

III

SALVATION HISTORY

1. Religious communities and prophets

Ṭabarī on Sūra 2:213/209

The people were a single community; then God sent forth the prophets as messengers of good tidings and as warners. And He sent down with them the Book with the truth, that He might decide between the people concerning their differences. But those to whom it had been given disagreed concerning it, after clear signs had come to them, being insolent one to another. Then, by His leave, God guided those who believed to the truth concerning the matters about which the people¹ disagreed; and God guides whomever He wills to a straight path.

The people were a single community (umma wāḥida) . . . : The commentators (ahl at-ta'wīl) disagree regarding the meaning of (the word) umma² in this passage and regarding the people whom God characterizes as a single umma. Some (commentators) maintain that the people referred to are the ten generations between Adam and Noah, all of whom followed a law of truth (sharī'a min al-ḥaqq), after which the people came to disagree. To be cited (as authorities) for this view are (the following):

Muhammad ibn Bashshār has related to us the following statement of Ibn 'Abbās on the basis of (a chain of authorities including) Abū Dāwūd (aṭ-Ṭayālīsī), Hammām ibn Munabbih, and 'Ikrima: Between Noah and Adam lay ten generations which followed a law of truth. The people later came to disagree and God sent the prophets forth as messengers of good tidings and as warners. Ibn 'Abbās says that 'Abd Allāh (ibn Maṣ'ūd) is reported to have read (the present verse): 'The people were a single umma, but later came to disagree;³ then God sent. . . .'

Al-Ḥasan ibn Yaḥyā has related to us . . . the following statement of Qatāda concerning the words of God 'the people were a single umma': They all found themselves on the path of right guidance, but then came to disagree. Then God caused the prophets to appear as messengers of good tidings and as warners. The first prophet to appear was Noah.

Thus, the interpretation (ta'wīl) of (the word) umma, according to the report (qaul) of Ibn 'Abbās which is related above, is 'religion' (dīn), as (the poet) an-Nābigha adh-Dhubayānī says:

I swear it, and leave behind
no suspicion in your soul.
Can a man with umma then go astray?

What is meant is a man with religion. According to the meaning contained in the statements of these authorities, the (present) verse is to be interpreted as follows: The people were one umma which was unified by a single creed (milla) and a single religion (dīn), but then came to disagree. Then God caused the prophets to appear as messengers of good tidings and as warners.

The original meaning of umma was a 'community' (jamā'a) which was unified by a single religion. One then spoke of 'the umma' instead of 'the religion' because the latter indicated the former. In this sense God says: 'If God had willed, He would have made you one umma' (Sūra 5:48/53; 16:93/95), that is, adherents of a single religion and a single creed. Thus, in his interpretation of God's words 'the people were a single umma', Ibn 'Abbās followed the view that they were adherents of a single religion, but then came to disagree.

Other (exegetes) maintain (however) that the interpretation is (as follows): Adam was in reality a model (imām) for his children; then God caused the prophets to appear among his descendants. These commentators interpret (the word) umma in such a way that obedience to God as well as the demand to acknowledge his unity and to follow his command (therefore, a manner of action as was characteristic of Adam) are also contained in the meaning of this term. To support this view they refer to the words of God: 'Surely, Abraham was an umma obedient to (the one) God, a man of pure faith (ḥanīf) and no idolater' (Sūra 16:120/121⁴), since here with the word umma God means a model (imām) by which one is led

to virtue and which one follows. To be cited (as authorities) for this view are (the following):

Muḥammad ibn 'Amr has related to us . . . the following statement of Mujāhid: By God's words 'the people were a single *umma*', Adam is meant. . . .

Al-Qāsim has related to us . . . the following statement of Mujāhid: By God's words 'the people were a single *umma*', Adam is meant. Between Adam and Noah there were ten prophets; then God sent forth the (other) prophets as messengers of good tidings and as warners. Adam was a single *umma*.

Those who advocate this view thus consider it permissible to refer to an individual with the designation for a community (*jamā'a*) because the various virtues found dispersed among members of the community come together in that individual whom God designates as *umma*. Thus one says: 'So and so constitutes an *umma*', when he assumes the position of such a person.⁵

It is (also) possible that God so designated Adam because the latter brought together various people in the virtues to which he called them. Since Adam now constituted the occasion for the coming together of his descendants, who were grouped together until they (later) came to disagree, God designated him as an *umma*.

Other (exegetes) say that the meaning may be as follows: In those days the people were a single *umma* with a single religion (*dīn*) when God caused the children of Adam to come forth from the loin of the latter and presented them to him. To be cited (as authorities) for this view are (the following):

'Ammār has related to us . . . the following statement of Ubayy ibn Ka'b concerning the words of God 'the people were a single *umma*': When the people were presented to Adam, they were a single *umma*. At that time God created them so that they found themselves in the state of submission to God (*islām*). They devoted humble adoration to him and were a single *umma* and were altogether people submitted to God (*muslimūn*). Then after (the death of) Adam they came to disagree. Ubayy read (the text of the Qur'ān as follows): 'The people were a single *umma*, but later came to disagree; then God sent the prophets as messengers of good tidings and as warners.' (According to Ubayy) God first sent forth the messengers and sent down the books on account of the disunity of the people. . . .

Interpreting the verse according to this view is in accordance

with the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of those who maintained with Ibn 'Abbās that between Adam and Noah the people followed a single religion—this view is explained above. However, the time during which the people constituted a single *umma* according to this view is not the same as that suggested by Ibn 'Abbās.

In opposition to these views, other (exegetes) say that God's words 'the people were a single *umma*' mean nothing more than that they followed a single religion and that God then sent the prophets (without signifying anything further). To be cited (as authorities) for this view are (the following):

Muḥammad ibn Sa'd has related to us . . . from Ibn 'Abbās (the following interpretation of) the words of God 'the people were a single *umma*': They constituted a single religion and then God sent the prophets as messengers of good tidings and as warners.

(Aṭ-Ṭabarī concludes that) among the interpretations of this verse one comes closest to what is correct if one says that God proclaims the following to his servants: The people were a single *umma* (in the sense of a community) with a single religion (*dīn*) and a single creed (*milla*). . . . The religion which they followed was the religion of truth. . . . Later they became at variance in their religion; then, on account of the disunity in their religion, God sent the prophets as messengers of good tidings and as warners, and he sent down with them on each occasion the Book in order to decide between the people concerning their disagreement. God did this out of mercy towards his creatures and in order to be just with them (when he later calls them to account).

It is possible that the period during which the people were a single *umma* lasted from the time of Adam to the time of Noah, as 'Ikrima relates from Ibn 'Abbās and as Qatāda maintains. It is (however also) possible that this was the case (only) at that time when God presented his creatures to Adam. (Finally) it is (also) possible that this was at another time. There exists no hint in the Book of God and no report through which a trustworthy argument might be produced to show that this period was that of the Fall. On the contrary, it is impossible to say regarding it other than what God has said: that the people were a single *umma* and that after they came to disagree he sent among them the prophets and messengers. In this matter, ignorance of the time in question produces just as little harm to us as knowledge of it produces benefit for us, since it does not represent an act of obedience to God.

This may therefore remain undecided, but it should be noted that in every case the Qur'ān clearly shows that those whom God proclaims to have been a single *umma* were so designated on the basis of their belief and their religion of truth and that there was with them no unbelief and no idolatry. God has said in the sūra in which Jonah is mentioned: 'The people were (originally) only one *umma*; then they fell into disagreement. Had it not been for a word from thy Lord that preceded, a decision would already have been given between them concerning their differences' (Sūra 10:19/20). Thus, God has pronounced a threat against disunity and not against harmony and the existence of a single *umma*. If the people were in agreement in unbelief before disunity entered and if they became at variance later, then such disunity would have originated only under the assumption that some of these people turned (from unbelief) to belief. In this case, however, it would have been more appropriate to divine wisdom for a promise to be pronounced rather than a threat, since it then would have been the case that some of these people would have turned to obedience to God. It is unthinkable that God would pronounce a threat if such a condition for repentance and conversion existed, or that he would neglect to do so if all (people) were in agreement in unbelief and idolatry.

Indeed (aṭ-Ṭabarī concludes), God's words *then God sent forth the prophets as messengers of good tidings and as warners* mean that he sent messengers to those who obeyed him, bringing good tidings concerning abundant reward and precious return (to God). With the expression *as warners* God means that the prophets should warn the disobedient and the unbelievers about severe punishment, harmful revenge, and their eternal stay in the hell-fire.

And He sent down with them the Book with the truth, that He might decide between the people concerning their differences: by which God means that the Book (*al-kitāb*), that is, the Torah (*at-taurāt*), should decide between the people concerning that about which they disagreed. God has assigned the decision to the Book and has established it and not the prophets and messengers as that which decides between the people, since whenever one of the prophets or messengers had to bring down a decision, he did this on the basis of the indications which are given in the Book which is sent down by God. Thus the Book was the deciding factor between the people on the basis of its indications of that which (at that time)

had qualified as an indication of the right decision, since the verdict between the people was also set down from the other side (that is, from the prophets).

The discussion of the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of God's words *But those to whom it had been given disagreed concerning it, after clear signs had come to them, being insolent one to another*. His words *disagreed concerning it* mean that they disagreed concerning the Book which God had sent down, that is, the Torah. (His words) *those to whom it had been given* mean the Jews of the Children of Israel.⁶ They are the ones who had been given the Torah and its knowledge. . . . (His words) *after clear signs had come to them* mean: after they had received the arguments and the proofs (*adilla*) of God indicating that the Book, concerning which they disagreed in their decisions, had come from God and that it constituted the truth, concerning which they were not to disagree and which must not be disobeyed. Thus, God proclaims that the Jews of the Children of Israel disobeyed the Book, the Torah, and disagreed concerning it in spite of the knowledge that it contains. Thereby they deliberately disobeyed God since they violated his command and the decision of his Book.

Thus God proclaims that this (disunity) occurred through mutual rebellion among themselves, when they sinned intentionally and committed disobedience by disobeying God's command. . . .

God's words *But those to whom it had been given disagreed concerning it, after clear signs had come to them, being insolent one to another* mean: Those who disagreed among the Jews of the Children of Israel disagreed concerning my Book, which I sent down to them by my prophets, not because they had not known it; on the contrary, they came to disagree regarding it only after knowing it, for they disobeyed the decision of the Book, when its arguments had already been presented thoroughly. (This disunity originated) out of rebellion among themselves because some of them desired mastery over the others and regarded them with scorn. . . .

The discussion of the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of God's words *Then, by His leave, God guided those who believed to the truth concerning the matters about which the people disagreed; and God guides whomever He wills to a straight path*. God's words *Then . . . God guided those who believed to the truth* mean that God has granted success to those who are believing, that is, those who support belief in (the one) God and his Messenger, Muḥammad, and who

put their trust in the latter and are convinced that his message, concerning which those to whom the Book had been given previously disagreed, comes from God. The disunity in which God left these people alone, while rightly guiding and helping to the truth those who believe in Muḥammad, concerns (Friday as) the 'day of gathering' (for worship). Although this day had been enjoined upon them as a duty just as it has been upon us, they deviated from it and changed (their day of worship) to the Sabbath. The Prophet has said: Although we are the last, we surpass (the others in following God's commands), even though the Book was given to them before it was given to us and we thus possessed it after they did. God has rightly guided us to this day, concerning which they have disagreed. The Jews have taken the following day and the Christians have taken the day after that (as the day of worship). . . .

Concerning the matters about which the people disagreed, Ibn Zaid is reported to have said, according to Yūnus ibn 'Abd al-A'lā, that God's words 'then God guided those who believed to the truth' mean (that he led the believers) to Islam. The people disagreed concerning prayer. Some prayed facing towards the East while others faced towards Jerusalem (*hait al-muqaddas*). Then God led us to the (right) direction of prayer (*qibla*) towards Mecca.⁷ (Also) the people disagreed concerning fasting. Some fasted at certain times of the day while others fasted at certain times of the night. Then God led us to the (right) times of fasting.⁸ (Also) the people disagreed concerning the 'day of gathering' (for worship). While the Jews chose the Sabbath, the Christians took Sunday; then God led us to the (right) 'day of gathering' (on Friday). (Also) the people disagreed concerning Abraham. The Jews considered him to be a Jew and the Christians considered him to be a Christian. Then God freed him from such a suspicion and showed him to be a *ḥanīf* who was surrendered to God (*ḥanīfan musliman*⁹), who also was not to be classed among the heathen as some maintained, who claimed that he had been one of the unbelievers. (Finally) the people (also) disagreed concerning Jesus. The Jews considered him to be the victim of a falsehood while the Christians considered him to be a god (*raḥb*). Thereupon God led us to the truth concerning him. God says all of this (with his words): *Then . . . God guided those who believed to the truth concerning the matters about which the people disagreed.*

(Aṭ-Ṭabarī concludes that) when God by his goodness leads to

the truth those who believe in Muḥammad and his message, concerning which these groups of the Children of Israel who had possessed the Book previously disagreed, then this guidance lies in his assisting them to (return to) the truth, according to which the people lived before the disunity that God depicts in this verse existed. For those people were a single *umma*, namely the religion (*dīn*) of Abraham, the *ḥanīf* who was surrendered to God and the friend of the compassionate.¹⁰ Those who believe have been made 'an *umma* standing in the middle' so that they may be 'witnesses among the nations'—so your Lord describes them (in Sūra 2:143/137).¹¹

2. Abraham the *ḥanīf*

Baiḍāwī on Sūra 3:65/58–68/61

*People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham?
The Torah and the Gospel were not sent down until after him.*

What, have you no reason?

Ha, you are the ones who (like to) dispute regarding what you know. But why do you dispute regarding a matter about which you know nothing? God knows, but you know not.

No! Abraham in truth was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a ḥanīf surrendered to God (ḥanīfan musliman). Certainly he was never one of the idolaters!

Surely the people standing closest to Abraham are those who followed him and this Prophet, and those who believe: and God is the Protector of the believers.

People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham?¹² . . . : There was a quarrel between the Jews and the Christians concerning Abraham, as each party maintained that he belonged to them. When they brought this dispute before the Messenger of God, the (present) verse came down. The meaning is the following: Judaism and Christianity were instituted when the Torah came down to Moses and the Gospel came down to Jesus. Now Abraham lived a thousand years before Moses and two thousand years before Jesus. How then could he have belonged to either of these religions?

What, have you no reason?: for you maintain what is absurd.

Ha, you are the ones who (like to) dispute regarding what you know . . . : . . . Your folly lies in that you have argued stubbornly about things concerning which you have knowledge, that is, on the basis of what you have found in the Torah and the Gospel, or what you claim to be contained in these books. But why do you dispute (now) concerning something about which you have no knowledge and that is not contained in your books, namely, the religion of Abraham? . . .

God knows: that concerning which you dispute. . . .

Abraham in truth was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a ḥanīf, one who had kept away from false doctrine, surrendered to God (muslim), one who was led by God. This does not mean that Abraham belonged to the creed (milla) of Islam. If this were the claim, then the same refutation would apply in this case.

Certainly he was never one of the idolaters: Here is indicated indirectly that the Jews and Christians (in reality) are polytheists, since they associate Ezra and Christ with God (as divine beings)¹³. . . .

3. Abraham and the holy place at Mecca

Baiḍāwī on Sūra 2:125/119

And when We appointed the House to be a place of visitation for the people, and a sanctuary. And (We said): 'Take to yourselves Abraham's station for a place of prayer.' And We made covenant with Abraham and Ishmael (with the words): 'Purify My House for those who shall go around it and those who cleave to it, to those who bow and prostrate themselves.'

And when We appointed the House (al-bait): that is, the Ka'ba, which is often called (simply) 'the house', just as (in Arabic) the Pleiades are often called (simply) 'the constellation' (*an-najm*).

To be a place of visitation (mathābatan) for the people: to be a place to which eminent visitors and the like return (*yathūbu*). Or: to be a place of reward (*thawāb*), in that the people who visit there will receive (heavenly) reward, if they go to this place as pilgrims (*bi-l-ḥajj wa-l-ʾitimār*). Some read (instead): 'to be places of visitation (*mathābātin*)', since the verse deals with a place for each individual (visitor).

And a sanctuary: and a place of safety where the people who stay there are not exposed to any danger, as God says: 'Have they not seen that We have appointed a sacred sanctuary in the district of Mecca, while all about them the people are snatched away (by force)? What, do they believe in vanity, and do they disbelieve in God's blessing?' (Sūra 29:67) Or: (a place of safety, in the sense) that the people who undertake the pilgrimage to that place are safe from the punishment of the hereafter, since the pilgrimage eradicates previous (sins). Or: (a place of safety) at which a criminal who seeks refuge there is not called to account until he leaves this place. This is the teaching of Abū Ḥanīfa.

And (We said): take (wa-ttakhidhū) to yourselves Abraham's station for a place of prayer: . . . The station of Abraham (*maqām ibrāhīm*) is the stone on which his footprint is found and the place at which he stood when he arose to summon the people to the pilgrimage or for the erection of the House (that is, the Ka'ba). It is the spot which (still) today is called the 'station of Abraham'.

It is reported that Muḥammad seized the hand of 'Umar and said: 'This is the station of Abraham.' Then 'Umar asked: 'Do we not want to make it a place of prayer?', to which the Prophet answered: 'That has not been commanded to me.' However, no sooner had the sun set than the (present) verse came down.

Some say (also) that it was here that the command came to do two prostrations (*rakʿān*, sing. *rakʿa*) in the circumambulation (*ṭawāf*) (of the Ka'ba), since Jābir has related that when the Prophet had completed his circumambulation he proceeded to the station of Abraham where he performed (*khalfahū*) two prostrations and recited: 'Take to yourselves Abraham's station for a place of prayer.' . . . Others say that the station of Abraham is the entire sacred area (*ḥaram*). (Still) others say that it consists of the stations of the pilgrimage. If these were made into a place of prayer, then this would mean that the people would call (to God) and come near him at these places.

Nāfi' and Ibn 'Āmir read the past tense (or perfect) form *wa-ttakhadhū* (instead of *wa-ttakhidhū*) and connected the sentence to the (previous one): 'And when We appointed the House. . . . That is: (And when We appointed the House to be a place of visitation for the people, and a sanctuary) and (when) the people took the so-called station of Abraham, that is the Ka'ba, as the orientation point for the direction of prayer (*qibla*).

And We made covenant with Abraham and Ishmael (with the words): Purify My House: We commanded them to purify (the house). . . . The meaning of these words is: Purify it of the idols, the impurities, and whatever is not worthy of it! Or, make it free for those who make the circumambulation around this House and give themselves to worship, (that is) for those who visit there or devote themselves to worship there! . . .

4. Noah and the flood¹⁴

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 11:36/38–39/41

And it was revealed to Noah, saying: 'None of thy people shall believe but he who has already believed; so be thou not distressed by what they may be doing.

Make thou the Ark under Our eyes, and as We reveal; and do not speak to Me concerning those who have done evil; they shall (without doubt) be drowned.'

So he was making the Ark; and whenever the chiefs of his people passed by him they scoffed at him. He said: 'You may scoff at us, but we surely will scoff at you, just as you scoff (at us).

And you shall know to whom will come a chastisement degrading him, and upon whom shall alight a lasting chastisement.'

None of thy people shall believe: Here hope is terminated for Noah that his (unbelieving) countrymen would believe, (and he is informed here) that this is now unthinkable and no expectation should be retained regarding it.

But he who has already believed: except those among whom Noah found that his expectation regarding belief had already been realized. . . .

So be thou not distressed (fa-lā tabta'is): Do not grieve like a poor sorrowful person. (The poet Ḥassān ibn Thābit) has said:

Take what God apportions (to you) without
being troubled about it (*ghaira mubta'is*)!
Remain noble and of good courage!

The meaning is: Do not grieve over the slander, abuse, and enmity which they have brought against you! The time has come when you shall be avenged towards them.

The meaning of the statement *make thou the Ark under Our eyes* is: And construct the Ark, protected (by us)! Properly it means: (And construct it) covered by our eyes! It is as if God had eyes just like Noah had which protected him from deviating from the correct way of constructing the Ark, and which prevented his enemies from interfering with his work.

And as We reveal: . . . According to Ibn 'Abbās, Noah did not know how to build the Ark. So God revealed to him that it should be built in the shape of a bird's breast (*ju'ju' at-ṭā'ir*).

And do not speak to Me concerning those who have done evil: And do not call to me on behalf of your fellow tribesmen, attempting to spare them the punishment through your intercession!

They shall (without doubt) be drowned: They are condemned to the drowning. This is an inevitable matter and is determined by the decree of God. The writing reed (with which this decree has been written down) has already dried up so that one can no longer repeal it. (Thus the case here is) as in God's words: 'Abraham, turn away from this; thy Lord's command has surely come, and there is coming upon them a chastisement not to be turned back!' (Sūra 11:76/78). . . .

They scoffed at him and his shipbuilding. Noah built the Ark in a pathless desert which was a long distance from water, and (indeed) at a time when the water was already rising enormously. The unbelievers laughed and said: 'Noah, you have changed from a prophet into a carpenter!'

But we surely will scoff at you, just as you scoff (at us): that is, we shall mock you just as you (mock us), since the drowning comes to you in this world and the burning (of hell-fire) comes to you in the next world. Others say (that the meaning is): While you regard us as stupid for building the Ark, we regard you as stupid for being in the state of unbelief and abandoned to the anger and punishment of God. You must be regarded as much more stupid than we are. Or: since you regard us as stupid, then we regard you as stupid (precisely) because you regard (others) as stupid, for you could do this only because you do not know the true state of affairs, and you rely only on external appearance, as is usually the case with the ignorant (*al-jahala*) who are far from the facts (*al-ḥaqā'iq*).

The following is also related: Noah prepared the Ark for two years. It was three hundred yards (*dhirā'*) long, fifty yards wide, and towered up to a height of thirty yards. It was made of teak wood

and had three rooms inside. Into the lower one Noah placed the wild and carnivorous animals, as well as the reptiles (having selected one pair of each kind), and in the middle one (he placed) the riding and pasture animals (which he had selected in the same manner). He (himself) and his companions stayed in the upper room along with the necessary provisions. (Moreover) Noah took the body of Adam with him and laid it crosswise between the men and the women. According to al-Ḥasan (al-Baṣrī) the Ark was a thousand two hundred yards long and six hundred yards wide.

It is reported (concerning Jesus) that, when the disciples said to him: 'Send to us just one man who was a witness of the Ark and could tell us about it!', he (continued) walking along with them until he came to a pile of dirt; then he took a handful of it and said: 'Do you know who this is?' They replied: 'God and his messenger know very well.' Then Jesus said: 'This is Ka'b ibn Ḥam (the grandson of Noah).' As he said this he struck the pile with his staff and added: 'Rise up, as God wills!' And behold, Ka'b ibn Ḥam arose and shook the dust from his head. He was an old man; yet when Jesus asked him if he had died as an old man, he answered: 'I died as a young man; but (when you just awakened me) I thought the Hour (of judgment) had come!¹⁵ and thus I have grown old.' Then Jesus said: 'Tell us about the Ark of Noah!', and he answered: 'It was a thousand yards long and six hundred yards wide. It had three decks: one for the riding animals and the wild animals, one for the people, and one for the birds.' At this point Jesus said: 'Return now, if God wills, to the condition you were in (until now)!' Then he returned to dirt. . . .

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 11 :42f./44f.

So it ran with them amid waves like mountains; and Noah called to his son who was standing apart: 'Embark with us, my son, and be thou not with the unbelievers!'

He said: 'I will take refuge in a mountain that will protect me from the water.' Noah said: 'Today there is no protector from God's command but for him on whom He has mercy.' And the waves came between them, and he was among the drowned.

. . . Some say the name of Noah's son was Canaan, and others say the name was Yām.¹⁶ 'Alī read 'their son' (*ibnahā*) (instead of 'his

son'), in which case the pronoun refers also to Noah's wife . . . thus supporting the view of al-Ḥasan (al-Baṣrī). Qatāda says: I asked al-Ḥasan (about Noah's unbelieving son) and received the following answer: 'He was certainly not his son.' To this I objected to al-Ḥasan: 'God (himself) reports (in Noah's words): 'My son is of my family (*min ahlī*) (Sūra 11 :45/47). But you say that he cannot be Noah's son, while among the People of the Book there is no disagreement that he was Noah's son.' To this al-Ḥasan replied: 'Who then will receive his religion from the People of the Book?' Al-Ḥasan draws his conclusion from the fact that the text states 'of my family' rather than 'of me (*minnī*)'. This son can thus be attributed to his mother in two ways: Either he was a stepson of Noah (belonging to his wife by an earlier marriage), as 'Umar ibn Abī Salama was for the Messenger of God (through his marriage with Umm Salama); or he was an illegitimate child, though this would have been a blemish from which the prophets have been kept free (*uṣīma*). . . .

5. Joseph and his brothers

Baiḍāwī on Sūra 12 :4 ff.¹⁷

(Remember) when Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw eleven stars and the sun and the moon; I saw them bowing down before me.'

His father¹⁸ said: 'My (little) son, relate not thy vision to thy brothers, lest they devise against thee some guile. Surely Satan is to man a manifest enemy.

So will thy Lord choose thee, and teach thee the interpretation of tales, and perfect His blessing upon thee and upon the family of Jacob, as He perfected it formerly on thy fathers Abraham and Isaac. Surely thy Lord is All-knowing, All-wise.'

In Joseph and his brothers were signs for those who ask questions.

. . . *I saw*: as a vision (*ru'yā*) and not with the eyes (*ru'ya*). (That a vision is intended here) is clear from God's words: 'Relate not thy vision!' (verse 5) and 'This is the interpretation of my vision of long ago' (verse 100/101).

Eleven stars and the sun and the moon. From Jābir it is related that

a Jew came to the Messenger of God and said: 'Muḥammad, tell me about the stars which Joseph saw.' The Prophet was silent (at first); then Gabriel came down and gave him the information about it, whereupon the Prophet said to the Jew: 'If I tell you (about it), will you profess Islam?' When the Jew consented, the Prophet said: '(The stars were) Jaryān, at-Ṭāriq, adh-Dhayyāl, Qābis, 'Amūdān, al-Falīq, al-Muṣabbiḥ, ad-Darūḥ, al-Far', Wath-thāb, and Dhū l-Katifain. Joseph saw them and the sun and the moon descending from heaven and they bowed down before him.' Then the Jew said: 'Yes, indeed, these are the names.'

... *My (little) son*: The diminutive form of 'son' appears here either as a sign of affection or as an indication of Joseph's youth, for he was twelve years old. ...

Relate not thy vision to thy brothers, lest they devise against thee some guile: lest they contrive some trick in order to destroy you. Jacob understood from Joseph's vision that God was choosing him to be a messenger and was raising him up over his brothers; thus, he feared that they would envy and hate Joseph. A vision (*ru'yā*) is like a visible sight (*ru'ya*) except that the former refers especially to what appears in sleep. ... A vision is the impression (*intibā'*) of an image (*ṣūra*) which is communicated from the realm of imagination (*mutakhayyila*) to the realm of sense-perception (*ḥiss mushtarak*) (which involves the individual senses).¹⁹ A genuine vision occurs only through the contact of the soul with the supernatural world (*malakūt*) on account of the relationship between the two which exists when the soul is freed to any extent from the control of the body. At that time it is capable of shaping (*taṣawwara*) an image according to its capacity, based on concepts (*ma'āmī*) which are given to it from the supernatural world. Then the imagination tunes in upon this concept through a related (sensory) image which transmits it to the common sense-perception where it (finally) becomes perceptible. When this image is so closely related to the concept (from the supernatural world) that the only distinction lies in the universal character (*kullīyya*) (of the concept) and the particular character (*ghuz'īyya*) (of the image), then the vision requires no interpretation. Otherwise, such an interpretation would be needed. ...

Surely Satan is to man a manifest enemy: He clearly demonstrated enmity (against mankind) through what he did to Adam and Eve.²⁰ Thus, he would spare no pains in deluding Joseph's brothers and

stirring up envy among them, inciting them to the use of treachery.

So: that is, just as God chose you through this vision, which indicates high standing as well as power and perfection of the soul, *will thy Lord choose thee* for prophethood and rulership, or (simply) for great things. ...

And teach thee the interpretation of tales (ahādīth): the interpretation of the vision. If the vision is true, it is based upon narratives of the angel; but if it is false, it is based upon narratives of the (human) soul and of Satan.²¹ Or, (it may mean) the interpretation of the obscure matters in God's books, the practices (*sunan*) of the prophets, and the sayings of wise men. It is a plural form of *ḥadīth*. ...

And perfect His blessing upon thee: by bestowing prophethood upon you, or by granting to you the blessing of the next world as well as the blessing of this world.

And upon the family of Jacob: by which God means either the other sons of Jacob, in which case Jacob may have inferred their prophethood from the light of the stars; or alternatively, God may mean the descendants of Jacob.

As He perfected it formerly on thy fathers: by appointing them as messengers. Some say (that God perfected his blessing) on Abraham by taking him as a 'friend' (*khalīl*)²² and by saving him from the fire (into which the unbelievers had cast him),²³ and (he perfected it) on Isaac by delivering him from the sacrifice and by ransoming him with a great victim (for the sacrifice)²⁴. ...

In Joseph and his brothers: that is, in the story about them.

Were signs: meaning either evidences of God's power and wisdom, or indications of your (Muḥammad's) prophethood (since this story of Joseph and his brothers could have become known only through revelation).

For those who ask questions: for those who ask about the story of Joseph and his brothers.²⁵ And by 'his brothers' are meant the ten²⁶ half-brothers, who included Judah, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Zebulon, Issachar, and Dinah, who were born to Jacob by his cousin Leah, whom he married first. After her death he married her sister Rachel who bore him Benjamin and Joseph. Others say that Jacob was married to Leah and Rachel at the same time, since this was not prohibited at that time (that is, having sisters as wives).²⁷ (Also among the so-called half-brothers) were four others: Dan, Naphthali, Gad, and Asher, who were born by two concubines, named Zilpah and Bilhah.

(*Contents of verses 8–14*: The brothers now decide to kill Joseph or to expel him, and they agree to cast him into a well so that some traveller will find him and take him away. They persuade Jacob to let Joseph go with them on the following day, and Jacob gives his consent, but at the same time reminds them of the dangers which are a threat from the wolves.)

15. *Thus they went with him and agreed to put him in the bottom of the well. And We revealed to him: 'Thou shalt tell them of this deed of theirs when they are unaware.'*

And agreed to put him in the bottom of the well: and resolved to cast him into the well, that is, the well of Jerusalem (*bait al-muqaddas*), or a well in the land of Jordan, or one between Egypt and Midian, or one that is three leagues²⁸ from Jacob's home. The main clause (to which the present is a subordinate clause) is omitted, but would read something like: 'They harmed him in various ways.' Thus it is related that when they came to the desert with him, they began to harm and to beat him until they almost killed him. Then when he cried and called out for help, Judah said: 'Did you not agree with me that you would not kill him?' So they took him to the well and cast him down into it. Then, since he clung to the rim of the well, they bound his hands. And they tore his shirt from his body so they could smear it with blood and thus deceive his father. Joseph implored: 'Brothers, give my shirt back to me so I can cover myself in it!' But they answered: 'Call on the eleven stars and the sun and the moon to clothe you and befriend you!' Then, when he was half-way down, they let him fall. There was water in the well and he sank down (into it) until he reached safety on a rock that was there. On this rock he stood weeping until Gabriel came to him with a revelation, as is stated in God's words: *And We revealed to him*. (At that time) Joseph was seventeen years old, or, others say he was just reaching puberty and had already received revelations as a child, like John (the Baptist) and Jesus.²⁹ The following story is also related: When Abraham was cast into the fire, his clothes had been stripped off him, and Gabriel brought him a shirt made of paradise silk and clothed him in it. (Later) Abraham handed this shirt on to Isaac, and Isaac gave it to Jacob, who put it in an amulet which he hung on Joseph. Gabriel then took the shirt (in the well) and clothed Joseph in it.

Thou shalt tell them of this deed of theirs: You will report to them what they have done to you.

When they are unaware: that you are Joseph. For you will receive a high position and be elevated far above their expectations. Also, a long time will have passed during which one's appearance and form change. The expression here is a play on words, referring to what he said to them (later) in Egypt when they came to him to buy grain, and he recognized them while they took him to be a stranger. God gave Joseph the good news concerning the outcome of his affair in order to comfort him and calm his heart. Others say that (the words) 'when they are unaware' are closely connected with 'and We revealed to him'; this would mean: 'We comforted him with a revelation although they were unaware of it.'

(*Contents of verses 16–20*: The brothers bring the bloody shirt to their father and report that Joseph must have been eaten by a wolf. Meanwhile, some travellers find Joseph and sell him 'for a paltry price, a handful of counted dirhams'.)

21. *He who bought him, being of Egypt, said to his wife: 'Give him goodly lodging for it may be that he will profit us, or we may take him for our son.' So We established Joseph in the land, that We might teach him the interpretation of tales. God prevails in His affairs, but most men know not.*

He who bought him, being of Egypt, said: This was the 'Azīz³⁰ who was in charge of the storehouses of Egypt, and his name was Qiṭfir or Itfir.³¹ The king of Egypt at that time was Rayyān ibn al-Walīd, the Amalekite, who believed in Joseph and died during Joseph's lifetime. Other say (however) that Rayyān ibn al-Walīd was the Pharaoh of Moses and he lived four hundred years, for (in the Qur'ān) God says (concerning the Pharaoh at the time of Moses): 'Joseph brought you the clear signs before' (Sūra 40:34/36). The commonly accepted view is that the Pharaoh of Moses was a descendant of the Pharaoh of Joseph and that the verse (just mentioned) is to be understood as a situation where descendants are addressed in the circumstances of their ancestors. It is related that the 'Azīz bought Joseph when the latter was seventeen years old, that he stayed in his house for thirteen years, that Rayyān made Joseph his vizier at the age of thirty-three, and that Joseph died at the age of one hundred and twenty. . . .

To his wife: Rā'il or Zulaikhā. . . .

Or We may take him for our son: . . . The 'Azīz was childless (and thus spoke of adopting Joseph) and, because of his knowledge

of men, had perceived that Joseph was a person of integrity. In this regard it is said that three people are famed as the best judges of men: the 'Azīz of Egypt, Shu'aib's daughter³² who said: 'Father, hire Moses!' (Sūra 28:26), and Abū Bakr, when he appointed 'Umar to be his successor as caliph.

So We established Joseph in the land: just as we firmly established the love for Joseph in the heart of the 'Azīz; or, as we established Joseph in the house of the 'Azīz; or, as we delivered Joseph and made the 'Azīz favour him, thus making a place for him in the land.

That We might teach him the interpretation of tales. (This statement is) connected with something not directly spoken, the meaning of which may be: (We gave Joseph power in the land) so that he might administer with justice and we might teach him. That is, we delivered him and gave him power so he would exercise justice and direct the affairs of men and know the meaning of the books and decrees of God in order to implement them. Or, he should know the interpretation of dreams which foretell future events, in order to prepare for these events and work for their implementation before they occur, just as he did through the years (of plenty and drought).

God prevails in His affairs. Nothing can turn God back and nothing can oppose him in what he wills. Or (the meaning may be): (And God prevails) in Joseph's affairs, for his brothers willed one thing and God willed something else, and only what God willed occurred. . . .

(*Contents of verses 22-53:* Joseph lives in the house of the 'Azīz, whose wife begins to attempt to snare him. Even though Joseph withstands the temptation with the help of God, he is still put in prison where he interprets dreams for two servants who are his fellow-prisoners. Both interpretations, that is, that one prisoner will be crucified and the other set free, come true. Joseph remains in the prison for several more years; meanwhile, the king of Egypt has a dream in which he sees seven fat cows which are eaten by seven lean ones, and seven green ears of grain along with seven that are withered. When the nobles of the court are unable to interpret this dream, the former fellow-prisoner remembers Joseph, who then interprets the dream correctly and is freed from prison by the king, after the king obtained clarification regarding Joseph's relationship with the wife of the 'Azīz, thus learning of Joseph's innocence.)

54-5. *The king said: 'Bring him to me! I would attach him to my person.'* Then, when he had spoken with him, he said: *'Today thou art established firmly in our favour and in our trust.'* Joseph³³ said: *'Set me over the land's storehouses; I am a knowledgeable guardian.'*

. . . *Then, when he had spoken with him:* that is, after they had brought him (to the king) and the king had spoken with him and had observed his integrity and wisdom.

He said: Today thou art established firmly in our favour: you have power and authority, *and in our trust:* and in all matters (you are) granted our trust. It is related that when Joseph came out of prison he washed and purified himself and put on new clothes, and when he entered the king's presence, he said: 'God, I ask you for a little of his goodness and I take refuge in your strength and power from his evil.' Then he greeted him in the Hebrew language and invoked blessings on the king, who asked: 'What language is this?', and he answered: 'The language of my forefathers.' Now the king was fully conversant in seventy languages, and he spoke to Joseph in all of them. When Joseph answered the king in each language, the king was amazed and said: 'I now desire to hear my vision from you.' Joseph related the dream to him and described the cows and the ears of grain, including the precise details, just as the king had seen them. Then the king placed Joseph on the throne and entrusted his rule (*amr*) to him. Others say that Qitfir died at that time and the king placed Joseph in his position and gave him Rā'il as a wife, and that Joseph found her to be a virgin and Ephraim and Manasseh were born to him by her.

Joseph said: Set me over the land's storehouses: make me the head (*wallā*) of their transactions. The 'land' was Egypt.

I am a guardian (ḥafīz) of them from those who have no right to them, *knowledgeable* in methods of managing them. Perhaps Joseph, when he perceived that the king was indeed going to appoint him to rule, wanted to choose an area of activity in which widespread benefits and significant results would be produced. This passage shows that one may strive for the position of a leader (*walī*), indicate one's readiness for it, and accept the appointment by an unbeliever, so long as it is known that it would be impossible to establish justice and rule over the people without such assistance. (However) according to Mujāhid (it is related that) the king became a Muslim (*aslama*) through the aid of Joseph.

and his inspiration. Or, God has designated Gabriel as his spirit (*rūh*) in a metaphorical sense, because he loves him and regards him as his companion, as one says to his friend: 'You are my spirit.' . . .

To give thee (news of) a boy most pure: to cause a son to be given to you through a breath under your chemise. . . .

Whom no mortal has touched: Here God uses the term 'touch' to refer to legal sexual intercourse, since the former (term) is a metonymical expression (*kināya*) for the latter, just as in God's words: 'O believers, when you marry believing women and then divorce them before you touch them' (Sūra 33:49/48) and 'or (if) you have touched women' (Sūra 4:43/46; 5:6/9). One would refer to prostitution in other ways (than with the expression 'touch'), such as: 'he committed sin with her', 'he practised unchastity with her', or something similar. Prostitution is not esteemed such that one would think of it with (such) metonyms and elements of refined speech. . . .

So she conceived him: According to Ibn 'Abbās, Mary found comfort in the words of the angel, and thus the latter approached near to her and breathed under her chemise so that the breath reached into her womb and she became pregnant. Some say that the pregnancy lasted for six months. According to 'Aṭā', Abū I-Āliya, and aḍ-Ḍaḥḥāk it lasted seven months. Others say that it lasted eight months and that besides Jesus no child capable of living ever came into the world after (a pregnancy of only) eight months. Still others say that it lasted three hours. Some maintain that Mary was pregnant with Jesus for (only) one hour, that he was formed in one hour, and that she brought him into the world in one hour at sunset. According to Ibn 'Abbās the pregnancy lasted for (only) one hour. (Also) Mary is said to have brought (*nabadhat*) Jesus into the world as soon as she became pregnant with him.

Some maintain that she became pregnant with him at the age of thirteen. It is also said that this occurred when she was ten years old, after she had had the menses for two months previously. (Moreover) some say that every (newborn) infant cries and that Jesus is the only one who did not do this.

And withdrew with him: that is, she secluded herself while she was carrying him in her body. . . .

To a distant place: to a place behind the mountain (Zion), which

was far away from her relatives. Others say (that she moved away) to the other end of the country (*dār*). (Furthermore) it is reported that she was engaged to one named Joseph, a son of a paternal uncle. When people began to say that she became pregnant through prostitution, Joseph feared that the king would kill her, so he fled with her. On the way he became convinced that he should kill her. But Gabriel then came and said: 'The pregnancy was brought about by the Holy Spirit. So do not kill her!' So Joseph did no harm to her.

10. Jesus' verification miracle

Ṭabarī on Sūra 5:114f.

Said Jesus son of Mary: 'O God, our Lord, send down upon us a table out of heaven which will be for us a festival, the first and last of us and a sign from Thee. And provide for us, for Thou art the best of providers.'

*God said: 'Verily I do send it down on you. Whoever among you hereafter disbelieves, verily I will chastise him with a chastisement wherewith I chastise no other being.'*⁵²

Said Jesus son of Mary . . . : Here God states that his prophet Jesus fulfilled the request of his people when they asked him to request from his Lord a table which should come down upon them from heaven.

The exegetes (*ahl at-ta'wīl*) disagree concerning the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of God's words: *which will be for us a festival ('id)*. Some maintain that the meaning is: (Send down upon us a table) so that we will take the day on which it comes down as a feast day (*'id*), which we and our descendants will hold in high respect. . . . Others maintain that the meaning is: (Send down upon us a table) from which we shall all eat together. . . . (Still) others say that when God speaks (here) of an *'id*, it is meant (not in the sense of a festival, but) in the sense of a benefit which God grants to us, as well as an argument and proof.

(Aṭ-Ṭabarī concludes that) among these interpretations, that which comes nearest to being correct is the one which embraces the following meaning: (Send down upon us a table) which will be

And He seized them with a surpassing grip: the strength of which surpassed all others.

8. Alexander the Great

Baiḍāwī on Sūra 18:83/82

They will question thee concerning Dhū l-Qarnain. Say: 'I will recite to you some of his story.'

Reference here is to the Greek (*rūmī*) Alexander, king of Persia and Greece (*rūm*).⁴⁷ He is also designated as king of the East and the West, and for this reason has been given the name 'the one with the two horns (*dhū l-qarnain*)'.⁴⁸ Or (he is so called), because he roamed all over the two horns of the earth, namely the East and the West; or, because two generations (*qarnān*) of men passed away during his lifetime; or, because he had two 'horns', that is, two braids of hair; or, because his crown had two horns. Since one who is brave is called a 'ram', it is (also) possible that this nickname was given to Alexander on account of his bravery, because he battered his enemies like a ram. There is disagreement as to whether Alexander was a prophet; it is, however, agreed that he was believing and just.⁴⁹

Those who raise the question (in this verse) are either the Jews, who advance this question in order to put Muḥammad to a test, or the unbelievers of Mecca. . . .

9. The announcement of the birth of Jesus

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 19:16-22

And mention in the Book Mary when she withdrew from her people to an eastern place, and she took a veil apart from them; then We sent unto her Our spirit (rūḥ) that presented himself to her a man without fault.

She said: 'I take refuge in the All-merciful from thee! If thou fearest God, . . .'

He said: 'I am but a messenger come from thy Lord, to give thee (news of) a boy most pure.'

She said: 'How shall I have a son whom no mortal has touched, neither have I been unchaste?'

He said: 'Even so thy Lord has said: "Easy is that for Me; and that We may appoint him a sign unto men and a mercy from Us; it is a thing decreed."'

So she conceived him,⁵⁰ and withdrew with him to a distant place.

. . . *When she withdrew from her people to an eastern place (makān sharqī). . .* Some say that Mary settled in an eastern place (*mashraqa*) when she wanted to purify herself from menstruation, and that she concealed herself behind a wall, or perhaps something (else) that would keep her out of view. The place where she (usually) stayed was the mosque (*masjid*). As soon as she received her menses, she went to the home of her maternal aunt; then, when she was again in the state of purity, she returned to the mosque. Now when she was at the place at which she customarily purified herself, the angel came to her as a young, smooth-faced man with pure countenance, curly hair, and a well-built body, without exhibiting a single blemish in his human appearance (*ṣūra*). . . . He presented himself to her in the form of a man in order that she might have confidence in what he was to say and not flee from him. Had he appeared to her in the form of an angel, she would have fled from him and would not have been able to hear what he had to say. If Mary now sought refuge with God from this charming, towering, and handsome figure, then this shows that she was modest and pious. Through the appearance of the angel in this manner, Mary had undergone a test and her modesty was made certain.

Others say that Mary lived at the home of Zachariah, the husband of her sister, where she resided in a niche (*miḥrāb*) all her own. When Zachariah went away he usually locked her door. As she now wished to find a place of her own on the mount (Zion) in order to delouse her hair, the roof over her broke open and she climbed out and settled down at the sunny place⁵¹ behind the mount (Zion). Then the angel came to her. (Still) others say that the angel appeared before her in the form of one of her contemporaries named Joseph, who belonged among the servants of Jerusalem (*bait al-maqaddas*).

Some say that the Christians adopted the practice of facing towards the east when praying because Mary retreated to an eastern place. The spirit is Gabriel, because the religion lives through him

answered: 'He exempts none when one of us bleeds and does not purify herself from uncleanness.' On the other hand, others say that the rule of the satan included everyone, and not just the wives. (At the end of the period of testing Solomon) the satan dashed away and threw the ring into the sea. A fish swallowed it and came into the hands of Solomon, who split open the belly of the fish and saw the ring there. When he put the ring on (his finger) and knelt down to worship, his power returned to him. Then he drilled a hole in a stone boulder for Şakhr and put him in it and closed the whole with another boulder. Next, he had the two boulders bound together firmly with iron and lead, and he cast him (with the boulders) into the sea.

Others say that when Solomon was put to a test, the ring fell from his hand again and again and would not cling (to his finger) any longer. Then Āşaf said: 'You must undergo a test on account of your transgression, as the signet-ring no longer wants to remain still on your hand.' At this, Solomon turned to God in repentance.

The pious scholars reject such (interpretations) and say that these belong to the false stories of the Jews. The satans are not capable of such acts. That God would give to them power over his servants so that they could change the laws (for the community), and that he would give to them power over the wives of the prophets so that they could commit adultery with them, is a detestable idea. The religious laws might differ concerning the use of statues (*tamāthīl*), for God said (in the Qur'ān): 'The jinn made for Solomon whatever he wished—palaces, statues, . . .' (Sūra 34:13/12). However, one cannot believe that God would permit his prophet to bow down before an idol (*şūra*). Should something take place (in Solomon's kingdom of which he is) unaware, then certainly it is not to be charged against him.

7. *The judgment upon the tribes of Thamūd and 'Ād*⁴¹

Jalāl ad-Dīn al-Maḥallī on Sūra 69:4–10

The Thamūd and the 'Ād declared (the threat of) the pounder to be a lie.

*Then the Thamūd were destroyed by the screamer;
and the 'Ād were destroyed by a clamorous, violent wind
that God*⁴² *compelled against them seven nights and eight days,*

uninterruptedly, so thou mightest see the people laid prostrate in it as if they were the stumps of fallen-down palm trees.

Now dost thou see any remnant of them?

*Pharaoh likewise, and those with him, and the subverted cities—they committed error,
and they rebelled against the messenger of their Lord, and He seized them with a surpassing grip.*

The Thamūd and the 'Ād declared (the threat of) the pounder (al-qārī'a⁴³) to be a lie: that is, the resurrection, since it pounds upon the hearts with its terror.

*Then the Thamūd were destroyed by the screamer: by screams that exceeded the bounds in their strength.*⁴⁴

And the 'Ād were destroyed by a clamorous wind: with a deafening noise; violent: one which proved strong and powerful to the 'Ād over against their strength and power.

That God compelled: that he sent out with force against them seven nights and eight days: beginning on the morning of Wednesday, the 22nd day of Shawwāl⁴⁵ and lasting until the end of winter.

Uninterruptedly: in continuous succession. Here is a comparison with the continuous act of his which opens (ḥasama) (a diseased place on the body) in order to sear it again and again until it is cured (inḥasama).

So thou mightest see the people laid prostrate: stretched out on the ground and destroyed, as if they were the stumps: trunks of fallen-down palm trees: (palm trees which had) fallen down and were no longer producing.

Now dost thou see any remnant (min bāqiya) of them: (The word) bāqiya (which is feminine in Arabic) is either an attribute to an understood nafs (soul), or the feminine ending serves as an (indication of) exaggeration, in which case it would mean that there is nothing left remaining (to see).

Pharaoh likewise, and those with him (qibalahū): his attendants. Some read qablahū, thus designating the unbelieving communities which lived 'before him'.

*And the subverted cities: meaning the inhabitants of these cities, that is, the places of the fellow tribesmen of Lot.*⁴⁶

They committed error: with sinful deeds.

And they rebelled against the messenger of their Lord: that is, against Lot, as well as others.

(in the Qur'ān), that is, in God's words: 'This is of the tidings of the Unseen, which We reveal to thee; thou didst not know it, neither thy people, before this' (Sūra 11:49/51). . . .

6. The temptation of Solomon

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 38:34f./33f.

Certainly We tried Solomon, and We placed upon his throne a mere body; then he repented.

He said: 'My Lord, forgive me and give me a kingdom such as may not befall anyone after me; surely Thou art the All-giver.'

Some say that after twenty years (of rule) Solomon⁴⁰ was subjected to a test and he reigned after that for twenty more years. The testing of Solomon proceeded as follows: When a son was born to Solomon, the satans (who were made subservient to Solomon) said: 'If this son continues to live, we will not be able to escape forced labour; thus, we should kill him or cause him to sink into madness.' Solomon learned of their plan, however, and caused his son to rise up into the clouds (so that he was hidden). Then he was completely surprised when God set a dead body on the throne (in his place), and he became aware of the sin he had (committed in that he had) not trusted in his Lord in this affair. He asked for forgiveness and turned in repentance to God.

The following account is related from the Prophet: Solomon (once) said: 'Tonight I shall visit seventy wives and each shall bear a knight who shall fight for God.' But he failed to add: 'If God wills.' Then he visited the wives, but only one became pregnant and she brought a monster into the world. By him in whose hand my soul lies, had he added 'if God wills', then all the knights (would have been born and) would have fought for God. God's words *certainly We tried Solomon* refer to this.

Such reports and similar ones are not to be rejected. On the other hand, regarding the (following) stories about the signet-ring, the satans, and the worship of idols in Solomon's house, God knows best whether they are true. It is related that Solomon received news of Sidon, a coastal city, and (he learned) that a powerful king ruled there, against whom one is powerless because (this

king) is protected by the sea. Then Solomon set out on the wind until he came down on Sidon with his hosts of jinn and men, and he killed the king of this city. Now, Solomon found here a daughter of the king named Jarāda who was the most beautiful to behold among all of mankind, and he selected her for himself. She declared herself to be surrendered to God (*aslamat*), and Solomon loved her. But the tears that she shed out of grief for her father would not be dried up; so Solomon commanded the satans to make an image (*ṣūra*) of her father and to clothe it according to his style. Jarāda and her maids then went to this image in the mornings and evenings in order to worship it; as was customary in her father's kingdom. When (the vizier) Āṣaf reported this to Solomon, Solomon had the image destroyed and he punished the woman. Then he went out (of his palace) to a deserted place to be in solitude, and ashes were spread out before him. Then he sat down, humbly doing penance before God.

(Another account of idolatry in the house of Solomon reads as follows:) Solomon had a slave named Amīna, who became a mother (*umm walad*) through him. (Once) when he went for purification or to cohabit with one of his wives, he deposited with Amīna his signet-ring in which his power lay. He left it with her for one whole day; then the satan who lives in the sea came to her. This satan, whose name was Ṣakhr and who had proved to be indispensable to Solomon in the task of building the Temple (*ba'it al-muqaddas*), came to her in the form (*ṣūra*) of Solomon, and said: 'Amīna, (give me) my signet-ring!' Then he put the ring on (his finger) and sat down on Solomon's throne. (This ring) placed under his command the birds, the jinn, and men. Also, he transformed the outward appearance of Solomon so that when the later came to Amīna to fetch the signet-ring, she took him for a stranger and drove him away. Then he realized that he had fallen into a state of sin, and he wandered among the houses as a beggar. Whenever he said: 'I am Solomon', people threw dirt at him and insulted him. Then he went to the fishermen whom he assisted by hauling the fish. For this they gave him two fish per day, and he remained in this situation for forty days, that is, for as long as idolatry was practised in his house. However, Āṣaf and the (other) great men of Israel did not acknowledge the sovereignty of the satan (who had taken over Solomon's throne). Now, when Āṣaf questioned the wives of Solomon regarding (the impostor), they

min. Others say that the meaning may be: 'You have stolen Joseph from his father' or 'Are you thieves?' ...

(*Contents of verses 71-97/98*: The younger brother is then detained after the goblet is found among his possessions, and the other brothers return to Jacob without him. Jacob now mourns for two sons and, growing blind in his grief, he sends the brothers back to Egypt in search of both of them. Finally, Joseph allows his brothers to recognize him and he invites them and their parents to move to Egypt. The brothers return to Jacob with Joseph's robe, which restores Jacob's power of sight when it is laid against his face, and they ask for his forgiveness.)

98/99. *Jacob*³⁴ *said: 'Surely I will ask my Lord to forgive you. He is the All-forgiving, the All-compassionate.'*

Jacob postponed this prayer for forgiveness until the (next) morning or the (next) evening prayer, or until the (next) Friday evening, because he wanted to seek a time when the prayer would receive a favourable hearing. Or (he postponed it), because he wanted to receive the sanction of Joseph (for such intercession) for them; or, because he wanted to know that Joseph had (for his part) forgiven them, since the forgiveness of the wronged person is a prerequisite for (divine) forgiveness. This interpretation is supported by the following tradition: When Jacob stood facing in the direction of prayer (*qibla*) and interceding (with God), Joseph stood behind him saying 'Amen'; and behind the two stood the brothers, humble and submissive. Finally Gabriel came down and said: 'God has answered your prayer for your sons and has sealed the covenant for their prophethood after your death.' If this is correct, then it is an indication that they (in fact) did become prophets and that (the sins) which they committed occurred before their elevation to prophethood.

(*Contents of verses 99f./100f.*: Joseph's parents and brothers now all move to Egypt and he thanks God, who has now fulfilled the vision of the stars.)

101/102. *'O my Lord, Thou hast given me to rule, and Thou hast taught me the interpretation of tales. O Thou, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, Thou art my Protector in this world*

and the next. O receive me to Thee in true submission, and join me with the righteous.'

... *And join me with the righteous*: (meaning those who are righteous) among Joseph's ancestors, or all of those who are righteous in rank and honour. It is related that Jacob stayed with Joseph for twenty-four years and then died. He had ordered that he be buried in Syria (*ash-sha'm*³⁵) beside his father; so Joseph took him and buried him there. Joseph then returned (to Egypt) and survived his father by twenty-three years, after which his soul began to yearn for the eternal kingdom (of God), and he desired death; thus God took him to himself, righteous and pure. The Egyptians disputed among themselves regarding where they should bury him, until they were on the verge of fighting. Then they decided to place him in a marble sarcophagus and bury him in the Nile so the water would flow over him and reach (all) Egypt, and they would (all) have their share of him. Later Moses transferred Joseph to the burial place of his forefathers. Joseph lived one hundred and twenty years and was the father of Rā'īl, Ephraim, and Manasseh. The later was the ancestor of Joshua ibn Nūn³⁶ and Raḥma,³⁷ the wife of Job.

102/103. *This*³⁸ *is of the tidings of the Unseen that We reveal to thee. Thou wast not with (the brothers of Joseph*³⁹) *when they agreed upon their plan, devising. Yet, be thou ever so eager, the most part of men believe not.*

This: referring to what has been related (in the foregoing verses of the *sūra*) of the story of Joseph. The one addressed is the Messenger (Muḥammad). ...

Thou wast not with (the brothers of Joseph) when they agreed upon their plan, devising. ... The meaning is that this story is a hidden matter which you could come to know only through revelation, since you were not present with Joseph's brothers when they decided on the plan to cast him into the bottom of the well, and when they were devising plots against him and his father so the latter would send Joseph with them. It is well known, and cannot be denied by those who call you a liar, that you never met anyone who had heard of this story so that you could have heard it from him. But this (last) part (of the chain of thought) is omitted (in this verse), since it is superfluous, having been mentioned in another story

(Verses 56–7 state that Joseph's proposal was accepted and he was put in charge of the storehouses in Egypt.)

58–60. *And the brothers of Joseph came and entered unto him, and he knew them but they knew him not.*

When he had equipped them with their provisions, he said: 'Bring me a certain brother of yours from your father. Do you not see that I fill up the measure and am the best of hosts?

But if you do not bring him to me, there shall be no (more) provisions for you from me, nor shall you come near me (again).'

And the brothers of Joseph came. It is related that when the king had made Joseph his vizier, Joseph brought justice (to the land), striving to increase the harvest and control the produce until the (seven) lean years finally came and famine was widespread throughout Egypt, Syria, and the neighbouring regions. The people then came to Joseph and he sold the produce of the harvest, at first for money (literally, 'dirhams and dinars') until the people had none left, and then for ornaments and jewels, then for animals, then for property and estates, and finally for the people's freedom until he had enslaved them all. Then Joseph reported the matter to the king, who said: 'Do whatever you think is best!' So Joseph set the people free and returned their property to them. Canaan was afflicted with the same misfortune as the other countries, so Jacob sent his sons, except for Benjamin, to Joseph to purchase provisions.

And entered unto him, and he knew them but they knew him not. That is, Joseph recognized them but they did not recognize him, because of the length of time that had passed, and their having parted from him when he was young, and their forgetting him and supposing him to be dead, and the difference between the state in which they now saw him and his state when they parted from him, and because they did not observe his outward appearance carefully on account of their awe and reverence (for him).

When he had equipped them with their provisions: assembled their supplies for them and had their camels loaded with what they had come for. . . .

He said: Bring me a certain brother of yours from your father. It is related that when they went in to Joseph, he said: 'Who are you and what is your business? Perhaps you are spies!' But they answered: 'God forbid! We are (all) sons of a single father, who is

an old man and one of the prophets. His name is Jacob.' Joseph asked: 'How many are you?' They answered: 'We were twelve, but one of us went into the desert and perished.' Joseph then asked: 'How many of you are here?' They said: 'Ten.' He asked: 'And where is the eleventh?' They said: 'With our father who finds consolation in him for the (son) who perished.' He asked: 'Who can bear witness on your account?' They said: 'There is no one here who knows us and can testify on our behalf.' Then Joseph said: 'Then leave one of you with me as a hostage and bring your brother to me from your father so I can believe you.' So they cast lots and the lot fell on Simeon. Others say that Joseph was giving a load (of provisions) to each of them and they asked for an extra load for a brother of theirs born to their father. So Joseph gave this (extra load) to them but stipulated that they must bring this other brother to him so he could verify their truthfulness. . . .

But if you do not bring him to me, there shall be no (more) provisions for you from me, nor shall you come near me (again). That is, you can neither come into my presence nor enter my territories. This is either a negative command or (simply) a negative statement. . . .

(*Contents of verses 61–9:* Joseph had the goods placed again in their packs, but they did not observe this until they returned home. Before the next trip, Jacob got from them the promise to take good care of Benjamin. When they came to Joseph with him, Joseph made known his secret to him.)

70. *Then, when he had equipped them with their provisions, he put his drinking-cup into the saddlebag of his (younger) brother (Benjamin). Then a herald proclaimed: 'Ho, cameleers, you are thieves!'*

. . . *Into the saddlebag of his (younger) brother (Benjamin):* Some say that the drinking-cup was used as a vessel for measuring (the grain). Others say that it was used for watering the animals and for measuring (the grain). According to some, it was made of silver; according to others, it was made of gold. . . .

Ho, cameleers, you are thieves. Possibly the one who called out did not say this at Joseph's command (since a false accusation is not appropriate to a prophet); or, inserting the drinking-cup and calling out about it could have been done with the consent of Benja-

a festival (*'īd*) for us, in that we will pray and worship our Lord on the day when it comes down, just as the people used to do on their feast days. Thus, the meaning which we affirm corresponds to the usual meaning that people associate with (the word) *'īd* in their speech, and not with the interpretation that accepts as the meaning: a benefit for us from God. The meaning contained in the 'speech of God' (*kalām Allāh*) is to be interpreted as lying closer to the usual manner of speaking of the one who makes the request, than to something inaccessible and unknown to him.

Regarding God's words *the first and last of us*, the interpretation that comes closest to being correct is the one that adopts the meaning: for those of us who are living today and for those who will come after us. This is based on the same (linguistic) argument we cited for God's words 'that shall be for us an *'īd*', since the meaning adopted (in each case) is the predominant one.

God's words *and a sign (āya) from Thee* mean: and an indication or argument from you, Lord, for your servants, which affirms that you are the only God and that I speak the truth when I present myself in the role of your messenger to them. . . .

The exegetes disagree concerning whether or not the table was (actually) sent down (out of heaven) and concerning what was on it. Some say that it was sent down with fish and (other) food and that the people ate from it. Then, after its descent (the table) was lifted up because of (certain) innovations they introduced in their relationship to God. . . . Other exegetes maintain that it came down with fruit from paradise. . . . (Still) others say that on it lay every (kind of) food except meat. . . . Other interpreters maintain that God did not send down a table to the Children of Israel. Those who advocate this view disagree further among themselves. Many say that this may be only a simile that God has offered to his creatures in order thereby to prohibit them from demanding (divine) signs from the prophets of God. . . . Others maintain that when (the words) *whoever among you hereafter disbelieves, verily I will chastise him with a chastisement wherewith I chastise no other being* were spoken to the people, they prayed for forgiveness but the table did not come down. . . .

(Aṭ-Ṭabarī concludes:) According to our view it is correct to say the following: God (actually) sent down the table to those who asked Jesus to request it from his Lord. We maintain this

in view of the information concerning this which we have related from the Messenger of God, his Companions, and after them the exegetes, since these do not occupy any special position in the interpretation mentioned above. Furthermore, God breaks no promise, and there will not be any contradiction in what he announces. God proclaims in his Book that he will fulfil the request of his prophet Jesus, when he says: *Verily I do send it down on you*. It is impossible that God would say 'verily I do send it down on you', and then not send it down. This verse deals with a proclamation of God; thus nothing that contradicts it can ensue from him. Were it possible for God to say 'verily I do send it down on you', and then not send it down, then he could also say: 'Whoever among you hereafter disbelieves, verily I will chastise him with a chastisement wherewith I chastise no other being', and someone thereafter could disbelieve without being punished by God. In this case neither the promise nor the threat of God would become true and valid; however, such things cannot be ascribed to God.

Concerning what was on the table, some say correctly that there was food on it. It could have been fish and bread, or it could have been fruit from paradise. It is to no advantage if one knows what it was; neither is it any harm if one does not know, so long as the conclusions drawn from the verse correspond with the external wording of the revelation.

God said: (Aṭ-Ṭabarī says that) here God gives to the people an answer to their demand which is addressed to his prophet Jesus, that he ask their Lord to send down to them a table. God says: *Verily I do send it down on you, you disciples, and you are to eat from it.*

Whoever among you hereafter disbelieves: that is, whoever among you, after I have sent down the table to you and you have eaten from it, denies that I have sent Jesus as a messenger, and whoever does not acknowledge the prophethood of my prophet Jesus, and whoever refuses obedience to me in my commands and prohibitions.

Verily I will chastise him with a chastisement wherewith I chastise no other being: that is, in the world at the time of Jesus. The people, however, did (disbelieve, in spite of this warning). After the table had been sent down to them, they denied (the miracle) and remained unbelieving, so that it was restored back to us, and, as it returned to us, they were punished so that they were transformed into monkeys and swine.

11. *Jesus is not God's son*

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 4:171/169

People of the Book, do not go too far in your religion, and say nothing about God but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the messenger of God, and His word which He committed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not: 'Three.' Refrain! Better is it for you. God is only One God. Glory be to Him—that He should have a son! To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth; God suffices for a guardian.

Do not go too far in your religion: The Jews went too far in that they degraded Christ in his position, since they regarded him as an illegitimate child (of Mary). And the Christians went too far in that they elevated him unduly, since they regarded him as a god.

And say nothing about God but the truth: Here is declared that God is exalted high above having a (divine) associate and a child. . . . Jesus is designated as 'the word of God' and as 'a word from Him' (see Sūra 3:39/34), because he alone originated through the word and the command of God, rather than through a father and a sperm. For this reason he is (also) designated as 'the spirit of God' (see Sūra 66:12, etc.) and as 'a spirit from Him', since Jesus was a spirit-endowed man (*dhū rūh*) who originated without any element from a spirit-endowed man, such as the sperm that is discharged from an earthly father. He was created through a new act of creation by God whose power (*qudra*) is unlimited.

Which He committed to Mary: which he delivered to her and permitted to enter into her.

(The word) *three* is the predicate to an understood subject. If one accepts the Christian view that God exists in one nature (*jauhar*) with three divine persons, namely the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and (if one accepts) the opinion that the person of the Father represents (God's) being (*dhāt*), the person of the Son represents (his) knowledge (*ilm*), and the person of the Holy Spirit represents (his) life (*hayāt*), then one must supply the subject as follows: 'God is three(fold).' Otherwise, one must supply (the subject) thus: 'The gods are three.' According to the evidence of the Qur'ān, the Christians maintain that God, Christ, and Mary are three gods, and that Christ is the child of God by Mary, as

God says (in the Qur'ān): 'O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men: "Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God"?' (Sūra 5:116), or: 'The Christians say: "The Messiah is the Son of God"' (Sūra 9:30). Moreover, it is well known that the Christians maintain that in Jesus are (combined) a divine nature derived from the Father and a human nature derived from his mother. God's words: *The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the messenger of God* are (also) explained on the basis of such an interpretation (of the Christians). These words confirm (the Christian view) that Jesus was a child of Mary, that he had with her the usual relationship between children and (their) mothers, and that his relationship to God was that he was his messenger and that he became a living being through God's command and new act of creation without a father. At the same time, these words exclude (the Christian view) that Jesus had with God the usual relationship between sons and (their) fathers. Also God's words: *Glory be to Him—that He should have a son* (are explained on the basis of such an interpretation of the Christians). However, what is reported by God must be regarded as having more validity than what is reported by others. . . .

To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth: Here is set forth why God is free from what was ascribed to him (by the Christians). If everything that is in the heavens and the earth is God's creation and possession, how then can one of his possessions be a part of him when one can properly speak of a part only regarding bodies, while God is exalted above the properties (*ṣifāt*) of corporeality and inconstant attributes (*a'rād*)^{5.3}? . . .

12. *The death of Jesus*

Baiḍāwī on Sūra 4:157f./156

And because they said: 'We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God.' But they did not slay him, nor did they crucify him; for only a likeness of him was shown to them. Those who disagree concerning it surely are in doubt regarding him. They have no knowledge of him, but only follow surmise.

*And it is certain that they did not slay him!
No indeed, God raised him up to Himself. God is All-mighty,
All-wise.*

And because they said: *We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God*: (that is) because the Jews asserted this. It is (however also) possible that the Jews said this (only) scornfully as is the case in a similar situation with (the words of Pharaoh concerning Moses): 'Surely your messenger who was sent to you is possessed!' (Sūra 26:27/26), and that God took up this assertion (of the Jews) again in order to praise Jesus or to replace their evil account with a good one.

But they did not slay him, nor did they crucify him; for only a likeness of him was shown to them. It is related that a group of Jews insulted Jesus and his mother, whereupon he appealed to God against them. When God turned (those who insulted Jesus and his mother) into monkeys and swine, the Jews came to an agreement to kill Jesus. Then God informed Jesus that he would raise him up to heaven; so Jesus said to his disciples: 'Who among you will agree to take a form similar to mine and die (in my place) and be crucified and then go (straight) to paradise?' A man among them offered himself, so God changed him into a form to look like Jesus, and he was killed and crucified.

Others say that a man pretended (to be a believer) before Jesus and then went away denouncing him, whereupon God changed this man into a form similar to that of Jesus, and then he was seized and crucified. (Still) others say that the Jew Titanus entered a house where Jesus was (with a treacherous intention) but could not find him. Then God changed him into a form similar to that of Jesus, and when he came outside people thought he was Jesus and so they seized and crucified him.

Similar unusual things which one may not find improbable for the time of the prophets (have been reported on this subject). When God blames the Jews (here), (it is) only because their words showed that they acted impudently towards God, wishing to kill his prophet in spite of the confirmation (of the prophethood of Jesus) through overwhelming miracles (*mu'jizāt*), and (furthermore they) rejoiced in doing so. (God blames them) not because their assertion (to have Jesus killed) was (merely) an opinion.

Those who disagree concerning it: (that is) concerning the state in which Jesus was. For as soon as this event (the crucifixion of another person in Jesus' place) occurred, the people disagreed (concerning it). Some Jews said: 'Jesus was a liar (when he said God would raise him up to heaven), for we certainly killed him!'

Others hesitated, and some of these said: 'If this (crucified person) is Jesus, then where is our companion (who wanted to betray him)?' Others said: 'That is the face of Jesus, but the body is that of our companion.' Those, however, who had heard Jesus when he said: 'God will raise me up into heaven', said: 'He was raised up into heaven.' Certain people believed (also) that his human nature was crucified, while his divine nature rose up to heaven. . . .

13. Jesus as the herald of the Day of Judgment

Baidāwī on Sūra 43:61

And he (hu) is the sign of the Hour. Doubt not concerning it, and follow me! This is a straight path.

And he, that is Jesus, is the sign of the Hour (of judgment), since his appearance or his coming down (from heaven) is among the signs which will announce that the Hour (of judgment) is near. Or: (Jesus is a sign of the Hour) because he showed through his resurrection from the dead that God has the power to raise the dead (on the Day of Judgment). . . .

In the Tradition (*ḥadīth*) it is reported that Jesus will come down over a mountain pass in the Holy Land called Afīq, and in his hand he will carry a spear with which he will kill the Antichrist (*dajjāl*⁵⁴). He will then go to Jerusalem (*bait al-muqaddas*) just when the inhabitants are performing the morning prayer. The prayer leader (*imām*) will want to step back (in view of Jesus' appearance), but Jesus will give precedence to him and perform the prayer behind him according to the rite (*sharī'a*) of Muḥammad. Then he will kill the swine, dash to pieces the crucifix, demolish the churches and synagogues, and kill the Christians who do not have (correct) belief in him.

Others say that the pronoun *hu* ('he' or 'it') refers to the Qur'ān, since signs of the Hour are given in it and it points the way to it. . . .

IV

ISLAM, THE 'BOOK RELIGIONS',
AND PAGANISM

1. The religions

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 22:17¹

Surely they that believe, and those who are Jewish, the Sabaeans, the Christians, the Zoroastrians, and those who associate (other gods with God)—God will distinguish (yafṣilu) between them on the day of resurrection. Surely God witnesses everything.

The distinction (which God will make between them) is unlimited and will involve the condition as well as the (future) abode of those in question. God will neither reward them (*ghazā*) uniformly without differentiation, nor bring them together to the same place. It is said that there are five religions, four of which belong to Satan and one to the Compassionate One. According to this view the Sabaeans² are considered to be Christians, constituting one branch of them.

It is also said that (the word) *yafṣilu* means that God will 'distinguish' between the believers and the unbelievers. . . .

2. The Muslims

Baidāwī on Sūra 2:142/136–143/138

The fools among the people will say: 'What has turned them from the direction they were facing in their prayers before?'

Say: 'To God belong the East and the West; He guides whomever

He wills on a straight path.'

Thus We have made you (Muslims) into a community in the middle that you may be witnesses to the people, and that the Messenger may be a witness to you; and We established the

direction of prayer thou wast facing only in order to discover who would follow the Messenger and who would turn on his heels—though it were a grave thing except for those whom God has guided; but God would never leave your faith to waste—truly, God is All-gentle with the people, All-compassionate.

The fools among the people will say: those (people) who exhibit (only) little capacity for insight (*aḥlām*) and who depreciate even this through their blind acceptance (*taqlīd*) (of other views) and their neglect of (any) examination (*naẓar*) (of such views on their own). Referred to are those among the hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*), Jews, and pagans, who want to know nothing of the change of the direction of prayer. That this (i.e., what the fools will say later) is reported of them here in anticipation (of the future) is advantageous because one can be ready for it spiritually and can prepare an answer, and because this (report concerning a future event) exhibits the miracle (*mu'jiza*) (of divine revelation).

What has turned them from the direction they were facing in their prayers before: . . . meaning the direction of prayer towards Jerusalem (*bait al-muqaddas*³). (The word) *qibla* originally designated the position (*ḥāla*) of a man when he looked towards (*istaqbala*) (a thing). It then became a useful designation for the place towards which one turns while praying.

Say: To God belong the East and the West: No place is so constituted by its nature that it belongs especially to God more than another place and would not be interchangeable with another such (place). The concern here is not to designate a special place but to portray God's dominion (*amr*) (over all places of the world).

He guides whomever He wills on a straight path: The straight path consists in the fact that wisdom approves, and benefit demands, that in prayer one turns towards Jerusalem at one time and towards the Ka'ba at another time.

Thus: referring to the content of the preceding verse. It means: thus as we have made you (Muslims) to be people who will be led on a straight path. Or: thus as we have made your direction of prayer to be the most excellent, so have we made you (Muslims) to be a community situated in the middle (*umma wasat*), that is, good and just (*'udūl*) people who are blameless in knowledge and actions. (The word) *wasat* (middle, in the middle) was originally a designation for a place with equal surfaces on the sides. Then it came to

refer to (certain) praiseworthy attributes of character because these lie (in the middle) between the extremes of excess and exaggeration on both sides. Thus, generosity lies between wastefulness and stinginess, and boldness lies between foolhardy recklessness and cowardice. This word is now (also) applied to the person who possesses such characteristics. . . . From the present words of God one can draw the conclusion that consensus (*ijmā'*) is a valid authority (*ḥujja*) (in questions of faith), since if that on which the Muslims are agreed were delusion (*bāṭil*), then a gap would be created in their integrity (*'adāla*) (and they would not stand in the middle).

That you may be witnesses to the people, and that the Messenger may be a witness to you: Here is stated God's motive (for making the Muslims a community in the middle). What is meant is: in order that you (Muslims) may come to know, through a weighing of the evidence which God has prepared for you and through the Book (*al-kitāb*) which he has sent down to you, that God has done no injustice to anyone, nor has he been miserly towards anyone, but that (on the contrary) his ways have been set forth clearly and he has sent the messengers who have fulfilled their mission and have warned (the people); but still the unbelievers have let themselves be led astray through their evil ways, to follow their own desires, and to disregard the signs (of God). Herein you will be witnesses to your contemporaries, ancestors, and descendants.

It is related that on the day of resurrection the communities (of unbelievers) will dispute (the claim) that the prophets fulfilled their mission. Then God will demand of the prophets an appropriate proof—whereby he knows very well how one proceeds in the use of proofs against the disavowing (unbelievers)—and the community of Muḥammad will be produced as witnesses. When the (other) communities say: 'How did you come to know (what you bear witness to)?', the community of Muḥammad will answer: 'We know this from the information given by God in his Book which was spoken by the tongue of his faithful Prophet.' Then Muḥammad will be brought forward and asked about the conduct of his community and he will bear witness to their justness. . . .

And We established the direction of prayer (qibla) thou wast facing: that is, (we have now instituted as the final, obligatory direction of prayer) the direction which you faced originally, that is, towards the Ka'ba. The direction of prayer which Muḥammad observed in Mecca was towards the Ka'ba; then when he emigrated

(to Medina) he was ordered to face in prayer towards the (Dome of the) Rock (*aṣ-ṣakhra*) (in Jerusalem), in order to establish a bond with the Jews. Or, (in this verse) the (temporary) direction towards the (Dome of the) Rock is meant, since, according to Ibn 'Abbās, Muḥammad observed the direction towards Jerusalem (also) in Mecca. To be sure, he positioned himself so that the Ka'ba came to stand between him and the (Dome of the) Rock. Thus, in the first case, the institution finally abolishing would be meant, and in the second, the one abolished would be meant. The meaning is (in the last case): Actually you are to adopt the direction of prayer towards the Ka'ba, for we made (Jerusalem) your direction of prayer (for a time), *only in order to discover who would follow the Messenger and who would turn on his heels:* (that is) in order to put the people to a test and in order to ascertain who follows you in facing towards Jerusalem in prayer and who is faithless regarding your religion out of devotion to the direction of prayer of his (unbelieving) forefathers. Or (what is meant is): in order to ascertain now (after the abrogation of the temporary direction towards Jerusalem) who follows the Messenger of God and who does not, and which followers are to be attributed to a temporary condition and (thus) disappear when the condition does. In the first case the meaning is: We have instructed you to turn back again (towards the Ka'ba) in the direction of prayer which you adopted (originally), in order to ascertain who would persevere in Islam and would not execute an about face as a result of inner uncertainty and weakness of faith. . . .

But God would never leave your faith to waste: that is, your firm perseverance in belief. Others say: your belief in the direction of prayer which was abrogated and the prayers which you performed facing in that direction. It is related that when the Messenger of God (changed the direction of prayer and) finally turned towards the Ka'ba, someone asked him: 'Messenger of God, what is the condition of those of our brothers who died before this change?' Then came down (from God the following words): *Truly, God is All-gentle with the people, All-compassionate, and will not let their reward come to nothing nor overlook their uprightness. . . .*

3. Jews and Christians

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 5:82f./85f.

Thou wilt surely find that the most hostile of men to the believers

are the Jews and the idolaters; and thou wilt surely find the nearest of them in love to the believers are those who say: 'We are Christians.' This is because some of them are priests and monks, and they wax not proud, and when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize. They say: 'Our Lord, we believe; so do Thou write us down among the witnesses.'

Here God portrays the Jews as being unyielding and as acknowledging the truth only grudgingly, while the Christians are (portrayed as) of gentle disposition, easily guided, and having an inclination towards Islam.⁴ On account of their vehement enmity against the believers, God places the Jews together with the idolaters; indeed, going even further, he shows them to be at the head, since they are mentioned before the idolaters. God does the same in his words: 'And thou shalt find them (the Jews) the eagerest of men for life—even more so than the idolaters. Each of them wishes he could be given a life of a thousand years; but, the grant of such life would not save him from chastisement—for God sees well all that they do!' (Sūra 2:96/90). The Jews are surely like this, and even worse! From the Prophet (the following is related): 'If a Muslim is alone with two Jews, they will try to kill him.'

That the Christians are to be treated kindly and are held in high esteem by the Muslims, God bases on the fact that there are priests and monks among them, that is, men of learning ('*ulamā*') and servants, and that they are modest and humble people who know no arrogance, while the Jews are just the opposite. Here is a clear example showing that the struggle for knowledge (*ta'allum*) is exceedingly useful, leading first to good and then to success, even among the (non-Muslim) priests. The same is true also of concern for the hereafter and speaking about the end, possibly another characteristic of the monk, just like freedom from haughtiness—even though a Christian is involved here.

God's characterization of the Christians as being tender-hearted and as weeping when they hear the Qur'ān is in accordance with what is reported concerning an-Najāshī (the Negus of Ethiopia). When the immigrants to Ethiopia (in 615) appeared before him with the idolaters (curses be upon them), the latter tried to stir him up against the immigrants, demanding that he use measures

of force against them. He said to Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib: 'Is Mary mentioned in your scripture?' To this Ja'far answered: 'In our scripture one sūra is devoted to Mary', and he began to recite this sūra (Sūra 19) up to the words: 'That is Jesus, son of Mary, in word of truth' (verse 34/35). Then he recited Sūra Ṭā Hā (Sūra 20) up to the words: 'Hast thou received the story of Moses?' (verse 9/8), and an-Najāshī wept. His seventy men who came as emissaries to the Messenger of God also did the same, (for) when the Messenger recited to them Sūra Yā Sīn (Sūra 36), they then wept. . . .

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 5:44/48

Surely We sent down the Torah, wherein is guidance and light; thereby the prophets, who had surrendered themselves, gave judgment against those who were Jewish, as did the masters (of the law) and the rabbis, following the portion of God's Book that was entrusted to them and to which they were witnesses. So fear not men, but fear you Me; and sell not My signs for a little price. Whoever judges not according to what God has sent down—they are the unbelievers.

. . . *The prophets, who had surrendered themselves (aslama, 'to become Muslim')*⁵: an attribute which is used in praise of the prophets and not as a distinguishing characteristic (that is, distinguishing some prophets from others, since according to Muslim dogma all true prophets in all ages have been Muslims), just as is the case with attributes one uses in reference to the Eternal One.⁶ The use of this attribute (of true prophets) shows that the Jews are far from acknowledging Islam, which is the (true) religion of the prophets in both ancient and modern times, and that Judaism is separated from this acknowledgment. God's words: *The prophets, who had surrendered themselves, gave judgment against those who were Jewish* emphasizes this forcibly (through the contrast of the two groups).

As did the masters (of the law) and the rabbis: as did the ascetics (*zuhād*) and the learned men ('*ulamā*') among the descendants of Aaron, who remained faithful to the way of the prophets and have remained aloof from the religion of the Jews.

Following the portion of God's Book that was entrusted to them: (the portion of God's Book) that the prophets had instructed the

rabbis and masters (of the law) to preserve as the Torah. That is, their prophets had ordered them to preserve the Torah from change and distortion.

And to which they were witnesses: people who watched over it so it would not be distorted. The meaning is that the prophets between Moses and Jesus, of which there were a thousand, as well as Jesus, were to judge the Jews on the basis of the statements of the Torah, forcing them to observe its regulations and allowing no deviation from it. The Messenger of God did precisely the same when he held the Muslims to the observance of death by stoning (for adultery), defying them and refusing to them (the punishment of flogging which they wanted to have (instituted as a milder punishment)).⁷ In the same way the judgment of the rabbis, masters (of the law), and Muslims should result, because the Book of God and the fulfilment of its regulations were entrusted to the prophets, and because they were made witnesses to it.

The pronoun in (the phrase) *that was entrusted to them* may possibly refer to the prophets, rabbis, and masters (of the law) all together, while the entrusting comes from God. (Thus) this means: God ordered them to preserve the Book and to be witnesses to it.

So fear not men, but fear you Me: Here those who make judgments are forbidden from every fear except the fear of God. In their judgments they should be incorruptible and should not deviate from the fairness which is commanded to them, out of fear before a tyrannical master or because they are afraid one of their relatives or friends might become angry.

And sell not My signs: and do not exchange the signs of God and his regulations, nor pawn them!

For a little price: such as corruptibility or striving after esteem and pleasure which is exhibited by men. Thus the masters (of the law) among the Jews falsified the Book of God in their desire for this world and in their striving for mastery, and they distorted its regulations and then perished.

Whoever judges not according to what God has sent down (in his Book), because they attach little value to it, *they are the unbelievers* (*kāfirūn*) and the transgressors (*ẓālimūn*) and the wicked ones (*fāsiqūn*).⁸ They are here characterized as disobedient in their unbelief because they transgressed and were rebellious through their disdain for the signs of God, since they did not judge according to these signs. According to Ibn 'Abbās, the unbelievers, transgres-

sors, and wicked ones are the People of the Book. (The following is related) from him: '(Muslims,) you are good people. What is agreeable belongs to you; what is disagreeable belongs to the People of the Book. Whoever denies the regulations of God is an unbeliever. Whoever recognizes it but does not judge according to it is a wicked transgressor.' According to ash-Sha'bi, the unbelievers are found among the people of Islam, the transgressors among the Jews, and the wicked ones among the Christians. According to Ibn Mas'ūd, the statement refers to the Jews and others altogether. (The following saying is related) from Ḥudhaifa: '(Muslims,) among the (religious) communities (*umam*) you are the closest to the Children of Israel in your behaviour. You follow their way as close as a hair, but I do not know whether or not you (also) worship the calf.'

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 4:51/54

Hast thou not regarded those who were given a share of the Book believing in demons (al-jibt) and idols (aṭ-ṭāghūt), and saying to the unbelievers: 'These are more rightly guided on the way than the believers'?

Al-jibt are the idols as well as all who are worshipped besides God; and *aṭ-ṭāghūt* is Satan.⁹ This passage refers to the following: the two (Medinan) Jews, Ḥuyayy ibn Aḥṭab and Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, went to Mecca with a group of (their) fellow believers in order to conclude a covenant with the (unbelieving members of the tribe of) Quraish to fight the Messenger of God. Then (the members of the tribe of) Quraish said: 'You are people who possess a book and thus stand closer to Muḥammad than to us. We feel uncertain as to whether you will betray us. Throw yourselves down before our gods, so we can feel assured before you.' So the Jews did this, and in so doing they placed their faith in *al-jibt* and *aṭ-ṭāghūt*. That is, they threw themselves down before the idols and obeyed Iblīs in their deeds. Abū Sufyān (the leader of the pagan Meccans) then said: 'Are we or is Muḥammad on the right path?' Then when Ka'b asked: 'What then does Muḥammad teach?', the (members of the tribe of) Quraish answered: 'He commands that God alone be worshipped and forbids associating (other gods with him).' In reply to this Ka'b asked (further): 'And of what does your religion

consist?' They replied: 'We administer the House (of the Ka'ba), provide drinking water for travellers, show hospitality to guests, and provide ransom for those who are captured.' When they thus enumerated their deeds, Ka'b suggested: 'You (rather than Muḥammad and his followers) are on the right path.'

Baiḍāwī on Sūra 9:29

Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid¹⁰ what God and His Messenger have forbidden—such men as practise not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book—until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled.

... *Who believe not in God and the Last Day*: that is, who do not believe in it as is required according to our statement at the beginning of Sūrat al-Baqara (Sūra 2, 'The Cow'); for the belief of such people is no belief at all.

And (who) do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden: (that is) what is firmly (and finally) forbidden according to the Book and the *sunna*. Others say that God's 'messenger' (here is the messenger whom they assert to follow. This would mean that they had deviated in their belief (*i'tiqād*) and their practice of the true form (*aṣl*) of their (own) religion, which has now been annulled (through Islam).

Such men as practise not the religion of truth: the firm (and final religion of Islam), which annuls and destroys the other religions. ...

Until they pay the tribute: (until they pay) what is imposed upon them (by the religious law)¹¹. ...

Out of hand (yad): indicating the condition of those who pay the tribute. (The meaning is) then (either): out of a hand which offers willingly, thus indicating that they submit obediently; or, out of their hand in the sense that they pay the tribute with their (own) hands, rather than sending it by the hands of others. Thus one is here forbidden to claim a proxy in this regard. Or: out of abundance ('*an ghinā*),¹² Thus some say that the tribute should not be taken from the poor. Or: by a hand which has power over them, thus indicating that they are humbled and powerless. On the other hand, (the expression 'out of hand') can also refer to the condition of the tribute. This would mean (either): (until they pay the tribute) as

ready cash which is handed over from hand to hand; or, as a charity, which is permitted to the one who is obliged to pay tribute. It is thus a great charity that they are spared from the tribute.

And have been humbled: brought low. According to Ibn 'Abbās the *dhimmi* (one of the People of the Book living under Muslim rule and paying tribute in return for protection) is struck on the neck (with the hand) when the tribute is collected from him.

According to the meaning of the verse, the tribute is restricted to the People of the Book. This is confirmed through the fact that 'Umar accepted no tribute from the Zoroastrians until 'Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn 'Auf testified that the Prophet had collected tribute from the Zoroastrians of Hajar (in southern Bahrain) and had said: 'Establish for them the same custom as for the People of the Book, for they have a similar book.' Thus they are regarded as possessing the Book. However, according to our view, tribute may not be collected from other unbelievers. According to Abū Ḥanīfa (on the other hand), it should be collected from them, except not from the pagan Arabs, for az-Zuhrī relates that the Prophet concluded peace treaties with the idolaters who were not Arabs. According to Mālik (ibn Anas), the tribute is to be collected from all unbelievers except the apostates. The minimum tribute amounts to one dinar per year, with the rich and poor being treated equally. Abū Ḥanīfa (however) says that it amounts to forty-eight dirhams for the rich, one half of that amount for those who are moderately well-to-do, one quarter of that amount for the poor who are capable of earning a living, and nothing for the poor who are not capable of earning a living.

4. *The pagans and their idols*

Baiḍāwī on Sūra 2:170f./165f.

And when it is said to them: 'Follow what God has sent down', they say: 'No, but we will follow such things as we found our fathers doing.' What? Even if their fathers had no understanding of anything? And even if they were not guided?

Those who disbelieve are like those who shout to something that hears nothing—except a call and a cry. Deaf, dumb, blind—they do not understand!

... *They say: No, but we will follow such things as we found our*

fathers doing: . . . This verse was sent down concerning the pagans, who were ordered to follow the Qur'ān and the other evidences and signs which had been sent down by God, but who had held instead to the blind acceptance (*taqlīd*) (of traditional beliefs and practices). Others say (that the verse was sent down) concerning a group of Jews whom the Messenger of God urged to accept Islam, but who answered: 'No, we will follow such things as we found our fathers doing, since they were better and had more knowledge than we.' However, what God sent down (as revelation) includes also the Torah, since it also summons people to the acceptance of Islam (in the sense of a state of surrender to God).

What? Even if their fathers had no understanding of anything? And even if they were not guided: . . . The final clause to this conditional clause is omitted. What is meant is: If their fathers had been ignorant, had not reflected on religion, and had not been rightly guided to the truth, then they (still) would have followed them. This (passage) shows that blind acceptance¹³ of what is capable of (individual) insight (*naẓar*) and independent research (*ijtihād*) is to be rejected. If one follows freely in the religion of another and thus has assurance through some kind of proof that he is correct, as is the case with the prophets and those who investigate the statements (of revelation) independently, then it is not in fact a matter of blind acceptance, but on the contrary one then follows what God has sent down. . . .

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 46:4f./3f.

Say: 'Have you considered what you call upon apart from God? Show me what they have created of the earth; or have they a partnership in the heavens? Bring me a book which precedes this, or some remnant of knowledge, if you speak truly.'
And who is further astray than one who calls upon, apart from God, such as will not answer him till the day of resurrection, and are heedless of the calling (of their worshippers)!¹⁴

. . . *Bring me a book which precedes this*: that is, which precedes this Book, namely the Qur'ān. What is meant is: This Book speaks of the unity of God and the futility of polytheism. Among the books of God which had been sent down earlier there is not one which speaks contrary to this. Thus (the meaning is): Bring (only) one

single book which was sent down earlier and which is a witness for the legitimacy of your worshipping beings other than God.

Or some remnant of knowledge: or some vestige (*baqiyya*) of knowledge which remains with you from the knowledge of the ancients. . . .

And who is further astray: The question posed here has its significance in the disavowal (of the assumption) that among all errors there may be one greater than idolatry. For idolaters do not call upon (him who is) All-hearing and All-granting, who (alone) has the power to fulfil every wish and every request. Instead of calling upon him, they call upon lifeless beings who do not hear them and who have no power to grant the requests of even one of their servants so long as the world remains and until the resurrection occurs. And when the resurrection occurs and the people crowd together, then the false gods will step forth as enemies and opponents of those who served them. Thus, the latter will have only burden and harm in both worlds (this world and the hereafter), since the false gods do not grant their requests in this world, and speak against them as enemies in the hereafter, and will disavow the worship which was paid to them . . . as in God's words: 'If you call upon them, they will not hear your prayer, and if they heard, they would not answer you; and on the day of resurrection they will disown your partnership' (Sūra 35:14/15). . . .

Zamakhsharī on Sūra 53:19–23

Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā and Manāt the third, the other?

What, have you males, and He females?

That were indeed an unjust division.

They are naught but names you yourselves and your fathers have named; God has sent down no authority concerning them. They¹⁵ follow only surmise and what the souls desire; and yet guidance has come to them from their Lord.

Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā and Manāt: the female idols of the pagan Arabs.¹⁶ Al-Lāt was worshipped by (the tribe of) Thaḡīf in aṭ-Ṭā'if. Others say that she was to be found in (the valley of) Nakhla (near Mecca), where (the tribe of) Quraish worshipped her. (The name) al-Lāt is the *fa'la* form from (the root)

l-w-y (to turn, curve, bend, rotate), since one turned to her in order to worship her, or one circled around her, that is, made the circumambulation around her. (This name also) is read *al-Lāttu* (the mixer) and it is held that this idol bore the name of a man who at this location used to mix butter with olive oil and give it to pilgrims for food. According to Mujāhid (however), there used to be a man in *aṭ-Ṭā'if* who made a mixture (out of wheat or barley), and (later) people began to worship at his grave and then they made an idol out of him.

Al-'Uzzā was worshipped by (the tribe of) *Ghaṭafān* and was an acacia tree. This name was originally the feminine of *al-a'azzu* (the most powerful one). The Messenger of God sent Khālid ibn *al-Walid* to her to destroy her.¹⁷ (When he arrived) a female demon came forth out of her and tore her hair, bewailing the calamity (which was about to occur) and placing her hands on her head. Then Khālid struck her with his sword until he killed her and said (in *rajaz* verse):

'Uzzā, not praise but curses upon you!
I see that God surely hath humbled you.

When Khālid returned and made his report to the Messenger of God, the latter said: 'That was *al-'Uzzā*. She will never again be worshipped!'

Manāt was a stone which was worshipped by (the tribes of) *Hudhail* and *Khuzā'a* and according to *Ibn 'Abbās* (also) by (the tribe of) *Thaqīf*.¹⁸ Some read (the name *Manāt* in the written form) *m-n-'t* (instead of *m-n-w-t*). It appears that this goddess *Manāt* was so named because the blood of the sacrifice was spilled (*amnā*) before her. . . . (Others read) in addition *manā'a* (which is the *maf'ala* form of *nau'* (stormy weather, rain, storm), suggesting that the people sought rain from her while imploring her blessing.

The third, the other (*al-ukhrā*): a deprecatory designation in the sense of one who is put back (*al-muta'akhhira*) on a lower rank.¹⁹ Similar is (the linguistic usage in) God's words: 'The first of them shall say to the last of them (*ukhrāhum*)' (*Sūra* 7:38/36), that is, last regarding importance and rank. It is possible that *al-Lāt* and *al-'Uzzā* held priority and pre-eminence among the pagan Arabs. The Arabs used to say that the angels and these (three) idols were daughters of God (*banāt Allāh*). They worshipped them and maintained that they were their intercessors before God, even though they buried alive their (unwanted) newborn daughters.²⁰

Thus, they were asked: *What, have you males, and He females?* What may be meant here is: *Al-Lāt*, *al-'Uzzā*, and *Manāt* are female beings whom you have placed alongside God as female associates. At the same time, you have the custom of despising and burying (alive) female beings who are born to you and are thus your relatives. How can you now regard these female beings as equal partners of God and designate them as goddesses? . . .

Zamakhsharī on *Sūra* 71:21/20–23

Noah said: 'My Lord, they have rebelled against me, and followed him whose wealth and children increase him only in loss, and have devised a mighty device and have said: 'Do not leave your gods, and do not leave Wadd, nor Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq, nor Nasr.'

. . . And do not leave Wadd, nor Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq, nor Nasr: It appears that these who are named were the most important and significant idols and are thus enumerated after the words *Do not leave your gods*. These idols of the (pagan) fellow tribesmen (*qaum*) of Noah reached the Arabs, so that (the tribe of) *Kalb* accepted *Wadd*, (the tribe of) *Hamdān* accepted *Suwā'*, (the tribe of) *Madhḥij* accepted *Yaghūth*, (the tribe of) *Murād* accepted *Ya'ūq*, and (the tribe of) *Ḥimyar* accepted *Nasr*.²¹ Thus an Arab may be named 'Abd *Wadd* (the servant of *Wadd*) or 'Abd *Yaghūth* (the servant of *Yaghūth*). Some say that these are the names of certain righteous men. Others say that these were among the descendants of Adam, and after they died, *Iblīs*²² said to their descendants: 'If you make for yourselves images (*ṣuwar*) of them, you can look at them.' This they did and after they died, *Iblīs* said to their descendants: 'Your parents worshipped these images.' Thereupon they began to worship them. (Still) others say that *Wadd* had the form (*ṣūra*) of a man, *Suwā'* that of a woman, *Yaghūth* that of a lion, *Ya'ūq* that of a horse, and *Nasr* that of an eagle (*nasr*). . . .

5. Superstition

Zamakhsharī on *Sūra* 113:1–5

Say: 'I take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak from the evil of what He has created,

*from the evil of darkness when it gathers,
from the evil of the women who blow on knots,
from the evil of an envier when he envies.'*

... *From the evil of the women who blow on knots (an-naffāthāti fī l-'uqad)*: By those who blow is meant the women who practise sorcery, (either) individuals (*nufūs*) or groups (*jamā'āt*) who make knots in ropes and then blow on them as a means of practising sorcery.²³ (The word) *nafatha* signifies blowing with spittle. This (practice) has an effect in the working of magic only if one eats, drinks, smells, or takes in in some other way something noxious. God still may effect something with the blowing as a test through which those who persevere in the truth can be distinguished from those who just talk and the fools among the common people. The talkers and the (ignorant) populace ascribe this result to the sorcerers and their blowing, while those who persevere in the firmly established words of God give no attention or consideration to such sorcery.

If one now asks about the meaning (of the statement) about seeking refuge from the evil which results from (such sorcery), then I answer that there are three possible interpretations (*aujuh*): The first is that one seeks refuge from their action as a (forbidden) practice of sorcery and (thus) from the sin that lies therein. The second is that one seeks refuge from the delusion of men through sorcery and from the deception by which the sorcerers delude people. And the third is that one seeks refuge from the evil that God allows to occur out of their blowing. The reference to the sorcerers may possibly (also) include the cunning women, as are mentioned in God's words: 'When (Joseph) saw his shirt was torn from behind, he said: "This is of your women's guile; surely your guile is great"' (Sūra 12:28). In this case her guile represents something comparable to sorcery and blowing on knots. Or, it may refer to the women who deceive men by offering themselves to them, exhibiting their beauty and thus bewitching them so to speak. ...

Baidāwī on the same passage

... *From the evil of the women who blow on knots*: from the evil that proceeds from the women or other sorcerers who make knots in rope and blow on them. (The word) *nafatha* signifies blowing with spittle. The specific occasion of this (verse) is found in the following

Tradition: A Jew practised an act of sorcery against the Prophet by making eleven knots in a string and placing this in a well. Then, when the Prophet became ill, the two sūras of refuge (sūras 113 and 114) came down. Gabriel (who transmitted this revelation) reported the act of sorcery to the Prophet, who then sent 'Alī who immediately brought back the string. When the Prophet then recited the (eleven verses of) the two sūras, each verse of the recitation loosened one knot, and the Prophet noticed (as each verse was recited) a steady alleviation (of his illness). From this it does not at all necessarily follow that the unbelievers were speaking the truth when they accused the Prophet of being bewitched (in regard to the source of his revelation), meaning that as a result of an act of sorcery he was jinn-possessed (*majnūn*) (so that his revelations were inspired by one of the jinn).

Others say that the statement about blowing on knots refers to the women who frustrate the resolve of men through cunning. Thus the reference would be a metaphor suggesting the softening of the knots by blowing on them for the purpose of loosening them more easily. ...