Hell in Popular Muslim Imagination

The Anonymous Kitāb al-ʿAzama

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Can we know anything about paradise and hell before being sent to them? This question must have been considered by the first Muslims, who worried about their eternal fate. The relatively scarce details given in the Quran may well have triggered the believers' imagination while failing to give any comprehensive answers to their questions. That task was left to the early exegetes, the storytellers (*qāṣṣ*, pl. *quṣṣāṣ*) and preachers who explained the Quran, recounted the life of the prophet Muḥammad, and alerted souls to the afterlife (*targhīb wa-tarhīb*). They were first hand witnesses to the most reliable source of further knowledge: the Prophet himself, whom they made journey through heaven and hell, in the best tradition of Apocalyptic and Ascension literature. Moses, Enoch, and various Christian apostles before him were said to have made a similar journey, and this tradition was also known in Iranian literature, in the *Ardā Virāz Nāmag* (sixth century CE?). This genre was to continue for centuries: much was written on Muḥammad's ascension, and this even spread within Europe (*Liber Scalae Machometi*; ca. 1250?). The idea was also picked up by al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058), Dante (d. 1321), and, at a more popular level, by the Bulūqiyā story, for example, in the *Arabian Nights*.¹ In this text Bulūqiyā, a Jewish boy from Cairo, wishes to find the prophet Muḥammad. His quest leads him through mythological landscapes, where he meets various supernatural beings who teach him about the unknown parts of the universe from where they originate. A king of the Jinn named Ṣakhr tells him about hell:

Bulūqiyā, God created hell in seven layers (*ṭabaqāt*), one above the other, and between every two layers is a distance of thousands of years. The first layer He called Jahannam; He set it up for the disobedient among the believers who die without having repented.²

¹ *Alf layla wa-layla* i, 660–704.

² *Ibid.*, i, 668.

The other layers have names as well, all taken from the Quran, such as *al-Jahīm*, *Ṣaḡar*, and so on. After the king has enumerated them all, Bulūqiyā asks:

“So perhaps Jahannam has the least of torture, since it is the uppermost?”
 “Yes”, said King Ṣakhr, “it has the least of torture of them all; yet in it are a thousand mountains of fire, in each mountain seventy thousand valleys of fire, in each valley seventy thousand cities of fire, in each city seventy thousand castles of fire, in each castle seventy thousand houses of fire, in each house seventy thousand abodes of fire and in each abode seventy thousand couches of fire and in every couch seventy thousand manners of torment. [...] As for the other layers of hell, Bulūqiyā, nobody knows the number of kinds of torment therein but God alone”. When Bulūqiyā heard this from King Ṣakhr, he fell down unconscious [...].³

From where did the storyteller of the *Arabian Nights* obtain his material? He may have been inspired by al-Thaʿlabī's (d. 427/1035) story about Bulūqiyā, which is, however, far less detailed.⁴ It is perhaps more likely that he got it from another book that dealt with such matters, of which a number must have existed.

1   *The Kitāb al-ʿAẓama*

One of these books is the *Kitāb al-ʿAẓama*, whose section on hell will be discussed here. *ʿAẓama* is not an Apocalypse or an Ascension story, instead being essentially a book on cosmology. It advertizes itself as a book on “God’s sublimity; His creatures in heaven and on earth, in between them and under the earth; the air; the creation; and the characteristics of paradise and hell”.⁵ However, in content, style, and atmosphere *ʿAẓama* is closely related to the Bulūqiyā story.⁶

ʿAẓama does not rely on the authority of Muḥammad, but on that of more ancient prophets. The original book is said to have been revealed to Adam, who wrote it down on clay tablets, baked them, and deposited them in a cave

3 Ibid.

4 Thaʿlabī, *Qīṣaṣ* 354–62 (tr. 593–604).

5 *ʿAẓama*, my edition of the part “ʿAẓama about itself”: <http://wp.me/p2gowF-4f>, no. 101.

6 I published an introductory article on the book as a whole in 1993. See Raven, *A Kitāb al-ʿAẓama*.

“in Sarandīb in India”,⁷ which was opened each year on the day of ‘Āshūrā’. When the prophet Daniel heard about this cave he brought forty scribes and copied down as much as he could on that one day. After his death the book was made public on copper sheets. According to the text itself, ‘Abdallāh ibn Salām, a Jewish convert to Islam from the time of the Prophet, read it to the caliph ‘Uthmān, who regularly burst into tears or even fainted upon hearing the text.⁸ The author shows his awareness of the requirements of Islamic scholarship by adding impressive but faked *isnāds* (chains of transmission) to the work in the manner demanded by the ‘ulamā’. Yet these imprimaturs, assigned to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and others, which are meant to underscore its reliability, have by their sheer quantity almost the opposite effect.

‘Aẓama is a rather neglected text. Anton Heinen described a number of *‘Aẓamas*,⁹ only one of which is identical with the work under consideration, the one he found ascribed to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 281/894).¹⁰ Fuat Sezgin mixed up several works of the same title.¹¹ The *K. al-‘Aẓama* edited by Mubārakfūrī is a completely different work and therefore irrelevant to this study.¹² Our text exists in two versions in at least twelve carelessly written manuscripts, some of which have been heavily enriched with eschatological and parenetic material. The different manuscripts ascribe the work to various authors: Abu Ḥayyān, Abu Shaykh, Ibn Ḥibbān, Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī, and Ibn Abī l-Dunyā.¹³ In Arabic script it is only a small step from Abu Ḥayyān to Ibn Ḥibbān. As such, it seems wiser for the time being to consider *‘Aẓama* an anonymous text.

Dating the book is also currently impossible, although it must have come into being a considerable time after, say, 300/910. The classical hadith collections and the early Quranic commentaries from before this period deal with the same subject matter as *‘Aẓama*, but in a much more restrained way. The trend towards large numbers and sizes already exists in hadith and *tafsīr*: a tree in paradise that takes five hundred years to go round, birds the size of Bactrian camels, and a river in paradise as broad as the Arabian peninsula,

7 I.e., Sri Lanka, the place where Adam “fell” to earth from paradise.

8 *‘Aẓama* 72–7 (ed. Abu Deeb). My edition of this part can be found at <http://wp.me/p2gowF-83>; for an English translation, see <http://wp.me/p2gowF-y>. In what follows, footnotes refer to my online edition, unless otherwise indicated.

9 Heinen, *Islamic cosmology* 37–52.

10 Ibid., 48–9.

11 GAS I, see *Indices: Büchertitel*, s.v. *K. al-‘Aẓama*.

12 This text, which is ascribed to Abū l-Shaykh al-Iṣbahānī (d. 369/979), is also mentioned by Heinen, *Islamic cosmology* 38–42.

13 The book by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā entitled *Ṣīfat al-nār* bears no resemblance to our *‘Aẓama*.

for example. Yet these are nothing compared to the billions and trillions that appear in *ʿAzama*. The larger the numbers, the later the text; and such is also the case for the earlier and later manuscripts of *ʿAzama*.

The language and style of *ʿAzama* do not conform to the rules and traditions of classical Arabic. To mention only a few examples: it often writes *hum* instead of classical *hiya*; uses phrases such as *wa-hum yaqūlū* and *dhālika al-jibāl*; or sentences get stuck halfway through or their initial subject becomes forgotten. It is unclear at which stage of transmission such sloppiness began; there may have been centuries of deterioration, and it must be supposed that the subject matter was apparently not considered religiously valuable enough to be transmitted carefully.

A printed edition was made by Kamal Abu Deeb on the basis of just one manuscript. I intend to present an edition and translation on the basis of more.¹⁴ It no longer seems necessary to be apologetic about editing a popular text that gives an insight in the beliefs of the not-so-intellectual Muslims of long ago. In the present paper, I will refer to the numbers 401–579 used in my nascent edition as well as to the pages in that by Abu Deeb.

Before we descend into *ʿAzama*'s hell, it will be useful to take a look at the construction of the cosmos within the text,¹⁵ in order to see where hell is. In summary, starting from the bottom: God created an atmosphere, above it a sea, above it an earth of iron, then again an atmosphere, above it an earth of lead, above it another sea, then again an earth from silver, then another sea. Soon, however, the picture becomes more confused. Millions of cities, seas, and mountains follow each other. It is impossible to obtain a clear picture, firstly because the text is chaotic, and secondly because these worlds are multi-dimensional; they are beyond our imagination. The difficulty is that the cities and gardens are not always on the earth, but sometimes in the air or even in a sea, as islands. One might call this obfuscation, but it successfully demonstrates God's sublimity (*ʿazama*), and highlights that there are more dimensions than humans can handle. It is also interesting to note that many of these worlds are inhabited by strange species: animal-like creatures, rather than jinn or angels. We are not alone! All these beings have their own prophets, revealed laws (*sharāʿi*), paradises, and hells. Where in this vast cosmos is our earth, where is mankind? ʿUthmān asks this question several times, but ʿAbdallāh

14 This edition-cum-translation is appearing in installments on <http://kitabalazama.wordpress.com>.

15 *ʿAzama* 77–99 (ed. Abu Deeb). My edition of this part: <http://wp.me/p2gowF-83>; for an English translation, see <http://wp.me/p2gowF-86>.

ibn Salām gives only evasive answers. The whole “layered cake” is glazed with an earth of crystal. On top of that is hell, our hell, which is also multilayered. Above it the cosmos continues; then comes paradise; and on top of that is the Throne of God.¹⁶

2 Hell in the *K. al-ʿAzama*

ʿAzama’s section on hell is a thick soup of variegated texts and fragments, many of which may or must have had an independent existence beforehand. The author did not stir them very well, so the mixture remains rather lumpy. With some effort a loose structure can be discovered, but it may be more useful to give a very short overview and then discuss the various parts, irrespective of their place in the whole.

Roughly, the first half is focused mainly on cosmology and the geography of hell, whereas the second half focuses on the special tortures designed for the various categories of sinners, and thus serves a clear parenetic function. The description begins with the seven layers of hell, identified according to their Quranic names. There then follows a long “geographical” description of hell in a similar manner to the preceding section on the cosmos. Throughout the text, Quranic nouns are given a new function as names for certain places in hell. The cruel tortures for four categories of sinners are described extensively, as well as those who mete them out: the angels of hell (*zabānī*; sic!), the scorpions, and the snakes. Then follow a number of descriptions of the people who are tortured, inspired by Quranic verses and, gradually, the text becomes more interested in those who are punished. Towards the end, a long list of categories of sinner is included, along with their respective punishments. The section closes with two pages on the heat and the cold of hell.

From the reference numbers that I use in my nascent online edition of *ʿAzama* it can be seen that related subject matter is sometimes scattered rather widely in the text. However, the following subjects can be discerned: (1) the geography of hell; (2) geomorphization: the Quranic names of the layers of hell; (3) geographication: unspecific Quranic nouns used as place names; (4) extensive descriptions of punishments; (5) elaborations of Quranic verses; (6) Mālik, the guardian of hell; (7) short formulaic texts: Sinners, punishment, and herald; (8) the frame-story: The interaction between ʿAbdallāh and ʿUthmān; and (9) the heat and the cold of hell. Sometimes these subjects overlap.

16 Similar, but less extravagant material can be found in the chapter on creation of al-Thaʿlabī’s *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. See Thaʿlabī, *Qīṣaṣ* 12ff. (tr. 19ff.).

2.1 *The Geography of Hell*

The extensive description of hell in “geographical” terms¹⁷ is linked with the general depiction of the cosmos. Just one quote will be enough to get an idea of this:

For hell He made seven gates, providing it with four pillars, which He provided with seven heads, each of which has seven faces, each with seven mouths, each of which has seven tongues and seven molars and [other] teeth; every tooth is as long as a billion¹⁸ years, a year being four thousand months; a month being four thousand days; a day being four thousand hours, and one hour lasts as long as seventy of our years. There is no tree there that was not written upon. On every tree the name of the person to which it belongs is written, and there is no scorpion, no snake, no angel of hell, and no iron hook that does not have the name of the person to which it belongs written upon it.¹⁹

Hell consists of innumerable seas of fire, rivers of fire, islands, valleys and mountains with Quranic names, caves, caverns, stinking pits, and abysses; everything of incredible size and four-dimensions. All these are inhabited by millions of monstrous angels of hell (*zabāniya*, Q 96:18) with their various instruments of torture, by extremely poisonous scorpions and snakes, and by devils (*shayāṭīn*) who live in coffins. As for plants, there are trees with disgusting fruits, such as the *zaqqūm* (Q 44:45, 56:52, 37:64–5), and with many thorns.

2.2 *Geomorphization: The Quranic Names of the Layers of Hell*²⁰

According to nos. 401–8, hell has seven layers (*ṭabaqāt*). They are named after the seven names of hell that occur in the Quran: *al-hāwiya*, *al-jaḥīm*, *al-saʿīr*, *saqar*, *laẓā*, *al-ḥuṭama*, and *jahannam*. It is interesting that the name *jahannam* is used both for hell as a whole and for one of the layers. Every layer is assigned to a different group of denizens. Right at the bottom are the hypocrites, in accordance with Q 4:145; then the unbelievers; the devils, Yājūj and Mājūj and their like; the Jews, the Dajjāl, and the wrongdoers; the Christians; and finally, in the highest layer, the disobedient Muslim sinners. Al-Kisāʾī's (*fl.* third/ninth century [?]) *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* has an almost identical enumeration of the layers,

17 *ʿAzama*, nos. 401–10, 416–35, 455–9, 468–70, 478, 487, 489, 492, 495, 501, 506, 515; *ʿAzama* 100–15 (ed. Abu Deeb) and *passim*.

18 Or a trillion. The manuscripts are quite generous with *alf* *alfs*.

19 *ʿAzama*, nos. 409–10.

20 *Ibid.*, nos. 401–8; *ʿAzama* 99 (ed. Abu Deeb).

including the double function for the name *jahannam*, but in reverse order, and he does not call them layers, but gates of hell.²¹ Quranic commentaries apply a similar geomorphization and vary between “gates” and “layers”. Al-Kisā’ī himself speaks of gates for a good reason, since he quotes the Quranic verse: “Seven gates it has [...]” (Q 15:44).²² His text is more modest than *ʿAzama*. According to him, the distance between the gates is five hundred years of travel, whereas the distance between the layers in *ʿAzama* is no less than “that between God’s Throne and the earth”. The main intention of both al-Kisā’ī and the description in *ʿAzama* seems to have been “geographical exegesis”: to turn hell-related nouns in the Quran into names of places and thus determine their location. This is also the methodology used in the description of paradise.²³

2.3 *Geographication: Unspecific Quranic Nouns Used as Place Names*

Apart from the seven names that refer directly to hell (nos. 401–8), other Quranic nouns and an occasional non-Quranic one are turned into place names: they are given locations in hell and described. Some of these words are rare or unclear in their meaning, while others are not:

1. *Khusr* (Q 103:2) is a fire between two trees.²⁴ Normally the word means “loss”.
2. *al-Wayl* (“woe”) is a valley.²⁵ This frequently used word may have been, but was not definitely, taken from the Quran, where it occurs 23 times;
3. *Ghayyan* is a mountain.²⁶ The word, including its accusative ending, is taken from Q 19:59, where it is normally translated as “perdition”. Here it is described in detail as an enormous mountain in Jahannam, inhabited by the angels of hell. It is the place where a self-satisfied couple is punished (see below, under [4]);
4. *Sakrān*: In the mountain of Ghayyan there is a valley called Sakrān (“drunk”).²⁷ This place name has no basis in the Quran. Its plural *sukārā* in Q 4:43 almost certainly did not inspire our author;

21 Kisā’ī, *Qīṣaṣ* 18–9 (tr. 18–9).

22 I use the Quran translation by Majid Fakhry.

23 My edition <http://wp.me/p2gowF-7E>; for an English translation, see <http://wp.me/p2gowF-7H>. Cf. *ʿAzama* 148 (ed. Abu Deeb).

24 *ʿAzama*, no. 428.

25 Ibid., no. 435.

26 Ibid., nos. 455–68.

27 Ibid., no. 468.

5. *Šaʿūdan* (Q 74:17; including the accusative ending) means “acclivity, hardship”, but here it is a mountain, also inhabited by the angels of hell, who drive the sinners up to the top;²⁸
6. *al-Falaq* (“daybreak”, Q 113:1), is interpreted as a mountain;²⁹
7. *Māt* (“he died”) is not a noun, but a verb form that occurs twice in the Quran, in rather unspecific contexts. Here it is understood to be a valley;³⁰ it may, but does not have to, have been taken from the Quran;
8. *al-Ḥazan* (“sadness, grief”, Q 35:34) is taken as a valley.³¹ Theoretically one might read *ḥuzn*, which occurs once in Q 12:84, but there the context does not encourage the establishment of a connection with hell;
9. *Saqar* (Q 54:48; 74:26, 27, 42), in addition to being one of the seven layers of hell mentioned above,³² is interpreted here as a valley.³³

This type of Quranic exegesis is extremely old; it occurs as early as the *Tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), who explains *ghayy* as a “valley in Jahannam”³⁴ and *saqar* as “the fifth gate of Jahannam”;³⁵ similar explanations occur in later commentaries, where it makes no difference whether something is a valley, a gate, or a layer. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), for instance, says about *ghayy* that it is “a river in Jahannam”, or “one of the wadis in Jahannam, that is, one of its sources”;³⁶ Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) knows that it is “a pit in deepest Jahannam, into which the fluid from the wounds of its denizens seeps”.³⁷ Such explanations exist also in connection with paradise. Muqātil explains the word *kawthar* in Q 108:1 as “the best river in paradise” and expands on it.³⁸ His contemporary Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 150/767) quotes a related piece of exegesis in the form of a hadith, albeit a defective one, according to which *kawthar* is “a river as broad as from Ṣanʿāʾ to Ayla”.³⁹

28 Ibid., nos. 478–9.

29 Ibid., in no. 484.

30 Ibid., no. 488.

31 Ibid., nos. 425, 489.

32 Ibid., no. 405.

33 Ibid., no. 492.

34 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* ii, 632.

35 Ibid., iv, 496.

36 Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* xvi, 100.

37 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr* iii, 128.

38 Muqātil, *Tafsīr* iv, 879.

39 Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra* 261–2 (tr. 180–1).

2.4 *Extensive Descriptions of Punishments*

With the exception of usury,⁴⁰ the sins mentioned in *ʿAzama*’s section on hell are not one of the seven deadly sins (*kabāʾir*) of Islamic theology, but rather are sins of the type that may have infuriated a local imam or neighbors: bearing false witness, kissing boys lustfully, shortening the prayer, coitus *a tergo*, treating neighbors badly, striving for worldly vanities, defiling graves, speaking with two tongues, leaving babies to wetnurses, associating with the powerful, slandering, and excessive mourning, among many others. Against the background of the vast geographical expanse described above, and courtesy of hell’s resident torturers, the punishments of a small number of sinners, including evil scholars, reciters of the Quran, a self-satisfied couple, and a man from the ruling classes—people for whom a modern reader may find it difficult to understand precisely why these people are seen as being so bad—are treated extensively.

Evil scholars (*ʿulamāʾ al-sūʾ*) are punished in the organ by which they sinned: their heads. These are ground between millstones because the scholars were greedy, wore large turbans and dressed in silk, hoarded gold and silver, and adulated potentates.⁴¹ Quran reciters (*qurrāʾ*) are severely punished and allotted much space in the text, which is kept lively by dialogues between them and the angels of hell.⁴² Their sins are immodesty towards the Lord, eye-service, and malicious behavior towards their fellow man. The reason for their being judged more harshly than evil scholars or others is not explained. They are thrown into caves, where they have to wear turbans and clothes of fire, and where lead is poured into their ears. This causes them to indulge in weeping and self-reproach, but this makes no difference and the angels of hell show no mercy, putting a scorpion which has the equivalent of 10,000 water-skins of poison in its belly in charge of each of them. Because of this, they complain that nobody is tortured more vehemently than they, but the angels point out that they are not fettered or chained, before setting loose on every person two black snakes, which penetrate their bodies and puff poison into their faces.

As for the complacent couple, the angels of hell bite a man and a woman, spit on them, cause them burns, and beat them with iron rods of fire. The couple plead that they were always obedient and pious, that they fasted and even performed the pilgrimage. On this occasion the angels cannot explain to them

40 *ʿAzama*, nos. 436 and 559.

41 *Ibid.*, nos. 436–7.

42 *Ibid.*, nos. 438–55.

why they are tortured; they just follow their orders. Then a mighty cry⁴³ makes everyone freeze, and an anonymous voice proclaims the couple's real sin: they postponed the prayer or performed it too early for reasons of their own.⁴⁴ Thereupon men and women (now in the plural) are gruesomely tortured, each by an individual devil that rises from a coffin. They are well aware of their own sinfulness, but complete insight as to the reason is apparently lacking: they have to be taught that they were not fearful, did not perform prayers with the ritual ablutions, and were not careful while urinating. This part of the text is rather chaotic, and actually consists of two texts, or two variations of the same text. However, both want to make it clear that even decent Muslims have no reason to be complacent, as many will not escape hell.

The torment of the "man from the ruling classes" (*rajul min ahl al-mulk*) is also very violent, and takes place in various stages.⁴⁵ Apparently because he had magnified himself on earth, he is now blown up to a grotesque size and pinned down by enormous chains. When he cries that he is thirsty, he is given a drink that makes his flesh fall from his bones, as well as his fingers and teeth. After a thrashing with rods of fire he cries for help once more, but the drink hardens in his mouth. Then they (*sic*) and others of the *ahl al-mulk* ask Mālik for refreshing food; they are given fruits from the *zaqqūm* tree, which is spiked with sharp thorns that cut into all parts of their face. The fruits themselves look good but turn out to be disgusting and worm-ridden; when they bite into a fruit, a worm comes out and eats their tongues and teeth. They try to flee, but fall into pits where they are tormented forever by snakes and scorpions.

2.5 *Elaborations on Quranic Verses*

As we saw above, the names of the layers of hell are Quranic, as are various place names. In fact, many isolated Quranic words occur, such as *ḥamīm* (boiling water, Q 55:44 and *passim*), *muhl* (hot oil [?], Q 18:29, 44:45, 70:8), and *ghislīn* (nauseating food, Q 69:36). But as well as those, certain sections in *Aḏama* elaborate on Quranic verses in a formulaic framework. They mention a group of sinners who are brought in (*yu'tā bi-qawm*), describe their specific punishments, point to the fact that they are referred to in the Quran (*hum alladhīna dhakarāhum/waṣafāhum allāh ...fī kitābihi*), and finally quote the relevant verse. A short example in this vein is:

43 The word is *ṣarkha*, but one is reminded of Quranic *ṣayḥa*.

44 Ibid., nos. 460–77.

45 Ibid., nos. 538–48.

Then people from this community are brought in, whose necks are put into those rings and whose cheeks are pressed against the fire. When the right cheek is done, it is put onto the left cheek until it is also done; then it is put back onto the right cheek again, so that they *taste the painful torment*. They are the ones whom God mentions in his book: *The day their faces are turned around in the Fire* (Q 33:66).⁴⁶

There are a few more paragraphs like this, most of them considerably longer. In nos. 471–7 devils torment couples who claim they had been pious and had meant well, and who cry out in their fright: “O ruination!” (*wā-thabūrāh*). Their devil explains to them: “You did not fear [God] and did not observe prayer with the ritual ablution, and you were not careful while urinating”. This scene refers to Q 25:13: “And if they are hurled in a narrow space therein, tied up in fetters, they would call out there for ruination”. A similar example is a group of people who had too much pleasure in this world and so they are crucified on thorns like spears of fire.⁴⁷ To them Q 39:24 is applied: “Is he who wards off with his face the evil punishment on the Day of Resurrection?”⁴⁸ And it is said then to the wrongdoers: “Taste what you used to earn”. Those who practiced anal intercourse are turned around as on a mill, then chained; they try to free themselves but to no avail.⁴⁹ “Those are the ones who God described in his book: ‘They will then wish to come out of the Fire, but they will never come out, and theirs is an everlasting punishment!’ ” (Q 5:37). In nos. 502–5 men and women are separated and thrown into pits. They are given the disgusting *zaqqūm* fruit to eat and fluid that seeps from wounds to drink (*ṣadīd*, Q 14:16). Then they are hung in baskets; when they try to climb out, the angels of hell push them back. The relevant Quranic verse is Q 32:20, with the exception of the last word which is from Q 22:22: “Every time they want to get out of it, they are brought back to it, and it is said to them: ‘Taste the agony of burning’”. Judges who were too severe on earth continue to rebuke the tortured in hell but are rebuked by them as well: “Then, they turned to one another, reproaching each other” (Q 68:30).⁵⁰ Other sinners look more or less as described in the verse: “Their garments made of pitch, and their faces covered with fire” (Q 14:50).⁵¹

46 Ibid., nos. 499–500.

47 Ibid., nos. 479–83.

48 The syntax in Arabic is unclear.

49 Ibid., nos. 494–7; the text is rather chaotic.

50 Ibid., no. 526.

51 Ibid., no. 529.

2.6 *Mālik, the Guardian of Hell*

One subject in the Quran which simply demanded some elaboration was the appeal of the denizens of hell to Mālik, its guardian (Q 43:77), and sometimes to its keepers (*ḥazana*). Mālik makes his appearance in three unconnected fragments in *Aẓama's* hell section, which again demonstrates that the book draws from various sources.

In nos. 507–14 three relevant Quranic verses are put to use in dramatic dialogues. First the sinners seek intercession from the very angels of hell who torture them. This is to no avail, of course, for “they are the ones who God mentions in his Book: ‘So we have no intercessors, nor an intimate friend’” (Q 26:100–1). Then they appeal to Mālik with the words of Q 43:77: “They call out: ‘O Mālik, let your Lord be done with us’ but he will say: ‘You are surely staying on’”. They try their luck once more with the angels of hell, whose intercession with Mālik they now ask for, in the hope that he will intercede with the Lord to obtain some alleviation. They are the ones that God mentions in the Quran: “Those in the Fire will say to the keepers of hell: ‘Call on your Lord that he may remit a day of punishment for us’” (Q 40:49).

In another tableau,⁵² a dialogue begins between the sinners and the angels of hell, who give them a drink—a drink that, unsurprisingly, brings them no refreshment. Then they ask Mālik for food; he orders his angels to bring them to the *zaqqūm* tree, the fruits of which are utterly indigestible. Then another relevant Quranic verse is quoted, Q 35:37: “Our Lord, bring us out and we will do the righteous deed, differently from what we used to do!” After one hundred years he⁵³ answers them: “Did we not prolong your life sufficiently for him to remember who is apt to remember? The warner came to you, so taste now. The wrongdoers shall have no supporter”. When they try it again with Q 43:77, it takes another hundred years before the answer comes, not from Mālik, who does not bother, but from a herald: “You are surely staying on”.

In a third scene⁵⁴ the sinners complain about the heat in hell and ask for cooling; Mālik then sends them out into the cold (*zamharīr*, see below, under [9]). The mise-en-scène and the wording are freer here, and there are no quotations from Quranic verses. Therefore, and also because the subject of the coldness of hell seems to be quite unique, it will be discussed separately below.

52 Ibid., nos. 542–8.

53 The text leaves who “he” is unclear.

54 Ibid., nos. 562–78.

2.7 *Short Formulaic Texts: Sinners, Punishment, and Herald*

Thirty-three short formulaic texts⁵⁵ begin with “Then other people were brought in ...” (*thumma yu’tā bi-qawm*), after which their punishment is described, like those mentioned above, under (5). But this time it is a herald who cries out what type of sinners they are, without reference to the Quran. One example: “Then other people from this community are brought, each of whom is administered one thousand lashes, and then one thousand more on their thighs. A herald cries out over them: ‘These are the ones who had bad relations with their neighbors’”.⁵⁶

The formulaic texts are rooted in a long tradition of Apocalyptic and Ascension literature. In Christian and pre-Islamic Iranian literatures and in the biography of Muḥammad they all follow a basic pattern: a traveler recounts his journey through heaven and hell, where he was guided by an angel or some other supernatural being; in hell he sees groups of people being tortured in a precisely described way and asks who they are. The guide then explains what sin they had committed. Here is an example from the Christian *Apocalypse of Paul* (written ca. 200–300 CE):

And I saw not far away another old man led on by evil angels, running with speed, and they pushed him into the fire up to his knees, and they struck him with stones and wounded his face like a storm, and did not allow him to say, “Have pity on me!” And I asked the angel, and he said to me: “He whom you see was a bishop and did not perform his episcopate well, who indeed accepted the great name but did not enter into the witness of him who gave him the name all his life, seeing that he did not give just judgment, and did not pity widows and orphans, but now he receives retribution according to his iniquity and works”.⁵⁷

In the late Sassanian Pahlavi text *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, formerly known as *Arda Viraf* (written sixth century CE), dozens of such episodes occur. One example is:

And I saw the soul of a man, both of whose eyes were gouged out, his tongue was cut out, and he was hung in hell from one foot, and his body was always being raked with a two-headed brass comb, and an iron nail

55 Ibid., nos. 486–8, 516–28, 530–7, 549–60.

56 Ibid., no. 521. The two other texts in which a herald appears are nos. 491 and 526. The latter text begins as one of these short formulaic texts, but ends with a Quranic verse.

57 *Apocalypse of Paul* 35, p. 634. Similar texts are found in the *Greek Apocalypse of Ezra* 4:9–12, 22–4; 5:1–3.

was driven into his head. And I asked: "Who is this man and what sin did he commit?" Srōš, the pious, and the god Ādur said: "This is the soul of that wicked judge whose [duty] in the world was to judge the wicked, and received bribes and gave devious judgments".⁵⁸

Ibn Ishāq's story (ca. 130/750) of Muḥammad's Ascension, under Jibrīl's guidance, has four fragments in this genre, one of which is:

Then I saw men with lips like camels; in their hands were pieces of fire like stones which they used to thrust into their mouths and they would come out of their posteriors. I asked: "Who are these, Jibrīl?" He answered: "These are those who sinfully devoured the wealth of orphans".⁵⁹

In Apocalyptic and Ascension literature there is a traveler and a heavenly guide who can be asked questions and who answers them. This dialogue is lacking in *ʿAẓama*, because it belongs to another genre: it is essentially a cosmology. There is no journey here, no traveler and no guide; the herald speaks on his own to no specific audience. In *ʿAẓama* it is significant that the present tense is used, referring to a future time: the author sees before him how it will be in hell in the hereafter.⁶⁰

2.8 *The Frame Story: Interaction between ʿAbdallāh and ʿUthmān*

The *Kitāb al-ʿAẓama* claims it was read aloud to the caliph ʿUthmān by ʿAbdallāh ibn Salām, a converted Jew and a Companion of the Prophet, who had found Daniel's book. Throughout the book, short intermezzos remind the reader of the setting. Sometimes ʿUthmān asks a question and ʿAbdallāh answers and explains. Often the caliph weeps, or both men weep, in awe of all the sublime and frightening descriptions they find in the book.

The section on hell has two dialogue situations: in nos. 411–6 both men are awed by the vastness of hell. ʿAbdallāh demonstrates a theological knowledge of the existence of hell: "Had God so wished, he would not have created it [i.e., hell], but He has foreknowledge and His decree (*amr*) is obeyed". In other words, God does what He wants and *could* have overruled His own decree, had

58 *Ardā Wirāz Nāmaq* 214.

59 Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra* 269 (tr. 185).

60 In the Jewish legend about the ascension of Moses (Ginzberg, *Legends* ii, 312), the question is omitted, whereas the guiding angel comments the sights on his own initiative: "Then Nasargiel said to Moses: 'Come and see' ..." etc. It is possible, however, that Ginzberg himself simplified the narrative structure. In *Legends* v, 416–8 he suggests that the Jewish legend was influenced by the Arabic one.

He so wished—but would He really want to? ‘Uthmān then weeps, apparently out of fear of the Judgment, the outcome of which is unknown, according to Q 46:9. ‘Abdallāh comforts him by quoting Q 48:1–2, “We have indeed given you a manifest victory, that Allah may forgive you your former and your latter sins [...]”, and continues his lecture. In no. 537 both men weep together after a gruesome description. ‘Uthmān wants to know where in hell the kings are. ‘Abdallāh tactfully answers that Jahannam, the upper layer of hell, is the abode of those who profess God’s unity. In spite of all the terrors just described, the upper layer is the mildest part of hell, so that the caliph can imagine what would await him in the other layers.

Why does ‘Uthmān ask about the kings? As an Umayyad he was a king (*malik*) himself; it is not insignificant that this episode is followed by the elaborate torture of a “man from the ruling classes” (*rajul min ahl al-mulk*).⁶¹ In nos. 572 and 578–9, the final part of the framing story, ‘Abdallāh is simply shown as continuing his lecture and then bringing the part on hell to an end.

2.9 *The Heat and the Cold*⁶²

In a coherent passage⁶³ that seems to be unconnected with the rest of the section on hell, the sinners ask Mālik, the guardian of hell, for mitigation, but in vain. The gates cannot be opened, and instead of a cool drink there is only *ḥamīm* (boiling water). But their yearning for coldness is fulfilled after one hundred years, when they are taken to *zamharīr* (the intense cold). This is by no means a better place, as it is a hell of blizzards and icebergs. After another one hundred years, they return to the fire, which is even hotter than before, and the torment continues.

The narrative plays with Q 43:77 (dialogue with Mālik) and Q 40:49 (prayer for mitigation once more), while the word *zamharīr* is taken from Q 76:13. The word is purely Arabic, a verbal noun whose stem is *izmaharra*, the meaning of which is not absolutely clear, and which is found only once in the Quran. Q 76:13 describes the believers in paradise, who are relaxing in a moderate climate and experience “neither sun nor *zamharīr*”. Hence, the latter word is mostly explained as “intense cold”. It does not refer to hell there, but to weather extremes on earth. I found only one hadith in which there is a connection between hell and intense cold:

61 *ʿAzama*, nos. 538–48.

62 *Ibid.*, nos. 562–79; *ʿAzama* 126–7 (ed. Abu Deeb).

63 *ʿAzama*, nos. 563–79.

The Prophet said: “Hell complained to its Lord, saying: ‘O Lord, parts of mine have consumed others’. Then it was allowed to do two exhalations, one in winter and one in summer. That is the extreme heat you experience in summer and the intense cold (*zamharīr*) you experience in winter”.⁶⁴

The Quranic commentaries of Muqātil, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) offer hardly more than lexical explanations of *zamharīr*. Al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī also quote the above hadith, while al-Qurṭubī, moreover, points to a verse by the poet al-Aʿshā (fl. ca. 570–625) that is strongly reminiscent of the wording of the Quran.⁶⁵ Tottoli found additional relevant hadith and fragments of *tafsīr*, but also remarks that the idea of a cold (place of) punishment never played a significant part in the Islamic tradition on hell.⁶⁶

Both hadith and Quranic exegesis are very limited on the subject and cannot have been the sources of the lively account in *Aẓama*. Hence the author must have had access to other modes of thought. I have found a Jewish, a Christian, and a Persian parallel, but establishing their sources or interdependence is beyond my grasp. In the Jewish legend of Moses’ tour of hell there is a definite contrast between hot and cold: “Moses yielded, and he saw how the sinners were burnt, one half of their bodies being immersed in fire and the other half in snow, while worms bred in their own flesh crawled over them [...]”.⁶⁷ In hell as described in the *Apocalypse of Paul* there is at least one cold place: “And again I observed there men and women with hands cut and their feet placed in a place of ice and snow, and worms devoured them”.⁶⁸

The cold of hell is also not lacking in *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg*. Here, too, the contrast between heat and cold is put to use as a means of torturing: “Then I saw the souls of the wicked who were ever suffering punishments of different kinds, such as snow, sleet, severe cold, and the heat of a quick-burning fire, and

64 Translated here from Muslim, *Masājid* 185; identical or similar: Buḥārī, *Mawāqīt* 9, *Badʿ al-khalq* 10; Muslim, *Masājid* 185; Ibn Māja, *Zuhd* 38; Dārimī, *Riqāq* 119. Hadiths are quoted according to Wensinck, *Concordance*.

65 *Munaʿamatun ṭaflatun kal-mahāti lam tara shamsan wa-lā zamharīra*, “accustomed to comfort, delicate like a wild cow; she experienced neither sun [glow] nor *zamharīr*”.

66 Tottoli, *Zamharīr*, esp. 147–8. Unlike Tottoli (p. 142 and 148 n. 2), I cannot take the exegesis *zamharīr* = “moon” seriously, in spite of its perpetuated transmission through the centuries. Its origin must have been the aporia of someone who just guessed the meaning of the word.

67 Ginzberg, *Legends* ii, 313; further references v, 418.

68 *Apocalypse of Paul* 39, p. 635.

stench, and stone and ashes, hail and rain, and many other evils [...];⁶⁹ and “[I saw] the souls of those who had fallen downwards in hell and smoke and heat were blown on them from below, and cold wind from above”.⁷⁰ There is, furthermore, an area of hell that is exclusively cold: “And I saw the soul of a man who was carrying a mountain on his back and he had that mountain on his back in the snow and in the cold”.⁷¹

Thus, the notion of cold in hell was sufficiently present in the ancient world to be a source of inspiration. However, in none of the aforementioned sources are the cold and the contrast between hot and cold so elaborated as in *ʿAẓama*. This piece, in which Mālik is introduced as if he had never been mentioned before, seems to have been a separate text which was inserted by the compiler of *ʿAẓama*, and which he attempted to integrate into the book as a whole. One description he puts explicitly into the mouth of ʿAbdallāh ibn Salām,⁷² while towards the end ʿAbdallāh is made to conclude the passage and at the same time the whole part on hell.⁷³

3 Conclusion

In the hell section of *ʿAẓama* there are so many doublets and overlaps that the author or compiler must have drawn on a number of sources. To establish what these sources were is a task for future research. Such a task will not be easy, and may prove impossible. It is obvious that parts of the subject matter occur in hadith and Quranic commentaries, but there we find only small fragments, whereas *ʿAẓama* is a sizeable book. It is hardly conceivable that traditionists encountered only fragments in their sources; there must have already been longer texts at an early stage, for the plausible chronological order is from a longer story to shorter pieces, just as it is in the biographies of the Prophet and other works of the *quṣṣāṣ* (storytellers). The Bulūqiyā fragments mentioned at the beginning of this article may well be later than *ʿAẓama*, but draw from a text that is apparently older, as one can tell by the numbers and the measures of things, which are still restrained. The part on the hot and cold in hell may well be original.

69 *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* 209.

70 *Ibid.*, 217. See also *ibid.*, 202, 210.

71 *Ibid.*, 206.

72 *ʿAẓama*, no. 572.

73 *Ibid.*, nos. 578–9.

There is an attempt at structure in *ʿAzama*. Sometimes the form of a layered cake is used.⁷⁴ Elsewhere, all, or at least most, similar fragments are placed together, as, for example, with the “herald”-fragments. The aim of the repeated dialogues between ʿAbdallāh ibn Salām and ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān is to keep the whole hell section together and integrate it into the book as a whole. Whether the sources will be located or not, *ʿAzama* possesses unique features in its elaborations on them, notably the pages on the heat and cold in hell. In spite of its structural and linguistic shortcomings, it gives, by its very size and fantasy, an all-round and impressive description of hell.

How effective was that description for the original audience or readership? It is easy enough for a modern person to dispose of this text as vulgar and sloppy, and to find the exceedingly large numbers it uses ridiculous. However, it probably did succeed in frightening a great deal of the intended readers, or at least made them shiver. It may even have encouraged them, indirectly, to live in such a way as to not end up in hell. At the same time, it may also have provided pleasure, at least to the author, who obviously had a sadistic streak. When one tries to visualize hell from this text, the result is similar to present-day sadistic fantasies, horror films and underground comic strips: monsters with iron hooks in their claws, severed limbs spouting blood and pus, stripped-off skins, snakes and scorpions wriggling over naked bodies. Today, quite a number of people derive a mixture of fright and lust from such pictures or descriptions; would that have been so different in past centuries?

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74 See, for instance, *ʿAzama*, nos. 487–8, 489–90, 506–7, 515–6 and *passim*.

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