

## Paradise as a Quranic Discourse: Late Antique Foundations and Early Quranic Developments\*

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### 1 Introduction

Eschatology is certainly among the central discourses of the Quran. Its prominence is largely due to the challenge encountered by the Quranic community that had to counterbalance the extremely powerful mundane pagan ideology that predominated in its Arabian milieu: the ideology of *muruwwa*, i.e., “heroism,” “tribal pride,” which expressed itself in a heroic and at the same time hedonist, “*carpe-diem*-life style,” embodied by the Bedouin hero and portrayed by the ancient Arab poet.<sup>1</sup> This anthropocentric understanding of the world, eloquently voiced in ancient Arabic poetry, is taken up as a primary target of the early Quranic message. Excessive worldliness and unlimited confidence in man’s autonomous power in the Quran is countered by a new, theocentric eschatological thinking. Quranic eschatology is projected through multiple images that during the first Meccan period of the Prophet’s ministry crystallized into an elaborate drama<sup>2</sup> often conjured up in the Quran. Yet, although the diverse events leading up to the last day – such as the cosmic cataclysm, the awakening of the dead, and the ensuing punishment of the sinners in hell – all play an important role in the message of eschatology, these are only secondary textual emplotments when compared with the core piece of Quranic eschatology, the image of paradise.

As a prevalent Quranic motif, paradise not only exerted a sustainable influence on the spiritual life and the socio-political *Weltanschauung* of the Prophet’s contemporaries and later recipients of the Quran,<sup>3</sup> but it also equally inspired classical Arabic literature and art. Whereas this complex reception history of the Quranic paradise motif has been amply studied, the particular

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\* A concise version of this chapter will appear in Neuwirth, *Scripture* 76–101.

1 For the concept of *muruwwa* see Montgomery, *Dichotomy*; see also Neuwirth, *Scripture* 53–75.

2 Smith, *Eschatology* 44–54.

3 Jarrar, *Martyrdom* 87–108.

literary shape of the Quranic paradise itself has seldom been submitted to investigation. Traditional Muslim scholars as well as Western critics have usually taken the numerous impressive descriptions of paradisaal scenarios simply as a Quranic “peculiarity,” an iconic *fait accompli*. They usually do not inquire into these narratives’ possible dialectical relation vis-à-vis earlier images of paradise,<sup>4</sup> let alone their ideological function in relation to the Quranic message. Instead, a teleological approach is pursued in which not late antique, but Islamic exegetical texts are consulted – texts that are built on a much later and very different vision of the world and the hereafter<sup>5</sup> – to explain the unique features of the Quranic paradise.

Though it is true that this kind of anachronistic approach is prevalent in contemporary scholarship, remnants of an earlier scholarly tradition remain. This tradition, which was established in the nineteenth century, succeeded during the short period of one century – between 1833 and 1935 – in laying the foundation for a historically conscious model of Quranic studies both in terms of methodology and the selection of comparative material. This scholarly tradition, initiated by Abraham Geiger (1833),<sup>6</sup> one of the founders of the reform movement of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*,<sup>7</sup> focused on late antique intertexts of the Quran, primarily the Jewish and Christian traditions, but paid equal attention to the pagan Arabian traditions. It was Josef Horowitz whose path-breaking essay “Das Koranische Paradies” (1923) was to open scholars’ eyes to the multiple literary layers that underlie the Quranic imaginations of the eschatological beyond. Furthermore, it was the role of the last representative of that tradition, Heinrich Speyer (1931),<sup>8</sup> to throw light on the primordial paradise, and submit its narrative references to a source-critical investigation. Some modern contributions on the subject – by Walid Saleh,<sup>9</sup> Patricia Crone,<sup>10</sup> Gabriel Reynolds<sup>11</sup> who has focused on Syriac textual predecessors, and the present writer,<sup>12</sup> – have proceeded in a similar vein. The historical approach based on the search for “intertexts,” i.e., late antique traditions echoed in the Quran, is pursued systematically in the recently established research project

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4 As an exception, Horowitz, *Das koranische Paradies* 1–16 deserves to be mentioned.

5 Kinberg, *Paradise* 12–20.

6 Geiger, *Judenthume*.

7 Hartwig et al. (eds.), *Geschichte*; Hartwig, *Anfänge*; Hartwig, *Gründerdisziplin*.

8 Speyer, *Erzählungen*, for more about Speyer see Rosenthal, *History* 113–6.

9 W. Saleh, *Etymological fallacy* 649–98.

10 Crone, *Quranic pagans* 387–99.

11 Reynolds, *Qur’ān and its Biblical subtext*, cf. the review by Neuwirth.

12 Neuwirth, *Symmetrie* 445–80; Neuwirth, *Psalms* 733–78.

*Corpus Coranicum*<sup>13</sup> which, however, goes an important step further. Beyond the identifying of formal and semantic convergences between pre-Quranic and Quranic texts, it endeavors to reconstruct the peculiar negotiation processes that appear mirrored in the individual Quranic reflections of the earlier traditions. It thus pays attention to the *Sitz im Leben* of individual reworkings of Biblical and post-Biblical traditions in the Quran, i.e., their theological and moreover educational function in the process of the emergence of a Quranic community.

The following exploration of the Quranic paradise follows the same approach. The strikingly different features of the Quranic imagination of paradise vis-à-vis the Jewish and Christian imaginations have until now not been investigated with regard to their historical foundations, nor has their impact on the Quranic community been examined. The two vantage points, Jewish/Christian and Quranic images of paradise, evince conspicuous divergences: whereas the Jewish and Christian traditions – following the narrative of Gen 2 – focus on the primordial paradise, it is noteworthy that the Quran, first and foremost, presents the hereafter as a utopian place awaiting the righteous in the future, and tells us only a few details about the lost primordial garden, whose inhabitants, Adam and Eve, become significant only at a later stage of the Quranic development.<sup>14</sup> Initially, it is the eschatological paradise that the Quran depicts in vivid and sensual detail.<sup>15</sup> It is true that Judaism and Christianity equally developed images of an eschatological beyond,<sup>16</sup> late antique Jewish apocalyptic literature and rabbinic writings know about a transcendent abode awaiting the just, yet these texts do not always describe the

13 Marx, Ein Koranforschungsprojekt 41–54, and see Corpus coranicum: <http://www.bbaw.de/en/research/Coran>.

14 Neuwirth, Qurʾān, crisis and memory 113–52.

15 S. Saleh, *La vie future*; Smith and Haddad, *Death and resurrection*; Afsaruddin, Garden 282–7; al-Azmeh, Rhetoric 215–31.

16 Brock, *St. Ephrem* 49, refers to the First Book of Enoch (second century) 61:12; it is however hard not to realize that the entire corpus of “apocalypses of ascension” is primarily interested in the heavenly representations of the temple, not in a garden scene, cf. Schäfer, *Ursprünge*; and Rosenkranz Verhelst, *Himmel und Heiligtum*. Brock further refers to the Jewish Palestinian Targum on Gen 3:24: “He drove out Adam. Now He had caused the Glory of His Shekhina (Divine Presence) to dwell above the Garden of Eden from the very beginning, between the Cherubim . . . he created the Law and established the Garden of Eden for the righteous, so that they might eat from it and enjoy its fruits, seeing that they had kept the commandments of the Law in this world.” There is more ample evidence of a vivid portrayal of the eschatological paradise in Christian tradition as Ephraem and his predecessors attest.

image of a garden, and if they do, such descriptions are little more than projections of the primordial paradise; they do not claim iconographical traits of their own. Though certainly a theologically significant phenomenon, the Jewish and Christian eschatological paradise – though identical with the primordial garden – is primarily a place where the just among men will be assembled to enjoy the radiance of the Divine Presence.<sup>17</sup> In Christian tradition paradise additionally is loaded with a particular theological function: to repair the broken image of Adam's paradise where his primordial transgression occurred and stained mankind with the birthmark of original sin. In contrast, the Quranic eschatological paradise, *al-janna*, is an ideal space of bliss in its own right, disconnected from the locus of Adam's transgression. Only in later periods does this depiction become loosely connected to that mythical scenario.

## 2 About the Methods and the Texts

Only a flashback to the earlier developed images of paradise can help to disclose the intertextuality of the Quranic paradise with its diegetic predecessors and/or referents. This is a necessary undertaking. Comparative textual studies on the tropological similarities between the Quran and other extant texts at the time of the Quran's transmission can help to clarify the peculiar function of descriptions of paradise in the Quran. We have to imagine that the Quran – or rather the community of the Prophet – debated and re-adapted earlier pagan and monotheistic images. This was not accomplished by simply copying such images, but by negotiating them and moreover occasionally “cleansing” them of their allegorical dimensions. This understanding of the Quranic genesis implies a process, not of authorial writing, but of intra-communal debate – one that extended from the beginning of the Quranic proclamation until Muḥammad's death. It is therefore necessary to explore not only extra-Quranic intertextuality but also intra-Quranic intertextuality as well, i.e., the constant revisiting of earlier proclaimed Quranic texts that during the proclamation were reviewed and modified according to diverse newly discovered theological aspects.

It is noteworthy that this negotiation was carried out without any polemical bias vis-à-vis the earlier traditions; these were not explicitly rejected but rather amalgamated into a new overall imagery. Paradisal imagery for the Quranic community acquired surplus momentum, however. First, paradise narratives constituted a crucial instrument in promoting the new eschatological

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<sup>17</sup> bBer 17a and 1 Cor 13:12.

theology.<sup>18</sup> But they also possessed another even more momentous function, which has until now been ignored in scholarship: paradise imagery served to counterbalance and ultimately to replace particular powerful pagan perceptions of reality that were predominant in the minds of the contemporaries of the Quran. I am referring here to the ancient Arab poet's lament about the contingency of reality and the transitoriness of human achievements in particular, articulated in the introductory section of the *qaṣīda*, the *nasīb*. Suzanne Stetkevych convincingly summarizes the message presented by the *nasīb*:

What society, culture, had created – both temporary and permanent encampments – nature has erased; what was once settled, cultivated, is now grown wild. Essential to this dialectic is the ephemeral and transitory quality of all that is cultural or cultivated as opposed to the permanence and perpetuity of the natural . . . [The *nasīb*] thus tells us that what man makes is ephemeral – abodes of a shorter or a longer stay – but the mountains, untamed nature, are eternal.<sup>19</sup>

Labīd expresses this idea:

*Balīnā wa-mā tablā l-nujūmu l-ṭawālī'ū / wa-tabqā l-jibālu ba'danā  
wa-l-maṣānī'ū . . .  
Wa-mā l-nāsu illā ka-l-diyāri wa-ahluhā / bihā yawma ḥallūhā wa-ghad-  
wan balāqī'ū.*

We vanish but the rising stars do not / Mountains remain when we are gone, and fortresses . . .  
People are just like abodes; one day filled with folk / the next day barren wastes.<sup>20</sup>

Quranic descriptions of paradise, as will be demonstrated, serve to invert the predominant imagery of pagan thought by re-arranging its elements to form the counter-image of everlasting bliss.

The following observations are limited to early Meccan Suras which have been thoroughly studied in the recently published Concise Commentary,<sup>21</sup> i.e., Q 78, 88, 83, and 55. Q 55, which presents the climax of Quranic descriptions of

18 Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*.

19 Stetkevych, *The mute immortals speak* 19.

20 Ibid., quoting Labīd in Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shi'r* 151.

21 Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*.

paradise, has particular prominence. Due to our limited space, the two Meccan Suras that chronologically succeed Q 55, Q 56 and Q 52 (also discussed in the Concise Commentary), remain excluded from our present investigation. Nor will there be reference to later Meccan paradise-related texts. A summary of the peculiar features of the later paradise depictions has been given by Stefan Wild;<sup>22</sup> yet their intra-Quranic development and their theological status in relation to the later proclamation still await investigation.

### 3 Quranic Developments

From early times onward the Quranic community has been concerned with the fate that awaits humans after the last judgment. Since the earlier – cyclical – perception of time was replaced by the new view of time as passing in linear motion from creation to the eschatological rendering of account<sup>23</sup> the door was open for an imagination of life in the Beyond. Already in early Meccan Suras the eschatological fate of the condemned, the ‘Evildoers,’ as well as the ‘Just,’ the God-fearing (*mani ttaqā*) is discussed. Yet, it is not the latter who are placed in the foreground, but rather their negative counterparts, the arrogant (*mani staghnā*), who are blamed for refusing to accept (*kadhhaba*) the monotheist message and who, at the same time, are accused of neglecting their social duties, i.e., those contemporaries who still adhere to the anthropocentric worldview of ancient Arabia. They are threatened with punishment in the future, a future that in the earliest texts is still far from concrete. Even in such Suras as Q 104 *al-Humāza* (The Clatterer),<sup>24</sup> which is completely dedicated to the condemnation of a reprehensible type, his punishment is not yet located in a determinable infernal space but remains confined to the mythical realm, where a gluttonous monster is prepared to devour the blameworthy individual.

Only midway through the early Meccan proclamation<sup>25</sup> do we find a stronger focus on the eschatological events in detail. Already some of the first Suras – Q 80, 79, 75, and 70 – had thrown light on the situation of humankind on the last day, focusing in particular on the isolation of man from his clan as the most menacing prospect. Short sections of these Suras – Q 80:38–9,

<sup>22</sup> Wild, *Virgins of paradise* 627–47.

<sup>23</sup> Tamer, *Zeit und Gott*; see also Neuwirth, *Koran als Text der Spätantike* 211–4 and 607–12.

<sup>24</sup> For a commentary on the entire Sura, see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I* 145–55. The translation of Quranic texts and Sura names is that of Arberry.

<sup>25</sup> We are following here the sequence of the Suras proposed in Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*.

40–2; 79:37–9, 40–1, and Q 75:22–3, 24–5 – had already presented contrastive verdicts on the fates of the condemned and the blessed. These texts did not yet however involve iconic depictions. More differentiated diptycha<sup>26</sup> (contrastive images) are found only later, in Q 78:21–6, 31–6 and Q 88:2–7, 8–16. It is Q 78, which as the first Quranic text, depicts the situation of the blessed in terms of a banquet (Q 78:31–6) – an image that is more fully developed in the slightly later Q 88:8–16. In both cases, the depiction of paradise is anticipated by a mirror image depicting the space of the condemned. Only in Q 78 and Q 88, thus, is the breakthrough achieved: by this point the Quranic beyond has accumulated sufficient imagery to be compatible with earlier depictions of a transcendent place of bliss, whether this be the Jewish and Christian place of consummate nature or the late antique *locus amoenus*, “delightful place,” although this place in the Quran has always been understood as counter to hell. Paradise and hell constitute a diptych.

### 3.1 *The Early Meccan Paradise Descriptions Previous to Q 55*

The earliest detailed Quranic paradise description is found in Q 78:31–6; it is preceded by its negative mirror image, a depiction of hell, Q 78:21–6:

21 *inna jahannama kānat mirṣādā*  
 22 *lil-ṭāghīna ma’ābā*  
 23 *lābithīna fihā aḥqābā*  
 24 *lā yadhūqūna fihā bardan wa-lā sharābā*  
 25 *illā hamīman wa-ghassāqā*  
 26 *jazā’an wifāqā*

21 Behold, Gehenna has become an ambush,  
 22 for the insolent a resort,  
 23 therein to tarry for ages,  
 24 tasting therein neither coolness nor any drink,  
 25 save boiling water and pus,  
 26 for a suitable recompense.

31 *inna lil-muttaqīna mafāzā*  
 32 *ḥadā’īqa wa-a’nābā*  
 33 *wa-kawā’iba atrābā*  
 34 *wa-ka’san dihāqā*

26 For a detailed description of the literary genres and subgenres of the Quran see Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition*.

35 *lā yasmaʿūna fihā laghwan wa-lā kidhdhābā*  
 36 *jazāʿan min rabbika ʿaṭāʿan ḥisābā*

31 Surely, for the God-fearing awaits a place of security,  
 32 gardens and vineyards,  
 33 and maidens with swelling breasts like of age,  
 34 and a cup overflowing.  
 35 Therein they shall hear no idle talk, no cry of lies  
 36 for a recompense from thy Lord, a gift, a reckoning.<sup>27</sup>

The depiction is limited to only a few features, which together evoke the scenario of a banquet: the inmates of the *mafāz*, the place of bliss, will be accommodated in gardens and vineyards to enjoy wine drinking in the presence of beautiful maidens, being aloof from the idle talk and false accusations put forward by their erstwhile opponents. Though this depiction is constructed as a reverse projection of the image of hell promised to the evildoers, who are offered nothing to cool the heat they suffer from the blaze surrounding them but only hot and disgusting libation, it should not be understood as a mere inversion of the description of hell. Whereas the image of hell seems to follow a novel, Quranic design, paradise, in contrast, partakes of the imagery of Biblical heritage: the filled cup, *ka's diḥāq*, echoes Ps 23:5 *kosi rewayah*, the vineyard, *a'nāb*, whose shade is enjoyed by the just alludes to Micah 4:42. As to the framework of a banquet, there are predecessors in the imagery of the Qumranic community. Their "ritual meal... is both a foreshadowing and a quasi-sacramental anticipation of the great eschatological messianic banquet that is often referred to in other religious writings of the period, e.g. the New Testament."<sup>28</sup> As against that, Horovitz<sup>29</sup> has pointed to the closely related depictions of banquets in ancient Arabic poetry equally featuring young and beautiful women. The image of women accompanying or receiving the dead in their postmortem abode is known not only from Iranian tradition<sup>30</sup> but equally from Greco-Roman culture.<sup>31</sup> The image should have been familiar to

27 Arberry's translation.

28 Klausner, *Eschatology* 623.

29 Horovitz, *Das koranische Paradies* 1–16.

30 Tisdall, *Original sources* 235–8.

31 Jarrar, *Martyrdom* 87–108; W. Saleh, *The woman* 123–45. In Jewish tradition – as attested in the late compilation *Yalqut Shimoni* – the presence of sexuality can at least be deduced from the statement that the blessed will be granted the enjoyments of the three stages of the human life cycle every day, cf. Rosenkranz Verhelst, *Himmel und Heiligtum* 44.

the listeners of the Quran since the maidens seem not in need of introduction, they are only alluded to through the mention of their characteristic attributes. In Q 78, they simply form part of the luxurious equipment of the “garden,” and it is only in the somewhat later Q 55 that they are assigned to the blessed as partners, and in Q 52, the last proclamation in the first Meccan period, that they are finally married to them.

The next detailed depiction of paradise is Q 88:8–16<sup>32</sup> and it is also preceded by a description of hell, Q 88:2–7:

1 *hal atāka ḥadīthu l-ghāshiya*  
 2 *wujūhun yawma'idhin khāshī'a*  
 3 *'āmilatun nāṣiba*  
 4 *taṣlā nāran ḥāmiya*  
 5 *tusqā min 'aynin āniya*  
 6 *laysa lahum ṭa'āmun illā min ḍarī'*  
 7 *lā yusminu wa-lā yughnī min jū'*

1 Hast thou received the story of the Enveloper?  
 2 Faces on that day are humbled,  
 3 labouring, toilworn,  
 4 roasting at a scorching fire,  
 5 watered at a boiling fountain,  
 6 no food for them but cactus thorn,  
 7 unfattening, unappeasing hunger.

8 *wujūhun yawma'idhin nā'ima*  
 9 *li-sa'yihā rāḍiya*  
 10 *fī jannatin 'āliya*  
 11 *lā tasma'u fihā lāghiya*  
 12 *fihā 'aynun jāriya*  
 13 *fihā sururun marfū'a*  
 14 *wa-akwābun mawḍū'a*  
 15 *wa-namāriqu maṣfūfa*  
 16 *wa-zarābiyyu mabthūtha*

8 Faces on that day jocund,  
 9 with their striving well-pleased  
 10 in a sublime garden,

32 For a commentary on the entire Sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I* 474–83.

- 11 hearing there no babble;  
 12 therein a running fountain,  
 13 therein uplifted couches  
 14 and goblets set forth  
 15 and cushions arrayed  
 16 and carpets outspread.

This paradise description responds to a particularly dire description of hell, where the inmates, again, are refused cool drink to ease their suffering from the heat of the blaze that surrounds them. In this text, furthermore, they are fed not with food edible for humans, but with the fodder of animals, bushwood, which is gloomily presented as “unfattening, unappeasing.” In contrast, the just are promised entrance to an elevated place (whose particular status, however, remains unspecified). It is – as in Q 78 – a place safe from disturbing idle talk. As in Q 78 it is a garden, which in this text is watered by a fountain. No mention of female companions is made, whose presence may perhaps be assumed as self-understood. Instead the focus is placed on the equipment of the space with urban furniture: there are sofas in the style of antique *klinai*, cushions, *namāriq*,<sup>33</sup> carpets, *zarābī*<sup>34</sup> – both obviously, as their foreign names suggest, precious Iranian import ware. In rabbinic descriptions the “righteous [are] sitting at golden tables (bTaan 25a) or under elaborate canopies (Ruth rabba 3:4) and participating in lavish banquets (BB 75a).”<sup>35</sup> There are also the indispensable vessels of any banquet scenario: cups awaiting the guests. Nature retreats into the background, urban furniture and equipment take its place. Paradise acquires the character of a courtly banquet.

In contrast to these images, Q 83:22,<sup>36</sup> a text that within the proclamation process immediately follows Q 88, contains only a brief reminiscence of the pomp laid bare in Q 88. The depiction, this time, is not preceded by a reverse image describing hell:

- 22 *inna l-abrāra la-fī naʿīm*  
 23 *ʿalā l-arāʾiki yanẓurūn*  
 24 *taʿrifu fī wujūhihim naḍrata l-naʿīm*  
 25 *yusqawna min raḥiqin makhtūm*

33 For *namāriq* see Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 181.

34 For *zarābī*, *ibid.*, 150.

35 Bamberger, Paradise 628 (there “Ruth rabba 3:4” is erroneously rendered as “Ruth 3.4”), cf. Rosenkranz Verhelst, *Himmel und Heiligtum* 46.

36 For a commentary on the entire Sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I* 484–98.

26 *khitāmuḥu miskun wa-fī dhālika fa-l-yatanāfasi l-mutanāfisūn*  
 27 *wa-mizājuhu min tasnīm*  
 28 *ʿaynan yashrabu bihā l-muqarrabūn*

22 Surely, the pious shall be in bliss  
 23 upon couches gazing:  
 24 thou knowest in their faces the radiancy of bliss  
 25 as they are given to drink of a wine sealed,  
 26 whose seal is musk – so after that let the strivers strive –  
 27 and whose mixture is Tasnim,  
 28 a fountain of which do drink those brought nigh.

In this case the depiction is tied to the reality of the addressees of the Quran who are made observers of the blessed in paradise: their bliss is recognizable from their faces, as the addressees would immediately discern. Paradisal recompense is particularly generous and attractive. This should be an incentive for the Quran's audience to emulate the earthly behavior of the blessed. In this description, no trace of a particularly lush nature, nor any mention of female companions is found. Instead the entire scene is filled with a description of the urban aspects of the place: the paradisaal wine, its seal, its water of mixture, *mizāj*,<sup>37</sup> the luxurious furniture<sup>38</sup> – and the pleasant looks of the inhabitants of paradise.

### 3.2 *Sura 55 – A Hermeneutical Turning Point*

Q 55, Surat *al-Raḥmān*<sup>39</sup> contains the most elaborate description of paradise in the entire Quran. Hence, a brief introduction is necessary. The Sura is one of the most poetic texts in the Quran and exemplifies a central *theologoumenon*: the symmetry of the divine order of creation, not only on the semantic level, but equally in grammatical and phonetic terms. Symmetry is thus not only pointed out to the listener as part of the content of divine speech, it is equally displayed in terms of structure, a procedure made possible by a unique device offered by Arabic morphology, i.e., the dual form. The excessive use of the dual, by virtue of its prominent position in pre-Islamic poetic compositions, implies an aesthetic claim that is unfamiliar to most Jewish and Christian scriptural

37 The promise of flavored wine – deduced from Cant 8:2 – is part of a rabbinic (though later compiled) description of paradise, see Rosenkranz Verhelst, *Himmel und Heiligtum* 32.

38 For *arāʾik* see Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 52.

39 For a commentary on the entire Sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I* 576–620; for a comparison of the Sura to Psalm 136, see Neuwirth, *Qurʾānic readings of the Psalms*.

texts: a claim to poeticity. The poetic character of the Quran has often been dismissed as merely “ornamental,” constituting an obstacle to the reader’s immediate grasp of the message. In the case of Q 55, the poetic style is clearly part of the message itself. Symmetry in this text is as much a characteristic of the signified as it is of the sign itself. For the harmoniously balanced order is manifest in binary structures exhibited in the “clear speech” of the Quran. The proemium of the Sura even gives precedence to the communication of word over creation:

1 *Al-Rahmān*  
 2 *‘allama l-Qur’ān*  
 3 *khalaqa l-insān*  
 4 *‘allamahu l-bayān.*

1 The All-merciful –  
 2 he taught the Koran,  
 3 he created man,  
 4 he taught him clear speech/clear understanding.

In view of the fact that the divine Word, *qur’ān*, and by extension the recitation of the Quran itself, is considered as the most sublime speech act, *bayān* can be understood as an evocation of Quranic language. At the same time, it may denote the human capacity for clear speech based on clear understanding. Thus, two phenomena that are inherent in the world since the act of creation itself – namely, the harmonious order of beings, and the distinctness and clarity of speech as a medium of communication – thematically permeate the entire Sura.

The text can thus be read as an exposition of the interaction of the primordial ensemble evoked in the beginning – *khalq* (creation) and *qur’ān* (divine instruction) – which, according to the Quranic paradigm, in a linear motion leads up to the dissolution of both elements at the end of time. The duality thus constitutes an intrinsic part of the Quran’s natural theology: that God has created the world as a manifestation of His presence, as a “text” no less than His verbal manifestation in revelation, and that He has created man in order that he may understand both His verbal and His “creational” self-expression. Both readings gain their urgency from their eschatological objective. Q 55, with its insistence on symmetry and dualistic structures, is the poetic orchestration of a theological claim. On the basis of these observations, the sophisticated linguistic shape of the text proves highly significant, and indeed functional, something that the Sura has been continuously denied in Western scholarship,

which has consistently found fault with the dual forms and dismissed them as merely the result of rhyme constraints.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.3 *The Paradise Sections of Q 55*

- 46 *wa-li-man khāfa maqāma rabbihi jannatān*  
 47 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 48 *dhawātā afnān*  
 49 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 50 *fihimā 'aynāni tajriyān*  
 51 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 52 *fihimā min kulli fākihatin zawjān*  
 53 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 54 *muttaki'īna 'alā furushin baṭā'īnuhā min istabraqin*  
*wa-janā l-jannatayni dān*  
 55 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 56 *fihinna qāṣirātu l-ṭarfi*  
*lam yaṭmithhunna insun qablahum wa-lā jānn*  
 57 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 58 *ka'annahunna l-yāqūtu wa-l-marjān*  
 59 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 60 *hal jazā'u l-'ihsāni illā l-'ihsān*  
 61 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 62 *wa-min dūnihimā jannatān*  
 63 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 64 *mudhāmmatān*  
 65 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 66 *fihima 'aynāni naḍḍākhatān*  
 67 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 68 *fihimā fākihātun wa-nakhlun wa-rummān*  
 69 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 70 *fihinna khayrātun ḥisān*  
 71 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 72 *ḥūrun maqṣūrātun fī l-khiyām*  
 73 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 74 *lam yaṭmithhunna insun qablahum wa-lā jānn*  
 75 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*

40 For an exception, see Lawson, Duality. See also M. Abdel Haleem's contribution to the present publication.

76 *muttaki'īna 'alā raḫrafin khudrin wa-'abqariyin ḥisān*  
 77 *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhhibān*  
 78 *tabāraka smu rabbika dhī l-jalāli wa-l-ikrām*

46 But such as fears the Station of his Lord, for them shall be two gardens –  
 47 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 48 abounding in branches –  
 49 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 50 therein two fountains of running water –  
 51 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 52 therein of every fruit two kinds –  
 53 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 54 reclining upon couches lined with brocade, the fruits of the gardens nigh  
 to gather –  
 55 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 56 therein maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any  
 man or jinn  
 57 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 58 lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral –  
 59 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 60 Shall the recompense of goodness be other than goodness?  
 61 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 62 And besides these shall be two gardens –  
 63 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 64 green, green pastures –  
 65 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 66 therein two fountains of gushing water –  
 67 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 68 therein fruits, and palm-trees, and pomegranates –  
 69 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 70 therein maidens good and comely –  
 71 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 72 houris, cloistered in cool pavilions –  
 73 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 74 untouched before them by any man or jinn –  
 75 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 76 reclining upon green cushions and lovely druggets –  
 77 O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?  
 78 Blessed be the Name of thy Lord, majestic, splendid.

After an elaborate portrayal of creation (Q 55:1–36) and judgment (Q 55:37–45) with their *binary* juxtapositions, there is the promise (Q 55:46) *li-man khāfa maqāma rabbihi jannatān* (“but for such as fears the Station of his Lord, for them shall be two gardens”). This is the only verse where the dual form cannot be explained in terms of any of the paired phenomena mentioned earlier in the text. This exception calls for an explanation. A parallel case appears in the second description of paradise, where again *two* gardens are mentioned (Q 55:62), *wa-min dūnihimā jannatān* (“and besides these shall be two gardens”). *Jannatān* (literally, “two gardens”) is best interpreted with reference to the conventions of ancient Arabic poetry, which often uses dual forms in topographic contexts to denote only one extended place, or – even more probably – with reference to the understanding of some classical Arabic philologists as an expression of infiniteness: “garden after garden, infinite gardens.”<sup>41</sup> The text depicts (twice: Q 55:46–61, 62–77) the image of the blessed residing in a garden with lush nature; Q 55:48: “abounding in branches,” and plenty of fruit; Q 55:52: “therein of every fruit two kinds.” In the first garden scenario (Q 55:46–60), one might understand Q 55:50 *‘aynāni tajrīyān* (“two fountains of running water”) as a mechanistic concession to congruence with *jannatān*; however, this is clearly impossible in the case of the phrase *min kulli fākihatin zawjān* (“therein is a pair of every fruit”) that immediately follows Q 55:52, since in this case a basic Quranic perception is evoked that is expressed in various texts, cf. Q 51:49: *min kulli shay’in khalaqnā zawjayni, la ‘allakum tadhakkarūn* (“and of everything we have created a pair, that perchance you might remember”).

41 The understanding of the dual form *jannatān* (Q 55:46–76) proposed in Western scholarship as due to constraints of rhyme is found already with al-Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān* 118; and al-Suyūṭī, *Itqān* iii, 299, as quoted by Wansbrough, *Quranic studies* 25. Wansbrough, however, fails to mention that the use of dual forms for a singular *metri causa* is a most frequent phenomenon in ancient Arabic poetry, where even fixed conventions emerged like the poet’s stereotypical address of two friends in the *nasīb* (see e.g., Nöldeke, *Delectus* 8.5, 12.14 etc.) or the phenomenon of two slanderers (Nöldeke, *Delectus* 8.8); see the additional examples collected by Gandz, *Mu‘allaqa*; and Goldziher, *‘Ijādat al-marīḍ* 185–200. Dual forms without numerical value are particularly frequent in toponyms; once these dual forms are transferred into extra-poetical contexts, they continue to convey their poeticity. This fact has been noted by a number of Arab classical philologists, see Neuwirth, *Symmetrie* 447–80. The apparent doubling of the gardens is less extraordinary than it may look. The play with the possibilities of Arabic morphology, familiar from poetry, should have caused far less problems to contemporary listeners than to later readers, who were predisposed and limited by the positivist approaches of Islamic exegesis.

The blessings of lush vegetation and plenty of water are complemented by the presence of beautiful maidens.

In accordance with the Sura's characteristic construction of the created world from *paired* elements, these maidens are compared to *two* complementary objects, in one case a variation of an observation expressed in the hymnal part is presented: Q 55:58: *ka-annahunna l-yāqūtu wa-l-marjān*, "lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral" (cf. Q 55:22: *yakhruju minhumā l-lu'lu'u wa-l-marjān*), and in the other case *two* qualifications (Q 55:72) are described. In spite of the prominence of the maidens' virginity (Q 55:56–74), no erotic dynamic between them and the blessed is perceivable. The blessed remain as motionless as the maidens themselves, transfixed in their luxurious seats. The last verse of the second description that focuses on the furniture and textiles of the space again introduces a *binary* juxtaposition: Q 55:76, *muttaki'ina 'alā raḫrafīn khudrin wa-'abqarīyin ḥisān* ("reclining upon green cushions and superb rugs"). The final proclamation introduces a last contrasting *pair*: the antithetical manifestations of *jalāl* ("majesty," comparable to the rabbinic *middat had-dīn*, the power of exerting judgment and thus punishment) and *ikrām* ("generosity," comparable to the rabbinic *middat ha-raḫamīm*, the power that manifests itself in generous forgiveness). The text closes with a doxology.

The description in Q 55:46–78 – unique in the Quran – according to its literal sense thus presents a "double paradise image": Not only are there "two gardens" instead of one, but the duplicated garden is also presented twice, figuring in two subsequent, slightly divergent descriptions (Q 55:46–61, 62–78). Expectedly, these duplicated paradises are replete with paired topics – a phenomenon that has long puzzled scholars. The frequent dual forms should not be taken in their literal, numerical sense, but as figures in a highly poetical and playful demonstration of linguistic virtuosity. One has to remember that Q 55 pursues a particular hermeneutical trajectory: to demonstrate the harmonious and balanced structure of creation. It follows that any proper description of the symmetry of creation demands an equally sophisticated, "dual-loaded" language to match its ontological harmony. Duality and opposition also point to their "opposite," viz. oneness.<sup>42</sup> The thesis that language is on a par with creation is a major topic of the Sura and has been discussed in detail elsewhere.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, some semantic peculiarities that seem to have exerted considerable influence on the later readers' perception of the Quranic paradise should be noted. What was already looming in the earlier paradise descriptions becomes evident in the elaborate portrayal of Q 55: the Quranic paradisaal

<sup>42</sup> See Lawson, Duality.

<sup>43</sup> Neuwirth, *Koran als Text der Spätantike* 433–48.

abode presents itself as surprisingly distinct from both the Jewish and Christian eschatological paradise.<sup>44</sup> Though it is meant as a reward granted to the virtuous in general, the space is obviously a gendered space. Those invited to enter the garden are male persons, who are honored according to the decorum of contemporary courtly hospitality. Part of their reward is the enjoyment of the erotic company of beautiful maidens, whom they find present at the site; Q 55:56, 58: “therein maidens restraining their glances // lovely like rubies, beautiful like corals,” Q 55:71, 73: “therein maidens good and comely // houris cloistered in pavilions.”<sup>45</sup> They are – indirectly – assigned to be their sexual partners; this thought seems to underlie the assertion that they are “untouched before them by any man or jinn,” Q 55:56, 74. There should be no surprise that this gendered social image of paradise later called for an adjustment: later Suras and even secondary additions to early Suras (Q 52:21) contain promises securing the participation of the families (Q 13:23, 36:56: wives) of the inhabitants of paradise, as well, in the eschatological bliss.<sup>46</sup> Yet, the image of the eschatological paradise first arises in the shape described above: as a space promising courtly enjoyments to a privileged male elect.

Another peculiarity unknown from the Jewish and Christian vision of paradise is the fact that the blessed are surrounded by luxurious furniture and precious textiles; Q 55:75: “green cushions and lovely druggets,” as well as furniture of courtly luxury; Q 55:84: “couches lined with brocade.” These observations raise the question: How can the presence of the corporally erotic, on the one hand, and the traces of material civilization, even luxury, on the other hand, be explained? More precisely: What is their function?

44 In Judaism, eschatological perceptions of paradise had been developed in particular in apocalyptic works such as the first book on Enoch (second century BC), and the Targums (Aramaic translations) at Genesis. In Christianity, the Genesis story in the Pshitta (Syriac Bible) itself reflects an understanding of paradise as both primordial and eschatological.

45 The designation “Houris” used by Arberry is derived from the plural form “*hūr*” of the Arabic adjective *ahwar*, *hawrā*, meaning “having eyes in which the contrast between black and white is particularly intense.” In Q 55:73 the word *hūr* is not yet the designation of “virgins of paradise” but rather a qualification of the “maidens good and comely” mentioned in Q 55:71. The word, which was not known as a technical term before its introduction through the Quran, has been questioned as to its traditionally accepted meaning designating women, see the controversy raised by the hypothesis of Luxenberg who claimed a completely different meaning (“grapes”), Wild, *Virgins of paradise*; and W. Saleh, *The etymological fallacy*. Also see, in particular, Sidney Griffith’s contribution to the present publication.

46 See Nerina Rustomji’s contribution to the present publication. For the addition to Sura 52 see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran I* 685–709.

#### 4 Paradisal Imaginations in Late Antiquity

It is sometimes forgotten that the Quran is neither directly derived from the Bible nor necessarily from Biblical tradition exclusively. This is particularly evident in the case of its depiction of paradise. Here, other textual precursors need to be taken into account. The presence of the erotic in the hereafter – looked upon from a broader perspective – is not as extraordinary as it may appear at first sight. Once we leave the Biblical model of the afterlife aside, there is ample evidence for the presence of women who accompany men postmortem. For example, in the pagan context, the antique goddess of victory, Nike, carries off the dead warrior to his postmortem abode.<sup>47</sup> Iranian lore knows of female figures attending the male dead as well.<sup>48</sup> And even in Biblical tradition, Church fathers from the time of Irenaeus (third century CE) have discussed whether or not corporal sexual relations should be imagined as continuing in paradise.<sup>49</sup> Proto-monastic ideals would, however, eventually win the day. Later authorities, such as the Syrian theologian Ephraem of Nisibis (c. 306–373) in his *Hymns on Paradise*, rigorously spiritualized sexuality; yet at the same time Ephraem's poetry leaves no doubt that he, too, imagined paradise not free from erotic terms. He states in his second *Hymn on Paradise*:

*Ṭūbaw l-man da-hwā rgīgā l-pardaysā  
d-rā'eg w-bāla' leh b-tar'eh l-shappīrā  
b-ūbeh mḥabbēb leh b-karseh mnaṣṣar leh  
ṣārē w-sā'em leh b-gaw mā'aw  
w-en dēn g'aṣ men (')nāsh pāleṭ w-shādē leh  
d-tar'eh hū d-buḥrānā d-rāḥem bnay (')nāshā*

Blessed is he for whom Paradise yearns.  
Yes, Paradise yearns for the man whose goodness makes him beautiful;  
it engulfs him at its gateway,  
it embraces him in its bosom, it caresses him in its very womb;  
for it splits open and receives him into its inmost parts.  
But if there is someone it abhors,  
It removes him and casts him out;  
This is the gate of testing  
That belongs to Him who loves mankind.<sup>50</sup>

47 Lumpe and Bietenhard, *Himmel* 173–212.

48 Tisdall, *Original sources* 235–8. See also S. Günther's contribution to the present publication, especially note 56.

49 Jarrar, *Martyrdom* 87–108.

50 Brock, *St. Ephrem* 84.

In the seventh *Hymn* eroticism becomes even more explicit:

*Aynā d-men ḥamrā šām hwā b-purshānā  
 leh šāwḥān yattīr gupnaw d-pardaysā  
 wa-ḥdā ḥdā sgūlāh mawsḥtā tettel leh  
 w-en dēn bṭūlā hwā tūb a'līh  
 l-gaw 'ūbhen dakyā d-metṭūl ihīdāyā  
 lā npal b-gaw 'ūbā w-'arsā d-zuwwāgā.*

The man who abstained, with understanding, from wine,  
 will the vines of Paradise rush out to meet, all the more joyfully,  
 as each one stretches out and proffers him its clusters;  
 or if any has lived a life of virginity, him too they welcome into their  
 bosom,  
 for the solitary such as he has never lain in any bosom nor upon any mar-  
 riage bed.<sup>51</sup>

The two visions of paradise are, however, distinctly and distinctively different. In comparison with Ephraem's allegorically tuned poetry, the female eroticism in the Quran appears rather realistic and hence more in line with its pagan predecessors. This anti-allegorical trend fits with a common characteristic of the Quran, one that may be described as a text-critical program of analysis intending to de-allegorize Christian readings of Biblical narratives.<sup>52</sup> So Ephraem's poetry (though probably not unfamiliar to the Quranic community as other parallel evidence would suggest) and its treatment of paradise bears little resemblance to the Quranic scenario of an assembly of privileged men and beautiful women in a luxurious ambience. Thus it is not Ephraem's hymns that can explain or solve the quandary regarding both the physical presence of women and the traces of material culture in the Quranic paradise. Indeed, both of these latter traits are difficult to reconcile with the vision of a purely spiritual abode. Nor is an explanation available through a reference to the rabbinic imagination of the heavenly abode, "Gan 'Eden"/"Garden of Eden," where "the righteous are sitting at golden tables or under elaborate canopies" (cf. Q 18:29), since here the two elements of lush nature and the erotic companions are missing – we should recall that according to bBer 17a there will be no sensual enjoyment in Gan Eden.<sup>53</sup>

51 Ibid., 125. (I owe the transcription of the Syriac original to the kind support of my associates Yousef Kouriyhe and David Kiltz, Corpus Coranicum.)

52 Neuwirth, *Koran als Text der Spätantike* 590–5.

53 Bamberger, *Paradise* 628.

## 5 The Pagan Subtext

It is helpful to remember that the Quran is last but not least the heir to the most sophisticated pagan Arabic poetry. As early as 1923<sup>54</sup> Josef Horovitz assumed that Quranic paradisaical scenarios reflect banquet scenes from ancient Arabic poetry. Looking closely at the Quranic descriptions we do not, however, find a banquet in the vein described by the ancient poets, but rather a static tableau portraying groups of men and women in a place of lush nature that at the same time bears courtly traits, being furnished with aesthetically refined artifacts. Although this is not a reference to any particular episode of ancient poetry, it is a poetical reference and, in fact, quite a universal one. Descriptions of paradise – this is the thesis raised in our paper<sup>55</sup> – are a response to the more general outlook expressed in the ancient Arabic *qaṣīda*. They constitute nothing less than an inversion of the image presented in its initial part, the elegiac and nostalgic *nasīb*, which depicts the previously inhabited encampments revisited by the poet as a wasteland, a landscape of ruins, stripped of its civilization, relinquished by its inhabitants and “mute,” inaccessible to communication. One of the most famous ancient Arabic *qaṣīdas*, by the poet Labīd, starts with the words: “Effaced (literally: extinguished) are the abodes,” *‘afati l-diyāru*. These words, or similar uses of the same cultural metaphor, formulate and evoke in the audience’s mind the stereotypical beginning of a large number of poems, all of which conjure up the emptiness of space and a “muteness,” a loss of communication. Frequently these descriptions of deserted campsites are used metaphorically as inscriptions on the body: The traces of the deserted campsites are reminiscent of the faint lines engraved on a wrist, or – which is even more revealing – they develop into the evocative trope of rock graffiti or inscriptions, *wahy*. There is, then, a meaningful message immanent in the writing and in the deserted space, a message which is hidden from the beholder. To the poet-hero, both the “extinguished” campsite and the lost beloved, who is the second main topic of the *nasīb*, are negations: allegories of irreversible time, irretrievable meaning, and unrecoverable emotional fulfillment. The place is perceived as desolate since the luxuriously furnished caravans have taken the women away (and with them the poet’s beloved), to be swallowed by a mirage. The *nasīb* thus serves to express an *aporia*.

Nature defies the poet, not responding to his ever-repeated question of “*ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere?*” (where are those who were before us in the

54 Horovitz, *Das koranische Paradies* 1–16.

55 As put forward earlier in Neuwirth, *Psalms* 711–7.

world?)”<sup>56</sup> about the whereabouts of the formerly pulsating social life, the reliable social structures, and the aesthetically formidable equipment of the living space with its promise of erotic pleasure. All culture and human achievement falls prey to time or is obscured by nature. In the end, the familiar topos of popular Hellenistic philosophy reminds the listener that nature alone is capable of cyclically renewing itself; man is destined to perish and decompose. For the ancient Arab poets, it is nature’s eternity that underscores the transitory nature of man and his achievements. The poet Labīd, an older contemporary of the Prophet, says: *Balīnā wa-lā tablā l-nujūmu l-ṭawālī’u, wa-tabqā l-jibālu ba’danā wa-l-maṣānī’u* (“We vanish but the rising stars do not, mountains remain when we are gone and fortresses”). Time does not affect nature, which is eternal (*khālid*), allowing repeated recurrences ad infinitum. In contrast, man is caught and “consumed” by time, in a concept popularly associated with *dahr*, fate.

It is this perception of nature as overwhelming man and his culture that the Quran has come to refute: God himself commands fate and reshapes the time of man, which now ranges from the primordial creation of the world and the coincidental or even preceding creation of the logos – to the end of the world on judgment day, when man will redeem the pledge of divine instruction. Q 55:1–4 foregrounds the sequence of the creational act: *al-raḥmān / ‘allama l-Qur’ān / khalaqa l-insān / ‘allamahu l-bayān*. The verse group expresses a close connection between divine instruction of the logos (*qur’ān*) and man’s innate faculty of understanding (*bayān*).<sup>57</sup> The Quranic description of paradise not only reverses the erstwhile bleak and threatening conception of nature into something ever-green and fruit-bearing, but it also preserves a high level of civilization: precious cushions and carpets, cups filled with wine that had been sealed with musk, and moreover the presence of beautiful young women, known from the *nasīb* as icons of a meaningful and enjoyable life. Paradise is a space where man is reinvested with his own cultural paraphernalia.

## 6 The Plural Functions of the Quranic Paradise

This hypothesis which tries to offer an explanation as to why the Quran introduces such a courtly image of paradise would remain mere guesswork were it not for the second connection between the *nasīb* of the *qaṣīda* and the Quranic

<sup>56</sup> The sustained presence of the late antique topos has been demonstrated by Becker, *Ubi sunt*; and made much of by Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*.

<sup>57</sup> On the Quranic logos theology, see Neuwirth, *Koran als Text der Spätantike* 158–63.

paradise, which we already alluded to: the Quranic re-interpretation of *wahy*.<sup>58</sup> The fact that the *qaṣīda* both laments the transitory nature of human achievements *and* complains of the “non-readability” of reality, which is regarded as a situation of collective loss, has seldom been recognized in scholarship. The poet who has halted to recall the deserted campsite of his former sojourn with his beloved is confronted not only with his loss, but with a hermeneutical *aporia* as well: Where are those people who used to furnish the place with social life and its pleasures, why has the erstwhile populated place fallen into ruin? The poet turns to the traces of the campsite in order to “ask them,” to search for the meaning of his present apprehension of reality. The ruins he addresses, however, remain mute, thus reminding him of an unreadable inscription, a *wahy* that bears a message linguistically incomprehensible to him. The ruined encampments as well as their symbolic representation, the faded or unreadable writing (*wahy*), leave the poet with the *aporia*, well known from Hellenistic poetry,<sup>59</sup> the unresolved question about the meaning of unretrievable history. Writing that is expected to provide a solution, proves in no way helpful. It is realized as an undecipherable sign system that only enhances the feeling of the vanity inherent in human achievement. Writing then, represented by *wahy* in pre-Islamic poetry, plays a rather ambivalent role by evoking the perception of loss.

*Wahy* is an important term in ancient Arabic poetry; it denotes any non-verbal “sign language,” among which the non-decipherable writing, the mirror image of the deserted and withered encampment is the most prominent. This term thus bears a pronounced negative connotation due to its prominent employment in the poet’s lament about the contingency of worldly reality. It is all the more striking to find that this ‘*wahy* of loss,’ a *wahy* representing the meaninglessness of history, has been inverted in the Quran. *Wahy* in the Quran denotes inspiration, it successively acquires the meaning of revelation as such. The Quranic *wahy* is likewise a non-verbal message. It is however conveyed to a person who, thanks to his prophetic gift, is able to “translate” the otherwise unintelligible *wahy* into human verbal language for his listeners and thus change it into a significant communication. In its Quranic re-employment, *wahy* is given a new inverted meaning. It comes to denote the most important medium of communication to be imagined: communication with the divine articulated in the Quranic message. One might have expected the introduction of a term to denote God’s communication to his elect as something famil-

58 On *wahy* in ancient Arabic poetry, see Montgomery, *Dichotomy*; the Quranic reinterpretation is discussed in Neuwirth, *Koran als Text der Spätantike* 711–6, see also Neuwirth, *Discovery*.

59 Becker, *Ubi sunt*.

iar or shared with other monotheist cultures, such as an Arabic rendering of the Greek *apokalypsis*, or the Syriac *galyutha*. The Quran, however, refers to the core corpus of Arabic literary articulations by ingeniously using the poetic term *wahy* and inverting its meaning. *Wahy* thus has come to denote the exact opposite meaning of unintelligible sign language. The poet's bleak psychological state and his inability to comprehend reality have been proven to be obsolete discursive fields. The new Quranic definition of *wahy* henceforth renders the term a positive force, one that clarifies existential and material ambiguity through the divine and definitive knowledge and inspiration of God.

## 7 Conclusion

Sura 55 has been demonstrated to be a re-working of a Biblical psalm, Ps 136.<sup>60</sup> The psalm text like the Sura in its introductory section records the events of primordial creation; it shifts however, in its core section, to a completely different topic, i.e., God's interventions in the history of His elect people. It is at this point that the Sura diverges from the psalm; in the Quranic perspective God's presence is less manifest with regard to His care for people in situations of political crisis than in the universal act of creation with its eschatological fulfillment in paradise on the one hand and the communication of His word on the other. Yet the Quran does engage in a discourse of history as well: Quranic descriptions of paradise provoke reflections on history and historical consciousness by rewriting ancient Arabic poetry. The refrain of Psalm 136 "God's grace lasts forever," echoed in the refrain of Q 55 "O which of your lord's bounties will you and you deny?" – connects with an inversion of the ancient Arabic conception of all-overpowering time, and claims that "God disempowers devastating time."

This shift in interest from history to eschatology is accompanied by a particular and well-defined meta-discourse: the hermeneutical accessibility of the cosmos, God's presence in language. The Quran attempts nothing less than to render the undecipherable understandable, to decode the message of enigmatic writing, *wahy*, that so haunted the ancient poet. *Wahy* reappears in the Quran to denote revelation, the hermeneutical field of inquiry and mode of meaning par excellence. With this paradigmatic turn, the Quran offers its listeners a new promise: divine faithfulness is not derived from the Biblical narrative of salvation, but rather from God's liberation of man from the aporetic crisis that is so expressively pronounced in ancient Arabic poetry. Subsequently, in this new conceptualization of paradise, an equally new plenitude of meaning

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60 Neuwirth, Psalms 733–78.

is staged: The old pagan poetic tropes of loss, the campsites lying in ruins, the beloved having departed, are inverted and reinterpreted to provide a comprehensive and socio-historical relevant narrative. Thus the hermeneutical inaccessibility of reality's "sign language," as propounded poetically in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, is discursively reversed. The Quranic manifestation of paradise, though amalgamating different well established traditions, introduces a substantially novel dimension into the eschatological thought of its time. It hence clearly betrays and even celebrates its late antique multi-cultural milieu of genesis, but it equally proves to be essentially new and challenging.

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