally mistakenly) said to be the work of al-Samarqandī. Noteworthy about the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* and the *Qurrat al-'uyūn* is that they both have a lot more to say about hell than about paradise. For example, ten chapters in the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* deal with the former, only five with the latter. The series of articles of John MacDonald on Islamic eschatology,²⁸ a translation of the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* with some added commentary, completely misses out on this important aspect. This is because MacDonald used a manuscript that happened to lack the hell section

24 Cf. the bibliography.

25 See, for example, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, *Ṣifat al-nār*; Ibn Rajab, *Takhwīf*; Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, *Yaqẓat*. On the development of the genre of traditionist eschatology, cf. Bauer, *Islamische Totenbücher*; Lange, *Paradise and hell* ch. 2 (forthcoming).

26 See on this text, Tottoli, *Muslim eschatological literature*; Lange, *Paradise and hell*, ch. 3 (forthcoming).

27 Another specimen is the text known as *al-Durar al-ḥisān*, commonly (and probably mistakenly) attributed to al-Suyūṭī. There is also debate about the correctness of the ascription of *al-Durra al-fākhira* to al-Ghazālī.

28 MacDonald, *Islamic eschatology* I–VI (1964–66).

of the text.²⁹ As for the *Qurraṭ al-ʿuyūn*, all ten of its chapters offer discussions of mortal sins and their punishments in hell. Only in the last chapter does one find a vision of paradise, which connects awkwardly to the rest of the text and may be a later addition.

For those reading or listening to the Quran and the hadiths on the afterlife, therefore, fear of hell was rather difficult to avoid. Of course, many Quranic verses and certain hadiths strike a more optimistic tone. One should also note that theologians of the formative and classical period developed an arsenal of concepts that were apt to mitigate the anxiety the believers may have felt. This included a broad, belief-based definition of faith (*īmān*), the affirmation of the possibility of repentance (*tawba*) for sins, and the doctrine of the intercession (*shafāʿa*) of the Prophet. Nonetheless, salvation anxiety was hardly absent in Islamic theology, as one realizes when studying Muslim doctrines of sin and salvation. Here, much depends on the definition of the major sins, the *kabāʾir*, which are opposed to the *ṣaghāʾir*, or minor sins (cf. Q 18:49). As in the Christian tradition, these major sins were held to constitute a ticket to hell, whereas the *ṣaghāʾir*, according to the majority position, would be of no consequence. However, how many major sins should one reckon with? Traditions counting three, four, or seven major sins³⁰ could not prevent the emergence of longer lists, a process that culminated in the discussion by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) of seventy-five, and by Ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī (d. 974/1567) of 467 major sins. The often-quoted definition attributed to the Companion, Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/686–8), that a major sin is “everything for which God has prescribed a fixed punishment (*ḥadd*) in this world and the Fire in the hereafter”³¹ was hardly apt to restrict the scope of the major sins. One should note that there was a near consensus among Muslim theologians of the later periods that punishment for Muslim grave sinners would only be temporary; eventually, after a purgatory sojourn in hell’s top layer, they would be admitted into paradise.³² But hell *was* where they were destined. Over the course of the centuries, the discussion came to center not on whether there would be punishment of Muslims, but on how long and how violent this punishment would be.

There was also the question whether God could forgive unrepented grave sins, and whether in practice He would do so. Theologians, particularly those

29 Similarly, Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire*, 108–10.

30 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-adab* 6, k. *al-shahādāt*, bāb 10; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-īmān* 144. Hadiths in al-Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s collection are cited according to Wensinck, *Concordance*.

31 Dhahabī, *Kabāʾir* 6.

32 On the emergence of the idea of a temporary hell in early Islam, see Hamza, *To Hell and back*.

belonging to the Ash'arite school of theology, tended to assert that God's mercy, as one could read in a hadith, would overcome the wrath He directs at human sinfulness, even in the absence of repentance. In contrast, Khārijite and Mu'tazilite theologians of the early centuries generally insisted on the punishment of sinful, unrepentant believers. As noted above, the dominant narrative in scholarship on Islamic theology has been that the Khārijite and Mu'tazilite position was lastingly defeated and erased by the salvific optimism of the mainstream. However, also in later centuries theologians reached different conclusions as to whether God could "renege on the threat" (*khulf al-wa'īd*) that is leveled at Muslim sinners in the Islamic revelation.³³ For example, the Meccan Māturīdī scholar, al-Qārī al-Harawī (d. 1014/1605), who dedicated an epistle to the question of *khulf al-wa'īd*, affirmed the general necessity for God to punish Muslim sinners, although he also granted that God did not have to punish them *in each case* (thereby parting ways with the more rigorous stance of many Mu'tazilites).³⁴ At the other end of the theological spectrum one comes across notions of universal salvation even for non-Muslims. Mohammad Hassan Khalil and Jon Hoover, both of whom are contributors to this volume, are to be credited for recently having brought these strands of universalist thinking to the attention of a broader audience.³⁵ In his chapter, Khalil revisits the eighth/fourteenth-century debate about Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) doctrine of the "demise of hell" (*fanā' al-nār*). Hoover pursues the doctrine's reception in later centuries, particularly in the work of the Yemenite Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 840/1436).

The fear of hell is also integral to the renunciant and ascetic strands of Muslim religiosity. According to a tradition reported by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/998), after a thousand years of punishment, only those Muslim sinners who are "more highly esteemed in the eyes of God" are let out of hell. The pious exemplar of the early second/eighth century, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), supposedly commented: "O, that I might be among these men!"³⁶ Other renunciants (*zuhhād*, sg. *zāhid*) of the early centuries are on record for expressing what Christopher Melchert has characterized as "exaggerated fear."³⁷ In his contribution to this volume, Melchert collects traditions that showcase instances in which the renunciants focused their fear on hell in particular.

33 See on the rejection of *khulf al-wa'īd*, particularly among Māturīdī theologians, the comments of Gardet, *Dieu* 304; Lange, *Sins*, expiation 160–67.

34 Qārī, *Qawl* 46–7.

35 Hoover, *Islamic universalism*; Khalil, *Islam*. See also Pagani, *Vane speranze*.

36 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb* (tr. Gramlich) iii, 221.

37 Melchert, *Exaggerated fear*.

As one learns from Melchert's piece, several of the *zuhhād* allegedly wept, fainted, or even died on the spot when passing blacksmiths working a forge, overwhelmed by the thought of hell-fire.³⁸ Such behavior resonated closely with a Quranic motif. "Have you not considered the fire that you light?" the Quran rhetorically asks, and then exclaims: "We have made it a reminder (*tadhkīra*)!" (Q 56:71–3). There are also cases reported of *zuhhād* who passed away upon hearing the Quran's hell verses (*āyāt al-wa'īd*) recited to them.³⁹

Zuhd motifs of the fear of hell also survive in later Sufi works. "Your coming unto it [hell] is certain, while your salvation therefrom is no more than conjecture", thunders al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in his *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, urging the believer to "fill up your heart, therefore, with the dread of that destination."⁴⁰ Others voiced a certain disregard for hell. Like paradise, they considered hell a distraction from the only valid object of their devotion, that is, God. This explains how a Sufi like Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī (d. 234/848 or 261/875) could assert that God's fire of love burns a thousand times more intensely than the fire of hell, and that God will take the foot of the hell-monster and dip it into the fire of His love, which will obliterate it.⁴¹ Baṣṭāmī is also said to have claimed that he would be able to smother hell with the tip of his frock, thereby saving the rest of humankind from punishment.⁴² The idea of universal redemption from punishment in hell also appears in the thought of a later Sufi, Ibn al-'Arabī of Murcia (d. 638/1240). As Samuela Pagani's contribution to this volume shows, on the one hand Ibn al-'Arabī makes room for hell as the manifestation of God's attribute of "majesty" (*jalāl*), which complements His "kindness" (*jamāl*). On the other hand, Ibn al-'Arabī predicts that punishment in hell will eventually come to an end. However, instead of moving on to paradise, hell's inhabitants will remain in hell, attached to it, and in a certain way enjoying it, like natives prospering in their homeland (*mawṭin*), albeit in a state considered abject by all others.

Yet other Sufis developed strategies of internalizing hell. The Persian mystic Hujwērī (d. 465/1073 or 469/1077), for example, wrote that man's lower soul (*nafs*), the seat of carnal appetites, corresponds to hell, "of which it is a type in

38 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf* xiv, 5, 8; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Zuhd* 320.

39 See the biographies collected in al-Tha'labī's *Qatā' l-Qur'ān*. Cf. Kermani, *Gott ist schön* 378–9; Meier, *Abū Sa'īd* 196–7. Famous among the "verses of threat" (*āyāt al-wa'īd*) were 4:37, 23:104, 39:46, 54:46, as well as suras 67 and 102.

40 Ghazālī, *Ihyā'* v, 156 (tr. Winter 220).

41 Sarrāj, *Luma'* (tr. Gramlich) 529–30.

42 See Ritter, *Aussprüche* 237.

this world.”⁴³ The Khurasani ‘Azīz-i Nasafī (*fl.* middle of 7th/13th c.), a follower and interpreter of Ibn al-‘Arabī, describes an ethical hell, in which “all the disapproved words and deeds and all the blameworthy manners are the gates of hell”,⁴⁴ a notion that one also encounters in the writings of al-Ghazālī and Rūmī, among others.⁴⁵ In addition, Nasafī outlines an intellectual, or noetic hell: this comes about when the human faculties of perception and understanding (the outer and inner senses) are, as it were, out of balance. If reason (*‘aql*), one of the inner senses, controls the five outer senses, as well as the two inner senses of imagination (*khayāl*) and phantasy (*wahm*), together they are the eight gates of paradise; if however reason is absent, the remaining seven faculties equal the seven gates of hell.⁴⁶

It should not surprise us that this kind of interiorization and intellectualization of paradise and hell also goes on in Islamic philosophy. Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī’s (d. 672/1274) *al-Mabda’ wa-l-ma’ād*, for example, echoes Nasafī’s scheme closely.⁴⁷ Ṭūsī, in the beginning of his career, was an Isma‘ili; the Isma‘ilis, as is well known, were particularly drawn to Neoplatonic thought. Isma‘ili authors such as Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971) deny the resurrection of bodies;⁴⁸ paradise and hell, for them, is a purely spiritual affair. “Impure” and “dark” souls, in al-Sijistānī’s language, those that are not enlightened by the teaching of the Isma‘ili Imam, suffer the torments of hell already during their earthly lives.⁴⁹ They may also undergo metempsychosis, that is, rebirth in another body or lower material form, a controversial motif in Isma‘ili thought that is explored in Daniel de Smet’s contribution to this volume, a study that provides a useful overview of Isma‘ili speculations about hell and the punishments suffered therein. As de Smet writes, Isma‘ili thinkers such as Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020) believed that the literal (*ẓāhir*) sense of the descriptions of paradise and hell in the Quran and the hadith was “absurd and contrary to reason”, and that one should at all times seek to understand their allegorical (*bāṭin*) meaning.

However, few mystics or philosophers in the Islamic tradition, though often latently critical of the traditional imagery of the afterlife, categorically and outspokenly rejected this imagery. In literary circles, it was on occasion

43 Hujwīrī, *Kashf* (tr. Nicholson) 199.

44 Nasafī, *Insān* 295.

45 See Ghazālī, *Ihyā’* v, 165–6 (tr. Winter 235); Rūmī, *Mathnawī* vii, 68.

46 Nasafī, *Insān* 295–6.

47 Ṭūsī, *Mabda’* 77–8 (§§ 65–6).

48 See, for example, Sijistānī, *Kashf* 120 (§ 7.2.3), 122–4 (§ 7.3).

49 Sijistānī, *Risāla* 45, 48–9.

ridiculed,⁵⁰ but such satire was patently fictional, and functioned within contexts characterized by their relative distance to institutionalized religion. Not only was the mass of details in the Quran and hadith about the material and sensual nature of the afterlife rather difficult to ignore. There was a theological consensus that one should accept the “reality” (*ḥaqq*) of the phenomena in paradise and hell without inquiring into what kind of reality, exactly, these phenomena possessed.⁵¹

In the popular religious literature of the Middle Period and Late Middle Period hell is prominently on display.⁵² Roberto Tottoli’s chapter in this volume provides insights into several of these narratives, albeit in a somewhat unexpected context, that of Spanish Morisco literature. A community under siege in its Christian environment, the Moriscos transmitted several texts about hell. This, as Tottoli shows, is not so much due to a certain Morisco pessimism in the face of their Christian persecutors; it is characteristic, rather, of late-medieval Islamic literature in general. One can also think in this context of the stories about the Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascension (*mi’rāj*), in which, over the course of the centuries, hell (but also paradise) is given more and more space.⁵³ Frederick Colby, in his chapter in this volume, traces a curious development in this body of texts, whereby hell is gradually moved up toward the higher heavenly spheres. Rather than seeing in this the attempt to remove the otherworldly realms from earth, that is, to make them more transcendental, one should probably interpret this phenomenon as the result of a process of literary elaboration of the narrative: the Prophet’s visit to paradise and hell comes at the end of his otherworldly journey because it heightens the dramatic effect and fits more neatly into the chronology of events. In fact, perhaps one should regard the kind of narratives discussed by Tottoli and Colby as skeletal versions that story-tellers performed in public, enriching them with other traditions. It is not difficult to imagine that hell in particular would have offered ample opportunities to do so. In the following two sections of this introduction, I provide an overview of the wide and varied pool of traditions from which story-tellers could draw.

50 An extreme example is Wahrānī, *Manām*.

51 See, for example, Ash’arī, *Maqālāt* 293, and the credal affirmations of the *ḥaqq* of eschatological phenomena in Watt (tr.), *Islamic creeds* 44 (§ 17, al-Ash’arī), 52 (§ 8, al-Ṭahāwī), 60 (§§ 20–21, *Wāṣiyat Abī Hanīfa*), 66 (§ 21, *Fiqh akbar 11*), 71 (§ 12, al-Qayrawānī), 77–8 (§§ 17–21, al-Ghazālī), 82 (§ 17, al-Nasafi), 88 (§ 18, al-Ījī).

52 Tottoli, Jesus and the skull.

53 On hell in Ascension narratives, see Vuckovic, *Heavenly journeys* 113–21; Tottoli, *Tours of Hell*; and the contribution of Frederick Colby to this volume.

3 The Topography of Hell

The common belief was that hell, like paradise, coexists in time with the temporal world. Q 3:131, which states that “hell has been prepared (*u’iddat*) for the unbelievers,” was generally taken to mean that, rather than coming into being at the end of time, hell was “already created.”⁵⁴ The fact that the prophet Muḥammad, during his Ascension, had seen the punishment of Muslim sinners in hell was also taken to be proof for hell’s coexistence.⁵⁵ While, as noted above, some theologians held that only paradise was eternal, while hell would eventually perish (*fanā’ al-nār*), the majority agreed that hell too was eternal unto eternity, that is, *a parte post* (*abad*) (cf. Q 4:169, 5:119, *passim*).⁵⁶

Given the temporal coexistence of hell, there was some speculation as to where in the cosmos hell is located. The “seven earths” mentioned in Q 65:12 were interpreted to be the seven levels (*ṭabaqāt*) of hell.⁵⁷ The Quranic *sijjīn* (“a written record,” Q 83:7–9), was commonly thought to be a rock in the lowest earth⁵⁸ on which the whole universe rests.⁵⁹ If, then, hell was (in) the lower part of the globe, it made sense to picture it as a vast subterranean funnel, spanned by the Bridge (*ṣirāṭ*), which the resurrected pass on their way to paradise,⁶⁰ with a brim (*shafīr*) and concentric circles leading down into a central pit at the bottom (*qa’r*).⁶¹ Eschatologists also debated the location of the entry to this subterranean structure. Some related that the sea is the top level of hell.⁶² Others believed that the sulphurous well in the Wādī Barhūt in Ḥaḍramawt (modern-day Yemen), haunted by the souls of infidels, was the gate to the nether regions.⁶³ Still others located the entry to hell in Gehinnom, the Biblical valley of Hinnom, between the eastern wall of the Jerusalem temple precinct and the Mount of Olives.⁶⁴ Further east, a Persian work of the *mirabilia* genre from the sixth/twelfth century locates the entry to hell in a gorge, appropriately called Wādī Jahannam, in the neighbourhood of Balkh in

54 Ash’arī, *Maqālāt* 475; Pazdawī, *Uṣūl al-dīn* 170.

55 Qurtubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 98.

56 Abrahamov, The creation and duration 96.

57 Yāqūt, *Buldān* i, 20.

58 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iv, 287; Muttaqī, *Kanz* xv, 265.

59 Heinen, *Islamic cosmology* 88, 143.

60 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-riqāq* 52; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-īmān* 299.

61 Qurtubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 108.

62 *Ibid.*, 101, 105; Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 411.

63 Fākihī, *Akhbār Makka* i, 41, 43 (## 1106, 1110); *Qurrat al-‘uyūn* 104; Suyūṭī, *Sharḥ al-ṣudūr* 312–3, 317–8, 330. Cf. Rentz, Barhūt; *TC* iv, 522.

64 Wāṣiṭī, *Faḍā’il* 23. Cf. Monfarrer, A propósito 152.

Afghanistan. The author says of this sinister venue that it “sinks steeply into the ground, and the fearless and ruthless joke that it goes down so deeply that if one throws a stone into the cavity one cannot see it reaching the bottom.”⁶⁵ He also notes that “in this cavity, strange birds have countless nests”, an observation that accords with the notion that the souls of infidels and sinners haunt the gate to hell in the bellies of black birds.⁶⁶ In this account, one also hears echoes of eschatological hadiths which describe the extreme depth of the hell funnel, where a stone thrown from the Bridge falls for seventy years before hitting the ground.⁶⁷ In sum, there is a general trend in the tradition to think of this world and hell as being temporally and spatially coterminous.

Q 15:44 states that hell has seven gates (*abwāb*), which were equated with hell’s seven levels (*tabaqāt*), mirroring the seven levels of paradise. At times, a terminological distinction was made between the levels of paradise, called *darajāt* (stairs upwards), and the levels of hell, called *darakāt* (stairs downwards; cf. Q 4:144).⁶⁸ The name for hell that is most often used in the Quran (some 125 times) is simply “the Fire” (*al-nār*). In the exegetical literature, seven of the other names for hell in the Quran were singled out and correlated with the seven levels of hell. According to the most common model, the descending order of these levels is as follows:⁶⁹ (1) *jahannam* “Gehenna”, a cognate of Hebrew *gehinnom* (Q 2:206, 3:12, passim in 109 places); (2) *al-sā’ir* “the blaze” (Q 4:10, 4:55, passim in fourteen places); (3) *al-ḥuṭama* “the crusher” (?) (Q 104:4–5); (4) *lazā* “blazing fire” (Q 70:15); (5) *saqar* “extreme heat” (?) (Q 54:48, 74:26–7, 74:42); (6) *al-jaḥīm* “the furnace” (Q 2:119, 5:10, passim in twenty-four places); and (7) *hāwiya* “pit, abyss” (Q 101:9). Various similar models exist with a slightly differing order of names. Al-Qurṭubī warns against other, less sound divisions,⁷⁰ possibly referring to models such as that recorded by al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035), in which the seven layers of hell appear to merge with the seven earths of medieval Islamic cosmology and are called *adīm* (surface), *basīṭ* (plain), *thaqīl* (heavy, onerous), *baṭīḥ* (swamp), *mutathāqila* (oppressor), *māsika* (holder), and *tharā* (moist earth).⁷¹ One may also refer to the concept of Ibn al-‘Arabī and other Sufis of hell as a meganthropos, in which the seven

65 Ṭūsī, *Ajāyib* 293–4.

66 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’* xxiv, 71. Cf. *TC* iv, 523.

67 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 108.

68 *Ibid.*, 89; Suyūṭī, *Budūr* i, 69.

69 Cf. O’Shaughnessy, The seven names 444–69.

70 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 90.

71 Tha’labī, *Qiṣaṣ* 6–7.

body parts with which man sins (eyes, ears, tongue, hands, stomach, genitals, and feet) are equated with the seven levels of hell.⁷²

As noted above, hell's uppermost level, called *jahannam*, was seen as a temporary place of punishment reserved for Muslim sinners. In later tradition, one finds the notion that hell has only two levels (*bābān*), an inner one (*al-jawāniyya*), from which nobody ever escapes, and an outer one (*al-barrāniyya*), in which Muslims are kept.⁷³ However, this place of temporary punishment never crystallised into a "third place" between paradise and hell as in the Christian tradition of purgatory. In common parlance, the term *jahannam* continued to be used *pars pro toto*, and it remained a place not outside or above hell, but part of it; it was not to be confounded with *al-a'rāf* (cf. Q 7:46), a residual place or limbo situated between paradise and hell, in which there is neither reward nor punishment.

Hell is so large that one must travel for five hundred years in order to get from one level to the next.⁷⁴ Hell's pitch-black darkness⁷⁵ is only faintly illuminated by the flames of the infernal fire.⁷⁶ Extreme heat predominates, but, according to some traditions, the bottom level of hell is freezing cold (*zamharīr*, cf. Q 76:13).⁷⁷ According to a well-known tradition, the extreme heat in summer and the extreme cold in winter are the two breaths of hell that God grants it as a means to relieve the pressure at work in it, its parts "eating each other."⁷⁸ Mountains, valleys, rivers, and even oceans (filled with fire, blood, and pus) are thought to form the landscape of hell. The Quranic terms *ṣa'ūd* (74:17), *yaḥmūm* (56:43), and *'aqaba* (90:11) were interpreted as names referring to mountains in hell.⁷⁹ Traditions that improvise on multiples of seven are common: hell has seventy thousand valleys, each with seventy thousand ravines, inhabited each by seventy thousand serpents and scorpions.⁸⁰ In hell, there are dry and thorny shrubs, the *ḍarī'* (Q 88:6) and *ghislīn* (Q 69:36). According to Q 37:62–6 and 44:43–6, the tree of *zaqqūm*, commonly identified with the "cursed tree" (*al-shajara al-mal'ūna*) of Q 17:60, grows at the bottom of hell (*fī aṣl al-jaḥīm*), sprouting fruit "like the heads of demons" (*ka-annahu ru'ūs al-shayāṭīn*), which

72 Asín, *La escatología musulmana* 145. See above, n. 42.

73 Muttaqī, *Kanz* xiv, 216.

74 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 93.

75 Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, k. *jahannam* 8; Muttaqī, *Kanz* xiv, 220.

76 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* vi, 139.

77 Cf. Asín, *La escatología musulmana* 152; Tottoli, Case of *zamharīr*.

78 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīh*, k. *bad' al-khalq* 10.

79 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'* xxiv, 155; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 114, 119.

80 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'* v, 157 (tr. Winter 221–2).

the inhabitants are forced to eat as one of their tortures. When the inhabitants of hell eat from it, *zaqqūm* snaps back at them.⁸¹ Commentators debated whether *zaqqūm* is “from this world” (*min al-dunyā*) or whether it is exclusively an otherworldly phenomenon. According to al-Tha’labī, the majority position was that *zaqqūm* is a desert tree known to the Arabs.⁸² All in all, the learned tradition of Islam embraced the notion of a geomorphic hell, as is also attested by the postulation of cities, palaces, houses, wells, and prisons in hell.⁸³

On the one hand, then, hell appears as a rather mundane setting; on the other, the traditionist literature on hell continuously seeks to push the human imagination to its limits. One might say that in this literature the unimaginable is approximated asymptotically. Infinite space, for example, is gauged in terms of distance measured in very large units of travel time. The popular eschatological literature pushes this idea to its extreme, resulting in traditions in which the imagination is “unbound.”⁸⁴ In this volume, Wim Raven provides an impression of just such a popular narrative, an anonymous fantastic cosmology known under the title of *K. al-ʿAzama* (“The Book of Majesty”), which has been ascribed, wrongly it seems, to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā. It is striking how in the *K. al-ʿAzama* the hundreds and thousands of years one encounters in the learned traditionist literature on hell are exponentially increased to multiples of thousands and millions. For example, each tooth of the hell-monster, one learns, “has a length of a billion years, a year being four thousand months; a month being four thousand days; a day being four thousand hours, and one hour lasts as long as seventy of our years.”

4 Hell as a Punitive Institution

The hell-monster Jahannam, which “raises its neck out of the Fire on the Day of Resurrection,”⁸⁵ is just the most prominent among the array of animal punishers in hell. Snakes and scorpions figure prominently,⁸⁶ but the damned also have to do with vermin and “all flying insects, to the exception of bees,”⁸⁷ as in fact all animals that inflict pain on earth, according to one tradition, continue

81 Abū Nuʿaym, *Ḥilya* vi, 11.

82 Tha’labī, *Tafsīr* viii, 146.

83 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 94.

84 Cf. Abu-Deeb, *The imagination unbound*.

85 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* ii, 336; Muttaqī, *Kanz* iv, 17.

86 Tha’labī, *Qiṣaṣ* 6; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 114 and passim.

87 Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 444. Cf. Canova, *Animals* 65.

to do so in the next.⁸⁸ (By a process of punitive transformation [*maskh*], the sinners also turn into animals themselves, a punishment that serves to dehumanise them.)⁸⁹ The staff of hell, however, is formed first and foremost by an army of fearsome punisher-angels. In a strictly monotheistic system like Islam, there is no place for Satan as the lord of hell; a relatively peripheral figure in Islamic eschatology, he is simply counted among the inmates of hell. According to Q 74:30, there are nineteen guardian angels of hell, who guard the gates of hell (Q 39:71) and are charged with punishing its detainees under the supervision of their chief, called Mālik (Q 43:77). In the exegetical literature and in popular eschatology, these guardian angels (*khazana*) are identified with the “repellers” (*zabāniya*) mentioned in Q 96:8, and their number is expanded *ad infinitum*.⁹⁰ The *zabāniya* have repulsive faces, eyes like flashing lightning, teeth white like cows’ horns, lips hanging down to their feet, and rotten-smelling breath, and they dress in black clothes.⁹¹ Evil demons, the followers of Satan, are punished in hell, along with humans (Q 26:95). The punisher-angels in hell, on the other hand, are on God’s side, as agents of His terrifying but ultimately just use of punishment.

Almost every punishment found in the catalogue of medieval Islamic punishments is also found in the imagined realm of hell. Fire is by no means the only source of suffering.⁹² There are executions by decapitation, gibbeting, stoning, throwing down from heights, drowning, and trampling by animals.⁹³ Corporal punishments, in addition to flogging,⁹⁴ appear in all forms, of which a ninth/fifteenth-century Uighur *mi’rāj* manuscript offers vivid depictions.⁹⁵ Sinners are tied up in torturous positions, left hand chained to neck.⁹⁶ They are hung up with ropes, dangling from their feet, calves, Achilles tendons, breasts, hair, and tongues.⁹⁷ Lips are cut with scissors, corners of the mouth slit all the way back to the neck.⁹⁸ Another important punishment incurred by the sinners is shaming. Already in the Quran it is stressed that the inhabitants

88 Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 445.

89 *Qurrat al-‘uyūn* 70; Tha‘labī, *Tafsīr* iv, 57.

90 Samarqandī, *Tafsīr* iii, 494. On the translation of *zabāniya* as “repellers,” see Christian Lange’s contribution to this volume.

91 Ghazālī, *Durra* 17.

92 Pace El-Saleh, *Vie future* 51.

93 Lange, *Justice* 147–8.

94 Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* vi, 10–1; *Daqā’iq al-akhbār* 66.

95 See Séguy, *The miraculous journey*, plates 46–57.

96 *Daqā’iq al-akhbār* 66.

97 Qushayrī, *Mi’rāj* 47.

98 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. al-ta’bīr 48.

of hell will suffer exposure and humiliation (6:124, 25:69, 40:60). The most obvious illustration of this is the fact that sinners in hell are naked,⁹⁹ but the face, as the seat of honour, is singled out for punishment.¹⁰⁰ Faces are beaten (Q 8:50, 47:27) and “blackened” by the heat (Q 23:104; cf. 3:106). Sinners “will be dragged on their faces into the Fire” (Q 54:48). The hadith elaborates with grotesque detail: The *zabānīya* trample the sinners’ tongues.¹⁰¹ Hellfire is so fierce that the upper lip of the sinner “is rolled up until it reaches the middle of his head, and his lower lip will hang down until it beats on his navel.”¹⁰² On the basis of Q 3:180 (“That which they held on to will be tied to their necks on the Day of Resurrection”), hadith traditions conjecture that sinners will be carrying visible signs of their sins into hell with them.¹⁰³ Spurred by the fact that the Quran speaks of the many chains with which the sinners will be bound (40:71–2; 73:12), many exegetes conceived of hell as a place of imprisonment. Al-Ghazālī imagined hell as a house with narrow walls and dark passageways in which the prisoner (*asīr*) dwells forever.¹⁰⁴ Some exegetes were of the opinion that *sijjīn* was the name of a prison in hell.¹⁰⁵ Finally, hell could also be seen as a place of banishment (that is, from paradise), “the worst punishment of the people of hell.”¹⁰⁶

Assigning certain sinners to hell reinforced a parallel moral hierarchy in the lower world. It is therefore not surprising to see the basic social classes and other divisions of medieval Muslim society reflected in the social stratification of hell, which is populated by common people, members of the learned religious elite, and rulers and their representatives. Traditions enumerating the punishments that await them in hell may well have served the lower classes as a kind of moral catechism. Along with their general condemnation of those who engage in wine-drinking, fornication, sodomy, suicide, and so forth, eschatologists also include among the damned those “who speak of worldly matters in the mosque” or sleep during prayer.¹⁰⁷ A tradition allocates seven types of mischievous scholars (*‘ulamā’*) to the seven different levels of hell.¹⁰⁸ Corrupt

99 Qushayrī, *Mi‘rāj* 37; *Daqā’iq al-akhbār* 69.

100 See Lange, “On that day.”

101 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 124.

102 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iii, 88; Tirmidhī, *Jāmi‘*, k. *jahannam* 5.

103 ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zakāt*, *bāb ghulūl al-ṣadaqa* iv, 55; Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-jihād* 189; Muttaqī, *Kanz* v, 222.

104 Ghazālī, *Ihyā’* v, 156 (tr. Winter 220).

105 Rāzī, *Tafsīr* xxxi, 84.

106 Ibn Rajab, *Takhwīf* 143.

107 Qushayrī, *Mi‘rāj* 40, 47; *Daqā’iq al-akhbār* 70.

108 Muttaqī, *Kanz* x, 82.

judges and hypocritical Quran readers are likewise assigned to hell.¹⁰⁹ Other traditions seem, often in oblique ways, to allude to policemen, tax-collectors, and market inspectors, as well as a number of other state officials.¹¹⁰ The ruler himself is not exempted from such threats. Al-Ghazālī cites a report from the Prophet that those rulers who punished their subjects beyond what God commands “will be shown the corners of hell.”¹¹¹ Such traditions suggest that the popular discourse on hell could have the double function of promoting an attitude of quietism and at the same time subverting the social status quo.

There is no shortage in the traditionist literature of patriarchal, at times overtly misogynist statements about women. At its most blunt, this is clothed in the tradition attributed to the Prophet that “most people in hell are women.”¹¹² Descriptions of the punishment of female sinners in hell do not make for pleasant reading.¹¹³ As Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Haddad have noted, these description, however, should not be seen as “the considered conclusion of Muslim theologians ... but rather [as] the attempt to legitimate forms of social control over women.”¹¹⁴ A similar dynamic is at work in hell traditions about non-orthodox Muslim and other minority groups. The apostle Paul (*Bawlus*), according to a Shi‘i tradition, is in hell;¹¹⁵ the atheists (*dahriyya*) and anti-predestinarian Qadarites keep him company there.¹¹⁶ Christiane Gruber’s analysis in this volume of a Safavid hell painting demonstrates how, in her words, “hell played a key role in sectarian politics.” In sum, eschatologists identified and classified sinners in hell in accordance with how they understood and—by reproducing traditions that underpinned them—perpetuated the gender-based, moral, social, political and sectarian hierarchies of medieval Islam.

5 The Islamic Hell and Modernity

The various ways in which modern and postmodern Muslim thinkers of the late nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have reacted to the

109 Ibid., xi, 179.

110 Abū Nu‘aym, *Hilya* iv, 2, 112; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 76–7, 130; Muttaqī, *Kanz* iii, 200, vi, 18.

111 Ghazālī, *Naṣīhat al-mulk* 22.

112 Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 460–61.

113 Cf. Malti-Douglas, *Faces of sin*.

114 Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 163. On this issue, see also the balanced remarks by Rosenthal, *Reflections on love* 251–2.

115 Majlisī, *Bihār* viii, 483.

116 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 92; Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 423; Majlisī, *Bihār* viii, 353.

modern onslaught on traditional eschatology deserves separate, detailed study. Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Haddad are pioneers in this field of inquiry.¹¹⁷ In conclusion to this introduction, I shall limit myself to some general observations, while seeking to highlight aspects of modern Muslim theology that relate to hell in particular.

Muslim modernists, in the words of Smith and Haddad, experience a “kind of embarrassment with the elaborate traditional detail concerning life in the grave and in the abodes of recompense, called into question by modern rationalists.”¹¹⁸ According to Smith and Haddad, “the great majority” of modern Muslim theologians, therefore, silence the issue, or content themselves with reaffirming the traditional position that the reality of the afterlife must not be denied, but that its exact nature remains unfathomable.¹¹⁹ More radical, skeptical reactions can also be found, however, including ironic reversals of traditionalist eschatology such as one encounters in Jamil Šidqī al-Zahāwī’s (Iraq, d. 1936) remarkable poem, *Thawra fī jahīm* (“Revolution in hell”), which is discussed in Richard van Leeuwen’s contribution to this volume. In al-Zahāwī’s visionary tale, which is clothed in the form of a dream of his own death that the poet has after eating a dish seasoned with watercress,¹²⁰ hell is where the philosophers and rationalists are, that is to say all the forward-thinking, revolutionary spirits that traditionalist Islam condemns to eternal damnation: Ibn Sīna, Ibn Rushd, and Ṭūsī, but also Socrates, Epicurus, Voltaire, and Spinoza, to name just a few. Fired up by the passionate address of a young male revolutionary, and with the aid of infernal weaponry developed by a group of empirical scientists, the inhabitants of hell storm heaven and threaten to topple God’s Throne—but then the poet wakes up.¹²¹ Al-Zahāwī’s poem unmistakably gestures back to earlier literary tours of the otherworld, in particular al-Ma’arrī’s (d. 449/1058) *Risālat al-ghufrān* (‘Epistle of Forgiveness’),¹²² but updates it and frames it in modern terms.

117 Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 99–146. For a recent overview, critical of Smith/Haddad, see Ryad, *Eschatology* (forthcoming).

118 Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 100.

119 Ibid.

120 Watercress is the only edible plant that grows in the Muslim hell, viz., in *jahannam*, hell’s uppermost layer where live becomes just about bearable. See Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 480; Majlisī, *Bihār* viii, 479.

121 Zahāwī, *Thawra*.

122 Ma’arrī, *Risāla*. See the new complete translation by van Gelder/Schoeler, *The epistle of forgiveness*.

Others have preferred to continue in the vein of Sufi spiritual and interiorized interpretations of hell.¹²³ An important contributor to this line of thought is the Pakistani reformer Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938). Just as al-Zahāwī updates al-Maʿarrī with modern science, so Iqbal combines the eschatological thought of Ibn al-ʿArabī and Rūmī with the thought of 20th-century Western philosophers such as Henri Bergson (d. 1941). Iqbal sees paradise and hell primarily as metaphors for the inner psychic and intellectual developments of the individual. In Iqbal's take, when the Quran announces that "the fire of God, kindled, ... rises over the hearts [of people]" (Q 104:6–7), this refers to none other than the painful realization of one's failure as a human being. Paradise and hell, in Iqbal's phrase, are "states, not localities."¹²⁴

Muslim theologians seeking a closer alignment with traditional Islamic theology have tended to find Iqbal's proposals insufficiently grounded in the tradition. As Fazlur Rahman criticizes, "the structural elements of [Iqbal's] thought are too contemporary to be an adequate basis for an ongoing Islamic metaphysical endeavor."¹²⁵ Rahman is more sympathetic to Muḥammad ʿAbduh's (Egypt, d. 1905) attempt to "resurrect ... rationalism", such as he finds it in the example of the Muʿtazilites of the early centuries of Islam.¹²⁶ ʿAbduh, in his seminal *Risālat al-tawḥīd* ("Epistle of Unity"), judged that Muslims are not required to believe in the corporeal particulars of the afterlife, even if these are recorded in "clear" (*ẓāhir*) traditions; a general affirmation of the doctrine of life after death, including postmortem rewards and punishment, was enough, in his view, to qualify someone a "true believer" (*muʾmin ḥaqq*).¹²⁷ In ʿAbduh's wake, also Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's "universalist" notion of *fanāʾ al-nār* has found important advocates among Muslim intellectuals and theologians, including the likes of Rashīd Riḍā (Egypt, d. 1935), İzmirlı İsmail Hakkı (Turkey, d. 1946), and Yūsuf al-Qarādāwī (Egypt/Qatar, b. 1926).¹²⁸

In spite of these developments, modern and contemporary eschatologists in the Muslim world often follow the traditional path of collecting hadith, though this endeavor is frequently clothed in modern Arabic and engages, albeit superficially, issues of modernity. The late ʿUmar Sulaymān al-Ashqar (d. 2012) can serve as an example of this trend. A prolific neo-Salafī writer and long-time

123 Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 127–46.

124 Iqbal, *Reconstruction* 98.

125 Rahman, *Islam and modernity* 132.

126 *Ibid.*, 153.

127 ʿAbduh, *Risālat al-tawḥīd* 178.

128 On Riḍā and al-Qarādāwī, see Ryad, *Eschatology* (forthcoming). On Hakkı, see Kaya, *İzmirlı İsmail Hakkı*.

professor of Islamic law at various universities in Kuwait and Jordan, al-Ashqar is the author-compiler of a work in three volumes entitled *al-Yawm al-ākhir* (“Endtime”), the last volume of which deals with paradise and hell. Strikingly, though he looks up to Ibn al-Qayyim as a forefather of Salafism, al-Ashqar rejects the doctrine of *fanā’ al-nār*.¹²⁹ In his discussion of the hadith that “most of the inhabitants of hell are women”, al-Ashqar first quotes a long passage from al-Qurṭubī, in which he rehearses the stock repertoire of arguments why women are less likely to enter paradise: they suffer from a deficiency in intellectual ability (*nuqṣān al-‘uqūl*), are too attached to the ephemeral world of the here-and-now, subject to uncontrollable passions, etc. Al-Ashqar then adds that “in spite of this, many women are good and pious (*ṣālihāt*) ... and a great number of them enter paradise, including those who are superior to many a man in terms of the soundness of their belief and their pious actions.”¹³⁰ Such statements only thinly veil the chauvinism that is typical of neo-Salafism. Contemporary traditionalist works like *al-Yawm al-ākhir*, therefore, do not represent a great advance over the medieval manuals, except perhaps in the sense that they are presented in such a way as to make traditional teachings more easily digestible for a broad audience. At the same time, medieval works like the *Daqā’iq al-akhbār* or the *Tadhkira* of al-Qurṭubī are reissued frequently in Arabic lands and beyond, and are widely on sale in bookshops and street corners all over the Islamic world.

In conclusion, this introduction has put into relief the many aspects that make the investigation of the Islamic hell a worthwhile scholarly endeavor. There is no shortage of monographs written about the history of the afterlife in the West.¹³¹ Also hell has been subject of numerous studies,¹³² not to mention

129 Ashqar, *Yawm* 44–6. On attempts by contemporary Muslim theologians to argue that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim actually affirmed the eternity of hell, see Hoover, *Against Islamic Universalism*.

130 Ashqar, *Yawm* 83–4.

131 See, for instance, the recent studies of Casey, *After lives*; Segal, *Life after death*. Both Casey and Segal include chapters on Islam in their surveys; both, however, rely exclusively on the secondary literature on Islamic eschatology. Casey attests Islamic eschatology an “extraordinary ... capacity to find arresting visual images for scarcely graspable ideas.” See Casey, *After lives* 144. Segal suggests that “Islamic views of the afterlife are just as rich and manifold as in Judaism or Christianity, but ... different in some important ways;” he identifies the study of “the whole tradition” as a desideratum. See Segal, *Life after death* 639.

132 In lieu of the many, reference can be made to Minois, *Histoire de l'enfer*; Turner, *History of hell*.

the spate of biographies of Satan in the Christian tradition.¹³³ As noted at the beginning of this introduction, very few comparable works exist in scholarship on Islam. It is hoped that this volume can be a first step toward filling this lacuna.

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PART 1

Quranic Netherworlds



The *barzakh* and the Intermediate State of the Dead in the Quran

Tommaso Tesei

Eschatological ideas are central to Quranic theology.¹ The expectation that at the end of time God will raise the dead, judge their deeds, and mete out rewards and punishments accordingly is one of the doctrines the Quran most often exhorts its audience to accept. The Quranic discourse is marked by constant admonitions about the Hour (*al-sāʿa*), the proximity of which is highlighted, even though it is not revealed exactly when it will occur. The belief in these final events, which take place in at an unspecified future point in time, raises the question of the interim condition of the dead who are waiting to be resurrected and judged. An answer in the Quran to this theological problem is elusive, as it addresses it on very few occasions. As is often the case, what is not addressed in the Quran is discussed in Muslim exegesis. The exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) developed a complex set of views about this intermediate state, mostly as result of speculation about *barzakh*, a term that in Q 23:100 is used to describe an obstacle standing behind the dead until the day of resurrection.

However, the present study is not mainly concerned with the *mufasssīrūn*'s views about the *barzakh*. It will instead focus on the question of the interim fate of the dead in the Quran in light of late antique theology and imagery about the afterlife. Here, the works of Syriac authors who wrote in the Middle East between the fourth and seventh centuries CE deserve special consideration. Because of their chronological and geographical proximity to both the period and location assumed for the compilation of the Quran these works can be expected to contain elements valuable for a better understanding of

1 This article was written during a period I had the privilege of spending as a guest of Utrecht University (September–October 2012). Many of the ideas developed in the following pages are the results of the many interesting conversations I had with scholars at this friendly and stimulating research environment. Above all, I would like to thank Christian Lange and Simon O'Meara for their comments and useful suggestions; I am also grateful to Gabriel Said Reynolds, Guillaume Dye and Sidney Griffith for their helpful comments on different versions of this article.

the Quran. Indeed, as I will suggest in the following pages, the Quranic views and imagery of the intermediate state appear to be closely related to doctrines, beliefs, and tropes widespread among Syriac Christians during Late Antiquity.

1 The *barzakh* in Light of the Late Antique Imagery about the Afterlife

Q 23:99–100: Till, when death comes to one of them, he says, “My Lord, return me; haply I shall do righteousness in that I forsook”. Nay, it is but a word he speaks; and there; behind them, is a barrier (*barzakh*) until the day that they shall be raised up.²

These verses from *sūrat al-muʾminūn* form the *locus classicus* for the question of the intermediate state in the Quran. The *mufasssirūn* expended considerable energy speculating on the meaning of these two verses. The term *barzakh* mentioned in v. 100 is the crux for the commentators, who explain it either as the space between the worlds of the living and the dead or as the time between death and resurrection.³ The etymology and meaning of the word in the Quran are uncertain.⁴ The Quranic text suggests that *barzakh* means a physical obstacle that confines the dead to an unspecified place until the time of their resurrection. Western scholars have, in consequence, understood the *barzakh* as a barrier that prevents the deceased from returning to the world of the living. The interpretation of *barzakh* as a barrier is strengthened by the two other occurrences of the word, in Q 25:53 and 55:19, where a *barzakh* is said to separate the two cosmic seas of sweet and salt waters. Therefore, it seems that the Quran attributes to the *barzakh* the twofold function of cosmological and eschatological partition.

In vv. 99–100 of *sūrat al-muʾminūn* the Quran makes reference to the *barzakh* in connection with a common *topos* of its eschatological discourse, that of the impossibility of repentance after death. This idea is fully expressed by the motif of the sinner’s denied request to be returned to the world in order to make amends for their sins. The same motif occurs in other Quranic passages (6:27; 7:53; 14:44; 23:107; 32:12–5; 35:36–7; 39:58; 42:44; 63:10), although here the term *barzakh* is never mentioned. Moreover, in most cases God’s refusal to

2 Here and in what follows, the translations of the Quranic passages are those by A.J. Arberry.

3 Western scholarship has produced an extensive literature on the development of the concept of *barzakh* in the Islamic tradition: see Carra de Vaux, *Barzakh*; Eklund, *Life*; Lange, *Barzakh*; Zaki, *Barzakh*.

4 See Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 77.

send the dead back seems to take place once the resurrection and judgment have been carried out and sinners have been condemned to punishment in the fire. Only on one other occasion (63:10) does it seem that the scenario of the denied request occurs before the final events. However, Q 23:99–100 represents the only case where the Quran explicitly relates the motif to the intermediate state, as the words *ilā yawm yub‘athūna*, “until the day that they shall be raised up”, make it clear that the scene occurs between death and resurrection.

The idea that it is impossible to return from the realm of death to remedy the sins committed during one’s lifetime is not limited to the Quranic eschatological discourse. The same concept is expressed in a passage of *4 Ezra* (probably composed in the late first century), according to which the souls of condemned sinners are aware of the impossibility of returning to act righteously (VII:80–2). Similarly, the motif of the denied request of sending someone dead back to the world of the living often occurs in late antique exegeses of the famous parable of the rich man and the poor man found in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 16:19–31).⁵ This parable presents the post-mortem states of the two characters as a reversal of their terrestrial ones: the poor man is carried by the angels to “the bosom of Abraham”, while the rich man is buried and tormented in Hades. The passage that interests the present study occurs at the end of the parable, when the rich man begs Abraham to send the poor man to warn his family, “so that they will not also come into this place of torment” (v. 28). However, Abraham rejects the request by saying that if the rich man’s family does not believe the prophets they will not believe the dead (Lk 16:27–31).

The dynamic described in Luke’s parable appears to be recalled by the Quranic passage discussed here: in the first case, a sinner asks whether someone dead can return to the world to prevent others from acting impiously; in the second case, a sinner asks to be returned so he can act righteously. In both cases the request is denied. It is important to observe that the story of the rich man and the poor man is quoted by almost every late antique Christian author who wrote about the afterlife. One should consider the possibility, therefore, that the Quran, like so many other texts from Late Antiquity, included some elements of the parable in the elaboration of its eschatological discourse. This notion is strengthened by the evidence that the author(s) of the Quran was (were) aware of the parable, as some of its elements are included in vv. 46–50 of *sūrat al-a‘rāf* (7). Indeed, the scene described in Q 7:50, where sinners in hell ask the righteous in paradise to pour water on them, rather closely echoes the unfulfilled request of being refreshed that the rich man addresses to the poor

5 On the eschatology of this parable, see Kreitzer, Luke 16:19–31; Lehtipuu, *Afterlife imagery*; Osei-Bonsu, Intermediate state.

in Lk 16:24–6. Moreover, the veil (*hijāb*) that in Q 7:46 is said to lie between sinners and the righteous parallels the great chasm that in Lk 16:26 separates the rich man from the poor.

As in the case of many Quranic passages that deal with biblical material, verses 99–100 of *sūrat al-mu'minūn* appear to be more closely related to late antique traditions and exegeses about biblical texts than to the Scripture itself. In fact, the connection with Lk 16:27–31 becomes very close when considering a homily that Narsai (d. ca. 502) wrote around the parable. Worthy of particular consideration are the following words that the East Syrian Church Father and poet adds to Abraham's negative answer to send the poor man back to the rich man's family:

A strong barrier (*syāgā*) rises in front of the faces of the dead,
and none among them can break it because of its solidity.
Insurmountable is the wall (*šurā*) which death built up in front of the
faces of the dead,
why do you ask for something whose accomplishment cannot be
allowed?⁶

Narsai's reference to obstacles behind which the dead are confined shows a rather precise correspondence with the Quranic *barzakh*. The parallel is particularly striking because in both cases the allusion to the eschatological barrier is inserted within the narrative of a denied request by someone dead to return to the world of the living. Of course, with this I do not mean that Narsai's homily acts as a direct source for the Quranic passage, but rather that verses 99–100 of *al-mu'minūn* reflect some theological trends and cultural concepts that were widespread in Late Antiquity.

From this perspective, it might be observed that the notion of a barrier preventing the dead from returning to this world is consistent with another common late antique representation of the netherworld, that of it being a place from which it is impossible to escape. This idea was widespread among the Syriac speaking communities of the Middle East; indeed, Syriac authors consistently describe Sheol, the realm of death, as a subterranean place with gates⁷ and walls to ensure the dead are confined.⁸ For instance, in the *Nisibene*

6 Narsai, *Cinq homélies* 55 (Syriac text: right column; French translation: left column).

7 The image of the gates of Sheol has its roots in the biblical descriptions of the realm of death. This occurs in several places in the Hebrew Bible (Isa. 38:10; Ps. 9:14, 107:18; Job 38:17), in post-biblical literature (Eccl. 5:19; Wisdom of Solomon 16:13; Ps. of Solomon 16:2; 3 Mac. 5:51), in the scripts of Qumran (1QH^a xiv:207; 4Q184:10) and in the New Testament (Matt. 16:18).

8 On the theme of Sheol in Syriac literature, see Kollamparampil, *Theme of Sheol*.

hymns (10:12), Ephrem (d. 373) states that the sinners are confined beyond a “wall of water”. In the same way, in a homily by Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), Sheol is defined as “high-walled” (79:353).⁹ The images of the afterlife that Narsai produces in the above verses are modeled on the same pattern, as the rich man is said to be imprisoned in Sheol.¹⁰ Other references to barriers or walls are often found in the numerous texts written as part of the tradition of Christ’s descent to, and subsequent ascension from, the netherworld, according to which Jesus visited the realm of the dead during the period between his crucifixion and resurrection.¹¹ The author of the work known as the *Teaching of Addai the Apostle* (fifth century) asserts that Christ “went down to the house of the dead, broke through the barrier (*syāgā*) which had never been broken through before, and gave life to the dead by being himself killed”.¹² Jacob of Serugh similarly speaks of the “hero”, that is, Jesus, who “has the strength to enter Sheol and to tear down its walls”,¹³ and of “the Slaughtered One who crushed the high fortifications” (*hesnē rāmē*).¹⁴ Finally, Narsai asserts that

he [i.e., Christ] descended according to (his) nature that begets passions and dwelt in Sheol
and brought up with him a catch of men to new life.
He broke (through) the wall which death had built before the dead,
and opened a way for mortality to vitality.¹⁵

The idea of Christ forcing a way through the boundaries of Sheol clearly demonstrates his ability to perform the miracle of resurrection and to escape the realm of death. The breach he opens up in the eschatological barrier also foreshadows the definitive collapse of Sheol, expected to take place on the Day of Judgment. Indeed, Jacob of Serugh asserts that on that day the general

9 Here and in what follows the homilies by Jacob of Serugh are classified according to P. Bedjan’s ordering.

10 Narsai, *Cinq homélies* 50–1.

11 The motif of the breach that Jesus opens up in the eschatological barrier/walls parallels the more common image of Christ’s breaking the bars/gates of Sheol when rising from among the dead. On this tradition, see Brock, *The gates/bars*.

12 *Teaching of Addai* 17.

13 Jacob of Serugh, *Homilies on Elijah* 109 (tr. 198).

14 Jacob of Serugh, *Homilies on the Resurrection* 57 (tr. 56).

15 Narsai, *Metrical homilies* 154–5. It is worth remarking on the proximity between the vocabulary of the Quranic verses and that used by Narsai in the quoted passage from the homily on the parable in Luke—with the difference, of course, that Christ here is credited with the ability to overcome the eschatological barrier.

resurrection will produce the collapse of the walls of Sheol and allow the people imprisoned there to escape (67:311–2; cf. 54:20, 39–40).

The texts quoted above lay out the theological and cultural contexts for Q 23:99–100, and constitute a significant example of the close relationship between the Arabic book and its cultural environment. It might also be observed that the Quran ostensibly conceives of the unspecified place beyond the *barzakh* in roughly the same manner as the Syriac authors envisage Sheol. For example, according to their eschatological doctrine, Sheol is the interim abode where the dead are confined while waiting to be brought back to life,¹⁶ and this belief is echoed in the Quranic sentence that states that “behind them is a barrier *until the day that they shall be raised up*”, which suggests that the place beyond the *barzakh* is where the dead are held captive until the day of resurrection.

A deeper examination of the last words of this sentence, “until the day that they shall be raised up” (*ilā yawm yub’athūna*), further suggests this. This is a fairly common expression within the Quranic corpus, occurring a total of six times (Q 7:14; 7:167; 15:36; 23:100; 37:144; 38:79; cf. Q 30:56). In addition to Q 23:100, the one example that is of particular interest for the present study is found in Jonah’s story in Q 37:143–4, where it is stated that: “Now had he [Jonah] not been of those that glorify God, [144] he would have tarried in its belly *until the day they shall be raised*”. Thus, the Quran confers an eschatological dimension on the belly of the fish in which Jonah is confined and posits an internal parallelism between this belly and the place beyond the *barzakh*. As such, both spaces are conceived of as sites of temporary confinement until the day of the final resurrection.

This reflects a common association of the belly of Jonah’s fish with Sheol in the Syriac literature. For example, on the basis of Matt. 12:40, Syriac authors often described Jonah’s captivity and exit from the belly of the fish as a foreshadowing of Christ’s visit to and rising from Sheol.¹⁷ Within this literary parallel, the belly of the fish comes to be associated with the eschatological place in which the dead are kept as prisoners until their resurrection. The fact that

16 See Daley, *Hope* 72–6, 171–6. A similar idea is also found in the works of some early “Western” Christian authors, such as Tertullian (*De Anima* 55–8), Hippolytus (*Against Plato* 1) and Origen (*De Principiis* 4:3), according to whom the souls of the dead wait to be resurrected in Hades.

17 See for example, Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 11:3; idem, *Hymns on Virginity* 42:12–6; idem, *Homily on our Lord* 2:1; Jacob of Serugh, *Homily on Jonah* (*mēmṛā* 122 in Bedjan’s ordering: *Homiliae selectae* iv, 368–490); Narsai, *Homily on Jonah* (*mēmṛā* 8 in the first volume of Mingana’s edition: *Narsai doctoris Syri homiliae et carmina* i, 134–49).

the Quran operates with this same association confirms that the early community of believers was familiar with theological views about Sheol widespread among Syriac Christians, which are also at play in Q 23:99–100.¹⁸ The Quran never explicitly mentions the realm of death, and instead focuses its attention mostly on the place of final punishment, Gehenna (*jahannam*). Nevertheless, the above examples suggest that the Quranic eschatological discourse shares tropes and literary images used by several Syriac authors to describe the condition of the dead in Sheol.

2 The Quran and the Doctrine of the Sleep/Death of Souls

Muslim exegetes took Q 23:99–100 as evidence for the existence of an intermediate state between death and resurrection. In the Islamic tradition this came to be designated through the term *barzakh*, though in the Quran the latter is more likely to designate an eschatological boundary of sorts that parallels the image of the barrier/walls of Sheol. The scene in Q 23:99–100 presenting a sinner who begs God to be returned so he can act righteously was taken by the *mufassirūn* as implying that the dead beyond the *barzakh* are in a state of consciousness similar to that experienced during life on earth. However, as Reynolds observes, “the language here is strongly homiletic, the point being that humans must not postpone their repentance, and the following section (vv. 101–6) makes it clear that judgment and retribution comes on that Day [of Judgment].”¹⁹ In fact, the Quran hints several times that men will not have any conscious record about the events they undergo between death and resurrection.

Q 10:45 affirms that on the Day of Judgment the dead will feel “as if they had not tarried but an hour of the day”, and similar statements occur in Q 17:52, 30:55, and 46:35. The same *topos* about the impossibility of correctly perceiving the length of “death time” occurs, in a more elaborated way, in other Quranic passages. For example, in the account of the man and his donkey in Q 2:259, God “made him die a hundred years”, and after raising him up He questions

18 It might be observed that the association between the belly of the fish and Sheol is already found in Jonah 2:2, which speaks of “the belly of Sheol”. However, as is known, the interpretation of Sheol as an interim abode of the dead is not found in the Hebrew Bible. The eschatological dimension the Quran attributes to the belly of the fish, marked by the sentence *ilā yawm yub’athūna*, appears to be primarily influenced by Syriac Christian doctrines about Sheol.

19 Reynolds, *Qur’ān* 157.

him: “‘How long hast thou tarried?’ He said, ‘I have tarried a day, or part of a day.’ Said He, ‘Nay; thou hast tarried a hundred years [...]’”. In Q 23:112–4, God asks the sinners in the same way about the length of time they spent in the grave. When they reply “We have tarried a day, or part of a day; ask the numberers!” God mocks their answer by stating that “You have tarried but a little, did you know”. In Q 20:103–4, at the Resurrection sinners discuss the length of the time they spent in the grave and “whisper one to another, ‘You have tarried only ten nights’”. A quite identical situation occurs in Q 18, in the story of the Companions of the Cave (vv. 9–26), whose sleep and awakening clearly functions as a metaphor for death and resurrection.²⁰ As God affirms in Q 18:19: “We raised them up again that they might question one another. One of them said, ‘How long have you tarried?’ They said, ‘We have tarried a day, or part of a day.’ They said, ‘Your Lord knows very well how long you have tarried [...]’” (cf. Q 18:12).

This survey of passages makes it clear that according to Quranic eschatology people will experience nothing during the time which elapses between their death and resurrection. It has been suggested that the Quranic idea that the dead fall completely unconscious until the Day of Judgment is closely connected to the doctrine of the sleep of souls which was widespread among Syriac Christians.²¹ This belief is first attested in the writings of Aphrahat (d. 345) and Ephrem,²² occurs later in those by Jacob of Serugh,²³ Narsai²⁴ and Babai the Great (d. 628), and, at the end of the second/eighth century (in 786–7), was canonized in a synod presided over by the Catholicos Timothy I (d. 823). According to this doctrine, after death and until the resurrection the soul lies in Sheol in a sleep-like state, during which it is deprived of its sense faculties.²⁵ Aphrahat affirms that during this period the dead *lose their memory*; they will recover it only after the resurrection on the Day of Judgment. Furthermore, the dead do not receive any preliminary reward or punishment. Indeed,

20 As Reynolds observes, “[t]he youths are said to be asleep in the cave (Q 18:18), yet the Quran strongly suggests (see e.g. Q 18:11–2, 21) that in fact they are dead. The entire episode points to God seizing souls at the body’s death, then reuniting soul and body on the Day of Judgment, that is, to the resurrection of the body”, *Ibid.*

21 Andrae, *Origines* 165–7; *idem*, *Mohammed* 89–90; O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s thoughts* 69–70.

22 See *ibid.*, 74–5; Gavin, *Sleep* 104–7.

23 See Guinan, *Where are the dead?* 542.

24 See Krüger, *Sommeil* 193–210; Gignoux, *Doctrines eschatologiques* 331–4; Daley, *Hope* 174; Samellas, *Death* 56–7.

25 See Daley, *Hope* 73.

Aphrahat unequivocally states that “as yet no one has received his reward. For the righteous have not inherited the Kingdom, nor have the wicked gone into torment”.²⁶ Ephrem also maintains this view and stresses the fact that reward (or punishment) cannot be experienced before the resurrection because of the soul’s inability to act without the body. In his *Hymns on paradise*, Ephrem reasons that

and the soul cannot * enter there [paradise] alone
for in such state it *is in everything* * deficient—
in sensation and consciousness; * but on the day of Resurrection
the body, with all its senses, * will enter in as well, once it has been made
perfect (8:9).²⁷

Because of the important role he attributes to the body, without which “it [the soul] *lacks true existence*” (8:4),²⁸ Ephrem dismisses the possibility, expressed by Aphrahat, that the soul in Sheol might dream about its future destiny.²⁹ A similar position is held by Narsai, who argues that “if, during bodily sleep, it [the soul] *can do nothing*, how can it now, when it [the body] is plunged in the sleep of death?”³⁰ It is doubtless in accordance with this view that in his homily on Luke’s parable Narsai stresses the metaphorical value of the story, whose literal interpretation would instead suggest the soul’s activity in Sheol.³¹ Similar concepts about the soul’s dormant state are expressed by the East Syrian theologian Babai the Great, who in the *Commentary on Evagrius* states that “after its [the soul’s] separation from the body all its activities are in a kind of sleep”. This is proved, he continues, by the fact that “our Lord and his apostles call the death sleep and slumber” and by “the miracle in the city of Ephesus” (that is, the story of the Seven Sleepers).³² Babai professes the same creed in his *Book of union*, where he affirms:

26 Passage reported *ibid.*

27 Ephrem, *Hymns on paradise* 133–4.

28 *Ibid.*, 133.

29 *Ibid.*, 74.

30 Narsai, *Narsai homilies* ii, 253. Translations can be found in O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s thoughts* 70; Krüger, Sommeil 202.

31 Narsai, *Cinq homélies* 47–51.

32 Babai, *Commentary on Evagrius* 30/31. Cf. Braun, *Mose Bar Kepha* 145; Gavin, *Sleep* 107; Andrae, *Origines* 166–7; *idem*, *Mohammed* 89–90.

Without the body, once being separated from it, [the soul] exists and does not exist. It exists, as it keeps its nature, its vitality and its reason. It does not exist, as it does not perform the properties of its nature: *it does not remember* nor think without its companion [the body], but its state is like [total] stillness and the deep sleep, as it is written [cf. Job 3:13].³³

In sum, the Quranic belief that, in Tor Andrae's words, "the soul sinks into complete unconsciousness after death, so that the Day of Judgment seems to follow immediately after death",³⁴ is likely to have been inspired by much the same theological concepts taught by the Syriac authors. From this perspective, it is extremely significant that in certain passages the Quran presents this unconscious, intermediate state as a sleep-like one. Such is the case, for instance, in the account of the Companions of the Cave, which also offers a perfect example of the communion of cultural views and literary motifs between the Quran and various Syriac authors. As is known, this account is based on the same story of the Sleepers of Ephesus that, in the late sixth/early seventh century, Babai presented as a proof of his eschatological doctrine.³⁵ The association between death and sleep is also implied in Q 36:52, where it is expressed by the complaint of the sinners: "Alas for us! Who roused us out of our sleeping place?" It is worth noting that the word *marqad*, "sleeping place", is related by its root to *ruqūd*, "asleep", which in Q 18:18 designates the Companions: "Thou wouldst have thought them awake, as they lay sleeping" (*wa-taḥsabuhum ayqāḥān wa-hum ruqūdun*). It is significant that the root *r.q.d.*, semantically related to the idea of sleep, occurs only twice in the Quran (in the two cases mentioned above), yet it is always in connection with death and the hereafter. This suggests that the two terms *marqad* and *ruqūd* specifically designate a kind of "eschatological rest".

At the same time, the Quran also compares death to the "common sleep" that people experience on a daily basis. This seems to be the case in the cryptic statement found in Q 39:42 (cf. Q 6:60), "God takes the souls at the time of their death (*ḥīna mawtihā*), and [He takes] that which has not died, in its sleep (*fī manāmiḥā*); He withholds that against which He has decreed death, but sets loose the other until a stated term". This obscure passage appears to indicate that sleep is a death-like state; sleepers resemble the dead since their souls

33 Babai, *Liber de unione* i, 297. See also *ibid.*, i, 275.

34 Andrae, *Mohammed* 89.

35 On the relationship between the Quranic account of the Companions of the Cave and the legend of the Sleepers of Ephesus, see the insightful study by Griffith, 'Companions'. See also Reynolds, *Qur'ān* 167–85.

enter into a state similar to that which they will experience at the moment of death. However, unlike the souls of the dead, which will be raised only on the Day of Resurrection, the ordinary sleeper's soul is sent back when he awakens—that is, of course, until the time of his death. This parallel between death and “common sleep” finds a fairly close correspondence in the poetical language used by Ephrem, who in the *Nisibene hymns* (7:15) affirms that: “The one who lies down to sleep resembles the departed and death resembles a dream, and the resurrection the morning”.³⁶

As is the case in the doctrine taught by the Syriac authors, that expressed in the Quran seems to imply that the soul will be rewarded or punished only after the final Judgment. It is plausible that, like the Syriac theologians, the author(s) of the Quran conceived of the restoration of the body as a fundamental part of experiencing the final sentence, and the emphasis the Quran continually puts on the physical resurrection which will occur on the Day of Judgment seems to point in this direction. In fact, it might be observed that references to the unconsciousness of the dead often occur in passages that profess or aim to demonstrate the reality of the restoration of the body. For instance, the statement in Q 17:52, mentioned above, “you will think you have tarried but a little”, is preceded by three verses in which the Quran argues against those who are skeptical of physical resurrection:

They say, ‘What, when we are bones and broken bits, shall we really be raised up again in a new creation?’ [50] Say: ‘Let you be stones, or iron, [51] or some creation yet more monstrous in your minds!’ Then they will say, ‘Who will bring us back?’ Say: ‘He who originated you the first time.’ [...].

The scene in Q 23:112–4, where God questions the sinners about the length of their death, is similarly followed in v. 115 by the statement: “What, did you think that We created you only for sport, and that you would not be returned to Us?” The same intention to prove the resurrection of the body underlies the story of the man and his donkey in Q 2:259. Here, after questioning the man about the length of time he has been dead and demonstrating his altered perception of time, God tells him: “... We would make thee a sign for the people. And look at the bones; how We shall set them up, and then clothe them with flesh”. In much the same way, in the account of the Companions of the Cave, which more than any other points to the Quran's awareness of the Syriac doctrine of the sleep of souls, the clear aim is to demonstrate God's ability to resurrect the

36 Quoted by Buchan, “*Blessed is He*” 296.

dead: “And even so We made them stumble upon them, that they might know that God’s promise is true, and that the Hour—there is no doubt of it [...]” (Q 18:21).

In these passages the Quran’s eschatological discourse is particularly close to that formulated by Babai, in whose ideas the belief in the soul’s sleep is intimately connected to the strong affirmation of the physical resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment.³⁷ Babai sets his creed in opposition to that of Ḥenana of Adiabene (d. 610), whom he polemically accuses of professing Origenist doctrines and of denying “not only the resurrection of Our Lord’s body, but also the general resurrection of the body of all men”.³⁸ Polemics over this subject did not end with Babai but continued for years after; indeed, when the doctrine of the sleep of souls was canonized at the synod of 786–787, Timothy I labeled different creeds as Origenist.³⁹ In light of these considerations, it is intriguing that the Quran inserts the motif of post-mortem oblivion in passages that specifically contest the deniers of physical resurrection. In fact, it appears that not only does the Quran refer to a concept very similar to that of the sleep of souls taught by the East Syrian theologians, but it also uses it towards roughly the same theological and polemical purposes, namely as an answer to those who deny the reality of physical resurrection. It is also significant that both Babai and the author(s) of the Quran adduce the example of the miraculous sleep of the Youths of Ephesus to corroborate their theological discourses. In fact, Babai’s reference to the miracle of Ephesus does not appear to be fortuitous; as Sidney Griffith observes, “the Syriac version/epitome of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias of Mytilene [composed around 569] mentions as an occasion of the miracle [of the Sleepers of Ephesus], controversies

37 Babai, *Liber de unione* 108–9, 183, 197–8.

38 Ibid., 195. Babai is here challenging the Origenist doctrine that the resurrected body will be spherical and ethereal. In fact, in the course of his polemic, he quotes Rom. 8:11 and thunders: “Behold! He said that the body will live, not a sphere, cursed Origenists and Ḥenanists!” Babai then strongly affirms the identity of the actual and raised body, which will be restored to new creation (ibid., 183). His discussion here closely parallels that found in the *Replies of Barsanuphius and John* (c. 520–540), where Barsanuphius contests the Origenist doctrine of the spherical body and, quoting Ez. 37:3–10, explains that at the moment of resurrection “[bone is gathered] upon bone, joint upon joint, and veins and flesh nerves” (Letter 607, in Barsanuphius, *Letters* 191). It might be observed that the Quran presents a similar understanding of resurrection, apparently conceived as a restoration of the dead body. For example, the statement in Q 2:259 “We shall set them [the bones] up, and then clothe them with flesh” strongly points in this direction.

39 Timothy I, *Epistulae* i, 42–5. See also Constas, *To sleep* 110–1.

over the fate of the human body after death sparked by works of Origen".⁴⁰ Thus, the story fits the strong anti-Origenist tones that characterize Babai's *Commentary on Evagrius*.

What is astonishing is that the Quran refers to the same miracle with much the same theological purpose: to illustrate the post-mortem condition of the dead, marked here as elsewhere by complete oblivion, and to affirm the final resurrection of the body. It is difficult to avoid the impression that in this passage and the others the Quran is not simply referring to a local Arabian context, but rather is participating in a heated theological discussion about the reality of bodily resurrection, which had been challenged by the diffusion of Origenist theories among Middle Eastern Christians in the sixth and seventh centuries. Of course, this view jars with the traditional accounts about the life of Muḥammad, according to which the polemic about the resurrection of the body is addressed to Meccan idolaters and not Christians holding Origenist doctrines.⁴¹ However, recent scholarship has questioned what the religion professed by those people that Muslim tradition portrays as pagan idolaters actually was. Gerald Hawting has convincingly argued that the Quran's invectives against *mushrikūn* are best explained as polemical discourses addressed against "soft" monotheists.⁴² As for the passages examined here, the impression is that the Quranic affirmation of physical resurrection and its polemic against those who deny it strictly follows the "theological lines" of the discussion that at that very same period was taking place amongst Syriac Christians. If not directly addressing Origenist theories, the Quran's invectives seem at least to adopt the same argument used by the Syriac Christians in the framework of the anti-Origenist polemic.⁴³

Similarly, the Quranic motif of the loss of memory suffered by the deceased during the interim state seems to have been inspired by images and concepts very close to those expressed by the Syriac authors. Beliefs similar to that of the sleep of souls are known to have circulated among Arab Christians by the middle of the third century. In his *Dialogue with Heraclides*, Origen (d. 254) reports a theological discussion he held with a bishop charged with heresy

40 Griffith, 'Companions' 132, n. 37.

41 This view is maintained by most Western scholarship. See, for example, Bell, *Origin* 87; Abdel Haleem, *Introduction* 56.

42 Hawting, *Idea*. Further significant evidence has recently been adduced by Crone, Religion. I borrow the expression "soft monotheists" from Donner, *Muhammad* 245.

43 From this perspective, it is worth remarking that sixth century Christian polemicists accuse Origenists of holding to the teachings of the pagans. Cf. Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Sabae* 36.

in the Roman province of Arabia (roughly corresponding to modern Jordan) around 244/248 CE. During the debate, Origen affirms, he heard “that some persons here and in the surrounding regions think that the soul, after its deliverance from this life, *no longer perceives anything* but lies in the tomb in the body” (10:19–20).⁴⁴ A century later, in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Eusebius (d. 339) mentions this debate and avers that Origen fought a heresy “foreign to the truth” that had arisen in “Arabia” and whose proponents pretended “that during the present time *the human soul dies and perishes with the body*, but that at the time of the resurrection they will be renewed together” (VI:37).⁴⁵

Eusebius’ reference to the belief in the mortality of the soul raises the question of which creed the Arab Christians professed. In fact, as it is presented by Origen in his *Dialogue*, the heretical doctrine seems to be very close to the teaching about the sleep of souls that roughly a century later Aphrahat and Ephrem embraced in their works, both of whom professed the post-mortem inactivity of the soul and its final reunion with the body. However, according to Eusebius, the Arab Christians believed *in the death* of the soul, which appears to be a significant difference to the doctrine taught by the Syriac authors, who affirm not the soul’s death but its temporary inactivity. A century after Eusebius, Augustine (d. 430) maintains that the belief in the mortality of the soul is a characteristic of the heretical doctrine of the *Arabici*.⁴⁶ As Refoulé observes,

Origen’s opponents claimed that the soul was deprived of sensitivity after death. Did they consider it as really dead or just as asleep? The two concepts are similar and it is not easy to distinguish between them.⁴⁷

Gavin dismisses the possibility of distinguishing between the two doctrines. According to him “both theories, if indeed there be two, are attempted explanations of the phenomena of death, and the relation of the body and soul to each other”.⁴⁸ However, Refoulé convincingly argues that the doctrine attacked by Origen cannot coincide with that of the soul’s sleep widespread among Syriac

44 Origen, *Dialogue with Heraclides* 65.

45 Eusebius, *Historia* i, 279.

46 Augustine, *De haeresibus* no. 83.

47 Refoulé, *Immortalité* 30.

48 Gavin, *Sleep* 115. Gavin observes that Eusebius’ statement is marked by a strongly polemical tone and does not necessarily give a complete picture of the doctrine he attacks. Nevertheless, it might be observed that Gavin’s discussion is somewhat undermined by the fact that, at the time he was writing, the text of Origen’s *Dialogue with Heraclides* had not yet been recovered and made available to scholars (the text was first edited by Schérier in 1949). See also Constatas, *To sleep* 111–2.

Christians. Despite the similarity of the two creeds, he observes, the sources certify that the Syriac theologians were able to make a distinction between them. He concludes that “la conception critiquée par Origène ne peut être celle des hypnopsychiques [i.e., those who profess the doctrine of the sleep of souls] et ne doit donc pas se différencier fondamentalement de celle visée par Eusèbe”.⁴⁹

Therefore, it seems that the belief professed by the Arab Christians diverged from the one accepted, and later canonized, by the Syriac theologians. While the latter affirmed the soul's post-mortem inactivity, the former conceived of the soul's post-mortem status not as a sleep but as a real death. Although it was continuously opposed, the belief in the soul's mortality must have continued to circulate at least until the end of the second/eighth century CE, when Timothy I rejected it. It is also worth noting that in much the same period the Christian heresiographer John of Damascus (d. 749) classified the Arabs as thnetopsychists [i.e., professing the doctrine of the death of souls] and accused them of believing that the human soul, like that of beasts, is destroyed at death along with the body.⁵⁰ Another possible piece of evidence for the persistence of the belief in the death of the soul occurs in the ninth-century (?) East Syrian *Chronicle of Seert*, according to which, around the year 580, the Fathers assembled to discuss the heresy of “those who say that when the man dies, his soul (*nafsuhu*) dies with him and it rises as the body does”. Moreover, the author reports that “Origen had [already] disputed with them about this point and contested it. However, he produced something [even] more abominable than that, namely his affirmation that the spirit (*rūḥ*) after leaving the body enters another body”.⁵¹

Such continuing polemic over the centuries suggests that belief in the mortality of the soul was fairly widespread among Arab Christians. In fact, this very doctrine may be alluded to in some Quranic passages, as several references to the death of the soul occur in the obscure verse Q 39:42 (see above). Moreover, Q 3:145 affirms that “it is not given to any soul to die (*mā kāna li-nafsin an tamūta*), save by leave of God, at an appointed time”, while in v. 185 of the same surah it is stated that “every soul shall taste of death” (*kullu nafsin dhā'iqatu l-mawti*), an assertion that is repeated twice more in the Quran (21:35; 29:57). Finally, in Q 31:34 it is observed that “no soul knows in what land it shall die” (*wa-mā tadri nafsun bi-ayyi arḍin tamūtu*).

49 Refoulé, *Immortalité* 30.

50 John of Damascus, *De haeresibus* no. 90.

51 *Histoire nestorienne* 99 (tr. 191).

It is difficult to establish whether these references to the mortality of the soul are meant to be taken literally or are just tropes for man's death, seeing that the term *nafs* could be understood as designating either the soul or the individual as a whole.⁵² However, the possibility that these passages refer to the belief in the soul's mortality gains weight when the cultural context of Late Antiquity and the belief that pre-Islamic Arab Christians are accused to have professed are taken into account. This would also be consistent with the presence in the Quran of ideas related to the doctrine of the sleep of souls, as both creeds are based on the same theological assumptions of the post-mortem soul's inactivity and its eventual reunion with the body. However, it must be admitted that this reading is as speculative as it is attractive, given the paucity of evidence enabling us to correctly understand the belief in the death of souls, the diffusion of which among Arab Christians is certified only by sources which are external (and ostensibly hostile) to that religious community. At the same time, despite the lack of documentation to support this view, it would seem plausible that the Quran reflect beliefs and concepts widespread among not only Syriac, but also Arab Christians.

3 The Case of Martyrs

The picture of Quranic eschatology that has emerged so far can be summarized as follows: at death the soul becomes completely unconscious, as in a dreamless sleep; the soul regains consciousness after being reunited with the body on the Day of Judgment; once resurrected, both sinners and the righteous experience the consequences of the acts they committed during their lifetime. As noted above, this eschatology closely parallels the doctrines taught by Syriac theologians and perhaps also certain beliefs widespread among Arab Christians. Unfortunately, the coherence of this picture is broken when other Quranic passages are taken into account. For instance, Q 3:169 affirms: "Count not those who were slain in God's way as dead, but rather living with their Lord (*bal aḥyā'un 'inda rabbihim*), by Him provided". A similar statement is found in Q 2:154: "And say not of those slain in God's way, 'They are dead'; rather they are living (*bal aḥyā'un*), but you are not aware". Thus, while in general the Quran teaches that retribution will come only on the Day of Judgment, these two verses suggest a different fate to be envisaged for "those who are killed in God's way". While elsewhere the Quran ostensibly denies any kind of experience or

52 It might be observed that the Arabic term *nafs* corresponds to the Syriac *napšā*, a word which the Syriac writers use to expound their doctrine of the sleep of souls.

life before the resurrection, these two passages state that martyrs are already “living with their Lord”. How to interpret the fact that despite being opposed to one another both of these views find a place within the same eschatological discourse?

Once again, a possible answer to this question is found in the Quran’s cultural context and in evidence found in Syriac sources. Scholars have noted that in the works of some Syriac authors the same mutually contradictory beliefs co-exist. Indeed, despite their acceptance of the soul’s dormant state, Syriac writers often confirmed the common belief that martyrs receive immediate reward and that they could intercede on behalf of the living, particularly at holy places. For instance, in the *Hymns on paradise* Ephrem affirms that “blessed indeed is that person on whose behalf * they⁵³ have interceded before the Good One” (6:19).⁵⁴ Elsewhere in the *Hymns*, Ephrem repeats this concept: “may all the children of light⁵⁵ * make supplication for me there” (7:25).⁵⁶ Of course, the idea that martyrs can intercede with their prayers suggests their actual activity and thus rather contradicts the doctrine of the soul’s sleep that Ephrem teaches elsewhere. Nevertheless, the poet does not make any attempt to reconcile the two views.

Ephrem’s case is not an exception among the Syriac authors. Jacob of Serugh’s homilies also refer both to beliefs about the sleep of souls and to the ability of martyrs to intercede with God.⁵⁷ Commenting on Jacob, Guinan remarks that “the intercession and the protection of martyrs and saints presents difficulties in light of the clear teaching on the sleep of all until the resurrection”.⁵⁸ In fact, he observes that within the eschatological framework emerging from Jacob’s works the specific case of martyrs appears to be highly confused, for in some passages Jacob “seems to say that the faithful and the persecuted will be glorious with their crowns only in the last day”.⁵⁹ This last sentence suggests that martyrs will enter paradise only after the Last Judgment and that in the meantime their souls will be sleeping in Sheol, as such, they could not intercede before their resurrection.

53 Ephrem is here talking about the just, presumably martyrs, who are already in paradise.

54 Ephrem, *Hymns on paradise* 115.

55 Elsewhere in the seventh hymn (v. 19), Ephrem refers to “the seven sons of the light”. As observed by Brock, this is a reference to the seven Maccabean martyrs of 2 Macc. 7. *Ibid.*, 193.

56 *Ibid.*, 128.

57 See Guinan, *Where are the dead?*

58 *Ibid.*, 548.

59 *Ibid.*

The case of Narsai represents another example worthy of mention. In Homily 25, this East Syrian poet infers that through their prayers martyrs guarantee the safety of others and deliver them from tribulations.⁶⁰ However, once again, this idea is not fully consistent with the eschatological doctrines that Narsai embraces elsewhere in his work. The difficulty of reconciling these two views eventually led to a dispute among scholars about the correct understanding of Narsai's eschatological teaching.⁶¹ A final example to be mentioned is that of Babai, in whose theological system, as was seen above, the soul's post-mortem inactivity occupies a central place. Nevertheless, concerning the martyrdom of the monk George, Babai too refers to the belief in the martyrs' power of intercession:

[M]ay the prayers of this crowned martyr be for all those who continually live in truth and follow in the footsteps of his orthodoxy [...] and [may his prayers] particularly be for this monastic congregation, in which he grew up spiritually and from which he was led to the victory of his marvelous martyrdom.⁶²

That martyrs enjoyed the exceptional privilege of proceeding to immediate post-mortem reward was a fairly widespread idea during Late Antiquity. This view, suggested several times in the New Testament, was given definitive shape by Tertullian⁶³ and maintained by many late antique Christian writers. Because of their privileged position close to God, martyrs were credited with the power to intercede with their prayers on behalf of the living.⁶⁴ This belief was shared also by Syriac Christians, although the idea of the martyrs' post-mortem activity was at odds with the doctrine of the sleep of souls.⁶⁵ However, the Syriac theologians apparently accepted and simultaneously referred to both creeds without trying to harmonize them. As Daley correctly observes in the case of Narsai, "it would be artificial to attempt to reconcile these two convictions: they are simply further evidence of the many elements—philosophical,

60 Narsai, *Homélie sur les martyrs*.

61 See Khouri-Sarkis, Sommeil; Krüger, Sommeil 193–6.

62 Quoted by Reinink in: Babai the Great's Life of George 177.

63 Tertullian, *De anima* 55–8.

64 See Daley, *Hope*; Reynolds, *Qur'ān* 161–7.

65 The difficulty of reconciling the two views must also have been felt during Late Antiquity. Indeed, the sixth century presbyter of Constantinople Eustratios wrote a treatise against "those who say that the souls of the dead are not active", with the aim of demonstrating the post-mortem activity of the souls of the departed saints. See Conostas, *To sleep* 109–11; Daley, *Hope* 200.

biblical, liturgical and folkloric—that together shape ancient eschatology”.⁶⁶ Such a *mélange* of diverse, if not mutually contradictory, views is to be related to the absence of an officially canonized doctrine about the post-mortem fate of the dead during Late Antiquity. More than representing a coherent system, the picture that emerges from the Syriac authors’ teachings about the interim state of the dead seems to reflect the fluidity and theological difficulties of their cultural environment.

Once adopted, this perspective also helps to settle the difficulties that the specific case of martyrs raises within the framework of the Quranic view of the intermediate state. Like the Syriac writers, the Quran does not attempt to reconcile the belief in the privileged fate of martyrs with the idea of the dead’s inactivity that it professes elsewhere. Similar observations have already been made by Tor Andrae, who is particularly keen to stress the communion of views between the Quran and the East Syrian Church, “[qui] faisait une exception pour les martyrs et leur assurait après la mort un autre sort que celui du commun des mortels”.⁶⁷ Andrae directs attention to a proclamation by Mar Ishai (sixth century) that, as he correctly observes, closely recalls that found in Q 3:169 (i.e., martyrs “are living with their Lord”): “People believed that they are dead. But their death killed their sin and they are living in the presence of God”.⁶⁸ According to Andrae, the striking parallel between these two assertions suggests that the author of Q 3:169 (Muḥammad, in his view), “ostensibly uses a common form of the Syriac homiletic vocabulary”.⁶⁹ Reynolds espouses Andrae’s point, adding that Ishai’s view of martyrdom as an act of expiation for sins (“their death killed their sin”), is recalled in turn by the statement in Q 3:157 “if you are slain or die in God’s way, forgiveness and mercy from God are a better thing than that which you amass”.⁷⁰

Previous scholars have convincingly shown the extent to which theological doctrines professed by the Quran and by the Syriac authors about the privileged fate reserved to martyrs overlap.⁷¹ However, one further aspect needs to be added to the discussion. It can be observed that, contrary to the beliefs expressed by Syriac Christians, the Quran lacks any meaningful reference to the martyrs’ ability to intercede with God in favor of the living. The absence of

66 Ibid., 174.

67 Andrae, *Origines* 168.

68 Ibid., Quoted also by Reynolds, *Qurʾān* 166.

69 Andrae, *Origines* 168.

70 Reynolds, *Qurʾān* 166.

71 Refoulé quite convincingly argues that at the time of Origen the belief in the martyrs’ special status was probably also shared by Arab Christians. Refoulé, *Immortalité* 36–7.

this specific element does not seem fortuitous, but rather agrees with another aspect of Quranic theology, namely, its denial of the possibility of intercession (*shafā'a*). This denial occurs in the framework of the Quran's polemic against the association of God with secondary divinities. The *mushrikūn* are often accused of expecting their deities to intercede with God on their behalf. For instance, Q 10:8 states: "They serve, apart from God, what hurts them not neither profits them, and they say, 'These are our intercessors with God' ". As Hawting observes, "the reliance which the *mushrikūn* place on these mediators will in fact lead to their damnation because by relying on them they are failing to be true monotheists".⁷² The Quran opposes this belief by denying the power of intercession with which the secondary divinities are credited (Q 32:4; 40:18), professing instead that no intercession is possible without God's permission (Q 2:225; 10:3; 19:87; 34:23). Sinners will be mocked because of the absence on the Day of Judgment of those whom they expected to intercede on their behalf: "We do not see with you your intercessors, those you asserted to be associates in you" (Q 6:94. Cf. 18:52; 41:47).

In addition to denying the possibility of intercession on the Day of Judgment (that is, without God's permission), it appears that the Quran dismisses intercession in the present life: "Say: 'What think you? That you call upon apart from God—if God desires affliction for me, shall they remove His affliction? Or if He desires mercy for me, shall they withhold His mercy?' " (Q 39:38). The idea expressed in this verse is particularly interesting in the context of the present discussion, because it is manifestly discordant with the hope of benefiting from the martyrs' intercession professed by Syriac Christians. In light of these observations, it is not surprising that, while agreeing with the Syriac theologians in recognizing a privileged eschatological position to "those who were slain in God's way", the Quran distances itself from the belief in their ability to intercede in favor of the living. It seems likely that in so doing the Quran aims to correct what it considers a doctrinal mistake made by Christians, as from its perspective conferring on martyrs an attribute belonging solely to God (Q 39:44) jars with strict monotheism. This case study could be taken as a good example of how the Quran positions itself vis-à-vis the doctrines professed by the other communities of its historical context: the author(s) of the Quran did not simply share the Christians' beliefs about martyrs but also reacted against them, in accordance with their own theological ideas.

72 Hawting, *Idolatry* 477. See also Crone, *Religion* 158–9.

4 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the Quran's conceptions about the interim state of the dead are consistent with beliefs and doctrines largely widespread among the religious communities that formed its cultural environment. Unsurprisingly, the Quran reflects the theological views, the creeds, and the related literary themes, motifs and tropes typical of its late antique context. At the same time, it is important to stress that this material is inserted into a framework that is developing its own particular religious message. The appreciation of the relationship between the Quran and its cultural environment should not lead one to underestimate the originality of a text that possesses a unique character.

For instance, it is worth remarking that the Quran demonstrates but little interest in the moment separating death from the final events, which it only sporadically alludes to. Indeed, this attitude differs significantly from the theological interests developed by Syriac authors, who discuss in detail the condition of the soul in Sheol. The Quran's counter-current tendency on this point reflects the specific character of a work whose major aim is not to establish a doctrinal or systematic theology, but rather to exhort its audience to repent and believe in its message. It is quite evident what the rhetorical interest is that leads the Quran to focus on the description of the post-mortem fate of humanity in heaven and hell, rather than in the intermediate state.⁷³ The rhetorical purpose is also strong in Q 23:99–100, whose point is not to provide a picture of the dead's condition beyond the *barzakh*, but to warn that repentance will not be possible once death has come. In a similar way, the recurring allusions to the motif of post-mortem oblivion are never meant to explain the intermediate state, but rather seem to reflect general concepts about the soul in relation to its final reunion with the body.

Finally, it can be observed that the marginal role the Quran assigns to the pre-resurrection condition of the dead is consistent with its own view of the history of human salvation. Beginning with the fall of Adam and destined to end on the Day of Judgment, this sacred history is the recounting of events in motion, presented as a series of recurring events and repetitive situations within a continuous overlap between present and past, a history that has its *raison d'être* only in the accomplishment of God's promise. The result is the creation of a kind of "eternal now",⁷⁴ where the final reward is not located in a

73 Here I follow an observation made by Gabriel Reynolds during a private conversation (April 16, 2012).

74 The (a-)temporal dimension of the "eternal now" also characterizes the work of Ephrem; on this point see Brock, *The luminous eye* 29–30.

far future, but in the moment that immediately follows the present. The proximity of the reward is stressed by the fact that, as Christian Lange observes, descriptions of paradise in the Quran are generally not marked as referring to future events, but rather seem to imply a synchronous relationship between this world and the next.⁷⁵ This aspect further explains why so little importance is attributed to the moment between death and resurrection, a moment that cannot play any role in the attainment of individual salvation, as repentance is not possible after death.

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75 Lange, *Discovery* 10.

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From Space to Place

The Quranic Infernalization of the Jinn

Simon O'Meara

The aim of this paper is to outline how autochthonous spirits and demons of central Arabia were infernalized by the Quran as a part of the Islamization of the region. The method to achieve this is ostensibly straightforward, namely, compare and contrast the nature of the region's supernatural beings before and after the coming of Islam. However, as is well known, almost all the knowledge concerning the pre-Islamic period comes from Muslim authors;¹ the authenticity and date of so-called "pre-Islamic" Arabic poetry are not beyond doubt;² and even situating the Prophet's career in central Arabia, as Islamic tradition asserts, is nowadays a scholarly decision, not an inevitability.³ In view of these difficulties, this paper proposes to consider only the representation of the autochthonous supernatural entities of central Arabia before and after the advent of Islam, without asking if this representation is a *true* record of any historical reality. In other words, in what follows the question of the historicity of this representation is postponed.

For the most part, the Quran serves as the principal source of this representation, because not only does it describe the allegedly degenerate world into which the Prophet was born, namely, the world of the pre-Islamic period; but it also sets forth a corrected version of that world, namely, the world of the prophetically-led Islamic period. As indicated by its title, the paper's underlying argument is that the Islamization of central Arabia was coterminous with a reconfigured hierarchy of the spiritual entities believed to exist there, the lowest rank of which were the spirits and demons, the jinn, who were put in, or became associated with, hell.⁴

1 A growing body of scholarship is slowly altering this situation, as succinctly discussed in Von Sivers, *Origins* 1–14.

2 For a succinct discussion of the problems concerning the alleged historicity of this poetry, see Reynolds, *Qur'ān* 30–3.

3 See, e.g., Hawting, *Idolatry* passim.

4 Despite the paucity and ambiguity of the evidence with which to make distinctions, it is important to acknowledge at the outset the different classes of jinn that are named in the

In a recent publication, Angelika Neuwirth discerns notions of space as portrayed in pre-Islamic poetry and compares them to the Quran.⁵ She writes:

[In the poetry,] the relation of man to space appears to be tense. The pagan poet or more precisely his persona, the Bedouin hero, has to reconquer space over and over again in order to meet the ideals of *murūwa* and thus fulfill his role as an exemplary member of tribal society.⁶

As an example, she cites the closing verses of al-Shanfarā's *Lāmiyyat al-ʿArab* (duly noting, also, that al-Shanfarā was an outlaw, not a member of society):

How many a desert plain, wind-swept, like the surface of a shield, empty, impenetrable, have I cut through on foot / Joining the near end to the far, then looking out from a summit, crouching sometimes, then standing / [...].⁷

In contrast to this Bedouin requirement to overcome what she terms “embattled space,”⁸ Neuwirth finds that in the Quran the human is “relieved of this burden.” She says:

Moving in an urban space he orients himself to ethical values that are symbolically mirrored in the urban structures themselves. [...] [T]he frequent descriptions of deserted space as a marker of loneliness, of the search for meaning and never ending questions which figure so

literature. For example, in the so-called pre-Islamic poetry, there is frequent mention of the *ghūlāt* (sg. *ghūl*). See, e.g., Ibn Zuhayr, *Bānat* 102, including the extensive note 2, 102–3. In the Quran, there is frequent mention of the *shayāṭīn* (sg. *shayṭān*); and in the Islamic period, frequent mention of both the *ghūlāt* and *shayāṭīn*, along with the *ʿafārīt* (sg. *ʿifrīt*), *saʿālī* (sg. *siʿlāt*), and *murrād* (sg. *mārid*). See Tritton, *Spirits* 715–17. Note, however, Bauer, *ʿIfrit* 486–7, for the absence of exegetical support regarding claims sometimes made by translators of the Quran that the word “ʿifrīt” (Q 27:39) is to be understood as a class of jinn. On the ultimately unclear, mostly fine distinction between the jinn and *shayāṭīn* in the Quran, see, inter alia, Fahd, *Génies* 176–7, and Chabbi, *Seigneur* 534 n. 289, but note the slightly greater distinction made in Welch, *Allah* 744–5, and Waardenburg, *Islam* 36–9.

5 Neuwirth, *Geography* 293–313.

6 *Ibid.*, 301.

7 Shānfara, *Lāmiyyat al-ʿArab*, as cited in translation in Sells, *Desert* 30–1.

8 Neuwirth, *Geography* 301. Also: “Space [...] is often presented as the site of a battlefield, a scene of human strife for self-assertion against threatening nature.” *Ibid.*, 302.

prominently in pagan poetry, also resound in the many allusions to deserted space in the Qur'ān. But in the Qur'ān [...] all the questions are answered. The desolate places are historical sites, evoked through the reports of events [...] assuring the listeners of a divinely endorsed order [...].⁹

As Neuwirth reads the Quran, the Quranically recoded space of the Hijaz is inherently meaningful space.

For the reason given earlier regarding the difficulties intrinsic to accepting pre-Islamic poetry as authentic, Neuwirth's conclusions regarding pre-Islamic versus Quranic space are problematic. When, however, the question of historicity is once again bracketed, or postponed, they point to a phenomenon that is borne out in at least one other area of Quranic representation. That area concerns the jinn and their subtle, spatial translation from moral or at least amoral, predominantly aerial beings to commonly immoral, predominantly chthonic, infernalized associates of Satan.

1 The Quranic Translation of the Jinn

Regarding the aerial nature of the jinn, on the basis of two Quranic assertions, this defining characteristic would seem certain. The first of these assertions is that the jinn are capable of ascending the skies at will to reach heaven's boundaries (Q 15:18; 37:10; 72:8–9).¹⁰ The second assertion is that the jinn are composed of a type of fire (Q 15:27; 55:15), a composition that should be taken to mean “the burning air of the solar day,” as Jacqueline Chabbi has recently argued.¹¹ The details of Chabbi's argument are too many to summarize here, but they are founded upon her initial distinction between nocturnal and diurnal fire.¹² In tribal Arabian society, she explains, the light and heat of the former were valued positively;¹³ whereas the light and, above all, the heat of diurnal fire, principally the sun, were valued negatively. From the burning, sunlit air, desert mirages would arise, for example, and they were to be trusted no more than the jinn, another category of shape-shifting entities that could

9 Ibid., 306–7.

10 See also Q 67:5, where it is said the *shayāṭīn* make this ascension.

11 Chabbi, Jinn 48. This encyclopaedia entry includes summarized parts of a chapter on the jinn in idem, *Seigneur* 185–211. See immediately below for more information.

12 Ibid., 189–94.

13 Cf. Fahd, *Feu* 43–61, a summary of which is found in idem, *Nār* 957–60.

swiftly appear and disappear.¹⁴ For Chabbi, any explanation of the Quranic assertion that the jinn are made of a type of fire, which is not mindful of this distinction between positively and negatively valued fire in tribal Arabia, risks resulting in mistranslation.

Notwithstanding the apparent incontrovertibility of the two foregoing Quranic assertions, in two verses concerning the biblical story in Exodus 4:3, where Moses throws down his rod and sees it writhe before him as a snake, the Quran says the rod writhes “as if a jinni (*ka-annah jānn*)” (Q 27:10; 28:31).¹⁵ In two additional verses recounting the same event, the Quran makes no mention of a jinni, but says the thrown rod “is a snake (*hīya thu‘bān*)” (Q 26:32; 7:107). In these four verses, the identity of jinni and snake have been conflated. Because the snake is considered to be an especially chthonic being in many cultures and religions,¹⁶ the conclusion follows that although the predominant, clearly stated view of the Quran regarding the jinn is that they are aerial beings, alongside this view is an implication that the jinn are in fact chthonic creatures or have chthonic associations.

It is perhaps not without consequence that in Nöldeke’s chronology of the Quran, three of these same four “chthonic” verses (Q 7:107; 27:10; 28:31) were revealed later than the aforementioned five “aerial” verses (Q 15:18; 15:27; 37:10; 55:15; 72:8).¹⁷ This fact might lead one to the conclusion that there was a moment during the period of Quranic revelation when the jinn transitioned from aerial to chthonic beings. According to the same chronology, however, the fourth of these four chthonic verses (Q 26:32) was revealed third out of the nine aerial and chthonic verses, rendering such a conclusion of questionable value.

The secondary literature on pre-Islamic demonology reflects this Quranic ambiguity regarding the nature of the jinn. Giorgio Levi Della Vida, for

14 Ibid., 189–90, 192.

15 With the notable exception of Rudi Paret and Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, most translators tend to say “as if a snake,” because *jānn* can also mean a snake, as per the Prophetic hadith: “There are various species of snakes: *jānn*, *afā’ī*, and *asāwid*.” See al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* vi, 21 (k. tafsīr al-Qur’ān [s. al-Qaṣaṣ], ch. 1, no. 4772). This dual meaning is almost certainly because in early and medieval Islam a snake was thought to be the jinn’s most common visible form. On this, see below, and Canova, *Serpenti* 199–201. See Chabbi, *Seigneur* 194–6, for further discussion of the two Quranic verses and their translation.

16 Lurker, *Snakes* 8456–60. For the role of snakes in early and medieval Islam in specific, see Canova, *Serpenti* 191–207, and idem, *Serpenti* (2) 219–244; and most recently, Schubert, *Dämon* 15–34.

17 Nöldeke/Schwally, *Geschichte* i, 74–164.

example, says that the jinn are aerial beings,¹⁸ whereas William F. Albright implies that they are subterranean.¹⁹ As with the Quran, the latter view is the minority view;²⁰ nevertheless, because it apparently contradicts the claim of the present paper that the advent of Islam resulted in the jinn becoming creatures of the underground, it must be examined further.

In 1940 William Albright published his article, "Islam and the religions of the ancient Orient." Included in this text is the author's proposed history and etymology of the word "jinn," in which he implies that the pre-Islamic jinn are subterranean beings. According to Albright, the word derives from a modified Aramaic word, "genyā," demon, which was introduced into Arabic most probably in the late pre-Islamic period.²¹ He claims that, upon the word's introduction into Arabic,

[the] occult figures of depotentized pagan deities with which the imagination of the Christian Aramaeans peopled the underworld, the darkness of night, ruined temples and sacred fountains, were organized by Arab imagination into the jinn of the Arabian Nights [...].²²

Much in this theory has proved contentious, as will be discussed immediately below, but it is relevant to note here that Albright's assertion that the Aramaic

18 Giorgio Levi Della Vida, private correspondence to Joseph Henninger, dated 16/01/1964, as cited in Henninger, *Belief* 46 n. 239.

19 Albright, *Islam* 293.

20 In addition to Albright, who propounds it, and Henninger, who mostly supports it (see below), Gonzague Rykmans avers a chthonic nature for the pre-Islamic jinn, but on no apparent evidence. See Ryckmans, *Religions* 11. Joseph Chelhod also argues for a chthonic nature, but does so almost exclusively on the basis of a coherent, dualistic theory of what constitutes the supernatural (*forces occultes*) for the pre- and early Islamic Arabs of the Hijaz; not on the incoherent evidence pertaining or purporting to pertain to the pre-Islamic period. This theory impels him to categorize the jinn as chthonic and the angels as celestial. See Chelhod, *Structures* 72–81. Wellhausen seems to hold both views, but it is not clear if he is referring to pre-Islamic jinn when he asserts the jinn's chthonic nature; this information is important to know, because as will be shown below, the chthonic nature of the Islamic period jinn is well attested. See Wellhausen, *Reste* 151. Jacqueline Chabbi is minded to ignore the chthonic nature suggested by the Quranic verses on Moses's rod writhing "as if a jinn." See Chabbi, *Seigneur* 196.

21 "[T]he word is neither Arabic nor Ethiopic, but a slight modification of Aramaic *genē*, 'hidden,' plural *genēn*, 'hidden things,' and emphatic plural *genayyā*, which appears as the name of a class of deities in inscriptions from the third century AD at Dura and in the Jebel esh-Shā'r, northwest of Palmyra." See Albright, *Islam* 292.

22 *Ibid.*, 293.

Christian jinn were chthonic in nature is corroborated by *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*. Attributed to the East Syrian mystic, Stephen Bar-Sudhaile (of Edessa, fl. c. 500), this text recounts the journey of the Christian mind through the regions of the world in its attempt to ascend to the Godhead. Below the earth, in the world's nether regions, live the demons.²³

Returning to Albright's theory in specific, although it is scarcely credible that the tribes of central Arabia had no concept of, and/or word for, spirits and demons prior to the introduction of this allegedly Aramaic term in the early centuries of Christianity, for Joseph Henninger the theory is "undoubtedly correct in its core assumptions."²⁴ This support is significant, as Henninger has reasonable claim to being one of the more informed specialists in "jinn studies," if only because he is one of the more recent, benefitting thus from the many studies preceding him.

However, as mentioned already, excepting Henninger, there is noteworthy scepticism towards the theory. Giorgio Levi Della Vida, for example, flatly denies there is a link between the Aramaic and the Arabic words, and additionally asserts that they refer to two different types of spirit: the first to chthonic ones, the second to aerial ones.²⁵ Fritz Meier thinks little better of it, troubled, for example, by the provenance of the second "n" in the modified Aramaic word's alleged translation into Arabic.²⁶ More cautious in his criticism, Jean Starcky effectively dismisses the proposed etymology,²⁷ but not the

23 Bar-Sudhaile, *Book* esp. 70–3, 96–102. Cf. Luke 8:31; Daley, *Early Church* 175; Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius* 125, 154, 160. In the interest of full disclosure, it must also be noted that Bar-Sudhaile attests to the existence of aerial demons, too. However, in comparison to the subterranean demons, these demons are both less severe and considerably less destructive with respect to the mind, and the author devotes little attention to them. Bar-Sudhaile, *Book* 31–3. With thanks to Tommaso Tesei for bringing this and the other sources and studies to my attention.

24 Henninger, *Belief* 51. See also, *idem*, Pre-Islamic 9 and 19 n. 63.

25 As cited from the aforementioned private letter to Henninger, in *ibid.*, 46 n. 239. This refutation is also found in summary form in Levi Della Vida, *Arabia* 54.

26 Meier, *Arabischer* 191–2. Although Meier finds much of merit in Wensinck's classic etymological study of the word "jinn" (Wensinck, *Etymology* 506–14), he acknowledges that the matter remains uncertain. *Ibid.*, 198. With thanks to Bernd Radtke for proffering a copy of Meier's article.

27 "Nous partageons donc l'opinion de ceux qui considèrent le mot palmyrénien GNY' comme un emprunt à l'arabe." Seyrig and Starcky, *Gennéas* 255. This is said without reference to Albright's proposed etymology.

history, which he finds worthy of consideration;²⁸ an approach later reiterated by Jacques Waardenburg.²⁹

Another look at the Quran's representation of the jinn offers a way of moving beyond this scholarly impasse, at least with regard to the proposed history of the word. If the Quran could be shown to be referring to chthonic beings in its use of "jinn," that would facilitate two outcomes. First, it would add weight to Albright's account of the jinn's non-Arab origins, whether these origins be total, as per his theory, or partial, as seems more plausible. This is because, if the jinn really were once depotentized pagan deities, as Albright asserts, one would expect them to have the same nature as those deities, and so be chthonic, too. Second, it would suggest the existence in the pre-Islamic period of the location in which a number of Quranic concepts of hell were to find a home, namely, the underworld. For although it is not possible to assert definitively that the Quranic hell is below ground, so ambiguous is the Quranic evidence, there are a number of verses that indicate the Quran considers it to be there. For example, hell is likened to a pit (*ukhdūd*, Q 85:4) and a structure bordered with a brink (*shafā*, Q 9:109); it has a lowest level (*al-dark al-asfal*, Q 4:145), and covers its occupants like the lid of a saucepan (*muṣada*, Q 104:8); on Judgment Day, all will be made to kneel around it and look into the abyss, with only the god-fearing being rescued (Q 19:68–72).³⁰ Lastly, because the Quran implies that the sun derives its heat from the underworld, nightly traversing this subterranean continent from west to east to stoke its fire (Q 18:86), the inference is that hell is there, too.³¹ Such an inference would be in keeping with a growing academic trend that views the Quran not just as Muslim scripture, but as a document of late antiquity.³² As is well known, the

28 Referring (in the footnotes only) to Albright's article, Starcky asks rhetorically: "Une question historique se pose: les djinns ne seraient-ils pas des divinités adoptées tardivement par les Arabes?" To this question, he gives an ambiguous response: "Certes, ils ne sont pas attestés avant Mahomet, mais on a pourtant quelques indices positifs de leur caractère autochtone." *Ibid.*, 255.

29 Waardenburg, *Islam* 31.

30 The interpretation of all these verses, it should be added, remains open to debate. With thanks to Christian Lange for sharing a work-in-progress in which he considers anew the cosmological and structural coordinates of hell; the present discussion has benefitted from this work.

31 See the analysis of this verse in Toelle, *Coran* 97–100, a brief summary of which is found in *idem*, *Fire* 212. As Toelle writes in this summary: "As far as the qur'ānic sun (*shams*) is concerned, it clearly appears to be nothing other than hell-fire."

32 See, for example, Neuwirth, *Koran* passim.

underworld played a significant role in late antiquity, and the Quran appears to reflect that.³³

Proceeding solely on the foregoing Quranic evidence concerning the subterranean location of hell, and not referring to the two jinn-specific verses regarding the rod of Moses discussed earlier, syllogistically it is straightforward to show that the Quran considers the jinn to be chthonic beings (in addition to preserving traces of an aerial understanding of their nature). For not only does the Quran state that the jinn are made from a type of fire (*mārij min al-nār*) (Q 55:15), fire being the predominant Quranic term for hell (*al-nār*); but in another verse, it specifies that the fire of which they are made is from the *samūm* (Q 15:27), the scorching wind of hell.³⁴ Neither of these two associational, or connotative readings contradicts the literal, or denotative, aerial-related reading of the same verses mentioned earlier. This is because the denotative reading pertains to the creation of the jinn in the pre-Islamic period, before the institution of hell as a Quranic concept; whereas the two connotative readings occur after the institution of hell as a Quranic concept, when words that were chemical (*nār*) or meteorological (*samūm*)³⁵ in significance in the pre-Islamic period have become overlaid with infernal associations. The syllogism is therefore: the jinn are composed of elements barely dissociable from hell; hell is underground; the jinn are chthonic beings.

Although no theory concerning the pre-Islamic jinn can be proved conclusively, the fact that the Quran at times considers the jinn to be chthonic adds weight to Albright's theory of their non-Arabian origins. As mentioned earlier, for this theory to be more plausible, it would be better were it restricted in scope so that it referred to just a part of the jinn's *otherwise* autochthonous conceptual and lexical origins. As Henninger also notes, it is quite possible to imagine this original Arabic word having been "infiltrated" by non-Arabian elements at the conceptual level.³⁶ Interestingly, with sole regard to Albright's much contested etymology, the existence of a jinn-like class of beings in the Quran, the *zabāniya* (Q 96:18), adds weight there, too. This is because this lexically uncertain word is possibly a remnant of the Arabic nomenclature

33 On the underworld in late antiquity, see, inter alia, Kaufmann, Virgil 150–60, including the literature review *ibid.*, 150 n. 1.

34 On the *samūm* of hell in the Quran, see also Q 52:27 and Q 56:42; on the *samūm* as a scorching desert wind, see immediately below. On the non-religious uses and connotations of fire (*nār*) in the pre- and early Islamic periods, see Fahd, Feu 43–61.

35 Wensinck, Samūm 1056.

36 "Even if the Arabic etymology were certain, it would still be possible for non-Arabian elements to have infiltrated the contents of the idea." Henninger, Belief 46–7 n. 239.

of the indigenous Arabian spirits and demons before they were collectively called jinn.³⁷

The fact that the Quran considers the jinn variously chthonic and aerial does not invalidate the claim made at the start of this paper that the jinn undergo a spatial transformation with the advent of Islam. Rather, it highlights what was said earlier, namely, the Quran references a variety of notions prevalent in late antiquity, often leaving contradictory ones unreconciled.³⁸ Even so, what is required to validate the paper's claim, is to show the chthonic nature of the Islamic period jinn, because then a contrast can be obtained, the Quran's ambiguity notwithstanding.

At first glance, the evidence for the Islamic period looks equally ambiguous. For example, a tradition attributed to Mujāhid (d. ca. 102/720) says: "The abode of the jinn is the air, the seas, and the depths of the earth (*maskan al-jinn al-hawā' wa al-biḥār wa a'māq al-arḍ*)."³⁹ However, Mujāhid is also alleged to have reported the following:

When God created the father of jinn, He said to him: "Make a wish!" [The jinni] replied: "I wish that we neither see nor are seen, that we belong beneath the ground, and that our elderly revert to youth (*lā narā wa-lā nurā wa-annā nadkhula taḥt al-tharā wa-anna shaykhanā ya'ūda fatan*)."⁴⁰

Judging by the number of early Islamic traditions relating encounters with jinn in the guise of snakes, this wish for ophidian attributes, including ecdysis, was granted,⁴¹ the word for a type of jinn, *shayṭān*, even becoming a term for a

37 See the chapter by Christian Lange in the present volume for a discussion of the *zabāniya*, 75–84. Lange's discussion is entirely unrelated to the possibility mooted here.

38 E.g. Quranic cosmology, which is at once Aristotelian-Ptolemaic and ancient Semitic. Neuwirth, *Cosmology* 445; see also Tesei, *Cosmological* 22.

39 Cited in al-Maqdisī, *Bad'* ii, 71 (Arabic), 62 (French). This ambiguity is amply replicated in that great treasure trove of jinn lore, *The Arabian Nights*, as conveniently illustrated in Lebling, *Legends* 218–26, and still more concisely in Marzolph and van Leeuwen, *Arabian* ii, 535–6.

40 *Ibid.*, ii, 71–2, 62. *Mā taḥt al-tharā* is a Quranic phrase meaning "beneath the ground" (Q 20:6); it is quite possibly referenced in this tradition.

41 See, for example, the stories collected in al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt* i, 173–4. Almost all of these stories are summarized in Fahd, *Génies* 194–5. See also the stories referred to in Smith, *Lectures* 128–9. For a brief, comparative analysis of the snake-like jinn, see El-Zein, *Islam* 95–100.

snake.⁴² The jinn's sobriquet during the Islamic period, namely, *ahl al-arḍ*, people of the earth, is presumably premised upon this identification with snakes, either fully or in part.⁴³

In conclusion, then, to this comparison between the pre-Islamic and Islamic period jinn regarding their aerial or chthonic nature, although contradictory evidence is found for both periods, the predominant trend is that with the advent of Islam the jinn go underground. Henninger's thoroughgoing review of the state of academic knowledge concerning both periods serves to confirm this, for he says of the Islamic period:

Among the sedentary population in Palestine and Syria the habitat of the jinn is thought to be the earth, the underworld. They are frequently described in analogous (comprehensive) terms, e.g. *ahl al-arḍ*, "people of the earth", etc. This is the reason why they are found mainly where there is a connection with the underworld. These are, above all, springs, wells, cisterns and indeed all places linked to underground water. [...] Cracks in the ground caused by great heat, and even a scratch in the ground made with a plough, can be sufficient opening to allow the spirits access to the surface of the earth.⁴⁴

2 The Quranic Moralization of the Jinn

If the foregoing has succeeded in demonstrating the spatial transformation of the jinn with the advent of Islam, as well as indicating the existence of a

42 Zbinden, *Djinn* 88, including n. 3 for the names of other scholars who have asserted the same, to which list could be added, Chelhod, *Structures* 74. On the ultimately unclear, mostly fine distinction between the terms *jinn* and *shayṭān*, see above, n. 3.

43 According to Smith, the earliest reference to this sobriquet is in Ibn Hishām's biography of the Prophet. See Smith, *Religion* 198 n. 2. However, although the reference there is admittedly ambiguous, it almost certainly means "human beings," which is how it is used elsewhere in this biography. See Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* ii, 31. (An approximate translation of this passage is available in Ibn Hishām, *Life* 179, where no mention is made of the jinn.) For other references to *ahl al-arḍ* in this text, all of them meaning "human beings," see Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* i, 166, tr. 90; and i, 167, tr. 91. Correct references to the jinn as *ahl al-arḍ* are common in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western travelogues and studies. See, inter alia, Doughty, *Travels* 159 n. 1; Canaan, *Dämonenglaube* 22.

44 Henninger, *Belief* 12–14. Referring to a Quranically resonant image for the jinn's subterranean habitat, Doughty writes: "They inhabit seven stages, which (as the seven heavens above) is the building of the under-world." Doughty *Travels* i, 259. See also, Westermarck, *Ritual* i, 371–3.

pre-Islamic subterranean locale in which certain Quranic ideas concerning hell could find a home, nothing yet in this paper has demonstrated the Quranic moralization of the jinn. The following analysis aims to correct that.

With regard to the pre-Islamic jinn, in the Quran the jinn are represented as, *inter alia*, beings that humans take as their protectors (sg. *walī*, Q 7:30) and even worship (*ya'budūn*, Q 34:41).⁴⁵ This indicates that the jinn were not construed negatively, as immoral, in the pre-Islamic value system, an indication that is confirmed in the secondary literature. Henninger, for example, writes:

[Pre-Islamic jinn] are not “evil” spirits in the moralistic sense, [...] but are morally neutral. They are helpful or harmful according to whim, depending on whether they are friendly or hostile to a person [...].⁴⁶

With the commencement of the Quranic revelations and the introduction of teleological time, including the eschatological concepts connected to it, the jinn become associated with hell and are accordingly evaluated as immoral.⁴⁷ The evidence for this is threefold.⁴⁸ First, in view of the two Quranic verses cited earlier regarding the fiery make-up of the jinn (Q 15:27, 55:15), one can say that, as represented in the Quran, the jinn have a hellish composition, something they cannot be said to have had prior to the institution of hell as a Quranic concept. Second, even though not all the jinn are destined for damnation, as evidenced by four verses (Q 46:19; 72:11, 14; 55:46),⁴⁹ many are so

45 On the Quranic usage of *walī* and the related *walā'*, see Chabbi, *Seigneur* 533–4 n. 288. On the “worship” of the jinn, see: Tritton, *Spirits* 726, where he asks whether this term should be understood as monotheistic propaganda and not taken literally; Henninger, *Belief* 36–9, where he carefully reviews the literature on this question; and most recently, Crone, *Religion* 175–7.

46 Henninger, *Belief* 35. Cf. Nöldeke, *Arabs* 669; and especially Seyrig and Starcky, *Gennéas* 256, where the authors make a similar appraisal: “Au VII^e siècle, il ne semble pas que les Arabes aient considéré les djinns comme des esprits malfaisants. C'étaient encore des dieux proprement dits, quoique leur rôle bienfaisant ne soit guère marqué.” Additional positive functions of the pre-Islamic jinn are described in Fahd, *Divination* 68–76, 91–117.

47 Cf. “At the beginning of Muhammad's career, the *jinn* were held to be Allāh's creatures, accepting or rejecting the prophet's message. But when Muhammad's legitimacy is at stake and he is reproached with being inspired by a *jinnī*, the *jinn* are demonized and their works are practically identified with those of the *shayāṭīn*.” See Waardenburg, *Islam* 41.

48 Reference to Nöldeke's chronology of the Quranic suras offers no additional evidence, for as before (p. 59) it proves inconclusive. See Nöldeke/Schwally, *Geschichte* i, 74–164.

49 To accept this particular verse as proof that not all the jinn are destined for hell, the reader must also accept that the entire sura from which it comes, *al-Raḥmān* (Q 55), is addressed to both humans and jinn.

destined, as evidenced by the greater number of verses stating or implying this (Q 6:128; 7:38, 179; 11:119; 26:94–5; 32:13; 55:39; 72:15). Third, the jinn's relationship with Iblis, the Devil, renders them immoral by association.

As with the nature of the jinn, the location of hell, and so many other matters, the Quran is ambiguous on the nature of the Iblis, in one verse stating that he is “from among the jinn” (Q 18:50) and in another implying that he is an angel (Q 20:116). Muslim exegetes have argued to and fro regarding which of these two natures is intended by the Quran.⁵⁰ Although not an exegete, Andrew Rippin has recently discussed this exegetical argument in his entry on the Devil for the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, and inadvertently or otherwise he appears to side with the first position, saying: “The Qurʾān *clearly* indicates, however, that Iblis was one *of* the jinn.”⁵¹ On that view, as just stated, the jinn are immoral by association.⁵²

This negative evaluation of the jinn continues with the Quranic verses recounting their thwarted attempts to steal from, or deceive (*astaraqa*) heaven (Q 15:18). In keeping with Neuwirth's discernment of a Quranically recoded spatial order as discussed at the start of this paper, in these verses the jinn are represented as no longer able to occupy the superior position that was theirs before. No more can they sit unobstructed at the borders of heaven, eavesdropping on the secrets of the “high assembly” (Q 37:8), but are violently sent back to earth (e.g. Q 72:9); one of the reasons for this being the need to defend the Quran as a divine, not demonic revelation (Q 26:210).⁵³

The foregoing treatment of the Quranic placement of the jinn in the subterranean hell, or, at the very least, the Quranic association of the jinn with hell, is not without conceivable repercussions for how the Quran and Hadith represent hell. For it is possible to see portrayed in a few Quranic verses and hadiths a jinn-hell hybrid, a monstrous hell: living, breathing, and barely restrained by its handlers, its “keepers” (*khazanatuhā*).⁵⁴ In Q 25:11–12, for example, one reads (in Yusuf Ali's translation):

50 For a summary of the different exegetical arguments during the early and medieval periods, see Awn, *Satan* 25–9.

51 Rippin, *Devil* 527; my emphasis.

52 Related to this conclusion, it is also said by some medieval exegetes that Iblis is the originator, the father, of all jinn. See Awn, *Satan* 31.

53 As explained in Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i, 166, tr. 90. For an analysis of this explanation, see Hawting, *Eavesdropping* 25–38.

54 Q 25:12, 50:30, 67:7–8.

Nay they deny the Hour (of the judgment to come): but We have prepared a Blazing Fire for such as deny the Hour: When it sees them from a place far off, they will hear its fury and its raging sigh.

And in Q 67:7–8, one reads (also in Yusuf Ali's translation):

When [the deniers] are cast therein, they will hear the (terrible) drawing in of its breath even as it blazes forth, almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is cast therein, its Keepers will ask, "Did no Warner come to you?"

In the canonic Sunni Hadith, aspects of this portrayal are repeated. For example:

Allah's Apostle said, "The Fire complained to its Lord: 'O Lord, part of me consumes the other part.' So He gave it permission to breathe out twice: one breath in the winter and one in the summer. [The breath in the summer] is the most intense heat that you feel then, and [the breath in the winter] is the most intense cold that you feel then."⁵⁵

Lastly, hell might even be said to act like a jinn if one reads Q 78:21, "Lo! hell lurketh in ambush," in conjunction with reports about Islamic-period jinn as creatures who lie in wait for the unsuspecting.⁵⁶

To see in this portrayal just a possible "jinn-ification" of hell would be to overlook the portrayals of a personified hell in Judeo-Christian traditions and the likely influence of those portrayals upon the Quran and Hadith.⁵⁷ However, if one accepts the argument put forward in this paper regarding an Islamic infernalization of the jinn, one might also be willing to consider a possible demonization of the Islamic inferno, a jinn-hell hybrid.

55 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* iv, 106 (k. bad' al-khalq, ch. 10, no. 3260).

56 See, for example, Nöldeke, *Arabs* 670; also Cunial, *Spiritual* 120, where she writes: "The *ghūl* is supposed to lie in wait at places where men are destined to perish; she entices them there, especially by night." The Quran translation is from Pickthall, *Meaning* 427.

57 As discussed by Christian Lange in his chapter of the present volume (pp. 86–7) e.g. "The idea that hell is a monster that talks has a rich Judeo-Christian genealogy: In 1 Enoch, a text written around the turn of the millennium, hell is said to have a 'mouth' with which is 'swallows' the sinners (56:8). In 3 Baruch (1st–3rd c. CE), hell is the 'belly' of a 'dragon' (4:5, 5:3)."

3 Concluding Remarks

In summary of the preceding pages, the claim was made at the outset that the advent of Islam was coterminous with a Quranic recoding of the supernaturally inhabited space of the Hijaz, exactly as per the argument of Neuwirth regarding the Quranically recoded, naturally inhabited space of the Hijaz. The ambiguity of the Quranic evidence notwithstanding, as well as the currently unresolvable academic debate regarding the jinn's origins, it was argued that the predominant trend of this recoded, supernaturally inhabited space revealed a reconfigured hierarchy of spiritual entities. It was shown that in this reconfigured hierarchy, the lowest rank were the jinn, who had been removed from open space and placed in, or become associated with, hell. Lastly, it was argued that in this process of infernalization, the jinn's moral value was simultaneously revised, dropping from moral or amoral in the representation of pre-Islamic period to immoral in the representation of the Islamic period.

In the context of religious studies as a whole, not just Islamic studies, there is little that is surprising in these findings; similar results have, for example, been presented in a recent article about the effects of Christianity on the autochthonous spirits of Ireland.⁵⁸ What alone might be considered surprising about these findings is that they are not valid for all of Islamic history, their Quranic pedigree notwithstanding. For example, in the period for which anthropological studies exist, the nineteenth century onwards, the jinn are neither consistently evaluated as immoral nor consistently associated with hell.⁵⁹ This fact does not, however, invalidate the findings, which can be verified by inquiring into the fate of angels.

If the paper's argument is correct, as supernatural beings, angels, too, should undergo a transformation. As noted by Alfred Welch in his seminal, diachronic reading of the Quran concerning the emergence of the doctrine of absolute monotheism, or *tawḥīd*, they do. They are transformed from visible, quasi-independent beings in the Meccan and early Medinan, pre-battle of Badr

58 Borsje, *Monotheistic* 53–81. With thanks to Marcel Poorthuis for bringing this text to my attention.

59 See, for example, Westermarck, *Ritual* i, 388–90, where the jinn are evaluated neutrally, described as “connected with [...] mysterious forces” and “personifications of what is uncanny in nature.” I owe this important caveat to Remke Kruk. As noted above, however, this neutral evaluation of the jinn is not consistently found in anthropological studies. For example, in Mohammed Maarouf's recent publication on contemporary Moroccan jinn-related practices, he observes: “Generally, [the Ben Yeffu healers] distinguish between two major types of jinns: the satanic (*shayṭani*) and the divine (*rabbani*).” *Idem, Jinn* 102.

(2/624) suras (e.g. Q 11:69–73; 19:17–21) to invisible beings, so closely related to the will of God that it makes little sense to talk of them as independent, in the post-Badr suras (e.g. Q 3:38–47).⁶⁰ As noted by Welch, too, the battle of Badr is also a watershed moment for the jinn, because thereafter the Quran refers to them no more.⁶¹ From about the same time, Allah—that ultimate supernatural entity—is repeatedly represented in the Quran as the cosmos's sole deity, *al-Wāḥid* (e.g. Q 12:39, 13:16, 14:48), all other spiritual entities having been either effectively stripped of their individuality (angels) and the divinity attributed to them (idols), or rendered mundane (Iblīs) and no longer mentioned (jinn): a hierarchy of One.⁶²

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Revisiting Hell's Angels in the Quran

Christian Lange

According to the *K. al-Aghānī* (“Book of Songs”) of Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967), the wine-loving poet Ādam b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz gained the personal favour of the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158–69/775–85) after repenting for the debaucheries of his youth. Among the more irreverent of his verses is the following:

isqinī yā Mu‘āwiyaḥ ... sab‘atan aw thamāniyah
isqinīhā wa-ghanninī ... qabla akhdhi l-zabāniyah

Give me to drink, oh Mu‘āwiya ... seven or eight [cups]!
 Give them to me to drink, and sing for me ... before the *zabāniya* take [me]!¹

Ādam pictured the *zabāniya* as duplicates of the angel of death who, according to the Quran (4:97, 32:11), seizes the souls of sinners when they die and interrogates them about their wrongdoings. This is also how later tradition pictured them: as black creatures who appear at the moment of death to pull people’s souls out of their bodies and drag them into hell, where they torture them.² However, the identity of the *zabāniya*, who are mentioned only once in the Quran (96:18), came to be established only gradually over the course of the early centuries of Islam. While Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687–8) is said to have held the view that the *zabāniya* are the punishers in hell,³ his contemporary ‘Abdallāh b. Abī l-Hudhayl thought that the *zabāniya* had their feet on the

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- 1 Ādam b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was an offspring of the Umayyad family, who survived the purge of the ‘Abbāsīd revolution. Al-Mahdī is said to have liked him because of his esprit and agreeable temperament. See Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī* xv, 278.
 - 2 Ghazālī, *Ihyā’* iv, 507 (tr. 158); Ibn Bashkuwāl, *K. al-Qurba* 88 (tr. 283).
 - 3 Ibn ‘Abbās calls them “the *zabāniya* of [hellish] punishment (*zabāniyat al-‘adhāb*).” See Ṭabari, *Jāmi’* xxvi, 352.

earth and their heads in the heaven.⁴ Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) opined that the *zabāniya* were the minions on the Day of Judgment whom the Quran describes as driving the sinners into the Fire “with iron hooks” (*maqāmi‘ min ḥadīd*, 22:21).⁵ The early exegetes Mujāhid b. Jabr (Meccan, d. 103/721–2?), Qatāda b. Di‘āma (Basran, d. 117/735–6?) and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (Kufan, d. 106/724–5?) all felt compelled to emphasize that the *zabāniya* were angels and not, as some apparently thought, a different class of beings.⁶

This unsettled state of affairs in the early period invites an examination of what the *zabāniya* were understood to be at the time of the proclamation of the Quran, particularly whether they were thought to be similar to, or different from, other helpers of eschatological punishment. Closely related to this is another, broader question, that of the genesis of the Quranic hell, a topic heretofore little studied. In what follows, I shall analyze the Quranic passages that bear, or appear to bear, on this issue. My aims in doing this are threefold. First, I want to shed some light on the meaning of certain obscure Quranic terms and expressions, by considering both intra-Quranic parallels and extra-Quranic intertextual and contextual clues. Second, I wish to suggest that Quranic verses about God’s helpers in hell fall into three coherent thematic clusters, each of which reflects the Quran’s propensity to experiment with the storehouse of eschatological images and ideas current in the Near East at the time of the Quran’s proclamation. Third, I seek to explore whether these three clusters show a gradual development of the Quranic picture of hell, whether such a development can be fit into a chronological reading of the Quran, and to what benefit this may be done.

1 The *zabāniya*: Autochthonous Spirits or Foreign Import?

Q 96:9–18, the third of the four thematic units that constitute surah 96,⁷ begins by polemicizing against those who, as we are told (vv. 9–14), interfere with the

4 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* iii, 502; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *dhikr al-nār* ix, 189 (no. 48); Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘* xxvi, 353; Suyūṭī, *Ḥabā’ik* 66–67 (no. 236). Late antique and early Islamic literature commonly refers to the great size of angels. Cf. Burge, *Angels in Islam* 63.

5 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, *Ṣifāt al-nār* 57 (no. 71).

6 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘* xxvi, 353–4.

7 Cf. Neuwirth, *Studien* 231, who distinguishes between the four units “hymn” (vv. 1–5), “scolding” (vv. 6–8), “polemic” (vv. 9–18), and a concluding “final summons” (v. 19).

prayer of “the servant” (presumably Muḥammad) and reject his message. The Quran goes on to declare:

- 96:15 No indeed! If he does not desist, We shall seize him by the forelock,
 96:16 A lying, sinful forelock (*nāṣiya kādhiba khāṭī'a*).
 96:17 Let him call his host (*fa-l-yad'u nādīyah*).
 96:18 We shall call on (*sa-nad'u*) the *zabāniya*.
 96:19 No indeed! Do not obey him, but prostrate yourself and draw near.⁸

The first thing to note about these verses is that they are oddly anthropomorphist: God, who speaks here in the *pluralis majestatis*, seizes Muḥammad's opponents by the forelock, in the same way in which Moses, as the Quran tells us, dragged Aaron by his hair (lit. his “head,” Q 7:150) and beard (Q 20:93) for having instigated the Israelites to worship idols. We see here an old Semitic image, that of the triumphant ruler-at-war who grabs his enemies by the forelock, a gesture expressive of unrestricted power over life and death. The context of this image is not per se eschatological. Rather, the Quran appears to invoke a cosmic battle between deities, pitching Muḥammad's god, in whose service the *zabāniya* are enlisted, against another god who counts human devotees among his followers (96:19) but who relies, in order to battle other deities, on his “host” of supernatural supporters.

An eschatological context, however, is not precluded; in fact it is likely for several reasons. It is on the Day of Judgment, as the Quran makes clear in another verse, that “the sinners will be known by their marks, and they will be seized by their feet and forelocks” (55:41).⁹ Other verses in which the sinners are threatened with being dragged over the ground “on their faces” (*‘alā wujūhihim*) also refer to eschatological punishment (25:34; 40:71; 54:48). Finally, the curious phrase “a lying, sinful forelock” chimes with the Quranic imagery of the divine tribunal at the end of time. One aspect of the expression is that it functions *pars pro toto*—not the forelock lies and sins, but the entire human being.¹⁰ However, a forelock that lies, as odd as the idea may seem, accords

8 In this paper I use, with minor amendments, the translation of the Quran by Alan Jones (2007).

9 Perhaps also Q 11:56 (“There is not a creature [*dābba*] that He does not take by the forelock”) refers to the judgment at the end of time.

10 Neuwirth, Qur'anic readings 760: “perhaps a meristic expression with intensifying intent.” See also eadem, *Handkommentar* 272.

with other body parts in the Quran that speak, or rather, that acquire the ability to confess to the sins in which they were instrumental during a person's life on earth. "On the day when the enemies of God are rounded up," one reads in another verse, "their skins bear witness against them about what they had been doing." Upset by these revolting body parts, the sinners ask: "Why do you testify against us?" to which the skins reply, "We have been given speech by God, who can give speech to everything" (41:19–21). Elsewhere, it is the sinners' hands and feet that testify against their owners (24:24). In the Judeo-Christian literature of Late Antiquity, examples of body parts that bear testimony against their owners on the Day of Judgment are a relatively common occurrence.¹¹

The *zabāniya*, the strike-force of the god of Muḥammad, are not further described in the Quran. The etymology of the name may provide some clues as to their identity. A considerable amount of ink has been spilled over possible derivations of this *hapax legomenon*. Lüling, for example, theorizes that the undotted consonantal skeleton of the word (its *rasm*) was misread in later tradition as *zabāniya*, while the original reading was *rabbāniyya*, which he understands to mean the "Angels of the High Council." Lüling also suggests a couple of other emendations to the sura, including a change from *fa-l-yad'u nādīyahu* ("Let him call his host") to *fa-l-tad'u nādīyahu* ("Call on His High Council"). This eliminates any trace of a cosmic battle between deities from the sura.¹²

Lüling's argument stands and falls with his broader claim that hidden beneath the surface of sura 96 lies a strophic Christian hymn first used by an Ur-Christian Arabian community, which in turn supports his ambitious theory that about a third of the Quran was originally an Arabic version of a Christian hymnal. In other words, the argument requires acceptance of a rather large set of further hypotheses. Here I do not wish to review these hypotheses, but merely point out that everybody seems to be agreed that the word *zabāniya* was never dotted or vocalized differently. The oldest codices (*maṣāḥif*) of the

11 For example, *Derek erez suta*, a much-read ethical tract of the Babylonian Talmud, states that "all the limbs of your body testify against you in the eternal abode" (4:5). Cf. *BT, Hagiga* 16a (x, 104) and *Ta'anith* 11a (ix, 49): "A man's limbs testify against him, for it is said: *You are my witnesses, says the Lord*" (Isaiah 43:10). Also in the milieu of Egyptian Christian asceticism, the notion had some currency. A 5th-century homily attributed to Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 CE) "depicts a separate demonic examination on the use of each of the five senses, and portrays in abundant and harrowing detail the world of torture that awaits convicted sinners after death." See Daley, *At the hour 76*. Note, however, that the forelocks mentioned in surah 96 lie, while the other body parts considered here speak the truth, albeit against the will of their owners.

12 Lüling, *Über den Ur-Koran* 63–9. Cf. the summary in Reynolds, Introduction 9–11.

Quran, which often record variants in how obscure Quranic words or phrases were read in the early centuries, have nothing to say about the *zabāniya*. Had the word been *rabbāniyya*, one would expect that somebody would have preserved the memory of such a reading. And while it is possible to imagine that an unusual word like *zabāniya* (in an undotted, unvocalized text) would have been misread as something more normal like *rabbāniyya*, it is difficult to envision it happening the other way around. Lüling's emendation, in other words, is a stretch of the imagination, as ingenious as his reconstruction of sura 96 may be.

Eilers suggests that the word *zabāniya* (the sg. of which, according to Eilers, is *zabān*, as in *ustādh*, pl. *ustādhīya*) derives from the Pahlavi *zen(dān)bān*, "warder, keeper of a prison."¹³ At first sight, this does not seem implausible. There are other words of Persian origin in the Quran, and they tend to appear particularly in eschatological contexts. Eilers lists several: *ibrīq* "decanter" < **āb-rēkh*; *istabraq* "silk brocade" < *istabra*; *surādiq* "tent, canopy" < [Phlv.] *srādakh* "splendid house, palace" (cf. Pers. *sarāy*); *firdaws* < **parādēs*.¹⁴ It is true that in later tradition, the *zabāniya* were sometimes associated with the earthly agents of the repressive state apparatus. The Basran exegete Qatāda (d. 117/735–6?), for example, is on record for saying that *zabāniya* is a word that designates policemen (*shuraṭ*).¹⁵ However, this seems a secondary development. For one, it is not clear why the Quran would use a Persian loanword to indicate a rather common profession such as that of warder. One would also have to envision the unlikely scenario that *zen(dan)bān* lost the first "n" as well as "(dan)" as a result of its Arabicization. In addition, there is nothing supernatural about the "prison wards" of the Pahlavi, much in contrast to the *zabāniya*. It is a rather long shot, therefore, from *zen(dān)bān* to *zabāniya*, both lexically and semantically. Another derivation from Persian, *zabāniya* > Pers. *z-bā-n-h* "blaze, tongue of fire" (from Phlv. *zūbān*, "tongue [of fire]"), seems even more unlikely.¹⁶

13 Eilers, *Iranisches Lehngut* 220.

14 *Ibid.*, 204–7.

15 Ibn Qutayba, *Adab al-kātib* 87.

16 Cf. Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 148, who attributes this derivation to Addai Sher, the Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Siirt (d. 1915). A class of minor angels in Jewish Kabbala mysticism also bears a name that is similar to *zabāniya*. Schwab, *Vocabulaire* 121 and 123, states that "Zabban(os)" (= זבנוס) is the "nom de l'ange qui, selon les Musulmans, tourmente les damnés," and thinks the expression is synonymous with "Zenawim" or "Zevanim" (= זנוים or זבנים) meaning "les queues," a class of beings among whom is "un desservant de Psuker [another angel] au 6^e camp céleste." Schwab refers for this information to the

A third possibility that one should consider is a derivation from Syriac. Andrae argues that the *zabāniya* are connected to the *šābāyyā* in Syriac literature. The *šābāyyā* appear in the writings of Ephrem, where they are the “ductores” who lead the departed souls to judgment.¹⁷ The primary meaning of *šābāyyā*, a plural of the active participle *šābē*,¹⁸ is “those who conduct [prisoners] away.” The word is applied by Ephrem to angels who catch souls. This meaning fits Ādam b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s understanding neatly, and may also be envisioned in the context of sura 96 (not to mention in other suras, where angels “take” [*tawaffā*] the souls of the deceased, see below). However, the etymology proposed by Andrae is problematic on lexical grounds. The Syriac letter *šin* usually appears as *sīn* in Arabic, not *zayn*, and the introduction of the *nūn* in *zabāniya* would likewise remain unaccounted for. It is conceivable, however, that elements of the imagery surrounding Syr. *šābāyyā* were merged, in post-Quranic times, into the evolving image of the *zabāniya*, much in the same way in which they became associated with Persian prison warders.

A fourth explanation, the one that will be followed here, derives from Grimme, who raises the possibility that the *zabāniya* are a class of Arabian demons, or *jinn*.¹⁹ Grimme does not say what motivates this conjecture, but one suspects he is familiar with a verse in pre-Islamic poetry that mentions the *zabāniya*. This verse is attributed to the poetess al-Khansā’ (d. ca. 24/644), a convert to Islam and contemporary of the Prophet Muḥammad.²⁰ To my knowledge, this is the only instance of the word *zabāniya* in pre-exegetical Arabic literature, provided that the dating of the verse is in fact correct.²¹ This

Sefer of Rabbi Raziel/Eleazar (b. 1220 in Worms), published in Amsterdam 1701, fol. 34b and 41a.

17 Andrae, *Ursprung* 153.

18 Payne Smith, *Syriac dictionary* 555a.

19 Grimme, *Mohammed* 19.

20 On al-Khansā’, “the snub-nosed,” see Jones, *Early Arabic poetry*, 105–6; *GAS* ii, 311–14; Kaḥḥāla, *A’lām* i, 360–71.

21 Margoliouth, *Origins* 439, flatly takes al-Khansā’'s invocation of the *zabāniya* (“a Qur’ānic technicality”) as proof of the poem’s post-Quranic date of composition. Also the idiom “war tucked up its garment from its shank” (*shammarat ‘an sāqihā*) resonates with, and may therefore seem secondary to, a Quranic phrase, that is, Q 68:42: “That day when the shank is bared (*yawma yukshafu ‘an sāqin*).” The commentary of al-Jalālayn notes that “this is an expression denoting the severity of the predicament during the Reckoning and the requital on the Day of Resurrection: one says *kashafatī l-ḥarbu ‘an sāqin* (‘war has bared a shank’), to mean that it has intensified.” See al-Jalālayn, *Tafsīr* 565. Jones, *Early Arabic poetry* 113–14, dates the poem to the post-conversion period (i.e., after 7/629) of al-Khansā’'s life. He suggests, however, that the use of *zabāniya* in al-Khansā’'s poem

seems to be the case, not least if one considers that the poem, as will become clear, betrays little in terms of an Islamic sensitivity but rather poses a challenge to the Quran. In her poem, al-Khansā' laments the passing of her late brother Mu'āwiya, killed in battle with Murra. She praises Mu'āwiya with the following words:

*wa-kāna lizāza l-ḥarbi 'inda shubūbihā / idhā shammarat 'an sāqihā wa-
h[i]ya dhākīyah
wa-qawwāda khaylin naḥwa ukhrā ka-annahā / sa'ālin wa-'iqbānun
'alayhā zabāniyah*

He was one who stuck to War when it was kindled / when it made ready
[lit. tucked up its garments and bared its leg], blazing fiercely,
and [he was] a leader of horses against others [of the enemy]; it was as
though they were / female demons (*sa'ālin*), and eagles on which are
zabāniya.²²

A couple of things in this verse make it rather plausible that the *zabāniya* mentioned here are a class of demons, or jinn.²³ One notes, to begin, that they are associated with another class of jinn, the *sa'ālī* (sg. *si'lāt*). These, according to the lexicographers, are she-*ghūls*, in fact they are the worst kind of them. The *sa'ālī* are frequently likened to horses,²⁴ as horses are to eagles.²⁵ The jinn are masters over demonic horses and as riders are known to urge their beasts to great speed.²⁶ The poet al-Nābigha (*fl.* late 6th c.), for example, writes about

“probably has no direct connection with the phrase *sa-nad'u l-zabāniya*,” while also noting that “the traditional picture of al-Khansā” is that of her “clinging to old ways after her conversion.”

22 Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī* xv, 89 (vv. 4–5). The translation follows that of Jones, *Early Arabic poetry*, 115–6, but diverts from it in sticking to the literal meaning of *'iqbān* (“eagles”) rather than opting for the metaphorical translation as “swift bringers of destruction.”

23 I have culled several references that relate to this topic from the collected papers (*Nachlass*) of Fritz Meier, preserved in Basel University Library, especially from the following folders: D 4.1.1 (“Volksglaube und altarabisches Heidentum I”); D 4.3.5 (“Dämonologie v”); D 4.3.7 (“Dämonologie VII”); D 4.3.8 (“Dämonologie VIII”); D 4.3.10 (“Dämonologie x”).

24 This is also noted by Jones, *Early Arabic poetry*, 116.

25 The horses that the Abbāsīd poet Abū l-'Atāhiya (d. 211/826) writes about have “their cheeks twisted [with pride], as if winged with the wings of eagles.” See the translation in Arberry, *Arabic poetry* 50.

26 The poet al-A'shā is given a “horse that kicks up dust” by his “jinn-brother.” See Jāhīz, *Ḥayawān* vi, 226.8. Poets, including al-A'shā, wrote about camels mounted by jinn. See the

horses “lean as arrows ... on which are people like jinn,” a line that resembles that of al-Khansā'.²⁷

At least some of the jinn are air-borne creatures.²⁸ According to a Prophetic hadith, there are three classes of jinn: those who have wings and fly through the air, those who are snakes and dogs, and those who travel over the surface of the earth like human nomads.²⁹ Al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956) states that one of the thirty-one different types of jinn takes on the form of winged snakes that inhabit the air.³⁰ Another authority speaks of four types: the *'afārita* (sg. *'ifrīt*), who live in wells and caves; the *shayāṭīn* (sg. *shayṭān*), who live in houses and haunt graveyards; the blood-thirsty *ṭawāghīt* (sg. *tāghūt*); and the *zawābi'* (sg. *zawba'a*), who ride the winds.³¹ Moreover, not only do the jinn fly through the air, they do so on the back of birds or other winged animals. The poet Mulayḥ b. al-Ḥakam, writing around the early Umayyad period, describes two jinn who ride on the shoulders of a raven, urging the bird on to great speed “as if it were a galloping horse.”³² Abū l-Najm (d. after 105/724) writes about horses made to fly by the jinn (*tuṭūruhu l-jinn*).³³

It should be noted that none of the lists of names of types of jinn in the scholarly literature (from Smith and Freytag to Wellhausen, Tritton, Henninger, Fahd, and Meier) includes the *zabāniya*. However, the sources on which these lists rely are post-Quranic, and by the end of the successive proclamations of the Quran, as is suggested here, the process of the angelification of the *zabāniya* had been concluded. In later times, hardly anyone remembered their origin as jinn.

examples in Geyer, Katze 67–8. On the riding beasts of the jinn in general, see Nünlist, Von Berittenen.

27 Nābiḡha, *Dīwān* 31 (no. 29, v. 21).

28 According to the *K. al-Aṣnām* of Ibn al-Kalbī (d. ca. 204/819), the *jinn* are both imagined to fly through the air and to ride on animals, especially foxes and ostriches. See Wellhausen, *Reste* 152.

29 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* v, 137.

30 Mas'ūdī, *Murūj* iii, 320–22.

31 Desparmet, *Ethnographie* 299, quoting Muḡammad b. Muḡammad Ibn al-Ḥajj (d. 771/1370), *Shumūs al-anwār*. According to Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḡh* ii, 585, a jinnee called Zawba'a is the commander of the jinn of the Yemen. He builds castles for the king there, at the command of Solomon.

32 Bräu, *Gedichte* 82. On the (uncertain) dating of Mulayḡ's death, cf. *GAS* ii, 263.

33 Goldziher, *Erscheinungsformen* 207 n. 4, quoting from Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940), *al-'Iqd al-farīd*. The poet-jinnee Abū Hadrash in Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's (d. 449/1058) *Risālat al-ghufrān* also speaks about the “night horses with wings ... unlike the horses of mankind” on which he used to ride. See Ma'arrī, *Risālat al-ghufrān*, 236 (tr. 237).

Exceptions to this may occasionally be found in early Islamic lexicography, in instances where the connection of the *zabāniya* to the world of the jinn is still intact. Al-Mubarrad (d. ca. 286/900), for example, states that ‘*ifriyyas* or ‘*ifrits*, a type of jinn that is often “associated with lamps (*mulḥaqun bi-qindīl*),” are sometimes referred to as “*ifriyya zibniyya*.” He explains that “*zibniyya* means: ‘one who rejects’ (*al-munkir*), the plural being *zabāniya*. The word derives from [the idea of] movement. One says: he ‘z-b-n-ed’ him (*zabanahu*) if someone pushed somebody (*dafa’ahu*).”³⁴ Perhaps one sees in al-Mubarrad a survival of the idea that the *zabāniya* are in fact jinn (in this case, ‘*ifrits*), and that pushing back or lashing out is their characteristic action. ‘Abdallāh b. Abī l-Hudhayl’s assertion, quoted at the beginning, that the *zabāniya* have their feet on the earth and their heads in the heaven may also be taken as evidence for their jinn nature; in later tradition, the same is often said about the jinn.³⁵ In the same vein, the lexicographers note that a whirlwind (*zawba’a*) of dust or sand that rises into the sky is generally thought to be driven by the jinn, in particular by the *zawābi’*, who derive their name from the natural phenomenon with which they are associated.³⁶

Paret follows Grimme in suggesting that the *zabāniya* are autochthonous Arab spirits. The verbal stem *z-b-n*, as he points out, denotes the action of pushing back in the way in which a camel might kick out with its hind legs in order to keep a calf away that wants to drink from its udder. Paret thinks that the singular form of the word should be **zabāni* with a short *i* at the end, in other words, that it is modeled on nouns of the type *fa’āli*.³⁷ This is an indeclinable pattern in Arabic morphology that often denotes animals, for instance, *qathāmi* (“female hyaena”).³⁸ In the same way, Paret notes, a dog, particularly a hunting-bitch, may be called *kasābi* (“grab-it,” from the verb *kasaba*, “to grab, seize”). Another example of the *fa’āli* form is *dafāri*, “stinker” (from the verb *dafira*, “to smell, stink”).³⁹ A **zabāni* would then be an animal or demon that is named after its characteristic action, that is, pushing back. If on this evidence, one is willing to concede that Paret’s suggested derivation hits the mark,

34 Mubarrad, *Kāmil* iii, 80. Also Sibawayh, *Kitāb* iv, 268, connects ‘*ifriyya* with *zibniyya*.

35 Rescher, *Studien* 45 n. 2, who culls his examples from the Arabian Nights, referring to ‘*ifrits*.

36 The word *zawba’a* is the name of both the whirling pillars of dust or sand and the jinn that inhabit them. See Lane, *Lexicon* iii, 1212a–b.

37 Paret, *Kommentar* 516.

38 Wright, *Grammar* i, 244.

39 Lane, *Lexicon* iii, 890b.

a good translation for the word *zabāniya* would be “repellers,” as I will henceforth refer to them.⁴⁰

There is one final consideration that makes it plausible, in my eyes, to think that the repellers are autochthonous beings. I would suggest that in the cluster of ideas centered around the repellers also belong those verses in the Quran that speak about the tree of *zaqqūm* and the infernal banquet that is held under its branches. In these verses, the sinners are force-fed by cruel beings who mockingly invite them to “taste” bitter fruits and boiling water. The imperative *dhuq/dhūqū* (“taste!”) appears several times in this context.

- 44:43 The tree of *al-zaqqūm*
 44:44 Is the food of the sinner,
 44:45 Like molten metal boiling in the bellies
 44:46 As scalding water boils.
 44:47 “Take him and thrust him into the midst of Hell.
 44:48 Then pour over his head some of the tormenting scalding water.”
 44:49 [Tell him,] “Taste. You are the mighty and the noble.
 44:50 This is that about which you had doubts.”
- 54:47 The sinners are in error and madness.
 54:48 On the day they are dragged into the Fire on their faces [they will be told], “Taste the touch of the Flame (*saqar*).”
 56:52 You will eat of trees of *zaqqūm*,
 56:53 Filling your bellies from them,
 56:54 And drinking scalding water on top of that,
 56:55 Drinking as does a camel desperate with thirst.
 56:56 That will be their hospitality on the Day of Judgement.

The violence depicted in these verses (“thrusting” the sinners into hell and “dragging them into the Fire on their faces”) recalls the violence of the act of “grabbing the sinners by their forelock,” the repellers’ characteristic action according to sura 96. The name *zaqqūm* might also be taken to point to an Arabian context—the lexicographers and exegetes often claim that *zaqqūm* is a bitter plant growing in Tihāma—,⁴¹ even though the origin of the word

40 Neuwirth, who also follows this line of reasoning, suggests “Wehr ab” as a translation. See eadem, *Handkommentar* 273.

41 Cf. also the statement of the botanist Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawārī (fl. second half of the 3rd/9th c.), who, while describing *zaqqūm* in great detail, asserts that it is a terrestrial species found on the South Arabian coast. See idem, *Book of plants* 204 (tr. 37).

remains obscure and open to debate.⁴² What seems clear is that the “hospitality” offered to those convened around *zaqqūm* betokens a “cynically inverted world,” as Neuwirth puts it, a travesty of the promised banquet in paradise.⁴³ This means that the beings who force-feed the unlucky creatures convened around the *zaqqūm* tree should be seen as the subterranean counterparts of the houris (*ḥūr ʿīn*, 44:54) in paradise. Jacob appears to have been the first to suggest that the *ḥūr ʿīn*, “maidens with dark, lustrous eyes” in Jones’s translation, derive from the imagery of pre-Islamic banquet poetry.⁴⁴ Such a suggestion is plausible, as has been emphasized by Horovitz and a number of more recent contributors to the debate.⁴⁵ If one grants this, and if the hosts of the infernal banquet, that is the *zabāniya*, are the mirror image of the *ḥūr ʿīn*, they are also likely to spring from an Arabian context.

In sum, there is a cluster of verses that centres around the *zabāniya* or “repellers,” autochthonous Arabian demons, as hosts of the infernal, subterranean banquet around the tree of *zaqqūm*. Tentatively, one might also add the verse that states that “nineteen are set over it [hell]” (74:30) to this cluster, although it should be noted that these “nineteen” might in fact be related to certain astral beings, or angels, that were known among Sabians, Mandaean and Gnostics—a topic that awaits further study, if in fact this riddle can be solved at all. Scholarly explanations of what or who exactly these nineteen are, including the suggestion that they correspond to nineteen *malakê* mentioned in Mandaean literature, remain inconclusive.⁴⁶

42 Cf. Bosworth, *Zaqqūm*; El-Awa, *Zaqqūm*. Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed* 68, conjectures that *zaqqūm* is derived from the two date palms at the entrance to hell in the valley of Gehinnom, mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud. See BT, *Sukkah* 32b (viii, 142). Radscheit, *Höllbaum*, discusses at length late antique Christian sources about the Tree of Knowledge, which he thinks is behind the Qur’ānic notion of *zaqqūm*. To this may be added the vision of Stephen Bar-Sudhaile (Edessa, fl. 500), *Book* 67–8, who describes a great Tree of Evil, “whose fruits are foul and its leaves hideous,” that grows from the “the abyss” of hell. There are also references in Manichean texts to an evil tree in Gehenna that sprouts “fruits of darkness.” See *The Kephalaia* 26. I owe this last reference to Tommaso Tesi.

43 Neuwirth, *Koran* 427.

44 Jacob, *Beduinenleben* 107.

45 Horovitz, *Paradies* 64–73; Wendell, *Denizens* 29–59; Neuwirth, *Koran* 221–22, 429–32.

46 In Mandaean literature, the seven planets and the twelve signs of the zodiac are referred to as *malakê* (a cognate of Arab. *malak* and other Semitic words meaning “angel”) and considered the administrators of the world, which is seen as dark and evil, as well as of nineteen purgatories in which the souls of sinners are tortured. See Ahrens, *Muhammed* 30–31. Rosenthal, *Nineteen* 304–18, cautiously accepts Ahrens’ theory, as does Paret, *Kommentar* 494. Halm adduces evidence for similar beliefs among the Sabians of Ḥarrān,

2 The Guardians of Hell

A second cluster of verses, it is submitted here, includes verses that represent hell as a monster, and the guardians of hell as its minders, who are accordingly referred to as *khazana* ("guardians"). The idea that hell is a monster in chains led by angels is part and parcel of the post-Quranic repertoire of eschatological ideas. One of the earliest and most comprehensive collections of hell traditions, the hell chapter in Ibn Abī Shayba's (d. 235/849) *Muṣannaḥ*, begins with a hadith in which it is stated that hell (*jahannam*) will be brought forth on the Day of Judgment, "led by 70,000 reins, each of which is held by 70,000 angels."⁴⁷ In later versions of the story, such as one finds in *al-Durra al-fākhira* of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) or in *al-Tadhkira fī aḥwāl al-mawtā* of al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), this is developed into a full-blown dramatic scene in which the hell-monster attempts to attack and devour the assembly of humankind on the Day of Resurrection. Despite their great physical prowess, its angelic guards cannot hold it back, so that hell, literally, breaks loose. The Prophet, however, heroically blocks the way and commands the hell-monster to turn back, whereupon it takes its place, after some heated discussion, to the left side of God's throne.⁴⁸

Already in the Quran, hell appears as a beast gifted with speech. In Quran 50:30, God asks hell: "Have you been filled?" and hell, eager for more food, responds: "Are there still more?" The fact that hell, in 104:4, is called *al-ḥuṭama*, "the insatiable" in Jones's translation, is corroborating evidence for the bestialization of hell in the Quran.⁴⁹ In 25:12, the Quran states that when the sinners approach the scene of the Final Judgment, hell spots them from afar and begins to roar and sigh loudly.

as well as the early Ismā'īliyya, stating that "the notion of the seven and the twelve, that is, the angels of the planets and of the zodiac, is omnipresent in the religions of Syria and Mesopotamia." See Halm, *Kosmologie* 91–100, at 98. On the nineteen, see further Eichler, *Dschinn* 111–12; Henninger, *Spuren* 63–4 n. 61. Lüling, *Über den Ur-Koran* 380–89, proposes an emendation from *tis'ata 'ashara* ("nineteen") to *sab'ata as'ur* ("seven gates"). Neuwirth, *Handkommentar* 369 sees in the "nineteen" an "ostentatiously enigmatic element."

47 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ* ix, 175 (no. 1). Also Muḥāsibī, *Tawāḥḥum* § 38 (tr. 43–4), includes an early version of this scene.

48 Ghazālī, *Durra* 67–8 (tr. 61–2); Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* 468.

49 Similarly, Sinai, *Kommentar* speaks of "personification." Neuwirth, *Koran* 709, notes that the form *fu'ala*, on which *ḥuṭama* is patterned, indicates an animate being who does something repeatedly or intensively. Cf. eadem, *Handkommentar* 153. Jeffery, *Materials* 112, notes the alternative active participle form *ḥāṭima*.

- 25:11 No. They say the Hour is a lie,
but We have prepared a Blaze (*sa'īr*)
for those who say the Hour is a lie.
- 25:12 When it sees them from afar,
they will hear its roaring and sighing (*sami'ū lahā taghayyūzan wa-zafīran*);

Similarly, in Quran 67:7, the sinners hear hell “drawing its breath” (*sami'ū lahā shahīqan*). The sounds referred to as *shahīq* and *zafīr*, as the early commentator Muqātil tells us, are the hee-haw of a donkey.⁵⁰ Another verse that perhaps belongs into this cluster of ideas is Quran 78:21, “Jahannam lies in wait” (*inna jahannama kānat miršādan*), which may be interpreted as a reference to an animal preying on its victim.

Quran 67:7, one of our key witnesses for the idea of the Quranic hell-monster, is followed by a verse that mentions “its keepers” (*khazanatuhā*). One infers that these are beings set to watch over the hell-monster. A different use of the word *khazana* in the Quran, however, complicates the picture. The *khazana* of hell also appear in a verse that states that “those who are ungrateful will be driven into *jahannam* in troops; and then, when they reach it, its doors (*abwābuhā*) will be opened, and its keepers (*khazanatuhā*) will say to them, ‘Did not messengers from among you come to you ...?’” (39:71). The possessive suffix *-hā* in *khazanatuhā* can refer either to hell or to its gates. In the latter case the *khazana* would simply be “gatekeepers.” Such a translation would also find confirmation in the following verse: “Those who fear God will be driven into the Garden in troops; and then, when they reach it, its doors will be opened, and their keepers (*khazanatuhā*) will say to them, Peace upon you!” (39:73).

In sum, while the fact that the Quran speaks of hell as a monster seems beyond doubt, one stands on less firm ground when affirming that the Quran knows of the hell monster’s minders as *khazana*. It is tempting, however, to suggest this, given the instances in late-antique Judeo-Christian literature in which hell is described as a monster and assigned a special class of angels as its keepers. Already in the Hebrew Bible, the underworld is described as having a mouth with which it devours the sinners. According to Isaiah 5:14, “Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure.” In 1 Enoch, a text written around the turn of the millenium, hell is said to have a “mouth” with which is “swallows” the sinners (56:8), while in the text known as 3 Baruch

50 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* ii, 432, iii 382.

(1st–3rd c. CE), hell is the “belly” of a “dragon” (4:5; 5:3). Judeo-Christian sources mention the moaning and groaning of hell.⁵¹

In Christian homilies and hymns of the 4th to the 6th centuries, the theme of hell as an insatiable monster is further developed in the light of Christian soteriology. Ephrem the Syrian, in his *Nisibene Hymns*, repeatedly makes reference to the great appetite of both Death and Sheol/Hades, who complain about Jesus for denying them food and making them fast.⁵² In one particularly graphic sermon of Ephrem, Jesus rips open the “voracious stomach of Hades” to save mankind from perdition.⁵³ In the apocryphal *Gospel of Bartholomew* (Egypt [?], 2nd–6th c.), Jesus, looking down from the Mount of Olives into the valley below, conjures up the hell-monster Beliar, led by 660 angels and bound by fiery chains, emerging to the surface of the earth. While the other apostles fall down on their faces and become “as dead,” Jesus confronts the monster and encourages Bartholomew to do the same; Bartholomew then proceeds to interrogate Beliar.⁵⁴

As does the Quran, Judeo-Christian texts of late antiquity conceive of the “guardians” of hell also as its gate-keepers. The visionary of 2 Enoch (late 1st c. AD), for example, sees “the key-holders and the guards of the gates of hell standing, as large as serpents, with their faces like lamps that have been extinguished, and their eyes aflame, and their teeth naked down to their breasts” (41:1). Such negative portrayals of hell’s angels as evil creatures pertain to cluster one of the Quranic verses here considered, but they are not an element in cluster two. Andrae states that the idea that hell’s angels are “good servants” (as opposed to forces of evil) was more typical of late antique Christianity than it was of Jewish eschatology, particularly after the 3rd century CE,⁵⁵ and the “guardians” of the Quran likewise appear as forces of the good. Be that as it may, in the Quran the *khazana* remain a somewhat underdefined group of eschatological helpers, thus perhaps occupying a middle position (or stage of development?) between the beings one encounters in clusters one and three, respectively. What matters to us here is that the first audience(s) of the Quran could have understood the term *khazana* both to refer to the minders of the hell-monster and to the gate-keepers of hell. In fact, the Quran appears to experiment with both ideas, while not committing itself fully to one or the other.

51 According to 2 Enoch, hell “weeps” (40:12). In a hymn of Ephrem, hell “groans” over the sinners. See Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 61:26. Elsewhere, Ephrem relates that one hears the sound of weeping and gnashing of teeth (cf. Matthew 22:13–14) of the damned from outside of hell. See Ephrem, Letter to Publius 340. Cf. Ephrem, Rede, 2:93, 2:97.

52 Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 35:6, 36:2, 36:7–11, 39:7, 41:13, 52:22, 62:6.

53 Ephrem, Sermon 249.

54 *Questions of Bartholomew* 662–3.

55 Andrae, *Ursprung* 73.

3 Hell's Angels

The third cluster of images and ideas about the helpers of eschatological punishment in the Quran is construed around their identification as angels (*malā'ika*). This point is made explicit in Q 74:31: "We have appointed only angels to be masters of the Fire, and We have appointed their number simply as an affliction for those who are ungrateful [...]." Scholars generally agree that this long verse is written in a style that is markedly different from that of the pithy verse that immediately precedes it, which states that "over it are nineteen" (74:30). This suggests that initially, the two verses were not a unit. It seems reasonable to assume that Q 74:31 is a gloss added for clarification.⁵⁶ While Q 74:31 in fact provides no explanation for the number nineteen, it makes the point that these nineteen, who, as I speculated earlier, are related to the demonic repellers, are in reality angels. Let it be noted that the picture of hell's angels that emerges from 74:30–31 and the related verses is different, not only from that of the repellers, but also from that of the angelic *khazana*, the keepers of the hell-monster and of hell's gates. While the *khazana* stand at hell's periphery, so to speak, hell's angels are squarely located within hell, where they are fused, it appears, with the repellers.

The Quran offers more evidence for this new synthesis. Q 8:50 merges the motif of the cynical invitation to "taste" the torments of hell, previously announced by the repellers, hosts of the infernal banquet, with the notion that the beings who run hell are angels. What is previously attributed to the repellers is here put in the mouth of angels: "Angels (*malā'ika*) strike their faces and their backs and [say to them]: Taste!" One should also note that the motif of beating (of the faces and of backs) is only found in explicit connection to angels (8:50, 47:27). It appears, in combination with the tasting-motif, in Q 22:21–2, where the damned in hell, wishing to escape from their punishment, are driven back by (unspecified) beings armed with "hooked iron rods" and told to "taste the torment of the burning."

The image of hooked iron rods (*maqāmi' min ḥadīd*) can be related with a measure of confidence to the 3rd-century *Apocalypse of Paul*, where Paul is made to say: "I saw there a man being tortured by Tartaruchian angels having

56 Nöldeke, *Geschichte* i 88–89. For a recent discussion, see Sinai, *Kommentar*. Muslim tradition readily concedes this. According to Ibn Ishāq, Abū Jahl would have mocked the Prophet by saying to Quraysh: "Oh assembly of Quraysh! Muḥammad claims that that the troops of God who will punish you in the Fire and imprison you in it are nineteen. You are more numerous! Will one hundred of your man be overcome by one of them?" This was the reason, continues Ibn Ishāq, why God revealed Q 74:31. See Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* i, 201.

in their hands an iron instrument with three hooks.”⁵⁷ In fact, the *Apocalypse of Paul* and the 2nd-century *Apocalypse of Peter* give us a significant number of precedents for this third cluster of ideas about hell's angels in the Quran. Both texts explicitly speak about the “angels of torment” that are operative in hell.⁵⁸ According to the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the souls of the sinners are handed over to an angel named Tartaruchus “who is set over the punishments” and who casts the souls “into deep darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.”⁵⁹ The *Apocalypse of Peter* describes how the sinners cry out in hell, “Have mercy upon us, for now we know the judgment of God, which he declared to us beforetime and we did not believe,” whereupon an angel called Tatirokos appears, saying to them: “Now do you repent, when it is no longer the time for repentance ...”⁶⁰ As the seer of the *Apocalypse of Paul* relates,

I saw the heavens open, and Michael the archangel descending from heaven, and with him was the whole army of angels, and they came to those who were placed in punishment, and seeing him, again weeping, they cried out and said, “Have pity on us!... We now see the judgment and acknowledge the Son of God!...” Michael answered and said: “Hear Michael speaking!... you have consumed in vanity the time in which you ought to have repented.”⁶¹

The Quran repeatedly reports the bitter regrets of the inhabitants of hell over their past sins and erroneous beliefs (23:106–8; 26:96–102; 67:9–11; passim). In 43:74–77 they address their woes to one of God's helpers in hell:

- 43:74 The sinners will remain for ever in the torment of *jahannam*.
 43:75 There will be no abatement for them
 and they are in despair at it.
 43:76 We have not wronged them—
 they have wronged themselves.
 43:77 They proclaim, “Oh *m-l-k*,
 let your Lord be finished with us!”
 He replies, “You will linger.”

57 *Apocalypse of Paul* 634.

58 *Ibid.*, 636; *Apocalypse of Peter* 604. Cf. Andrae, *Ursprung* 73–6.

59 *Apocalypse of Paul* 626. On the angel Tartaruchus, whose name is derived from Gr. *temeloukhos* (“care-taking”), see Rosenstiehl, Tartarouchos.

60 *Apocalypse of Peter* 608.

61 *Apocalypse of Paul* 638.

The word in 43:77 that I have left untranslated here is usually vocalized as *mālik* (“possessor, master”) and understood as a proper name. Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), in his account of the Prophet’s ascension (*miʿrāj*), relates that Mālik is the “master of the Fire” (*ṣāhib al-nār*).⁶² As the leader of hell’s myrmidons, Mālik is the most powerful of them. The popular preacher (*qāṣṣ*) Muḥammad b. Kaʿb (d. between 117–20/735–38) imagined him, like the chief warder in a panopticon, sitting on an elevated position in the center of hell, “from where he can see its [hell’s] closest as well as farthest parts.”⁶³ According to a tradition related by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), Mālik has as many fingers as there are hell’s inhabitants, who are each tortured by one of his fingers.⁶⁴ The exegete Muqātil (d. 150/767) makes Mālik into the most prominent of the *kha-zana*, calling him “the [arch-]guardian of the Fire” (*khāzin al-nār*).⁶⁵ This is also how he is known in later tradition: as the unsmiling gate-keeper of hell, seen by the Prophet during his ascension.⁶⁶

Most Western translators of the Quran follow this view and render “Mālik” as a proper name (e.g., Arberry, Berque, Leemhuis, Paret), even though on occasion a translation of *mālik* as “master” is preferred (Pickthall, Jones). Paret explains that “Mālik” means “ruler (of hell), to be understood here as a proper name.” He also refers to Q 35:36–37, where the unbelievers in hell, who “will not die,” call out to God to alleviate their punishment.⁶⁷ The comparison with the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*, however, suggests that the dialogue in 77:43 unfolds between those who are punished in hell and an angel, not God. Q 35:36–7 is therefore not a close parallel.

The early codices (*maṣāḥif*), purported to go back to the first two centuries of Islam, offer all kinds of alternative spellings and vocalizations for *m-l-k*. Supposedly, Ibn Masʿūd and ʿAlī read *māli*, and they were followed in this by Ibn Yaʿmar and al-Rabīʿ b. Khuthaym. According to some others, Ibn Masʿūd and ʿAlī read *maliku*, as did al-Aʿmash. Still others remembered that Ibn Masʿūd,

62 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* i, 268. Mālik’s characteristic is that he does not smile when he sees the Prophet, unlike all the other angels. In this respect he is similar to the angel Mikāʾīl (Michael) who, according to a hadith, “has never smiled since the creation of the Fire.” See Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iii, 223.

63 Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ* xii, 78 (*ad* sura 23:105–6). According to the anonymous *Daqāʿiq al-akhbār*, Mālik “sits on a minbar of fire in the middle of Jahannam.” See *Daqāʿiq* 100 (tr. 178).

64 Suyūṭī, *Ḥabāʾik* 65 (# 229).

65 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* iii, 197.

66 See the mid-2nd/8th-century (?) *K. al-Miʿrāj* of Abū l-Ḥakam al-Jawālīqī, quoted in the *Tafsīr* of ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. ca. 307/919), translated in Buckley, *Night journey* 6–8, at 7. See also Baḥrānī, *Nuzhat* 396. On this text, cf. Modarressi, *Tradition* i, 269. For a Sunni attestation, see Suyūṭī, *Laʾāl* i, 64; idem, *Ḥabāʾik* 68 (# 239).

67 Paret, *Kommentar* 442.

‘Alī and Ibn Waththāb read *mālu*.⁶⁸ What this shows is that the earliest authorities for the transmission of the Quran had significant doubts about the correct reading of the word. While it is better to err on the side of caution, in this case one may wonder whether the correct reading of the *rasm* text is not simply *yā malak*, “O angel!” This reading would not only have the virtue of being considerably less complicated than what is offered in the *maṣaḥif* and in the *textus receptus*. It is a reading that makes sense if we imagine a situation in which the realization that the punishers in hell are angels, not some other class of beings, had just begun to dawn on the audience of the Quran.

If one is justified in thinking that the Quran gradually comes to discover angels as the agents of eschatological punishment, then those verses that talk about the “angel(s) of death” also belong in this third cluster. Q 32:11 states that “the angel of death (*malak al-mawt*) ... will seize you (*yatawaffākum*); then to your Lord you will be returned.” A number of other verses also describe how angels “seize” (*tawaffā*) the unbelievers (16:28, 16:32, 4:97). In two instances, the act of seizing is accompanied by additional beating on the faces and the backs (8:50, 47:27). As noted earlier, beating of the unbelievers’ faces and backs only occurs in this third cluster of ideas about the helpers of eschatological punishment. In contrast, the repellers’ characteristic punishment, in addition to force-feeding the sinners with *zaqqūm*, is to drag them over the ground (54:48), which appears to be related to the motif of grabbing them by their hair.

4 Conclusion

A first conclusion to be drawn from the material discussed here is simply that there exist three different clusters of Quranic verses that speak about the helpers of eschatological punishment. This is a taxonomy that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been proposed earlier in the scholarly literature. Methodologically speaking, it seems to me that to study thematic clusters in the Quran, rather than single words or verses, has important advantages. First of all, such an approach takes the wind out the sail of the argument that it is largely an arbitrary exercise to pinpoint sources for certain Quranic words or expressions in the literatures of the late antique context into which the Quran was born. For no longer do we examine atomistic instances, but currents of thought. What emerges from the foregoing discussion is a composite picture of hell’s angels in the Quran, related to a number of eschatological traditions current during the time when the Quran came into being. As scholars become increasingly sensitive to the theological landscape of the Near East at the time

68 Jeffery, *Materials* 88, 190, 303, 325.

of the proclamation of the Quran, one of the Quran's core concerns, namely, the afterlife, thus moves into sharper focus.

There are also lessons to be learned in regard to the question whether the three clusters described here can be brought into a logical, perhaps even a chronological sequence, as in fact has been suggested several times in the preceding discussion. In this regard, hell's angels in the Quran may once more fruitfully be compared to their heavenly counterparts, the *houris*. If one follows the chronology proposed by scholars working in the tradition of Nöldeke, it results that the second Meccan period sees the gradual disappearance of the *houris*, who are last mentioned in Q 44:54. At the same time, from the second Meccan period, the earthly wives of believers are explicitly included among the inhabitants of paradise (43:70). Eventually, in the Medinan period, they become "purified spouses" (*azwāj muṭahhara*, 2:25, 3:15, 4:57).⁶⁹ In the third Meccan period (13:23, 40:8), the "righteous" fathers and the children of the believers are brought in to complement the promise that families will enter paradise intact.⁷⁰ The family-oriented picture that thus emerges also corresponds to the fact that after the middle Meccan period the Quran offers no more descriptions of wine banquets in paradise.⁷¹

It appears that the repellers, hell's demonic counterparts of the heavenly *houris*, underwent a similar crisis of identity in the course of their Quranic career, gradually changing their profile. Initially acting as subterranean demons in hell, they are consequently degraded to mere keepers of hell, then to reappear, triumphantly, as angels, and to resume their shenanigans around the tree of *zaqqūm*. However, the existence of three thematically and lexically coherent clusters of hell's minions in the Quran does not necessitate that they follow upon each other chronologically. It might be suggested, instead, that these clusters belong to three different literary layers that the Quran's redactor(s) combined into a single text. This is a possibility that should be considered carefully. However, the fact that the clusters do not exist independently and side-by-side, but rather show traces of mutual contamination, of merging into one another, supports the idea of a relative chronology, that is, a development from cluster one, passing through cluster two and resulting in cluster three.

Is it possible to turn this relative chronology into an absolute one by attaching it to the shifting allegiances that mark the historical development of

69 These "purified spouses," as has been argued, cannot be the same as the *houris*. This is because the *houris*, as heavenly beings, are not in need of ritual cleansing.

70 Horovitz, *Paradies* 57. Already sura 52:21 promises that believers will be joined with their "offspring." This sura is held to be early Meccan, but verse 21, given its unusual length, has been identified by Nöldeke as a later insertion. See Nöldeke, *Geschichte* i, 105.

71 Horovitz, *Paradies* 58.

Qurānic theology? The repellers' crisis occurs in the late Meccan period, and the reason for their survival appears to be that they develop into angels. This conforms to the findings of Welch, who argues that the jinn and other deities drop out of the picture in the late Meccan and Medinan parts of the Qurān.⁷² Angels, as Bell asserts, "do not appear in the earliest part of the Qurān; they belong to the period of closer contact with Judaism and Christianity."⁷³ Even if belief in angels was common among the audience of the Qurān from the beginning of its proclamation,⁷⁴ the idea that they inhabit the netherworld only gradually takes shape. Punisher angels, sent to smite the enemies of God, figure prominently in the Hebrew Bible (cf., for example, Exodus 12:23; 2 Samuel 24:16; Isaiah 37:36) and may have been considered natural successors to the demonic helpers of eschatological punishment of the early Qurānic revelations, whose character traits were transferred to them, all the more so because the storehouse of eschatological images of post-biblical late antiquity also included examples of hell's guardians and hellish angels of punishment.⁷⁵

In the second or middle cluster considered here, one sees an increased willingness to speculate about the bestialization of hell. While the notion that hell is a bone-crushing monster (104:4) that "lies in ambush" (78:21) goes back to the earliest suras, the idea is further developed in the middle Meccan period, and the *khazana* appear as the minders of the hell-monster. It is also in the middle Meccan period, however, that the realization that the myrmidons of hell are in reality angels dawns on the Qurān. In fact, if my reading of 43:77 is correct, it is dramatically announced in the context of the sinners' plea to God's steward in hell to "make an end" of their lives. Simultaneously, the "angel of death" appears on the horizon.⁷⁶ It is from this point onwards that the combined picture of hell's angels as beings that "seize" the sinners, beat them on the faces and backs, and tell them to "taste" the torment of hell emerges and fully imposes itself. In sum, the three clusters of hell's minions in the Qurān broadly fit and thus confirm the Nöldekian understanding of the phases of development of the Qurān (cf. Table 4.1 below).

In post-Qurānic exegesis, the three types of hell's minions that one encounters in the Qurān are indiscriminately welded together. The repellers become

72 Welch, Allah 752.

73 Bell, Introduction 144.

74 Cf. Crone, Angels.

75 See Coblenz Bauch, Heavenly beings 467–71, who discusses instances in the Enoch literature, Dead Sea Scrolls, Rabbinic literature, and Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts. See also Himmelfarb, *Tours* 120–21.

76 This angel of death, as is well known, in later tradition developed into the figure of 'Izrā'īl. See Wensinck, 'Izrā'īl; MacDonald, Angel of death 489–96.

identified with the angels of death, the stewards of ‘Izrā’īl; they grab the soul of the poet Ādam b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, who predicts his wine-fuelled exit from this world; they are declared to be identical with the “harsh and severe angels” that reign over the tortured in hell (66:6);⁷⁷ and the nameless angel of 43:77 becomes Mālik, the foremost “keeper” (*khāzin*) of hell. The free use of this synthetic picture in the later tradition however conceals the birth pangs of hell’s angels in the Quran, who are born from several different traditions of eschatological thought.

TABLE 4.1 *The clusters of hell’s minions in the Quran: A developmental chart (numbers in square brackets refer to Nöldeke’s ordering of surahs)*

	<i>zabāniya</i>	<i>khazana</i>	hell as monster	hell’s angels
Early Meccan	96:18 [#1, <i>zabāniya</i>]			
	74:30 [#2, ‘nineteen’]		104:4 [#6, <i>huṭama</i>]	
	78:24 and 78:30 [#34, ‘taste’]		78:21 [#33, ‘ambush’]	
	88:5 [#35, ‘drink from a boiling spring’]			
	56:52–56: [#41, <i>zaqqūm</i> ’s ‘hospitality’]			?
	55:41 [#43, ‘seizing by feet and forelock’]			↓
Middle Meccan	54:48: [#49, dragging on faces, ‘taste’]		50:30 [#55, dialogue w/God]	

77 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* i, 201; Zabīdī, *Tāj*, s.v. *z-b-n* (from al-Zajjāj).

	<i>zabāniya</i>	<i>khazana</i>	hell as monster	hell's angels
	44:43–50 [#54, eat <i>zaqqūm</i> , 'taste']	67:8 [#64, of hell as monster]	67:7 [#64, <i>shahīq</i>]	43:77 [#62, <i>yā m-l-k</i>]
	38:57 [#60, 'let them taste']		25:12 [#67, <i>zafīr</i>]	
Late Meccan		39:71 [#81, of hell's gates]		32:11 [#71, 'angel of death seizes'] 16:28 [#74, 'angels seize']
Medinan	22:22 [#108, beating of faces, 'taste!']			74:31 [Medinan insertion: 'We appointed only angels'] 8:50 [#96, 'angels seize/beat faces/say: taste'] 47:27 [#97, 'angels seize/beat faces'] 4:97 [#101, 'angels seize'/interrogate] 66:6 [#110, 'harsh, severe angels']

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PART 2

Hell in Early and Medieval Islam



Locating Hell in Early Renunciant Literature

Christopher Melchert

Yūnus b. ‘Ubayd (d. 139/756–7) is said to have thus described al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728):

When he came, it was as if he had just buried one of his parents. When he sat, it was as if he had been a prisoner condemned to having his head struck off. When the Fire was mentioned before him, it was as if it had not been created for anyone but him.¹

Unsurprisingly, the renunciants (*zuhhād*) of the first three Islamic centuries often contemplated hell. For example, the Damascene Sa‘īd b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 168/784–5?) always wept at the ritual prayer, explaining that hell was always prepresented to him.² They looked for reminders of hell in the world. For example, it is said that the Yemeni Ṭāwūs (d. 106/724–5?) would sometimes walk through the market on his way to the mosque. If he saw heads roasting there, he could not sleep that night.³ Nevertheless, the literature of their sayings apparently mentions the contemplation of death more often than of hell, and elaborations on Quranic descriptions of hell are a little more common in Quranic commentaries and collections of prophetic hadith. The theme evidently illustrates how much renunciant concerns pervaded all of Islamic religious culture in the early centuries, but it also shows the renunciants more cautious about descriptions of hell than some others.

1 Sources

Our most voluminous sources for early piety are Abū Nu‘aym (d. 430/1038), *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), *al-Zuhd*, Ibn al-Mubārak

1 Al-Jāhiz, *Bayān* iii, 171. Something similar is attributed to ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd *apud* Aḥmad, *Jāmi’* i, 65–6.

2 Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* viii, 274.

3 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 375 449.

(d. 181/797), *al-Zuhd*, the *zuhd* and other sections of Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), *al-Muṣannaf*, and Hannād b. al-Sarī (d. 243/857), *al-Zuhd*.⁴ These are all from eminent traditionists (hadith experts) and provide more sayings than any source in the traditions of *adab* (e.g., the works of al-Jāhīz and Ibn Qutayba) and Sufism (e.g., the works of al-Sulamī and al-Khargūshī). These sources also include most of our earliest-attested quotations. (A partial exception is Ibn Abī 'l-Dunyā [d. 281/894], *Ṣifat al-nār*, a whole book in the *adab* tradition devoted to descriptions of hell. More on this below.) Moreover, traditionists seem to have been the most inclined to quote accounts of a piety that contradicted their own (here especially by contrast with the Sufis). Altogether, then, literature in the hadith tradition seems generally the least likely to reflect back projection from the ninth and later centuries. The first two of the sources just named are roughly arranged biographically, the rest topically, which of course makes it easier to find items in them dealing with hell.

The *Zuhd* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal is extant in a version of about 2,400 items, about one-third of which does not actually come through Aḥmad but only his son 'Abdallāh (d. 290/903), its evident compiler. Almost 750 more items may be added from quotations by Abū Nu'aym.⁵ The *Zuhd* of Ibn al-Mubārak is extant in two overlapping but fairly different recensions, of al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥasan al-Marwazī (d. 246/860–1), who lived in Mecca, and of Nu'aym b. Ḥammād (d. 228/843?), who lived in Egypt until he was dragged to Iraq and imprisoned for defiance of the caliph at the Inquisition. The modern editor of the *Zuhd* presents first 1,627 items from al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥasan, about 1,300 of them from Ibn al-Mubārak, then a further 436 items found in Nu'aym's recension but not al-Ḥusayn's.

Standard collections of hadith on all topics, such as the Six Books, include advice on renunciation; likewise some books of *adab*, such as Ibn Qutayba's *Uyūn al-akhbār*. They will be drawn on here when they overlap with specialized collections of renunciatory sayings. One book that I am inclined not to count as a specialized collection of renunciatory sayings, despite its title, is Asad b. Mūsā (d. Old Cairo, 212/827), *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, of which the standard edition is that of Raif Georges Khoury. Actually, this text begins with a *bāb al-zuhd* comprising four items but then proceeds to the first of many sections on hell comprising 38 items, followed by other sections on the Last Judgement comprising 61 items.

4 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Zuhd*; Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*; Hannād b. al-Sarī, *Zuhd*. For a list of over 60 early works on renunciation, including many not extant, see Ḥaydar's introduction to Bayhaqī, *Zuhd* 47–56, to be supplemented by the editor's introduction to Hannād, *Zuhd*, esp. 7.

5 Details in Melchert, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's book 349–53.

Therefore, the title *al-Zuhd* was probably taken from this one small section of a doubtfully complete manuscript. Asad b. Mūsā had a strong reputation for orthodoxy, a mixed one for hadith transmission, and none that I have observed in the biographies for renunciation.⁶ The book scarcely belongs to the literature of *zuhd* any more than, say, Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, which likewise includes a section on *zuhd*. Khoury believes that our text is probably a fragment of the one ascribed to Asad by Ibn Khayr al-Ishbīlī, *Kitāb al-Zuhd wa-l-'ibāda wa-l-wara'*.⁷ This is conceivable, but Khoury seems to assume too readily that the books we have from this period were assembled in the form that we have them by their reputed authors with stable titles. Compare his careless references to the *Kitāb al-Zuhd wa-l-raqā'iq* of Ibn al-Mubāarak, actually comprising the overlapping but not identical assemblages of two disciples to Ibn al-Mubāarak, as though they together constituted a single text directly from him.⁸ Asad b. Mūsā's book may legitimately be cited for ideas current in the ninth century; however, it should not be taken to document what particularly preoccupied renunciants as opposed to other hadith collectors.

2 Reminders of Hell

Various things in the world were taken as salutary reminders of hell. Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32/652–3?) melted some silver in the treasury, then sent a message to the people of the mosque, saying “Whoever wishes to look at *muhl*, let him look at this.”⁹ Harim b. Ḥayyān (fl. 1st/7th cent.) was governor of Basra for the caliph 'Umar. When some kinsmen appeared (presumptively looking for special favour), he lit a fire, then bade them approach him. They said, “By God, we cannot approach you, for the fire is between us and you.” He said, “Yet you wish to meet me in a greater fire than this, in Jahannam.” They went away.¹⁰ Similarly, Ibn Sīrīn and some comrades were sitting with the Kufan

6 See Khoury, Introduction to Asad, *Zuhd*, esp. 21–30. To Khoury's list of biographies, add Dhahabī, *Tārīkh* xv (211–229 H.), 69–70, with additional references.

7 Khoury, Introduction 39–41.

8 *Ibid.*, 38–9, 41.

9 Hannād, *Zuhd* i, 184–5, quoting Wakī' b. al-Jarrāḥ but not found in the extant collection of his, *Zuhd*. Ṭabarī presents another version of Ibn Mas'ūd's object lesson in his commentary *ad Q* 18:29; see Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'* viii, 218. According to the Quran, the sky on the Day of Judgement will resemble *muhl*, then the condemned will drink something like it (*Q* 18:29, 44:45, 70:8). It is usually taken to mean “molten metal,” but an alternative view interprets it as “blood and pus” (more on this below).

10 Ibn Sa'd, *Biographien* vii/1, 96 vii, 133; Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 232 284; Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* ii, 120.

Abū 'Ubayda b. Ḥudhayfa (*fl.* 1st/7th cent.) when a man came to him and said something the others did not catch. Abū 'Ubayda told the man, "I will ask you to put your finger in this fire", referring to a fire before them. The man refused. Then Abū 'Ubayda told him, "You withhold from me one of your fingers, yet you ask me to put my whole body into the fire of Jahannam." Ibn Sīrīn and his comrades supposed that the man had just offered Abū 'Ubayda a judgeship.¹¹

Sometimes hell was represented not merely by reminders but by fragments of itself. The Prophet said, "The fire of the sons of Adam that is used for fire is a seventieth of the fire of Jahannam."¹² Some such thought was probably behind the early call for ritual ablutions after eating anything touched by fire, abandoned by the third/ninth century.¹³ (Admittedly, there continued to be a ban on burying Muslims with anything flammable, such as wood, which must have been symbolic of what might be consumed by fire, not something that hellfire had actually touched.) Extreme weather also comes directly from hell. The Prophet said, "The Fire complained to God that part of it was consuming another, so God allowed it to exhale twice, so that the severest heat and cold are from it."¹⁴ One could apparently tell where the hell was, if not directly see it, by looking at the ocean. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said, "The sea is the Fire's cover

11 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 87, *kalām 'Ikrima*, xii, 413.

12 Hammām, *Ṣaḥīḥa* no. 14; Mālik, *Muwaṭṭa'*, recension of Yaḥyā al-Laythī, *jahannam, mā jā'a fi ṣīfat jahannam*; Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* (Nu'aym) no. 308; 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaḥ* xi, 423; Aḥmad, *Musnad* ii, 244, 467, 478 xii, 280–1, xiv, 492–3, xvi, 77–8; Hannād, *Zuhd* i, 167; Dārimī, *Sunan, al-raqā'iq, bāb fi qawl al-nabī ... nārakum hādhihi juz'*; Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, bad' al-khalq* 10, *bāb ṣīfat al-nār wa-annahā makhlūqa*, no. 3265; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-masājid* 32, *bāb istiḥbāb al-ibrād bi-l-zuhr*, nos. 180–4, also *al-janna, bāb fi shiddat ḥarr jahannam*, no. 2843; Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, *ṣīfat jahannam* 7, *bāb mā jā'a anna nārakum ...* no. 2589; Ibn Māja, *Sunan, al-zuhd* 38, *bāb ṣīfat al-nār*, no. 4318; Ibn Abi 'l-Dunyā, *Ṣīfa*, 58. Cf. the version in Aḥmad, *Musnad* ii, 378 xiv, 492–3, "This fire is a hundredth part of Jahannam."

13 See Katz, *Body* 102–23.

14 Hannād, *Zuhd* i, 169; Aḥmad, *Musnad* ii, 238, 277, 462, 503 xii, 188–90, xiii, 156, xvi, 37–8, 318; Mālik, *Muwaṭṭa'*, *al-ṣalāt* 7, *bāb al-nahy 'an al-ṣalāh bi-l-hājira*, no. 27; Bukhārī, *Jāmi'*, *mawāqit al-ṣalāt* 9, *bāb al-ibrād bi-l-zuhr*, no. 537, also *bad' al-khalq* 10, *bāb ṣīfat al-nār wa-annahā makhlūqa*, no. 3260; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-masājid* 32, *bāb istiḥbāb al-ibrād bi-l-zuhr*, nos 185–7; Dārimī, *Sunan, al-raqā'iq, bāb fi nafas al-jahannam*; Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, *ṣīfat jahannam* 9, *bāb mā jā'a anna lil-nār nafasayn*, no. 2592; Ibn Māja, *Sunan, al-zuhd* 38, *bāb ṣīfat al-nār*, no. 4319; Ibn Abi 'l-Dunyā, *Ṣīfa*, 58. The afternoon heat is also said to be part of hell in connection with delaying the afternoon prayer; e.g., Bukhārī, *Jāmi'*, *mawāqit al-ṣalāt* 9, *bāb al-ibrād bi-l-zuhr*, nos. 533–6, 10, *bāb al-ibrād bi-l-zuhr fi 'l-safar*, no. 539, and *bad' al-khalq* 10, *bāb ṣīfat al-nār wa-annahā makhlūqa*, nos. 3258–9. And the heat of a fever is also identified with hell; e.g., Bukhārī, *Jāmi'*, *bad' al-khalq* 10, *bāb ṣīfat al-nār wa-annahā makhlūqa*, no. 3261, and *al-ṭibb* 28, *bāb al-ḥumā min fayḥ jahannam*, nos. 5723, 5725–6.

(*al-baḥr ṭabaq al-nār*).¹⁵ This is apparently the background to reports that it was weakened by water, perhaps on the way to our world. The Prophet said, “This fire of yours is a 70th part of Jahannam. The fire was struck twice by the sea. If not for that, God would have made it of no use to anyone.”¹⁶ ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Amr (d. 63/683?), when sitting before a fire, would say if it leapt up, “By him in whose hand is my soul—it is taking refuge with God from the greatest fire.”¹⁷

Heroes of piety found their routines interrupted by the recollection of hell. Ibn Mas‘ūd fell down on seeing some smiths blowing the bellows and wept at the sight of a hot iron.¹⁸ (An anonymous worshipper was even said to have stopped to look at a forge, then sobbed and died on the spot.)¹⁹ ‘Āmir b. ‘Abd (al-)Qays (d. ca. 55/674–5) told a woman, “My daughter, Jahannam does not allow your father to sleep.”²⁰ Shaddād b. Aws (d. ca. 60/679–80) on his bed was like a grain of wheat on a frying pan, saying “O God, the Fire has prevented me from sleeping”; then he would get up for ritual prayer.²¹ The Kufan Abū Maysara (d. 63/682–3) is said to have taken to his bed and said, “Would that my mother had never borne me.” His wife said, “Abū Maysara: God has done well by you, having guided you to Islam.” He said, “Yes, but God has made it clear to us that we are bound for the Fire without making clear to us that we are going out of it”, alluding to Q 19:71, “There is none of you who will not go

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- 15 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 288 350. Or perhaps the reference is specifically to the surrounding sea at the edge of the world. The Prophet is said to have explained, “The sea is Jahannam,” then recited Q 18:29, which mentions surrounding although not the sea: Ibn Abi ‘l-Dunyā, *Ṣifa*, 70–1.
- 16 Aḥmad, *Musnad* ii, 244 xii, 280–1; similarly, Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, k. *al-zuhd* 38, *bāb ṣifat al-nār*, no. 4318. Attributed rather to the Companion Anas b. Mālik (d. 92/710–11?) by Hannād, *Zuhd* i, 167; Ibn Abi ‘l-Dunyā, *Ṣifa*, 59.
- 17 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 24, *kalām ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Amr*, xii, 255; similarly, Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* i, 289, quoting a lost portion of Aḥmad, *Zuhd* (addition < ‘Al.); similarly, Ibn Abi ‘l-Dunyā, *Ṣifa*, 58. Ibn Mas‘ūd is quoted as saying, “This fire of yours takes refuge [in God] from the fire of Jahannam.” See Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-janna wa-l-nār*, xii, 108; likewise Mujaḥhid: Ibn Abi ‘l-Dunyā, *Ṣifa*, 58.
- 18 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 73, xii, 371; Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 160, 163 200, 203. He is also said to have wept every time he passed by the smiths: Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 92, xii, 423.
- 19 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 92, xii, 425.
- 20 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 218 268; similarly, Ibn Abi ‘l-Dunyā, *Ṣifa*, 72–3. The same tradition is quoted of Sa‘īd b. Jubayr (Kufan, d. 95/714?) by Qushayrī, *Risāla, bāb ru’yā al-qawm fi ‘l-nawm*, tr. Knysh, 395, cited by Gramlich, *Weltverzicht* 324.
- 21 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 195 243 (< ‘Al.); Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 92, xii, 439.

down to it.”²² Ibn ‘Umar (d. 73/693?) would pause to pray (*yad‘ū*) when he recited in the course of his ritual prayer a verse that mentioned hell.²³ When some brethren engaged in the recollection of paradise, the Basran Muṭarrif b. al-Shikhhkīr (d. 95/713–14) said, “I do not know what you are saying. The recollection of the Fire has come between me and the Garden” (although he is also quoted as saying that the believer’s hope and fear should weigh the same).²⁴ The Yemeni Ṭāwūs and the roasting heads that kept him awake have been mentioned before. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī recounted a conversation alluding to Q 19:71: “O brother, have you heard that you are going to the Fire?” “Yes.” “Have you heard that you are going out of it?” “No.” “So what is there to laugh about?” The man was not seen laughing again until he died.²⁵ A friend came to visit the Basran ‘Aṭā’ al-Salīmī (*fl.* mid-2nd/8th cent.) and found him unconscious. His wife Umm Ja‘far explained, “Our neighbour lit the oven and he fell down in a faint.”²⁶ He could scarcely eat or drink from thinking on Jahannam.²⁷ ‘Alī b. Fuḍayl (d. bef. 187/803), son of the famous Meccan renunciant Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyāḏ, fainted on hearing a hadith report mentioning hell.²⁸

The most common explanation for weeping is regret for past sins, but hell is also directly mentioned. ‘Abdallāh b. Rawāḥa al-Anṣārī (d. 8/629) wept on being called out to *jihād*. He explained to his wife, “By God, I have not wept from fear of death ... but rather on account of God’s saying, ‘There is none of you who will not go down to it [Q 19:71].’ I am sure I am going down to it, but I do not know whether I shall escape or not.”²⁹ Abū Hurayra (d. 58/677–8) wept in his death illness not over the world but uncertainty whether he would be taken to the Garden or the Fire.³⁰ The Kufan Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī (d. 96/714?), on being found weeping, explained that he was uncertain whether the angel of

22 Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* no. 312; Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* iv, 141; similarly, Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 45, xii, 296. Quran translations by Jones, *The Qur‘ān*.

23 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 193 241.

24 Ibid., 239 293; Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* ii, 202.

25 Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* no. 311; similarly, Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd*, *kalām al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*, xii, 360. A man named al-Ghazwān, probably Syrian, reportedly resolved not to laugh until he knew whether he was bound for the Garden or the Fire. He also did not laugh until he died: Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* (Nu‘aym) no. 324.

26 Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* vi, 218. Alternatively, one might read *jāriyatunā*, “our serving girl.”

27 Ibid., 219.

28 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 172 215.

29 Wakī‘, *Zuhd* i, 260–1; Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* i, 118–19; similarly (without mention of *jihād*), Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* nos. 309–10; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 26, *kalām ‘Abdallāh b. Rawāḥa*, xii, 257; Hannād, *Zuhd* i, 163; Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 200 249.

30 Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* (Nu‘aym) no. 154; Ibn Sa‘d, *Biographien* iv/2, 62–3 iv, 339; Ibn Qutayba, *‘Uyūn* ii, 309; *Ḥilya* i, 383; similarly, Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 178 223.

death would announce he was heading for the Garden or the Fire.³¹ In a long comment on Q 25:63, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī says that the believers weep from fear of the Fire.³² “By God, that by which they have sought the Garden does not seem great in their souls. The fear of the Fire has made them weep.”³³ Yazīd b. Marthad, a Damascene Follower, could scarcely eat for weeping, and made his wife and children weep with him. He explained that he would have been justified to weep continually had God merely threatened to imprison him in the bath-house (*ḥammām*) for disobedience, so how much more at the threat of imprisonment in the Fire?³⁴ ‘Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (Basran, d. 177/793–4?) explained that he wept from fear of the Fire.³⁵

Some renunciants are remembered for seeking out reminders of hell. Harim b. Ḥayyān and the Companion Ḥumama would go by day to the perfume market and pray to God for paradise, then go to the smiths and pray for refuge from the Fire before parting.³⁶ The Companion Abu ‘l-Dardā’ (d. 32/652–3?) would blow on the fire under the pot until the tears flowed.³⁷ The Companions Abu ‘l-Dardā’, Abū Hurayra, and Ibn ‘Umar are all quoted as saying, “What a good house a bath is. It takes away filth and reminds one of the Fire.”³⁸ Al-Aḥnaf b. Qays (*mukhadram*, d. 67/686–7?) would draw the lamp near him, then put his finger to it, saying “Feel, O Aḥnaf! What carried you to doing such-and-such today?”³⁹ The Basran Mālik b. Dīnār (d. ca. 130/747–8) would have liked to make people think constantly about hell. “By God,” he said, “if I were able not to sleep, I would not sleep for fear of the descent of torment while I was sleeping. By God, if I had some helpers, I would distribute them among the minarets of the world calling out, ‘O people, the Fire! the Fire!’”⁴⁰ He himself was seen facing the *qibla*, grasping his beard and saying, “O my lord, deny Mālik’s grey hairs to the Fire.”⁴¹

31 Ibid., 364 437; by another *isnād*, Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* no. 437; by another, Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* iv, 224. Similarly, Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 83, *ḥadīth Ibrāhīm*, xii, 397.

32 Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* no. 397.

33 Ibid., no. 531; but quotation in Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* ii, 153, has instead “the fear of God.”

34 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 382 458; shorter version in Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* no. 481.

35 Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* vi, 160–1.

36 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 231 282.

37 Ibid., 138 172.

38 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-ṭahāra* 131, *man rakkhaṣa fī dukhūl al-ḥammām*, i, 200–1. Also attributed in a Shi‘i source to ‘Alī: Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, k. *al-zī wa-l-tajammul*, *bāb al-ḥammām*, vi, 496.

39 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 235 287 (addition < ‘Al.).

40 Ibid., 319 387.

41 Ibid., 325 393.

3 Contemplating Hell

Unsurprisingly, those who behaved badly might be threatened with hell. Moses asked God why he created people whom he would torment in hell. God instructed him to sow and tend a field. When he had harvested, God asked him, "Have you left anything of it?" Moses said, "What has no good in it or I have no need of." God said, "Likewise, I do not torment anyone except one who has no good in him or of whom I have no need."⁴² Protracted descriptions of hell are ascribed to the *mukhaḍram* Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 34/655?), a Yemeni said to have converted from Judaism.⁴³ The Yemeni Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 114/732–3?) is recalled as quoting the prophet David, "My lord, I have no patience with the heat of your sun, so how can I be patient with your Fire? My lord, I have no patience with the sound of your mercy (meaning thunder), so how can I be patient with the sound of your torment?"⁴⁴ Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) is quoted as warning, "Do not hold God in contempt, lest he cast you down in the Fire on your face", with allusion to Q 27:90, "Those who come with evil will be cast face first into the Fire."⁴⁵ The Companion Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (d. 50/670–1?) said, "Whoever follows the Quran, it will drop him in the pastures of the Garden. Whomever the Quran follows, it will throw him down on his nape, then hurl him into Jahannam."⁴⁶ Abū Hurayra advised a daughter, "Do not wear something decorated with gold, for I fear for you the flame (*mudhahhab, lahab*). Do not wear silk, for I fear for you the fire (*ḥarīr, ḥarīq*)."⁴⁷ The Basran Bakr b. 'Abdallāh al-Muzanī (d. 106/724–5?) warned, "Who sins laughing will enter the Fire weeping."⁴⁸ The Basran Muḥammad b. Wāsi' (d. 123/740–1) said he had heard that someone who himself failed to do as he had commanded and forbidden others to do would be thrown into the Fire, where his intestines

42 Ibid., 87–8 110–11.

43 E.g., Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*; k. *al-zuhd* 73, xii, 385–6 (faces to be blackened or whitened, and so on); Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* v, 368–71 (a series of stories in which 'Umar asks of Ka'b, "Make us afraid," to which he responds with descriptions of paradise and hell); *ibid.*, vi, 10–12 (ʿĪsā describes the seven levels of hell that he was allowed to see); *ibid.*, vi, 37–42 (God details to Mūsā the rewards and punishments due various categories of the obedient and disobedient). For Ka'b's conversion, see Ibn Sa'd, *Biographien* vii/2, 156 vii, 445.

44 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 71 90. Although less often than Ayyūb, David is sometimes credited with being the most patient of people: *Ibid.*, 84 106.

45 *Ibid.*, 110 137.

46 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*; k. *al-zuhd* 37, *kalām Abī Mūsā*, xii, 279.

47 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 153 192 (addition < 'Al.).

48 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* ii, 229, vi, 185, quoting a lost portion of Aḥmad, *Zuhd* (addition < 'Al.).

would be drawn about him as turns a mill stone.⁴⁹ The Damascene Bilāl b. Sa'd (d. bef. 125/743) warned, "Many a man is mistakenly pleased, not realizing that as he eats, drinks, and laughs, by God's decree he is rightly fuel for the Fire."⁵⁰ The Basran Abū 'Imrān al-Jawnī (d. 128/745–6?), recalled, "We were in the mosque when a shaykh stood up before us and said, 'By God, O people of the mosque, God will certainly use you to complete the number of the people of the Garden or the number of the people of the Fire,' making us weep."⁵¹ One 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Mikhmar warned from the *minbar*, "Woe betide the one who gathers but keeps his gains from people. ... They will carry him to a valley in Jahannam called Law."⁵² (*Law* here is probably the Arabic particle used in its optative sense, as in, say, *awaddu law akūnu sakhīyyan*, "Would that I were generous." Compare the Prophet's saying, "Beware of *law*, for it opens up the work of Satan.")⁵³

Renunciant literature also quotes not preachers but experimenters in contemplating hell for themselves. Ibrāhīm al-Taymī (Kufan, d. 92/710–11) recounted,

I imagined my soul in the Fire, experiencing its boiling and flaming, eating of its *zaqqūm* (Q 37:62, 44:43, 56:52) and drinking of its *zamharīr* (Q 76:13). I said to my soul, "O soul, what do you wish?" It said, "Return to the world and do a deed by which I may escape from this punishment." Then I imagined my soul in the Garden with its houris, wearing its *sundus*, its *istibriq* (Q 18:31, 44:53, 76:21), and its silk. I said, "O soul, what do you wish?" It said, "Return to the world and do a deed such that I can have more of this reward." I said, "You are in the world and safe."⁵⁴

Yazīd b. Abān (Basran *qāṣṣ*, d. bef. 120/737–8) made himself thirsty in the Basran heat for forty years. He said to his companions, "Come, let us weep over cold water" (presumably contemplating the torment of hell).⁵⁵ 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd similarly called for his brethren to weep over cold water in

49 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 377–451.

50 Ibid., 385–6 462 (addition < 'Al.).

51 Ibid., 313 380 (addition < 'Al.).

52 Abū Dāwūd, *Zuhd* 260, no. 519 (Syrian *isnād*).

53 Among other places, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *al-qadar*, *bāb bayān anna al-ājāl...*, no. 6774; Ibn Māja, *al-muqaddima* 10, *bāb fi 'l-qadar*, no. 79; *ibid.*, *al-zuhd* 14, *bāb al-tawakkul*, no. 4168. For the grammar, see Wright, *Grammar* ii, 347–8.

54 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 363 434 (addition < 'Al.).

55 Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn* ii, 297; Abū Nu'aym, *Hilya* iii, 50. Cf. also a report that the Basrans Budayl (d. 130/747–8?), Shumayṭ or Sumayṭ, and Kahmas (d. 149/766–7?) met together in

this world, hoping it might be served them in the afterlife.⁵⁶ Dāwūd al-Ṭā'ī (Kufan, d. 165/781–2?) repeated all night a verse of the Quran that mentioned hell. By morning he was ill and remained so for days, until he was found dead.⁵⁷ Sa'īd b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, for whom hell was always prepresented, has been mentioned before.

Al-Muḥāsibī (Basran, d. Baghdad? 243/857–8) is the most famous theorist of renunciation. He calls for contemplation (*tafakkur*) of hell and describes it at some length in his main work, *al-Ri'āya li-ḥuqūq Allāh*.

When he thinks about the threat to frighten himself of the great extent of his punishment, when the extent of the torment becomes great in his heart, then fear rages such as he cannot control. ... As the one feeding the fire adds fuel below the boiling pot, the longer the fuel lasts, the fiercer is the boiling. So likewise the servant: so long as thinking to make himself fear the punishment, the number of the terrors, and the great questioning, along with knowing how great a claim God has and how it is incumbent to obey him, whereas he has wasted that, his fear rages.⁵⁸

In *al-Ba'th wa-l-nushūr*, on the Resurrection, al-Muḥāsibī restricts his discussion to the terrors of the Last Judgement, not actually hell.⁵⁹ (Many renunciant sayings stress terror at the prospect precisely of standing before God at the Last Judgement rather than hell. A leading advantage of the doctrine of purgatorial pains, “the torment of the tomb”, is that it allows Muslims to be threatened with punishment while maintaining the dogma that all Muslims will be saved. Nevertheless, references to purgatorial pains in early renunciant literature are rare. See for example a story from the Kufan 'Amr b. Shuraḥbīl [d. 63/682–3] of an outstandingly scrupulous man who was surprised, after dying, to find himself flogged and his grave consumed by fire. It was explained that he had once performed a ritual prayer without duly renewing his ritual

the house of one of them and said, “Come, today, for us to weep over cold water.” See Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* vi, 213, quoting a lost portion of Aḥmad, *Zuhd* (addition < 'Al.).

56 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* vi, 161.

57 Ibid., vii, 340. There is also a story of his being found inside on a hot evening, even though his house was as hot as a bath. At first he ignored his visitors' complaining, then he ordered them to go out into the court. There he reminded them of some Quranic torments, especially being struck by hooked iron rods (*maqāmī'*, with allusion to Q 22:21). After this he lost consciousness, whereupon his guests left: Ṣaymarī, *Akhbār*, 110.

58 Muḥāsibī, *Ri'āya*, 29 71.

59 Muḥāsibī, *Ba'th*.

purity and forbore to help a poor man who had importuned him.)⁶⁰ In *Kitāb al-Tawahhum*, al-Muḥāsibī calls for imagining death, being called to assembly at the Last Judgement, and the torment of the condemned, among other things, although these terrors are balanced by an equally long section on the attractions of paradise. “Imagine your passing over the bridge in severity of terror and weakness of body, even if you should have fainted, being unforgiven, without knowing whether your foot had slipped from the path.”⁶¹

It must be conceded, however, that contemplation of death comes up more often than of hell. The Prophet, on hearing Companions praising someone, asked, “How is his recollection of death?” They said, “He is not like that.” Prophet: “Then he is not as you say.”⁶² The Prophet said to one of the *anṣār*, “I commend to you the recollection of death, for it will make you forget the matter of the world.”⁶³ Abu ‘l-Dardā’ said, “Whoever recollects death, his envy diminishes and likewise his joy.”⁶⁴ “Consider yourselves among the dead” was some of his advice.⁶⁵ Sa‘d b. Abī Waqqāṣ (Companion, d. 55/674–5) told his son, “When you wish to pray, perform the ritual ablution well and pray such a prayer as if you think you will never pray another after it.”⁶⁶ Al-Rabī‘ b. Khuthaym (Kufan, d. 63/682–3?) advised, “Often remember this death whose like you have never before tasted.”⁶⁷ “If recollection of death departed from my heart for a moment (*sā‘atan*), it would be corrupted.”⁶⁸ Yazīd b. Sharīk (Kufan, d. 65–86/685–705) or his son Ibrāhīm (d. 92/710–11) was unable to have sex with his wife from recollection of death.⁶⁹ Many more examples might be quoted.⁷⁰ It is difficult to be certain, but the recollection of death seems to be recommended chiefly

60 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, k. *al-zuhd* 45, xii, 296–7. For examples of terror at the prospect of standing before God, see Melchert, *Exaggerated fear* 287–8, 290–4.

61 Muḥāsibī, *Tawahhum* 415.

62 Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 17 24, with an *isnād* that skips from Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna to the Prophet.

63 Nu‘mān, *Da‘ā‘im* i, 221. Similarly, the Prophet on the best of people: “The one who most recollects death is the readiest for it.” See *ibid.*, i, 221. *Da‘ā‘im al-islām* is mainly a book of law, not renunciation; however, we have no alternative sources for early Ismā‘īli piety, and it illustrates the pervasiveness of renunciant piety that a book of laws should include a section on *dhikr al-amr bi-dhikr al-mawt*.

64 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, k. *al-zuhd* 13, *kalām Abi ‘l-Dardā’*, xii, 219; similarly, by two alternative *asānīd*, Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* i, 220; similarly, Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* (Nu‘aym) no. 149.

65 Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* no. 115; Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 134–5 168.

66 *Ibid.*, 182 227.

67 Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya* ii, 114.

68 *Ibid.*, ii, 116.

69 *Ibid.*, iv, 210.

70 For some, see Gramlich, *Weltverzicht* 140–5.

for the sake of two aims. First, it should promote detachment from the world, since one will not remain in it for long. Secondly, it should promote fervent devotions, since one dare not depend on accumulating credit in the future. It thus overlaps with exhortations to restrict one's plans and hopes to the short term (*qiṣar al-amal*).

Indeed, fairly few sayings about hell dwell on such details as are to be found in the Quran. "On the day when [the gold and silver] will be heated up in the fire of Jahannam and their foreheads, sides and backs will be branded with them" (Q 9:35a). "Behind him is Jahannam, [where] he is given pus-like water to drink. He sips it but can hardly swallow it" (Q 14:16–17a). "We have prepared for the wrong-doers a fire, whose pavilion encloses them. If they ask for showers of rain, they will receive showers of water like molten copper which will roast their faces. How evil a drink; how evil a resting-place" (Q 18:29). And so on and so on. Renunciant literature does sometimes quote glosses on the terrors of hell. For example, Muṭarrif b. al-Shikhkhīr explained of Q 37:55 ("He looks down and sees him in the midst of hell"), "He saw them with boiling skulls. ..."71 But such quotations are surprisingly hard to find.

4 The Extent of Renunciant Interest in Hell

Content analysis shows that renunciant literature is highly miscellaneous. Analysis of a sample of 163 items randomly chosen from Ibn al-Mubārak, *al-Zuhd*, recension of al-Ḥusayn al-Marwazī, shows that *recommendations of ritual prayer* constitute the category best represented. *Restricted eating and drinking* is mentioned about half as often, likewise *hell* and *paradise*, each with about 5 percent of all items. This shows that hell, while far from being the principal thing renunciants talked about (or at least that collectors of renunciant sayings put down), was something they thought about as often as almost anything else.⁷² The recension of Nu'aym b. Ḥammād includes 436 items not in that of al-Ḥusayn al-Marwazī. Both recensions feature topical arrangement but only Nu'aym's has separate sections on paradise and hell. The section on

71 Abū Nu'aym, *Hilya* ii, 201.

72 Cf. a content analysis of items quoted of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *al-Zuhd*: "In a content analysis of a random sample of 117 quotations from Abū Nu'aym, the category best represented is *rejection of worldly goods*. ... This is followed by items *praising particular individuals* in fairly general terms. ... Of *ritual activities*, prayer (*ṣalāh*) is the single one most often commended; of *austerities*, restricted eating and drinking." See Melchert, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's book 358.

the description of paradise runs nos. 227–85 (59 items, 5% or less), while the section on the description of hell runs nos. 286–346 (61 items, 5% or less).⁷³ Hannād b. al-Sarī, *al-Zuhd*, is likewise arranged topically and includes sections on paradise and hell. It appears to have somewhat more on paradise and hell than other collections, the section dealing with the former comprising nos. 9–194 (186 items, 13% of the whole book), the latter nos. 205–319 (115, 8% of the total).

Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, includes 800 items in a *kitāb al-duʿāʾ* within. In a randomly-chosen sample of 100, only one mentions hell: “Protect us from the torment of the Fire.”⁷⁴ One in the sample mentions “Your torment of the unbelievers”, two paradise. The *Muṣannaḥ* also includes about 1,500 items in a *kitāb al-zuhd* within, presenting very much the same sort of material as fills up the *Zuhd* books attributed to Ibn al-Mubārak and Aḥmad. Ibn Abī Shayba concentrates sayings about paradise and hell in a separate book, though, comprising the three subsections *mā dhukira fi ʿl-janna* (“what has been said of the Garden”) with 165 items, *mā dhukira fi ʿl-nār* (“what has been said of the Fire”) with 83, and *mā dhukira fi saʿat raḥmat Allāh* (“what has been said of the wideness of God’s mercy”), with 28. If the section on hell were added to the book on renunciation, it would comprise about 5 percent of the total. Thus, sections on paradise and hell are either in balance (Ibn al-Mubārak as collected by Nuʿaym) or the one on paradise preponderates (Hannād, Ibn Abī Shayba).

Quranic glosses seem to be unusually prominent in these sections on hell. They comprise 30 percent of the section on hell in Nuʿaym’s additions to the *Zuhd*, 22 percent of all of Nuʿaym’s additions. To a yet greater extent, the proportion of Quranic glosses in Hannād’s section on hell is higher than in the book as a whole, 51 percent as opposed to 9. Quranic glosses make up 30 percent of Ibn Abī Shayba’s chapter on hell, 11 percent of his *kitāb al-zuhd*. There is some overlap with the literature of Quranic commentary. For example, of 59 explanations from Hannād of Quranic passages describing hell, 35 (59%) are also in al-Ṭabarī’s Quran commentary.

73 “Or less” requires a gloss. The editor does not tell us how many items make up Nuʿaym’s collection. It must include at least the 436 numbered items at the end plus the 650 or so in al-Ḥusayn’s recension for which he remarks textual variants in Nuʿaym’s. Five percent of Nuʿaym’s recension represents a maximum estimate, based on the assumption that only items in al-Ḥusayn’s recension for which the editor remarks textual variants are also in Nuʿaym’s.

74 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-duʿāʾ* 30, *man yuḥibbu idhā daʿā an yaqūla rabbanā ...*, x, 59.

Given many shocking images of hell in the Quran, I thought to look up the three passages quoted above about the terrors of hell in al-Ṭabarī's Quran commentary to see whether there were any typical differences. Regarding the first, Q 9:35a, al-Ṭabarī begins with some paraphrases of his own. Then he quotes the Companion Abū Dharr by a Basran *isnād*: "Give those who store up treasure tidings of branding (*kayy*) on the forehead, branding on the side, and branding on the back, until the heat penetrates to the interior." Next come three more stories, again with Basran *isnāds*, in which an anonymous man in rough clothing preaches the same message in the mosque of Medina. In one version, his hearers react sullenly, for which he rebukes them: "They do not understand."⁷⁵

Al-Ṭabarī's treatment of the next passage, Q 14:16–17a, likewise begins with comments from al-Ṭabarī, first glosses of words, then grammatical explanations. He says that *mā' ṣadīd* ("pus-like water" in Jones's translation) means pus and blood. This is followed by quotation of those who said so: Mujāhid, by three *isnāds*, then Qatāda by two, saying it means "what runs from his flesh and skin", then al-Ḍaḥḥāk, saying it means "what comes from the interior of the unbeliever, a mixture of pus and blood." Finally, he quotes an elaboration from the Prophet of the next phrase: "When he drinks it, it cuts up his intestines until they come out of his rear."⁷⁶ None of these, on Q 9:35a and 14:16–17a, have I found in collections of renunciant sayings, including the last, although it has Ibn al-Mubārak in the *isnād*. A partial exception is a gloss not quoted by al-Ṭabarī that appears in Ibn Abī Shayba, *kitāb al-janna wa-l-nār* (not *al-zuhd*), from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: "If a bucket of the *ṣadīd* of Jahannam were poured from heaven so that its odour reached the people of the earth, it would spoil the world for them."⁷⁷

Ṭabarī's treatment of Q 18:29 begins not with philological notes but a discussion of predestination, quoting with *isnāds* Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, and Ibn Zayd. Then he quotes three glosses on *ṣurādiq* ("pavilion" in Jones's translation): a wall of fire according to Ibn 'Abbās, smoke according to an anonymous man, and an ocean according to the Prophet. Then comes the story of Ibn Mas'ūd and the treasury to introduce six glosses on *muhl* ("molten copper" in Jones's translation).⁷⁸ I have found one of these items in major collections of renunciant sayings, namely the story of Ibn Mas'ūd—the rest not. (By comparison,

75 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'* vi, 363, *ad* Q 9:35.

76 *Ibid.*, vii, 428–30, *ad* Q 14:16–17.

77 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*; k. *al-janna wa-l-nār* 2, *mā dhukira fīmā u'idda li-ahl al-nār*, xii, 108. Ibn Abi 'l-Dunyā offers a slightly different version: "There would be no one left on the face of the Earth but who had died" (*Sifat al-nār*, 38).

78 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'* viii, 216–19, *ad* Q 18:29.

al-Ṭabarī's younger contemporary al-Māturīdī [d. 333/944–5] devotes as much space to glosses and paraphrases but usually quotes his authorities anonymously, never with *isnāds*, and more often summarizes. For example, he says of Q 18:29 that most say *muhl* means the dregs of oil or juice. Some say the point of comparison is its thickness, some its blackness, al-Ḥasan and Abū Bakr its mixing different colours.)⁷⁹

I also tried the reverse for one gloss from Ibn al-Mubārak. With an Egyptian *isnād*, he quotes the Prophet as saying, "If a bucket of *ghislīn* were poured out in the world, it would befoul the people of the world."⁸⁰ This glosses a word in Q 69:36 ("Nor any food except filth"). Ṭabarī first glosses it by saying some Basrans describe *ghislīn* as what flows from a wound or the anus. With an *isnād*, then, he gives Ibn 'Abbās' gloss that it means *ṣadīd*, "serum"; by another *isnād* that Ibn 'Abbās said it was what came out of their flesh; by an *isnād* from Qatāda that it means the worst, foulest, and most revolting food; and finally by an *isnād* from Ibn Zayd that no one knows what *ghislīn* and *zaqqūm* are.⁸¹ Oddly, he quotes the hadith report through Ibn al-Mubārak not here but apropos of Q 78:25: "If a bucket of *ghassāq* were poured out in the world, it would befoul the people of the world."⁸² The version with *ghassāq* instead of *ghislīn* also appears in the hadith collections of al-Tirmidhī and Aḥmad, perhaps confirming the sensibleness of Ibn Zayd's agnosticism; that is, suggesting that the interpretation of these torments of hell was fairly arbitrary.⁸³ The similarity

79 Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt*, v, 363–4, vi, 377–8, vii, 167, *ad* Q 9:35, 14:16–17, 18:29.

80 Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* (Nu'aym) no. 316c. Also *apud* Asad, *Zuhd* 61, not through Ibn al-Mubārak but through his shaykh, Ibn Lahī'a.

81 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'* xii, 221–2, *ad* Q 69:36.

82 *Ibid.*, xii, 407, *ad* Q 78:25. Quoted of the Prophet by Asad ibn Mūsā, *Zuhd* 61. *Ghassāq* is the reading favoured by the Kufan readers Ḥamza and al-Kisā'ī, also 'Āsim according to one *riwāya*. The rest of the seven favour *ghasāq*. *Ghassāq/ghasāq* also occurs at Q 38:57, on which occasion al-Ṭabarī provides yet more glosses but not the hadith report through Ibn al-Mubārak. Hannād b. al-Sarī offers three glosses, from 'Aṭīyya (b. Sa'd, Kufan, d. 111/729–30), Mujaḥid, Abū Razīn (Mas'ūd b. Mālik, Kufan, d. 85/704–5), and Abū 'l-Āliya (Basran, d. 90/807?), only the last of whom is the least prominent as a renunciant: Hannād, *Zuhd* i, 186–7. Ibn Abi 'l-Dunyā quotes in turn the Prophet and Ibn 'Abbās (by Egyptian and mixed Kufan/Meccan *isnāds*, respectively): "If a bucket of *ghassāq* were poured out in the world, it would befoul the people of the world" (*Ṣifāt al-nār*, 37–8). Admittedly, Ibn Abi Shayba does include a gloss on *ghassāq* as it appears in Q 78:25 from the Kufan Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī in his *k. al-zuhd*: "It is what drips from their skins and flows from their scrapes (*bashr*)."⁸³ See Ibn Abi Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 83, *ḥadīth Ibrāhīm*, xii, 397. Ibrāhīm is most famous as a jurispudent but renunciant sayings are also often quoted of him.

83 Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*; *ṣifāt jahannam* 4, *bāb mā jā'a fī ṣifāt sharāb ahl al-nār*, no. 2584; Aḥmad, *Musnad* iii, 28, 83 xvii, 231–2, xviii, 310–11.

to al-Ḥasan's reported comment on *ṣadīd* suggests that the identification of speakers might also be arbitrary.

Here are al-Ṭabarī's leading authorities in descending order of frequency of citation:⁸⁴

1. Mujāhid b. Jabr, Meccan (d. 103/721–2?);
2. Qatāda b. Dī'āma, Basran (d. 117/735–6?);
3. 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās, Companion (d. Ta'if, 68/687–8);
4. al-Suddī, Kufan (d. 127/744–5);
5. al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī;
6. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam, Medinese (d. 182/798–9);
7. al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim, Kufan (d. 106/724–5?);
8. Muḥammad the Prophet;
9. Sa'īd b. Jubayr, Kufan (d. 95/714?);
10. 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd, Companion;
11. 'Ikrima b. 'Abdallāh, Medinese (d. 107/725–6?).

Al-Ḥasan is very prominent in renunciatory literature and had a high reputation as a preacher. Al-Jāḥiz, who should have been an expert judge, states, "As for orations (*khuṭab*), we do not know of anyone who came before al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in them."⁸⁵ He expressly identifies both al-Ḥasan and his brother Sa'īd as early *quṣṣās*.⁸⁶ One might have expected the *quṣṣās*, popular preachers in the mosques, to have delighted in elaborating on the torments of hell. An example has been quoted from the obscure 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mikhmar. By and large, however, this is not the part of their preaching that made its way into the specialized literature of renunciation. Of the foregoing eleven names, six rate separate sections in Ibn Abī Shayba's *kitāb al-zuhd*, for example, but the rest do not (including a majority of the Followers on the list). The section devoted to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in Aḥmad, *al-Zuhd* includes 228 sayings, including glosses on 30 verses of the Quran. Two of those glosses have to do with hell: how often people in hell will have their skins burnt off and replaced, as promised in Q 4:56, and the length of the *ahqāb* in Q 78:23.⁸⁷ It appears again that it was not the leading renunciators of the early eighth century who dominated the elaboration of Quranic descriptions of hell.

84 Based on an unpublished paper by Ismail Lala.

85 Al-Jāḥiz, *Bayān* i, 354.

86 Ibid., 367. Al-Ḥasan and his Kufan contemporary Sa'īd b. Jubayr are especially remarked for preaching (*kāna al-Ḥasan yaquṣṣ*) in Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 215 264 (addition < 'Al.)

87 Ibid., 269 329 (addition < 'Al.), 288 351.

Quran commentary is closer to the tradition of *adab* than to that of *zuhd*, as shown by al-Ṭabarī's interest in philology and grammar. Ibn Abi 'l-Dunyā, *Ṣifat al-nār*, comprises 259 items (by the editor's count, excluding a few long descriptions from an unnamed contemporary), all of them of course having to do with the description of hell; that is, over twice as many as in the section on hell in Hannād, *al-Zuhd*, four times as many as in the section on hell in Ibn al-Mubārak, *al-Zuhd* (recension of Nu'aym). Forty-two percent of all items are glosses on the Quran. However, it might be a mistake to generalize from al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Abi 'l-Dunyā about greater interest in hell in the tradition of *adab*. Abū 'Ubayd (d. 224/838–9?), *al-Khuṭab wa-l-mawā'iz*, comprises 145 items from prophets, early scriptures, and the last prophet's Companions. Just one mentions hell: "I have not seen the like of the Fire, the one fleeing which is asleep, nor the like of the Garden, the one seeking which is asleep."⁸⁸ (I take it this is a joke—the Fire should be sufficiently frightening that no one can sleep who is threatened by it, the Garden sufficiently attractive that no one can sleep who has a chance of gaining it.)⁸⁹ Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889?), *Uyūn al-akhbār*, includes a section on renunciation comprising about 400 items. I have noticed very few that mention hell. One quotes al-Khansā', a poetess who survived into the Islamic period: "I used to weep over Ṣakhr because of his being killed, but now I weep over him on account of the Fire." Another quotes Abu 'l-Dardā' as saying that three things make him laugh and three weep, the last of those making him weep being the thought of standing at the Last Judgement before God, not knowing whether he will go to the Garden or the Fire.⁹⁰ Yet another has been noted above, namely Abū Hurayra's weeping over uncertainty whether he will be taken to the Garden or the Fire. These do not constitute a major presence, nor is there any lurid elaboration on Quranic torments.

Al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035–6), *Qatlā 'l-Qur'ān*, collects stories of persons (about twenty in all; in one case *jinn*) who died on hearing the Quran recited or on contemplating it. For a few, he provides multiple versions. Most stories include quotations of particular lines. They might be as harmless as "Little of the night

88 Abū 'Ubayd, *Khuṭab*, 101–2; also reported by Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, *abwāb ṣifat Jahannam* 10, no. 2601; Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* no. 27. Alternatively attributed to Harim b. Ḥayyān: Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd* no. 28; Ibn Sa'd, *Biographien* vii/1, 95 *vii*, 132; Ibn Abi Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zuhd* 85, xii, 407; Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 231 283 (addition < 'Al.); Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* ii, 119, quoting a lost portion of Aḥmad, *Zuhd* (addition < 'Al.). Similarly attributed to 'Āmir ibn 'Abd Qays, Basran (d. ca. 55/674–5). See Hannād, *Zuhd* i, 291.

89 By contrast, Ibn Abi 'l-Dunyā quotes a straight version going back to the Prophet: "The one fleeing the Fire does not sleep, nor the one seeking the Garden. Do your utmost in seeking paradise and your utmost in fleeing the Fire." See Ibn Abi 'l-Dunyā, *Ṣifa*, 14.

90 Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn* ii, 298, 359.

they used to slumber” (Q 51:17).⁹¹ An anonymous Basran shaykh was deeply disturbed to hear the verse,

Say, “The truth is from your Lord. Let whoever wishes believe and whoever wishes be ungrateful. We have prepared for the wrong-doers a fire, whose pavilion encloses them. If they ask for showers of rain, they will receive showers of water like molten copper which will roast their faces. How evil a drink; how evil a resting-place” (Q 18:29).

He asked whether there was any relief. Yes, said the reciter, and recited the verse, “Say, ‘O my servants who have been prodigal against yourselves, do not despair of God’s mercy. God can forgive sins altogether. He is the Forgiving, the Compassionate’” (Q 39:53), whereupon the shaykh cried out and died.⁹² (He may have recalled the next verse, “Turn in penitence to your Lord and submit to Him before the torment comes to you”, encouraging him to quit this life at once to avoid any chance of backsliding.) Altogether 33 verses are mentioned, by my count, of which nine mention hell or at least punishment. The Quran might terrify in many ways, then, including but not exclusively by threatening the unbelievers with hell.

5 Conclusion

Hell is a threat to discourage misbehaviour. To this end, the Quran continually refers to it. One might expect it to be prominent in the literature of renunciation, directed as it is to encouragements to piety. Yet I have found less there on hell than I expected. Much as renunciants liked to recite the Quran, much as they contemplated it, they did not characteristically elaborate on its vivid descriptions of punishments in the afterlife. They generally preferred, rather, to commend the contemplation of death. Hell may easily be contemplated in a spiritually dubious manner, out of *schadenfreude* or voyeuristic sadism. I remember going to an exhibit of drawings by Botticelli to illustrate *The Divine Comedy*. The first gallery, with drawings of hell, was inconveniently full; the crowd was noticeably thinner in the second gallery, with drawings of Purgatory; and my wife and I almost had to ourselves the last gallery, with drawings of Heaven. The crowd was by and large unsympathetic to Botticelli’s scheme of uplift. There is more detail on the torments of hell in both prophetic hadith

⁹¹ Tha’labī, *Qatlā* 81 (Ger.), 141 (Ar.).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 83–4 (Ger.), 146 (Ar.).

and Quranic commentary than in the renunciant literature. It is certainly no rule that the compilers of renunciant sayings avoided all elaborations of Quranic descriptions of hell without implications for how to live better. On the whole, however, the compilers of renunciant sayings seem to have shown wise restraint in limiting what they related about hell.

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Fire in the Upper Heavens

Locating Hell in Middle Period Narratives of Muḥammad's Ascension

Frederick Colby

As we examine the idea of “locating hell,”¹ it might be worth our time to examine how Muslim popular depictions of where hell is located change over time. One way to examine such changes is to examine the development of Muslim accounts of Muḥammad visiting hellfire or meeting its terrifying guardians during his otherworldly journeys. By the phrase “otherworldly journeys,” I here refer to the genre of narratives known under the rubric of Muḥammad’s *isrā’* and *mi’rāj*, or his “night journey” and “ascension” respectively, which for convenience sake I will be referring to collectively as the Islamic *mi’rāj* or “ascension” narratives. Roberto Tottoli has recently studied “tours of hell and punishments of sinners in *mi’rāj* narratives” in an article by that name,² a study which makes an important contribution to our knowledge of the historical development of Muslim conceptions of hell as depicted in different versions of the story of Muḥammad’s ascension. Tottoli’s piece demonstrates how the types of sinners depicted in ascension narratives and the types of punishments they receive therein gradually change as these narratives develop over time. Here I wish not so much to reproduce that study but to build on it, asking a slightly different question, namely: Where do these ascension narratives locate hell? By examining select ascension accounts from the early to late medieval period, I shall argue that while descriptions of the topography of hell may remain largely terrestrial, Muḥammad’s initial encounter with hell and its guardians appear in increasingly upperworldly, non-terrestrial locations. His tour of hell gradually becomes more extensive and more detailed, and gets deferred until later and later in the story as one traces its development and expansion from the formative period of Islamic history through its apogee in the late medieval period. We shall see that at the height of the development of the non-canonical but

1 This essay was first delivered at the conference “Locating hell in Islamic Traditions” (28–29 April 2012, Utrecht), organized by Christian Lange. I offer my thanks to him for his invitation to participate, and for his insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. All faults and mistakes in this final draft are, of course, my own.

2 Tottoli, *Tours of hell*.

widespread Ibn ‘Abbās ascension narratives in the seventh–ninth/thirteenth–fifteenth centuries, the beginning of the tour of hell comes to be located at two primary sites in Muḥammad’s otherworldly journey: on the one hand, in the fifth heaven, and on the other hand, after his audience with God, somewhere in the sixth or seventh heaven.

In the earliest extant written hadith reports, the tour of hell appears nowhere in the heavens, and in fact it hardly ever is mentioned at all.³ As Tottoli correctly points out, most early reports on Muḥammad’s *mi’rāj* do not contain any detailed reference to the Prophet’s tour of hellfire on his journey, beyond the idea that he witnesses the punishment for some classes of sinners,⁴ and briefly meets Mālik, the guardian of hellfire. In the early reports where these details do appear, these two scenes often are presented separately in different parts of the narrative, which suggests that the Prophet’s merely observing the tortures reserved for a few types of evil-doers on the road to Jerusalem, for instance, cannot be classified as an full-fledged “tour of hellfire” any more than the witnessing of a certain class of the blessed constitutes a full-fledged “tour of paradise.”⁵ But there are a few instructive exceptions in early hadith reports that say that the tour of hell was part of the Prophet’s heavenly ascent, and these early exceptions are worthy of our attention, for they serve as the

3 The early reports on the night journey and ascension that I have in mind here are those hadith reports written down in the formative period and appearing in the major sound Sunni collections of the 3rd/9th century, including in works by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Ḥanbal, etc., as well as reports from the early collections of Shi’i hadith reports and *akhbār* that become authoritative for mainstream Shi’i scholars in and around the 4th/10th century. It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss such narratives in detail here; the interested reader could consult my *Narrating Muhammad’s Night Journey*, as well as the work by Brooke Olson Vuckovic entitled *Heavenly journeys, earthly concerns*. Aside from the exceptions discussed in what follows here, few early reports even mention a visit to hell as a part of the Prophet’s otherworldly journey. Tottoli, *Tours of hell*, cites the example of an additional key narrative attributed to Abū Hurayra by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bayhaqī but not found in the collections of early reports cited above, but as he states, even this Abū Hurayra *mi’rāj* narrative only mentions the punishments of evil-doers that Muḥammad sees on his night journey—presumably on earth on his way to Jerusalem—prior to his ascension through the heavens.

4 Tottoli, *Tours of hell* 12.

5 I am thinking here of the Abū Hurayra ascension narrative included in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary on Q 17:1 and elsewhere. On this version of the Prophet’s ascension, see my *Narrating Muhammad’s Night Journey* 96–101. A partial translation into English by R. Firestone appears in Renard (ed.), *Windows* 336–45, but unfortunately this version skips over these narremes from the Prophet’s journey to Jerusalem, merely summarizing their contents.

forerunners to the more extensive and detailed versions of the tour of hell included in the ascension narratives of subsequent centuries.

For example, in a report recorded in al-Tirmidhī's (d. 279/892) *Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, one that intriguingly calls into question the widespread idea that Muḥammad prayed with the other prophets in Jerusalem, we find the Garden and the Fire on the itinerary of Muḥammad's otherworldly journey: "Hudhayfa said, 'The Messenger of God was brought a mount ... [Burāq, who is described next, after which it continues:] They did not abandon Burāq's back until after they saw paradise, hellfire, and all the threatening promise of the afterworld. Then the two came back ...'"⁶ This hadith report does not go into any detail about what the Fire looked like or about the types of sinners and punishing angels encountered therein, but it does assert that Muḥammad and Gabriel had a vision of (if not a tour of) hell, apparently near the end of their journey together, for its mention immediately precedes the hadith's mention of their return.

This representation of Muḥammad's journey as involving a vision or tour of hell finds support in Ibn Sa'd's (d. c. 230/845) *Ṭabaqāt*, where he summarizes the events of the *mi'rāj* as follows:

The Prophet used to ask his Lord to show him the Garden and the Fire. On the night of the 17th of Ramaḍān, 18 months before the hijra, while the Prophet was sleeping on his back in his house, Gabriel and Michael came to him. They said, "Come away to what you asked of God!" So they brought him to the site between the Maqām [Ibrāhīm] and Zamzam. He was brought the Mi'rāj [Ladder], which was the most beautiful thing to behold. They ascended with him to the heavens, heaven by heaven, and in them he met the prophets and ended at the Lote Tree of the Boundary, and was shown the Garden and the Fire ... And he was commanded [to fulfill the duty of] the five daily liturgical prayers.⁷

The most remarkable aspect of this brief reference from Ibn Sa'd's history is the way that it suggests that the Prophet's desire to tour paradise and hellfire provides the primary reason he was taken on the heavenly journey. Moreover, it portrays these tours as taking place near the end of the journey, presumably

6 See Tirmidhī in Ibn 'Arabī, *ʿArīḍa* xi, 304–5 (no. 3159, *tafsīr* Q 17:1), translated in Colby, *Constructing* 129–30.

7 Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* i, 213, emphasis added; the full translation (sections updated here) appears in Colby, *Constructing* 103–4. Later versions of this same report appear in the works of Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1176) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).

in the vicinity of the Lote Tree, prior to God assigning the five daily liturgical prayers to the Muslim community. The report never specifies exactly where hell might be located, but it suggests that his vision of the Fire—and at least the portal to the Fire if not the actual site of the Fire itself—is located in one of the highest heavens.

In Ibn Hishām's (d. 218/833) recension of Ibn Ishāq's (d. 150/767) *Sīra*, he offers a narrative of Muḥammad's *mi'rāj* that draws together fragments from diverse hadith reports, and nowhere does this early composite account present an explicit tour of hell that joins the vision of the Fire with a tour of some of its scenes of post-mortem retribution. It does, however, present encounters that could be related to these individual themes, for instance, the anecdote in which Muḥammad meets the guardian of hellfire in the first heaven:

Ibn Ishāq said: One of the hadith folk told me what had been told to him from the Messenger of God, who said: "Angels greeted me when I entered the [first] heaven, and each one laughed joyfully, expressing good wishes, until I met one among them who said the same things without laughing, looking unlike any I had seen. I asked Gabriel about him ... and he replied, "If he would have laughed with any individual, before or after you, he would have laughed with you, but he does not laugh. This is Mālik, the guardian of hellfire. I said to Gabriel ..., "Command him to show me the Fire." "Of course. Mālik, show Muḥammad the Fire!" So he uncovered its covering, and it transformed. It raised up so high that I thought it would consume all that I had been shown. I told Gabriel to command him to return it to its place, so he did, and [the Fire] returned to the place from which it had emerged. I can only compare its return to the descending of shade, until the point at which it entered where it had exited. Then he [Mālik] returned its cover over it.

This report does not so much describe a tour of hell, per se, as a vision of the Fire that results from its being uncovered at the Prophet's request. Immediately following this account, after his description of Muḥammad's encounter with the prophet Adam as he presides over the spirits of recently departed individuals, Ibn Hishām transmits a different anecdote describing several groups of evil-doers who receive measure-for-measure types of punishments in the first heaven: those who devoured the wealth of orphans (with hot stones shoved into their mouths); those who charged usury (with swollen bellies that got trampled); male adulterers (who left good meat for rotting meat); women adulterers (who hang by their breasts). Variations on this fragmentary report

appear in several sources from the formative and middle periods, and seem to originate in a widely circulated report transmitted by Abu Saʿīd al-Khudrī.⁸

The early Shiʿite exegete al-Qummī (d.ca 307/919) supplements and develops the Abu Saʿīd al-Khudrī report in the long narrative about Muḥammad's *miʿrāj* that he includes his Quran commentary, one in which the Prophet encounters the guardian of hell soon after entering the first heaven (just as in Ibn Hishām's version):

Gabriel went up and I went up with him to the [first] heaven, at which was an angel called Ismaʿīl ... Under his command are seventy-thousand angels, each of whom command seventy-thousand more angels. He asked, "Gabriel, who is that with you?" [Gabriel] replied, "Muḥammad." He asked, "Has he been sent?" He replied, "Yes." So [Ismaʿīl] opened the gate. I greeted him and he greeted me; I begged forgiveness for him and he begged forgiveness for me. He said, "Welcome righteous brother and righteous prophet."⁹ Then I continued to receive angels until I entered the [first] heaven. Every angel I met laughed and was joyful, until I met one who was greater than the others I had seen. He was ugly in appearance and outwardly angry. He addressed me in a way similar to the others, yet he did not laugh, nor did I see in him the joy that I had seen in the other angels. I asked, "Who is that, Gabriel? He scares me!" He answered, "You have reason to be scared of him, for we all are. That is Mālik, guardian of the hellfire. He has never laughed since the time God appointed him in charge of hell. Each day his anger and fury at the enemies of God increases. God will take vengeance on them through him. Were he to have laughed in the presence of anyone before or after you, he would have laughed with you, but he does not laugh." I greeted him, and he returned the greeting, giving me joyful tidings of paradise. I asked Gabriel ..., "Will you command him to show me the Fire?" So Gabriel said,

8 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 1/1, 268–9. Tottoli mentions the specific groups enumerated by Ibn Hishām. See Tottoli, *Tours of hell* 13–14. For a discussion of this Khudrī report across different sources from the early period, see Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*, 55–6 (Ibn Hishām), 101–4 (Tabarī), 105–8 (Qummī), 124–5 (Bayhaqī).

9 The language used in this exchange duplicates the language used for the Prophet's encounter with other individuals in his prophetic lineage, including Adam, Jesus, Moses, Abraham, etc. This fact suggests that although Ismaʿīl is called an angel at the beginning of this narrative, he takes on some of the qualities of a human prophet such as Abraham's son, Ishmael (= Ismaʿīl). Notice how this figure calls Muḥammad his "brother" just as other prophets do in this account.

“Show Muḥammad the Fire.” [Mālik] uncovered it and opened one of its gates. A blaze shot out from it, spreading through the heavens. It boiled and rose until I thought it would consume me and everything I saw. I cried to Gabriel, “Tell him to return its cover!” He did, and when [Mālik] said “Return!” then [the Fire and cover] returned as they were before.¹⁰

As already mentioned above, this encounter with Mālik and vision of the uncovering of the Fire as presented by al-Qummī directly mirrors that of Ibn Hishām’s account (transmitting an anecdote which was similarly attributed to al-Khudrī, and likely derives from the same source), merely elaborating and expanding on a few of its details. In al-Qummī’s version, Muḥammad goes on in the first heaven to meet Adam who sits in judgment, dividing good spirits from evil spirits, followed by the Angel of Death, who describes his methods of capturing souls. Then one finds several scenes in which Muḥammad witnesses the punishment of groups of individuals who committed evil deeds, for instance, the Muslims “who eat forbidden foods while they had been invited to eat permitted foods.”¹¹ These scenes of punishment in al-Qummī and Ibn Hishām’s works, while related to the punishments that one would expect to find in the Fire, are presented separately from Muḥammad’s vision of the uncovering of the Fire. Therefore, I would maintain that they can only be classified as a “tour of hell” with the caveat that the account never labels them with that rubric nor associates them directly with hell, presenting these scenes apart from the places where the Fire is mentioned explicitly.

Another noteworthy composite ascension report that includes a vision of the Fire appears in the *Tafsīr* of the famous exegete from Nishapur, al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035). It describes how Mālik uncovers hellfire for Muḥammad early in his heavenly journey, a detail we have already seen from Ibn Hishām’s recension of the *Sīra* and al-Qummī’s commentary.¹² Later in al-Tha‘labī’s same narrative, however, one finds an explicit and fully-fledged tour of hellfire that follows after the Prophet has traversed all the heavens, has had a dialogue with God, and has been taken on a tour of the Garden.

10 Qummī, *Tafsīr* ii, 4–5 (commentary on Q 17:1). A fuller translation of this narrative’s description of the angels and other beings the Prophet meets in the first heaven appears in Colby, *Constructing* 206–10, from which this passage has been adapted (*ibid.*, 207). Regarding early Shi‘i ascension narratives, see Colby, *The early Imami Shi‘i narratives*.

11 Qummī, *Tafsīr* ii, 6–7; Colby, *Constructing* 209.

12 Tha‘labī, *Tafsīr* iv, 10 (on Q 17:1).

Then he showed me the Fire until I had seen its manacles and chains, its snakes and scorpions, its stench and smoke. I looked, and suddenly I was with a people who had lips like those of camels, along with one assigned to take their lips and force into their mouths stones of fire, which then exited from their buttocks. I asked Gabriel who they were, and he said, "Muhammad, they are those who wrongfully consume the wealth of orphans." Then we moved on, and I found myself with a group that had stomachs as large as houses, on the path of Pharaoh's people. When the people of Pharaoh passed them, they were stirred up. [Each one] inclined his stomach toward one of them, and fell. The people of Pharaoh trampled upon them with their legs while they were stretched out, morning and night, over fire. I asked Gabriel who they were, and he replied, "They are the consumers of usury. They are like the *one whom Satan lays low by his touch* [Q 2:275]." Then we moved on, and I suddenly found myself among women hanging from their breasts, their legs upside down. I asked, "Who are they, Gabriel?" He responded, "They are those who commit [sexual] indecency (*zinā*) and kill their children."¹³

On seeing the last of its punishments, al-Tha'labī records that Muḥammad states, "After [Gabriel] brought me out of the Fire, we passed out of the heavens, descending from heaven to heaven until we came to Moses." This transitional detail suggests that the tour of hell quoted above must have taken place above the sixth heaven, for that is Moses' typical location in the heavens, and earlier in this narrative as the Prophet ascends up through the heavens he encounters Moses there.¹⁴ Al-Tha'labī's version thus depicts Muḥammad's tour of hellfire as taking place somewhere in the upper realms, presumably in the seventh heaven near or beyond the Lote Tree.

Select ascension reports from al-Tha'labī, al-Qummī, al-Tirmidhī and others, then, demonstrate how a few versions of Muḥammad's journey break with the majority of early ascension reports that make little mention of hell or paradise as part of the *mi'rāj*. These exceptional early reports, such as the ones discussed above, in contrast, depict a vision of the Fire or even a full-fledged tour of hell as representing a part of Muḥammad's heavenly ascent. Moreover, a few of these exceptional references, such as that found in Ibn Sa'd's narrative, suggest that such a tour was in fact one of the main purposes of sending Muḥammad on a journey through the heavens in the first place. With the

13 Ibid., 15. Note the close correspondence between the three specific classes of evil-doers mentioned in this brief tour of hell and three of the four classes of evil-doers given by Ibn Hishām in his account from the *Sīra*, summarized above.

14 Ibid., 11.

exception of al-Tha‘labī’s account, however, these early references do not offer much detail about what the Prophet’s vision or tour of hell was like.

Let us turn from these reports to later ascension accounts that circulate outside the canonical hadith collections in the middle centuries, attributed to Muḥammad’s young companion Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687–8), and quite frequently circulated with reference to the popular storyteller Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī (fl. in the second–third/eighth–ninth centuries?).¹⁵ I have dealt elsewhere with the development of what I have called the Ibn ‘Abbās ascension discourse and some of its versions attributed to al-Bakrī,¹⁶ and revisiting such issues is beyond the scope of this work. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that the Ibn ‘Abbās version of the *mi‘rāj* story enjoyed a broad circulation in the middle periods of Islamic history, transmitted and copied in royal courts from Castille in al-Andalus to Zabid in Yemen to Tabriz in Persia.¹⁷ It is important to stress that we find versions (plural) of the Ibn ‘Abbās narrative in these types of disparate locations, for as Tottoli correctly observes, “[r]ather than forming a standard text, the *mi‘rāj* narratives attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās should be considered a corpus of variant texts that share a number of peculiarities.”¹⁸ One of the peculiarities of these Ibn ‘Abbās narratives is the fact that Muḥammad’s encounter with Mālik and his increasingly more extensive and detailed tour of hellfire in these narratives often begin in upperworldly locations. For example, in Istanbul Sulemaniye ms. Ibrahim Efendi 852/3 (dated 908/1502–3), Muḥammad encounters Mālik sitting on a throne of fire among innumerable other angels immediately on entering the third heaven.¹⁹ After Mālik and Muḥammad exchange pleasant greetings (nothing is said here about Muḥammad being afraid, nor about Mālik’s not initially responding to him out of pride), Muḥammad notices Mālik’s anger and asks him about it. He responds, telling Muḥammad that God created him out of anger, and that he prepares tests and punishments for those people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, who break the shari‘a. Muḥammad requests that Mālik “uncover

15 It is difficult to determine with any precision many of the details—or even the historicity—of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī. Boaz Shoshan argues that the historical Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī, if he indeed existed, likely flourished in the middle of the third/ninth century. See Shoshan, *Popular culture* 35–36.

16 Colby, *Narrating*.

17 Regarding the context of the Andalusian *Liber Scalae*, I have relied on the introduction by Isabelle Weill to Besson/Brossard-Dandre (eds), *Le Livre de l’Echelle* 27–38; for the Yemeni context of the Rasulid ms., see Colby, *Narrating Muhammad’s Night Journey*, chapter 8 and appendix B; for the Ilkhanid *Mi‘rajnameh*, see Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 17–31.

18 Tottoli, *Tours of hell* 16.

19 Ibrahim Efendi 852/3 (dated 908/1502–3), fol. 16v. A parallel but slightly less detailed account appears in ms. Cairo Dār al-Kutub Tārikh Taymūr 738/10, fols. 330r–332v.

Jahannam” for him to be able to see the lot of the sinners so that he might warn his companions about it on his return.²⁰ Mālik informs Muḥammad that the Prophet could not bear to see it, and in any case, Mālik was not commanded to uncover it for him. Immediately a voice from above—the divine voice—commands Mālik to give Muḥammad, God’s beloved, what he asks, namely a tour of hell, for God only created the Garden and the Fire for Muḥammad’s sake. Mālik uncovers it, and after the fire and smoke rush out (cf. the versions of Ibn Hishām and others cited above), the Prophet sees 90,000 cities of iron, each containing 90,000 castles of brass, each containing 90,000 houses of lead, etc. It is then that he proceeds to witness specific measure for measure punishments, with punishments for sinful women highlighted in the final few scenes.²¹ Muḥammad then prays with the angels of the third heaven, and Gabriel proceeds to bring him up to the gate of the fourth.²²

Several things are remarkable about this tour of hell from Ibrahim Efendi 852/3 and its parallel text in Cairo Dār al-Kutub Tārikh Taymūr 738/10, not only that no encounter with any prophet appears in this version of Muḥammad’s tour of the third heaven, but also and perhaps more importantly, Muḥammad’s meeting with Mālik and his tour of hell all seem to have taken place in the midst of the third heaven only. While it is true that Mālik “uncovers” Jahannam for Muhammad to see near the beginning of his “tour,” and Muḥammad gazed into the fire and saw the thousands of cities and palaces, etc., there is no disjuncture between the end of the subsequent tour of the punishments and Muḥammad’s praying with the angels of the third heaven and ascending to the fourth. From the cosmology presented here, therefore, it appears that the Fire (or at the very least the entrance into the Fire) is located in the third heaven.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, however, in the majority of the more fully developed ascension narratives from the middle periods of Islamic history, two prominent patterns tend to emerge: accounts that locate the beginning of the full-fledged tour of hellfire in the fifth heaven, and accounts that locate its beginning in the sixth or seventh heaven. After examining several of the beginnings of Muḥammad’s “tours of hell” from these narratives, this essay hopes to offer some provisional theories as to why the launching place for these tours was located in these particular points in the story, and why this specific trope becomes one of the peculiarities which nearly all of the later Ibn ‘Abbās ascension narratives reflect.

20 Ibrahim Efendi 852/3, fol. 17r.

21 Tottoli describes how scenes depicting the punishments reserved for women become more and more prominent in later centuries. See Tottoli, *Tours of hell* 16–17, 22.

22 Ibrahim Efendi 852/3, fols. 17r–18r.

1 Tour in the Fifth Heaven

The idea that the Fire—or at the very least the gate or entrance into hell—appears in a precise location up in the heavens can be seen in a series of late middle period ascension accounts that show a number of the peculiarities of the Ibn ‘Abbās ascension discourse. While a few of these variations depict Muḥammad’s tour of hell as taking place in the first or third heaven (as in Ibrahim Efendi 852/3, discussed above), one finds an even greater number of manuscripts depicting Muḥammad’s tour taking place in the fifth heaven.

The earliest extant dateable ascension narrative that shows this pattern is found in the Persian text Istanbul Sülemaniye Kütüphanesi ms. Ayasofya 3441, recently published by Christiane Gruber in a wonderful edition and translation titled *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension* (2010). In the version from Ayasofya 3441, on entering the fifth heaven, Muḥammad first meets the prophet Aaron and an angel named Saqtiyāyil. After these encounters he comes upon a bejeweled gate in the fifth heaven, with no guardian in front of it, but with a lock upon the gate that opens when the *shahāda* is recited.²³ Muḥammad describes what happens next: “The door opened, and I looked at it. [Gabriel] said: ‘O Muḥammad, look.’ When I looked, the heavens disappeared and a land (*zamīn*) appeared.” In what follows, he gazes on seven lands, given names that are sometimes associated with hell in these types of narratives: Ramka, Khawfa, ‘Arfa, Ḥadna, Damā, Tanīnā, and Ḥanīnā.²⁴ Subsequently, he tours more valleys and mountains within the Fire, sees a series of valleys that are given the standard “seven names” of hell along with their respective guardians,²⁵ and after that yet another tour of hell is collated into the narrative, with Muḥammad greeting Mālik (who now appears sitting in front of a door) and asking him to open the door of hell (*dar-i dūzakh*) so that he might be able to see inside. In this next stage of the tour in Ayasofya 3441, there are many more specific descriptions of punishments than were recounted in the earlier section of the same narrative. At the end of this text’s tour of hell, Muḥammad asks Mālik to show mercy to his community, but Mālik refuses, and Muḥammad weeps and prays, after which Gabriel carries him the standard five-hundred-year distance

23 Ayasofya 3441, fols. 28r–28v; Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 52.

24 Ayasofya 3441, fols. 28v–29v; Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 52; the emphasis in the quotation is mine. The origin of these seven names remains something of a mystery. They differ from the names given to the seven lower earths recorded by al-Tha‘labī in his *Qisas al-anbiyā’*. See Tha‘labī, *Qīṣaṣ* 7. They are also different from the names of the seven gates of hell recorded by al-Qāḍī, for which see Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire* 118–9.

25 Ayasofya 3441, fols. 31v–32r; Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 53; on these names, see below.

to the sixth heaven. The fact that this five-hundred-year distance is the conventional distance separating each of the heavens suggests that despite this long tour of hell having apparently shown the Prophet various “lands” outside of the fifth heaven, nevertheless in the manuscript’s worldview, Muḥammad’s actual tour of the Fire appears to remain within the fifth heaven, rather than traveling outside of it. In other words, while the seven heavens seem to have disappeared before Muḥammad as he looked upon the fiery earths, still the whole visionary tour appears to have taken place within the general realm of the fifth heaven in this Persian Ilkhanid *Mi’rājnāma*.

This same pattern, with Muḥammad’s tour of hell being launched from and/or entirely located within the fifth heaven, appears again in a number of subsequent Ibn ‘Abbās ascension manuscripts, including a large number of the Bakrī narrative that I have analyzed elsewhere.²⁶ The fact that the recension commonly reproduced in the cheap mass-printed versions of the Ibn ‘Abbās *Kitāb al-mi’rāj* also places the tour of hell in the fifth heaven helps to explain the ubiquity of this particular pattern in modern Ibn ‘Abbās ascension texts. This, then, forms the first of two major patterns.

2 Tour after the Audience, in the Sixth or Seventh Heaven

A second major pattern, one that presents the tour of hell near the very end of the journey and after the audience with God, the pattern we saw above in al-Tha’labī’s *Tafsīr* and alluded to in other early reports, becomes another common trope of the late medieval ascension narratives, found in some of the versions most well known to scholars today, including the Timurid Chaghatay *Mi’rājnāma* and the Andalusian Latin *Liber Scalae Machometi*. One of the earliest extant independent examples of the more developed Ibn ‘Abbās ascension narrative appears again in Persian in a work by an anonymous Shi’i scholar that is ascribed by its contemporary editor to approximately

26 Ayasofya 867 (dated 886/1481). This text has been analyzed as the “Reshaped Version of the Pseudo- Ibn ‘Abbās Ascension Narrative” in Colby, Constructing, with the complete text of this ascension narrative translated therein as Appendix 2. See Colby, “Constructing” 442–62. For other examples of versions of Ibn ‘Abbās Ascension narratives containing this trope, see the following manuscripts (not listed in the bibliography below): Cairo Dār al-Kutub, ms. Ta’riḫ Taymūr 738/8 (= Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. Arabe 1931); Istanbul Sülemaniye, ms. Hacı Mahmud Efendi 648 (fols. 10v–14r, dated 1179/1765–6); Istanbul Sülemaniye, ms. Hacı Mahmud Efendi 4475 (fols. 13v–17r, dated 1282/ ca. 1861); Istanbul Sülemaniye, ms. Düğümlü Baba 360/3 (fol. 64v–, dated 1291/1874–5); Istanbul Sülemaniye Laleli 1927 (fols. 19v–25v, n.d.).

the twelfth century CE.²⁷ The text depicts Muḥammad as first meeting Mālik, guardian of hellfire, on his entrance to the first heaven, before his meeting with Adam and the angelic Ismāʿīl.²⁸ But for Muḥammad's vision of the Fire in this Persian Ibn ʿAbbās narrative, one needs to wait until after Muḥammad's audience with God at the divine throne (*ʿarsh*). As Muḥammad returns from the divine presence, he sees an angel with a terrifying form and asks Gabriel about him, receiving the reply that this is none other than Mālik of hell (*Mālik-i dūzakḥ*), a figure whom Muḥammad supposedly already met on his ascent.²⁹ Unlike in that cursory first meeting, however, here Muḥammad expresses a wish to see the states of the sinners (*ʿaṣīyān*) in hell, and Mālik agrees to let him tour the Fire, where he proceeds to witness specific punishments assigned to specific classes of evildoers.

Later in this same Persian work, there is a separate whole chapter devoted to the description of hell (*dūzakḥ*) and the types of punishments in it, and here we find a mention of the detail that during his *miʿrāj* to the sixth heaven (sic!), Muḥammad meets the angel “Sarḥāʿīl” whom God commands to take him on a tour of the Fire, where he learns the respective names of seven different earths (*zamīn*) or layers of hell.³⁰ Subsequently, we learn that this “Sarḥāʿīl” presides over *jahannam*,³¹ and a series of specific scenes of measure-for-measure punishments follow thereafter. The fact that the “tour of hell” scene appears in more than one location in this Persian Ibn ʿAbbās text, and the fact that Muḥammad is forced to ask Gabriel to identify Mālik more than once in these encounters, suggests that this particular twelfth century *miʿrāj* account brings together different ascension narremes from earlier periods.

A century or so later, in an Arabic text ascribed to the enigmatic Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī, recorded in a manuscript apparently copied in seventh/thirteenth-century Yemen and now found in Istanbul's Amcazade Hüsayın

27 *Majlis dar qiṣṣa-yi rasūl* 65–75, supplemented by a description of hellfire at 307–312. I wish to express my sincere thanks to Christian Lange and his research team for calling my attention to this text and sending me a copy of it.

28 This trope of an initial meeting with the guardian of hellfire and other significant angels (such as the Angel of Death, the angel in the form of a rooster, or the angel made half of fire and half of ice) derives from very early versions of the Ibn ʿAbbās narrative. See Colby, *Narrating* 32–3 and 176–7 (Appendix A).

29 *Majlis dar qiṣṣa-yi rasūl* 74.

30 *Ibid.*, 307.

31 The fairly commonly repeated names for the seven hells listed by O'Shaughnessy in his article “The seven names for hell in the Qurʾān” are subsequently given here, together with their respective guardians. *Ibid.*, 308. Cf. O'Shaughnessy, Seven names.

Paşa 95/2,³² we find again that Muḥammad first encounters the guardian of hellfire before the first heaven,³³ just prior to his encounter with the angel Ismāʿīl and the prophet Adam.³⁴ Muḥammad approaches and asks Mālik a series of questions, including why the guardians of the hellfire never exit from the Fire to seek some relief.³⁵ After finishing with his questions, Muḥammad and Gabriel pass onward, grieving from what they heard Mālik say, and seeking refuge in God from the hellfire, but still not having seen hellfire itself or any specific punishments therein.

Just as we find in al-Thaʿlabī's *Tafsīr* and in the Ibn ʿAbbās *miʿrāj* account from the twelfth-century Persian ascension narrative, the narrative in Amcazade 95/2 defers the actual tour of hellfire until after Muḥammad's audience with God. Here the comparatively brief tour of the Fire, again launched from the sixth heaven, focuses on reporting the names of each layer of hell, and each of the guardians therein. Because there might be utility in comparing this short text to others of its type, and since I did not translate it previously where I translated nearly the rest of this key ascension narrative, the English translation of this tour of hellfire follows here, taking up the story after the audience with God and after the tour of the Garden:

[81r] He took me by the hand and led me to Mālik, the guardian of the Fire, who was in the sixth heaven. [Gabriel] said to Mālik, "Indeed God has commanded you to show Muḥammad what [God] prepared for his enemies in the Abode of Punishment. So he said to me, "Look, Muḥammad!" He led me by the hand and the five heavens [below us] parted so that I gazed at the valley of the House of Sanctity [Jerusalem], which was called the Valley of Jahannam.

I found myself suddenly with an enormous angel, the most frightening angel I had ever seen, more intensely black than the dark night. His body

32 Amcazade 95/2. The majority of this *miʿrāj* text is translated in Colby, *Narrating* 195–234 (Appendix B).

33 Just prior to this encounter, the Angel of Death explains to Muḥammad that *Sijjīn* is the deepest pit of hell, the "seventh and the lowest." See Amcazade 95/2, fol. 36v; Colby, *Narrating* 204.

34 Not only is Muḥammad terrified of Mālik in this version, but Gabriel, too, appears terrified, praying to God that Mālik is not to be on his path in the future, and explaining that "there is no angel in the heavens that does not seek refuge from him, for he knows one's fate." See Amcazade 95/2, fol. 38v; Colby, *Narrating* 206.

35 Mālik explains that these guardians are comfortable in the Fire, for they were created in it, and they would die if they were to exit from it, just as a fish dies when it leaves the water. Moreover, he continues, they proceed with their punishments of the evildoers unabated, unheeding any pleas for mercy. See Amcazade 95/2, fol. 39r; Colby, *Narrating* 207.

was larger than a mountain, and set in his face were two blue eyes like blue glass jars. Suddenly tongues of flame shot from his ears, nostrils and mouth. The length of his body was as if it were the distance between heaven and earth. He was turning over live coals and rocks of brimstone. Mālik called to him, “O Sūkhā’il,” and he replied “Here I am, Gabriel.” [Muḥammad] said, “When I heard his [greeting] “here I am” to Gabriel, my intellect flew from me, and my soul nearly departed from my body. Blindness came over me from the terror of that form. So Gabriel said to me, “That is the guardian of the first gate of the gates of *jahannam*.”

[81v] Then he called out, “Look, Muḥammad, on the punishments that God prepared in them. Sūkhā’il said, “Look, Muḥammad,” and he pointed with his hand to the earth. The first earth split open, and its name is al-Ramkā, its width being the distance of five hundred years. I saw in it the chains of the people of the Fire. Then I saw in it a people whom I will not describe, since I am not able to describe them.

Then the second was split open, and its name is al-Khawfā. Its width was the distance of five hundred years. I saw in it terrors and punishments.

Then the third was split open, and its name is al-‘Arqā [‘Arfā?],³⁶ and its distance was five hundred years. Between it and the fourth was a distance of five hundred years. In it were striped garments, which were the clothing of the people of the Fire.

The fourth was split open, and its name is al-Khalada [Ḥadna?]. Its width was the distance of five hundred years. Between it and the fifth was a distance of five hundred years. In it were the snakes and scorpions of the people of the Fire.

Then the fifth was split open, and its name was Damā. Its width was the distance of five hundred years, and in it were the stones which were thrown upon the people of the Fire. They were the ones mentioned by God in his Clear Book [the Quran] when He says, “Its fuel are people and rocks, and in it are angels who are brutal, intense,”³⁷

[82r] [at its heart]³⁸ are rocks of brimstone.

Then the sixth was split open, and its name was Fashā [Tanīnā?]. Its width was five hundred years, and between it and the seventh was five hundred years.

Then the seventh was split open, and its name is Jahannam [Ḥanīnā?]. Its width was five hundred years. In it were different types of punishments

36 On these names, compare Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 52, cited above.

37 Q 66:6; cf. similar phrasing to the beginning in Q 2:24.

38 A repair in the binding partially obscures the text at this point, so this reading is somewhat speculative.

that only God knows, which God prepared. Those are for they who “consume his bounty” and worship other than He ...³⁹

As with the earlier Persian text discussed above, in this text the actual tour into the Fire is led not so much by the guardian of all of hellfire, Mālik, but with another terrifying angel, here named “Šūkhā’īl,” guardian of the first gate of *jahannam*.⁴⁰ “Šūkhā’īl” leads Muḥammad down through the seven levels of the Fire, named respectively al-Damkā, al-Ḥarqā, al-‘Arqā, al-Khalada, Damā, Fashā, and Jahannam. The description of each of these realms spans scarcely more than a sentence or two, and immediately after this tour of the seven layers of the Fire, Gabriel brings Muḥammad together with Burāq, and they set off on the return journey from Jerusalem to Mecca. The fact that there is very little segue between this tour into the levels of hell split open before Muḥammad’s eyes and his terrestrial journey on the road to Mecca may suggest that in this particular account from Amcazade 95/2, the tour of hell (proceeding after the audience with God and after the tour of the Garden) takes him back from the heavens and down to the earth, where these seven layers of hell split open below.⁴¹ This key manuscript, then, offers more evidence in support of the idea that the tour of hellfire takes place at the very end of Muḥammad’s journey, although once again the text offers conflicting information about where the Fire is located, ultimately apparently going back to the earlier model (familiar

39 The tour of hell ends at this point, and the manuscript quickly concludes in two folio pages with the return of the Prophet to Jerusalem and Mecca on the back of Burāq, and the questioning he receives at the hands of the doubting Quraysh (fol. 82r line 6 to fol. 82v).

40 Compare “Sarḥā’īl” of the Persian text in Anon., *Majlis* 307. The letters *šād-wāw* here are a close kin to the Persian ms.’s *šin-rā’* at the beginning of the name. See Amcazade 95/2, fol. 81r–81v. Instead of God commanding the guardian from on high to show Muḥammad around on a tour of hellfire, however, in this version Gabriel does the commanding, and the guardian responds by giving the “here I am” phrase from the *talbiya* to Gabriel. That this displacement must be a later emendation to the original version, however, becomes clear when a few lines later in the narrative, our heroes leave behind Mālik (without so much as a goodbye) and Gabriel explains that the terrifying form that Muḥammad then beholds is none other than “Šukhā’īl.”

41 The connection between the beginning of this tour and Muḥammad’s upperworldly encounter with the angel “Sarḥā’īl” or “Šukhā’īl,” guardian of *jahannam*, which is mentioned both in this 7th/13th-century Amcazade Bakrī text as well as the anonymous Persian 6th/12th-century text, is suggestive but not definitive proof of the idea that this angelic guardian who is standing in front of a firey gate takes Muḥammad through that gate which leads him straight down to the lowest earthly realms.

also in the pre-Islamic period) depicting its actual location to be below the earth near Jerusalem and associated with the Valley of Jahannam.

One final text I wish to offer as evidence before turning to my conclusions is the Arabic ascension text of the early ninth/fifteenth-century Anatolian scholar Musa Iznikī (d. 833/1429). In Iznikī's version of the Ibn Abbas account, the first hint of a tour of hell comes once again in the fifth heaven, where an unnamed angel sitting on a throne holding pillars of fire (and whose description resembles that of Mālik) presides over the punishment of evildoers such as those guilty of associating partners with God (shirk), who wear clothes of fire. Shortly thereafter he meets Mālik himself in the sixth heaven. No actual tour appears at this point in Iznikī's story, however; after Muḥammad talks with Mālik, he immediately goes on to meet the prophets Noah and Idris/Enoch elsewhere in the sixth heaven.⁴²

The tour of hell proper once again gets postponed to the end of the audience with God, where God asks Muḥammad if he wishes to view what God has prepared for believers in the Garden, to which he replies with an ardent "Yes!"⁴³ Following this long tour of the Garden, Muhammad reports that his vision of the Garden causes him also to want to see *jahannam*, and he asks Gabriel to take him there.⁴⁴ The tour of hell that comes next is approximately twice as long as Iznikī's tour of the Garden.⁴⁵ Mālik calls on his servant angel Susā'il, who appears to be one of the punishing angels called the *zabāniya*, and now serves as Muḥammad's guide through his tour of hell.⁴⁶ After the tour, God questions Muḥammad about his experience, and leaves him with a final commission:

42 Iznikī, *Mī'rājnāma* (dated 1095/1684) fol. 10v–11r.

43 Ibid., fol. 19v.

44 Ibid., fol. 21v.

45 Ibid., fols. 21v–25r.

46 Ibid., fol. 21v. Aside from the extraordinary length of this tour of hell, one particularly remarkable scene in Iznikī's texts appears where specific individuals are mentioned in the Fire. In Iznikī's account, similar to Ayasofya 867 discussed above in which Muḥammad sees a woman who recognizes him and asks for his help during his fifth heaven tour of *jahannam*, Muḥammad himself recognizes specific people, in this case his own parents, on his tour of hell. Muḥammad asks Gabriel if he might be able to intercede with God on his parents' behalf, but Gabriel informs him that he would have to make a choice: either intercede on behalf of his parents or intercede later on behalf of the whole Muslim community, and of course Muhammad chooses the latter option, leaving his parents to burn out of his greater compassion for his entire *umma*. Ibid., fols. 23v–24r.

Muḥammad, you and your obedient community are protected from the intensities of the Fire and its punishments, and I have prepared in the Garden for you and your community—with all the monotheist submitters [muslimūn]—pleasures whose number only I know. Return to the world, and call your community to belief and the pleasures of the Garden, inform them about its pleasures, and warn them of the punishments of the Fire ...⁴⁷

After this “commission,” Muḥammad descends to the sixth heaven, encounters Moses, and the familiar bargaining session with God for the reduction of the number of daily prayers begins. The text makes explicitly clear the exhortative and didactic purpose of Muḥammad’s tour of the Garden and of hellfire, and its placement near the culmination of the ascension narrative—after the audience with God and likely somewhere near the seventh heaven—gives this section of Iznikī’s text special emphasis.

3 Conclusions

Narrative accounts of Muḥammad’s ascension show a clear movement from a brief vision of the Fire in or around Jerusalem near the culmination of the *isrā’*, or similar descriptions in the first heaven of the *mi’rāj* in some of the earliest texts, to a brief encounter with Mālik in the first heaven followed by a vision of hellfire near the culmination of the ascension in the early middle periods, and then the appearance of two major patterns in the Ibn ‘Abbās texts of the seventh/thirteenth to ninth/fifteenth centuries, one in which a full tour of hell takes place in the fifth heaven, and another in which it occurs shortly after Muḥammad’s audience with God in the sixth or seventh (or higher) heavens. One may wonder why we find the narreme of the tour of hell in such diverse places in these ascension reports, and I conclude this survey by offering some working hypotheses.

One theory to explain why the tour of hell is reported in diverse upper-worldly locations is that there was an element of oral transmission and oral performance in these non-canonical *mi’rāj* narratives. Just as one could not predict with any certainty in the Ibn ‘Abbās ascension accounts in which heaven one might find Muḥammad’s encounter with Adam, Jesus, Solomon, or even Moses and Abraham,⁴⁸ so too it appears that, until the modern era at

47 Ibid., fol. 25r.

48 See Colby, *Narrating* 138–41 (Table 1).

least, the tours of hellfire in these ascension reports never achieved a stable format or standard location in the discourse. Despite this lack of single form, however, we have seen that certain patterns do begin to emerge, and in the later middle periods the tour of hell more often than not becomes placed in one of the upper heavens, especially the fifth, sixth, seventh or beyond. This development, too, could be seen as consistent with theories of oral transmission and oral history, especially as conditioned by scholarly concerns with narrative authenticity that would tend to channel diverse oral reports into particular patterns.

Unlike the placing of a vision of the Fire in the first heaven, which may be connected to the common early trope of Muḥammad meeting Adam in the first heaven as the latter presides over an evaluation of newly departed souls, for those narratives that place the tour of hell in the fifth heaven, the connection between the tour of hell and the prophet whom Muḥammad encounters in the fifth heaven is less clear. Sometimes Aaron shows up in this heaven, as in many mainstream Sunni hadith reports, but sometimes Muḥammad finds Idris/Enoch there, and in other versions he finds no prophet at all. Although it is rare for Muslim ascension texts to make any direct connection between the seven heavens and the respective planetary spheres of the Ptolemaic universe, it is intriguing to consider the possibility that since the Ptolemaic model associates the fifth heaven with the red planet Mars (the God of War), this association could theoretically have something to do with the placement of the terrifying Mālik and the violent punishments of the Fire in this particular sphere in some later Ibn ‘Abbās ascension narratives.

Perhaps more easy to explain is the placement of the extended tours of hell near the very end of Muḥammad’s heavenly journey, at a location in the narrative where the long section would not detract from the flow of the accounts of the other heavens, and where it would be poised to have its most dramatic impact. One often finds this pattern reproduced on the borders of Islamdom—for instance, in the versions copied in al-Andalus, Greece, Herat, Anatolia, etc.—, sometimes accompanied by a few sentences that make explicit the moral and didactic purpose of the tours, as we saw in Iznikī’s account that was surveyed at the end of the discussion above. This positioning of the narrative and explicit didactic purpose underscores Gruber’s thesis regarding the Ilkhanid and Chaghatay accounts, namely that they served as teaching manuals for recently converted Muslims at least as much as they might have been used as tools for the attempted conversion of non-Muslims to Islam.

This being as it may, the patterns that we have seen describing an upper-worldly hell in the fifth heaven or beyond demonstrate that Muḥammad’s tour of hell—or at least the encounter introducing or leading to his tour of

hell—gets moved from a site on earth, its typical location in early ascension narratives and later eschatological manuals, to a position higher and higher in the heavenly realms in the majority of the widely-circulated ascension texts transmitted in the middle and later periods of Islamic history.

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Hell in Popular Muslim Imagination

The Anonymous Kitāb al-ʿAzama

Wim Raven

Can we know anything about paradise and hell before being sent to them? This question must have been considered by the first Muslims, who worried about their eternal fate. The relatively scarce details given in the Quran may well have triggered the believers' imagination while failing to give any comprehensive answers to their questions. That task was left to the early exegetes, the storytellers (*qāṣṣ*, pl. *quṣṣāṣ*) and preachers who explained the Quran, recounted the life of the prophet Muḥammad, and alerted souls to the afterlife (*targhīb wa-tarhīb*). They were first hand witnesses to the most reliable source of further knowledge: the Prophet himself, whom they made journey through heaven and hell, in the best tradition of Apocalyptic and Ascension literature. Moses, Enoch, and various Christian apostles before him were said to have made a similar journey, and this tradition was also known in Iranian literature, in the *Ardā Virāz Nāmag* (sixth century CE?). This genre was to continue for centuries: much was written on Muḥammad's ascension, and this even spread within Europe (*Liber Scalae Machometi*; ca. 1250?). The idea was also picked up by al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058), Dante (d. 1321), and, at a more popular level, by the Bulūqiyā story, for example, in the *Arabian Nights*.¹ In this text Bulūqiyā, a Jewish boy from Cairo, wishes to find the prophet Muḥammad. His quest leads him through mythological landscapes, where he meets various supernatural beings who teach him about the unknown parts of the universe from where they originate. A king of the Jinn named Ṣakhr tells him about hell:

Bulūqiyā, God created hell in seven layers (*ṭabaqāt*), one above the other, and between every two layers is a distance of thousands of years. The first layer He called Jahannam; He set it up for the disobedient among the believers who die without having repented.²

1 *Alf layla wa-layla* i, 660–704.

2 *Ibid.*, i, 668.

The other layers have names as well, all taken from the Quran, such as *al-Jahīm*, *Saqar*, and so on. After the king has enumerated them all, Bulūqiyā asks:

“So perhaps Jahannam has the least of torture, since it is the uppermost?” “Yes”, said King Şakhr, “it has the least of torture of them all; yet in it are a thousand mountains of fire, in each mountain seventy thousand valleys of fire, in each valley seventy thousand cities of fire, in each city seventy thousand castles of fire, in each castle seventy thousand houses of fire, in each house seventy thousand abodes of fire and in each abode seventy thousand couches of fire and in every couch seventy thousand manners of torment. [...] As for the other layers of hell, Bulūqiyā, nobody knows the number of kinds of torment therein but God alone”. When Bulūqiyā heard this from King Şakhr, he fell down unconscious [...].³

From where did the storyteller of the *Arabian Nights* obtain his material? He may have been inspired by al-Tha’labī’s (d. 427/1035) story about Bulūqiyā, which is, however, far less detailed.⁴ It is perhaps more likely that he got it from another book that dealt with such matters, of which a number must have existed.

1 *The Kitāb al-‘Azama*

One of these books is the *Kitāb al-‘Azama*, whose section on hell will be discussed here. *‘Azama* is not an Apocalypse or an Ascension story, instead being essentially a book on cosmology. It advertizes itself as a book on “God’s sublimity; His creatures in heaven and on earth, in between them and under the earth; the air; the creation; and the characteristics of paradise and hell”.⁵ However, in content, style, and atmosphere *‘Azama* is closely related to the Bulūqiyā story.⁶

‘Azama does not rely on the authority of Muḥammad, but on that of more ancient prophets. The original book is said to have been revealed to Adam, who wrote it down on clay tablets, baked them, and deposited them in a cave

3 Ibid.

4 Tha’labī, *Qiṣaṣ* 354–62 (tr. 593–604).

5 *‘Azama*, my edition of the part “‘Azama about itself”: <http://wp.me/p2gowF-4f>, no. 101.

6 I published an introductory article on the book as a whole in 1993. See Raven, *A Kitāb al-‘Azama*.

“in Sarandīb in India”,⁷ which was opened each year on the day of ‘Āshūrā’. When the prophet Daniel heard about this cave he brought forty scribes and copied down as much as he could on that one day. After his death the book was made public on copper sheets. According to the text itself, ‘Abdallāh ibn Salām, a Jewish convert to Islam from the time of the Prophet, read it to the caliph ‘Uthmān, who regularly burst into tears or even fainted upon hearing the text.⁸ The author shows his awareness of the requirements of Islamic scholarship by adding impressive but faked *isnāds* (chains of transmission) to the work in the manner demanded by the *‘ulamā’*. Yet these imprimaturs, assigned to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and others, which are meant to underscore its reliability, have by their sheer quantity almost the opposite effect.

Azama is a rather neglected text. Anton Heinen described a number of *Azamas*,⁹ only one of which is identical with the work under consideration, the one he found ascribed to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 281/894).¹⁰ Fuat Sezgin mixed up several works of the same title.¹¹ The *K. al-Azama* edited by Mubārakfūrī is a completely different work and therefore irrelevant to this study.¹² Our text exists in two versions in at least twelve carelessly written manuscripts, some of which have been heavily enriched with eschatological and parenetic material. The different manuscripts ascribe the work to various authors: Abu Ḥayyān, Abu Shaykh, Ibn Ḥibbān, Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī, and Ibn Abī l-Dunyā.¹³ In Arabic script it is only a small step from Abu Ḥayyān to Ibn Ḥibbān. As such, it seems wiser for the time being to consider *Azama* an anonymous text.

Dating the book is also currently impossible, although it must have come into being a considerable time after, say, 300/910. The classical hadith collections and the early Quranic commentaries from before this period deal with the same subject matter as *Azama*, but in a much more restrained way. The trend towards large numbers and sizes already exists in hadith and *tafsīr*: a tree in paradise that takes five hundred years to go round, birds the size of Bactrian camels, and a river in paradise as broad as the Arabian peninsula,

7 I.e., Sri Lanka, the place where Adam “fell” to earth from paradise.

8 *Azama* 72–7 (ed. Abu Deeb). My edition of this part can be found at <http://wp.me/p2gowF-83>; for an English translation, see <http://wp.me/p2gowF-y>. In what follows, footnotes refer to my online edition, unless otherwise indicated.

9 Heinen, *Islamic cosmology* 37–52.

10 Ibid., 48–9.

11 GAS I, see *Indices: Büchertitel*, s.v. *K. al-Azama*.

12 This text, which is ascribed to Abū l-Shaykh al-Iṣbahānī (d. 369/979), is also mentioned by Heinen, *Islamic cosmology* 38–42.

13 The book by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā entitled *Ṣifat al-nār* bears no resemblance to our *Azama*.

for example. Yet these are nothing compared to the billions and trillions that appear in *ʿAzama*. The larger the numbers, the later the text; and such is also the case for the earlier and later manuscripts of *ʿAzama*.

The language and style of *ʿAzama* do not conform to the rules and traditions of classical Arabic. To mention only a few examples: it often writes *hum* instead of classical *hiya*; uses phrases such as *wa-hum yaqūlū* and *dhālika al-jibāl*; or sentences get stuck halfway through or their initial subject becomes forgotten. It is unclear at which stage of transmission such sloppiness began; there may have been centuries of deterioration, and it must be supposed that the subject matter was apparently not considered religiously valuable enough to be transmitted carefully.

A printed edition was made by Kamal Abu Deeb on the basis of just one manuscript. I intend to present an edition and translation on the basis of more.¹⁴ It no longer seems necessary to be apologetic about editing a popular text that gives an insight in the beliefs of the not-so-intellectual Muslims of long ago. In the present paper, I will refer to the numbers 401–579 used in my nascent edition as well as to the pages in that by Abu Deeb.

Before we descend into *ʿAzama*'s hell, it will be useful to take a look at the construction of the cosmos within the text,¹⁵ in order to see where hell is. In summary, starting from the bottom: God created an atmosphere, above it a sea, above it an earth of iron, then again an atmosphere, above it an earth of lead, above it another sea, then again an earth from silver, then another sea. Soon, however, the picture becomes more confused. Millions of cities, seas, and mountains follow each other. It is impossible to obtain a clear picture, firstly because the text is chaotic, and secondly because these worlds are multi-dimensional; they are beyond our imagination. The difficulty is that the cities and gardens are not always on the earth, but sometimes in the air or even in a sea, as islands. One might call this obfuscation, but it successfully demonstrates God's sublimity (*ʿazama*), and highlights that there are more dimensions than humans can handle. It is also interesting to note that many of these worlds are inhabited by strange species: animal-like creatures, rather than jinn or angels. We are not alone! All these beings have their own prophets, revealed laws (*sharāʿi*), paradises, and hells. Where in this vast cosmos is our earth, where is mankind? ʿUthmān asks this question several times, but ʿAbdallāh

14 This edition-cum-translation is appearing in installments on <http://kitabalazama.wordpress.com>.

15 *ʿAzama* 77–99 (ed. Abu Deeb). My edition of this part: <http://wp.me/p2gowF-83>; for an English translation, see <http://wp.me/p2gowF-86>.

ibn Salām gives only evasive answers. The whole “layered cake” is glazed with an earth of crystal. On top of that is hell, our hell, which is also multilayered. Above it the cosmos continues; then comes paradise; and on top of that is the Throne of God.¹⁶

2 Hell in the *K. al-ʿAzama*

ʿAzama’s section on hell is a thick soup of variegated texts and fragments, many of which may or must have had an independent existence beforehand. The author did not stir them very well, so the mixture remains rather lumpy. With some effort a loose structure can be discovered, but it may be more useful to give a very short overview and then discuss the various parts, irrespective of their place in the whole.

Roughly, the first half is focused mainly on cosmology and the geography of hell, whereas the second half focuses on the special tortures designed for the various categories of sinners, and thus serves a clear parenetic function. The description begins with the seven layers of hell, identified according to their Quranic names. There then follows a long “geographical” description of hell in a similar manner to the preceding section on the cosmos. Throughout the text, Quranic nouns are given a new function as names for certain places in hell. The cruel tortures for four categories of sinners are described extensively, as well as those who mete them out: the angels of hell (*zabānī*; sic!), the scorpions, and the snakes. Then follow a number of descriptions of the people who are tortured, inspired by Quranic verses and, gradually, the text becomes more interested in those who are punished. Towards the end, a long list of categories of sinner is included, along with their respective punishments. The section closes with two pages on the heat and the cold of hell.

From the reference numbers that I use in my nascent online edition of *ʿAzama* it can be seen that related subject matter is sometimes scattered rather widely in the text. However, the following subjects can be discerned: (1) the geography of hell; (2) geomorphization: the Quranic names of the layers of hell; (3) geographication: unspecific Quranic nouns used as place names; (4) extensive descriptions of punishments; (5) elaborations of Quranic verses; (6) Mālik, the guardian of hell; (7) short formulaic texts: Sinners, punishment, and herald; (8) the frame-story: The interaction between ʿAbdallāh and ʿUthmān; and (9) the heat and the cold of hell. Sometimes these subjects overlap.

¹⁶ Similar, but less extravagant material can be found in the chapter on creation of al-Thaʿlabī’s *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. See Thaʿlabī, *Qīṣaṣ* 12ff. (tr. 19ff.).

2.1 *The Geography of Hell*

The extensive description of hell in “geographical” terms¹⁷ is linked with the general depiction of the cosmos. Just one quote will be enough to get an idea of this:

For hell He made seven gates, providing it with four pillars, which He provided with seven heads, each of which has seven faces, each with seven mouths, each of which has seven tongues and seven molars and [other] teeth; every tooth is as long as a billion¹⁸ years, a year being four thousand months; a month being four thousand days; a day being four thousand hours, and one hour lasts as long as seventy of our years. There is no tree there that was not written upon. On every tree the name of the person to which it belongs is written, and there is no scorpion, no snake, no angel of hell, and no iron hook that does not have the name of the person to which it belongs written upon it.¹⁹

Hell consists of innumerable seas of fire, rivers of fire, islands, valleys and mountains with Quranic names, caves, caverns, stinking pits, and abysses; everything of incredible size and four-dimensions. All these are inhabited by millions of monstrous angels of hell (*zabāniya*, Q 96:18) with their various instruments of torture, by extremely poisonous scorpions and snakes, and by devils (*shayāṭīn*) who live in coffins. As for plants, there are trees with disgusting fruits, such as the *zaqqūm* (Q 44:45, 56:52, 37:64–5), and with many thorns.

2.2 *Geomorphization: The Quranic Names of the Layers of Hell*²⁰

According to nos. 401–8, hell has seven layers (*ṭabaqāt*). They are named after the seven names of hell that occur in the Quran: *al-hāwiya*, *al-jaḥīm*, *al-saʿīr*, *saqar*, *lazā*, *al-ḥuṭama*, and *jahannam*. It is interesting that the name *jahannam* is used both for hell as a whole and for one of the layers. Every layer is assigned to a different group of denizens. Right at the bottom are the hypocrites, in accordance with Q 4:145; then the unbelievers; the devils, Yājūj and Mājūj and their like; the Jews, the Dajjāl, and the wrongdoers; the Christians; and finally, in the highest layer, the disobedient Muslim sinners. Al-Kisāʿī's (*fl.* third/ninth century [?]) *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* has an almost identical enumeration of the layers,

17 *ʿAzama*, nos. 401–10, 416–35, 455–9, 468–70, 478, 487, 489, 492, 495, 501, 506, 515; *ʿAzama* 100–15 (ed. Abu Deeb) and *passim*.

18 Or a trillion. The manuscripts are quite generous with *alf* *alfs*.

19 *ʿAzama*, nos. 409–10.

20 *Ibid.*, nos. 401–8; *ʿAzama* 99 (ed. Abu Deeb).

including the double function for the name *jahannam*, but in reverse order, and he does not call them layers, but gates of hell.²¹ Quranic commentaries apply a similar geomorphization and vary between “gates” and “layers”. Al-Kisā’ī himself speaks of gates for a good reason, since he quotes the Quranic verse: “Seven gates it has [...]” (Q 15:44).²² His text is more modest than *ʿAzama*. According to him, the distance between the gates is five hundred years of travel, whereas the distance between the layers in *ʿAzama* is no less than “that between God’s Throne and the earth”. The main intention of both al-Kisā’ī and the description in *ʿAzama* seems to have been “geographical exegesis”: to turn hell-related nouns in the Quran into names of places and thus determine their location. This is also the methodology used in the description of paradise.²³

2.3 *Geographication: Unspecific Quranic Nouns Used as Place Names*

Apart from the seven names that refer directly to hell (nos. 401–8), other Quranic nouns and an occasional non-Quranic one are turned into place names: they are given locations in hell and described. Some of these words are rare or unclear in their meaning, while others are not:

1. *Khusr* (Q 103:2) is a fire between two trees.²⁴ Normally the word means “loss”.
2. *al-Wayl* (“woe”) is a valley.²⁵ This frequently used word may have been, but was not definitely, taken from the Quran, where it occurs 23 times;
3. *Ghayyan* is a mountain.²⁶ The word, including its accusative ending, is taken from Q 19:59, where it is normally translated as “perdition”. Here it is described in detail as an enormous mountain in Jahannam, inhabited by the angels of hell. It is the place where a self-satisfied couple is punished (see below, under [4]);
4. *Sakrān*: In the mountain of Ghayyan there is a valley called Sakrān (“drunk”).²⁷ This place name has no basis in the Quran. Its plural *sukārā* in Q 4:43 almost certainly did not inspire our author;

21 Kisā’ī, *Qīṣaṣ* 18–9 (tr. 18–9).

22 I use the Quran translation by Majid Fakhry.

23 My edition <http://wp.me/p2gowF-7E>; for an English translation, see <http://wp.me/p2gowF-7H>. Cf. *ʿAzama* 148 (ed. Abu Deeb).

24 *ʿAzama*, no. 428.

25 *Ibid.*, no. 435.

26 *Ibid.*, nos. 455–68.

27 *Ibid.*, no. 468.

5. *Ša‘ūdan* (Q 74:17; including the accusative ending) means “acclivity, hardship”, but here it is a mountain, also inhabited by the angels of hell, who drive the sinners up to the top;²⁸
6. *al-Falaq* (“daybreak”, Q 113:1), is interpreted as a mountain;²⁹
7. *Māt* (“he died”) is not a noun, but a verb form that occurs twice in the Quran, in rather unspecific contexts. Here it is understood to be a valley;³⁰ it may, but does not have to, have been taken from the Quran;
8. *al-Ḥazan* (“sadness, grief”, Q 35:34) is taken as a valley.³¹ Theoretically one might read *ḥuzn*, which occurs once in Q 12:84, but there the context does not encourage the establishment of a connection with hell;
9. *Saqar* (Q 54:48; 74:26, 27, 42), in addition to being one of the seven layers of hell mentioned above,³² is interpreted here as a valley.³³

This type of Quranic exegesis is extremely old; it occurs as early as the *Tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), who explains *ghayy* as a “valley in Jahannam”³⁴ and *saqar* as “the fifth gate of Jahannam”;³⁵ similar explanations occur in later commentaries, where it makes no difference whether something is a valley, a gate, or a layer. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), for instance, says about *ghayy* that it is “a river in Jahannam”, or “one of the wadis in Jahannam, that is, one of its sources”;³⁶ Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) knows that it is “a pit in deepest Jahannam, into which the fluid from the wounds of its denizens seeps”.³⁷ Such explanations exist also in connection with paradise. Muqātil explains the word *kawthar* in Q 108:1 as “the best river in paradise” and expands on it.³⁸ His contemporary Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 150/767) quotes a related piece of exegesis in the form of a hadith, albeit a defective one, according to which *kawthar* is “a river as broad as from Šan‘ā’ to Ayla”.³⁹

28 Ibid., nos. 478–9.

29 Ibid., in no. 484.

30 Ibid., no. 488.

31 Ibid., nos. 425, 489.

32 Ibid., no. 405.

33 Ibid., no. 492.

34 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* ii, 632.

35 Ibid., iv, 496.

36 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* xvi, 100.

37 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr* iii, 128.

38 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* iv, 879.

39 Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra* 261–2 (tr. 180–1).

2.4 *Extensive Descriptions of Punishments*

With the exception of usury,⁴⁰ the sins mentioned in 'Azama's section on hell are not one of the seven deadly sins (*kabā'ir*) of Islamic theology, but rather are sins of the type that may have infuriated a local imam or neighbors: bearing false witness, kissing boys lustfully, shortening the prayer, coitus *a tergo*, treating neighbors badly, striving for worldly vanities, defiling graves, speaking with two tongues, leaving babies to wetnurses, associating with the powerful, slandering, and excessive mourning, among many others. Against the background of the vast geographical expanse described above, and courtesy of hell's resident torturers, the punishments of a small number of sinners, including evil scholars, reciters of the Quran, a self-satisfied couple, and a man from the ruling classes—people for whom a modern reader may find it difficult to understand precisely why these people are seen as being so bad—are treated extensively.

Evil scholars (*'ulamā' al-sū'*) are punished in the organ by which they sinned: their heads. These are ground between millstones because the scholars were greedy, wore large turbans and dressed in silk, hoarded gold and silver, and adulated potentates.⁴¹ Quran reciters (*qurrā'*) are severely punished and allotted much space in the text, which is kept lively by dialogues between them and the angels of hell.⁴² Their sins are immodesty towards the Lord, eye-service, and malicious behavior towards their fellow man. The reason for their being judged more harshly than evil scholars or others is not explained. They are thrown into caves, where they have to wear turbans and clothes of fire, and where lead is poured into their ears. This causes them to indulge in weeping and self-reproach, but this makes no difference and the angels of hell show no mercy, putting a scorpion which has the equivalent of 10,000 water-skins of poison in its belly in charge of each of them. Because of this, they complain that nobody is tortured more vehemently than they, but the angels point out that they are not fettered or chained, before setting loose on every person two black snakes, which penetrate their bodies and puff poison into their faces.

As for the complacent couple, the angels of hell bite a man and a woman, spit on them, cause them burns, and beat them with iron rods of fire. The couple plead that they were always obedient and pious, that they fasted and even performed the pilgrimage. On this occasion the angels cannot explain to them

40 'Azama, nos. 436 and 559.

41 Ibid., nos. 436–7.

42 Ibid., nos. 438–55.

why they are tortured; they just follow their orders. Then a mighty cry⁴³ makes everyone freeze, and an anonymous voice proclaims the couple's real sin: they postponed the prayer or performed it too early for reasons of their own.⁴⁴ Thereupon men and women (now in the plural) are gruesomely tortured, each by an individual devil that rises from a coffin. They are well aware of their own sinfulness, but complete insight as to the reason is apparently lacking: they have to be taught that they were not fearful, did not perform prayers with the ritual ablutions, and were not careful while urinating. This part of the text is rather chaotic, and actually consists of two texts, or two variations of the same text. However, both want to make it clear that even decent Muslims have no reason to be complacent, as many will not escape hell.

The torment of the "man from the ruling classes" (*rajul min ahl al-mulk*) is also very violent, and takes place in various stages.⁴⁵ Apparently because he had magnified himself on earth, he is now blown up to a grotesque size and pinned down by enormous chains. When he cries that he is thirsty, he is given a drink that makes his flesh fall from his bones, as well as his fingers and teeth. After a thrashing with rods of fire he cries for help once more, but the drink hardens in his mouth. Then they (*sic*) and others of the *ahl al-mulk* ask Mālik for refreshing food; they are given fruits from the *zaqqūm* tree, which is spiked with sharp thorns that cut into all parts of their face. The fruits themselves look good but turn out to be disgusting and worm-ridden; when they bite into a fruit, a worm comes out and eats their tongues and teeth. They try to flee, but fall into pits where they are tormented forever by snakes and scorpions.

2.5 *Elaborations on Quranic Verses*

As we saw above, the names of the layers of hell are Quranic, as are various place names. In fact, many isolated Quranic words occur, such as *ḥamīm* (boiling water, Q 55:44 and *passim*), *muhl* (hot oil [?], Q 18:29, 44:45, 70:8), and *ghislīn* (nauseating food, Q 69:36). But as well as those, certain sections in *Aḏama* elaborate on Quranic verses in a formulaic framework. They mention a group of sinners who are brought in (*yu'tā bi-qawm*), describe their specific punishments, point to the fact that they are referred to in the Quran (*hum alladhīna dhakarāhum/waṣafāhum allāh ...fī kitābihi*), and finally quote the relevant verse. A short example in this vein is:

43 The word is *ṣarkha*, but one is reminded of Quranic *ṣayḥa*.

44 Ibid., nos. 460–77.

45 Ibid., nos. 538–48.

Then people from this community are brought in, whose necks are put into those rings and whose cheeks are pressed against the fire. When the right cheek is done, it is put onto the left cheek until it is also done; then it is put back onto the right cheek again, so that they *taste the painful torment*. They are the ones whom God mentions in his book: *The day their faces are turned around in the Fire* (Q 33:66).⁴⁶

There are a few more paragraphs like this, most of them considerably longer. In nos. 471–7 devils torment couples who claim they had been pious and had meant well, and who cry out in their fright: “O ruination!” (*wā-thabūrāh*). Their devil explains to them: “You did not fear [God] and did not observe prayer with the ritual ablution, and you were not careful while urinating”. This scene refers to Q 25:13: “And if they are hurled in a narrow space therein, tied up in fetters, they would call out there for ruination”. A similar example is a group of people who had too much pleasure in this world and so they are crucified on thorns like spears of fire.⁴⁷ To them Q 39:24 is applied: “Is he who wards off with his face the evil punishment on the Day of Resurrection?”⁴⁸ And it is said then to the wrongdoers: “Taste what you used to earn”. Those who practiced anal intercourse are turned around as on a mill, then chained; they try to free themselves but to no avail.⁴⁹ “Those are the ones who God described in his book: ‘They will then wish to come out of the Fire, but they will never come out, and theirs is an everlasting punishment!’ ” (Q 5:37). In nos. 502–5 men and women are separated and thrown into pits. They are given the disgusting *zaqqūm* fruit to eat and fluid that seeps from wounds to drink (*ṣadīd*, Q 14:16). Then they are hung in baskets; when they try to climb out, the angels of hell push them back. The relevant Quranic verse is Q 32:20, with the exception of the last word which is from Q 22:22: “Every time they want to get out of it, they are brought back to it, and it is said to them: ‘Taste the agony of burning’”. Judges who were too severe on earth continue to rebuke the tortured in hell but are rebuked by them as well: “Then, they turned to one another, reproaching each other” (Q 68:30).⁵⁰ Other sinners look more or less as described in the verse: “Their garments made of pitch, and their faces covered with fire” (Q 14:50).⁵¹

46 Ibid., nos. 499–500.

47 Ibid., nos. 479–83.

48 The syntax in Arabic is unclear.

49 Ibid., nos. 494–7; the text is rather chaotic.

50 Ibid., no. 526.

51 Ibid., no. 529.

2.6 *Mālik, the Guardian of Hell*

One subject in the Quran which simply demanded some elaboration was the appeal of the denizens of hell to Mālik, its guardian (Q 43:77), and sometimes to its keepers (*ḥazana*). Mālik makes his appearance in three unconnected fragments in *Azama's* hell section, which again demonstrates that the book draws from various sources.

In nos. 507–14 three relevant Quranic verses are put to use in dramatic dialogues. First the sinners seek intercession from the very angels of hell who torture them. This is to no avail, of course, for “they are the ones who God mentions in his Book: ‘So we have no intercessors, nor an intimate friend’” (Q 26:100–1). Then they appeal to Mālik with the words of Q 43:77: “They call out: ‘O Mālik, let your Lord be done with us’ but he will say: ‘You are surely staying on’”. They try their luck once more with the angels of hell, whose intercession with Mālik they now ask for, in the hope that he will intercede with the Lord to obtain some alleviation. They are the ones that God mentions in the Quran: “Those in the Fire will say to the keepers of hell: ‘Call on your Lord that he may remit a day of punishment for us’” (Q 40:49).

In another tableau,⁵² a dialogue begins between the sinners and the angels of hell, who give them a drink—a drink that, unsurprisingly, brings them no refreshment. Then they ask Mālik for food; he orders his angels to bring them to the *zaqqūm* tree, the fruits of which are utterly indigestible. Then another relevant Quranic verse is quoted, Q 35:37: “Our Lord, bring us out and we will do the righteous deed, differently from what we used to do!” After one hundred years he⁵³ answers them: “Did we not prolong your life sufficiently for him to remember who is apt to remember? The warner came to you, so taste now. The wrongdoers shall have no supporter”. When they try it again with Q 43:77, it takes another hundred years before the answer comes, not from Mālik, who does not bother, but from a herald: “You are surely staying on”.

In a third scene⁵⁴ the sinners complain about the heat in hell and ask for cooling; Mālik then sends them out into the cold (*zamharīr*, see below, under [9]). The *mise-en-scène* and the wording are freer here, and there are no quotations from Quranic verses. Therefore, and also because the subject of the coldness of hell seems to be quite unique, it will be discussed separately below.

52 Ibid., nos. 542–8.

53 The text leaves who “he” is unclear.

54 Ibid., nos. 562–78.

2.7 *Short Formulaic Texts: Sinners, Punishment, and Herald*

Thirty-three short formulaic texts⁵⁵ begin with “Then other people were brought in ...” (*thumma yu'tā bi-qawm*), after which their punishment is described, like those mentioned above, under (5). But this time it is a herald who cries out what type of sinners they are, without reference to the Quran. One example: “Then other people from this community are brought, each of whom is administered one thousand lashes, and then one thousand more on their thighs. A herald cries out over them: ‘These are the ones who had bad relations with their neighbors’.”⁵⁶

The formulaic texts are rooted in a long tradition of Apocalyptic and Ascension literature. In Christian and pre-Islamic Iranian literatures and in the biography of Muḥammad they all follow a basic pattern: a traveler recounts his journey through heaven and hell, where he was guided by an angel or some other supernatural being; in hell he sees groups of people being tortured in a precisely described way and asks who they are. The guide then explains what sin they had committed. Here is an example from the Christian *Apocalypse of Paul* (written ca. 200–300 CE):

And I saw not far away another old man led on by evil angels, running with speed, and they pushed him into the fire up to his knees, and they struck him with stones and wounded his face like a storm, and did not allow him to say, “Have pity on me!” And I asked the angel, and he said to me: “He whom you see was a bishop and did not perform his episcopate well, who indeed accepted the great name but did not enter into the witness of him who gave him the name all his life, seeing that he did not give just judgment, and did not pity widows and orphans, but now he receives retribution according to his iniquity and works.”⁵⁷

In the late Sassanian Pahlavi text *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, formerly known as *Arda Viraf* (written sixth century CE), dozens of such episodes occur. One example is:

And I saw the soul of a man, both of whose eyes were gouged out, his tongue was cut out, and he was hung in hell from one foot, and his body was always being raked with a two-headed brass comb, and an iron nail

55 Ibid., nos. 486–8, 516–28, 530–7, 549–60.

56 Ibid., no. 521. The two other texts in which a herald appears are nos. 491 and 526. The latter text begins as one of these short formulaic texts, but ends with a Quranic verse.

57 *Apocalypse of Paul* 35, p. 634. Similar texts are found in the *Greek Apocalypse of Ezra* 4:9–12, 22–4; 5:1–3.

was driven into his head. And I asked: “Who is this man and what sin did he commit?” Srōš, the pious, and the god Ādur said: “This is the soul of that wicked judge whose [duty] in the world was to judge the wicked, and received bribes and gave devious judgments”.⁵⁸

Ibn Ishāq’s story (ca. 130/750) of Muḥammad’s Ascension, under Jibrīl’s guidance, has four fragments in this genre, one of which is:

Then I saw men with lips like camels; in their hands were pieces of fire like stones which they used to thrust into their mouths and they would come out of their posteriors. I asked: “Who are these, Jibrīl?” He answered: “These are those who sinfully devoured the wealth of orphans”.⁵⁹

In Apocalyptic and Ascension literature there is a traveler and a heavenly guide who can be asked questions and who answers them. This dialogue is lacking in *ʿAzama*, because it belongs to another genre: it is essentially a cosmology. There is no journey here, no traveler and no guide; the herald speaks on his own to no specific audience. In *ʿAzama* it is significant that the present tense is used, referring to a future time: the author sees before him how it will be in hell in the hereafter.⁶⁰

2.8 *The Frame Story: Interaction between ʿAbdallāh and ʿUthmān*

The *Kitāb al-ʿAzama* claims it was read aloud to the caliph ʿUthmān by ʿAbdallāh ibn Salām, a converted Jew and a Companion of the Prophet, who had found Daniel’s book. Throughout the book, short intermezzos remind the reader of the setting. Sometimes ʿUthmān asks a question and ʿAbdallāh answers and explains. Often the caliph weeps, or both men weep, in awe of all the sublime and frightening descriptions they find in the book.

The section on hell has two dialogue situations: in nos. 411–6 both men are awed by the vastness of hell. ʿAbdallāh demonstrates a theological knowledge of the existence of hell: “Had God so wished, he would not have created it [i.e., hell], but He has foreknowledge and His decree (*amr*) is obeyed”. In other words, God does what He wants and *could* have overruled His own decree, had

58 *Ardā Wirāz Nāmaq* 214.

59 Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra* 269 (tr. 185).

60 In the Jewish legend about the ascension of Moses (Ginzberg, *Legends* ii, 312), the question is omitted, whereas the guiding angel comments the sights on his own initiative: “Then Nasargiel said to Moses: ‘Come and see’ ...” etc. It is possible, however, that Ginzberg himself simplified the narrative structure. In *Legends* v, 416–8 he suggests that the Jewish legend was influenced by the Arabic one.

He so wished—but would He really want to? ‘Uthmān then weeps, apparently out of fear of the Judgment, the outcome of which is unknown, according to Q 46:9. ‘Abdallāh comforts him by quoting Q 48:1–2, “We have indeed given you a manifest victory, that Allah may forgive you your former and your latter sins [...]”, and continues his lecture. In no. 537 both men weep together after a gruesome description. ‘Uthmān wants to know where in hell the kings are. ‘Abdallāh tactfully answers that Jahannam, the upper layer of hell, is the abode of those who profess God’s unity. In spite of all the terrors just described, the upper layer is the mildest part of hell, so that the caliph can imagine what would await him in the other layers.

Why does ‘Uthmān ask about the kings? As an Umayyad he was a king (*malik*) himself; it is not insignificant that this episode is followed by the elaborate torture of a “man from the ruling classes” (*rajul min ahl al-mulk*).⁶¹ In nos. 572 and 578–9, the final part of the framing story, ‘Abdallāh is simply shown as continuing his lecture and then bringing the part on hell to an end.

2.9 *The Heat and the Cold*⁶²

In a coherent passage⁶³ that seems to be unconnected with the rest of the section on hell, the sinners ask Mālik, the guardian of hell, for mitigation, but in vain. The gates cannot be opened, and instead of a cool drink there is only *ḥamīm* (boiling water). But their yearning for coldness is fulfilled after one hundred years, when they are taken to *zamharīr* (the intense cold). This is by no means a better place, as it is a hell of blizzards and icebergs. After another one hundred years, they return to the fire, which is even hotter than before, and the torment continues.

The narrative plays with Q 43:77 (dialogue with Mālik) and Q 40:49 (prayer for mitigation once more), while the word *zamharīr* is taken from Q 76:13. The word is purely Arabic, a verbal noun whose stem is *izmaharra*, the meaning of which is not absolutely clear, and which is found only once in the Quran. Q 76:13 describes the believers in paradise, who are relaxing in a moderate climate and experience “neither sun nor *zamharīr*”. Hence, the latter word is mostly explained as “intense cold”. It does not refer to hell there, but to weather extremes on earth. I found only one hadith in which there is a connection between hell and intense cold:

61 *‘Azama*, nos. 538–48.

62 *Ibid.*, nos. 562–79; *‘Azama* 126–7 (ed. Abu Deeb).

63 *‘Azama*, nos. 563–79.

The Prophet said: “Hell complained to its Lord, saying: ‘O Lord, parts of mine have consumed others.’ Then it was allowed to do two exhalations, one in winter and one in summer. That is the extreme heat you experience in summer and the intense cold (*zamharīr*) you experience in winter”.⁶⁴

The Quranic commentaries of Muqātil, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) offer hardly more than lexical explanations of *zamharīr*. Al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī also quote the above hadith, while al-Qurṭubī, moreover, points to a verse by the poet al-A’shā (fl. ca. 570–625) that is strongly reminiscent of the wording of the Quran.⁶⁵ Tottoli found additional relevant hadith and fragments of *tafsīr*, but also remarks that the idea of a cold (place of) punishment never played a significant part in the Islamic tradition on hell.⁶⁶

Both hadith and Quranic exegesis are very limited on the subject and cannot have been the sources of the lively account in *Aḏama*. Hence the author must have had access to other modes of thought. I have found a Jewish, a Christian, and a Persian parallel, but establishing their sources or interdependence is beyond my grasp. In the Jewish legend of Moses’ tour of hell there is a definite contrast between hot and cold: “Moses yielded, and he saw how the sinners were burnt, one half of their bodies being immersed in fire and the other half in snow, while worms bred in their own flesh crawled over them [...]”.⁶⁷ In hell as described in the *Apocalypse of Paul* there is at least one cold place: “And again I observed there men and women with hands cut and their feet placed in a place of ice and snow, and worms devoured them”.⁶⁸

The cold of hell is also not lacking in *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg*. Here, too, the contrast between heat and cold is put to use as a means of torturing: “Then I saw the souls of the wicked who were ever suffering punishments of different kinds, such as snow, sleet, severe cold, and the heat of a quick-burning fire, and

64 Translated here from Muslim, *Masājid* 185; identical or similar: Buḥārī, *Mawāqīt* 9, *Bad al-khalq* 10; Muslim, *Masājid* 185; Ibn Māja, *Zuhd* 38; Dārimī, *Riḡāq* 119. Hadiths are quoted according to Ginzberg, *Concordance*.

65 *Muna‘amatun ṭaflatun kal-mahāti lam tara shamsan wa-lā zamharīra*, “accustomed to comfort, delicate like a wild cow; she experienced neither sun [glow] nor *zamharīr*”.

66 Tottoli, *Zamharīr*, esp. 147–8. Unlike Tottoli (p. 142 and 148 n. 2), I cannot take the exegesis *zamharīr* = “moon” seriously, in spite of its perpetuated transmission through the centuries. Its origin must have been the aporia of someone who just guessed the meaning of the word.

67 Ginzberg, *Legends* ii, 313; further references v, 418.

68 *Apocalypse of Paul* 39, p. 635.

stench, and stone and ashes, hail and rain, and many other evils [...];⁶⁹ and “[I saw] the souls of those who had fallen downwards in hell and smoke and heat were blown on them from below, and cold wind from above”.⁷⁰ There is, furthermore, an area of hell that is exclusively cold: “And I saw the soul of a man who was carrying a mountain on his back and he had that mountain on his back in the snow and in the cold”.⁷¹

Thus, the notion of cold in hell was sufficiently present in the ancient world to be a source of inspiration. However, in none of the aforementioned sources are the cold and the contrast between hot and cold so elaborated as in *ʿAzama*. This piece, in which Mālik is introduced as if he had never been mentioned before, seems to have been a separate text which was inserted by the compiler of *ʿAzama*, and which he attempted to integrate into the book as a whole. One description he puts explicitly into the mouth of ‘Abdallāh ibn Salām,⁷² while towards the end ‘Abdallāh is made to conclude the passage and at the same time the whole part on hell.⁷³

3 Conclusion

In the hell section of *ʿAzama* there are so many doublets and overlaps that the author or compiler must have drawn on a number of sources. To establish what these sources were is a task for future research. Such a task will not be easy, and may prove impossible. It is obvious that parts of the subject matter occur in hadith and Quranic commentaries, but there we find only small fragments, whereas *ʿAzama* is a sizeable book. It is hardly conceivable that traditionists encountered only fragments in their sources; there must have already been longer texts at an early stage, for the plausible chronological order is from a longer story to shorter pieces, just as it is in the biographies of the Prophet and other works of the *quṣṣāṣ* (storytellers). The Bulūqiyā fragments mentioned at the beginning of this article may well be later than *ʿAzama*, but draw from a text that is apparently older, as one can tell by the numbers and the measures of things, which are still restrained. The part on the hot and cold in hell may well be original.

69 *Ardā Wirāz Nāmaq* 209.

70 *Ibid.*, 217. See also *ibid.*, 202, 210.

71 *Ibid.*, 206.

72 *ʿAzama*, no. 572.

73 *Ibid.*, nos. 578–9.

There is an attempt at structure in *ʿAzama*. Sometimes the form of a layered cake is used.⁷⁴ Elsewhere, all, or at least most, similar fragments are placed together, as, for example, with the “herald”-fragments. The aim of the repeated dialogues between ʿAbdallāh ibn Salām and ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān is to keep the whole hell section together and integrate it into the book as a whole. Whether the sources will be located or not, *ʿAzama* possesses unique features in its elaborations on them, notably the pages on the heat and cold in hell. In spite of its structural and linguistic shortcomings, it gives, by its very size and fantasy, an all-round and impressive description of hell.

How effective was that description for the original audience or readership? It is easy enough for a modern person to dispose of this text as vulgar and sloppy, and to find the exceedingly large numbers it uses ridiculous. However, it probably did succeed in frightening a great deal of the intended readers, or at least made them shiver. It may even have encouraged them, indirectly, to live in such a way as to not end up in hell. At the same time, it may also have provided pleasure, at least to the author, who obviously had a sadistic streak. When one tries to visualize hell from this text, the result is similar to present-day sadistic fantasies, horror films and underground comic strips: monsters with iron hooks in their claws, severed limbs spouting blood and pus, stripped-off skins, snakes and scorpions wriggling over naked bodies. Today, quite a number of people derive a mixture of fright and lust from such pictures or descriptions; would that have been so different in past centuries?

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74 See, for instance, *ʿAzama*, nos. 487–8, 489–90, 506–7, 515–6 and *passim*.

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PART 3

Theological and Mystical Aspects



Is Hell Truly Everlasting?

An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Universalism

Mohammad Hassan Khalil

Is the Quranic hell everlasting? For many theologians and scholars of religion, this is a non-issue: the everlastingness of the Fire (*al-nār*) is taken for granted in numerous works on Islam. In Muslim theological works, it is often made clear that while sinners who passed away with at least an iota of faith (*īmān*) in their hearts may one day be saved (though this claim was famously contested by, among others, various Mu‘tazilites), those who rejected faith and refused to mend their ways before death will never be relieved of the torments of hell.¹ Many theologians present the doctrine of everlasting damnation, or damnationism, as one that was agreed upon by “consensus” (*ijmā‘*).² By dismissing or, more commonly, not mentioning alternative views, various modern western works on Islam leave the reader with a similar impression.³

Yet upon closer examination, we find that we cannot label as damnationists some of the most prominent theologians in the history of Islam. These include giants such as Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), and, in modern times, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and Yūsuf al-Qaradawi. With the

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- 1 See, for example, Watt (tr.), *Islamic creeds* 36 (a version of the Ḥanbalite creed), 52–4 (Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭahāwī [d. 321/933]), 60 (the anonymous *Waṣṣīya* ascribed to Abū Ḥanīfa [d. 150/767]), 82 (Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī [d. 537/1142]), 88 (‘Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ijī [d. 756/1355]); Ibn Bābūya Shaykh Ṣadiq (d. 381/991), *Risālat al-i‘tiqād*, tr. Fyze, *Shiite creed* 80–2; ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), *Uṣūl* 238, 242–4.
 - 2 See, for example, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), *Marātib* 167–73; Ibn ‘Atīyya al-Andalusī (d. 541/1146), *Muḥarrar* ii, 346; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), *Muḥaṣṣal* 237; Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233), *Akbār* iv, 360; Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), *Tadhkira* ii, 211; Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), *Shifā‘* 163; Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 791/1389), *Sharḥ* 106, 114–5; Mar‘ī ibn Yūsuf al-Karmī (d. 1033/1624), *Tawqīf* 76; Ḥasan Ṣiddīq Khān (d. 1890), *Yaqzat* 15–7, 125.
 - 3 See, for example, Calder, *Limits* 224; Esposito, *Islam* 33–4; Esposito, *What everyone needs to know* 29; O’Shaughnessy, *Muhammad’s thoughts* 68; Rahman, *Major themes* 120; Rustomji, *Garden* 2, 40, 80, 82; Sells, *Approaching* 106, 199; Stöckle, *Doctrine* 49; Watt, *What is Islam?* 48; Winter, *Last trump card* 137.

exception of Ibn al-ʿArabī, these scholars were open to the possibility that *all* of humanity might one day be delivered from hell and granted admission into the everlasting Garden (*al-janna*)—a position henceforth referred to as universalism. As for Ibn al-ʿArabī, although he affirmed the everlastingness of the Fire, he maintained that the damned will be relieved of all physical torments and will in fact experience some form of contentment *in hell*—a position I call quasi-universalism.⁴ Perhaps more obscure is the view that the damned will ultimately perish rather than experience perpetual torment—an annihilationist outlook ascribed to Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 128/746), who reportedly went so far as to claim that even heaven and its inhabitants will similarly eventually cease to exist.⁵

In what follows, I shall present the scriptural arguments for universalism put forth by Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn al-Qayyim—traditionalist scholars who produced the most developed medieval articulation of Islamic universalism. I shall also discuss the critical damnationist responses by their contemporary Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355). I hope to show that, contrary to popular belief, the duration (not to mention purpose) of damnation in the case of unbelievers has long been a contested topic in Islamic thought.⁶

1 Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Qayyim, and the Case for Universalism

Toward the end of his life, and for reasons that are ultimately difficult to discern, Ibn Taymiyya gravitated toward a universalist paradigm. Not long before he passed away as a prisoner in the Citadel of Damascus, he composed what is widely regarded as his final work: a treatise commonly called *Fanāʾ al-nār* (The Annihilation of the Fire).⁷ It is here that we encounter what is to the best of our knowledge the first fully-developed case for Islamic universalism.⁸

4 See Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 25, 466; Khalil, *Islam*, 62–7.

5 See Shahrastānī, *Milal*, 87–8.

6 For a more thorough examination of the topic at hand, see Khalil, *Islam*, particularly the introduction and chap. 3; and Hoover, Islamic universalism.

7 Two extant manuscripts of the *Fanāʾ* are located in Cairo's Dār al-Kutub and Beirut's al-Maktab al-Islāmī, though the Beirut text is incomplete. The *Fanāʾ* was published in its entirety for the first time in 1995 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia under the somewhat misleading title *al-Radd ʿalā man qāla bi-fanāʾ al-janna wa-l-nār* ("The Rejoinder to Those Who Maintain the Annihilation of the Garden and the Fire").

8 For a response to the modern claim that Ibn Taymiyya either abandoned or never advocated universalism, see Khalil, *Islam* 86–9. For a response to a similar claim regarding Ibn al-Qayyim, see Khalil, *Islam* 99–101.

In the *Fanāʾ*, Ibn Taymiyya attempts to present the Garden and the Fire as being fundamentally dissimilar—a common theme in universalist discourse. Heaven, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is undeniably everlasting: its “food is perpetual” (*akluhā dāʾim*) (13:35); its provisions “will never end” (*mā lahu min nafād*) (38:54) and will “neither be limited nor forbidden” (*lā maqtūʾa wa-lā mamnūʾa*) (56:33); the Garden will be “an unceasing gift” (*ʾaṭāʾ ghayr majdhūdh*) (11:108). According to the “leaders” of Islam, the everlastingness of heaven is a fundamental tenet, the denial of which renders one a heretic.⁹

Hell is another matter. To illustrate this, Ibn Taymiyya cites Q 6:128 and 11:106–108, both of which state that the damned will remain in the Fire “unless [God/your Lord] wills otherwise”:¹⁰

On the day [God] gathers everyone together [saying], “Company of *jinn!* You have seduced a great many humans,” their adherents among humankind will say, “Lord, we have profited from one another, but now we have reached the appointed time You decreed for us.” He will say, “Your home is the Fire, and there you shall remain (*khālidīna fihā*)”—unless God wills otherwise (*illā mā shāʾa Allāh*): your Lord is wise, aware.

(6:128)

The wretched ones will remain in the Fire, sighing and groaning, there to remain (*khālidīna fihā*) for as long as the heavens and earth endure, unless your Lord wills otherwise (*illā mā shāʾa rabbuka*): your Lord carries out whatever He wills. As for those who have been blessed, they will be in paradise, there to remain as long as the heavens and earth endure, unless your Lord wills otherwise (*illā mā shāʾa rabbuka*)—an unceasing gift (*ʾaṭāʾ ghayr majdhūdh*).

(11:106–108)

It is reported that some of the Companions of the Prophet—including Jābir ibn ʾAbd Allāh (d. 78/697) and Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī (d. 74/693)—taught that the exception in Q 6:128 (“unless God wills otherwise”) qualifies all divine threats. These include threats such as the following: “such people will have nothing in the hereafter but the Fire” (Q 11:6); “they shall not leave the Fire” (Q 2:167); “whenever, in their anguish, they try to escape, they will be pushed back in and told, ‘Taste the suffering of the Fire’” (Q 22:22).

We find no similar statement attributed to the Companions concerning the divine promises of heavenly reward—this, even though the promise in Q 11:108

9 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 42–4.

10 My translation of the Quran loosely follows that of Abdel Haleem, *Qurʾan*.

is similarly qualified (“unless your Lord wills otherwise”). But notice what follows both exceptions in Q 11:106–108: whereas paradise is an “unceasing gift,” God “does as He pleases” with regard to hell. Ibn Taymiyya takes this entire passage to mean that God is not bound to punish or reward anyone; however, whereas hell’s fate is left ambiguous, God explicitly informs us of His plan to provide everlasting reward to those who are righteous.¹¹

A third passage that Ibn Taymiyya invokes is Q 78:23: “[The transgressors] will remain in [hell] for ages (*aḥqāban*).” The “transgressors” (*al-tāghīn*) condemned here and explicitly mentioned in the previous verse are unbelievers who “did not fear a reckoning, and they rejected Our messages as lies” (Q 78:27–28). As Ibn Taymiyya explains, the term “ages” (*aḥqāb*) connotes finitude. Thus, he argues, it necessarily limits the duration of chastisement for the unbelievers. Although the term *aḥqāb* appears nowhere else in the Quran, the singular form of this term, *ḥuqub*, appears in Q 18:60: “Moses said to his servant, ‘I will not rest until I reach the place where the two seas meet, even if it takes me years [or an age (*ḥuquban*)]!’” One gets the impression from this verse that each “age” is long but ultimately finite. Ibn Taymiyya cites reports ascribed to the *salaf* that indicate that each “age” lasts either forty, seventy, eighty, or seventy thousand years (with each day being equivalent to one thousand years), or a period of time known only to God.¹² A long duration of chastisement would explain why we find in the Quran a refutation of the claim made by some Jews that they may only be punished in hell for a “a few days” (2:80–81). Be that as it may, Ibn Taymiyya’s argument here is compelling: if the damned were to remain in hell *forever*, why would God use the term “ages” in the first place?

Ibn Taymiyya points to statements attributed to the Prophet’s Companions that simultaneously corroborate his universalist assertions and invalidate any consensus claims concerning the everlastingness of the Fire. According to one report cited by ‘Abd ibn Ḥamīd al-Kissī (d. 249/863) in a no longer extant work of Quranic commentary, the second caliph and Companion of the Prophet ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) proclaimed that the people of the Fire (*aḥl al-nār*) will eventually leave the Fire after a long period of chastisement.¹³ Furthermore, the Companion Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652) reportedly foretold “a time” in which “no one” will remain in hell—a time that will arrive after the

11 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 57–61, 66–8. On the qualification of divine threats, see Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ḥādī* 620–3; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’*, ii, 229–30; Khalil, *Islam* 98, 194 n. 165.

12 Ibid., 60–6.

13 Ibid., 53. Ibn al-Qayyim suggests that Ibn Taymiyya was introduced to this statement ascribed to ‘Umar shortly before the composition of the *Fanā’*. See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’* ii, 231, 245.

passing of “ages” (*aḥqāban*). A similar proclamation was attributed to the Companion Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678).¹⁴

To be sure, Ibn Taymiyya would have dismissed the common claim that because the Quran employs the terms *khālidīna* and *abadan* when describing the fate of the inhabitants of hell, damnation must be everlasting. Thus, *khālidīna fihā abadan* (Q 72:23) need not mean “they will remain in [hell] forever,” just that they will be confined to hell, unable to escape it, as long as it exists. As Ibn al-Qayyim elaborates elsewhere, these terms can connote extended yet ultimately finite periods of time. Consider the Quranic statement concerning the evildoers among the Jews: “they will never long for [death]” (*lan yatamannawhu abadan*) (Q 2:95). Here the term *abadan* (translated as “never”) expresses the perpetuity of their aversion to death; however, this could only constitute a temporal reality. In the life to come, the people of hell will cry, If only God would “put an end to us!” (Q 43:77). Thus, *abadan* connotes perpetuity, but only within a particular context, for instance, this life or life in hell. Lest one deduce from this that heaven may not be everlasting—for its duration is also referred to by the term *abadan* (e.g. 98:8)—, Ibn al-Qayyim maintains that heaven’s endlessness is made evident by the aforementioned passages that describe heaven’s bounty as never-ending (Q 38:54) and “unceasing” (Q 11:108).¹⁵ To reiterate, the terms used in these passages are never used in reference to hell. And as Ibn al-Qayyim observes, the Quran appears to limit the duration of chastisement when it mentions “the punishment of a dreadful day” (*yawm ‘azīm*) (6:15) and “a painful day” (*yawm alīm*) (11:26); never does it refer to the joy of paradise as the joy of a “day.”¹⁶

Once again, for universalists, heaven and hell are profoundly dissimilar. The Garden, Ibn Taymiyya writes, is derived from God’s everlasting essence—an essence of mercy (*rahma*). This mercy is stressed throughout the Quran.¹⁷ Furthermore, Ibn al-Qayyim avers that God in the Quran never calls Himself by a name that connotes wrath. God is “severe in punishment” (*shadīd al-‘iqāb*) (Q 5:98) and “swift in punishment” (*sarī‘ al-‘iqāb*) (Q 7:167) but He is not the Punisher (*al-mu‘āqib*). “He forgives whomever He will and punishes whomever He will” (Q 3:129), but while He calls Himself the Forgiving (*al-ghafūr*), He

14 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 60–2.

15 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Mukhtaṣar*, ii, 675; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’*, ii, 228, 239.

16 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 597.

17 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 81–3. Indeed, all but one sura either begin with or are preceded by the phrase, “In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy (*al-rahmān*), the Giver of Mercy (*al-rahīm*).”

never calls himself the Torturer (*al-mu'adhhib*).¹⁸ Along these lines, notice the wording in Q 15:49–50: “[Prophet], tell My servants that I am the Forgiving, the Merciful, but My torment is the truly painful one.”¹⁹ Assuming, then, that wrath is merely an aspect of God’s actions (rather than His essence), its duration must be finite: only that which is connected to God’s essence persists.

What, then, is the purpose of temporal wrath and chastisement? According to Ibn Taymiyya, all chastisement rectifies and purifies wrongdoers.²⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim uses the metaphor of a physician who causes his patient pain through a life-saving medical procedure. In this light, chastisement is the rugged, agonizing path to ultimate mercy and contentment.²¹ For those who maintain that God’s mercy will be forever restricted to certain people, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim remind their respective audiences that divine mercy “encompasses all things” (Q 7:156); and as we read in the hadith corpus, it “outstrips” and “overcomes” His wrath.²² Indeed, God has “taken it upon Himself to be merciful” (Q 6:12). And He is “the most merciful of the merciful” (*arḥam al-rāḥimīn*) (Q 7:151).²³ It is true that He is also just. But this is precisely why He only punishes people in accordance with their *finite* sins.²⁴

In the end, following the Judgment Day slaughtering of death itself (in the form of a spotted ram, according to a popular hadith),²⁵ and after the people of the Fire complete their chastisement and purification, they will be saved. Following the annihilation of the Fire, the once-damned will proceed to the only remaining destination, “the abode of felicity.” There they will enjoy “everlasting pleasure.”²⁶

18 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 609–10. On this point, see Khalil, *Islam* 98, 195 n. 166.

19 Cf. Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 81–3.

20 *Ibid.*, 81–3.

21 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 599–603, 611.

22 The hadiths about God’s mercy “outstripping” and “overcoming” His wrath appear in, among other places, Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-tawḥīd* 15. Hadiths are quoted according to Wensinck’s *Concordance*.

23 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 81–3; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 598–9, 606–7; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’*, ii, 240–3.

24 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 599–600, 603.

25 Versions of the spotted ram hadith appear in, among other places, Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *tafsīr sūrat 19* 1; Tirmidhī, *Jāmi’*, k. *al-janna* 20.

26 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 87.

2 Al-Subkī's Refutation

Approximately two decades after the death of Ibn Taymiyya, the Ash'arite Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, a fierce critic of both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, produced a well-known damnationist refutation—and a model for later refutations²⁷—called *al-Itibār bi-baqā' al-janna wa-l-nār* (Considering the permanence of the Garden and the Fire). In it, al-Subkī presents universalism as a heretical and irrational innovation. The everlastingness of the Fire, he notes, was agreed upon by the consensus of Muslim scholars according to the fifth/eleventh century Andalusian scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). Therefore, the reports of the Prophet's Companions that appear to support a universalist paradigm are either unreliable or necessitate reinterpretation. Furthermore, the Quran contains dozens of ostensibly unqualified passages that depict the damned as being unable to escape their chastisement.²⁸ It is with this in mind that one should assess the passages invoked by Ibn Taymiyya when arguing for universalism.

Al-Subkī attempts to demonstrate the fundamental flaws of Ibn Taymiyya's exegesis. According to numerous exegetes, the exceptions in Q 6:128 and 11:106–108 (“unless [God/your Lord] wills otherwise”) do not suggest that damned unbelievers may be saved: these exceptions may simply refer to the period of time preceding damnation, in which case they should be retranslated as, “except whatever [period of time God/your Lord] wills.” Alternatively, even if the exceptions signify the termination of chastisement in the Fire, they do not signify the termination of chastisement itself: hell consists of other forms of punishment, including the *zamharīr*, the extremely cold abode of torture. And while it is true that the transgressors will remain in hell “for ages” (Q 78:23), we have no reason to think that these “ages” are finite (even if each individual “age” consists of a limited number of years); these could be ages followed by ages *ad infinitum*.²⁹

Al-Subkī also addresses Ibn Taymiyya's claim that God's names reflect His everlasting essence, and that He never calls Himself by a name that connotes wrath. To the mind of al-Subkī, we should consider terms such as “severe in punishment” (*shadīd al-iqāb*) divine names. Furthermore, referencing the most widely known version of the list of ninety-nine “most beautiful names of God,” al-Subkī observes that God's names include the Subduer (al-Qahhār) (Q 12:39) and the Compeller (al-Jabbār) (Q 59:23)—though here one might

27 See Khalil, *Islam*, 88–9.

28 Subkī, *Rasā'il* 196–8, 201.

29 *Ibid.*, 201–4.

question whether these terms *necessarily* connote wrath; the Avenger (al-Muntaqim)—though the Quran (in 44:16) simply uses an indefinite (and plural) form of this term when referring to God on a “day” that lies ahead; and the Humiliator (al-Mudhill)—though the Quran (in 3:26) simply states that God humiliates. Al-Subkī here could just as easily include the name the Harmer (al-Ḍārr), though this too is *derived* from the Quran, specifically 6:17, which refers to God touching people with “harm” (*ḍurr*). As should be clear by now, various names that appear in the most popular list of ninety-nine are not taken verbatim from the Quran. Be that as it may, al-Subkī points to another possible problem in Ibn Taymiyya’s claim: if the divine names connote *eternal* realities, and if God calls Himself the Creator (al-Khāliq) (Q 59:24), this would mean that the universe must be infinitely old—a notoriously heretical doctrine in ‘mainstream’ Islamic theology.³⁰

According to al-Subkī, God is indeed overwhelmingly merciful, and this mercy is enjoyed by the righteous; however, on account of God’s justice, damnation must be everlasting for the truly wicked. While it is true that His mercy “encompasses all things,” it is ordained only “for those who are conscious of God” (Q 7:156), not for Satan and Pharaoh. Those who choose evil and die in a state of evil cannot expect purification after death: “no soul will profit from faith if it had none before” (Q 6:158).³¹

3 Closing Thoughts

The three passages that Ibn Taymiyya invokes to argue for universalism are all traditionally classified as “Meccan” (meaning, revealed before the Prophet Muḥammad’s *hijra* [emigration] from Mecca to Medina [then called Yathrib]). There are in fact other Meccan passages that Ibn Taymiyya might have invoked to support his case for universalism but for whatever reason did not. Perhaps the most significant is Q 7:40, which states that “those who rejected” the message arrogantly “will not enter the Garden until the camel [or, according to an alternative translation, rope, Arab. *al-jamal*] passes through the eye of the needle.” The qualification “until the camel passes through the eye of the

30 Ibid., 206–8.

31 Ibid. According to Ibn al-Qayyim, the statement in Q 7:156, “[God’s] mercy encompasses all things,” is general in nature, while the latter segment of the verse, “I shall ordain”—literally, “I shall write out” (*aktub*)—“My mercy for those who are conscious of God,” is in reference to a special form of mercy awaiting the righteous. See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’* ii, 242.

needle” might in fact be taken to be a sign of hope. We encounter a comparable and widely known statement in the Gospels: “It is easier for a camel [or: rope] to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Revised Standard Version, Mark 10:25). According to a popular interpretation of this passage, the rich will encounter additional hurdles on the road to glory, but they will not necessarily be barred from the kingdom of God. As we read in the clarification two verses later, “all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27).

As for the depictions of hell in suras classified as “Medinan” (meaning, revealed after the *hijra*), one passage that Ibn Taymiyya might have invoked but did not is Q 57:13, which states that a “wall with a gate will be erected” between the people of the Garden and the people of the Fire. One could argue that the mere existence of this “gate”—established *after* the initial entry into paradise—suggests that the barrier between heaven and hell will never be permanently impenetrable.

As al-Subkī shows us, however, the matter is not this simple. Indeed, universalists must account for the fact that their reading of scripture has not been obvious to most theologians and exegetes. If we assume that even some of the Prophet’s Companions were universalists, why is it that a few centuries later, damnationism was regarded by at least some to be the “consensus” view? But here one might imagine a universalist response: prevailing scriptural interpretations are potentially fallible and often shaped by historical impulses.

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Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and the Political Functions of Punishment in the Islamic Hell

Samuela Pagani

Who is the man here below who has never committed a sin, tell me?
 He who had never committed one, how could he have lived, tell me?
 If, because I do evil, you punish me with evil,
 what difference is there between you and me, tell me?

‘UMAR KHAYYĀM¹

The eternity of hell is among those issues on which Ibn Taymiyya (d. 723/1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) opted for an original theory, one that is in contrast to established Sunni doctrine. From the perspective of the latter, hell is eternal for infidels, while the faithful dwell there only temporarily. The two Ḥanbalī theologians, instead, argued in favour of the eventual annihilation of hell. Numerous recent studies that have analysed this theory have also examined its relationship with that of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), for whom the punishment, but not hell, is finite, thus prompting interesting cues for comparison.²

The comparison is legitimate, given that the stance taken by the two Ḥanbalī authors can, in part, be explained as a reaction to Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory. Ibn al-Qayyim refers to it explicitly, clearly distancing himself while at the same time implicitly acknowledging his debt.³ Here, I would like to return to the issue,

1 Khayyām, *Rubā‘iyāt*, tr. Fitzgerald 70 n. 2.

2 Al-Manā‘ī underscores the points of concordance between the three authors, from the perspective of a cautious rehabilitation of Ibn ‘Arabī in a Salafi modernist intellectual context. See Manā‘ī, ‘Aqīda. Khalil considers Ibn ‘Arabī’s theories and those of the Ḥanbalīs as alternative visions of “universal mercy.” See Khalil, *Salvation* 73. He concludes, however, that Ibn Taymiyya “moved beyond Ibn ‘Arabī’s quasi-universalism.” See *ibid.*, 86. At least in as much as concerns Ibn al-Qayyim, Ajhar arrives at a similar conclusion: *yumkinu al-qawl inna Ibn al-Qayyim qad fāqa Ibn ‘Arabī fi hādhihi al-mas’ala wa-dhahaba ab’ad minhu*. See Ajhar, *Su’āl* 263. See also Hoover, *Theodicy* 46–8; *idem*, God’s wise purposes 126.

3 Ibn al-Qayyim quotes a long passage from Ibn ‘Arabī (*Fuṣūṣ* i, 93–4) where the latter argues in favor of the possibility for God to renege on his threat of punishment (*khulf al-wa’id*).

focusing on an aspect of Ibn ‘Arabī’s eschatology which may prove useful in comparing the two theories further: the concept of punishment that lies at the root of Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory. What does infernal punishment actually involve? And which legal model of punishment does it match?

Ibn ‘Arabī’s own speculations on the nature of eschatological castigation are part and parcel of his reflections about the notion of punishment, which are in turn a recurring motif in his legal thought. For the topic to be covered suitably, a thorough catalogue and correlation of the many relevant passages scattered throughout Ibn ‘Arabī’s entire works would be necessary. The task would be all the more difficult because Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing is more akin to hermeneutics than to philosophy or theology. His aim, in the field of eschatology as elsewhere, is to disclose the multiple aspects (*wujūh*, lit. “faces”) of the Revelation rather than giving a systematic presentation of doctrine. Moreover, without having to subscribe to any schools, Ibn ‘Arabī is able to find a *wajh ṣaḥīḥ* (an aspect that is real and true) in the disparate opinions voiced in Islamic systematic theology (*kalām*), philosophy (*falsafa*) and Sufism, including those distrusted by the heresiographers.

My own knowledge does not extend far enough for such an undertaking; I will, however, endeavour to determine major themes. The positions taken by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, following the principle that things can be discerned through their opposites, will help identify these themes, that is to say those sensitive points in Ibn ‘Arabī’s outlook that may have triggered a creative response in the two Ḥanbalis. Among these issues, the notion of punishment appears to me to be of particular relevance.

Thus, prior to illustrating some of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas on the topic (sections 3 and 4), Ibn al-Qayyim’s position will be covered, dwelling primarily on the jurisdictional-political element (section 2). We cannot proceed, however, without first of all covering the essential features of the ongoing debate on the eternity of hell in the realm of Islam before the seventh/thirteenth century (section 1). I make no pretence of exhausting the topic, but doing so will allow me to clarify the approach taken in this paper.

See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 352. Ibn al-Qayyim supports the same theory. See *ibid.*, 383–4. Ibn al-Qayyim remarks that one should not reject the theory of the annihilation of the Fire only because “innovators” have supported it (*ibid.*, 364). In fact, both Ibn ‘Arabī and Ibn Taymiyya limit binding consensus to the Salaf, making room for the adoption of opinions rejected as “innovations” by the majority of the Sunni schools. Finally, it should be remembered that Ibn Taymiyya, at least in his formative years, held a favorable view of Ibn ‘Arabī. See Ajhar, *Su‘āl* 119–21; Khalil, *Salvation* 87; Manā‘ī, ‘Aqīda 101. However, Ibn Taymiyya rejected Ibn ‘Arabī’s views of hell. See *ibid.*, 96; Chodkiewicz, *Procès* 102.

1 Universal Salvations

Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), the hadith and the *kalām* tradition offered a vast and varied arsenal of arguments in favour of the end of hell; Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim take advantage of all of these arguments in different degrees. The underlying idea is that, in God, mercy prevails over wrath and that it will triumph at the end of time. Going into specifics, these can be listed as follows: God will most certainly honour His promise of reward but is not obliged to fulfil His threats; when the Quran refers to the “eternity” of hell, the term can be taken to mean a “long period”; an eternal penance would not be rightful, as it would be inconsistent with the offence, which was committed in a limited time-span; penance has a purifying function and therefore has a finite duration; the intercession of the faithful and the Prophet, or God’s own direct intervention, can save sinners. There are also isolated traditions that announce the final emptying and annihilation of hell.⁴

According to Sunni authors, these arguments apply only in the case of sinning believers, not in that of unbelievers, but nevertheless, they appear to offer an opening for universal salvation. All of these arguments are actually echoed by Christian supporters of universal salvation, a position rejected by Augustine in book 21 of *City of God*. Augustine’s well-known rejection helps us hone in on the various nuances this concept can take on. The targets of his criticism are on the one hand Origen, whose position had been condemned by the church, and, on the other, “tender-hearted” Christians whom Augustine does not regard as heretics, but as misguided by a misplaced compassion for the damned (*De Civ. Dei* 21.17).⁵ These two tendencies have distinctive features. Origen’s doctrine of apocatastasis (restoration) fits into a framework of optimistic theodicy, sharpened by the dispute with dualists: evil is accidental and transitory and is, in the end, removed. The trials of hell have a purgative and therapeutic function whose duration is limited. Ultimately leading to the total destruction of evil, they help to restore the original harmony and unity of creation.⁶

The “tender-hearted,” in turn, split into two distinct groups. The first are universalists who envisage the salvation of unbelievers through the intercession of the saints (*De Civ. Dei* 21.18).⁷ This act of mercy, rather than a necessary

4 For an in-depth analysis of exegeses of verses on the eternity of hell in early *tafsīr* see Hamza, Hell 74–119. For further developments in exegesis, see Manā’ī, ‘Aqīda; Khalil, *Salvation*. Cf. also Pagani, Vane speranze 184–93 (tr. 286–90).

5 Bauckham, *Fate* 151.

6 Daley, *Hope* 48–60.

7 Bauckham, *Fate* 147, 155–6.

return to a primordial state, is the outcome of a salvation history in which the saints' mediation plays an essential role. In this context, much is made of the conflict between justice and mercy, and castigation in hell is seen more as retributive punishment that can be revoked by virtue of the victim's forgiveness than as a necessary corrective penalty.⁸ The source of this view may have been the *Apocalypse of Peter*,⁹ where the legal paradigm underlying the unlimited possibility of forgiveness may have been retaliation.¹⁰ In Muslim eschatology this chance of salvation is foreseen, but it is limited to believers. Al-Nasafi (d. 508/1114), for example, suggests that the Quranic verses on retaliation allow believers to hope for salvation.¹¹ Here, private justice, which helps to right wrongs, only applies to the believing "brothers," and not to the unbelievers, whose irreparable wrongdoing is punished in eternity. This two-tiered justice brings to mind Plato's afterlife where the punishment of "curable" sinners comes to an end when their victims have been contented and appears principally to regard private offences, while the exemplary punishment of the "incurable," which is eternal, is inflicted mainly on tyrants, whose wrongdoing afflicts the *polis*.¹²

The second category of "tender-hearted" refuted by Augustine are those who wish to extend the scope of salvation to people who profess Christian faith, but who have lived wicked lives (*De Civ. Dei* 21.19–21).¹³ This last tendency, which we can call confessional universal salvation, and which is echoed in the 'catholic' tendency voiced by Jerome "at his most generous,"¹⁴ finds an exact match in the position that the traditionalists succeeded in enforcing at the end of a long struggle by basing themselves on the authority of the Sunna. Feras Hamza has given us a clear sketch of the polemic atmosphere of the early centuries of Islam in which the "People of the Sunna and the Community" (*ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a*) developed their doctrine of temporary hell while

8 Ibid., 132–48.

9 Ibid., 149–59.

10 For a critical appraisal of this interpretation, with further references, see Roig Lanzillotta, *Punishment* 141–52.

11 Nasafi, *Tabṣira* ii, 771–2. For further references on retaliatory punishment in Islamic eschatology, see Lange, *Justice* 147 n. 64.

12 Plato, *Gorgias* 525b–d; see also idem, *Phaedo* 114a–b; idem, *Republic* 615a–e.

13 Bauckham, *Fate* 147.

14 Daley, *Hope* 104: "And as we believe that the devil and all apostates and impious sinners, who say in their heart, 'There is no God,' will undergo eternal punishments, so we think that those who are sinners—even impious ones—and yet Christians will have their works tried and purged in fire, but will receive from the judge a moderate sentence, mingled with mercy" (Jerome, *In Is* 18.66.24).

simultaneously defining the boundaries of the faith group. This doctrine hinged upon bestowing the status of believers on Muslims guilty of grave sins, saving them from eternal hell-fire (in contrast with the Kharijis and Mu'tazilis), although not sparing them all forms of punishment (a position attributed to the "corrupt" Murji'is).¹⁵

Yet eternal hell-fire in the Sunni tradition is a poorly guarded realm, open to attack on many sides. Here are but four of them. Firstly, some theological arguments could lend themselves to universalist outcomes. This is especially the case for the *khulf al-wa'id* (renege on the threat of punishment): if God is free to recant on His threats then why should He not forgive unbelievers, too?¹⁶ The Ash'aris are, in fact, forced into conceding this possibility, in theory at least.¹⁷ These snags caused Maturidi theologians to discard the argument.¹⁸ Secondly, Islam has kept many of those concepts that precede purgatory in Catholic theology,¹⁹ but without confining the temporary castigation to a well-defined location. This lack of a clearly-defined purgatory results in a pervious frontier between paradise and hell, offering the damned a chance of escape, the opposite of what took place in the Latin Middle Ages, when the precise location of purgatory acts as the final bolt on the portal of hell, that is to say, the creation of eternal hell-fire.²⁰ Alongside the uncertainties as to its whereabouts, there are those regarding the nature of the punishment, which the eschatological traditions illustrate as both purgative and retributive. Thirdly, the idea of intercession, despite its confessional limitations, may have provided an opening for the hope of universal salvation. The Prophet's negotiations with God, which feature so prominently in the narratives of his Ascension (*mi'rāj*), highlight the oppositeness of promise and threat and raise hopes in the delay or annulment of the sentence.

Lastly, on a wider scale, eternal hell-fire turns out to be a stumbling block for Islam as universalist monotheism. The heated overtones with which the Quran

15 See Hamza, Hell. On the last point, see Nasafi, *Tabṣira* ii, 766 (*wa za'amat al-murji'a al-khabitha anna aḥadan min al-muslimin la yu'aqabu 'alā shay' min al-kabā'ir*). On this passage, see Lange, Sins 163 n. 122.

16 Vasalou, *Moral* 195; see also Vajda, *Perpétuité* 34–5.

17 Cf. Nasafi, *Tabṣira* ii, 784, 789; Nābulusī, *Qawl* 217a–218b.

18 See Lange, Sins 22–9. The Ash'ari position did, in fact, encourage theologians in the Ottoman era to accommodate 'universalist' opinions favored by the study and diffusion of Ibn 'Arabī's work. Nābulusī, *Qawl*, vindicates the legitimacy of this trend, which had been criticized by Harawī, *Qawl*, 51–53.

19 Cf. Le Goff, *Nascita* 37–107.

20 Baschet, *Justices* 554. For a wider discussion, see Pagani, *Vane speranze* 199–200 (tr. 299–300).

spells out the eternity of hell suggest that this concept has been the object of inter-religious debate from the beginning and may even have taken on an intra-religious dimension. The gaps in our knowledge of the history of nascent Islam prevent us from establishing whether the Quran's tirades are directed at other religious groups or at "believers"; particularly as we have no way of knowing who the "believers" actually were at this point in religious history.²¹ The Quran censures the Jews for believing that the punishment lasts for a limited number of days; however "Jews" may actually mean "misguided judaizing believers." The Quran's polemic against intercession, in any case, fits in well with the rejection of the Jewish and Christian exclusivist claim that "no one will enter paradise unless he [or she] is a Jew or Christian" (Q 2:111).²² On the other side, the idea of *fiṭra* (original constitution) and the emphasis on God's mercy and the return of all things unto him do actually share some points with the philosophical concept of apocatastasis.

Leaving the Quran aside, it is clear that the issue of eternal hell is a problem shared by Islam and Christianity alike, two universalist monotheisms that went on to become the official creed of empires, in which ties with political power required religious legitimization of the use of force by the state. The imposition of the dogma of eternal hell (a development that did not arise in either Zoroastrianism or Judaism), in this light, takes on a significant political function. Hannah Arendt, reflecting on the profound political implications of Augustine's espousal of the doctrine of eternal hell, suggested that, through it, "an element of violence was permitted to insinuate itself into both the very structure of Western religious thought and the hierarchy of the Church."²³ Arendt compared Augustine's use of the belief in hell to that of Plato, in so far as the Church Father, like the Greek philosopher before him, "understood to what an extent these doctrines could be used as threats in this world, quite apart from their speculative value about a future life."²⁴ The Ḥanbalī judge Ibn al-ʿAqīl (d. 513/1119) is startlingly forthright on the point: whoever plays down the dread of hell, as do Murji'is who deny the punishment of believers and Sufis who claim to be able to quell the Fire, weaken the coercive power of law (*siyāsāt al-sharʿ*) and are therefore to be condemned as infidels and, if possible,

21 Donner, *Muhammad*, without solving the issue, deserves acknowledgment for having rekindled the debate.

22 Khalil, *Salvation* 8.

23 Arendt, *Authority* 132–3.

24 *Ibid.*, 131; see also Eslin, *L'Au-delà*. In the Neoplatonic tradition, Plato's eschatological myths were overtly read as expressions of the judicial part of his political philosophy. See O'Meara, *Platonopolis* 107–11.

eliminated by the sword.²⁵ As a judge, Ibn al-‘Aqīl compared his sentencing to death of an Isma‘īli to God’s sentencing sinners to hell.²⁶ Ghazālī’s crusade against esoteric and philosophical interpretations of eschatology was prompted by similar concerns for public order.²⁷ Both cases illustrate the particularly important role hell played in legitimizing the violence of the state during the Seljuq period.²⁸ Ibn al-‘Aqīl’s argument ties the success of the religion to coercion through fear. But this point was highly problematic for Muslim religious scholars, who shared in many respects the deep ambivalence of their Christian counterparts towards the political sphere.²⁹ Moreover, it can be argued that the failure to recognize the humanity of one’s opponent, which the recourse to violence entails,³⁰ jeopardizes the very foundations of the universal mission of a religion that claims to be destined for all men created equally according to the *fiṭra* or in the likeness of God.³¹

As a consequence of these various factors, both in Islam and in Christianity, critiques of the eternity of hell follow on the heels of the dogma of eternal hell. Despite official condemnation, they badger and hound it from within, so hell is not solely vulnerable to attacks from without by dualists and *zindīqs* (free-thinkers),³² but also from religious key figures in the community, even though the orthodoxy of these figures may be contentious. In fact, it was primarily the mystics, both Muslim and Christian, who voiced criticism of hell from within. It is in the area of mysticism that cross-pollination between Islam and Christianity appears most clearly.³³

Isaac of Nineveh (d. ca. 80/700), who lived in Iraq in the first Islamic century, criticised the eternity of hell with arguments that combined the theological-philosophical theory of apocatastasis and the eschatological hope of the “tender-hearted.” His case is particularly significant because it proves that this trend survived in eastern Christianity, despite official hostility, especially

25 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs* 82, 332, 335.

26 Griffel, *Apostasie* 282.

27 See Lange, *Throne* 144–5.

28 See on the whole issue, Lange, *Justice*, esp. 47, 147, 239.

29 See Crone, *No compulsion* 167–9.

30 See Brague, *Philosophies* 198–216.

31 The interpretation of the notion of *fiṭra* is the basic problem behind the controversy over the salvation of babies born to polytheists and the related debate on the legitimacy of their killing in *jihād*. See Gobillot, *Conception* 26–45, 83–4.

32 See Crone, *Abū Sa‘īd* 101–3; Urvoy, *Penseurs* 114, 125.

33 For further parallels between the arguments made by Muslim, Jewish and Christian theologians, see van Ess, *Das begrenzte Paradies* 111–112.

in monastic spheres and more specifically in Syriac monasticism.³⁴ Isaac of Nineveh's tract on hell was translated into Arabic by the monk Ḥanūn b. Yūḥannā Ibn al-Ṣalt (d. after 286/900) at the end of the third/ninth century, and the spread of thinking similar to his own among Persian Christians in the following century is reported by 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025).³⁵ Both Isaac's name and ideas were known to al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), who calls him Mār Ishāq (Saint Isaac) and sums up his stance on hell in terms that would have sounded familiar to the Muslim supporters of salvation for all: the universality of mercy, the incompatibility of divine benevolence with the eternity of castigation, the possibility of *khulf al-wa'īd*.³⁶

Ibn al-Ṣalt opens his translation with a very interesting remark: at his time the works of Isaac were kept and studied yet their diffusion was discouraged. The translator, nevertheless, appears to feel that making them more accessible was useful. It has been suggested that his aim was to make use of them in the debate with Islam.³⁷ This remark by Ibn al-Ṣalt illustrates the delicate position that the criticism of eternal hell occupied when put forward by a saint within the context of a religion that officially condemned this attitude. Although questionable and marginal, this opinion would continue to be transmitted privately and informally, and could be tolerated as long as it remained an intellectual hypothesis and an aspiration, without turning into a dogma, that is to say "heresy."

34 On Isaac of Nineveh's eschatology see Chialà, *Ascesi* 263–282. In 170/786–7, Origenism was condemned anew by Timothy I (d. 207/823), the Nestorian patriarch of Baghdad; the initiative was related to the doctrine's survival among the monks. See Berti, Grazia, 223. There is evidence that these ideas were still circulating in the 7th/13th century. See Reinink, Origenism 241, 249. A further witness to the universalist tendencies in Syriac monasticism can be located in an early eight century dispute between a monk and a Muslim *amīr*. To the latter's question: "Are the sons of Hagar going to enter the Kingdom or not?", the monk answers: "If there is a man who has good deeds, he will live in grace, in abodes far removed from torment. However, he will think of himself as a hired man and not as a son." See Griffith, *Disputing* 49–50.

35 Cf. Reynolds, *Medieval* 223–5. Reynolds says that to imagine here an influence from Origen would be "farfetched and speculative," but he seems overcautious in view of the circumstantial evidence.

36 Shahrastānī, *Milal* ii, 28–9 (ch. on the Melkites). Another possible clue suggesting that Isaac was known to Muslims can be found in the catalogue of Christian sects compiled by the Mu'tazili theologian al-Nāshī' al-Akbar (d. 293/906), which mentions among these the "Isaacites" (Ishāqīyya), who can presumably be identified with the followers of Isaac of Nineveh. See Thomas, *Christian doctrines*, 53.

37 Chialà, *Ascesi* 60–3, 334–5; Swanson, Ibn al-Ṣalt 161.

Tolerance shown towards such doctrines obviously depended on whether or not there was a willingness to allow for mystical approaches to religion within the community. In Islam, as we know, the delicate balance between mystics and theologians was upset whenever the formers' more dubious 'secret doctrines' surfaced in the public domain through writings or preaching.

Among the Muslim mystics of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, the case of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. between 295/905 and 300/910) deserves greater attention. Al-Tirmidhī, who was temporarily banished from his hometown, Tirmidh,³⁸ for having "spoken of love," was particularly concerned with the notion of *fiṭra* and the question of the salvation of infants, and his description of the purifying function of hell-fire shares some features with the Christian doctrine of apocatastasis.³⁹ The most open testimony to the criticism of hell in Sufism at this time are the ecstatic utterances (*shaṭaḥāt*) attributed to al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261/874) and al-Shiblī (d. 334/945): they voice the universal mercy characteristic of the friends of God, with overtones of a protest against the doctrine which restricts the intercession (*shafā'a*) of the Prophet to his own community.⁴⁰ Insolence that, as we have seen, was harshly checked by Ibn al-'Aqīl.

The spread of this defiant criticism of hell is one of the issues that brought Sufism and the political and religious orthodoxy into open conflict. In the case of the mystics, their criticism of eschatology was quite distinct from that of the philosophers (*falāsifa*) as it sprang from a religious impetus of charity and was accompanied by a claim to sainthood. Moreover, the allegorical interpretation of hell typical of the philosophical tradition does not necessarily question the usefulness of its political function for the masses.

This background information demonstrates that Ibn 'Arabī, illustrating comprehensively in writing his own "compassionate" interpretation of eschatology, performed an act of great moment, perfectly in line with his very high conception of his own function as "seal of the saints" (*khatam al-awliyā'*). Indeed, the issue of the cessation of infernal castigation occupies a key role in Ibn 'Arabī as it is the destination of his line of thinking on the encompassing universality of divine mercy (*umūm* and *shumūl al-raḥma*). For him, this

38 A city in which Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/746) had lived for a long time, leaving there a following. See van Ess, *Theologie* ii, 494; cf. also *ibid.*, ii, 507–8, for a suggestion that there were possible affinities between Jahmites and local Sufis. An awareness of Jahmite ideas may be detected in al-Tirmidhī's theology. See Radtke, *Theosophie* 163–4.

39 Gobillot, *Conception*, 53–8, 105–7; eadem, *Corps* 246.

40 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs* 332, 335. See also Hatem, *Amour* 54, 64, 79. On the case of al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), see *ibid.*, 85; Massignon *Passion* iii, 217; Addas, *Victoire* 76–7.

thread running through his work is not merely a theory deriving from his metaphysical vision but “glad tidings” (*bushrā*) which he himself brings to humankind.⁴¹ Ibn ‘Arabī shares this expectancy with the ecstatic mystics who came before him, yet differs from them because he does not challenge the Shari‘a and the Sunna, but claims to be their inspired interpreter. Universal salvation is neither against the Law nor in competition with Muḥammad’s intercession, rather, it is the deepest meaning of the universality of the Shari‘a and the *telos* of Muḥammad’s mission.⁴² This meaning and this *telos* are as yet unaccomplished, and the saint, who is both commentator and intercessor, provides decisive aid in bringing them about. For this very reason the “seal of the saints” considers himself to be the “heir of Muḥammad” and not an ecstatic mystic or the *maître à penser* of a particular school.

The link between universal salvation and the doctrine of sainthood, as well as the implicit claims to authority, could not have escaped Ibn Taymiyya, who channelled much of his dialectic skill into dismantling Ibn ‘Arabī’s hagiology. It may even have provided the Ḥanbalī scholar and his disciple Ibn al-Qayyim with a cue for radically rethinking eschatology, thus safeguarding the universalist tendency of Islam without following Ibn ‘Arabī in his more dangerous ideas.

2 Ibn al-Qayyim’s Reform of Political Hell

Ibn al-Qayyim resolutely disentangles the disorderly and contradictory mesh of the Sunni hell, putting forward a coherent and rational reform within the framework of a strict theodicy.⁴³ Castigation, in so far as it entails infliction of pain, constitutes an evil; however, within the cosmos created and governed by God, evil, in itself, cannot exist. It is therefore a relative evil justified by a wise purpose (*ḥikma*). It is not retributive, as retribution brings nothing of benefit to either the evildoer or God, who has no need for revenge. It has, hence, a purifying function and as such cannot but have a limited duration. This is because once the sinner is healed and reformed the castigation has fulfilled its

41 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* ii, 206–7.

42 Cf. Chodkiewicz, *Océan* 66; idem, *Banner* 51; Addas, *Victoire* 57–79. To my knowledge, the latter study is the most exhaustive on the concept of apocatastasis in Ibn ‘Arabī, with special attention to the soteriological role of the Prophet, which will not be covered in this article.

43 For a detailed examination see Hoover, *Islamic Universalism*; idem, *God’s Wise Purposes*; Manā‘ī, ‘Aqida; Khalil, *Salvation* 92–102; Ajhar, *Su‘āl* 257–69. See also Abrahamov, *Creation*.

purpose. Even when this requires a long lapse of time, the punishment restores man's original constitution (*fiṭra*) to its primary state much in the same way as drastic medical treatments, such as cauterization or amputation "remove alien matter that has accidentally corrupted the sound nature (*ṭabī'a mustaqīma*) of an invalid".⁴⁴ By way of its beneficial, although painful, character, punishment is an expression of mercy, an attribute of the divine essence that prevails over the incidental attribute of wrath.

This therapeutic model of punishment⁴⁵ is located inside a providentialist outlook in which evil lacks an ontological standing of its own and will, ultimately, be completely eliminated, so much so that even Iblis will probably be redeemed. As Hoover remarks "[Ibn al-Qayyim's] aim is apologetic. He is trying to explain why God creates evil and to defend God's wise purpose against detractors."⁴⁶ One is tempted to add that Ibn al-Qayyim is also a political writer who defends state power; not an arbitrary power that indifferently shows clemency or inflicts punishment but a rational and wise power.⁴⁷

Ibn al-Qayyim employs legal terms to describe the punishment of hell, associating it with the *ḥudūd* (divinely ordained punishments), and by doing so setting it within the framework of public criminal law, in which the *ḥudūd* are generally characterized as "rights of God" (*ḥuqūq Allāh*):

God does not quench his thirst for revenge by punishing His servants, as does he who has suffered wrongdoing when he takes revenge on the offender. He does not harrow His servant with this purpose, but with the aim of redeeming him and because of His mercy towards him. His punishment is, in fact, a benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) to him, despite the infliction of great pain; likewise the application of the *ḥudūd* in this world is of benefit to whoever is subjected to them.⁴⁸

44 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 370. The same analogy is found in Ghazālī, *Maqṣad* 68. See also Khalil, *Salvation* 46–7. It was already used by Neoplatonists. See O'Meara, *Platonopolis* 109.

45 On the importance of this model see Hoover, *God's wise purposes* 115; idem, *Islamic Universalism* 189; Khalil, *Salvation* 97.

46 Hoover, *God's Wise Purposes* 127.

47 Instead, al-Nasafī, in response to a Qadarī objection, compares God to the ruler, who for the same offence may grant a pardon or impose a punishment. See Nasafī, *Tabṣira* ii, 767, 776. On the correlation between the arbitrariness of Seljuk rulers and that of the Ash'ari God, see Lange, *Throne* 141.

48 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 369.

The analogy of the *ḥudūd* appears to be even more effective than that of medicine in describing infernal castigation. Indeed, Ibn al-Qayyim foresees the objection that the treatment that causes the sick person suffering, differently from the torment of the damned, is not referred to as “punishment” as the physician cares for his patient and feels no anger towards him. This is true, replies Ibn al-Qayyim, “but this does not mean that the punishment cannot be mercy towards them, as the *ḥudūd* in this world are simultaneously punishment, mercy and purgation.”⁴⁹

In one of his legal works, Ibn al-Qayyim explains that the *ḥudūd* have a purifying and reforming function: in the case of capital punishment, these penalties rehabilitate the sinner’s soul, though not his body, because they exempt him from hell.⁵⁰ Like the *ḥudūd*, infernal castigation, by virtue of its being gainful, is inevitable, even though mercy is dearer to God than punishment,⁵¹ and even though the suffering experienced by those who are punished evokes pity in others.⁵² Indeed, “tribulation is mercy” (*al-ibtilā’ raḥma*), and for this reason, God answers those who pray for mercy for those who suffer great tribulation: “How can I be merciful towards him by depriving him of the very same thing through which I show him mercy?” (*kayfa arḥamuhu min shay’ arḥamuhu bihi*).⁵³ The *ḥikma* and the *maṣlaḥa* (utility, common good) justifying the punishments and the sufferings borne in this world and the next are one and the same: following careful contemplation one can discover the perfect correspondence (*tanāsub*) and harmony (*tawāfuq*) between earthly and otherworldly rewards and punishments, all similarly serving the purpose of healing and purification.⁵⁴

In conclusion, the temporary hell, which is described by Ibn al-Qayyim either as a hospital (*māristān*)⁵⁵ or as a prison, is a political hell: a place where violence is employed in the name of the common good, within the limits of reason. Hence, unlike the mystics’ protests against hell censured by Ibn al-‘Aqīl, Ibn al-Qayyim’s ‘reform’ of hell does not undermine the coercive power of the

49 Ibid., 371. See also Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’* 692–4, 698, 720–1.

50 Ibn al-Qayyim, *I’lām* i, 97; ii, 72–3; iii, 15–6. On the theory that *ḥadd* crimes are expiated by earthly punishments, see Lange, *Sins* 148 n. 29, 151 n. 59.

51 Khalil, *Salvation* 96.

52 Cf. Ibn Taymiyya’s argument for the divine mercy concealed in the enforcement of *ḥudūd*: the father would spoil his son if he refrained from punishing him as his tender mother would have it. See Ibn Taymiyya, *Siyāsa* 79; cf. also Ghazālī, *Maqṣad* 68.

53 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 376.

54 Ibid., 369; see also *ibid.*, 379. On the correspondence between worldly and otherworldly legal rules see also *ibid.*, iii, 115.

55 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’* 692.

law (*siyāsāt al-sharʿ*), but instead rationalizes it. In this regard, Ibn al-Qayyim's understanding of justice in the netherworld, while reminiscent of ancient precedents,⁵⁶ anticipates the critique of eternal hell that would affirm itself in Modern Europe along with the adoption of a penal theory founded on the ideas of reform and deterrence rather than retribution.⁵⁷ It hardly comes as a surprise, therefore, that Ibn al-Qayyim has been favourably received among Islamic modernists.⁵⁸

3 The Hell of Wrath and the Hell of Mercy

Ibn ʿArabī's conception of hell is much less easy to circumscribe than that of Ibn al-Qayyim. If we approach it from the angle of its legal implications, we are confronted with two major questions. The first concerns the relationship between the legal function of hell and the other roles it fulfils through its continued existence. The second concerns the model of justice to which its legal function is related. We will deal with the first question in this section, and with the second in the next one.

According to Ibn ʿArabī, once a term of infernal punishment has come to an end, hell ceases to be "painful," although it does not cease to exist altogether. As is done in the mainstream Sunni tradition, Ibn ʿArabī makes a distinction between sinful believers whose stay in hell is only temporary and "the people of the Fire, those who are its inhabitants" (*ahl al-nār alladhīna hum ahluhā*), and will stay there eternally. However, according to him, the eternity of the stay does not necessarily imply that the punishment (*ʿadhāb*) will be eternal, too.⁵⁹

The term *ʿadhāb* raises some issues as Ibn ʿArabī uses it both in its primary meaning of "castigation," as in the Quran, and also in the broader sense of "suffering." Thus, certain passages may lead us to think that the cessation of *ʿadhāb* is solely the end of suffering but not of the punishment in the legal sense. As

56 On otherworldly punishment as therapy in Plato and Origen, see, respectively, McKenzie *Plato* 177–8, 184, 187, 203; Daley, *Hope* 57. Cf. also Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* 21.13. For the sake of coherence, Neoplatonists adhering to Plato's reformatory conception of justice rejected his idea that "incurable" souls will suffer eternal punishment. See O'Meara, *Platonopolis* 107–111.

57 Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* 13. See also Walker, *Decline of hell* 29–32.

58 Manāʿī, 'Aqīda 93, 100, 121; Khalil, *Salvation* 110–35.

59 Chittick, *Death* 77; Chodkiewicz, *Océan* 67; Addas, *Victoire* 64; Manāʿī, 'Aqīda 106; Khalil, *Salvation* 62–3. I leave aside here the question of what kind of people actually qualifies for eternal hell, which is in turn related to Ibn ʿArabī's definition of infidelity. See Chittick, *Religious diversity* 152–5; Khalil, *Salvation* 55–62; Gril, Pharaon.

an example, describing the way in which the *ahl al-nār* (“the people of the Fire”) lose their sensitivity to the pain (*al-ihsās bi-l-ālām*) of burning, Ibn ‘Arabī compares their situation to that of sinful believers who, according to a hadith, God lets die (*amātahum Allāhu fihā imātatan*) so as to spare them the suffering of their temporary stay in hell.⁶⁰ In this case, the absence of pain can be considered simply as an easing, but not a discontinuation, of the punishment.

However, further passages clarify that, for Ibn ‘Arabī, what draws to a close is the punishment in its legal sense: “When the fixed penalty (*ḥadd*) against *ahl al-nār* comes to its end, they dwell in hell-fire because they are suited to it (*bi-l-ahlīyya*) and not as recompense (*bi-l-jazā’*).”⁶¹ Indeed, the duration of the castigation in hell stands as a “proportional recompense” (*jazā’ wifāq*, Q 78:26), corresponding exactly to what is merited (*istiḥqāq*) on account of one’s evil deeds in this world. It is, therefore, limited, inasmuch as limited sin could not warrant unlimited punishment.⁶² At the same time, while in the Quran the expression *jazā’ wifāq* (proportional recompense) appears solely in reference to infernal punishment, Ibn ‘Arabī also applies it to the reward that the faithful receive through merit, in a special paradise called the “paradise of deeds” (*jannat al-a’māl*). In the case also of the blessed, the reward earned through deeds is bestowed over a limited period of time.⁶³

Thus, limited duration pertains to the function of the two abodes in so far as they are loci of reward and punishment. Once the spell is over, both the eternal extension of the pleasures of paradise and the transformation

60 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* i, 303. The hadith is found in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-īmān* 82 (*bāb ithbāt al-shafā’a wa ikhrāj al-muwahḥidīn min al-nār*). It specifies that experiencing death in hell is a special favour accorded to sinful believers. This restriction is mentioned elsewhere also by Ibn ‘Arabī. See *Futūḥāt* ii, 161; Sha’rānī, *Yawāqūt* ii, 469. In his commentary on Muslim, al-Nawawī says that the death accorded to the sinful believers is “real” (*ḥādhihi al-imāta imāta ḥaqīqīyya*), and that it makes them lose their sensibility after they have suffered a punishment proportional (*alā qadr*) to their sins. See Nawawī, *Sharḥ* iii, 38. According to Qurtūbī, “death” can be taken here either literally (*mawta ḥaqīqīyya*) or as a metaphor for a state of unconsciousness. He further explains that even if God does not torment these sinners (*wa-in lam yu’adhhibhum*), their stay in hell is a punishment (*‘uqūba*), in the same way as serving a prison sentence without being put in chains. See Qurtūbī, *Tadhkira* 769–71 (*bāb man dakhala al-nār min al-muwahḥidīn māta wa-ḥtaraqa thumma yakhrujūna bi-l-shafā’a*).

61 Ḥakīm, *Mu’jam* 1089, quoting Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iv, 120.

62 Chittick, *Death* 77.

63 Ḥakīm, *Mu’jam* 288; 1021–2. Cf. also Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* ii, 212–3, transl. in Addas, *Victoire*, 65–6: once the spell of reward and punishment is over, all are “rewarded” by divine mercy by virtue of their original disposition to love and serve God.

of infernal misery into bliss depend on divine grace (*minna*), as opposed to deserts (*istihqāq*). Indeed, both perpetual reward and perpetual punishment are beyond equity. Going beyond equity in reward is generosity (*fadl*), while it would be blameworthy in the case of punishment.⁶⁴ Once the period of reward or punishment has ended, divine mercy embraces the people of the two abodes, notwithstanding the fact these are separate and that different forms of bliss (*naʿīm*) are found in each.

Although some critics, from the time of Ibn Taymiyya onwards, have drawn parallels between Ibn ʿArabī and the Jahmiyya,⁶⁵ this idea does not imply the annihilation of paradise and hell, rather, it amounts to a downgrading of the retributive concept of the afterlife in a spirit akin to Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 185/801), who wished to burn paradise and put out hell as places of reward and punishment.⁶⁶ So, despite having fulfilled its legal function, hell continues onto eternity.

The reason for hell's eternity is both theological and anthropological. Theologically, it fulfils the economy of the Divine Names: hell is the eternal manifestation of wrath, even when its *ḥukm* (rule) comes to an end, in contrast to that of divine satisfaction (*yantahī ḥukmuhu wa-lā yantahī ḥukm al-riḍā*).⁶⁷ That Divine Names of wrath manifest themselves without exercising their *ḥukm* is a key concept that deserves attention. In linguistic terms, this means that the names lose their referential, but not their significative function.⁶⁸ In legal terms, this means that penal law ceases to be operative, without being declared invalid. Ibn ʿArabī compares God's giving preponderance (*tarjih*) to mercy over wrath to the choice of the judge between two equally legitimate decisions: "When God weighs mercy against wrath, mercy preponderates and is heavier, and wrath is lifted; that something is lifted has no other meaning that it ceases to be in operation; therefore, in the outcome, divine wrath has

64 Cf. Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt* iv, 171.

65 Cf. van Ess, *Theologie* ii, 508. Yet, in a way that recalls an opinion attributed to the Jahmiyya, Ibn ʿArabī says that, despite not being believers, those who know the oneness of God are not among the permanent inhabitants of hell. See Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt* i, 314, and cf. van Ess, *Theologie* ii, 503; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs* 22.

66 A possible parallel in Syriac mysticism can be found in Stephen Bar Sudaili (c. 480–c. 543), who posits an end to both reward and punishment, after which all will be enveloped in divine mercy. See Guillaumont, *Conférence* 370; Daley, *Hope* 176–8. Cf. van Ess, *Theologie* iv, 548; idem, *Das begrenzte Paradies* 111.

67 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 383. Cf. Chittick, *Religious diversity* 115–6; idem, *Death* 79.

68 Cf. Ajhar, *Suʿāl* 193.

no enforcement power.”⁶⁹ Notwithstanding this, the Divine Names of wrath do not lose the “right” to be fulfilled, which is implemented through the manifestation of their properties in the imaginative realm.⁷⁰ In other words, the outward show of punishment is eternal in its exemplarity. It is a pure spectacle, hiding the reality of divine mercy.⁷¹

Anthropologically, eternal hell, as a “veil” or “separation” (*ḥijāb*) from God, is made necessary by the inability of certain natures to sustain the vision of God and bear the climate of paradise.⁷² The *ḥijāb*, being deprivation, is a form of suffering, but as hell is not punishment in the legal sense of the term, it does not qualify as a *poena damni*, but is the inevitable consequence of a lack of knowledge.⁷³ This is close to Ibn Sīnā’s intellectualist conception, where imperfect souls cannot aspire to absolute beatitude, but also to the mystical vision of Emanuel Swedenborg, where the souls that lack charity

were seized by such anguish of heart from the approach of heavenly heat, which is the love in which angels are, and from the influx of heavenly light, which is Divine truth, that they perceived in themselves infernal torment instead of heavenly joy, and being struck with dismay, they cast themselves down headlong.⁷⁴

69 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 176: *fa-lammā wāzana Allāh bayna al-raḥma wa l-ghaḍab rajaḥat al-raḥma wa-thaqlat wa-irtafa’ā al-ghaḍab al-ilāhī wa lā ma’nā li-irtifā’ al-shay’ illā zawāl ḥukmihi; fa-lam yabqa min al-ghaḍab al-ilāhī ḥukm fi l-ma’āl*. It is interesting to note that the notion that a law can lose its binding force without being rendered null by abrogation plays an important role in Ibn ‘Arabī’s view of the relationship of Islam with Judaism and Christianity. See Chittick, *Religious diversity* 125.

70 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 119: *fa-ḥaythu zahara ḥukm al-Muntaqim [...] fa-qad istawfā ḥaqquhu bi-zuhūr ḥukmihi*. For a translation, see Chittick, *Religious diversity* 115.

71 Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretation of the “wall” dividing the Garden from the Fire in Q 57:13. Chittick, *Religious diversity* 117–8.

72 Chittick, *Death* 79–80; idem, *Religious diversity* 117–8.

73 Cf. ‘Afīfī’s comment in Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* ii, 96. For the same reason, the “paradise of the knower” (*jannat al-’arīf*) is different from that of the believer. See *ibid.*, ii, 90.

74 Swedenborg, *Heaven and hell* 340. Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iv, 14: “And if they were resurrected from their graves in the constitution of their own abode and were given a choice between the Garden and the Fire, they would choose the Fire, just as a fish chooses water and flees from the air through which the inhabitants of the earth have life” (tr. Chittick, *Religious Diversity* 118). For the comparison with Swedenborg, see Corbin, *Imagination* 260, 270.

Ibn 'Arabī imagines 'infernal pleasure' both as the cessation of pain and as an actual "independent bliss" (*na'īm mustaqill*) alongside it.⁷⁵ He remarks on a number of occasions that 'adhāb comes from the same root as 'udhūba (sweetness), and this shows that the torment of hell-fire will turn into pleasure.⁷⁶ Before him al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) had dwelt on the link between the two meanings, putting forward an explanation based on the meaning of 'adhāb as deterrent penalty: as freshwater ('*adhb*) quenches thirst, the deterrent penalty ('*adhāb*) quells the desire to commit a crime.⁷⁷ The double meaning of the root 'dh-b, exploited in erotic poetry (being tortured by your beloved is sweet), is further expanded in the mysticism of amorous martyrdom. This is the case of Ḥallāj, who calls forth and pursues "la suave extase dans le supplice" (*maldhūdh wajdī bi-l-'adhāb*).⁷⁸ The idea seems even to have captivated Ibn al-Qayyim, who states that the punishment turns into bliss (*inqalaba na'īman*) for those who accept it as rightful and healing.⁷⁹

However, Ibn 'Arabī is far from extolling suffering. *Na'īm* in his hell has nothing sublime about it: in contrast with 'adhāb, it is whatever is appropriate (*mulā'īm*) to the "nature" (*ṭab'*) or "temperament" (*mizāj*) of each man.⁸⁰ 'Adhāb thus becomes sweet when it is no longer against nature. The *ahl al-nār* relish hell like natives love their homeland (*mawṭin*) and are drawn to it like iron to a magnet.⁸¹

Occasionally, Ibn 'Arabī appears to emphasize the redeeming properties of the *ahl al-nār's* happiness, as when he compares them to Abraham, who found "coolness and safety" (*bardan wa-salāman*) in the furnace.⁸² Elsewhere their pleasure is described as relish in wretchedness, quite simply "natural perversion":⁸³ something more akin to Fourier's utopia, where everyone follows his inclinations, than to the "virtuous city" of the *falāsifa*. To all appearances, given Ibn 'Arabī's definition of the notions of pleasure and pain, there is a variety of natural pleasures which, though being peculiar, should not be

75 Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 114. Cf. Addas, *Victoire* 74.

76 Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 94; idem, *Futūḥāt* ii, 207. Cf. Chodkiewicz, *Océan* 66; Khalil, *Salvation* 66.

77 Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf* (ad Q 2:7). See also Lane, *Lexicon* v, 1982.

78 Hatem, *Amour* 113.

79 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ḥādī* 373.

80 Ḥakīm, *Mu'jam* 786–8; Chittick, *Death* 79–80; idem, *Religious diversity* 117–8.

81 Ḥakīm, *Mu'jam* 1089, 1091.

82 Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 169. Cf. Q 21:69.

83 Ḥakīm, *Mu'jam* 1091 (*inzī'āj yaqtaḍihī ṭab'uhu*). See also Qayṣarī, *Maṭla'* i, 432, commenting on *Fuṣūṣ* i, 94: "bliss for corrupt (*khabītha*) souls comes only from vile things, like a dung beetle relishes filth and cannot abide good things."

considered as diseases.⁸⁴ Such an outlook is foreign to Ibn al-Qayyim for whom medicine restores us to “sound nature” (*ṭabīʿa mustaqīma*) in the same way as infernal punishment restores our “original constitution” (*fiṭra*) to health.⁸⁵ But the natural aversion of certain souls from paradise is problematic also in connection with what Ibn ‘Arabī himself says of the *fiṭra*. In fact, the *fiṭra* is for him a key argument in favour of universal salvation, in so far as he considers it as the original and unalterable disposition to know God, which is common to every human being.⁸⁶ Thanks to this, hell cannot be the “home” (*mawṭin*) of the rational soul, and if it were to alight there the flame would be smothered.⁸⁷ But *fiṭra* has for Ibn ‘Arabī a great variety of meanings.⁸⁸ So, while adhering to a universalist conception of *fiṭra*, he does not dismiss altogether the alternative interpretation of this notion which prevailed in Sunni tradition, and according to which God gives men different “original constitutions” ordaining them *ab aeterno* either to hell or paradise.⁸⁹ However, Ibn ‘Arabī curbs this idea from its predestinarian outlook towards a universal determinism: God’s decree does not damn people but only establishes their dwelling-place.⁹⁰

We have here a major difficulty: if the “people of the Fire” are not restored to the fullness of the original disposition, because it was pre-determined that their individual natures would not attain the felicity of human perfection, in what sense can we say that Ibn ‘Arabī maintains “universal salvation”? In order to answer this question, we have to go back to Ibn ‘Arabī’s original use of the theological distinction between God’s ontological and moral will, or His “creation” and His “command.”⁹¹ The paradoxes of determinism are a recurring motif in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings. The real meaning of the “decree” (*qadar*) is a “secret” that revelation jealously veils,⁹² because it betrays the fact that

84 Cf. the debate on the possibility of sodomy in paradise. See Lange, *Justice* 211.

85 Cf. above, n. 44.

86 See Addas, *Victoire* 64–6. Cf. also Chittick, *Religious diversity* 51–2.

87 Ḥakīm, *Muʿjam* 296, quoting Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 360. On the dignity (*sharaf*) of the rational soul, see ‘Abd al-Qādir, *Mawāqif* ii, 932, 936, 941.

88 See Gobillot, *Conception* 60–1.

89 See *ibid.*, 32–45, 46–51 (on the theological debate), and 62–5 (on the rejection of the predestinarian interpretation by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim). Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* ii, 330, where Ibn ‘Arabī says that certain rational souls are not originally disposed to knowledge of God (*lam tuḥṭar ‘alā al-‘ilm bi-llāh*), and were destined to hell since the pre-eternal Covenant (cf. Q 7:172). See also ‘Abd al-Qādir, *Mawāqif* ii, 935.

90 Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 76; Chittick, *Death* 77.

91 For references to the use of these concepts before Ibn ‘Arabī, see Hoover, *Theodicy* 128–9; Ajhar, *Suʿāl* 227–8.

92 Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 131; see also *ibid.*, 109–10.

disobedience to God's "command" is morally evil but ontologically good. God's creative mercy lets everything subsist conforming with its "fixed entities" (*a'yān thābita*),⁹³ the concrete determinations of singular beings that since pre-eternity are established as potentialities in God's knowledge, and which, in themselves, are neither good nor evil, but "indifferent". God's "command," instead, is what confers their legal-moral qualifications to the actualized manifestations of the "fixed entities," through the revelation of the Law.⁹⁴ The injunctions and prohibitions of the Law can be disobeyed: they are a verbal imperative through which God commands what He lacks the power to impose, unlike God's creative imperative, the *kun*, which is necessarily fulfilled.⁹⁵ Hell as a temporary legal institution where moral evil is punished is under the sway of God's wrath, but as an eternal dwelling-place it is the object of God's creative will and mercy, which encompasses and "precedes" wrath.

Precisely this aspect of Ibn 'Arabī's eschatology is the target of Ibn Taymiyya's criticism: according to the latter, the emphasis on God's ontological mercy leads to disregard His moral will, and actually paves the way for the antinomian tendencies of some of Ibn 'Arabī's followers.⁹⁶ Ibn 'Arabī's distinction between the two dimensions of hell, the legal and the existential, is obviously incompatible with the view held by the majority, for whom eternal hell is the fulfilment of an irrevocable sentence against unbelievers. Yet it is also incompatible with Ibn al-Qayyim's hell as this too, as long as it lasts, has a penal function. Ibn al-Qayyim is without doubt unfair when he states that according to Ibn 'Arabī "nobody at all is punished in hell" (*'indahū lā yu'adhhabu bihā aḥad aṣlan*),⁹⁷ as he does not take account either of the temporary punishment or of the deprivation of the vision of God that Ibn 'Arabī foresees. Yet the accusation is not entirely unfounded in so far as the driving force behind Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutics is the desire to dispense with punishment altogether:

We have experienced in ourselves and in those God made benevolent by nature that they have compassion for all men, to such an extent that if God were to give them authority over creation they would erase punishment completely from the world.⁹⁸

93 On this translation, see Chittick, *Cosmology* xxxviii.

94 Cf. Chittick, *Religious diversity* 47–8.

95 Cf. Ajhar, *Su'āl* 186.

96 Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi* 92; Hoover, *Theodicy* 110, 125, 130; Ajhar, *Su'āl* 227, 256.

97 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ḥādī* 353. See Manā'ī, 'Aqīda 93, 127–9; Khalil, *Salvation* 93.

98 Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 25. For a translation, see Addas, *Victoire* 63.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s desire, however, is reined in by *adab*, the proper manner of behaving with God, which is a consequence of the receptivity to His Word.⁹⁹

As we will see in the next section, Ibn ‘Arabī considers the end of punishment not only as the necessary consequence of God’s ontological mercy, but also as the deepest intention of His revealed Law. This intention, however, can only be fulfilled if man understands it and freely chooses to put it into practice. In this sense, God’s moral command plays a key role in Ibn ‘Arabī’s scheme of salvation, a scheme where man is an active participant and not only the passive recipient of mercy. But salvation, which is “universal” from the point of view of God’s ontological mercy, can only be individual in so far as it results from man’s answer to God’s personal revelation.

4 “Rights of God” and “Rights of Men”

We have seen that Ibn al-Qayyim plainly affirms the “correspondence” between earthly and otherworldly punishment in so far as both aim at the restoration of the common good. *Iṣlāḥ*, which has the meaning of “making wholesome,”¹⁰⁰ or “restoration,” and is thus very close to “apocatastasis,” is also a key-term of Ibn ‘Arabī’s eschatology. The latter, however, uses it in reference to two different processes: reparation in the afterlife is brought about both by a purifying and inescapable punishment, and by reconciliation and forgiveness. We will now attempt to show how these two different processes are related to each other and to their respective legal counterparts in earthly justice.

As we have seen, hell is the place of proportional recompense (*jazā’ wifāq*), where one can only receive what one deserves. This requital is inevitable as it is literally the product of deeds: one is punished (or rewarded) by the personification of one’s actions. It is, therefore, the individual who “creates” and “builds” the hell of punishment (as with the paradise of reward).¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Ibn ‘Arabī also describes this penalty as imposed by God, attributing to it a purifying function: “Divine mercy involves punishment solely as a purifying recompense (*jazā’ li-l-taḥḥir*): were it not for the purification, the punishment would not take place.”¹⁰² God, like a doctor, makes his patient suffer for his wellbeing:

99 Cf. Gril, *Adab*.

100 Cf. Chittick, *Cosmology* 122.

101 Ḥakīm, *Muʿjam* 1089–90; Chittick, *Religious diversity* 109.

102 Ḥakīm, *Muʿjam* 786–7, quoting from Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 352. On the purifying function of punishment, see also Chittick, *Death* 78; idem, *Religious diversity* 109; Feiz, “Qahr” 12.

The punishment inflicted by God is an act of mercy towards he who undergoes it and a purification, like medicine for an invalid made to suffer by a doctor because of mercy towards him, and not to exact revenge.¹⁰³

While being merciful, punishment is not, however, absolute mercy (*rahma*): for this reason, when God punishes He is not defined as “the Merciful” (*al-rahmān*), but as “Lord of the Worlds” (*rabb al-‘ālamīn*). The title *rabb* (“Lord”) encompasses mercy as it implicates reform (*iṣlāḥ*) and education (*tarbiya*).¹⁰⁴ Intrinsic to the *rabb* is being a

teacher (*murabbī*) [...]: that is he who has the task of reforming the status (*iṣlāḥ ḥāl*) of those educated—and education can be a source of pain, as when a person beats his son to teach him a lesson. [...] Similarly, God’s *ḥudūd* are a lesson to His servants.¹⁰⁵

Ibn ‘Arabī thus justifies punishment in the netherworld by making use of both therapeutic and pedagogic models, as well as legal ones that liken infernal punishment to *ḥudūd*. Much like Ibn al-Qayyim after him, he compares the healing properties of the Fire with cauterization and *ḥudūd* punishments, which in this world serve as atonements, exempting sinners from punishment in the afterlife.¹⁰⁶ In this way, Ibn ‘Arabī deals with the issue from a theodicean perspective: a relative evil is justified by its wise purpose, in this world as in the next. This approach also safeguards God’s transcendence (*tanzīh*), which literally indicates “exempting” God from all that does not become His perfection. Defending God as a transcendent principle implicates defending the cosmic order and the political order as well.

This perspective does not however decide the issue. Another point of view is that of immanence (*tashbīh*), the idea that there is a “resemblance” between the Creator and the creature, a personal relationship between God and man created in His image. From this angle, Ibn ‘Arabī does not speak as a theologian justifying divine castigation but as an advocate-intercessor eager to spare

103 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iv, 256–7.

104 Ibid., i, 308.

105 Ibid., iii, 383.

106 Ibid., ii, 161: *fa-ja‘ala Allāh lahum al-nār [...] dawā’ ka-l-kayy bi-l-nār fī l-dunyā [...] idhā ja‘alnāhā wiqāya kamā ja‘alnā fī l-ḥudūd al-dunyāwiyya wiqāya min ‘adhāb al-ākḥira wa-li-ḥādḥā hiya kaffārāt ay tasturuḥu ḥādhihi l-ḥudūd ‘an ‘adhāb al-ākḥira*. Cf. above, n. 44 and 50. Ibn ‘Arabī also defines punishment in the afterlife as “the period in which God’s penal laws are operative” (*muddat iqāmat al-ḥudūd*). See *ibid.*, iii, 346, 383.

each individual suffering, and for this reason cannot sidestep the issue of pain with a rational line of reasoning. While it is true that many Sufis describe evil as a trial to endure and a chance to reform,¹⁰⁷ there are notable exceptions, as for example in ‘Aṭṭār’s (d. 627/1230) *Muṣibat-nāme*, where nameless “madmen” and “paupers” argue with God with overtones that recall those of the *zindīqs*, yet in intimate and personal conversation with Him.¹⁰⁸ Ibn ‘Arabī, for his part, in commenting on the case of Job, approves his complaint (*shakwa*), countering the position of those Sufis who preach total resignation: “Not to complain to God when you feel an ill contrary to His desire, is to want to resist the divine constraint [...]. *Adab*, all *adab*, is in that complaint addressed to God and to Him alone without losing by that the virtue of patience.”¹⁰⁹

As we have seen, Ibn ‘Arabī is a “well-mannered” intercessor, who does not challenge the Shari‘a, but seeks to unfold its potentialities. In this case, like a skilful lawyer, he homes in on the “rights of men” (*ḥuqūq al-‘ibād*) rather than the “rights of God” (*ḥuqūq Allāh*). From this viewpoint, the cornerstone of his discourse on the justice of hell is retaliation (*qiṣāṣ*). The *lex talionis* is suitable to his purpose precisely because it corresponds to a relational model of justice, where the focus of the law is the harm done to a person, requiring compensation, rather than the transgression of a norm, requiring punishment.¹¹⁰ Unlike public penal law, *qiṣāṣ* is based on the principle of private prosecution: man has the “right” to forfeit his right to retaliation,¹¹¹ and is even encouraged to do so. The recommendation to pardon is a strong ethical component of Islamic law, which, however, does not abrogate *qiṣāṣ* as a law, revoking the right to retaliation or compensation.¹¹²

Ibn ‘Arabī’s reflections on *qiṣāṣ* apply equally to this world and to the next. In the chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* on the prophet Jonah, he gives special attention to the following Quranic verse: “The recompense of one evil is an evil like it (*wa-jazā’u sayyi’ā sayyi’ā mithluhā*), but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation (*aṣlahā*), his reward is with God” (Q 42:40). In his commentary, Ibn ‘Arabī emphasizes the fact that God Himself calls retaliation an “evil,” “even

107 Cf. Hoover, *Theodicy* 3.

108 See Ritter, *Ocean* 165–87; idem, *Strife*.

109 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iv, 143, (tr. with commentary in Gril, *Adab*). See also Chittick, *Cosmology* 121.

110 This fundamental distinction plays a key role in the Mu‘tazilite reasoning on otherworldly justice. See Vasalou, *Moral* 81–2.

111 Peters, *Crime* 39, 45–6.

112 This interpretation of the *lex talionis* was also typical of Rabbinic law. Jesus’ instruction to turn the other cheek in Matthew 5:39 can be read within this legal framework. See Johnson, *Jesus and Moses* 100–106.

though it is legal,” and that He promises to reward the person who forfeits his right to kill another man, “because he is in His image.”¹¹³ In the final part of the chapter, Ibn ‘Arabī argues against the eternity of hell, clearly establishing an analogy between killing in retaliation and eternal damnation. This analogy is made stronger by the fact that a Quranic verse from the sura of Jonah describes eternal castigation in terms very close to retaliation: “And for those who have earned evil deeds the recompense of an evil deed shall be the like of it (*wa-alladhīna kasabū sayyi’āt jazā’u sayyi’a bi-mithlihā*) [...]. Those are the companions of the Fire. They will abide therein eternally” (Q 10:27).

The institution of retaliation has an important place in Ibn ‘Arabī’s reflections about the relationship between law and spirituality. Talionic punishment is an evil for the receiver because suffering is an evil by definition. Yet it is also an evil for he who inflicts it as it negates the *makārim al-akhlāq* (noble character traits), by virtue of which man becomes like God and achieves his own happiness (*sa’āda*). Even though retaliation cannot be defined as an “evil” from a legal point of view, according to the Law it is better not to claim it. There is in fact a difference between “good” and “better” rulings of the Law, just as there is a hierarchy of Divine Names, and the noble character traits which correspond to the “most beautiful names” (such as the Generous or the Merciful) can only be acquired by practising the best part of the Law.¹¹⁴

Sa’āda is thus attained enacting the Law in its entirety, not only obeying what it enjoins, but also preferring what it recommends. Ibn ‘Arabī pays particular attention to the ethical value of not exerting violence when one is given the choice (*takhyīr*),¹¹⁵ which is the case of *qīṣās*, but not of *ḥudūd*.¹¹⁶ The happiness attained by freely choosing what God most desires is clearly distinguished from “natural” happiness. The choice not to repay evil with evil is actually a way to go beyond man’s nature (*ṭabī’a*), the *amor sui naturalis* that man shares with other living beings and that drives him to seek pleasure—and revenge is a pleasure, too. In this sense, the moral law acts to bridge the abyss

113 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 168 (tr. in Austin, *Bezels* 209). For further references and commentary, see Pagani, *Imago* 252; Feiz, *Notion* 137–8; idem, “Qahr” 7–8; Chittick, *Cosmology* 122–3, 217.

114 Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iv, 171.

115 See Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 129–30: The Prophet, when free to choose, opts not to use his powers. The founding principle of the *futuwwa* is to forego retaliation when one has the strength to enforce it. Cf. Hatem, *Amour* 87 (quoting from *Futūḥāt* i, 241). On clemency as a political virtue, see Ghazālī, *Ihyā’* iii, 179–81 (*K. dhamm al-ghadab*; b. *faḍīlat al-’afw wa-l-iḥsān*).

116 Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iv, 46–7.

of one's nature, as the *ṣirāt* over hell.¹¹⁷ By overcoming the inborn yearnings in their animal soul, humans become truly human; becoming truly human, human beings become divine, actualizing in themselves the image of God.¹¹⁸ Spiritual happiness is also distinguished from the common good, because it is not justified by utilitarian considerations, but is an end in itself. Forgiveness grants an immediate spiritual benefit to the one who pardons the offender, to such an extent that "if God removed the veil, and we were to see with our own eyes what great good is there for us in the next world in consequence of that offence, we would say that nobody benefited us more than that so-called wrongdoer."¹¹⁹ The "love of one's enemy," therefore, is not a sacrifice: the point is not to substitute oneself for the enemy, to die or condemn oneself to damnation in his place, but rather, to actualize in oneself the image of God and, at the same time, to leave the other alive in order not to preclude him from the possibility of achieving the same goal.¹²⁰

The implication that what is "evil" for man is equally "evil" for God is articulated by Ibn 'Arabī when he argues for the possibility that God may not carry out His threat. God can only be praised by saying of Him what is praiseworthy *per se* (*al-maḥmūd bi-l-dhāt*), but this only applies to pardon (*tajāwuz*) and not to "sincerity in menace" (*ṣidq al-wa'īd*), and God Himself says that He "overlooks their misdeeds" (*yatajāwazu 'an sayyi'ātihim*) (cf. Q 46:16).¹²¹ In this passage, as in the chapter on Jonah, where he hints at the parallelism between killing in retaliation and eternal damnation, Ibn 'Arabī argues against the eternality of punishment, equating it with a blameworthy form of retribution.

117 Ḥakīm, *Mu'jam* 296. On the contrary, those souls condemned to hell "love only those things fitting their nature." See Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* ii, 330. See also 'Abd al-Qādir, *Mawāqif* ii, 935. According to Ibn 'Arabī, the prophets, who serve the divine "command" aiming at man's salvation, resist the divine decree, in the same way as the doctor who strives to save the invalid's life resists the law of nature. See Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 98.

118 Cf. Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* ii, 332–3, where Ibn 'Arabī distinguishes between natural love, which loves the beloved only to satisfy its own needs, and spiritual love, which loves the beloved for himself, also in his freedom not to love us. For Ibn 'Arabī the specific distinction between man and animal is not language, but the image of God. See Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 154.

119 *Ibid.*, iv, 47.

120 Cf. Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 168. See also Ibn 'Arabī's commentary on Noah's saying: "Lord, leave not a single soul of the unbelievers alive on the earth" (Q 71:26). Ibn 'Arabī states that "now perhaps, had they lived longer, they would have returned to God, or from their loins would have sprung men who would have believed in God, and brought delight to the believers." See Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iv, 60 (trans. in Gril, *Adab*).

121 Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 93–4. See also *idem*, *Futūḥāt* iv, 46–7.

Thus, one could think that the plea for the annulment of punishment in the hereafter cannot be extended to the case of the 'therapeutic' *ḥudūd*. However, in actual fact it is possible to intercede also for the annulment of temporary punishment:

In intercession, a servant, through his role of advisor (*nāṣiḥ*), upon seeing that God wishes to punish a man for his misdeed, says to Him: Oh Lord, You have urged us to forgive and made forgiveness a noble trait, preferable to taking revenge on the wrongdoer [...]. You are more worthy of such ways [...]. Punishing evil is gainful only in this world, as the fulfilment of the *ḥudūd* wards off public harm (*maḍarra āmma*). Just as God is praised in this world (*dunyā*) for the institution of the *ḥudūd* [...], so is He praised in the next (*ākḥira*) for His forgiveness. For *ḥudūd* in this world no intercession is possible, as they are God's rights; in the next, however, the common good (*maṣlaḥa*) that here below wanted the application of the rights of God, no longer holds sway. In the case of men's rights, on the other hand, God Himself urged forgiveness.¹²²

This passage is noteworthy as it sets out an asymmetry between *dunyā* and *ākḥira*: in the hereafter, the common good (*maṣlaḥa*) that calls for public criminal law no longer applies. Consequently, the legal principle upholding punishment in this world cannot be extended by analogy to the hereafter. Another passage hints that in the afterlife God punishes *only* the wrongs done to other creatures:

As the Lord (*rabb*) is He who restores (*al-muṣliḥ*), on Resurrection Day God will reconcile (*yušliḥ*) His servants with each other. Indeed, the Prophetic tradition tells of two men, one of whom has a claim to make against the other: they appear in front of God, and when the victim says: "Avenge me for the wrong he did to me," God answers: "Look heavenward!" The man sees there great goodness and says: "Whose is this, Lord?" And God answers: "It belongs to whoever can give me its price." So the man says: "Who could ever have that much?." So God says to him: "You will have that much if you forgive your brother." And he says: "I forgive him!" and takes him by the hand and they both enter paradise together. The Prophet, having told this story, said "Fear God and seek reconciliation between you as God will bring together His servants on the Day of Resurrection." But if God is so generous as to bring about reconciliation

122 Ibid., 468–9.

between His servants in such a way that the victim renounces his right, it goes without saying that He too will renounce the rights He has in their regard. Indeed, God punishes whom He wills for wrongs done to others, but not for His own right (*bi-ḥaqqihi al-mukhtaṣṣ bi-hi*). Associationism (*shirk*) is punished in as much as it is a wrong done to others. God does not stand up for Himself, but for others (*mā yantaṣir li-naḥsihi wa-innamā yantaṣir li-ghayrihi*). On the Day of Resurrection the “associates” will disown their followers [cf. Q 2:166].¹²³

In other words, idolatry, the ultimate crime against God, is not punished in order to safeguard a right of God, but because those who have been associated with God have been “wronged” by their followers, who attributed to them something they did not claim.

The benefit of forgiveness, which is “veiled” in this world, becomes evident in the next. Nevertheless, the victim is given the choice. In the tradition on righting wrongs in the afterlife reported by Ibn ‘Arabī, God is not a forgiver but a conciliator (*muṣliḥ*): He does not annul the punishment by unilaterally bestowing grace. Rather, He reconciles the victim and the offender by paying the blood-money himself.¹²⁴ A well-known version of this theme features David and Uriah: David is already on the pulpit at the gate of heaven reciting Psalms when Uriah grabs his robes claiming his right to retaliation. God, however, ransoms David by compensating Uriah with a number of castles in paradise.¹²⁵ According to Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), this story answers a problem raised by the “People of the Book”: if God pardons David, must one not deduce that his victim will have no justice?¹²⁶ Al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), in reporting this story, stresses that the likelihood of God stepping forward as a conciliator comes about only for penitent wrongdoers, as David was, otherwise no one would go to hell (*wa-law kāna dhālika fi jamī‘ al-nās mā dakhala aḥad al-nār*).¹²⁷ In the same way, nobody would go to hell were one to take the following report attributed to the Prophet seriously: “On the Day of Resurrection, a herald will proclaim from beneath the Throne: Oh community of Muḥammad, I forgive

123 Ibid., iii, 383: *fa-inna al-shurakā’ yatabarra’ūna min atbā’ihim yawm al-qiyāma*.

124 The idea that God “funds” the settling of accounts in the afterlife also plays an important role in Mu‘tazili thinking on compensation (*iwāḍ*). See Vasalou, *Moral* 80–1. Ibn ‘Arabī’s focus on “rights” is a continuation of this line of reasoning. Cf. *ibid.*, 41–3, 60–2, 79–86.

125 Ghazālī, *Durra* 86–8.

126 Déclais, *David* 221. On the topic of the forgiveness of victims in the afterlife in Zoroastrianism and in rabbinical Judaism, see Winston, *Iranian* 213. See also above, n. 8.

127 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* 662 (*bāb fi irḍā’ Allāh ta’ālā al-khuṣūm yawm al-qiyāma*).

you whatever I could claim from you; as for the injuries which remain, forgive each other for them (*fa-tawāhabūhā*) and enter the Garden for My mercy.”¹²⁸

By suggesting that only crimes against other creatures, and not those against God, are punished in hell, Ibn ‘Arabī exempts hell entirely from the reach of public penal law where the common good justifies state violence. Even where the sin does not appear to be transitive it impinges on the rights of “others”: the rational soul, entrusted with “governing” one’s animal soul (*nafs*) and the limbs of one’s body, breaches their rights when it disobeys divine command, acting as a tyrant (*wālī jā’ir*) who forces his subjects to commit crimes.¹²⁹ For Ibn ‘Arabī, among sins, haughtiness (*takabbur*) is the first in line to be punished eternally in hell, Pharaoh being the archetype of this class of sin in the macrocosm.¹³⁰ But every iniquitous soul is a “tyrant” in the microcosm, the focus of Ibn ‘Arabī’s interest, who shifts politics from the administration of others to the administration of oneself, from the common good to individual happiness.¹³¹

Even if punishment relates to the “rights of men” and not to the “rights of God,” any wrongs committed against men are at the same time a wrong against God:

[In hell] there is hunger as God created it from the manifestation (*tajallī*) of His word [reported] in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim: “I was hungry and you did not feed Me, I was thirsty and you did not quench My thirst, I was sick and you did not come to visit Me.” This is the most awe-inspiring personal revelation through which God has descended among His servants in His gentleness towards them. Hell has been created from this reality. May God protect me and you all from it.¹³²

Precisely because He is immanent, God ‘suffers’ sin and takes revenge—a reprisal not vitiated by mercy—but only for a limited spell: as long as it takes for Him to free Himself from His pain.¹³³

128 Ibid.; cf. Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’* iv, 530 (*k. dhikr al-mawt wa-mā ba’dahu, b. fi sa’at raḥmat Allāh*). Augustine had warned the “tender-hearted” not to interpret the Our Father in this way: “For He does not say, if ye forgive men their sins, your Father will also forgive you your sins, no matter of what sort they be” (*De Civ. Dei* 21.27.4).

129 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 76. This is also quoted in ‘Abd al-Qādir, *Mawāqif* ii, 938; see also *ibid.*, 934, 936.

130 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* i, 301.

131 Cf. Nyberg, *Schriften* 15–7. Ibn ‘Arabī calls man, as microcosm, *al-madīna al-fāḍila*. See Ḥakīm, *Mu’jam* 1018.

132 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, i, 297; Sha’rānī, *Yawāqūt* ii, 463.

133 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* i, 172. On the “suffering” of God, see also Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* ii, 206.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Ibn al-Qayyim can help us better comprehend Ibn ‘Arabī’s eschatological ideas; things can be discerned through their opposites. The inhabitants of paradise comprehend their own felicity by contemplating the Fire,¹³⁴ and in a similar way, an examination of Ibn al-Qayyim facilitates comprehension of Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of universal salvation. Ibn al-Qayyim perfects political hell, taking the principle that violence is justified by the common good as far as logic will allow: in the eternal *civitas* the use of violence will no longer be necessary as enemies will be wholly reformed and reinstated in the normality of a single sound nature. Ibn ‘Arabī downplays the political and legal aspect of hell, to the advantage of its ethical and spiritual values. The underlying principle is not *maṣlaḥa* but happiness: the unshadowed joy of those who, by going beyond “nature” have actualized in themselves the image of God, and the “veiled” joy that can take on as many forms as there are temperaments and natures of men.

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¹³⁴ Cf. Chittick, *Religious diversity* 117–8.

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Withholding Judgment on Islamic Universalism

Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 840/1436) on the Duration and Purpose of Hell-Fire

Jon Hoover

In the late 740s/1340s, the Ḥanbalī theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) and the Shāfi‘ī chief judge of Damascus Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355) came into conflict over Ibn Taymiyya’s (d. 728/1328) arguments for limited chastisement of unbelievers and the annihilation of hell-fire. Ibn al-Qayyim supported Ibn Taymiyya’s arguments: Hell is therapeutic and reformative, and God’s wise purpose in chastising unbelievers is to make them fit to leave the Fire. Al-Subkī for his part issued a sharp refutation of Ibn Taymiyya, declared assent to the annihilation of the Fire unbelief and reasserted the mainstream Sunni doctrine of eternal hell-fire for unbelievers. Controversy over Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim’s arguments continues to the present day with some Muslims such as contemporary scholar Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (b. 1926) following them through to a doctrine of universal salvation and others rejecting that doctrine as erroneous or heretical.¹

This study introduces the uniquely conciliatory and ecumenically-minded voice of Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 840/1436) into this controversy. Ibn al-Wazīr was a Yemeni traditionalist theologian who shifted away from the Mu‘tazilī *kalām* theology espoused by his Zaydi community of origin early in his career. In order to mitigate the conflict over hell-fire, Ibn al-Wazīr withholds judgment on its duration, and he includes both its annihilation and its eternity within the realm of acceptable belief. However, the theological cost to Ibn al-Wazīr in taking this tolerant position is sacrificing explanation why God ultimately punishes unbelievers in Hell.

The following discussion will survey the key arguments of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Subkī, explain the character and sources of Ibn al-Wazīr’s ecumenical and conciliatory spirit, and elaborate his agnosticism on the duration and purpose of chastisement in the Fire. I will argue that Ibn al-Wazīr’s conciliatory posture in the controversy over universal salvation probably

1 For discussion of the arguments and notes on the history of the controversy, see Khalil, *Islam and the fate of others* 80–109, 126–31; Hoover, *Islamic universalism*; Hoover, *Against Islamic universalism*.

derived from the fact that he lived within Zaydi social and political spaces even after abandoning Zaydi doctrine for Sunni theological views. A more contentious and unyielding stance would have made him *persona non grata* among the Zaydis and probably among the Sunni scholars whom he sought out as teachers as well.

1 Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and al-Subkī on Hell-Fire

Ibn Taymiyya reflects on the duration of hell-fire in the last treatise that he wrote before his death in 728/1328, and he seems not to have addressed the question directly before this. The treatise, which I have called *Fanā' al-nār*, makes several arguments for limited chastisement of unbelievers in the Fire.² I will highlight five that constitute the core of Ibn Taymiyya's case.

The first two arguments are textual. One is Ibn Taymiyya's citation of a tradition attributed to the second Sunni caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13–23/634–44), "Even if the People of the Fire stayed in the Fire like the amount of sand of 'Ālij, they would have, despite that, a day in which they would come out." 'Ālij was a large tract of sand outside Mecca, and the sense of the tradition is that those in the Fire will eventually leave, even if only after a very long time. According to Ibn Taymiyya, this clarifies that the statement in the Qur'an affirming that unbelievers will stay in Hell "for long stretches of time" (*lābithīna fīha aḥqāban*) (Q 78:23) need not mean forever.

A second textual argument is based on the Quranic verses, "As for those who are unhappy, they will be in the Fire, sighing and groaning, abiding (*khālidīn*) therein, as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord wills" (Q 11:106–7). The mainstream Sunni tradition took the key term *khālidīn* to mean "everlasting" or "eternal" in an absolute sense, especially as it appears frequently in the Qur'an without being qualified by the duration of the heavens and the earth or by God's will. For Ibn Taymiyya, however, the presence of these qualifications or exceptions indicates that *khālidīn* need not mean "forever" absolutely, and the Qur'an does not therefore preclude universal salvation.³

In a third argument in *Fanā' al-nār*, perhaps the most pivotal, Ibn Taymiyya rejects all claims that the Muslim community has reached a consensus (*ijmā'*) on the eternity of hell-fire for unbelievers. The early Muslims, the Salaf, were not of one mind on this issue, and any alleged consensus of later scholars is of

2 For a discussion of the origins of this treatise, see Hoover, *Islamic universalism* 182–5.

3 Ibn Taymiyya, *Fanā' al-nār* 52–70. Cf. Hoover, *Islamic universalism* 186.

no account in principle because it is always too difficult to verify. The operating principle here is Ibn Taymiyya's Salafi reformism, which sidesteps the consensus-based authority structure of the Sunnism of his time and allows him to critique the received doctrine of everlasting punishment for unbelievers.⁴

Two further arguments in *Fanā' al-nār* are theological. First, Ibn Taymiyya draws on hadith reports in which God says, "My mercy overcomes My anger,"⁵ and "My mercy precedes My anger,"⁶ to reason that God's mercy precludes chastising unbelievers forever. Second, as a firm defender of rationality and wise purpose in God's actions, Ibn Taymiyya argues that God could have no good reason for chastising anyone forever. Rather, the purpose of chastisement is therapeutic. It is to purify and cleanse from sins.⁷

Ibn Taymiyya's arguments seem not to have generated much interest until his student Ibn al-Qayyim copied and discussed portions of *Fanā' al-nār* in his book *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*. So far as we can tell, Ibn al-Qayyim wrote this book in 745/1344–45. Ibn al-Qayyim also treated the duration of hell-fire soon thereafter in two further tomes: *Shifā' al-'alīl* and *Al-Ṣawā'iq al-mursala*.⁸ In all three of these works, Ibn al-Qayyim develops the therapeutic rationale for chastising unbelievers much more fully than did his teacher: God is a physician for whom the Fire is the great remedy to treat the worst of human maladies. In the first two works, Ibn al-Qayyim backs away from the thrust of his argument and leaves the final destiny of unbelievers to God's will. In the third, however, he follows his argument through to its logical conclusion and affirms that chastisement of unbelievers in the Fire will come to an end. Ultimately, no creature can resist God's therapeutic power, and the chastisement of hell-fire will no longer be necessary after it has served its reformatory purpose.

In 748/1348, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355) wrote a refutation of Ibn Taymiyya's *Fanā' al-nār*.⁹ Al-Subkī had come into conflict with Ibn al-Qayyim on a number of other matters at the same time, and it seems obvious enough that al-Subkī's real aim in refuting Ibn Taymiyya was to stop Ibn al-Qayyim from arguing against eternal fire for unbelievers. Al-Subkī's strategy appears

4 Ibn Taymiyya, *Fanā' al-nār* 71–2. Cf. Hoover, *Islamic universalism* 186–7.

5 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-tawba* 14, 16 (*fī sa'at raḥmat Allāh*).

6 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-tawḥīd* 55 (*qawl Allāh ta'ālā bal huwa Qur'ān majīd fī lawḥ mahfūz*); Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-tawba* 15 (*fī sa'at raḥmat Allāh*).

7 Ibn Taymiyya, *Fanā' al-nār* 82–3. Cf. Hoover, *Islamic universalism* 188–9.

8 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ* 307–41, in ch. 67; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Shifā' al-'alīl* 540–65, in ch. 22. The discussion in *Al-Ṣawā'iq al-mursala* is only available in an abridged form. See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawā'iq* 544–690. For analysis of these three texts, see Hoover, *Islamic universalism*.

9 Subkī, *I'tibār*.

to have worked, as we have no evidence that Ibn al-Qayyim speculated further about the matter. Instead, he briefly affirms in his last work *Zād al-ma'ād* that unbelievers will suffer eternal punishment.¹⁰

Al-Subkī's refutation does not engage Ibn Taymiyya's therapeutic rationale for chastisement, and his decisive appeal is to scholarly consensus. He asserts that a consensus has been reached that unbelievers will spend eternity in the Fire; denying this is unbelief (*kufṛ*). Al-Subkī is careful to say that he is not accusing anyone in particular of being an unbeliever, and Ibn Taymiyya is never mentioned explicitly in the treatise. Nonetheless, it is clear that deviation from belief in eternal punishment for unbelievers lies beyond the pale of Islamic orthodoxy. Al-Subkī also does not accept Ibn Taymiyya's interpretations of the key Qur'ānic texts, and he marshals a large body of Quranic evidence to show that unbelievers will abide in hell-fire eternally.¹¹ Ibn al-Wazīr took a mediating approach to this controversy, and we first look at his life and thought more generally to assess why he may have taken such a position.

2 Ibn al-Wazīr and His Shift to Ecumenical Traditionalism

Ibn al-Wazīr has received only passing notice in European language scholarship,¹² but he was the subject of a few sizable studies in Arabic in the 1980s. The most thorough and analytical of these is Rizq al-Ḥajar's 1984 book on Ibn al-Wazīr's life and theological thought.¹³ A 1985 dissertation by 'Alī al-Ḥarbī covers much the same ground but in less penetrating fashion.¹⁴ Al-Ḥarbī is aware of al-Ḥajar's work, but it appeared too late for him to make use of it. Both authors bemoan that the biography by the early nineteenth-century Yemeni reformer Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834) was the only source of what little was known previously about Ibn al-Wazīr.¹⁵ There is however an earlier discussion

10 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Zād al-ma'ād* i, 68. On Ibn al-Qayyim's silencing, see Hoover, *Against Islamic universalism*, and Hoover, *A medieval Muslim argument*. Khalil interprets Ibn al-Qayyim not to have retracted his belief in universal salvation in *Zād al-ma'ād*. See Khalil, *Islam and the fate of others* 100–1.

11 Hoover, *Islamic universalism* 187–8.

12 See, for example, Madelung, *Zaydī attitudes* 143; Haykel, *Reforming Islam* 338; Brown, *Canonization* 214, 314.

13 Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr*.

14 Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr*.

15 Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 13; Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 3–4. For the biography, see Shawkānī, *Badr* ii, 80–93.

of Ibn al-Wazīr's thought in a 1980 survey of Zaydi theology by Aḥmad Ṣubḥī.¹⁶ A further modern work, a biography of Ibn al-Wazīr and a survey of his vast theological treatise *Al-ʿAwāṣim wa-l-qawāṣim* ('The protectors and destroyers') by the Yemeni historian Ismāʿīl al-Akwaʿ (d. 1429/2008), was first written in 1984 as part of the introduction to *ʿAwāṣim*¹⁷ and then published independently with additions in 1988.¹⁸ I have not found substantial research on Ibn al-Wazīr that is more recent, and I rely on the above sources for much of what follows.

Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Wazīr was born in 775/1373–4 into a family of scholars in the Zaydi Shīʿi enclave of al-Ḍahrawayn, which lay about 100 kilometers to the northwest of Ṣanʿāʾ in the Zaydi dominated Yemeni highlands. First in his hometown and then in Saʿda, Ibn al-Wazīr learned the Qurʾan, Zaydi legal works and the Muʿtazilī *kalām* theology prevalent among the Zaydis. He then abandoned traditional Zaydi teachings early in his career to accept the full authority of the canonical Sunni hadith collections, especially Bukhārī and Muslim. His elder brother al-Hādī b. Ibrāhīm (d. 822/1419–20), who had been one of his early teachers, tried to persuade him to return to Zaydi views but to no avail. Despite their differences, al-Hādī sometimes defended his brother, and the two remained in contact throughout their lives exchanging letters and verses of poetry. At an unknown date, Ibn al-Wazīr moved to Taʿizz, capital of the Sunni Rasūlid rulers of southern Yemen and the western coastal lowlands, to study with the Ḥanafī hadith scholar Nafīs al-Dīn al-ʿAlawī and then in 807/1404–5 travelled to Mecca to study under a number of Mālikī and Shāfiʿī scholars. Ibn al-Wazīr remained in the Yemeni highlands during his later years teaching and writing. He suffered Zaydi opposition to his ideas and sometimes withdrew into seclusion to write and worship. He died of the plague in 840/1436.¹⁹

Ibn al-Wazīr wrote more than 40 works; many are extant, and several have been published.²⁰ His two major theological works relevant to the present

16 Ṣubḥī, *Fī ʿilm al-kalām* iii, 347–95. The introduction to this book is dated 1400/1980.

17 Ibn al-Wazīr, *ʿAwāṣim* i, 7–100.

18 All references to Akwaʿ, *Imām*, are to the 1988 edition.

19 Akwaʿ, *Imām* 10–19, 33–40, 52–61, 64–9, 78; Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 23–57. Ḥajar suggests that Ibn al-Wazīr began his life of asceticism and frequent seclusion in the early 820s/late 1410s. See *ibid.*, 44–5. Cf. Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 36–49. For an example of poetic exchange between Ibn al-Wazīr and his brother Hādī, see vom Bruck, *Regimes of piety* 206–8, in which Ibn al-Wazīr urges his brother to keep his distance from political affairs, a counsel which is cited by modern Zaydi quietists against Zaydi activists.

20 Lists of Ibn al-Wazīr's works are given in Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 88–101; Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 103–14; Akwaʿ, *Imām* 74–8; Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* ii, 188, *Supplementbände* ii, 249; Kaḥḥāla, *Muʿjam al-muʿallifīn* viii, 210–11.

study are the aforementioned *Al-'Awāṣim wa-l-qawāṣim*, which extends to nine volumes in the printed edition, and *Īthār al-ḥaqq 'alā al-khalq* ('Preferring the Real over the creation'), which exceeds 450 pages in the 1318/1900 edition.²¹ Ibn al-Wazīr wrote *'Awāṣim* in 808/1405–6 to respond to a treatise by his Zaydi teacher 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. Abī al-Qāsim attacking him for deviation from Zaydism. Early in *'Awāṣim*, Ibn al-Wazīr outlines his methodology of creative jurisprudence (*ijtihād*), undermines the Sunni legal regime of four recognized law schools by refuting those who deny *ijtihād* after al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), and clarifies his traditionalist theological method. Ibn al-Wazīr reports that he had believed in accord with *kalām* theology that the first human obligation was speculation (*naẓar*) to prove the existence of God but that he then turned to the Qur'an and the Sunna convinced that they must contain all necessary proofs and guidance. Ibn al-Wazīr's shift away from traditional Zaydi doctrines is readily apparent in *'Awāṣim* in the doctrinal positions that he defends. For example, he rejects the Zaydi-Mu'tazilī view that humans create their own acts in favor of the Sunni traditionalist belief that God creates all acts. He denies that the unrepentant Muslim grave sinner (*fāsiq*) will spend eternity in the Fire, and, along with the Sunni mainstream, he maintains that monotheists with the least grain of belief in their hearts will eventually enter paradise, even if they must first spend time in the Fire as punishment for their sins. The book also absolves Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) of corporealism in the question of God's attributes, and it contains treatments of the beatific vision of God and the imamate.²² Ibn al-Wazīr completed an abridged version of *'Awāṣim* several years later in 817/1411 called *Al-Rawḍ al-bāsim* ('The smiling garden').

Īthār al-ḥaqq was written toward the end of Ibn al-Wazīr's life in 837/1433–4. The stated purpose of the book is to set out the essential beliefs of all Muslims, not just the views of a particular sect, and leave aside the many secondary issues that divide, confuse and distract. Ibn al-Wazīr observes that some things are best left unexplored, as life is short, and that ignorance is sometimes beneficial.²³ The book touches on the full range of Islamic theological issues from the foundations of knowledge and the existence of God to prophecy, eschatology and the imamate, and it includes lengthy discussions of

21 The edition used for this study is the 1318/1901 edition Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq*, which is reviewed briefly by Rashīd Riḍā in *Majallat al-manār* 4,1 (1318/1901), 16. A more recent but no better edition was published in Beirut at Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya in 1403/1983.

22 Akwa', *Imām* 102–14, provides a full overview of Ibn al-Wazīr's *'Awāṣim*. Ibn al-Wazīr, *'Awāṣim* i, 202, relates his conversion from *naẓar* to the Qur'an and the Sunna.

23 Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 3–7, 30.

God's creation of the human act and God's wise purpose in creating all things, including evils.

The exact cause of Ibn al-Wazīr's turn to traditionalist Sunni doctrines is not readily apparent, but the increasing influence of Sunnism in Yemen and Mecca in the late eighth/fourteenth century probably played an important role.²⁴ The Ayyūbids had conquered a politically fractured southern Yemen and the western Yemeni coastal area of Tihāma in 569/1173, and they strongly supported the Shāfi'ī law school. In 626/1228 the Ayyūbids gave way to the Rasūlids who ruled through 858/1454 over southern Yemen, Tihāma, and, at times, Ṣan'ā' and parts of the Yemeni highlands. The Rasūlids nurtured a thriving civilization that attracted renowned scholars such as the hadith expert Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) and the Sufi 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 832/1428) to Yemen. The Shāfi'īs became dominant under the Rasūlids through defections from the Ḥanafīs, and Ash'arism gained ground against theological traditionalism among Shāfi'īs beginning in the eighth/fourteenth century.²⁵ In Mecca the ruling Sharifs had been largely Zaydi from the late fourth/tenth century onwards. However, their allegiance gradually shifted to Sunnism in the latter half of the eighth/fourteenth century under pressure from the Mamluk rulers of Egypt and Syria. The Sharifs turned to the study of hadith to solidify their Sunni identity and contributed to the growing number of endowed Sunni *madrasas* in Mecca. They completely disassociated from Zaydism in the first half of the ninth/fifteenth century.²⁶

In addition to the rising prestige of Sunnism in Mecca and the Yemeni lowlands, Ismā'īl al-Akwa' suggests that the robust Zaydi doctrine of *ijtihād* facilitated Ibn al-Wazīr's transition to Sunni doctrines.²⁷ Aḥmad Ṣubḥī claims as well that Ibn al-Wazīr's practice of *ijtihād* did not even lead him beyond the foundations of Zaydism.²⁸ Ibn al-Wazīr did write substantially on *ijtihād*,

24 Similarly, Haykel briefly suggests that “[t]he openness to Sunnism amongst Zaydī-born scholars in this period [of Ibn al-Wazīr] is probably related to the increased contacts Zaydīs now had with Shāfi'ī scholars, in particular those living in Rasūlid Lower Yemen, but also others in Mecca.” See Haykel, *Reforming Islam* 338 n. 4.

25 On the Rasūlids, see Smith, *Rasūlids*; Smith, *Political history*. On the religious history of medieval Yemen, see Aziz, *Religion and mysticism* 7–33; Gochenour, *Towards a sociology*; Madelung, *Islam in Yemen*; and Madelung, *Zaydiyya*. Discussions of the religious and political situations in Yemen are also found in Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 50–5, 70–80; and Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 66–75.

26 Mortel, *Zaydi Shi'ism*; Mortel, *Madrasas in Mecca*.

27 Akwa', *Imām* 8.

28 Ṣubḥī, *Fī 'ilm al-kalām* iii, 348, n. 2.

and he is, moreover, often seen as a precursor to Muḥammad al-Shawkānī,²⁹ probably because al-Shawkānī's biography of Ibn al-Wazīr casts him in that role. Al-Shawkānī calls Ibn al-Wazīr an absolute independent jurist (*mujtahid mutlaq*), and he takes the biography as an opportunity to launch a diatribe against blind imitation (*taqlīd*). Al-Shawkānī also relates an anecdote in which Ibn al-Wazīr rebuffed an invitation from a teacher in Mecca to join the Shāfi'i or Ḥanafī legal school. The invitation so angered Ibn al-Wazīr that he retorted that if he were in need of someone to follow, he would have chosen the Zaydi Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm (d. 246/860) and his grandson Yahyā b. al-Ḥusayn al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq (d. 298/911), the eponym of the Zaydi-Hādawī legal school in Yemen.³⁰ Yet, despite all of this, Ibn al-Wazīr does occasionally identify with the Shāfi'is by speaking of the Meccan Shāfi'i scholar Sa'd b. 'Alī al-Zanjānī (d. 471/1078–9) as “one of our Shāfi'i colleagues” (*min aṣḥābinā al-shāfi'iyya*).³¹ The significance of this statement is not entirely clear, and perhaps it means only that al-Zanjānī is a scholarly colleague who happens to be Shāfi'i. Nevertheless, the exact nature of Ibn al-Wazīr's *ijtihād* and al-Shawkānī's reasons for characterizing him as an absolute *mujtahid* require further study. What is apparent, however, is that Ibn al-Wazīr's independence of mind, to which his advocacy for some form of *ijtihād* bears evidence, afforded him the capacity to rethink his sources of religious authority and his theology.

While Ibn al-Wazīr firmly adopts traditionalist Sunni theological positions, he does not vilify Zaydi-Mu'tazilī doctrines, and his theology is distinctly conciliatory and accommodating in character. This requires elaboration and explanation, especially as we encounter these same characteristics in Ibn al-Wazīr's reflection on the duration of unbelievers' chastisement in hell-fire. The accommodating tenor of Ibn al-Wazīr's theology is readily apparent in his reticence to practice *takfīr*, that is, labelling fellow Muslims unbelievers. Ibn al-Wazīr does exclude from belief those who intentionally deny the Islamic revelation or misinterpret an essential part of the religion—among them the Bāṭinīs (Ismā'īlīs) in his view—but he refuses to call anyone who delves into

29 Madelung briefly remarks on the “neo-Sunnī school” that emerged out of Zaydism from Ibn al-Wazīr to al-Shawkānī, and he states that Ibn al-Wazīr “insisted . . . that he was not joining any Sunnī school and was simply employing sound, independent *idjtiḥād*.” See Madelung, *Zaydiyya* 480. Haykel mentions Ibn al-Wazīr's anti-Zaydi traditionalism as a forerunner to al-Shawkānī. See Haykel, *Revival and reform* 10–11. Elsewhere, Haykel states that Ibn al-Wazīr did not formally declare “an affiliation to any of the Sunnī schools.” See Haykel, *Reforming Islam* 338.

30 Shawkānī, *Badr* 81–90.

31 Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 378. See also idem, *ʿAwāṣim* viii, 8; idem, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 203.

interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of ambiguous expressions (*mutashābihāt*) an unbeliever. Ibn al-Wazīr says that error in calling someone an unbeliever is among the worst crimes one could commit against fellow Muslims, even worse than offending God's rights by failing to label someone an unbeliever who is one. It is better to withhold judgment in the face of contradiction and ambiguity.³²

Ibn al-Wazīr's caution in regard to *takfīr* prevents him from dismissing *kalām* theology out of hand in the fashion of its virulent critics among the Sunni traditionalists. He allows that *kalām* functions to clarify and defend Islamic doctrines, and he warns against calling *kalām* theologians unbelievers or charging them with going astray. However, Ibn al-Wazīr criticizes *kalām* for erring in the obscurity of its proofs and for its propensity to delve into the interpretation of ambiguous matters like the modality (*kayfiyya*) of God's attributes and the secret of God's determination of evil, all of which lead to divisions and innovations within Islam. Moreover, Ibn al-Wazīr maintains that the Qur'an's proofs are superior to the complex proofs of *kalām*; the proofs in the Qur'an clarify the principles of religion, and they accord with true rationality.³³

In addition to permitting a range of interpretation in ambiguous matters, Ibn al-Wazīr manifests an ecumenical spirit in trying to conciliate opposing doctrines. Rizq al-Ḥajar outlines how Ibn al-Wazīr seeks to mitigate differences between the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites in several aspects of the divine-human relation. Brief attention to al-Ḥajar's findings in two aspects will suffice to illustrate Ibn al-Wazīr's approach. The first involves difference over God's will (*irāda*). The Mu'tazilites maintain that God wills that everyone believe, even the unbeliever, whereas for many Ash'arites God's will is all-encompassing such that God wills even unbelief and disobedience. Ibn al-Wazīr turns to the philosophically inclined Ash'arī theologian al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) for a more sophisticated view and responds that the Ash'arites do not say that God wills disobedience in itself. Rather, God hates disobedience and wills it only for the sake of something else. With this clarification, and even though real difference remains on the creation of the human act, Ibn al-Wazīr can claim that Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites agree that God does not will evil.³⁴

The second example from al-Ḥajar's analysis of Ibn al-Wazīr's conciliation efforts involves God's wise purpose (*ḥikma*), which will be further elaborated in conjunction with his views on chastisement in hell-fire discussed below. While Mu'tazilism affirms that God acts for purposes, classical Ash'arism denies purpose in God's acts in order to exalt God's power and self-sufficiency. Ibn al-Wazīr explains that the Ash'arites' extreme position is an over-reaction

32 Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 190–9, summarizing Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 414–51.

33 Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 138–90, 237–50.

34 *Ibid.*, 260–7.

to their opponents' excessive enthusiasm for detailing why God does what He does.³⁵ Taking inspiration from the philosophically-inclined Ash'arism of al-Ghazālī, as well as the traditionalist theology of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Wazīr seeks out a conciliatory path by affirming that God acts for wise purposes even if they cannot always be known. That wise purposes in God's acts are not always apparent, especially in evil and pain, does not mean that they do not exist.³⁶

As al-Ḥajar's analysis shows, Ibn al-Wazīr takes the edge off substantive theological difference by identifying shared affirmations between Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites and avoiding dissenting Ash'arī views, and he shows little interest in discrediting the Zaydis and their Mu'tazilī doctrines. It remains to explain why Ibn al-Wazīr adopts this conciliatory approach to theology as well as his extreme caution in the face of ambiguity and difference of interpretation. For Aḥmad Ṣubḥī, the conflictual character of *kalām* grated against Ibn al-Wazīr's temperament,³⁷ and for 'Alī al-Ḥarbī, Ibn al-Wazīr's conciliatory stance derived from a pious desire for unity in a fractious theological environment.³⁸ It was also a prudent strategy, as al-Ḥarbī and al-Akwa' both point to the physical danger that Zaydi fanaticism posed to Ibn al-Wazīr, a danger that drove him to dissimulation (*taqīyya*) as he himself explains in *Awāṣim*.³⁹ The following passage comes from an interpolation into the introduction to the work, apparently added by Ibn al-Wazīr later in life, as it makes direct reference to *Al-Rawḍ al-bāsim*, the abridgement of *Awāṣim*.

In this response [i.e., *Awāṣim*], I followed the paths of the dialecticians in reducing the opponent to absurdity in his principles. In part of it, I did not undertake to clarify my own choice [of doctrines]. This was for the sake of guarding against (*taqīyya*) the ignorant and fanatical. So, let the reader take notice of that and not take my answer to the opponent for my own doctrine. Then, I abridged this book into a small book that I called *Al-Rawḍ al-bāsim*, which is less [an instance of] dissimulation (*taqīyya*) than this one.⁴⁰

35 Ibid., 286, quotes the argument directly from Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 194.

36 Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 286–312, 322–36.

37 Ṣubḥī, *Fī 'ilm al-kalām* iii, 349–50.

38 Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr*, 66.

39 Ibid., 125–8; Akwa', *Imām* 81–2.

40 Ibn al-Wazīr, *Awāṣim* i, 225. It may be that Ibn al-Wazīr added the full introductory discussion found in *Awāṣim* i, 201–27, later in life, as it takes a reflective tone characteristic of some remove from the writing of the work. In modern terms, it reads like a new author's preface for a twentieth anniversary edition of a successful scholarly book.

Ibn al-Wazīr here makes clear that he concealed some of his views and measured his words carefully in *ʿAwāšim* so as not to provoke opponents unnecessarily. Al-Akwaʿ adds that Ibn al-Wazīr could not have forgotten that the Zaydi Imām al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn had killed the Shāfiʿī jurist Aḥmad b. Zayd al-Shāwiri in 793/1391 after al-Shāwiri wrote a book attacking the Imam’s doctrines and actions. It thus comes as no surprise to al-Akwaʿ that Ibn al-Wazīr sometimes reconciled with his Zaydi opponents and leaned toward Zaydi views as much as he could without compromising the integrity of his own position.⁴¹

Given the danger that Ibn al-Wazīr felt from Zaydi opponents, it is not entirely clear why he never abandoned the Yemeni highlands for good. Perhaps it was an unwillingness to affiliate with a single Sunni school of law or a continuing sense of Zaydi identity and deep-felt loyalty to family and community of origin—recall his close relation to his brother al-Hādī noted above.⁴² Whatever be the case, Ibn al-Wazīr remained sufficiently connected to Zaydi society to appear in Zaydi biographical dictionaries,⁴³ and it is apparent that at least part of his strategy for carving out sufficient place for himself within the Zaydi intellectual world was adopting a theological stance of conciliation and accommodation. A more combative style would have made it difficult for Ibn al-Wazīr to sustain his Sunni traditionalism not only at home among the Zaydis in the Yemeni highlands but also during his visits to Sunni scholars in Mecca and the lowlands of Yemen. A conciliatory, accommodating and even dissimulating posture better served his purposes of developing and maintaining his ecumenical traditionalist vision in the interstices of the Yemeni theological and political conflicts of his day. This intellectually circumspect stance is especially evident in his deliberations over the duration of chastisement for unbelievers, to which we now turn.

3 Withholding Judgment on the Duration of Hell-Fire

Ibn al-Wazīr briefly narrates the controversy around Ibn Taymiyya’s case for the annihilation of the Fire in *ʿAwāšim* and *Īthār al-ḥaqq*. Here it becomes

41 Akwaʿ, *Imām* 82–3. On the killing of al-Shāwiri, see also Aziz, *Religion and mysticism* 167; and Madelung, *Zaydī attitudes* 134.

42 Ibn al-Wazīr also had a son ʿAbdallāh, who was an accomplished Zaydi jurist. See Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 56.

43 The introductory materials to Ibn al-Wazīr, *Al-Rawḍ al-bāsim*, contain a list of medieval and modern Yemeni biographies of Ibn al-Wazīr (pp. 17–9), as well as the biography of Ibn al-Wazīr by his brother al-Hādī’s grandson Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh (d. 897/1492) (pp. 21–52). Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 85–6, also contains a list of biographies.

apparent that he composed at least two separate works on the topic, one a poem and the other a commentary on the relevant part of Ibn al-Qayyim's *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*. In *Īthār al-ḥaqq*, Ibn al-Wazīr writes, "I composed independent works (*muṣannafāt mustaqilla*) on this issue," that is, on the duration of chastisement in the hereafter.⁴⁴ Moreover, Ibn al-Wazīr states in *ʿAwāṣim*,

Ibn Taymiyya wrote in support of his doctrine [of limited chastisement], and al-Dhahabī wrote in refutation of him. In this matter I have discussions and additions, and criticism of both of them. In this matter I have a long poem that I have called *Al-Ijāda fī al-irāda* ['The excellent expression on the will'], which is more than 1000 verses.⁴⁵

Ibn al-Wazīr continues in *ʿAwāṣim* by quoting twelve verses from the *Ijāda* and observing that the poem may be about the best one can say on the question. He adds that Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya wrote about this matter in his book *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ* and leaned very strongly toward supporting his teacher Ibn Taymiyya.⁴⁶ Among Ibn al-Qayyim's writings on the duration of hell-fire, it appears that Ibn al-Wazīr had access only to *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*, as this is the only book that he mentions by name.

Presumably Ibn al-Wazīr's reference to al-Dhahabī is to the Shāfiʿī traditionalist and historian Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348). However, it is not otherwise known that al-Dhahabī wrote a refutation of Ibn Taymiyya on the duration of hell-fire, and, commenting on Ibn al-Wazīr's citation of al-Dhahabī more than 300 years later, the Yemeni traditionalist Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Amīr al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 1182/1768–9) observes that he could not find any such treatise.⁴⁷ Most likely, Ibn al-Wazīr confused al-Dhahabī with his Shāfiʿī counterpart Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, especially as Ibn al-Wazīr never refers to al-Subkī writing against the annihilation of the Fire otherwise.

In *Īthār al-ḥaqq* Ibn al-Wazīr again mentions his *Ijāda* and quotes 54 of its verses; these 54 verses are translated and annotated below in the Appendix. He adds in *Īthār al-ḥaqq* that the whole poem is about 1200 verses and that

44 Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 290.

45 Idem, *ʿAwāṣim* vi, 365.

46 Ibid., 366. Ibn al-Wazīr also quotes 13 verses from the *Ijāda* in *ʿAwāṣim* v, 363 and another four verses, which he says are taken from the end of the poem, in *ʿAwāṣim* vi, 342.

47 Ṣanʿānī, *Rafʿ al-astār* 62. Al-Ṣanʿānī is here commenting on Ibn al-Wazīr's citation of al-Dhahabī in *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 219. Additionally, there is no discussion of Ibn Taymiyya's views on the duration of hell-fire in al-Dhahabī's book on major sins *Kitāb al-kabāʾir*. However, al-Dhahabī was not without theological and personal grievances against his erstwhile teacher Ibn Taymiyya, on which see Bori, *A new source*, especially 326–8.

he wrote it to avoid falling into danger and error in his youth.⁴⁸ Ibn al-Wazīr further states that he wrote a “long discourse” (*kalām ṭawīl*) on the question of chastisement in the hereafter.⁴⁹ As he elaborates,

Ibn Taymiyya wrote to expound [God’s] wise purpose in the chastisement of the hereafter. His disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya followed him and elaborated that in his book *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ ilā diyār al-afrāḥ*, and I separated that out into a small volume (*juz’ laṭīf*) and added to it.⁵⁰

Ibn al-Wazīr also writes in *Īthār al-ḥaqq*, “Ibn Taymiyya and his disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya have composed interesting works on this, and al-Dhahabī has a work opposing them. I have a mediating [work] (*tawassuṭ*) between them.”⁵¹ As with the *Ijāda*, this “mediating” work was probably written before *ʿAwāṣim*, that is, before 808/1405–6, since Ibn al-Wazīr already mentions in that book that he had written something besides the *Ijāda* on the duration of chastisement. It is a matter of curiosity that Ibn al-Wazīr gave so much attention to this topic in his early years, and it is unfortunate that none of these works is known to be extant apart from the verses of the *Ijāda* quoted in *ʿAwāṣim* and *Īthār al-ḥaqq*. Obviously, the duration of the Fire had puzzled Ibn al-Wazīr greatly, and he may have considered adopting Ibn Taymiyya’s view for himself as he made his way from Zaydi to Sunni theological positions.⁵²

Ultimately, however, Ibn al-Wazīr does not take a position on the duration of hell-fire and instead devotes space in both *ʿAwāṣim* and *Īthār al-ḥaqq* to explaining how the different views on the question emerged. In *ʿAwāṣim*, in the context of discussing the problem of “perpetual evil that is not cut off, like the chastisement of the Fire and abiding in it [forever],”⁵³ he claims that the ominous and apparently irrational prospect of perpetual chastisement drove the extremists (*ghulāt*) among the Ashʿarites to deny wise purpose in God’s acts entirely⁵⁴ and Ibn Taymiyya to affirm the annihilation of the Fire. Ibn al-Wazīr explains that Ibn Taymiyya’s strongest proof comes from two Quranic verses

48 Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 219.

49 Ibid., 216.

50 Ibid., 99.

51 Ibid., 223.

52 Ḥarbī, *Kashf al-astār* 17–8, 25–8, maintains that Ibn al-Wazīr “leaned” (*yamīl*) toward Ibn Taymiyya’s view before deciding to withhold judgment on the matter.

53 Ibn al-Wazīr, *ʿAwāṣim* vi, 356.

54 Ibid., v, 335–69, develops the charge that the Ashʿarites make God aimless to avoid problems of evil.

that make an “exception” (*istithnā*) to everlasting chastisement of unbelievers: “[God] will say, ‘The Fire be your dwelling place, abiding therein, except as God wills’ (Q 6:128), and unbelievers will be in the Fire ‘abiding therein, as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord wills’ (Q 11:107). In Ibn al-Wazīr’s analysis, Ibn Taymiyya uses the exceptions “as long as the heavens and the earth endure” and “except as your Lord wills” to specify or particularize (*takhṣīs*) the general applicability (*‘umūm*) of the great many Quranic verses affirming eternal chastisement for unbelievers. For Ibn Taymiyya, the Quranic exceptions justify setting aside the general witness of the Qur’an in favor of limited chastisement. Ibn al-Wazīr only explains how Ibn Taymiyya comes to this view; he does not condemn it even though he himself is not ready to embrace it. Rather, Ibn al-Wazīr notes that uncertainty in the matter could only be set aside if there were necessary knowledge (*‘ilm ḍarūrī*) deriving from the religion or the Muslim consensus (*ijmā’*) that spoke to it.⁵⁵ Earlier in *Awāṣim*, Ibn al-Wazīr speaks to this point more fully: there is no text calling someone who denies the perpetuity of the Fire an unbeliever, nor is the perpetuity of punishment known by consensus or known to be a necessary part of religion; this is because Muslims have differed over the exception given in the verses cited above.⁵⁶

Ibn al-Wazīr takes the same approach in his later work *Īthār al-ḥaqq*, which provides a more unified account of his position in the lengthy quotation from his poem, the *Ijāda*. Preceding the quotation is discussion of the tension in God between wisdom and power (*qudra*). Ibn al-Wazīr identifies three ways in which the tension is relieved: impugning God’s wise purpose, impugning God’s power, or impugning the perpetuity of chastisement (*dawām al-‘adhāb*). The extremists among the Ash‘arites impugn wise purpose in God’s acts because it is difficult to understand what wise purpose God might have in creating the evils of this world and in the hereafter. The extremists among the Mu‘tazilites impugn God’s power when they imagine that there are things that God cannot do, that for example God could not reach the disobedient with His grace. Ibn Taymiyya and his followers maintain that impugning wise purpose and power entails deficiency in God and comes close to unbelief. However, they themselves impugn the perpetuity of chastisement for unbelievers on account of God’s great mercy and wise purpose, as well as the “exception” in the revelation—this is the same exception to everlasting punishment noted from the Quranic verses cited above (Q 6:128, 11:107).⁵⁷

55 Ibid., vi, 365.

56 Ibid., 142–3.

57 Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 215–6, cf. 246.

The beginning of the *Ijāda* invokes the problem of evil and God's will more generally (verses 1–5). Ibn al-Wazīr then pits the frequent mention of eternal Fire in the Qur'an against God's generosity and mercy (verses 6–8) and states, "The matter of eternity in the Fire becomes grave for everyone who ponders the names of the Lord of the worlds" (verse 7). So, how does eternal chastisement of unbelievers in hell-fire fit with an all-merciful God? This is no doubt the dilemma that Ibn al-Wazīr pondered as a young man. But then, as he writes in the *Ijāda*, the Qur'an itself provides relief: "When the exception to eternal chastisement appears openly in His Book, the edge is taken off the gravity [of the matter]" (verse 11). As we have seen above, the destiny of unbelievers is not eternal Fire without exception. Rather, it depends on the duration of the heavens and the earth and on God's will, and this suddenly opens up a broader range of doctrinal possibilities (verses 12–13). Reading the *Ijāda* autobiographically, Ibn al-Wazīr here begins to see a way out of his dilemma.

Ibn al-Wazīr continues in the *Ijāda* by alluding to three views on the duration of chastisement in the sparest of terms. Ibn al-Wazīr begins, "One view holds to the eternity [of chastisement] because the threats of that are abundant in the overwhelming [number of] revealed texts" (verse 14). The eternal chastisement in this verse apparently applies to both unbelievers and Muslim grave sinners, which is the view of the Mu'tazilites and the Zaydis. As I read the poem, the mainstream Sunni view that Muslim sinners will eventually reach paradise while unbelievers will not is what Ibn al-Wazīr identifies as a third position: "The third view, the prevailing one (*al-mansūr*), [maintains that] there is hope for the Muslim, but whoever resists Islam is not safe" (verse 16). In between these two positions, Ibn al-Wazīr mentions that of Ibn Taymiyya: "Another view gives precedence to the specific, and the names of the wisest Judge help him [in that]" (verse 15, cf. verse 29). That is, Ibn Taymiyya specifies the general Quranic witness to eternal chastisement with the exceptions "except as God wills" and "as long as the heavens and the earth endure" (Q 6:128, 11:107) and supports this with appeal to God's wise purpose.

In the following verses of the *Ijāda*, Ibn al-Wazīr in his ecumenical and conciliatory spirit admonishes against adherents of one view censuring proponents of another (verses 17–18, 20), and he counsels against calling Ibn Taymiyya an unbeliever, even if some of his proofs turn out to be weak (verses 29–32). Ibn al-Wazīr expands the domain of acceptable belief to include all three views because the evidence of the Qur'an is not uniform: "There is no unbelief in any of the views after decisive proofs in the revelation of the most knowledgeable Knower contradict" (verse 19). He also rationalizes the contradictory character of the Quranic evidence as having an ecumenical purpose. God's aim in introducing the "exception" or "specification" indicated in Quranic verses such

as 6:128 and 11:107 is to widen the scope of acceptable belief: “If God had not willed to widen His ruling, He would not have specified it in His Reminder openly” (verse 21).

The remaining verses of the *Ijāda* quoted in *Īthār al-ḥaqq* further discuss various attempts to resolve the tension between God’s power and God’s wisdom. The extreme Ash‘arites emphasize God’s power at the expense of His wise purpose, and the Mu‘tazilites underline wise purpose and justice at the expense of power (verses 35–54). Ibn al-Wazīr counsels affirming both God’s power and God’s wise purpose and withholding judgment on the matter beyond that (verse 49) because “the safety of the judicious in the face of fear [of error] is better than the correctness of the [overly] decisive” (verse 50). The “[overly] decisive” are those theologians who resort to reinterpretation to resolve the tension (verse 47), and here we see again Ibn al-Wazīr’s caution in the face of divisive theological questions.

To sum up Ibn al-Wazīr’s view thus far, there is no consensus on the duration of unbelievers’ chastisement in the Fire, contrary to the earlier view of Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, and this is in fact what God willed by providing contradictory indications in the Qur’an. Moreover, Ibn al-Wazīr neither adopts Ibn Taymiyya’s argument for limited chastisement nor condemns it. Both limited chastisement and everlasting chastisement fall within the domain of acceptable Muslim belief, but Ibn al-Wazīr judges it best to withhold judgment on which one it will be.

4 Agnosticism on the Ultimate Purpose of Hell-Fire

As the *Ijāda* indicates, Ibn al-Wazīr rejects the classic Ash‘arī denial of purpose in God’s will, and much like Ibn Taymiyya and al-Ghazālī, he affirms wise purpose in all of God’s acts, including the creation of evil.⁵⁸ Ibn al-Wazīr identifies specific wise purposes in some evils, especially in illnesses and punishments. These serve to expiate sins, test human beings, act as moral object lessons, and

58 Ibid., 193–209, defends wise purpose in God’s acts and ranges scholars into the various views on the matter. Ibn al-Wazīr, *Awāṣim* vii, 286–326, supports causality or rationality (*ta’līl*) in God’s acts against objections by the Ash‘arī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209). However, this defense does not bring out the implications of purpose for God’s nature and God’s relation to the created world as thoroughly as does Ibn Taymiyya who follows them through to a vision of God as perpetually creative and dynamic. On this see Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s theodicy* 70–102.

instigate thanksgiving to God for the good in this world.⁵⁹ With respect to punishments in the hereafter, Ibn al-Wazīr states that the reason for chastising the People of the Fire is to recompense them for their sins,⁶⁰ and he affirms a consensus that absolute pardon of unbelievers is not permissible out of regard for the rights of prophets and messengers.⁶¹

Ibn al-Wazīr also gives special attention to God's creation of unbelievers to ward off the Zaydi-Mu'tazilī charge that the Sunni God brought them into existence for no reason other than chastisement. In *ʿAwāṣim*, Ibn al-Wazīr counters that there is no proof in the Qur'an, the Sunna of the Prophet, or the consensus of the community that the chastisement of the People of the Fire was something that God willed for its own sake. God does not will chastisement as a pure evil, and He does not create unbelievers only for chastisement. Rather, everything is for a wise purpose, which cannot be known in every detail. Ibn al-Wazīr then lists seven wise purposes for which God creates unbelievers: (1) to worship Him (cf. Q 51:56), (2) to be tested (cf. Q 67:2), (3) to thank God for His gifts, (4) to chastise unbelievers for their ungratefulness toward God's blessing and their denial of God's proofs, (5) for a wise purpose that makes punishment preponderant over pardon and which is the interpretation of the ambiguous, (6) on account of God's absolute will, and (7) on account of what only God knows.⁶² Adherents of Mu'tazilī *kalām* would find this list disingenuous. The first four wise purposes presuppose independent human agents who could have freely chosen to worship and thank God had they wished. However, the Mu'tazilī objection is to the Sunni belief that God predetermines the unbelief of the unbelievers, obviating autonomous choice on their part. The last three wise purposes do not provide substantive reasons for the creation of unbelievers but hide these instead in God's will and knowledge.

Elsewhere in *ʿAwāṣim*, Ibn al-Wazīr replaces the sixth wise purpose with the notion that God creates unbelievers to benefit believers in this life and in the hereafter.⁶³ Later in the same book, he elaborates that God created unbelievers—particular Jews and Christians—to serve as ransom payments to release disobedient Muslims from hell-fire. Jews and Christians are vicariously laden with the punishments due to be meted out to Muslim grave sinners so that the latter may enter paradise. In support he cites the hadith, “God gives every

59 Ibn al-Wazīr, *ʿAwāṣim* vi, 7, 347.

60 Ibid., vii, 288.

61 Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 245. For further discussion of God's wise purposes in pains, afflictions and the chastisement of the hereafter, see Ḥajar, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 323–36.

62 Ibn al-Wazīr, *ʿAwāṣim* v, 344–6. The same list appears in idem, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 284–5.

63 Idem, *ʿAwāṣim* vi, 5–6.

Muslim a Jew or a Christian, and He says, "This is your ransom (*fidā*) from the Fire."⁶⁴ This goes some way toward explaining God's wise purpose in creating unbelievers. However, it implies a degree of unfairness unacceptable to Mu'tazilī Kalām, and it would not appear to provide sufficient reason for consigning unbelievers to Hell forever.

Ibn al-Wazīr acknowledges in *Awāṣim* that there is a problem rationalizing the evil of perpetual chastisement: "In every outward punishment is an inward blessing. ... It is indeed expiation (*kaffāra*) in addition to it being punishment and exemplary deterrence (*nakāl*). There is no difficulty in any of that evil except the perpetuity of chastisement."⁶⁵ Ibn al-Wazīr is not however willing to say decisively that chastisement is not perpetual, and his withholding judgment on the duration of hell-fire involves him in an agnostic position as to the Fire's ultimate purpose. If its purpose is reformatory and therapeutic, as in the theology of Ibn Taymiyya, chastisement of unbelievers must eventually come to an end. If the purpose of the Fire is retribution for the entirely unforgivable sin of associating partners with God (*shirk*), as in mainstream Sunnism, chastisement must be eternal. Consigning unbelievers to Hell eternally implies that Hell's ultimate wise purpose is retribution, and consigning them to Hell temporarily implies that its ultimate wise purpose is reform. As Ibn al-Wazīr does not take a position on the duration of hell-fire, he cannot speculate on God's fundamental reason for chastising unbelievers therein.

Ibn al-Wazīr affirms that God indeed has an ultimate wise purpose in hell-fire even if humans cannot know it, and to motivate the possibility that good may be intended by evil without humans seeing the point, he invokes the Quranic story of Moses and his guide, traditionally said to be the legendary figure Khidr. In the story (Q 18:60–82), Khidr kills a boy, and Moses objects because he does not perceive the reason for the killing: Khidr knew that the boy would grow up to afflict his parents with tyranny and unbelief. Ibn al-Wazīr considers the objection that God should never have created the boy in the first place. He replies that had God not created this boy the moral of the story would have been lost, which is "that God's ambiguous acts have good interpretations in the minds of reasonable people" and that God does not will evil in itself.⁶⁶ Equally, in Ibn al-Wazīr's view, this story proves that humans do not know the interpretation of the ambiguous (*ta'wīl al-mutashābih*). For if

64 Ibid., 160–4. The hadith is translated from Ibn al-Wazīr's text (vi, 160). The wording is somewhat different in the collection of Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, k. al-tawba* 49 (*qubūl tawbat al-qātil wa-in kathura qatluhu*).

65 Ibn al-Wazīr, *Awāṣim* vi, 7. Cf. idem, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 98–9.

66 Idem, *Awāṣim* vi, 150. See also idem, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 210.

Moses, who was so close to God, knew less than Khidr, then he knew even far less of God's knowledge.⁶⁷

In reflections on the duration and purpose of hell-fire, Ibn al-Wazir also turns to passages from al-Ghazali's discussion on God's names the Merciful and the Compassionate (*al-Rahmān al-Rahīm*) in *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*. Following the verses quoted from the *Ijāda* in *Īthār al-ḥaqq*, Ibn al-Wazir affirms that God has wise purposes even in things that appear irrational, such as inflicting pain on children and the innocent. To imagine how this could be so, he quotes al-Ghazali's contrast between a mother who protects her child from cupping out of pity and the father who imposes cupping on the child. An ignorant person thinks the mother is merciful and the father mean, while an intelligent person recognizes that the father is in fact the one showing mercy because he is inflicting the pain of cupping on the child to avert a greater evil. Al-Ghazali's point, and Ibn al-Wazir's as well, is that God's mercy takes precedence over God's wrath and that God does not will evil for its own sake but only accidentally for the greater good. Al-Ghazali adds that there is in this matter a secret that may not be divulged.⁶⁸ Ibn al-Wazir suggests that this secret may be "the great hope in God's mercy" (*sa'at al-rajā' li-rahmat Allāh*),⁶⁹ which he apparently takes to mean universal salvation for all human beings, especially as in *ʿAwāṣim* he understands this same text of al-Ghazali's to hint at that.⁷⁰

While Ibn al-Wazir presumes to divulge al-Ghazali's secret, he himself blocks the way to understanding God's fundamental purpose in the chastisement of unbelievers in hell-fire by withholding judgment on its duration. Whereas Ibn Taymiyya says that God could have no good reason for chastising creatures in the Fire forever, Ibn al-Wazir leaves open the possibility that God might have a good reason for doing so. It is, however, not for humans to know what it might be. Ibn al-Wazir establishes this in *ʿAwāṣim* with two rules. First, God's knowledge of the wise purposes and benefits in His acts far exceeds that of humans and what humans could ever bear. Those who do not accept this

67 Idem, *ʿAwāṣim* v, 342. Cf. idem, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 196.

68 Ibid., 220–2, quoting parts of Ghazali, *Maqṣad* 67–9 (tr. 55–7). Ibn al-Wazir invokes al-Ghazali's *Al-Maqṣad al-asnā* elsewhere, as in *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 98 (the cupping example), and *ʿAwāṣim* v, 365–6 (on God not willing evil for its own sake and on not divulging God's secret).

69 Idem, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 223.

70 Idem, *ʿAwāṣim* vi, 364. See also Khalil, *Islam and the fate of others* 46–8, on al-Ghazali's discussion of God's names *al-Rahmān al-Rahīm* in *al-Maqṣad al-asnā* and an argument that al-Ghazali is not a universalist.

rule are guilty of placing God and creatures on the same level in respect of knowledge. Second, the chastisement of hell-fire falls under the category of ambiguous matters of which only God knows the interpretation (*ta'wīl*). It is in fact the “mother of ambiguous matters” (*umm al-mutashābihat*), and no one should try to understand it. Withholding judgment is the most fitting response. Ibn al-Wazīr counsels further that humans should recall that things happen that fall outside their normal experience, that they should fear the chastisement of the hereafter, and that they should not let passions divert them from the truth.⁷¹ In other words, nothing should be permitted to dissuade believers from prudent agnosticism on the ultimate purpose of hell-fire. In *Īthār al-ḥaqq*, Ibn al-Wazīr sums up to the same end by gently criticizing Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Ghazālī for trying to discern God's wise purpose in evils, whether in this world or the hereafter:

The upshot of what [Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya] say is that it is not permissible to believe that God wills evil inasmuch as it is evil. Rather, it must be on account of a preponderant good toward which that evil is a means. That good is the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of that evil preceding it, in the way that Khidr's interpretation was for Moses. They apply that to the evils of the two abodes [of this world and the hereafter] together, and al-Ghazālī supports that in commenting on [God's names] the Merciful, the Compassionate [in *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*]. Let us relate in this regard one hadith that indicates a prohibition against delving into specifying the wise purpose in that. We say, “Al-Bayhaqī said in his book *Al-Asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt* from ‘Amr b. Maymūn, from Ibn ‘Abbās, when God raised up Moses and spoke to him, [Moses] said, ‘O God, You are a great Lord! If You willed to be obeyed, I would obey. And if You willed to be disobeyed, I would not disobey; You love to be obeyed, but in that You are disobeyed. How can that be, O Lord?’ So, God revealed to him, ‘I am not asked about what I do, but they are asked’ (cf. Q 21:23), and Moses stopped.”⁷²

71 Ibn al-Wazīr, *ʿAwāṣim* vi, 357–63. Near the beginning of *ʿAwāṣim* i, 212, Ibn al-Wazīr briefly explains that God has a wise purpose in not clarifying eschatological matters, which is to preserve the element of testing in the affairs of this world.

72 Idem, *Īthār al-ḥaqq* 99–100. The hadith is found in Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt* 169 (*b. mā jā'a 'an al-salaf raḍiya Allāh 'anhum fī ithbāt al-mashī'a*).

5 Conclusion

In the controversy over Ibn Taymiyya's arguments for universal salvation, Ibn al-Wazīr exchanges the theological speculation of *kalām* and of Ibn Taymiyya for an ecumenism grounded in ambiguity. Ibn al-Wazīr withholds judgment on the duration of punishment for unbelievers in hell-fire and, breaking with the consensus alleged by al-Subkī, includes within the realm of acceptable belief both the limited chastisement view of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and the eternal chastisement doctrine of Zaydi Mu'tazilism and the Sunni mainstream. Ibn al-Wazīr takes this tolerance of diverse belief to be God's intention and justifies it with the contradictory witness of the Qur'an: while the general testimony of the Qur'an is to everlasting chastisement of unbelievers, a few exceptions open the door to the opposite view by making the duration of chastisement conditional upon the duration of the heavens and the earth, as well as upon God's will. Moreover, and following on from his agnosticism regarding the duration of hell-fire, Ibn al-Wazīr withholds judgment as to God's ultimate wise purpose in chastising unbelievers. As this is "the mother of ambiguous matters," it cannot be known whether the purpose of hell-fire is to reform unbelievers for paradise as in Ibn Taymiyya's theology or to mete out eternal retribution for the unforgiveable sin of associating partners with God.

The origins of Ibn al-Wazīr's agnosticism on the duration and purpose of hell-fire probably lie in the need to find a *modus vivendi* between the competing Yemeni Muslim confessional communities that his life and thought bridged. Born into the Zaydi community of the Yemeni highlands and educated in its Mu'tazili theology, Ibn al-Wazīr switched to Sunni theological doctrines and the authority of the canonical Sunni hadith collections early in life. He travelled to the Yemeni lowlands and Mecca to learn from various Sunni masters before spending his later years living within his Zaydi community teaching and writing. Ibn al-Wazīr developed a conciliatory approach to theology so as not to unduly antagonize the Zaydis among whom he lived, and, according to his own testimony, he engaged in a measure of dissimulation to protect himself from opponents. Perhaps Ibn al-Wazīr could have joined a Sunni school of law and found adequate security within its embrace to adopt a more dogmatic stance. However, it appears that his independence of mind and Zaydi communal loyalty prevented him from affiliation with a single Sunni law school. As he was unwilling to take the steps required to integrate fully into the Sunnis' structures of religious authority, he probably needed to tread lightly within their scholarly circles as well.

Appendix

*Translation of the Verses from Ibn al-Wazīr's Ijāda Found in His Īthār al-ḥaqq*⁷³

1. Those endowed with intelligence become confused: what does [God] will for the disobedient among the jinn and the sons of Adam?
2. Does God will good for creatures initially, or does the wisest Judge intend evil?
3. If good, is it conceivable that it elude a Master who knows in the Unseen what He wills?
4. If evil, does [God] will it for its own sake? Or does [God] intend good in it along with [its] necessary concomitants?
5. Does the prior intention of good in evil require that that intention be congruent with the value of the outcomes?⁷⁴
6. When mention of [spending] eternity in His Fire overrides His generosity in His Reminder [the Qur'an] and the decisive [texts],
7. the matter of eternity in the Fire becomes grave for everyone who ponders the names of the Lord of the Worlds.
8. For He is not vanquished, and He is not ignorant, definitely not aimless, and nothing but merciful.⁷⁵
9. Everyone who investigates seriously will submit to what the Lord of the Worlds says in the Reminder,

73 I am grateful to Geert Jan van Gelder and Jamal Mohammed Robain for their kind assistance in reading this poem. The translation was made from the Arabic of Ibn al-Wazīr, *Īthār al-ḥaqq*, 216–9.

74 In verse 1 Ibn al-Wazīr begins the poem by raising the issue of what God wills for those who disobey. The more specific question of eternal punishment for unbelievers arises later in verse 6. The intervening verses 2–5 inquire more generally into the relation between evil and God's will. If God only wills the good, then why does some evil occur? Surely it cannot be that God lacks sufficient power to effect His will to create the good (verse 3). So, if God wills evil directly, then does God will it for its own sake or for some greater good?

75 Verses 6–8 draw attention to the tension between God's justice and God's mercy. The Qur'an is filled with threats of eternal punishment to such an extent that they appear to override its message of God's generosity and mercy. Yet, Ibn al-Wazīr affirms, God's mercy is God's dominant attribute, and God will not be defeated in his purposes. However, it is not yet clear how Ibn al-Wazīr thinks this tension can be eased.

10. no matter whether He decreed eternity in the Fire or that the chastisement (*‘adhāb*) of the wretched is not perpetual.⁷⁶
11. When the exception to eternal chastisement appears openly in His Book,⁷⁷ the edge is taken off the gravity [of the matter].
12. The range of what can be said about that widens again, for the matter had become as tight as signet rings.
13. The doubts of the heretics are driven back, repelled, and the vast knowledge of the most honorable people of knowledge is broadened.⁷⁸
14. One view holds to the eternity [of chastisement] because the threats of that are abundant in the overwhelming [number of] revealed texts.⁷⁹
15. Another view gives precedence to the specific (*khuṣūṣ*),⁸⁰ and the names of the wisest Judge help him [in that].⁸¹

76 Verses 9–10 invoke the unassailable authority of the Qur’an. For Ibn al-Wazīr, whatever view one takes on the duration of chastisement, the Qur’an is the ultimate standard for belief.

77 The exception appears in those Quranic passages subjecting the duration of hell-fire to God’s will and the duration of the heavens and the earth (Q 6:128, 11:106–7).

78 Whereas verses 6–10 heighten the tension in the Quranic testimony between God’s mercy and God’s punishment of unbelievers forever, verses 11–13 ease that tension by alluding to the Qur’an’s subjection of the duration of chastisement to God’s will. This means that a dilemma that had become so grave in Ibn al-Wazīr’s eyes as to compare with the tightness of signet rings now appears much less severe. This gives the benefit of the doubt to the honorable scholars of religion over against the heretics who now have no reason to highlight apparent contradiction in God’s ways to justify their skepticism. This sets the stage for Ibn al-Wazīr in verses 14–16 to present the doctrinal views on the duration of chastisement that he judges to lie within the realm of Muslim belief.

79 The first Muslim view, according to Ibn al-Wazīr, maintains that the Qur’an’s testimony to eternal punishment of unbelievers is overwhelmingly preponderant. This corresponds to the dominant Sunni view, as well as to that of the Mu‘tazilites and the Zaydi Shi‘is. However, while not indicated in the poem, Ibn al-Wazīr maintains that Mu‘tazilites and Zaydi Shi‘is err by consigning not only unbelievers but also unrepentant Muslim grave sinners to eternal chastisement (on this see al-Ḥarbī, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 266–9). The dominant Sunni doctrine that Muslim grave sinners will eventually be saved is implied in the third view given in verse 16.

80 Reading *al-khuṣūṣ* instead of *al-khuṣūm* (opponents).

81 Ibn al-Wazīr identifies this view in verse 29 below as that of Ibn Taymiyya. Here in verse 15, Ibn al-Wazīr explains that Ibn Taymiyya gives the specific exceptions in Q 6:128 and Q 11:106–7 precedence over the general Quranic affirmations of eternity in hell. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya supports this judgment with the names of God, especially All-Wise and All-Merciful, which would seem to preclude consigning anyone to hell-fire forever.

16. The third view, the prevailing one (*al-manṣūr*), [maintains that] there is hope for the Muslim, but whoever resists Islam is not safe.⁸²
17. One view, which is confused, censures someone who delves into that [matter]. Another withholds judgment and is not censuring.
18. Yet another delves into it while charging his opponent with unbelief for something similar to what he [himself] does; he is not safe.
19. There is no unbelief in any of the views after decisive proofs in the revelation of the most knowledgeable Knower contradict.
20. [The wise scholar] fears charging another with unbelief and bearing the burden of it or of committing sins.⁸³
21. If God had not willed to widen His ruling, He would not have specified it in His Reminder openly.⁸⁴
22. Concerning the Garden, He made an exception and followed it with what indicates the eternity of the perpetual gardens⁸⁵
23. in accord with the fact that the ascription of generosity to God is perpetual and definitely makes the perpetuity of [God's] noble deeds follow necessarily.
24. How could sovereignty, generosity and laudation persist, while the good is cut off in the words of One Who Knows?!⁸⁶

82 The third view presented by Ibn al-Wazīr is an allusion to the mainstream Sunni doctrine that sinful Muslims may suffer punishment in the Fire for a period of time before entering paradise while those outside Islam face eternal chastisement.

83 In verses 17–20 Ibn al-Wazīr makes room for all three of the preceding views within the fold of Islam. According to Ibn al-Wazīr, it is unenlightened confusion to censure someone who delves into the duration of chastisement (verse 17), and it is dangerous to censure as unbelief any one of the three views at the expense of the others because the Quranic testimony is subject to contradictory interpretations.

84 Ibn al-Wazīr argues that God must have had a reason for specifying or making an exception to the general Qur'an testimony to eternal chastisement of unbelievers. Had God not wished to soften this testimony, he would not have introduced exceptions.

85 In verse 22 Ibn al-Wazīr turns to the eternity of the paradisiacal Garden and alludes to the Quranic verse, "As for those who are made happy, they will be in the Garden, abiding therein, as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord wills, a gift never cut off" (Q 11:108). The phrase "a gift never cut off" that comes after the exceptions "as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord wills," confirms that the Garden is most certainly eternal. The same exceptions occur in the preceding verse (Q 11:107), but without a comparable confirmation of the Fire's eternity. Thus, while the eternity of the Garden is assured, the eternity of the Fire is not.

86 Verses 23–4 affirm that the Garden must be perpetual to accord with God's generosity.

25. And there are authentic hadith reports that agree with rational minds concerning the exception of the Lord, the most Merciful.⁸⁷
26. When [the exception] appears after the reward, it is to increase the reward of the most honorable people out of generosity.⁸⁸
27. When it appears after the threat [of chastisement], it is to pardon and forgive the punishment of crimes,⁸⁹
28. and agreeing with it is mention of an increase and a superabundance in the Reminder in the decisive texts.
29. Ibn Taymiyya went on at length about the second view. Take interest in his learning in his writing and the biographical works.
30. He supports [his view] on the authority of six of the greatest of the most honorable Companions of the Prophet whose words he quotes.
31. Do not consider a scholar [i.e., Ibn Taymiyya] an unbeliever even if what [the six Companions] say is not authentic and comes to light as weak and disreputable.
32. This is nothing but thinking well [of Ibn Taymiyya]. If, after all, it is necessary [to call him an unbeliever], the All-Merciful will not reduce the hope of mercies.⁹⁰

87 Ibn al-Wazīr is presumably referring to hadith reports such as “My mercy overcomes my anger” (Muslim) and “My mercy precedes my anger” (Bukhārī) that lend support to the notion that God’s mercy will bring an end to chastisement.

88 Ibn al-Wazīr’s sense is apparently this: Q 11:108 first indicates that those who are happy “will be in the Garden, abiding therein;” then, the text qualifies this reward with the exception, “as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord wills” to respectfully submit everything to God’s will before coming back to affirm all the more so that the reward will last forever; it will be “a gift never cut off.”

89 Ibn al-Wazīr affirms that when the exceptions “as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord wills” appear in Q 11:107, God’s purpose is to forgive and pardon. The next verse, verse 28, underlines the Quranic witness to God’s will to forgive.

90 Verses 29–32 treat Ibn Taymiyya’s view, the second view on the duration of chastisement cited previously in verse 15. Ibn al-Wazīr first underscores the value of Ibn Taymiyya’s scholarship in verse 29 and then in verse 30 states that Ibn Taymiyya supports his view from six Companions of the Prophet. Four of these are easily identified. In *Fanā’ al-nār*, Ibn Taymiyya ascribes the doctrine of finite chastisement of unbelievers directly to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, Ibn Mas‘ūd, Abū Hurayra, and Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī, and he quotes the report from ‘Umar, “Even if the People of the Fire stayed in the Fire like the amount of sand of ‘Alīj, they would have, despite that, a day in which they would come out” (p. 53). The fifth and sixth Companions are presumably Ibn ‘Abbās and ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ. Ibn Taymiyya cites a number of reports from Ibn ‘Abbās lending support to the limited duration of the Fire (pp. 57–62), and he quotes the following from ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Amr, “A day is indeed coming to hell when its doors will slam shut, and no one will be in it” (p. 69). It is doubtful that Ibn al-Wazīr read Ibn Taymiyya’s *Fanā’ al-nār* directly, but Ibn al-Qayyim quotes the relevant parts of the treatise in *Hādī al-arwāḥ*, to which Ibn al-Wazīr

33. The words of the Friend of God, and then the Son of Mary, are proof of the invalidity of the censure of those who censure.⁹¹
34. The majority of humankind would almost have disbelieved by mistake because of that had it not been for the grace of the most Merciful.⁹²
35. One view [the Ash'arī] intends to render Him incomparable, wishing to safeguard for Him the weightiness of the gravity of the Omnipotent, the Real.
36. A [second] view [the Mu'tazilī] intends to magnify His greatness, wishing to safeguard for Him praises of One praised as the wisest Judge.⁹³
37. All those who know uphold both [God's omnipotence and God's wisdom], and this is the straight path for someone steadfast.
38. This is a point that a rational person does not throw into jeopardy. The worlds were created for it,
39. to disclose the causes of the creation of the seven [heavens]. All seven [were brought into existence] through the determination of His two qualifications All-Powerful and All-Knowing.⁹⁴

had access. In verses 31–2 of the poem, Ibn al-Wazīr allows that the Companion reports cited by Ibn Taymiyya may not be reliable but still urges the utmost respect for him.

91. Ibn al-Wazīr here invokes Abraham, the Friend of God, and Jesus, the Son of Mary, to support his call for leniency toward Ibn Taymiyya, but it is not apparent what words or deeds of Abraham and Jesus are referred to. The mention of Jesus may be an allusion to Jesus' defense of his mother Mary against her people's charge of unchastity against her (Q 19:27–33). Al-Ḥarbi, *Ibn al-Wazīr* 481, takes the reference to Abraham to be an allusion to his supplication for himself and his posterity that they not worship idols (Q 14:35–6) and the mention of Jesus to refer to his submission to God in stating, "If You punish them, they are your servants; if you forgive them, you are truly all-mighty and all-wise" (Q 5:118).
92. The reference is perhaps to the question of eternal chastisement and the moral difficulties it raises: had it not been for the mercy of God in introducing the exceptions to everlasting chastisement in Q 6:128 and Q 11:107, many people would have disbelieved.
93. Verse 35 marks a shift of topic that may indicate some verses of the *fjāda* are missing. As it is, the poem swings from discussing the duration of chastisement for unbelievers and the tension between God's justice and God's mercy to the theological challenge of holding God's power and God's wisdom and justice in proper balance. In verses 35 and 36 Ibn al-Wazīr mentions the Ash'arī and Mu'tazilī stances, respectively, on God's power, justice and wise purpose. The Ash'arī *kalām* theologians underline God's power at the seeming expense of God's justice and wisdom, while the Mu'tazilites exalt these latter qualities at the seeming expense of God's omnipotence. Ibn al-Wazīr comes back to treat the two groups of *kalām* theologians in more detail in verses 42–8.
94. Over against the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites, Ibn al-Wazīr maintains in verses 37–9 that God's power and wisdom must both be upheld without sacrificing one to the other. This is in fact the point or purpose that the worlds were created to reveal, that is, God created them to reveal his omnipotence, wisdom and knowledge in proper balance.

40. Indeed, a point at which [God's] Addressee [Moses] became confused and was unable to be patient with the Best of the Worlds [Khidr]
41. is worthy of great study and wariness of error on the part of every scholar when deciding [the matter].⁹⁵
42. Do you not see what the two parties' *kalām* theology leads to when they are out of their depth?
43. [The Ash'arites] deny the wise purpose of the All-Merciful in justice and recompense, and [the Mu'tazilites deny] His power to guide the basest unjust person.
44. The one party weakens the might of the most Powerful, and the other party weakens the holiness of the wisest Judge.⁹⁶
45. This is their excuse concerning these views [of their opponents]; that they are an abomination in the view of the majority of the most honorable people.
46. [It is] as if they longed to help those endowed with intelligence and put souls blind with passion for the Unseen at ease.
47. So, they could not find an escape from one of the three calamities in the [religious] sciences except through reinterpretation (*ta'awwul*)
48. of the wise purpose of the Lord in creation, or His capacity to be gracious, or the consignment of evildoers to eternity [in the Fire].⁹⁷

95 In verses 40–1 Ibn al-Wazīr calls on scholars to exercise great care in the question of God's power and wisdom in order to avoid error. For this is a matter that even God's Addressee (*kalīm*) Moses failed to understand adequately, and it caused him to be impatient with Khidr, his guide through the three ordeals related in Q 18:60–82. The implication is that the Ash'arī and Mu'tazilī *kalām* theologians discussed in the following verses also fail to give the matter sufficient care.

96 In verses 42–4 Ibn al-Wazīr identifies the errors of the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites regarding God's power and wisdom. Verse 42 charges both groups of *kalām* theologians with going to extremes, of following their method beyond what it can know. Verse 43 censures the Ash'arites for denying that God has wise purposes in the justice and recompense that he metes out and the Mu'tazilites for denying God's power to guide the unjust and disobedient. In Mu'tazilī theology and the Zaydi theology influenced by it, humans create their own acts free of God's direct intervention. Ibn al-Wazīr interprets this to mean that God can never intervene in human choices to set a sinner back on the right way, which inappropriately limits the reach of God's power. Verse 44 restates the errors of the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites identified in verse 43.

97 In verses 45–8 Ibn al-Wazīr examines the reasoning behind the Ash'arī and Mu'tazilī views on God's power and wisdom. According to verses 45–6, the two groups of *kalām* theologians justify their views as avoiding what violates the religious and moral sensibilities of the majority; additionally, they are apparently trying to put minds troubled by the conundrum of God's power and wisdom to rest. According to verses 47–8, the *kalām* theologians engage in reinterpretation (*ta'awwul*, i.e., *ta'wīl*) of God's qualities in order to evade what they perceive to be one of three religious "calamities." It is implied first that

49. Better than this is withholding judgment in [the matter] because we all are definite about the goodness of the judgment of the best Judge.
50. That suffices, seeing that the safety of the judicious⁹⁸ in the face of fear [of error] is better than the correctness of the [overly] decisive.⁹⁹
51. Laud and do not exclude anything from laudation, and leave innovations be like the muddles of a dreamer.
52. Fear neither impotence nor ignorance of wise purpose, neither the exasperation of the oppressed nor the tyranny of the oppressor,
53. and [think] not that He in His beneficence is not powerful and mighty, and not that He in His might is not merciful.
54. and not that He in His judgment is not just, wise and knowing what creatures do not know.¹⁰⁰

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the Ash‘arites reinterpret God’s wise purpose to avoid excessive focus on God’s wisdom and justice at the expense of his power. Second, the Mu‘tazilites reinterpret God’s “capacity to be gracious” to evade overemphasizing God’s power at the expense of his wisdom. Third, Ibn Taymiyya reinterprets the eternal punishment of evildoers in the Fire to avoid impugning God’s mercy. Ibn Taymiyya is here reintroduced alongside the *kalām* theologians as holding a position resulting from reinterpretation.

- 98 Reading *ḥāzīm* instead of *jāzīm*.
- 99 In view of the errors introduced by the reinterpretive efforts of the Kalam theologians and Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Wazīr counsels in verses 49–50 a reverent agnosticism, a withholding of judgment (*waqf*), concerning the question of God’s power and wise purpose. It suffices to affirm God’s goodness and say no more. It is in fact better, Ibn al-Wazīr affirms, to exercise caution than to be rashly and compulsively decisive and per chance get something correct.
- 100 In verses 51–4 Ibn al-Wazīr ends the portion of his *Jāda* quoted in *Īthār al-ḥaqq* with the exhortation to praise God and not to worry that God might be in any way deficient in power, wisdom, justice, mercy and knowledge.

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PART 4

Varieties of Hell in Islamic Traditions



Isma‘ili-Shi‘i Visions of Hell

From the “Spiritual” Torment of the Fāṭimids to the Ṭayyibī Rock of Sijjīn

Daniel De Smet

“Locating hell” in medieval Isma‘ili-Shi‘i thought is not an easy task. Far from holding a unified and homogeneous interpretation of Islam, Isma‘ilism has a wide range of conflicting movements and ideas. But even among authors belonging to the same religious and intellectual tradition, conceptions about paradise and hell are not always uniform. In the first part of this article, I shall try to address the idea of hell in Qarmatian and Fāṭimid Isma‘ilism (fourth-fifth/tenth-eleventh centuries, mainly in Persia and Egypt); the second part is devoted to the “hell of Sijjīn” in Ṭayyibī Isma‘ilism (which appeared in Yemen from the sixth/twelfth century onwards).¹

Our investigation is seriously hampered by the “esoteric writing”² Isma‘ili authors adopted when dealing with matters related to eschatology. It is important to bear in mind that Isma‘ili conceptions concerning the Resurrection and the Afterlife are quite different from the beliefs currently held by Sunnis, Zaydīs and Twelver Shi‘is. Hence, such “dissenting” views on paradise and hell have been one of the main targets of anti-Isma‘ili polemics, as they were often used as a decisive argument for designating Isma‘ilism as *kufṛ* (“unbelief”) and its adherents as *mulḥidūn* (“apostates”) or *zanādiqa* (“Manichaeans, dualists, heretics of all kinds”).

To give only one example, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), after repeating again and again in his *Kitāb Fadā’ih al-bāṭiniyya* that in matters of eschatology the Isma‘ilis follow the doctrines of the philosophers (*falāsifa*), concludes with a *fatwā* (“legal opinion”) in which he settles a question that was much debated at the time, given the long-running conflict between the Saljūqs and the Nizārīs:³ are the Isma‘ilis guilty of unbelief and is the shedding of their blood legitimate? According to al-Ghazālī, those who maintain that the pleasures of

¹ For a brief survey of the doctrinal history of Isma‘ilism, see De Smet, *Philosophie ismaélienne* 15–22.

² I use this expression (“écriture ésotérique”) in the sense described by Strauss, *Persécution* 51–69.

³ Mitha, *al-Ghazālī* 1–27.

paradise and the torments of hell are purely spiritual and not corporal, and who base their doctrine on a *ta'wīl* (“allegorical interpretation”) of the Quranic verses related to the Garden and Hellfire, claiming that these are only images meant for common people, are treating God as a liar. Charging God and his Prophet with lying (*takdhīb*) is an act of manifest unbelief (*kufr šariḥ*), and in the period of the Companions, al-Ghazālī adds, someone professing such blasphemous views would have been slain.⁴

Given the gravity of these accusations, one can easily understand why Isma'ili authors treated the thorny question of eschatology with caution, avoiding expounding their position in a clear and systematic way, preferring instead to scatter their teachings about “reward and punishment” (*al-thawāb wa-l-'iqāb*) throughout their works, including them in different contexts⁵ and shrouding them in deliberately obscure and often ambiguous language. When we add to this the numerous problems related to the transmission of Isma'ili manuscripts and the poor quality, if not outright unreliability, of many modern editions of Isma'ili texts, it becomes clear that it is not easy to make sense of the sources we are about to study.

Nevertheless, some general principles forming the background of all Isma'ili speculations about punishment and hell can be highlighted. Most authors belonging to different trends and periods of Isma'ilism would probably adhere to these, although with some important nuances. In order to facilitate the understanding of what follows, it will be useful first to briefly underline these principles.

1. Since the opening of the present “cycle of occultation” (*dawr al-satr*) by Adam (or Noah according to another opinion),⁶ a first level of hell is located in this world (*al-dunyā*). Hellfire indeed refers to the revelations and the laws imposed by the six “Speaking-Prophets” (*nuṭaqā'*, i.e., Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad), as long as these revelations and laws are only taken in their outward meaning (*zāhir*), thus depriving them of their hidden and real sense (*bāṭin*) which each prophet entrusted to the Imams of his cycle. The satans and devils are the antagonists (*aḍḍād*) and enemies of the prophets (in the cycle of Muḥammad: the first three caliphs, the wives and companions of the Prophet hostile to 'Alī, the Umayyads, and the Abbasids), but also the *fuqahā'* (jurists), the philosophers, and the theologians among the *ahl al-zāhir* (exotericists, i.e., the mainstream of Sunni Islam). The *muslim* who

4 Ghazālī, *Fadā'iḥ* 151–4. Cf. McCarthy, *Freedom* 267.

5 The “dispersion of knowledge” (*tabdīd al-'ilm*) is one of the methods of “esoteric writing” often followed by Shi'i authors. See Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète* 97–8, n. 36.

6 De Smet, Adam 187–202.

accomplishes the prescriptions of the sharia without understanding their inner significance suffers the torments of hell during his earthly life, whereas the *mu'min* (believer) who is aware of their *bāṭin* aspect already enjoys the pleasures of paradise.

2. Punishment, hell, suffering and damnation are always linked to ignorance and lack of knowledge due to the rejection of the *bāṭin* that is expounded in the teaching (*ta'līm*) of the imams. On the other hand, reward, paradise, pleasure and salvation result from the acquisition and acceptance of this teaching.

3. “Rebirth” (*ba'ṭh*) is distinct from “Resurrection” (*qiyāma*). As long as the present “cycle of occultation” lasts, human souls cannot subsist without a material substrate. After the death of its body, each soul is reborn in a new body, the nature of which Isma'ili authors held conflicting opinions about, ranging from rebirth in another human body or even in that of an animal (raising the delicate issue of metempsychosis, highly controversial even in Isma'ili circles)⁷ to a rebirth in the *barzakh* or one of the celestial spheres. In any case, this new corporal “envelope” (*qālab*) is for the soul a kind of prefiguring of paradise or hell, according to the degree of salvation or damnation acquired during its previous life on earth.

4. The “Great Resurrection” (*al-qiyāma al-kubrā*) is operated by the “Resurrector” (*Qā'im*), the “Lord of the seventh cycle” (*ṣāhib al-dawr al-sābi'*). He will open a new “cycle of manifestation” (*dawr al-kashf*) by closing the cycle of Muḥammad and abrogating the *ẓāhir* of his sharia. As he reveals the *bāṭin* of all the previous revelations in its totality, the *Qā'im* provides the soul with the knowledge it needs in order to reach its “second perfection” (*al-kamāl al-thānī*)—which means the entire actualization of its rational faculty, the intellect—and, ultimately, to be liberated from its entanglement in matter. Hence, *qiyāma* is a purely spiritual event which precludes the resurrection of the body. The afterlife concerns only the souls, not their bodies. Paradise is then located in the intelligible world: the abode of the saved souls is the Throne (*'arsh*) of God and its Pedestal (*kursī*), identified respectively with the Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul, and the Closest Angels (*al-malā'ika al-muqarrabūn*), which refer to the remaining cosmic entities (*ḥudūd*) composing the intelligible world. As to the location of hell after the Great Resurrection, this issue is shrouded in obscurity. Even the souls of the wicked are resurrected without their body and hellfire refers to a purely spiritual punishment: all authors seem to agree on these matters. But does this mean that hell is also located in the intelligible world? Or is there a place of punishment elsewhere in the universe; for instance, somewhere in the celestial

7 De Smet, Transmigration 77–110.

spheres, or even here on earth? Qarmatian and Fāṭimid authors do not address this question directly and explicitly, and they also avoid the related topic of the “end of the world”: does the advent of the Great Resurrection suppose that the “heavens and the earth” will cease to exist, or is the world eternal? Later Ṭayyibī doctrine would develop a theory about the “hell of Sijjīn”, and integrate it into the structure of its complex cosmic system. But here again, many ambiguities remain.

1 The Kitāb al-Shajara Attributed to Abū Tammām (Fourth/Tenth Century)

As a great part of Qarmatian⁸ literature from the fourth/tenth century has been lost, the “Book of the Tree” (*Kitāb al-Shajara*) is of the greatest importance for our present investigation. However, the transmission of the text, its dating, and the identification of its author raise many problems, amplified by the mystifications of its modern editor.

The book was first published by ‘Arif Tāmīr in 1965 with the title *Kitāb al-Īḍāḥ* and attributed to Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Firās al-Maynaqī (d. 937/1530 or 947/1540), a Syrian Nizārī *dā‘ī*. A close examination of the text shows that the first part is missing and that its contents have nothing to do with tenth/sixteenth century Syrian Nizāritism, reflecting instead a much older strand of Isma‘īli doctrine. Without referring to his previous edition, ‘Arif Tāmīr published an almost identical text in 1982, but this time with the title *Kitāb Shajarat al-yaqīn* and under the name of ‘Abdān (d. ca. 286/899), one of the founders of the Qarmatian movement! Although the book clearly belongs to the Qarmatian tradition, its attribution to ‘Abdān seems improbable, as the author extensively quotes the now lost *Kitāb al-Maḥṣūl* of Muḥammad al-Nasafī (d. 332/934). Eventually, Paul Walker discovered the first part of a *Kitāb al-Shajara* attributed to a *dā‘ī* called Abū Tammām in the Hamdani Collection of Isma‘īli manuscripts. As the last folios of this manuscript include the beginning of the text published by Tāmīr, Walker concluded that Tāmīr’s text is the second part of the *Kitāb al-Shajara* by Abū Tammām, obviously a Qarmatian *dā‘ī* and disciple of al-Nasafī, active in Khurāsān during the fourth/tenth century.⁹

8 I use the term “Qarmatian” to designate those Isma‘īlis, mainly belonging to the Eastern *da‘wa*, who remained faithful to the original doctrine by considering Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl as the seventh and last Imam of the cycle of Muḥammad and as the Qā‘im whose advent was expected in the near future. They thus rejected the claims of the Fāṭimids to the imamate.

9 Walker, Abū Tammām 343–52; Madelung and Walker, *Heresiography* VII–VIII, 1–9.

Tāmir seems to have based his two editions upon different manuscripts, as there are variant readings due to scribal errors and interpolations. The text, which apparently was not transmitted by the Indian Bohras¹⁰ but only by Syrian Nizarīs whose libraries remain closed to outsiders, is in a poor condition, with numerous corrupted passages, incongruities and contradictions, omissions, and false readings, probably worsened by Tāmir's unreliable editing of Arabic texts.¹¹ Hence, without access to the manuscripts, it is clear that the contents of the *Kitāb al-Shajara* must be studied with great caution. My analysis of its doctrine about hell and punishment can, therefore, only be tentative.

Throughout his work, the author makes several short statements about paradise and hell which are quite conventional parts of Isma'ili doctrine. As paradise is the "spiritual world" (*al-ʿalam al-rūḥānī*), "entering paradise" means, for the *mustajīb* (the Isma'ili initiate who "responds" to the call of the imam), leaving the sense world and returning to the world of the Intellect.¹² The *zāhir* is the cause of death and punishment ("the *muslim* is the one who dies"), whereas the *bāṭin* leads to resurrection and reward.¹³ "The satans and devils *in potentia*", which are only concerned with the *zāhir*, are bereft of the knowledge proceeding from the Intellect: for them, this lack of knowledge is equivalent to hell.¹⁴

However, one section of the book is exclusively devoted to the question of punishment and hellfire.¹⁵ It contains a very original doctrine about seven hells located in the seven planetary spheres, for which there is to my knowledge no direct parallel in Isma'ili literature.

The author begins by distinguishing three kinds of fire, each situated in a different part of the universe and corresponding to a particular mode of punishment. "Corporal fire" (*al-nār al-jusmāniyya*) refers to the element "fire", which encompasses the three other elements: air, water and earth. As "corporal fire" is one of the four elements of the sublunary world, the hell to which it refers is

10 The Qarmatian and Fāṭimid literature written in Arabic was mainly transmitted by the Ṭayyibi Isma'ili community in Yemen and later in India, where they are known as Bohras.

11 For a similar case, that of *al-Risāla al-Mudhhiba* attributed to al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān; see De Smet, *The Risāla al-Mudhhiba* 309–19.

12 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 40, 42, 138/38, 39, 132. For all quotes from the *Kitāb al-Shajara*, the first pagination refers to the text published by Tāmir under the name of 'Abdān, the second (after the slash) refers to the text he published under the name of Abū Firās al-Maynaqī.

13 *Ibid.*, 50/48.

14 *Ibid.*, 75/74. On the distinction between satans and devils *in potentia* (*bi-l-quwwa*) and in act (*bi-l-fi'l*), one of the main items of the book, see Madelung and Walker, *Heresiography* 19–28.

15 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 125–51/121–45.

located here on earth.¹⁶ Next, there is the “celestial fire” (*al-nār al-jirmāniyya*),¹⁷ generated by the rotation of the seven planetary spheres. As each sphere contains its own hell, there are seven celestial hells in which seven categories of *ahl al-ẓāhir* are punished. Both kinds of fire and the hells they nourish will last for as long as the heavens and the earth exist. After their annihilation (with the advent of the *Qā'im*) only the third kind of fire will remain: the “spiritual fire” (*al-nār al-rūḥāniyya*), in which the souls of the damned will burn forever.¹⁸

Abū Tammām continues by giving a long description of the seven hells located in the planetary spheres. Strangely enough, these hells seem to be intended only for the punishment of “scholars and intellectuals”, and not for ordinary people. Only the *khāṣṣ* (“the elite”) is to be sent to these celestial hells, not the *‘āmm* (“the populace”). According to the author, when the satans and the devils *in potentia* are separated from their corporal envelopes (*qawālib*), they become satans and devils *in actu*. This means that their souls, with their vegetative, sensitive, and rational faculties, are transported to the sphere of the moon, where they are attached to the ether that composes this sphere (probably because, prior to the advent of the *Qā'im*, souls cannot exist without a material substrate). Their ethereal bodies are ignited by the fire generated by the rotation of the moon. Those souls which have acquired a highly imperfect, ugly, and compact form are compelled to stay there, as they are forbidden from proceeding further in their ascension through the spheres. These are the souls of well-known doctors and philosophers of nature who criticized the science of *ta'wīl* and proclaimed instead the eternity of the world, such as the materialists (*dahriyya*). This hell, located in the sphere of the moon, is called *saqar* in the Quran (Q 74: 42–7).¹⁹

The less compact souls enter the sphere of Mercury (*‘utārid*) and burn in the fire generated by its rotation and by that of the moon. The souls of the mathematicians and geometricians (*muhandisūn*) among the *ahl al-ẓāhir* are

16 Ibid., 125/121. This hierarchy of the four elements—earth, water, air, fire—is widespread in Isma‘īli doctrine. See, for instance, al-Sijistānī, *Yanābī‘* 15; al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 229, 275. However, it is not clear to me why the author refers to the element “fire” with the term “ether” (*athīr*), the “fifth element” composing the matter of the heavenly spheres, stars and planets according to Aristotle. The text is probably corrupted, as the celestial spheres are linked to the second kind of fire.

17 In Arabic Neoplatonic texts, *jism* refers usually to bodies in the sublunary world, composed of the four elements, whereas *jirm* is used for the celestial bodies. See, for instance, Rudolph, *Doxographie* 140–1.

18 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 125/121.

19 Ibid., 125–6/121. There follows a long set of speculations about the correspondences between the letters of the words *qamar* (“moon”) and *saqar*.

placed here: their hell, located in the sphere of Mercury, is called *al-hāwīya* (Q 101: 9–1). At the next sphere, that of Venus (*zuharā*), the souls of astronomers and astrologers (*munajjimūn*) are kept: they remain there, in a hell called *jahīm*.²⁰ The “satanic forms” (*al-ṣuwar al-shayṭāniyya*) of the souls of the philosophers (*falāsifa*), in particular those versed in metaphysics (*mā baʿda al-ṭabīʿa*), remain in the sphere of the sun, burned in the fire generated by the rotation of the spheres of Venus and the sun itself. Their hell, located there, is called *lazā* (Q 70: 15–6). The “jurists engaged in trivialities” (*al-fuqahāʾ al-qishriyya*),²¹ i.e., those who only accepted the *zāhir* of the laws revealed by the prophets, are punished in the sphere of Mars (*mirrikkh*), in a hell called *al-ḥuṭama* (Q 104: 4–6). The souls of their colleagues trained in theology (*kalām*) have a “satanic form” that prevents them from proceeding beyond the sphere of Jupiter (*mushtarā*): here, they burn in a hell called *jahannam* (Q 21: 98). Finally, the souls of apostates, those who, after being initiated into the science of *taʿwīl*, subsequently rejected it, are held in the sphere of Saturn (*zuḥal*): their hell is called *al-saʿīr* (Q 67: 5).²²

By making use of the rich variety of Quranic terms related to hell and hell-fire, Abū Tammām is able to speak of seven celestial hells, located in the seven planetary spheres. These are, according to the author, the seven gates of hell mentioned in Q 15: 44. The first six of these hells, as we have seen, are the abode of specific categories of “scientists and scholars” who, although having acquired knowledge and science, refused to accept the teaching of the Imams. The ethereal bodies in which their compact and obscured souls (their “satanic forms”) are imprisoned are ignited by the heat proceeding from the rotation of the spheres. Yet at the same time, they are also tormented by an intense cold (*zamharīr*) caused by the rotation of the sphere of the zodiac that penetrates the planetary spheres with varying degrees of intensity. According to Abū Tammām, the Prophet would have alluded to this fact in the following hadith: “In hell there is an intense cold with which the unbelievers are punished”. Apparently, heat and cold increase from sphere to sphere, starting at

20 Ibid., 126–7/122 (with kabbalistic speculations about the letters forming the names *uṭārid-hāwīya* and *zuharā-jahīm*). Although this last name is Quranic, the author quotes Q 2:39, in which *jahīm* is not mentioned.

21 *Qishriyya* and its synonym *hashwiyya* are derogatory terms used by the Ismaʿilis to designate the *ahl al-zāhir*, in particular the Sunnis.

22 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 127–9/122–4. The correspondence between the name of the sphere and the hell which is located in it, is “proved” once again by kabbalistic speculations about the letters of *shams* (“sun”)–*lazā*, *mirrikkh-ḥuṭama*, *mushtarā-jahannam* and *zuḥal-saʿīr*.

the moon and ending with Saturn. The hell of Saturn is therefore the worst place of punishment, where the gravest category of sinners, the apostates, are tortured.²³

Despite all this, the punishment of the physicians, mathematicians, astronomers, metaphysicians, jurists and theologians in their six celestial hells is only temporary. Although the text is not entirely clear, the author seems to present their torment as a kind of “purgatory”. Burning in the celestial spheres implies a process of purification for these souls. As a result of the gravity of their—intellectual—sins and their capacity to gradually adopt a “spiritual form” (*ṣūra rūḥāniyya*), they will sooner or later be allowed to join the other *muqalladūn* which are in the “rotation” (*dawrān*) of the successive “corporal generations” (*al-mutawallidāt al-jusmāniyya*).²⁴

In Ismaʿili terminology, the *muqalladūn* are the *ahl al-taqīd*, the common people (*al-ʿamm*) who blindly follow (*taqīd*) the outward (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the Quran and the Law without knowing their real, internal (*bāṭin*) sense. If I understand the text correctly, the author states that, as soon as the souls of the “scholars” have undergone their punishment in the celestial hells, they shall return to earth and enter into the cycle of successive reincarnations that is hell for ordinary people. In other words, after their return, they again burn in the first kind of fire, the “corporal fire” of the sublunary world.

As is usual in Ismaʿili works belonging to the Qarmatian and Fāṭimid traditions, Abū Tammām treats the thorny question of the transmigration of the soul in deliberately obscure and veiled terms. His starting point seems to be Q 4:56: “Those who disbelieve Our revelations, We shall expose them to the Fire. As often as their skins are consumed We shall exchange them for fresh skins that they may taste the torment”.²⁵ The author first gives a daring interpretation of this verse, stating that it contains an allusion to the succession of the prophetic cycles: every prophet abrogates the *ẓāhir* of the sharia of his predecessor and imposes the *ẓāhir* of a new sharia. This is the “lower punishment” (*al-ʿadhāb al-adnā*) mentioned in Q 32:21. The *ẓāhir* of the sharia being hell on earth, the “lower punishment” occurs with the succession of the corporal generations along the prophetic cycles.²⁶ The common people (*al-ʿamm*), the

23 Ibid., 130–2/126–32.

24 Ibid., 134–5/129–30.

25 The translation is that of Pickthall.

26 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 134/129. According to Poonawala in the English introduction to Sijistānī, *Maqālid* 28, Abū Muḥammad al-Yamanī, in his *ʿAqā'id al-thalāth wa-l-sabʿina firqa* (written ca. 540/1145–6), attacks Abū Tammām for having declared in his *Shajarat*

ordinary *muqalladūn*, are swept away in the rotation (*dawrān*) of the successive corporal generations. Their souls are

established in the skins of the corporal generations, transported (*tastahīlu*) from one skin to another during the rotation, and they are supported by the shells (*qushūr*) of the physical elements which are transformed from one form into another during transmigration (*jawalān*).²⁷

This clearly suggests metempsychosis and is presented as a second *ta'wīl* of Q 4:56.²⁸ Later on, the verse is again quoted in relation to “the lower punishment by the shells”, which is the lowest level of hell, located here on earth, and clearly distinguished from the second level which are the seven hells located in the planetary spheres.²⁹ As they belong to the “lower punishment” the terrestrial and celestial hells are not eternal. Only for the souls of the apostates in the hell of Saturn is no salvation possible.

With the advent of the *Qā'im*, when the heavens and the earth will be annihilated, punishment in the corporal and celestial fire comes to an end. The Great Resurrection initiates the “spiritual punishment” (*al-'adhāb al-rūhāniyya*), located in the “spiritual fire” of the intelligible world. Strangely enough, this third level of hell, the only one that will last forever, seems to be restricted to the souls of apostates. Upon the destruction of their abode—the sphere of Saturn—they will enter the intelligible world. They are allowed to do so because of the “spiritual form” they acquired at the very moment when they took their oath of allegiance (*'ahd*) before the Imam or his representative.³⁰ This form, which remained in their soul even after they betrayed the *da'wa* and rejected the teaching of the Imam, grants them access to the intelligible world, as the sphere of Saturn which blocked their way no longer exists. However, being unprepared to receive the “influences” (*āthār*) and the “inspiration” (*ta'yīd*) proceeding from the Universal Intellect,³¹ they are unable to receive

al-dīn that the strict observance of the sharia in everyday life is hell for the ordinary Muslim. Cf. Walker, Abū Tammām 346.

27 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 137/131.

28 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 136–7/130–1; cf. *ibid.*, 150–1/144–5. The author (*ibid.*, 137/131) says that he developed this question in more detail in his *Kitāb al-Burhān*. On this lost work, see Walker, Abū Tammām 349–51.

29 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 140–1/134.

30 On the Isma'ili oath of allegiance that every neophyte has to take prior to the beginning of his initiation, see Halm, Oath 91–8.

31 In Isma'ili terminology, *āthār* (pl. of *athar*) and *ta'yīd* refer to the flow proceeding from the Intellect. This continuous emanation maintains all beings in existence; it is also the

its “benefits” and “graces”, which represent the rewards of the blessed. Residing in paradise without being able to participate in its (intellectual) delights is an extreme form of punishment called “spiritual fire” or “spiritual hell”.³²

As to the *ahl al-zāhir* who never converted to Isma‘ilism, Abū Tammām remains silent about their destiny. Probably they will “die”. As their souls never succeeded, in spite of their successive reincarnations, to become plainly actualized by the teaching of the Imam, one might surmise that they will vanish with the disintegration of the sense world.

Upon the death of their bodies the blessed souls of the initiates are transported through the seven planetary spheres. The subtleness of their “spiritual forms” makes them insensible to the heat of the various celestial fires and allows them to pass through the sphere of Saturn and enter the sphere of the zodiac. However, just as it is impossible to acquire knowledge of the *bāṭin* (= paradise) without previous knowledge and experience of the *zāhir* (= hell), even the blessed are unable to proceed directly to the intelligible world, because prior to the advent of the *Qā'im* their souls still need a bodily substrate. In the eighth sphere they receive a temporary punishment for their sins, as the sphere of the zodiac acts as a kind of “purgatory for the elect”. This was what the Prophet meant when he said: “The sinful believer will be punished in the fire, in function of his sins, and then he will leave it”.³³ With the advent of the *Qā'im* they will enter the intelligible world, which is the abode of the Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul.

2 Hell in the Works of Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971)

In the present state of our documentation, the impressive hierarchy of seven celestial hells described by the author of *Kitāb al-Shajara* remains unparalleled in the Isma‘ili literature from that time. Nevertheless, the idea that, after the death of their bodies, human souls rise to the heavenly spheres in order to receive a temporary and provisional reward or punishment before the advent of the *Qā'im* is attested by other Isma‘ili texts. The still unpublished *Kitāb al-Fatarāt* attributed to Ja‘far b. Maṣū‘ al-Yaman (d. c. 346/957), for instance, gives the sun a central role in the temporary reward and chastisement of the souls of the deceased, as it sends the saved souls of the Isma‘ili initiates to the

source of revelation and it provides the knowledge necessary for salvation through the intermediary of the Imams and their representatives.

32 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 135–6, 139/129–31, 133.

33 Ibid., 137–9/131–3 (the hadith is quoted in *ibid.*, 139/133).

spheres of Jupiter and Venus (probably in a kind of “purgatory for the elect” that has nothing to do with the hells of Jupiter and Venus described by Abū Tammām) and the wicked souls of the unbelievers to the spheres of the ominous planets Saturn and Mars.³⁴

As far as I can see, this kind of speculation, which probably served as an alternative to the doctrine of successive transmigrations of the soul from one terrestrial body to another prior to the advent of the Great Resurrection, does not occur in the writings of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī. This celebrated Iranian *dā'ī*, who first served the Qarmatian *da'wa* before recognizing the claims of the Fāṭimids to the imamate,³⁵ explicitly rejected the traditional Islamic doctrine about the Resurrection and the afterlife in paradise or hell. But his own views on eschatology, in particular the destiny of the souls of the damned, remain shrouded in obscurity.³⁶

Like the author of *Kitāb al-Shajara*, al-Sijistānī locates hell, or at least a first level of it, in the sublunary world. The torments of hellfire, as they are described symbolically in the Quran, in fact refer to the sufferings of ordinary Muslims, condemned to comply with a religion, that is, Islam, and a Law, that is, sharia, the real meaning of which is ignored. In the 28th “wellspring” of his *Kitāb al-Yanābī'* (“The Book of Wellsprings”), al-Sijistānī claims that paradise and its pleasures refer to the state of felicity provided by the instruction of the Imam, whereas hell means the *ẓāhir* of the sharia without its *bāṭin*. Just like the element “fire” (*nār*), the sharia is both beneficial and harmful. The believer is not able to acquire the virtues necessary for his salvation without adhering to the principles of religious law, but the practice of the sharia without knowledge of its inner sense is a deadly poison which ineluctably leads to perdition. Al-Sijistānī is perfectly clear on this issue:

Fire is employed for the improvement of life and for the cooking of raw things even though it corrupts natural forms and makes them unknowable so that the form of what has a form cannot be grasped. In a way similar to this, normative scriptural laws (*al-sharā'i' al-nāmūsiyya*), devoid of [underlying] sciences, are employed for the improvement of the natural world and for the maintenance of people in it, despite [the danger] that being warmed by them and using them corrupts the sublime form and causes doubt and ambiguity to occur. But when that form appears in its

34 Orthmann, *Astrologie* 354.

35 On the works and thought of al-Sijistānī, see De Smet, *Religiöse Anwendung* 519, 527–9.

36 As remarked by Walker, *Early Philosophical Shi'ism* 134–42, especially 142; Poonawala, English introduction to Sijistānī, *Iftikhār* xxiv–vi.

true identity, it beholds the laws inflicting such grievous pain to the souls [still] attached to them [...]. An example here would be a deadly poison that nature has produced in order to ameliorate the condition of people on certain occasions that call for it. If someone were to prolong its use, his life would be vitiated and he would be cut off from the pleasures of this sensual world.³⁷

In other words, the Ismaʿili initiates, by gradually acquiring the esoteric knowledge taught by the Imam and his representatives, enjoy an intellectual pleasure during their earthly life which is a foretaste of their state of felicity in paradise. The pious “exotericist” Muslim, on the other hand, although the prescriptions of the sharia turn him away from earthly pleasures, is at the same time bereft of any form of intellectual enjoyment, so that his daily life is a hell that foreshadows his future sojourn in hell.

What happens to the elect and the souls of the damned after the death of their bodies is not clear in al-Sijistānī’s thought. As with many other Ismaʿili authors, he introduces a distinction between “rebirth” (*baʿth* or *bar-angikhtan* in Persian) and “resurrection” (*qiyāma*), linking them with the “two blows of the trumpet” mentioned in Q 39:68. Prior to the advent of the *Qāʾim* (the “Lord of the seventh cycle” who will operate the Great Resurrection, “the second blow”), souls cannot exist without a corporal substrate. Hence, they must continuously be reborn into new bodies whose perfection is in accordance with the degree of purification attained by them during their previous lives. Although al-Sijistānī explicitly rejects reincarnation into animals as a form of punishment—a doctrine he attributes to the “extremists” (*ghulāt*)³⁸—it seems to me that his conception of *baʿth* (“the first blow”) implies a form of transmigration, and that for impure souls the long cycle of successive reincarnations represents a form of corporal hell (“the lower punishment”, *al-ʿadhāb al-adnā*) in a foreshadowing of the “greater punishment”, the “real hell”, that will be purely spiritual.³⁹ In other words, hell is corporal before *qiyāma* and spiritual after *qiyāma*.

37 Sijistānī, *Yanābīʿ* 68 (§ 133). The translation is that of Walker, *Wellsprings* 90.

38 Sijistānī, *Maqālīd* 200–4; idem, *Kashf* 59–60, French trans. Corbin, *Dévoilement* 93–4, English trans. Landolt, *Unveiling* 109–10.

39 On the distinction between *baʿth* and *qiyāma*, see Sijistānī, *Kashf* 81–94, Corbin, *Dévoilement* 114–28, and Landolt, *Unveiling* 118–27. See also Sijistānī, *Iftikhār* 181–205; *Bāhira* 40–9. For a detailed analysis of these texts, see De Smet, *Transmigration* 82–86, 95–103.

This seems to be confirmed by al-Sijistānī's *al-Risāla al-bāhira*, which is in large part a refutation of traditional Muslim views on eschatology. Raising the question of the soul's fate before the advent of the *Qā'im*, the author warns the reader that this matter is "very difficult, as it is only accessible to those who possess a pure soul prepared to conceive spiritual and luminous things". Only the initiates mastering the "knowledge of the *barzakhs*" (*ma'rifat al-barāzikh*) are able to understand this matter.⁴⁰ Traditional Muslim eschatology usually interprets the Quranic term *barzakh* ("barrier") as referring to the place where the souls of the deceased remain while awaiting the Day of Resurrection, and where they receive a foretaste of their future destiny in paradise or hell.⁴¹ Al-Sijistānī, however, uses the term in the plural form and applies it to the bodies into which the souls transmigrate prior to the *Qiyāma*. The corrupted souls, spoiled by the vices of the physical world, are reborn in bodies prepared to receive such ugly forms, by the influence of the celestial spheres at the moment of their generation. This means that they return in bodies naturally predisposed to all kinds of depravation and sin. These corrupted bodies are their *barzakhs* in which they suffer the torments of hell during their successive earthly lives. The purified souls, on the other hand, are reborn in harmonious and noble bodies, predisposed to the acquisition of knowledge and virtues, through which they enjoy the pleasures of paradise.⁴²

While the whole notion of *barzakhs* remains quite obscure, al-Sijistānī is far more explicit when refuting the resurrection of the body during the Great *Qiyāma*. The *ahl al-ẓāhir* who limit themselves to a literal understanding of the Quranic verses referring to *qiyāma* believe that the bodies of the deceased will be reassembled and their souls attached to them, so that they will appear before the Judge with the same bodies they possessed during their earthly lives. After judgment, they will enter paradise or hell while keeping their bodies. According to al-Sijistānī, such a belief is both ridiculous and contrary to reason, as it reflects complete ignorance about the real meaning (*ḥaqīqa*) of *qiyāma*. To the *ahl al-ḥaqā'iq* (i.e., the Isma'ilis) *qiyāma* is a "spiritual, psychic state" (*ḥāl rūḥānī nafsānī*). This means that, with the appearance of the "pure soul" (*nafs zakīyya*) of the *Qā'im*, the "influences" and "benefits" proceeding from the intelligible world will plainly illuminate the souls of the elect, causing their spiritual resurrection.⁴³ Transformed by the "cognitive and

40 Sijistānī, *Bāhira* 46.

41 Guiraud, *Barzakh* 114–8.

42 Sijistānī, *Bāhira* 40, 46–7. Cf. Madelung, Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, 138–9; De Smet, *Transmigration* 101–103.

43 Sijistānī, *Iftikhār* 182–4, 194.

intellectual emanations" (*al-idāfāt al-'ilmīyya al-'aqliyya*) which are to descend from the Universal Intellect through the intermediary of the "pure soul" of the Resurrector, they will abandon forever their bodily vehicle and ascend to the intelligible world, meaning paradise. The impure and darkened souls, however, will not gain any advantage from these emanations and illuminations, remaining in profound obscurity, which is hell for them.⁴⁴

In his *Kitāb al-Iftikhār*, al-Sijistānī describes punishment (manifestly after the Resurrection) in the following terms:

Punishment is a distress (*shaqwa*) attached to the souls, which causes the oppression (*dīq*) of their substance, prevents them from obtaining the ranks which are convenient for them and provokes their downfall to the lowest levels, because of their inadvertence and neglect of the luminous world that is theirs, and because of their link with and their blind passion for the material things of this world, which only procure for them vileness and poverty. Thus, they continuously move further away from felicity (*sa'āda*), being more and more confused in their distress. What distress is more obvious than the distress of the ignorant people who remain in this state day and night?⁴⁵

It is clear from this text that, in contrast to Abū Tammām, al-Sijistānī does not locate his ultimate hell in the intelligible world. For him, the meaning of hell is rather privation from knowledge and exclusion from the intelligible world. The doomed remain outside. But where? What is their abode? Al-Sijistānī states only that after the Resurrection, those punished will stay close to the natural world.⁴⁶ Does this then mean that the physical world will continue after the advent of the *Qā'im*? Certainly, in the 13th "Wellspring" of his *Kitāb al-Yanābī*, he explicitly advocates the eternity of creation and hence of all levels of reality. As the act of creation (*ibdā'*) through which God, who is beyond Being, produced the first being (the Intellect) was absolutely perfect, transforming being into non-being—which implies the destruction of creation—would be an act of imperfection, unworthy of God. Hence, Intellect, Soul, Nature, minerals, plants, animals, man, reward, punishment, paradise and hell cannot be annihilated and are therefore eternal.⁴⁷ It is not clear, however, if the hell of the

44 Sijistānī, *Bahira* 45, 48–9.

45 Sijistānī, *Iftikhār* 212.

46 Sijistānī, *Ithbāt* 35.

47 Sijistānī, *Yanābī* 37–8 (§ 66–9); Walker, *Wellsprings* 65–6.

damned is located somewhere in a place close to the physical world, or if their torment consists of a new cycle of successive transmigrations here on earth.⁴⁸

3 Hell in the Works of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020)

Although he was one of the most famous representatives of “moderate” Fāṭimid Isma'īlism, active under the reign of the caliph-Imam al-Ḥākim, al-Kirmānī⁴⁹ openly includes the Quranic descriptions of paradise and hell among the “sense images” which the Prophet⁵⁰ used in order to express a reality that is not perceivable by human senses.

In his main work *Kitāb Rāḥat al-ʿaql*, he states that the knowledge of the real quiddity (*māhiyya*) of reward and punishment is an “obstructed path” (*sabīl munsadd*) only practicable for the “inspired” (*al-muʿayyadūn*). This is because the Prophet, when speaking about realities which are not perceptible to the senses (such as God, the angels, paradise, hell, reward and punishment) was compelled to make use of images and symbols by referring to things which can be sensed. Had he not done so, common people would have been unable to understand his message. Thus, he described hell with images related to fire, pain, boiling water, and instruments of torture only for pedagogical reasons, in order to evoke repugnance and fear of hell.⁵¹

In nearly identical terms, al-Kirmānī defends in his *Kitāb al-Maṣābiḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma* the symbolic nature of the Quranic descriptions of paradise and hell:

48 The anonymous author of the *Jāmiʿat al-jāmiʿa*, attributed to the Brethren of Purity, seems close to agreeing with Abū Tammām and al-Sijistānī when he places hell in the physical world. As in the *Kitāb al-Shajara* (see above), Q 4:56 is quoted as scriptural proof for the doctrine of metempsychosis: after death, the impure souls return to “the abode of abasement, the place of illnesses and pains in the world of generation and corruption”. Their torture will last there “as long as the heavens and the earth exist” (Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ [attr.], *Jāmiʿat* 176). As noted by Baffioni, *Éléments* 108 n. 27, this raises the question of the eternity of hell.

49 On Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, see De Smet, *Quiétude* 3–16; idem, *Religiöse Anwendung* 518–20, 529–31; Walker, *Kirmanī* 1–61.

50 According to common Isma'īli doctrine, the Quran was “created” by the Prophet from a non-verbal “inspiration” (*taʿyīd*) he received from the intelligible world. His task was to translate this inspiration into the language of his people and in accordance with their intellectual level (i.e., Arabic spoken by illiterate Bedouins). See De Smet, *Triade* 319–36.

51 Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 522–3.

There is no way to comprehend what is unseen and not subject to sensation other than by means of an expression for it, that is, something that can be seen and sensed. The Messenger reported about what cannot be seen or sensed, such as God, paradise and its felicity, hell and its torments [...]. Thus, for example, [...] his report about hell and its torments, which are neither seen nor sensed, is by reference to fire and burning and boiling water and burning thirst and iron chains and fetters and all manner of physical pains that are entirely seen and sensed. If that is a necessary consequence, what he said and did and summoned to in regard to the afterlife follows the rule of similitudes in forming likenesses (*al-amthāl fi l-tashbīh*). Similitudes require the things that are represented by them (*al-amthāl taqtaḍi l-mumaththalāt*) and the things that are represented are designated by interpretation (*ta'wīl*). Thus, for what the Messenger brought and summoned [people] to in the revelation and law, there is an interpretation. Hence, the interpretation is necessary.⁵²

As the Quranic descriptions of paradise and hell are purely symbolic, their literal sense (*ẓāhir*) seems absurd and contrary to reason. They have, however, an inner, esoteric meaning (*bāṭin*) which has to be discovered by *ta'wīl* under the guidance of the Imam. How to understand the *bāṭin* of hell in al-Kirmānī's thought is indeed an "obstructed path" for the non-initiate, as it is not easy to interpret the few passages referring to it.

In a certain sense, the issue is complicated by the fact that al-Kirmānī rejects without compromise any idea of the transmigration of the soul, even criticizing al-Sijistānī on this point, albeit in veiled terms.⁵³ Nevertheless, he adopts the latter's distinction between *ba'th* and *qiyāma*, linked to the "two blows from the trumpet".⁵⁴ Here again, the distinction appears between the "rebirth" or first resurrection of the soul after the death of its body, and the second resurrection operated by the *Qā'im*, the "Lord of the seventh cycle" who brings the "new creation" (*al-khalq al-jadīd*) to completion.

However, the last part of al-Kirmānī's *Rāḥat al-'aql* which is devoted to eschatology raises some problems. Although usually a very careful writer adopting a rigorous method of "scholastic" argumentation, he seems here to mix the two resurrections, so that it is not always clear whether his scattered remarks

52 Kirmānī, *Maṣābīh*, 32; the translation is that of Walker, *Master of the Age*, 66–7. A similar argument occurs in Kirmānī, *Kāfiyya* 151–2; Haji, *Distinguished* 60.

53 Kirmānī, *Tanbīh* 212–21; idem, *Aqwāl* 50–4; idem, *Rāḥat* 543–5. Cf. De Smet, *Transmigration* 87–93; Walker, *Metempsychosis* 236–8.

54 Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 511, 514–5.

on “reward and punishment” refer to the destiny of souls before or after the appearance of the *Qā'im*. In other words, he follows an esoteric way of writing, dispersing his doctrine over several passages intersected with Quranic verses and hadith for which the *ta'wīl* is not always given.⁵⁵ In any case, it is clear that al-Kirmānī adheres to the general Isma'ili principle that, before the advent of the *Qā'im*, the soul cannot exist without a material substrate, whereas the Great Resurrection is purely a spiritual event.

First of all, al-Kirmānī quotes a version of the well-known hadith about the “interrogation in the tomb”: after the deceased is buried, he is interrogated about his deeds and, depending on his answers, the gates of paradise or hell are opened for him, so that he already knows what his future abode will be.⁵⁶ Much later, al-Kirmānī introduces the notion of *barzakh* (quoting Q 23: 101): after the death of their bodies, all the souls are gathered in the *barzakh*, waiting there for the moment when all cycles will be closed by the advent of the *Qā'im*, well aware of what their future condition in paradise or hell will be. Contrary to al-Sijistānī, who used the term in the plural form and identified the *barzakhs* with the bodies into which the souls have to transmigrate, al-Kirmānī locates the *barzakh* at the top of the physical world, just below but outside the intelligible world.⁵⁷ He then quotes a second version of the hadith about the “interrogation in the tomb”:

When the deceased is laid in the tomb, he is submitted to an interrogation. If he belongs to those who have professed God's unity (*tawhīd*) and who acted in obedience to Him and to His Messenger, the gate of paradise is opened for him. The actions he accomplished by worshiping God take the form of a person (or a human body, *tashkhaṣu*) which comfort him in the distress he suffers in the tomb and announces to him that he belongs to the elect. Hence, his soul is in a state of rest (*rāḥa*) until the day of the Resurrection [...]. On the other hand, if he belongs to those who were guilty of polytheism (*shirk*), who were disobedient and proud, and who neglected and refused the worship of God, the gate of the hell is opened for him. His base actions become for him an animal (*ḥayawān*) which tortures him and fills him with terror, so that he remains in distress and fright until the day of Resurrection, being certain to belong to the inhabitants of hell.⁵⁸

55 See De Smet, Transmigration 103–7.

56 Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 519–20.

57 Ibid., 538–9, 543.

58 Ibid., 538.

From this, one may infer that this hadith is referring to the *barzakh*. As all souls still need a corporal substrate, those saved are reborn here in a noble body which prepares them to receive all the benefits of the intelligible world on the day of *qiyāma*, whereas the doomed ones are reborn in an “animal body” which only increases their state of depravation.

On the day of Resurrection, the “spirit of sanctity” (*rūh al-quds*, i.e., the infusion emanating from the Universal Intellect) will reach, through the intermediary of the “Lord of the seventh cycle”, all the souls gathered in the *barzakh*, allowing them to leave that place, meaning they are liberated from any material substrate. All the souls that once came into existence, will be “as the form of one single person” (*ka-shakhṣ wāḥid*) made up of several limbs. According to the form each individual soul acquired during its earthly life, it will be allotted a place in one of the limbs of this “spiritual man”, the most subtle (*latīf*) souls being near the head and the most compact ones at the lowest level, that of the feet. This is the “second creation”, the perfection of the “first creation” which was the creation of “the first *shakhṣ* or the first being” (i.e., the Universal Intellect).⁵⁹

It is quite clear that, to al-Kirmānī, paradise is located in the world of the Intellect. Due to the spiritual “benefits” (*faḍā’il*) proceeding from the “pure soul” of the *Qā’im*, (all?) the souls in the *barzakh* accede to their “second perfection” (*kamāl thānī*), which means that they are plainly actualized: being no longer *in potentia* and bound to a material substrate, they join the intelligible world. For the elect, this implies a state of eternal peace and rest, enjoying perpetual intellectual pleasure in the near vicinity of the Intellect (“the head” of the spiritual *shakhṣ*), as do the angels and the other entities composing the intelligible world.⁶⁰ The doomed souls are gathered in the lower limbs of the spiritual *shakhṣ*, the level of their remoteness from the Intellect depending on the gravity of their errors. But does this mean that ultimate hell and eternal punishment are located in the intelligible world?

Al-Kirmānī includes, amidst speculations about the *barzakh*, a long passage reporting al-Ḥākim’s teaching concerning punishment. The caliph-Imam is supposed to have taught that it is sins committed during their earthly lives that torture the souls once they are separated from their bodies. At this moment, they regret that they made no use of their bodies as instruments in order to acquire knowledge and virtue. The benefits and the good things of which the doomed souls are deprived are for them a source of eternal torment. This is hell for them. The pain and sufferings resulting from their nakedness burn

59 Ibid., 539–41.

60 Ibid., 506, 519, 528. Cf. De Smet, *Quiétude* 17 n. 69, 368; Walker, *Kirmani* 105–6, 111.

these souls, as fire burns physical bodies.⁶¹ As the text stresses the eternal character of this punishment, it must refer to the state of the damned souls after Resurrection.

Further on, al-Kirmānī gives a long *ta'wīl* of Q 83:7–11, about the enigmatic term *sijjīn*. According to his understanding of these verses, it is the souls of sinners, those who opposed the commandments of God, his Messenger, and his Friends (i.e., the Imams) by not observing a strict balance between *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, “who are in *sijjīn*”. This means “in the farthest remoteness (*bu'd al-ab'ad*) from the first limit (*al-nihāya al-ūlā*) which is *ʿIlīyyūn*”. In al-Kirmānī’s terminology, “the first limit” refers to the first Intellect.⁶² Deriving *sijjīn* from *sijn* (“prison”), he claims that *sijjīn* refers to the place where sinners are punished, just as prisons are intended to punish criminals in the physical world.

After mentioning in passing the opinion of the exoteric interpreters of the Quran (*ahl al-tafsīr*), who understand *sijjīn* as a rock located at the lowest level of the universe, al-Kirmānī continues his *ta'wīl* by explaining *kitāb marqūm* (“an inscribed register”, Q 83:9) as referring to the souls on which the forms and images of their evil deeds are “inscribed”. After the advent of the *Qā'im*, these forms will determine their suffering, caused by their remoteness from the Universal Intellect.⁶³

In a similar manner, the souls of the *munāfiqūn* (“the hypocrites”) have a tenebrous form that veils them from the lights and the benefits of the intelligible world. This veiling torments them, as they fall down into the deepest part of hell, at the greatest remoteness from felicity. Still worse is the fate of the apostates, who rejected the truth after knowing it. Their souls have acquired two distinct forms, the first proceeding from their former faith (*īmān*) and the second produced by their base actions. The presence of these two opposite forms is for them a source of indescribable suffering.⁶⁴

Al-Kirmānī obviously conceives of hell after the Resurrection as a state of privation: the incapacity of wicked souls to enjoy the intellectual goods and benefits of the intelligible world and to participate in the eternal peace of mind that is paradise for the elect. Nevertheless, there remain many open questions. Will the doomed souls also acquire their “second perfection” with the advent of the *Qā'im* and be allowed to enter the intelligible world, kept at the “farthest

61 Ibid., 522.

62 De Smet, *Quiétude* 190–3. *ʿIlīyyūn* (Q 83:18–21) is, together with *sijjīn* (Q 83:7–9), one of the enigmatic terms occurring in the Quran. See De Smet, *ʿIlīyyūn* 413–5. Traditional Sunni *tafsīr* often identifies them respectively with paradise and hell.

63 Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 530–1.

64 Ibid., 535–6.

remoteness” from the Intellect, not being able to enjoy the benefits emanating from it? This would be the highest form of punishment—“hell in paradise”—as described by Abū Tammām. This could be inferred from the image of the “spiritual *shakhs*”, as hell is located “nearby his feet”. But what does “at the lowest level” of the intelligible world mean? In the vicinity of the sense world and matter? It is not clear at all if, according to al-Kirmānī’s system, the physical world will disappear after the final Resurrection, or rather if it supposes the eternity of the world, as did al-Sijistānī’s.

4 The Ṭayyibī Hell: The “Rock of Sijjīn”

Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī was considered a major authority by the Ṭayyibī Isma‘īlis in Yemen.⁶⁵ Starting with Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī (d. 557/1162) and his *Kitāb Kanz al-walad*, Ṭayyibī authors interpreted al-Kirmānī’s thought in the light of the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’* and the *al-Risāla al-jāmi’a* attributed to the same “Brethren of Purity”. Moreover, they adopted many “gnostic” elements taken from early Shi‘i *ghulāt* texts (such as the *Kitāb al-Haft* and the *Umm al-Kitāb*) supposed to contain the secret “revelations” of the sixth Imam, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, to his disciple al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ju‘fi.⁶⁶ In consequence, they developed an impressive system which presents the generation of the sense world as the direct result of what Henry Corbin called “the drama in heaven” (*le drame dans le ciel*).⁶⁷

It is not possible here to give an extensive account of Ṭayyibī cosmology.⁶⁸ For our present purpose, it may be sufficient to recall that “the drama in heaven” was caused by the “oblivion” and the “error” of the third Intellect. According to al-Kirmānī, the first of the ten cosmic Intellects simultaneously generated an Intellect in act and an Intellect *in potentia*. In al-Ḥāmidī’s interpretation, the third Intellect, being *in potentia* and thus imperfect in actuality, falsely considered the first Intellect to be the Ultimate Principle (in fact it is the first created being) and refused to recognize the pre-eminence of the second Intellect. This “error” (*khaṭī’a*) caused the emanation, out of the second Intellect, of seven Intellects in act, so that the Intellect *in potentia* became the tenth and last of the

65 On the history of Ṭayyibism, the “new *da‘wa*” (*da‘wa jadīda*) established in Yemen after the death of the Fatimid caliph-Imam al-Āmir (524/1130) by the partisans of his son al-Ṭayyib, see Daftary, *Ismā‘īlīs* 261–9.

66 De Smet, *Éléments* 45–53.

67 See, for instance, Corbin, *Histoire* 124–7.

68 See Daftary, *Ismā‘īlīs* 269–76; De Smet, *Philosophie ismaélienne* 157–68.

cosmic Intellects.⁶⁹ This downfall produced obscurity (and probably matter), so that parcels of light from the intelligible world became mixed with the darkness of matter. Frightened by the consequences of its error, the tenth Intellect (the “first Adam” or “cosmic anthropos”) repented and received from the first Intellect the power to create, from the matter that was produced by its fall, the stars, the planets and the sublunary world (with its three kingdoms: minerals, plants and animals, and man) as a cosmic “machine”, in order to free as much light as possible. Finally, prophets and Imams were sent to mankind, in a great number of successive cycles, all attempting to liberate human souls—parcels of light fallen from the intelligible world—from their imprisonment in matter, by providing the necessary knowledge for their salvation.⁷⁰

Ṭayyibī authors adhered to the common Isma'īli idea that paradise can be identified with the intelligible world and hell with remoteness from it. But they considerably complicated this doctrine by introducing notions of *naskh/nasūkhīyya* and *maskh/masūkhīyya* taken from the *ghulāt* tradition and by openly professing a belief in metempsychosis.

At the very moment when the neophyte takes his oath of allegiance before the Imam or his representative, a point of light (*nuqṭa min nūr*) appears in his soul. As he advances in his initiation and acquires more knowledge from the Imam, this light increases. When his body dies, he is reborn in a nobler body, duly prepared to receive this purified soul by a complex alchemical and cosmological process. If, in the course of numerous reincarnations, the believer remains faithful to the teaching of the successive Imams, his soul becomes more and more luminous. At the same time the purity of its corporal envelope increases, as to become as “white as camphor”, increasingly resembling the “camphor-like body” (*jism kāfūrī*) of the prophets and the Imams. Incorporated in these bodies, from which the obscurity of matter is progressively eliminated, the believer receives a foretaste of paradise during his earthly life. The whole process of gradual ascension is called *naskh* or *nasūkhīyya*. With the advent of a *Qā'im* closing a series of prophetic cycles (as most Ṭayyibī authors accept the existence of several *Qā'ims*)⁷¹ all souls liberated during these cycles are

69 Hāmidī, *Kanz* 66–8; cf. De Smet, *Philosophie ismaélienne* 82–8; idem, *Quiétude* 243–51.

70 This comprehensive system is expounded in a concise and relatively clear way in the *Risālat al-Mabda' wa-l-ma'ād* of al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Walīd (d. 667/1268), ed. and French trans. in Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne* 99–130 (trans. 129–200).

71 According to Ṭayyibī doctrine, a prophetic cycle lasts 7000 years. After seven prophetic cycles (49,000 years) a *Qā'im* appears. He opens a “cycle of manifestation” of 1000 years, during which all the light liberated during the previous cycles is gathered in a “Light Temple” nearby the tenth Intellect, allowing the latter to ascend to the ninth rank in the

attracted by “divine magnetism” (*al-maghñātīs al-ilāhī*) through the “column of light” (*‘amūd min nūr*) and gather in a “Temple of Light” (*ḥaykal nūrānī*) located in the vicinity of the tenth Intellect. This “Temple of Light” is paradise as symbolically described in the Quran and other revealed texts.⁷²

On the other hand, the souls of those who refused the teaching of the Imams, or even worse, betrayed the oath they took before them during their present life (or during a preceding existence),⁷³ choose the descending path of *maskh/masūkhīyya*: “transformation” or “metamorphosis”.⁷⁴ This means that they are first reborn in “ignoble” human races, such as blacks (*zanj*), Turks or Berbers, and next in animals whose meat is licit, for instance cows, sheep or chickens. At this stage however, there is still some hope for salvation: a black can accept the teaching of the Imam and be reborn in a “nobler” body. If a given person, after consuming the meat of a cow whose soul belonged to an apostate, conceives a child, the soul may enter into his sperm and be reborn in a human body susceptible to receive the knowledge necessary for salvation. However, the most darkened souls proceed further downwards, being reborn in animals whose meat is *ḥarām* (pigs, dogs, apes, snakes, etc.) or not fit for consumption; then as worms, scorpions, chafers, scarabs, spiders and other kinds of frightening insects born by spontaneous generation out of excrements and putrid matter. The lower they fall, the smaller their chance to attain salvation becomes. All these animal bodies are *barzakhs*, ranged in several levels of decreasing purity, in which the wicked souls suffer, here on earth, the torments of hell. This is the “lower punishment” (*al-‘adhāb al-adnā*, Q 32: 21).⁷⁵

cosmic hierarchy. As the fallen third Intellect needs to climb seven ranks in order to return to its initial position, there are seven series of seven prophetic cycles. At their end, after 350,000 years ($7 \times 50,000$), the “Great Resurrection” occurs. A final “cycle of manifestation” of 1000 years achieves the liberation of light and the sublimation of nature. After 360,000 years, the results of the “drama in heaven” are effaced: this corresponds to the “Great Year” of Greek astronomy. Cf. Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte* 9, 12, 19; De Smet, *Philosophie ismaélienne* 166–8.

72 Ḥāmidī, *Kanz* 134–48; ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Walīd, *al-Mufīda* 172–3; Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabda’* 116–8 (trans. 172–5); Idrīs, *Zahr* 83–96; Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte* 97–8, 105–7. Cf. De Smet, *Scarabées* 50–3; Freitag, *Seelenwanderung* 165–9.

73 The Ṭayyibī system probably presupposes that the souls of the initiates are reborn inside the community, as is the case with the Druzes. However, I am not aware of any text stating this explicitly.

74 On this term, see De Smet, *Métamorphose* 552–4.

75 Ḥāmidī, *Kanz* 300–11; Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabda’* 125–9 (trans. 191–5); Idrīs, *Zahr* 327–8; Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte* 11–3, 16–7, 53–4, 63–4, 126. Cf. De Smet, *Scarabées* 41–9; Freitag, *Seelenwanderung* 170–82.

The “greatest punishment” (*al-‘adhāb al-akbar*) is inflicted by the *Qā’im* at the end of every set of prophetic cycles. Shortly before his advent the most wicked souls, those that have reached the lowest *barzakhs*, are reborn in plants which are eaten by all kinds of unbelievers, entering into their sperm and reappearing in the bodily envelopes of their children. When the *Qā’im* appears, he calls them into his presence, and confronts them with their sins and destiny. Then they are killed and their souls go to Sijjīn. This is a rock located in the “lowest part” of the earth. When the demiurge—the tenth Intellect—created the sense world in order to liberate as much light as possible from the obscurity of matter generated by his fall, he compressed the most darkened elements of it into an extremely compact mass: the “Rock of Sijjīn”, which is in the middle of the earth. The doomed souls, fully conscious of their faults, are imprisoned inside this rock, suffering the torments of hell because they are now completely cut off from the intelligible world and its brightness, being covered in an absolute darkness, at the utmost distance from the “Temple of Light”. This is the “greatest punishment”.⁷⁶

Al-Ḥusayn b. al-Walīd adds, however, that Sijjīn is only a place of punishment for the gravest sinners, “the greatest antagonists”, probably referring to the enemies of the prophets and the Imams. It would be contrary to divine justice to inflict such a severe punishment upon ordinary people, the “fools and ignoramuses” among the masses. They continue their transmigrations among the *barzakhs* and, at certain instances, God in His mercy grants them the favor of being reborn in human bodies, giving them a new chance for salvation.⁷⁷

The question remains as to what will happen with Sijjīn and its inhabitants after the advent of the final *Qā’im* and the closing of the ultimate cycle, generally considered to occur 360,000 years after the “drama in heaven”.⁷⁸ As we have seen, this is the lapse of time needed to save enough parcels of light in order to allow the tenth Intellect to rejoin the third rank of the cosmic hierarchy and to restore the initial configuration of the intelligible world. But does this mean that matter and all material beings, including the earth and the Rock of Sijjīn in its center, will disappear?⁷⁹

76 Ḥāmidī, *Kanz* 301–2; Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabda’* 106–7, 128–9 (trans. 154–5, 193–5); Idrīs, *Zahr* 322–44; Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte* 11–4, 16–7.

77 Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabda’* 129 (trans. 194–5).

78 See above, n. 71.

79 Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabda’* 128 (trans. 194) claims that the souls of the damned will be in *sijjīn* during a “great cycle” of 360,000 × 360,000 years! Cf. Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne* 199 n. 127. However, it is not clear to me how this can be explained within the general structure of the Ṭayyibī system.

5 Conclusion

Locating hell in medieval Ismaʿilism is not an easy task, as the positions differ from one tradition or author to another. Hell starts here on earth for the masses of common people who blindly follow established religions and laws whose real, hidden sense they ignore. After the death of their bodies their souls remain attached to a bodily substrate in which they continue to suffer the torments of hell that are ignorance and remoteness from “real” knowledge. They transmigrate from one body to another, they are “burned” in the fire of the planetary spheres, or they are tortured by their “animal form” in the *barzakh*. After the advent of the *Qāʾim* they are liberated from their corporal prison, but only to enter a new kind of hell, either located in the intelligible world or somewhere in the physical realm, be it here on earth, or in its “deepest part”. In both cases, their torture consists of their incapacity to enjoy the intellectual delights proceeding from the Universal Intellect. Many questions about the location of the places of punishment, their nature, their eternity or temporality, remain. Far removed from Islamic “orthodoxy”, Ismaʿili eschatology is deliberately shrouded in obscurity, as it is one of the most esoteric and secret parts of the doctrine, an “obstructed path” only accessible to the initiated happy few.

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The Morisco Hell

The Significance and Relevance of Aljamiado Texts for Muslim Eschatology and Islamic Literature

Roberto Tottoli

In a recent monograph, Stephen J. Shoemaker highlights the relevance of Aljamiado literature for the historiography of early Islam. In his discussion of the different versions of a second/eighth-century letter ascribed to the caliph ‘Umar II (r. 99–101/717–20) and addressed to the Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717–41 CE), he mentions an Aljamiado translation, longer than those found in other versions written in different languages.¹ As such, the Aljamiado version has long been considered a Morisco enlargement or even a complete forgery. Shoemaker, who builds on the earlier work of Jean-Marie Gaudeul,² brilliantly shows that the Aljamiado text is in fact more closely related to the original Arabic than the shorter versions, which are instead abridgments of the original. This constitutes a rare occasion on which an Aljamiado text is used by a scholar of Islam to corroborate evidence found in Arabic or other Near Eastern works. Although Aljamiado literature exhibits a number of noteworthy characteristics, it is rarely taken into consideration in studies of the diffusion of Arabic and Islamic motifs and reports. In fact, the many comprehensive and rich studies related to Aljamiado writings are the products of the work of specialists in Romance philology, scholars who discuss the linguistic evidence found in these works and address other questions related to the environment in Iberia rather than to the Islamic contents of the Aljamiado corpus.

This is surprising for a number of reasons. The Aljamiado texts are neither very numerous nor do they reproduce the works of major Muslim authors, but they have the peculiarity of constituting a relatively homogeneous literary

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1 Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet* 60–1.

2 Gaudeul, *Correspondence between Leo and ‘Umar*.

corpus.³ In Arabic literature, particularly late Arabic literature, this is a rarity. Traditional Arabic literature is conservative so that, for example, classical Arabic is consistently used within it. In addition, popular, late remakings of this literature are usually anonymous. These two issues usually give rise to a major problem: how to connect texts to a specific time and place, and thus how to use this literature as evidence for a particular historical, cultural or social context. In this regard, Aljamiado texts are an interesting counter-example, since the community that they refer to, as well as the conditions in which this community lived, are well known, namely being the minority Morisco community who suffered gradual erosion under Castilian and Spanish domination. In addition, the places (in Iberia) and the times of production (mid-ninth/fifteenth to early eleventh/seventeenth century) of these texts are usually well known. As such, from the point of view of the historian of Islamic literature and traditions, cross-checking Morisco texts against other Muslim literature and traditions allows one to understand the circulation of those traditions and literature in that specific place and at that time. Aljamiado literature also provides a useful way of understanding the circulation of Muslim Arabic literature in Spain, North Africa and the entire Muslim world, while throwing into relief the specificities of Aljamiado texts in relation to Islamic literature as a whole.

Aljamiado manuscripts and texts can also provide insights into a number of religious subject-matters in addition to what they tell us about *adab* literature, law and other literary genres. Pious devotion to the Prophet Muḥammad, stories of the prophets, and legendary reports about the battles fought by Muḥammad and his early companions, especially ‘Alī, are favorite topics. Eschatology, too, has some relevance in the Aljamiado corpus, and among the texts devoted to this subject some offer descriptions of hell. This chapter is devoted to the analysis of this Aljamiado literature on hell. Its aim is to ascertain their specific, or non-specific, concerns or peculiarities in relation to Islamic literature as a whole. A study of these Aljamiado versions can, as we shall see, contribute to a better understanding of the relations between Arabic sources and Aljamiado

3 I am aware of the fact that Aljamiado manuscripts were written in different places and thus show specific peculiarities, and that the modes of production of manuscripts were different at the beginning of tenth/sixteenth century from those prevalent at the end of it. However, I believe that the examination of the spatio-temporal embeddedness of manuscripts produces more relevant results in respect to linguistic and historical questions. As for the properly religious content of Aljamiado texts, from the point of view of the Islamicist the Morisco experience appears as rather homogeneous.

Spanish versions, and also suggest some hypotheses for the diffusion of the manuscripts that preserve versions of them.

1 Spanish Islamic Eschatological Literature

The question as to when Islamic literary works or even non-literary documents produced in Romance and then Spanish vernaculars first emerged is debated. What is of most significance to our discussion is that, from the fifteenth to the middle of the seventeenth century, texts related to Islamic traditions and literature circulated in the Iberian peninsula and among Muslims of Iberian origin according to differing modalities. Manuscript remains and historical evidence bearing testimony to the special social conditions of Spanish communities attest to a complex situation, and there is clear evidence of the circulation amongst Muslims living in these communities of works written in Arabic, in Spanish using Roman script, and in Spanish with Arabic characters.⁴

The texts preserved in these manuscripts deal with various subjects, ranging from translations of the Quran to literary works. Notwithstanding the wide range of typologies attested and the various definitions proffered by scholars to characterize the various texts, religious ideas are a consistent part of them,⁵ and eschatology constitutes one of the main topics in these texts. Thus, Galmés de Fuentes refers to eschatology in a list of ten major topics of Morisco literature in *Aljamiado*,⁶ while Bernabé Pons in his more analytical listing also includes eschatological narratives (*relatos escatológicos*).⁷ There are many further examples. Concern for eschatological matters is, for instance, clearly

4 On this point see Casassas Canals, *La literatura islámica castellana* 92–5. Casassas Canals offers some important preliminary statements and rightly points out that the Spanish of *Aljamiado* texts is a Muslim vernacular like any other vernacular of Muslim minorities in other parts of the Islamic world. He also correctly laments how little attention *Aljamiado* literature has received from Arabists and Islamicists. See *ibid.* 108. See also Maria J. Viguera in her preface to Urrea de Jalón, 20. On the complex linguistic situation see also Harvey, *Muslims in Spain* 122–3.

5 See on this point Bernabé Pons, *Los manuscritos aljamiados*, and Wieggers, *Islamic Literature* 1. As these point out, one of the three major areas of production of *Aljamiado* literature, which is based entirely on translations, is religion, while entertainment and handbooks of practical matters are the other two. Other scholars emphasize that original works were in fact produced; these texts are mostly on religious matters. See Harvey, *Muslims in Spain* 168; Montaner Frutos, *El recontamiento* 40; Martínez de Castilla Muñoz, *Una biblioteca morisca* 41.

6 Galmés de Fuentes, *Estudios* 29, 88–9.

7 Bernabé Pons, *Los manuscritos aljamiados* 33.

attested as early as the works of Yça de Segovia (fl. c. 850/1450) who, in his work *Thirteen Articles*—which contains a Muslim creed—devotes a large section to eschatological beliefs.⁸ In other instances, scholars of Aljamiado literature have highlighted a specific concern for eschatological works.⁹ However, the Aljamiado interest in eschatological matters should not be overstated as, when compared to Islamic literature as a whole, this is not of greater concern in the Aljamiado corpus of literature than it is elsewhere. This is because eschatology constitutes one of, if not the, major topics of the Quran and early Muslim traditions (hadith), while later Islamic literature also demonstrates a special concern for eschatological questions. Muslim creeds, from early times, also showcase the relevance of eschatological themes.¹⁰ Given this, it is difficult to follow Miguel Ángel Vázquez who states in his work on the conception of death among Moriscos that their literature displays an eschatological obsession diffused in the crypto-Muslim communities.¹¹

Apart from Aljamiado translations of the Quran and of *Tanbīh al-ghāfilīn* of Abū l-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), one encounters the majority of references to eschatology and hell in short texts usually collected in miscellaneous manuscripts. These miscellanies constitute a specific aspect of Aljamiado literature, one that has usually been connected to the peculiar conditions of the Moriscos, that is, their supposed need to have books that were easy to use and which combined various texts on a number of different topics.¹² Such small but comprehensive anthologies would have permitted the Morisco community to preserve as much as possible of as wide a range of topics as they could, while also being easier to hide in the house—a significant advantage in the tenth/sixteenth century, marked as it was by the harsh conditions imposed by the Spanish Inquisition. These miscellaneous texts, and particularly the question of their originality, have been at the core of competing and polemical evaluations of the Morisco cultural heritage and its relation to Muslim lore and

8 Wieggers, *Islamic Literature* 92–8.

9 López-Baralt dedicates a few pages describing the eschatological contents in the work of the so-called *Refugiado de Túnez*; see López-Baralt, *La literatura secreta* 584–8.

10 See Watt, *Islamic creeds* 20–1, and the examples provided *passim*.

11 See Vázquez, *Desde la penumbra* 12. Later on, Vázquez admits that Aljamiado texts are not different from classical Muslim texts as regards themes and images. See *ibid.* 83. Cf. on this the description of his doctoral dissertation, on which the book is based, in *Aljamía*, 14 (2002), 77–9.

12 Harvey, *Muslims in Spain* 151, calls these “pious miscellanies”, which he says were primarily designed for religious education, therefore conveniently collecting various texts in one codex.

tradition. As Galmés de Fuentes clearly showed,¹³ the position that dismissed Aljamiado literature as the product of a Muslim community contaminated by its Western environment and by Christian literature, and thus as neither properly Muslim nor Christian, is no longer tenable. Morisco works are fully Islamic. As others, such as Reinhold Knotzi and Alberto Montaner Frutos, have argued, the choices made for anthologies was motivated by a wish to preserve Islamic doctrine in a way that was both convenient and all-encompassing, including, as these anthologies did, various typologies of texts.¹⁴ Nevertheless, as will emerge from the following discussion, the difficult contexts of production prompted a conservative attitude towards the textual heritage, resulting in a situation in which texts were copied faithfully through the centuries until the second half of the eleventh/seventeenth century, thereby fulfilling the need to preserve religious literary texts in easily consultable manuscripts.¹⁵

In fact, we can develop this idea further and argue that Aljamiado texts on eschatology and hell display a particularly strict adherence to Islamic tenets and literary devices, something which is further reflected in the composition of the miscellaneous texts. However, even though such anthologies gained wide circulation because of the specific conditions and sensibilities of the Morisco Muslim communities, particularly in the tenth/sixteenth century, they can hardly be considered specific to them.¹⁶ Although it is true, as suggested by Galmés de Fuentes,¹⁷ that the texts are fully and properly Spanish versions of Muslim Arabic texts and that in this kind of literature the originality and specific character of the collector are displayed not so much by the contents of the stories but by his choices and the inclusions or exclusions from the miscellany, it must be added that Arabic literature as a whole preserves many

13 Galmés de Fuentes, *Estudios* 47–8.

14 See Montaner Frutos, *El recontamiento* 39. See also the discussion of this question by Martínez de Castilla Muñoz in a commentary in *BRAH T8*, 69.

15 The notion that there was a decline in Morisco literary expression in the second half of the tenth/sixteenth century is no longer tenable: most of the attested manuscripts are from the clandestine second half of tenth/sixteenth century. On this point, see Vespertino Rodríguez, *Una aproximación a la datación*.

16 Galmés de Fuentes, *Estudios* 39–40, quoting Hawkins, *A Morisco Philosophy of suffering*.

17 Galmés de Fuentes, *Estudios* 47. Galmés de Fuentes underlined this point in order to counteract those who maintained that the Aljamiado texts were the product of communities influenced by Christians and so were not Muslim any more. According to Galmés de Fuentes, by contrast, it deserves to be emphasized that the originality of an author or collector is measured by his choices when collecting and ordering the translated texts.

examples of similar anthologies featuring more or less the same topics.¹⁸ One comes across such examples in Andalusian Arabic manuscripts, which possibly include some sources for the Aljamiado texts, but also in manuscripts from other places in the Islamic world in which we find short collections of texts, sometimes written in the same hand.¹⁹ The topics are the usual ones: the life of Muḥammad; his battles; pre-Islamic prophets, with special emphasis on episodes of the lives of Abraham, Moses and Jesus; eschatological texts; prayers; invocations; examples of Quranic exegesis; and points of legal debate. Whatever may explain the use of Spanish in Arabic script, a feature which gives this literature a peculiar character and taste, the adherence of the Aljamiado corpus to mainstream Muslim literature is, as we shall see, rather startling, denoting as it does a decidedly conservative attitude vis-à-vis the contents of the religious culture. As we hope to demonstrate, this conservative attitude, rather than other factors, was the primary motivation for the preservation and transmission of these texts in Spanish.

2 Aljamiado Versions of Islamic Eschatological Narratives

The relationship of the Aljamiado narratives to the corresponding Arabic texts is a major concern when discussing this literature. There are two ways of ascertaining the peculiarities of Aljamiado literature in relation to Islamic literature as a whole. Firstly, the translation practices and language used in these translations can be studied, as far as possible. Secondly, the contents of these works can be cross-checked against those of the Arabic and Islamic traditions (probably) circulating in Spain at the time, as well as of the Muslim eschatological literature as a whole.

As regards language and terminology, Hispanists and scholars of the Aljamiado texts have carried out numerous studies of the linguistic aspects of these texts, mainly in order to shed light on the history of Spanish languages and vernaculars of the periods in which they were written. However, from the point of view of the Islamicist, their interest lies in the relations between the Arabic works and their Spanish versions or calques. While a more

18 Barletta tries to typify the Aljamiado miscellanies as peculiar to the Morisco situation. See Barletta, Aljamiado-morisco narrative.

19 See, for instance, the Iberian manuscripts analyzed by Levi Della Vida, *Note di storia letteraria* 26–33, 36–9.

comprehensive discussion of the question is given elsewhere,²⁰ a few general remarks relating to the circulation of literature about hell are in order here. The first point to be made concerns the two main terms used to indicate hell, namely, *jahannam* and *al-nār*, the former rendered as *jahannam* in Spanish, the latter translated as *fuego* (“fire”). Problems of recognizability and identifiability most probably prompted the emergence of *jahannam*, rather than *fuego*, as the favorite term, which is also used in relation to other, less frequent Quranic names for hell. This is a clear demonstration of the conservativeness of the Aljamiado texts in relation to terminology. The use of *jahannam* also demonstrates that these texts seek to refer to the Quranic and Islamic hell in an immediate and unequivocal fashion, emphasizing their Islamic character much more than the more neutral *fuego*, or any other term, would.²¹

These linguistic features thus indicate a conservative reproduction of Islamic texts and traditions. The same impression is given by the literary contents of the texts that include descriptions of hell. A few other studies have discussed the relationship between single Arabic and Aljamiado texts, but none has attempted to compare the contents of an entire corpus of Aljamiado texts with the corresponding body of literature on the Arabic side. In my opinion this lacuna deserves to be filled, as Aljamiado literature allows us to understand what types of Islamic traditions were circulating from the ninth/fifteenth to the eleventh/seventeenth century under the particular conditions of the Morisco community, and in what kind of literary culture they were embedded.

To compare the various Aljamiado versions of single complete narratives against the corresponding genres of Islamic Arabic literature would no doubt be an exhausting task, and such a comparison would lead us well beyond our topic. My intention in the following paragraphs is to carry out such a study but on a smaller scale, limiting myself to the eschatological parts of some of the Aljamiado narratives, and particularly the descriptions of hell that occur within them. This means that the scope of this analysis is rather narrow, and consequently no general conclusions can be drawn. However, a small-scale

20 Here I shall deal with Aljamiado literary motifs and versions and their Arabic and Islamic counterparts. I shall not discuss questions connected to the translation from Arabic to Spanish, or the use of calques or translations in the names of hell. On this topic, see my article, *The Toledo Qur'an and Islamic eschatology*, to which I refer for all the questions discussed here in relation to translation and terminology.

21 Another hypothetical reason for the use of the term *jahannam*, which is less neutral given its explicit Islamic connotation, is the interest of Aljamiado texts in the topography of hell. In fact, in Arabic early traditions *jahannam* already appears as the favourite name when describing the physical features of hell. See Tottoli, *The Toledo Qur'an*.

comparative study of this type can shed some light on a number of questions. Not only will it be possible to trace the Morisco imagining of hell in its relation to Arabic Islamic literature, but also, more importantly, some first steps toward uncovering the relations between the Aljamiado texts and versions and their Arabic counterparts will be made.

2.1 *Narratives about the Day of Resurrection*

Aljamiado texts preserve a number of versions of a narrative describing the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*) in which some information about hell can be found. This narrative, which ranges between twenty and forty folios, tends to appear in miscellaneous collections under the title *Recontamiento/Estoria/Alhadith del día del juicio* (“tale/story/hadith of the Day of Judgment”). Pablo Roza Candás, in his edition of a manuscript from Aitona, lists six other versions, and thus a total of seven, and indicates that two groups or families of the narrative exist.²² One family, which includes the texts of MS Aitona and MS Paris 774, links the narrative back to the Prophet by a chain of transmission that runs through the well-known Jewish convert Ka’b al-Aḥbār (d. between 32/652 and 35/655).²³ Ka’b’s name features regularly in the later literature devoted to cosmogony, pre-Islamic prophets and other popular stories. Along with Ka’b, who is identified at the beginning as the main transmitter of the entire narrative, some Aljamiado versions also quote the Companion Ibn ‘Abbās (d. c. 68/687–8) in connection with some details inserted after the beginning of the text.²⁴ References to hell and things connected to it are ubiquitous across the different versions of the story. Phrases that mention paradise and hell frequently occur together, and special emphasis is placed on the question of whether people will be saved or doomed, and on the figure of Mālik, the gatekeeper of hell. There are also passages approaching a full description of hell, particularly when it talks of God putting those who deserve it into the fire/*jahannam*. Much attention is given to the question of what happens to the sinners of the Muslim community,²⁵ to the extent that it can be asserted that this is the major concern in the narrative. The answer given is that which is most common in Muslim theology and attested all over medieval Islamic

22 *Aitona*, 140–1.

23 *Paris 774*, 186–214; *Aitona*, 284–329. The text edited by Guillén Robles, *Leyendas moriscas* iii, 351–88, which is derived from MS Madrid, BRAH T17, belongs to the same family. On Ka’b al-Aḥbār and his role as transmitter, see Tottoli, *Biblical prophets*, 89–91, and the references quoted there.

24 *Paris 774*, 188; *Aitona*, 285 has a lacuna after *ibnu*.

25 See for ex. *Paris 774*, 207, 209.

literature: Muslim sinners will leave the fire because of their belief in one God and on account of the intercession of Muḥammad.²⁶

Variant details can be found in the other family of texts, and this can be seen from the very beginning of the narrative. In the version in MS Junta 57, no chain of transmitters (*isnād*) is provided. Later on, different transmitters are mentioned, such as the Companion Abū Hurayra (d. c. 58/678). The narratives of the two manuscript families in many instances overlap. One detail is particularly relevant in regard to hell: the names that the Quran gives to hell are usually understood in the literature to refer to the various doors or layers of hell. In MS Junta 57, however, they are taken as the names of valleys in *jahannam*: Lazā, Ḥuṭama, Jaḥīm, and Sa'īr.²⁷ The concluding section, after a long passage in which Mālik addresses the fire and the fire talks back to him, is again dedicated to the fate of Muslim sinners and the intercession of the Prophet.²⁸

Arabic Islamic literature concerning the Day of Resurrection spans a wide range of traditions, and includes detailed descriptions of hell. The significant length of the Aljamiado narratives and the mention of Ka'b indicate that the original Arabic versions from which the Aljamiado texts derive are late literary re-modelings. These enlargements of previous, shorter narratives constitute a massive body of Arabic popular literature, and include several narratives ascribed to figures such as Wahb b. Munabbih, Ibn 'Abbās and Ka'b al-Aḥbār. It is also interesting to note that earlier, normative literature attributes a relatively long hadith-like report describing the Day of Resurrection to Ka'b. This particular report focuses on the question of intercession, stating at the end that Muslim sinners will be brought out of hell by Gabriel and led to paradise. The narrative, which covers two pages, appears in the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* of Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038) and in some major later works.²⁹ Notwithstanding the common elements (the ending, the large space given to angels, and the name of Ka'b), the narrative related by Abū Nu'aym and the Aljamiado text are different, and this demonstrates that a connection was made in traditional literature between Ka'b and a (relatively) long story of the Day of Resurrection.

Other literary works and late manuscripts show the diffusion of different narratives about the Day of Resurrection. Although the sources on which this

26 Cf. *Ibid.*, 213.

27 *Junta* 57, 149v, 150v.

28 *Ibid.*, 166v–172r.

29 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyat* ii, 372–4; from the *Ḥilya* then quoted in Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* iii, 915–8. Ibn Kathīr, *Nihāya* ii, 200–2, adds that a number of other hadiths confirm parts of this long narrative, which is the reason why he feels justified in inserting it into his work.

study is based are limited and no final conclusion can be drawn from them, it appears that there were late Arabic narratives about the Day of Resurrection that were similar in dimension and content to the Aljamiado versions. However, no direct Arabic parallel to the Aljamiado versions could be found. A number of manuscripts preserve various attestations of one long report transmitted from Ibn ‘Abbās in which the Prophet, having finished his prayer, recounts to his Companions the events of the Day of Resurrection.³⁰ This is an important narrative that gained popularity and was copied and elaborated, but it is different from what one finds in the Aljamiado texts. Other manuscripts attribute reports on this subject to the same Ibn ‘Abbās, but with different *isnāds*, or to other transmitters, thus conforming to the typical pattern by which these literary remakings were spread.³¹ Other works rephrase the first chapters of the “Stories of the prophets” (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*) attributed to al-Kisā’ī (d. sixth/twelfth century?), which have sections on cosmology, angelology and eschatology, including a description of paradise and hell.³² Although this is not a specifically eschatological text, but rather a general description of the cosmos, its contents and tone are similar to the Aljamiado texts. However, the texts are again similar, but different. The same applies to some anonymous narratives in Arabic on topics such as angelology, intercession, paradise and hell, and punishments of Muslim sinners, such as one finds, for example, in the so-called *Manuscrito de Ocaña*.³³

In general, the description of hell in Aljamiado narratives about the Day of Resurrection is perfectly in line with the body of late Arabic literary

30 The manuscripts including this narrative usually give the title as *Aḥwāl al-qiyāma*, *Aḥwāl al-qiyāma* or *Aḥwāl yawm al-qiyāma*. See MS Paris, Bib. Nat. ar. 2727, fols. 36v–42a; MS Paris, Bib. Nat. ar. 5728, fols. 156v–164r, and the references given in the bibliography.

31 See for instance the manuscript versions of *Aḥwāl [yawm] al-qiyāma* MS Princeton Garrett no. 2854 (no. 3018), fols. 220–5 (from Ibn ‘Abbās > ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb); MS Sarajevo, Ghazi-Husrev-Bey no. 2258/5, fols. 60–66r (with no transmitter, but with the same *incipit* as MS Princeton Garrett no. 2583, where it is ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbās). See also MS Berlin Staatsbibliothek Sprenger 461, fols. 144v–145v, from Abū Hurayra a shorter report with no title. Cf. also other narratives in *Manuscrito de Ocaña*, fols. 72v–107v; MS Vaticano Borg. 161, fols. 160v–167v; MS Paris, Bib. Nat. ar. 5667, fols. 228r–243r.

32 See for example al-Kisā’ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* 10f. Cf. also MS Leiden, 14.027, fols. 2a ff. The opening chapter of the Leiden manuscript, a reworking of al-Kisā’ī’s work in Maghrebi script, is titled *faṣl dhukira fihi masā’il yawm al-qiyāma* (“a chapter dealing with aspects of the Day of Resurrection”) and is traced back to the Prophet and Ibn ‘Abbās. In the following folios (3v ff.) paragraphs are derived from the beginning of al-Kisā’ī’s work, and other authorities such as Wahb and Ka’b are quoted.

33 *Manuscrito de Ocaña*, fols. 45 ff.

re-workings of eschatological and cosmological traditions usually attributed to Ka'b al-Aḥbār, Wahb b. Munabbih and Ibn 'Abbās. Consequently, these Aljamiado texts belong squarely in this literary tradition. Some interpretations appear original, for example, that Lazā, Ḥuṭama, Jaḥīm and Sa'ir are the names of valleys in hell,³⁴ but it is only natural that narratives in this kind of literature develop and grow in such ways. What is relevant, however, and what will become clearer after we have examined other kinds of narratives, is that in none of the Arabic versions consulted for this study can one find an apparent source or model for the Aljamiado versions. Furthermore, the existence of two families of the narrative, both of which were copied multiple times, indicates a more conservative attitude at work in the Aljamiado texts than in the body of related Arabic texts.

2.2 *The Night Journey and Ascension of Muḥammad*

The night journey (*isrā'*) and ascension (*mi'rāj*) of Muḥammad is one of the most significant episodes in the biography of the Prophet, and consequently one which gave rise to a rich literary genre ranging from early hadith reports to carefully composed longer narratives and literary works written in all the Islamic languages.³⁵ The story, as told in its various versions, includes eschatological details, in particular in the Prophet's vision of paradise and hell.³⁶ Aljamiado versions of the story have attracted some scholarly attention. Kontzi was the first to point out that the six known Aljamiado versions fall into two distinct groups or families.³⁷ Recently, William Reuter has produced the most comprehensive study on the topic, in which he also discusses the possible Arabic Islamic versions from which the Aljamiado texts are derived.³⁸

34 Hadiths and hadith-like reports usually include traditions identifying various names of *wādīs* with certain Quranic terms or other names. See, for instance, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, *Ṣifat al-nār* 37–48; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Budūr al-sāfira* 314–20; Qurṭubī, *Kitāb al-tadhkira* ii, 871–6.

35 The scholarly literature on the topic is abundant. On this topic, and also in relation to Spanish versions of the *mi'rāj*, the work of Asín Palacios, *La escatología musulmana*, is still fundamental. For a comprehensive picture and for further references, see the recent work by Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey*. See also Colby, *Constructing an Islamic ascension narrative*. This PhD dissertation was partially published in the above monograph but its unpublished part analyzes late medieval literary works and is therefore the most relevant for our topic. For contributions about the *mi'rāj* in a variety of Islamic literatures, see Gruber/Colby, *The Prophet's ascension*.

36 On eschatology, see Tottoli, *Tours of Hell*; idem, *Muslim eschatology*.

37 Kontzi, *La ascensión* 45–54.

38 Reuter, *Aljamiado narratives*. See also Hachard, *L'ascensión*.

Reuter's work, which follows a number of studies by Islamicists on the topic, above all those of Colby, takes the latter's line of enquiry in his interpretation of the evolution of the story and the emergence of its various versions. Thus, he points to the diffusion of texts and traditions related on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās but originating, in reality, from one Abū l-Ḥasan al-Bakrī (fl. third/ninth century [?]), or at least circulating under his name. Reuter further argues that the division into two families suggested by Kontzi is basically correct but that it fails to take account of textual differences between specific manuscripts within the same family. Reuter points out that these differences are, in fact, far from minor.³⁹

I have already discussed elsewhere how, in the spread and diffusion of the medieval literature on Muḥammad's ascension, eschatological elements were gradually inserted, thereby enriching a growing narrative.⁴⁰ In general, the inclusion of a comprehensive description of paradise and hell is more usual in popular narratives than in works of theology, or in more strictly hadith-oriented collections. As for the different Aljamiado versions of the ascension, we find that they, too, include some descriptions of paradise and hell. This invites consideration about the relations between these versions and the body of Islamic literature as a whole.

In the Islamic literature on Muḥammad's ascension, the issue that absorbs most of the Prophet's vision of hell is the description of the punishments suffered therein. In one Aljamiado version, Gabriel shows *jahannam* to Muḥammad in the fifth heaven, and the Prophet sees people of his community (*alumma*) who eat fire, and over whose faces fire is poured. When he asks about the identity of particular groups of the damned, he is given the answer that they are the wine-drinkers and those who consume the property of orphans, two of the most 'classical' groups of sinners in hell.⁴¹ Other versions add to these two categories a third one, describing the punishment of women who treated their husbands badly.⁴² In other versions the vision of *jahannam* takes place in heaven right before the Prophet's return to Mecca, and the three

39 Reuter, Aljamiado narratives 85.

40 See Tottoli, *Tours of Hell*, and Tottoli, *Muslim eschatology*.

41 *Aitona*, 307, *Junta* 57, 87v–88r; Guillén Robles, *Leyendas moriscas* ii, 285 (from MS Madrid, BRAH T17). Two categories are also mentioned in the brief reference to the story in *Manuscrito de Ocaña*, 18–9 (transl. 28–9), that is, those wasting orphans' goods and users. See on this Reuter, Aljamiado narratives 99.

42 Reuter, Aljamiado narratives 253 (from MS Paris, BNF 1163).

groups of the damned are identified as those who consume the property of orphans, women who treated their husbands badly, and the rich (*ricos*).⁴³

A few things are remarkable about these scant details. First of all, few categories of sinners are named. Those which are include 'classical' ones such as usurpers of the property of orphans and misbehaving wives—two types that appear already in early traditions, where other categories are also named.⁴⁴ It can be stated, therefore, that there is little trace in the Aljamiado versions of further re-modellings and enlargements, such as is evident in some other Arabic narratives written around the same time. The inclusion of rich people among the damned, however, appears to be an original touch, at least in the Aljamiado wording, which is devoid of further qualifications. (Sometimes Arabic versions of Muḥammad's ascension mention among the damned those who have money but do not spend it on the way of God etc.) Such is also the case with the mention of wine-drinkers, which occurs repeatedly, and may point to the particular pressures of living in a Christian environment in which wine-drinking would have been commonplace.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is clear that in Aljamiado versions of the ascension the eschatological descriptions are scant and much reduced if one compares them, as Reuter does, with those in the *Liber scalae*⁴⁶ or, as one might add, with those which are found in the enlarged versions of the al-Bakrī narrative.

In conclusion, on the evidence of the Prophet's vision of hell, it can be stated that the Aljamiado versions of Muḥammad's ascension did not undergo any significant remaking or enlargement, even though there are some noteworthy differences found in them. The few details given about hell are among those most commonly found in the early hadith literature and in hadith-like

43 *Junta* 9, 242. See also from the same manuscript in López-Morillas, *Textos aljamiados* 138; Kontzi, *Aljamiado Texte* 870–1 (from MS Madrid, BNM 5053): orphans, women and *ricos*. Other categories can sometimes be found. For example, according to *Junta* 9, 425, those giving false testimony—another recurring category—will have tongues so long that they reach the depths of *jahannam*.

44 See for example, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr* i, 367–8; Yahyā b. Sallām, *Tafsīr* 107–8; Hūd b. Muḥakkam, *Tafsīr* ii, 402–3; Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 272. On this hadith see Colby, *Constructing an Islamic ascension narrative* 191–6. See further references in Tottoli, *Tours of Hell* 13.

45 *Aitona*, 307; *Junta* 57, 87v–88r. See also Guillén Robles, *Leyendas moriscas* ii, 285 (from MS Madrid, BRAH T17). Other passages emphasize winedinking; see, for example, *CSIC* XXIX, 46, and *Junta* 9, 424, where winedinking is mentioned alongside usury (*comer logro*). See also *Junta* 9, 426: winedrinkers will be thrown in the fire of *jahannam*; Reuter, *Aljamiado narratives* 185 (from MS Madrid, BRAH T17), 209 (from MS *Junta* 57).

46 Reuter, *Aljamiado narratives* 61–2.

traditions, and contain no elaboration; one reason for this is simply that the Aljamiado versions are shorter than most Arabic ascension narratives compiled from the eighth/fourteenth century onwards. Overall, however, in regard to their eschatological contents the Aljamiado versions are another piece in the wider body of Muslim literature about the Prophet's ascension.

2.3 *The Colloquy of Moses and God (Munājāt Mūsā)*

Aljamiado literature includes a number of different versions of the story of the colloquy between Moses and God. In the Arabic versions Moses comes to know of the privilege accorded to Muḥammad's community and God provides answers to a series of questions posed by Moses, who expresses a desire to belong to that community. The story also includes a variety of topics and motifs within this basic framework, thereby considerably enlarging the story, which in some instances becomes a long and strictly patterned question-and-answer session between Moses and God. A description of hell only occurs in some of the Aljamiado versions of the story. We find mention here again of the *kulebras de jahannam* ("serpents of *jahannam*"), whose great size is described, of the *al-aqrabes* ("scorpions"), and of the *grillones del fuego* ("shackles of fire"). Then, when Moses asks what *jahannam* is like, God answers that there are seventy thousand towns in it, that each town has seventy thousand castles, and so on and so forth. This is followed by lists of serpents, scorpions and *grillones*.⁴⁷ This imagery is well attested in hadith literature and reflects traditional views. The stereotypical descriptions of this imagery usually involve huge numbers and dimensions.

Next in the Aljamiado versions of the colloquy comes a list of the sinners who enter hell. There are the *renegado[s]* ("apostates"), a category that appears specific to the Morisco context, unbelievers, disobedient wives, wine-drinkers, adulterers, those committing usury, and a number of others. They all are doomed unless they repent and act correctly.⁴⁸ Thus, in some of the Aljamiado versions of the colloquy one comes across a comprehensive description of hell and a relevant list of sinners. However, most of the extant Aljamiado versions of the colloquy simply mention hell and *jahannam* but add no details; this is reflected in the fact that of the three versions collected and transcribed by

47 *París 774, 276–7; Vespertino Rodríguez, Leyendas aljamiadas 220–2; BRAH T8, 472–3.*

48 *París 774, 277; Vespertino Rodríguez, Leyendas aljamiadas 221.* See another but later manuscript (Madrid, Bibl. Real, no. 1767), which includes a description of punishments in the dialogue between God and Moses: Castrillo, Un manuscrito 40.

Vespertino Rodriguez, which can be said to constitute a characteristic sample, only one of them contains a description of hell.⁴⁹

This reflects what is found in the Arabic versions. Not all of them include a description of hell, which in some cases is mentioned only briefly,⁵⁰ although in some instances we find long descriptions of the punishments awaiting sinners. These are given in God's answer to Moses's question about what the penalty for certain acts, such as consuming the property of orphans, deceiving people, eating forbidden food, wasting money, usury, adultery, and so on, will be.⁵¹ Although there is no comprehensive study of this literature, some of its peculiarities are known from articles by Joseph Sadan and Omar Alí-de-Unzaga. Sadan has shown how many variants there are, not only between Christian and Muslim versions, but also within the corpus of Arabic Islamic versions.⁵² Alí-de-Unzaga has further underlined this while also drawing attention to the fact that the various versions he studied are characterized by some variations, but also by a range of common themes, of which a "description of paradise and hell" is one.⁵³

This picture conforms to the complex mechanisms by which different narratives and their variants were diffused across the medieval Muslim world. Aljamiado narratives about Moses's colloquy with God are no different from the medieval literary reworkings and enlargements of other stories and legends. The Aljamiado texts in this case simply mirror the prevailing situation in Arabic literature as a whole. However, regarding the description of hell and the

49 Vespertino Rodriguez, *Leyendas aljamiadas* 161–234. See also the various narratives collected and analyzed by Kobrin, *Moses on the margin*.

50 *Munājāt Sayyidinā rasūl Allāh* 7; *Hadhihi munājāt kalīm Allāh* 5. No relevant eschatological details are mentioned in the versions of the related story of Moses, the hawk and the dove. See Bellino, *Mosè, il Falco e la Colomba: Edizione*; idem, *Mosè, il Falco e la Colomba: Origine*.

51 *Al-Munājāt al-kubrā* 32–4; *Qiṣṣat munājāt kalīm Allāh* 11–2. See also MS London, British Library Or. 437, which includes fourteen answers by Moses on the destiny of various sinners (I am indebted to Omar Alí-de-Unzaga for this reference). Further manuscript versions of the *Munājāt Mūsā* are briefly discussed and listed in Sadan, *Some literary problems* 373–4 n.56, 395–6. According to J. Sadan (personal communication, 1 October 2012), hell is not a common topic in these versions.

52 Sadan, *Ants* 422–40. In a long note Sadan discusses Aljamiado versions that derive, as he says, from one of the earlier Muslim versions. In relation to a single episode of the story, he states, referring to the version in the MS Urrea de Jalón (edited by Corriente Córdoba, *Relatos píos* 84), how the different Aljamiado versions preserve or not this particular, which is attested only in some Arabic manuscripts. See Sadan, *Ants* 429 n. 76.

53 Alí-de-Unzaga, *The conversation between Moses and God* 377.

sinner destined for it, the Aljamiado texts, unlike the longer Arabic reworkings, are evidence for the diffusion of shorter versions. In the case of the colloquy of Moses and God, no direct Arabic source for the Aljamiado versions could be identified.

2.4 *Jesus and the Skull*

Another widely diffused narrative in Muslim literature that found its way into Aljamiado works is the story of Jesus and the skull. In this story Jesus revives a skull, and the skull proceeds to tell Jesus a tale about his former owner's descent into hell, of which a long description is given. Then Jesus calls the man back to life so that he can convert and become a proper Muslim. The story is attested in many languages, from Aljamiado Spanish to Indonesian, and has been the topic of various studies.⁵⁴ An examination of the Arabic versions has shown that almost all of them are original works that combine elements from a fixed set of themes and motifs. Only in rare cases can a direct textual relationship based on the copying of written versions be ascertained.

In contrast, the three Aljamiado versions of the tale belong to the same textual family, and the text circulated in the Aljamiado community in a version that includes all the themes attested in medieval Arabic remakings.⁵⁵ Only one modern edition faithfully reproduces a manuscript version; the other two available editions are in reality modernized Castilian translations of the original. However, a simple comparison between these three texts demonstrates that they are substantially the same, notwithstanding some minor variations that seem to have resulted from reading or copying errors. Furthermore, the three versions of this Aljamiado text, when compared to the body of Arabic versions, show the same variability, that is, they treat themes and motifs in the usual order but change the wording and other details in a specific and original way. Consider, for instance, one of the main topics in the tale's description of hell: the doors/layers of hell and the categories of sinners punished in them, as seen by the skull's former owner during his tour of the netherworld. In the Aljamiado text, the man raised to life by Jesus states that he saw those who

54 For the Arabic versions, see in particular Tottoli, *The story of Jesus and the skull*, where there is mention of previous studies on the topic, above all those by Michele Bernardini and Fabrizio A. Pennacchiotti. To the references quoted there add, on the Indonesian versions, Brakel-Papenhuyzen, *The tale of the skull*. See also Tottoli, *What will be the fate*.

55 These are MS Madrid, BNM 5305, 16v–22v, edited by Vespertino Rodríguez, *Leyendas aljamiadas* 342–8; MS Madrid, BNM Gg 196, published by Guillén Robles, *Leyendas moriscas* i, 159–70; and MS Escuela Pías de Zaragoza 11, published in Vázquez, *Desde la penumbra* 158–64.

consumed the property of orphans in the first layer, perjurers and blasphemers in the second, wine-drinkers in the third, those who eat what is forbidden in the fourth, wives maltreating their husbands in the fifth, and adulteresses in the sixth, while the seventh layer defies description.⁵⁶ The river al-Falaq is then mentioned, as well as a deep pit in which there is a terrible fire.⁵⁷ The three versions display, as stated above, some typical textual variations, even in the terms used to describe some of the categories, but these variations point to a rewording by a copyist. In some cases, such as the MS Escuelas Pías de Zaragoza no. 11, the mention of the paradisiacal river al-Kawsar (*sic*) instead of al-Falaq seems to be due to the confusion of the copyist or to careless editing of the text.⁵⁸

The textual condition of the Aljamiado versions necessitates further consideration. As mentioned above, these versions are similar to the Arabic ones in regard to the themes, phrases and words that are used. However, they have two unique characteristics. Firstly, the Aljamiado versions are shorter than the Arabic ones, and are not enlarged or terminologically enriched as regards the standard themes that they cover. The sensitive topic of the categories of sinners and their position in the seven layers of hell can serve as a useful example of this. In the Aljamiado versions this theme is merely a summary of what the Arabic texts deal with much more extensively. While the latter indicate the categories of sinners and specify the names of the layers of hell, repeating what kinds of people are destined for them, the Aljamiado versions do not name the layers, mentioning only the categories of sinners. Secondly, the three Aljamiado versions are all basically the same text; in contrast, the Arabic versions, for the most part, are mutually independent, original reworkings.⁵⁹

56 Vespertino Rodríguez, *Leyendas aljamiadas* 346–8; see also Vespertino Rodríguez, *Las figuras de Jesús y María* 286; Guillén Robles, *Leyendas moriscas* i, 167–9; Vázquez, *Desde la penumbra* 161–3.

57 See Vespertino Rodríguez, *Leyendas aljamiadas* 348; Guillén Robles, *Leyendas moriscas* i, 169; *BNM* 4953, 124. The name *al-falaq* is not very frequent in medieval larger remakings. It appears in Saqṣīnī, *Zahrat al-riyād* 37, and MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Sprenger 2005, 22r, where it is identified with a castle with a thousand houses etc. Cf., however, Asín Palacios, *Logia et agrapha Domini Jesu* 427, where *al-falaq* is a river above which is the seventh layer of hell, in which the damned undergo terrible punishments. Similar is the version in Saqṣīnī, *Zahrat al-riyād* 37.

58 Vázquez, *Desde la penumbra* 163 rightly indicates in a note that it is strange to find here the paradisiacal river. One assumes this to be a misreading on the part of the copyist of the manuscript, or by the editor.

59 See Tottoli, *The story of Jesus and the skull* 247–8; *idem*, *What will be the fate*.

An examination of an Andalusí Arabic version found in the *Manuscrito de Ocaña* studied by Iris Hofman Vannus provides some clues about the original Arabic version on which the Aljamiado one is based.⁶⁰ This particular version of the story of Jesus and the skull is identical with the Aljamiado version in both its general scope and detail; it certainly belongs to the same family of texts. However, there are also differences. The list of sinners and layers is similar but not entirely identical, and sentences are either added or omitted in the Aljamiado version.⁶¹ Other small details suggest that the Aljamiado translator did not use this Arabic version as a direct source, but rather employed a text which was very similar.⁶²

Finally, some further remarks can be made in relation to the categories of sinners and types of punishment recounted in the story of Jesus and the skull. Most of the Arabic versions of the story and the Islamic eschatological tradition as a whole include long lists of sinners, while naming in various contexts the seven layers and the categories of people destined for each. The much-discussed question as to what people inhabit the seven layers of hell was in fact what prompted the introduction of categories of sinners. We have already discussed this issue in a previous contribution, pointing out how different sets of traditions responded to various concerns, and most probably targeted different audiences.⁶³ However, the Aljamiado versions of the story of Jesus and the skull include neither the names of the layers nor the categories of sinners that typically belong to them, that is, Jews, Christians, Mazdeans, etc.⁶⁴ This

60 Hofman Vannus, *Jesus y la calavera*.

61 According to *Manuscrito de Ocaña* 44, the first layer is inhabited by those who waste the property of orphans, the second by perjurers, the third by wine-drinkers, the fourth by those who eat what is *ḥarām*, the fifth by women who calumniate and abuse their husbands with their tongues, and the sixth by women mourners and those who do not cover themselves before men. Finally, in the seventh layer there is a valley named al-Falaq in which various punishments take place.

62 There is no use in listing additions or omissions on one or the other side. In general the similarity is striking and the wording largely identical. In some passages the Aljamiado version omits something or, more significantly, inserts something. These additions, however, cannot be considered the copyist's invention, since they are also attested in Arabic literature more widely. Thus, for instance, the Aljamiado versions add that the skull is white while the *Manuscrito de Ocaña* misses this detail. See Vespertino Rodríguez, *Leyendas aljamiadas* 342. Many other details suggest a similar situation. Note that where the *Manuscrito de Ocaña* has *abwāb al-nār* (*Manuscrito de Ocaña* 44), the Aljamiado version has *puvertas de jahannam* (Vespertino Rodríguez, *Leyendas aljamiadas* 346).

63 See Tottoli, *Tours of Hell*.

64 Polemics of this kind only appear in other narratives, but not in the story of Jesus and the skull. For instance, a Morisco text in Latin characters coming from Tunis, while not

points to the fact that, while a major concern of the Arabic versions of the story of Jesus and the skull is interreligious polemic, the Aljamiado version does not share this concern. Instead, it adds a new category of sinner, namely the wine-drinkers, who are not mentioned in any Arabic version apart from that found in the *Manuscrito de Ocaña*. The Aljamiado version has a specific interest in this question, as we have already noted above, and this specific trait defines the originality of the Aljamiado version. At the same time, however, it conforms perfectly to the way the Arabic versions were diffused and spread all over the Islamic world.

2.5 *The Tale of the Donzella Carcayona and other Texts*

Ideas of Islamic eschatology and the Muslim hell are also related in the story of the *Donzella Carcayona*, which exists in a number of Aljamiado versions. Given that the text originates from within the Aljamiado community itself, the question of how it relates to the body of non-Aljamiado Islamic literature is moot. The contents of this story are significant only in as far as they help us to delineate what ideas about hell circulated in Morisco circles. The story is a fairytale about a dove teaching the tenets of Islam to the *Donzella Carcayona*, and includes a description of the “fire of *jahannam*” awaiting those who disobey God. Pino Valero Cuadra, in his *La leyenda de la Donzella Carcayona*, has recently introduced, described and edited the different versions of this story, using six manuscripts. With regard to hell, the text mentions a place made of fire, iron, stones and so on, in which angels punish the damned. This is followed by a standard description of the seven gates (*puertas*) of hell. The names of these gates are explained in terms of what the fire does to the damned, but there is no mention of the categories of sinners. The names are, from the first to the seventh gate, Jahannam, Lazā, Şaqar/Safalar,⁶⁵ al-Ḥuṭama, Saʿīr, al-Jaḥīm,

naming the layers, mentions the seven *lugares* (places) of hell. In the first there are believers; in the second Jews; in the third Christians; in the fourth and fifth the Gentiles; in the sixth philosophers; and in the seventh the hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*). See *BNM* 9653, 352. It is also relevant in this regard that the *Manuscrito de Ocaña* includes something similar, but again, this does not occur in its version of the story of Jesus and the skull. After giving the names of the doors of hell (*jahannam*, *saʿīr*, *lazā*, *al-jaḥīm*, *saqar*, *al-ḥuṭama*, *al-hāwiya*), the manuscript states that in the first level (*darak*) there are the hypocrites; in the second door (*bāb*) those slandering the Prophet and adoring idols; in the third the Mazdeans; in the fourth the Sabeans; in the fifth the Jews; in the sixth the Christians; and in the seventh the Muslims who committed grave sins (*kabāʿir*). See *Manuscrito de Ocaña* 73.

65 Safalar is the variant given in *Aitona* 229–30.

and al-Hāwiya. Then there is a pit named al-Hab or al-Habhab.⁶⁶ The fire of Jahannam is depicted as pitch black. The story then describes how Jahannam speaks to God on the Day of Judgment, to the despair of young people and women. Mālik and the punishments of hell are mentioned, and finally a—fairly typical—list of the contents of Jahannam is provided.⁶⁷

The description of hell preserved in this narrative fully tallies with the Islamic tradition in that it resembles other enlarged medieval hell narratives that combine quotations from the Quran with material culled from hadith literature while also going into greater detail on aspects such as angelology and the fire, as well as stressing the punishments of hell.⁶⁸ In general, the long description of hell in the story of the *Doncella Carcayona* further underlines the fact that Aljamiado texts strictly adhere to the Islamic idea of hell as it circulated during Morisco times. This phenomenon can be observed not only in the faithful transcriptions of Islamic Arabic texts into Aljamiado, but in original Aljamiado tales such as this one.⁶⁹

Other Aljamiado stories and tales also include references to hell, such as that occurring in a story about a disputation of the Prophet with the Jews, which is found in MS Paris 774.⁷⁰ In one text narrating the life of Jesus we find a discussion of the Arabic alphabet in which it is stated that the letters *wāw* and *zayn* are the names of valleys in *jahannam*.⁷¹ It is also not uncommon to find hell and its punishments mentioned in sermons and parenetic works prompting people to pray.⁷² This attitude is mirrored in early reports in Arabic Islamic literature that detail the punishments that await those who do not perform a certain religious duty. In the texts that describe the punishments in hell we also find the Prophet describing *jahannam* as a place of fire in which there is a deep pit, serpents and so on, and how people who listen to the Quran but do

66 Al-Hab: *Aitona* 229–30; al-Habhab: *Junta* 57, 44v (cf. Ibn Kathīr, *Nihāyat* 382; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-mawḍūʿāt* ii, 434); Guillén Robles, *Leyendas moriscas* i, 202: alhab.

67 Valero Cuadra, *La leyenda de la Doncella Carcayona* 472–7; *Aitona* 229–30, *Junta* 57, 43v–46v; Guillén Robles, *Leyendas moriscas* i, 201–6 (from MS Madrid, BNM Gg 47).

68 Cf. the discussion in Valero Cuadra, *La leyenda de la Doncella Carcayona* 201–21.

69 As regards the text and the edition by Valero Cuadra, R. Suárez García raises some questions as to the origin, diffusion and reconstruction of the text. See his review in *Aljamía*, 14 (2002), 481–9.

70 *Paris* 774, 156 ff.

71 *Aitona* 243; *Junta* 57, 63r. See also Kontzi, *Aljamiado Texte* 658 (from MS Madrid, *Junta* 3): letters *hāʾ*, *wāw*, *zayn*.

72 See for example, *BRAH T19*, 48–9, 295.

not follow its precepts are thrown into *jahannam*.⁷³ These references further corroborate what has already been established, namely that the Aljamiado hell is perfectly in line with the Arabic Islamic idea of hell, which is strictly derived from the Quran and the imagery developed in hadith literature. When a small detail is added here or there, it can be explained by the same processes of remaking that are typical of all of Islamic literature in medieval times.

3 Conclusion

The results emerging from the comparison between Aljamiado hell narratives, their possible Arabic sources, and the other Islamic traditions and literary works to which they are related permit us to suggest a number of things. These are not definitive conclusions, but observations confirming some recent studies and highlighting other noteworthy points.

The first observation to be made concerns the “Islamic” character of Aljamiado literature. Previous scholarly evaluations of this include the well-known statement by Nykl that Aljamiado texts reveal the decline in knowledge of the precepts of the Islamic faith within the Morisco community.⁷⁴ This statement can no longer be considered as tenable, as other scholars’ research over the last decades has also shown. Instead, it seems the reverse is true: the Moriscos were a minority strongly attached to the tenets of their faith and the preservation of their literature,⁷⁵ and the passages on hell in the Aljamiado corpus of texts clearly indicate this.

Vincent Barletta, who analyzed various Aljamiado versions of the story of Muḥammad’s birth, suggested that these texts can be seen as Aljamiado re-elaborations that acquired specificity in particular contexts, for instance, in that of the confrontation with Christians, and thus display considerable variability.⁷⁶ He further maintained that the narrative amplification of single Quranic episodes is typical of Aljamiado-Morisco texts.⁷⁷ This does not appear

73 One report states that the bodies of the people of *jahannam* will have enormous dimensions—this is described in full detail—to be able to suffer greater torment. See López-Morillas, *Textos aljamiados* 118–99 (from ms Madrid, Junta 8). López-Morillas underlines that this idea is not found in the major books of hadith.

74 Nykl, *A Compendium* 29.

75 See on this Barceló/Labarta, *Archivos moriscos* 59 ff.

76 Barletta, *Gestos clandestinos* 130–5.

77 Barletta, Aljamiado-morisco narrative 57–8. The work of Barletta has great merits but, as has been pointed out by Alberto Montaner in a long review, the situation of Morisco texts is not so easy to define. See his review in *Aljamía*, 18 (2006), 243–85, in particular at

to apply to the Aljamiado descriptions of hell or, in general, to the narratives in which they are contained. Reworkings and revisions are not absent, and some elements point to specific contextual concerns, but on the whole the extent of these remakings is completely consistent with what happened with Arabic texts throughout the medieval Islamic world. Variants in wording and in how specific phenomena (sinners, layers, names and so on) are identified do not differentiate Aljamiado versions from those found in other Islamic literature; on the contrary, they demonstrate that Aljamiado texts were subject to the same dynamics of Arabic Islamic literature at the time. The reason for this is simply that, as in other Muslim literatures, Morisco writings display differing attitudes and concerns but were always engaged with existing modes of expression within the Islamic literary traditions. Even though Moriscos were coerced into a peculiar socio-political situation, this situation did not force them to embrace a radically different take on the Muslim literary heritage. On the contrary, the specific Morisco context gave rise to strongly conservative attitudes, resulting in faithful translations from the Arabic. When new versions were produced this happened according to typical Muslim conventions such as were in use in Muslim majority societies. Variability is one of the main characteristics of the late medieval Muslim production of this kind of literature. For instance, the variability that Harvey noted when studying the reception in Aljamiado literature of Abū l-Layth al-Samarqandī's *Tanbīh al-ghāfilīn*⁷⁸ indicates that medieval Muslim texts and traditions were reworked in the Morisco milieu according to mechanisms that unfolded elsewhere as well. Thus, the variability found in Aljamiado texts cannot be considered to reflect a pronounced context-specific concern for communal identity.⁷⁹

One question of great relevance is the relation of the Aljamiado texts to the original Arabic versions. As is evident in the descriptions of hell contained in the narratives discussed in this paper, there was a clear tendency in Aljamiado literature to produce versions that were relatively short in comparison to the body of late medieval enlargements and remakings in Arabic. The problem is how to know if this was because Aljamiado translators chose short Arabic versions or because they reduced and summarized the original texts. In the case of Aljamiado copies of Aljamiado texts, one sees a tendency towards reduction:

246, 257, and 279–80, where he discusses some specific points resulting from the specific Morisco situation that are not taken into consideration by Barletta.

78 Harvey, *Muslims in Spain* 147.

79 Pace Reuter, Aljamiado narratives 135. Reuter ignores the fact that texts and traditions on Muḥammad's excellence and its increased relevance were not peculiar to the Morisco environment but were quite common in the Muslim medieval world. See *ibid.*, 140.

new versions usually abridge and summarize older ones, while enlargements never occur. This is likely to have been an economic measure meant to preserve and include more texts in one manuscript.⁸⁰ A number of studies that shed light on this question suggest that short Aljamiado texts are not the result of summarizing activity but of the choice of specific Arabic versions for translation. For example, as Iris Hofmann Vannus has observed, the Arabic version of the story of Jesus and the skull in the *Manuscrito de Ocaña*, which was probably written in the middle of ninth/fifteenth century, is closely connected to later, short Aljamiado versions.⁸¹ Other scholars have highlighted the same phenomenon, stating for instance that the reduced versions in the Aljamiado corpus are closely related to the Arabic sources from which they derive,⁸² or alternatively affirming that the absence of exactly corresponding Arabic versions should not be overinterpreted.⁸³

Finally, there is one other question prompted by the analysis of the description of hell in these texts. This concerns the textual condition of the narratives as they were first translated from the Arabic and then underwent further copying and diffusion in the tenth/sixteenth century. I would suggest that it is in this respect, rather than in regard to content, that the diffusion and use of the versions bears the mark of the particular situation of the Moriscos. This point has been touched upon by scholars demonstrating that the faithful reproduction of texts is a sign of the specific Morisco situation.⁸⁴ It is true that a feeling of anxiety and concern about the future of the community prompted the circulation of this literature in the Morisco community, as well as the production of collections of miscellanea.⁸⁵ First and foremost, however, the situation in which the Moriscos found themselves brought about a conservative attitude, more conservative than that prevailing in other Islamic environments in which texts and their various versions were transmitted. The manuscripts studied by Martínez de Castilla Muñoz provide evidence that almost all the transmitted copies follow bipartite ways of transmission; that is, at the beginning of the

80 Cf. Martínez de Castilla Muñoz, *Una biblioteca morisca* 35–40.

81 Hofman Vannus, *El Hadīṭ de El profeta Muḥammad y el niño huérfano*.

82 Kobbervig, *Un cuento aljamiado* 52.

83 See Harvey, *La leyenda morisca de Ibrahim*; Kobbervig, *Un cuento aljamiado*. It must be pointed out that the use of Aljamiado, Latin or Arabic texts sometimes corresponds to the specific usages in different Spanish regions. Manuscripts that come from a region where the use of Arabic was still alive are different in this respect from those coming from regions where Muslims already used Spanish. In consequence, Arabic and Aljamiado manuscripts with similar contents may not reflect geographical contiguity and dependence resulting from direct translations.

84 On this point see above all Barletta, *Gestos clandestinos*.

85 See Reuter, *Aljamiado narratives* 133.

transmission process there were only one or at most two texts⁸⁶ (three in a few cases).⁸⁷ Copyists relied on these texts without ever translating original Arabic texts anew.⁸⁸ This means that after a set of Arabic texts on which Aljamiado translations could be based was put into circulation, it was no longer possible to access other Arabic versions, due to the isolation and difficult condition of the Moriscos. It may also be the case that Moriscos of later times preferred to stick to the Spanish of the already translated versions,⁸⁹ sometimes reproducing them faithfully and sometimes abridging or reworking them,⁹⁰ rather than to produce new translations. There are some instances of new translations of the same text or of a previously untranslated text, but overall, to use Montaner Frutos's phrase, the Morisco copyists reproduced *en cadena* ("in chain") from one and the same source. It is important to observe that this technique of transmission is more conservative than that which one finds in the Arabic literature of other regions of the Islamic world. Medieval Arabic bodies of literature, as in the case of the story of the night journey and ascension of the Prophet, and in that of Jesus and the skull, are characterized by a great degree of variation and a proliferation of different texts. By contrast, Aljamiado texts preserve the same text or remaking in as many as three or four different copies. This is a quite unique feature and as such deserves to be highlighted, showing as it does the conservatism at work in the diffusion of Aljamiado narratives.

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- 86 On the bipartite stemma in Aljamiado *mi'rāj* texts see Kontzi, Problemas 122–4.
 87 See Martínez de Castilla Muñoz, *Una biblioteca morisca* 361, 366.
 88 See *ibid.* 303–4. This bipartite pattern of transmission is not to be confused with the problem, raised by Joseph Bédier, of bipartite stemmata in textual editing.
 89 No doubt knowledge of Arabic decreased; see Gómez Renau, *La lengua aljamiada* 76.
 90 On reworkings of the same text in variant manuscripts bearing the signs of variation but also of textual filiation, see Valero Cuadra, *La leyenda de la Doncella Carcayona* 27–33. In some cases, this resulted in the production of new versions; see Martínez de Castilla Muñoz, *Una biblioteca morisca* 388. On the dialectics between faithful reproduction and reworking, see Montaner Frutos, *En torno a la tradicionalidad* 349.

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Curse Signs

The Artful Rhetoric of Hell in Safavid Iran

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The scholarly study of Islamic eschatology has tended to focus on textual sources that deal with the signs of the hour, last judgment, and otherworldly spheres and events. During the pre-modern period, however, a number of manuscripts produced in Persian and Turkic cultural spheres were expanded by pictorial images. Such paintings added a distinctly graphic quality to heaven and hell, whose visual details resulted from creative expression via both word and image production. The most important of these illustrated manuscripts are two Timurid “Books of the Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascension” (*Mi’rājnāmas*), Safavid “Books of Omens” (*Fālnāmas*), and several Ottoman “Conditions of the Resurrection” (*Aḥwāl al-qiyāma*). The *Mi’rājnāmas* of ca. 1430–60 contain the most elaborate series of paintings depicting hell and the torture of sinners in the history of Islamic art (Figure 13.1).¹ Equally important yet less well-known are the Ottoman illustrated copies of the *Aḥwāl al-qiyāma*, possibly produced in Istanbul around 1600.² Although the latter text is indebted to earlier eschatological treatises composed in Arabic,³ the various manuscripts’ paintings—including one illustrating the chasm between heaven and hell (Figure 13.2)—appear to connect closely with the apocalyptic imagery developed in antecedent Timurid “Books of Ascension” and Safavid “Books of Divination.”⁴

1 On the Timurid *Mi’rājnāma* of ca. 840/1436, see Séguy, *Miraculous journey*. On both *Mi’rājnāmas*, see Gruber, *Timurid Book of Ascension*, esp. 338–44; Sims, *The Nahj al-Faradis*.

2 For a brief mention of the Ottoman *Aḥwāl al-qiyāma* manuscripts, see Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 74 and n. 37. For these and other Ottoman manuscripts depicting the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell, see And, *Minyatürlerle* 240–65.

3 For a Turkish transliteration of the illustrated Ottoman *Aḥwāl al-qiyāma* manuscript in the Süleymaniye Library, see Yıldız, *Aḥwāl-i kıyāmet*. For the kind of Arabic-language “Conditions of Resurrection” text it appears to have drawn upon, see Wolff, *Kitāb Aḥwāl al-qiyāma*.

4 On Safavid and Ottoman *Fālnāmas*, see most especially Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens*; Welch, *The Falnameh*; Bağcı, *Images for foretelling*.



FIGURE 13.1 *The punishment of sinners who did not pay the tithe. Anonymous, Mi'rajnāma (Book of Ascension), Herat, ca. 1436.*

BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, PARIS, SUPPL. TURC 190, FOLIO 63R.



FIGURE 13.2 *The inhabitants and angels of heaven (on the right) and the demons, hellfire, scorpions, and snakes (on the left). Anonymous, Ahwāl al-Qiyāma (Conditions of Resurrection), possibly Istanbul, ca. 1600.*

STAATSBIBLIOTHEK ZU BERLIN, BERLIN, MS. OR. OCT. 1596, FOLIO 27R.

In these Persian and Turkic illustrated manuscripts of the Prophet's ascension, the conditions of resurrection, and image-based divination, paintings helped convey concepts of the otherworld through the language of visual form, itself a powerful non-verbal mechanism that encodes and promotes a variety of ideological messages to a cultured audience conversant in signs—be these artistic motifs or the signs of the hour (*ishārāt al-sā'a*). By engaging with the sign, or *ishāra*, artists in effect sought to convey the immediacy of abstract soteriological concepts. As such, these pictorial representations paraded as manifest reality, optically observable and only secondarily mediated by language. Moreover, such images conveyed a number of narratives and worldviews, while their visual codes abided by, and in turn reinforced, political and religious agendas whose frequent reiteration (through texts, images, storytelling, sermonizing, and other private and public forms of communication) in effect amounted to convention.⁵ Picture-signs thus can be said to flow from as well as to strengthen the otherwise constructed concept of “tradition.”

In Islamic lands, traditions about heaven and hell were quite pliable. They varied across time and space, and often took center stage in religious debates. During the early modern period, when eschatological imagery reached its peak in Persian and Ottoman painterly traditions, heaven and hell partook in a shared language of millenarianism. The growth in apocalyptic imagery also intersected with the Sunni Ottoman—Shi'i Safavid divide that emerged over the course of the tenth/sixteenth century, most especially during the decades leading up to the *hijri* millennium. At this time, the occult and prognosticative arts flourished in order to assist individuals chart a proper path toward Doomsday, itself described as an impending moment that would herald either salvation or damnation.⁶ To secure a felicitous course of action, individuals sought auguries from the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfiz,⁷ the Quran,⁸ and, last but certainly not least, illustrated books of omens. Within the latter, Safavid and Ottoman images of the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell could support a number of sectarian messages. In some instances, Safavid paintings might argue for the legitimacy of Shi'i Islam and the authority of the imamate while Ottoman illustrations might forward the Sunni cause. Thus both the concept and image of hell were matters of creative contention at this moment of increasing sectarian differentiation in the Islamic world.

5 On the sign as “saturated through and through with cultural convention,” see Potts, Sign 31.

6 Babayan, Cosmological order; Fleischer, Ancient wisdom and new sciences.

7 On the use of Ḥāfiz's *Dīvān* for prognostication, see Ḥāfiz, *Fāl-i dīvān-i ghazāliyat-i Ḥāfiz bā ma'nī*; Schmidt, Ḥāfiz.

8 On Safavid divination by the Quran (*fāl-i Qur'ān*), see Gruber, The ‘restored’ Shi'i *mushaf*; Tourkin, Use of the Qur'ān.

Although there exist a number of early modern Persian and Ottoman eschatological texts and images, this study offers a tightly focused analysis of Safavid cursing rituals and how these intersect with one particular Persian painting representing the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell (Figure 13.5). Through an in-depth exploration of its contents and motifs, religious and historical setting, related historical and theological texts, and its use in practices of divination, it will be argued that hell could at times function as a curse sign within a Safavid cultural milieu. Indeed, the Shi'i practice of ritually cursing Sunni and Ottoman opponents flourished in Safavid religious practices during the mid-tenth/sixteenth century, at which time the Last Judgment painting was executed. Via royal and popular storytelling, preaching in mosques and public squares, and practices of divination, Shi'i maledictions intersected with the visual arts in a number of social and cultural arenas. As a result, in a number of instances hell could be envisioned as the ultimate punishment not only for unbelievers and sinners but, more precisely, as a sign of damnation for opponents of Imam 'Alī, the imamate, the Safavid state, and Shi'i Islam in general.

1 Safavid Cursing

In Safavid Iran, a number of paintings promoting the Shi'i cause were developed by artists enjoying royal patronage. The implementation of overtly sectarian imagery was precipitated by the dynasty's founder, Shāh Ismā'īl I's (r. 907–930/1501–24) declaration of Imami Shi'i Islam as the official religion of the Safavid domain even though he himself harked from more mystical-messianic origins.⁹ A number of Safavid chronicles describe Ismā'īl's declaration of religious affiliation as part of his coronation address upon his accession to the throne. In their descriptions of the shah's coronation, these histories also note that he delivered a sermon (*khuṭba*) in which he publicly professed the *walāya*—that is, declaring that “Alī is the Friend of God” (*'Alī walī Allāh*)—and then cursed the first three caliphs, Abū Bakr, 'Uthmān, and 'Umar.¹⁰ During and after his coronation, Shāh Ismā'īl's Qızılbaş (“Red Head”) forces helped implement the ritual curse by intimidating and subjugating those who continued to abide by the Sunni faith and refused to damn the three *rāshidūn* and other Sunni foes. Later Safavid sources also inform us that Sunnis at times were threatened with decapitation for refusing to vilify the three caliphs.¹¹

9 Babayan, *Mystics*; eadem, Safavid synthesis.

10 Quinn and Melville, Safavid historiography 241; Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra'īyan* 47.

11 *Ibid.*, 54, 57, 67.

This early Safavid method of “proactive” conversion to Shi‘i Islam is attested to in at least one surviving eleventh/seventeenth-century Safavid manuscript illustration depicting Shāh Ismā‘īl’s accession to the throne (Figure 13.3).¹² The young ruler is shown wielding a sword as he stands on a stepped pulpit resembling a minbar, while the immanent Imam ‘Alī holds an open document—possibly declaring Ismā‘īl’s divinely decreed right to rulership—as he hovers above him in a *mīhrāb*-like niche. On the right, the shah’s Qızılbaş forces—identifiable by their distinctive red headgear called “Ḥaydar’s crown” (*tāj-i Ḥaydari*)¹³—approach a group of men on the left. Ismā‘īl himself holds his sword aloft, apparently ready to assail (perhaps even decapitate) any member of the assembly who refuses to abide to the Shi‘i faith and engage in ritual cursing. This form of sectarian subjection is so astonishing to several men that they bite their index fingers, a typical Persian gesture of astonishment, fear, and grief.¹⁴ With action and suspense, this image potentially records early methods of Safavid conversion to Shi‘ism by the sword, not the pen.

By the reign of Shāh Ṭahmāsp I (r. 930–84/1524–76), the practice of ritual cursing became more institutionalized through the establishment of a corps of professional “disavowers” (*tabarrā’iyyān*). These cursers formed part of the ruler’s entourage in the palace and they also accompanied him while on the road. Additionally, they oversaw public cursing in mosques, markets, squares, and quarters in various cities, where they also doubled-up as spies.¹⁵ Without a doubt, they formed part of Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s larger anti-Sunni project to Shi‘ify Persian lands as well as to distinguish himself from his Ottoman counterparts.¹⁶

As a case in point, in his letter to Sultan Süleimān I (r. 926–74/1520–66), Ṭahmāsp linguistically and symbolically equates the third caliph ‘Uthmān to the eponymous founder and subsequent rulers of the House of Osman, all of whom were, to his mind, deserving of divine punishment. Ṭahmāsp warns the Ottoman monarch that he has gone astray of the right path—of the guidance of the *ahl al-bayt*—and that if he is to seek salvation, then he must proclaim

12 This painting appears in an illustrated history of Shāh Ismā‘īl produced in Iran during the 1090s/1680s. Detailed information about the manuscript can be found in Morton, Date and Attribution. A list of its paintings and its relation to other illustrated chronicles of Shāh Ismā‘īl are addressed in Wood, *The Tarikh-i Jahanara*, esp. 104, Table 3.

13 On the *tāj-i Ḥaydarī*, see in particular Moin, *The millennial sovereign* 81, 89–90.

14 See the entry on “finger” (*angusht*) in Steingass, *Persian-English dictionary* 114, especially the verbal expression “to place the finger in one’s mouth” (*angusht ba dandān gazīdan*, *angusht bar dahān nihādan*, and *angusht bar giriftan*) as well as the genitive construct for the “finger of amazement” (*angusht-i taḥayyur/ta‘ajjub/ḥayrān/ḥayrat*).

15 Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra’iyan* 48, 51.

16 On Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s anti-Sunni activities, see Stanfield-Johnson, *Sunni revival*.



FIGURE 13.3 *The young Shāh Ismā'īl ascends to the throne, Ta'rikh-i Jahāngushā (The History of the World Conqueror), Iran, 1680s. BRITISH LIBRARY, LONDON, OR. 3248, FOLIO 74R.*

his obedience to ‘Alī.¹⁷ He then addresses the Ottoman request that the Shi‘is stop cursing the companions of the Prophet, retorting with aplomb: “Until the Last Judgment we will lift our heads from the dust of the grave and will curse ‘Uthmān, Abū Bakr, and ‘Umar.” Per Ṭahmāsp’s reasoning, this practice must continue because the three companions, much like the Ottoman dynasts themselves, are the evil “oppressors of the family of the Prophet and the enemies of the *ahl al-bayt*.”¹⁸ This particular conflation of past grievances and present politicking permeates Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s letter, much as they are elided in Safavid curse lists that include the names of Sunni enemies ranging from ‘Uthmān to the Ottomans.¹⁹ Such accusations did not go unnoticed or unanswered by the Ottoman Sunni ruler and members of his religious elite.²⁰

Ritual cursing was a hallmark of Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s reign. The “disavowers” under his predecessor Shāh Ismā‘īl I comprised a relatively impromptu force, while his successor Shāh Ismā‘īl II (r. 984–5/1576–8) banned the practice of *tabarru’* altogether. To a large extent, the institutionalization and spread of cursing practices accelerated after 917/1511, when ‘Alī ‘Abd al-‘Alī al-Karakī (d. 940/1534) penned his treatise entitled “Breath of Divinity in Cursing Witchcraft and Idolatry” (*Nafaḥāt al-lāhūt fī la’n al-jibt wa’l-ṭāghūt*). Besides his treatise on the virtues of cursing, this Safavid Imami Shi‘i jurist was appointed *shaykh al-islām* (chief jurist) by Shāh Ṭahmāsp, from whom he received the authority to hire and dismiss all religious and military officials throughout Iran.²¹ Although al-Karakī’s oeuvre remains to be studied in detail, it is clear that he held a highly esteemed and powerful position and hence commanded profound influence over religious affairs and practices within Iran. In addition,

17 Navā‘ī, *Shāh Ṭahmāsp* 227.

18 Ibid., 228–9.

19 For a discussion of the ‘Uthmān-Ottoman linguistic elision in Safavid ritual cursing, see Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 126–8. On the Qızılbaş notables who had cursers who preceded them in parades while crying out curses against the Ottomans, see Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra’iyan* 62.

20 The Ottomans likewise accused Shi‘is, especially the Qızılbaş, of disbelief. In his collections of fatwas, for example, Sultan Süleimān’s *shaykh al-Islām*, Ebüssu‘ūd Efendī, accuses the Qızılbaş of disbelief and innovation (*küfr ü bid‘atler*) because of their cursing of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. He also notes that whosoever curses the Sunnis, from the Prophet’s companions to Mu‘āwiya, deserves punishment (*ta‘zīr*) and must be thrown into jail (*hapīs*). See Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislām Ebüssu‘ūd Efendī* 174–5, 178.

21 On al-Karakī, see Abisaab, *Converting Persia* 27; idem, *The ulama of Jabal ‘Amil*; idem, *Karakī*; Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra’iyan* 59–60; Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 126; Arjomand, *Two Decrees*; Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 306–7; Newman, *The myth of clerical migration*.

his strong anti-Sunni views are palpable in a number of Safavid elite and popular practices. One of these is ritual cursing, which, along with other cultural and religious activities during the Safavid century, served to enforced Shi'i ideology and religious cohesion within Persian lands.

Al-Karakī's treatise on cursing offers a fascinating "manifesto" on the merits of cursing and vilifying (*la'n va-ta'n*) Sunni opponents, itself a critical component of Safavid sectarian belief systems concerned with proper creed and hence salvation, heaven, and hell. In its structure, al-Karakī's text looks somewhat like a *tafsīr*, with selected Quranic verses that mention the benefits of cursing, followed by an overtly anti-Sunni explanation of the verses' meanings. The extracted verses put to this particular Shi'i hermeneutical exercise include, among others, "The curse of God is on disbelievers" (Q 2:89), "Certainly God will condemn the oppressors" (Q 11:18), and "Those who offend God and His Prophet are cursed in this world and the next. A shameful punishment awaits them" (Q 33:57).²² Al-Karakī explains that the damned disbelievers (*kāfirūn*) and oppressors (*zālimūn*) who will be punished on earth and in the afterworld (*fi'l-dunyā wa'l-ākhirā*) are Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and any individual who was unjust towards 'Alī and the *ahl al-bayt*. Cursing these Sunni enemies, he argues, is not just permitted (*jā'iz*) but a requirement (*wājib*), because expressing "hatred of God's enemies forms an integral part of one's faith (*īmān*)."²³ Ergo, for al-Karakī cursing and hatred are a virtuous endeavor and a "most beloved form of devotion" (*aḥabb al-'ibādāt*).²⁴

Al-Karakī systematically aims to prove that the first three *rāshidūn* are deserving of ritual curse on earth as well as punishment in the afterlife. The reasons for retribution that he lists are many.²⁵ For example, he accuses Abū Bakr of having denied Fāṭima her rightful inheritance after the Prophet died; he castigates 'Umar as insincere in his support of Muḥammad since he fled the battlefield at Uḥud and Ḥunayn;²⁶ and, last but certainly not least, he reserves

22 Karakī, *Nafahāt al-lāhūt* 20.

23 Ibid., 26.

24 Ibid., 21.

25 For a list and study of Shi'i accusations against the Prophet's companions, see Kohlberg, *Some Imāmī Shī'ī views*.

26 'Umar is also accused of having denied the Prophet a pen and tablet on his deathbed so that he could write an explicit will designating 'Alī as his rightful successor. This Shi'i accusation against 'Umar made him not only the subject of ritual cursing but also the centerpiece of a later Safavid festival known as the "feast of the killing of 'Umar" (*'ūd-i 'Umar-kushān*). In these festivals sponsored by Shāh 'Abbās I (r. 995–1038/1587–1629), straw mannequins and effigies (threaded with animal droppings) of the Sunni antagonist were ritually cursed, murdered, and burned in the main square of Isfahan. The curses

his most acerbic comments for ‘Uthmān, whom he accuses of having burned the Quran.²⁷ Al-Karakī’s attack on ‘Uthmān is surely intertwined with several Shi‘i discourses on the Quran, which argue that the ‘Uthmānic codex (*muṣḥaf-i ‘Uthmānī*) was censured at the hands of the Sunnis. As a result of this alteration, references to ‘Alī and his vicegerency (*walāya*), the *ahl al-bayt*, and the Imams were expunged from the Quranic recension produced under ‘Uthmān’s supervision during the middle of the first/seventh century. Thus, the Quran of ‘Alī (*muṣḥaf-i ‘Alī*) underwent falsification (*tahrīf*), its original form only to be restored at the End of Time.²⁸

Although Safavid attitudes towards the ‘Uthmānic codex were not as antagonistic as those found in pre-Buwayhid texts, it is nevertheless clear from al-Karakī’s treatise on cursing that narratives about ‘Uthmān burning copies of the Quran were revived in Safavid clerical circles. For al-Karakī, ‘Uthmān’s putative burning of the Quran is “enough to show unbelief (*kuf̄r*). No one does such a thing unless he is a disbeliever (*kāfir*) in the religion of the Prophet (*dīn al-Muṣṭafā*).”²⁹ ‘Uthmān is here divested of the believer’s title of “Muslim” and excommunicated from the Islamic *umma*. Along with ‘Umar and Abū Bakr, he thus joins the ranks of the disbelievers (*kāfirūn*), oppressors (*zālimūn*), and sinners (*fāsiqūn*) mentioned in the Quran as deserving of damnation and infernal tortures (*‘adhāb*).³⁰ Put simply, the only real Muslim believer (*mu‘min*) is he who believes in ‘Alī.³¹

One last point raised by al-Karakī addresses another significant topic while also explaining his treatise’s peculiar title, “Breath of Divinity in Cursing Witchcraft (*jibt*) and Idolatry (*tāghūt*).” He reports that ritual cursing was practiced by the earliest members of the Prophet’s household, and it is therefore due to religious precedent that Safavid believers should emulate this meritorious

included a number of foul-mouthed invectives, including calling ‘Umar a “son of a whore, son of a dog, and excrement of the earth.” See Calmard, Shi‘i rituals and power 161–3; Dakake, Hiding in plain sight 346; Massé, *Croyances et coutumes* i, 166–9.

27 Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-lāhūt* 73–4, 99–115, 132.

28 On Shi‘i interpretations of the Quran and the question of *tahrīf*, see in particular Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi, *Revelation and falsification* 24–30; Kohlberg, Some notes; Lawson, Note for the study of a ‘Shi‘ī Qur‘ān’; Tisdall, Shi‘ah additions.

29 Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-lāhūt* 132.

30 For the Shi‘i doctrine of accusing the Prophet Muḥammad’s companions of disbelief (*takfir ṣāḥāba*), see Kohlberg, Some Imāmī Shi‘i views 148.

31 For al-Karakī’s use of the term heretics (Q 5:47: “Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are heretics”), from which he extrapolates a detailed roster of the first three caliphs’ false decrees and evil deeds, see his *Nafaḥāt al-lāhūt* 99–113, esp. 104.

tradition of execrating the enemy. He notes, for instance, that ‘Ali himself used to ritually curse Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, whom he maligned as the “two idols of the Quraysh” (*ṣanamay Quraysh*).³² Although Shi‘i maledictions also included ‘Uthmān—forming a triumvirate of cursed ones (*malā’in thalātha*)³³—Abū Bakr and ‘Umar tended to be coupled as one unit. As a conjoined entity, they are referred to in Shi‘i textual sources by the subversive code names *jibt* and *tāghūt*, both of which mean false idol and appear in the title of al-Karakī’s treatise.³⁴ Without a doubt, the Safavid cleric forwards his anti-Sunni discourse by lifting both terms from the Quranic verses that enquire: “Have you not seen those who were given a portion of the Book (*al-kitāb*), who believe in false deities and idols (*al-jibt wa’l-tāghūt*)? [...] They are the ones whom God cursed (*la’anuhum Allāh*), and those who are cursed by God will have nobody to protect them” (Q 4:51–2). Sunni foes—past and present—are here shown by al-Karakī to be merely idolaters, polytheists, and heretics, whose ultimate punishment will be cursing by God. In Safavid Shi‘i theory and practice, then, the curse is not just a repeated slogan of dismissal or the assertion of a maledicting formula. Much more precisely, it is telling Sunni “non-believers” to go to hell.

During the Safavid century, cursing functioned as an orally uttered sign in early attempts to draw clearer boundaries between Sunnism and Shi‘ism. As Abisaab notes in this regard, “it made allegiance to the latter almost inconceivable without a rejection of the former.”³⁵ In some sense, the Shi‘i rejection of Sunni figures is tantamount to a breaking of icons, in which an agent impounds his opponents’ idols, figuratively obliterates them, and jettisons them to hellfire.³⁶ Such iconoclastic acts—be they oral, visual, or material—are never purely destructive, however. They creatively help build contrasting systems of faith and a new world order by radically transforming sacred entities and what they signify. Indeed, via Safavid maledictory metaphors, the founding fathers of Sunni Islam are symbolically recast into idols that are damned to hell. This “semioclasm”³⁷ causes a break in meaning through which iconoclastic acts are intended to invigorate and propagate the “true” (Shi‘i) faith through its “most beloved act of devotion”: that is, cursing and rejecting idols (Sunni figureheads) and damning to hell their idol-worshippers (members of the Sunni

32 Ibid., 161.

33 Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 122.

34 Dakake, *Hiding in plain sight* 344.

35 Abisaab, *Converting Persia* 27.

36 On the destruction of oppositional idols, see Latour, *What is iconoclasm?* 27–8.

37 On the Barthesian notion of “semioclasm” and semiotic breaks in meaning within iconoclastic acts, see Rambelli and Reinders, *What does iconoclasm create?* 24, 36.

community). In Safavid Iran, Shi'ī ritual cursing was therefore nothing if not an iconoclastic illocutionary sign.

The Safavid conceptualization of idols transcended textual sources such as al-Karakī's treatise since it formed part of ritual cursing that took place in mosques, markets, city squares, and other public arenas. For these reasons, discourses about idols benefited from popular currency, influencing other spheres of Persian cultural and artistic expression during the tenth/sixteenth century. One such field of production was the painterly arts. Beyond the themes of idolatry and iconoclasm, Safavid paintings attest to an interest in, and intriguing alteration of, the story of the Prophet Muḥammad's return to Mecca and his breaking of the idols at the Ka'ba. Sunni biographical and historical sources describe the event as Islam's decisive triumph over Arab polytheism and hence a restitution of the monotheistic faith under the aegis of the last Messenger of God. Shi'ī texts, however, expand the story by describing how Muḥammad lifted 'Alī on his shoulders so that his son-in-law could take a leading roll in this pivotal event.

While some Safavid manuscript paintings depict 'Alī on Muḥammad's shoulders, others Shi'ify the episode further by depicting 'Alī walking on top of the Ka'ba—where he swings his mace at silver and gold idols on its roof—while Muḥammad stands below, appearing as if a mere assistant and witness to the main action above (Figure 13.4). Even the gold pagan statuette on the ground is crushed under the feet of a little black devil, and not by the Prophet himself. This sectarian picturing of Muḥammad's biography is without a doubt inspired by Safavid-period *sīras*, including the painting's accompanying Persian text, Nizām's biographical poem entitled *Āthār al-Muẓaffar* ("The Exploits of the Victorious") completed in 974/1567.³⁸ Like other illustrated manuscripts of the Islamic tradition, the painting thus illustrates a particular narrative episode contained within the text proper.

Yet the image's meanings and messages do not simply halt there. On the contrary, it expands the textual narrative by including several iconographic details that are especially noteworthy within a Safavid sign system aiming for sectarian differentiation via ritual cursing and other overt tactics of distancing. First and foremost, the inscribed band at the top the *kiswa* does

38 Nizām's *Āthār al-Muẓaffar* presents a Shi'ī view on Islamic history. It is a Persian-language mathnavi poem that was composed during the reign of Shāh Ismā'īl I, i.e., during the first two decades of the tenth/sixteenth century. Its preliminary sections include a discussion of the Prophet, the Prophet's light, and how this light was invested in the Imams. On this Shi'ī historical text, its illustrated copies, and the painting illustrated in Figure 13.4, see Rührdanz, *Illustrated Manuscripts*; Wright, *Islam* 182, fig. 135.



FIGURE 13.4 'Ali breaks the idols atop the Ka'ba as Muḥammad stands below, Niẓām al-Muẓaffar (*The Exploits of the Victorious*), Iran, 1567. CHESTER BEATTY LIBRARY, DUBLIN, PER. 235, FOL. 55R.

not include the *shahāda* but rather the (repeated) Shi'ī *walāya*, which proclaims that “There is no God but God, Muḥammad is His Prophet, and ‘Alī is the friend of God.”³⁹ As noted previously, the Shi'ī *walāya*—also known as the “third *shahāda*”—is reported to have been declared by Shāh Ismā'īl I upon his accession to the throne. Thereafter, it became more widespread in Iranian visual culture via epigraphic inscriptions on buildings and Safavid manuscript paintings, especially those depicting the *kiswa* as a backdrop to ‘Alī’s (and not Muḥammad’s) breaking of the idols at the Ka’ba. Just as the Shi'ī *walāya* adds a third and final codicil praising the vicegerency of ‘Alī, so too does the painting insert its own visual clause heralding the imam’s leading role in the foundational iconoclastic act of Islamic history.

The Shi'ī *walāya* is related to both communal prayer and ritual cursing. First, in Safavid Iran the call to prayer (*adhān*) was similarly expanded from Shāh Ismā'īl’s time onward. At times, the traditional dual formula, “Come to prayer, come to salvation,” was augmented by two additional phrases inviting the Shi'ī faithful to “come to the best of deeds,” and that “Muḥammad and ‘Alī are the best of mankind.”⁴⁰ According to Safavid belief and practice, then, prayer is an invitation to salvation not only through the performance of good deeds but, just as critically, by following the path of the best of men (*khayr al-bashar*), Muḥammad and ‘Alī. Salvation is the promise of eternal life for those who believe and enact the “true” or “proper” faith, i.e., Shi'ī Islam. Evidently, those who do not are doomed to hell.

Secondly, the Shi'ī *walāya* was closely intertwined with—and construed as the polar opposite of—ritual cursing in Safavid Iran. The believer’s association with ‘Alī and the Imams was referred to as *walāya*, a politico-spiritual rapprochement or drawing close that appears to have been articulated in contradistinction to *barā'a*, itself a form of distancing or dissociation from a perceived enemy. The double credo of avowing and disavowing created a clear binary, sharpening the divide between Shi'ī and Sunni Islam. Without a doubt, this attempt at signaling a chasm was delivered through both oral and visual signs.

Returning to the painting of the breaking of the idols at the Ka’ba, a similarly split structure of saved and damned in the image’s foreground can be detected. Here, it appears that, on the left, Muḥammad, ‘Alī, and the young, beardless Ḥasan and Ḥusayn find salvation through their iconoclastic act while two individuals on the right—might they be the “false idols,” Abū Bakr and ‘Umar?—seem to follow the little black devil below. As such, the manuscript painting

39 On the Shi'ī *walāya*, see Takim, From *bid'a* to *sunna*.

40 Stanfield-Johnson, The Tabarra'īyan 57; and Calmard, Les rituels shiites 115.

invites its elite reader-viewer to witness the superiority of ‘Alī, to declare the Shi‘i *walāya*, and to reject all idols, be these statuettes of pagan gods or the double *jibt* and *ṭāghūt* of Sunni Islam.

2 Picturing Judgment Day

Just like ritual cursing, Safavid paintings could function as double signs positing *tawallā* against *tabarru’*. Unlike textual sources and oral execrations, however, images offer their viewers the “intensified illusion of having unmediated access to meaning,”⁴¹ since visual signs give the appearance of circumventing the intervention of a verbal code. Certainly this crafted semblance of manifest reality does not exist *qua* reality; rather, it is formed through an operation of codes to create what Stuart Hall has called a “communicative event.”⁴² In occasions of avowing and disavowing, both Safavid preacher and artist encode their messages for respondents and observers who have benefited from exposure to Shi‘i religious and political discourses in mosques, palaces, squares, and other arenas. Within Safavid Iran, the communication of Shi‘i state ideology was widespread, its codes of engagement more or less naturalized as a “given” by the mid-tenth/sixteenth century.⁴³

At this time, sermonizing and the painterly arts became closely aligned, both within Safavid palatial spheres and more public contexts. One example of the intertwining of homiletic and pictorial practices is the practice of religious storytelling with pictures. As mentioned previously, textual sources record the presence of official cursers at Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s court; they also make it clear that such cursers mingled with displayers of religious images and popular preachers in the main square of Tabriz. The most valuable record of this Safavid intermixing of cursing, preaching, and image-making is without a doubt the travelogue penned by the Italian traveler Michele Membré after his 1539–42 trip to the court of Shāh Ṭahmāsp. He describes these crowded public “communicative events” in the following words:

The Safavids paint figures, like the figure of ‘Alī on horseback and with a sword, and when people see this figure said to be ‘Alī, they grab their ears and take off their hats, as if in reverence. In their squares, there are many

41 Potts, Sign 31.

42 Hall, Encoding, decoding 92.

43 On the sign’s strongly fixed ideological value, and thus its position as a ‘natural’ sign, see *ibid.*, 97.

Persian popular preachers (*zaratani*, lit. “charlatans”) seated on a carpet on the ground. They have a number of large paintings (*carte longhe*) with figures. These preachers carry in their hands small sticks with which they show figure after figure. They predict the future and tell stories based on these figures, for which people give them money. There are still others with books in hand, from which they read about the battles of ‘Alī and the wars of ancient kings and Shah Isma‘il. People give money to hear [these stories]. Still others, known as the “cursers” (*tepperrai* = *tabarrā’ī*), [are paid to] curse the Ottomans (*Ottomani*) and sing songs about how the Shah should go to Constantinople and install his brother Sam Mirza on the throne.⁴⁴

Membré offers a lively eyewitness description of Safavid folk practices in the main square of Tabriz. Here, preachers, cursers, augury-tellers, and storytellers armed with large painted images and hand-held manuscripts entertained the *hoi poloi* with Persian tales of kings, both past and present, and the battles of Shi‘i heroes, from Imam ‘Alī to Shāh Ismā‘il. Among the crowds were cursers, who denounced not just Sunni figureheads but the Ottomans as well. It is also clear from Membré’s account that picture storytellers delivered their image-based performances with sticks that functioned as pointers.⁴⁵ Finally, with or without visual aids, these Safavid deliverers of stories, sermons, curses, and auguries engaged in their respective trades for monetary gain, and not *pro bono*.

Such popular practices did not just take place in the public squares of Safavid Iran. Within palace quarters, Shāh Ṭahmāsp also had in his employ official cursers and augury-tellers. Moreover, it is evident from the large-scale *Fālnāma* paintings of the 950s/1550s that these images were used for foretelling in royal spheres as well. Combining elite and popular practices was not a novel endeavor in mid-tenth/sixteenth-century Iran; several decades earlier al-Karakī, the leading Imami jurist, had already turned the popular practice of cursing into a quintessential marker of Shi‘i orthopraxy. What was unprecedented, however, was the monumental scale of the *Fālnāma* paintings (at ca. 58 × 43 cm), their emphasis on eschatological themes, and their facing good or bad omens written in Persian.

44 Membré, *Relazione* 59.

45 Chelkowski argues that picture storytelling should be considered a Qajar practice supported by elite—not folk—patronage. See Chelkowski, *Narrative painting* 98. However, as Membré’s travelogue clearly proves, picture storytelling was indeed: 1) a Safavid practice; and 2) guided to a general public.

Today Shāh Ṭahmāsp's illustrated *Fālnāma* is dispersed, yet one of its paintings depicting the Last Judgment is of paramount importance (Figure 13.5).⁴⁶ While its accompanying textual augury does not survive, its many iconographic components offer a fascinating view into how Safavid eschatological concepts were expressed and promoted in Iran during the early modern period. For these reasons, it is critical to examine its figural elements and component parts in a detailed manner. The painting's iconographic details are many and its structure is clearly divided into three horizontal registers and include, from bottom to top: groups of male and female believers and sinners gathered on the Day of Reckoning (Figure 13.6); the Prophet Muḥammad and Imam 'Alī with angels in the middle ground (Figure 13.10); and eleven seated figures and a bundle of gold flames on either side of a tree in a lush landscape above (Figure 13.9).

The lowermost register depicts groups of women and men gathered on the Day of Judgment (Figure 13.6). To the right and observing the event stands the Angel Gabriel, who places his right hand on his cheek in a gesture of awe. Immediately adjacent to Gabriel sit a group of women, clad in white burial shrouds and without any facial deformations. These women surely must represent the believers, whose good faith and actions—as recorded in the books of deeds they grasp firmly in their hands—secure ultimate salvation for them. Conversely, the sinners and disbelievers bound for hell are represented outwardly through a variety of pictorial tactics, including black robes, black or gray faces and bodies, distended red tongues, and animal heads. These individuals' fates are made clear through the rendition of their external appearances, with a particular accent on the face. As Christian Lange has shown, the face is widely considered in Islamic thought to act as a seat of honor, the mirror of the human soul, and an indicator of innate characteristics (*al-akhlāq al-bāṭina*).⁴⁷ Within the Safavid pictorial rendition of the Last Judgment, the blackened face thus provides its viewing audience an outward and clearly legible sign of eschatological doom.

Other signs of damnation include the disfiguration of humans into animals, most especially pigs (or boars) and monkeys (or apes). In Islamic religious thought, monkeys are deemed a sign of doomsday. From the time of Quranic revelation, the ape served as the very emblem of depravity and turpitude.⁴⁸ In several verses in the Quran (inter alia, 2:65 and 5:60), believers are warned that God will transform sinners into accursed apes and swine on the Day of

46 The painting is published along with a one-page descriptive entry in Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 190–91, cat. no. 55.

47 Lange, "On that day" 438–9, 445.

48 Lichtenstädter, "And become ye accursed apes" 175.



FIGURE 13.5 *The Last Judgment, Ja'far al-Šādiq (attributed), Fālnāma (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.*

HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.



FIGURE 13.6 *Sinners gathered for the Last Judgment, Ja'far al-Shādiq (attributed), Fāhnama (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.*
HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM; CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.

Judgment.⁴⁹ Along with pigs, monkeys are therefore associated with eschatological metamorphic events as described in the Quran.⁵⁰ Further elaborated within hadith compilations and works of *tafsīr*, the monkey is also described as a portent sign of the end after a period of tribulations or civil strife known as *fitan*. In these texts, the human's deformation is referred to as *maskh*, or punitive metamorphosis.⁵¹ *Maskh* joins two other punishments—i.e., *khasf*, the engulfing of sinners, and *qadhf*, the pelting of stones against them—to form a triad of signs that herald the hour of Reckoning (*ishārāt al-sā'a*).⁵² This triple calamity of deformation, submersion, and lapidation warns sinful Muslims of apocalyptic retribution—itsself a rhetoric of admonishment that is echoed visually in the Safavid painting, in which groups of men with boar and monkey heads join other sinners with distended tongues and bloodied, truncated limbs (on the left) and men turned upside-down or engulfed in the ground (on the right).

Previously, scholars have argued that this painting represents specific groups of sinners destined for hell as described in Islamic eschatological writing.⁵³ Such sinners include the idolaters (monkeys), deceitful traders, transgressors, narcissists, hypocrites, false witnesses, hedonists, drunkards, spies, slanderers, and usurers (pigs).⁵⁴ Although the Last Judgment painting does include groups of the damned, their respective sins are not at all clear, however. With no pictorial labels and no surviving augury text, it is not possible to clearly identify the sinner's respective vices and violations. Despite a lack of labels and captions in the image, the painting's viewers could nevertheless engage in creative interpretation of these culturally inflected visual signs.

Such pictorial auguries and narratives were surely tinted by the cultural, political, and religious current present at the Safavid court during the 1550s. Among these varied currents was the ritual cursing of Sunni opponents as idolaters, heretics, and disbelievers doomed to hell. Within this particular context, images of the damned could take on correlative meanings and cater to contemporary discourses on salvation, especially in light of the impending millennium. The black faces of the sinners may provide one example of this potential double reading, fusing both general and specific narratives on the Last Judgment. The black-face trope finds its roots in Quran 39:60, which states

49 For the Quranic verses that describe the transformation of humans into apes, see *ibid.*, 156–7.

50 Cook, *Ibn Qutayba and the monkeys* 53–4.

51 For a general discussion of *maskh*, see Traini, *La métamorphose*.

52 Rubin, *Apes, pigs, and the Islamic identity* 91.

53 Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 191.

54 MacDonald, *Day of Resurrection* 159–60.

briefly: “On that day when faces will be white or black.” The day points to a moment of reckoning, when the white faces are said to belong to the faithful bound for paradise while the black faces are those of sinners, unbelievers, apostates, hypocrites, people of innovation, and people of erroneous opinion and sectarian or heretical inclinations (*ahl al-ahwāʾ*) destined for hell.⁵⁵ Without a doubt, much like Islamic textual sources, the Last Judgment painting makes a clear distinction between good and evil, saved and damned. However, the more probing question here remains: by what “sectarian” and thus “heretical” inclinations do hell’s denizens abide according to this painting and a Safavid Shiʿi worldview?

From the earliest Shiʿi texts, such the *Tafsīr* of Furāt al-Kūfī (d. 300/912), to al-Majlisī’s (d. 1110/1698) later Safavid compendium of Shiʿi hadiths entitled *Biḥār al-anwār* (“Oceans of Lights”), efforts were expended (especially during the seventeenth century) to couch the so-called “partisans” of the Sunni cause as pagans and non-believers embarked on a path towards perdition. A clear-cut dichotomy pervades Shiʿi texts, in which the people of paradise are posited against the denizens of hell, with the first referring to the Imams and the faithful initiates while the second encompasses the enemies of the Imams and their partisans.⁵⁶ For example, Furāt al-Kūfī notes that: “He who dies without having known his Imam dies the death of the ignorant pagans,”⁵⁷ in essence arguing that Sunnis do not belong whatsoever to the Islamic faith. He continues by lauding Imam ʿAlī and his ability to serve as an ultimate judge during the Day of Resurrection, noting that: “Without ʿAlī, truth would not be distinguished from falsehood, nor believer from non-believer.”⁵⁸ Echoing such words about the Imam, the Safavid ruler Shāh Ṭahmāsp, who commissioned the illustrated “Book of Divination” to which the Last Judgment painting belongs, recorded a *ḥadīth qudsī* (saying by God) in his autobiography, in which he states that God admonished: “Had everyone accepted the love of ʿAlī, then God would not have created Hellfire.”⁵⁹ Put simply, in Shiʿi exegetical works as well as in the Safavid ruler’s own memoirs, hell is both created *and* reserved for those who refuse to accept the Imam—namely, the so-called Sunni “heretics.”⁶⁰

55 Lange, “On that day” 430.

56 Amir-Moezzi, Pre-existence of the Imam 150.

57 Idem, Super-existence of the Imam 123.

58 Idem, Some remarks 118, citing Furāt al-Kūfī’s *Tafsīr*, no. 503.

59 Shāh Ṭahmāsp, *Tadhkira* 51.

60 For a discussion of the punitive deformation (*maskh*) of enemies of the *ahl al-bayt*, in which ʿUthmān is described as turned into a toad, see Amir-Moezzi, *The divine guide in Shiʿism* 16, 93, 129, 171.

Related evidence can be found in other illustrated Persian books of divination, including in a painting depicting hell (Figure 13.7). Here, the sinners sit, kneel, or stand among golden flames, as scorpions and snakes bite at their limbs and a large red demon wields a fiery mace. Above the painting is the Quranic verse stating that “It [hell] has seven gates: a class [of sinners] is assigned to each one of those gates.” (Q 15:44). While the Quranic excerpt only mentions seven generic classes of sinners, its facing augury gives further details by offering an inflected admonition: “You must keep company with a devout and pious person who loves the people of the family of the Chosen One [Muḥammad] and the Approved [‘Alī], so that evil and hardship leave you.”⁶¹ This image is thus semiotically restricted by its attendant text: its visual signs may appear vague or general at first glance, but upon its activation through augury its official readings are carefully enclaved to make clear to its elite viewer-reader that those who are pious and devout—and consequently deserving of paradise—are those who embrace the Shi‘i faith. Expanding the augury’s textual mention of hypocrites, infidels, and non-believers, the overt insinuation here is that these classes of sinners are, to some extent, by-words or code-names for the term “Sunni.”

These two Safavid divinatory paintings of hell are by no means exceptional. Other Persian texts and images engage in similarly sectarian tactics. For example, al-Varamīnī’s *Aḥsan al-kibār* (The Best of the Grand Men), a history of the Shi‘i imams, was produced as a manuscript in 837/1433.⁶² Most paintings were added to the manuscript in 932/1526 by the portrait painter Qāsim ibn ‘Alī, who included epigraphic praises of Shāh Ṭahmāsp embedded within his paintings.⁶³ While the manuscript contains numerous paintings of the Prophet Muḥammad and the imams, one illustration accompanying a section of the text reporting a miracle performed by Imam Ḥusayn depicts hell (Figure 13.8). Here, the sinners are kneeling while chained together in a blaze of flames in the pit of hell, whose entrance (or mouth) is symbolically depicted

61 The full English translation of the Persian omen (Topkapı Palace Library, Istanbul, H. 1702, folio 57r), provided by Sergei Tourkin, is included in Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 292. For a discussion of this “Book of Divination” (but not its hell scene), see Bağcı, *Images for foretelling*.

62 The manuscript’s date of transcription has been read as 837/1433. However, its fully developed *nasta‘liq* script suggests that it is a Safavid, not Timurid, manuscript. On the question of dating, see Stchoukine, Qāsim ibn ‘Alī 45. For further information about this manuscript, see Akimushkina and Ivanova, *Persidskie miniatyuri* no. 35; Thompson and Canby, *Hunt for paradise* 108–9.

63 For further information on this late Timurid to early Safavid portraitist, see Blair, Qasim ‘Alī.

Due to rights restrictions, this illustration is not available in the digital edition of the book.

FIGURE 13.7 *Sinners tortured in hell, Jaʿfar al-Šādiq (attributed), Fālnāma (Book of Omens), Iran, ca. 1575–1600.*
TOPKAPI PALACE LIBRARY, ISTANBUL, H. 1702, FOLIO 56V.



FIGURE 13.8 *Sinners tortured in hell, al-Varāmīnī, Aḥsan al-kibār fi maʿrifat al-aʿimmat al-aẓhār (The Best of the Grand Men: On the Knowledge of the Immaculate Imam), Tabriz, ca. 1521–26. THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF RUSSIA, ST. PETERSBURG, DORN 312, FOLIO 391V.*

by a large growling dragon in the lower right corner. A number of demons club the shackled sinners with maces or else force them to drink molten or putrid liquids. Snakes and scorpions also torment the denizens of hell under the infernal tree Zaqqūm, whose black and red fruits take the shape of human heads.⁶⁴ Finally, a white monster's head hovers in the hilly landscape to the right of the Zaqqūm.

While the painting remains relatively imprecise with regards to the identity of the depicted sinners, its accompanying text allows its reader-viewer to interpret its contents within carefully delineated parameters. Indeed, the narrative, related by Jābir 'Abdallāh Anṣārī, states that Imam Ḥusayn miraculously was able to open the gate of heaven. Therein were the Prophet Muḥammad, Amīr al-Mu'minīn [‘Alī], and the four companions of Ḥusayn, Ḥamza, Ja‘far, Tayyār, and ‘Aqīl. The Prophet then addresses Jābir, telling him that, “You would be a believer (*mu'min*) if you trust in whatever the Imams do and not question them.” Thereafter, Muḥammad shows Jābir hell, in which he sees the *shuyūkh*,⁶⁵ Mu‘awīya, Yazīd, Walīd, Mughīra, Abū Jahl, and others all chained together. Their tortures, he notes, are more severe than those of all other sinners in hell. The text thus invites the painting's viewer to identify these key opponents of the Prophet, ‘Alī, and Ḥusayn as the figures shown chained together and viciously beaten by demons. Their careful horizontal aligning across the painted page echoes the text's enumeration of names, and both the text and its image echo the roster of opponents who were ritually damned in Safavid cursing practices. Without a doubt, then, the manuscript owner and his circle of reader-viewers were invited—either directly, by insinuation, or via common cultural praxis—to see within images of hell the symbolic presence of Sunni “heretics,” thereby reinforcing the Shi‘i precept that heaven is reserved for those who believe in and follow the Imams.

Returning to the Last Judgment image belonging to Shāh Ṭahmāsp's *Fālnāma*, these many interrelated Safavid texts and images help explain why the eleven Imams are depicted kneeling in a paradise-like setting at the very top of the divination painting (Figure 13.9). Here, they sit as a collective, divided into two

64 On the Zaqqūm tree, see Q 37:62–67; and on the tree's representation in the Timurid “Book of Ascension,” see Caiozzo, *Une curiosité de l'enfer musulman*.

65 The exact meaning of the term *shuyūkh* is unclear here. It may refer to Sufi mystics or else to the spiritual leaders of the Sunni community. In the dual (*shaykhān*), it also refers to Abū Bakr and ‘Uthmān as the “older men” in comparison to the younger ‘Alī. On the *shaykhān*, see Kohlberg, *Some Imāmi Shī‘i views* 146–7.



FIGURE 13.9 *The imams and Fatīma (as a gold bundle of flames) sitting in heaven during the Last Judgment, Ja'far al-Šādiq (attributed), Fālmāma (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.*

HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.

groups by a large tree, perhaps the Lote Tree of the Limit (*sidrat al-muntahā*).⁶⁶ Two of them touch their adjacent companions on the shoulder in a relational act suggestive of paternal-filial relations, thereby evoking the genealogical line of the Imams. Their faces are encircled by flaming gold and silver nimbi; the two Imams closest to the tree have white facial veils while all others bear no facial features.⁶⁷ It appears that the two veiled Imams are, on the right, the Mahdī (with an inscription reading *Ṣāhib al-Zamān* or “Lord of the Age”) and, on the left, Ḥasan, whose name is not legible even though he sits next to a clearly identified Ḥusayn.

Whether they are depicted with white veils or a pink skin tone, all the Imams’ faces are rendered featureless in this Safavid painting. This particular technique of figural representation appears to emerge from, as well as to propel forward, the Shi’i belief that the Imams are pure and impeccable beings emerging from the pre-existential world of shadows or particles, in which they exist as light silhouettes (*ashbāh nūr*), spirits of light (*arwāḥ min nūr*), or shadows of light (*aẓillat nūr*).⁶⁸ Safavid paintings from Shāh Ismā’īl’s time onward depict the Prophet Muḥammad and the Imams as partaking in the same light—the light of God and the light of Muḥammad—their faces too sacred and radiant to behold.⁶⁹

Their appearance in a paradise setting is not unprecedented either. Indeed, ascension narratives penned by Shi’i authors relate that Muḥammad saw the Imams’ names inscribed on the Throne of God⁷⁰ or else witnessed their presence at the Throne as bundles of lights. One particularly apt saying by the Prophet records Muḥammad glancing at the feet of the Throne, stating: “I saw twelve lights each containing an inscription in green indicating the names of my legatees, from the first, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib to the last, the Mahdī of my

66 In a Shi’i context, the tree can also symbolize the family tree of the Prophet, in which case this particular tree may well act as a nature metaphor for Muḥammad’s genealogy and the Imamate rather than the Lote Tree of the Limit. Such an allegory is found in a number of statements, including a saying attributed to Ja’far that notes: “Muḥammad is the trunk of prophecy and its branch is the Imamate.” The saying is cited in Amir-Moezzi, *Pre-existence of the Imam* 135.

67 Technical analysis suggests that these faces were most likely painted as such, their facial features not removed or repainted at a later date. See Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 323, fn 16.

68 Amir-Moezzi, *Pre-existence of the Imam* 140–41.

69 For a discussion of the Safavid pictorial use of the facial veil and its sectarian implications, see Gruber, When *nubuvvat* encounters *valāyat* 55–61.

70 Amir-Moezzi, *Imam in Heaven* 180.

community.”⁷¹ Ascension tales likewise record God speaking to the Prophet in the following words: “Muḥammad, I created you, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn as figures of light out of my light. [...] Those who accept your authority become close companions in my eyes, and those who struggle against it become unbelievers.”⁷² From the hadith to ascension tales and omen-paintings, Shi‘i texts and images sought to memorialize the Imams’ pre-existence as light sources emanating from the heavenly spheres as well as to project their post-existence in paradise, the eternal abode promised for the righteously faithful.

In its upper section, the Last Judgment painting also includes a gold bundle of flames, which is inscribed with the name of Fāṭima and praise formulas in her honor. Her corporeality is entirely subsumed by the teardrop outline that is set ablaze, in some sense paying tribute to her honorific epithet, *al-Zahrā’* or “The Radiant One.” In a Shi‘i interpretative framework, this non-physical—even immaculate—abstraction of the Prophet’s daughter appears to render her as the so-called “confluence of the two lights” (*majma‘ al-nūrayn*)⁷³—that is, the intersection of the light of prophecy (as Muḥammad’s daughter) and the light of the Imams (as ‘Alī’s wife and maternal figure of the Imamate). Shi‘i hadith compilers and theologians likewise linked Fāṭima to the Quranic verse of light (*āyat al-nūr*, Q 24:35), stipulating that the verse’s expression “light upon light” should be interpreted as “Imam upon Imam.” The lamp is thus analogized to her womb, itself the birthplace of the Imamate.⁷⁴ Moreover, as recorded by al-Majlisī, beyond her inceptive role, Fāṭima is also believed to enlighten the Day of Judgment, illuminating a post-apocalyptic heaven like a sun guiding the Shi‘i community to salvation.⁷⁵ In sum, she serves as the Mistress of the Day of Judgment who both vindicates and redeems.⁷⁶ In the Safavid Last Judgment painting, therefore, the Imams and Fāṭima function as a visual sign, proof, and argumentation (*hujja*) in favor of the rightful restoration of sacred order according to the Shi‘i millenarian worldview espoused and publically promoted by Shāh Ṭahmāsp, who couched himself as both a *sayyid* and ‘Alid ruling on behalf of the hidden Imam.⁷⁷

71 Ibid.

72 Colby, Early Imami Shi‘i narratives 145–6, citing Furāt al-Kūfi.

73 Amir-Moezzi, Pre-existence of the Imam 133–4, 137.

74 Pinault, Zaynab Bint ‘Alī 74.

75 Cited in Ruffle, May Fatimah gather our tears 89.

76 Sered, Rachel, Mary, and Fatima 134.

77 Quinn, Dreams of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn 138.

Beyond Fāṭima and the Imams, Muḥammad, ‘Alī, and the angels all hold preeminent positions within Shi‘i belief systems concerned with the eschaton. It is for these reasons that they occupy the central portion of the Safavid painting of the Last Judgment (Figure 13.10). In the image’s central register, the action’s main protagonists are depicted and they include, from left to right: the angel Isrāfīl, nicknamed the “Possessor of the Trumpet” (*ṣāhib al-qarn*), which is sounded to announce the Day of Gathering; and the angel Michael, who holds the scales of justice (*mawāzīn*) and is believed responsible for weighing the deeds of mankind.⁷⁸ As in the Last Judgment painting, this triad of angels (Gabriel, Michael, and Isrāfīl) is widely found in Islamic works on angelology. Just as significantly, they are central to sectarian views of the Last Judgment. In Shi‘i textual sources, for example, the three angels are described as appearing to the world during the advent of the Mahdī, at which time they rally the faithful to swear allegiance to him.⁷⁹ Moreover, a number of Shi‘i hadiths, such as those compiled by al-Majlisī, state that all three angels are the *malā’ika al-Qā’im* (the angels of the Riser/Mahdī) as well as the angelic companions of the Prophet Muḥammad and Imam ‘Alī, both of whom are depicted to the right of Michael.⁸⁰

‘Alī stands while gesturing to the Prophet, who himself sits on a carpet next to the so-called “banner of mercy” (*liwā’ al-ḥamd*), which is raised on the Day of Judgment and guarded by an attendant wearing an orange robe. Were it not for the captions inscribed above their flaming nimbi and the two long black tresses that are reserved for the Prophet (Figure 13.11), it would be almost impossible to tell the two protagonists apart. Both wear gold embroidered robes, both have white veils that hide their facial features (but not their ears), and both emit the same radiant bundle of light from their heads. Moreover, it appears as if the Prophet Muḥammad is here acting as if an observer, his capacity for intercession (*shafā’a*) on his community’s behalf in large part rendered dependent on ‘Alī’s agency or intermediacy. The prophetic prerogative is quite literally pushed to the side. Instead, it is ‘Alī who appears to rise to the occasion.

78 The term *mīzān* (singular) is a general term for justice, whereas *mawāzīn* (plural) takes on a clear eschatological signification in the Quran (7:8–9; 12:47; and 13:102–3) as the scales of justice. It is believed that the scales will be set up for the Day of Reckoning in the Garden of Paradise (MacDonald, Paradise 336) or else on the “area of gathering” (*arḍ al-maḥshar*).

79 Madelung, *Angels in Shi‘ism* 219. Shi‘i texts also narrate that these angels spread their protective wings over the Imams. See Schimmel, *Deciphering the signs of God* 230.

80 On the *malā’ikat al-Qā’im*, see Majlisī, *Bihār lii*, ch. 27, 349, and liii, ch. 29, 62–63.



FIGURE 13.10 The angels Israfil and Michael, on the left, and Ali and Muhammad, on the right, interceding on behalf of sinners during the Last Judgment, Ja'far al-Sadiq (attributed), *Fahnama* (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.
HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.



FIGURE 13.11 *Alī and Muḥammad, with identifying captions inscribed above their flaming nimbi, interceding on behalf of sinners during the Last Judgment, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (attributed), Fālnāma (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.*

HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.

Besides becoming more “prophet-like” in his intercessory duties and pictorial appearance, Imam ‘Alī is also conceptually positioned within a greater Shi‘i eschatological landscape. Not only does he seem to surpass Muḥammad, he inches ever closer to God, becoming, to borrow Amir-Moezzi’s fitting expression, an “Imam-God.”⁸¹ This more sacred form of ‘Alī represents him as a final judge, who, like God, is entrusted with assigning heaven and hell. To give just a few further examples of ‘Alī’s quasi-deification, Shi‘i authors such as Furāt al-Kūfī, al-‘Ayyāshī (4th/10th century), and al-Majlisī record a number of statements that effectively serve to elevate the Imam to godly proportions, according to which ‘Alī is said to have declared: “I am the Rewarder (*dayyān*) of men on the Day of Reckoning; I am he who assigns the Garden or the Fire,

81 Amir-Moezzi, *Some remarks* 106.

no one enters without my designation; I am the Great Judge (between good and evil, *al-farūq al-akbar*); [...] I have learnt the science of fortune and misfortune. [...] I am the successor to the Messenger of the Lord of the worlds; I am the Judge of the Garden and Fire.”⁸² In such statements attributed to ‘Alī, hell is not strictly under God’s dominion; rather, it also falls under the purview of the Imam’s jurisdiction.

Similar statements are found in the corpus of Shi‘i hadith on the Mahdī or Qā‘im, especially as gathered by al-Majlisī. For instance, a number of sayings attributed to God make it clear that a refusal to accept the Imam’s vicegerency is tantamount to refusing Muḥammad’s prophecy, and hence constitutes a conscientious and deliberate refusal to enter paradise. This syllogistic premise posits that paradise is not granted but rather sought after and secured via swearing allegiance (*walāya*) to ‘Alī. For example, the belief in the Imam’s active agency is recorded in a statement made by God to Muḥammad, according to which: “Whoever denies [‘Alī’s] right, denies your right. Whoever refuses to accept him as his master, refuses to accept you as his master; and whoever refuses to accept you as his master, verily he refuses to enter paradise.”⁸³ Besides stressing individual responsibility in the process of salvation, Shi‘i hadiths continue to promote the Imam as judge-like, the distributor of paradise and hellfire, and the possessor of the Kawthar pond.⁸⁴ Last but certainly not least, Shi‘i hadiths describe the Day of Resurrection as a “time of realization,” when Muḥammad will hand over his standard to ‘Alī, who will then serve as chief of all created beings that will congregate under his flag.⁸⁵ Like these Shi‘i eschatological texts, the Safavid painting similarly suggests a handing over of the reigns of power, with Imam ‘Alī acting as Chief Intercessor and Master of the Day of Judgment.

3 Curse Signs

In its pictorial complexity, the *Fālnāma* painting invites its viewers to visually navigate and contemplate its many constituent signs. Its pictorial codes can be unraveled and deciphered via iconographic details, related textual evidence, and the cultural setting of its production. On the one hand, this image of the last judgment was certainly used as a pictorial omen for Safavid divinatory

82 Ibid., 117–8.

83 Majlisī, *Bihār* li, ch. 6, 69–70.

84 Ibid., liii, ch. 29, 96, 112.

85 Ibid., liii, ch. 29, 71.

practices, aiding inquirers in palace quarters determine whether a course of action was propitious to pursue or not. On the other hand, the painting also could fulfill a variety of other functions beyond its use for seeking auguries within the context of an approaching millennial mark by offering one mechanism (among many) to enact and strengthen an elite Safavid Shi'i religious worldview. Its character and use were saturated with possibilities, and it thus could catalyze multiple significations.

First and foremost, the painting should be considered a warning sign. It admonishes its viewers of what events lay ahead at the Day of Judgment, when believers will be separated from non-believers. The righteous and pious will be granted paradise, while the disbelievers and sinners will be thrown to hell. From stealing the wealth of orphans to engaging in backbiting, offenses that carry the punishment of hellfire are quite varied in the Islamic eschatological imagination. In the painting, various classes of sinners—from those whose faces turn black to those who are engulfed in the ground—are represented as suffering the punishments of hell already at the moment of Judgment. These sinners, however, are visually positioned against Imam 'Alī (as intercessor and judge) and the Imams (as eternal inhabitants of heaven), their transgressions strategically circumscribed by the overarching visual rhetoric of the Last Judgment scene. Through this pictorial bracketing and polarity, the viewer is hailed to interpret the transfigured sinners as offenders of the faith, and in this instance specifically as offenders and opponents of the Shi'i faith. While this interpretation is not clearly elucidated in the composition, it is indubitably insinuated by pictorial and compositional means. As such, the Last Judgment scene functions as a pictorial caveat, warning its audience that Shi'ism must be considered the only true religion (*madhhab-i haqq*).⁸⁶

Secondly, the painting functions as a covenant of the faith expressed in visual form. It provides an overt sign of the ascendancy and authority of the Shi'i faith within an apocalyptic landscape. Preachy and sanctimonious, it engages in a holier-than-thou visual discourse. Shi'ism here is not disguised or dissimulated as the doctrine of *taqiyya* would dictate. Instead, within the ascendant Safavid religio-political complex, the painting is not even a form of "hiding in plain sight."⁸⁷ Rather, as a large-scale image produced under the aegis of a ruling monarch of staunch Shi'i persuasion, it represents a total upturning of *taqiyya*: it is a pictorial oath of the faith, both binding and proudly declamatory.

86 Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 115.

87 This term is borrowed from Maria Dakake's discussion of the Shi'i doctrine of secrecy. See Dakake, *Hiding in plain sight*.

Thirdly, the painting's oratorical qualities mimic the Safavid practice of ritual cursing, itself a slogan or "external sign"⁸⁸ of the true faith. The political division between the Safavids and Ottomans became increasingly vocalized through the symbolic language of religion over the course of the tenth/sixteenth century. The Safavid cursing of Sunni opponents both past and present appears to have been an important component of the state-sponsored program to implement Shi'i ideology across Persian lands. This oral practice aimed to create a stronger binary of creedal concepts as well as a crisper definition and disambiguation of true vs. false faith. By placing *walāya* (association, allegiance, or avowal) against *barā'a* (dissociation, malediction, or disavowal), the uttering of maledictions also invited respondents to rejoin in kind by emitting curse formulas.

This responsorial activity could also be enacted by other loud "slogans," including paintings. Indeed, pictorial images act sometimes like rhetorical invitations to their viewers, who themselves can engage in a variety of responses, from active contemplation, to semiotic decipherment, to affective response. Within a Safavid context, therefore, one cannot help but wonder whether paintings—especially one that so clearly posits *walāya* versus *barā'a* as salvation versus damnation—could act as visual aids in both private and public, elite and popular, practices of cursing. In this instance, execrations could multiply across the classes and media, soliciting viewers and listeners to curse and vilify Sunni opponents in response, as per the dictates of the Shi'i rejoinder to ritual cursing: "Better too much than too little!" (*bish bād kam mabād*).⁸⁹

From warning to covenant and curse, the Safavid Last Judgment painting functions in a variety of ways. It is a vision (*ru'ya*), augury (*fāl*), and image (*ṣūra*) of the Day of Reckoning, an eschatological prophecy (*malḥama*), a pictorial allegiance (*walāya*) to Shi'ism and its figureheads, a manifestation (*mazhar*) of the true faith, and an invitation to curse (*la'n*) those destined for hell. It telescopes and channels these multiple meaning-laden visual modes, proving that an image is worth a thousand words, especially when it offers an intensified illusion of unmediated access to an "eternal now."

Just as significantly, the Safavid painting offers a sectarian vision of the Last Judgment and hell, revealing how painterly practices were deeply entangled with Shi'i, millenarian, and apocalyptic worldviews, royal and popular practices of divination, and sectarian claims to authority and intercession at a moment of growing religio-political divide between the Safavids and Ottomans. Transcending the purely linguistic domain, these sorts of images

88 Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 114.

89 On the response "*bish bād kam mabād*" in Shi'i Safavid ritual cursing, see Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 129; Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra'iyan* 48.

bolster a culturally encoded system of visual signage in order to allow hell's meanings to be both enclaved and open-ended all at the same time. As a sign, vision, augury, epiphany, and curse, the Last Judgment painting thus highlights how the visual imagination of otherworldly realms could provide an artistic mechanism by which to reify the concept of hell within early modern Islamic eschatological thought.

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Literature and Religious Controversy

The Vision of Hell in Jamīl Ṣīdqī al-Zahāwī's Thawra fī l-jaḥīm

Richard van Leeuwen

Sometimes it appears that religion and literature are each other's natural foes. The lack of harmony between the two domains may partly result from different views about the function of texts. Whereas literary authors usually claim the liberty to explore new, sometimes controversial, visions of the human predicament and to dislodge traditional certainties, religious authorities generally see it as their task to uphold sacred models and preserve religious prescriptions. Both literary authors and religious authorities feel the responsibility to develop visions of the moral integrity of society, but whereas the latter tend to stabilize interpretations of texts and of the moral boundaries derived from them, the first usually propagate the pluriformity of the process of interpretation and a possible redefinition of moral boundaries. The different perceptions of texts, as a medium to either confirm or question established world-views, not only result in clashes between specific writers and specific religious authorities, but rather reflect frictions between different kinds of interpretive communities, with their own structures and institutions of authority, their respective modes of influencing society, and their mechanisms for self-perpetuation.

In recent years, the clashes that have occurred between religion and literature have mainly been related to Islam. The case of the fatwa of the Iranian leader Khomeini against Salman Rushdie, accusing him of apostasy because of certain allegedly blasphemous passages in his novel *The satanic verses*, generated a world-wide debate about artistic freedom and the repressive nature of religion in general and of Islam in particular. This quite spectacular and shocking incident was followed in 1988 by a similar verdict by a prominent religious scholar in Egypt against the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature Nagīb Maḥfūz, who was accused of distorting Islamic history and advocating the death of God in his novel *Children of our alley* (*Awlād ḥāratinā*). In these and other cases, the condemnation of writers should be placed in the context of political and cultural conflicts both between the Muslim world and the West and within the respective societies in which these problems erupted. Although the verdicts were based on religious arguments, they were not restricted to the religious domain.

Against the accusations of heresy, both Rushdie and Maḥfūz retorted that they had in no way intended to vilify or discredit religion, God, or the Prophet Muḥammad, nor to incite the public to atheism or even scepticism. Both declared themselves to be Muslims and ascribed the outrage of the religious authorities to misunderstandings and, especially, a misinterpretation of their texts. They insisted that their texts were fictional novels which were not intended to denounce religious truths or to propose an alternative vision of the Islamic history of revelation, but rather to reflect on the complexity of moral, social and political issues and their relationship with the religious domain. These reflections, moreover, belonged to the field of artistic expression and fiction, which fall outside the scope of religious judgement. The religious authorities were not impressed by these arguments. They insisted that the novelistic genre should not be considered as a separate, or autonomous, domain with regard to the discursive representation of reality. For them, there was only one discourse, only one reality, only one historical truth, and only one vision of reality. Thus, at least on one level, the conflict can be reduced to a difference of opinion about the nature of texts and their relationship to reality and truth.¹

These observations raise intriguing questions concerning the recurrent frictions between literature and religion. To what extent should generic differentiation be taken into account in disputes about the religious, and perhaps moral, evaluation of literary texts? Does the fictional character of a novel by definition make it incommensurable with religious truth claims? Can fictional literature even convey a truthful reflection of the religious attitude of the author or should it by its inherent nature be considered deprived of any serious religious significance? In other words, are the literary and religious discourses essentially different and separated, so that any effort to link them is useless? In this paper I would like to relate questions such as these to a literary work which produced a religious uproar in the 1930s and which permanently branded the author as a heretic (*zindīq*). In 1931 the Iraqi poet and philosopher Jamīl Ṣīdqī al-Zahāwī published his long poem *Revolution in hell* (*Thawra fī l-jaḥīm*), an evidently controversial theme. It is remarkable that in later evaluations of his life and work, in which he is usually presented as a heretic and a sceptic, conclusions are based almost exclusively on his poetic work, and not, for instance, on an analysis of his philosophical essays or, even more strikingly, on a religious treatise he wrote in 1905 that contained a fierce refutation of Wahhābī doctrines. The question arises whether al-Zahāwī's treatment of

1 See about the controversies about Maḥfūz and Rushdie, Ruthven, *A Satanic affair*; van Leeuwen, *Creation and revelation*; Najjar, *Islamic fundamentalism*.

religious elements in his poems, and specifically in *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm*, justifies the verdict of heresy. Or should his poetry, because of its fictional nature, be rejected as a criterion to assess his orthodoxy? And does the fictional nature of poetry not forcibly exclude an evaluation of al-Zahāwī's references to religion according to religious standards? Are doctrinal criteria adequate to judge a work of fiction?

In the following we will first give a brief overview of al-Zahāwī's life and work, before analyzing the text that concerns us here. It should be noted that we will not discuss al-Zahāwī's poetic oeuvre as a whole, nor his philosophical/scientific essays, which are controversial in their own way. We will limit our discussion mainly to al-Zahāwī's use of the concept of hell in combination with his strategy of fictionalization.²

1 Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī

Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī was born in Baghdad in 1863³ as the son of the mufti of the Iraqī province of the Ottoman Empire and studied the traditional Islamic sciences, although eventually he became more interested in the 'modern' disciplines through his readings of such journals as *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Mu'ayyad*. He was appointed to several official positions, especially in the field of education and in the judiciary. He led an eventful life, which was at least partly due to his rather recalcitrant character, and partly to his unconventional writings, which consisted of poetry and philosophical/scientific treatises. He remained a controversial scholar/intellectual throughout his life and was even summoned to Istanbul for a time and put under surveillance of the authorities. His poetry aroused the anger of religious scholars who accused him of heresy, because he openly put into doubt the compatibility of modern scientific insights with religious doctrines. He befriended such secularly oriented intellectuals as Fāris Nimr, Shibli Shumayyil, Jurjī Zaydān and Ibrāhīm al-Yazījī. Apart from his religious scepticism, he became especially famous for his defense of women's rights and his rejection of the veil for women.⁴

Al-Zahāwī's name remains known mainly for his poetic oeuvre. His philosophical work is rather eccentric, because he was fascinated by the modern natural sciences but was unable to grasp their concepts and methodology. His

² I am grateful to Luc Deheuvels (INALCO, Paris) for drawing my attention to al-Zahāwī's text.

³ For al-Zahāwī's biography, see Walther, Camīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī; Masliyah, Zahawi's philosophy; Widmer, Der 'irāqische Dichter.

⁴ See Masliyah, Zahawi: a Muslim pioneer.

deficient absorption of the sciences resulted in ideas about the nature of matter, gravitation and energy that would have been considered bizarre by specialists even in his lifetime. In his poetry al-Zahāwī was unconventional as well, not only because of the religious ideas that it contains, but also because of his rebelliousness against the Ottoman authorities. During his exile in Istanbul he wrote a fierce attack on the Sultan, for which he was punished with two weeks imprisonment, and in general he tried to incite the population to 'wake up' and stand up against obsolete ideas, anachronistic mentalities, repression, fatalism and injustice. The Iraqis should adopt a modern world-view based on scientific knowledge and a radical rationalism.

The accusation of heresy and religious scepticism which was directed at al-Zahāwī during his life and afterwards, was based mainly on his poetry, and, more specifically, on his collection *al-Nāzighāt* ("Incitements to evil"), published in 1924, and on *Thawra fi l-jaḥīm*. The controversial verses focus particularly on the incompatibility of the traditional concept of God with scientific rationality: "When science lives, God will die," and: "Science came into the world after religion and sharpened its weapons, to deprive it of its place; religion used to triumph over science, in the future it is science that will triumph."⁵ This scepticism repeatedly leads to a questioning even of the existence of God:

When you were unable to solve the mystery of Nature,
You persistently invented an interpretation thereof.
You have created a God to solve your problem,
But in the end He became your biggest problem.⁶

And: "I no longer know about Truth; did I create [God] or did He create me?"⁷ Although verses such as these suggest a deep religious doubt, there are other verses that mitigate them to some extent, and that rather reveal a mystical attitude: "My religion is the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*); there is no being but the mighty, eternal God."⁸ Thus, perhaps al-Zahāwī prefers a pantheist vision of God, inspired by Ibn al-'Arabī, in which God becomes identical with the basic force in nature, which he calls "ether" (*athīr*).⁹

Before evaluating the significance of these controversial statements, we will now discuss the text that concerns us here in more detail.

⁵ Walther, Camīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī 447.

⁶ Masliyah, Zahāwī's philosophy 181.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

2 *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm*

The poem *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm* by al-Zahāwī consists of almost 400 double verses divided into 24 parts by sub-headings. It is a narrative poem, in the sense that it tells a coherent story centred on a main character and contains dialogues between the different protagonists. In the first part, the poet relates that he has died and, while lying in his grave, sees Munkar and Nakīr, the two angels of death, approaching with ominous faces, eyes spitting fire, large teeth, and thick snakes in their hands. The grave becomes narrow and suffocating. The two angels start interrogating the dead man with a gruff voice about what he has done during his life. The poet feels like a sparrow sitting before a vulture and simulates that his soul has never known any doubt. Upon the persistent questions of the angels, he finally confesses, however, since for a “free poet” hypocrisy is reprehensible and inadmissible.¹⁰

After this brief introduction, the conversation between the two angels and the poet is represented in a more detailed way. The poet claims that Islam and God are his religion, but he says that during his life he has been a “slave” without freedom, unable to act freely. He argues—shivering—that he has obeyed the religious obligations and that he believes in Muḥammad and the Quran. Still he acknowledges that there are many things in religion about which the mind says the opposite of what the heart claims,¹¹ and that in his youth he was a believer, but later in his life was beset by unrest and doubt, so that in the end he did not know what to believe. As far as angels, devils and jinn are concerned, for instance, the poet says: “God has created many creatures in heaven, on earth, and in between, but I am in doubt about everything that the mind and intelligence, in their weakness, are unable to understand.”¹²

When questioned about God, the poet states that he has no doubt about the existence of God, but he complains that God has allowed the devil to sow doubt in the hearts of human beings. He asks: “Why should I be punished when everything I have done was predetermined? I had no free choice. Is it justice to create a devil who sows doubt? There are injustice and violence everywhere without heaven intervening.”¹³ And about the nature of God, he avers: “Everything that exists has only one God, who does not perish, and that is “ether,” from which all life derives and to which everything after death returns.

10 Zahāwī, *Dīwān* 715–7, tr. Widmer, 50–2.

11 *Ibid.*, 717/52.

12 *Ibid.*, 720/56.

13 *Ibid.*, 721/57.

Between God and ether there is no distinction except in expression, when your feeling leads you correctly."¹⁴

The poet realizes that these statements can harm him and laments that "The word of pure truth is forbidden for free men even in the grave."¹⁵ He resigns himself to his fate, but reproaches the angels that they pester him with senseless questions. Why have they not asked about what is in his heart? About his defence of the fatherland, his loyalty to friends, his fight against evil, his defence of women? And why is his poetry not taken into account? In poetry lie "the liberation of a people and an admonition." In his poems he has established Truth as a rock to build upon. Should they remain silent about this while asking many questions about what is untrue? The angels retort that they are only interested in the true faith and continue to interrogate him about such notions as the Mountain of Qāf, Gog and Magog, and Hārūt and Mārūt. The poet, resigning himself to his fate, exclaims that he does not know anything about these things and that his mind orders him to deny their existence.¹⁶

In the final part of the interrogation the poet calls in the help of "ether," the Lord: "You are my only Lord; through You I live and will decay in my grave; You are the Almighty under whose Authority the graves will remain."¹⁷ This supplication enrages the angels, who now expose him as a heretic destined to go to hell. They throw stones at him, while he screams: "Forgive me! My whole philosophy was only what my weak mind dictated to me. The 'You are my Lord' was a mistake!"¹⁸ However, his fate has been decided. He is beaten with clubs, they throw pitch over his head and scourge his head and face. His grave becomes hot like an oven and he loses consciousness. When he awakes he finds himself in chains.

Next, the angels take the poet to paradise, and show him its joys and pleasures to increase his spite. Then he is thrown into hell, which is a ravine filled with fire and screams, scorpions, serpents, lions, panthers, faces black as pitch, eyes spitting fire, food of the Zaqqūm tree and red and black fire for drinking. The poet meets Laylā, who bemoans her beloved, and the poets al-Farazdaq, al-Akhtal, Jarīr, al-Mutanabbī, al-Ma'arrī, Bashshār and Imru' al-Qays. They are all great poets and philosophers, since "the abode of the ignorant is paradise."¹⁹ There are not only Arabic literati in hell, but also Christian ones, such as Dante

14 Ibid., 722/58.

15 Ibid., 723/59.

16 Ibid., 724-5/61.

17 Ibid., 725/61-2.

18 Ibid., 725/62.

19 Ibid., 731-2/68-70.

and Shakespeare, because they didn't attach much significance to religion. A typically incorrigible 'Umar al-Khayyām sings the praise of wine. Then the poet meets a group of philosophers and scientists, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Copernicus and Darwin. A large and rather diverse group of thinkers follows, among them Spencer, Fichte, Spinoza, Bruno, Newton, Renan, Rousseau, Voltaire, Zarathustra, Epicurus, al-Kindī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rushd, Ibn al-Rawandī and al-Ṭūsī.²⁰

Of this group Socrates is the most strong-willed. After he has explained the origin of the fire burning in hell, he declares: "Development will end our current situation. When we remain steadfast the difficulties will disappear thanks to the progress of science. In this valley there are wells from which great quantities of petrol spout. In the course of time these wells will dry up."²¹ Now it is the turn of al-Ḥallāj to proclaim his bitterness. He reproaches God: "Why haven't You protected me during my life? It was my fate that the people should kill me. Should I be punished here as well? Has Fate made a mistake?"²²

Subsequently, a smart "sinner" invents a machine that can extinguish the fire and a weapon that can kill a large number of people with one blow, as well as a device by which a man can make himself invisible. At that point a young man holds an inflammatory speech instigating the millions of inhabitants of hell to revolt. Is it justice that someone who is forced to unbelief for one hour should burn in eternity? "We have served science, were killed for it and now suffer punishment."²³ He summons them to liberate themselves by using violence and reclaim their rights. The people in hell take up their arms and go to battle. Al-Ma'arrī proclaims: "You have only wretched huts, made of fire, whereas the blockheads live in palaces in paradise; fire is the fate only of those who strive for lofty aims—a bad outcome!"²⁴

A fierce struggle ensues, which is described vividly. Bellies are ripped open, heads fly off, blood flows; hot winds blow, the angels throw lightning, mountains and seas; the devils, embittered, too, help the rebels against the angels guarding hell. God's throne shakes, the heavens nearly fall down and the angels finally take flight. The rebels enter paradise flying on the backs of the devils. They throw the blockheads out after a brief struggle and occupy the magnificent palaces. Only those who have advanced the good may stay. During the

20 Ibid., 733/71–2.

21 Ibid., 733–4/72–3.

22 Ibid., 734/73.

23 Ibid., 736/75.

24 Ibid., 736/76.

festivities the poet sighs: “This was the great revolution through which times became better in their long course.”²⁵

The final lines contain the plot which changes the perspective of the whole poem and which can to some extent be considered an anti-climax: “And when I woke up in the morning from my sleep, the sun shone in the sky; it turned out that everything had not been real but a dream I had dreamt because I had eaten cress.”²⁶

3 Truth and Illusion

Readers of *Thawra fi l-jaḥīm* who are even faintly familiar with Arabic literature would immediately be reminded of Abū ‘Alā al-Ma‘arrī’s famous work “The epistle of forgiveness” (*Risālat al-ghufrān*), and we can be sure that al-Zahāwī had al-Ma‘arrī’s poem in mind as a model. However, the resemblance is limited to concept and form, and the differences are perhaps more significant. Whereas al-Ma‘arrī describes a visit to hell by someone else and lets him observe it rather than experience it, al-Zahāwī describes himself as the unfortunate “traveller” and suffers the tortures himself. Moreover, the discussions embarked upon by al-Ma‘arrī’s protagonist are focused on literary matters and poetry, not on the injustice of God’s judgement. It would appear that al-Zahāwī may have borrowed al-Ma‘arrī’s concept, but that his message is much more radical. Another obvious influence is Dante’s *Inferno*. In his discussion of *Thawra fi l-jaḥīm*, Nāṣir al-Hānī claims that al-Zahāwī became acquainted with Dante’s work through a summary and analysis in a Turkish study. This could also be the way in which al-Zahāwī had access to another potential source, Victor Hugo’s *Dieu* and *La fin de Satan*.²⁷

It is clear that al-Zahāwī intended to use the setting of hell for a much more controversial purpose than his prominent predecessors. Whereas Dante uses cosmological and eschatological visions to link hell to earthly morality and thereby rationalizes its function as a punishment for sins, al-Zahāwī on the one hand stresses the punitive function of hell as part of a moral system, but on the other hand questions this morality and even inverts it. Like Dante and al-Ma‘arrī, al-Zahāwī refers to traditional visualizations of hell, even with reference to the Quran, creating a sense of familiarity in the setting of the narrative. This realism is enhanced by taking the figure of the poet—in the first

25 Ibid., 737/79.

26 Ibid., 738/79.

27 Hānī, *Muḥaḍirāt* 58–9.

person—as the perspective from which the story is told. The poet undergoes all the horrendous experiences himself and through his person draws the readers into the experience, enabling them to identify with him. By emphasizing his weakness, as a human being, opposite the enormous forces of judgement, he expects to arouse a feeling of sympathy and compassion in the reader during his ordeal.

By constructing a traditional setting and perspective, al-Zahāwī draws the reader's attention to the immense contrast between the standards imposed by the faith and the limitations of the human experience. Judgement is based on the acceptance of certain doctrines, but there are several obstacles that may make this acceptance difficult. The first is the deficiency of the human mind, that is, its inclination to try to understand phenomena in a rational way and explain them in rational terms. It is very difficult to accept explanations that are outside the scope of this rationality, or, even worse, it may be impossible for the human mind to internalize phenomena by other means than its rational capacity. The second obstacle is that this "weakness" is exploited by the devil, who uses the inability of humans to rationalize their explanations not only to sow doubt, but also to seduce them to unbelief in the existence of God.

The nature of hell as the quintessential site of punishment imposes a matrix of morality, which is carefully constructed in the interrogation by Munkar and Nakir. It requires, first, adherence to Islam and belief in the existence of God, and, secondly, the practicing of the religious duties; it entails belief in the Quran in its entirety and in elements of seemingly secondary importance, such as the existence of angels and *jinn*, the bridge in the hereafter and the Mountain of Qāf. It is, in brief, a matrix in which morality is reduced to belief in a system of doctrines and prescriptions that are seen as a complete, undifferentiated whole. There is no distinction between central and marginal issues; there are no exceptions; it is, moreover, a system that is abstract, devoid of any practical significance. It seems to have its own logic, constructed around the concept of hell, apparently aimed only at recruiting souls to inhabit it, rather than to evaluate, differentiate and punish specific sins.

The poor poet who is subjected to this severe set of rules tries to wriggle his way out of it through a number of strategies. First, as was noted above, he emphasizes human weakness, beset by the evil whisperings of the devil, and he calls upon God's mildness and clemency. Secondly, he tries to introduce an element of relativity into the system by differentiating between, for instance, essential and secondary doctrines. The first are indispensable for evaluating piety, while the latter cannot be embraced by the rational mind and therefore cannot be accepted as an essential criterion for religiousness. To support this, he argues that the Book may be true, but that interpretations may be wrong,

thus relativizing the whole process of deriving religious knowledge from the Quran and reducing at least part of the system of rules to the human effort of interpretation. This relativization does not, apparently, diminish the poet's belief in the essentials; on the contrary, it is the insistence that the whole system should be accepted as equally true which makes the poet doubt the essentials, too.

A third strategy used by the poet is to juxtapose the system of doctrines and rules with a system of values as the basis of moral judgement. This change of perspective turns the abstract matrix meant for 'collective' judgement into a practical template, which can be used to judge individual acts. It is not abstract, but linked to human experience in daily life. Thus, the poet enumerates his virtues and good deeds, which, although specific to his person and scattered over his life rather than integrated into a system, still justify a positive evaluation of his conduct and character. Whatever his beliefs and whatever his deviations from the rules, he has lived according to the values of which morality should be a reflection. Although his individual acts may not be included in the doctrines, they still ultimately represent what the result and impact of religiousness should be.

The poet's relativization of the moral matrix brings the values of morality back to human proportions. By doing this, however, the chasm between the system of doctrines and everyday human practice becomes so vast as to be virtually unbridgeable. For if the faith's doctrines have such a compelling force, what would be the sense of human agency and what is the ratio behind human weakness? Why has God, in commanding such severe rules, not equipped human beings with the power to adhere to them? Why, if He is almighty, has He given them the faculty of doubt, and why does He punish them if they submit to it? How, if man has no free choice, can any punishment be justified? Here, the poet refers to the age-old discussion about man's freedom to act, which, within Sunnite orthodoxy, resulted not in a doctrine of predestination, but nevertheless in a narrowing of the space for human agency. The poet complains that since God has created him as he is, with all his deficiencies, and created a devil to exploit these deficiencies, He should not punish him in the end for 'sins' that he could hardly have avoided. If God wanted to punish him without committing an injustice He should have given him more freedom to choose and a greater capacity to understand His intentions.

The poet's inability to solve the theological problems underlying the doctrines results in a scepticism that is amplified by his awareness that the human mind is to a large extent capable of explaining phenomena and experiences in a rational way. The doubts about certain doctrines are inspired by their apparent incompatibility with the insights of modern science. Since the doctrines

are unable to give rational explanations, they are gradually pushed back by scientific knowledge, which can provide explanations that can be grasped by human intelligence. Here the poet shows his predilection for the natural sciences. It is no coincidence, of course, that hell is filled with scholars, philosophers and scientists, who have striven to discover the nature of the world, sacrificed their lives for the disclosure of Truth, and are now being punished for their noble efforts. Socrates praises the merits of science and progress, and in the end it is scientific inventions that destroy the traditional cosmological setup based on an unjust polarity between paradise and hell.

The destruction of hell with the help of modern science symbolizes the possibility of replacing the age-old obscurantist visions of life and the world with new insights. If science has the power to deconstruct traditional cosmology, it may also provide a rational basis for a system of values, and, moreover, provide explanations for phenomena that have hitherto belonged to the domain of religious speculation. It is here that the poet poses his most radical hypothesis concerning religion: it may be true that God exists, but He should perhaps be identified as the basic force in the universe, which the poet calls "ether." In al-Zahāwī's philosophy, based on European scientific theories, "ether" is a non-substantial matter that "embodies" the elementary force in the universe, and thus, in an Aristotelian way, could be equated with a divine "energy," a "prime mover."

In al-Zahāwī's philosophy it is science that poses the greatest challenge to traditional religion. Religion, in its traditionalist form, seems to be part of an obscurantist world-view, in which scientific explanations do not exist or are invalid; in the future, science will provide rational explanations for phenomena about whose nature religion can only speculate. Hell is vanquished by two phenomena: scientific thinking and the awakening of a revolutionary spirit. This combination not only counters obsolete ideas, but also deeply-rooted structures of authority.

4 Fiction and Theology

After this analysis, we can try to assess al-Zahāwī's intentions in writing his rather peculiar poem. It has been said that when King Fayṣal complained about the rebellious purport of the poem, al-Zahāwī retorted: "Since I was unable to instigate a revolution on earth, I enacted a revolution in hell."²⁸ It is clear that the controversial attitude of al-Zahāwī concerning religion was

28 Hānī, *Muḥaḍirāt* 58.

linked to a more general abhorrence of repression, fatalism, and the perpetuation of obscurantist ideas. He saw before him a future governed by freedom and a modern, rationalized world-view, which would liberate the society from backwardness and stagnation. Through the literary form he uses he expects the readers to experience themselves the injustice imposed on the poet and to be mobilized through their identification with him. The poet represents the reader and is subjected to injustice by a system based on a traditional interpretation of existence. The traditional view is subsequently dismantled, to set an example, it seems, for the readers: a call to revolt against injustice and backwardness. It is important to keep in mind, however, that in the poem it is not the poet who calls for revolution, nor the scientists and philosophers, but a young hot-head who perhaps does not take into account the consequences of his rashness. The role of the poet himself is not described.

An important narrative strategy adopted by al-Zahāwī is the strengthening of the fictional character of the text through the use of dialogue. A dialogue is by definition an open and contingent form of communication, based on arguments and rationality, and intended to convince and persuade. Still, it takes place during a physical encounter and is thus susceptible to outbursts of emotion, physical threats, and pressures connected with relationships of power. Dialogues present opportunities for manipulating the 'dialogic situation,' by way of lying, simulation, &c. Since dialogues are based on the provocation of direct responses and counter-responses, they are typically apt to question and even subvert fixed ideas and doctrinal systems, because forms of all-knowingness would make any dialogue *a priori* senseless and impossible. Thus, by using the device of the dialogue, the poet aims to draw Munkar and Nakīr into his discursive domain, that is, the domain of literature and poetry, in order to force them to deconstruct their monologic religious discourse, with its moral and prescriptive implications and the potential punishment following from it. In the poem the doctrines are thus drawn into a novelistic, fictionalized world that tailors the religious world-view to human proportions. Needless to say, the two angels refuse to enter into a real dialogue, thereby confirming the reality and consistence of the religious discursive system and its instruments for punishment.

Although the poem is not a mere instigation to revolt and is clearly fictionalized, it still contains an explicit religious component. With its exploration of the compatibility of science and religion, it fits in the context of intellectual developments in the interwar period, especially its avalanche of new scientific knowledge, political upheavals and ideological debates. If we compare al-Zahāwī's thought to, for instance, the ideas of the reformist Rashīd Riḍā, we see a similar fixation on politics, societal modernization, and incorporation of

scientific knowledge. Riḍā, too, tried to grasp the developments in Western science, and his interpretation of the nature of electricity and spiritism resembles al-Zahāwī's scientific speculations. However, whereas Riḍā sees no contradiction between science and religion and embraces new discoveries, al-Zahāwī does not succeed in reconciling the two domains and ends up with a rather pantheistic view of religion. Whereas Riḍā saw modern science as a possibility to rationalize the faith, for al-Zahāwī radical rationalism results in a rejection of not only obsolete manifestations of religion, but also of quite fundamental doctrines.²⁹

Although he can be linked to the discussions within Islamic reformism, al-Zahāwī cannot himself be considered a religious reformist. In a treatise written in his youth (1905),³⁰ al-Zahāwī fiercely attacked the ideas of the Wahhābīs, whose influence was spreading to Baghdad at the time. It is remarkable that al-Zahāwī's arguments in this treatise are derived from a rather traditional form of theology and that he for instance rejects Mu'tazilite ideas about the Quran as heretical innovation (*bid'a*). He opposes the Wahhābī prohibition of *tawassul*, or mediation by saints, which was also rejected by Riḍā. He denounces the Wahhābī conviction that the attributes of God should be accepted, but does not embrace the Mu'tazilite doctrine that they should be interpreted metaphorically. In short, al-Zahāwī rejects the irrational ideas *and* rational ideas of the Wahhābīs, clearly to oppose their violent and oppressive nature as a movement, and, especially, their adoption of anathematizing (*takfīr*). He does not develop an alternative theological system rooted in the Islamic tradition. Although it is not a pamphlet advocating religious reform or a re-evaluation of theological thought, it is a serious treatise, which contrasts with al-Zahāwī's literary work.

The poem *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm*, then, is not a component in a coherent theological system of reasoning, but rather a playful enactment of a religious dilemma. It is ironic that the poet undergoes the interrogations and torments that are precisely the object of his scepticism, without changing his view. During his life he would probably have rejected the existence of Munkar and Nakīr, but their appearance before him does not instigate him to give up his doubts. It is ironic, too, that at a certain point during the interrogation he calls in the help of God, or "ether," hoping that He/It will save him. In traditional conversion stories similar episodes are usually inserted to prove the powerlessness of idols, when confronted with the almighty powers of God. Perhaps the poet realizes this when he repents having said this. Does this mean that the poet

29 See van Leeuwen, Islamic reformism.

30 al-Zahāwī, *al-Fajr al-Ṣādiq*.

accepts the existence of God according to the traditional theodicy? Does it mean that the rebellion does not spring forth from a denial of His existence but from anger about the alleged injustice? After all, in the poem God's throne is shaken, but it does not fall.

Perhaps the crux of the matter is that on discovering the truth of the doctrines, the poet sees it as an injustice that God was unwilling to convince him of this truth during his life and now punishes him for what the poet considers to be God's deficiency. After all, the poet now finds out that the doctrines are true, and it is this discovery which confirms his sense of injustice and which makes a revolution unavoidable. However, this revolt is directed against a specific part of religion only, since God's status remains unscathed. Religion is to a large extent drawn into the sphere of secular struggles, excluding only God Himself. The revolution is thus not an attack on religion as such, but rather on the claims it lays on the secular domains of life and the ways in which these claims are shaped into doctrines, threats and authority.

It is important, of course, that *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm* is not a religious treatise, but a work of fiction. Its fictionality is emphasized by the final sentence, which relegates the whole adventure to the realm of dreams. This device is also used by Salman Rushdie, who incorporated some of the controversial episodes of *The satanic verses* into a dream. This relativization in *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm* may be intended to avoid the accusation of heresy, of course, but it may also indicate that the author does not intend to deliver a theological religious statement, but rather create a narrative space for the staging of a moral dilemma, in its individual and human implications. Since the dream is presented as a nightmare, the contradictions in the adventure are not solved: like Maḥfūz in his defence of *Awlād ḥāratinā*, he can argue that he did not represent the revolt in hell as a positive event, but as something rather frightening, both in its actual happening and in its consequences. The ironies and inconsistencies in the work, such as the poet's persistence in his 'error' in full view of the reality of the eschatological doctrines, are signs as well that the account is not intended as a blasphemous denouncement of religion or God, but rather as a visualization of the human predicament *vis-à-vis* the enormity of religious truth. The poet may ridicule certain rigid forms of religious authority, but in the end he does not ridicule God or religiousness as such. What is portrayed is not unbelief, but scepticism.

By using the device of dialogue to strengthen the fictional nature of the text, al-Zahāwī juxtaposes the poetic and religious worldviews, defining his own work as being outside the realm of religious discourse. He exposes the absence of a dialogic potential in religious discourse, which is unable to compromise or to give up its monolithic claims. Still, at a certain point, the truth-claims of

religion are opposed by al-Zahāwī's claim that poetry, too, contains a measure of 'truth' and represents a moral value system. In contrast to religious truth, however, poetic truth is part of a dialogue, an open worldview and a vision of ethics that can be understood by man. Does this poetic truth, in *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm* replace religious truth? It is significant that in the dialogue with Munkar and Nakīr the poet accepts the existence of God, but his vision of God is complex: He is almighty, but he allows the revolution to take place. In the end, God's throne is shaken, but not toppled, so God continues to exist with His authority intact. Therefore, even if God is equated to ether, this should not be seen as a denial of God's existence, but rather as a concept of God stripped of all its doctrinal attributes, as in the mystical, speculative vision of the highest power. Apparently, it is not al-Zahāwī's intention to destroy God or religion, but only to create a space for posing questions and discussing moral and social dilemmas by limiting the domain of religious authority. It is of course understandable that in spite of its limited aims, religious authorities would be disturbed by the ultimate purport of al-Zahāwī's poem.

Although the poem as a piece of fiction rejects any religious authority and avoids the criteria of the religious interpretive community, its reference to poetry as containing some truth, opposing art to the angels' questions as truth versus untruth, could suggest some form of religious obstinacy. It can be argued, however, that the fictional nature of the poem would sufficiently protect it against the criteria of religious evaluation. The poem may contain some truth, but it is the truth of scepticism rather than a truth that can be equated with religious doctrines. Rather than with theological doctrines, poems such as *Thawra fī l-jaḥīm* should be compared with mystical texts, which contain speculations about the nature of existence and God, and combine experiential certainty with intellectual speculation. Whether God is God in the traditional sense or "ether" as in the imagination of al-Zahāwī is of no essential significance. What is important is the way in which religious belief is linked to the human experience and to human values. In this relationship religious doctrines, traditions and authorities are only of secondary importance. For al-Zahāwī once remarked that the question whether he was an atheist or not concerned only himself and no-one else.³¹

We can now clearly see the function of hell in al-Zahāwī's poem: it is the locus where the struggle between doctrine and human experience takes place, where authority is effectuated, where traditional ideas are protected and preserved, and where judgement is put into cruel practice. It is also a fictional setting, where dilemmas and contradictions can be shown in their full complexity,

31 Widmer, *Der 'irāqische Dichter* 13.

without the necessity to reach a final judgement or to solve all the questions that are raised. And, finally, it is a setting where the reader can identify more than in any other setting with the fear, doubts and horror of the poet in his predicament as an essentially free, sceptic mind.

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