

THE REAL SATANIC VERSES?

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Whatever its other ramifications, Salman Rushdie's novel has, by its very title, served to focus attention on an alleged incident in the life of Muḥammad. The traditional sources depict him as having been tempted by Satan to utter a Quranic recitation which included material that was not part of the Holy Writ - a damaging situation that was put right only by the intervention of the archangel Gabriel.

Whilst the majority of Muslim scholars were willing to transmit the story, its contents were unacceptable to others. Thus we know from aṭ-Ṭabarī that Ibn Ishāq (d. c. 767 AD) included the story in his *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*¹ but Ibn Hišām (d. c.835 AD) omitted it from his abridgement of Ibn Ishāq's work. There were other scholars who were deeply unhappy about the story, perhaps the most prominent being one of the major commentators on the Qur'ān, Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1209 AD)².

The crucial source which gathers together the various recensions of the story is the *Tafsīr* of aṭ-Ṭabarī (839-923 AD). One of the verses on which he has to comment is *sūra* 22, verse 52, which reads as follows³:

Whenever We sent a messenger or a prophet before you,
and he had the desire [to recite],
Satan tampered with his desire.
But God annuls Satan's tamperings,
and then God confirms His signs.
God is Knowing and Wise.

aṭ-Ṭabarī explains the verse by reference to a passage in *sūra* 53. Why he should do this is problematical, as the passage in *sūra* 53, which deals with Muḥammad and his contemporaries, is not a particularly apposite explanation for a verse that apparently refers to Muḥammad's prophetic predecessors ['before you']. I am inclined to think that this apparent mismatch indicates that the story about the passage in *sūra* 53 was already in existence in some form or other before any need was felt to explain *sūra* 22, verse 52, and that it is not simply a story that came into existence to explain

¹ See aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* on *sūra* 22, verse 52, and *Tārīḥ* 1192. Cf. Guillaume 1959:165-167.

² See ar-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ* on *sūra* 22, verse 52.

³ The translation of the verse is mine, as is that of *sūra* 53 and the 'Satanic verses'.

sūra 22, verse 52. The story and the verse had come together with the passing of time.

In commenting on *sūra* 22, verse 52, aṭ-Ṭabarī gathers together all the traditions that he knows about the passage in *sūra* 53. Though these cover just over four quite densely printed pages of roughly A4 size, they boil down to one story with variations in fairly minor detail. aṭ-Ṭabarī gives just one version in his other great work, the *Tārīḥ*. This version was translated into English by Guillaume in 1959, when he included it in his translation of the *Sīra*. Basically, Guillaume was translating Ibn Hišām's work, but in an attempt to get as near as possible to Ibn Ishāq's earlier and more detailed version, he included passages from Ibn Ishāq that had survived in other sources, particularly aṭ-Ṭabarī. Guillaume's translation, with one or two minor alterations, runs as follows:

Now the apostle was anxious for the welfare of his people, wishing to attract them as far as he could. It has been mentioned that he longed for a way to attract them, and the method he adopted is what Ibn Ḥamīd told me that Salama said Muḥammad ibn Ishāq told him from Yazīd ibn Ziyād of Medina from Muḥammad ibn Ka'b al-Qurazī: When the apostle saw that his people turned their backs on him and he was pained by their estrangement from what he brought them from God, he longed that there should come to him from God a message that would reconcile his people to him. Because of his love for his people and his anxiety over them it would delight him if the obstacle that made his task so difficult could be removed; so that he meditated on the project and longed for it and it was dear to him. Then God sent down 'By the star when it sets, your comrade errs not and is not deceived. He speaks not from his own desire.' [These are the the first three verses of *sūra* 53.] When he reached His words 'Have you thought of al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā and Manāt⁴, the third, the other', Satan, when he was meditating on it, and desiring to bring it (*sc.* reconciliation) to his people, put upon his tongue 'these are the exalted *ḡarānīq* whose intercession is approved [*or* hoped for].' When Qurayš heard that, they were delighted and greatly pleased at the way in which he spoke of their gods and they listened to him; while the believers were holding that what their prophet brought them from their Lord was true, not suspecting a mistake or a vain desire or a slip, and when he reached the prostration and the end of the *sūra* in which he prostrated himself the Muslims prostrated themselves when their prophet prostrated, confirming what he brought and obeying his command, and the polytheists of Qurayš and others who were in

⁴ Information about pre-Islamic deities is not very reliable, but it would seem that al-Lāt was particularly venerated in aṭ-Ṭā'if, al-ʿUzzā by the Qurayš in Mecca, and Manāt by the Arabs of Medina. See Fahd 1968.

the mosque prostrated when they heard the mention of their gods, so that everyone in the mosque, believer and unbeliever, prostrated, except al-Walīd ibn Muġīra who was an old man who could not do so; so he took a handful of dirt from the valley and bent over it. Then the people dispersed and Qurayṣ went out, delighted at what had been said about their gods, saying, 'Muḥammad has spoken of our gods in splendid fashion. He alleged in what he recited that they are exalted *garānīq* whose intercession is approved.'

The story concludes by telling us, with some variation of detail, of Gabriel's intervention and the dropping of the 'Satanic verses'.

Though, as mentioned above, there were some objectors, the accounts found in aṭ-Ṭabarī's works were widely accepted, and we find them frequently retold not only in other commentaries on the Qur'ān but also in such widely read works as the *Tārīḥ* of Ibn al-Aṭīr (1160-1234 AD). One can therefore expect any Muslim with a good traditional education grounded in the major Arabic sources to know of it, at least in outline, and to accept it.

The common attitude amongst western scholars has been to accept the substance of the story, mainly on the basis that it is impossible for the story to have been invented. However, its accuracy has been attacked from time to time, notably, from the historical point of view, by Caetani (1905-26: I, 278-282). However, the best and most interesting critique is in an article by John Burton (1970), which is particularly concerned with the problem of the abrogation of Quranic material. I share Professor Burton's view that the text that we now find in *sūra* 53, verses 19-23 is due to abrogation of earlier material and is not merely the text minus the so-called Satanic verses, two verses⁵ that, according to the Muslim view, were never really in the text at all. I shall not attempt to summarize Professor Burton's detailed and technical arguments, which should be read in full.

My own focus is on the wider problems of the revelation, and I am therefore interested to see whether the story preserved by aṭ-Ṭabarī is compatible with the text of *sūra* 53 as it survives in the 'Uṭmānic recension or in any earlier version that can be discerned behind this.

Central to aṭ-Ṭabarī's accounts is the assumption that the text of *sūra* 53, as it figures in the story, was that of the 'Uṭmānic recension, revealed as a single entity, plus, of course, the two extra verses. This seems to me to be quite impossible with the text of *sūra* 53 as we now have it, even if we ignore the later insertion of verse 23, which is generally recognised (e.g. by the standard Egyptian edition) as being Medinan⁶.

⁶ According to the Egyptian edition, verse 23 is the only Medinan verse in *Sūra* 53.

One should always remember that the basic unit of the Quranic revelation was a randomly variable number of verses. Except with some of the earliest passages, this did not normally coincide with the working unit of revelation, the *sūra*. *Sūra* 53, like the vast majority of *sūras*, appears to be a composite piece. There is nothing doctrinally difficult for Muslims about this process of collation and revision: Tradition tells of Gabriel visiting the Prophet to go over and revise the text of the Qur'ān from time to time.

Sūra 53 in its present form runs as follows:

1. By the star when it sets,
2. Your comrade has not gone astray,
nor has he erred,
3. Nor does he speak out of caprice.
4. This is simply a revelation that is being revealed,
5. Taught to him by one great in power,
6. Possessed of strength.
He stood straight
7. On the highest horizon;
8. Then he drew near and came down,
9. [Till] he was two bows'length away or even nearer;
10. Then he inspired his servant with his inspiration.
11. His heart has not lied [about] what he saw.
12. Will you dispute with him about what he sees?
13. Indeed, he saw him on another descent
14. By the *sidr*-tree of the boundary,
15. Near to which is the garden of refuge,
16. When the *sidr*-tree was covered by its covering.
17. His eye did not swerve nor turn astray.
18. Indeed, he saw [one] of the greatest signs of his Lord.
19. Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā
20. And Manāt, the third, the other?
21. Do you have males, and He females?
22. That would then be an unjust division.
23. They are merely names
which you and your forefathers have bestowed.
God has sent down no authority in them.
They follow only surmise and what their souls desire
– and that when guidance has come to them from their Lord.
24. Or will man have whatever he desires,
25. When the hereafter and the first life belong to God?
26. How many an angel is there in the heavens
whose intercession is of no avail

- save after God gives permission
to whom He wills and is pleased.
27. Those who do not believe in the hereafter
give the angels the names of females.
28. They have no knowledge of that.
They only follow guesswork,
and guesswork is of no avail against the truth.
29. So turn away from him who turns his back on Our Remembrance,
and desires only the present life.
30. That is the sum of their knowledge.
Your Lord knows full well those who have gone astray from His way,
and He knows full well those who are guided.
31. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on the earth,
for Him to requite those who do evil for what they have done,
and to requite those who have done good with the fairest [reward].
32. Those who avoid the heinous sins and wrongdoings,
[but commit] venial offences
- [for them] your Lord is embracing in His forgiveness.
He is well aware of you
[from the time] when He raised you from the earth
and when you were foetuses in your mothers' bellies.
Do not assert yourselves to be pure.
He is well aware of those who fear God.
33. Have you considered
the person who turns his back
34. And gives little and is grudging?
35. Does he possess the knowledge of the Invisible,
so that he sees?
36. Or has he not been told
of what is in the scrolls of Mūsā
37. And Abraham, who paid his debt in full?
38. - That no laden [soul] bears the load of another,
39. And that a man will have to only as he has striven,
40. And that his striving will be seen,
41. Then he will be recompensed for it with the fullest recompense?
42. And that the final end is to your Lord,
43. And that it is He who makes [men] laugh and makes [them] weep,
44. And that it is He who makes [men] die and makes [them] live,
45. And that He created the two pairs, male and female,
46. From a drop of sperm when it was ejaculated,
47. And that on Him rests the second growth,

48. And that it is He who gives wealth and riches,
 49. And that it is He who is the Lord of Sirius,
 50. And that He destroyed 'Ād, the first,
 51. And Thamūd, and He did not spare them,
 52. And the people of Noah before
 - for they did grievous wrong and were vile transgressors -
 53. And He also overthrew the overturned settlements,
 54. So that they were covered by that which covered [them].
 55. Then on which of your Lord's bounties do you cast doubt?
 56. This is a warner, of the warners of old.
 57. The Imminent is imminent.
 58. None apart from God can remove it.
 59. Do you then marvel at this discourse,
 60. And do you laugh, and do you not weep,
 61. While you amuse yourselves?
 62. Bow down before God and serve Him.

A basic division into five sections virtually imposes itself: -

- (a) 1-18 The assonance is in *-ā* (as it is for the first 56 verses). The verses are addressed to the Meccans, and they have some internal cohesion. As with most of the *sūra*, the material is relatively early.
- (b) 19-25 Similarly addressed to the Meccans, but with an abrupt change of theme. This does not necessarily show that they are a separate revelation from verses 1-18, but they could well be. These remarks do not apply to verse 23, which is accepted as being a verse added at Medina. Thematically, verse 23 is integrated, but with its later, more diffuse, style - it is more than four times as long as the surrounding verses - it has all the appearance of a substitution that makes points that would have not been in the original text.
- (c) 26-32 Here the verses are considerably longer than those that have preceded (with the exception of verse 23). The Meccans are no longer being addressed. Instead, Muḥammad is addressed in verses 29 and 32 and mankind in verse 32. In verse 26 we find the word *šafā'a* 'intercession', which, as we shall see, was in the second of the 'Satanic verses' (S2). This could be a faint echo of the 'intercession' theme of S2. There can be little doubt that this section is a few years later than most of the material in the *sūra*. It is not unreasonable to suppose that it was added at the same time as verse 23.
- (d) 33-56 Here the short verses return, the assonance still being in *-ā*. First there is an address to Muḥammad and then a sketching in of some

basic beliefs. There must be some doubt whether verse 56 is integral or a bridge verse to the final section.

(e) 57-62

The assonance in *-ā* ceases. We have two verses with assonance in *-fa*, three with *-ūn*, and a final verse ending in *-ū*. This little peroration fits neatly on to what has preceded, but the breaking of the assonance in *-ā* may well point to it originally having been a separate revelation.

This means that at-Ṭabarī's accounts, if they have any validity at all, must refer to an earlier version of *sūra* 53, of which verses 23 and 26-32 were not a part. On the other hand, at-Ṭabarī's accounts require the presence of verses 1-2, 19-20, the 'Satanic verses' and verse 62. Thus, at-Ṭabarī's implied earlier version would have been composed of verses 1-20, the 'Satanic verses', 21-22, 24-25 and 33-62. I am not convinced that such a long piece would have been recited as a unity on its first recitation at what was an early period in the development of the Qur'ān; and I suggest that the five divisions I have made correspond with what were originally separate revelations. However, that problem is peripheral to the main one, the position of the 'Satanic verses'. Let us look at the crucial passage, starting at verse 19. According to at-Ṭabarī, the text of the initial recitation would have been as follows:

19. Have you considered al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā
20. And Manāt, the third, the other?
- S1. They are the exalted *ḡarānīq*
- S2. Whose intercession is approved.
21. Do you have males, and He females?
22. That would then be an unjust division.
24. Or shall man have whatever he desires,
25. When the hereafter and the first life belong to God?

The implication is that S1 and S2 then disappeared almost instantly; that they were never really part of the original text. That takes us to:

19. Have you considered al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā
20. And Manāt, the third, the other?
21. Do you have males, and He females?
22. That would then be an unjust division.
24. Or shall man have whatever he desires,
25. When the hereafter and the first life belong to God?

It is normal for little or no attention to be paid in the commentaries to the later insertion into the text of additional material, and the implication that there was yet

a third version, in which verse 23 was now included, is accepted without comment. That gives us the version that we find in the °Uṭmānic text:

19. Have you considered al-Lāt and al-°Uzzā
20. And Manāt, the third, the other?
21. Do you have males, and He females?
22. That would then be an unjust division.
23. They are merely names yourselves and your forefathers have bestowed. God has sent down no authority in them. They follow only surmise and what their souls desire – and that when guidance has come to them from their Lord.
24. Or shall man have whatever he desires,
25. When the hereafter and the first life belong to God?

This sequence of development simply lacks credibility. It is most unlikely that a very sensitive passage evolved in such fits and starts. It is much more probable that the original arrangement was:

19. Have you considered al-Lāt and al-°Uzzā
20. And Manāt, the third, the other?
21. Do you have males, and He females?
22. That would then be an unjust division.
- S1. They are the exalted *garānīq*
- S2. Whose intercession is approved.
24. Or shall man have whatever he desires,
25. When the hereafter and the first life belong to God?

With this version, the evolution of the present text is absolutely straightforward. S1 and S2 are not ‘Satanic’ at all, but a couple of verses which, having served their original purpose, were dropped (abrogated, if one wants to use that term) and replaced by verse 23. An echo of the abrogated material does, however, appear in the use of *šafā’a* at the beginning of the other added passage, verses 26-32.

It should be noted that if we accept this as the probable way in which *sūra* 53 evolved, it would mean that the abrogation would have had to have taken place at Medina, as verse 23 is a Medinan verse. This is a long way from at-Ṭabarī’s story, in which Satan’s success is envisaged as being very short-lived, a matter of days, not years.

That is probably as far as we can explain a perplexing story at this distance in time. Certain awkward questions remain. First, if at-Ṭabarī’s accounts are untrue, how did they arise? In my view, the most likely explanation is that although the ‘Satanic verses’ were dropped from the text, they were nevertheless remembered by

some members of the Muslim community, in the same way that many variant readings were remembered. In fact, not only were they remembered; an explanation for their excision was also propounded: they were the work of Satan. A simple statement like that could have evolved, with the passing of time, into the more elaborate accounts that we find in at-Ṭabarī.

Another mystifying problem is that it is S1 and S2 that have disappeared but not verses 19 and 20, which look much more like the Devil's temptation than S1 and S2. The non-Muslim is hardly likely to be satisfied by the argument to which a Muslim can turn, that the Devil's work cannot be laid bare by rational critique, and that clearly Gabriel confirmed 19 and 20 whilst removing S1 and S2 as the work of Satan.

Finally, what does *garānīq* mean? I suspect that this is at the centre of the reworking of the passage. Unfortunately, we are totally let down by the commentators and lexicographers, who have not a sensible suggestion to make between them⁷. *Sūra* 53, verse 28, describes their position precisely. As is always the case with the Qur'ān, Allah knows best.

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⁷ The confusion and ignorance is epitomized in a note to the section of Guillaume's translation of the passage quoted in the text: 'The word is said to mean "Numidian cranes" which fly at a great height.' We all know what happens with birds that do that.