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Are these nothing but sorcerers? : A linguistic analysis of Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63 using intra-Qurʾānic parallels

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Are these Nothing but Sorcerers? – A linguistic analysis of Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63 using intra-Qurʾānic parallels

Abstract: The seemingly ungrammatical wording of Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63 *ʾinna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* has been cause for much debate, both in traditional Muslim sources as well as in modern discussion. This paper sets out to reevaluate the grammar of the various reading that are present by comparing them not against the normative grammar as it is established by the medieval grammarians, but rather by comparing its grammar to other, comparable construction in the Qurʾān. By analyzing this Qurʾānic verse within its intra-Qurʾānic parallels it is argued that the minority reading *ʾin hadhāni la-sāḥirāni* is the original intended reading of the ʿUthmānic text, while the grammatically problematic majority reading *ʾinna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* is to be understood as an approximation to popular non-ʿUthmānic readings. Through the comparison with other verses, it is also shown that we may gain deeper understanding into verses of constructions of the type found in Q al-Ṭāriq 86:4 (*wa-ʾin kullu nafsin la-mā ʿalayhā ḥāfiẓun*) and shed light on some of the competing canonical readings in these verses.

Introduction

One of the famously controversial verses in the Qurʾān in terms of grammar is Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63.[1] In the majority reading[2] *ʾinna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* appears to have an incorrect inflection for case. The expected form is *ʾinna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni*, as *ʾinna* governs the accusative. The accusative option is in fact the reading of the canonical Baṣran reader Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ (d. *ca.* 154–56/770–72) despite its disagreement

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[1] For a discussion on this verse and several of the other difficult verses see John Burton, "Linguistic Errors," 181–96.

[2] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr al-qirāʾāt*, § 3590–1.

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with the *rasm* (ان هذن لسحرن).[3] The problems with this reading were clearly understood very early on. The Kūfan grammarian al-Farrāʾ (144–207/761–822) already cites a report which traces back to the prophet Muḥammad's wife ʿĀʾishah, who claims that this is a scribal error in the Qurʾān.[4]

There is yet another reading, *ʾin hādhāni la-sāḥirāni*, which is the reading of the now dominant Ḥafṣ transmission from ʿĀṣim (as well as that of Ibn Kathīr, who however has a slightly different nominative dual form *hādhānni*).[5] This secondary reading has frequently been understood as containing the negator *ʾin* followed by the *la-* which takes on the function of *ʾillā* "except." This gives the meaning, "these two are nothing but sorcerers," drawing upon similar phraseology in the Qurʾān that does use *ʾillā* like *ʾin hādhā ʾillā ṣihrun mubīnun* "this is nothing but manifest sorcery" (Q 5:110, 6:7, 11:6, 34:43, 37:15). This interpretation is clearly awkward, as there is no precedent for the asseverative particle *la-* to take on the meaning of *ʾillā* in the qurʾānic corpus – or, to my knowledge, outside of it – and thus such an understanding comes off as special pleading to resolve a grammatical issue.[6]

However, yet another understanding of this sentence is found in the grammatical literature which has much better support within the qurʾānic corpus, namely that this *ʾin* is to be understood as the *ʾin al-mukhaffafah* – a short form of *ʾinna*. In this paper I will argue that this interpretation is in fact the correct one, and that despite being a minority reading, *ʾin hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* is the intended ʿUthmānic reading of this verse.

The Sisters of *ʾinna*

The morphosyntactic behavior of *ʾinna* "verily" is well-known. It is placed at the beginning of a phrase and topicalizes or emphasizes the word it governs. The noun that it governs is placed in the accusative. Usually this noun follows *ʾinna* directly, e. g. *ʾinna l̠l̠āha ʿalā kulli shayʾin qadīrun* "God is powerful over everything" (Q al-Baqarah 2:20 and *passim*),[7] but it may be interrupted by a prepositional phrase

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[3] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr al-qirāʾāt*, § 3590–91.

[4] Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān,* 2: 183.

[5] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, § 3590–91.

[6] In fact, the *la-* in the grammatical tradition is explicitly called *al-lām al-fāriqah* ("the distinguishing *lām*") specifically because its presence helps distinguish the word-initial *ʾin* from the negator *ʾin* which cannot be followed by *la-*; cf. Weigelt, "The Particle *La-* in Classical Arabic," 95.

[7] When distinctions between the readings are not relevant, verses are cited in the transmission of Ḥafṣ ʿan ʿĀṣim. When other readings are relevant, this will be mentioned explicitly.

especially if the governed word is indefinite, *ʾinnā fī l-qalʿati sijnan* "In the fortress there is a prison".[8]

There are two other particles that have very similar behavior, namely *lākinna* "but, yet" and the subordinator *ʾanna* "that" which likewise govern the accusative.[9]

> *Wa-**lākinna** kathīran minhum fāsiqūn*
> "But many of them are sinners." (Q al-Māʾidah 5:81)

> *ʾa-lam taʿlam **ʾanna** ʾḷḷāha ʿalā kulli shayʾin qadīr*
> "Do you not know that God is powerful over everything?" (Q al-Baqarah 2:106)

However, these particles are not always followed by nouns. Instead, a verb may follow as well. In such a case, shortened forms of these particles are used, namely *lākin* and *ʾan*. *ʾan* is followed by a subjunctive verb, which ends in *-a* in its non-suffixed forms. In Arabic grammatical thought the subjunctive ending *-a* is considered to be *naṣb* just like the accusative ending in the noun. Thus, its morphosyntactic behavior is not considered to change. In the case of *lākin*, however, this behaviour is not retained, and *lākin* may be followed by either a perfect verb or regular imperfect verb in *-u* (*rafʿ*).[10]

> *Wa-mā ẓalamnāhum wa-**lākin** kānū ʾanfusahum yaẓlimūn*
> "We did not wrong them; but they wronged themselves" (Q al-Naḥl 16:118)

> *wa-mā tashāʾūna ʾillā **ʾan** yashāʾa ʾḷḷāhu rabbu l-ʿālamīn*
> "But you will not wish it except if God, the lord of the universe, wills it" (Q al-Takwīr 81:29)

However, such shortened forms are not strictly relegated to the preverbal position. They occasionally can occur in front of nouns. In such cases, there seems to be no obvious difference in meaning from the use of *lākinna*. For example:

> *wa-**lākini** ʾl-rasūlu wa-ʾlladhīna ʾāmanū maʿahū jāhadū bi-ʾamwālihim wa-ʾanfusihim*
> "But the messenger and those who believed with him fought with their wealth and themselves." (Q Barāʾah 9:88)

> ***lākini** ʾl-ẓālimūna ʾl-yawma fī ḍalālin mubīn*
> "But the wrongdoers today are in obvious error." (Q Maryam 19:38)

> *wa-laysa ʿalaykum junāḥun fīmā ʾakhṭaʾtum bihī wa-**lākin** mā taʿammadat qulūbukum*
> "And you have committed no sin if you err therein but for what your hearts intended." (Q al-Aḥzāb 33:5)

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8 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 339; Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 284–85; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 36

9 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 338; § 415; Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 287, 292; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 39–40.

10 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 340, § 344; Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 287, 292; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 322–24.

*wa-**lākin** man sharaḥa bi-l-kufri ṣadran fa-ʿalayhim ghaḍabun mina ʾḷḷāhi wa-lahum ʿadhābun ʿaẓīm*

"But those who open their hearts to disbelief, the wrath of God will be upon them, and they will have a great punishment." (Q al-Naḥl 16:106)

There are a good number of cases where the readers disagree whether *lākin* or *lākinna* is used, e. g.

*wa-**lākinna** ʾl-shayāṭīna kafarū yuʿallimūna ʾl-nāsa ʾl-siḥra wa-mā ʾunzila ʿalā ʾl-malakayni bi-bābila hārūta wa-mārūt* (Majority reading)
*wa-**lākini** ʾl-shayāṭīnu kafarū yuʿallimūna ʾl-nāsa l-siḥra wa-mā ʾunzila ʿalā ʾl-malakayni bi-bābila hārūta wa-mārūt* (Ibn ʿĀmir, Ḥamzah, al-Kisāʾī)[11]
"Rather the devils disbelieved, teaching people magic and that which was revealed to the two angels at Babylon, Hārūt and Mārūt" (Q al-Baqarah 2:102)

*fa-lam taqtulūhum(ū) wa-**lākinna** ʾḷḷāha qatalahum(ū)* (Majority reading)
*fa-lam taqtulūhum wa-**lākini** ʾllāhu qatalahum* (Ibn ʿĀmir, Ḥamzah, al-Kisāʾī)[12]
"You did not kill them, but God killed them" (Q al-Anfāl 8:17)

*wa-mā ramayta ʾidh ramayta wa-**lākinna** ʾḷḷāha ramā/ē/ǟ* (Majority reading)
*wa-mā ramayta ʾidh ramayta wa-**lākini** ʾllāhu ramā/ē* (Ibn ʿĀmir, Ḥamzah, al-Kisāʾī)[13]
"And you did not throw when you threw, but God threw" (Q al-Anfāl 8:17)

*laysa ʾl-birra/u ʾan tuwallū wujūhakum(ū) qibala ʾl-mashriqi wa-l-maghribi wa-**lākinna** ʾl-birra man ʾāmana bi-ʾllāhi [...]* (Majority reading)
*laysa ʾl-birru ʾan tuwallū wujūhakum qibala ʾl-mashriqi wa-ʾl-maghribi wa-**lākini** l-birru man (ʾ)āmana bi-ʾllāhi [...]* (Nāfiʿ, Ibn ʿĀmir)[14]
"Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but righteousness is that one believes in God [...]" (Q al-Baqarah 2:177)

*laysa l-birru bi-ʾan taʾtū l-bi/uyūta min ẓuhūrihā wa-**lākinna** l-birra mani ttaqā/ē* (Majority reading)
*laysa l-birru bi-ʾan taʾtū/tātū l-bi/uyūta min ẓuhūrihā wa-**lākini** l-birru mani ttaqā/ǟ* (Nāfiʿ, Ibn ʿĀmir)[15]
"Righteousness is not entering houses from the backdoor, righteousness is that one fears God" (Q al-Baqarah 2:189)

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11 Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, § 2717.
12 Ibid., § 2717.
13 Ibid., § 2717.
14 Ibid., § 2717.
15 Ibid., § 2717.

*ʾinna ʾḷḷāha lā yaẓlimu ʾl-nāsa shayʾan wa-**lākinna** ʾl-nāsa ʾanfusahum(ū) yaẓlimūn* (Majority reading)

*ʾinnā ʾḷḷāha lā yaẓlimu ʾl-nāsa shayʾan wa-**lākini** ʾl-nāsu ʾanfusahum yaẓlimūn* (Ḥamzah, al-Kisāʾī, Khalaf)[16]

"God does not wrong people at all, but they wrong themselves" (Q Yūnus 10:44)

***lākini** ʾlladhīna ʾttaqaw rabbahum(ū) lahum(ū) jannātun tajrī min taḥtihā ʾl-(ʾ)anhāru [...]* (Majority reading)

***lākinna** ʾlladhīna ttaqaw rabbahumū lahumū jannātun tajrī min taḥtihā ʾl-ʾanhāru [...]* (Abū Jaʿfar)[17]

"But those who fear their Lord will have the Gardens beneath which rivers flow [...]" (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:198)

***lākini** ʾlladhīna ʾttaqaw rabbahum(ū) lahum(ū) ghurafun min fawqihā ghurafun mabniyyatun tajrī min taḥtihā ʾl-(ʾ)anhāru [...]* (Majority reading)

***lākinna** ʾlladhīna ʾttaqaw rabbahumū lahumū ghurafun min fawqihā ghurafun mabniyyatun tajrī min taḥtihā ʾl-ʾanhāru [...]* (Abū Jaʿfar)[18]

"But those who fear their Lord, for them are built chambers upon chambers, beneath which rivers flow" (Q al-Zumar 39:20)

There are only two examples of *ʾan* before a noun rather than in front of a verb, but where it occurs, the noun that follows indeed does not take the accusative, but the nominative as well. In both cases, the *ʾan* is functionally not quite identical to *ʾanna* as it functions as the introduction of direct speech, known by the name *ʾan al-mufassirah*.[19]

*wa-ʾākhiru daʿwāhum **ani** ʾl-ḥamdu li-ʾllāhi rabbi ʾl-ʿālamīn*
"And the end of their prayer is: 'Praise be to God, Lord of the universe'" (Q Yūnus 10:10)

*wa-nādaw ʾaṣḥāba ʾl-jannati **ʾan** salāmun ʿalaykum*
"And they call out to the companions of Paradise: 'Peace be upon you'" (Q al-Aʿrāf 7:46)

ʾIn al-mukhaffafah

In light of the behavior of the closely related particles *lākin(na)* and *ʾan(na)* one might expect that *ʾinna* should also have a short form that is (predominantly) used when it is followed by a verb rather than a noun. Indeed, there are many examples

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16 Ibid., § 2717.
17 Ibid., § 2901.
18 Ibid., § 2901.
19 Wright, *Grammar,* 1: 292; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb,* 29.

of this throughout the Qurʾān.[20] All of them are either followed by the verb *kāna*, with a predicate marked with the particle *la-*, or with verbs of perception/consideration like *wajada* "to consider to be" and *ẓanna* "to think to be."[21]

> *wa-ʾ**in** kānat la-kabīratan ʾillā ʿalā ʾlladhīna hadā ʾḷḷāh*
> "It was indeed difficult, except for those whom God guided" (Q al-Baqrah 2:143)

> *wa-ʾ**in** wajadnā ʾaktharahum la-fāsiqīn*
> "We found most of them to definitely be sinners" (Q al-Aʿrāf 7:102)

> *wa-ʾ**in** naẓunnuka la-mina ʾl-kādhibīn*
> "We think you are certainly among the liars" (Q al-Shuʿarāʾ 26:168)

Above, it was shown that the short forms *lākin* and *ʾan* were used before verbs but could also on occasion be used before nouns in the nominative. The Arab grammarians also consider this to be an option for *ʾin*, and they consider *ʾin zaydun la-qāʾimun* "Zayd is standing" to be semantically equivalent to *ʾinna zaydan la-qāʾimun*.[22] Also within the Qurʾān there is evidence for such uses (outside of Q Ṭā-Hā 20:63); however, in all cases there is disagreement among the readers about the specific reading. All have in common that they start with *ʾin* followed by a noun phrase followed by what is variously read *la-mā* or *lammā*. *La-mā* can transparently be understood as the asseverative *la-* followed by a relative pronoun *mā* "what" which introduces a relative clause. These can be translated to English, with somewhat awkward copular relative clauses, as I have done below to accentuate the structure, but the *mā* is probably best understood as being semantically empty. In the following overview I will refrain from giving a translation of the *lammā* reading, which I will discuss afterwards.

> *wa-ʾin kullun **la-mā** jamīʿun ladaynā muḥḍarūn* (Majority reading)
> "All (of them) is what is present before us, all together" (Q Yā-Sīn 36:32)

> *wa-ʾin kullun **lammā** jamīʿun ladaynā muḥḍarūn* (Abū Jaʿfar, Ibn ʿĀmir, ʿĀṣim, Ḥamzah)[23]

> *wa-ʾin kullu dhālika **la-mā** matāʿu ʾl-ḥayāti ʾl-dunyā/ē/ǟ* (Majority reading)
> "All of that is what is the enjoyments of the worldly life" (Q al-Zukhruf 43:35)

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20 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 339; Wright, *Grammar*, 1: 284–5; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 20.
21 Nebes, "*ʾIn al-Mukhaffafa*," 15–17. There is also the construction with the verb *kāda/yakādu* "to be about to" followed by an imperfect verb marked with *la-*, but this construction is less relevant for the discussion at hand.
22 Weigelt, "The Particle *La-* in Classical Arabic," 95.
23 ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, § 3312.

*wa-ʾin kullu dhālika **lammā** matāʿu ʾl-ḥayāti ʾl-dunyā/ē* (Abū Jaʿfar, Ibn ʿĀmir, ʿĀṣim, Ḥamzah)[24]

*wa-ʾin kullu nafsin **la-mā** ʿalayhā ḥāfiẓ* (Majority reading)
"Each soul is that which has a protector over it" (Q al-Ṭāriq 86:4)

*wa-ʾin kullu nafsin **lammā** ʿalayhā ḥāfiẓ* (Abū Jaʿfar, Ibn ʿĀmir, ʿĀṣim, Ḥamzah)[25]

Medieval works occasionally explain the reading with *lammā* instead of *la-mā* with *ʾin* not as the short form of the topicalizing particle *ʾinna*, but rather as the negator *ʾin*, whereas *lammā* – which usually functions as a conjunction where it translates as "when" or "not yet"[26] – is explained as having the meaning *ʾillā* "except, but."[27] Thus the verses above would have to be explained as being functionally identical to the common *ʾin … ʾillā* construction such as *ʾin kullun ʾillā kadhdhaba ʾl-rusula* "No one of them but denied the messengers" (Q 38:14), which would then allow translations of the previous verses as: "All (of them) are not but presented before us all together" (Q 36:32), "But all of that is not but the enjoyment of worldly life" (Q 43:35), "There is no soul but that it has over it a protector." (Q 86:4). This explanation was accepted by Nebes in his seminal discussion on the *ʾin mukhaffafah*,[28] following Bergsträsser in this interpretation.[29]

However, from a linguistic point of view such explanations do not strike me as satisfactory. First, I see no obvious (or even a not-so-obvious) path to go from the semantics of the conjunction *lammā* "when" or "not yet" to the meaning "except."[30] This impression appears to have been shared by quite a few early exegetes. Al-Farrāʾ on discussing Q 36:32, for example, discusses this interpretation of this verse, but cites his teacher, the canonical reader al-Kisāʾī (d. 189/904):[31] "Al-Kisāʾī used to reject this opinion, saying: 'I am not aware of an interpretation of *lammā* with gemination in recitation."[32] For Q 86:4 he says "the masses recited *lammā*, and some of them without gemination (i.e. *la-mā*). Al-Kisāʾī used to pronounce it without gemination, and we are not aware of an interpretation of it with gemination, and it is thought that in the Hudhayl dialect they consider *lammā* to mean *ʾillā* when

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24 Ibid., § 3312.

25 Ibid., § 3312.

26 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 443; Wright, *Grammar*, 287; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 310–311.

27 Akhfash, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*,2: 514; Fārisī, *al-Ḥujjah*, 6: 149–50., 397; Ibn Khālawayh, *al-Ḥujjah*, 191, 368; Makkī, *al-Kashf*, 2:, 215; Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 311–14.

28 Nebes, "*ʾIn al-Mukhaffafa*," 12.

29 Bergsträsser, *Verneinungs- und Fragepartikeln und Verwandtes im Kurʾān*, 14–16 n4.

30 There is yet another use of *lammā* used in oaths, which will be discussed below.

31 Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, 2: 377.

32 *Wa-kāna ʾl-kisāʾiyyu yanfī hādhā ʾl-qawla wa-yaqūlu: lā ʾaʿrifu jihata lammā fī ʾl-tashdīdi fī ʾl-qirāʾah.*

it occurs with a light ʾin (i. e., not ʾinna), but they do not consider that correct."[33] Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923)[34] seemingly cites al-Kisāʾī anonymously: "Some of the experts in the Arabic lexicon used to say: 'I am not aware of an interpretation of lammā with gemination.'"[35]

The explanation of lammā in the meaning of ʾillā "except" truly runs into trouble when one uses it to parse Q Hūd 11:111.[36] This verse is exceptional in that, unlike the other cases, the word following ان is clearly accusative, as reflected by its *rasm* كلا rather than كل. It is read in four different ways:[37]

1. *wa-ʾinna kullan **la-mā** la-yuwaffiyannahum rabbuka ʾaʿmālahum* (Abū ʿAmr, Yaʿqūb, al-Kisāʾī, Khalaf)
2. *wa-ʾinna kullan **lammā** la-yuwaffiyannahum(ū) rabbuka ʾaʿmālahum(ū)* (Ḥafṣ ʿan ʿĀṣim, Ḥamzah, Ibn ʿĀmir, Abū Jaʿfar)
3. *wa-ʾin kullan **la-mā** la-yuwaffiyannahum(ū) rabbuka ʾaʿmālahum(ū)* (Nāfiʿ, Ibn Kathīr)
4. *wa-ʾin kullan **lammā** la-yuwaffiyannahum rabbuka ʾaʿmālahum* (Shuʿbah ʿan ʿĀṣim)

The first reading reads naturally as identical in meaning as the ʾin kullun la-mā reading of Q 36:32, with the difference here being that the short version ʾin is not used, but instead ʾinna, thus triggering the accusative form kullan. Thus, the verse translates to: "All is what your lord will certainly compensate them for their deeds".

Several medieval authorities argue, regarding Q 36:32, that lammā can be understood as la-man-mā "certainly whoever," which after the regular assimilation of the *nūn* to the *mīm* (la-mam=mā) was contracted to la-mmā.[38] This explanation

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33 Farrāʾ, Maʿānī al-Qurʾān, 3: 254.

34 Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 19: 432.

35 *Wa-kāna baʿḍu ʾahli ʾl-ʿarabiyyati yaqūlu: lā ʾaʿrifu wajha lammā bi-ʾl-tashdīd.*

36 The difficulty of this verse was noted by Bergsträsser, who nevertheless argues for the meaning *ʾillā* "except," arguing that there is no evidence for the use of *lammā/la-mā* as an alternative to *al-lām al-farīqah*. This point is well-taken, but I do not think that skews the argument in favor of the *ʾillā* interpretation. After all, there is no unambiguous evidence for *lammā/la-mā* having the meaning of "except" either, outside the constructions under discussion. The advantage of interpreting it as a form of *la-*, is that after that it requires no further syntactic special pleading especially in the verse Q 11:111, whereas this form remains problematic if *lammā/la-mā* is interpreted as having the meaning of *ʾillā*. Cf. Bergsträsser, *Verneinungs- und Fragepartikeln und Verwandtes im Ḳurʾān*, 14–16 n4.

37 Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, § 3311–2.

38 Ibn Khālawayh, *al-Ḥujjah*, 191; Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, 2: 29; Fārisī, *al-Ḥujjah*, 4: 384, who does not approve of this interpretation and considers the reading a problem (*mushkilah*); Makkī, *al-Kashf*, 1: 537.

is not implausible, but alternatively one could argue that *la-mmā* is simply some sort of not-entirely-understood emphatic pronunciation of the same particle *la-mā*. What one cannot argue for is that it is the particle *lammā* with the meaning of *ʾillā* "except."[39] When one accepts that *ʾinna* can occur with *lammā*, just like *ʾin*, then it becomes difficult to accept that *ʾin* must be considered a negator when it occurs with *lammā* in Q 36:32, 43:35 and 86:4. Indeed, the medieval authorities occasionally cite *la-(m)mā* in its asseverative use as a possible – and to some, clearly preferable – understanding of *lammā* even for the other verses.[40]

The remaining two readings with *ʾin* followed by *kullan* are explained as instances where *ʾin*, despite being the short form, continues to govern the accusative case.[41] These strike me as less preferable readings which were likely imposed rather artificially onto the text to strengthen the similarity to the *ʾin kullun … la(m)-mā* verses discussed above. While there are several cases of *ʾin* followed by the nominative, within the Qurʾānic corpus there are no other examples where a shortened *ʾin* continues to govern the accusative. Another proposed view is that *kullan* takes the accusative because it functions as the object of the following verb *la-yu-waffiyannahum* "he will compensate them". This seems odd, as *kullan* is essentially functioning as the head of an asyndetic relative clause, and therefore its case should follow its function in the main clause, not that of the relative clause. Indeed, already Al-Farrāʾ says it is an option he does not like (*huwa wajhun lā ʾashtahīhi*) because one does not say ***ʾin zaydan la-ʾaḍrabu* "it is Zayd whom I will surely hit" or ***mā zaydan ʾillā ʾaḍrabu* "it is none other than Zayd whom I will hit", so it is a mistake with both *ʾillā* and *la-* (*fa-hādhā khaṭaʾun fī ʾillā wa-fī ʾl-lāmi*).[42]

Therefore, to sum up: *ʾinna* may indeed occur in its short form *ʾin* just as *lākinna* and *ʾanna* do. This form *ʾin* is clearly attested in front of verbs in the Qurʾān, but also in several rare cases in front of nouns. The construction in which it occurs in front of nouns consistently combines with *kull* 'all, each' and an asseverative relative clause *la-m(m)ā*. In one case this exact same construction occurs which uses the long form *ʾinna* followed by the accusative *kullan*, confirming that *ʾin* should not be understood as the negator *ʾin*, but instead as the shortened form of the topicalizer *ʾinna*.

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39 Which is why both readings with *lammā* are outright dismissed by Fārisī, *al-Ḥujjah*, 4: 386–88.

40 Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, 2: 377; Makkī, *al-Kashf*, 2: 215.

41 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 428.

42 Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, 2: 29–30.

Lammā in the meaning of *ʾillā* in oaths

The reason why the grammarians and exegetes seem to have been tempted to interpret *lammā* as meaning *ʾillā* seems to stem from the use of *lammā* in oaths, where it can be used interchangeably with *ʾillā*, e. g., *nashadtuka bi-llāhi lammā faʿalta* "I swear to you by God, you must do it" may also be expressed as *nashadtuka bi-'llāhi ʾillā faʿalta* "I swear to you by God, you must do it." Such constructions are explicitly invoked, for example, by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) in order to defend the understanding of *lammā* in the meaning of *ʾillā* in *ʾin ... ʾillā* constructions.[43] However this compares two clearly different constructions, and the *ʾillā* in such constructions performs a different functional role than the *ʾillā* in *ʾin ... ʾillā* construction.

As Fischer points out, sentences in oaths introduce the wish with *ʾin* "if" if it is a negative oath and *ʾillā* for a positive oath.[44] An oath like *nashadtuka 'ḷḷāha ʾin rimta hādhā 'l-makāna ʾabadan* "I swear to you by God that you shall never leave this place!", should literally be understood as "I swear to you by God that if you ever leave this place (the consequences will be dire)." By extension *ʾillā* in such oaths does not mean "except," but should be parsed as *ʾin-lā* "if not," thus *bi-ḥayātī ʾil-lā ʾanshadtanī 'l-bayta* should be understood as "by my life, if you do not recite the verse for me (the consequences will be dire)!"

Lammā may be used in such constructions for positive oaths in the place of *ʾillā*. If anything, *lammā* here should therefore mean "if not" and not "except" as it ostensibly would in *ʾin ... lammā* constructions when one takes *ʾin* as the negator. But it seems to me that the *lammā* in the oath constructions can in fact be understood as an emphatic form of *la-* or *la-mā*, thus a sentence like *nashadtuka bi-'llāhi lammā faʿalta* could be interpreted as "I swear to you by God that you may certainly do it (or that it certainly may be what you will do)!" This construction therefore does not provide compelling evidence that *lammā* can mean *ʾillā* in the sense of "except."

These two are certainly sorcerers!

With the use of the *ʾin al-mukhaffafah* discussed above, it is now possible to return to the famously problematic verse Q 20:63 that we started this discussion with, which can be understood in a new light with the preceding discussion. When one reads

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43 Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 894.
44 Fischer, *Grammar*, § 456.

this verse as *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* the lack of accusative inflection of *hādhāni* is indeed a grammatical anomaly,[45] and for this very reason this reading should not be considered the intended reading of the ʿUthmānic text, and neither should *'inna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni*, which is grammatically unremarkable, but disagrees with the *rasm*.

The remaining reading, however, *'in hādhān(n)i la-sāḥirāni*, only adhered to by Ḥafṣ *'an* ʿĀṣim and Ibn Kathīr among the canonical readers, can be understood as both grammatical and in line with the *rasm*. This construction should not be understood as an *'in ... 'illā* construction where *la-* inexplicably takes on the meaning of *'illā* "except,"[46] but instead it should be understood as the asseverative *'inna ... la-* construction, using the short form *'in* instead of *'inna* just like in Q 36:32, 42:35 and 86:4. While such an interpretation has fallen out of favor in modern translations, it is well-attested in the medieval works of (grammatical) exegesis. Thus, Q 20:63 should be translated as "these two are certainly sorcerers!"

Is *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* the *lectio difficilior?*[47]

Although hidden in a footnote of an article otherwise almost entirely unrelated to the topic at hand, Nicolai Sinai has once made the argument that the *'inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* reading is to be considered the preferred reading, arguing that this reading is grammatically quite difficult to explain, but is nevertheless the majority reading among the canonical readings.[48] It would be difficult to explain this widespread preference for an otherwise awkward grammatical construction, where other grammatical options are present, had it not reflected a more original recitation. Sinai therefore points out that it is the *lectio difficilior* and should be preferred.

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45 One might note that *hādhān(n)i* only ever occurs in the nominative form in the Qurʾān (see Q 20:63, 22:19) and thus might wonder whether the form inflected for case at all. But here one should note that the feminine *hātayn(n)i* (Q 28:27) does occur in the accusative form, in a syntactic context where this is expected. From this I believe that it is likely that in the Qurʾānic Arabic dialect the dual proximal deictic inflected for case; cf. Van Putten, *Quranic Arabic*, 278; Al-Jallad, *The Damascus Psalm Fragment*, 68–69.

46 It strikes me as likely that this awkward interpretation of *la-* as *'illā* took inspiration from reports of non-ʿUthmānic companion readings that do use *'illā* like *'in dhāni 'illā sāḥirāni*. Ibn Khālawayh, *Mukhtaṣar*, 88; Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī*, 2: 184.

47 I would like to thank Hythem Sidky for his valuable input in helping me think through this section.

48 Sinai, "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure? Part II," 519 n41.

This argument seems defensible,[49] but would initially seem to go directly against the above argument that *ʾin hādān(n)i la-sāḥirāni* is not only a grammatically correct reading, but also the one intended by the ʿUthmānic text. However, this need not be a contradiction, and it is important to keep in mind that the ʿUthmānic text is *not* the original composition of the text, but rather a standardization of the Qurʾān. Variant readings associated with this text are the result of a complex interaction between the (frequently) pre-ʿUthmānic oral tradition and an attempt to adhere to this new standard text. In light of this, it seems possible that Sinai's argument in principle holds up when speaking of the original composition of the text, all the while maintaining that the ʿUthmānic text indeed intended *ʾin hādhān(n)i la-sāḥirāni.*

It is possible to take as the original composition the much more typical *ʾinna hādhāyni la-sāḥirāni* construction, while acknowledging that there were other viable and probably existing oral variants such as the intended ʿUthmānic *ʾin hādhān(n)i la-sāḥirāni* and companion readings such as *ʾin dhān(n)i ʾillā sāḥirāni* "these two are nought but sorcerers",[50] and variations thereupon.[51]

Abū ʿAmr's reading was able to access the non-ʿUthmānic reading *ʾinna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni* with only a minor intervention into the *rasm*, and quite a few non-canonical readers did likewise.[52] Abū ʿAmr is remarkable among the canonical readers in more readily – although still very rarely – disagreeing with the ʿUthmānic text,[53] and therefore him adopting what would have been a popular pre-ʿUthmānic reading that disagreed with the ʿUthmānic text is easily understood.

This brings us to the *lectio difficilior*, *ʾinna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni*. While certainly the majority of the readers adhered to this reading and its reading is the most difficult, it does not mean that therefore it must be considered the most probable original reading of the Uthmanic text. This skips over the issue that Qurʾānic readings are the result of an interaction between the oral tradition and the written text. It is clear that the majority of the readers, both canonical and non-canonical, avoided devi-

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49 Though, only if we accept the grammaticality of *ʾinna* being followed by the accusative – which I believe is to be doubted. This would not make it the more difficult reading, but the more unlikely reading.

50 Ibn Khālawayh attributes it to Ibn Masʿūd and al-Farrāʾ attributes it to Ubayy ibn Kaʿb. It seems likely that knowledge of these companion readings gave rise to the rather awkward attempts to understand the *ʾin hādhān(n)i la-sāḥirāni* construction as an *ʾin* X *ʾillā* Y construction by the later exegetes. See ibn Khālawayh, *Mukhtaṣar*, 88; al-Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, 2: 184.

51 The lower text of the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest, for example shows clear traces of *mā dhān(n)i ʾillā sāḥirāni*; see Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1 and the Origins of the Qurʾān," 86.

52 The readings of ʿĀʾishah, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Nakhaʿī, ʿĀṣim al-Jaḥdarī, al-Aʿmash, Ibn Jubayr and Ibn ʿUbayd are reported in Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 7: 350.

53 Van Putten, "When the Readers Break the Rules," 438–61.

ating from the *rasm*, and this should be taken into account when evaluating such variants. Assuming that *ʾinna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni* was the preferred pre-ʿUthmānic reading, the closest reading that could be achieved without violating adherence to the *rasm* would be *ʾinna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni*. It seems that readers preferred *ʾinna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* – perhaps emboldened by observations that one finds among early grammarians that the Banū al-Ḥārith would not inflect *hādhāni* for case[54] – over the marked construction intended by the ʿUthmānic text (*ʾin hādhāni la-sāḥirāni*), or the ones that violated the *rasm* (*ʾinna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni* or *ʾin dhāni ʾillā sāḥirāni*). The *lectio difficilior* argument would then only argue for a common popularity of the *ʾinna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni* reading before readers came to be confronted with a *rasm* that could not accommodate such a reading – leading to the difficult reading.

As a final note, it is worth pointing out that in this model of the competing readings interacting with the ʿUthmānic standard, it is not necessarily obvious that *ʾinna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni* is to be considered the *lectio difficilior* (and therefore *potior*) in relation to other non-ʿUthmānic readings, most notably ones that would have used the *ʾin/mā (hā)dhāni ʾillā sāḥirāni* construction. These are all perfectly plausible readings with only a very minor difference in meaning and no exegetical value. It does not strike me as possible to recover what the original wording of the composition would have been. I am not sure that such a question even makes sense if the Qurʾān was originally a (semi-)oral composition, which in its early years enjoyed considerable freedom of oral recomposition and reformulation as the famous *sabʿat aḥruf* hadith seems to suggest.[55]

Conclusion

It is hoped that this excursus into the syntax of the Qurʾān highlights the importance of using the Qurʾān itself to understand its syntax. The Qurʾān is a corpus on its own, and frequently has constructions that are rare if not non-existent outside of it. By strictly adhering to what can be gleaned from different sections of the Qurʾān, and closely examining the relevant variant readings in such locations, it is possible to come to new insights that are informed not by later grammatical interpretation but by the corpus itself. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the importance of the medieval grammatical-exegetical works while approaching the syntax of the

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54 Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, 2: 184.
55 For a compelling discussion on the early Qurʾān within a Parry and Lord-style oral composition framework see Dutton, "Orality, Literacy and the 'Seven Aḥruf' Ḥadīth."

Qurʾān in this way. While such works often have a maximalist approach to presenting different options, and it is not always possible to get a clear answer from them as to what the preferred understanding should be, they are an essential body of literature that gives a broad overview of different interpretations that are around. Taking a comparative approach to parallel constructions within the Qurʾānic corpus, it becomes possible to decide which interpretation is the most compelling. Doing so, it becomes clear that Q 20:63, which at first seems like a grammatical anomaly can be understood within the attested grammar of the corpus, and turns out to be a rare, but nevertheless understandable formation if read as *ʾin hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* "these are surely sorcerers!"

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