

## THE ANNUNCIATION OF *SŪRAT AL-QADR*: CELEBRATING THE INCARNATION OF THE DEITY

### 1. Introduction and Summary

A recent surge of articles and books has debated *Sūrat al-Qadr* (Q 97) and its connection to Christmas, including prominent contributions by Christoph Luxenberg,<sup>1</sup> Nicolai Sinai,<sup>2</sup> Guillaume Dye,<sup>3</sup> and Daniel Birnstiel.<sup>4</sup> Luxenberg and Dye have argued that Q 97 refers to Christmas; Sinai and Birnstiel have argued that this archaic *sūrah* instead refers to a Meccan *Gegen-Weihnachten* (counter-Christmas), which substituted the Qur'ānic revelation for the birth of Jesus. But one piece of the puzzle remains missing, and it lies at the center.

Sinai is right that the *sūrah*'s key phrase *laylat al-qadr* ("night of the *qadr*") designates a night of divine revelation. But it designates the Christian revelation, the incarnation of the Word of God, which took place on the Annunciation night. The Annunciation was central to late antique Christianity (celebrated as part of Christmas, as its own great feast on March 25th, and as part of the Epiphany octave), and an important theme in the Qur'ān (which narrates Mary's virgin conception of 'Īsā al-Masīh at Q 3:42-7, Q 19:16-22, Q 21:91, and Q 66:12).<sup>5</sup> Q 97 describes the descent of angels and the *rūḥ* (God's Spirit) during the night of the *qadr*, paralleling their appearance in the four Qur'ānic narratives of the virgin conception of Jesus.

*Qadr* is usually translated as destiny, decree, power, the German *Bestimmung*. Yet Qur'ānic Arabic normally uses this noun form of the q-d-r root (ق د ر) to mean a process of measurement or restriction. The same is meant here. Q 97 uses *qadr* to designate the infinite that was miraculously made finite on this night by its *measurement/restriction*. This process of measuring and restricting the infinite into material form is the same stereotypical description of the Incarnation used by Syriac Christian hymns (which gloried in this paradox) to celebrate when the infinite *logos* descended into Mary's virgin womb. Ephrem's Nativity Hymn No. 21 is so remarkably parallel to Q 97 in describing the Incarnation as a measurement/restriction, and in many other key respects, that Q 97 is close to a concise Arabic paraphrase of Ephrem's hymn.

Efforts to decipher Q 97 have suffered from the implicit assumption that the *qadr* must either designate the physical birth of Jesus or else the revelation of the Qur'ān. But the *qadr* designates something more specific: Incarnation of the deity, described in Syriac Christian form by Arabic language. This critical point has been obscured because the *Sitz im Leben* of this *sūrah* has been seen as either Christmas or orthodox Islamic revelation, with the textual analysis driven by its presumptive *Sitz im Leben* (which must be analyzed secondarily instead).

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\* *Author's note*: I would like to thank an anonymous scholar for his valuable comments and aid on an earlier draft.

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in German, recently republished in revised form as C. Luxenberg, "Christmas and the Eucharist in the Qur'ān," in *Christmas in the Koran*, I. Warraq ed. (Amherst 2014).

<sup>2</sup> N. Sinai, "'Weihnachten im Koran' oder 'Nacht der Bestimmung'?" Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," *Der Islam* 88 (2012): 11-32.

<sup>3</sup> G. Dye, "La nuit du Destin et la nuit de la Nativité," in *Figures Bibliques en Islam* (2012): 107-169.

<sup>4</sup> D. Birnstiel, "Illibration or Incarnation? A critical assessment of Christoph Luxenberg's alleged Christmas liturgy in surah 97," preprint edition [Forthcoming in: Kurnaz et al. (eds). 2015. *Horizonte der Koranexegese und Koranwissenschaften* (working title).]

<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Q 19:22-26 represents the solitary Qur'ānic account of the Nativity (physical birth) of Jesus.

The Incarnation reference of Q 97 became obscured as later *mu'minūn* (believers) distanced their faith from Christianity. Both Sinai and Dye identify an interpolation in Q 97:4 which clarified that the angels and *rūḥ* descend “with their Lord’s permission” rather than by their own free will. That interpolation reflected the increasing Qur’ānic polemic against *širk* (‘associating,’ i.e. polytheism). As the *mu'minūn* moved towards stricter monotheism, they rejected Christian reverence of Jesus and Mary as vessels of the Incarnation. Jesus was now just a human prophet, and angels had no free will. Mary’s virgin conception of Jesus was still acceptable when understood as God’s miracle, his *āyah*. But this miracle was no longer *celebrated* as the Incarnation, which had become *širk* because it implied that Jesus was God’s son, worthy of worship. Q 97 is a relic, composed when both the Incarnation narrative **and** its nocturnal worship ritual were still accepted within the archaic Qur’ānic milieu.

This article will further analyze how Qur’ānic revelation concepts evolved diachronically from roots in Syriac Christian incarnation theology, with Qur’ānic composition following a process of transition from (1) the descent of the *logos* and its incarnation by action of the *rūḥ* to (2) the descent of a divine Arabic Book that Jib’rīl progressively transmitted to the messenger, combined with a prophetic typology that likened this descent to theophanic revelations received by Jesus and Moses. This should not be understood as a unified teleological drive towards a natural end. Rather it represents a profusion of complex and contingent efforts to retain the paradoxical concept of incarnated divinity while combating polytheistic inference.

The analysis will conclude by progressively examining several *Sitz im Leben* hypotheses about what Q 97 was originally composed to communicate, how its interpretation and use may have developed, and how it may have been integrated into the Qur’ānic corpus.

## 2. Text and Translation of *Sūrat al-Qadr*

The transliterated Arabic text of Q 97 is as follows, with brackets around text in its fourth verse that Sinai and Dye identify as a later interpolation:<sup>6</sup>

1. innā anzalnāhu fī laylati l-qadri
2. wamā adrāka mā laylatu l-qadri
3. laylatu l-qadri khayrun min alfi šahrin
4. tanazzalu l-malāikatu wal-rūḥu fihā [bi-idh’ni rabbihim] min kulli ’amrin
5. salāmun hiya ḥattā maṭla‘i l-fajri

The German translation by Rudi Paret, with the interpolation bracketed:

1. Wir haben ihn (d.h. den Koran) in der Nacht der Bestimmung hinabgesandt.
2. Aber wie kannst du wissen, was die Nacht der Bestimmung ist?
3. Die Nacht der Bestimmung ist besser als tausend Monate.

<sup>6</sup> See “Eine Interpretation von Sure 97,” 23-24. The interpolation was intended to clarify that the *rūḥ* and angels descend and act by God’s permission alone, rather than as independent divine agents. Without the interpolation, all five verses are roughly the same length. This interpolation reflects a climate of intensifying Qur’ānic polemic against *širk*. Yet free-willed angels were not entirely eliminated from the Qur’ān; a variety of strategies were used to adapt older Qur’ānic narratives to the newer theological mandates. Iblīs is a fine example. In Q 15:30-31, he is still described as a disobedient angel. “Then the angels [*l-malāikatu*] bowed themselves all together, save Iblīs; he refused to be among those bowing.” (Arberry tr.). As Qur’ānic polemic against *širk* increased, Iblīs was recast as a *jinn* rather than an angel (Q 18:50) to explain why he could disobey God.

4. Die Engel und der Geist kommen in ihr [mit der Erlaubnis ihres Herrn hinab,] lauter Logos(wesen).]
5. Sie ist (voller) Heil (und Segen), bis die Morgenröte sichtbar wird (w. aufgeht).

The recent English translation by A.J. Droge,<sup>7</sup> with the interpolation bracketed:

1. Surely We sent it down on the Night of the Decree.
2. And what will make you know what the Night of the Decree is?
3. The Night of the Decree is better than a thousand months.
4. The angels and the spirit come down during it, [by the permission of their Lord,] on account of every command.
5. It is (a night of) peace, until the rising of the dawn.

### 3. The Scholarly Dispute About *Sūrat al-Qadr* and Christmas

The phrase *wamā adrāka mā* (“and what will let you know what”) usually follows a puzzling or foreign term, which is then explained. In Q 97:2, the night of the *qadr* is what the Qur’ānic audience needs explained. The *sūrah*’s next three verses explain that this special night is better than a thousand *šahr*, the angels and the Spirit descend during this night, and there is peace until the rise of dawn. But what exactly is the special night, and what happens during it? What was sent down on this night? What happens at dawn? To answer those questions, Luxenberg and Sinai have asserted theories that appear quite different.<sup>8</sup> Dye’s article defends the Christmas view at length, improving on Luxenberg’s approach.<sup>9</sup> On the counter-Christmas side, a recent article by Daniel Birnstiel focuses on rebutting Luxenberg. This section briefly summarizes the conclusions of these scholars, as well as their difficulties.<sup>10</sup>

Islamic tradition generally maintains that Q 97 refers to the Qur’ān’s first revelation to Muḥammad, transmitted by the angel Jib’rīl in Mecca.<sup>11</sup> Yet the tradition also claims the Qur’ān was revealed to Muḥammad piecemeal over a period of 20 years, first in Mecca and then in Medina, not in a single night.<sup>12</sup> Many *sūrahs* (e.g. Q 17:106, Q 25:32, Q 76:23) take pains to clarify that the Qur’ān was sent down progressively, which is the only way the *sūrahs* could have been delivered to a historical audience. It is also unclear why the angels and the Spirit of God descend for every command of their Lord in Q 97, which is not how Islamic tradition describes the Qur’ānic revelations to Muḥammad. Q 97 characterizes the *laylat al-qadr* as a special all-night ritual, better than a thousand *šahr*, but Islam has preserved no truly corresponding ritual.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A.J. Droge, *The Qur’ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Bristol 2013).

<sup>8</sup> This is not the first study to note that Luxenberg and Sinai are less distant than they initially appear. See M. Gross, “Christmas and the Eucharist in Early Islam?,” in *Christmas in the Koran* (Amherst 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Dye’s 2012 article was published prior to Sinai’s 2012 article.

<sup>10</sup> For more detail, the reader should consult the original articles. Here it is enough to sketch the general nature of the dispute.

<sup>11</sup> For a representative example of traditional Islamic exegesis of Q 97, see I. Kathir, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Azim*, tr. M. Abdul-Rahman, Part 30 (London 2011).

<sup>12</sup> This incongruity gave birth to casuistic exegesis. Ibn Kathir relates in his *Tafsīr* that Q 97 refers to when the Qur’ān was revealed in one night to a “House of Might” located in the heavens of this world, and only thereafter was revealed in pieces to Muḥammad over the years. *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of problems with the traditional Islamic exegesis of Q 97, see “La nuit du Destin,” 116-125.

Citing such problems, Luxenberg has argued that Q 97 refers to the Christmas vigil. He finds several linguistic Syriacisms in the *sūrah*, and gives it a new German translation, contending that it refers to Jesus being ‘sent down’ on Christmas night.<sup>14</sup> The Christmas-like aspects of Q 97 have indeed long been observed. But many of Luxenberg’s Syriac readings are implausible, and his characterization of Jesus as ‘sent down’ on Christmas fails to address the Syriac Christian belief that the Word initially descended at his Incarnation, as opposed to biological birth. “The Syriac fathers view Christ’s redemptive work as resulting from his entry into three wombs: the womb of Mary, the waters of the Jordan, and the depths of *sheol*.”<sup>15</sup> As the Word of God, the ultimate revelation, Jesus descended from heaven and was incarnated by the Holy Spirit within Mary’s virgin womb. Jesus was already divinity incarnate at his conception on the night of the Annunciation, a prominent paradoxical theme in early Syriac Christian texts.<sup>16</sup> The distinction between Annunciation, Incarnation, and Nativity can easily become confused because Christian tradition commonly celebrates all three events as part of Christmas, as well as by other great feasts (such as the feasts of Annunciation and Epiphany).

Sinai’s article levels powerful arguments against many of Luxenberg’s putative linguistic Syriacisms. But Sinai recognizes that Q 97 conflicts with traditional Islamic narratives, and so he presents his own novel theory. Sinai suggests that Q 97 should be understood as an Islamic adaptation of a posited *altarabische Schicksalnacht*, an “old Arabian Destiny-Night,” into which the Qur’ānic revelation was substituted, something like Christianization of old pagan holidays.<sup>17</sup> According to Sinai, “die *lailat al-qadr* ist deshalb am ehesten als ein bereits im vorkoranischen mekkanischen Kultus beheimatetes Fest zu sehen,” meaning we should see this night as derived from a celebration in the pre-Islamic Meccan cult.<sup>18</sup> Sinai rightly notes that Islam placed the *laylat al-qadr* into Ramadan as a secondary development.<sup>19</sup> He characterizes the Q 97 night as a *Gegen-Weihnachten*, a Meccan counter-Christmas version of the postulated old pagan celebration. Yet Sinai’s speculative reconstruction is as unsatisfactory as Luxenberg’s narrow focus on linguistic Syriacisms. It leaves the *sūrah* a Qur’ānic anomaly, and lacks support in the Qur’ānic text or comparable late antique religious traditions.

Dye’s article greatly improves on Luxenberg’s analysis, while reaching similar conclusions.<sup>20</sup> Dye interprets Q 97 as referring to Christmas, and sees its central term *qadr* as a reference to the ‘star of Destiny’ that appeared at the Nativity of Christ. Correcting significant defects in Luxenberg’s methodology, Dye conducts a much broader analysis of the relevant Syriac and Biblical literature.<sup>21</sup> Dye demonstrates several close parallels between Q 97 and

<sup>14</sup> Specifically: “1. Wir haben ihn (= den Jesusknaben) in der Nacht der Schicksalsbestimmung (= des Geburtshoroskops = Weihnachten) herabkommen lassen. 2. Was weißt du, was die Nacht der Schicksalsbestimmung ist? 3. Die Nacht der Schicksalsbestimmung ist vorzüglicher als tausend Vigilien. 4. Darin bringen die Engel, vom Geist begleitet, mit Erlaubnis ihres Herrn allerlei Hymnen herab. 5. Friede ist sie bis zum Anbruch der Morgendämmerung!”

<sup>15</sup> S. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology* (Washington D.C. 2014): 41.

<sup>16</sup> In Ephrem’s Hymn of the Nativity, No. 3, he describes how while Christ was in the womb he was the one who was forming other infants in other wombs. “For while His Power was dwelling in the womb, He was fashioning infants in the womb!” *Hymns and Homilies of St. Ephraim the Syrian*, ed. P. Böer (2012): 193.

<sup>17</sup> “Eine Interpretation von Sure 97,” 18-20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Dye’s 2012 article was published prior to Sinai’s 2012 article. Unfortunately Dye’s important article is not yet widely available, and has not been translated into German or English.

<sup>21</sup> Luxenberg tends to form insights that he insists on proving by reading the language of the Qur’ān as Syriac, rather than analyzing the text in late antique context more broadly, including a consideration of relevant Syriac

Ephrem's Nativity Hymn No. 21, which is by far the most significant comparative text for deciphering the *sūrah*.<sup>22</sup> The main problem is that Dye's analysis of the term *qadr* as 'Destiny' requires significant work to accept as an astrological Christmas reference. The *sūrah* also seems to have deviated from Ephrem's Hymn in certain slight but important ways, as Dye notes, suggesting that Q 97 might not refer to an orthodox Christian Nativity celebration.

Birnstiel's recent article focuses on rebutting Luxenberg's philological arguments.<sup>23</sup> Birnstiel's skillful criticisms of Luxenberg's proposed Syriac readings are generally effective. Yet Birnstiel's paper does not explore the Syriac hymns of Ephrem, and does not address Dye's article; he largely defers to Sinai on how Q 97 should be understood, while defending traditional Islamic exegesis more strongly than Sinai (which may be explained by the fact that Birnstiel began writing his article several years before Sinai and Dye's articles were published).

#### 4. The Annunciation and its Celebration in Late Antique Syriac Christianity

A brief examination of the Annunciation and its celebration in early Syriac Christianity will help elucidate the corresponding Qur'ānic Annunciation narratives. The Gospel of Luke narrates the Annunciation.<sup>24</sup> The angel Gabriel visits Mary, announces that she will miraculously conceive a son, and proclaims that her son is destined to rule eternally over the kingdom of Jacob. Gabriel explains that Mary will conceive by the Holy Spirit coming upon her, when the power of God will overshadow her. In response, Mary declares herself a servant of the Lord, and asks that everything happen to her in accordance with Gabriel's word.

In Syriac Christianity, the Annunciation is called *suboro* or *subara*, which means 'Proclamation.' It is one of the twelve great annual liturgical feasts. Like the other great feasts, the Annunciation was celebrated as a nocturnal vigil, beginning with Vespers at dusk on March 24<sup>th</sup> and ending with the Eucharist liturgy (*qurbono/qurbana*) on the morning of March 25<sup>th</sup>.

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literature. As Tommaso Tesei has quoted an anonymous reviewer of his recent article, "Luxenberg's emphasis on a Syriac *linguistic* comparandum for *saraban* actually prevents him from recognizing important Syriac literary *comparanda*." See T. Tesei, "Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity in Q 18:60-65: The Quran in Light of its Cultural Context", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135.1 (2015): 32 n. 65.

<sup>22</sup> This is underscored by the fact that Dye, Sinai, and this author appear to have independently discovered this same subtext, which the reader familiar with Q 97 cannot easily miss when reviewing Ephrem's hymns. Dye's 2012 article was the first to explain this critical subtext, which he discusses in detail.

<sup>23</sup> This narrow focus probably reflects the article's genesis, which Birnstiel describes as follows: "The contribution at hand is the extensive revision, refinement and final completion of a paper originally commenced and partly drafted during my time as research fellow at the Cambridge Muslim College (2009-2011). This continued editing and reworking has made it possible to take into consideration the contributions by Sinai (2012; 2014) and Gross (2014)." "Illibration or Incarnation," 1. That explains why Birnstiel does not address Dye's 2012 article.

<sup>24</sup> The Gospel of Luke is the only canonical Gospel that narrates the Annunciation to Mary: "26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her." Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV).

This is because early Christianity followed the older Jewish practice of beginning each new day at sunset, rather than midnight, so that the Annunciation holiday effectively began at dusk on March 24<sup>th</sup>. Annunciation always falls on March 25<sup>th</sup> because that is exactly nine months before Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> – Jesus was incarnated by the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary on the Annunciation night, and was then born nine months later on Christmas. Before being made a separate great feast, the Annunciation was originally celebrated as part of the Epiphany octave. And the events of the Annunciation and Incarnation were also both celebrated via the Christmas feast, since they are central to its narrative.

Hymns were (and are) sung at the Syriac Christian vigils. The fourth-century Syrian theologian Ephrem composed numerous hymns for such occasions. Particularly important here is Ephrem’s Nativity Hymn No. 21, which was sung at the Christmas vigil, and describes the miraculous incarnation of Jesus. As Dye has shown, the language and themes of this hymn are extraordinarily similar to Q 97.<sup>25</sup> For the reader’s ease of reference, a complete English translation of Hymn No. 21 is attached as an Appendix at the end of this article.<sup>26</sup>

The Syriac Christian vigil concludes with a Eucharistic liturgy at dawn. In the epiclesis prayer, the priest asks the Holy Spirit to descend upon the offerings, transforming them into the body and blood of Christ. This descent of the Holy Spirit into the offering parallels the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Mary.<sup>27</sup> The Eucharist is a sort of repeated incarnation, where the congregation mystically unites itself with the divinity.<sup>28</sup> When the liturgy ends in the morning, the faithful are dismissed.

## 5. The Qur’ānic Annunciation Narratives

Turning from Syriac tradition to the Qur’ān, four different *sūrahs* apart from Q 97 narrate the Annunciation<sup>29</sup> and Mary’s miraculous conception of Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

- In the longest account, in *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān*, angels tell Mary she has been chosen by God over all other women (Q 3:42). The angels declare<sup>31</sup>: “Mary! Surely God gives you good news of a word [*kalimat*] from Him:<sup>32</sup> his name is the Messiah,

<sup>25</sup> An initial draft of this article, arguing the same point about Nativity Hymn No. 21, was completed before the author reviewed Dye’s 2012 article.

<sup>26</sup> The classic translation by J. B. Morris is attached. For quotations from the hymn in the body text of this article, however, the modern translation by Kathleen E. McVey (Mahwah 1989) is used instead, which relies on the critical edition of these hymns by Dom Edmund Beck. The reader can thus compare both translations of this hymn. To lessen confusion, I have changed the strophe numbers in the Morris translation to match McVey’s translation.

<sup>27</sup> A sixth-century *ma’neetho* hymn begins the *Qurbono* liturgy by recounting the Incarnation: “I exalt Thee, Lord and King, / Only-begotten Son and Word / of the heavenly Father, / immortal by nature, Thou came down by grace / for salvation / and life for all human race; was incarnate / of the holy, / glorious, pure Virgin / Mary, Mother of God / and became man without any change; / was crucified for us.” *Order of the Holy Qurbono*, Syriac Orthodox Church (2005): 20.

<sup>28</sup> As another *Qurbono* hymn puts it, “Our Lord (Jesus) said that, “I am the bread of life” Who came down from « the heights » to « the depths », to nourish the world. The Father sent Me, the Word without body. Like a farmer, Gabriel sowed Me. Like the good earth, the womb of Mary received Me and behold, like angels, the priests exalt Me in their hands, Halleluiah, upon the altar.” *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> For a fine analysis of the Qur’ānic Annunciation narratives, see generally J. Reck, “The Annunciation to Mary: A Christian Echo in the Qur’ān,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014): 355-83.

<sup>30</sup> Q 3:42-7, Q 19:16-22, Q 21:91, and Q 66:12.

<sup>31</sup> Q 3:45-47 (A.J. Droge tr.).

<sup>32</sup> This phrasing differs from the immediately preceding Annunciation to Zechariah concerning his son, the prophet John (Yahyā). In Q 3:45, Mary is told *l-laha yubashiruki bikalimatīn min ‘hu us ‘muhu l-masīhu ‘īsā*, “Allah

Jesus, son of Mary, eminent in this world and the Hereafter and one of those brought near. He will speak to the people (while he is still) in the cradle and in adulthood, and (he will be) one of the righteous. She said, ‘My Lord, how shall I have a child when no man has touched me?’ He<sup>33</sup> said, ‘So (it will be)! God creates whatever he pleases. When He decrees something, He simply says to it, “Be!” and it is.’<sup>34</sup>”

- In Q 19:16-22, the narrative begins “And remember in the Book, Mary: When she withdrew from her family to an eastern place.”<sup>35</sup> God sends his *rūḥ* in the form of a messenger who tells Mary that her Lord will grant her a pure son. Mary responds “[h]ow can I have a boy when no human being has touched me, nor am I a prostitute?” The following verses give the answer: “He said, ‘So (it will be)! Your Lord has said: ‘It is easy for Me And (it is) to make him a sign to the people and a mercy from us. It is a thing decreed.’” So she conceived him, and withdrew with him to a place far away.”<sup>36</sup>
- In Q 21:91, the audience is reminded “And she who guarded her private part – We breathed into her some of Our spirit [*rūḥ*], and made her son a sign to the worlds.”
- Q 66:12 reminds “And Mary, daughter of ‘Imrān, who guarded her private part: We breathed into it some of Our spirit [*rūḥ*], and she affirmed the words of her Lord and His Books, and became one of the obedient.”

These four accounts explain the miraculous conception in two different ways. In Q 21:91 and Q 66:12, short reminder formulas state that Jesus was conceived when God breathes his *rūḥ* into Mary’s womb (more accurately, the Arabic here means female genitals). That is the more archaic narrative, essentially a rough paraphrase of the accounts in the Gospel of Luke and Protoevangelium of James. In Q 19:16, however, the *rūḥ* is combined with Jib’rīl as a mere messenger,<sup>37</sup> and in Q 19:21 Jesus is now conceived purely by Allah’s command (*wakāna amran*

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gives you good news of a word from him, his name is the Messiah Jesus.” In Q 3:39, Zechariah is told *l-laha yubashiruka biyahyā muṣaddiqan bikalimatīn mina l-lahi*, “Allah gives you good news of yahyā, confirming a word from Allah.” Mary is thus given good news of a word from Allah, his name being *l-masīhu ‘īsā*. But Zechariah is given good news that the prophet John will be born, news which *confirms* a word from Allah. The miraculous conceptions are also described differently. In Q 3:40, Zechariah asks how he can have a son when he is old and his wife barren, and an angel answers him *l-lahu yaf’alu mā yashāu*, “God does what he wills.” The same account is given by Q 19:9. Unlike the conception of Jesus, there is no divine decree in the Qur’ānic conception of John.

<sup>33</sup> The shift from plural angel proclaimants to an unnamed “He” (presumably Gabriel) suggests that two narratives may have been combined. The same shift is seen in the preceding annunciation to Zechariah.

<sup>34</sup> This is similar to the Annunciation narrative in the Protoevangelium of James: “1. And she took the pitcher and went forth to fill it with water: and lo a voice saying: Hail, thou that art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And she looked about her upon the right hand and upon the left, to see whence this voice should be: and being filled with trembling she went to her house and set down the pitcher, and took the purple and sat down upon her seat and drew out the thread. 2 And behold an angel of the Lord stood before her saying: Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things, and thou shalt conceive of his word. And she, when she heard it, questioned in herself, saying: Shall I verily conceive of the living God, and bring forth after the manner of all women? And the angel of the Lord said: Not so, Mary, for a power of the Lord shall overshadow thee: wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Highest. And thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord is before him: be it unto me according to thy word.” PEJ 11:1-2 (M.R. James tr.).

<sup>35</sup> This seems a straightforward reference to written scripture.

<sup>36</sup> Q 19:20-22 (Droge tr.).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the extraordinary Q 17:85-86: “They will question thee concerning the Spirit [*rūḥ*]. Say: ‘The Spirit [*rūḥ*] is of the bidding of my Lord [*quli l-rūḥu min amri rabbī*]. You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little. If We willed, We could take away that We have revealed to thee, then thou wouldst find none thereover to guard thee against Us.’” (Arberry tr.). By this stage, the *rūḥ* had become problematic within Qur’ānic composition;

*maqdiyyan*).<sup>38</sup> With Q 3:47, the *rūḥ* is no longer mentioned, and Jesus (although he is described as a ‘word’ – *kalimat* – that God gives to Mary) is conceived purely by Allah’s command (*qaḍā amran*). This transformation, where the *rūḥ*’s physical incarnation of the Word of God by going into Mary’s virgin womb became re-conceptualized as a simple command (*‘amr*) from Allah, will be discussed in detail below.<sup>39</sup>

These Qur’ānic narratives depict Jesus as a rather generic prophet, and his baptism by John is absent.<sup>40</sup> The major point where the Qur’ānic Jesus is not demythologized, besides his divine conception, is telling: Jesus can miraculously speak at his birth,<sup>41</sup> and proclaims from his cradle that “[God] has given me the Book and made me a prophet.”<sup>42</sup> Unlike other Qur’ānic prophets, Jesus always had the revelation, as one might expect of God’s own *kalimat*.<sup>43</sup>

## 6. *Sūrat al-Qadr* as Arabic Celebration of the Incarnation by Nocturnal Vigil

Each verse of Q 97 will now be closely examined. The analysis will argue that Q 97 should be translated as follows, leaving *qadr* to be explained below:

1. Surely we sent it<sup>44</sup> down on the night of the *qadr*;
2. And what will make you understand what the night of the *qadr* is?
3. The night of the *qadr* is better than a thousand vigils;
4. in it the angels and the Spirit descend [by the permission of their Lord,] for every song.
5. It is peace, until the rising of dawn.

This reading deviates on three major points from most translations. First, *ṣahr* is translated (following Luxenberg) as ‘vigils,’ but if *ṣahr* is understood as the more traditional ‘months of worship,’ the message would remain the same. Second, the interpolated phrase in the fourth verse is bracketed (following Sinai and Dye here). Third, *‘amr* is emended to read ‘song’ (following Dye’s interpolation argument here, not Luxenberg’s Syriac reading), rather than command or matter.

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it could not be rejected outright, but its polytheistic implications required admonitions. Q 17 emphasizes the critical dogma on this point, which is that the *rūḥ* operated solely by the command (*min amri*) of the Lord, but otherwise it was mysterious. If further questioning was conducted along such lines, the revelation would be taken away, since it was being misunderstood in a ‘polytheistic’ sense.

<sup>38</sup> Q 66 was probably composed later than Q 19:19, but it incorporates the old formulaic description of Mary’s conception of Jesus as a biological procreation involving the *rūḥ*, a simple reminder apparently well-known to its audience. Q 19:16-22 is a re-worked version of the Annunciation and Incarnation, in which the troublesome *rūḥ* and the disturbingly physical activity of God have been deemphasized.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Q 17:85.

<sup>40</sup> The Qur’ān does not seem to preserve any narrations about the baptism of Jesus. The only Qur’ānic reference to baptism seems to be Q 2:138, where the reference to *ḥanif* in Q 2:135 is followed by an injunction to take on the *ṣibgha* of Allah, likely meaning baptism. But see S. Anthony, “Further Notes on the Word *Ṣibgha* in Qur’ān 2:138,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* LIX/1 (Spring 2014): 116-129 (recognizing that “modern scholars seeking to translate *ṣibgha* have often found justification for regarding the Quranic *ṣibgha* as akin to an Arabic calque of the Syriac *maṣbū’itā*, or ‘baptism’,” but arguing that *ṣibgha* also means ‘dye’ in a secondary sense. Anthony’s argument about this semantic transition raises issues similar to those discussed by this article).

<sup>41</sup> Q 3:46, Q 19:24, Q 19:29.

<sup>42</sup> Q 19:29-30.

<sup>43</sup> But cf. the prophet Yahya (John). Q 19:12 reports that *l-ḥuk’ma* (the wisdom) was given to him as a child.

<sup>44</sup> Technically the suffix translated “it” is a masculine object pronoun (i.e. ‘him’) in the Arabic, but it makes little difference for the argument here, so the more traditional translation is retained.

1. Surely we sent it down on the night of the qadr;
2. And what will make you understand what the night of the qadr is?

*Laylat al-qadr* should be understood as the night when Mary miraculously conceived 'Īsā al-Masīh by the *rūḥ* of God coming upon her. *Laylat al-qadr* was a superbly descriptive name for the night when Jesus was incarnated.<sup>45</sup> *Qadr* is usually translated as destiny, decree, determination, or divine power.<sup>46</sup> The Qur'ān normally uses derivations of the trilateral root *qāf dāl rā* (ق د ر) to mean power, measuring, determining, or restricting. As the specific noun form used in Q 97, it is used to mean appraisal (Q 6:91 and Q 39:67), estimation (Q 22:74), and measure (Q 65:3). Q 97 uses *qadr* with that same literal meaning – not 'destiny' or 'decree,' as it is usually more loosely translated, but rather 'process of measuring/restriction.'

As a form I verb, derivatives of the same root are also commonly used in Qur'ānic Arabic to mean to restrict, to control, to have power, to measure.<sup>47</sup> As a form II verb, it means to determine, plot, or destine. It is used as another noun form to mean measure, appraisal, or 'as a measure.'<sup>48</sup> Despite its prevalence in translations of Q 97, only rarely does the Qur'ān use a derivative of this root to mean 'decree.'<sup>49</sup> Finally, derivatives of the root are commonly used to mean power or powerful. The general sense is *a process of measuring or restricting power*. But what was measured, restricted, or determined on the night of Q 97, and why was it powerful?

Incarnation provides a beautiful and precise answer. The paradoxical restriction and rendering-finite of the infinite deity was a stereotypical Syriac Christian description of the Incarnation, with Ephrem's Nativity Hymn No. 21 being the premier example of its celebration in ritual song.<sup>50</sup> Compared to other Nativity hymns, this particular hymn focused with special intensity on the paradoxical restriction of the deity during the Incarnation and its relation to the songs sung by the vigil-keepers – by coming down and humbling himself, the deity formed a union between the worshipers and himself, mingling them together.<sup>51</sup> As McVey summarizes in her translation preface, "The song to be sung is one of praise and thanksgiving for the paradox of the incarnation: the Incomprehensible and Unlimited One was confined to the womb of Mary (str. 6-8); the All-powerful One became the abused servant of his servants (str. 13-15)."<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, contemporary Lebanese Christians call the night before Epiphany the *laylat al-qadr*. Epiphany, also called Theophany, commemorates the first manifestation of Jesus's divinity to the world at his baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended upon him. It is a sort of second descent of Jesus into the material world, celebrated by all-night vigil, and thus the Epiphany vigil is quite appropriately called the *laylat al-qadr*. One could call this reversed evolution, in which the Arabic phrase reverted to its older and less forced theological meaning.

<sup>46</sup> Prominent translations of *qadr* as used in Q 97: *Bestimmung* (Paret), Decree (Droge, Salih Int'l, M. Khan), Predestination (Pickthall), Power (Arberry, Y. Ali), Grand (Shakir), Destiny (M. Sarwar).

<sup>47</sup> E.g. Q 2:264; 6:91; 13:26; 16:75; 22:74; 28:82; 29:62; 34:36; 39:54; 39:67.

<sup>48</sup> E.g. Q 2:236; 13:17; 15:21; 20:40; 23:18; 42:27; 43:11; 54:49.

<sup>49</sup> See Q 36:38; 41:12.

<sup>50</sup> There are numerous other examples. As stated in Ephrem's Nativity Hymn No. 2: "Glory to that Hidden One, Whose Son was made manifest! Glory to that Great One, whose Son descended and was small! Glory to the Power who did straiten His greatness by a form, His unseen nature by a shape!" *Hymns and Homilies of St. Ephraim the Syrian*, 182. A descent, a restriction. Or again, in Hymn No. 8: "A wonder is Thy Mother. The Lord entered her, and became a servant: the Word entered her, and became silent within her; thunder entered her, and His voice was still: the Shepherd of all entered her; He became a Lamb in her, and came forth bleating." *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>51</sup> Although Dye and Sinai both analyze this hymn, the debate over whether Q 97 refers to Christmas has tended to overshadow the specific details of this particular Syriac work – the uniqueness of its message, which is carried over into Q 97.

<sup>52</sup> K. McVey, *Ephraem the Syrian: Hymns* (Mahwah 1989): 173.

The refrain of Hymn No. 21 summarizes the hymn's central message – the paradoxical restriction of the deity, which divinized his worshipers: “*Blessed be he who became beyond measure low, that he might make us beyond measure great.*” The hymn describes how the infinite deity descended into our world and took on human flesh within a small womb:

6. The Power that governs all dwelt in a small womb.—While dwelling there, He was holding the reins of the universe.—His Parent was ready for His will to be fulfilled.—The heavens and all the creation were filled by Him.—The Sun entered the womb, and in the height and depth—His rays were dwelling.

7. He dwelt in the vast wombs of all creation.—They were too small to contain the greatness of the First-born.—How indeed did that small womb of Mary suffice for Him?—It is a wonder if . . . sufficed for Him.—Of all the wombs that contained Him, one womb sufficed: —[the womb] of the Great One Who begot Him.

8. The womb that contain Him, if it contained all of Him,—is equal to the wonderful womb that is greater than [the womb] of His birth.—But who will dare to say that a small womb,—weak and despised, is equal to [the womb] of the Great Being?—He dwelt [there] because of His compassion and since His nature is great,—He was not limited in anything.

This debasing of the immeasurable by its descent to our low and finite realm is praised:

13. O [You] Greater than measure who became immeasurably small,—from glorious splendor You humbled Yourself to ignominy.—Your indwelling mercy inclined You to all this.—Let Your compassion incline me to become praiseworthy in my evil.—Blessed be the one who became a source of melodies—and entirely gave thanks to all of you.

14. He became a servant on earth; He was Lord on high.—Inheritor of the height and depth, Who became a stranger.—But the One Who was judged wrongly will judge in truth,—and He in Whose face they spat, breathed the spirit into the face.—He Who held a weak reed was the sceptre for the world—that grows old and leans on Him.

This transformation of the infinite into the finite was a marvel for the ages, with the deity glorious in his entry and then despicably human at his birth:

22. The First-born entered the womb, but the pure one perceived not.—He arose and emerged with birthpangs, and the fair one felt Him.—Glorious and hidden His entry; despised and visible His emergence,—since He is God at His entry, but human at His emergence.—[What] a wonder and confusion to hear: Fire entered the womb,—put on a body and emerged!

One could hardly find a more fitting Qur'ānic Arabic term to designate this Syriac Christian conceptualization of the Incarnation than the *qadr*, which marvelously conveys both power and its restriction/measurement, the infinite becoming finite. English has no term as precise.

Compare the Incarnation reading with traditional explanations of the *qadr*. How could the revelation of the Qur'ān to Muḥammad be reasonably described as a night of restriction, a measuring? To surmount that problem, Sinai concludes that *qadr* means *Vorherbestimmung* (Paret uses the vaguer *Bestimmung*), meaning something like ‘determination of destiny.’<sup>53</sup> Sinai envisions the night of the *qadr* as an annual nocturnal celebration in which Allah ‘restricted’ or

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<sup>53</sup> Luxenberg's ‘Syriac’ reading of the *qadr* as a reference to the Star of Destiny (i.e. Nativity) is difficult to sustain, for the reasons given by Sinai. “Eine Interpretation von Sure 97,” 15.

‘defined’ the destiny of the future year, reducing its infinite possibilities to a finite set of destined events.<sup>54</sup> But Islam has preserved nothing like that. So Sinai invokes an unattested pre-Islamic pagan festival, held annually, an *Altarabische Schicksalnacht*, in which God determined the destiny of the upcoming year. But how would the Meccans have understood this postulate as the Qur’ānic revelation? So Sinai suggests the Meccan believers mimicked Christmas when adapting this ancient ritual, substituting the Qur’ānic revelation for Jesus, a new ritual which the Muslims then forgot for unknown reasons. Such a cascade of *deus ex machina* explanations evidences the bankruptcy of the Meccan paradigm. If the Qur’ān does not fit pagan Mecca, then pagan Mecca must be made to fit the Qur’ān. If an archaic Qur’ānic text seems strikingly Christian, then Mecca must have been populated with Mock-Christian *mu’minūn*, as required.<sup>55</sup>

Birnstiel makes the same point while arguing against the astrological interpretation of the *qadr*,<sup>56</sup> ironically demonstrating why it designates the Incarnation:

[T]here is some question as to whether القدر *al-qadr* in surah 97 can simply be rendered as ‘fate’ or ‘destiny.’ As noted by a number of commentators, *qadr* is a verb noun (*maṣḍar*) and thus primarily denotes a process. Furthermore, as Rahman has pointed out, *qadr* is not yet used in the Koran in the predeterministic or even fatalistic sense the term receives in later theological thought. Rather, it still has the literal meaning of ‘measuring out, determining (actively), calculating, limiting.’<sup>57</sup>

These problems with the ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’ readings underscore the error of reading *qadr* as *bestimmung*. As Birnstiel continues, disagreeing with Sinai on this specific point, “the original sense of ‘measuring out’ is still strongly noticeable in the Koranic use of the root.”<sup>58</sup> Precisely. *Qadr* describes a process of measuring and limiting, measuring the immeasurable into finitude on this most sacred night – see Ephrem’s Nativity Hymn No. 21.

Rather than forcing the analysis to comply with later Islamic exegesis, Q 97 must be analyzed against the background of other late antique religious texts and traditions, including other Qur’ānic *sūrahs*. The most obvious Biblical and Qur’ānic reference for Q 97 is ‘Īsā al-Masīh. That is why scholars have seen the *anzal* of Q 97:1 as a reference to the **birth of Jesus at Christmas**, whether explicit (like Luxenberg/Dye) or as Islamic mimicry (like Sinai/Birnstiel). But when parallel Qur’ānic language and early Syriac theology are considered, the *anzal* makes far better sense as a reference to the **incarnation of Jesus** which took place on the Annunciation night; secondarily this incarnation was manifested at the Nativity, and was celebrated as part of Christmas night. Consider the Qur’ānic Annunciation, when Jib’rīl proclaimed to Mary her son’s mighty destiny, and he was conceived in Mary’s virgin womb by God’s *rūh*:

<sup>54</sup> In this, Sinai has precisely identified the semantic sense of the Arabic term *qadr*, but he has missed its reference, which is not an ‘annual nocturnal winnowing of the year’s infinite possibilities into finite destiny’ (which incidentally makes little sense as annual activity by an omnipotent God) but rather the Incarnation, the paradoxical descent and restriction of the infinite deity into our finite material world on this sacred night.

<sup>55</sup> For Qur’ānic studies, the Meccan exegetical device has little determinate content beyond its intended function of forcing exegesis within a Hijazi prophetic biography. It produces pseudo-explanation. One can find ancient paganism or contemporary Christianity in Mecca, as the interpretive occasion requires; the interpretive framework generates the desired answer, just as Luxenberg tends to find linguistic or orthographic Syriacisms as required. These are problems of circular method. Breaking the circle requires a broader analytical approach.

<sup>56</sup> This is the sense that Luxenberg and Dye interpret *qadr* as conveying.

<sup>57</sup> “Incarnation or Illibration,” 39 n. 108.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

- In Q 66:12 the miraculous conception happens by *fanafakhnā fīhi min rūhinā* – God ‘breathes’ or ‘blows’ his Spirit (*rūh*) into Mary’s womb. Q 21:91 likewise describes the miraculous conception as happening by *fanafakhnā fīhā min rūhinā*.
- In Q 19:19, Jib’rīl tells Mary that Allah will bestow a pure son on her. In response to Mary’s objection about her virgin state, Jib’rīl ends his speech at Q 19:21 with the words *wakāna amran maqdiyyan* (“and it is a matter decreed”), followed by the word *fahamalathu* (“so she conceived him”) that opens Q 19:22.
- In Q 3:47, Jib’rīl tells Mary she will miraculously conceive because *idhā qaḍā amran fa-innamā yaqūlu lahu kun fayakūnu* – when God decrees a matter, it happens.
- In Q 3:45, angels tell Mary that God will give her a word (*kalimat*) whose name will be the Messiah Jesus (*l-laha yubashiruki bikalimatīn min ‘hu us ‘muhu l-masīhu ‘īsā*).
- In Q 3:45-51, Jib’rīl proclaims the prophetic destiny of Jesus.<sup>59</sup> Jesus will be made a messenger to the Children of Israel, and will tell them that he “can heal the blind and the lepers and bring the dead to life *bi-idh ‘ni l-lahi* (by permission of Allah).”

In these Qur’ānic Annunciations, we have (1) a nocturnal proclamation by Jib’rīl and other angels, (2) about a prophetic destiny, with (3) a miraculous conception (4) accomplished by God’s decree, (5) via the *rūh* of God blown into Mary’s womb; (6) creating a child called a word (*kalimat*) from God. These themes closely parallel Q 97 and the Syriac Incarnation narratives.

But there was a critical lexical transition. **First**, in the shorter and more archaic reminder formulas of Q 21:91 and Q 66:12, God breathes his *rūh* into Mary’s womb, incarnating Jesus. **Second**, that miracle is re-characterized as a decreed *‘amr* in Q 3:47 and Q 19:19. In these later and more detailed accounts, God no longer breathes his *rūh* into the virgin womb to incarnate Jesus, a sexualized and biological procreation. The *rūh*’s role in the Incarnation needed to be replaced, for dogmatic reasons, by Allah’s bare legal command. So the *rūh* was turned into an anonymous angelic messenger in Q 19:19, and omitted entirely from Q 3:47. In these later narratives, the words used for ‘decree,’ *qaḍā* and *maqdiyyan*, derive from the triliteral root *qāf ḍād yā* (ق ض ي). The meaning is legalistic. For example, Q 33:36: “It is not for any believer, man or woman, when God and His Messenger have decreed [*qaḍā*] a matter [*amran*], to have the choice in the affair.”<sup>60</sup> Derivatives of the root can also convey that a matter has been ‘judged,’ as in Q 40:78: “When God’s command [*amru*] comes, justly the issue shall be decided [*quḍiya*]; then the vain-doers shall be lost.”<sup>61</sup> This terminology was adopted to help purge Christian implications from Qur’ānic language. The miraculous incarnation of the divine Word by God’s *rūh* on the night of the *qadr* became a bland *qaḍā amran* that conceived a generic prophet,<sup>62</sup> the

<sup>59</sup> The Qur’ānic narrative has a jarring shift here from Gabriel’s prophetic proclamation to Mary about what Jesus would accomplish into a past-tense narrative of what Jesus had done (Q 3:52-54).

<sup>60</sup> Arberry tr.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> As Reck notes, “One formula in Q. 3:47 (and its derivations) occurs several times in the Qur’ān: “When He decrees a matter, He says to it ‘Be!’ and it is”. The formula seems to occur in polemical contexts that emphasize God’s sovereign ability to speak life into existence (Q. 40:68), particularly at the final resurrection (Q. 6:73; 16:40; 36:82).” See “The Annunciation to Mary,” 373. Reck points out that when the Qur’ān applies this formula to Jesus, it is in the context of polemical assertion that God has no son; instead God creates life by speaking it into existence. God’s Word is his alone. “Accordingly, God does not lower himself to human procreation, but rather everything that He creates is spoken into existence by divine fiat.” *Ibid.* That is notably different from the earlier Qur’ānic Annunciation accounts, where God conceives Jesus *fanafakhnā fīhā min rūhinā*, a sexualized description very different than the bureaucratic decree of later narratives.

paradoxical incarnated *logos* of Syriac Christianity was split into God and his human messenger. This was a sophisticated process of harmonizing older narratives with urgent new ideologies.

Challenging Luxenberg, Sinai has argued that the verb *anzal* cannot refer to the descent of a person like Jesus, only to the descent of a revelation, citing parallel Qur'ānic usage.<sup>63</sup> So, Sinai maintains, *anzal* could not refer to the biological birth of Jesus on Christmas. In the Annunciation context, Sinai's objection is reversed against itself. The Qur'ān actually does use derivatives of the *nūn zāy lām* (ن ز ن) root to refer to the descent of angels, *jinn*, and many other things.<sup>64</sup> But more importantly, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ was not understood by Syriac Christianity, or early Christianity more generally, as just the descent of a biological person. It was the descent of the Word itself as God's ultimate revelation. It would be somewhat incongruous if the epochal incarnation of God's Word into our material reality was not described in Arabic terms that also describe a divine revelation or manifestation. Sinai largely concedes this point in his brief discussion of Ephrem's hymns, noting that Nativity Hymn No. 21 uses the Syriac verb *nahhet*, which corresponds to the Arabic *anzal*, to describe the descent of the angels and archangels. But he contends that his earlier analysis nonetheless strongly suggests that Q 97 was an Islamic revaluation (*Umwertung*) of an old Arabian Destiny-Night, with select Christian motifs interjected, so that any such Christian content should be understood as mimicry.<sup>65</sup> That is an untenable way to evade the implications of his own technical analysis.

The Qur'ān contends that 'Īsā al-Masīh was conceived on Annunciation night, with God's *rūḥ* breathed into Mary's womb in connection with the divine proclamations made by Jib'rīl and other angels. That Islam has not preserved any nocturnal ritual corresponding to Q 97 demonstrates that *the early Qur'ānic milieu forgot or – much more plausibly – deliberately rejected the ritual subtext of Q 97*. To explain that rejection, we must identify a corresponding older ritual subtext, and plausibly explain why later *mu'minūn* would have rejected that ritual. The Incarnation fits beautifully, with its vigils being rejected alongside increasing Qur'ānic polemic against *širk*, which also necessitated the interpolation in Q 97:4, and the transformation of the Qur'ānic Annunciation narratives.

Given its overt Christian content and derivation, how did Q 97 survive the process of Qur'ānic compilation? A major factor may have been the *sūrah*'s textual ambiguity about what was 'sent down.' It originally meant the Word of God, who descended at his Incarnation. But even when later believers recognized the Incarnation context of Q 97, they could interpret the *sūrah* in an acceptable way. What was sent down in Q 97:1 could be seen as God's *rūḥ* or angels, as named in Q 97:4, or some vague legitimization or blessing by the deity of Muḥammad's prophethood, or some other mysterious aspect of the process of Qur'ānic revelation (which is how it was generally taken by later Islamic tradition). If one overlooked its Syriac Christian derivation, the Qur'ānic Arabic was ambiguous enough<sup>66</sup> to allow Q 97 to be reinterpreted in tolerable harmony with the increasingly strict monotheism of the later Qur'ānic milieu, particularly when an interpolation clarified that the *laylat al-qadr* of Q 97, including its descending *rūḥ* and angels, was all solely by God's permission.

<sup>63</sup> "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 15-16.

<sup>64</sup> For example, angels descend from heaven *tanzīlan/natanazzalu/lanazzalnā*, are sent down *munzalīna*, and are seen *nazlatan* (Q 25:25, Q 19:64, Q 17:95, Q 3:124, Q 53:13). At the request of Jesus, the divine table is sent down from heaven *munazziluhā* for a feast (Q 5:115). Soldiers from heaven are sent down *munzilīna* (Q 36:28). Jinn descend *tanazzalu* upon a sinner (Q 26:221-222).

<sup>65</sup> "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 27-28.

<sup>66</sup> If a completely free editorial hand had been applied, one would expect the terms *qadr* and *rūḥ* to have been altered to fit later sensibilities, with the result resembling the 'blessed night' of Q 44:2-6.

Sinai is right that Q 97 evidences a type of Islamic *überschreiben*, but it occurred through a process of reinterpretation and interpolation, not original composition. The chronological problems that Sinai wrestles with are illusory.<sup>67</sup> Q 97 was composed early. Its reinterpretation and interpolation were late.<sup>68</sup>

### 3. *The night of the qadr is better than a thousand vigils [šahrin]*

Luxenberg's analysis of *šahr* as designating 'vigils' akin to the Syriac *šahrā* is fairly compelling, and Sinai's objections on this point are ineffective.<sup>69</sup> But even if *šahr* is given the traditional interpretation 'months of worship',<sup>70</sup> the message of Q 97:3 remains the same: to celebrate the Incarnation by worship on the night of the *qadr* is more meritorious than to perform a thousand normal acts of worship (whether specified as vigils or months).

Why does the *sūrah* invoke a sacred ritual night, which brings peace until the dawn? And why is its worship so incomparably meritorious for the believer? The traditional Islamic explanation, that the night of the *qadr* is a night during the last part of Ramadan, underscores the disjunction between the Qur'ānic night of the *qadr* and later Islamic worship rituals.<sup>71</sup> The sacred night of the *qadr* was rejected at a relatively early stage by what became the dominant *mu'minūn* faction. Only secondarily did Islam introduce a nocturnal ritual that was anachronistically derived from Q 97. We must return to the text's late-antique context for the explanation. Ephrem's Hymn No. 21 is a Syriac mirror of Q 97:3:

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<sup>67</sup> Sinai assigns Q 97 to the end of the 'early Meccan' period, largely because he finds it hard to reconcile its archaic language with what he takes to be its reference to the Qur'ānic revelation; the pieces do not fit, but the theory is retained by adjusting the chronology. "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 22-23. A better analysis is that of Nöldeke, who places Q 97 as the 14<sup>th</sup> *sūrah* in his chronology, one of the most archaic *sūrahs*. Beyond rough measures, such efforts to carefully ascertain the relative chronology of the earliest *sūrahs* can be misleading, because these *sūrahs* were probably a selection of textual units that were filtered, modified, and canonized (with alterations) by later tradition out of a larger body of such texts.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Marx has complained that "The majority of researchers still refuse to recognize that the chronology of the text allows it to be reconstructed as a record of Muḥammad's proclamations and that it can be interpreted as part of the process of establishing a community; this continues to impede the kind of serious discussion of Qur'ānic theology in its gradual stages of development which is needed if the significance of the figure of Mary is to become clear." "Glimpses of a Mariology," 538. To the contrary, progress will be nearly foreclosed as long as analysis of the development of the Qur'ānic text is forcibly confined within a literary prophetic biography, which condemns the analysis to repeat circular variations of traditional Islamic exegesis. Marx recognizes that the Qur'ānic text evidences a long process of removing Christological implications, but his commitment to seeing the Qur'ān as 'a record of Muḥammad's proclamations' prevents him from viewing that process in critical light. "Mary thus is present in the Qur'an, but Mariology has been rigorously de-mythified, allegories having been changed into veristic statements. Yet, not least because there are still recognizable traces of the allegorical intertexts adduced above, the Qur'anic figure of Mary has preserved a strongly poetic, spiritual dimension." *Ibid.*, 561. One might more precisely say: The text has been only partially de-Christianized.

<sup>69</sup> Unlike Sinai's powerful rebuttals of many of Luxenberg's linguistic Syriacisms, when it comes to rebutting the vigil interpretation of *šahr*, "Sinai's argument here is more than weak." M. Gross, "Christmas and the Eucharist in Early Islam?," in *Christmas in the Koran* (Amherst 2014): 398. The weakness of Sinai's objections on this point does not, on the other hand, establish that Luxenberg's proposed Syriac reading is valid.

<sup>70</sup> 'Worship' is commonly understood here, because no other reading appears plausible. Hence M. Sarwar translates it "(Worship) on the Night of Destiny is better than (worship) for a thousand months," and M. Kahn translates it as "The night of Al-Qadr (Decree) is better than a thousand months (i.e. worshipping Allah in that night is better than worshipping Him a thousand months, i.e. 83 years and 4 months)."

<sup>71</sup> Ibn Kathir advances this exegetical theory in his *Tafsīr*. If we interpret the thousand months as just 'a lot of time' rather than time worshipping, on the other hand, it seems awkward and problematic to say the Qur'ānic revelation was better than 'a lot of time ... specifically it was better than 83.33 years (i.e. 1000 months) of time.'

2. Let us not count our vigil as everyday vigils;—it is a feastday whose wage increases a hundredfold.—For it is a feast that attacks sleep with its vigil,—a speaker who attacks sleep with its voice.—He snatches all good things; he is head of the hosts of the feasts and of all joys.

The *sūrah* explains to its audience why the nocturnal holiday vigil is so important, with their worship being incomparably more meritorious than worship on profane nights; they should attend and partake of the fruits of the incarnation itself.<sup>72</sup> “Christ is the Watcher who by his incarnation makes it possible for humans to participate in the angelic service of praise, that is, to make them ‘watchers in creation.’”<sup>73</sup> This night celebrates when the deity itself descended and mingled with humanity, enabling his commemorating worshipers to become divinized with their ritual praise. Later Islamic interposition of a prophet and his angel-delivered messages eliminated this Syriac Christian mingling, obliterating the specific ritual message of Q 97.

4. *in it the angels and the Spirit descend [by the permission of their Lord,] for every song.*

This obscure verse, which has caused scholars great difficulty, should be understood by combining a suggestion from Dye (that its word *'amr* is an interpolation over an original term that meant ‘song’)<sup>74</sup> with an insight from Sinai (that its phrase *bi-idh 'ni rabbihim* is a later interpolation, which Dye and others had also independently observed).<sup>75</sup> The resulting reading is beautifully coherent, and resolves many difficulties: “in it the angels and the Spirit descend for every hymn.” This mirrors how Ephrem’s Hymn No. 21 describes the Syriac Christian vigil:

3. Today the angels and even the archangels—came down to sing a new song of praise on earth.—by this mystery they come down and rejoice with vigils.—At the time when they sang praise, blasphemy filled [the earth].—Blessed is the Birth on which a generation thundered—with hallelujahs of praise.
4. For [this] is the night that mingles heavenly Watchers with vigilants.—The Watcher came to make watchers in creation.—Behold vigilants have been made partakers with the Watchers.—Praisegivers have been made companions with the Seraphim.—Blessed is he who became a lyre for Your praise,—and whose wage was Your mercy.

As such hymns were sung, the angels and archangels descended to join the vigil-keepers in their worship, just like their descents on the original holy night that the vigil ritually reenacted. Yet

<sup>72</sup> Sinai notes ‘incidentally’ (*übrigens*) that this theme of especially meritorious holiday worship is prominent in some of Ephrem’s Nativity hymns, but he does not directly connect it with Q 97:3. See “Eine Interpretation von Sure 97,” 27. Nor does he explain why this *sūrah*, allegedly delivered in pagan Mecca as one of Muḥammad’s earliest revelations, is so similar to Syriac Christian hymns, with concepts that have no parallel in later Islamic worship. Instead Sinai repeats his contention that the *sūrah* is better understood as a Meccan inversion (*Umwertung*) of an Old Arabian Destiny-Night, which was mock-Christianized with ‘select Christian motifs,’ and then forgotten by Islamic tradition. *Ibid.*, 28. Such alternation between near-Christian Mecca and completely-pagan Mecca is characteristic of traditional Islamic exegesis, and cannot explain the text.

<sup>73</sup> McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, p. 173 n.470 (discussing the message of Nativity Hymn No. 21).

<sup>74</sup> Paret also interprets *'amr* as an Aramaism, reading it through its Jewish Aramaic equivalent, *memrā*, meaning divine word. That is how Paret gets his ‘lauter Logos(wesen).’ But it has long been clear that the Qur’ān’s early religious terminology primarily derives from Christian Syriac sources, not Jewish Aramaic sources. See generally R. Kerr, “Aramaisms in the Qur’ān and their Significance,” *Christmas in the Koran*, ed. I. Warraq (New York 2014): 183.

<sup>75</sup> “Eine Interpretation von Sure 97,” 23-24.

again the *specific message* of Hymn No. 21 is key for understanding this text, rather than interposing a generic Islamic or Christian context. The difficult phrase *min kulli 'amrin*<sup>76</sup> is now easily explained. It means that the angels and Holy Spirit descend and join the singers of praise “for every song” or “on account of every song”<sup>77</sup> sung at the vigil. At the Eucharist liturgy that concludes the Syriac Christian vigil, the priest calls the Holy Spirit itself down to incarnate Christ in the Eucharistic offering.

This reading reveals the *sūrah*'s beautiful symmetry. Just as God sent his Word down by his *rūh* in the night of the *qadr*, so his angels and spirit descend and join the believers as the sacred hymns are sung at the commemorating nocturnal vigil. The believers celebrate God's revelation (*anzal*) of his Word with their own holy speech, mediated by the angels and God's *rūh*, who are invoked by and join in these songs of praise.<sup>78</sup> The focus is on the ecstatic divinization that the vigil-keepers will achieve through their songs, just as the central ritual message of Hymn No. 21 is that “One who sings and keeps vigil on the eve of the Nativity becomes like the angels.”<sup>79</sup> Divinity and humanity are united, a joyous ritual repetition of the original Incarnation. “Blessed is He Who came in what is ours / and mingled us into what is His.” (Hymn No. 21, str. 12).

Turning to parallel Qur'ānic references, similar nocturnal descents occur in just one context. Predictably, it is the Annunciation. Q 3:42 begins as follows: “And when the angels said, ‘Mary, God has chosen thee, and purified thee; He has chosen thee above all women.’”<sup>80</sup> This is followed by Q 3:45, which says “When the angels said, ‘Mary, God gives thee good tidings of a Word from Him whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; high honoured shall he be in this world and the next, near stationed to God.’”<sup>81</sup> The angel Jib'rīl appears, implicitly, in all four narratives. In addition, Q 19:17, Q 21:91, and Q 66:12 explicitly name the *rūh* as being sent to Mary (just like in the Gospel of Luke and the Protoevangelium).

But there is one serious problem with all this putative symmetry and elegance: in fact the word *'amr* cannot truly mean hymn. The word *'amr* does not mean hymn in Arabic, and its Syriac cognate *memrā* does not mean hymn either. Rather *memrā* designates a verse homily, a type of rhymed recitation that was not sung, distinct from sung hymns like Ephrem's Hymn No. 21 (called *madrashē* in Syriac).<sup>82</sup> Luxenberg's proposed interpretation of *'amr* has therefore been rejected by Dye, Sinai, and Birnstiel.

<sup>76</sup> Sinai observes that its meaning is *umstritten*, disputed. “Eine Interpretation von Sure 97,” 28 n. 46. To take some of the most prominent English translations, the phrase is rendered as “for every matter” (Salih Int'l), “with all decrees” (Pickthall), “on every errand” (Y. Ali), “for every affair” (Shakir), “with his decree (to determine everyone's destiny)” (M. Sarwar), “with all Decrees” (M. Khan), “upon every command” (Arberry), “upon account of every command” (Droge).

<sup>77</sup> Droge translates this phrase as “on account of every command,” which is a correct rendition of the grammar. “For every *'amr*” is a typical English translation of this grammatical concept.

<sup>78</sup> Thematic coherence and elegance were important features of early Qur'ānic *sūrahs*. Incoherent and disjointed interpretations are too-often excused with supposed ancient Arabian practices or ‘ecstatic speech.’ This lack of critical respect for the *sūrah*'s coherence creates interpretive problems, such as when interpolations like *bi-idh'ni rabbihim* (a crude disruption of Q 97) go unnoticed. A coherent reading must be demonstrated with rigorous critical analysis, not assuming Arabian exceptionalism. When coherence is lacking, a satisfactory explanation must be provided; this is when interpolation, polemical redactions, or misunderstood terminology may well be at work.

<sup>79</sup> K. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, p. 173.

<sup>80</sup> Arberry tr.

<sup>81</sup> Arberry tr.

<sup>82</sup> For a detailed discussion of this difficult issue, see “La nuit du Destin,” 132-138.

Yet the ‘hymns’ reading makes so much sense here, and the usual Arabic reading is so peculiar (which is why Paret translates it in a hypostatic sense), that it is difficult to see how the ‘*amr*’ reading could have been original. Dye has proposed an innovative solution to this problem,<sup>83</sup> noting that the correct Syriac term here would have been a form of *zmar*, which is what Ephrem’s Hymn No. 21 uses in its fifth strophe to describe the song sung by the Christmas celebrant: “But let us sing [*nzammer*] the birth of the First-born—how Divinity in the womb wove itself a garment.” Borrowings from the Syriac *zmr* root are attested in Arabic as psalm (*tazmīr*) and chant (*mizmār*). In the Qur’ānic rasm, the word *zmar* would be identical to ‘*amr*’ except that it begins with the letter *zā*’ rather than ‘*ayn*’.<sup>84</sup> If just one letter in the Qur’ānic rasm was changed, the parallel would be perfect.<sup>85</sup> And both Sinai and Dye have shown that Q 97:4 was subjected to greater interpolation (Sinai actually argues that the entire fourth verse is ‘very likely’ an interpolation), so changing just one letter to make it less objectionably Christian, while preserving the rhyme, would not seem improbable. But does any other evidence support Dye’s theory that a derivative of *zmr* might have been changed to read ‘*amr*’?

Since this article has shown that the *qadr* designates the Incarnation, we have the advantage of considering a parallel transition in Qur’ānic composition. The four Qur’ānic Annunciation narratives all also describe the conception of Jesus, and they shift away from an earlier sexualized description of the Incarnation involving God’s conception of Jesus *min rūhinā* (in Q 66:12 and Q 21:91, with no ‘*amr*’) towards a bland, generic description of his conception as accomplished by God’s ‘*amr*’, with the *rūh* now marginalized<sup>86</sup> (Q 19:21) and then with the *rūh* abandoned entirely (Q 3:47). To sanitize the archaic text of Q 97 against polytheism, the interpolator would conform it with this lexical transition in parallel Annunciation narratives. And the interpolator would prefer to avoid significantly changing the existing rasm, while preserving its rhyme scheme if possible.<sup>87</sup> Changing one letter from *zā*’ to ‘*ayn*’ would conform Q 97 with this overarching shift in Qur’ānic descriptions of the Incarnation as being a mere ‘*amr*’ of God, making the interpolated text match the corrected lexicon of the newer Annunciation narratives, at the price of Q 97:4 becoming a very awkward verse. Further, this *überschreiben* of *zmar* would help distinguish the Qur’ānic recitation from Christian *zmar*, which became

<sup>83</sup> Dye notes that ‘*amr*’ could also be polysemic boilerplate used to preserve the *surāh*’s rhyme, since ‘*amr*’ could mean almost anything. “La nuit du Destin,” 138. That is possible, but a more specific interpretation of Q 97:4 is preferred here; boilerplate is more likely in a longer composition.

<sup>84</sup> Since the short ‘*a*’ in ‘*amr*’ would not be indicated in the rasm.

<sup>85</sup> Dye interprets Q 97:4 as referring to songs that the angels and *rūh* ‘send down’ at the Nativity. “La nuit du Destin,” 139. This article prefers the more traditional view that Q 97:4 describes the angels and *rūh* as descending ‘for’ or ‘on account of’ every song, which would be more consistent with Nativity Hymn No. 21 itself, a text that emphasizes the divine communion and invocation functions of the worshipers’ songs – “the singers of praise are made companions of the Seraphs.” Ephrem’s hymn indicates that the angels are invoked by the worship and join in the celebration, singing alongside the praising worshipers, rather than ‘sending down’ songs to worshipers who passively receive them. Or as Nativity Hymn No. 21 puts it (Morris tr.), “To-day the angels, and the archangels,—descended to sing—a new song on earth.—In this mystery they descend, and rejoice with the vigil-keepers.” These spirits mysteriously descend and join the worshipers in their *ritual songs*. The ritual parallels the miracle of the Eucharist itself, with its active invocation of the Holy Spirit, ritual incarnation of Jesus, and communion.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Q 17:85: “They will question thee concerning the Spirit [*rūh*]. Say: ‘The Spirit [*rūh*] is of the bidding of my Lord [*quli l-rūhu min amri rabbī*]. You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little.” This exhibits the same ideological transition as the Annunciation narratives and interpolation of Q 97, wrestling with what had become a problematic theological inheritance.

<sup>87</sup> The change is unlikely to have been a scribal mistake, as neither the orthography nor the phonology of these two Arabic letters (or their Syriac counterparts) can be easily confused.

anathema because of its central importance for Christians as part of their ecstatic ritual invocation of the incarnated deity.<sup>88</sup>

A related explanation, if *'amr* was indeed the original term, is that the Q 97 worship ritual involved 'divine Arabic speech' that did not consist of songs, but rather something more similar to the Syriac *memrā*, a type of rhymed Arabic recitation (perhaps like Qur'ānic recitation itself). In other words, if no songs were used to celebrate the Arabic night of the *qadr*, then it would have been incongruous for Q 97 to refer to hymns. Q 97 would then need to identify equivalent Arabic liturgical recitations, while maintaining the surah's rhyme. The polyvalent word *'amr* could have been selected for that purpose, paralleling the Syriac *memrā*, and designating rhymed recitations. We would not expect such a liturgical meaning of *'amr* to be retained in later Arabic, moreover, because the Q 97 ritual itself was not retained. On balance, however, this alternative seems less likely than Dye's proposed interpolation.

Sinai agrees that the Qur'ānic word *'amr* sometimes displays equivalence with the Aramaic word from the same root, *memrā*.<sup>89</sup> "Hier is der *'amr* offenbar wirklich ein hypostaseähnliches Wesen, welches sich räumlich verorten lässt."<sup>90</sup> Finding this difficult to reconcile with his interpretive framework, Sinai rejects the *memrā* interpretation, and takes the more traditional view that Q 97 uses *'amr* to mean command or decree.<sup>91</sup> One of Sinai's objections is that Jesus as *logos* should be called *kalimat* not *'amr*<sup>92</sup>; actually *kalimat* is exactly what Q 3:45 calls the word named *l-masīhu 'īsā* that God gave Mary by conceiving Jesus.<sup>93</sup> But

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<sup>88</sup> The Qur'ānic hostility towards poetry and its attendant 'possession' is poorly understood. In the author's view, this hostility likely originated as polemic against *songs and rhymed recitations* that ritually invoked the deity and his angels. By criticizing that 'polytheistic practice' in the guise of Arabian poetry, and adamantly denying that the messenger follows this practice, or that he is possessed in the same manner, the Qur'ān differentiated the emerging faith from its Christian origins – not from pre-Islamic poetry in the literal sense. This 'hymnoclastic' attitude is reflected in the Qur'ānic disruption and elimination of older strophic Arabic structures in its text. Q 97 and other *surāhs* could not be interpreted as suggesting that the deity was ritually invoked with song, because that would make the celebrants possessed like the Christian worshipers (i.e. polytheists). Wansbrough thus quotes a prophetic *hadīth*, traced to Abū Hurayra and reported by Tustarī, stating "Recite the Qur'ān with the rhythmic embellishments of the Arabs without burdening it with other things. Do not read it with the embellishments of the people of the churches and the synagogues, nor the people of heresy and innovation. I and my god-fearing community are relieved of (all) burdens. People after me will begin to return their voices to those of the singers with melodies, captivating their hearts by captivating the listening heart. Those are the heedless." In Tustarī's commentary on this *hadīth*, "the stigma was related specifically to the practice of synagogue and church (i.e. cantillation), which ascribed to 'diabolical possession' of the kind characteristic of the Jāhilī poets." J. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies* (Amherst 2005): 105. Thus the *Tafsīr* of Tustarī understood the messenger to have equated such Christian/Jewish songs with the demonic possession attributed to *jāhilī* poetry. "Until Iblīs ruled their hearts just as he ruled the hearts of the poets of the *jāhilīyya*." This equivalence is consistent with a defining characteristic of Qur'ānic polemic – implicitly criticizing Christianity as a faith that had been corrupted by paganism, a criticism accomplished by restating the types of criticisms that Christians had previously directed against true paganism, including the condemnation of ecstatic possession by (and invocation of) spirits via rhymed ritual speech.

<sup>89</sup> "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 23-24.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> "Dabei ist der koranische *'amr* jedoch nicht ohne weiteres mit dem griechischen Begriff des *logos* gleichzusetzen: *Logos* als christologischer Hoheitstitel, wie er auf die Eröffnungspassage des Johannes-Evangeliums zurück-geht, wird im Koran, wie Hubert Grimme bemerkt hat, nicht mit *'amr*, sondern mit *kalimat Allah* wiedergegeben[]." "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 28. n. 46.

<sup>93</sup> This overt description of Jesus as the Word (*kalimat*) suggests that the Qur'ānic account was influenced by the Protoevangelium of James (PEJ). "For example, one distinguishing mark of the PEJ's Annunciation is the angel's foretelling of Mary conceiving the Word (PEJ 11:2; Q. 3: 45). No such reference to Mary bearing the Word occurs in any canonical account." Reck, "The Annunciation to Mary," 367.

more importantly, the pre-interpolation Q 97:4 used *zmr* to mean hymns (or alternatively used *'amr* to mean liturgical recitations), not a hypostatic *logos*.<sup>94</sup>

Before proceeding to Q 97:5, we must further examine the interpolation; it evidences how early *mu'minūn* understood this *sūrah*, why they added additional text to prevent an objectionable reading, and why they rejected its worship ritual. This is critical. As Sinai points out, Q 97:4 is much longer than the other four verses, and its phrase *bi-idh'ni rabbihim* does not fit.<sup>95</sup> The term *bi-idh'ni* is primarily associated with Medinan *sūrahs* like *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, and apart from Q 97 does not occur before Nöldeke's 'Third Meccan' grouping. The term is used to de-*širk* older Christian narratives so they will not be interpreted in a 'polytheistic' way. Compare Q 3:49, when Jesus breathes life into clay that becomes a bird *bi-idh'ni l-Alahi*, followed by the announcement that Jesus "can heal the blind and the lepers and bring the dead to life *bi-idh'ni l-lahi*." As used in Q 97:4, the phrase clarifies that the *laylat al-qadr* happens by God's permission, not the will of another being. This phrase was interpolated to prevent the 'polytheistic,' meaning trinitarian Christian, interpretation of Q 97.<sup>96</sup> Why was it crucial to clarify that the descent of the angels and *rūḥ* during the night of the *qadr* was with God's permission and command? Because the Qur'ānic audience needed to be firmly guided to understand that this miraculous night was accomplished by God's will alone, as opposed to the independent will of the angels, Jib'rīl, the *rūḥ*, Mary, or 'Īsā al-Masīh. That interpolation would be unnecessary if the *sūrah* had not become seen as dangerously Christian.

The interpolation explains why Islamic tradition did not preserve the original meaning of Q 97. The *sūrah* was interpolated, and its Christian nocturnal ritual rejected, as older texts were overwritten with anti-*širk* doctrines to help forcefully articulate the *mu'minūn* as a distinct confession from orthodox Christianity. Over time, this process was itself obscured by the traditional Islamic *Heilsgeschichte* apparatus, which sought to depict the Qur'ān's origins as pure Meccan prophetic revelation, emerging from a pagan milieu rather than a Christian milieu.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Sinai objects to Luxenberg's 'hymn' reading as lacking a systematic analysis of how the Qur'ān otherwise uses *'amr*. "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 17. That is a fair objection, which Dye's arguments address.

<sup>95</sup> "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 23-24.

<sup>96</sup> To understand how this interpolation worked, we must consider Q 97's rhyme scheme. All five verses share a loose end rhyme when recited in pausal form: *qadr/qadr/šahr/'amr/fajr*. Removing *bi-idh'ni l-lahi*, the rhyme scheme remains intact, and Q 97 reads as follows:

1. innā anzalnāhu fī laylati l-qadri
2. wamā adrāka mā laylatu l-qadri
3. laylatu l-qadri khayrun min alfi šahrin
4. tanazzalu l-malāikatu wal-rūḥu fihā min kulli 'amrin
5. salāmun hiya ḥattā maṭla'ī l-fajri

The interpolator modified this by adding the *bi-idh'ni rabbihim* admonition in the standard text of Q 97:4. To preserve the *sūrah*'s end rhyme, that phrase had to be placed into the middle of the verse.

<sup>97</sup> Having profited by combining the insights of Luxenberg and Sinai regarding Q 97:4, their missteps should be briefly noted. Luxenberg argues that the fourth verse should be re-interpreted to mean the angels and archangels "send down" (rather than themselves descending) "all sorts of hymns." Not only are his textual alterations unnecessary, the resulting reconstruction is not consistent with how Hymn No. 21 describes the Christmas feast – the angels descend and join in the hymns sung by vigil-keepers, so that the angels join communion together in the nocturnal ritual worship, rather than delivering songs to passive Christian recipients.

Sinai asserts that the entire fourth verse of Q 97 is very likely (*sehr wahrscheinlich*) an interpolation. "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 25. To echo Sinai's harsh description of Luxenberg's analysis (*ibid.*, 1), that claim is "seriously flawed." First, the interpolator can hardly have added a long and awkward new verse to prevent *širk* ... by introducing the descent of angels and the *rūḥ*. Second, interpolation only makes sense if the *sūrah* was being understood in a problematic way; it would be unnecessary if the *sūrah* was understood as referring to Muḥammad's Qur'ānic revelation. Third, we would have no plausible explanation for why Islamic tradition rejected the Q 97

5. *It is peace, until the rising of dawn.*

This *āyah* is straightforward when understood within the context of a Christian vigil. As Luxenberg notes, the Syrian Christian vigil begins with worship at dusk (following the Jewish tradition of counting days from the preceding dusk), ending in the morning. The sacred peace concludes with the Eucharistic liturgy at daybreak, when the Holy Spirit descends at the epiclesis and transforms the offering into the blood and body of Christ, which the worshipers consume. That is why the rising of the dawn following the night of the *qadr* is described as a cessation of the peace, and a return to the mundane, as the believers' sacred night of worship ends.

## 7. Origins of Qur'ānic Revelation Theology in Syriac Christian Incarnation Theology

We must now briefly examine the Qur'ān's complex and variegated treatment of Qur'ānic revelation, and in particular the 'night of blessings' presented in Q 44:1-6, which in this author's view is an attempt to restate and reinterpret Q 97 theology in terms acceptable to the later *mu'minūn*, divesting the archaic *sūrah* of its distinctively Christian features (exactly as the interpolation of Q 97 attempted).<sup>98</sup> It will be argued that later layers of Qur'ānic text sought, in contrasting ways, to take the archaic incarnation theology embodied in Q 97 and restate it as typology that promoted the emerging idea of an Arabic Book given to an Arabophone prophet, equivalent to the Book of the Jews and the Book of the Christians.<sup>99</sup>

It is important to be sensitive to the complexity of such cross-Qur'ānic discourse, which commonly aims to subvert, transform, defeat, expand, or constrain the meaning of older Qur'ānic text. Partial semantic decontextualization and recontextualization is facilitated by (quite deliberate) lexical ambiguity. There is no unadulterated 'original meaning' in the composite text apart from a complex process of textual transformation and argument, no isolated 'new meaning'

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ritual. Fourth, the awkward placement of *bi-idh'ni rabbihim* within the verse can hardly reflect an original composition, as interpolation or otherwise. Fifth, the *sūrah* is nearly incomprehensible without its fourth verse. Last, identifying a verse as an interpolation requires supporting evidence. But the few supporting arguments ventured by Sinai on this point prove the opposite case. Sinai notes that the Qur'ān associates the *rūh* with the angel Jib'rīl, citing Q 2:97 – that leads us right back to the Annunciation and Jesus. He asserts there is just one other early Meccan *sūrah* where the *rūh* and angels are mentioned together, Q 78:38, which he distinguishes as 'eschatological.' Sinai overlooks the other prominent context where the Qur'ān uses both *rūh* and angels: Q 66:12 and Q 21:91, where God's *rūh* is breathed into Mary's womb, and Q 19:17, where God's *rūh* is sent to Mary in the appearance of a man, who reveals himself to be a *rasūl* of the *rabb*. All of these narratives involve angels, and three name the *rūh*.<sup>98</sup>

Here I must disagree with Dye, who sees this pericope as largely independent of Q 97, identifying many key differences between them. "La nuit du Destin," 157-59. The numerous differences that Dye identifies between these texts must be assigned not to their independence, but rather to Qur'ānic argument; the differences evidence the struggle by later Qur'ānic composers to reframe Q 97 and assimilate its text with new doctrines of Qur'ānic revelation. It is a deliberate reinterpretation and modification of the earlier text, a type of intratextual dialogue.<sup>99</sup>

Qur'ānic references to the Torah and Injil seek to reconceptualize these older scriptures as "Books" that parallel the emerging Arabic Book; their depiction in the Qur'ān is derivative of that theological function. In the author's view, it is misguided to take these *rhetorical* and *theological* characterizations of the earlier scriptures as if they reflect an illiterate composer's dim apprehension of actual texts. In Qur'ānic form, these Books are in the first instance constructs that further the Qur'ānic argument, much like the *mush'rikūn*. Muḥammad was a prophet who brought the Book to his people. So did Moses. So did Jesus (and any implication that Jesus did something more than bring the Book is false, for he must perform the same soteriological function as Muḥammad). The actual contents of contemporary scriptures were a subsidiary issue, and if those contents contradicted the Qur'ānic argument, then by logical inference the scriptures must have been corrupted.

or ‘old meaning’ that can stand on its own. Confining Qur’ānic analysis within a prophetic biography dooms the analysis to naïvety on this front; it can never escape *Asbāb al-nuzūl*. To form a critical interpretation of how the text formed and evolved, we must analyze the Qur’ānic text as a more complex diachronic object, a type of hypertextual literature.<sup>100</sup>

That said, interpolating Q 97 was just one way that later Qur’ānic developments rendered its archaic Syriac Incarnation theology and language more acceptable. We see a fascinating parallel transformation in later *sūrah*s, including the Annunciation narratives. Most important is the ‘night of blessings’ related by Q 44, one of the seven so-called ‘Ḥawāmīm’ *sūrah*s (Q40-46), each beginning with the mysterious letters *h* and *m*.<sup>101</sup> Each of these *sūrah*s begins by describing itself as part of a ‘clear Book’ that has been ‘sent down.’ At this stage of Qur’ānic composition,<sup>102</sup> these *sūrah*s could be characterized as part of a written Arabic Book that was ‘sent down,’ asserted on equal footing with the Books attributed to the Jews and orthodox Christians. But what kind of Book, and what did the mysterious letters mean?<sup>103</sup> We must start at the most archaic texts and trace the transformations.

The most archaic Qur’ānic descriptions of how its texts originated resemble monastic compositions, and are associated with writing. In Q 73:4-5, an anonymous ‘enwrapped’ individual stays up late at night to “arrange [*rattal*] the Qur’ān very carefully [*tartīl*]/ Surely We shall cast upon you a heavy word,” as Droge translates, preserving the reference to active literate composition.<sup>104</sup> In Q 96:4-5, the Lord is said to be the one who “teaches by the pen / teaches the human what he does not know.” Q 68:1 begins “Nūn. By the pen and what they write.” This literate background is combined with prophetic typology in which the Lord descends into visible material form and meets his human messenger; as a result of this theophany, the messenger appears possessed by spirits, but the Qur’ān insists this seeming possession reflects genuine prophetic authority: “Similarly, there came not to those before them any messenger except that they said, ‘A magician or a madman.’” (Q 51:32). The prophet’s audience invariably accuses God’s messengers, including Moses (Q 26:27, 51:39), Noah (Q 23:25, 54:9), Salih (Q 26:153),

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<sup>100</sup> See G. Dye, “The Qur’ān and its Hypertextuality in Light of Redaction Criticism,” presented at Nangeroni Meeting *Early Islam: The Sectarian Milieu of Late Antiquity?* (Early Islamic Studies Seminar, Milan, 15-19 June 2015).

<sup>101</sup> Q 42 also adds the letters ‘, *s*, and *q*.

<sup>102</sup> Nöldeke assigned these *sūrah*s to his second and third Meccan periods. While his chronology is not accepted here as reflecting an orderly succession of revelations, the general clustering of certain textual transitions is clear enough. The ‘Ḥawāmīm’ texts in their current form (along with other *sūrah*s preceded by the mysterious letters) were plainly composed much later than Q 97, and indeed later than most other Qur’ānic *sūrah*s that do not exalt a written Arabic book. It is possible that their ur-texts were composed much earlier, and then later adapted and revised to reflect the new Book concept, but that subject exceeds the scope of this article.

<sup>103</sup> The ‘mysterious letters’ that precede many *sūrah*s remain a Qur’ānic puzzle. A.J. Droge observes that “[n]o satisfactory explanation has been given for their occurrence.” *The Qur’ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Bristol 2013): 246 n. 1. Luxenberg has advanced the most plausible theory to date, which is that the mysterious letters designated specific liturgical recitations and readings to be used with each *sūrah*, although his suggestions as to specific liturgical candidates remain speculative. C. Luxenberg, “Syriac Liturgy and the ‘Mysterious Letters,’” in *Christmas in the Koran*, I. Warraq ed. (Amherst 2014): 505-46. As such, they represent an attempt to articulate an Arabic liturgy based on Syrian Christian precedent. As Islam did not preserve the liturgical context of these *sūrah*s (a lacuna which traditional views regarding Qur’ānic composition have never been able to explain), it may be impossible to recover further detail.

<sup>104</sup> Traditional exegesis characterizes this ‘arranging’ as mere passive recitation of the revelation, against the literal meaning of the Arabic, thereby obscuring this reference to active human composition of the Qur’ān. Q 73:4 draws a clever parallel between two uses of the r-t-l root, arranging [*rattal*] into a careful arrangement [*tartīl*]. When *rattal* is misinterpreted as ‘reciting’ in order to deny any active composition, this parallel is effaced.

Shuaib (Q 26:187) as well as the anonymous Qur'ānic messenger,<sup>105</sup> of *majnūn*, meaning possessed by *jinn*, or of being bewitched (*musaharīn*), thus failing to perceive that the Lord himself speaks directly through his messenger, without any spiritual mediation. This prophetic typology is often misunderstood as biography, such that the behavior of a historical Muḥammad (speaking ecstatically or falling into epileptic fits or trances) was supposedly projected back onto earlier prophets. But it is actually an abstraction of incarnation theology, with the community's stereotyped accusation of 'possession' following the theophany that conferred the prophetic status – The Lord himself now speaks through his messenger, who he had descended to.

In the developed form of this early Qur'ānic typology, the messenger sees his Lord<sup>106</sup> descend from the highest heaven into our material world, becoming a prophet via that theophany – which his putative audience perceives as spiritual possession. The two descents of the Lord to his messenger in Q 53 thus mirror the two theophanies by God to Moses on Mount Sinai and in the burning bush<sup>107</sup> (which is why we have the Lote Tree in Q 53:14-16), which in turn mirror the two theophanies of Jesus<sup>108</sup> at his Epiphany in the River Jordan and his Incarnation within Mary's womb.<sup>109</sup> This typology parallels the Syriac Christian incarnation delineated in Q 97, a humbling descent and restriction to the material world that the deity undertook as a favor to humanity. Only with growing hostility towards *širk* did this revelation by theophany of the descending Lord become mediated in Qur'ānic composition by angels (which previously had *announced and celebrated* the descent of the Lord to our material world, but now *transmitted* the revelation), distancing the Lord from his material theophany and its polytheistic implications.

Later *sūrah*s struggle to reconcile the reality of periodic *sūrah* composition and revision with this inherited background of incarnation theology. Q 17:73-76 reports that the messenger was tempted and 'almost' joined his interlocutors, evidently orthodox Christians.<sup>110</sup> The messenger lacked an actual book, which his interlocutors considered proof of prophetic legitimacy; in Q 17:93, the interlocutors proclaim that they will not believe the messenger until he brings down to them from heaven a book they can read. In Q 17:105, the Qur'ān is said to have been sent down with the truth, and God declares that the messenger has been sent (parallel to the Qur'ān) as a bringer of good tidings and a warner. But the following verse, Q 17:106, states that the Qur'ān has been separated by intervals so that it might be recited over a prolonged period, and was sent down progressively. This juxtaposition attempts to reconcile incarnation theology with the reality of successive revelations delivered by a human; the Qur'ān was sent

<sup>105</sup> This is a constant refrain. (e.g. Q 7:184, 15:6, 23:70, 34:8, 34:46, 37:36, 44:14, 52:29, 68:2, 68:51, 81:22).

<sup>106</sup> Islamic tradition usually interprets the descending being in Q 53 as an angel (likewise with Q 81:22), but the Qur'ānic text simply imitates the theophany when Moses encountered his Lord. In all three Qur'ānic accounts of the burning bush (Q 20:9-24, 27:7-14, 28:29-33), the Lord speaks to Moses directly (cf. Exodus 3, where Moses sees an angel but the Lord then speaks directly to him from the burning bush), just as he did on Mt. Sinai. As with the descents of Jesus, the deity itself descends and manifests itself, though angels may announce this descent.

<sup>107</sup> In Eastern Christian tradition, the burning bush is seen as a symbol of the virgin womb of Mary Theotokos. The miraculously unburnt-yet-burning bush prefigures how Mary conceived and bore Jesus while remaining a virgin. As Ephrem's Nativity Hymn No. 21 marvels in its 21<sup>st</sup> strophe, "The Firstborn entered the womb, and the pure Virgin was not harmed." This showed how the Incarnation had renewed and divinized the material world.

<sup>108</sup> For Ephrem, Moses prefigured Jesus as the source of revelation, and the rebellious Jews likewise rejected Moses' authority (as Ephrem saw it). "Moses saw that he alone received the brightness of God, and he anticipated the One to come—by his teaching, the Multiplier of the godlike." Nativity Hymn no. 1, str. 28 (McVey tr.).

<sup>109</sup> Technically Jesus also made a third theophany by descending to harrow hell after his crucifixion.

<sup>110</sup> We should not, however, assume this reflects a real-world scenario, as opposed to the composer imagining the prophet struggling to assert his message against polytheist antagonists. The point is that the message is characterized via a background of bitter struggle against the threat of Christian assimilation.

down at once (incarnated), and also sent down in stages (revealed), with their vague correlation being emphasized by use of the same Arabic term for both functions.<sup>111</sup>

Q 16:98-106 is similarly remarkable. Q 16:98-99 discuss Qur'ānic recitation and accuse the *mush'rikūn* of being under Satanic influence. Q 16:101 provides that “And when We exchange a verse in the place of another verse and God knows very well what He is sending down – they say, ‘Thou art a mere forger!’ Nay, but the most of them have no knowledge.” Here the successive revelation and alteration of *sūrahs* is decried as textual forgery by the interlocutors. As its response to that criticism, Q 16:102 explains that the Holy Spirit (literally *rūḥu l-quḍusi*) was brought down from the Lord to make ‘it’ a guidance and good news for Muslims (*qul nazzalahu rūḥu l-quḍusi min rabbika bil-ḥaḳi liyuthabbita alladhīna āmanū wahudan wabush'rā lil'mus'limīna*). This phrasing seems to defend changes to the Qur'ānic revelation, in fact the process of Qur'ānic composition itself, by describing the revelation (the subject of the bitter complaints about changed verses) in near-Christian form. Innovation was constrained by precedent. Following is Q 16:103, where interlocutors accuse the messenger of being taught by one who is a ‘human being,’ but this recitation is clear Arabic (*'arabiyyun mubīnūn*), while the other one is said to speak what is called a foreign tongue (we can guess what that tongue would have been, and what the accusation of forgery was; the Qur'ānic milieu evidently did not lack for Luxenbergs).<sup>112</sup> Such was the contested cradle from which Qur'ānic revelation theology and terminology emerged, filled with strife, revisions, and compromises.

When we reach the Ḥawāmīm, however, a true written Arabic Book now appears to be confidently asserted, evidently as part of a community which recited its provisions<sup>113</sup> in a liturgical context lost to us. Amongst these *sūrahs*, Q 44 is distinctive for containing a revised *laylat al-Qadr*, in which the Christian liturgical elements of Q 97 have been transformed to conform to the new ideology of a clear Arabic Book.<sup>114</sup> The nocturnal worship ritual of Q 97 has

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<sup>111</sup> Interestingly, Q 17:105-106 was apparently interpolated, disrupting its grammar and rhyme, as Barth pointed out a century ago. J. Barth, “Studies Contributing to Criticism and Exegesis of the Koran,” in *What the Koran Really Says*, I. Warraq ed. (Amherst 2002): 415 (G.A. Wells tr.) (from *Der Islam* 6 (1916): 113-48). In translation, these verses become artificially clear. Droge’s annotation of these verses discusses some of the translation problems.

<sup>112</sup> This does not mean this rhetoric designated a historical person. This text tries to distance the recitation from what, to the putative interlocutors, was its obvious source in a foreign language that the Qur’ān studiously avoids mentioning because of its forgery implications, surely a form of Aramaic. Coupled with the accusations of changing verses, and the peculiar Incarnation phrasing of Q 16:102, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that these verses defend a rewriting of older Arabic recitations that were closer to Syriac Christianity, creating considerable opposition among believers who held more “Christian” views, and were offended by innovative Qur’ānic revisions. Such changes had to be justified, and strategies were taken to minimize the resulting conflicts, but the need to differentiate the emerging faith from the *mush'rikūn* (the negative correlate of the differentiating anti-polytheistic doctrines, rather than a defined population) had become paramount.

<sup>113</sup> Or was intended to recite it. These *sūrahs* might never have been used for the composer’s intended liturgical function; they may have been crafted for that purpose, but were instead taken up and expanded on for a quite different set of religious, social, and political purposes. Indeed that is exactly what happened as later *sūrahs* were generated, now without ‘mysterious letters.’ The intended liturgical function of this subset of Qur’ānic *sūrahs* was not retained, and remains mysterious.

<sup>114</sup> Here the analysis diverges from Dye’s article, which tries to show that the Q 44 account is largely independent of Q 97, rather than analyzing it as part of a Qur’ānic transition. For understanding the transition from Ephrem’s Nativity Hymn No. 21 to Q 97 to later Qur’ānic text, it is important to ascertain the types of ideological, rhetorical, and textual transformations that are embedded in the text. Q 44 provides a valuable opportunity to examine how the earlier texts were transformed, rewritten, and reinterpreted at the point of Qur’ānic composition where an actual Arabic “Book” could be proclaimed, with an associated liturgical context, albeit lost to us.

vanished, and its Incarnation theology has been flattened and made usefully ambiguous by a number of lexical changes. Here is the transliterated Arabic text of Q 44:1-6:

1. Ḥa Mīm. 2. wal-kitābi l-mubīni 3. innā anzalnāhu fī laylatin mubārakatin innā kunnā mundhirīna 4. fihā yufʿraqu kullu amrin ḥakīmin 5. amran min ʿindinā innā kunnā murʿsilīna 6. raḥmatan min rabbika innahu huwa l-samīʿu l-ʿalīmu

As translated by A.J. Droge:

1. Ḥa Mīm. 2. By the clear Book! 3. Surely we sent it down a blessed night – surely We were warning – 4. during which every wise command was divided out, 5. as a command from Us – surely We were sending – 6. as a mercy from your Lord. Indeed he is the all-hearer, the all-knower.

Examine the changes from Q 97. The extraordinary night of the *qadr* has been replaced with the generic ‘blessed night,’ which could mean anything. The text begins by invoking the ‘clear Book.’ There are no more vigils, nor exhortation to all-night worship that excels ordinary worship a thousand times over. The night is now called a warning (!). *ʿAmr* is used twice, but now conveys the generic ‘every wise command,’ which is indeterminate given that God gives wise commands every night and day (what distinguishes his commands on the blessed night? They are particularly wise?). There is no longer any peace, nor any dawn, nor any descending angels – and certainly the *rūḥ* no longer appears!<sup>115</sup> The Syriac Christian Incarnation structure and semantics of Q 97 have been transformed into a *proto-Islamicized* night, stated in vague and generic terms, allusive to Qurʾānic revelation in an indeterminate sense, but no longer exalting a distinct associated worship ritual. The term *ʿamr* operates as a generalized mantra against polytheistic inference.<sup>116</sup>

Yet alongside such transformations Qurʾānic composition never abandoned the old incarnation theology, instead recrafting it into complex variant forms. For example, Q 43:4 and Q 13:39 state that there is a Mother of the Book with God (*ummi l-kitābi ladaynā / wa ʿindahu ummu l-kitābi*). If we replace Mother of the Book with the equivalent Father of the *Logos*, which was incarnated by the descent of the *rūḥu l-quḍusi* (Q 16:102) on the night of the *qadr*, we have a fine Qurʾānic description of the trinitarian Christian Incarnation.<sup>117</sup> Q 43:31 describes this ‘sending down’ as being upon a man, moreover, not into a mystical region that has been artificially isolated, to prevent polytheistic inference, from the human messenger.<sup>118</sup>

Similarly instructive is comparing the descriptions of Qurʾānic revelation with the Qurʾānic Annunciation narratives. Q 26:193-4 states “[t]he trustworthy spirit [*rūḥ*] has brought

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Q 17:85. The *rūḥ* was now dangerous, theologically, and had to be confined.

<sup>116</sup> Q 97 was interpolated in furtherance of this ideological shift, although relative timing is uncertain.

<sup>117</sup> This parallel is why the Mother of the Book had to be separated from God and conceptualized as a distinct creation in heaven, with the caveat that it was subordinate to God. The paradox of retaining incarnation theology while ferociously condemning polytheism generated a chain of subsidiary insulating entities between God and his Messenger, proceeding from God, to the Mother of the Book, to the Book as descended in lower heaven, to Jibʿrīl, to Muḥammad, to Muslims. This proliferation was not theologically necessary when Q 97 was composed.

<sup>118</sup> More precisely, Q 43:31 has anonymous interlocutors lament “if only this Qurʾān had been sent down on some great man of the two towns,” thus complaining that it was instead sent down upon a messenger who was not a powerful man. Nobody has yet satisfactorily identified the two towns (*qaryatayni*). Nowhere else does the Qurʾān use this specific dual noun.

it down on your heart so that you may be one of the warners, in a clear Arabic language.”<sup>119</sup> This refers to Qur’ānic revelation, which is brought down “on the heart” of the messenger by the *rūḥ* itself, strikingly similar to the Gospel account of Mary’s conception of Jesus when the Holy Spirit came down upon her, as well as its Qur’ānic equivalents in Q 66:12 and Q 21:91. Varying this theme, Q 2:97 names Jib’rīl as the one who “has brought it down on your heart.”<sup>120</sup> It is not accidental that Gabriel is the Christian proclaimer of the Annunciation and Jib’rīl is the vehicle of the Qur’ānic revelation. The Qur’ān only expressly names Jib’rīl three times,<sup>121</sup> always in connection with the Qur’ānic revelation. As A.J. Droge has noted, the Qur’ān never says that Jib’rīl is an angel, and Q 66:4 even characterizes Jib’rīl as *not* being an angel. Jib’rīl’s sensitive status is paired with Qur’ānic anxiety about who or what delivered the Annunciation to Mary. In Q 19:7, the annunciation to Zachariah is given by an anonymous “we.”<sup>122</sup> Q 19:17 then describes the Annunciation to Mary as “We sent to her Our spirit [*rūḥ*], and it took for her the form of a human being exactly.” God’s descended *rūḥ* in human form (!) then declares itself only a messenger, and gives Mary the Annunciation. In the Q 3:45-47 Annunciation narrative, by contrast, multiple anonymous angels deliver the initial Annunciation message to Mary in Q 3:45, followed by an anonymous “He” who gives the more specific Annunciation of Q 3:47. There is an extended struggle to differentiate these narratives from their Christian origins, separating Jib’rīl from Jesus, and minimizing the role of the *rūḥ*. In that process, older theological pieces were tested in myriad contrasting configurations, with anonymity and ambiguity used to generate interpretive flexibility.

The *mufasssirūn* had a difficult time with this convoluted Qur’ānic effort to describe the revelation in terms derived from Christian incarnation theology, while also making ardent attacks on polytheism. In perhaps the leading exegetical theory, God incarnated the Book outside of a human being in a mystical heavenly location, and Jib’rīl then delivered its pieces to the human prophet. Two revelations, two sending downs, one sent down by the *rūḥ* in unknown form to a remote heavenly location that was rigorously isolated from the material world, the other transmitted by an angel to a human in segments over time. This compromise, reminiscent of the two gardens and two more gardens of Q 55:46-76, exemplifies how Christian incarnation theology became Qur’ānic revelation. Syriac Christianity had conceptualized the Incarnation as a paradoxical fusion of infinite deity and finite man. Qur’ānic composition sought to separate that Incarnation into an infinite divine revelation that was still connected to finite human revelation. But the paradox was not so easily disentangled.

The oft-remarked similarities between Qur’ānic revelation and the Christian concept of Jesus as incarnated *logos* are readily explained. Qur’ānic revelation concepts emerged from the latter, in the Semitic Christian form exemplified by Q 97. That is why the Qur’ān describes the revelation in such vague and abstract terms. It argues for the divine provenance and authority of newer Qur’ānic revelation, while using prophetic typology and polemic to diminish the supremacy claims of Christianity and its definitive revelation, Jesus Christ. Remnants of older

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<sup>119</sup> Droge tr.

<sup>120</sup> These formulations ostentatiously use an anonymous ‘it/he’ as the descending subject; we are implicitly invited to recognize that ‘it’ is the Qur’ānic revelation in some unspecified sense, but the studiously anonymous formulation preserves the parallel to Q 97 and Christian antecedents. This deliberate use of generic or anonymous formulation to restate Biblical text, thereby expanding its possible readings and implicitly recharacterizing older Qur’ānic statements by subsuming them within the newer reading, is a characteristic form of Qur’ānic argument. Unfortunately this form of argument has not been given the scholarly attention it deserves.

<sup>121</sup> Q 2:97-98 and Q 66:4.

<sup>122</sup> Droge annotates this verse by noting “it is not clear whether God and/or the angels are speaking.”

incarnation theology were constrained, obscured, segregated, and distinguished from polytheism by a broad variety of complex textual and exegetical strategies, implemented by methods including original compositions, interpolations, and reinterpretations.

## 8. What Kind of Incarnation? Considering the *Sitz im Leben* of Q 97

The analysis has demonstrated that Q 97 originally designated the night when the divinity was incarnated. The *sūrah*'s overt reference to a sacred night when the infinite deity was measured/restricted into finitude, mirroring Ephrem's Nativity Hymn No. 21, and theologically indistinguishable from Syriac Christianity in that regard, precludes understanding Q 97 as a reference to Qur'ānic revelation in any traditional Islamic sense.<sup>123</sup> And a succession of *sūrahs* revealed by the messenger over time does not resemble the night of the *qadr*. The casuistic idea of a preexisting infinite Book that was incarnated at night in a remote mystical House of Might, and then transferred by angel to Muḥammad in pieces over decades, is anachronistic at this earliest stage of Qur'ānic composition, with no support in the text of Q 97.<sup>124</sup> Finally, Islam did not preserve the Q 97 vigil, which was already rejected by the time Q 44:1-6 was composed, nor did Islam preserve any coherent explanation for why worship on this night was infinitely superior to worship on any other night.<sup>125</sup>

Yet the Incarnation focus of Q 97, and its dominating Nativity Hymn No. 21 subtext, do not prove that the *sūrah* was originally composed to extol Christmas in Arabic; that is just one possibility, albeit the one that seems most likely.<sup>126</sup> Considering Sinai's arguments, while

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<sup>123</sup> Sinai and Birnstiel contend that "Muslims" (an anachronistic term in this context) might have conducted a worship ritual inspired by the Christian Nativity rites. See "Eine Interpretation von Sure 97," 26-28 ("selektiv christliche Motive aufnimmt"); "Illibration or Incarnation?," 16 n. 47. If the broader word *mu'minūn* is substituted here for Muslim, one must agree, as early *mu'minūn* likely included self-identified Christians who would continue celebrating Christmas, as well as Jews. See generally F. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge 2010). But in the later sense of Muslims who follow a faith distinct and separate from Christianity, that claim of Islamic orthodoxy cannot be reconciled with the text's overtly Christian form, nor its proximity to Syriac Christian Nativity hymns. Even within the Qur'ānic milieu itself, the Q 97 ritual and its semantic content soon became unacceptable, as shown by the interpolation of Q 97, and by the radical transformation of its incarnation concepts and ritual in Q 44:1-6 (itself a poorly understood text, from its 'mysterious letters' onward). We must accept that the emerging faith of the *mu'minūn* need not fit neatly within the narrow theological confines of what ultimately became Islam (or within orthodox forms of Christianity either).

<sup>124</sup> Cf. "Illibration or Incarnation?," 26-28. This author must agree with Luxenberg that the "Illibration" explanations of the exegetes are inconsistent and secondary. The exegetical theory that the Qur'ān was sent down to the 'lowest heaven' cannot be reconciled with the way Q 97 uses *qadr* to mean incarnation by measuring/restricting, or with the ritual's remarkable parallel to Ephrem's Nativity hymn. Why would it have been sent down from higher to lower heaven? What was the point of this intra-heaven movement? This makes sense as a forced exegetical compromise that sought to reconcile older incarnation theology with later Qur'ānic theology, so that the Qur'ān could paradoxically be considered both 'fully sent down into lower heaven' and yet 'on Earth, not really sent down and not really incarnated.' But as the original sense of the archaic Q 97, this cannot be interposed without heroic deference to later Islamic exegetical tradition. That is particularly true when, as Sinai, Dye, and Luxenberg recognize, the corresponding worship ritual of Q 97 was abandoned, and its text already required interpolation even during the era of Qur'ānic composition itself.

<sup>125</sup> Birnstiel has argued that some authentic memory of the Q 97 worship ritual was preserved in Ramadan celebrations, but the arguments on this point are so difficult that the attempt demonstrates how the traditional view cannot be salvaged. See "Incarnation or Illibration," 12-16. Dye, Sinai, and Luxenberg are surely correct in recognizing this as a secondary development.

<sup>126</sup> As Dye notes, the "analyse de la sourate présentée ici ne permet pas de conclure au caractère préislamique (antérieur à Muḥammad) de l'œuvre, mais montre seulement sa dépendance directe envers des hymnes chrétiennes préislamiques." "La nuit du Destin," 150.

retaining the Syriac Christian background, we must analyze whether Q 97 was composed to extol a sort of *Christian* counter-Christmas, a possibility that scholars have generally overlooked because of the lingering misconception that early *mu'minūn* were necessarily distinct from Christianity in the core respects asserted by later Islamic tradition.<sup>127</sup> Further, we should also consider whether Q 97 was a *text of convergence*,<sup>128</sup> in which earlier Christian text/rituals were restated in Arabic with contingent adaptations towards emerging ideologies that later coalesced as Islam (for example, the generic prophetic typology discussed above). It may be a transitional text, just as we might expect near the origins of a new religious confession.<sup>129</sup>

In that regard, Q 97 does not entirely fit with what one might expect for an orthodox Christmas context. It is curious that the *sūrah* would focus so heavily on the Incarnation, rather than the physical birth of Jesus at his Nativity (although Hymn No. 21 does focus on contrasting his glorious entry with his lowly birth). Most important, the *sūrah*'s first line takes the form of divine speech (i.e. it is narrated as 'we' speech), which (if not a later imposition on the text<sup>130</sup>) lacks an equivalent in Syriac Christian tradition. "Les choses sont bien différentes dans le Coran."<sup>131</sup> The recitation of divine speech strongly implies that the reciter is speaking as the divinity itself, which seems rather heretical for orthodox Christianity. Just as we cannot ignore the derivation of Q 97 from Syriac Christian tradition, so we cannot ignore the *sūrah*'s innovations. How, then, should we contemplate the original *Sitz im Leben* of Q 97, if it was not an orthodox Christmas?

Although the following discussion is necessarily much more speculative and tentative than the preceding textual analysis, three postulated scenarios can help explain how a text so closely derived from Syriac Christian Nativity hymns became part of the Qur'ān through intermediary steps. The scenarios are not mutually exclusive, and could reflect a chronological sequence of composition, diffusion, reinterpretation, and transformation. The objective is not to dogmatically proclaim where and how the text emerged – that is, in many ways, the central puzzle of Qur'ānic composition, and cannot be resolved here – but rather to explore some avenues by which such transitions could potentially occur.

### *The Annunciation Feast in Arabic*

The first possibility is that Q 97 originated as an Arabic explanation of the great Christian feast of Annunciation (celebrated March 25<sup>th</sup>), originally focused on Jesus and his Incarnation, but later a distinctively Marian feast, particularly in Western Christianity. The Annunciation

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<sup>127</sup> This misconception is rapidly disappearing from Qur'ānic studies, and the author might here be accused of drawing inspiration from the Qur'ān's habit of utilizing polemic against pagans who no longer existed. Yet the problem is less that modern scholars maintain that Islam was distinct at its origins, and more that direct Christian influence on Qur'ānic composition is discounted without justifiable cause. Much of this problem results from deference to traditional Islamic exegesis, as well as from confusion caused by the Qur'ān's ingenious redeployment of Christian polemical forms against trinitarian Christianity, implicitly equated with the (literary) polytheistic antagonists that oppose the messenger. See G. S. Reynolds, "On the Qur'ānic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*tahrif*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130.2 (2010): 189-202.

<sup>128</sup> This phrase is adapted from Dye's article "The Qur'ān and its Hypertextuality."

<sup>129</sup> Transitional in a non-teleological and contingent sense, akin to the evolution of biological organisms, not in the sense of a determinate historical process that began with a natural goal.

<sup>130</sup> Dye hypothesizes that this could have happened, with a transition from "He speech" to "We speech" in Q 97:1, but the difficult question of how the Qur'ānic divine speech format originated and what it signifies awaits a detailed investigation. See "La nuit du Destin," 155-56.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

Feast is closely related to Christmas, but emphasizes the Incarnation when Christ first descended into our material world, which is why the feast is also called *festum incarnationis*.

The feast has somewhat uncertain origins. Earlier forms of the celebration may have originated around the time of the council of Ephesus in 431 C.E., approximately the same time that construction began on the Kathisma of the Theotokos shrine, about which more below. In early Hagiopolite liturgy, the Annunciation was originally celebrated at the Mount of Olives as the fourth day of the Epiphany octave.<sup>132</sup> Marian feasts were developed by detachment and elaboration from such earlier rituals. “It is a commonplace of modern scholarship to note that the feast of the Theotokos in the Kathisma was the earliest of the Marian feasts celebrated in Jerusalem, independently and disconnected from the cycle of the Epiphany and the Nativity feasts.”<sup>133</sup> Following this trend, the Annunciation was detached from older octaves and made a separate great feast that fell annually on March 25th. By the tenth Synod of Toledo in 656 C.E., the Annunciation feast was described as universal across Christendom, although it is not easy to trace its development and emergence during this formative era.<sup>134</sup> In the early 7th Century, the relatively recent formation and spread of this great feast across Christendom meant that its liturgy, rituals, and texts were necessarily innovations, particularly when described in vernacular languages. Interestingly, when Dionysius Exiguus first introduced the Anno Domini calendar system in 525 C.E., he began the ecclesiastical calendar on March 25<sup>th</sup> because that is when Jesus was incarnated within Mary by the Holy Spirit.<sup>135</sup>

It would have made sense to explain the Annunciation feast to Arabophone Christian worshipers as a Christmas-equivalent that focused on the Incarnation, celebrated on the night of March 25<sup>th</sup>, nine months before Christmas. From a Syriac Christian foundation, Ephrem’s Nativity Hymn No. 21 would be a natural model to adapt for such a concise Arabic explanation, since (among many Nativity hymns) this hymn focused tightly on the paradox of incarnation and the unique rewards that were provided by its ritual celebration as a Christian feast. Secondly, the explanation (i.e. Q 97) would have been reinterpreted to designate another revelation, this time sent down to an Arabian messenger. The most useful texts for such adaptation would have been Arabic Christian texts (or portions thereof) like Q 97, which were ambiguous or peripheral enough to permit their re-interpretation as scriptural validations of the new prophet.

The main problem with this hypothesis is our lack of detail on how the Annunciation feast was introduced and characterized in late-antique Arabophone Christianity. Without additional evidence, conclusions cannot readily be drawn.

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<sup>132</sup> This is reported by the Armenian lectionary. See R. Avner, “The Initial Tradition of the Theotokos at the Kathisma: Earliest Celebrations and the Calendar,” in *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium*, ed. L. Brubaker and M. Cunningham (Burlington 2011): 19. Avner argues, contrary to Shoemaker and Ray, that the Kathisma was not associated with the Nativity but rather “the central theme of the celebration was the glorification of the Theotokos, focusing on Mary’s virginal motherhood, as most scholars have observed.”

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> F. Holweck, “The Feast of the Annunciation,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York 1907). Retrieved June 5, 2015 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01542a.htm>

<sup>135</sup> This is set forth in his “Argument XV.” Disputed issues of how exactly Dionysius developed his calculations and his related Easter Computus are too complex to address here, where the point is that the March 25<sup>th</sup> date for the Annunciation/Incarnation was established well before the Qur’ānic era.

### *Christian Competition For Arabophone Believers: The Kathisma*

Recent scholarship has suggested another way Q 97 could have originated as a Christian counter-Christmas. What Christian group would benefit from composing an Arabic recitation that adapted Ephrem's Nativity Hymn No. 21 to extol a ritual that focused closely on the Incarnation of Jesus, rather than his physical birth? And is there any evidence that such a Christian group may have influenced Qur'ānic composition? The Church of the Kathisma of the Theotokos (the 'seat' of the 'mother of God') suggests an intriguing possibility. The Kathisma shrine, along with its monastery, was located midway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It was directly responsible for complex Hagiopolite liturgical innovations centered on Mary, the Incarnation, and the Nativity. The Kathisma was converted into a mosque in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, and was then lost to history, until its recent archaeological rediscovery. It has been shown that the Kathisma was the direct architectural model for the Dome of the Rock, which was formerly thought to be unique from an architectural perspective, and that specific Nativity traditions associated only with the Kathisma were incorporated into the Qur'ān as the Nativity narrative in Q 19; insofar as the Qur'ān describes the birth of Jesus, it evidently only gives us the Kathisma version.<sup>136</sup> But the Kathisma's role in Islamic origins may not have been not narrowly limited to those two known influences, which were only discovered via the recent archaeological finds; had we followed traditional Islamic narratives, we could never have learned of that role.

The Kathisma was poorly positioned during the chaos of early 7<sup>th</sup> century Palestine. Christian pilgrimage had played the primary role in motivating and financing the population explosion of 4th-7th century Palestine.<sup>137</sup> And pilgrimage was often the subject of intense competition in late antiquity.<sup>138</sup> The Kathisma was vulnerable when regional conflict disrupted pilgrimage. It was a huge edifice, with an attached monastery, that was built specifically to attract pilgrimage,<sup>139</sup> but its identity soon became unstable. As Shoemaker puts it, "the Christians of late antiquity appear relatively uncertain as to exactly what they should make of the Kathisma shrine, now that the events of the Nativity were firmly established in Constantine's Bethlehem shrine."<sup>140</sup> Originally the Kathisma had been the primary church associated with the Nativity (basing its Marian liturgy on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of the Jerusalem Epiphany octave, which concentrated on the Annunciation). But that function was seized by Bethlehem and its Church of the Nativity, when the orthodox Nativity narrative suppressed the Kathisma's conflicting Nativity claims (as Shoemaker writes, "[o]nly one of them could be 'true,' and consequently a different significance had to be found for the Kathisma shrine").<sup>141</sup> Thereafter, the Kathisma was associated with the Dormition/Assumption of Mary. By the middle of the 6th century, however, that feast's observance was transferred to the Church of Mary's Tomb at Gethsemane. The Nea Maria was also built in Jerusalem. As its distinctive points, the Kathisma was left with the August 13th "Memory of Mary," and being a resting place on Mary's Christmas journey to

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<sup>136</sup> S. J. Shoemaker, "Christmas in the Qurān: The Qur'ānic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (2003): 11-39.

<sup>137</sup> R. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy* (New Haven 1992): 178-83.

<sup>138</sup> B. Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 2005): 196.

<sup>139</sup> "[T]his was planned as a pilgrimage church; as such, the aim was to provide additional religious attractions which would encourage and accelerate religious tourism. One may surmise that the driving force behind this pilgrimage policy was Juvenal, the Bishop of Jerusalem." "The Initial Tradition of the Theotokos," 24.

<sup>140</sup> "Christmas in the Qurān," 35.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

Bethlehem. New Marian feasts emerged in Jerusalem proper. So how to promote pilgrimage to Kathisma, which had become a bare ‘seat’ of Mary, located neither in Jerusalem nor Bethlehem? One innovation was to associate it with Mary’s rest on her flight to Egypt. Shoemaker quotes Ray: “New significance would have to be found for any other spot which claimed the same distinction, if the spot were to be retained as a site for pilgrimage.’ It would appear that an effort was made to dissociate the Kathisma church from its hoary Nativity traditions and to reinvent it as a shrine commemorating Mary’s rest during the flight into Egypt.”<sup>142</sup> The Kathisma and its associated factions were evidently under significant pressure to innovate.<sup>143</sup>

One way of obtaining advantage, in this competitive and fluid environment, would be by composing new Arabic liturgy and recitations, capitalizing on the rising Arabophone population of Palestine and Syria (long famous for their ardent pilgrimage<sup>144</sup>). Monks in the Kathisma monastery would presumably be responsible for this. In such compositions, one would expect the Kathisma faction to exalt its own position and derogate its competition by, in Shoemaker’s words, “dissociat[ing] the Kathisma church from its hoary Nativity traditions and to reinvent it” as a Marian shrine. Hagiopolite liturgy is known for being a hybrid with both monastic and urban features. Q 97 might then have been composed, by a Kathisma monk, as part of Arabic compositions that emphasized where the Kathisma shrine was uniquely competitive, bearing in mind its Bethlehem rival’s rise to dominate the narratives centered on the physical birth of Jesus. The text, or its recitation, could have then diffused into the Arabophone regional population.

That putative nexus between the Kathisma and early Qur’ānic texts would explain why Hymn No. 21 might have been Arabicized in a way that privileged the Incarnation (*qadr*) on the night of the Annunciation against the Christ-birth Nativity function that Bethlehem dominated. In addition to the Annunciation feast, moreover, did the Kathisma celebrate another kind of counter-Christmas focused on Mary and the Incarnation, rather than the physical birth of Jesus? Actually that describes the Kathisma’s August 13<sup>th</sup> Memory of Mary itself, which as Shoemaker notes continued to retain an implicit competing Nativity. As Dye has summarized the core meaning of this Marian celebration, “[T]he reading which gives the ultimate meaning of the commemoration is the verse ‘Arise, O Lord, to your resting place, You and the Ark of Your holiness.’”<sup>145</sup> It is Mary’s status as ark of the Incarnation that is the key liturgical point (Jesus rested in her womb, just as Mary rested on her journey to Bethlehem), distinct from the ultimate birth of Jesus. How then to explain the corresponding worship night in Arabic, and reinforce this esoteric distinction in the mind of believers? *Qadr*. Q 97 would be an attempt to articulate, in Arabic, why the Kathisma’s Marian celebration was so meritorious, adapted from Hymn No. 21 (which is certainly the subtext), but shifted to emphasize Mary as Theotokos, vessel of the Incarnation, the Ark and House of the Lord – as opposed to the physical birth that later took place in Bethlehem. This originating context of Hagiopolite liturgical competition would, of course, become unintelligible within later Islam.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>143</sup> The peculiar early 7<sup>th</sup> century document known as the Lection of Jeremiah, used in the Kathisma’s Marian liturgy, is another good example of Kathisma-driven liturgical innovation during this era. See G. Dye, “The Qur’ān and its Hypertextuality,” 12-13.

<sup>144</sup> See Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, pp. 191-92 (discussing the tens of thousands of ‘Ishmaelites’ making pilgrimage in early 5th Century Syria to revere Symeon the Stylite).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>146</sup> This could also explain a puzzling feature of the Annunciation narrative in Q 3:42-46. Why is the Annunciation delivered by multiple anonymous angels, paralleling Q 97? Why does the text then shift in Q 3:47 to talking about an unnamed ‘He’ (now presumably Gabriel) who answers Mary? The same oddity is seen in Q 3:39-

In this context, the ‘we’ divine speech framework of the early Qur’ānic text might have originated as a creative way to present the Christian liturgy as if it was narrated by Jesus himself. That would be a decided innovation, but much less so than a new Arabian Incarnation. As Dye puts it, “Une part considérable de la force de persuasion du Coran provient indiscutablement de ce dispositif très particulier, par lequel le discours du messager (en tout cas celui du ou des rédacteurs du texte) se présente comme étant le discours même de Dieu.”<sup>147</sup> Evidently the rhetorical power of this first-person form of address was particularly impressive for Arabophone believers, and so it may have been preferred for Arabic recitations.

If this hypothesis about liturgical rivalry expressed as Arabic innovation is correct, it could explain why the Kathisma’s architecture was so important to Islam, and why Mary is mentioned more often in the Qur’ān than in the New Testament. The Dome of the Rock might be a corrected Kathisma, embodying late Qur’ānic theology (parallel to the Q 19:33-40 interpolation), placed in Jerusalem as a supersessionist challenge to Byzantine orthodoxy. Shoemaker reports that the Kathisma was converted into a mosque in the early 8th century: “When the conquering Arabs took this shrine from Christian hands, they no doubt retained its ancient associations with the birth of Jesus, whom they too revered as a great messenger of Allah.”<sup>148</sup> But ‘conversion’ may be anachronistic, implying the abrupt imposition of a completely new confessional identity by ‘Muslims’ against a ‘Christian’ church. The early 8th century alterations to the building, including its mihrab, certainly conformed the Kathisma to the newer Qur’ānic ideology exemplified by the Dome of the Rock, and the structure was decidedly Islamic by this point, but the institution or monks associated with it could have already played a significant role in facilitating the emergence of the new Arabic faith. There is some evidence that the Kathisma site was used simultaneously for Christian and Muslim pilgrimage.<sup>149</sup> If we consider whether the Kathisma would have accepted pilgrimage from early *mu’minūn*, such patronage seems difficult to doubt. That would explain why it seamlessly became a mosque, and why it was closely mimicked by the most important Islamic building in Jerusalem, now correcting the early incarnation theology of the Kathisma with true Islamic inscriptions.<sup>150</sup>

This hypothesis integrates with the Muḥammad al-Masīh hypothesis discussed below. Monks or factions associated with the Kathisma may have facilitated the transition from Christianity towards proto-Islam in a gradual sense, beginning with relatively orthodox Christian

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40. G.S. Reynolds considers this an attempt to create typology with Sarah, which is possible, but not entirely satisfactory, considering how central Gabriel is within Christian and Qur’ānic Annunciation narratives. See G.S. Reynolds, “The Qur’ānic Sarah as Prototype of Mary,” in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden 2007): 203-4. The jarring shift from multiple angels to “He” must also be explained. In fact Ephrem did write a Nativity Hymn (No. 22) that refers to multiple angels at the Annunciation. But the context is extraordinary. At R 36-37, Ephrem’s hymn criticizes the *absence* of multiple angels, saying that only Gabriel alone was present at the Annunciation, not multiple angels, and the birth of Jesus (which numerous angels heralded) thus deserves greater celebration than his conception. The writer of Q 3:42-47 may have incorporated a revised Annunciation/Incarnation narrative (like Q 97) which countered or ‘corrected’ Ephrem’s harsh criticism, interpolating multiple anonymous angels, thereby raising the status of the Annunciation/Incarnation, and exalting Mary as Ark/resting place.

<sup>147</sup> “La nuit du Destin,” 155.

<sup>148</sup> “Christmas in the Qurān,” 35.

<sup>149</sup> See R. Avner-Levy, “The Kathisma: a Christian and Muslim Pilgrimage Site,” ARAM 18-19 (2006-7): 541-57. But cf. V. Shaled-Hurvitz, *Holy Sites Encircled: The Early Byzantine Concentric Churches of Jerusalem* (Oxford 2015): 141 (arguing there was not shared worship at the Kathisma, although the argument is thin).

<sup>150</sup> This hypothesis generates further possibilities for Qur’ānic analysis. The seeming monastic context of Q 73, Q 74, and Q 96 has long been noted; we might have a plausible context for explaining that. Likewise, the Kathisma had its two big annual pilgrimages at the winter Christmas (December 25<sup>th</sup>) and the summer Memory of Mary (August 13<sup>th</sup>) celebrations; we could call them the *riḥ’lata l-shitāi wal-ṣayfi* of Q 106.

liturgy and recitations in Arabic, transitioning to texts that equated Muḥammad with Jesus, and ending with early Qur’ānic *sūrahs*, which in turn were appropriated, expanded, and supplemented over time by other factions that attempted to articulate a distinct new confession that followed an Arabic Book given to the Arab Prophet; such later developments may have taken place in quite different contexts and locations (this process of diffusion need not be confined to one narrow context, geographical or otherwise). Syriac Christian traditions certainly played a central role in the earliest Qur’ānic compositions, which could have catered to the *mu’minūn* movement, without being identical to it. Transformation of Kathisma traditions into innovative Arabic form as part of the emergence of early Islam, in this sense, would parallel the emergence of Islam more broadly – a sustained process of immense creativity and complexity, a gradual coalescence of a new faith through myriad adjustments, analogous to how one biological species evolves into a new species by a process of speciation.<sup>151</sup>

Unfortunately this hypothesis must remain speculative. Similar processes of Christian liturgical competition and innovation could have produced Q 97 in entirely different locations and contexts (for example, in the Nabatean region).<sup>152</sup> Unless substantial further evidence comes to light,<sup>153</sup> it is not possible to form specific conclusions.

### *The Incarnation of Muḥammad al-Masīh*

We must finally consider whether Q 97 was composed, or at least reinterpreted, to celebrate its contemporary (or near-contemporary) Arabian prophet, rather than Jesus.<sup>154</sup> Q 97 would thus celebrate the incarnation of God’s Word as the Arabian messenger. The *sūrah* would indeed extol a counter-Christmas, a second Christmas celebrating the incarnation of a second Jesus, who had preached eschatology in Arabic, just as his predecessor had preached eschatology in Aramaic. This might explain why the Qur’ān is narrated as ‘we’ speech – it was originally understood as speech by divinity incarnated as the messenger. This archaic conception of

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<sup>151</sup> Revealed religions commonly narrate their emergence as a distinct new faith propelled by divine revelation, just as their texts describe the emergence of animal kinds by divine proclamation:

And God said, ‘Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.’ And it was so. – Genesis 1:24

But it was not really so, biologically or historically speaking.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. the *altarabische Schicksalnacht*. Sinai envisions a similar dynamic of liturgical rivalry as the *Sitz im Leben* of Q 97, but he locates that liturgical rivalry within Mecca, with Muslims asserting their new ritual by mimicking distant Christians. Other contexts for such liturgical rivalry – particularly competitive innovation by Christian institutions/factions – appear more plausible, better accounting for the remarkable proximity of Q 97 to Syriac Christian tradition. The point is not to insist that such potential contexts are historical fact (since we lack sufficient evidence to be dogmatic about the *Sitz im Leben*), but rather to consider their relative plausibility.

<sup>153</sup> The most likely source of such further evidence would be improvements in our understanding of Qur’ānic Arabic and its relation to the distribution of pre-Islamic Arabic dialects.

<sup>154</sup> Actually this need not be either/or. *Mu’minūn* could have used Q 97 to extol both the Incarnation of Jesus and/or the Incarnation of Muḥammad, assimilating the two and building a shared Arabic liturgy across an Arabophone coalition. Such an ecumenical liturgical concept would be anathema after confessions became more distinct, of course, but may have been possible at an early stage. Certainly many *sūrahs* recognize the presence of various factions criticized as ‘unbelievers’ who are nonetheless said to consider themselves *mu’minūn* who follow the messenger. Little remains known about early *mu’minūn*, despite frequent claims to the contrary, which is why determining *Sitz im Leben* is so difficult and imprecise.

Muḥammad as incarnation of the *logos*<sup>155</sup> would, of course, have become anathema at a later point of Qur’ānic composition, which for dogmatic reasons mandated that the *logos* be rigorously segregated and distinguished from its periodic recitation by God’s messenger.<sup>156</sup> In later tradition, Jib’rīl transmitted God’s incarnated revelation, rather than announcing it. But we cannot force the earliest Qur’ānic texts to comply with the refined dictates of later Islamic theology, particularly when later Qur’ānic composers found Q 97 too polytheistic, and interpolated it to help ‘sanitize’ the text of its problematic Christian implications. Nor are we entitled to presume that early Qur’ānic texts necessarily embodied a unified body of beliefs held by the historical Muḥammad and his followers, or even arose from the same narrow milieu.

Stephen Shoemaker has made a compelling argument that early *mu’minūn* saw Muḥammad in an eschatological light focused on Jerusalem, and after the prophet’s death reinterpreted his life in a Hijazi context that focused on what were taken to be his revelations, assembled together as the Qur’ān.<sup>157</sup> At an early stage, Q 97 could have been composed to proclaim Muḥammad as bearer of the Word of God,<sup>158</sup> who would bring the Kingdom of God into being by triumphantly entering Jerusalem, just like Jesus had done before. It has long been noted that the name Muḥammad appears Christological,<sup>159</sup> and may have been an epithet rather than a name.<sup>160</sup> To expand on Shoemaker’s theory, after Muḥammad unexpectedly died without ushering in the Kingdom of God, his followers would have reinterpreted his life in a way that paralleled Moses. His messianic function was reconceptualized as the deliverance of an Arabic revelation, the Qur’ān. The *logos* was thereby segregated from its incarnated human form, and instead exalted as a postulated Book that was (presumably in a context of intense sectarian rivalry) urgently assembled to help re-articulate the religious confession. Following this logic, Jesus had to be reinterpreted as somebody who did not die by crucifixion in Jerusalem to bring salvation, but was rather just a messenger who had likewise received a Book in the sense of

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<sup>155</sup> The title of Birnstiel’s article suggests that Q 97 must either refer to Illibration *or* Incarnation, such that either Luxenberg or Islamic tradition must be right. But there is no logical reason that Q 97 could not describe ‘Illibration’ as identical to the Syriac Christian Incarnation, its repetition, thus both Illibration *and* Incarnation. This equivalence and ambiguity could have been intended either at the time of original composition or (more likely given the slow and paradoxical development of the Book concept) as a secondary interpretation. In other words, the theological distinction is not necessarily as binary as Birnstiel’s title might imply.

<sup>156</sup> Carlos Segovia has circulated an abstract of a forthcoming book (Segovia 2015) in which he evidently will argue that Muḥammad was once tentatively thought of as an Arabian messiah within a Jewish-Christian background. The analysis of Q 97 presented in this article may bolster that argument.

<sup>157</sup> S. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet* (Philadelphia 2012).

<sup>158</sup> This would imply that the composer was probably either a Christian monk or somebody closely associated with such monks, presumably located in the Palestinian region, who was either converting to or affiliating himself with the Muḥammadan movement.

<sup>159</sup> See G.S. Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and its Biblical Subtext* (New York 2010): 185-199; Wansbrough also discusses this point in *Quranic Studies*, noting that the name is used only in messianic contexts.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Q 61:6: “And [mention] when Jesus, the son of Mary, said, ‘O children of Israel, indeed I am the messenger of Allah to you confirming what came before me of the Torah and bringing good tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name is Ahmad.’” Since the name Ahmad means ‘more praised,’ this claim implies that Jesus was the praised one, literally ‘Muḥammad,’ who would be followed by the more praised one, ‘Ahmad.’ As the typological identification of the Arabian prophet with the Christian messiah was deconstructed into a series of generic prophets, this nominal progression would have to be collapsed into a singular Muhammad. This possibility is supported by the *Doctrina Iacobi* in which the Saracen prophet is depicted as an apocalyptic figure who was “proclaiming the arrival of the Anointed One who is to come, the Christ.” See generally S. Anthony, “Muḥammad, the Keys to Paradise, and the Doctrina Iacobi: A Late Antique Puzzle,” *Der Islam* 91.2 (2014): 243-265. Interpreting the Arabian prophet as the divinely-inspired herald of the coming Christ, akin to John the Baptist, may have been a way for Christians to join the early *mu’minūn* movement without considering themselves to be apostate.

abstract authoritative revelation. The emerging Qur'ānic texts would have taken their Judaizing and anti-polytheistic turn here, vigorously disavowing their early Syriac Christian roots. In that context, Q 97 would not be a true Christian or Islamic text, but rather a transitional text, with an innovative Christian-Muḥammadan theology that later *mu'minūn* recast to suit the idea of an Arabian messenger who, like Moses, had been given an extrinsic divine revelation; soteriological expectations were transferred away from the prophet himself, vessel of the incarnated Word, to the emerging concept of an Arabic Book and its nascent texts. Dye has recently argued that Q 19:1-63\* was a 'text of convergence,' composed by a Christian monk, that converged Christian narratives with the Muḥammadan movement.<sup>161</sup> Q 97 could be seen as another text of convergence, albeit earlier and more distinctively Christian.

This explanation solves many problems, and generates interesting hypotheses, but it has difficulties. It is hard to picture a nocturnal vigil that celebrated the incarnation of Muḥammad while he lived; are we to imagine this ritual being directed at a living prophet?<sup>162</sup> Other archaic *sūrahs* do not confirm this picture of the messenger as bearer of the incarnated divinity. While many early *sūrahs* suggest that the prophet was seen as possessed by a divine spirit (or at least the unbelievers<sup>163</sup> are said to accuse the messenger of such possession), they do not give the anonymous messenger the epochal status one might expect for incarnated divinity. And this theology clashes against the constant Qur'ānic refrain against associators. Such polemic against *shirk* might have secondarily emerged or intensified in response to the prophet's unexpected death, with his messianic function (since it no longer could be to enter Jerusalem and usher in the Kingdom of God) being reinterpreted as the delivery of Qur'ānic revelation, necessitating an abandonment of the archaic Q 97 ritual that celebrated the incarnated *logos*.<sup>164</sup> Alternatively, Christian followers of Muḥammad might have simply wanted to celebrate Christmas, as they had always done, while also honoring the new messenger. Early Qur'ānic *sūrahs* could have emerged as a way of ministering to such Muḥammadan Christians, who would have been seen as heretics by more orthodox Christians, but continued with their faith.

The Annunciation feast and Kathisma compositional hypotheses discussed above could have readily transitioned into seeing Muḥammad as the vessel of the *qadr* of Q 97. These hypotheses are not exclusive, and in any event the transition between Syriac Christian and Islamic understandings of the text was surely more graduated, subtle, and sophisticated – that is to say, evolutionary – than maintained by Islamic tradition.

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<sup>161</sup> G. Dye, "The Qur'ān and its Hypertextuality in Light of Redaction Criticism," 15-20 (Dye uses "Q 19:1-63\*" to designate this portion of Qur'ānic text without its interpolated verses Q 19:33-40).

<sup>162</sup> This would not be a problem if Q 97 did not reflect an actual contemporary ritual, but rather was a literary composition that likened Muḥammad to Jesus by praising his parallel incarnation. Alternatively, Q 97 could have been a way to "Muḥammadize" Christian believers, transforming their existing Christmas celebration into an adjunct of parallel messianic expectation for Muḥammad.

<sup>163</sup> This rhetoric may not have referred to actual unbelievers. The targets may have been devout Muḥammadan *mu'minūn* who held different views on the prophet's status, i.e. a different faction, or else believers who were disappointed by his death and turned away from the movement; alternatively they may have been rhetorical constructs, used to articulate the faith by contrast, that did not exist as individuals in the contemporary context.

<sup>164</sup> Much of the most strident Qur'ānic polemic against polytheism appears to have been written over and against earlier Qur'ānic theology that was more consistent with Christianity, 'correcting' the text. For a good example, see Dye's analysis of the interpolated Q 19:33-40. "The Qur'ān and its Hypertextuality," 3.

## 9. Conclusion

The Syriac Christian background of Q 97 was obscured as the religious movement that became Islam (a) progressively altered its Annunciation narratives; (b) rejected the worship ritual extolled by Q 97; and (c) articulated an emerging confessional identity with the aid of an intensely creative process of transforming and reconceptualizing Christian incarnation theology.

This process provides insight into how some early Qur'ānic texts were developed and reinterpreted to meet changing religious needs. Composition diverged away from archaic Christian beliefs, rituals, and narratives, coalescing as a more strictly monotheistic faith, increasingly political and genealogical in character.<sup>165</sup> That divergence had a unique and contingent character. From an analytical perspective, the archaic text cannot be forcefully assimilated to its descendants, distorting Q 97 into a primitive version of later Islamic texts and doctrine. It is not a rudimentary form that implicitly sought to express such later forms.

Instead, Q 97 is exactly the kind of Arabic text that one would expect to find near the beginnings of Islam – intimately connected to the broader religious traditions of late antiquity, but with a unique character that proved suitable, with the aid of dynamic adaptations, to help define the emerging confession.

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<sup>165</sup> Even by the traditional Islamic account, written and oral materials (similar to the earliest *sūrahs*) would have been elaborated and transformed into Qur'ānic texts, with great industry, over a period of decades. It seems unlikely that major Qur'ānic composition took place much past the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the same general period when Islamic tradition contends Uthman compiled the Qur'ān. Reck has stated the point well: “Where Wansbrough’s notion is deviated from in this article occurs over the issue of when the Qur'ān became canonized. Wansbrough held to the prophetic *logia* becoming canonized far beyond Islam’s nascent years, while here it is affirmed that such *logia* became incorporated far earlier into the Qur'ān’s crystallized text.” *Ibid.*, 371 n. 59.

## APPENDIX

### **Ephrem's Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh Hymn No. 21**

(J.B. Morris Translation)<sup>166</sup>

(Resp.—*Blessed be he who became beyond measure low, that he might make us beyond measure great*)

1. Of the Birth of the Firstborn, let us tell on His Feast-day.—He gives on His day, secret comforts.—If the unclean *King* at his feast, in memory of his day,—gave the gift of wrath, the head in a charger,—how much more shall the Blessed, give blessings to him—who sings praise at His Feast!
2. Let us not count our vigil like vigils of every day.—His feast, its reward, exceeds an hundredfold.—For this feast makes war, on sleep by its vigil;—speaking it makes war, on silence by its voice;—clad with all blessings, it is chief of feasts,—and of every joy.
3. To-day the angels, and the archangels,—descended to sing—a new song on earth.—In this mystery they descend, and rejoice with the vigil-keepers.—At the time when they gave praise, blasphemy abounded.—Blessed be the Birth by which, lo! the world resounds—with anthems of praise.
4. For this is the night that joined, the Watchers on high with the vigil-keepers.—The Watcher came to make watchers in the midst of creation.—Lo! the vigil-keepers are made comrades with the Watchers:—the singers of praise are made, companions of the Seraphs.—Blessed be he who becomes, the harp of Thy praise!—and Thy grace becomes his reward.
5. The Birth then of the Firstborn, I will sing *and tell* how—the Godhead in the womb wove itself a vesture.—He put it on and came forth in birth, in death again put it off;—once he put it off, twice He put it on.—On the left He wore it, then took it off thence,—and laid it at the right.
6. He dwelt in a narrow bosom, the Might that rules all.—While He was dwelling there, He held the reins of the whole:—to His Father He made offering, that He might fulfil His Will:—Heaven

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<sup>166</sup> To lessen confusion, I have taken the liberty of changing this hymn's numbering and that of its strophes to accord with the modern critical edition of Ephrem's hymns by Dom Edmund Beck, which McVey uses as the basis for her translation. The original Morris translation identified Nativity Hymn No. 21 as its Nativity Hymn No. 14. Furthermore, strophe 13 in the Morris translation is excluded from Beck's critical edition and the McVey translation, causing the Morris translation of this hymn to have one extra strophe number (i.e. strophe 14 for McVey is strophe 15 for Morris). To keep the strophe numbering consistent, I have followed McVey by excluding Morris's strophe 13 in this Appendix and renumbered the strophes to follow McVey's numbering. The excluded strophe no. 13 from the Morris translation states as follows: "13. Who would not marvel, at Mary, David's daughter,—bearing an infant, and her virginity kept!—She lays Him on her breast, and lulls Him with song and He rejoices.—The Angels raise hymns, the Seraphs cry "Holy,"—the Magi offer, acceptable gifts,—to the Son Who is born."

was filled by Him, and every creature.—The Sun entered the womb, and in the height and the depth—his splendour abode.

7. He dwelt in the wide bosoms, of all the creatures;—too narrow to hold, the greatness of the Firstborn.—How then sufficed for it, that bosom of Mary?—Marvellous if it sufficed, bewilderment if it sufficed not.—Of all bosoms that held Him, one bosom sufficed for Him,—His, the Supreme Who begat Him.

8. The bosom that held Him, if it held Him Wholly,—equals the wondrous bosom, of the Supreme Who begat Him.—But who dare say the bosom, that is narrow weak and lowly,—is equal to His, Who is the Supreme Being?—He dwelt there of His mercy, though so great is His Nature:—it is without bound.

9. Reconciling Peace, sent to the nations!—gladdening Brightness, that came to the sad!—Mighty Leaven in silence, overcoming all!—Patient One that hast taken, man after man in Thy net!—Happy he who has welcomed, thy joy in his heart,—and forgot his groans in Thee!

10. They sounded forth peace, the Watchers to the vigil-keepers.—Among the vigil-keepers the good tidings, were announced by the Watchers.—Who would sleep on that night, which has waked all creatures?—For they bear good tidings of peace, where warfare had been.—Blessed is he who has pleased, the *Divine* Majesty by his silence,—when speaking moved His wrath!

11. Watchers mixed with watchers, they rejoiced that the world came to life.—The Evil One was shamed who was king, and had woven a crown of lies;—and set up his throne, as God in the world.—The Babe laid in the manger, cast him from his dominion.—The Sun rendered worship, doing Him homage by his Magi;—in his worshippers he worshipped Him.

12. God saw that mankind, worship things created:—He put on a created body, that in our custom He might capture us.—Lo! in this *our* form, He that formed us healed us;—and in this created shape, our Creator gave us life.—He drew us not by force: blessed be He Who came in ours,—and joined us in His!

13. O great above measure, immeasurably made low,—praised beyond praises, debased to humiliation!—the tender mercies laid on Thee, bowed Thee down to all this;—let Thy grace bow me down, though evil to give praise!—Happy he who becomes, a fountain of voices,—all praising Thee in all!

14. He was servant on earth; He is Lord in Heaven.—Heir of height and depth, He became a stranger:—Whom men judged in guile, He is judge in truth:—He Whose face they spat on, breathes His Spirit on theirs:—He Who held the frail reed, is become the staff of the world,—which grows old and leans on Him.

15. He Who rose to wait on His servants, now sits to be worshipped.—Whom the scribes despised, before Him Seraphs cry “Holy.”—This praise Adam desired, to steal privily.—The serpent which made him fall, saw to what height he was raised:—he crushed it because it deceived him; the feet of Eve trod it down,—which had sent venom into her ears.

16. The wife proved barren, and withheld her fruit;—but the bosom of Mary, holily conceived.—To wonder at fields, and to admire plants—she needed not who received, and rendered what she borrowed not.—Nature confessed its defeat; the womb was aware of it,—and restored what *Nature* gave not.

17. Mary was defeated, in the judgment by Elizabeth.—She that was barren pleaded, that the Will which prevailed—to close the open door, has opened the closed.—He has made childless the married womb; He has made fruitful the virgin womb.—Because the People were accurst faithless, He made her that was married,—held from bearing before the face of the maiden.

18. He Who could give moisture, to breasts barren and dead,—caused them to fail in youth, made them to flow in age;—forced and changed nature, in its season and out of its season.—The Lord of natures changed, the Virgin's nature.—Because the People were barren, He made her that was aged,—a mouth on behalf of the damsel.

19. And as He began at birth, He went on and fulfilled in death.—His Birth received worship; His Death paid the debt.—As He came to His Birth, the Magi worshipped Him;—again He came to His Passion, and the thief sought refuge in Him—Between His Birth and Death, midway He set the world:—in birth and Death he gave it life.

20. Thousand thousands stand, and ten thousand thousands haste.—The thousands and ten thousands, cannot search out the One:—for all of them stand, in silence to serve.—He has no heir of His Throne, save the Son Who is of Him.—In the midst of silence is the enquiry into Him, when the watchers come to search Him out,—they attain to silence and are stayed.

21. The Firstborn entered the womb, and the pure Virgin was not harmed.—He stirred and came forth in *her* travail, and the fair Mother was troubled by Him.—Glorious and unseen in entering, humble and manifest in issuing;—for He was God in entering, and He was man in issuing.—A marvel and bewilderment to hear: fire entered the womb; put on a body and came forth!

22. Gabriel chief of Angels, called Him “My Lord”:—he called Him “My Lord,” to teach that He was his Lord, not his fellow.—Gabriel had with him, Michael as fellow:—the Son is Lord of the servants; exalted *is* His Nature as His Name.—*No* servant can search Him out; for the greater the servant,—He is great above His servant.

23. When they stand before Thee, the watchers with songs of praise,—they know not in what part, they shall discern Thee.—They have sought Thee above in the height; they have seen Thee below in the depth:—they have searched for Thee in the midst of heaven; they have seen Thee in the midst of the abyss:—they have discerned Thee beside Him that is worshipped; they have found Thee in the midst of the creatures:—they have come down to Thee and sung Glory to Thee.

24. Thou art all wonderful, in all parts where we seek Thee.—Near art Thou,—and far, and who may attain to Thee?—No seeking avails, that its stretch should reach unto Thee.—Whereon it stretches to reach Thee, it is checked and stops,—it falls short of Thy mountain; Faith reaches thither,—and Love with prayer.

25. The Magi also sought Him, and in the manger when they found Him,—instead of scrutiny worship, they offered Him in silence;—for empty strivings, oblations gave they Him.—Seek thou too the Firstborn, and if thou find Him in the height,—instead of troubled questionings, open thy treasures before Him,—and offer Him thy works.