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Problems in sura 53*

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For Gez, whose book of 1999 changed my academic direction

Abstract

This paper argues that sura 53 contains a number of problems, of which the most intractable is the question: who is speaking in the oracular, part I? The answer is not God, nor is it easy to see how it could be the Prophet. Since the Prophet is undoubtedly responsible for the sura as a whole, the solution tentatively proposed here is that he found part I in an earlier text current among his people, such as a collection of oracular verdicts.

Keywords: Diviners, Angels, "Have you seen?", Satanic verses, Heavenly journeys, *Tafṣīl al-āyāt*

Sura 53, *al-Najm*, "the Star", is a famous short sura in which the speaker describes a vision of God and/or His angel. It consists of 62 verses in rhymed prose, with the same rhyme used in all but the last seven verses and falls into four parts.

The disputed *ṣāḥib*

Part I opens with an oracular verdict on the credibility of "your man" (*ṣāḥibukum*), narrated in the style of a pre-Islamic diviner (*kāhin*) delivering a verdict in a dispute brought to him, if we may trust the tradition on Jāhilī Arabia.[1] But whereas a *kāhin* delivers a verdict on another person, the speaker

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1 For *kāhin*s (of whom there were several different kinds) acting in dispute settlements, see Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq*, ed. Kh.A. Fāriq (Hyderabad, 1964). The procedures are particularly well described in the cases at 114–6 (disputed presence at a *majlis*) and 118–20 (accusation of adultery; also in other works). Ibn Ḥabīb strangely calls both cases a *munāfara*, a boasting competition, perhaps because honour was the issue in both of them, but real boasting competitions were about the relative merit and nobility of two men and were normally settled by *ḥakam*s, usually translated as "umpires" or "arbitrators" (correctly, if meaning judges whose could not cannot be enforced). There were several kinds of those too. The key difference between *ḥakam*s and *kāhin*s was that *ḥakam*s were knowledgeable about tribal law, whereas *kāhin*s had knowledge of the supernatural. *Ḥakam*s were chosen on the basis of their "nobility, truthfulness, reliability, leadership,

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in sura 53 is delivering a verdict on himself: namely, that he is speaking the truth when he claims to have seen a heavenly being and is neither mistaken nor trying to mislead – he has indeed received a revelation from a mighty power. He proceeds to describe how this revelation was imparted and asks if they are going to dispute what he saw, adding that he saw the mighty power on another occasion too, describing that as well (53:1–18).

There are several problems in this section. Leaving aside the oddity of the *fa-* in verse 6, where it introduces an earlier event rather than a subsequent one, who is the heavenly being imparting revelation to the disputed person? One takes the answer to be God, since the recipient is identified as "His servant" (53:10), but this identification has always been controversial, and a parallel passage in sura 81 identifies the power as the angel by the throne. Here, the oracular verdict on the disputed person's claim is that "this is the statement of a noble messenger (*rasūl karīm*), a powerful one by the firm throne whom your *ṣāḥib* did see in the clear horizon" (81:19–23), presumably giving us an oracular verdict on the disputed person again. Maybe there is no contradiction, for in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere angels are sometimes manifestations of God, not least the angel of the throne. This is, however, at odds with the rest of the Quran, for the Messenger devotes immense energy to distinguishing angels from God, stressing that they are beings created by Him, not His "partners", as the pagans reputedly claimed. In other words they did not share in His divinity and could not do anything on their own initiative. It is also noteworthy that the word used for the angel in 81:19 is *rasūl*. This term does indeed appear elsewhere in the Quran in the sense of angel (for example, 11:69f and 51:26f, on how the *rusul* did not touch the calf that Abraham prepared for them; cf. also the angels of death as sometimes *rusul* and sometimes *malāʾika* in 4:97; 6:61; 7:37 and 16:28). But normally the Messenger prefers the term *malak.* In his understanding, a *rasūl* was a human messenger (*apostolos*), such as he claimed to be himself. He sometimes clarifies this by glossing *rasūl* as *nabī*, prophet (for example, 19:51), or by using *nabī* alone (for example, 7:157). He even asserts that all the *rusul* sent before him were human (12:109; 13:38; cf. also 2:98, where the *malāʾika* and *rusul* appear together as angels and human messengers respectively). It is his opponents who think that a *rasūl* is an angel (*angelos*) and

age, dignity and experience", as al-Yaʿqūbī says (see *Taʾrīkh*, ed. M.Th. Houtsma (Leiden, 1883), II, 299), and many were chiefs. By contrast, diviners had opted out of their tribes and lived in isolation, or they were women, sometimes slave women, who stood outside the tribal system of authority. It was for their supernatural knowledge that they were chosen, and they were always tested for their access to the unseen before being asked to deliver a verdict. Ibn Khaldūn saw this very well. T. Fahd, *La divination arabe* (Leiden, 1966), 118, citing his *Muqaddima*, ed. M. Quatremère (Paris, 1858), I, 196; tr. F. Rosenthal (second ed. Princeton, 1967), I, 218ff, on *ʿarrāf*s and *kuhhān.* Diviners always delivered their verdict in rhymed prose (*sajʿ*). Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa'l-tabyīn*, ed. ʿA.-S.M. Hārūn, second printing (Cairo, 1960–61), I, 284, 289f, claims that *ḥukkām* (enumerated by name) did so as well, thereby creating a confusion that has endured to this day.

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who mockingly ask what sort of *rasūl* it is that eats food and walks about in the markets (25:7).[2] The *rasūl karīm* also appears in the account of the exodus from Egypt in 44:17, where one takes him to be the angel of the throne (as in sura 81) identified with the angel of the Lord who accompanied the Israelites on their exodus from Egypt in the Bible (Exod. 14:19: Hebrew *malʾāk YHWH*, Greek *angelos tou theou*); but he now seems to be recognized as Moses. Here the Messenger is reshaping material that he seems to owe to Jews or Christians with a Greek-speaking past.[3]

Another oddity is that the divine being descends to the human recipient of the revelation: he drew near and came down, *danā fa-tadallā* (v. 8), as we are told (the image is of a bucket being lowered down a well), and then he made known his revelation. The second occasion on which the disputed person saw the divine being is explicitly called a *nazlatan ukhrā*, another descent, suggesting that the divine being is indeed envisaged as an angel here. One would otherwise have expected the human recipient of divine knowledge to ascend to the divine realm. In fact, J. Fossum takes it for granted that 53:13–18 (the second vision) records an ascent to heaven,[4] and one has to agree that we do seem to be in the heavenly realm here, but contrary to what Fossum says, the Messenger never claims to have ascended to heaven in the Quran – only in the tradition in the light of which Fossum unwittingly reads suras 53:12–18 and 17:1. It is the Messenger's opponents who undertake, or just read about, heavenly journeys. As the Messenger says, they would not believe in him unless he ascended to heaven and brought down a book (17:95). He sarcastically asks them whether they have a ladder for climbing into heaven (52:36–8) and challenges them to ascend in the heavenly cords (38:10),[5] declaring that they would not believe even if God opened a gate of heaven for them so that they could go on ascending (15:14f). He never speaks of going on such a journey himself. On the contrary, he repeatedly stresses that the book has been *sent down* to him.[6] If a heavenly journey is indeed described in sura 53, the Messenger is here sharing the conception of his opponents.

There can in any case be no question that the process of revelation is being described differently in this sura from elsewhere in the Quran. If God came down to the disputed person and conveyed revelation to him at a distance of two bow lengths, the disputed person must have seen His face, which is more than was possible for Moses, or indeed for any human being. If the Messenger had been an exception, it would have been so momentous that we would have heard about it, both here and in other parts of the Quran. But it

2 See further, P. Crone, "Angels versus humans as messengers of God", in P. Townsend and M. Vidas (eds), *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2011), 315–36, 316–8.

3 Cf. Crone, "Angels versus humans", esp. 320–3.

4 J.E. Fossum, "The apostle concept in the Qurʾān and pre-Islamic Near Eastern literature", in M. Mir and J.E. Fossum (eds), *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy* (Princeton, 1993), 149–67, 157. Similarly Th. Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, ed. F. Schwally (Leipzig, 1909–38), I, 100.

5 On these, see K. van Bladel, "Heavenly cords and prophetic authority in the Quran and its late antique context", *BSOAS* 70/2, 2007, 223–46.

6 Cf. Crone, "Angels versus humans", 334f.

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surely was not God Himself who came down. In 42:51 we are informed that "it is not fitting for a human being that God should speak to him except by inspiration (*waḥy*), or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger (*rasūl*) to reveal with God's permission what He wills". Was it then by inspiration that the disputed person of sura 53, part I received his revelation? The fact that it was taught to him by one of mighty powers (*ʿallamahu shadīdu 'l-quwā*, v. 5) does not suggest so. Was it then delivered by a messenger, i.e. an angel? This possibility fits very well: the heavenly being would in that case be the high-ranking angel described in sura 81, the *rasūl karīm*. There would be no discrepancy between the two suras, and since the angel represented God, there was nothing odd about the disputed *ṣāḥib* being called His servant – "His" here means God's.

Yet another problem is where the first section ends. The traditional answer is in verse 18, but it is difficult to see why, for verses 18–22 are written in the same oracular style as the beginning, whereas polemics in a more prosaic style with long sentences begin in verse 23 and continue till the end of part II in verse 32. What is more, practically all of this polemical section is generally regarded as a later addition,[7] so that if part I ends at verse 18, we are left with 5 verses constituting an unmotivated section of their own. It seems considerably more likely that these seemingly unmotivated verses belong in part I and should be read in that light.

The verses in question ask a famous question, or rather two: "Have you [opponents] seen al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā and Manāt, the third, the other? Have you got males and He females? That would be an unjust division." The precise significance of this hinges on the meaning of "have you seen" (*a-fa-raʾaytum*). It is normally held to have the sense of "have you thought about/reflected on", and this is certainly what it often means in the Quran, as also in the forms *a-raʾaytum, a-lam tarā* and *a-lam tarā ilā*. But a more idiomatic translation would usually be "haven't you seen" or "can't you see" in the sense of "haven't you understood" (for example, 36:71; 56:58, 63; 58:7), while the dividing line between seeing in the literal sense and that of understanding is often thin (for example, 22:65; 31:31; 36:71; 105:1).[8] Here we should probably take the

7 The exceptions are verses 24 and 25, cf. Nöldeke, *Geschichte,* I, 103 (one of the many examples where current academic orthodoxy turns out to rest on one line in this book). But verse 24 only makes sense against the background of verse 23 (i.e. the supposedly later addition): for verse 23 assures us that the devotees of the female angels are following nothing but conjecture and "what [their] souls fancy" (*mā tahwā 'l-anfus*). Verse 24 continues this line of thought by rhetorically asking, "Shall man have whatever he desires?" (*am li'l-insāni mā tamannā*). Verse 25, on the other hand, is just a nondescript claim that this world and the next belong to God.

8 Sura 105:1 has, "Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?" (*a-lam tarā kayfa faʿala rabbuka bi-aṣḥābi 'l-fīl*). Compare Zuhayr in Th. Nöldeke (ed.), *Delectus Veterum Carminum Arabicorum* (Wiesbaden, 1933; repr. 1961), 106, l: "Have you not seen Ibn Sinān how he favoured him (*a-lam tarā 'bna Sinānin kayfa faḍḍalahu*), he does not buy people's praise of him for a price." Obviously Zuhayr is speaking of what one should learn from Ibn Sinān's example, but he presupposes that his audience has seen Ibn Sinān's behaviour. As regards 105:1, an African elephant was brought by a man from Aila to Anastasius I in 496, almost certainly as a gift from the ruler of Aksum. An extremely rare sight, it was depicted in a papyrus (S.M. Burstein, "An elephant for Anastasius: a note on P. Mich.

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question to be about literal seeing, for there is no doubt that visual evidence was an issue in connection with the pagan angels. "Have you seen your partners (*a-fa-raʾaytum shurakāʾakum*) whom you call upon apart from God?", the Messenger asks in another sura, using the same expression as in 53:19 and clearly meaning seeing in a literal sense. "Show me (*arūnī*) what they have created", he continues, "or do they have a partnership (*shirk*) in the heavens, or have We given them a book providing them with clear evidence?" (35:40; similarly 46:4). The answer to all four questions is clearly negative: the unbelievers have not seen their alleged deities; they cannot point to any creative activity by the deities in question; they have no partnership in heaven endowing them with privileged knowledge and God has not given them a book vouchsafing the existence of their alleged deities. In short, the unbelievers have no evidence at all. By contrast, we are told no less than five times that the disputed person *saw* the heavenly being, a point repeated in sura 81 (v. 23): "the heart [of the viewer] did not lie about what it saw" (v. 11). The reference is clearly to seeing in the literal sense, and the five passages are closely bunched together: "will you then dispute about what he saw?" (v. 12); "he also saw him at another descent" (v. 13); "his sight never swerved" (v. 17); "he saw the greatest of the signs of the Lord" (v. 18). When the continuation asks, "have you seen Allāt, al-ʿUzzā and Manāt?", it is accordingly somewhat artificial not to understand the question literally here as well. What the oracular verdict is saying is that *he*, the disputed person, has seen a divine being whereas *they*, his opponents, have never seen their false deities, because these deities do not actually exist.[9] They are empty concepts devised by the pagans without any authority (53:23; similarly 7:71; 12:40); or they are misconstructions of genuine angels by the unbelievers, who wrongly give them female names (53:27). Either way, the pagans are venerating figments of their own imagination.

This brings us to the question of the identity of the speaker in part I. One assumes the answer is God, meaning the Messenger in practice, but this means that the disputed *ṣāḥib* is sitting in judgement of a dispute about himself, which is somewhat strange. One would have expected the oracular section to be spoken by an external authority delivering a verdict on the disputed person, whose visions he declares to be genuine and whose sanity he endorses: this

Inv. 4290", in Burstein, *Graeco-Africana* (New Rochelle, NY, 1994), 215–17. Compare the enormous impression made by an elephant sent by an embassy from western Sudan to Marrakesh in 1593, or that made by the Indian elephant Hanno sent to Pope Leo X around 1510 (M. García-Arenal, *Ahmad al-Mansur: the Beginnings of Modern Morocco* (Oxford, 2009), 2. It is presumably the elephant seen at Aila that sura 105 is referring to, though it fuses it with some other story, identified in the tradition as Abraham's campaign against Mecca (cf. A.L. dePrémare, "'Il voulut détruire le temple': L'attaque de la Kaʿba par les rois yémenites avant l'Islam. Akhbār et Histoire", *Journal Asiatique* 28/2, 2000, 261–367).

9 Similarly Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, I, 100, cited in J. Hämeen-Anttila, "Qur. 53:19, the prophetic experience and the 'satanic verses' – a reconsideration", *Acta Orientalia* 58, 1997, 24–34, 26; cf. also p. 30 (drawn to my attention by J. Witztum). Hämeen-Anttila plays safe by interpreting the seeing as both literal and metaphorical.

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evidently is not a role that the disputed person himself could fulfil. And yet, it seems that he does.

Who then is the speaker? Who had the authority to sit in judgement of the Messenger's claim to contact with the divine? In the rest of the Quran, the Messenger regards himself as the direct representative of God and thus the ultimate authority on earth. But he does describe the recipients of the earlier book (presumably meaning that of Moses) as a source of authoritative knowledge second only to God Himself, and in a passage in which he himself doubts the veracity of his revelations, God assures him that: "If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who recited/read the book before you" (10:94). Is he following God's instructions in sura 53? The speaker would in that case be a Jewish or Christian *kāhin*, meaning a person renowned for his knowledge of the unknown who used the techniques of his pagan counterparts. In 10:94 it is the divine origin of what has been sent down to the Messenger that the recipients of the earlier book can confirm: God is not sending down anything to the disputed *ṣāḥib* in sura 53, however. What the *kāhin* is confirming is that the disputed person saw God, if perhaps only in the form of an angel, and received oral revelation or inspiration (*waḥy*) from Him. We are not told anything about the contents of the revelation, nor is there any reference to a book. All this is so different from the manner in which the Messenger normally speaks that one wonders whether the disputed *ṣāḥib* is really the Messenger after all. Did the latter have a predecessor, who envisaged revelation as taking place by direct contact with a divine being rather than by a book being sent down (whether as a whole or in instalments), who claimed to have enjoyed such contact himself and who objected to the pagan angels – not because they violated the dividing line between God and created beings but rather because they were female? We do not hear of such a predecessor elsewhere in the Quran, but we do learn that the Messenger had competitors in his own time, at least in Yathrib (2:79, where they share his concept of revelation as a book), so there is nothing implausible about the proposition that there were preachers before him too, including some whose preaching anticipated features of his own. If we accepted the existence of such a predecessor, we could postulate that part I had come to form part of the literary corpus of the Messenger's community before the latter appeared on the scene, for example by incorporation in a book of oracular decisions. The Messenger would in that case have liked the piece for its relevance to his own situation and recited it as he found it without taking everything it said as reflecting his own experience, or, more probably, without noticing that it was not consistent with his own claims. It is striking that his comments in part II of sura 53 say nothing further about the visions and revelations of the disputed person, only about the female angels. He is equally silent about the visions and revelations elsewhere in the Quran, whereas polemics against the pagan angels abound, suggesting that he had no personal experience of the visions and revelations in question.

The Satanic verses

The tradition claims that after reciting "have you seen Allāt, al-ʿUzzā and Manāt, the third, the other?", Muḥammad was prompted by Satan to insert the

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verse, "these are the high-flying cranes whose intercession is sought", as a concession to Quraysh, who reacted by being very pleased until Muḥammad withdrew it. This story has usually been accepted as true by Western historians on the grounds that it is so unflattering to Muḥammad that no Muslim could have invented it. According to F.E. Peters, for example, the story is "indubitably authentic" because "it is impossible to imagine a Muslim inventing such an inauspicious tale".[10] But this rather presupposes that the quality of inauspiciousness, whatever exactly that may be, is an unchanging universal. Certainly, the story became problematic when the doctrine of prophetic infallibility was accepted; and today it is regarded as quite unacceptable.[11] But why should this have been how it was seen back in the early days? The story is no more unflattering to Muḥammad than is that about Gethsemane to Jesus. Jesus prays that the cup be taken from him, in fear of death; Muḥammad compromises with his kinsmen, in fear of ostracism. Both display a human weakness that makes it easier for us to identify with them. The only problem with the story of the Satanic verse is that it does not fit its supposed Quranic context.[12] The question whether the opponents have seen the three deities is clearly posed in a hostile vein, and the continuation is sharply polemical. There simply is no room for a concession here. Presumably the exegetes (or the storytellers who preceded them) were inspired by 7:200 or 22:52, on Satanic suggestions assailing the Messenger's mind, and picked on sura 53 to show exactly where the Messenger's mind had been temporarily subverted.

Polemics against the false angels/deities

Unlike the oracular part I, the prosaic part II voices views familiar from the rest of the Quran, mostly in the form of polemics against the angels or deities of the opponents. We are assured that the alleged deities are just names that the fathers of the opponents have made up without authority from God and that the culprits are just following conjecture (*ẓann*, fallible human reasoning as opposed to revelation) and their own fancies (vv. 23–5, an unflattering synonym for the same); no angel (*malak*) can intercede without God's permission (v. 26); those who give the angels (*al-malāʾika*) female names are "those who don't believe in the afterlife" (*lā yuʾminūna biʾl-ākhira*, v. 27); they follow mere conjecture (*al-ẓann*), as we are told again (v. 28). God knows better and to Him belongs everything in heaven and on Earth. He will punish those who do evil and reward those who do good, and He is forgiving of those who only commit minor sins. As noted already, the prosaic polemics of part II are generally regarded as a later addition, except for verses 24–5, and this makes good sense if we take part I to predate the Messenger and assume part II (including verses 24–5) to have been composed by the Messenger himself.[13] For example, he could have started his

10 F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany, NY, 1994), 161.
11 Cf. S. Ahmed, "Satanic verses" in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, IV (Leiden, 2004), 531–5; S. Ahmed, *The Problem of the Satanic Verses and the Formation of Islamic Orthodoxy*, forthcoming.
12 See also N. Sinai, "An interpretation of *Sūrat al-Najm* (Q53)", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13, 2011, 10f.
13 Cf. above, note 7.

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preaching on a particular day by reciting the oracular part I during the communal morning service (cf. 17:78) and then commented on it in the prosaic style that comes naturally in a sermon during the afternoon service. He will in any case have thought of all of it as revelation from God (which is why it was all preserved together), for he sees the book he has received not just as confirmation (*taṣdīq*) of earlier revelations but also as *tafṣīl*, a spelling out or explanation, and held both the verses and the explanation to come from God. God established the verses first and then explained their meaning, as emerges from 11:1 (*kitābun uḥkimat āyātuhu thumma fuṣṣilat min ladun ḥakīmin khabīrin,* cf. also *faṣṣalnā al-āyāt*, 6:126; and 7:52). It is similarly God who has spelled out (*faṣṣala*) the types of food He has forbidden (6:119). As Sinai observes, only God can act as the exegete of the heavenly book.[14] The Quran is *tafṣīl al-kitāb*, an explanation of the (heavenly) book (10:37); it was sent down *mufaṣṣalan*, endowed with an explanation (6:114); the verses of the heavenly book were "unpacked" in the form of an Arabic recitation (*fuṣṣilat qurʾānan ʿarabiyyan*) (41:3).[15] The Quran is both a translation and an explanation of the heavenly book, as Sinai remarks, but whereas some of the formulations suggest that the two were indistinguishable, sura 11:1 (cited above) envisages them as consecutive. This is the scenario proposed here in connection with sura 53:23ff: first the Messenger recites the "translation", then he proceeds to the explanation. The abrupt transition from the oracular to the prosaic style probably struck both him and his audience as perfectly natural.

Polemics against the miser

After the polemics against the female angels, the sentences go short again and we are back in the oracular style of the beginning, including the peculiar use of *fa-* to introduce an antecedent (v. 35). Once again the question is asked, "have you seen?", this time addressed to "you" in the singular: "Have you seen the one who turns back, gives a little, then hardens [his heart]: does *he* have knowledge of the unseen, having seen it?" This is plainly a continuation of the question of whether the opponents have seen the three goddesses. Here the first "have you seen" should probably be understood in the normal Quranic sense of "have you considered" or "haven't you seen how", but what the next line denies is that the miser has actually seen the unseen. (The variation is undoubtedly deliberate.) The passage continues by asking, "has he not been told what is in the scrolls of Moses and Abraham, who fulfilled [his obligations], [namely] that no [soul] bearing a burden can bear the burden of another [soul], that man shall have only as he has striven, that his striving will be seen, and that then he will be amply requited for it" (vv. 36–41). In other words, has the miser not learnt from the writings of those two prophets that people will be punished or rewarded for what they have done? The implicit contrast is with people who think they can rely on the merits of their forefathers (presumably the

14 N. Sinai, "Qurʾānic self-referentiality as a strategy of self-authorization", in S. Wild (ed.), *Self-Referentiality in the Qurʾān* (Wiesbaden, 2006), 103–34, 127. (I owe my knowledge of this study to J. Witztum.)

15 The formulation here is Sinai's ("Self-referentiality", 121).

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Israelites, cf. for example, 2:47f, 80). It is followed by some Quranic commonplaces on how God is the bringer of death and life (53:44, where the Messenger uses the Deuteronomic word order also current among his opponents),[16] as well as the creator of male and female, the bringer of a second creation and the destroyer of the people of Noah, ʿĀd, and Thamūd, all of which one can read in many other suras, and it culminates in yet another question: "So what benefits of your lord will you dispute? This is a warner from among the warners of old" (vv. 55f).[17]

This passage is a mirror image of the first. Both contrast the fanciful ideas of opponents with the certainty possessed by prophets: have you polytheists seen your alleged deities, has the miserly person seen the *ghayb*? (vv. 19, 34). Why then do you dispute your *ṣāḥib*'s claims, why do you dispute the benefits of your lord, who has sent you a warner? (vv. 12, 55f). The two units are built around the same themes of seeing and wrongly disputing, and the passage about the uncharitable person also echoes the first by reusing the same words: *nazlatan ukhrā* is echoed in *wizra ukhrā* and *al-nashʾata* '*l-ukhrā* (vv. 13, 38, 47), *sidrati*'*l-muntahā* is echoed in *ilā rabbika* '*l-muntahā* (lines 4, 42), *ṭaghā* in *aṭghā* (vv. 17, 52), *yaghshā* in *ghashā* (vv. 16, 54) and *unthā* in *al-dhakaru wa*'*l-unthā* (vv. 21, 45). The piece on the uncharitable person is not nearly so striking a composition as the first oracular section, however, and it voices views that accord with the rest of the book, so it is apparently the Messenger himself who is composing here. If he is citing an earlier work in part I, here he is simply imitating it, composing a continuation in the same style.

Warnings of the imminent end

The last seven verses retain the oracular style but introduce new rhymes in a manner suggesting a deliberate variation to wake people up. "The end is imminent, nobody but God can unveil it [different translations are possible]. So do you marvel at this talk? Will you laugh rather than weep, diverting yourselves? Rather, prostrate to God and worship!" (vv. 57–62). This sounds like the Messenger composing again.

16 Cf. P. Crone, "The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection, part I", *BSOAS* 75/3, 2012, 445–72, 461ff.

17 The precise meaning of this is open to debate since no benefits have been mentioned, only punishments, but we can leave that aside here.

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