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Laylat al-Qadr as Sacred Time: Sacred Cosmology in Sunni *Kalām* and *Tafsīr*¹

Arnold Yasin Mo²

*In this analysis we will show how the Islamic tradition constructs a sacred cosmology wherein a sacred space and sacred time are defined. In Sunni Islam only a few sacred spaces on earth exist, the majority belong to the world unseen (‘ālam al-ghayb) and are not accessible for the common human. But when there is a transfer between the seen and unseen world a sacred time is created which is accessible for the whole of creation. The most clear example of the creation of sacred time is Laylat al-Qadr, which is seen as sacred due to the sending down of the Qur’ān and fate (qadar). But as the Qur’ān doesn’t indicate when this night is, intertextual interpretations were constructed which allowed the formation of the dominant opinion it is during the month of Ramaḍān. The uncertainty of when the night is was incorporated into the sacred time of Laylat al-Qadr, whereby searching for the night became just as important as praying in it. In our analysis we will show how for the Islamic exegetical tradition the revelation of the Qur’ān isn’t just a matter of historicity (occasions of revelation) and textual meaning (what and who is addressed), but first of all reflects a sacred cosmology wherein the Qur’ān is transferred from Creator to creation, and then from the unseen world to the seen world. Our analysis will discuss Sunni *Kalām* positions on the idea of revelation, predestination, and sacred cosmology; Qur’ānic sciences (‘ulūm al-Qur’ān) discussions on when and where the Qur’ān existed within this cosmology; and a translation and analysis of the exegesis of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE) of sūra al-Qadr (S.97).*

1 Introduction

¹ My gratitude goes out to my supervisor Maurits Berger (Leiden University) for reviewing the article, and especially to Aisha Musa (Colgate University) for suggesting major improvements.

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1.1 *Revelation within Metaphysical and Physical Cosmology*

In religious and academic literature the revelation of the Qur'ān is mainly viewed from the point of view of historicity: when and why a certain text was revealed in history. In this way, the revealed text is viewed as a physical text *within* time and *within* the physical world. Because of the Qur'ān's physical existence within creation as well as its designation as the word of God (*Kalām Allāh*, Q 2:75, 9:6, 48:15), discussions emerged in early Islam on the created or uncreated ontology of the Qur'ān. How can the divine attribute of speech which exists outside of creation and time be present within a physical and time-bound vehicle as language? This has many parallels to the Christian discussions on how the word of God (*Logos*, John 1:1) can be manifested within Jesus.³ The Qur'ān also indicates that Mary received the word of God (*bi-kalimatīn minhu*, Q 3:45, 4:171), thereby providing, depending on which exegetical interpretation is followed, an Islamic Logos-Christology.⁴ It therefore became important for Muslim scholars to differentiate between the divine attribute of speech and its manifestation within creation.

Early theologians such as the Mu'tazilah viewed the divine attribute of speech (*kalām* or *qawf*) as belonging to the active attributes (*ṣifāt al-af'āl*)⁵ as to them

³ For an overview of different Logos-Christologies, see: Mark Edwards, *Image, Word and God in the Early Christian Centuries* (UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

⁴ Some Muslim scholars understood God's word in this verse as referring to Jesus, thereby formulating an Islamic Christology, but the majority of scholars linked the word to the creational word (*Be!, kun*) in the next verse, "He says: 'Be and it is' (*yaqūl lahu kun fayakūn*, Q 3:47)". See: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1420 AH), 8:220-226, 11:270-272; Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Tafsīr al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī* (Riyad: Dār al-Waṭan, 2003), 2:255-264, 4:238-239. Wolfson claims, without reference, that the whole discussion on the (un)createdness of the Qur'ān is caused by verse 3:45. If Muslims would believe the word of God is eternal and uncreated, it means Muslims must also accept the Christian concept of the Incarnation (*ḥulūl*). According to Wolfson this is the reason why the Mu'tazilah claimed the Qur'ān and divine speech as created. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 308-318. The Islamic theologian and exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE) provides a similar argument as Wolfson by comparing the Ḥanbalī-Ḥashawīyyah (the theo-anthropomorphism adherents among the Ḥanbalī) with Christians as the former believed the word of God to be eternal and to exist with letters and sounds, thereby making the earthly Qur'ān a hypostasis (*uqnūm*) which is incarnated (*ḥālla*) just as Jesus is within Christian theology. Al-Rāzī, 1:44.

⁵ For the Mu'tazilah and the the Ash'arī these are active, non-essential, bound to the creative act, attributes (*ṣifāt al-af'āl*), which designate the divine activities that are essential for creation to exist. They are not essential for God and therefore not timeless-eternal (*qadīm*). The Ash'arī deem them as 'not disappearing (*lā yazal*)'. Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE) and his school see active and

speech is bound to an audience.⁶ Later theologians from the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī schools saw divine speech as belonging to the essential attributes (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*)⁷ as God can have an internal speech (*kalām al-nafsī*) which is not dependent on an external non-divine audience. But all three schools agreed on the hermeneutical differentiation between divine attributes and their effectual manifestations within creation. God and world are incomparable and never collapse into one another. When divine speech is viewed as belonging to the essential attributes, then it doesn’t exist through letters or sounds (*laysa min jins al-ḥurūf wa al-aṣwāt*), while the Qur’ān is expressed in letters and sounds which are created (*makhḷūq*).⁸ The Qur’ān is an expression (*‘ubbir*) or manifestation (*hikāya*) of divine speech, but is not incarnated in the physical text (*ghayri ḥāll fihā*).⁹ It is produced (*maḥdūth*)¹⁰ or

essential attributes as both being *qadīm*. Abū Bakr ibn Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *al-I‘tiqād wa’l-Hidayah ilā Sabīl al-Rashad* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ufuq al-Jadīda, 1401 AH), 71-72; Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2010), 113-116; Abu al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī, *Baḥr al-Kalām yajthū fī ba‘ḍa al-Firaq al-Islāmiyyah wa al-Radd ‘alayhā min al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2005), 32-33.

⁶ For the positions of the Mu‘tazila, see: Aḥmad bin Ḥamad al-Khalīlī, *al-Ḥaqq al-Dāmigh* (Muscat: Maktabat al-Muscat, 2012), 159-174; Al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 2009), 529-562.

⁷ The essential attributes (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*) are essential for God which differentiates Him with creation, and are therefore timelessly-eternal (*qadīm*). Al-Bayhaqī, *ibid*.

⁸ Al-Taftāzānī’s commentary on the ‘*Aqā’id al-Nasafī* in *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafī ma’a Ḥāshiyyatahu Jamu’ al-Farā’id bi-inārat Sharḥ al-A‘qā’id wa yalīhimā Sharḥ Mīzān al-‘Aqā’id* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Madīna, 2012), 159. See also: ‘Abd Allāh al-Bayḍāwī, *Tawālī’ al-Anwār min Matālī’ al-Anzār* (Cairo: al-Maktabat al-Azhariyyah li-l Turāth, n.d.), 189; Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, *Sharḥ Kitāb al-Fiqh al-Akbar* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2007), 47-49; Abu al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī, *ibid*, 60-61; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 1:43-45. Divine speech as an attribute is one (*wāḥida*), but when revealed becomes multiplicit whereby the Hebrew ordering (*manzūm*) is the Torah, and the Arabic ordering the Qur’ān. Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, 52.

⁹ Al-Taftāzānī, *ibid*, 167.

¹⁰ “That he says: ‘The Qur’ān is Kalām Allāh ta‘ālā [which] is uncreated (*ghayri makhḷūq*)’, and he doesn’t say: ‘The Qur’ān is uncreated’.” Al-Taftāzānī, *ibid*, 164. The Qur’ān is indicated as being *ḥadīth/muḥdath* (a produced telling/event) in multiple Qur’ān verses (Q.39:23, 45:6, 52:34, 56:81), thereby allowing the designation of being produced (*ḥudūth*) but not as being created (*makhḷūq*). See Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dahlawī in his *Sharḥ Mīzān al-‘Aqā’id* in *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafī ma’a Ḥāshiyyatahu Jamu’ al-Farā’id bi-inārat Sharḥ al-A‘qā’id wa yalīhimā Sharḥ Mīzān al-‘Aqā’id* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Madīnah, 2012), 165; Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, *ibid*, 48-49; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 1:43-44, 21:426, 30:782. The Māturīdī theologian Abu Mu‘īn al-Nasafī (d. 1113 CE) is also against using *ḥudūth* as a designation for the Qur’ān as the *Ur-Qur’ān* exists within divine speech and is thereby also eternal (*qadīm*). Our expression (*‘abarah*) of the *Ur-Qur’ān* is an expression with letters and sounds, and the remembrance of this within our hearts doesn’t mean the *Ur-Qur’ān* is present

conveyed (*ikhbār*) in letters and sounds that make it cognizable within creation.¹¹ Revelation did not manifest itself initially on the tongue of the prophet Muḥammad, but had according to the Islamic tradition gone through a whole process before its oral manifestation. The Qur'ān is written on the well-preserved Tablet (*al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz*)¹², on which the whole of creation, concerning ontology (*wujūd*), capabilities (*imkāniyyah*) and acts (*afa'āl*) is recorded, meaning the complete description of every real and possible determination (*qadr*) of everything that will be, or could have been, created.¹³ Islamic theologians differed about *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz* being one of the first creations, or it being created together with the creations it describes (heavens, earth, angels, beings etc.).¹⁴ It is *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz* from which God's

within them. Thus for al-Nasafī we can only use *ḥudūth* for the expression of the *Ur-Qur'ān*, but he never explains in what way the recited and written forms of the *Ur-Qur'ān* can be truly called Qur'ān (according to al-Nasafī the use of *ḥadīth/muḥdath* in the above mentioned verses refer to the angel Gabriel). Abu Mu'īn al-Nasafī, *ibid*, 63-69. Abu al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī, *Tabṣīrat al-Adilāh fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* (Cairo: al-Maktabat al-Azhariyyah li-Iṭirāth, 2011), 1:66-69. These detailed discussions try to find ways how one can discuss the earthly Qur'ān without collapsing it with God and without at the same time separating it from its divine origin. A similar discussion can be seen on all the divine attributes as mentioned in the Qur'ān, in human language, and in what way they describe God. Abu Mu'īn al-Nasafī, *ibid*, 70-71.

¹¹ On the development of the discussions on the (un)createdness of the Qur'ān, see: Al-Taftāzānī, *ibid*, 157-167; Wolfson, *ibid*, 235-273; Al-Khalīlī, *ibid*, 96-176.

¹² Qur'ān 85:21-22. These verses can be read in two ways: (1) "...a glorious Qur'ān, in a well-preserved Tablet (*lawḥⁱⁿ maḥfūzⁱⁿ*)", or (2) ".. a glorious well-preserved Qur'ān (*Qur'ān^{un} majīd^{un}*) in a Tablet (*lawḥⁱⁿ maḥfūz^{un}*)". In reading (1) is the Qur'ān and the *qadr* of all creation on the Tablet protected against tampering, change and corruption by Satan or other forces. In reading (2) is the Qur'ān protected in its revealed form on earth. The *Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz* is generally seen as similar or linked too the *Umm al-Kitāb* (Q.3:7, 13:39, 43:4) and the *Kitāb Maknūn* (Q.56:79). See: Tāhīr ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Tunis: Dār Sahnūn li-Il-Nashir wa al-Tawzī', n.dt.), 12:255; Maḥmūd al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm wa al-Sab' al-Mathānī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2005), 30:386.

¹³ The Ḥanafī-Māturīdī emphasize that this determination is recorded as a description and not as a decree (*bi-l-Waṣf wa lā bi-l-Hukm*), it expresses God's eternal knowledge of what is and will be, and is not a commanding of the fate of everything (pre-destination), which would eliminate free will from creation. The freely chosen human beliefs and acts are described, but not decided by God. Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, *ibid*, 74-75; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 9:379.

¹⁴ A prophetic *ḥadīth* says the 'pen' (*al-qalam*) was the first creation, and the Tablet the second. Another narration says the Tablet is the first creation. The Tablet is understood by some as a metaphor (*yushabbahu*) for the Throne (*al-'arsh*) which itself is also understood to be a metaphor (*majāz*) for God's knowledge (*'ilm*) or power (*sulṭān/mulk*). Others see it as a physical object (*jism*) containing real writing, but differ on the substances from which it is made (the most popular traditions say it is made from pearl (*durra*). There are also claims of there being four Tablets: *lawḥ al-qaḍā'* (tablet of decree), *lawḥ al-Qadr* (Tablet of determination), *lawḥ al-naḥs* (tablet of the soul), en *lawḥ al-*

word as a divine attribute is transferred into a revelation which is present within creation¹⁵, and therefore takes up a physical position within the Islamic cosmology which is defined as a *sacred space* by the Islamic tradition. This Islamic cosmology was inherited from Greek-Persian-Indian cosmology, to which the Islamic tradition has added sacred spaces (see figure 1 below).

The Islamic tradition has constructed multiple versions of *how*, *where* and *when* the Qur'ān was revealed to Muḥammad. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE) describes in his encyclopedia of Qur'ānic sciences, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, multiple traditions of how the Qur'ān was transferred from *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz* to Muḥammad (in order of most to least accepted version):

- 1) On *Laylat al-Qadr* God brought it in its totality down to the lowest heaven (*al-samā' al-dunyā*), after which He revealed it in parts over a period of twenty, twenty-three, or twenty-five years. The differences are due to the differences [of opinion] on how long the [the Prophet] remained in Mecca after his calling.
- 2) The Qur'ān descended in its totality on *Laylat al-Qadr*, and it was between the spheres of the stars. Then God revealed it to His messenger part after part.
- 3) In one night, *Laylat al-Qadr*, the Qur'ān descended towards the lowest heaven, after which it was revealed over a period of twenty years.

hayyūlā (tablet of primal matter). These coincide with the higher intellects and forms in Islamic philosophy. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 19:52, 27:617-618; 'Abd Allāh al-Bayḍāwī, *Ṭawālī' al-Anwār min Matālī' al-Anzār* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Azhariyya li-l Turāth, n.d.), 148-149; Al-Māturīdī, *ibid*, 10:369-370, 490; Tāhir ibn 'Āshūr, *ibid*, 12:253-254; Al-Alūsī, *ibid*, 30:386; A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1965), 148-149; Ibn Abī al-'izz, *Sharḥ al-'Aqida at-Taḥawiyya*, trans. Muḥammad Abdulḥaqq Anṣārī (Riyadh: Imadat al-Baḥth al-'Ilmi, 2000), 209-210, 223-226; Ibn Kathīr al-Damashqī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2004), 4: 463-464.

¹⁵ On the *Lawḥ* is God's word, the Qur'ān and other revelations, described in the forms (*ashkāl*) of words and sounds. Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, *ibid*, 49. The Mu'tazilah al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE) emphasizes that this described Qur'ān has therefore become a physical object (*jism*) and proves it is an originated creation (*ḥadath*). Al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mutashābuh al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, n.d.), 685.

- 4) The Qur'ān was separated from the *Dhikr*¹⁶ and was placed within the Abode of Glory (*Bayt al-ʿizza*)¹⁷ in the lowest heaven, after which Gabriel revealed it to the Prophet.
- 5) It was given to Gabriel who placed it within the *Bayt al-ʿizza*, after which he brought it down [to earth] in parts.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Al-Dhikr*, lit. remembrance/admonition, a common term used in the Qur'ān itself for the Qur'ān as revelation (e.g. 3:58, 6:69/90, 7:2/63, 15:6), and for the revelations revealed to all previous messengers (16:43-44, 21:48/105), and is understood in relation to the Tablet as being the totality of revelation as written on *al-Lawḥ al-Mahfūz*.

¹⁷ *Bayt al-ʿizza*, a non-Qur'anic term which is linked by many commentators to the frequent house (*Bayt al-Ma'mūr*) mentioned in Q.52:4. According to Islamic tradition this is located in the lowest heaven and is similar to the Ka'ba, where angels perform their own Ḥajj rituals. Others see the *Bayt al-ʿizza* as the place where revelation is copied by the noble scribes (*al-Safarat al-Karīm al-Kitabayn*), mentioned in Q.80:15-16. Al-Bayḍāwī places the *Bayt al-Ma'mūr* in the fourth heavenly sphere if it is understood as the angelic Ka'ba, or its is the earthly Ka'ba, or it is the heart of the believers, and he does not mention any linkage to the *Bayt al-ʿizza*. Al-Māwardī mentions it being the heavenly Ka'ba but also that it is above the seven heavens. Other opinions he cites says it is the original Ka'ba as build by the prophet Adam, or the current Ka'ba. Al-Suyūṭī mentions it could also be in the third, sixth, or seventh heaven. 'Abd Allāh al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa āsrār al-Tāwīl* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2004), 2:1016; Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī al-Baṣrī, *al-Nukat wa al-Uyūn Tafsīr al-Māwardī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, n.d.), 5:377-378; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Damascus: Dār al-Jayl, 1995), 523; Ibn Kathīr al-Damashqī, *ibid*, 4: 218-219.

¹⁸ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-Aṣariyya, 1997), 1:116-117.

In the multiple versions there is an agreement on *when* the Qur'ān was sent down to the lowest heaven and from there to Muḥammad: the month of Ramaḍān. This is also mentioned in the Qur'ān “**Ramaḍān is the month in which the Qur'ān was sent down** (Q.2:185)”, and that is the reason why this month is specified for fasting due on every healthy adult Muslim.¹⁹ According to the above mentioned traditions, based on Qur'ān 97:1; there is also a specific night within the month of Ramaḍān on which it is sent down: *Laylat al-Qadr*, the night of power or determination. Al-Suyūṭī tries to reconcile the conflicting traditions of the double descent with the majority opinion of it's being sent down during Ramaḍān: the Qur'ān was sent down to the lowest heavens during Ramaḍān (1st *tanzīl*), *and* was also revealed to Muḥammad during Ramaḍān (2nd *tanzīl*). There is even a tradition that claims that all previous revelations were also sent down during Ramaḍān. Al-Suyūṭī tries to do the same for *Laylat al-Qadr*, whereby the cosmic descent, as well as the earthly descent, all collapse into a singular *sacred time*.²⁰ With the transfer from the 1st *tanzīl* to the 2nd *tanzīl*, the Qur'ān was brought from the unseen world (*'ālam al-ghayb*) to the seen world (*'ālam al-shahāda*).²¹ This revelatory cosmology (see figure 2 below) provides

¹⁹ Fasting during the month of Ramaḍān belongs to the five pillars of Sunni Islam. For a discussion on the requirements and proofs for its obligation on mature healthy Muslims, see: Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, *al-Fiqh al-islāmiyyu wa adillatuhu* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2008), 2:509-510.

²⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-itqān*, 1:117-121. The definitions of *sacred time* and *sacred space* are given below.

²¹ Al-Alūsī, *ibid*, 30:523.

a *sacred space* that is not accessible for the common man as it belongs to the unseen world, but it also provides a *sacred time* that is, as time overlaps the unseen and seen worlds and can be witnessed by both.²² It is this *sacred time* in which mankind can perform acts which create their own *sacred spaces* on earth.

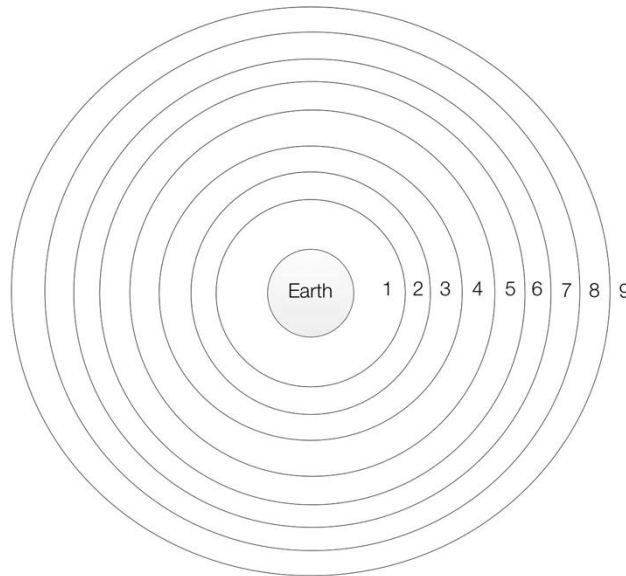


figure 1. Classical Greek and Islamic cosmology²³

²² The exception is prophet Muḥammad who during the nightjourney (*laylat al-Mi'rāj*) went to the highest heaven, which mirrors the act of revelatory descent on *Laylat al-Qadr*.

²³ All dominant classical cosmologies are geocentric. Heliocentric models were proposed by some Greek, Indian and Islamic thinkers, but never became dominant because of to the classical understanding of motion and the limitations of naked-eye astronomical observation. An example of heliocentric proposals is by al-Rāzī: "The universe as a whole is build with eleven spheres, five of which are outside the solar sphere, and these are the spheres of Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the fixed stars, and the outer greater sphere. The other five are within the solar sphere, and these are Venus, Mercury, the moon, the spheres of fire, air, water and earth [i.e. the four elements]. And as the sun is the sultan of the heavenly bodies, isn't it more appropriate for it to be at the centre of the universe?", Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliyyah min al-'ilm al-ilāhiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1987), 4:9. Post-Galileo heliocentrism was slowly accepted in the Muslim world, especially among Ottoman scholars who had access to translations of European works, but geocentrism remained dominant in Arabo-Islamic thought well into the 18-19th century. For example, the Baghdadi scholar Maḥmūd al-Alūsī (d. 1853 CE) in his commentary on Q 55:5 mentions that "contemporary philosophers [i.e. philosophers of nature/scientists] claim that the sun doesn't revolve around the center [of the solar system], and that the moon revolves around the earth, and the earth around the sun. [...] so they claim that [around] the sun the other planets move. They have no proof for their statements." Al-Alūsī, *ibid*, 27:131. For the Islamic-theological cosmologies, see: 'Abd Allāh al-Bayḍāwī, *Ṭawālī' al-Anwār*, 138-141; Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Raḥman al-Iṣfahānī, *Maṭāl' al-Anwār 'alā Ṭawālī' al-Anwār* (Riyad: Dār al-Kutubī, 2008), 120-125; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 4:154-161. For the philosophical

Sphere	Aristotle	Islamic theology	Islamic philosophy
1. 7 th and lowest heavenly sphere	Moon, four elements	Moon, four elements <i>Bayt al-‘izza/Bayt al-Ma‘mūr</i>	Moon, tenth intellect, four elements, Gabriel
2. 6 th heavenly sphere	Mercury, ether	Mercury	Mercury, ether, ninth intellect
3. 5 th heavenly sphere	Venus, ether	Venus	Venus, ether, eighth intellect
4. 4 th heavenly sphere	Sun, ether	Sun	Sun, ether, seventh intellect
5. 3 rd heavenly sphere	Mars, ether	Mars	Mars, ether, sixth intellect
6. 2 nd heavenly sphere	Jupiter, ether	Jupiter	Jupiter, ether, fifth intellect
7. 1 st heavenly sphere	Saturn, ether	Saturn	Saturn, ether, fourth intellect
8. Sphere of the stars	Zodiac, fixed stars	Zodiac, fixed stars	Zodiac, fixed stars, third intellect
9. Outer greatest sphere	Sphere of the prime mover	Outer sphere which moves everything, highest heaven, <i>al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz</i> , <i>al-‘Arsh</i>	Outer sphere which moves everything, highest heaven, second intellect, beyond this sphere is the first intellect which emanates directly from God and does not embody a sphere

cosmologies, see: Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 115-117, 163-165, 228, 284; Damien Janos, *Method, Structure, and Development in al-Fārābī's Cosmology* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 115-202; Jean-Claude Pecker, *Understanding the Heavens: Thirty Centuries of Astronomical Ideas from Ancient Thinking to Modern Cosmology* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2001), 79-83, 151-153.

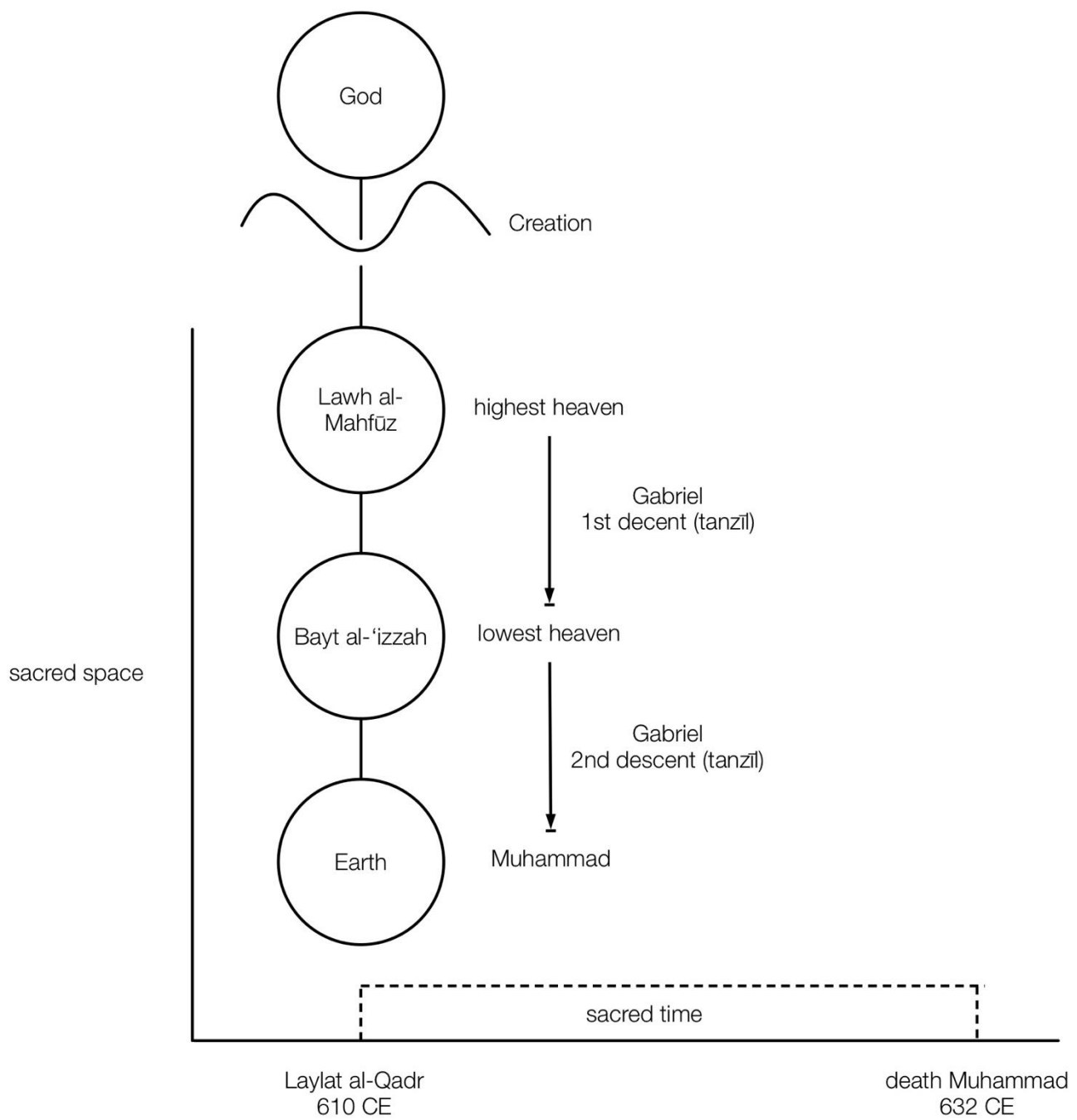


figure 2. Revelatory cosmology

2 Sacred time and space in Islam

Islam acknowledges multiple *sacred spaces* that were considered sacred before the advent of Islam, such as Jerusalem,²⁴ Mecca,²⁵ and graves of known prophets. The Qur'ān also designates monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques as *sacred spaces* because in them “**God’s name is mentioned frequently** (Q.22:40)”.²⁶ The month of Ramaḍān was named as such in the Arab calendars before the advent of Islam, and the Qur'ān integrated the calendar into the new religion. The same holds for the sacred months designated for the Hajj rituals and truces.²⁷ Already existing months that were designated as *sacred time* before Islam were integrated into it, other previously existing months that were not sacred before, were made into *sacred time* with the introduction of the new religion. As for *Laylat al-Qadr*, it is a name given by the Qur'ān to a specific moment in time unknown before Islam, and therefore, is the creation of *sacred time* through revelation, and is sacred because it refers to the act of revelation itself.²⁸ In Mircea Eliade’s concept of *sacred time* and *sacred space* he positions the sacred, the ‘transcendent,’ as the opposite of the profane, the ‘secular,’ thereby linking the sacred to cosmogony, the creation of the world. *Sacred spaces* link creator, created cosmos, and the human daily world through ritual spaces which represent this cosmogony on earth.²⁹ We see this concept in Islam with the heavenly *Bayt al-Ma‘mūr* being a copy of the earthly Ka‘ba, linking humans and angels together into a single ritual space and act. *Sacred times*

²⁴ The ‘furthest mosque’ (Q.17:1).

²⁵ The ‘first house’ (Q.3:96), the ‘sacred house’ (Q.14:37), the ‘sacred mosque’ (Q.2:143), the ‘old house’ (Q.22:29), and the ‘house of the Lord’ (Q.106:3).

²⁶ The issue if God’s name is mentioned in all these religious buildings equal in monotheistic worth, see: Tāhir ibn ‘Āshūr, *ibid*, 17:276-280.

²⁷ Q.2:197, 9:2/36, and 5:2. The holy months of the Hajj and ‘Umrah rituals are in the Sunni tradition Shawwāl, Dhū al-Qa‘dah, and Dhū al-Ḥijjah. The holy months of Q.9:36 are Dhū al-Qa‘dah, Dhū al-Ḥijjah, Muḥarram, and Rajab. Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl*, 1:116, 405. There existed several calendars before Islam, solar and lunar calendars, which were applied by different Arab tribes. But the mentioned names were already known. With the advent of Islam a singular lunar calendar was constructed. Gerhard Böwering, ‘The Concept of Time in Islam’ in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 141, No. 1 (Mar., 1997), pp. 63-64.

²⁸ Which will be discussed further below in our analysis of al-Māturīdī’s commentary on *sūra* 97.

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harvest Book), 44-65.

point to the moment of creation, the *illud tempus*, and through being present and performing a determined set of acts within that timeframe, the moment of creation itself is made present.³⁰ It is this aspect of linking time and creation through which we return to the divine attribute of speech; in Biblical and Qur'ānic theology creating and revealing are the same, both are derived from God's speech.³¹ Samer Akkach emphasizes that in Islam the sacred is not mirrored in the profane. The world does not corrupt the sacred.³² The Islamic sacred exists without a necessary profane. In Islam, *sacred time* and *space* are rarely designated through terms as *muqaddas* (holy) or *muḥarram* (taboo), but by *faḍā'il*, meaning something with superior, special or virtues qualities.³³ It is this term we also encounter in the commentaries on Qur'ān sūra 97 discussing why *Laylat al-Qadr* is better than a thousand months. The rituals of Ramaḍān have, for the most part, been stipulated extensively in the Qur'ān and the prophetic *Sunna*, without major differences of opinion among the Sunni schools

³⁰ Eliade, *ibid*, 80-81. Time can be divided into: (1) universal and personal history, (2) daily routine, (3) sacred time which lies outside normal history and to which one wants to return constantly (cyclic) or which introduces new time (as new year). See: Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2006), 213.

³¹ In the Qur'ān nature, miracles, and the verses of the Qur'ān themselves are designated with the term *āyāt*, signs, which point towards God's existence, almightiness, en wisdom, and all have come about through His word (e.g. Q.2:99/164 etc.). The Biblical term *'Owth* is similarly used for nature, covenantal signs, and miracles (e.g. Genesis 1:14, 4:15, 9:12, 17:11, Exodus 4:28 etc.). The Qur'ānic term is probably derived from the Biblical term through Syriac, and has retained its Semitic theological significance. See: Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill publishers, 2007), 72-73. In Western systematic theology, creation (the order of nature) is termed 'general revelation', and verbal revelation (as in scripture) 'special revelation'. See: EQ (Leiden: Brill publishers, 2006), 5:2-11; Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill publishers, 2007), 72-73; Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 87-100; G.Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (trans. John T. Willis. Grand Rapids: Willem B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 1:167-188; Gerald O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology: Toward a New Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57-68.

³² Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 165. According to a well known prophetic tradition, the whole earth has been made into a mosque, designating the whole earth as sacred space and therefore as pure and non-corrupted. We see this also in the Ḥanafī claim that the world and everything in nature is in its essence beneficial (*nafa'a*), permitted (*mubāḥ*), and pure (*ṭāharah*). For a discussion on the Ḥanafī concept, see: Arnold Yasin Mol, *Rational ethics and Natural Law in classical Islam: Examples from the Hanafī school* (2015), https://www.academia.edu/10939863/Rational_ethics_and_Natural_Law_in_classical_Islam_Example_s_from_the_Hanafi_school.

³³ Akkach, *ibid*, 165-168.

of thought.³⁴ But on the timing and the stipulated acts of *Laylat al-Qadr* there are many conflicting source texts and opinions. Are they linked with the ten-day retreat into the mosque in the last days of Ramaḍān (*i'tikāf*, Q 2:187), or is it a separate *sacred time*? And how can a believer participate in this *sacred time* when there is no certainty on its exact timing?

2.1 *Laylat al-Qadr as Sacred Time in Sunni Tafsīr*

In the following translation and analysis of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī's *tafsīr* of Qur'ān sūra 97, we will discuss these issues surrounding *Laylat al-Qadr*. What does its name mean, when was it sent down, what was sent down in it, why is it better than a thousand months, why is there peace in it, and more importantly, when is it? Al-Māturīdī's work has been chosen for this analysis because his approach as an orthodox-rational theologian (*mutakallimun*) provides a coherent summary of both the rational and traditional arguments in the Sunni tradition on this sūra.³⁵ According to al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE), there are two methods of exegesis, (1) *tafsīr*, which according to him is based on the prophetic Sunna and the opinions of the prophetic companions who know the reason of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) from which the revealed command (*'amr*) and intent (*murād*) can be derived; and (2) *ta'wīl*, the rational interpretations by the jurist-theologians, the *fuqahā'*, who through the use of reason (*rā'y*) extend the meaning and implications of this command and intent to its utmost limit.³⁶ Elsewhere he also states: "*Tafsīr* is the categorical conclusion (*al-qāṭi'*)

³⁴ 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jazīrī, *al-Fiqh 'alā al-Madhāhib al-Arb'ah* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1994), 1:487-562.

³⁵ On the life, works, and methodology of al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE), see: Mustafa Ceric, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islām* (Malaysia: ISTAC, 1995); Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

³⁶ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *ibid*, 1:349. *Tafsīr* is derived from *fasara* and literally means 'to explain something'. *Ta'wīl* is from *awala* and means 'to return something to its first or original intended meaning'. Early *tafsīr* works applied the term *ta'wīl* as a title, such as the works by al-Māturīdī and al-Tabarī (d. 923 CE), whereby it represented the rational-jurist interpretations and *tafsīr*. In later works (post-1200 CE) is *Tā'wīl* used for mystical interpretations. For the discussion on *tafsīr* genres, see: 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Keys to the Arcana (Mafāṭīḥ al-Asrār wa Masābīḥ al-Abrār): Shahrastānī's esoteric commentary on the Qur'ān*, trans. Toby Mayer (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104-108, 37-50; Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'ānic Exegesis: Genesis and*

that the meaning of the term in question is this, and the testimony before God Almighty that this is what He meant by the term in question; while *ta'wīl* is the preferment (*tarjīh*) of one of several possibilities without categorical conclusion nor testimony.”³⁷ In his analysis of *sūra* 97, both methods of exegesis are present. Also to provide an overview in the many ways *sūra* 97 has been understood by the Sunni tradition, we have placed al-Māturīdī's exegesis next to other classical Sunni exegetes (see appendix I).³⁸

“Translation and analysis of al-Māturīdī's tafsīr³⁹ on Q 97”

“إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةِ الْقَدْرِ”

97:1 We have sent it down (*anzalnāhu*) in the night of power/determination/decreed (*Laylat al-Qadr*).

“وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ”

97:2 And what will make you perceive/know (*adrāka*) what the night of power is?

“لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ”

97:3 The night of power is better (*khayr*) than a thousand months.

“تَنْزَلُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَالرُّوحُ فِيهَا بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ مِنْ كُلِّ أَمْرٍ”

97:4 In it descend (*tanazzalu*) angels and the spirit (*al-rūḥ*) by leave of their Lord, with every command (*min kulli 'amr*).

“سَلَامٌ هِيَ حَتَّىٰ مَطْلَعِ الْفَجْرِ”

97:5 Peace (*salām*) it is until the rise (*maṭla' i*) of dawn.

development (Abdingdon: Routledge, 2010), 84-110; Mannā' al-Qatān, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2009), 295-300.

³⁷ Al-Māturīdī, *ibid*, 1:185.

³⁸ By classical I mean all pre-1800 works. For a discussion of this, see: Abdul-Raof, *ibid*.

³⁹ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Tafsīr Tā'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2005), 10:583-587.

Meccan⁴⁰. “97:1” The people of *Ta’wīl* say: That He says “**We have sent it down**”, meaning: the Qur’ān.⁴¹ And it is possible that “**sent it down**” means: *al-salām*, which is mentioned later in the *sūrah*, where He says: “**with every command, peace**”. Those who say He has sent down the Qur’ān in *Laylat al-Qadr* disagree about it:

Some say: The Qur’ān was sent down in one piece (*jumla*)⁴² to the lowest heaven from *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz* during this night and it is in the month of Ramaḍān, because He says “**The month of Ramaḍān is when He sent down Qur’ān** (Q.2:185)”, meaning: He sent it down from *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz*, then from the lowest heaven unto the messenger of God in separate parts according to the needs of command (*‘amr*) and prohibition, the permissible and forbidden, admonitions, and all that is necessary.⁴³ Some say: Only the amount that is necessary for the coming is sent

⁴⁰ An opinion of ibn ‘Abbās states this *sūrah* was revealed in Mekka. Another tradition says ibn ‘Abbās stated it was revealed in Medina. Al-Wāqidī says it is the first revealed *sūrah* in Medina because fasting was only made an obligation (*farḍ*) after the Hijrah. Al-Alūsī says this *sūrah* was revealed when Muḥammad was sitting on the minbar, therefore it could only be revealed in Medina as he had no mosque or minbar in Mekka. The majority opinion states it is Medinan. Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2003), 3:640-641; Tāhir ibn ‘Āshūr, *ibid*, 30:455-466. Al-Alūsī, *ibid*, 15:521.

⁴¹ According to al-Rāzī, by using only the suffix - *hu* - for the Qur’ān it indicates its prestige and can be compared to how the revelation of the Qur’ān in Q.56:77-80 is mirrored to the moment of death (*al-waqt*) in Q.56:83. That it refers to the moment of death is not directly stated, but is clearly meant, thereby indicating the importance of the subjects not directly stated in these verses. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 32:27. For an alternative reading of this suffix, see: Micheal Sells, ‘Sound, Spirit and Gender in Sūrat al-Qadr’ in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 111/2 (Apr. - Jun., 1991), 239-259.

⁴² There are multiple opinions on if: (1) Gabriel brings parts of the Qur’ān down to the lowest heaven and the prophet each *Laylat al-Qadr*, or (2) the whole text was sent down to the prophet all at once where after parts were made conscious to him over a period of 20-25 years, (3) the majority of the Qur’ān was revealed during the months of Ramaḍān, (4) the whole Qur’ān was sent down to the lowest heaven (1st *tanzīl*) and after which sent down to Muḥammad over a period of 20-25 years (2nd *tanzīl*). Discussions revolved also around Q.31:27 if it indicates that there is more revelation on the totality of possible revelation (*dhikr*), which is on *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz*, than revealed to Muḥammad. The ritual of reciting the whole Qur’ān during Ramaḍān mirrors the descent and/or revelation of the Qur’ān during Ramaḍān. See: Abbas Jaffer and Masuma Jaffer, *An Introduction to Qur’ānic Sciences (‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān)* (London: ICAS Press, 2009), 46-53. Al-Alūsī, *ibid*, 15:523.

⁴³ This does not make the Qur’ān a reactive or an *ad hoc* revelation, but an interactive revelation with a teleological focus. According to the *mutakallimūn* and philosophers of law (*uṣūliyyūn*) the Qur’ān is revealed through God’s assisting grace (*luṭf*) and mercy (*rahma*, Q 55:1-2), and for general human welfare (*al-masāliḥ al-rājiḥa*). Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl*, 1:129; Tāhir ibn ‘Āshūr, *ibid*, 1:379-381; Al-Māturīdī, *ibid*, 6:7, 8:536; Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *ibid*, 1:569.

down as a whole from *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz* in this night; afterward it is sent down onto the messenger of God appearing in separate parts, and God knows best.

Moreover, we do not know what makes this night virtuous (*al-Faḍīla*): Because special worship occurs in it.⁴⁴ He tests creation in its pursuit of estrangement [from anything evil or worldly] (*al-taghrīb*) and civility (*al-adab*); or it is virtuous as a place where He tests the angels and makes them responsible for descending therein, and worshipping on earth, and sending down the Qurʾān and such.⁴⁵ Or the wisdom [behind not revealing how to know *Laylat al-Qadr*] means the virtuousness does not appear (*lam yuṭala*⁴⁶) in one specific meaning.⁴⁷ There are certain localities [in time or place] that are more virtuous for worship therein, as mentioned [in the Ḥadīth]: "A single prayer in the Masjid al-Ḥarām is equal to a hundred thousand prayers elsewhere, and a single prayer in a mosque is equal to a hundred prayers elsewhere except [compared to] the Masjid al- Ḥarām." And God the Exalted says "**and the mosques are God's** (Q 72:18)", these localities have been distinguished from others in virtuousness because worship is performed in them.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is possible that certain times are more distinguished in virtuousness than others, for the worship [performed within] a locality is performed in [a certain timeframe], because these

⁴⁴ Here *Laylat al-Qadr* is portrayed as special because of man's worship in it. There are several acts and prayers recommended for *Laylat al-Qadr*: (1) complete ritual purity (*ghusl*), (2) the giving of alms (*ṣadaqa*), (3) the pronouncement of the supplication (*duʿāʾ*): "God You are forgiving, You love forgiveness, so forgive me (*Allāhumma innaka ʿafuwwun tuḥibb al-ʿafwa faʿffu ʿannī*)", (4) to perform four *rakaʿāt* after the *ʿishāʾ* prayer. Some sources add more acts: (5) to recite *sūrat al-Fātiḥa* for seven times (s.1) and *sūrat al-ʾIklāṣ* (s.112), (6) the seventy or hundreds time repeating of the supplication: "God forgive me and I seek repentance with Him (*ʾastaghfiru allāha wa-atūbu ilayhi*)", (7) to lay the Qurʾān on one's head while repeating several supplications, whereby the physical Qurʾān is used as a ritual object. Al-Zuhaylī, *al-Fiqh al-islāmiyyu wa adillatuhu*, 3:1623-1625, 1677-1678; Abū Bakr al-Kāsānī, *Badāʾīʿ al-Ṣanāʾiʿ tartīb al-Sharāʾiʿ* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1986), 1:285; http://www.duas.org/laylat_aamaal.htm, access date: 17 May 2016.

⁴⁵ Here *Laylat al-Qadr* is portrayed as special because of the duties of the angels, and not due to the acts of man.

⁴⁶ Here al-Māturīdī mirrors the non-apparent (*lam yuṭala*) knowledge with the rise (*maṭlaʾi*) of dawn in Q 97:5, by using a verb from the same rootword.

⁴⁷ This is a typical form of *tāʾwīl* discourse where multiple meanings are all seen as possibly true even though they are conflicting. Through this, the extend of the meaning of the Qurʾān maximized, which is according to al-Māturīdī the exact purpose of *tāʾwīl*, see fn.38 above.

⁴⁸ See also the discussion on this in: al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *ibid*, 3:640.

places are made distinct, but the special times are not manifested, thereby to be made distinct from other times,⁴⁹ so it is —and God knows best— that if it had been made manifest, and pointed out, then there would be no provisions necessary for the searching [of when these times are], because He preserves that time and that night in particular.⁵⁰ Concerning the position (*al-makān*) of the necessary provisions in arriving at that position, it is similar to what is inferred from [the fact that] the time the spirit (*rūḥ*) of a man leaves his body is not made manifest. Because if it were made manifest and he knew when his life would end he would engage in great sin and disobedience (*maʿṣiya*) secure until the latter parts of his life, and then he would repent. So [the moment of death or *Laylat al-Qadr*] it is not made manifest, so that he is always in a state of fear, warning, and hope (*rajāʾ*). In the same way, this night is not made manifest, so that it is sought after from among all other nights, so they may celebrate. And God knows best.⁵¹

Then there is the question whether the Qurʾān is revealed in this night, the proof (*dalīluhu*) [for this] is His statement: **“Ḥā Mīm, by the clear Book, truly We**

⁴⁹ “*Al-waqt*, literally “a period/point in time,” denotes, according to Ibn ʿArabī, a designation (*taqdīr*) in something that in itself does not admit what is being designated. It is an assumption, in other words, as is the case when one assumes a beginning, middle, or end in a sphere, while the spatiality of the sphere does not admit any of these definitions. With reference to a prophetic tradition that describes time (*zaman*) as being circular in form, Ibn ʿArabī argues that *al-awqāt*, as temporal assumptions, are meaningful only with reference to both human spatiality and man’s centrality in the world. It is the correlation of the stellar movements with human spatiality that establishes the spatio-temporal order of the world.” Akkach, *ibid*, 172.

⁵⁰ Meaning the Qurʾān nowhere indicates what is required to know or how to find *Laylah al-Qadr*. But such indications are provided in Prophetic traditions, see below.

⁵¹ According to al-Rāzī, *Laylat al-Qadr* is hidden (*ikhfāʾ*) with the reason (*sabab*) that mankind is rewarded for searching (*ṭalab*) the night, it proves the necessity and reward for personal interpretation (*ijtihād*) which night it is, and provides people hope (*rajāʾ*) comparable to the hope expressed in God’s expression in Q.2:30 **“I know what you don’t know”** which expresses the good potential and future God knows humanity has. Al-Rāzī also compares the hiddenness of the moment (*al-waqt*) of *Laylat al-Qadr* with the moment of death. Al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 32:28-29. In this way the unknowability of the exact moment of *Laylat al-Qadr* and the searching of it are incorporated into the ritual of *Laylat al-Qadr*. Uncertainty and expectation concerning *sacred time* are in this way ritualized. Both al-Māturīdī and al-Rāzī refer to the ignorance of the angels in Q.2:30-32 as an example how Muslims must deal with the hiddenness of *Laylat al-Qadr*. It is uncertain where this similar exegesis comes from (I was unable to trace it, al-Māturīdī was known to al-Rāzī and he cites him several times (al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 5:316, 14:353, 24:492, 27:612), but it is unclear if he had access to al-Māturīdī’s tafsīr). The similarity in exegesis could be coincidence, or there is a wider exegetical tradition of linking hidden knowledge to Q.2:30-32.

sent it down on a blessed night...(Q.44:1-3)” and this inquiry is about *Laylat al-Qadr* and is evidence (*al-Bayān*) for it. Then He says: “**And what will make you perceive what the night of power is?** (Q.97:2)”, this has two aspects: Firstly, He says: You will know only until He will let you know; such as His statement: “**What We have revealed unto you, before this, neither you or your people knew it** (*ta‘lamuhā*)⁵²...(Q.11:49)”. And it is possibly obtained from His statement: “**And what will make you perceive**” [that it is] about the glory and amazement [one has] for it. And God knows best. And it is stated: The descent of this verse [Q.97:2] is with the meaning of consolation, it provides virtue for this night and the works performed in it, and then declares its virtuousness with: “**The night of power is better than a thousand months** (Q.97:3)”, on which is disagreement (*ikhtilāf*): Some say: That the Prophet saw the Umayyad clan on his minbar, so it had become evil (*sā‘ahu*), and after which He revealed [the whole of *sūrah al-Qadr*] (Q.97:1-6), meaning: For a thousand months [the minbar, i.e. the caliphate] will be occupied by the Umayyad clan, O Muḥammad!⁵³ And some say: “**The night of power is better than a thousand months**”, meaning: The works in it are better than the works in a thousand months similar to it. And it is also stated: That the Messenger of God mentioned to his companions that a man from the Banī Isrā’īl performed *jihād* in the path of God for a thousand months, and they had veneration [for this man]. And then the Exalted revealed “**The night of power is better than a thousand months**”, meaning: the

⁵² Here al-Māturīdī sees Q.97:2 “perceive (*adrāka*)” to Q.11:49 “knew (*ta‘lam*)” as semantic synonyms.

⁵³ Through this tradition on the reason of revelation (*sabab al-Nuzūl*) this *sūrah* becomes a political statement, transcending the chronological context or any form of *sacred time*, responding to events after the death of the prophet. The Banī Umayyad (661-750 CE) regime was in the dream portrayed as bad, but declared as divinely approved by linking it to Q.97:3. Al-Rāzī provides a similar *sabab* tradition in which the Prophet sees in his sleep the Banī Umayyad ruling from his minbar one after the other and that this is the divine *Qadr*, and after this dream *sūrah al-Qadr* was revealed whereby the reign of the Umayyad is stated as a thousand months, 83 years. After which al-Rāzī cites the Mu‘tazilah ‘Abd al-Jabbār who clearly responds to this *sabab* tradition by ridiculing it by saying God mentions nothing good about the Umayyads, and that it were it were a horrible (*madhmūma*) thousand months. Al-Rāzī rejects this opinion and praises the Umayyads for being great (*‘azīm*) in worldly bliss and that it is nor forbidden to connect this *sūrah* to them. Al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 32:231. This *sabab* is a typical example of what is generally viewed as a fabricated tradition which presents the reign of the Banī Umayya as being divine *qadr*. Many theologians attacked them on this issue, including Ḥassan al-Baṣrī (d. 728 CE), who pointed out that God never wills injustice. See: Michael Schwarz, ‘The Letter of al-Hasan al-Baṣrī’, *Oriens*, Vol. 20 (1967), pp. 15-30.

works therein are as good as the *jihād* of that man for a thousand months.⁵⁴ And from this it is possible that the thousand months is mentioned in the way of allegory (*al-Tamthīl*)⁵⁵ and is not meant as a time measurement (*al-tawqīt*). Meaning: better than a thousand months and more, because a measurement (*al-taqdīr*) is meant to demonstrate an essential quantity (*al-‘adad nafsuh*), and to demonstrate that is distinguishes and emphasizes something. Therefore it is not with the purpose (*al-gharaḍ*) to restrict (*al-qaṣr*) the quantity [to a thousand], and it is as His statement: **“If you seek forgiveness for them seventy times, He will not forgive them (Q.9:80)”**, in such a manner.

Then there is disagreement in the naming of *Laylat al-Qadr*. Some say: A night of judgement (*al-ḥukm*) and decree (*al-qaḍā’*), in which He judges and decrees as He wills what will be in the upcoming year (*al-‘ām al-maḡbūl*).⁵⁶ Such as His statement: **“Therein every wise command (*al-Ḥakīm*) is made distinct (Q 44:4)”**. Or it is named such because this night is meant for determination (*qadr*) and distinct rank (*manzila*) with God the Exalted, because something great is described with *Qadr* and *manzila*. And also the name *Laylat al-Mubāraka*⁵⁷ [is used for *Laylat al-Qadr*], because what is revealed therein has blessings (*al-barakāt*) and mercy (*al-rahma*) from God the Exalted for His creation. Or it is a blessing (*mubāraka*) because of the many works of worship performed in it.

And the Mighty and Majestic says: **“In it descend angels and the spirit (*al-Rūḥ*) by leave of their Lord, with every command (Q.97:4)”**. Some say the *rūḥ*

⁵⁴ For discussions and gradings of the reasons of revelation (*asbāb al-Nuzūl*), see: Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, *al-Tafsīr al-Munīr fī al-‘Aqīda wa al-Sharī‘a wa al-Minhaj* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr al-Ma‘āsir, 1418 AH), 30:331.

⁵⁵ Al-Māturīdī explains *tamthīl* as being the opposite of *taḥqīq*: “It is allegorical and not literal.” In his commentary on Q.31:33 he explains it as: “That which adds to the delusion of it (*adhāf al-taghrīr ilayhā*); in order what is from the ornamentation (*al-taẓiyīn*) and beautification (*al-taḥsīn*) of the apparent [meaning] (*al-zāhar*), and the showing (*iẓhār*) of its splendor (*bahjatihā*) and its delight (*surūrahā*) and for [the display of] its essence if one were to use differentiation (*al-tamīyīz*) and reason (*al-‘aql*) and understanding (*al-fahm*) and [so one sees] the reality of the ornamentation and beautification are a delusion, and so what belongs to [the way of] the apparent [meaning] is a delusion [and belongs to the way of] allegory (*al-Tamthīl*). Al-Māturīdī, *ibid*, 8:527, 322.

⁵⁶ Reference to the yearly descent of ‘fate’, *Qadr*, see below.

⁵⁷ Based on Qur’ān 44:3 **“We sent it in a blessed night”**.

here is Gabriel (as), such as the Exalted says: **“brought down by the Trustworthy Rūḥ (Q.26:193)”**. And some say: the angels charged with creation, such as the angels who are charged with the descendants of Adam. And it is possible that *Rūḥ* here is mercy (*al-Raḥma*), meaning: the angels are sent down with mercy. And on what it designates: *Mubāraka* through what is sent down in it [the night] of blessings. Then there is a disagreement about His statement: **“In it”**. Some say: Meaning, in the night the angels and the spirit were sent down. And it is said: **“In it”**, meaning: in the angels. And the Mighty and Majestic says: **“by leave of their Lord”**, meaning: they descent by the command of their Lord. And the Mighty and Majestic says: **“with every command, peace”**⁵⁸, some say: meaning through every command it is decreed for that year on earth⁵⁹, and as al-Qatabī said: **“with every command, peace”**, meaning through every command [there] is peace. And it is said⁶⁰: through every command God arranges it (*yudabbaruhu*), meaning, the angels do not know what God the Exalted has determined for them, except what God informs them about. And the Mighty and Majestic says: **“peace is (*salām hiya*)”**, it is said: the angels were sent down through their wings with peace, mercy, and forgiveness by God the Exalted. And some say: meaning it is a safe night because it doesn’t bring about evil (*sharr*) and Satan is not dispatched (*yurasul*) in it until sunrise.⁶¹ And some say: it is peace from the angels, meaning, the greetings of peace from the angels unto all the believers. And some say: **“with every command, peace”**, meaning, from all types of plague and affliction one is secure. And that is mentioned in the Exalted His saying: **“For him there are attending angels to his front and rear, guarding him by God’s command. (Q.13:11)”**, as said by some: they protect against the

⁵⁸ By a difference in recitation a difference in meaning can occur, these recitations (*qirāʾāt*) are thus used as forms of tafsīr. This is also why there is a difference of opinion if this *sūra* has 5 or 6 verses. See: Tāhir ibn ʿĀshūr, *ibid*, 1:379-381.

⁵⁹ In this interpretation the angels descent with both revelation and the yearly *Qadr* from the Tablet. In this theological construct, fate is brought into the world in a cyclic fashion, as is typical for *sacred time* constructs.

⁶⁰ *Qīl*, translated here as “it is said”, generally relays opinions deemed weak, unconvincing, or coming from a minority.

⁶¹ This is a typical aspect of *sacred time* whereby that which corrupts the earth is taken away so the sacred can be fully present. From this point of view, it is Satan who represents the profane in Islam.

punishment (*‘adhāb*) from God. And some say: they protect against it by God’s command. So these two similar aspects are obtained from His saying: “**with every command peace**”. And His statement: “**is until the rise of dawn**” it possibly meansthat the blessings which were mentioned are there until the rise of dawn. And it is possible that peace, which was mentioned, is there until the rise of dawn. And it is possible that the angels remain on earth until the rise of dawn. And it is related from Ibn ‘Abbās, may God be pleased with him, that he recited it as “**with every command peace**”, and he said: meaning the angels.

Then some say: there is a disagreement on the narrations from the Prophet on when *Laylat al-Qadr* is. And there is also disagreement among the Ṣaḥabāh, may God be pleased with them, on this: it is related from ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Anīs about the Prophet that he said: “Search in the last ten, and search in the uneven [days].” And it is related by ‘Abd Allah b. Mas‘ūd that he said: “The Messenger of God said: ‘A night in the 19th of Ramaḍān, and the 21st night, and the 23rd night.’” And it is related by Ibn ‘Umar, may God be pleased with him, about the Prophet that he said: “They search *Laylat al-Qadr* in the latter seven [days].” And it is related that it is in the 27th. And by ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar that: “The Prophet was asked about *Laylat al-Qadr*, and I listened, and he said: ‘It is in the whole of Ramaḍān.’” And by Zar that he said: “I said to Abī b. Ka‘b: ‘Tell us about *Laylat al-Qadr*, O father of al-Mundhir, because our companion ‘Abd Allah ibn Mas‘ūd asked about it.’ So he said: ‘Whoever has the power (*al-ḥawl*) strives for it.’ So he said: ‘Yes, plead God for mercy father of ‘Abd al-Raḥman, and God will certainly let it be known it is in Ramaḍān’, [stating] repeatedly to have trust, ‘and by God that it is Ramaḍān, the 27th night.’” Then we don’t have [knowledge] of it, and no one can point towards this night. Therefore it is stated: it is a night as the night of the 27th or the 29th, except that it is established by *Tawātir*⁶²

⁶² A *Tawātur* report is a Ḥadīth or saying (*khābar*) that is transmitted in every stage of the stages of the transmission-chain (*sanad*) by multiple transmitters (general agreed upon requirement is 10 transmitters), whereby it can be rationally be concluded that these transmitters could not have agreed upon a fabrication (*ikhtilāq*). A *Mutawātir* provides necessary knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-ḍarūrī*). Any *ṣaḥīḥ* tradition that doesn’t confirm to these criteria, but has an authentic *isnād*, is of the status of *Aḥād* (singular transmission) only provides conditional knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-mutawaqqif*), which needs further investigation. Maḥmūd al-Ṭaḥḥān, *Taysīr Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth* (Riyad: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif li-l Nashr wa al-Tawzī‘, 1425 AH), 23-25, 27.

about the Messenger of God in that he informs by a sign (*bi-lishāra*) towards it⁶³, and so that it is pursued and is required in the nights [of Ramaḍān]. And this aspect [of the obligation for searching without certainty] is taken from the related traditions in conformity [with all of them] without rejection [of any tradition], as they are all authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*).⁶⁴ In one year it is in some nights, in the other year other nights, and in another year the last ten [days] of Ramaḍān, and in another Sunna the ten middle ones, and in another Sunna the first ten.⁶⁵ And God knows best.⁶⁶—[end of the exegesis]

3 Conclusion

Our analysis shows how the Islamic tradition constructs God's interaction with the world as a *sacred cosmology* that encompasses both *sacred space* and a *sacred time*. The *sacred space* belongs to the unseen world (*ʿālam al-ghayb*) and is not

⁶³ According to a tradition from Ibn ʿAbbās people will know it is *Laylat al-Qadr* because the night wasn't hot or cold, and because at dawn the sun at sunrise has a weak red glow. See a discussion on this, and the grading of these traditions, in: Al-Zuhaylī, *ibid*, 3:1625.

⁶⁴ Al-Jaṣṣāṣ uses the exact same sentence and examples in his tafsīr. He does not mention al-Māturīdī directly by name in his tafsīr, so it is unclear if he cites al-Māturīdī, or that both cite a similar reconciliatory solution from a source or teaching unknown to us today. Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *ibid*, 3:640-641. Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman in his thesis on al-Māturīdī's *tafsīr* states that al-Jaṣṣāṣ's work must be a condensed version of al-Māturīdī's because of its similarity in topical sequence. Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman, *An Edition of the First Two Chapters of Al-Māturīdī's "Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunna"* (PhD. Diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, 1970), 127-128.

⁶⁵ Nowhere does al-Māturīdī link these ten days to the ritual ten-day mosque retreat, the *i'tikāf*, which is also part of the Ramaḍān rituals. He discusses the requirements for *i'tikāf* in his exegesis of Q.2:187, but doesn't discuss the presence or overlap of *Laylat al-Qadr* in relation to the mosque retreat. Al-Māturīdī, *ibid*, 2:83-85. *Laylat al-Qadr* and *i'tikāf* are both *sacred time* and can overlap, but do not collapse into one another as each have their causes, requirements, rituals, and rewards. That these are two separate *sacred times* can also be seen with ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jazīrī (d. 1941 CE) mentioning that supplication in *Laylat al-Qadr* surpasses (*taghallab*) everything, but does not circumvent (*yunqis*) the value of *i'tikāf*. For the requirements and rituals of *i'tikāf*, see: al-Zuhaylī, *ibid*, 3:1749-1784; Al-Jazīrī, *ibid*, 451-456. According to al-Zuhaylī is the 27th night *Laylat al-Qadr* as per majority opinion. For discussions on the mentioned Prophetic traditions, see: al-Zuhaylī, 3:1623-1624; Al-Alūsī, *ibid*, 15:523-525.

⁶⁶ So according to al-Māturīdī, the only way to reconcile the different traditions on *Laylat al-Qadr* is to accept that it doesn't occur on the same night in Ramaḍān every year, but can shift every Ramaḍān to a different night, thereby making it almost impossible for the believer to find it. Therefore the only obligation on the believers is to search it and hope for a sign that points towards it.

accessible for the common man, but when an intersection occurs between the unseen and seen worlds, a *sacred time* is created that is accessible for the whole of creation, as the whole of creation has a temporal aspect. Only God is atemporal. *Laylat al-Qadr* is described as *sacred time* in the Qur'ān through of three aspects:

- 1) Something supernatural is sent down in it (Qur'ān, angels, *Rūḥ*, God's decree)
- 2) It is better than a thousand months, thus being superior to normal time
- 3) It is the whole night, thus made accessible for normal humans

But nowhere does the Qur'ān inform us when *Laylat al-Qadr* is. To solve this, intertextual connections were made within the Qur'ān, with Prophetic narrations, and opinions of the first generations of Muslims. That the Qur'ān descended in it became the dominant position. In this way, *Laylat al-Qadr* could be placed within the month of Ramaḍān. But the Islamic tradition encountered a problem that it rarely has: there are too many different traditions and opinions on when it is. Even though a dominant position formed, which pointed out the 27th night as the most likely night for *Laylat al-Qadr*, all the other conflicting traditions could not be dismissed precisely because they were of the same historical authenticity. So the uncertainty of when the *sacred time* exactly is was incorporated into the ritual of Ramaḍān. Searching for *Laylat al-Qadr* became just as important as worshiping in it. This concept was partially based on several traditions which refer to the obligation of searching for *Laylat al-Qadr*, but it was also a solution constructed by the Islamic exegetical tradition itself. The pursued *sacred time* was, in this way, extended so every believer with the right intention can participate in it. Because in the end, only God knows best.

Appendix I

Comparative Table Commentaries on *Sūra 97*

In this comparative table we have provided short summaries of the important trends and diverse positions taken by the Sunni tafsīr tradition. Al-Muqātil (d. 722 CE) represents the earliest complete tafsīr extant in the Sunni tradition, al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE) and al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE) represent the orthodox Kalāmīc tradition, Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 985 CE) the Ḥanafī legal tradition, al-Māwardī (d. 1058 CE)

presents the opinions of the first generations of Muslims, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 1072 CE) represents the Ṣūfī tradition, and the Ottoman *Shaykh al-Islām* Abu al-Su‘ūd al-Efendī (d. 1574 CE) presents a late-classical accumulation and preferred selection (*tarjīh*) from all the above mentioned traditions.

Q 97:1	أنزلنا "We have sent it down"	ليلة القدر "night of power"
Al-Muqātil ⁶⁷ :	The Qur’ān	
Al-Māturīdī:	The Qur’ān; peace (<i>salām</i> , Q 98:5)	<i>Laylat al-Muqadār</i> , <i>Laylat al-Mubārakah</i> (Q 44:3); night of judgement (<i>hukm</i>) and decree (<i>qadhā</i> ’); latter 10, all uneven days, 19 th , 21 st , 23 rd , 7 latter ones, 27 th , the whole of Ramaḍān, 29 th , the 10 middle ones, the first 10
Al-Samarqandī ⁶⁸ :	The Qur’ān; provision (<i>rizq</i>) from God	Night of decree
Al-Māwardī ⁶⁹ :	Gabriel; Qur’ān	Last 10 uneven ones, the whole month, 21 st , 23 rd , 24 th , 27 th , one of the signs is the sun without rays
Al-Qushayrī ⁷⁰ :	Mercy from God’s saints (<i>rahmah al-Awliyā’ihu</i>)	The <i>Qadr</i> from the ego’s (<i>nufūs</i>) of the worshippers; the <i>Qadr</i> of existence and the

⁶⁷ Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān* (Beirut: Dār al-Ihyā’ al-Turāth, 1423 AH), 4:771-772.

⁶⁸ Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī aw Bahr al-‘ulūm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1993), 3:601-602.

⁶⁹ Al-Māwardī al-Baṣrī, *ibid*, 6:311-314.

⁷⁰ ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* (Egypt: al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-Kitāb, n.d.), 6:311-314.

		Qadr of witness (i.e. the world); refers to the spread of <i>Qadr</i> that night
Al-Rāzī ⁷¹ :	The Qur'ān; descent of custodianship (<i>khalifah</i> , Q 2:30); remembrance (<i>dhikr</i> , Q 15:9)	<i>Qadr</i> existed before creation and <i>Laylat al-Qadr</i> is when the book of <i>Qadr</i> of all creation is sent down (Q 54:49); night of decree and rulings (<i>laylat taqdīr wa al-Aḥkām</i>); 1 st night of Ramaḍān, 17 th , 19 th , 20 th , 23 rd , 24 th , 25 th , 27 th , 29 th , last 3, last 9,
Abū al-Su'ūd al-Efendī ⁷² :	The Qur'ān	Last 10

Q 97:3	لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ “better than a thousand months”
Al-Muqātil:	Works are rewarded a thousand times
Al-Māturīdī:	Thousand is metaphorical; is better because of the worship made in it; works in it are rewarded multiple times; a thousand months the Bani Umayyad shall rule
Al-Samarqandī:	Works are rewarded a thousand times
Al-Māwardī:	Works are rewarded a thousand times; <i>Laylat al-Qadr</i> is better than to live for a thousand

⁷¹ Al-Rāzī, *ibid*, 32:27-32.

⁷² Abu al-Su'ūd al-Efendī, *Tafsīr Abu Su'ūd aw Irshād al-'Aql al-Salīm ilā Mazāyā al-Kitāb al-Karīm* (Quetta: al-Maktabat al-Ma'rūfiyya, 2011), 6:452-453.

	months; the reign of prophet Sulayman and Dhū al-Qarnayn were each 500 months, making a 1000 months, therefore works in <i>Laylat al-Qadr</i> are equal to these two reigns combined
Al-Qushayrī:	<i>Laylat al-Qadr</i> is better than a thousand months without <i>Laylat al-Qadr</i> ; it is a short night for the lovers (of God) to converse (with God)
Al-Rāzī:	Worship performed in it is worth a thousand months of worship; thousand months is equal to a long life of 80 years, therefore the sins of a lifetime can be forgiven; a thousand months the Bani Umayyad shall rule
Abū al-Su‘ūd al-Efendī:	The reign of Prophet Sulaymān and Dhū al-Qarnayn were each 500 months, making a 1000 months, therefore works in <i>Laylat al-Qadr</i> are equal to these two reigns combined

Q 97:4	“angels” الْمَلَائِكَةُ	“spirit” الرُّوحُ	“command” أَمْرٌ
Al-Muqātil:		A great creation (‘ <i>aẓīm al-Khalqah</i> ’); the angel Malik	Mercy (<i>rahma</i>); the <i>Qadr</i> and <i>Qadhā’</i> of the new year
Al-Māturīdī:	Angels responsible with creation	Gabriel (Q 26:193); mercy	By the command the angels descend; the <i>Qadr</i> of the new year
Al-Samarqandī:	The angels ‘ <i>Isrāfīl</i> , Gabriel, <i>Mīkā’īl</i> , angel of death	A creation looking like an angel but with the face of a human;	The command of death (‘ <i>amr al-mawt</i> ’)

		the spirit of man comes through the command of the Lord (Q.17:85)	
Al-Māwardī:		Gabriel; commanding angels; angels close to God; army of God which doesn't belong to the category of angels; mercy	Provision (<i>rizq</i>) for each period
Al-Qushayrī:		Gabriel; a mighty angel (<i>malaku 'aẓīm</i>)	
Al-Rāzī:	The angels close to God descend on the worshipper; you can only see angels during <i>Laylat al-Qadr</i>	A mighty angel; Jesus; Qur'ān (Q 42:52); mercy (Q 12:87)	A veil over evil; by His command angels descend; <i>amr</i> is <i>qadr</i>
Abū al-Su'ūd al-Efendī:	You can only see angels during <i>Laylat al-Qadr</i>	A creation belonging to the angels	All <i>amr</i> with the decree of God (<i>qaḍā' Allāh</i>) for the new year (Q.44:4); the length of people's life

Q.97:5	سلام "peace"
Al-Muqātil:	Peace; blessings and goodness
Al-Māturīdī:	The angels are sent with peace, mercy and forgiveness; night without evil or Satan through which people are safe (<i>sālim</i>);

	protection against the punishment from God;
Al-Samarqandī:	Safe from any sin, evil or Satan
Al-Māwardī:	Safe from any evil or Satan; is peace, goodness and blessings; the engelen peace unto the believers
Al-Qushayrī:	Peace unto the saints
Al-Rāzī:	Greetings of peace by the angels unto the obedient; safe against evil, calamities, or Satan; peace, blessings, and bliss
Abū al-Suʿūd al-Efendī:	God decrees (<i>yuqaddir</i>) only with safety (<i>salāma</i>) and goodness (<i>khayr</i>)

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