

A Qumranian Expression in the Koran¹

Marc Philonenko

(tr. Ibn Warraq)

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Sura LXXXV has always disconcerted translators and commentators. The whole interpretation of the text is in fact dictated by the reply to the question: Who are "the men of the trench [or ditch or the pit], 12 that curse the Prophet?

Three major solutions have been suggested, which we shall make a note of here. The most widespread solution sees in the sura an evocation of the persecution of the Christians of Najran by the Jewish king Dhu Nuwas in 523.³ The persecuting king would have had an immense trench dug that would have been filled with combustible material. A great number of martyrs must have been hurled on the brazier.

Other scholars, from Geiger⁴ and Loth⁵ up to Blachere⁶ see in our sura rather an allusion to the history of the Three Young Men in the furnace (Dan. 3:19-20).⁷

These two interpretations come up against some difficulties that J. Horovitz has highlighted. The imprecations in verses 1 to 3 could scarcely apply to past events, but presuppose, on the contrary, a judgement to come. Taking up again a suggestion of H. Grimme,⁸ Horovitz sees in "the men of the trench" the impious thrown into the fire of hell and who, on the Day of Judgement, would have to give an account of the crimes they had perpetrated against the believers.⁹ Let us note nonetheless that just one example has been produced where the word "trench" (ukhdudlo in Arabic) could designate hell in the grip of flames.¹¹ The verse in question is IV Esdras¹² (7, 36): Then the place [French, Fosse] of torment shall appear, and over against it the place of rest; the furnace of hell shall be displayed, and on the opposite side the paradise of delight."¹³

Such, then, is the state of a question that the manuscripts discovered near the Dead Sea have entirely revived.¹⁴ Hell, the Sheol,¹⁵ is constantly designated there by the Hebrew *gahat*, "trench," which already in the Old Testament designates the abode of the dead.¹⁶ Thus, we read in "The Teaching on the Two Spirits" (Rule 4, 11-13): "And the visitation of all who walk in this spirit shall be a multitude of plagues by the hand of all the destroying angels, everlasting damnation by the avenging wrath of the fury of God, eternal torment and endless disgrace together with shameful extinction in the fire of the dark regions."¹⁷

The passage is important for the exegesis of the sura. The Qumran text describes, in effect, the torments of the damned in the hereafter on the Day of Judgement: in "the eternal trench," they will be burned by "the fire of the gloomy regions."¹⁸

The Book of Hymns repeatedly describes in some visions of the Apocalypse the forces of the Trench that sweep through the world at the end of time. "The wombs of the Pit shall be prey to all the works of horror,"¹⁹ "the arrows of the Trench"²⁰ fly in the sky; "the doors of the Pit shall close,"²¹ while "all the snares of the Pit were opened."²²

¹ Ibn Warraq, *What the Koran really says*, Prometheus Books, New York 2002.

There is more. The Qumran texts expressly call the impious by the name of bene hag-gahat, "sons of the Trench,"²³ or better still, anege hag-gahat "men of the Trench," meaning the damned, those who are destined for the infernal Trench.²⁴ One thus reads in the Rule (9, 16): "And let him not reprimand the men of the Trench nor dispute with them"; or, in 9, 22, "eternal hate toward the men of the Trench because of their spirit of hoarding money!"²⁵ or, better still, in 10, 19-20:

I will not grapple with the men of perdition [the men of the Trench] until the Day of Revenge, but my wrath shall not turn from the men of falsehood and I will not rejoice until judgement is made.²⁶

The latter text is particularly interesting, for "the men of the Trench" [the men of perdition] here they are truly the ones on whom the punishments of the Day of Judgement will be exercised.

The origin of the Koranic formula *ashy b al-'ukhdud* is thus established. It is a simple transposition of the Qumranian expression *ane.e haš-šahat*. The general sense of the sura is assured as a consequence. It is the scene of the Last Judgement. The impious shall be thrown in the trench set alight by hell, where they will burn on a low flame, in punishment for the crimes that they have committed against the righteous.

Verse 10 corroborates our interpretation: "In truth, they who persecute the believing men and women, and do not repent, theirs will be the torment of hell, and theirs the doom of burning."²⁷ Admittedly, a number of scholars have there detected a later addition, but this interpolation was not made at random. It reveals an intimate and reliable understanding of the sura, for which it provided, so to speak, the oldest and most profound commentary.

The presence in the Koran of a Qumranian expression as technical as "men of the Trench" suggests in the most precise manner that the Prophet had had knowledge of typically Essenian ideas and formulas.²⁸ It is an earnest invitation to take up again the study of Koranic eschatology in the light of Qumran texts.

NOTES

1. I was able to discuss this text with my colleague at Strasbourg, T.Fahd. The translation [in French in the original article] that you have just read is the fruit of this discussion. [I have used various English translations, including those of Arberry, Dawood, Yusuf Ali, and Pickthall-Ed.] Sura LXXXV.1-8.

2. [Cf. other translations: Dawood: "Diggers of the trench"; Arberry: "Men of the Pit"; Pickthall: "Owners of the ditch"; Bell: "fellows of the Pit."]

3. See for example: A. P. Caussin de Perceval, *Essai sur l'histoire des Arabes* (Paris, 1847), vol. 1, p. 129 n. 2; T. Noldeke, *Geschichte der Perser and Araber zur Zeit der Sassaniden* (Leiden, 1879), p. 186; I. Guidi, *L'Arabie antéislamique* (Paris, 1921), pp. 73-74; T. Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam et le Christianisme* (Paris, 1955), pp. 18-20.

4. A. Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthum aufgenommen?* (Bonn, 1833), p. 192

5. O. Loth, "Die Leute der Grube," *ZDMG* 35 (1881): 610-22.

6. R. Blachere, *Le Coran* (Paris, 1957).

7. [Dan. 3:20: "And he [Nebuchadnezzar] commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace."]

8. H. Grimme, *Mohammed* (Munster, 1895), vol. 2, p. 77 n. 4.

9. See also R. Paret, *E12*, vol. 1, p. 713.

10. [Cf. E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut, 1968), part 2, pp. 705-706: *khadda* = to make a trench; *'ukhdud* = furrow, trench, or channel in the ground.]

11. H. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim, 1961), vol. 2, p. 424.

12. [IV Esdras = The Second Book of Esdras of the Apocrypha.]
13. [New English Bible with Apocrypha (Oxford, 1970), p. 32 of the section `The Apocrypha.']
14. We shall quote the Qumran texts in the translations of A. DupontSommer, *Les ecrits esseniens decouverts pres de la mer Morte* (Paris, 1964).
15. [In the Old Testament, Sheol has the meaning of the underworld, the place of departed souls. It is usually translated in the Authorized Version as "hell, " "grave, " or "pit."]
16. See, for example, Ps. 16:10 ["For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell," King James Version; "For thou wilt not abandon me to Sheol," The New English Bible.]; 30:10; 55:24; Job 33:24, 28, 30.
17. [I have used Geza Vermes's translation: *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth, 1998), *The Community Rule*, p. 102] DupontSommer's French translation:
- Et quant a la Visite de tous ceux qui marchent en cet (Esprit), elle consiste en l'abondance des coups qu'administrent tous les Anges de destruction en la Fosse eternelle par la furieuse colere du Dieu des vengeancees, en l'effroi eternel et la honte sans fin, ainsi qu'en l'opprobre de l'extermination par le feu des regions tenebreuses.
18. Compare what Josephus says of the Essenians in his *De Bello Judaico*, II, § 155: ". . . while the evil souls, they relegate them to a gloomy hollow... See also I Enoch 103, 8; *LiberAntiquitatum Biblicarum* 63, 4.
19. Hymns 3:12 [Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 260]; DupontSommer's translation: "Les flots de la Fosse (se dechainent) pour toutes les oeuvres d'epouvante."
20. Hymns 3:27.
21. Hymns 3:18 [Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 260]; DupontSommer: "les battants de la Fosse se referment."
22. Hymns 3:26 [Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 2611; DupontSommer: "toutes les trappes de la Fosse."
23. *Ecrit de Damas* [Damascus Covenant or Damascus Document], 6, 15; 13, 14; cf; *Book of Jubilees* 10:3; 15:26.
24. Cf. Dupont-Sommer, *Les ecrits esseniens decouverts pres de la mer Morte*, p. 96, n. 1 and 115 n. 2.
25. Dupont-Sommer's translation: "haine eternelle envers les hommes de la Fosse a cause de (leur) esprit de thesaurisation!" But cf. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 111: "Everlasting hatred in a spirit of secrecy for the men of perdition!"
26. *Ibid.*, p. 113-14]
27. [Essentially, Pickthall's translation. Our author used Blachere's French translation.]
28. See other examples of it in the author's "An Essenian Tradition in the Koran," *RHR* 170 (1966): 143-57; chap. 4.3 of this volume.