A PLACE BETWEEN TWO PLACES:
THE QUR’AN’S INTERMEDIATE STATE AND THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE BARZAKH

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ABSTRACT

For those who believe in a future resurrection of the body, there naturally arises the question of what happens after death but before the end of time. This condition is the intermediate state. For most Muslims, the intermediate state is called the barzakh. It is a fantastical and frightening time in the grave, often equated to Purgatory in Christianity. Muslims throughout history and today have discussed this belief and expressed it in many forms. In the theological turmoil of the early Islamic Middle Ages, it even became a touchstone of orthodoxy: to be a true Muslim was to believe in the barzakh. But where does the medieval/modern belief in the barzakh come from? While the word barzakh does appear in the Qur’ān three times, it is never explained there in detail. The Qur’ān’s primal audience is expected to understand this word without further comment. Using the methodologies of comparative religion and oral compositional forms (ring structure, chiasms, parallelisms), this project aims to show what the Qur’ān meant by barzakh in the 7th century. A long study will be given on the Qur’ān’s eighteenth sūra, al-Kahf. Fifteen other sūras will be examined as well. I will argue that the Qur’ānic barzakh is an eschatological cosmology designed specifically to nullify saint cults and the cult of the divine Christ by putting the dead into a sleep state. From here, the belief in the barzakh will be shown passing through early Islamic history and culminating in the distinctive eschatological claims of the Islamic Middle Ages.
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Tasi, whose many and varied talents make the world a better place, and to Rachel whose question one day lead me to construct this study of the barzakh. And to all my other colleagues and friends, I am indebted to each of you. I regret that I cannot name everyone else here whom I would like to thank for their help in this project and remark on each of their many gifts. Even if the seas were made of ink, I could not write enough about the patient support of you all.

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Notes on languages. All transliterated Arabic, including within citations, has been adjusted to match the system used by the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*. Greek terms have been transliterated according to the “Scientific” system of the Library of Congress standards for “Greek, Ancient and Medieval (before 1454).” All other languages referenced that do not use the Latin alphabet will be transliterated as found in their cited modern sources. In the interest of style, the grammatical constructions of the English language have been introduced (for example, *ḥadīth* will be pluralized as *ḥadīths*, not *ahādīth*; I will refer to Khārijites and Khārijism, not *Khawārij*).

For clarity, all Qurʾānic references are given first in the original Arabic. For translations, most are based on those of A. J. Droge, *The Qurʾān: A New Annotated Translation*, (Bristol, Connecticut: Equinox Publishing, 2013). When warranted, I have reworked that translation, or replaced it entirely with my own. These translations have also been checked against other English translations of the material, especially: A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, (New York: Collier Books, 1955); Tarif Khalidi, *The Qurʾan*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); and the “Qurʾanic Arabic Corpus,” of the Language Research Group at the University of Leeds, corpus.quran.com. Biblical citations are from the *New International Version* with my own edits. All other translations are those of their respective modern scholars. Some citations from English translations have been edited as needed. Mostly this has been for consistency: for example, Muḥammad's title will always appear as “Messenger” and “Prophet,” although a given translator may have used “Emissary” or “Apostle”; the Deity will always be “God,” not “Allāh,” etc.

Notes on gender and divine names. Any individual in general, or one whose gender is undefined, will be referred to by the feminine pronouns and possessives. For example, “If someone were to read her favorite book...” God will not be assigned a gender unless in a translation or reference to a text with clearly gendered pronouns and possessives. For example, translations from the Qurʾān
will render God “He,” “Him,” and “His.” Divine names will be capitalized. For instance “God,” “the Merciful,” “the Living,” etc.

Notes on dating. All dates are C.E. (the “Christian Era,” also nebulously called the “Common Era,”) unless marked otherwise as B.C.E. (“Before the Christian Era”). Referring to large periods of time is a perennial issue. For simplicity, I will call the time before the ‘Abbāsid period (750) “Late Antiquity.” The following 1,000 years, in which the studies of the Qurʾān are overwhelmingly being undertaken by self-identified Muslims using Islamic methods will be the “Middle Ages,” and the period after 1798 indicating European colonialism in the Islamic world “Modernity.” These are my own completely artificial divisions, and could easily and correctly be debated in any number of ways.

Notes on citing classical sources. There is unfortunately no standard convention for citing classical Islamic texts that is meaningful according to both modern-critical and traditional scholarship of Islam. Regarding the Qurʾān, I am very hesitant of using typical modern citations such as 1.4 or Q 1:4. Besides ignoring the traditional method of citation by the classical names of each sūra, replacing the accepted titles with numbers alone erases the independence of the sūras from one another. It would be like referring to Psalms 45:2 as Jewish/Protestant Bible 16:42:2. This assumes that this book is merely next in an obvious and meaningful sequence, which is simply not true. Because we do not know why the received Qurʾānic text is ordered as it is, the classical names of the sūras, while not consistent or even necessarily indigenous to the Qurʾān, have value. However, the numbers of the sūras are still of use and so common in modern literature that I have decided to use a hybrid method of citation which (as far as I can tell) was first created by Munawar Ahmad Anees and Alia N. Athar. It includes both sūra names and numbers, as well as the verse numbers according to the Royal Cairo edition of 1924. For example, the line of the Qurʾān which reads "مالك يوم الدين" ("Master of the Day of Judgment") would

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be rendered as *al-Fātiḥa* 1:4. This method is redundant as the *sūra* is given both in the traditional Arabic name and as the numeral 1, however this route satisfies both Western and Islamic sensibilities. Classical exegetes will be cited with the same method as the Qurʾān (for instance, al-Ṭabarī, *ad al-Fātiḥa* 1:4). Ḥadīths will include the compiler's name, the compilation's name, and the reference number of the report from the beginning of the entire collection (such as, Ibn Wahb, *Jāmiʿ*, 48).

**Notes on citing modern sources.** All secondary scholarship will be cited according to the current *Chicago Manual of Style*. Often cited works with be abbreviated thus:

- **AEL** *Arabic-English Lexicon*, by E. W. Lane (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863).
- **EI** *Encyclopedia of Islam* (with edition and author).
- **EQ** *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAulliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001). (with author and volume)
Chapter I: Introduction, or “That Second Kingdom”

To course now across more gentle waters
the little boat of my talent lifts her sails
leaving behind it a cruel sea
and I sing of that second kingdom.

-Dante, Purgatorio 1

In the religious traditions which gave us the Near Eastern scriptures, there are many notions of a general Resurrection of the dead at the end of time. When this is understood as a quantifiable event in future history, it means one day there will be a reunion between body and soul after death. In the manifestations of Christianity, Islam, and post-Hellenistic Judaism that concern themselves with a final Resurrection, many or all of the people who have died throughout history will be returned to their bodies in some way, all at the same appointment in the Eschaton. The details of how, when, where, and why this will happen are many, and range from vague expectations to elaborate, many-stepped prophetic histories. Specifics aside though, all notions of a common Resurrection create a common problem: what becomes of the soul in the interim period? What happens between the end of this life and the return to the body at the beginning of the next one? How are we to account for the souls of people who will die years or long millennia before the Resurrection? Are they somewhere waiting or doing something to pass the time? Are they here on earth or elsewhere? Are they aware or dormant? Frozen in time or changing? Exerting influence on this world or remote? One's response to all of these questions is called the intermediate or interim state. It is the history of this second stage of human reality — according to the Qur’ānic scripture and the 7th century conversation of which it is a part — that I would like to discuss.

In this chapter, I will introduce various plans of intermediate states, especially according to Muslims. I will then give short notes on significant pre-Islamic schemes of the afterlife insofar as they
had resonance with the Qurʾān and its first listeners\(^1\) regarding intermediate states. After this, I will sketch out a course of analysis for the larger project that will use recent developments in structural investigation to bring us closer to very early Islam and its obscure take on the interregnum after death and before the Resurrection. In short, I will argue that the Qurʾānic corpus is functionally equating the dead to people who are asleep. If the dead — be they beloved friend, family, saint, or even savior — are unconscious while they wait for the Resurrection on the last day, then it stands to reason that they cannot answer prayers or otherwise act as independent intercessors. How the Qurʾān is making this argument is not clear from pre-Islamic or post-Qurʾānic materials alone, and neither is it apparent from the Qurʾānic scripture as it is normally engaged. Therefore, we must find a way to read the Qurʾān that accounts for both its distinctness and the context of its first appearance.

Part 1 - *Barzakh*

There are five major (and often intertwined) ways Muslims, Christians, and Jews with future Resurrection mythologies have addressed the questions of the intermediate state. I have named them *ambiguity, pilgrimage, purgation, soul-death,* and *soul-sleep.* Each choice solves a theological problem, and goes on to create some new ones.

First and most naturally, the span between death and resurrection can be left in *ambiguity:* the intermediate state is beyond our knowing. One might take this option from an honest admission of not knowing the future, or perhaps one may think the matter is not of particular concern. Also, being agnostic on the intermediate state might be appealing for those who think available information on the matter lacks detail. Many modern Reformed Jewish and early Eastern Christian interpretations of

\(^1\) How to refer to the very first people to hear the Qurʾān is troublesome. “The Arabs” is problematic twice over, as what exactly defines an Arab in this period is unclear, and there are several players of note in the Qurʾānic milieu who were not Arabs in any regard. The same can be said for “the Meccans” and so forth. The ‘first Muslims’ or ‘early Muslims’ is too limiting, as most of the people who heard the Qurʾān in this setting would not be identified as such. Instead, I have disregarded all ethnic frameworks and any typology that falsely simplifies how someone reacted to the Qurʾān. When necessary, I will refer to the “very early hearers,” the “first listeners,” the “principle audience,” and so forth.
death would fall into this category. For example, suppose a Late Antique Christian learned that Jesus mentions ‘Abraham's bosom’ as a place outside of Hades (haidēs) where at least one righteous, non-resurrected dead person dwells. Whether being in ‘Abraham's bosom’ is a normal condition of the upright soul after death, a special case of a special individual, or just the colorful imagery of a parable-teller, Luke's text does not elaborate. Either from acknowledging scripture's lack of specifics, modestly claiming ignorance of events that have yet to occur, or remaining indifferent, having no defined intermediate state may appear to be a safe route as it is staking no positive claims. Yet this is problematic as merely dodging the questions of the intermediate state does not provide any comforting or useful insights either. Also one may believe that having correct knowledge of God's plan for humanity is directly or indirectly significant for her salvation.

Second and third options suggest activities that busy the soul before the end of time. A believer in the Resurrection could argue that the soul goes on a pilgrimage away from the body into an environment where a corpse could not readily go in life, such as through the earth, the air, or into another body. Particularly with Platonic understandings of a division between the soul and the body, it would not be hard to see why one would conclude that the soul spatially goes somewhere while its physical form is broken and decaying. Often Ezekiel's visions of the merkavah, Christ's harrowing of Hell, Paul's trip up to the “third heaven,” or Muḥammad's miʿrāj can be the visionary prototypes of a

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3 In historical studies, it is usually argued that Sheol/Hades was the resting place of all the dead, with some sort of partition or hierarchy between the righteous and the wicked. Andrew F. Key, “The Concept of Death in Early Israelite Religion,” Journal of Bible and Religion 32 (1964): 239-247. “Abraham's bosom” is also mentioned as the resting place of the righteous dead in 4 Maccabees 13:17 and Jubilees 22:24, however in pre-modern Western Christian eschatology, the reference would most likely be considered more unusual, if not mistakenly considered unique to the words of Christ. Whether the phrase implied heaven, purgatory, limbo, or some other destination in the afterlife would be unclear. Even Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) suggested that, “Abraham's Bosom” was some kind of intermediate state; Jesus of Nazareth (New York: Doubleday Press, 2007), 215.

4 We can also include many who believe that immediately following one's demise the soul travels to Heaven or Hell, from whence it will be called back to the body for judgment and presumably returned to where it had previously been waiting.

5 2 Corinthians 12:2-4. It should be noted that Paul does not claim it was he himself that traveled into the heavens. However, Christian tradition habitually understands this passage as Paul speaking of himself in the third person.

voyage of this kind. Or, in a third and often overlapping option, the intermediate state can be a type of 
*purgation* in which the soul is inflicted with pains or pleasures in preparation for the Resurrection. The Catholic Middle Ages especially give us the classic examples of ‘particular judgment’ and souls in Purgatory, with counterparts in post-Temple Judaism\(^7\) and the Islamic mystical traditions.\(^8\) Often stated or implied in pilgrimage and purgation schemes is a belief that the soul develops or learns something in the intermediate state.

Both the pilgrimage and purgation depictions of the intermediate state give us two bonuses and two problems. These considerations relieve concerns that one cannot reach God's requirements of us in this life alone, especially if those requirements are impossibly high. If true religion demands that only a perfect person can escape damnation at the Resurrection, it is consoling to think that one has at least two chances and perhaps a very, very long time to learn how to become such a person. An educational journey of the soul or a transformative experience would thus make practical use of the hiatus between death and the apocalypse. It is also clear though that this line of thinking may cheapen one's opinions of virtue and hard work in this lifetime. In line with Augustine's famous parody of youthful prayer, why bother practicing abstinence, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice now, when there will be time for that sort of thing later?\(^9\) Also, if the dead are in a state that involves free choice, awareness, and self-development, and they are closer to God than most or all living people can possibly be, then does that create a place for other spiritual agents besides the one God of monotheism? In other words, if a dead loved one is in a place or a state of extramundane power, and this soul is still aware of mortal suffering on earth, does this imply some ability of the soul to intercede on behalf of the living, or even to act from afar on its own whims from a supernatural vantage point?

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\(^7\) There is some suggestion of punishment in *Sheol* in the Hebrew canon (e.g., *Psalms* 18:5, 49:14), but this kind of eschatology does not firmly appear in the historical record until the Babylonian Talmud (e.g. *Sanhedrin* 47b). Christian Lange, "*Barzakh*," *EI3*.  
This can be taken as a boon if one is partial to saint cults and personal patrons, but it can also be (or seem to be) crypto-polytheism; a major threat to ancient and modern reformers and strict monotheists.

Our fourth and fifth options are often considered together, like the second and third. In these the intermediate state is also given a defined mythology (unlike the argument for ambiguity) but this last set prevents the soul from postmortem self-development or interaction with the living as in the above pilgrimage and purgation models. Thnetopsychism, mortalism, or less technically soul-death, means that the death of the body is also the death of the soul. It is a near materialism, but in the end of days both the body and the soul will be reborn and brought back together again. Although not common today, soul-death had at least some sway for Christians in the province of Arabia Petraea in the 240s, as reported by Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339):

> About the same time others arose in Arabia, putting forward a doctrine foreign to the truth. They said 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.

Citing this same passage from the Ecclesiastical History, John Calvin (d. 1564) condemned an apparent reappearance of this belief in the Anabaptists of his own day. Calvin also explains why soul-death can be an issue. If the soul can only be alive in and with the body, how is ‘soul’ not just another way of saying that human beings are only bodily creatures without any inner spiritual existence? “Is not the soul more than meat?” Calvin asks. To claim that the soul dies at bodily death makes ‘soul’ synonymous with physical life to such a degree that it is not clear that there is any independent reality of souls besides as poetic equivalents of biological functioning. The soul is just an interesting term for

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10 It could be argued that there is also a possibility that after death but before being raised up again, there is no intermediate state at all. However, I would contest that this is only a version of soul-death, without such bodily terms.

11 Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History 6.37. Later in this passage, Eusebius tells us that Origen himself traveled to Arabia, and thus the heresy was apparently halted.

12 John Calvin, Psychopannychia, Preface. 1534, in The Writings of John Calvin, ed. Wulfert de Greef (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 151-154. Note that Calvin does not see a distinction between soul-death with soul-sleep, as I have made here.

a person with a pulse. Many early Muslim authors condemned the shadow-religion of the pre-Islamic Arab pagans for a very similar materialistic belief (although these authors presumed the ‘pagans’ did not have expectations of a Resurrection).\textsuperscript{14}

The fifth and final scheme of the intermediate state is formally referred to as hypnopsychism or psychopannychism. This soul-sleep puts the souls of the dead into a dormant state, like in the state of soul-death. Like soul-death too, soul-sleep prevents eschatological ambiguity and intercessory cults. Unlike soul-death though, soul-sleep gives the soul an independence from the body and therefore a raison d’être. Soul-death is possibly materialism while soul-sleep cannot be. Granted, the soul does not necessarily do anything without the life of its body but sleep, but the notion of a disembodied soul is still meaningful.

How sleep is to be understood in this sense has some range as well. I will thus need to create two sub-categories: deep soul-sleep and dreaming soul-sleep. If by ‘sleep,’ the soul is taken as being in a death-like dormancy (such as in deep sleep or a coma) then there is minimal distinction between soul-sleep and soul-death, as Calvin also believes. Deep soul-sleep may even be soul-death by another name. However, sleep can instead be taken as a condition where there is still some possibility of chronology or passive experiences (such as the dreams, nightmares, comforts, or pains of living sleep), hence dreaming soul-sleep. It would be easy enough to pair dreaming soul-sleep with the intermediate state models of purgation and pilgrimage. Do the visions and torments of the dead transport, transform, reform, or torture the soul at rest? When we ask how a sinful person sleeps at night, or hope a beloved person rests in peace, we acknowledge sleep as both a non-event and as a state of moral exposure. In either version of soul-sleep, hope of intercession on behalf of the living can be nullified. How can someone who is ‘out cold’ or at least unaware answer a prayer? However, it must

\textsuperscript{14} E.g., \textit{al-Mu'minun} 23:37; see also W. Montgomery Watt, “Pre-Islamic Arabian Religion in the Qur'an,” \textit{Islamic Studies} 15 (1976): 73-79.
be noted that dreaming soul-sleep may not always be understood this way, as in much of the ancient world dream was a state with communal and communicative properties.

All this is not to say that soul-sleep is the solution to the dilemma of the intermediate state either, however. If one understands 'sleep' in the comatose sense of deep soul-sleep, there is no chance of conscious maturation or redemption in the afterlife, and no hope for someone to intercede with God against divine decree, then even minor sins and errors in life become major hazards. Believers in deep soul-sleep would have to be hyper-aware of sin and religious errors. Martin Luther (d. 1546), who argued against the Catholic authorities of his day by suggesting soul-sleep also claims to have spent much of his life plagued by the torment of unescapable damnation. If on the other hand one believes in dreaming soul-sleep — that souls at rest have some kinds of semiconscious experiences — then the whole ethical dilemma of postponing good works reappears, as we have seen in the purgative and pilgrimage schemas.

No one religious tradition favors just one vision of the intermediate state over all others at all times. So naturally, as with any belief shared by many millions of people over the centuries, the Islamic intermediate period, the barzakh, is understood in quite a number of fluid ways. Although Islam in its boundless varieties almost universally calls the intermediate state by this name, that should not in the slightest imply a monolith. On the whole however, depictions of the barzakh tend toward the intermediate state models of pilgrimage, purgation, and most especially, soul-sleep of both kinds. In the modern and high medieval eras, barzakh is often a blend of all these types, with perhaps some priority given to purgation. In the formative period of Islamic commentary literatures and legal schools the role of pilgrimage in the barzakh is much less apparent. And further back still, even the presence of purgation in the barzakh is debatable, leaving one or another form of soul-sleep alone.

16 Martin Luther, Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings, 1545, in Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times, 1483-1546, ed. Helmar Junghans (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1998).
In the Middle Ages, Muslims, notably but not exclusively Ṣūfīs, developed particularly complex phantasmagorical depictions of the *barzakh* which were simultaneously a form of dreaming soul-sleep, a visionary pilgrimage, and a purgation.\(^7\) Although the soul in the *barzakh* was in a dormant condition in the grave (see fig. 1.1), the *barzakh* was also a pilgrimage in that it was equated with a trip into a liminal environment underground and/or in the heavenly spheres. And furthermore, this pilgrimage had a purgative flavor, usually related to the ‘torment of the grave,’ (‘adhāb al-qabr’). For example, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350) explained that the soul’s entry into the sleep of the grave matched a simultaneous migration of the soul to heaven or Hell, where it would be rewarded or punished, and from which it would be called back for the Resurrection.\(^8\) The most famous and most analyzed development in the medieval *barzakh* came from Andalusian theosophist Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240). The human condition itself was essentially the *barzakh*, as it was the meeting place of the seen and unseen worlds.\(^9\) He painted the *barzakh* as a purgative voyage through the Islamic cosmos, and yet also retained its relationship to sleep. As Ibn ‘Arabī and many others have claimed, living people can travel through this hierarchical cosmos and interact with the unseen and

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\(^7\) Leah Kinberg argues that the ubiquitous medieval combination of purgation, pilgrimage, and soul-sleep in the intermediate state stems directly from the writings of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 894). Leah Kinberg, “Interaction Between This World and the Afterworld in Early Islamic tradition,” *Oriens* 29-30 (1986): 288.

\(^8\) Lange, “Barzakh.”

the dead gaining hidden knowledge (ʿilm al-barzakh) in ecstasy and in their nightly dreams. In his Kitāb al-Barzakh, al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) even uses the example of sleep to explain that those in the grave must be able to suffer torment and shame:

Al-Suyūṭī reports the view that a person being crucified undergoes the punishment of barzakh even though ordinary mortals cannot see it, in the same way in which someone who is asleep may appear to be dead yet is full of life. For example, a person on the cross experiences a pressure (ḍaghṭa) like that of the grave because his chest is compressed.

As we reach further back into Islamic history, the barzakh is less associated with a form of pilgrimage, while becoming more strictly identified with just purgation and sleep. When the soul is in the grave, it does not go anywhere beyond the environs of the corpse; the soul remains with the body for the full timespan (ajal) between death and resurrection. According to various hadiths, one or more angels (most often two named Munkar and Nakīr) visit the soul in the grave, and ask the deceased questions about her beliefs (musāʾala) concerning the oneness of God and the prophecy of Muḥammad. Depending on the soul’s responses, it is either blessed or tormented before its final lot is revealed at the divine judgment. The torments of the grave are many but most typically include being crushed inwards, as al-Suyūṭī has in mind. Even the Arabic word for a nightmare (ḍāghūṭ) carries the implication of being compressed, like being entombed. Other forms of punishment also

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21 Lange, “Barzakh.”


24 Lange, “Barzakh.”

25 For a longer exposition on the specifics of the barzakh as informed by the hadith and other post-Qurʾān materials, see Ragnar Eklund, Life Between Death and Resurrection According to Islam (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1941); Leor Halevi, Muhammad’s Grave (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 197-214; Smith and Haddad, The Islamic Understanding, 31-62.
include being burnt, attacked by scorpions or worms, or shut away in the darkness alone. All of these bring to mind the conditions of being a corpse, as if the soul is still present in the decaying body.

Not all early Islamic authors agreed that there was going to be punishment in the *barzakh*, however. During the *miḥna* of al-Ma’mūn (d. 833) and its immediate aftermath, we can see clear signs of a lingering debate over whether the intermediate state was both purgation and soul-sleep, or just the latter. The Traditionalists (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) came to argue for the suffering of the sleeping dead, as this was referenced in gradually canonizing bodies of prophetic sayings. Meanwhile many of the Mu’tazilites are said to have favored soul-sleep alone. Yet history would favor the Traditionalists, and by the tenth century they commonly claimed that disbelief in the purgation of the grave was the same as disbelief in Islam itself. But it has been suggested that before this purgatorial vision of the intermediate period came to be one of the emblems of orthodoxy, there were at least some parties who thought the pre-resurrected dead experienced nothing; not even time, like one does in soul-sleep or soul-death. “[T]he early centuries of Islam offered only limited speculation concerning this period and in fact felt little inclination to think of it as a period at all ... this time will pass like the wink of an eye.” This absence of torment or even time in the sleep of the soul has been attributed to the Khaṭṭāmites as well as Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (and then by extension to the Jahmites).

But what about the Qur’ān? What does it have to say about the *barzakh*? Considering the Qur’ān’s boundless discussion of death and Resurrection, sin and punishment, and reward and good works, there seems to be surprisingly little to be found about the intermediate period. And what is available is very unclear using linear readings of the text. In standard readings of Sunnī eschatology, the legwork of explaining the nature of the life after this one but before the next is almost entirely

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26 Ibid., 38.
27 Lange, “Barzakh.”
28 Ibid.
29 Smith and Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding*, 33.
30 Lange, “Barzakh.”
carried out by the later commentary traditions of ḥadīth and tafsīr. Certainly some of the information contained in this massive collection of literatures does indeed reflect the historical realities of the Qur’ānic milieu in 7th century Arabia. But the long distances of space, time, and culture between the Qur’ān and the post-Qur’ānic materials makes weeding out the fabrications and mis-remembrances from the facts notoriously problematic by modern critical standards. I will address how the later commentary sources may be useful for addressing the history of Late Antique Arabia and the days of Muḥammad in the fifth chapter. For now, to be as grounded in the text as possible, it would be apt to narrow in on the Qur’ānic references to the barzakh without the insights of the early medieval sources of commentary.

There are only three times that the word barzakh appears in the Qurʾān, and only one of these obviously uses the word barzakh in the context of death and Resurrection. It reads:

99. Until, when death comes to one of them, he says, 'My Lord, send me back, so that I may do righteousness concerning what I left (undone).” Surely "No" is the word that He speaks. Behind them is a barzakh until the Day when they will be raised up (al-Muʾminūn 23:99-100).

When this individual dies, he realizes that he has made mistakes or left things undone. So the dead person asks God to return to life (or to return to the world of the living in some other way) in order to set his affairs right. God says firmly, "no," because there is a barzakh between the dead person and the living world in the time between now and the Resurrection. There is no further clue given on the nature of this barzakh, except that it appears to be solid and unassailable. “Having passed into that realm, one can never return, either to right past wrongs or to communicate with the living.” Impregnability is the only sure attribute of the barzakh easily offered by the text itself. This

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33 Smith and Haddad, The Islamic Understanding, 32.
relationship of the *barzakh* to unassailability is repeated in the other two uses of the term, in which *barzakh* is a barrier between two bodies of water; a geological isthmus or a constructed partition (see fig. 1.2). From our standpoint, there is no obvious relationship to death and the Resurrection in either; only that a *barzakh* is a border that cannot be crossed.34

19. He let loose the two seas (which) meet.
20. Between them (there is) a *barzakh* (which) they do not seek (to cross) (*al-Rahmān* 55:19-20).

53. He (it is) who has let loose the two seas, this one sweet and fresh, and this (other) one salty (and) bitter, and placed between them a *barzakh* and a restricted obstruction (*al-Furqān* 25:53).

Other than this sparse set of three, there is nowhere else in the text of the Qur’ān that mentions the *barzakh* by name. Where is the later discussion of the *barzakh* coming from if not the Qur’ān itself? Perhaps there is an internal cultural allusion being made: someone within the Qur’ānic milieu would understand the reference of the term *barzakh* without having to be told. It is familiar, common-sensical information to an early 7th century proto-Muslim Arabic speaker, but not to us.

If we examine the term, even a rudimentary understanding of Semitic languages and their root systems tells us that *barzakh* is not native to that language family. Arthur Jefferies offers some analysis. He first notes that the lexicographers are unable to find a

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34 I will argue that there is indeed a message about the intermediate state in these two verses, although it is hidden within an eschatological cosmology. This will be elaborated upon in chapters 3 and 4.
verbal root or a reference to another Arabic source for the term. He suggests the word is from the Middle Persian *frasang/frasangan* or the Greek *parasangēs*, indicating a certain measure of land,\(^{35}\) such as a barrier, partition, or isthmus would be. This seems plausible, but it does not throw any new light on the matter, save that the intended reference is to be found beyond the Arabic linguistic milieu but is still familiar within it. Of course, as all languages are porous and contain ‘foreign’ words, this does not necessarily help us. Otherwise, nearly all other modern scholarship of note concludes from Jeffery or the Islamic sources that the *barzakh* is a barrier, but neither critical nor traditional investigations can explain the disparity between the Qurʾān’s 7th century discussion of *barzakh*, and the 9-10th century debate in Baghdad over the soul’s dormancy and pre-Resurrection purgation.

I argue that we can precede over this barrier of our own by looking at the Qurʾān in new directions and with new eyes. If all early Islamic sources regardless of their opinions of the *barzakh* and purgation agree that there is some degree of deep or dreaming soul-sleep involved in the matter, it might be wise to investigate the Qurʾānic materials looking not just for the word *barzakh*, but for discussions of sleep and dormancy in their relations to death. Investigating how the Qurʾān talks about these subjects, I suggest, not only will provide much more information on the intermediate state of the *barzakh*, it will help us bridge the gap in the discussion between the scripture and the later commentaries (and debates) about it. But opening the Qurʾān is never as straightforward as the theologian or the critical historian would like, and so let us look for a contextual and historical framework for our reading.

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\(^{35}\) Karl Vollers, “Beiträge zur Kenntniss der lebenden arabischen Sprache in Aegypten” *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 1896. I-li. see *FVQ*, 77. I will offer another, much more likely origin for the word *barzakh* in the fourth chapter.
Part 2: Contextual Background - Underworlds: Sleep and Death in Antiquity

Getting at solid information about the Qur’ānic milieu is the hot topic of modern critical investigations of the Qur’ān. Without relying on the later commentary materials as first-hand accounts, which they are not, there is nothing outside of the Qur’ān that without question tells us information about the beliefs of that exact time and place. All other Islamic materials are at least compiled (if not written) later. Meanwhile, those sources that truly are contemporaneous with the Qur’ān’s conversation are from peoples with debatable relationships to that conversation. Archeological evidence too, when conclusive, is never the evidence of the Qur’ānic context precisely. While it is true that any or all of these sources might get us quite close to our goal, all come with provisos.

Too often moderns suppose incorrectly that ancient peoples of all sorts lived in vacuums. This is a tyranny of the living. There is no reason to assume that the 7th century Ḥijāz was not in full awareness of and communion with the wider world of which it was a part. And even more significantly, the Qur’ān itself insists that its message is one of recollection, reform, and confirmation, and not simply new information.36 The Qur’ān and its content is at once something novel and yet very old, hence its disbelieving audience can claim that they have heard this all before.

25. [...]ose who disbelieve say, “This is nothing but old tales” (al-An‘ām 6:25).

The Qur’ān makes direct and indirect mention of the biblical lore at length, as well as some pagan stories and cosmologies from various sources, as if the audience was expected to know these references intimately. Therefore we can make some general observations about how the Qur’ān’s principal audience could have understood sleep and the conditions of the dead using pre-Islamic materials. We can look to the cultures which surrounded the Qur’ānic milieu in space or in influence for clues about how these first and proto-Muslims would have thought about the relationship between

36 E.g. Yūnus 10:37.
sleep and death. This too will not give us incontrovertible hard data on the Qurʾānic conversation unfortunately, although it can offer us some groundwork for our textual analysis later, and after this we can look to the post-Qurʾānic sources. To wit, contextual analysis of those cultures and worldviews that have some presence in the Qurʾān will give us hints about a gamut in which the missing information might be found when we do turn to the text itself shortly in search of the intermediate state.

Also I must say that the Qurʾān has no interest in the historical distinctions between the many allusions which it calls up. The Qurʾān is not worried about our contrasts between gentile, Jewish, and Christian; or Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac; or the cultural origins of each individual datapoint, be they in the fifth century B.C.E. Babylon or the fifth century C.E. Syria. The Qurʾān's conversation is only in dialogue with the primary material itself; not our history of it. We must assume a disregard for what more recent studies have to say about the dating of these stories and their many distinctions and disagreements: the message of Islamic revelation is one of continuity, not textual development as moderns would have it. In the Qurʾānic milieu these materials all belong to one worldview together as the collected revelation of God to the human race. Here though I will present the gentile and biblical lores' visions of sleep and death in historical progressions scholars today would recognize. Yet, these accounts of sleep and death are coming from so many sources which are so differentiated from one another in history and context, we should not expect a single cohesive system to emerge. Still there are certainly patterns which present themselves readily. Again, as I shall demonstrate in later chapters, these themes are present in the Qurʾān as well, and many in full harmony with these other traditions.

To speak of sleep and death in the truly ancient cultures of the Near East is to speak of the underworld, where the dead exist apart from the living. The majority and oldest of these underworlds are not intermediate states, as that would require an expectation of the Resurrection; an expectation

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not common until the biblical inter-testamental period. However, before I turn to those Jewish and Christian sources that require an intermediate state, there are Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman afterlives which inform much later intermediate periods of soul-sleep. As all this material has been treated at great length by modern scholarship, I will offer only a cursory overview here. I will give a few quick glosses of several underworlds and afterlives without in-depth reference to the Qurʾān. For clarity, it would be better to merely introduce these pre-Islamic cultures of sleep and death, saving the exact points of contact between the Qurʾān and its references for the chapters to come. When these patterns reappear in the investigation of the Qurʾān, I will return to them in more detail in order to draw Qurʾānic parallels which move us closer to the Qurʾān’s conversation.

As far back as the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Hittites, there are plentiful but fragmented accounts of Kigal, or Kurnugi: a somber subterranean world. Kigal is where the dead linger, unlit by firelight and without chance of parole. Kigal is surrounded by Apsu (apsû), an ocean of fresh water and the source of all rivers. Apsu is the netherworld’s mirror of the salt-sea Tiamat (tiʾāmat) in the world above.38 In the Enuma Elish, Apsu is also personified as a sleeping god who is awakened at the dawn of creation. However, he is put back to sleep by Ea and this “kills him.”39 The underworld is literally encircled by a sleeping/dead god who at once provides life-giving sweet water. This land can be traveled to through caves, as demonstrated by the many stories of Tammûz. Of course, Kigal is also the place where the divine warrior-king Gilgamesh of Uruk traveled in his doomed quest to escape death.40 Gilgamesh is just one source of this mythological geography, but as the best-studied and longest-lived material of its kind,41 it can stand in for its wider tradition. The story of Gilgamesh is well-

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39 Enuma Elish 1:59-78.
40 The Gilgamesh Epic as presented here is a standard conglomerate account of the poem’s 73 incomplete manuscripts, as no one complete version of the story survives to us. For information of how the epic relates to the biblical lore, see Alexander Heidel, The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).
41 The story was still alive and mentioned by name by the Roman author Claudius Aelianus (d. cir. 235). Heidel, The Gilgamesh Epic, 4.
known but I would like to recount some of its key elements in this overview of Mesopotamian views of
sleep and death.

The epic opens with self-referentiality. There is a Babylonian scribe named Sîn-liqe-unninni who recorded the text as it comes to us, but the poem is attributed to the god-king Gilgamesh himself. “[He learnt] the sum of wisdom. He saw what was secret, and discovered what was hidden.”

Gilgamesh recorded his story on tablets of celestial blue stone to be found in a box with bronze hinges. This box and the story written within it reside in the temple of the goddess Ishtar (Inanna). Like the tragic-hero Gilgamesh, Ishtar herself as a river goddess descends into the underworld as part of the earth's refertilization. (Her cult would later be fused with the Egyptian Isis, and by the Nabateans with the goddess al-Uzzā.) The poem tells the reader to go to Ishtar's temple, open the box, and read the tablets for herself to hear about how Gilgamesh found wisdom in the netherworld. Likewise, the same passage commands us to examine the walls of the city of Uruk to see what Gilgamesh did with this wisdom. The juxtaposition of secret knowledge of the hopeless underworld and the construction of the city's noteworthy fortifications, both attributed to the hero's own hands, reinforce the poem's major argument: death is inescapable, but life is valuable. Therefore, work to sustain life (contemplate the safety of a walled city) and remember the mortality of all (read and consider the epic itself).

In the story proper, the troublemaking young king is the plague of his own people until the passing of his friend and foil Enkidu creates in him the fear of dying. So Gilgamesh chooses to leave his

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43 That is, lapis lazuli. The scarcity of this rock, and its highly unusual color, creates a relationship between it and the heavens, and most especially heavenly waters. e.g., Exodus 24:1-10: “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.” c.f., Babylonian incantation from Cuneiform Tablet XVI, 46 183 in the British Museum: “… in a pure place … its aspect is like lapis lazuli branching out … [the god Ea’s] abode being in the underworld … at the mouth of the two rivers.” Albright, “The Mouth of the Rivers,” 164.
44 Ibid., 184.
home in Uruk to seek out his immortal ancestor Utnapishtim beyond the borders of the living world. To get to the underworld, Gilgamesh must pass through the gate of the sun god, Shamash (hence the Arabic, *al-shams*), where each day comes to its end. Like in many ancient Near Eastern cosmological systems, the sun rides a vehicle across the sky by day and under the world every night. Indeed, in Akkadian odes to the sun, Shamash is called the only being who is allowed to enter the world of the dead and return, as he does each day at sunrise. But generally this descent-and-return is true of several divinities. We can see that solar gods (like Shamash and Gilgamesh) and fresh water gods (like Apsu and Ishtar) have the ability to travel down beneath or into the earth, the place for the dead, and come back again to the living world. This motion is demonstrated in daily life at sunrise and sunset, or when fresh water seeps into the dry ground and bubbles back up in springs, rivers, and plants.

At Shamash’s gate stand two guardians in the form of scorpion-men, “whose look is death.” They strike fear into even the divine ruler Gilgamesh. He bows before them, they recognize that he is more god than mortal, and so they allow him to pass. Gilgamesh is only one third mortal, but still the guardians have to consider whether or not he can enter the underworld. They conclude that, like Shamash, Gilgamesh is a solar deity and so not entirely forbidden to enter the netherworld while alive. Again, like the city walls of Uruk, we can see the appearance of a barrier which distinguishes between the living and dead worlds. As a symmetrical reflection of Uruk, the city of the living whose wall keeps out death, the solar doorway has guardians who keep out life. But there is a liminal zone. The living simultaneously should not cross into the underworld, but also it is their inevitable fate to do just that in the afterlife. It is a solid barrier with a hole in it: a gate. To keep the doorway a proper barrier however, guardians reinforce the distinction of the two worlds. And again, the guardians are liminal: they are at once men (that is, the living) and scorpions (harbingers of death). In turn, these hybrid

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beings only allow Gilgamesh to cross their threshold because they recognize that he too is liminal: he may be a mortal man but he is also a descending/arising sun god.

For exactly twenty-four hours — one solar cycle — Gilgamesh walks through utter darkness. “He took the path of the sun god.” As he entered the sun’s gate while the sun was shining on the living, he is moving in an antipodal pattern to the solar path. He moves with the sun, but is opposite to it. It is rising and he is setting, so “[he came] out in advance of the sun.” Finally Gilgamesh arrives at a supernatural forest at the shore of the sea. Like the borders of the world above, the underworld is enclosed by the ocean. While the living world is surrounded by the salty Tiamat, the dead world is ensnared by the fresh sea of Apsu. A ferryman, after he instructs Gilgamesh how to build a boat, takes the traveller to the land on the other side of the water. There lives Utnapishtim at the “mouth of the [two] rivers” (pire nARRATI). The immortal lives at the place where fresh water ascends to the world above at the great waterways (usually the Tigris and Euphrates). Utnapishtim tells his descendant that in ancient times, the god Enlil was trying to sleep but the human race continuously kept him awake. As gods do, Enlil decided to annihilate all humans with a great flood, save for Utnapishtim and his wife. For these two, the god Ea gave them instructions on how to build a boat like the ferryman just did for Gilgamesh. As the survivors, Utnapishtim and his wife were made immortal. Gilgamesh realizes to his disappointment that he himself cannot repeat this experience, and so immortality is unreachable.

Instead, Utnapishtim offers the suggestion that if Gilgamesh stays awake for six days and seven nights, then he will never die afterwards. “If he can master sleep, the twin brother of death, than he may be able to master death itself.” As the sleeplessness of Enlil spells death to humanity in the above realm, Gilgamesh can find immortal life in the underworld by never going to sleep. Gilgamesh

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fails at this almost immediately, and likewise fails at his following attempt at avoiding death by fetching a magical underwater plant. A serpent eats the miraculous plant of life while Gilgamesh is resting in a pool of water. Twice Gilgamesh is condemned to die for being human enough to need rest. In both cases, the key elements of some kind of dormancy and the presence of fresh water meet to spell Gilgamesh and humanity's ultimate demise. Defeated but wiser for it, the god-king returns to his home in Uruk realizing the futility of escaping mortality. Instead of trying to cheat death, Gilgamesh sings the praises of the city of the living. The epic ends with Gilgamesh in one last liminal state: travel. Back on the road, Gilgamesh tells the ferryman about the glories of his home, Uruk, with its great defensive walls and temple of Ishtar.

In a later Akkadian recension of the Gilgamesh cycle, there is also an addendum story now referred to as Tablet XII. It is a related but independent account in which Gilgamesh unintentionally sends Enkidu on an errand to the underworld. Unfortunately, Enkidu cannot come back from the land of the dead, although with the divine petition of Gilgamesh Enkidu is allowed to return to communicate with his friend in the form of a shade. In Mesopotamian anthropology, human beings are by definition fully mortal. That which continues existing after death is not a disembodied soul of some sort, but instead the “flesh” of the gods which is always somewhat present in human beings as their descendants. Even the word gedim (which we would translate as “soul” or “shade”) is written identically to the word for any supernatural being (uttuku).50 This shadowy divine echo of Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that the underworld is the lot of all living people, and that it is a world of darkness, dreariness, and fruitless waiting. “Dust is their food and clay is their sustenance.”51 A sour place indeed, there still are some primal glimmers here of ultimate reward beyond death. Even though the underworld is unavoidable and never pleasant, there are slightly better conditions there for people who lived more productive lives — by having as many sons as possible and following proper burial

51 Heidel, The Gilgamesh Epic, 12.
rituals. In any case, the narrator reminds the reader that it is better to enjoy living, and live a life of value, as one cannot return to fix mistakes and shortcomings later.

Similarly presenting elements that will reappear in the Qur‘anic milieu, we can turn to the other great river civilization of deep antiquity: Egypt. As Egypt’s vision of the afterlife was extraordinarily Byzantine even by ancient religious standards, I want to narrow in on just sources that appear in the New Kingdom or later. In historical retrospect, these are all stories which are collectively called *The Book of Going Forth By Day*, or belong to the mythologies from the Hellenistic and Roman eras that expand on that collection.

The principal account of death and sleep in the later eras of Egypt’s ancient history is the hero-quest of Isis, who goes in search of her murdered husband-brother Osiris. The account was long-lived and had many variations well into the conversion of the Roman world to Christianity. Generally the epic begins with the entombment of Osiris, who is alive while he is trapped in his own sarcophagus. Having learned of his coffin’s location via a prophecy, Isis travels down the Nile looking for the resting place of her beloved. Isis calls on a group of dogs to sniff out the body, but instead they take her to the jackal god Anubis who agrees to be her companion. After a failed attempt at rescuing the sarcophagus containing Osiris, the body is divided into fourteen pieces and spread throughout Egypt. Isis, with the help of Anubis, gradually locates thirteen of them. The fourteenth piece, the god’s phallus, is consumed by a fish. Either way Isis returns Osiris to life (but not consciousness) with her magic, often resulting in the conception of the solar deity Horus (even though his dormant father is

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52 Popularly called the “Book of the Dead” in the modern period, this ‘book’ is in truth an ancient catch-all name for the written accounts of the proper conduct in the afterlife unique to the New Kingdom. For brevity, I will disregard much older works such as the Old Kingdom’s “Pyramid Texts” and the Middle’s “Coffin Texts.” As these two applied only to the wealthiest few of Egyptian society, and are of such great antiquity, their impact on the Qur‘ān’s conversation is filtered through the much later and much more democratic *Book of Going Forth by Day*, which applied even to the commoner and the servant. John H. Taylor, *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead: Journey Through the Afterlife* (London: British Museum Press, 2010), 54.

neutered). However, because he is not fully alive and conscious Osiris is forced to relocate to the underworld as its king; with his son Horus as king in the living world above.

For these exploits, a first century C.E. temple at Cyrene praises Isis thus:

I, Isis, am sole ruler of time, inspector of the limits of the sea and the land, and, with scepter in hand, their sole inspector. All name me supreme goddess, the greatest of all the gods in heaven. For I myself have discovered everything, all is my work: the writing on the seals shows it clearly... I have fortified cities with reverend walls, and to mortals I have shown how to understand (such skills) clearly.54

Like in the Gilgamesh cycle, this short passage shows textual self-awareness. The proclamation points out the written accounts of which it is itself one. Also, Isis praises herself for her wisdom, both for traveling to the boundaries of the world and for the building of city walls. Like Gilgamesh, Isis is in search of her dead foil, and finds a possible way to escape death. However, this attempt ultimately fails and the beloved must remain in the land of the dead. In both Gilgamesh's and Isis' stories, the route to immortality involves sleep, a quest, fresh water and the plants that grow from it, and an escaping animal, all ending in disappointment.

The descent of the sleeping/dead Osiris is to the underworld called Duat (dw’t), and again like in the Gilgamesh cycle it too is associated with barriers, guardians, boatmen, and the convergence of waters.55 Unlike in Mesopotamian anthropology though, there is a quasi-division between the body and the one who lives in it (ba, for our ends, ‘the individual’ or ‘the soul’ in the form of a bird). During the daytime the ba either ascends to the heavens or sleeps with its mummy in the grave, in a parallel or parody of its sleep cycle in life and/or the movements of the solar disk. Thus at night the ba takes pilgrimages down into Duat, where there are various tests, caverns, or gates to cross and guardians to appease. The many accounts of this solar journey equate the dead individual with the god Re in some form, and the ba follows in the god's wake. Like the sun's motion in Gilgamesh's story, Re moves in his boat from the sky above to the underground sea of fresh water, Nūn. And like we have seen with Apsu,

55 Shushan, Conceptions, 53-69.
all the world’s rivers flow from this underworld source (now, the two Niles). Here too the sun descends each day and returns, although in the Egyptian version it is the sun itself which sails a boat and one of three manifestations of Re — Atum, Osiris, or Kheprer — is its pilot across the waters.57

Unlike the deathless Utnapishtim of the Gilgamesh epic, the genius of Duat is himself dead and mummified. Osiris, the dead god, sits (or, often in art, lies) in state as a royal mummy. When the ba comes to the hall of the dead god-king, she must be declared worthy of citizenship in the afterlife. The dead person must offer testimony that she is guiltless of various crimes while alive, and a series of judges headed by Osiris, Isis, and their family observe. The court of Osiris over the dead (and thus the passage to the peaceful afterlife) is acted out by three hybrid deities, like those we have seen in Gilgamesh's questioning scorpion-men. Hybrid gods were common in the various Egyptian pantheons, but here their half-animal forms have obvious functions. The court proceedings are recorded by Thoth, whose form as an ibis with a long thin beak doubly recalls the liminal space of the river bank; where ibises, reed pens, and papyri are found. Another hybrid river creature is Ammit, the half-hippopotamus, half-crocodile. He is something of the executioner. If the dead individual is found wanting, the guilty have their hearts consumed and so they lose continued existence in the underworld. Note that this creature has no human component or character beyond his dual animal natures. On the side of the defendant is the jackal Anubis, who guides Re and/or the ba in the journey and the trial. As in the Isis cycle, Anubis is employed as both a loyal companion (in figure 1.3 Anubis seems to even be trying to tip the scales in the defendant's favor literally) and as one who has proper knowledge of the dead. Rightly, Anubis is also the god of mumification and burial places. His form as the scavenging dog is a reminder of corpses and decay, and yet protection and guardianship over the forbidden places.\textsuperscript{58}

Another tradition was the popular cult of the Apis river-bull, and the worship of Apis — although much older than the New Kingdom — would carry the Egyptian vision of the underworld well beyond its homeland. The Apis cult was always particularly porous. In its native Egypt, Apis was

\textsuperscript{58} Cf. John Burger, \textit{The Shape of a Pocket} (London: Bloombury, 2001), 5; Susan McHugh, \textit{Dog} (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 12. Although there is a biological distinction between a jackal and a domestic canine, both are symbolically identical. In either case, by the Greek period Anubis was taken to be only a dog proper (if he was depicted with animal attributes at all).
at once equated with the Pharaoh, the fertility of the Nile, and the creator god Ptah.\(^59\) Later, the most significant fusion of Apis with Osiris transformed the bull into a dying/rising figure in its own right. Apis is the \textit{ba} of Osiris; the death god's own self. Famously, the mummification of bulls associated with Apis in their appearance was cause for widespread public mourning, as Apis was the proxy for the death of all beings.

The worship of Apis would spread throughout the Near East, bringing along Isis and Anubis in its shadow. Again and again the cult of Apis would prove itself a universalizing force, and local deities would combine with this already multi-layered god. Earlier, the worship of Apis had a huge presence in the lands of the Arabs, where it was merged with the Arabian god \textit{Ṣalm} and with Mesopotamian solar gods like Shamash (fig. 1.4).\(^60\) In the Hellenic period, Ptolemy I Soter (d. 285 B.C.E.) claimed that the Greek god Hades came to him in his sleep and identified himself with the Apis cult. Conveniently, the Egyptian devotion to Apis-Osiris and the Greek's to Hades merged just as the new capital city of Alexandria needed a national cult that included both Egyptian natives and Greek newcomers.\(^61\) This was the cult of Serapis (that is, Osiris+Apis). Serapis' relationship to Alexandria, and the founder of that city (who

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\(^{59}\) Although this cannot be confirmed, it is commonly assumed that the worship of Apis may have played a hand in the story of the Golden Calf created by the Hebrews after their Egyptian enslavement in \textit{Exodus} 32:20. In a mocking inversion of the Egyptian religion, Moses has the calf burned and mixed with water, which he forces his people to drink.


supposedly worshiped the Apis bull) would bind this new god with Alexander (d. 323 B.C.E.) himself, both as a historical and mythological figure. Revered by the Nabateans too, there was also a later association of Serapis with some islands at the end of the world: especially off the coast of modern Oman. In Roman Egypt, there even emerged a gentile-Christian cult of Serapis, as witnessed by Hadrian (d. 138): “They who worship Serapis are Christians... and some who call themselves bishops of Christ are devoted to Serapis.”

Within the Greco-Roman pantheon, Apis/Serapis dropped his manifestation as a bull (the Greeks had no taste for worshiping animals) taking instead the form of Zeus/Hades alone. However, in an echo of his Egyptian heritage, Serapis was depicted with wheat growing from his head (see fig. 1.5), recalling the fertility and fresh water brought back from the netherworld. Enthroned by his side were variously named consorts who were each re-imaginings of Isis mixed with local underworld goddesses, such as Persephone, Ishtar, and al-ʿUzzā. Isis’ attendant Anubis would likewise in the Hellenistic period be transformed into either a full human or a full animal. If Anubis was invoked as a deity in his own right, he would appear in the human form of

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64 Ezquerra, Romanising Oriental Gods, 60-62.
Hermes (Hermanubis). If Anubis’ hybrid role as watcher, companion, and scavenger was required, all humanity would be shucked off and he would sit at Serapis’ feet as Cerberus; guard dog of the passage to the underworld; “the bronze barking-dog of Hades.” In the Aeneid of Virgil (d. 19 B.C.E.), Cerberus is written as a horrific, bulky creature who “sprawls over all his cave,” thus blocking the entrance until another descending/ascending hero, Aeneas, puts him to sleep.

The classical Greek mystery religions, which would each inform the Hellenistic Near East, had many noteworthy accounts of such descents to Hades. Heracles’ fetching of Cerberus and Orpheus’ of his dead wife are typical of the trend. Again, there is the presence of caves (such as the cave of Hypnos, “sleep,” the twin of Thanatos, “death”), rivers (Styx, Acheron, Lethe, Phlegethon, and Cocytus), a ferryman (Charon), and a guide (Hermes). The oldest of these myths is likely the cycle of Persephone, the maiden who is taken into the underworld by Hades when he appears from an opening into the earth. Persephone’s mother Demeter searches for her daughter to each end of the world, until the sun god Helios points her to the cleft Hades has left in the ground. However, in her captivity, Persephone consumed the seeds of the pomegranate and so she must divide her existence between the under and over worlds; she has become a liminal goddess. Like Serapis later, Persephone would appear in art with a bundle of grain symbolizing her function as both a chthonic and fertility goddess. Empedocles (d. c. 430 B.C.E.) would take her descent and association to plants to mean that she is the goddess of the element of water.

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67 Hesiod, Theogony 311
68 Virgil, Aeneid 6.488
Part 3: Contextual Background - The Saints Beside Paradise: Sleep and Death in the Biblical Lore

Within this wide ocean of underworlds, the biblical lore would appear in the mix. I must note that I do mean the *biblical lore* and not the Bible. I refer to the many miscellaneous bits of oral folklore, midrash, history, cosmology, and recorded texts of the Jewish and Christian peoples. The Qurʾān is not telling its listeners to literally refer to codices for further information (whether or not such writings were available to them) as much as it refers to the world of the ancient Jews and Christians as it was known in the common imagination. It should therefore be taken into account that many of the notes I am about to provide may not have been known to the Qurʾānic audience directly, as is also the case with the pagan mythologies above. However again, the larger body of legend and history to which all these notes belong, and to which they all gave and received meaning, was certainly in the Qurʾānic air.

The biblical lore in its older and most popular currents is vague on the underworld. References certainly exist, but there are no mythological traces of solar gods, water goddesses, magical plants, doorways, caves, guides, or hero-quests like those we have already seen. Hebrew tradition has no epic of the underworld. Put simply, in Sheol (שׁוֹל) being entombed, being asleep, and being in the netherworld are identical. The reason is simple. Without a Greek or Egyptian distinction between the body and the soul, and no heroic demigods, the oldest Hebrew sources must have concluded that if every dead body is inert in the earth, the spirit/soul/shade must be as well.70 Because the body is dormant in the underworld, so is the individual who lived in that body, and thus there is no action amongst the dead that could be expressed in narrative form. The person and their corpse are equally hidden in the ground, in darkness, and in silence. So “death... it seems, is an eternal sleep (نُحَات ʿolām, anapausis aiōnos).”71 Indeed, “there is no hard and fast distinction made between the grave and

Sheol.” With Hellenism this will change, but most of the Jewish scriptures predate this shift. Therefore the underworld of the Hebrew peoples is a non-event. As the body of the dead person is doing nothing but lying under the ground indefinitely, the soul is doing the same. But when the biblical lore’s passing references to the underworld do occur, it is bound up in the language of sleep. And so let us start there instead.

When the biblical lore mentions sleep, there are two wide contexts in mind. The first is corporeality and this-worldliness. This appears most often regarding sexuality: so-and-so sleeps with so-and-so. We can also include in this a relationship of sleep to birth and the powers of women. There are also several instances of sleep being a byword for physical or religious laziness. Needing sleep is a sign of limitation or human shortcomings: our tendency towards the sexual, the body, the desire to rest when tired; comparable to the gentile mythologies we have seen already. These earthly examples aside though, the majority of other references throughout the biblical lore place sleep as a liminal space between God and creation. Sleep is the condition in which human beings approach the world of the divine: in dream, in vision, as the evidence of divine safekeeping, and in death. Likewise, the Hebrew God and other powerful divine beings expose their influence by not needing sleep, or by waking from sleep they can manipulate the mortal realm.

Particularly in the Psalms and Proverbs, we can see sleep as the time in which one is aware of God’s protection and blessings. “He grants sleep to those He loves.” When people are asleep they are particularly vulnerable to theft and attack, so the opportunity to sleep peacefully is a sign that God is watching over the sleeper. “In peace I will lie down and sleep, for You alone, Lord, make me dwell in

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73 E.g., Genesis 30:2-16; Exodus 23:15-17; Leviticus 19; Jubilees 3:4-6. Other instances abound.
74 E.g., Genesis 2:21-22; Judges 16.
safety. "I call out to the Lord, and He answers me from His holy mountain. I lie down and sleep; I
wake again, because the Lord sustains me." In a similar manner, when people lack God's favor, they
are denied peaceful slumber. When King Saul loses the favor of the Lord, he is spared by his rival David
who chooses not to kill him in his sleep. Other evildoers "cannot rest," and "they are robbed of
sleep" altogether. And according to Isaiah, when God gives power to other nations to punish the
Israelites on God's behalf, "not one of them grows tired or stumbles, not one slumbers or sleeps."

As sleep is a sign of God's favor on the sleeper, it follows that in sleep people are reassured of
God's communication with the world, as we are told by the revelatory dreams of Abraham, Jacob,
Joseph, and many others. Sleep and dream are the territory where God and the angels make
themselves known: "[O prophets,] blind yourselves and be sightless. Be drunk but not from wine.
Stagger but not from beer. The Lord has brought over you a deep sleep. He has sealed your eyes. He has
covered your heads." Often it is also in sleep that God awakens people to a message or a prophetic
experience. God rouses the sleeper to awareness and divine communication. "Then the angel who
talked with me returned and woke me up, like someone awakened from sleep." The wakefulness of
the prophets is required for revelation and prayer. When Jesus or Jonah are not awake, their ability to
intercede with God on behalf of other people is cut off: "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your
God! Maybe He will take notice of us so that we will not perish."

Less common to modern ears — but well in line with their gentile neighbors — are similar
passages in the biblical lore in which divine beings themselves fall asleep. Like in several of the

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77 Psalms 4:7-8. Compare also the third of the five non-biblical "Syriac Psalms," verse 16: "I slumbered and slept; I dreamed
and was helped, and the Lord sustained me."
78 Psalms 3:4-6.
79 1 Samuel 26:9.
81 Isaiah 5:26-27.
83 Isaiah 29:9-11.

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prophetic sleeping accounts above, the dormant divinity's intercession is interrupted, or its power halted. The noteworthy example would be on the seventh day of creation, when God stops forming the earth and rests. When God is awake, the world is activated; when God sleeps, the world waits. This is also a response to the Mesopotamian lore. Gilgamesh is fated to die for not being able to stay away for six days and seven night; the exact task at which the Hebrew God succeeds. Later, God's saving interactions with His people are like His awakening: "Then the Lord awoke from sleep, as a warrior wakes from the stupor of wine. He beat back His enemies; He put them to everlasting shame." The Psalmist also asks God to come in the hour of need: "Awake for me!" The language of sleeping gods may apply to other divinities, too. When the rival god Baal does not answer the calls of his priests, Elijah mockingly tells them to call louder: "Maybe he is asleep and must be awakened!" To underline the endless power of God (or at minimum of His endless love for Israel, or perhaps His distinction from other gods like Baal, Apsu, or Enlil), the Psalms also claim elsewhere that God never sleeps. “He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." 1 Enoch makes a similar claim regarding the angels that directly encircle God's abode. The ever-awake divinity is one who is always knowing and responsive.

Sleep is also on very many occasions equated to death idiomatically. It is the "sleep in the dust." This is a natural connection between two inert states which both imply powerlessness and unawareness. It is not surprising then that this connection is made throughout Near Eastern visions of

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86 Genesis 2:2-3.
87 Psalms 78:65-66.
89 E.g., 1 Kings 18:27 for reference to the sleep of Baal; Psalms 7:6 for the sleep of the Hebrew God.
90 Psalms 121:3-4.
91 1 Enoch 71:2-7. “I saw two rivers of fire glittering like the hyacinth. Then I fell on my face before the Lord of spirits. And Michael, one of the archangels, took me by my right hand, raised me up, and brought me out to where was every secret of mercy and secret of righteousness... My spirit saw around the circle of this flaming habitation, on one of its extremities, that there were rivers full of living fire, which encompassed it. Then the Seraphim, the Cherubim, and Ophanin surrounded it: these are those who never sleep, but watch the throne of His glory.”
92 Holland, Gods in the Desert, 240.
the underworld. It would also further account for why the divine beings worthy of human attention do not sleep at all or can at human bidding be awoken. In reference to human beings, the sleep of death can be both a sign of God’s favor or that God has denied favor. The Psalms especially favor this latter position. Alternately, it is a violation of God’s will to disturb the sleeping (that is, dead) prophet in Sheol, as in the example of the witch of Endor. While necromancy is possible for the author of 1 Samuel, the waking of the dead at rest carries with it the displeasure of the prophet — and by connotation, his God.

Although Sheol is rightly put in continuity with other cultures’ vision of the afterlife, it would not remain so. In time we can start to find ancient Israelites thinking that the sleep of the dead in Sheol will someday come to an end. Related visions of the world of the dead, like the Babylonian Kigal, the Egyptian Duat, and the Greek Hades, have no strong indication of this. If anything the myths of Gilgamesh, Isis, Orpheus, and Persephone actively discourage this kind of thinking, as do some older biblical materials. But already in the Jewish texts there are clues that the sleep of the dead is bound only to the continuation of the mortal plane as a whole. There is vague reference in Job that the dead sleep and this state continues only as long as the world does. Resurrection would not be what the author of Job has in mind, but there is a gradual shift towards death and sleep as a fixed timespan with some kind of conclusion. The book of Jubilees also speaks this way. As the influence of Hellenism grows more apparent, it brings with it the division of body and soul. Texts written in Greek, which

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94 E.g., 2 Baruch 11:4-7 “Our fathers went to rest without grief, and lo! the righteous sleep in the earth in tranquility, for they knew not this anguish, nor yet had they heard of that which had befallen us. Would that you had ears, O earth, and that you had a heart, O dust: That you might go and announce in Sheol, And say to the dead: ‘Blessed are you more than we who live.’”

95 E.g, Psalms 13:3 “Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death.”

96 E.g, Psalms 76:5, 90:5; cf., Jeremiah 51:39.

97 1 Samuel 28.

98 E.g., Isaiah 26:14 “The dead do not live; shades do not rise [from sleep, yāqûmû];”

99 Job 14:12-17 “But a man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more. As the water of a lake dries up or a riverbed becomes parched and dry, so he lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, people will not awake or be roused from their sleep.”

100 E.g., Jubilees 10:14, 231.
translate Sheol as Hades, appear in the inter-testamental period and with that is a tendency towards belief in a Resurrection, and many of the same thoughts about dying, rising, and their associated symbol systems. As the expectation of a Resurrection comes ever more into focus, we can start to detect a waking after the sleep of death.

But at that time your people — everyone whose name is found written in the book — will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. 101

These sleep- unto-Resurrection mythologies, although appearing for some time, were widespread by the time shortly after the revolt and the destruction of the second/Herodian Temple in 70. “All who have fallen asleep in hope of Him shall rise again” 102 The message is repeated in many sources that death is not just death; it is sleeping from which one will someday rise. “Not dead, but sleeping,” as Christ says of Jairus’ daughter in the Synoptics, 103 and of Lazarus in John. 104 The references to having “fallen asleep,” or being “asleep in Christ” are nothing more than Christian shorthand for a dead person, loving and being beloved by God; one who is to be awakened again. 105 Expressed in a simple pair of chiastic parallelisms:

For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together in Him. 106

At the coming of the apocalypse the dead do not only rise from the grave. Nor does the living non-believer who comes to faith just turn to belief. They “wake up.” 107 The firm distinction between being

101 Daniel 12:1-3; cf. 1 Enoch 49:3-4. 100
102 2 Baruch 30:2-5. This pattern should not be too surprising. As the function of Jewish nation and cult increasingly seemed to fail in the living world, the Resurrection after a long sleep could act as a corrective; justice is to be postponed.
105 E.g., Mark 14:41; Matthew 26:45; 1 Corinthians 15; Ephesians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15.
106 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10. Such structures will be addressed in depth in the next chapter. For now, the elements of the passage that refer to God are in bold, while those that refer to the believing community are underlined.
107 E.g., Matthew 27:52.
resurrected (a corpse returning to life), resuscitated (a dormant person awakening), or reinvigorated (gaining a new spiritual life) is only so apparent in later thought and language. For a simple example, when Christ commands Jairus’ daughter to rise up, we are given the Aramaic and the Greek by the source texts; *talitha koum, korasion... egeire:* “little girl, get up.”108 The term for the Resurrection, which appears thirty-five times in the canonical New Testament alone, is *egeirin,* “to awaken.”109 Sleep and death are so synonymous in the Christian gospels that we cannot suppose a strong distinction between awakening and resurrecting as exists in English. The community that produced *John* even suggests that in the preaching of Christ at least, death and sleep were related enough to be confused with each other: “Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.”110

Of course as the eschatology of the post-exilic Jewish and early Christian authors assumes a more immediate Resurrection, it should not be surprising that there are no complex visions of the intermediate state right away. Why would they flesh out a fully developed vision of the immediate nature of the afterlife, when the ultimate goal after death was impending quickly? Merely equating the intermediate state with an ambiguous form of dormancy (with little or no reference to purgation or pilgrimage) appears to have answered the question. We can, however, detect even in the earliest period of Christian and post-Temple Jewish literature the first clues that the sleep of the dead is also somehow transformative. Consider the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* (c. 190-250). Unlike the canonical gospels, this gospel shows Christ coming out of the tomb after the Resurrection. His cross, miraculously walking and speaking, follows behind Jesus as he comes up from the grave. Then a voice from the heavens asks the cross, “Have you proclaimed to those who are asleep?” and the cross

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responds, “Yes.”\textsuperscript{111} For the author of this gospel the dead are in a state of rest. Because they are in the physical tomb, in Sheol/Hades, it also seems likely that their souls are united with their corpses, yet Christ still offers them ultimate salvation.\textsuperscript{112}

The proper discussion of the intermediate state appears in the record as a response to certain ideas later deemed heretical. Like so much of Christian (and later, Islamic) formal doctrine, only in the heat of controversy do lines of demarcation between theological options start to become solidly engraved. The earliest example of this at play regarding the intermediate period is the debate with the people collectively called the Gnostics, whose eschatology did not require such an intermediate state. The Gnostics rejected the physical Resurrection of the dead, for the whole cosmology of their religion(s) hinged on the final escape from corporeality. They favored the Greek, particularly Platonic vision of the disembodied soul returning to its celestial point of origin, freed from the prison (sema) of the body (soma).\textsuperscript{113} Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c. 202) struck back against this school of thought by arguing in line with the scriptural tradition that the soul and the body are designed to exist together. However, Irenaeus does not give us soul-sleep, but rather mentions an “invisible place” based on a parallel to the death of Christ.

For as the Lord went away in the midst of the shadow of death, where the souls of the dead were, yet afterwards arose in the body, and after the Resurrection was taken up, it is manifest that the souls of his disciples also, upon whose account the Lord underwent these things, shall go away into the invisible place allotted to them by God, and there remain until the Resurrection, awaiting that event; then receiving their bodies, and rising in their entirety, that is bodily, just as the Lord arose, they shall come thus into the presence of God.\textsuperscript{114}

Ambiguous intermediate states such as this “midst of the shadow of death” would remain the unofficial default position for some time while the Christian intermediate state as opinions of the


\textsuperscript{112} Cf., 1 Peter 3:19-20.

\textsuperscript{113} A wordplay originally from Plato’s Phaedo 62b and Cratylus 400c.

relationship between the soul and the body shifted between the two possible viewpoints of Plato and Aristotle. The Platonically-oriented Christians would gravitate towards the ascent of the disembodied soul through the heavens: pilgrimage models. These often combined with ascetic Egyptian afterlife accounts (in their way, the Christian descendants of the *ba* as found in the *Book of Going Forth By Day*, complete with angelic or demonic gatekeepers, and the measuring of hearts).\(^{115}\) Conversely, those more inclined to Aristotelianism considered a coincidence of the soul and its body. The soul and the body were theoretically distinct, but interdependent as form is with matter. The Aristotelians would thus tend to favor soul-sleep or soul-death. For example, Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), turning at once to Aristotle and the Hebrew scriptures, said, “in a certain sense, sleep and waking are nothing more than the intertwining of death with life: our senses are dulled in sleep and our awakening brings about the Resurrection we long for.” However, Gregory dismisses the existence of a physical underworld, favoring instead a Hades which refers only to the time between death and the Resurrection.\(^{116}\)

Simultaneously, another strong indication that a vision of a Hebrew and/or Aristotelean intermediate state was emerging is the appearance of narratives that dwell on the inability to detect the passage of long periods of time in sleep or in death. In bodily sleep, without the aid of some outside indication, it is more or less impossible to know if one has been sleeping for a few minutes or a few hours. As Aristotle writes of the fabled sleepers of Sardinia:

> Time does not exist without change; for when the state of our own minds does not change at all, or we have not noticed its changing, we do not realize that time has elapsed, any more than those who are fabled to sleep among the heroes in Sardinia do when they are awakened; for they connect the earlier ‘now’ with the later and make them one, cutting out the interval because of their failure to notice it...

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\(^{115}\) Ibid., 108.

\(^{116}\) *De mortuis oratio* PG 46.521, in Costas, “To Sleep,” 98. Costas also draws our attention to *In sanctum Pascha*: “What is it we call man? Is it both [i.e., body and soul] together, or one of them? Surely it is clear that the conjunction of the two is what gives the living thing its character.... There is no division of the soul from the body when it practices theft or commits burglary, nor again does it by itself give bread to the hungry or drink to the thirsty or hasten unhesitatingly to the prison to care for the one afflicted by imprisonment, but for every action the two assist each other and cooperate in the things that are done.” In the 20th century, Karl Rahner (d. 1984) would propose a similar view. *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961), cf. N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 166.
the soul seems to stay in one indivisible state, and when we perceive and distinguish we say time has elapsed, evidently time is not independent of movement and change.\footnote{117}

It seems logical, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, that the sleep of death is the same. As proto-Rabbinical Jews and early Christians began to realize that the historical Resurrection was possibly quite far off, it became necessary to account for how long the soul's sleep was going to last, and if one would be consciously waiting through it. If soul-sleep is truly just like typical sleep, this could be a way of bypassing quite a bit of waiting and also maybe the more terrible aspects of the Eschaton. By the post-Temple Jewish and Christian patristic periods, “this para-eschatological state appears as an attenuated, semiconscious mode of existence, of indefinite relation to time and space.”\footnote{118} A Platonic model of the soul, on the other hand, would not have to account for a gap in time, only the soul's whereabouts.

Early instances of the biblical lore using preternaturally long sleep as a way of bypassing extended periods of time appears in the Talmudic accounts of Ḥoni the Circle Drawer (d. c. 65 B.C.E.) and his grandson of the same name. The elder Ḥoni was a notable scholar who one day noticed a man planting a carob tree, which we are told takes seventy years to grow to maturity. Mentioning that this means that the man who plants the tree cannot therefore benefit from it himself, Ḥoni went to sleep nearby. He awakened seventy years later and found the same tree full grown before him, tended to by the grandson of the original planter. Ḥoni came to realize that his own children are now dead, and (to add insult to injury) no one believed that this mysterious man in their midst was in fact the notable teacher of two generations ago. In lonely despair, Ḥoni prayed for his own death, which is granted to him.\footnote{119}

This same Ḥoni’s grandson similarly slept through seventy years, but with a now more clearly apocalyptic dimension to the tale.\footnote{120} Hiding from the rain in a cave, the younger Ḥoni fell asleep in the


\footnotetext[118]{Constas, “To Sleep,” 91.}

\footnotetext[119]{b. Ta’anit 23a. Jens Herzer, tr., \textit{4 Baruch (Paraleipomena Jeremiou)} (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 84-89.}

\footnotetext[120]{y. Ta’anit 3:9, ibid.}
latter days of the second Temple. He slept through the revolt and fall of that Temple, awaking after the construction of the seemingly identical third Temple (which the author must have assumed was imminent). However, Ḥoni noticed that the fields of olives and grain were not where he remembered them, and so was tipped off that something was amiss. Instead of lamenting like his grandfather though, the younger Ḥoni brought his blessings to the new Temple and prayed aloud in the voice of the Psalmist, “when the Lord restored the fortune of Zion, we were like those who dream!”121

Another example of this trend is found in the second century Jewish text which some manuscripts call The Things Left Out of Jeremiah, now usually called 4 Baruch. There is an account of the prophet Jeremiah's exile to Babylon, and his Ethiopian servant Abimelech who is left behind in Jerusalem. Abimelech took a nap one day outside of the walls of the city, using a basket of figs for a pillow. He awakens, assuming he has taken a short rest, and makes to return to his home in First Temple Jerusalem. He quickly notices that the city is completely changed and he doesn't know anyone there. Abimelech gradually comes to realize that 66 years have passed after asking an old man what has happened.

And as he sat, he saw an old man coming from the field. And Abimelech said to him, “I say to you, old man, what city is this?” And he said to him, “It is Jerusalem.” And Abimelech said to him, “Where is Jeremiah the priest, and Baruch the secretary, and all the people of this city, for I could not find them?” And when the old man saw [the pillow of figs, now out of season], he said, “O my son, you are a righteous man, and God did not want you to see the desolation of the city, so he brought this trance upon you. For behold it is 66 years today since the people were taken captive into Babylon.”122

The old man concludes that this long sleep is an emblem of God's favor, not because it is a reward in itself, but because the supernaturally extended nap has spared Abimelech from the destruction of the First Temple and its peoples’ exile. Notice also that in all these stories, just like in the death and return cycles of Gilgamesh and Isis, there is both a (re)identification of the city with the return of the hero to the living condition, and the hero's return is marked by a realization involving a plant or a fruit.

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121 Psalms 126:1.
Miraculously long periods of sleep as shortcuts around apocalyptic events and as signs of God's blessings would find their most noteworthy form in the many versions of the Sleepers of Ephesus tale. Probably composites of these post-exile Jewish sources and the seven resurrected brothers of the Synoptics, the story of these Sleepers appeared first in the Greek (c. 450, no longer extant), and it survives to us in several versions in the Syriac (starting around 520).

That the Sleepers' legend came to have so much presence in the Syriac traditions is not surprising. While the European and African Christians moved towards models of the intermediate state that centered ever more on purgation and pilgrimage, pre-Islamic Syriac and Arabian Christianity would become the bastion of soul-sleep. Syriac writers like Aphrahat the Persian Sage (d. c. 345), Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), Narsai (d. 502), and Babai the Great (d. 628) would argue that the soul sleeps through the interim period of existence, as without the body, the soul has no ability to act deliberately.

The soul cannot be active without the body, hence one must say that after death it is in a kind of sleep. The Holy Scriptures call death sleep; thus, too, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. As light cannot burn without fuel, so the soul in Abraham's bosom possesses only its unchangeable faculties, — i. e., the life from God, and (its) memory... Man is a bodily existence endowed with reason. The soul is not a 'complete nature' (yet) it cannot be said that after death it is as if it were not.

The grounding for the Syriac version of soul-sleep is found in the biblical lore itself; as the scriptures spoke of Sheol and sleep as near equivalents, so did these later Semitic Christians. Besides the encouragement of the biblical sources, we can detect traces of Aristotle's indirect impact as well. However, in order to harmonize this vision of Christianity with the Hebrew scriptural tradition as well as with the Greeks, the Syriac authors argued for a tripartite Stoic-Pauline anthropology. Human

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125 Constas, “To Sleep,” 110.
127 Cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:23.
beings are composed of body, soul, and spirit. At death, the spirit departs, as the spirit is that same animating gift of God blown into Adam at creation’s dawn. Thus the body dies without the spirit. The soul, which cannot act without a living vehicle but cannot die itself, remains on earth in an inactive state. In some accounts, the soul may experience dreams though. However, the soul is otherwise asleep, and is blocked from returning to or interfering with the living world by some kind of wall (šurā) or barrier (syāgā). Such depictions of the underworld divided by a partition have their prototypes in the biblical material proper, such as in the Lukan “Bosom of Abraham” account of Lazarus and the rich man. Just as in the living world the rich and the poor stand on either side of a gate, in the underworld they are separated by a chasm or a wall. In his homily on that parable, Narsai says: “Solid is the rampart which death has erected before the face of the dead.”

We can see elaborate discussion of the intermediate state already in the eighth of Aphrahat the Persian Sage’s Demonstrations (Taḥwithā). Entitled “On the Dead Coming to Life,” there the author says that “death is sleep,” but this is only from our point of view: “An upright [person], though dead, is alive to God.” Whether this is a softening of soul-death like the one imagined/known by Eusebius, or a direct re-expression of the New Testament, or both, is uncertain. In any way, this allows Aphrahat to keep the central Christian belief in the ultimate inconsequentiality of life, but temper it with

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129 Genesis 2:7.
132 Ibid. “The image of the gates of Sheol has its roots in the biblical descriptions of the realm of death. In fact, it occurs in several texts of the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 38:4; Psalms 9:14 and 107:48; Job 38:17), in the post-biblical literature (Ecclesiasticus 51:9; Wisdom of Solomon 16:2; 3 Maccabees 55:1), in the scripts of Qumran (1QHa XIV:207; 4Q184:10) and in the New Testament (Matthew 16:28).”
135 Aphrahat, Demonstrations, 8:8 in The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage trans. Adam Lehto (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2010), 219-236.
136 Ephrem the Syrian also notes in that only God (in the dual nature of Christ) can create meaningful change in the intermediate state, e.g., “the dead cannot repent in Sheol.” Nisibene Hymns 36:6, in The Harp of the Spirit: Twelve Poems of Saint Ephrem tr. Sebastian Brock (Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1975), 46.
realism. As are the experiences of the sleeper, one's experiences in life are not utterly insignificant. They are merely limited. Like seeds, which both seem to be dormant and yet hold potential life, the "heavenly body will enter the tomb and then come out from it again." Mundane life and the sleep of the soul are not nothing, but they are not the purpose of creation either. Similarly too, although Adam came "from nothing," his (and our) creation only becomes fully realized at the raising of the dead.

Some activities do happen in death, but they only echo what occurred in the former and future life. Some activities of significance do happen in life, but these only foreshadow the Last Day. Like a living person can take delight in or be tormented by dreams which she will wake from, the dead are only doing something of supplemental value. They dream; no more, no less.

While he is sleeping, the servant for whom his master is preparing punishments and fetters does not want to wake up, since he knows that when the morning comes and he wakes up his master will punish and bind him. But the good servant, to whom his master has promised gifts, waits for the coming of the morning so that he might receive presents from his master. Even though he is truly sleeping, he sees in his dream how his master would give him what he promised him; he rejoices in his dream, and is exultant and gladdened. The sleep of the wicked person, however, is not pleasant for him. He thinks that the morning has arrived, and his heart is broken in his dream. In contrast, the upright lie down and their sleep is pleasant for them, during [both] the day and the night. For the whole night, they do not perceive it to be [a] long [time], but experience it as a single moment. Then, with the coming of the morning, they wake up and rejoice. The sleep of the wicked, however, lies [heavily] upon them, like a man lying [sick] with a strong and deep fever who turns to and fro on his bed, and who is disturbed for the whole of the long night.

These dreams foretell future torment and rewards, but they are not intrinsically valuable or even ultimately real. Aphrahat claims that the dead are subject to neither reward nor punishment until after the Resurrection. "The upright do not receive [the fulfillment of] their promises, nor do the wicked receive punishment, until the judge comes and distinguishes between right and left." Life and the sleep of the soul are just tastes of what is to come, and so their only worth is as the settings for praise and preparation. As Ephrem the Syrian argues later, life is only a condition in which one makes

\[137\] Aphrahat, Demonstrations, 8:2-3; 15. cf. Isaiah 55:10-11; 1 Corinthians 15:36-38.
\[138\] Aphrahat, Demonstrations, 8:6.
\[139\] Ibid., 8:19.
\[140\] Ibid., 8:20.
the Lord’s path straight. “O Lord, may the body be a temple for him who built it! May the soul be a palace of praise for its architect!” The sleep of the soul is the same.

Although Aphrahat says that “no person has yet received reward or punishment,” some of the exceptionally blessed are partially with God in Heaven already. Hence Jesus can tell the thief crucified at his side, “today you will be with me in Paradise.” Such people are the saints. Although there was a belief in dreaming soul-sleep, Syriac Christianity also possessed a plentiful pantheon of saints. The Sleepers’ popularity in the Syriac traditions show the coincidence of both of these beliefs. For the early Syriac Christians, there was activity in the saints’ sleep of death. Because these people were vehicles of the Holy Spirit, at their deaths the Spirit returned to its origins by its natural gravitation to Heaven. Meanwhile their human souls remain with their corpses. Because the soul and the body are buried together, it follows that the bodies of the holy dead contain within them the same blessing they provided in life. Therefore the bodies of the saints are precious, although they are not to be worshipped. A saint can intercede on behalf of the believer, but according to the earlier Syriac authors this only appears to happen after the Resurrection, when the soul, spirit, and body are united once again.

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143 Aphrahat, Demonstrations, 8:23. Because nothing divine can be subject to weariness or death, Aphrahat also denies that God “rested” after the sixth day of creation. He says this only means that God’s creative activities stopped on the seventh day. “Listen to the proof that God is not grow weary. David said, ‘The Guardian of Israel does not slumber or sleep’” (13:10-11). Human rest on the sabbath is only evidence of divine mercy. It is not an imitatio dei.
144 Aphrahat explains that this was the reason behind the elaborately described burials of the early Prophets (Jacob, Joseph, Moses, etc.), e.g., “The bones of [that] righteous man [i.e., Joseph] were more precious and valuable to [Moses] than the gold and silver that the Israelites took from the Egyptians when they plundered them” Demonstrations 8:8. cf. Exodus 13:9.
145 Aphrahat, Demonstrations, 8:9.
146 Matthew Dal Santo, Debating the Saints’ Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237-320. The author notes that there was a minority position held by Narsai that the saints could act in this life, but this was on the whole rare. Narsai’s On the Nature of the Soul wrestles with the problem: “Through the body God has given the soul the means to display the power of His wisdom; and God has not permitted the soul, in its state of sleep, to anything whatsoever” (ibid., 260) and yet the intellect remained active in a limited role: “The soul is at rest, I say, from her work, but not from life […] Her riches remain, even after she had left her dwelling behind; but she has been rendered unable to direct them as before” ibid., 262.
The saints' true functions are as reminders of the one who is to be worshiped: the Redeemer who passed into sleep/death and conquered it. As the anonymous author (fl. c. 575) of *The Legend of Mar Qardagh* wrote:

They [the saints] are spiritual nourishment for the holy congregations of the Cross. They are an ornament to the lofty beauty of Christianity that is bespattered with the blood of the Son of God. They are a heavenly treasure for all the baptized generations who enter the holy church through the spiritual birth of baptism. They are a polished mirror in which discerning men see the ineffable beauty of Christ.\(^{147}\)

But the saints were still dead and asleep. Therefore the saved saint underscored the helplessness of the dead — that the dead require a savior — but then they also pass along the light of Christ to others.

Heaven forbid that we mean by [the adoration of the relics of saints] the adoration that belongs only to God. It would be sacrilegious to worship in an idolatrous way the relics of these illustrious men. For, these bones of the blessed are not themselves aware of the miracles that flow from them.\(^{148}\)

The sleeping saint made Christ available, but not with full consciousness. Syriac Christian soul-sleep was not an argument against the adoration of the dead, but rather explained the powers of Christ. Christ was not defeated by death, and hence his activity extends to all those who were. Soul-sleep explains the necessity of Christ, while simultaneously re-presenting his salvific function in the saint.

Jesus has elucidated for us the symbols that took place at Elisha's grave,\(^{149}\) how from an extinguished lantern a lantern can be relit, and how, while lying in the grave he could raise up the fallen, himself remaining there, but sending forth a witness to Christ's coming.\(^{150}\)

It is worth noting how the Syriac Christian authors interlock soul-sleep and the Christological saint. Therefore, the saints too are associated with many of the mythological markers we have seen in other traditions of the underworld, such as the road of the sun, the source of water, and the descent into caves. The two greatest examples of such saint mythologies (besides the Sleepers of Ephesus) are the Virgin and Adam.

In the *Cave of Treasures* (c. 550), the role of the saint is expounded by the first human being.

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\(^{147}\) *The Legend of Mar Qardagh* in Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult*, 274.

\(^{148}\) Ishai of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (d. c. 582), *On the Martyrs* in Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult*, 292.

\(^{149}\) 2 Kings 13.

\(^{150}\) Ephrem the Syrian, *Nisibene Hymns* 50:12.
The *Cave of Treasures* repeatedly and at great length draws parallels between Christ and Adam: “Christ was like unto Adam in everything.”\(^{151}\) Because Christ is a human being, Adam as the quintessential human being blessed by God is his type.

At the first hour of Friday, God fashioned Adam from the dust, and at the first hour of Friday Christ received spittle from the sons of Adam. At the second hour of Friday the wild beasts, and the cattle, and the feathered fowl gathered themselves together to Adam, and he gave them names as they bowed their heads before him. And at the second hour of Friday the Jews gathered themselves together against Christ, and they gashed their teeth at him […] At the third hour of Friday a crown of glory was placed on the head of Adam, and at the third hour of Friday the crown of thorns was placed on the head of Christ [the parallelisms continue thus] On Friday Adam and Eve went forth from Paradise, and on Friday our Lord went into the grave […] On Friday the door of Paradise was shut and Adam went forth, and on Friday it was opened and a robber went in. On Friday the two-edged sword was given to the Cherub, and on Friday Christ smote with the spear, and broke the two-edged sword […] At the ninth hour Adam went down into the lowest depth of the earth from the height of Paradise, and at the ninth hour Christ went down to the lowest depths of the earth, to those who lay in the dust, from the height of the cross.\(^{152}\)

And as the fallen human condition, Adam is the antitype of the divine Savior. Adam is the prototype of the glorified human being. Because he is Christlike he reminds the believer of the divine, and because he has sinned and is redeemed he reminds the human race of itself. First he is introduced as the solar, Christic hero.\(^{153}\) He comes from a cave in the mountains of the East and passes into the world at its dawn. Adam's creation and features mark him as the ruler of all that God has made:

> [Adam's face burned with] glorious splendor like the orb of the sun, and the light of his eyes was like the rays of the sun, and the image of his body was like unto the sparkling of crystal. And when he rose at full length and stood upright in the center of the earth, he planted his two feet on that spot whereon was set up the cross of our Redeemer; for Adam was created in Jerusalem […] the voice of God saying to him, “Adam, behold; I have made you king, and priest, and prophet, and lord, and head, and governor of everything which has been made and created; and they will be in subjection to you, and they shall be yours, and I have given to you power over everything which I have created.” And when the angels heard this speech they all bowed the knee and worshipped him.\(^{154}\)

This solar Adam is also particularly significant in his sleep and in his death. Like in the narrative of

\(^{151}\) The *Cave of Treasures* 44:2.

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 43:2-44:2

\(^{153}\) The solar Christ appears in the Syriac sources as well. For example: “And when the light of this temporal breath flickers out, do you relight in the morning this lantern that was extinguished in the night. The sun arrives and with the warmth of its rising it revives the frozen and relights what has been extinguished. It is right that we should acknowledge that light which illumines all, for in the morning when the sun has gone up, lanterns are extinguished, but this new sun has performed a new deed, relighting in Sheol the lanterns that had been extinguished.” Ephrem the Syrian, *Nisibene Hymns* 50:8-7.

\(^{154}\) The *Cave of Treasures* 5:2.
Genesis 2:21-22, Adam is put into a sleep at which Eve (who is Ḥawwāh, “life” itself, Ar. Ḥawwāʾ) is crafted from his rib. While Adam's sleep is the setting for the first creation, Adam's death points ahead to the new creation in Christ. “At the same hour in which the Son of Man delivered up his soul to his Father on the cross, did our father Adam deliver up his soul to him that fashioned him; and he departed from this world.” Thus Adam's relics are holy like the body of Christ. “They were blessed by the body of Adam their father.”

The nature of Adam's passing is worth some consideration. In the Syriac tradition Paradise was found at the top of the highest mountain in the East. When Adam was expelled from Paradise, he took up residence in a certain mountain cave adjacent to it. It should be noted that this vision of the Fall is not as radical as other Christians often interpret it. Adam remains in a blessed state in this cave, which functions as a sub-Paradise for Adam and many of his descendants. In Ephrem's Hymns on Paradise, this mountain cave is also the place where the heavenly voices of praise from Paradise commingle with the believers' prayers and the laments of the damned below. The cave is twice holy for being both proximate to Paradise, while also the future tomb-shrine of Adam himself.

[God said to Adam,] “After the fulfillment of the times which I have allotted that you shall be in exile outside [Paradise...]. Command your sons, and order them to embalm your body after your death with myrrh, cassia, and stakte. And they shall place you in this cave, wherein I am making you to dwell this day [...] and they found themselves in a cave in the top of the mountain, and they entered it and hid themselves therein [...] And Adam took from the skirts of the mountain of Paradise, gold, and myrrh, and frankincense, and he placed them in the cave, and he blessed the cave, and consecrated it that it might be the house of prayer for himself and his sons. And he called the cave “the Cave of Treasures” (mʿarath gazze).

It is only after the sin of Cain and future human misdeeds that the mountain and its cave was made inaccessible. The transformation of the sub-Paradise of the mountain into the forbidden place is

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155 Ibid., 8:2.
156 Ibid., 9:2.
157 Ibid., 5:10. Surge Ruzer and Aryeh Kofsky, Syriac Idiosyncrasies: Theology and Hermeneutics in Early Syriac Literature (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 89-90.
158 Ibid., 93.
159 The Cave of Treasures 7:1-2. The consecration of Adam's body following these instructions reprises these details at 8:1-2.
160 Ruzer and Kofsky, Syriac Idiosyncrasies, 113.
marked by the removal of Adam's relics — opening the epic of Christian salvation which ends with the entombment of Jesus in the West. The cave is an arrow that points forward through salvation history towards the cross. In microcosm, this also plays out in the life of Jesus, who is born in a cave marked by visitors from the distant East, and is buried in a cave in the distant West. The adoration of Adam and his treasures all prefigure the worship of Christ. The Magi depart from the East to the far West of the earth, bringing with them their gold, myrrh, and frankincense, recalling the blessing of Adam's tomb-shrine. That caves and mountains were the homes of many holy saints, martyrs, and monks would underlie the parallel.

The other major saint of the Eastern Christians is the Virgin Mary. She, like Adam, is at once a presentation of the divine Christ and the whole human condition. And she also is associated with the course of the sun and caves through her Christological typing. She is a proper saint because she is a human being who carries within her something holier than herself. In Ephrem's *Homily (memra) on the Nativity* she is at once equated to a cave, a revelatory mountain, a veil, the source of water, and a doorway. Ephrem uses this symbol cluster as an explanation of Mary's sainthood, as the *Cave of Treasures* did for the solar Adam. Ephrem's *Homily* opens with the wonders of the incarnate Christ. Christ took up flesh and did not shrink from spending nine months in a womb. This is likened to Mount Horeb which was not consumed by the fire of the burning bush.

([O,] how a womb of flesh was able to carry a flaming fire, and how a flame dwelt in a moist womb which did not get burnt up. Just as the bush on Horeb bore God in the flame, so did Mary bear Christ in her virginity.)

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161 Ibid., 113-114.
162 *On Paradise* 12:10, in Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis*, 133. Ruzer and Kofsky write, "There was, according to the *Cave of Treasures*, an unbroken chain of cultic tradition starting in the cave of treasures and carried all the way to Golgotha. The primordial cult of the cave and that of the Christian Eucharist are intrinsically connected." *Syriac Idiosyncrasies*, 117.
163 The *Cave of Treasures* 40:1; 41:1
165 *Exodus* 3.
The text goes on to make the unusual claim that the Spirit entered Mary through her ear, like a word,\footnote{Ibid., 113.} and thus she was made pregnant while still a virgin.\footnote{Ibid., 18.} This is a reversal of the words of “poison” which Satan poured into Eve’s ear: “Through the gate by which death entered, life also entered.”\footnote{Ibid., 161-166.} Ephrem explains that Mary received her son without awareness. “He entered and dwelt in her without her perceiving.”\footnote{Ibid., 105.} Mary receiving Christ as a word in her ear exposes her as the instrument of an invisible God’s revelation to the world. She is the palace of the great king;\footnote{Ibid., 134-135.} the clothing God wears;\footnote{Ibid., 142. cf. Sebastian Brock, “Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition,” in Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter ed. Margot Schmidt (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1982), 11-38.} the Heaven in which the divine resides. “She is the new Heaven in which there dwells the King of kings”\footnote{Ibid., 121-122.} and “This day Mary has become for us the Heaven that bears God.”\footnote{Ibid., 56.}

And then Christ is born to her in a cave, and this too is a sign of Heaven, as Mary herself is. “The cave corresponds to the heavens.”\footnote{Ibid., 142. cf. Ephrem the Syrian, Homily on the Nativity 139-140.} Ephrem says that the cave is a microcosm of the heavenly dome: the firmament. “He who measures the heavens with the span of His hand lies in a manger a span’s breath; He whose hands cupped the sea is born in a cave; His glory fills the heavens as the manger is filled with His splendor.”\footnote{Ibid., 29-34.} And as death and new life entered through the portal of a woman’s ear, death and new life enter the world through the portal of a cave. The cave of Adam’s setting in the East mirrors the birth and death of the Incarnation in Christ in the West. In short, the cave is the place of Mary, Adam, and all of the saints; it is the junction of two worlds as much as the intermediate state is.

\footnotesize{167} Ibid., 113. 
\footnotesize{168} Ibid., 18. 
\footnotesize{169} Ibid., 161-166. 
\footnotesize{167} Ibid., 105. 
\footnotesize{167} Ibid., 134-135. 
\footnotesize{171} Ibid., 142. cf. Ephrem the Syrian, Homily on the Nativity 139-140. 
\footnotesize{172} Ibid., 121-122. 
\footnotesize{173} Ibid., 56. 
\footnotesize{174} Ibid., 29-34.}
Part 4: A Junction of Two Analyses

We have had a general introduction to the history of the afterlife and intermediate states in the pre-Islamic period, and the trajectory of the barzakh's development after the appearance of the Qurʾān. How do we make all this diverse Islamic and pre-Islamic material tell us something about the Qurʾān's conversation of the intermediate state?

We can certainly take what we know of the underworld, sleep, and death from the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and biblical lores which we have just glanced at and suppose relationships between those peoples and the very early hearers of the Qurʾān in the future. Such influences clearly existed, as the Qurʾān offers so many clues that its audience was expected to know these ancient traditions without elaboration. Again, the Qurʾān insists that it is not primarily a revelation of new data, but is rather a clarification of what is known to its hearers already. However, this late modern method of historical research, which is ever-trying to ‘turn to the sources,’ threatens infinite regress at every stage. Reducing historical data to its lineage erases meaning and creativity by perpetually (and artificially) favoring the past. We cannot and should not assume a story or thought's point of origin is the same as its point. And so our question is not primarily where did the Qurʾānic community get its information — a question to which we can never reach satisfactory answers in most cases regardless — but what is it doing with the information in its present conversation? The ‘sources’ are important to this discussion, but only because they give our discussion vocabulary, not substance.

Similarly but regarding the future literature, we can easily consider post-Qurʾānic materials like ḥadīths, prophetic biographies, and tafsīrs, along with later Muslim descriptions of the barzakh, to understand the Qurʾānic period in the past. Again, as in the case with the critical turn to the sources, much of what we would find in the ‘turn to the readers’ in the Islamic period could be quite correct.

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Yet it would not necessarily show us the novelty and uniqueness of the 7th century Ḥiāzī milieu and that tantalizing but elusive conversation which occurred within it. In a certain way, the fallacy of looking to the later Islamic tradition for firm information about the Qur’ānic milieu is the same as the problem of looking for the ‘sources’ of the Qur’ān’s dialogue taken on by revisionist scholars today. We are giving one place and time the power to dominate another to which it is a neighbor. Since the 9th century, and increasingly more to this day, the Islamic (especially Sunnī) world has given too much authority to the commentators. We can ask, ‘What has Baghdad to do with Mecca?’ and while the answer is certainly ‘something’ it is absolutely not ‘everything.’

When we do investigate the Qur’ānic context’s past and future, useful clues will present themselves though, and so we will ultimately engage in the analysis of both. But both methods of approaching the Qur’ān’s conversation are tenuous if they are not grounded in an examination of how the Qur’ān itself presents information to its primary audience. If we want to create the fullest possible history of the early Islamic intermediate state, and the Qur’ān is the central piece of evidence, how we choose to analyze the Qur’ān is paramount. Merely comparing the Late Antique past and the Islamic future is not enough. We have to ask not only if the Qur’ān conceives of the intermediate state, we have to ask how it is presented to its first audience: the Qur’ān’s form, technique, and organization of thoughts. Then, only after we have found out in what manner the Qur’ān first offered its vision of the intermediate state, can we start to flesh out the Qur’ān’s reception of the past and the Islamic civilization’s reception of the Qur’ān in the future, and not the other way around.

Fortunately, a fair amount of recent scholarship has begun to examine the structures, styles, and other modes of expression which the Qur’ān utilizes. While there are many insightful specific observations made lately, some common trends occur which are significant to us here.

First, even though the Qur’ān is considered a revelation, the Qur’ān is part of a conversation — a term I have already employed quite a bit, which I borrowed from Angelika Neuwirth. The
recitation of the Qurʾān “structurally may be compared to a telephone conversation where the speech of only one party is audible, yet the (unheard) speech of the other is in no way totally absent, but roughly deducible from the audible parts of the exchange.” While only a small fragment of this conversation remains extent in the Qurʾānic corpus, that does not mean that other pieces of the conversation are totally unobtainable. Like any half-heard discussion, we can make some informed comments on what we are missing. If the Qurʾān gives us an answer, we can propose a question was asked. If the Qurʾān provides a seemingly extraneous detail, we can suggest there must be a purpose. Or on the other hand, if a reference to a complex story or belief is made with little or no detail, this can lead us to believe that the audience was expected to understand already.

Second, also noted by Neuwirth as well as others, the central communicative unit of the Qurʾān is the sūra. Although scholarship often notes the length, title, and possible location of revelation of each sūra, rarely until very recently has the sūra been considered a fixed set that presents information in a very particular fashion, and thus has explanatory value. (The very short sūras are noted exceptions). Instead, the vast majority of traditional Islamic and modern critical scholarship assume three forms of meaningful units: the full Qurʾān, the pericope, and the verse. These are not incorrect readings — in fact it would be quite difficult to discuss the Qurʾān at all without so dividing it. But problems arise. Reading the entire Qurʾān as a meaningful whole together (the way one would approach a deliberately linear book) wipes away the context of the first audience of the text, who would have received only parts of it, and those piecemeal in a specific (but hotly debated) chronological order.

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Narrowing in on the pericopes within each sūra similarly decontextualizes the record, and furthermore, where a given pericope begins and ends often calls for guesswork. Atomistic readings of the text, where ‘verses’ (typically meaning āyas, although also longer or shorter sub-pericope units) are examined outside of their location in the sūra, proliferate in all forms of scholarship\(^8\) — including in the Qur’ānic citations from this project we have seen already — as this is the easiest method of citation. However, merely because this is a practical way to engage the text, this does not mean it is always ideal. Although the āyas are usually based on the Qur’ān’s rhyme schemes, like the pericopes there is no reason to assume from the text itself that the mere existence of a rhyme makes a given line an independent unit. Also, not every āya ends in a rhyme, and neither does every rhyme coincide with the end of an āya. However natural it may seem, the Qur’ān never explains if and how to subdivide itself into āyas.

Neither does the Qur’ān ever directly assume its audience knows its full revealed contents (which would be an anachronism). On the other hand, the Qur’ān does mention that it is deliberately given in sūras:

10. Or do they say, “He has forged it”? Say, “Then bring a sūra like it, and call on anyone you can, other than God, if you are truthful” (Yūnus 10:38).

\(^8\) On the most practical level, a line or two is much easier to memorize or recall than a full sūra, especially as many sūras can be quite long. The āyas may receive priority because both classical and modern scholars have proposed that the sūras themselves are later compilations in attempts to account for their seemingly random change of language, subject, and perspective; see Neuwirth, “Structure and the Emergence,” 142-145. Also, atomistic examinations of the Qur’ān can spring from a theological argument. Starting roughly with Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), the exact wording of the Qur’ān was considered the uncreated expression of an eternal God. It follows therefore that the text is indivisible. Every sentence, word, letter, or pause is utterly filled with meaning, and thus can act independently of the whole. see Wilferd Madelung, “The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Koran,” in Orientalia hispanica, ed. J. M. Barral, (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Josef van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration? Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology,” in The Qur’ān as Text, ed. Stefan Wild, (Leiden: Brill, 1996); George Archer, “The Hinterlands of the Qur’ān: The Edges of the Eternal and the Temporal in Early Ḥanbalite Thought with Analogos to Catholic Theology,” Journal of Comparative Theology 1 (2013): 86-103.
We cannot be certain what a **sūra** may mean in such examples, although that is not to suggest we can make no strong guesses. The term must refer to a unit of words which can stand alone, or else this “challenge verse” is making a very odd request of the unbeliever. Indeed, considering how elastic the received text’s genre of **sūra** can be in content, style, and size, it is not clear what purpose the division of the Qurʾān into **sūras** has if the genre itself is not significant. The probable meaning of the term **sūra** — something “enclosed” or “contained” together — may also back up this kind of reading. Neuwirth observes the telling detail that no **sūra** (in our present sense of the term) is strongly dependent on the material found in any other **sūra**.\(^1\) When a **sūra** introduces a passage which has a parallel in another **sūra**(s), the new passage does not appear to require notable awareness of whatever may be found in the older passage.\(^2\) Contrast this to the chapters of most modern books, where the reappearance of a person or theme is built on top of what the reader would have encountered already.

As I shall demonstrate in the coming chapters, even the very long received **sūras** have a generally consistent internal balance which is more easily explained by having been planned by the originator of their content, rather than by a secondary editing process. The **sūras** as we have them very often appear to be meaningfully structured in harmony with their content. Also, this structuring dates to the earliest known evidence of the text itself. The Ṣanʿāʾi palimpsest and other very early copies of the Qurʾānic text maintain divisions into **sūras** regardless of other variations from the modern recension.\(^3\) In lack of affirmative evidence to the contrary, I must offer that the structure of the **sūras** as we have them before us behave in ways at least comparable to the **sūras** mentioned in the Qurʾān.

We cannot say for certain if any, many, or even some of our current **sūras** are identical with those

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\(^2\) Cf. As late as the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites” (Concerning Heresy, 101) by John of Damascus (d. 749), we see reference to the **sūras** al-Baqara 2, al-Nisā’ 4, and al-Māʾida 5 by name. While John is aware that these were each part of a single collection of revelations to Muhammad, there is no reference to the “Qurʾān.”

‘enclosed’ units referenced by the Qurʾān itself, but it seems highly probably that they work in very similar ways.

Third, the Qurʾān is an oral document, and therefore it will process information as such. That the Qurʾān is meant to be recited aloud is common knowledge, but this orality has a number of significant implications here. An oral text will organize its contents in order to favor both the memorization of the reciter and the recollection of the listener. Therefore repetition, patterns, and poetic/musical memory aids are deliberate and useful. This must be true of the text on various scales: there will be mnemonic devices which assist the reciter in recalling the order of elements in the full sūra, within a pericope, within a rhyme scheme, within a single verse, and within key phrases. Also, despite the repetition, in an oral document pithiness must be given priority over elaboration. Allusion and other kinds of reference will move some of the burden of remembering from the reciter to the listener. Sequentiality and parallelisms too must play a major role in an oral text, with major themes being presented in several ways, as the listener (unlike a reader) cannot go back and re-read or take notes. In theory and perhaps quite often in reality, the listener within an oral culture must both understand and remember what was said in one go.

When we open the Qurʾān itself looking for clues about the intermediate state, we must employ a method (or methods) which takes account of these three key points: the Qurʾān is part of a half-silence conversation, any reading proposed must make sense not only of verses and pericopes but must work in the context of the structure of a sūra, and the Qurʾān must be treated as an oral document which presents itself to an oral culture. A method which I will argue does all of this is called ‘ring structural analysis’ or ‘Semitic rhetorical analysis.’ This method assumes the presence of a historical listener (as well as a reciter), applies itself well to the unit of the sūra (as well as the sub-

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units of pericope, verse, and phrase), and takes account of the performative/oral nature of the source material at hand. Although this is a form of analysis with a number of problems, to its credit it can also prove itself very apt for walking a modern reader through the text of the Qurʾān. I will treat this method in my next chapter. I will also offer some problems with how ‘ring structural analysis’ has been labelled and applied, as well as my corrections for these shortcomings. Furthermore I will address the ethical and political issues of using this technique (as well as modern critical technologies in general) on the text of the Qurʾān.

In my third chapter, I will apply the ring structural analysis to a particular sūra of the Qurʾān as a case study. As we are looking for what the Qurʾān has to say about the intermediate state, it might seem obvious to start with the references to the barzakh. However, as the Qurʾānic vision of the intermediate state is somehow in orbit around its vision of sleep and death, there is a much more plentiful discussion to examine first. By far the longest discussion the Qurʾān offers on sleep is found in the account of the People (ahl) or Companions of the Cave (aṣḥāb al-kahf), found in the sūra named after their resting place: al-Kahf, “the cave”; sūra eighteen by our reckoning. This same sūra also contains several passages on the general Resurrection of the dead, and so coupled with the Sleepers’ story, this seems a better place to start than the three fleeting uses of the term barzakh. Not coincidentally, this particular sūra also contains many of the same themes we have noted from the pre-Islamic period involving sleep, death, and underworlds, such as barriers, doorways, guardians, and the pathways of the sun and the waters. Then, after we have offered our analysis of al-Kahf and each of its elements according to ring structuralism, we will return to these pre-Islamic materials in search of elaboration into the Qurʾān’s implied conversation. I will argue that one of the primary concerns of al-Kahf is to demonstrate that the dead in the intermediate state are asleep, and this sleep nullifies the advocacy of saint-cults, the worship of Christ, and a plurality of gods.
If this thesis stands, it follows that the argument will present itself similarly elsewhere in the Qur’anic corpus. Our fourth chapter will return to the references of the *barzakh*, and the many other places where the Qur’an addresses sleep/dormancy, Resurrection, the pre-Islamic themes of the underworld, and the supposed intercession of beings besides the one God. As in the previous chapter, my modified version of ring structural analysis will be our prime method of research. Again, after using ring structural analysis on each of these case studies, we will also put our findings into dialogue with pre-Islamic texts. However, as there is no discussion of sleep or the intermediate state which comes even close to the length and elaboration of the Sleepers' pericope found in *al-Kahf*, the discussion of the intermediate state of soul-sleep will also play a more minor role in these other sūras. Also, I will present these elements in a general order according to our knowledge of the Qur’an's appearance and development (as much as this is possible given our limited understanding of the Qur’an's exact sequentiality). This will provide us with a rough chronological history of the Qur’an's conversation on the intermediate state from the beginning to the end of Muḥammad’s prophetic career.

Our fifth chapter will turn to the Islamic tradition proper, which was affected by and reflected upon the Qur’an's conversation. There are many gaps in our understanding of the history of early Islam's reception of the Qur’an. We know that Islamic history follows from the Qur’an's conversation, the only question is how exactly. Therefore, if the Qur’an is deliberately thinking in a ring-structure-like pattern which renders the dead unconscious in order to prevent their postmortem intercessions and worship, there will be echoes of this tendency appearing in the early Islamic period. I will turn to the biographical material, the sayings attributed to the Prophet and his associates, and the very earliest commentators on the Qur’an for traces of the Qur’an's conversation of the intermediate state. Examples of art and architecture from the Umayyad period will also be discussed as re-presentations of the Qur’anic vision of soul-sleep.
My sixth chapter will serve as a concluding argument. I will put the Qurʾān's conversation of the intermediate state into dialogue with similar conversations throughout history. First, we will return to the pre-Islamic Christians and their reading of the biblical lore on the sleep of the soul. How is this discussion akin to the Qurʾān's conversation, and how are the two discourses distinct? That is, why is the Qurʾān's conversation something other than the Christian one? After this, we will turn to the questions this project will leave open, as well as those it has created. How does reading the Qurʾān this way generally and on these specific themes change what we know of primal Islam? What are the future possibilities of what we will have learned here?

In the end, this project will give us a number of significant results. Methodologically, the refinement of ring structuralism that I propose will free the technique from its more hypothetical claims and its tendencies towards eisogesis. Also, our investigation of the intermediate state according to the Qurʾān will move us one small step closer to a full comprehension of early Islam and the context out of which it sprang. Who were these people that the Qurʾān was speaking to, what did they think, and what did they believe about the world to come? Through this, we will know something more of the history of Islam itself as it pertains to eschatology. Finally, and perhaps most importantly is not merely a question of Qurʾānic studies, but rather the larger, Islamic concern: what does this conversation say about human discussions of the afterlife in general? What is the Qurʾān saying to people at all times and places - Muslims, other monotheists, and even non-believers?
In the previous chapter, I introduced the various models of the intermediate state that are available to believers in a future bodily Resurrection. Also, we reviewed some trends in how such states appear in Islamic history and its precursors: the biblical and ‘pagan’ lore. How can we use this material to move forward in the search for the early Islamic intermediate state? How can we use this material to interpret the Qurʾān, its audience, and their eschatology? In this chapter, I will turn to method.

First, we are in search of the Qurʾān’s relationships to pre-Qurʾānic and post-Qurʾānic peoples. How does the Qurʾān and its conversation fit into the larger history of the Near East? What does the Qurʾān expect from its primary audience, and later what does the Qurʾān’s secondary audience expect from the Qurʾān and its references? Does the Qurʾān fit easily into the greater continuity of Near Eastern history? For these matters, I will have to use morphological comparisons. But why would I use comparisons and not just work with the sources? Regarding the pre-Qurʾānic past, we do not have any indisputable chains of dependence of the Qurʾān’s conversation on any other text for more than a line. Besides a few of the Psalms,3 we do not know what exactly was available to the Qurʾān’s first audience,

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3 The Psalms are the only clear source that we can be sure has a direct literary relationship to the Qurʾān, where there is both a reference to the text and a quotation: “Certainly We have written in the Psalms (zabūr), after the Reminder: ‘the earth — my righteous servants will inherit it’” (al-Anbiyāʾ 21:105). Compare Psalms 37:29: “The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever” (saddiqim yirash “āreṣ wayishkanū laʿaḥā; dikaioi de kléronoméousin gēn kai katastasousin eis aiōna aiōnos ep ’autēs). There are also possible re-workings of the Psalms’ phrasing, although these may be filtered through other channels such as rabbinical literature or spoken idioms. Compare the construction from Psalms 121:4, “neither slumber nor sleep” (lóyánium walóyishān); [... ] “Slumber does not overtake Him, nor sleep [...]” (al-Baqara 2:255).
and in what form, and so we can only compare pre-Qurʾānic and post-Qurʾānic literatures to the Qurʾān cautiously, with similarities due to some undefined dispersion. For example, when the Qurʾān makes a reference to story x, and this is morphologically quite similar to Syriac homily y and Greek book z, we will not immediately jump to the assumption that either y or z are the ‘source’ of the Qurʾānic x. While we can usually be sure there is some kind of relationship, we often do not have the ability to demonstrate the precise nature of the relationship. Perhaps the Qurʾānic story x is an exegesis of y and not z, or vice versa. Maybe the Qurʾānic x is examining both y and z in different ways (a hybrid account). Perhaps Qurʾānic reference x is a direct descendent of one or both of the earlier sources with missing written or oral material between them. Maybe the Qurʾānic story shares a common ancestry with one or both of the other morphologically similar stories y and z, but is not descended from either of them. Or again, the stories may have no literary relationships at all, but instead appear related to each other because of other factors such as similar milieu.

The same observations can be made of post-Qurʾānic materials, too. If a particular Islamic scholar interprets the Qurʾān in a certain way, and claims that this interpretation is based on what is known of the Qurʾān's original conversation, can we affirm or deny the validity of this claim? With absolute certainty, no, we typically cannot. Perhaps the scholar does truly have access to a genuine survival from the Qurʾān's conversation. Instead, maybe this scholar can reproduce the understandings of the Qurʾān's very early hearers, but only because they share common understandings possessed by many Near Eastern people. Perhaps this Islamic scholar's reading is actually foreign to the Qurʾān's conversation, but falsely appears applicable. These doubts can go on. All this is to say that precision with the intertextual relationships is simply not on the table in most cases. What we do have are sources that have morphological similarities to the Qurʾān from before, during, and after the Qurʾān's appearance. The details of why and how certain materials appear to be morphologically similar to the Qurʾān will more often than not have to remain speculative.
Second, we are also looking for information about how the Qurʾān interprets its own milieu. What is the nature of the conversation in which the Qurʾān plays the major, surviving role, that according to traditional sources only lasted for two decades in the environs of Mecca and Medina? While intra-Qurʾānic morphological comparisons will play a function in this investigation, we can also use structural comparisons. As hard data for this locale is so scant, the investigation of the Qurʾān’s conversation as its own unique moment in history will depend mostly on a structural investigation of the text itself. By ‘structural’ I have two meanings in mind, both of which I mean at once. I mean structural in the sense of *Structuralisme* (and also post-Structuralism), and most especially how this academic trend in the last third of the twentieth century addresses anthropologies of creativity and originality. How do particular trends in the Qurʾān compare to the structures imbedded in the human animal itself? However, I also mean structural in a conventional way as how parts of a complex system relate to each other and their whole. How can we compare one part of the text to the structure of its system, and how does the structure of the system compare to its parts? How does the Qurʾān relate to itself? Of course, both of these meanings of structural blend together and intermix.

In this chapter, I will introduce how these morphological and structural comparisons can work for us. Then I will employ them to address two queries. First, what is the state of orality and textuality in the time of the Qurʾān's conversation — how did these people organize data and relate it to others generally? Second, how does the Qurʾān create comparisons internally — what is its structure? With these addressed, we will be able to continue on to look for the Qurʾān's foggy intermediate state as we will have more precisely established to whom the Qurʾān is speaking and how.

**Part 1: Structural and Morphological Comparisons**

To dig up the undefined discourse of the Qurʾān we will start with the use of a general morphological comparison. That is, we can look for alignments between the Qurʾān and the biblical or Islamic lore,
like those we have introduced already. Or, if nothing else similar to the Qurʾān is available in its close relations, we can look to more distant cultures as well. Although this is not the only way to conduct a comparison, Jonathan Z. Smith, in his short but challenging essay “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” argues well that morphological comparison seems to produce results in the field that, “stand the test of time.”

By ‘morphological” Smith means specifically the methods of Mircea Eliade (d. 1986, and behind him, his grandsires, the Victorian anthropologists and Rudolf Otto, d. 1937). Attempting to be anti-reductive, with various levels of success, morphological comparison works from the understanding that although the religion within a given setting cannot be directly pinpointed, it can be triangulated by phenomenology. To get at this invisible something, the study of religion must tremble between familiar phenomena (things which are meaningful to us) and foreign phenomena (things which require interpretation). A basic principle like an archetype or a trend is exposed in ever more complex patterns and repetitions which each elaborate upon or portray some unuttered concept. Each of these concepts is something that is deeply familiar to us all (for reasons that seem metaphysical, if not directly theological), although particular appearances of such a concept may be diverse and quite alien. Therefore, the study of the Qurʾān’s conversation is a project of translation from the boundaries of the subject’s knowledge to some deeply — perhaps innately — familiar center.

Normally morphological comparisons of an artifact like the the Qurʾān would mean the study of the Qurʾān and its setting naturally pushes us to study the religious systems with which the Qurʾān strikes similarities. What is the Qurʾān likened to in other religious systems in other times and places of which we have more understanding? For instance, if we would follow Eliade’s lead, Qurʾānic studies would be a matter of finding materials that appear to share similar forms, functions, or qualities as the

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5 Ibid., xii.
Qurʾān. Ubiquitous comparisons include pre-existent oral texts such as the Torah and the Vedas and prophetic literature such as the Psalms and the Book of Mormon. An even more properly Eliadean approach would consider a particular part of the Qurʾān, such as the reference to a cosmic tree, and find some relationship to other cosmic trees such as Northern Europe’s Yggdrasil or the Subcontinent’s Aśvattha. Such an approach would prove particularly apt to a case like the Qurʾānic discourse, where source data is so limited, but possible comparisons are so plentiful. This kind of method could prove useful given the critical Qurʾānic scholar’s lack of unquestionable source material. When there is insufficient source material on a given passage of the Qurʾān, a comparison can be created from historically unrelated artifacts.

But Smith warns that despite its potential this vision of comparison is also flawed. As so much of Eliade’s (and other morphological) projects are in search of the eternal and super-historical, it is only to be expected that these projects may become altogether ahistorical. If we were considering material that was completely without context, such as an obscure, strictly emic reference or a very unclear hapax legomenon, a fully Eliadean morphological approach would be warranted. In lack of any historical context, use a method which is not reliant on history. However, even in the obfuscated Qurʾānic discourse this is not typical. The received Qurʾān almost always gives us something to work with: narrative context, allusions to other materials, Semitic roots, and so forth. It is one matter to disregard historical context when it is completely unknown; in such a case all we can do is search for

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7 E.g., Arie Schippers, “Psalms,” in *EQ*.
other ways to find information and insight. However, using a method that by its very nature ignores historical placement may prove problematic when we are looking for the Qurʾān's place in a historical conversation. We are working towards a Qurʾānic context; a decontextualization seems the very move we do not need. Thus, I must agree with Smith that while classic morphological comparison should not be thrown away, it is not ideal. There are however revisions of morphological comparison which may serve us better.

Trying to find methodologies with fewer limitations, Smith insinuates a possible way forward for the morphological approach when it is wedded with intratextual structuralism. By this I mean to say that when the Qurʾān gives us enough data to at least hint at a pattern between them, we can make a comparison within the source materials alone. After this we can check for other comparisons to wider Near Eastern history using general morphological alignment (with priority given to sources near to the Qurʾānic discourse). Although this will not allow us to get at the meaning of an independent element as Eliade attempts, following from Claude Lévi-Strauss (d. 2009) we can take patterns of elements all present within a single source (here, the Qurʾān) and fish for internal relationships between these elements: an intratextual reading. Structuralism can then be used to explore such intratextual relationships.

The supposition of structuralism is the basic human categorization of sameness and difference, which therefore must be transmitted in all human cultures at all times. As common members of the same species, the minds of all human beings are physiologically the same; hence the ground of our cultures' traits — 'the structures' — are indigenous to the human mind collectively. Suppose we are looking for the meaning of Qurʾānic term x. If we have an idea of how the Qurʾān relates data points to each other — that is, how it exhibits structure — we have grounds for a

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13 Smith, Imagining Religion, 25.
structural comparison. If the familiar term y is placed in an oppositional structure to the mysterious term x, we can move closer to the meaning of x, even if the Qurʾān does not oppose y and x in the same way we would. We can do the same for grammatical constructs, themes, stories, pericopes, and entire sūras. Comparative patterns do not need to be grounded in crypto-theology or a generic metaphysics: the patterns are presumably products of nature and its common course. For example, binary linguistic distinctions between one direction and the opposite direction, or psychological juxtaposition between the self and the other, however these are worked out, are basic structures of all human culture. Unlike Eliade's archetypes, the structures of Lévi-Strauss do not require extra-historical foundations in metaphysics to stand their ground in theory. Structures are not necessarily things in themselves, at least not outside of the mechanics of the human brain and body. Structures can therefore be read either as physiologically determined or as practical nominalisms. All human beings have the generic ability to create distinctions. How they do so is only a matter of style.

Whatever morphological and structural comparisons tell us, their conclusions must interact seamlessly with known data about the worlds that surround the Qurʾān's conversation, and so we must enter a caveat. Our search for the Qurʾān's conversation (as far as it tells us something about its first audience and the intermediate state), must also fit into a larger historical framework (connecting the Late Antique past and Islamic future). The Qurʾān is a part of a conversation in the conventional sense of an exchange between parties, with a certain priority given to the spoken word. The voice of the Qurʾān speaks with recognizable language, anticipates reactions or turns against misunderstandings, and clarifies, even if only by saying further clarification is not possible given the limits of human understanding. As Neuwirth pointed out, it is not unlike a half-heard telephone call. I might go one further and say that it is more of a series of conference calls, where only the voice of one party remains but there are many, many others out of direct historical earshot. We can also take the
Qurʾān to be a fragment of a conversation in Michel Foucault's (d. 1984) sense of a discourse.¹⁶ The Qurʾān reacts against certain categories, norms, and identities, and exposes replacements or corrections for them. The text poses questions and crafts answers. It is at once taking apart bits of cultural data and re-creating others and so the very early hearers are a part of a conversation in motion.¹⁷ Even if the Qurʾān is as the Islamic traditions say it is — meaningful to humanity at all times — the appearance of the recitations on the stage of history places it in the realm of human thought patterns. Whatever we may believe about the metaphysical reality of the Qurʾān, in all quantifiable matters the received corpus as we have it is a piece of a historical conversation, and as such it must fit into history. Therefore, the Qurʾān and its first hearers are in a unique relationship. We need to know something about them if we want to approach the Qurʾān itself. The Qurʾān operates within the invisible rules of a meaning system, and the very early hearers knew how to work in that system. Thus our grasp of the Qurʾān is always dependent on what we know of the system in which it operates. Whether we are Foucauldians (who would see the Qurʾān as ‘monument’), theologians (for whom the Qurʾān is an eternal word in a form effable to the human race), or historians (who take the Qurʾān as a document, a text), this acknowledgement of the Qurʾān as part of a conversation in time must be of utmost importance.

Part 2: The Ancient Arab Mind and Orality

If there are common structures between all humanity and the first audience of the Qurʾān, then why does the Qurʾānic text seem so deeply unfamiliar to the Western reader, while other ancient texts are

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¹⁷ Naturally, a theology of the Qurʾān sees different parameters of this discourse beyond my category of the very early hearers/first audience, etc. In a narrow sense, Qurʾānic theology can tend to focus only on those people that comprise the Islamic community; those who agreed with the Qurʾān's message. Anti-Qurʾānic opinions are not significant to such theologies. Or, in a wider regard, the Qurʾān's audience can be understood as the human race as a whole. There is value to either move, although my concerns are principally historical, even if it carries this theological question along with it.

more easily readable? Indeed, if structuralism stands, how can foreignness even be possible? The problem arises when the Qurʾān is approached from forms of thought that belong to another time and a later people, who no longer collect and appropriate data as Qurʾānic peoples did. The Qurʾānic culture works within a particular framework, which is in many ways quite unlike ours. Claude Lévi-Strauss, like Eliade, Otto, and the Victorians, rightly argues for the acknowledgement of markedly magical or mythical forms of thought in such cultures, in which similarity assumes shared causality or common meaning. Lévi-Strauss calls this the ‘science of the concrete,’ or pensée sauvage (idiomatically, “raw thinking”). This mode is still present in us today, but it has been significantly minimized in favor of scientific thought.

For example, let us return to the two conditions of sleep and death, which are often paired in the Qurʾān. The scientific-conceptual mind we try to possess today can claim no relationship between the two. The dormant and the deceased are in fact quite distinct as far as quantification alone is concerned. However, many expressions of many cultures place these two dissimilar states of being into particular relations with each other, thus exposing mythical relationships. Structuralism posits this is because both sleep and death can in common be considered binary opposites of other common human states like deliberate bodily motion, awareness of time, and response to stimuli. Any state in which one can move freely in her body, sense time as passing with predictable regularity, and react to outside forces is neither sleep nor death. From here the inverse conclusion can be made that sleep suggests a state like death and death suggests a state like sleep. And so, as all human beings are aware of sleep and death however far they are dispersed across history and the planet, how they choose to relate sleep and death to each other is culturally informative.

Just because remote cultures may possess given experiences like death and sleep in common,

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20 E.g., al-Arāf 7:97, al-Zumar 39:42.
however, that does not mean that there is no way for a culture to express them creatively. As Lévi-Strauss would say of mythical thought generally, it is “a kind of intellectual bricolage.” In this case, two primal, universal human experiences — slumber and mortality — are some of the ‘bric-a-brac’ of human comings and goings. Like the collage or the patchwork which is made of gathered odds and ends, or the painting which is composed of paint and canvas not made by the artist, a bricolage takes the matter already available and re-contextualizes it purposefully. The bricolage-maker, the bricoleur, is the prophetic figure or myth-making community who moves these common thoughts, stories, and experiences into a creative formation that begets or exposes undetected importance.

Here lies the signification of the famous notion of bricolage (literally, an intellectual form of DIY). The bricoleur is [...] confronted with forms that already have a signification in themselves, but he gives them another signification by relating them to other forms. Therefore, his selection of elements is not arbitrary: it depends on possibilities that are already there in the elements he manipulates.

When one set of signs is culturally meaningful in general, but fails to express a specifically desired meaning, another set of meaningful signs can be imported from what is already available. This rearrangement shifts the meaning of both signs by unveiling meaning in their relationship. Therefore, ‘John sleeps like the dead’ implies a state of rest more still or deeper than ‘John sleeps’ alone can express, without suggesting that John has died. Hamlet’s great question of ‘what dreams may come’ in ‘that sleep of death’ is more meaningful than merely asking what death is like. Counter to the reasoning of the sciences, the mythic/metaphoric use of already known cultural data-points makes reality more plain. Myth is this process writ large. As Robert Parkin says of Lèvi-Strauss’ argument: “Myth [...] is] language focused on metaphor, and thus being like life despite its inversions of it, can be treated as an autonomous domain that provides the key to human thought through its resolutions of the false oppositions it sets up, which lead back to reality.” If we reduce away the distinctions of the terms or we try to understand the parts outside of their network of interrelationships (for example,

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23 Barth, et al., *One Discipline*, 213.
sleep is either utterly identified with death, or is absolutely distinct from it) then the meanings of cultural expressions are lost. This reading overlooks the ever-recycling, ever-new meanings presented by the *bricolage*. The *bricolage* is fresh in arrangement and familiar in its contents. And the Qurʾān does this again and again. It shuffles around human bric-a-brac like sleep and death, as well as old biblical narratives, pagan mythologies, legal commands, descriptions of nature, and the daily lives of common people in novel relationships, thus handing the very early hearers their own culture back to them with a new orientation.

We can use this awareness of the Qurʾānic *bricolage* to get closer to the Qurʾān's conversation. How the Qurʾān relates given cultural artifacts to each other can inform us of what the text expects its addressees to know about and understand. As particularly remote outsiders to this intended audience, we need to find out what sort of *bricolage* the Qurʾān would make use of. How would such a document create associations between cultural data? The particular flavor of *bricolage* that the Qurʾān represents appears more clearly when we consider the historical space from which the Qurʾān speaks. To do this, we need to infuse the structuralist approach with anthropological/morphological comparisons.

We can progress by cross-referencing the almost universal declaration of the Qurʾān's method of expression with modern studies of orality. The Qurʾān is an oral text speaking to an overwhelmingly oral culture, specifically called a culture with a “high residual orality.” High residual orality implies that writing is known and available to some, but it is never used in a way that is not either completely practical or highly specialized (or both). Simply, the written word does not factor into most peoples' internal or public lives. (This is distinct from pure orality, where writing is not known at all.) We can be certain that the Ḥijāz of the Qurʾānic milieu was by no means a great center of literary output,

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25 The Qurʾān itself is aware that it is accused of merely re-presenting the familiar “tales of the ancients.” See previous citation to al-An’ām 6:25.

although there are some traces of literacy to be found. Yet Arabic writing from all quarters (almost exclusively brief stone carvings) hardly ever approached anything of substance. Neither does the widespread appearance of such inscriptions mean that a large number of people were able to make use of such writing themselves. “[E]ven if writing was used for commercial purposes, this does not necessarily mean that a large section of the population was able to read and write.” If someone did want to write something down, she would most likely have to turn to a specialist. Normally this would mean she hired a scribe or mason, implying literacy was not common even amongst those affluent enough to need it. Still, whether these thousands of Arabic writings used a defective script or not, anything written that passes beyond the matters of day-to-day life — that is, which approach anything like literature — is “extremely rare.” In short, Peter Stein argues, “[t]here are no indicators of the existence of a [written] literature of an epic, mythological, or historical kind in pre-Islamic Arabia.”

From this Salwa M. S. El-Awa can conclude that the orality of the Qur’ānic text and its conversation “caused, or played a part in causing, textual relations to be expressed in a certain way rather than other possible ways.” The Qur’ān is an oral expression. It would not arrange itself the way most literature would in a very literate climate like our own. Thus, we need to use structures of orality, symbolization, and memory that would be used by pre-literate or semi-literate people, as these are closer in proximity to the Qur’ān’s world than a more scribal approach.

The literature on orality and oral cultures consistently shows that the people in these contexts process their surroundings and use their senses in ways very much unlike us. This is not merely a distinction in education. Note Augustine’s famous meeting with Ambrose (d. 397). Augustine was

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27 Peter Stein, “Literacy in Pre-Islamic Arabia: An Analysis of Epigraphic Evidence,” in The Qur’an in Context, ed. Angelika Neuwirth et al., (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 255. Stein gives an educated guess based on studies of other cultural milieus that in Arabia in the pre-Islamic period less than ten percent of people would have been even somewhat literate in Syriac and fewer than one percent in Greek. These numbers, we can guess, would be even lower in a less urban setting like Mecca and its environs.

28 Ibid., 273.

29 Ibid., 266-268.

30 Salwa M. S. El-Awa, Textual Relations in the Qur’an (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.
fascinated with Ambrose’s apparently uncanny ability to read silently to himself without even moving his lips.\(^{31}\) We often consider the shift from orality to literacy a singular act in which the actor stays intact, like learning to use morse code or semaphore. But it is much more than these. A whole culture learning to read and write is not like teaching a dog a new trick; it is more like changing the dog’s breed so it can perform the trick instinctively. The slow shift from pure orality to high literacy is a change of brain, not only a change of mind. The divide between primarily oral and highly literate minds is large enough that one’s experiences of sight and sound, and even the ability to remember and think abstractly are effected.\(^{32}\) And the oral mind naturally produces a very different form of literature than the literate one. Walter J. Ong, whose book *Orality and Literacy* still defines its field, even rejects categories like literature and text. Instead, cultures of orality produce performances, which exist in given places and times rather than others. Orality is deeply reflected in such productions and Ong

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\(^{31}\) *Confessions* 6:3. This amazement strikes us as almost silly for being able to read without sounding out the words is an assumed part of the ability to read in a highly literate culture like ours. Often history has explained the story as a sign of Ambrose’s particular genius, but Augustine was hardly unintelligent or illiterate himself, yet he was still struck. This difference between the two readers is a gap in cultures: Ambrose’s urban Italian milieu had much less oral residue than Augustine’s provincial African one. Whether silent reading in the Western Mediterranean in Late Antiquity was common or not is the matter of some debate. However, it could not have been so common that Augustine was not surprised by it. cf. Albert Manguel, *A History of Reading* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996); Frank D. Gilliard, “More Silent Reading in Antiquity: Non Omne Verbum Sonabat,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993): 689-694.

\(^{32}\) How the brains of the first audience of the Qur’an would have worked exactly is not something that can be said. However, we can make comparisons to the common traits noted in other overwhelmingly oral cultures. The oral mind is much more episodic than the totalizing literate one. The oral mind rarely expresses thoughts abstractly and will often respond to very simple direct questions with deliberate tangents. Individuals from a culture with a high residual orality have a very hard time interpreting perspective in pictorial art or plot arcs in narratives as this demands ignoring individual elements in order to ‘see the big picture’. Also, oral peoples will respond to sound in ways that literates would consider absurdly overdramatic, such as yelling at an orator or a recording, or attempting to join in with songs whether one knows the tune or not. If one’s primary means of gathering new information is aural, then one’s reaction to this must be immediate as sound is ephemeral. On the other hand, visions (whether one’s surroundings or words on a page), smells, and feelings linger on from the past and continue into the future. They can be postponed in favor of more immediate concerns. Sound demands response and demands it now. See Ong, *Orality*, 31-35, 77-78; Eric A. Havelock, *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976); Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Boston, Harvard University Press, 1963), 134-144; Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1986); Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 26-46; Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Open University Press, 2003), 27-49; Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of Typographical Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 21-28.
gives us a useful list of some common trends.33

Central to all this is the need to remember the material itself. Oral traditions are defined by remembering the past, not just ‘putting it to paper’ once. The story only exists if it is told and retold in the living milieu. If a story is forgotten or just unsung by the people, then its contents slip into oblivion. There are a number of consequences of this. Words have no definitions outside of their current usage. History is only what one can say about it. Nothing can be looked up. Therefore, oral productions like the Qurʾān always contain within themselves the means to remember them: fixed repetitions, parallelisms, and pointed reminders. Literate peoples see such elements as either extraneous, or even the sign of poor composition, while to oral peoples they are the keys to the survival of the story and the meanings contained within it.

The remembrance of a long oral piece like the Qurʾān must also be understood in two ways,

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33 I have summarized a portion of Ong’s observations here; *Orality*, 36-56. They include:

- "Additive rather than subordinate": Unlike written language which switches terms and grammatical constructions to break monotony, oral performances create much longer strings of repeating combinations. For example, consider the “and... and... and...” so typical of the books of the Pentateuch, the Gospel of Mark, or classical Arabic generally.

- "Aggregative rather than analytic": Oral peoples prefer fixed expressions and formulas that create totalizing pictures, such as ‘the swift-footed Achilles’ or ‘the glorious October revolution.’ To the literate mind these come across as cliché, but to people who cannot look anything up references must come pre-loaded with maximal content. A simple Qurʾānic example is the Christology densely packaged in the phrase ‘Jesus, son of Mary’ and its variations.

- "Redundant or copious": As a spoken word is ephemeral by nature, important information must be constantly re-presented and reenforced by the speaker. Although we readers would see this as needlessly repetitive or boring, it is a natural outcome of a literature in which the listener cannot slow down, pause, or re-read what has already appeared, and there is no guarantee of a second performance like one would have from words frozen on paper. For instance, the constant reassurance that God reveals (nazala, nazzala, anzala, etc.) information to humanity.

- "Conservative or Traditionalist": It is only by retelling a story that it remains in existence. Furthermore, it is memory-efficient to work from existing material that the audience would know, rather than introducing totally new stories. Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time — at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously. But narrators also introduce new elements into old stories. In oral tradition, there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it [...]. Consider how the Qurʾān repeats certain significant stories like the fall of Iblīs with each account stressing different elements.

- "Agnistically toned": Oral cultures generally throw down dares, puzzles, and provocations for its listeners to keep them engaged. "Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat: utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a more apposite or a contradictory one." On a similar note excessively violent material with gory detail, as well as rich declarations of praise, are common. The audience is not only to be interested; they must react. We have seen already the ‘challenge verse’ of Yūnus 10:38. More examples would include the very colorful explanations of Paradise and frightening imagery of damnation.
which do not always overlap. First the performance needs to be *memorizable*. This is the concern of
the author of an oral text. She would need to see the piece's larger structure and patterns, and
therefore she would be able to create, recreate, or arrange the material as the situation dictated. For
instance, the author of an oral performance would have to design plot, sections, acts, and order on the
larger scales of the text, and segments, rhymes, repetitions, and reminders on the smaller scale. This
kind of remembering is distinct from the audience's more passive remembrance of the performance.
For them, the text must be *memorable*. They do not necessarily need to memorize the entirety of what
they have heard. They only need to be able to recall it in the more general sense. They may memorize
segments from the text's micro scale that repeat themselves, such as a theme, rhyme, or pattern. Also,
they may memorize the order of events on the macro scale. However, they would not need to
understand the relationship between the two scales of the text. If a certain memorable line comes up
ten times in a given presentation, the audience will probably only remember the line, not how many
times they heard it, where, or even why.

Consider for example our own oral performative art of popular music; music that is not
particularly made to be written, such as jazz, rock, or blues. The person who writes a song must not
only write the piece (the music and lyrics), she must create the piece's structure (say, first verse,
chorus, second verse, chorus, bridge, third verse, chorus). In order to reproduce the piece from
memory, the performer must be able to understand the relationships of the pieces to the whole, and
vice versa. This may be changed or improvised for any number of reasons, but the structure of the
whole must remain essentially intact. Meanwhile, the audience will usually only remember the
melody, the chorus, and perhaps the general ordering of the whole or the subject matter of the verses.
How this material all fits back together again would not be important. Even in the case of a second
performer covering the song, this person would not need to understand the relationships between all
the parts, only that they have a roughly fixed relationship. In short, whatever the reasons for the
creator/performer being able to memorize the song, they may not necessarily line up with why the song produced is memorable to the audience or the later student of the song.

How does the Qurʾān do all this? A short history of the modern study of orality which Ong paints may serve as a simile to our search for the Qurʾān's conversation. As Qurʾānic studies is a close relation to biblical criticism, the study of oral peoples grew out of critical scholarship of Homer. Although the Homeric epics — the Iliad and the Odyssey — have been considered the classics of the Western canon since time immemorial, in the modern period they came under attack. In the seventeenth century, scholars began to argue that they were poorly designed in character and structure; clearly just compilations of older odes and stories falsely attributed to a fictional or fictionalized bard named Homer. (There are times when Achilles is called ‘swift-footed’ while he is sitting down!)

A nineteenth century school called the Analysts engaged in lengthy studies of how the apparently independent elements of the epics had been layered together over long periods of time. A counter-movement appeared in the early twentieth century called the Unitarians, who instead suggested that the texts were not random anthologizations at all, but rather were so well-structured in form, character, and quality that it is easier to see how they are all under the firm control of a single poet-redactor than an accidental committee.

This argument came to a breakthrough when the young Homeric scholar Milman Parry (d. 1935) encountered the orality studies of the Jesuit Marcel Jousse (d. 1961). Jousse grew up the child of French peasants, and then spent his adulthood in the Arab Middle East. Most of Jousse's life was spent with people who still lived in primarily oral cultures and he applied this experience to biblical texts. Parry used Jousse's methods to re-approach the epics. “[T]he Homeric poems valued and somehow

35 Ong, Orality, 19-20.
made capital of what later readers had been trained in principle to disvalue, namely, the set phrase, the formula, the expected qualifier — to put it more bluntly, the cliché. Cedric Whitman (d. 1979) took Parry’s episodic observations and applied them to the whole of the *Iliad*. He discovered that patterns and repetitions permeated the text on both a micro- and macro-scale. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are “structured by the formulaic tendency to repeat at the end of an episode elements from the episode's beginning; the epic is built like a Chinese puzzle, boxes within boxes[.]”

So for instance, when we look to the *Odyssey*, it is composed of a number of symmetrical stories, each of which foresee or remind each other of their place in the larger epic. The epic opens with the departure of Odysseus from previously idyllic but now fallen Troy — the fall which he himself brought about directly. The epic ends with the arrival of Odysseus at the fallen Ithaca, which is restored to its proper glory by his return. The episode of the narcotic-using Lotus-Eaters mirrors the later episode of the narcotic-using Calypso. The encounters with monsters likewise seem to fall into set pairs, and so on:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Troy</th>
<th>Cicones, then a two-day long storm</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Lotus-Eaters</td>
<td>The Cyclops</td>
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<td>Aeolus</td>
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<td>The Laestrygonians</td>
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<td>Circe</td>
<td>Nekyia (Journey to the Underworld)</td>
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<td>Sirens</td>
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<td>Scylla, then Charybdis</td>
<td>Thrinacia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calypso</td>
<td>Charybdis, then Scylla</td>
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<tr>
<td>A two-day storm, then the Phaeacians</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ithaca</td>
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38 Ibid., 26.
The epics themselves, while apparently so disordered from the point of view of the literate world, are in truth strategically arranged for oral reproduction, with the ordering of the text serving as its own *aides-mémoire*. The shape of any performance of the text helps one remember the shape of the whole, and the shape of the whole helps one remember the shape of the parts.

How could you ever call back to mind what you had so laboriously worked out? The only answer is: think memorable thoughts. In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper,' and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax.  

Albert Lord (d. 1991) was the first to actively pursue such memory feats in living reciters. He famously studied the oral epic poets of Yugoslavia and recorded their productions. However, although these poets could indeed retell a long piece from memory multiple times, the units of memorization were quite malleable. That is, when a Yugoslav bard has memorized a long piece, it is not normally memorized verbatim. Instead, stock passages and phrases are fixed, while their ordering is not. And even when the bards claimed to be reciting verbatim, how can this be falsified within an oral landscape, anyway? More recently, Lord's conclusion has come under fire for not being applicable to all oral productions. Ong notices later studies of oral productions from Panama, Somalia, and Japan that prove verbatim recitations in oral cultures are possible, and they may be

40 Ibid., 34; Havelock, *Preface*, 87-96.
42 Ibid., 64.
retold, word-for-word, over many years. This has been verified by recordings and outside observers. Studies in Vedic productions make similar findings. Although these are less common and much more difficult than the Yugoslav style of flexible oral presentation, the verbatim recall of long texts does happen. We cannot make the leap to assume that the Qurʾān is such an example, but it is not impossible. Archeological evidence at least seems to indicate a general stability of the materials from an earlier date than many revisionists had imagined. Meanwhile, the overwhelming voice of the Islamic tradition which insists on at least the stasis of the consonant skeletons must be noted, even if with critical reservations. Interestingly, although Ong never discusses the orality of the Qurʾān, he points out that verbatim recitations over long periods of time are specifically found in instances when the text has a fixed musical or liturgical function. These word-for-word or nearly word-for-word productions take their form in ‘schools’ in which a master/teacher-poet (who may or may not be the author) can continuously correct many students over years, and thus later productions are well-known enough by enough people that variations can be cross-referenced and so minimized.

**Part 3: Ars Memoriae: Rings of Bricolage**

Around the same time as this scholarship on orality was beginning to coalesce, other anthropologists and biblical/literary scholars (quasi-independently of orality studies and each other) were beginning to piece together a related phenomenon. Mary Douglas (d. 2007) calls this ‘ring composition’; biblical scholars often invoke ‘chiastic’ or ‘concentric structure’; and Roland Meynet in particular uses

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47 Ong, *Orality*, 63.
‘Semitic rhetoric’\textsuperscript{59} Gathering the research of many independent scholars working on elements as diverse as the \textit{Iliad}, the book of \textit{Numbers}, Zoroastrian \textit{gāthās}, and Chinese bone and tortoise oracles (\textit{jiǎgǔ}), Douglas explains that various classic texts speak in a pattern which moves meaning towards the middle, and then echo that meaning outwards towards the beginning and end of the text in the forms of pairs or ‘rings’ of exempla. Like a stone cast into a still pond, the gravity of certain texts’ meaning is in their literal center, and the effects of this central theme ripple outwards as two-part sets: either parallelisms, antitheses, or both (paradoxes, riddles, or mysteries). Roland Meynet makes the case for such structures at work in early Islamic texts, and this method has found its champion in Qur’ānic studies with Michel Cuypers who applied it to many parts of the received text.\textsuperscript{52}

Modern literate peoples tend to approach all texts looking for familiar linear progressions of thought. In very general terms, if a certain work is an argument, then for the modern literate Westerner it ought to progress: thesis, antithesis, response, examples, conclusion. That is, we write and think according to the rules of classical rhetoric (or something unwittingly approximating those rules). The central argument is presented at or near the beginning of the text, and the rest of the material points back to this opening argument. Or, if a certain written work is a narrative, then the

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\textsuperscript{59} Roland Meynet, \textit{Rhétorique sémitique. Textes de la Bible et de la Tradition musulmane} (Beirut: Université Saint-Joseph, 1998). As the field developed in various independent academic disciplines, there is a problem of multiple terminologies. To keep matters as simple as possible, I will give priority to Mary Douglas’ vocabulary set, as it was developed for wider, comparative usage, and not for a specific text or family of texts. Furthermore, Meynet and Cuypers’ name ‘Semitic rhetoric’ is particularly confusing as this rhetoric is not found in all Semitic texts, and it is found in many more non-Semitic texts. Douglas’ term, ‘ring composition’ or ‘ring structure’, while less exact than ‘chiasmic structure’ and other terms coming from biblical criticism, is self-identifying to a degree without carrying the specific cultural references of terms like ‘Semitic’ or ‘chiasm’. Also, not all of the repetitive tools in these texts are chiasms, but they are all repetitive, and so, while problematic, suggesting that they form ‘rings’ seems more apt. I will offer my own suggestions for the future rebranding of this technology’s use in the final chapter.

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reader expects: exposition, a long rising action, a climax, a brief falling action, dénouement.\textsuperscript{53} The tension in the piece's plot is resolved towards the end, in the climax or response, which quickly leads to the end of the material. Repetition, a-chronology, and cliché are typically frowned upon. In both the cases of written argument and written narrative, the bulk of the text's meaning moves in a single direction between the beginning and the end. Also, in written literature there is almost unanimously much more text on one side of the crescendo than the other.

Oral performances such as ring structures, on the other hand, are quite different. This causes the unintended side-effect that if one reads an oral ring composition unawares, looking for the familiar forms of literate linear progression, then the reader will only see repetitive, unrelated pericopes and asides without a defined order of events. The text thus appears redundant, episodic, cliché, and maybe outright random — all claims often made about the Qurʾān.\textsuperscript{54} It would not be unusual then to conclude like the Homeric Analysts once did that the text must be a compilation of unrelated fragments, despite ancient claims to the text's beauty and stable form. And like the Homeric Unitarians, the structural students of the Qurʾān are suggesting a fully organized text which simply defies our expectations of order, shape, and style.

According to this theory of Qurʾānic unity (or near unity), there are certain general forms and tendencies that ring compositions follow with high regularity. The patterns of ring compositions are summarized with an oft-revised system of seven governing rules outlined by Nils Lund (d. 1954), referred to as ‘Lund's laws'. They are:

1. \textit{The center is always the turning point […] and it may] consist of one, two, three, or even four lines.}
2. \textit{At the center there is often a change in the trend of thought, and an antithetic idea is introduced.}

After this the original trend is resumed and continued until the system is concluded. For want

\textsuperscript{53} This is the famous example of Gustave Freytag's \textit{Die Technik des Dramas}, 1863. Unsurprisingly, this pattern can be expressed in numerous other guises, with infinite sub-variations. However, in the study of fiction Freytag's system is now near ubiquitous, and has long since replaced the older conventions of Aristotle's \textit{Poetics} and Horace's \textit{Ars Poetica}.

of a better name, we shall designate this feature the law of the shift at the center."
3. "Identical ideas are often distributed in such a fashion that they occur in the extremes and at the center of their respective system, and nowhere else in the system."
4. "There are also many instances of ideas, occurring at the center of one system and recurring in the extremes of a corresponding system, the second system evidently having been constructed to match the first. We shall call this the law of shift from the center to the extremes."
5. "There is a definite tendency of certain terms to gravitate toward certain positions within a given system."
6. "Larger units are introduced and concluded by frame-passages."
7. "There is frequently a mixture of chiastic and alternating lines within one and the same unit."

Thematic priority is given to the center of the text and its connections to the outer edges, instead of either near the end or the beginning alone. The rest of the ring structure beyond the dead center is composed of dual sets of examples or conclusions, which recall or predict the central element and are illuminated by it. In other words, the ‘climax’ or ‘pivot’ is found in the middle of the work, buttressed by the opening and closing of the system, and the rest of the text is composed of examples that are informed or reformed by this central axis. Thus the vast majority of any text is always made up of orbital pairs. Every significant theme or thought appears at least twice. Each piece of data either foreshadows or harks back. This is marked by oral memorization aids such as repeated key words, rhymes, common themes, or grammar. The whole text “turns back on itself in order to assist the memory to reach the end by having it anticipated somehow in the beginning.” All sets of data are symmetrical within themselves and each other and “the only patterns of symmetry that are available are mirror symmetry (leading to chiastic patterns, such as ABC - CBA or ABCBA) and translation symmetry (leading to alternation, such as ABC - ABC).” I will refer to these as concentric parallelisms and linear parallelisms respectively.

55 Lund, Chiasmus, 40-41.
56 Returning to an analogy mentioned already, perhaps the closest tool we have to oral composition in our culture is popular musical composition, which would make this comparable to variations on a theme that can be strictly composed or improvised during the performance.
Suppose a generic oral poem whose rhyme scheme is ABCDC’EB’A’. If this text is a ring composition, the most significant line will be D. Whatever theme or argument is made in D will define the rest of the system, but will only be spelled out directly there and in weaker forms in the extreme ring which contains lines A and A’. Lines A, D, and A’ will likely have other relationships as well, such as similar phrases, grammar, or related terms. However, there will probably be something distinct about line D which expresses the overall point of the whole system with particular force: a paradox, riddle, call out to the audience, or the turn in a debate. Lines B and B’ compose the second ring, and these two will have common elements, grammar, imagery, and so forth. Likewise, C and C’ will make a third ring with its own particular trends. However, the central argument of the first ring (A and A’) and the center (D) will not be restated in the second and third rings explicitly, or may be stated only briefly. This is because the oral mind does not create outright abstractions but rather aligns episodes.

This kind of investigation based on the strength of the center can also be applied to the text on many scales. Non-literary presentations within orally rich cultures think foremost in terms of pattern, order, and memory. Length is not a concern. So we can look for these echoing-tendencies in entire texts, or in sub-sections like pericopes or even single phrases. We have seen this already when Ong suggested that the *Iliad* seems to be “built like a Chinese puzzle, boxes within boxes.” Mary Douglas calls this ‘rings within rings.’ A Qur’ānic example of how this multi-tiered ringing operates will be given in the next chapter’s examination of *Sūrat al-Kahf*, and it has also been treated in many other *sūras* in Cuypers’ collective works.

The ring structure of an applicable passage or text is indicated by repetitions. A certain term, phrase, element (or in the case of Semitic languages, a root) will appear two or more times. Often these little repetitive markers will be employed in unusual ways that make them stand out from the rest of the system. In other instances, the repetitive markers of the ring constructs will be manipulated in various ways — such as through reformulation, conjugation, or declension — so that a line or
whole system both repeats itself and shows a fixed ordering. In short, a ring is exposed when there are one or more redundant elements that are either unusual, seemingly functionless, or repeat many times.

Also, when a single text is composed of several concurrent ring structures, there is often a marker to show where one ring ends and another begins. Mary Douglas calls this the ‘latch’ of the system. The latch shows the conclusion of a system in one of two ways. It may create a small sub-set of parallels independent of the larger system that appear in quick succession (\(ABCDC'B'\)AEE’) or the latch can break the system by itself being a part of the larger structure, but abruptly changing the topic or introducing an aside.

For an example of how these ring structures work, let us look at some straightforward ring structures in the New Testament gospel attributed to Mark both on the scale of a pericope and as a whole text. First let us look at the story of Jairus’ daughter, which is interrupted in the middle by the healing of a woman with a hemorrhage.

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<tr>
<th>The Woman with a Hemorrhage/Jairus’ Daughter (Mark 5:21-43)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ring 1A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ring 2A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pivot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ring 2B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ring 2A</td>
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The dying-death-rising of the girl follows the same pattern as Jesus entering-searching-leaving the crowd. In the second ring of the pericope, the healed woman is juxtaposed to the girl, as they are both identified as a “daughter” (34, 35). Also the fear of the woman (33) predicts Jesus’ command to the

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60 *Mark* 5:21-43.
servants to not be afraid (36). At either extreme of the system is the key marker of “twelve years,” which is not itself odd, but in substance adds nothing to the story. Indeed, when the age of the girl is given it seems loudly out of joint: “Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around. She was twelve years old. At this they were completely astonished” (42). However, as a key to the larger structure the detail of “twelve years” points out the circularity of the pericope's whole system and hooks the first scene ahead to the last and vice versa. This system also ends with a latch: the concluding detail of Jesus telling “them to give her something to eat” (43). This fits into the larger plot, but because it contains a unique element that does not warrant elaboration — the paleo-Christian sacrament of eating — it shows us that the system has now closed.

On the largest scale, ring structures can bind together entire texts, even if they are of great length. Again we can look to Mark.

| John points to the coming of Jesus (1:4-8) |
| Jesus is baptized, the heavens split, “You are my son” (1:9-11) |
| Jesus is tested in the wilderness (1:12-23) |
| The parable of the sower (4:1-9) |
| The raising of Jairus' daughter (5:21-43) |
| The death of John (6:14-29) |
| Peter's declaration “you are the Messiah” (8:27-30) |
| “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected...” (8:31-33) |
| The Transfiguration (9:2-10) |
| The young rich man (10:17-22) |
| The raising of the young man (in Secret Mark, after 10:34) |
| The parable of the vineyard (12:1-11) |
| Jesus is tested in the Temple (12:13-27) |
| Jesus dies, the Temple curtain split, “Truly this was the Son of God” (15:33-39) |
| The angelic man points to Jesus' return (16:1-8) |

As this is a very complex structure with many rings and sub-rings, only some of the pattern is
represented in the interest of pithiness. The central passage is the self-identification of Jesus as the Son of Man who “must suffer many things” (8:31). This passage is framed with the dual recognition of his messianic/divine identity by Peter (8:27-30) and during the Transfiguration (9:2-10). Together this central ring and its pivot exposes a paradoxical situation: Jesus is the object of both glorification and humiliation. This double-theme divides the whole gospel in two, with the first half of the text focusing more on Jesus’ signs and good news, and the second more on his despair and shameful death. Other pairings appear throughout. Jesus’ coming is predicted by the prophecy of the Baptist at the opening of the gospel (1:8), and his Resurrection is validated by the angelic young man at the empty tomb at the gospel’s original conclusion (16:1-8). The echoing carries on throughout the text, with each major event, sign, or declaration finding its equal in a ring on the opposite side of the middle passage.

To apply what we have seen in Mark to the Qurʾān, I will provide two short examples. The first is the famous opening of Sūrat al-ʿAlaq (“The Blood Clot,” 96:1-5).

1. Recite by the name of your Lord who created,
2. Created the human from blood-coagulated.
3. Recite, for your Lord is the Most Bounteous,
4. Who taught by the stylus,
5. Taught the human of what he wasn’t conscious.

The system is composed of a single short ring moving around a central passage: “Recite, for your Lord is the Most Bounteous.” The first word of the line calls back to the first word of the sequence: “Recite”

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In order to make this particular rendering of Mark work, Krantz must include reference to Secret Mark. Although the text of Secret Mark does not survive to us, a letter of Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) mentions the story of the Resurrection of a young man after the verse we label as Mark 10:34. cf. John Dominic Crossan, Four Other Gospels (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, 1985), 91-124; Marvin Meyer, Secret Gospels: Essays on Thomas and the Secret Gospel of Mark (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2003), 109-134.
or “read aloud” (iqra’). The first half of the ring and the center share this term, which does not appear in the second half of the ring. However, the second half of the ring does share the rhyming end with the center (-am), which does not appear in the first half of the ring. Therefore, the center connects the two halves of the ring by combining elements which they do not share with each other. However, the arrangement of the terms in either side of the ring show a mirroring effect which suggests a parallelism of theme as well. “In” or “by the name of your Lord” (bi-ismi rabbika) and “by the stylus” or “pen” (bi-al-qalam) are both paired with a sound or root that will be manipulated: “created, created… coagulated” (khalq, khalaqa, 'alaq) and “taught… taught… know” or “conscious of” (‘allama, ‘allama, ya’lam). The first half of the ring discusses God’s role as the Creator, while the second half is God as the revealer of knowledge. The ring structure as a whole then focuses in on God as the most generous or bounteous (al-ikram), which is demonstrated by the distinct but comparable actions of God making and instructing the human race. God is abundant and this is proven by both our original creation and our education through divine messages.

The second example is Sūrat al-Mā‘ūn (“charities” or “small acts of kindness,” 107) which has a rhyme scheme throughout which is based on -īm/-īn, and -ūn endings. The form is simple (AAAABBB), but the ring structure is slightly more elusive. Again there is a central pivot line where the rhyme changes, but this time there are two rings in the system.

1. Have you seen the one who denies the Recompense?
2. That is the one who shoves away the parentless,
3. And does not urge to feed the penniless.
4. So woe to the supplicants
5. Who [in] supplications are unwary,
6. Who are showy,
The turning point is the center as always: “So woe to the supplicants;” (or better but without the rhyme, “the worshippers” or “those that pray”). They do not give small acts of charity (māʿūn) and they do not believe that they will someday get what is coming to them (dīn), as is indicated by the first ring. That is, the general problem with these people is that they deny what they owe to others and what God will owe to them. The second ring is made of two sets of parallels which document the specific acts of these worshippers: they don't tend to the orphans or the poor, and their prayers are done without care or just to impress others. The ones who pray but deny their own ultimate debt and don't give small acts of kindness to others don't help the orphan and they have no urge to feed the poor, and neither are their prayers performed dutifully and for the right reasons. Here though, the central verse is worded in a provocative manner; like a gestalt or a double entendre. In isolation the verse seems to mean the exact opposite as the rest of the system: there is something unfortunate about those who say their prayers. The people who pray are to be pitied.

Part 4: “Possible Objections”

Before beginning this morphological and structural comparison to get at how the Qurʾān's conversation considers the intermediate state, there are some questions that need to be addressed about these proposed methods. Is ring structural analysis of the Qurʾān Orientalism, and thereby oppressively reductive? What are the motives behind these methodologies? Why are there no records from antiquity which explain how to create or understand ring structures if they are so common?

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62 As described by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, dīn appears over ninety times in the Qurʾān and in three different regards. In the parts of the text that are traditionally considered from the earliest Meccan period (as this sūra often is), dīn is that which is owed by a certain party, such as a debt or retribution. The typical construction is in “the day of dīn” (yawm al-dīn); that is the day when people give what is owed, and/or receive what is coming to them: Judgment Day. Appearing slightly later in the Qurʾān's standard internal chronology, a second Qurʾānic meaning of dīn is one's own actions regarding this divine debt. This is individual; my dīn as opposed to your dīn, either of which can be ethically better or worse, true or false. A clunky English translation like 'cultic observance' would be a good start. Finally, the term seems to be equated with the specific cultic system of the Qurʾānic community. See also, “Dīn” in FVQ; Patrice C. Brodeur, “Religion,” EQ4; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, What is Scripture (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
I would first like to address charges of Orientalism, as this threat lingers over modern critical scholarship of the Qurʾān in its entirety. Is the move away from traditional Islamic modes of Qurʾānic scholarship to Western critical methods a textbook case of Orientalism? In 1978, Edward Said’s (d. 2003) groundbreaking Orientalism argued that the West has historically regarded the East through myriad forms of cultural hegemony. The peoples of the East are at once objectified and generalized into a monolith, and thus they are dominated. Because people consent to its power structures, Orientalism can continuously adapt to history. It changes over time and beginning with Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798, it took on increasingly academic methods. After all, as Said is right to point out, we cannot artificially separate the arrival of Napoleon's legion of academics from that of his conquering army. They came on the same boats.63 Although a great deal of the Orientalists' scholarship has no deliberate political agenda, the undergirding assumption of their work is the presumption that the writer knows the subject better than the subject knows herself, as the scholar speaks from what the Enlightenment would call an 'objective' vantage point. In this ideal sterile world of scholarship, we are told that there is a clean distinction between pure knowledge and political knowledge.

But Said claims that this cannot be delivered. "No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life."64 Even if that is one's goal — to seek pure, nonpolitical knowledge for its own sake — that is not to say that one's methods will produce such a nonpolitical result.

For a European or an American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer.65

64 Ibid., 10.
65 Ibid., 11.
That I am an American non-Muslim male of European descent (in Washington, D.C. no less) must be underscored. It is the canvas behind my work, even if I paint over it with Islamic subjects.

The threat of Orientalism only grows more apparent when we consider the value of the object of investigation: a people’s scripture. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith (d. 2000) points out, by positing a discussion about the Qurʾān within occidental English frameworks, we likewise move the Qurʾān into the category of scripture.\(^{66}\) The Qurʾān must be defined as more than a mere text or a performance. It is not just a museum piece. It lives with people and must be treated accordingly.

‘Scripture’ is a bilateral term. By that we mean that it inherently implies, in fact names, a relationship. It denotes something in a particular relation to something else [...] at issue is the relation between a people and the universe, in the light of their perception of a given text.\(^{67}\) To speak of the Qurʾān is to speak of those who consider it precious. This is a simple observation that very many critical investigations of the Qurʾān completely overlook. Attempts to work with the Qurʾān in the Western methods of critical investigation are therefore always potentially claiming cultural hegemony over Muslims themselves. What can we do to construct a way of addressing the Qurʾān as critical scholars without resorting to Orientalism? We need to bring the Qurʾānic discourse into contact with ours without violently subjugating it.

This is Cuypers’ error on occasion, although often hidden in footnotes. As mentioned above, he applied ring structural analysis to the Qurʾān at length. Although his results are often impressive, on several occasions Cuypers notices that the Qurʾān disobeys the rules of his structural analysis. From time to time the text breaks from the ring structure for a line or two. When this happens,

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\(^{66}\) Scripture must be a nominal category. It is merely a conventional marker of the English language that needs to be exposed as both present and insufficient. “The basic issue [...] is that inherited conceptual categories of no one tradition, religious or secular, no one civilization, are adequate for comprehending, for doing justice to, the new awareness that today is available to us. For this purpose we must either construct new categories or carefully modify old ones [...] it seems then, perhaps defensible that this presents itself as a book about ‘scripture.’ Yet it must be recognized that calling it that could be part of the very problem that it ostensibly is trying to solve. There is no ontology of scripture [...] just as at a lower level, there is no ontology of art, nor of language, nor of other things that we human beings do, and are.” Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 236–7.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 18.
Cuypers concludes that the passage in question must have been corrupted from some original form.\(^6\) Although there is room within the traditional Islamic sciences of the Qur’ān to speak of alterations in the text (alternative recitations or abrogations of some sort), Cuypers does not appear to have these in mind. Cuypers thus exposes two serious problems with his own approach. First, on purely empirical grounds, he is making questionable assumptions. Does a minor textual variation in rhetoric imply the hand of a later editor? Possibly, but not necessarily. Second, doesn’t this suggest that Cuypers is standing at some position of privilege over the text as it exists before him? His analysis is stronger than his source material. His theory is more authoritative than his evidence. This problem is only amplified as this particular text is someone else’s scripture. Most Muslims today would argue that as the eternal word of God, the Qur’ān could not have been changed in any significant way. God protects the text somehow.\(^7\)

If the Qur’ān seems to stop using ring structure for a few lines, or the information provided by the ring structural analysis is not informative, then results are nil. No text is the same as its rhetoric, and so when the text does not fit into the rhetorical analysis, or that analysis does not provide meaningful results, it is the critical scholar who must give way and say no conclusion can be drawn from the instance in question. For example, if ring composition is primarily an oral method whose prime concern is the memorization of the reciter and the remembrance of the audience, then it stands to reason that if a certain passage is easily memorized or more familiar in some other way (which is not clear to us now), why risk corrupting that memory by changing its form? Also, minor variations in a pattern may serve to strengthen the memory itself by adding pause, elegance, brevity, or memorability. If we consider the Shakespearean chiastic structure, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in

\(^6\) E.g. Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 229-239. If there was some external evidence of these hypothetical edits (such as in the reference to *Secret Mark* in the above ring structure, which is mentioned in an independent ancient source) the argument would be of a different order altogether. However, rather than addressing a standing question of the Qur’ān as received, Cuypers is giving his methods authority over the available evidence.

\(^7\) Cf. al-Ḥijr 159
our stars, but in ourselves; that we are underlings," the placement of “dear Brutus,” does not constitute a failure of form or a revision in the text. It provides for stylistic pause and also evens out the meter of the lines. What the role of certain departures from strict ring structure in the Qurʾān may mean are not clear in most cases, and in the absence of other evidence, we must leave it at that. The text before us always takes precedence over the theory within us. The critical approach of ring compositional analysis should come with its own short circuit. If this methodology colonizes the Qurʾān, then it is no longer critical scholarship; if it remains critical scholarship, then it cannot claim objective authority over the scripture. The text, as far as we can say, is fixed; it is we who must move.

More to the point, a systematic, critical analysis of a scripture does not have to be colonizing by definition. Salwa M. S. El-Awa puts it best.

The subject is a text that is communicated to humans, and hence it is only reasonable to apply principles of human communication in explaining it. The objection that Western methodology is after all, a non-Muslim methodology... is completely invalid. The Qurʾān was revealed among non-Muslims, and never claimed it was ‘only for Muslims.’ A non-Muslim theory explaining the Qurʾān is no different from a Muslim one, as long as they both analyze utterance in the way early Muslim commentators did when they applied rhetoric and grammar and even used ‘non-Muslim’ poetry in explaining Qurʾānic words.

Scholarship of the Qurʾān has always been moving into new venues, many of which are not native to Islam itself. The text appeared in a non-Muslim setting, and it has consistently moved forward through the ages by being investigated by people who do not consider themselves Muslims (even if many times their research into the Qurʾān has a hand in converting them). Furthermore, as Gabriel Said Reynolds notes, Cuypers’ book specifically (with its claims of Qurʾānic editing included) won the “World Prize for Book of the Year for 2009” by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance of the Republic of Iran. “This award helps to undermine the fallacy that believing Muslims will neither welcome nor tolerate serious critical research on the Qurʾān.”

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70 Julius Caesar 1:2.

71 Salwa M. S. El-Awa, Textual Relations in the Qurʾān (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7-8.

A second, much more serious concern is raised by Andrew Rippin. In a recent review of Carl Ernst's *How to Read the Qurʾān*, Rippin casts doubts on all structural examinations of the Qurʾān. “[T]here is nothing natural, inherent or scientific about this extraction of structure. The ability to see structural features depends solely on the reader's willingness to project them onto the text.” He names the work of Neuwirth and Cuypers specifically. Rippin goes on to say that the interest in apparent structures within the Qurʾān is a backlash against the older generation of scholarship which sought to shatter the received text into Urtexts and prophetic logia. Put simply, Rippin is asking us what are the academic shifts and politics underneath structural Qurʾānic studies.

Within Qurʾānic studies there has been little overarching consensus across the field of a positive theory about the whole Qurʾānic text and its early history. There have certainly been convincing inroads in Qurʾānic studies, it is just that they have thus far been in regard to specific sub-disciplinary questions: the meanings of important or unusual passages, words, and roots; the correlation of certain sections of the Qurʾānic material with pre-Islamic texts and languages; the certainty that the received text was essentially fixed before the turn of the seventh century; and many more besides. Doors have been unlocked by critical research: but there is no skeleton key that a high majority of scholars today accept. The closest we might come to such a grand theory so far is only an increasingly nuanced question: all critical investigations of the Qurʾān which have appeared in the last forty years accept that the traditional accounts of Islamic origins are somehow doubtable. How much, and in what way, is still quite open. Wansbrough's questions still have no set answers. Within this doubt the only clear trend is that the setting for the Qurʾān's appearance is much closer to a biblical milieu than the classical Muslims normally granted. But there has been nothing that is both affirmative and comprehensive that could be called a convention of Qurʾānic scholarship today. The absence of an all-but-official standard introduction to the field like a textbook is telling. As yet,

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Qur’anic studies has not produced anything of such common endorsement as its sister discipline’s ‘Two Source’ hypothesis with a Markan priority, for instance, which is recognized as highly likely by the overwhelming majority of critical New Testament scholars across the sub-fields. Critical studies of the New Testament long wrestled with the Synoptic Problem before the hypothesis gained credence in the 1920s. There is maybe something comparable for the study of the Qur’an, but for now such a unifying theory of the discipline has not presented itself and been generally acknowledged as such a theory.

Structural investigation of the Qur’an assumes that the lack of an adequate response to Wansbrough’s question is likely due to begging. That is to say, the “scientific” or “inherent” studies of the Qur’an have usually proposed theories from an evolutionary methodology. They are looking for ‘sources.’ But the evolutionary approach alone cannot be enough. The origins of the Qur’an do not tell us why it is original, anymore than Pyramus and Thisbe explains the worth of *Romeo and Juliet,* (or Homer explains Virgil explains Dante explains Milton explains Blake). These are valuable comparisons, but they will never shift from comparisons to identifications. Similarities between sources — even directly related sources — does not lead us to the conclusion of identical meaning and function. Structuralism (and post-structuralism) assumes this barrier. Therefore, rather than waiting for a critically-affirmed revisionary theory of the Qur’an’s emergence (that may never come), we can advance in other ways by assuming the Qur’an’s appearance as is.

In a strange historical irony, the Islamic tradition at once posits the fixedness of the Qur’an, and yet also volunteers some variant forms and readings. While this first statement can be dismissed by a critical scholar for being a theological claim, the second statement for a moment catches the eye. However, the differences within the received text of the Qur’an, the existence of which the Islamic tradition explains freely, are so minor that they are often irrelevant. And so we are brought back to the

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first conclusion: the Qurʾān as it appears before us today has been for the most part stable as far back as we can currently tell. There is no known Qurʾān that is radically different to ours, nor even an ancient reference to one. As Ong and others say, there are indeed oral compositions of musical quality and liturgical import that are recalled verbatim over many years, and that oral productions more generally strike literate peoples as pell-mell. It is not yet impossible to suppose that the Qurʾān came from a single bricoleur during a relatively short period of time in a primarily oral culture, and once it moved into a space which demanded written texts they were created with only insignificant differences between them.

Does this therefore mean that the structural methods themselves are scientific, natural, or objective? Yes and no. Like the evolutionary methods, structural investigations of all kinds are always in danger of reductionism, and both forms of study have at times fallen into this trap. However, this does not need to be the case. We must firmly establish what a structural analysis of the Qurʾān is, can be, and cannot be. In short though, structural analysis (ring or otherwise) is a modern method of translation and not a component of the text itself. The recurring fallacy found in ring compositional analysis of the Qurʾān is always the confusion of the theory with the evidence. Like in all religious and literary comparisons, we cannot reach the minds and culture of the Qurʾān’s conversation. We can only suspend them in spheres in which we find meaning, though they are only constructs. We must move the Qurʾānic bricolage, whatever that may be, into a bricolage of our own.

Therefore, the absence of any traditional reference to ring structures, which seems particularly troublesome, is not. It is an anachronism upon an anachronism. It is no different then speaking about ‘pagans’ or ancient ‘culture; ‘religion; ‘art; or ‘science. Oral peoples have technique (technē, fann; “craft”), not technology (a logic or explanation of technē). Ring composition (or whatever else we may call it) is just a short-hand. It does not exist before the modern period. It is a nominalism based upon a tendency, not a school of thought or a rhetoric. There is no reason to suppose that someone who
composed a ring composition in a primarily oral society could have explained why they were choosing this pattern over others. So much of our own terminology about language and its workings are specific to highly literate cultures. To a highly oral people, all constructions are only examples, even if they expose key themes. Orality-orientated people do not create grammars, rhetorics, or dictionaries. All texts exist only in performance, even if they can be repeated verbatim. All words are nonce words, even if they are used daily. Language exists only in the present. Meaning cannot be syphoned away from context and structure or refined into a clean concept or a pure thought. Again to use the analogy to our own oral performances of popular music, the creation of the performance does not mean the musician understands the principles that guide it. Thus the popular musician (read, oral bard) can alter or edit the pattern without breaking any rules; it just sounds or ‘works’ better one way rather than another. The sonnet or haiku writer, on the other hand, is constrained by rhetoric, cannot deviate, and knows exactly why.

We can catch this mentality when purely oral peoples’ descendants slowly grow literate, but still have high residual orality: the thought of fixed meanings in some past time seems almost pathetically ignorant of the present. The famous example is the shift from the Homeric oral milieu to the classic Hellenic written one. Socrates (d. 399 B.C.E.) belonged to the older culture and so wrote nothing. Two generations later Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.E.) or more precisely, his followers, wrote objective treatises. In the middle is Plato (d. circa 348 B.C.E.), whose writings are almost always in the form of dialogue. They mimic speech. They are far closer to performances than philosophy books. Famously his *Phaedrus* ponders the inhumanity of writing; its frozenness; its stupidity. It can only parrot the past to no one in particular — its does not speak.\(^75\) Writing “is not a recipe for memory, but for reminder.”\(^76\)

Or, we can look at the movement of the nascent Christian communities towards literacy. Jesus

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\(^76\) Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275a.
wrote nothing. Two generations later John (c. 90) explains Jesus’ own identity directly, and most especially as an eternal, “word made flesh.” Between the two is the ring-composing Mark (c. 70), whose Jesus speaks in oral examples: the parables of good news. And when Mark does mention writing, it is always in reference to the (apparently dying) Jewish past: ‘it is written that…’; ‘Moses wrote; “The written notice […] read, ‘King of the Jews.” Likewise, when an Arab poet like Labīd (d. c. 660) mentions writing as his own culture grew more literate, writing is paired with imagery of the abandoned campsite: “The tent marks in Mīnan are torn away, where she encamped […] and the torrent beds of Rayyān, naked tracing, worn thin, like inscriptions carved in flattened stones.” Writing does not explain, it reminds.

Ong says that the complete absence of explanatory texts on oral production is therefore to be expected. What form would an oral culture’s rhetoric take anyway?

Oral cultures […] can have no ‘arts’ of this scientifically organized sort. No one could or can simply recite extempore a treatise such as Aristotle’s Art of Rhetoric, as someone in an oral culture would have to do if this sort of understanding were to be implemented. Lengthy oral productions follow more agglomerative, less analytic, patterns. The ‘art’ of rhetoric, though concerned with oral speech, was, like other ‘arts,’ the product of writing.

An oral compositional technique like ring structure would not need a formal rhetoric as the performance itself is the rhetoric. The argument against ring structure because of its absence in the historic record is cyclical and falls in upon itself. A culture without a strong sense of a written record would have no use for such an invention, as any ‘text’ that would present these methods would itself have to employ them. There are books about how to compose music and draw figures, but what would be the point of writing an opera on how to create operas, or drawing one’s own how-to-draw pictograms? We may offer scientific rejections or affirmations to a structural analyst’s arguments or findings — Why does a section break here and not there? Why does this intratextual relationship matter

78 Ong, Orality, 107.
more than this other one? — but to condemn it as unscientific or unnatural is not a productive criticism.

Children raised in the Northern Hemisphere learn to find the North Star with the Big Dipper. That the constellations in truth take infinite forms in three-dimensional space and Polaris is not north of anything doesn’t mean it isn’t a useful method. It would be worth noting a brief caveat posited by J. Z. Smith, as well as Foucault, against comparative arguments of all sorts: morphological and evolutionary included. Both authors agree that comparison is not sameness: it is ‘magic.’ To wit, structural analyses, like evolutionary analyses and classical morphologies, fail when they confuse their findings with the structures that supposedly undergird them. Ring composition is a tool to arrive at a goal, and it does not have to be the end in itself. In fact, it ought not be. Ring structures may be the effects of innate and determined human structures, but they are not themselves such structures. As I have argued, ring composition is a nomen. Whatever metaphysical claims might be buried in Lévi-Strauss’ or Douglas’ anthropologies, or Meynet’s and Cuypers’ Semitic rhetoric, what they provide is never more than fingers that point to the moon. If the proposed technology does not seem present at a certain point in the text, that means nothing at all. Results are inconclusive but that does not shatter the original theory because the theory must follow from the evidence.

The Buddhist parable of the raft seems apt. In the story a would-be renouncer has his journey blocked by dangerous rapids. To cross, the man builds a raft from what he has at hand. After crossing though, he discards the raft rather than drag it along behind him. Using a tool or a technology that gets us across a wild river only becomes a fetter if we do not admit that it is a construct. Rhetoric is not text; or as Smith says, map is not territory, but neither does it need to be.

Ring structural analysis of the Qur’ān is a way of translating, and therefore like any translation it does not need to make claims over other forms of translation. A translation is not nothing, but it is

80 *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:22
not the thing being translated. As Clifford Geertz says, “Normally, it is not necessary to point out quite so laboriously that the object of study is one thing and the study of it is another. It is clear enough that the physical world is not physics and A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake not Finnegans Wake.”\textsuperscript{81} Even J. G. Frazier himself, the most famous student of religious comparisons, must admit (in victory? in defeat? in a joke?) that in the end, his subject matter is only an instrument. The obscure Italian priest of Nemi, the question at the heart of the thousands of pages of the multivolume \textit{Golden Bough} is only a toy that has no life in itself. He is a means to an end. "He too, for all the quaint garb he wears, is merely a puppet, and it is time to unmask him before laying him up in the box."\textsuperscript{82} Ring structural analysis of the Qur\'an if used within its proper limits is only a tool to find more possible meanings; it is not meaningful itself. False claims of objectivity, and thus culturally hegemonic leverage, vanish for this method when it is properly exposed as a potentially profitable form of translation.

In the following two chapters, I will continue to use this method on the text of the Qur\'an itself, although now with more specific goals. First, I will conduct a detailed examination of \textit{Sūrat al-Kahf} in search of the Qur\’anic intermediate state. What does reading this \textit{sūra} through a ring structure reveal to us that might go unnoticed by another reading? Then, I will apply my findings from \textit{al-Kahf} to other significant parts of the received text to see if my conclusions hold in other fragments of the Qur\’an’s conversation as well. If my observations stand, then the structural, morphological, and evolutionary methodologies I have employed will lead us into the later period of the Islamic historical record and its fleshing out of the \textit{barzakh} without leaving any gaps in the middle. This advancement into the Islamic milieu will be discussed in the final chapters.

\textsuperscript{81} Clifford Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures} (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 15.

Chapter III: An Excavation of the Cave

"How you have fallen from Heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the Mount of Assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit."

- Isaiah 14:12-15

In order to see the Qur’an’s conception of the intermediate state, we have to define how we will approach the Qur’an. As we have seen in our introduction both the pre-and post-Qur’ānic sources on either side of the Qur’an’s appearance equate death with sleep, such as in the Syriac Christian doctrine of soul-sleep and the Islamic depictions of the barzakh. It stands to reason therefore, if we are looking for the Qur’ānic interim period, it would be wise to start with the Qur’ān’s longest discussion of sleep. This discussion takes its form in the account of the People (ahl) or Companions of the Cave (aṣḥāb al-kahf), found in Sūrat al-Kahf. This is a better place to start than the three fleeting uses of the term barzakh. Not coincidentally, this particular sūra also contains many of the same themes we have noted from the pre-Islamic period involving sleep, death, afterlives, and underworlds, such as quests, barriers, doorways, guardians, guides, tests, and the pathways of the sun and the waters.

When we engage this sūra using the method of ring structural analysis, all of these themes reappear as a single coherent discussion. God has made some created beings special in the grand order of the universe which moves from creation to judgment. These are the prophets and various other saints. They serve as the signs of God on earth, most especially because they are the bringers of revealed words and reliable knowledge. More generally, the created world is packed with signs of all sorts — the movements of nature, the ancient stories, the wonders of bodily delights. Yet all these signs, both the prophetic and the material, ought not to be valued in themselves. They are references, not referents. God alone is the true and the eternal and everything else passes away in time. And that which is no longer in the living world is as shut away from us as we are from them. In the case of other human beings, even especially important ones like prophets, there is no reason to worship them or ask
for their independent intercession. They are dead and the dead are dormant. Although this sleep does not change their significance, the dead's lack of awareness nullifies any need for a cult of their own. To worship the dead is therefore not distinct from a kind of materialism. There is no creation which should be bowed down to, not even a prophet. Although this common Qur’ānic view is hardly unique to al-Kahf, from the point of view of the translation of ring composition it becomes clear that this sūra in particular is entirely undergirded by this message, offered in many guises and variations.

Some notes on how this interpretation of al-Kahf will work: the major concern of this chapter is to show how a ring structural reading of al-Kahf works on a macro-level; how the tendency towards ringing affects the reading of the whole sūra. For the sake of brevity, when there are clear rhymes, mnemonic devices, parallelisms, chiasms, and concentric forms on the micro-level, they will only be noted if they have bearing on the larger forms of the whole system. If they are not significant to the larger system, or do not provide information that is not already obvious from other readings, they will not be reflected in order to keep this translation as clean and approachable as possible. Otherwise they will only create tangents that distract from my specific argument.

Also, it must be acknowledged that the search for literary parallels within a text is not a wholly ‘scientific’ process. This has been discussed in the previous chapter. Parallels of many kinds (linguistic, thematic, aural) naturally occur in all lengthy texts. In short, any particular observation made about the Qurān's structure and use of parallelisms could be due to pure chance. We must admit that any number of the repetitions observed below may be merely coincidence, or may be part of other structures that are also active in al-Kahf (and the Qurān as a whole). And yet, the search for ring compositions only posits that there is a tendency behind a system's parallels. I would argue that when these parallels are considered collectively, the sūra’s dozens of parallels and their specific placements within the text shows a pattern that exceeds chance.
Finally, we need some provisional terminology to talk about the sūra's structure which makes this discussion less verbose or technical, rather than more so. Unfortunately, because this method of examination is relatively new to Qur’ānic studies, there is no universally accepted vocabulary which we can employ. Conversely, if we try to avoid jargon altogether, the descriptions of the material at hand can get quite complex, as most patterns do not cleanly align just one verse, sentence, or theme. The text itself must take pride of place over our translation of it. Therefore, each unit will be named according to its scale in the system of the whole sūra. For the sake of this project, the whole sūra is divided into sūra-rings, which move inward in a concentric pattern towards a central pivot. The beginnings and endings of these sūra-rings are marked by a drastic change of topic or style. The central pivot is the middle of the entire system of the sūra, and it is contained within the smallest sūra-ring. Each sūra-ring is composed of two halves. Sūrat al-Kahf is rendered into four sūra-rings and a central pivot thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sūrat al-Kahf (Full Structure)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 1A, the outermost ring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 2A, exempla</td>
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<td>Sūra-Ring 3A, exempla</td>
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<td>Sūra-Ring 4A, the center ring</td>
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<td>Central Pivot</td>
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<td>Sūra-Ring 4B, the center ring</td>
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<td>Sūra-Ring 3B, exempla</td>
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<td>(al-Kahf 18:27-46)</td>
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<td>(al-Kahf 18:83-102)</td>
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This labeling system will continue on each scale of the text. So, each half of a sūra-ring is composed of one pericope. Each pericope is made up of pericope-rings. Each pericope-ring is also composed of paralleling or reflecting parts. If the parts within a pericope-ring parallel other materials in the pericope-ring, they will be called sub-pericope parallels. If they are concentrically related to other material in the pericope-ring, they are sub-pericope rings. And within each sub-unit are smaller
symmetrical or paralleling units, which will be labeled when they prove significant to the sūra's vision of the intermediate state on the macro-scale.

**Part 1: The Center Sūra-Ring and the Pivot: The First Day and the Last Day**

(*al-Kahf* 18:47-59)

For the reading mind to get to the heart of a very long oral ring construction, it is usually easiest to read the center of the system first, then investigate the opening and closing, followed by each exempla ring. In the center we can, as much as possible, see the major themes spelled out. However, I must repeat that strictly speaking, the productions of oral peoples do not have themes, climaxes, or meanings. Yet for lack of a better nomenclature, I am forced with reluctance to continuously employ such a literary vocabulary. These are the abstractions of the literate mind, which habitually seek to reduce all complex systems of thought and expression. The frustration of Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930) comes to mind: the Qurʾān is “almost totally incapable of logical abstraction.”¹ Maybe it would be useful to soften how we take words like ‘theme,’ ‘center,’ ‘meaning,’ and the like. Although it may make this project more complicated if used strictly, let us think less of literature when these terms are needed, and think instead of how these words are used in our own performative arts, such as music and dance. The Qurʾān is after all a performance, not a text. The pivots are likened to “theme” as we would hear in a symphonic climax or a dramatic moment in dance. The opening of a ring is our overture, the ending the coda² or cadence, the inner rings our variations. Considering this sort of reading, what we will find at the centers of ring constructs are forceful and/or inverted presentations of larger trends; not reductions. By offering an episode which demonstrates its point in a way that

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¹ Nöldeke is speaking of Muḥammad as “author” of the Qurʾān, in contrast to the insistence of the Islamic traditions to not think of him as such. In any case, the remark is telling of our dilemma here. *The History of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3.

² This term has already been used by Angelika Neuwirth in structural analyses of the Qurʾān. Generally her usage is comparable to Douglas’ term ‘latch.’ However, I use the term coda here only in comparison to its more common usage regarding musical performances.
might seem backwards, misdirected, or exaggerated, a contrast is created within the larger system that can give our eyes and ears some orientation.

| Judgment Day (Central Pivot and Frames, al-Kahf 18:47-59) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|
| **Structure**   | **Themes**      | **Verses**  |
| Pericope-parallel 1A | On the day the earth/mountains removed | (al-Kahf 18:47) |
| Pericope-parallel 1B | Humanity made an arrangement with God | (al-Kahf 18:48) |
| Pericope-parallel 1C | The record revealed | (al-Kahf 18:49) |
| Central Pivot    | ADAM AND IBLIS  | (al-Kahf 18:50-51) |
| Pericope-parallel 2C | On the day associates called, they ignored the recitation | (al-Kahf 18:52-54) |
| Pericope-parallel 2B | Humanity quarrels over the past and the reminder | (al-Kahf 18:55-57) |
| Pericope-parallel 2A | God forgives/torments, towns destroyed | (al-Kahf 18:58-59) |

In the central ring (sūra-ring 4) of al-Kahf, we see a discussion of the Eschaton which carries on from verse 47 to verse 59. This conversational flow is cleft in two by one of the accounts of Adam and Iblis at the start of human history (50-51), which both distracts the attention away from the larger story of the end of time and yet strengthens its dramatic impact. The end of history contains the beginning, while the beginning of humanity informs and predicts its final destiny.

In the opening half of the sūra-ring (47-49), we see three pericope-rings. The first, starting with the standard construction referring to the last day, “on the Day...” (wa yawmi...), doubly emphasizes the removal of the earth and the herding together of humanity after the Resurrection.

47. On the Day We shall cause the mountains to move, and you see the earth coming forth, and We gather them (hashāhāhum) so that We do not leave behind of them anyone (al-Kahf 18:47).

The final collecting of humanity is then elaborated upon. In the Qur'ānic accounts of creation, people were presented to God in some pre-historical event, during which they took on an arrangement which the earth and the mountains had rejected. Before they were even born, all human beings testified that God alone was worthy of worship. Often referred to as the ‘Covenant’ or ‘Day of Alast’, people promised to remember the sole Lordship of God. This post-Resurrection line-up recreates that primordial

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3 Cf. al-Ahzāb 33:72.
4 al-’Arāf 7:72.
event, first by dismissing the earth and mountains, then by asking people to recall what they had once promised.

Humanity denies that there was a standing agreement with God. God claims otherwise. As evidence, the record (kitāb) of deeds is brought out.

In this third pericope-ring we notice two calls back to the first pericope-ring at verse 47. First is the key verb “to omit” or “leave behind” (yuğhudir). God never fails to notice any individual (47), nor does his record miss any deed small or large (49). This verb and its root appears nowhere else in the Qurʾānic corpus. Second, both verses 47 and 49 end with the word “one” (ahad) of them.

After this verse the recitation jumps from a dialogue about the Day of Judgment all the way back to the creation of Adam and the disobedience of Iblis for just two verses (50-51). Then the topic immediately shifts to Judgment Day again. The material on the final judgment forms a sūra-ring around the Iblis and Adam story, which as we shall see is the central pivot of Sūrat al-Kahf. Upon returning to the subject of Judgment Day, the Qurʾān restarts the previous subject with the same introduction at line 52 as we saw at 47: “on the Day...” (wa yawmi).
52. On the Day when He will say, "Call those who you claimed were My associates," they will call them, but they will not respond to them—(for) We have set between them a place-of-destruction (mawhiq).

53. And the sinners will see the Fire and think that they are about to fall into it, but they will find no escape from it.

54. Certainly We have explained (sarrafnā) for the people in this recitation by means of every (kind of) parable, yet the people remain contentious for the most part (al-Kahf 18:52-54).

As verses 52 through 54 are the continuation of the pericope-ring found in verse 49, we can notice similar subjects played out in a reverse order. Verse 49 ends with the presentation of humanity's sins back to them; here 52 opens with God mockingly making the sinful expose their own failures by calling divine associates who cannot respond. In 53, humankind's guilt is sealed because they have been sent a recitation (qur'ān) that could have explained (sarrafnā) how to escape (maṣrif) this fate. This Qur'ān is juxtaposed to the record (kitāb) of deeds which opens verse 49.

The themes found in the first half of a ring structure continue to be unwound and expanded upon in the second half. In the second pericope-ring at verse 48, we observed humanity being lined up on the Last Day, and how they will deny that they made an agreement with God in the primordial epoch. Verses 55 through 57 return to this claim by explaining that people remain bound by this ancient promise. In the second half of the pericope-ring, humanity has either forgotten about their promise with their Maker, or they lie and claim to know nothing of it. However, God explains that this covenant remains in force because God has sent them reminders, specifically in the form of prophets and their messages. Those who did not properly respond to these messages are therefore guilty of ignoring these reminders or not taking them seriously.

5 A hapax from the verb “to perish” (wabaqa). As this root has no equivalent in any other related language, and there is no other Qur'ānic usage of this term, we must leave it as - unfortunately ambiguous. We can suppose it is something of a pit, cave, or chasm, as it is possible to fall into it.
55. Nothing prevented the people from believing, when the guidance came to them, and from asking forgiveness from their Lord, except that the customary way of those of old should come upon them, or the punishment come upon them head on.

56. We send the messengers only as bringers-of-good-news (mubashshirīn) and warners, but those who disbelieve dispute by means of falsehood in order to refute the truth with it. They have taken My signs and what they were warned about in mockery.

57. Who is more evil than the one who, having been reminded by the signs of his Lord, turns away from them, and forgets what his hands have sent forward? Surely We have made coverings over their hearts, so that they do not understand it, and a heaviness in their ears. Even if you call them to the guidance, they will never be guided (al-Kahf 18:55-57).

We can see some echoes of verse 48 in this section. In the first half of the pericope-ring, the discussion invoked the final judgment when people come to God: “Certainly you have come to Us (jiʿtumūnā).” Here at verse 55 it is guidance which “comes to” the people (jāʿahum). This symmetrical “coming to” is distinct from what “comes to them (taʿtiyahuān)” from earlier peoples or what “comes” (yaʿtiyahuān) from fear of torment. When the people in verse 48 claimed that they did not make an arrangement with God, verse 56 wonders who is more benighted than one who has been reminded of the signs of the Lord and still turns away in forgetfulness. Verse 57 also contrasts God making (jaʿalnā) a covering over their hearts and the deafness of their ears with the arrangement made in verse 48: “You claimed that We had not set an appointment for you!”

Verses 58 and 59 close the sūra-ring by harking back to the opening of the sūra-ring at verse 47 and then providing a conclusion. Mary Douglas would call this the ‘latch’ of the system, like what we have seen in Mark 4:21-23. It functions as the clausula which signals the end of one topic and the shift to another.6

58. Yet your Lord is the Forgiving, the One full of Mercy. If He were to take them to task for what they have earned, He would indeed hurry the punishment for them. Yet for them (there is) an appointment from which they will find (yajidū) no escape.

59. These towns — We destroyed them when they did evil, and We set an appointment for their destruction (al-Kahf 18:58-59).

6 “This stylistic device consists in a particular closure of the long verses of late Meccan and Medinan times; the last sentence of a verse often does not partake in the main strand of communication but presents a comment on its contents, indicating divine approval or disregard of the fact reported [...]” Neuwirth, “Structure,” 152.
The latch is the reference to “these towns” which God arranged to be destroyed. This reminds the hearer of the leveling of the earth and the mountains at the start of the sūra-ring, as well as the two references to arrangements being made by God and humans (48, 58). In this regard the final verse still fits into the cycle of the whole sūra-ring. On the other hand, the mention of towns being destroyed in some indeterminate past does not otherwise develop any other material found in this ring or anywhere else in the sūra. The latch simultaneously continues the pattern of the ring, while signaling that it is ending.

At the center of this innermost sūra-ring, and therefore at the pivot of the entire sūra, is one of the Qur'ānic references to Iblīs' actions at the creation of Adam.

50. (Remember) when We said to the angels: “Prostrate yourselves before Adam;” they prostrated themselves, except Iblīs. He was one of the jinn, and acted wickedly (against) the command of his Lord. Do you take him and his descendants as ones-to-turn-to instead of Me, when they are your enemy? Evil is the exchange for the evildoers!

51. I did not make them witness the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor the creation of themselves. I am not one to take those who lead (others) astray (for) support (al-Kahf 18:50-51).

According to a ring structural analysis, the center will indicate the trend of the whole system in a manner that is particularly forceful — usually by inverting patterns and thereby throwing the matter into relief. This center does this in several ways. First is the radical shift in time: this passage discusses the dawn of history in the middle of a discussion about the end of history. Second, as a fragment of an oral conversation to a highly oral culture, this account calls out a challenge to the listeners: “Do you take him and his descendants as ones-to-turn-to instead of Me, when they are your enemy?” Assuming that what we have learned from the anthropologies of orality is applicable to the Qur'ān's

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7 Neuwirth argues that this line is reminiscent of the theodicy of Job 38-41. "Negotiating Justice," 4.
conversation, the audience would vocally respond to such a question, such as by ecstatically insisting “No!”, “We will not!”, “There is no god but God!” “God is most great!” or the like.

Third and most significantly, there is also the ethical reversal of Iblīs’ dilemma. Iblīs is at once wicked for disobeying his Lord, and yet he is also correct for refusing to bow to a mere creation: Adam. In the first half of the ṣūra-ring of which this is the center, we noticed a general introduction to the last day: the destruction of the earth (47), the gathering of a forgetful humanity (48), the record of deeds, and the accusation of sin (48-49). In the second half of the ṣūra-ring, these themes are specified. The sin of which people are accused is looking for powers besides God (52); the arrangement people made with God was fulfilled through reminders (57); this fulfillment has come in the form of messengers who are only messengers: “We send the messengers only as bringers-of-good-news and warners” (56). This can all be encapsulated in the Iblīs story. Since the beginning of time God created prophets (starting with Adam). The prophets are significant to God’s purposes in the created world, but are therefore often confused with that which they signify. They can also mistakenly become the focus of worship (like we see with the angels here). Therefore, Iblīs is right not to bow to Adam, but is wrong for disobeying the God who speaks through such prophets. This trend of underscoring the role of prophets and other religiously significant people, while subverting their worth in the ultimate sense, will return again and again throughout the rest of the ṣūra.

Before moving on and seeing how this ṣūra-ring and the central pivot informs the rest of al-Kahf, it is worth noting the final line in this ring’s center: “I am not one to take those who lead (others) astray (for) support” (51). Of particular importance is this last term, as it carries a great deal of the weight of the ṣūra’s central argument. The word here rendered imperfectly as ‘support’ is ‘ʿadud. In the Qurʾān this root is unique to this word, and the word itself is a Qurʾānic dis legomenon. The only other usage appears in a reference to the relationship between Moses and Aaron, where it means an ‘arm,’ ‘hand,’ or ‘ability’.
Both references imply a subordinate power. Aaron makes Moses stronger; God does not require the aid of those who mislead. Unfortunately, there is no other Qur'anic usage of this word or this root. We can tentatively expand the meaning of the word ‘adud by looking at related terms in other languages. In other Semitic tongues, there is always some implication of gardening. In Syriac, ‘adid is “weeded,” “cleared of weeds,” or “pruned.” In Ugaritic, m’dd is a “harvesting instrument.” Ma’šād is Hebrew for an ‘axe.’ If this Semitic tendency holds in the Qur’ān, and therefore the term carries the implication of ‘assisting;’ an ‘arm;’ and gardening, we might translate ‘adud as ‘helping-hand,’ or ‘farm-hand.’ In other words, God does not need anyone else’s help in tending to His garden. This may be taken as a response to Genesis 2:5, in which Adam was created because “there was no one to tend the soil.” The Qur’ān represents the story with God Himself as the one with power; God doesn’t need anyone else.

Part 2: The First Sūra-Ring: A Childless God and a Sea of Ink
(al-Kahf 18:1-8, 102-110)

Following the ring structural method further, we should next look to the beginning and end of the whole system for relationships to the center we have just investigated, as well as relationships between all three. The sūra begins with this pericope-ring:

| 1. Praise (be) to God, who has sent down on His servant the Record! He has not made it in any crookedness |
| 2. (He has made it) right: to warn of harsh violence from Himself, and to give good news to the believers who do righteous deed, that for them (there is) a good reward |
| 3. In which they will remain forever. |

4. And to warn those who have said, ‘God has taken a son.’
5. They have no knowledge about it, nor (did) their fathers. Monstrous is the word (that) comes out of their mouths! They say nothing but a lie.

8 CLS, 290.
6. Perhaps you are going to destroy yourself by following after them, if they do not believe in this proclamation.
7. Surely We have made what is on the earth a splendor for it, so that We may test them (to see) which of them is the best in deed.
8. And surely We shall make what is on it barren ground.

The sūra opens with a praise of God and the declaration of a clarifying and warning revelation; a standard Qur'ānic introduction.

1. Praise (be) to God, who has sent down on His servant the Record! He has not made it in any crookedness.
2. (He has made it) right: to warn of harsh violence from Himself, and to give good news (yubashir) to the believers who do righteous deeds, that for them (there is) a good reward.
3. In which they will remain forever (al-Kahf 18:1-3).

Moving then from the promises of everlasting reward for the righteous, the warning of this revelation is explained. This constitutes the pivot of the pericope-ring.

4. And to warn those who have said, 'God has taken a son.'
5. They have no knowledge about it, nor (did) their fathers. Monstrous is the word (that) comes out of their mouths! They say nothing but a lie. (al-Kahf 18:4-5).

The ones being warned are the Christians; those who say God has taken a son (4). They have been misinformed about this information from their “fathers” — which folds back on the nature of the error: the mistake of claiming God has a “son.” Speaking is referenced three times in this pivot, which recalls the revelatory announcement that precedes it. As God speaks to humanity in a warning, so the

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9 These two first verses open with a contrast between ‘iwajā and qayyīm. ‘Iwajā is nearly always translated as ‘crookedness’ as this carries the sense of being unclear, but that misses a bit. The verbal root ‘W-J also implies a sense of ‘turning’ or ‘twisting’ as in ‘ūj (an elephant's tusk, ‘ivory’), or the Hebrew ‘qūḏ (a baked ‘disk’) or ‘ēqqā (a ‘circle’). This latter term also means a ‘cavity’, as does the Aramaic ‘āgyū. And so we are left with a word carries connotations of being confusing, twisting, and a space within a solid object: perhaps ‘boring’? Unfortunately, as this implies uninteresting as well, I have opted for the standard “crookedness” cf. CLS, 298-299. Likewise, the opposite term, qayyīm, (here translated as ‘right’) has to have the implication of clarity and clarification, as well as something that stands upright (like ‘people,’ qawm), and arising from bed (qūma) or death (the ‘resurrection,’ qayāma).
Christians “say nothing but a lie.” Then the audience is directly addressed, and the sūra-ring is closed with a latch.

6. Perhaps you are going to destroy (bākhi’) yourself by following after them (āthārīhim), if they do not believe in this proclamation.

7. Surely We have made what is on the earth a splendor for it, so that We may test them (to see) which of them is the best in deed.

8. And surely We shall make what is on it barren ground (al-Kahf 18:6-8).

As we have seen, the central pivot of the sūra contains a prediction of the end of days and the paradoxical story of worshipping Adam and the disobedient Iblīs. Here in this pivot, instead of mentioning the primordial human tendency to worship other creatures, the text gives us the specific case of the Christians who worship Jesus as the Son of God. The incorrect words of the Christians (4-5) are flanked by references to the true messages of God to the human race regarding rewards and punishments (1-3, 6-8), just as the worship of Adam (50-51) is surrounded by the record of deeds (49) and the Qurʾān itself (53) as they pertain to the final judgment. The first pericope ends with a latch which declares that the earth was only created to be a test for the believers and that it will some day be swept away (7-8) — exactly where the story of the middle of the sūra starts: “On the Day We shall cause the mountains to move, and you see the earth coming forth” (47).

Moving down to the second half of the first sūra-ring (the pericope of verses 102-110), and hence the end of the sūra, these messages all reappear, but now they are in reference to the present moment: the time of the very early hearers.

102. Do those who disbelieve this that they can take My servants as ones-to-turn-to instead of Me? Surely We have prepared Gehenna as a reception for the disbelievers.

103. Say, ‘Shall We inform you about the worst losers in (regard to their) deed?’

104. (They are) those whose striving goes astray in this present life, even though they think that they are doing good in (regard to their) work.

105. Those - (they are) those who disbelieve in the signs of their Lord and in the meeting with Him. So their deeds have come to nothing. We shall not assign any weight to them on the Day of Resurrection.
106. That is their payment — Gehenna — because they disbelieved and took My signs and My messengers in mockery.
107. (But) surely those who believe and do righteous deeds — for them (there will be) Gardens of Paradise as reception,
108. There to remain. They will not desire any removal from there.

109. Say, ‘If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would indeed give out before the words of my Lord would give out, even if we brought (another sea) like it as an extension.’
110. Say, ‘I am only a human being like you. I am inspired that your God is one God. So whoever expects the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous deeds and not associate anyone in the service of his Lord.’

The pericope begins with the same subject matter which we have seen in the first half of the sūra-ring, the fourth and innermost sūra-ring, and the central pivot. Disbelief is defined by confusing the signifier and the signified. It may seem that one should bow to Adam, but one is truly bowing to the will of God (50-51). God does not make intrinsically valuable children, but referentially valuable messengers (1-6).

102. Do those who disbelieve this that they can take My servants (‘ibādi) as ones-to-turn-to instead of Me? Surely We have prepared Gehenna as a reception for the disbelievers.
103. Say, ‘Shall We inform you about the worst losers in (regard to their) deed?’
104. (They are) those whose striving goes astray in this present life, even though they think that they are doing good in (regard to their) work.
105. Those - (they are) those who disbelieve in the signs of their Lord and in the meeting with Him (li-qā’iḥa). So their deeds have come to nothing. We shall not assign (naqīm) any weight to them on the Day of Resurrection (qiyāma) (al-Kahf 18:102-105).

The punishments for one's deeds and beliefs that were alluded to in the first half of this sūra-ring and threatened in the center of the sūra are now laid out in their most direct form. In the opening we are told of a warning of punishment (2). In the center the sinners see a pit that they fear they are about to fall into (52-53). In the conclusion of the system, the threat is fulfilled. Likewise, the rewards for virtue and proper belief are reintroduced, and like in the opening pericope (3) the permanence of Paradise is recalled.
106. That is their payment — Gehenna — because they disbelieved and took My signs and My messengers in mockery.
107. (But) surely those who believe and do righteous deeds (ṣāliḥa) — for them (there will be) Gardens of Paradise as reception,
108. There to remain. They will not desire any removal (hiwat) from there (al-Kahf 8:106-108).

And once again, the topic of revelation returns, as we have seen in the beginning of this sūra-ring (1-2) and the fourth sūra-ring (54). Again, the general topic of revelation as a warning in the comparable sections of the sūra's opening and middle is juxtaposed with a specific message: the revelation is of utmost importance but that does not mean that the one who brings the message is an object of worship.

In this closing pericope-ring we can notice two key references back to the start of the pericope-ring. God’s servants (‘ibād, 102) and the future meeting with Him (qā‘ihī, 105) opens this second section of the pericope-ring, while meeting (qā‘a, 110) and service to Him (‘ibādahī, 110) close it.

Tying together the entire system of al-Kahf, through the opening, middle, and closing are a number of key patterns. First is the root B-Sh-R, which is common enough elsewhere in the Qur’ān but yet does not appear anywhere else in the whole sūra but in these three sections. Revelation comes down “to give good-news (yubashir) to the believers who do righteous deeds” (2). “We sent the messengers only as bringers-of-good-news (mubashirīn) and warners” (56). But the messengers themselves are still just people: “I am only a human being (bashar) like you” (110). Second, all three parts of this system suggest the worship of prophets — Jesus (4), Adam (50), Muḥammad (110) — and

10 Cl. John 21:25.
like the root B-Sh-R this theme is explicit nowhere else in the sūra. Third, only the sūra’s opening, center, and closing sūra-rings overtly discuss the mechanics of revelation and its purpose. God sends messages as warning of damnation and promise of salvation, and these messages have their archetype in the hidden record of deeds which is brought out on the Day of Judgment. The priority is always given to the word over the speaker of the word; the message over the messenger.

Because these patterns are each distinct to the center and extremes of the sūra, we will only find them in the rest of the system as exempla and variations. As we look to the other two sūra-rings of the text, we will only encounter stories and parables that show how these messages play out in specific situations, without the general prohibition against the worship of prophets and the value of their revelations.

Part 3: The First Half of the Second Sūra-Ring: The Course of the Sun
(The Sleepers, al-Kahf 18:9-26)

The second major ring of Sūrat al-Kahf is composed of two famous pericopes. The first of these is the Qur’anic account of the Companions of the Cave (9-26); the second the adventures of the Two-Horned One (Dhū al-Qarnayn, 83-101). This ring takes two wide mythological cycles from Late Antiquity — the sleeping hero-saints and the Alexander tale — and couples them together meaningfully to expose something at once new and old. They form a uniquely Qur’anic bricolage on the borders of the living world and the liminal spaces one finds at the edges and bottom of the earth.

The first half of the sūra-ring focuses on the story of the Sleepers. As we have seen already, the Sleepers’ legends belong to an older strain of thought found in the post-exilic Jewish lore which also produced the sleeping-saint stories of Honi the Circle Drawer,¹¹ his grandson,¹² and Abimelech.¹³ In the later two of these Jewish materials, the given sleeper bypasses the apocalyptic fall of one of the

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¹¹ b. Ta'anit 23a. Herzer, 4 Baruch (Paraleipomena Jeremiou), 84-89.
¹² y. Ta'anit 3:9, ibid.
Temples in rest, and thus serves as both a sign of continuity between the past and the end of days, as well as an emblem of God's blessing carrying on after this era comes to an end. Independently but on a related note, in the mind of Aristotle supernaturally long periods of dormancy address the question of what happens to the soul after death in a milieu in which the body and soul are reliant upon each other but still distinct — thus the Aristotelian reference to the sleeping heroes of Sardinia. “We do not realize that time has elapsed, any more than those who are fabled to sleep among the heroes in Sardinia do when they are awakened; for they connect the earlier ‘now’ with the later and make them one.”

When these themes of sleep and sleepers arise in Christian literatures as hagiography, they naturally become interwoven with the life and teachings of Christ. In nearly all cases, Christian saints serve Christological functions and the Sleepers of Ephesus are clear examples of this typing in action. Christian saints offer alternate visions of the religion's central claims without subverting or replacing them. Within this matrix, a certain saint is significant because of what she can say or show about God in Christ. She re-informs her audience of Christ and his unique function. What Christ tells us about God in the life of a human being also has significance to humanity as a whole. It follows then that it is possible to make the same observations in reverse: the lives of other people may inform us of Christ who reveals the hidden God. Specifically, the Sleepers are clearly reminders of Jesus’ burial, Resurrection, and eventual return. They are Christ in his more apocalyptic modes. But the Sleepers decentralize the singularity of the Christ event. As Christ is the first fruits of the Resurrection, the Sleepers are a memorial (or preparation) for the eventual plurality of the Resurrection. The Sleepers are both fully a reminder of Christ and yet stand for the condition of the whole world. In this regard, it should be clear why so many Christian versions of the legend maintain that there are seven of these

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The Sleepers also call to mind the teachings of Christ in the story of the seven brothers who are resurrected — a story in which God's relationship with the dead is severed: “He is not the God of the dead but of the living!” In continuity with the Hebrew underworld, the God of the early Christians was not interested in death and dead people (perhaps in counter-distinction to other ancient Near Eastern cultic groups). The silence of the early gospels on Holy Saturday speaks loud and clear.

Also as we have seen, the legends of the Sleepers held particular sway over the Syriac Christians. The Syriac authors agree that the story is a parable about death and the Resurrection, while Babai the Great specifically named them as evidence of soul-sleep. “The Holy Scriptures call death sleep; thus, too, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.” Besides being ensnared by sleep, in the Syriac sources the dead are also blocked away from this world by a wall or a barrier. The Sleepers are walled into a cave in much the same manner as Christ. Modern scholars have likewise agreed that the Sleepers are reminders of the Resurrection, and starting with Tor Andrae, that they recall soul-sleep directly. When we move the Syriac story into the Qurʾān’s conversation, much of this baggage could have been assumed and therefore many of the accounts’ details would not need to be restated. The

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15 There is some negotiation of their number, but seven is the central designation of the group. “In the Syriac tradition there is in fact some disagreement about the number. According to the mēmrâ of Jacob of Serugh and the Ecclesiastical History of John of Ephesus, the number is consistently eight, the youths’ leader and spokesman Yamlíkā and his “seven companions”; the Ecclesiastical History of Zacharias of Mitylene speaks of “their leader Akleides and his six companions.” In other early Christian language traditions the youths are called the “Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.” Griffith, “Christian Lore,” 129. Seven is the numerical equivalent of the ‘Alpha and the Omega.’ It is a sign for the fullness of the world: the days of Creation (Genesis 1), cycles of the year (Genesis 41, Leviticus 25). But seven is also the most eschatological of numbers: the seven trumpets which destroy Jericho (Joshua 6:8), and the many ‘seven’ signs of the book of Revelation.

17 Nicholas Constas, “‘To Sleep,’” 110.
20 Mark 16:3; Matthew 28:2; Luke 24:2; John 20:1.
Qurʾān takes for granted that its hearers would know of the youths and their reference to Christ.

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The pericope begins its first pericope-ring by questioning the familiar story of the Sleepers as one of God’s signs. It is not entirely certain if this question is highlighting the miraculous nature of the tale (the story is a wonder; an ‘ajab), or that the story is astonishing but not unique (Did you mistakenly think the story was more wondrous than it really is, as God does this sort of thing all the time?). The conversation then moves on to introduce the story in general terms. Included is a reference to a debate between “two factions” regarding the length of the Sleepers’ rest.

9. Or did you think that the Companions of the Cave and the Raqīmā were an amazing thing (‘ajab) among Our signs?
10. (Remember) when the young men took refuge (āwā) in the cave, and said, “Our Lord, grant (ʿūān) us a mercy (raḥma) from Yourself, and furnish (wahāyi) the right (rashad) (course) for us in our situation (amrinā)?”
11. So We sealed up their ears in the cave for a number of years,
12. And then We raised them up (baʿathnāhum), so that We might know which of the two factions would better count (the length of) time (they had) remained (there) (al-Kahf 18:9-12).

Verse 13 then introduces the story proper.

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22 A notoriously mysterious term and hapax legomenon; theories abound. I have let the question stand for the moment but will return to it shortly. The mostly likely explanation of the term is a lead “inscription,” but others include the name of the Sleepers’ dog, the place of their cave, and others. cf. James A. Bellamy, “Al-Raqīm or al-Ruqī? A Note on Surah 18:9,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111 (1991): 115-117; Roberto Tottoli, “Raqīm,” EQ4; Gabriel Said Reynolds, The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext, 171-173.
We shall recount (naqṣṣ) to you their story in truth: Surely they were young men who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in guidance (hudā) (al-Kahf 18:1-33).

The innermost pericope-ring then retells the significant details of the story.

14. We strengthened their hearts (qulābihim) when they stood up (qāmu) and said, "Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We do not call on any god other than Him. Certainly we would then have spoken an outrageous thing.

15. These people of ours (qawmanā) have taken gods other than Him. If only they would bring (yatāna) some clarifying (bayyin) authority concerning them! Who is more evil than the one who forges a lie against God?"

16. And when you have withdrawn from them and what they serve instead of God, take refuge (awā) in the cave. Your Lord will display some of His mercy (raḥmatih) to you, and will furnish some relief (wayuḥāyyi) for you from your situation (amrikum) (al-Kahf 18:4-16).

The terms which open the first pericope-ring of the structure reemerge in its second pericope-ring forming a single sub-pericope-ring. Look at the echoes like retreating to the cave (10, 15), and God's mercy easing a condition (10, 16). These sub-pericope-rings form a three-tiered concentric structure which predicts/is mirrored by three sections composed of verses 19-26; a second sub-pericope-ring. As always, in ring structures we must look for both linear and concentric patterns of recall.

17. And when (al-kahf) they asked one another, then let them say: "We have received the news (khuda) that your Lord has sent down against your enemies a building; a day, or part of a day. " Others said, "Your Lord knows best how long you have remained (here)."

18. So Raised them up (ba‘athnāhum) that they might ask questions among themselves. A speaker among them said, "How long have you remained (here)" Some said, "We have (only) remained (here) a day, or part of a day. " Others said, "Your Lord knows best how long you have remained (here)."

19. So send (ab‘athū) one of you with this wariq of yours to the city, and let him see which (part) of it (has the) purest food, and let him bring you (jālyatikum) a supply of it. But let him be cautious, and let no one realize (who you are).

20. Surely they — if they become aware (yazharī) of you — they will stone you, or make you return to their culture (millāṭiḥim), and then you will never prosper.

21. So we caused (the people of the city) to stumble upon them, in order that they might know that the promise of God is true, and that the Hour — (there is) no doubt about it. When they argued amongst themselves about their situation (amrahāum) they said, "Build over them a building.

23 wariq means "coinage" of silver or gold. However, the root also suggests something which has been written upon, and so wariqātum might also be taken as a "note (i.e., a writing, a banknote) of yours"
This introduction to the second half of the pericope recalls both the introduction to the first half (it is a sub-pericope-parallel to verses 9-12) and the end of the first half (it is the second half of a pericope-ring which started in verses 14-16). The pericope's opening ring began by telling the listener that the Sleepers were “raised up” (ba‘athnāhum) to resolve a debate between parties (12), while this opening starts with the Sleepers “raised up” (ba‘athnāhum) to be questioned about the length of their stay, and sending (ab‘athū) one of their number out of the cave (19). Also, as the opening of the pericope tells us that God stamped an unknown number of years on the Sleepers’ ears (11), here we are told that even the Sleepers themselves do not know the number (19). The contents of the story (the Sleepers' discussion and leaving the cave) is aligned with the historical discussion about the story (the later confusion over the details). On the concentric level, verses 19-21 echo 14-16. Together they flank the center of the pericope, marking the smallest and third pericope-ring. The Sleepers ask God to send a “clarifying (bayyīn) authority” to clear up the details of their peoples’ irreligion (15), and so upon waking one of them is sent out with some kind of money which signifies the truth of their miracle to the people (19).

Then in answer to verse 13, which offers the listener the true account of the Sleepers' story, verse 22 depicts the useless debate over its trivialities.

22. Some say, “(There were) three, the fourth of them was their dog” — guessing (rajūma) about what is unknown. Still others say, “(There were) five, the sixth of them was their dog” — guessing (rajūma) about what is unknown. Still others say, “(There were) seven, the eighth of them was their dog.” Say: “My Lord knows about their number. No one knows (about) them except a few. So do not dispute about them, except (on) an obvious (zāhir) point, and do not ask (tastaftī) for a pronouncement about them from any of them (al-Kahf 18:22).

The pericope then comes to a close by affirming that God alone knows the story in full.
25. And do not say of anything, "Surely I am going to do that tomorrow;"
26. Except (with the proviso), "if God pleases! And remember your Lord, when you forget, and say, "It may be that my Lord will guide me (yahdiyani) to something nearer the right (rashad) (way) than this"
27. They remained in their cave for three hundred years and add nine (more).
28. Say: "God knows about how long they remained (there). To Him (belongs) the unseen of the heavens and the earth. How well He sees and hears! They have no-one-to-turn-to (walby) other than Him, and He does not associate anyone in His judgment" (al-Kahf 18:23-26).

The recitation commands the hearer that the only right (rashad) one to turn to is God (26), mimicking the opening verse of the Sleepers "furnish the right (rashad) (course) for us in our situation" (10). And the number of years which is questioned in the opening of the pericope (11) is revealed here as three hundred and nine (25). While the Sleepers’ ears were closed by this number of years, “How well [God] sees and hears!” God’s ears are not shut, but He shuts the ears of others.

Looking now to the pivot of the Sleepers’ structure, we find a number of unusual elements which do not reflect anything in the Christian versions of the story, or anything else in the pericope as the Qur’an tells it. We can take these as our hermeneutical signposts.

17. And you (would) see the sun when it rose (tala’at), inclining (tażawwur) from their cave toward the right, and when it set, passing them by (taqriduhum) on the left, while they were in the hollow (fiwj) of it. That was one of the signs of God. Whoever God guides is the rightly guided one, and whoever He leads astray — you will not find for him one-to-turn-to, a guide (murshid).
18. And you (would) think them awake (ayqâz) even though they were asleep (ruqâd), and We were turning them (now) to the right and (now) to the left, while their dog (lay) stretched out (basit) with its front paws (dharâ’ayhi) at the door (wasid). If you had observed (ittala’ta) them, you would have indeed turned from them in flight (firâr), and indeed been filled (with) dread (ru’b) because of them (al-Kahf 18:17-18).

On the lexical level, both the opening and closing of the pericope are (p)re-presented in this center, as is typical of ring constructs. Recalling the opening of the pericope: the Sleepers are signs (9, 17), about whom people reckon (hasibta at 9, tahsabuhum at 18). Predicting the end of the story, beyond God
there is no one-to-turn-to (waliyy 17, 26) and no other guide (yahd at 17, yahdiyanī at 24).24 God alone grants proper guidance (rashad at 10, murshid at 17, rashad at 24). Another indication that this passage is the central pivot of the pericope is the very high number of terms and roots that appear nowhere else in the sūra, many of which are common in other sūras: the inclining (tazāwar), the passing (taqrīḍ), the hollow (fajwa), awake (ayqāẓ), asleep (ruqūd), stretching out (bāṣīṭ), front paws (dharāʾ), the door (wasīd), flight (firār), and dread (ruʿb). These are each indications that a particular message is being relayed in these two lines that is specific to this part of the system. The singularity of these elements within the pericope means that they are not a part of a pericope-ring, and so this must be our pivot. In a similar manner, we can be sure that this is the pivot of the pericope because those parts that do repeat themselves in these two verses only repeat themselves within these two verses and nowhere else in the pericope. These are the movements to “the right and the left” (dhāt al-yamīn, dhāt al-shamāl, 17, 18) and the root Ṭ-L-ʿ. This latter repetition shows itself with the sun’s rising (ṭalaʿat at verse 17) and the listeners’ own hypothetical observing (iṭṭalaʿta) of the Sleepers and their dog (18).

If this is the pivot, how does this apply to the meaning of the whole pericope? First we can notice the return of the theme we found in the central pivot story of Adam and Iblīs, as well as in the first and fourth sūra-rings. God is to be worshipped, His signs are not. The Sleepers’ pericope opens by declaring them a wonder from God (9). The pericope closes underscoring the lack of any intercessor or second divinities besides God. “They have no-one-to-turn-to (waliyy) other than Him, and He does not associate anyone in His judgment” (26). And in the pivot, both of these messages are repeated in a single statement. “That was one of the signs of God. Whoever God guides is the rightly guided one, and

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24 In the variant reading of the Ṣanʿā’ Palimpsest (DAM 01-27.01, folio 32B), verse 17 also includes “beside him” (min dānīhī) before “one-to-turn-to” (waliyy). Although much of the line is missing, it can be partially reconstructed as “...God ... one guided... beside him one-to-turn-to (min dānīhī waliyy), a guide.” Compare this to line 26 in our recension: “They do not have one-to-turn-to beside him (min dānīhī waliyy).” While this may strengthen the ring structure even more, the palimpsest’s line 26 is not extant. Also, it is not yet clear what the exact the relationship between the standard recension and the otherwise unknown recension of the palimpsest is. see Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, “Ṣanʿāʾ 1 and the Origins of the Qurʾān,” Der Islam 87 (2012): 73.
whoever He leads astray — you will not find for him one-to-turn-to, a guide (murshid).” (17). The Sleepers are signs from God which tell us not to worship anything other than God. If the refusal of Iblis to bow to Adam is a lens for reading the Companions of the Cave, this would also keep the Qur’ānic pericope in line with the Syriac version of the Sleepers’ legend as told by Jacob of Serugh (d. 521). There, the pagan emperor commands the “Youths of Ephesus” to bow to certain idols. “We are not going to bow down to dumb idols, the work of human hands. Ours is the Lord of the heavens; He will help us.”

More bluntly, the Qur’ān is turning the Christian legend of the Sleepers against itself. The Qur’ān is using a story about Christian saints to speak out against the specifically Christian practice of saint and tomb cults. Whatever its relations may be to Jewish and Aristotelean materials, the Sleepers story proper is uniquely Christian. The Qur’ān indicates that those who discovered the Sleepers did indeed believe in God, but that they responded to the miracle by putting a building (bunyān) or “a place to worship” (a masjid, a mosque) over the Sleepers’ cave (20-21). The text seems to mean a martyrion. In parallel to this, the Qur’ān also says that the Sleepers initially fled from people who took other gods besides God; they believed in a “lie” (kadhib, 15). This term is identical to the first sūra-ringing’s accusation against the Christians. “They say nothing but a lie (kadhib)” (5). In other words, the Qur’ān is still giving the Sleepers a Christological hagiography. But because the Qur’ān has a low Christology, it likewise has a more limited vision of other saints like the Sleepers. The supernatural power and advocacy of the Sleepers (and by extension, Christ) is lowered by doing what the Christian tradition does not do — the Qur’ān puts the most rhetorical force into the dormancy of the Sleepers. The seven resurrected brothers of the Synoptics, the non-appearance of Holy Saturday in the canonical gospels, and the Christian legends of the Sleepers all actively disregard the significance of

their subjects’ deaths, focusing instead on their resurrections. On the other hand, the Qur’an literally shines a light on the Sleepers’ time in the cave.

Unlike all of the Christian versions of the Sleepers of Ephesus, the Companions of the Cave are not sealed into their resting place by a stone or bricks. This is at first suggested by the relationship between the Sleepers and the movements of the sun. “And you (would) see the sun when it rose, inclining from their cave toward the right, and when it set, passing them by on the left, while they were in the hollow of it” (17). The spatial relationship of the sun to the cave is not entirely discernible, but we can make some comments. If the Sleepers are to be understood as the dead, or at least as proxies for the souls in the underworld, then this detail is critical. Near Eastern mythological milieus quite often equate the road to the underworld with the pathway of the sun. The sun regularly passes under the earth when it sets and returns when it rises. It would be easy to explain this cosmology by having the sun enter and leave the underworld through a cave or gateway equated with the horizon, the mountains, or both. We have seen this with the descents of Gilgamesh, Shamash, Ishtar, Isis, Osiris, Persephone, Demeter, and Helios into the land of the dead, and the same can be said of many other related stories. The Nabatean-Arabian incarnation of Ishtar and Isis, al-ʿUzza, may have even been the occasional consort of the Syrio-Roman solar-mountain god Elagabalus (*Heliogabalus, Ilaha-jabal*).27 The central Syriac saints, Adam and Mary, are also given symbolic settings related to the sun and caves. The Qur’an is working with a similar motif. We see both the sun’s rising and setting and hence we would think of this cave as related to the horizon. And according to the *Lisān al-ʿArab*, the word *kahf* refers to “a cave in the mountains”28. But remember also that in the central *sūra*-ring the mountains are going to be removed, along with the earth, on the last day (47). That the Qur’an thinks

27 Martin Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989), 52. Similarly, when the Mesopotamian god Shamash appears in Arabia proper, he was turned into the goddess Shams ʿAliyyāt. She appears to have been worshipped at mountaintop shrines, such as the one discovered in Wadi Qāniya. see Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 211.
28 As *kahf* has no Semitic root, it is presumably from the Middle Persian *kōf* (“mountain”), and thus *kahf* (“mountain cave”) and *Qāf* (the cosmic mountain of Islamic legends).
of the mountains and the earth as two distinct places leads us to think that “the mountains” are references to the edge of the world (so, the horizon) while “the earth” means the place in the middle of the world which lies under the sun's course, where ordinary people live. And turning back to the Syriac version of the story told by Jacob of Serugh, the cave of the Sleepers is also in the mountains.\(^2^9\) In any case, in the Qurʾān we cannot be entirely sure if the story is supposed to be reminding its audience of the passage to the underworld, or this cave is a passage to the underworld.

Following from these conclusions, we can explain the next piece of data which is unique to the Qurʾānic Sleepers and is also found in the pericope's pivot: the Sleepers are moving. “And you (would) think them awake, even though they were asleep, and We were turning them (now) to the right and (now) to the left” (18). Immediately we must question what the Qurʾān means by sleep if the Sleepers are in motion. If this is simply a miraculously long version of typical sleep, that does not explain why the Sleepers are moving enough to be mistaken for being awake, and why this movement mimics the route of the sun. However, if the cave of the Sleepers is equivalent to the mouth of the netherworld, and the Sleepers are closer to death than mere dormancy, this issue evaporates. In the other mythological systems of the Antique and Late Antique Near East like Kigal, Duat, and Hades, where sleep and death are all but identical, we often find shades and other beings who are both at rest and in motion; dead but not-quite-inanimate. But within the earliest pieces of the biblical lore, the dead are in a notably non-mobile rest in Sheol. The Qurʾānic cosmology assumes both of these are the case at once, like many later Christian and Jewish sources would. Aphrahat tells us that the dead only appear dormant from our point of view. The sleeping dead are at once doing nothing and doing something. This would also partially explain the concluding remark of the pivot, “If you (had) observed them, you would indeed have turned away from them in flight, and indeed been filled (with) dread because of them.” It is not clear why someone who was merely at rest (whether preternaturally

\(^{2^9}\) Griffith, “Christian Lore,” 128;
long or not, mobile or not) would be frightening. But if the Sleepers are both dead and still moving, the terror of looking upon them is self-explanatory.

This takes us to our third original piece of the Qurʾanic bricolage in this pivot, which we have mentioned already: the cave of the Sleepers is open to the sunlight (if not the sun itself) and it is possible for “you” (the hearer of the Qurʾān) to see them. In other words, the Sleepers are exposed and specifically not walled into their hollow. This exposure is highlighted by the strictly Qurʾanic addition of the dog who “(lays) stretched out (with) its front paws at the door.” If the dog is sitting in the entrance of the cave, it would indicate that the doorway is not sealed up. Like the scorpion-men who guard the solar gate to the underworld in the Gilgamesh epic, or the cherubim who stand before Eden, the presence of a guardian plays a dual role: the way is blocked, but it can be crossed. A guardian means a barrier remains a barrier even though there is a hole in it. This allows for liminality.

In Jacob of Serugh’s telling of the story, there is a watcher which God sets over the Sleepers, who is invoked: “We beseech you, Good Shepherd, who has chosen His servants, guard your flock from this wolf who thirsts for blood’ [...] and [God] left a watcher to be the guardian of their limbs.”30 Although it would not be too hard to see how this “watcher” could be doglike in some regard — like a guard dog outside of an encampment or looking after sheep — this watcher appears more angelic than canine. Only in the Qurʾānic milieu is the guardian of the Sleepers an actual dog. But why a dog? The confusion over the dog lies in the assumption that the Sleepers’ dog is some kind of pet, which is not at all suggested by the Qurʾān, and neither accords with the very common Middle Eastern conception of dogs as unclean and defiling. But if this is a supernatural guard dog of the sleeping dead then the dog’s placement at the entrance of the cave and the fear it drives into those who look upon it falls into place. We have seen other guard dogs in the land of the dead: Anubis and Cerberus for

instance. In Mazdayasnian/Zoroastrian cosmology too, the bridge between this world and the afterlife is guarded by a dog(s). The Zoroastrian practice of funerary “dog looking” (sagdīd) shows that the association of dogs with corpses was still alive and well at least within the era of the Qurʾān’s conversation.

If this dog is something of a Qurʾānic Cerberus whose “two arms extend at the portal,” then it is a monster just as much as the Hellenic beast who “sprawls over all his cave.” This would account for its presence in the Sleepers’ pericope, the association of the story with the dead and the underworld, and the horror in looking upon it. The dog guards the unseen, or at least what one is not supposed to see. It maintains the sanctity of God’s signs and messengers by allowing people to see them, but as a fearsome guard dog it keeps the living at bay. Taking account of the pivot story of Adam and Iblīs, the first sūra-ring, and the ring structure of the Sleepers’ pericope-ring, the message of the cave, the sun’s pathway, the moving Sleepers, and the dog becomes plain: the saints are God’s signs on earth, but do not look to them for supernatural influence from beyond the world of the living. The holy dead are to be regarded but not approached because decay, dormancy, and death stands as a barrier between you and them.

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31 This same connection between the Qurʾānic dog and Cerberus was drawn by the unusual 1670 French occultist novel, *Comte de Gabalis*, by the Abbé Nicolas de Monfaucon de Villars. cf., 1995, 262: “And in the entry lay their dog with paws outstretched. A commentary upon the Koran states of the dog that “One of its traditional names is Katmir, a word whose letters, it should be observed, are with one exception identical with Rakim.” The added letter T has the meaning of sequel or continuation. Therefore Katmir, the dog, is seen to be the sequel or continuation of the external manifestation of the Divine Principle in man, — the body, lower nature, emotions and mind which, as it were, sleeping, lie across the threshold of man’s Divine Nature and its evolution. In ancient Greece the lower nature and its three aspects were in like manner symbolized by a dog, Cerberus, a monster with three heads having the tail of a serpent, and said to guard the entrance to Hades.”


34 Virgil, *Aeneid* 6:488
The second half of this sūra-ring gives a story and a message which is symmetrically inverted and yet in communion with the Sleepers’ pericope. As the Companions of the Cave are made inaccessible by a deathly sleep and a horrific guard dog, the corresponding story of the Two-Horned One says that the world beyond the horizon has been shut away from us. The barrier works in two directions.

A significant number of classical Islamic sources and nearly all critical scholarship have long established that the figure of the Two-Horned One (Dhū al-Qarnayn) is none other than Alexander the Great. How we are to take Alexander’s ‘horns’ is inconsistent (in some sources he has ram’s horns, while in others goat’s, or wears a horned helmet, or has horns of silver, or is associated with divine bulls). In all cases, his specific designation as “two-horned” relates Alexander to the cults of a number of solar deities (see figs. 3.1-3.4). Long before the time of Alexander of Macedon, Amun-Re (in Greek, Zeus-Ammon) was depicted as a criosphinx and referred to as the “two-horned one” (sept ābu). In both Syriac and Ethiopic versions of Alexander’s adventures, his mother is impregnated by this sun god via a magical proxy in a dream, and there is a prophecy that foretells the birth of a boy whose emblem is the sun and who like Ammon has two horns. This recalls the story of the historical Alexander and the myth of the founding of Alexandria. Ptolemy I Soter claimed that the Apis bull came to him in a dream in the form of Zeus/Hades, thus binding together the founder of the new Greek city with the Egyptian cults of the underworld and the solar horned animal. The Apis bull too,

36 E. A. Wallis Budge, Alexander the Great: An Account of His Life and Exploits from Ethiopic Sources and Other Writings (London: Kegan Paul, 2003), xviii.
37 The Ethiopic version of the legend as we have it dates from the late Middle Ages. However, it is in origins far older. How it relates to the story know to the Qur’ānic audience is unclear.
38 Budge, Alexander the Great, 22. It is interesting that although these are Christian Alexander accounts, he is still sired by a pagan god.
39 Ibid., 15.
Fig. 3.1 (top left): Alexander-Helios. 150 B.C.E.- 100 C.E., Alabaster. Egypt. From Joseph Roisman ed. *The Brill Companion to Alexander the Great* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), Fig. 12.

Fig. 3.2 (top right): Caracalla-Alexander. 211-216 C.E., material and origin unknown (no longer extant). ibid., Fig. 15.

Fig. 3.3 (bottom left): Horned-Alexander. 295-290 B.C.E., Silver tetradrachm. Syria. ibid., Fig. 10.

Fig. 3.4 (bottom right): Horned-Alexander. 297-281 B.C.E., Silver tetradrachm. Thrace. ibid., Fig. 11.
itself a manifestation of the Egyptian Re through Osiris, was supposedly worshipped by Alexander. The conqueror himself was first depicted with the ram-horns of Zeus-Ammon in 321 B.C.E., as part of the propaganda effort of Ptolemy, which implied the unity of the Greek and Egyptian peoples under one divine dynasty.41

Depicting Alexander in this seemingly unusual way also put him in continuity with all of the other horned solar gods of the ancient Near East. These would include the Arabian Šalm, the Canaanite Moloch, the Yemenite al-Maqqa, the Babylonian Marduk, the Minoans' solar bull, and the cosmic bull of Mithraism. In the biblical lore as well, Alexander appears horned again, now in the form of a goat.42 And when he was depicted without horns of any kind, Alexander was still often combined or associated with anthropomorphic solar gods, such as Helios, Shamash, and Gilgamesh.43

The stories of this superhuman Alexander and his fantastical adventures proliferated Late Antiquity and continued on in countless variations in at least a dozen languages well through the Middle Ages. The history of this literature is notoriously convoluted and the internal relationships of its various parts controversial. The stories which are the most similar to the pericope of the Two-Horned One are themselves of questionable origins. Although we cannot know which exact version of the Alexander Romance is being assumed of the Qur’ānic audience, it has three close relations.44 The first is from a Syriac update of a Greek cycle attributed (falsely) to Alexander’s court historian Callisthenes. This original work is most likely a product of an Egyptian writing in Greek in the second

42 In Daniel 8, the figure of the horned Alexander is mockingly and terribly demonized: here “the King of the Greeks” is a unicorn-goat who brings havoc to the world.
43 Bruno Meissner, Alexander Und Gilgamos (Leipzig: Druck von A. Pries, 1894); Brannon Wheeler, “Moses or Alexander? Early Islamic Exegesis of Qurʾān 18:60-65,” Journal of Near Eastern Studies 57 (1998), 191-215. Note that Gilgamesh too is often equated with a horned animal, as the epic repeatedly calls him “the wild bull” who “battles like an ox.” His journey down the solar road into the underworld is prompted by his and Enkidu’s slaying of the bull of heaven, thus twice relating a horned solar deity to the descent into the nether-realm.
century of the Christian era. Some version(s) of this Greek text was translated into heavily redacted composite Christian versions. This Syriac edition of the Romance which is closest in form to the Qurʾān’s pericope has come to be called “A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander” by scholarly convention. However, this account was probably composed after the year 628, and therefore it is more contemporaneous with the Qurʾān than whatever was already known to the very early hearers. The second close relation to the Qurʾānic pericope of the Two-Horned One is the Song of Alexander, which is also falsely attributed; in this case to Jacob of Serugh. The Song is most likely a response to the “Christian Legend,” and so postdates it — placing its dating at least a century after Jacob’s death and a decade or two after Muḥammad’s. Third, there is a medieval Ethiopian version of the story (see above) which is descended from a now-lost, Persian original, and itself often parallels the Qurʾānic and Syriac materials in plot and detail. Besides these, there are other, older stories too, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, which can tell us something of whichever story of the Two-Horned One the Qurʾān expects of its audience. But again, how these all fit together into the Qurʾān’s conversation is problematic.

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45 Budge, Alexander the Great, xix.
46 Originally published under this name in E.A. Budge, The History of Alexander the Great, Being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1889), 144-158.
47 Gerrit J. Reink, “Heraclius, the New Alexander. Apocalyptic Prophecies During the Reign of Heraclius,” in The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation, ed. G.J. Reink and B.H. Stolte (Dudley, Massachusetts: Peeters, 2002), 26. cf. van Bladel, “The Alexander Legend,” 185. Van Bladel argues that the story of the Two-Horned Alexander in the Qurʾān is dependent upon the “Christian Legend,” and therefore enters the Qurʾān either at the very end of the Prophet's lifetime or later. While this is possible, it is only a guess. By the author's own admission this would mean that the “Christian Legend” (which he convincingly says is pro-Byzantine propaganda) was “very well known soon after its publication,” and yet was immediately de-politicized, repurposed, and assumed so familiar to the Qurʾānic audience that it is a “remembrance.” Also, this does not explain how elements from the Song of Alexander which do not appear in the “Christian Legend” but do appear in the Qurʾān (e.g. the Mosaic episode of the fish in verses 60-64) could have developed (another problem the author himself notes). The author says that the pericope fully lacks Syriac loanwords, which also raises questions about his conclusion. The locations of certain key events are different in the tales, too. Finally, the “Christian Legend” never uses names like Two-Horned One for Alexander (and only refers once to the horns in passing) or Gog and Magog as a generic name for the Huns. The Qurʾān always uses these names and never mentions ‘Alexander’ or ‘Huns.’ Van Bladel’s overall conclusion then, while possible, is a cum hoc ergo propter hoc. It seems more likely that the story living in the Qurʾān’s conversation shares a common ancestor with the two Syriac stories, but that it developed from this common root through a different (primarily oral?) lineage.
48 Ibid., 163-200.
50 Ibid., 176.
and requires further exploration. For this project though, precise textual relationships are not our major concern. I would simply like to note these other accounts for intertextual morphological comparison to our ring structural analysis.

When the pericope of the Two-Horned One\(^5\) is translated into a ring structure, we see two clean halves of the story. The first is the three adventures of the hero and the second the building of a barrier that will last until the apocalypse. The central pivot is the junction of these two halves when the three journeys' pattern overlaps with the introduction of the barrier to keep out Gog and Magog (Ya'jūj wa Ma'jūj). Such narrative overlap is often the sign of a pivot. Also, like many of the pivots in Qur’ānic rings, the center turns around a conversation in which one speaker makes a problematic statement and is corrected by another. (We will see more of both of these trends presently.)

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<th>The Two-Horned One (al-Kahf 18:83-101)</th>
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We must ask ourselves three questions about this translation. First, what does reading the pericope in this way tell us about the meaning of the story? Second, how does this connect with the story of the Sleepers in the first half of the same sūra-ring? Third, how does the reading of the full sūra-ring (both the Sleepers and Two-Horned One together) fit into the whole sūra as governed by the central pivot and the first sūra-ring (the prohibition against worshipping God’s signs and prophets)?

To arrive at these ends, let us go through the pericope step-by-step.

\(^5\) As the Qur’ān never employs the name Alexander (al-Iskandar) I will not use it when discussing the Qur’ānic story, as there is no reason to assume that the Qur’ānic audience knew the given name of this figure.
The pericope is governed by a framing structure of pericope-rings around a pivot, each half of which surrounds one set of sub-pericope-rings. The first of the pericope-rings forms the introduction and conclusion.

83. They ask you about the Two-Horned One. Say: “I shall recite to you a remembrance (dhikr) of him.”

84. Surely We established (makkannā) him on the earth (ard) and We gave him a course to everything (al-Kahf 18:83-84).

101. Whose eyes were covered from My remembrance (dhikrī) and (who) were not capable (of) hearing (samʿa) (al-Kahf 18:101).

The pericope of the Two-Horned One begins and ends with “remembrance” (dhikr), thus equating remembering the story of the Two-Horned One (83) with remembering God (101).

This same thought — that meditation on one of God's emissaries is a reminder of God — also loops us back to the conclusion of the Sleepers' pericope in the first half of this sūra-ring. At the end of the Sleepers' story, it is God who is the best at seeing and hearing: “To Him (belongs) the unseen of the heavens and the earth. How well He sees and hears! They have no one-to-turn-to other than Him, and He does not associate (yushrik) anyone in His judgment” (26). The temptation to turn to one of God's saints for help besides God is nullified because the Sleepers' ears are blocked up (11). The dead do not hear anything, but God hears everything. In the conclusion of the Sleepers' pericope's pairing, the story of the Two-Horned One, the action of associating other beings with God (shirk) is transposed with the name of such an association: disbelief. The closing of this sūra- and pericope-ring defines disbelief in contrast to the seeing and hearing of God, just as shirk was earlier. The disbelievers are those “whose eyes were covered from My remembrance and (who) were not capable (of) hearing (samʿa)” (101). The root S-M-ʿ is especially telling here, as it appears in al-Kahf only in these two places,

52 sabab: literally a "rope," but here more a way to a particular end, hence a "course" cf. AED, 415.
both at the end of pericopes, and both in counter distinction to people who have hearing problems of some kind. Here is the pivot of the Two-Horned One's pericope:

92. Then he followed a course,
93. Until, when he arrived (at the place) between the two barricades (saddayn), he found on this side of them a people hardly able to understand (his) speech.
94. They said, “O Two-Horned One, surely Gog and Magog are fomenting corruption on the earth (ard).53 Shall we pay tribute to you on (the condition) that you construct a barrier between us and them?”
95. He said, “What my Lord has established (makkani)54 me with is better. Help me with a force, (and) I shall construct a rampart between you and them” (al-Kahf 18:92–95).

Whether we are supposed to take the people of the two barriers' inability to easily comprehend the Two-Horned One as a linguistic difficulty or a hearing impairment is not defined. As the hero then immediately goes on to have a conversation with them (apparently without problems), it is not an unresolvable issue either way. Quite significantly, like the Sleepers, the people of the two barricades are either literally or symbolically in some intermediate place at the mountainous edge of the world.

The “two barricades” (saddayn) could also be read as “two mountains,”55 which again points us back to the Sleepers' location in the mountains of the horizon. Also, as the deafened Sleepers in their prophetic functions attempt to bring payment to the people (19), so do these other liminal people conversely offer a payment to the prophetic figure (95). Therefore, if these people at the edge of the world are the inverted parallels of the Sleepers, a pattern emerges. Unbelief and associating partners to God is the crime of those who will not listen (26, 101). Those God sends (like the Sleepers, 11) and those who follow the messengers (like the people of the two barricades, 93) have only a limited ability

53 A connection back to the first pericope-ring. As the Two-Horned One was established on the earth (84), so are Gog and Magog reprobates on the earth (94).
54 The verb “to establish” appears no where else in the sūra except in the 84 and 95, thus making a second link to the opening of the pericope from the center.
55 AED, 428. cf. Emeri von Donzel and Andrea Schmidt, Gog and Magog in Early Eastern Christian and Islamic Sources (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 53.
to hear because they are barricaded away in liminality (the stamped ears, 9-11; the barriers of the earth, 93). The only one-to-turn-to, the true God, always sees and hears (26, 101).

The sūra-ring of the Sleepers and the Two-Horned one is particularly concerned with limits and boundaries: what one can see and not, hear and not, know and not know, where one can go and not go, and when these limits will come to an end. As we shall soon see, this is the larger theme of all the exempla of Sūrat al-Kahf; the second and third sūra-rings which form the whole system's mantle layers. The Sleepers' pericope points out the edges of human knowledge regarding life and death: the debate over the number of the Sleepers and the duration of their stay; the nature of their sleep and our ability or not to understand God's signs; the accessibility/inaccessibility of the underworld to the living. As the Sleepers' account forms the sūra's epistemological concerns with the afterlife, so the Two-Horned One's pericope rightly fleshes out the temporospatial boundaries of the Qur'ān's eschatological cosmology.

The two smaller concentric structures of this pericope are, 1.) the adventures of the Two-Horned One to the two opposite ends of the earth, and 2.) his construction of a barrier and his prophecy of its final ends. The second sub-pericope-ring indicates this cosmology's borders in time, while the first is in space. This first sub-pericope-ring which measures the boundaries of the Qur'ānic earth reads:

85. He followed a course,
86. Until, when he reached the setting of the sun (maghrib), he found it setting (taghrub) in a muddy spring ('ayn), and he found next to it a people. We said, "Two-Horned One! Either punish them or do them (some) good" (al-Kahf 18:85-86).

87. He said, "As for the one who does evil, we shall punish him. Then he will be returned to his Lord, and He will punish him (with) a terrible punishment.
88. But as for the one who believes, and does righteousness, for him (there is) the good payment, and we shall speak to him something easy from our command" (al-Kahf 18:87-88).
89. Then he followed a course,
90. Until, when he reached the rising (matli’) (place) of the sun, he found it rising (taṭlu’) on a people for whom We had not provided any shelter (sitr) from it.
91. So (it was), but We had already encompassed what his situation was in (Our) awareness (al-Kahf 18:89-91).

Even in the English translation, this sequence is easily defined by the variations on “he followed a course, until when he reached...” (faʾatbaʾa sababan ḥattā idhā balagha...85, 89, with 91 marking the start of the pivot, above). Like the solar mythologies which surround Alexander, the Two-Horned One is following the path of the sun, albeit apparently in reverse. The Two-Horned One is moving from the setting of the sun, to its rising, to the two mountain-barriers where he seals in Gog and Magog.

How this journey could be plotted out on a map is debatable and has effects on our ring translation, but we can make some observations. The Qurʾānic earth floats on a great ocean.56 Like a scroll, the earth wants to roll up, and so God used the mountains to pin the world in place.57 The mountains encircle the earth and so mark the horizon.58 The sun rises into the living world over the eastern edge of these mountains and sets near (or into) a pool of muck in the West. If the cosmos which the Qurʾān expects of its audience is comparable to what is seen in the Syriac versions of the Alexander cycle,59 this means that the Two-Horned One left the world of ordinary people by following

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58 The details of the sun's road from the fetid sea to the place of the sunrise and its passing through the mountains is slightly more detectable in the Syriac “Christian Legend” and Song of Alexander, in Budge, The History of Alexander the Great, 148-152; 178.
59 Ibid., 145. In the “Christian Legend” we are told that the earth is at the center of a concentric cosmos. The earth is surrounded by the mountains, which are then surrounded by the eleven seas, which are surrounded by a narrow strip of land, which is surrounded by the fetid sea (the ocean). Although the “Christian Legend” takes Alexander to the fetid sea as the Qurʾān does with the Two-Horned One, there is in indication in the former that this is the place of the sun's setting. Also in the Syriac material the Huns reside at the northern pass in the ring of mountains. Alexander is traveling by boat in the eleven navigable seas beyond the mountains but before the strip of land that belts them. The Qurʾān appears to be working with a similar cosmos, although there is no indication that Gog and Magog are Huns (and thus are in the North).
the sun into the West, where his way was blocked by a filthy pool. In the Syriac “Christian Legend,” Alexander is halted by a fetid sea, and so to test its effects on living people he sends convicts into it who promptly die. In the Qurʾān, the punishment of these people is implied, but in keeping with Qurʾānic eschatology, true torment is left to God not a mere human being (87-88).

How the Two-Horned One then moves from the absolute West of the world to its absolute East is not spelled out. The Qurʾān could intend to suggest that when the Two-Horned One arrived at the western end of the earth he was halted, as the Syriac texts say. In order to continue, he followed the edge of the world disk down to the absolute South and then eventually he arrived in the sun’s rising place in the East. From here he would then continue to turn north until he reached the pass through the mountains where Gog and Magog reside in the northernmost part of the earth (where he would turn again heading south). Or, if the Two-Horned One backtracked, he went to the far West, back over the whole world to the far East, and then headed northeast until he arrived at the lands of Gog and Magog.

Or, if the Qurʾān’s assumed version of the story is closer to the Gilgamesh epic, and it is possible to cross over or around the pool of muck as Gilgamesh crossed the sea of death, the Two-Horned One is circumnavigating the earth by passing underneath it. This third option is perhaps more in line with the Qurʾānic text itself, as the three repetitions of “he followed a course, until…” imply a single forward progression with three stops, rather than a series of turns and detours. This can also account for the Qurʾānic vision of a “spring” rather than a “sea,” as the latter would more likely impede the journey than the former. This would mean that the Two-Horned One is continuously heading west

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60 Budge, The History of Alexander the Great, 147-148. In the Song of Alexander this sea is merely too foul to be approached. In the Gilgamesh stories there is a comparable sea of death (Tablet X-XII).

61 Some have concluded that the hero’s “course” (sabab) is miraculous teleportation, “reminiscent of the wormholes of modern science fiction,” Carl Ernst, How to Read the Qurʾan, 133. While the Qurʾān certainly suggests that the nature of the Two-Horned One’s travels is marvelous, and perhaps even miraculous, the use of Late Antique versions of Einstein-Rosen bridges is unlikely. Verse 84 implies that the Two-Horned One’s sabab is something remarkable that God has allowed him to use, rather than a miraculous power.
without turning (like the sun), and passing under the living world arrives next (where the sun reenters the world) in the distant East. Further, the placement of this line here rather than at the end of the hero’s travels hints that at this point he has completed his circuit of the world. Then, the Two-Horned One, still moving in a straight line, would pass through the mountains that encircle the living world (the two barriers, 92). There he builds his barricade, and is ostensibly shutting the door to the underworld behind himself. This route would also put Gog and Magog in the East — an unusual but not unheard of detail.62

If, like Gilgamesh, the Two-Horned One is traveling around the earth in a single direction antipodal to the sun’s path without variation, which seems most probable, this accords better with both the ring structure of the sub-pericope-ring and the sūra-ring. On the sub-pericope level, there is obvious paralleling between the sun’s rising and setting places (86, 89) and the “people” (qawm, 86, 90) “he found” (wajada, 86, 90) in each. By any reading, it is also easy to see a relationship between the West, the setting sun, and death. The “muddy spring” where the sun sets in verse 86 is this relationship manifested as a narrative location.

What about the people of the East? In verse 90, the Qurʾān only tells us that these people were not given “shelter” or “covering” (sitr) from the sun. Unlike the people near the muck and the people of the two barricades, the people without concealment are not commented upon by the Qurʾān. The lack

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62 Placing Gog and Magog in the East (near the people unsheltered from the sun) rather than the North (where the Huns are) is found in the Syriac Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius (circa 690). “It is not in the North but the East that Alexander encounters these impure people, in a land called ‘the Fire of the Sun’ ” Donzel and Schmidt, Gog and Magog, 28. Presumably a central Arabian version of the Alexander epic would be less concerned with the threat of invading hyperboreans than the “Christian Legend” which was written in Mesopotamia, and therefore the Arabian story would not need to think of Gog and Magog as being northerners. Al-Muqaddasi (d. 991) also puts the barricade in the East. The Best Division For Knowledge of the Regions, trans. Basil Collins (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1897), 32. Much later, the 12th century Chronicle of Michael the Syrian tries to reconcile the discrepancy of these details: “their habitat extends from the sunrise to the extreme North [...],” ibid., 32. Andrew Runni Anderson likewise interprets the Qurʾān passage: “The Gate, instead of being built [in the] North [...] is built apparently somewhere in the remote Northeast [...]” Anderson as a Latin scholar is dependent on Sale’s translation of the Qurʾān, (which includes line 91 translated as “And he prosecuted his journey from south to north” from ¿ثُمَّ أَخْرَجَهُ بِمَأْعَالِيْهِ مِنْ غَيْبَتِهِ بِجَبَالٍ) so the author’s unfounded inclusion of the North into the Qurʾānic narrative is not unexpected. Alexander’s Gate, Gog and Magog, and the Inclosed Nations (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Medieval Academy of America, 1932), 29.
of elaboration suggests an intracultural reference. The audience must have already known what they needed to know about the unsheltered oriental people in this line. In the Syriac “Christian Legend Concerning Alexander,” contemporaneous to the Qurʾānic milieu, we can get some more information that may be applicable. “The place of [the sun’s] rising is over the sea, and the people who dwell there, when he is about to rise, flee away and hide themselves in the sea, that they be not burnt by his rays [...]” 63 If the Qurʾānic conversation’s implied version of the Two-Horned One’s adventure includes details like this, then a solution presents itself. The people in the opening of the sub-pericope-ring

63 Budge, The History of Alexander the Great, 148. cf. Revelation 16:14-16: “The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?’”
enter the pool of muck and die (86), while those who enter the sea at the close of the structure are spared (90). Between this vision of the western waters of death and the eastern sea of deliverance is the statement of divine judgment: torment for the guilty and protection for the righteous (87-88). This ring's pivot warns of the world to come, and encircles its warning with two spatial extremes of mortal life and death.

The above citation from the “Christian Legend,” also brings us back to the opening of the sūra-ring: the People of the Cave. The same line from the “Christian Legend” above continues:

“[…] and [the sun] passes through the midst of the heavens to the place where he enters the window of heaven [passes beneath the horizon]; and wherever he passes there are terrible mountains, and those who dwell there have caves hollowed out in the rocks, and as soon as they see the sun passing, men and birds flee away and hide in the caves.”

If the Qurʾān's suggested cosmology is anything like this Syriac legend, and the Qurʾānic reference to the Two-Horned One means to remind us of two different groups of people who dwell in the eastern regions of the world, then this fully links together with many of the otherwise specifically Qurʾānic details of the Sleepers’ story. The Sleepers are exposed in a mountain cave, and like shades in the underworld they move by the path of the sun (17). If you saw them you would flee (18). In the Syriac story we first see that the people on the eastern shores of the earth hide in the water and thus survive the sun's burning. Then the Syriac account skips ahead to the sun's path in the underworld. Like the Sleepers, the people in the “Christian Legend's” underworld are also uncovered. Their movements are also dictated by the sun. But while the Sleepers in their cave are the objects of horror, these people themselves are horrorstruck and flee into their caves, rather than away from them. The geography implied by the Qurʾān puts the uncovered people in the liminal space of the sunrise beyond the edges of our world. But, in contrast to the “Christian Legend” where the Huns are coming from the North, in the Qurʾān the people who are plagued by Gog and Magog are put in the East along with the

\[64\] Ibid. Many of the Islamic exegetes mention similar details in their exegesis of al-Kahf 18:90-92. Muqatil ibn Sulaymān mentions they flew into their homes in the earth like swarms. Several exegetes, including Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), cite a tradition of Qatada ibn al-Nu'mān in which these people lived in tunnels.
uncovered people. Thus there are two Easts being mentioned, and two eastern peoples: one people who hide from the sun (like in the Syriac underworld) on the far side of the mountains, and the other on our side of the mountains, as it were.

So when we arrive at the pivot of the pericope-ring of the Two-Horned One where this third group is introduced, the two halves of the sūra-ring fold together. In the first half of the pericope of the Two-Horned One we meet people who both directly and by inversion remind us of the Companions of the Cave. And in the pericope of the Companions of the Cave we meet Sleepers who foreshadow the dying people of the muck, the cave-dwellers who move by the path of the sun, and the hearing-impaired people who live within the boundary zone of two worlds. To restate, the first sub-pericope-ring of the Two-Horned One's system gives us an eschatologically oriented map of the world. The West is aligned with the setting of the sun and death. It is therefore apt that here is also where we see the sub-system's reference to filth: this passage to the underworld is marked by a muddy pool as the Sleepers' entrance is marked by a defiling dog. In the East we find opposing symbols: the rising of the sun and the deliverance from death. Finally, also in the East but within the geography of the living, another group of people are tormented as well. They are delivered by a barrier which keeps the fearful outer limits of creation from bringing havoc to the waking world.

Similar to the encounter with the Huns in the Syriac versions of the Alexander legend, the Qurʾān closes the story of the Two-Horned One with the barricade of Gog and Magog and the prophecy of its fall. This forms the second sub-pericope-ring of the system, and marks the temporal boundaries of the sūra's eschatological cosmology.

96. “Bring me (ātīnī) sheets (zubar) of iron!” — Until, when he had made level the gap between the mountainsides, he said, “Blow!” — Until, when he had made it a fire, he said, “Bring me (ātīnī) molten-copper to pour over it” (al-Kahf 18:96).

97. So they were not able to surmount it (yašhāriḥū), nor were they able to penetrate it.
He said, “This is a mercy from my Lord. But when the promise of my Lord comes, He will shatter it. The promise of my Lord is true” (al-Kahf 18:97-98).

We shall leave some of them on that Day crashing into (yamūj) each other, and there will be a blast on the horn, and We shall gather them all together.

And We shall present (ʿaradnā) Gehenna on that Day to disbelievers [as a] display (ʿard) (al-Kahf 18:99-100).

This system is rounded off with the root N-F-Kh, ‘blowing’ or ‘breathing’. The door of Gog and Magog was sealed up with the command of the Two-Horned One to “Blow!” (unfukhū, 96). And on the Last Day, the door will open again when the horn will “blast” (nufikh, 99). The action that created the barricade in the distant past will also signal its collapse in the future. Similarly, the closing of the mountain pass by which the Two-Horned One has come from the underworld (or environments which strongly suggest the underworld) reminds the hearer that the adventurer’s “course” to everything (84) has now been shut off. As God granted him (ātūnāhu) this course, here the metals that the hero asks to be granted (ātūnī, 96) will seal off that course until the end of time. The world beyond the realm of the living is no longer accessible. The ears of the people in the liminal world are shut; their comprehension confused. Those beyond the bounds of the earth cannot interact with the world of the living, and neither can the living meddle with the dead.

After taking account of the central pivot story of Adam and Iblūs, along with the first and fourth sūra-rings, an even more complete message comes out. Living people cannot leave the world because they are barred out of whatever lies beyond. Neither can any power from outside of the living world intrude into it. But, there is one exception which both crosses the space between the two worlds and reinforces their separation: revelation. In the very beginning, middle, and end of Sūrat al-Kahf, the role of the prophets was minimized as the function of revelation was emphasized.

Cf. Joshua 6, Revelation 8.
In the pericope of the Two-Horned One, the passage between the world and the underworld is sealed with metals. The wall he builds is of iron and molten-copper (96). These details have parallels in the biblical lore and in the Syriac sources on Alexander, however, as with other elements in a *bricolage*, we should take special note of distinct structures and turns of phrase. First the Two-Horned One asks for “sheets” (*zubur*) of iron to build the barricade (96). That he asks for iron in a paper-like form is telling. In the Sleepers’ pericope, there is another piece of metal which suggests a writing of some kind. The Sleepers are told to bring their *wariq* to the people, and by this action the people are informed of God’s sign up in the mountain cave (19). Normally this *wariq* is interpreted as “[gold/silver] coinage” and this is comparable to the Christian tellings of the legend. Yet we can also understand *wariqikum* as “your leaf” of paper, as it is understood in every other Qurʾānic appearance of the root. This is the Sleepers in their prophetic role, bringing a precious, bookish something to their people that they may believe in what it signifies. As finding the Sleepers made some people believe in God’s arrangement (*waʿd*, 21), now the Two-Horned One’s barricade shows how that arrangement (*waʿd*) comes to pass (98). Both the iron and the coinage carry the implication of something written or otherwise presented like a writing which either reveals or conceals. And both metal writings call to mind the passage to the underworld: the barricade’s sheets are *Totentüsse*; the coinage, ‘Charon’s obol’ or a *viaticum*.

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66 Cf. Deuteronomy 33:25-26; 1 Chronicles 22:3 and 14; Job 20:24-29 and 41:27; Psalms 107:16; Isaiah 45:1-3; Jeremiah 15:20; and especially Daniel 2:39-40, and Daniel 7 in reference to the iron and bronze as symbols of Alexander the Great.


Then there are second metallic allusions in both passages. The Two-Horned One's barricade is made of scrolls of iron, but it is sealed with flaming copper.\(^{69}\) The Qur'ānic equation of fire to Hell is ubiquitous, and appears in this pericope-ring as the parallel between the fired metal of verse 96 and the close of the ring's introduction of Hell at verse 100. (This symbolism will appear again in Šūrat al-Kahf, verse 29, below.) This finds its match with the sealant to the Sleepers' cave — our Islamic Cerberus, or as Hesiod says, “the bronze barking-dog of Hades.”\(^{70}\) Even if the dog is not made of metal in the Qur'ānic audience's story then there is a fifth possible metallic material in the mix. This is present in the sūra's most obscure element, the Raqīm, which could quite probably be an inscription in lead which both indicates the Sleepers' resting place and verifies the miracle. If this reading stands, and it is certainly in accord with the Syriac traditions,\(^{71}\) it would hook back onto and explain the “sheets of iron.” In other versions of the Alexander cycle, the barricade is also sealed with an inscription in metal. For instance, here is the Ethiopian Christian story. Note the relationship of the barrier-door to writing, lead, the apocalypse, blowing fire, and even a dog:

Now when Alexander had finished the work of the gate he closed it firmly, and sealed it, and covered it over and protected it [...] And he wrote in lead above the door in Greek characters [...] “The nations shall gather themselves together every year, and at every season, and at every time, and shall seek to open this gate [...] And at the end of ten thousand [years] which shall pass by, the nations shall perish, and the marvelous things which are in all the world will come to an end, for there shall be none of them left, and there shall not be left a man to blow the fire, nor a dog to defile a wall.”\(^{72}\)

These references to revelatory, barring, and damning metals each are paired with a central pivot which they flank. The Sleepers' coinage and their Raqīm reveal them as God's signs, and although they are exposed to the sun, they are shut into their sleeping-death by a Hellhound — a mark of decay and defiling death. The Two-Horned One travels beyond the edge of the earth marked

\(^{69}\) It might also be understood that overlaying iron with copper would be an act of building a dam, as iron is strong but copper does not rust in salt water. This detail does appear in other material related to Alexander, although often in other contexts. See A. J. Wensinck, *The Ocean in the Literature of the Western Semites* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1918), 30.

\(^{70}\) *Theogony* 31


by muck and exposure to the sun, and is offered money to create a barrier of revealing, burning metals. The iron, the coins, (and probably the Raqīm) are prophecy as revealing. The copper and the dog are prophecy are a warning. And so, at the pivot of the end of the entire sūra, Hell is the reward (106) for those who do not say, though God as written more words with more ink then held by the seas (109), that the messengers are only human (110). And in the pivot of the whole system of the sūra, there is the irreligion of Iblis (50-51), which is followed right away with the promise of Hellfire (52-53) for those who did not accept “this recitation” (54).

Part 5: The First Half of the Third Sūra-Ring: The Course of the Water
(Recollections of Isaiah 5, al-Kahf 18:27-46)

The first half of the third sūra-ring of al-Kahf functions slightly differently than any other section of the system. Rather than having one consistent plot divided into episodes, this pericope is three distinct episodes that are bound together only by reference, theme, and structure. The first of these episodes is an eschatological homily, while the second and third are self-described parables. Yet, in a ring composition, it becomes apparent that they do form one complete unit. They reflect each other, and fit quite well into the larger structures of the sūra-ring and the sūra. Each section echoes Isaiah 5 in some indirect fashion, but the full pericope does not obey Isaiah’s sequencing or clear political message. Other passages from the Psalms and the gospel of Luke (or Tatian’s Diatessaron) appear to be moving in the background as well. The resulting bricolage is one pericope that is composed of a sermon about damnation and salvation (27-31); a re-invention of “The Song of the Vineyard” from Isaiah 5 (32-44); and a parable about rain which reproduces Psalms 103, as well as Isaiah 5 (45-46).73

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Some significant terms and images bind this set together, exposing it as a single unit. There is the opening and closing restatement of “the adornment of the life of this world” or “the splendor of this present life” (28, 46), and “the truth” (29, 44). All three sections employ “decoration”: the clothing of the blessed (thiyyāb, 31), and their reward (thawāb, 31, 44, 46). Likewise, each of the sub-pericope divisions make mention of water (the infernal drink at 29; the celestial rivers at 31; the river at 33 and 41; the rain from heaven at 45) and plants (the garden of Paradise at 31; the two gardens at 32–35 and 39–40; the fruit at 32, 34, and 42; and the plants of the earth at 45).

This section begins with preaching about final rewards and punishments, composed of two sets of sub-pericope-parallels running from 27 to 31. The first of these reinforces the theme of recitation from the divine record, and compares/contrasts this to those who call out to God for the wrong reasons.

27. Recite what you have been inspired (with) of the Record of your Lord. No one can change His words, and you will find no refuge other than Him (al-Kahf 18:27).

28. Be patient within yourself with those who call on their Lord in the morning and the evening, desiring His face, and do not let your eyes turn away from them, desiring the (passing) splendor of this present life. Do not obey (anyone) whose heart We have made oblivious of Our remembrance, and (who only) follows his desire and whose concern is (only) excess (al-Kahf 18:28).

The people who call out to God because they seek worldly ends are to be ignored by those who know that it is in fact God who is calling out to them. The following set of parallels confirms and inverts the opening. Those who asked to see God’s face and for material goods — say, water to drink — will get
the reverse of what they ask for: water like molten metal thrown in their own faces. While those who remembered God and heard His call and thus lived in virtue will be given heavenly waters, vestments, and other plenties far greater than the sinners' earthly desires.

29. Say, “The truth is from your Lord. Whoever pleases, let him believe, and whoever pleases, let him disbelieve” Surely We have prepared a Fire for the evildoers — its walls (surādiqahā) will encompass (ahāt) them. If they call for help, they will be helped with water like melted-metal (muhl) (which) will scald their faces. Evil is the drink and evil the resting place! (al-Kahf 18:29).

30. Surely those who believe and do righteous deeds — surely We do not allow the reward of anyone who does a good deed to go to waste.

31. Those — for them (there are) Gardens of Eden through which rivers flow. There they will be adorned with bracelets of gold, and they will wear green clothes of silk and brocade, reclining there on couches. Excellent is the reward, and good the resting place! (al-Kahf 18:30-31).

As stated above, the center of this pericope is a bricolage of “The Song of the Vineyard” from the book of Isaiah, chapter 5. The story of the Hebrew prophet also serves to expose the unity of the entire pericope. For instance, the preaching parallelisms we have seen already mention “those who call their Lord in the mornings and in the evening longing for His face” (28). This is a new presentation of Isaiah 5:11-12, which also equates people active in the early and late hours with lust after worldly concerns.

Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine. They have harps and lyres at their banquets, pipes and timbrels and wine, but they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord, no respect for the work of His hands.

Like this section of the Qur’an, Luke 12 is also a bricolage of Isaiah 5, and so Christ too contrasts worldly and heavenly concerns. Included in the gospel narrative are references to the clothing and abundance that God will provide for the righteous. This may be the suggested thought behind the

74 muhl: specifically burning copper, but any molten metal generally. It may also be an ironic quasi-pun on related terms like mahhala and amhala (“to grant respite,” “reprieve,” “relief”), see AED, 903.
Qur’anic detail of green clothing and reclining on couches.

Then Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes [...] Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will He clothe you — you of little faith!
And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it [...] It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.”

The center of the Qur’anic pericope (32-44) addresses the opening narrative of the “Song of the Vineyard” (Isaiah 5:1-7). The Isaiah passage reads:

I will sing for the One I love a song about His vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then He looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done for My vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines He delighted in. And He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

When we turn to the Qur’an, we notice that the political allegory of Israel and Judah has been replaced by the more linear story of two unnamed men. The Qur’anic presentation of this material consists of a concentric structure, which like the example we have seen with the Two-Horned One (92-95), is in orbit around a conversational pivot where one speaker corrects another (36-38). In a similar fashion this also forms the central pivot of a pericope. The full section can be formed into a sub-pericope-ring and a pivot thus:

32. Strike for them a parable of two men: We made for one of them two gardens of grapes, and We surrounded both with date-palms, and we placed between them (a field of) crops.
33. Each of the two gardens produced its fruit and did not fail in any way. And We caused a river to gush forth between them.

And he had fruit. So he said to his companion, while he was talking with him, "I am greater than you in wealth, and mightier (a‘zz) in family."

And he entered his garden, doing himself evil. (for) he said, "I do not think that this will ever perish, (al-Kahf 18:32-35).

Nor do I think the Hour is coming (qāymat). If indeed I am returned to my Lord, I shall indeed find a better (place of) return than this." (al-Kahf 18:36-38).

Why did you not say, when you entered your garden, 'What God pleases,' (for there is) no power (qawwā) except in God! If you see me as inferior to you in wealth and children, it may be that my Lord will give me (something) better than your garden, and send (yursīl) on it a reckoning from the sky, so that it becomes slippery ground.

Or its water sinks (into the earth) (ghawrā), so that you will not be able to find it;" (al-Kahf 18:39).

And (all) his fruits were overwhelmed, and in the morning he began wringing his hands (ka‘fīhī) over what he had spent on it, (for) it had collapsed on its trellises ('urūshīhā), and he said, "I wish I had not associated anyone with my Lord!"

But there was no cohort to help him (yunṣurūnahu), other than God, and he was helpless (muntasīr).

In such a case protection (belongs only) to God, the True One. He is best in reward, and best in final outcome (al-Kahf 18:39-44).

The sub-pericope-ring for this section is marked by a set of terms and images which are introduced in the first half and then are represented in reverse order in the second. In the first half of the structure

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76 Literally, moving into a ‘cave or a cavern. Compare the Syriac/Aramaic mē‘ārā (‘cave,’ especially “a burial place”), Hebrew mā‘ārā (‘cave’). CLS, 310-311.

77 This term has two implications. It can be read as a garden trellis which serves as a fencing, as the passage indicates earlier, serving as a barrier between the two gardens. Also, it can be read more literally as a seating place for plants: their ‘arsh, (‘seat,’ or ‘throne; Syriac/Aramaic ‘arsā). ibid, 285.

78 It should be noted that this root N-Ŝ-R, which is here associated with the wicked man who thought he could rely on “help” from other than God, is the same root the Qur‘ān uses to refer to Christians. As the opening of the sāra does indeed direct itself at those who say ‘God has taken a son’ (4), it is possible that the Qur‘ān is drawing a relationship between materialism and Christian claims about the Sonship of Christ. Is the Qur‘ān suggesting that Christians are defined by their belief in intercessional “help” coming from other than God?
we see fruit (33), a river (nahar, 33), wealth (māl, 34), strength (aʿazz, 34), and the first man speaking while entering the garden (35). In the second half, this pattern unwinds itself as we hear what the first man should have spoken while entering the garden (39). Then there is reference to strength (qawwa, 39), wealth (māl, 39), water (41), and fruit (42). Also the act of granting or bringing food in 33 (ātat) foresees something even better God will grant to the righteous man in 40 (yuʿtiyanī). The construction of the phrases also mirrors wealth and “family” (nafar, 34) with wealth and “children” (walad, 39).

Regarding the content of the system when translated into this ring structure, the centrality of the lines 36-38 tell us the thrust of the passage is the ultimate creative power of God. Like the central pivot of the whole sūra — the account of final judgment encircling the story of Adam and Iblis — this center hinges between the Resurrection (36) and first creation of humanity (38), with the exact pivot landing on the reversal of topics as the speakers switch (37). Also, like the sūra’s outermost ring and its center, the moral command of the passage is a warning against associating other things with God (38). But here, rather than making cultic idols out of prophets (as in sūra-ring one and the center) or the supernatural forces beyond the living world (as in sūra-ring two), the objects of false worship are the riches of the earth. Food, water, wealth, kith, and kin all appear in this sub-pericope ring, but are absent in the center. And in the center are the matters of ultimate concern: the Lordship of God, the falseness of associations with God, the first creation, and the Last Day. In other words, while the stories of the Sleepers and the Two-Horned One were concerned with the false gods of supernatural powers, the story of the men with their gardens focuses on the false gods of earthly powers, such as wealth, greed, and fertility.

The final segment of the first half of the third sūra-ring is composed of a second parable. Again there are more recollections of Isaiah 5 and Luke 12, as well as Psalms 103.70 Isaiah says:

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70 Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Quran* (London, Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), 87-88.
Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their roots will decay and their flowers blow away like dust; for they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel. Yet for all this, His anger is not turned away, His hand is still upraised. He lifts up a banner for the distant nations, He whistles for those at the ends of the earth. Here they come, swiftly and speedily! Not one of them grows tired or stumbles, not one slumbers or sleeps [...]

While the Psalm reads in part:

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him; for He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear Him, and His righteousness with their children’s children — with those who keep His covenant and remember to obey His precepts. The Lord has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all.

And the Qurʾān says:

\[45\text{. Strike for them a parable of this present life: (It is) like water which We send down from the sky, and the vegetation of the earth mingles with it, and it becomes stubble which the winds scatter. God is powerful over everything.}\]

\[46\text{. Wealth and sons are the (passing) splendor of this present life, but the things that endure — righteous deeds — are better in reward with your Lord, and better in hope (al-Kahf 18:45-46).}\]

The message at the center pivot of this pericope tells us that the creative energies of the world (in the first creation, in this life, and in final Resurrection) belong to God. To forget this is an act of association with God; to confuse material and social goods with the One who is the source of them all. Hence is the question as to whether the man (“you”) disbelieve in that which created you from dust, then from a sperm-drop, then leveled you out as man? But for the pious one, “He is God, my Lord, and I do not associate anyone with my Lord” (36-38). In the opening of the pericope, those who beg God for the “(passing) splendor of this present life” are contrasted against the recitations of God which disprove the power of secondary divine protections: “Recite what you have been inspired (with) of the record of you Lord. No one changes His words, and you will find no refuge other than Him” (27). Here at the end

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80 Isaiah 5:24-27.
of the pericope, the circle is closed. Although God has indeed granted the bounties of mortal life, they belong to this world, while virtue and obedience will carry on beyond this life. “Wealth and sons are the (passing) splendor of this present life, but the things that endure — righteous deeds — are better in reward with your Lord, and better in hope” (46). Yes, God has given people abundance in belongings — such as well-watered gardens, their produce, and children — but these will all come to an end, “like water which We send down from the sky, and the vegetation of the earth mingles with it, and it becomes stubble which the winds scatter. God is powerful over everything” (45). In short, the wall of death will separate people from their worldly concerns with fertility and ownership as surely as the fruits of the wicked gardener collapsed onto its fence.

Part 6: The Second Half of the Third Sūra-Ring: The Course of the Water
(Moses’ Two Adventures, al-Kahf 18:60-82)

It could probably be argued that the second half of the third sūra-ring of al-Kahf is the most analyzed and commented upon section of the sūra. Indeed, it is certainly one of the most examined and interpreted narratives in the entire Qur’ān. The massive history of interest in this section — an episode of Moses’ interactions with a getaway fish (60-64) and a bizarre/whimsical/frightening character called only “a servant from our servants” (65-82) — has created an exegetical library which continues to grow to this day.82 What does this section say in light of the first half of this sūra-ring (the recollections of Isaiah 5), the structure of the full sūra, and the emic assumptions of the Qur’ān’s conversation?

Before this however, we should note the relationship of this pericope to some other legends. As we shall see, the first part of this section (regarding the fish, 60-64) bears the marks of Alexander’s extraordinary quests just as much as the story of the Two-Horned One.83 Yet the Qur’ān presents the

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two sections as distinct, for the heroes are here presented as different people, while the name of Alexander never appears. Returning to the discussion above, the internal history of the Alexander legend’s many parts is debatable — the more so because so much of it is lost, far-flung, falsely-attributed, or conjecturally dated. But as the Qurʾān examines the stories of Moses and the Two-Horned One as if they are both separate (by positing them as the accounts of two different heroes in distinct narrative units) and yet connected (by putting them side-by-side in this sūra) we can make some guesses.

We do not have the story or stories which are expected of the Qurʾān’s very early hearers in this situation. The closest relation we do have is the Syriac Song of Alexander of Pseudo-Jacob, recorded around the 640s, which is not the Qurʾānic account’s predecessor and does not mention Moses. In this account, Alexander asks a wise man for information about the “fountain of life,” which is located in the “Land of Darkness.” As there are apparently many fountains in the Land of Darkness, the wise man gives Alexander instructions on how to find this particular water:

“Command thy cook to take with him a salt fish, and wherever he sees a fountain of water let him wash the fish, and if it comes to life in his hands when he washes it, that is the fountain of the water of life which thou askest for, O king.” And when he arrived at the door which goeth into the Land of Darkness, the king said to his cook, “Take thou a dry fish, and where thou seest a fountain of water, wash it […]” Finally [the cook alone] came to a fountain in which was the water of life, and he drew near to wash the fish in the water, and it came to life and escaped […] And he leaped down into the water to catch it but he was not able. And he went up from the fountain to tell the king that he found the [fountain of life]. He cried out and they heard him not, he went to the mountain and then they heard him […] and Alexander [alone] went back to bathe in it as he had asked. He went to the mountain in the darkness but he did not stand upon it, and it was not granted to him by the Lord that he should live [for ever], and he was grieved about this even unto death.

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84 Cf. also: The legend of Ḥāʾidh ibn Abī Shālūm recorded by al-Muqaddasī and others. This hero seeks out the source of the Nile, even if it costs him his life. Muqaddasī adds that this source is the ocean which surrounds the world. At the edge of the ocean, Ḥāʾidh meets a mysterious man named ʿImrān sitting in prayer beneath a tree. Ḥāʾidh asks about the source of the water, and ʿImrān says he will only tell him if Ḥāʾith follows his orders exactly. At the edge of the cosmic ocean a four-legged animal attempts to swallow the sun. Ḥāʾith must ride him until he reaches the other side. There are three mountainous regions of iron, silver, and gold respectively. At the end is a golden barrier guarded by an angel. Out of it four waterways flow forth: three underground, one above ground as the Nile. The angel tells him he has gone far enough as this is the edge of Paradise. The Best Division for Knowledge, 34-36.

85 Budge, The History of Alexander the Great, 172-174.
This account is certainly similar to whatever material is expected of the Qurʾān's primary audience, but it is also quite different in several major ways; most especially the absence of Moses.

We cannot be sure why the Qurʾān treats Moses’ quest and the Two-Horned One’s journeys as two different tales. Is the Qurʾān itself dividing up the Alexander myths into two related-but-independent stories? Were the stories broken up before they entered the Qurʾānic milieu and the Qurʾān is knowingly or unknowingly placing them (almost) back together? Were they a part of a lost branch of Late Antique Near Eastern oral lore in which these two episodes were never one, but were understood as part of a larger cycle? For our ends in this ring structural analysis, whatever the facts are beneath the confusion about the tale of the hero and the fish, we must only work with what we have before us. In other words, here we can only trust in the evidence of the existing texts as they stand now; without any well-defined lines of influence one way or another. What we do know of the fish story, however, is that in the Qurʾānic milieu at very least, it was possible to see this story as both akin to but different from the other adventures of Moses and all the deeds of the Two-Horned One.

The rest of the Moses’ pericope (regarding the encounter with the unnamed “servant,” 65-82), carries with it a number of theories which link it to stories of the rabbi Joshua ben Levi (fl. c. 250) and his meetings with Elijah. This relationship too has been problematized, as many of these ‘earlier’ Jewish sources may in truth be post-Qurʾānic and derived from the Islamic commentators. Those

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86 This would be similar to the “Epic Cycle” in the classical Greek world, the elements of which certainly all overlapped, and surround the same material, but survived as distinct expressions of the larger (but never originally unified) epic of the Trojan War. So we understand that the Homeric stories of the days before the fall of Troy (the Iliad) and the journey of Odysseus to Ithaca (the Odyssey) ‘belong with’ the stories of Paris’ kidnapping of Helen and the ruse of the Trojan Horse (both no longer extant), but there was never a single original or source account that bound all these pieces together. Later we, like the Greeks of the classical period, habitually put all the pieces together to form a theater of many heroes sharing similar quests, while knowing that this is a later creation. see Jonathan S. Burgess, The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

which are pre-Qur’ānic without doubt do not much resemble the Qur’ānic story in any clear regard. Furthermore, the Alexander and Gilgamesh cycles may be playing a part yet again, but referring back to our previous discussion, this does not mean we have any material before us that is clearly and without serious questions a direct, recent progenitor of the Qur’ānic audience’s tale. To repeat, regarding all of the Alexander/Gilgamesh adventures (and now possibly Joshua ben Levi, too) we cannot be sure what the Qur’ān already expects its audience to understand, versus what was utterly new.

Again for this project however, this ongoing debate does not play much of a role in the ring structural reading of the pericope. Unlike the pericopes of the Companions of the Cave and the Two-Horned One, the adventures of Moses in al-Kahf are relatively self-contained as they come to us. That is not to say there are not missing details that the Qur’ān may expect its listeners to insert which we do not know precisely, only that these two episodes’ more elliptical references need not bog us down here. (In an exception that proves the rule, I will only engage the possibly related literatures on a more-than-lexical level in one case, and as we shall see, it does not effect the ring structural analysis severely one way or another.) Most of our needed commentary on Moses’ tales can be provided by the ring structure, as we can use this method to link seemingly obscure passages to others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moses’ Adventures (al-Kahf 18:60-82)</th>
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<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
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| Pericope-Parallel 1A | Moses and youth going to the collecting place of the two seas  
They forget the fish and lose it | (al-Kahf 18:60-62) |
| Pericope-Parallel 1B | The boy confesses to forgetting and losing the fish  
They return by back-tracking | (al-Kahf 18:63-64) |
| **Pivot** | APPEARANCE OF THE SERVANT, CAN YOU BE PATIENT? | (al-Kahf 18:65-69) |
| Pericope-Parallel 2B | Servant perforates ship, murders boy, rebuilds wall  
You were not able to be patient | (al-Kahf 18:70-78) |
| Pericope-Parallel 2A | Servant explains ship, murdered boy, rebuilt wall  
You were not able to be patient | (al-Kahf 18:79-82) |

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The structural translation exposes Moses' pericope is composed of three units: a central pivot containing a conversational reversal and a narrative overlap, surrounded on either side by sub-pericope-parallelisms. The first part of the system consists of the journey of Moses and a youth⁸⁹ to the “collecting-place of the two seas”

60. (Remember) when Moses said to his young man (futâhu), “I will not give up until I reach (ablugh) the junction of the two seas or (else) I shall go on for a long time.”

61. When they reached (balaghâ) the junction between the two seas, they forgot (nasiyâ) their fish, (for) it had taken its way into the sea freely (sarah) (al-Kahf 18:60-61).

The pattern starts with Moses speaking to the youth, the explanation of the quest to the collecting place of the two seas, the forgetting of the fish, and its escape path to the sea. After they “passed beyond” (jâwazâ), the same elements repeat. Moses speaks to the youth, the journey is reintroduced, they found some rest by a rock (şakhra), the fish is remembered, its path discussed. Then they turn around a follow their own path back.

Even without knowing any particulars of the relationship of this passage to other mythologies, we can say quite a bit. The “junction of the two seas” (60, 61) can be understood in two similar ways.

The junction means the place where the seas of the earth meet each other beyond the edge of all dry

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⁸⁹ The first missing detail of this section is the identity of this boy, who is identified with Joshua, Moses' valet, his son, his cook (based on references to the Alexander material), the mysterious “servant” of the following section, and others as well. I will not treat this long-standing debate here, as it does not aid in the ring structural reading. The only important fact we need for this discussion is that it is a "youth" (futâ), as opposed to an adult or another named character.
land, or (more likely) the place where the waters of the world meet with the heavenly sea above the firmament. In either case, the “junction of the two seas” is a reference to the edges of the mortal world. If the location were plotted on a map, it would be the same regardless of which two seas are being alluded to.

This would also account for another unusual Qur’ānic term which appears in this section, which I have translated in a standard way as “rock” (ṣakhra, 63). Though there is no root or related word available to us, simply rendering ṣakhra as “rock” is probably not incorrect. The other two appearances of the word in the Qur’ān may suggest walls of rocks like cliff faces or mountains, and perhaps specifically the ring of mountains that surround the world. These interpretations are strengthened by the ring structure. Because reaching the “junction” (61) and retreating to the “rock” (63) are presented as parallel events, they must either be identical, equivalents, or opposites. If the “junction” means the edge of the living world, and the “rock” refers to the mountainous region that belts the earth, then the ring structure supports both these readings. Moses and his youth are traveling to the limits of the world of the living, and they stopped to sleep in the liminal mountain zone.

It was here that the boy forgot his remarkable fish. There is some unspecified miracle involved in this episode, which the Qur’ān expects its audience to understand without much elaboration. It is almost certainly related to the episode of the fountain of life from the Alexander episode above. Also, through or alongside the tellings of Alexander’s mythical quest for the water of immortality is the

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91 CLS, 256; AEL, 1658.
92 The carving of the people Thamúd in their valley being the first example. Reading the carvings as in the “rock [walls]” of their valley seems the explanation of the usage, rather than say carving the stones on the ground or boulders. “And Thamúd, who carved out the ṣakhra in the valley” (al-Fajr 8:93). This would also be in accord with the other descriptions of the dwellings of the people Thamúd in “mountains” (al-‘Aráf 7:74; al-Shū’ārā’ 26:149). See also, Reuven Firestone, “Thamúd,” EIQ.
93 If the word ṣakhra does carry the implication of the rocky mountains that lasso the earth, the third appearance of the term (ياَيَّامِيِّ إِنَّكَ مَنْ تُكْرِهُ حَيَاةَ مِنْ حُرُولِ فَتَكَّنَّ فِي صَخْرَةٍ أَوْ فِي السَّمَاءَاتِ أَوْ فِي الأَرْضِ أَيْنَ بِهَا اللَّهُ (Luqmān 31:6)) would read: “My son! Even if it is only the weight of a grain of mustard, and it is in a rock [i.e., it is between the heavens and the earth], or in the heavens, or in the earth, God will bring it forth [...]”
similar descent of Ishtar to find this same water in the underworld, as well as the Gilgamesh epic (where there is not water of immortality, but rather an underwater plant which makes old men young again; this is stolen by a serpent while the hero was resting in a pool of water). A failed quest to reach the paradisal zone beyond the mountains also features in the biblical death of Moses.  

The way in which the fish escaped, sarab, I have given a standard translation as “freely,” although this is problematic. The hapax probably has the connotations of moving water which flows below the world, as through a tube, or — more in line with the Qurʾān — an underground river. So we have both a possibly miraculous resurrection of a fish, its possibly miraculous escape route, and possibly both. Yet I am not convinced that we can make precise readings of how this passage ties together with the ‘waters of immortality’ materials. It is not even completely clear from the Qurʾān that the fish was dead (although this seems probable). As Moses was planning to eat the fish, it is unlikely that they were bringing it along as some kind of test for the waters’ miraculous nature (as in Pseudo-Jacob). Also, it is not said that the fish touched any water at all before it swam away. Furthermore, there are other stories active in the Late Antique Near East which also connect sleeping, escaping fish, and failed attempts at winning supernatural life, which are not at all related to this Moses tale in the Qurʾān. Consider the failure of Isis to catch the fish which will restore Osiris from his sleeping death to immortal life. In other words, in order to understand the precise reference and meaning of the fish story we have both unknowns and unknown unknowns.

Instead, just by looking at the story as we have it, we can say this much. Moses and the boy are

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94 It is also possible that this scene is a Qurʾānic re-imagining of the death of Moses on Mount Nebo (Deuteronomy 34), with the death of the prophet in obscurity on the liminal mountain being replaced by a story of his ultimate powerlessness and sleep.

95 See Wensinck, The Ocean, 16. For example, Wensinck paraphrases the Cave of Treasures: “God made in the earth beneath, passages and veins and channels for the passage [of water?]!” This has been argued convincingly more recently by Tommaso Tesei in “Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity in Q 18:60-65: The Qurʾān in Light of its Cultural Context,” (forthcoming). Tesei also shares Neuwirth’s and my own reading of “junction of the two seas” as the meeting of the world-sea with the water above the firmament. He adds that in many sources which are near to the Qurʾānic conversion, the fresh waters of heaven flow under the salty sea and appear from the earth as rivers.
traveling to the edges of the living world. At the boundaries they go to retreat (awaynā, 63) just as the Sleepers retreated to their rest in the mountain cave (awā; awū, 16). In this place between the lands of the living and the dead, living things are not quite active and dead things behave like they are alive (18). Therefore, when they forget the fish, it escapes via some watery course back to the sea. And when we account for the larger form of the sūra-ring, which pairs this parallelism with the parallelisms from verses 27-31, we do not see a conversation on immortality, but rather a discussion of those who seek God but only for the splendors of this present life (and their ultimate place in the next one).

There we see people who call to God in the mornings (ghadā) and the evenings only asking God for earthly things (28). They are “oblivious of our remembrance,” and their “only concern is excess.” They beg for water which in the end will burn them. Likewise, Moses willfully goes beyond the bounds in another way (in search of water, miraculous or not), asks for “our morning meal” (ghadā’anā), only to find that it has gotten away from him because his youth has forgotten. Both stories are concerned with people who, for lack of remembering, look for a material good (water, food) and thus miss this good’s ultimate significance. Moses’ response to the missing fish, “that is what we were seeking,” (64) is either his confirmation that he had excessive desire for the food and the world beyond the horizon (and so now understands his error), or he understands the fish’s significance as a marker of the crossing over into a space where the dead live. Having learned the lesson, now he knows that he is supposed to turn back. Whether the fish was dead and touched the waters of life, or was dead and started to behave like a living thing because they were entering the land of the dead, or was always alive but got away as all the splendors of this life are by their nature temporary is of little consequence. The story reads roughly the same way.

As we have seen several times already, one of the themes of al-Kahf is the radical disparity between how things seem to be in the living world, and how they really are from the point of view of God and/or people in the afterlife. The Companions of the Cave are asleep, but seem to move. We
would flee from their condition in terror, while the uncovered people in the Two-Horned One's travels flee into caves. In the first half of this same sūra-ring, we have seen that people who ask God for worldly goods will receive evils instead. Likewise, those who appear to be poor, but believe and work righteousness will gain the riches of Paradise: bracelets of gold, couches to recline upon, and fine green (khudr) clothing (31). This coincides with the introduction of the unnamed “servant” in the second half of the same sūra-ring (65), who will spend the rest of the pericope showing Moses how the goods and evils of the world are not as they seem to be, for living people do not have the vantage of the unseen. The strange but ubiquitous nickname of this servant in the post-Qur’ānic sources, al-Khīdīr (or Khīdir, “the green [one]”) seems to strengthen this symmetry.

Like we have encountered several times already, the pivot of the pericope lands on a conversation in which a speaker inverts another’s words (67-69). It takes the shape of a sub-pericope-ring, with the frames being lines 65-66 and 70.

65. And they found a servant, one of Our servants to whom We had given mercy from Us, and whom We had taught knowledge from Us.
66. Moses said to him, “Shall I follow you (on the condition) that you teach me some of what you have been taught (of) right (knowledge)?” (al-Kahf 18:65-66).

67. He said, “Surely you will not be able to have patience (sabr) with me.
68. How could you have patience (tasbiḥ) for what you do not encompass in (your) awareness of it?”
69. He said, “You will find me, if God pleases, patient (ṣābir), and I shall not disobey you in any command” (al-Kahf 18:67-69).

70. He said, "If you follow (me), do not ask me about anything, until I mention it to you" (al-Kahf 18:70).

The center hinges on the theme of patience (§-B-R, 67, 68, 69). The servant knows something which Moses ought not to be able to handle, and this proves to be the case. This observation is flanked by “following” (attabiʿuka, 65; attabaʿtini, 70) and the relaying of true understanding. The servant has
been given correct knowledge from God which will ultimately be passed on to Moses (66); the servant will mention (ḥdith) a reminder (dhikr) to Moses (70).

All we know of this servant is that he appears in the same liminal space which has appeared throughout the sūra's second and third sūra-rings, but not in its outer rings or central pivot. However, the orientation shifting between the inner pericopes of the sūra is significant. While the Sleepers' liminal zone is faced from the point of view of living people, and the men of the gardens are alive and reflecting on the conditions of the afterlife, here Moses, the youth, and the servant are outside of the living world moving back into it. We know this because after the episode of the fish marked the arrival at a place where dead things act as if they are alive, Moses and the boy have turned around and are now retracing their steps (āthārihimā, 64). The sūra has already equated this movement with death in the first sūra-ring: “maybe you would slay yourself over their tracks (āthārihim, 6).” Like the Two-Horned One was outside of the limits of the living world and is moving back into it through the mountains, Moses was outside the living earth and is heading back through the mountains, too. Therefore, the orientation of the exempla pericopes before the sūra's central pivot is that of the living looking at the world of the dead, while after the center the travelers are outside of the living world looking and moving back into it. The identity of the “servant” — yet another great question of this pericope — is therefore not too significant to the ring structural analysis. What we need to know about him is that he appears in a location outside of the living world but is looking back. If he is supposed to be a dead person, an angel, a prophet, or an immortal saint, it is all the same in the end. This also easily corresponds to the first half of the sūra-ring. A discussion about the disparity of the goods of this world and the ultimate good in the next world (27-31) shifts into a parable on the same topic which takes the form of the interactions of two men (32-44). In both halves of the sūra-ring, one man seems to have understanding in this world, but in the other world of ultimate truth their understanding is reversed.
The conclusion of the *sūra*-ring is made of two long parallelisms: the famous three deeds which Moses misinterprets. The three acts each appear twice and in the same order, first as they happen, and then as the servant explains their meanings. Even in English translation, the parallels are obvious in the passage, as the narrative and the inner-narrative explanation of it mirror each other in word, grammar, pattern, and subject.

71. So they both set out (and continued on) until, when they came to the people of a town, they asked... 72. He said, "Did I not say to you, 'Surely you will not be able (to have) patience with me?" 73. He said, "Do not take me to task for what I forgot (nasīta), and do not burden me (with) hardship in my affair." 74. So they both set out (and continued on) until, they met a young boy, he killed him. He said, "Have you killed an innocent person, other than (in retaliation) for a person? Certainly you have done a terrible thing!" 75. He said, "Did I not say to you, 'Surely you will not be able (to have) patience with me?" 76. He said, "If I ask you about anything after this, do not keep me as a companion. You have had (balaghta) enough excuses from me." 77. So they both set out (and continued on) until, when they came to the people of a town, they asked its people for food, but they refused to offer them hospitality. They both found in it a wall on the verge of collapse, so he set it up (fa-aqāmahu). He said, "If you had wished, you could indeed have taken a reward for that." 78. He said, "This is the parting between me and between you. (Now) I shall inform you about the interpretation (tuwil) of what you were not able (to have) patience with (al-Kahf 18:71-78). 79. "As for the ship, it belonged to the poor people working on the sea, and I wanted to damage it, (because) behind them (there) was a king seizing every ship by force. 80. As for the young boy, his parents were believers, and we feared that he would burden them both (with) insolent transgression and disbelief. 81. We wanted their Lord to give them both in exchange (one) better than him in purity, and closer (to them) in affection."
82. As for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and underneath it was a treasure belonging to them both, for their father had been a righteous man. Your Lord wanted them both to reach their maturity, and bring forth their treasure as a mercy from Lord. I did not do it on my (own) command. That is the interpretation (ta'wil) (of) what you were not able (to have) patience with” (*al-Kahf* 18:79-82).

When this final sub-pericope-parallelism is read in tandem with the first half of the *sūra*-ring, we start to notice that all of the details of these unusual actions appear throughout the ring and in many variations.

This *sūra*-ring is especially concerned with water,96 plants,97 wealth,98 and children.99 In all of these many references, the subject can be read as a sinful material good for its own ends or as a reminder of the glory of God. Plants, gardens, food, and drink may be signs of plenty and greed, or they are signs of God's abundance and mercy. Water can be the source of life or death. Wealth can attract you to the ephemera of the earth, or to the pleasure of the Lord. Children can be a snare of materialism or a marker of the primal creativity of God. Like the pre-Qur’ānic mythologies of fertility we have seen before, the second road to the underworld follows the course of the water into the depths of the earth and returns to the world in the form of plenty: plants, springs and rivers, boon, and children. It is also notable that such stories are often linked to goddesses of abundance, like the creatrix-mother Isis, the river-underworld goddess Ishtar, the water deity Persephone and her mother Demeter the harvest matron, and finally al-‘Uzzā, the river goddess and probable bride of the solarmountain. The Qur’ān is aware of the mythological fertility data-cluster of water, plants, riches, and progeny and is revealing this path to immortality as ultimately fruitless.

The significance of the idols of this world (or the “splendors of this present life”) is not in their own value, but rather are signs of the Creator-God who grants them: “Do you disbelieve in Him who created you from dust, then from a drop, (and) then fashioned you as a man?” In both halves of the

96 Particularly as relating to life and death: see *al-Kahf* 18:29, 31, 33, 41, 45, 60, 61, 63, 71, 79.
97 Particularly as food: see *al-Kahf* 18:31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 39, 40, 42, 45, 77.
98 See *al-Kahf* 18:31, 34, 39, 45, 77, 82.
99 See *al-Kahf* 18:39, 45, 60, 62, 74, 80, 81, 82.
sūra-ring these material goods disappear or are destroyed because someone forgets or is unable to find something (28, 41, 61). But the irony is that these things are themselves supposed to be causes of remembrance. They are revelations; signs, not goals. Material plenties should cause one to recall God, while the plenties themselves are empty, worthless, and even deadly. In the first half of the sūra-ring, fresh water grants life (42), but it is ultimately impermanent (41), and may also be the instrument of one's own damnation (29). Likewise, in the second half of the ring the salty sea points the way to the land of the blessed (60), perhaps where people can find everlasting life on earth (64?), but this too may be a means of destruction (71). The path to immortality through one's family fails, too. Children will all eventually die (74), or may be the cause of your forgetting (63), or falling into despair and sin (80). They aren't even irreplaceable (yubdílahumā, 81). But the value of revelation is eternal; the words of God cannot be exchanged (mubaddila, 27). And everlasting life through wealth and material gains is not the way either. Crops fail (42, 45), wealth is fleeting (38, 45), and excess is the enemy of generosity (77). But for one who waits for their rewards in the next life and serves God, there is plenty in store (30). Like orphans who will receive their treasure only when they are finally ready for it (82), God will grant bounty and abundance to those who say “You will find me, if God pleases, patient” (69).

Part 7: Some Conclusions - the Sūra of the Barriers

Now that we have treated the entirety of Sūrat al-Kahf, we can look back over it to see how the full system is translated by ring structural analysis. The central argument is contained in the paradoxical pivot story of Adam and Iblīs. This culminates in a question posed to the audience, which God almost answers for them: “Do you take [Iblīs] and his descendants as ones-to-turn-to instead of Me, when they are your enemy? Evil is the exchange (badal) for the evildoers! [...] I am not one to take those who lead (others) astray for support.” This ancient event replays itself throughout history in the worship of other beings besides God. The first sūra-ring especially focuses on the deification of prophets — Jesus and Muḥammad. What we should note though is that the prophets are not the
children of Iblis mentioned in the pivot. Jesus and Muḥammad are in both their species and missions the children of Adam. The whole sūra is bound together by this inversion, the system's largest parallelism: to worship anything that is not God is to join the party of Iblis. This system-wide parallelism also has a second, counter-message. Each time this theme appears in the sūra's beginning, middle, and ending, it is juxtaposed against the appearance of divine writ or revelation generally. This signals the Qurʾān's solution to the problem of idolatry, which defines the entire sūra: the prophets cannot save you anymore than the jinn can. The prophets are only people. What can save you however is God, who is made known through prophecy. However, God's prophets remain only messengers in themselves. They are not objects of worship or second, intercessory powers beside the one true God.

To keep prophets and prophecy distinct, the exempla narratives will each downplay the roles of God's creations; even the righteous servants. If one wishes to worship the holy dead, like the Sleepers, it will not help. They cannot hear your prayers, and the details of their story are confused to you, anyway. If you would like to follow the path of Moses, you will realize that he does not know what heaven knows. Indeed, compared to the one who sees what God sees, a prophet like Moses looks surprisingly foolish. The Two-Horned One (who may also be a prophet) is not supposed to be an intercessor or semi-divinity; instead his mission actually seals off his own access to the supernatural world. His pericope and its marvelous 'course' to other worlds actually tries to dissuade people from following such courses of action. It is not prophets that grant access to the unseen, but prophecy; revelation.

This revelation serves a dual function. Revelation points people towards the unseen world of the truth, where the dead continue to exist with God. However, revelation also warns, keeping people away from the temptation to find innate meaning and value in other powers, both natural and supernatural. The exempla of the system (the pericopes of the Sleepers, the recollections of Isaiah 5, Moses, and the Two-Horned One) do not spell out this message on their own; they are each
demonstrations in several variations. In short, the possible secondary powers beside God (the dead, saints, prophets, and worldly bounty) do actually exist, and they are even the work of God's own hands. However, they only have value as reminders of the divine creation and final divine re-creation. So to keep these powers in check, God has placed barriers in both space and time which allows for them to be known and yet not approached; grasped but not reached. Revelation is the emblem of this barrier.

The sūra of the Cave is remarkably full of barriers and things being blocked up or away. Some of these keep the living away from the dead, such as the hull of Moses' ship. Some keep the dead away from the living, like the seals on the Sleepers' ears, the fiery walls of Hell, and the barricade of Gog and Magog. Some mark the meeting place of two worlds, such as the garden fence and the rock where the boy lost the fish. Sometimes a barrier is notably absent, as in the dog, the muddy spring, and the uncovered people. These latter three can act as a tip-off as they are each reminders of death. It is not literal barriers that the sūra is concerned with, as much as the barrier of death itself. The Two-Horned One hints at this division: yes, he will build his physical barricade, but “what my Lord has established me with is better.” Mortality keeps the worlds of the living and divine apart from each other. Therefore, in all of the exempla stories that do not contain barriers in any regard (present or absent), we notice signs of death and decay: the murdered boy in the second stop on Moses and the servant's trip and the rotting of the plants of the earth in the second parable. All of the sūra's many narratives (whether or not they suggest barriers) call to mind death and human shortcomings in their own way and with different nuances. Therefore, based on what we know from the translation technology of the ring structure, each of these sings must be an example of the central pivot and first sūra-ring of the whole system. Each barrier, lack of barrier, or reminder of death must tell us why Iblīs is both right and wrong in his refusal to bow to Adam.

In the third sūra-ring (the recollections of Isaiah 5 and Moses' travels) we see material goods
prayed for, valued, or sought out for their own apparent worth. The course of the water seeks to escape the trap of mortality by chasing after the goods of the living world (and likely dodging death altogether by finding everlasting life). Material prosperity, the gifts of the earth, and the greatness of family and company all appear many times, and are repeatedly struck down, forgotten about, proved useless, or even wither before their prideful owner’s eyes. The first half of this system closes by universalizing this pattern to all of the goods of this world, which at once are given by the blessings of Heaven, and yet will all inevitably go the way of all flesh. The second half of the ring ends with the creation of a wall, and in that wall is a great treasure of another sort. We are told that it will someday be given to two orphans, but not now. They will be rewarded when they are ready. They have been separated from their reward by the death of their father, as in the previous story in which parents will find their true treasure upon the death of their son. People are barred away from true treasure and true worth by death and their own failure, which like Moses, is that they do not remember and remain patient. People are going to be rewarded, but only in the course of time at the final Resurrection. Meanwhile, the human race has to learn to see the world as signs and recall the messages which God has sent. Following the course of water — the means of escaping or bypassing death by material effort — is a fool’s errand.

The second sūra-ring (the Sleepers and the Two-Horned One) likewise downplays the value of supernatural powers, including God’s own saints. This is the course of the sun, which seeks to pull one over on death by following the path of the heroes or gaining their supernatural assistance. Compare this to the Greek kleos: the escape from death by personal glory or supernatural glorification by association with the glorious dead. Although the blessed of God have indeed followed this course and thus bring messages from the unseen, they remain human and therefore cannot function as second divinities or idols. The Companions of the Cave may serve a revelatory function, but they are only pointing through themselves, not at themselves. Although they are literally or symbolically in the
world beyond death they are shut away by their deafened sleep, marked as forbidden by their dog, and revealed as signs by their coinage and their Raqīm. This ring closes, as does the third ring, with the creation of a wall. Like the Sleepers, the Two-Horned One’s wall springs from the words and deeds of a prophetic figure, and is implicitly marked by signs of a revealed literature. Only this sign is universalized; this wall holds back Gog and Magog who spell the death of the whole created order at the apocalypse. And like the wall of Moses and the servant, this barricade is a symbol of the passage of time. The wall’s existence overlaps exactly with the remaining lifetime of the earth itself.

And so the exempla of the sūra leads us back to the center’s message. Hidden in the middle of the material world is creation and ultimate annihilation, wherein the true meaning and value of the world is to be found. It is not found in any sensible object or even an otherworldly being, but in the revealed wisdom of God which undercuts all such objects and beings. In the end, Sūrat al-Kahf reads like a great meditation on Job 28:

There is a mine for silver and a place where gold is refined. Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ore. Mortals put an end to the darkness; they search out the farthest recesses for ore in the blackest darkness. Far from human dwellings they cut a shaft, in places untouched by human feet; far from other people they dangle and sway. The earth, from which food comes, is transformed below as by fire; lapis lazuli comes from its rocks, and its dust contains nuggets of gold. No bird of prey knows that hidden path, no falcon’s eye has seen it. Proud beasts do not set foot on it, and no lion prowls there. People assault the flinty rock with their hands and lay bare the roots of the mountains. They tunnel through the rock; their eyes see all its treasures. They search the sources of the rivers and bring hidden things to light. But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? No mortal comprehends its worth; it cannot be found in the land of the living. The deep says, “It is not in me”; the sea says, “It is not with me.” It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed out in silver. […] Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell? It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds in the sky. Destruction and death say, “Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.” God understands the way to it and He alone knows where it dwells, for He views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When He established the force of the wind and measured out the waters, when He made a decree for the rain and a path for the thunderstorm, then He looked at wisdom and appraised it; He conﬁrmed it and tested it. And He said to the human race, “The fear of the Lord — that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.”

And also Isaiah 45:

This is what the Lord says […] to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: “I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the
God of Israel, who summons you by name. For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged Me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting people may know there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things. You heavens above, rain down My righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness flourish with it; I, the Lord, have created it. Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, “What are you making?” Does your work say, “The potter has no hands?” Woe to the one who says to a father, “What have you begotten?” or to a mother, “What have you brought to birth?” This is what the Lord says — the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: “Concerning things to come, do you question Me about My children, or give me orders about the work of My hands? It is I who made the earth and created mankind on it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts […]” Truly you are a God who has been hiding Himself, the God and Savior of Israel. All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced; they will go o… of… of ignorance together […] For this is what the Lord says — He who created the heavens, He is God; He who fashioned and made the earth, He founded it; He did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited — He says: “I am the Lord, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness […] Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no God apart from Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but Me.”

And so to keep a forgetful humanity away from empty goals and false gods, the sūra of the Cave says that the true God has set barriers of death before them (52) and barriers of ignorance within them (56). In the physical cosmos these have taken the form of the barrier of rocky mountains that garland the earth and the separation of the earth’s salty seas from the heavenly sea of fresh water. In history, this barrier plays out as the stretch of time between this life and the Resurrection on the Day of Judgment.

This barrier takes the shape of the deafness of sleep, the inevitability of decay, the need for patience and waiting, and separation between the worlds by God’s deeds and words, as addressed by each of the sūra’s exempla rings in their turn. In short, these are the Qur’ān’s references to the intermediate state. As spelled out by each of the four exempla pericope’s pivots in order: The holy dead are from the signs of God. You may reckon them as awake, but they are really asleep, so do not turn to them as friends or guides (17-18). Don’t you know that God is the source of your creation from the beginning? Don’t you know who will resurrect you in the end? He is your God, so do not associate anyone with the Lord (36-38). You will not be patient because you do not have full knowledge of
things, and neither do the prophets. But God does. So say “you will find me, if God pleases, patient” (66-69). What God has established for you is better than what you think you want, and so, God, through His instruments the prophets, has made between you and them a barrier (94-95).

There is the Qurʾānic intermediate state. None of these themes is by any stretch unique to Sūrat al-Kahf, although they appear here with particular boldness. As we will see in the next chapter, each of these trends appear repeatedly throughout the Qurʾānic corpus, and, following our ring-structural analysis to a much larger scale, always in specific patterns and relationships which together will plot out the emergence of the eschatological-cosmology of the barzakh.
Chapter IV: Sleep Cycles: The Intra-Qur'anic Development of the Barzakh

"[Qāf is] a mountain which encompasses the earth and encloses it. Qāf is mentioned in the Qur’ān. The exegetes say that it is a mountain surrounding the earth. They say it is made out of green crystal and that the green of the sky is from its green. They say its base is a green rock and it is on top of it, that Mount Qāf is a tributary of it. They say the bases of all mountains are tributaries of Mount Qāf. Some of them mention that the distance between it and between the heavens is the distance of a man standing. It is said that the heavens are resting upon it. Some of them allege that behind it are worlds and creations about which God alone knows. Among them are those who allege that what is beyond are those of the next world and its jurisdiction, that the sun sets in it and rises from it. It screens them from the earth. The ancients called it al-Burz."

-Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 1229)

In this chapter we will look at the whole text of the received Qur’ān for references to the barzakh and the Qur’ānic intermediate state. The Qur’ān’s intermediate state is suggested in many ways, and these must all be accounted for. Al-Kahf will be our guide. In al-Kahf, we noticed quite a number of Qur’ānic topics which must be considered. Not only are we looking for references to sleep and the intermediate state as the nullification of saint cults, we are looking for related cosmological and theological themes. For example, in al-Kahf we noted two visions of earthly immortality which the Qur’ān is dismissing or blocking with barriers: the ‘course of the sun’ (escaping mortal death) and the ‘course of the waters’ (materialism). The first of these employed the images of the sun’s path, the horizon, caves, and the mountains; the second, the junction of the seas, the descent of water, and earthly abundance in food, water, progeny, and wealth. Using ring structures, we will look for how these are compared, paralleled, and/or contrasted to the Qur’ān’s eschatology. For example, instead of merely cataloging every Qur’ānic reference to the sun and its movement, we will look specifically for relationships between the sun and death, Resurrection, false idols, and so forth. By these sorts of triangulations, we will gradually reveal the Qur’ānic barzakh, its implications, and the general order in which its details came to light.

Of course, references to the term barzakh itself will take pride of place. It must be noted that the Qur’ān does not use the word as if it were mysterious or novel. The Qur’ān’s first audience is

1 Mu’jam al-Buldān 4:18; Brannon Wheeler, Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 96.
expected to understand the term without explanation. While it does not have a Semitic root, neither is it a ‘foreign term’ in the strict sense. It seems to have been current in Arabic for some time; probably many generations. Neither does the Qurʾān refer to the barzakh in a specialized way, as if it were a proper noun referring uniquely to something that cannot be expressed otherwise. We have seen this already in al-Kahf 18:60-61 when Moses and the youth traveled to “the junction of the two seas” (majmaʿa al-baḥrayn). The word barzakh is not used, but when compared to the appearance of barzakh elsewhere it is clear that majmaʿa al-baḥrayn and barzakh are at least geographically synonymous, if not proper synonyms. This applies to other words and phrases as well.

To discover what these other ways of saying barzakh are, we need to address the term’s definition and history. As discussed in the first chapter, Arthur Jeffery and others have written that the word barzakh entered Arabic from either the Middle Persian frasang/frasangan or the Greek parasangēs, indicating a ‘tract of land’; and hence a barrier. Other modern scholars have followed this lead, translating barzakh as ‘barrier,’ ‘barricade,’ or ‘isthmus.’ While the Qurʾān certainly does use the term barzakh as a barrier between waters, this appears to be more of a function of the barzakh, rather than its lexical meaning. The barzakh is a barrier, but barzakh does not mean ‘barrier.’

Another etymology of the word barzakh has been suggested by Shaul Shaked. He connects barzakh to the Middle Persian burz-axw (a “high existence”), related to the German Berg, and thus the English “burg” and “borough.” The “high” or “height” (burz) in question is specifically the ring of mountains that encircle the earth, which is a common feature of Near Eastern and Asiatic cosmologies. These mountains were typically the place where divine beings dwelt, where the dead

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3 “He released the two seas, meeting together. Between them is a barzakh they do not breach” (al-Rahmān 55:19-20) and “And it is He that released the two seas: this one pleasant and sweet, and this one salty and bitter. And he made between them a barzakh and a restricted obstruction” (al-Furqān 25:53).

3 This etymology was first argued by Karl Vollers “Beiträge zur Kenntniss der lebenden arabischen Sprache in Aegypten” Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1896. 1-li. see FVQ, 77.

traveled on the way to the afterlife, or both. In the Zoroastrian afterlife, the dead travel to the burz, specifically the harburz, (the “all-burz,” the source of all mountains) for judgment. In the dharmic traditions of the Subcontinent and the Tibetan Bön, there are many holy mountains on the edge of the world, such as Kailās, Lokāloka, and Meru/Sumeru. Al-Birūnī (d. 1048) notes that Meru is the home of the solar gods, and “the sun […] revolves around Meru." To the Greeks it was Olympus, the divine mountain range which also marked the northern edge of the ‘civilized’ world. In the biblical lore Isaiah 14:13 mentions “the Mountain of Assembly”; Mount Zaphon (Ar. jabal al-aqra’), where the gods of Canaan sit enthroned with in court. Later, Muslims would imagine a similar world-mountain that surrounds the earth, typically called Qāf. The circular mountain range we discussed in al-Kahf is one more instance of this wide-flung cosmology, although now in a monotheistic milieu.

By this etymology, the Middle Persian word for the mountains ensnaring the earth passed into Arabic at multiple different entry points, and so appears in the Qurʾān in many different ways. First, as a calque the Persian burz or burz-axw became the Arabic barzakh. Second, burz entered Arabic in translation. The burz as “height(s)” appear as Qurʾānic terms like aʾrāf (coll. “heights”) and rabwa (“high place”). The cosmology of the burz — that there is a mountain range of eschatological import that encircles the world — also appears in the Qurʾānic usage of many other words. The burz as a mountain or a mountain range is reflected by the Qurʾānic rawāsiya, aʾlām, jabal/jibāl, and tūr.

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5 Various sources for this eschatology are given in Jal Pavry, *The Zoroastrian Doctrine of a Future Life, From Death to the Individual Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929). Like the Sleepers in their mountain cave, the burz’s door is guarded by dogs (see 70, 92), and one’s entrance matches the movements of the sun and the solar Mithra (see 63).
6 The home of Śiva as a wild, dreadlocked ascetic for the Hindus. For Jains, the site of the first person’s attainment of moksha, and so on.
7 The edge of the human world. In Sanskrit, literally the “place [of] no place,” or the “world [of] not the world” (lok-āloka); from the same root as the Latin locus (“place”) and several Greek terms, such as allos and allokotos (“strange, foreign”).
9 See M. Streck and A. Miquel, “Kāf” in *Elz*.
10 Mount Qāf may also explain the etymology of the word kahf, which like barzakh has no semitic root. Both may be the related to the Middle Persian kāf: a “hill,” or “mountain.” The Arabic could have referred to specifically to a mountain cave or a cavern. As both Syriac Christian and Islamic sources agree that the Sleepers retreated to the mountains (without such a detail in the Qurʾān according to later Arabic readings), it seems plausible.
Similarly, the *burz* as the edge of the living world we have seen already in the word *sakhra* (the “rock” walls that surround the earth; the boundary “stone” at the periphery). In the *barzkh*’s role as a barrier, the Qurʾān uses terms like *ḥijāb* (“partition”), *ḥājiz* (“barrier”), *sūr* (“enclosing wall”), and the phrase *ḥijran mahjūran* (“restricted obstruction”). These and several other terms are used in arrangements similar to those of the word *barzkh*’s, as we shall see.

To even begin discussing the development of any topic within the received Qurʾān is to wade into the greatly disputed and highly conjectural waters of the Qurʾān’s chronology. I am not convinced that anyone is equipped to truly resolve the issue of what material appeared in which order. However, there is a generally agreed upon movement from the very short *sūras* with shorter verses to the much longer ones with longer verses. This does not resolve the issue with any detail, and overlooks the possibilities of a more randomly appearing text or a heavy editing process within or after Muḥammad’s lifetime. I do not make any solid claims about the precise timing of any one piece of the Qurʾān as it stands before us. With those reservations noted, I will be following the *sūra* chronology proposed by Theodor Nöldeke in his *Geschichte des Qorâns*, but not the later back-editing of many verses which he also proposes. Nöldeke’s chronology is not significantly different from the (equally modern) ordering presented in the Royal Cairo edition, and so my chronology here is not unlike what is assumed by most readers of the Qurʾān today. On a more practical level, Nöldeke’s division of the Meccan period into three sub-periods makes the material significantly more manageable. Of course, this sub-division exposes certain observable trends, but it appears far more exact than could ever be truly defended. For instance, *Ṣūrat al-Kahf* appears last in his second Meccan sequence. I fail to see how the reading of it would be changed in any way by placing it first in the third Meccan period, or much earlier in the second. Therefore for this effort, Nöldeke’s chronology is assumed merely as a scaffolding; another modern interpretation of the Qurʾān not unlike my own.

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Because this project requires going through many different sūras of the Qurʾān, it would be both impractical and unproductive to provide ring translations as detailed as what we have given for al-Kahf. And as we shall see, al-Kahf appears to be the only sūra which has passages relevant to the Qurʾānic intermediate state in all of its major sections. Therefore the following structural analyses will be much shorter. For instance, long linear parallelisms are usually not noted here as they are obvious to the literate mind thinking in temporal progressions. Concentric parallelisms are much more elusive and it is these we must draw out. Further, parallels which do not give us useful details on the intermediate state will not be examined. However, generally I have given an outline of the full structures of all sūras which are noteworthy here (fifteen in total), unless they are only cited briefly or their structures do not provide information useful to this project. Smaller structures such as sub-sūra-rings and parallels, sub-pericope-rings, and verse-rings (parallelisms and chiasms) will only be provided when they are informative.

Part 1: The First Meccan Period

Starting from the earliest stages of the Qurʾān’s appearance, there is a ubiquitous concern with nullifying the cults of intercessors. In opposition to this is the Qurʾān itself as a reminder of God’s unique powers and position. To recall the God of the Qurʾān is to reject the intercessors, and vice versa. For example:

48. The intercession of intercessors will not benefit them
49. What is (the matter) with them, turning away from the Reminder, […] (al-Muddaththir 74:48-49).12

Likewise, the early recitations are already concerned with the distraction of materialism. The pursuit of wealth for its own sake is folly as it will not profit anyone in the grave.13 However, how these two

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12 Cf. al-Ṭāriq 86:8-10.
major Qur’anic concerns of intercession and materialism are related to the intermediate state is not immediately apparent.

The first glimmer of the Qur’anic intermediate state appears with Sūrat ‘Abasa (80, “he frowned”), which contains a reference to the time in the grave as part of its central pivot’s frame. Translating this sūra into a ring structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sūrat ‘Abasa (Full Structure)</th>
<th>Pericope</th>
<th>Verses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 1A</td>
<td>A man (presumed to be Muhammad) frowns and is distracted</td>
<td>(‘Abasa 80:1-10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 2A</td>
<td>This is a reminder for those who listen</td>
<td>(‘Abasa 80:11-16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 3A</td>
<td>A man is created and proportioned</td>
<td>(‘Abasa 80:17-19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Pivot</td>
<td>THE WAY IS MADE EASY</td>
<td>(‘Abasa 80:20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 3B</td>
<td>A man dies and is revived</td>
<td>(‘Abasa 80:21-23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 2B</td>
<td>Water is sent down and food provided</td>
<td>(‘Abasa 80:24-32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 1B</td>
<td>The faces of the dead, the damned preoccupied</td>
<td>(‘Abasa 80:33-42)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The beginning and end feature people's faces and their preoccupations. The second sūra-ring compares the reminder from heaven with the nourishment of the world by the descent of water. In the center, a concentric structure lays out the creation and resurrection of a sinful man, circling around the call to an easy path (18).

17. May the human perish! How ungrateful (of) him!
18. From what did He create him?
19. From a drop! He created him, and determined him,
20. Then He made the way easy for him,
21. Then He caused him to die and buried him,
22. Then, when He pleases, He will raise him
23. By no means! He has not accomplished what He commanded him (‘Abasa 80:17-23).

For the purposes of this study, the significant point of this section appears where the ungrateful human dies and is buried (aqbarahu, 21). At first glance this seems to offer little. However,
when we account for the structure of the passage we can say some more about the intermediate state. The section opens and closes with the human's destruction and the explanation of why this came about (17, 23). Within this frame, the human is created (18, 19) and then re-created (21, 22). The hinge of these two halves of the passage falls on the life in this world, when “the way [was] made easy for him” (20). Within this structure, we can see that the period in the grave is parallel to the human’s “determining” or “proportioning” (qaddarahu, 17). This measuring out can be understood in two possible ways. If it refers to the time in the human incubation, then the parallel is between the womb and the tomb. Read in this way, both periods of time — womb and tomb — are shown as waiting periods after creation and before resurrection, respectively. The time of the infant in the mother, like the time after death, is a time in near-absolute passivity. The person exists, but is not doing much. The significant time period for this human is this life, when the “way (was) made easy.” This is when he should have proved his mettle but did not. On the other hand, qaddarahu may instead refer to human development after birth; one’s coming of age. Again this is a passive state. Whichever reading stands, the time in the grave is parallel to a passive condition, and so we must conclude the grave is comparable.

The first detailed instance in which we can see the specific themes already noted in al-Kahf appears in al-Qalam (68, “the pen”). This sūra does not make any reference to the grave or the intermediate state per se, however it does draw connections between sleep and the worship of created beings. This especially concerns “the course of the water,” (materialism; the love of plants, food, water, and progeny without recognition of their divine source).
Sūrat al-Qalam opens and closes with a discussion on the truth of the Messenger’s recitations and the accusation against him of a spirit-possessed madness. The opening is followed by the first half of the first sūra-ring, in which people dismiss the message of the Qur’ān, even though God has already blessed these people with worldly plenty:

14. (Just) because he has wealth and sons,
15. When Our signs are recited to him, he says, “Old tales!” (al-Qalam 68:14-15).

The second half of this sūra-ring appropriately takes the form of one of these “old tales.” In this case, an unnamed allusion to Jonah.

48. Be patient (ṣabar) for the judgment of your Lord, and do not be like the companion (ṣāhib) of the fish, when he called out, choked with distress (al-Qalam 68:48).

Like the ring structure of al-Kahf, al-Qalam sends out a warning to people distracted from God by “wealth and children,” and this is counterbalanced by a story of a prophet. In al-Kahf, these were the adventures of Moses to the junction of the two seas, in which he was taught the value of patience (ṣabr) by God’s servant and a fish. Now we see another prophet taking a sea voyage which is interrupted by divine providence in the form of a fish, who likewise should teach patience for those who would reflect. God’s ends are beyond human understanding, even to those God has favored like Moses and Jonah. Both prophets are sent fish as a sign of God’s postponed justice and the need for

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14 Cf. Jonah 1:3ff.
patience. This is in contrast to the more immediate lures of wealth and children.

The second sūra-ring of al-Qalam also treats a theme we have seen in al-Kahf: the inevitability of decay and loss versus the permanence of heavenly rewards. Again like al-Kahf, there is a story of certain people who value their garden in this world more than the Garden of the next. The story running from verses 17 to 32 mentions the Companions of the Garden (aṣḥāb al-janna) who promise that they will reap the fruits of their labors at sunrise. While they are asleep the night before the harvest, their produce is taken from them by God. This is because they did not recognize that it was only through God's will that they had such bounty. Like in the gardeners of al-Kahf, these gardeners debate about what has happened and the most righteous one of them corrects his associates:

28. The most moderate one of them said, "Did I not say to you, 'Why do you not glorify (God)?""
29. They said, "Glory (be) to our Lord! Surely we have been evildoers [...]
32. It may be that our Lord will give us a better one in exchange for it" (al-Qalam 68:28-29, 32).

As shown in the recollections of Isaiah 5 in al-Kahf, it is by God's power that the fruits of the earth grow, and in the end it is God who will do the harvesting. Like with the Companions of the Cave, the Companions of the Garden go to sleep. This sleep is a reminder of the limited powers of mere humans before the ultimate powers of a God who is always active. As the intercession of saints like the Sleepers is halted by their deafened sleep, so the wealth and prosperity of these mortals is nullified in their sleep. Further, the Sleepers' pericope contains a reminder that God alone controls the course of the future, as this pericope also claims. Recalling both of the parallel pericopes of Moses and Isaiah 5 in al-Kahf, the material goods of the world can be exchanged or swapped for others.

The second half of this second sūra-ring (34-43) compares the failed garden on earth with the celestial, everlasting Garden. Rather than going back over materialism (the sin of not seeing divine
providence in mere creatures), this half of the ring warns against idolatry (the sin of worshiping mere creatures).

34. Surely for the ones who guard (themselves) (there will be) Gardens of Bliss with their Lord.
35. Shall We treat those who submit like the sinners?
36. What is (the matter) with you? How do you judge?
37. Or do you have a Record which you study?
38. Surely you (would) have in it whatever indeed you choose!
39. Or do you have guarantees from Us, reaching the Day of Resurrection? Surely you (would) have whatever indeed you judge!
40. Ask them which of them will guarantee that.
41. Or do they have associates? Let them bring their associates, if they are truthful.
42. On the Day when the leg will be bared, and they will be called to (make) prostration, but are unable:
43. Their sight will be downcast, and humiliation will cover them, because they had been called to (make) prostration when they were able (al-Qalam 68:34-43).

Through the ring we can see a number of the same kinds of parallels that we encountered in al-Kahf. First is the earthly garden (17) and the heavenly one (34), as already mentioned. Then the sleep of the Companions of the Garden and their arising (19-20) aligns with the Resurrection of the dead (38). The shame of the now-impoverished people of the garden stripped of their worldly possessions matches up with the humiliation of the idolaters whose idols do not answer (40-42). A reference to exchanging (32) is paired with the act of bowing down (42-43).

The Qurʾān’s eschatological cosmology of the intermediate state makes its first explicit

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17 Cf., the second sūra-ring of al-Kahf; the sleep and awakening of the Companions of the Cave compared to the Resurrection foretold by the Two-Horned One.
18 Cf., al-Kahf 5:50-51.
19 Cf. the three uses of the root B-D-L used in al-Kahf in the third sūra-ring and the central pivot. “His words cannot be exchanged and you will not find a refuge beside Him” (27); “So will you take [Iblis] and his offspring as ones to turn to instead of Me, while they are your enemies? Contemptible for the sinner is the exchange” (50); “[The unnamed servant] longed for their Lord to exchange [the murdered boy] for one better in purity and closer in mercifulness” (81).
Several of these parallels are already familiar to us. There is a contrast between the despicable water

It treats the creation of the earth, the mountains, fresh water, and the human race.

Not surprisingly, the central pivot falls on the line “Woe on that Day to those who rejected” (waylun yawma’idhin li-’lmukadhdhibina, 24), which appears nine times throughout the entire sūra as its reprise. Framing the central, pivotal appearance of this line in the center is the system’s smallest ring.

It treats the creation of the earth, the mountains, fresh water, and the human race.

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<td>Sūra-Ring 1B</td>
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19. Woe on that day to those who rejected.
20. Didn’t We create you from a water putrid?
21. Then We made it an abode guarded (makin)
22. for a measure understood?
23. So did We measure and We are the best of measurers.
24. Woe on that day to those who rejected.
25. Didn’t We make the earth a place-for-resting (kifūt)
26. for the dead and the living?
27. And We made the mountains-anchored
and We poured-out for you water refreshing?
28. Woe on that day to those who rejected (al-Mursalāt 77:19-28).

Several of these parallels are already familiar to us. There is a contrast between the despicable water
out of which the earth and humanity were made (20) and the sweet water which God gives people to
drink (27). Then the earth is introduced as a safe or firm (makīn) dwelling place (21), which is paired
below with the deeply rooted mountains (27). Whether this suggests that the mountains are holding
the flat earth in place, or are working as a protective barrier by surrounding it, or both, is not apparent.
The known timespan of verse 22 matches the set of the living and the dead in verse 26. And lastly the
measuring out or restriction of creation (23) predicts the true purposes of the earth (25).

The earth's created purpose is defined by the *hapax kifāt*. The word *kifāt* can be understood in
two ways. First it can be a 'gathering place,' such as a 'home,' or 'territory.' It can also be interpreted as
a 'burial place,' a 'hiding place,' or a place for the dead. Based on the full line — “Didn't we make the
earth a *kifāt* for the living and dead?” — it seems that the Qur’ān means both. This same symmetry
between the creative state of being measured out/proportioned for a certain amount of time (the root
Q-D-R) and the time in the grave has been noted already in ‘Abasa 80:19. More to the point, the Qur’ān
is telling us directly that the earth is the home of both the living and the dead; the dead are still here
and not somewhere else. Furthermore, the earth is made secure by mountains and habitable by fresh
water. The security of the mountains keeps the world safe from destruction at least for the time being.
The mountains prevent the apocalyptic ‘rolling up’ of the earth and keep back the foul waters of the
dead.

In Sūrat al-Raḥmān (55, “the Merciful”), we encounter the first of the three appearances of the
term *barzakh* (verse 20), and so we will focus our attention here for a moment. Echoing *Psalms* 136, the
*sūra* is governed by an even, galloping repetition. Like the Psalm, there is a constant reprise (31

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20 *CLS*, 355; *AED*, 809.
21 Ibid.; *AEL*, 2618.
"Jüdischer und christlicher Gebetstypus im Koran," *Der Islam* 16 (1927), 229-248; Angelika Neuwirth, "Psalmen — im Koran
neu gelesen (Ps 104 und 136)," Dirk Hartwig et al, edit. "Im vollen Licht der Geschichte": Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und
die Anfänge der kritischen Koranforschung (Würzburg: Egon Verlag, 2008), 157-189.
uses; over a third of the 78 verses of the sūra):

Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie? (al-Raḥmān 55, passim)

The dual reference of this reprise appears to refer to humanity and the jinn. Just as we have seen in al-Mursalāt, the central pivot of the Raḥmān system falls on one of these repetitions (the fifteenth occurrence; verse 45).

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<td>The Merciful created humanity and taught the recitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pericope-Ring 1A</td>
<td>Creation of heaven/earth, humanity/jinn, barzakh/the sea</td>
<td>(al-Raḥmān 55:5-25)</td>
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<td>Pivot</td>
<td>All perishes but your Lord, the one of majesty and honor</td>
<td>(al-Raḥmān 55:26-27)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pericope-Ring 2A</td>
<td>Destruction of heaven, judgement of humanity/jinn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central Pivot</td>
<td>SO WHICH OF YOUR LORD’S BLESSINGS DO YOU TWO DENY?</td>
<td>(al-Raḥmān 55:45)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pericope-Ring 2B</td>
<td>Two gardens, two springs, fruit, reclining, consorts</td>
<td>(al-Raḥmān 55:46-59)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pivot</td>
<td>Is there any reward for goodness, except goodness?</td>
<td>(al-Raḥmān 55:60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Ring 2A</td>
<td>Two gardens, two fountains, fruit, consorts, reclining</td>
<td>(al-Raḥmān 55:61-77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 1B</td>
<td>Hallowed be the name of your Lord, the one of majesty and honor</td>
<td>(al-Raḥmān 55:78)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Al-Raḥmān opens with the naming of God as the Merciful who taught the recitation and created humanity (1-4). It closes by blessing the name of God (78). The exempla sections of the system mirror each other also, forming a single sūra-ring with one pericope-ring in each half. The first half of the system details the creation, limitation, and end of the cosmos. The second describes the gardens of Paradise.

Our search for the development of the barzakh leads us to pay special attention to the first pericope-ring (verses 5-44). The first half of this ring describes the making of the natural order: the creation of the heavens and the earth (5-13), the creation of humanity and the jinn (14-16), and the creation of the two seas (17-25).
5. The sun and the moon (move) in predictable paths
6. And the star and the tree prostrate themselves.
7. The sky — He raised it, and He laid down (waḍa’a) the balance (mīzān)
8. — do not transgress insolently (tāṭghū) concerning the balance
9. But establish the weight (wazn) in justice, and do not cheat (tukhsirū) concerning the balance.
10. And the earth — He laid it down (waḍa’ahā) for all-that-comes-to-rest (anām).
11. On it (there are) fruit, and date palms with sheaths,
12. And grain with its husk, and fragrant herbs.
13. Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie? (al-Raḥmān 55:5-13)

While the Qurʾān has many passages which detail God’s creative actions, here we should notice a few particularly meaningful features. First, verses 7-9 mention the creation of the “balance” (mīzān). The explicit meaning of the “balance” is the justice of God, especially at the Last Judgment; God’s “scales.” This is suggested in verse 9, and appears many times elsewhere in the Qurʾān. However, in this passage the “balance” also appears to refer to a natural phenomenon, as this section is dealing with the creation of tangible celestial and terrestrial bodies: the sun, moon, stars, trees, plants, heavens, and earth. The balance here carries a second connotation of the “equilibrium” of the physical world. All things have their proper place in which one ought not make limits or detractions. Reading the “balance” as both a legal-moral restriction and as a sign of a well-ordered cosmos also makes sense in the structure of the passage. The establishment of the “balance” is reflected in the establishment of the earth (10). The earth is the home of plant life, and in this case there are two specific references to plants which have protective sheathes: dates and grains. As the whole of creation is guarded by a “balance,” dates and grains have been given casings. Indeed, the reoccurrence of the dual form throughout the sūra underscores this vision of a balanced cosmos.

24 See al-An’am 6:152, al-Aʿrāf 7:85, Hūd 11:84, etc.
On the more general level, verse 10 declares that the earth has been established for the *anām*. A hapax of unclear origins, *anām* is typically understood as ‘creatures’ or all the living things which God has created. *Anām* seems to be derived from the non-verbal root *ʾ-N-M*. However, it has been suggested that the term *anām* is more correctly related to the root *N-W-M*, meaning ‘sleep’ or ‘rest’. If this relationship is correct, *anām* can be read as “those things which require sleep,” (that is, all living creatures), and hence my translation, “all-that-comes-to-rest.”

After plant life is introduced, the text then turns to the creation of humanity and *jinn*. In keeping with the Qur’ānic and biblical details of human genesis, *al-Raḥmān* underscores that people have been made directly by God’s handiwork, but from already existing creations. This is clay in the case of humans; fire in the case of the *jinn*.

For both people and *jinn*, these cosmological details lay out a double-duality (two sets of two will reoccur throughout the rest of the sūra). People and *jinn* are both created by God, and yet they are composed of other terrestrial creations. They belong here on earth; not elsewhere.

The next double set of two appears in the following lines:

14. He created man from clay like pottery
15. And He created the *jinn* from blaze (*mārij*) from fire

If read alone, this unusual allusion to “Two Easts” and “Two Wests” appears to be quite mysterious. However, when we account for the cosmology of *al-Kahf* the line becomes clearer. In the story of the

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25 The common reading *anām* as “humanity” appears to over-specify the term, as the text here goes on to mention fruits and other plant life before coming to the human race. The term should presumably be understood as “all-that-comes-to-rest” in the sense of all created things which have limited spans of life.

26 See *AED* 58, *AEL* 118.
Two-Horned One, we observed that there seems to be two different groups of people in the East. In the world of the living these were the people of the two barriers; those inside of the barricade of Gog and Magog.27 Outside of the mountain-barriers were a second eastern people. They were those without shelter from the sun who either literally were or symbolically recalled the dead.28 If this reading is correct then in al-Kahf there are indeed “two Easts”: one within the boundaries of the earth, and another in the next world. The “two Easts” meet each other at the barricade, but are also made distinct from each other by it.29 This reading is strengthened by the following verses of al-Rahmān, in which the barzakh-proper appears for the first time.

While the term barzakh can still be understood as a constructed barrier made specifically to stop two things from comingling, even in this geographic usage the reference is eschatological. The barzakh marks the meeting place of the two worlds, and also makes these worlds discrete.

Several other themes from al-Kahf can be recognized here as well. Like the wall that Moses and ‘Khiḍr’ built,30 this barrier is also a place of hidden treasure. “From both [the seas] come forth

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27 al-Kahf 18:93 ff.
28 al-Kahf 18:90.
29 Another Qur’ānic reference to “two Easts” features in al-Zukhruf 43:38. There an associator is assigned to a devil who misguides him. At the judgment the sinner laments his error wishing that the distance between the two Easts stood between him and his “partner” (qarīn).
30 al-Kahf 18:82.
pearl and coral. Ships appear again as well, although this time it is spelled out that they ultimately belong to God (whereas in al-Kahf it is only implied that God can sink them as He wishes). Also, the mountains make a reappearance. The mountains indicate the intersection of the two worlds, like in the stories of the Sleepers, Moses and the "youth," and the Two-Horned One.

Arriving now at the center of this ring, the text tells the listener/reader that all created things are impermanent.

26. All who are on it perish (fān).
27. And the face of your Lord will remain, the One possessing majesty and honor (al-Rahmān 55:26-27).

We know that the "it" (-hā) referred to in verse 16 is feminine, and so the referent is not the "sea" (baḥr) or the barzakh. If the pronoun ending refers to the "ships" in verse 24, then the sea is being equated with doom: "all who are in [the ships] perish." Again, the limits of the earth in the sea and comparable to the limits of mortal creations; all that comes to rest. The second half of this ring will elaborate on the limitations placed on created beings in counter-distinction to the unresting powers of the Creator.

Mirroring the introduction of the barzakh above, after the pivot the spacial limitations of created beings are contrasted to the ever-active powers of God.

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31 This detail also indicates the larger ring structure of al-Rahmān. The "coral" (marjān) recalls the releasing of the seas (marajā). The hidden treasures of the seas parallel the encased fruits of the earth in lines 10-11 and the creation of the jinn out of a (smokeless) blaze (mārij) in line 15. On the largest scale of the sūra, not fully expanded upon here, "the pearl and the coral" of the seas foreshadows the "rubies and coral (marjān)" of Paradise in line 55.

32 al-Kahf 18:79.

33 This is not as explicit in the Qur'ānic text as it is in other accounts of the Sleepers, while is it quite likely to be understood as such (see previous chapter and the note of the etymology of kahf above).

34 al-Kahf 18:65.

35 al-Kahf 18:93.
28. Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie?
29. (All) who are in the heavens and the earth make requests of Him. Every day He is (engaged) in some matter (sha’n)
30. Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie??
31. Soon We shall be free (to attend) to you, you two burdens (thaqalān)!
32. Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie?
33. Assembly of jinn and humankind! If you are able to pass beyond (tanfudhū) the confines (aqṭār) of the heavens and the earth, pass (unfudhū)! You will not pass (tafudhūn) beyond (them) but by authority.
34. Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie?
35. A flame (shuwāz) of fire and copper (nuhās) will be sent against you, and who will not (be able to) defend yourselves.

God is active at all times, while eventually God’s particular activities with people and jinn will come to an end at their deaths. Depending on how verse 29 is interpreted, “everyday He is (engaged) in some matter (sha’n),” may also include the suggestion that God does not need sleep — a topic we will return to shortly when the Qur’ān discusses this explicitly.

What is of note here is also the spatial claims about created beings’ limitations, beginning at verse 33. The Qur’ān dares or mocks people and jinn who seek to penetrate or “pass” (N-F-Dh) the boundaries of the created order. While there is a moral component in this line (do not go to excesses), the primary claim is about physical limits. The heavens and the earth are the confines of material bodies: clay and fire. The use of the root Q-Ṭ-R to define these confines, the same root which is employed by the text when the Two-Horned One seals his barricade, may be more than a coincidence. This would also be in accord with verse 35, in which this spatial blocking may be interpreted as

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36 aqṭār: regions, confines, a place where one is contained. Compare to the “molten copper” (qīṭr) sealant which the Two-Horned One creates to keep back Gog and Magog.
37 nuhās can be understood as either bronze, brass, copper, or smoke. As it is paired with fire, the reading of “smoke” may seem logical. However, as there are several Qur’ānic equations between the torment of Hellfire and molten metal, the use of “copper” or “bronze” seems likely. Also, this would be in parallel with line 33.
38 sha’n: an affair, matter, or concern. Badawi and Abdel Haleem remark, “(55:29) […] constantly at work taking care of all things [lit. everyday he is busy doing something] (considered as a rebuttal for the claim that he rests on the Sabbath); AED 474. See for example the tafsīr of Muqātīl ibn Sulaymān (d. c. 767): “So that the Jews say that God does not spend Saturday with matters, so God revealed [this line...]”

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consisting of burning metal, also as demonstrated in *al-Kahf*. Most significantly, this passage is the parallel of the passage above concerning the *barzakh*. As the two treasure-filled seas are kept apart by a *barzakh* which is reminiscent of the mountains and boats (and thus both the ring of mountains around the world and the ship of Moses' journey), so the infernal materials of Hell keep mere creatures in their proper place in the “balance” (cf. the dog, the molten metals, and the barriers of death we have encountered in *al-Kahf*).

Closing the discussion of the creation of the heavens, earth, humanity, and *jinn* (5-16), this ring ends with the rending of heaven and final judgment.

37. So when heaven is split so it becomes rosy like oiled-leather
38. Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie?
39. So on that day you will not be asked about the sin of humankind or *jinn*
40. Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie?
41. The offenders will be known by their marks, so they will be seized by the forelocks and feet.
42. Which of the blessings of your Lord will you two call a lie?
43. This is Hell which the offenders deny (*yukadhhib*)
44. They will circle between it and between heated, boiling-water (*hamim*) (*al-Rahmān* 55:37-44).

Pairing with the above verses on the first creation, these apocalyptic lines signal the breaking of heaven and the condemnation of the sinful people and *jinn*. The system is closed with a latch at the word “[they] deny” (*yukadhhib*). This is the only appearance of the root in the entire *sūra*, outside of the reprise (*tukadhdbāni*), indicating the arrival at the central, pivotal reprise. Also, the final lines of the ring regarding the sinners ironic space between a fiery Hell and scalding water recalls the initial “balance” of the first creation: heaven and earth, sweet and salty seas, fruits and their casings, humanity and *jinn*. 
Part 2: The Second Meccan Period

The appearance of the intermediate state and its correlation with intercession in an eschatologically-oriented cosmology comes fully into focus in the second Meccan period. Quite a few sūras which came forth during this phase of the Qurʾān’s conversation mention the barzakh explicitly or implicitly. This all ends in the arrival of al-Kahf.

However, before continuing the search for the Qurʾān’s intermediate state and its equation to sleep, we ought to acknowledge an opposite trend. If the intermediate state is related to sleep, and this suggests the powerlessness of the dead — specifically would-be intercessors — then it stands to reason that God does not succumb to sleep. God has innate power; the intercessors do not have power save by God’s leave. In the biblical lore there is precedent for such a claim as we have noted already: “He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”39 This was also suggested in al-Rahmān 55:29 which says, “Everyday [God] is in a matter (sha’n).” The argument appears overtly for the first time in Sūra Qāf (50) with two references:

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<td>Pericope-Ring 1A</td>
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<td>Central Pivot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 4B</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Sūra-Ring 1B</td>
<td>The recitation, the caller, the last day</td>
<td>(Qāf 50:41-45)</td>
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15. أَفَغَفَّلُونَا بِالَّذِينَ يَبْلَغُونَ الْخَلْقَ الْأَوَّلِ ۚ يَلْهُمُ فِي لَيْلَةٍ مِّنْ حَلَقٍ جَدِيدٍ?

39 Psalms 121:3-4.
38. And surely We created the heavens and the earth and what is between the two in six days, and we were not touched by any exhaustion (lughūb) (Qāf 50:38).

These are similar sentiments. God does not become tired or exhausted by the acts of creation. While the thoughts are presented in parcelling passages, because they are reflections of an identical thought we cannot draw further conclusions from their relationship. They merely reinforce each other, two other parcelling sections on God's creativity in this world and the next (6-11; 30-35), and show the sūra's structure. Qāf does not expand on either claim of God's inexhaustibility, and so we will again leave the discussion with just one note.

The oft-repeated Qurʾānic detail that God created the heavens and the earth in “six days” in verse 38 is a reminder of Genesis 1 and 2. In the biblical lore, God “rested” (yishbōth) on the seventh day: the sabbath (shabbāth, Sh-B-Th). Whether this means God went to sleep is not clear. The name of Saturday as the ‘day of rest’ (yawm al-sabt, S-B-T) in Arabic continues this tradition. However, as the Qurʾān rejects God's sleep but affirms His rest, a dilemma appears which the Qurʾān must resolve. How to show God resting on the seventh day without putting Him into a powerless sleep? The Qurʾān's solution is a compromise. God rests on the seventh day in the most powerful way possible: by sitting down on His throne. Thus the sign of God's rest is inverted to become a sign of His monarchy. God's rest does not mean He can grow weak but that He is omnipotent. Further elaboration of God's sleeplessness and throne will be presented below when the matter returns with more detail.

Returning to the powerlessness of human sleep, in al-Kahf when the Sleepers were awoken they were questioned about how long they slept.

19. [...] A speaker among them said, “How long have you remained (here)?” Some said, “We have (only) remained (here) a day, or part of a day.” Others said, “Your Lord knows how long you have remained (here)” [...] (al-Kahf 18:19).

Besides adding drama to the realization of the amount of time which has actually passed (309 years), there is also a theological warning contained in this conversation. Even holy people who are signs of
God are going to die, and in death they are made unaware of the world around them. Asking for the intercessions of dead saints (or worshipping them directly) is as futile as asking a question to someone who is asleep.

Discussions quite like this one from al-Kahf are found throughout the received text. Chronologically, the first of these is found in Sūra Ṭā Hā (20), verses 102-104.

102. On the Day when there is a blast on the horn — and We shall gather the sinners pale-eyed (zurq) on that Day
103. They will murmur among themselves, "You have not remained only for ten (days)."
104. We know what they will say, when the best of them in way (tariqa) (of life) will say, "You have remained only for a day" (Ṭā Hā 20:102-104).40

Although Ṭā Hā does not mention the word barzakh, there are familiar patterns we have mentioned in al-Kahf and the other sūras already introduced.

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<tr>
<td>Pericope-Parallel 1B</td>
<td>Moses: defeats magicians with miracles, they are forgiven, bow</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:49-76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Parallel 2A</td>
<td>Moses: Crossing the sea, the mountain, food from heaven</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:77-82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Parallel 2B</td>
<td>Moses: the calf worshipped but not responsive, Aaron</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:83-97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Pivot</td>
<td>THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD, HIS KNOWLEDGE ENCOMPASSES ALL</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Parallel 3A</td>
<td>Resurrection, the dead unaware, the mountains fall</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:99-107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Parallel 3B</td>
<td>Judgment, no intercessors, Qur’ān sent down</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:108-114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Parallel 4A</td>
<td>Adam: All but Satan bow, parasidal food, Adam forgiven</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:115-126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Parallel 4B</td>
<td>Believers: Past and future destruction, pray with your family</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:127-132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 1B</td>
<td>Unbelievers: the proof they seek is in revelation</td>
<td>(Ṭā Hā 20:133-135)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The passage cited above in which the resurrected dead question how long they slept is found in a

40 Zurq (sing. azzurq) in this context can be understood in a number of ways. It certainly has something to do with the sinners’ eyes; that they are “blue,” “grey,” or “white,” similar to the Syriac zăqā, “blue-eyed;” CLS 207. Idiomatically this could mean they are “blind” or “sightless;” AED 397. I have chosen “pale-eyed” as this can suggest a blueness, greyness or whiteness, as well as the clouded eyes of the blind. Although there does not seem to be a linguistic connection, the term also behaves similarly to the Greek glaukos, meaning “light blue,” “grey,” “milky,” or “light-eyed.” There appears to have been a correlation between these thoughts in the larger milieu of the Near East which was not specific to any one language family.

41 A similar conversation in this period of the Qurʾān’s chronology also appears in al-Isrā’ 17:52. There are other examples of this pattern in later periods of the Qurʾānic corpus discussed below.
system of parallelisms discussing the Resurrection and Final Judgment (99-114). Although the parallels here take a concentric form, and hence are also rings, there is no one pivotal passage in the middle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
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<td>Sub-Pericope-Parallel 1A</td>
<td>Those who carry a heavy burden ignored the remembrance</td>
<td>(Ṭā Ḥā 20:203-204)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Pericope-Parallel 1B</td>
<td>The horn is blown and the sinners are herded together blind</td>
<td>(Ṭā Ḥā 20:102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Pericope-Parallel 1C</td>
<td>They murmur and do not know how long they slept</td>
<td>(Ṭā Ḥā 20:99-101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Pericope-Parallel 1D</td>
<td>The mountains will be blasted flat so they are not crooked</td>
<td>(Ṭā Ḥā 20:105-107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Pericope-Parallel 2A</td>
<td>They follow the caller who is not crooked</td>
<td>(Ṭā Ḥā 20:102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Pericope-Parallel 2B</td>
<td>Nothing but whispers are heard, no intercessors</td>
<td>(Ṭā Ḥā 20:103-104)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Pericope-Parallel 2C</td>
<td>God knows everything, He is the Living, the Everlasting</td>
<td>(Ṭā Ḥā 20:103-104)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Pericope-Parallel 2D</td>
<td>Those who carry their sins' burden, those who do good</td>
<td>(Ṭā Ḥā 20:111-112)</td>
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</table>

Latch 1  We sent down an Arabic recitation as threat and remembrance (Ṭā Ḥā 20:103) to each other after they are resurrected, before the Judgment their voices are humbled (khashaʿati) and only whispering (hams) is heard. Besides revealing the parallelism, this may also be understood as the general muteness of the dead. They are not aware of the living world because they are at rest. Neither can they communicate with the world

As the dead murmur (yatakhāfatūna, 103) to each other after they are resurrected, before the Judgment their voices are humbled (khashaʿati) and only whispering (hams) is heard. Besides revealing the parallelism, this may also be understood as the general muteness of the dead. They are not aware of the living world because they are at rest. Neither can they communicate with the world
because their voices are hushed.

More directly however, the ignorance of the dead about the passage of time in the grave mirrors the failure of intercession on the Last Day. The sleep of the dead is equated to the futility of pleading to intercessors. The two divine names given here further this symmetry. God alone is the Living (al-hayy), because unlike the saints or second divinities God never dies. God is also al-qayyum: the Everlasting or the Self-subsisting. God is not a person (qawm) who is subject to the Resurrection (qiyama), but God is the active power behind these both. This passage, and two others which pair these divine names, may also be a direct critique of the cult of Christ. “I am the Resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die.” The words of the divine Christ are reformulated in the mouth of a God who needs no associates.

Although this system has no pivot, at its center are two parallels built around the word ‘iwaṣ (“crookedness” or “twisting” 105-107, 108). In the opening verses of al-Kahf ‘iwaṣ is presented as the opposite of qayym (“straightening”). Here the word is juxtaposed to God as al-qayyum in verse 111. The resurrected dead follow a “caller” (the Qur’ān, the Prophet?) whose call is not “twisted” (108). Likewise, the Last Day is signaled by the flattening of the mountains, so that they too are not “crooked” (107).

105. And they question you about the mountains, so say, "My Lord will blast them (yansifuhā) into bits (nasf).
106. So He leaves them a level plain.
107. You will not see any crookedness (‘iwaṣ) in them and no curve" (Ṭā Hā 20:105-107).

As we suggested when discussing al-Kahf, the mountains are the pegs which hold the world in place until the time of the apocalypse. Reading the stories of the Sleepers, Moses, and the Two-Horned

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42 al-Baqara 2:255, Āl ʿImrān 3:2 (see below).
43 John 11:25.
One through ring structures also suggested that the mountains are the borderlands between the living and unseen worlds. In *al-Kahf*, the mountains also carried the connotations of false gods, materialism, and death. The Sleepers in their mountain cave are not to be worshipped. Moses loses his fish in the mountainous zone at the edge of the world. Gog and Magog (and hence the apocalypse itself) will enter the world between two mountains when the Two-Horned One's barricade falls. *Al-Mursalāt* 77:27 and *al-Rahmān* 55:24 presented comparable messages. In *Ṭā Hā* this reading stands as well. Again, the fall of the mountains coincides with the end of history and the arising of the dead. The failure of the would-be intercessors and second divinities is implied here too, but it is only evident in the ring structure.

On the largest scale of the sūra's structure, *Ṭā Ha* mirrors this section with two accounts from the Exodus of Moses and the Children of Israel. The concentric reference is in the episode of the (golden) calf at verse 97:

97. [...] And look at your god which you stayed devoted to! Surely we will burn it, then blast it *(nansifannahu)* into bits *(nasf)* in the waterway *(yamm)* *(Ṭā Ha 20:97).*

Like in many of the mountainous references we have seen already, the mountains are equated with the sea at the edge of the living world. Here, it is the false god of the calf which is related to the water, which is destroyed using the same language as the mountains' fall in verse 105. The idols which mark the barrier between the seen and the unseen are just like the mountains at the meeting of the two worlds. God will blast them both into bits.

In *al-Kahf* we also noted that the mountainous regions were related to revelation, as well as the sea. The Sleepers up in the mountains are marked as signs by their coinage *(wariq)* and their inscription *(raqīm)*, just as the Two-Horned One uses sheets *(zubur)* to construct his dam between the mountains. The linear parallel reference to these mountains in *Ṭā Hā* appears at verses 77-80.
The misguiding Pharaoh is overtaken by the water, while God guides Moses to guide his people through it. The fall of the misguider is then immediately paired to the covenant made from the right side of the mountain (presumably Sinai). The sea is at once death, but the route (ṭarīq) to deliverance, depending upon whether or not one is guided. Likewise the site of this guidance is in the mountains, which again, like in al-Kahf, are emblems of revelation as both a promise and a warning. Those who are guided by revelation will find hope in the mountains and the sea which bars people out of the other world; those who are misguided will find their annihilation in them. Once more, the barriers at the limits of the world can be read in two opposing ways.

We encounter the Qurʾān's second use of the term barzakh in Sūrat al-Muʾminūn (“the Believers,” 23).

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<th>Sūrat al-Muʾminūn (Full Structure)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 1A</td>
<td>The Creation: The believers, humanity, making the world</td>
<td>(al-Muʾminūn 23:1-22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 2A</td>
<td>The former prophets: the prophets are merely human</td>
<td>(al-Muʾminūn 23:23-51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Pivot</td>
<td>THIS IS YOUR UMMA, AND I AM YOUR LORD, SO FEAR ME</td>
<td>(al-Muʾminūn 23:52-56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 2B</td>
<td>The current prophecy: the record, no associates or sons</td>
<td>(al-Muʾminūn 23:57-92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sūra-Ring 1B</td>
<td>The Hereafter: the Resurrection, no gods besides God</td>
<td>(al-Muʾminūn 23:93-118)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reference to the barzakh appears in verses 99-100, which is found in the section labeled B of the first sūra-ring. After investigating this section, we should look for its parallels. This will start with the sūra-ring i’s first half (A), which is B’s concentric parallel. Then we will examine the entire sūra.

The pericope-ring which mentions the barzakh runs from verse 93 to 118.

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45 Cf. Ṭū Ḥā 20:104.
The whole section is bound together by a series of questions and requests between humanity and God made in the hereafter. The word *barzakh* appears in the third of these dialogues:

99. حَنَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدُهُمْ أَحَدُهُمْ قَالَ رَبِّ ارجِعُونَ
100. لَعَلَّيْ أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا وَيَزِدُنِي عِنْدَكَ كَلِمَةً مَّثِلَةً مُؤْتِمَةً وَمَنْ يَرِثَّ فِي النَّارِ إِلَّا مَنْ يَسْأَلُ وَيَسْأَلَ لِأَبِيَّةٍ أَبِيَّةٍ
101. فَإِذَا نَفَخَ فِي الصُّوْرِ قَالَ فَإِنَّا أَنْسَبْ بِيَدِي بَيْنَهُمْ وَلاَ يَسَّأَلُونَ

99. Until, when death comes to one of them, he says, 'My Lord, send me back,
100. So that I may do righteousness concerning what I left (undone).' Surely "No" is the word that He speaks. Behind them is a *barzakh* until the Day when they will be raised up.
101. When there is a blast on the horn, (there will be) no (claims of) kinship among them on that Day, nor will they ask (one another about it) (al-Muʾminūn 23:99-101).

This is the only time in the Qurʾānic corpus in which the *barzakh* is equated with the intermediate state in a way that is obvious in a linear reading. From this passage alone it seems that the *barzakh* keeps the dead away from the living world, and that it will continue until the Resurrection when the horn is blown. Returning to the story of the Two-Horned One in *al-Kahf*, there we also found a barricade which was made specifically to keep beings out of the world of the living.\(^{46}\) In both cases, the *barzakh* and the barricade will stand until the horn blows on the Day of Resurrection.

As the barricade of the Two-Horned One is in a concentric parallel to the Sleepers in their cave, so the reference to the *barzakh* in *al-Muʾminūn* is in a concentric parallel to God questioning the number of years a person stayed in the earth. In the passage above we see a pre-resurrected dead person pleading with God to return to the world. In its parallel, we see people after the Resurrection questioned by God.

\(^{46}\) al-Kahf 18:92-100.
112. He will say, “How long did you remain in the earth, (by) number of years?”
113. They will say, “We remained a day or part of a day. Ask those who keep count.”
114. He will say, “You remained only a little (while), if only you knew!” (al-Muʿminin 23:112-114).

This passage calls to mind the waking of the Sleepers in al-Kahf, as well as the Resurrection scene in Ṭā Hā. This very specific question and response formula in al-Mum’īnūn 23:112-114 would not appear at first glance to be related to the barzakh reference or to the construction of the Two-Horned One’s barricade. However, translated into a ring structure both the barzakh and the barricade are equated to a period of dormancy, an unclear passage of time seeming to last “a day or part of a day,” and a declaration of God’s knowledge of the true amount of time in question. The dead cannot return to the living world in the former section and neither are they aware of the world around them as shown by the latter one. Sleep and/or the time in the grave is a barrier between life and the day of Resurrection as much as the barzakh and the barricade of Gog and Magog are barriers between supernatural powers of death and the living world. In both al-Muʿminūn and al-Kahf a barrier in time is equated with a barrier in cosmology.

The barzakh and “day or some of a day” passages in al-Muʿminūn are in concentric orbit around another conversation between the dead and God: the sub-section’s pivot.

As in the barzakh passage above (99-101), the dead are in a state from which they ask God for deliverance. In this case it is in Hellfire. Here, the damned residing in torment ask God for a second chance and God denies them this. “Do not speak to Me (lā tukallīmūn).” In the barzakh reference the question is similar, however rather than asking for release from a state in which the person is already,
they ask to return to the world in order to prevent their future damnation. Again God responds in the negative: “Surely ‘No’ (kallā) is the word (kalima) that He speaks.” In both instances the dead’s state of regret or agony is enforced by the negative (lā) and the act of divine speech (K-L-M). On the other side of the same ring is the “day or part of a day” passage (112-114). Again this shows a conversation between the dead and God. In this case, the ignorance of the dead is juxtaposed against God’s knowledge, instead of His speech. But these dead people (like the Sleepers in al-Kahf) volunteer their own ignorance after guessing how long they slept. “We stayed a day or part of a day. Ask those who keep count.” They behave like God’s servants the Sleepers, not like the regretful un-resurrected dead or the damned in torment. We can conclude that like the Sleepers, these are the friends of God to whom one might be tempted to ask for intercession, and who are exposed as unaware and unconscious.

The many exempla references in al-Kahf of barriers and death are framed and in concentric rings around passages which highlight the humanity of the messengers (Jesus, Adam, Muḥammad). In this last pericope-ring of al-Muʾminūn are frame passages which explain the dominion of a God that has no associates (93-98; 115-118). Both of these sections conclude with commands that invert the pivotal pleading of the damned with God, ending with His command for them not to speak to Him. Instead, these two frame passages tell the believer what to say to God:

97. And say, “My Lord, I seek-refuge in you from the suggestions (hamazāt) of the devils.
98. And I seek refuge in you, my Lord, lest they approach me” (al-Muʾminūn 23:97-98).

118. And say, “My Lord, forgive and have-mercy, and you are the best of the merciful” (al-Muʾminūn 23:118).

The barrier between the dead and the living in both influence (barzakh) and awareness (the dormancy of the dead) are inverse examples of how to address God: in this life, not in death when one has no power and no knowledge.
Al-Muʾminūn's eschatological pericope is in concentric symmetry to the sūra's opening pericope which addresses the first creation and the believers (1-22).

Again ring structural translation reveals a parallel between the end of time and the beginning of time. At the pivots on both sides of the sūra-ring are situations in counter-distinction to each other. Above at verses 106-108, the Qurʾān shows people who ask to be brought out of damnation and are rebuffed. Here in this system, it is the promise of resurrection in the middle of a discussion on the primal creation. The dead will surely be returned to life as surely as the damned will not be returned to it.

The correlation between the sleep of death and the futility of bowing down to mere creatures is made more explicit when we turn to al-Muʾminūn's second sūra-ring and its discussion of the humanity of the messengers.

This system follows a threefold parallelism of stories from past prophets: Noah, an unnamed
prophet. Moses, and Aaron. In each story the prophets come to their respective communities' “chiefs” (mala’). The prophets are each in turn “rejected” or “denied” (kadhdhab, 26, 39, 48) for being “human like you” or “us” (basharun mithlukum, 24, 33, 34; basharayn mithlinā, 46). Then the community in question is destroyed (27, 41, 48).

As a ring structural translation demands, we should pay particular attention to the central unit of this structure. This takes the form of the unnamed prophet’s story, marking it as further distinct from the biblical prophets’ accounts which precede and follow it. All three prophetic stories contain similar accounts and phrases, most notably the rejection of each prophet for being only “human(s) like you/us.” However, in the middle of the three passages this claim appears twice in a chiasmic form, and once more in a verbally distinct arrangement, thus illuminating a pivot at the center of the three stories:

33. And the chiefs of those who disbelieved and rejected the hereafter’s meeting, and whom we lavished in the life of the world, said, “This is nothing but a human like you. He eats of what you eat and he drinks of what you drink.
34. And if you obey a human like you, then you are losers.
35. Does he promise you that when you are dead and are dust and bones that you will be brought-forth?
36. Preposterous, preposterous is what you are promised!
37. [There] is not but our life of the world. We die and we live and we will not be resurrected.
38. He is but a man (rajul) who invented a lie (kadhih) about God. And we are not believers in him (al-Munāmin 23:33-38).

The humanity of the unknown messenger is stated three times in this pivot, bracketed by doubts in

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47 Although this story does not name the prophet in question, it does say that his people were destroyed by a blast (sayba) in verse 41. The Qur’an uses the word sayba a number of times in describing the fall of Thamūd (Hūd 11:67, al-Hijr 15:83, al-Qamar 54:31) hence possibly identifying the prophet here as Sālih. The term also appears in the story of another unnamed people’s annihilation in Yā Sin 36:29. However, the word sayba is used less often in the stories of other prophets. This could instead be a reference to the Prophet Shu’ayb; see Hūd 11:34, or Lo; al-Hijr 15:73. In al-Ankabūt 29:40, Yā Sin 36:49, and Śād 38:15, this blast appears as the general punishment for all wicked people. In Yā Sin 36:33, Qīf 50:42, and al-Munāfiqūn 63:4 it is the horn blast of the Resurrection.
the Resurrection and the afterlife. While true of all three parts of this system, this pivot in particular can be read ironically: most especially regarding verse 34. This is the Qurʾān's own rejection of high Christology put in the mouth of sinners: “And if you obey a human like you, surely you are losers.” The Qurʾān challenges Christians for thinking too highly of Jesus’ divine origins; whereas here these other prophets are rejected for not being considered divine enough. The chiefs are correct that the messenger is merely a human being, but that ought not be a cause of disbelief. The terms used by this passage are an inverted version of claims we have already seen in al-Kahf, particularly in that sūra’s center and outermost ring. There is more than “this present life.” The messengers are just “human like you.” The nonbelievers have “invented a lie” about other divinities besides God, and most especially regarding the Sonship of Jesus.

The first of the two latches of this second ring system in al-Muʾminūn suggests such an ironic interpretation of the pivot as well. Mary and her son are introduced for a single verse.

And we made the son of Mary and his mother a sign. And we sheltered them away to a high-place (rabwa), possessing an abode and a spring (al-Muʾminūn 23:50).

It is particularly remarkable that in this case the Qurʾān chooses to parallel material about the failure of calling prophets divinities with this unusual verse. Rather than compare the mere humanity of Noah, the unnamed prophet, Moses, and Aaron to the worship of Jesus as we may expect, we are only given this. How we interpret this line is questionable. It could be a reference to Jesus’ Ascension and Mary’s Assumption. If this is correct it would also add meaning to the first half of the verse. They are signs but nothing more than signs. They are like the Sleepers: Jesus and Mary are signs of God which

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48 Cf. the central pivot of al-Kahf, the account of Adam and Iblīs.
49 al-Kahf 18:28, 45, 46, 104.
50 al-Kahf 18:110.
51 al-Kahf 18:5.
52 The second latch of the system parallels the food and drink allowance that ended the previous sūra-ring (21-22) and also closes the reference to food and drink in this section’s own pivot (33).
cannot be worshipped because they are in a dormant or at least inaccessible state in a “high place” (rabwa). A more probable reading of this verse is as a reference to Jesus’ miraculous birth. When the story is detailed elsewhere in the Qur’an, Jesus is born in a remote place with a date-palm and a fountain. Read this way, the mere humanity of the other prophets is compared to the birth of Jesus. This is a miracle and a sign, but it does not make Jesus more than a mere human being like the other prophets were. Whichever reading is correct, it is not insignificant that Jesus comes from and/or currently is in a “high place,” as the mountains are where the worlds intersect in revelation and in the meeting of life and death.

The mere humanity of Jesus suggested at the close of this first half of al-Mu’minun’s second sūra-ring returns more directly in the close of the second half of this same system.

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Ring 2A Those who are ignorant and sin will not be helped</td>
<td>(al-Mu’minun 23:52-65)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pericope-Ring 3A They ignore the signs, the Messenger and Truth</td>
<td>(al-Mu’minun 23:66-72)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pivot You are calling them to a straight path</td>
<td>(al-Mu’minun 23:73-74)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope Ring 3B They will not be given mercy, will be tormented</td>
<td>(al-Mu’minun 23:75-77)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pericope-Ring 2B God made the senses, earth; they doubt Resurrection</td>
<td>(al-Mu’minun 23:78-89)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericope-Ring 1B God did not take a son and has no associates</td>
<td>(al-Mu’minun 23:90-92)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This ring system ends:

90. ِبَلْ لَيْنُبِئُوهُمْ بِالْحَقِّ وَيُبَيِّنُهُمْ لَكُمْ بَيْنَاهُمْ
91. ِمَا أَفْتَحَ الَّهُ مِنْ أَيْدِيٍّ وَمَا كَانَ مَعَهُ مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِذَا أَذَهَبَ كُلُّ إِلَهٍ بِمَا خَلَقَ وَلَعَلَّ يُبْلِيُّهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَيْنِي سَبِيعَانِ اللهِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ
92. عَالَمَ الْعَمِّيَّ الْمُهِيَّةَ فَتَعاَلَى عَمَّا يُشَافِكُونَ

90. No, we granted them the truth, but surely they are liars (kādhūbīna).
91. God has not take a son, nor is (there) any (other) god with Him. Then each god would indeed have gone off with what he has created, and some of them would have surely overtaken the others. Glory (be) to God above what they attribute.
92. (He is) the Knower of the unseen and the seen. He is exalted above what they associate (al-Mu’minun 23:90-92).

The attribution of a son to God here elaborates on the seemingly random reference to “the son of

55 For more on the interpretation of this verse, see Neal Robinson, “Jesus,” EQ3.
Mary” in the latch at line 50. Like the sinners’ ironic dismissals of Noah, the unnamed prophet, Moses, and Aaron for being merely human beings, Jesus is correctly identified as less than God’s son. The root K-Dh-B appears here as well, echoing the “merely human” prophetic stories (26, 39, 48). However, in this system the central argument is not the rejection of prophets for being only people. Instead, this system is concerned with associating other beings with God. In the extreme of this section this appears as the childlessness of God and the lack of other deities (90-91) and the praise of those who do not associate (59). The pivot reverses this message and makes it a positive command.

ٍمٍيَقتَسٍمٍ١٣٧٣٧٤
وَإِنَّ الْمُنَّانِيْنَ لَا يَسْقَطُونَ بِالْإِحْزَاءِ عَنِ الْمَسَّرَاطِ لَا يَكُونُنَانَ

73. And indeed you surely call them to a straight path.
74. And indeed those who do not believe in the hereafter are surely wandering from the path (al-Muʾminun 23:73-74).

The Qurʾān’s third and final use of the word barzakh appears in Sūrat al-Furqān (“Piecemeal,”56 25). The sūra is composed of four major rings, the second and third of which are in turn composed of a pair of three parallelisms each.57

57 An interrupted sūra? Interestingly, the sūra deviates from the ring structure on the macro-level. The opening discussion of the furqān coming down (al-Furqān 25:1-2) reappears in the central pivot and its frames (32-39), but not at the end of the sūra. The sūra’s end does parallel the second sūra-ring quite well, so the structure stands on the whole, only the conclusion is ‘missing’. We cannot use this observation to conclude that some ‘real ending’ of the sūra has been lost or edited away, even if that is indeed what has happened. Neither is there a variant reading which might be used to make this argument. Oral productions are not guided by structure as firmly as literary texts are, so deviations from the norm need not have any implications, per se. Oral performances (here, ring structures) are only guided by what ‘sounds right’, and are hence memorable and memorizable.

This apparent absence might be read as both deliberate and ironic. If Saleh’s reading of the word furqān as ‘piecemeal’ stands, the central argument of the sūra is that the process of revelation is ongoing. The words of God are coming a piece at a time both across history from prophet to prophet (al-Furqān 25:35-39, cf. al-Baqara 2:53), and within the life of Muhammad (and both of these themes are suggested by this sūra). As the beginning and ending of a large ring structure are the most obvious and memorable parallels drawn, a missing ending would be especially noteworthy, perhaps even jarring. Here the missing conclusion ought to be discussing God’s piecemeal revelation again, but instead there is only an abrupt silence. Maybe this ‘missing conclusion’ is also an argument that the process of revelation is furqān; God is not done speaking. (Comparisons to other oral performances would include the all-but-absent second movement of Bach’s third Brandenburg Concerto, which suggests both silence and a space for the musician’s own improvisation, and the dramatic or humorous pause before the concluding ‘foot’ of an Irish limerick.)

200
The word barzakh appears in the second half of the third sūra-ring:

53. He (it is) who has let loose the two seas, this one sweet and fresh, and this (other) one salty (and) bitter, and placed between them a barzakh and a restricted obstruction (ḥīrān mahjūrān).
54. He (it is) who created a human being (bashar) from water, and made him related by blood and by marriage, (for) your Lord is powerful.
55. Yet they serve what neither benefits them nor harms them, instead of God (alone). The disbeliever (always) allies himself against his Lord.
56. We have sent you only as a glad-tidings-bearer (mubashir) and a warner (al-Furqān 25:53-56).

The section falls into both concentric and linear forms. A linear reading shows two parallelisms. The barzakh was made between the two seas as humanity was made from water. While the former keeps two forms of water apart, the latter shows two states in which water (in this case, humanity) joins together: in blood-ties and marriage-ties (literally in “melting,” sīhr). As the sea and fresh waters are kept apart, so people flow together. In the second half of the system, unbelievers associate beings with God who can neither help nor hurt them, while the Prophet is only a glad-tidings-bearer and a warner.

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59 Also, al-Mursalat 77:20.
The mere humanity of the prophet as not but a bringer of good news (mubashir) parallels humanity itself (bashar).\(^5^9\)

A concentric reading of the same passage posits God's self-declaration as the Powerful in the pivotal position. The inner ring of the system (54-55) contrasts proper human associations with family and spouses to improper associations with useless intercessors. The outer ring of the system (53 and 56) compares the creation of the barzakh with the true function of the Messenger. As people are to associate with each other but not false gods, so the barzakh's creation is to the mere humanity of the warning Prophet. Without the ring structural reading this second parallel may be missed, as there does not seem to be an obvious connection between the barzakh and the limited role of the Prophet. Taking into account the examples we have seen already, as well as the structure here, it is a natural juxtaposition. If the barzakh (as either a physical, mountainous barrier like the Two-Horned One's or the dormancy of the Companions of the Cave or the Garden) was made specifically to keep the living from worshipping the dead, especially Christ and other friends of God, then pairing this barzakh with the Prophet in this way is to be expected.

Most of the details of the barzakh which we have noticed already appear here directly or by implication. The barzakh was constructed for the specific purpose of keeping the two seas of this world and the heavens apart. Because we are told that it is ḥijran mahjūran, we must conclude that it is made of stone (ḥijāra, ḥajar), and so the mountains seem to be the barrier in question. The waters of Heaven and earth meet at the edge of the world where the ring of mountains mark and reinforce the border. Human beings are made of water in order to form relations with each other. However, they are not to form relations with false divine powers who have no ability to intercede in any case. Therefore, prophets like this one are sent to guide and threaten, but they are still just people. People belong with other people, not associates who are of no use regardless; God keeps the two seas (read, two worlds)

\(^5^9\) We have seen this juxtaposition of the root B-Sh-R in al-Kahf's outermost ring and center (al-Kahf 18:2, 56, 110). Note also that in the last of these the mere humanity of Muḥammad is opposed to the sea (baḥr) of revelation (109).
distinct, and sends a human agent with good news and warnings; God alone is the one with power.

The two immediate parallels before and after this passage will give us the rest of the major themes related to the barzakh which we have seen before: the movements of the sun, sleep, Resurrection, and the deathlessness of the one true God.

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In the parallels to the barzakh passage above, God's creative power is expounded. Just as God made the barzakh and humanity (53-54), God made other natural phenomena (46-52; 61-62). In the first parallelism (40-52), God created shadows, the sun, the night, the day, the winds, and the rain so that people may remember. Several of these are particularly significant to the search for the barzakh and the intermediate state.

The first cluster of creations mentioned in this sūra-ring read as follows:

45. Have you not regarded your Lord, how He stretched out the shadow? If He had (so) pleased, He would indeed have made it stand still. Then We made the sun a guide for it.

46. (And) then We drew it to Us gradually.

47. He (it is) who has made the night as a covering for you, and made sleep as a rest, and He has made the day as a raising up (al-Furqān 25:45-47).

The parallels of this system tell us that these examples are comparable to the creation of the barzakh. These specific references — the course of the sun, sleep, arising, and covering — brings to mind the Sleepers in their cave following the solar path in their uncovered sleep before their ‘resurrection’. The first line of this segment does the same, although by reference to another story. The Qur’ān is asking its audience if it recalls the time when the sun stood still:
On the day the Lord gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the Lord, “Sun, stand still [...] so the sun stood still and the moon stopped, [...] There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a human being. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel. Then Joshua returned with all Israel to the camp at Gilgal. Now the five kings had fled and hidden in the cave at Makkedah. When Joshua was told that the five kings had been found hiding in the cave at Makkedah, he said, “Roll large rocks up to the mouth of the cave, and post some men there to guard it.”

Just as the Sleepers are uncovered and make people flee from their cave, and this is counter-balanced by the uncovered people who flee into caves encountered by the Two-Horned One, al-Furqān 25:45 implies such a relationship as well, albeit much more quickly. The introduction of the barzakh is proceeded by the suggestion of the Joshua story of the movement of the sun and the flight into caves sealed with guardians, as well as the creation of the night as a time for sleep and the day as a time to arise.

Verses 57-62 conclude this system of creation parallelisms. The formation of the sun reappears (61), as does the creation of night and day (62), recalling the first parallelism of the set (with the sun made at 45; night and day at 47). However, unlike the first section which discusses the solar path and sleep (and strongly implies flight into a guarded cave) and the second section which places the barzakh in agreeing opposition to the mere humanity of the Prophet, this third section addresses the theological reasoning for the barzakh: pray to God alone because unlike saints and prophets, God never goes to sleep and never dies. The first half of this third section reads:

57. قُلْ ما أَسَاءَكُمُ عَلَيْهِمْ إِنّ أَجُرَّ إِلَّا أَنْ يُحْذِّرُ إِلَى رَبِّهِ سَبِيلًا
58. وَيَوْكَلُ عَلَى الْحَيٍّ الَّذِي لاَ يَضُرُّ وَسَيْعَ يَنْمِي وَسَيْعَ يَحْلَوُ وَكَفَى بِهِ عِبَادَنَا حَقِيقًا
59. الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فِي سَبِيلٍ أَيَامَنَّ مُسِلِّمَةٍ عَلَى الْعُرْفِ اللَّهُمَّ فَاسْتَغْفِرُ لَهُ وَحَبْرِهِ

57. Say, “I do not ask any reward (ajr) for it, except for whoever pleases to take a way to his Lord!”
58. Put your trust in the Living (One) who does not die, and glorify (Him) with His praise. He is sufficient (as One who) is aware of the sins of His servants,
59. Who created the heavens and the earth, and what is between them, in six days. Then He mounted the throne (as) the Merciful. Ask anyone (who is) aware about Him! (al-Furqān 25:57-59).

The deathlessness of God and only God is the opposite of the Qur’ānic intermediate state. If the

60 Joshua 10:12-18. Note that this passage in Joshua is directly after the Gibeonites are attacked by miraculous hailstones (Joshua 10:11). The Qur’ānic passage under discussion (al-Furqān 25:45) is likewise directly after the destruction of an unnamed town by an “evil rain” (al-Furqān 25:40). As the Joshua passage then immediately goes on to discuss sealing up five men in a cave with guardians, so al-Furqān goes on to discuss the barzakh.
Qurʾānic barrier between life and death doubles as a wall between living people and would-be intercessors; it stands that God must be outside of this system. God’s power is not limited in any way, by either death or dormancy. This passage presents this argument. God is the “the Living (One) who does not die.” Furthermore, we can see here that the rest of God on the seventh day of creation has been displaced by the establishment of His throne.⁶¹ God’s seat means He does not sleep, and also mirrors His deathlessness (58).

On the opposite side of Sūrat al-Furqān is the barzakh passage’s parallel on the largest scale of the sūra. The barzakh appears in a threefold parallelism set on creation (verses 40-62), and this is cast against a threefold parallelism set on the hereafter (11-31). While the barzakh is mentioned in the second section of the three as “a restricted obstruction” (ḥijran mahjārān), in the second of three equivalent passages on the hereafter we find this phrase again. The reappearance of “a restricted obstruction” (22) is the most direct marker of a ring that leads back to the barzakh. This exact phrase appears only twice in the received Qurʾānic corpus and only in these two uses in al-Furqān.

19. So they have called you a liar in what you say, and you are incapable of turning (it) aside or (finding any) help. Whoever among you does evil — We shall make him taste (nudhiqhu) a great (kabīr) punishment.
20. We have not sent (arsalnā) any of the messengers (mursalin) before you, except that they indeed ate food and walked about in the markets. We have made some of you a test for others: Will you be patient? Your Lord is seeing.
21. Those who do not except to meet Us say, “If only the angels were sent down on us, or we saw our Lord!” Certainly they have become arrogant (istakbarā) within themselves and behaved with great disdain (‘atāw ‘utuwwan kabīrān).
22. On the Day when they see the angels, (there will be) no glad-tidings (bushrā) that Day for the sinners, and they will say, “a restricted obstruction (ḥijran mahjārān);”
23. We shall press forward to whatever deeds they have done, and make them scattered dust.

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24. The companions of the Garden on that Day (will be in) a better dwelling-place and a finer resting-place (maqīl)\(^2\) (al-Furqān 25:19-24).

The larger context of this passage must be noted. It is in response to the doubts of the unbelievers earlier in the sūra:

7. They say, "What is wrong with this messenger? He eats food and walks in the markets. If only an angel were sent down to him to be a warner with him" (al-Furqān 25:7).

Both of these sections are the second of three parallelisms, as is the barzakh reference, too. The passage from 19-24 is answering the doubts of verse 7. People question the mere humanity of the Messenger: Why does he eat food and walk in the markets like a typical person? Why wouldn't God just send an angel instead of a human? The answer to both of these is given at the Eschaton. All of the messengers have been mere humans who eat and wander the markets as part of God's test for humanity (20). The doubtful will meet the angels eventually, but they will not bring good news (22). In fact, the unbelievers will look at the angels and say they are obstructions for them.\(^6\) The mere humanity of the prophets is again compared to an obstruction with eschatological tones. Now we can include the limitations of the angels to this juxtaposition as well. This warning ends with God's beloved in the Garden, who are sleeping during the daytime (24). And again in counter-distinction to eschatological sleep and the mere humanity of the messengers, God is the one who sees (baṣīr, 20).

In Sūrat al-Naml ("the ants," 27) we find a reference to the barzakh that does not use that specific term. Instead, al-Naml mentions "a barrier (ḥājiz) between the two seas" in one of the frames of its central pivot (verses 59-64).

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\(^6\) This term carries the implication of a place where one sleeps during the daylight hours (qāla, "to nap" or "siesta;" or the Qur'ānic qā'il, "a napper" in the afternoon in al-A'raf 7:4). See AED 788.

\(^6\) Who the "they" speaking in line 22 could possibly be read as the angels. However, the sinners seems much more likely to be the speakers as the previous "they" referenced in the same line, as well as the "they" in the next line implies the sinners, not the angels.
Because the mention of the unnamed barzakh occurs within the central pivot of the whole sura, there are not explicit parallels elsewhere in the system. Like we have seen already, the barzakh is introduced in a series of statements which proclaim the glory of God as the Creator.


61. Or (is He not better) who made the earth a dwelling place, and placed rivers in the midst of it, and made mountains-anchored for it, and placed a barrier (ḥājiz) between the two seas? (Is there any other) god with God? No! But most of them do know (it).

62. Or (is He not better) who responds to the distressed (person) when he calls on Him and removes the evil, and establishes you as successors on the earth? (Is there any other) god with God? Little do you take heed! (al-Naml 27:61-62).

This quick reference does not give any new information, but it does reinforce some relationships we have seen already. Again, the barrier between the two seas is made by God, and this act of creation is comparable to the creation of the inhabitable earth and the firmly-anchored mountains (as well as the rivers, 61). These creations, including the barrier, are the evidence of God’s sole dominion: the pivot repeatedly asks “Is there a god with God?” Then the passage continues on by questioning whether there is any other being that answers the call of the distressed. The barrier between the two seas is related to both the mountains and the failure of intercessors.
The word barzakh does not appear again in the third Meccan period, nor at the end of the Prophet's career in the Medinan period. However, all of the noted themes relating to the barzakh do reappear. In al-Rūm (“the Romans/Byzantines,” 30) the dead are again presented as being unaware of the passage of time. Here this is directly after a claim that they are deaf and unaware of what is happening in the living world. Even the Prophet (indicated by the singular “you”) cannot make the dead hear.

In this passage, it is claimed that only the wrongdoers are not aware of the passage of time. The righteous do not appear. Previously in Tā Hā 20:104, it was suggested that some amongst the dead were aware. “[...] The best of them in bearing say, ‘You have not remained but for a day.’” However, in the Sleepers story, the Sleepers too have this kind of debate. It seems unlikely that the Qur’ān means to suggest that the Sleepers were sinners. Therefore it must be concluded that all the dead are unaware of the passage of time (and by extension, anything else that has happened in the world). However, some of the righteous are aware of their own lack of awareness.

In al-Zumar (“the groups,” 39), there is a passing reference to the dead that may clarify this apparent inconsistency.

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64 See also Yānis 10:45.
65 al-Kahf 18:39.
God takes the souls at the time of their death, and those that do not die in their sleep (manāmihā).
Then He keeps the one [on] whom He has ordained death, and sends (yursīl) the others for a specified period. Surely in that are signs for a people who reflect (al-Zumar 39:42).

Again we can notice that death and sleep are comparable states. Like God takes the souls of the dead, so God takes the soul when it is asleep. After that much, there is a question of how we are to interpret this passage. The reading depends on where God “sends” (yursīl) the soul asleep. A more atomistic reading says that God takes the sleeping soul for a time, and then “sends” it back to the body when it wakes. Later that person will die too. At first glance this seems a reasonable enough reading. Or, is this passage suggesting that some people die typical deaths, while others do not; they merely ‘go to sleep' and thus bypass death altogether? While not explicit here, as we shall see later passages in the third Meccan and Medinan periods do claim that some people do not suffer mortal death in the normal way (such as martyrs). Therefore this reading has some credence as well. It would also explain the above mentioned problem regarding the various levels of awareness at the Eschaton. Perhaps the wicked die, while the righteous are instead taken by sleep. They are all unaware, but some more than others. God “sends” the sleeping-dead to some temporary condition like an intermediate state or an occultation.66

In Sūra Fāṭir (“Originator,” 35), the Qurʾān provides a long discussion of God’s dominion over creation, life, death, and the afterlife. The only exception to this subject matter appears in the central pivot’s framing passages when the voice of the recitation addresses the Prophet directly in his specific role as a warner (nadhīr). In the opening frame (Fāṭir 35:18), the warning is sent to a people who must purify themselves because they are not to expect collective atonement or guilt. In the closing frame (35:23-26), the warning is sent to those who cling to the religions of the past, and so call the warner a

66 If the later biographical epics of the Prophet are accurate, this development in the Qurʾān coincides with the end of the Prophet’s career in Mecca. If this is correct, it would be an appropriate time for such a development, as the first of the believers were starting to die before the Eschaton (e.g. Khadija). However, for the present this interpretation will remain guesswork.
In the central pivot, the message is still addressed to the Prophet, as it is in the frames. Here a series of distinctions are made between classes of opposites. This is in keeping with the role of God as fāṭir:

“creating” by “cleaving,” or “breaking things apart” (faṭara) from each other.⁶⁷

19. The blind and the sighted are not equal,
20. Nor the darkness and the light,
21. Nor the shade and the heat,
22. The living is and the dead are not equal. Surely God causes whomever He pleases to hear. You [(singular)] will not cause those who are in the graves to hear (Fāṭir 35:19-22).

If we read the pivot as addressing the Prophet specifically (most likely as he is the object of the two frames and the “you” is singular), the claim is simple. The living and the dead are distinct, and so the living Prophet cannot make the dead hear.⁶⁸ A second reading, which is also clear, is that no one but God can make the dead hear, the blind see, the darkness light, and so on. God makes all creatures in pairs by “cleaving” them. It is not for anyone — not even a prophet — to bridge this separation between categories, especially life and death. This is an equivalent to the “balance” (mīzān) discussed...

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⁶⁷ In some respects this is similar to the English verb ‘to cut,’ which can mean to divide by slicing, but can also refer to how something is made or its primal nature (e.g., cut from the same cloth; cut out for the job). cf. the duality of creation indicated by the repeated use of the dual form in al-Rahmān.

⁶⁸ See also Jane I. Smith, “Eschatology,” EQ2. There is also the natural implication that those who merely reject the Qur’ān stubbornly are doomed. They are going to be destroyed because they will just not listen.
in al-Rahmān\textsuperscript{69} and elsewhere in the corpus.\textsuperscript{70}

Like the long list of pairs introduced as God's signs in al-Rahmān, the second sūra-ring of Fātir addresses the many wonders of God's creation, mostly in pairs: reward and punishment, sky and earth, death and life, and so on. Of interest here are the parallel verses 12-14 and 33-35.

12. The two seas are not alike: this one is sweet, fresh, good to drink, and this (other) one is salty (and) bitter. Yet from each you eat fresh fish, and bring out ornaments (hīya) (with) which you adorn (talbasināhā) (yourselves), and you see the ship cutting through it, so that you may seek some of His favor (fadilīhī) and that you may be thankful (tashurūna).

13. He causes the night to pass into the day, and causes the day to pass into the night, and He has subjected the sun and the moon, each one running (its course) for an appointed time. That is God, your Lord — to Him (belongs) the kingdom, and those you call on instead of Him, do not possess even a speck (qīmīr).

14. If you call on them, they do not hear your calling, and (even) if they heard, they would not respond to you. On the Day of the Resurrection (qiyyāma), they will deny your association. No one (can) inform you like One who is aware (Fātir 35:12-14).

33. Gardens of Eden ('adn) — they will enter them. They will be adorned (yuḥallawna) with bracelets of gold and pearls, and there their clothes (libāsuhum) (will be of) silk.

34. And they will say, 'Praise (be) to God, who has taken away all sorrow from us! Surely our Lord is indeed forgiving, thankful (shakīr).

35. Who out of His favor (fadilīhī) settled us in the last (muqāma) home. No fatigue will touch us here, and no weariness will touch us here (Fātir 35:33-35).

Both the larger structure of the sūra and five shared roots mark these passages as a sub-pericope parallel. Besides the comparable discussion of the balance in al-Rahmān, this parallel also recalls the exempla parallels in al-Kahf. There is a discussion of the two seas, the edible fish, and the ship reminiscent of the adventures of Moses.\textsuperscript{71} There is also reference to clothing of the blessed composed

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\textsuperscript{69} E.g., al-Rahmān 55:33. (above).

\textsuperscript{70} See also al-Ḥadid 57:25 (below), al-Isrā 17:35, al-Shuʿarā 26:182, and al-Shūrā 42:37.

\textsuperscript{71} al-Kahf 18:60-82.
of bracelets and silks as mentioned in the recollections of Isaiah 5. Further, the sleeplessness of the people of the gardens is juxtaposed to the Resurrection, as the Resurrection prophecy of the Two-Horned One mirrors the dormancy of the Sleepers. Also, the movement of the sun is in opposition to false idols. There may even be an echo of the Sleepers’ dog. And all this is presented as exempla of Fāṭir’s central discussion: the Prophet is only a warner and he cannot commune with the dead. The only major element of the Qur’ānic intermediate state that is not present here are the mountains which encircle the earth.

Those mountains do appear in Sūrat al-A‘rāf (“the heights,” 7). The word a‘rāf appears to be a near synonym of barzakh as we have discussed above. The word only appears in this sūra that bears its name in the first half of the sūra’s third ring.

72 al-Kahf 18:27-46.
73 al-Kahf 18:100-102.
74 al-Kahf 18:3-26.
76 The hapax qiṭmār in Fāṭir 35:13 is also the standard name of the Sleepers’ dog. While the dog is not named in the Qur’ān itself, Muqṭāl and others were already invoking the unusual name Qiṭmār even before the full flowering of the Islamic commentary sciences. Qiṭmār is the only Arabic word constructed from the four-radical root Q-T-M-R, which has no equivalent in any other language. A qiṭmār is ‘the cleft of a date-stone’, the ‘skin of a date-stone’, or the ‘white point in the back of the date-stone’. Idiomatically, it implies ‘a small, mean, paltry, contemptible, thing’ See AEL 2543 and AED 767-768. Similar to the introduction of the dog in al-Kahf 18:17–18, the word qiṭmār’s sole Qur’ānic usage appears immediately after a description of the sun’s movement. The solar reference here is also concluded by denying the authority of alternative or associate divine powers besides the one God. Compare this passage to what we have seen already in al-Kahf 18:17. Also, sleep reappears here as well. As the deafened Sleepers are foreshadowing sleeping-death and the Resurrection, here the Resurrection concludes the false idols’ inefficacy and deafness. The powerlessness of both the Sleepers and the would-be intercessors proves their inability to hear or respond to human calls. Both the dog and the qiṭmār are invoked as signs of the uselessness of turning to powers besides the one true God. The otherwise bizarre name of this animal in many of the later Islamic sources echoes an older reading of the story, which does not consider the dog as simply a pet but as a warning.
The first half of the third sūra-ring details various states in the hereafter (al-Aʿrāf 7:36-58). The wrongdoers are cast into Hellfire for calling on false gods and claiming that God's message is a lie. Their guilt is also equated to materialism, as the Qurʾān states they will stay in the Fire until “the camel passes through the eye of the needle.”77 Hell is to be their “bed” or “resting-place” (mihād) where they will have some kind of “covering” (ghawāsh) placed over them (41). Meanwhile, the righteous will gain entry to the Gardens where they thank God for guiding them aright. Then the people in the Garden call out a taunt to the people in the Fire from across a “partition” (hijāb, 46), which will later be responded to (50), reminiscent of the exchange between Lazarus and the rich man in the biblical lore.

At this point a third group of people is introduced who are not in the Fire or the Garden. They too call out to both the damned and the saved:

77 al-Aʿrāf 7:40. cf. “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God,” Mark 10:25; also Matthew 19:24; Luke 18:25; Diatessaron 29:2-3.

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47. And when their sight is turned toward the companions of the Fire, they say, "Our Lord, do not place us among the people who are evildoers."
48. And the companions of the heights call out to the men whom they recognize by their marks (and) say, "Your hoarding is of no use to you nor what you were arrogant (about).
49. Are these the ones home you swore God would not reach with (His) mercy? Enter the Garden! (There will be) no fear on you, nor will you sorrow (al-ʿArāf 7:46-49).

We must presume that this event precedes the Final Judgment, as at least some people (the Companions of the Heights) are not in Paradise or Hell. Also, because the Companions of the Heights can see and speak to the people in the Garden and the Fire, we have to suppose that the Companions of the Heights are dead. The timing of this situation is unfortunately ambiguous, and neither are we helped by the parallel passage. The most likely resolution to this is that this is a scene from after the Resurrection, during the process of the Last Judgment. While the Companions of the Heights are dead, they also seem to be quite awake. There is no mention here of sleep or dormancy. However, if we recall the Sleepers in the cave, they were asleep but did not seem to be. Both groups are called “companions” (aṣḥāb), and both turn in opposite directions (from right to left; from Paradise to Hell). Therefore both the Companions of the Cave and the Companions of the Heights present the state of the dead; the former before the Resurrection, the latter after. Both are placed in the inaccessible mountains at the edge of the world.

The Qur’ānic accounts of the unaware dead continue to appear. In al-ʿArāf (“the dunes” or “[sand] drifts,” 46), there is yet another instance of the dead not knowing how long they slept in the grave. This passage is put in opposition to God’s tirelessness in creation, while it is also compared to the failure of intercessors.

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78 Being a scene from Moses at Sinai at al-ʿArāf 7:37: "And [recall] when We shook (nutaqnā) the mountain above them as if it was a canopy (zulā). And they thought it would fall on them. Take with strength what We have given you and remember what is in it so that you will fear (tattaquāna)." Both scenes take place at a “height,” but otherwise neither section informs the other in any obvious way.
80 Cf. Matthew 25:31-46 for a similar division of the saved and the damned, in which the former are put on the right and the latter on the left.
33. Do they not see that God, who created the heavens and the earth, and was not tired out (ya'yu) by their creation, is able to give life to the dead? Yes indeed! Surely He is the powerful over everything.
34. And on the Day when those who disbelieve are presented to the Fire: "Is this not the truth?" They will say, "Yes indeed! By our Lord!" He will say, "Taste the punishment for what you have disbelieved."
35. Be patient, as the messengers of firm resolve were (also) patient. Do not seek to hurry it for them. On the Day when they see what they are promised, (it will seem) as if they had remained for only an hour of the day. A delivery! Will any be destroyed but the people who are wicked? (al-Aḥqāf 46:33-35)

The passage reads as two linear parallelisms. God creates and re-creates without becoming tired, and then punishes the disbelievers; the prophets wait patiently for the Resurrection in a dormant state, and the destruction of the disobedient is foretold. It is God who raised the dead (33), while the prophets remain in a patient, subordinate role.

This is compared to the first half of the same sūra-ring (verses 1-8). God’s role as Creator of the heavens and the earth reappears, with the addition of “what is between the two” (mā baynahumā, 3): the Heights/the barzakh.

3. We did not create the heavens and the earth, and whatever is between them, except in truth and (for) an appointed time, but those who disbelieve are turning away from what they are warned of.
4. Say: “Do you see what you call on instead of God? Show me what (part) of the earth they have created. Or do they have any partnership in (the creation of) the heavens? Bring Me any Record before this (one) or any trace of knowledge, if you are truthful.”
5. Who is farther astray than the one who, instead of God, calls on those who will not respond to him until the Day of Resurrection, while they are (otherwise) oblivious of their calling?
6. When the people are gathered, they will be enemies to them, and will deny their service (al-Aḥqāf 46:3-6).

On the day of the Resurrection, the would-be intercessors are brought forth. However, they are unaware of the calls of their worshippers (5) and had no share (shirk) in the works of creation (4). Like the dead in the second half of the ring, the intercessors cannot respond to prayers because they did not hear them.

The lives of the dead are simply immaterial to the lives of the living, whether this is before the Resurrection or afterward (the Companions of the Heights). There is a high barrier between the living and the dead. The dead commune with each other, as the living do. But there is no way for the two groups to interact. Just like a person in sleep may have some kind of activity (dreams, visions) and yet is not in contact with the waking world, so are the deceased. The dead, or at least some of the dead, are at once dormant and not. Like the Sleepers, or the Two-Horned One's interlocutors at the barricade, they are doing something from their own point of view, but are inaccessible to ours. And like the sleeper who has dreams, they still remain unaware of the passage of time.

Part 4: The Medinan Period

Moving into the Medinan Qurʾān, the cosmological aspects of the intermediate state are scaled back slightly. The barzakh, the heights, and other comparable terms do not reappear, or are much less developed. However, the theology of the argument (the inaccessibility of the dead and the intercessors; the sleeplessness of God) continue to appear regularly.

There are quite a few passages of significance to the Qurʾān's intermediate state to be found in

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81 A similar detail also appears in al-Anʿām 6:36, the next sūra according to Nöldeke's chronology.
the longest sūra system, *al-Baqara* (“the cow,” 2). In the system’s second and fifth sūra-rings there are a number of passages that are informative of the Qur’ānic intermediate state. In the fifth ring is a claim that some of the dead are still alive, while in the second ring is a discussion of God’s sleepless creativity.\(^8\)

### Sūrat al-Baqara (Full Structure)

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We start with the fifth major ring of *al-Baqara* (142-177), which contains the sūra’s central pivot and its frames. The central pivot of this concentric system (and therefore the pivot of the entire sūra) falls on verses 163-164. There we find a firm declaration of the oneness of God compared to the great plurality of God’s creations, which are each signs of their Creator.

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\(^8\) For a similar ring structural analysis of *al-Baqara*, see Asif Uddin, “The Coherence of al-Baqarah,” accessed July 28, 2014. http://www.islam21c.com/texts/6203-the-coherence-of-al-baqarah/. Raymond Farrin also provides a ring structure of this sūra. Farrin divides the rings differently, but he also places the pivot in a comparable position as my own analysis’ and Uddin’s. Therefore, while the rings Farrin uses are not identical to my own, the parallels those rings signify remain generally the same. Raymond Farrin, *Structure and Qur’anic Interpretation* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 2014), 75–85.
Surrounding the central pivot are two interlocking discussion-sets in four parts. The first of these sets of four details certain Islamic practices. Specifically it is those practices which mark the *umma* as in continuity with the Scripture People and yet distinct: the direction of prayer, the pilgrimage, and the dietary laws. The second discussion set of four is a soteriological catalog of four different groups of people.⁸³ The first part of this second set (154-157, sub-pericope ring 2A) reads:

154. And do not say that those who are killed in the way of God, 
[They are] dead: No, they are alive but you do not perceive.
155. And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger, and of the loss of wealth, and lives, and fruits, but give-glad-tidings to the patient.
156. And those who when misfortune strikes them say, 'Surely we are God's and surely we return to Him,'
157. On those are blessings from their Lord, and mercy. And those are the guided (al-Baqara 2:154-157).⁸⁴

This is the first time in the Qur’an when there is an explicit reference to those who are dead but not yet resurrected as being alive. And the text is quite clear that they are still alive somehow, but are

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⁸³ Therefore, the overarching theme of the whole *sūra* is both the continuity of Islam with the religions of the past (the third *sūra*-ring, treating the Scripture People), its distinction from them (the fourth *sūra*-ring, treating the failures of the Scripture people and the new Islamic legal order), and the universality of the one God (the second *sūra*-ring, treating God's power over all aspects of the first and second creations).

⁸⁴ There is a comparable claim made in *Āl ‘Imrān* 3:69 about the martyrs still living. However, there the parallels involve the audience's fears of dying in battle. The martyrs are declared alive in a section traditionally equated with the Battle of Uhud (*Āl ‘Imrān* 3:153-175). This is the second half of a pericope-ring whose first half details the Battle of Badr (*Āl ‘Imrān* 3:121-128). There we find that victory of Badr was due to angelic assistance (*Āl ‘Imrān* 3:124-125). In both cases, the victory or loss is due to the will of God, not the presence or absence of soldiers.

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![Table](image-url)
merely outside of normal perception. It stands to reason that this applies to the faithful of the past too, such as the Sleepers, who also seemed to die but are rather just outside of living awareness. Meanwhile, the audience of the Qurʾān is told to prepare for the loss of worldly fertility — food, wealth, and life — by being patient.

This passage is not talking about all of the dead though, only those who have been martyred. The three sections which parallel this one also describe the lot of different people. In the first of these are the dead who denied the signs and revelations. They will be punished unless they repent (159-162). Next are the dead who worshipped other beings besides the one God. Like in passages we have already encountered, their would-be intercessors do not help them and they are sent into the Fire (165-167). Finally, there are those who merely follow the way of their ancestors (170-171). These people seem to still be in this life, which mirrors both the living martyrs (the concentric parallel) and the unbelieving dead (the two linear parallels). In a similar manner, these living people also cannot be reached by pleading, like the false gods of the idolaters and like the dead.

But the God of the Qurʾān does see and hear at all times, and this is explained in the second major sūra-ring of al-Baqara.
We are here concerned with the parts of this section labeled sub-pericope ring 1 in both halves of the sūra-ring (21-22, 28-29, 254-260, 284). The first part of this sequence details how God alone made the earth as “resting-place” or “couch” (firāsh) with the heavens a canopy (bīnāʾ) over it (22). If you doubt what God has sent, see if you can make a comparable sūra (23). The sub-pericope ring continues at verse 28:

28. How can you deny God? And you were dead, so He gave-you-life, then He causes-you-to-die, then He gives-you-life, then to Him you are returned.
29. He is the one who created all that is in the earth for you. Then He turned to Heaven and made seven heavens. And He knows everything (al-Baqara 2:28-29).

These verses are also in turn the linear parallels of verse 284, which continues the discussion of God’s dominion over the heavens and the earth. Here God uncovers what people have hidden, in contrast to the creation of heaven as a covering in verse 22.

284. God’s is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth. And if you disclose what is in yourselves or if you conceal it, God will call-you-to-account for it. So He forgives whom He wills, and He torments whom He wills. And God is-powerful-over everything (al-Baqara 2:284).

The theme throughout all the verses in this cycle is the power and knowledge of God over the heavens and the earth which He created. These all reflect or predict the following longer section (254-260), in
which God is declared the all-powerful owner of creation (cf. 284) and a number of resurrection stories are provided (cf. 28). However, rather than needing to rest on the earth as people do (22), God does not need sleep. And all these themes (God's sole power, the Resurrection, and the mortal need of rest) are contrasted against the belief in intercessors or other gods.

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This sub-section begins at verse 254 with the command to the faithful to contribute the goods they been given to the greater cause. These goods are of no use anyway, because the day is coming when there will be “no bargaining, and no friendship, and no intercession.” This leads into the Throne Verse (255), which also functions as a single verse concentric system.

255. God, [there] is no God but He: the Living (hayy), the Everlasting (qayyim).
He is not taken by slumber or sleep.
What is in the heavens and what is in the earth (are) His.
Who is there who can intercede with Him, except by His permission?
He knows what is between the front of them and what is behind them.
And they do not encompass a thing of His knowledge, except by what He willed.
His throne extends to the heavens and the earth
And He does not weary (yu’adhuha) from guarding them.

87 Length is not a major concern of oral performances, and therefore does not factor into a ring structural translation. However, the extreme length of the section from verses 254-260 in comparison to its three parallels is quite unusual, more so because this section is itself composed of a sub-pericope ring, not a linear parallelism as the three related units are. And yet, the subjects of both of these passages are certainly intertwined, and they all fit well into the larger structure of the sūra. Therefore, while odd, there is no strong reason to suppose this passage's length and structure is not deliberate. Unfortunately this section does not survive to us in the Ṣan‘ā’ Palimpsest for comparison. Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Ṣan‘ā’ 1 and the Origins of the Qur’ān.”

88 Foretelling the beginning of a discussion on spending wealth in the cause of God in the ring composed of verses 261-267 and 270-283.
And He is the High, the Great (al-Baqara 2:255).\(^9\)

Except for the pivot declaring God’s knowledge of whatever is before them and behind them, and the outer-rings composed of two divine names each, the verse is made of synonymous statements. No one can intercede with God or gain some of His knowledge unless He allows it. God’s throne reprises His ownership of the heavens and the earth. God does not sleep, and neither does He become tired by his work.

The Throne Verse is in many ways similar to two passages we have seen already. In al-Furqān 25:58-59 we noted that because God is alive, undying, and all-knowing, there is no need for associates or intercessors: “And trust in the Living, the one who does not die, and glorify with His praise. And He is adequate for the sins of His servants: the Informed. The one who created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six days, then He established His throne over it: the Merciful. So ask Him: the Informed.” Comparably, Ṭā Hā 20:109-111 says, “On that day, intercession will not help but to whom the Merciful has permitted it and excepted his word. He knows what is between the front of them and what is behind them. And they do not encompass it in knowledge. And the faces are shamed for the Living, the Everlasting.” Ṭā Hā 20:109-111 is in a symmetrical structure to one of the Qurʾān’s many verses in which resurrected or awakened people wonder whether they slept for “a day or some of a day.”\(^9\) The power of God is contrasted to people asleep/dead who do not know what is happening

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\(^9\) The Throne Verse may be read as a recollection or reversal of a number of biblical passages. Like al-Kahf, there is some similarities with Isaiah 5. Also Jesus’ declaration that he is the “resurrection and the life” in John 11:25 may be suggested by God’s first two divine names here. A stronger relationship seems to be present with Psalms 132:1-7: “Lord, remember David and all his self-denial. He swore an oath to the Lord, he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob: ‘I will not enter my house or go to my bed, I will allow no sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob. We heard it in Ephrathah, we came upon it in the fields of Jaar. Let us go to His dwelling place, let us worship at His footstool, saying, ‘Arise, Lord, and come to your resting place, You and the ark of Your might. May Your priests be clothed with Your righteousness. May Your faithful people sing for joy.’”

For another ring structural reading of this verse, see Azaiez, Mehdi, “The Throne Verse (ʾāyat-l-kursī) in Light of Rhetorical Analysis.” International Qur’anic Studies Association. March 4, 2013. Accessed July 2, 2014. http://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/2013/05/04/ttvir/. Azaiez’ ring structure is identical to this one, save that he does not consider the first words “God, [there] is no God but” (allāhā là ilaha illā) as part of the structure. He does not explain why he makes this exclusion which breaks the grammar of the sentence.

\(^9\) Ṭā Hā 20:103-104, also above.
around them. The Throne Verse follows a similar structure, as seen in its concentric parallel passage,

\textit{al-Baqara} 2:259.

259. Or, like the one who passed by a town and its roofs were overturned. He said, “How will God bring life to this after its death?” Then he was-made-to-die by God for a hundred years, then He raised him. He said, “How long have you remained?” He said, “I remained a day or some of a day!” He said, “No, you remained a hundred years. So look at your food and your drink: they did not change. And look at your donkey. And We will make you a sign for the people. And look at how We raise the bones, then We cover them with flesh.” Then when it became clear to him he said, “I know that God is-powerful-over everything” (\textit{al-Baqara} 2:259).

Besides recalling all of the Qur’ānic ‘day or some of a day’ passages, this story is particularly reminiscent of the story of the Sleepers in \textit{al-Kahf}. Like the Sleepers, this person is dormant for many years and unaware of the passage of time. His resurrection is marked by his food and drink, as the Sleepers are signified to the people by their need for food.\textsuperscript{91} Both this man and the Sleepers are accompanied by an animal: the donkey and the dog.\textsuperscript{92} Most significantly, the resurrection of this man and his ignorance of the world around him in his death are contrasted against the Throne Verse, which claims that God both does not die and does not sleep. Again like the Sleepers, God alone is the miraculous agent, while dormant people are only His signs. God is powerful over everything; the sleeping and the dead are not. The pivot of the Throne Verse highlights God’s limitless knowledge, while this verse highlights the dead’s lack of knowledge.

The passages that both come before and after this resurrection story also discuss the Resurrection, and both feature Abraham. In the first of the set (\textit{al-Baqara} 2:258), Abraham and an

\textsuperscript{91} In this sense, this story is particularly similar to the accounts of Ḥoni the Circle Drawer, his grandson, and Abimelech discussed in Chapter 1, whose time in miraculous sleep are marked by the carob fruits, grains, and figs, and all align with the destruction of the Temple. A number of Muslims exegetes cite the fall of Jerusalem during the days of Jeremiah as one of the possible settings for this story (e.g. al-Tabarî and Ibn Kathîr), suggesting the story of Abimelech in particular.

\textsuperscript{92} There is a cluster of prophetic reports which specifically mention donkeys’ and dogs’ abilities to sense the unseen. e.g., Abū Dāwūd, \textit{Sunan}, 5084.
unnamed questioner\textsuperscript{93} debate whether God brings life and death. The questioner claims that he has power over his own life and death, which Abraham denies:

258. [...] Abraham said, “Surely, God brings the sun from the East, so you bring it from the West” (al-Baqara 2:258).

Like in the story of the Sleepers and the Two-Horned One, God’s power over life and death is demonstrated by the path of the sun. This passage does not suggest the barzakh or any comparable terms, however the parallel passage does (260).

Again we find Abraham discussing the Resurrection, but this time directly with God. Although Abraham believes in the reanimation of the dead, he does not understand its mechanics. So he asks God for a demonstration.

260. And [recall] when Abraham said, “My Lord, show me how you give-life to the dead.” He said, “Have you not believed?” He said, “Yes, but for the satisfaction of my heart.” He said, “Then take four of the birds, shape them [surhuma] to you, then place a piece of them on each mountain [jabal], then call them and they will come to you quickly. And know that God is the Mighty” (al-Baqara 2:260).\textsuperscript{94}

Rather than equating death and the Resurrection to the sun, this Abraham story equates them to the mountains. In a parody of God’s activity, Abraham takes birds, places them in the mountains, and then

\textsuperscript{93} Perhaps the pharaoh Abraham meets in Genesis 12:10-20, the king of Sodom in Genesis 14, the king of Gerar, also named Abimelech, in Genesis 20-21, or his pagan father Abaz (the biblical Terah) from al-An’âm 6:74-83. This last possibility seems particularly likely as both this debate and the debate with the unknown unbeliever in al-Baqara 2:258 are resolved by a demonstration of God’s power relating to the rise and fall of the sun.

\textsuperscript{94} There are two pre-Islamic stories in which Abraham has strange interactions with birds, symbolizing the patriarch’s God-given fertility and also his mortality. In Jubilees 11:21-24, the young Abram gains fame for keeping birds from his father’s seeds. Slightly closer to this Qur’anic story, in Genesis 15 (also Jubilees 14) Abram famously questions God’s ability to grant him children. God tells him to look at the stars and see the plentitude of his descendants. Then as a sacrifice Abram slaughters certain animals and cuts their bodies in half. However, the passage notes that “the birds however, he did not cut in half” (15:20). Then Abram immediately falls into a prophetic sleep as the sun starts to set, in which his family’s enslavement and salvation in Egypt is foretold. Abram, however, is told he will die and be buried with his ancestors at a happy old age (15:35). Then when the sun finally passes below the horizon, a mysterious fire passes between the pieces of his sacrifice (15:47), and Abram is promised the land of Canaan.
calls them [back?95] to life. It is noteworthy that this miracle is very similar to the Qur’ānic and apocryphal stories of Jesus animating clay birds.96 Also, as previously discussed regarding al-Mu‘minūn 23:50, Jesus himself was miraculously born in a “high place” and/or miraculously resides there now in occultation. Therefore this Abraham story has Christological undertones. Note also that although a prophet is a part of this process, he has no independent power or understanding of the miracle. Even Abraham is just God’s instrument, without any knowledge or advocacy apart from the Deity’s. Jesus and other holy people are the same. And again, the place of the dead is associated with the mountains, perhaps even the specific mountains that encircle the earth.97

Sūrat al-Ḥadīd (“the iron,” 57) functions much like the second half of the second sūra-ring of al-Baqara.98 It opens with a section very similar to the Throne Verse, (al-Ḥadīd 57:1-6) and this is counter-positioned to the Scripture Peoples’ belief in intercession (28-29). The exempla of the ring asks for contributions to the cause of God, and praises those who sacrifice goods that are temporary anyway (8-11, 25-26).99 Parallel verses detail a wall between the people of the next life (12-15), and the arrival of both messages and iron (25-26).

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95 Ṣurhunna (and its root, S-W-R) can be read as “shaping” or “forming.” The meaning here is unclear. It could be that Abraham is taking four living birds, and chops them up in order to conduct the demonstration. This is possible as the passage refers to the birds being in pieces. Or, more likely, Abraham is crafting the birds out of clay or some other material, similar to Jesus in Al ’Imrān 3:49 and at-Mā’ida 5:110. This would therefore make the action a demonstration of God’s role in both creation (forming people out of clay) and Resurrection (calling them to life).


97 That is, because there are four birds, it may mean that Abraham placed them at the four cardinal points of the compass.

98 al-Baqara 2:254-284

99 Cf. al-Baqara 2:261-267, 270-283
The first sūra-ring of al-Ḥadīd reads quite like the Throne Verse and the similar passages to it from other sūras, such as al-Furqān 25:58-59 and Ṭā Hā 20:109-111. God is called the Owner of the heavens and the earth (1). His power and knowledge over everything is verified (2-3). His throne (here ‘arsh, not kursī) appears (4).

1. What is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God. And He is the Mighty, the Wise.
2. His is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He causes-life and causes-death. And He is the powerful over everything.
3. He is the first and the last, and the outer and the inner. And He is the Knower of everything.
4. He is the one who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then He rose over the throne (‘arsh).

Also like the Throne Verse and al-Furqān 25:58-59, there is the implication that God does not sleep. After explaining how the world was created in six days, God takes His place upon the throne (4). He does not rest on the seventh day, but rather sits as master of creation. The first half of verse 4 is also the pivot of this sub-section, which suggests that it is the most forceful or dramatic presentation in the section. The rest of the rings of the section are concerned with God as knowledgeable and as ruler. Once again the familiar biblical story of Genesis 1-2 is reintroduced to the audience, but flipped around so that God’s rest is His sitting enthroned, not the rest of sleep.

Unlike the ‘Throne Verse,' intercession does not appear in this passage. Instead, it appears in the other half of this same sūra-ring (27-29). Notice here the belief in extra-divine power is attributed
specifically to the Scripture People.

The Qur'an does state elsewhere that monks are notably humble, and they are close to the Qur'anic faith in their devotion. But the Qur'an also warns against those Christians who take their monks as "lords (arbâb) besides God." Besides the charge of religious innovation, this second claim appears to be relevant in the above passage as well. The structure of al-Ḥadîd 57:27-29 parallels the invention of monasticism (27) with the Scripture Peoples' belief in a power outside of God's allowance (29): saint cults. The danger of monasticism is the tendency to assume the monk carries redemptive or supernatural abilities beyond himself; that the monk may act as a communal intercessor or carry the sins of another person. This is contrasted to God as the one who forgives sins (28) who grants His bounty to whomever He pleases (29). Read against the first half of the sûra-ring, the belief in the intercessions of another person contradicts God's power and knowledge: His sleeplessness.

In our reading of al-Kahf (as well as Tâ Hâ 20:77-80) we argued that the barrier between the

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100 E.g., al-Ma'âda 5:82. It must also be recognized that there is no record in the Qur'an, the Islamic literatures, or in any other available source that the Qur'anic milieu was itself host to large-scale, systematic monastic communities. Such communities did exist nearby (in the Sinai, the Levant, Mesopotamia, and in Southern Arabia) and would have been known of, but it seems more likely that by "monasticism" (rahbânîyya) the Qur'an means primarily individual or small groups of hermits and ascetics (e.g. Nestor and Bahîra). See Sidney Griffith, "Monasticism and Monks," EI4.

101 al-Tawbah 933. Note too that in this passage the taking of monks (and rabbis) as "lords" springs out of a discussion of Christology. The saint cults of the monks is an outgrowth of the cult of the divine Christ.
living and the dead was a cosmological equivalent to the act of revelation. The dog at the cave of the Sleepers and the barricade of the Two-Horned One are the strongest examples of this. Like the words and signs God sends down, the barrier and barrier-like features of the Qur’ānic cosmology read two ways. The living are blocked away from the other world, as the dead are sealed away from this one. The words of God enter into the world; the calls of the associators are excluded and unheard. We also argued that these barriers help to maintain the balance (mīzān), as we have seen in al-Raḥmān 55:33, and less directly in Fāṭir 35:19-22. And all these balancing-barriers can be ‘read’: the wariq and the raqīm of the Sleepers; the zubur of the Two-Horned One. Further, these barriers are made of or suggest metal: the wariq, silver or gold; the raqīm, lead; the zubur, iron; the barricade (and perhaps the dog as well), bronze. Al-Kahf also compares these all to the molten metal of Hellfire, the golden bracelets of the blessed, the payment Moses and ‘Kḥīḍr’ do not receive, and the treasure they uncover beneath a wall. The second sūra-ring of al-Ḥādīd in its second set of parallels (12-15, 25-26) reintroduces this relationship between revelation, the balance, and the dual meaning of metal, and in much more direct language.

25. And certainly We sent our messengers with clarification. And We sent-down the record with them, and the balance (mīzān) to establish people in justice. And We sent down iron, in which is mighty violence (bas) and benefit for the people. And so God makes evident who helps Him and His messengers unseen. Surely God is the Strong, the Mighty (al-Ḥādīd 57:25).

As God sends down revelation and the balance to create justice, God sends down iron which is both terrible in power and useful in craft. In the ancient world, metal came from only two sources: caves and meteorites. Thus iron and other metals could be understood as both celestial and a chthonic symbols. It comes from either the world of the dead or the world of the sky. This would lead to a
number of meteorite cults which appeared throughout antiquity.  

While highly conjectural, such a cult is often supposed to have existed in pre-Islamic Mecca. Whatever the case, we can see the Qurʾān understands both the heavenly and deathly meanings of iron here and in *al-Kahf*.

This passage, in which the revealed record is paralleled directly with the descent of iron, in turn parallels the following verse, which discusses a barrier and a door between the Garden and the Fire:

13 On the Day, the hypocrite-men and the hypocrite-women say to those who believed, “Wait for us, [so that] we may-gain from your light.” It is said, “Go back behind you and seek light.” So between them will be erected a wall (sūr) [with] a door for it. Its inside is mercy and its outside faces punishment (*al-Hadīd* 57:13).

We have already encountered interactions between the dead across the Heights (the walls of stone that surround the earth) in *al-Aʿrāf*. Here the wall is called *sūr*, which implies the wall ‘surrounds’ or ‘encloses’. This wall is not just a partition which divides space in half. It is going around something. Also, like the barriers we have discussed in *al-Kahf* and elsewhere, the wall has two natures which are defined by one’s orientation. Inside of the wall is mercy; outside is punishment. Whether this wall is to be literally understood as the same barrier of mountains that surrounds the earth, or is an eschatological mirror of that barrier in the world to come or in the unseen, this passage informs us of what we have argued about *al-Kahf*. In either reading, the living world is associated with mercy, while the world beyond with punishment.

Also, here we notice the introduction of a door (*bāb*) in this surrounding wall. The text does

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102 An Eros meteorite cult appeared in the 5th century B.C.E. See Barbara Breitenberger, *Aphrodite and Eros: The Development of Greek Erotic Mythology* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 142. In Egypt, iron was the semen of Atum or Amun-Re, such as evidenced in the “Mother’s Bull” cult of Thebes, the Benben stone cult of Heliopolis, and a cult that worshiped “a fallen piece of the sun” according to Pliny. See Alan F. Alford, *Pyramid of Secrets* (London: Eridu Books, 2003), 168-171. In Mesopotamia (where iron only came from meteorites) iron was “the metal of the heavens,” See D.T. Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization: The Material Foundations* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 177.

103 The Black Stone of the Kaʿba is often considered a meteorite, suggesting a similar Arabian pre-Islamic meteorite/fertility cult (hence the stone is oriented to the sunrise). Later Muslims claimed the stone had a dual nature as well: it is white in heaven, but black on earth. See Gerald R. Hawting, “Kaʿba,” *EQ* 3.
not elaborate on this door, and yet it is there, implying that there is some way to cross the wall. There were openings in the barriers of *al-Kahf*, but these were blocked by the dog and the Two-Horned One's barricade. Here there does not appear to be any guardian or restriction before the door in either direction, but neither is anyone shown using the passage. Therefore this leaves us with three possible interpretations. First, the dead cannot pass through the door from damnation to salvation, but this is how they can see and communicate with each other. Second, the dead can pass through the door, and therefore it is possible for someone in Hellfire to gain reprieve, or for someone in the Garden to be condemned (neither of which the Qurʾān discusses). Third, the door between damnation and salvation is not used by the dead in the Fire or in the Gardens, but by other people. As we saw in *al-ʿArāf* 7:46-49, the Companions of the Heights ask to be granted the Gardens, even though they are already dead. Therefore it seems plausible that it is possible for them to win deliverance after their mortal deaths, likely at the Resurrection and Final Judgment.

If this last option is correct, this would mean that the Qurʾānic cosmology and soteriology assumes a distinction between 'particular judgment' and Final Judgment. Some who die go immediately to the Gardens where they are alive but out of mortal sight.104 Some others die and straight away enter the Fire, where they are also "covered up."105 And some others beside these enter an intermediate state aligned with the high mountains surrounding the world: the *aʾrāf*, the *barzakh*, and now the *sūr*. This state is more porous than Paradise or Hell. Like the Companions of the Heights, someone who enters this state in death can hope to win entrance to the Gardens. Or, like the Sleepers in *al-Kahf*, one can enter this place in life by the will of God and return to the living world. However, because this can only be accomplished by divine permission, the living person in the intermediate state remains a mere sign. And like the Christologically oriented Sleepers, this appears to be the case of Christ himself, who we have seen either dwells “sheltered” away in a “high place” (*rabwā*), or is

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104 E.g., *al-Baqara* 2:154.
105 E.g., *al-ʿArāf* 7:41.
miraculously born there, or both, but is still only a “sign.” A more direct discussion of Jesus’ status is elaborated on in Sūrat al-Nisāʾ (“the women,” 4).

The issue of Jesus’ death or apparent death is introduced in verses 156-158 in the second half of the second sūra-ring of al-Nisāʾ (116-175). The Jesus discussion is found in a concentric system circling around a declaration of God’s sole dominion (131-132). Again, the similarity of this section to the Throne Verse and its parallel and related passages in al-Baqara, al-Ḥadīd and elsewhere is significant.

131. And God’s is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth. And certainly We instructed those who were given the record before you, and you that fear God. And if you disbelieve, indeed God’s is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth. And God is independent, praiseworthy.

132. And God’s is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth. And God is enough of a guardian (al-Nisāʾ 4:131-132).

God alone has power over the entirety of creation, and there is no need for other divine beings. The outer ring of the section of which this is the pivot gives counter-examples of this message. In the first half (116-126), a sub-ring contrasts those who call on other divinities (such as female goddesses or

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106 al-Muʾminūn 23:50.
angels, 116-117) with the true monotheism of Abraham (125). This section ends with the statement repeated in the pivot: “And God's is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth” with the added latch of “And God is the encompassing of everything” (126).

Placed in a parallel position to this passage, and as the other half of the outer ring of the system, is the discussion of Jesus and his afterlife (156-158). Like the contrast of the goddess-worshippers to Abraham, this section is a sub-ring system of its own.

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This section centers on an affirmation that God speaks to messengers across history, with which a list of former messengers is provided. Moses is singled out for having been spoken to directly (164), and this is compared to the revelation of the Qurʾān in the present (163). These themes introduce the section (153-154) and conclude it (175) forming its outer ring. Jesus is mentioned in the list of former messengers in the central pivot (163), and he is discussed in both halves of the second sub-ring of the unit (155-158, 171-174). The first of these discusses his apparent death by crucifixion.

155. ...مَنْ نَفَقَهُمُ اللَّهُ وَبَعْرَاءُ هُمْ بِاللَّهِ، فَعَلَّفَ بَلْ طَبْعُ اللهُ عَلَيْهِمْ، يُبْعَرُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا
156. ...يَبْعَرُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا وَقَوْلُهُمْ عَلَى مَرَجِعَهُمُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ، مَنْ نَفَقَهُمُ اللَّهُ وَبَعْرَاءُ هُمْ بِاللَّهِ.
157. ...مَنْ نَفَقَهُمُ اللَّهُ وَبَعْرَاءُ هُمْ بِاللَّهِ، فَعَلَّفَ بَلْ طَبْعُ اللهُ عَلَيْهِمْ، يُبْعَرُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا
158. ...بَلْ وَقَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا

So because of their breaking of the covenant and their disbelief in God's signs, and their killing of the prophets without right, and their saying ‘Our hearts are covered': No, God has sealed them for their disbelief. So they do not believe except a few.

156. And for their disbelief and their saying a great insult against Mary,
157. And for their saying, ‘Surely we killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God.' And they did not kill him and they did not crucify him, but it-was-made-to-seem to them. And surely those who differ in it are certainly in doubt about it. They do not have any knowledge
about it except following conjecture. And they definitely did not kill him.

158. No, God raised him (rafa’ahu) to Him. And God is the Strong, the Wise (al-Nisā’ 4:155-158).

This passage, which is so central to the Qur'anic and Islamic views of the crucifixion, can be interpreted in a number of ways, so let us first focus on what is clear about these verses. The primary audience of the verses are not Christians but Jews. The Jews are the addressees of the verses which precede these (153-154), and they are the ones who do not attest to Mary’s miracle (156). Likewise, in Matthew 27:20-23, Jesus’ crucifixion is prompted by the priests of the Temple, which is also suggested here.

There are various ways this section has been understood. The passage has often been read to mean that Jesus did not die but only seemed to (an Islamic-Docetist argument). This is problematized by Maryam 19:33, when the infant Jesus says explicitly that he will die someday. The later details of the story used to justify this reading, such as Judas Iscariot or a more willing believer taking Jesus’ place on the cross, are not suggested either. And also, the claim that God would not allow one of His beloved prophets to be killed does not stand, as verse 155 in this same passage affirms that prophets have been killed before and by these very people. Rather, the passage is much more interested in the agency of the event: you claimed to have killed him; they did not kill him. In this case, Jesus in one sense died on the cross, but as he was a righteous martyr he lives on in some elevated state. God “raised” him to Himself (158), in accord with similar references to Jesus’ ascension to and/or birth in a “high-place” in al-Mu’mīnūn 23:50 and his “raising” in Āl ‘Imrān 3:55. And as we have seen, other righteous martyrs have been killed but are also still alive. Therefore, the Qur’ān is claiming that the

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107 See also, Mahmoud M. Ayoub, “Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion,” The Muslim World 70 (1980): 91-121.
108 Verse 155’s “Our hearts are covered” (qulūbunā ghufūn) may also be a reference uncircumcised hearts, cf. Acts of the Apostles 7:51.
109 For an overview of the later Islamic readings of this passage, see Robinson, “Jesus,” EQ3.
110 Āl ‘Imrān 3:55 likewise appears to say that Jesus is going to die. Typically Islamic eschatology explains that Jesus will die after his second coming. This belief is not clearly affirmed or denied by the Qur’ān itself.

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significant power in the event is God, as it always must be.

Rather than attempt to say exactly what the Qurʾān is claiming happened at Golgotha, let us instead notice that it is not clear. Rather than assuming the Qurʾān has simply provided an emic Christological reference that we do not easily comprehend now, perhaps the confusion over the matter is the matter itself. The Qurʾān is purposefully obfuscating whatever happened to Jesus. “They do not have any knowledge about it except following conjecture.” By removing human agency and knowledge from the question of Jesus' death, the purpose and cause of it become muddled. Naturally the larger concern over the death of Jesus is not those people who think they killed him (here, some of the Jews), but the effects of that death: the Christians who claim salvation via Jesus on the cross. Like we have seen with the Christological Sleepers in al-Kahf, leaving the details of Jesus’ passing confused allows the Qurʾān to complicate Jesus as a cultic focus, while keeping Jesus as a sign. Also like the Sleepers' pericope, the Qurʾān mentions that Jesus’ death or seeming-death is a debated issue. “And surely those who differ in it are certainly in doubt about it.” Whatever happened to Jesus, God alone is the agent and the reference.

While this previous passage addressed what some of the Jews say of Jesus, the parallel passage in verses 171-174 speaks to what some of the Christians say of him.

171. O Scripture People, do not transgress in your religion (dinikum) and do not say anything of God except the truth.

The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary is only a messenger of God and His word, which He conveyed to Mary and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers. And do not say, ‘Three.’ Stop, it is better for you. Only God is [the] one God. Glory-be-to-Him, that He had a son. His is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth. And God is enough of a guardian.112

112 Note that this line concludes in language identical to al-Nisāʾ 4:131-132, the pivot this section is in orbit around, and thus recalls the Throne Verse and its complementary passages as well.
172. The Messiah did not disdain being a servant of God and the angels, the ones-brought-near \( \text{(muqarrabūn)} \). And who disdains from His service and is arrogant, then We will gather them to Him together.

173. Then for those who believed and worked righteous-acts, then He gives them their reward and grants-them-plenty from his bounty. And for those who disdained and were arrogant, then He torments them [with] a painful torment. And they will not find for themselves any one-to-turn-to besides God, and no helper \( \text{(naṣīr)} \).

174. O humanity, surely a proof has come to you from your Lord. And We sent-down a clarifying light to you \( \text{(al-Nisāʾ 4:171-174.)} \)

This passage also has a basic structure of concentric rings. The first ring compares the Scripture People speaking untruths about God \( (171, \text{first half}) \) to humanity as a whole being sent a clarification \( (174). \)

The second ring introduces the claims of Trinitarianism and high Christology and says God is guardian enough \( (171, \text{second half}) \). The close of the second ring mentions the damned and saved and says there is no one to help \( (\text{naṣīr}) \) besides God \( (173). \)\(^{113}\) In the center is the pivot and the strongest claim \( (172). \)

One who does not serve God and thinks too highly of herself will be gathered together on the Last Day.\(^{114}\) Jesus was only a servant who knew his place, and he was amongst the “ones-brought-near” \( \text{(muqarrabūn)} \).

The word \textit{muqarrabūn} can be understood in a number of ways, all of which seem to be meant here at once. The first refers to Jesus’ ascension again: that he is no longer available to the human race in any mundane sense of the term.\(^{115}\) He has been \textit{brought near} to God and hence he is no longer with us. Jesus is mentioned as one amongst the \textit{muqarrabūn} in another verse as well.\(^{116}\) Second, the \textit{muqarrabūn} can be understood as the most favored group of the two categories of blessed people in the afterlife.\(^{117}\)

\[^{113}\text{ Cf. this section’s concentric parallel at verses 13-14: a discussion of association and eschatology.}\]

\[^{114}\text{ Cf. this section’s linear parallel at verses 36-42: another discussion of association and eschatology.}\]

\[^{115}\text{ The first half of this sections’ sub-ring made the same claim at al-Nisā’ 4:158. cf. Āl Īmrān 3:55; al-Mā’ida 5:117; and possibly also al-Mu’minūn 2330.}\]

\[^{116}\text{ Āl Īmrān 3:45.}\]

\[^{117}\text{ The lesser group amongst the people of Paradise are the “companions of the right” (al-Wāqīʿa 56:8, 27-40, 90-91).}\]
10. And the foremost (sābiqūn)? The foremost
11. are those ones-brought-near (muqarabūn)
12. In Gardens of bliss
13. a company from the former ones
14. and a few from the later
15. on decorated seats (surur)
16. reclining on them, facing each other (al-Wāqi‘a 56:10-16).

This group includes many people from both the past, as well as some from the present. There are at least some angels amongst them too.¹¹⁸ There is also a third meaning, which at first appears to be rather mundane. *Muqarrabūn* are members of a royal court. For instance, when Pharaoh calls his court magicians to use their powers, he offers to make them his *muqarrabūn*.¹¹⁹ When the angels are described as *muqarrabūn*, it is because they carry God’s throne.¹²⁰ And when the other *muqarrabūn* are discussed, they are depicted on seats (surur) facing inwards like a court surrounding a dais.¹²¹

God’s throne (*kursī*²²² or ‘*arsh*²²³) is mentioned twenty times in the Qur’ān. Three of these mention that it is surrounded by angels,¹²⁴ and twice it is used as part of a divine honorific.¹²⁵ On one occasion the throne is contrasted to the worship of Jesus and other would-be intercessors.¹²⁶ Besides these, the fourteen other appearances of the words *kursī* or ‘*arsh* are accompanied by some direct or

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¹¹⁹ Al’Arḍf 7:114 and al-Shu’arā’ 26:42.
¹²⁰ Ghāfir 40:7.
¹²² In an exception that proves the rule, the only other figure in the Qur’ānic corpus who has a *kursī* is Solomon, Šūd 38:34. This throne is occupied by a some kind of false body or corpse (*jasad*) as a test. In another version of this story in Sabā’ 34:13-14, this false king is identified as Solomon’s own dead body (here, however, the throne is not mentioned). He is unwittingly served by the jinn until the staff which had been supporting him collapses and he is exposed as a mere corpse. These stories may be a correction of 1 Chronicles 29:23, which states that “Solomon sat on the throne (kissê) of the Lord.”
¹²³ There is some discussion in the later literature as to whether or not the terms are synonyms. See Jamal J. Elias, “Throne of God,” EQ5.
¹²⁴ al-Zumar 39:75; Ghāfir 40:7; 15; al-Ḥāqqā 69:36-17.
¹²⁵ al-Takwīr 81:20; al-Burjij 85:15.
¹²⁶ al-Zukhruf 43:81-87.
indirect discussion of God’s sleeplessness or of mere creatures falling into unaware dormant states.  

Twelve of these references immediately follow the creation of the heavens and the earth (most with the detail “in six days”). God made the cosmos and rather than rest on the seventh day, He sits in state.  

Around God’s throne are the muqarrabûn, the humans and angels whom God favors most. It appears to be a larger group than the prophets, as the muqarrabûn also consist of a few people from Muhammad’s own day and at least some of the angels. These are presumably ‘saints’ in the less technical sense of the term: prophets, holy men, martyrs, and archangels generally. These are the false intercessors of the Scripture People. In their seats (surur, arā‘ik, furush) they recline (W-K-); suggesting both subservience and dormancy. Jesus, like the other holy people and angels whom one might be tempted to worship, is in a state of repose and supplication before God’s throne: the symbol of His sleepless creation, knowledge, and unresting authority.

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128 al-A‘râf 7:53-54; al-Tawba 9:329; Yûnus 10:3; Hûd 11:7; al-Ra’d 13:2; al-Isrâ’ 17:42-44; Ṭâ’ir Hâ’ 20:4-8; al-Anbiyâ 21:39-22; al-Mu‘minûn 23:86; al-Furqân 25:38-39; al-Sajda 32:4; al-Hadîd 57:4. Cf. “And surely We created the heavens and the earth and what is between the two in six days, and We were not touched by any exhaustion’ (Qâf 50:38), where God’s tirelessness is inserted where the above passages depict God taking His throne. For example, “[God] created the heavens and the earth and what is between the two in six days, then He mounted His throne […]” (al-Furqân 25:39).
129 Cf. al-Rahmân 55:29 (above).
130 Cf. Revelation 4:4ff. on the “elders” seated around God’s throne who fall down before it.
131 In the biblical lore, the throne of God or a human being is generally a symbol of continuity ‘his descendants will sit on his throne forever,’ etc. “The Lord reigns forever; He has established His throne for judgment” (Psalm 97). “Your throne, O my God, will last forever and ever” (Psalm 45:6). “I will establish [David’s] line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure […] that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before Me like the sun […]” (Psalms 89:29-36). “Your throne was established long ago; You are from all eternity” (Psalm 93:2). “their sons will sit on your throne forever and ever” (Psalm 132:12). “A glorious throne, exalted from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary” (Jeremiah 17:12). “You, Lord, reign forever; Your throne endures from generation to generation” (Lamentations 5:29). “Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place for the soles of My feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever” (Ezekiel 43:7). “But about the Son He says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever’” (Hebrews 1:8). “To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!” (Revelation 5:3).
A rough chronology of the Qurʾān's vision of the intermediate state can be plotted out by taking the observations above, and noting the additions of particular details at particular moments in the Qurʾān's appearance.

The larger cosmology of the Near East was long familiar to the people of the Hijāz. Even before the career of Muḥammad, his people already believed that there was a ring of mountains that surrounded the earth. It was called by many names, including barzakh. The mountains stood where the navigable seas met the great salt sea at the world's edge, and thus also marked the horizon. The mountains would have already been considered liminal places, as they stood at the end of the world and at the limits of human knowledge. From the biblical lore these people also associated the mountains with the liminal place from which God spoke to the human race. Prophets meet God in the mountains, just like they receive God's messages in their dreams.

Also from the biblical lore, some of the Qurʾānic audience (or more likely, their ancestors) would have come to believe in soul-sleep or something quite like it, such as a materialistic soul-death. Some of these people were Jews and Christians, and so would have expected a Resurrection, while others did not. Some amongst them also believed that certain saints had returned from this state previously in their own resurrections or reawakenings (Christ, the Sleepers). Some others also believed that holy people could escape death, or their deaths were inconsequential to their continued activity. Therefore, by praying to the saints or following their example, the worshipper could also escape death literally (‘the course of the sun’) or gain everlasting honor through family and wealth (‘the course of the water’). The belief in other intermediate beings or divinities also continued to play their own role. Some of these were actively worshipped. Other cults were on the decline or dead already, but were recent enough in the collective memory to influence the current cultural-religious milieu. These would include quasi-divinities from the biblical lore (angels, rabbis, monks, ascetics, and intercessory
saints), the syncretistic Near Eastern pantheons (fertility goddesses and solar gods), and local ʿHijāzī fetishes (jinn, sacred stones, the Kaʿba).

When the Qurʾān began to appear, all these pieces of the intermediate state's puzzle were already available and deeply familiar. The Qurʾān never has to enter into long, detailed discussions of soul-sleep and the liminal function of the mountains, any more than a 21st century novel set in North America must explain the continent's geography. This sort of knowledge is assumed and so it is referenced everywhere but explained nowhere.

In the early Meccan period, the Qurʾān began to warn its hearers against the cults of intercession and the material boon they seemed to offer. Material goods are only temporary and so it is best to wait for your true reward. You cannot make up for what you did or failed to do later, as you will be as powerless in the afterlife as you were before your maturation. God made the world a place of balance (mīzān) with strong categories and boundaries. Living beings like humans and jinn are only active in the abode of the living — on earth — and so God kept them in their proper places with the deep-rooted barzakh. Only God has power on both sides of the barzakh; in both the inside and outside of it: the “two Easts and two Wests.” And someday the barzakh will fall and the material balance will be overturned. So look only to God who never rests and whose power is never interrupted.

In the second Meccan period the language of the Qurʾān becomes increasingly biblical. Reversing the claims of Genesis 1-2, which say God rested on the seventh day, the Qurʾān employs the language of the prophetic and wisdom literature: God never sleeps. He is always watching, listening,
and acting. Everything and everyone else will perish, and the dead can only speak to each other (and even then, only in whispers). They have no idea what is happening on earth, or even that time is passing. Calling on the dead, therefore, is just more materialism; they are false gods. Like all mere creatures they will fall when the *barzakh* does. Indeed, God made this *barzakh* as much to keep the dead away from interfering with the living as to keep the living from interfering with the dead. God alone can speak across the *barzakh*. He calls living people and sends them back to the earth with His communications from the unseen. They still belong with the living inside the *barzakh* though; they are still just living people. The narratives of *al-Furqān*, *al-Naml*, and *al-Kahf* address this distinction. If one thinks a prophet has supernatural powers or is God's child, the angels of the Resurrection will remind them of the “restricted obstruction” between the seen and unseen worlds.

These themes continue on until the end of the Prophet's career, but with increasing details and refinements. For example, the Qur'ān continued to say that would-be intercessors could not hear or answer prayers. By the third Meccan period it also became necessary to say that the Prophet himself had no way of contacting the dead. Perhaps as his own religious community grew, he was also starting to be considered the kind of intercessory saint which the Qur'ān was trying to combat. Also, as members of the community asked about their dead relatives, who were neither wicked nor part of the Qur'ānic cultus, the Qur'ān would have to supply answers. According to most sources, the Prophet's own beloved uncle and patron Abū Ṭālib died during this time without joining his nephew's community formally. Was Abū Ṭālib and those like him damned? Here the Qur'ān introduces the Companions of the Heights. Like the Companions of the Cave, the Companions of the Heights

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\begin{align*}
\text{139} & \quad \text{Ṭā Hā 20:302-104, 108-111.} \\
\text{140} & \quad \text{Ṭā Hā 20:307, 105-107.} \\
\text{141} & \quad \text{al-Muʾminūn 23:99-101.} \\
\text{142} & \quad \text{al-Muʾminūn 23:23-49.} \\
\text{143} & \quad \text{al-Furqān 25:39-24, 53.} \\
\text{144} & \quad \text{Fāṭir 35:39-22.} \\
\text{145} & \quad \text{The death of Abū Ṭālib and the Prophet's possible intercession for him will be addressed in the following chapter.} \\
\text{146} & \quad \text{al-Arāf 7:46-49.}
\end{align*}
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appear in the *barzakh*. They turn from one side to the other, and they can possibly win entrance to the Gardens. And while the Sleepers and the prophets can travel into the liminal mountain space of the *barzakh* by God’s permission while alive and in an unconscious ignorance, the dead cannot return.

The hope suggested by the Qurʾān’s eschatological cosmology manifests itself as the door in the barrier between the Gardens and the Fire.\(^{147}\) This passage is not used by the saved or the damned, and so we must assume it is reserved for the people in the intermediate state — the Companions of the Heights — who hope for deliverance. The Medinan period also deals with the new issue of martyrdom. They are also still alive and active (presumably in Paradise already), but they also cannot be seen or contacted by their living loved ones.\(^{148}\) The Qurʾān’s discussion with the Scripture People also comes to a more dominant position in the Medinan period, while the cosmological features of the intermediate state recede. The Throne Verse and those like it, while appearing throughout the Prophet’s career, now become more detailed and polemical. To claim that God did not rest on the seventh day simultaneously refutes the Jewish sabbath and the Christian cults of the dying and rising Christ and the dead saints. God ‘rests’ on the *yawm al-sabt* only the most active way: by merely sitting; not by sleeping or dying.

In the centuries to come, the paleo-Islam of Late Antiquity was replaced by the classical Islam of the early Middle Ages. The Qurʾān was heard, read, and studied by secondary audiences, with various cultural, religious, and linguistic relationships to the Qurʾān’s primal milieu. The sciences of classical Islam (*ḥadīth, sīra, tafsīr, kalām*) arose in order to explain the Qurʾānic materials in new times and places. Although the authors behind these sciences did not understand all of the specifics of 7th century Ḥijāzī oral performances, they did (with varying degrees of authenticity) retain some memories of the early Qurʾānic community. In the next chapter, we will address how the early classical

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\(^{147}\) *al-Hadīd* 57:13.

\(^{148}\) *al-Baqara* 2:154-157; *Āl ʿImrān* 3:169.
Muslims remembered their pasts regarding the intermediate state, and how that led unto the formal doctrine of the *barzakh* in the ‘Abbāsid period.
Chapter V: Dreams of Muhammad: the Medieval *Barzakh*

Say: “My Lord knows the words (spoken) in the sky and the earth. He is the Hearing, the Knowing.” “No!” they say, “(it is but) confused dreams (adghāth al-aḥlām)!”

- *al-Anbiyā* 21:4-5

From the nature of the human mind, time is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas; and that the highest and most wonderful truths, though communicated to the world once and for all by inspired teachers, could not be comprehended all at once by the recipients, but, as being received and transmitted by minds not inspired and through media which were human, have required only the longer time and deeper thought for their full elucidation.

- John Henry Newman¹

In this chapter, I will reconstruct the development of the *barzakh* from the eschatological cosmology of the Qurʾānic milieu to the formal doctrine of the intermediate state defined as orthodox by the Traditionalists of the ‘Abbāsid period. How did the worldview assumed of the Qurʾān’s paleo-Muslim audience transform into the doctrinal claims of the Qurʾān’s Muslim audience in the early Middle Ages? How did the earth’s fresh water (‘adhab) retaining wall evolve into humanity’s pre-Resurrection torment (‘adhāb)? How did the Qurʾānic *barzakh* become the medieval *barzakh*?

By Qurʾānic *barzakh* I refer to the geographic eschatology that appears in the Qurʾān and that we have seen already. The Qurʾān would express this thought in many ways, but for clarity I will just call it the Qurʾānic *barzakh*. The earth is surrounded by mountains which keep this world apart from the other world. Those mountains — occasionally called the *barzakh* — have three overlapping functions as a timespan, a location, and a liminal zone.² As a timespan the Qurʾānic *barzakh* stands between the present and the final Judgment. The mountains mark the countdown between now and the Resurrection when the high places will fall. As a location the *barzakh* is a barrier. It stops the dead and the forces of the apocalypse from entering into the world of the living. This keeps this world safe, and prevents the meddling of supernatural powers: would-be idols. Vice versa, the mountains stop the living from accessing the unseen. Idolatry is prevented by obfuscating human knowledge of and

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² Zaki, “Barzakh,” *EQ*. 

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contact with the supernatural and the dead. As a liminal zone the barzakh allows passage by the leave of God alone. The barzakh is entered only passively in sleep, in prophecy, and in death. Thus like a guarded cave or an enclosing wall with a gate, the barzakh is forbidden and yet passable if one is granted permission. One cannot go there, but one can be brought there. A person can only depart this life in powerless conditions (sleep, death, ignorance), none of which ever apply to the God who sits sleepless, deathless, and all-knowing on His throne. The primary function of the Qurʾānic barzakh is the prevention of idolatry.

By medieval barzakh, I mean the intermediate states discussed in formal Islamic theology, Traditionalism, and modern Islamic thought. Like in the Qurʾān, the word barzakh is not always applied by the classical authors. Indeed, the word is unique to the exegetes of the Qurʾān until the high Middle Ages. My usage of medieval barzakh is simply for the sake of clarity. Although there are many variations and representations of the barzakh in medieval and modern Islamic thought, there is a nucleus of elements at their core. Like the Qurʾānic barzakh, the medieval barzakh is a timespan, a location, and a liminal zone. However, it is not identical to the Qurʾānic barzakh but is an elaboration of it. Both visions of the barzakh mark timespans between this life and the Resurrection: they are both intermediate states. However the Qurʾānic barzakh only refers a time period, while the medieval barzakh is itself the name for that time period. As a location, the medieval barzakh refers specifically to one’s own grave or wherever one’s remains await the Resurrection.3 As a liminal zone, the medieval barzakh is a state of torment, tribulation, and preparation. It is a continuation of the past (mortal life) and a foreshadowing of the future (Judgment, Hell and/or Paradise). Predicting the final Resurrection the body and the spirit are reactivated in a limited sense. There is a judgment of one’s beliefs by liminal angels. If found heterodox, the dead person is tormented by having her grave crush her inwards. If one is orthodox, the grave is expanded, allowing the dead to move about freely. Other

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3 As the mountainous rims of the earth, the barzakh would be relegated to folklore and symbolic mysticism as the Qurʾān was read/heard outside of its original cosmological milieu.
rewards or punishments appear as well, although with less regularity. As we shall see, the primary function of the medieval barzakh is to warn the living against heretical thoughts. The angels of the medieval barzakh are only concerned with one's beliefs; never one's deeds.

This chapter will reconstruct the Qur’anic barzakh’s transformation into the medieval barzakh. There are a number of issues which we must face in this reconstruction. The most critical among these is the space of time between the Qur’ān's appearance and the creation, compilation, and standardization of the secondary Islamic literatures. If we disregard those literatures which are no longer extant, those which never truly were, and those which survive only in heavily edited forms, then the gap between the initial audience of the oral Qur’ān and the classical Islamic texts becomes quite discouraging. From the death of Muḥammad to the first major exegesis of the Qur’ān is at least 120 years by the most generous dating; to the first surviving prophetic florilegia 150 years. And even these are problematic, as the details of the Prophet’s career, the editing process of the Qur’ānic corpus, and the dating and attribution of essentially all the early Islamic literatures are subject to question.

This gap problem is not entirely insurmountable here. If a given text or an oral tradition appears in the Middle Ages, but claims to contain genuine data from the more remote past, we at least know what was within the realms of possible beliefs in the Middle Ages. For instance, imagine a hypothetical prophetic ḥadīth is first recorded in the ninth century. Generally we cannot verify the truth of the muḥaddith’s claim without external evidence. Perhaps the isnād is flawed or forged. The matn may be warped by later agendas, confused into oblivion by generations of paraphrasing and dozens of variants, a common saying confused for something specifically Muḥammadan, or merely fabricated for any number of reasons. This is only a problem if we are concerned with unearthing the exact words of the Qur’ān’s presenter and the text’s very early hearers. Because we are looking for the continuity or evolution of a specific worldview — the Qur’ānic barzakh — whether a later report truly springs from the Ḥijāz of the seventh century may not be significant. If an individual in the ninth
century thought this imaginary ḥadīth was plausibly correct and so has recorded it, we can say for
certain what type of worldviews this ninth century muḥaddith considered plausible for the seventh
century. We can therefore observe evolution and continuity. Sources and origins are another matter.
Whether continuity is due to actual historical survival, Islamic or proto-Islamic folklore, later exegesis
of the Qurʾān, or common but now obscured assumptions about the world, will not be explored here
in depth.

The transformations of Arabic as a language and a vessel for thought are also a concern. The
dialect amongst dialects which is the Qurʾānic language is not identical to the formal Arabic registers
to which it gave birth. Words were lost and gained in the interim. Words’ usages were replaced by their
definitions. Meanings slid: kahf from “mountain cave” to “cave;” ṣakhra from “boundary stone” to “rock.”
Some terms became technical: barzakh, ummī, qurʾān, kitāb, sūra. Other Qurʾānic elements became
cryptic: raqīm, furqān, muḥkamāt/mutashabihāt, the muqattaʿāt. As formal Arabic became
increasingly fixed by the spread of Islam and the appearance of written texts (which are inseparable
events), the highly oral language of memorability begat a literary language of high cultures. The
Qurʾānic charge to remember became the classical Islamic call to memorize. But again, this may not
be too troubling here. A worldview may be expressed in any number of ways, and often not
deliberately. The seventh century Qurʾānic cosmology and a ninth century formal theological claim
may share similar foundational assumptions though expressed in radically dissimilar ways, with
different details, and with contrary purposes. Textual artifacts can express a single worldview in many
ways, or conversely use the same terms to explain two or more different worldviews. Literature,
theology, law, proverbs, art, and architecture can all express one worldview albeit in many forms.
Part 1: The Cave of Souls: The Qurʾānic Barzakh in the Umayyad Period

With the exception of materials written at the very end of their age, the Umayyads did not leave us elaborate explanations of their visions of the world. This is not to say that the Umayyads did not leave us clues about their religious culture. It is only that this evidence still depended heavily upon intra-cultural knowledge, as the Qurʾān does. Highly oral peoples do not create abstractions like those necessary to think etically. Regarding the matter of the intermediate state and the cosmology that supported it, it would therefore be only suggested by the evidence. It would not be addressed head on as an independent subject of inquiry until after the Umayyad era ended.

As such, the most striking depictions of Umayyad eschatological-cosmology are found not in literature but in art and architecture. Even in the earliest period of historical Islam there are tombstones which suggest that some people who are already dead are not yet in Heaven or Hell.

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, this grave belongs to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Khayr al-Ḥajrī. Forgive him, O God, and make him enter [Paradise] by Your mercy, and let us go with him. Seek forgiveness for him whenever this inscription is read, and say “Amen!” This inscription was written in Jumādā II of the year 31 [(January or February of the year 652)].

There were any number of reasons for this almost complete omission. First and most simply, the formal literatures of Islam came into being only gradually. If such and such a thought was not recorded, it may simply be that the thought did not yet exist. Second, the scarcity of texts from the Umayyad period was also due to the high-residual orality of the first Muslims. In the pre-Islamic Hijāz writing was rare and true literature almost unknown. This carried on into the Umayyad caliphate. Third, early Umayyad culture was a near relative of primal Islam. Exegesis of the Qurʾān and its underlying culture and history at such an early date would have been redundant. ‘Common knowledge’ does not need to be recorded; only arguments and problems do. Hence Umayyad period literature on the Qurʾān tended towards the paraphrastic (suggesting it was only just becoming somewhat foreign), while the anti-Umayyad factions and sects (Sunnis, Shiʿites, ʿAbbāsids, and so on) would have to justify their readings of the Qurʾān. In the process the latter would construct more distinctly medieval Islams. That is, histories, arts, literatures, theologies, and identities that can be relocated and reinvented in many places and times. These are worldviews that assume the Qurʾānic milieu is far off and yet its meaning is transferable. It is artifacts of these peoples that survive to us in abundance. Fourth, the contents of such future exegesis and theology needed time to spread (in the case of the canonical Qurʾān and other genuine seventh century survivals) or be invented (in the case of forged, folk, or garbled traditions), prompting their later collection, editing, and dissemination. And fifth, thoughts recorded during the Umayyad period that later groups found heretical may simply not have survived censorship. This could have been via editing, neglect, or deliberate erasure.

If this ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was not yet in Paradise, where was he now? There is no cause to think he is in the Fire, either. Could he be in a dormant intermediate state like the barzakh? This seems probable for God has not yet judged the man. And could the prayers of the living sway the judgment of God? We must presume that this was the case, as there would be no point in asking God for forgiveness otherwise.

We can also see an Umayyad coincidence of sleep and death using Late Antique motifs in the hunting lodge of Qaṣr ʿAmra (cir. 730). In the hallway leading out of the hammām, there are several depictions of a person's life cycle moving from birth to death in an East-West configuration following the solar pathway. In the East are images of a baby and a young couple, followed by images of maturity.
in the middle, and decrepitude in the West. At the end of this series is a fresco over the doorway into the main throne room. In the scene is a representation of a man sitting upright in bed, accompanied by the funerary image of Eros (see fig. 5.1). The man has a thoughtful pose, and he looks down at a shrouded figure who lies parallel to his bed. Perhaps it is a representation of the Dionysian story of Ariadne (Helios’ granddaughter) or the death of Salmā. It is not clear. Whatever the reference, the placement of the fresco at the end of a human life cycle, its western orientation, the presence of Eros, and the paralleling of the sleeper and the shrouded figure all suggest this is a reflection on mortality. Eros is warning the young man to consider death while he sleeps — or he has come to collect the man for his own death. While this is not Islamic art in the strict sense, and therefore has no fear of intercessors or false gods, it does expose the eschatological landscape of the larger Late Antique world which the Umayyads governed. Sleep and death were comparable states relating to the solar road and the visitation of liminal supernatural beings.

An earlier, much more substantial eschatology of the Umayyad period is found in the Dome of the Rock (qubbat al-ṣakhra) in Jerusalem (cir. 692). Importantly, this building may be to some degree immune to the gap problem of early Islamic history, at least regarding cosmology and its ramifications to the afterlife. Fortunately, the dating of the original Dome of the Rock is not a significant dilemma. And besides, large physical artifacts do not hide their editing processes nearly as well as texts may. It is only the meaning(s) of any archeological feature of the Dome of the Rock (and the Haram al-Sharif of which it is a part) that is open to major objections. However, what is certain is that buildings must

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7 Ibid. 258.
8 Ibid.
9 The Dome of the Rock’s own inscriptions mention “the [lunar Hijri] year two and seventy” (i.e., 692). The only question is whether this is the date of the beginning of the construction or its completion. For the debate over the dating see K.A.C. Cresswell, *A Short Account of Early Islamic Architecture*, 17ff; Gülru Necipoğlu, “The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest: ‘Abd al-Malik’s Grand Narrative and Sultan Süleyman’s Glosses,” in *Muqarnas* 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 22.
reflect the builders' conception of space and order, as well as the psychological/cultural geography assumed by the building's audience.

A considerable deal of scholarship has been devoted to the Dome of the Rock. Leaving aside the complex's conjectural political motivations, what is striking here is the reoccurrence of many of the elements pertinent to the Qur'ānic *barzakh* we have catalogued in the previous chapters: the throne of God juxtaposed to the sleep of the dead; the mere humanity of the messengers (Jesus most especially); the 'path of the sun' and the 'path of the water'; caves and the edges of the world; the place where prophets encounter God; the barrier between Paradise and Hell; and the coming of the Resurrection.

Because of the place's ancient and continuing significance, there are many layers of demolition and construction to sort through. The site has been hit with quite a few earthquakes over the centuries. The Crusaders' destruction and later Mamlūk and Ottoman renovations have confused the original layout of the area. Most of the prayer niches, smaller domes, and gates have been moved, removed, or are later additions. Nearly all of the literature on the Ḥaram was written long after its construction, requiring some guesswork, too. However, we can come to a fairly coherent depiction of what the area would have looked like in the Marwānid-Umayyad period. The city of Jerusalem was taken by the third caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644) around the year 638. Either he, or the first Umayyad caliph Mu‘awiya I (d. 680) claimed the former site of the Second Temple in the name of the new religion. There one of them constructed a rough mosque which does not survive to us. However, sometime during the reign of Mu‘awiya a Gallic Bishop named Arculf (fl. c. 670) visited the city and

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made mention of the “saracen” house of prayer he saw on the eastern side of the Temple Mount compound. This mosque would be taken down and replaced by al-Aqṣā Mosque on the southwestern corner of the site soon thereafter by ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 705) and his son al-Walīd I (d. 715).

It was also ʿAbd al-Malik who built the Dome of the Rock which stands today with many of its original features. It is not a mosque in more than the most general sense of the term for a place of prayer. The Dome of the Rock is rather a shrine aligned with the four cardinal points of the compass. This absence of any clear horizontal axis alludes to the building’s role as a microcosm. It is a center of the world (an omphalos), while the larger Ḥaram is a representation of the world itself (a kosmos). The Dome of the Rock seems to be particularly concerned with eschatology and the Resurrection. The building’s designation as a qubba suggests this, and its octagonal base capped with a dome is modeled on Christian funerary monuments and martyria. Scenes of Paradise cover the interior walls, as they once did the exterior as well.

The whole edifice was designed to stand over an exposed ṣakhra (a “rock” at the boundaries). This is that Qur’ānic term of unknown origins, which as we have seen previously suggests the eschatologically-charged walls of the earth. That the whole place is associated with the periphery or the “furthest” locale, hence al-masjid al-aqṣā, seconds this signification. In the ṣakhra itself is a

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11 Recorded by the Adomnán of Iona in De Locus Sanctis. See also N.J. Johnson, “Aqṣā Mosque,” EQ1.
14 The most common use of the term is for mausoleums, such as the shrines of saints. It is also noteworthy that the earliest uses of the word favor temporary structures: i.e., tents. Oleg Grabar, The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 64-65.
16 The blue tiles now covering the building’s exterior were introduced in the 16th century. Kaplony, “The Mosque of Jerusalem,” 106.
17 al-Isrāʾ171. Masjid al-Aqṣā is typically used to refer to the specific mosque on the southern end of the site, however it may also be used as a more general term for the entire complex, synonymous with “the Mosque of Jerusalem” and medieval/modern appellation “the Noble Sanctuary.” Hitti, The History of the Arabs, 221.
natural cleft with artificial additions. Although there is the occasional pre-Islamic reference to this cave, the Muslims introduced a connection between the cave and the dead.\(^{18}\) The first mention of the cave as a site of Islamic worship appears in 902 by Ibn al-Faqīh (d. c. 951),\(^ {19}\) but it is certainly much older. While there are no documents to affirm or deny the Islamic reading of the rock and its cave at the time of the Dome of the Rock’s construction, it must be assumed that it was of paramount significance. The building’s floor was made to accommodate the rock, requiring the entire structure to be notably off-center in the Ḥaram. Simply put, the Dome of the Rock was made to be above this specific rock, and the piercing in it is the rock’s most striking feature.\(^ {20}\) Already as early as Muqāṭīl ibn Sulaymān we can see many references to the ṣakhra — if not the cavity in it — as suggestive of the grave: “Īsrāfīl will stand on the ṣakhra in Jerusalem, calling the people of the graves with a horn.”\(^ {21}\) This cave at some unclear later time gained the name “the Cave of the Spirits” (mughārat al-arwāḥ). It is mentioned by this name by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Harawī (d. 1215), who also associates it to the burial place of a prophet. “Underneath the rock is the cave of the spirits. They say that God will bring together the souls of all the believers to this spot […] They say that the tomb of Zachariah — peace be upon him — is here in this cave.”\(^ {22}\) Later still the appellation shifted into the modern “Well of Spirits” (bīr al-arwāḥ), or as it is known in English, “the Well of Souls.” It is never mentioned in pre-Islamic texts as

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\(^ {18}\) “As there was no ritual or historical reason for Muslims to cut such an opening, we must assume, as everyone has, that it belonged to an early, probably Jewish — although possibly even earlier — religious practice. The initial use of the rock and the time of its piercing will probably never be known and there may be no reason to dispute the association made between the rock under the Dome of the Rock and the stone mentioned by the pilgrim from Bordeaux. But the absence, to my knowledge, of any other earlier reference, Christian or Jewish, to what must have been a very prominent feature of the area remains puzzling.” Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy*, 29.

\(^ {19}\) “Under the rock is a cave (magḥāra) in which the people pray.” Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī, *Mukhtaṣar Kitāb al-Buldān* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 100.

\(^ {20}\) The other noted feature of the rock is a footprint which was said to be God’s own, and later the Prophet’s. Josef van Ess, “The Youthful God: Anthropomorphism is Early Islam,” *The University Lecture in Religion at Arizona State University* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University Department of Religious Studies, 1989), passim. While an ancient account, we must presume this was a secondary story, as the footprint is neither especially obvious or peculiar on its own, and neither is referenced by the building’s texts or forms.

\(^ {21}\) Muqāṭīl, ad-Īsrā’17:53. More on the exegete will be addressed below.

such, although this name would be read back onto the Jewish and Christian mythologies of the Temples and the Holy of Holies especially. Over the cave/well was also a black flagstone (al-balāṭa al-sawdā'), which was later said to cover “over one of the gates of Paradise.”

Alongside these multiple allusions to the afterlife are several monumental Kufic inscriptions, including the date of 692 and the attribution of the building to ‘Abd al-Malik (now effaced). The inscriptions consist of Qur’ānic and Qur’ān-like passages that stress that God alone is the ruler of creation, and that His prophets include Muḥammad and Jesus. This is found in the remaining inscriptions on the Dome’s inner and outer arcades, as well as on four bronze plaques which marked each entrance to the building. Two of these Totenpässe survive. The inscriptions on both begin with the opening of the Throne Verse and most of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, suggesting this was likely the case with all four. The original dome also contained the Throne Verse at its inner zenith, but this dome partially collapsed and was replaced in the 1020s. The second dome also featured the Throne Verse, as the modern dome does. Gülru Necipoğlu notes,

The Throne Verse [... in the] dome must have been, in my view, an integral part of the original epigraphic program; it is probably no coincidence that the same verse is partially quoted at the

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23 Simon Goldhill, Jerusalem: City of Longing (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008), 118; Peters, The Distant Shrine, 52-54; Grabar, The Shape of the Holy, 28. Gibson and Jacobson argue that the cave and the stone would have not played a role in the Temples, as they would have been a few meters below the foundation (and neither is the stone or the cave mentioned in any pre-Islamic Jewish source). The cave and the stone were probably exposed by Hadrian (d. 138), who had the site of the fallen Temple cleared. Gibson and Jacobson, Below the Temple Mount, 288. Peters and Grabar offer references to Jerome (d. 420) and an anonymous Bordeaux pilgrim of 333. Both of these mention the site. The latter writes that there was “a pierced stone [lapis pertusus] where the Jews came and which they anoint each year” Jerome tells us that the rite was held on the 9th of the Jewish month of ‘Āb, the anniversary of the Temple's destruction by the Romans. The date of the ritual suggests that this was a commemoration of the fall of the Temple. There is no indication of a chthonic cult or eschatological themes.

24 Mentioned by both al-Wasiti (d. c. 932) and Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (d. 940), as well as later authors. See Amikam Elad, Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 78-81.


27 Necipoğlu, “The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest,” 46. The original dome which contained the Throne Verse was replaced by a later dome which also contained the same in gilt silver. The Crusaders defaced this dome, and eventually the Ottomans would add their own inscription of the Throne Verse to the structure.
beginning of the two extant bronze plaques which provide a preview of themes more fully elaborated inside the building. This verse sets the tone for the interior inscriptions by affirming the majestic glory of the enthroned Deity, whose eternal kingdom comprises the entire universe, created and maintained by Him.28

Besides the Throne Verse and many other Islamic declarations of God's unity among the original inscriptions, the mere humanity of Jesus also takes a noteworthy place.29 The structure is concerned with the Christians. This is odd for the site of the former Temples. Unlike Late Antique Jews, Christians did not consider the site especially important. This is perhaps because of Jesus' prophecy that the Temple was supposed to be destroyed.30 That is to say, the cult of the divine Christ replaced the Temple cult. In the Islamic monument there is no direct reference to Jews, Judaism, or the figures of the Hebrew Scripture.3¹ Even the apparent worship of Ezra by the Jews, which the Qurʾān parallels to the worship of Jesus,3² does not appear. We must therefore conclude that apart from its Muslim audience, the Dome of the Rock is specifically addressing Christians. Goitein explains:

The inscriptions decorating the interior clearly display a spirit of polemic against Christianity, while stressing at the same time the Qurʾānic doctrine that Jesus Christ was a true prophet. The formula ū sharika lahu ['He has no associate'] is repeated five times, the verses from [Maryam] 19:34-37, which strongly deny Jesus' sonship to God, are quoted together with the remarkable prayer: allāhumma šallī ‘alā rasūlika wa ‘abdika ‘isā ibn maryam ['Pray for your prophet and servant Jesus, son of Mary']. All this shows that rivalry with Christendom, together with the spirit of Islamic mission to the Christians, was at work at the creation of the famous Dome.3³

Further along this line, when one takes into account the general layout of the Dome of the Rock, it is often observed that it was built as a contending shrine to the nearby Christian Holy

30 Mark 13:2; Matthew 24:2; Luke 19:44.
3¹ Grabar, The Shape of the Holy, 67. The inscriptions only mention the collective “Scripture People.”
3² al-Tawba 9:30.
Sepulcher (Naos tēs Anastaseōs, Kanīssat al-Qiyāma, “the Church of the Resurrection.”)\(^3^4\) In a similar way, the earliest recorded Islamic rituals unique to the Dome mirror the Christian rituals at the Sepulcher.\(^3^5\) The ṣakhra was regularly treated by servants with fragrant oils, like a corpse, as Christians scent the Stone of Unction. The rivalry between the two places would continue on into the coming ages.\(^3^6\) As the Holy Sepulcher is Christianity’s architectural commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ, the Dome of the Rock presents a vision of the final Resurrection as seen by early Muslims. Comparable to the Qur’ānic edition of the Sleepers’ story, the argument against Christ’s unique Resurrection is the plurality of the general Resurrection. Again this correction is accomplished by arguments against high Christology. Jesus is special, but is only one servant amongst others.

The Dome as an architectural text also responds to high Christology by obfuscating any obvious point of horizontal orientation. In the words of Josef van Ess: “[The] Dome of the Rock [...] does not have an orientation except towards the sky,”\(^3^7\) In all of his extensive research on the Dome, Oleg Grabar too is struck again and again by the Dome of the Rock’s resistance to horizontal hierarchy. Although the features of the Dome are borrowed from other Late Antique architectural forms used by Christians, the Islamic monument consistently removes those Christian features which pull the eye in any particular direction at eye level. Christian shrines ‘point’ to their relics and altars; the Dome of the Rock does not. The building has no front, back, left, or right. The paradisal mosaics show a great

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\(^{3^6}\) When the Christian monument was first established, the site of the future Dome of the Rock was being used as a garbage dump. Later Muslims, writing after the erection of the Dome, would throw this language back onto the older Church, by calling it a “dump” (qamāma, punning qiyāma) in turn.

\(^{3^7}\) Van Ess, “The Youthful God,” 1.
variety of plant species (real or mythological), but always in symmetrical forms so as to render the figures equivalent. The original inscriptions appear in symmetrical parallels or are circular, and none can be read in full from any single perspective. Even the rock itself, which would seem to be the sacred object and thus the point of focus, was obscured from most angles by waist-high marble barriers. The Dome of the Rock ‘reads' like an eschatological shrine designed to resist eschatological cults.

Related to this is another innovative feature of the Dome of the Rock: its exteriority. Unlike any of the Christian buildings upon which the Dome is based, or even other Umayyad buildings, the Dome of the Rock is made to be seen from both the inside and the outside. Comparable Christian martyrrological shrines have simple, functional exteriors. The Dome of the Rock is striking even at a great distance. The dome itself was once made of a brilliant brass or copper, as mentioned by Jerusalem native al-Muqaddasi. The author notes how well it captures sunlight. The dome of solar metals was also matched by the four inscription tablets over each doorway. The external images of the gardens of Paradise were of a similar brass or copper (mirroring the extant interior art in form but not color).

Following from this exteriority, it is significant that we should not think of the Dome of the Rock as a lone building. The Dome of the Rock was not meant to be seen as a singular extraordinary structure, but rather as part of a larger complex of which the Dome was a “focal point” (see fig. 5.2). Some of this complex survives but much does not, or is hidden by later developments.

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38 Grabar, The Shape of the Holy.
39 Necipoğlu, “The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest,” 30-31. The original metals of the Dome were later vandalized, and have since been replaced several times. The current dome, which is aluminum alloy made to mimic gold, belongs to the 20th century.
40 Ibid., 23. Necipoğlu goes on to say that of those monuments in the Sanctuary today, only the Dome of the Rock, the Dome of the Chain, and parts of the al-Aqṣā Mosque are reflections of the Umayyads’ creation before an earthquake in the 1020s, the Crusader's destruction, and the later restorations.
To the immediate east of the Dome is the smaller Dome of the Chain (qubbat al-silsila), which belongs to the same period. This dome was originally made of lead. Unlike the inside of the Dome of the Rock (which is utterly without a focal point on the horizontal plane), the Dome of the Chain is centered. “[T]he Dome of the Chain is located at the exact center of the Haram, at the meeting point of its two axes, the only building on the whole Haram, in fact, that is in the middle of anything.”

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43 Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy*, 131. This observation was first made by Rosen-Ayalon, *The Early Islamic Monuments*. 
“chain” referred to in the Dome’s title is usually explained by a story in which either David or Solomon used a miraculous chain to judge innocence in court cases. As the Umayyads had no known interest in the site’s connection to Jewish lore, this seems unlikely. Considering the Ḥaram’s special role in the Eschaton, and the central location of this particular dome, an older and more likely source of the name would be the ‘chain’ (silsila) by which sinners will be attached to their idols and Satan himself at the Final Judgment.

In front of the Dome of the Chain, also on the eastern side of the Dome of the Rock, was a shrine devoted to Khidr. No longer extant and its precise location unclear, this was seen by Ibn al-Faqīh, who unfortunately did not describe its features. It may be that some early Muslims thought the šakhrā under the dome was that same šakhrā mentioned in al-Kahf. Ibn Ḥawqal (d. c. 980) calls it “the rock (šakhrā) of Moses,” connecting it to the šakhrā at the junction of the two seas: the place where Moses slept.

44 E.g., Grabar, The Dome of the Rock, 152.
46 Muqātil ibn Sulaymān makes five references to this chain. In his exegesis of al-Ṣāfīṭ 37:22 he writes: “Gather those who have done evil; those associators from the sons of Adam, ‘and their wives; their consorts from those devils that remain, and all the unbelievers with Satan on one chain.” See also Muqātil, ad al-Ṣāfīṭ 37:55-56; al-Zukhruf 43:37-38, al-Insān 76:4, and al-Masad 11:15 for similar details. For the relationship of this chain to the grave in early hadiths, see Eklund, Life Between Death and Resurrection According to Islam, 30-31.
47 In Le Strange, Palestine Under the Moslems, 121. This is not related to the current Dome of Khidr, located on the northwestern corner of the Dome of the Rock’s platform. Also, Peters, Jerusalem, 214. “[Khidr] was often spotted worshiping at the sanctuary, where several sites came to be named after him.” Necipoğlu, “The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest,” 41. Some instances of Khidr sightings are given in Goitein, “The Sanctity of Jerusalem and Palestine,” 142-143.
48 al-Kahf 18:60-62.
49 “This is a block of stone that rises like a platform. It is huge, and its surface is not flat […] The height of this Rock, called the Rock of Moses, comes to the chest of a man standing; its length and width are roughly equivalent. All around there is a perimeter wall covered with marble slabs, the half the height of a man in size. The Rock’s dimensions are a little over ten cubits. You can descend inside that Rock by a staircase behind a door that looks like the hatch of an underground and leads to a room measuring about five ten cubits; it is neither round or square, and is not very high, although exceeding the size of a man” Ibn Hawqal, La Conformation de la Terre (Kitab Surat al-Ard), Vol. 1, trans. J.H. Kramers and G. Wiet (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001), 168; Necipoğlu, “The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest,” 31.
Similarly, water also plays a significant role both literally and figuratively around the site.\textsuperscript{50} Muqāṭil ibn Sulaymān says that the šakhra was “mentioned by God in the Qurʾān,” and it is the site of all fresh water.\textsuperscript{51} Ibn Ḥawqal’s reference to “the Rock of Moses,” would make the same claim. Muqaddasi is even more to the point. Writing a very long, glowing list of the virtues and holy sites of his homeland, he says:

[The Levant] is a splendid country: the land of the Prophets, the abode of the righteous, the home of the saints. It is the center of attraction to the virtuous, it contains the first qibla, the place of the Resurrection, the Īsrā’ [...] the wall between torment and pardon, [the Ḥaram’s eastern wall...] the noble and glorious Gate of Ḥiṭṭa [the modern Barclay’s Gate], the Gate of the Horn [an eastern gate on the Ḥaram], the tombs of both Mary [in the Kidron Valley] and Rachel [on the border of Jerusalem and Bethlehem], the junction of the two seas, the dividing place of the two worlds, the Gate of the Shekinah [i.e, the Golden/Mercy Gate], and the Dome of the Chain.\textsuperscript{52}

While not a pilgrim’s guide, Muqaddasi is only focusing on places one can actually go. So, when he mentions the “junction of the two seas” and “the dividing place of the two worlds” in this list of places in and immediately around Jerusalem, he is talking about a physical location that one may visit. Thus he is presumably saying the šakhra in the Ḥaram al-Sharif is that same “junction of the two seas” mentioned in al-Kahf; both the source of the waters and the boundary of the worlds: the Qurʾānic barzakh. Similar sentiments would carry on throughout later Islamic history. For an example from another Jerusalemite, the qāḍī Mujir al-Din al-ʿUlaymī (d. 1522) wrote: “The very site of the city is holy by dint of its being the closest of the earth to the heavens, the source of all sweet water [...] the dividing line between Heaven and Hell. In addition it is, of course, the place of the Day of Judgment.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50} There are a remarkable number of wells and cisterns at the Ḥaram; at least thirty. See Gibson and Jacobson, Below the Temple Mount.

\textsuperscript{51} Necipoğlu, “The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest,” 30.

\textsuperscript{52} al-Muqaddasi, The Best Division for Knowledge, 242-247. The translator here notes that the “junction of the two seas” refers to a location on coast of Greater Syria. And truth be told, the Levant does boast a number of shrines to al-Khīḍr. But this does not seem to be what Muqaddasi means. All of the other places appearing in this section of Muqaddasi’s list are in Jerusalem or its immediate environs.

Taking into account the original mosque along the Ḩaram’s eastern wall, we can conclude that the oldest Islamic reading of the Temple Mount/Ḥaram suggested something of significance towards the east. Further to the east of the Domes of the Rock and the Chain is the sealed “Golden Gate” which exists today. The Umayyads also had a gate in the east of the Ḩaram, which they named the “Mercy Gate” (bāb al-raḥma). It is not clear if the current walled-up gate is this same gate, but in any case the Umayyads either built or recognized a gate to the immediate east of their domes. The Umayyads named it the Mercy Gate in reference to al-Ḥadid 57:13: “a door [...] its inside is mercy and its outside faces punishment.” In order to associate this gate with the Qur’ānic gate of mercy and punishment, the Umayyads also needed to rename the valley outside of the gate to match the Qur’ānic passage: “its outside faces punishment.” That outside — the Kidron Valley leading up to the Mount of Olives — therefore was associated with punishment and torment, and so it became the “Valley of Gehenna” (wāḍī jahannam). Oddly, the valley called Gehenna is usually placed elsewhere, such as south or west of the city. That the Umayyads shifted the well-known layout of Jerusalem tells us quite a bit about their project in the city, as I shall explain momentarily. The slope of the Mount of Olives, across from the Mercy Gate and on the opposite side of the new Valley of Gehenna, was to be the sight of the final Resurrection, and hence al-Sāhira (“the Wakeful [place],” “the Sleepless [place]”).

On the western side of the complex was the former site of the main entrance to the Temple of Herod. It is now called “Warren’s Gate.” The gate lies directly before and beneath the western entrance to the Dome of the Rock. Because this site was the closest one could come to the alleged site of the Holy of Holies without entering the sacrosanct ground, Jews prayed here most especially after their reintroduction to the city. The gate was already underground in the Umayyad era, as it is today,

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55 Le Strange, Palestine Under the Moslems, 218; Grabar, The Shape of the Holy, 66.
57 Goldhill, Jerusalem: City of Longing, 75 and 85. Named after the Englishman Charles Warren (d. 1927), who was at once an engineer, general, London police chief (during the Jack the Ripper affair), and “amateur” biblical archeologist.
and at some point in the early Islamic period it was also the site of a synagogue. The base of the gate is Herodian, but the Umayyads (re)constructed the arch itself. The Umayyads named this gate “the cave” (*al-maghāra, al-kenēsia*), perhaps because it was underground. However, there may be more to this name. As we have seen in the Qurʾān’s cosmology, caves are associated with the dead, the sun, and false objects of worship; Christ and his saints most notably. This “cave” points in the direction of the Holy Sepulcher.

When this is all put back together as a whole, we can notice an eschatological cosmology quite similar to the Qurʾān’s (with only one new element). In a place associated with the edge of the earth horizontally (as *al-ṣakhra, al-aqṣā*), we find a monument which at once celebrates the past prophets, the future Resurrection, and the eternal dominion of God alone. The Ḥaram is both oriented towards all directions, but also has some echo of the solar pathway. To the sunrise is the “Sleepless” site of the Resurrection and the pit of Hell, on the other side of the Mercy Gate. Also to the east of the Dome of the Rock is the Dome of the Chain and the prayer place of Khidr, as well as the original site of the Ḥaram’s mosque, echoing some ancient direction of orientation. The Ḥaram is un-oriented, but leans towards the East.

That the Ḥaram notes the different directions but favors none of them on the horizontal plane is key. What one can see from different vantage points shifts, not unlike in Qurʾānic eschatological-cosmology. To accomplish this, the site’s inscriptions mix and divide Qurʾānic and traditional stock phrases with longer passages, allowing certain messages to appear only from certain directions.

If one were to enter the Ḥaram from the east, the visitor would pass through the Dome of the Chain and enter the Dome of the Rock’s eastern door. The outward-facing eastern side refers to the Resurrection. Above the eastern door the tablet would have reminded the visitor that God alone is the ruler and judge of the worlds. The Throne Verse is cited, but without its affirmation of God’s

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sleeplessness, which only appears inside the building's dome facing down towards the sakhra below.

Also, the intercession of Muḥammad at the Resurrection is asked for:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to God other than whom there is no god but He. The Living. The Eternal. The Creator of the heavens and the earth. The Light of the heavens and the earth. The pillar of the heavens and the earth. The One. The eternally besought of all. He does not beget nor was He begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him [... ] bless Muḥammad, Your servant, Your prophet, and that You accept his intercession for his people. The blessings of God be upon him and peace be upon him and the mercy of God... [the rest of the line is cut off]. (eastern door tablet).

Moving inside the Dome of the Rock's eastern entrance, if this visitor moved straight ahead and looked up, reading the inscriptions inside, the outside tablet's message would be repeated:

[God] gives-life and He gives death. And He has power over everything. Muhammad is the Messenger of God — the blessings of God be upon him. May He accept his intercession on behalf of his people on the Day of Reckoning. In the name of God, the Merciful; the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is one. He has no associate. Muḥammad is the Messenger of God — the blessings of God be upon him (outer arcade, from northeast to southeast).

The day of the Resurrection is recalled, and again facing eastward. The intercession of the Prophet is re-introduced, and this is only mentioned in the Dome's inscriptions as read from the east. Both examples are also clear that this does not make Muḥammad an associate of God's. The orientation of both mentions of Muḥammadan intercession towards the day of Resurrection also suggests that only at the Eschaton is intercession possible; not now.

Then, moving straight ahead (proceeding west) the visitor would come to the sakhra, whose entrance does not open due east but to the southeast — where the sun would rise at Christmas. At least one ancient ‘visitor’ (if dreams count as visits), al-Ḥawlī (fl. c. 946), even thinks that the Ḥaram
(and perhaps the cave itself) is Jesus’ birthplace. In any case, if one were to stand at the ṣakhra and face east, the inscriptions would read:

O Scripture People, do not transgress in your religion and do not say anything of God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary is only a messenger of God and His word, which He conveyed to Mary and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers. And do not say, “Three!” Stop, it is better for you. God is only One God. Far be it removed from His majesty that He should have a son. (inner arcade from southeast to northeast).

The messages are similar but reversed. If you are facing west from the east: the unique intercession of Muḥammad in the future does not make him divine. If you are facing east from the west: the unique birth of Jesus in the past is the same.

Towards the sunset is the “cave” at the Ḥaram’s western side, which also faces the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This is now due West, where the sun would set on Good Friday/Easter. If one were to stand at the rock and face the “cave,” the sunset, and the Sepulcher, the inscriptions would read:

O God, bless Your messenger and Your servant Jesus, son of Mary. Peace be upon him the day he was born, the day he dies, and the day he is resurrected, alive. This was Jesus, son of Mary; a statement of truth about which they doubt. It is not fitting that God should take a son unto Himself. Glory be to Him. When He decrees a thing, He says to it only “Be!” and it is. For God is my Lord and your Lord, so serve Him. That is the right path. God is witness that there is no god but He (inner arcade, northwest to southwest).

A visitor entering the Dome of the Rock from this direction (that is, coming from the Holy Sepulcher), would be told by the inscriptions to continue to hold that God is one, to accept the prophecy of Muḥammad, and so to renounce divine sonship.

There is no God but God. He is One. He has no associate. Muḥammad is the Messenger of God. This God and His angels shower blessings upon the Prophet. O believers, ask for blessings on him and greet him with a worthy greeting. In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One. Praise be to God who has not taken unto Himself a son, and who has no associate in authority and neither has He any friend to depend upon (outer arcade, southwest to northwest).

According to Ibn al-Murajjā’s (d. 1099) Faḍā’il Bayt al-Muqdis, Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥawlī came to the complex in a dream on 10/11 August, 946. He mentions many of the sites of the Haram specifically, but about the Haram generally he remarks “Making ritual prayer at the birth-place of Jesus and at the Chamber of Zechariah is like entering Paradise, entering these places like looking at Mary and Jesus, or at Zechariah and Mary.” in Andreas Kaplony, The Ḥaram of Jerusalem, 324-1099: Temple, Friday Mosque, Area of Spiritual Power (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 462. The author does not say the cave is the site of Jesus’ birth, but it is not impossible that this is what he means. Later, al-Harawi (above) said that Cave of Spirits was the tomb of Zachariah, and al-Ḥawlī seems to think the “Chamber of Zechariah” and the “birth-place of Jesus” are the same.
It may even be that the dome itself recalls the solar road. The dome over the rock was uniquely covered in bronze or copper (contrasted to the other domes of lead) and was made to be seen from the outside. This would have been very unusual. It would not be too difficult to imagine the dome as a great, eternal depiction of the sun's road across the sky written in solar metals. It ‘moves’ from the place of the Resurrection to the “cave” in which it sets, in time with the Christian liturgical year whose errors it is correcting. Muqaddasī mentions how remarkably the Dome of the Rock reacts to the sunlight. This may well have been its very purpose. Not only would it catch the eyes of Jerusalem's Christian residents and pilgrims, it was relaying theological content along with its declaration of Islam's triumph.

Within the Dome of the Rock this eschatological cosmology also appears vertically. The Throne Verse was placed at the highest point, declaring the sleepless Creator who only grants intercession to whom He wills. This was likely the only place where the Throne Verse appeared in its entirety in its five citations upon the building. This is written in the dome. Like most ancient domes, this dome presumably symbolized the heavens. Below this and therefore encircling it is the much wider octagonal building with four doors: hence it is the earth. Because of this terracing of the dome on top of the octagon, one could only see up into the dome if one was standing within the inner arcade, facing and immediately in front of

Fig 5.3: The Dome of the Rock interior (not to scale). The visitor in the outer arcade would not be able to see either the Throne Verse or the Rock. As one moved further inside, and the Rock became visible, the Throne Verse would as well.
the rock (see fig. 5.3). There in the inner arcade inscriptions God's prophets are affirmed, and the Scripture People are told not to go to excesses in their religion by divinizing Jesus. Both the inscriptions and the paradisal mosaics deemphasize any particular direction except the vertical.

And on the ground is the rock itself. Its cave is the location of the dead (the spirits), the sleeping (Moses), and/or the prophets (Moses, Jesus, Zechariah). The oldest sources noted that the rock was surrounded by a “waist-high” marble barrier. This would have blocked the visitor from seeing the ṣakhra at a distance, but not up close. To someone standing in the outer arcade the rock would be obscured, while in the inner arcade it would have been possible to see right over the barriers. And it is only in the inner arcade where one can see the full Throne Verse in the height of the inner dome. In other words, once one approached the place of the dead close enough to see it, the Qurʾānic passage of the sleepless, deathless God beyond intercession would appear in the heavens. Because the only clear axis of the building which can be seen from all directions on the compass is the vertical which reaches from the top of the dome down to the almost-hidden rock, we can envisage an opposition established between these two places. The untiring, unique God of the Throne Verse is contrasted with the partially obscured creatures of the ṣakhra: the false intercessors; the sleeping dead, the prophets.

A slight evolution of Qurʾānic eschatology is found in the two inscriptions’ prayer for the intercession of Muḥammad. This intercession is only expected after the Resurrection, which is spelled out plainly by the passages and underscored by their eastern orientation. Although the Prophet is often the Qurʾān's addressee, in the Qurʾān's larger depiction of history and cosmology, he plays a relatively minor role. He is just one more link in the long chain of prophets and warners. Indeed, affirmations of the Prophet's equivalence to the former messengers appear far more often and more directly than affirmations of his uniqueness. But there are some clear signs that even the earliest Muslims began thinking of the Prophet with supernatural powers beyond in his function as the bringer of revelation. For instance, the Qurʾānic denial that the Prophet could contact the dead
implies some people claimed or wondered that he could. After the death of the Prophet as the Islamic community grew and spread, Muḥammad would be credited with ever more significance and power. He would quickly rise to a place of special import and communal identity. Muḥammad defined Islam’s break from the Scripture People.

The biographical epics of Muḥammad would elaborate on this theme. Regarding the Ḥaram al-Sharīf, the early story of the Prophet’s “night journey” (isrā’) from Mecca to Jerusalem and back would explain the unique role of this one specific prophet. It would also address a few of the features of the Qur’ānic barzakh. Some of the many Isrā’ stories were almost certainly already in circulation at the time of the Ḥaram al-Sharīf’s construction, if not soon thereafter. Whether these stories were a factor in the construction of the Ḥaram is not apparent. I would guess that they were not, since the oldest features of the Ḥaram do not seem to suggest a familiarity (or concern) with the account. However, the cosmology of both the Ḥaram al-Sharīf and the Isrā’ can tell us of collective thoughts of Muslims in the Umayyad period. Both the Temple Mount and the Isrā’ show traces of the Qur’ānic barzakh, while emphasizing the role of Muḥammad himself in a new way.

Ibn Isḥāq’s Sīra gives us several interlocked variants of the Isrā’, and alludes to others. In all of them the Prophet is asleep, and in most he meets past prophets, including Jesus. The version attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. c. 730) would provide the backbone of most later elaborations on the story, and it is also the longest and most detailed version the Sīra gives. The Prophet is sleeping in the Ḥījr, the semi-circular stone “barrier” around the Ka’ba. Gabriel appears and attempts to wake the Prophet, prodding him with his foot three times. Mirroring the Sīra’s version of the first Qur’ānic

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60 Fāṭir 35:19-22.
61 The story of the Prophet’s ascent through the heavens would later be coupled with the Isrā’ narratives. This would prompt a number of later buildings in the Ḥaram. However, the earlier strands of the stories of the Isrā’ and the Mi’rāj functioned independently, often occurring at different parts of the Prophet’s career. See Michael Sells, “Ascension,” EQ; Frederick S. Colby, Narrating Muḥammad’s Night Journey (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 29-64; Rubin, Eye of the Beholder, 65ff.
revelation (see below), the threefold waking process also emphasizes the difficulty of rousing someone who is asleep.\textsuperscript{63} That the sleeping Prophet is completely unconscious is apparently critical. Then a liminal animal is presented at the gate of the Meccan sanctuary. Unnamed in Ḥasan’s story, the animal is four times a hybrid being. It is “half mule, half donkey,” and is also winged. Along with his appearance in a doorway, this makes for an extremely liminal creature.\textsuperscript{64} They arrive at the “Temple” in Jerusalem, where Muḥammad meets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (and no one else), the prophets of utmost significance to Jews and Christians. They pray together with Muḥammad serving as the īmām, lowering the status of the three former prophets. Gabriel then presents the Prophet with two drinks: wine and milk. The Prophet correctly chooses to drink the milk, which at once affirms the Islamic prohibition of wine, while again correcting the excesses of Jewish and Christian worship: the sabbatical and sacramental wine (reenacting God’s rest and death respectively). They then return to Mecca, where Abū Bakr is informed of the story.\textsuperscript{65}

In both the Īsra’ and the Ḥaram al-Šarīf those who are asleep are in a guarded, liminal place, aligned with barriers and prophecy. This is where the dead prophets are. Even the most exalted prophets are either revealed to be subservient or are in a deep sleep. Thus far, the Ḥaram al-Šarīf and this small part of the Sūra are in complete conjunction with the Qur’ān’s conversation with only one addition. The new element — the special role of Muḥammad even amongst the other prophets — signals the growth of Islam’s post-Qur’ānic independence from the previous revelations. But it also

\textsuperscript{63} Whether the Prophet traveled bodily to Jerusalem is a perennial Islamic question. The discussion already appears in the Sūra, with two of the variants addressing the matter by saying the Prophet was traveling in a vision while his body remained behind.

\textsuperscript{64} That is to say, the unnamed Burāq is part mule (which is already a hybrid of a horse and a donkey), part proper donkey (so he is doubly part donkey), and yet he is also winged like an angel or a bird. Later sources would hybridize Burāq even more, by portraying him with a human head and the gift of speech.

\textsuperscript{65} Interestingly, the account’s major climax is not the ascent to heaven (which does not appear), but rather the affirmation of Abū Bakr as “the truthful” (al-Ṣaddiq), indicating a political function. F.E. Peters also notes that the account strikes certain similarities to the Transfiguration of Christ (Mark 9; Matthew 17:1-9; Luke 9:28-36). Peters, The Distant Shrine, 64-66. Other likenesses can be found with the drama at the garden of Gethsemane (sleep, four men, the presentation of a cup as a test of faith) in Mark 14:32-41; Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46.
hints at the disintegration of the Qurʾānic eschatological framework's primary function. As the Prophet Muḥammad drew closer to the center of Islamic communal identity in the coming centuries, and as he came to be seen as a possible intercessor both at the Resurrection and eventually in the present, the soul-sleep of the Qurʾān (designed to minimize such intercessors) would give way.

**Part 2: Sleep, Dreams, and the Dead in Early Narrative Theology**

As the years passed and Islamic thought and history appeared on paper, the cosmology assumed by the Qurʾān would be eclipsed by narrative theology, and then formal theology. These were readings of Islam that were increasingly less dependent on one's particular cultural milieu. The narrative theologies of Islam developed in response to the Qurʾān's increasing foreignness. The time of the first Muslims was now several generations off. The pre-Islamic Ḥijāzī culture that the Qurʾān assumed of its listeners was growing inaccessible. To fight this, early Islamic authors introduced memories to explain and create their communal identity and bind the later Muslims to their sacred past. Because these memories came from the massive store of Near Eastern oral and written lore, their relationships to the Qurʾān's very early hearers varies. It is typically not clear whether these represent legitimate lines of memory to the Qurʾān's appearance (or at least people much closer to that milieu), later inventions based on Qurʾānic exegesis or theological necessity, or simply shared assumptions common to both the Qurʾānic audience and the late Umayyad Near East. And yet, in these first falling stones of the future avalanche of classical Islamic literature, a few authors occasionally drew together otherwise disparate elements suggesting remnants of the Qurʾānic cosmology of the *barzakh*.

Concurrently, these literary developments would introduce features into the Islamic intermediate state which are not represented in the oldest sources, such as the constriction and expansion of the grave, particular judgment, and the visitation of pre-Resurrection angelic questioners. These would become some of the hallmarks of the medieval *barzakh*, but they have no
Qurʾānic precedent. As these details of the medieval *barzakh* appeared, some of the older features of the Qurʾānic *barzakh* were re-purposed or minimized. The versions of the *Isrāʾ* contained in the *Sīra*, which echo themes both of the Dome of the Rock and the Qurʾānic milieu and includes new mythological features is such a case, as are others. Most specifically, the sleep of the dead as a response to divine association and the *barzakh* as the eschatologically significant mountains surrounding the earth would in time disappear. Islam was changing from a monotheistic revival amongst the ‘*mushrik*’ religions to a religious culture with its own internal histories and wisdom traditions.

The more distinct Islam became from other religions, the less it would require a cosmology that was designed specifically to respond to them. The major claim of Islam — that God has no associates, and speaks through human prophets — was previously a call for radical reform. As the world became Muslim, this claim was becoming common knowledge. The Qurʾānic *barzakh* would no longer be needed to express this (now familiar) message. For evidence of this transformation, we can look at more examples from the oldest biographical epics of the Prophet, as well as early exegetes, such as Mujāhid ibn Jabr al-Makkī (d. c. 722)66 and Muqṭil ibn Sulaymān.

Mujāhid’s *Tafsīr* is not particularly substantial. Most of the Qurʾān’s verses pass without comment, and those that receive treatment are typically just paraphrased. As we have argued, this minimal approach suggests that the Qurʾānic message was becoming more foreign with the passage of time and the text’s appearance beyond its original setting. And yet this author was close enough to the Qurʾānic conversation that most of the verses needed no further comment. Mujāhid does, however, give a short explanation of the unusual word *barzakh* in his gloss of al-ʿ*Muʾminūn* 23:100. He says “the *barzakh* is the barrier (*ḥājiz*) between death and the return to this-world [...] the *barzakh* are the

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66 While this source certainly functions in style and tone like the earliest of exegeses, its exact origins are very open to question. “The text may well represent one of the interpretative strands connected to the name Mudjāhid, but it has been shown by Stauth and Leemhuis to have been neither a source for, nor an extract from, al-Ṭabarī. It consists of primarily periphrastic comments with some narrative embellishment; it appears to be theologically neutral and not marked by over de-anthropomorphism.” Andrew Rippin, “Mudjāhid b. Djabr al-Makki,” *EI2*. 269
graves that are between you and the hereafter.” While we can use ring structure to equate the *barzakh* to the grave, it is not obvious using a linear reading of the text. That Mujāhid makes this same connection between *barzakh* and the grave reinforces this relationship. However, that he explains the term at all means that already at this early date some Arabic speakers did not know its meaning. No exegete will ever neglect to explain the word; they all think it is unusual.

Muqātil, like Mujāhid, presents us with a vision of Islam before the concretization of the Islamic historical and exegetical technologies, when the borders between Islam and the other religions of the Late Antique Near East were perhaps more porous than they would be later. For an example of this relating to the sleep of the dead (as well as the culture which begat al-Ḥaram al-Sharif), consider his commentary on the Throne Verse. “He is not taken by slumber or sleep. What is in the heavens and what is in the earth belong to Him: the creatures are His servants and His property: the angels, and Ezra, and Jesus, son of Mary, and others who are worshipped.” Muqātil reads the Throne Verse as a response to the cult of angels and saints. He names Jesus specifically, mirroring the Dome of the Rock in this regard. That is, the Qur’ānic claim that God does not require rest is more than merely descriptive of the Deity. It is a message addressed to very specific un-Islamic theologies.

Using the biblical lore, he also connects the Throne Verse back to the site of the Temples. “And He is the High, the Great: the exalted over all His creation, the Great: there is nothing greater. His throne is supported by four angels, and each of the angels has four faces. Their feet stand below the rock (*ṣakhra*) that is below the bottom of the earth [...]” He then goes on to detail each of the four angels’ four faces (a man’s, a bull’s, a “great bird’s” and a lion’s) and how they walk around the cosmos in a 500 year cycle. It is a re-presentation of *Ezekiel* 10. In the vision of Ezekiel, God abandons the

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67 See also Zaki, “Barzakh,” *EQr*.
69 As noted above, he writes many times elsewhere that this same *ṣakhra* is the one in Jerusalem where the resurrected dead will be called out of their graves: e.g., “[As the Resurrection begins] a caller calls at the *ṣakhra* in Jerusalem (*bāyt al-muqdis*): ‘O people of this-world, here is the account of your reckoning!’ So he will hear the calls of the people altogether, and they will draw-close to the voice.” Muqātil, *al-Māʾida* 5:109.
Temple and His people for turning to other gods. Muqātil is in a similar way telling us that God departed from the Scripture People for their idolatry. Like the builders of the Dome of the Rock, Muqātil saw the Throne Verse as a corrective of this specific sin. Displacing the sun, the luminous body which cycles the world granting life and Resurrection, is the throne and the One who sits upon it.

Muqātil’s exegesis also provides us with other clues about the intermediate state. In his introduction to the Sleepers’ pericope, he begins by paraphrasing the Qur’ānic words by which God creates: “Be!” (kun). That is, God creates and re-creates everything by His command alone. God does not exert effort (creating divine fatigue). He merely wills and this will is manifested as existence. Of the seven times this detail appears in the Qur’ān, all are in reference to Christ, to other false divinities, to God’s ability to raise the dead, or to some combination of the three. The Dome of the Rock also uses this phrasing in its inner western arcade (towards the sunset, the “cave,” and the Holy Sepulcher), relating to all three categories: Resurrection, Jesus, and false associations with God. By introducing the Sleepers thus, Muqātil suggests that he understands their story similarly. Their miracle does not make them an object of cultic worship. They are just more of God’s signs which He can create and resurrect as He wills by summoning them to “Be.”

Further, the exegete also introduces some details of the story suggesting the eschatological

70 In the vision, Ezekiel is forcibly taken from his home and flown to the gate of the Temple, “where the idol that provokes jealousy stood.” Then God makes Ezekiel dig into a wall and he sees a variety of false gods and worshipped images. Next God makes him see a woman mourning the dead Tammūz. Finally, God shows a group of men in the Temple facing east and bowing to the sun. At this, God commands an angelic scribe to mark the foreheads of all the just people in the city, and has a squad of angels slay all of the others. Ezekiel then sees the throne of God supported by four-faced angels, looking like a cherub, a man, a lion, and an eagle. The glory of God then departs the Temple. Ezekiel 8-10.
71 Muqātil, ad al-Kahf 18:9ff.
72 al-Baqara 2:116-117; al-Nisā’ 3:47; al-An‘ām 6:71-73; al-Nahl 16:35-40; Maryam 19:34-35; Yā Sīn 36:78-83; Ghāfir 40:66-68. In the De Fide of Ephrem the Syrian, the command words of creation are given as proof of high Christology. Because the text of Genesis says “Let there be!” and not “Be!” alone, God must have been speaking to the pre-existent Christ as the instrument through whom all things were made. God said: ‘Let there be light!’ — and so it was created. Whom, now, did He command, when there was nothing? And if it is held that it was the light He commanded [this is excluded, since] His command was not ‘Be!’ ‘Let there be!’ He said. For different is the word ‘Be!’ from ‘Let there be!’ [...] the Father commanded through His voice. The Son carried out the work.” De Fide 6:6-13. Tryggve Kronholm, Motifs from Genesis 1-11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian (Sweden: CWK Gleerup Lund, 1978), 40.
cosmology proposed or strengthened by the ring-structures. He knows that the *raqīm* is an inscribed lead tablet (*lūḥ min rašās*) and he says that the Sleepers were entombed in copper (*nuḥās*). This would appear to add nothing to the story, but according to the ring structure this foreshadows the construction of the Two-Horned One’s barricade on the other side of the same *sūra*-ring. It also alludes to the symbolic juxtaposition of solar/infernal metals, underworlds, and dogs. He goes on to say that the dog is a guard of the Sleepers, reinforcing the ring structural reading which tells us the dog serves as a barrier. Oddly, Muqātil introduces the non-Qurʾānic detail that the dog is asleep too, which would negate its very function as a watchdog. Hence it seems the dog as a guardian is the older memory of the Qurʾānic (or some proximate) milieu, while the sleep of the dog is a later introduction.

Also, as we have noted previously, he calls the dog by the strange and insulting name Qiṭmīr. This marks a connection to *Fāṭir* 35:13’s discussion of the sun’s movement, the Resurrection, and the worship of idols. Muqātil does not note any relationship among the details he adds to the Sleepers’ passage, and so his apparent ignorance of their significance might indicate a memory the exegete has received but does not fully grasp himself.

Muqātil also provides an early *sabab al-nuzūl* for the story. The villainous Abū Jahl gets information from the rabbis of Medina on the biblical lore by which to test the Prophet. They tell him to ask Muhammad about the youths who disappeared and about the spirit (*rūḥ*). The word *rūḥ* does not appear in the Sleepers’ pericope, or anywhere else in *al-Kahf*. Therefore, it seems to be in reference to something in the pericope or the *sūra* that is called by another name, too. There are four possibilities. They could be asking about the *rūḥ* as the agent of prophecy, as *al-Kahf* discusses revelation in its introduction, conclusion, and central frames. Or this could be a question about how

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73 In Mujāhid’s commentary on *al-Kahf* 18:17 a similar connection to the Two-Horned One’s barricade appears. But rather than discussing metals, the exegete adds that the Sleepers’ cave was located “between two mountains” (*bayna jabalayn*) as the Two-Horned One’s barricade was built “between the two mountains” (*bayna al-sadayn*).

74 E.g., *al-Baqara* 2:87 and 253; *al-Māʾida* 5:110; *al-Nahl* 16:2 and 102.
the Spirit of God (rūḥ al-qudus) animates the body at creation⁷⁵ and Resurrection.⁷⁶ Or, this could be a question about the intermediate state directly. That is, regarding the Sleepers: what is the nature of disembodied people; spirits without living bodies?⁷⁷ Or it could be a question about the nature of Jesus, who is called a rūḥ or directly made by God’s rūḥ elsewhere.⁷⁸ As the mountainous zone of prophecy, the “high place” from which Jesus came/went, and the Qur’ānic sleep state are all identical, it is plausible that the question about the rūḥ refers to them all. The exegete does not explain further as he either thinks the connection of rūḥ to the Sleepers is obvious, or he does not understand the reference himself.

Muqātīl ibn Sulaymān does not have any particularly nuanced vision of the intermediate state. He adds nothing to the description of the Companions of the Heights beyond paraphrase.⁷⁹ Neither does he note any connection between the word barzakh and its synonyms: the barzakh between the two seas,⁸⁰ the “junction of the two seas,”⁸¹ and the barzakh between the living and the dead.⁸² However, regarding this last passage in which the barzakh is clearly equated to eschatology, he gives details which may prove critical to the later development of the medieval barzakh.

It was said that the angels were the daughters of God, the Almighty. But God, the Exalted says, “God has not taken a son,” (al-Muʾminūn 23:91) meaning the angels. “Nor is there any (other) god with Him,” meaning associates. No, there are not [other] gods with Him […] About fighting [the associators], the

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⁷⁵ Regarding the creation of Adam in al-Ḥijr 15:29, al-Sajda 32:9, and Sād 38:72.
⁷⁶ E.g., al-Maʿārij 70:4; al-Qadr 97:4.
⁷⁷ The disembodied spirit or soul (nafs) does not appear in the Qur’ānic corpus as this is not an attribute of indigenous Semitic anthropologies. However, as Muslims appeared in new milieus and with new anthropologies (such as those of Greek origins) the discussion of spirits and souls having activities beyond the body appeared as well. Therefore, Muqātīl (or whomever is the origin of this tradition) may be back-reading a later anthropological divide between body and spirit onto the Qur’ān; seeing spirits where the Qur’ānic audience saw dead bodies. Eklund says, “[The word rūḥ] is often associated with the dead, which signifies the parting of the spirit from the body and its transition to a more independent state. Here we find such expressions relating to death such as: the spirit parts (fāraqa) from the body, or the various expressions for the spirit’s being violently, demonically possessed, torn asunder, wrenched out of the body? Between Death and Resurrection According to Islam, 12.
⁷⁹ Muqātīl, ad al-ʾArāf 7:46.
⁸² Muqātīl, ad al-Muʾminūn 23:99-100
Exalted said, “Glory (be) to God above what they allege,” meaning the angels [as] daughters of the Merciful [...] For their saying that the angels are the daughters of God, “Say: ‘My Lord, if You show me what they are promised,’” (93) that is, torment (ʿadhāb). It means those killed at Badr, so the Prophet — peace and blessings of God be on him — wanted to call the unbelievers of Mecca [to Islam]. Then he said, “My Lord, do not place me among the people who are evildoers. ‘Surely We are able indeed to show you what We promise them” (94-95) of torment [...] Then He ordered [the Prophet] to seek-refuge from the devils, so the Exalted said, “And say: ‘My Lord, I take refuge with You from the incitements of the devils,’” (97) meaning the devils who commanded Abū Jahl, “and I take refuge with You, my Lord, from their being present with me.’ Until, when death comes to one of them,” (98-99) meaning the unbelievers, “he says, ‘My Lord, send me back,’” to this-world, he says aloud when he sees the angel of death take him. He looks at his sins before death, and when he is taken by surprise in shame, he asks to return to this-world in order to do good-works in what he left behind. So he will say to Him, the Exalted, “My Lord, send me back,” to this-world, meaning “so that I may do righteousness concerning what I left (undone),” of good-works, meaning faith (īmān). The Almighty says, “Surely no,” you cannot return to this-world [...] Then the Almighty said, “behind them is a barzakh,” meaning the timespan (ajal) after death “until the Day when they will be raised up,” (100) meaning they are cramped [together] (yukhāshruna) after death.

Muqātil doesn’t explain the grammatical stretch required to claim that the singular masculine “son” (walad) in verse 91 means the feminine plural daughters of God. Neither does he relate the barzakh to the grave like Mujāhid and the later Muslims did. But otherwise, he does equate the barzakh to idolatry, as the “good works” required for salvation are defined as “faith” (īmān); presumably meaning faith in the unity of God; that God has no associates. The relationship between faith and works suggested here will also become a significant issue when we arrive at the first formal theologies of Islam regarding the barzakh.

What the exegete has added to the passage also tells us how the Qur’ānic intermediate state is transforming into the medieval barzakh. Those unbelievers killed at Badr, such as Abū Jahl, are to be shown “torment” (ʿadhāb). After dying, they will see the angel of death take them and will cry out loud in their panic and regret. That is, immediately after death one will see and speak to an angel, as well as God. The sinful dead ask to return to the world, but the barzakh keeps them out. Then Muqātil explains that the barzakh means the timespan (ajal) from death to the Resurrection.83 Although it could be pieced together from the Qurān’s larger eschatological agenda that the barzakh relates to a

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83 The equation of the barzakh to a timespan is made earlier as well: Muqātil, ad al-An‘ām 6:2.
span of time — the life of the mountains coincides with a countdown to the Resurrection — never does the Qur’anic barzakh mean a span of time. When Muqātil addressed the word barzakh in its two other Qur’anic appearances, he understood the barzakh as a physical barrier between the two seas. Therefore, paired with his exegesis here, he thinks the barzakh is both a physical barricade and a span of time. The medieval barzakh too will both be a physical location (the grave) and a time period (between death and the Resurrection).

In retrospect, the history of the Islamic understanding of intermediate state may also hinge on the last line of this citation and its use of yuḥāshrūna. When the Qur’ān uses the verb ḥāshara, it is synonymous with jama’a, meaning that at the Resurrection the dead will be “gathered” or “collected” together. Thus yawm al-jama’ and yawm al-ḥāshr both mean “the day of gathering,” that is, Resurrection Day. Muqātil means this as well. However the Qur’ān does not use the word ḥāshara in connection to the intermediate state at any point. The “gathering” is post-Resurrection. In that regard, Muqātil’s usage here (while perfectly in accord with the Qur’ān’s) leaves room for a second interpretation. The verb ḥāshara also has the related meaning of “to cram,” “squeeze” or “force” together. Muqātil’s use only tells us that this ḥāshr happens “after death,” but not specifically on the day of Resurrection. This would not cause a confusion looking at the Qur’ānic passage alone, but because Muqātil has just said that the barzakh is a timespan as well as a barrier, it is not clear when this “cramming [together]” is going to happen: before the Resurrection or after. As we shall see, the barzakh will soon be explained as a timespan (ajal), characterized by visions of torment (ʿadhāb) and being pressed inwards. Its role as a physical wall — the mountains at the liminal zones of the earth — is vanishing.

Accounts from early biographical epics of the Prophet also provide insight to the development of the Islamic intermediate state as a countermeasure to saint cults, and show the transformation of

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84 E.g., al-Isrāʾ 17:97; Qaf 50:44.
the *barzakh* into the crushing period of torment in the grave. Many examples are provided by the now-canonical *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* of Ibn Ishāq edited by Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī. We will also consider Ma‘mar ibn Rāshid’s (d. 770) *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* as preserved by ‘Abd al-Razzāq ibn Hammām (d. 827). A few examples also appear in al-Wāqidi’s (d. c. 822) *Kitāb al-Tūrīkh wa al-Maghāzī* and his pupil Ibn Sa‘d’s (d. 845) *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubra*.

In the *Sūra*, the beginning of Muḥammad’s prophetic career shares many details with the Qur’ānic story of the Sleepers. Turning to “his right and his left,” he retreats to the mountain of Ḥirā’, where he falls asleep. (In all later editions of the tale he sleeps in a cave). Without waking Muḥammad up — that is, in a vision or dream — Gabriel appears to him with a piece of writing on a cloth. Three times Gabriel “pressed me (*ghattanī*) with it so tightly that I thought it was death,” ending in the revelation of *al-ʿAlaq* 96:1-5. Then the Prophet awakens and heads down the mountain with the words “written on [his] heart.” In Ṭabarī’s version of Ibn Ishāq, the Prophet contemplates going to the top of the mountain and throwing himself down “that I may kill myself and rest.” Gabriel then reappears to the Prophet while he is midway down the mountain. The angel is standing on the entire horizon, so that whichever way the Prophet looks the angel is there. Like the Sleepers, who also turn to the right and the left, the Prophet sleeps on a mountain which is equated to the horizon. Both the Sleepers and the Prophet descend from their resting place with a piece of writing. Sleep is compared to death multiple times. The ignorance and helplessness of the Prophet appears throughout the story, just as the Sleepers are ignorant and confused by their miraculous situation. The human beings who act as signs and bring special words from the mountains are powerless in sleep/death and senseless before the God who sends them to do His work. Both stories thus lower the agency of their prophetic actors.

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The most detailed references to the Qur’ānic intermediate state are given in *al-Kahf*, of which the *Sīra* provides a long *sabab* composed of many parts.\(^{87}\) It is by far the longest *sabab* contained in the *Sīra*, which may hint at an older significance of this *sūra* which later waned. This complicated report is comparable to Muqāṭil’s much shorter version above, suggesting a common source. In brief, a large group of the Quraysh (including Abū Jahl) gather together at sunset by the Kaʿba, hoping to stop the Prophet’s mission by bribery. When this fails, they mockingly ask Muḥammad if he can make God “remove these mountains (*jabāl*) which shut us in, and to straighten out our country for us, and to open up in it rivers like those of the Levant and Iraq, and to resurrect for us our forefathers.” Mountains surround them, these mountains stop the flow of waters, and their removal is roughly equivalent to the dead being raised up. Muḥammad responds that this is not his mission, and so the men question his mere humanity. Later, the Quraysh send a delegation to the rabbis of Medina, looking to test Muḥammad with prophetic lore.

The rabbis said, “Ask him about three things of which we will instruct you. If he gives you the right answer then he is an authentic prophet. If he does not, then the man is a rogue, so form your own opinion about him. Ask him what happened to the youths who disappeared (*dhahabū*, or departed, or died) in ancient days, for they have a marvelous story. And ask him about the itinerant man who reached the boundaries of the East of the earth and its West. And ask him what is the spirit (*rūḥ*).\(^{88}\)

The delegation returns to Mecca and asks the questions of the Prophet. The Prophet says he will return with the answers tomorrow, but instead it takes fifteen days for Gabriel to come with *al-Kahf* in its entirety.\(^{89}\) Some exegesis is given. Again, *al-Kahf*’s warning to those who say God has taken a son\(^{90}\) “means the Quraysh when they say, ‘We worship the angels who are the daughters of God.’”\(^{91}\) The story of the Sleepers is “a proof against those Scripture People who knew their story” and demanded a demonstration (the rabbis of Medina). Almost no information is given about the Two-Horned One,

\(^{87}\) Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 133-141.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 136.
\(^{89}\) In Muqāṭil’s version, the Prophet waits three days; a more colorful symbolism given the Christology of the Sleepers and the possible Christic reference of *rūḥ*.
\(^{90}\) *al-Kahf* 18:4.
\(^{91}\) Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 137.
save a short debate over whether he was an Egyptian man or an angel. The question about the spirit is dismissed outright, using a citation not from *al-Kahf* (which again, never mentions the word *rūḥ*), but from *al-Isrā’*17:85. Then the earlier question about the removal of the mountains and the Resurrection of the dead is replied to, and again the Qur’ānic answer is not from *al-Kahf*, but *al-Ra’d* 13:31 “If only there were a recitation by which the mountains were moved, or by which the earth were split open, or by which the dead were spoken to.” Following this, the mere humanity of the Prophet is discussed again, but *al-Kahf* is not the given response to this question either. Instead, the *Sīra* makes reference to *al-Furqān* 25:7 and 20: “Why does this messenger eat food and walk in the markets? Why isn’t an angel sent-down to him to be a warner with him?”

As a historical record of the 7th century Ḥijāz, the *Sīra’s* *sabab* of *al-Kahf* (like Muqātil’s) is problematic many times over. Jewish rabbis would presumably not test a potential prophet by checking his knowledge of well-known Christian lore: the Sleepers, and now the Two-Horned One, too. Neither does this *sabab* address those narratives in *al-Kahf* that do have some distant relationships to Jewish legend: the recollections of Isaiah 5, the creation of Adam, and the adventures of Moses. And again, explaining *al-Kahf* 18:4’s “son” as a reference to Meccan goddess worship makes no grammatical sense. And also, the other questions put to the Prophet are explained by citations from other *sūras*.

Muqātil’s and Ibn Iṣḥaq’s explanations of *al-Kahf* are similar enough that they are certainly related, but neither seems to be the source of the other. The origins or ages of these memories cannot be determined,92 but the clues that survive are enticing. Both authors struggle to make their story

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92 Ibn Iṣḥaq cites an unnamed traditionalist who heard the story from two people: the freed slave ʿIkrima and Saʿīd ibn Jubayr (d. c. 714). ʿIkrima is cited as the transmitter in the *sabab* of Two-Horned One’s story by Wāḥidī (d. 1075), and that report has some similar elements as the *Sīra’s* (the Quraysh’s questions about the mountains and the dead, the tempting of the Prophet) while it lacks other key details (the rabbis, the connection to the Sleepers or the *rūḥ*). This tells us Ibn Iṣḥaq’s version is a composite. These other details came from Saʿīd ibn Jubayr from Kufa; Ibn Iṣḥaq’s ancestral town. Unfortunately, Muqātil does not supply us with his source. As he was relatively well-traveled (but there is no indication he was ever in Kufa), we cannot establish the connection to Saʿīd and thus to Ibn Iṣḥaq.
explain the Qur’ānic material in question. They must bend the rules of grammar, relate Jewish rabbis to Christian lore, account for the question about the spirit, and so forth. Because neither author ends with what seems to be a coherent result, we must suppose that both of them are working with information that neither of them fully understands but cannot disregard. They have actual (but unclear) memories of some distant past. In short, Ibn Ishāq knows that *al-Kahf* has something to do with the mere humanity of the Prophet, the mountains which encircle the earth, and the reanimation of the dead. He also knows that *al-Kahf* is a whole, and that there is a particular connection between the Sleepers and the Two-Horned One. Both of these assumptions are demonstrated by ring-structural translation. And the question about the *rāḥ*, mentioned by both Muqātil and Ibn Ishāq, seems of particular importance to *al-Kahf* (and in Muqātil’s case, the Sleepers specifically), even though neither author explains why this might be so.

Memories — whether true, invented, or distorted — of the Qur’ānic *barzakh* appear elsewhere in the early epics as well. Many times caves, sleep, the worship of saints, Jesus, and idols are contrasted to the Qur’ānic revelation’s call to worship of God alone.

Ma’mar ibn Rāshid also gives a backstory for the Qur’ānic Sleepers, although there is no *sabab*. One of Jesus’ apostles came to a certain city, and an idol stood at its gate. Rather than entering the city by bowing to the idol, the apostle traveled to a nearby bathhouse outside of the city to earn a living by making people clean. Earlier in the book, Ma’mar says directly that “Filth means idols.” The apostle gained a following of youths (the soon-to-be Sleepers) to whom he taught religion. Meanwhile, the apostle repeatedly scolded the local prince and his mistress for their loose morals, chasing them away from the bathhouse. Finally, the royal couple entered the bathhouse without permission and

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93 The biographer also does not mention the Two-Horned One traveling to the North; only the East and the West. We can take this to mean that he also believes that the barricade of Gog and Magog is found in the East, again matching the ring structure.

94 Ma’mar ibn Rāshid, *The Expeditions*, 167-171. cf. the Sleepers account of Zacharia Rhetor of Mytilene (d. c. 536), as noted by the translator of Ma’mar, 303.

95 *The Expeditions*, 17.
when night fell the prince and his consort suddenly died. The king was enraged by his son's death and searched for the apostle (who mysteriously disappears from the story) and his young companions. The companions fled for their lives, and along with another believer and a dog they met on the road, they took shelter in a cave and slept. That night the wicked king arrived and each time his men attempted to enter the cave, they would retreat in terror. Hence hundreds of years passed until the Sleepers awoke. The miracle was brought to the attention of a Christian king, who like his pagan predecessor centuries earlier tried to make his men enter the cave. Again, the men were overcome with fear and failed. This terrifying miracle prompted the building of a church (kanīsa) at the site.

Pulling details from the Christian lore, Ma’mar’s elaboration of the Sleepers’ pericope provides inverse parallels of the Qur’ānic material. The ring structure predicted many of these. Rather than running from a city and disappearing into a cave guarded by a canine emblem of idolatry, an apostle attempts to enter a city and is blocked by an actual idol. The defiling dog who stops entrance to the world of the dead is also inverted by the bathhouse outside of the city’s walls. The apostle cleans those who enter the bathhouse with his permission, while those who force entry (the prince and his consort) are doomed. The apostle vanishes while his proxies the Sleepers disappear into their dormancy. Two different kings try to exceed their bounds by making their men enter the Sleepers’ cave. Both groups — pagan and Christian — run away in terror. The sin of both communities is confusing a proxy with the genuine article. Looking for the dematerialized apostle, the pagan king pursues the Sleepers. Looking for the divine, the Christian king looks for saints.

Ma’mar’s following passage also details the proxy of the dead, as well as the barrier which surrounds the earth and the Temple Mount. This story expounds on the building of Solomon’s Temple and a false idol who sits on his throne. This is a tale mentioned in passing by the Qurʾān.⁹⁶

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⁹⁶ I.e., Sabāʾ 34:13-14; Ṣād 38:34.
Solomon is told via revelation to build a temple. The prophet commanded the devils (shayātīn) to build it on the condition that he does not hear the sounds of its construction. The devils said that they knew of a great sea demon who could do this, and that this demon drinks from a certain well every seventh day. The devils thus empty the well and replace the water with wine. The sea demon drank the wine on the seventh day, becoming drunk, allowing the devils to seize him and drag him before Solomon. The king showed the demon his signet ring as a sign of his power, and so the sea demon explained how to create the Temple silently. The devils must build a glass container and place it over the egg of a hoopoe. The hoopoe, blocked from its egg by the barrier, will fly off, returning with a diamond by which to cut through the glass silently. This they did, and the devils then grabbed the diamond, so they could use it to cut the stones of the Temple without making Solomon hear a thing. Later, Solomon became defiled by sleeping with one of his wives, and so he went to a bathhouse. The sea demon snuck into the bathhouse with him, stole his ring, and threw it into the sea. While Solomon wandered the earth in search of the ring, the sea demon magicked a doppelgänger of the prophet on his throne. The pseudo-Solomon taught false religion to the people leading to their disbelief in him. He told them that they could have intercourse with their wives and sleep until the sun rises without becoming ritually impure. Meanwhile, the true Solomon found his ring in the belly of a whale, allowing him to return to power, overthrow the false king, and rule over all creatures; even demons.97

There are many symbols and themes in this story pertinent to the Qur’ānic barzakh, and the Sleepers’ tale most especially. God is to be worshipped at a shrine, but the prophetic figure’s hearing must be impaired for this to happen. Just as the Sleepers’ ears must be blocked up to prevent their hearing prayers, Solomon cannot hear the creation of God’s proper mosque. The sea demon stands for the Scripture People, who out of a mistaken commemoration of God’s rest and/or death, drink wine every seven days and create false idols out of their dead prophets. In the Qur’ānic story, the pseudo-

97 Ma‘mar ibn Rāshid, *The Expeditions*, 172-175.
Solomon is an actual, rotting cadaver. These false idols corrupt the people by telling them sleep and intercourse are not defiling. Like the dead, the true prophet is also defiled, and this is the cause of his disappearance. Likewise, the absence of the prophets is part of their missions. The search for the ring in the belly of the whale recalls Jonah, as well as the Christian reading of Jonah as a prefiguration of the death of Christ. While the disappearance of the prophets into obscurity and death is confusing, it ought not be a cause of incorrect belief (denying the truth of said prophet, or worshiping his dead likeness). Indeed, true religion is actually known by the sea demon/the Scripture People. They know that God placed a barrier of separation (the glass dome, the firmament, the barzakh) around the world until the Resurrection (the egg). As both the entire earth and the Temple specifically are alluded to by the bird and the egg, we can read this back onto the Ḥaram al-Sharif as well. Both the Jerusalem site and the earth generally are sites of dormancy leading to the Resurrection. The Scripture People also know that the prophets (in that standard prophetic symbol of the hoopoe) bring revelation (the diamond) which can pierce the barrier between the worlds. But the symbol is ironically inverted. The diamond-as-revelation is precious because it makes no sound; the Qurʾānic-as-revelation is a sound. God does not want Solomon (and presumably all Prophets) are to hear (intercessory prayers), but to make people hear.

The prophets may be obscured by sleep, idolatry, absence, and death, but that is inconsequential to the God who sends them. Attempts to exceed the bounds set by God through prophetic figures leads to destruction and havoc. Maʿmar thus places his accounts of the Sleepers and Solomon back-to-back as they both express this theme. And in both accounts defiled beings (the prince of the city with the idol; the sea demon who creates idols) sneak into a bathhouse where God's true servants reside. Pagans and the Scripture People introduce corruption to the prophets, and are

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98 Maʿmar’s book is not chronological. The fragmented elements of the Prophet’s and the Companions’ lives (and in these cases above, Qurʾānic exegesis) are arranged into clusters based on their themes and contents.

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corrupted by their contact with the dead. Maʿmar’s next account is on the same theme. It is the story of Muḥammad’s own death and those who sought to worship him. We will come back to this below.

Returning to the Sīra, we find even more stories that reflect the Qurʾānic barzakh. After the systematic persecution of the Muslims begins, the dark-skinned slave Bilāl was pressed by a rock (ṣakhra) and exposed to the sun until he affirmed the goddesses Allāt and al-ʿUzzā. The Qurʾān repeatedly relates false gods or disbelief to the walls of the earth (ṣakhra) and the movement of the sun. To his torment Bilāl cries out “[God is] one, one.” The unity of God is the proper response to the mythologies of intercessory beings and symbols of the sun and death. Waraqa, the Christian, sees what is happening, and repeats the monotheistic call: “One, one, by God, Bilāl.” Christians claim to be monotheists, too. Then Waraqa tells Bilāl’s oppressors that “if you kill him this way, I will make his tomb a shrine.” If this is supposed to be a threat of some sort it is a bizarre one. Instead, Waraqa’s saying should be understood as a parallelism. The pressing punishment by the rock and the sun is equivalent to the worship of pagan goddesses and Christian saints; neither can help. Christian tomb cults give lie to professions of monotheism. And when Bilāl is rescued, it is not by Waraqa, but by the Muslim Abū Bakr. Abū Bakr offers another dark-skinned slave to take Bilāl’s place. The would-be object of Waraqa’s worship is not unique, and neither does he have to die to fulfill God’s purposes. This is not unlike Islamic conceptions of Jesus’ death on the cross, the Sleepers, or the false image of Solomon.

The swapping of the holy person for an illusory proxy, with undertones of the eschatological cosmology of the Qurʾān, also appears in the story of the Hijra. While the Quraysh were debating what to do with the troublemaking Muḥammad, the devil appeared as an old man wrapped in a cloak, and he stood at the doorway of their assembly hall. He said he had come from the highlands, and he continued to refute each idea the Meccans proposed to stop the Prophet. Finally Abū Jahl suggested a

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100 Ibid., 221ff.
member of each tribe stabs him all at once while he sleeps, which the devil says is the right solution. Thus the party of assassins waited at the Prophet's door for him to fall asleep. Meanwhile, Gabriel appeared to Muḥammad and informed him of the plan. So Muḥammad told ʿAlī to wrap himself in the Prophet's green night cloak and sleep in the Prophet's bed. Then the Prophet walked out the door reciting the opening of Sūra Ya Sīn: “And we made before them a barrier (sadd) and behind them a barrier. So we covered them, thus they would not see.” At this all of the killers were miraculously blinded, allowing the Prophet to pour dirt on each assassin's head and then escape unseen. As the assassins regained their sight, they realized they had been duped and defiled. Thus the Prophet and Abū Bakr fled to the mountain-cave of Thawr, where they hid for three days.

Once again, the unbeliever is mistakenly looking at an illusion; a shadow of the truth. This proxy is marked by multiple liminal symbols. There are doorways (the devil and the assassins stand outside doorways, while the Prophet appears within the doorway and then in a cave), barriers (the Prophet's recitation of Ya Sīn), sleep (the Prophet's apparent sleep, ʿAlī's actual sleep), blindness and filth, coverings (the devil's and ʿAlī's deceptive cloaks), mountains (from which the devil falsely claims he has come, and to which the Prophet and Abū Bakr actually go) and revelation. Carrying the symbols further, in other versions of the story the cave of Thawr is miraculously guarded by animals. Usually a spider or birds, the Qur'ānic version of the Sleepers' dog at the mouth of their cave springs to mind. And also like the pluralized, low-Christological reading of the Sleepers in the Qur'ān, the stay of the Prophet and Abū Bakr in a cave for three days dilutes the unique role of Jesus' death and Resurrection after three days of entombment. All of God's messengers pass into the barzakh, the place of the dead — Jesus is just one more of them.

101 Ya Sīn 36:9-10.
The attempt to slay the sleeping Prophet at the hands of many killers rather than just one makes for a similar symbol, although reversed. The unbeliever is confused by the many and the one, tries to gain entrance to a forbidden place, and is thus ritually contaminated by the illusions of the unseen world. The believer is informed by revelation and sees through the prophets’ apparent sleep, death, ascent to the mountains, and disappearance. Belief looks to the Prophet and sees what the Prophet refers to. Unbelief looks to the Prophet and sees the referrer, leading to corruption, defilement, and ultimately failure.

Marking the gradual disappearance of the Qur’anic barzakh was the rise in the Prophet’s own ontological significance. Starting at least as early as the Dome of the Rock inscriptions, the possible intercession of Muḥammad could have negated the prime purpose of the Qur’anic barzakh. However, it seems that the early Muslims reconciled the contradiction by making this a post-Resurrection intercession — it does not happen during this life. A few tales which illustrate this transformation appear in the biographical sources. Shortly before the Hijra, while Abū Ṭālib is on his deathbed, the question of death and intercession appears. Muḥammad begs his dying patron to embrace Islam, “and then I shall be able to intercede with you on the day of Resurrection.” Abū Ṭālib says something with his dying breaths or in semi-consciousness, but the Prophet replied, “I did not hear it.” Whether the Prophet will someday intercede for his patron is never explained, but he certainly did not intercede at the present. To this God reveals Ṣād 38:1-6 “They all called out but there was no time for escape [... the unbelievers say] he has made the gods one God,” followed by a gloss of al-Mā‘īda 5:73: “[The Quraysh] went off saying [to Abū Ṭālib], ‘Go and remain true to your gods... we have not heard of this in the last religion,’ meaning the Christians because they say, ‘Surely God is the third of three.’”\footnote{Ibn Ishāq, The Life of Muhammad, 192.} Again, paganism and Christianity are rendered equivalents, which in this case is particularly strange as there are no Christians in this story. But both the pagan gods and the Trinity are contrasted to Muḥammad’s
intercession for the dead. And this intercession may not work, because the Prophet cannot hear someone who is either asleep or dead. Because he is a mere human being, the Prophet’s powers and knowledge are limited. While it may be possible to gain the help of an intercessor in the Eschaton, it is not clear. The Sīra does not give a firm answer to the question of how Muḥammad’s intercessions work, or even if they will work at all for his beloved uncle.

The Sīra is much clearer on the topic of false intercessors, who are also linked to sleep and death. As the first of the Muslims began to migrate to Medina, the Sīra tells us of their conflict with the cult of Manāt. A local shaykh named ‘Amr kept a household idol to this goddess, “making it a god to reverence and keeping it clean.” At a certain point ‘Amr’s son Mu‘ādh became a Muslim. Along with some other young Muslim men, Mu‘ādh would steal the idol of Manāt each night while his father slept and throw it face-first into a pit of muck. And each morning ‘Amr would find the idol, clean it, and restore it to its place. Finally ‘Amr attached a sword holster to the statue so the goddess could defend herself while he slept. The Muslims then stole the idol again, this time replacing the sword belt with a dead dog on a rope before defiling the statue as before. After waking up, ‘Amr found the statue once again, this time doubly filthy. At this his son and the other Muslims approach him and explain themselves. This leads to ‘Amr’s conversion, about which he said:

God, if you [Manāt] were a god you would not have been
Bound to a dog in the middle of a pit (bi‘r).
That we ever treated you as a god.
Now, your evil trick has been found out.
Praise be to God, the Exalted, the One-Who-Ordains (al-minan),
The Giving, the Provider, the Judge of the Judgment
The One who delivered me, for before
[I was] subject to the darkness of the grave,

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104 Ibid., 207-208.
105 In a similar manner, an image al-‘Uzzā is also given a sword to protect herself, ibid., 565-566.
106 The meaning is obscure. It is probably from manā ("to test, to tempt"), and thus to manan ("fate, destiny"); also punning on the name Manāt (the goddess of fate).
Once again like in the Sleepers’ story, the worship of other divinities is compared to sleep, a dog, filth, the grave, and a pit. The other beings who seem to be gods have no power, even when given weapons. True power belongs not to Fate (manāt) but the one God who creates fate (al-minān).

Regarding the state of the dead appearing during the Prophet's time in Medina, there are quite a few discussions of those killed in battle. The dead of the Quraysh and the hypocrites are notably silent. In one passage, al-Ḥārith is executed as a criminal. Ḥassān ibn Thābit mocks the dead man by contrasting revelation and sleep in a couplet: “O Ḥārī, in deep sleep, despair!/ Of Gabriel you were unaware.” Elsewhere, after the Battle of Badr, the Prophet has the bodies of his enemies (including Abū Jahl, ‘Utba, and Umayya) thrown into a collective grave. Then the Prophet speaks to the dead, “Evil were your people and you to your prophet: you called me a liar [...]” Confused, the Muslims ask the Prophet why he is speaking to the dead, to which he replies only that they knew that their false idols promised them nothing. He does not expect the dead to respond to him. Ibn Ishāq and Ma’mar ibn Rāshid record variants of the same story. Several of these conclude with a discussion of what the dead hear and do not hear. ʿĀ’isha recounts that the Prophet said, “They hear what I say to them,” to which the meta-narrator corrects her: “what [the Prophet] really said was ‘they know.’” In Anas ibn Mālik's (d. c. 712) version, the Prophet goes out to the pit in the middle of the night and takes jibes at each corpse in turn. The Muslims ask, “Are you calling to dead bodies?” He answered that the dead

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107 This short poem may also be a weak ring structure, meaning it may very well come from an author within or close to the Qur'anic milieu. That does not mean we can reconstruct the original (assuming this guess is even correct). However, it is interesting that the middle line is an inverse parallel of the first line and thematic parallel to the last. This would also mean that “the dog in the middle of a pit” is compared to “the darkness of the grave.” Ring structure or not, we can still assume such parallelisms are in effect thematically.


109 Ibid., 56.

110 Ibn Ishāq, The Life of Muhammad, 305.
and the living can hear equally well, only the dead cannot answer.\textsuperscript{111} It is not so much that their ears are shut, but rather their mouths.

Conversely, we can start seeing some signs of life in the Muslim dead, too.\textsuperscript{112} A great deal of Wāqidi’s book discusses the burial of the martyrs. This text and the Sīra also contain numerous accounts of later Muslims coming to visit the old grave sights and speaking to the martyrs. At least one of these martyrs actually answers his visitors.\textsuperscript{113} These are our first hard clues that Islam is developing a vision of the holy dead, akin to the slow introduction of the Prophet's intercessory powers. And like the expansion of Muḥammad’s intercession, the activity of the dead tells us the Qur’ānic barzakh is fading away.

Following from the Qur’ānic passages which say that the martyrs are still alive, there are several accounts of living people receiving messages from the dead in dreams.\textsuperscript{114} In the days leading up to the Battle of Uḥud, ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr dreamt of his friend Mubashshir, who was killed at Badr. Mubashshir says he is presently in Paradise, and may come and go wherever he pleases. This presumably means that in Paradise he can ‘enter’ living people’s dream space. ‘Abdullah, confused, asks, “Were you not killed?” and is told, “Of course, but then I came alive.” The Prophet later explains to ‘Abdullah that “this is martyrdom.”

When ‘Abdullah himself dies at Uḥud, he is so severely mutilated that his remains cannot be distinguished from another martyr’s. Forty-six years later ‘Abdullah’s son Jābir came to his father’s burial site to find that the body had been unearthed by a stream. And although the body was previously unrecognizable, and decades have passed since his death, Jābir remarks, “I saw my father in

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 306.

\textsuperscript{112} On one occasion the martyrs are referred to by the Prophet as “the companions of the mountain” (aṣḥāb al-jabal), although the reference is uncertain. Perhaps relating to the cosmological place of the dead, or perhaps Mount Uḥud where they died. The name is unusual in either case as the same passage repeatedly says that the martyrs were buried in the valley (wādī) of Medina. al-Wāqidi, The Life of Muḥammad, 151.

\textsuperscript{113} This occurs when Fāṭima al-Khuṣaiyya and her sister visit the gravesite of Ḥamza. A disembodied voice (the martyr’s? an angel’s? God’s?) returns their greetings of peace, ibid., 152.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 134.
his grave as though he were sleeping. There was, more or less, no change in his condition. Other martyrs too are depicted as sleeping incorruptibles, like Christian saints (like the Sleepers) often are. Upon inspection the body of ‘Abdullah is also said to still be bleeding from a facial wound, and likewise other martyrs’ bodies do the same. Flashing back in time again, Jābir is consoled by the Prophet who says, “your father lives.” Then Jābir wishes to also be martyred by the Prophet’s side, returned to life, and then martyred a second time. The Prophet approves but amends the wish, saying that the dead cannot return. The unbelievers in their pits above are silenced and cannot correct their errors, while the faithful pass into a peaceful, dreaming sleep beyond the reach of time but still with some ability to contact the living.

One of the martyr stories also provides the first strong example of the medieval barzakh’s expansion and contraction. After the Battle of the Trench, one of the few Muslims to die was Sa’d Abū ‘Amr. He received a wound in the conflict which later burst open, killing him in the middle of the night. Muḥammad, who was elsewhere, was at the same time visited by Gabriel who asked him, “Who is this dead man for whom the doors of heaven have been opened and at whom the throne (ʿarsh) shook?” The Prophet then went and found his companion already dead. A tradition attributed to Ḥasan al-Baṣrī recounts that although Sa’d was heavyset, his bier was miraculously light. This is explained as being due to the help of angelic pallbearers who “rejoiced at the spirit (rūḥ) of Sa’d and the throne shook for him.” The Prophet and others bury Sa’d together, with the Prophet saying “Glory be to God” (subḥān Allāh). The Muslims asked the Prophet why he said this, to which the Prophet responded: “The grave was constricted (taḍāyaq) on this good servant, until God eased him from it.”

This story gives us two vital pieces of information. First, the death of the martyr is linked directly to

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117 This phrase also appears immediately before the introduction of the barzakh in al-Muʾminūn 23:91, and will also appear in many prophetic reports about the conditions of the grave (see below). However, it is a common enough phrase that this may be only coincidence.
118 Ibn Işıq, The Life of Muḥammad, 468.
the function of God’s throne, which in the Qur’an is the emblem of God’s sleeplessness. Second, and more significantly, this may be the oldest recorded instance of the constriction and expansion of the grave; one of the most distinctive features of the medieval barzakh. However, the constriction of Sa’d’s tomb is probably a reference to his portly frame, not a state that applies to all of the dead. As Sa’d was heavy God made him lighter; as Sa’d was wide God made his grave wider. This miracle occurs through the prayers of the Prophet now, in this life.

Finally, as the time of the Prophet’s own passing was approaching, he took to visiting the martyrs’ graves himself in the middle of the night. In the earlier versions of these stories, such as Ibn Ishāq’s, the Prophet would wish peace on each of them, remarking how they were better off and free from factionalism.¹¹⁹ In time however, intercession would be introduced. According to Ibn Sa’d, the purpose of these visits was to ask God for the martyred dead to be forgiven their sins.¹²⁰ Both the Qur’an and all of the extant sources up to this point affirm that the martyrs are already in Paradise. But this small detail (which Ibn Sa’d repeats several times and has no precedent) is unusual, and alludes to the aforementioned shift in the eschatological landscape. Even the most noble of the dead may require the intercession of Muḥammad, and this can be given before the Resurrection. This may also imply that one’s state in the immediate afterlife is subject to change even before the reanimation of the body.

In complete contradiction to this, and exposing an early theological question on the matter of intercession, Ibn Sa’d follows these passages with several accounts of the Prophet’s last words. In some of the reports, such as this one from ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Umayr al-Laythī, the Prophet’s last words denied his function as an intercessor at any time: “Do good works, for I shall not be of any avail with God for you.”¹²¹ In a number of other reports Ibn Sa’d offers, the Prophet’s dying words are a warning against

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 678.
¹²⁰ Ibid., 268.
¹²¹ Ibid., 290.
grave-cults and curses on those who build them.¹²² Such accounts appear in all of the oldest biographical epics.

According to the majority of the early stories of Muḥammad's passing (of which there are several dozen), these fears of prophet-worship came to pass straight away. Some amongst the community refused to believe that their Prophet was now out of reach. ʿUmar says, “by God he is not dead: he has gone to his Lord as Moses [...] went and was hidden from the people for forty days, returning to them after it was said that he had died.”¹²³ Or, “The Messenger of God has not died. Rather he has been made to slumber as Moses slumbered!”¹²⁴ Another report says, “[He] is not dead, only his soul ascended like that of Moses.”¹²⁵ It is a telling comparison: the death of the Prophet is somehow like Moses going to Mount Sinai; that is, the time in which the golden calf was created.¹²⁶ The Prophet's disappearance (in sleep/death, in absence) and the creation of idols features in many other tales from his passing. Maʿmar tells of the sick Prophet covering his face with a cloak, which he would then cast off and say, “May God's curse be upon the Christians and the Jews, for they have adopted the graves of their prophets as places of worship!”¹²⁷ In another version from the Sūra the people go even further, invoking Christ. “No, by God, he has not died. He has been raised as Jesus the son of Mary was raised.”¹²⁸ Then Abū Bakr arrives and corrects ʿUmar's and/or the peoples' claims by saying directly that thinking this way is akin to worshipping the merely human Prophet. “If anyone worships Muḥammad, Muḥammad is dead. If anyone worships God, God is alive [and] does not die.”

¹²² Ibid., 298ff.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 182-183.
¹²⁶ Moses' stay on Sinai for forty nights and the creation of the calf appears in al-Aʿrāf 7:142-153; also Ṭā Hā 20:80-98, cf. Exodus 32
¹²⁷ Maʿmar ibn Rāshid, The Expeditions, 178-179. Again, note that Maʿmar places his accounts of the Prophet's death immediately after the retellings of the Sleepers and Solomon's construction of the Temple, alluding to a thematic similarity.
'Umar appears again as the Prophet's body is being prepared for burial and the men discuss who will become the leader of the community. Apparently having learned his lesson, 'Umar declares: “Did not the Messenger say, ‘Do not praise me extravagantly as Jesus, son of Mary was praised?’ At this, 'Umar puts his vote of confidence in Abū Bakr: “God has placed your affairs in the hands of one of the best amongst you, the companion of the Messenger, the second of the two when they were in the cave [...]” Meanwhile, Alī and the Prophet's family are tending to the body, and the community begins to argue about where to bury him. Abū Bakr suggests burying the Prophet directly underneath the place of the Prophet's bed. So they buried him where he slept in life. The way to avoid worshipping mere humans, Abū Bakr seems to think, is to put them in states comparable to sleep. After the burial, ʿĀʾisha declares, “God slay a people who choose the graves of their prophets as mosques [...] when the Messenger died the Arabs apostatized and Christianity and Judaism raised their heads.”

In a number of eulogies to the Prophet reported by Ibn Saʿd, there appears other references to expansion and contraction after death. In the first, attributed to Abū Bakr, rather than being the grave which is crushing inwards on a dead person, it is the houses of Medina which constrict (ḍāqa) on the living coinciding with the burial of the Prophet. This threw Abū Bakr into a terror which he equated twice to the breaking of his bones. The poem concludes: “Such strange calamities will befall us after him, as will crush ribs and chests.” In another eulogy, the author speaks of being attacked by fears in the middle of the night: “Like rocks (mithla al-ṣukūr) they crushed my body.” In another, the author reports how the death of Muḥammad made ears turn deaf, and how death comes to all people, even the Prophet. His death is compared to the long-standing mountains.

But no one can defend against death. I had sworn not to praise anyone from amongst the people after [the Prophet] had perished, for as long as [the mountains of] Thabīr and Fārī remain high. But I shall

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130 That is, the cave of Thawr, above, and Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 231ff. cf. al-Tawba 9:40.
weep for him and I shall follow his calamity. Surely, I will return to God. God caused the prophets to die before him.133

Throughout these early exegetical and biographical materials, we have seen repeated references which suggest echoes of the older eschatological cosmology of the Qurʾān. Sleep is like death. Idols, would-be idols, and idolaters are blinded, unhearing, filthy, and depicted as powerless and confused. Tomb cults are disregarded, while the holy dead are still praised. Caves and mountains are related to dormancy, prophecy, and the inaccessibility of the dead. These are memories of the Qurʾānic barzakh.

Along with this continuity, we also noticed three developments which will come to define the medieval barzakh. First, according to Muqātil the barzakh is a length of time, as well as a physical barrier, while to Mujāhid the barzakh is the length of time in the graves. These thoughts could be deduced by the Qurʾān, but they are not exactly identical to the Qurʾānic barzakh. Second, but certainly not suggested by the Qurʾān, is the interaction with angels in liminal states: for example, the angel of death in Muqātil's discussion of the barzakh,134 the questions of Gabriel to Muḥammad in his sleep atop Ḥirāʾ and his test on the Temple Mount, the pallbearers of Saʿd. Third, also without Qurʾānic precedent, are the multiple instances of being pressed, crushed, and constrained while in liminal states. Muqātil (intentionally or not) relates the barzakh to being crammed together. The Sīra puts the Prophet into a crushing, death-like sleep, presses Bilāl physically with a rock suggesting false gods, and constricts Saʿd in his grave. Ibn Saʿd shows visions of having ribs crushed during the Prophet's burial, and bodies crushed by stones in the middle of the night. Conversely, the dead martyr Mubashshir appears to his sleeping friend to brag about his freedom to move about as he wills.

One more note. Underneath many of the above traditions (and many, many more besides) is also an occurrence which is so ubiquitous in post-Qurʾānic literatures that it is easily overlooked. In

133 Ibid., 401-402.
134 In al-Sajda 32:11, the Qurʾān mentions the angel of death, but there is no mention of any conversation with this being.
short, the Prophet receives revelations in very passive states. Sometimes revelations only come when
the Prophet is not fully conscious and aware, and they do not appear to come by his bidding. The
Qur’ān itself never expounds on how the Prophet receives his messages other than the occasional
suggestion that they come like dreams. “Your [Muḥammad’s] dreams (manāmuka)” are signs from
God.135 Revelation seems to come when the Prophet is “wrapped up” in an obscure nighttime vigil.136
The Prophet’s enemies call the revelations “confused dreams.”137 Abraham138 and Joseph139 also receive
divine dreams. And as we have seen in the previous chapter, prophecy comes from the same liminal
zone associated with the sleeping and the dead. While the prophetic properties of sleep and dream
have precedent in the biblical lore,140 in Islamic literature the belief is almost universal. The memories
of Muḥammad insist that the Prophet often entered sleep or sleep-like trance states at his revelations.
Naturally this has been understood as proof of the Qur’ān’s divine origins, but it must also conversely
be understood as a lowering of the Prophet’s status. Likewise, in the sabab of al-Kahf given in the Sīra
and elsewhere, revelation does not come when and how the Prophet wills it to. Like the dead prophets

every year for a month to practice tahannuth as was the custom of Quraysh during the Age of Ignorance. Tahannuth is
religious devotion!” Life of Muḥammad, 105. Note also the number of passages above which take place in the “middle of
the night,” such as the death of Sa’d and the Prophet’s visitation to the martyrs’ graves. Whether and how the Prophet’s
revelation and nighttime practices relates to wider practices like “incubation” and enkomēsis is unclear. M.J. Kister, “Al-
Tahannuth: An Inquiry into the Meaning of a Term,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of
137 See opening citation above.
138 al-Ṣāfīf 37:105.
139 Yūsuf 12:4, passim.
140 See chapter 1. For the practice of incubation, see Kimberly C. Patton, “A Great and Strange Correction: Intentionality,
Locality, and Epiphany in the Category of Dream Incubation,” History of Religions 43 (2004): 194-223; Timothy E. Gregory,
and Sleepers of the past, Muḥammad cannot be an object of worship because he too is not always aware, awake, and alive. More traditions which express this sentiment will appear below.

**Part 3: The Torment and Trials of the Grave: The Intermediate State in Ḥadīth Literature**

As systematic Islamic thought appeared in writings that survive to us, formal theologies developed regarding the *barzakh*. There are any number of factors involved in why this may have happened. First, questions about the intermediate state are natural enough, and the Qurʾān does not answer them in one obvious way. There is no reason for recourse to an availability heuristic: that the discussion only began with the creation of formal Islamic theology. That may just be when the record of the discussion appears. Second, the increasing age of historical Islam suggested that the Resurrection was not imminent. Therefore, the time between death and Resurrection demanded a greater interpretation. And not surprisingly, those interpretations would become ever more complex, resolving more and more issues. The *barzakh* would evolve from an ambiguous soul-sleep to pilgrimage and purgation models of the intermediate state. Third, as the community grew, so did its internal diversity. Therefore a theological conundrum appeared: how can Muslims who believe and do contradictory things all be given equal reward in the afterlife? Aren't some Muslims more righteous, and hence more deserving of Paradise, than others? Therefore, checks must be put in place which account for people who are correct in their beliefs (they are Muslims and so worthy of salvation) but are sinful in other ways (they are innovators, hypocrites, and so on). To believe that Islam is the salvific religion does not mean that some Muslims don't need to be punished for their sins first. A purgative vision of the intermediate state is one way to correct this imbalance, as is intercession.

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14 The *munāfiq* controversy may be the oldest intra-Islamic theological debate on record. What is the difference between someone who is merely an Islamic monotheist, and someone who is an ideal follower of Muḥammad in both thoughts and actions? Do the two receive equal reward in the next life? For example, the Qur’anic term for a hypocrite (*munāfiq*) was supposedly used by Ḥasan al- Баṣrī in reference to the Umayyads, who were Muslim in belief but apparently more interested in worldly luxuries. See H. Ritter, “Ḥasan al- Баṣrī” *EL2*. This same topic is also central to the discussion in Abū Ḥanīfa’s *Risāla ilā ʿUthmān al-Battī* (c. 760), the oldest surviving document composed by Islamic law’s foundational figures.
Simultaneously prompting and being prompted by these shifts, and moving just one step behind the biographical turn, was the collection of hadīths, and then the specifically Muḥammadan hadīths. Even though the rise of Traditionalism and theology in Islam are two parts of the same development, for simplicity's sake we will treat the hadīth literatures first, before addressing formal theology.

There is no reason to suppose that the earliest Muslims were not interested in the particular anecdotes of the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions. It also is likely that some very early Muslims collected rudimentary florilegia. Yet only decades into the ‘Abbāsid period did the general curiosity about fragmentary lore blossom into wisdom systems complex enough to support all-encompassing Islamic worldviews (addressing law, morality, practice, politics, and theology). The Rashidūn, Umayyad, and first ‘Abbāsid rulers seemed comfortable enough to govern based on personal judgment and the expectations of whichever conception of tradition they preferred. But in time, ever-increasing factionalism and distrust on the part of the marginalized and the ambitious demanded a ‘clear’ path within the now-far-flung Muslims of the empire; a path that was independent of and stronger than any potentate or caliphate. The Traditionalist scholars (ahl al-ḥadīth/ahl al-sunna) offered one such path.

The Traditionalists’ path appeared with the slow shift from sunna-as-the-customs-of-the-community to sunna-as-the-ordinances-of-the-Prophet. The pivotal piece of this progression was the Muwattā’ of Mālik ibn Anas (d. 795). Mālik represents both views. On the one hand his collection reached back into the past looking for collective wisdom. He gathered the hadīths of any of the believers worthy of emulation. Authority belonged to the community as a whole; especially the community of Medina. On the other hand, this move was telescopic. If age and provenance defined the community’s authority, then the Medinan sunna was best because it was the oldest; the most “well-trodden.” Others would follow this line of reasoning to its natural end. If the traditions of Medina
were best because they were the most ancient, then the most ancient of these were Muḥammad’s own. Hence the Muwaṭṭa’ would later be canonized by many Sunnīs as one of the ‘Six Books’ (kutub al-sittah), even though it preceded the others by generations and had a different agenda from that of the later five.

Mālik’s Muwaṭṭa’ never uses the word barzakh, and neither do the other Traditionalists. To repeat, there is no indication from the Qurʾān itself that barzakh is a specialized term; in fact it is interchangeable with many other expressions for barriers, mountains, and walls. Instead, with one exception the Traditionalists discuss the intermediate state as the state of being in the grave. Usually this appears in the expressions ‘trial of the grave’ (fitnat al-qabr) and the ‘torment of the grave’ (‘adhāb al-qabr). The one exception appears in Mālik and his fellow Traditionalists discussing some (or all?) of the righteous dead already in Paradise. “The Messenger of God […] said, ‘The spirit (rūḥ) of the believer is a bird (ṭayr) that perches in the trees of the Garden until God returns it to its body on the day He raises him’.” In the deads’ state as either a corpse or a bird we can see that intermediate death is simultaneously a physical location, a condition, and a period of time.

The discussion of the birds in Paradise appears in many reports. It is not Qurʾānic beyond the Qurʾān’s insistence that the martyrs are not dead but alive. There is reason to believe that in pre-Islamic Arabia some dead people were believed to continue on in the form of birds. But why? Assuming the Qurʾānic unity of spirit and body — that a disembodied human is an oxymoron — the

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142 These phrases were probably new to this period. Given the traditional death date of Mālik in 795, and the appearance of tombstones which employed the phrase “torment of the grave” starting in 796, we can assume safely that the 780s or early 790s was the dawn of the stock phrase. See Halevi, “The Paradox of Islamization,” 137. Halevi also notes the grave on one Rabi’ā ibn Maslama dated to 795. The inscription asks God to “insinate to him His proof (laqqinhu ḥujjatahu) and fill with light his grave (nawwir ‘alayhi qabrahu).” ibid., 130. suggesting that the discussion of postmortem questioning and reward was also emerging by this period (if not earlier).

143 Mālik ibn Anas, Muwaṭṭa’ 572.

continued life of some people must be accounted for. While the Qurʾān and some of the oldest sources mentioned above simply keep the person united with the body in sleep (even if that body is destroyed), Mālik’s source solves the problem by giving some of the dead temporary bodies. Birds as liminal creatures can carry the believer up to Heaven, but as animals still demand a reintroduction to the human body at the Resurrection. And the Qurʾān does use birds as signs of God’s ability to create and re-create as He wills. We can also suppose that for people who do not naturally gravitate to abstractions, and have little-to-no knowledge of Greco-Roman anthropologies, the only way to imagine a dead person living would be to give them another body. The Islamic intermediate state as a bird did not survive long. By the time of the later canonical Traditionalists, the reports were reworded to say that the dead’s rūḥ lived in (not as) celestial green birds. That is, as soon as Islamic anthropology allowed for the disembodied spirit, that route was taken. Thus these traditions rarely factored into the medieval barzakh beyond the discussions of martyrdom.

The medieval barzakh is many times more dependent on the Traditionalists’ reports of the trials and torments of the grave. Mālik’s intermediate state is one of the first clear depictions of a purgative intermediate state in extant Islamic literature. A person stays in their tomb and suffers somehow. Mālik never tells us what precise torments are in store in the grave, but it does seem to be a universal phenomenon at least in principle. Anyone may be tormented in the grave, not just sinners. For instance, an innocent child may suffer in the intermediate state.

145 See the discussions of Abraham’s birds in al-Baqara 2:60 and Jesus’ birds in Āl ’Imrān 3:49 and al-Māʾida 5:10 in the previous chapter.
146 E.g., Ibn Mājah, Sunan 1516; Abū Dāwūd, Sunan 2520; Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ 1887.
147 For a detailed discussion of these birds, see Eklund, Life Between Death and Resurrection, 16ff.
148 There is a mention of a person “punished in his grave” in a poem attributed to Jarīr ibn ’Atiyya (d. c. 728), but whether this is to be understood as a normative condition in the tomb or merely a mocking jibe at someone who dies a pitiful death is not clear. Further the poem only appeared in writing with the collection of Jarīr’s works by Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb (d. 859). See Sharḥ Dīwān, in Halevi, Muhammad’s Grave, 330; A. Schaade and H. Gätje, “Jarīr,” Elz.
Sa‘īd ibn al-Musayyib (d. 715) said, “Once I prayed behind Abū Hurayra over a child who had never done anything wrong. And I heard [Abū Hurayra] say, ‘O God, give him protection from the torment of the grave.”\(^{149}\)

However, reports like this also give us reason to suppose some suffer more or less than others in the grave. Prayers for relief from this torment suggests that it is possible to bypass it, or that some will be more “protected” from it than others, or that one can find early reprieve from it. The heavenly life of the believer as a bird seconds this conclusion.

The Messenger of God — God bless him and grant him peace — used to teach his prayer-of-supplication (\(du'ā‘\)) in the same way he taught them a \(sūra\) of the Qur‘ān. “O God, I seek-refuge in You from the torment of Gehenna. And I seek-refuge in You from the torment of the grave. And I seek-refuge in You from the trials (\(fitna\)) of life and death.”\(^{150}\)

There is some variation in the grave’s torments. Factors such as one’s own prayers in life, as well as the prayers of the living for the dead, play a role in this diversity.

Mālik does tell us that some people thought that the torment in the grave can be caused by a living person mourning for the dead: that a deceased person can suffer due to the sins of her living relatives.

‘Ā’isha, the Mother of the Believers, when it was said to her that ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar would say, “The dead are tormented by the weeping of the living,” said, “May God forgive [him]. He did not lie of course, but he has forgotten or is mistaken. The Messenger of God — God bless him and give him peace — passed by a Jewish woman whose family were weeping over her. And he said, ‘You weep for her, and she is being tormented in her grave.”\(^{151}\)

The \(ḥadīth\) says that ‘Abd Allāh is incorrect: the dead are not punished by the weeping of the living.\(^{152}\)

Then what is the Prophet talking about when he speaks to the mourners? The story specifies that the dead woman is Jewish;\(^{153}\) so the weeping in question is presumably ritualized, excessive weeping for

\[^{149}\text{Mālik ibn Anas, } \text{Miṣwaṭta‘} \text{, 18.}\]

\[^{150}\text{Ibid., 505; cf. } \text{ʿAbd al-Razzāq, } \text{Muṣannaf, } 6461.\]

\[^{151}\text{Mālik ibn Anas, } \text{Miṣwaṭta‘} \text{, 559.}\]

\[^{152}\text{There are other, contradictory reports that agree with } \text{ʿAbd Allāh, in which the Prophet himself is made to say directly that the weeping of the living is the cause of the torment of the grave. e.g., } \text{al-Bukhrā, } \text{Ṣaḥīḥ } 1292.\]

\[^{153}\text{It is from the common association between Jews and the torments of the grave in the } \text{ḥadīths that Ragnar Eklund, author of the standard reference work on the } \text{barzakh in critical scholarship, concludes that the } \text{barzakh stems from a response to older Jewish eschatologies. Eklund, } \text{Life Between Death and Resurrection According to Islam, 3.}\]

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the dead: for instance deliberately becoming or remaining dirty, tearing one's clothes (keriah). It may also be significant that Jewish ritual mourning is based on Jacob's mourning of his son Joseph (who only seemed to be dead, but was in truth in a well) and Joseph's mourning for Jacob in turn. The Qurʾān rejects both stories, so it stands that the rituals based upon the stories are to be rejected too. Many later traditions report such: “The Messenger of God [...] said, 'He who shaves, screams, and tears his clothes does not belong with us.” Seen through the eyes of Qurʾānic prophetology, Jewish ritual mourning may be akin to the false worship of prophets. If this is correct, the older Qurʾānic taboo of creating cults of the dead or the prophets remains a factor. The Prophet admonishes the mourners for idolatry; for turning living people into fetishes. And this woman is not helped by such worship in any case.

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154 For a detailed study of weeping and mourning rituals in hadith literatures, see G.H.A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 96-133. Some hadiths do mention the Prophet himself weeping for the dead. This suggests that it is not the mere act of crying that is problematic, but rather ritualized weeping and mourning that implies intercession or funerary cults. For instance: “The Prophet [...] visited the grave of his mother and wept, making the people near him weep. Then he said, 'I asked my Lord for permission to beg forgiveness on her, but He did not give me permission. Then I asked my Lord for permission to visit her grave and He gave me permission. Visit graves, for they remind you of death.” Ibn Mājā, *Sunan* 1639.

155 In *Genesis* 37, Jacob famously presents his son with an ornate robe as a sign of his favor. After Joseph's brothers throw him down a well, they fake Joseph's death by dipping the robe in goat's blood and presenting it back to their father. Assuming his son was killed by an animal, Jacob dramatically rips his own clothes and vows to wear sackcloth until he joins Joseph in the grave. Later in *Genesis* 50, Jacob and Joseph are reunited in Egypt, and after Jacob's death his son has him mummiﬁed in the fashion of Egyptian funerary practices, mourning him for seven days. It is the origin story of sitting shiva.

156 The Qurʾān takes the deathly symbol of torn and contaminated clothing (the robe of Joseph) and transforms it into a test of true belief (the many shirts of Joseph). In *Yūsuf* 12:18, Jacob is presented with Joseph's defiled shirt. Here Jacob immediately sees through the rouse of Joseph's 'death' and so instead vows to be patient. The destruction and contamination of Joseph's shirt in the Qurʾān is repeated by the adulterous Egyptian woman who rips another shirt the prophet is wearing while racing Joseph to a doorway (*Yūsuf* 12:23-29). The self-deﬁling is performed by the women of the city who cut their own hands because they confuse Joseph for an angel (*Yūsuf* 12:30-31). Although the Qurʾān has Jacob and Joseph reunited in Egypt, the death of Jacob and his entombment ceremony is not mentioned at all. However, in its place there is another story involving a shirt of Joseph's. Here, Jacob is blind and when Joseph has him brought to Egypt for their reunion, he tells his brothers to place the shirt on Jacob's face, by which he regains his sight (*Yūsuf* 12:93).

157 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan* 3130. cf. ibid., 370: “The Messenger of God [...] used to stand for a funeral until the body was put into the grave. Once an educated Jew passed him and said, 'This is what we do [too]; So the Prophet [...] sat and said, 'Sit and act differently from them.”
A few other reports in the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* also draw connections between the torment of the grave and the pre-Islamic conceptions of the dead. In these cases, the discussions of the grave’s ordeals are related to Muḥammad’s own correct prayers and the course of the sun. We have seen already that the Qurʾān draws connections between the sun’s path across the sky and the sleeping dead. The solar road is the sign of the underworld and the saint cults which the Qurʾān is rejecting. Hence the Sleepers follow the sun into the underworld and back in their flight into the cave, their dormant turning, and their return to the world of the living. The Two-Horned One in both his title (Dhū al-Qarnayn) and his travels (following the sun) also indicates this solar-underworld cosmology which the Qurʾān is correcting. The *Muwaṭṭaʾ* contains some other memories of the pre-Islamic solar-death mythologies. Mālik’s collection includes three ḥadīths in which the Prophet warns his people not to pray as the sun is rising, at its apex, and is setting. The Prophet says that at these times the sun is “between the horns (bayna qarnayi) of Satan.” There are also two ḥadīths in which the Prophet condemns the East itself. In one he says the “the head of unbelief is towards the East,” while in the other, he points eastward and says, “The cause of dissension is here. The cause of dissension is here, where the helpers of Satan arise.”

Other ḥadīths in the collection are also remnants of this anti-solar mythology. In these it is not the sun’s disappearance and reappearance on the horizon that stands for death, but rather the sun’s eclipse. The Prophet responds to this false association with correct prayer and with warnings of the torment of the grave. The ritual prayer and the torment of the grave are the opposite of the eclipse; they are the correction of death cults as symbolized by the course of the sun.

1ʿĀʾisha the wife of the Prophet […] recalled that] a Jewish woman came to her begging. And she said, “God grant-you-refuge from the torment of the grave.” Thus ʿĀʾisha asked the Messenger of God […] “Are people tormented in their graves? And [does] the Messenger of God […] take-refuge in God from it?” Then one morning the Messenger of God […] left on a trip and there was a solar eclipse. And in the late

159 Ibid., 1780.
160 Ibid., 1794.
morning he returned and passed by his apartments. Then he stood and prayed and the people stood behind him. He stood for a long time then he bowed for a long time. Then he arose. And he stood for a long time, although less than the first time, and then he bowed for a long time, although less than the first time. Then he arose. And he prostrated. Then he stood for a long time, although less than the previous time, then he bowed for a long time, although less than the previous time. Then he arose. And he stood for a long time, although less than the previous time, then he bowed for a long time, although less than the previous time. Then he arose and he prostrated. When he finished, he said what God had willed, and then he told them to seek-refuge from the torment of the grave.\footnote{Ibid., 450.}

Because this \textit{hadīth} seems to be an oral ring system\footnote{That is, there is a ring structure present: a structure used in the oral Qur'ānic milieu but not known later. In this \textit{hadīth}, the question about the grave is given twice in a parallelism. The Prophet leaves in the morning. The sun eclipses. The Prophet returns in the morning. The prayer cycles are given twice in a parallelism. The original question is answered. This would put the eclipse in the story's pivotal position: the parallel and inversion of the torment of the grave. The relationship between the eclipse and the dead is elaborated upon in the previous two \textit{hadīths} in the \textit{Muwatta'}. These other \textit{hadīths} are different versions of the same account, but neither mentions the torment of the grave. In both the Prophet says: “The sun and moon are two of the signs of God. They don’t eclipse because of someone’s death or life. So when you see an eclipse remember God.” Mālik ibn Anas, \textit{Muwatta’} 448 and 449. cf. when this eclipse coincides with the death of the Prophet’s infant son Abraham, e.g., al-Bukhārī, \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ} 1060, or is accompanied by the Prophet’s visions of the afterlife, e.g., ibid., 1052.} and mentions a dateable astronomical event from the life of the Prophet — January 27, 632\footnote{The only solar eclipse visible in Arabia during the Prophet’s lifetime was an annular eclipse on January 27, 632 at 7:45 a.m. The \textit{hadīths} do mention that the eclipse happened earlier in the morning, so it is plausible that this is that eclipse. That al-Bukhārī (see previous note) and other authors mention this eclipse happened when the Prophet’s son Abraham died, and his death is normally said to have occurred a few months before his father’s own death (traditionally in the summer of 632), is also alluring. The back-calculations required to invent such a coincidence would be extraordinarily difficult, and are deeply unlikely for such a small detail. While this does not verify the \textit{matn} of any \textit{hadīth} in specificity, it does inform us that the \textit{muḥaddith} were, at least occasionally, working with genuine survivals from a much earlier generation. See the “NASA Eclipse Web Site,” at http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEatlas/SEatlas/SEatlas0621.GIF, accessed 26 February, 2014.} — this may very well be an ancient memory indeed. If this is correct, and the historical Muḥammad did in fact introduce the “torment of the grave,” then it only appeared at the very end of the Prophet’s life, doubly-prompted by his own failing health and the eclipse. This may also explain the torment’s commonness in the post-Qur’ānic literature, but absence in the Qur’ān itself. Whatever the case, the Medinan community remembers the Prophet warning his people about the torments of the grave, and that the Islamic prayer can grant the believer (some?) respite from it. Also a Jewish woman appears again, and she correctly warns ‘Ā’isha about the torment, and that prayer may offer a degree of refuge from it.
Mālik's most detailed report on the grave also relates to the eclipse of the sun. Here though, the torment is not mentioned. Instead there is a trial (fitna). The account begins:

Asmā’, daughter of Abū Bakr the Sincere, said, ‘I went to ‘Ā’ishah, the wife of the Prophet — God bless him and grant him peace — during an eclipse of the sun. The people were standing in prayer, and she was standing in prayer too. I said, ‘What is everyone doing?’ She pointed to the sky with her hand and said, ‘Glory to God’ (subhān allāh). I said, ‘[Is it] a sign?’ She nodded with her head, yes.’

Because of the reappearance of ‘Ā’ishah and the discussion of standing, we can assume this is another variant of the same eclipse story we have seen already. Like in the Sleepers’ pericope, the sun is identified as a sign (āya). Also like in the previous account, this report goes on to say that the people stood for a very long time. Asmā’ mentions that they stood so long that she almost fainted. Because the appearance and disappearance of the sun is a reminder of death (although not its cause) this scene may be foreshadowing the ‘standing’ (qiyām) at the Resurrection (qiyāma). The Prophet then begins to speak and affirms the analogy:

The Messenger of God […] said, ‘There is nothing I had seen before, even the Garden and the Fire, that I have not also seen standing right now. It was communicated to me that you will be tried in your graves with a trial, like or close to the trial of the Antichrist.’ ([Sub-narrator: I don’t know which Asmā’ said.)

It is as if the Prophet is having his entire prophetic experience replayed to him. The replaying of the whole Qurʾān to the Prophet soon before his death is a common Islamic story, and one cannot help but think of dying people whose lives ‘flash before their eyes.’ The Prophet specifically mentions that during this experience of the eclipse he sees the Garden and Fire, again alluding to a relationship between the (dis)appearance of the sun and eschatology. At this the Prophet introduces the inquisition people will undergo in the grave. He likens it to the trials of Christ’s proxy; al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl; the “Deceiving Messiah” equated to the biblical Antichrist. In other words, the trial of the

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164 Mālik ibn Anas, Muwaṭṭa‘ 451.
165 The apocalyptic figure never appears in the Qurʾān. It may be noted that the biblical figure (2 Thessalonians 2:3-10; 1 John 4:3) or figures (1 John 2:18, 22; 2 John 1:17) only appear in the epistles of the Christian Bible, which do not seem to have been available in the oral Qurʾānic milieu.
grave is a test to see if one can tell true religion from false objects of worship. The trial is then described:

‘All of you will have someone that comes and asks, ‘What do you know about this man [Muḥammad]?’ A believer or someone-who-is-certain (mūqin) ([Sub-narrator:] I don't know which Asmā’ said) will say, ‘He is Muḥammad, God's Messenger [...] who came to us with clarifications and guidance. So we answered [him], believed, and followed: He is thus told, ‘Sleep sound (namāsāḥan), for we know you were a believer.’ A hypocrite or a doubter ([Sub-narrator:] I don't know which Asmā’ said) will say, ‘I don't know. I heard the people say something, and so I said it.’”

We must suppose that the visitor to the entombed person is an angel, or some comparable supernatural being. The visitor asks only one question: what can you tell me about this Muḥammad? (Notice that good deeds and the other concerns of Islamic theology do not appear; including tawḥīd) The believer affirms Muḥammad's prophecy, and is thereby allowed to have a peaceful rest. This trial is said to be comparable to the Antichrist's. That is, if one understands the proper function of the prophets (that they are messengers, but no more than mere humans) she will bypass the time in the grave in sleep. In contrast to this belief is false religion defined twice by the hadīth. Disbelief is both confusing the true Jesus with his shadow-self (the proxy of either the one who died on the cross or the Antichrist), and merely parroting inherited beliefs (a common Qur'ānic charge, for instance against Christians).

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166 In most later versions of the trials of the grave, there are two or more angels. Mālik's Muwatṭa’ may also be the source of this angelic multiplication. In hadīths unrelated to those above, two angels visit people who are sick, and judge the individual's faith by what she say; whether she thanks God, etc. The angels do not appear to speak directly to the person either before or after her death. e.g., Mālik ibn Anas, Muwatṭa’ 1718. It is possible that the two angelic visitors to the dying was fused onto the stories of the trials of the grave.

167 In another early report of the grave's trials, angels descend with “their faces like the sun.” ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Muṣannaf 6737ff. In ‘Abd al-Razzāq's accounts, the questions for the dead are three: “Who is your Lord? What is your religion? Who is your Prophet?” This tripartite questioning would later be standardized. For Mālik and most of the other Traditionalist reports, the question is only about Muḥammad. Regardless of the number or nature of the questions, there is no version in any of these accounts in which Muḥammad's identification does not appear.

168 The comparison of the Antichrist to the period in the grave would continue on as more and more hadīth collections appeared. Mālik's Egyptian disciple ʿAbd Allāh ibn Wahb (d. 812) reports that the Prophet prayed, “O God, I take-refuge in You from laziness, decrepitude, loss, and sin. And I take-refuge in You from the evil of the Antichrist. And I take-refuge in You from the torment of the grave. And I take refuge in You from the torment of the Fire.” Ibn Wahb, Jami’, 315. cf. Bukhari, Ṣaḥīḥ 1377; Ibn Māja, Sunan 962, etc. Al-Ṭayālīsī (d. 820) writes: “The Prophet [...] mentioned the Antichrist and said, ‘One of his eyes is like green glass, so seek-refuge in God from the torment of the grave’” al-Ṭayālīsī, Musnad, 541.
After the appearance of Mālik’s collection, other ḥadīth anthologies followed, often citing identical or slightly-variant reports about the intermediate state. The torments of the grave appear in all these books. ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s Muṣannaf includes an entire sub-chapter of twenty-four reports on the topic. However, memories of the older vision of the Qurʾānic barzakh were also present in fragmentary and indirect forms. Like in earlier examples of this process, we can occasionally spot the remains of the past cosmology which later Muslims remembered but did not fully understand.

Al-Bukhārī knew that there was a barrier (ḥil) surrounding the earth which kept the devils at bay, comparable to the Two-Horned One’s barricade. The devils travel to the East and the West and discover the revelations to Muḥammad are the cause of the barrier (specifically the warning against assigning associates to God in al-Jinn 72:1-2). In another cluster of reports, the sabab of al-Mursalāt is given. As we have seen in the previous chapter, al-Mursalāt 77:19-28 provides one of the most substantial descriptions of the early Qurʾānic barzakh. In the ḥadīths, the sūra is revealed in an unnamed cave. Following the revelation, a liminal animal appears in the cave and attacks the believers. It is not a dog, but a snake. The Prophet commands his audience to kill it, but it escapes. Then, echoing the bi-directionality of the Qurʾānic barzakh (and the Ḥaram al-Sharif), the Prophet says, “It escaped your evil, as you escaped its evil.”

Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 875) knew there was some connection between Surāt al-Kahf and the Throne Verse, for one of his sub-chapters is named bāb faḍlī sūrat al-kahf wa āyat al-kursī. The sub-chapter only contains three ḥadīths, not one of which mentions both the sūra and the āya. The first of these reports warns the believer to recite the opening ten verses of al-Kahf as a talisman against the

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169 al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīh, 773.
170 E.g., Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīh, 4930. cf. Muslim, Ṣaḥīh, 2234.
171 Muslim, Ṣaḥīh, 1766-1768.
Antichrist. The second hadith is the same, except that it adds that some claim it is the end of the sura that should be recited, not the beginning. The third hadith merely captures a discussion of which Qur'anic verse is the best, with the conclusion being the Throne Verse. That Muslim would group these three reports together is inexplicable without acknowledgement of Qur'anic soul-sleep, which features as a major theme in both the verse and the sura. Muslim knew of some relationship between the two parts of the Qur'an, but he does not say or know what that relationship is.

One of the more unusual trends that appeared after Malik's Muwatta' blamed the torments of the grave on defilement: specifically with urine. This new detail appears first in Ibn Abi Shayba's (d. 849) Musannaf. There one report says without explanation or backstory: “The torment of the grave is mostly from urine (būl).” In a second hadith, we can see the reappearance of a Jewish woman who interacts with 'Ā'isha:

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172 That is, those verses which explain the process of revelation and deny that God has taken a son (al-Kahf 18:1-8). However, the hadith says to recite the first ten verses, not the first eight (which seems a more coherent topical unit, as the ninth and tenth verses are the opening of the Sleepers' story). This could refer to another division of the verses by rhyme. The rhyme of the sura is the tarwin ending -an, which appears 15 times in the opening section. Therefore it would be easy enough in an oral milieu to divide the opening into more than eight rhyming verses without breaking the structure. Al-Tirmidhi gives a similar report in which the believer is to recite the first three verses of al-Kahf, which may also reflect the same issue over the division of rhyming ends, Jami', 3127.

173 That is, the discussion of the day of Resurrection, the process of revelation, and the mere humanity of Muhammad (al-Kahf 18:103-110). This debate reveals some relationship between the opening and closing of al-Kahf, but does not elaborate. As people from an oral culture could not express the structure of literature in the abstract, this confusion may be a memory of oral peoples acknowledging what we would identify as a ring structure; that the opening and closing of the sura are comparable passages.

174 The collection process of the hadith may have been a factor in this arrangement. For a text as long as the Sahih, the compiler may have created an outline of chapters and sub-chapters first, and then inserted the reports as he found and checked them. If this is the case, Muslim may have heard of some relationship between al-Kahf and the Throne Verse, but never found a single report which explained the connection. Or, he did know exactly why they were related from a report which could not be verified according to his standards.

175 Ibn Abi Shayba, Musannaf, 1314.

176 While the number of reports attributed to 'Ā'isha exceed count, the continued correlation of the torments of the grave to a Jewish woman is interesting. Although we cannot arrive at a historical core narrative beneath the variants, these all may be memories of the first Islamic funerary practices, which like Jewish burial practices are called tawārīkh. Similarly, the earliest Islamic sources often posited supernatural and/or animal watchers over grave sites, as Jewish corpses are guarded by shomerim ("watchers"). Perhaps out the fear of Christian saint cults, the first Muslims adopted Jewish graveside practices. If this is correct, it would stand that these hadiths both relate the Islamic rituals back to Judaism, but mark themselves distinct from them. However, it may also be possible that the Jewish practices are themselves based on the Islamic ones.
ʿĀʾisha said, “A Jewish woman entered and said that the torment of the grave is from urine. I said that she was lying. She said, “Yes! It clings to the skin and the clothes.” [ʿĀʾisha] said that the Messenger of God — peace be upon him — then left to pray, and voices arose saying, “What is this?” So he told them, “She speaks-truly.”

The connection between the torment of the grave and urine would feature in later ḥadīth collections as well. A few of these describe a prophetic, intercessory ritual which may reverse the defilement. We have seen a number of situations already in which the grave was equated to filth. In most of these the filth was a sign of irreligion. The dog of the Sleepers, the Two-Horned One’s encounters with the people of the muck, the dirty would-be assassins who awaited the Prophet before the Hijra, and the idol of Manāt tied to a dog and thrown in a garbage-pit each use this symbolism in their own ways. In the cases of the ḥadīths regarding urine and the grave, there is no sign of false religions. The one non-Muslim in the stories actually has her belief affirmed by the Prophet. Ḥadīths such as this one may be memories of the older connection between the intermediate state and filth. However, as the context changed so did the content. The other stories were responding to paleo-Islam’s interreligious sectarian milieu, while this ḥadīth speaks to an intrareligious discussion. The corruptions of the intermediate state were once about defining monotheism in a world of associators. Now, the defilement of the grave is about defining orthopraxy/orthodoxy in an age of competing Islamic schools of law and tradition.

This change can also be seen in the many stories of questioning in the grave, like the one we have seen already above. The trials of the intermediate state are a time period in which one proves that she has the correct theology. The central theological issue of Islam, monotheism, does not appear

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177 Ibn Abī Shayba, Muṣannaf, 1315.
177 E.g., al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, 215; al-Nasāʾī Sunan, 30.
177 There is a lingering connection between ritual purity/filth, dogs and false idols reported in several ḥadīth collections, only none discussing the torment of the grave. For example is the oft-cited cluster of reports that claim “angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or an image of a living being” e.g., al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, 3322.
180 There are a number of other ḥadīths which equate protection from torments in the grave with one’s personal purity. For example, in Ibn Mājah, Sunan, 1500, the Prophet asks God to protect a dead man from torment by washing him with water and snow, and to “cleanse him of sins like a white garment is cleansed of dirt.”
in many of these early underworld examinations, and neither is one ever questioned about their actions. However the identification of Muḥammad is always a factor. The assumed audience of these reports are Muslims — although not necessarily those who follow the sunna of the Prophet (as understood by the Traditionalists). Here is a typical example:

The Prophet said, “When a human is put in his grave and his companions return, he hears their footsteps. Two angels come to him and make him sit-up. And they ask him, ‘What did you say about this man, Muhammad?’ He will say, ‘I testify that he is the servant of God and His Messenger.’ It will then be said to him, ‘See your place in the Fire? God has given you a place in the Garden instead of it.’” The Prophet added, “The dead person will see both of his places, but an unbeliever or a hypocrite will say to the angels, ‘I do not know [about Muhammad], but I said what the people used to say.’ It will be said to him, ‘You did not know, and neither did you take [Muhammad’s] guidance. Then he will be struck with an iron hammer between his ears. And he will scream, and that scream will be heard by anything that comes near him, besides humans and jinn.”

There are a few developments and refinements here and in comparable reports from the same time period. The dead are provided with options, as they have a place in both Hell and Paradise reserved for them. The punishment of the grave (here being struck between the ears) is a reimagining of the Qurʾānic detail of the dead (and the Sleepers) whose ears are struck shut; confirming their ignorance of the world. Now the dead can hear the living, but beings who make theological choices (humans and jinn) cannot hear the sinful dead. Again, the questioning in the grave will regard the affirmation of Muḥammad’s prophecy. But notice that this later hadith says that torment will come to the unbeliever and the hypocrite. The division here is not between Muslims and non-Muslims, but between ‘good’ Muslims (ahl al-ḥadīth, ahl al-sunna) and all others (non-Muslims and impious Muslims, perhaps such as the Umayyads or the supposed ahl al-rāʾy). Thus the particular judgment of the grave begins with the dead condemned for their ignorance (“You did not know”) and/or their disobedience (“You did not

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181 al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, 1338.
182 ʿAbd al-Razzāq also reports that the “two races” (al-thaqalān) cannot hear the dead, although the dead can hear footsteps, Muṣannaf, 6738. There are other hadiths in which animals (such as dogs and donkeys) can sense the dead, e.g., Abū Dāwūd, Sunan, 5084.
183 As shown in examples above, the righteous dead — especially martyrs and prophets — can contact the living, typically in dreams. There is no Qurʾānic precedent for this belief, as in the Qurʾān even the dead prophets cannot speak to the living.
take his guidance”). The charge of the unbeliever simply repeating inherited beliefs is now cast wider to include Muslims who just followed the crowd. They followed communal, but not necessarily prophetic, sunna.

The angels of inquisition in the grave are henceforth almost always fixed as a pair.\(^\text{184}\) The introduction of two questioning angels who display reprieve and torment to people in the intermediate state coincides with other hadiths which introduce two angels that visit people in their dreams. These pairs (or the same pair?) similarly shows the sleeper and the deceased Paradise and Hellfire.\(^\text{185}\) Likewise, other hadiths support the continued comparability between sleep and death.\(^\text{186}\) The two angels are also named in several traditions as Munkar and Nakîr.\(^\text{187}\) The reports which invoke these names generally contain most of the features of the medieval barzakh, and these reports remain the standard references today. Here is one example from al-Tirmidhi’s (d. 892) Jāmi’:

> The Messenger of God […] said, "When the dead or one of you is buried, two black and blue angels come to him. One of them is called ‘disavowed’ (munkar) and the other is ‘disavowal’ (nakîr). They say, ‘What did you say about this man?’ and [the dead man] says what he used to say, ‘He is the servant of God and His Messenger. I testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.’ They say, ‘We knew you would say such.’ Then his grave is made spacious for him — seventy cubits by seventy — and it is illuminated for him. It is then said to him, ‘Sleep!’ and he says, ‘Can I return to my family and speak to them?’ They say, ‘Sleep like a groom who will be awoken by none but his dearest beloved.’ So it is until God raises him from his resting-place. But if [the dead man] was a hypocrite he says, ‘I heard what the people said [about the Prophet] and so I said something like that. I don’t know.’ They say, ‘We knew you would say such.’ Then the earth is told ‘compress him,’ and thus it compresses him until his ribs overlap. So it is until God raises him from his resting-place."\(^\text{188}\)

\(^\text{184}\) In an exception to the trend, there are hadiths in which a party of angels and a party of devils argue over the fate of a dead man who was sinful but wished to repent. The issue is resolved by a single angel who arrives and argues that people are to be judged by the communities to which they wished to belong, rather than the ones to which they were actually a part. e.g., Ibn Majah, Sunan, 2622.

\(^\text{185}\) E.g., al-Bukhārī, Ṣahih, 1121 and 1156ff. In another instance in which the sleeper is the Prophet himself, the story acts as a prolegomenon to the mīrāj. Gabriel appears to the Prophet in his sleep, accompanied by these two other angels. Instead of waking the Prophet up, the two unnamed angels question each other about the Prophet. They affirm he is a prophet because “although [his] eyes are closed in his sleep, his heart is not asleep.” al-Bukhārī, Ṣahih, 7281.

\(^\text{186}\) For instance, when the Prophet went to sleep, he would remember God as the cause of life and death, and when he awoke he would remember God as the master of the Resurrection, e.g., al-Bukhārī, Ṣahih, 6324.

\(^\text{187}\) These names first appear in 'Abd al-Razzāq, Musannaf, 6738 and 6760.

\(^\text{188}\) al-Tirmidhi, Jāmi’, 1071. cf. Abū Dāwūd, Sunan, 4753

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Many of the pieces of older Islamic intermediate states appear again here, now repurposed in an era of intra-Islamic theological conflict. The deathly liminal beings who in previous stories represented the boundaries between idolatry and monotheism (the Sleepers’ dog, Burāq, Muqātīl’s angel of death, the guardian animals of Thawr cave, Solomon’s sea demon) have been replaced by deathly angelic guardians who ask about one’s personal prophetology. Previously the concern (expressed symbolically) was how one approached prophecy itself: the watchers in the liminal state warned against worshiping beings besides God. Now the question (asked directly) is what one makes of the Prophet specific to Muslims: not do you worship him? but do you follow his path?

If one answers correctly, the grave is expanded enough for the dead person to move about as he pleases. He may even be able to communicate with his living relatives, depending on how we read this report. This was suggested by earlier Islamic literatures in which the righteous dead could come and go freely, and on occasion speak to their families in dreams. The prototypes of this appeared already in the stories of martyrs like Mubashshir and Sa’d in the Sīra. However, this is not apparent in the Qurʾān itself. In the scripture there are prophetic dreams, but they only come from God; not other people. Instead the Qurʾān implies a form of soul-sleep, in which the dead cannot be reached.

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189 Munkar and Nakīr are “[b]lackish or bluish, with long, wild curly hair, lightning eyes, frighteningly large molars, and glowing iron staffs, these angels would ask a number of questions about points of dogma. All of these questions were reasonably easy to answer, their aim being neither to delve into abstruse points of theology nor to ponder the articles of belief, but quite simply to determine confessional affiliation [... Later] Shiʿites claimed the angels also asked the dead person about ‘the Imam of his time’ and about the Prophet’s family, the ahl al-bayt [...]” Halevi, Muhammad’s Grave, 212.

190 Another series of reports specifies that people who die martyrs are protected from the torment of the grave, e.g., Ibn Mājah, Sunan, 1559. Some reports also depict the Prophet specifically asking gravediggers to make spacious graves: “Make it spacious for him, and may God make it spacious for him,” e.g., Ibn Mājah, Sunan, 1559. There is also a parable which may demonstrate a larger trend of particular judgment evolving out of the Qurʾānic cosmology. In the story three men are trapped in a mountain cave (ghārin fi jabal) by a rock (ṣakhra) which falls before the entrance. They agree that if they can convince God that they are righteous people, they will be let out. Each man recounts certain good deeds (faith and doctrine do not appear), and after each man finishes, the boulder moves slightly. Finally, after the third man is finished explaining his virtuous acts, the boulder is moved completely and the men escape. e.g., al-Bukhārī, Sahīḥ, 2215. While the story has elements of both the Sleepers’ pericope and the medieval barzakh, suggesting that it appeared first between the two, it serves only as a morality tale without mentioning death/sleep, idolatry, eschatology, or later Islamic theologies. Unfortunately, because the tale only appears in Bukhārī (three versions), we cannot compare older versions to younger to detect a thematic core narrative and its progression.
Therefore that detail must be accounted for too. So the angels put the upright dead person into a sleep from which only God will awaken him. With this hybrid sleeping/purgative/pilgrimage intermediate state, the righteous dead remain asleep and so they cannot be contacted by the living, but the dead maybe can reach the living in their dreams. The abundant literature of Muhammad appearing in one's sleep would be such a case — an experience that also appears with the classical hadīth literature.\textsuperscript{192} The dead Prophet can both contact the living and act as a future intercessor. Communication via dreams gives at least some of the dead an open line with this world, while still preventing the living from contacting the dead.

If one fails the test of the grave, the dead person is crushed inwards by her own tomb. Again, this does not appear in the Qur’ān itself, but it can be suggested by various examples of crushing in other older Islamic literatures. However these examples are either very open to interpretation (like Muqātil’s reference to hashara after death, Sa’d’s grave), or are symbolic warnings that lower the status of holy people (like the Prophet’s pressing by Gabriel, the pressing of Bilāl, and the references to pressing in the eulogies of Ibn Sa’d). The worship or potential worship of human beings does not appear in these hadīth. Indeed, there is no longer much thought given to the practices of non-Muslims in many accounts. The example above does not even mention the fate of unbelievers. One report relayed through Ibn Jurayj (d. c. 767) even says, “Whether the unbeliever is asked about Muḥammad, Ibn Jurayj did not know.”\textsuperscript{193} The only sinner always worthy of discussion is the hypocrite; the ‘bad Muslim.’ In short, the symbolic eschatological cosmology of the Qur’ān, which combated idolatry, was being evermore overshadowed by a doctrinal eschatology whose primary goal was to fight heresy.

\textsuperscript{192} This appears as early as the Muwāṭṭa: “Did any of you have a dream last night [asked the Prophet]? After me, the true dream will be all that remains of prophecy.” Muwāṭṭa, 1752. There also are a great number of reports which explain that the true dreams are one forty-sixth of prophecy, e.g., ibid., 1753. Many later hadīths also add the key detail that dreams of the Prophet are by definition true visions: e.g., “And whoever sees me in a dream has surely seen me, for Satan cannot impersonate me.” al-Bukhārī, Šāhīb, 110.

\textsuperscript{193} ‘Abd al-Razzāq, Muṣannaf, 6757.
Towards the end of the period in which the final canonical ḥadīth collections appeared, the major elements of the medieval Islamic intermediate state were roughly fixed. This state received its first long presentation in the folkloric works of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā. His visions of the time in the grave before the Resurrection would mark the coalescence of the medieval barzakh in all but name. However, all of the significant details he provides can be found in many other sources such as those above. Al-Dunyā's works on the intermediate state are episodic, and because they exist only as a modern reconstruction, the original order of his episodes is unknown. And yet the postmortem episodes he provides form a clear series of events. After death, the spirit is removed from its body, then quickly returned to it, at which Munkar and Nakîr arrive and begin their inquisition. The righteous believer is blessed and has her grave expanded, especially if the living have prayed well for her. The sinner is tormented and has her grave constricted, although there is hope for reprieve via the prayers of the living. The dead do know what is happening around them, and they have some limited ability to contact the living in dreams, but unlike the living the dead cannot act or perform good deeds. All of the classical descriptions of the barzakh would follow these visions. While such later medieval and modern authors, most especially al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111), Ibn ʿArabî, and al-Suyûṭî, would add creative and theological details to the intermediate state, the central narrative was now available more-or-less as it is in our own day, minus the name barzakh.

As we have seen above, the narrative sources of early Islamic thought (ḥadīth, biography, folklore) never employed the odd Qurʾānic term barzakh to talk about their intermediate state. This

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196 The barzakh appears throughout the theosophist's many works. See Bashier, Ibn ʿArabî's Barzakh and Chittick Imaginal Worlds for the recollection of Ibn ʿArabî's barzakh.
197 al-Suyûṭî, Sharḥ al-Ṣudūr fī Sharḥ Hâl al-Mawtâ wa al-Qubûr (popularly, Kitāb al-Barzakh).
should not surprise us. As noted several times already, the Qurʾān itself does not suggest that *barzakh* is a proper noun, or that it refers to a specialized state that cannot be addressed in other ways. Therefore the narrative sources had no reason to discuss the word. The much more common, unambiguous Qurʾānic word ‘grave’ (*qabr*) would suffice. But the authors whose writings were expressly exegetical had to deal with unusual Qurʾānic terms as a logical outcome of their work. They would have noticed that the word *barzakh* was obscure, and had something to do with the intermediate state. After the torment and trials of the grave came to the fore with the Traditionalist movement, *barzakh* would be grafted onto that discussion. This would at once resolve the apparent absence of the intermediate state in the Qurʾān, further ground the Traditionalist’s orthodoxy in the authority of the sacred past, and define a strange Qurʾānic word.

Returning to Mujāhid’s commentary above, we observed that he related the *barzakh* to a barrier in time in the grave. Muqātil also understood *barzakh* as the timespan between life and the Eschaton, but he did not see any relationship to the grave or to the other appearances of the word *barzakh* in the Qurʾān, in which it is clearly a barrier. Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) says *barzakh* is just another word for a partition (*ḥājiz*), in this case between this life and the next. The final grafting together of the word *barzakh* with the traditional reports and biographies would appear in the famous commentary of al-Ṭabarī. Al-Ṭabarī draws together the older exegesis, as well as the Traditionalist reports, and explains that the *barzakh* refers to three things: the grave, a time span, and a barrier. Paraphrasing *al-Muʾminūn* 23:100 through Mujāhid, Ṭabarī says: “In front of them is a partition (*ḥājiz*) between them and the Return; meaning to the day of arising from their graves (*qabūruhum*).” He goes on to explain that as well as being a barrier between death and the Resurrection, it is also a “time delay” (*muhla*) between the two. Coupled with the reports on the trials and torments of the grave which would explain the substance of this time period, and propagated by Ṭabarī’s enormous

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198 Ghariḥ al-Qurʾān ad al-Muʾminūn 23:100. Unlike Muqātil, Ibn Qutayba does note the connection to the “junction of the two seas” in al-Kahf and the “restricted obstruction” in al-Furqān.
influence, the medieval *barzakh* was now in place in name, as well as in content. At once citing Mujâhid, Ṭabarî, and many of the prophetic reports we have seen already, al-Tha’labî (d. 1036) says that the still-living martyrs are “in the *barzakh*.“ In al-Zamakhsharî (d. 1144), we can see that the Qur’ânic discussion of the *barzakh* and the Traditionalists’ ‘torment of the grave’ were considered identical. He even employs the hybrid, “the torment in the *barzakh*” (*al-ʿadhâb fî al-barzakh*) without further explanation.

**Part 4: The Torment of the Grave as Orthodoxy**

It would not be useful here to explain in detail all of the distinct Islamic schools of thought which appeared in the early period and what each supposedly believed. This has been treated in the critical scholarship already, and so I will only gloss some of them here as a form of conclusion. That is to say, we have arrived at the beginning of previous studies of Islamic theology, to which my contribution above has hopefully provided a prolegomenon regarding the intermediate state. The Qur’ânic *barzakh* fully transformed into the medieval *barzakh* with the rise of Islamic Traditionalism. We have seen this in its narrative manifestation. Now we will turn to its formal appearance in the forge of theological controversy.

Dogmatic statements are *theo-political*. Both politics and theology must be at play at once. Thus the early political division over the Prophet’s succession did not produce formal theology until these breaks were read with the retrospect of centuries. Conversely, theological diversity alone does not lead to dogmatism either. If the political order stands theological plurality poses no threat.

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200 al-Zamakhsharî, ad *al-An’âm* 6:93.

Whatever theological diversity was present within the early *umma* was not meaningful enough to appear in the Qurʾān unless it created political strife (hypocrisy, a practical issue). Only when theological diversity and political authority overlapped did creedal thinking appear. This process began with the decline of the Umayyads and the ascent of the new order of the ‘Abbāsids. This was when theological and political divisions were concerted enough to create formal theologies; faiths distinct from one's actions. With this came all of faith's implicit and explicit self-identifications (orthodoxy) and ostracisms (heterodoxy). This is when we can see the post-Qurʾānic distinction between the submitter (*muslim*) and the believer (*muʾmin*); between religious affirmation (*islām*) and faith (*īmān*).

Like early forms of other global religious traditions, primal Islam was not deeply concerned with doctrine and dogma. Only the most general kind of monotheism and prophetology factors into the Qurʾānic message, and in neither case are these beliefs expounded in the abstract. Individual actions (good works, prayer, pilgrimage, and the like) take pride of place, and even these are only discussed in general terms more often than not. It was only after the Muslims became diverse enough theologically to threaten the political order that creedal statements appear.

Following in the wake of the first two civil wars, several theological factions emerged. Of these we can say something about the early advocates and opponents of the medieval *barzakh* from primary and secondary sources. The Khārijites argued that any major sin negated one's Islam. Their deep fear of sin and prioritization of human agency did not warrant an afterlife which accounted for ‘deceived believers’ (*muʾminūn ẓullāl*). The only Muslim was the one who avoided sin and error at all cost; the

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202 This distinction first appears in the late Umayyad period with the Khārijites: the first theo-political movement in Islamic history to have an unassailable division between the orthodox and all other so-called Muslims. Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology: From Muhammad to the Present* (Princeton, New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 45.


204 Cf. The early Christians (whose first strong doctrinal lines were not drawn at the Council of Jerusalem but at imperial Nicaea) and Buddhists (whose various schools come into focus not in the first two Councils, but at the Third under Aśoka).
martyr's death was “purifying” enough. Neither did they put much store in the (as yet uncollected) prophetic reports. Thus without purpose or precedent, they rejected the torment and trials of the grave as un-Qur'anic; an eschatological category that served no function in their worldview. Sharing roots with the Başran Khārijites, the Qadarites did not have any purgative intermediate state for similar reasons.

A third group who supposedly rejected the purgative vision of the intermediate state were the Jahmites. Probably little more than straw men for the Traditionalists, Jahm ibn Ṣafwān and his followers are said to have sprung from a radical wing of the school of postponement theology (murji’a). It is not for human beings to know the limits of God's justice and mercy, therefore human judgment is to be postponed. Eschatologically speaking, this means that God can save the sinner, even if she is already in Hell. In that case (we can suppose), the Jahmites too would not require a purgative intermediate state, and so later sources claimed they denied it. “Whoever says, 'I don't know the torment of the grave,' belongs to the sect of the Jahmites.” Like in the introduction of Muḥammadan intercession, the Jahmites' apparent belief in a temporary stay in Hell tells us that questions were being raised about how the imperfect Muslim could win redemption.

In opposition to these parties were the Sunnī and proto-Sunnī Traditionalists. Starting with many of the non-Jahmite Murji’ites were such figures as Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767). It was correct to claim that mere humans could not know God's judgment, and that there were Muslims who were correct in their faith but fell short in their actions. “Transgressors of the law who belong to the community of Muḥammad are all of them faithful; they are not unbelievers. Works are distinct from faith.” But that

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206 Eklund, Life Between Death and Resurrection According to Islam, 88.
207 This too began as a political discussion, as the postponement originally in question was that of ‘Uthmān and ‘Ali; i.e., what is one to make of a ruler whose personal virtues are the subject of debate? Therefore, postponing human judgment and accepting only (unknown) divine judgment was a move towards political pacification.
209 Abū Ḥanīfa (attributed), Wasiya, ibid., 125.
does not mean that God will overturn His own eternal order, including the punishment of damnation, as Jahm ibn Ṣafwān supposedly believed. Thus many of the Murji’ites would conclude that the torments of the grave are a natural sequence in God’s postponed justice. Abū Ḥanīfa is said to have written several creedal statements on the matter. For example: “[T]he questioning of Munkar and Nakūr in the grave is true. And the spirit’s return to the servant in the grave is true. And the pressing of the grave is true. And the torment is true for all of the unbelievers and for some of the Muslims.”

Both branches of Murji’ism stressed the identification of faith with a kind of knowledge, meaning one could thus be a believer despite one’s shortcomings. This probably led to the popularity of this line of thinking.

This inclusiveness prompted the evolution of Murji’ism into the catholic approach of later Sunnism. However there were Murji’ites who rejected the torment of the grave, such as Ḍirār ibn ‘Amr (d. c. 800), Ḥusayn al-Najjār (d. c. 833), and Bishr al-Marīsī (d. c. 833). The latter requires special notice as it was he who served as an advisor to al-Ma’mūn, the patron of Mu’tazilism and the caliph who orchestrated the Inquisition (mīḥna). On the matter of the intermediate state, al-Marīsī leaned

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210 Abū Ḥanīfa (attributed), Fiqh al-Akbar (II). Notice that this creedal statement is constructed against specific sects. The presence of Munkar and Nakūr and the pressing of the grave affirms prophetic reports in opposition to the Khārijites. So too, the inclusion of some Muslims and all unbelievers into purgation rejects the Khārijites’ extremely exclusive umma. The return of the spirit to the body in the grave responds to the Mu’ṭazilites and Neo-Platonists. cf. ibid., Wāṣīya, 129.

211 Even if one was not sinless in life, it would be reassuring to know that faith alone was enough to win eventual salvation. The medieval barzakh would level the salvific playing field by purgation. Such an open-endedness would prove especially alluring to the disenfranchised non-Arab client peoples (mawālī), who were Muslims in faith but may not know or have access to all of the Qur’ān’s and the tradition’s ethical requirements.


213 Blankinship notes that Ḍirār ibn ‘Amr (d. c. 800) would not have called himself a Murji’ite, although he aligned with their school is many ways. It was Ḍirār who coined the phrase “a place between two places,” later adopted by the Mu’tazilites. Ḍirār argued that such a person would burn in the Fire eternally, and so he too rejected the torment of the grave as unnecessary. ibid., 45-46.

214 Al-Ma’mūn was also the political patron of the Catholicos Timothy I (d.823), who likewise argued for the doctrine of soul-sleep on the grounds that activity required a functional composite of spirit and working body. See Dal Danto, Debating the Saints’ Cult, 299ff.
slightly towards the teachings attributed to the Jahmites, in that he denied the torments of the grave on the grounds that sinful Muslims would not stay in Hell eternally.

Another reading of Murji‘ism, coupled with Qadarism via a back-projected mythical break with al-Hasan al-Basri, would beget the Mu‘tazilites (ahl al-tawhid wa al-‘adl) — likely the true targets of anti-Jahmite traditions. The Mu‘tazilites argued that there was certainly an interim period before the Resurrection after death. However, the majority of them are said to have rejected the torment of the grave. There are two reasons for this rejection; one anthropological, the other theological.

First the torments of the grave are problematic because a dead person does not have a functional body, and therefore she cannot experience pain. The human being is a composite (jumla) of many parts, no one of which is alive or causes life on its own. To feel pain, and thus experience torment, the spirit must be present in a fully functioning body. A disembodied spirit cannot be tormented, and neither can a corpse. Not only must the spirit be present with the body, the body must be capable of biological functioning in order to feel pain. Therefore, divine torment and reward must wait until the reunion of the spirit with a working body at the Resurrection.215

Furthermore, torment in the grave is not clearly mentioned in revelation, and in fact may be contrary to God’s justice. God is just (‘adil) and would never violate His own revealed threats and promises. There are clearly hypocrites who never believed and believers guilty of serious crimes (fasiq), but there would be no reason for God to employ a postmortem loophole like purgation to

215 See Margaretha T. Heemskerk, “Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī on Body, Soul, and Resurrection,” in A Common Rationality: Mu‘tazilism in Islam and Judaism, edit. Camilla Adang, Sabine Schmidtke, and David Sklare (İstanbul: Ergon-Verlag, 2007), 127-156. Also, Sophia Vasalou, Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu‘tazilite Ethics (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008). Al-Nasafi (d. 1114) responded to the larger Mu‘tazilite claim that the disembodied could not suffer using sleep as a comparable state: “There is a proof that the torment of the grave is something which the intelligence can accept. Do you know see that a sleeper’s spirit goes out from him and yet remains connected with the body, so that he may suffer pain in a dream, and both the pain and the relief reach him? Also conversations take place in dreams because the spirit is connected with the body.” Bahr al-Kalâm in F.E. Peters, A Reader on Classical Islam (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 405.
establish His future justice. It does not follow that the ethical ‘place between two places’ (al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayn) leads to an eschatological transformation between life and Resurrection. A Muslim sinner will be condemned eternally like any other sinner. Torment in the grave before the Resurrection does not add to this justice. Thus the majority of the Mu‘tazilites rejected the torment of the grave on rational grounds.

If the early Mu‘tazilites offered an alternate intermediate state, it is no longer apparent beyond the clue that the spirit is no longer present with the body. Whether the spirit is in another earthly location, in a dormant state, or merely dead we can only guess. An Islamic mortalism like soul-sleep or soul-death is the most probable case. If many Mu‘tazilites thought a dead person could not experience pain, it also seems unlikely that they believed a corpse or a disembodied spirit was feeling or doing anything else either. Thus the spirit was either dead, in deep sleep, or dreaming inconsequential dreams. If this was due to the survival of the Qur‘ānic barzakh into formal theology cannot be established.

As the intermediate state lies outside of human experience for the living, and is not spelled out by revelation, affirmative arguments for the torment of the grave overwhelmingly came from prophetic reports like those we have seen already. Therefore the Traditionalists could only explain their insistence on the torment and trials of the medieval barzakh in declarations or arguments from consensus: creedal statements. For instance, Ibn Qutayba says:

> If we wished to abandon the Traditionalists (aṣḥāb al-hadīthi) and turn from them to the Theologians (aṣḥāb al-kalām), and to follow them, then we would pass from unity to disunity, from order to dispute, from civility to barbarity, from agreement to difference. For the Traditionalists are agreed on the following points: [the author lists six doctrines here, concluding with] belief in the punishment of the grave. On these principles, they have no disputes. Whoever departs from them on these matters is opposed, despised, accused of heresy, and abandoned.

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26 These are in short the second, third, and fourth of the “five principles” of Mu‘tazilism attributed to Abū al-Hudayl al-`Allāf (d. 841).

A creedal statement attributed to Ibn Hanbal also says, "[A believer from the people of the sunna] are believers in the torment of the grave and in Munkar and Nakir".218 Al-Ash'ari (d. 936) writes:

The Mu'tazilites also denied the torment of the grave; but there are traditions about it on the authority of the Prophet from many sources, and on the authority of his Companions. It has not been related on the authority of any of them that he denied it [...] so it must be the consensus of the Companions of the Prophet.219

This may not be a convincing strategy as many of the anti-purgative arguments about the intermediate state preceded the collection, availability, and perhaps existence of those hadiths which explained the torment of the grave. However, the ever-increasing authority of the prophetic reports wiped away so many memories of pre-Traditionalist Islam. Hence those factions which took little or no store in non-Qur'anic holy writ transformed into willful deniers of the Prophetic sunna.

Likewise, a via media theology based in salvation by both faith and work, with the possibility of intercession, was presumably more favorable to most people. A worldview like the Qur'anic barzakh negated intercession and redemption in the intermediate state. So, if one only had one lifetime to win deliverance in eternity, and the fixed price of that deliverance was righteousness or even saintliness, puritanism would be the only option. As we saw in Ibn Sa'd, the dying Muḥammad even told his people to "do good works" because he would not be able to help them later. Sunnism softened that threat considerably with the medieval barzakh. If in their dreams or their resurrections the Prophet would intercede for his people merely because they believed, and the torments of the grave could purify the sinful believer or repay a debt (dīn) owed to God, then human errors and ignorance may not necessarily end in eternal damnation. In several different creedal statements al-Ash'ari interlocks the discussion of intercession with the torments of the medieval barzakh illustrating this moderate approach. In one:

We [the Traditionalists (ahl al-ḥadīth wa al-sunna)] hold that God will bring forth a group from the Fire after they have been burned because of the intercession of the Messenger of God. For we believe in what has come down in the traditions from the Messenger of God. We believe in the torment of the grave [...] and [that] the Resurrection after death is a reality. And that God will stop creatures at the station [from whence Muhammad will intercede] and will settle accounts with the believers. We believe that faith is both speech and work, and that it increases and decreases. And we admit the sound traditions concerning that which has been related from the Messenger of God by trustworthy narrators; just man from just man, going back to the Messenger of God.220

Following al-Ashʿarī’s train of thought, the discussion of temporary, purgative torment and intercession flows directly into the affirmation of the medieval barzakh. And this in turn moves straight into the definition of faith as both words and deeds. The intercession of the Prophet, the medieval barzakh, and the identification of faith as speech and work are not three distinct arguments. To claim that faith is more than a duality of belief/unbelief or righteousness/sin — that faith has degrees — allows for the internal diversity of the Islamic community, while also rejecting those who deny that diversity (the draconian Khārijites, the Muʿtazilites of the Inquisition). But if Muslims are diverse in beliefs and deeds, there must be a system in place which accounts for how the upright believer, the misguided believer, and the sinful believer can all be worthy of the same ultimate reward. The medieval barzakh accounts for this while the Qurʾānic barzakh cannot. So too the variety of Muslims can be corrected by intercession. Muḥammad can save the imperfect believer from Hell after she has been purified by fire. The Qurʾānic barzakh cannot address this possibility; the medieval barzakh can.

The Qurʾānic worldview does not allow for independent intercession, for the dead are either asleep or are otherwise inaccessible. Intercession after the Resurrection is not addressed at all. Neither can the Qurʾān’s intermediate state account for any meaningful interaction between this world and

the supernatural world apart from revelation. Therefore anyone who seeks the intercession of the dead is meddling with defilement and damnation. The post-Qur’anic development of Jesus’ proxy the Antichrist would be such a case, as are earlier figures (the Sleepers, the pseudo-Solomon). Only revelation breaks through the barzakh to reach living prophets, but no living person can make contact with God or the unseen by her own will. The barzakh can only be penetrated by the will of God — “who will intercede with Him except by His leave?”

In a second passage from al-Ash’arī, this line of thinking is slackened by simultaneously affirming the Prophet’s passage beyond this world and back, the falsehood of the deceiving Antichrist, the torment of the grave, and the meaningfulness of activity in sleep.

We acknowledge that the Deceiver (al-dajjāl) will go forth, according to what has come in the tradition from the Messenger of God. We believe in the torment of the grave, and in Nakīr and Munkar, and their questioning those buried in their graves. We credit the tradition of the Ascent (mi’rāj). We hold that many a vision seen during sleep is genuine, and we acknowledge that it has interpretation.221

Again, these are not four independent assertions. For al-Ash’arī one argument leads to the next. There are interactions between this world and the unseen besides the revealed words of the Qur’ān. Dark, apocalyptic forces may enter into this world (the Antichrist), and the righteous may travel to Heaven and back (the Prophet’s Ascent). There is supernatural activity in sleep (visions like the Mi’rāj, or the intercessory appearances of the Prophet) as there is supernatural activity in death (the medieval barzakh).

Creedal statements such as these must always be read as both affirmations and negations. In the former cases, the Antichrist, the medieval barzakh, and the Mi’rāj only appear explicitly in post-Qur’ānic literature. By affirming these, al-Ash’arī is also informing us that there were people who denied them; people who rejected some or all post-Qur’ānic prophetic reports: the Khārijites, the ‘Jahmites’, and most especially the Mu’tazilites. But then Ash’arī affirms the reality of true dreams in sleep. This must also suggest that some people did not hold to this belief. That is, some parties claimed

221 Ibid. 250-251. Again, a nearly identical collection of statements in the same order is presented in the Maqālāt.
that dreams did not make contact with the other world; that a living person could not be put into contact with the dead Muḥammad or the martyrs. The sleeper only seems to be doing something meaningful, but in reality is just asleep.\footnote{For more on this matter, see Smith, “Concourse Between the Living and the Dead.”}

We can suppose that this is the survival, mutatis mutandis, of the Qur’ānic barzakh. These people (the known heterodox groups or anyone else) who rejected the medieval barzakh did so because they did not think non-prophetic sleep was a condition of significant activity. If sleep and death are comparable, what one makes of dreams is critical. If dreams are signs and messages from a greater reality, then there can be meaningful activity, development, and torment in both sleep and death. There is room for the intercession from the noble dead (especially the Prophet Muḥammad) and confusion from satanic forces (the Antichrist). However, if dreams are just dreams, then nothing of true import can happen to the sleeper or the dead, and neither is there any possibility of intercession or demonic trickery.

In time, the Islamic community affirmed the medieval barzakh in some form or another almost universally. Some later Mu’tazilites tried to modify their own intermediate states to accord with the prophetic reports\footnote{For instance, Mānkdīm (d. 1034) offered a compromise between Mu’tazilite and Traditionalist thought regarding the punishment in the grave. There could be torment before the final judgment but after the general Resurrection; i.e., in the time between the two trumpet blasts at the Eschaton for that point the dead would have bodies again. Ta’līq, 73345-16, in Margaretha T. Heemskerk, Suffering in the Mu’tazilite Theology (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 108-109. As Zamakhshari also speaks of torment in the barzakh (above), we must suppose that his Mu’tazilism also conceived of a compromise position on the matter. Unfortunately he does not elaborate on the matter.} but these did not take. The authority of the prophetic lore, the ever-increasing internal diversity of the umma, and the conversion of common people who did not have the time or the resources to become religious scholars with informed opinions all demanded an inclusive intermediate state that the Traditionalists offered. Just as the Qur’ānic barzakh responded to a pluralistic milieu by obfuscating human knowledge of the supernatural powers of the dead, the prophets, and the unseen, so too the medieval barzakh maintained an orthodoxy which allowed for
some intra-Islamic diversity by blurring the strong Qurʾānic barriers between the worlds. Both visions of the intermediate state were controlled allowances for plurality, differing only in the nature of the plurality which they were addressing. The Qurʾānic *barzakh* accepted all of the prophetic communities by limiting the power of the prophets themselves. The medieval *barzakh* accepted the diversity of the imperial Islamic world by piercing the barriers of dualism, puritanism, and rationalism.

In the next and final chapter, we will return to our observations and conclusions from above and ask what these mean for our understanding of the Qurʾān and early Islam. What do we know now, and where can this new information take us in the future?
Chapter VI: Orality Translation, Soul-Sleep, and the Monotheistic Imagination

“(Remember) when God said, ‘Jesus, Surely I am going to take you and raise you to Myself, and purify you from those who disbelieve [...]’” (Āl ʿImrān 3:55)

[... According to al-Ḥasan al-Basri] the meaning of the verse, “I am going to take you” is this: it means “I will kill you with the death of sleep.” So God raised the Prophet Jesus to the heavens while he was asleep.

- Ibn Kathîr (d. 1373)

Using our findings above, this chapter will present a brief genealogy of Near Eastern intermediate states, leading up into the early Islamic period. How does the Islamic intermediate state respond to the pre-Islamic period, and how does this response continue on into the Islamic Middle Ages? We will also return to the conclusions we have reached from this project, and their significance to the larger questions of Qur’ānic and early Islamic Studies. What does the topic of death before the Resurrection tell us about Islamic and paleo-Islamic religious communities, their self-awareness, and their pluralities? We will also ask ourselves what questions have been left open, or were created by this project, and how they might be addressed in the future. Finally, we will return to the study of ring structures and other oral technologies through which we can examine the received Qurʾān. I will offer suggestions for how the field ought to be refined, expanded, and reintroduced based on what has been uncovered here. Finally, I will ask what these techniques can (and cannot) do; which problems still linger; and how they can be applied to other issues of Qurʾānic and early Islamic studies.

Part 1: The History of Near Eastern Intermediate States as Cosmology and Theology

Due to the paucity of first hand evidence about the Qurʾānic milieu and the early Islamic period generally, it is understandably tantalizing to look to older sources: the biblical lore, and the Syriac Christian materials most especially. While these are certainly a boon, they can also envelop early Islam so completely as to erase the distinctiveness of the Qurʾānic milieu. As with all studies of the remote past, the artifacts available to the Qurʾānic scholars are limited, and so their findings must
be expressly comparative. Rarely can we say more about the relationship between the Qurʾān and the pre-Islamic authors beyond the fact that they often speak to related worldviews. To go further and assume relationship is sameness, that the Qurʾān is referring to and dependent upon certain available written documents, is almost invariably conjecture. To confuse relationship with sameness underestimates the magnitude of the ancient world. It also minimizes ancient minds by holding them to very modern standards of authorial creativity and novelty. The pre-modern oral imagination adores the well-known tale retold: the bricolage. In such milieux, where all but a sliver of the sources are oral conversations which long ago sank into the depths, and where the written ones make little claim to originality themselves, source criticism invariably falls into single1 and third cause2 fallacies.

That said, there were already several substantial debates regarding the intermediate state before the appearance of the Qurʾān. The larger story of proper intermediate states begins roughly with the rise of Christianity and Rabbinical Judaism: the dual set of great religious developments of the second half of the first century. At the dawn of Christianity — as far as it is recorded in the materials composing the Christian Scripture proper — the intermediate state is highly ambiguous. Besides the occasional reference to sleep and one to “imprisoned spirits [from] long ago,”3 there is not much substance to the conception of the time straight after death. There is little to say on the matter. Hence “revelation” as apokalypsis is an “unveiling” of what is present already but not obvious. Unlike its English descendent ‘apocalypse’, the term ‘unveiling’ does not carry the sense of an unclear distant future necessitating an interim worthy of explanation. The material realm of both the living and the

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1 The single cause fallacy is a textual version of post hoc ergo propter hoc. This is the assumption that in the case of two similar artifacts or events, the older is the cause of the newer. While it may be true in some cases that the older is a cause of the newer, it may not be the only or primary cause. Therefore it is reductive as it assumes that a complex artifact, text, thought, or event has only one cause.

2 The third cause fallacy is an application of an availability heuristic. In the case of two similar artifacts or events, the older is considered the cause of the latter, when both may have been caused by an unknown cause(s). For example, if a common oral tale x is recorded in documents y and z, a historian writing centuries after the fact will not have the oral tale x, and therefore may mistakenly claim that y is the cause of z.

3 1 Peter 3:18-22.
dead is just a mask of the Eschaton, and that mask is about to fall.

In the exception that proves the rule, the one passage of the canonical Christian Scriptures that may be saying something about the intermediate state in any detail is a parable. The interactions of Lazarus and the rich man are not concerned with explaining the normative conditions of the immediate afterlife. It is not even clear if the story is supposed to be understood as anything more than just a parable. Is it merely an informative narrative or does it give details about the intermediate states of other people? What is clear is that the story's primary concern is with people's thoughts and actions now. This one passage that may be about the intermediate state actually explains why the intermediate state was not a more important topic to the early Christians.

But Abraham replied [to the rich man], “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” He answered, “Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” “No, father Abraham,” he said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Whatever the state of the dead may be, it cannot affect the living both because the dead are inaccessible and the living would not be convinced anyway. Rather than worrying over the conditions of the dead, according to the first Christians what one is supposed to do in this life is get beyond the world's trappings. The conditions of the intermediate state are inconsequential. “He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for to Him all are alive.” Why expound on the dead in Sheol when that state is undone? Why dwell on Christ's sleep when in his awakening he calms the stormy sea?

The intermediate state, like mortal life, is just a kind of unconsciousness from which the Christian attempts to wake. Underneath the ambiguous intermediate state of the New Testament is a simple observation which we may apply to other visions of the intermediate state, including the

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Qur’ān’s. A certain individual’s conception of the intermediate state is a projection of her state now. While this is true to some extent with all depictions of the afterlife, the intermediate state fulfills this role much more explicitly than Paradise and Hellfire do.

Salvation, unity with the divine, the beatific vision, and/or Paradise are this life perfected. Heaven or the post-Resurrection earth is how the world and its people ought to be. It is in some way like this world, but it replaces it or re-presents it in a more ideal form. “I saw a new Heaven and a new earth, for the first Heaven and the first earth had passed away.”\(^6\) However, this is rarely something that can be fully grasped. Even supposed first hand experiences of the ideal such as those of the mystic are replete with the ineffable and the unimaginable. Conversely, Hell, damnation, and/or annihilation are the imperfections of this world writ eternal. To envision the infernal is to examine what is wrong with this life, hence the ubiquitous depictions of ironic punishments. Like ultimate salvation, Hell too as explained in the traditional reports as in some limited way like living experiences. But the length or gravity of these descriptions is drawn out to unfathomable degrees. A living person can suffer or be in despair, but cannot experience everlasting hopelessness or torment as even the most horrific and long-lasting sorrow ends at mortal death. Final redemption and damnation are envisaged as being like this world and so are both relatable, but they always include experiences that far exceed life’s possibilities.

The intermediate state is significantly more lifelike. It has a beginning and an end. Because the intermediate state is finite, its conditions and experiences are not unlike our own now. We already know what it is like to feel temporary hope, ecstasy, pain, fear, and confusion. We know what it is like to go to sleep, to dream, to change, to learn, to suffer, to make progress, to wait through time, or bypass time in unconsciousness. The intermediate state is also a junction of two worlds, as the living human condition is the meeting of the sacred and the profane, the material and the immaterial, fallenness

\(^6\) Revelation 21:1.
and salvation, earth and Heaven, and so on as one's anthropology dictates. As Ibn 'Arabi's life was one full of mystical wonder and wandering in search of divine knowledge, so too was his barzakh an ever-present reality of revealed wisdom constantly impinging on the waking world. Dante Alighieri, a victim of Italian political strife, an exiled poet, and a third order Franciscan, designed his Purgatory as a long, winding road back to the homeland of the human race, governed by the arts and calls for political stability, all as dictated by Franciscan spirituality. Martin Luther introduced his vision of an overwhelming Deity whose justifying grace removed the need for human agency in this life. And so Luther turned to the sleep of the soul: the dead are passive under the boundless will of God. Accounts of the intermediate state are the author's own vision of this life written in a heavy, firm hand.

We noticed this previously. To give just one example, we observed the coincidence of the appearance of what we have called “the medieval barzakh” along with the emergence of Sunnī orthodoxy. In that case, the question of identity and belonging in the Islamic community based on one's theological opinions paralleled a purgative intermediate state in which one is tried, rewarded, and punished based on one's personal adherence to doctrine. In the most powerful instance of this, the individual's attitude in this life to the prophetic sunna is mirrored by the posing in the barzakh of the question “What do you say about this man [Muḥammad]?” The same wellspring that begat the miḥna of the Muʿtazilites flowed into the afterlife as a fitna against the Muʿtazilites. Such correspondences between life and the intermediate state appear in many other contexts as well.

Returning to the early Christian intermediate state: the ambiguous pre-Resurrection afterlife of the New Testament developed in many ways. One tangent of this flowed into what was referenced by Eusebius regarding the Christians of “Arabia.” He tells us that in the 240s the Christians there believed in soul-death. While soul-death is not biblical, and Eusebius may be simplifying these remote Christians’ actual beliefs, he may not have been far off the mark. We do not have other sources

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7 Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History 6.37.
this early to confirm or deny Arabian/Levantine soul-death or a deep soul-sleep, but it is plausible. It would not be too difficult to imagine how a belief in the inconsequentiality of the present, material world could also manifest itself as a Christian mortalism. It may not be a coincidence, then, that it was the Christians of the Levant who also developed extreme asceticism and honored those who performed such feats. If death was truly the death of the spirit or a dreamless sleep, then this life was the only possible setting for the believer’s salvation. While the New Testament suggests some forms of ascetical practices such as fasting and renunciation, it certainly does not go so far as to tell people to live atop columns for 37 years. “Mar Simeon stood on a pillar in these days because he saw creation as if asleep.” One had to forcefully remove oneself from the world of people by retreating to mountain caves, the wilderness, and other remote locations. The Christian had to be as close to death as feasible: “For there is nothing that brings this passion to nought like always thinking of your own death in every season.” Martyrdom remained the ideal even after it was less called for. The true follower of the cross was to be alone, in prayerful stasis, and otherwise as much like a living corpse as possible.

And we cleanse ourselves from the dead deeds, mortifying our bodies on earth, by fasting, self-denial, and constant prayer which is the fruit of fasting. Through this the ancient saints were exalted [...] the holy apostles followed these (virtues), fasting all of their lives [...] Also that we purify ourselves, and die with Christ, this is what he wants from us. So that we die with him and with him we shall be glorified.

The same was presumably so in the intermediate state. If the true bodily life was barely more than bodily death, then it would stand to reason that life in the grave would be even less substantial. A culture that developed and revered so many forms of severe asceticism was probably one that

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considered the intermediate state to be particularly deathlike.

A more moderate approach to radical asceticism (and hence soul-death) was taken up in communal or semi-communal monasticism. And similarly, these monks adopted a more reasonable expression of the intermediate state: soul-sleep. As an ordered monasticism requires more standardization and elaboration than extreme renunciation, so too does dreaming soul-sleep compared to deep soul-sleep or soul-death. The Syriac authors therefore devised a vision of the intermediate state that was substantive, but from the human point of view appeared negligible. Only from the unseen vantage point of God was the activity of the dead apparent. Quoting Aphrahat, “An upright [person], though dead, is alive to God.” Christ himself would be the greatest exemplar of this thought. Although Jesus passed into the underworld of the sleeping-dead, his powers and activity, invisible to the eyes of the living, continued on at the cosmic scale.

But there is a natural side effect of considering the dead to be asleep. In the ancient world sleep has a communal function. Dreams are not always just dreams. Dreams can have a public dimension, and this would open the door to Christian saints; those who foretold and reenacted the drama of Christ. The saints, like Christ, passed into the sphere of the dead and so they too brought together the divine and the human. This would apply most especially to figures like Adam and the Virgin; mere human beings whose lives stood for and made contact with the ultimate. Similarly, the Sleepers of Ephesus, Jonah, Moses, and the Christian Alexander passed beyond the mundane world of the living, and returned to it with supernatural treasure. In opening a path beyond the boundaries of the mortal world, these figures themselves became sanctified by their likeness to the dying-rising Christ.

The same transfer of holiness also passed on to the symbolic cosmological settings of the

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12 Ephrem the Syrian also notes in that only God (in the dual nature of Christ) can create meaningful change in the intermediate state, e.g., “the dead cannot repent in Sheol.” Nisibene Hymns 36:6. The Harp of the Spirit: Twelve Poems of Saint Ephrem tr. Sebastian Brock (Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1975), 46.
saints: mythologically significant bodies of water; the mountains and their caves; the sun and its disappearance/reappearance; the places saints visited and died; and their relics. Consider the Syriac Cave of Treasures, the Alexander cycle, or the Syriac homilies, which employ all of these symbol-clusters. And again, like the divinity and humanity of Christ, the holy people and their respective mythological systems unleashed debates over how the natural and the supernatural met and interacted. The more divine the Christian considered Jesus, the more powerful Jesus’ proxies became. The more active Jesus’ time in the tomb was considered (for instance in the Syriac Christian visions of the Harrowing of Hell), the more the dead saints became powerful and worthy of their own cults (for example, the “treasures” of the Cave of Treasures are the relics and adornments of the solar Adam).

When and how this kind of belief appeared in the Ḥijāz is very debatable, but there is no reason to suppose that it came in ways unlike those which spread ancient Christianity elsewhere. It presumably had a complex genesis stretching out over the centuries all the way back to the dawn of Christianity and perhaps even Paul’s supposed journey to Roman Arabia. Slowly various strains of Christianity coursed their way southward from the Levant, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, and also eastward from Ethiopia and northward from Himyar. Thousands of traders, monks, soldiers, and refugees moved into or traveled through the region for any number of reasons. On their backs they carried lore from their various homelands. Thus many visions of soul-death, deep soul-sleep, and dreaming soul-sleep would have filtered slowly into the Ḥijāz, fused with the cult of the divine Christ and his saints. Some of these Christian interjections in the Arabian interior vanished, leaving only stories and cosmologies in their wakes. Others intertwined with the native cultures of the Ḥijāz, adding a few more folkloric pieces to the tapestry of Arabian ‘paganism.’ And still others thrived, remaining distinctly Christian and winning converts. Among these various pilgrims and wanderers were Persian speakers who called the liminal zone of the prophets and saints burz and kōf.

\[13\ *Galatians* 1:17.\]
In short, the Hijāz was home to ‘pagan’-Christianities; pluralistic gentile quasi-Christianities of common people. By “gentile” of course, we must simultaneously mean gens/ethnos, goyim, ḥanīf/ḥanpā, and ummī. These people knew the old tales and had some general understanding of Trinitarianism and Christology, but they did not often identify themselves as Christian. They had little or no direct access to the written biblical lore, except in forms that retained their own original orality (the Psalms, expressions, parables, and perhaps songs) or could be easily conveyed in new oral forms (liturgy, hagiographic stories). Oral creedal statements were certainly in the mix too, but on the whole these were rarely available and thus only rarely responded to by the Qurān. Neither should we assume that knowing an oral creedal statement means that it was commonly understood or reflects popular religiosity. Even today, a literate, English-speaking Christian can recite an English translation of a creedal statement verbatim much like an Arabic-speaking Muslim can recite the Qurān without necessarily comprehending the significance of what she is saying. How much more true this must have been in a pre-literate environment.

Similar to the popular Christianities of many other pre-modern times and places, the folk Christianity of the Hijāz is nearly imperceptible. Ironically, if there had been enough high literacy in the Hijāz to beget true histories, that folk Christianity would never have developed in the first place.

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14 “Pluralism” in this sense describes a state of affairs where multiple approaches are in coincidence, but not necessarily agreement. As William James and John Dewey would say, it is more like a gathering than a harmonizing. Paganism is a coincident, fluid plurality with a lack of total coherence. It is an excess of loose ends; the pieces all belong together but don’t all fit together. See Pamela E. Klassen and Courtney Bender, “Habits of Pluralism,” After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement, edit. Pamela E. Klassen and Courtney Bender, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1-30.


16 al-Baqara 2:78, al-‘Imrān 3:20 and 75, al-A‘raf 7:157, and al-Jum‘a 62:2. Traditionally this term was understood as ‘unlettered’ or ‘uneducated,’ but recent studies have found it much more likely to be understood as a translation of ‘gentile’ or ‘one of the nations’ cf. the Arabic umma, ‘nation’; Sebastian Günther, “Ummī,” in Encyclopaedia of the Qurān, Volume V, 399-403.

17 The rarity of Qurānic response to baptism or an ancient Islamic initiation ritual which served a similar function may suggest that actual conversion to Christianity was rare. There appears to be only the one instance of al-Baqara 2:238’s word ṣīḥa (“dye,” “color”) as a reference to baptisma (“dipping,” “dunking”).
High literature (and hence abstract, systematic thought) is required to create strong orthodoxy, as sure as paper fixes liquid ink in place. While the occasional monk may have been informed by distant Church-bodies in the North (often via the Ḥimyarites and Aksūmites\textsuperscript{88}), most people would be several degrees removed from any form of orthodox, creedal thinking. The Qurʾān’s own repeated insistence on its orality and Arabic form is evidence that its assumed audience did not consider Greek and Syriac writing deeply informative.

Also, the holy figures of the biblical lore may have partially or entirely shucked off their humanity, as Christian saints divorced from formal theology is wont to do. Again, the presence of high orality played a role in this. To make a strong distinction between physical signifier and the immaterial signified demands the abstractions of the literate mind. Therefore, Jesus, and to a lesser extant his mother and the other saints, became sub-divinities with a power independent of the One God of monotheism, sometimes beyond what would be allowed for by the more theologically rigorous Christianities elsewhere. The elements in the stories of these holy people become mythologized and took on cosmic significance. The mountains and their caves became passages to hidden worlds, which godlike saints, ascetics, and heroes could enter (and return from) at their will. The tombs and cults of the dead, especially the holy dead, reenacted this worldview in which human beings could transcend their mortal bounds, grant fertility, and conquer death itself. This kind of religiosity would also run parallel to folk angelology, demonology, and to an unclear degree, residual Arabian polytheism.

This was the conversation which the Qurʾān engaged. By positing the visible world (nature, people, and familiar information) as signs, the Qurʾān could create a strong barrier between creations and Creator without recourse to abstraction. Using the cosmological order and biblical vocabulary which the Ḥijāzī peoples had known for generations, the Qurʾān rejected the cults of secondary divine powers, while keeping their geographical and narrative forms. Saints, prophets, angels, and jinn do

exist, but they are only the instruments of the One God. They have no independent agency; they can neither help nor harm anyone by their own powers. The biblical lore is true, but is has been misinterpreted. The *barzakh* is real, and it is the meeting place of the seen and the unseen, but it is not freely accessible. Rather than highlighting the liminality of this *barzakh*, and thus opening the door for saints, superhuman heroes, and the divine Christ, the Qurʾān underscored the *barzakh*'s role as a barrier. God made the earth and the heavens distinct. Living people and *jinn* belong on earth; the dead belong in the *barzakh*; the supernatural powers belong in the unseen. While living human beings are to commune with each other, they are not to commune with the supernatural or the dead. Indeed, they cannot. The supernatural is shut away from the world of mortal people by the *barzakh*, as the dead are deafened, asleep, and unaware within it.

God and only God can breach the *barzakh* at will, because unlike the saints He is the Living and the Everlasting. His power is not restrained by the *barzakh* because slumber does not overtake Him, nor sleep. Because He is unbounded by the *barzakh*, both the heavens and the earth are His dominion. He is the Lord of the Two Easts and the Two Wests, but His prophecy is neither of the East nor the West. While it is still true that God's servants the prophets can access the liminal role of the *barzakh*, this is only by God's permission. The prophets have been given access to the divine, but they cannot grant that access themselves. Thus the independent advocacy of the saints is a mere illusion. One can mistakenly think the holy dead (for instance, the Sleepers) are awake and can hear prayers, but they are asleep. Likewise, one can think the heroes of faith can shield the believer from death (for example, the Two-Horned One), but the barrier God has established is better. God transcends all of the markers of the *barzakh*: sleep, death, and ignorance, and He has placed this mountainous ring around the earth as a sign of His own advocacy.

To honor this vision of the Deity, the first Muslims started to reject any custom or rite which implied God rested or was subject to death (a sabbath on either Saturday or Sunday). Similarly they
rejected any act that was reminiscent of saint and tomb cults (ritualized mourning; the underworld mythology of the sun; the fertility mythology of the water). Both corpses and sleep came to be considered ritually defiling. Any stories that could possibly support saint cults would be corrected (such as the mourning of Jacob and Joseph) or infused with obscurities (for example the number of the Sleepers).

Indeed, while the Qurʾān mentions the collective deaths of the prophets many times, the details of their individual deaths are strikingly rare. When the deaths of individual prophets do appear, they are always deliberately confusing or are immediately brushed off. The famous death scenes of Moses at Mount Nebo, John the Baptist under Herod Antipas, or Zechariah under Herod the Great do not appear at all. Breaking the longest narrative arc in the entire Qurʾān, the Jacob and Joseph stories end abruptly at the very point at which in the biblical account the patriarchs face death and mourning. While Jacob's final words appear elsewhere in the Qurʾān, his death is never depicted. While not mentioned in his eponymous sūra, Joseph's death is also referred to only in passing. This is promptly accompanied by people erroneously claiming that Joseph was somehow unique. Muhammad's own possible death is dismissed as inconsequential. Solomon seemed to be alive when he was actually dead. Jesus seemed to have died when he was in truth alive.

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19 E.g., Āl ʾImrān 3:143; al-Nisāʾ 4:55.
20 It may even have been re-presented by his adventures in al-Kahf 18:60-62. The biblical Moses ascends Mount Nebo, glimpses the Promised Land, fails to "cross over into it," dies, and is buried in obscurity on the mountain (Deuteronomy 34). The Qurʾānic Moses travels to the ṣakhra (the mountainous edges of the earth), fails to "pass beyond," falls asleep, and is consequently presented as foolish and out of contact with ultimate reality.
22 Gospel (or Protoevangelium) of James 16:9-25.
23 Jacob arrives in Egypt in Genesis 46, while the following three chapters (47-49) detail his death, followed by Joseph's mourning ritual and his own death in chapter 50. In Yūsuf 12:99-101, Jacob arrives in Egypt, and then the story ends. In place of the death-accounts, the rest of the sūra goes on to discuss unbelief, association, and idolatry.
24 al-Baqara 2:333.
25 Ghāfīr 40:34.
26 Āl ʾImrān 3:144.
27 Sabāʾ 34:14.
28 al-Nisāʾ 4:157. It is worth noting too that the Qurʾān also depicts the death and burial of the unnamed Abel. However, the Qurʾān and its primal audience do not seem to have considered him a prophet (al-ʾMāʾīda 5:27-31).
The intermediate state — the present state of all dead people — is treated similarly. For a text so remarkably full of discussions of death and eschatology, the Qurʾān never stops and dwells on the intermediate state for more than a moment. Like the deaths of the prophets, the death of all people is a plain yet confusing reality that must be acknowledged. The Qurʾān's hearers knew something about the dead from their own personal experiences and the religious milieus of which they were part. This knowledge was not to be completely rejected, only reinterpreted. The world of the dead was liminal (people enter it at death and leave it on the Last Day), but this liminality is guarded. Only by God's leave do people die and return to life, sleep and wake, or make contact with the unseen. Hence the Qurʾān takes the cosmological order already familiar to its hearers, and rather than highlighting the porousness of death as Christians do, the Qurʾān fleshes out its aspects of limitedness and powerlessness. This allows mortal beings to function as signifiers of God, but nothing more. Death, like life, is just a time of finitude and corporeality. Like everything in the visible, material realm of the living, the hidden dead are material signs. The dead, like the cosmos entire, are significant only because they signify God's power to rise them up again.

That power is as a Living, Everlasting Deity who makes and takes life, and is in constant contact with the entirety of creation. God can talk to the dead, for example in al-Muʾminūn's discussion of the barzakh, just as God talks to living prophets. In neither situation does God's power pass over into passive human beings. The Qurʾānic God's ability to commune with the dead or the living does not transfer onto either: no saint cults; no prophetic worship. The Qurʾānic intermediate state and the Qurʾānic vision of the living state are nearly identical in their cosmological forms, differing only in how they signify; not what they signify.

The cosmological-eschatology of the Qurʾānic barzakh remained in the background of Islam's ascent and subsequent eruption onto the world stage. This was supported by the continuity of strong Arabic orality. Although the Qurʾān appeared in rudimentary written forms quite early, the high
residual orality of the early Muslims did not demand a stronger elaboration of the *barzakh* or most other Qur’ānic topics. The shape, functioning, and ordering of the visible world was more than enough evidence of the Qur’ānic vision of the intermediate state. Obviously the world was surrounded by eschatological mountains of the dead, as such worldviews appeared all over the Near East and central Asia. Only those theological issues distinctive of Islam required discussion: the sleeplessness and deathlessness of God, the dead’s lack of awareness, and the powerlessness of putative intercessors. The cloth out of which the Qur’ānic *bricolage* was formed was as much the *barzakh* as it was the biblical lore. It was the old cosmology everyone knew already. Islamic monotheism and prophetology were what needed to be drawn out. Keeping the same metaphor of *bricolage*, we can say that these strictly Islamic elements were the dramatic stitchings and reorganizations that offered new meanings in the familiar and the ancient.

Thus the oldest surviving expressions of post-Qur’ānic Islam do not seem to feel the need to address the intermediate state of the Qur’ānic *barzakh*, yet they consistently assume it. The original Ḥaram al-Sharīf compound would be such a case. Like the Qur’ān, the Umayyad masterpiece was a *bricolage* of older elements (such as Christian shrines) meaningfully reoriented or purposefully disoriented to provide a new theological message. The cosmology assumed by the Ḥaram al-Sharīf was just another brick in the rubble heap of the old Temple, reused to construct a fresh, relevant shrine. Like all well-made architecture, the Dome and its environs do not have to explain the meaning systems they employ. Its original audience would have seen the solar, Christic imagery of the dome on the outside and understood why it was replaced with the message of the inside; the God of the Throne Verse juxtaposed to the sleeping-dead.

The oldest biographical materials on the Prophet and his Companions likewise never spell out the *barzakh*, yet invoke it many times. Revelation comes in sleep and in the mountains. The strange imagery of Gabriel crushing and kicking the dormant Prophet serves no purpose, other than to
underline the helplessness of all possible objects of worship before the power of God. While we can see in the exegetes that the word *barzakh* itself appears to have become obscure quite quickly, the complete lack of detailed explanations of the Qurʾānic eschatological-cosmology in either exegetical or biographical works — in spite of the many references to it — suggests that for the sources on which they drew it was often still alive to the point of being considered common knowledge. Many of the sources employed by the biographers and the early exegetes knew what it meant to go to the mountains, or retreat to a cave, or to have a dream.

At the same time as these literatures began to appear, in order to establish the Qurʾānic message outside of its primary setting, the assumptions the Qurʾān makes of its audience needed to be addressed in writing. The *ḥadīth*, the biographies, and the commentaries substituted for the now-absent thought world of the 7th century Ḥijāz. However, as is true in all acts of translation, present mindsets, cultures, and cosmologies must be accounted for. Before, the Qurʾān struggled to show how its message was the same as that of the holy past. Once that point was made, and the affirmation of the Qurʾān was assumed, that struggle align Islam with the past was replaced by the later effort to show how the Qurʾān and Muḥammad were distinct from that same past. A distinctive Islamic identity was to be reinforced in the person of the Prophet and his *sunna*. However, a cosmology that deliberately downplayed the significance of the prophets after their deaths would work against such a project. Therefore, the plurality with which the *barzakh* was associated became the internal plurality of belief and action of proto-Sunnī Islam, rather than the plurality of divine powers in the ‘pagan’ 7th century Ḥijāzī culture.

Moreover, as the rise of Islam as a civilization transformed Arabic into a written vehicle for thought, so too did abstraction and complex creedal thinking become possible. The disappearance of oral rhetorical structures along with the particular Qurʾānic understanding of the *barzakh*, and the emergence of the conception of a disembodied spirit, along with the distinction between faith and

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action reflected by the medieval understanding of the *barzakh* are all echoes of the same transformation. The dilemma of the sinful Muslim had to be addressed, as did the question of the individual's activities after the physical body was no longer active. The medieval *barzakh* explained these issues convincingly and with a certain amount of theological self-assurance. These were not the questions of the Qur’ānic milieu because they were not yet conceivable questions. The medieval *barzakh* was not so much a later invention but a natural outgrowth of a Late Antique narrative theology read in a foreign, early medieval world.

In other words, the fact that the Qur’ānic text survived unscathed into the Middle Ages that does not mean we can presume its cosmology would have survived unchanged. It had to be translated from the cosmology of a specific cultural setting into a theology which speaks to many settings. First, as the reality of Islam as distinct from other religious communities was now self-evident, the older purpose of the *barzakh* as a deterrent against the worship of prophets and saints could be put aside. The falsity of Christ-worship or idolatry was assumed, as was the primacy of Muḥammad. To be a Muslim was by definition to reject of other divinities and to affirm Muḥammad's prophecy. Cosmology was not needed in order to explain symbolically what could now be said directly as a faith-statement. Hence the medieval conception of the *barzakh* explicitly includes its affirmation of Islamic orthodoxy as the Prophetic *sunna*. The Qur’ānic *barzakh* would have just been a particularly complicated way of saying indirectly what most later Muslims had known since childhood: God is one and has no need of secondary powers, sons, or associates.

Likewise, cosmologies in general do not spread as religions do. Religious positions can change relatively quickly through conversion or reform, but rarely does one have the incentive to change one's cosmology radically. And even then, old cosmologies do not simply disappear as the convert casts away her old identity (or at least tries to). Western Christians, after centuries of knowing that the earth is spinning on its tilted axis, still say that the sun rises and sets as if they believe it to be the case. The
European shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric perception of the cosmos did not change anyone's sensory experiences, yet the theologies of that pre-modern cosmos (such as mystical ascents through the heavenly spheres) vanished quickly. Something similar happened with the Qurʾānic barzakh. The Qurʾān traveled across the known world bringing new theological, and to a lesser extent, cosmological affirmations. People did adopt this new cosmology, but the eschatology and prophetology once implicit to it did not serve a purpose in the new lands of Islam.

For an example of this that may act as an analogy, let us turn again to al-Muqaddasī. Because he was a Muslim, his cosmology was informed by the Qurʾān. But he was also shaped by other cosmological and geographical systems, which were either specific to his own milieu (10th century Jerusalem), or elsewhere. And so he had to reconcile any contradictions, without denying the validity of any of his sources. The Qurʾānic cosmology is true by in principle, and so it must be in accord with the known and visible world. So when he explains the shape of the earth and its seas and regions, he must cite the Qurʾānic references to these and juggle them with his own first-hand experiences of geography.

The barzakh would seem to be a problem. God said that there are two seas, one fresh and one salty, that meet together at a barrier. But Muqaddasī knows full well that there are more than just two seas. Rather than giving up the vision of the world he knows from experience, he shows how the Qurʾān has spoken true within two different cosmologies: the first Muslims’ and his own. Citing seven, eight, or as many as ten seas of which he is aware, he writes:

> If it were urged that the consequence of this interpretation would make the seas more than ten [...] we answer in the first place that God has spoken to the Arabs of facts which they knew and were always before their eyes, to bring the argument home to their minds [...] In the second place, we don’t deny that the seas might be numerous, and only eight have been mentioned [in the Qurʾān29]. If it were retorted that this turns against you and compels you to admit that the seas may be seven and only two have been mentioned in that verse [on the barzakh and the two seas], we reply that there is no similarity in the two [references]. For God said in that verse, “He let loose the two seas [(al-bahrayn)]

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29 He explains that the seas are listed as seven in Luqmān 31:27, while he is not sure if the cosmic ocean counts as an eighth sea.
(which) meet,” referring, no doubt to two particular seas, since the article al- when not giving the species of a thing points out an object definitely.30

Muqaddasī at once affirms that the cosmology of the Qur’ānic barzakh is correct in its primary milieu as well as in his own, even though he is aware that those cosmologies are not identical. He believes that truth is one and the same across history, but the implications of that truth change age to age, place to place, as people learn and understand more. The cosmology understood by the 7th century Arab was no longer active, but that ought not to imply anything about the continuing validity of the Qur’ān which appeared in that setting, or the validity of the ‘new’ cosmology of the post-Qur’ānic Muslims.

Part 2: Why the Barzakh Matters

Several major conclusions can be drawn from this genealogy of the barzakh which have larger ramifications to the study of the Qur’ān, early Islam, and the religious cultures of the Late Antique Near East. Besides the history of the doctrine of the barzakh itself, we can now glimpse a firmer vision of the Qur’ānic cosmology and the Qur’ānic community’s evolving interactions with the religious other. Not a few questions appear as well which could be treated by further investigation.

Embedded within the discussion of the barzakh is the Qur’ānic vision of the world’s shape and layout. The form of the Qur’ānic cosmos is roughly comparable to what is found in Near Eastern literatures both before and after the career of Muḥammad; thus the Qur’ān never has to explain how the world is shaped. However, the purpose of creation’s form is distinctly Qur’ānic. Cosmology is doing something of theological relevance. The living world is surrounded by a high ring of mountains like a massive crater. Mortal people and every thing else “which comes to rest” dwell at the bottom of the bowl. The barzakh at the edge preserves the living within it in numerous ways. It keeps the earth flat for the present, preventing the earth’s “rolling up” until the apocalypse. The barzakh also stops the

30 Muqaddasi, The Best Division, 26-27.
interference of demonic forces. However, it likewise keeps putative intercessors unavailable in a silenced, deafened, and blind sleep, making false religion both fruitless and unconvincing. The mythologies of solar heroes, interceding dead saints, and fertility idols are doubly exposed as flawed (because they do not work) and destructive (because they lead to perdition).

The eschatological-cosmology of the Qurān engages many Near Eastern religious strands of intercessory beings, underworld stories, and fertility fetishes. However, the cult of Jesus would be the prime target. Jesus is at once all of these. He is the dying-rising solar hero, the divine-human intercessor par excellence, and the giver of new life. While the far-off theologians as well as the local folk-Christianities affirm these claims about Jesus and his holy associates, the very shape of the cosmos says they are wrong. In the unseen, Jesus and the other prophets, saints, martyrs, and angels — any creature one may be tempted to worship; the “ones brought near” — recline and rest in a circle around the throne of God: the ever-knowing, sleepless, deathless Lord on high; the Living. The lower world echoes this heavenly court. The dead here also rest in a great ring. In the middle of this ring of sleep are living people who now in this life have limited power and awareness. Like God, human beings and jinn are alive, powerful, and knowledgable, but in a more derivative and mundane sense of these terms. In a similar relationship, the dead both above and below lack power, life, and awareness. This cosmology allows the Qurān to keep the prophecy of Jesus meaningful in the present, but also to lower his status and thereby to render him equivalent with the former and present prophets.

Besides working as a deterrent against idolatry, the Qurānic cosmology also plays a part in the creation of the Prophet's new community. Late Antique biblical lore favors typology to connect the events of the sacred past with each other and the present as well. For the Christian, the words, lives, and deaths of the patriarchs and prophets point forward towards the coming of the Messiah. The saints point back to him. And all of these foretell the Resurrection and Judgment that are to come. All the major players in Christian history signify in two directions: towards the first and second comings
of Christ. The Qurʾān functions typologically as well, although in a much more streamlined manner and without high Christology. All of the Qurʾānic prophets indicate the coming of the Day of Reckoning, however, the prophets also refer to each other. The coming of prophecy, the preaching of the prophets, and their rejection plays out again and again in massive cycles of salvation history. This is now happening once more in Muḥammad, perhaps for the last time. But unlike Christian salvation history, the Qurʾānic story of prophecy does not present Muḥammad as the central point of reference. Although all the former prophets do affirm the present Prophet, the present Prophet also confirms those who have come already. The Qurʾānic Muḥammad is a link in a chain; he is the “seal” of authenticity on the prophets past, but he is not the reference point of all histories. The Qurʾān discourages favoring any prophet above the others: “And We make no distinction between any of them [the prophets].” This is a strategic disorienting of the Christian salvific timeline. There is no ‘tentpole’ in the middle of history to which all types refer unidirectionally, such as the Christians see in the figure of Jesus.

The Qurʾānic barzakh explains the Qurʾān's typological regularity. The prophets preach and warn in the living world, travel bodily or in dreams/visions to the otherwise inaccessible barzakh, and pass into utter inaccessibility in their deaths. The Qurʾānic cosmology of the barzakh allows the prophetic enterprise to function, but prevents their messages from being taken to excess. The barzakh lets the prophets be prophets, but nothing more. Because prophecy is intermeshed with cosmology, and cosmology is a constant until the Eschaton, the prophetic story is bound up with the earth's

31 For a discussion of the Qurʾān's regular typology, see Griffith, The Bible in Arabic, 54-96.
32 al-Ahzāb 33:40. The full connotations of the phrase “seal of the prophets” are debatable. However, we can be sure that the phrase refers to a verification of the past. A 'seal' marks a document's uncorrupted transmission and validity, and “the prophets” in question are all in the past. Whether “seal of the prophets” is supposed to imply that the cyclical history of the prophets is now 'sealed' shut with the coming of Muḥammad, the last Prophet, is not clear. It is certainly possible, especially if we understand to Qurʾān to suppose the Eschaton is quite nearby. Unfortunately the Qurʾān does not dwell on the issue one way or the other. This silence can be read in favor of either reading. There are no more prophets because Muhammad has "sealed" up the prophetic lineage behind him, or there are no more prophets because the world is ending.
33 al-Baqara 2:136.
history itself. The coming of prophets is fixed because the cosmology that allows for them is fixed. Like the change of the seasons or the rise and fall of the heavenly bodies, the prophets must by the nature of the world move in a very regular way as individual instances of an identical unseen reality that supports them all. And thus, the regularity of both the created order and the career of each of the prophets proclaims the identity of the latest Prophet and the message he brings. The furqān is active now as it was with Moses before, just as the sun rises every day anew but identical to days past. Cosmography, history, and typology all strengthen the claims of this new Prophet and his role in this new community: “We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth."34

The discussion of the barzakh and the cosmology of which it is a part captures snapshots of the Islamic approach to the apparent and actual pluralities of religions. Starting with the very early Meccan sûras, there is not yet a new community to which to compare the old ones. Instead, there is the cosmology which continues on from the earliest moment of creation, affirming and allowing for prophets now as it has always done. Therefore, evidence of what is happening in the present is offered by the world itself. “By the sun!”35 “By the morning light!”36 “By the afternoon!”37 “By the night!”38 These are not merely colorful invocations or symbolism. Rather, they are proofs of prophecy. The processes of nature are not only like prophecy in that they are signs of God; they actually are the instruments of prophecy, as water takes on the form of the rock it flows over. The shape of the natural world is the same mechanism by which prophecy occurs. “I swear by the Day of Resurrection!”39 “By the sky and the night visitor!”40 The order of nature proves the continuity of this Prophet with those who have

34 Fuṣṣilat 41:53.
35 al-Shams 91:1.
36 al-Duhā 93:1.
37 al-ʿAsr 103:1.
38 al-Layl 92:1.
39 al-Qiyāma 75:1.
40 al-Ṭāriq 86:1.
come already. “By the pen!”41 “By the fig and the olive! By Mount Sinai!”42 The argument from the cosmos and the argument from biblical lore are the same, with the exception that the former is generic (belonging to no one community) while the latter is particular. Thus, as the new community’s identity comes into focus, the biblical lore appears more and more powerfully while the opening cosmological oaths and invocations recede. They would be replaced by invocations of prophecy directly, and this introductory pattern would continue on into most of the subsequent sūras of the Qurʾān.

Although references to the Qurʾān’s eschatological-cosmology in opening invocations would vanish, other references would continue to appear in the inner mantles of the sūras for the rest of the Prophet’s career. That noted, there does seem to be much more priority to the topic of eschatological-cosmology in the Meccan period(s) than in the Medinan. It is in the Meccan sūras that we see all three usages of barzakh and the only appearance of rare terms like rabwa, aʾrāf, and ḥijran mahjūran. In the Medinan period there are thematically similar passages, but none argue from cosmology alone. This reduction in the centrality of the Qurʾānic barzakh is due to the religious identities of the Qurʾān’s listeners, and how these shifted during the piecemeal appearance of the Qurʾān. This shift took two major forms.

First there is a shift in the Qurʾān’s primary setting: from Mecca to Medina. The religious cultures of both towns are very conjectural, but here I offer two guesses as to why the eschatological-cosmology of the Qurʾān appears more strongly in the Meccan sūras. The first is simple geography. Mecca’s horizon is dominated by mountains in almost every direction. Medina is located beside the mountains, but on a lava flow leading out into the flat desert. It may simply be that the cosmology of the Qurʾānic barzakh was more meaningful in Mecca because it spoke more directly to the locals’

41 al-Qalam 68:1.
42 al-Ṭīn 95:1-2. cf. the ‘Light Verse’ in which the olive is presented as a symbol for prophecy that is “neither of the East nor the West” al-Ṭīn 24:35.
immediate vision of reality. The Meccans saw a world surrounded by a ring of mountains everyday. Also, it may be that the presence of Ḥijāzī folk Christianity was stronger in Mecca than Medina. The association of mountain caves with saints, or the sun with salvific figures is a Christian and polytheistic cosmology, and much less so a Jewish one. If the details given by the later Muslim authors are correct — that Medina had a much more plentiful Jewish community than Mecca — then the reduction of eschatological-cosmology with the Meccan/Medinan shift may be due to an increased presence of Jews in the Qurʾān's conversation. The Qurʾān scaled back the cosmological evidence of its truth in favor of arguments from the biblical lore which would have been more widely meaningful to Jews, as well as Christians, and did not depend as much on regional topography.

The second chronological shift in the Qurʾān's audience is more significant, but is much more difficult to trace. This is the transformation of Islam from a monotheistic revival into an independent religious community distinguishable from Judaism and Christianity. This transformation involves many known and unknown factors before, during, and after the career of Muḥammad. When this process reaches that critical turning point where islām becomes Islam is hotly debated. What is clear however, is that this process was underway already as the Qurʾān was appearing. By the end of the Qurʾān's chronology there is certainly a particular Qurʾānic community engaging in legal and theological debates. Such a community is never seems to be assumed by the oldest passages in the corpus. They simply address whoever was at hand.

Therefore, the passages which discuss the Qurʾānic barzakh are in an inverse relationship to the appearance of the new religious community. When the Qurʾān presents the barzakh, it is evidence that the cults of false divinities like Jesus, the saints, and other supernatural powers are erroneous. Because the dead and the supernatural powers are inaccessible and/or ignorant, praying to them is useless. Perhaps this argument was less needed in Medina. We can suppose that the Medinan Jews were more obviously monotheistic from the Qurʾānic point of view. Whether, why, and how often they
were worshiping Ezra or their rabbis as “lords,” they certainly weren’t worshipping Jesus.

Furthermore, Medina may have been less prone to supernatural cults generally. For example, the jinn are rarely mentioned in the Medinan period. Again, this may have been due in part to a large Jewish presence there. However, the increasing coherence of the Qur’anic community was probably the major factor in the shift. As the Prophet’s career progressed, his message created a community based around a straightforward monotheism and prophetology. This fed back into the content of the message itself, which was assuming more and more that the audience had agreed with the call to monotheism. The pivotal break with tribal lines and the creation of a new monotheistic nation (umma), which later Muslim sources all align with the Prophet’s flight to Medina, marked a new assumption that most of the Qur’ān’s audience agreed with the prophecy already (that is, they were ‘Muslims’) or were Medinan Jews. The argument of the Qur’ānic barzakh against pagan and Christian cults was therefore less prioritized. The mirror-argument that God never rested on the sabbath remained relevant, since it applies equally to both Jews and Christians, and so such passages appear regularly throughout the Qur’ān.

It is interesting, the slow minimizing of the cosmology of the barzakh as the Prophet migrated to Medina also appears in the Sīra. Those famous stories in the Sīra which assume that cosmology minimizes divine intercession and association (like the early revelations, the torments of Bilāl, the sabab of al-Kahf, the Hijra) are Meccan. Their Medinan equivalents (the defilement of Manāt, the nature of martyrs, the death of the Prophet) work toward the same ends, but without the cosmological framework. Although the Sīra should not be seen as a pure survival from the Qur’ānic milieu, the existence of the same pattern of the barzakh’s reduction is evidence of some direct correlation between the two. The Qur’ānic cosmology is almost entirely composed of intra-cultural references, and the Sīra makes little effort to translate these references for its own audience. Furthermore, most of the Sīra’s eschatological-cosmology appears in stories that are independent of the Qur’ān’s content. In
other words, the Sīra is paralleling the Qurʾān's conversation of the intermediate state but not simply because the Sīra is exegetical. Can we perhaps conclude, therefore, that regarding the issue of eschatological-cosmology the Sīra captures something of the trajectory of the Prophet's historical ministry? Whether and to what degree this might be so must unfortunately remain unresolved here.

Similar observations can be made about later Islamic literatures using the Qurʾānic barzakh as a yard stick. Just as the Syriac Christian sources can give us some clues as to what information might have been active in the Qurʾānic milieu but not with specificity, the cosmology of the Qurʾān can tell us more about the milieux of the Islamic authors to a certain extent. Because cosmology in the Qurʾān, like in nearly all literatures, is mostly given in internal references, it can easily vanish along with the community that subscribed to that cosmology. Of course this is a historical loss, but the simultaneous ubiquity and invisibility of cosmology can also be used to our advantage. If a certain text employs this cosmology instinctively, we can conclude that the source (oral or written) of that text not only knew about the Qurʾān's milieu, but was actually in contact with it. Or, if another text refers to elements of the Qurʾānic eschatological-cosmology, but either tries to explain the elements' meanings or does not seem to see how all the elements fit together, we can suppose indirect survivals are at work. The author is working in a milieu related to that of the Qurʾān, but because the author does not understand the 'big picture' instinctively that milieu of the Qurʾān is not particularly familiar either. Although this kind of continuity-mapping does not give us many specifics as to the relationship in question, we at least know what kind of continuity existed.

For one example, let us look at the earliest Muslim exegesis of the Sleepers' tale. Through a translation into ring structures — a technology unknown to the Islamic authors of the time — we noticed that the Qurʾān itself is offering the saints as evidence that the holy dead are not to be worshipped. Nor can they act as intercessors, because they are in a deafened sleep in the liminal mountains, although their miracle is still to be understood as a sign of God. This reading would not be
obvious to a highly literate author who did not have access to the Qurʾānic milieu.

Ibn Isḥaq recorded some non-Qurʾānic examples of the Qurʾānic cosmology and equated these to the Sleepers (that they have something to do with the mere humanity of the messengers, the ring of mountains, the Resurrection, and the Two-Horned One). But the biographer doesn’t seem to know how the pieces all fit back together again, only that these somehow relate to al-Kahf. Although he might possibly have been born in Medina, Ibn Isḥaq spent most of his life in Egypt and Iraq; indeed, he rarely cites Medinan sources in his text. Therefore, we must conclude that while some of Ibn Isḥaq’s sources from other locations did employ the Qurʾānic cosmology instinctively, the author did not think this way himself. He was collecting the fragments of someone else's culture. In a similar way, when we turn to Muqātil, we can see that he too has received some survivals of that now-extinct Ḥijāzī milieu (such as the meaning of raqūm and the solar metals, the function of the dog), but he does not employ that full cosmology either. He too was collecting disconnected reports, rather than relaying information from a single person who understood the Qurʾānic cosmology intimately because it was her own.

On the other hand, when we look at Maʿmar ibn Rāshid’s biographical epic and how it addresses the Sleepers, there is no struggle to explain cosmology. Neither does he include a composite sabab of the Sleepers’ pericope like Ibn Isḥaq and Muqātil do. However, Maʿmar does give the Sleepers’ story a reading which is comparable to the ring structural translation. The Sleepers’ is a story of worshipping proxy figures, a warning against the defilement of false idols and sleep, and specifically how this applies to Jesus and Christianity. That Maʿmar thematically aligns the Sleepers with the false worship of the proxy-Solomon and the rejection of worshipping the dead Muḥammad strengthens this argument. Although like Muqātil and Ibn Isḥaq, Maʿmar was not native to the Qurʾānic milieu, in

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43 J.M.B. Jones art. “Ibn Isḥāḳ” in Elz. Jones states that there is only one Medinan transmitter used by Ibn Isḥāq, and that is Ibrāhīm ibn Sa’d. Ibn Sa’d is not the source of the sabab of al-Kahf, and neither of the other passages which clearly assume the Qurʾānic eschatological-cosmology (the first revelations, the Hijra, etc.).
in this case he appears to have had much more direct access to that milieu then they did. Muʿmar's teacher was Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 742), who was from Medina, and whose teachings undergird Muʿmar's text throughout. Therefore it seems plausible that Maʿmar could have been instructed in the older reading of the Sleepers' story, without himself having to know the intra-cultural details of pre-Islamic Ḥijāzī cosmography. Al-Zuhrī or his teachers knew the Qurʾānic cosmology instinctively, and could thus interpret it for Maʿmar who could thereby explain the Sleepers' story without the struggles and narrative loose ends evident in Muqātil or Ibn Ishāq. Maʿmar's source(s) knew what that cosmology hidden in the Sleepers' story was doing, so the biographer himself could cut to the chase.

We cannot use reconstructions like this one to get back to the sources beneath the sources (again, as in the case of Syriac Christianity's relationship to the Qurʾānic milieu), but we can use these to give our eye some orientation. Cosmological assumptions or details that would otherwise be difficult to detect without first-hand knowledge of the Qurʾānic milieu or oral literary forms appearing in later literatures can suggest survival, and even to a small extent indicate the directness of such survivals.

Part 3: Orality Translations

The study of ring and other paralleling structures as a means to translate the oral Qurʾān into our own meaning systems has only just begun in earnest. I would like to offer this project as proof of what such studies can do and cannot do, and of how they can be applied to other issues in the text.

There are several major shortcomings of the field of Qurʾānic ring composition which require improvement. Even the terminology of the discipline is problematic and does not always fit well with the Qurʾān or oral productions. ‘Ring structure’ and the comparable names of the discipline still carry many false assumptions which poison the well. Ring structures are not always rings, and the word ‘structure’ may be hopelessly reductive; as are also the occasional references to ‘chiastic’ or ‘concentric
structures. ‘Semitic rhetoric’ is not exclusively or universally Semitic, and the term ‘rhetoric’ implies a deliberate literary construct (physical or mental) which undergirds the oral performance. This notably imperfect nomenclature not only fails to define the discipline, it even twists it with suggestions of textual regularity or formulaic self-awareness. These sorts of terms disguise the truth of the methodology: that it is an act of translation; no more, no less. Ring structures are not in the text of the Qurʾān any more than English or even fiṣḥā Arabic are. Ring structural translation, like linguistic translation, is just a way of moving a radically foreign artifact into forms in which we find meaning. Perhaps rebranding the discipline as Orality Translation would avoid future reductive assumptions from both the discipline’s practitioners and its critics.

It may also be time to reinvent the methodological guidelines of the discipline. Central to this are the ‘rules’ of engagement: ‘Lund’s laws.’ Lund’s list of seven structural tendencies directly or indirectly governs all studies of Qurʾānic ring structures. On the whole Lund’s laws work well when applied to the Qurʾān, but they could be refined. Because they were created to study the New Testament, they sometimes fail to account for Qurʾānic patterns, or are simply not applicable at all.

For instance, Lund’s first law declared that “the center is always the turning point,” and it may “consist of one, two, three, or even four lines.” The first half of this statement appears to be true in the Qurʾānic texts considered by this study and others. However, the second half is problematic. What a “line” may be in the Qurʾān is not clear. Can we even say that oral texts have lines? If we take “lines” to mean Qurʾānic “verses” (āyas) — usually but not universally meaning a segment with a rhyming end — the law does not always apply either. Some otherwise straightforward “turning points” are composed of more than four verses. Other turning points are only half of one verse. And some others still have clear concentric parallelisms without any one section serving as a “turning point.”

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44 Lund, Chiasmus, 40-41.
45 E.g., al-Mursalāt 77:19-28.
46 E.g., the second part of al-Kahf 18:17.
47 E.g., Tū Hā 20:105-108.
Similar problems crop up throughout Lund's list when it is applied to the Qurʾān.

Conversely, there are structural patterns visible in the Qurʾān that are in no way accounted for by Lund. The most critical of these are Qurʾānic timescales. The text's macro-structures appear most powerfully when one looks for the timeframe to which the text most directly applies. The Qurʾān has four such timescales: the present (discussions of Muḥammad's prophecy; the community's laws; questions and challenges to the Qurʾān's listeners), the primal past (creation; Adam; Iblīs), the prophetic past (all former prophets and peoples, save Adam — who is never called a prophet in the Qurʾān) and the Eschaton (including Paradise and Hellfire). Whenever the Qurʾān shifts from one of these timeframes to another, it marks a parallel shift elsewhere in the system. The pivots or “turning points” of the Qurʾān always take place in the present timeframe, even if another timeframe must be interrupted to accomplish this. Such a pattern does not appear in the New Testament, and therefore it is not discussed by Lund's laws. But this observation is critical to Qurʾānic orality translations. This indeed may be the most useful method for identifying Qurʾānic parallels as the timeframes of most passages are quite obvious and few are open to debate.

So what can orality translations show us? Heretofore, studies of Qurʾānic ring structures have been primarily driven by self-authentication. Because the discipline is quite new, the search for structures has been used to demonstrate that such structures can be detected. Whatever themes are amplified or downplayed by these new readings have been secondary matters. Now that many sections of the received Qurʾān have been treated thus (here and elsewhere), the methods can be used to arrive at more substantive results.

For example, in this study we used orality translation to define an obscure textual element: the word *barzakh*. Because the word *barzakh* is used in passages that can be treated by orality translation, we detected parallel passages that expanded our knowledge of the problematic word via comparison.

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48 The exception to this rule would be in the case of parables, which do not have a clear timescale.
inversion, or equivalence. A similar method could be used to explore other questions of the Qurʾān and its primary audience. To a certain extent we have already done this with elements related to barzakh, such as ṣakhra and the “junction of the two seas.” Features of the Qurʾānic cosmography in general may be excellent possible subjects for such orality translations, as cosmography by its nature is mentioned repeatedly but usually in intra-cultural references. Similar cosmography studies of the Qurʾān’s astronomy (like the sun, the moon, the sky, God’s throne) or geography (mountains, rivers, seas) could be well treated by such projects. To a lesser extent hapax legomena and other rare terms or proper nouns may also be worthy objects of investigation.

Much more significantly, older studies of ring structures in the Qurʾān have analyzed passages in isolation. The studies in question either examined only one passage (usually a sūra), or studied several without investigating the relationships among them. This self-limiting is an understandable way to make one’s project manageable. However it also leaves considerable room for accusations of eisogesis or overemphasizing coincidences. Of course such risks are intrinsic to nearly all literary studies, but they can be minimized. Here, rather than simply observing the apparent patterns of one system within the larger data set, we examined the whole gamut of possible artifacts: the entire received Qurʾān and its significant variants. We could therefore observe which parallels occurred repeatedly, perhaps often enough to exceed mere chance. And because there is a general consensus about the order in which the Qurʾān’s sūras appeared, we can use orality translation to read the text diachronically: tracking developments, elaborations, or repeated assumptions. Moving forward, it may even be possible to use diachronic orality translations to uncover the text’s macro- and mega-editing processes: how the sūras came to take on their largest shapes, and how they were compiled.

Why only the largest structures though? Micro-orality patterns are very common and useful for memorization, but the text often departs from them. Oral compositions are not sonnets. Oral performances do not have formulas as much as they have tendencies. The oral Qurʾān tends to
compose itself in such-and-such a way, but it is not usually rigid about this composition on the micro-
scale of grammar, wording, and poetic forms. Indeed, we should not expect strict obedience to any
pattern on the micro-scale. The primary desiderata of oral texts are memorability and memorizability.
The text must have regularities, but to have too many of them would be counterproductive. Deeply
redundant, evenly applied patterns would degenerate into monotony, and thus backfire and
undermine the first principle of memory. Therefore, rings and other oral devices (like the sajʿ form)
cannot be used to reveal the editing process of a text in precision, save in the rare instance when there
is also a meaningful variant reading available elsewhere to give affirmative evidence to such an
argument.

In a similar regard, the lack of any singly employed device cannot give us exact evidence of the
editing of the Qurʾān either. Anything that makes the text memorable and memorizable must be used
to make two (or more) passages parallel each other: rhymes, rhythms, reprises, grammar, puns, roots,
synonyms, irony, chiasms, themes, plot structure, stock phrases, aphorisms, setting, imagery, and
extra-textual associations can all be used — a kitchen sink approach to memory. It may even make for
better mnemonics to deliberately stagger which elements of the text mark the larger structure. But
again, the failure or seeming failure of the Qurʾān to employ any of these features to trigger memory in
any particular instance confirms nothing. There are many factors involved in memory which are
unpredictable. Why one thought is memorable, or a passage memorizable, and others are not isn't
always apparent, even in our own minds today. Rarely can we, who are so radically removed from the
Qurʾānic milieu, see what memory dictated in that context and why. If one story uses only weak orality
patterns, and another uses them repeatedly, overtly, and on several scales, that does not necessarily
mean that the second story is a stronger survival of an original oral form. In fact, it may mean the
opposite. The first story may be memorable as-is for some unknown reason, while the second required
multiple mnemonic devices (added in the oral transmission process) to make it stick. All this is to say
that orality translations cannot be used on their own to uncover the Qurʾān’s precise editing process on the smallest scale. Oral micro-forms can and do break as memory demands.

While orality translations cannot be used on their own to affirm or deny the Qurʾān’s editing process in any specificity on the micro-scale, they can perhaps be used as such on the macro- and mega-scales (the sūra and the entire corpus). The largest parallels reappear in fixed pairs throughout the received text, even though the exempla of the parallels changes. This implies that the sūras’ contents were not edited heavily by anyone removed from the Qurʾānic milieu. That is to say, the presence of the repeated orality markers suggests that the oral Qurʾān deliberately uses the sūra as a form, and the substance of those oral sūras is not radically dissimilar from those that appear before us in the received text. This conclusion seems especially likely when it is considered in tandem with other evidence. For a remote editor of the corpus to create or heavily manipulate the text into such complex parallels and then disappear entirely from the historical record without even leaving rumors of a markedly different Qurʾān seems highly improbable.

Neither does the Qurʾān show any clear awareness of the death of the Prophet, the debate over succession, or the rise of the Empire. These events were public, clearly significant to the Qurʾān’s conversation, and occurred within the Qurʾānic milieu. The ascent of the caliphate especially would have offered powerful proof of the Qurʾān’s message, powerful enough that a later editor certainly would have mentioned it. Editorial additions of later information disguised as more ancient prognostications proliferate in the literatures of the biblical lore and the later Islamic authors, from Isaiah to Daniel to the Sūra. But the Qurʾān has no strong sense of the immediate future, which suggests that it arrived in its present macro-form very quickly; perhaps almost immediately.

The appearance of sūra-rings throughout the canon suggests a much more plausible editing process. Simply put, the sūras’ primary speaker and their primary editor were one and the same. The

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49 The Qurʾān rarely addresses the immediate future. For one such instance, see al-Rūm 30:3-4. The near disregard for the future before the Eschaton may also underscore the Qurʾān’s efforts to downplay the significance of the intermediate state.
oral Qurʾān could have appeared in a manner similar to what is called “chunking,” whereby the active memory never has to retain more than nine independent elements at once, but always uses at least five.59 “Chunking” is the use of constructs of spacial memory whose structures are fixed but whose content can be reworked and replaced as needed. It is similar to the building of ‘memory palaces’ or ‘thought webs,’ except that the ‘chunks’ are not made deliberately.

It may have worked like this. The first sūras consisted of only one major macro-ring with a pivot in the center, on only one theme, and with minimal variation. Therefore there were five independent elements which could all be held in short term memory at once: an opening, a closing, two parallels, and a central pivot. These would form a repertoire of stock themes and parallels. Most of these would be composed of well-understood juxtapositions. These included obvious parallels (Heaven and earth, this life and the next, belief and unbelief) and those which were specific to the Qurʾānic milieu (the mountains and the seas, the sun and idols). New parallels unique to the Qurʾān (Muḥammad to the biblical prophets, sleep to the inaccessibility of the unseen) would be mixed with these known sets, and together the novel parallels would pass into long-term memory.

Because all of these parallels are built on the same structural foundation of juxtaposition/opposition/equivalence, they could also be easily reworked and combined into increasingly complex systems. When called for, new themes and stories could appear, and be inserted into standing configurations. In turn some of these became stock parallels, too. Others would be dropped or ‘abrogated’ if they were no longer needed. As even more material was introduced, second parallel systems appeared and sub-pericope rings were introduced. Most systems would keep the original limit of five or seven independent parts (an opening, two exempla rings of two parts each, a central pivotal passage, a closing) with no system of any scale ever exceeding nine units (an opening, three rings of two passages each, a pivotal center, a closing). At no point would the initial structure need to break

down, as more and more material could be introduced to the stock parallels by increasing the scale of previously established forms (as opposed to tacking new passages onto the end of old ones as a literate author might add an addendum).

This could also explain why rare elements tend to be paralleled to other rare elements. New themes or stories need to be introduced in sets of two in order to make parallels. For instance, each of the unique pericopes in *al-Kahf* are paired to other unique pericopes. The story of the Sleepers only appears once in the received Qurʾān, and it is paired with the Two-Horned One, who also never appears again. The Recollections of *Isaiah 5* paralleling Moses’ adventures works similarly. However, even unique stories are composed of many parallels which appeared previously, meaning they are not textual additions added by an independent editor. (For a simplified schematic of how this would have worked in the case of *al-Kahf*, see fig. 6.1). The stock parallels (the ‘chunks’) would remain the same. However, because more and more parallels were becoming standardized and moving to the stock repertoire of long term memory, the systems on both the macro- and micro-scale would grow longer, and longer over time. The complexity of the sūras would increase, but it would not become any more difficult for the reciter to recall them.

Because the received sūras are all composed of oral formulae, and yet the earliest record of each sūra’s contents is overwhelmingly stable, we may conclude that the oral sūras passed into written forms quite quickly. The discrepancies that do appear never break the form of the sūras as known to us today. The variants between them are minor, and neither do they appear to be merely scribal
Fig 6.1: This graphic shows the hypothetical movements of parallels relating to the Qurʾānic barzakh in the Meccan period. The Qurʾān was thus compiled by the reapplication of fixed parallels with malleable contents, here signified by the various arrows.
errors.\textsuperscript{51} This would also mean the reciter was not the scribe. The most likely conclusion then is that the sūras were recorded one at a time by at least two scribes very close to the sūras’ first recitations. As in the case of the appearance of verbatim oral recitation described by Ong, which centered around a single master interacting with a community, the more literate members of the community could have recorded the Prophet’s words as they first appeared, or very soon thereafter. This process would continue on for years, sūra by sūra, which would each in its turn gain wider circulation in both written and oral forms. In such a case, rather than going back and editing the older sūras (as a literate editor would do), the oral editor would introduce new sūras built on the older forms. This may account for both the repetition of intra-sūra phrases and stories, as well as the sūras’ almost complete independence from one another.

Later, probably after the Prophet’s lifetime, several people gathered the sūras together into a number of different anthologies. The one which survives to us in full, the standard received text, was compiled using the only organizational principle available to one who did not know the text’s chronology: length. Like the epistles of the New Testament, the compiler arranged the already written sūras starting with the materials that could not be easily memorized. So the very long sūras would

\textsuperscript{51} The partial, roughly-standard recension of Tübingen MS VI 165 (http://idb.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/diglit/MaVI165) has been dated with 95.4\% probability to before the year 675. “Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen,” accessed 18 November, 2014, https://tue.ubs-bw.de/dISWeb/app?service=direct/o/Home/$DirectLink&sp=S127.0.0.1:23022&sp=SAKSWB-lIDN366787616. The partial C1 variant Qur’ān DAM 01-27.01 (the “Ṣan‘a’ Palimpsest”) has been dated with 99\% probability to before the year 671. Sadeghi and Bergmann, “The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet,” 352-353. While the recensions of the two codices are distinct from each other, there is no reason to suppose these distinctions are caused primarily by copying error in either direction. The nature of the additions, subtractions, grammatical and spelling variations, and the different sūra orders suggest the source texts were copied and compiled independently, but not radically so. As we have noted previously, there is also at least one instance (al-Kahf 18:17) where the texts are divergent but still maintain the same ring structure. From all this it must be concluded that the common source from which both texts stem was oral, not written, and neither recension is significantly distant from that oral Vorlage.

While radiocarbon dating may be flawed, and neither codex is complete, it no longer seems justified to question the collection date of the sūras as significantly later than traditionally attested. I would argue that the final collection process instigated by ‘Uthmān in 653 or thereabouts remains a strong possibility for the canonical text’s terminus ante quem, as this account does not appear mythologized and fits the criterion of embarrassment. The story does not graft well into Islamic salvation history, freely offers that variant texts existed, and leaves an otherwise problematic gap of twenty years in which the Qur’ān could have been altered. While we cannot make the leap to assume that the ‘Uthmānic account is exactly correct (it may have been pro-‘Uthmān/Umayyad propaganda), it seems highly unlikely that the dating and processes of the account are entirely off the mark either.
have been gathered first as these were the priority. The shortest sūras that many people would have
known in both oral forms and writing could merely be added to the end of those passages more likely
to be forgotten. At the end of this process, the compiler of the standard recension flanked the codex
on either side with parallels like a basic ring structure. At the beginning was the all-important prayer
of al-Ītāḥa. At the end, was a dual-prayer parallel system: al-Falaq and al-Nās, which like a ‘latch’ of
two divine names within a sūra, here indicated that the mega-system was now closed.

To recreate this process in reconstruction demands much more attention than we can give it
here. But with the tools provided by orality translations, it may be possible to accomplish this task. If
the experiment proved successful when applied to the majority of the text — which seems plausible
given the findings of this orality translation — it could result in much more evidence of the Qur’ānic
milieu, its people, and the conversation they had — a conversation which continues to shape the
course of human history.
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