Sura 53, *al-Najm*, “the Star”, is a famous short sura in which the speaker describes a vision of God and/or His angel. It consists of 62 verses in rhymed prose, with the same rhyme used in all but the last six verses, and it falls into four parts.

The Disputed Ṣāḥib

Part I opens with an oracular verdict on the credibility of “your man” (*ṣāḥibu-kum*), narrated in the style of a pre-Islamic diviner (*kāhin*) delivering a verdict in a dispute brought to him, if we may trust the tradition on Jāhilī Arabia.1 But

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1 For *kāhin*s (of whom there were several different kinds) acting in dispute settlements, see Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq*, ed. Kh.A. Fāriq (Hyderabad, 1964). The procedures are particularly well described in the cases at 114–116 (disputed presence at a *majlis*) and 118–120 (accusation of adultery; also in other works). Ibn Ḥabīb strangely calls both cases a *munāfara*, a boasting competition, perhaps because honour was the issue in both of them, but real boasting competitions were about the relative merit and nobility of two men and were normally settled by *ḥakams*, usually translated as “umpires” or “arbitrators” (correctly, if meaning judges whose verdict could not be enforced). There were several kinds of those too. The key difference between *ḥakams* and *kāhins* was that *ḥakams* were knowledgeable about tribal law, whereas *kāhins* had knowledge of the supernatural. *Ḥakams* were chosen on the basis of their “nobility, truthfulness, reliability, leadership, age, dignity and experience”, as al-Yaʿqūbī says (see *Taʾrīkh*, ed. M.Th. Houtsma (Leiden, 1883), ii, 299), and many were chiefs. By contrast, diviners had opted out of their tribes and lived in isolation, or they were women, sometimes slave women,
whereas a kāhin delivers a verdict on another person, the speaker in sura 53 is delivering a verdict on himself: namely, that he is speaking the truth when he claims to have seen a heavenly being and is neither mistaken nor trying to mislead—he has indeed received a revelation from a mighty power. He proceeds to describe how this revelation was imparted and asks if they are going to dispute what he saw, adding that he saw the mighty power on another occasion too, describing that as well (53:1–18).

There are several problems in this section. Leaving aside the oddity of the fa-in verse 6, where it introduces an earlier event rather than a subsequent one, who is the heavenly being imparting revelation to the disputed person? One takes the answer to be God, since the recipient is identified as “His servant” (53:10), but this identification has always been controversial, and a parallel passage in sura 81 identifies the power as the angel by the throne. Here, the oracular verdict on the disputed person’s claim is that “this is the statement of a noble messenger (rasūl karīm), a powerful one by the firm throne whom your šāhib did see in the clear horizon” (81:19–23), presumably giving us an oracular verdict on the disputed person again. Maybe there is no contradiction, for in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere angels are sometimes manifestations of God, not least the angel of the throne. This is, however, at odds with the rest of the Quran, for the Messenger devotes immense energy to distinguishing angels from God, stressing that they are beings created by Him, not His “partners”, as the pagans reputedly claimed. In other words they did not share in His divinity and could not do anything on their own initiative. It is also noteworthy that the word used for the angel in 81:19 is rasūl. This term does indeed appear elsewhere in the Quran in the sense of angel (for example, 11:69 f. and 51:26 f., on how the rusul did not touch the calf that Abraham prepared for them; cf. also the angels of death as sometimes rusul and sometimes malā’ika in 43:7; 6:61; 7:37 and 16:28). But normally the Messenger prefers the term malak. In his understanding, a rasūl was a human messenger (apostolos), such as he claimed to be himself. He sometimes clarifies this by glossing rasūl as nabi, prophet (for example, 19:51), or by using nabi alone (for example, 7:157). He even asserts that all the rusul

who stood outside the tribal system of authority. It was for their supernatural knowledge that they were chosen, and they were always tested for their access to the unseen before being asked to deliver a verdict. Ibn Khaldūn saw this very well. T. Fahd, La divination arabe (Leiden, 1966), 118, citing his Muqaddima, ed. M. Quatremère (Paris, 1858), 1, 196; tr. F. Rosenthal, second ed. (Princeton, 1967), 1, 218 f., on ‘arrāf’s and kuhhān. Diviners always delivered their verdict in rhymed prose (saj). Al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Bayān wa’l-tabīn, ed. ‘A.-S.M. Hārūn, second printing (Cairo, 1960–1961), 1, 284, 289 f., claims that hukkām (enumerated by name) did so as well, thereby creating a confusion that has endured to this day.