

Pharaoh and His Council: Great Minds Think Alike

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In two suras of the Quran (Q 7 and Q 26) a dialogue between Pharaoh and his council members (*mala'*) is recorded after Moses performed miracles before them. The account in Q 7 is textually problematic, the version of Q 26 is smooth. After a brief survey of possible pre-Islamic precedents for the dialogue, this note explores the two nearly identical yet contradictory intraquranic parallels and the relationship between them, and surveys the harmonizing approaches of the classical exegetes as well as the critical attitudes of modern scholars to the issue. Finally, the textual dynamic that caused the passage in Q 7 to change is reconstructed. An appendix examines the other minute differences between the two passages.

INTRODUCTION

This note is devoted to an examination of two parallel passages in the Quran that, although almost identical in wording, actually contradict each other. Since the relevant passages contain a dialogue between Pharaoh and his council and are part of a quranic retelling of a biblical narrative, I begin with a brief survey of possible postbiblical precedents for this dialogue. I then turn to compare the two passages and explain the textual dynamic that caused one of them to change and thus bring about this contradiction.

THE BIBLICAL AND POSTBIBLICAL BACKGROUND

In Exodus 7:8–13 Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh. Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants and it became a serpent. Pharaoh summoned the sorcerers of Egypt and they too threw down their staffs, which became serpents, only to then be swallowed by Aaron's staff. Nonetheless, Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron. The Quran relates this episode several times with various departures from the biblical text.¹ This note is devoted to one such departure: the advice given to Pharaoh by his council members (*mala'*) to summon all the magicians.²

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1. For attempts to identify antecedents for some of these departures, see A. Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (Leipzig, 1902²), 156–58; H. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Gräfenhainichen, 1937 [1931]), 263–67; J. Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives" (PhD diss., Princeton Univ., 2011), 27–30; and A. C. Smith, "Moses and Pharaoh's Magicians: A Discursive Analysis of the Qur'anic Narratives in the Light of Late Antique Texts and Traditions," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20.1 (2018): 67–104.

2. The following definition is given for the word *mala'* in A. A. Ambros (with S. Procházka), *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 258: "leading members of a community, esp. (but not necessarily) when assembled for a political purpose." For brevity's sake I will use the transliterated Arabic word.

Though the *mala*³ are a typical feature of several quranic narratives,³ it is worthwhile to briefly consider possible biblical and postbiblical precedents for our scene.⁴ The closest one finds in Exodus to the *mala*³ are Pharaoh's servants. While these servants are mentioned throughout the biblical narrative,⁵ they do not speak in the scene of the staff and the subsequent contest, and in this account the summoning seems to be Pharaoh's sole initiative (Ex. 7:11). The only speech of the servants to Pharaoh is in Ex. 10:7, where just before the locust plague they urge him to let the Israelites go.⁶

In postbiblical sources one finds a few embellishments that add other dialogues between Pharaoh and his men to the biblical story. Though the context is different, a few Jewish sources apply Isaiah 19:11–14 (where the “sage of Pharaoh's advisers” give absurd advice and lead Egypt astray) to the time of Moses. In Tanḥuma Va-era 5 these verses inspire an elaboration on Ex. 5:2 in which Pharaoh asks the sages of Egypt whether they have heard of the God of Israel and they give a ridiculous response based on the language of Is. 19:11.⁷ In a postquranic liturgical poetic composition, Is. 19:11 and 13 are applied to Ex. 7:9 without, however, mentioning the sages' advice or quoting a dialogue of theirs with Pharaoh.⁸ A closer parallel to the quranic dialogue is found in the fourth-century Samaritan work *Tibat Marqe* I.40, where after Aaron's staff becomes a serpent, Pharaoh is greatly frightened and turns to his faction (סיעתה), which advises him to summon the sages to determine whether or not this was the work of sorcerers.⁹ This dramatic embellishment may have sought to give Pharaoh's servants an active role and thus justify their mention in Ex. 7:10.¹⁰

3. The occurrences of this word in the Quran, its role in quranic prophetology, and its possible polemical connotations against the Meccan elite (see Q 38:6) are discussed in Smith, “Moses and Pharaoh's Magicians,” 84–86.

4. In what follows I adduce rabbinic sources as well as a fourth-century Samaritan work. I did not find a comparable dialogue in the Syriac works I examined. Such a dialogue might still be found in Syriac sources or elsewhere upon further research. I have cited sources younger than the Quran since they may preserve old traditions.

5. That these are important figures and not mere servants is emphasized in the Peshitta to Ex. 7:10 (*ḥērē* “nobles, men of rank”; compare, e.g., the Peshitta to Jer. 51:28 and Ezra 8:25) and in Targum Neofiti throughout the Moses narrative (translated with words from the root *sh-l-l* meaning “officials”). Cf. M. P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 1999), 124.

6. Compare Smith, “Moses and Pharaoh's Magicians,” 84. After noting Ex. 10:7 Smith adds that the *mala*³ “could roughly correspond to, or be an expansion upon, the ‘wise men’ [. . .] that Pharaoh calls on in conjunction with the magicians (Exod. 7:11). Yet, there is no mention of that group doing anything in the Biblical narrative, nor are they there to counsel Pharaoh previously.”

7. See *Sefer Tanhuma* (Mantua, 1563), 27b. See also, e.g., the late (tenth century?) Exodus Rabba 5:14 (A. Shinan, ed., *Midrash Shemot Rabbah: Chapters I–XIV* [Jerusalem, 1984], 170–71 [in Hebrew] where parallels are noted).

8. E. Fleischer, ed., *The Pizmonim of the Anonymus* (Jerusalem, 1974), 143. According to Fleischer, the “Anonymus” likely lived in Palestine in the ninth century; *ibid.*, 31–33.

9. See the Aramaic text and Hebrew translation in Z. Ben-Ḥayyim, ed. and trans., *Tibāt Mārqa: A Collection of Samaritan Midrashim* (Jerusalem, 1988), 70–71: “Aaron threw down his rod before Pharaoh and it became a serpent—a terrifying sight! Pharaoh and all those who sat with him looked [at it] and extremely great dread fell upon them. The serpent opened its mouth in the direction of Pharaoh, as if coming with the intention of swallowing him up, and it fixed its eyes like lightning toward him, as if coming with the intention of burning him up. Pharaoh looked at his faction (סיעתה) and began to seek advice on immediate action. Those who sat with him said to him, ‘O king, we share your affliction. This is a great miracle, the like of which we have not seen. We believe that there is none like it in the whole land of Egypt, not since the day it was created. Send word now, summon all the sages. Indeed, they will inform you what this wonder is, whether it is the work of sorcerers, for it is in their power to tell you, O king’”; Eng. trans. adapted from J. Macdonald, ed. and trans., *Memar Marqah: The Teaching of Marqah* (Berlin, 1963), 2: 20. In spite of the argument put forth in P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977), 19–29, quranic scholarship has yet to give *Tibat Marqe* its due attention. Cf. H. Zellentin, “Triological Anthropology: The Qurʾān on Adam and Iblis in View of Rabbinic and Christian Discourse,” in *Contemporary Approaches to Human Dignity in the Context of the Qurʾānic Anthropology: The Quest for Humanity*, ed. R. Braun and H. Çiçek (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2017), 54–125, at 78 n. 42.

10. Another possible impetus for the creation of this dialogue may have been an oddity in the Hebrew of Ex. 7:11 that translated literally states, “Pharaoh too (*gam*) summoned the wise men and the sorcerers.” This may

THE QURANIC PASSAGES

A similar embellishment is reported twice in the Quran in almost identical language but with one significant difference, which has puzzled exegetes and modern scholars alike. I wish to offer an explanation for the textual dynamic that caused the confusion.

In Q 7:107–112 we read as follows:

فَأَلْقَى عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ ثُعْبَانٌ مُّبِينٌ (107) وَنَزَعَ يَدَهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ بَيْضَاءُ لِلنَّاظِرِينَ (108) قَالَ الْمَلَأُ مِنْ قَوْمِ فِرْعَوْنَ
 إِنَّ هَذَا لَسَاحِرٌ عَلِيمٌ (109) يُرِيدُ أَنْ يُخْرِجَكُمْ مِنْ أَرْضِكُمْ فَمَاذَا تَأْمُرُونَ (110) قَالُوا أَرْجِهْ وَأَخَاهُ وَأَرْسِلْ فِي
 الْمَدَائِنِ حَاشِرِينَ (111) يَا تَوَكُّبُ كُلُّ سَاحِرٍ عَلِيمٌ (112)

(107) So he [Moses] cast his staff, and behold it was a manifest serpent. (108) He drew forth his hand, and behold it was white to the beholders. (109) The *mala'* of Pharaoh's people said, "Surely this is a knowledgeable sorcerer (110) who wishes to drive you (pl.) out of your (pl.) land. What, then, do you (pl.) advise?"¹¹ (111) They said, "Have (sg.) him and his brother wait a while,¹² and send (sg.) among the cities musters (112) and they shall bring to you (sg.) every knowledgeable sorcerer."¹³

There are a few problems in this passage: (1) It is not clear whom the *mala'* are addressing in vv. 109–110. The second person plural is used, but the identity of the addressees is not made explicit. (2) Likewise, the response in vv. 111–112 opens with "they said" without mention of who is speaking. (3) One would expect vv. 111–112 to address the *mala'*. Instead the addressee is a single person, presumably Pharaoh, who was not mentioned explicitly as part of the preceding discussion.

The exegetes offer a few solutions to these problems, but none is entirely satisfactory in my opinion. One understanding of these verses is as a dialogue between the *mala'* and Pharaoh. The *mala'* are clearly the speakers in v. 109 and most probably the speakers in vv. 111–112 as well. One could, however, argue that v. 110, or at least part of it, was uttered by Pharaoh. According to one interpretation, the second part of 110 consists of the words of Pharaoh. Thus, first the *mala'* address him in vv. 109 and 110a, using the plural.¹⁴ He responds in 110b, asking their advice ("What, then, do you [pl.] advise?")¹⁵ even though

have suggested to some readers that someone else was involved in the summoning of the experts. I thank Naphtali Meshel for this suggestion. Compare Tanhuma Buber Va-era 12 (S. Buber, ed., *Midrasch Tanchuma: Ein agadischer Commentar zum Pentateuch* [Vilna, 1885], 2: 27–28) and the comments in M. M. Kasher, *Torah Shelema*, vol. 9, tome 10 (New York, 1945), 35 (in Hebrew).

11. The Arabic *ta'murūna* is often rendered as "command" both here and in the parallel in Q 26:35; see, e.g., Ambros, *Concise Dictionary*, 27. If the *mala'* are addressing Pharaoh, "command" would indeed fit nicely (compare the exchange between the queen of Sheba and her *mala'* in Q 27:32–33). If, however, Pharaoh is addressing his *mala'* (see below), "advise" would seem a better rendition. For this nuance, see, e.g., E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863–1893), 1: 95; Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-ṣuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta'wīl*, ed. 'Ā. A. 'Abd al-Mawjūd and 'A. M. Mu'awwaḍ (Riyadh, 1998), 2: 485, 4: 389; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr aw Maḥāṭiḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut, 1990), 14: 161, 24: 144.

12. The reading and meaning of *arjih* are debated. See, e.g., 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt* (Damascus, 2002), 3: 118–24; Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'A. al-Turkī (Cairo, 2001), 10: 349–51; Abū Maṣ'ūr al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, ed. A. Vanhoḡlu et al. (Istanbul, 2005–2007), 6: 17–18; Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *al-Tafsīr al-basīṭ*, ed. M. al-Fawzān et al. (Riyadh, 2009), 267–70.

13. The renditions of quranic verses are mostly adaptations of A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London, 1955) and M. Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (London, 2012).

14. For justifications for the use of the plural, see, e.g., Abū Ja'far Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Naḥḥās, *I'rāb al-Qur'ān*, ed. Kh. al-'Alī (Beirut, 2008), 317.

15. According to a variant reading attributed to Nāfi', the verse (and its parallel in Q 26:35) reads *ta'murūni* ("advise me") rather than *ta'murūna* ("advise"). This clearly assumes that Pharaoh is the speaker. See al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 3: 117.

the change in speaker is not mentioned explicitly in the verse.¹⁶ In vv. 111–112 they answer him, this time addressing him in the singular. According to another interpretation, v. 110 in its entirety is the speech of Pharaoh.¹⁷

Another understanding, no less problematic, views vv. 109–110 as the words of the *mala'* to Pharaoh and his intimate attendants and vv. 111–112 as a second address of the *mala'*, this time to Pharaoh alone. Alternatively, one could interpret that the *mala'* addressed Pharaoh twice: once in vv. 109–110 using the second person plural and a second time in vv. 111–112 using the second person singular.¹⁸

In a parallel passage these problems do not occur. Consider Q 26:32–37:¹⁹

فَأَلْفَى عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ ثُعْبَانٌ مُّبِينٌ (32) وَنَزَعَ يَدَهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ بَيْضَاءُ لِلنَّاظِرِينَ (33) قَالَ لِلْمَلَأِ حَوْلَهُ إِنَّ هَذَا لَسَاحِرٌ عَلِيمٌ (34) يُرِيدُ أَنْ يُخْرِجَكُمْ مِنْ أَرْضِكُمْ بِسِحْرِهِ فَمَاذَا تَأْمُرُونَ (35) قَالُوا أَرْجِهْ وَأَخَاهُ وَأَبْعَثْ فِي الْمَدَائِنِ حَاشِرِينَ (36) يَأْتُونَكَ بِكُلِّ سَحَابٍ عَلِيمٍ (37)

(32) So he [Moses] cast his staff, and behold it was a manifest serpent. (33) He drew forth his hand, and behold it was white to the beholders. (34) He [Pharaoh] said to the *mala'* around him, “Surely this is a knowledgeable sorcerer (35) who wishes to drive you (pl.) out of your (pl.) land by his sorcery. What, then, do you (pl.) advise?” (36) They said, “Have (sg.) him and his brother wait a while, and send (sg.) among the cities musterers (37) and they shall bring to you (sg.) every knowledgeable sorcerer.”

In this version all is smooth.²⁰ Pharaoh addresses his *mala'* in the plural and he is answered in the singular. The identity of the speakers is entirely clear. However, a comparison of the two passages creates a new problem that is no less intriguing.

Consider the two passages in synopsis:

Q 26	Q 7
<p>قَالَ لِلْمَلَأِ حَوْلَهُ إِنَّ هَذَا لَسَاحِرٌ عَلِيمٌ (34) يُرِيدُ أَنْ يُخْرِجَكُمْ مِنْ أَرْضِكُمْ بِسِحْرِهِ فَمَاذَا تَأْمُرُونَ (35) قَالُوا أَرْجِهْ وَأَخَاهُ وَأَبْعَثْ فِي الْمَدَائِنِ حَاشِرِينَ (36) يَأْتُونَكَ بِكُلِّ سَحَابٍ عَلِيمٍ (37)</p>	<p>قَالَ الْمَلَأُ مِنْ قَوْمِ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّ هَذَا لَسَاحِرٌ عَلِيمٌ (109) يُرِيدُ أَنْ يُخْرِجَكُمْ مِنْ أَرْضِكُمْ فَمَاذَا تَأْمُرُونَ (110) قَالُوا أَرْجِهْ وَأَخَاهُ وَأَرْسِلْ فِي الْمَدَائِنِ حَاشِرِينَ (111) يَأْتُونَكَ بِكُلِّ سَاحِرٍ عَلِيمٍ (112)</p>
<p>(34) He [Pharaoh] said to the <i>mala'</i> around him, “Surely this is a knowledgeable sorcerer (35) who wishes to drive you (pl.) out of your (pl.) land by his sorcery. What, then, do you (pl.) advise?” (36) They said, “Have (sg.) him and his brother wait a while, and send (sg.) (<i>wa-b'ath</i>) among the cities musterers (37) and they shall bring to you (sg.) every knowledgeable sorcerer (<i>sahhār</i>).”</p>	<p>(109) The <i>mala'</i> of Pharaoh's people said, “Surely this is a knowledgeable sorcerer (110) who wishes to drive you (pl.) out of your (pl.) land. What, then, do you (pl.) advise?” (111) They said, “Have (sg.) him and his brother wait a while, and send (sg.) (<i>wa-arsil</i>) among the cities musterers (112) and they shall bring to you (sg.) every knowledgeable sorcerer (<i>sahīr</i>).”</p>

16. See, e.g., Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, ed. A. Y. Najātī et al. (Cairo, 1955–1972), 1: 387, 2: 47; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 10: 348. Al-Farrā' and al-Ṭabarī adduce Q 12:51–52 and Q 27:34 as parallels for such a change of speakers. Both examples are, however, debated.

17. See, e.g., Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. 'A. M. Shihāta (Cairo, 1979–1989), 2: 53.

18. For these two possibilities, see, e.g., Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarī al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa-i'rābuhu*, ed. 'A. Shalabī (Beirut, 1988), 2: 364. See also al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, 14: 160–61. One could also argue that in vv. 109–110 the *mala'* discuss the matter among themselves and in vv. 111–112 they address Pharaoh.

19. The parallels between the two suras go beyond the verses cited here. A full comparison is beyond the scope of this note.

20. Note also the similarity to Tibat Marqē mentioned above.

Side-by-side, the utterances of Q 26:34–35 and Q 7:109–110 are almost identical. But whereas in Q 26 the speaker is Pharaoh, in Q 7 it is his *mala'*.²¹ How are we to understand this? Who uttered the sentence—Pharaoh or his *mala'*?

Many Muslim exegetes posed exactly this problem and offered a harmonizing solution, according to which both Pharaoh and his *mala'* uttered the same utterance.²² This either occurred independently or was the result of the *mala'* repeating the words of the king, perhaps to the general population.²³ This harmonizing understanding is far from compelling. The almost precise sameness of the two passages strongly suggests that we have two versions of the same tradition, not two complementary elements.

Indeed, our example has attracted the attention of a few modern scholars who approached it in a different manner, highlighting the contradiction between the two passages rather than attempting to explain it away. Earl Edgar Elder adduced it to demonstrate to Muslims that contradictory accounts are not unique to the Gospels.²⁴ Muḥammad Khalafallāh adduced the two passages in support of his argument that in its artistic freedom the Quran does not concern itself with the historicity of the events it recounts.²⁵ Alan Dundes, on the other hand, tried to explain how the contradiction came about with recourse to oral transmission. In discussing variations found in apparently duplicate passages, Dundes noted our example and commented: “From the point of view of historicity, presumably either Pharaoh’s followers told him or he told his followers. A small point, but precisely what is to be expected when one has several oral traditions recounting the same basic story.”²⁶ Most recently Andrew Smith has argued that the shift from Pharaoh as speaker in Q 26 to the *mala'* as speakers in Q 7 reflects a “polemical condemnation of the local Meccan elites who would have feared Muḥammad’s rise to power and worried that he would drive them out of their positions.”²⁷

To recapitulate, it would seem that Q 26 and Q 7 offer two slightly different versions of the same event. In one the speaker is Pharaoh, in the other his *mala'*. Since both suras agree that in the next utterance (Q 26:36 and Q 7:111) we have the words of a group, likely the *mala'*, addressed to a singular man, to my mind Q 26:34 supplies an easier and more original reading than Q 7:109. Can one explain how or why the two versions came about beyond mere recourse to oral transmission or to a supposed historical context?

21. This was noted by several scholars. See, e.g., R. Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart, 1977), 170; Smith, “Moses and Pharaoh’s Magicians,” 98 n. 54.

22. Compare Q 10:76 and Q 28:36, where Pharaoh and his *mala'* respond to Moses’s miracles, saying that this is sorcery; Q 27:13, where Pharaoh and his people respond similarly; and Q 40:24, where Pharaoh, Haman, and Qārūn respond to Moses’s miracles, saying that he is a sorcerer and a liar. Cf. Q 51:39, where only Pharaoh is mentioned. See also Q 20:57, 63 discussed in n. 34 below (and see the comment in al-Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 22: 70 [to Q 20:63]).

23. See, e.g., Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 2: 53; al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 6: 16; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2: 485.

24. E. E. Elder, “Parallel Passages in the Koran (The Story of Moses),” *The Muslim World* 15 (1925): 254–59, at 258.

25. See M. A. Khalafallāh, *al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī al-Qur’ān al-karīm* (Cairo, 1957), 52, 149.

26. A. Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur’an* (Lanham, MD, 2003), 28–29. In a review published in the *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 6.2 (2004): 78–84, at 83, Abbas Kadhīm accuses Dundes of completely misunderstanding the text: if only Dundes had known Arabic and had not read the Quran in translation he would have seen that there is no problem here. Readers competent in Arabic understand that when Q 7:109 says that the *mala'* spoke, this does not mean that everyone uttered the statement. The one who actually said it was Pharaoh, who was also a member of the council. Kadhīm’s accusation greatly loses its force when leveled, by implication, at exegetes such as Muqātil, al-Māturīdī, and al-Zamakhsharī.

27. Smith, “Moses and Pharaoh’s Magicians,” 76–77. Smith notes this in the course of tracing the chronological development of the *mala'* as a literary element in the Moses story. He does not remark on the problems posed by the passage in Q 7.

An alternative explanation would be that this was the result of a scribal error caused by the graphic similarity between *lām* (لām) [qāla li-l-malaʾ] in Q 26) and *alif* (الā) [qāla al-malaʾ] in Q 7). The corruption of one form to the other is readily understandable. Though tempting, this approach is in itself ultimately insufficient. One could emend Q 26 to *al-malaʾ* in light of Q 7, but that would be counterproductive since *li-l-malaʾ* of Q 26 is the better text, as argued above. It would be preferable to emend Q 7 in light of Q 26. There is, however, a problem: the words that follow in Q 7:109 (“of Pharaoh’s people”) do not favor an understanding of Pharaoh as the speaker in that verse since we would expect it to read “of *his* people.” If the scribal error scenario is to be defended, we would need to assume that the words “of Pharaoh’s people” were added to the verse only after the graphic corruption from *li-l-malaʾ* to *al-malaʾ* had occurred. Though possible, this is somewhat complicated and difficult to prove.

A simpler solution might be supplied by the context of Q 7 in which the role of the *malaʾ* is much more amplified than in Q 26.²⁸ Thus, in Q 7:103 Moses is sent to Pharaoh and his *malaʾ*, whereas in Q 26:16 Moses and Aaron are sent only to Pharaoh.²⁹ Moreover, while Q 26 refers to the *malaʾ* only once, in the very passage we are discussing,³⁰ in Q 7 there are eight occurrences of the word (three of which are in a Pharaonic context). Looking at these occurrences in Q 7, we note that in seven of them the *malaʾ* are the speakers.³¹ Especially relevant is Q 7:127: “And the *malaʾ* of Pharaoh’s people said (*wa-qāla al-malaʾu min qawmi firʾawna*), ‘Will you allow Moses and his people to work corruption in the land, and to forsake you and your gods?’ He [Pharaoh] replied, ‘We shall slaughter their sons and spare [only] their women; surely we are triumphant over them!’” Note that the speakers in this verse are the *malaʾ* and that they are described in the very same manner in which they are described in Q 7:109 (“of Pharaoh’s people”). It seems likely then that the words of Q 7:109 were reshaped by natural attraction to fit their immediate literary context within sura 7, as Richard Bell had already seen.³² Whether this was done when the dialogue was first embedded in the sura or later in the course of the sura’s transmission is hard to determine.³³ It does

28. The difference between the two suras generally might be related, as Smith has argued, to the changing circumstances in Mecca (see n. 27 above). Note, however, that when the occurrences of the word *malaʾ* outside of the Moses story are examined, the chronological development noted by Smith is somewhat called into doubt. Compare, e.g., Q 23:24 and 33 of the second Meccan period, which mention the *malaʾ* in connection with the people of Noah and an unnamed people (likely ʿĀd), with two passages from the third Meccan period, Q 10:71–73 (Noah) and Q 11:50–60 (ʿĀd), which do not, even though those suras use the word elsewhere.

29. This point is made in Ibn al-Zubayr al-Gharnāṭī, *Milāk al-taʾwīl al-qāṭiʿ bi-dhawī al-ilḥād wa-l-taʿfīl fi tawjīh al-mutashābih al-laḥz min āy al-tanzīl*, ed. S. al-Fallāḥ (Beirut, 1983), 1: 560–63. Cf. al-Khaṭīb al-Iskāfī, *Durrat al-tanzīl wa-ghurraṭ al-taʾwīl*, ed. M. Muṣṭafā (Mecca, 2001), 2: 647–50.

30. We do, however, find in Q 26 Pharaoh again addressing those surrounding him (*qāla li-man ḥawlahu*) in Q 26:25 (and 27). They do not respond.

31. Q 7:60 (responding to Noah), 66 (to Hūd), 75 (reprimanding those who believe in Šālīḥ), 88 (responding to Shuʿayb), 90 (reprimanding those who believe in Shuʿayb), 109 (our verse), and 127 (see below). In Q 7:103 there is no speech; we are simply told that God sent Moses to Pharaoh and his *malaʾ*.

32. See R. Bell, *A Commentary on the Qurʾān*, ed. C. E. Bosworth and M. E. J. Richardson (Manchester, 1991), 1: 245 where the following comment is made on Q 7: “The nobility here speak, as in the preceding group of stories; in xxvi it is Pharaoh who speaks to his nobility; on the whole what is said suits the latter situation better.”

33. If the reformulation of the dialogue occurred already during the initial composition of the sura, this may lend some support to the relative chronology offered by Theodor Nöldeke, according to which Q 26 belongs to the second Meccan period whereas Q 7 belongs to the third Meccan period. See Th. Nöldeke et al., *Geschichte des Qurʾāns* (Leipzig, 1909–1938), 1: 126–29, 158–60. See also the comment concerning the Moses story of Q 7 in R. Bell, *The Qurʾān: Translated, with a Critical Re-Arrangement of the Surahs* (Edinburgh, 1937–1939), 1: 136 (“It was also based on earlier material, and in fact up to v. 122 [= 125] is practically taken from Surah XXVI”). Bell considers this to be an early Medinan addition to the sura. See also *ibid.*, 1: 148. As for the Moses story in Q 26, Bell consid-

seem clear, however, that the literary context influenced the phrasing of the Moses story in Q 7 and thus created two problems: incoherence in Q 7 and tension between the two parallel versions. This tension drove the exegetes to offer harmonizing interpretations that then created new versions.³⁴

The stages these passages underwent may be summarized as follows:

(1) Originally the utterance “Surely this is a knowledgeable sorcerer who wishes to drive you (pl.) out of your (pl.) land (by his sorcery). What, then, do you advise?” was attributed to Pharaoh and directed to the *mala'*. This is attested in Q 26.

(2) In Q 7 the same utterance is attributed to the *mala'*. This reflects the influence of the wider literary context of sura 7 where the *mala'* have an active role as speakers. When and how exactly this reformulation took place is unclear.³⁵ Likely, *li-l-mala'* was replaced with *al-mala' min qawm fir'aun* under the influence of Q 7:127, but one can imagine other scenarios as well.³⁶ The reformulated dialogue in Q 7 created incoherence in Q 7 as well as a contradiction with Q 26 in that the same utterance is attributed to different speakers in each sura.

(3) The exegetes attempted to solve the incoherence of Q 7 and offered harmonizing interpretations for the contradiction between the two passages, thus creating new unattested versions in which both Pharaoh and his *mala'* uttered the very same words.

APPENDIX: OTHER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PASSAGES

The two passages display three other minute differences: (1) Q 26:35 has a word, *bi-siḥrihi* (“by his sorcery”), that is not found in Q 7:110.³⁷ (2) The word for “send” is (*wa-*)*arsil* in Q 7 and (*wa-*)*b'ath* in Q 26. (3) The word for “sorcerer” is *sāḥir* in Q 7 and *sahḥār* in Q 26. Let us examine these differences briefly.³⁸

Additional words are typical of both intraquranic parallels and variant readings of the same quranic passages.³⁹ This is true of synonyms as well. The two synonyms for “send”

ers it to “have been re-written in early Medinan times” on a Meccan basis; *ibid.*, 2: 353, 354. See also B. Sadeghi, “The Chronology of the Qurʾān: A Stylometric Research Program,” *Arabica* 58 (2011): 210–99, at 234 where the chronological scheme of Mehdi Bazargan is summarized. According to Bazargan, the relevant verses from Q 26 are part of block 84 whereas the relevant verses of Q 7 are part of block 122. Following Bazargan, Sadeghi himself (p. 238) places the relevant verses from Q 26 in his group 5 and the relevant verses from Q 7 in his group 10. The traditional chronological lists of the suras, on the other hand, usually place Q 7 before Q 26. See Nöldeke et al., *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 1: 58–62.

34. It should be added that in Q 20 we do find two stages with two utterances, once by Pharaoh and once by his people, but these cannot be identified with the two utterances as understood by the harmonizing interpretation. Here Pharaoh responded to the miracles by asking Moses whether he came to drive them out of the land with his sorcery (Q 20:57). Later the sorcerers (referred to with an unspecified plural) were gathered to compete in sorcery and they said to each other that Moses and Aaron are two sorcerers who wish to drive them out of their land (Q 20:63). Perhaps this presentation in two stages was inspired by the tension between Q 7 and 26, but this is unlikely since these two stages are not easily reconcilable with the two other suras.

35. It is thus unclear whether the reformulation was intentional or—more likely—simply the natural result of assimilation of nearby terms in the course of transmission. For examples of the latter, see B. Sadeghi and U. Bergmann, “The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qurʾān of the Prophet,” *Arabica* 57 (2010): 343–436, at 388, 401–2, 427.

36. For instance, one might suggest that originally Q 7:109 read “Pharaoh said” but that this was conflated with Q 7:127 and produced “[the *mala'* of the people of] Pharaoh said.”

37. Compare two other verses in which Pharaoh and his people attribute to Moses (and Aaron) a plan to drive them out of the land by use of sorcery: Q 20:57 (*bi-siḥrika*) and 63 (*bi-siḥrihimā*).

38. The first two differences are given artificial explanations in al-Gharnāḥī, *Milāk al-taʾwīl*, 563–65.

39. See, e.g., Sadeghi and Bergmann, “Codex of a Companion,” 422–29.

alternate elsewhere in the Quran and it seems that neither is preferable.⁴⁰ This use of synonyms is reminiscent of variants found in the Sanaa palimpsest as well as in the noncanonical readings of Ibn Mas‘ūd and Ubayy b. Ka‘b. Though the synonym variants attributed to these figures frequently seem like secondary improvements of a more difficult reading, this is not always the case. At times they seem more original and at times there is no clear advantage to one reading over the other.⁴¹ The last situation corresponds to our case of *wa-arsil* and *wa-b‘ath*.⁴² Another comparable parallel is found in the various transmissions of the same hadith traditions in varying formulations that are often simply different wordings of the same idea. What all these three examples (intraquranic parallels, noncanonical variants, and parallel hadith traditions) reflect is a transmission that to some extent is more interested in content than in form.⁴³ It is also likely, though not necessary, that this transmission was oral.

As for *sāḥir* and *saḥḥār*, the two words probably reflect different interpretations of the same consonantal skeleton since medial *ā* was often not indicated in early manuscripts. Indeed, when we turn to readings beyond that of Ḥafṣ from ‘Āṣim we find that both forms were read in both verses.⁴⁴

40. Compare Q 26:36 (“and send [*wa-b‘ath*] among the cities musterers”) with Pharaoh’s gathering of his army in Q 26:53 (“Then Pharaoh sent [*arsala*] among the cities musterers”). Compare also, e.g., Q 7:103 (“Then We sent [*ba‘athnā*], after them, Moses with Our miracles to Pharaoh and his *mala*’, and they willfully rejected them”) with Q 11:96–97 (“And, indeed, We sent [*arsalnā*] Moses with Our miracles and a manifest authority to Pharaoh and his *mala*’; but they followed [only] Pharaoh’s command”).

41. See Nöldeke et al., *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 3:78–79, 93–94. For synonyms with no clear advantage over each other, see especially the references *ibid.*, 79 n. 2 and 94 n. 2.

42. For *arsala* in the lower layer of the Sanaa palimpsest instead of the canonical *ba‘atha* in Q 2:213, see Sadeghi and Bergmann, “Codex of a Companion,” 431.

43. The question whether one must transmit hadith traditions verbatim or whether paraphrastic transmission was permissible as long as the content was preserved was debated among scholars of hadith. See, e.g., I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (London, 1967–1971), 2: 186–87; J. A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford, 2009), 23. A similar approach seems to have existed regarding the Quran. See the evidence collected in Nöldeke et al., *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 3: 105–6.

44. In Q 7:112 *saḥḥār* was the reading of three Kufan readers: Ḥamza, al-Kisā‘ī, and Khalaf; al-Khaṭīb, *Mu‘jam al-qirā’āt*, 3: 124–25. In Q 26:37, on the other hand, the reading *sāḥir* is attributed only to two readers: al-A‘mash and ‘Āṣim (in one transmission); al-Khaṭīb, *Mu‘jam al-qirā’āt*, 6: 412–13. See also Abū ‘Amr ‘Uthmān b. Sa‘īd al-Dānī, *al-Muqni‘ fī ma‘rifat marsūm maṣāḥif ahl al-amṣār*, ed. M. A. Dahmān (Damascus, 1940), 20–21. In Q 10:79 too, both readings are found—a whole series of readers (including Ḥamza, al-Kisā‘ī, and Khalaf) is said to have read *saḥḥār*; al-Khaṭīb, *Mu‘jam al-qirā’āt*, 3: 599–600. In other instances, these three consonants are interpreted in yet another manner: *siḥr*.