CHAPTER 5

Paradise as a Quranic Discourse: Late Antique Foundations and Early Quranic Developments*

Angelika Neuwirth

1 Introduction

Eschatology is certainly among the central discourses of the Quran. Its prominence is largely due to the challenge encountered by the Quranic community that had to counterbalance the extremely powerful mundane pagan ideology that predominated in its Arabian milieu: the ideology of muruwwa, i.e., “heroism,” “tribal pride,” which expressed itself in a heroic and at the same time hedonist, “carpe-diem-life style,” embodied by the Bedouin hero and portrayed by the ancient Arab poet. For the concept of muruwwa see Montgomery, Dichotomy; see also Neuwirth, Scripture 53–75. This anthropocentric understanding of the world, eloquently voiced in ancient Arabic poetry, is taken up as a primary target of the early Quranic message. Excessive worldliness and unlimited confidence in man’s autonomous power in the Quran is countered by a new, theocentric eschatological thinking. Quranic eschatology is projected through multiple images that during the first Meccan period of the Prophet’s ministry crystallized into an elaborate drama2 often conjured up in the Quran. Yet, although the diverse events leading up to the last day – such as the cosmic cataclysm, the awakening of the dead, and the ensuing punishment of the sinners in hell – all play an important role in the message of eschatology, these are only secondary textual emplotments when compared with the core piece of Quranic eschatology, the image of paradise.

As a prevalent Quranic motif, paradise not only exerted a sustainable influence on the spiritual life and the socio-political Weltanschauung of the Prophet’s contemporaries and later recipients of the Quran,3 but it also equally inspired classical Arabic literature and art. Whereas this complex reception history of the Quranic paradise motif has been amply studied, the particular

* A concise version of this chapter will appear in Neuwirth, Scripture 76–101.
1 For the concept of muruwwa see Montgomery, Dichotomy; see also Neuwirth, Scripture 53–75.
2 Smith, Eschatology 44–54.
3 Jarrar, Martyrdom 87–108.
literary shape of the Quranic paradise itself has seldom been submitted to investigation. Traditional Muslim scholars as well as Western critics have usually taken the numerous impressive descriptions of paradisal scenarios simply as a Quranic “peculiarity,” an iconic *fait accompli*. They usually do not inquire into these narratives’ possible dialectical relation vis-à-vis earlier images of paradise,⁴ let alone their ideological function in relation to the Quranic message. Instead, a teleological approach is pursued in which not late antique, but Islamic exegetical texts are consulted – texts that are built on a much later and very different vision of the world and the hereafter⁵ – to explain the unique features of the Quranic paradise.

Though it is true that this kind of anachronistic approach is prevalent in contemporary scholarship, remnants of an earlier scholarly tradition remain. This tradition, which was established in the nineteenth century, succeeded during the short period of one century – between 1833 and 1935 – in laying the foundation for a historically conscious model of Quranic studies both in terms of methodology and the selection of comparative material. This scholarly tradition, initiated by Abraham Geiger (1833),⁶ one of the founders of the reform movement of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*,⁷ focused on late antique intertexts of the Quran, primarily the Jewish and Christian traditions, but paid equal attention to the pagan Arabian traditions. It was Josef Horovitz whose path-breaking essay “Das Koranische Paradies” (1923) was to open scholars’ eyes to the multiple literary layers that underlie the Quranic imaginations of the eschatological beyond. Furthermore, it was the role of the last representative of that tradition, Heinrich Speyer (1931),⁸ to throw light on the primordial paradise, and submit its narrative references to a source-critical investigation. Some modern contributions on the subject – by Walid Saleh,⁹ Patricia Crone,¹⁰ Gabriel Reynolds¹¹ who has focused on Syriac textual predecessors, and the present writer¹² – have proceeded in a similar vein. The historical approach based on the search for “intertexts,” i.e., late antique traditions echoed in the Quran, is pursued systematically in the recently established research project

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⁴ As an exception, Horovitz, *Das koranische Paradies* 1–16 deserves to be mentioned.
⁶ Geiger, *Judenthume*.
⁷ Hartwig et al. (eds.), *Geschichte*; Hartwig, *Anfänge*; Hartwig, *Gründerdisziplin*.