

QUR'ĀNIC THEOLOGOU MENA IN IBN AL-LAYTH'S MISSIVE TO BYZANTIUM: SCRIPTING THE SĪRAH IN EPISTOLARY FORM[Ⓐ]

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ABSTRACT

By the late eighth century, the Muslim Caliphate sought to exert pressure on the Byzantine Empire by dispatching a warning letter after the Byzantine emperor ceased paying tribute to the Abbasids. Although formally structured as a diplomatic missive, the letter predominantly contained apologetic arguments defending key tenets of the Islamic faith particularly the prophethood of Muḥammad. As a result, some scholars have regarded this letter as a supplementary source for the Sīrah Nabawiyyah. This study aims to examine the theological discourse embedded within the letter and to analyse the rationale behind the inclusion of Qur'ānic references by its author, Ibn al-Layth (d. c. 203/819). It also investigates how Qur'ānic verses operate as rhetorical and theological elements within Abbasid diplomatic letters and assesses how Ibn al-Layth's usage both aligns with and diverges from other examples of the genre. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research utilizes textual analysis to explore each Qur'ānic verse cited in relation to the Prophet's early life. These verses are examined within their historical context, with attention given to the evolving contours of Muslim theological thought. The findings suggest that Ibn al-Layth may have adopted rhetorical and epistolary conventions attributed to the Prophet himself, reflecting a broader practice among Muslim courts of reinforcing diplomatic correspondence with appropriate Qur'ānic citations.

Keywords: *Ibn al-Layth, Quran, Sira Nabawiyya, Theologoumena*

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1. INTRODUCTION: IBN AL-LAYTH AND HIS LETTER

In describing his professional background, Roggema identifies Ibn al-Layth as an 'orator' (*khāṭīb*), 'jurist' (*faqīh*), apologist/theologian (*mutakallim*), 'epistolographer' (*mutarassil*), and 'secretary' (*kātib*) based on information provided by Ibn al-Nadīm (Roggema, 2014). Three of these professions (specifically orator, epistolographer and secretary) indicate that the person identified should, at the very least, be familiar with Arabic language and its sciences. In fact, Ibn al-Layth seems to be more known as an Arabic litterateur (*al-adīb*) (Kahālah, 1993). His words are cited by Yāqūt in describing the important of employing grammar (*al-naḥw*) in literature (*al-adab*) (al-Ḥamawī, 1993). He was ascribed by al-Ya'qūbī as *sāhib al-balāgha* (one who possesses eloquence, or is an expert in rhetoric) (al-Ya'qūbī, 2010), while Al-Khafājī lists his name in the same group with al-Jāhiḡ, as being among those scholars who make use of the literary device of alliteration and rhyme (*al-saj'*) in their writing (Al-Khafājī, 1982). Furthermore, his work on *belles-lettres* in *Kitāb (ilā) Yaḥyā ibn Khālid fī al-Adab* (The Book of Yaḥyā ibn Khālid in literature), and a work entitled *Kitāb al-Khaṭ wa al-Qalam* (calligraphy and the pen) may represent exemplars of his literary efforts. In addition, his letter to Ja'far ibn Yaḥyā indicates his expertise in Arabic calligraphy (al-Andalūsī, 1404H).

Apart from being known as writer of Arabic literature, Ibn al-Layth is also recognized as a theologian (*mutakallim*) and jurist (*faqīh*). Chokr suggests that three of his works (*Kitāb al-Radd 'alā al-Zanādiqa*, *Kitāb 'Izat Hārūn al-Rashīd* and *Kitāb al-Halīlaja fī al-I'tibār*) illustrate his position as a theologian (Chokr, 1993). There is also a work attributed to Ibn al-Layth which is recorded by al-Bīrūnī. It is known as Ibn al-Layth's refutation of an alchemist. However, this work was later refuted by Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (Sharif, 1963). Since none of these works has survived, Ibn al-Layth's theological discussion of its contents remains uncertain. Regarding Ibn al-Layth's designation as a jurist (*faqīh*), Ibn al-Nadīm was probably the first bibliographer to ascribe to him this title, and it is possible that later scholars were simply following the information provided by him. Al-Ya'qūbī, the earlier historian however, did not include Ibn al-Layth as a jurist in his *Tārīkh*, when his usual practice was to provide an extensive list of jurists at the end of each Abbasid Caliph's history.

Besides the *Risāla*, Ibn al-Layth writings have survived in fragments in two works. The letter he wrote to Ja'far ibn Yaḥyā is preserved in *al-'Iqd al-Farīd* (al-Andalūsī, 1404H) while writings regarding peace and apology recorded in Ibn Ṭāhir's *al-Manzūm wa al-Manthūr* (Şafwat, n.d). None of these works contains any verse from the Qur'ān, which might help us to make a comparative analysis

of his understanding of the Qur'ān. This means that his letter to Constantine remains the only exemplar of his works that brings to us a particular Muslim understanding of a reference to Muḥammad in the Qur'ān within this early period.

This unique status of the Constantine letter as the only surviving text in which Ibn al-Layth explicitly employs Qur'ānic citation provides an important window for identifying the specific theological constructs or *theologoumena* that inform his presentation of the Prophet. The term *theologoumena* (sing. *theologoumenon*) refers to theological notions or interpretive propositions that, while not explicitly mandated by foundational revelation, emerge within the discourse of a religious community to articulate, expand, or systematize elements of belief. In other words, *theologoumena* denote interpretive frameworks, narrative elaborations, or speculative explanations that seek to clarify or support theological claims yet remain distinct from core doctrinal tenets. Within the context of early Islamic thought, *theologoumena* often take the form of exegetical inferences from Qur'ānic verses, narrative embellishments in *sīrah* traditions, or rhetorical motifs developed in *kalām* debates. These elements play a significant role in shaping how prophetic history, authority, and sacred narrative are articulated particularly in texts designed for persuasion, such as polemical treatises and diplomatic correspondence. Thus, identifying and analysing *theologoumena* within Ibn al-Layth's letter allows us to observe how Qur'ānic references were mobilized not merely as citations of divine proof but as vehicles for constructing an authoritative theological memory of the Prophet Muḥammad.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, text-historical methodology centred on close reading and comparative textual analysis. The primary source for analysis is the critical edition of Ibn al-Layth's letter prepared by Khalid Muḥammad 'Abduh (2006), which collates the extant textual witnesses preserved in *al-'Iqd al-Farīd* and *al-Manzūm wa al-Manthūr*. Variants between these transmissions whether in phrasing, lexical choice, or Qur'ānic citation were examined and recorded, with particular attention to cases where variation may influence the theological nuance or rhetorical emphasis of the letter. Biographical and bibliographical material concerning Ibn al-Layth, especially as synthesized by Roggema (2014), was consulted to clarify his intellectual formation and potential engagement with *kalām* discourse and chancery rhetoric within early Abbasid Baghdad.

In examining the Qur'ānic verses embedded in the letter, the study adopts an intertextual approach informed by early *tafsīr* literature, *sīrah* narrative

development, and the formation of Qur'anic *theologoumena* that is, theological constructions that elaborate meanings not explicitly stated in the revealed text. Each Qur'anic citation was contextualized within its exegetical reception and evaluated in terms of its rhetorical purpose when addressed to a Byzantine Christian audience. To situate the letter within broader patterns of Muslim-Byzantine intellectual encounter, the study also engages Shboul's (1999) analysis of early Arab-Islamic perceptions of Byzantine religious identity and cultural difference. This dual approach, philological comparison of textual witnesses and contextual interpretation of Qur'anic citation allows us to assess how Ibn al-Layth mobilized scripture not only as proof-text but as a persuasive theological narrative shaped for diplomatic communication.

3. RESULT: THE LETTER OF IBN AL-LAYTH

According to Nadia el-Cheikh, within this period, Constantine VI instigated an aggressive eastern policy which compels al-Rashīd (d. 193/809) to send him a letter of reminder (El-Cheikh, 2004). Byzantine was reported to have stopped paying tribute to the Abbasid's empire, which they had previously paid twice annually before this. For this reason, according to 'Abd Al-Jabbār, the Caliph decided to put pressure on Byzantium by sending them a message offering the emperor the opportunity to convert to Islam. If Constantine refused to do so, then it was suggested that he would be obliged to pay tribute. Rejecting these two options, the Caliph threatened to wage war with the Byzantine Empire. In general, this is the only description of circumstance where the letter was composed. Even though it was drafted as a diplomatic missive, most of the letter contained specifically apologetic lines of argument defending Muslim's creed, particularly the prophethood of Muḥammad as verified by Block (2011). For this reason, Kister considers it as *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa* (Kister, 1983). This study is based primarily on the edition of the letter published by Khalid Muḥammad 'Abduh (2006), which preserves the text transmitted in *al-'Iqd al-Farīd* alongside variant readings drawn from *al-Manzūm wa al-Manḥūr*. Any significant divergences in wording, phraseology, or Qur'anic citation between these witnesses have been discussed where they bear upon the theological argumentation of the letter.

Reading between the lines those terms of address that have been used, it seems that the letter was not intended solely for the Byzantine emperor; it also alluded the message to the emperor's ecclesiastical authorities and religious advisors, which are likely to have had a considerable influence upon Constantine's decision (Shboul, 1999). The terms used in the letter indicate the probability of further addressee. Even though the letter begins by addressing the

emperor directly as *'Azīm al-Rūm* (the Emperor of Rom), terms such *yā ahl al-kitāb* (O' People of the Book) were then commonly employed, as they were also to the addressee (the term *yā ahl al-kitāb* was used four times in the letter). Furthermore, after every term of *yā ahl al-kitāb* is stated, it is usually followed by a second person plural pronoun, in which it is apparent that the author is addressing a wider audience.

The proportions of the content are worthy of note. Based on 'Abd al-Jabbār's account, the letter was written to put a pressure on the Byzantines to pay tribute. However, this aspect occupies only a minor section of the letter. Most of the content is concerned with theological argumentation, especially the articulation of *tawhīd* (the oneness of God), the sign of prophethood, arguments on the concept of trinity, disputation of the divinity of Jesus and Biblical predictions on Muḥammad's prophethood. In Maktaba al-Nāfiza's edition, the letter starts at page 11 and finishes at page 56. The first part that consists of theological discourse covers pages 11 to 55. Only from page 56 to 62 does the letter start to remind the emperor of his duty to pay tribute to the 'Abbasid's empire. Compared with *Risāla* preserved in *Jamharat Rasā'il al-'Arab* by Ṣafwat, the Maktaba al-Nāfiza's edition omits two paragraphs of theological discussion, which suggests that the discussion on theological discourse is more evident in *Jamharat's* edition.

One might imagine that the greater portion of theological discourse indicates that religious matters play a considerable role in influencing the Emperor's decision. The way the author classifies the Emperor in the group of religious people implies the author's perception of the Emperor as a religious figure. This can be confirmed by Shboul's observations, in which he conceives that the Byzantines were always perceived as religious personages in Arab eyes (Shboul, 1999). If this is accepted, it could offer explanations about why theological discussion dominates most of the letter's content. In terms of this proposition, it also shows that the Caliph is really concerned to explain to the Emperor about Islam; or the message might be an allusion to the Emperor's religious authorities, challenging their beliefs. As Shboul suggests, the real battle is the battle of belief.

Since the Emperor was regarded by the author as a specifically religious figure, or, at the very least, influenced by ecclesiastical authorities, it is not therefore curious, that the letter amplified by at least forty verses from the Qur'ān, and fourteen Biblical quotations. The verses of the Qur'ān are cited within various topics of discussion as a fundamental element of arguments

presented by the author. In addition, most of the Biblical references are cited as proof of the veracity of Muḥammad's prophecy.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 *Qur'anic References in the Letter*

The letter was initiated by the Caliph in recognition of his responsibility to deliver an admonishment (*mau'izā*) and to convey his hope that the Emperor would benefit from this dialogue (*wa intifā'uka bi mujādalatihi*). He furnished the introduction with five verses from the Qur'ān: first, to explain his objective (16:125 and 41:33), inviting for the common word (*kalima sawā'*) (3:64), honouring those who accept good words (39:17) and reminding them not to be like the previous deviated nations (4:171).

The letter continues with the author starting to deliver his specifically theological discourse from an Islamic perspective. The tone of expression indicates an apologetic style, defending Islamic belief and arguing against the Christian creed. Dialectical arguments interspersed in many parts of the passage show that the Caliph (or Ibn al-Layth) was familiar or had already anticipated the arguments that would come in response from his audience. The author also adduced Qur'anic references in order to strengthen his argument. The Qur'anic references can be summarised thematically:

- a. The concept of *tauḥīd* (the oneness of God). In this part, five verses were quoted (2:164, 35:9, 67:3, 23:90-91 and 7:190-191). The first three verses call the reader to reflect and contemplate the existence of the nature and its system as evidence of the oneness of God. The author asserts that if the God has partners, every of them will bring their own creation (*ladhababa kullu ilāhin bimā khalaqa*), and this consequently will engender instability in the universe (*latafāwatu al-khalq*). He then denies the existence of God's son and condemns those who believe in polytheism. (23:90-91 and 7:190-191). Obviously the concept of *tauḥīd* presents a challenge to the concept of trinity within the Christian faith. Arguments against this concept are presented in other passages (page 46 to 50). However there is no Qur'anic citation quoted in this dispute, even though there are references in the Qur'ān regarding this contentious debate, as, for example, verses 112:1-4, 4:171, and 5:73. The arguments against the concept of trinity are presented in the forms of both dialectical and logical argument.

- b. Discussion on the prophethood of Muḥammad forms a major part of theological discourse in this letter, and it is an instance in which most of the Qur'ānic references are employed as proof of his prophethood. It can be divided to four subtopics as follows: the concept of prophethood in Islam; the evidence of shooting stars as offering proof of his prophethood, the victory that always accompanied him in wars; and his mistakes and imperfections attributed to him in the Qur'ān.

4.2 *The Prophethood of Muḥammad*

Discussion of the prophethood of Muḥammad forms a major part of the theological discourse in the letter of Ibn al-Layth. In it, Qur'ānic references are employed as proof of his prophethood, which may be divided to four specific areas of discourse as follows:

- a. **The concept of prophethood in Islam** comprises the first part of the discourse and concerns the prophethood of Muḥammad. The author introduces the discussion with an explanation of the purpose of sending a messenger. Verse 4:165 is cited to assert that there is no excuse for mankind to blame God for not forewarning mankind, on the Day of Judgment because He has already sent the world a messenger to convey the truth. The verse elucidates this with the warning so that “mankind will have no argument against Allah after the messengers.” In general, the way Ibn al-Layth select this verse reminds us the concept of God's justice proposed by Mu'tazilī's scholar. However, as confirmed by Van Ess, he was never been regarded as a Mu'tazilī (Roggema, 2014). The author then identifies the principal reasons why the unbelievers rejected the Prophet. After quoting verse 6:33, he clarifies that injustice (*baghyan*), enmity (*'adāwa*), animosity (*ḥasadan*) and importunity (*lajāja*) are the main factors that influence the unbeliever to reject the Prophet. These selection of words used in the letter could be an indication of his familiarity with the terms used in the Qur'ān. Three of these terms (*baghyan*, *'adāwa* and *hasadan*) were clearly stated in the Qur'ān as referring to the attributes of the People of the Book. The terms were used in the Qur'ān as an explanation of why the People of the Book rejecting the truth. Being rejected is a standard experience for the Prophet, therefore according to the author: God promises the Prophet that He will grant him victory (37:173) and protect him from any harm (5:67). The author continues by challenging the attitude of the unbelievers (47:22-23) and asks them to provide tangible evidence if, indeed, they do possess the truth (2:111 and 27:64). In addition, a few

references to Muḥammad's early condition are also provided (10:16), such as the fact of his illiteracy (29:48), which is credible evidence that he is unlikely to have been influenced by his teachers or associates. This argument is offered as proof that the Qur'ān is indeed not the product of Muḥammad's own faculties and capacities, but that the message of the Qur'ān is fundamentally and necessarily divine, a direct message from God to mankind.

- b. **The evidence of 'shooting stars'** is similarly cited as offering proof of Muḥammad's prophethood. Apart from other miracles or evidence adduced by Ibn al-Layth, discussion about the phenomena of shooting stars consumes a considerable part of the discourse. Seven Qur'ānic references are alluded to as apparent references to this event; and this forms the second largest portion of Qur'ānic references to Muḥammad's proof of prophethood. The verses quoted are: 15:16-17, 37:6-7, 72:8, 26:221-223, 72:10, 72:9, 26:210-212. A discussion of these verses will be made later in the section which deals with Qur'ānic references to Muḥammad's early life.
- c. **The victory that always accompanied the Prophet in wars.** As mentioned above, God had promised Muḥammad victory, and his series of victories were regarded by Ibn al-Layth as one of the major pieces of evidence of truth. Based on Zaman's observation, this is among the most consistent features which recur in the letter, in which the author seems to emphasize that Muḥammad would not succeed if Islam had not been a true faith (Zaman, 1997). Two battles that were led by the Prophet are mentioned, and these are supported by Qur'ānic references: the Battle of Badr and the Battle of Khandaq. Verse 54:45 is employed as an explanation of God granting victory in the battle of Badr. Even though Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Hishām are not referred to this verse, it is nevertheless, assumed to be a reference to the battle of Badr by scholars of this period; it was adduced by al-Wāqidī in his *Maghāzī* (al-Wāqidī, 1984). In addition, Muqātil (1423H) and Yaḥyā ibn Salām (2004) were among Mufasssīr in the same period who interpreted this verse as referring to the battle of Badr. It seems likely to have taken place within this phase, that the verse having been circulated among Muslim scholars, and widely accepted as alluding to this battle. The author then calls the reader to contemplate an extraordinary triumph that God bestowed upon Muslims in the battle of Khandaq. Verses of the Qur'ān (38:11, 33:10-11, 33:12, 33:13, 24:55, 33:22, 33:25 and 33:9-10) that were interspersed between the lines, are

used by the author as auxiliary devices to elaborate upon and provide a context to the battle, and prove that the victory is evidence of the authenticity of Muḥammad's prophethood.

- d. **The Prophet's mistakes and imperfections attributed to him in the Qur'ān.** This argument is actually predicated on a logical premise which proves that the Qur'ān is revealed by God and not composed by Muḥammad. Ibn al-Layth is at pains to argue that if the Qur'ān is, indeed, the work of Muḥammad, why then does he expose himself and his good name to be degraded and besmirched by including his mistakes and flaws in the Qur'ān? This implies that he has no authority to adjust the content of the Qur'ān. The Book belongs solely to God, and Muḥammad is only His messenger. At this stage, the author presents four verses as instances from the Qur'ān that illustrate the apparent imperfection of characters depicted in the Qur'ān. These include the following: the domestic problems within the marriage of Zayd ibn Ḥāritha and his wife, Zainab (33:37); Muḥammad's emotional reaction when he frown to the blind that asked him about the Qur'ān (80:1-11), his tendency to compromise with unbelievers regarding the concept of *tauhid* (17:74-75) and God's admonishment to him regarding the Qibla (the direction of prayer) in 2:120.

4.3 Qur'anic Citation as Rhetorical Structuring Device

A closer reading of several Qur'anic insertions demonstrates that Ibn al-Layth is not merely quoting scripture for ornamentation, rather, he deploys verses with clear argumentative intent. For instance, in the opening invocation of *da'wa* (16:125), the phrase *ud'u ilā sabīli rabbik bi-l-ḥikma wa-l-maw'iza al-ḥasana* frames the entire epistle as an act of moral persuasion rather than political coercion. This rhetorical move positions the Caliph not as a worldly sovereign, issuing demands, but as a divinely guided agent fulfilling a prophetic mandate. The following verse (41:33) *wa-man aḥsanu qawlan mimman da'ā ilā Allāh* further asserts that the one who calls to God occupies the highest discursive authority. The implication is unmistakable: the message of Islam is intrinsically superior, and therefore, the letter constitutes not merely negotiation, but divine clarification.

The famous invitation verse (3:64), *ta'ālāw ilā kalimatīn sawā'in baymanā wa-baynakum*, intensifies this strategy. When addressed to a Christian emperor, this verse reframes the encounter as a shared Abrahamic heritage rooted in uncompromising monotheism. Ibn al-Layth's repeated use of *yā ahl al-kitāb*

throughout the letter underscores this inclusive yet corrective discourse: the emperor and his clergy are invited as participants in a scripturally grounded dialogue but are simultaneously reminded that deviation from monotheism is a betrayal of their own revelation.

Thus, Qur'ānic citation in the letter functions not only as proof-text, but also as discursive reconfiguration. The emperor is addressed not as a political rival, but as a member of a religious community whose own scripture points toward Muḥammad a structure that reframes acceptance of Islam not as conversion but completion.

4.4 Qur'ānic References to Muḥammad's Early Life

The main consideration of this work is to analyse the Qur'ānic references to Muḥammad's early life and explore Muslim understanding of these references. We realize that the intentions of the letter's author is not intended to convey a biographical history of Muḥammad's life; nor is it an exegetical account of Muslim understanding of the Qur'ān. However, the information provided by Ibn al-Layth in the letter possibly shows that such ideas had been well circulated within Muslim community before the Qur'ānic elements were integrated to events of the Prophet's early life. Four biographical themes of Muḥammad's genealogy, birth, childhood and the early signs of his prophethood form the basis of scrutiny and are discussed in the following section.

4.4.1 The Prophet's Genealogy

Based on our observation, the consideration of Muḥammad's genealogy is included in this letter and presented by Ibn al-Layth in brief. Neither Qur'ānic references nor the prophetic Hadith are cited by the author with regard to this topic. The notion of the purity of the Prophet's genealogy is illustrated clearly here. The author explains that Jesus had already prophesied Muḥammad's advent (*bashshara bihā*), his genes had been transmitted from the most worthy of forefathers (*al-abā' al-akhāyir*) and virtuous foremothers (*al-Ummahāt al-Tawāhir*), from century to century, until he was born at the most auspicious time, among the noblest clan, and in the purest place. This implies that the impression of the purity of Prophet's genealogy had already begun to develop and was circulated within this period. The works of Muslim scholars testify to this. During this period, Ibn Ishāq described the nobility of the genealogy of the Prophet's family (Ibn Ishāq, 2004). He adduced various stories and extraordinary events in his work to show that Muḥammad was chosen by God on account of noble descent. In addition, Ma'mar has also recorded a prophetic tradition

exemplifying the excellence of Quraysh (*faḍā'il quraysh*), the Prophet's clan, while Ibn Sa'd includes a specific section of the prophet's genealogy in his *Ṭabaqāt*, explaining the graciousness of Muḥammad's lineage (Ibn Sa'd, 1990). Moreover, the concept of the nobility of the Prophet was not only rooted in the heart of the author of this letter; he also believed that this notion had been accepted among the Romans. His words, such as "Muḥammad, the man that all of you depicted as of sound intellect, clear excellence and good governance" (*anna Muḥammadan ṣallallāhu 'alaihi wasallam allazī waṣaftumūhu bikamāl al-'aql wa bayān al-faḍl wa riḥq al-tadbīr*) and "Muḥammad, the man that you described as an excellence" (*anna Muḥammadan ma'a mā nasabtumūhu min al-faḍl*), clearly indicate that he believes that the Emperor and his people conceived Muḥammad as a man of excellent qualities.

4.4.2 *Muḥammad's Birth and Childhood*

Ibn al-Layth's understanding of Muḥammad's early life seems to meet the basic characteristic as depicted in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*. According to him, Muḥammad was an orphan, powerless (*da'if*), an employee or worker (*ajir*), in need (*'ā'il*), illiterate, and had not inherited wealth. Some of the words he uses clearly indicate the Prophet's fallible nature as a human being, such as negligence (*sāhī*) and having the ability to be distracted by frivolous amusements (*lāhī*). Indeed, some of the terms he employed are rather ambiguous, for instance, the word inactive (*khāmil*). Verse 29:48 is cited by the author to assert the condition of the Prophet as illiterate. This is an often cited and popular source of evidence, which is offered as conclusive proof that the Prophet has no other source of knowledge except God's revelation. The story of the Companion of the Elephant is recounted in this letter to create an impression of the sanctity of Mecca as a Holy land. The author seems not to regard this story as an early sign of Muḥammad's birth or prophethood as has been conceived by later scholars. Overall, these are the only two references from the Qur'ān regarding the early life of Muḥammad. Most of the conditions before his prophetic vocation come without any references from the Qur'ān. It might be an indication of the Qur'ānic references to Muḥammad's early life emerged only gradually after this period.

4.4.3 *The Early Sign of Prophethood*

The discussion regarding shooting stars as an early sign of Muḥammad's prophethood consumes many parts of the letter. Ibn al-Layth begins the discussion by dividing the signs into two types of evidence: general (*al-āyāt al-'awwām*) and specific (*al-khawwās*). According to him, the phenomenon of shooting stars is one which has not only been accepted by the Arabs but also a

wider range of people. He elaborates on the concept from an historical point of view. As prevalent in Muslim tradition, he deems that the demons (*al-shayātīn* and *al-jinn*) have ability to 'steal' the secret news emanating from heaven by eavesdropping on the exalted assembly held in heaven. This kind of information is then debased and disseminated to the agents of the demon to create disorder and corruption in the earth. Soothsayers are regarded as among the group of people who receive news from devils. This is confirmed by the prophetic tradition narrated by Aisha, when she reveals: "I heard Allah's Apostle saying, "The angels descend the clouds and mention this or that matter decreed in the Heaven. The devils listen stealthily to such a matter, come down to inspire the soothsayers with it, and the latter would add to it one hundred lies of their own." After God sent Muḥammad as his messenger to this world, the devils were no longer able to penetrate heaven. It was 'guarded' by shooting stars as a defence, and whenever the devils try to enter heaven, there will be burning flames (*shihāb*) watching them, and waiting in ambush. In this regard, this hadith could be one of the references of this happening. Narrated by Ibn 'Abbās, who says : The Prophet set out with the intention of going to Sūq 'Ukāḏ (market of 'Ukāḏ) along with some of his companions. At the same time, a barrier was put between the devils and the news of heaven. Fire commenced to be thrown at them. The Devils went to their people, who asked them, "What is wrong with you?" They said, "A barrier has been placed between us and the news of heaven. And fire has been thrown at us." They said, "The thing which has put a barrier between you and the news of heaven must be something which has happened recently. Go eastward and westward and see what has put a barrier between you and the news of heaven." Those who went towards Tihāma came across the Prophet at a place called Nakhla and it was on the way to Sūq 'Ukāḏ and the Prophet was offering the Fajr prayer with his companions. When they heard the Qur'ān they listened to it and said, "By Allah, this is the thing which has put a barrier between us and the news of heaven." They went to their people and said, "O our people; verily we have heard a wonderful recital (Qur'ān) which shows the true path; we believed in it and would not ascribe partners to our Lord." Allah revealed the following verses to his Prophet (Sūra al-Jinn) (72): "Say: It has been revealed to me." And what was revealed to him was the conversation of the Jinns. (al-Bukhārī, *al-Sahih*, 1/154).

This cosmological phenomenon of shooting stars as the 'shields of heaven', has been regarded as one of the signs of Muḥammad's prophethood in this letter. In other words, this is a sign to people that the devil is no longer able to steal the heavenly news, and Muḥammad, the only person who has been recognised and authorised by the exalted council to receive the divine message.

This concept also seems to emphasize that the divine message, the Qur'ān itself, did not originate from any other supernatural sources, except from God's divine message.

To support his argument about the shooting stars as the early signs of Muḥammad's prophethood, Ibn al-Layth adduced seven references from the Qur'ān, as follows:

And we have, adorned the lowest heaven with Lamps (stars), and We have made such (lamps) (as) missiles to drive away the Evil Ones, and have prepared for them the Penalty of the Blazing Fire. (67:5)

1. It is We Who have set out the zodiacal signs (stars) in the heavens, and made them fair-seeming to (all) beholders; And (moreover) We have guarded them from every cursed devil. (15:16-17)

2. We have indeed decked the lower heaven with beauty (in) the stars, (For beauty) and for guard against all obstinate rebellious evil spirits. (37:6-7)

3. "And we (the Jinn) pried into the secrets of heaven; but we found it filled with stern guards and flaming fires". (72:8)

4. Shall I inform you, (O people!), on whom it is that the evil ones descend? They descend on every lying, wicked person, (Into whose ears) they pour hearsay vanities, and most of them are liars. (26:221-223)

5. "And we (the Jinn) understand not whether ill is intended to those on earth, or whether their Lord (really) intends to guide them to right conduct. (72:10)

6. No evil ones have brought down this (Revelation): It would neither suit them nor would they be able (to produce it). Indeed they have been removed far from even (a chance of) hearing it. (26:210-212)

7. "We (the Jinn) used, indeed, to sit there in (hidden) stations, to (steal) a hearing; but any who listen now will find a flaming fire watching him in ambush. (72:9)

All seven references were used by the author as an auxiliary device to substantiate his argument regarding Muḥammad's early sign of prophethood by God. Even though the discussions regarding this topic range widely and recur in many passages, some details of the discussion remain obscure and inconclusive. For example, what kind of divine messages to man have been stolen, how exactly does the devil eavesdrops upon the divine messages (heavenly news) and how, precisely, do the shooting stars functions as a defence against the devil? Both questions and answers remain ambiguous. The Qur'ānic references he cites seem not to render much help, as no substantial additional information may be gleaned

from it. In fact, the literal meaning of the verses does not appear to hold any explicit message connecting these references with the sign of prophethood. It is the author's own personal interpretation that associates these verses with the apparent signs of prophethood. Muqātil and Ibn Ishāq have already preceded the author in suggesting this interpretation. This could be an indication of how this kind of commentary was widely accepted during this period. But in Ibn al-Layth's case, the circumstances are totally different: Muqātil and Ibn Ishāq most likely wrote for their own Muslim audience; but Ibn al-Layth's interpretation was made in the capacity of an official letter, sent by the Muslim Caliph to the Roman Emperor. It is therefore very likely to be an official statement of belief, held and produced by the court of the Caliph itself.

4.5 *Tafsīr Context: Shooting Stars as Signs of Prophethood*

The interpretation of *shihāb* (shooting stars) as defensive missiles against devils is well-attested in early tafsīr, though its connection to Muḥammad's prophethood varies across exegetical traditions. Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767) explicitly links Qur'ān 72:8–9 with the advent of Muḥammad, arguing that the *heavenly council* was guarded only *after* revelation began, preventing devils from accessing divine speech. Yaḥyā b. Sallām (d. 200/815) accepts the same cosmological framework but does not explicitly articulate this as a *proof* of prophethood; instead, he treats it as an aspect of divine governance of the unseen.

By contrast, the *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa* tradition, beginning with Ibn Ishāq and continuing through al-Bayhaqī, presents the phenomenon as a *public and observable miracle marking the beginning of revelation*.

Ibn al-Layth's usage aligns most closely with this *Dalā'il* framework. Yet, his rhetorical innovation lies in his context: he presents the cosmological change not to a Muslim audience, but to a Christian emperor, transforming an internal narrative of prophetic legitimacy into an argument intelligible to Byzantine theological cosmology, where angelic hierarchies and celestial order also hold persuasive force.

In modern tafsīr, the "shooting stars" passages are generally read symbolically or phenomenologically rather than cosmologically. This contrast underscores that Ibn al-Layth's reading was not idiosyncratic, but reflected a conventional early Islamic explanatory model, strategically adapted for interreligious polemic.

5. CONCLUSION

By presenting these references, the author appears to try to convince the Emperor that the sign of prophethood was delivered by God himself via the Qur'ān. Even though not much information is contained within these verses, it nevertheless possesses divine status, being formed of God's own words, and containing an allusion to a cosmological phenomenon which signifies the unseen occurrence in heaven. In the mind of the author, by adducing these references, he could be offering clarification in the mind of the reader; but from the reader's side, we are still unclear to what extent the Emperor would accept this as depicting the truth of the Islamic creed. On the contrary, it could be argued that the author himself apparently undermines his own argument, leading to the reader to a view that the Qur'ān might be furnished with untruth and illogical content.

Some of his interpretations of these references are, however, interesting. In verse 72:8, Ibn al-Layth highlights the word "now". In the verse, the Jinn admit: "We (the Jinn) used, indeed, to sit there in (hidden) stations, to (steal) a hearing; but any who listen "now" (*al-āna*) will find a flaming fire watching him in ambush." The word "now" evidently reflects the period of the Prophet's advent, which implies that as a result of his advent, the Jinn were no longer able to gain access to or possess the divine Word. Furthermore, he also believes that eavesdropping had been a normal practice since or during the era of King Solomon. According to him, the Jinn had also been eavesdropping on the exalted assembly held in heaven, and delivered the information gleaned as a result and this occurred during the reign of Solomon. The source of this idea might be originated from his understanding of verse 2:102 of the Qur'ān. This notion is however contradicted with al-Dahhak's interpretation where according to him, the heaven-stealth information has only occurred within the period of Jesus and Muḥammad.

Overall, his understanding of the Qur'ānic references adduced in the letter seems to be in line with contemporary commentaries as illustrated in the work of preceding scholars such as Muqātil and Ibn Ishāq. The connection he made between these references and the sign of prophethood resembles what has been delivered by Ibn Ishāq. However, the story of the Jinn conveying the heavenly message during Solomon's reign seems to be a novel element. One puzzle remains: what makes Ibn al-Layth includes references from the Qur'ān to the Emperor of the Romans, when he is aware already that the Emperor was a Christian and surrounded by Christian advisors. A few suggestions can be made, such as:

1. Based on the phrasing and terms he uses, the author might possibly be following the style and conventions of writing employed by the Prophet when he, for the first time, sends a letter to Heraclius, the Roman Emperor. In the letter, the Prophet calls Heraclius *Aẓīm al-Rūm*, a specific designation used by the Prophet for Heraclius. He also cites verse 3:64 from the Qur'ān to invite the Emperor to accept "the Common words". In this letter Ibn al-Layth seems to follow what has been done by the Prophet. He uses the same designation for the Emperor Constantine, invites them to the "Common words" and cites verses from the Qur'ān.

2. It could be one of the standard practices for Muslim court to send a letter bolstered by appropriate verses from the Qur'ān. The first letter of the Prophet to the Heraclius and the letter of Umar II to Leo III are salient exemplars of this practice. Umar II not only adduces verses from the Qur'ān, but he also attempts to persuade Leo III to convert to Islam (Jeffery, 1944). The story of Ja'far, cousin of the Prophet, who read the Qur'ān before the Negus of Ethiopia, might have inspired fellow Muslims to recite the Qur'ān to non-Muslim correspondents. In the story, Ja'far and a small number of the nascent Muslim community migrated to Ethiopia after suffering persecution and being tortured by their polytheistic Meccan detractors. They seek refuge with Negus, the Christian king, who, according to the Prophet, was a man of justice. The Quraysh of Mecca sent their diplomat with gifts and presents to persuade the Negus to return the Muslim group to Mecca. Negus calls upon the Muslims to defend themselves. Ja'far read the Qur'ān to Negus who, being very moved, began to cry and declared, "Surely these words and the words delivered by Jesus (in other accounts, the words of Moses) were from the same source." Then to the two Meccan ambassadors, he said, 'By God, I will not hand over these persons to you (Ibn Ishāq, 2004)."

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