

Reconstructing the Abrogated. Exegesis of *Qur'ān* 53:21-22

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to analyze verses 21-22 of Sūrah 53 of the Qur'ān, النُّجْمُ al-Najm (The Star). These two verses have been the object of many discussions, in the West as well as within the Muslim world. My aim is twofold: first, I introduce the historical background that eventually led to the alleged abrogated verses. The immigration(s) to Abyssinia and Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina are the starting point of my analysis. Second, and more importantly, the exegesis of Sūrah 53:21-22, covering historic and philological aspects, as well as theoretical issues, will demonstrate that the episode of the "wrong verses" actually never happened, or rather, it was indeed the result of later interpolations. The reconstruction of the abrogated verses is therefore an inseparable part of my exegesis, necessary to prove the discrepancies inherent to the alleged incident.*

Keywords: *abrogated, emigrants, emigration, exegesis, Hegira, immigration, muhājirūn, Qur'ān, sūrah*

I. INTRODUCTION

Except for verse 32, which is Medinan, *Sūrah* 53 of the Qur'ān, النُّجْمُ *al-Najm* (The Star), is a Meccan *sūrah*, of the first Meccan period, with a total of 62 verses.¹ According to some scholars, this chapter was revealed after *Sūrah* 81, التَّكْوِيرُ *al-Takwīr* (The Overthrowing); whereas, according to others researchers, it was revealed after *Sūrah* 112, الإِخْلَاصُ *al-Ikhlās* (The Purity of Faith).

Sūrah 53 is called *سُورَةُ النُّجْمِ Sūrah al-Najam*, or rather, "The Chapter of the Star." Its title comes from an oath found in the first verse.² The first eighteen verses of this *sūrah* deal with Revelation and the

¹ The Qur'ān is a revealed book. Its archetype is in Heaven. The Qur'ān was revealed gradually to Muhammad, the Last Prophet. Each revelation came down directly to Muhammad or piecemeal through the intermediary role of the Archangel Gabriel. Since revelations were not recorded down chronologically, the Qur'ān was later organized in book form with a total of 114 *سُورَاتٍ suwar* (chapters) from the longest, *Sūrah* 2, البَقَرَةُ *al-Baqarah* (The Calf/Cow), to the shortest, *Sūrah* 114, النَّاسُ *al-Nās* (Humankind). The only exception is *Sūrah* 1, الْفَاتِحَةُ *al-Fātiha* (The Opening), which "opens" the Qur'ān. *Suwar* are divided into Meccan, with a total of 90, and Medinan, with only 24 *suwar*. Meccan *suwar* are internally divided into three periods. As for the chronological order of the *suwar*, the received wisdom among scholars is as follows: the first Meccan Period, (c. 612-615), comprises the following 48 *suwar*: 96, 74, 111, 106, 108, 104, 107, 102, 105, 92, 90, 94, 93, 97, 96, 91, 80, 68, 87, 95, 103, 85, 73, 101, 99, 82, 81, 53, 84, 100, 79, 77, 78, 88, 89, 75, 83, 69, 51, 52, 56, 70, 75, 112, 109, 113, 114, 1; the second Meccan Period, (c. 615-619), is made of the following 21 *suwar*: 54, 37, 71, 76, 44, 50, 20, 26, 15, 14, 38, 36, 43, 72, 67, 23, 21, 25, 17, 27, 18; the third Meccan Period, (c. 619-622), contains the following 21 *suwar*: 32, 41, 45, 16, 30, 11, 14, 12, 40, 28, 39, 29, 31, 42, 10, 34, 35, 7, 46, 6, 13. The Medinan *surahs*, (c. 622-632), instead, comprise the following 24 *suwar*: 2, 98, 64, 62, 8, 47, 3, 61, 57, 4, 65, 59, 33, 63, 24, 58, 22, 48, 66, 60, 110, 49, 9, 5. Alessandro Bausani. *Il Corano*. Florence: Sansoni, 1978. xlvi.

² Most likely "the star" here represents the Pleiades, in Arabic, الثُّرَيَّا *al-Thurayyah*, from the Greek πλειειν, i.e., to sail. This constellation was used by Greek and Hellenic navigators as their guide during spring, apparently the

celebrated **المِعْرَاج** *Mi'raj*, or rather, the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-June 8, 632) from Jerusalem up to the Seven Heavens, and thence finally entering Allāh's presence. The **المِعْرَاج** *Mi'raj* was preceded by the **الإِسْرَاءُ** *Isra'*, namely, Muhammad's Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem that took place during the twelfth year of the Prophet's mission. Other prophets are also mentioned, such as Moses, Abraham, and Noah. Most of all, though, this chapter provides firsthand information on the life of Muhammad or rather, it gives insight on the mystic nature of Allāh's revelation to the Prophet and ultimately to Humankind as a whole.

II. THE EMIGRATION TO ABYSSINIA

The episode of the abrogated verses of Qur'ān 53:21-22 should be placed within the general background of the immigration to **الْحَبَشَةُ** *al-Habash*, i.e., Abyssinia, that took place in circa 615, and of Muhammad's emigration, **الهِجْرَةُ** (*al-Hijrah*, Hegira), from Mecca to Medina in 622.³

According to traditions, when Muhammad migrated from Mecca to Medina, as a way of compensating his faithful followers for having left behind their village, friends, family, and clan, he granted upon them a special status of preeminence over other Muslims.⁴ Indeed, they were the **المُهَاجِرُونَ** *muhājirūn*, or rather, those who emigrated with Muhammad. As time went by though, the Prophet also extended these privileges to members of tribes who converted to Islam without having taken part of the original Hegira.

most favorable time to navigate in the Mediterranean. In fact, the Latin word for Pleiades is *Vergiliae*, i.e., metaphorically speaking, the daughters of spring, from Latin *Ver*, spring. In Greek mythology, Pleiades was the name given to the seven daughters of *Atlas of Pleione*—or *Æthra*, a member of the *Oceanides*—who, after their death, were metamorphosed into stars that together formed the constellation of the Pleiades. Given their origin, the Pleiades were also known as *Atlantides*—i.e., the daughters of *Atlas*—or *Hesperides*, or rather, those who lived in the famous garden owned by *Atlas*. In Arabic-Islamic tradition, the Pleiades were synonymous with an unreachable goal, as in the famous proverb: **أَيْنَ الثَّرْيَا مِنْ يَدِ الْمُتَنَاوِلِ** *aina al-thurayā min yadī al-mutanāwili*, or rather, "The *Pleiades* are unattainable, unattainable!" Scientifically speaking, the Pleiades is an open-star cluster in the constellation of Taurus—placed near the back of the bull—consisting of several hundred stars, of which only six are visible to the naked eye. Always according to ancient Greek traditions, their names are: *Alcyone*, *Celæne*, *Electra*, *Maia*, *Merope*, *Sterope*, and *Taygeta*. Albert de Biberstein Kazimirski. *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français*. 2 vols. 1860. Paris: Editions G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1960. 1: 222-223; John Lemprière. *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary*. London: Bracken Books, 1994. 538-539; Renato Traini, ed. *Vocabolario Arabo-Italiano*. 3 vols. 1966-1973. Rome: Istituto Per l'Oriente, 1993. 1: 129; Julio Cortés. *Diccionario de Árabe Culto Moderno. Árabe-Español*. Madrid: Gredos, 1996.

³ The ancient name of **الْمَدِينَةُ** *al-Madīnah* was **يَثْرِب** *Yathrib*. It is mentioned only once in the Qur'ān, *Sūrah* 33:13. Muhammad changed the name from **يَثْرِب** *Yathrib* to **الْمَدِينَةُ النَّبِيَّةُ** *al-Madīnah al-Nabī*, i.e., the city of the Prophet, or rather, **الْمَدِينَةُ الْمُنَوَّرَةُ** *al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah*, The Enlightened City. The Islamic year is commonly abbreviated as A.H., i.e., *Anno Hegirae*, which stands for "the year of the *Hegira/Hejira*, *al-Sanatu al-Hijriyyah*;" it is Muhammad's transmigration from **مَكَّة** *Makkah* (Mecca) to **يَثْرِب** *Yathrib*, July 16, 622, of the Common Era. **يَثْرِب** *Yathrib* from this day on will be known as **الْمَدِينَةُ** *al-Madīnah*, or rather, "The City [of the Prophet Muhammad]," also renowned by its epithet **الْمُنَوَّرَةُ** *al-Munawwarah*, i.e., "the Radiant." Later this date was taken as the first year of the Muslim Era, i.e., **الهِجْرَةُ** *al-hijrah*, the Hegira. The following mathematical equations convert years from the Western Gregorian calendar, now in general use, G, (*Anno Gregoriani*), to the correspondent H, (*Anno Hegirae*), and vice versa: $G - 622 + \frac{G - 622}{32} = H$; $H + 622 - \frac{H}{33} = G$.

⁴ Leone Caetani. *Annali dell'Islam*. 10 vols. Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1905-1926. rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1977. 1: 263; Aloys Sprenger. *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed, nach bisher gröstentheils unbenutzten Quellen*. 3 vols. Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1869. 2: 53; Julius Wellhausen. *Muhammed in Medina. Das ist Vakidi's Kitāb al-Maghazi, in verkürzter deutscher Wiedergabe*. Berlin: G. Reimer, 1882. 320; note 1.

Muhammad was the first one then, to introduce the concept that believers were indeed divided into many classes, or rather, they were grouped together according to the services they gave to the cause of Islam. During the lifetime of the Prophet, preeminence was given to the المهاجرون *muhājirūn*.

Later on, during the reign of the second caliph ‘Umar (r. August 23, 634-November 3, 644), when the system of pensions was instituted, the same concept, though interpreted more loosely, was applied: believers were divided into different classes not only according to their religious merits but also, and here is the innovation, according to their degree of relationship, i.e., their family ties.

Hence, first came the blood relatives, then the widows and the cousins of the Prophet, and finally all those who fought in the Battle of Badr (غَزْوَةُ بَدْرٍ *Ghazwat Badr*).⁵ However ‘Umar, perhaps in order to avoid internal divisions and rivalries, eliminated, or rather expanded, the privilege previously enjoyed only by the المهاجرون *muhājirūn*.

Therefore, a new and official noble class was born, thus establishing, and this time forever, the basic principle of prestige among the Companions of the Prophet: a commodity obtainable only through the basis of one’s services to the أُمَّة *ummah*, or rather, the Muslim community.

The “class of the Companions” then is an all-encompassing term embracing the former المهاجرون *muhājirūn*, those of the battle of Badr, as well as any other person who, in some capacity or another, during Muhammad’s lifetime had accumulated titles of merit. To the latter category we must also add those Muslims who took part of the immigration to الحَبَشَة *al-Habash* (Abyssinia) in circa 615.⁶ In this case Muhammad himself, upon seeing the dire straits in which the new community was being confined, suggested that they leave:

When the apostle saw the affliction of his companions and that though he escaped it because of his standing with Allāh and his uncle Abū Tālib, he could not protect them, he said to them: "If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you), for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allāh shall relieve you from your distress." Thereupon his companions went to Abyssinia, being afraid of apostasy and fleeing to God with their religion. This was the first *hijra* in Islam.⁷

Later on, Muhammad had written correspondence with النَّجَاشِي *al-Najāshī*, or rather, the Christian ruler of Ethiopia, the Negus አርማህ *Armah*, also known in Arabic as أَصْحَمَةُ بْنُ أَبَجْرٍ *al-Aṣḥamah bin Abjar*.⁸ In fact, when in the seventh year of the Hegira those who had previously immigrated to Abyssinia finally returned to Medina, they were received by Muhammad with happiness and gratitude for the way in which they had been treated, as in this reported incident:

1585. Narrated Umm Khâlid bint Khâlid: When I came from Ethiopia (to Al-Medîna), I was a young girl. Allāh’s Messenger made me wear a sheet having marks on it. Allāh’s Messenger was

⁵ The Battle of Badr, (624/2 A.H.), was the first major battle between Muhammad, aided by the Medinans, and the Meccans. The Muslims won against the infidels also thanks to holy intervention: i.e., angels fought on the Prophet’s side. Qur’ān 8:9; 12; Martin Lings. *Muhammad. His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*. London: Islamic Texts Society, George Allen and Unwin, 1983. 146-154.

⁶ Leone Caetani. *Annali dell’Islam*, 1: 236-237; 1: 274.

⁷ Abd al-Mālik ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Trans. and ed. Alfred Guillaume. London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1955. 146.

⁸ Abd al-Mālik ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, 657-658.

rubbing those marks with his hands
saying: “*Sanâh! Sanâh!*” (i.e. good,
good.) [5:214-O.B.]⁹

The Negus showed great signs of respect for Islam, considering it a religion that did not contradict either Jewish or Christian teachings. In fact, he also refused to hand over a Muslim messenger to the Quraysh general عمرو بن الغاصص ‘Amir bin al-‘Āṣ (c. 573-663) who—before his own conversion to Islam in 629, inspired by the words of the Negus—wanted to kill him:

Would you ask me to give you the messenger of a man to whom the great Namus comes as he used to come to Moses, so that you might kill him! [...] Woe to you, ‘Amr, obey me and follow him [i.e., Muhammad], for by Allāh he is right and will triumph over his adversaries as Moses triumphed over Pharaoh and his armies.¹⁰

Furthermore, there are also traditions indicating that the Negus did actually convert to Islam. After his Farewell Pilgrimage to Mecca,¹¹ Muhammad sent messengers to various kingdoms, "of the Arabs and the non-Arabs," inviting their leaders to accept Islam. This is the Negus' response:

From the Negus al-Aṣḥām b. Abjar, Peace be upon you, O prophet of Allāh, and mercy and blessing from Allāh beside Whom there is no God, who has guided me to Islam. I have received your letter in which you mention the matter of Jesus and by the Lord of heaven and earth he is not one scrap more than what you say. We know that with which you were sent to us and we have entertained your nephew and your companions. I testify that you are God's apostle, true and confirming (those before you). I have given my fealty to you and to your nephew and I have surrendered myself through him to the Lord of the worlds. I have sent to you my son *Arha*. I have control only over myself and if you wish me to come to you, O apostle of God, I will do so. I bear witness that what you say is true.¹²

Later, when news of the death of the Negus arrived to Muhammad, prayers were immediately said in his honor:

After the next ritual prayer to be prayed in the Mosque, he [Muhammad] turned to the congregation and said: "This day a righteous man hath died. Therefore arise and pray for your brother Aṣḥamah" Then he led them in the funeral prayer. Reports came later from Abyssinia that a light was constantly seen shining over the king's grave.¹³

⁹ Muḥammad Muhsin Khân, trans. *Summarized Sahih al-Bukhari. Arabic-English, Chapter 38. The migration to Ethiopia*, 736.

¹⁰ Abd al-Mālik ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, 484.

¹¹ The Farewell Pilgrimage, حَجَّةُ الْوَدَاعِ *Hijj al-Wada'*, being the last pilgrimage of the Prophet, 632/10 A.H., it consequently also became the model for all future pilgrimages.

¹² Abd al-Mālik ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, 657-658.

¹³ Martin Lings. *Muhammad. His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, 316.

III. CONTEXTUAL PREAMBLE TO THE ABROGATED VERSES

There are numerous surviving lists of "Companions" extant today. However, as it should be expected, this does not necessarily prove their authenticity. In all likelihood, these names are either hypothetical or tendentious, dating between the time of 'Urwah bin al-Zubayr bin al-'Awwam, (23-94 A.H.) and Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, (705-767/85-151 A.H.).¹⁴ Obviously, some names do correspond to reality, whereas the great majority conforms to that compelling necessity, common all round the Islamic world, of having an ancestor among these distinguished Muslims, one who first followed the Prophet Muhammad, in other words, one who first embraced Islam, the true religion.

Hence, in order to enumerate officially these eminent relatives in one's family tree, falsifications and interpolations were the norm, thus leading the way to many discrepancies and contradictions. The number was so high and confusion so rampant that many forgeries just went unnoticed as in the case of a *ḥadīth*¹⁵ found

¹⁴ 'Urwah bin al-Zubayr bin al-'Awwam was a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. He is a well-recognized authority on the early history of Islam. In fact, he is by many considered the founder of Islamic history. Muḥammad ibn Ishāq is best known for his collection of written material on the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Most of his writings were edited by Abd al-Mālik ibn Hishām, (d. 828 or 833/213 or 218 A.H.). His most famous book is the *Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, i.e., "The Book of the Life of the Prophet of Allāh," by far the most important source on the life of Muhammad. Abd al-Mālik ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Trans. and ed. Alfred Guillaume. London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, OUP, 1955; Martin Lings. *Muhammad. His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*. London: Islamic Texts Society, George Allen and Unwin, 1983; Ferdinand Wüstenfeld. *Das Leben Muhamed's nach Muhammed ibn Ishāq bearbeitet von Abd el-Mālik ibn Hishām*. 2 vols. Göttingen, 1858-1860. rpt. Frankfurt am Main: MINERVA G.m.b.H, 1961.

¹⁵ *Ḥadīth*, plural *Aḥādīth*, of the prophet Muhammad, also known as *الأخبار al-Akḥbār* and *الأثر al-Athar*, or rather, the traditions. *الأخبار Al-Akḥbar* and *الأثر al-Athar* are often used as synonyms for the *أحاديث Aḥādīth*. The term *الأخبار Al-Akḥbar*—singular *الخبر al-Khabar*—usually carries the meaning of 'tradition' as it refers to only one person, often with a historical connotation. The *ḥadīth*, Arabic for story, is the 'tradition,' i.e., the written record of the saying and doings, *سنة Sunnah*, of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. Together with the Qur'ān, it forms the basis for Islamic Jurisprudence (*أصول الفقه uṣūl al-fiqh*, principles of Islamic Law). Obviously, this traditional literature was first transmitted orally, through memorization, and then—for fear of permanent loss—it was written down for posterity. Thus, the *سنة Sunnah* is the implicit, non-expressed, revelation. A *Ḥadīth* can be: verbal, *سنة القول Sunnah al-Qawli*; extrapolated from a fact or an action of the Prophet Muhammad, i.e., *سنة الفعل Sunnah al-Fi'li*; or founded on tacit approval, i.e., *سنة التقرير Sunnah al-Taqrīriyah* (agreement). The *Aḥādīth* are thus a collection of the text of the tradition (*ماتن matn*) based upon chains of supposedly authentic transmitting authorities—in Arabic, *إسناد isnād*, i.e., the support, or rather, the chain of witnesses. In some cases, these traditions that were allegedly attributed to the Prophet Muhammad conflicted with one another. In order for a *Ḥadīth* to be valid and, therefore, accepted, i.e., *صحيح saḥīh*, it has to contain the *راوي rāwy*, or rather, the teller/narrator of the tradition and it has to show a continuous uninterrupted chain—*إسناد isnād*. In other words, it has to be *اتصال ittisāl*, i.e., non-interrupted. From a legal point of view, in order to overcome this weakness new principles were employed, namely: the *إجماع ijmā'*, i.e., the consensus of the community, or rather, the tacit opinion of the *أمة Ummah*, the Islamic community, usually the learned men of the local Islamic community; the *ijmā'* is therefore the "*Vox Unita Populi, Vox Dei*" and, just like the *سنة Sunnah*, it can be of three kinds: verbal, *إجماع القول ijmā' al-qawli*; extracted from a fact or actions, *إجماع الفعل ijmā' al-fi'li*; founded on tacit approval, i.e., *إجماع التقرير ijmā' al-taqrīri*, also known as *إجماع السكوني ijmā' al-sukūni*; the *قياس qiya's*, the "comparison," i.e., the analogical deduction; it depends upon the fallible human criterion; it is an inductive process, derived from logic; it has to extrapolate actions, concepts, and facts from singular events; the *إجتihad ijtihād*, i.e., the exertion, the independent reasoning of a learned Muslim; *رأي ra'y*, i.e., the private opinion, or the systematic reasoning of the people. Hence, four recognized Sunni schools of recognized legal interpretation—in Arabic, *شريعة Shari'ah*—began

in al-Bukhāri.¹⁶ This is the episode of the first immigrants to Abyssinia. Apparently, tradition had gradually accepted the alleged analogy between the two migrations, thus elevating to merit what perhaps was intended to be a demerit, changing a vile act, akin to apostasy, into true virtue. Muhammad is reported having said that the returnees from Abyssinia could boast not one but two emigrations: from Mecca to *الْحَبَشَة* *al-Habash*, Abyssinia, and thence to Medina.¹⁷

Though reported in al-Bukhāri's work, this tradition is however based upon not very reliable sources. Apparently, the sentiment was quite the opposite. It was felt that those who 'immigrated' to Abyssinia had had a better life, one of peace and relative tranquility, as compared to the numerous tribulations suffered by the Muslim community in the Arabian Peninsula, first in Mecca and then in Medina. The resentment was therefore there. It was necessary then, in order to placate feelings and reconcile the spirits of both 'emigrant' groups, to put words in the Prophet's mouth and actions, or rather, the *أَحَادِيث* *Ahadith*, so that not only the two groups could be brought to the same level but also, and more importantly, there had to be a hint at a special merit, thus elevating the immigration to *الْحَبَشَة* *al-Habash* to the same rank of the *الهِجْرَة* (*al-Hijrah*, Hegira).

A new title of glory was therefore created. Among these early 'emigrants' there was Ja'far bin Abū Ṭālib, brother of the fourth caliph 'Alī.¹⁸ When he returned in the seventh year of the Hegira, Ja'far could have been accused of being a coward, since he chose to return only when things for the Muslim Community had definitively turned for the better. These negative doubts had to be prevented: the reputation of Ja'far and his companions had to be unblemished. Obviously, during the second half of the first century of the Hegira all those who had taken part of the immigration to *الْحَبَشَة* *al-Habash* were by then already dead; no one knew with certainty what had really happened, especially in a remote place such as Abyssinia. The Meccan episodes were therefore reconstructed tendentiously; they were thus given a glorious veneer only to parallel those of Medina. As time went by though, details were added in such a way that, if we look at ibn Ishāq's opus, the oldest source on the life of the Prophet, the discrepancies are obvious. Moreover, erroneous interpretations of ibn Ishāq's *كِتَاب سِيرَة رَسُولِ اللَّهِ Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* led scholars to believe in two subsequent immigrations to Abyssinia. In its turn, this fallacious idea generated the necessity of an alleged return of the emigrants, before the second immigration to *الْحَبَشَة* *al-Habash*. This was explained by the fact that at that time the number of Muslims in Mecca was so scanty as to justify two separate emigrations.

Hence, there was the need to create the story of the return with the subsequent second immigration to Abyssinia. But how can we explain this return? Apparently, later exegetes of the Qur'an found the appropriate answer: linking the stories of the two separate emigrations to that of the abrogated verses of Qur'an 53:21-22 and the temporary agreement between the Quraysh and the Prophet Muhammad.

The many sources of Muhammad's biography give the most diverse versions of what really happened. The most ancient, and therefore more reliable documents are, besides ibn Hishāq's *كِتَاب سِيرَة رَسُولِ اللَّهِ Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, the one composed by Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarir al-Tabāri, (839-923/224-311 A.H.),¹⁹ and the

during the 8th and 9th centuries of the Common Era and are still used today. These schools are known collectively as *مَذَاهِب* *madāhib* ('ways to act,' singular: *مَذْهَب* *madhab*).

¹⁶ Muḥammad bin Ismā'il bin Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mughīrah ibn Bardizabah al-Bukhāri, (810-870/194-256 A.H.), is the most famous compiler of the *أَحَادِيث* *Ahadith*. Muḥammad Muhsin Khān, trans. *Summarized Sahih Al-Bukhāri. Arabic-English*. Riyadh: Dār-us-Salam Publications, 1994; Ludolf Krehl. *Le recueil des Traditions Mahométanes par Abou Abdallāh Mohammed ibn Ismail al-Bokhāri*. 4 vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1862-1908. 3: 128-129.

¹⁷ Ludolf Krehl. *Le recueil des Traditions Mahométanes par Abou Abdallāh Mohammed ibn Ismail al-Bokhāri*, 3: 128-129.

¹⁸ 'Alī bin Abū Ṭālib, (598-661), was Muhammad's cousin, son-in-law, and fourth caliph who ruled during 656-661/35-40 A.H.

¹⁹ Persian scholar Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (838-923) is considered to be a great historian and, most of all, the major early exegete of the Qur'an. He is the author of the *جَامِعُ الْبَيَانِ فِي تَأْوِيلِ أَيِّ الْقُرْآنِ Jami' al-Bayān fī ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, i.e., "The Collection of Declarations Regarding the Commentary of the Qur'an," a

one by ‘Izz al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-Athīr (1160-1233).²⁰ Of these three, only the last two report the incident of the abrogated verses. Both works also lead us to believe that the persecutions of the Quraysh were more tactics of persuasions rather than real corporal violence or tortures. Ridicule, slander, and lies were their weapons chosen for fighting Muhammad and his followers. Their aim was to depict the Prophet as a madman, an impostor, and a political schemer. The Quraysh believed that if they could disseminate these doubts among Muhammad’s followers they could indeed destroy his increasing popularity with the masses. If these tactics did not work, threats of financial and material damages were then used to scare the new converts to Islam.

Hence, this immigration to *الْحَبَشَة* *al-Habash* was done in order to escape pressure and to preserve their vacillating faith. Since only a small number of believers crossed the sea, we must assume then that Muhammad sent only those whose perseverance in the faith he trusted less, had they remained in Mecca under Quraysh pressure. In other words, they lacked enough “inner faith,” *إِيمَان* *īmān*,²¹ to endure the attacks. They were therefore weak and missing courage. This is also substantiated by the fact that some of the emigrants, while in exile in Abyssinia, actually converted to Christianity.²² Hence, the two subsequent immigrations to *الْحَبَشَة* *al-Habash* are the result of erroneous interpretations of ibn Ishāq’s words:

Afterwards Ja‘far b. Abū Tālib went, and the Muslims followed one another until they gathered in Abyssinia; some took their families, others went alone.²³

It is evident then, that exegetes split in half ibn Ishāq’s narration thus creating two different emigrations. The total number of emigrants is therefore 105, extremely high if we consider that at the time of ‘Umar’s conversion,²⁴ which occurred after the emigration, the number of believers was around forty!²⁵ After ‘Umar’s conversion the number went up to 70; in fact, 70 Muslims took part of the Hegira from Mecca to Medina in 622. Furthermore, it is very likely that the list of the *المُهَاجِرُونَ* *muhājirūn* contains more than one interpolation. Finally, even more suspicious is the list given by ibn Ishāq of those Muslims who performed the hegira (emigration) from *الْحَبَشَة* *al-Habash* to Mecca before the 622 Hegira. This list could have been compiled to give these Muslims the double honor of having taken part of two emigrations. Moreover, not even one of the names of the *المُهَاجِرُونَ* *muhājirūn* to Abyssinia matches the *المُهَاجِرُونَ* *muhājirūn* to Mecca. The list of these "returnees" is made of names found only in the second list.²⁶ This is not mere coincidence, but rather, it is an indication that perhaps the first list really contains the names of those who left for Abyssinia; hence, all the

30-volume opus of indispensable exegetical value. Michael Jan de Goeje, ed. *Annales quos scripsit abū Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir al-Tabari*. Lugduni Batavorum: E.J. Brill, 1879-1901.

²⁰ ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn al-Athir. *Uṣd al-Ghabah fī Ma‘rifah al-Sahabah, li-‘Izz al-dīn abū-l-Hasan ‘Alī ibn al-Athir*. 12 vols. Qahirah, 1285; rpt. Bayrut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1997; Christian Friederich Seybold. *Ibn al-Athir’s (Magd al-dīn al-Mubarak). Kunja-Wörterbuch, betitelt Kitāb al-Murassa’*. Weimar: Emil Felber, 1896; Carolus Johannes Tornberg, ed. *Ibn al-Athiri Chronicon*. 14 vols. Lugduni Batavorum: E.J. Brill, 1851-1876; Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, ed. *Specimen el-Lobabi sive Genealogiarum Arabum quas conscriptas ab ibn Sa‘d Sam’anense, abbr. et emend. ibn al-Athir*. Gottingae, 1835.

²¹ *إِيمَان* *īmān* is the inner faith; the heart, *قَلْب* *qalb*, is the internal world or, better yet, human conscience; whereas *الضَّمِير* *al-ḍamīr* is the “sense of right or wrong” and *الدِّين* *al-dīn* is the outer manifestation of the religion. *إِيمَان* *īmān* is therefore the intimate counterpart of the external manifestation of our faith, i.e., *إِسْلَام* *Islām*.

²² Leone Caetani. *Annali dell’Islam*; 1: 269. 271, note 1.

²³ Abd al-Mālik ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirāt Rasūl Allāh*, 146.

²⁴ Abd al-Mālik Ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirāt Rasūl Allāh*, 155-159.

²⁵ Abd al-Mālik Ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirāt Rasūl Allāh*, 221-231.

²⁶ Leone Caetani. *Annali dell’Islam*; 1: 274-278; Carolus Johannes Tornberg, ed. *Ibn al-Athiri Chronicon*. 14 vols. Lugduni Batavorum: E.J. Brill, 1851-1876. 2: 57-58.

interpolations belong to the second list only. The list of the "returnees" is therefore a list of those who never went to *الْحَبَشَةَ al-Habash*; tradition, though, attributed to them the honor of two emigrations.

As for the moral value of the immigration to Abyssinia, in all likelihood Muhammad himself did not consider it a glorious act, given that there is no mention of it in the Qur'ān. The only possible indirect reference could be Qur'ān 16:41-42; however, the allusion to the immigration to *الْحَبَشَةَ al-Habash* is extraordinarily vague:

To those who leave	وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا
Their homes in the cause	فِي اللَّهِ مِنْ
Of Allāh, after suffering oppression	بَعْدَ مَا ظَلَمُوا
We will assuredly give	لَنُنَبِّئَهُمْ
A goodly home in this world:	فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً
But truly the reward	وَلِأَجْرٍ
Of the Hereafter will be greater.	الْآخِرَةِ أَكْبَرُ
If they only realised (this)!	لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ
(They are) those who persevere	الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا
In patience, and put	وَ عَلَى رَبِّهِمْ
Their trust on their Lord. ²⁷	يَتَوَكَّلْنَ

The term *المُهَاجِرُونَ muhājirūn* is definitively from the Medinan period, used by Muhammad—as per Qur'ānic intervention—as an honorary epithet only after the 622 Hegira. Had the immigrants to *الْحَبَشَةَ al-Habash* performed a worthy action, most definitively the Qur'ān would have mentioned them, perhaps using them as an example to be followed by other believers. Hence, we would have to infer that the immigrants to Abyssinia were considered lost Muslims, with whom, given the geographical distance, it was impossible to keep constant communication. In fact, those who eventually returned to Arabia did so only after more than eleven years of absence! We should also not forget the tradition reported by al-Bukhāri, which though of dubious veracity, talks about the general sentiment towards the emigrants in Abyssinia.²⁸ One of the reasons why Muhammad sent these Muslims to Abyssinia is perhaps the fact that this land was Christian; hence, it could have offered better protection and, most of all, it had to guarantee freedom of religion to the Muslim community. In other words, as *أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ ahl al-Kitābi*, i.e., members of the "people of the book," it was hoped that these Muslims could enjoy the *دِيْمَةٌ dhimma*, or rather, "the protection," just as Jews, Christians, Sabians, Hindus, Sikhs, Samaritans, Mandeans, and Zoroastrians would if they were to live in *دَارُ الْإِسْلَامِ Dār al-Islām*, "the land of Islam."²⁹

²⁷ 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*. 6th ed. Beltsville: Amana, 1989. 16:41-42.

²⁸ Please see note 16.

²⁹ According to Islam, the *أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ Ahl al-Kitābi* are those who belong to the "family of the book," i.e., Jews (*الْهُود al-Hūd*), Christians (*أَهْلُ الْإِنْجِيلِ ahl al-Injīl*), Sabians (*الصَّابِئِيَّة al-Ṣābi'ah*), Zoroastrians (*الزُّرَادَشْتِيُونُ al-Zurādštīūna*), Hindus (*الهِندُوسِيُونُ al-Hindūsīūna*), Sikhs (*السِّيخِ*), Samaritans (*السَّامِرِيُونُ al-Sāmīriyyūna*), and Mandeans (*الصَّابِئِيَّة الْمَنْدَانِيُونُ al-Ṣābi'ah al'Mandā'iyūna*). Due to their monotheistic faith and, moreover, given that their religions are based upon a book, they are to be considered, while living in *دَارُ الْحَرْبِ dār al-ḥarb* (non-Muslim soil) as *دِيْمِي dhimmi*, i.e., protected. Perhaps Muhammad thought that the Negus, being a just and pious man, would recognize that Christianity and Islam were indeed tied historically as well as religiously. Leone Caetani. *Annali dell'Islam*; 1: 272; Hebert Grimme *Darstellungen aus dem Gebiete der nichtchristlichen Religionsgeschichte. - VII and XI. Muhammed*. 2 vols. Münster: i. W. Aschendorff, 1892-1895. 1: 35; Joseph Abraham Levi. "Beyond Invasion: the *Bāb* باب in the *Dār* دَار, or rather, the Door in the Land. Islam as the Door to the Portuguese Age of Discoveries." *International Journal of Arts and Social Science* 3 4 (July-August 2020): 403-430.

The Quraysh³⁰ then, not being able to persecute the emigrants in Abyssinia, not even after their failed attempt with the Negus,³¹ concentrated, instead, on the Muslims left at home, or rather, those in Mecca. Using many tricks, they tried to impede their worship by the الكعبة ka'bah,³² and, most of all, they began, more than ever, a slanderous campaign against Muhammad, accusing him of being an impostor, a sorcerer, a madman, and a fortuneteller.³³

IV. THE ABROGATED VERSES

It is evident then that all these difficulties took a toll on Muhammad, the man. His faith in Allāh and His message were steady; his courage, instead, needed some support and reassuring. This is where the tradition of the wrong verses starts. According to this tradition, one day, before the 622 Hegira, a few wealthy members of the Quraysh were standing around the الكعبة ka'bah, discussing business, when Muhammad came and sat by them. *Sūrah* 53 of the Qur'ān started to descend from Heaven and, as it was descending, Muhammad was also reciting it out loud.³⁴ Apparently, always according to this tradition, the recitation went smoothly until Muhammad reached verses 19-20:

- 19.) Have ye seen *Lat*, and *'Uzza*,
20.) And another, The Third (goddess), *Manat*?

أَفَرَأَيْتُمُ اللَّاتَ وَالْعُزَّىٰ

وَمَنْوَةَ الثَّالِثَةَ الْآخَرَىٰ³⁵

At this point, always according to this tradition, the devil intervened. Evidently, he had been planning this for a long time. Satan then whispered two verses that, to the ears of the pagan, or rather, the polytheist Quraysh, could have been interpreted as "words of reconciliation and compromise with idolatry."³⁶ Based upon this tradition, here are the wrong verses, reconstructed for exegetic purposes only:

- 21.) They are as the most exalted cranes (i.e., stars)!

³⁰ Muhammad was a member of the *Quraysh* قُرَيْش (literally "shark") tribe of the *Hāshim* clan (the *Banū Hāshim* بنو هاشم) of *Makkah* مكة, Mecca. The Quraysh trace their ancestral origin to a mythical *Quraysh* قُرَيْش or *Fihr* فِهْر. According to some scholars, *Fihr ibn Mālik* (fl. c. 230-240) was one of Muhammad's ancestors. Alfred Guillaume. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955.

³¹ Abd al-Mālik Ibn Hishām. *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, 150-153; Michael Jan de Goeje, ed. *Annales quos scripsit abū Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir al-Tabari*, 1: 1180-1184; 1: 1189.

³² الكعبة *Ka'bah* is the cube-like building in the center of the mosque at Mecca. It contains the الحجر الأسود *hajar al-aswad*, i.e., the black stone, symbol of Allāh's presence on Earth. The archetype of the الكعبة *ka'bah* is in Heaven. Adam built the الكعبة *ka'bah* exactly below its heavenly model. After the Deluge, Abraham and his son Ishmael rebuilt it. The Archangel Gabriel gave Ishmael the black stone so that with it he could mark the southeast corner of the building. During the centuries, the الكعبة *ka'bah* became a polytheistic pantheon whereas its ownership passed from one tribe to another, each one taking care of its maintenance. At the dawn of Islam, the Quraysh were in control of the الكعبة *ka'bah*.

³³ Michael Jan de Goeje, ed. *Annales quos scripsit abū Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir al-Tabari*, 1: 1185; Carolus Johannes Tornberg, ed. *Ibn al-Athiri Chronicon*, 2: 59.

³⁴ Please see note 1.

³⁵ Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 53:19-20.

³⁶ Thomas Patrick Hughes. *Dictionary of Islam*. 1885. New Delhi: Cosmo, 1977. 285.

وَأَيْنَهُنَّ لَهِنَ الْغَرَائِقِ الْعُلَى

22.) (One) must hope for good things [from Allāh] from their intercession!³⁷

وَأِنْ شَفَاعَتَهُنَّ لَهِيَ الَّتِي تَرْتَجِي

Hence, always according to this tradition, the joy of the Quraysh was equaled only by their marvel at this divine "concession" to idol worshipping when they eventually heard the final verse of this سُورَة sūrah:

62.) But fall ye down in prostration
To Allāh and adore (Him)!

فَاَسْجُدُوا لِلَّهِ وَاعْبُدُوا³⁸

According to this tradition, the idolaters then imitated the Prophet Muhammad and prostrated themselves. The news spread all over Mecca; many were pleased by what they thought was a concession from Allāh through His Prophet Muhammad, or rather, to allow pagan idols as intermediaries between Allāh and Humankind; in other words, they thought that it was allowed to direct their prayers to these pagan idols. Soon after, the Prophet Muhammad, always according to this tradition, was greatly disturbed by this incident: it was a concession to idolatry suggested by Satan, a concession that went against the very nature of monotheism. Always according to this tradition, during the night the Archangel Gabriel came to Muhammad and reproached him: "What have you done? You have recited what I did not adduce from Allāh! You said what was not told to you!" Muhammad was scared and feared the wrath of Allāh. Allāh had mercy upon Muhammad and revealed then two more verses, thus abrogating the preceding ones. According to this tradition, these are verses 21 and 22 as they are now found in Sūrah 53:

21.) What! For you The male sex And for Him, the female?
22.) Behold, such would be Indeed a division Most unfair!³⁹

أَلَكُمُ الذَّكَرُ وَلَهُ الْأُنثَى

تِلْكَ إِذَا قَسَمَةَ ضَبْرَى

These new verses thus abrogated the preceding ones. However, for the corrupt Quraysh, they became the necessary ammunition for new accusations and slanderous remarks. Always according to this tradition, the Quraysh would have said that Muhammad had repented and that he himself, and not Allāh, had abrogated the verses. This is also the beginning of additional and harsher persecutions against Muslims.⁴⁰

³⁷ The reconstructed verses in Arabic are mine. For background information on this subject please see: Leone Caetani. *Annali dell'Islam*; 1: 278; Muḥammad Hamidullāh, and Michel Léturmy, eds. and trans. *Le saint Coran. Traduction et Commentaire*. Brentwood: Amana, 1989. 526; Federico Peirone, ed. and trans. *Il Corano*. 2 vols. Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1979. 2: 733-738; مُصْطَفَى [Muṣṭafā]. *قصة غرانيق*. ["The Story of the Cranes."] مدونة الباحث الإسلامي [The Islamic Researcher Blog]. Saturday, January 27, 2018. <http://mustafa7261.blogspot.com/2018/01/blog-post_27.html>.

³⁸ Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 53:62; 1385.

³⁹ 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 53:21-22; 1379; Muhammad Hamidullāh, and Michel Léturmy, eds. and trans. *Le saint Coran. Traduction et Commentaire*, 526.

⁴⁰ Michael Jan de Goeje, ed. *Annales quos scripsit abū Djarir Moḥammed ibn Djarir al-Tabari*, 1: 1192-1195.

V. EXEGESIS

According to al-Tabārī, Qur'ān 17:73-74 could be an answer to the problem, where Allāh says:

73.) And their purpose was	وَإِنْ كَادُوا
To tempt thee away	لِيَفْتِنُوا نَكَ
From that which We	عَنِ الَّذِي
Had revealed unto thee,	أَوْحَيْنَا
To substitute in Our name	إِلَيْكَ لِتَقْتَرِي
Something quite different:	عَلَيْنَا غَيْرَهُ
(In that case), behold!	وَإِذَا
They would certainly have	لَا تَحْذُوكَ
Made thee (their) friend!	خَلِيلًا
74.) And had We not	وَلَوْ لَا أَنْ
Given thee strength	تَبَتْنَاكَ
Thou wouldst nearly	لَقَدَكِدْتَ
Have inclined to them	تَرَكْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ
A little. ⁴¹	ثِيَابًا قَلِيلًا

Allāh is clearly on the Prophet's side, since He gives him strength to face daily temptations, especially if these include promises of prestige, respect, and recognition among men, in this case his fellow tribesmen, the Quraysh. However, these two verses, though alluding to the Quraysh, refer to political situations as a whole and not to the episode of the "wrong verses." Furthermore, these verses cannot be extrapolated from their context. This subsection of *Sūrah* 17, *الإِسْرَاءُ al-'Isrā'*, the Night Journey, namely verses 71-77, deals with Judgment Day and is particularly directed at those who rejected and those who listened to Allāh's message.

There is also another "version" of Qur'ān 53:21-22, reported by both Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasān al-Diyārbakrī, (d. 1558), and 'Alī ibn Ibrāhīm Nūr al-Dīn ibn Burhan al-Ḥalabī, (1567-1635).⁴² In this rendition of the story, the devil, right when Qur'ān 53:21-22 was descending, obfuscated the voice of Muhammad so that no one could hear what the Prophet was transmitting from Allāh. Quickly then, and imitating Muhammad's voice, Satan introduced the two "wrong verses" so that no one could tell that it was he and not Muhammad himself who had uttered them.

Sprenger and Muir also investigated Qur'ān 53:21-22. However their exegeses were based upon the ill desire to prove that Muhammad was an impostor. In other words, their study was not rooted on either historical or philological criteria.⁴³ Other scholars, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, are not agreed on the subject either. Most have categorically denied the historic foundation of the event.⁴⁴ The story upon which it is based is by many deemed of little if no trust at all.⁴⁵ In all likelihood, it is the fabrication of heretics.

'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar Nasir al-Dīn al-Baydawi, (d. 1291/692 A.H.), one of the most famous and well-respected exegetes of the Qur'ān, totally ignored it in his *أنوار التنزيل وأسرار التأويل Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-*

⁴¹ 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 17:73-74; 694-695.

⁴² 'Alī ibn Ibrāhīm Nūr al-Dīn ibn Burhan al-Ḥalabī. *Kitāb Insān al-'Uyun fī Sirah al-Amin wa al-Ma'mun*. 3 vols. Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Tijariyah, 1962. 2: 4-7; Husayn b. Muḥammad b. al-Hasan al-Diyārbakrī. *Ta'rikh al-Khamis fī ahwal anfas nafis*. 2 vols. Cairo: al-Matba'ah al-Wahbiyah, 1866. rpt. Beirut: Mu'assasat Sha'ban, 1970. 1: 326-327.

⁴³ William Muir. *The Life of Mahomet and History of Islam, to the Era of the Hegira*. 4 vols. London: Smith and Elder, 1858-1861. 2: 149; Aloys Sprenger. *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed, nach bisher grösstentheils unbenutzten Quellen*. 3 vols. Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1869. 2: 16.

⁴⁴ 'Alī ibn Ibrāhīm Nūr al-Dīn ibn Burhan al-Ḥalabī. *Kitāb Insān al-'Uyun fī Sirah al-Amin wa al-Ma'mun*, 2: 7.

⁴⁵ Michael Jan de Goeje, ed. *Annales quos scripsit abū Djarfar Mohammed ibn Djarir al-Tabari*, 1: 1192.

Tā'wil, or rather, "The Lights of Revelation and the Secrets of Interpretations," one of the most popular classical Qur'ānic exegesis of Sunni Islam.

Acclaimed Andalusian Qur'ānic scholar al-Qāḍi 'Iyād ibn Mūsā al Yahsūbi, better known as al-Qāḍi 'Ayād, (1083-1149), challenged the authority of this tradition, also because its transmitters do not go down to the Prophet, in other words the *إِسْنَاد* *isnād* is not good.⁴⁶

Renowned Persian historian Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, (ca. 996-1077/d. 458 A.H.), also considered it apocryphal, stressing the ill fate of these men of letters.⁴⁷

The legendary *أَحَادِيث* *ahādīth* scholar Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyā bin Sharaf al-Nawawī, (1233-1277), not only did not believe in the account, but also, and more importantly, he pointed out the absurdity of the story. Al-Nawawī stressed that it really went against common sense: to worship a deity—be it a god, a goddess, and/or many gods or goddesses, as in this case—other than Allāh is misbelief and to attribute this to the Prophet of Allāh would be absolutely absurd. Furthermore, we cannot admit the fact that Satan could have spoken as if he were the Prophet himself, most certainly this would have nullified divine revelation.⁴⁸

Ibn 'Umar Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad Rāzī, (1149-1210/d. 606 A.H.), a renowned Persian commentator of the Qur'ān, and Islamic scholar and polymath Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al Faḍl Ahmad ibn Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, (1372-1449/d. 852 A.H.), were also of the same opinion.⁴⁹

Apparently, the *إِسْنَاد* *isnād* upon which the story is based is traceable back to Muḥammad ibn Ka'b al-Qurazi, (d. 108 A.H.),⁵⁰ a not-very-accurate exegete of the Qur'ān who, in an attempt at clarifying difficult verses of the Qur'ān, added anecdotes such as this one. Maybe this was due to the fact that he was a disciple of 'Abd Allāh ibn al-'Abbās, (619-686/d. 68 A.H.), uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, known as the father of Qur'ānic exegesis, and a strong believer in exposing the facts as they were as an aid to completely understanding the Holy Text. Al-Qurazi then, though moved by an honest desire of providing assistance to the interpretation of the Qur'ān, included everything he could find, without questioning aspects like provenience or authenticity. Hence, the entire *إِسْنَاد* *isnād* provided by Muḥammad ibn Ka'b al-Qurazi should be considered forged. In fact, ibn Hishām (d. 833/A.H. 218) did not mention this episode and, unlike al-Tabari,⁵¹ he never mentioned Muḥammad ibn Ka'b al-Qurazi even if apparently he accepted his "authority." Perhaps ibn Hishām's silence is due to the fact that the *إِسْنَاد* *isnād* presented here is posthumous. Al-Tabari used at least two different

⁴⁶ For the meaning of *isnād*, please see note 15. Leone Caetani. *Annali dell'Islam*; 1: 279-280.

⁴⁷ William H. Morley, ed. *Ta'rikh-i-Bayhaqī, Containing the Life of Mas'ud Son of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni*. 9 vols. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1861-1862.

⁴⁸ Leone Caetani. *Annali dell'Islam*; 1: 280; Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, ed. *The Biographical Dictionary of Illustrious men, Chiefly at the Beginning of Islamism, by Ab Zakariya Yahya al-Nawawi. Kitāb tahdhib al-Asma'*. Göttingen: London Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts, 1842-1847.

⁴⁹ Ibn 'Umar Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad Rāzī. *Tasfīr-i-kabir-i Mafatih al-ghayb*. Tehran: Asatir, 1992; Ahmad ibn 'Alī Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī. *Al-Isabah fi tamyiz al-Sahabah. Wa-bihamishih kitāb al-Isti'ab fi asma' al-Ashab*. 4 vols. Cairo: Matba'at al-Sa'adah, 1910; Abd-al-Haqq Mawlawies Mohammed Wajyh, Ghola'm Qa'dir, and Aloys Sprenger, eds. *A Biographical Dictionary of Persons Who Knew Mohammad, by Ibn Hajar. Kitāb al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. 4 vols. Calcutta: T.J. M'Arthur, Bishop's College Press, 1856-1888.

⁵⁰ Muhammad ibn Ka'b al-Qurazi was a disciple of the famous exegete 'Abd Allāh ibn al-'Abbās (619-686/d. 68 A.H.), a cousin of the Prophet and, most of all, a collector of numerous traditions. Because of his deep knowledge and integrity, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-'Abbās was nicknamed *تَرْجُمان القرآن* *Turjumān al-Qur'ān*, i.e., the Interpreter of the Qur'ān. In a sense, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-'Abbās was the father of Qur'ānic exegesis. He believed that the best way to explain each passage was the narration of the fact that eventually led to the revelation. Leone Caetani. *Annali dell'Islam*; 1: 47-51; 1: 280; Michael Jan de Goeje, ed. *Annales quos scripsit abū Džafar Mohammed ibn Džarir al-Tabari*, 1: 1200-1203; 1: 1232-1233; 1: 1421.

⁵¹ Al-Tabari mentions Muḥammad ibn Ka'b al-Qurazi as one of Ibn Ishāq's sources twenty-nine times. Michael Jan de Goeje, ed. *Annales quos scripsit abū Džafar Mohammed ibn Džarir al-Tabari*, 1: 298-299; 1: 343.

sources attributed to ibn Ishāq: an original copy—yet not the one transmitted by ibn Hishām—and another copy, full of interpolations, including this apocryphal *isnād* introducing the episode of the "wrong verses."

Hence, stories like this one should all be considered as fictional. Further proofs of the falsity of this legend are the anomalies and the contradictions that it carries. The conflict between Muhammad and the Quraysh was so acute and the persecutions so severe that the Muslims were forced to immigrate to Abyssinia. But Muslims at this time were subject to even worse pains if they only "dared" to publicly recite a few verses of the Qur'ān!⁵² Hence, we can hardly picture Muhammad solemnly reciting a long chapter of the Qur'ān, like *Sūrah* 53, with a total of 62 verses, standing in front of the *ka'bah*, and being surrounded by the Quraysh, unbelievers and blasphemous, paying attention to him while at the same time ignoring the message sent by Allāh. Even more improbable and absurd is the fact that these skeptical and greedy merchants would bow down and worship as Muslims, given that they already disapproved of the divine message that the Prophet was bringing. This tradition infers that Muhammad recited the "wrong verses" either because he did not understand them or because he did not know what else to say; the real verses, according to this same tradition, were revealed unto him only later. If this were true then, we would have to ponder: what could have the Prophet recited if, at this point, Allāh still had not revealed to him what He had to relate to Humankind?

Finally, it is also important to look at verses 19-20 of *Sūrah* 53. *al-Lāt*, *al-ʿUzzah*, and *Manāt* were three pagan deities worshipped in the Arabian Peninsula. They were among the many gods and goddesses of the Arabian pantheon that were worshipped at the *ka'bah* in Mecca from pre-Islamic times to 629-630 when Muhammad finally entered Mecca and destroyed all the idols housed at the *ka'bah*.⁵³ *al-Lāt* was venerated by the *Thaqif* tribe (*Banū Thaqif*) and was also the protector of *Ṭā'if*, today a city southeast of Mecca, in the Hijāz region. *al-ʿUzzah*, instead, was adored at *Nakhlah*, now a town between Mecca and *Ṭā'if*. Finally, *Manāt* was worshipped at *Sif al-Bahr*, currently a city by the Red Sea, not far from Medina. Together with disparate gods and goddesses, including images of Mary, Jesus, and other characters of the Old and New Testament, they were all worshipped at the *ka'bah*.

These three goddesses betray a mixture of ancient Semitic and Greco-Roman origins. If they belong to the Semitic tradition then, *al-ʿUzzah*, i.e., "the Mighty," is, in all likelihood, the goddess of the *Ḡhatafān*, *Thaqif*, and *Quraysh* tribes. *Manāt* is, according to tradition, the idol for the *Aws* (*Banū Aws*), *Hudhayl* (*Banū Hudhayl*), and *Khazraj* (*Banū Khazraj*) tribes of Medina. She is the goddess of destiny.⁵⁴ Of the three goddesses, *al-ʿUzzah* could be compared to or perhaps is identifiable with Venus, the star-goddess, or rather, the morning star. What is definitively Semitic, and more specifically, Arabic, is the expression, *al-gharānīqu al-eulah*, i.e., "the most exalted cranes," a metaphor for the stars, the celestial beings. Apparently these cranes⁵⁵ are migratory birds and they usually travel from Scandinavia to Madagascar. Since pre-Islamic times these birds were wont to fly over the Arabian Peninsula and the pagan Bedouins, seeing them flying so high in the sky, would compare them to celestial beings, i.e., to goddesses.⁵⁶

⁵² Leone Caetani. *Annali dell'Islam*, 1: 259-260; Michael Jan de Goeje, ed. *Annales quos scripsit abū Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir al-Tabari*, 1: 1188-1189; 'Alī ibn Ibrahim Nūr al-Dīn ibn Burhan al-Halabi. *Kitāb Insan al-'Uyun fī Sirah al-Amin wa al-Ma'mun*, 1: 399; Carolus Johannes Tornberg, ed. *Ibn al-Athiri Chronicon*, 2: 63-64; Ferdinand Wüstenfeld. *Das Leben Muhamed's nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk bearbeitet von Abd el-Mālik Ibn Hishām*, 1: 202-203.

⁵³ Alas, the exact date of when this occurred is not known. It must have occurred between 10-20 Ramadan, 8 A.H., or rather, December 11, 629, 10-11 January 630, or June 6 630. Fazlur Rehman Shaikh. *Chronology of Prophetic Events*. London: Ta-Ha, 2001. 3; 72; 134-136.

⁵⁴ Besides these three goddess, perhaps it is worth mentioning *Hubal*, i.e., the vapor or spirit, of ancient Aramaic origin.

⁵⁵ Crane: *ḡrānīqu* or *ḡrānīq*; plural: *ḡrānīqu*.

⁵⁶ Muḥammad Hamidullāh, and Michel Léturmy, eds. and trans. *Le saint Coran. Traduction et Commentaire*, 5: 19-21; 526; Federico Peirone, ed. and trans. *Il Corano*, 2: 733-738.

If we look at the reconstructed abrogated verses closer, we notice that the two "wrong verses" could be read as a question. In this case they would read:

21.) Are they are the most exalted cranes (i.e., stars)?

وَأَيُّهُنَّ لِهِنَّ الْعَرَانِيقُ الْعُلَى

22.) Must (one) hope for good things [from Allāh] from their intercession!?⁵⁷

وَأِنْ شَفَاعَتَهُنَّ لِهِيَ الَّتِي تَرْتَجِي

In classical Arabic, a question is usually introduced by a pronoun or an interrogative adverb. Other ways of formulating a question, besides using a pronoun or an adverb akin to "how?" and "where?," are the interrogative particles *أ* *a* or *هَلْ* *Hal*, "maybe?," "could it be that?," the latter limited by specific rules.⁵⁸ Sometimes *هَلْ* *Hal* is omitted; hence, a question is indicated by the tone of the voice only. At times, the two particles are juxtaposed. However, *هَلْ* *Hal* is never used to express marvel or indignation, in this case *أ* *a* is used, with the meaning of "what?" or "how could it be?" This *أ* *a* is called the *هَمْزَةُ الشَّوْبِيَّةِ* *hamzah al-taswiyah*, i.e., the pared *hamzah*. In these cases, *أ* *a* is sometimes also omitted; thus, once again, only intonation and the pitch of the voice of the speaker indicate the question and the sense of marvel. Finally, right after *أ* *a* or *هَلْ* *Hal*, the object of the question is placed. If we look at Qur'an 4:79, 7:115, and 2:124, indeed we find that intonation is our only guide:

79.) Whatever good, (O man)

Happens to thee, is from Allāh;

But whatever evil happens

To thee, is from thy (own) soul[?] [...]

مَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ حَسَنَةٍ

فَمِنَ اللَّهِ

وَ مَا أَصَابَكَ

مِن سَيِّئَةٍ فَمِن نَفْسِكَ⁵⁹

As we can see then, there are no interrogative particles here. Intonation is the key to a full understanding of the passage. Without an interrogative particle, the affirmative of the preceding verse on the issue of predestination would most definitively be missed.⁶⁰

115.) They said: "O Moses!

Will thou throw (first),

Or shall we have

The (first) throw[?]"

قَالُوا يَا مُوسَى

إِمَّا أَنْ تُلْقِيَ

وَ إِمَّا أَنْ نُلْقِيَ

تَحْنُ الْمُلْقِينَ⁶¹

Literally, though, the original Arabic reads: "It is us who will be the throwers." The interrogative particle is omitted. Also in this case, the context mandates the interrogative.⁶²

⁵⁷ Muḥammad Hamidullāh, and Michel Léturmy, eds. and trans. *Le saint Coran. Traduction et Commentaire*, 5: 19-21; 526; Federico Peirone, ed. and trans. *Il Corano*, 2: 733-738.

⁵⁸ Laura Veccia Vaglieri. *Grammatica teorico-pratica della lingua araba*. 2 vols. 1959-1961. Rome: Istituto Per l'Oriente, 1993-1996. 1: 61-62; 1: 87; 2: 131-132; 2: 159-160.

⁵⁹ 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 4:79, 209.

⁶⁰ Muḥammad Hamidullāh, and Michel Léturmy, eds. and trans. *Le saint Coran. Traduction et Commentaire*, 4: 79; 4: 90.

⁶¹ 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 7:115, 376.

⁶² Muhammad Hamidullāh, and Michel Léturmy, eds. and trans. *Le saint Coran. Traduction et Commentaire*, 7: 115, 164.

124.) And remember that Abraham	و إِذْ ابْتَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ
Was tried by his Lord	رَبَّهُ
With certain Commands,	بِكَلِمَاتٍ
Which he fulfilled:	فَمَا تَمَّهِنَّ
He said: "I will make thee	قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ
An Imam to the Nations."	لِلنَّاسِ
He pleaded: "And also	إِمَامًا قَالَ وَ مِنْ
(Imams) from my offspring!"	نُرِّيَّتِي
He answered: "But My Promise	قَالَ لَا يَبْتَئَلُ
Is not within the reach	عَهْدِي
Of evildoers." ⁶³	الظَّالِمِينَ

Though the Qur'ān is a book whose archetype is in Heaven—written, hence immutable—it was sent to Humankind in stages, through "progressive" revelations, as Allāh saw it fit, to fulfill the needs of us humans. Therefore, it had to adapt to local circumstances and situations, not to mention the needs of the moment. Once these necessities were met, there was no need to stress the validity of a specific ordinance.

This could be the case of Qur'ān 2:144 where believers are told that from now on they must pray facing Mecca and not Jerusalem.⁶⁴ Abrogation thus leads to perfection, to the rectification of once accepted, recommended, and mandatory norms of conduct but that were then changed by Allāh for their own good. This does not mean that Allāh changed His mind. He already knew what was going to happen. We, as humans, did not.

The same concept of abrogation and "perfected message" applies to the sacred books that came before the Qur'ān. The Torah (تَوْرَة *Tawrah*), the Psalms (زَبُور *Zabūr*), the New Testament (إِنْجِيل *Injīl*), the *Ginzā Rbā*, and the Zend-Avesta,⁶⁵ are all examples of Allāh's revelation to Humankind. Originally, these sacred books contained the divine truth; yet, as time went by, due to the corruption and greed of Humankind, they no longer contained the original, divine message. Indeed, they still contain some divine truth because they were sent from Allāh; however, much of what it is contained in each revealed book is interwoven with human and not divine ordinances. Hence, there was the need for a last, divine revelation. The Qur'ān is therefore the "perfected" version, the uncorrupted word of Allāh. Indeed, it abrogates the other books because it was not forged by humans. According to Islamic theology and jurisprudence then, the Qur'ān came from Heaven and it was revealed piecemeal to the Prophet Muhammad, either directly or semi-directly through the intermediary presence of the Archangel Gabriel. The Qur'ān is Humanity's last chance. After the Qur'ān, Allāh did not send and will not send any other book.

VI. CONCLUSION

Bearing all this mind, it is evident then, that had this episode really taken place, most definitively the "abrogated verses" would not have allowed any kind of adoration for the pre-Islamic pagan goddesses of the *Jāhiliyyah*, or rather, "the time of ignorance," namely, *al-Lāt*, *al-Uzzah*, and *Manāt*.

Furthermore, it should be remembered here that Muhammad did not withdraw these verses. Again, had this episode occurred, it mostly likely would have to conform to the divine ordinances of "perfected" actions.

⁶³ 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 2:124, 52.

⁶⁴ 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, ed. and trans. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 2:144, 59.

⁶⁵ The *Ginzā Rbā* (Great Treasury, c. 1st-3rd century of the Common Era) is by far the most famous and the longest (21 books) of many sacred texts of the Sabians, also known as Nasoraean, Mandaeans, or Christians of Saint John. Yet, they are not to be confused with the Sabaeans of Southern Arabia. The Zend-Avesta is the book of the sacred writings of the *Majūs*, i.e., the Zoroastrians who practice *al-Majūsiyya* (دِينِ زَرْدُشْتِ *Dīn Zardusht*, Zoroastrianism). The sacred texts of Zoroastrianism are: *Yasna Haptanghaiti* (Worship, 7 Chapters), namely: a set of 7 hymns within the *Yasna*; the *Yasna*: liturgical collection of the *Avesta* texts; the *Avesta*: a collection of 72 sacred texts; and the *Gathas*: 17 hymns in verse (religious poetry).

Hence, withdrawal, abrogation, and change would have come from Allāh and Allāh alone. In this case Allāh—seen that the Quraysh were not ready to accept the message as it was being sent and, moreover, in order to avoid confusions as to whether it was good or bad to seek intercession from other gods/goddesses—saw it fit to abrogate the preceding two verses, hence sending down two more verses, clear enough for anyone to understand.

Reconstructing the abrogated was thus an essential tool in the exegesis of Qur'ān 53:21-22. It was therefore necessary to expand on this episode of Muhammad's biography so as to clarify, once and for all, the mistake of many biographers, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, at fault of not having examined the problem at hand and for not giving the attention that it duly deserved.

Furthermore, this tradition goes against Muhammad's very mission, or rather, it does not coincide with the *Sunnah*, i.e., his sayings and his daily actions. Additionally, and more importantly, it nullifies the content of his call, among which stands out the basic principle of monotheism, namely, to adore one and only one god, Allāh.

The pre-Islamic traditions of the Arabian Peninsula that were absorbed by Islam were first and foremost stripped of all pagan imagery and symbolism, as in the case of the *الكعبة ka'bah* which went from being a pagan shrine—with many gods and goddesses, more than 365—to a holy sanctuary, consecrated to Allāh and Allāh only.

Muhammad was a real statesman, with a very keen political understanding and an even more extraordinary ability to deal with and, moreover, leading people. To make such a great mistake in accepting, if only momentarily, the adoration of three pagan idols was absolutely impossible for him. In doing so, Muhammad would have destroyed many years of hard work, whereby his sole mission was that of leading as many souls as possible to the true God. Had Muhammad had this weak moment, the Quraysh would have most definitely taken advantage of this temporary concession and would have most certainly exposed him to the pagans—i.e., the polytheists—as well as his fellow Muslims.

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