

Revisiting Hell's Angels in the Quran

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According to the *K. al-Aghānī* (“Book of Songs”) of Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967), the wine-loving poet Ādam b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz gained the personal favour of the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158–69/775–85) after repenting for the debaucheries of his youth. Among the more irreverent of his verses is the following:

*isqinī yā Mu‘āwiyah ... sab‘atan aw thamānīyah
isqinīhā wa-ghanninī ... qabla akhdhi l-zabānīyah*

Give me to drink, oh Mu‘āwiya ... seven or eight [cups]!
Give them to me to drink, and sing for me ... before the *zabāniya* take [me]!¹

Ādam pictured the *zabāniya* as duplicates of the angel of death who, according to the Quran (4:97, 32:11), seizes the souls of sinners when they die and interrogates them about their wrongdoings. This is also how later tradition pictured them: as black creatures who appear at the moment of death to pull people’s souls out of their bodies and drag them into hell, where they torture them.² However, the identity of the *zabāniya*, who are mentioned only once in the Quran (96:18), came to be established only gradually over the course of the early centuries of Islam. While Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687–8) is said to have held the view that the *zabāniya* are the punishers in hell,³ his contemporary ‘Abdallāh b. Abī l-Hudhayl thought that the *zabāniya* had their feet on the

1 Ādam b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was an offspring of the Umayyad family, who survived the purge of the ‘Abbāsīd revolution. Al-Mahdī is said to have liked him because of his esprit and agreeable temperament. See Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī* xv, 278.

2 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’* iv, 507 (tr. 158); Ibn Bashkuwāl, *K. al-Qurba* 88 (tr. 283).

3 Ibn ‘Abbās calls them “the *zabāniya* of [hellish] punishment (*zabāniyat al-adhāb*).” See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’* xxvi, 352.

earth and their heads in the heaven.⁴ Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) opined that the *zabāniya* were the minions on the Day of Judgment whom the Quran describes as driving the sinners into the Fire “with iron hooks” (*maqāmi‘ min ḥadīd*, 22:21).⁵ The early exegetes Mujaḥid b. Jabr (Meccan, d. 103/721–2?), Qatāda b. Di‘āma (Basran, d. 117/735–6?) and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (Kufan, d. 106/724–5?) all felt compelled to emphasize that the *zabāniya* were angels and not, as some apparently thought, a different class of beings.⁶

This unsettled state of affairs in the early period invites an examination of what the *zabāniya* were understood to be at the time of the proclamation of the Quran, particularly whether they were thought to be similar to, or different from, other helpers of eschatological punishment. Closely related to this is another, broader question, that of the genesis of the Quranic hell, a topic heretofore little studied. In what follows, I shall analyze the Quranic passages that bear, or appear to bear, on this issue. My aims in doing this are threefold. First, I want to shed some light on the meaning of certain obscure Quranic terms and expressions, by considering both intra-Quranic parallels and extra-Quranic intertextual and contextual clues. Second, I wish to suggest that Quranic verses about God’s helpers in hell fall into three coherent thematic clusters, each of which reflects the Quran’s propensity to experiment with the storehouse of eschatological images and ideas current in the Near East at the time of the Quran’s proclamation. Third, I seek to explore whether these three clusters show a gradual development of the Quranic picture of hell, whether such a development can be fit into a chronological reading of the Quran, and to what benefit this may be done.

1 The *zabāniya*: Autochthonous Spirits or Foreign Import?

Q 96:9–18, the third of the four thematic units that constitute surah 96,⁷ begins by polemicizing against those who, as we are told (vv. 9–14), interfere with the

4 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* iii, 502; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *dhikr al-nār* ix, 189 (no. 48); Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘* xxvi, 353; Suyūṭī, *Ḥabā’ik* 66–67 (no. 236). Late antique and early Islamic literature commonly refers to the great size of angels. Cf. Burge, *Angels in Islam* 63.

5 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, *Ṣifat al-nār* 57 (no. 71).

6 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘* xxvi, 353–4.

7 Cf. Neuwirth, *Studien* 231, who distinguishes between the four units “hymn” (vv. 1–5), “scolding” (vv. 6–8), “polemic” (vv. 9–18), and a concluding “final summons” (v. 19).

prayer of “the servant” (presumably Muḥammad) and reject his message. The Quran goes on to declare:

- 96:15 No indeed! If he does not desist, We shall seize him by the forelock,
 96:16 A lying, sinful forelock (*nāṣiya kādhiba khāṭi'a*).
 96:17 Let him call his host (*fa-l-yad'u nādiyah*).
 96:18 We shall call on (*sa-nad'u*) the *zabāniya*.
 96:19 No indeed! Do not obey him, but prostrate yourself and draw near.⁸

The first thing to note about these verses is that they are oddly anthropomorphist: God, who speaks here in the *pluralis majestatis*, seizes Muḥammad's opponents by the forelock, in the same way in which Moses, as the Quran tells us, dragged Aaron by his hair (lit. his “head,” Q 7:150) and beard (Q 20:93) for having instigated the Israelites to worship idols. We see here an old Semitic image, that of the triumphant ruler-at-war who grabs his enemies by the forelock, a gesture expressive of unrestricted power over life and death. The context of this image is not per se eschatological. Rather, the Quran appears to invoke a cosmic battle between deities, pitching Muḥammad's god, in whose service the *zabāniya* are enlisted, against another god who counts human devotees among his followers (96:19) but who relies, in order to battle other deities, on his “host” of supernatural supporters.

An eschatological context, however, is not precluded; in fact it is likely for several reasons. It is on the Day of Judgment, as the Quran makes clear in another verse, that “the sinners will be known by their marks, and they will be seized by their feet and forelocks” (55:41).⁹ Other verses in which the sinners are threatened with being dragged over the ground “on their faces” (*alā wujūhihim*) also refer to eschatological punishment (25:34; 40:71; 54:48). Finally, the curious phrase “a lying, sinful forelock” chimes with the Quranic imagery of the divine tribunal at the end of time. One aspect of the expression is that it functions *pars pro toto*—not the forelock lies and sins, but the entire human being.¹⁰ However, a forelock that lies, as odd as the idea may seem, accords

8 In this paper I use, with minor amendments, the translation of the Quran by Alan Jones (2007).

9 Perhaps also Q 11:56 (“There is not a creature [*dābba*] that He does not take by the forelock”) refers to the judgment at the end of time.

10 Neuwirth, Qur'ānic readings 760: “perhaps a meristic expression with intensifying intent.” See also eadem, *Handkommentar* 272.

with other body parts in the Quran that speak, or rather, that acquire the ability to confess to the sins in which they were instrumental during a person's life on earth. "On the day when the enemies of God are rounded up," one reads in another verse, "their skins bear witness against them about what they had been doing." Upset by these revolting body parts, the sinners ask: "Why do you testify against us?," to which the skins reply, "We have been given speech by God, who can give speech to everything" (41:19–21). Elsewhere, it is the sinners' hands and feet that testify against their owners (24:24). In the Judeo-Christian literature of Late Antiquity, examples of body parts that bear testimony against their owners on the Day of Judgment are a relatively common occurrence.¹¹

The *zabāniya*, the strike-force of the god of Muḥammad, are not further described in the Quran. The etymology of the name may provide some clues as to their identity. A considerable amount of ink has been spilled over possible derivations of this *hapax legomenon*. Lüling, for example, theorizes that the undotted consonantal skeleton of the word (its *rasm*) was misread in later tradition as *zabāniya*, while the original reading was *rabbāniyya*, which he understands to mean the "Angels of the High Council." Lüling also suggests a couple of other emendations to the sura, including a change from *fa-l-yad'u nādiyahu* ("Let him call his host") to *fa-l-tad'u nādiyahu* ("Call on His High Council"). This eliminates any trace of a cosmic battle between deities from the sura.¹²

Lüling's argument stands and falls with his broader claim that hidden beneath the surface of sura 96 lies a strophic Christian hymn first used by an Ur-Christian Arabian community, which in turn supports his ambitious theory that about a third of the Quran was originally an Arabic version of a Christian hymnal. In other words, the argument requires acceptance of a rather large set of further hypotheses. Here I do not wish to review these hypotheses, but merely point out that everybody seems to be agreed that the word *zabāniya* was never dotted or vocalized differently. The oldest codices (*maṣāḥif*) of the

11 For example, *Derek erez suta*, a much-read ethical tract of the Babylonian Talmud, states that "all the limbs of your body testify against you in the eternal abode" (4:5). Cf. *BT, Hagiga* 16a (x, 104) and *Ta'anith* 11a (ix, 49): "A man's limbs testify against him, for it is said: *You are my witnesses, says the Lord*" (Isaiah 43:10). Also in the milieu of Egyptian Christian asceticism, the notion had some currency. A 5th-century homily attributed to Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 CE) "depicts a separate demonic examination on the use of each of the five senses, and portrays in abundant and harrowing detail the world of torture that awaits convicted sinners after death." See Daley, *At the hour* 76. Note, however, that the forelocks mentioned in surah 96 lie, while the other body parts considered here speak the truth, albeit against the will of their owners.

12 Lüling, *Über den Ur-Koran* 63–9. Cf. the summary in Reynolds, Introduction 9–11.

Quran, which often record variants in how obscure Quranic words or phrases were read in the early centuries, have nothing to say about the *zabāniya*. Had the word been *rabbāniyya*, one would expect that somebody would have preserved the memory of such a reading. And while it is possible to imagine that an unusual word like *zabāniya* (in an undotted, unvocalized text) would have been misread as something more normal like *rabbāniyya*, it is difficult to envision it happening the other way around. Lüling's emendation, in other words, is a stretch of the imagination, as ingenious as his reconstruction of sura 96 may be.

Eilers suggests that the word *zabāniya* (the sg. of which, according to Eilers, is *zabān*, as in *ustādh*, pl. *ustādhiya*) derives from the Pahlavi *zen(dān)bān*, "warder, keeper of a prison."¹³ At first sight, this does not seem implausible. There are other words of Persian origin in the Quran, and they tend to appear particularly in eschatological contexts. Eilers lists several: *ibrīq* "decanter" < **āb-rēkh*; *istabraq* "silk brocade" < *istabra*; *surādiq* "tent, canopy" < [Phlv.] *srādakh* "splendid house, palace" (cf. Pers. *sarāy*); *firdaws* < **parādēs*.¹⁴ It is true that in later tradition, the *zabāniya* were sometimes associated with the earthly agents of the repressive state apparatus. The Basran exegete Qatāda (d. 117/735–6?), for example, is on record for saying that *zabāniya* is a word that designates policemen (*shurat*).¹⁵ However, this seems a secondary development. For one, it is not clear why the Quran would use a Persian loanword to indicate a rather common profession such as that of warder. One would also have to envision the unlikely scenario that *zen(dān)bān* lost the first "n" as well as "(dān)" as a result of its Arabicization. In addition, there is nothing supernatural about the "prison wards" of the Pahlavi, much in contrast to the *zabāniya*. It is a rather long shot, therefore, from *zen(dān)bān* to *zabāniya*, both lexically and semantically. Another derivation from Persian, *zabāniya* > Pers. *z-bā-n-h* "blaze, tongue of fire" (from Phlv. *zūbān*, "tongue [of fire]"), seems even more unlikely.¹⁶

13 Eilers, *Iranisches Lehngut* 220.

14 Ibid., 204–7.

15 Ibn Qutayba, *Adab al-kātib* 87.

16 Cf. Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 148, who attributes this derivation to Addai Sher, the Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Siirt (d. 1915). A class of minor angels in Jewish Kabbala mysticism also bears a name that is similar to *zabāniya*. Schwab, *Vocabulaire* 121 and 123, states that "Zabban(os)" (= זבנוס) is the "nom de l'ange qui, selon les Musulmans, tourmente les damnés," and thinks the expression is synonymous with "Zenawim" or "Zevanim" (= זנוים or זבנים) meaning "les queues," a class of beings among whom is "un desservant de Psuker [another angel] au 6^e camp céleste." Schwab refers for this information to the

A third possibility that one should consider is a derivation from Syriac. Andrae argues that the *zabāniya* are connected to the *šābayyā* in Syriac literature. The *šābayyā* appear in the writings of Ephrem, where they are the “ductores” who lead the departed souls to judgment.¹⁷ The primary meaning of *šābayyā*, a plural of the active participle *šābē*,¹⁸ is “those who conduct [prisoners] away.” The word is applied by Ephrem to angels who catch souls. This meaning fits Ādam b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s understanding neatly, and may also be envisioned in the context of sura 96 (not to mention in other suras, where angels “take” [*tawaffā*] the souls of the deceased, see below). However, the etymology proposed by Andrae is problematic on lexical grounds. The Syriac letter *šin* usually appears as *sīn* in Arabic, not *zayn*, and the introduction of the *nūn* in *zabāniya* would likewise remain unaccounted for. It is conceivable, however, that elements of the imagery surrounding Syr. *šābayyā* were merged, in post-Quranic times, into the evolving image of the *zabāniya*, much in the same way in which they became associated with Persian prison warders.

A fourth explanation, the one that will be followed here, derives from Grimme, who raises the possibility that the *zabāniya* are a class of Arabian demons, or *jinn*.¹⁹ Grimme does not say what motivates this conjecture, but one suspects he is familiar with a verse in pre-Islamic poetry that mentions the *zabāniya*. This verse is attributed to the poetess al-Khansā’ (d. ca. 24/644), a convert to Islam and contemporary of the Prophet Muḥammad.²⁰ To my knowledge, this is the only instance of the word *zabāniya* in pre-exegetical Arabic literature, provided that the dating of the verse is in fact correct.²¹ This

Sefer of Rabbi Razi’el/Eleazar (b. 1220 in Worms), published in Amsterdam 1701, fol. 34b and 41a.

17 Andrae, *Ursprung* 153.

18 Payne Smith, *Syriac dictionary* 555a.

19 Grimme, *Mohammed* 19.

20 On al-Khansā’, “the snub-nosed,” see Jones, *Early Arabic poetry*, 105–6; *GAS* ii, 311–14; Kaḥḥāla, *A’lām* i, 360–71.

21 Margoliouth, *Origins* 439, flatly takes al-Khansā’'s invocation of the *zabāniya* (“a Qur’ānic technicality”) as proof of the poem’s post-Quranic date of composition. Also the idiom “war tucked up its garment from its shank” (*shammarat ‘an sāqihā*) resonates with, and may therefore seem secondary to, a Quranic phrase, that is, Q 68:42: “That day when the shank is bared (*yawma yukshafu ‘an sāqin*).” The commentary of al-Jalālayn notes that “this is an expression denoting the severity of the predicament during the Reckoning and the requital on the Day of Resurrection: one says *kashafat l-ḥarbu ‘an sāqin* (‘war has bared a shank’), to mean that it has intensified.” See al-Jalālayn, *Tafsīr* 565. Jones, *Early Arabic poetry* 113–14, dates the poem to the post-conversion period (i.e., after 7/629) of al-Khansā’'s life. He suggests, however, that the use of *zabāniya* in al-Khansā’'s poem

seems to be the case, not least if one considers that the poem, as will become clear, betrays little in terms of an Islamic sensitivity but rather poses a challenge to the Quran. In her poem, al-Khansā' laments the passing of her late brother Mu'āwiya, killed in battle with Murra. She praises Mu'āwiya with the following words:

*wa-kāna lizāza l-ḥarbi 'inda shubūbihā / idhā shammarat 'an sāqihā wa-
h[i]ya dhākiyah
wa-qawwāda khaylin naḥwa ukhrā ka-annahā / sa'ālīn wa-'iqbānun
'alayhā zabāniyah*

He was one who stuck to War when it was kindled / when it made ready
[lit. tucked up its garments and bared its leg], blazing fiercely,
and [he was] a leader of horses against others [of the enemy]; it was as
though they were / female demons (*sa'ālīn*), and eagles on which are
zabāniya.²²

A couple of things in this verse make it rather plausible that the *zabāniya* mentioned here are a class of demons, or jinn.²³ One notes, to begin, that they are associated with another class of jinn, the *sa'ālī* (sg. *si'lāt*). These, according to the lexicographers, are she-*ghūls*, in fact they are the worst kind of them. The *sa'ālī* are frequently likened to horses,²⁴ as horses are to eagles.²⁵ The jinn are masters over demonic horses and as riders are known to urge their beasts to great speed.²⁶ The poet al-Nābigha (*fl.* late 6th c.), for example, writes about

“probably has no direct connection with the phrase *sa-nad'u l-zabāniya*,” while also noting that “the traditional picture of al-Khansā’ is that of her “clinging to old ways after her conversion.”

22 Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī* xv, 89 (vv. 4–5). The translation follows that of Jones, *Early Arabic poetry*, 115–6, but diverts from it in sticking to the literal meaning of *'iqbān* (“eagles”) rather than opting for the metaphorical translation as “swift bringers of destruction.”

23 I have culled several references that relate to this topic from the collected papers (*Nachlass*) of Fritz Meier, preserved in Basel University Library, especially from the following folders: D 4.1.1 (“Volksglaube und altarabisches Heidentum I”); D 4.3.5 (“Dämonologie v”); D 4.3.7 (“Dämonologie VII”); D 4.3.8 (“Dämonologie VIII”); D 4.3.10 (“Dämonologie x”).

24 This is also noted by Jones, *Early Arabic poetry*, 116.

25 The horses that the ‘Abbāsīd poet Abū l-‘Atāhiya (d. 211/826) writes about have “their cheeks twisted [with pride], as if winged with the wings of eagles.” See the translation in Arberry, *Arabic poetry* 50.

26 The poet al-A’shā is given a “horse that kicks up dust” by his “jinn-brother.” See Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān* vi, 226.8. Poets, including al-A’shā, wrote about camels mounted by jinn. See the

horses “lean as arrows ... on which are people like jinn,” a line that resembles that of al-Khansā'.²⁷

At least some of the jinn are air-borne creatures.²⁸ According to a Prophetic hadith, there are three classes of jinn: those who have wings and fly through the air, those who are snakes and dogs, and those who travel over the surface of the earth like human nomads.²⁹ Al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956) states that one of the thirty-one different types of jinn takes on the form of winged snakes that inhabit the air.³⁰ Another authority speaks of four types: the *afārīta* (sg. *ifrīt*), who live in wells and caves; the *shayātīn* (sg. *shayṭān*), who live in houses and haunt graveyards; the blood-thirsty *ṭawāghūt* (sg. *ṭāghūt*); and the *zawābi'* (sg. *zawba'a*), who ride the winds.³¹ Moreover, not only do the jinn fly through the air, they do so on the back of birds or other winged animals. The poet Mulayḥ b. al-Ḥakam, writing around the early Umayyad period, describes two jinn who ride on the shoulders of a raven, urging the bird on to great speed “as if it were a galloping horse.”³² Abū l-Najm (d. after 105/724) writes about horses made to fly by the jinn (*tuṭīruhu l-jinn*).³³

It should be noted that none of the lists of names of types of jinn in the scholarly literature (from Smith and Freytag to Wellhausen, Tritton, Henninger, Fahd, and Meier) includes the *zabāniya*. However, the sources on which these lists rely are post-Quranic, and by the end of the successive proclamations of the Quran, as is suggested here, the process of the angelification of the *zabāniya* had been concluded. In later times, hardly anyone remembered their origin as jinn.

examples in Geyer, Katze 67–8. On the riding beasts of the jinn in general, see Nünlist, Von Berittenen.

27 Nābigha, *Dīwān* 31 (no. 29, v. 21).

28 According to the *K. al-Aṣṇām* of Ibn al-Kalbī (d. ca. 204/819), the *jinn* are both imagined to fly through the air and to ride on animals, especially foxes and ostriches. See Wellhausen, *Reste* 152.

29 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* v, 137.

30 Mas'ūdī, *Murūj* iii, 320–22.

31 Desparmet, *Ethnographie* 299, quoting Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥajj (d. 771/1370), *Shumūs al-anwār*. According to Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh* ii, 585, a jinnee called Zawba'a is the commander of the jinn of the Yemen. He builds castles for the king there, at the command of Solomon.

32 Bräu, *Gedichte* 82. On the (uncertain) dating of Mulayḥ's death, cf. *GAS* ii, 263.

33 Goldziher, *Erscheinungsformen* 207 n. 4, quoting from Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940), *al-'Iqd al-farīd*. The poet-jinnee Abū Hadrash in Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's (d. 449/1058) *Risālat al-ghufrān* also speaks about the “night horses with wings ... unlike the horses of mankind” on which he used to ride. See Ma'arrī, *Risālat al-ghufrān*, 236 (tr. 237).

Exceptions to this may occasionally be found in early Islamic lexicography, in instances where the connection of the *zabāniya* to the world of the jinn is still intact. Al-Mubarrad (d. ca. 286/900), for example, states that *ʿifriyyas* or *ʿifrīts*, a type of jinn that is often “associated with lamps (*mulḥaqun bi-qindīl*),” are sometimes referred to as “*ʿifriyya zibniyya*.” He explains that “*zibniyya* means: ‘one who rejects’ (*al-munkir*), the plural being *zabāniya*. The word derives from [the idea of] movement. One says: he ‘z-b-n-ed’ him (*zabanahu*) if someone pushed somebody (*daḥaʿahu*).”³⁴ Perhaps one sees in al-Mubarrad a survival of the idea that the *zabāniya* are in fact jinn (in this case, *ʿifrīts*), and that pushing back or lashing out is their characteristic action. ʿAbdallāh b. Abī l-Hudhayl’s assertion, quoted at the beginning, that the *zabāniya* have their feet on the earth and their heads in the heaven may also be taken as evidence for their jinn nature; in later tradition, the same is often said about the jinn.³⁵ In the same vein, the lexicographers note that a whirlwind (*zawbaʿa*) of dust or sand that rises into the sky is generally thought to be driven by the jinn, in particular by the *zawābiʿ*, who derive their name from the natural phenomenon with which they are associated.³⁶

Paret follows Grimme in suggesting that the *zabāniya* are autochthonous Arab spirits. The verbal stem *z-b-n*, as he points out, denotes the action of pushing back in the way in which a camel might kick out with its hind legs in order to keep a calf away that wants to drink from its udder. Paret thinks that the singular form of the word should be **zabāni* with a short *i* at the end, in other words, that it is modeled on nouns of the type *faʿāli*.³⁷ This is an indeclinable pattern in Arabic morphology that often denotes animals, for instance, *qathāmi* (“female hyaena”).³⁸ In the same way, Paret notes, a dog, particularly a hunting-bitch, may be called *kasābi* (“grab-it,” from the verb *kasaba*, “to grab, seize”). Another example of the *faʿāli* form is *dafāri*, “stinker” (from the verb *dafira*, “to smell, stink”).³⁹ A **zabāni* would then be an animal or demon that is named after its characteristic action, that is, pushing back. If on this evidence, one is willing to concede that Paret’s suggested derivation hits the mark,

34 Mubarrad, *Kāmil* iii, 80. Also Sibawayh, *Kitāb* iv, 268, connects *ʿifriyya* with *zibniyya*.

35 Rescher, *Studien* 45 n. 2, who culls his examples from the Arabian Nights, referring to *ʿifrīts*.

36 The word *zawbaʿa* is the name of both the whirling pillars of dust or sand and the jinn that inhabit them. See Lane, *Lexicon* iii, 1212a–b.

37 Paret, *Kommentar* 516.

38 Wright, *Grammar* i, 244.

39 Lane, *Lexicon* iii, 890b.

a good translation for the word *zabāniya* would be “repellers,” as I will henceforth refer to them.⁴⁰

There is one final consideration that makes it plausible, in my eyes, to think that the repellers are autochthonous beings. I would suggest that in the cluster of ideas centered around the repellers also belong those verses in the Quran that speak about the tree of *zaqqūm* and the infernal banquet that is held under its branches. In these verses, the sinners are force-fed by cruel beings who mockingly invite them to “taste” bitter fruits and boiling water. The imperative *dhuq/dhūqū* (“taste!”) appears several times in this context.

- 44:43 The tree of *al-zaqqūm*
 44:44 Is the food of the sinner,
 44:45 Like molten metal boiling in the bellies
 44:46 As scalding water boils.
 44:47 “Take him and thrust him into the midst of Hell.
 44:48 Then pour over his head some of the tormenting scalding water.”
 44:49 [Tell him,] “Taste. You are the mighty and the noble.
 44:50 This is that about which you had doubts.”
- 54:47 The sinners are in error and madness.
 54:48 On the day they are dragged into the Fire on their faces [they will be told], “Taste the touch of the Flame (*saqar*).”
- 56:52 You will eat of trees of *zaqqūm*,
 56:53 Filling your bellies from them,
 56:54 And drinking scalding water on top of that,
 56:55 Drinking as does a camel desperate with thirst.
 56:56 That will be their hospitality on the Day of Judgement.

The violence depicted in these verses (“thrusting” the sinners into hell and “dragging them into the Fire on their faces”) recalls the violence of the act of “grabbing the sinners by their forelock,” the repellers’ characteristic action according to sura 96. The name *zaqqūm* might also be taken to point to an Arabian context—the lexicographers and exegetes often claim that *zaqqūm* is a bitter plant growing in Tihāma—,⁴¹ even though the origin of the word

40 Neuwirth, who also follows this line of reasoning, suggests “Wehr ab” as a translation. See eadem, *Handkommentar* 273.

41 Cf. also the statement of the botanist Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawārī (fl. second half of the 3rd/9th c.), who, while describing *zaqqūm* in great detail, asserts that it is a terrestrial species found on the South Arabian coast. See idem, *Book of plants* 204 (tr. 37).

remains obscure and open to debate.⁴² What seems clear is that the “hospitality” offered to those convened around *zaqqūm* betokens a “cynically inverted world,” as Neuwirth puts it, a travesty of the promised banquet in paradise.⁴³ This means that the beings who force-feed the unlucky creatures convened around the *zaqqūm* tree should be seen as the subterranean counterparts of the houris (*ḥūr ʿīn*, 44:54) in paradise. Jacob appears to have been the first to suggest that the *ḥūr ʿīn*, “maidens with dark, lustrous eyes” in Jones’s translation, derive from the imagery of pre-Islamic banquet poetry.⁴⁴ Such a suggestion is plausible, as has been emphasized by Horovitz and a number of more recent contributors to the debate.⁴⁵ If one grants this, and if the hosts of the infernal banquet, that is the *zabāniya*, are the mirror image of the *ḥūr ʿīn*, they are also likely to spring from an Arabian context.

In sum, there is a cluster of verses that centres around the *zabāniya* or “repellers,” autochthonous Arabian demons, as hosts of the infernal, subterranean banquet around the tree of *zaqqūm*. Tentatively, one might also add the verse that states that “nineteen are set over it [hell]” (74:30) to this cluster, although it should be noted that these “nineteen” might in fact be related to certain astral beings, or angels, that were known among Sabians, Mandaean and Gnostics—a topic that awaits further study, if in fact this riddle can be solved at all. Scholarly explanations of what or who exactly these nineteen are, including the suggestion that they correspond to nineteen *malakê* mentioned in Mandaean literature, remain inconclusive.⁴⁶

42 Cf. Bosworth, *Zaqqūm*; El-Awa, *Zaqqūm*. Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed* 68, conjectures that *zaqqūm* is derived from the two date palms at the entrance to hell in the valley of Gehinnom, mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud. See *BT, Sukkah* 32b (viii, 142). Radtscheit, Höllenbaum, discusses at length late antique Christian sources about the Tree of Knowledge, which he thinks is behind the Qurʾānic notion of *zaqqūm*. To this may be added the vision of Stephen Bar-Sudhaile (Edessa, *fl.* 500), *Book* 67–8, who describes a great Tree of Evil, “whose fruits are foul and its leaves hideous,” that grows from the “the abyss” of hell. There are also references in Manichean texts to an evil tree in Gehenna that sprouts “fruits of darkness.” See *The Kephalaia* 26. I owe this last reference to Tommaso Tesei.

43 Neuwirth, *Koran* 427.

44 Jacob, *Beduinenleben* 107.

45 Horovitz, *Paradies* 64–73; Wendell, *Denizens* 29–59; Neuwirth, *Koran* 221–22, 429–32.

46 In Mandaean literature, the seven planets and the twelve signs of the zodiac are referred to as *malakê* (a cognate of Arab. *malak* and other Semitic words meaning “angel”) and considered the administrators of the world, which is seen as dark and evil, as well as of nineteen purgatories in which the souls of sinners are tortured. See Ahrens, *Muhammed* 30–31. Rosenthal, *Nineteen* 304–18, cautiously accepts Ahrens’ theory, as does Paret, *Kommentar* 494. Halm adduces evidence for similar beliefs among the Sabians of Ḥarrān,

2 The Guardians of Hell

A second cluster of verses, it is submitted here, includes verses that represent hell as a monster, and the guardians of hell as its minders, who are accordingly referred to as *khazana* (“guardians”). The idea that hell is a monster in chains led by angels is part and parcel of the post-Quranic repertoire of eschatological ideas. One of the earliest and most comprehensive collections of hell traditions, the hell chapter in Ibn Abī Shayba’s (d. 235/849) *Muṣannaḥ*, begins with a hadith in which it is stated that hell (*jahannam*) will be brought forth on the Day of Judgment, “led by 70,000 reins, each of which is held by 70,000 angels.”⁴⁷ In later versions of the story, such as one finds in *al-Durra al-fākhira* of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) or in *al-Tadhkira fī aḥwāl al-mawtā* of al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), this is developed into a full-blown dramatic scene in which the hell-monster attempts to attack and devour the assembly of humankind on the Day of Resurrection. Despite their great physical prowess, its angelic guards cannot hold it back, so that hell, literally, breaks loose. The Prophet, however, heroically blocks the way and commands the hell-monster to turn back, whereupon it takes its place, after some heated discussion, to the left side of God’s throne.⁴⁸

Already in the Quran, hell appears as a beast gifted with speech. In Quran 50:30, God asks hell: “Have you been filled?” and hell, eager for more food, responds: “Are there still more?” The fact that hell, in 104:4, is called *al-ḥuṭama*, “the insatiable” in Jones’s translation, is corroborating evidence for the bestialization of hell in the Quran.⁴⁹ In 25:12, the Quran states that when the sinners approach the scene of the Final Judgment, hell spots them from afar and begins to roar and sigh loudly.

as well as the early Ismāʿīliyya, stating that “the notion of the seven and the twelve, that is, the angels of the planets and of the zodiac, is omnipresent in the religions of Syria and Mesopotamia.” See Halm, *Kosmologie* 91–100, at 98. On the nineteen, see further Eichler, *Dschinn* 111–12; Henninger, *Spuren* 63–4 n. 61. Lüling, *Über den Ur-Koran* 380–89, proposes an emendation from *tisʿata ʿashara* (“nineteen”) to *sabʿata asʿur* (“seven gates”). Neuwirth, *Handkommentar* 369 sees in the “nineteen” an “ostentatiously enigmatic element.”

47 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ* ix, 175 (no. 1). Also Muḥāsibī, *Tawahhum* § 38 (tr. 43–4), includes an early version of this scene.

48 Ghazālī, *Durra* 67–8 (tr. 61–2); Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* 468.

49 Similarly, Sinai, *Kommentar* speaks of “personification.” Neuwirth, *Koran* 709, notes that the form *fūʿala*, on which *ḥuṭama* is patterned, indicates an animate being who does something repeatedly or intensively. Cf. eadem, *Handkommentar* 153. Jeffery, *Materials* 112, notes the alternative active participle form *ḥāṭima*.

- 25:11 No. They say the Hour is a lie,
but We have prepared a Blaze (*saʿīr*)
for those who say the Hour is a lie.
- 25:12 When it sees them from afar,
they will hear its roaring and sighing (*samiʿū lahā taghayyuzān wa-zafīran*);

Similarly, in Quran 67:7, the sinners hear hell “drawing its breath” (*samiʿū lahā shahīqan*). The sounds referred to as *shahīq* and *zafīr*, as the early commentator Muqātil tells us, are the hee-haw of a donkey.⁵⁰ Another verse that perhaps belongs into this cluster of ideas is Quran 78:21, “Jahannam lies in wait” (*inna jahannama kānat miršādan*), which may be interpreted as a reference to an animal preying on its victim.

Quran 67:7, one of our key witnesses for the idea of the Quranic hell-monster, is followed by a verse that mentions “its keepers” (*khazanatuhā*). One infers that these are beings set to watch over the hell-monster. A different use of the word *khazana* in the Quran, however, complicates the picture. The *khazana* of hell also appear in a verse that states that “those who are ungrateful will be driven into *jahannam* in troops; and then, when they reach it, its doors (*abwābuhā*) will be opened, and its keepers (*khazanatuhā*) will say to them, ‘Did not messengers from among you come to you ...?’” (39:71). The possessive suffix *-hā* in *khazanatuhā* can refer either to hell or to its gates. In the latter case the *khazana* would simply be “gatekeepers.” Such a translation would also find confirmation in the following verse: “Those who fear God will be driven into the Garden in troops; and then, when they reach it, its doors will be opened, and their keepers (*khazanatuhā*) will say to them, Peace upon you!” (39:73).

In sum, while the fact that the Quran speaks of hell as a monster seems beyond doubt, one stands on less firm ground when affirming that the Quran knows of the hell monster’s minders as *khazana*. It is tempting, however, to suggest this, given the instances in late-antique Judeo-Christian literature in which hell is described as a monster and assigned a special class of angels as its keepers. Already in the Hebrew Bible, the underworld is described as having a mouth with which it devours the sinners. According to Isaiah 5:14, “Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure.” In 1 Enoch, a text written around the turn of the millenium, hell is said to have a “mouth” with which is “swallows” the sinners (56:8), while in the text known as 3 Baruch

50 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* ii, 432, iii 382.

(1st–3rd c. CE), hell is the “belly” of a “dragon” (4:5; 5:3). Judeo-Christian sources mention the moaning and groaning of hell.⁵¹

In Christian homilies and hymns of the 4th to the 6th centuries, the theme of hell as an insatiable monster is further developed in the light of Christian soteriology. Ephrem the Syrian, in his *Nisibene Hymns*, repeatedly makes reference to the great appetite of both Death and Sheol/Hades, who complain about Jesus for denying them food and making them fast.⁵² In one particularly graphic sermon of Ephrem, Jesus rips open the “voracious stomach of Hades” to save mankind from perdition.⁵³ In the apocryphal *Gospel of Bartholomew* (Egypt [?], 2nd–6th c.), Jesus, looking down from the Mount of Olives into the valley below, conjures up the hell-monster Beliar, led by 660 angels and bound by fiery chains, emerging to the surface of the earth. While the other apostles fall down on their faces and become “as dead,” Jesus confronts the monster and encourages Bartholomew to do the same; Bartholomew then proceeds to interrogate Beliar.⁵⁴

As does the Quran, Judeo-Christian texts of late antiquity conceive of the “guardians” of hell also as its gate-keepers. The visionary of 2 Enoch (late 1st c. AD), for example, sees “the key-holders and the guards of the gates of hell standing, as large as serpents, with their faces like lamps that have been extinguished, and their eyes aflame, and their teeth naked down to their breasts” (41:1). Such negative portrayals of hell’s angels as evil creatures pertain to cluster one of the Quranic verses here considered, but they are not an element in cluster two. Andrae states that the idea that hell’s angels are “good servants” (as opposed to forces of evil) was more typical of late antique Christianity than it was of Jewish eschatology, particularly after the 3rd century CE,⁵⁵ and the “guardians” of the Quran likewise appear as forces of the good. Be that as it may, in the Quran the *khazana* remain a somewhat underdefined group of eschatological helpers, thus perhaps occupying a middle position (or stage of development?) between the beings one encounters in clusters one and three, respectively. What matters to us here is that the first audience(s) of the Quran could have understood the term *khazana* both to refer to the minders of the hell-monster and to the gate-keepers of hell. In fact, the Quran appears to experiment with both ideas, while not committing itself fully to one or the other.

51 According to 2 Enoch, hell “weeps” (40:12). In a hymn of Ephrem, hell “groans” over the sinners. See Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 61:26. Elsewhere, Ephrem relates that one hears the sound of weeping and gnashing of teeth (cf. Matthew 22:13–14) of the damned from outside of hell. See Ephrem, Letter to Publius 340. Cf. Ephrem, Rede, 2:93, 2:97.

52 Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 35:6, 36:2, 36:7–11, 39:7, 41:13, 52:22, 62:6.

53 Ephrem, Sermon 249.

54 *Questions of Bartholomew* 662–3.

55 Andrae, *Ursprung* 73.

3 Hell's Angels

The third cluster of images and ideas about the helpers of eschatological punishment in the Quran is construed around their identification as angels (*malā'ika*). This point is made explicit in Q 74:31: "We have appointed only angels to be masters of the Fire, and We have appointed their number simply as an affliction for those who are ungrateful [...]." Scholars generally agree that this long verse is written in a style that is markedly different from that of the pithy verse that immediately precedes it, which states that "over it are nineteen" (74:30). This suggests that initially, the two verses were not a unit. It seems reasonable to assume that Q 74:31 is a gloss added for clarification.⁵⁶ While Q 74:31 in fact provides no explanation for the number nineteen, it makes the point that these nineteen, who, as I speculated earlier, are related to the demonic repellers, are in reality angels. Let it be noted that the picture of hell's angels that emerges from 74:30–31 and the related verses is different, not only from that of the repellers, but also from that of the angelic *khazana*, the keepers of the hell-monster and of hell's gates. While the *khazana* stand at hell's periphery, so to speak, hell's angels are squarely located within hell, where they are fused, it appears, with the repellers.

The Quran offers more evidence for this new synthesis. Q 8:50 merges the motif of the cynical invitation to "taste" the torments of hell, previously announced by the repellers, hosts of the infernal banquet, with the notion that the beings who run hell are angels. What is previously attributed to the repellers is here put in the mouth of angels: "Angels (*malā'ika*) strike their faces and their backs and [say to them]: Taste!" One should also note that the motif of beating (of the faces and of backs) is only found in explicit connection to angels (8:50, 47:27). It appears, in combination with the tasting-motif, in Q 22:21–2, where the damned in hell, wishing to escape from their punishment, are driven back by (unspecified) beings armed with "hooked iron rods" and told to "taste the torment of the burning."

The image of hooked iron rods (*maqāmi' min ḥadīd*) can be related with a measure of confidence to the 3rd-century *Apocalypse of Paul*, where Paul is made to say: "I saw there a man being tortured by Tartaruchian angels having

⁵⁶ Nöldeke, *Geschichte* i 88–89. For a recent discussion, see Sinai, *Kommentar*. Muslim tradition readily concedes this. According to Ibn Ishāq, Abū Jahl would have mocked the Prophet by saying to Quraysh: "Oh assembly of Quraysh! Muḥammad claims that that the troops of God who will punish you in the Fire and imprison you in it are nineteen. You are more numerous! Will one hundred of your man be overcome by one of them?" This was the reason, continues Ibn Ishāq, why God revealed Q 74:31. See Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* i, 201.

in their hands an iron instrument with three hooks.”⁵⁷ In fact, the *Apocalypse of Paul* and the 2nd-century *Apocalypse of Peter* give us a significant number of precedents for this third cluster of ideas about hell's angels in the Quran. Both texts explicitly speak about the “angels of torment” that are operative in hell.⁵⁸ According to the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the souls of the sinners are handed over to an angel named Tartaruchus “who is set over the punishments” and who casts the souls “into deep darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.”⁵⁹ The *Apocalypse of Peter* describes how the sinners cry out in hell, “Have mercy upon us, for now we know the judgment of God, which he declared to us beforetime and we did not believe,” whereupon an angel called Tatirokos appears, saying to them: “Now do you repent, when it is no longer the time for repentance ...”⁶⁰ As the seer of the *Apocalypse of Paul* relates,

I saw the heavens open, and Michael the archangel descending from heaven, and with him was the whole army of angels, and they came to those who were placed in punishment, and seeing him, again weeping, they cried out and said, “Have pity on us!... We now see the judgment and acknowledge the Son of God!...” Michael answered and said: “Hear Michael speaking!... you have consumed in vanity the time in which you ought to have repented.”⁶¹

The Quran repeatedly reports the bitter regrets of the inhabitants of hell over their past sins and erroneous beliefs (23:106–8; 26:96–102; 67:9–11; passim). In 43:74–77 they address their woes to one of God's helpers in hell:

43:74 The sinners will remain for ever in the torment of *jahannam*.
 43:75 There will be no abatement for them
 and they are in despair at it.
 43:76 We have not wronged them—
 they have wronged themselves.
 43:77 They proclaim, “Oh *m-l-k*,
 let your Lord be finished with us!”
 He replies, “You will linger.”

57 *Apocalypse of Paul* 634.

58 *Ibid.*, 636; *Apocalypse of Peter* 604. Cf. Andrae, *Ursprung* 73–6.

59 *Apocalypse of Paul* 626. On the angel Tartaruchus, whose name is derived from Gr. *temeloukhos* (“care-taking”), see Rosenstiehl, Tartarouchos.

60 *Apocalypse of Peter* 608.

61 *Apocalypse of Paul* 638.

The word in 43:77 that I have left untranslated here is usually vocalized as *mālik* (“possessor, master”) and understood as a proper name. Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), in his account of the Prophet’s ascension (*mi’rāj*), relates that Mālik is the “master of the Fire” (*ṣāhib al-nār*).⁶² As the leader of hell’s myrmidons, Mālik is the most powerful of them. The popular preacher (*qāṣṣ*) Muḥammad b. Ka’b (d. between 117–20/735–38) imagined him, like the chief warder in a panopticon, sitting on an elevated position in the center of hell, “from where he can see its [hell’s] closest as well as farthest parts.”⁶³ According to a tradition related by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), Mālik has as many fingers as there are hell’s inhabitants, who are each tortured by one of his fingers.⁶⁴ The exegete Muqātil (d. 150/767) makes Mālik into the most prominent of the *kha-zana*, calling him “the [arch-]guardian of the Fire” (*khāzin al-nār*).⁶⁵ This is also how he is known in later tradition: as the unsmiling gate-keeper of hell, seen by the Prophet during his ascension.⁶⁶

Most Western translators of the Quran follow this view and render “Mālik” as a proper name (e.g., Arberry, Berque, Leemhuis, Paret), even though on occasion a translation of *mālik* as “master” is preferred (Pickthall, Jones). Paret explains that “Mālik” means “ruler (of hell), to be understood here as a proper name.” He also refers to Q 35:36–37, where the unbelievers in hell, who “will not die,” call out to God to alleviate their punishment.⁶⁷ The comparison with the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*, however, suggests that the dialogue in 77:43 unfolds between those who are punished in hell and an angel, not God. Q 35:36–7 is therefore not a close parallel.

The early codices (*maṣāḥif*), purported to go back to the first two centuries of Islam, offer all kinds of alternative spellings and vocalizations for *m-l-k*. Supposedly, Ibn Mas’ūd and ‘Alī read *māli*, and they were followed in this by Ibn Ya’mar and al-Rabī’ b. Khuthaym. According to some others, Ibn Mas’ūd and ‘Alī read *maliku*, as did al-A’mash. Still others remembered that Ibn Mas’ūd,

62 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* i, 268. Mālik’s characteristic is that he does not smile when he sees the Prophet, unlike all the other angels. In this respect he is similar to the angel Mikā’īl (Michael) who, according to a hadith, “has never smiled since the creation of the Fire.” See Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iii, 223.

63 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’* xii, 78 (*ad* sura 23:105–6). According to the anonymous *Daqā’iq al-akhbār*, Mālik “sits on a minbar of fire in the middle of Jahannam.” See *Daqā’iq* 100 (tr. 178).

64 Suyūṭī, *Ḥabā’ik* 65 (# 229).

65 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* iii, 197.

66 See the mid-2nd/8th-century (?) *K. al-Mi’rāj* of Abū l-Ḥakam al-Jawālīqī, quoted in the *Tafsīr* of ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. ca. 307/919), translated in Buckley, *Night journey* 6–18, at 7. See also Baḥrānī, *Nuzhat* 396. On this text, cf. Modarressi, *Tradition* i, 269. For a Sunni attestation, see Suyūṭī, *La’ālī* i, 64; idem, *Ḥabā’ik* 68 (# 239).

67 Paret, *Kommentar* 442.

‘Alī and Ibn Waththāb read *mālu*.⁶⁸ What this shows is that the earliest authorities for the transmission of the Quran had significant doubts about the correct reading of the word. While it is better to err on the side of caution, in this case one may wonder whether the correct reading of the *rasm* text is not simply *yā malak*, “O angel!” This reading would not only have the virtue of being considerably less complicated than what is offered in the *maṣahif* and in the *textus receptus*. It is a reading that makes sense if we imagine a situation in which the realization that the punishers in hell are angels, not some other class of beings, had just begun to dawn on the audience of the Quran.

If one is justified in thinking that the Quran gradually comes to discover angels as the agents of eschatological punishment, then those verses that talk about the “angel(s) of death” also belong in this third cluster. Q 32:11 states that “the angel of death (*malak al-mawt*) ... will seize you (*yatawaffākum*); then to your Lord you will be returned.” A number of other verses also describe how angels “seize” (*tawaffā*) the unbelievers (16:28, 16:32, 4:97). In two instances, the act of seizing is accompanied by additional beating on the faces and the backs (8:50, 47:27). As noted earlier, beating of the unbelievers’ faces and backs only occurs in this third cluster of ideas about the helpers of eschatological punishment. In contrast, the repellers’ characteristic punishment, in addition to force-feeding the sinners with *zaqqūm*, is to drag them over the ground (54:48), which appears to be related to the motif of grabbing them by their hair.

4 Conclusion

A first conclusion to be drawn from the material discussed here is simply that there exist three different clusters of Quranic verses that speak about the helpers of eschatological punishment. This is a taxonomy that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been proposed earlier in the scholarly literature. Methodologically speaking, it seems to me that to study thematic clusters in the Quran, rather than single words or verses, has important advantages. First of all, such an approach takes the wind out the sail of the argument that it is largely an arbitrary exercise to pinpoint sources for certain Quranic words or expressions in the literatures of the late antique context into which the Quran was born. For no longer do we examine atomistic instances, but currents of thought. What emerges from the foregoing discussion is a composite picture of hell’s angels in the Quran, related to a number of eschatological traditions current during the time when the Quran came into being. As scholars become increasingly sensitive to the theological landscape of the Near East at the time

68 Jeffery, *Materials* 88, 190, 303, 325.

of the proclamation of the Quran, one of the Quran's core concerns, namely, the afterlife, thus moves into sharper focus.

There are also lessons to be learned in regard to the question whether the three clusters described here can be brought into a logical, perhaps even a chronological sequence, as in fact has been suggested several times in the preceding discussion. In this regard, hell's angels in the Quran may once more fruitfully be compared to their heavenly counterparts, the houris. If one follows the chronology proposed by scholars working in the tradition of Nöldeke, it results that the second Meccan period sees the gradual disappearance of the houris, who are last mentioned in Q 44:54. At the same time, from the second Meccan period, the earthly wives of believers are explicitly included among the inhabitants of paradise (43:70). Eventually, in the Medinan period, they become "purified spouses" (*azwāj muṭahhara*, 2:25, 3:15, 4:57).⁶⁹ In the third Meccan period (13:23, 40:8), the "righteous" fathers and the children of the believers are brought in to complement the promise that families will enter paradise intact.⁷⁰ The family-oriented picture that thus emerges also corresponds to the fact that after the middle Meccan period the Quran offers no more descriptions of wine banquets in paradise.⁷¹

It appears that the repellers, hell's demonic counterparts of the heavenly houris, underwent a similar crisis of identity in the course of their Quranic career, gradually changing their profile. Initially acting as subterranean demons in hell, they are consequently degraded to mere keepers of hell, then to reappear, triumphantly, as angels, and to resume their shenanigans around the tree of *zaqqūm*. However, the existence of three thematically and lexically coherent clusters of hell's minions in the Quran does not necessitate that they follow upon each other chronologically. It might be suggested, instead, that these clusters belong to three different literary layers that the Quran's redactor(s) combined into a single text. This is a possibility that should be considered carefully. However, the fact that the clusters do not exist independently and side-by-side, but rather show traces of mutual contamination, of merging into one another, supports the idea of a relative chronology, that is, a development from cluster one, passing through cluster two and resulting in cluster three.

Is it possible to turn this relative chronology into an absolute one by attaching it to the shifting allegiances that mark the historical development of

69 These "purified spouses," as has been argued, cannot be the same as the houris. This is because the houris, as heavenly beings, are not in need of ritual cleansing.

70 Horovitz, *Paradies* 57. Already sura 52:21 promises that believers will be joined with their "offspring." This sura is held to be early Meccan, but verse 21, given its unusual length, has been identified by Nöldeke as a later insertion. See Nöldeke, *Geschichte* i, 105.

71 Horovitz, *Paradies* 58.

Quranic theology? The repellers' crisis occurs in the late Meccan period, and the reason for their survival appears to be that they develop into angels. This conforms to the findings of Welch, who argues that the jinn and other deities drop out of the picture in the late Meccan and Medinan parts of the Quran.⁷² Angels, as Bell asserts, "do not appear in the earliest part of the Quran; they belong to the period of closer contact with Judaism and Christianity."⁷³ Even if belief in angels was common among the audience of the Quran from the beginning of its proclamation,⁷⁴ the idea that they inhabit the netherworld only gradually takes shape. Punisher angels, sent to smite the enemies of God, figure prominently in the Hebrew Bible (cf., for example, Exodus 12:23; 2 Samuel 24:16; Isaiah 37:36) and may have been considered natural successors to the demonic helpers of eschatological punishment of the early Quranic revelations, whose character traits were transferred to them, all the more so because the storehouse of eschatological images of post-biblical late antiquity also included examples of hell's guardians and hellish angels of punishment.⁷⁵

In the second or middle cluster considered here, one sees an increased willingness to speculate about the bestialization of hell. While the notion that hell is a bone-crushing monster (104:4) that "lies in ambush" (78:21) goes back to the earliest suras, the idea is further developed in the middle Meccan period, and the *khazana* appear as the minders of the hell-monster. It is also in the middle Meccan period, however, that the realization that the myrmidons of hell are in reality angels dawns on the Quran. In fact, if my reading of 43:77 is correct, it is dramatically announced in the context of the sinners' plea to God's steward in hell to "make an end" of their lives. Simultaneously, the "angel of death" appears on the horizon.⁷⁶ It is from this point onwards that the combined picture of hell's angels as beings that "seize" the sinners, beat them on the faces and backs, and tell them to "taste" the torment of hell emerges and fully imposes itself. In sum, the three clusters of hell's minions in the Quran broadly fit and thus confirm the Nöldekian understanding of the phases of development of the Quran (cf. Table 4.1 below).

In post-Quranic exegesis, the three types of hell's minions that one encounters in the Quran are indiscriminately welded together. The repellers become

72 Welch, Allah 752.

73 Bell, Introduction 144.

74 Cf. Crone, Angels.

75 See Coblentz Bauch, Heavenly beings 467–71, who discusses instances in the Enoch literature, Dead Sea Scrolls, Rabbinic literature, and Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts. See also Himmelfarb, *Tours* 120–21.

76 This angel of death, as is well known, in later tradition developed into the figure of 'Izrā'īl. See Wensinck, 'Izrā'īl; MacDonald, Angel of death 489–96.

identified with the angels of death, the stewards of ‘Izrā’īl; they grab the soul of the poet Ādam b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, who predicts his wine-fuelled exit from this world; they are declared to be identical with the “harsh and severe angels” that reign over the tortured in hell (66:6);⁷⁷ and the nameless angel of 43:77 becomes Mālik, the foremost “keeper” (*khāzin*) of hell. The free use of this synthetic picture in the later tradition however conceals the birth pangs of hell’s angels in the Quran, who are born from several different traditions of eschatological thought.

TABLE 4.1 *The clusters of hell’s minions in the Quran: A developmental chart (numbers in square brackets refer to Nöldeke’s ordering of surahs)*

	<i>zabāniya</i>	<i>khazana</i>	hell as monster	hell’s angels
Early Meccan	96:18 [#1, <i>zabāniya</i>]			
	74:30 [#2, ‘nineteen’]		104:4 [#6, <i>ḥuṭama</i>]	
	78:24 and 78:30 [#34, ‘taste’]		78:21 [#33, ‘ambush’]	
	88:5 [#35, ‘drink from a boiling spring’]			
	56:52–56: [#41, <i>zaqqūm</i> ’s ‘hospitality’]			
	55:41 [#43, ‘seizing by feet and forelock’]			
			↓	?
Middle Meccan	54:48: [#49, dragging on faces, ‘taste’]		50:30 [#55, dialogue w/God]	

77 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* i, 201; Zabīdī, *Tāj*, s.v. *z-b-n* (from al-Zajjāj).

	<i>zabāniya</i>	<i>khazana</i>	hell as monster	hell's angels
	44:43–50 [#54, eat <i>zaqqūm</i> , 'taste']	67:8 [#64, of hell as monster]	67:7 [#64, <i>shahīq</i>]	43:77 [#62, <i>yā m-l-k</i>]
	38:57 [#60, 'let them taste']		25:12 [#67, <i>zafīr</i>]	
Late Meccan		39:71 [#81, of hell's gates]		32:11 [#71, 'angel of death seizes'] 16:28 [#74, 'angels seize']
Medinan	22:22 [#108, beating of faces, 'taste!']			74:31 [Medinan insertion: 'We appointed only angels'] 8:50 [#96, 'angels seize/beat faces/say: taste'] 47:27 [#97, 'angels seize/beat faces'] 4:97 [#101, 'angels seize'/interrogate] 66:6 [#110, 'harsh, severe angels']

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