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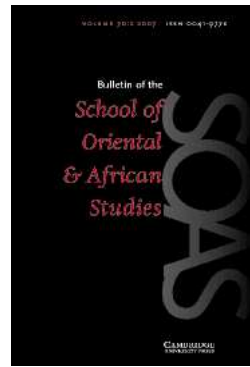
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Heavenly cords and prophetic authority in the Quran and its Late Antique context*

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Abstract

The *asbāb* mentioned in five passages of the Quran have been interpreted by medieval Muslims and modern scholars as referring generally to various “ways”, “means”, and “connections”. However, the word meant something more specific as part of a biblical-quranic “cosmology of the domicile”. The *asbāb* are heavenly ropes running along or leading up to the top of the sky-roof. This notion of sky-cords is not as unusual as it may seem at first, for various kinds of heavenly cords were part of Western Asian cosmologies in the sixth and seventh centuries CE. According to the Quran, a righteous individual may ascend by means of these cords to heaven, above the dome of the sky, where God resides, only with God’s authorization. The heavenly cords are a feature of quranic cosmology and part of a complex of beliefs by which true prophets ascend to heaven and return bearing signs.

Many traditions of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East maintained that certain purified persons are able, either physically or psychically, to ascend to the upper reaches of the sky, sometimes into the presence of the creator God himself who resided at the uppermost point of the cosmos. The notion of heavenly ascent by the purified is found in ancient Egyptian beliefs,¹ in Mazdaism,² in Greek and Latin philosophical traditions,³ in Judean tradition and its gentile Christian offshoots,⁴ Manichaeism,⁵

* I read a shorter version of this paper at the 216th Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society, Seattle, 18 March 2006.

1 Allen (2005).

2 *Šāyast na-šāyast* 12.5 (citing the lost Avestan *Dāmdād Nask*); *Greater Bundahišn* 30.11; *Dādestān-i Dēnīg* 34.3; *Sad dar* 87.11; *Mēnōg-i Xrad* 7.1. This doctrine may have appeared among Mazdaeans as early as Darius I (West 2002).

3 Examples include Plato, *Republic* (Myth of Er) Book 10, 614a–21d; Cicero *De Re Publica* (Dream of Scipio) 6.9–26; the so-called Mithras Liturgy; the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*; *Corpus Hermeticum* I and XIII.

4 2 Kings 2:1–12, Luke 24:51, Acts 1:9, 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, Revelation of John 4:1. For a general overview of these and other sources see Segal (1980). Other notable studies include Scholem, (1941: 40–79), Lohfink (1971), Meeks (1972), Dean-Otting (1984), Tabor (1986), Grese (1988), and Himmelfarb (1993). Many more references could be added to this sample of the literature on the subject but these will provide an ample bibliography.

5 Mani wrote in his *Gospel*, “I have shown the way to the heights to those who go up according to this truth”, Koenen and Römer (Cologne Mani-Codex) (1985: 67.8–11). See further Gardner and Lieu (2004: 19–20, 88–9, 245–6, 256–8), and Reeves (1997: 246–9).

Mandaism,⁶ as well as in the Sanskrit Upaniṣads⁷ and other traditions. In view of the ubiquity of the idea it is therefore not surprising to find it also among Muslims, whose literature includes a well-known and elaborate complex of traditions relating Muḥammad's journey to heaven and back, his *mi'raj*.

Since the idea of heavenly ascent was so widespread, it has been amply studied by modern scholars, especially where it involves Judaic and Christian scriptures. In this effort, historical approaches have often been neglected in favour of the comparative-religious and structuralist approaches.⁸ Nevertheless, historical context is required for these traditions and their interrelationships to be understood.⁹ Here I attempt to provide this context for aspects of the cosmology implicit in the Quran, focusing on the word *sabab*. This word has a meaning overlooked by much of Islamic tradition and modern scholarship but which, when understood, helps to clarify the cosmological notions of the audience that the Quran first addressed. This cosmology forms the framework for a concept of prophetic authority used in the Quran.¹⁰

Cosmology from scripture in the sixth century CE

One major difference between the various traditions on human ascent to heaven is found in the shape that the heavens and the earth are imagined to have – that is, in their cosmologies – and also in the imagined manner of ascent. According to a very old view, described explicitly or, sometimes implied, in various books of the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, heaven (or a series of heavens) lies above the mostly flat earth like the dome of a building or tent, forming the upper boundary of the physical world.¹¹ In contrast to this, the Aristotelian picture of the world has the earth rather at the centre of the universe with the heavens as spheres of great but finite diameter spinning around it. This Aristotelian model eventually became part of the basic theoretical framework for the practice of astrology almost

6 Drower (1937: 197–9).

7 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.1, 5.2.1, 6.2.15–16; *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 1.2–3.

8 For a structuralist approach, see for example Segal (1980). Porter (1974) likens the Prophet's *mi'raj* to shamanic journeys. The likeness may be interesting but calling something “shamanism” does little to explain it; moreover the existence of such a thing as “shamanism” as a real or even general category is in doubt.

9 Widengren (1950, 1955) shows how usefully the integration of diverse sources can contribute to the history of ideas such as heavenly ascent. Nevertheless, as noted by Vuckovic (2005: 7), his work has shortcomings in that he consults a limited number of Arabic sources.

10 Vuckovic summarizes past research on Muḥammad's *mi'raj* (2005: 6–13) and argues specifically that the stories of the *mi'raj* were strongly concerned with prophetic authority (2005: 17–39).

11 Already in the Akkadian *Enūma Eliš*, Tablet IV, ll. 137–40, the dome of heaven is made out of half of the hide of Tiamat's corpse. Being a skin, perhaps something like leather, it may have been imagined as a tent. In the translation of Foster (1995: 32): “He split her in two, like a fish for drying, / Half of her he set up and made as a cover, (like) heaven. / He stretched out the hide and assigned watchmen, / And ordered them not to let her waters escape”.

everywhere it was pursued, thanks to the influence of the works of Ptolemy (2nd century CE), who accepted that model.

In the sixth century, and during Muḥammad's lifetime, Christians of different schools of thought in the eastern Mediterranean region were arguing, at times heatedly, over which of these two cosmic pictures was the true one: the Hebrew or the Hellenic? The debate involved a vexed question with a long and pre-Christian pedigree: to what extent scripture was to be interpreted allegorically. This was a part of a debate taking place among the leaders of Byzantine society: the 540s and 550s witnessed both Byzantine imperial edicts against Origenism, and what were seen as its allegorical excesses, and also a repudiation of the Antiochene school of exegesis, adhered to by many important members of the Church of the East outside the Roman Empire, which held to a cosmology adhering more closely to the literal interpretation of scripture.

Entering into the debate was John Philoponus, a Christian philosopher of sixth-century Alexandria, who wrote his commentary on Genesis to prove, against earlier, Antiochene, theologians like Theodore of Mopsuestia, that the scriptural account of creation described a spherical, geocentric world in accord with the Ptolemaic cosmology.¹² Although Philoponus is today best known for his arguments against important aspects of Aristotelian physics and cosmology, here he can be seen to argue against those who wish to take the Bible's cosmology literally. He makes the case that Ptolemy's model of a spherical cosmos in fact follows the intended and true meaning of Moses' book of Genesis.¹³

On the other hand, Cosmas Indicopleustes wrote his contentious *Christian Topography* in the 540s and 550s to prove that the spherical, geocentric world-picture of the erroneous, pagan Hellenes contradicted that of the Hebrew prophets. Cosmas was an Alexandrian with sympathies towards the Church of the East, who had travelled through the Red Sea to east Africa, Iran, and India, and who received instruction from the East Syrian churchman Mār Abā on the latter's visit to Egypt. His *Christian Topography* has been shown to be aimed directly at John Philoponus and the Hellenic, spherical world-model he supported.¹⁴ It was enough for Cosmas to cite the scriptures, interpreted quite literally, to arrive at the truth. One of his favourite verses for this argument was Isaiah 40:22, "It is he (God) who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent (*ōhel*, Greek LXX *skēnē*) to live in".¹⁵ He also used Psalm 104:2 several times: "You stretch out the heavens like a tent-screen (*yeri'ā*, LXX *dérris*)". Both of these Cosmas took as literal descriptions of the heavens, and since they came from prophets, their word was as good as the words of God. However, it is clear that Cosmas was going against the

12 Philoponus (1897).

13 This is especially clear in *De opificio mundi* 1.7 and 3.10 (Philoponus 1897: 15–16, 131–41).

14 Wolska (1962).

15 These and other biblical quotations in this article are given in the translation of the New Oxford Annotated Bible, 2nd ed., rev.

opinions of his educated though, as he saw it, misguided contemporaries in Alexandria.

A number of Syrian churchmen, notably but not only the Easterners working in the tradition of Theodore of Mopsuestia, took the view of the sky as an edifice for granted. Narsai (d. c. 503), the first head of the school of Nisibis,¹⁶ in his homilies on creation, described God's fashioning of the firmament of heaven in these terms: "Like a roof upon the top of the house he stretched out the firmament / that the house below, the domain of earth, might be complete". *ayk taḥlilâ l-baytâ da-l-thēt mtaḥ la-rqī'â / d-nehwê mamlâ dūkkat ar'â l-baytâ da-l'el*.¹⁷ Also "He finished building the heaven and earth as a spacious house" *šaklel wa-bnâ šmayyâ w-ar'â baytâ rwihâ*.¹⁸ Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) wrote similarly on the shape of the world in his Hexaemeron homilies.¹⁹ A further witness to the shape of the world in his Hexaemeron homilies.¹⁹ A further witness to the discussion is a Syriac hymn, composed c. 543–554, describing a domed church in Edessa as a microcosm of the world, its dome being the counterpart of the sky. This is the earliest known text to make a church edifice to be a microcosm, and it shows that the debates over cosmology were meaningful to more than a small number of theologians.²⁰ Clearly the Ptolemaic cosmology was not taken for granted in the Aramaean part of Asia in the sixth century. It was, rather, controversial.

The Quran, uttered to Western Arabians only decades after these authors were writing, exhibits no signs of a cosmological controversy but implicitly presents a similar picture of the cosmos as an edifice, though certainly not identical in all details with Cosmas' model. The similarity is no doubt due to the Quran's taking part in the ancient tradition of biblical texts which Cosmas, his teacher Mār Abā, and their authorities from the Antiochene school of exegesis were also using.

Quranic *sabab*

The Arabic word *sabab* (pl. *asbāb*) occurs in five passages in the Quran, traditionally interpreted to mean "way", "means", or "rope", depending on the context. However, it will become evident below that the Quran in every instance refers to something more specific than just "ways". The *asbāb* are, rather, some kind of ropes or cords that support or run along the high edifice of heaven and which can be traversed physically by people who arrive at them. In effect, *asbāb* in the Quran are "heavenly ways" or "heavenly courses" which humans might attempt to traverse to gain access to the highest reaches of heaven but that God alone controls. Evidence to support this understanding is drawn here from the context of the word's

16 On the school of Nisibis see now Becker (2006).

17 Narsai (1968), Homily 1.55–6. See also McVey (1983: 114–5).

18 Narsai (1968), Homily 1.103.

19 McVey (1983: 115–17).

20 Kathleen McVey's (1983) study of this hymn is an excellent introduction to the relation of the controversies over biblical exegesis to cosmology in this period, particularly in Syriac. On the connection of the tradition of Theodore of Mopsuestia's hermeneutics with this type of cosmology, see Becker (2006: 120–5).

occurrences in the Quran, from the Syriac *Alexander Legend* retold in Quran 18:83–102, and from Arabic poetry contemporary with the Quran.

The Syriac *Alexander Legend*²¹ (to be distinguished from the better-known *Alexander Romance*, a different work) is an apocalyptic text composed in Syriac in 629 or 630 in support of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius shortly after he and his armies defeated the Sasanian Persians, about the time he restored the relic of the True Cross to Jerusalem.²² The *Alexander Legend* prefigured Heraclius with Alexander the Great portrayed as a pious, Christ-awating Christian world-emperor who ventured to the boundaries of the world: westward, eastward, northward, and then southward. In describing the shape of the world, bounded by an ocean on all sides and covered by a dome, the text shares its cosmological model with the Bible. Some of the story told in this Syriac *Alexander Legend* derives, apparently through a lost and perhaps oral Aramaic tradition, from the ancient tale of Gilgamesh, including the idea that Alexander, like Gilgamesh, follows the sun through its course from the place it sets towards the place where it rises again in the East. In the *Alexander Legend* the place of the sun's setting is at the fetid and deadly waters of the ocean at the world's western edge. Alexander cannot cross the water but enters and follows the sun's conduit, evidently a heavenly course leading beyond the dome of heaven or a similarly difficult passage. This way is called "the window of the heavens" (*kawwteh da-šmayyâ*)²³ in the Syriac text.

As shown in detail elsewhere, this *Alexander Legend* – again, composed about 630 – is retold with modifications in the Quran 18:83–102.²⁴ The quranic passage matches the Syriac *Alexander Legend* precisely, relating the same events in exactly the same order. Therefore the Syriac text becomes in effect a key to understanding some of the obscurities of Q 18:83–102. In the quranic retelling, Dhū l-Qarnayn, "the two-horned one", who stands for Alexander (also described as having horns in the *Alexander Legend*) follows a *sabab* three times on his journey to the west, the east, and the north.²⁵ In Q 18:83–102, the word *sabab* referred not just to the "ways" that Dhū l-Qarnayn travelled but rather to a special kind of heavenly conduit like that described in the *Legend*, when Alexander follows the sun through "the window of heaven". This constitutes only one of very many exact correspondences of details between Q 18:83–102 and the *Alexander Legend*.²⁶ Moreover, at least one major explanation of Q 18:83–102, found in the *Tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī and the *Kitāb Futūḥ Miṣr* of Ibn 'Abdalḥakam, interprets Dhū l-Qarnayn's journeys precisely as travel up into the sky, led

21 Budge (1889: 255–75 Syriac text, 144–58 English trans.).

22 Reinink (2002, 2003).

23 Budge (1889: text 260, trans. 148).

24 See van Bladel (forthcoming a). According to my analysis, the *Alexander Legend* is not retelling Q 18:83–102, nor do they share a common source. Rather, the quranic passage is a retelling of the *Alexander Legend*.

25 This argues anew for a thesis originally suggested by Th. Nöldeke (1890).

26 van Bladel (forthcoming a).

by an angel who “took him up” (*ʿaraja bihī*).²⁷ It is important to note that at the same time many details derived from the *Alexander Legend* independently of the Quran appear in this account, reflecting more direct knowledge of the story first told in Syriac.²⁸

Examination of the other uses of the word *sabab* in the Quran shows that *sabab* in the Quran probably refers to a heavenly conduit, or a path into the sky, not just sometimes but in each of the four other passages in which the word occurs. In fact it seems indeed to be the *only* use of the word appearing in the Quran. At the very least, *sabab* is explicitly connected with heaven or the heavens in three of the four other passages to use the word. However, tradition has mostly not preserved the special meaning of *sabab* in the Quran. While Quran commentaries do maintain that in some passages the *asbāb* are in effect “gates of heaven” or “paths to heaven”, their nature and the cosmology of which they form a part was not rightly comprehended and evidently became obscure quite early, or their character would not have been forgotten. However, traces of the old views on *asbāb* are preserved, as will be shown in what follows. In modern translations of and modern scholarship on the Quran the meaning of *sabab* argued for here appears to be unknown.²⁹

The word *sabab* occurs in four passages outside of the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn. One is Q 40:36–37, where Pharaoh is portrayed as thinking he can go up to the heavens by means of *asbāb* in order to see the God of Moses in person. 40:36. *wa-qāla Firʿawnu yā Hāmānu bni lī ʿarhan laʿallī abluḡhu l-asbāba* 40:37. *asbāba l-samawāti fa-aḡliʿa ilā ilāhi Mūsā wa-innī la-aḡzunnuhū kādhiban wa-kadhālika zuyyina li-Firʿawna sūʿu ʿamaliḡi wa-ṣudda ʿani l-sabāli wa-mā kaydu Firʿawna illā fī tabāb.* (40:36) “Pharaoh said, ‘O Haman, build for me a platform³⁰ that I may reach the *asbāb*, (40:37) the *asbāb* of the heavens so I can rise up to the God of Moses – though I suspect he is a liar!’ Thus to Pharaoh was commended his evil deed, but he was blocked from the way. Pharaoh’s scheme was merely (his own) perdition”.

27 al-Ṭabarī (1986–87: pt 16, 7–8) and Ibn ʿAbdalḡakam (1922: 38.7–39.15). Ibn ʿAbdalḡakam (1922: 39.17–8) and al-Qurṡubī (1967: vol. 11, 46) also relate one short report in a mass of other reports, on the authority of Ḥālid ibn Maʿdān al-Kalāʿī (d. c. 722–7), saying that the prophet said that Dhū-l-Qarnayn was a king (*malik*, or perhaps angel, *malak*) who measured out the earth *from beneath* by the *asbāb* (*malikun masaḡa l-arḡa min taḡtiḡa bi-l-asbāb*). This is the only suggestion that I found which seems to locate the *asbāb* beneath the earth; other reports indicate a connection with the sky.

28 On the *ḡadīth* sources as witnesses to the *Legend*, see van Bladel (forthcoming b).

29 Andrew Rippin (1985: 12–13) shows that the Quran commentators interpret *sabab* variously, depending on the passage, to mean “gates/doors”, “stations, places, supports”, “knowledge”, and “rope”. He also shows (2–12, 14) that the use of the term to describe the “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) was a late development (11th century CE).

30 Shawkat Toorawa has suggested to me that this platform was supposed to be an Egyptian pyramid, and this seems to be a reasonable suggestion for the origin of the myth represented here.

Tradition does recognize that the *asbāb* in this passage are heavenly ways, where they are clearly thought to be located high in the sky and access to them provides a way up and beyond to the heavens, where God is found.³¹ Clearly this is correct: these *asbāb* are not just any “ways” but special, apparently physical, ways up to God’s presence. They correspond with the *asbāb* used by Dhū l-Qarnayn to travel from one far end of the earth to another, shown by the *Alexander Legend* to be at least in one case the course followed by the sun through the “window of heavens”. However, we are told that Pharaoh was prevented from ascending by means of them. There seems to be an allusion here to a story that the audience was expected to know, perhaps to the effect that Pharaoh was cast down or blocked from the heavens in his attempted ascent – hence his scheme being really his perdition.

Q 38:10 also clearly shows the *asbāb* to be conduits leading to the heavenly heights, and tradition has recognized them as such: *am lahum mulku l-samawāti wa-l-arḍi wa-mā baynahumā fa-l-yartaqū fī l-asbāb* “Or do they possess dominion over the heavens and earth and everything in between? Then let them go up in the *asbāb*!” God is portrayed here as challenging opponents: if they think they truly have power in this world, as God does, then let them ascend in the *asbāb*, the heavenly courses³² – but of course they cannot. The clear implication is that no mortal can rise into the heavens by these ways without God’s permission. Medieval Quran commentaries duly note this meaning of the *asbāb* here as ways of ascent.³³ This is now the third passage in which the word *sabab* clearly refers to a way into heaven located in the sky.

There are two other passages in the Quran including this word. One is Q 22:15: *man kāna yazunnu an lan yanṣurahū llāhu fī l-dunyā wa-l-āḥirati fal-yamdud bi-sababīn ilā l-samā’i thumma l-yaqta’ fa-l-yanzur hal yudhhibanna kayduhū mā yaghīz* “Whoever would think that God will not help him in this world or the next, let him reach by a *sabab* into the heaven and then *let him cut (it)*.”³⁴ Then let him see whether his scheme will remove him from what galls him”. Though the interpretation of this passage is a bit more difficult, it is clear that the *sabab* is here too connected with heaven, *al-samā’*. The uses of the word *sabab* already encountered lead one to surmise that God is here issuing a challenge like that in Q 38:10: whoever does not believe, let him try to demonstrate his power by going up to heaven himself; this will show the futility and powerlessness of men next to God and demonstrate God’s control over the cosmos.

Early recorded tradition unanimously interprets this passage strangely to make the *sabab* an actual rope extended to the rafters of a *ceiling* (forcing the word *al-samā’*, unnaturally, to mean “ceiling” in order to make this

31 E.g., al-Ṭabarī (1986–87: vol. 11/pt 24, 42–3).

32 Al-Ṭabarī (1986–87: vol. 10/pt 22, 82) glosses *asbāb al-samā’* here as *abwāb al-samā’ wa-ṭuruqihā*, “the gates and paths of the sky”.

33 e.g., al-Zamaḥṣarī, *al-Kaššāf* (1966–68: 3.361) glosses the verse as *fa-l-yaṣ’udū fī l-ma’ārij wa-l-ṭuruq allatī yatawaṣṣalū bihā ilā l-’ars*, “Let them ascend in the heavenly ascents and ways by which one reaches the Throne (of God)”.

34 See the suggestion for emending the vocalization of this word below.

work) so that the person challenged should hang himself to death in frustration.³⁵ Clearly this is too much of a stretch of meaning, especially when the words *sabab* and *samā'* both occur in such close proximity following the pattern of the passages just reviewed, where the meaning is clearer. The word whose letters are traditionally vocalized in Q 22:15 as *yaqta'* may rather have been intended as *yuqta'*, so that the verse says: "let him reach by a *sabab* into the heaven – then let it be cut (off)". As far as grammar is concerned, this may explain the lack of a direct object for the verb. The meaning would thus be that if a man tries to reach heaven by a *sabab*, that way is certain to be severed. Thus his scheme (*kayd*) will fail, just as Pharaoh's scheme (also *kayd* in Q 40:37) was bound to fail when his way was blocked.

The remaining use of *sabab* appears in Quran 2:166, in a more obscure context. It continues the contrary-to-fact condition introduced by *law* in 2:165, the previous line: *idh tabarra'a lladhīna ttabi'ū mina lladhīna ttaba'ū wa-ra'awu l-ʿadhāba wa-taqaṭṭa'at bihimu l-asbāb* "... then those who are followed would dissociate from those who follow, and they (i.e. those who take other gods beside God) would see the punishment and the *asbāb* would be cut off for them".³⁶ Tradition has taken the cutting of the *asbāb* as reiterating the notion of *tabarru'*, or dissociation: social "ties" with them are cut.³⁷ But in light of every other example in the Quran, where *sabab* always refers to courses into the sky, I suggest that the cutting down or cutting off of the *asbāb* refers to the preceding words, that is, the punishment (*ʿadhāb*) that they will see: they will witness a time when their ways to heaven are cut off – or cut down – and they may not ascend to a heavenly reward. This matches the cutting off in Q 22:15 already seen, where the way is cut (**yuqta'* according to my emendation of the originally unwritten vowels, given above).

Thus there is repeated in the Quran four times the theme of humans ascending or attempting to ascend by the *asbāb* into heaven only to find their way blocked or cut off. However, in the fifth instance of the word's occurrence (the first one studied above), the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn, God has opened the *asbāb* as conduits for one human's use. Some light may be shed on the precise meaning of these passages when one considers the quranic depiction of heaven and contextualizes it in the milieu of the early seventh century.

35 al-Ṭabarī (1986–87: vol. 9/pt 17, 95–6) gives many traditions glossing *sabab* as "rope" (*ḥabl*) and *al-samā'* as ceiling (*saqf*) or referring to "the 'sky' of the house" (*samā' al-bayt*). The large number of traditions trying to explain these words is an indication of how awkward the interpretation of the word as "ceiling" is.

36 The exact translation of *bihim* is troubling. There are three basic uses of the preposition *bi-* in the Quran: 1) with oaths, 2) with instruments (not agents), and 3) as a locative prefix, usually indicating place or time (Ambros 2004: 327). The first two meanings make no sense in this passage, so I conclude that it indicates the third possibility, those *in whose case* the *asbāb* will be cut off: it will be cut off "for them".

37 al-Ṭabarī (1986–87: 2.42–3), where the word *asbāb* is glossed by tradition specialists as *tawāṣul*, *wiṣāl*, *mawadda*, and the like.

As in the received Judaic and Christian traditions, so also in the Quran God holds rewards for the pure in a place literally located at the top of the sky, that is, in the heavens. Other people will be prevented from entering the gates of this lofty place, as one learns from Q 7:40: *inna lladhīna kadhdhabū bi-āyātīnā wa-stakbarū ‘anhā lā yuftaḥu lahum abwābu l-samā’i wa-lā yadhūlūna l-jannata ḥattā yaliḡa l-jamalu fī sammi l-ḡiyāṡi wa-kadhālika najzī l-mujrimīn* “The gates of heaven shall not be opened to those who deny and scorn our signs, nor will they enter the garden until camels pass through the eye of the needle. Thus We shall requite the sinners”. Here the gates of heaven are the way to the garden, that is, paradise. Elsewhere in the Quran these gardens are specified as the Gardens of Eden (38:50 *jannāt ‘adan*). Those who fear and obey God will be rewarded by admission to these Gardens through gates (again in 38:50 and also 39:70). Putting all this together, the *asbāb* appear to be courses high above leading to the gates of heaven, where the righteous may enter to enjoy eternal life in paradise, but one may ascend by them and pass through the gates only with God’s approval and permission (hence the reference to the camel passing through the eye of a needle, alluding to Matt. 19:24, Mark 10:25, and Luke 18:25). God alone possesses control of the pathways up; He is God, Possessor of the Ways of Ascent (Q 70:3–4 *min Allāhi dhī l-ma‘ārij*).

Another example of God’s challenge to men to attempt an ascent beyond the dome of the sky is found in Q 55:33–4. *yā ma‘šara l-jinni wa-l-insi ini staṡatum an tanfudhū min aqṡāri l-samawāti wa-l-arḡi fa-nfudhū lā tanfudhūna illā bi-sulṡānin (55:34) fa-bi-ayyi ālā’i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān (55:33)* “O Jinn and Humans, if you can penetrate through the outer regions of the heavens and the earth, then do so! You shall not penetrate (them) without authorization! (55:34) So which of the blessings³⁸ of your Lord will you say is false?” Clearly no one, not even a *jinnī*, will pass beyond the dome of heaven without God-granted authority. But just such a power was given to Dhū l-Qarnayn, who is described in Q 18:84 as an exception: *innā makkannā lahū fī l-arḡi wa-āṡaynāhu min kulli šay’in sabab* “We granted him power in the earth and gave him a heavenly course (*sabab*) out of every thing”. Only when God enables a person can he ascend by a *sabab*. These words demonstrate God’s power, which is not to be doubted.

Some evidence from poetry contemporary with Muḡammad indicates that in the early seventh century this notion of *asbāb* as conduits leading to heaven was generally known in Arabic and that this is not an isolated or strange set of uses of the word. A verse of al-A‘šā (d. 625) preserves a phrase where the possibility of ascending to the *asbāb* of heaven is expressed: *wa-ruqṡāta asbāba l-samā’i bi-sullam*, “and were you to be brought up the *asbāb* of heaven by a ladder”. The same verse is also found in different versions with the synonymous, variant reading *abwāb al-samā’* “gates of heaven”,³⁹ but *asbāb* is the *lectio difficilior* and hence the reading more likely to represent the archetype. A similar verse is attributed to

38 The early meaning of *ālā’* seems poorly documented and subject to doubt.

39 Lane (1863–93: article “*thamānūn*”, Book 1, part 1, pp. 355c–6a). Ibn Manzūr (1955: 1.458a) cites the same verse with more context.

another contemporary of Muḥammad, the poet Zuhayr (fl. late sixth and early seventh century): *wa-man hāba asbāba l-manīyati yalqahā wa-law rāma asbāba l-samā'i bi-sullam* “And whoever fears the cords (*asbāb*) of fate will endure it (i.e. fate), even if he should seek the *asbāb* of heaven by a ladder”.⁴⁰ Through a play on words this example shows two distinct senses of *asbāb* in early seventh-century Arabic. It could mean cords in the sense of bonds, with which something might be tied, or it could, in connection with heaven, refer to the heavenly cords, courses that an exceptional human might traverse with the aid of a ladder. These examples prove that the conception of *asbāb* leading to heaven existed more generally in Arabic in the time of Muḥammad. The formulaic character of both of these examples also makes one wonder whether the “reaching the *asbāb* of heaven by a ladder” was indeed proverbial in Arabic in Muḥammad’s time.

The source of such a proverbial expression, the point of reference, would be the book of Genesis. The word for “ladder” or “flight of steps” to heaven in these verses of al-Aṣṣā and Zuhayr, *sullam*, refers to Genesis 28:12, where the Hebrew word for “ladder” is *sūllām*, a *hapax eirēménon* in the Hebrew Bible. The Arabic word here may be originally a loan word from Hebrew; the Syriac Pšīttā of Genesis 28:12 has *sebltā*, the Greek LXX *klímax*. The context of the word’s occurrence is important. In Genesis 28 Jacob has a dream in which he sees a flight of steps or a ladder by which angels, God’s divine messengers, go back and forth from heaven, ascending and descending. God himself appears by Jacob’s side and promises the land to him and his offspring as Jacob is of Abraham’s line. Upon awakening, Jacob exclaims, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven⁴¹ (*šā‘ar haššāmayīm*, Syriac Pšīttā *tar‘āh da-šmayyā*, LXX *hē pulē tou ouranou*)”. He founded a place there that came to be called “God’s house”, Bethel.

The word *sullam* is also used twice in the Quran. On one occasion it definitely refers to a ladder or stairway to heaven (Q 6:35 *sullaman fī l-samā’*), again in a deliberate parallel to Jacob’s story. Muḥammad is told by this verse that if he is able to find such a way to heaven he could bring a sign to the people. Here the connection between prophetic authority and a heavenly journey is perfectly clear. The second instance of *sullam* in the Quran (Q 52:38) has a similar meaning: “or do they have a ladder on which they listen? Then let the listener bring a clear authorization!” *am lahum sullamun yastami‘ūna fīhi fa-l-ya’ti mustami‘uhum bi-sulṭānin mubīn*. This does not explicitly make the ladder (*sullam*) a way to heaven, but it occurs in a list of questions about Muḥammad’s opponents asking whether or not they have certain signs of religious authority such as those held by Muḥammad. According to the interpretation of al-Ṭabarī, these opponents claimed that they heard from God himself that they are in the right against Muḥammad.⁴² Presumably this entailed ascending to heaven by means of a ladder in order to listen there. (But what were the opponents

40 Ahlwardt (1870: 96, line 54).

41 Translation from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, 2nd ed. rev., p. 36.

42 al-Ṭabarī (1986–87, vol. 11, pt 27, 20).

really challenged by the Quran to listen to?) The would-be listener is challenged by this verse to come forward with “clear authorization” (*sultān*). This refers again to God’s authorizing only certain persons to ascend to heaven (cf. *sultān* in Q 55:33, cited above). Jacob’s ladder is again the most likely point of reference in older tradition, as it is in al-Aṣṣā’s and Zuhayr’s verses just cited.

Sky as dome, roof, or tent

Al-Aṣṣā’s and Zuhayr’s verses make the *sullam*, or ladder, a way up to the *asbāb* of heaven, but the ladder is not itself a *sabab*. What then is the nature of the *asbāb* if they are different from ladders or gates? A clearer picture of the shape of the cosmos of the *asbāb* will help in determining an answer. Like Narsai, Jacob of Edessa, and others, the Quran explicitly states that the sky was made as a roof (Q 21:32): “We have made the sky a roof well-protected” *wa-jaʿalnā l-samāʿa saqfan mahfūz*. It is implied that there are invisible pillars supporting this roof (Q 13:2): “God is the one who raised the heavens without pillars you can see” *allāhu lladhī rafaʿa l-samawāti bi-ghayri ʿamadin tarawnahā*. Elsewhere in the Quran one learns that rains are poured through the gates of heaven, *abwāb al-samāʿ* (Q 54:11). All this describes the sky fairly clearly in the pattern of a domicile or a building, an interpretation typical in the sixth century, as already seen.

One may also consider other biblical passages that depicted a cosmology like that found in the quranic verses gathered above, in the hope of learning more about the world-picture expected in the audience of the Quran. In Genesis 7:11, in the story of Noah, the windows of heaven (Hebrew *ʾarubbôt haššamayim*) were opened to admit the waters of the flood. The biblical text known as *1 Enoch*, surviving complete only in Ethiopic where it is part of the canonical Ethiopian Octateuch, but also known from fragments in Greek and other languages, offers a picture of the world very much like that described above. Here one is reminded that some of Muḥammad’s own followers fled to Ethiopia for a time where they may have encountered it.⁴³ In any case *1 Enoch* may readily have been available in Arabia as it was widely known in Late Antiquity and could easily have been a part of the cultural context of the Quran’s first utterance. In this book the prophet Enoch is personally shown the edges of the world and receives a vision not only of the fate of the fallen angels but also a view of the shape of the world. The cosmology encountered in the passages of the Quran reviewed above (and in the Syriac *Alexander Legend*)⁴⁴ is similar to that found in *1 Enoch*. In Enoch’s vision, there are winds that serve as the pillars of heaven over the earth (*1 Enoch* 18:3: Ethiopic *aʿmāda samāy*, whereas the Greek has “firmament of heaven” *steréōma tou ouranou*), pillars perhaps calling to mind the invisible pillars (*ʿamad*) of Q 13:2.⁴⁵ Enoch also finds “gates of heaven” in the north (*1 Enoch* 34–6: Ethiopic *xəwāxəwa samāy*). In the

43 Watt (1953: 109–17).

44 van Bladel (forthcoming a).

45 It is interesting to note that the means by which the dome of heaven was supported was a matter of pointed comment by Jacob of Edessa, who dismisses the idea of a

portion of the work known as “The Book of the Heavenly Luminaries”, *I Enoch* 75–82, Enoch sees the gates of heaven (1 Enoch 72:2 ff.: again Ethiopic *xəwāxəwa samāy*, sing. *xoxət*) and the windows (1 Enoch 72:3 ff. Ethiopic *maskot*, pl. *masākəw*) to their right and left. The sun, moon, stars, and winds pass through these gates.⁴⁶ Clearly the sky is imagined in these texts as a dome or tent complete with windows and doors or gates, and the plain meaning of these passages was not lost on Cosmas Indicopleustes and his Antiochene predecessors. Indeed, the view of the sky specifically as a tent was not uncommon in antiquity.⁴⁷

There is every reason to believe that Muḥammad’s early followers were well aware of this biblical cosmology in which the world was likened to a large domicile complete with windows, gates, and supports, or to a tent with similar apertures. The question, then, is how the quranic *asbāb* are therefore to be imagined in a way that suits the common biblical-quranic “cosmology of the domicile”. Lane’s *Lexicon*, compiling entries from numerous pre-modern Arabic dictionaries, shows that the word *sabab*’s basic meaning was a rope by which one can climb up or down. The first part of the entry is worth citing at length.

Sabab signifies any rope let down, or made to descend, from above; or a strong and long rope, but no rope is so called except one by means of which one ascends and descends; or this appellation is only given to a rope of which one end is attached to a roof or ceiling or the like; or one by which one ascends palm trees: [and] a rope by means of which one reaches, or gains access, to water.⁴⁸

The *asbāb* therefore appear to be the ropes of the heavenly tent or dome, leading to the upper level of the dwelling of the cosmos: God’s place above the firmament of heaven. If the cords are conceived of as part of the inner supports of the tent of heaven, perhaps attached to a central pole and stretched out to the edges of the floor of the earth, they are in effect part of the dome’s girding or structure. According to this interpretation, one who reaches these inner supports of the sky-dome can venture to the highest of heights, to Paradise itself and the physical presence of God, by travelling along them. Dhū l-Qarnayn, enabled by God, was able to travel along them

support structure undergirding the heavenly dome: “It became a vault that hangs and stands without foundation / and not columns but a gesture supports it”. Translation from McVey (1983: 155b).

46 Words cited here are taken from the Ethiopic and the surviving Greek portions of *I Enoch* (Flemming 1902, Black 1970).

47 Isaiah 40:22, Psalm 104:2. In *Corpus Hermeticum* 13:12 the aspirants leave “this tent” (*tò skēnos toūto*) composed of the zodiacal circle. 2 Cor. 5:1 “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in (*hē epigeios hēmōn oikia tou skēnous*) is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (trans. New Oxford Annotated Bible, 2nd ed. rev.). Cosmas Indicopleustes, 2.3–4, takes this to refer not to the body but to the actual cosmos.

48 Lane (1863–93: 1285b).

from one edge of the world to another, whereas Pharaoh wanted a platform to raise him to the point that he could reach them, though he failed.

Prophetic authority

The challenge to ascend to heaven issued to sceptical humans in the Quran is not merely to stress human incapability next to God's total and cosmic power. It is also and primarily to emphasize Muḥammad's legitimacy as a prophet.⁴⁹ It does so through a challenge to the sceptics to produce another prophet like Muḥammad, one who can offer a true eye-witness account of heaven and the rewards of the righteous after death. This is part of an older tradition doubtless also well known in sixth- and early seventh-century Arabia. Certain human beings, prophets in Judaeon religion and also apostles in Christian tradition, were thought to have ascended to heaven either physically or psychically. Enoch was shown a vision of the ends of the earth (*1 Enoch*). Paul's "acquaintance" was snatched up to the third heaven (*harpagénta ... héōs tou trítou ouranoû*) and given a vision of Paradise where he heard unspeakable words (2 Cor. 12:2–4). Paul implies that he might have received such revelations but that he was given "a thorn" in his flesh, a messenger of Satan, to keep him from being brought up (2 Cor. 12:7 *hina mē hyperairōmai*). This is his excuse for not having greater apostolic signs. Revelation 21:10–22:7 tells how John was brought in spirit (*en pneúmatí*) to see the new Jerusalem that would descend from the sky (21:2 *katabainousan ek tou ouranoû*) at the final judgement. Presumably his spirit journey was understood to have taken him up to heaven in order to see it. All these visions appear to have been regarded as a basis for prophetic authority. The one who ascended to heaven and described the heavenly realm was bearing very important signs. In Judaeon tradition the Hekhalot and Merkabah literature, works such as *Hekhalot Zutarte*, *Hekhalot Rabbati*, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and *3 Enoch*, attests to similar notions of accounts of or by those righteous who ascended to heaven. M. Idel has shown how the idea of a cosmic pillar from earth to heaven – both as a feature of cosmology and also as a metaphor for the relationship between humankind and righteousness – was developed in the Talmud and in medieval "Kabbalistic" literature.⁵⁰

In Late Antiquity this type of claim to religious authority was not limited to Judaeon, Christian, and Muslim traditions. A similar authority was claimed by the third-century Magian reformer Kirdēr. In one of his inscriptions he claimed to have seen heaven in the skies above, and palaces therein, in a vision.⁵¹ The account makes allusion to the tradition of the ancient Avestan text *Vidēvdād* 19, where Zoroaster asks for and receives from Ahura Mazda a description of the afterlife: the righteous soul is led up

49 Vuckovic (2005: 17–39) has studied the story of Muḥammad's heavenly ascent as a way of constructing his prophetic authority, so I do not investigate those narratives here.

50 Idel (2005), especially pp. 73–100.

51 MacKenzie (1989) and Skjærvø (1983).

into the heavens to join the yazds.⁵² Unfortunately the text of Kirdēr's inscription is damaged, having many lacunae causing numerous questions for modern readers. What is clear is that Kirdēr professed to have a vision in (or of) heaven and saw fit to record it in an inscription testifying that he had personally verified the truth of his religion. He may even have claimed to ascend by way of a ladder, depending on how one fills one particular damaged line of the inscription; just such a ladder is described in the ninth-century Zoroastrian *Greater Bundahišn*, a work based on much older sources now lost, as a way of ascent for the just after death.⁵³ Therefore also in the tradition of the magi, one finds ample evidence for the idea that a priest could verify the religion through visions of or a visit to heaven.⁵⁴

In magian tradition, as in the biblical traditions reviewed above, the heavens were conceived as a dome over the earth and not as a sphere, though at an unknown point the Greek word for sphere was borrowed by speakers of Middle Persian, naturalized as *spihr* and used for the heavenly domes.⁵⁵ The idea of an ascent to heaven may have been present in the traditions of the magi as early as the Achaemenid dynasty.⁵⁶

Even a much later Arabic author, the lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311–12), saw the connection between ascent by the *asbāb* of heaven and piety. In his notes to the verse of the poet Zuhayr cited above, under his article on *sabab*, he adds, *wa-rtaqā fī l-asbābi idhā kāna fāḍila l-dīn* “he ascends in the *asbāb* when he is outstandingly pious”.⁵⁷

More on the nature of the *asbāb*

While the model of the sky as a dome or tent is clear from the foregoing, it is difficult to define precisely the real nature of the cords running along or leading up into the heights. Without an authoritative statement there was probably little actual agreement about their nature in Muḥammad's community. It may have been a matter of Arabian folklore if the *asbāb* of heaven were as proverbial as al-Aʿšā and Zuhayr make them seem to have been. First, a limited amount may be inferred from Arabic usage itself. As already mentioned, the word *sabab* is well-documented in Arabic lexica to mean “cords” that form part of the structure of a tent or even a wooden peg (to which one might attach cords). The *asbāb* of the Quran by which or to which humans are challenged to climb, and which Dhū l-Qarnayn traversed, seem to be none other than cords running down from or along part of the structure of the “tent” or “house” of the upper cosmos, perhaps conceived of as fixed to the celestial pole. By means of them one can ascend to the upper storey of the domicile. However, the appearance, material composition, and location of the *asbāb* themselves still remain mysterious.

52 Skjærvø (1983: 290–1).

53 Skjærvø (1983: 302).

54 The Zoroastrian book of Wirāz the Just also contains a similar idea of a vision of hell and heaven after an ordeal: Vahman (1986).

55 Panaino (2002).

56 West (2002).

57 Ibn Manẓūr (1955: 1.458b).

So far I have found only one brief reference in the commentaries containing a description specifically of the heavenly cords mentioned in the Quran. The rarity of descriptions of the cords is probably due to the oblivion into which the true quranic meaning of *sabab* fell. Al-Ṭabarī gives the following statement of al-Rabīʿ ibn Anas (d. 756), to whom is attributed an early Quran commentary:⁵⁸ “The *asbāb* are finer than hair and stronger than iron; it [*sic*] is in every place although it is invisible”.⁵⁹ This apparently unique comment is tucked away without remark at the end of al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis of the words “let them ascend in *asbāb*” in Q 38:10. Evidently the source of this explanation of the *asbāb* imagined them as cords so thin as to be invisible, unbreakable, but connected to every place. One may assume that in al-Rabīʿ’s view they were made of a supernatural material and that they were found not only at the edges of the earth, where they tied the sky-dome to the lower part of the cosmos on which the earth rests, but also in every location, as he says.

Nevertheless, the peculiar explanation of al-Rabīʿ may have been foreign to the milieu of Muḥammad and may not have been part of the intended meaning of the Quran when it includes mention of the *asbāb*, since there were many widespread traditions in the period that the Quran appeared expressing the notion that cords of one kind or another either held together heavenly bodies or tied earthly locations to the heavenly bodies. Mostly these are transmitted as Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and Mandaean traditions, but in all likelihood reflect a view commonly held in Iran and Iraq in the lifetime of Muḥammad’s listeners. Al-Rabīʿ ibn Anas lived in Marw, where Muslims were still a minority, having moved from Baṣra, and it is quite likely that he would have been exposed to these Iranian traditions if he had inquired about cosmology.

Antonio Panaino has written an excellent study of various types of heavenly cords in these and other contexts; those interested in pursuing many of the threads presented below will find it to be an essential reference.⁶⁰ In what follows, I add also some of my own findings. Already in the Avesta one hears of a good star binding a bad star with bonds; this theme was developed among the magi over a long period of time.⁶¹ In the cosmology offered in the ninth-century Zoroastrian books, which preserve in Middle Persian many ancient Iranian traditions, some as old as the Avesta, one reads how the sun and moon bound the planets to themselves with cords (*zīg*). This theory was apparently used to explain the retrograde motion of the planets as well as the reason some planets (Mercury and Venus) never appear very far from the sun in the sky.

According to Panaino and David Pingree, this idea was probably common to Iran and India from the Achaemenian period but no earlier; part of an intellectual current that originated in or about the Achaemenian

58 GAS 1.34.

59 *al-asbāb adaqq min al-šaʿr wa-ašadd min al-ḥadīd wa-huwa bi-kull makān ghayr annahū lā yurā*. al-Ṭabarī (1986–87: vol. 10, pt 22, 82).

60 Panaino (1998).

61 Yašt 8.55.

Persian Empire and leaving traces in very early philosophical Greek thought as well.⁶² Sanskrit cosmologies inherited it. The *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* refers to the wind-ropes (*vātarajjūnām*) attached to the pole of heaven. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, an influential text of the third–fourth century CE, includes references to “cords of wind” binding the stars to the northern celestial pole (the stars are *prabaddhā vāyuraśmibhiḥ*); attached to the pole by these cords, the stars spin around the sky. Also Varāhamihira, writing in the sixth century, refers to the binding of the stars to the celestial pole in his *Pañcasiddhāntika*.⁶³

A similar notion prevailed among the magi, who refer to the celestial north pole as the central “Peg” or “Tent-Pole” (Middle Persian *mēx*, Avestan *mərəzu*) from which the heavenly bodies hang.⁶⁴ The binding of the planets is mentioned in the *Greater Bundahišn* and in the *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār*. Cords are specified only in the latter; the former tells only of astral binding.⁶⁵ The *Greater Bundahišn* also explains that tethers tie each of the seven terrestrial continents (*kišwar*) to the Great Bear in order to hold them together during the present period of the Mixture. The Great Bear is of course Ursa Major, a constellation of seven stars very near the northern celestial pole around which heaven seems to spin. The name of the Ursa Major in Middle Persian, *Haftōring*, is made by folk etymology in the *Greater Bundahišn* to mean “seven veins” (*haft rag*), i.e. seven cords, one for each of the seven continents in the Iranian cosmology.⁶⁶ Here a possibility for imagining the connection of heavenly cords with the celestial polar cardine is most explicit. The same text, it is interesting to note, states that the sun rises and sets through windows (Middle Persian *rōzan*) in the east and west. When the sun disappears in the west, it is not passing around a spherical earth but rather has been obscured by the high terrain of the north around the great mountain peak, Tērag (Avestan *Taēra*), situated near the middle of the earth.⁶⁷ The path of the sun described here is exactly like the description of the sun’s movements presented by the oft-mocked Cosmas Indicopleustes, a fact that I think has gone unnoticed. Since Cosmas says he took his teaching from Mār Abā, one suspects that here is a non-Ptolemaic cosmology common to Mazdaeans and Christians in the Persian Empire as well as to Indian tradition.⁶⁸

Pre-Islamic Arabs apparently knew of this notion, too. The idea that celestial bodies, in particular the stars, can be attached by cords to terrestrial objects such as mountains is implicit in some famous pre-Islamic

62 Panaino (1995–96: 203).

63 Sanskrit texts cited in Panaino (1995–96: 196–8).

64 Panaino (1995–96: 202–3). For the meaning of *mēx* as “tent-pole” see Durkin-Meisterernst (2004: 237a).

65 *Greater Bundahišn*, chapter 5 (MacKenzie 1964: 512–3, 516) gives the story of how Ohrmazd bound the planets to the sun and moon. The *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār* (Menasce 1945: 52–3 (4: 39–45)) gives the story in more detail.

66 Henning (1942: 232 and n. 6).

67 MacKenzie (1964: 517–9).

68 Cosmas Indicopleustes 2.2 and 8.25. Cosmas knows Mār Abā as Patrikios. He refers to him also (but not by name) at 2.29 and 5.1

Arabic verses from the *mu‘allaqa* of Imru’ al-Qays of Kinda (d. c. 550):⁶⁹ *fa-yā laka min laylin ka-anna nughūmahū bi-kulli mughāri l-fatli šuddat bi-Yadhbulī / ka-anna l-Thurayyā ‘ulliqat fī mašāmiḥā bi-amrāsi kattānin ilā šummi jandalī* “What kind of night are you? It’s as if its stars were fastened to Mount Yadhbul by every twisted cord; / it’s as if the Pleiades were tied in their station by flaxen cables to strong stones”. These verses describe a long night of worry that seems never to end, but they also make new sense when understood against the background of a widely held belief in heavenly cords reaching from the stars to the earth, or even anchoring them to the earth.

The designation of heavenly cords as a kind of “veins”, seen above in the folk etymology of *Haftōring*, is found also in Manichaean texts preserved in Iranian languages. For example, a Manichaean Sogdian text describes how the planetary demons were imprisoned in the zodiacal circle, similarly to the Zoroastrian account above: “They wove to and fro roots, veins, and tethers (*wyx r’k ‘ty ptβnd w’fnd ‘ty ptyw’fnd*) from all the demons who were imprisoned in the zodiacal circle”.⁷⁰ The Coptic Manichaean *Kephalaia* also tell of a thing called *λιζμε*, thought to mean “conduits” from heaven to earth, yet the nature of these is not well understood. They seem to correspond with the Greek *rhizai* (roots) in the Manichaean *Acta Archelai*, connecting the heaven to earth through individual humans.⁷¹

One of Mani’s own writings, his Middle Persian *Šāhbuhragān*, named for its addressee Shapur I, describes how at the final conflagration, when this world is destroyed, the evil-doers will beg the Manichaean souls to intercede on their behalf by throwing them cords or life-lines (*zīg*) to pull them out of the fire into heaven above.⁷² Though this is not the same as cords binding together parts of the firmament of heaven, it nevertheless provides an example of how humans were portrayed in the scripture of a religion still significant in the time of Muḥammad as potentially capable of ascending to heaven by means of ropes lowered from on high.

The schoolmen of the Church of the East in the sixth century also argued in Syriac about the nature of heavenly ascent. Cyrus of Edessa’s *Explanation of the Ascent of Jesus from Earth to Heaven* offers a demonstration (*tahwītā*) by way of analogy to explain how Jesus could have passed beyond the solid firmament of heaven without breaking it open or causing a portal to be seen.

Just as water is taken up in the roots (*b-‘eqqārē*) of olive or other trees and circulates by their branches and clusters as though by ducts (*b-qatrîné*), as it were, though neither tunnels nor channels are hollowed

69 Ahlwardt (1870: 148.4–6).

70 Translation by Henning (1942: 232 n. 6) of Manichaean Sogdian *M* 178. Henning claims here, “In unpublished Manichaean texts M(iddle) Pers(ian) *rag* (also Sogdian *r’k*) is actually in use for these invisible and indestructible connecting lines”.

71 See Gardner (1995: 127–32 (= *Keph.* 120.21–24.32)) for a list of occurrences, Clackson, Hunter, and Lieu (1998: 106); Panaino (1998: 105–29).

72 MacKenzie (1979: 517–8).

out within them, so by an ineffable miracle Christ entered heaven without tearing it asunder.⁷³

The osmosis of Jesus into heaven through the firmament without any visible aperture is explained by the likeness of the unseen yet real course of water within a plant's root. Perhaps Cyrus' analogical demonstration also sheds light on the notion of roots in Manichaean cosmology mentioned above. Cyrus of Edessa was also a student of the same Mār Abā whom Cosmas Indicopleustes claimed as his teacher.⁷⁴ Moreover, this Cyrus is alleged to have founded a school in al-Ḥīra,⁷⁵ capital of the Christian Laḥmid dynasty, the "most important Arab city in the Fertile Crescent in the three centuries prior to the rise of Islam" and a place that the poet al-Aṣṣā (570–625), whose verse on the *asbāb* of heaven was discussed above, frequented a short time later, and where Caskel says al-Aṣṣā was "educated" (as a *rāwī?*).⁷⁶ In any case, Cyrus' imagination of the manner of Jesus' ascent shows that learned men in the sixth century were seriously trying to figure out exactly how heavenly ascent occurs. The quranic *asbāb* are one possible answer to the question from a similar and closely neighbouring milieu.

By way of summary, the idea of heavenly cords was by no means a strange one in the seventh century, when the Quran was first uttered. Belief in and speculation about heavenly cords of various kinds, including cords by which a living human could ascend to heaven, were evidently widespread, and the traditions of several religions in many languages document this. Though it is a matter of speculation, one may suggest that the *asbāb* of the Quran were also imagined as being attached to the celestial pole around which the sky appeared to revolve.

Conclusion and epilogue: God's rope

The cosmology of the Quran reflects that of the peoples east of the Roman Empire generally and does not show in its expression any reference to a spherical heaven around a spherical earth. Its view of the sky rather as a rounded domicile with windows and gates, or as a tent, is held in common with the literal reading of several well-known passages in the Bible and *I Enoch* and posits heavenly cords of some kind, perhaps pointing to beliefs like those preserved in Zoroastrian and Manichaean cosmology and alluded to in early Arabic poetry.

The idea of heavenly cords in the upper reaches of the sky, along the firmament of heaven or dangling from it, called *asbāb* (perhaps now to be translated in this context as "sky-cords"), is clear in the Quran in the five passages reviewed here. These cords were used in a quranic theme in which

73 Cyrus of Edessa (1974: text 140, translation 124). I have cited Macomber's translation.

74 Becker (2006: 102). Cosmas Indicopleustes 2.2 and 8.25.

75 Baumstark (1922: 122).

76 A.F.L. Beeston and I. Shahid, "al-Ḥīra", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 3.462–3, and W. Caskel, "al-Aṣṣā", *ibid.*, 1.689–90.

God is characterized as warning Muḥammad's opponents that they cannot rise to heaven by means of them, that their way to heaven is cut off, and that only one authorized by God may see God's supercelestial domain. They are thus part of an ancient complex of beliefs, common to several communities, about the ascent of righteous ones to heaven and the prophetic authority gained thereby. Only those who visited heaven and returned could truly claim the status of prophet. One of these heavenly journeys was made by Dhū l-Qarnayn, the sole example in the Quran of a human who successfully travelled by *asbāb*.

If all this is the case, and the true meaning of *sabab* in the Quran has been successfully explained above, then some explanation is required for why traditions of interpretation of the Quran have not maintained such a view. For although the meaning of *sabab* as "rope" clearly survived in Arabic, the exegesis of the word in the Quran does not reflect that meaning in most cases. However, proving why the correct interpretation did *not* survive is difficult to do, since no direct and explicit discussion of the *asbāb* appears to survive. Here I can offer only a suggestion. When the worldview of educated Muslims after the establishment of the Arab Empire came to incorporate principles of astrology including the geocentric, spherical, Aristotelian-Ptolemaic world picture – particularly after the advent of the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty in 750 – the meaning of these passages came to be interpreted in later Islamic tradition not according to the biblical–quranic cosmology, which became obsolete, but according to the Ptolemaic model, according to which the Quran itself came to be interpreted.⁷⁷ The word *sabab* in the Quran thereafter had to be understood differently, meaning merely "a way", by the commentators, because they did not imagine the cosmos according to the older cosmology with its girded sky-dome. Instead they saw the earth as a sphere at the centre of the universe around which the heavenly spheres spun for the duration of the cosmos. This was, according to my suggestion, incompatible with the idea of *asbāb* leading *up* to the "top" of the cosmos. For Muslims after the adoption and widespread acceptance of Ptolemaic astronomy, there was no place for a dome with windows for the sun and rains to pass through, a ceiling outfitted with cords almost within reach that, with God's permission and empowerment, one could grab and climb up in order to visit the paradise in heaven, and God himself.⁷⁸ So the cords were forgotten outside of a phrase preserved in

77 Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* was first rendered into Arabic in the second half of the eighth century (GAS V.167). The *Almagest* was first translated into Arabic under al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–33) (Kunitzsch 1974: 17–34). Ibn Rusta (1892: 8–14), writing c. 900, begins his geography with a Ptolemaic cosmology (and chapter headings such as "That the sphere of the Earth is fixed in the middle of the sphere of Heaven"). Ibn al-Faqīh, writing c. 903, cites "the philosophers" for the same view at the beginning of his geography (1885: 4). Al-Mas'ūdī (1894: 7–14), writing in 955–6, also begins his partly geographical *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa-l-iṣrāf* with the properties of the spherical heavens, citing Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Philoponus as authorities, and he explicitly interprets Q 36:38–40 as referring to heavenly *spheres*.

78 Iranian astrologers as late as al-Bīrūnī were nevertheless aware of an older Iranian doctrine holding that heavenly bodies were tied together by cords. See Panaino (1998: 57–69).

a couple of verses of pre-Islamic poetry and a few odd references in Quran commentaries. But I hasten to add that this suggestion is based largely on negative evidence – the non-survival of the idea of sky-cords – so it is, for now at least, a provisional explanation.

As already seen, however, traces of the early belief remained. By way of closing, a final example of this may be presented. In one of its historically more important passages the Quran uses the image of a rope (*ḥabl*, a synonym of *sabab*) from God to symbolize the solidarity of the community of Muḥammad’s believing followers: “Hold on to the Rope of God, all of you, and do not be divided” *wa-‘taṣimū bi-ḥabli llāhi jamī’an wa-lā tafarraquū* (Q 3:103). This verse appears to be using the idea of heavenly cords as a metaphor, but it is a metaphor that makes sense primarily in light of the cosmology of the *asbāb*, ropes attached to the sky-dome giving access to heaven and life everlasting in God’s realm.

After Muḥammad’s death, this metaphorical use of God’s rope was reinterpreted and extended in two different ways, reflecting a debate over authority among the community that became the Muslims. The first of these ways has been discussed by Crone and Hinds: the name “God’s rope” was adopted by early caliphs, who claimed (at least in some cases) by their title to be God’s deputies (*ḥulafā’ Allāh*) on earth.⁷⁹ Many examples show how Caliphs called themselves and were referred to metaphorically as “God’s rope”, that is, the sole means by which the community was connected with heaven, though the chronology of the use of the title is not entirely clear.⁸⁰ Apparently the righteous conduct of the caliph was thought to assure the righteousness of the community. To the very present some Muslims regard their Imām figuratively as “God’s rope”.⁸¹

Second, the Quran itself was also dubbed “God’s rope”. This seems to reflect a counterargument against the first position to the effect that only the pious interpreter, who alone could claim to know best the interpretation of the Quran, had the key to the metaphorical cord leading up to heaven.⁸² This view is implicit in a well known *ḥadīth*, according to which the weightier of the “two weighty things” left by the prophet for his followers is “God’s book, a rope extended from heaven to the earth”, *Kitāb Allāh ḥabl mamdūd min al-samā’ ilā l-ard*.⁸³ Here the Quran itself is described, not

79 Crone and Hinds (1986: 6–11) give evidence for the early use of this title using primarily later literary sources. For contemporary evidence so far we have, at least, the caliph ‘Abdalmalik’s coins showing the title Ḥalīfat Allāh.

80 Crone and Hinds (1986: 39–40, 82 n. 155, 101, n. 33, 120). Thanks to Michael Pregill for pointing out to me the importance of their study of this term.

81 See, e.g., the twentieth-century Ismaili interpretation of ‘Allāmah Naṣīr al-Dīn Naṣīr Hunzai (1996: 142–3): “In the time of the Prophethood, the holy Prophet himself was the rope of Allah. He was both the speaking Qur’ān and embodied Islam. After him the true Imams from the progeny were the rope of Allah in their respective times and today this most exalted position is indeed held by the Imam of the time”.

82 This argument is effectively that of Crone and Hinds (1986: 59–96), which holds that the caliphs and the scholars vied for control of the *sunna*. Here, I merely add that scholarly exegetes came also to hold the Quran, the other half of the rallying slogan *kitāb Allāh wa-sunnat nabīyihī*, as a higher authority than the caliphs.

83 For references see *ḥabl* in Wensinck (1936–88), vol. 1, p. 414b; Tirmidhī, Manāqib 31, Muslim, *Faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba* 38, al-Dārimī, *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān* 1.

literally of course but metaphorically, as a rope lowered from sky to earth. The other “weighty thing”, the second of the two authorities in this *ḥadīth*, it is interesting to note, is nevertheless the household of the Prophet.

Readers knowledgeable in Islamic texts will know how richly developed the image of a rope to heaven became through such later interpretations. It should form the subject of a separate investigation. In any case, now that the relevance of the notion of cords from heaven to earth has become clearer from the historical context, this characterization of the caliphs and of the Quran takes on greater profundity. The cords of heaven, once part of the Quran’s cosmology and connected with belief in prophetic authority based on heavenly ascent, became instead a symbol for a sure and direct connection between humans and God, a symbol that was claimed by different factions in the struggle for authority in the community after the passing of their prophet, who was thought to have personally visited heaven itself. According to the implied claims of these uses of the term “God’s rope”, it is either the leader of the community or the Quran itself, and not any other supernatural way such as *asbāb*, that provides the means authorized by God for an individual believer’s personal, post mortem ascent to the realm of the righteous located in God’s presence above the material dome of the sky, where every person obedient to God will see the heavenly reward that the true prophets promised on the basis of their direct experience of supernatural ascent.

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