

The Qur'an and Communal Memory: Q. 85 and the Martyrs of Najrān

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Introduction

Sūrat al-Burūj, one of the early, short Meccan revelations, has attracted sustained interest from scholars working within the Euro-American sphere since the nineteenth century due to its association with a major event that took place in the Middle East in 523 CE: the massacre of a group of Christians carried out by the Jewish ruler of Yemen in the Christian town of Najrān in northern Yemen.¹ As a result of the massacre, a major war broke out in the region that resulted in Ethiopia invading Yemen and imposing a new Christian regime. The event reverberated throughout the Christian Middle East, and the invasion of Yemen was seen as just retribution. The massacre was commemorated in Syriac Christian hagiography, and the victims came to be known as the Martyrs of Najrān. Although there is no explicit reference to the massacre in Q. 85, the Islamic tradition (in the Qur'an commentary literature) tied this sura to the Najrān massacre, and early Muslims viewed *Sūrat al-Burūj* as a commemoration of this event.

However, no non-Islamic sources on this massacre were available until some previously unknown Syriac writings that purported to be eyewitness reports of the massacre were unearthed in the late nineteenth century. There was, understandably, much excitement among scholars about the discovery of these texts, which described the historical circumstances of the massacre, and this led to renewed interest in Q. 85. Since it was the Islamic tradition that linked Q. 85 to the massacre, a debate ensued among modern scholars as to the veracity and historicity of this connection. In terms of perspectives, European scholars can be broadly divided into two main camps when it comes to their views on the interpretation of this sura. One group of scholars – the majority – agreed with the Islamic tradition, that the sura indeed referred to the massacre. The second group – a tiny minority – saw Q. 85 as a reference to the story of Daniel and the three youths in the 'fiery furnace' told in the Biblical Book of Daniel. Soon, however, a third

group of scholars emerged, who discounted any such historical connections and claimed that the sura referred to an apocalyptic scene of the torments of Hell rather than any historical event. This eschatological interpretation became the standard and dominant opinion in the European literature about this sura.

This article provides an overview of the development of the three main interpretations of this sura, followed by my own analysis of Q. 85. Refuting the latter two interpretations of Q. 85 as referring either to the Book of Daniel or an eschatological vision of Hell, I argue that the most plausible interpretation is that this sura does, in fact, make reference to the massacre of the Christians of Najrān.

Below is a translation of Q. 85, by Muhammad Abdel Haleem,² who clearly espouses the traditional Islamic understanding of the sura. The ambiguities of the text, which understandably are not reflected in this translation, will be dealt with extensively later in the article.

¹By the sky with its towering constellations, ²by the promised Day, ³by witness and witnessed, ⁴perish the makers of the trench, ⁵of the fuel-stoked fire! ⁶They sat down [this is an incomplete translation, WS] ⁷and witnessed what they were doing to the believers. ⁸Their only grievance against them was their faith in God, the Mighty, the Praiseworthy, ⁹to whom all control over the heavens and earth belongs: God is witness over all things.

¹⁰For those who persecute believing men and women, and do not repent afterwards, there will be the torment of Hell and burning. ¹¹But for those who believe and do good deeds there will be Gardens graced with flowing streams: that is the great triumph. ¹²[Prophet], your Lord's punishment is truly stern—¹³it is He who brings people to life, and will restore them to life again—¹⁴but He is the Most Forgiving, the Most Loving. ¹⁵The Glorious Lord of the Throne, ¹⁶He does whatever He will. ¹⁷Have you [not] heard the stories of the forces ¹⁸of Pharaoh and Thamud? ¹⁹Yet still the disbelievers persist in denial. ²⁰God surrounds them all.

²¹This is truly a glorious Qur'an ²²[written] on a preserved Tablet.

The Martyrs of Najrān

All the Late Antique world would, eventually, come to hear about the Christian martyrs of Najrān. To go north from Najrān – to go anywhere north – is to pass if not by Mecca, then surely by al-Ṭāʾif or Medina, places with which Muḥammad was intimately connected. The massacre of the Christians of Najrān in 523 CE, an event that would lead to a major conflagration that toppled a kingdom to the south, was unusual for Arabia; their neighbours would have been bound to hear about it. The persecution

of the Christians of Najrān was not an insignificant event, it was an international incident, one which had repercussions throughout the region; it was also an event that was used and publicised to create an international diplomatic incident. James Howard-Johnston has gone so far as to characterise the massacre as 'the most widely broadcast episode of the early sixth century'.³ It upended the political structure of Yemen, the most powerful state in Arabia – in fact the only real state in the Peninsula. The most dramatic result of the massacre was the conquest of Yemen by Ethiopia, an invasion that established a new order that would exert its influence north into the Hijaz.⁴ Yet, since 1895 various Qur'an scholars have maintained that the Qur'an could not be referring to the massacre of Najrān: that the Islamic exegetical tradition asserted this connection was a double-edged sword, both impossible to disregard yet tempting to discard. A number of modern Qur'an scholars have seen in this supposed reference in the Qur'an a misconstruing of an eschatological scene, and it is this view that has become orthodox in Western scholarship.

The first question to be asked when studying Q. 85 is: can we find any evidence in the historical knowledge of the milieu in which the Meccan Qur'an emerged that this sura does indeed make reference to a Christian martyrdom story? If the connection between Q. 85 and the famous massacre of the Christians in Najrān was fabricated by early Muslims, this would have had to have been put into circulation well before 150/767, when we have the first written evidence of this connection. However, positing the creation of a connection between Q. 85 and the massacre in this timeframe creates a problem: why would the early Muslims connect an enigmatic phrase in their holy book to a Syriac Christian martyrdom narrative if not for the fact that this connection was, to them, undeniable? Honouring Christian martyrs at a time when the Muslim Arabs were in the midst of existential protracted wars with Byzantium, as they were during this period, and making repeated attempts to take Constantinople, seems odd at the very least; this was not a connection that was in any way advantageous to the Islamic tradition.⁵ The monumental inscriptions erected by early Muslims almost always make Christians and their theological 'fanaticism' about the divinity of Jesus a target.⁶ The Arab conquerors of Jerusalem even built a shrine, the Dome of the Rock, over the destroyed Jewish Temple to undo one of the major Christian confirmatory supersessionist narratives, that the Temple of Jerusalem will never be rebuilt.⁷ They might have been good custodians of the inhabitants of their new empire, but they were not playing nice theologically.⁸

Indeed, the later exegetical tradition would try to downplay this connection between the Qur'an and the Martyrs of Najrān, deciding that a hymn to Christian martyrs was not something that it would care to acknowledge. The only unequivocal and undisputed connection of Q. 85 to the Najrān martyrology is found, appropriately, in the earliest Qur'an commentary, that of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767, see endnote 100 for reference). But, after Muqātil, the exegetical tradition hums and haws about the identity

of the people referred to in Q. 85, downplaying the historical reference to Najrān, and nearly supressing it altogether.⁹ So determined was the tradition to forget this link that it invented a long list of alternative possible suspects. Thus, for example, Daniel 3 would be proposed as a reference by the Islamic tradition. In one report, a confrontation is set up between ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib – Muḥammad's cousin and a contender for the role of caliph – and the Bishop of Najrān, who was visiting Medina. The bishop is asked about the story of the 'People of the Ditch' in Q. 85:4, and relates the story of the massacre of Najrān, only to be told by ʿAlī that he knows the true story, a story that has nothing to do with Christians but is rather about a new prophet that came to Abyssinia and was persecuted, he and his new followers, by being burned by fire.¹⁰ More crucial for our analysis is the fact that Muḥammad himself revisited this sura to rework it, from which we might extrapolate that it seemed to have been already causing difficulties during his lifetime (this is discussed in more detail below). It appears that this was a connection the tradition at first admitted, and having admitted it, tried to forget. The multitude of supposed possible groups that Q. 85 is read as referring to by classical exegetes not only indicates that they were dissatisfied with the original reference but also, and more crucially, that the sura referred to a historical event which they could not escape the responsibility of identifying, rather than being an eschatological reference. The idea that the commentators confused an eschatological reference with a historical event is untenable, for neither the grammar nor the context of the sura support such a reading, as will be made clear later.

Q. 85 is not the only sura in the Qur'an that is made intelligible only when read through the memory of early Muslims. For example, Abraha's elephant would make a grand appearance in the Qur'an in Q. 105. Abraha (r. c. 535–565), the new ruler of Yemen after the Najrān massacre, came invading north, apparently with an African elephant.¹¹ This was an elephant the Meccans could not forget; they called that year the Year of the Elephant. In fact, the Year of the Elephant was so significant that it was used to mark the beginning of one of their event-based calendric systems before they eventually adopted the Hijra.¹² Until recently, when it was corroborated by some newly discovered inscriptions, the Qur'an preserved for us the only historical record of this detail about Abraha's campaign.¹³

Q. 105, with its central reference to the 'People of the Elephant', who were supposedly destroyed, is incomprehensible without the exegetical tradition, which informs us that it was reminding Muḥammad's tribe of God's grace.¹⁴ There is no amount of higher criticism that can make sense of the reference to an elephant in this sura without this; it is untethered to any specific historical event in the text.¹⁵ One can even push the matter further: why read the word *al-fīl* in Q. 105:1 as 'elephant' as the tradition claimed, when it is after all a hapax legomenon in the Qur'an? There are no elephants in Arabia, certainly not in the Hijaz. It is not only the historical reference that is grounded in the memory of the early Muslim community, but the very

reading, a name for a non-native animal, makes this a clear example of an ancient tradition that could not be changed. Unlike Q. 85, for which the tradition offered myriad interpretations, Q. 105 was uniformly and unequivocally seen by Muslims as referring to Abraha and his army, and no other interpretation was ever entertained. The tradition did not attempt to erase the elephant in Q. 105 as it did the Christians of Najrān in Q. 85.

Not everything the tradition informs us is historical, but a reference in the Qur'an to a historical event from before or around the time of Muḥammad is not an unusual occurrence. For example, one cluster of early suras refers to the condition of the Meccans on the eve of the advent of Islam. In them, the Qur'an seems to have wanted to comment on the most memorable myths of the Meccan Quraysh and reformulate them, connecting them to Muḥammad's God. Accordingly, the first verse of Q. 106 names Muḥammad's tribe, Quraysh, as the recipient of God's protection and generosity. (Like *ḥil* in the preceding sura, Q. 105, *Quraysh* is also a hapax legomenon). The sura reminds its audience of their summer and winter caravans – a reference to trade with Syria and Yemen and, in turn, to their wellbeing and security.¹⁶ Neuwirth has noted that this cluster of early suras reformulates the local history of Mecca in a cosmic or global setting, in doing so making reference to momentous historical events from the near past of Muḥammad's tribe. Q. 90, for example, with its oath about Mecca (Q. 90:1), is part of a web of references to a locale that is being raised from regionalism to divine cosmic interest.¹⁷ Q. 85 belongs to this group of suras and, in this context, it should be noted that while the story of the Martyrs of Najrān may have been transformed by hagiography, it is at its core the story of a real historical event that occurred, moreover, within the living memory of Muḥammad's generation, which makes it all the more probable that it would have been mentioned in his preaching. There is thus no historical reason to refuse the connection between Q. 85 and the Martyrs of Najrān: the chronology, the infamy of the event, and geography all align to make this a plausible historical reference.

The Martyrs of Najran and Arabic Historical Memory: What About the Sleepers of Ephesus (Q. 18)?

The secondary literature on the Martyrs of Najrān is extensive.¹⁸ It is safe to assume that the potential for a connection between the Qur'an and the Martyrs of Najrān would have been assessed differently had the early Islamic tradition discovered the story from Syriac sources and retroactively tied the story of the martyrs to the Qur'an. There are many such instances in the Qur'an commentary tradition of what came to be called *Isrā'iliyyāt*, Jewish Biblical lore acquired after the codification of the Qur'an that was used to interpret it.¹⁹ Instead, in its earliest moments, the Islamic tradition thought that Q. 85 was referring to the Martyrs of Najrān. Given that this link was unprompted by any Christian considerations, the ease with which this connection has been dismissed

by some modern Qur'an specialists is more indicative of flawed analysis than of any historical improbability.

There is textual precedent within the Qur'an itself for thinking that Q. 85 recalls the story of a Christian martyrdom: Q. 18 retells the legend of the Sleepers of Ephesus, a Christian martyr legend. This fact leaves no doubt that Muḥammad was aware of Christian martyrdom stories and used them in his preaching.²⁰ However, remarkably, not one scholar who has written on Q. 85 has thought it relevant to connect this sura to Q. 18, perhaps because reference to the exegetical tradition is not necessary to make sense of the indebtedness of Q. 18 to Syriac Christian lore. While the Islamic exegetical tradition is invariably accused of atomism, I argue that modern, Western Qur'anic Studies scholarship too often displays even more of an atomistic approach, with the result that Q. 85 has neither been analysed in relation to the reference to martyrdom found in Q. 18, nor studied in light of the whole of the Qur'an. There is, for example, a parallel between Q. 85 and Q. 18 in the fact that the Sleepers are referred to in the Qur'an as *aṣḥāb al-kaḥf* ('the People of the Cave'), in the same manner that the persecutors of the Martyrs of Najrān of Q. 85 are referred to as *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* ('the People of the Ditch'). The Sleepers of Ephesus are an obscurity compared to the Martyrs of Najrān, and they are also historically and geographically unconnected to Arabia. With its glorification of an obscure story of martyrdom celebrated by the Christians of the East, Q. 18 is the most important evidence we have from inside the Qur'an that Muḥammad could have been referencing another Christian martyr story. There is a clearly pro-Byzantine bias in the Meccan Qur'an that is hard to square with post-Muḥammad Islam. Understanding Q. 85 as a tribute to the suffering of Arab Christian martyrs thus fits perfectly within the Meccan Qur'anic discourse, a discourse that the exegetical tradition initially unwillingly admitted and then tried to undo.

In the case of the Martyrs of Najrān, early exegetes tied a Qur'anic term, *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, to the story, unprompted by Christian considerations. Had the early exegetes not highlighted this connection, it would have been impossible for later generations – literally so – to know that the Qur'an was referring to this incident. This raises the issue of why early exegetes would invent such a connection in the first place if it was not real? I am arguing that the connection was known at the time, and the referent of the term *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* in Q. 85:4 as the persecutors of the Christians was widely acknowledged. This is a situation in which there was an entrenched oral tradition that related to events that had had a direct impact on the lives of the Qur'an's Meccan audience, unlike much of the Jewish and Christian lore which the Qur'an retells (most notably Q. 18). Historians have now admitted the obvious, that Arab chroniclers were aware of the story, but this has yet to have an impact on Qur'anic Studies. As Howard-Johnston has shown, 'the later Muslim traditions were firmly rooted in the pre-Islamic [Arabian] past', and, he goes on to say, the historical

memory of those that recorded them entailed a detailed knowledge of Yemeni history that included three major events with immediate implications for the inhabitants of the Hijaz:²¹

[the] transformation of the kingdom of Himyar (Yemen), which had long dominated south Arabia, into a protectorate of Axum (Ethiopia) early in the century, the last large-scale expedition north from Yemen which reached the Hijaz in 552, and the imposition of Sasanian direct rule on Yemen some two decades later.

He concludes that 'there is no reason to question the main Arab storyline, since a great deal of reliable genealogical and narrative material made its way into Muslim texts from the pre-Islamic period'.²²

In the case of the Martyrs of Najrān, Howard-Johnston seems to think that the Arabic sources absorbed the Christian propaganda 'disseminated throughout the Middle East, to arouse Christian ire and to prepare Roman public opinion for aggressive action against Yemen'.²³ He does not claim here a translation or a direct borrowing from any particular document but rather diffusion from pre-Islamic times. The Arabic sources were also a reworked independent source, insofar as they were part of a local historical memory of Arabia before Islam.²⁴ That they reflected a pro-Byzantine bias is not surprising: the Qur'an, as I have already noted, shows such a bias – both in Q. 85 but also in Q. 30, where it is rooting for the Byzantine Empire in its wars with Sassanid Iran.²⁵

The Rejection of the Historicity of the 'People of the Ditch' (Q. 85:4)

As mentioned in the introduction, the history of engagement with Q. 85 goes back to the moment of the birth of modern Qur'anic Studies in Europe. Modern scholarship took two routes in its separation of Q. 85 from Najrān: one identified the sura with Daniel 3:8–30, and the other interpreted the sura in an eschatological manner, linking its fire imagery with Hell.

It is important to mark the first instance when Q. 85 was divorced from the massacre of Najrān, for it has profound consequences on how this sura would be read. Abraham Geiger, in 1833, was the first to overlook the possible connection to the Christian martyrs of Najrān, instead seeing in it a reflection of Daniel 3:8–30, the story of the three Jewish believers thrown into the oven, or fiery furnace.²⁶ In this story, King Nebuchadnezzar punishes three Jewish youths after they refuse to worship his gods and a gold 'image' he set up. The youths are thrown into a blazing furnace but miraculously are unharmed by the fire. Geiger seemingly did not know that the Islamic tradition had already suggested a connection between Daniel 3 and Q. 85,²⁷ and his understanding of Q. 85 received the endorsement of the leading scholar on the Qur'an, Theodor Nöldeke,

in his 1860 first edition of *Geschichte des Qorâns*.²⁸ Nöldeke (unlike Geiger) was aware that the Islamic tradition had already suggested this possibility and saw this as confirmation that Q. 85 was indeed referring to Daniel 3.²⁹ However, by the time the second edition of *Geschichte des Qorâns*, edited by Friedrich Schwally, came out in 1909, Nöldeke had recanted this position³⁰ and instead supported the Islamic tradition's assertion that this sura referred to the Najrân martyrdom. Another early scholar to agree with Geiger was Otto Loth, in an article published in 1881. Loth, who was editing parts of al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) Qur'an commentary at the time, before it was fully published in 1905, was the first to mention that al-Ṭabarī supported this view, even before al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) had offered such a possibility. It is also with Loth that we have the first detailed defense of the Daniel 3 interpretation supported by analysis of Qur'anic terms: Loth was the first to start an 'etymologising' inquiry into the expression *ukhdūd*,³¹ on the basis of which he declared that the term was of dubious Arabic credentials. In his view, its Arabic 'etymology' was artificial (*künstlich*) and it was more related to the Hebrew 'oven' (אֶפְרַיִם) than 'trench'. Therefore, he concluded that the meaning of *ukhdūd* was 'oven'. This is the first time we encounter modern scholarship characterising the word *ukhdūd* as *dunkel* ('dark', 'unclear'), an assessment that became an open invitation to speculate about its meaning, and the beginning of a trend for what can be only termed as pseudo-etymologising guesswork.³² In the twentieth century, Geiger's and Loth's suggestions were dismissed and would lose their pre-eminence among Qur'anic studies scholars, with the exception of Régis Blachère, who would come out strongly in support of the Daniel 3 connection and the 'oven' etymology.³³

The assertion of a connection between Q. 85 and Daniel 3 was an interesting move, if an inconsequential one, and was chiefly motivated by the desire of some modern scholars to see references to Jewish traditions in most of the Qur'an. Its merit lies in the fact that it did not violate the language and grammar of Q. 85, according to which there was a group who tortured (Q. 85:4, *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, or 'the People of the *ukhdūd*') and a group that was tortured (Q. 85:7, *al-mu'minūn*, or 'the believers'). It fell within the parameters of traditional readings and, as mentioned above, was a reading that had actually already been suggested by exegetes, motivated by a desire to undo the connection to a Christian martyr narrative. The problem with the Daniel 3 interpretation is that it is derivative of the motif of torture already assumed from the Martyrs of Najrân, and thus unconvincing. The connection is also problematic because the motif of youths surviving a fire is not what Q. 85 portrays, as the sura involves protagonists being harmed by fire, not saved. It instead portrays a sadistic scene of watching torture – there is no mention of miraculously saved youths anywhere in the text. This supposed connection to Daniel 3 has been recently resuscitated by the most recent study on the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, by Adam Silverstein, which will be discussed later in this article.³⁴

The second, and most enduring, interpretation of Q. 85 proposed by Western scholarship reads the passage as evoking an eschatological scene of Hell. This interpretation was first proposed in 1895 by Hubert Grimme in his misleadingly titled work *Mohammed*, which is actually a study of the Qur'an.³⁵ Grimme, in a footnote no less, denied that Q. 85 included a torture story, and argued against the two interpretations of the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* available in the secondary literature.³⁶ He claimed that Q. 85 referred neither to the Najrān massacre (as advanced by the tradition and some Western scholars) nor to the youths of Daniel 3 (as proposed by Geiger and Nöldeke),³⁷ rather it referred to the 'in Hell damned enemies and torturers of the believers'.³⁸ This short footnote was to seal the fate of Q. 85 in Qur'anic studies. Grimme's explanation was not only categorical but also dismissive. He provided no analysis, no proof, just an opinion, and that in a footnote rather than the main text,³⁹ yet somehow his opinion would carry the day. The nagging question of the dissonance between this reading and the grammar of the sura would now and again bubble to the surface, but it would linger unresolved.

As mentioned earlier in this section, Nöldeke-Schwally's 1909 second edition of *Geschichte des Qorāns* reversed Nöldeke's 1860 position in favour of the traditional Muslim understanding of Q. 85, that it was connected to the massacre of Najrān ('Das hat viel für sich').⁴⁰ Schwally, in fact, does mention the Daniel 3 suggestion without providing a definitive resolution. He then raises a point that would long be regarded as a solid historical objection to connecting Q. 85 to the Najrān massacre and would become determinative in the debate on this sura. Schwally noted that reports about death by fire in Q. 85 and the reports about the massacre in the newly discovered Syriac historical writings were incongruent. By then, new material and letters in Syriac about the massacre had been unearthed, including one that mentioned that a church was burned with people inside it, material that he duly noted and cited. Yet, in an odd turn of reasoning, Schwally seemed to require direct confirmation of the Qur'anic account – i.e. that there was a ditch of fire made to burn believers – from the Syriac reports. That there was a church burned with people inside was not sufficient for him.⁴¹ One is left surprised at his expectation that the Qur'an should be treated as a historical document, and Schwally's insistence on a complete congruence of the Qur'an and the Syriac reports is a good example of historical positivism vitiating textual analysis.

The next significant discussion of Q. 85 appeared in 1926, in Josef Horovitz's *Koranische Untersuchungen*. In this publication, Horovitz gave a summary of the scholarship on Q. 85 and the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, and treated the matter as settled.⁴² His discussion incorporates all the elements of the debate, and it would set the tone for the coming century. Horovitz agrees with Grimme that Q. 85:4–8 is an eschatological scene and elaborates further on Grimme's suggested reading of the passage. According to Horovitz, the expression *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* refers to the tortured unbelievers in Hell who will give testimony of what they have done to the believers (v. 7: 'and they are

witnessing what they are doing [of torture] to the believers'). The violence done to both the grammar and the apparent meaning of the original Arabic verse is such that Horovitz had to even change the verb tense. He adds a footnote about Q. 85:7, providing a reading that reconciles the temporal rift he has created in the sura with an eschatological setting.⁴³ Those doing the witnessing are the evildoers in this translation, but they are not doing anything to the believers – rather, they are witnessing what was being done to reward the believers, although Horovitz expresses his personal doubts about this interpretation.⁴⁴ It is interesting that Rudi Paret copied Horovitz's footnote, but not his text, in his own commentary on the Qur'an. This seems to indicate that Rudi Paret was uncomfortable with Horovitz's interpretation and that he saw serious issues with the way Q. 85:7 was treated.⁴⁵ Scholars who have since worked on this sura seem to have been unaware that verse 7 is actually the crux of the matter, more so than the identity of the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*. Q. 85:7, as Horovitz sensed, is the lynchpin of this sura. If one understands it as a reference to a group witnessing an act of violence done to the believers, then a historical setting is certain. If not, then one can move it to an eschatological future (although this throws up interpretive difficulties, because the following verse, Q. 85:8, explains why they, the unbelievers, were torturing the believers, as will be discussed below).

Another way that Horovitz supported the eschatological reading of Q. 85 was by disputing the curse *qutla' ṣḥābu'l-ukhdūdī* ('perish the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*') in verse 4. He claimed that this curse is never used in the Qur'an as referring to events in the past, but only to future events, and cites similar expressions in Q. 80:17 (or Q. 80:16 according to Fluegel's verse count) and Q. 74:19–20. However, this argument is not accurate, because the curses used in the examples he gives are general and not time-bound. For example, Q. 80:17, 'damned (killed) is a human being; how ungrateful he is' does not refer to any future event, but is a timeless curse. To claim that curses are temporally bound in the Qur'an is to misunderstand the rhetoric of cursing and how it is employed. Finally, and most significantly according to Horovitz himself, the fact that it was not usual for Muḥammad to tell a story of unbelievers without supplying information about the punishment they receive, as is the case here, meant that this had to be an eschatological reference. (He discounts Q. 85:10, which promises divine retribution). This is an odd position to take since in this very sura, Q. 85:17–18 ('Did you hear the story of the armies, of Pharaoh and Thamūd') refers to Pharaoh and Thamūd without making any explicit reference to punishment or retribution.⁴⁶ Having said that, punishment is highlighted in general in this sura and the emphatic statement that 'your Lord's punishment is truly stern' in Q. 85:12 is a clear reference to God's powerful chastisement.

Horovitz's analysis was apparently intended to present a cohesive interpretation of Q. 85, but it is not a complete or exhaustive analysis. The selective attention paid to particular verses allows him to avoid scrutinising the entire sura in depth while

presenting strained arguments that are unsupported by the language and style of the Qur'an. The major flaws in his analysis are his total reversal of the tense of verse 7, and his total disregard of verses 8 and 10 (I have already pointed out Paret's equivocation on this verse,⁴⁷ but luckily some major scholars such as Blachère and Karl Ahrens did not agree with this line of reasoning, as we will see). Horovitz dedicates a whole section to discussing the expression *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*.⁴⁸ Here, he shows his careful philological acumen, insofar as he does not pay heed to Loth's 'etymologising' Hebrew exercise regarding the word *ukhdūd*. Horovitz admits that it is not a commonly used Arabic word ('kein sehr häufiges Wort ist'), and gives a possible explanation as to how it had acquired the meaning of 'ditch' from its classical Arabic usage in poetry.⁴⁹ It is here that the issue of the 'pit' and 'fire' mentioned in the Qur'an are made central in the denial of a connection to the Najrān martyrdom narratives, picking up on Schwally's argument. Horovitz argues that since the narratives of the Martyrs of Najrān do not include the motif of trenches for fire, and the burning of believers is not emphasised in this narrative, then the Qur'an could not possibly be referring to this episode. This is one of the most bizarre of all the arguments that have been presented in the two-hundred-year history of Western scholarship on Q. 85, given that fire was central to the Syriac martyrdom narratives, as will be shown below, not to mention the fact that they also featured a valley, which is not entirely conceptually unlike a ditch.

After Horovitz

Horovitz's 1926 analysis would prove so influential that it would become the dominant narrative in Qur'anic Studies. Even someone like Richard Bell, a scholar who found Christianity under every Qur'anic rock, would have a dramatic conversion in 1939 about Q. 85 and toe the line, regretting his previous understanding of Q. 85 as connected to the Najrān massacre. Instead, like Horovitz, Bell saw the fires of Hell as the referent. Thus, in the introduction to his translation of this sura he admits that '[T]he reference of 1–9 to the persecution of the Christians of Najrān, which I formerly favoured, can hardly be maintained'.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, Bell does not explain why he suddenly changed his mind, but his conversion gave even more weight to Horovitz's analysis. When Rudi Paret wrote his *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition) article on the term *ukhdūd* in 1960, the debate was presented as settled, but more importantly, dissenting opinions were trivialised: Paret did not countenance any interpretation but that of Horovitz.⁵¹

Yet Paret, judicious as he was and ambivalent as he could sometimes be, did not present us with the full picture. Several major scholars, namely Karl Ahrens and Régis Blachère, were not convinced by Horovitz's analysis, and their arguments could not simply be dismissed by Paret's statement that they are 'not decisive'.⁵² Paret did not convey to the reader the gravity of the issue at hand: that the grammar of the sura does not support the reading given by Horovitz. However, Paret himself was clearly having

issues with the sura, and his English translation is diametrically opposite to his German one (as I indicate in endnote 45). Horovitz, in a footnote which was copied by Paret in his *Konkordanz*, separates the pronoun of verse 7 from the verb that follows it. This is a remarkably ungrammatical liberty, yet it does solve the problem Horovitz created by breaking the coterminous tenses of the two verses. First Ahrens, and then Blachère, would independently dispute how Horovitz read the language of the sura, and not just the referent: the issue here is not only the identity of the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, but the meaning of the whole sura. Paret would have liked us to believe the matter was settled, but it was clearly not.

As a matter of fact, a better review and summary of the debate was provided by Karl Ahrens in 1930.⁵³ Ahrens lists all the literature on Q. 85 written by European scholars of the Qur'an, outlines the three positions taken in this literature, and gives a far more accurate picture of the status quo. His analysis makes it clear that the Islamic tradition's understanding of this sura as referring either to Najrān or Daniel 3 has not been without support from major scholars, and his overview reveals that the majority of scholars did not support Horovitz's opinion. He points out first that Geiger, Loth, and (hesitantly) Nöldeke-Schwally in *Geschichte des Qorāns* (which was, in fact, Schwally), were of the opinion that the sura referred to Daniel 3 (Ahrens here was clearly giving deference to the first of the two editions of *Geschichte des Qorāns*); second, that Grimme and Horovitz believed that it was referring to unbelievers being tortured in hellfire; and third, that there were scholars who believed it referred to the Martyrs of Najrān: Nöldeke in a footnote to his partial edition of al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (1879), Ignazio Guidi in his *L'Arabie antéislamique* (1921), Richard Bell in his *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (1926) (before he changed his mind in 1939), and Tor Andrae in his *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (1926).⁵⁴ Ahrens also sees no reason to reject the Islamic tradition's understanding of this verse and comes out strongly in support of it as referring to the Massacre of Najrān.

Ahrens' analysis warrants a closer look.⁵⁵ First of all, he takes Q. 85:4 – *qutīla aṣḥābu'l-ukhdūdī* ('cursed are the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*') – as a cursing formula. This is what Horovitz took it to mean, although as we saw he tried to create a temporal issue, but to Ahrens that is a quibble that masks the fact that the damned people the Qur'an portrays are a real group, the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, who were also the persecutors of another group of people. This is the first step in trying to understand the sura; we have a specific group being cursed for torturing believers. Ahrens then gets to the heart of the matter, Q. 85:6–7, which, he says, 'explicitly' state that this group was sitting around the fire and watching 'what they did to the believers'. He then says: 'The talk here is not about what the sinners would suffer, but about what the believers are suffering at the hands of the sinners'. I will come back to the sura and its translation, but what I want to emphasise here is that some scholars were not convinced by Horovitz's analysis, and

for them the issue was not only who the group was, but also who was doing what and where. Now Ahrens, a rather stolid and meticulous scholar, mentions the fact that there are not many reports of burning in the historical accounts of the Najrān massacre (the majority of the Syriac letters had not yet been published), a point he seems to wish to resolve. In my view, Ahrens remains one of the most cogent supporters of the relationship of Q. 85 to the massacre of Najrān, and Paret's offhand dismissal of his analysis was unwarranted. The fact that Ahrens has effectively been written out of the scholarly debate on Q. 85 by later scholars is puzzling.

Thus, when Régis Blachère, in his 1951 translation of the Qur'an, refused to accept Horowitz's reading of this sura, he was not taking a quirky position on the issue. His stance reflected a solid reading of the Arabic and a refusal to be swept along by a trend.⁵⁶ Blachère zooms in on Q. 85:7, the crucial verse, and states that if Q. 85:4 might be deemed ambiguous, verse 7 'categorically' ('catégoriquement') leaves no doubt as to what the Qur'an is talking about: it is referring to executioners. We have here a group of executioners, a historical group, a group that perpetrated an act of violence that they were (concomitantly) witnessing (and which they are perpetrating [*yaf'alūna*] on the believers). Blachère, however, solidly supports the understanding that this sura is referring to the story in Daniel 3. He even translates *ukhdūd* as 'oven' ('four') and accepts Loth's etymology as possible. However, what interests me here is not his ideas about the identity of the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, whether they were the persecutors of the Christians of Najran or the persecutors of the youths of Daniel 3, but the grammar of the sura, and Blachère, who was a sensitive reader, was categorical – as is the grammar – about who is what here. He does, however, ask whether there might have been a confusion ('confondu') in the Islamic tradition between a reference to Daniel 3 and the historical event of the massacre of the Christians of Najrān, the one bleeding into the other. The trope of the Qur'an's 'confusions' is an old one, which surfaces often.

How Many Victims does a Hagiographer Need to Create a Martyrology?⁵⁷

At the heart of the refusal to countenance a connection between Q. 85 and the Najrān massacre is the historical argument that there is a discrepancy between the Qur'an and the Syriac narratives in reporting the method of the martyrs' death. It is clear from my exposition that fire, and its role in both the Qur'an and the historical massacre, were major factors in swaying the debate. Qur'an scholars seem to have wanted a complete historical correspondence between what the Qur'an states and the historical records and/or the hagiographers' accounts of the massacre.⁵⁸ Scholars who have claimed that Q. 85 presents an eschatological scene have used supposed incongruities as central in arguing why the sura does not, in fact, refer to the massacre. These scholars admit that the Syriac sources do mention the burning of believers, and accept the existence of such reports, but they would either claim that the manner of death by fire differs, or that fire

was not central to the Syriac reports as it was in the Qur'anic narrative. However, even the first Syriac text published by I. Guidi in 1881 mentions at least three instances of the burning of a church with priests inside, and it mentions a *wādī* ('valley') where people were slaughtered.⁵⁹ The Syriac Chronicle known as *Zachariah of Mitylene*, which was published in 1899, includes a similar letter that mentions the episode of burning of a church and all who were in it.⁶⁰ This apparently was not deemed sufficient evidence of correspondence, but soon new versions of the story would appear with more evidence that burning was progressively becoming a central theme of the Najrān martyrdom narrative. The publication of the *Book of the Himyarites*, with its myriad references to fires and burned churches with priests inside is one such text.⁶¹ The *Book of the Himyarites* includes a horrendous scene, one among many, where persecutors fan the fire, and then hurl a woman into it to burn. Following the publication of such texts, one could no longer claim that fire was incidental to the Najrān narrative, yet somehow this denial was sustained. It did not help that Axel Moberg himself, the editor of the *Book of the Himyarites*, adopted a dismissive tone when it came to Islamic narratives and joined the ranks of those who believed that Q. 85 has nothing to do with the Martyrs of Najrān.⁶² Thus, the historical arguments that were made early in the debate have never been revisited, despite the fact that the available material on the massacre increased markedly after 1971, when we had access to the second letter of *The Martyrs of Najrān*.⁶³ It seems that even this momentous publication by Irfan Shahîd did not seem to warrant revisiting the issue, although when he wrote on the Islamic legend of the Martyrs of Najrān in early Muslim historiography, hagiography, and Quranic exegesis, Thomas Sizgorich did notice the similarity between the Qur'anic narrative and the Syriac sources, persecution by fire being central to both (see note 72).

The claim that death by fire was not a prominent theme in the Najrān narratives is actually not accurate, and, in my view, this assertion was only sustained because, as mentioned above, the editor of the *Book of the Himyarites*, Moberg, who was not a Qur'an specialist, was sceptical about the collective Arabic historical memory and favoured the eschatological reading of the text.⁶⁴ He took the view that if there was a collective memory of the Najrān massacre, it had been preserved only in Syriac texts such as the *Book of the Himyarites*.⁶⁵ Because of Moberg's influence, one is willing to excuse the claim that burning by fire played only a marginal role in the Syriac reports by scholars who worked on the sura before 1971. However, as mentioned above, the publication by Irfan Shahîd of newly discovered documents in 1971 radically changed the picture and should have been the moment to reassess the debate about Q. 85.⁶⁶ Yet this did not happen.

Let us now revisit the history of the arguments for the supposed incongruence between the fire motif in the Qur'an and that in the Syriac martyrologies. As discussed above, this was first articulated by Schwally in a footnote, and then picked up by Horovitz.⁶⁷ There are at least two major problems with the 'historical' approach on which this

analysis rests. The first is the presumption that the Qur'an should report fully or accurately about the massacre. This argument has been articulated most emphatically by David Cook in his article on the Islamic narratives of the Martyrs of Najrān.⁶⁸ Cook adheres to this positivist paradigm, as can be seen in his statement that '[c]omparison of the stories above with those of the historical Martyrs of Najrān does not reveal very many similarities'.⁶⁹ Cook is unaware of the hagiographic nature of what he terms the 'historical' narrative of Najrān, but then he is not a Syriac specialist. He proceeds to say that '[w]hile the theme of burning in the *ukhdūd* may overlap with the martyrological narratives, the burning is almost always associated with being burnt in houses or in churches'.⁷⁰ Scholars now can no longer claim that fire was incidental to the Syriac narrative and so, in order to counter the idea that the Qur'anic and Syriac narratives might be linked, a new argument was added: that the burning was different in each case. The fact that the Syriac documents are hagiographic narratives and not pure historical narrative is conveniently ignored. This positivist historical understanding of hagiographic narratives has seeped deep into the scholarly literature on Q. 85, such that even scholars who are steeped in theory and discourse on historiola seem unable to escape this logic.⁷¹ The idea that the Qur'an could have zeroed in on what seems to have been a focal emotional motif of Christian propaganda is never entertained. The second problem with the historical argument was that the fire was not considered significant in the narrative of Najrān martyrdom. Fire is actually central to the hagiographic narratives as they matured, especially in the *Book of the Himyarites*, but more importantly in the letter published by Irfan Shahîd. It is my belief that the Qur'an, as I will argue later, actually picks up the central theme of the martyrological narrative, and amplifies it, partaking in a hagiographical narrative and making fire its central motif, just as the mature Syriac tradition would also do.

The similarities and connections between the Qur'anic narrative and the Najrān Syriac hagiographies are not hard to see, and it is surprising that it was not until 2009 that Thomas Sizgorich spotted the similarities between the two.⁷² Sizgorich's work is a landmark study, in which he pointed out the similarities between the texts, including the fire narratives and the story of the woman walking voluntarily into the fire.⁷³ Moreover, he connected the *wādī* where the slaughter of the innocent took place in the Syriac narratives to the Qur'anic word *ukhdūd*.⁷⁴ His article, however, went unnoticed.⁷⁵ Sizgorich was not primarily concerned with the original Qur'anic reference – that is, he was not attempting to determine whether the Qur'an was originally connected to the Najrān narrative – but he did recognise the connection between the Islamic narratives that appear in *tafsīrs* and the Syriac narratives. David Cook, in contrast, was summarily dismissive of the Islamic tradition, in terms of a possible connection between the Qur'an or post-Qur'anic narratives and the Syriac narrative.⁷⁶

At about the same time, in 2010, David Taylor published his study of the Syriac martyr narratives of Najrān, and like Sizgorich (although independently, since Taylor was

seemingly not aware of Sizgorich's article) has argued that these are hagiographic narratives and not historical first-hand reports.⁷⁷ More importantly, his study of the document published by Irfan Shahîd ('Letter 2' as he labels it) is a turning point in the study of the Najrân narratives. Taylor notes that 'Letter 2 has metamorphosed into a full-blown hagiographical work'.⁷⁸ Moreover, he highlights the 'sadistic and ingeniously cruel tortures' found in the document. More importantly, like Sizgorich, Taylor noticed the high frequency of incidents of killing by burning in the narrative. He states that '[t]here is also much burning of victims, in one case with a martyr being thrust in and out of the flames, in order to prolong her agonies'.⁷⁹ He then adds that many of the victims in Letter 2 have been 'killed by being burnt alive in the church in a group said to number two thousand and to have included "priests, deacons, subdeacons, readers, sons and daughters of the covenant, and laity, both men and women"', and notes that 'Christians are described as running to join them in the flames'.⁸⁰ I would actually go much further than Taylor and characterise Letter 2 as a theologically pointed hagiography that uses death by fire as the backbone of the narrative, in which Christians are presented as fire-offerings by a Jewish king. The incidents of burning by fire are so prevalent that one has to realise that the Martyrs of Najrân were now being depicted as a Deuteronomic fire offering which, by the time of Augustine (d. 430 CE), was understood as a typological representation of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross in Christianity.⁸¹

There was an incremental increase in the use of the fire as the mode of death in the Syriac narratives as they were retold. Accordingly, the version of the letter preserved in the early *Chronicle of Zuqnîn* has no reports of any victims being burned.⁸² The only use of fire in this narrative is the burning of the dug up bones of the dead bishop of the city.⁸³ In the second iteration of the narrative, however, the people gathered in the church are burned, as in the letter published by I. Guidi.⁸⁴ (On the basis that the fire motif should be used as the central criterion in assessing the stemma of the letters, I would move the letter in *Chronicle of Zuqnîn* higher up in the manuscript stemma provided by Taylor.⁸⁵) Seen in this light, the Qur'an is referring in Q. 85 to what has become a persecution of fire, and we can now see why this sura is a narrative of burning: it brings the hagiographic developments in the Syriac narrative to an apex. Yet the similarities do not end there, the Syriac narratives all make reference to a *wādī* in which the victims are murdered and their bodies dumped, and the mention of the *wādī* is as prevalent as that of the fire.⁸⁶ It seems clear, on this basis, that the Qur'an is echoing the mature Syriac hagiography about the martyrs, a martyrdom of burning, of offerings to God, especially as reflected in Letter 2; and that the Qur'an is no less hagiographical here than the Syriac narratives. At the time the twentieth-century debates over Q. 85 were ongoing, Tor Andrae had already noted the absurdity of the expectation that the Qur'an should be treated as a historical document, highlighting that Muḥammad 'was not familiar with the historical facts, but with the legendary stories

circulating during his lifetime'.⁸⁷ However, Tor Andrae's insights went unheeded, especially by Rudi Paret.

The 'People of the Ditch' Pericope: Q. 85:4–12

It is now time to offer a detailed analysis of Q. 85. My aim is not to focus on Q. 85:4 'Cursed (literally 'murdered') are the People of the Ditch (*aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*)' or the identity of the people in question. I am rather interested in the setting of the sura. This pericope comprises two parts, verses 4–9 and 10–11, and both parts are joined by the particle *idh*, the conjunction *wa-*, and *inna* in the two last verses conclusion statements (the emphatic particle *inna*). Verses 6–8 are of fundamental importance, as they are determinative in terms of meaning, and must not be overlooked. The first thing to ascertain is the referent of the pronoun *hum* ('they') that is used emphatically in verses 6 and 7.

Q. 85:6, literally, 'And they (*hum*) around it (the fire) sitting' (*idh hum ʿalayhā quʿūdun*) includes several elements that need clarification. First, as mentioned above, who is the referent of *hum* (third masculine plural pronoun) here, and what does *ʿalayhā* (lit. 'on it', feminine singular) refer to? The only masculine plural noun of a group of human beings mentioned in the passage is the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* of verse 4: there is no other group for *hum* to refer to, so *hum* must refer to the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*. The only other feminine noun preceding verse 6 is *nār* in verse 5, *al-nāri dhāti'l-wuqūdi* ('the well-stoked fire'). Verse 6 should thus be read: 'and they, the People of the Ditch, are "around" or "in, above, inside" it, the fire, sitting'.

If the pronouns and their referents are rather a straightforward matter – and no one is disputing the referents – the question of exactly where the People of the Ditch are 'sitting' is still to be resolved. Are they sitting 'in' the fire or 'around' it? Scholars who have read this passage as a reference to the Martyrs of Najrān have understood it to mean they were sitting around the fire, stoking it, while those who have understood it as an eschatological reference have assumed it meant that they were sitting in it. The question is thus: are they being tortured by the fire, or are they stoking it? The root *q-ʿ-d* used in Q. 85:6 occurs frequently in the Qur'an, and it is essential that we have an overall picture of how it is used. The first thing to notice is that of the 31 uses of the root and its permutations, none is used to describe Hell, and the verb is never used in the context of fire apart from this usage. That is to say, there is no other instance in which anyone is described in the Qur'an as sitting in a fire being tortured using this root. As a matter of fact, the Qur'an does not use the concept of 'placement upon fire' as a concept of torture; rather, it uses other verbs, mainly of the root *ṣ-l-y*, 'to roast'.⁸⁸ The root *q-ʿ-d* is, however, used in the context of war, strife, and ambush. Thus, the devil promises to 'sit on [God's] straight path' (*la-aqʿudanna lahum ṣīrāṭaka'l-mustaqīma*) so as to cause the believers to go astray (Q. 7:16). And in his preaching, the prophet Shuʿayb

asks his people 'not to sit on all the paths threatening and obstructing from the path of God' (*wa-lā taq'udū bi-kulli širāṭin tū'idūna wa-tašuddūna 'an sabīli'llāhi*, Q. 7:86). In Q. 9:5, God orders the Muslims to declare war on the unbelievers in an all-out call to arms. It is worth quoting this verse in full, since this is one of the clearest examples of the use of the root *q-c-d* to refer to an act one performs during war:

When the holy months are over, kill the unbelievers wherever you find them, take them [as prisoners], besiege them, and sit in ambush (*aq'udū lahum*) everywhere for them, if they repent, perform the prayers, gave the alms, release them, God is all forgiving.

The root is thus actually used here to denote the station of a fighter in battle formation. In another, similar example of the verb's usage, in Q. 3:121 Muḥammad is described as forming his fighters into battle formation, 'and when you left your family and went with the believers arranging them into their stations (*maqā'id*) for fighting'. One sits on roads for ambush, one sits on roads to divert people, and one sits in battle formation.

Another use of the root *q-c-d* is also found in the context of war, but this time with the sense of 'sitting it out', i.e. not going out to battle. Q. 9, already quoted above, uses the root seven times in this sense in a lengthy pericope, Q. 9:38–102, about refusal to fight and not going into battle when ordered to do so. This passage is a long discourse on fighting, spending on war, and the will to fight, in which the word used to describe those unwilling to join the call for conscription is *qā'idīn*. The Qur'an derisively tells these deserters to 'sit with the sitters' (*uq'udū ma'a'l-qā'idīna*, Q. 9:46). Indeed, in Q. 9:81 enthusiastic deserters are described as being happy in their stations (*maqā'idihim*) back home, here using the same word for 'battle station' to mockingly jeer at their cowardice. Finally, *qā'id* is the technical term used in the Qur'an for those unable to go to war because of bodily imperfections, or who have valid excuses not to fight, as in Q. 4:95, and for women who have ceased to be sexually active, as in Q. 24:60.

The root *q-c-d* is thus often tied to both the intention to do something, and war. In the Qur'anic context, it seems to denote a resolution to act or not to act – usually the most momentous of acts: the decision to carry or not carry arms. The root is of course also used with the simple meaning 'to sit', especially with or in the company of people (Q. 6:68, Q. 4:140, etc.), but it is most often tied to war settings, and it is even used to describe a state of being, as in Q. 17:22, in which the Qur'an states 'do not take another god along with God lest you sit despised and defeated', and Q. 17:29. *Q-c-d* in the Qur'an is thus used to denote both a mental state and a physical position expressing intentionality and positionality.

The root *q-c-d* is also used twice in an eschatological context. The first occasion is in reference to the righteous who are dwelling in Paradise and among rivers, 'in a seat

(*maq^cad*) of righteousness with a mighty king' (Q. 54:54–55, cf. Q. 44:51 *maqāmin amīnin*). The second, and perhaps the most ominous usage of the root, is in Q. 50:17, which describes the two angelic figures that are sitting in wait, keeping watch over human beings and their sins. The grammatical form of *q-^cd* used here is exactly the same as that in Q. 85:6 – *qa^cīd* (singular with *ī* instead of *ū*, but the same noun formation). These mysterious threatening beings are described as 'sitting (lurking) and watching mightily' (Q. 50:18, *raqībun 'atīdun*). Extrapolating from this use then, Q. 85:6 is describing not someone sitting within a burning fire, but someone lurking beside a fire in a menacing way intending on doing something. For dwelling in fire and Hell, the Qur'an uses the expression *fī'l-nār* ('in fire', e.g. Q. 59:17, among many), and when it uses verbs it uses other roots and never *q-^cd*, notably *m-k-th* ('to dwell', Q. 43:77 for Hell, Q. 18:3 for Heaven), *l-b-th* ('to stay in a place', Q. 78:23), *a-w-y* ('to have refuge in', cf. Q. 45:34, Q. 32:20), *th-w-y* ('to rest in a place', cf. Q. 47:12), *l-q-y* ('to throw', as in *ulqiyā*, Q. 41:40), and *'-r-d* ('to expose', Q. 40:46).⁸⁹

A translation of Q. 85:6 is, then: 'There they, the People of the Ditch, are, around the fire, sitting menacingly'.⁹⁰ The following verse, Q. 85:7, makes this even clearer, through its use of the conjunction *wa-*:

and they (*wa-hum*, this is the same *hum* as in Q. 85:6), in what they are doing to the believers, witnessing.

As I have previously stated, Q. 85:7 is the crux of Q. 85. If the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* were being tortured, they would surely not simultaneously be witnessing what they were doing to the believers? The tenses of the verbs and the temporal structure in the two verses are connected; they describe different actions happening at the same time. The two verses are temporally and structurally tied: what is happening in the first verse continues to happen in the following verse. Paret asserts that one would have expected a different tense for the verb of Q. 85:7, because he wanted the verse to be temporally different from that in verse 6, thus allowing for a relocation into an eschatological setting.⁹¹ It is, likewise, not for nothing that Régis Blachère was so adamant about his own reading of the text and dismissive of Horovitz's proposed understanding.⁹² Horovitz, in his reading of the text, separates the two Qur'anic verses temporally, asserting:⁹³

I would like nevertheless to agree with Grimme in his book *Mohammed* that *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* are not a group of pious believers that were thrown into a fire pit in the forgotten past, but they are rather fallen sinners in hellfire, who themselves on the day of Judgment will bear witness (testify) to what they did to their believing Meccan relatives.

Horovitz here separates the suffering of those burned in the fire temporally from the Qur'anic present, placing it in the future rather than interpreting it as an experience

undergone by believers in this world. But that is not what the two verses are saying, as it is clear from the language used that whatever is happening in verse 6 is happening at the same time as the events of verse 7. In a footnote to this sentence, Horovitz does, however, give an alternative reading: 'while they the sinners witness or watch over what one is doing to the believers in Paradise' – a reading that he himself finds improbable. I would like to add that this is an impossible reading, one cannot separate the phrase '*wa-hum ʿalā mā yafʿalūna bi'l-muʿminīna shuhūdun*' (lit. 'and they witnessing what they are doing to the believers') from the previous verse. The ones doing the sitting around the fire are doing something to the believers, and at the same time. Horovitz's way of dealing with the verb *yafʿalūna* in verse 7, a verb that shows that the whole sura should be viewed as inhabiting one temporal setting, is to rather too conveniently claim that so 'real' is this experience that Muḥammad was experiencing it as if it were happening in the present.⁹⁴ One can see why Paret also dwelt on this same verb and why, to his credit, he chose to quote Horovitz's footnote rather than his text in his *Konkordanz*. The repentant Richard Bell, meanwhile, provides a proper translation – the same translation I propose – which makes his interpretation of this verse all the more perplexing, as if he had changed his mind about the reference but not the translation:⁹⁵

4. Slain be the fellows of the Pit,
5. The Fire fed with fuel!
6. See them by it sitting,
7. While they of what they do with the believers are witnesses.

Q. 85:8–9 continue the pericope, verse 8 connecting itself to the previous narrative with the conjunction *wa-*: *wa-ma naqamū minhum illā an yuʿminū bi'llāhi'l-ʿazīzi'l-ḥamīd*, i.e. 'and they (*aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*) took vengeance on them (the believers) only because they believed in God the mighty and praised one'. The verb *naqamū* ('to take vengeance on someone because of their faith') in Q. 85:8 is used elsewhere in the Qur'an in another torture scene, when Pharaoh tortures his magicians after they believed in the God of Moses (Q. 7:126, see also Q. 5:59). The verb is also used in the context of God enacting His vengeful punishment on the evildoers (see, for example, Q. 43:25 and 55, for just two of many instances). It is a verb indicative of exacting punishment or torture. Q. 85:9, the next, and final, verse in this part of the pericope, then qualifies God, adding: 'The One who has the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and God witnesses everything'. Thus, these two verses provide us with the lesson of this story. Before turning to the next part of this pericope, Q. 85:10–11, let me summarise what it says so far: According to Q. 85:4–9, there is a cursed group, called the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, who are menacingly sitting around a blazing fire fed with fuel, and while they are around that fire, they are aware, witnessing, that what they are doing to the believers is torture. They hate the believers and take vengeance on them because the believers believe in God,

a God who is mighty and who is in control of the heavens and the earth and witnesses everything.

Q. 85:10–11

There is a consensus among scholars that verses Q. 85:7–11 are a later addition to this early sura, and I will discuss the significance of this later in this article. These two concluding verses of the pericope have never been brought to bear on the story of the Martyrs of Najrān. They are, however, integral to the narrative and indicate a deliberate attempt to bring greater resonance to the finale of this drama. Q. 85:10 in particular deserves examination. The verse reads: ‘Those who torture (or persecute, *fatānū*) the male believers and the female believers (*al-mu'mināti*) and do not repent shall have the torture of Hell and the torture of burning (*‘adhābu al-ḥarīqi*)’. The specification of the gender of the believers is unusual here, and the pairing of male and female believers is rare in the Meccan milieu. Of the twelve occurrences of this pairing in the Qur'an, ten are in Medinan verses, and only two in Meccan suras, in Q. 85:10 and Q. 71:28. Angelika Neuwirth has discussed the use of gender specific language in this verse and tied it to Medinan societal developments in the preaching of Muḥammad.⁹⁶ I actually think that this rare pairing is used here because of the prominence of women's martyrdom narratives in the Martyrs of Najrān hagiographies. In my view, the mature narratives of the Martyrs of Najrān had two main elements that distinguish them: death by fire, which I have already addressed, and a preponderance of women's martyrdom narratives.⁹⁷ Sizgorich has already noted that mothers and children (he did not say women) were a central theme in these hagiographies,⁹⁸ and that women in general became central as the narrative developed.⁹⁹ Sizgorich was apparently not aware that the Islamic Najrān narrative, when it first appeared tied to the Qur'an in the commentary of Muqātil, contained the two features we encounter in the mature Syriac narratives: death by fire and the centrality of women in the heroism shown by the persecuted believers.¹⁰⁰ The fact that Q. 85:10 presents what is the only instance of female-specific persecution in the Qur'an is not, I believe, a coincidence.

Verse 85:10 ends with a hendiadys: ‘they will have the torture of Hell, and they will have the torture of burning’ (*fa-lahum ‘adhābu jahannama wa-lahum ‘adhābu’l-ḥarīqi*). This tautological double phrase is never used again in the Qur'an and is remarkable. The first part of the phrase ‘torture by burning’ is only mentioned five times in the entire Qur'an,¹⁰¹ and, significantly, the four other instances are all in Medinan suras. Q. 85:10 is thus the only Meccan verse to contain this rather unusual expression. Once again, I do not think this is a coincidence.¹⁰² Rather, this is an allusion to the burning motif of the martyrdom narratives – and not a subtle one. The pointed reference to the torture by burning that those who persecute believers will undergo is nothing short of a direct reference to Q. 85:5–6, ‘the fire stoked, they around it sitting menacingly’, describing a commensurate punishment for the torture they have inflicted.

The Original Structure of Q. 85 and Later Additions

As previously mentioned, there is consensus among scholars that verses 7–11 are a later addition to Q. 85.¹⁰³ This is an important feature of this rather short early Meccan sura that requires explanation. Of all the scholars who have studied this sura, Angelika Neuwirth, who is the only one to have offered an extensive discussion of both Q. 85 and the division of the sura,¹⁰⁴ has attempted to offer a sustained analysis as to why it was reworked.¹⁰⁵ She sees this reworking as having been effected in two stages: verses 7–9 were added first in the late Meccan period, then verses 10–11 were added during the Medinan period.¹⁰⁶ Verses 7–9 were added, according to Neuwirth, because of an ambiguity in verse 3 ('and I swear by a witness and a witnessed'), which provoked the need for an explanation in the late Meccan period. The evildoer in verse 7, according to Neuwirth, is now the one witnessing the act of persecution. She claims that the addition dates to a time when the threats to Muḥammad from unbelievers were no longer just verbal but now involved physical harassment (this is based on Neuwirth's understanding of the root *n-q-m* in Q. 85:8, with which I disagree, as clarified below), and so this verse declares the believers to be victims of the evildoers because of their religious beliefs. Much later, in Medina, according to Neuwirth, it appeared to the community that the explanation offered in Mecca was rather weak, and so it was rethought in the context of the new Medinan religio-political milieu, in which this harassment was not seen as mere abuse but as persecution.¹⁰⁷

It is not clear to me why a two-step reworking of Q. 85 is proposed. Neuwirth seems to see a marked difference between the verb *n-q-m* used in verse 8 and *f-t-n* used in verse 10, and on that basis asserts that each verse comes from a different moment in Muḥammad's career. Actually, *n-q-m* (which Neuwirth claims dates to the late Meccan period) is far more appropriate a verb when used to kill or annihilate one's enemy in the Qur'an than *f-t-n*. Indeed, a verse like Q. 68:6 uses the root *f-t-n* as something that both Muḥammad and his opponents could be described as suffering from. Verse 8 is as indicative of persecution as verse 11. It is also not clear that this elaboration is about Muslims, and why would a victorious Muḥammad come back to a persecution story with such a meek voice? There is no agency here for the believers persecuted, and no reflection of Medina as a safe haven for the Muslims. When Muḥammad discussed in retrospect the untenable situation of his group in Mecca, he offered immigration as the remedy, not God interfering directly (see, for example, Q. 4:97–100 and Q. 29:65). When the Qur'an uses the verb *n-q-m* in the same phraseology as in Q. 85:8 to describe the Muslims' own situation it has a different possessive pronoun: *minnā* ('from us', see Q. 7:126) instead of *minhum* ('from them'). There is no evidence that Q. 85 is describing Muḥammad's Meccan community. I therefore believe that Q. 85 came again to the attention of Muḥammad because of theological issues that rose later in Medina, and that the reworking was done once and in the Medinan period.

The arguments made by Neuwirth for the additions to Q. 85 are also unconvincing. Verse Q. 85:3 is no less ambiguous than the opening verses of many other early Meccan suras (for example, Q. 81, Q. 79, Q. 77, and Q. 56), and Neuwirth makes no comment about the fact that her proposed reworking involves the addition of more than 140 percent new material (the old word count is 45, the newly added material is 63 words). She does not address the fact that no other early Meccan suras involve persecution of Muḥammad and his followers; actually, at most the difficulties experienced by Muḥammad in these are jeering and name calling, and people laughing at and mocking the believers (see, for example, Q. 83:29–36, and also Q. 96:9–15, Q. 104:1, and Q. 70:42). Early Meccan suras usually present Muḥammad as the protagonist, as yet without a community around him (Q. 76:24). Q. 85, moreover, has nothing of the characteristics of suras that describe Hell dating from the early Meccan period: these do not mince their words, and they are not ambiguous in their terminology and phrasing. Hell in the Qur'an is also not a trench. It is a topography that has trees (Q. 56:51–56 and Q. 17:60),¹⁰⁸ and levels (Q. 4:145); it also has long chains (Q. 69:32 describes a seventy cubits length chain), and those who dwell within it have food and water (Q. 88:5–7 and Q. 69:36). It also has seven gates (Q. 15:44, Q. 16:29, Q. 39:72, and Q. 40:76), and hot springs (Q. 88:5), and the food is a horrible plant that even camels refuse to eat (Q. 85:6). Finally, it has pillars extended (Q. 104:9), a detail that implies spaciousness. Hell in the Qur'an was also made of layers that encompass levels of severity of torment, as Q. 4:145 makes clear. In Hell, the damned seem to be able to see and hear the glorious lives of those who dwell Paradise, and they are able to talk to each other (Q. 7:50).¹⁰⁹ Finally, Hell in the Qur'an is never described with the word *ukhdūd*. Hell does have various names, and these are continuously repeated in the Qur'an, while *ukhdūd* is a hapax legomena. On the basis of these considerations, it is my opinion that *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* is a colourful term used to describe a group of people, just as *aṣḥāb al-fīl* denotes 'the People of the Elephant'.

It is my belief that Muḥammad revisited Q. 85 after it became a theological liability that could not be left unclarified. If the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* were Christian martyrs, then a reworking was necessary after Muḥammad had outlined his opposition to major Christian doctrines in Q. 3. This sura, which is a lengthy polemic against Christianity and Judaism, and a strong defence of the new religion's place in God's plan, constitutes a turning point in the relationship of the nascent Muslim community to previous dispensations.¹¹⁰ A verse like Q. 3:19 – a supersessionist proclamation unlike anything seen before in the Qur'an – leaves no place for any ambiguity towards Christianity. By the time of Q. 3:59, Christianity is redefined, and Jesus is now like Adam; both were created by God out of earth. The Qur'an seems to be adopting the typological designation of Jesus as the New Adam by underscoring his humanity. If there is a period in Muḥammad's career when he would have revisited his earlier revelation to 'fix' any Christological implications, it would have been after Q. 3 was proclaimed,

because of the anti-Trinitarian stance of this sura. For this reason, I think that Q. 85 was lengthened at some point after Q. 3 was composed, and that there is, in fact, no need to postulate that Q. 85 was revisited on two separate occasions.

In the original schema of Q. 85, the Qur'an had not made it clear that the believers (Christian believers in the original narrative) believed in one God and were persecuted because they were believers, rather than for some other reason (such as belief in the divinity of Jesus). The original Q. 85 was not discursive, certainly not in the way that Q. 18 is with its reworked elaboration on the beliefs of the protagonists of the Christian martyrdom story of the Sleepers of the Cave, which was 'monotheised', so to speak. The situation would change radically after the additions of Q. 85:7–11, and suddenly the similarities between Q. 8 and Q. 18 become remarkable. Q. 18:13–14 transforms the Christian Sleepers of Ephesus into radical monotheists:

We tell you the story of their news in truth: they were youngsters who believed in their Lord, and We increased their faith. We made firm their hearts when they resisted and said our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and we shall not worship beside Him another God [and if we do worship another God beside the God] we have spoken untruth.

The first two verses added to Q. 85 are, as in Q. 18, a reaffirmation that the protagonists 'believed in God the mighty and praiseworthy, the One who has the kingship of the heavens and the earth and is capable of anything' (Q. 85:8–9). These clarify any ambiguity about the nature of the faith of a previous community the Muslims were asked to honour. There would have been no reason whatsoever to revisit Q. 85 if it were an eschatological sura: the clarification is required not because a scene in Hell needed to be elaborated upon, but because a martyrdom narrative needed to be set straight. Verses 10 and 11 thus provide a summary of the persecution and the punishment awaiting the unbelievers. The form the changes take also raises a significant question: if these two verses were added in Medina, why would they still be using the rhetoric of 'God as the sole punisher' that is characteristic of the Meccan Qur'an's discourse when in Medina the believers are well on their way to being God's instrument to chastise the unbelievers (cf. Q. 9:14)?

Q. 85:8–11, moreover, are a remarkable addition to such a short sura, or for that matter would be to any of the early Meccan suras (as I have already noted the additions are more wordy than the original). The use of the verbal root *n-q-m* ('to take vengeance') in Q. 85:8 is uncommon in the Qur'an, in which it is only used seventeen times. Of these seventeen instances, seven occur in suras that also contain words deriving from the root *f-t-n* ('to torture', 'to subject to an ordeal'), which is also found in Q. 85:10. Of these seven instances, only three use the same phrasing as is found in Q. 85:8. These are Q. 5:59, Q. 7:126, and Q. 9:74, and occur in some of the longest suras of the Qur'an. Why would such a short sura contain additions that exhibit strong similarities with

passages found in long Medinan suras? Of the seven double occurrences of the two roots, Q. 5 has the most in common with Q. 85, and is no less virulent in its anti-Christian polemics. Q. 5:17, for example, declares those who believe that Jesus is the son of God to be in *kufṛ* ('disbelief'), and contains the phrase *lahu mulku'l-samawāti wa'l-arḍi* ('and for God is the dominion of the heavens and the earth') which is also found in Q. 85:9. There is thus a remarkable affinity between the language of the additions to Q. 85 and that used in Q. 5, and also Q. 3. When the addition to Q. 85:10 of the 'torture by burning' phrase is viewed in this context, a rather peculiar set of characteristics emerges that can only be explained as coming from a radical shift in theology that needed to be systematised backwards and made clear.

Recent Scholarship on Q. 85

Moving on to the most recent scholarship on Q. 85: in 2019 Adam Silverstein published an article on the identity of the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* that highlights the absence of scholarly consensus on how to do work in the field of Qur'anic studies.¹¹¹ The article is seemingly unaware of the majority of scholarship on this sura, and when it does refer to some of this scholarship, Silverstein has chosen not to engage with it. This has serious implications that go beyond the issue of oversight and has resulted in a mischaracterisation of the state of the field on Q. 85 in this piece. In the abstract, Silverstein declares that he will argue 'that the verses refer to the events recorded in Daniel 3, rather than the martyrs of Najrān'. However, in his discussion of the sura, he fails to mention that various major scholars have in the past already suggested that Daniel 3 is the referent of Q. 85: Geiger, Nöldeke, Loth, Speyer, and Blachère.¹¹² More importantly, he also does not clarify that the Islamic exegetical tradition itself has already suggested this possibility.¹¹³ It is not until seven pages into the article that the reader is informed that Abraham Geiger suggested in 1833 that Q. 85 refers to Daniel 3.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the opposing view, that Q. 85:4 was seen as a reference to the Massacre of Najrān, is characterised in the abstract as being held by 'many modern scholars'.¹¹⁵

The manner in which Silverstein deals with the fact that the Islamic native tradition had already mentioned Daniel 3 as a possibility is moreover perfunctory. He characterises their hermeneutical strategies as demonstrating that they were 'torn between the options'.¹¹⁶ As I have made clear earlier, my understanding is that the Islamic commentary tradition was attempting to distance Q. 85 from a direct connection to Christian martyrs, and a suggested relationship between the sura and Daniel 3 is one among many suggestions proposed by the tradition to achieve this. Silverstein seems not to understand the inner dynamics of the Islamic exegetical tradition, and this results in a misconstrual of the purpose underlying their interpretative choices and suggestions. He is, moreover, seemingly unaware that al-Ṭabarī had mentioned Daniel 3 as a possibility, citing instead the later authors al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), and

Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372) as examples of what the exegetical tradition had to offer.¹¹⁷ This means that he may have been unaware of the archaic character of this interpretative choice.¹¹⁸

In the case of Q. 85, the exegetical tradition understood it as a persecution narrative and assessed the relevant material accordingly. The profundity of the Muslim exegetes' historical investigation can be seen in a tradition preserved for us by al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) and attributed to Muqātil b. Ḥayyān (d. c. 150/767).¹¹⁹ (There is no reason to doubt this attribution on the part of al-Tha'labī, who was a meticulous scholar.¹²⁰) Muqātil b. Ḥayyān, who was a scholar contemporaneous to the other early exegete cited at the beginning of this article, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, starts his interpretation by stating that there were three *ukhdūds*, three fire persecutions: one in Najrān in Yemen, one in Syria, and one in Fāris (Iran), all involving victims burned by fire. Muqātil then specifies each of these persecutions: the one in Syria was carried out by Antyāḥūsh (Antiochus Ephiphanes),¹²¹ the one in Iran was carried out by Nebuchadnezzar, clearly a reference to Daniel 3, and the third was in the land of the Arabs and was carried out by Yūsuf b. Dhī Nawās, the perpetrator of the Najrān massacre. The tradition then adds a general remark, 'as for the persecutions in Persia and Syria, God did not send any Qur'anic revelations about them, but God did send down revelation about the one in Najrān'.¹²² The origins of the perplexing and throwaway remark preserved by al-Ṭabarī that some exegetes believed Q. 85 referred to the youths of Daniel 3 is now clear. Q. 85 was seen by Muslim scholars as a persecution story, and Muslim exegetes searched and assessed scriptural martyr narratives and seem to have selected the most famous of the persecution stories from the Jewish and Christian traditions. In the process, some thought Q. 85 could be a reference to Daniel 3. Thus, the appearance of the Daniel 3 suggestion in al-Ṭabarī's commentary has a background that al-Tha'labī's exegesis makes clear. The exegetical tradition was far more informed and sophisticated than it has been given credit for, and we should add now the Seleucid persecution as a third interpretive option for Q. 85 that was contemplated (and rejected) by the tradition.¹²³

Quo vadis, Etymology in Qur'anic Studies?

The need to be aware of previous scholarship is also important so that one does not replicate work already done. Silverstein's reference to the linguistic similarity between Q. 85:5 ('the fire with fuel', *al-nāri dhāti'l-waqūdi*) and Daniel 3's use of the root *w-q-d* have both already been noted by Christian Robin in a 2015 article.¹²⁴ But these comparisons between Semitic languages with their extensive common roots are not an argument on their own. The root *y-q-d* (the Syriac equivalent of the Arabic *w-q-d*) is actually the root used to describe the fire and the burning of the victims in all the Syriac documents we have on the Najrān massacre.¹²⁵ I do not think that this is any more a cogent piece of evidence that the Syriac story is more valid an interpretation because of

its common occurrence in both. It is however the new 'etymology' of *ukhdūd* in the expression *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* proposed by Silverstein that needs special attention.

Silverstein is seemingly unaware of the previous etymologising attempts by scholars, such as Loth and Speyer, and proceeds to propose a somewhat bizarre etymology that stipulates that the Qur'anic usage is not an Arabic spelling, but that *ukhdūd* is made up of two words: *akh*, of Egyptian/Hebrew origin, for 'oven' and *dūd* – which can be Hebrew for 'cauldron' or Middle Persian for 'smoke'. He seems to settle on the Middle Persian option, thus *ukhdūd* was *akhdūd* and is made up of two words, one Hebrew and the other Middle Persian.¹²⁶ I do not find Silverstein's proposed etymology convincing. It does, however, invite us to revisit the nature of the word *ukhdūd*.

In an email correspondence with Professor Ramzi Baalbaki at the American University of Beirut, we discussed the nature of the word *ukhdūd*. In what follows, I quote directly from his answers to my query about the morphology of *ukhdūd*.¹²⁷ Baalbaki addresses several issues raised by Silverstein's treatment of *ukhdūd*, including the vocalisation proposed by Hayajneh, which Silverstein adopts, and the notion that the form *uf^cūl* is rare in Arabic.¹²⁸

1. 'Sībawayhi (*Kitāb* IV, 245–6)¹²⁹ mentions six nouns of that pattern: three *asmā'* [nouns] and three *ṣifāt* [adjectives]. One cannot therefore claim that "*al-Ukhdūd* is unusual and strange for Classical Arabic nominal morphology; [or that] nouns built after the form *uf^cūl* are barely known in Arabic" (Hayajneh, p. 135).¹³⁰ Note that the examples given by Sībawayhi are nominal patterns, irrespective of the grammatical distinction between *ism* and *ṣifa*. In footnote 79, Hayajneh quotes Ibn 'Uṣfūr who mentions in *al-Mumti'* only four examples. Hayajneh probably thought that these are the only examples in Arabic.¹³¹

2. Ibn Khālawayhi in his *K. Laysa* nowhere mentions the pattern *uf^cūl*. This means that he does not consider it to be one of the patterns that are so rare that their examples can be counted and exhausted based on his method of "there is no forms of such words in Arabic but (these few words)".¹³²

3. More importantly, Ibn Durayd has a chapter in *al-Jamhara* (II, 1193–5) in which he lists (without claiming exhaustiveness) more than twenty words of this pattern.¹³³ *Uḥbūsh*, *uṣlūm*, and *umlūk* are most interesting because they refer to groups of people (cf. Hayajneh's argument about group and tribal designations being specific to the South Arabian linguistic sphere)! I am sure that if one looks hard enough, one can find other examples. One that occurs to me is *ughrūd* (see Lane *ĠRD*).

4. Now for the assumed vowel shift (*akhdūd* < *ukhdūd*). This is, of course, possible through regressive assimilation, in which a previous vowel is assimilated to a later one. But the problem here is for Hayajneh (and others) to explain that ALL words of the *uf^cūl* pattern were similarly derived from an **af^cūl* pattern. Did no word of the **af^cūl* pattern survive due to this assimilation? Rather, it is much more likely that this pattern never existed in Arabic in the first place, or one would have expected at least some representative words to survive. Furthermore, the feminine counterpart of *uf^cūl* (i.e. *uf^cūla*) is a very well attested pattern (e.g., *unshūdah* [“song”], *urgūzah* [“poem”], *ukdhūbah* [“little lie”], *uštūrah* [“fable”]).’

Baalbaki concludes that, ‘In short, I think that you are right in dismissing *akhdūd* and sticking to *ukhdūd*’. As Baalbaki’s exhaustive analysis shows, *ukhdūd* is an Arabic word, and is not rare, nor unique. That it is a hapax legomenon in the Qur’an is hardly a disqualifying argument for its autochthonous status, since some basic vocabulary words are hapaxes in the Qur’an (such as *j-l-s*, ‘to sit’, in Q. 58:11) and this status has no bearing on their frequency in the language. Arabic is ultimately deprived of integrity by etymologising word games that pay no heed to the evidence from inside the language and text corpus. I would also like to emphasise, in addition to Baalbaki’s analysis, that there is some basic Arabic vocabulary that takes the same form as *ukhdūd*, such as *unbūb*, the part of a branch between two nodes, or simply ‘a pipe’, which is a common term still used in modern Arabic, or *uṣlūb*, ‘a path’, and now in modern Arabic ‘style’ or ‘manner’, or more famously *usbū^c*, ‘a week’, a basic term of the calendar that shows how deeply entrenched this form is. I would also like to highlight that the feminine form is abundant in Arabic, a point raised by Baalbaki. Silverstein either disregards or is unaware of the exegetical tradition which has dealt extensively with the word. In this, Arab philologists gave examples of the form *uf^cūl*, as al-Zamakhsharī, for example, does.¹³⁴ Silverstein also does not appear to have checked if there were variant readings for *ukhdūd* in the tradition (there are).¹³⁵

This speaks to a wider issue: etymology as it is habitually exercised in Qur’anic studies is a remnant of an unscientific nineteenth-century discourse that both idealised Arabic and deracinated it at the same time.¹³⁶ Indeed, the usage of *ukhdūd* to mean ‘trench’ or ‘valley’ is attested in at least two other Semitic languages. For example, in his 2002 lexical study of Qur’anic Arabic, Martin Zammit alerted us to the existence of a cognate with the same meaning in Akkadian.¹³⁷ Zammit was using von Soden’s *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* and he cites the German explanation for the Akkadian (Old Babylonian) word as ‘tief einschneiden’.¹³⁸ Zammit did not, however, quote other usages of the word in Old Babylonian, specifically one which means ‘deep furrows caused by streams of water’, basically the equivalent of wadis in the desert.¹³⁹ Even more intriguingly, the South Arabic Jibbali language uses the term as a common word

to refer to a wadi.¹⁴⁰ This could not be from Arabic, since *ukhdūd* is not a spoken word used in modern Arabic dialects. That a root so entrenched in Semitic languages could be so easily dismissed is an indication of how haphazardly Qur'anic Studies is still practiced. Etymology should be a last resort, and even when there is no evidence from an etymological analysis that a word is genuine, a word should not be declared 'fabricated'. Arab philologists never seemed to have any doubt about the meaning of *ukhdūd*. The new Akkadian attestation corroborates their analysis, but even without this, there is no compelling reason to not accept the determination of its meaning provided by the Arabic tradition.¹⁴¹

Martyrdom and Bearing Witness: Q. 85:3, Q. 85:7, and the Root *sh-h-d*

The two-word verse Q. 85:3, *wa-shāhidin wa-mashhūdin* ('and by the witness, and by the witnessed'), ostensibly clear as the words were, provoked a hunt among Muslim exegetes for their specific meaning. What was God swearing by exactly? Remarkably, no Muslim exegete proposed that this double oath might refer to the persecution story that followed. One can see why the Islamic tradition might dismiss this possibility, preferring to understand such a solemn oath as bearing directly on their own religious experience. Accordingly, this verse became a site for weaving God into the very fabric of Islam, a practice in Qur'an commentary that kept the scripture relevant for Muslim readers, and the identity of the terms proposed ranged from the Day of Resurrection, to Muslim holy days, to Muḥammad.¹⁴² God was read as swearing by the details of the new religion itself now – a trope not to be found anywhere else in the Qur'an. When it comes to modern Western scholarship, only Rudi Paret and Angelika Neuwirth have tried to determine what the referents of Q. 85:3 might be. Most modern scholars who have written on this sura were happy to leave the verse undiscussed.

Of those who do discuss Q. 85:3, Rudi Paret in his *Kommentar und Konkordanz* links it to two other verses: Q. 11:103 and Q. 19:37. Both of these verses speak about the Resurrection Day using the same term as Q. 85:3, replicating *mashhūd* in the case of Q. 11:103, and another word (*mashhad*) from the same root in the case of Q. 19:37. Paret was aware of Q. 17:78 where the term *mashhūd* is also used, but he does not seem to think that it has any bearing on Q. 85:3,¹⁴³ thus implying that the Qur'an is here swearing by the Day of Resurrection and humanity's act of witnessing. There is much to recommend this understanding, especially since the preceding verse, Q. 85:2, is about the Day of Resurrection. In contrast, Angelika Neuwirth understood the verse in two different ways. The first interpretation offered by Neuwirth was understood in the context of the original composition of the sura, before it was expanded; in this interpretation verse 3 refers to a heavenly observer (God) and an earthly observed being (humanity). The observer was also the protector of the observed, a function that obviously applies to God. She then connected Q. 85:3 to Q. 86:4 and Q. 82:10, which,

although they do not use the root *sh-h-d*, depict God as protector and human beings as the protected.¹⁴⁴

Neuwirth moreover realised that verse 3 and verse 7 in Q. 85 must be connected. Q. 85:7's use of the root *sh-h-d* makes it impossible to not relate it to verse 3. In her analysis of the sura as an expanded unit, Neuwirth links these two verses and proposes that the meaning of verse 3 shifted with the addition of verses 7–11 (which were a later addition in her view). With the addition of verse 7, the 'evildoer' is now raised to the level of a 'witness' who is watching the ongoing suffering of the believers.¹⁴⁵ However, this reading can only work if one accepts that the eschatological understanding of Q. 85 is valid. That is to say, according to this interpretation, Q. 85:3 could not have possibly been referring to a massacre in the first place. Yet, in the expanded sura, this verse can now be read as referring to a persecution event. I find the justification for this transformation in meaning unconvincing, but, also, if verse 7 was added to clarify verse 3, does not that mean that verse 3 was intended to mean what verse 7 took the trouble to explicate? Q. 85:7, which Grimme saw as original to the first version of the sura (see note 103), remains central in clarifying the scene depicted in the sura. If verse 3 did not originally mean what verse 7 makes it mean, then there is a serious issue with what Muḥammad was trying to do with his addition. The scenario presented by Neuwirth is too convoluted. If verse 3 is about God the protector and human beings the protected, why does it need explication? Why would Muḥammad then tie the act of witnessing to evildoers, if the original witnessing was an act performed by God Himself?

A simpler reading seems more plausible: verse 7 was clarifying verse 3, and those who were witnessing were the aggressors, and those who were witnessed were the victims. God was swearing by a martyrdom event, using a root that clearly hinted at the Christian usage of the term but did not conform to the Qur'anic usage of the term. This was a solemn, terrifying scene, a return to a simultaneously humanising and dehumanising act of persecution. To persecute, you need to come close to your victim, to witness them, and they in turn know that they are witnessed. While the Qur'an uses the root *sh-h-d* extensively and with various religious denotations, it does not use it in the context of dying from persecution. There is a debate about whether the Qur'an uses this root to denote martyrdom, but no modern scholar agrees with the Muslim exegetes that some verses in the Qur'an do refer to martyrs with words derived from *sh-h-d*.¹⁴⁶ Personally, I think the Qur'an was aware of the Christian term 'martyr' but was unwilling to adopt it for itself as physical persecution as such was not something that early Islam suffered. By the time Muslims were dying for their faith in Medina, they were not dying from persecution but from active participation in war. This, I believe, is why the Qur'an did not care to adopt the use of *shahīd* for 'martyrdom', an act of death that invoked a concept of Christian humility that was thought unbecoming by early Arabs. Muḥammad did not wait to be martyred; he would

emigrate, turn on a dime when in Medina, and wage war against his own tribe. Post-Qur'anic Muslim appropriation of the Christian term for martyrdom is an interesting development, which might have to do with robbing Christians of the exclusive use of religious terminology.

Be as it may, the root *sh-h-d* is used four times in Q. 85 (twice in verse 3, and once in verses 7 and 9 each). It seems likely that it is an allusion to the word for martyrdom in Syriac Christianity, which is derived from the same root. The high frequency of its occurrence in this sura is a strong indication that this was not a haphazard use of this verb, but instead a linguistic allusion that is hard to dismiss once we realise its connection to the concept and depiction of martyrdom in Syriac texts. We know that the Qur'an was not above engaging in word play with other Semitic languages. For example, Q. 4:46 remains an astounding polemical use of original Hebrew transcribed to Arabic to reverse the very meaning of the prayers of the Jews.¹⁴⁷ In the context of Q. 85, verses 3 and 7 seem to be explaining each other and describing an event in which one group was persecuting another, committing an act of persecution with conviction and presence of mind that the term 'to bear witness' carries in Arabic (whether it was aware of the Syriac allusion or not). This was a wilful act of vengeance, a vindictive persecution carried out from motives of religious animosity, not an eschatological vision of Hell.

Conclusion

Between Axel Moberg's adamant refusal to see the connection between the fires of *The Book of the Himyarites* and Q. 85 and Rudi Paret's biased summary of the literature in his *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article on *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, most scholars forgot that the debate about Q. 85 was not as settled as one might have thought. Even as thorough and meticulous a scholar as Angelika Neuwirth, who subscribes to the eschatological understanding of Q. 85, did not fully engage the literature on this sura.¹⁴⁸ However, having said that, it is not as if there were no periodic reassessments of the question. As late as 1974, W. Montgomery Watt wrote a short article with the title 'The Men of the Ukhdūd (Q. 85)'.¹⁴⁹ Watt, a student of Bell and a meticulous scholar, went over the evidence and concluded:¹⁵⁰

All these considerations seem to rule out the eschatological interpretation and to support a historical one, more particularly the reference to the martyrs of Najrān. A reference to the companions of Daniel is not impossible, but the Arabian incident is more likely to have been known, even if only in a garbled version, to some people in Mecca in the early seventh century. It is worth remarking, however, that the point emphasised by the passage – the eventual punishment of those who persecute believers – remains valid whether there is a precise historical

reference or not. The first hearers of the passage presumably thought that it referred to a particular event, but their tradition-based understanding of this event may have been inaccurate.

This comprises one of the most even-handed reviews of the evidence. Christian Robin was far more dramatic in his assessment of the issue, and of the opinion that the evidence is inconclusive in either direction, declaring the situation a 'great embarrassment' and claiming that none of the suggested interpretations are convincing.¹⁵¹ Robin, who I think was treating the Qur'anic account in Q. 85 as a historical narrative, is not alone in his dejection and dismay in the face of the problems it presented. In the Islamic tradition, there was also despair at the proliferation of interpretations of this sura, and even a scholar like al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) exasperatedly refused to come to a conclusion about who it could possibly refer to.¹⁵²

The evidence, in my view, points to the Martyrs of Najrān. Not to entertain the possibility that Muḥammad could reflect on such a major Christian obsession in Late Antiquity about how to manifest one's faith as martyrdom seems to be absurd. It is clear from Q. 18 that the Christian faith and its relationship to martyrdom were on the Qur'anic agenda to at least some degree. The moment we approach the Qur'an as partaking in a hagiographic narrative, and not providing a historical report of the massacre, the evidence becomes irrefutable. The analysis of the root *q-c-d* above is also fundamental in resolving this issue. There is, furthermore, a political dimension to a possible interest on the part of Muḥammad in the fate of a kingdom in southern Arabia. It is debatable as to when Muḥammad developed an imperial political vision, but the swiftness with which his immediate followers moved to conquer Yemen is not coincidental. In a report attributed to Muḥammad, he is supposed to have stated: 'This matter (dominion or sovereignty) was in Ḥimyar [Yemen] and God took it away from them and gave it to Quraysh'.¹⁵³

The Najrān massacre haunts Q. 85, and it likewise haunts the scholarship on the Qur'an. The more the connection between Q. 85 and Najrān grew tenuous in the eyes of some scholars, and the more the scholarship on Najrān increased, the more the apparition of Najrān hovered over Q. 85. One can always sense the ghost of this massacre shadowing Q. 85 in the necessity of insisting on its irrelevance to understanding the sura. Meanwhile, the mounting literature on the Najrān massacre has made the connection more and more plausible. This was a major event, a tragedy that was exploited for propaganda purposes, the most famous of the very few Arab Christian martyrdom stories, and the probability that Muḥammad and his Meccan contemporaries were aware of it only increases with our increased awareness of how massive the echo it left behind actually was. Nagging doubts about the interpretation of Q. 85 have remained among even the eschatological camp of scholars, and one can always sense it in the secondary literature.

As an example of this ever-present shadow, one has only to turn to one of the longest articles written on the Martyrs of Najrān, which is included in a collection of articles on the Qur'an published in 2010.¹⁵⁴ The author, Norbert Nebes, is not a Qur'an specialist, and he clearly feels that he has to mention the by then unanimous scholarly opinion that there is no Najrān in the Qur'an.¹⁵⁵ This massive article, an homage to a connection between the two that refuses to be forgotten, speaks to the hold this story has had on the imagination of scholars of the Qur'an, especially those who do not see a connection between Q. 85 and Najrān. I, however, think there was something to this connection, and I believe it is a historically plausible one. Above and beyond this, it is fascinating that Q. 85, this apparently unassuming sura, is one of the most written about in Western scholarship: the history of scholarship on it provides a window onto the history of Qur'anic studies in the Euro-American academy over the past two centuries.

NOTES

1 I am grateful for Aaron M. Butts for his invitation to the conference 'Ethiopia and the Qur'an' at the Catholic University, DC (April 2019). I would also like to thank my colleagues Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Ash Geissinger for their comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to my graduate students who took a seminar on Q. 85 with me.

2 See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 416.

3 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p. 396.

4 For a history of the entanglement of Ethiopia and Yemen, see Robin, 'Arabia and Ethiopia'. For the period under discussion here and the massacre, see pp. 281–292.

5 See Kaegi, *Byzantium*. See also Morony's review of *Muslim Expansion*, especially the remark that the conquest of North Africa was long and protracted and took 70 years to complete. Such internecine wars are hardly conducive to religious amity.

6 For the latest literature and analysis of the history of the monument and its inscriptions, see Milwright, *The Dome of the Rock*.

7 For a summary of the various interpretations given for why the Dome of the Rock was built see Levy-Rubin, 'Why was the Dome of the Rock Built?'

8 See the conclusion of Gideon, *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine*, pp. 351–353. The Christians from their side were no less vitriolic; John of Damascus was scathing about this new heresy calling itself Islam (see Louth, *St. John Damascene*, pp. 76–83).

9 Earlier Qur'an commentators like Zayd b. ʿAlī (d. 120/737) tie the sura to events in Yemen, with no mention of Najrān, this being the only interpretation he gave. See Zayd b. ʿAlī, *Tafsīr*, p. 381. Mujaḥid b. Jabr (d. 102/722) offers two interpretations, one with no locale, while the other connects the story to Najrān: see his *Tafsīr*, p. 718. For the story in Muqātil's commentary see Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, vol. 4, pp. 647–648.

10 See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, vol. 15, pp. 336–337. See also al-Ṭayyār, *Mawsūʿa*, vol. 23, pp. 92–93.

11 On Abraha and the latest in the scholarship on him, see Robin, 'The Peoples Beyond the Arabian Frontier', pp. 65–77. See also Robin, 'Arabia and Ethiopia', p. 285, for the dates of Abraha's reign.

12 See the article by Kister, 'The Campaign of Ḥulubān'. For an analysis of Kister's dating and new inscriptions see Robin, 'Arabia and Ethiopia', pp. 286–287. Robin posits an approximate date of the Expedition of the Elephant as between 555–565 CE 'probably closer to 565, toward the end of Abraha's reign', p. 287.

13 Robin, 'L'Arabie dans le Coran', pp. 36–48. The graffiti are on p. 47. Note also that before the discovery of the inscriptions about the campaigns of Abraha there were no non-Islamic corroborations of them.

14 Harris Birkeland has published on this sura already, and my analysis closely follows his. Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth*, pp. 100–101.

15 For the summary of the literature on this verse, see Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, pp. 112–118.

16 See Rubin, 'Quraysh'. See also Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, pp. 118–124.

17 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, pp. 236–252. See especially her remark on page 240: 'In Analogie zu dem frühen Schwur dürfte Mekka auch in V.1 als Ort göttlicher Selbstmitteilung zu verstehen sein'. Neuwirth also highlights Q. 95:5 as part of this web of references to Mecca. She does not mention Q. 28:57 or Q. 29:67 – although there the reference is to the sanctuary (*ḥaram*) and not Mecca.

18 The best introduction is by Beaucamp, Briquel-Chatonnet, and Robin, 'La persécution des chrétiens de Nagrān'. See also the literature in Nebes, 'The Martyrs of Najrān'.

19 On the history of the term, see Tottoli, 'New Material'.

20 The literature on Q. 18 is extensive. For a summary, see Griffith, 'Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān', especially Griffith's remark on p. 137, n. 97 that: 'The earlier remarks of Wahb b. Munabbih (d. c. 110/728) show no traces of an awareness of the Syriac tradition'. Griffith makes no connection between the two suras. For a summary of the Islamic literature on the Men of the Cave (Sleepers of Ephesus), see Tottoli, 'Men of the Cave'. See also the analysis of Q. 18 in Brown, 'The Apocalypse of Islam'.

21 See Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p. 396, and the references there.

22 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p. 398. On the nature of Arab knowledge of pre-Islamic history, see Whitby, 'Tabarī'. Nicolai Sinai agrees with Howard-Johnston about the veracity of the Arabs' knowledge of these events, highlighting the massacre of Najrān in particular (Sinai, *The Qur'an*, p. 45). Note also Sinai's reference to the introductory remarks made in Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, pp. 12–13.

23 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p. 396.

24 It is not clear why Howard-Johnston does not refer to the article by Irfan Shahîd ('Byzantium in South Arabia') cited below in note 64.

25 For the literature on Q. 30, see El Cheikh, 'Sūrat al-Rūm: A Study of the Exegetical Literature', pp. 356–364. See also an updated discussion of this Sura and the historical events it refers to in Bowersock, *Empires in Collision*, pp. 60–72.

26 See the English translation of the German 1833 edition, Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, pp. 152–153.

27 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 24, p. 272, where it states, 'and some said it is Daniel and his companions'. This tradition is also mentioned in other Qur'an commentaries; see al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, vol. 29, p. 166, esp. n. 2, which makes clear that in addition to al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī, this was mentioned by al-Baghawī, Ibn al-Jawzī, and al-Qurṭubī.

28 Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, p. 77.

29 Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, p. 77: 'scheint mir richtiger diese Verse auf die drei Männer im feurigen Ofen (Daniel III) zu beziehen, eine Erklärung, die unter andren schon von Albagawī

angeführt wird'. Nöldeke had by then access to the newly published *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* of al-Baghawī.

30 Nöldeke and Schwally, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, p. 99.

31 The expression *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, 'People of the Ditch', in Q. 85:4, was an expression believed by the Islamic tradition to refer to the massacre of Najrān. In Q. 85 it is the People of the Ditch who did something to the believers and tortured them.

32 See Loth, 'Ṭabarī's Korancommentar', p. 621. On the history of etymological studies in Qur'anic studies, see Saleh, 'The Etymological Fallacy'.

33 On Régis Blachère's views and analysis, see note 56 below.

34 See Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?'.

35 Grimme, *Mohammed*, vol. 2, p. 77.

36 Grimme, *Mohammed*, vol. 2, p. 77 n. 4.

37 He was clearly referring to the 1860 edition of *Geschichte des Qorāns*, the second edition had yet to appear.

38 Grimme, *Mohammed*, vol. 2, p. 77 n. 4: 'die zur Hölle verdammten Feinde und Verfolger der Gläubigen'.

39 The full footnote reads: 'Keine Strafgerichtserzählung darf man in S. 85 suchen; die hier erwähnten „Männer der Feuergrube“ dürfen weder mit den meisten der orientalischen Exegeten als Dū Nuwās und seine Leute, noch mit Geiger und Nöldeke als die drei Männer im Feuerofen (Daniel c. III) gedeutet werden, sondern ganz allgemein als die zur Hölle verdammten Feinde und Verfolger der Gläubigen. V. 8–11 ist übrigens späterer Zusatz' (Grimme, *Mohammed*, vol. 2, p. 77 n. 4).

40 Nöldeke and Schwally, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, p. 99.

41 Nöldeke and Schwally, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, p. 97.

42 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, pp. 11–12, 92–93.

43 The full footnote is: 'Man könnte auch übersetzen: „während sie (die Sünder) ansehen müssen, wie man mit den Gläubigen (im Paradies) verfährt“, was mir aber doch nicht wahrscheinlich ist. Auch bei der im Text gegebenen Übersetzung kommt das Imperfekt *jaf' alūna* zu seinem Recht: Muhammads Stoßseufzer ist veranlaßt durch das, was seinen Anhängern geschieht; das ist ihm so gegenwärtig, daß er es leibhaftig vor sich sieht' (Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 12 n. 1).

44 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 12: 'was mir aber doch nicht wahrscheinlich ist'.

45 Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, p. 506. In his article on *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* Paret gives the opposite – and I would say the only correct – translation of this verse. Here is his translation of Q. 85:4–7: 'Slain be those of the trench, of the fire fed with fuel, (lo) when they are sitting by it (i.e., the fire), while they are witnesses of what they do (were doing) with the believers!' (Paret, 'Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd'). To add confusion to the story, Paret's German translation hews closely to Horovitz's translation of this verse; in fact it is almost a verbatim copy. Paret has this translation for verse 7 'und (notgedrungen) Zeugnis ablegen über das, was sie (zeitlebens) mit den Gläubigen angestellt (w. gemacht) haben' (Paret, *Der Koran: Übersetzung*, p. 426). Compare this with Horovitz's translation: 'die selber am Tage des jüngsten Gerichts Zeugnis über das ablegen müssen, was sie ihren gläubigen mekkanischen Landsleuten antun' (Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 12).

46 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 12.

47 See note 45 above.

48 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, pp. 92–93.

49 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 93.

50 Bell, *The Qur'ān*, vol. 2, p. 646. This change of opinion is noted by Paret in his *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, p. 506.

51 Paret, 'Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd'.

52 Paret, 'Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd'.

53 Ahrens, 'Christliches im Qoran', pp. 148–149.

54 For detailed references for these sources see Ahrens, 'Christliches im Qoran', pp. 148–149. Ahrens also mentions the work of Frants Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammads* (1930) in a footnote. Buhl summarises the literature without taking a position; see Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammads*, p. 10.

55 Ahrens, 'Christliches im Qoran', p. 149. The analysis warrants quoting in full: 'Trotz der Einwendung, die Horovitz a. a. 0. 92 dagegen macht, daß nämlich in den christlichen Berichten über die Märtyrer niemals von einer Feuergrube die Rede sei, halte ich doch die Beziehung der Stelle auf diese für richtig. Allerdings fasse auch ich *qutla* Vers 4 als Verwünschungsformel, aber Vers 6 und 7 sagen doch ausdrücklich, daß die *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, unter denen wir nicht die getöteten Märtyrer, sondern die Verfolger zu verstehen haben, an dem Graben saßen und Zeugen waren dessen, „was man den Gläubigen antat“. Es ist also nicht die Rede von dem, was die Sünder einst erleiden werden, sondern von dem, was „die Gläubigen“ von jenen zu erleiden hatten'.

56 Blachère, *Le Coran*, pp. 644–645.

57 I follow the chronology of the Syriac literature on the martyrs established by Taylor in his 'A Stylistic Comparison'. See especially the stemma for the manuscripts on p. 172.

58 Not all of them were so positivist. See note 87 below further for Tor Andrae's cogent unrecognised remarks.

59 I am using the translation provided in Jeffery, 'Christianity in South Arabia'. For the burning of the church with priests inside, see p. 205; for the burning of the church, see p. 209 (reporting the first burning); for the burning of the church and monks and the people and all that was found in it, and the relic bones of the bishop, see p. 210; and for the wadi, see p. 212.

60 Hamilton and Brooks, *The Syriac Chronicle*, p. 194.

61 Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites*. The references for fire are as follows: p. cv (regarding the burning of the church in Zafar, and of burning the homes of those who shelter Christians); p. cx (remembering the burned ones in Najrān); p. cxi (mention of those who were burned because of their insolence); p. cxii (this is the most dramatic of the burning narratives in the *Book of the Himyarites*: we have here the martyrdom of the woman who chose to die with the people being burned in the church, and the 'servants of the unrighteousness' who 'threw wood on wood and made a flame above the fire that was above the bones of the blessed ones' then led the woman by her hand and feet and 'hurled and threw her into the flames of the fire'; there is also on this page a remembrance of those who burned in the church of Zafar); p. cxii (another woman who 'with great joy took upon herself that she should be burned in fire', and another priest [a brother of the holy order] who 'threw himself willingly on the flames', as well as another three of the blessed ones, in total five burnings on this page).

62 Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites*, p. xlvii: 'be that as it may, considering those varying interpretations one can hardly cite Koran LXXX [sic], 4 sq. as proving that the story of the martyrs of Najrān was known to Muhammad'. (Moberg meant to write LXXXV). It is not the first time a Syriacist has felt entitled to present themselves as a Qur'an specialist.

63 Shahîd, *The Martyrs of Najrān*.

64 Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites*, pp. xlvī–xlvii. Irfan Shahīd, in his assessment of the Arabic sources, pointed out Moberg's apparent, unwarranted distrust of the Arabic sources: see his 'Byzantium in South Arabia', p. 67, in which he comments 'Of the various groups of sources, the Arabic ones have been the least appreciated'. See also his footnote 111 on Moberg and his mistakes. Shahīd also refers to J.W. Hirschberg article 'Nestorian Sources of North-Arabian Traditions', and his rejection of Moberg's claims that the Arabic sources were unoriginal. Hirschberg's article is much more critical than Shahīd appears to believe it to be when he states that Hirschberg 'partially corrected' Moberg. A partial text of the lost sixth volume of al-Hamdānī's *al-Iklīl*, the loss of which Shahīd laments, has since been found and edited: see al-Hamdānī, *al-Juz' al-sādis*.

65 See the radically different assessment of the Arabic historical knowledge of this event provided by Christian Robin in 'L'Arabie dans le Coran', p. 56. Robin refutes the notion that the Arabic historical memory about the massacre is a simple amplification of the Qur'anic text and states that it contains original historical knowledge.

66 Moberg, in his 1930 *Über einige christliche Legenden*, pp. 18–21, offers rather conflicted support for Horovitz and Loth when he discusses Loth and his interpretation of *ukhdūd* as meaning 'dark'. Moberg however suggests what is possibly a good reading of *ukhdūd*. He mentions that some Arabic lexicons understood *ukhdūd* to refer to 'the bed of a river' – and saw in this definition a strong resemblance to the *wādī* ('valley') of the Syriac narratives, only for him to then go on to reject this suggestion. He concludes that the mystery of *ukhdūd*'s meaning remains as 'dark' as before ('so dunkel wie vorher').

67 Nöldke and Schwally, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, p. 97. Schwally was aware that the letter of Simon does mention the burning of a church along with all the priests and laypeople who took refuge in it, however he points out that the majority were killed by the sword. Schwally then adds 'from specific pyres or ditches the letter (of Simon) does not report'. Horovitz had the following to say about this issue: 'This explanation [of the martyrs of Najrān] is unlikely because in none of the reports about the event did a ditch with fire play an important role' (*Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 92).

68 Cook, 'The *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*'.

69 Cook, 'The *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*', p. 142, the same argument made by Horovitz and Schwally.

70 Cook, 'The *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*', p. 142.

71 See Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 282 (for historiola), and p. 306 for this fallacious historical reason to reject the Najrān explanation: 'and in any case the Christian accounts do not refer to the martyrs being burned in a "pit" (or the like)'.

72 Sizgorich, "'Become Infidels'".

73 Sizgorich, "'Become Infidels'", pp. 140–141.

74 Sizgorich, "'Become Infidels'", p. 141. The reference to the *wādī* ('valley') has been noticed before but never taken seriously by the eschatology espousing scholars. Only Serjeant takes this *wādī* seriously and compares it to *ukhdūd*, on the basis of which he then argues for a correspondence between the two. See his '*Ukhdūd*', p. 573.

75 Although the article is mentioned by Adam Silverstein in his study of Q. 85, Silverstein failed to engage with any of its arguments. See Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 285.

76 Cook, 'The *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*', pp. 142–144.

77 See note 57 above. See also the precursor work of Ryckmans, 'A Confrontation'.

78 Taylor, 'A Stylistic Comparison', p. 168.

79 Taylor, 'A Stylistic Comparison', p. 168.

80 Taylor, 'A Stylistic Comparison', p. 169.

81 I will give here a complete inventory of the references to burning by fire in Letter 2 to show the prevalence of the motif. See Shahīd, *The Martyrs of Najrān*, pp. 44, 45, 46, 46–47 (a section entitled: 'The Burning of the Church and the Martyrs', which involves 2,000 victims); p. 47 (a woman who wanted to be burned with the victims); p. 49 (two narratives, one about three women walking into the fire consuming the church, the second about a woman burned in her house by the Jews); and pp. 61 and 64 (which repeat the motif of the 2,000 victims). The root used for burning in *The Martyrs* is *y-q-d*, the same as is used in the description of the Temple offerings in the *Peshitta*. Additionally, for the equivalence of the Deuteronomic fire offering with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross by Augustine, see Philip Schaff, *A Select Library*, p. 231.

82 Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, p. 79.

83 Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, p. 79: 'So I exhumed his bones and burned them. I compelled their priests and all those whom I found taking refuge in their church, and the rest, to renounce Christ and the cross. But they did not want to. Rather, they confessed that he was God the son of the Blessed One, and chose to die for his sake.'

84 See note 57 above for reference.

85 Taylor, 'A Stylistic Comparison', p. 172. I would move LC (PsD) to the place of LC (PsZ).

86 Taylor, 'A Stylistic Comparison', pp. 54, 55, 57, and 60.

87 Andræ, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum*, p. 11.

88 See the concordance for *ṣ-l-y* in its (mostly) Meccan and a few Medinan usages.

89 The word 'fire' (*nār*) is used 126 times in the Qur'an and in no instance is the verb *q-ḥ-d* used in combination with it other than in Q. 85:5. Given the Qur'an's tendency towards repetitive use of phrases, it is reasonable to conclude from this that *q-ḥ-d* is not used in the Qur'an in the context of being tortured by fire. The particle used to denote the relation of fire to human beings is *fī* ('in', e.g. Q. 59:17 and Q. 40:49 among many instances), then the particle *ilā* (e.g. Q. 14:30). Human beings enter (*d-kh-l*) into (*fī*) fire (Q. 4:14, Q. 71:25, Q. 4:14), or go out of it (*kh-r-j*, e.g. Q. 5:37).

90 See al-Ḥalabī's pointed explanation in his *al-Durr al-maṣūn*, vol. 10, p. 746: 'and the meaning of "sitting on it" is "near it", as in "on its edge", and the same usage is seen in the poetry of al-A'ṣhā' (*wa-ma'c'nā qu'ūdūhm 'alayhā ay 'alā mā yaqrubu minhā, wa-minhu qawl al-A'ṣhā*).

91 Paret, *Kommentar und Konkordanz*, p. 506: 'Statt des Imperfekts *yaf'alūna* würde man eigentlich das Perfekt *fa'alū* oder allenfalls die Kombination *kānū yaf'alūna* erwarten'. In this instance, he was actually echoing Horovitz.

92 Blachère did not mince words; the syntax is clear, and he uses the word 'categorical' when describing what Q. 85:7 means. See note 56 above.

93 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 12: 'Ich möchte jedoch Grimme, *Mohammed II 77* darin beistimmen, daß mit den *aṣḥāb al-uḥdūd* nicht irgendwelche in die Feuergrube geworfenen Frommen vergangener Zeiten gemeint seien, sondern mit Höllenfeuer verfallene Sünder, die selber am Tage des jüngsten Gerichts Zeugnis über das ablegen müssen, was sie ihren gläubigen mekkanischen Landsleuten antun, V.7)'.
 94 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 12.

95 Bell, *The Qur'an*, vol. 2, p. 646. Compare Bell's translation with Arberry's, which takes into account an eschatological understanding of the verse: 'slain were the Men of the Pit, the fire abounding in fuel, when they were seated over it and were themselves witness of what they did with the believers' (Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, vol. 2, p. 332).

96 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, p. 337.

97 There are many women's martyrdom narratives. See, for example, Shahīd, *Martyrs*, pp. 47–48, for the story of Elizabeth.

98 Sizgorich, "“Become Infidels”", p. 141, 'More notable, however, is the role of mothers and children in the extant Christian versions of the Najrānī martyr narrative'. Taylor does mention the women but does not emphasise their preponderance: see Taylor, 'A Stylistic Comparison', pp. 168–169.

99 Taylor notices that the clericalisation of the martyrs and the raising of their social status become features of the narrative as it developed. See Taylor, 'A Stylistic Comparison', p. 169. The examples from the second letter are numerous, and the women are named.

100 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, vol. 4, pp. 647–648. The interpretation given states that 80 men and nine women were killed, but it then goes on to mention the story of a mother with a child who, after some hesitation, is convinced by the miraculously talking infant to jump into the fire.

101 Q. 3:181, Q. 8:50, Q. 22:9, and Q. 22:22. It is to be noted that all four expressions in these verses have the verb 'to taste' (*dhūqū*), but Q. 85:10 does not. Note also that the first expression in Q. 85:10, 'the torture of Hell', is also rare in the Qur'an, occurring in only three other instances (Q. 25:65, Q. 43:74, Q. 67:6).

102 Remarkably, al-Ṭabarī understood this phrase here as a pointed reference to the manner in which the victims were killed, otherwise the hendiadys has no meaning, he mused. See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 24, pp. 277–278.

103 The first to notice the existence of a later addition is Hubert Grimme; he was of the opinion that Q. 85:8–11 were added later ('V. 8–11 ist übriges späterer Zusatz'). This remark was made in a footnote, for which see his *Mohammed*, vol. 2, p. 77. There is something profound about his insight, and I am more inclined to accept his suggestion than Neuwirth's 7–11. The difference is inconsequential, but I do think verse 7 is part of the original version. For the purpose of this article, however, I go with the scholarly consensus which Neuwirth represents.

104 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, p. 332. Neuwirth believes that Q. 85 had most probably two consecutive independent additions ('sind zwei voneinander unabhängige Erweiterungen wahrscheinlich'): verses 7–9, which she dates to late Meccan period ('spätmeccanische Zeit'), and verses 10–11, which she dates to the Medinan period (see p. 337). I would rather propose a single revision. The sura was most probably revisited in the Medinan period, and only once. Neuwirth has already given the same basic analysis of the structure in her first book *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, p. 223, wherein she calls the verses 7–11 'weitere Erläuterung' ('later explanation') and goes on to say 'Nach einiger Zeit dürften – zur Erklärung des Part. pass. aus V. 3 – die Verse 7–9 angefügt worden sein'. For a reconstructed original Q. 85 structure, see p. 224.

105 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, pp. 341–342.

106 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, p. 342.

107 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, p. 342.

108 And I do believe that the stories recounting how, after hearing Muḥammad speak of trees in Hell, the Meccans started making fun of a Hell that does not burn its trees, are historical.

109 A similar argument was raised by Christian Robin against the eschatological interpretation. Robin states that the Qur'an has a very rich vocabulary for 'Hell' and it never uses a word that could be read with the meaning 'ditch' or 'pit': 'La première est que le Coran, pourtant riche en termes désignant les Enfers, ne se réfère jamais à une fosse (si on exclut Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd)'. See Robin, 'L'Arabie dans le Coran', p. 63.

110 On Q. 3, see Reda, 'The Poetics', pp. 27–53.

111 Silverstein, 'Who are the Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd?'.

112 Heinrich Speyer, writing in 1935, gave one of the strongest arguments in defence of a Daniel 3 connection, although he remained uncommitted. See Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, p. 424.

113 Reading the abstract of Silverstein's article, one is left with the impression that what the author is proposing is a novel idea. Silverstein reinforces this impression of originality in the introduction to the article by failing to mention previous scholars, stating 'I examine the evidence put forward by adherents of the historical approach, and demonstrate that although the martyrs of Najrān episode is most widely adduced in elucidating this Qur'anic passage, it is in fact the episode recounted in Daniel 3 that is most relevant here' (Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 282). This lack of reference to the fact that Daniel is mentioned in medieval commentaries as a basis for Q. 85 pervades the article. Towards the end, Silverstein states, 'it is curious that the entirety of the early Islamic exegetical tradition is unaware of the eschatological resonances of this passage, choosing instead to see it as referring to the Martyrs of Najrān or some other historical event' (p. 318).

114 Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 287. In a footnote, Silverstein mentions Loth as one who 'followed' Geiger in this opinion and refers to his 1881 article, but engages no further with either this author or any of the literature produced by other scholars who held this opinion. Silverstein does not mention Blachère or Speyer, and fails to engage with Nöldeke. Above all, he completely ignores Neuwirth's scholarship.

115 Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 281, states: 'it is argued that the verses refer to the events recorded in Daniel 3, rather than to the Martyrs of Najrān episode that most exegetes (and many modern scholars) opt for'. For a more cohesive summary on this issue, see Tottoli, 'People of the Ditch', pp. 43–44.

116 Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 291.

117 Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 290.

118 At one point he accuses the exegetical tradition of 'absurdity', but Muslim exegetes had their own very real concerns and aims, and such assumptions miss the whole point of what they were up to (Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 291 n. 23). It is disingenuous to use the exegetical tradition to argue that Muslim exegetes did not understand the Qur'an: in many cases, exegetes were offering new interpretations for the language of the Qur'an and undermining earlier interpretations.

119 al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, vol. 29, pp. 170–172. On Muqātil b. Ḥayyān and his use by al-Tha'labī, see Saleh, *The Formation*, p. 248 (no. 34 in the appendix). On this personality, see Crone, 'A Note on Muqātil b. Ḥayyān', especially the references to van Ess.

120 Saleh, *The Formation*, pp. 67–75.

121 It is remarkable that the *tafsīr* tradition preserved the correct form of the name only in one manuscript of *al-Kashf*. See al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, vol. 29, p. 171 fn 1. In the body it is given as *Baṭyānūs*, the form that would appear in most works.

122 al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, p. 171.

123 The information supplied by al-Tha'labī, who was the first to preserve this very early tradition, is a pointed reminder of the complexity of the exegetical tradition. It would be copied from him by later authors, but always in short form. See al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, vol. 29, p. 172 for references. Note that al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505) did not adduce this tradition in his *al-Durr al-manthūr*.

124 Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', p. 318; Robin, 'L'Arabie dans le Coran', p. 62: 'En faveur de cette interprétation, on a remarqué depuis longtemps que le verset 5 du texte coranique, *al-nār dhāt al-waqūd*, décalque l'expression araméenne pour « fournaise ardente » qu'on trouve dans le *Livre de Daniel* (Dn III, 6, 11, 15, 17, 20,

- 21, 23 et 26, *attûn nûrâ' yâqidtâ'*). This similarity has already been noted by Speyer, see note 112 above.
- 125 See, for example, Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites*, p. 18 column a (of the Syriac text: lines 18, 19, 21 – the English translation of this section is on p. cxii); see also Shahîd, *The Martyrs of Najrân*, p. iv (lines 7, 15, and 16).
- 126 Silverstein, 'Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*?', pp. 316–318.
- 127 This correspondence took place in the week of 10 January 2020.
- 128 Email with references sent on 10 February 2020.
- 129 Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb*, vol. 4, pp. 245–246.
- 130 Hayajneh, 'Usage of Ancient South Arabian', p. 135.
- 131 Hayajneh, 'Usage of Ancient South Arabian', p. 135.
- 132 Ibn Khālawayh, *Laysa fī kalām al-ʿarab*.
- 133 Ibn Durayd, *Jamharat al-lughā*, vol. 2, pp. 1193–1194. Ibn Durayd gave 26 examples of this form.
- 134 See al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 4, pp. 237–238. Al-Zamakhsharī gives an example of the form *ufʿūl* with a poetry citation, *al-ukhqūq*. This word is not among those cited in Ibn Durayd. All evidence suggests that the *ufʿūl* form is more common than previously thought.
- 135 See al-Khaṭīb, *Muʿjam al-qirāʾāt*, vol. 10, p. 367.
- 136 On the history of etymology in Qurʾanic studies, see Saleh, 'The Etymological Fallacy'.
- 137 Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study*, pp. 157–158.
- 138 von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, vol. 1, p. 306 ('cut deeply').
- 139 I am grateful to my colleague Professor Paul-Alain Beaulieu for his help navigating Akkadian literature. See von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, vol. 1, p. 306 ('Gießbächen im Gebirge'). The same information is available in *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 6, p. 223 (i.e. 'of the mountain') the gullies of the mountain streams are (so) deeply cut in (that the eyes become dizzy from looking into them). See the discussion in Serjeant, 'Ukhdūd', p. 572, quoting *Tāj al-ʿarūs*.
- 140 Cohen, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 3, p. 960.
- 141 Christian Robin was not aware of the Akkadian and Jibbali cognates and seemed to think the matter was settled because of an article by Marc Philonenko on a similar expression found in the Qumran scrolls. See Robin, 'Ukhdūd'. The Qumran connection is not only tenuous but remains highly speculative; Philonenko, a specialist on the Essenes, is fond of drawing parallels between the scrolls and the Qurʾan.
- 142 On salvific interpretation in *tafsīr*, see Saleh, *The Formation*, pp. 108–129.
- 143 Paret, *Kommentar und Konkordanz*, p. 505, which refers the reader to Q. 11:103.
- 144 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, p. 334.
- 145 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, pp. 341–342.
- 146 On the debate and literature, see Kohlberg, 'Shahîd'.
- 147 See Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, pp. 301–303.
- 148 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. 1, p. 344, under 'Bibliographie', most of the literature cited in this article is missing, especially Ahrens.
- 149 See Watt, 'The Men of the Ukhdūd', pp. 54–56. I owe this reference to my colleague Ash Geissinger.
- 150 Watt, 'The Men of the Ukhdūd', p. 56.

151 Robin, 'L'Arabie dans le Coran', p. 63: 'En conclusion, l'embarras est grand. Nous avons deux interprétations contradictoires, mais aucune ne convient. La première suppose que les « Gens de la Fosse » sont les victimes chrétiennes du massacre de Najrān. Or ces chrétiens ne sont pas tués dans une fosse et ceux qui sont portés sur les autels (égorgés ou décapités) ne périssent pas par le feu. L'interprétation eschatologique fait également difficulté : les damnés sont châtiés, mais non « tués ». Quoi qu'il en soit, il est bien douteux qu'il y ait dans Q 85 une référence historique, comme le supposent les théologiens musulmans'.

152 al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 17, pp. 145–146. This is not the place to analyse this fascinating paragraph, but it is sufficient to state that some exegetes dissented and refused to partake in the tradition and insisted on an agnostic, reserved understanding.

153 See al-Biqā'ī, *al-Nukat wa'l-fawā'id*, p. 700.

154 Nebes, 'The Martyrs of Najrān', pp. 27–59.

155 Nebes, 'The Martyrs of Najrān', p. 49.

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