ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	POLEMIC AGAINST PRE-ISLAMIC DEITIES IN THE *SŪRAH* NAMED AFTER THE PLEIADES
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The thesis explores the idea of whether Allāt, al-ʻUzzā, and Manāt were worshipped as manifestations of Venus by Muhammad's pagan opponents known as the *mushrikūn*; an idea inspired through engagement with Gerald Hawting's book *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*. By reading *Q53 Sūrat al-Najm* within a broader context of ancient Near Eastern astral religion/mythology I develop an "astral" interpretation of Muhammad's angelic vision of the Archangel Gabriel, highlighting how the description of Gabriel at the beginning of the *sūrah* parallels the movements of Venus as the morning star in some salient features. Based on this finding I argue that the Venusian description of Gabriel serves as a polemic posing him in comparison to the goddesses mentioned later in the *sūrah* at Q53:19-20. These developments prompt me to

examine their implications for the Satanic verses story and propose a date for Q53's revelation.

POLEMIC AGAINST PRE-ISLAMIC DEITIES IN THE *SŪRAH* NAMED AFTER THE PLEIADES

by

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Dedication

For my beloved *nanu*, Amena Begum. Who raised me while I was young, prays for me constantly, and through whom I first heard the Qur'an.

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الحمد لله وصلاة و سلام على رسول الله

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List of Abbreviations

Ar. – Arabic
BSOAS – *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
CAD – *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*
CRAI – *Comptes Rendus De L'Académie Des Inscriptions*
JANER – *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*
JNES – *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JSAI – *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
LIMC – *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologicae Classicae*
NCP – North Celestial Pole
Pl. – Plural
Sg. – Singular

Introduction

This thesis attempts to demonstrate that Muhammad's pagan opponents known in the Qur'an as the *mushrikūn* or associators[1] worshipped Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt mentioned in Q53:19-20 as manifestations of Venus, particularly as the morning star. This proposition was inspired by related ideas that were raised by Gerald Hawting in his book *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*.[2] Relying on the Qur'an as a primary source and critical of the traditional Muslim picture portraying Islamic origins as arising out of a pre-Islamic Arabia awash in idol worship, Hawting argues instead that the qur'anic accusations against the *mushrikūn* of "idol-worship" is a polemic that mischaracterizes not only their excessive veneration of angels, but their own monotheistic leanings.

While I have reservations about the proposition that Muhammad's opponents did not engage in any literal idol-worship at all, the claim that the *mushrikūn* worshipped angels deserves further investigation. The trio of Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt mentioned in Q53:19-20 presents a complication for Hawting's thesis since the Muslim tradition portrays these beings as goddesses and idols, while the Qur'an intimates that they were considered angels, and daughters of Allah. Addressing this conundrum Hawting speculates that if the *mushrikūn* called their angels by female names, i.e. female names like al-'Uzzā, that were once associated with the

[1] I will often use the English words 'associators' and 'pagans' and on occasion 'polytheists' and 'idolaters' as synonymous with '*mushrikūn*.' In all cases these words refer to Muhammad's opponents who cannot readily be identified as belonging to either Jewish or Christian parts of Muhammad's qur'anic audience.

[2] G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 147.

worship of astral bodies like Venus, then the qur'anic attack against the associators would make sense.[3] Taking Hawting's suggestion seriously, I reexamine the language of Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm*, reading it in light of a number of different contexts in order to determine if it might provide evidence that these three beings whether angels or goddesses were worshipped as manifestations of Venus.

Chapter 1 summarizes Hawting's arguments against the Muslim tradition's picture of a pre-Islamic Arabia entrenched in actual idol worship, and follows his line of argument leading up to his suggestion that the names Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt were used to refer to Venus, which the *mushrikūn* associated with their angels. Chapter 2 follows up on Hawting's acknowledgement of a number of late antique Christian reports claiming that North Arabian tribes engaged in astral worship of al-'Uzzā in her manifestation as Venus as the morning star on the eve of Islam. The cautious approach of some scholars who question whether this worship of al-'Uzzā as Venus continued up to the time of Muhammad in central Arabia prompts me to examine part of a study by James Montgomery offering suggestive intimations that instead people did continue to worship al-'Uzzā as the morning star around that time. Due to the lack of incisive information settling the issue of whether al-'Uzzā was still worshipped as Venus up to the time of Muhammad, the remainder of the chapter argues that an appreciation of the astral mythology of the ancient Near East[4] can inform our reading of the Qur'an in such

[3] Ibid, 133-147.

[4] Specifically where the movements of the planet Venus describe the movements of the goddess Inana (Sumerian) or Ishtar (Akkadian), one of the oldest Venus goddesses amongst the world's mythologies. This analysis will thereby situate the study of pre-Islamic Arabia within the broader context of the *longue durée* of the cultural legacy of the ancient Near East, a need scholars of Early Islam have recognized within the last couple of decades.

a unique and important way that it will help to uncover the worship of al-'Uzzā[5] as a manifestation of Venus in Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm*.

The first part of Chapter 3 examines different aspects of the astral language of Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm*. It attempts to demonstrate how Muhammad's visionary encounter with the supernatural being mentioned in Q53:5-9 and identified in traditional sources as Gabriel is described in language that parallels Venus' planetary motion. This observation that the movements of Gabriel as mentioned in Q53:5-9 are expressed in a language that could similarly describe the movements of the planet Venus is based on our study of the astral myths mentioned in Chapter 2 where the movements of the planet Venus correspond with the movements of a Venusian goddess. Based on our new found appreciation of the astral language of Q53:1 and 53:5-9 the second part of Chapter 3 attempts to date when Q53 may have been revealed using planetarium software. A biographical report from the Prophet's life conveying the year and lunar month when Q53 was revealed to the Prophet, along with a few other considerations serendipitously influenced our examination of a particular date when observations of astronomical phenomena in the Meccan sky corresponded with what may be seen as their exact descriptions as found in Q53:1 and Q53:5-9.

Chapter 4 considers the historical implications of the Satanic verses story in light of both Q53's proposed date, and the astral interpretation of the angelic vision of Q53:5-9. The discovery made in the previous chapter that the angel Gabriel is described in Venusian terms leads us to reread the *sūrah*[6] as a highly charged polemic comparing

[5] And by extension the other two goddesses of Q53:19-20.
[6] In what we believe to be its original context.

him against the pagan angels Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt. This reading of the *sūrah* uncovers the logical implications for how the *mushrikūn* would have conceived of these angel-goddesses. Since we learned in Chapter 2 that at least al-'Uzzā was a historically well regarded Venus goddess, it stands to reason that at least Muhammad's opponents continued to worship her as a Venus goddess if the Venusian comparison between Gabriel and this trio of angel-deities is to retain any significant purpose as a rhetorically forceful comparison. Given that the Venusian association with al-'Uzzā is clear from the writings of late antique Christian authors, I speculate as to how al-'Uzzā's sisters Allāt, and Manāt may have been associated with the worship of Venus also. In both Chapters 3 and 4, I provide a few comments about how some aspect/echo of the Venus goddess Inana/Ishtar continues in each of the three beings as remembered in early Muslim traditions. The brief conclusion to this study considers the implications of the continued worship of Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt as manifestations of Venus for Hawting's suggestion that only the names of these long-forgotten goddesses were used by the *mushrikūn* to refer to the planet Venus.

Chapter 1: Pre-Islamic Idolatry, Angel Veneration, and Allah's Daughters

The traditional biographies of Muhammad state that he started proclaiming the Qur'an in Mecca in 610 AD. The tradition claims that Mecca in addition to being a famous cult site, was also an important node in long distance trade routes in the region. According to the tradition the strict monotheism that Muhammad espoused invoked the ire and persecution of Mecca's pagan inhabitants. Due to growing hostilities, Muhammad and his followers emigrated to Yathrib (later renamed Medina) which was situated 320km north of Mecca in 622 AD. This exodus, known as the Hijrah would later form the basis as the "starting point of the Islamic calendar."[7] At Medina/Yathrib Muhammad and his followers settled among the tribes of the city, some of which were Jewish, all parties formed a pact known as the 'Constitution of Medina' maintaining that the tribes would maintain their religious identities but everyone would recognize the civil authority of Muhammad even if his authority is couched in religious terms identifying Muhammad as the 'Messenger of God.'[8] Ongoing hostilities between Muhammad and the Meccans ultimately ended in his victory over them and his retaking of the city in 630 CE. After his death in 632 CE his successors would go onto conquer large swaths of previously held Byzantine and Sassanian territories in the Levant and Mesopotamia.[9]

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[7] Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an*: *A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 40.
[8] Ibid, 40-41.
[9] Ibid, 41. Sinai explains that biographical information about Muhammad comes from the most famous sources which are Muḥammad ibn Isḥaq's (d. 767-8CE) biography of the Prophet Muhammad, *Book of* [*the Prophet's*] *Military Expeditions (Kitāb al-maghāzī)*, which was further redacted in 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām's (d. 833-4CE) *Life of Muhammad, the Messenger of God (Sīrat Muhammad rasūl Allāh)*. Also widely recognized is the monumental universal history of Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī *History of the Messengers and Kings*. Speaking about the sources of information these works rely on, Sinai

Just how entrenched Meccan society had become with idol worship in the traditional Muslim narrative of Muhammad's life is best exemplified in the reports about how Muhammad rid the sanctuary of its idols after he gained control over Mecca. One of many reports about this occasion in Ibn Hishām's (d. 833 AD) *Sīrat Muhammad rasūl Allāh* states:

> The apostle entered Mecca on the day of the conquest and it contained 360 idols which Iblis had strengthened with lead. The apostle was standing by them with a stick in his hand, saying, 'The truth has come and false-hood has passed away; verily falsehood is sure to pass away' (Sūra '7. 82). Then he pointed at them with his stick and they collapsed on their backs one after the other.
>
> When the apostle prayed the noon prayer on the day of the conquest he ordered that all the idols which were round the Ka'ba should be collected and burned with fire and broken up.[10]

If there were in fact 360 idols surrounding the Ka'bah the Muslim historians were not able to collect much information about them, save a small fraction. The sources mention Isāf and Nā'ilah two Jurhumite lovers who committed adultery in the Ka'bah who were subsequently petrified due to violating the sanctity of the sacred house.[11] The most famous of the Meccan idols was Hubal a statue formed in the shape of a man made of red agate, it came to the Quraysh with its right hand broken off after which they fashioned for it a hand of gold. The idol answered questions of paternity, marriage matches, and other issues through divination arrows that were cast before it.[12]

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mentions that, "These and other authors claim to be citing earlier sources and are wont to preface reports about events…by a list of the successive transmitters through whom they believed the information in question to have received them." But Sinai reminds us that despite claims that these reports "preserve an earlier oral tradition" that traces its authority back to the first Muslims we cannot take the historicity of such narratives for granted, even if modern scholarship has confirmed that "crucial episodes form Muhammad's career were in circulation by the second half of the seventh century." These reports are generally known as hadith. For the full discussion see Ibid, 41-42.

[10] Muḥammad Ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967), 552.

[11] Hishām Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī Pasha (Cairo: Dār al-Qawmiyyah, 1924), 9; *Book of Idols*, trans. Nabih Amin Faris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), loc. 23 of 74, Google Play Books.

[12] Ibid, 28; tr. loc. 38 of 74.

Sacrifices were made to these idols and others just outside the Ka'bah.[13] Other famous idols include those of the three famous goddesses Allāt, Manāt, and al-'Uzzā[14] mentioned in the Qur'an at Q53:19-20 whose cults will be discussed in detail throughout this thesis.

Reading the *locus classicus* of pre-Islamic idolatry, Hishām ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī's (known as Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 821 or 822 AD))[15] *Book of Idols* (*Kitab al-Aṣnām*) however, does not provide much more information other than the mention of 14 to 15 or so additional idols that Ibn al-Kalbī was able to obtain reports about. Many entries contain no more information about these idols than their names, physical descriptions, locations, and which Arabian tribes worshipped them. If the 360 gods that are purported to have surrounded the Ka'bah constituted a pantheon or had a mythology, none of that information seems to have reached Ibn al-Kalbī.

Given the report from the Prophet's biography of such a large number of idols being worshipped at the Ka'bah up until Muhammad's victory over his townsmen, most people are surprised to learn or be reminded that in the Qur'an the *mushrikūn* (sg. *mushrik*) clearly admit that Allah created all that exists. A few verses from the Qur'an[16] make this abundantly clear:

> Q29:61: If indeed you ask them Who has created the heavens And the earth and subjected The sun and moon (To His Law), they will Certainly reply, 'Allah.' How are they then deluded Away (from the truth)?

---

[13] Uri Rubin, "The Ka'ba Aspects of its ritual functions and position in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times," *JSAI* 8 (1986): 105-107.
[14] *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 13-27; tr. loc. 27-38 of 74.
[15] See translator's preface *Book of Idols*, trans. Nabih Amin Faris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), loc. 8 of 74, Google Play Books.
[16] Citations quoting the Qur'an from other scholars' articles will naturally be based on their chosen translation of the Qur'an, unless otherwise noted however, my own individual citations to qur'anic verses follow those of 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī. *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'ān*, trans. 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī (Washington, D.C.: Amana Corporation, 1989).

> Q31:25: If thou ask them, Who it is that created The heavens and earth, They will certainly say, 'Allah.' Say: "Praise be to Allah." But most of them Understand not.
>
> [In denial of the resurrection the Prophet is instructed to question his opponents]
>
> Q23:84: Say: "To whom belong The earth and all beings therein? (Say) if ye know!
> Q23:85: They will say, "To Allah!" Say: "Yet will ye not Receive admonition?"
> Q23:86: Say: "Who is the Lord Of the seven heavens, And the Lord of the Throne (Of Glory) Supreme?
> Q23:87: They will say, "(They belong) To Allah." Say: "Will ye not Then be filled with awe?"
> Q23:88: Say: "Who is it in whose Hands is the governance Of all things – Who protects (All), but is not protected (Of any)? (Say) if ye know."
> Q23:89: They will say, "(It belongs) To Allah," Say: "Then how Are ye deluded?"

This disparity between how the *mushrikūn* are portrayed in the Qur'an as opposed to how they are portrayed in sources on the biography of the Prophet have raised a number of questions in recent historical-critical scholarship on Islam's origins. Could the *mushrikūn* have been monotheists? After all, it is clear that "they recognized a single sovereign, creator God"[17] according to the Qur'an. Given that, what are we to make of the widespread idea that they engaged in idolatry (i.e. worship of physical statues) in Muslim historical sources? As we shall see in the next section some scholars question whether the *mushrikūn* literally worshipped idols at all.

Critical challenges to the Muslim tradition's account of pre-Islamic Religion

The disparity between what the Qur'an says of the *mushrikūn* as opposed to how they are portrayed in traditional sources commenting on the life of Muhammad has prompted scholars to focus on the Qur'an as a primary source that more accurately represents their pre-Islamic religion. Commenting on the Qur'an as a source on pre-Islamic religion, Patricia Crone mentions that it gives us a glimpse into the formative society/setting of the Messenger's life, and that it is our only source that describes his opponents' beliefs and practices. A question might arise as to what extent the Qur'an

[17] Patricia Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57, no. 2 (2010): 154, https://doi.org/10.1163/157005810X502637.

accurately portrays the beliefs and practices of the *mushrikūn* though, as it is a document that records Muhammad's theological stance against his opponents, and therefore may take on a polemic tone. In this regard Crone points out that the Messenger's polemic against the pagans was not taking place at a distance, but he was preaching to his people face to face. This naturally imposed limitations on the extent of the rhetoric he could engage in when criticizing their beliefs and practices since he hoped to gain their attention and be taken seriously. She concludes, "His statements are often aggressive, but they are also coherent and accord well with what we know about religious patterns in the pre-Islamic Near East. In short, the Messenger does seem to give us enough genuine information about his opponents for us to reconstruct their views and internal divisions, if only in broad outline."[18]

It was Crone's predecessor in this field, Hawting, however who most thoroughly "demonstrated how little the pagans of the Qur'ān have to do with those of the tradition."[19] In his book, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* Hawting reexamines traditional Muslim sources that coalesced into a standard narrative of Islam's origin. This narrative as outlined above, which places the beginning of Islam in a Ḥijāzī-Arabian milieu depicts an original Abrahamic Monotheism in the Ḥijāz that was corrupted by an accretion of foreign pagan practices. On the contrary, Hawting argues that the pre-Islamic period (known as the *jāhiliyyah* in Muslim literary sources) being steeped in pagan customs is simply the creation of later Muslim writers imagining what they thought of Islam's birthplace, but we have no evidence to believe that it is

[18] Patricia Crone, "Pagan Arabs as God-fearers," in *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, eds. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 140.
[19] Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans," 152.

actually a historically accurate portrayal of Islamic origins. Hawting actually makes a stronger claim that the qur'anic polemic against the *mushrikūn* was misrepresented by later Muslim tradition.[20]

The Qur'an was not railing against Arabs who worshipped idols and believed in many gods in a so called 'age of ignorance.' Rather the Qur'an's claim of *shirk* (placing other gods on par with God) on behalf of Muhammad's opponents is a form of "polemic" against other monotheists that follows a long line of intra-monotheist polemic traditions.[21] Although the idea that the *mushrikūn* seemed to believe in some sort of monotheism was engaged in varying degrees by previous scholars,[22] no previous scholar ever made so radical a claim that the *mushrikūn* did not engage in idol worship at all, let alone that the Qur'an's claim of *shirk* against them was simply polemical. Hawting's argument forces scholars to come to grips with the phenomenon that Muslim believers are no different from believers in other religions who back-project a tendentious narrative onto their religion's purported origins.[23]

Hawting begins by pointing out how much academic scholarship is beholden to the picture of Islam's origins as depicted in traditional sources. The Qur'an does not

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[20] By "Muslim tradition" Hawting intends, "the mass of traditional Muslim literature, such as lives of the Prophet (*sīras*), commentaries on the Koran (*tafsīrs*), and collections of reports (*ḥadīths*) about the words and deeds of the Prophet." Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 1. Hawting goes onto say that this secondary material which should be considered separate from the Qur'an was "produced from about the end of the second [AH]/eighth century [CE} at the earliest." As a reminder, reports about the Prophet's life found in such compendia record earlier sources through a chain of preceding authorities back to an original source that recorders believe faithfully transmitted the information. See fn. 9 *supra*.

[21] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 1-5.

[22] Most notably by the puritanical reformer Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Hawting also mentions a number of European scholars who came to somewhat similar conclusions, Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 61-66. Patricia Crone similarly cites Toshihiko Izutsu as claiming that the *mushrik's* idea of God "was surprisingly close to the Islamic concept." Patricia Crone, "Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God," in *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity*, ed. Phillipa Townsend and Moulie Vidas (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 315, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[23] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 12.

say much about the place or setting it was written in and traditional sources often go beyond the vague references mentioned in the book. For example, traditional materials assume that "Bakka = Makka, the 'house' = the Ka'ba, the standing place of Abraham – the stone that now bears that name at Mecca," all of these identifications are "problematic and not self-evident," according to the author.[24] Rather, these identifications found in traditional sources were written down to answer the question, "how did the polytheism and idolatry of the *jāhiliyya* come about?"[25] The *jāhiliyya* it should be pointed out is a Muslim construction and attitude towards Arabia's pre-Islamic past. In defining the *jāhiliyya* Hawting states that:

> in the main it was portrayed as a state of corruption and immorality from which God delivered the Arabs by sending them the Prophet Muḥammad. A salient characteristic of it in Muslim tradition is its polytheistic and idolatrous religion, and with that are associated such things as sexual and other immorality, the killing of female children, and the shedding of blood.[26]

Muslims believed that Abraham brought monotheism to Arabia in "the remote past," however Ishmael's descendants got corrupted by falling into polytheism. Hawting informs us that this polytheism came about when Ishmaelites dispersed from Mecca. Considering the preceding Hawting concludes that the Muslim reconstruction of the pre-Islamic past serves to form the basis of qur'anic exegesis – pious exposition elicited to fill in the ambiguities of the text of the Qur'an. Therefore, it would be infelicitous to treat these traditional sources as faithfully recording and transmitting the historical reality out of which the Qur'an came about.[27]

[24] Ibid, 25.
[25] Ibid, 24.
[26] Ibid, 2.
[27] Ibid, 24-25.

Hawting points out that when traditional sources of pre-Islamic religion are examined they are not consistent in their details. He looks at one of the primary traditional sources on pre-Islamic religion, Ibn al-Kalbī's *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* and concludes from a structural analysis based on the work of others that the book is a composite work containing many interpolations though most likely containing an original core going back to its author.[28] What is more important to understand about Ibn al-Kalbī's book is that it is not a straight forward historical understanding of pre-Islamic Arabian religion. This is because Ibn al-Kalbī positions his information within a broader narrative framework about the etiology of paganism within the world and more specifically within the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, Hawting argues that Ibn al-Kalbī's work should be placed in a broader tradition of a monotheistic genre of writing that attempts to explain the origins of polytheism and idolatry.[29] All the information found in Ibn al-Kalbī's book is not necessarily false, but the entire work cannot be accepted at face value as its intent serves a particular literary agenda.

As for the theonyms found in the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* and in other traditional sources matching inscriptional materials external to Muslim tradition, Hawting cautions against reading this external material as a corroboration of the tradition. While it is not unreasonable to expect that the tradition would contain some historically veridical information, scholars' tendency to read the inscriptional materials in light of Muslim tradition, especially when they may present contested readings is problematic. Sometimes a scholar will read an inscription in light of Muslim sources on pre-Islamic

[28] Ibid, 92-94
[29] Ibid, 95-110.

religion resulting in a circularity where the inscribed theonym will substantiate the veracity of the Muslim tradition based on the scholar's understanding of the theonym from the tradition itself.[30]

The Qur'an, according to Hawting, however paints a much different picture of the religion of the *mushrikūn* as opposed to Muslim tradition. One would assume if the Qur'an arose in a milieu suffused in idol worship, that the names of such idols would at least appear in the text.[31] Where the Prophet's biography mentions him destroying hundreds of idols on the day that he conquered Mecca, the Qur'an alternatively, only mentions eight "gods" by name.[32] Five of these gods are mentioned in the Qur'an as being specifically worshipped by Noah's people at Q71:23; Wadd, Suwāʿ, Yaghūth, Yaʿūq, and Nasr. The tradition however takes these idols not only as the gods of Noah's people, "but also as part of a tradition that focuses on Mecca" during Muhammad's time.[33] The only "gods" that were worshipped by Muhammad's contemporaries that are named in the Qur'an and mentioned in traditional sources are Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt. While the tradition claims they were worshipped as idols, the Qur'an alternatively indicates that Muhammad's opponents believed them to be angels and daughters of Allah.[34] Suprsingly, Hubal a god given "relative prominence" in Muslim

[30] Ibid, 112-113. For more on reading traditional materials in light of material evidence see the discussion on Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt in this chapter p. 31.
[31] Nicolai Sinai however points out that, "such anonymity is entirely in keeping with the Qur'an's marked tendency to prefer general terms over proper names, of which the Islamic scripture contains conspicuously few." Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an*: *Historical-Critical*, 68. That being the case, the qur'anic author's decision not to directly address or name idols that could have been worshipped by Muhammad's opponents should not necessarily be seen as strong evidence against traditional Muslim sources that literal idolatry was altogether non-existent in Muhammad's milieu.
[32] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 130.
[33] Ibid, at 128, 116, 119, 121, 127-129.
[34] Ibid, 54-55.

tradition to such an extent that only his idol was permitted inside the Ka'ba is not mentioned in the Qur'an at all.[35]

We might argue that the absence in the Qur'an of the gods' names found in Muslim tradition does not necessarily entail as Hawting intends that the *mushrikūn* were monotheists. Hawting's argument however, seems to be strengthened by the fact that even general terms relating to idolatry in the Qur'an like *wathan* (pl. *awthān*) and *ṣanam* (pl. *aṣnām*) are hardly ever applied to Muhammad's contemporaries. These terms for idolatry are mostly applied to episodes relating to people in the past, especially vignettes about Abraham's encounters with his people's idolatry, and only once is the term *awthān* applied to Muhammad's contemporaries.[36] Moreover, Hawting

[35] Ibid, 112 and fn. 4, where Wellhausen suggests that Hubal was not attacked because he was identical with Allah, while Fahd suggests that Hubal was not named in the Qur'an because he was not uniquely identifiable among other idols. Alternatively, I suggest in the vein of fn. 31 above that one need not see the absence of the god's name mentioned in the Qur'an as evidence that he did not exist in the qur'anic milieu or as the saying goes – absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Moreover, one could see here a rhetorical choice made by the qur'anic author, that of censure or shunning the mention of the name akin to *Damnatio Memoriae*. For a text like the Qur'an that absolutely eschews the association of any other being with Allah due to Allah's ontological status and authority it would make perfect sense that the text intentionally does not mention Allah's most competitive rival for worshippers' attention within the Meccan sanctuary. By treating the lesser god as a trifle not worth mentioning the rhetorical stance of the Prophet betrays a social atmosphere in which Hubal is quite highly regarded among the Prophet's opponents. The only problem with this hypothesis is that it rests entirely on the importance that Muslim tradition grants to Hubal, at present it is only a provisional suggestion which might never be definitively determined. Material evidence indicating the importance of the cult of Hubal being practiced in Mecca and its environs could help to dispositively settle the matter but is unlikely to ever be recovered if it ever existed due to the modern structural modifications to *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* complex and the general expansion of the city. For information on the field of Archaeology and its relation to the Qur'an, see *Encylopedia of the Qur'ān*, s.v. "Archaeology and the Qur'ān," by Robert Schick, accessed May 06, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00031.

[36] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 55. However, the notion that because terms like *awthān* and *aṣnām* overwhelmingly relate to nations of past prophets in the Qur'an and based on this, one might conclude that Muhammad's accusations of idolatry against his opponents can simply be chalked up to rhetorically charged polemic (and not actual litholatry practiced by his opponents) requires further scrutiny. This line of reasoning simply ignores that the struggles of previous prophets mentioned in the Qur'an are conveyed so as to serve the purpose of an inverse typological commentary of the events taking place in Muhammad's life. See Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'ānic Studies and Philology: Qur'ānic Textual Politics of Staging, Penetrating, and Finally Eclipsing Biblical Tradition," in *Qur'ānic Studies Today*, eds. Angelika Neuwirth and Michael Sells (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 191-195. Speaking about how biblical typology works in the Prophet's community, Neuwirth states:

reminds us that the word *shirk* often glossed as idolatry or polytheism acquires that meaning in a polemical context, but the word in its original sense as an active participle (*mushrik*) actually means, "someone who associates something or someone with God as an object of worship."[37] Considering that actual litholatry hardly plays any role in the Qur'an, that the *mushriks*' conception of Allah is not very different from Muhammad's, and because the only qur'anic charge against the *mushrikūn* seems to be

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> In the Qur'ān the relationship between biblical and qur'ānic figures and events is a mirrored relation: what happens in the real world of the community mirrors what already happened in the biblical world…It is through the textual politics of that modified typology that the prophet gradually slips into the role of earlier prophets, Moses in particular. The proclaimer historically "relives" Moses' experiences. Ibid, 192.

For a similar comment on how previous prophets' lives prefigure that of Muhammad's especially in regards to temptation towards disobedience see Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 278-279; and for comments about how previous prophets' lives prefigure Muhammad's with regard to punishment stories in Q26 *Sūrat al-Shu'arā'* see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*: *The Scriptures of the* "*People of the Book*" *in the Language of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 64-71. Just as Muhammad relives the life of Moses through the Qur'an, he similarly relives the life of Abraham's struggle with his people's idolatry, all the more so in fact since the Prophet's mission is based upon his Abrahamic lineage. See Goudarzi who states that the Qurʾan particularly, "anchors the cultic and scriptural aspects of the Prophet's mission squarely on his community's descent from Abraham via Ishmael." Mohsen Goudarzi, "The Ascent of Ishmael: Genealogy, Covenant, and Identity in Early Islam," *Arabica* 66, no. 5 (2019): 415, https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1163/15700585-12341543. Abraham could also be viewed as a forerunner of Muhammad based on the fact that in the Qur'an Abraham makes a prayer for a messenger like Muhammad in Q2:129 "Our Lord! Send amongst them A Messenger of their own, Who shall rehearse Thy Signs To them and instruct them In Scripture and Wisdom…" Muhammad is revealed to be the answer to the prayer in Q2:151, where the Prophet is described in identical terms. Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. eds., *The Study Quran : A New Translation and Commentary* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2015), 59. One might accept the Muhammad-as-Abraham typological relationship without however, conceding that the idolatry of Abraham's time corresponds to actual idolatry being practiced in Muhammad's time also. Along these lines Suleyman Dost raises an important point that will serve as a major argument in this thesis, that Abraham's conversion story in Q6:76-79, coupled with the condemnations of solar worship among the people of the Queen of Sheba, and the worship of stars or planets in Q53 "posit astral worship as an associationist (*shirk*) attribute" Suleyman Dost, "An Arabian Qur'ān: Towards a Theory of Peninsular Origins," (PhD diss. University of Chicago, 2017), 54. If one accepts the overall argument of the remainder of this thesis, pace Dost that Muhammad is attacking astral religion in Q53, just as Abraham is attacking astral religion in Q6:76-79, then it stands to reason, that Abraham's attacks against obeisance to statues serve as veiled attacks against Muhammad's contemporaries for practicing the same. It is difficult to say how likely this argument is to convince Hawting since his reading of the Qur'an (at least in the *The Idea of Idolatry*) is almost completely divorced from any information found in Muslim sources that discuss the life of Muhammad. The only exception to this general principle of his, is his consideration of the Satanic verses incident in his reading of Q53. This event will be discussed briefly in this chapter and more extensively in Chapter 4 *infra*.

[37] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 48.

their excessive veneration of angels and hope for the angels' intercession,[38] Hawting avers that they could not have been actual idol worshippers.[39]

Epigraphic evidence supporting Hawting's contention?

Hawting's conclusions seem to be corroborated by Arabian epigraphic evidence.[40] The late antique epigraphic record of the Arabian Peninsula clearly indicates a trend towards monotheism. In the latter half of the fourth century CE monumental inscriptions to polytheistic South Arabian gods seem to disappear. Instead they are replaced by monumental inscriptions that refer to one God Raḥmānān.[41] Although it is important to note that the transition from monotheism to polytheism is not as abrupt as previously thought,[42] Raḥmānān however, becomes increasingly referenced in inscriptions commissioned by at least nominally Jewish kings.[43] One such inscription, CIH 543 is rendered, "May the name of Raḥmānān who is in heaven, Israël and their god, the Lord of the Jews, who helped his servant, bless and be blessed"[44]

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[38] Discussed in this chapter in further detail below.

[39] Ibid, 51-54. His position is best summed up when he states:

> So far, although the material may not be sufficient to enable us to obtain a clear idea of the beliefs of the opponents, it does not portray them as polytheists of the sort depicted in Muslim exegetical and other traditional literature. The verses of the Koran mentioned above do not point to a group that worshipped a multiplicity of gods and bowed down before idols, but rather a group that shared some basic concepts of monotheism (God as creator, angels, perhaps the Last Judgment, intercession, etc.) but held views that the Koran equated with, and presented – surely polemically – as, polytheism and idolatry. Ibid, 54.

[40] For a good summary of the interpretation of the epigraphic materials see Iwona Gajda, "Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia," in *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, eds. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 247-256.

[41] Gajda, "Monotheism in Anc. S. Arabia," 247.

[42] Gajda, "Monotheism in Anc. S. Arabia," 249-250.

[43] Gajda, "Monotheism in Anc. S. Arabia," 250-251.

[44] Christian Julien Robin, "Arabia and Ehtiopia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 271. Regarding the Jewish nature of Southern Arabia at this time Robin states, "However, if Judaism seems to have enjoyed a privileged position, it did not have the status of an official religion: while the sovereigns were probably Jewish personally, their inscriptions never state this conviction, only a careful monotheism with no particular affiliation…" Ibid.

In other parts of Arabia inscriptions that appear in a new script deciphered as the first stages of the Arabic script also convey the monotheistic social contexts in which they were inscribed. In the sixth century CE one of the most famous such inscriptions is a bilingual Greek-Arabic inscription in Ḥarrān, Syria, to the northwest of Bostra dated to 568 CE, the inscription records the creation of a martyr shrine (*martyrion*) to an unknown saint John.[45]

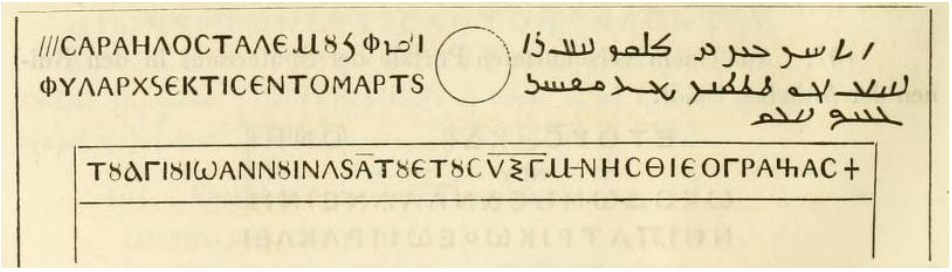

Fig. 1-1 (*Martyrion* to an unknown Saint John) Source: The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity online database, Oxford University. Credit: Drawing in Wetzstein, J.G., "Ausgewählte griechische und latinische Inschriften, gesammelt auf Reisen in den Trachonen und um das Haurangebirge", *Philologische und Historische Abhandlungen des königlichen Akademie des Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (1863) [1864], 296, no. 110 (Greek and Arabic text).

The Arabic portion of the inscription reads: I Šaraḥīl son of Ẓālim built this martyrion [in] the year 463, after the rebellion [?] of Khaybar by one year (= one year after the rebellion of Khaybar).[46] In a discussion about sixth century CE Arabic inscriptions that intimate that their authors may have been Christian, Ahmad Al-Jallad refers to a recent study by Robin, Al-Ghabbān, and Al-Sa'īd of a number of inscriptions that they published from an area called Ḥimā, north of Najrān.[47] These inscriptions are

[45] Paweł Nowakowski, "Bilingual Greek-Arabic building inscription for a martyr shrine (*martyrion*) of *John…Dated 568. – Evidence ID E02143," *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity*, last modified June 11, 2017, http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E02143.

[46] The translation is that of Fiema, Al-Jallad, Macdonald & Nehmé. Regarding the dating of the inscription, the article author states, "The date is computed according to the era of the province of Arabia. Its year 463 together with the 1st indictional year corresponds to AD 568." Ibid.

[47] Ahmad Al-Jallad (@Tweetistorian), "Ibn al-Kalbi's 'Book of Idols' depicts 6th c. Arabia (excluding Yemen) as dominated by paganism. But what do the Arabic inscriptions of 6th century Arabia tell," Twitter, April 28, 2020, 8:24 a.m., https://twitter.com/Tweetistorian/status/1255110763540340743.

interesting because some of the inscriptions begin with the symbol of the cross indicating that their authors were most likely Christian.[48] A similar inscription that ends with the symbol of the cross was discovered by Laïla Nehmé from the area of al-Jawf which was ancient Dūmat al-Jandal, suggesting how far Christianity had spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula.[49]

Rounding out his discussion of these types of inscriptions Al-Jallad mentions that they differ from pagan Arabic/Arabian inscriptions with the last datable pagan inscriptions mentioning the old gods going back to the fourth century CE, the sixth century inscriptions however only mention "al-Ilāh 'the god', an Arabic calque of Greek ho theós, lit. the god." Of course the people writing these inscriptions could be pagan, but usually the content and context of their inscriptions tend to be monotheistic, particularly Christian. Al-Jallad counsels that the field is rapidly growing and we do not yet have a complete picture of the region, future expeditions may lead to discoveries of invocations to pagan goddesses in the sixth century, however at present "the old gods seem to have been on the retreat across Arabia well before the rise of Islam." [50]

The growing epigraphic evidence bears witness to a progressive trend towards monotheistic expressions of religion on the eve of Islam which increasingly problematizes the traditional narrative of Islam arising out of a polytheistic and idolatrous Arabia. Nevertheless, I believe it would be wise to adhere to Al-Jallad's note

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[48] Christian Robin, ʿAlī Ibrāhīm Al-Ghabbān, and Saʿīd Fāyiz Al-Saʿīd, "Inscriptions antiques de la région de Najrān," *CRAI* no. 3 (Julliet-Octobre 2014): 1087-1109.
[49] Laïla Nehmé, "New dated inscriptions (Nabataean and pre-Islamic Arabic) from a site near al-Jawf, ancient Dūmah, Saudi Arabia," *Arabian Epigraphic Notes*, no. 3 (2017): 124-131, http://hdl.handle.net/1887/54231.
[50] Ahmad Al-Jallad (@Tweetistorian), "Ibn al-Kalbi's 'Book of Idols' depicts 6th c. Arabia (excluding Yemen) as dominated by paganism. But what do the Arabic inscriptions of 6th century Arabia tell," Twitter, April 28, 2020, 8:24 a.m., https://twitter.com/Tweetistorian/status/1255110763540340743.

of caution reminding us that much of the region still needs to be surveyed. We may yet discover later pagan inscriptions datable to the sixth century CE, even if the present state of our knowledge increasingly points toward a "monotheistic" Arabia, it is still too early to definitively state that Arabia had become mostly monotheistic upon the eve of Islam. In this vein Aziz al-Azmeh notes that: Both polytheism and ambient monotheisms were equally pertinent to the emergence of Allāh as a monotheistic deity.[51] Al-Azmeh's comment therefore problematizes suggestions that by the time Muhammad began preaching his message all of Arabia was already monotheistic.

In the interim how can we contextualize the Qur'an which has always been read as arising out of an idolatrous, polytheistic environment? Hawting's suggestion that the *mushrikūn* of the Qur'an were themselves probably monotheists, but not monotheistic enough in Muhammad's eyes presents a convincing possibility. Alternatively however, I ultimately argue that Hawting's classification of the *mushrikūn* as monotheists who simply showed excessive veneration to angels is problematized by his own acknowledgement at the end of *The Idea of Idolatry* that Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt could have been venerated in an astral manifestation, particularly as Venus or other celestial bodies.[52] Before we discuss how this trio must have been viewed by the associators in some astral manifestation, we first need to understand the issue of angel veneration in the Qur'an that Hawting raises, and more specifically, how Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt were viewed by the *mushrikūn* as angels. It is to these two issues that we now turn.

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[51] Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*: *Allah and His People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), loc. 2274 of 34592, Kindle.
[52] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 147.

The Mushrikūn as Angel Worshippers in the Qur'an?

While Hawting ultimately concludes that the *mushrikūn* were not worshipping idols, as part of his argument he acknowledges the numerous qur'anic passages "that imply, or explicitly say, that the opponents worshipped or believed in a plurality of gods."[53] Hawting warns against accepting these passages at face value, i.e. accepting that the associators did in fact worship a plurality of gods and instead urges that they should be understood within the context of religious polemic. He points out that the Qur'an does acknowledge the existence of other beings or things that the associators are said to worship besides the true god, but the Qur'an simply deems them to be inferior beings.[54] Most importantly he reminds us that in monotheist polemic, "the 'god' of the opponents may not be considered a god by the opponents themselves and his 'worship' may only be a form of veneration or even a (disapproved) enthusiasm."[55]

Along these lines we learn that what the *mushrikūn* expect most from those that they associate with God is intercession either for some worldly benefit or an expectation that their intercessor will be able to plead their case before God at the final judgment of mankind. We can infer their expectation of intercession at the final judgment based on the fact that the Qur'an repeatedly denies this possibility in a number of verses. It is not so much that the possibility of intercession is altogether

[53] Ibid, 50.
[54] Ibid, 50-51.
[55] Ibid, 51.

denied, "but God will only permit it by and for those whom He wishes, and the beings in whom the opponents place their trust are not among these…"[56]

Just who were these beings from whom the *mushrikūn* expected intercession? Some passages of the Qur'an seem to indicate they were angels that the *mushrikūn* thought were God's offspring, taking them as lords. A few of these verses claim angels as God's daughters. Regarding such verses the Qur'an highlights the hypocrisy of attributing daughters to God since the *mushrikūn* preferred to have sons. Select verses are cited below:

> [On taking the angels as lords]
>
> Q3:80: Nor would he instruct you To take angels and prophets For Lords and Patrons…
>
> [These verses mention daughters being attributed to Allah, without specific reference to the angels]
>
> Q16:57: And they assign daughters For Allah! – Glory be to Him! – And for themselves (sons – The issue) they desire!
> Q16:58: When news is brought To one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face Darkens, and he is filled With inward grief!
>
> [However, it becomes increasingly clear that the daughters being attributed to Allah are angels]
>
> Q17:40: Has then your Lord, (O Pagans!) preferred for you Sons, and taken for Himself Daughters among the angels? Truly ye utter A most dreadful saying!
>
> Q43:15: What! Has He taken Daughters out of what He Himself creates, and granted To you sons for choice?
> …
> Q43:19: And they make into females Angels who themselves serve Allah…

Hawting never specifically clarifies what he means by the term 'monotheism,'[57] nor does he ever definitively state what type of monotheism (whether Jewish, Christian,

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[56] Towards this end Hawting cites a number of qur'anic verses including: Q2:225 "Who is he that can intercede (*yashfa'u*) with Him except by His permission?"; Q10:3 "Your Lord is God who made the heavens and the earth in six days…None can intercede with Him except after His permission"; Q32:4 God it is who has created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days…Except for Him you shall have no patron (*walī*) and no intercessor (shafī')" Ibid, 52.

[57] Except to say that it is an abstract and subjective ideal, and generally that he intends by it "all those groups that have originated within the Abrahamic tradition, but not groups outside that tradition even though they might legitimately be described as monotheistic." Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 6 fn 9.

or other) the *mushrikūn* might follow. His study of the angels however, helps to shed some light on the issue. Considering the intercessory nature of the angels, Hawting positively cites D.B. Macdonald who wrote, "'The religion of Mecca in Muḥammad's time was far from simple idolatry. It resembled much more a form of the Christian faith, in which saints and angels have come to stand between the worshippers and God.'"[58] Reflecting on such a historical possibility and its relation to Muslim tradition Hawting avers: Naturally, it is not impossible that a religion resembling Christianity was espoused by the people of Mecca at the beginning of the seventh century, but the tradition does not tell us so…[59]

While Hawting would aver that the intercessory nature of the angels would not necessarily place the *mushrikūn* outside the bounds of Judaism or Christianity the situation of Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt present an interesting case as Muslim tradition has always portrayed them as goddesses and idols even though the Qur'an seems to indicate that the *mushrikūn* saw them as interceding angels consistent with the qur'anic verses cited above. Can these competing visions be reconciled? We turn to this issue in the following section.

Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt as angels in the Qur'an

In Q 53 *Sūrat al-Najm* shortly after asking members of the *sūrah's* audience in verses 19 and 20, whether they have in fact seen Allāt, and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt the third of the trio, and thereafter, again expressing wonder at the hypocrisy of the *mushrikūn* for attributing daughters to Allah while preferring sons for themselves in verse 21, the qur'anic narrator goes on to state a few verses later:

[58] Ibid, 64.
[59] Ibid, 66.

> Q53:26: How many so ever be The angels in the heavens, Their intercession will avail nothing Except after Allah has given Leave for whom he pleases And that he is acceptable To Him.
>
> Q53:27: Those who believe not In the Hereafter, name The angels with female names.
>
> Q53:28: But they have no knowledge Therein. They follow nothing But conjecture…

From these two clusters of verses that are only separated by four verses (Q53:19-21 and 26-28)[60] the seemingly most apparent inference to be drawn in line with the similar verses cited in the previous section is that Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt were regarded by the *mushrikūn* as angels and daughters of Allah.

Hawting agrees that the qur'anic accusation that spans Q53:19-28 is completely consistent with other qur'anic verses (some of which have been previously mentioned) that equate *shirk* with angel veneration, regard angels as God's offspring, and "charge them with making the angels female and granting them the power to intercede with God."[61] Muslim tradition portrayed the beings so named as goddesses who were represented as idols, could this be the reason for the Qur'an's heightened condemnation of these three specific beings? In the next section we provide a brief overview of how

[60] Sinai argues that verses 26-28 are part of a larger periscope consisting of verses 26-32 that were later interpolated into an initial core of the *sūrah*. He claims that we can tell that these verses were interpolated into an earlier version of the *sūrah* based on the following reasons: the length of the verses; their "argumentative and didactic" style; their omission not causing a gap in discourse; the content of verse 31 and 32 matching the content of late Meccan and early Medinan *sūrahs*; and the overall compositional symmetry that results when verses 26-32 are removed from the *sūrah*. Nicolai Sinai, "An Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm (Q. 53)," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 9, https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2011.0018. I don't believe however that these verses being interpolated into an earlier version of the *sūrah* has any bearing on the inference drawn from reading the two verse clusters together (Q53:19-21 and 26-28) and concluding that Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt were regarded by the *mushrikūn* as angels and daughters of Allah. Firstly Sinai doesn't make the claim that these verses were interpolated after the passing of the Prophet, and secondly that these three beings would be regarded as angels and daughters of Allah is consistent with the overall picture of the verses cited previously, almost all of which belong to the Meccan period of qur'anic chronology. On Sinai's relative chronology of the *sūrahs* of the Qur'an see further discussion in this thesis, Chapter 3, pp. 85-86.

[61] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 137.

these goddesses are portrayed in the *Book of Idols* and other traditional Muslim sources.[62]

Manāt, Allāt, and al-ʻUzzā in traditional Muslim sources

In recording information on this trio of goddesses in his *Book of Idols*, Ibn al-Kalbī begins the discussion with Manāt. He states that her idol[63] is the most ancient among the Arabs. Although she was worshipped by people from around the region, including Mecca and Medina, she was most adored by the Aws and the Khazraj tribes. He states that her idol was erected "on the seashore in the vicinity of al-Mushallal in Qudayd, between Medina and Mecca."[64] The Aws and Khazraj, and people who

[62] A sampling of the traditional sources are related here in so far as they advance Hawting's thesis about how problematic such sources are. As for the secondary literature and publications of the material evidence that represents these theonyms over a vast span of time and space in the Near East prior to the rise of Islam, a bit of it will be mentioned in Chapter 4 in so far as it touches upon the goddesses' astral character. Otherwise, I have avoided a comprehensive review of these sources to avoid redundancy and because some of the issues discussed in the literature are beyond the scope of this thesis e.g. the etymology of the goddesses' names. The list of studies that follow herein are not meant to be exhaustive but cover a broad range of the material. The most comprehensive study to date remains that of Susan Krone, *Die altarabische Gottheit al-Lāt* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992) *passim*; for coverage of the goddesses from a Nabatean perspective see John F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabateans*: *A Conspectus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 107-119 (Allāt and al-ʻUzzā), 132-137 (Manāt); for treatment at Palmyra see Javier Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 12-18 (Manāt), 53-76 (Allāt); for treatment of Allāt at Dura Europos see Lucinda Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura Europos*: *A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 81-86 and *passim*; the highly cited study of Fahd attempts to read the Muslim materials against the *longue durée* of ancient Near Eastern religion generally, see Toufic Fahd, *Le Panthéon de l'Arabie centrale à la veille de l'Hégire* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1968), 111-120 (Allāt), 123-126 (Manāt), 163-182 (al-ʻUzzā); Al-Tawil attempts to prove that Arabia had an indigenous artistic tradition of statuary by reading Muslim literary sources in the context of the figural arts of the Near East, see Hashim Mohammed Al-Tawil, "Early Arab icons: Literary and archaeological evidence for the cult of religious images in pre-Islamic Arabia," (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 1993), 102-131(Allāt), 131-144 (al-ʻUzzā), 144-152 (Manāt); Dost provides a recent summary of the inscriptional material on the three goddesses, see Dost, "An Arabian Qur'ān," 24-44.

[63] Attempting to point out the inconsistencies of the traditional material and how it cannot be relied on to convey historically accurate information, Hawting points out how Manāt is variously described as a 'rock'; 'idol sculpted from a rock'; and a 'stele,' or 'sanctuary.' Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 140-141. Of the many inconsistencies he does highlight about these goddesses in the traditional sources that do lead one to quite naturally question the historicity of the sources, this particular line of attack seems most uncharitable. One can easily imagine people referring to the physicality of the goddess in different ways without it necessarily calling into question the historicity of the information being reported about her. People naturally refer to a thing sometimes in general terms, and at other times by a specific aspect of the thing, such differences therefore cannot necessarily lead one to conclude that these traditions are necessarily confused and therefore historically suspect.

[64] *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 13; tr. loc. 27 of 74.

followed their rites did not consider their pilgrimage to Mecca complete until after they had gone and visited Manāt, stayed at her sanctuary for a while, and shaved their heads there (instead of shaving their heads at Mecca).[65] Ibn al-Kalbī mentions that the Prophet dispatched ʻAlī b. Abī Ṭālib in the eighth year of the Hijrah to destroy Manāt, after which ʻAlī carried away two prize swords out of the treasures from her sanctuary that were presented to the goddess by the King of Ghassān.[66] Other versions of the story sometimes mention that it was either Abū Sufyān, or Saʻd b. Zayd al-Ashhalī who were dispatched upon a mission against the goddess.[67]

Ibn al-Kalbī claims that Allāt is more recent than Manāt. She was most adored by the Banū Thaqīf tribe, although the Quraysh and all the Arabs venerated her as well, and her sanctuary was located in al-Ṭāʾif.[68] There are conflicting accounts of whether her idol existed in either anthropomorphic or aniconic fashion. Ibn al-Kalbī mentions that she was a cubic rock, however in one report it is mentioned that she had the head of a lady.[69] Other sources report that her statue was "adorned with necklaces, pendants and jewels."[70] Based on these reports Hashim Al-Tawil concludes that the goddess' "statue represented a standing female figure modeled in a naturalistic style." In further support of the claim that Allāt must have been represented in a naturalistic style he

[65] Ibid, 14; tr. loc. 27-28 of 74.
[66] Ibid, 15; tr. loc. 28 of 74.
[67] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 141.
[68] *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 16; tr. loc. 29 of 74. Although Hawting points out discrepancies in the tradition about which particular clan was the custodian of her sanctuary Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 138 fn. 19; additionally there are also discrepancies in the tradition about where exactly her sanctuary was located, with some saying it was at Nakhlah rather than al-Ṭāʾif, leading Wellhausen to claim that later generations often confused Allāt with al-ʻUzzā, which Hawting contests. Ibid, fn. 14.
[69] Regarding her representation as a cubic stone see *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 16; tr. loc. 29 of 74; for the report on her idol having the head of a lady which Hawting infers might indicate her idol having either a human, or an animal form see Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 138.
[70] Al-Tawil, "Early Arab icons," 128. Citing al-Waqidī, and Ibn Hishām.

mentions a report about Abū Sufyān carrying statuettes of both Allāt and al-'Uzzā into battle against Muhammad for the goddesses' support and victory in the battle.[71] Both Allāt as well as Manāt were known by the epithet *al-Ṭāghiyah* which means insolent or tyrannical. It's possible that Allāt was given this epithet because she was known as a warrior goddess.[72] Supposedly her idol or betyl (depending on one's perspective) was destroyed by Mughīra b. Shu'ba, a Thaqafī convert to Islam. Some reports say he was accompanied by Abū Sufyān.[73]

A number of sources clearly indicate that both Allāt and al-'Uzzā were considered to be a natural pair as they are almost always mentioned together, some examples are provided below:

> The pre-Islamic ritual invocation announcing the pilgrim's presence at the Meccan sanctuary or *talbiyah* indicates how Allāt and al-'Uzzā were considered separately from Manāt, its wording closely parallels the phrasing of Q53:19-20:
>
> | pre-Islamic *talbiyah* | Q53:19-20 |
> |---|---|
> | [By] Al-Lāt and al-'Uzza and Manāt, the third, the other! Indeed, they are the high *gharānīq*! And, indeed, their intercession is to be hoped for![74] | Have you seen Allāt and al-'Uzzā?! And Manāt, the third, the other?! |
>
> People often swore their oaths upon both goddesses at the same time:
> "By Allāt and al-'Uzza and those who in them believe, And by Allah, verily He is greater than both."[75]

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[71] Ibid, 128-129, at 128. He further speculates that the cubic or "squarish" stone mentioned by Ibn al-Kalbī must have served "as a base to the statue and an altar for sacrifice at the same time." Ibid, 130.

[72] Regarding her warrior aspect, see the translator's footnote in Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The History of Al-Ṭabarī, Volume 8*: *The Victory of Islam*, tr. Michael Fishbein (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 76 fn. 325; for the meaning of *al-Ṭāghiyah* and further reading see translator's footnote at *The History of Al-Ṭabarī, Volume 9*: *The Last Years of the Prophet*, tr. Ismail K. Poonawala (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 44-45 fn. 327; For Manāt sharing the same epithet as Allāt see *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., s.v. "Manāt," by T. Fahd, accessed July 09, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4909.

[73] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 139.

[74] Ahmed citing Ibn al-Kalbī's version of the *talbiyah* and citing additional variants, see Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 65. For the rendering of the Ar. *gharānīq*, translated by some as Numidian cranes and the information that the crane motif conveys in the overall narrative logic of the various reports of the Satanic verses incident see Ibid, 60-65. This event will be discussed briefly in this chapter and much more extensively in chapter 4 *infra*.

[75] *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 16; tr. loc. 29 of 74; Fahd citing the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* mentions that King Mundhir of Hīra used to swear his oaths upon both Allāt, and al-'Uzzā together, see Fahd, *Le Panthéon*, 168; In al-

> Prior to the rise of Islam, the gentile monotheist (*ḥanīf*) Zayd ibn-'Amr ibn-Nufayl congratulated himself for not engaging in idol worship by saying: I have renounced Allāt and al-'Uzza, For thus would the brave and robust do.[76]
>
> A man from the tribe of 'Udhrah was asked about why their tribesmen become so infatuated with their lovers. He responds saying, "By God if you saw women's charming eyes topped by gorgeous eyebrows, and underneath, startling smiling lips, you would adore them (women) and would venerate them as Allat and Al`uzza."[77]
>
> While Muhammad attempts to recruit new believers by preaching to them during the Ḥajj his uncle and enemy Abū Lahab warns the pilgrims, "Banū so-and-so, this man [i.e. Muhammad] is calling upon you to cast off al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā from your necks…"[78]
>
> When a tribal sheikh asks Muhammad what he is calling people to, he responds, "I am summoning people to worship the One God, who has no partners, and that you should throw off allegiance to idols, proclaim your disbelief in Allāt and al-'Uzzā…"[79]

As for al-'Uzzā she was the youngest of the three according to Ibn al-Kalbī.[80] He lays out his method for ascertaining this conclusion, which he claims he accomplished by looking at the naming practices of the Arabs. Ibn al-Kalbī says that al-'Uzzā's was the greatest and most venerated idol among the Quraysh. There are discrepancies about the location of her sanctuaries. On the one hand it is said that it was located in the Northern Nakhlah valley just outside Mecca, and "to the right of the road" from Mecca to Iraq. However Ibn al-Kalbī also mentions another location where she was worshipped in the valley of Ḥurād in the ravine called Suqām.[81] Hawting has summarized the problems with this conflicting material.[82] Upon visiting a dying

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Ṭabarī's *History* it is mentioned that after Muḥammad is visited miraculously by angels as a child and is later investigated by a soothsayer/seer, the soothsayer swears by Allāt and al-'Uzzā that the young Muḥammad should be killed as he forsees him bringing chaos and an end to the old pagan religion. See Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (Leiden: Brill, 1881-1882), I.2:977; *The History of Al-Ṭabarī, Volume 5*: *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen*, tr. C.E. Bosworth (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 279.

[76] *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 22; tr. loc. 34 of 74.

[77] Al-Tawil, "Early Arab icons," 129.

[78] *Taʾrīkh* (Leiden: Brill, 1882-1885), I.3:1204-1205; tr. 6:120.

[79] *Taʾrīkh* (Leiden: Brill, 1881-1882), I.2:977; tr. 5:281.

[80] *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 17; tr. loc. 31 of 74.

[81] *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 18-21; tr. loc. 31/74 to 34/74.

[82] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 139.

Qurashī elder who fears that the worship of al-'Uzzā will cease, the Prophet's uncle Abū Lahab exhibits his loyalty to the goddess saying, "By God! Al-'Uzza was not worshipped during your lifetime for your sake, and her worship will not be discontinued after you depart because of your death."[83] Stories about him and his association with al-'Uzzā will surface in exegesis on two *sūrahs* Q53, and Q111. In a famous story about the destruction of al-'Uzzā, the Prophet commands Khalid b. Walīd to destroy her sanctuary. The Prophet instructs Khalid to cut down one of the three trees that the goddess inhabits. Every time Khalid returns the Prophet asks him if he has seen anything unusual, to which Khalid replies in the negative. On Khalid's third attempt he meets the demoness inhabiting the trees who appears in the form of a woman. When Khalid splits her head she turns to dust after which Khalid kills the sanctuary's custodian. On his return the Prophet informs Khalid that demoness was al-'Uzzā, "But she is no more. The Arabs shall have none after her. Verily she shall never be worshipped again."[84]

Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt: goddesses, angels or stars?!

When Hawting first introduces the idea that the *shirk* the associators are being accused of in the Qur'an is that of angel veneration, he goes on to point out that the qur'anic polemic against them does not require one to "follow the tradition in transforming the angels of the Koran into gods and idols." The reason being that monotheist groups in Late Antiquity had "a highly developed angelology" which resulted in Early Christian polemic against Judaism for angel worship. Hawting

[83] *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 23; tr. loc. 35 of 74.
[84] Ibid, 25-27, at 26-27; tr. loc. 36/74-37/74, at 37/74.

believes such polemic was prompted by a number of factors affording angels such a high status, including: a mischaracterization of the role of angels "in the transmission of revelation" resulting in blurring distinctions between prophets and angels as both beings could be referred to as 'messengers'; associating or identifying them with stars; and believing they might intercede at the Last Judgment.[85]

Nevertheless the tradition presents this trio as goddesses and idols. Hawting admits that at least one of the events surrounding these goddesses during the life of the Prophet as reported in the traditional material, namely the Satanic verses incident, poses a problem for his claim that the Meccans did not engage in idol worship at all.[86] The Satanic verses incident which we will review again in Chapter 4 tells a story about how Muhammad wishes to reconcile with his people. The story goes that Muhammad wished God would reveal a qur'anic proclamation to him so that the hearts of his fellow nonbelieving tribesman would soften to his message. It was around this time that Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* was revealed to him. When Muhammad was reciting the *sūrah*, it was at the point right after the verses "Have you seen Allāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third, the other?" that Satan "cast" some verses upon his tongue so that the very next thing that his mixed audience of believing followers and Qurashī nonbelievers heard was "Those high *gharānīq*: Indeed, their intercession is approved [*tilka al-gharānīq al'ulā: wa-inna shafā'ata-hunna la-turtaḍā*]."[87] In the story Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt are presented as goddesses whom the Meccans worshipped. According to the story, the claim that the Prophet had acknowledged these goddesses' intercession with Allah

[85] Ibid, 53.
[86] Ibid, 133.
[87] Ahmed citing Ibn Isḥāq's version of the story, see Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 49.

(even if temporarily) resulted in the Quraysh converting to Islam. Later Gabriel would reveal to Muhammad the "corrected verses" which are found in the received text of the Qur'an that we have today.[88]

Hawting is interested in examining the historicity of the story because if the story is more or less accurate as reported, then he concedes that "the importance of polytheism and idolatry in the society addressed by the Prophet would seem to be established and the traditional view of the koranic *mushrikūn* confirmed." He admits that even if the story is not historical the traditional Muslim view of a polytheistic idol-worshipping Arabia could still be true, nevertheless "at least one compelling piece of evidence for Meccan idolatry" could be cast aside.[89] Ironically, after reviewing the scholarship on the question of the historicity of the Satanic verses story Hawting finds the scholars' answers to that question ultimately unhelpful to his main purpose about whether Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt were actually worshipped as idols. That is to say, such scholars were concerned with the Satanic verses story as fact, but not with the particular question of the Meccans' worship of these goddesses, therefore while the scholars' methods and conclusions may generally support the traditional view of Meccan polytheism, it remains to be seen, how in fact, these three beings were *actually* worshipped.[90]

As for the traditional materials that make mention of these goddesses that are strewn across different genres of Muslim religious history they suffer the same fate of recording pre-Islamic religion as mentioned before; lack of consistency and tendentious

[88] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 133.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid, 136.

organization of the material due to an author or compiler's religious presuppositions. The location of the goddesses' shrines are confused, the identities of the goddesses themselves are confused, as are the details about who their caretakers were. Despite inconsistencies about the particular details of these goddesses, general themes indicating tendentious arrangement of the materials are evident: The idols of two of the goddesses are inhabited by demons who make themselves known when their sanctuaries are destroyed, and a general concern of the compilers to center the Meccan sanctuary in the discussion about these idols. Discussing the epigraphic record of these goddesses' names strewn across a large swath of geography, other material evidence, and other non-Muslim sources, Hawting avers that while Muslims may have been aware of the ancient theonyms they were probably ignorant of much else about the goddesses. As an example, al-'Uzzā's astral nature and Venus cult is unheard of in Muslim tradition.[91]

This leads Hawting to fall back on his consistent method of seeing what the Qur'an actually says about an issue. Hawting assesses that in the case of the three named beings, negatively speaking, the Qur'an does not call them goddesses or idols, but instead, the tradition does that. In a positive sense it would seem that talk of the three angels/goddesses is completely consistent with other verses that mention angels as being female, God's offspring, and able to intercede with God. This leads Hawting to conclude, and perhaps a little too narrowly, that the Qur'an's only problem with the

[91] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 137-142.

mushrikūn is the names they attribute to these specific angels.[92] The pagans are criticized in Q53:27 for giving the angels female names.

According to Hawting this is problematic because "The idea of angels as female and as daughters of God has puzzled modern scholars." The idea that angels were interpreted as "sons of God" can easily be found in the Hebrew Bible, the especially famous example being Genesis 6 where they are viewed as fallen angels; but Jewish or Christian conceptions of angels as being portrayed as female and as daughters is difficult to document. This has led scholars to actually seek out Jewish and Christian traditions where the idea of female angels may have existed, averring that it must have been the "product of Arab pagan syncretism" when their results turned up empty.

Where did this idea of angels as female, and daughters of God originate from then? Hawting reminds us that we should not take the Qur'an's polemic at face value, and perhaps the associators only gave some angels female names like those of Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, thus opening themselves up to the qur'anic attack.[93] In order to make sense of that attack he proposes that some Jewish and Christian sects believed the stars to be angels and gave some of them female names. About this he states:

> The identification of entities bearing female names could make sense in relation to a group that saw stars, planets and other astral bodies as angels, ideas which seem to have flourished in some early Jewish and Christian sects. The book of Enoch 6-8 gives the names of several angels, Kōkābiel (Star of God) and Satarel, which L. Ginzberg suggested contains the name of Ishtar/Astarte, the Semitic mother goddess with affinities to the western Aphrodite/Venus.

Building upon these examples, and based on the fact that it was well-known in non-

[92] Speaking about how Q53:19-28 differs from other sections of the Qur'an where angels are also called female, God's offspring, and claimed to have the power to intercede before God, Hawting states, "The distinctive element in 53:19-28 is the names that, it is here charged, the opponents give to the angels." Ibid, 136-137, at 137.
[93] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 146.

Muslim sources that al-'Uzzā, and possibly Allāt, and Manāt as well, were worshipped as Venus, Hawting seeks to make sense of the qur'anic polemic against them. Regarding the trio's association with the worship of Venus and its relation to the qur'anic polemic he states:

> It is conceivable that this idea underlies the koranic accusation that the opponents gave the angels female names and regarded them as the daughters of God. If the three names given in Koran 53:19-20 had been used to refer to Venus or any other of the heavenly bodies, and if the opponents did associate the heavenly bodies with angels, the koranic polemic against them would be understandable.[94]

I believe Hawting's argument is a subtle one, but if I am reading him correctly, I don't take him to be saying that Muhammad's *mushrik* opponents actually worshipped Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt as manifestations of Venus. Rather what I believe he is saying is that regardless of their previous contexts, these theonyms became signifiers or referents for Venus among Muhammad's interlocutors. In other words the names 'Allāt,' 'al-'Uzzā,' and 'Manāt' bereft of older pagan connotations came to mean or be a stand-in for the planet Venus for at least some members of Muhammad's speech community. Muhammad's *mushrik* angel-venerating monotheistic opponents did not worship the planet Venus, but associated their angels with the planet Venus instead. In other words in the minds of the *mushrikūn* 'previous goddess name bereft of pagan connotations' = Venus = *mushrik's* Angel, BUT NOT goddess = Venus. In Hawting's estimation then, it must have been the case that the pagan connotations of the goddess names were never completely forgotten, and subsequently this issue became the source

[94] Ibid, 147. Speaking particularly about al-'Uzzā's connection to the planet Venus, Hawting states, "Drawing on evidence external to the Muslim tradition, evidence relation to Syria, Mesopotamia and the Sinai, modern scholars have frequently associated the names, especially that of al-'Uzzā, with cults devoted to astral bodies, particularly Venus. Her worship was ascribed to the Arabs of the northern border regions by several writers of Late Antiquity." Ibid, 142. In the next chapter we will review a number of these citations from late antique Christian writers who identify the worship of al-'Uzzā with Venus.

of polemic between Muhammad and the *mushrikūn*. Hawting's argument is clever and complicated, but assuming it is true, it ends up painting Muhammad as quite pedantic. In essence Muhammad condemns the *mushriks* because they called some of their angels by the names of the old pagan goddesses. Hawting may respond that that is the nature of religious polemic; to argue over minutiae. This would certainly call into question though, Crone's previous assessment of the transparency of the debate between Muhammad and his opponents where she states, "In short, the Messenger does seem to give us enough genuine information about his opponents for us to reconstruct their views and internal divisions, if only in broad outline."[95] In the remainder of this thesis I attempt to demonstrate that Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt were associated with the planet Venus in Muhammad's milieu like Hawting suggests, however the nature of that association will become apparent as the study progresses.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have outlined Hawting's main arguments against the traditional portrayal of the qur'anic *mushrikūn* or associators as polytheistic idol worshippers. Although we noted the weakness of the assumptions underlying some of his arguments against the associators' potential practice of literal idol worship, overall his main thesis seems to be substantiated by the Arabian epigraphic record based on our current state of knowledge. That record clearly indicates that monotheistic beliefs were highly prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula well before the rise of Islam, and mention of the old pagan gods were on the decline. Hawting concedes that the qur'anic accusation of *shirk* is prominent in the Qur'an, however it is directed towards some vague Arabian

[95] Patricia Crone, "Pagan Arabs as God-fearers," in *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, eds. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 140.

monotheistic group who believed in a monotheistic creator god, overzealously venerated angels, and expected those angels to intercede on their behalf with God. The Qur'an's polemic was not targeted against people who actually bowed to statues. In this regard, these so-called monotheistic *mushrikūn* were not too different from Christians who venerate saints and hope for their intercession also. Hawting acknowledges that the portrayal of Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt as goddesses and idols in traditional materials, especially the Satanic verses incident presents problems for his thesis, but scholars who study the historicity of that purported episode in the life of the Prophet are not so much concerned with the religious conception of these beings. Reiterating his skepticism of the traditional material, Hawting adds also that there is a disconnect between non-Muslim sources and the picture of the goddesses as presented in the Muslim tradition. Concluding on the issue of how the idea of female angels as daughters of God arose, Hawting offers that the associators opened themselves up to that accusation by possibly giving some angels female names. These names came from the names of stars and because some Jewish and Christian groups believed that the angels were stars, they called their angels by these names, some of which happened to be female names. Prominent among these names is that of al-'Uzzā who was once worshipped as a Venusian goddess. This thesis attempts to show that the goddesses mentioned in Q53:19-20 were worshipped as manifestations of Venus. The next chapter looks at late antique Christian reports about the worship of al-'Uzzā in North Arabian regions and assess whether she was similarly conceived in the Ḥijāz on the eve of Islam.

Chapter 2: How Ancient Near Eastern Astral Mythology Might Inform Us About the Worship of al-ʻUzzā as the Morning Star in the Late Antique Arabian Milieu of the Qur'an

In the previous chapter we cited Hawting mentioning late antique authors writing about the goddesses al-ʻUzzā (mentioned in the Qur'an as an angel) being worshipped in some form of astral religion. Before advancing our discussion about how al-ʻUzzā may have been worshipped in some form of astral religion further, it would be beneficial to review what the practice of astral religion actually entails. The concept may already seem simple or intuitive enough to the reader, however astral religion expressly defined, "refers to the cultic worship of heavenly bodies or deities associated with them." Among differing systems "the relationship between a heavenly body and a deity may range from identification to mere association" because the boundaries between deity and celestial object are fluid. Though there may be no religion *per se* that has completely astralized all of its gods, aspects or "elements of astral religion do appear within particular religious systems."[96] Additionally, efforts among some scholars to trace all of mythology back to an astral religion or astral mythology are now viewed as obsolete.[97]

According to Hutter the most fundamental human experience from which astral religion arises is "the visible but inexplicable motion of the stars and planets," these phenomena are then "perceived as an expression of divine power" which subsequently

[96] Hutter, Manfred. "Astral Religion," in *Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Thelogy and Religion*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 466.
[97] Hutter, "Astral Religion," 466. As will become apparent in our discussion of the history of the Pan-Babylonian school of Assyriology in this chapter *infra*.

results in mythological reflection.[98] Such observable phenomena included the movement of the stars about a motionless pole star; observation of the asterism of the Pleiades; and most famously among the Semitic peoples worship of a Venus goddess with special attention paid to her movements as the morning and evening star.[99]

Returning to the issue of whether al-'Uzzā, and possibly the two other angels of Q53:19-20 were worshipped as celestial bodies, Hawting pointed out that the association of Venus with al-'Uzzā was especially prominent in this regard. James Montgomery commenting on this issue has stated:

> A recurrent feature among studies of the religious beliefs and practices of the pre-Islamic Arabs is the issue of astral cults, for which some scholars find ample evidence in Islamic as well as extra-Islamic materials, while others remain skeptical. Central to every discussion of astral cults and star worship, is the equivalence of the deity al-ʿUzzā with the planet Venus, and specifically its manifestations as the morning star. The question of whether al-ʿUzzā is to be equated with Aphrodite is quite a different matter from the identification of al-ʿUzzā with the planet Venus and the deity's consequent involvement in astral worship.[100]

As for the equating al-'Uzzā with the goddess Venus/Aphrodite, Macdonald and Nehmé mention that a single "Nabataean-Greek bilingual inscription from the Greek island of Cos"[101] equates Aphrodite with al-'Uzzā. As for worshipping al-'Uzzā as the planet Venus there are numerous reports from Christian authors describing

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[98] Hutter, "Astral Religion," 466. Another writer simplifying the issue states, "Ancient people thought the stars were living entities. Their reasoning was simple: Many stars moved. That was a sign of life to the ancient mind. Stars were the shining glory of living beings," Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*: *Recovering the supernatural worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 24. However the work of Rochberg and others clarifies that the issue of the astralization of the gods in Mesopotamian thought at least was a bit more complex as the previous quote might lead one to believe. In Mesopotamian thought gods were closely associated with the celestial bodies, but known to be not exactly identical with them. About this Rochberg states, "The meaning of 'the stars, their likenesses' seems to be that images of the gods are made visible in the stars." See Francesca Rochberg, "The Stars Their Likenesses," in *What Is a God?* ed. Barbara Nevling Porter (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 65. On celestial bodies acting as secondary agents of divinities see Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "Divine Agency and Astralization of the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 142-149, EBSCOhost eBook Collection.

[99] Hutter, "Astral Religion," 467.

[100] Montgomery, "The Empty Ḥijāz," 91.

[101] *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., s.v. "al-ʿUzzā," by M.C.A. Macdonald and Laila Nehmé, accessed April 19, 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7789.

northern Arabians worshipping Venus, or Aphrodite, or the morning star all of which seem to be associated with al-'Uzzā.

In one story Jerome writes about Saint Hilarion meeting a number of Arabs in the town of Elusa. Mentioning the Arabs worship of Venus during Hilarion's visit, Jerome states, "[Hilarion] reached Elusa [south-west of the Dead Sea] as luck would have it on the very day on which an annual ceremony had gathered all of the people of the town in the temple of Venus. The nation of the Saracens is devoted to the cult, which they worship, however, as the Morning Star. Because of its location, the town itself is in the greatest part semi-barbarian…Receiving them pleasantly and with humility, he entreated with them to worship God, rather than idols."[102] Regarding the star mentioned in the quote Fisher and Wood state that it "is usually associated with Aphrodite/Venus and Al-Allat or 'Uzzai, and appears elsewhere, such as in the works of Herodotos, Jacob of Serug, Isaac of Antioch, Ps.-Zachariah, the *Chronicle of Seert*, Theodoret, and Procopius."[103] Another interesting story about Arabs worshipping the morning star includes mention of the potential sacrifice of the son of St. Nilus who was saved when his captors overslept and missed the rising of the morning star, thereby missing the time to fulfil the sacrifice.[104] In Chapter 1 we mentioned at least one report in a Muslim literary source of the Naṣrid leader al-Mundhir swearing oaths by Allāt, and al-'Uzzā,[105] it's interesting to note that his adoration of al-'Uzzā seems to be corroborated in Christian sources. Reporting on the raids of al-Mundhir against the

[102] Greg Fisher and Philip Wood et. al. "Arabs and Christianity," in *Arabs and Empires Before Islam*, ed. Greg Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 288.
[103] Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity," 288.
[104] William James Adams Jr., "Human Sacrifice and the Book of Abraham," *Brigham Young University Studies* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1969): 478, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43042396.
[105] see p. 26 fn. 75; see also fn. 195 *infra*.

Romans, the *Chronicle* of Pseudo Zachariah states, "and he led away many and brought down with him four hundred virgins who were suddenly carried into captivity from the assembly of the apostle Thomas in Emesa, whom he sacrificed in one day for the worship of 'Uzzai."[106] Procopius also mentions an anecdote about al-Mundhir sacrificing the son of his Jafnid enemy al-Ḥārith ibn Jabalah to Aprhodite,[107] establishing the association between al-'Uzzā and Aphrodite that is consistent with the al-'Uzzā-Aphrodite Greek-Nabatean bilingual inscription from Cos. Such information helps us to realize why scholars sought to equate the worship of al-'Uzzā with Venus. Toufic Fahd goes so far as to equate all three goddesses, Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt with the worship of Venus when he says, "These three deities correspond to the theophanies of Venus, morning star and evening star, very often confused with the Semitic Baʿla and worshipped by the Arabs since time immemorial."[108] Also Wellhausen, attempted to identify al-ʿUzzā with the planet Venus, and on this basis H.W.J. Drijvers attempted to "equate her with the goddess Aphrodite."[109]

Countering the eager identification between these goddesses and the worship of Venus, especially al-ʿUzzā, Macdonald and Nehmé aver that very little is known about her, and, "Attempts to identify her with the planet Venus are only achieved through a tenuous series of equations." Discussing such tenuous associations, they reference a study by John Henninger on the possibility of astral cults in Northern and Central Arabia, stating that, "Henninger has noted that these strained identifications are based

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[106] As cited in Peter Edwell et. al. "Arabs in the Conflict between Rome and Persia, AD 491-630," in *Arabs and Empires Before Islam*, ed. Greg Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 229.
[107] Ibid, 248.
[108] *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., s.v. "al-Lāt," by T. Fahd, accessed April 19, 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4647.
[109] Macdonald and Nehmé, "al-ʿUzzā."

on non-Arab sources from the northern borderlands of the Peninsula and cannot be assumed to apply to Arabia as a whole, or to the cult of al-ʿUzzā in Mecca in particular."[110] They go onto point out how meagre the evidence is for identifying al-ʿUzzā with the planet Venus or with the goddess Aphrodite by stating, "The only unequivocal equation of al-ʿUzzā with the planet Venus is in the 10th-century Syriac-Arabic dictionary of Bar Bahlūl …while the only explicit equation of al-ʿUzzā with Aphrodite, is in a 1st century B.C. to A.D. Nabataean-Greek bilingual inscription from the Greek island of Cos." Based on the foregoing they conclude, "It is possible, but at present unprovable, that al-ʿUzzā was considered by her worshippers to have some of the features of Aphrodite and/or to be in some way a manifestation of the planet Venus, but there is not enough evidence to establish exactly how she was conceived in any particular region or period."[111]

While heeding Macdonald and Nehmé's call to caution about drawing any definititive identifications between al-ʿUzzā and Venus/Aphrodite, James Montgomery nevertheless gathers together some thought provoking lines of evidence that make an identification between al-ʿUzzā and Aphrodite seem more plausible. In his article the "Empty Ḥijāz," Montgomery identifies a luxurious piece of jewelry known since Homer as Aphrodite's Body Girdle,[112] with an item of women's apparel rarely but memorably mentioned in some pre-Islamic and Umayyad era poetry known as a *wishāḥ*. A piece of jewelry that "formed a cruciform shape around the wearer's

[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] James Montgomery "The Empty Ḥijāz," in *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy: From the Many to the One: Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank*, ed. James E. Montgomery (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 83.

breasts."[113] This type of jewelry which is well known in Roman art was well represented in iconography from Egypt to the Levant to Iran as well.[114] Based on an iconographic study, the body chain seemed to be the preserve of only goddesses, nymphs, women of very high stature or "women enformed by the divine."[115] It is mentioned in early Arabic poetry in contexts that are highly eroticized where a number of poets "describe their various love-interests as resplendent in their body chains."[116] Montgomery identifies the "most consummate visual celebration of the body chain extant [in a] pre-modern Arabo-Islam[ic]" context as being depicted at the Umayyad bath house complex in Jordan known as Quṣayr ʿAmra which depicts a number of stunning bathing nude women most of whom are shown wearing a body chain. Montgomery concludes that they serve as instantiations of the goddess Aphrodite or at least her nymphs.[117] Reflecting on the goddess' body chain, Montgomery wonders whether a report about Muhammad's general Khalid b. al-Walid collecting some of al-ʿUzzā's jewelry after destroying her cult statue, could be a forgotten reference to the goddesses' body chain.[118] Returning to the issue about whether there is sufficient evidence for pre-Islamic Arabian astral cults, Montgomery reminds us that this debate should not diminish our appreciation of how deeply the celestial realm played a role in the world-view of the pre-Islamic poets and their warrior-elite patrons. Along these lines he raises the intriguing observation that in poetry the body chain is compared to

[113] Ibid, 78.
[114] Ibid, 81-83.
[115] Ibid, 80.
[116] Ibid, 83.
[117] Ibid, 84-87, at 84.
[118] Ibid, 90-91. The word used for the jewelry is *ḥilya*, a general term, and whether it could be referring specifically to the wishāḥ is the question that Montgomery raises.

the Pleiades in the way that it shines.[119] Implying then, that whether one is talking about Aphrodite or al-ʿUzzā, the goddess wearing the *wishāḥ* has a connection to the celestial realm through its poetic association with the Pleiades. Finally Montgomery mentions that many early exegetes associated Q 111 – *Sūrat al-Masad*, a *sūrah* that condemns the Prophet's uncle Abū Lahab and his wife to Hell with Qur'an 53. The reason being that Abū Lahab and his wife were both known as devotees of al-ʿUzzā, the goddess mentioned in Qur'an 53. While Montgomery's observations do not supply us with any direct evidence that can link al-ʿUzzā and her sisters with the worship of Venus, the associations that he draws between al-ʿUzzā and Aphrodite (who was also associated with the worship of Venus) through her body chain, seem very promising. This evidence certainly has probative value for cementing an astral connection to the goddesses mentioned in Q53:19-20, however stronger evidence is required in order to establish a more definitive link.

I believe such evidence may be found in a section of Q53 that serves as a polemic against the *mushrikūn.* Montgomery's study informs us that the worship of al-'Uzzā as Venus is implied in some sections of the Qur'an as remembered in the Muslim reception of the text. In the following chapters I will argue that the idea that al-'Uzzā (and possibly her sisters along with her) was worshipped as Venus amongst the *mushrikūn* in the qur'anic milieu is a consequence of the discovery that Muhammad's angelic vision described particularly in Q53:5-9 corresponds with the movements of Venus. Furthermore, I will explain that this depiction of Gabriel in language mirroring

[119] Ibid, 92. Citing a line from Imru'al-Qays: When al-Thurayyā [the Pleiades] appears at an angle in the heavens, Just as the folds of the body chain divided <in sections, by gems> appear at an angle.

the movements of Venus earlier in the *sūrah* was authored deliberately to serve as a polemic against the *mushrikūn* by stating that the planet Venus is symbolic of the Prophet's angel of revelation, and not a manifestation of their goddesses.

What lead me to notice this "astral" characterization of Gabriel in the passage of Q53:5-9 however comes from an unexpected source. It was through reading ancient Near Eastern mythology (specifically Mesopotamian) where significant astral information was incorporated into such mythology that I noticed that the movements of Gabriel correspond with the movements of Venus, just like the movements of a goddess will correspond with the movements of the planet Venus in these astral myths. I believe then that just as Mesopotamians incorporated their awareness of astronomical phenomena into their mythological/religious texts, in so doing, they provided cultural, regional, and historical precedents that help to contextualize my argument that the Prophet as the qur'anic proclaimer is doing the same thing in describing the descent of the angel that brings him the revelation in closely Venusian terms. Therefore our study of the presence of the worship of Venusian goddesses in the underlying subtext of a particular qur'anic passage can only be further enriched by considering it within the broader context of the *longue durée* of ancient Near Eastern thought; in this particular case, the ideas conveyed in Mesopotamian astral mythology.[120] In the remainder of this

[120] The realization that pre-Islamic Arabia, and the emergence of Islam in Arabia needs to be considered within the framework of an Arabian reception of the legacy of the thought and culture of the ancient Near East more generally has been expressed by a few scholars in the past couple of decades. One example is Fred Donner's discussion regarding continuities between the Islamic and pre-Islamic eras where he laments that modern secular research academies unfortunately fictitiously bifurcate the study of the Near East into ancient and Islamic periods. Regarding this issue he states, "Most university programs in Near Eastern studies specialize in either the ancient (read pre-Islamic) Near East, or in the Islamic Near East – not in both; and those departments that cover both almost always organize their programs of study so that students do one or the other – bridging the "divide" has not been particularly frequent, nor has the structure of programs and their requirements encouraged it." See Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*: *The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: The Darwin

chapter we will look at two such astral myths but before reviewing different analyses of the myths for their astral content, readers will be introduced to some fundamental astronomical concepts dealing with the movements of the stars and the planetary motion of Venus so that they may not only better appreciate the astral content that is expressed in these two myths, but also so they can more fully understand the astral character of Muhammad's angelic vision and other celestial phenomenon mentioned in Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* which will be explained in later chapters. In pre-modern times of course such an introduction may not have been necessary as the natural movement of the heavenly bodies was readily observable and such observation informed different societies' and cultures' sense of time.

Unfortunately, light pollution in our contemporary urban settings cuts modern humans off from appreciating the complex phenomenon of a clear night sky.[121] The stars' movement about an imaginary axis coupled with their variations in spacing, color, and brightness naturally compelled observers to impose patterns upon their placement in the sky. The combination of these two observations during clear nights over time lead pre-modern people "to craft folkloric and calendrical complexes" in

Press, 1998), 294-296. Crone and Silverstein conclude their article on assignment of property by lot casting with a similar sentiment when they state, "Here, however, our interest is not in modern politics, but rather in the relationship between ancient Near Eastern and Islamic culture. The question has not been much studied, but it has received some attention of late, deservedly in our view, because it amounts to asking how far we can reconstruct the cultural and religious history of the Near East as a single, continuous narrative rather than as disjointed parts studied under the rubrics of Biblical, Greek, Roman, ancient Iranian, and Islamic history." See Patricia Crone and Adam Silverstein, "The Ancient Near East and Islam: The Case of Lot-Casting," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 55, no. 2 (2010): 446-447, https://doi.org/10.1093/jss/fgq007.

[121] M. Willis Monroe, "Mesopotamian Astrology," *Religion Compass* 13, no. 6 (2019): 2, https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12318.

which the stars became the central characters.[122] Against the backdrop of the night sky's dark expanse, a particularly striking phenomenon that captures the attention of every star-gazer, both modern and ancient, is the movement of the planets because "they were often brighter than the background stars and moved across the heavens and through constellations unlike the fixed stars."[123]

In the ancient Near East, particularly Mesopotamia, not only were the movements of celestial objects studied with great care, but these movements were understood against a greater cultural background where the stars were thought to encode messages from the gods. Thus both scientific astronomy, and a culturally constructed astrology were inextricably linked.[124] Unfortunately the history of modern scholarship on the Mesopotamians' relationship to the stars has been mired in controversy.

In the late nineteenth century the pan-Babylonian school of thought mistakenly interpreted all Mesopotamian cult, and literature as expressing an astral mythology based on some ill-formed methodological presuppositions.[125] As an example, they interpreted the hero's journey in the Epic of Gilgamesh as a "mytho-poetic metaphor for the sun's journey through the signs of the zodiac."[126] Once it was exposed that these interpretations were quite anachronistic because Mesopotamians had not discovered the zodiac and the precession of the equinoxes until a much later period than these

[122] Danielle Kira Adams, "Rain Stars Set, Lunar Stations Rise: Multivalent Textures of Pre-Islamic Arabian Astronomy and the Hegemonic Discourse of Order," (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 2018), 44.
[123] Monroe, "Mesopotamian Astrology," 2.
[124] Ibid, 2-3.
[125] Jeffrey L. Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 2-6.
[126] Jeffrey L. Cooley, "Early Mesopotamian Astral Science and Divination in the Myth of Inana and Šukaletuda," *JANER* 8, no. 1 (2008): 76, https://doi.org/10.1163/156921208786182446.

interpretations assumed, many scholars in the field of Assyriology shied away from applying astral interpretations to Mesopotamian myths.[127]

As time passed, advances in understanding the chronology of "Mesopotamian celestial sciences" accompanied by theoretical shifts in situating Mesopotamian history of science within a cultural framework,[128] allowed scholars to realize that despite the excesses of the pan-Babylonian school "it is clear that many Mesopotamian myths have considerable astral content."[129] Below I briefly survey two such myths about the goddess Inana (Sumerian)/ Ištar (Akkadian) where scholars connect the movements of the goddess told in the stories to the planetary motion of Venus – the planet recognized as the goddess' celestial manifestation in Mesopotamian mythology. Appreciating the astral content of these myths however, first requires adequate background knowledge in some basic positional astronomy. Therefore some foundational information about the motions of the stars and the planetary motion of Venus are reviewed below. Information about the motions of the stars is included here as it will inform some of our readings of Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* in the next chapter.

Spending a few hours under the sky on any clear, dark night, affords a person the chance to notice that the stars move through the sky.[130] Aside from circumpolar stars which neither rise nor set, when the sky gets dark, stars appear at some point in the east and move westwards each night. (Fig. 2-1 p. 48). Because the celestial sphere

[127] Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy*, 2-6.
[128] Ibid, 6-25.
[129] Cooley, "Early Mesopotamian Astral Science," 76. Rochberg states she considers the genre of astral myth to be "a modern misnomer" when the term claims that myths were meant to teach astronomical phenomena. She concedes that "some elements in a number of myths may have astral referrents." Rochberg, "The Stars Their Likenesses," 47-48, at 47. What I mean by the term coincides with Cooley's statement which is simply to say astral myths are myths that have "considerable astral content," regardless of an ultimate message/moral the myth may be trying to convey.
[130] Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 45.

completes a full rotation about the Earth's axis (known as a sidereal day) four minutes faster than the Sun, "any star will reach the same point in the sky roughly four minutes earlier each night: for example, a star which crosses the eastern horizon at about 6pm on January 1st will cross the horizon at about 5.40pm on January 6th."[131] As stars move east to the west across the celestial sphere, each star will eventually reach its highest point along its trajectory in the sky (called culmination) when it crosses or "transits" through the meridian line.[132] The meridian is a great circle (bisecting the celestial sphere into eastern and western hemispheres) that crosses through the points of the observer's zenith and nadir, and the celestial poles.[133] (Fig. 2-2 p. 48).

As the stars move from east to west, they appear to move in a counter-clockwise direction, about an imagined central point through which the Earth's axis extends called the North Celestial Pole (NCP) or *quṭb*.[134] Presently, Polaris, "a star of moderate brightness" commonly called the Pole Star or North Star, is the star closest to the NCP.[135] (Fig. 2-3 p. 49). Just as the Earth spins about its axis, it simultaneously wobbles about its axis like a top causing the axis to trace out a circle among the stars of the northern sky about once every 26,000 years. This phenomenon is known as axial precession or the precession of the equinoxes. (Fig. 2-4 p. 49). It is the reason why a bit over 1400 years ago at the birth of Islam observers of the night sky would not have seen a Pole Star. (Fig. 2-5(a) p. 50). Instead pre-Islamic Arabians observed Polaris

[131] Matthew Robinson, "Ardua Et Astra: On the Calculation of the Dates of the Rising and Setting of Stars," *Classical Philology* 104, no. 3 (2009): 356, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/650145.
[132] Dominic Ford, "Culmination," In-The-Sky.org, accessed June 19, 2020, https://in-the-sky.org/article.php?term=culmination.
[133] "Celestial Meridian," COSMOS – The SAO Encyclopedia of Astronomy, accessed June 19, 2020, https://astronomy.swin.edu.au/cosmos/c/Celestial+Meridian.
[134] Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 45.
[135] Ibid, 46.

which they called the Goat Kid (*al-jady*) and the two stars named Kochab and Pherkad which they called the Two Wild Cow Calves (*al-farqadān*) as a "trio of young animals that slowly danced around the NCP as the sky rotated."[136] (Fig. 2-5(b) p. 50).

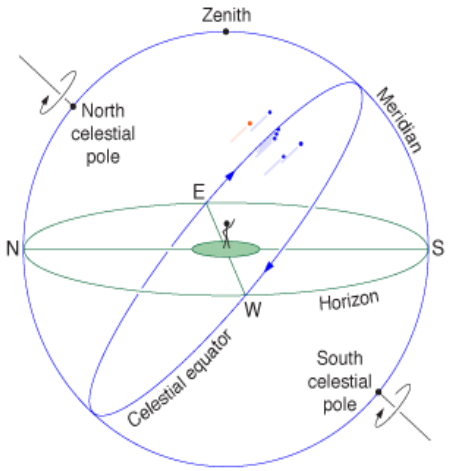

Fig. 2-1 Diagram of the celestial sphere depicting stars moving from East to West.
©2010-2011 Daniel V. Schroeder [CC BY-NC 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/)], Source: *Understanding Astronomy*. https://physics.weber.edu/schroeder/ua/StarMotion.html. Accessed June 18, 2020.

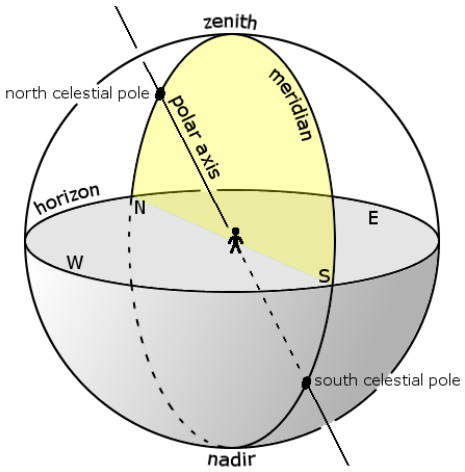

Fig. 2-2 Diagram of the celestial sphere highlighting the meridian and the polar axis passing through it at the celestial poles. Stars that reach the meridian are at their highest point in the sky, or are said to have reached culmination.
By Tfr000 (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en)], via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meridian_on_celestial_sphere.png. Accessed June 18, 2020.

[136] Ibid, 46-47, at 47. All three stars served as excellent guide stars, "for they always indicated the general direction of north, and they were always visible above the horizon." Ibid, 47.

Fig. 2-3 Time lapse star trail photo exhibiting stars moving about the NCP. By Feng Chu (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en)], via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Startrail_Feng.jpg. Accessed June, 18 2020.

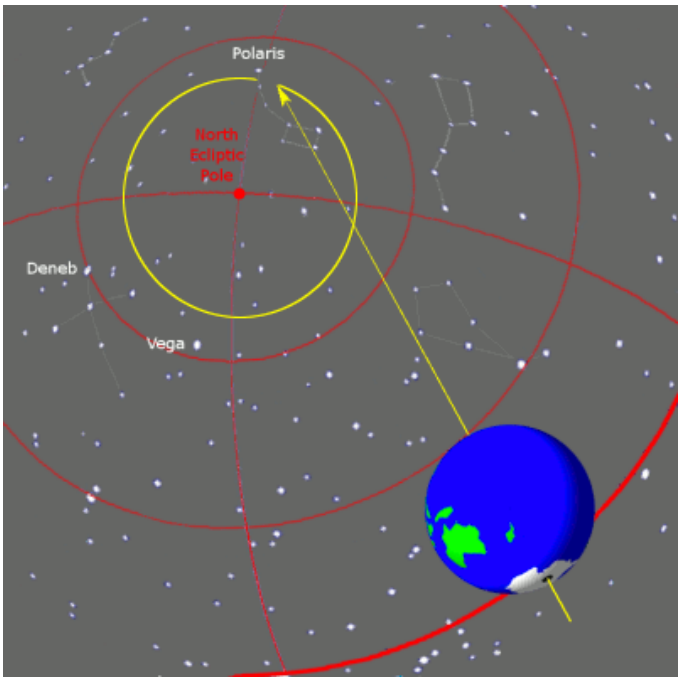

Fig. 2-4 Image part of a larger animation indicating a full cycle of precession (approx. every 26,000 years) beginning and ending at Polaris. By Tfr000 (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en)], via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Precession_animation_small_new.gif. Accessed July, 27 2020.

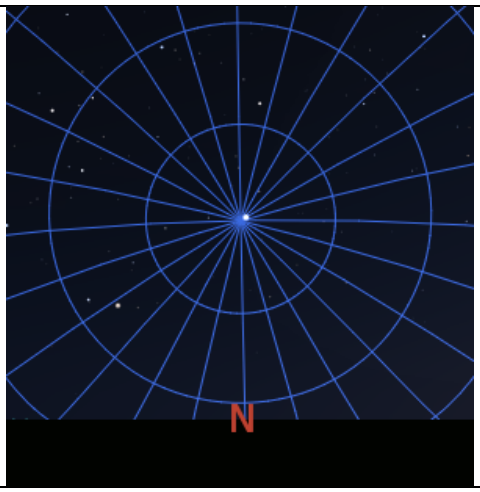

Fig. 2-5(a) View of Polaris very close to the NCP or *quṭb* as depicted from present day Mecca using *Stellarium* planetarium software ver. 0.19.3

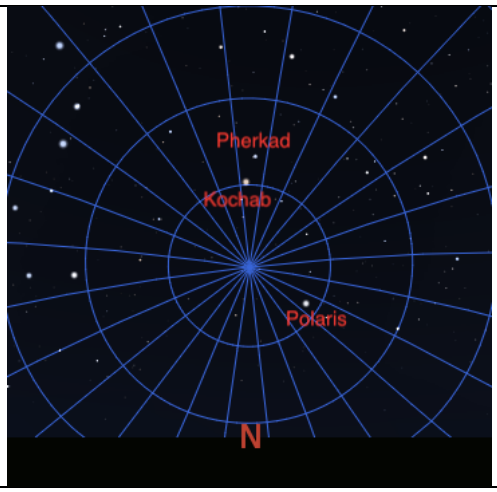

Fig. 2-5(b) View of the NCP or *quṭb* surrounded by Pherkad and Kochab known as the Two Wild Cow Calves (*al-farqadān*) and Polaris known as the Goat Kid (*al-jady*), as seen from Mecca on March 1, 614 CE.

As for Venus, it is the second brightest object in the night sky after the moon and its planetary motion behaves differently from the fixed stars mentioned above. Because its orbit is closer to the Sun than Earth's orbit, the planet does not appear to traverse across the dome of the sky from east to west as the stars normally do, "unlike the stars, Jupiter, Saturn or Mars, Venus never appears high overhead."[137] Instead the planet appears for a certain number of months as "the morning star" and an equal number of months as "the evening star" between two periods of invisibility.[138] Understanding the planet's synodic period, or the time it takes for a planet to reappear in the sky at "the same position with respect to the Sun (but not necessarily the stars)"[139] from an earth bound vantage point will help us to better appreciate the astral content of the two myths we will discuss shortly.

[137] Cooley, "Early Mesopotamian Astral Science," 80-81, at 81.
[138] "Synodic period (the cycle of Venus)," European Southern Observatory (ESO), last updated March 4, 2007, https://www.eso.org/public/outreach/eduoff/vt-2004/Education/edu1app4.html.
[139] ESO, "Synodic period (the cycle of Venus)."

A walk through Fig. 2-6 takes a look at Venus' milestones through its synodic period from the perspective of an overhead view of the solar system:

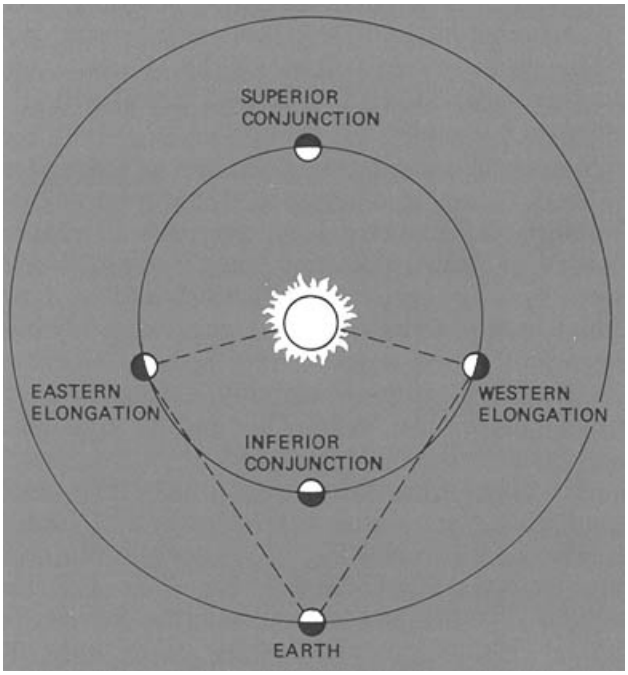

Fig. 2-6 The milestones of the synodic period of Venus. Credit: Nasa, Source: https://history.nasa.gov/SP-424/ch1.htm

1. Venus' first period of invisibility is known as Inferior Conjunction, a phase where it passes between the Sun and the Earth. This period can last from "three days (in the winter) to over two weeks (in the summer).[140]

2. Once the planet moves out of the sun's glare it starts to become visible, rising before sunrise on the eastern horizon in its apparition as the morning star. As the "planet's distance from the sun increases," the planet rises incrementally earlier each night before sunrise thereby increasing its visibility in the later part of the night and in the early twilight of dawn up to the time of sunrise.[141] Until…

3. The maximum angular distance between the Sun and Venus with Earth at the apex is reached. This is known as the greatest elongation between Venus and the Sun, because Venus is an inner planet and the angle of separation between the two objects cannot be any greater (usually not much more than 47 degrees).[142] It is called the "Greatest Western Elongation" because Venus is said to be West of the Sun;[143] although it applies to Venus in its apparition as the morning star on the eastern horizon. Note however that there is a difference, sometimes slight and sometimes not so slight between a planet's greatest elongation angle, and the date of its greatest

[140] Cooley, "Early Mesopotamian Astral Science," 81.
[141] Ibid, 80.
[142] Guy Consolmagno and Dan M. Davis, "Mercury and Venus," *Turn Left at Orion* web pages, Cambridge University Press, accessed August 16, 2020, https://www.cambridge.org/turnleft/pages/the_planets/mercury_and_venus.
[143] "Elongations and Configurations," Astronomy Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, accessed June 22, 2020, https://astro.unl.edu/naap/ssm/modeling2.html.

visibility and its peak altitude above the horizon. The highest peak angle that Venus will reach above the horizon before sunrise and the chance to observe it during its greatest visibility will depend on the observer's latitude and the season of the year in which Venus appears as the morning star i.e. Venus' position along the ecliptic plane.[144]

4. Once Venus has reached a peak altitude above the horizon in its apparition as the morning star, the planet incrementally rises later and later at night as the angular distance between the planet and the sun starts to decrease; thereby shortening the time period between its rising and sunrise. Consequently, the planet will reach an altitude lower and lower on the horizon just before it can no longer be seen due to the brightness of the sun shortly after sunrise, making it appear as if Venus is descending slowly each morning until it makes its last appearance on the eastern horizon as the morning star. When…

5. Venus travels behind the sun known as a period of Superior Conjunction. Venus is hidden behind the Sun and cannot be seen for a period of about 50 days.[145]

6. After Venus makes it out from the Sun it begins appearing on the western horizon as an evening star. Its movements as an evening star along the western horizon correspond to its movement as a morning star on the eastern horizon. It appears higher and higher in the sky shortly after sunset, and reaching its Greatest Eastern Elongation angle. Once it reaches its highest point in the sky as the evening star it begins to descend lower and lower each night after sunset until it makes its final appearance as the evening star[146] when it passes through the Sun and the Earth again in a period of Inferior Conjunction once more.

[144] For Venus' highest point in the sky from present day Mecca see Dominic Ford, "Venus reaches highest point in morning sky," In-The-Sky.org, accessed July 28, 2020, https://in-the-sky.org/news.php?id=20200813_11_100&town=104515. For an informative website on amateur naked-eye astronomy which nicely explains the differences between the terms: maximum altitude, maximum elongation, and maximum brightness see Martin J. Powell, "Naked-Eye Venus: Apparitions, Conjunctions & Elongations 2010 to 2020," nakedeyeplanets.com, accessed July 28, 2020 http://www.nakedeyeplanets.com/venus-conjunctions.htm

[145] ESO, "Synodic period (the cycle of Venus)."

[146] Cooley, "Early Mesopotamian Astral Science," 81.

Fig. 2-7(a), and Fig. 2-7(b) helps visualize the milestones of Venus' synodic period from the perspective of an Earth bound observer:

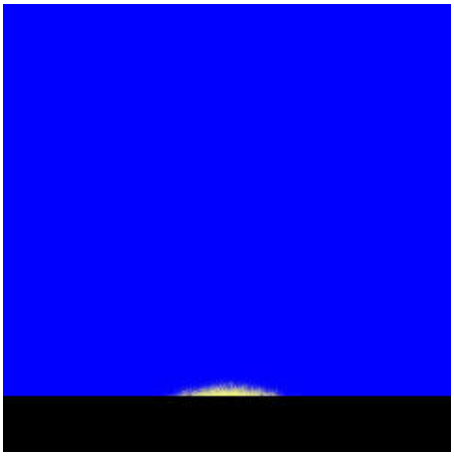

Fig. 2-7(a) (Venus' visibility) No appearance of Venus anywhere on either horizon during its periods of invisibility known as Inferior and Superior Conjunction. This horizon picture assuming a clear sky, flat horizon, and depicting first or last glow of the sun is the work of Mr. Dale Dellutri, reproduced here with his permission. ©2020 Dale A. Dellutri. "The Synodic Period of Venus," DaleDellutri.com, last modified May 9, 2020, http://www.daledellutri.com/dvc-venus-synodic.html.

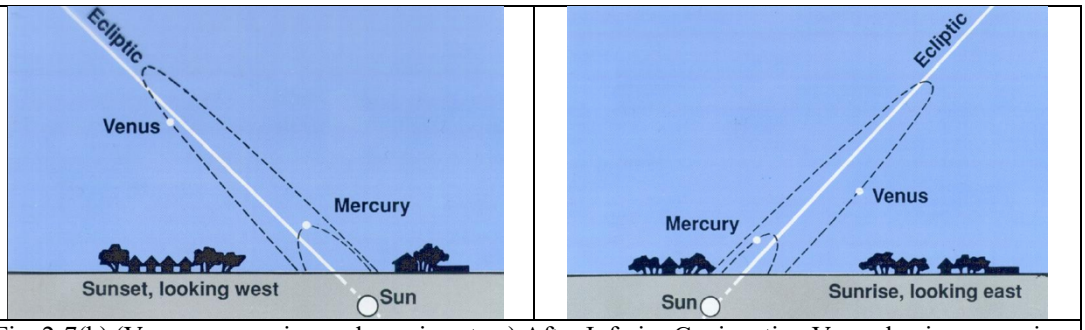

Fig. 2-7(b) (Venus as morning and evening stars) After Inferior Conjunction Venus begins appearing as the morning star on the eastern horizon slowly rising higher and higher each day until it peaks off and rises at a lower point on the horizon each day close to sunrise until it makes its final appearance as the morning star. After a period of invisibility due to Venus being behind the Sun known as Superior Conjunction, Venus appears on the western horizon as the evening star, appearing higher and higher each evening after sunset until Venus peaks off and starts to descend by appearing at a lower point on the horizon after sunset each day until Venus makes its final appearance as an evening star, at which point the cycle begins again at Inferior Conjunction.
Source: https://faculty.virginia.edu/skrutskie/images/inforb.jpg

The whole synodic period from one Inferior conjunction to the next takes a period of 584 days. This includes 263 days each in its apparitions as morning and evening stars, about 50 days of invisibility during Superior Conjunction, and about

eight days on average during Inferior Conjunction. As mentioned above, the synodic period is the time it takes for a planet to reappear in the sky at "the same position with respect to the Sun (but not necessarily the stars)."[147] (Fig. 2-8). Five synodic periods take place over the course of eight years, at which point, "Venus, seen from the Earth, is in the same position with respect not only to the Sun, but also to the stars."[148]

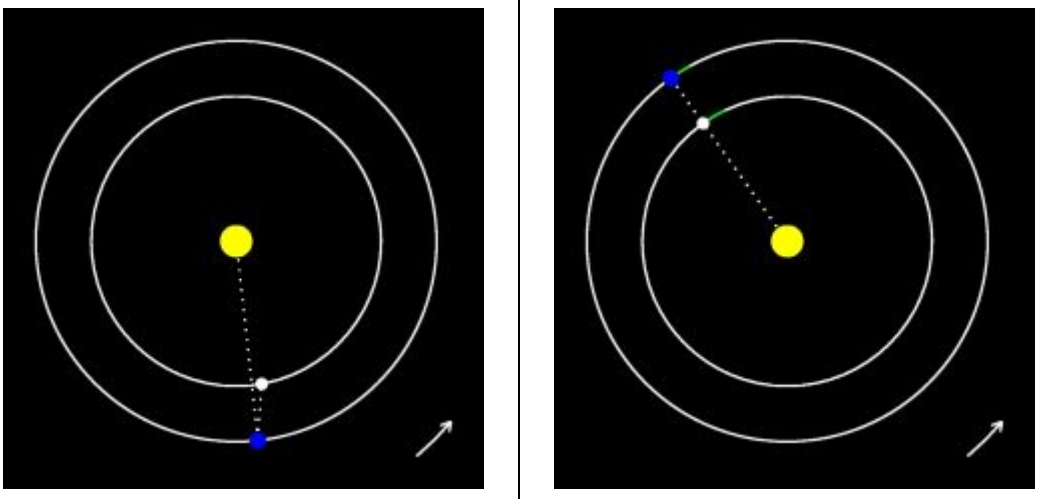

Fig. 2-8 (Orbital view of one synodic period of Venus) Both planets (roughly here) in the same place with respect to the Sun, but not the fixed stars. The Earth has revolved around the Sun along its orbit about 1.6x, while Venus has revolved around the Sun along its orbit about 3x. These orbital diagrams are the work of Mr. Dale Dellutri, reproduced here with his permission. ©2020 Dale A. Dellutri. "The Synodic Period of Venus," DaleDellutri.com, last modified May 9, 2020, http://www.daledellutri.com/dvc-venus-synodic.html. After five synodic periods, all three celestial bodies would return to their positions on their diagram on the right.

[147] ESO, "Synodic period (the cycle of Venus)."
[148] "Pentagram of Venus," European Southern Observatory (ESO), last updated March 4, 2007, https://www.eso.org/public/outreach/eduoff/vt-2004/Education/edu1app5.html; To be exact, "after 8 years Venus returns to a position in the zodiac that falls on average 2.5º short of its previous position." See Teije de Jong, "A Study of Babylonian planetary theory II. The Planet Venus," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 73, no. 4 (2019): 309, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00407-019-00224-0.

With these fundamentals of Venus' planetary motion in mind we are better positioned to more easily grasp the astral content of the two Mesopotamian myths we will review. The first myth that we examine is the famous Sumerian myth *Inana's Descent to the Netherworld* which was probably the source for the later, and shorter Neo-Assyrian Akkadian version *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*.[149] In the Sumerian version of the story, Inana begins with a firm resolve to take over the underworld, however why she decides to do this is not mentioned in the story. After donning her divine regalia, she informs her maidservant Ninshubur of what to do should she not return, that is to say, which gods to call upon and how to appeal to them. She then violently knocks at the gate of the underworld, demanding entry. When the gatekeeper asks her what business she has with the underworld since she originally identified herself as Inana "towards the place of sunrise," she replies that she has come to give her condolences to her sister Ereshkigal upon the death of Ereshkigal's husband, the lord Gugalanna, "The great bull of heaven." Ereshkigal, seemingly attuned to Inana's scheme, nevertheless acquiesces to letting her sister enter into her realm. Inana then follows the gatekeeper through the seven gates of the underworld.[150] At each gate she must give up an item of clothing, when she demands to know why, she is rebuked with the retort that its simply the way things are done in the underworld. When she has passed through all of the gates Inana finally reaches Ereshkigal's room where Inana is presented before her sister naked and crouching.[151] Despite her state, Inana is still

[149] For the different translations of the two versions of the myth see Julye Bidmead and Marilyn Love, "Ištar's Journey: Above and Below," *Culture and Cosmos* 22, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2018): 5 fn. 1.
[150] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 55-56.
[151] Similar to the human interment in the society that produced the myth. Ibid, 57.

resolved to remove her sister from her throne which she goes about doing. Not realizing she would have to reckon with the judges of the underworld, the judges condemn Inana to death due to her attempt to overthrow her sister. Upon her death she is hung upon a hook like a piece of meat, "utterly vanquished by death and its grim process of decay."[152] Alerted by the prolonged absence of her mistress, Ninshubur takes to mourning for the goddess Inana. In the process of her mourning rituals Ninshubur ultimately approaches Inana's father the god Enlil to help Inana appealing to him via the supplications and entreaties that Inana taught her. Nevertheless, Enlil avers that Inana brought this upon herself, and he cannot directly intervene since the underworld is beyond his control. Thereafter, Ninshubur moves onto ask the god Enki of Eridu for help. Enki decides to help by creating two expert mourners "out of the dirt under his fingernails."[153] Upon Enki's instructions these two expert mourners slip into the underworld undetected and get in with Ereshkigal's good graces when they join her in her laments. Impressed by their affectations of sorrow and commiseration with her, Ereshkigal asks how she can repay them, to which they respond that they want Inana's carcass, or the side of meat hanging on the hook. After attempting to persuade the mourners that she can give them all other sorts of powers instead of the "side of meat," she finally gives up Inana's corpse upon their insistence.[154] The mourners bring Inana back to life by throwing the "grass of life" and the "water of life" that Enki gave them on Inana's withered remains. After springing back to life, and just as she is about to ascend from the underworld along with Enki's mourners, the judges of the underworld

[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid, 57-58, at 58.
[154] Ibid, 58-59.

decree that Inana cannot simply leave, but that someone must be substituted in her place. She is then escorted out of the underworld with a number of deputy-guards to ensure that a substitute is found.[155] Every time the guards meet someone who was loyal to Inana and mourned her absence, like Inana's maidservant Ninshubur, or some gods of certain localities, the guards suggest they take that person in Inana's stead. To which Inana responds negatively. Until they come upon Dumuzi, Inana's young husband, who is enjoying his life and not at all concerned about the death and mourning rituals of his goddess-wife. As the guards can see Inana is enraged by this situation, they fall upon Dumuzi taking him to the underworld as Inana's replacement.[156] At the end of the story Dumuzi cries out to the sun god Utu for justice due to the ridiculous punishment that he has been sentenced to endure.[157]

Scholars have offered a number of interpretations for this fascinating tale's *sitz im leben*. One interpretation is that the story explains the dying and rising god (Dumuzi) motif inspired by the work of James G. Frazer, and how this dying and rising god motif relates to the alternation of seasons.[158] An archaeological interpretation states that "Ištar's jewellery and other adornments removed at each gate are related to funerary offerings and gifts to enter the netherworld."[159] Yet another interpretation offers an original cult setting for the story which is geographical in the sense that it "represents

[155] Ibid, 59.
[156] Ibid, 59-60.
[157] Jacobsen informs us that the main version of the story trails off here, but it seems the story continued on in other sources where we learn that Dumuzi's sister Gehstinanna seeks out justice for her brother finding out that her brother is being kept in the underworld from a fly in a brewery. Geshtinanna's actions seem to anger Inana, who ultimately decides that both Dumuzi and Geshtinanna will serve alternating half-year terms in the underworld. Ibid, 60-61.
[158] Bidmead and Love, "Ištar's Journey," 21; see also Jacobsen's seasonal etiology interpretation, Jacobsen, "*The Treasures of Darkness*," 62-63.
[159] Bidmead and Love, "Ištar's Journey," 22.

the ritual journey of Inanna's cult statue through her cities."[160] Regardless of the myth's original meaning, some scholars have highlighted the astral content that is noticeable within it and have suggested that the rising and setting of Venus, or more specifically "the time between these two phenomena – inspired the Sumerian story and its later Akkadian version."[161] While Bidmead and Love do admit that the movements of the goddess in the myth do not correspond exactly with the movements of the planet, and the goddess' movements cannot be correlated to any specific astronomical event, nevertheless they argue that the astral symbolism present in the myth can be noticed through an examination of "the language and words describing the goddess' movements and actions."[162]

The first eight verses of the Akkadian version of the myth describe the goddess' descent into the underworld:

1. To the mountains on the horizon, place of no return
2. Venus, daughter of Sîn (the Moon) set her mind
3. the daughter of Sîn did set [her] mind
4. to the dark house (i.e., night sky), the seat of Irkalla,
5. to the house, where (stars) set and do not rise
6. on the path where movement is in one direction
7. to the house where those who dwell are deprived of light
8. to the dark house where no star comes out.[163]

Even absent a scholarly analysis examining and translating technical Akkadian vocabulary and its astronomical connotations,[164] based on the translation alone we still might be able to pick up on the astral connotations of the passage, which Bidmead and Love inform us corresponds with Venus' movement in its apparition as an evening star

[160] Ibid.
[161] Bidmead and Love quoting Cooley, Ibid, 22-23.
[162] Ibid 23.
[163] From Bidmead and Love, "Ištar's Journey," 23
[164] Ibid.

moving towards the western horizon and ultimately reappearing in the eastern sky. For in the Sumerian version of the myth Inana identifies herself in her celestial manifestation as the morning star saying, "'I am Inanna of the place where the sun rises. I am Inanna going east" the movement of the planet in its western apparition as an evening star, temporary disappearance, and reappearance are referred to in modern terminology as inferior conjunction.[165] (Fig. 2-6(1) p. 51). That Inana is moving towards the western horizon could also be inferred from the information provided in line 5 "where (stars) set and do not rise," as the fixed stars appear in the east and set in the west.

Bidmead and Love also point to the astral significance of the goddess' movement through the seven gates of the underworld. In the Akkadian version, just as in the Sumerian version, Ishtar like Inana is led by the gatekeeper through the seven gates of the underworld, giving up an item of clothing at each gate. Bidmead and Love suggest that "As Ištar moves through each gate, the Mesopotamians may have thought that Venus gradually loses its brilliance as the planet prepares to becomes invisible." At each of the seven gates one item of clothing or adornment is removed. Stephanie Dalley's translation renders Ishtar and the gatekeeper's interaction at the first gate thus:

> He let her in through the first door, but stripped off (and) took away the great crown on her head.
> 'Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the great crown on my head?'
> 'Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the Mistress of Earth.'[166]

In support of the idea that Venus loses its brilliance Bidmead and Love suggest that the gatekeeper's removal of her "great crown" (*agâ rabâ*) at the first gate has

[165] Ibid, 24.
[166] Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*: *Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 156.

celestial connotations because the related word *agû* when used for "astral bodies, describes the halo the planets wear, their appearance at first visibility, or a particular celestial phenomenon wherein the light from a bright star or planet is refracted in the atmosphere." And the verb *tabālu* used to refer to the crown's removal is used in astronomical contexts to refer to "a star entering a period of invisibility or disappearing." The removal of an item of clothing or jewelry at the next six gates however has no exact celestial parallel that is apparent.[167] The story does however mention the goddess' corresponding ascension from the underworld. In the Akkadian version of the myth, Ea, Enki's Assyrian counterpart, creates Aṣûšunamir to rescue Ishtar from Erashkigal. Aṣûšunamir serves as a handsome love interest for Erashkigal, and this comes across clearly in Dalley's translation:

> Ea, in the wisdom of his heart, created a person.
> He created Good-looks the playboy.
> "Come, Good-looks, set your face towards the gate of kurnugi
> The seven gates of Kurnugi shall be opened before you
> Erashkigal shall look at you and be glad to see you
> When she is relaxed, her mood will lighten.[168]

It is significant however, that Aṣûšunamir's name means "his appearance or rising is brilliant," which refers to the rising of a celestial body.[169] This seems to strengthen the authors' claims that the goddess' loss and subsequent regaining of clothing corresponds with the planet's decrease in luminosity as it sets and increase in luminosity as it rises. As Ishtar is resurrected the gatekeeper takes her back through the

[167] Ibid, 26.
[168] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 158.
[169] Bidmead and Love, "Ištar's Journey," 27; Dalley similarly informs us that his name literally means 'His appearance is bright,' she takes the name to be an "intentional play on a name of the moon-god," Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 161 fn. 13.

gates in the corresponding reverse order. Two salient words that express the gatekeeper's actions are the words *aṣû* and *târu*. The verb *aṣû* can refer to 'celestial rising' while the verb *târu* used when the gatekeeper returns Ishtar's clothing and adornment to her also has the sense of putting something back in its place or reinstating it in its previous position. Therefore Bidmeand and Love conclude that, "The gatekeeper is assisting her to rise while restoring her to her previous station as the morning star."[170] While scholars may disagree then on the ultimate meaning of the two versions of this famous story, it seems that any interpretation will have to grapple with the astral content alluded to within it. The theme of the goddess' death and resurrection is elegantly captured in the corresponding astral symbolism of Venus' setting as the evening star on the western horizon i.e. the gate of the underworld and the place of no return, and her subsequent rising in the eastern sky in her apparition as the morning star.

The second myth we will examine for its underlying astral content is a much shorter one called the myth of *Inana and Šukaletuda*. The story is about an unlucky gardener named Šukaletuda who is bad at what he does. All the plants in his garden either die or are uprooted except for a "broad, shade providing poplar tree." Feeling dejected by the utter lack of results of his agricultural labors Šukaletuda looks to the skies for solace[171] where he spots the goddess Inana who, weary from her travels, rests under the gardener's poplar tree. Amazed by the goddess' presence in his garden Šukaletuda removes her divine clothing and takes advantage of her while she is

[170] Ibid.
[171] Which scholars have recognized "to be an obvious act of celestial divination" somewhat corroborating the overall astral interpretation of this story. Cooley, "Early Mesopotamian Astral Science," 78.

asleep.[172] When the goddess wakes up she realizes she has been raped and sets out to find the criminal who violated her. She casts a series of plagues upon the land, so that the sinner who committed this violation against the goddess will be ultimately discovered. Realizing the goddess' intentions Šukaletuda goes to his father for advice. His father tells him to get lost in the crowd of the city so that the goddess cannot find him. This proves to be good advice as Inana attempts to find her assailant in the mountains but does not find him there. Undeterred the goddess unleashes a number of storms upon the land as collective punishment against the community in the expectation that the criminal will ultimately be revealed. Šukaletuda approaches his father again for advice. His father again advises to seek out the anonymity of the crowds in the city. Again the goddess is unable to find the one who violated her while looking for him in the mountains. In the third iteration of this cycle, the goddess curses the land by blocking the roads. Šukaletuda is told again by his father to hide out in the city, and the goddess is again unable to find her rapist in the mountains. Frustrated by her failed attempts to identify her assailant the goddess descends into the *apsu* and seeks out the wise counsel of Enki who agrees to help her. Inana then spreads out across the sky like a rainbow, and given this omniscient perspective is able to locate her attacker.[173] Afraid for his life Šukaletuda attempts to explain himself, the goddess unmoved by his pleas condemns him to death, but "his name will live on in the musical whimsy of the palace and pasture, in songs sung by court bards and lonely shepherds."[174]

[172] Ibid, 76. Commenting on the rape scene, Cooley mentions that it takes place as a "darkly comedic parody of the *hieros gamos*." Ibid.
[173] Ibid, 77.
[174] Ibid, 77-78.

Like the previous myth we studied, scholars have offered different interpretations of this myth also. These include a political interpretation, taking the story as it is at face value (i.e. the story of a bad gardener who rapes a goddess, almost gets away with it, and is immortalized in song), and the recognition of various astral aspects of the tale. Cooley's interpretation builds upon the previously recognized astral aspects of the story. The movements of the goddess in the story seem to correspond with those of her actual astral manifestation as the planet Venus.[175] In the story's introductory hymn to Inana the goddess is said to be "departing the sky and the earth in order to head to the kur,"[176] However, there is a question as to what the word 'kur' means exactly within the context of the story. In any case, the goddess' movements in the prologue to the story seem to indicate "the interval between her last appearance in the west to just before her first eastern visibility."[177] Thereafter the gardener's initial sighting of the goddess as he scans the sky has him notice her in a "ghost-like form" returning supposedly from the underworld, in which case she would be rising in the eastern part of the sky before sunrise.[178] Inana first discovers that she has been raped by awakening and examining herself due to the morning light, and later inspects herself again in the morning light just before she goes down into the *apsu*, "Enki's freshwater abode located *within* the earth." Cooley interprets these events as corresponding with Venus' first and last visibility in the east just before sunrise.[179] He interprets the time in between these two points when the goddess is launching her curses upon the land

[175] Ibid, 78.
[176] Ibid, 82.
[177] Ibid, 82-83.
[178] Ibid, 84.
[179] Ibid, 86.

from the mountains, known as kur-kur as Venus' eight month period of visibility in the east.[180]

If one were skeptical about Cooley's astral interpretation of the goddess' movements in the story as corresponding with the movements of the planet Venus up until this point, the goddess' miraculous ability to move across the sky might supply the decisive evidence for the myth's underlying Venusian content. In the story, the goddess' ability to transform into a rainbow that spans the sky by Enki's help, a celestial impossibility, seems to indicate the original author's knowledge of the movements of the planet. Regarding Inana's transformation into a rainbow, Cooley states:

> Since it is not feasible for Inana as the planet Venus to cross the entire sky this must be understood as a miraculous event…Inana is able to move away from both horizons, which lie to the east and west of Sumer respectively and, with Enki's help, position herself directly over the city-dense region in which the culprit is hiding. By describing Inana's movements in such a manner, the ancient author has revealed his knowledge of the normal movements of the planet. In the context of the story, the wondrous phenomenon's corresponding event within Venus' synodic cycle is the planet's eight month period of visibility in the west... Inana's extraordinary ability to cross the entire sky becomes the fulcrum event in the story, a true *deus ex machina*, which allows the goddess to find her attacker.[181]

In other words, the transformation of the goddess into a rainbow seems to indicate a knowledge of the planetary motion of Venus because if the goddess could not span the sky like a rainbow she would simply be restricted to hovering over the eastern and western mountains. The reason being that, Venus as an inferior planet is never seen traveling across the dome of the celestial sphere since it is invisible during the day due to Sun's brightness outshining everything else in the sky. Therefore, it only sticks to the eastern and western horizons in its apparition as morning and evening star when the sky is darker just after sunset or just before sunrise. (Fig. 2-7(b) p. 53). Because the

[180] Ibid, 85-86. Cooley claims that the kur-kur "might refer to actual mountains in the east over which the goddess is hovering." Ibid, 85.
[181] Ibid, 86-87.

story sees the movements of Inana bound to the eastern and western horizons, and that this normal course of events can only be broken "when Inana receives permission to miraculously step out of these prescribed movements," Cooley concludes that "*Inana and Sukaletuda* is an astral myth, which exploits the accepted celestial phenomena of the planet Venus as inspiration for its narrative."[182]

In analyzing these two ancient Near Eastern myths, we were able to see that a basic knowledge of the night sky helped us to notice the astral content in these myths that a person would likely be oblivious to on a plain sense reading of these texts. Certainly the cultural practice of describing celestial beings in symbolic language that corresponded to the movements of stars and planets, even if only used in a figurative sense continued in other Near Eastern contexts. In the next two chapters we will see how the language expressing the movements of the angel Gabriel mentioned in a passage of Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* correspond to the movements of the planet Venus, similar to the ways that the movements of the goddess Inana/Ishtar corresponds with Venus' planetary motion in the two myths studied above. Furthermore it will be argued that Gabriel is being described in such Venusian terms as a polemic against the Venus goddesses of Q53:19-20 (specifically al-'Uzzā, and most likely her sisters as well); who in some salient features seem to be types of Inana/Ishtar.

[182] Ibid, 95.

Chapter 3: The Astral Language of Q53, and its Implications for the Description of the Angel of Revelation and the Dating of the *Sūrah*

The cultural practice of encoding observations of the natural patterns of the stars and planets into myths and stories was not peculiar to the ancient Mesopotamians alone. Recently, Cooley showed how celestial phenomena also played a culturally significant role in the religious literature of ancient Israel, which was itself part of the bigger ancient Near Eastern thought world.[183] It should not be surprising then to find pre-Islamic Arabian inheritors of ancient Near Eastern thought also weaving the natural rhythms of culturally significant celestial bodies into their literature as well.

Here I argue that the same language used to describe Muhammad's encounter with a great angel at the beginning of Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* expresses the movements of Venus through the sky in its apparition as a morning star. This section of the Qur'an then, encapsulates the movements of Venus into part of its messaging just like the astral myths describing the movement of Inana/Ishtar in Venusian terms studied above. Notice of the prominent astral aspect of the prophetic encounter with the angel has attracted comment in three very recent studies, those of: Dost, Adams, and Hussain.[184]

Adams does not associate the encounter with any particular celestial object but notes that the Prophet's vision places the angel "very close to the horizon, much like a

[183] Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy*, 21-23

[184] Dost, "An Arabian Qur'ān," 53-54; Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 217-219; For the abstract to Saqib Hussain's paper entitled, "The Prophet's Visions in Sūrat al-Najm," delivered at the 2019 International Qur'anic Studies Association annual meeting in San Diego, CA, see Forum moderator's post to "Andrew Rippin Best Paper Prize Winners 2020," International Qur'anic Studies Association Discussion Group, February 25, 2020, 12:00:35 p.m. (PST), https://groups.google.com/forum/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=footer#!msg/iqsadiscussion/dv3RWKz021Y/ga3U8nErAQAJ.

star that is about to disappear in its pre-dawn setting."[185] Hussain however, relates the astral aspect of the prophet-angel encounter to the Pleiades.[186] Dost, on the other hand speculates on the connection between the Prophet's angelic vision (which he frames in terms of the descent of revelation) and the planet Venus when he states:

> Indeed, one wonders whether the concept of "the star" that governs the whole chapter of al-Najm is a reminiscence of kawkabtā in Isaac of Antioch's polemic, or an amalgam of Venus/Aphrodite/al-ʿUzzā . . . The Qur'ān's rejection of astral worship is very clear from other verses, but this chapter in particular embodies a very symbolic picture of revelation that evokes the imagery of a heavenly body. . .it appears on the higher horizon, draws near and suspends, comes closer than two bow's lengths away, reveals a revelation and finally reappears in a second descent.[187]

This brings us back to the purpose of our study, which is to investigate whether the associators worshiped the beings mentioned in Q53:19-20 as manifestations of Venus. Here, we recall Hawting's admission at the end of Chapter 1, that the qur'anic polemic against these beings only make sense if the *mushrikūn* associate them with Venus, and thereby associate Venus or other celestial objects with angels.[188] But what does Muhammad's angelic vision in its celestial movement as a morning star have to do with the goddesses of Q53:19-20? In the next chapter we will see that a greater understanding of the Venusian nature of Muhammad's angelic vision helps to explain the original context in which this *sūrah* was most likely recited, as a polemic against the goddesses of the *mushrikūn* who were worshipped as apparitions of the morning star also.

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[185] Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 219.
[186] Saqib Hussain, e-mail reply to author, February 10, 2020.
[187] Dost, "An Arabian Qur'ān," 53. Though I am in agreement with Dost's suggestion that Venus plays an important role in understanding the *sūrah* overall, "the star" mentioned at the very beginning of the *sūrah* can be none other than the Pleiades. The relationship between these two celestial bodies relates to the timing of when Muhammad might have proclaimed this *sūrah* to his Meccan audience as will be demonstrated further below.
[188] Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 147.

In the remainder of this section I examine select verses from Q53 for their astral significance to demonstrate how the angel of revelation is described in Venusian terms which leads to a suggestion as to when this *sūrah* was revealed. In the next chapter we will demonstrate how that proclamation is polemically used against the worship of Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt who must have been worshiped as manifestations of Venus as well. Throughout the next two chapters we will see how in some ways these goddesses share salient characteristics with the greatest Venusian goddess of the ancient Near East, Inana/Ishtar.

Recounting one of the occasions for the revelation of Q53: Points of comparison between Ishtar and al-Uzzā

A story about the Meccan audience's reaction to Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* demonstrates how al-'Uzzā could be viewed as a goddess modeled after Ishtar. In al-Ṭabarī's Qur'an commentary (Ar. *tafsīr*) there are two reports recorded about a dispute Muhammad had with one of his enemies around the time the *sūrah* was revealed. In the story Muhammad's cousin 'Utbah, the son of Abū Lahab[189] says to Muhammad, "I don't believe in the Lord of The Star (i.e. the Pleiades)."[190] (*kafartu bi-rabbi al-najm*), to which Muhammad responds, "Are you not afraid that Allah's dog may eat you?" (*A mā takhāfu an ya'kuluka kalbullahi*?)[191] We later find out in this vignette that Allah's dog turns out to be a lion. After his encounter with Muhammad, 'Utbah and his

[189] Abū Lahab was one of Muhammad's paternal uncles, considered part of the Meccan elite, and one of his most notorious enemies, see Uri Rubin, "The Hands of Abū Lahab and the Gazelle of the Ka'ba," *JSAI* 33 (2007): 93.
[190] "The Star" was a colloquial epithet for the Pleiades in Arabic, discussed *infra* in this chapter.
[191] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*: *Jāmī' al-bayān*, ed. 'Abdullah al-Turkī (Cairo: Hajar, 2001), 22: 6-7. Muhammad's response comes in two other variants, "Be careful lest Allah's dog eat you," (*Iḥdhar lā ya'kuluka kalbullahi*) and "Aren't you afraid that God will unleash his dog upon you?!" (*A lā takhāfu an yusalliṭa Allahu 'alayka kalbahu*). Ibid. The story is part of a larger dispute between 'Utbah and Muhammad regarding 'Utbah divorcing one of Muhammad's daughters. See also, Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 220.

companions go out on a trade expedition. Upon, hearing a lion's roar close to one of their stopping places, and fearing Muhammad's warning, they surround 'Utbah in order to protect him but they all fall asleep and so the lion takes 'Utbah away even while he was in the midst of them.[192]

What is interesting about this particular version of the story is that lions are recognized as canines, not feline, just as they were in Mesopotamian literature, and moreover the lion is called Allah's dog. Long before the lion was called Allah's dog however, it was associated "preeminently with the warlike Ishtar, for whom the lion was a special pet, indeed, her 'dog'!"[193] While the lion was closely associated with Ishtar, the symbol did not belong to her alone, lions were associated with various deities in "manifold ways."[194] Despite lions being associated with a variety of Near Eastern deities however, the vignette about Muhammad's encounter with 'Utbah provides a salient link between Ishtar and al-'Uzzā. The story presents the possibility that a historically popular symbol of the goddess Ishtar which represents her warlike nature was eventually associated with al-'Uzzā at some point in time.[195]

Both Ishtar and al-'Uzzā were well known Venus goddesses.[196] Given that

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[192] Ibid.
[193] Brent A. Strawn, *What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, (Fribourg, Switzerland / Göttingen, Germany: Academic Press / Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 2005), 190, https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-150391. See especially Ibid, 190, fn. 346 citing *CAD* N, part 2, 194: išgum Ur.MAḪ *kalab Ištar šagāma la ik*[*la*]; "the lion, the dog of Ištar, roarded and did not st[op (roaring)]."
[194] Strawn, *Stronger than a Lion?*, 190.
[195] Commenting on stories about King Mundhir IV of al-Hīra and his sacrifices of enemy captives to al-'Uzzā supposedly in her manifestation as the morning star, Winnett states, "Evidently al-'Uzza fulfilled the function of a war-goddess, among other things, like Ishtar of Babylon." See F.V. Winnett, "The Daughters of Allah," *The Muslim World* 30, no. 2 (1940): 128.
[196] W. Heimpel, "A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities," *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4 (1982): 14, 18.

‘Utbah’s father, Abū Lahab was a known supporter of al-‘Uzzā,[197] the story takes on a special irony if we might see in al-‘Uzzā a glimmer of the archetypical Venus goddess Ishtar. In the story the lion is called Allah’s dog which is curious because it is not a common expression. That Allah’s dog, a lion, eats the son of one of Muhammad’s biggest Venus goddess worshipping enemies hints at how al-‘Uzzā might be viewed as some later version of Ishtar.

Although the story never explicitly mentions al-‘Uzzā, or lions being closely associated with this goddess,[198] the otherwise inexplicable detail of calling a lion the dog of Allah can be made sense of when we assume that in its *sitz im leben*, members of the audience of this story would recognize the indirect reference to al-‘Uzzā through her worshipper Abū Lahab , and that lions are al-‘Uzzā’s companions, perhaps even her attack dogs. The vignette’s implied theological message is that lions are not al-‘Uzzā’s attack dogs, but in fact Allah’s servants and under His command. Thus, proving Allah is the true god as opposed to al-‘Uzzā who was worshipped so ardently by Abū Lahab and the rest of his family.

To summarize, calling a lion the dog of a divinity has a clear ancient Mesopotamian precedent associated with Ishtar. Seeing the same predicated of Allah is not ordinary. This peculiar detail can only be made sense of when we realize that the original audience of this story would have understood that al-Uzzā, a Venusian goddess

[197] As was discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. In fact his name is ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, while his nickname is Abū Lahab, see *Taʾrīkh* (Leiden: Brill, 1882-1885), I.3:1204-1205; tr. 6:120.
[198] On the other hand lions were closely associated with Allāt in iconography, and Allāt and al-Uzzā are often closely associated with each other, if not viewed as two sides of the same goddess discussed *infra*. Scholars have suggested that al-‘Uzzā might have been the goddess worshipped at the temple of the winged lions at Petra, but this is inconclusive. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabateans*, 44.

like Ishtar before her, generally had lions as companions. The story polemically targeted against the *mushrikūn* asserts that the lion companion of the goddess is actually under the control of Allah instead. Thus the true god (Allah) ironically uses the symbolic animal companion (lion) commonly associated with the goddess (al-'Uzzā) against the worshippers (Abū Lahab and his son) of this particular false goddess, in order to vindicate the representative of the true god (Muhammad). Understood in its proper context, the vignette highlights connections al-'Uzzā may have had with the archetypical ancient Near Eastern Venus goddess, Ishtar. While analyzing the *sūrah* other connections between Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt and their predecessor Inana/Ishtar will hopefully become apparent.

Q53:1-4 and oaths in the Qur'an

1. By the Star when it goes down,
2. Your Companion is neither astray nor being misled.
3. Nor does he say (aught) of (his own) desire.
4. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him

Like many other Meccan *sūrahs* in the Qur'an, Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* also begins with an oath, "By the star when it goes down," or sets (*wa najmi idhā hawā*).[199] Commentators (Ar. pl. *mufassirūn*) have offered different options about which celestial body or metaphorical referent "the star" refers to. Most intriguing for our purposes is a statement made by a very early authority that is found in al-Qurṭubī's (d. 671 AH/1273 CE) *tafsīr*. We find that al-Suddī (d. 127 AH/744-745 CE)[200] states, "Certainly 'the star' mentioned here is Venus because a group of people from amongst the Arabs used

[199] Some examples of other Meccan *sūrahs* that open with similar oath formulas include: Q85:1 "By the sky full of constellations," Q92:1 "By the night as it enshrouds;" QQ103:1 "By the declining day." This list is illustrative, not comprehensive. The purpose of such opening oaths will be discussed below.
[200] A famous early kūfan exegete. Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*: *The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), 90.

to worship her." (*inna al-najma hāhunā al-zuhrah li-anna qawman min al-ʻarab kānū yaʻbadūnahā*).[201] Undoubtedly this testimony from an early authority provides clear evidence for our claim that this *sūrah* is in some way related to people worshipping Venus in the Qur'an's original milieu,[202] however "the star" or *al-najm* in this specific instance is not referring to Venus.

Colloquially the Arabs referred to the Pleiades as "the star." This is made clear in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* when he has to choose between two different opinions on the meaning of "the star." He leaves aside the opinion of the Basran grammarians who claimed that *al-najm* in this case refers to all the stars because, as they claimed it is the use of "an utterance in the singular to refer to the totality/generality (of things)" (*lafẓ al-wāḥid wa huwa fī maʻnā al-jamīʻ*).[203] After citing the different opinions on the matter al-Ṭabarī ends up siding with Mujāhid (d. 722 CE)[204] and says *al-najm* refers to "the Pleaides, because that is what the Arabs used to refer to as 'the star.'" (*al-thurayyā wa dhālika an al-ʻarab tadʻūhā al-najm*).[205] Even if we are convinced that "the star" refers to the Pleiades though, the question remains what exactly is the qur'anic author's purpose in swearing an oath by the Pleiades?

Both contemporary scholars and medieval exegetes have wondered about the intentional connection, if any, between the oaths that many Meccan *sūrahs* open with,

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[201] al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmīʻ li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abdullah al-Turkī (Beirut: Mu'asasah al-Risalah, 2006), 20:7.
[202] Based upon my study of exegetical works (which was not exhaustive) al-Suddī seems to be the only early authority that makes a connection between *al-najm* and Venus. This suggests that at least some members of the earliest generations following the death of Muhammad remembered a connection between the planet/goddess and the *sūrah*, but for the most part this connection was forgotten by the quickly expanding Muslim community in its early stages.
[203] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*: *Jāmīʻ al-bayān*, ed. 'Abdullah al-Turkī (Cairo: Hajar, 2001), 22: 7.
[204] A famous early authority on the Qur'an, he was a student of the Prophet's cousin Ibn Abbās.
[205] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*: *Jāmīʻ al-bayān*, ed. 'Abdullah al-Turkī (Cairo: Hajar, 2001), 22: 7.

and the remaining part of these *sūrahs*. Mir points out that medieval exegetes believed oaths simply magnified the object that was sworn by.[206] If the oath is to have any significance beyond simply magnifying the Pleiades, deciphering that significance is complicated by the case that by 610 CE when Muhammad "began receiving the revelations that would form the Qurʾān" the star cluster known as the Pleiades took on a "multivalency of meaning" in Arabia.[207] The Pleiades came to take on a number of symbolic associations expressing "notions of plenitude, military might, nobility and eroticism."[208] The multifaceted associations of the Pleiades make it difficult to decipher in what specific sense the asterism is being used and how it relates to the rest of the *sūrah*. If, however, we take the divine oath by the Pleiades to refer to a specific time, or particular times, we might be better positioned to decipher the purpose of the oath and how it relates to the rest of the *sūrah* that follows. In fact al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* provides a valuable clue as to the purpose of swearing by the Pleiades, when he reports on the authority of Mujāhid again, that the first verse of the *sūrah* "By the star when it sets," (*wa najmi idhā hawā*) means "the Pleiades when it sets during the twilight of dawn."

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[206] As an example he cites al-Ṭabarī who says, "'Qatādah maintained that, when God swears by certain objects, He does so in view of the exalted status they have in His eyes.'" Mustansir Mir, "The Qur'ānic Oaths: Farāhī's Interpretation," *Islamic Studies* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20839979. The exegetes technically defined the purpose of the oath as confirming a statement in order to place emphasis upon it. Such understandings were not very illuminating in establishing any purposeful or intentional connection between the object sworn by and the discourse that followed the oath or oath cluster. So long as the greatness of the thing sworn upon in God's eyes was established, the truth of the statements that followed the oath could be taken for granted. Ibid, 5-6. In opposition to the medieval theory of the purpose of *surah*-opening oaths or oath clusters, Mir advances the theory of a modern Indian exegete, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī (d. 1930 CE), who claimed that the qur'anic oaths are argumentative in nature. Ibid, 8.

[207] Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 15.

[208] Montgomery, "The Empty Ḥijāz," 93-94. Describing themes expressed in "twenty-six Pleiades similies from Early Arabic and Umayyad poetry" collected in the study of Paul Kunitzsch, Manfred Ullman, and Anton Spitaler, *Die Plejaden in Den Vergleichen Der Arabischen Dichtung* (München: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), 5-9.

(*idhā saqaṭat al-thurayyā maʿa al-fajr*).[209] Unfortunately al-Ṭabarī does not comment further on the significance of the Pleiades setting at dawn.

Understanding the significance of this event however, requires knowing something about the cultural astronomy of Arabia. In this regard, Danielle Adams points out that, "As part of the celestial geography of Arabia, the position of al-Thurayyā in the sky at specific times of night recalled corresponding seasons of the year and their related meteorological, floral and faunal events."[210] Its pre-dawn rising in mid-May from the eastern horizon marked the beginning of summer when there was no rain,[211] while its setting "into the western horizon during the growing pre-dawn twilight of early November marked the end of the period of heavy *wasmī* ("marking") rains[212]…and so it was widely recognized as a rain star (*nawʾ*)."[213] The observation of rain stars or *anwāʾ* refers to the Arabian practice of recognizing periods of seasonal rains as they were associated with the rising or setting of brightly visible fixed stars on the horizon just before sunrise, or after sunset.[214]

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[209] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 5.
[210] Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 21.
[211] The intensity of the heat is captured in the following line of pre-Islamic rhymed prose, "When the Star rises (*idhā ṭalaʿa al-najm*), the summer is vehement (*fa al-ṣayfu fī ḥadam*), and the herbage is brittle (*wa al-ʿushbu fī ḥaṭam*)." Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 19-20.
[212] As memorialized in the following lines of pre-Islamic poetry: "As if the Star (*al-najm*) when it disappears just before dawn were young camel calves roaming around on a rainy day." Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 18. And, "When they saw us in al-Nisār like the mighty rain clouds of al-Thurayyā whipped up by their south wind." Montgomery, "The Empty Ḥijāz," 93.
[213] Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 19.
[214] Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 66-68. The agency imputed to these stars to actually bring rain was denounced with the coming of Islam, See Nadia Jamil, "Playing for Time: *Maysir*-gambling in Early Arabic Poetry," in *Islamic Reflections, Arabic Musings: Studies in Honour of Professor Alan Jones*, eds. Robert G. Hoyland and Phillip F. Kennedy (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), 68; For Muhammad's condemnation in the hadith of people who say "We received rain by the naw' of such and such" as being ungrateful to God who is the true source of the rains, see Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 223; Muhammad's loathing of the rain star system or *anwā'* set the course for a trajectory within emerging and early Islam to purify the concept, however the multivalent shared cultural meaning associated with the complex of stars and asterisms was too entrenched in Arabian society to purify and thus a hegemonic foreign discourse of order and uniformity of Indian lunar stations was imposed upon them, see Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 221-247; According to Adams, Varisco was the first modern scholar to notice Islamic

Better equipped with this knowledge of the *anwāʾ* and the centrality of the Pleiades in the cultural astronomy of pre-Islamic Arabia, particularly its function for marking off the seasons during the year due to its position in the night sky, we might conclude that the oath sworn on the Pleiades might be a witness to the event of the revelation of the *sūrah* itself. In which case Mujāhid's statement cited by al-Ṭabarī above, *idhā saqaṭat al-thurayyā maʿa al-fajr* refers to the Pleiades setting on the "western horizon during the growing pre-dawn twilight of early November" marking the end of the heavy *wasmī* ("marking") rains which Adams informed us about. If we interpret the oath to be referring to the time when the *sūrah* "came down" or was revealed to Muhammad this would place its revelation in early November. Information collected on the Prophet's biography also mentions that *Sūrat al-Najm* was revealed to the Prophet in Mecca during the month of Ramadan in the fifth year of the Prophet's mission.[215] However, Muhammad's early followers remembered events that happened

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era tinkering with local pre-Islamic rain star calendars, see Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 226, citing Daniel Varisco, "The Origin of the Anwā' in Arab Tradition," *Studia Islamica*, no. 74 (1991): 28. More specifically Varisco noted that the term *anwā'* "did not originally designate the 28 lunar stations (*manāzil al-qamar*), as was claimed in the numerous writings of the Abbasid period, but instead referred to a group of agentic rain stars that were credited for bringing seasonal rains in pre-Islamic Arabia." Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 28; Adams' work, "reanimates the Arabian stars by stripping away the hegemonic discourses that imposed order upon them and flattened their multivalency." Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 43. Though there is a recognized literature of Islamic-era astronomy/astrology, the field of cultural astronomy of the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula seems to be in its infancy. In addition to Adams' exciting contributions, mention should also be made of Al-Jallad's discovery of an ancient Arabian zodiac in the Safaitic inscriptions, see Ahmad Al-Jallad, "An ancient Arabian zodiac. The constellations in the Safaitic inscriptions, Part I," *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy* 25 (2014): 214-230; "An ancient Arabian zodiac. The constellations in the Safaitic inscriptions, Part II," *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy* 27 (2016): 84-106.

[215] As is recorded by Ibn Saʿd in his biography of Muhammad, mentioning reports about the persecution of early Muslims in Mecca by the pagan elites and how these early Muslims had to emigrate to Abyssinia. The reports state that these Muslims left for Abyssinia in the month of Rajab (the seventh lunar month of the Islamic calendar) in the fifth year of the Prophet's mission, and returned to Mecca when they heard that Muhammad had reconciled with the pagans of Mecca due to the Satanic verses event mentioned in Chapter 1, and which will be discussed further in Chapter 4. It is recorded that both Muhammad and the pagans all performed prostration at the same time while the Prophet was reciting *Sūrat al-Najm* in front of his pagan opponents. Numerous Muslim reports claim that this happened because Satan cast false revelation upon the tongue of Muhammad which caused Muhammad's audience to believe that he was

in his life before the Islamic calendar was standardized. Attempting to devise a chronology of the events that occurred during the Prophet's life is complicated by the fact that the pagans at the time of the Prophet used to practice intercalation in some form, the exact mechanism of which is not agreed upon by scholars.[216] With some exceptions, lack of definitive evidence on the intercalation mechanism makes it difficult to say when an event in the Prophet's life occurred within a Julian calendrical framework. So, while a report might say that a certain event occurred in the month of Rajab of the Prophet's fifth year of his mission, it is difficult to correlate this month to a corresponding Julian month because we don't know how pagan Ḥijāzīs calculated their months before the Prophet abolished intercalation in 632 CE. Despite this wrinkle in dating events of the life of the Prophet within a tropical calendrical framework, this has not stopped scholars from utilizing clever methods such as looking at astronomical

praising their gods. The event of prostrating in unison reached the Muslim refugees in Abyssinia which lead them to believe that Muhammad and the pagans had reconciled. It is reported that this event of both believers and pagans all bowing together during Muhammad's recitation of the *sūrah* while it was being revealed to him took place in Ramadan (the ninth lunar month of the Islamic calendar). See Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr* (*Biographien Muhammeds*), ed. Eduard Sachau et al., vol. 1.1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1904), 136-138. For further discussion about the year on which the Satanic verses occurred and thus, when *Sūrat al-Najm* would have been revealed, see Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 67.

[216] Generally intercalation is the process of reconciling civil and religious calendars by adding leap days, weeks, or months so that religious rituals may generally be observed at the same times (seasons) of the tropical year. Scholars are not in agreement as to how pre-Islamic Arabs, particularly those of the Ḥijāz performed intercalation (*al-nasī'*), and a number of mechanisms have been proposed. For example Maurice McPartlan states that, "'One theory asserts that, until intercalation was forbidden at the time of the Farewell Pilgrimage a luni-solar calendar was observed and a thirteenth month was intercalated at intervals for the purpose of keeping the moon calendar in conformity with the seasons determined by the sun. The other maintains that the Arab calendar was always a purely lunar reckoning in which the months and the festivals always receded from one season to another.'" Maurice A. McPartlan, "The Contribution of Qur'ān and Ḥadīṯ to Early Islamic Chronology," (PhD diss., University of Durham, 1997), 5. The Prophet abolished intercalation at his farewell pilgrimage on the tenth of Dhū al-Ḥijja 632CE. Ibid, xix. McPartlan provides different calendrical options to account for intercalation. If the pagan intercalation at the time of Muhammad followed a luni-solar calendrical scheme then the Julian date of October 1, 615CE, would coincide with the first of Rajab, placing Ramadan (two lunar months from Rajab) in December of 615CE. Ibid, 128.

details mentioned in hadith about the Prophet's life, for example eclipses, to determine when a certain event in the Prophet's life might have occurred.[217]

Similarly, if we accept that the opening oath of the *sūrah* provides astronomical information about not only the time of year, but even the time of day[218] during which the *sūrah* was revealed and if we accept the biographical reports about the year in which the *sūrah* was revealed, this would place Muhammad's first proclamation of this *sūrah* to his Meccan audience at some time in early November of 615 CE.[219] Observations of the setting of the Pleiades on the western horizon during the early twilight of dawn[220]

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[217] For example McPartlan states about a number of texts discussing events in the life of the Prophet that take place around the time of an eclipse: The detailed study of the eclipse texts shows a remarkable degree of accuracy when comparing them to descriptions of the events based upon astronomical predictions. McPartlan, "Early Islamic Chronology," 104. However, he is unable to definitively date any of these eclipse texts. Ibid, 50-71.

[218] The oath informs us about not only the season in which it occurs, but also the time of day in which it takes place because the setting of the Pleiades on the western horizon before sunrise only takes place at the end of the *wasmī* rain season. See Adam's statement above that, "the position of al-Thurayyā in the sky at specific times of night recalled corresponding seasons of the year…" p. 74

[219] This proposed date is promising for two reasons. First, the biographical report of the *sūrah* being revealed in the fifth year of the Prophet's mission in Mecca (610 CE to 622 CE) recorded by Ibn Sa'd in his biography of Muhammad (see fn. 215 above) corresponds well with Nicolai Sinai's placement of Q53 within a relative chronology of the Qur'an. On the basis of textual criteria through formal and structural analysis of qur'anic *sūrahs* Sinai categorizes *Sūrat al-Najm* as a transitional *sūrah* from the late early Meccan phase to the middle Meccan phase. See Sinai, "Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm," 7; see also our discussion of this issue in this chapter on pp. 85-86 *infra*. Secondly, although there are a number of calendrical options to consider that would result in differing dates for the events in the Prophet's life, nevertheless the fact that our proposed date of early November 615CE falls at least within one month of a proposed luni-solar intercalation scheme during the Prophet's life (mentioned in fn. 216) suggests that the November 615CE date is very close to the actual date that the Prophet first proclaimed this *sūrah.*

[220] According to Danielle Adams, "Most of the star calendars of ancient Arabia work by observing stars as they rise or set shortly before the sun rises." She recommends that the stars are best viewed "almost touching the horizon (within 5-10 angular degrees or so) to be in the proper position." She states that historical observers viewed the rain stars (*anwa'*) at a time called *ghalas*, which occurs "when the darkness of the night mixes with the light of dawn in the tracts of the horizon." The requisite mixture of such darkness and light in which the brighter stars may still be visible "represents a precise period of the night, but not an exact time." Consequently, she warns that it would be misguided to "get caught up in trying to find an exact time." Finally the proper timing for viewing a star's rising or setting will depend on its brightness (magnitude in astronomical terms), with the brightest stars still being visible just before sunrise, while dimmer ones "may require observation more than an hour before sunrise." Danielle Adams, "About: How to Observe," Two Deserts, One Sky: Arab Star Calendars, accessed July 3, 2020, http://onesky.arizona.edu/about-two-deserts-one-sky/.

in early November of 615CE according to astronomical simulations coincide with their literary descriptions as found in poetry and in the Qur'an. (Fig. 3-1).[221]

Fig. 3-1 Screen capture of the Pleiades as seen from Mecca looking west-northwest on November 1, 615 CE at 05:35:00 26 minutes from sunrise (06:06:00) at an altitude of approximately 7.5º above the horizon. The brightness of the cluster starts to greatly diminish as the time for sunrise approaches and cannot be seen after about 05:44:00 when it would be located close to 5˚34' above the horizon.

Swearing an oath by Arabia's most culturally significant celestial signifier certainly would have captured the attention of Muhammad's audience. Swearing such an oath was possibly done to bring attention to the auspicious time of year marking the end of a period of life giving rains. Perhaps the positive associations with the Pleiades already present in people's minds primed the attitudes of Muhammad's audience members to be receptive to the message of the succeeding verses 2-4; that Muhammad was neither misguided, nor was he inventing the revelation of the Qur'an. Though our introduction to this chapter focused on the significance of the planet Venus for the *sūrah*, the *sūrah* begins with an oath by the Pleiades instead. This naturally leads one to question whether any significant connection exists between these two celestial bodies. In the following sections we will discover the possible importance of a

[221] All screen captures of celestial positions estimated based on *Stellarium* planetarium software ver. 0.19.3. Times for astronomical simulations are calculated in Local Mean Sidreal Time (LMST), based in Universal Coordinated Time (UTC) time zone UTC+02:39 for the city of Mecca.

coincidence between the setting of the Pleiades on the western horizon before sunrise and the rising of Venus on the eastern horizon as a morning star before sunrise.

Q53:5-9 the descent of the angel of revelation as paralleled in the movements of Venus

5. He was taught by one Mighty in Power,
6. Endued with Wisdom: For he appeared (In stately form)
7. While he was in the highest part of the horizon:
8. Then he approached and came closer,
9. And was at a distance of but two bow-lengths or (even) nearer;

This section introduces Muhammad's vision of a heavenly being. Medieval exegetes were divided on the identity of the being the Prophet saw in his visions. Some argued that the object of the Prophet's visions referred to the two separate occasions[222] when he witnessed the Archangel Gabriel in his original angelic form rather than seeing Gabriel in a humanoid form. Others interpreted these verses as referring to "the Prophet's vision of God, either with the heart alone or with the eyes and the heart together, during his famous Night Journey and Ascension (*al-isrā' wa'l-mi'rāj*), when he is said to have traveled through the seven heavens to within two bows' length of God."[223] Commenting on the verses of Q53:1-18 and their relation to Muhammad's fantastic night journey and ascension, Frederick Colby mentions that, "Some Muslims from the first centuries of Islamic history denied that the following verses had much of a connection to Muḥammad's night journey or ascension, as the compilation of early exegesis by the famous commentator Ibn Jarīr al Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) proves."[224] While the shift in interpretation of the powerful being described by these cryptic verses shifted over time from viewing them as referring to God as opposed to Gabriel,[225] once the

[222] As indicated by Q53:13 "For indeed he saw him At a second descent"
[223] Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1289.
[224] Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey*: *Tracing the Development of the Ibn 'Abbās Ascension Discourse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), loc. 5-6 of 303, Google Play Books.
[225] Ibid, loc. 6-7 of 303.

astral character of these verses, and similar ones found in Q81:15-24 become clearer it will become apparent that such verses can only be referring to Gabriel, and not to Allah Himself.

The astral content of verses Q53:5-9 are obscure for a few reasons. Dost's interpretation of the events depicted in Q53:5-13 therefore are worth repeating here since they nicely capture that content. When comparing the descent of revelation to the movements of a heavenly body, Dost states, "but this chapter in particular [i.e. Q53] embodies a very symbolic picture of revelation that evokes the imagery of a heavenly body in its most characteristic movements: it appears on the higher horizon, draws near and suspends, comes closer than two bow's lengths away, reveals a revelation and finally reappears in a second descent."[226] In our analysis, the depiction of the movements of the angel Gabriel described in imagery of the movement of a heavenly body must be describing the movements of the planet Venus. This is because these verses describe the movements of a celestial body that ascends, levels off, and then slowly descends, much like the planet Venus in its apparition as either a morning or evening star as we learned from the previous chapter. (Fig. 2-7(b) p. 53).

These movements are not always readily apparent to readers either because they may not be knowledgeable enough of the regular patterns of movements of the sun, moon, stars, and planets to consider such an interpretation in the first place, and secondly because translators' word choices sometimes obscure the astral nature of the verses also. As an example, Daniel Adams refers to Yusuf 'Alī's translation of the verb *istawā* in verse 6 "Endued with Wisdom: For he appeared (In stately form)" (*Dhū*

[226] Dost, "An Arabian Qur'ān," 53.

mirratin fastawā). ʻAlī translates the verb as "he appeared," but Adams states that the verb has a more precise meaning in Lane's Lexicon of a thing becoming "'equal in respect of elevation or of depression.'"[227] The verb *istawā* is a Form VIII verb of the root س-و-ى. While discussing the verbal semantics of this verb pattern, Peter Glanville states that its "content is framed in a non-prototypical semantic structure that disallows the separation between an actor and an affected party that is inherent in prototypical transitivity…Since there is no conceptual separation between initiator and endpoint, the subject of *istawaa* is EVEN internally…"[228] In other words, the verb is a reflexive verb, and as applied to anything it would mean that the person or thing became level of its own accord. In light of Adams' and Glanville's observations, I think it is more apt to translate verse 6 as "Endued with Wisdom: For he ascended and became level." Because *istawā* can apply to becoming level in terms of either ascent or descent, one may rightfully ask why I decided to render it "he ascended and became level?" But the possibility of becoming level after one has descended is logically eliminated by the very next verse which says that the angel had been on "The highest part of the horizon" (*wa huwa bi-al-ufuqi al-aʿlā*), and thus the angel could only have reached the highest part of the horizon via ascending towards it.[229] The meaning intended by the phrase "the highest part of the horizon" (*al-ufuqi al-aʿlā*) of Q53:7 will be explained shortly.

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[227] Adams citing Lane's Lexicon, see Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 218 fn. 81. Adams however takes the verb to be referring to the movements of a star rather than a planet when she further states, "When applied to the stars, this term indicated that a star appeared level with one's eyesight..." Ibid. But she does not provide citations of this technical usage. In any case, the verb meaning in the sense Lane has provided is just as applicable if the celestial body referred to is the planet Venus, a possibility Adams does not consider.

[228] Peter John Glanville, *The Lexical Semantics of the Arabic Verb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 105.

[229] This meaning is pretty much captured in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* when al-Ṭabarī refers to the verb *istawā* as meaning "to rise and to level out" (*irtafaʿa wa-iʿtadala*). al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 22:12.

As for verse 8 (*thumma danā fa-tadallā*), Adams disagrees with 'Alī's translation again. She prefers to render the verb *tadallā* as "he/it hung down low" based on a line of poetry that describes a certain asterism as hanging down low in the sky.[230] Lane's Lexicon lists both meanings: the one given by 'Alī of "approaching," and the one offered by Adams of "hanging low"[231] and so it is hard to pick which choice among various other meanings recorded for this verb best captures the intent of this particular verse. Given the difficulty of choosing between equally convincing possibilities it may be instructive to return to the verbal semantics of the verb form under discussion. *Tadallā* is a Form V verb, Form V verbs are both reflexive and indicate that the subject of the verb "undergoes an incremental or otherwise multiplex change."[232] A verb quite similar in meaning and sharing the exact same form/pattern of *tadallā* is *tanazzala*, about which Glanville states, "Archaic pattern V *tanazzala* 'to descend slowly' captures a similar type of repetition, with a single element descending in consecutive phases."[233] In other words the verb *tanazzala* refers to a single event of descending which occurs over the course of incremental stages. Lane's entry for one of the meanings of the verb *tadallā* is "It was let down or lowered."[234] This meaning seems to best parallel the verbal pattern of *tanazzala* mentioned by Glanville. One might add that it was let down or lowered slowly or in stages as *tanazzala* means 'to descend slowly'. Crone mentions about *tadallā* in this verse that "the image is of a bucket being

[230] Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 218.
[231] Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, bk. 1, part 3 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1867), 909.
[232] Glanville, *Lexical Semantics*, 156.
[233] Glanville, *Lexical Semantics*, 157.
[234] Lane, *Lexicon*, 909.

lowered down a well,"[235] which one might add again, following Glanville, can only happen slowly or in stages.

With the preceding discussion in mind, I would render verses 6-8 thus:

6. Endued with Wisdom: For he ascended and became level
7. While he was in the highest part of the horizon:
8. Then he alighted, descending slowly…

Read in such a manner, it becomes clearer how the ascent and descent of the heavenly being that is traditionally identified as the angel Gabriel in these verses closely parallels the movements of Venus in its apparitions as the morning star. Recall from the previous chapter (Fig. 2-6 pp. 51-52) that the planet rises earlier and earlier each night and therefore reaches a higher and higher position in the sky at the time of sunrise, until such time as it levels off reaching a peak altitude above the horizon. The fact that Venus may reach a peak altitude of 48 degrees[236] corresponds well with the qur'anic description of the angel as being "in the highest part of the horizon," as much higher angular altitudes above the horizon would require the observer to crane their neck to observe a celestial body directly up above their head.[237] And finally, we know that after Venus has reached a peak altitude by leveling off from its previous ascent, that it rises later and later each night, appearing lower and lower in the sky close to the

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[235] Patricia Crone, "Problems in sura 53," *BSOAS* 78, no. 1 (2015): 17, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X15000014.

[236] The peak altitude Venus will reach in its morning apparition this year for Mecca is 44 degrees, while generally it may reach "a maximum altitude of between 32° and 48° above the horizon at sunrise during each morning apparition, depending on the time of year." See Dominic Ford, "Venus reaches highest point in morning sky."

[237] This line of reasoning is based on the consideration that a normal human field of vision is limited to about 60º above the viewers horizontal line of sight. This conclusion was reached based on an interpretation of a graphical representation of the "Binocular Visual Field" as originally produced in T.C. Ruch, "Binocular vision and central visual pathways," in *Medical Physiology and Biophysics*, 18th ed. of *Howell's Textbook of physiology*. Eds. Theodore C. Ruch and John F. Fulton (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders & Co., 1960), 453 as cited and reproduced in LeRoy A. Stone and L. Glenn Collins, "The Golden Section Revisited: A Perimetric Explanation," *The American Journal of Psychology* 78, no. 3 (September 1965): 504, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1420591.

time of sunrise and consequently looking as if it is slowly descending in the morning sky.[238] The description of this slow descent is well expressed by the verb *tadallā* as we have mentioned in our preceding discussion. Because a person should always beware that they are trying to "fit the data" to their desired hypothesis, one could reasonably argue that I have arbitrarily chosen those definitions of the key words in Q53:5-9 that fit my intended theory that the angel Gabriel is described in those verses in Venusian terms. In the next section however, we will review a passage similar to Q53:5-9 that Muhammad proclaimed before Q53:5-9 was first revealed to him, where the angel of Muhammad's vision is described in language that clearly portrays images of planetary motion thereby corroborating our argument in this section and others that the angel's movements are expressed in a language that parallels the movements of Venus.

[238] Everything that applies to the description of the movement of Venus as a morning star could equally apply to the apparition of Venus as an evening star as well in terms of its ascent higher and higher in the sky just (this time after sunset), it's reaching a peak altitude and levelling off, and its slow descent. In the following section however, I will discuss why I believe the movements of the angel in verses 5-9 more closely follow the movements of Venus as a morning star. To some extent however, the late antique Christian reports clearly indicate that Arabians really only worshipped morning star apparitions of Venus. Additionally it's important to keep in mind that Mercury follows a similar path as Venus as seen in the previous chapter (Fig. 2-7(b) p. 53) because it is also an inferior planet positioned closer to the Sun than the Earth. However if the verses of the angelic vision coincide with the movements of a planet, it is highly unlikely that the verses would be metaphorically referring to Mercury as apparitions of this planet occur over a very short time period as mentioned by Consolmagno and Davis who state, "The time windows for catching Mercury are short: just a few tens of minutes during twilight over just a week or two near greatest elongation." Consolmagno and Davis, "Mercury and Venus."

Q53:5-9 and additional qur'anic evidence at Q81:15-24 that the celestial description of the angel of revelation is conceived of in language portraying planetary motion

Table 3-1[239]			
Q53:5-9, 11-12		Q81:19-24	
5. *It was taught to him by one with mighty powers*	*ʿallamahu shadīdu'l-quwā*	*innahu la-qawlu rasūlin karīm*	19. *It is the speech of a noble messenger,*
6. *and great strength, who stood straight,*	*dhū mirratin fa'stawā*	*dhī quwwatin ʿinda dhī'l-ʿarshi makīn*	20. *who possesses great strength and is held in honour by the Lord of the Throne;*
7. *while He was on the highest horizon,*	*wa-huwa bi'l-ufuqi'l-aʿlā*	*muṭāʿin thamma amīn*	21. *he is obeyed there and worthy of trust*
8. *and then approached and came down*	*thumma danā fa-tadallā*	*wa-mā ṣāḥibukum bi-majnūn*	22. *Your companion is not possessed by demons.*
9. *until He was two bow-lengths away or even closer,*	*fa-kāna qāba qawsayni aw adnā*	*wa-la-qad raʾāhu bi'l-ufuqi'l-mubīn*	23. *after all he saw him on the clear horizon;*
11. *The heart did not make up what he saw.*	*Mā kadhaba'l-fuʾādu mā raʾā*	*wa-mā huwa ʿalā'l-ghaybi bi-ḍanīn*	24. *he does not withhold what is hidden.*
12. *Are you going to dispute with him what he saw?*	*a-fa-tumārūnahu ʿalā mā yarā*		

In his study of Q53, Sinai compares the Prophet's visionary accounts in both Q53 and Q81.[240] In studying these two passages Sinai determines that the Prophet must have proclaimed the verses making up the passage in Q81 prior to the similar passage in Q53.[241] He makes this judgment on the basis of his refinement of Nöldeke's relative chronology of the *sūrahs* in the Qur'an which Nöldeke devised by taking a *sūrah's* "verse length, overall text length, literary structure, introductory and other formulae, rhyme profile, and religious and ethical terminology" into account to see if they would converge on "consistent textual clusters" that could "plausibly be viewed as chronologically consecutive stages of development."[242] Subdividing Nöldeke's Third

[239] The transliteration and translation of the respective verses in the table are those of Sinai, "Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm," 2, 8.
[240] Sinai, "Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm," 7-9.
[241] Ibid, 7.
[242] Ibid, 6.

Meccan period into Groups IIIa and IIIb, Sinai assigns Q53 to Group IIIa, and Q81to Group II based on their respective literary profiles.[243] When comparing the passage in Q53 to the earlier passage in Q81, the similar content covered in both passages becomes immediately apparent, Sinai also points to the overlapping language of the person identified as Gabriel. Specifically Q53:5 and Q81:20 refer to the strength of this "supernatural being" that the Prophet encountered in his vision, while Q53:7 and Q81:23 respectively describe the horizon on which they were witnessed.[244]

Sinai agrees that the *rasūl karīm* of Q81:19 must refer to "some elevated angelic figure" because of how the figure is described in the next two verses. On the other hand, Sinai believes that the verses dealing with the Prophet's vision in Q53 refer to a different person than the one mentioned in Q81 despite the overlapping language and imagery of the two passages. Sinai argues that the referent of the Prophet's vision in Q53 is God himself rather than a vision of an angel. Accordingly, Sinai believes that the Prophet is changing track in Q53, and is making a stronger claim to his audience than he did before.[245] By claiming to have seen God Himself, Sinai says the Prophet is laying "claim to the 'objective' scriptural heritage" of Abraham and Moses mentioned at Q53:36-37.[246]

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[243] Ibid, 7.
[244] Ibid, 8.
[245] Ibid.
[246] Ibid, 13. Sinai's argument that Muhammad must have been claiming to see God, just like Moses saw God at the burning bush so that Muhammad could thereby establish his prophetic/biblical credentials (Ibid, 15-16.) is not the only way that Muhammad could have laid claim to Abrahamic-Mosaic authority. Alternatively, Muhammad could have claimed that he received revelation from the 'Angel of the Presence' a highly authoritative angel mentioned in the *Book of Jubilee*s who gave revelation to Abraham and Moses. See James C. Vanderkam, "The Angel of the Presence in the Book of Jubilees," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 7, no. 3 (2000): 380. One might see in the description of the angel in Q81:15-24 and Q53:5-9 something similar to the Angel of the Presence and this is a hypothesis I hope to develop further in future research. For the Book of Jubilees as an important intertext for the Qur'an and how it is used to

I agree with Sinai that Q81 was chronologically prior to, and offers a less developed vision account than the ones in Q53, I also agree with him that the Prophet's vision is mentioned in order to stake a claim to the scriptural heritage of Abraham and Moses. I disagree with him however when he says that the Prophet supports his claim by pleading to his audience that he actually saw God rather than an earlier vision of an angel thereby backtracking his previous claim of an angelic vision. Sinai's judgment that Muhammad revised the object of his visionary experience and it is God represented in the visionary accounts of Q53 and not the angel mentioned in Q81 should be reconsidered based on previously unrecognized thematic connections between the two passages in terms of language expressive of, or pointing to planetary motion. In attempting to decipher the connection between the brief oath of Q53:1, "*By the star when it sets!*" and the Prophet's subsequent visions in Q53, Sinai observes that the Q53:1 oath was meant to intentionally alert readers/listeners to recall the similar passage in Q81.[247] Sinai points out that like Q53, Q81 similarly makes oaths based on astral phenomenon, but the logical connections between those oaths and the subsequent vision in Q81 similarly elude him. About this he states:

> In any case, it is striking that the earlier vision account from Q. 81 is also introduced by an oath alluding to celestial bodies (Q. 81:15–16 probably refer to the planets) and to the break of day (Q. 81:17–18). Whatever the reason for the connection between such cosmic phenomena and the vision account following them may be there, the similar sequence of motives in Q. 53 was surely bound to recall the earlier passage from Q. 81.[248]

The oaths taken in Q81:15-18 and their relationship to the angel of Q81:19-24 may start to make a little more sense however given what we know about the being in Q53:5-

confer prophetic authority in the Qur'an see Dost, "An Arabian Qur'ān," 164-207; more specifically on what the Qur'an calls "the Scripture of Abraham and Moses" see Ibid, 203-207.

[247] Sinai, "Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm," 13.

[248] Ibid.

9 being described in terms of the descent of the morning star.

I believe Sinai is correct in his estimation that the oaths in Q81:15-16 probably refer to the planets. "So I swear by those receding those that move and set" (*fa-lā uqsimu bi-al-khunnasi al-jawāri al-kunnas*) have been interpreted by most medieval exegetes to mean the planets.[249] For example al-Ṭabarī notes that there was a split among early exegetes as to the meaning of this phrase, but citing a number of reports from the Prophet's cousin, 'Alī ibn abī al-Ṭālib (d. 661), al-Ṭabarī mentions that *al-khunnasi al-jawāri al-kunnas* means the five wandering planets (*al-nujūm al-darārī al-khamsah*)[250] However, some of these terms require further explanation. Lane's Lexicon generally defines *khanasa* (3p masc. sg. verb) as "He went, or drew, back or backwards; receded; retreated; retired; or retrograded."[251] While Lane states that *al-khunnas* (pl. noun) could refer to all of the stars, "because they retire, or hide themselves, at setting; or because they become concealed in the day-time" he goes on to state that the word could also refer to the planets:

> or the five stars, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury: because they return in their course: when you see a star [thereof] in the end of a sign of the zodiac, it returns to the beginning of it: or because of their retrogression; for they are erratic stars (*al-kawākibu al-mutaḥayyarah*), which [at one time appear to] retrograde, and [at another time to] pursue a direct [and forward] course…[252]

[249] The translation of these two verses in this sentence is from Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1481.
[250] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 24:105.
[251] Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, bk. 1, part 2 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1865), 816.
[252] Ibid.

In other words *al-khunnas* likely refers to the planets' retrograde motion. (Fig. 3-2).

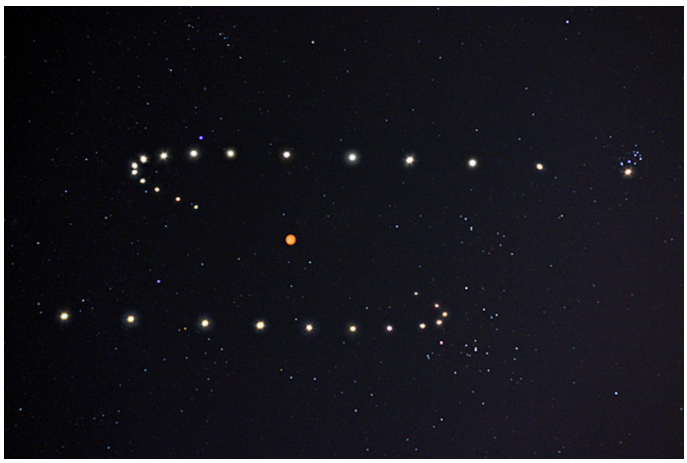

Fig. 3-2 Composite picture of the retrograde motion of Venus from April 3 to August 7, 2004 by astronomer Tunc Tezel. Accessed May 5, 2020: https://www.csmonitor.com/Photo-Galleries/In-Pictures/Venus/(photo)/275526

As for *al-kunnas* (pl. noun) it refers to the planets' being hidden from sight, again we quote Lane's Lexicon which states:

> the five stars, [or planets,] Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury; because they hide themselves in their place of setting, like antelopes in their *kunus* [or coverts]; or because they become hidden beneath the light of the sun…every star [of those thus named] having a circuit in which it becomes stationary and [then] revolves [again], and then it departs, returning: or the angels…[253]

The mention of angels is interesting to note here as it is directly relevant to our discussion of the angel mentioned in the next set of verses in Q81:19-24. The definition of *kunnas* however, as the planets as they "become hidden behind the light of the sun," could refer to planets when they become invisible because of either superior conjunction which happens when a planet is hidden from sight because it is traveling in its orbit behind the sun, or inferior conjunction which happens when the inferior planets Mercury and Venus become hard to see due to them getting lost in the sun's glare as they travel between Earth and the sun.[254]

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[253] Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, bk. 1, part 7, ed. Stanley Lane-Poole (London: Williams and Norgate, 1885), 2634.
[254] Refer back to Venus' planetary motion in Chapter 2. (Fig. 2-6 pp 51-52).

If we understand Q81:15-16 *al-khunnasi al-jawāri al-kunnas* as the planets, how should we understand the next two oaths Q81:17-18 "by the night as it approaches and the by the morning as it breathes!" (*wa layli idhā ʿasʿas wa al-ṣubḥi idhā tanaffas*)[255] Clearly it refers to the two ends of the day with respect to the rising and the setting of the sun. But what exactly is the relationship between the planets and the two ends of the day? There is a clear connection here to the planet Venus as it has been popularly known as both the morning star and the evening star, although these terms would eventually be applied to all five planets visible to the naked eye.[256]

Given that these oaths refer to the planets and their appearances at the two ends of the day, what reasonable connection might they have to the subsequent angelic vision mentioned in the following verses at Q81:19-24? Here the exegetical tradition might supply some clues. As Sinai has already pointed out, a close reading of both Q53 and Q81 alert us to the overlapping terminology that refers to the Prophet's visionary experience of some supernatural being in both *sūrahs*.

As close readers of the text themselves the *mufassirūn* spotted similar connections with respect to the overlapping terminology between the two passages. One pertinent example is when they gloss the "clear horizon" (*al-ufuq al-mubīn*) of Q81:23 where the Prophet sees the noble messenger (*rasūl karīm*),[257] with the "highest horizon" (*al-ufuqi al-aʿlā*) of Q53:7.[258] More interestingly, early authorities report that

[255] The translation of these two verses in this sentence is from Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1481.
[256] See Joe Rao, "What Is a 'Morning Star,' and What Is an 'Evening Star'?" Space.com, published February 06, 2016, https://www.space.com/31851-what-is-morning-star-evening-star.html.
[257] al-Ṭabarī cites a number of reported opinions identifying the noble messenger as Gabriel, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 24:163-165.
[258] al-Ṭabarī citing a report on the authority of Mujāhid, states that the clear horizon refers to the highest horizon. Ibid, 166.

al-ufuq al-mubīn means the eastern horizon.[259] This is interesting because some authorities also said that *al-ufuqi al-aʿlā* refers to the eastern horizon also.[260] These reports are not really contextualized further, and simply report Muhammad's vision of Gabriel in his full angelic glory on the eastern horizon as a matter of fact.[261] But why do the transmitters of these reports insist that the phrase the "clear horizon" (*al-ufuq al-mubīn*) of Q81:23 and the phrase the "highest horizon" (*al-ufuqi al-aʿlā*) of Q53:7 must refer to the "eastern horizon" only and not any other cardinal direction?

These reports of Gabriel's appearance to Muhammad upon the eastern horizon in his true form are better contextualized when understood according to our hypothesis that the movements of the angel evoke the celestial imagery of the planetary movements of Venus. If the movements of the angel are described in Venusian terms, then the various decontextualized reports that al-Ṭabarī records of Gabriel appearing to Muhammad on the eastern horizon are highly suggestive that the angel is being analogized to the movements of Venus in its apparition as a morning star. After Venus passes between the Earth and the Sun it appears as a morning star for close to nine months out of the year along the eastern horizon, rising higher in the sky around the

[259] al-Ṭabarī summarizes a number of early reports to this effect, Ibid.

[260] For example al-Ṭabarī cites Qatādah, who states about the "highest horizon" from Q53:7 that it refers to "the horizon from which daylight comes" (*wa al-ufuqu alladhi ya'tī minhu al-nahār*), see Ibid, 22:13; he says something fairly similar about the "clear horizon" from Q81:23 "We used to speak about (the meaning of this) horizon (that it refers to the) horizon from where the sun rises." (*kunna nataḥaddathu an al-ufuq ḥaythu taṭluʿu al-shams*), see Ibid, 24:166.

[261] al-Ṭabarī summarizing a number of early reports on the meaning of the "clear horizon" (*al-ufuq al-mubīn*) of Q81:23 states: Surely Muhammad saw Gabriel in his full manifestation/angelic glory – May God's Peace and Blessings be upon both of them – from the horizon [lit. from the direction] where things are made clear so that they can be seen from it [i.e. when they become clear to see due to the emerging daylight]…and that is from the horizon where the sun rises in the east. (*wa laqad raʾā Muḥammadun Jibrīla ṣallā Allāhu ʿalayhima wa sallama fī ṣūratihi bi-al-nāḥiyati alatī tubīnu al-ashyāʾa fa turā min qibalihā wa dhalika min nāhiyati maṭliʿi al-shamsi min qibali al-mashriqi*). Ibid. My thanks to Mr. Sharif Randhawa for helping me to clarify my understanding and translation of this text.

time of sunrise each day until it levels off/reaches a peak altitude and then its elevation at sunrise decreases each day making it appear as if it is slowly descending towards the horizon.

This has important implications for people who interpret the language of the descent of the angel in Q53:5-9 to be metaphorically or literally related to some kind of astral phenomenon just as Dost, Adams, and Hussain do. If we take the exegetical reports of Q53:7 and Q81:23 of Gabriel appearing on the eastern horizon seriously, one would presume that his subsequent descent as described in Q53:8-9 would be towards the eastern horizon as well. If we interpret Gabriel's movements in this passage as being representative of or concurrent with the movement of some celestial body, then that celestial body could only be one of the inferior planets i.e. Mercury or Venus. It cannot be one of the fixed stars, or an asterism comprised of the fixed stars because the fixed stars never set on the eastern horizon.[262]

Therefore, contra Sinai, we can say that the supernatural being mentioned in Q53:5-9, must be the same as the angelic figure of the *rasūl karīm* mentioned earlier in Q81:19. As we have mentioned Sinai already accepts that the first part of Q53 was meant to intentionally remind readers/listeners of Q81:15-24. The being in Q53 however, cannot be referring to God due to Muhammad changing his mind, and claiming he had actually seen God Himself, rather than the noble and powerful messenger he witnessed and mentioned in his earlier proclamation in Q81. The beings described in the visions of both *sūrahs* are one and the same entity; an angelic figure

[262] On the possibility of the being of Q53:5-9 being expressed in language symbolic of Mercury see fn. 238 *supra*.

(whether it is Gabriel or not is immaterial for our purposes here) described in both *sūrahs* by related and overlapping celestial planetary phenomena. These phenomena that are communicated in both *sūrahs* are not arbitrary or disconnected, they are certainly consistent. Because it is unlikely that Muhammad would describe Allah "moving" in planetary terms. The being mentioned in Q53:5-9 must be the same as the angelic figure mentioned in Q81:15-24 who is also described in planetary terms.

Q53:5-9 the angel of revelation as the morning star. The connection between the setting of the Pleiades and the helical rising of Venus as a morning star.

Accepting that both passages Q53:5-9 and Q81:15-24 describe the movements of the angel Gabriel as being analogous to the movements of Venus as a morning star, one might wonder whether the knowledge of the movements of Venus in the Meccan sky might help us to determine the date of Muhammad's first revelation as the passage in Q53 is related to Muhammad's first encounter with revelation in the biographical literature. Or perhaps the language of Q53:5-9 might inform us of the date of the revelation of the *sūrah* itself.

The attraction to find a date for Muhammad's angelic vision persists based on an assumption that the celestially significant language of Q53:5-9 (in addition to the possibly relevant astronomical clues provided about it in exegetical glosses) is expressed in terms so specific that the vision must have coincided with the actual movements of the planet Venus at an ascertainable point in time. An example of the highly specific language describing the angel in astral terms is found in Q53:9 which describes the angel's descent.

Yusuf 'Alī translates the verse as "And [he i.e. the angel] was at a distance of but two bow-lengths or (even) nearer." The particular Arabic phrase that 'Alī translates

as “two bow-lengths” is *qāb qawsayn*. Commenting on the verse, Adams alerts us to the astronomical meaning of the phrase which is “two angles of the bow.” She informs us that based on this unit of measurement as it applies to the descent of the angel, it would place Gabriel “very close to the horizon, much like a star that is about to disappear in its pre-dawn setting.”[263] Expounding further on the phrase *qāb qawsayn* and its astronomical implications, she says:

> As an angular measure, the *qāb* was “the portion, of a bow, that is between the part [that] is grasped by the hand and the curved extremity.” When applied to the night sky, this became an angular measure of the distance between stars in the sky, like the cubit (*dhirā‘*), with each *qāb qaws* being roughly equal to 2-1/3 degrees (º) in the sky. (90º is the angular measure between the horizon and the zenith, straight overhead). Verse 9 of Sura 53 thus pictures Gabriel at a distance of 5º or so (4-2/3º to be precise, which is obviously not the intent here) above the horizon.[264]

Adams comment that the intent of mentioning the *qāb qawsayn* in the verse was not for the purpose of indicating an actual physical unit of distance is interesting to note. This contention may be motivated by her original idea of a celestial chronotope which she defines as, “a category of cultural meaning that is embodied by the appearance of a star pattern in time and space (the sky) and its mention through oral or written speech acts over time.”[265] The shared cultural meaning of a star pattern in the Arabian sky allowed for people to “need not have observed the stars in the sky for them to be able to share the same symbolic meaning when their names were mentioned.”[266]

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[263] Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 219. Although I disagree with Adams’ characterization of Gabriel in so far as he would have been conceived as a fixed “star.” The exegetes insist that Gabriel appeared to Muhammad on the eastern horizon, and stars do not set in the east but in the west. However, Venus as a morning star can set along the eastern horizon. One might shrug off the exegetes insistence that Gabriel appeared in the east as a peculiarity that proves nothing, but the planetary imagery used in the angelic vision passage in Q81 uses language that overlaps with the description of the angel in Q53:5-9 which pretty much establishes in these passages the movement of the angel in planet-like terms, and not stellar terms.

[264] Adams initially cites Lane’s Lexicon for the non-technical meaning of the term, before describing its technical aspect. Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 219.

[265] Adams, “Rain Stars Set,” 52.

[266] Ibid, 53.

Thus I take her prior comment to mean that the language of the passage is metaphorical or symbolic. That is to say, the language of the passage describes the movement of the angel *as if it were* a celestial body, but the passage is not providing a physical description of an actual celestial body. That is certainly a possibility, but then one could ask why such a technically precise unit of measurement is used in the passage? Would metaphorical language require such technical precision to get its point across?

It seems more likely in this particular instance that the movement of an actual celestial object is encoded into the language expressing the event of Muhammad witnessing a heavenly messenger. Assuming as we have been that the movements of Gabriel in some way parallel the movements of Venus, and given this precise unit of measurement where the angel and thereby, Venus, would appear on the horizon, can we determine an exact date as to when Muhammad would have experienced his angelic vision as described in Q53:5-9? Based on the language of Q53:5-9, I have attempted to determine the date of Muhammad's first revelation assuming it would have taken place in 610 CE. The results of that exercise which did not end in any conclusive results have been moved to the Appendix.

Despite not being able to discover the date of Muhammad's initial revelation based on the coded astronomical language that describes this event as found in Q53:5-9 though, there is however, one other date I believe the astral language of this *sūrah* might help us determine. And that is the actual date on which the *sūrah* was itself proclaimed or revealed. The following list of points summarizes what we have already stated regarding the date of when Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* might have been proclaimed or revealed:

1. It is clear from the language of Q53:1, when considered along with the comments of early exegetical authorities, and the astrometeorology preserved in pre-Islamic poetry that the verse is referring to an astronomical event that will occur in early November – the end of the *wasmī* rain season, which corresponds with the setting of the Pleiades at dawn in the west.[267] It stands to reason then, this was the time of year when this *sūrah* would have been revealed. It is well attested in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry how the movement of the Pleiades in the night sky over the course of the year acted as a celestial clock for the Arabs.[268] Just as the poets use the position of the Pleiades in the sky to signal the time of night and thereby, the time of year, to describe when an event takes place, similarly the opening oath of the *sūrah* based on its very immediacy signals the time of its proclamation. As the Pleiades is an asterism consisting of "fixed stars" its position in the night sky will only change imperceptibly over the course of one's lifetime,[269] in the early seventh century CE the Pleiades would have set in early November every year. So while the first verse of the *sūrah* is highly suggestive of the time of the year during which it was likely proclaimed, it cannot however tell us the year in which it was revealed.

2. At least one biographical report of the Prophet informs us that the *sūrah* was revealed in the fifth year after the Prophet received revelation, i.e. 615 CE. Although this report also tells us it was revealed in Ramadan of the same year, there is as of yet no definitive way to determine which civil solar months Ramadan took place during in 615 CE.[270] That is, if we take this report to be historically reliable.

3. However, the suggested year of 615 CE for the year in which Q53 was revealed seems to be somewhat corroborated by Sinai's literary analysis of the *sūrah* which places it in a relative chronology of the Qur'an within a middle Meccan phase that would roughly correspond to the fifth or sixth year after Muhammad began receiving revelation in Mecca in 610 CE.

4. Based on (1),(2), and (3) we surmised that early November of 615 CE would be a good candidate for when the *sūrah* might have been revealed.

Now based on a peculiar detail that takes place fairly concurrently with the setting of the Pleiades at dawn on November 1, 615 CE, we now suggest that November 1, 615 may be the date that the *sūrah* was first revealed or proclaimed by Muhammad. The date of November 1, 615 was used as an example in Fig. 3-1 (p. 78) simply to

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[267] Refer to the discussion supra on the first verse of the *sūrah*.

[268] Refer to discussion above pp. 74-75; Adams, "Rain Stars Set," 58-61.

[269] Discussing how precession of the equinoxes may affect perception of the night sky over long spans of time, Adams states that "change within any individual's lifetime is imperceptible" see Adams, "The Hands of the Pleiades: The Celestial Clock in the Classical Arabic Poetry of Dhū al-Rumma," in *The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena VI*, *ASP Conference Series,*vol. 441, ed. Enrico Maria Corsini (San Francisco: Astronomical Society of the Pacific, 2011), 312.

[270] Speaking about the migration of some of Muhammad's companions to Abyssinia and their return to Mecca upon hearing that Muhammad had reconciled with the pagans, Ibn Sa'd reports, "Muḥammad ibn 'Umar said that they left during Rajab in the fifth year, they stayed during Sha'bān and the month of Ramaḍān, and the sajdah [a reference to the Satanic verses incident] happened in the month of Ramaḍān so they returned in Shawwāl in the fifth year."(*qāla Muḥammad b. 'Umar fa-kānū kharajū fī Rajab sanah khams fa-Aqāmū Sha'bāna wa shahra Ramaḍān wa kānat al-sajdah fī shahr Ramaḍān qadamū fī Shawwāl sanah khams.*) Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, 138. See broader discussion in fn. 215 *supra*.

illustrate how the Pleiades would have appeared around the time it set close to the horizon marking the end of the *wasmī* rain season in accord with Q53:1. Earlier we mentioned that on this day the Pleiades becomes quite faint and close to invisible at about 05:44:00 about 5º above the horizon in the west.[271] What is quite fascinating to note is just five minutes later Venus will rise as a morning star in the east to an altitude at just about the *qāb qawsayn* level mentioned in Q53:9 (Fig. 3-3). This quite serendipitous and nearly sequential astronomical event should not be dismissed as a coincidence or simply a curious factoid.

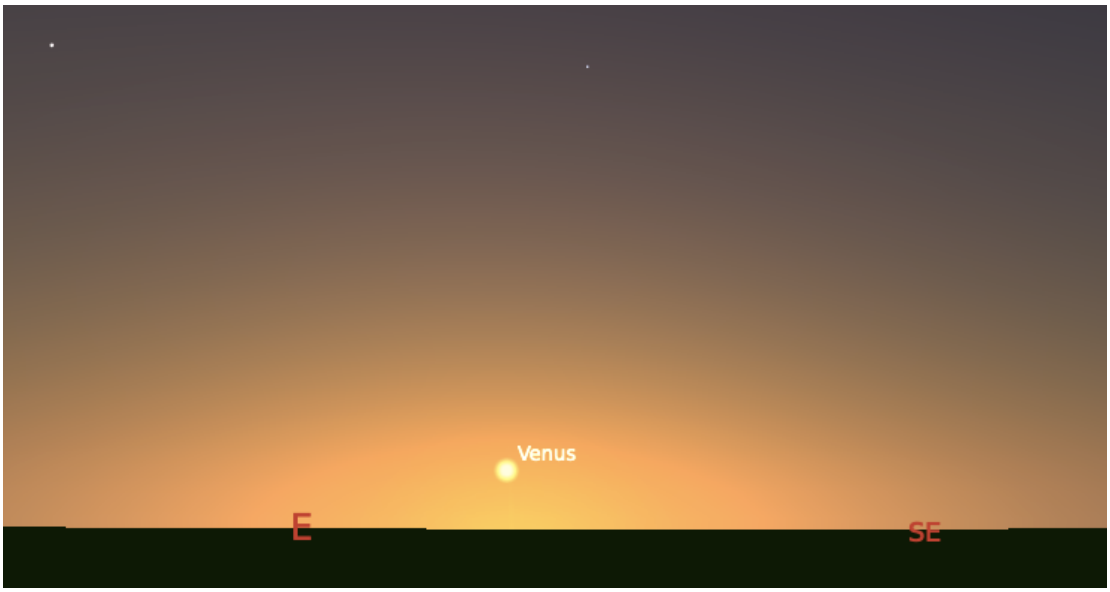

Fig. 3-3 Screen capture of Venus looking east-southeast as seen from Mecca on November 1, 615 CE, at 05:49:01 just five minutes after the Pleiades disappears along the western horizon and about fifteen minutes before sunrise (06:06:00). Venus is elevated at an altitude of approximately 4º32' above the horizon in line with the qur'anic phrase *qāb qawsayn aw adnā* (i.e. the distance of two lengths of the bow, or a little closer, where two lengths of the bow = 4º40' above the horizon). 80º Field of View.

Based on the astronomical significance of the phrase *qāb qawsayn* as indicated by Adams, I argued that this term was too technical for it to be simply used metaphorically. Although the description did not help us identify an exact date of Muhammad's angelic

[271] For Adams' suggestions on the ideal viewing conditions for setting rain stars in the twilight before sunrise see fn. 220.

vision (see Appendix), it seems that it may be able to substantiate the date for the revelation of Q53 itself.

From planetarium software simulations I observed that the planet Venus appeared for most of the year 615 CE in the Meccan sky as a morning star starting around late February. It reaches its highest peak altitude around mid-June; and starts slowly appearing lower and lower in the sky at about sunrise thereafter. Around early November it does not appear very high in the sky at sunrise. If we accept by now, the argument that the language describing the angelic vision of Q53:5-9 somehow encodes the movements of Venus, then the activity of Venus during the year 615 CE closely matches up with the description of the movements of the angel in the passage. The angel rises and ascends, just like Venus does during the year, it approaches a peak and levels out just like Venus does, and then on November 1, 615 CE Venus reaches the *qāb qawsayn*, roughly a few minutes after the Pleiades sets on the western horizon exactly as is described in Q53:1. That Venus would reach the level of the *qāb qawsayn* in its apparition as a morning star at close to the same time that the Pleiades would set on the western horizon is more than just a lucky coincidence then. That is to say, it must be seen as highly significant that on this day the Pleiades sets exactly as described in Q53:1, while just a few minutes later Venus (after having moved through the sky over the course of the year in motions that corresponded with the movement of the angel in Q53:5-8) will be located at exactly the point Q53:9 states the angel was located at during what was possibly Muhammad's initial encounter with the angel. The fact that Venus returns closely to the same place with respect to the fixed stars only every

eight years[272] (i.e. it will not be in the same position in the sky with respect to the Pleiades on this date until another eight years from this date) further highlights the significance of this event, confirming our initial presumption at the beginning of this chapter that the *sūrah* was revealed sometime in early November of 615 CE.

In summary then, given the tradition that the Arabs expressed time by the movements of the Pleiades in pre-Islamic poetry, and based on the observation that on November 1, 615 CE two astronomical phenomena mentioned in Q53, [one of them literal (i.e. the setting of the Pleiades during the time of dawn), another symbolic (i.e. the placement of Venus as the morning star as the angel of revelation at an angle of 4º40' or a bit closer, above the horizon)] occurred within five minutes of each other, and considering that something like this will only takes place every eight years, it stands to reason that this was probably the date on which the *sūrah* was revealed/proclaimed by Muhammad. Additionally this serendipitous observation corroborates our earlier presumption that the *sūrah* was probably revealed sometime in 615 CE based on a biographical report, and internal literary analysis of the *sūrah* itself. In the next chapter we will see how this dating may help us to explain particular issues with respect to the historicity of the Satanic verses narrative.

[272] See de Jong, "A Study of Babylonian planetary theory II," 309; ESO, "Pentagram of Venus."

Chapter 4: The Satanic Verses and a Venusian Gabriel

The story popularly known as the Satanic verses incident in the life of the Prophet has bedeviled scholars both modern and medieval for millennia. Central to almost every treatment of the subject is the question of its historicity. Although mentioned briefly above, we will review the story here before discussing its historicity also. In doing so it will become apparent how an astral reading of the angelic vision of Q53:5-18, especially verses 5-9 helps to explain the original context of the *sūrah* that has become so obscured by the myriad reports of the incident.

Just before al-Ṭabarī presents the Satanic verses story in his *Taʾrīkh* he mentions an interesting short vignette that helps to contextualize what builds up to the incident. In this vignette the notables of Quraysh gather to meet with Muhammad to convince him to stop speaking out against their gods. After offering him money and numerous women in marriage during their attempted negotiations and cajoling of the Prophet they request a compromise:

> They said, "This is what We will give you, Muḥammad, so desist from reviling our gods and do not speak evilly of them. If you will not do so, we offer you one means which will be to your advantage and to ours." "What is it?" he asked. They said, "You will worship our gods, al-Lāt and al-ʻUzzā, for a year, and we shall worship your god for a year." "Let me see what revelation comes to me from my Lord," he replied.[273]

What is most striking about this exchange is the Prophet's openness to seek an accord with the pagan leaders among his fellow Meccans. The exchange seems out of place for the Prophet because even when they offer to worship Allah for a year, in exchange for getting to worship Allāt and al-ʻUzzā for a year the Prophet does not immediately dismiss the offer out of hand, but considers the possibility until he receives further

[273] *Taʾrīkh* (Leiden: Brill, 1882-1885), I.3:1191; tr. 6:107.

guidance. This openness by the Prophet to seek an accord or reconcile with the pagan leaders is seen throughout a number of variant reports that purport to convey the events of the Satanic verses episode also. One good example is Ibn Sa'd's report that we have already mentioned,[274] here we present Shahab Ahmed's translation of the beginning of the report:

> The Messenger of God saw his tribe shunning him [*kaffan 'an-hu*]. He sat alone and desired [*tamannā*] and said, "Would that nothing come down to me that causes them to turn away from me [*layta-hu lā yanzil 'alay-ya shay'un yunaffiru-hum 'an-nī*]!" Then the Messenger of God drew near to his tribe and became close to them, and they became close to him [*danā min-hum wa-danū min-hu*].
>
> One day, he was sitting in one of those gatherings around the Ka'bah when he recited to them [*qara'a 'alay-him*], "By the star when it sets," until he reached, "Have you seen al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt, the third, the other? Whereupon Satan cast two phrases upon his tongue [*alqā al-shayṭānu 'alā lisāni-hi kalimatayni*]: "Those high *gharānīq*! Indeed, their intercession is to be hoped for! [*tilka al-gharānīq al-'ulā wa-inna shafā'ata-hunna la turtajā*]."[275]

Because the pagans heard their goddesses being praised in the *sūrah* and thinking that Muhammad had softened his approach towards their goddesses, both Muhammad's followers and the pagan opponents prostrated themselves once Muhammad finished reciting the whole *sūrah*.[276] The Quraysh inform Muhammad of their satisfaction after the recitation, stating, "and now that you have given them [i.e. the goddesses] a share, we are with you." This distressed Muhammad and later when Muhammad reviews the *sūrah* with Gabriel, Gabriel informs the Prophet that he did not bring the two phrases that Satan had "cast" upon the Prophet's tongue. Thus making the Prophet even more anxious as exhibited by his statement in the narrative, "'I have said on God's behalf that which He did not say! [*qultu 'alā Allāh mā lam yaqul*]'"[277]

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[274] See fn. 215 *supra*.
[275] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 90. Ahmed numbers this report *Riwāyah* 3 out of the 50 that he studies.
[276] Ibid, 90-91.
[277] Ibid, 91.

Did this event actually take place? Hawting informs us that two reasons are offered to support the historicity of the episode in modern scholarship. The first reason being "that there is a sufficiently large number of versions of the story, preceded by different statements about the authorities and transmitters of the reports, to make one believe that there must be some basis in fact for them."[278] The second reason offered is that Muslims could not have possibly concocted such a story so embarrassing to Muhammad which would lead many of them to later deny its veracity, and because of this the story must "reflect a real event."

Regarding the issue of judging the story to have a historical basis due to the embarrassing light in which it portrays Muhammad, Hawting and others argue that what may be considered embarrassing for religious believers will change over time, and therefore to consider the Satanic verses episode to be a historic event on this criterion alone is too simple.[279] This is amply demonstrated in the late Shahab Ahmed's posthumously published work *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*. While the historicity of the story is universally rejected by all Muslim sects on pain of heresy today, Ahmed's work which collects 50 variant transmissions or *riwāyat* of the Satanic verses narrative clearly proves that in the first two centuries of Islam Muslims were not at all scandalized by the story because they were in fact the ones who transmitted it.[280] Despite the enormous potential that Ahmed's work presents towards questioning the historicity of the story at least on grounds of embarrassment, Ahmed

[278] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 133-134.
[279] Ibid, 134. See also Anthony's brief comments regarding the defense of the historicity of the event based on the 'criterion of embarrassment.' Sean W. Anthony, "The Satanic Verses in Early Shi'ite Literature: A Minority Report on Shahab Ahmed's *Before Orthodoxy*," *Shii Studies Review* 3, no. 1-2 (2019): 241 and fn. 109, https://doi.org/10.1163/24682470-12340043.
[280] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 2.

states early in the book that he is not interested in passing judgment on its historicity. That he is more interested in how Muslims remembered the story over time rather than determining whether it actually happened is made expressly clear when he says, "What I am concerned with is not whether the Satanic verses incident really happened, but whether or not Muslims through history *believed* it to have happened: if so, why; and if not, why not?"[281] Although Ahmed begins the book disinterested in the question of the story's historicity, Sean Anthony points out in his review essay of Ahmed's book that Ahmed is inexorably drawn in by the question's allure near the end of the book.[282] Anthony draws our attention to Ahmed's discussion on the historicity question at the end of the book where Ahmed states:

> In light of the fact that the Muslim community of the first two centuries of Islam overwhelmingly accepted the historicity of the Satanic verses incident, it is hard to see how it could have been fabricated and introduced into Muslim discourse by early enemies of Islam, as Islamic orthodoxy has argued. Orientalists have insisted that Muslims could not possibly have invented such an inauspicious story. We have seen, however, that early Muslim discourse did not view the Satanic verses incident as objectionable–or even as merely unobjectionable–but rather that the incident is illustrative of the standard understanding of Muḥammad's Prophethood among early Muslims. There is presumably no reason, therefore, why they could not have made it up.[283]

Ahmed's discussion leaves us in an agnostic quandary over the historicity of the story. On the one hand Ahmed concurs with the first reason Hawting offered for accepting the story as fact, namely the sheer number of reports transmitted by Muslim authorities themselves in the first two centuries of Islam militates against it being a complete fabrication of "early enemies of Islam." On the other hand however, the fact that early Muslims were not really scandalized by the story makes it equally possible that they could have invented it, or that they did not invent it.

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[281] Ibid, 6.
[282] Anthony, "The Satanic Verses in Early Shi'ite Literature," 241.
[283] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 301.

A different approach that Sinai has taken to the historicity issue is to simply ask "whether there is any way of meaningfully fitting the *gharānīq*[284] verses into the place they supposedly occupied before they were excised from *Sūrat Al-Najm*."[285] As all versions of the Satanic verses story have the *gharānīq* verses come after verse 20, Sinai reasons that two reconstructions are possible; either the *gharānīq* verses were placed right after verse 20, preceding verses 21-22 of the received text, OR the *gharānīq* verses were later replaced by verses 21 and 22 of the received text.[286] (Table 4-1). When laid out and placed side by side, it becomes clear that neither reconstruction of the placement of the *gharānīq* verses within Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* can result in a coherent reading of a plausible iteration of this *sūrah* that could have preceded the received text

Table 4-1[287]

Sinai Reconstruction A (Originally inserted between verses)	Sinai Reconstruction B (Verses replaced)	
19. *Consider al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā*	19. *Consider al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā*	
20. *and the third one, Manāt.*	20. *and the third one, Manāt.*	
Those are the high flying cranes	***Those are the high flying cranes***	21. *Are you to have the male and he the female?*
Whose intercession is to be hoped for.	***Whose intercession is to be hoped for.***	22. *That would be a most unjust distribution!*
21. *Are you to have the male and he the female?*	24. *Is man to have everything he wishes for,*	
22. *That would be a most unjust distribution!*	25. *when the present life and the life to come belong only to God?*	
24. *Is man to have everything he wishes for,*		
25. *when the present life and the life to come belong only to God?*		

[284] i.e. "Those high *gharānīq*! Indeed, their intercession is to be hoped for!" as translated by Ahmed above in the passage cited from Ibn Sa'd mentioned in fn. 215.
[285] Sinai, "Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm," 10.
[286] Sinai, "Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm," 10-11.
[287] Reproducing Sinai's hypothetical reconstructions A and B here in tabular format. Ibid. As a separate matter Sinai considers that verses 23, and 26-32 are "subsequent expansions" of the *sūrah*, Ibid., 9; see also fn. 60 in this thesis *supra*. These expansions are unrelated to the Satanic verses incident, I simply make mention of it here to clarify why Sinai's reconstructions exclude verse 23 and stop at verse 25.

as we find it in the Qur'an today. This observation leads one to strongly question any claim to the historicity of the Satanic verses account. Sinai points to how Reconstruction A is clearly contradictory on its face since verses 21-22 indicate that God does not have female offspring, while the *gharānīq* verses further substantiate the gender of the goddesses in verses 19-20 "and even credit them with the authority to intercede with God." Reconstruction B on the other hand is just as implausible. Considering verse 23 was a later addition to the *sūrah*, the *gharānīq* verses are followed by verses 24-25 which provide a "scathing denouncement" and "castigation" of "man's presumption to have *whatever he wishes*." This attitude of the *mushrikūn* however, only makes sense within the context of their hope for the goddesses' intercession. Therefore verses 24-25 are "hardly reconcilable with the conciliatory attitude of the *gharānīq* verses."[288] Based on the preceding analyses of both reconstructions, Sinai concludes that the *gharānīq* verses "are apocryphal and were not originally part of the sura," and agrees with John Burton's claim that the *gharānīq* verses were incorporated into the *tafsīr* tradition as a manufactured frame narrative to contextualize or provide an occasion for the revelation of Q22:52 which states, "'*We have never sent any messenger or prophet before you whose wishes Satan did not insinuate something, but God removes what Satan insinuates and then God affirms His message. God is all knowing and wise…*'"[289]

I believe Sinai's reconstructions more than aptly indicate that the Satanic verses incident could not have occurred in as much as the core story is conveyed in its variant

[288] Sinai, "Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm," 11.
[289] Sinai, "Interpretation of Sūrat Al-Najm," 11. The translation of the verse is from Sinai's paper, who modifies the translation of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

transmissions. We can clearly see from Sinai's reconstructions that the Prophet's recitation of the verses "*Those are the high flying cranes – Whose intercession is to be hoped for*" before his audience is highly unlikely. If Muhammad did in fact recite those verses to the end of the *sūrah*, then no coherent reading of the *sūrah* on that specific occasion is possible.[290] But if we agree that the Prophet did not recite these verses before his audience, does that mean that the rest of the elements of the Satanic verses narrative are necessarily false, or should be seen as equally having no historical basis in fact? On the contrary, I believe some elements of the story may still actually have some historical basis even if we deem that the Prophet's recitation of the *gharānīq* verses was completely fictitious and invented for the purposes of providing an exegetical contextualization of Q22:52.

One common element of the story is that all of the *mushrikūn* bow down in obeisance with Muhammad at the end of his recitation.[291] The reason for their bowing in unison with Muhammad is of course explained in the Satanic verses story through the *gharānīq* verses which serve as the basis of the story itself. I believe however, that there is another way to explain why the associators could have bowed along with

[290] The last verse of the *sūrah* (Q53:62) commands, "So prostrate yourselves to Allāh and worship him [*fa-usjudū li-Allāhi wa-u'budū*]." The translation and transliteration is from Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 66. It is of course possible that interpolations into the *sūrah* took place during the life of the Prophet, and after his death. However, even acknowledging the common practice in manuscript culture of later redactions, based on the received text of the *sūrah*, it is hard to imagine where at all, the *gharānīq* verses would fit in to the overall structure of the composition without causing some kind of immediate and incoherent rupture in the text. One might imagine a scenario where fitting the *gharānīq* verses into an earlier iteration of the *sūrah* did not cause such textual/compositional difficulties but absent an extant attestation of such a hypothetical prior iteration of the *sūrah*, such thought experiments belong in the realm of pure unmitigated speculation.

[291] Based on a comprehensive reading of the variant transmissions of the Satanic verses episode, Ahmed infers the existence of "nine structural or dramatic units that make up the plot" of the whole ordeal. What he terms Narrative Unit 5 encompasses the issue of the *mushrikūn* bowing along with Muhammad and his believers, Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 52-53, 66.

Muhammad. That is because the description of Muhammad's prior visions of Gabriel placed at the beginning of the *sūrah* (Q53:5-18) are expressed in a language that in salient ways matches some of the prominent features of their Venusian goddesses (Q53:19-20). This interpretation of both the *sūrah*, and the occasion or setting, and audience before which it was revealed is not readily apparent however, if one is not cognizant of the astral character of the angelic vision that we developed in the previous chapter. Our argument builds upon some of Dost's observations about the thematic development in Q53 as a whole. After discussing the astral nature of the descent of the revelation which we cited in the previous chapter, Dost goes onto mention how the *sūrah* condemns astral worship. As part of this discussion his comment on the "swerve" found in the *sūrah* is most illuminating:

> However, this imagery quickly gives way to a polemic about the three goddesses that are condemned as "names that are named" with no real content…we are brought back to the original astral content of the chapter with Allāh's identification as the Lord of Sirius at the end. …the Chapter of the Star posits astral worship as an associationist (shirk) attribute and puts the worship of the three goddesses in the same context… *It is no wonder that this unusual swerve in the Chapter of the Star with a tacit association of revelation with astral movements and a later rejection of three astral goddesses was evaluated as an actual swerve in the life of Muḥammad by later Muslim scholars in the famous episode of the Satanic verses.*[292]

Stated differently, after describing the descent of revelation in astral terms (which in our argument is evocative of the planetary movement of Venus) the Qur'an goes on to condemn the names of goddesses (who have been historically associated with Venus) as empty signifiers, and condemns their astral worship as infringing on God's divinity. It is Dost's comment about the swerve in the *sūrah* however, which most captures our attention and it is this observation upon which we build our argument. Namely, it is the *sūrah's* abrupt switch or swerve, from the description

[292] Dost, "An Arabian Qur'ān," 53-54. Emphasis on the last sentence is my own.

of Gabriel in Venusian terms in Q53:5-18, and more specifically Q53:5-9 which the *mushrikūn* found quite comparable to the characteristics of the Venusian goddesses they must have been worshipping in Q53:19-20 that caused them to bow down at the end of the *sūrah* along with Muhammad. Because the original astral context of the *sūrah* was not well understood, the idea that the *mushrikūn* would have bowed down with Muhammad after the recitation of the *sūrah* required an explanation. And so, somehow, the story of the Satanic verses developed over time[293] in order to explain this curious event in the early life of the Prophet's ministry.

The preceding discussion helps to explain why the *mushrikūn* could have bowed down along with Muhammad at the end of the *sūrah*. In order to better contextualize that conclusion it is important to recognize that in this part of the *sūrah* the Divine Voice speaking through the Prophet is engaged in a polemic. To reiterate the preceding discussion with a slight shift in focus; the implied message being communicated in the first half of the *sūrah* seems to be that the heavenly body of Venus that the *mushrikūn* worshipped was not a manifestation of their goddesses at all, but actually a manifestation of the angel of revelation, identified as the archangel Gabriel. It goes without saying then, that the strength of such a reading only works based on the presumption that these goddess-angels were also truly worshipped as

[293] Actually quite a short period of time, as one of the major tradents/narrators of the Satanic verses material is Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Quraẓī, whom Ahmed argues was preserving and teaching this material in "Madīnah at the end of the first century." Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 94. For purposes of our hypothesis then, this means that the elements constituting the Satanic verses narrative would have coalesced and emerged within a few decades, shortly after the death of the Prophet.

manifestations of Venus.[294] What Muhammad is communicating to his pagan audience is that, the morning star as a form that represents their goddesses, is nothing but Gabriel, the angel of revelation bringing down the revelation to him. In essence Muhammad refashions the person represented by the celestial phenomena of the movements of Venus in the sky before morning light that the associators would have attributed to their goddesses. The Prophet attributes those movements to the Archangel Gabriel instead.[295]

The astral characterization of Gabriel aside, if we start to read the first part of the *sūrah* as a highly charged polemic in which Gabriel is purposefully compared to the angel-goddesses, some interesting correspondences between Gabriel on the one hand, and the goddesses of Q53:19-20 on the other (particularly al-'Uzzā individualy, and the *gharānīq* collectively) start to become apparent. One such correspondence that emerges from this perspective is the observation that Gabriel's description in Q53:5 as "one Mighty in Power" (*shadīd al-quwā*) becomes noticeable as a polemicly-comparative counterpart to the goddess al-'Uzzā, whose name is the feminine form of "the Mighty one" (al-'Azīz), "one of the ninety-nine Qur'ānic attributes of Allāh."[296] Another such correspondence becomes apparent in the very next verse Q53:6 where Gabriel is given the epithet *dhū mirrah* which Yusuf 'Alī translates as "Endued with

[294] That presumption is quite reasonable since we know from a number of Christian late antique authors mentioned in Chapter 2 that al-'Uzzā was historically worshipped as the morning star in Northern Arabian regions.

[295] We might see a complementary parallel of this "monotheistic" appropriation of astral symbolism that was commonly indicative of the worship of pagan goddesses within the context of the New Testament when Jesus proclaims in Rev 22:16 (NRSV) that he is "the bright morning star."

[296] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 57. To be a bit more precise, al-Uzzā (lit. the mightiest lady) is the feminine form of the masculine superlative al-'A'zza i.e. the mightiest one. Which the dictionaries say is synonymous with al-Azīz, the form known in morphological terminology as *ism sifah* which indicates a permanent quality of a thing, i.e. it will always and constantly have the quality of being mighty, often translated as God's attribute of being Ever Mighty.

Wisdom." In the *tafsīr al-Jalālayn*[297] however, some additional information is provided about the meaning of this construct phrase which states, "***possessed of vigour***, of strength and might (or [alternatively it, *dhū mirratin*, means] possessed of a beautiful appearance), namely, Gabriel, peace be upon him…"[298] Now assuming that this is the meaning that the original qur'anic audience had in mind when the *sūrah* was being recited, we could ask what the specific purpose of mentioning Gabriel's beauty in this act of communication might be. Again, if we read this part of the *sūrah* through the lens of a polemic comparison between Muhammad's angel of revelation, and the angels that the *mushrikūn* adored, al-'Uzzā being one of them, it becomes clear that Gabriel's epithet of being *dhū mirrah* (possessing a beautiful form) serves as a polemical and comparative counterpart to al-'Uzzā as the goddess of beauty, if her association with the goddess Aphrodite is to be trusted.[299] In any case it may also serve as a polemical and comparative counterpart to all three of the angel-goddesses mentioned in Q53:19-20 as all three of them are called *gharānīq* in the Satanic verses story. Ahmed relates that the term *gharānīq* has three meanings all of which are applicable within the context of the Satanic verses narrative, they are: Numidian or Demoiselle cranes; fair, tender, comely youth with beautiful hair, generally, and when used of women to refer to a "shapely young woman,"; and also to the shoots of a jojoba tree emerging from its

[297] "The fifteenth-century Qur'anic commentary…of 'the two Jalāls'" who are Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Maḥallī (d. 864 AH / 1459 CE) and his famous polymath of a student Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 AH / 1505 CE). al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, trans. Feras Hamza (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008), x. The *tafsīr* is popular in the Muslim world for its simple glosses of qur'anic words and phrases.
[298] Ibid, 512.
[299] Refer to the discussion in Chapter 2 *supra* on evidence outside of Muslim tradition where al-'Uzzā may have been seen in interconfessional contexts as associated with Aphrodite. Acknowledging Macdonald and Nehmé's criticism that the evidence is slim, nevertheless positive evidence for the equation does exist.

trunk "'likened to a tender youth because of their freshness and beauty.'"[300] Regarding the meaning of *gharānīq* as "shapely young woman" Ahmed states: Given the fact that al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt were female deities represented in naturalistic figurative statuary – and they were, as we shall see, viewed as the daughters of Allāh – the characterization of them as comely young women is readily understandable and convincing.[301] Thus the purpose of attributing the epithet *dhū mirrah* to Gabriel and thereby highlighting his beauty can be made sense of as a title to compare him to the goddess of beauty al-'Uzzā as Aprhodite, or this polemically-inspired title attributed to him for comparative purposes may have been targeted at all three of the *gharānīq* angel-goddesses instead. The final comparison I wish to identify is from verse 7 of the *sūrah* which Yusuf 'Alī translates as "While he was in the highest part of the horizon," but how can Gabriel's being in the highest part of the horizon communicate a polemically intended comparison against the goddesses? The polemical intent of the description becomes apparent when we compare the qur'anic verse against the pre-Islamic *talbiyah*[302] to the goddesses that seems to be the source for the *gharānīq* verses of the Satanic verses story (Table 4-2).

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[300] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 60-64.

[301] Ibid, 63. In other places Ahmed clearly informs his readers that he believes the practice of actual idolatry took place in Muhammad's setting, see Ibid, 59 fn. 44 for his critical perception of Hawting's argument. Since the issue of idolatry in Muhammad's time is very closely related to the subject under review in this thesis and is not taken for granted we will not be able to rely on Ahmed's claim that the meaning "comely young women" for the *gharānīq* is understandable because they were all represented in figural statuary. Nevertheless the *mushrikūn* could still have conceived of the *gharānīq* as beautiful young women in their imaginations since they all have female names even if they did not bow down to statues of them.

[302] Within the context of the Satanic verses narrative, assuming that the *talbiyah* was historically accurate and not a derivate of the Satanic verses narrative itself, Ahmed states, "then the Prophet's immediate Qurayshī audience would have understood him to be incorporating their *talbiyah* into his Divine Recitation (Qur'ān). Also, any later persons aware of this tradition would have understood the accounts of the Satanic verses incident to be presenting the Prophet as uttering the words of a Jāhilī *talbiyah* of Quraysh. However, it is important to note that there seems to be no evidence of any subsequent commentator interpreting the incident with reference to this reported *talbiyah*." Ibid. 65. As stated above

Table 4-2	
Q53:7	pre-Islamic *talbiyah* to the goddesses[303]
wa huwa ***bi-al-ufuqi al-a'lā***	*wa-al-Lāt wa- al-'Uzzā wa-Manāt al-thālithah al-ukhrā* ***fa-inna-hunna al-gharānīq al-'ulā*** *wa-inna shafā'ata-hunna la-turtajā*
"While he was **in the highest part of the horizon**"	Al-Lāt and al-'Uzza and Manāt, the third, the other! Indeed, **they are the high *gharānīq*!** And, indeed, their intercession is to be hoped for

As one of the meanings of the word *gharānīq* refers to cranes, the phrase *al-gharānīq al-'ulā* refers to the goddesses in avian imagery. About this avian imagery Ahmed states:

> the phrase *al-gharāniq al-'ulā*—"the high cranes"—is understood as expressing the idea that the deities fly up to heaven to intercede with Allāh. Certainly, "high-flying cranes" present a spectacular sight: "Migrating cranes traveling high in the air in a strong V or a long extended echelon are a beautiful sight. When traveling any distance, as in their long migrations, they frequently fly at considerable altitudes, reportedly as high as 2 miles."[304]

As the goddesses were described as high-flying, it's easy to see how Gabriel's description as being upon the highest horizon could be seen as a polemically-inspired comparison against the goddesses as he is claimed to be even higher than they are. In

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we believe that some elements of the Satanic verses narrative are entirely fictitious; specifically, that part of the story that says the Prophet mistakenly recited the *gharānīq* verses upon the first recitation/revelation of Q53 via Satanic machinations. This may lead to some confusion since we are now raising the issue that Gabriel is polemically compared to the *gharānīq* as they are mentioned in a pre-Islamic *talbiyah*. One should keep in mind however that just because we believe the Prophet's recitation of the *gharānīq* verses to be fictitious, this does not necessarily mean that the *talbiyah* mentioning these goddesses or angels as *gharānīq* has no historical bases in fact. It is quite possible that the information conveyed in Muslim sources about the *gharānīq* are historically reliable, even if the narrative element about the Prophet reciting the *gharānīq* verses never happened. On this issue see Hawting's discussion where he argues that the *al-gharānīq al-'ulā* phrase as transmitted in Muslim sources reliably reflects the *mushriks'* terminology and conception of Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 144-149.

[303] Ahmed's transliteration and corresponding translation of the *talbiyah*. See Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 65.

[304] Ibid, 62, and quoting from Oliver L. Austin Jr., *Birds of the World*: *A Survey of the Twenty-Seven Orders and One Hundred and Fifty-Five Families* (New York: Golden Press, 1961), 104. On conceptual links between avian imagery and angels see Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 148; especially interesting is the closely related discussion in Daniel Beck, *Evolution of the Early Qur'ān*: *From Anonymous Apocalypse to Charismatic Prophet* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 13-35, who contextualizes close associations between avian imagery, angels, and astral phenomenon within a late antique context, providing an excellent background discussion to many of the topics I discuss in this thesis.

summary, given that Muhammad describes his vision of Gabriel at the beginning of Q53 in a manner so strikingly similar to the qualities of the goddesses that the *mushrikūn* adored as summarized in (Table 4-3), the reason for their bowing along with

Table 4-3		
Qur'anic verse	Gabriel's Description or Title	Comparison against polemically intended target
Q53:5	"Mighty in Power" (*shadīd al-quwā*)	"The Mightiest Lady" (al-'Uzzā)
Q53:6	"Possessed of a beautiful appearance" (*dhū mirrah*)	al-'Uzzā as associated with Aphrodite, OR all of the goddesses as "Shapely young women" (*gharānīq*)
Q53:7	"While he was in the highest part of the horizon" (*wa huwa bi-al-ufuqi al-a'lā*)	"They are the high-flying cranes" (*inna-hunna al-gharānīq al-'ulā*)

Muhammad starts to become clearer. It is not because Muhammad indicated his acceptance of their goddesses in the middle of his recitation of the *sūrah*. Rather, they might have bowed out of a sense that perhaps Muhammad was acquiescing to their beliefs since Muhammad's angel as described in certain noticeable respects, sounded quite like Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt. The parallels drawn here between Gabriel and the goddesses are only in terms of secondary characteristics though, it's really Gabriel's description in terms of Venus' planetary motion that can best help us explain why the *mushrikūn* might have bowed down with Muhammad at the end of his recitation of this *sūrah* if the event really happened. It is now to the proposed original setting/context of the "revelation" of the *sūrah* and its initial proclamation that we now turn.

Another one of the important units out of the "nine structural or dramatic units that make up the plot" of the Satanic verses story that Ahmed informs us about from his study is what he calls "Narrative Unit 2" or the occasion or setting in which the Prophet recited the Satanic verses. Some of the "narrative motifs" that constitute this narrative unit include: 1. the Prophet's recitation of *Sūrat al-Najm*; 2. in the presence

of the Mushrikūn; 3. at the Ka'bah.[305] In the report from Ibn Sa'd cited above, the following part of the report would constitute Ahmed's Narrative Unit 2, or the laying out of the scene: One day, he[306] was sitting in one of those gatherings around the Ka'bah when he recited to them [*qara'a 'alay-him*], "By the star when it sets," until he reached, "Have you seen al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt, the third, the other?[307]

Regarding the original setting/occasion of the story, Anthony in his review of Ahmed's work, mentions one tradition that Ahmed does not consider in *Before Orthodoxy*. A tradition from 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr "that is potentially of crucial importance for understanding the historicity of the satanic verses story and how it came to be." The tradition does not reproduce the Satanic verses narrative "as such," but does reproduce "much of its narrative structure."[308] Because our argument for the original occasion/setting of the *sūrah* will depend on this report, we reproduce Anthony's translation of the report here in full:

> Yaḥyā related to us: Ibn Abī Maryam related to us: Ibn Lahīʿa related to us from Abū l-Aswad, from ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr, from al-Makhrama b. Nawfal, from his father:
>
> The Messenger of God had begun preaching Islam openly, and all the inhabitants of Mecca became Muslim (*laqad aẓhara…al-islām fa-aslama ahlu Makka kulluhum*)—and that was before the ritual prayer was required—so that if he were to recite the Qurʾan with prostration (*in kāna la-yaqraʾ bi-l-sajda*), then he would prostrate, and they would prostrate. Some of them were not even able to prostrate due to the crowding and lack of space because of the throngs of people. Eventually the leaders of Quraysh, al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra and Abū Jahl along with others, arrived, for they had been in al-Ṭāʾif on their estates *(fī arḍihim)*. They said, "Have you all abandoned your forefathers' religion (*tadaʿūna dīna ābāʾikum*)?" so they disbelieved *(fa-kafarū)*.[309]

[305] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 52-54
[306] Referring to the Prophet.
[307] Ibid, 90.
[308] Anthony, "The Satanic Verses in Early Shi'ite Literature," 242.
[309] Ibid.

Although the report is transmitted through "the notoriously unreliable Ibn Lahī'a (d. 174/790),"[310] Anthony believes the report is reliable because corroboration for it comes in the form of similar content from 'Urwa which can be found in a letter he purportedly wrote "to the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65-86/685 705)."[311] Secondly Ibn Lahī'a's reports that he transmitted before his library was burned, like this one, are deemed to be reliable by the hadith experts.[312] Besides how reliably the report may have been transmitted however, Anthony finds the report to be more historically plausible than the reports that transmit the standard Satanic verses narrative due to the content of the report itself. In this regard, he finds the above report and the similar one found in 'Urwa's letter to ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān more plausible than other Satanic verses reports due to the "criterion of dissimilarity" meaning the story's chronology is off, it takes place "far too early in Muḥammad's prophetic career and, moreover, it is not the 'right' story. The pagan Meccans are not supposed to be accepting of the Qurʾan *en masse* from the outset, only to abandon its message later." Additionally the story contradicts "the standard narrative arc" of Muḥammad's life "as conventionally recounted in the *sīra-maghāzī* literature."[313] In the standard narrative arc of the Prophet's biography, the Prophet starts preaching to people in secret and gains followers among people mostly living on the margins of society while the Qurashī elite mock him. It is not until the Prophet denounces their gods, and damns their ancestors who died without faith that they begin to persecute him. However Anthony reads the above report from 'Urwa as altogether different in that, from the very

[310] Ibid, 241-242.
[311] Ibid, 243.
[312] Ibid, 244.
[313] Ibid, 243.

beginning of the Prophet's mission, his "preaching was overwhelmingly positive and only later did he encounter opposition."[314] Anthony's reasoning suggests that the above mentioned report records an event that probably occurred very early in the Prophet's career, if not near the very beginning. The report does contain a few details however that we believe might corroborate our proposed dating for Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm*, November 1, 615 CE, which would place the event five years into the Prophet's mission. Although the report does not mention what *sūrah* the Prophet recited from, it indirectly mentions that this *sūrah* would have contained a verse of prostration "so that if he were to recite the Qurʾan with prostration (*in kāna la-yaqraʾ bi-l-sajda*), then he would prostrate, and they would prostrate."[315] *Sūrat al-Najm* is one such *sūrah* that contains a verse of prostration at the end Q53:62 "But fall ye down in prostration to Allah, and adore (Him)!" In the variant reports of the Satanic verses story all of the *mushrikūn* fall in prostration along with the Prophet for this very reason. It is most likely then that the above cited report from 'Urwa via Ibn Lahī'a is alluding to *Sūrat al-Najm*, even if the *sūrah* is not mentioned by name. The small detail about the Qurashī leaders al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra and Abū Jahl returning from al-Ṭā'if, i.e. "for they had been in al-Ṭāʾif on their estates (*fī arḍihim*)," provides a slight glimmer of further

[314] Ibid.

[315] There are fifteen verses in the Qur'an mentioning the word 'prostrate' where a Muslim is required to immediately fall down in prostration upon reciting the verse, even if it causes an interruption within the normal flow of their ritual prayer. The 'Urwa via Ibn Lahī'a narration above suggests that the Prophet was enacting this practice even before the ritual prayer had been formally decreed to be an obligation. The verses of prostration are: Q7:206, Q13:15, Q16:49, Q17:107, Q19:58, Q22:18, Q22:77, Q25:60, Q27:25, Q32:15, Q38:24, Q41:37, Q53:62, Q84:21, and Q96:19. See "Verses in the Qur'aan where we should perform Sujood al-Tilaawah," Islam Question & Answer, published May 26, 1999, accessed August 23, 2020, https://islamqa.info/en/answers/5126/verses-in-thequraan-where-we-should-perform-sujood-al-tilaawah.

corroboration of our proposed date of Novemeber 1, 615 CE as the date of the revelation of the *sūrah*. Recall from the previous chapter that the Pleiades sets in early November "marking the end of the heavy *wasmī* ("marking") rains." Since al-Walīd and Abū Jahl were returning from their garden-estates in al-Ṭā'if, it would make eminent sense that their return would coincide with the end of the *wasmī* rain season when they were tending to their gardens. al-Walīd especially, "is said to have owned a garden in Ṭāʾif which he planted for pleasure only and never gathered the fruit in it."[316]

We now have access to all the elements in which we might imagine a scenario in which the Prophet could have recited Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* which prompted the *mushrikūn* to prostrate along with him at the end of the *sūrah* without using the *gharānīq* verses to explain why both believers and "pagans" prostrated together in unison. If we imagine that the Prophet was at the Ka'bah as the report from Ibn Sa'd and so many other variant reports of the Satanic verses narrative state, and if he was there in the twilight of dawn just before sunrise on November 1, 615, the scenario could have occurred in the following manner:

> If the Prophet was reciting Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* to the audience at around 05:49:01 on November 1, 615 CE (Fig. 3-3 p. 97), then he would have been reciting the *sūrah* at quite an auspicious time! For he would have been reciting it just after the Pleiades seems to have disappeared on the western horizon as mentioned in Q53:1 (Fig. 3-1 p. 78), while at that time Venus would have been rising in its apparition as a morning star just fifteen minutes before sunrise and reached an altitude of approximately 4º32' above the horizon in line with Q53:9 – the qur'anic phrase *qāb qawsayn aw adnā* (i.e. the distance of two lengths of the bow, or a little closer, where two lengths of the bow = 4º40' above the horizon). Considering the fact that the *mushrikūn* were listening to the Prophet's recitation describe the angel who's description in Q53:9 they could see at that very moment corresponded with Venus' position in the sky, and considering that the Prophet was describing this angel in traits very similar to the other Venusian angel-goddesses that they were familiar with, it is no wonder that they prostrated

[316] *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., s.v. "al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra," by K.V. Zettersteen, accessed October 14, 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7848.

along with him on the verse of prostration at the end of the *sūrah* Q53:62, "But fall ye down in prostration to Allah, and adore (Him)!" For while some of the verses that the Prophet would have recited must have tipped them off that he was not accepting Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt i.e. 19-22, 24-25 see (Table 4-1), the highly Venusian language and context of the situation must have swept them up in the moment. The Venusian swerve to borrow Dost's language might have made them believe that even if Muhammad wasn't accepting their angel-goddesses, he was nevertheless describing an angel that didn't sound too different from their own. al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra and Abū Jahl upon their return to Mecca from al-Ṭā'if would be surprised to discover that so many people prostrated. But their return mentioned in the 'Urwa by Ibn Lahī'a report somewhat corroborates parts of our proposed dating of the first proclamation of the *sūrah*. If they immediately arrived from al-Ṭā'if as the report seems to indicate, then they would have arrived later in the morning, because desert travel takes place mostly at night when it is cool, and the Prophet's proclamation of the *sūrah* would have taken place just before sunrise. Secondly the report of their return states that they had just returned from their estates in al-Ṭā'if, where they would presumably have been tending to their gardens, in which case it is reasonable to believe that they would have returned to Mecca from al-Ṭā'if at the end of the *wasmī* rain season, providing a bit of additional corroboration[317] to this proposed scenario for the "revelation" of Q53.

Additionally, evidence for the possibility that the *mushrikūn* were never under the impression that Muhammad had accepted their angel-goddesses by reciting the *gharānīq* verses can be found in one of the variant reports of the Satanic verses story itself. In Ibn Sa'd's report of the Satanic verses that we have been following throughout this thesis, Quraysh's reaction to Muhammad's purported recitation of the Satanic verses is as to be expected. Ibn Sa'd's report records the following: They (Quraysh) were satisfied [*raḍū*] with what the Messenger of God had uttered [*takallama bi-hi*] and said: "We know that Allāh gives life and death, and that it is He who creates and sustains, but these gods of ours intercede with Him on our behalf; and now that you have given them a share, we are with you"[318] One of the variants of the Satanic verses found in al-Ṭabarī's *Taʾrīkh* however conveys an intriguingly different message. This version records Quraysh's response to Muhammad in the following words, "We

[317] The reasons we believe November 1, 615 to be the actual date of the *sūrah's* revelation or first proclamation were already provided at the end of Chapter 3 and are not dependent upon the scenario outlined here. The purpose of this exercise was to imagine a plausible scenario given the date we had already proposed in which we could explain why the *mushrikūn* prostrated with Muhammad at the end of the *sūrah* without invoking the *gharānīq* verses to explain the reason for their prostration.
[318] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 91. I have underlined the part I wish to compare with another report.

recognize that it is God who gives life and death, who creates and who provides sustenance, but if these gods of ours intercede for us with him, and if you give them a share, we are with you."[319] The two reports could not be any more different, and the report in the *Taʾrīkh* is a very unexpected reading because if the Prophet did recite the *gharānīq* verses as the section in the *Taʾrīkh* reports that he did then one would expect the *mushrikūn* to say "now that you have given them a share" like the version reported by Ibn Sa'd. This version in the *Taʾrīkh* seems to indicate that the Prophet did not originally recite the *gharānīq* verses leading further credence to a scenario like the one we have outlined above where the *mushrikūn* intently listen to the Prophet's recitation and acknowledge the truth of his message as suggested by 'Urwa's report above. Since the version we have identified from the *Taʾrīkh* is the more uncommon and difficult reading, according to the canons of textual criticism, it is likely the more correct reading. Finally, there is only one problem with basing our scenario on 'Urwa's report and that is the suggestion by Anthony of its very early occurrence in the Prophet's life. However, the report on its face does not indicate when exactly in the Prophet's life the event would have taken place. It only says "The Messenger of God had begun preaching Islam openly," and therefore it is entirely possible that it could have taken place five years after Muhammad had received his first revelation in line with "the standard narrative arc" of the Prophet's life "as conventionally recounted in the *sīra-maghāzī* literature."[320]

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[319] *Taʾrīkh* (Leiden: Brill, 1882-1885), I.3:1195; tr. 6:111.

[320] "Muḥammad, we are told, preached Islam secretly and gained followers among the downtrodden, but not among the notables (*al-ashrāf*). Men of Quraysh mocked him whenever he passed by their assemblies…However, they did not begin to persecute him until he began to denounce their gods and to declare the perdition of their ancestors who died as unbelievers." Anthony, "The Satanic Verses in Early Shi'ite Literature," 243

The proposed date we have suggested for the revelation of Q53 *Sūrat al-Najm* has helped us to scrutinize some elements of the Satanic verses story, recognize others as fictitious, while imagining how yet even other parts of the story may actually be true. Throughout that discussion though, what really helped to contextualize the possible original intent of the *sūrah* is the recognition of Gabriel's astral nature as expressed in the beginning verses of the *sūrah*. Recognizing Gabriel's astral nature in the language of the verses which reflect the movements of Venus helped to highlight how the beginning of the *sūrah* acts as a polemic against the other angels within the *sūrah's* original setting, who must have also been viewed as representations, or manifestations of Venus. We have already argued for the reasons why November 1, 615 CE is too serendipitous a day to simply ignore as the possible date of the *sūrah's* first proclamation or revelation in Chapter 3, nevertheless it is possible that the Prophet could have recited the *sūrah* at any time and the *mushrikūn* would still have recognized it as an incisive polemic against their angel-goddesses Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt because of its depiction of Gabriel in very Venusian terms expressing targeted comparisons against al-'Uzzā primarily, but also against all three of them as a group.

In Chapter 2 we examined the material suggesting whether al-'Uzzā was worshipped as Venus/morning star and noted the controversy surrounding whether her worship as a morning star did continue up until the time of Muhammad. Given the polemic comparison between Gabriel and al-'Uzzā as outlined above, it stands to reason that the worship of al-'Uzzā as a morning star continued up to the advent of Islam. The depiction of Gabriel in very Venusian terms suggests it is likely that the worship of Venus goddesses was prevalent among the Prophet's opponents, otherwise

what would be the social and religious factors to provoke such a polemically-inspired comparison? Given that some astral aspect of al-'Uzzā's cult did continue up until the time of Muhammad, what could we say about her sisters Allāt and Manāt?

It is important to recognize that both Allāt and al-'Uzzā were viewed as a pair, often to the exclusion of Manāt in the materials that Muslim tradition has recorded about these two goddesses. We have already presented some of that material in Chapter 1. The reason for this close association may stem from Healey's suggestion that at an earlier point in time both Allāt and al-'Uzzā were worshipped as a single goddess in North Arabian regions much further north of Mecca.[321] Be that as it may, is there any other evidence we might be able to identify to suggest Allāt's association with Venus/morning star, other than to suggest an astral identity for this goddess just because she is so closely related with al-'Uzzā?

Herodotus famously reports that the Arabs worship two gods, Al-ilat "whom he identifies with Ourania" and Orotalt who is identified as Dionysis. Macdonald warns that many writers were quick to identify Al-ilat with Aprhodite since Ourania is an epithet sometimes used for Aphrodite. However, Macdonald claims that what Herodotus was trying to communicate is that one of the gods is simply a sky god and the other an earth/fertility deity. This is evidenced by the fact that later classical writers from antiquity understood that Al-ilat was a sky-god, and not specifically the goddess

[321] Healey, *The Religion of the Nabateans*, 114.

Aphrodite because sometimes they would associate sky gods like Zeus or Uranus with Al-ilat.[322]

Although we have no material remains that indicate how Allāt would have been worshipped, if indeed she was worshipped at the time of Muhammad, there is some pre-Islamic evidence indicating that Allāt was associated with the morning star. In an article on religious syncretism in the Near East, Christides mentions some tessera from Palmyra depicting Allāt along with the morning star.[323] Along these lines Christides opines that Allāt's iconography when standing atop or standing next to a lion closely resembles the famous Venus goddess Ishtar in her war-like attributes.[324] Krone similarly mentions how Allāt is closely associated with Ishtar at Palmyra. She is expressly equated with Ishtar in two Palmyrene inscriptions. Although the name Ishtar by this time could have been used as a general word to apply equally to any goddess, certain iconographic motifs of clothing, astral symbolism, and leonine companions suggest salient links between the two goddesses.[325]

Mention should also be made of some famous lines of poetry that Haldar highlights to indicate a cult of "Daughters of the morning star belonging to al-Lāt" (*banāt tāriq al-lātī*). The lines were famously sung by Hind bint 'Utbah at the Battle of Uḥud:[326]

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[322] Michael C.A. Macdonald, "Goddesses, dancing girls or cheerleaders?" in *Dieux Et Déesses D'arabie : Images Et Représentations : Actes De La Table Ronde Tenue Au Collège De France, Paris, Les 1er Et 2 Octobre 2007*, ed. Isabelle Sachet and Christian Julien (Paris: De Boccard, 2012), 264.
[323] Vassilios Christides, "Religious Syncretism in the Near East: Allāt-Athena in Palmyra," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 1 (2004): 75, http://hdl.handle.net/10396/4067.
[324] Ibid, 74.
[325] Krone, *Die altarabische Gottheit al-Lāt*, 331.
[326] For full list of sources recording all variants of these lines of poetry see Alfred Haldar, *Associations of Cult Prophets Among the Ancient Semites* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1945), 191-192. I would like to mention a kind word of thanks to Mr. Kader Smail for alerting me to these lines of poetry and this story about Hind.

We are the daughters of the morning star! (*naḥnu banāt tāriq*)
We walk along soft pads (*namshī ʻalā al-namāriq*)
Advance and we embrace you! (*in taqbalū naʻāniq*)
Retreat and we desert you! (*aw tadbirū nafāriq*)
A separation bereft of adoration… (*firāq ghayr wāmiq*)

Unfortunately for our purposes, Haldar's argument that the different women who sang these verses throughout history must have belonged to some cult of Allāt is not very convincing.[327] If that was the case, our job of finding a connection between Allāt and the morning star would be done. Haldar insists that a common relative pronoun اللّاتِي for the fem. pl. referring to these women should instead be read اللاتيّ as a gentilic referring to a person or group of people as belonging to Allāt,[328] e.g. "The women of Allāt with Hind" rather than "The women who were with Hind." However, there is no reason to read it as such, except to support his thesis that there is a morning star cult for Allāt. Even if Haldar's argument for a cult of the morning star belonging to Allāt is not convincing, we should keep in mind that during their battles the Quraysh were reported to raise statues of both Allāt and al-ʻUzzā for protection.[329] Considering Hind's lines of poetry belong to a battle cry to spur on the Qurāshi troops against the Muslims, the poetry and its context suggests at least some connection between these goddesses and the morning star. Because there is some historical precedent for Allāt's association with the morning star in pre-Islamic contexts like that at Palmyra, and if we believe that association continued up to the rise of Islam as suggested by the poetry cited above, it would not be unreasonable then to see in the polemic of Gabriel against the other goddesses an indication that Allāt like her sister al-ʻUzzā continued to be worshipped as a morning star.

[327] Ibid.
[328] Ibid, 191.
[329] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 58.

As for Manāt according to Healey, her name derives from the root MNW/Y which means "fate, portion, lot."[330] This may explain why she was either depicted as, or closely associated/assimilated with the Hellenistic goddesses of fortune (Tyche/Fortuna) and fate (Nemesis). She is mentioned in inscriptions at Palmyra,[331] in north Arabian inscriptions in the Nabatean regions,[332] and at Tayma she was called "goddess of goddesses" i.e. the greatest goddess (*mnwh 'lht 'lht'*).[333] Her consistent association with Bel Ḥamon in Palmyrene inscriptions raises the question of whether she was his female partner.[334] Her cult at Palmyra never merged with that of Allāt, and Teixidor speculates that both goddesses seem to have arrived at Palmyra separately, each as the "Fortune of a different Arab group…"[335]

On a Palmyrene tessera she was depicted anthropomorphically, seated with scepter in her left hand, clearly identified as MNWT. A crescent moon appears in the right hand corner of the tessera suggesting a "cosmic connection," according to Zayadine.[336] Based on such a depiction Zayadine associated her with Fortune's counterpart, the goddess of fate, or Nemesis.[337] At Ḥegra/*madā'in Ṣāliḥ*, Manāt is

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[330] John F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabateans*: *A Conspectus* (Leiden: Brill 2001), 134.
[331] Javier Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra* (Leiden: Brill 1979), 12-18.
[332] Healey, *The Religion of the Nabateans*, 132.
[333] In a reading whose inscription is contested, Healey, *The Religion of the Nabateans*, 134. Additionally, her name appears in a Latin inscription by a Palmyrene worshipper as far away as Dacia, (present day Hungary) Ibid, 135; as defective spelling 'mnt' in Lihyanite and Thamudic, Ibid, 136. In South Arabia her name is attested in a single Minaean inscription, and a number of anthroponyms at Qaryat al-Faw, see Christian Robin, « Les "Filles de Dieu" de Saba' à La Mecque : réflexions sur l'agencement des panthéons dans l'Arabie ancienne », *Semitica* 50 (2001):142-143.
[334] Teixidor, *Pantheon of Palmyra*, 18.
[335] "Manwat became the *Gad* of the Bene Agrud just as Allat concealed her name under the title the *Gad* of Yedi'ebel." Ibid, 17.
[336] Fawzi Zayadine, "Manawat," in *LIMC*, (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1981-2009), 8.1:805-806, and 8.2:552, at 8.1:806.
[337] "As the goddess of Human Destiny, of due measure and justice, Manât is equated with Nemesis. In this role, she appears on the Roman reliefs of Palmyra with the cubit, the attribute of due share (*qisma*) meaning Fate." Ibid.

represented more abstractly by a rosette circumscribed by a circle with one griffin placed on the left side and another placed on the right side of the circle. According to Zayadine, the symbol represents, "the attributes of Nemesis-Manât, the rosette being a stylized representation of the Nemesis wheel…"[338] Indeed fate as destiny, synonymous in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry with death[339] corresponds well with Manāt's role in the Nabatean inscriptions at Ḥegra where she serves as one of the gods who protect the tombs of the deceased.[340] Because she was closely related with death, perhaps Manāt could be seen as Venus in her role in the underworld that we learned about when we examined the myth of *Inana/Ishtar's Descent into the Netherworld*. This suggestion is of course speculative, but because the name 'Manāt' in the form Menūtum constituted one of the names of Ishtar[341] it is not without any basis. In summary then, all of the goddesses could be seen to represent some form of Venus, further corroborating our reading of a Gabriel-goddess comparative polemic over which "angels" actually represent Venus.

[338] Ibid.
[339] Aida Gasimova, "Models, Portraits, and Signs of Fate in Ancient Arabian Tradition," *JNES* 73, no. 2 (2014): 321, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/677285.
[340] Her curse along with the curses of other gods are invoked in a number of tomb inscriptions, Healey, *The Religion of the Nabateans*, 132-133, 136.
[341] T. Fahd, "Manāt."

Conclusion

At the end of Chapter 1, my reading of Hawting suggested that the *mushrikūn* did not worship Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt as goddesses, but they probably venerated angels that were given these names – hoping for their intercession. Hawting suggested that some late antique Jewish and Christian groups associated their angels with a particular star or celestial body, and the *mushrikūn* may simply be doing the same. The only real infelicity that they got mixed up in that earned them the ire of Muhammad's polemic is that they gave the names of old pagan goddesses – goddesses who were at one time associated with the planet Venus – to their angels. One might imagine that the *mushrikūn* probably did this because by their time, these names were bereft of connotations with the goddess, but simply referred to the planetary aspect of Venus and not its pagan goddess referent. About these issues Hawting states, "One might speculate that the opponents themselves would not have admitted that they regarded the angels as female but that they had left themselves open to the accusation because they identified as angels entities that were traditionally given female names, whether or not they really went so far as to use the three names the Koran provides."[342] Although Hawting never identifies what religion the *mushrikūn* may be following their crime in Muhammad's eyes is probably no different from angel or saint veneration. Positively citing D.B. Macdonald who compares the faith of the *mushrikūn* to Catholicism with angels and saints standing between Man and God, Hawting states, "Naturally, it is not

[342] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 146.

impossible that a religion resembling Christianity was espoused by the people of Mecca at the beginning of the seventh century."[343]

Given what we have learned through the course of these arguments does this look like a reasonable interpretation of the qur'anic milieu with respect to these goddesses? I must answer in the negative. The trio of beings mentioned in Q53:19-20 were definitely associated with the planet Venus in some respect. But based on the evidence we have reviewed it doesn't really seem like the pagan connotations of these "angels" ever really vanished by the time of Muhammad. As we saw with regard to al-'Uzzā in particular, stories that are related to her seem to evoke some close similarities to Ishtar. Moreover, the polemic of purposefully comparing Gabriel to the goddesses through the targeted use of Venusian imagery highly suggests that these beings were still viewed as goddesses. Whether they continued to be worshipped in figurative form as tradition suggests is harder to determine. Nevertheless a strong sense of astral religion is at play. And yet the Qur'an still acknowledges that the *mushrikūn* referred to them as "angels." What then could they mean when they were using this word? The word they used was not 'angel' but *malā'ikah* which like 'angel' means messenger. But in the ancient Near East, messengers of higher gods could themselves be gods, and they constituted the lowest rung of the divine hierarchy.[344] This is what influenced me to use the awkward "angel-goddesses" throughout this thesis. Is it possible then that the *mushrikūn* were using the word 'angel' to mean a messenger god, while the Prophet's conception of angels was more in tune with main-stream late antique Jewish

[343] Ibid, 64-66, at 66.
[344] Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven*: *The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake: Eisenbraums, 1994), 176.

and Christian conceptions of angels? Another aspect of Hawting's suggestion that the *mushrikūn* might have conceived of the angels as celestial bodies like some earlier Jewish and Christian groups before them deserves further comment and detailed study. Hawting suggests that this idea of theirs originates in the *Book of Enoch* or 1 Enoch. This work contains a fantastic biblical legend of the fallen angels. It blames the existence of Evil in the world on the "sons of God" who were known to be angels called Watchers, falling to the earth as stars in 1 Enoch 86:1-2.[345] These Watchers produced an ungodly, hybrid, violent and bloodthirsty progeny through their coupling with women. Their "sexual mingling" with women coupled with "their revelation of secret knowledge caused 'all manner of wickedness' to be adopted by humankind, thereby accounting for the antediluvian proliferation of sin."[346] Considering that the goddesses of the *mushrikūn* share peculiar similarities to the Watchers: both are angels, both are viewed as God's children, and both the goddesses and the Watchers share some astral character, it seems more likely that the Prophet could draw upon Enochic material to chastise the angels of the *mushrikūn* as fallen angels.[347] What seems less likely is that the *mushrikūn*, as some vague, quasi-Christian, Arabian monotheistic sect would adopt such ideas that were clearly used to explain the existence of anti-Christian forces in the world. Did Muhammad use Enochic ideas in his attacks against the *mushrikūn* then

[345] Anette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 36.
[346] Ibid, 6.
[347] A growing body of literature posits that Enochic ideas must have been circulating within the qur'anic milieu at the rise of Islam. I shall not review all of that literature here in the interest of space. Here I simply acknowledge one of the major contributions to the field by Patricia Crone. See Patricia Crone, "The *Book of the Watchers* in the Qur'ān," in *Exchange and Transmission Across Cultural Boundaries*: *Philosophy*, *Mysticism and Science in the Mediterranean World*, ed. Haggai Ben-Shammai, Shaul Shaked, and Sarah Stroumsa (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013), 17.

because the *mushrikūn* were engaged in some sort of astral worship? This is part of what I hope to explore in future research.

Appendix

Muhammad began receiving the revelations that would eventually be compiled as the Qur'an in 610 CE.[348] Some traditional reports state that it was during his first visit from Gabriel right after receiving the first revelation of the Qur'an that Gabriel manifested himself in his full form to Muhammad on the horizon.[349] One should always be cautious about reading the traditional materials of the Prophet's biography into the Qur'an, as the biographical reports do exhibit inconsistencies and at times flat out contradictions about events purported to have taken place during the Prophet's life. Despite that cautionary proviso, it is difficult to ignore how clearly the language about the movement of Gabriel in the sky expresses the movements of the inferior planets, especially Venus. When the language of Q53:5-9 and Q81:15-24 is considered in light of the early exegetical authorities previously cited who insist that Muhammad must

[348] The critical issue of post-prophetic interpolations into the Qur'an is beyond the scope of this thesis. For more see Sinai, *The Qur'an*: *Historical-Critical*, 52-54.

[349] For example in the traditional story where the angel teaches Muhammad the first five verses of Q96 *Sūrat al-'Alaq*, after Muhammad leaves the cave where he was undertaking a spiritual retreat startled by his experience he witnesses Gabriel on the horizon. Ibn Isḥāq has Muhammad saying, "When I was midway on the mountain, I heard a voice from heaven saying, "O Muhammad! thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel." I raised my head towards heaven to see (who was speaking), and lo, Gabriel in the form of a man with feet astride the horizon, saying, "O Muhammad! thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel." I stood gazing at him, moving neither forward nor backward; then I began to turn my face away from him, but towards whatever region of the sky I looked, I saw him as before." Ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 106. In his recent book Sean Anthony contests the historicity of the part of the narrative where Gabriel initiates Muhammad into prophethood by teaching him Q96:1-5 that occurs prior to Muhammad's vision of the angel on the horizon. Anthony admits that this story about Muhammad's initiation into Prophethood which he names the *iqra'* narrative circulated early, but is not based in historical fact. Instead he claims that the story is a late antique literary creation of how Muslims wished to remember Muhammad's prophetic initiation. Sean William Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith*: *The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 228, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvw1d5tc. Anthony does not however comment on the angelic vision part of the narrative. Anthony collects a number of alternative versions of Muhammad's initiation into prophethood. Ibid, 230-234. One intriguing report of an Egyptian provenance ultimately based on the authority of 'Ā'ishah has Muhammad witness Gabriel on the horizon in a place on the outskirts of Mecca called Ajyād, in this report 'Ā'ishah connects the vision to the meaning of the verses of Q53. Ibid, 233. For a similar discussion of alternative versions of Muhammad's first encounter with revelation see also Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 103-112.

have witnessed Gabriel on the eastern horizon, the inevitable conclusion is that the qur'anic descriptions of Gabriel in these passages capture something of the actual movements of Venus as a morning star at the time when Muhammad would have experienced his vision of Gabriel on the horizon.[350] If Muhammad witnessed this vision or apparition of Gabriel in 610 CE, then it stands to reason that a knowledge of the movements of Venus as a morning star in the Meccan sky in 610 CE might help us to place at least a fairly relative, if not precise, date as to when Muhammad experienced his first revelation.

The strongest objection that could be raised against the preceding line of argument is that just because the Qur'an describes the movement of Gabriel in very Venusian terms, that does not necessarily require that the movements of the actual planet Venus coincided with Muhammad's experience of his vision of the angel. The qur'anic description of the movement of the angel in planetary terms could simply be metaphorical. In other words, when Muhammad saw Gabriel, Gabriel moved like the planet Venus, but Gabriel's movements were not concurrent with the movements of the planet itself. Moreover, the movements of Venus in its apparitions as the morning star take place over the course of close to nine months, while according to a plain sense reading of Q53:5-9 it seems Muhammad would have witnessed Gabriel's ascent to the highest horizon, his levelling out at a peak, and his final descent towards the horizon all in the course of one night.

[350] Whether Muhammad saw an angel or not, however we define the term 'angel', is not the question at issue here. Whether a person actually saw an angel assumes that angels exist. Whether angels exist or not is a question for natural theology or philosophy of religion, which does not concern us here. However, if Muhammad claimed that he saw an angel, then the question of the date or time when he could have experienced this vision is an altogether perfectly legitimate historical question even if it may seem pedantic, wrong-headed, or unanswerable due to lack of adequate evidence or information.

Given the difficulty in attempting to date Muhammad's first vision of the angel one may naturally wonder whether it is even a worthwhile exercise to undertake. In attempting such an exercise I did not reach any definitive conclusions. Additionally, one should keep in mind that these results are based on my starting assumptions. That is to say the movement of the angel corresponds with the movements of Venus over the course of its synodic period, and I interpret the vision encounter to take place where the angel, and thereby the planet would reach a height above the horizon measured as *qāb qawsayn*.[351]

Using planetarium software I observed astronomical simulations of the movements of Venus over the Meccan sky during 610 CE, the year scholars agree Muhammad received his first revelation. In doing so I discovered that Venus follows the sun for the first third of the year as an evening star. Around the end of April it appears lower and lower upon the horizon just after sunset and reaches a point where it is barely visible around 5º above the horizon. (Fig. A-1).

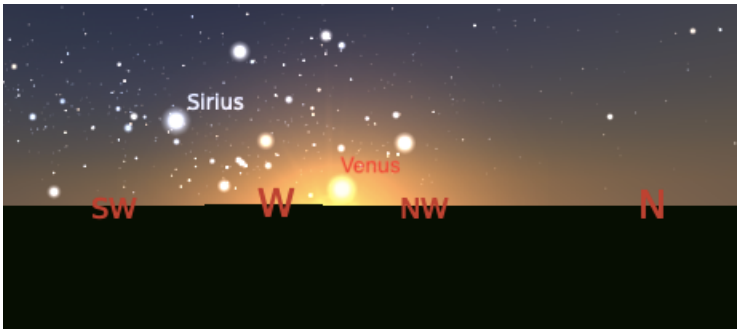

Fig. A-1 Screen capture of Venus as an evening star at an altitude of approximately 4º40' above the horizon looking west-northwest as seen from Mecca on April 28, 610 CE at 18:51:50 approximately half an hour after sunset.

[351] See pp. 93-95 *supra*.

Could this be the time when Muhammad witnessed Gabriel and received his first revelation? It's possible, but without any other information to help us contextualize why April 28, 610 CE might be a significant date in the life of the Prophet, we cannot say for sure. Just because Muhammad could have seen Venus in the evening sky as the angel at the requisite *qāb qawsayn* distance per Q53:9 on this date does not make it a compelling enough reason to believe that it is in fact the actual date he would have witnessed the angelic apparition. Moreover if we decide to take the exegetes claims that Muhammad witnessed the angel arise on the eastern horizon seriously, then this date does not match up with that assertion because we are looking at Venus descend in the west.

Investigating apparitions of Venus as a morning star during the latter half of 610 CE indicate more promising leads for a potential date of Muhammad's first encounter with Gabriel; unfortunately however, they still do not provide any definitive answers. From the end of April Venus is lost within the glare of the sun for approximately two weeks as it passes between the earth and the sun, known as inferior conjunction (Fig. 2-6 pp. 51-52). Subsequently it reappears on the eastern horizon as the morning star in mid-May. For the rest of the year Venus will appear in the sky as a morning star. Close to the last third of July Venus appears to reach a peak altitude of about 42˚ above the horizon after which it appears lower and lower in the morning sky at the time just before sunrise each day. Thus, even though the planet is rising above the horizon each day we say that it appears to be descending over time because its maximum height at the time of sunrise decreases each day. Venus appears lower and lower in the sky at sunrise in the latter part of the year, especially the months of

November and December.

All of these circumstances so far fit well with the description of the movement of the angel in Q53. The angel ascends, reaches a peak where it levels off, and then descends, just like Venus. Additionally Venus' apparition as a morning star at this time of the year would also be consistent with the exegetical reports that Muhammad witnessed Gabriel on the eastern horizon. Beyond this we cannot say much more.

We might note that the Qur'an does mention in its peculiar self-referential style that it was revealed in Ramadan Q2:185 "Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an…" and that it was sent down on an auspicious night called the Night of Power, Q97:1 "We have indeed revealed This (Message) In the Night of Power." Muslim tradition holds that this night falls on one of the odd nights of the last ten nights of Ramadan. If we could determine when Ramadan fell on 610 CE then, and check on the position of Venus during the last ten nights of Ramadan, we might find out whether our hypothesis that the language of Q53:5-9 was intended to coincide with the actual movements of Venus was correct or not. But as we mentioned before determining how Ḥijāzī lunar months (which became Islamic months) coincided with Christian solar months, or the solar months of late antique civil calendars is complicated by the pre-Islamic pagan practice of intercalation. Interesting for our purposes however, is McPartlan's calculation that the first of Ramadan fell on November 24, 610 CE. McPartlan's calculation is based on an assumption that the pre-Islamic intercalation scheme followed a luni-solar calendar.[352] Based on this date, the last ten nights of Ramadan in 610 CE would have started on December 14, 610 CE. On this day Venus

[352] McPartlan, "Early Islamic Chronology," 128.

rises from the horizon at about 05:15:00, and close to 05:39:00 it reaches about 4º40' above the horizon (the *qāb qawsayn* height), about an hour before sunrise (06:35:00). Interesting to note is that at this time Mercury is directly above Venus at an angle of about 9º18' above the horizon also. (Fig. A-2). Mercury is famously associated in Babylonian astronomy with a messenger god, as it is similarly in classical Greek mythology, so perhaps this planetary configuration may be of some significance. I am not sure if this particular planetary configuration would have been culturally significant in pre-Islamic Arabia though.

Fig. A-2 Screen capture of Venus and Mercury as morning stars looking east-southeast as seen from Mecca on December 14, 610 CE close to 05:39:00 approximately an before sunrise (06:35:00). Venus is elevated at an altitude of approximately 4º40' above the horizon, while mercury is elevated 9º18' above the horizon and situated directly above Venus.

Could any of these ten nights possibly be the nights on which Muhammad might have received his first revelation? This time period presents a more promising alternative during which Muhammad may have received his revelation. Venus has already reached its peak height earlier in the year and is gradually setting. It reaches the *qāb qawsayn* height at a time of dawn when it is dark enough in the sky that it appears prominent on the horizon, and does not rise very much higher close to the time of sunrise. Moreover, if Ramadan did start in late November of 610 CE this might in fact settle the matter as the traditional narrative and the astronomical conditions that were deciphered from Q53:5-9 coincide nicely. Nevertheless the date range rests on an assumption about how the pre-Islamic intercalation system worked, and until scholars

have decisively settled that matter this date range for Muhammad's first revelation can only remain a provisionally plausible suggestion. Even if we were certain that the first of Ramadan took place on the day McPartlan says it did, one will notice that I still made the assumption that the movements of Venus as a morning star which takes place over the course of months matches up with the movements of the angel vision described in Q53:5-9 which one would assume happened in a single night.

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