

# Islamic Studies Today

*Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*

*Edited by*

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# *Laylat al-Qadr* as Sacred Time

## *Sacred Cosmology in Sunni Kalām and Taf̄sīr*<sup>1</sup>

Arnold Yasin Mol<sup>2</sup>

### 1 Introduction

#### 1.1 *Revelation within Metaphysical and Physical Cosmology*

In religious and academic literature the revelation of the Qurʾān is mainly viewed from the point of view of historicity, i.e. when and why a certain text was revealed in history. As such, the revealed text is viewed as a physical text *within* time and *within* the physical world. Because of the Qurʾān's physical existence within creation as well as its designation as the word of God (*Kalām Allāh*, Q 2:75; 9:6; 48:15), there were discussions in early Islam as to the created or uncreated ontology of the Qurʾān. How can the divine attribute of speech, which exists outside of creation and time, be present within a physical and time-bound vehicle such as language? This has many parallels to Christian discussions on how the word of God (*Logos*, John 1:1) could be manifested within Jesus.<sup>3</sup> The Qurʾān also indicates that Mary received the word of God (*bi-kalimatīn minhu*, Q 3:45; 4:171), thereby providing, depending on which exegetical interpretation is followed, an Islamic Logos-Christology.<sup>4</sup>

1 My gratitude goes out to my supervisor Maurits Berger (Leiden University) for reviewing the article, and especially to Aisha Musa (Colgate University) for suggesting major improvements.

2 Arnold Yasin Mol is a graduate student in Islamic studies at the University of Leiden, lecturer in Islamic theology and qurʾānic sciences at the Fahm Institute ([www.fahminstituut.nl](http://www.fahminstituut.nl)), and co-founder of the Islam and human rights institute ([www.islamandhumanrights.institute](http://www.islamandhumanrights.institute)). He can be contacted at: [aymol@fahminstituut.nl](mailto:aymol@fahminstituut.nl).

3 For an overview of different Logos-Christologies, see Mark Edwards, *Image, word and God in the early Christian centuries*, Ashgate, UK 2013.

4 Some Muslim scholars understood God's word in this verse as referring to Jesus, thereby formulating an Islamic Christology, but the majority of scholars linked the word to the creational word (*Be!*, *kun*) in the next verse, "He says: 'Be and it is' (*yaqūl lahu kun fa-yakūn*, Q 3:47)." See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Taf̄sīr maf̄ātiḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut 1420/1999), 7:220–26; 11:270–2; Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *Taf̄sīr al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī* (Riyadh 2003), 2:255–64; 4:38–239. Wolfson claims, without reference, that the whole discussion on the (un)createdness of the Qurʾān is caused by Q 3:45. If Muslims could believe the word of God is eternal and uncreated, he states, they must also accept the Christian concept of the Incarnation (*ḥulūl*), and this is why,

It therefore became important for Muslim scholars to differentiate between the divine attribute of speech and its manifestation within creation.

Early theologians such as the Mu'tazila viewed the divine attribute of speech (*kalām* or *qawl*) as belonging to the active attributes (*ṣifāt al-af'āl*),<sup>5</sup> because to them speech is bound to an audience.<sup>6</sup> Later theologians from the Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools saw divine speech as belonging to the essential attributes (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*)<sup>7</sup> since God can have an internal speech (*kalām al-nafsī*) which is not dependent on an external, non-divine audience. But all three schools agreed on the hermeneutical differentiation between divine attributes and their effectual manifestations within creation. God and world are incomparable and never collapse into one another. When divine speech is viewed as being an essential attribute it doesn't exist through letters or sounds (*laysa min jins al-ḥurūf wa al-aṣwāt*), although the Qur'ān is expressed in letters and sounds which are created (*makhlūq*).<sup>8</sup> The Qur'ān is an expression

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he goes on to say, the Mu'tazila claimed the Qur'ān and divine speech were created. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge 1976), 308–18. The Islamic theologian and exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE) provides a similar argument to Wolfson by comparing the Ḥanbalī-Ḥashawīyyah (the theo-anthropomorphism adherents among the Ḥanbalī) to Christians, because the former believed the word of God to be eternal and to exist with letters and sounds, thereby making the earthly Qur'ān a hypostasis (*uqnūm*) which is incarnated (*ḥālla*), just as Jesus is within Christian theology; Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 1:44.

- 5 For the Mu'tazila and the Ash'arī these are active, non-essential, and bound to the creative act, attributes that designate which divine activities are essential for creation to exist. They are not essential for God and therefore not timeless-eternal (*qadīm*). The Ash'arī deem them as "not disappearing (*lā yazal*).” Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE) and his school see active and essential attributes as both being *qadīm*. Abū Bakr ibn Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *al-I'tiqād wa-l-hidayah ilā sabīl al-rashad* (Beirut 1401/1980), 71–2; Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd* (Beirut 2010), 113–6; Abu al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī, *Baḥr al-kalām yabḥṭhu fī ba'd al-firaq al-Islāmiyya wa-l-radd 'alayhā min al-Kitāb wa-l-Sunna* (Beirut 2005), 32–3.
- 6 For the positions of the Mu'tazila, see Aḥmad bin Ḥamad al-Khalīlī, *al-Ḥaqq al-dāmigh* (Muscat 2012), 159–74; al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa* (Cairo 2009), 529–62.
- 7 The essential attributes (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*) are those which are essential for God and the ones that differentiate Him from creation, and are therefore timelessly-eternal (*qadīm*); Bayhaqī, *al-I'tiqād*, 71–2.
- 8 Al-Taftāzānī's commentary on the *Aqā'id al-nasafī* in *Sharḥ al-'aqā'id al-Nasafīyya ma'a ḥāshiyatih: jamu' al-farā'id bi-'inārat sharḥ al-'aqā'id wa yalīhimā sharḥ mizān al-'aqā'id* (Karachi 2012), 159. See also 'Abdallāh al-Bayḍāwī, *Ṭawālī' al-anwār min matālī' al-anzār* (Cairo n.d.), 189; Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, *Sharḥ kitāb al-fiqh al-akbar* (Beirut 2007), 47–9; Abū al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī, *ibid.*, 60–1; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid.*, 1:43–5. Divine speech as an attribute is one (*wāḥida*), but when revealed becomes multiplicit whereby the Hebrew ordering (*manzūm*) is the Torah, and the Arabic ordering the Qur'ān; Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, 52.

or manifestation of divine speech, but this speech is not incarnated in the physical text itself (*ghayri ḥall̄fihā*);<sup>9</sup> rather, it is produced (*maḥdūth*)<sup>10</sup> or conveyed (*ikhbār*) using letters and sounds that make it understandable within creation.<sup>11</sup> Revelation did not manifest itself initially on the tongue of the Prophet Muḥammad, but, according to the Islamic tradition, had already gone through a whole process before its oral manifestation. The Qurʾān is said to be written on the well-preserved Tablet (*al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz*)<sup>12</sup> on which is also recorded the whole of creation, including ontology (*wujūd*), capabilities (*imkāniyya*), and acts (*afaʿāla*), is also recorded, meaning a complete description of every real and possible determination (*qadr*) of everything that will

9 Taftāzānī, 167.

10 “That he says: ‘The Qurʾān is *Kalām Allāh taʿālā* [which] is uncreated (*ghayr makhliq*),’ and he doesn’t say: ‘The Qurʾān is uncreated.’” Taftāzānī, *ibid.*, 164. The Qurʾān is indicated as being *ḥadīth/muḥdath* (a produced telling/event) in numerous verses (Q 39:23; 45:6; 52:34; 56:81), thereby allowing it to be designated as produced (*ḥudūth*) but not created (*makhliq*); see Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dahlawī in his *Sharḥ mīzān al-‘aqāʿid* in *sharḥ al-‘aqāʿid al-nasafiyya ma’a ḥāshiyatih*, 165; Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, *Sharḥ*, 48–9; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid.*, 1:43–4; 21:426, 30:782. The Māturīdī theologian Abu Muʿīn al-Nasafī (d. 1113) is also against using *ḥudūth* as a designation for the Qurʾān because the *Ur-Qurʾān* exists within divine speech and is thereby also eternal (*qadīm*). Our expression (*‘abarah*) of the *Ur-Qurʾān* is an expression with letters and sounds, and the remembrance of this within our hearts doesn’t mean the *Ur-Qurʾān* is present within them. Thus, for al-Nasafī, we can only use *ḥudūth* for the expression of the *Ur-Qurʾān*, but he never explains how the recited and written forms of the *Ur-Qurʾān* can be truly called Qurʾān (according to al-Nasafī. the use of *ḥadīth/muḥdath* in the aforementioned verses refers to the angel Gabriel). Abu Muʿīn al-Nasafī, *ibid.*, 63–9; Abu al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī, *Tabṣirat al-adilla fī uṣūl al-dīn* (Cairo 2011), 1:66–9. These detailed discussions try to find the ways in which one can discuss the earthly Qurʾān without collapsing it with God and but also, at the same time, without separating it from its divine origin. A similar discussion can be seen surrounding each of the divine attributes mentioned in the Qurʾān, in human language, and in what way they truly describe God; Abu Muʿīn al-Nasafī, *ibid.*, 70–1.

11 On the development of the discussions on the (un)createdness of the Qurʾān, see: Taftāzānī, *ibid.*, 157–67; Wolfson, *ibid.*, 235–73; al-Khalīlī, *ibid.*, 96–176.

12 Qurʾān 85:21–2. These verses can be read in two ways: (1) “... a glorious Qurʾān, in a well-preserved Tablet (*lawḥ<sup>m</sup> maḥfūz<sup>in</sup>*),” or (2) “... a glorious well-preserved Qurʾān (*Qurʾān<sup>um</sup> majīd<sup>um</sup>*) in a Tablet (*lawḥ<sup>in</sup> maḥfūz<sup>um</sup>*).” In reading (1) the Qurʾān and the *qadr* of all creation on the Tablet are protected against tampering, change, and corruption by Satan or other forces. In reading (2) is the Qurʾān protected in its revealed form on earth. The *Lawḥ al-maḥfūz* is generally seen as similar or linked to the *umm al-kitāb* (Q 3:7; 13:39; 43:4) and the *Kitāb maknūn* (Q 56:79); see Tāhir ibn ‘Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr* (Tunis n.d.), 12:255; Maḥmūd al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-‘Azīm wa al-sabʿ al-mathānī* (Cairo 2005), 30:386.

be, or could have been, created, is there.<sup>13</sup> Islamic theologians differed as to whether *al-Lawḥ al-Mahfūz* was one of the first things created, or if it was fashioned together with the creations it describes (heavens, earth, angels, beings etc.).<sup>14</sup> It is from *al-Lawḥ al-Mahfūz* that God's word as a divine attribute is transferred into a revelation that is present within creation,<sup>15</sup> and therefore takes up a physical position within the Islamic cosmology which is defined as a *sacred space* by the Islamic tradition. This Islamic cosmology was inherited from Greek-Persian-Indian cosmology, to which the Islamic tradition added sacred spaces (see figure and table 5.1, below).

The Islamic tradition has constructed multiple versions of *how, where, and when* the Qur'an was revealed to Muḥammad. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) describes in his encyclopedia of Qur'anic sciences, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, multiple traditions of how the Qur'an was transferred from *al-Lawḥ al-Mahfūz* to Muḥammad (in order of most to least accepted version):

- 
- 13 The Ḥanafī-Māturīdī emphasize that this determination is recorded as a description and not as a decree (*bi-l-waṣf wa lā bi-l-ḥukm*), that it expresses God's eternal knowledge of what is and will be, and that it does not command the fate of everything (predestination), which would eliminate free will from creation. The freely-chosen human beliefs and acts are described, but not decided by God; cf. Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, *ibid.*, 74–5; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid.*, 9:379.
- 14 A prophetic *ḥadīth* says the “pen” (*al-qalam*) was the first creation, and the Tablet the second. Another narration says the Tablet is the first creation. The Tablet is understood by some as a metaphor (*yushabbahu*) for the Throne (*al-'arsh*) which itself is also understood to be a metaphor (*majāz*) for God's knowledge (*'ilm*) or power (*sultān/mulk*). Others see it as a physical object (*jism*) containing real writing, but differ on the substances from which it is made (the most popular traditions say it is made from pearl (*durr*). There are also claims that there are four Tablets: *lawḥ al-qaḍā'* (tablet of decree), *lawḥ al-qadr* (tablet of determination), *lawḥ al-naḥs* (tablet of the soul), and *lawḥ al-ḥayyūlā* (tablet of primal matter). These coincide with the higher intellects and forms in Islamic philosophy: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid.*, 29:52, 27:617–8; 'Abdallāh al-Bayḍāwī, *Ṭawālī' al-anwār*, 148–9; al-Māturīdī, *ibid.*, 10:369–70, 490; Tāhir ibn 'Ashūr, *ibid.*, 12:253–4; al-Ālūsī, *ibid.*, 30:386; A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim creed: Its genesis and historical development* (London 1965), 148–9; Ibn Abī l-'Izz, *Sharḥ al-'aqīda al-ṭahāwīyya*, trans. Muḥammad Abdulḥaqq Anṣārī (Riyadh 2000), 209–10, 223–6; Ibn Kathīr al-Damashqī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* (Beirut 2004), 4:463–4.
- 15 On the *Lawḥ* is God's word, the Qur'an and other revelations, described in the forms (*ashkāl*) of words and sounds. Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, *ibid.*, 49. The Mu'tazilī al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE) emphasizes that this described Qur'an has therefore become a physical object (*jism*) and proves it is an originated creation (*ḥadath*); al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mutashābuh al-Qur'ān* (Cairo n.d.), 685.

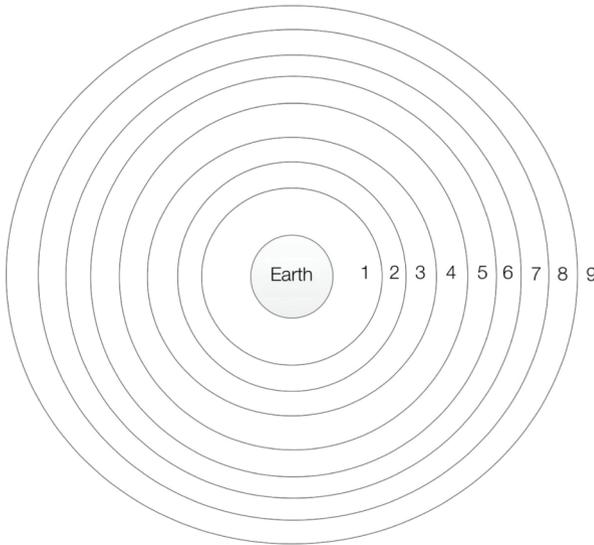


FIGURE 5.1 *The spheres within classical Greek and Islamic cosmology, photo by Arnold Y. Mol.*

1. On *Laylat al-qadr* God brought it down to the lowest heaven (*al-samā' al-dunyā*) in its totality, after which He revealed it in parts over a period of twenty, twenty-three, or twenty-five years. The differences are due to the differences [of opinion] on how long the [the Prophet] remained in Mecca after his calling.
2. The Qur'ān descended in its totality on *Laylat al-qadr*, and it was between the spheres of the stars. Then God revealed it to His Messenger piece by piece.
3. In one night, *Laylat al-qadr*, the Qur'ān descended to the lowest heaven, after which it was revealed over a period of twenty years.
4. The Qur'ān was separated from the *Dhikr*<sup>16</sup> and was placed within the Abode of Glory (*Bayt al-'izza*)<sup>17</sup> in the lowest heaven, after which Gabriel revealed it to the Prophet.

16 *al-Dhikr*, lit. remembrance/admonition, a common term used in the Qur'ān itself for the Qur'ān as revelation (e.g. Q 3:58; 6:69, 90; 7:2, 63; 15:6), and for the revelations revealed to all previous messengers (16:43–4, 21:48, 105), and is understood in relation to the Tablet as being the totality of revelation as written on *al-Lawḥ al-mahfūz*.

17 *Bayt al-'izza*, a non-qur'anic term which is linked by many commentators to the frequent house (*Bayt al-ma'mūr*) mentioned in Q 52:4. According to Islamic tradition this is located

5. It was given to Gabriel who placed it within the *Bayt al-‘izza*, after which he brought it down [to earth] in parts.<sup>18</sup>

In the multiple versions there is agreement over *when* the Qurʾān was sent down to the lowest heaven and from there to Muḥammad: the month of Ramaḍān. This is also mentioned in the Qurʾān “Ramaḍān is the month in which the Qurʾān was sent down (Q 2:185),” and for this reason it is the month specified for fasting.<sup>19</sup> According to the traditions mentioned above, based on Q 97:1, there is also a specific night within the month of Ramaḍān on which it is sent down: *Laylat al-qadr*, the night of power or determination. Al-Suyūṭī tries to reconcile the conflicting traditions of the double descent with the majority opinion of it having been sent down during Ramaḍān: the Qurʾān was sent down to the lowest heavens during Ramaḍān (1st *tanzīl*), and was also revealed to Muḥammad during Ramaḍān (2nd *tanzīl*). There is even a tradition that claims that all previous revelations were also sent down during Ramaḍān. Al-Suyūṭī tries to do the same for *Laylat al-qadr*, whereby the cosmic descent, as well as the earthly descent, all collapse into a singular *sacred time*.<sup>20</sup> With the transfer from the 1st to the 2nd *tanzīl*, the Qurʾān was brought from the unseen world (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) to the seen world (*‘ālam al-shahāda*).<sup>21</sup> This revelatory cosmology (see figure 5.2 below) provides a *sacred space* that is not accessible for the common man as it belongs to the unseen world, but it also provides a *sacred time* that is accessible, because time overlaps the unseen and seen worlds and can

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in the lowest heaven, is similar to the Ka’ba, and is the place where angels perform their own Ḥajj rituals. Others see the *Bayt al-‘izza* as the place where revelation is copied by the noble scribes, mentioned in Q 80:15–6. Al-Bayḍāwī places the *Bayt al-ma’mūr* in the fourth heavenly sphere if it is understood as the angelic Ka’ba, or its is the earthly Ka’ba, or it is the heart of the believers, and he does not mention any linkage to the *Bayt al-‘izza*. Al-Māwardī states it is the heavenly Ka’ba but also that it is above the seven heavens. Other opinions he cites says it is the original Ka’ba as build by the prophet Adam, or the current Ka’ba. Al-Suyūṭī mentions it could also be in the third, sixth, or seventh heaven. ‘Abdallāh al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa āsrār al-tā’wīl* (Beirut 2004), 2:1016; Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī al-Baṣrī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘Uyūn Tafsīr al-Māwardī* (Beirut n.d.), 5:377–8; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Damascus 1995), 523; Ibn Kathīr al-Damashqī, *Tafsīr*, 4:218–9.

18 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fi ‘ulūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut 1997), 1:116–7.

19 Fasting during the month of Ramaḍān belongs to the five pillars of Sunni Islam. For a discussion on the requirements and proofs for its obligation on mature healthy Muslims, see Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, *al-Fiqh al-Islāmīyya wa-adillatuhu* (Damascus 2008), 2:509–10.

20 al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 1:117–21. The definitions of *sacred time* and *sacred space* are given below.

21 al-Alūsī, 30:523.

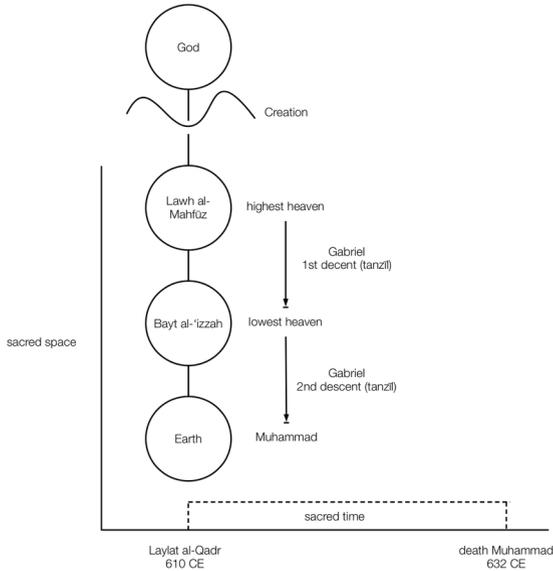


FIGURE 5.2 *Revelatory cosmology, photo by Arnold Y. Mol.*

be witnessed by both.<sup>22</sup> It is this *sacred time* in which mankind can perform acts which create their own *sacred spaces* on earth.

## 2 Sacred Time and Space in Islam

Islam acknowledges multiple *sacred spaces* that were considered sacred before the advent of Islam, such as Jerusalem,<sup>23</sup> Mecca,<sup>24</sup> and the graves of prophets. The Qurʾān also designates monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques as *sacred spaces* because in them “God’s name is mentioned frequently (Q 22:40).”<sup>25</sup> The month of Ramaḍān was named as such in the Arab calendars before the advent of Islam, and the Qurʾān integrated the calendar

22 The exception is the Prophet Muḥammad who during the night journey (*al-miʾrāj*) went to the highest heaven, which mirrors the act of revelatory descent of *Laylat al-qadr*.

23 The “furthest mosque” (Q 17:1).

24 The “first house” (Q 3:96), the “sacred house” (Q 14:37), the “sacred mosque” (Q 2:143), the “old house” (Q 22:29), and the “house of the Lord” (Q 106:3).

25 The issue if God’s name is mentioned in all these religious buildings equal in monotheistic worth, see Tāhir ibn ʿĀshūr, *ibid.*, 17:276–80.

TABLE 5.1 *A comparison of Aristotelian, Islamic theological, and Islamic philosophical cosmologies*

Sphere	Aristotle	Islamic theology	Islamic philosophy
1. 7th and lowest heavenly sphere	Moon, four elements	Moon, four elements <i>Bayt al-‘izza</i> / <i>Bayt al-ma‘mūr</i>	Moon, tenth intellect, four elements, Gabriel
2. 6th heavenly sphere	Mercury, ether	Mercury	Mercury, ether, ninth intellect
3. 5th heavenly sphere	Venus, ether	Venus	Venus, ether, eighth intellect
4. 4th heavenly sphere	Sun, ether	Sun	Sun, ether, seventh intellect
5. 3rd heavenly sphere	Mars, ether	Mars	Mars, ether, sixth intellect
6. 2nd heavenly sphere	Jupiter, ether	Jupiter	Jupiter, ether, fifth intellect
7. 1st heavenly sphere	Saturn, ether	Saturn	Saturn, ether, fourth intellect
8. Sphere of the stars	Zodiac, fixed stars	Zodiac, fixed stars	Zodiac, fixed stars, third intellect
9. Outer greatest sphere	Sphere of the prime mover	Outer sphere which moves everything, highest heaven, <i>al-Lawḥ al-Mahfūz</i> , <i>al-‘Arsh</i>	Outer sphere which moves everything, highest heaven, second intellect; beyond this sphere is the first intellect, which emanates directly from God and does not embody a sphere

into the new religion. The same holds for the sacred months designated for the Ḥajj rituals and truces.<sup>26</sup> Existing months that were designated as *sacred time* before Islam were integrated into it, while other previously existing months

26 Q 2:197; 9:2, 36; and 5:2. The holy months of the Ḥajj and ‘Umra rituals are in the Sunnī tradition Shawwāl, Dhū l-Qa‘da, and Dhū l-Ḥijja. The holy months of Q 9:36 are Dhū l-Qa‘da, Dhū l-Ḥijja, Muḥarram, and Rajab; Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl*, 1:116, 405. Several calendars existed before Islam, both solar and lunar, which were applied by different Arab tribes, but the specific names as mentioned were already known. With the advent of Islam

that were not sacred before were made into *sacred time* with the introduction of the new religion. As for *Laylat al-qadr*, it is a name given by the Qurʾān to a specific moment in time unknown before Islam and, therefore, marks the creation of *sacred time* through revelation, something that is sacred because it refers to the act of revelation itself.<sup>27</sup> In Mircea Eliade's concept of *sacred time* and *sacred space* he positions the sacred, the "transcendent," in opposition to the profane, the "secular," thereby linking the sacred to cosmogony, the creation of the world. *Sacred spaces* link creator, created cosmos, and the human daily world through ritual spaces that represent this cosmogony on earth.<sup>28</sup> We see this concept in Islam with the heavenly *Bayt al-ma'mūr* being a copy of the earthly Ka'ba, linking humans and angels together into a single ritual space and act. *Sacred times* point to the moment of creation, the *illud tempus*, and through being present and performing a determined set of acts within that timeframe the moment of creation itself is made present.<sup>29</sup> It is this aspect of linking time and creation through which we return to the divine attribute of speech; in biblical and qur'anic theology creating and revealing are the same, both are derived from God's speech.<sup>30</sup> Samer Akkach emphasizes that in Islam the sacred is not

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a singular lunar calendar was constructed; Gerhard Böwering, The concept of time in Islam, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 141/1 (1997), 63–4.

- 27 Which will be discussed further below in our analysis of Māturīdī's commentary on *sūra* 97.
- 28 Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and profane. The nature of religion* (New York), 44–65.
- 29 Ibid., 80–1. Time can be divided into: (1) universal and personal history, (2) daily routine, (3) sacred time which lies outside normal history and to which one wants to return constantly (cyclic) or which introduces new time (as new year); see Daniel Pals, *Eight theories of religion* (Cambridge 2006), 213.
- 30 In the Qurʾān nature, miracles, and the verses themselves are designated *āyāt*, "signs," which point towards God's existence, almightiness, and wisdom, and have all come about through His word (e.g. Q 2:99, 164 etc.). The biblical term *Owth* is similarly used for nature, covenantal signs, and miracles (e.g. Genesis 1:14; 4:15; 9:12; 17:11; Exodus 4:28 etc.). The qur'anic term is probably derived from the biblical term through Syriac, and in so doing retained its Semitic theological significance. In Western systematic theology, creation (the order of nature) is termed "general revelation," and verbal revelation (as in scripture) "special revelation." See EQ, 5:2–11; Arthur Jeffery, *The foreign vocabulary of the Qurʾān* (Leiden 2007), 72–3; Tariq Ramadan, *Radical reform. Islamic ethics and liberation* (Oxford 2009), 87–100; G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (ed.), *Theological dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids 1997), 1:167–88; Gerald O'Collins, *Rethinking fundamental theology. Toward a new fundamental theology* (Oxford 2011), 57–68.

mirrored in the profane. The world does not corrupt the sacred.<sup>31</sup> The Islamic sacred exists without a necessary profane. In Islam, *sacred time* and *space* are rarely designated through terms as *muqaddas* (holy) or *muḥarram* (taboo), but by *faḍā'il*, meaning something with superior or special qualities or virtues.<sup>32</sup> It is this term we also encounter in the commentaries on Qur'ān *sūra* 97, which discuss why *Laylat al-qadr* is better than a thousand months. The rituals of Ramaḍān have, for the most part, been extensively stipulated in the Qur'ān and the prophetic *Sunna*, without major differences of opinion among the Sunnī schools of thought.<sup>33</sup> But on the timing and the stipulated acts of *Laylat al-qadr* there are many conflicting source texts and opinions. Are they linked with the ten-day retreat into the mosque in the last days of Ramaḍān (*i'tikāf*, Q 2:187), or is it a separate *sacred time*? And how can a believer participate in this *sacred time* when there is no certainty about its exact timing?

### 2.1 *Laylat al-Qadr as Sacred Time in Sunnī Tafsīr*

In the following translation and analysis of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī's *tafsīr* of Q 97, I will discuss these issues surrounding *Laylat al-qadr*: What does its name mean, when was it sent down, what was sent down in it, why is it better than a thousand months, why is there peace in it, and most importantly, when is it? Al-Māturīdī's work has been chosen for this analysis because his approach as an orthodox-rational theologian (*mutakallimun*) provides a coherent summary of both the rational and traditional arguments in the Sunnī tradition on this *sūra*.<sup>34</sup> According to al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE/333 AH), there are two methods of exegesis: (1) *tafsīr*, which, according to him, is based on the prophetic Sunna and the opinions of the prophetic Companions who know the reason of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*), from which the revealed command (*amr*) and

31 Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and architecture in premodern Islam. An architectural reading of mystical ideas* (Albany 2005), 165. According to a well-known prophetic tradition, the whole earth was made a mosque, thus it is all sacred space, pure and uncorrupted; al-Zuhaylī, *al-Fiqh al-Islāmīyya wa-adillatuhu*, 1:561. We see this also in the Ḥanafī claim that the world and everything in nature is in its essence beneficial, permitted (*mubāḥ*), and pure. For a discussion on the Ḥanafī concept, see Arnold Yasin Mol, *Rational ethics and natural law in classical Islam. Examples from the Hanafi school* (2015), available at: <[https://www.academia.edu/10939863/Rational\\_ethics\\_and\\_Natural\\_Law\\_in\\_classical\\_Islam\\_Examples\\_from\\_the\\_Hanafi\\_school/](https://www.academia.edu/10939863/Rational_ethics_and_Natural_Law_in_classical_Islam_Examples_from_the_Hanafi_school/)>.

32 Akkach, *ibid.*, 165–8.

33 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jazīrī, *al-Fiqh 'alā l-madhāhib al-arba'a* (Cairo 1994), 1:487–562.

34 On the life, works, and methodology of al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE), see Mustafa Ceric, *Roots of synthetic theology in Islām*, Malaysia 1995; Ulrich Rudolph, *al-Māturīdī and the development of Sunnī theology in Samarqand*, Leiden 2015.

intent (*murād*) can be derived; and (2) *taʿwīl*, the rational interpretations of the *fuqahāʾ*, who use reason (*rāʾy*) to extend the meaning and implications of this command and intent to its utmost.<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere he also states “*tafsīr* is the categorical (*al-qāṭiʿ*) conclusion that the meaning of the term in question is this, and the testimony before God Almighty that this is what He meant by the term in question; while *taʿwīl* is the preference (*tarjīh*) of one possibility over several others without categorical conclusion or testimony.”<sup>36</sup> In his analysis of Q 97 both methods of exegesis are present. Also, to provide an overview of the many ways which Q 97 has been understood in the Sunnī tradition I have placed al-Māturīdī’s exegesis alongside that of other classical Sunnī exegetes (see appendix 1).<sup>37</sup>

### 2.1.1 Translation and Analysis of al-Māturīdī’s *tafsīr* on Q 97<sup>38</sup>

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةِ الْقَدْرِ

97:1 We have sent it down (*anzalnāhu*) in the night of power/determination/decreed (*Laylat al-qadr*).

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ

97:2 And what will make you perceive/know (*adrāka*) what the night of power is?

لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ

35 Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *ibid.*, 1:349. *Tafsīr* is derived from *fasara* and literally means “to explain something.” *Taʿwīl* is from *awala* and means “to return something to its first or original intended meaning.” Early *tafsīr* works applied the term *taʿwīl* as a title, such as the works by al-Māturīdī and al-Tabarī (d. 923 CE), whereby it represented the rational-jurist interpretations and *tafsīr*. In later works (post-1200 CE) is *tāʿwīl* used for mystical interpretations. For the discussion on *tafsīr* genres, see ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrestānī, *Keys to the arcana (Mafāṭīh al-asrār wa-masābīh al-abrār)*. *Shahrestānī’s esoteric commentary on the Qurʾān*, translated by Toby Mayer (London 2009), 37–50, 104–8; Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of qurʾānic exegesis. Genesis and development* (Abingdon, UK 2010), 84–110; Mannāʿ al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥiṭh fi ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut 2009), 295–300.

36 Māturīdī, *ibid.*, 1:185.

37 By classical I mean all pre-1800 works. For a discussion of this, see: Abdul-Raof, *Schools of qurʾānic exegesis*.

38 Māturīdī, *Tafsīr taʿwīlāt ahl al-sunna* (Beirut 2005), 10:583–7.

97:3 The night of power is better (*khayr*) than a thousand months.

تَنْزِيلُ الْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالرُّوحِ فِيهَا بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ مِنْ كُلِّ أَمْرٍ

97:4 In it descend (*tanazzalu*) angels and the spirit (*al-rūḥ*) by leave of their Lord, with every command (*min kulli amr*).

سَلَامٌ مَّيِّ حَتَّىٰ مَطْلَعِ الْفَجْرِ

97:5 Peace (*salām*) it is until the rise (*maṭlaʿi*) of dawn.

Meccan.<sup>39</sup> “97:1” The people of *taʿwīl* say: That He says “We have sent it down,” means: the Qurʾān.<sup>40</sup> And it is possible that “sent it down” means: *al-salām*, which is mentioned later in the *sūra*, where He says: “with every command, peace.” Those who say He has sent down the Qurʾān in *Laylat al-qadr* disagree about it:

Some say: The Qurʾān was sent down in one piece (*jumla*)<sup>41</sup> to the lowest heaven from *al-Lawḥ al-mahfūz* during this night and it is in the

39 An opinion of Ibn ʿAbbās states this *sūra* was revealed in Mecca. Another tradition says Ibn ʿAbbās stated it was revealed in Medina. Al-Wāqidi says it was the first revealed *sūra* in Medina because fasting was only made an obligation (*farḍ*) after the Hijra. Al-Alūsī says this *sūra* was revealed when Muḥammad was sitting on the *minbar*, therefore it could only be revealed in Medina as he had no mosque or *minbar* in Mecca. The majority opinion states it is Medinan. Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (Beirut 2003), 3:640–1; Tāhīr ibn ʿĀshūr, *ibid.*, 30:455–66; Alūsī, *ibid.*, 15:521.

40 According to Rāzī, by using only the suffix – *hu* – for the Qurʾān it indicates its prestige and can be compared to how the revelation of the Qurʾān in Q 56:77–80 is mirrored to the moment of death (*al-waqt*) in Q 56:83. That it refers to the moment of death is not directly stated, but is clearly implied, thereby indicating the importance of the subjects not directly stated in these verses. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid.*, 32:27. For an alternative reading of this suffix, see Micheal Sells, Sound, spirit and gender in *Sūrat al-Qadr*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111 (1991), 239–59.

41 There are several opinions on whether: (1) Gabriel brought parts of the Qurʾān down to the lowest heaven and the Prophet each *Laylat al-qadr*, or (2) the whole text was sent down to the Prophet all at once, after which parts were made known to him over a period of 20–25 years, (3) the majority of the Qurʾān was revealed during the months of Ramaḍān, (4) the whole Qurʾān was sent down to the lowest heaven (1st *tanzīl*) and after which sent down to Muḥammad over a period of 20–25 years (2nd *tanzīl*). The ritual of reciting the whole Qurʾān during Ramaḍān mirrors the descent and/or revelation of the Qurʾān during that month. See Abbas Jaffer and Masuma Jaffer, *An introduction to quranic sciences* (London 2009), 46–53; al-Alūsī, *ibid.*, 15:523.

month of Ramaḍān, because He says “The month of Ramaḍān is when He sent down the Qurʾān (Q 2:185),” meaning: He sent it down from *al-Lawḥ al-mahfūz*, then from the lowest heaven unto the Messenger of God in separate parts according to the needs of command and prohibition, the permissible and forbidden, admonitions, and all that is necessary.<sup>42</sup> Some say: Only the amount that is necessary for the coming is sent down as a whole from *al-Lawḥ al-mahfūz* in this night; afterwards, it is sent down onto the Messenger of God in separate parts, and God knows best.

Moreover, we do not know what makes this night virtuous (*al-faḍīla*): Because special worship occurs in it.<sup>43</sup> He tests creation in its pursuit of estrangement [from anything evil or worldly] (*al-taghrīb*) and civility (*al-adab*); or it is virtuous as a place where He tests the angels and makes them responsible for descending therein, and worshipping on earth, and sending down the Qurʾān and such.<sup>44</sup> Or the wisdom [behind not revealing how to know *Laylat al-qadr*] means the virtuousness does not appear<sup>45</sup> in one specific meaning.<sup>46</sup> There are certain

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- 42 This does not make the Qurʾān a reactive or *ad hoc* revelation, but an interactive revelation with a teleological focus. According to the *mutakallimūn* and philosophers of law (*uṣūliyyūn*) the Qurʾān was revealed through God’s assisting grace (*lutf*) and mercy (*rahma*, Q 55:1–2), and for general human welfare. Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl* 1:129; Tāhir ibn ʿĀshūr, *ibid* 1:379–81; Māturīdī, *ibid.*, 6:7; 8:536; Jaṣṣāṣ, *ibid.*, 1:569.
- 43 Here *Laylat al-qadr* is portrayed as special because of man’s worship in it. There are several acts and prayers recommended for *Laylat al-qadr*: (1) complete ritual purity (*ghusl*), (2) the giving of alms (*ṣadaqa*), (3) the pronouncement of the supplication (*duʿāʾ*): “God You are forgiving, You love forgiveness, so forgive me (*Allāhumma innaka ʿafiwun tuḥibb al-ʿafwa fa-ʿffu ʿannī*)”, (4) performing four *rakaʿāt* after the *ʾishāʾ* prayer. Some sources add more: (5) reciting *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* seven times (Q 1) and *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (Q 112), (6) the seventy or hundreds time repeating of the supplication: “God forgive me and I seek repentance with Him (*astaghfiru allāha wa-atūbu ilayhi*)”, (7) to lay the Qurʾān on one’s head while repeating several supplications, whereby the physical Qurʾān is used as a ritual object. Zuhaylī, *al-Fiqh al-Islāmīyya wa-adillatuhu* 3:1623–5, 1677–8; Abū Bakr al-Kāsānī, *Badāʾīʿ al-ṣanāʾīʿ tartīb al-sharāʾīʿ* (Beirut 1986), 1:285.
- 44 Here *Laylat al-qadr* is portrayed as special because of the duties of the angels, and not due to the acts of man.
- 45 Here Māturīdī mirrors the non-apparent knowledge with the rise of dawn in Q 97:5, by using a verb from the same root.
- 46 This is a typical form of *tāʾwīl* discourse where multiple meanings are all seen as possibly true even though they are conflicting. Through this, the extend of the meaning of the Qurʾān is maximized, which is according to Māturīdī the exact purpose of *tāʾwīl*, see note 36, above.

localities [in time or place] that are more virtuous for worship therein, as mentioned [in the *ḥadīth*]: "A single prayer in the Masjid al-Ḥarām is equal to a hundred thousand prayers elsewhere, and a single prayer in a mosque is equal to a hundred prayers elsewhere except [compared to] the Masjid al-Ḥarām." And God the Exalted says "and the mosques are God's (Q 72:18)," these localities have been distinguished from others in virtuousness because worship is performed in them.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is possible that certain times are more distinguished in virtuousness than others, for the worship [performed within] a locality is performed in [a certain timeframe], because these places are made distinct, but the special times are not manifested, thereby to be made distinct from other times,<sup>48</sup> so it is – and God knows best – that if it had been made manifest, and pointed out, then there would be no provisions necessary for the searching [of when these times are], because He preserves that time and that night in particular.<sup>49</sup> Concerning the position of the necessary provisions in arriving at that position, it is similar to what is inferred from [the fact that] the time the spirit of a man leaves his body is not made manifest. Because if it were made manifest and he knew when his life would end he would engage in great sin and disobedience (*ma'ṣiya*) until the latter parts of his life, and then he would repent. So [the moment of death] it is not made manifest, so that he is always in a state of fear, warning, and hope. In the same way, this night is not made manifest, so that it is sought after from among all other nights, so they may celebrate [in it]. And God knows best.<sup>50</sup>

47 See also the discussion on this in Jaṣṣāṣ, *ibid.*, 3:640.

48 "*al-Waqt*, literally 'a period/point in time,' denotes, according to Ibn 'Arabī, a designation (*taqdīr*) of something that itself does not make clear what is being designated. It is an assumption, in other words, as is the case when one assumes a beginning, middle, or end in a sphere, while the spatiality of the sphere does not admit any of these definitions. With reference to a prophetic tradition that describes time (*zaman*) as being circular in form, Ibn 'Arabī argues that *al-awqāt*, as temporal assumptions, are meaningful only with reference to both human spatiality and man's centrality in the world. It is the correlation of the stellar movements with human spatiality that establishes the spatio-temporal order of the world." Akkach, *ibid.*, 172.

49 Meaning that nowhere does the Qur'ān indicate what is required to know *Laylat al-qadr*, or how to find it. But indications are provided in prophetic traditions, see below.

50 According to al-Rāzī, *Laylat al-qadr* is hidden because of the reason (*sabab*) that mankind is rewarded for searching (*ṭalab*) the night, it proves the necessity and reward for personal interpretation (*ijtihād*) which night it is, and provides people hope (*rajā'*) comparable to

Then there is the question whether the Qurʾān is the revealed in this night; the proof (*dalīluhu*) [for this] is His statement: “Hā Mīm, by the clear Book, truly We sent it down on a blessed night . . . (Q 44:1–3),” and this inquiry is about *Laylat al-qadr* and is evidence (*al-Bayān*) for it. Then He says: “And what will make you perceive what the night of power is? (Q 97:2),” this has two aspects: First, He says: You will know only until He will let you know; such as His statement: “What We have revealed unto you, before this, neither you or your people knew it (*taʿlamuhā*)<sup>51</sup> . . . (Q 11:49).” And it is possibly obtained from His statement: “And what will make you perceive” [that it is] about the glory and amazement [one has] for it. And God knows best. And it is stated: The descent of this verse [Q 97:2] is with the meaning of consolation, it provides virtue for this night and the works performed in it, and then declares its virtuousness with: “The night of power is better than a thousand months (Q 97:3),” on which is disagreement (*ikhtilāf*): Some say: That the Prophet saw the Umayyad clan on his *minbar*, so it had become evil (*sāʾahu*), and after which He revealed [the whole of *Sūrat al-Qadr*] (Q 97:1–6), meaning: For a thousand months [the *minbar*, i.e. the caliphate] will be occupied by the Umayyad clan, O Muḥammad!<sup>52</sup>

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the hope expressed in God's expression in Q 2:30 “I know what you don't know” which expresses the good, potential and future, God knows humanity has. He also compares the hiddenness of the moment (*al-waqt*) of *Laylat al-Qadr* with the moment of death; Rāzī, *ibid.*, 32:28–9. In this way the unknowability of the exact moment of *Laylat al-qadr* and the searching of it have been incorporated into the ritual of *Laylat al-qadr*. Uncertainty and expectation concerning *sacred time* are in this way ritualized. Both Māturīdī and Rāzī refer to the ignorance of the angels in Q 2:30–2 as an example of how Muslims must deal with the uncertainty surrounding *Laylat al-qadr*. It is not clear where this similar exegesis comes from (I was unable to trace it; al-Māturīdī was known to al-Rāzī and cites him several times [Rāzī, *ibid.*, 5:316, 14:353, 24:492, 27: 612], but it is unclear if he had access to al-Māturīdī's *tafsīr*). The similarity in exegesis could be coincidence, or there is a wider exegetical tradition of linking hidden knowledge to Q 2:30–2.

51 Here al-Māturīdī sees Q 97:2, “perceive (*adrāka*),” and Q 11:49 “knew (*taʿlam*)” as synonymous.

52 Through this reason of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) this *sūra* became a political statement, transcending the chronological context or any form of *sacred time*, responding to events after the death of the prophet. The Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE) was, in the dream, portrayed as bad, but declared as divinely approved by linking it to Q 97:3. Rāzī provides a similar *sabab* tradition in which the Prophet sees, in his sleep, the Banī Umayyad ruling from his *minbar* one after the other and that this is the divine *qadr*, and after this dream *Sūra al-Qadr* was revealed, whereby the reign of the Umayyads is stated as being a thousand months, 83 years. After this al-Rāzī cites the Muʿtazilī ʿAbd al-Jabbār who responds to this *sabab* tradition by ridiculing it, saying God mentions noth-

And some say: “The night of power is better than a thousand months,” meaning: The works in it are better than the works in a thousand months similar to it. And it is also stated: That the Messenger of God mentioned to his companions that a man from the Banī Isrāʾīl performed *jihād* in the path of God for a thousand months, and they had veneration [for this man]. And then the Exalted revealed “The night of power is better than a thousand months,” meaning: the works therein are as good as the *jihād* of that man for a thousand months.<sup>53</sup> And from this it is possible that the thousand months is mentioned in the way of allegory (*al-Tamthīl*)<sup>54</sup> and is not meant as a time measurement (*al-tawqūt*). Meaning: better than a thousand months and more, because a measurement (*al-taqdīr*) is meant to demonstrate an essential quantity (*al-ʿadad nafsuḥ*), and to demonstrate that it distinguishes and emphasizes something. Therefore, it is not with the purpose (*al-gharaḍ*) of restricting (*al-qaṣr*) the quantity [to a thousand], and it is as His statement: “If you seek forgiveness for them seventy times, He will not forgive them (Q 9:80),” in such a manner.

Then there is disagreement in the naming of *Laylat al-qadr*. Some say: A night of judgement (*al-ḥukm*) and decree (*al-qaḍāʾ*), in which He judges and decrees as He wills what will be in the upcoming year (*al-ʿām al-maqbūl*).<sup>55</sup> Such as His statement: “Therein every wise command (*al-ḥakīm*) is made distinct (Q 44:4).” Or it is so named because this night is meant for determination (*qadr*) and distinct rank (*manzila*) with God

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ing good about the Umayyads, and that it was a horrible (*madhmūma*) thousand months. Rāzī rejects this opinion and praises the Umayyads for being great (*ʿazīm*) in worldly bliss and that it is nor forbidden to connect this *sūra* to them. Rāzī, *ibid.*, 32:231. This *sabab* is a typical example of what is generally viewed as a fabricated tradition which presents the reign of the Banī Umayya as being divine *qadr*. Many theologians attacked them on this issue, including Ḥassan al-Baṣrī (d. 728 CE), who pointed out that God never wills injustice. See Michael Schwarz, The letter of al-Hasan al-Baṣrī, *Oriens* 20 (1967), 15–30.

53 For discussions and gradings of the reasons of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), see Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, *al-Taḥf al-munīr fī l-ʿaqīda wa-l-sharḥ wa-l-minhaj* (Damascus 1418/1997), 30:331.

54 Al-Māturīdī explains *tamthīl* as being the opposite of *taḥqīq*: “It is allegorical and not literal.” In his commentary on Q 31:33 he explains it as: “That which adds to the delusion of it (*adhāf al-taghrīr ilayhā*); in order, what is from the ornamentation (*al-tazyīn*) and beautification (*al-taḥsīn*) of the apparent [meaning] (*al-zāḥar*), and the showing (*iḥḥār*) of its splendor (*bahjatihā*) and its delight (*surūrahā*) and for [the display of] its essence if one were to use differentiation (*al-tamyīz*) and reason (*al-ʿaql*) and understanding (*al-fahm*), and [so one sees] the reality of the ornamentation and beautification are a delusion, and so what belongs to [the way of] the apparent [meaning] is a delusion [and belongs to the way of] allegory (*al-Tamthīl*). Māturīdī, *ibid.*, 8:527, 322.

55 Reference to the yearly descent of “fate,” *qadr*, see below.

the Exalted, because something great is described with *qadr* and *manzila*. And also the name *Laylat al-mubāraka*<sup>56</sup> [is used for *Laylat al-qadr*], because what is revealed therein has blessings (*al-barakāt*) and mercy (*al-raḥma*) from God the Exalted for His creation. Or it is a blessing (*mubāraka*) because of the many acts of worship performed in it.

And the Mighty and Majestic says: “In it descend angels and the spirit (*al-Rūḥ*) by leave of their Lord, with every command (Q 97:4).” Some say the *rūḥ* here is Gabriel (*as*), such as the Exalted says: “brought down by the Trustworthy *Rūḥ* (Q 26:193).” And some say: the angels charged with creation, such as the angels who are charged with the descendants of Adam. And it is possible that *Rūḥ* here is mercy (*al-raḥma*), meaning: the angels are sent down with mercy. And on what it designates: *Mubāraka* through what is sent down in it [the night] of blessings. Then there is a disagreement about His statement: “In it.” Some say: Meaning, in the night the angels and the spirit were sent down. And it is said: “In it,” meaning: in the angels. And the Mighty and Majestic says: “by leave of their Lord,” meaning: they descend by the command of their Lord. And the Mighty and Majestic says: “with every command, peace,”<sup>57</sup> some say: meaning through every command it is decreed for that year on earth,<sup>58</sup> and as al-Qatabī said: “with every command, peace,” meaning through every command [there] is peace. And it is said:<sup>59</sup> through every command God arranges it (*yudab-baruhu*), meaning the angels do not know what God the Exalted has determined for them, except what God informs them about. And the Mighty and Majestic says: “peace is (*salām hiya*),” it is said: the angels were sent down through their wings with peace, mercy, and forgiveness by God the Exalted. And some say: meaning it is a safe night because it doesn’t bring about evil (*sharr*) and Satan is not dispatched (*yurasul*) in it until sunrise.<sup>60</sup> And some say: it is peace from the angels,

56 Based on Q 44:3 “We sent it in a blessed night.”

57 Through differences in recitation, differences in meaning can occur; these recitations (*qirāʾāt*) are then used as forms of *tafsīr*. This is also why there is a difference of opinion as to whether this *sūra* has 5 or 6 verses; see Tāhir ibn ʿĀshūr, *ibid*, 12:455–56.

58 In this interpretation the angels descend with both revelation and the yearly *Qadr* from the Tablet. In this theological construct, fate is brought into the world in a cyclical fashion, as is typical for *sacred time* constructs.

59 *Qīl*, translated here as “it is said,” generally relays opinions deemed weak, unconvincing, or coming from a minority.

60 This is a typical aspect of *sacred time* whereby that which corrupts the earth is taken away so the sacred can be fully present. From this point of view, it is Satan who represents the profane in Islam.

meaning, the greetings of peace from the angels unto all the believers. And some say: “with every command, peace,” meaning, from all types of plague and affliction one is secure. And that is mentioned in the Exalted His saying: “For him there are attending angels to his front and rear, guarding him by God’s command (Q 13:11),” as said by some: they protect against the punishment (*‘adhāb*) from God. And some say: they protect against it by God’s command. So these two similar aspects are obtained from His saying: “with every command peace.” And His statement: “is until the rise of dawn” possibly means that the blessings that were mentioned are there until the rise of dawn. And it is possible that peace, which was mentioned, is there until the rise of dawn. And it is possible that the angels remain on earth until the rise of dawn. And it is related from Ibn ‘Abbās, may God be pleased with him, that he recited it as “with every command peace,” and he said: meaning the angels.

Then some say: there is disagreement on the narrations from the Prophet on when *Laylat al-qadr* is. And there is also disagreement among the *ṣaḥābā*, may God be pleased with them, on this: it is related from ‘Abdallāh b. Anīs about the Prophet that he said: “Search in the last ten, and search in the uneven [days].” And it is related by ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd that he said: “The Messenger of God said: ‘A night in the 19th of Ramaḍān, and the 21st night, and the 23rd night.’” And it is related by Ibn ‘Umar, may God be pleased with him, about the Prophet that he said: “They search *Laylat al-qadr* in the latter seven [days].” And it is related that it is in the 27th. And by ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar that: “The Prophet was asked about *Laylat al-qadr*, and I listened, and he said: ‘It is in the whole of Ramaḍān.’” And by Zar that he said: “I said to Abī b. Ka‘b: ‘Tell us about *Laylat al-qadr*, O father of al-Mundhir, because our companion ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd asked about it.’ So he said: ‘Whoever has the power (*al-ḥawl*) strives for it.’ So he said: ‘Yes, plead God for mercy, father of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, and God will certainly let it be known it is in Ramaḍān,’ [stating] repeatedly to have trust, ‘and by God that it is Ramaḍān, the 27th night.’” Then we don’t have [knowledge] of it, and no one can point towards this night. Therefore it is stated: it is a night as the night of the 27th or the 29th, except that it is established by *tawātīr*<sup>61</sup> about the Messenger of God

61 A *mutawātīr* report is a ḥadīth or saying (*khābar*) that is transmitted in every stage of the stages of the transmission-chain (*sanad*) by multiple transmitters (general agreed upon requirement is 10 transmitters), whereby it can be rationally be concluded that these transmitters could not have agreed upon a fabrication (*ikhtilāq*). It also provides necessary knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-ḍarūrī*). Any *ṣaḥīḥ* tradition that doesn’t confirm to these criteria, but has an authentic *isnād*, is of the status of *aḥād* (singular transmission), and

in that he informs by a sign (*bi-lishāra*) towards it,<sup>62</sup> and so that is pursued and is required in the nights [of Ramaḍān]. And this aspect [of the obligation for searching without certainty] is taken from the related traditions in conformity [with all of them] without rejection [of any tradition], as they are all authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*).<sup>63</sup> In one year it is in some nights, in the next year another night, and in another year the last ten [days] of Ramaḍān, and in another year the ten middle ones, and in another year the first ten.<sup>64</sup> And God knows best.<sup>65</sup> [end of the exegesis]

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thus only provides conditional knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-mutawaqqif*), and therefore needs further investigation. Maḥmūd al-Ṭaḥḥān, *Taysir muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth* (Riyadh 1425/2004), 23–5, 27.

- 62 According to a tradition from Ibn ʿAbbās people will know it is *Laylat al-qadr* because the night wasn't hot or cold, and because at dawn the sun at sunrise has a weak red glow. See a discussion on this, and the grading of these traditions, in al-Zuhaylī, *al-Fiqh al-Islāmiyya wa-adillatuhu*, 3:1625.
- 63 Al-Jaṣṣāṣ uses the exact same sentence and examples in his *tafsīr*. He does not mention al-Māturīdī directly by name, so it is unclear if he cites al-Māturīdī, or that both cite the same source or teaching that is unknown to us today; Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *ibid.*, 3:640–1. Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman, in his thesis on al-Māturīdī's *tafsīr* states, that al-Jaṣṣāṣ's work must be a condensed version of al-Māturīdī's because of its similarity in topical sequence: Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman, *An edition of the first two chapters of al-Māturīdī's Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunna*, Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies (London 1970), 127–8.
- 64 Nowhere does al-Māturīdī link these ten days to the ritual ten-day mosque retreat, the *i'tikāf*, which is also part of the Ramaḍān rituals. He discusses the requirements for *i'tikāf* in his exegesis of Q 2:187 but doesn't discuss the presence or overlap of *Laylat al-qadr* in relation to the mosque retreat. Al-Māturīdī, *ibid.*, 2:83–5. *Laylat al-qadr* and *i'tikāf* are both *sacred time* and can overlap, but do not collapse into one another as each have their causes, requirements, rituals, and rewards. That these are two separate *sacred times* can also be seen by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jazīrī's (d. 1941 CE) comment that supplication in *Laylat al-qadr* surpasses everything, but does not circumvent the value of *i'tikāf*. For the requirements and rituals of *i'tikāf*, see Zuhaylī, *ibid.*, 3:1749–84; Jazīrī, *ibid.*, 451–6. According to Zuhaylī the 27th night is *Laylat al-qadr*, as is the majority opinion. For discussions on the prophetic traditions, see Zuhaylī, 3:1623–4; Alūsī, *ibid.*, 15:523–5.
- 65 Therefore, according to al-Māturīdī, the only way to reconcile the different traditions on *Laylat al-qadr* is to accept that it doesn't occur on the same night in Ramaḍān every year, but can shift every Ramaḍān to a different night, thereby making it almost impossible for the believer to find it. Thus, the only obligation on the believers is to search it and hope for a sign that points towards it.

### 3 Conclusion

Our analysis shows how the Islamic tradition constructs God's interaction with the world as a *sacred cosmology* that encompasses both *sacred space* and a *sacred time*. The *sacred space* belongs to the unseen world (*‘alam al-ghayb*) and is not accessible for the common man, but when an intersection occurs between the unseen and seen worlds a *sacred time* is created that is accessible for the whole of creation, as the whole of creation has a temporal aspect. Only God is atemporal. *Laylat al-qadr* is described as *sacred time* in the Qur'an through three aspects:

1. Something supernatural is sent down in it (Qur'an, angels, *Rūh*, God's decree)
2. It is better than a thousand months, thus being superior to normal time
3. It is the whole night, thus made accessible for normal humans

But nowhere does the Qur'an inform us when *Laylat al-qadr* actually is. To solve this, intertextual connections were made within the Qur'an, with prophetic narrations, and opinions of the first generations of Muslims. That the Qur'an descended in it became the dominant position. In this way, *Laylat al-qadr* could be placed within the month of Ramaḍān. But the Islamic tradition encountered a problem that it rarely has: there are too many different traditions and opinions on when it is. Even though a dominant position formed that pointed to the 27th night as the most likely for *Laylat al-qadr*, all the other conflicting traditions could not be dismissed precisely because they were of the same historical authenticity. So the uncertainty of when the *sacred time* exactly is was incorporated into the ritual of Ramaḍān. Searching for *Laylat al-qadr* became just as important as worshiping in it. This concept was partially based on several traditions that refer to the obligation of searching for *Laylat al-qadr*, but it was also a solution constructed by the Islamic exegetical tradition itself. The pursued *sacred time* was, in this way, extended so that every believer with the right intention can participate in it. Because in the end, only God knows best.

### Appendix 1

#### *Comparative Table Commentaries on Sūra 97*

In this comparative table I have provided short summaries of the important trends and diverse positions taken by the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition. Al-Muqātil (d. 767 CE/150 AH) represents the earliest complete extant *tafsīr* in the Sunnī tradition, al-Māturīdī

(d. 944 CE/333 AH) and al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE/604 AH) represent the orthodox *kalām* tradition, Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 985 CE/375 AH) the Ḥanafī legal tradition, al-Māwardī (d. 1058 CE/450 AH) presents the opinions of the first generations of Muslims, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 1072 CE/465 AH) represents the Ṣūfī tradition, and the Ottoman *Shaykh al-Islām* Abū al-Su‘ūd al-Efendī (d. 1574 CE/982 AH) presents a late-classical accumulation and preferred selection (*tarjīh*) from all the aforementioned traditions.

TABLE 5.2 Comparative table commentaries on *sūra* 97

Q 97:1	أُنزِلْنَا “We have sent it down”	ليلة القدر “night of power”
Al-Muqātil: <sup>a</sup>	The Qur’ān	
Al-Māturīdī:	The Qur’ān; peace ( <i>salām</i> , Q 98:5)	<i>al-Laylat al-miqdār</i> ; <i>Layla mubāraka</i> (Q 44:3); night of judgment ( <i>ḥukm</i> ) and decree ( <i>qaḍā</i> ); latter 10, all odd-numbered days, 19th, 21st, 23rd, 7 latter ones, 27th, the whole of Ramaḍān, 29th, the 10 middle ones, the first 10
Al-Samarqandī: <sup>b</sup>	The Qur’ān; provision ( <i>rizq</i> ) from God	Night of decree
Al-Māwardī: <sup>c</sup>	Gabriel; Qur’ān	Last 10 uneven ones, the whole month, 21st, 23rd, 24th, 27th, one of the signs is the sun without rays
Al-Qushayrī: <sup>d</sup>	Mercy for [God’s] saints ( <i>al-rahma li-awliyā’ih</i> )	The <i>qadr</i> from the ego’s ( <i>nufūs</i> ) of the worshippers; the <i>qadr</i> of existence and the <i>qadr</i> of witness (i.e. the world); refers to the spread of <i>qadr</i> that night
Al-Rāzī: <sup>e</sup>	The Qur’ān; descent of custodianship ( <i>khalīfa</i> , Q 2:30); remembrance ( <i>dhikr</i> , Q 15:9)	<i>Qadr</i> existed before creation and <i>Laylat al-qadr</i> is when the book of <i>qadr</i> of all creation is sent down (Q 54:49); night of decree and rulings ( <i>laylat al-taqdīr wa al-aḥkām</i> ); 1st night of Ramaḍān, 17th, 19th, 20th, 23rd, 24th, 25th, 27th, 29th, last 3, last 9,
Abū l-Su‘ūd al-Efendī: <sup>f</sup>	The Qur’ān	Last 10

Q 97:3

لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ "better than a thousand months"

Al-Muqātil:	Works are rewarded a thousand times
Al-Māturīdī:	Thousand is metaphorical; is better because of the worship made in it; works in it are rewarded multiple times; a thousand months the Bani Umayyad shall rule
Al-Samarqandī:	Works are rewarded a thousand times
Al-Māwardī:	Works are rewarded a thousand times; <i>Laylat al-qadr</i> is better than to live for a thousand months; the reign of Prophet Sulaymān and Dhū l-Qarnayn were each 500 months, making a 1000 months, therefore works in <i>Laylat al-qadr</i> are equal to these two reigns combined
Al-Qushayrī:	<i>Laylat al-qadr</i> is better than a thousand months without <i>Laylat al-qadr</i> ; it is a short night for the lovers (of God) to converse (with God)
Al-Rāzī:	Worship performed in it is worth a thousand months of worship; thousand months is equal to a long life of 80 years, therefore the sins of a lifetime can be forgiven; a thousand months the Bani Umayyad shall rule
Abū l-Su'ūd al-Efendī:	The reign of Prophet Sulaymān and Dhū l-Qarnayn were each 500 months, making a 1000 months, therefore works in <i>Laylat al-qadr</i> are equal to these two reigns combined

Q 97:4

الْمَلَائِكَةُ "angels"

الرُّوحُ "spirit"

أَمْرٌ "command"

Al-Muqātil:		A great creation; the angel <i>Malik</i>	Mercy ( <i>rahma</i> ); the <i>Qadr</i> and <i>Qadā'</i> of the new year
Al-Māturīdī:	Angels responsible with creation	Gabriel (Q 26:193); mercy	By the command the angels descend; the <i>Qadr</i> of the new year
Al-Samarqandī:	The angels Isrāfīl, Gabriel, Mikā'īl, angel of death	A creation looking like an angel but with the face of a human; the spirit of man comes [or leaves his body] through the command of the Lord (Q 17:85)	The command of death ( <i>amr al-mawt</i> )

TABLE 5.2 Comparative table commentaries on sūra 97 (cont.)

Q 97:4	الْمَلَائِكَةُ "angels"	الرُّوحُ "spirit"	أمر "command"
Al-Māwardī:		Gabriel; commanding angels; angels close to God; army of God which doesn't belong to the category of angels; mercy	Provision ( <i>rizq</i> ) for each period
Al-Qushayrī:		Gabriel; a mighty angel ( <i>malak 'azīm</i> )	
Al-Rāzī:	The angels close to God descend on the worshipper; you can only see angels during <i>Laylat al-qadr</i>	A mighty angel; Jesus; Qur'ān (Q 42:52); mercy (Q 12:87)	A veil over evil; by His command angels descend; <i>amr is qadr</i>
Abū l-Su'ūd al-Efendī:	You can only see angels during <i>Laylat al-qadr</i>	A creation belonging to the angels	All <i>amr</i> with the decree of God ( <i>qaḍā' Allāh</i> ) for the new year (Q 44:4); the length of people's life
Q 97:5		سلام "peace"	
Al-Muqātil:		Peace; blessings and goodness	
Al-Māturīdī:		The angels are sent with peace, mercy and forgiveness; night without evil or Satan through which people are safe ( <i>sālīm</i> ); protection against the punishment from God;	
Al-Samarqandī:		Safe from any sin, evil or Satan	
Al-Māwardī:		Safe from any evil or Satan; is peace, goodness and blessings; the angels say peace unto the believers	
Al-Qushayrī:		Peace unto the saints	

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Al-Rāzī:	Greetings of peace by the angels unto the obedient; safe against evil, calamities, or Satan; peace, blessings, and bliss
Abū l-Su‘ūd al-Efendī:	God decrees ( <i>yuqaddir</i> ) only with safety ( <i>salāma</i> ) and goodness ( <i>khayr</i> )

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- a Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān* (Beirut 1423/2002), 4:771–2.  
 b Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī aw Bahr al-‘ulūm* (Beirut 1993), 3:601–2.  
 c Al-Māwardī al-Baṣrī, *ibid*, 6:311–31.  
 d ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā‘if al-ishārāt* (Cairo n.d.), 6:311–4.  
 e Al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 22:27–32.  
 f Abū l-Su‘ūd al-Efendī, *Tafsīr Abū Su‘ūd, aw Irshād al-‘aql al-salīm ilā mazāyā al-Kitāb al-Karīm* (Quetta 2011), 6:452–3.