

MUḤAMMAD’S NIGHT JOURNEY IN ITS PALESTINIAN CONTEXT – A PERFECT SOLUTION TO A FORGOTTEN PROBLEM (Q 17:1)

The author was here drawing the boundaries of the sacred space of Jerusalem, while at the same time proclaiming possession of this territory of grace—that this network of holy places belonged to his hero too, and not only to the Chalcedonians currently in possession of them. Although Peter could not undertake this sacred journey, or was prevented from doing so, he did not renounce the holy places. This visionary journey was in fact a provisional solution, a perfect device used in troubled times in the city for tackling the tension between access to and debarment from the holy places in Jerusalem.¹

1. Introduction and Summary

Muḥammad’s night journey, related by the opening verse of *Surat al-Isrā’* (Q 17:1), is a fantastic episode in the prophet’s biography. Scholars have usually analyzed this journey as a heavenly vision that helped legitimate the Arabian prophet, similar to various prophetic visions from Jewish and Christian tradition. Yet this specific Qur’anic text has rarely been subjected to modern analytical methods, and its Palestinian context has been unduly minimized.

Starting with Gustav Weil, scholars have observed that Q 17:1 was interpolated, since *inter alia* every verse in *Surat al-Isrā’* shares the same end rhyme – except Q 17:1. Moses was evidently the subject of the pre-interpolation Q 17:1, with variants of its rare verb *’asrā* used by three other surahs to designate Moses’ nocturnal exodus from Egypt (Q 20:77, 26:52, 44:23). But the interpolation of Q 17:1 substituted an anonymous servant of God (meant to be understood as Muḥammad) for Moses, and described that servant’s journey from the sacred *masjid* to the furthest *masjid*, usually understood as Jerusalem. Why was it so important to establish that Muḥammad made this nocturnal journey, to the point of requiring interpolation?

This article argues that the interpolation of Q 17:1 sought to fix a severe problem with Qur’anic typology as Islam emerged, with the problem’s context being Palestinian (hence its focus on the *masjid al-aqṣā*) rather than Hijazi. The Qur’ān likened the *mu’minūn* (believers) to Abraham’s children, and likened its Arabian messenger to Moses. This helped legitimize the *mu’minūn*’s claims to political and religious authority.

But this typology also left the *mu’minūn* vulnerable to incendiary forms of Christian polemic incorporated in their own Qur’anic texts, particularly *Surat al-Isrā’*. Q 17:4-8 revels in the Roman destruction of the Jewish Temple, along with the Roman expulsion of the ‘corrupt’ Jews from Jerusalem. Q 17:4 contends that the Book of Moses decreed this fate for the Jews, and identifies the Romans as God’s new servants. This Qur’anic exaltation of Roman-Christian supremacy over Jerusalem contradicted emerging claims for the supremacy of Muḥammad and his followers. Jesus had entered Jerusalem as a perfectly obedient prophet, and God had given the city over to his followers. In contrast, both Muḥammad and Moses had failed to reach

¹ B. Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 2005): 187 (discussing the visionary pilgrimage to Jerusalem made by Peter the Iberian, the anti-Chalcedonian monk and Bishop of Gaza).

Jerusalem. Further, as Stephen Shoemaker has argued, early *mu'minūn* evidently viewed Muḥammad's death as an unexpected calamity. He had planned to enter Jerusalem in eschatological triumph, but failed.² How could Muḥammad be God's final prophet when he had died in exile from the Holy Land, just like the disobedient Moses? God had instead made Jerusalem the Holy City of Jesus, Romans, and Christians, as Q 17:1-8 confirmed.

To fix this vulnerability, Q 17:1 was interpolated to claim that Muḥammad had made a miraculous journey to Jerusalem. The interpolator adapted a distinctive anti-Chalcedonian pilgrimage tradition: When a holy man could not enter Jerusalem because the city was controlled by heretics, he could instead make a spiritual pilgrimage. As interpolated, Q 17:1 clarified that Muḥammad had not, like Moses, failed to reach Jerusalem. Instead God took him to the city, where he saw its holy signs and encountered the divine presence they embodied (a *topos* of Christian pilgrimage). Q 17:1 does not describe signs witnessed in heaven. Rather the text describes the servant of God as being shown the signs in Jerusalem itself, embedded in the city's sacred geography, as revealed by God to the successor Qur'anic prophet.

Like Jesus, Muḥammad had fulfilled his destiny within the Holy City. His nocturnal pilgrimage allowed him to evade the corrupt Christian *mushrikūn* who controlled Jerusalem, while still claiming the Holy City's sacred space, just as Peter the Iberian, the hero of Palestinian anti-Chalcedonians (and a central historical personality behind conversion of Arabia Petraea to Christianity), had famously made his own late 5th century nocturnal pilgrimage to Jerusalem, communing with God's signs in the city while flouting Chalcedonian power. Peter's journey was part of the broader anti-Chalcedonian reinvention of Palestinian pilgrimage traditions in the fifth-sixth centuries, which re-conceptualized Palestinian pilgrimage as a spiritualized and abstracted practice that could be claimed by 'pure believers' isolated in peripheral regions.

This ingenious Qur'anic argument was obscured when Islamic tradition almost entirely suppressed the early *mu'minūn*'s focus on Jerusalem, replacing it with a Meccan focus and a competing Hijazi pilgrimage. Muḥammad was now portrayed as a perfect Hijazi prophet, only vaguely connected to Jerusalem, and the specific argument for his prophetic status that Q 17:1 had forcefully advanced was replaced in Qur'anic exegesis with mystical speculation.

The analysis concludes by examining several other classic 'pilgrimage problems' in the Qur'ān, suggesting that anti-Chalcedonian tradition can help explain these riddles.

2. Text and Translation of Q 17:1

The transliterated Arabic text of Q 17:1 is as follows:

subḥāna lladhī 'asrā bi-'abdihī laylan mina l-masjidi l-ḥarāmi 'ilā al-masjidi l-'aqṣā lladhī
bāraknā ḥawlahū li-nuriyahū min 'āyātina 'innahū huwa s-samī'u l-baṣīru

A. J. Droge's translation:

“Glory be to the One who sent His servant on a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Distant Mosque, whose surroundings We have blessed, so that We might show him some of Our signs. Surely He – He is the Hearing, the Seeing.”³

² S. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet* (Philadelphia 2012).

³ A. J. Droge, *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Bristol 2013).

3. Traditional Interpretation of Q 17:1 and its Problems

*Modern scholars usually treat this verse as isolated, with no direct relationship to the following verses, but this attitude seems to be wrong.*⁴

Most readers will recall the traditional Islamic exegesis of Q 17:1. The verse is said to relate Muḥammad's miraculous night journey (*isrā'*) from Mecca to Jerusalem, with the prophet traveling upon the magical steed Buraq. From Jerusalem, Muḥammad ascended (the *mi'rāj*) to the heavens, where he witnessed many incredible signs and marvels.

These stories appear late, legendary, and extrinsic to the text. It is unclear why Muḥammad would need to be taken to Jerusalem to ascend into heaven. The Qur'anic text does not mention an ascent. The traditional reading also disconnects Q 17:1 from its following verses.

Yet modern scholars have generally followed Nöldeke in treating the verse as relating a heavenly vision or dream experienced by Muḥammad, similar to the magical journey described by Islamic tradition, and akin to the visions of various Biblical figures. This approach isolates Q 17:1 from its following verses and from its late antique context. Such isolation prevents the analysis from adequately engaging several critical points: (1) the verse was interpolated; (2) it focuses on a nocturnal journey to see the holy places in Jerusalem; and (3) it relates intimately to its following verses.

The analysis below attempts to apply a more modern and contextual approach, focused upon the text itself, its surrounding verses, parallel Qur'anic language, and late antique Palestinian traditions regarding miraculous spiritual journeys to Jerusalem.

4. The Interpolation of Q 17:1 and a Reconstruction of its Ur-Text

*Redaction criticism can be applied to the Qur'ān.*⁵

The observation that Q 17:1 was interpolated is not new. More than a century ago, Gustav Weil concluded that the verse must have been inserted after Muḥammad's death⁶; Sprenger likewise considered it a forgery. In response, Nöldeke and Schwally asserted its authenticity, claiming that Muḥammad must have composed the verse to relate a vivid dream that the prophet mistook for reality⁷ – although they conceded that Muḥammad could not have placed the verse in its present location in *Surat al-Isrā'*, given its broken rhyme scheme, surmising that the verse's

⁴ U. Rubin, "Muhammad's Night Journey (*Isrā'*) to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā. Aspects of the Earliest Origins of the Islamic Sanctity of Jerusalem," *Al-Qantara* XXIX 1, pp. 147-164 (2008): 154.

⁵ G. Dye, "The Qur'ān and its Hypertextuality in Light of Redaction Criticism," Paper for the Fourth Nangeroni Meeting (Early Islamic Studies Seminar, Milan, 15-19 June 2015): 2 n. 9.

⁶ G. Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran*, 1st ed. (Bielefeld 1844): 65-66. See also G. Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran*, 2nd ed. (Bielefeld 1872): 74-76.

⁷ According to Nöldeke this is *ohne Zweifel*, beyond doubt. Nöldeke-Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns I* (Leipzig 1909): 102. Against this Nöldekian certainty one should contrast Gabriel Said Reynolds' observation that "Nöldeke's approach to the text appears simplistic today. He never considers seriously the possibility that the Qur'ān might include different sources, or that later redactors might have had a role in modifying an earlier text. He takes for granted the traditional notion that the Qur'ān can be split up according to episodes in the life of one man and assumes that the Qur'ān is a perfect transcript (albeit out of order) of what Muḥammad – and only Muḥammad – really said." G.S. Reynolds, "The History of the Qur'ān," *Ilahiyat Studies* Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 2-57 (Summer/Fall 2014): 254.

original ending must have been lost.⁸ As his concluding point, Schwally argued that there was no plausible reason for interpolating the verse: “Vor allem wäre aber das Motiv der Interpolation aufzudecken, was noch niemanden gelungen ist.”⁹ Answering that challenge, this article attempts to explain the *Motiv der Interpolation*.

The interpolation itself is readily shown by the text and its parallel Qur’ānic language.¹⁰ Q 17:1 ends with the word *basīru*, recited as *basīr* in pausal form, with the ending sound *īr*. Every other verse in the surah, which has 111 verses total, ends with *an*, generally recited as *a*, so that the surah otherwise has a very constant and monotonous end rhyme. Q 17:1 does not rhyme, but every other verse in this long surah does. Such a striking disruption of a strict Qur’ānic rhyme scheme is often a good indication of interpolation.

Q 17:1 has a somewhat different theme than its following verses.¹¹ It recounts a marvelous journey by God’s ‘servant,’ usually taken to be Muḥammad, who God took from one *masjid* (literally place of prostration) to a second *masjid* located within blessed precincts, where the servant was shown God’s signs (*āyāt*). Q 17:2 then begins “And we gave Musa [Moses] the Book, and made it a guidance for the Children of Israel,” followed by Q 17:3 which states “The seed of those We bore with Noah; he was a thankful servant.” After the miraculous night journey of a contemporary Arabian prophet, the next two verses invoke two ancient Biblical prophets, followed by several verses (Q 17:4-9) that condemn the Jews for their disobedience.

Q 17:1 portrays the servant of God as making a magical journey over an immense distance. This clashes with the Qur’ān’s refrain that Muḥammad did not work miracles.¹²

Q 17:1 has a peculiar shift of narrative perspective. It begins by proclaiming “Glory be to the One who sent His servant,” but then describes that servant as being taken to a place “whose surroundings We have blessed, so that We might show him some of Our signs” before concluding “Surely He – He is the Hearing, the Seeing.” The verse thus shifts rapidly between “He” speech and “We” speech, with the deity being praised by a third party, but then suddenly speaking as himself in plural, and then finally shifting back to being praised by the third party. The verse praises God in third-person singular, while narrating his actions in the first-person plural. The Qur’ān frequently employs confusing shifts of narrative perspective,¹³ but Q 17:1 is extreme. It looks as though an older verse, composed in glorifying “He” speech, was partly

⁸ Per Schwally, “Die Beobachtung Weils, daß der Vers im folgenden keinen Ausschluß habe, ist richtig, aber für die Echtheitsfrage belanglos, trifft dies ja doch noch für viele andere Qorānverse zu, die bisher nicht beanstandet worden sind. Der Sachverhalt läßt sich damit erklären, daß der Vers seine ursprüngliche Fortsetzung verloren hat. Und wegen des abweichenden Reimes auf *īr*, während die übrigen 110 Verse der Sure ausnahmslos auf *a* endigen, ist wahrscheinlich, daß der ganze Abschnitt ehemals eine ganz andere Stelle hätte.” *GdQ II*, pp. 86-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹¹ According to Nöldeke, “V. 1 hängt mit dem folgenden nicht zusammen; vielleicht ward er absichtlich hierher gesetzt, weil in dieser Sura auch sonst von jenem Traum die Rede ist. Dagegen muss vor v. 2 Etwas ausgefallen sein, da dieser Vers sonst ganz zusammenhanglos wär.” *GdQ I*, p. 103. Nöldeke’s suggestion that the verse has lost its original conclusion follows his contention that the verse must relate a dream that Q 17:61 and Q 17:96 also describe (and which Muḥammad supposedly mistook for reality, an error that Nöldeke claims is common in primitive society). Against Nöldeke’s suppositions, it is argued here that nothing was accidentally *ausgefallen*.

¹² Weil treats the journey’s miraculous nature as proof that the verse is inauthentic, but that inference seems unnecessary. The verse’s broken rhyme scheme, and its shifts of narrative perspective, are stronger evidence.

¹³ See, e.g., G. Dye, “La nuit du Destin et la nuit de la Nativité,” *Figures Bibliques en Islam* (Brussels 2012): 155 (noting that Q 16:1 and Q 17:1 use third-person singular narrative, i.e. ‘he speech,’ and that the Qur’ān displays a complex alternation of narrative perspectives, often with grammatical conflict and ambiguity).

overwritten with divine action (God sending his servant on the night journey) that is directly narrated in “We” speech, the divine narrative perspective so characteristic of the Qur’ān.

Examining parallel Qur’anic language helps clarify how Q 17:1 was likely altered. Its rare verb *’asrā* is only used five other times in the Qur’ān.¹⁴ All five other Qur’anic uses of the verb are in the imperative form *’asri* (unlike the *’asrā* of Q 17:1, with its final *alif maqṣūrah*), and designate miraculous nocturnal escapes made by Biblical prophets. Three of these *’asri* episodes (Q 20:77, 26:52, 44:23) describe the nocturnal exodus made by Moses and the Israelites from Egypt; like Q 17:1, each such ‘Moses’ *’asri* also contains a variation of the word ‘servant,’ *ibād*.¹⁵ The other two Qur’anic uses of *’asri* refer to the nocturnal escape of Lot (*Lūṭ*) from his city (Q 11:81, 15:65). For all five Qur’anic uses of *’asri*, the nocturnal escapes are accompanied by divine destruction of the wicked oppressors. They are all retribution pericopes. For Moses, the Red Sea drowns Pharaoh’s forces. For Lot, angels destroy his sinful city. These five *’asri* episodes are each followed by rhetoric which implores obedience to God.

With this comparative Qur’anic background, the original form of Q 17:1 can be ascertained in rough contour. **First**, its text would certainly have ended with *an*, just like every other verse in the *sūrah*. **Second**, it was probably closer in length to its following verses. **Third**, it related to Moses, who is described as the servant of God, and it led naturally into Q 17:2, which recounts Moses receiving the scripture on Mount Sinai. **Fourth**, it related a nocturnal escape, which was followed by divine punishment of the disobedient oppressors. **Fifth**, its main theme paralleled the theme of its immediately-following verses, Q 17:2-8, as well as other Qur’anic verses with parallel language.

The opening clause of Q 17:1—*sub ’ḥāna alladhī ’asrā bi ’abdihi laylan*—already meets these criteria. It has the same end rhyme as the rest of the *sūrah*, ending with the accusative indefinite noun *laylan*. It is shorter. It means “Glory be to the One who sent His servant on a journey by night,” which matches the other three Qur’anic accounts of Moses, which all use *’asri* alongside *ibād*. The ur-text of Q 17:1 would thus have reminded its audience about Moses’ nocturnal exodus from Egypt (just like the *’asri* of Q 20:77, 26:52, and 44:23), after which Moses received the Book on mount Sinai, precisely as Q 17:2 recounts. This was evidently the ‘night journey’ of the ur-text, a formulaic reminder about Moses leading his people’s escape from Egypt, with the wicked Pharaoh’s forces being destroyed in the Red Sea¹⁶ (cf. Q 17:101-104, relating this same story),¹⁷ followed by Moses receiving the Torah on Sinai (Q 17:2).¹⁸

Because the verse’s parallels to the Qur’anic Moses narratives are so strong, A.J. Droge annotates his recent translation of Q 17:1 by noting that the reference to the “servant of God”

¹⁴ Q 17:1 uses *’asrā* to specify that God ‘sent’ or ‘took’ his servant on the journey. All five other Qur’anic uses of the verb are in the imperative *’asri* form (Q 11:81, 15:65, 20:77, 26:52, 44:23), with Moses and Lot being ordered to make their night journeys; evidently the Q 17:1 servant could not make his magical journey unaided.

¹⁵ In Q 20:77, the phrase is *’asri bi ’ibādī*. In Q 26:52, the phrase is *’asri bi ’ibādī*. In Q 44:23, the phrase is *fa-’asri bi ’ibādī laylan*. By contrast, the two uses of *’asri* in the context of the prophet Lot do not mention *ibād*. In Q 11:81, the phrase is *fa-’asri bi-’ahlīka bi-qīṭ ’in mina l-layli*, the same phrase that Q 15:65 uses.

¹⁶ The same salvation narrative is related in Q 8:41, where God’s servant (*’abdinā*) in the original textual unit was Moses, with God saving the Israelites and giving (*anzalnā*) Moses the Book. Islamic tradition’s ‘Battle of Badr’ was later interposed over this text, resemanticizing its Syriacism (*fur ’qān*). F. Donner, “Quranic Furqān,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* no. 52, 2 (2007): 288-289.

¹⁷ Q 17:101-104, relating the ‘clear signs’ (*āyāt bayyinātin*) that Moses showed to Pharaoh, followed by the Egyptians’ destruction and the Israelites’ inheritance of the Holy Land, probably parallels the ur-text of Q 17:1.

¹⁸ While it is impossible to be certain about the ur-verse’s original form, which may well have included other language (and been followed by one or more other short verses), its likely broad contours can be ascertained.

may simply designate Moses outright, not Muḥammad.¹⁹ Yet this is difficult to accept when we consider the last portion of Q 17:1, which diverges from orthodox Christian and Jewish narratives about Moses. In contrast to the postulated ur-text of Q 17:1 described above, the verse's concluding text that describes the night journey as being from *l-masjidi l-ḥarāmi ilā l-masjidi l-aqṣā* has no Qur'anic parallel, nor does it plausibly refer to Moses.²⁰ This geographical description was added to the verse,²¹ probably following its otherwise rhyming end word *laylan* (night). A narrative relating Moses' nocturnal exodus from Egypt was revised to relate a different 'night journey' made by a different servant, implicitly the Qur'anic messenger, who had miraculously travelled between his local *masjid* and a distant *masjid* located in Jerusalem.

Q 17:1 has often been interpreted as focused upon a heavenly Jerusalem, rather than the actual terrestrial city. As Uri Rubin has observed, however, that is an artifact of the verse's Christian subtext, which depicts the city in sanctified form. "[T]he Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā seems to reflect an Islamized version of the earthly—yet divinely purified—Jerusalem as envisioned in Christian texts of late-antiquity."²² The interpolated language distinguished the messenger's night journey from the night journey of Moses by emphasizing the unique geographical destination of the Arabian prophet, conceptualized via this prevailing Christian imagery of the terrestrial Jerusalem. "[N]othing in the Qur'ānic *isrā'* verse seems decisively heavenly and much of it seems rather to lead to the conclusion that the verse deals with a night journey to a terrestrial *masjid* situated in the holy land."²³

But why was it so crucial to differentiate Muḥammad from Moses, and why was this differentiation articulated as a nocturnal journey between two *masjids*, ending in Jerusalem? What was the point of interjecting Muḥammad into the Qur'anic narrative here, and why was his night journey to Jerusalem written over text that had originally related Moses' exodus from Egypt? What urgent problem did this interpolation help solve (i.e. what was its *Motiv*)? We must analyze the immediately following verses before returning to answer these questions.

¹⁹ Droge annotates Q 17:1 by explaining that the verse "is traditionally identified with the Prophet, but it may refer to Moses, who is mentioned in the verse immediately following; cf. the similar descriptions of Moses' departure from Egypt (Q20.77; 26.52; 44.23); and Lot's departure from Sodom (Q11.81; 15.65)." *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation*, p. 175 n. 1. Droge here seizes upon the parallel use of *'asrā/i*.

²⁰ Nöldeke criticized the idea that the servant of God refers to Adam or Abraham, who are not traditionally said to have made similar visionary journeys. The visionary journey made by Ezekiel from Babylon to Jerusalem to view the desecrated Temple (Ezekiel 8:3) is closer, but as Nöldeke notes it makes little sense for Ezekiel to be taken to Jerusalem from the "Sacred Mosque," which Nöldeke interprets as the Ka'ba – not Babylon. In addition, Ezekiel was not shown blessed signs via his visionary journey to Jerusalem, but rather outrageous desecrations.

²¹ The formal bluntness of this interpolation, which breaks the rhyme, suggests that it was a relatively urgent polemical device which, as Schwally notes, cannot have been placed in its present location by Muḥammad himself.

²² See U. Rubin, "Muhammad's Night Journey (*Isrā'*) to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā. Aspects of the Earliest Origins of the Islamic Sanctity of Jerusalem," *Al-Qantara* XXIX 1 (2008) 147-164. Per Rubin, "What is relevant is the fact that the idea of Jerusalem as a destination of a visionary journey is pre-Islamic. Islam did not have to wait until the actual Islamic takeover of Jerusalem in order to envision its own prophet experiencing a vision in which he is taken there at night. Everything seems to indicate that already the Qur'ānic *isrā'* verse alludes to such a journey to Jerusalem. The choice of this particular destination takes the Qur'ānic prophet on a visionary pilgrimage along the Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity. He is taken to the very heart of the holy land, and this creates a visual contact between the prophet and the sacred locality of the biblical prophets and links him to their prophetic heritage and makes him a prophet like them." But the Qur'ān is otherwise hostile to the idea that a prophet must dwell within the Holy Land. Every people has its own messenger. The servant's journey to Jerusalem in Q 17:1 did not make him a generic prophet. Rather it made the servant's prophetic status equal to Jesus, a supreme prophet.

²³ "Muhammad's Night Journey," p. 152.

5. Q 17:1-8: *Straflegenden* Concluding with God Sending His Roman Servants to Occupy Jerusalem, Expel its Disobedient Jews, and Destroy their Temple (*Masjid*)

*We have learned to recognize the centrality of Jerusalem for the earliest stages of Islam.*²⁴

The *Motiv* for the interpolation of Q 17:1 is revealed by its following verses, which constitute a series of *Straflegenden*. Q 17:2 states “We gave Moses the Book, and made it a guidance for the Sons of Israel: ‘Do not take any guardian other than Me!’” Q 17:3 is similarly short, to the point of being fragmentary, stating only “(They were) descendants of those whom We carried with Noah. Surely he was a thankful servant.” Parallel Noah anecdotes in the Qur’ān typically represent *Straflegenden* (e.g. Q 17:17, 21:77). Noah was obedient to God, and the descendants of those who listened to God’s messenger (Noah) survived, while by contrast Noah’s disobedient community was destroyed by God’s aquatic punishment. The ur-text of Q 17:1 likely began this *Straflegenden* theme by recounting the Exodus escape, with its watery destruction of the unbelievers (cf. Q 17:101-104), just like the brief reference to Noah in Q 17:3 reminded its audience about the salvation of Noah’s followers who joined his escape from the watery destruction of the unbelievers.

The following Q 17:4-8 forms the core *Straflegend*, which is far longer and more detailed than its situating Biblical predecessors (Q 17:1-3), bringing the theme to its apex:

4. And We decreed for the Sons of Israel in the Book: ‘You will indeed foment corruption on the earth twice, and you will indeed rise to a great height.’
5. When the first promise came (to pass), We raised against you servants of Ours, men of harsh violence, and they invaded (your) homes, and it was a promise fulfilled.
6. Then We returned to you (another) chance against them, and increased you with wealth and sons, and made you more numerous.
7. ‘If you do good, you do good for yourselves, but if you do evil, (it is likewise) for yourselves.’ When the second promise came (to pass), (We raised against you servants of Ours) to cause you distress, and to enter the Temple as they entered it the first time, and to destroy completely what they had conquered.
8. It may be that your Lord will have compassion on you. But if you return, We shall return, and We have made Gehenna a prison for the disbelievers.

God had expelled the corrupt and arrogant Jews from Jerusalem, sending Romans to destroy his own Temple, which Q 17:7 explicitly calls *al-masjid*, the mosque, the place of prostration. This is the only explicit Qur’anic reference to the Second Temple, and its parallel with the *masjid al-aqsā* of Q 17:1 is deliberate. Q 17:4-8 here repeats a fundamental late antique Christian polemic against the Jews. More broadly, “[t]he Qur’an seems to echo traditional themes of Christian anti-Jewish polemic.”²⁵ As Reynolds puts it, “the Qur’an’s fascination with Jewish perfidy is rooted in the tradition of Syriac typological exegesis.”²⁶

Consistent with such Syriac Christian polemics, the Jewish corruption vaguely referred to by Q 17:4-8 was certainly the Jews’ rejection of Jesus, which Q 17:4-8 portrays as a repetition of

²⁴ G. Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. B. Sadeghi (Leiden 2015): 78.

²⁵ G. S. Reynolds, “On the Qur’anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*tahrif*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130.2 (2010): 189-202.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

the prior Israelite rejections of Moses and Noah (Q 17:1-3²⁷), each rejection being punished by God, and accompanied with a grant of supremacy to those remaining who were faithful believers. Or as Q 61:14 more explicitly states this same point:

O believers, be you God's helpers, as Jesus, Mary's son, said to the Apostles.

'Who will be my helpers unto God?' The Apostles said, 'We will be helpers of God.' And a party of the Children of Israel believed, and a party disbelieved. So

We confirmed those who believed against their enemy, and they became masters.

Q 17:4-8 reiterates this same anti-Jewish polemic, explaining that God had granted supremacy to the Christians and made them his new servants. Because they denied Jesus (just like Pharaoh had denied Moses, and just as Noah's community had denied his prophetic authority),²⁸ the disobedient Children of Israel were condemned to subjugation.

The phrase "if you return, We shall return," as used in Q 17:8, is commonly read as meaning that God will punish the Jews if they return to their sinful ways. Certainly the Qur'ān uses derivatives of the root '-w-d (د و ع) to designate a return to disbelief or disobedience. But the specific phrase "if you return, We shall return" (*wa-in 'udtum 'ud'nā*) is directly paralleled only by Q 8:19 (*wa-in ta 'ūdū na 'ud*), where it designates physical battle in which the *mu'minūn* will destroy the disbelievers (*kafir*). The phrase is bellicose. Since Q 17:8 uses this phrase in connection with God's servants expelling the Jews and destroying their Temple, the message is that the Jews (who the same verse characterizes as *kafir* destined for Gehenna) are permanently disfavored, while his Roman servants have been granted rulership over the Holy City.²⁹ If the Jews try to reverse this state of affairs by deposing their Christian masters, God will punish them.

In the Qur'anic corpus, the uniqueness of Q 17:4-8 lies in its geographical specificity (cf. the ambiguous Q 61:14), which exalts in the destruction of the Jewish Temple (*masjid*) in Jerusalem. Q 17:4-8 delineates God's plan for the Holy City and its Temple – identifying Christians as its sanctioned masters, and the old covenant of the Jews as superseded by Christian rule. This polemic replicates the Christian tradition it derives from. *Surat al-Isrā'* is often

²⁷ As interpolated, Q 17:1 has lost its original reference to the exodus of Moses and God's accompanying punishment of Pharaoh's army. The ur-text would have reminded its audience about how Pharaoh had rejected the prophetic authority of Moses, just like Noah, and Jesus. While rescuing his prophet by nocturnal *isrā'* from Egypt, God punished the unbelieving tyrant and his followers, leaving the Israelites the triumphant survivors, as recounted by Q 17:101-104. "And We had certainly given Moses nine evident signs, so ask the Children of Israel [about] when he came to them and Pharaoh said to him, 'Indeed I think, O Moses, that you are affected by magic.' [Moses] said, 'You have already known that none has sent down these [signs] except the Lord of the heavens and the earth as evidence, and indeed I think, O Pharaoh, that you are destroyed.' So he intended to drive them from the land, but We drowned him and those with him all together. And We said after Pharaoh to the Children of Israel, 'Dwell in the land, and when there comes the promise of the Hereafter, We will bring you forth in [one] gathering.'" (Sahih Int'l tr.). Before interpolation, Q 17:1-8 would have followed this theme, with the unbelievers destroyed because of their successive rejections of Moses, Noah, and finally Jesus, followed each time by the faithful inheriting the land.

²⁸ The fact that Q 17:4-8 does not explicitly identify the 'corruption' that the Jews caused in the land suggests its author's potential discomfort with the idea that rejecting Jesus warranted divine punishment.

²⁹ Q 17:4-8 is not entirely clear about the identity of God's servants. Paret notes that the Arabic is ambiguous about the timeframe. Most commentators assume that the Babylonians and Romans are meant, since they respectively destroyed the First and Second Temples, as a matter of historical fact. Yet the text can also be interpreted as indicating the second promise was of a future event, which had not yet happened at the time of composition. The second servants could also designate the Byzantines, led by Heraclius, who had expelled the Persians from Jerusalem in 629, taking revenge against Hagiopolite Jews who had severely persecuted the Christians; this revenge would then be seen as a Byzantine repetition of the first Roman destruction of the Temple. Such possibilities exceed the scope of this article, which proceeds on the more traditional understanding that God's servants are the Romans, and that the text refers to their destruction of the Second Temple.

curiously close to Christianity in its theological content, an indication of its relatively early composition date.³⁰ Q 17:73-74 even reports that the messenger ‘almost’ joined his opponents; we are not told what those opponents believed, but Christology and priestly authority were presumably the primary doctrinal issues that divided them from the anonymous messenger.³¹

The pro-Christian polemic of Q 17:2-8 contradicted efforts by later *mu’minūn* to assert political and religious supremacy over the Holy Land and its communities. Our earliest historical account of *mu’minūn* in Jerusalem describes them as building a mosque on the Temple ruins. According to the Chronicles of pseudo-Sebeos, written approximately 660 C.E., the *mu’minūn* copied Jewish attempts to rebuild their Temple following the conquest of Jerusalem:

I shall also speak about the plots of the rebellious Jews, who after gaining help from the Hagarenes for a brief while, decided to rebuild the temple of Solomon. Finding the spot called Holy of Holies, they rebuilt it with base and construction as a place for their prayers. But the Ishmaelites, being envious of them, expelled them from that place and called the same house of prayer their own. Then the former built in another spot, right at the base of the temple, another place for their prayer.³²

Arculf, a pilgrim in the 670s, is similarly reported by Adomnan to have observed:

In that famous place where once stood the magnificently constructed Temple, near the eastern wall, the Saracens now frequent a rectangular house of prayer which they have built in a crude manner, constructing it from raised planks and large beams over some remains of ruins. This house can, as it is said, accommodate at least 3000 people.³³

Writing during the construction of the Dome of the Rock, Anastasius of Sinai likewise complained that thirty years before (*i.e.* 660 C.E.) he had heard Egyptian workmen as they cleared the ruined Temple Mount to build a new place of worship, allegedly with demonic aid.³⁴

This drive to restore worship at the ruined Jewish Temple clashed with Christian polemics in the *mu’minūn*’s own Arabic scriptures. Per Q 17:4-8, the Book of Moses had condemned the Jews to exile from Jerusalem, replacing them with God’s new servants, the Romans, with the Jewish Temple rightfully desecrated by the Romans at God’s command. God’s new servants followed a prophet who was crucified and resurrected in Jerusalem itself, ‘Īsā al-Masīh, unlike the disobedient Moses, who God had punished with death on Mount Nebo in the Transjordan.³⁵ Christians could hardly refrain from reminding the *mu’minūn* that they

³⁰ Nöldeke placed Q 17 within his ‘Second Meccan’ period.

³¹ By this point in Qur’anic composition, the messenger’s putative antagonists are surely Christians, although they are rhetorically depicted as polytheists. When Q 17:90-96 discusses the antagonists’ objections to the messenger (for example, insisting that he bring them a Book from heaven that they can read, or bring an angel), their objections do not make any sense as genuine polytheist discourse. No pagan worshiper of Manat or al-Lat would have demanded a book from heaven, or demanded to see an angel. These are inter-monotheistic contentions, in which all sides already accept Biblical tradition as authoritative. Yet the Qur’ān’s rhetorical opponents are subjected to classic Christian polemics against polytheism, now re-employed against trinitarian Christianity.

³² R. W. Thompson, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, Chapter 43 (Liverpool 1998): 103-4.

³³ R.. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton 1997): 221.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³⁵ For a discussion of similar Christian use of Islamic traditions to argue for the inferior status of Muḥammad relative to Jesus, See Krisztina Szilágyi, “A Prophet Like Jesus? Christians and Muslims Debating Muḥammad’s Death,” *JSAI* 36 (2009): 131-71. As Szilágyi explains, “Early Muslims saw Muḥammad as a mere mortal with a divine message, and apart from the misguided judgment of their leaders after Muḥammad’s death, they probably did

were God's successor servants, and the rightful lords of Jerusalem, which God had made the city of Jesus and his followers – not that of Muḥammad or Moses, who both shared inferior outsider status, having never set foot in the city.³⁶ Even the *mu'minūn*'s own Qur'anic recitations acknowledged the painful truth of Christian supremacy in the Holy City.³⁷

Pilgrimage tied such polemics to ritual. Christian pilgrims sought to encounter a Jerusalem purified by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, replacing the sinful Jewish reign. As Rubin puts it, “[t]he Temple Mount was left in ruins to commemorate the Israelite sin and punishment. This was the time when, according to the texts, Jerusalem began to turn into a major pilgrimage site.”³⁸

6. The Qur'anic Account of the Exile and Death of Moses

*The power of Christ surpassed the power of Moses.*³⁹

To better understand the prophetic asymmetry that necessitated the interpolation of Q 17:1, we must compare the respective deaths of Moses, Muḥammad, and Jesus.

In Late Antiquity, Jews and Christians believed that Moses had died outside the Holy Land. Numbers 20:1-13 describes how Moses disobeyed God by striking a rock with his staff to make water, taking credit for the miracle. As punishment, God barred Moses and Aaron from leading the Israelites into their promised land. Deuteronomy 34 reports that Moses died on Mount Nebo, exiled on the east side of the Jordan river, longing for the Holy Land that he had led his people to.⁴⁰ Tragically, Moses never lived to see that land conquered by God's people, its polytheistic Canaanites subjugated, and the pure faith of the Lord established in Jerusalem.

not find anything embarrassing in his ordinary death. But soon after the dead Prophet's followers conquered the Near East, the predominantly Christian inhabitants of those lands compared the story of Muḥammad's life and death to the stories of the life and death of those whom they believed he should have resembled: the biblical prophets, Jesus and Christian saints. Comparing Muḥammad's death to that of the biblical prophets was not detrimental to his standing; apart from Enoch and Elijah who, according to the Bible, were translated to heaven alive, the rest were believed to have died the ordinary death of a mortal. But Muḥammad, in Christian eyes, did not fare well in comparison with Christ. One of the most significant contrasts between their stories was the end of their lives: the one disintegrating the earth, the other being resurrected from the dead and ascending to heaven. When compared to the saints, Muḥammad also failed the test. According to his own followers, Muḥammad's body putrefied in death; the corpses of the saints, according to their vitae, resisted decay, emitted sweet fragrance, and their complexions remained fresh. The all-too-human death of Muḥammad, according to the religious worldview of the Christians, did not fit his claim to divine authority. The eighth-century Muslim narrative of Muḥammad's death, as understood by Christians, made him look inferior to Jesus and the saints, and was thus a useful polemical argument.” Ibid., 155-56.

³⁶ J. W. Drijvers, “Transformation of a City: The Christianization of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century,” *Cults, Creeds and Identities in the Greek City After the Classical Age* (Leuven 2013): 320.

³⁷ As Islam emerged, Syriac Christianity recrafted anti-Jewish polemics to serve an anti-Islamic polemical function, depicting Muslims as repeating the failed Jewish attempt to restore the Temple that Christ had permanently replaced. See M. Debié, “Muslim-Christian Controversy in an Unedited Syriac Text: Revelations and Testimonies about Our Lord's Dispensation,” *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity With Islam* (Leiden 2006): 225-235.

³⁸ U. Rubin, “Muhammad's Night Journey,” p. 153.

³⁹ R. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, p. 127.

⁴⁰ By the 6th century Mount Nebo was seen as an Arab locale, one of the few sites in Arabia that received major Christian pilgrimage. Being well outside of Chalcedonian Jerusalem, Mount Nebo seems to have evaded the complex anti-Chalcedonian attitudes towards more conventional pilgrimage goals. “Peter and John, however, did not limit themselves to the holy places in Jerusalem. We learn indirectly of at least one journey to Transjordan, with another monk, in order to visit holy sites, especially the tomb of Moses on Mount Nebo. Perhaps John Rufus

The Qur'ān exonerates Moses and Aaron of their Biblical disobedience, but it leaves their deaths in exile unchallenged. Only obliquely does the Qur'ān acknowledge that Moses never entered the Holy Land, with Q 5:21-26 blaming the prophet's exile on his 'ungodly people' who were too cowardly to battle the Canaanites:

“O my people, enter the Holy Land which God has prescribed for you, and turn not back in your traces, to turn about losers.”

They said, “Moses, there are people in it very arrogant; we will not enter it until they depart from it; if they depart from it then we will enter.”

Said two men of those that feared God whom God had blessed,⁴¹ “Enter against them the gate! When you enter it, you will be victors. Put you all your trust in God, if you are believers.”

They said, “Moses, we will never enter it so long as they are in it. Go forth, thou and thy Lord, and do battle; we will be sitting here.”

He said, “O my Lord, I rule no one except myself and my brother. So do Thou divide between us and the people of the ungodly.”

Said He, “Then it shall be forbidden them for forty years, while they are wandering in the earth; so grieve not for the people of the ungodly.”

Moses calls those who do not enter the Holy Land 'losers' (*khāsirūn*) who should not be grieved for, but the Qur'ān does not confront the painful fact that Moses and Aaron were themselves such losers. The ambiguity of Q 5:21-26 suggests that God may have rewarded these two prophets in some unspecified way, so that they were not *khāsirūn*. The Qur'ān here extends and follows the exoneration of Moses and Aaron in the Syriac works of Ephrem, for whom these Biblical prophets prefigured Christ and transmitted his priesthood.⁴² This Qur'anic rehabilitation is constrained by its audience, however, which 'knows' that Moses died on Mount Nebo.⁴³

In stark contrast to Moses, late antique Christians maintained that Christ had entered Jerusalem and saved the world through his crucifixion and resurrection in the Holy City.

7. The Death of Muḥammad – Like Moses, Jerusalem Denied

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo ... The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over

suppressed further information showing Peter and John as typical pilgrims on the conventional pilgrimage routes, in light of Peter's later attitude towards the holy places and pilgrimage.” A. Kofsky, “Peter the Iberian,” p. 212.

⁴¹ The Biblical Joshua and Caleb. (Numbers 14:5-10).

⁴² In his *Commentary on Exodus*, Chapter XXXII, Ephrem largely exonerates Aaron and instead blames the Jewish people for the golden calf, similar to the Qur'anic account.

⁴³ Rubin argues that for Q 17:2 “The destination of Moses' exodus is evidently a land upon earth, the Holy Land, and Lot's flight is also entirely within the boundaries of the same land.” See “Muḥammad's Night Journey,” p. 151. Rubin does not explain his claim that the destination of Moses' exodus was the Holy Land, and all Jewish and Christian believers of Late Antiquity would have known that claim to be mistaken (unless Rubin just means here the intended or desired destination), since Moses famously never led the Israelites into the Holy Land – instead Moses led them to Mt. Sinai, precisely as Q 17:2 says. This was followed by his wandering, until he died in the Transjordan. Yet Rubin completes the implicit parallel of Q 17:1, making his Qur'anic Moses enter the Holy Land. Rubin is thus gripped by the same prophetic asymmetry that required interpolation of Q 17:1. Qur'anic logic was indeed driving down that path, as with Q 17:1, but it never articulated a truly equal prophetic typology in which Muḥammad, Jesus, and Moses all entered Jerusalem and claimed its legitimation.

there.” Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. (Deut. 34:1-5)

In the year 945, indiction 7, on Friday 7 February (634) at the ninth hour, there was a battle between the Romans and the Arabs of Muhammad [tayyaye d-Mhmt] in Palestine twelve miles east of Gaza. The Romans fled, leaving behind the patrician bryrdn, whom the Arabs killed. Some 4000 poor villagers of Palestine were killed there, Christians, Jews and Samaritans. The Arabs ravaged the whole region. (Thomas the Presbyter, Chronicle)⁴⁴

Citing converging threads in our earliest historical evidence, Stephen Shoemaker has argued that the historical Muḥammad died unexpectedly while leading his followers towards Jerusalem, accompanied by intense eschatological expectations.⁴⁵ Islamic traditions “make clear Jerusalem’s status as an important sacred center in primitive Islam whose prestige rivaled and indeed seemingly surpassed that of Mecca in the earliest stages ... Mecca did not emerge as the center of Islam’s sacred geography until somewhat later in the movement’s history.”⁴⁶ Muhammad’s followers directed their piety towards the Holy Land “almost certainly with Jerusalem, the eschatological nexus of Abrahamic monotheism, as their ultimate goal.”⁴⁷ According to this thesis, the prophet’s followers saw his death, before that eschatological goal was achieved, as an unexpected calamity. Over time, the prophet’s mission was reinterpreted in a purely Hijazi context, rendering his followers’ dashed expectations moot.

For this article, it suffices to note that (a) Islamic tradition reports that the early *mu’minūn* focused their worship on Jerusalem, before turning their *qibla* to Mecca during the ‘Medinan’ period, an innovation that factions of the *mu’minūn* evidently criticized (Q 2:142-47); and (b) our earliest contemporary reports suggest that Muḥammad may have been leading battles in the Transjordan up to two years after the date (632 C.E.) that is traditionally given for his death. Likewise, the *Doctrina Iacobi*, probably dating to the late 7th or early 8th century, depicts Muḥammad as a messianic figure who proclaimed the imminent second coming of Christ in connection with his military leadership.⁴⁸

Shoemaker’s thesis makes good sense of such data. At an early juncture, Muḥammad was seen by some *mu’minūn* as having failed to lead the *ahl al-Islām* to his goal, almost certainly eschatological and connected with intended Arab conquest of the Holy Land.⁴⁹ Later Islamic tradition suppressed the prophet’s ambitions, re-articulating Muḥammad as a purely Hijazi prophet, divorced from Palestine, with no eschatological expectations tied to his leadership. He had not failed, and his death was not disastrous.

But Q 17:1 should be considered alongside earlier traditions. Just like Moses, God did not permit Muḥammad to complete his intended entrance into the Holy Land. The Day of Judgment never came. Fragments of the sky did not fall as prophesied (Q 17:90).

⁴⁴ R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 120.

⁴⁵ S. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet* (Philadelphia 2012).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁸ The *Doctrina Iacobi* depicts the Saracen prophet as an apocalyptic militant figure who was “proclaiming the arrival of the Anointed One who is to come, the Christ.” See generally S. Anthony, “Muḥammad, the Keys to Paradise, and the Doctrina Iacobi : A Late Antique Puzzle,” *Der Islam* 91.2 (2014): 243-265.

⁴⁹ This may not have been the view of all the *mu’minūn*, much less ‘Arab’ elites as a whole, but it appears to have been a prevailing (and perhaps predominant) view among early Muḥammadan believers.

8. Interpolating Q 17:1 to Prevent Qur'anic Endorsement of Christian Supremacy

Thy Lord knows very well all who are in the heavens and the earth; and We have Preferred some Prophets over others. – Q 17:55 (Arberry)

The problem facing the interpolator of Q 17:1 can now be stated in full. The ur-text of Q 17:1-8 characterized Christian mastery of Jerusalem as the decreed culmination of Biblical precedent. A perfect prophet had entered Jerusalem, and his followers had (at God's command, and as decreed by the Book of Moses itself) expelled the Jews and destroyed their Temple. These followers and their Christian faith had a superior claim to the Holy City, as the ur-text of Q 17:1-8 confirmed. Given this Qur'anic endorsement, how could the *mu'minūn* claim supremacy over Christian Jerusalem, or seek to rebuild its ruined *masjid*? God's new servants had built their shrines to the West of the Temple ruins, symbolizing God's new covenant, a purified city now tied to the physical places of Christ's death and resurrection. And how could the *mu'minūn* claim their prophet was the final prophet, who the People of the Book were obliged to heed? At best he was a second Moses, lesser than 'Īsā al-Masīh, just as Jews were lesser than Christians (see Q 17:1-8, Q 61), and likewise denied a legitimate claim to the Holy City.

Logically, there were two ways to insulate the emerging Islamic faith from such searing critique. First, Muḥammad must have indeed reached Jerusalem and fulfilled his prophetic destiny in the Holy City, making him equal to Jesus.⁵⁰ Second, Muḥammad never failed to reach Jerusalem because he had never tried to reach Jerusalem. Instead he lived and died almost entirely within the Hijaz, focusing his pilgrimage entirely on the competing Arabian shrine of Mecca, with his followers' early Jerusalem *qibla* being an abrogated aberration.

The latter solution ultimately triumphed within Islam, along with its vast *Heilsgeschichte* apparatus. But Q 17:1 was interpolated to advance the former solution, which required no seismic shift of sacred geography. It just required establishing that Muḥammad had somehow traveled to Jerusalem and fulfilled his prophetic destiny there, like Jesus, while also explaining how Muḥammad could have made that journey unnoticed, unreported, and without leading his people into the Holy Land.

A difficult problem. So where did this required explanation come from? The perfect mechanism had already emerged within the primary source of Palestinian demographic and economic growth during the 4th to 7th centuries, the engine that had transformed pagan Aelia Capitolina into the Holy City: Christian pilgrimage. Muḥammad had made a form of nocturnal pilgrimage to Jerusalem, *mina l-masjidi l-ḥarāmi ilā l-masjidi l-aqṣā*. As he entered Jerusalem and encountered the city's blessed precincts, God had shown his Arabian prophet the city's sacred signs, conferring upon him prophetic authority over the Holy Land, and helping to legitimate Muḥammad as the seal of the prophets, both successor to Jesus and his equal.

⁵⁰ Particularly in its later layers, the Qur'ān confronts the problem of prophetic hierarchy, commanding the believers to make no distinctions between prophets (Q 2:136, 2:285, 3:84, 4:152). The Qur'anic drive to articulate equivalence between Jesus and Muḥammad generated a level prophetic typology, diminishing the uniqueness of Jesus and elevating the status of Muḥammad. This emphatic leveling produced relatively interchangeable prophets. Stories about one messenger could be recast as stories about another messenger, just as Q 17:1 could be altered from designating Moses to later designating an Arabian permutation of the same Qur'anic messenger-function. But prevailing narratives still granted exceptional status to certain Biblical figures, particularly Jesus. Their elevated status continued to challenge the relative status of the Arabian messenger/prophet.

9. The “Night Journey” To Jerusalem In Late Antique Anti-Chalcedonian Christianity

*The journey of the Qur’ānic prophet to al-Masjid al-Aqsā is actually a pilgrimage to the cradle of prophethood.*⁵¹

Qur’anic Studies has undervalued Christian pilgrimage as a resource for textual analysis. It is commonly assumed that Meccan pilgrimage is both older than Christian pilgrimage and independent of it – the *hajj* and ‘*umra*’ of Islamic tradition are seen as inner-Arabian affairs derived from ‘ancient pagan’ traditions, following how Islamic tradition depicts their origins in the *jāhiliyah*. Setting aside whether that assumption is viable, the exclusion of Palestinian Christian context is unjustifiable when it comes to Q 17:1, since this text describes the servant of God as being taken to Jerusalem to tour its blessed precincts and witness God’s ‘signs’ there, mimicking the central Christian pilgrimage of Late Antiquity – not pre-Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. And the adjacent text of Q 17:4-8 focuses entirely on Jerusalem and its Temple being replaced by the rule of Roman Christian servants, making it even more difficult to appreciate why prevailing late antique Christian traditions and texts about pilgrimage to Jerusalem, seemingly the most obvious interpretive context for this Qur’anic text, would be overlooked.

Part of the problem is that Q 17 appears to be a relatively early composition, which Nöldeke assigned to his “second Meccan” period. Its *Sitz im Leben* is therefore usually pictured deep within the Hijaz, with Muḥammad dreaming in Mecca about travelling to the fabled object of his *qibla*, the holy city lying over a thousand kilometers to his Northwest, which he had never visited. But the interpolated nature of Q 17:1 is critical. Even by Nöldeke-Schwally’s conservative account, the verse cannot have been placed in its present position by Muḥammad himself. In the specific form that has been transmitted to us, the verse does not represent the proclamation of a historical Muḥammad from within the Hijaz.⁵²

So we must ask what a night journey from one *masjid* to see signs at the furthest *masjid* in Jerusalem would have meant in a historical context where the *mu’minūn* were engaged with late antique Palestine and its traditions of sacred journeys to Jerusalem. If we suspend the isolating claims of later Islamic tradition, and instead analyze the text in a broader late antique context, the most straightforward precedent for Q 17:1 consists of the visions and spiritual pilgrimages of anti-Chalcedonian Christians, which helped believers maintain spiritual contact with the holy places of Palestine following their annexation by the ‘corrupt’ Chalcedonians.⁵³

⁵¹ U. Rubin, “Muhammad’s Night Journey,” p. 164.

⁵² Weil speculated that Q 17:1 was added during Abu Bakr’s caliphate. This reflects Weil’s assumption that the living prophet would not have permitted other individuals to add such obtrusive verses, which disrupted the surah’s rhyme and introduced miraculous new themes. But that view assumes that Muḥammad exercised very tight control over the entire process of Qur’anic composition, and it is surely reasonable to doubt this assumption. When we consider that the text may be deeply composite, as Lüling (for example) suggests, then it cannot necessarily be assumed that Q 17:1 was added after the prophet’s death. In any event, the arguments advanced herein do not depend on any particular chronology of interpolation, since anti-Chalcedonian influence cannot reasonably be excluded from any stage of Qur’anic composition. Such influence is present even in the most archaic surahs.

⁵³ By focusing on fifth-sixth century Palestinian context, I depart from more traditional effort to situate the journey within the visions of Biblical literature. Rubin, for example, explains that “The Qur’ānic night journey to al-Masjid al-Aqsā seems to be a vision experienced by the Qur’ānic prophet, much in accordance with similar visions known already from Pre-Islamic apocalyptic literature. The Book of Enoch already mentions a vision of a travel to a ‘blessed place’ i.e. Jerusalem, which is situated in the ‘center of the earth.’ The idea of a journey in vision to Jerusalem is also known from the Old Testament. Nöldeke already suggested that Q 17:1 reflects Ezekiel 8:3 where Ezekiel experiences in Babylon a vision in which he was taken by a lock of his hair and a wind lifted him

The preeminent example is presented by Peter the Iberian, the famed late 5th century monk and bishop of Gaza. Anti-Chalcedonians (i.e. monophysites⁵⁴) like Peter faced an enormous disruption of their pilgrimage rituals:

Following the suppression of the monophysite revolt in Palestine, the monophysites in Jerusalem, in other holy places and in Palestine at large seem to have faced a particular dilemma in light of the new domination of Jerusalem and the holy places by the Chalcedonians, and the persecution and expulsion of monophysite leaders. The predicament of the Palestinian monophysites seems to have created special problems among local monophysite circles with regard to the holy places and to pilgrimage to these sites. These issues are exemplified in the life and times of Peter the Iberian (c. 417-491) – prince, pilgrim, monk, miracle maker and visionary, bishop and charismatic monophysite master.⁵⁵

Peter refused to abandon pilgrimage. He was an ardent pilgrim, and could not forswear this ritual practice. In late antique Christian tradition, the Jerusalem pilgrim retraced episodes from the city's Biblical past. By viewing and touching the lingering physical signs of the divine presence, the pilgrim encountered the transcendent God. So when Chalcedonians seized control over those physical signs, it created a severe dilemma. "This dilemma posited a collision between loyalty to the holy places, and fidelity to the true faith. The sincere monophysite living in the holy places must make his bitter choice either to abandon his attachment to and veneration of the holy places thereby remaining true to his faith and brethren or to retain communion with the 'heretical' Chalcedonians."⁵⁶

How to resolve that dilemma? Peter's journey is central to the analysis, and its narration by his follower and biographer John Rufus will therefore be quoted in full:

up between earth and heaven to one of the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem." U. Rubin, "Muhammad's Night Journey," p. 152. Ezekiel 8:3 is difficult to credit as a proximate influence on the night journey of Q 17:1, because it recounts Ezekiel's visionary journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, where he was shown detestable and horrific idolatry that the Israelites were committing in God's Temple, followed by a fearsome slaughter of the idolaters. Admittedly, this does neatly parallel the punishment of Q 17:4-8. It also implies a parallel between the Chalcedonian 'heretics' who ruled Jerusalem during the era of Qur'anic composition and the 'idolaters' who ruled Jerusalem during Ezekiel's era. Yet Q 17:1 refers to its journey positively, treating God's signs as a marvelous form of prophetic legitimation. It lacks the horror and disgust that pervades Ezekiel's vision of the desecrated Temple.

⁵⁴ Following scholars like Cornelia Horn, I use 'anti-Chalcedonian' rather than 'monophysite,' 'miaphysite,' 'non-Chalcedonian,' or 'Jacobite' to designate the late antique Christian factions that opposed the Council of Chalcedon (excluding pre-Chalcedonian factions like Nestorianism, which did not need to oppose the Council). See C. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian* (Oxford 2006): 8-9. In addition to the more general reasons given by Horn, this distinction is particularly useful for Qur'anic studies, because terms like 'monophysite' and 'Jacobite' tend to imply a significant degree of doctrinal and ecclesiastical uniformity. The opposition to Chalcedonian Christianity included deeply conflicting positions on Christology and ecclesiastical authority. Many of those conflicting positions are reflected (as well as criticized) in the Qur'ān. To conceptualize the heterogeneous Christian opponents of Chalcedon as 'Jacobite' or 'miaphysite' is to anachronistically assimilate their complexity with later forms of Christian orthodoxy, much of which crystallized in the seventh century or later. On the latter point, see J. Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam* (2010).

⁵⁵ A. Kofsky, "Peter the Iberian: Pilgrimage, Monasticism and Ecclesiastical Politics in Byzantine Palestine," LA 47 209-222 (1997): 210.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 217. It is difficult to overstate how rabidly many anti-Chalcedonians opposed the Chalcedonians, who were viewed as a corrupt imperial evil that set out to deny the divinity of Christ and destroy the pure orthodox faith. "Statements denouncing Chalcedon as the work of the devil, the supporters of Chalcedon as the worshipers of the devil, and Juvenal as the Antichrist and similar vituperations, appear throughout Rufus' works to the extent that the entire empire is depicted as the root of all evil." Id., p. 218. Other anti-Chalcedonian factions, however, were much more moderate, and later even operated with explicit imperial sanction (most prominently, Jacob Baradaeus).

After these [things], when the time after summer arrived, the blessed one returned to the brethren in the plain. When he went, some were indignant in their soul and said, “How when he abode all these days beside Jerusalem, did the blessed one not desire greatly to enter the Holy City, even if by night, and venerate the worshipful places, and especially the holy Golgotha and the life-giving tomb?” The day after his departure, one of the brethren who was very simple and innocent came and said to them, “I saw a fearful vision this night. For it seemed to me that I was seeing Abba Peter the bishop, who was saying to me, ‘Can you give me a hand, brother?’ When he alone took me in this vision to the Holy City, in the same night in which he was about to depart, he first entered the *martyrion* of the holy Stephen, upon which he happened [to come] first. And when he went down to the cave, he venerated the sarcophagus. And when he went out from there, he ran to the holy Golgotha and the holy Tomb. And from there he went down to the church that is called [that] of Pilate and from there down to that of the Paralytic. And after this, to Gethsemane. When he had gone around also in the holy places that [are in] its surroundings, after this he went up to the Upper Room of the disciples, and afterwards to the holy Ascension, and from there to the house of Lazarus. Next he came upon the road bringing [him] from there until he arrived at the holy Bethlehem. When he had prayed there, he turned [back] towards Rachel’s Tomb. And when he had prayed there and in the rest of the temples and houses of prayer on the road, he went down to [the Church of] Shiloah. From there, after he had gone up to holy Zion and had completed a holy course and had worshiped the Lord in every place, finally he returned to the village of Beth Tafsha, while I, indeed, in every place was supporting him. On the very next day, [after the one on] which I had seen that vision, the Abba returned to his journey.” This, however, was [done] so that those who were indignant might be instructed that the blessed one was offering in every holy place every day, undoubtedly also at every hour, worship to the Lord in [his] spirit. For it is written, “The spiritual one judges everything. He himself, however, is not judged by anyone.” When that brother had told them these [things], those [brethren] fell down upon their faces and worshiped the Lord.⁵⁷

Peter made a *spiritual* night journey to all of the holy places in Jerusalem. This created a continuous spiritual connection with the city, legitimating the great holy man’s authority against the corrupt Chalcedonian priests. The monks of Palestine supposedly fell prostrate and worshiped the Lord when they learned of Peter’s spiritual pilgrimage.

This ritual innovation helped break Palestinian pilgrimage free from its physical center in Jerusalem, moving the practice to the periphery traveled by ascetics, where spiritualized pilgrimage became an identity marker for anti-Chalcedonians. “The centrality of pilgrims and pilgrimage in the *Life of Peter the Iberian* can hardly be overstated.”⁵⁸ As Cornelia Horn notes, the bulk of the *Life* consists of tales of forced peripatetic exile, adventures on pilgrimage, and travel tours, all of which facilitated a spiritualized conception of pilgrimage:

The spiritual interpretation of pilgrimage that Rufus presented in this text even turned Peter into a traveling holy site. Anti-Chalcedonians felt they were barred

⁵⁷ John Rufus, *The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem, and the Monk Romanus*, tr. by C. Horn and R. Phenix Jr. (Atlanta 2008): 195-99 (§§ 133-34, R 98-100).

⁵⁸ *The Lives of Peter the Iberian*, Introduction by C. Horn and R. Phenix Jr., p. lii.

from many of the churches, especially at places where Chalcedonians formed the majority of the worshiping community. Their monasteries were forced either to recognize Chalcedon and enter into communion with Juvenal or to be disbanded. In order to be able to hold on to a rightful claim to ‘holy places,’ Rufus provided a new interpretation of the events as well as of the definition of ‘holy place,’ a definition that suited the actual circumstances of the anti-Chalcedonian experience in Palestine. Accordingly to that newly defined understanding, holy places were holy only if the bishop and the believers worshiping there were orthodox, that is, anti-Chalcedonian. In other words, it was faith, not possession of a building or even of relics, that conferred holiness and spiritual authority... Consequently Peter had to be shown as an associate of the great travelers of the Bible: Moses, Jesus, and Paul; thus he was manifested as the sole true heir to the biblical and apostolic tradition.⁵⁹

Peter’s spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem is probably the most prominent example of late 5th/early 6th century narratives in which anti-Chalcedonian believers used such ritual innovation to justify their abandonment of the Palestinian holy places. “For strict anti-Chalcedonians like John Rufus the proximity of the Holy Places seems to have been one of the most dangerous obstacles for the strict preservation of faith. The risk of polluting the faith of their fathers through association with Chalcedonian pilgrims could be averted only by avoiding the Holy Places.”⁶⁰ The believers typically received visions of a Biblical figure or saint who authorized their flight, promising that the believer would henceforth maintain a spiritual communion with the holy place.⁶¹ This allowed the believer to claim spiritual connection to an abstracted and purified form of sacred space, while avoiding communion with the loathed Chalcedonians. It is this abstracted and spiritualized idea of pilgrimage that Q 17:1 uses to connect its own servant of God with the holy places of Jerusalem, claiming their authority for the Arabian prophet.⁶²

This is not to suggest that Q 17:1 passively copied such anti-Chalcedonian precedent, or viewed it as authoritative. Rather the author of this Qur’anic text cleverly and creatively adapted the idea of spiritual pilgrimage.⁶³ Such pilgrimage was perfectly suited for asserting the

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. lii-iii.

⁶⁰ J.E. Steppa, *John Rufus and the World Vision of Anti-Chalcedonian Culture* (Piscataway 2002): 14.

⁶¹ See Kotsky, “Peter the Iberian,” pp. 217-18. As Kotsky relates one of several examples, “When the repression of the monophysites after Chalcedon took place and the priests of the party of the patriarch Theodosius were banished by the emperor Marcian, Constantine had to decide either to flee the communion of the apostates and thus deprive himself of the presence of St. John the Baptist; or to remain in Sebaste and become an apostate himself. Constantine implored the Baptist, in his wisdom, to disclose God’s will. He had a vision of the saint who said: Priest, do not lose your soul because of me and do not deny your faith. But go and guard your soul untarnished. For wherever you go, I shall be with you. And Constantine left his beloved saint and his tomb, and escaped Sebaste.”

⁶² Anti-Chalcedonians used other mechanisms to detach the holy places from Chalcedonian domination. For example, the martyr Marcellus is reported as having appeared to pilgrims on the road, where he denounced his own Egyptian shrine and insisted that its land was no longer holy; he had left in protest at the shrine’s seizure by Chalcedonian heretics. See C. Horn, “Transgressing Claims to Sacred Space: The Strategic Advantage of the Portability of Relics for Anti-Chalcedonians in Syria-Palestine in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries CE,” *Georgian Christian Thought and its Cultural Context: Memorial Volume for the 125th Anniversary of Shalva Nutsbidze (1888-1969)*, ed. T. Nutsbidze, C. Horn, B. Lourié, pp. 45-68 (Leiden 2014): 45. To counter the Chalcedonian control over the holy places of Palestine, “anti-Chalcedonians highlighted in their life of religious devotion that relics were endowed with the capability to be used for creating Holy Places of the anti-Chalcedonians’ own choosing and approval.” Id., p. 46. Again, this innovation helped create decentralized forms of sacred space.

⁶³ The Qur’anic milieu was influenced on many levels by anti-Chalcedonian Christianity. See generally J. Bowman, “The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syriac Christianity,” in E.C.B. MacLaurin, ed., *Essays in Honour of*

legitimacy of a *pure holy man on the periphery* against a *heretical imperial center*, because that is precisely what anti-Chalcedonian Christianity had created it for. Facing the same problem—how to legitimate a holy man by claiming his spiritual communion with sacred space controlled by heretics—the interpolator of Q 17:1 adopted the same solution. Peter and the Q 17:1 servant both obtained enhanced religious authority via their journeys to Jerusalem. This legitimation embodies the distinctive late antique Christian concept of pilgrimage, which emphasized transforming the individual rather than creating a sense of sacred community. “[T]he essence of this practice in late antiquity [w]as the desire of the pilgrim—to be in a state of alienation from the world so as to be able to encounter the sacred rather than the desire to harbor feelings of *communitas* ... The act of pilgrimage thus served as a vehicle for this self-transformation.”⁶⁴

Far from being obscure, “John Rufus can rightfully be considered the most prominent Palestinian anti-Chalcedonian author of the late fifth and early sixth centuries.”⁶⁵ His influence was particularly notable in Arabia. As Cornelia Horn has noted, Peter the Iberian and John Rufus (who was evidently himself a Syrian Arab, and probably a native Arabic speaker) together played a central role in the initial establishment of anti-Chalcedonian Christianity in Arabia in the fifth century.⁶⁶ This has been overshadowed by the incorrect assumption that Arabia was first converted to anti-Chalcedonian Christianity during the sixth century. “The case of Peter the Iberian ... allows us to correct this view and establish a fifth-century date for the Ghassânids’ initial conversion to anti-Chalcedonianism.”⁶⁷ During his travels in Transjordanian Arabia, Peter was hailed by its inhabitants as “a second Elijah and Moses,” but John Rufus depicts his ministry there as actually surpassing the Old Testament prophets.⁶⁸

When considering the connections between anti-Chalcedonian tradition and Q 17:1, we should further recall that Syriac monasticism was a dominant force in the anti-Chalcedonian movement,⁶⁹ and Arab conversion to Christianity was largely driven by monks and ascetic holy men from the Syrian tradition. “[W]e do indeed have numerous accounts of Christian missionary work among the Arab tribes, in particular, tales of the virtuous lives and miraculous deeds of Christian clergy and holy men that won the hearts of many a pagan Arab.”⁷⁰ In Syria, vast numbers of Arabs reportedly came to witness Simeon the Stylite, converting to Christianity.⁷¹ The Nabateans were reportedly converted to Christianity *en masse* by a monk

Griffiths Wheeler Thatcher, 1863-1950, pp. 191-216 (Sydney 1965); G. Risse, “Gott ist Christus, der Sohn der Maria”: Eine Studie zum Christbild im Koran (Bonn 1989). Further, scholars like Gabriel Said Reynolds have demonstrated that the Qur’ān presumes its audience has a broad background knowledge of Syriac Christian tradition, a tradition that was dominated in the West by anti-Chalcedonian forms of Christianity.

⁶⁴ B. Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, p. 10 (citing the pilgrimage of Peter the Iberian, and distinguishing late antique Christian pilgrimage from Jewish pilgrimage and medieval Christian pilgrimage).

⁶⁵ C. Horn, “A Chapter in the Pre-History of the Christological Controversies in Arabic: Readings from the Works of John Rufus,” *Parole de l’Orient* 30, pp. 133-56 (2005): 136.

⁶⁶ Ibid. On the Arab background of John Rufus, see pp. 137-39.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 144.

⁶⁹ “Whereas Monophysitism was deeply rooted in Syriac monasticism, Nestorianism appears to have been more associated with the official Persian church.” I. Toral-Niehoff, “The ‘Ibād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq,” *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu* (Leiden 2010): 337.

⁷⁰ R. Hoyland, “Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur’ān,” *The Qur’ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G. Reynolds (New York 2008): 59.

⁷¹ Ibid.

who brought miraculous rain.⁷² Likewise, Christianity in al-Ḥīra began with monasticism.⁷³ Such monastic efforts to convert and minister to Arab populations often took remarkable forms:

Since the late fifth century, Syriac Monophysite monks were indeed very active propagators of the Christian faith in Mesopotamia and Iraq, mostly among the Aramaic peasants and the Arab Bedouin of the so-called “barbarian plain.” This movement increased significantly with the restrictive anti-Monophysite policy of Justin I (518–524), which forced many Syrian monks to retreat into the desert where they concentrated their efforts on the Bedouin. These monks are not easy to classify. In this period of Aramaic Christianity, various manifestations of asceticism existed side by side, such as hermits and cenobitic monks. Their missionary zeal forced them to adapt to the special living conditions in the desert, e.g., by introducing transportable altars and by practicing baptism with sand.⁷⁴

It cannot be surprising that Qur’anic composition occasionally exploits useful anti-Chalcedonian themes and narratives from the fifth and sixth centuries (such as those in the *Life of Peter*), since this was the dominant Christian tradition in most Arabian regions.⁷⁵ Qur’anic argument often seems contiguous⁷⁶ with early anti-Chalcedonian efforts to articulate a pure peripheral Christianity, particularly in the monkish⁷⁷ early surahs.

⁷² Petra was reportedly converted to Christianity in similar fashion. “There is a colourful account of the Nabataean conversion to Christianity in the story of the zealous monk Bar Sauma, famous for never sitting or lying down. In A.D. 423 he arrived at Petra with forty monks with the intention of destroying that city’s pagan temples and Jewish synagogues. To prevent this, the inhabitants closed the city gates against them. In response, Bar Sauma threatened to attack the city and burn it down if they did not let him enter. Petra was then suffering from a four-year drought, but coincidentally when Bar Sauma arrived it began to rain heavily and the flood waters washed away the city walls. The pagan priests were amazed by this seemingly miraculous inundation which they interpreted as a divine intervention and promptly converted to Christianity. Intriguingly, there are no references to pagans being present in Petra after that date.” K. Politis, “Nabatean Cultural Continuity into the Byzantine Period,” *The World of the Nabateans* (Stuttgart 2007): 194.

⁷³ “Syriac sources indicate that Christianity in al-Ḥīra goes back to monastic origins: a certain ‘Abdīsho‘ is reported to have founded the monastery of al-Ḥīra during the fourth century.” I. Toral-Niehoff, “The ‘Ibād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq,” p. 336.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Surprisingly few Qur’anic scholars have focused on the connections between anti-Chalcedonian asceticism, Arabia, and Christological controversy in the late fifth-late sixth centuries. That is disappointing given how well this milieu suits the emergence of archaic Qur’anic texts and discourse – an Arabic-speaking population that fiercely opposed the Chalcedonians, seething with Christological controversy, largely bereft of (and often hostile towards) priestly hierarchy, populating Biblical locations outside the Holy Land, and suffused with ascetic messengers who followed Syriac Christianity. It is hard to picture a better milieu for the early evolution of Arabic discourse that privileged pious ascetic messengers against a corrupt ecclesiastical establishment, to the point of creating an innovative Arabic counter-liturgy and counter-rituals (rejecting sacraments administered by Chalcedonian priests). Yet traditional conceptions of Qur’anic origins in Mecca, and revisionist conceptions of very late Qur’anic composition in Syria and Mesopotamia, have tended to overshadow the potential role of this earlier milieu.

⁷⁶ I use ‘contiguity’ to emphasize that such influence was freely selected and displayed in the process of Qur’anic composition, rather than being imposed as the doctrinal authority of any particular Christian sect. The heterogeneity of Christian beliefs in the Qur’anic milieu, which evidently lacked the rigid boundaries of later orthodoxies, is increasingly recognized by scholars. See, e.g., G. Fisher, “From Mavia to al-Mundhir: Arab Christians and Arab Tribes in the Late Antique Roman East,” at <https://carleton-ca.academia.edu/GregFisher>.

⁷⁷ The Qur’ān is traditionally read as making two explicit references to ‘monks’ (Q 5:82 and Q 9:31-34) and one reference to ‘monasticism’ (Q 57:27). Holger Zellentin has recently argued that this may be a misreading, and that the term *ruhbān* in these verses actually means bishops, not monks. See H. Zellentin, *The Qur’ān’s Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen 2013): 203-228. If Zellentin is right, then Q 57:27 complains that bishops are a Christian innovation that God did not require, and Q 9:34 criticizes bishops for

10. The Signs [*Āyāt*] of Jerusalem against the *Mi'rāj*

*It is in Jerusalem, in any case, in the place that stood as the symbol of eastern Christianity, where the Islamic anti-trinitarian and Christological polemic, as expressed in the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock, has its true sitz im leben.*⁷⁸

In Q 17:1, God takes his servant to Jerusalem “that We may show him” (*linuriyahu*) “of our signs” (*min āyātina*). The journey is required so that God can show his signs to his servant. God’s signs could not be shown to the servant at the “Sacred Masjid” where he began. Instead, the signs had to be shown to the servant in “the furthest place of prostration [*masjid*], where We had blessed the surroundings” (*l-masjidi alladhī bāraknā ḥawlahu*). What signs were shown within these blessed surroundings? Why could they only be shown in this specific geographical location, the place of prostration in Jerusalem? The text’s geographical specificity contradicts the traditional narrative that Muḥammad made a mystical ascent (*mi'rāj*) into the heavens from Jerusalem. Q 17:1 makes no reference to the mystical heavenly ascent of Islamic tradition. Both the text and its following verses have a distinctly terrestrial focus, centered on Jerusalem.

Instead the *āyāt* mirror the signs that the Christian pilgrim viewed in Jerusalem. Seeing and touching those signs was the central activity in Christian pilgrimage. The pilgrim comes to Jerusalem because it is filled with the ‘signs’ of God, which the Christian pilgrim understood as visible symbols that retained the divine presence from scriptural events. As Wilken explains:

In Christian discourse the terms *sign* and *symbol* designated things that could be seen and touched that pointed beyond themselves. They were tiny windows that opened on another world ... What did he mean by calling the holy places signs? These places, writes Gregory, had ‘received the footprints of Life itself’ and for this reason they are palpable reminders that God once walked this earth. ... By visiting those places that bear the imprint of ‘life itself,’ the pilgrim was able to know the transcendent God who was beyond human comprehension.⁷⁹

The power of these signs was geographically specific, meaning that their power had to be transmitted through sight and touch in a specific location. Pilgrims could not encounter the signs’ sacred power anywhere else on Earth (unlike miracles, revelations, recited verses). The word *linuriyahu*, as used in Q 17:1, means that the signs were ‘visually shown.’ These visual signs were not spoken words like Qur’anic recitations, which God could have transmitted to his prophet anywhere. They could only be seen in Jerusalem, where they were located, because their sacred power necessarily derived from their physical connection with the city’s Biblical past.

This does not mean that the *āyāt* of Q 17:1 designate the literal sights of Christian pilgrimage, such as the tomb of Jesus and the relics of martyrs. Nor do the *āyāt* designate competing ‘Islamic’ sights in tangible form. Rather the signs of Q 17:1 are a parallel logical construct, divine power manifested in Jerusalem, equivalent to the signs of Christian pilgrimage, much as the Arabic Book was theologically equivalent to the Jewish and Christian Books, and

devouring the wealth of the people. That comports significantly better with late antique criticisms of ecclesiastical hierarchy, which ascetic monks usually accused of excessive spending and worldly compromise.

⁷⁸ A.L de Prémare, “‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān and the Process of the Qur’ān’s Composition,” in *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New research into Its Early History*, ed. K.-H. Ohlig and G. R. Puin, pp. 189-221 (Amherst 2010): 193.

⁷⁹ R. L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (Binghamton 1992): 116-17 (italics in original).

the Arabian prophet equivalent to Jesus and Moses. Qur'anic invocation of these *āyāt* helped portray Jerusalem as a city filled with Islamic signs and symbols. Q 17:1 argues for an Islamicized Jerusalem, just as the Romans had Christianized Jerusalem by replacing Judaism, which is the central theme of Q 17:4-8. In this sense, Q 17:1 was interpolated to present a competing Islamic counterpart to Q 17:4-8, replacing the Romans with *mu'minūn* and Jesus with Muḥammad, implicitly identified as the servant of God (with the servant's anonymity reinforcing the typological equivalence).

Why has this parallel to Christian pilgrimage been obscured by the *mi'rāj*? The need to interpose Hijazi subtext over the text's overt Palestinian context evidently produced the *mi'rāj* narratives. For later *mu'minūn*, the servant's journey had to culminate in a heavenly ascent to avoid interpreting the *āyāt* as geographically-specific signs. The surah's focus on Jerusalem, the city of Jesus and his followers, clashed with the emerging Islamic understanding of Qur'anic revelation as oral recitations first transmitted by the angel Jib'rīl to the prophet in Mecca. Being visual, the signs of Q 17:1 could not be the Qur'anic revelations. Further, the signs could not be confined to Jerusalem, which would undercut Mecca as the competing locus of prophetic authority. Accordingly, the signs had to be displaced into an unreachable abstract region. A prophetic ascent into the heavens, accompanied by fantastic visions, was interjected via exegesis.

Against the *mi'rāj*-free interpretation of Q 17:1, it might be objected that the Dome of the Rock, built around 692 C.E., commemorates the point where Muḥammad ascended to heaven by the *mi'rāj*. But the Dome of the Rock's inscriptions argue for the equivalence of Jesus and Muḥammad, portraying both as mere human servants of God. Even setting aside its late date, nowhere do the building's inscriptions address heavenly ascents by Muḥammad, or prophetic dialogues in heaven, an omission inconceivable if the building was originally designed to glorify visions that followed a heavenly ascent. "Wenn die nächtliche Reise der Grund gewesen sein sollte, um den Felsendom zu bauen, darf man selbstverständlich annehmen, daß Verse 17, 1 in den ältesten Inschriften vorkäme. Genau das ist nicht der Fall."⁸⁰

Van Esbroeck has argued that the connection between Q 17:1 and the Dome of the Rock is secondary, with the Dome originally erected to correct and subsume an older theology in which some Muslims believed the rock bore the footsteps of the anthropomorphic God.⁸¹ That seems correct in part, but the older theology is better understood as the attempt by *mu'minūn* to claim that Muḥammad had miraculously set foot in Jerusalem. The competing footsteps of God were the signs left by his incarnated son Jesus, ritually witnessed by the Christian pilgrim; it is the attempt by early *mu'minūn* to depict Muḥammad as equivalent in status to this incarnated Jesus that gives the misimpression of an anthropomorphic theology held by the *mu'minūn*.⁸²

⁸⁰ See M. Van Esbroeck, "Die Quelle der Himmelfahrt Muḥammeds vom Tempel in Jerusalem aus," *Le Museon* 117, Issue 1-2, pp. 175-92 (2004): 188.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 188-89.

⁸² See the Wilken quote above, summarizing the significance of Jerusalem: "These places, writes Gregory, had 'received the footprints of Life itself' and for this reason they are palpable reminders that God once walked this earth." Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, pp. 116-17.

11. The Enigma of Qur'anic Pilgrimage to *Bakka*

*It so happens that our 'Bakka,' which one finds a single time in the Koran, in a context relating to the site of worship and pilgrimage, corresponds to a Biblical word 'Baca,' which one finds a single time in the Bible, in Psalms 84:6-7, precisely in a song of pilgrimage!*⁸³

Finally, anti-Chalcedonian pilgrimage precedent may help illuminate a related Qur'anic puzzle. Why does the Qur'ān lack clear reference to the city of Mecca? Why are the two verses that are traditionally interpreted as explicitly mentioning Mecca's name so enigmatic and strange (Q 3:96, stating *bakka*, and Q 48:24, stating *makka*)?

Regnier long ago showed that the hapax *bakka* in Q 3:96 (traditionally considered a variant pronunciation and spelling of Mecca) closely follows Psalms 84:6-7, where the hapax Hebrew term *baca* designated a valley of 'tears,' not a city called 'Mecca.' Psalms depicts *baca* as a valley that the Biblical Jews traveled through on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Regnier's insight appears decisive. The textual parallels are exceptionally strong, and unlikely to be coincidental.⁸⁴ But this raises deep interpretive problems.

Q 3:96-97 insists that the 'first House' appointed for men was at *bakka*. "In it are clear signs: the standing place of Abraham. Whoever enters it is secure. Pilgrimage to the House is (an obligation) on the people to God – (for) anyone who is able (to make) a way to it." If Regnier is correct, why does Q 3:97 command the believers to make pilgrimage to an otherwise unknown Palestinian valley that Biblical Jews passed through on their way to Jerusalem, exalting that transitional waypoint as the superior pilgrimage? How can the solitary Biblical reference to *baca* be reconciled with Islamic tradition about Mecca? And why would the author of Q 3:96 characterize the obscure valley of *baca* from Psalms as containing the House of Abraham?

Contiguity with anti-Chalcedonian precedent suggests an elegant solution. We should understand the reference to *bakka* as an early Qur'anic effort to create a *peripheral Biblical pilgrimage*, asserted against the corrupted Jerusalem pilgrimage. *Mu'minūn* probably never made pilgrimage to *bakka*, which did not designate an actual physical location. The counter-pilgrimage of Q 3:96 was a literary abstraction derived from Psalms – conceptualized as the pure original pilgrimage of Abraham, predating the pilgrimages of Jews and Chalcedonian Christians. The reference to *bakka* in Q 3:96 evidently represents an attempt at ritual innovation, which sought to claim authority from a usefully-unspecific pilgrimage reference in Biblical text. Like other fragments of archaic Qur'anic liturgy and ritual (e.g. Q 97, Q 106⁸⁵), the *bakka* pilgrimage of Q 3:96 seems to have been more literary ambition than a significant ritual reality.⁸⁶ That early

⁸³ A. Regnier, "Quelques Enigmes Littéraires de L'inspiration Coranique," *Le Muséon* 52 (1939): 145-62.

⁸⁴ For a much fuller discussion of these issues, concluding with a preliminary endorsement of Regnier's view, see I. Warraq and M. Gross, "Makka, Bakka, and the Problem of Linguistic Evidence," *Christmas in the Koran: Luxenberg, Syriac, and the Near Eastern and Judeo-Christian Background of Islam* (Amherst 2014): 781-97.

⁸⁵ I interpret Q 106 as a prayer regarding seasonal pilgrimage, probably either to Jerusalem (for the Encaenia and Christmas) or else as part of the archaic Qur'anic effort to conceptualize and assert a competing counter-pilgrimage on the Palestinian periphery; in the latter event, the journeys of winter and summer in Q 106 should be seen as formalized ritual parallels to Hagiopolite Christian pilgrimage. But this archaic context was not preserved as functional ritual. Later Islamic tradition re-read this archaic surah as referring to *economic* journeys, with the Quraysh taken to be Meccan pagans, despite the surah's focus on the monotheistic worship of the *rabb* in his house. That is why traditional exegesis of Q 106 is so astonishingly confused regarding journeys which, had they genuinely referred to the central economic livelihood of a Hijazi Quraysh tribe, must have been exceptionally well understood.

⁸⁶ The *hajj* and *'umra* are named in just four surahs, all 'Medinan' surahs (Q 2, Q 3, Q 9, and Q 22), suggesting that Meccan pilgrimage emerged at the end of Qur'anic composition, evidently in dispute (Q 2:142-50).

ritual ambition, closely modeled on Christian tradition, was soon superseded by further developments in Qur'anic thought and doctrine.⁸⁷ The text of Q 3:96 was not conformed to match those developments, instead retaining its archaic character.⁸⁸

Qur'anic sacred geography should not, then, be pictured as a binary contrast between Mecca and Jerusalem.⁸⁹ Instead it appears to have been a more evolutionary process, moving beyond fifth-sixth century anti-Chalcedonian efforts to displace an abstracted form of pilgrimage towards Biblical sites on the Palestinian periphery, accompanied by literary conceptualizations of a 'pure and original' pilgrimage located just outside of Jerusalem.⁹⁰ Over time, this process of ritual innovation increasingly privileged a distinctively Arabian sacred geography. That differentiation eventually culminated in the familiar *hajj* and *'umra* pilgrimages to Mecca,⁹¹ leaving earlier forms like Q 3:96 as orphaned intermediaries.⁹²

⁸⁷ Many puzzles and transitions in the Qur'anic text can be explained in a similar manner. The usual objection to interpreting Qur'anic text in close relation with anti-Chalcedonian tradition is that the anti-Chalcedonians shared an extremely high Christology, while "the Qur'ān" (an anachronism when used to signify a unified Christological view) asserts a very low Christology, akin to Nestorianism. As I plan to argue in a forthcoming article, that may be a misleading way to look at the problem. The assumption that Qur'anic Christology is relatively uniform—often accompanied by an analytical approach that aggressively assimilates archaic Qur'anic text either to the doctrines of ancient Christian sects or else to later Qur'anic textual layers—has obscured significant theological innovations displayed in the early textual layers.

⁸⁸ If Q 3:96 is an older fragment of Qur'anic text which was incorporated into the later surah, that origin helps explain why the verse displays so many grammatical and orthographic oddities. See generally I. Warraq and M. Gross, "Makka, Bakka, and the Problem of Linguistic Evidence."

⁸⁹ The reader may recall that the prayer direction of the earliest Islamic mosques tended to converge upon Southwestern Jordan, near Petra, rather than upon either Jerusalem or Mecca. This intermediate architectural orientation, perplexing for traditional and revisionist analysis alike, can be understood as embodying an older sacred geography aligned upon the Palestinian periphery. This older prayer orientation does not establish, however, that Qur'anic composition itself necessarily took place at or near the geographical center of the older *qibla*.

⁹⁰ Sixth-century South Arabia presents a parallel, where the Axumite empire seems to have sought to Christianize the South Arabian landscape and make it holy in a way that consciously imitated Palestinian tradition. See G. Hatke, "Holy Land and Sacred History: A View from Early Ethiopia," *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100* (Farnham 2012): 259-75.

⁹¹ Another Qur'anic enigma can be explained here. Why does Q 9:3 say that God and his messenger announced on the "day of the great pilgrimage" (*yawma al-hajj al-akbar*) that they were free of any obligations to the *mushrikūn*? Uri Rubin has argued that this day was Muḥammad's farewell pilgrimage to Mecca in 632 C.E., which was combined (!) with the Easter and Passover pilgrimages of the Jews and Christians; at that farewell pilgrimage, the prophet ordered that the *hajj* was thereafter separated from these pilgrimages. See U. Rubin, "The Great Pilgrimage of Muḥammad: Some Notes on Sūra IX," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27 (1982): 241-60. A more plausible explanation is that the *yawma al-hajj al-akbar* designated the true Hijaz-centered pilgrimage, as an innovation that rejected the believers' earlier pilgrimage orientation towards Palestine (now castigated as *mushrikūn* ritual). But Rubin is surely correct that the abolition of the *nasi'* (intercalation) in Q 9:37 was another innovation that was intended to further separate the believers' pilgrimage from older Christian pilgrimage. Id., p. 251. Other references to pilgrimage in the Qur'ān, particularly in Q 2, may designate true Meccan pilgrimage.

⁹² This may also explain why the Qur'ān laments that the *alladhīna kafarū* (those who have disbelieved) have made the *maṣjīd al-ḥarām* (the sacred place of prostration) inaccessible to the believers (Q 22:25-26, Q 48:24-27). Jerusalem, as the believers' object of ritual desire, had been made inaccessible by the Chalcedonian corruption. This anti-Chalcedonian lament later became expressed as the Qur'anic literary theme of frustrated pilgrimage, now detached from its original context and developed into new literary forms that railed against the polytheist oppressors.

12. Conclusion

Q 17:1 should be understood as a forceful Qur'anic argument, grounded in its contemporary context and relating closely to its following verses, not as relating miraculous heavenly ascents extrinsic to the text. The verse's argument repeats fundamental Qur'anic themes. It seeks to legitimate the Arabian prophet by constructing a parallel with Jesus, helping armor the emerging faith against competing Christian claims of superiority.

This concrete contextual meaning, intimately connected to religious ritual and identity in the Holy Land, became obscured and overwritten by the systematic exegetical efforts of later Muslims to relocate and seal the Qur'ān's interpretive context almost entirely within the Hijaz, assigning the authorship of the Qur'anic corpus solely to Muḥammad.

By broadening the interpretive approach to include late antique Palestinian pilgrimage traditions,⁹³ we can see that Q 17:1 is not a disconnected accident of surah compilation, only comprehensible to those who possess an extrinsic body of 'insider' knowledge about Muḥammad's life. Rather the verse was composed to operate as an efficient polemical weapon within broader currents of late antique discourse. Its argument would have been readily comprehensible to the early *mu'minūn* and their rhetorical counterparts.

⁹³ A final example of how Christian pilgrimage tradition has been underutilized in Qur'anic studies: Scholars have made great efforts to decipher the term *ṭuwā* used in Q 20:12 and 79:16, where God spoke to Moses through the burning bush *bi-l-wādi l-muqaddasi ṭuwā*. See, e.g., A. Rippin, "The Search for *Ṭuwā*: Exegetical Method, Past and Present," *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom?*, ed. C. Segovia & B. Lourie (2012): 399-421. Yet such efforts do not generally consider the reports by late antique pilgrims regarding their visits to the sacred valley of Mount Sinai, by the Arabian peninsula, where pilgrims witnessed the 'burning bush' in the same valley where Moses encountered it (St. Catherine's monastery was later built at this location). Starting with the late fourth century *Egeria's Travels*, these reports do not name the valley, but rather just identify it as the anonymous valley adjacent to Mount Sinai. See *Egeria's Travels*, tr. J. Wilkinson, 3d ed. (Oxford 2006): 101-115 ("[W]e had come right down the Mount and reached the Bush. This, as I have already said, is the Burning Bush out of which the Lord spoke to Moses, and it is at the head of the valley with the church and all the cells."); J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (2014 Oxford): 146-7 (Piacenza pilgrim), 211 (Epiphanius the monk). This supports the theory that the Qur'anic *ṭuwā* derives from the Syriac *ṭur*, meaning mount (i.e. Sinai), and answers the question recently posed by Joseph Witztum as to why a valley would be described by the term for a mountain. See D. Stewart, "Notes on Emendations of the Qur'ān," *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G. Reynolds (New York 2008): 236-37. Egeria also reports that "our route was first to ascend the mount of God, which is in sight here [because] the ascent was easier by the way we were coming, and then to descend to the head of the valley where the bush was, that being the easier descent, so we determined, having first seen all that we desired, to descend from the mount of God so as to arrive at the place of the bush, and thence to return on our journey throughout the whole length of the valley[]." This may support the alternative argument that *ṭuwā* should be understood as an adjectival form of the verb *ṭawā*, equivalent to an active participle, meaning "turning around." See M. Kropp, "'People of powerful South Arabian kings' or just 'people of their kind we annihilated before'?: Proper noun or common noun in Qur'ān 44:37 and 50:14," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 39 (2009): 237-44. We could then see this as the valley of *turning around* or *returning back from* mount Sinai. Egeria reports that pilgrims turned around and returned from Sinai, reversing their lengthy journey down the valley (just like Moses did), retracing their steps. "So also did the children of Israel return from Sinai, the mount of God, to this place by the way they had come." The problem cannot be resolved here, where instead the principal point is that such late antique context, involving an important contemporary ritual practice in the Arabian region, should not be excluded from the textual analysis.