

A Possible Allusion to the Phoenix of 2 Enoch/3Baruch in Qur'ān Sūra 100

(Essay/Short Note: Rough Draft)

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As Munther Younes notes, a disproportionate amount of the total words in *āyāt* 1-5 of Qur'ān Sūra 100 are *hapax legomena*, namely, *al-‘ādiyāti*, *ḍabḥā*, *qadhā*, *al-mūriyāt*, *naq‘ā* and *wasatna*.<sup>1</sup> Since these words were intensely disputed by traditional *tafsīr* authorities, we suspect, like Younes, that part of the difficulty may lie in the possible status of at least some of these words as foreign loanwords. We do not have the space to rehearse Younes' reconstruction of *āyāt* 1-5, but we will give our own suggested translations, which in some points diverge from Younes, especially in our retaining *āya* 3.

1. *wa-l-‘ādiyāti ḍabḥā*: Usual rendering: “By the snorting coursers.” We suggest (in basic agreement with Younes): “By those who go forth in the morning.”

2. *fa-l-mūriyāti qadhā*: Usual rendering: “Striking sparks of fire.” We suggest (in basic agreement with Younes): “those who kindle fire.”

3. *fa-l-mujīrāti ṣubḥā*: Usual rendering: “Dashing to the raid at dawn.” We suggest (contra Younes): “those who dash early in the morning.”

4. *fa-aṭarna bihi naq‘ā*: Usual rendering: “Then they raise thereby dust.” We suggest retaining the traditional understanding, contra Younes.

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<sup>1</sup> See Munther Younes, “Charging Steeds or Maidens Doing Good Deeds? A Re-Interpretation of Qur'ān 100 (*al-‘ādiyāt*),” p. 370.

5. *fa-wasaṭna bihi jam'ā*: Usual rendering: "As one, cleaving through the centre."

We suggest (in basic agreement with Younes, but modified): "pass through the midst of the multitude."

Although we accept many of Younes' suggestions, we interpret the passage's overall narrative meaning in a very different sense. Whereas Younes sees in *āyāt* 1-5 a group of righteous women going out in the morning to perform good by lighting flames, we suggest the following scenario:

1. "By those who go forth in the morning," i.e., the quickly moving morning stars, i.e., the planets.

2. "and those who kindle fire," a reference to the brightness of the stars, i.e., the planets.

3. "and those who dash early in the morning," the rising stars (planets) of the morning.

4. "then they raise thereby dust," which, as we will see, may be an allusion to the Phoenix of the sun.

5. "and pass through the midst of the multitude," the rising planets pass swiftly through the multitude of fixed and therefore more slowly moving non-planetary stars.

*Āyāt* 1-5 are usually understood as referring to charging steeds dashing off for early-morning raids, but the Arabic is terse, enigmatic and difficult, and need not necessarily refer to such animals and actions, at least not in a literal or earthly sense. There are, as Younes notes, conflicting traditions which interpret the animals as either horses or camels. However, in other *sūras* that similarly begin with an implied oath formula, that which is sworn by is generally (though of course not always) a positive or a celestial phenomenon rather than something terrestrial (one exception being "town")

or negative; see e.g., *sūras* 68:1, “By the (angelic?) pen!” 75:1, “By the resurrection,” 77:1, “By the winds sent forth,” 79:1-2, “By those (angels?) who forcefully extract (the wicked dead from their graves?), and those (angels?) who gently draw out (the righteous dead from their graves),” 85:1, “By the sky with its constellations,” 86:1,3, “By the sky and the one who arrives at night . . . the piercing star,” 89:1, “By the daybreak,” 90:1, “By this city,” 91:1-2, “By the sun in its morning radiance, and by the moon that follows it,” 92:1-2, “By the night that shrouds, by the radiant day,” 93:1-2, “By the morning brightness and by the night that grows still,” and 95:1-3, “By the fig, by the olive, by Mount Sinai, by this secure town.”

In light of the predominance of celestial and related phenomena in these formulae, we would propose that *āyāt* 1-5 of *sūra* 100 are alluding to the luminous planetary “stars” that precede sunrise. In view of the ancient poetic idea of the sun as a chariot drawn by horses, an indirect allusion to horses may actually be implied behind the imagery of *āyāt* 1-5, just as many, but not all, traditional authorities assert, although they admittedly assume earthly rather than celestial horses. Maidens also may indeed be present implicitly in *sūra* 100, as Younes argues, but by contrast in our view the maidens would not be earthly, but celestial, especially since in Greek traditions Helios is closely associated with his maiden daughters, the Heliades. Indeed, “those who kindle fire” may on one level allude to the four fire-breathing/darting horses of Helios’ chariot (see Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 7:71), or to some equivalent non-Greco-Roman tradition. There is, however, no need to restrict the symbolism to Greece since the latter merely shared with the Ancient Near East in general the idea of a celestial horse leading the chariot of the sun.

In 3 *Baruch* chapters 5, 7 and 8, which are in some mode directly or indirectly dependent on 2 *Enoch*, the sun is drawn not by four fiery horses, but by four shining or

fiery angels. According to *2 Enoch* 11:5, “a hundred angels kindle the sun and set it alight,” which may help us understand *sūra* 100:2’s “and those who kindle fire.” That these Enochic traditions may indeed shed light on *sūra* 100 is the fact that in both *2 Enoch* and *3 Baruch* the sun is associated with the marvellous bird known as the Phoenix. As Forbes and Charles explain in their comments on *2 Enoch* 12: “Jewish authorities find a reference to the phoenix in Job xxxix. 18, where they render כחול ‘as the phoenix’ and not ‘as the sand.’”<sup>2</sup> The passage reads in the RSV:

18 I shall die in my nest (קן),  
and I shall multiply my days as the sand (חול),  
19 my roots spread out on the waters,  
with the dew all the night on my branches,  
20 my glory fresh with me,  
and my bow ever in my hand.

Rabbinic literature (e.g., *Bereshit Rabba* 19,5; cf. TB *Sanhedrin* 108b) therefore understands verse 18 as, “I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the Phoenix.” A case can even be made that Job 29:18 and its surrounding verses have shaped the Enochic traditions under discussion (cf. *2 Enoch* 12:2 and *3 Baruch* 6:11, “dew,” with Job 29:19, and *3 Baruch* 6:12 and 7:2, 5, “glory,” with Job 29:20). The story of the Phoenix was known in ancient Arabia, and indeed Arabia was often held to be the dwelling place of the Phoenix.<sup>3</sup> An allegorical understanding of “sand” as “phoenix” may

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<sup>2</sup> R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. Volume 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913), p. 436.

<sup>3</sup> See throughout R. Van den Broek, *The Myth of the Phoenix: According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

supply us with a clue regarding the enigmatic word *naq'ā* in *āya* 4, usually understood as “dust,” which is certainly compatible semantically with “sand.”

We should add that the equivalence between the phoenix and dust, through the use of a synonym of *naq'ā*, namely, *habā'*, is attested in Arabic sources as well. In her edition of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *al-Ittiḥād al-kawnī*, Angela Jaffray remarks that the bird called ‘*anqā*’ by Ibn al-‘Arabī is “sometimes translated into English as either gryphon or phoenix.”<sup>4</sup> However, “phoenix” is the more standard definition. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes of the phoenix as follows: “If you ask: What is the ‘*Anqā*’?, we answer: [It is] the Dust (*habā'*). . . . The ‘*Anqā*’ is the Dust in which God reveals/opens (*fataḥa*) the bodies of the world.”<sup>5</sup> Jaffray writes of the word *habā'*: “In its original meaning, *habā'* was the dust particles that dance in the rays of the sun.”<sup>6</sup> The same author explains: “In philosophical parlance, the ‘*Anqā*’ is a metonym for the Greek notion of *hylē* (Arabic: *hayūlā*), or prime matter, which Ibn ‘Arabī, citing precedent in the Qur’an, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and the Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896), generally prefers to call Dust (*habā'*).”<sup>7</sup>

If *āya* 4 means “and thereby they raise the phoenix,” then we would obtain a striking parallel to the Enochic-related traditions regarding angels who kindle the fire of the sun and regarding the phoenix who accompanies the sun which they raise up aloft; the angels also “lift up” the crown off the sun’s head in *3 Baruch* 8:3. The phoenix is a

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<sup>4</sup> Angela Jaffray, *The Universal Tree and the Four Birds: Treatise on Unification (al-Ittiḥād al-kawnī). Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2006), p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

traditional symbol of the resurrection, an event mentioned in *āya* 9. 2 *Enoch* 11:2 says of the sun: “Its circle and the wheels on which it goes always, like a wind going past with very marvellous speed, and day and night it has no rest.” This may be compared to the high velocity implied in *āyāt* 1 and 3. With *āya* 5’s image of a collective or group piercing through to a centre, cf. 2 *Enoch* 11:4-5: “And by day fifteen myriads of angels attend it, and by night a thousand. And six-winged ones issue with the angels before the sun’s wheel into the fiery flames, and a hundred angels kindle the sun and set it alight.” With the general imagery of *āyāt* 1-5, cf. 2 *Enoch* 15:2-3: “The giver of light comes to give brightness to the whole world, and the morning guard takes shape, which is the rays of the sun, and the sun of the earth goes out, and receives its brightness to light up the whole face of the earth. . . .”

In *āya* 6 we encounter the puzzling word *kanūd*, which is not found elsewhere in the Qur’ān, and is likely to be understood as *\*kabūd*, from Hebrew *kabōd*, as suggested by Younes.<sup>8</sup> Cf. the frequent use of the word “glory” in 3 *Baruch* 6:12 and 7:2, 5. Additionally, as we have already noted, Job 29:20 contains the word “glory.” However, keeping in view the traditional understanding of *āya* 6’s *kanūd* as “ungrateful,” it is intriguing that in the midst of its account of the solar angels and the phoenix 3 *Baruch* 8:5 explains that the sun is defiled each day “because it beholds the lawlessness and unrighteousness of men . . . which are not well-pleasing to God.” The word “behold” is surely semantically compatible with *āya* 7’s “witness.” 3 *Baruch* 8:5 specifies the following sins: “fornications, adulteries, thefts, extortions, idolatries, drunkenness, murders, strife, jealousies, evil-speakings, murmurings, whisperings, divinations, and

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<sup>8</sup> See Munther Younes, “Ungrateful or Honorable: A Re-examination of the Word *Kanūd* in Qur’ān 100 (*al-‘Ādiyāt*),” *Arabica* 56 (2009), pp. 280-281.

such like. . .” This calls to mind the traditional understanding of *āya* 8 as referring to inordinate or excessive “love of wealth.”