

# Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity in Q 18:60–65: The Quran in Light of Its Cultural Context

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The Quranic terms *sarab*, a hapax legomenon, and *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* have generated a number of different interpretations among both Muslim exegetes and Western scholars. In this article I demonstrate how they can be better understood when read in the light of the cultural context of late antiquity and, in particular, of the cosmological imagery of this historical period.

The present article addresses a narrative at vv. 60–82 of sura *al-Kahf* (18) concerning the encounter between Moses and an anonymous servant of God. The principal focus will be on three elements occurring in the first five verses: the term *sarab(an)*, found at v. 61; the notion of *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn*, referred to at v. 60 and alluded to again at v. 61 as *majmaʿ baynihimā*; and the rock (*ṣakhra*) mentioned at v. 63. My objective is to demonstrate that the concepts these elements designate can be better understood if read in light of the cultural context of late antiquity. In fact, as I will argue, the scenario described in this Quranic passage is permeated by references and allusions to cosmological notions largely widespread throughout the Near East during that historical period. From a theoretical perspective, this research is largely inspired by a series of studies published in the last few years by Gabriel Said Reynolds.<sup>1</sup> Another important source of inspiration is an article by Kevin van Bladel dealing with the Quranic word *sabab* (occurring, among other verses, in the pericope immediately following Q 18:60–82) and the cosmological notion it designates.<sup>2</sup>

## SARABAN

The narrative found in Q 18:60–82 includes two main stages. In the first (vv. 60–65), Moses travels with his servant to “the junction of the two seas” (*majmaʿ al-baḥrayn*), where he meets the Servant of God. In the second (vv. 65–82), Moses follows the Servant of God on a new journey, during which he experiences the unpredictability of divine will.

The pericope opens with Moses declaring his intention to travel to the junction of the two seas (Q 18:60). The Quranic text states that he is able to reach it after hearing from his young attendant about the fish that they were carrying with them escaping. This is twice referred to, in vv. 61 and 63. In both cases the dynamic is described by exactly the same phrase,

*Author's note:* My thanks go to Gabriel Said Reynolds, Patricia Crone, Kevin van Bladel, and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the article. I would also like to thank Peri Bearman for her help and useful suggestions.

1. G. S. Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?” *BSOAS* 72 (2009): 237–58; *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010); “On the Qurʾānic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*tahrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic,” *JAOS* 130 (2010): 1–14; “Le problème de la chronologie du Coran,” *Arabica* 58 (2011): 477–502; “On the Qurʾān’s Māʾida Passage and the Wanderings of the Israelites,” in *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom? Studies on the Rise of Islam in Memory of John Wansbrough*, ed. B. Lourié et al. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2011), 91–108.

2. K. van Bladel, “Heavenly Cords and Prophetic Authority in the Quran and Its Late Antique Context,” *BSOAS* 70 (2007): 223–47.

*fa-ttakhadha sabīlahu fī l-baḥr* (“and it [the fish] took its way in the sea”), except for the word that follows. In v. 61 the phrase ends with *saraban*, while v. 63 has *‘ajaban*, which is commonly translated as “wondrously” or “in a marvellous way,” and does not offer particular difficulties of interpretation. By contrast, *saraban* in v. 61 presents some complications.

While the root *s-r-b* is found in three other Quranic passages—*sarāb* (“mirage”) in 24:39 and 78:20, and *sārib* (“to go forth or away”) in 13:10—*sarab* is a Quranic hapax legomenon, that is, it appears only once. One way to understand *saraban* is to read it as the accusative of *sarab*, which means “tunnel” or “subterranean excavation.” Then the phrase in v. 61 can be translated as either “and it took its way in the sea by way of a subterranean excavation” or “and it took its way: a subterranean excavation in the sea,” depending on whether *saraban* is considered an accusative of circumstance (*ḥāl*) or a second direct object (the first being *sabīlahu*) of the verb *ittakhadha*.<sup>3</sup>

Such an understanding of the phrase is complicated by the cryptic idea of a tunnel into the sea. The early exegetical commentary ascribed to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) tries to solve this conceptual problem by explaining that once it reached the sea, the fish split<sup>4</sup> it when passing through, and the shape of the wake the fish left in the sea was similar to a tunnel in the ground (*ka-hayʿat al-sarab fī l-‘ard*).<sup>5</sup> Compared to Muqātil, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) is more concerned with the meaning of *saraban* and lists several explanations. The first is attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, who explained that *saraban* meant that the wake of the fish was rocklike. A second explanation is attributed to the Prophet himself through a hadīth reported by Ibn ‘Abbās on the authority of ‘Ubayy b. Ka‘b. According to this report, the water split itself in front of the fish and when Moses saw that path (*maslakahu*) he said: “This is what we were seeking!” (Q 18:64). Another report, attributed to Qatāda, one of the companions of the Prophet, claims that where the fish passed it left a wake of frozen water. According to a fourth understanding, attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, each part of the sea the fish touched became dry and turned to rock. A final explanation, reported on the authority of Ibn Wahb, on the authority of Ibn Zayd, is that God made the fish come back to life but that it made its way to the water in a valley and not in the sea. Al-Ṭabarī accepts all the explanations as plausible, while expressing his preference for the second one, as it was reported on the authority of the Prophet.<sup>6</sup> Analogous interpretations occur in the work by later commentators (e.g., al-Zamakhsharī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr), who report about miraculous events or divine interventions that brought about the solidification of the sea or the blocking of its running. Such attempts to relate the path the fish takes in the sea to passage on land are direct consequences of the apparent discordance between the meaning of the word *sarab*, “subterranean passage,” and the place where it is said to be found: the sea.<sup>7</sup>

3. Cf. the translation of the phrase in some Western-language translations of the Quran, e.g., Kazimirski (“[le poisson] prit la route de la mer par une voie souterraine”), Yusuf Ali (“which took its course through the sea [straight] as in a tunnel”), Arberry (“and it took its way into the sea, burrowing”), Jeffery (“it took its way to the sea by a path”), Khoury (“so nahm er seinen Weg ins Meer wie einen Tauchpfad”). It is similarly explained by John Penrice (*A Dictionary and Glossary of the Kor-ān* [London: H. S. King, 1873, repr. Curzon 1993], s.v. *saraba*) as “a pipe for the conveyance of water; *saraban* Q 18:60 [*sic*] may be translated ‘as it were in a tunnel’.”

4. Muqātil uses *infalaqa*, the same verb that in Q 26:63 describes the parting of the sea for Moses and his people during their escape from Pharaoh’s chariots.

5. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān* (Cairo: al-Hayʿat al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1988), 2: 593, ad Q 18:61.

6. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān fī ta’wīl al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1954), 16: 273–74, ad Q 18:61.

7. In *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1971), 381, Rudi Paret rejects the understanding of *saraban* as subterranean passage and is of the opinion that this interpretation originated due to a linguistic misunderstanding (“Die Kommentatoren haben ihn fälschlich mit dem aus dem Persischen übernommenen

Despite the fact that *saraban* is read most often as an accusative form by the exegetes, some offer another reading—*saraban* as the verbal noun of *sariba* “to flow” appearing in adverbial position (*ḥāl*).<sup>8</sup> For instance, the Shi‘i commentator al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153) suggests that the phrase could be taken as meaning *fa-sariba l-ḥūt saraban* (lit. and the fish flowed flowing).<sup>9</sup> Al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) also observes that it could mean *sariba fī l-baḥr saraban* (lit. and it flowed in the sea flowing), but, he emphasizes, “God said *fa-ttakhadha*” instead of *sariba*.<sup>10</sup> This second reading of *saraban* also presents some difficulties, since *sariba*, “to flow,” would more likely be expected to refer to the sea or to how the fish makes its way in it—perhaps as a wake left after its passage—rather than to the fish itself. It is probably because of this conceptual difficulty that both al-Ṭabrisī and al-Rāzī try to make a connection with *sārib*, active participle of the related root *saraba* (“to go forth or away”), which occurs in Q 13:10. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the interpretation of *saraban* as “going forth” would seem appropriate in the context of Q 18:61.<sup>11</sup> However, this explanation is grammatically problematic, as the verbal noun of *saraba* is *surūb* and thus not consistent with the actual term in 18:61.

As noted, modern-day translators of the Quran mostly follow these two understandings of *saraban*. However, a third explanation has recently been suggested by Christoph Luxenberg, who attempts a philological solution on the basis of the method he propounds to decode the Quran. According to Luxenberg, a spelling mistake is at the base of the reading *saraban*, which should instead be read *sharyā*, a Syriac participle adjective meaning “freely.” At the end of his analysis, Luxenberg argues (perhaps too confidently) that this Syro-Aramaic reading is the only correct one for the phrase, meaning thus “And it made its way freely into the ocean.”<sup>12</sup> As will appear evident below, Luxenberg’s interpretation of *saraban* is unlikely and somewhat forced.<sup>13</sup> It also fails to relate the term to cosmological notions typical of the late antique cultural context, which offer the key to a correct understanding of the concept

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Lehnwort *sarab* (*sarāb*) ‘Wasserleitung’, ‘Kanal’ identifiziert und daraus alle möglichen phantastischen Vorstellungen abgeleitet”). In their *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 429, Elsaid Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem define *saraban* as “by stealth, furtively; tunnel-like” and provide a translation of Q 18:61 using only the first of their meanings: “they forgot their fish, which made its way into the sea furtively (or, dipping in the water).” On p. 187 Abdel Haleem provides yet another interpretation of *saraban* (“and swam away”), which attests to the difficulty of this problematic term.

8. Paret (supra, n. 7) approves of this alternative understanding of *saraban* (“Der Ausdruck *saraban* (am Ende von Vers 61) ist wohl als adverbialer Infinitiv von *sariba* ‘fließen’ zu verstehen und bedeutet demnach so viel wie ‘(und er schwamm) auf und davon’”); similarly, Régis Blachère: “[le poisson] reprit son chemin dans la mer, en frétilant.”

9. Al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma‘ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, s.d.), 3: 178–82.

10. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb: Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘at al-Bahiyat al-Miṣriyya, 1935), 2: 146.

11. This is also a very common interpretation among modern translators of the Quran, who usually read *saraban* as “freely.” See, for example, Bausani (“e questo prese la sua via, libero, nel mare”) and Pickthall (“and it took its way into the waters, being free”). Richard Bell (*A Commentary on the Qur’ān* [Manchester: Univ. of Manchester Press, 1991], 1: 94) argues: “*sarab*, ‘freely’, only here, sometimes explained as meaning a subterranean passage, but probably verbal noun of *saraba* [*sic*] ‘to flow’.” By contrast, Arthur Jeffery (*The Koran: Selected Suras* [Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001], 220) remarks: “*Saraban* could possibly mean ‘freely’, but a *sarab* is a water conduit and since two verses later the fish is said to have made its way ‘wondrously’ to the sea, the likelihood is that these are both references to an element in the legend which says that the fish made its way by an underground channel from the Fountain of Life to its natural habitat in the sea.”

12. Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007), 143. (English version of *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* [2000].)

13. One might also wonder whether his interpretation is influenced by Bell’s translation, which he quotes.

that *saraban* is meant to denote. In the following pages I propose my own interpretation of *saraban* on the basis of the study of the text of Q 18:60–65.

Taken by itself the curious episode about the fish's escape is difficult to interpret. All we know is that the fish breaks loose near a rock at the junction of the two seas and that this event indicates to Moses that he has reached the goal of his journey. When examined in light of a legend concerning Alexander's journey to the Land of the Blessed, during which he fails to bathe in the water of life, the episode acquires more sense, however. Specifically, the fish's escape represents an allusion to the resurrection of a salt fish after Alexander's cook washes it in the water of life. The most ancient versions of this story are found in three sources preceding or contemporaneous to the rise of Islam: the Rec. β of the Alexander Romance (fourth/fifth century), the Babylonian Talmud (*Tamid*, 32a–32b), and the so-called Syriac Alexander Song (ca. 630–635). Muslim exegetes introduced some elements of this legend in their explanation of the narrative told in the Quran. In fact, the fish's escape episode is usually related to the motif of the water of life.<sup>14</sup> Western scholars, too, almost unanimously consider this story of Alexander to be behind the Quranic account.<sup>15</sup>

The motif of the source of life reported in the legend concerning Alexander should certainly be understood in relation to the life-giving characteristics that Near Easterners attributed to the sweet waters of the rivers. This concept is clearly manifested in the expression *my' hy'*, "living water," that the author of the Syriac Alexander Song uses to designate the water of the miraculous source sought by Alexander. In fact, it is with these same words that the Peshitta translates the common biblical expression *māyīm ḥayyīm* (ὕδωρ ζῶν), which designates the flowing water of the rivers. The same terms occur in a legend concerning the baptism of Constantine, where the "living water" of the source of life (*m'yn' d-hy'*) is credited with the power of curing the emperor of leprosy.<sup>16</sup> Such healing properties should in turn be related to Lev 14:51–53 and 15:12–14, which prescribe the use of "living water" in the rituals of purification from leprosy. 2 Kgs 5:10–14 similarly attributes the ability of curing leprosy to the waters of the Jordan. During late antiquity, the theme of Alexander's quest for the water of life came to be associated with Christian symbolism. This is particularly evident in the Syriac Alexander Song, whose author designates the miraculous source as "fountain of living water" (*ʿyn' d-my' hy'*), "fountain of life" (*ʿyn' d-hy'*), and "fountain of the water

14. For instance, the early *tafsir* ascribed to Muqātil (supra, n. 5) explains that Moses and his boy-servant pass the night nearby the rock where the source of life (*ʿayn al-ḥayāt*) is located, and that the salt fish (*samaka māliḥa*) they bring with them comes to life after being sprinkled with that water. The reference to the miraculous properties of the water of life as an explanation for the Quranic narrative of the fish's escape became a common point of later commentaries. See, for example, al-Ṭabarī (supra, n. 6), 16: 279, ad Q 18:65.

15. See, in particular, A. J. Wensinck, "al-Khaḍir," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004), 4: 902b–5b. See also Aaron Hughes, "The Stranger at the Sea: Mythopoesis in the Qur'ān and early *tafsir*," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 32 (2003): 261–79. Brannon Wheeler, who dismisses any direct relationship between Q 18:60–82 and the Alexander legend, has attempted to challenge the dominant views concerning the dependence of Q 18:60–82 on the Alexander tale ("Moses or Alexander? Early Islamic Exegesis of Qur'ān 18:60–65," *JNES* 57,3 [1998]: 191–215); yet the results he achieves are highly doubtful. The same arguments are repeated in his *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10–36. For a critique of Wheeler's study, see Kevin van Bladel, "The Syriac Sources of the Early Arabic Narratives of Alexander," in *Memory as History: The Legacy of Alexander in South Asia*, ed. H. P. Ray (New Delhi: Aryan International, 2007), 59–60. See also Kevin van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qur'ān 18:83–102," in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. G. S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2007), 197–98 n. 8.

16. Text in *Historia ecclesiastica Zachariae rhetori vulgo adscripta*, ed. E. W. Brooks, CSCO, Script. Syri, ser. 3, t. 6 (Paris: Typographeo Reipublicae, repr. Leuven: Peeters, 1921), 64.

of life” (‘yn’ d-my’ d-hy’).<sup>17</sup> Such expressions closely recall those by which the baptismal ceremony is referred to in several Christian texts from late antiquity. Furthermore, in the Song the act by which Alexander would acquire immortality is always designated by the verb *sh’*, “to bathe,” which has a ritual significance related to baptism. The fountain of life is thus a baptismal symbol—an idea expressed also in the above-mentioned legend concerning Constantine.<sup>18</sup> As for the particular episode of the salt fish coming back to life, this might have been read as an allusion to Christ’s resurrection, the fish being a very common symbol for Jesus in late antique art and literature. This would explain the absence of the motif of the fish’s revivification in the Talmudic version of the legend of the water of life. Indeed, the author (or authors) of the Talmudic account has intentionally eliminated the episode from the core of the narration in accordance with his theological agenda, for by omitting to mention the fish coming back to life he avoids any reference to Jesus’ resurrection that is implied.

When at v. 63 the Quran states that the fish “took its way in the sea in a marvelous way,” it evidently refers to its wondrously being revived upon contact with the miraculous water. In fact, the enigmatic episode acquires sense *only* if read in light of the dynamic described in the legend of the water of life, and the extreme vagueness with which the Quran describes the episode suggests that its audience was expected to be acquainted with the Alexander tale. The philological evidence confirms this view. The term *‘ajab*, “wonder,” occurs five times in the Quran; two of these are in sura *al-Kahf*—the first in our verse in question, 18:63, and the second in 18:9 to describe the story of the companions of the cave: “Or dost thou think the Men of the Cave and Er-Rakeem were among Our signs a wonder (*‘ajaban*)” (trans. Arberry).<sup>19</sup> The account of the companions’ long sleep is related in turn to the theme of resurrection, since, as Reynolds points out, the Quran uses this story “to convince its audience that God will clothe bones with flesh, in much the same way that it uses the example of life returning to the soil when it rains (e.g., Q 41:39; 43:11).”<sup>20</sup> As *‘ajab* is used here in a story related to the theme of resurrection, it is reasonable to assume that the same term refers to the same theme in the same sura a few verses later, i.e., 18:63. Thus, in the case of *‘ajaban*, both the literary and the philological analysis seem to confirm the link between the Quranic account and the episode of the fish regaining life. The case of *saraban* is more complex and requires a deeper analysis of the cultural concepts that adhered to the Alexander story of the source of life during late antiquity.

The Anomoean Church historian Philostorgius (d. ca. 439) attributes to the waters of the river Hyphasis miraculous properties similar to those with which the water of life is credited in the story of Alexander. According to Philostorgius (*Church History*, bk 3, §10),<sup>21</sup> the Hyphasis had the power to cure violent fevers when the sick person soaked in its waters. Philostorgius identifies the Hyphasis with the biblical Pishon, that is, one of the four rivers—with the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Gihon—flowing from the Garden of Eden, as referred to in Gen 2:10–14.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that in the Talmudic version of the story

17. Text in G. J. Reinink, *Das Syrische Alexanderlied: Die drei Rezensionen*, CSCO 454–455, Script. Syri, t. 195–196 (Leuven: Peeters, 1983).

18. On the relation between this legend and that of Alexander, see Mario Casari, “La fontana della vita tra Silvestro e Ḥiḍr: Alessandro e Costantino a confronto,” in *Medioevo romanzo e orientale: Macrotesti fra Oriente e Occidente*, ed. G. Carbonaro et al. (Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 2003), 230–31.

19. Henceforth, either A. J. Arberry or Yusuf Ali has supplied the Quran translations.

20. Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 179–85.

21. Philostorgius, *Church History*, tr. Philip R. Amidon (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

22. As Kevin van Bladel suggested to me, “it is quite significant that the Hyphasis (modern Beas) is the river that formed the easternmost limit of Alexander’s campaign. The connection drawn between Phison and Hyphasis pulls Alexander into the world of the Bible” (p.c., January 2013).

of Alexander, the water of life is in turn paralleled to, and eventually identified with, one of the paradisiacal rivers. In fact, according to this version of the story, Alexander washes a salt fish in a stream whose fragrance then reveals that the waters flow from the Garden of Eden.<sup>23</sup> By following this watercourse Alexander is able to reach the earthly paradise, which here takes the place of the Land of the Blessed. This version of the story of Alexander reflects a simple idea that follows the literal understanding of Gen 2:10–14, namely, that the earthly paradise could be reached by following the course of one of the four rivers.<sup>24</sup> In fact, sources confirm that during late antiquity it was widely held that paradise was a physical place situated on the other side of the ocean encircling the earth.<sup>25</sup> In accordance with this concept, it was generally assumed that the rivers flowing from paradise passed under this ocean to reach the inhabited part of the world. This idea goes back at least to Ephrem (d. ca. 373), who in his commentary on Genesis (§2, ¶6) states: “Paradise is set on a great height, the rivers are swallowed up again and they go down to the sea as if through a tall water duct (ʿyk d-mn qtrynʿ) and so they pass through the earth which is under the sea into this land,”<sup>26</sup> and was taken up by other late antique authors, such as the above-mentioned Philostorgius and Severian of Gabala, but also Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403) (*Ancoratus*, §58) and Augustine (d. 430) (*Literal Meaning of Genesis*, bk 8, §7; cf. Philo of Alexandria, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, bk 1, §12).<sup>27</sup> The geographer Cosmas Indicopleustes (sixth century) also con-

23. The idea that it could be possible to recognize the origin of a course of water through the smell (or taste) of a fish strictly parallels a passage in *Genesis Rabbah*, which argues: “The taste of a fish that is caught at Akko is not the same as the taste of a fish caught at Sidon or at Aspamia” (ch. 5, §8, ¶3) (Jacob Neusner, tr., *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985], 1: 52).

24. The same idea is repeated by Severian of Gabala (*Homilies on Creation and Fall*, tr. Robert C. Hill, in *Commentaries on Genesis 1–3*, ed. Michael Glerup [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVanity Press, 2010], 66) and by the anonymous author of the Syriac Alexander Legend (see the quoted passage below).

25. On this, see Joachim Jeremias, “παράδεισος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 5: 767–68; J. E. Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990).

26. St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Prose Works*, tr. Edward G. Mathews, Jr., and Joseph P. Amar (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2004), 101; Syriac text: R.-M. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum commentarii*, CSCO 152, Script. Syri 71 (Leuven: Peeters, 1955), 29. Ephrem’s commentary on Genesis had a lasting influence on Eastern Christian literature. His explanation on the subterranean course of the rivers of paradise is quoted almost literally by Isho’dad of Merv (d. ca. 850) and is mentioned by Moses Bar-Kepha (d. 903) in his *Commentaria de Paradiso*. Sources show that the concept of the subterranean course of the paradisiacal rivers continued to thrive in medieval Christian Europe. On this, see Alessandro Scafi’s insightful study of the representations of paradise in European cartography: *Mapping Paradise: A History of Heaven on Earth* (London: British Library, 2006).

27. In his discussion of the third day of creation, the anonymous author of the Syriac history “Cave of Treasures” (rec. I, §1, ¶¶14–16; cf. Philo, *De opificio mundi*, §38) provides us with a description: “Les eaux s’amassèrent dans les mers, sous la terre, à l’intérieur d’elle et sur elle. Et Dieu fit à l’intérieur de la terre, en dessous, des passages (m<sup>brt</sup>), des veines (šry<sup>n</sup>), des courants (rht<sup>ʿ</sup>), des torrents (nhl<sup>ʿ</sup>), et d’ouvertures (nqb<sup>ʿ</sup>) pour la circulation des eaux [...] Or la terre, par dessous, était faite comme une éponge pour les eaux parce qu’elle était établie et posée sur les eaux” (Andreas Su-Min Ri, *La Caverne des Trésors: Les deux recensions syriaques*, CSCO 486–487, Script. Syri 207–208, 2 vols. [Leuven: Peeters, 1987], Syr. text, 1: 8; Fr. trans., 2: 4). Cf. a Syriac astronomical treatise attributed to Ps.-Denys (late fifth/early sixth century), according to which “la surface inférieure de la terre est faite comme une éponge; et l’intérieur de la terre, de passages (m<sup>brt</sup>) et de creux (hly<sup>ʿ</sup>); tout (ce qui est à l’intérieur) fut fait pour la course des eaux des fleuves et des sources, et aussi pour l’utilité du chaud et du froid” (Andreas Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors: Étude sur l’histoire du texte et de ses sources*, CSCO 581, Subsidia 103 [Leuven: Peeters, 2000], 126); see Marc-Antoine Kugener, “Un traité astronomique et météorologique syriaque attribué à Denys l’Aréopagite,” in *Actes du XIVe Congrès international des orientalistes, Alger 1905* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1907), 2: 153. On the idea of subterranean waters, see also A. J. Wensinck, *The Ocean in the Literature of the Western Semites* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1918), 15–19.

siders the four rivers to reach the inhabited world by following a subterranean course under the ocean: “the four rivers which divine scripture says emanate from Paradise cleave a passage through the ocean and spring up in this earth” (*Christian Topography*, 2,81).<sup>28</sup> In his *Homilies on Creation*, the Syriac theologian and poet Narsai (d. 502) refers to a very similar concept about the course of the rivers from paradise to earth: “Glorious was its [paradise] spring, whose course flows at the four extremities [of the earth] / and like a pipe in the sea (*w-ʿyk sylwʿ b-ymʿ*), it passes [through it] without mixing [its water with it]” (Hom. 1, vv. 395–96).<sup>29</sup> The author of the so-called Syriac Alexander Legend (ca. 629) doubtless had a clear and complete picture of these cosmological concepts about paradise in mind when he wrote:

God made four rivers to go forth from the paradise of Eden. As He knew that men would dare to go up these rivers to enter paradise, He drew them inside the earth and brought them through valleys, mountains, and plains. Then, after leading them across many mountains, He made them spring out at their feet, and there is one that He made flow from a cave. As for paradise, He surrounded it with seas, rivers, and the ocean, the fetid sea, so that men cannot get close to it, nor can they see where the rivers have their source; all that they see is the place from which they spring, from mountains or valleys.<sup>30</sup>

While not explicit, it is implied that the rivers travel under or through the ocean and the seas surrounding paradise to reach the inhabited earth. The occurrence of these notions in the Alexander Legend is very meaningful for the present study, as the work was composed during the same period as the last years of Muḥammad’s life. It would seem that there was direct knowledge of this work in Medina, as the Quranic story of Dhū l-Qarnayn (18:83–102), which immediately follows the story of Moses, has been successfully demonstrated to be a retelling of a narrative included in the Legend.<sup>31</sup>

In light of the above cosmological concepts from late antiquity—on the one hand, the identification of the water of life with the rivers of paradise, as confirmed by Philostorgius and, more significantly, in the Talmudic version of the Alexander legend, and, on the other hand, the idea that these rivers flowed underground beneath the sea from paradise to the inhabited earth, as several authors report—it seems very likely that *saraban* in Q 18:63 is meant to describe the subterranean passage under the sea that the fish takes once resurrected by the miraculous water of the paradisiacal rivers. Thus, a translation of *fa-ttakhadha sabīlahu fī l-baḥr saraban* as “and it took its way: a tunnel (or subterranean) passage in the sea,” makes the most sense. Alternatively, *sarab* can be considered as meaning a “pipe for the conveyance of water” or a “water conduit,” as both Jeffery and Penrice suggest.<sup>32</sup> In this case, *saraban* would almost fully correspond with Ephrem’s sentence *ʿyk d-mn qtrynʿ* (“as it were down a water pipe”) with which the Syriac author describes the entry of the rivers in

28. J. W. McCrindle, tr., *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1897; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 75.

29. Syriac text: P. Gignoux, *Homélie de Narsai sur la création*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 34,3–4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 550. The same idea that some rivers flowed through the sea without their waters mixing occurs in a number of Greek and Latin works (e.g., Strabo, *Geography*, bk 6, §2, ¶4; Polibius, *Historiae*, bk 12, §4d; Virgil, *Aeneid*, bk 3, vv. 694–96; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, bk 5, vv. 600–41; Seneca, *Quaestiones Naturales*, bk 3, §26, ¶5; Pliny, *Natural History*, bk 2, §225; bk 31, §55; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, bk 5, §7, ¶3; Lucian, *Dialogi Marini*, bk 3, §§1–2). See also this article’s final section, below, for some remarks about the association of the same cosmological idea to the Jordan.

30. Syriac text: E. A. Wallis-Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great, Being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1889), 206.

31. Van Bladel, “The Alexander Legend in the Qurʿān 18:83–102.”

32. Jeffery, *The Koran*, 220; Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Kor-ān*, 104.

the sea surrounding paradise, or, still more strikingly, with Narsai's statement that the rivers travel *'yk sylwn' b-ym'* ("like a pipe in the sea").

Therefore, in light of the text behind the narrative found in Q 18:60–65, such an interpretation of *saraban* seems the most accurate. Moreover, it appears to be consistent with Quranic paradisiacal imagery—paradise in the Quran is constantly depicted as a place characterized by its close relationship with sweet waters. For instance, Q 88:10–12 describes paradise as "an elevated garden [. . .] in which is a running fountain," an image recalling Ephrem's description of paradise as the source of the rivers "situated on a great height"; and "the godfearing shall be amidst gardens and fountains" (Q 15:45; 51:15, cf. 44:51–52; 55:50, 66; 77:41; 88:12). Furthermore, the motif of the paradisiacal rivers appears (Q 47:15, "in it are rivers of water incorruptible; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and clear"),<sup>33</sup> and finally, and most importantly, it is worth noting that the cosmological notion of the subterranean course of the paradisiacal rivers is possibly given substance by the very common phrase *jannātun tajrī min taḥtihā l-anhāru* ("gardens from beneath which the rivers flow"), which epitomizes the Quranic description of paradise and would seem to refer to the very idea of the underground course of rivers leading from the garden to the earth as has been suggested of the term *saraban* above. Indeed, the enigmatic expression *min taḥtihā* (lit. from beneath which) is plausible when understood as an allusion to both the place of origin and the subterranean course of the paradisiacal rivers. Moreover, the use of the definite article before *anhār* suggests that all the rivers are meant here, which again could evidence the ancient Near Eastern and biblical idea that the earth's rivers are of divine origin and their source is located in a paradisiacal land. Indeed, as Heidi Toelle notes, the Quran implies a direct relationship between the sweet waters of paradise and those of the earth, as in most cases they are indicated with the same terminology.<sup>34</sup>

#### MAJMA<sup>c</sup> AL-BAḤRAYN

The link between paradisiacal and terrestrial waters, to which it is suggested *saraban* refers, is reflected in turn by the notion of *majma<sup>c</sup> al-baḥrayn* ("the junction of the two seas"), which specifies the location where the fish is said to have miraculously escaped by way of the *sarab*. Muslim commentators tried to provide an actual geographical location—most often the meeting point of the Baḥr al-Rūm and the Baḥr Fāris.<sup>35</sup> Western scholars have more convincingly associated the expression *majma<sup>c</sup> al-baḥrayn* with cosmological concepts of the origins and the course of the rivers that were prevalent since very ancient times, for instance, a reflection of El's abode on a cosmic mountain located "at the springs of the two rivers, midst the channels of the two deeps," as it is referred to in some Ugaritic texts.<sup>36</sup> Marvin Pope also traces some interesting parallels between the "channels of the two deeps" of El's abode, the "channels of the sea" mentioned in 2 Sam 22:16 and in Ps 18:15,

33. Here the Quran refers to imagery connected to the paradisiacal rivers that was widespread. In 2 Enoch one finds two streams coming forth from paradise, one being a source of honey and milk, the other of oil and wine (8:5). Likewise in the Apocalypse of Paul a river of honey and milk flows (22) as does the "river of wine" where the Apostle meets Abraham and other righteous of the past (29).

34. Heidi Toelle, *Le Coran revisité: Le feu, l'eau, l'air et la terre* (Damascus: IFPO, 2003), 122.

35. See W. E. Mulligan, "al-Baḥrayn," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 1: 940b–41a; Wensinck, "al-Khaḍir," 4: 903a.

36. W. F. Albright, "The Mouth of the Rivers," *AJSL* 35 (1919): 192–93; Marvin H. Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955), 61–80. See also Edward Lipiński, "El's Abode: Mythological Traditions Related to Mount Hermon and to the Mountains of Armenia," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 2 (1971): 225–26.

and the Quranic *saraban*—in its meaning of “subterranean conduit.”<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, Pope does not refer in his discussion to the late antique imagery of the subterranean course of the rivers, which is of such importance for the legacy of the ancient Near Eastern cosmological concepts and their eventual transmission to the Quran.

On the other hand, Arent Jan Wensinck associates the “junction of the two seas” with Utnapishtim’s abode at the “the mouth of the rivers” (*ina pî nārāti*), mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh.<sup>38</sup> The parallel proposed by Wensinck is consistent with his suggestion that the encounter between Moses and the Servant of God in Q 18:65 is reminiscent of that between Gilgamesh and Utnapishtim in the Epic (11). Although it is plausible that Q 18:60–65—as well as the Alexander legend to which it is related—is somehow related to the ancient story of Gilgamesh’s quest for immortality,<sup>39</sup> it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a direct philological link between the Akkadian *ina pî nārāti* and the Arabic *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn*. However, it seems likely that the expressions refer to similar cosmological concepts. As Andrew George has convincingly argued, the notion of *ina pî nārāti* is meant to describe the place across the encircling sea where the rivers were thought to rise again after passing through a subterranean ocean of sweet waters (Apsû).<sup>40</sup> This notion strongly mirrors the late antique imagery about the course of the paradisiacal rivers, as well as the Quranic *saraban*.<sup>41</sup> From this perspective, there is a parallelism between *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* and *ina pî nārāti*, as proposed by Wensinck.

The ancient Canaanite and Babylonian notions to which *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* has been related are part of a larger cosmological imagery that is shared by the Book of Genesis. Scholars have often invoked correspondences between both Utnapishtim’s and E1’s abodes and some features of the biblical Garden of Eden, among which the four rivers.<sup>42</sup> Through the Bible these ancient notions continued to wield a lasting influence on the late antique descriptions of paradise by Jewish and Christian authors. As a consequence, the paradisiacal mountain described by Ephrem as the source of all the rivers of the earth does not

37. Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts*, 78–79.

38. Wensinck, “al-Khaḍir,” 903b. Other—not always convincing—explanations of the Quranic expression by previous scholars are reported by Paret (*Der Koran*, 318).

39. On this, see Wouter Henkelman, “Beware of Dim Cooks and Cunning Snakes: Gilgameš, Alexander, and the Loss of Immortality.” In *Interkulturalität in der alten Welt: Vorderasien, Hellas, Ägypten und die vielfältigen Ebenen des Kontakts*, ed. Robert Rollinger et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 323–60. For some brief but perceptive observations about the late antique legacy of the Gilgamesh epic and its possible connection with the Syriac legend concerning Alexander and the Quran, see van Bladel, “The Alexander Legend in the Qurʾān 18:83–102,” 197–98 n. 8.

40. According to George (*The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003], 1: 520–21), this concept is related in turn to the ancient Sumerian imagery about the paradisiacal land of Dilmun, which in the myth of Enki and Ninkhursag is described as located nearby “the mouth whence issues the water of the earth.” In the Sumerian version of the Flood myth, the king Ziusudra is said to have been given immortality and residence in the mythical land of Dilmun by the gods. Since this myth was later incorporated into the Epic of Gilgamesh, scholars generally agree on the identity of Utnapishtim with Ziusudra and of the “mouth of the rivers” with the land of Dilmun. See also Albright, “The Mouth of the Rivers” (as per George, p. 520).

41. This cosmological parallel appears more concrete when one considers later references to similar concepts, as, e.g., Pliny, who in *Natural History* reports that the Euphrates reappeared in southern Arabia after flowing under the sea (bk 6, §159). See also 1 Enoch 17:8, where during a journey at the edges of the earth, Enoch sees “the mouth of all the rivers of the earth and the mouth of the abyss.”

42. See Howard N. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 76–77, 85–86; T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000).

considerably differ from the ancient Canaanite and Israelite imagery of the sacred places.<sup>43</sup> In much the same way, the image of the Land of the Blessed or of the Garden of Eden, which the authors of the various versions of the Alexander story of the water of life probably had in mind, should not have been too different from how a Babylonian reader conceived the abode of Utnapishtim at “the mouth of the rivers.” Since the legend of the water of life represents the text behind Q 18:60–65, it seems reasonable that the “junction of the two seas” to which Moses is said to journey was thought to represent a similar place, that is, a land with a special connection to the waters of the rivers. A deeper analysis of the expression *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* confirms this view, with the scene described in Q 18:60–65 appearing closely connected to late antique concepts about the origins of sweet waters.

In four other passages than 18:60–65 (Q 25:53, 27:61, 35:12, 55:19), the Quran alludes to the existence of two different seas (*baḥrān*), which are described as separate bodies of sweet and salt water. Scholars have argued that these two seas correspond to the waters that are located, according to the biblical cosmology, above and below the firmament (Gen 1:6–8).<sup>44</sup> This suggestion can be confirmed by adducing the evidence of late antique literature. For instance, in his commentary on Genesis, Ephrem explains that while the lower waters became salty “when they were gathered into seas on the third day,” the upper waters remained sweet “for they had not been left on the land to become stagnant” (§1, ¶¶10–13).<sup>45</sup> The Quranic concept of the existence of two bodies of water, one sweet, the other salty, evidently refers to this. In much the same way, the image of two cosmic seas describing the waters above and below the firmament is not peculiar of the Quran’s cosmology, for in his poetical description of the creation of the firmament Narsai states: “O balance which divided the great water cistern and gathered it in two seas (*tryn ymmyn*), in the heaven and in the deep!”<sup>46</sup>

It has been observed that in Quranic cosmology the celestial ocean represents a kind of cistern for the rain that God sends down from heaven.<sup>47</sup> This “heavenly cistern” is not only the source of rainwater, but of all the sweet waters of the earth, including the four rivers.<sup>48</sup> This appears evident given that the Quran opposes the sweet and salty seas in a firm dualistic view, as two opposite bodies of cosmic water. It is important to stress that the Quranic discourse credits the celestial waters with life-giving qualities. The example of the life that rain brings to the arid soil (e.g., Q 43:11: “and Who sent down out of heaven water in measure; and We revived thereby a land that was dead; even so you shall be brought forth”) is often adduced as proof of God’s ability to resurrect from death.<sup>49</sup> The life-giving qualities of the celestial waters are consistent with the fish regaining life—alluded to in Q 18:61 and 63—

43. See Gary Anderson, “The Cosmic Mountain: Eden and Its Early Interpreters in Syriac Christianity,” in *Genesis 1–3 in the History of Exegesis: Intrigue in the Garden*, ed. Gregory Allen Robbins (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988), 187–224.

44. Toelle, *Le Coran revisité*, 125–26; Angelika Neuwirth, “Cosmology,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006), 1: 445–46.

45. St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Prose Works*, tr. Mathews and Amar, 82–84. See also Abraham Levene, *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis: From a Syriac Ms. on the Pentateuch in the Mingana Collection* (London: Taylor’s Foreign Press, 1951), 82.

46. Syriac text: Gignoux, *Homélie de Narsai sur la création*, 528.

47. Toelle, *Le Coran revisité*, 125–26. The idea of a heavenly cistern recalls the cosmological description found in Deut 11:17 and 28:12, where rainwater is said to fall on the earth when heaven is open. On this, see also Wensinck, *The Ocean in the Literature of the Western Semites*, 19–21.

48. See Toelle, *Le Coran revisité*, 125–26. From this perspective, it is worth remarking that in the *Hymns on Paradise* (2, §9) Ephrem compares the water issuing from paradise to rainwater.

49. Aphrahat uses the same metaphor of the rain (quoting Is. 55:10–11) to explain the miracle of the resurrection (*Demonstrations*, Dem. 8, §15).

that meaningfully takes place where the heavenly ocean joins the lower part of the world. Indeed, one can imagine that the exceptional properties of the water at “the junction of the two seas” are due to its proximity to the celestial sea.

With this we arrive at our central point, which is the parallelism between the Quranic *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* and the late antique notions about the paradisiacal origins of the rivers. The notion of “the junction of the two seas” indicates that the place reached by Moses in Q 18:60–65 has a special relationship with the ocean of fresh waters. In Quranic cosmology, this expression is possibly intended to designate a place that has a specific role in the passage of the heavenly waters to earth. In light of the above, one can imagine *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* as the place where the heavenly and terrestrial oceans meet, and from where the sweet waters reach the earth, by way of an underground course alluded to by the expression *saraban*.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the Quranic notions of *saraban* and *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* appear to be related as well as being consistent with the complex set of images and cosmological notions that are part and parcel of the late antique collective imagination about the origins of the rivers and, more generally, about paradise.

#### AL-ŞAKHRA

The specific representation of the meeting point between the celestial and terrestrial seas suggests that the rock (*şakhra*) from which the fish in Q 18:63 is said to escape was thought to be located at the junction between heaven and earth. Once again, this description closely recalls the ancient Near Eastern and Judaic imagery of the cosmic mountain of God. Similar images also occur in the works of some Syriac authors, who represent the paradisiacal mountain as the *axis mundi*, that is, the junction between the upper and lower parts of the world. For instance, Ephrem describes paradise as a mountain encircling the whole creation (*Hymns on Paradise*, 1, §§8–9; 2, §6), an image that “suggests that the cosmic mountain is at once a peak and firmament.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the author of the Alexander Legend concludes that “[paradise] is close to neither heaven nor earth. It is rather like a fair and mighty city, which appears between heaven and earth [. . .].”<sup>52</sup> It might also be observed that in Arabic classical literature the term *şakhra* designates the sacred rock of Jerusalem, where the Second Temple was built and from where, according to later Muslim tradition, the Prophet’s heavenly ascent began. Except for the reports about the *miʿrāj*, which are late with regard to the Quran, it seems that the designation of the sacred rock by the term *şakhra* is ancient. The construction of the Dome on the Rock on this site reflects the veneration that this place enjoyed among the members of the early Muslim community. If the rock reached by Moses in Q 18:63 stood for the sacred rock of Jerusalem, this would concur with the continuous overlapping between Jerusalem (Zion) and paradise, present in both biblical and extra-biblical literature. In fact, the depiction of Zion through traits typically attributed to Eden (paradise) and the eventual

50. Much the same imagery occurs in the description of the origin and the course of the four rivers of paradise in the version of the Apocalypse of Peter contained in the Ethiopic Pseudo-Clementines, the so-called Qalementos. Here Peter learns from God: “Les quatre fleuves qui arrosent le monde, jaillissent de l’eau qui est sous le trône de ma gloire [cf. Rev 22:1]. Voici que moi-même j’ai établi quatre canaux, qui passent de la mer des vents, descendent rapidement dans l’Éden et de là coulent, et arrosent le monde” (Sylvain Grébaud, “Littérature éthiopienne pseudoclémentine: III. Traduction du Qalémentos (suite),” *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien*, 2ème série 4,7 [1912]: 343). It is also worth remarking that Origen associates the rivers of living water mentioned in Rev 22:1 (ποταμός ὕδατος ζωῆς; Pesh: *nhrʿ d-myʿ hyʿ*) with the “spiritual water” that is above the firmament (*Homilies on Genesis*, Hom. 1, §2).

51. Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 61.

52. Syriac text: Wallis-Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great*, 206. For other examples and some general remarks, see Anderson, “The Cosmic Mountain.”

identification between the former and the latter “is as old as the Bible itself.”<sup>53</sup> As a consequence of this superposition of the two “holy places,” Jerusalem is often associated with the water imagery typical of paradise. Indeed, the prominent motif of the stream of living water emanating from Zion’s cosmic mountain (Ezra 47:1–12; Joel 3:18; Ps 46:4) recalls the imagery of the paradisiacal rivers in Gen 2:10–14. This parallelism is strengthened by the meaningful homonymy between the Gihon spring, found in Jerusalem, and one of the four paradisiacal rivers.<sup>54</sup> Still more significantly, Ps 36 identifies the cosmic stream flowing from Zion with the fountain of the water of life—an element that also represents a possible point of contact with the legend of Alexander examined here. In much the same way, the prophecy of Zechariah (Zech 14:8) states that living waters (*mayyim hayyim*) shall flow from Jerusalem on the final day.<sup>55</sup> The superposition of the waters of paradise on those of the Holy Land is also reflected in the above-mentioned passage 2 Kgs 5:10–14, which credits the Jordan with healing properties. It is also worth remarking that in extra-biblical sources the Jordan is associated with the same cosmological notions used to explain the course of the paradisiacal rivers. Indeed, Josephus (*Jewish War*, bk 3, §10, ¶7) reports that the Jordan has its apparent source at Paneion; in reality it rises in the pool called Phiale, from which it passes by an unseen subterranean channel to Paneion. Furthermore, according to the *Genesis Rabbah* “the Jordan river passes through the Sea of Tiberias and is not mixed up with the sea” (ch. 4, §5, ¶1).<sup>56</sup> Of course, such explanations closely parallel those that the late antique authors use to explain the origins of the rivers of paradise, so that the Quran’s possible transposition to Jerusalem of cosmological notions proper to paradisiacal imagery is consistent with a solid and widespread tradition.

It is noteworthy that the potential allusion to Jerusalem in Q 18:63 is also consistent with the replacement of Alexander by Moses as protagonist in the Quranic account. Some have attributed this exchange of characters to possible imprecisions in the Quran in retelling the Alexander story.<sup>57</sup> However, some elements suggest that the presence of Moses instead of Alexander in Q 18:60–82 is not accidental, but seems instead to be related to the biblical motif about Moses’ impossibility of entering the Promised Land, which duplicates and then replaces Alexander’s failure to enter paradise. It is also worth remarking that according to rabbinic commentaries on the Book of Numbers, God forbids Moses to reach the Promised Land as a punishment for his impatience in the episode of Meribah, when he twice struck a rock to obtain water (20:1–13). The same theme reappears in the second stage of the Quranic account, when Moses is similarly guilty of being impatient with the Servant of God.<sup>58</sup> These

53. Anderson, “The Cosmic Mountain,” 203.

54. *Ibid.*, 198, cf. 191–93. See also H. Eising, “Gihôn,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–), 2: 466–68; Georg Fohrer and Eduard Lohse, “Σιών,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7: 317–18.

55. The prophecy also asserts that these living waters will run into two eschatological seas, an image that Q 18:60–65 possibly alludes to. In fact, the Quran credits the two cosmic seas with both cosmological and eschatological functions. For instance, in Q 25:53 the two seas are said to be separated by a *barzakh* (a term that in Q 23:100 stands for a partition behind which the dead are confined until the resurrection) and a *hijr mahjūr*, a permanent bar dividing the two seas (*hijran mahjūran* is also said by the angels to the sinners, in Q 25:21–22, when barring them from entering paradise). On *barzakh*, see Tommaso Tesei, “The Barzakh and the Intermediate State of the Dead in the Qur’an,” in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, ed. Christian Lange (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

56. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 1: 41.

57. See Armand Abel, “Dū’l-Qarnayn, prophète de l’universalité,” *Annuaire de l’Institut de Philologie et d’Histoire Orientales et Slaves* 11 (1951), 6–18; Richard Hartmann, “Zur Erklärung von Sūre 18, 59 ff.,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 24 (1910), 307–15.

58. In Q 18:66–82 Moses’ impatience is the cause of his failure to acquire a deeper knowledge, paralleling Alexander’s impossibility of obtaining immortality. Such “thematic switching,” from the loss of knowledge to the

elements point to a manifest intention to use the main elements of the story of Alexander for some episodes of Moses' mythic cycle.<sup>59</sup> In this case, the switch from paradise to Jerusalem could be explained as logically following the replacement of the two characters: the unattained destination of Alexander's expedition has been duplicated and eventually replaced by the forbidden goal of Moses' journey.

#### CONCLUSION

Sources from late antiquity do not present a univocal way of representing the universe, but rather show that the populations of the eastern Roman empire knew at least two diverse and somehow conflicting cosmological models.<sup>60</sup> The first and more widespread model can be classified as Aristotelian or Greco-Roman; it describes the earth as located at the center of a universe composed of different heavens (usually seven), represented as concentric spheres. From the second century and throughout the Middle Ages, this model became predominant thanks to the influence of the work of Ptolemy. The second cosmological model derives from the ancient Semitic tradition, which pictured the earth as a flat disk encircled by waters and surmounted by a dome-like sky. This model first appears in Akkadian and Ugaritic texts as well as in biblical descriptions of the universe. Through the Bible, this ancient cosmology exercised a lasting influence on the imagery of Jewish and Christian authors until the Middle Ages, when the Aristotelian model was definitively adopted. Some efforts to mediate between the two cosmological models and to produce a mixed system are evidenced, namely, in some apocalyptic works (e.g., 2 Enoch and 3 Baruch), but often the two differing views generated a dispute among the erudite Christians of the Byzantine empire as to which was the true one, or to be more precise, the delicate question of whether the cosmographic description given in the Bible was to be taken literally or allegorically.<sup>61</sup>

In the period of the Quranic revelation, the debate was very intense. Nevertheless, both interestingly and surprisingly, the Quran refers to both cosmological models.<sup>62</sup> It is not clear whether the Prophet or his contemporaries had a coherent imagery about the shape of the world and to what extent it mediated between the two models—as far as I know, a thorough study of Quranic cosmology is as yet lacking. Be that as it may, the Quran commentators seem to have often misunderstood the passages containing concepts related to ancient Near Eastern and biblical cosmology.<sup>63</sup> This is probably a consequence of the different cultural

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loss of immortality, plausibly reflects the ambivalence of these two concepts found in both biblical and extra-biblical literature (e.g., in the image of the two trees of knowledge and life), and concurs with the widespread idea that beyond conferring life the living water may also grant wisdom (Prov 10:11, 13:14, 14:27, 16:22; 1 Enoch 47:1, 49:1, 96:6; 4 Ezra 38–47; Wis 8:17, 15:3).

59. Additional possible points of contact between the two characters of Alexander and Moses are suggested by Aaron Hughes ("The Stranger at the Sea," 271–73), who also makes some insightful observations about the Quran's interest in presenting Moses as protagonist of the account. At the same time, it is difficult to establish whether the replacement took place before or at the time of revelation. Further study of this point is required.

60. On this point (especially in relation to the imagery relating to the location of paradise), see J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000).

61. See van Bladel, "Heavenly Cords and Prophetic Authority," (supra, n. 2), 224–26, 241.

62. Neuwirth, "Cosmology," 445.

63. See, for example, van Bladel, "Heavenly Cords and Prophetic Authority," a study of the Quranic term *sabab*, originally meant to designate the heavenly cords supposed to run through the dome-like sky. See also Angelika Neuwirth's remark ("Cosmology," 445) that "the cryptic qur'anic statement about the two oceans has engendered diverse interpretations, mostly attempts to vindicate the geocentric Aristotelian-Ptolemaic world view. Only al-Ṭabarī [. . .] presents an interpretation in accordance with the qur'anic evidence, the image of a world swimming in an ocean and being covered by another ocean above the highest heaven."

contexts in which the Quran was first revealed and later interpreted. It is possible that the commentators failed to correctly explain the meaning of expressions such as *saraban* and *majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* simply because they had no knowledge of the cosmological notions that these were meant to designate.<sup>64</sup> Their attempts to clarify these and other similar concepts must be seen as similar to someone trying to explain “black hole” without knowing modern-day astronomical concepts. Likewise, Luxenberg’s explanation of *saraban* lacks any contextualization of the term.<sup>65</sup> Of course, the example of *saraban* represents only a single and marginal case among the many he proposes in *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*, and thus cannot stand for a general assessment of the quality of his work. However, it reinforces the criticism most often leveled at his method, that it “operates in the splendid isolation of purely philological intuitions, but disregards any form of historical-critical analysis.”<sup>66</sup>

The analysis of single Quranic passages in the light of the Quran’s cultural context is an important key to improving our knowledge and comprehension of the Arabic text. Since the present study is concerned with only two expressions in the whole Quranic corpus, it cannot—and does not aim to—be taken as a general indicator. However, the results obtained represent a very small example of how modern interpreters can benefit from such a methodological reading of the Quran. Taking the knowledge, the beliefs, and more generally the collective imagination of the Quran’s contemporaries into account is crucial in understanding how the Quran was originally meant to be understood.

64. The explanation of *saraban* provided by *Tafsīr Muqātil*, which compares the wake of the fish in the sea to a water-bag (*qirba*), is the only one that perhaps reflects notions about the course of the paradisiacal rivers. The similarity of *qirba* to *qtrynʿ* in Ephrem’s sentence *ʿyk d-mn qtrynʿ* (“as it were down a water pipe”) is noteworthy. Cf. St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Prose Works*, tr. Mathews and Amar, 101; St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, tr. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1990), 80–81, 87. The Syriac *qtrynʿ* probably derives from the Greek *κάνθαρος* or from its diminutive *κωνθάριον* (this second, more plausible etymology was suggested to me by David Kiltz during a private conversation in July 2012), both designating a drinking cup or a water-bag.

65. One of the anonymous reviewers of this article succinctly made the point that “Luxenberg’s emphasis on a Syriac linguistic comparandum for *saraban* actually prevents him from recognizing important Syriac literary comparanda.”

66. Gerhard Böwering, “Recent Research on the Construction of the Qurʿān,” in *The Qurʿān in Its Historical Context*, ed. Reynolds, 81.