

5 The Casting

A Close Hearing of Sūra 20:1–79

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Early Qur'ānic Mūsā

The prophet Mūsā takes a principle role in the sacred history presented within the Qur'ān. The frequency of Mūsā's appearances, the sustained nature of many of them, the multiple overlaps of particular episodes of his life and prophetic career, each with its distinctive perspective and mode of representation, and the intensity with which the life of Mūsā and the unfolding life of the prophet of the Qur'ān reflect one another – all of these features present to Qur'ānic literary criticism both a challenge and an opportunity.¹

Mūsā's staff and the uses to which he puts it form a motif that bridges diverse Qur'ānic accounts. Mūsā casts the staff to the ground, whereupon it takes on the state of a writhing snake; he contends with the forces of Fir'awn in a duel of staff casting; he wields his staff to strike a dry path through the sea; and then, when his people are thirsting in the desert, he uses it to strike open twelve springs from out of a rock.

The act of casting – of the staff and other objects – dominates the Mūsā account in Q 20 (ṬāHā). This sura contains the longest Mūsā narrative in the Qur'ān, in both word count and verse count, and is also the sura most completely given over to the story of Mūsā (90 of 135 verses). In ṬāHā, a revelation of divine identity and a struggle over the nature of lordship unfold through embedded chains of vision, speech acts, and acts of casting that carry a transformative, even miraculous impact or, in their failure to do so, are exposed as pretense. Verbs for casting or throwing (*ilqā'*, *qadhf*, *nabdih*) dominate the action. The objects cast, in addition to the staff/snake and Fir'awn's would-be rope-and-staff snakes, include: the infant Mūsā, who is cast into the ark by his mother; the ark itself, now holding the infant, which is to be cast onto the waters and then cast by the waters onto the shore; the love that the divine addresser tells Mūsā “we cast over you”; the magicians, who are cast prostrate to the ground into the position of prayer; the fistful of something “from the trace of the messenger” cast by as-Sāmīrī upon the idol of the calf; the ornaments that Mūsā's people cast down during the construction of the idol; and the tablets cast down by Mūsā in reaction to their idolatry.

The prophetic career of Mūsā within the Qur'ān can be divided into two clearly delineated parts: one, that of “the young Mūsā,” in which Fir'awn is his chief

antagonist, and the other, following the parting of the sea, in which the waywardness of the Banī Isrā'īl constitute his principle challenge – with the escape of Mūsā and the Banī Isrā'īl through the waters (*al-yamm*) and the perishing of Fir'awn and his followers marking the division between the two parts. In this essay, I will limit the discussion to the early Mūsā accounts, with a focus on ṬāHā: 9–79.

Figure 5.1 indicates the major episodes of the early Mūsā passages as they appear in ṬāHā and the five other suras most germane to the discussion that follows.²

Before proceeding, I note some essential features of the method employed here. Two Qur'ānic Mūsā passages begin with the question, “has the story of Mūsā reached you?” (*hal atāka ḥadīthu mūsā*, Q 79:15 and Q 20:9).³ That question establishes core structures of address, locution, quotations, verse style, and rhyme for what follows. The masculine, singular *you* is recognized as the primary, implied addressee of the Qur'ān, but that addressee, unlike other prophets (e.g., as in the expression *yā mūsā*) is never named within locutions of direct address. I will refer

Episode ↓ / Sūra →	79	20	27	26	28	7
Ark / Umm Mūsā		37–40a			7–13	
Homicide		40b			14–21	
Madyan		40c			22–28	
Vision of Fire	16a	10–11a	7–8		29–30a	
I Your Lord		11b13	9		30b	
I Allāh		14–16				
Snake / Staff 1		17–21	10–11		31	
White Hand 1		22–23	12a		32a	
Mission 1	16b–20	24	12b	10–11	32b	103
Hārūn Request		25–36		12–14	33–34	
Mission 2		42–48*		15–17	35	
Audience Fir'awn	21	47–60*		16–31	36–37	104–6
Mūsā Expounds		52–53				
Divine Exposition		54–55				
Staff / White Hand 2				32–33		107–8
Fir'awn Reacts	21–24	60–64	13–14	34–36	37	109–12
Magicians Plan				37–42		112–14
Dueling Staffs		65–69		43–45		115–19
Magicians Thrown		70		46–47		120–22
Fir'awn's Threat		71		48–49		123–24
Magicians Expound		72–76		50–51		125–26
Splitting the Sea		77–79		52–66	40	136–38

Figure 5.1 Some Major Early Mūsā Passages in the Qur'ān

to this primary addressee simply as “the prophet.” By *the* prophet, I intend the figure who is both the primary addressee (as in “has the story of Mūsā reached you?”) as well as the implied proclaimer (as indicated, e.g., by the frequent occurrence within the Qur’ān of the second-person singular imperative “*qul*” (say!).⁴ For reasons elaborated below, I will also not use upper-case for the prophet; all references to “the prophet” are references to the prophet figure who receives and proclaims the Qur’ānic revelations. By refraining from naming the prophet in the act of addressing him, the Qur’ān shapes him as its central persona, allowing him to reflect and indeed partake of the life and prophecies of earlier figures in a particularly intimate manner – none more so in this regard than Mūsā in ṬāHā. The accounts of earlier prophets are told not only as sacred history but also, insofar as aspects of their stories and of the revelations given to them are also applicable to the Qur’ānic prophet, as sacred present. The drama of the prophet’s life in process is frequently marked within the Qur’ān, as in the admonition at the end of the full Mūsā account in ṬāHā (Q 20:114), “Do not rush the *Qur’ān* before the revelation has been determined for you” (*lā ta’jil bi-l-Qur’āni min qabli an yuqḍā ilayka wahyuhu*). Here the admonition may refer not simply to the need of the prophet to avoid haste in telling the story he already has been told but also to avoid haste in telling the story that he has not yet been fully told because it has not yet been fully determined within his own life.

The non-naming of the prophet within locutions of direct address intensifies the partial fusion among the lives, struggles, and consciousness of the early prophets and the ongoing drama of the prophet as well as the character development of the prophet, the primary protagonist within the text. That non-naming is also a vital element in establishing the sense of intimacy between the prophet as the first addressee and the audience of the Qur’ānic addresses, to whom the prophet was to proclaim them, as well as all those who later hear or read them. The audience encounters the revelation through the persona of the prophet, as if they were standing alongside or somehow located within him as the divine voice is presenting its various prophetic utterances. In addition, although the singular “you” at times applies exclusively to the prophet, in other cases (e.g., “has the story of Mūsā reached you?”), the “you” may evoke both the first addressee as well as each member of the implied and actual audience as the Qur’ānic everyman who will hear the narrations of the story of Mūsā that follows.⁵

Along with the non-naming of the prophet in direct address, the feature known as “turning” (*iltifāt*) in the Qur’ān is of particular importance in this regard. As defined by Arabic rhetoricians, *iltifāt* includes, among other features, a sudden change in the grammatical person or number in reference to the same existent. Of the varieties of this feature of *iltifāt*, the shifts of most concern in this essay will be those in reference to the deity: among first-person plural “we”; first-person singular “I”; third-person pronominal “he”; third-person by relational substantive, as with “your lord” or “his lord”; and third-person through names such as al-Raḥmān and Allāh or epithets such as al-‘Azīz al-Ḥakīm – to mention a few of the more common examples. Such shifts can be found in other genres of Arabic literature and in other literature, but few texts are as fundamentally and radically marked by them as the Qur’ān.⁶

Qur’ānic *iltifāt* works against an objectifying God language. That there is one and only one deity affirmed within the Qur’ān is not of course in question. But

Qur’ānic *iltifāt* disrupts the development of any extended second-order denomination of a generic deity that might be objectified and thus put at a semantic removal through a stable set of grammatical persons, names, or pronouns. The epithets and circumlocutions used by classical Qur’ānic exegetes and rhetoricians, such as “may he be exalted,” “may he be held as mighty and transcendent,” “may the mention of him preserve his transcendence,” and “majestic be the one who said” (*ta’ālā, ‘azza wa jalla, ta’ālā dhikruhu, ‘azza min qā’il*), and as used by rhetoricians to indicate a word referring to the deity as “a locution of transcendence” (*lafẓ al-jalāla*), can serve not only as gestures of respect but also as reminders of the non-objectified and thereby transcendent nature of the Qur’ānic addresser.⁷ In most cases, the identity of the actors will be inferred without difficulty by hearers or readers of the Qur’ān. Nevertheless, the need for continual acts of inference draws the reader or hearer of the Qur’ān into an intensive engagement with the discourse. In order to respect and reflect these characteristics, I make every effort to avoid naming the unnamed, filling in ellipses, or otherwise superimposing over the Qur’ānic language any form of paraphrase that would override such core literary features. In the translations presented here, therefore, I refrain from employing the large-case, small-case convention commonly used to inflect pronouns as divine or non-divine. I also refrain from employing parenthesis to fill in the names of actors who are not named and whose identification requires more or less intensive engagement even by those who know the passages well.

Such an approach to the Qur’ān needs also to confront the issue of the reader – be it the implied reader, model reader, minimally competent reader, or actual reader. Modern poetics and narratology, which are heavily invested in prose fiction, assume that the consumers of literature are readers and that the work of literature is written. And writing, as Walter Ong points out, is a solitary activity, as is, of course, reading in the modern sense. The Qur’ān, by contrast, is characterized (and characterizes itself) as both oral and aural.⁸ It is permeated with the characteristics of oral-performative discourse. Its thick texture of rhyme, rhythm, assonance, consonance, cadence, and loose syntactical structures produces aurality and continually calls attention to that aurality.⁹ In addition, as mentioned earlier, the Qur’ān presents itself as made up, in large part, of a set of divinely authored discourses addressed to the prophet that, however we might explain the communications theologically, are in the form of direct speech, and thus not only the prophet but also the secondary audience (both implied and, I suggest, actual) are both listening to and hearing those addresses. They are hearers. But they are also listeners – the more active and attentive side of the hearing/listening doublet. Finally, the actual audience of the Qur’ān today and, according to all indications in the historical record, in the past as well, consists of those who learn the Qur’ān by learning to recite it, who hear it recited throughout their lives, and who recite it themselves – including the literate percentage of the audience who also read the Qur’ān as well as a remarkable number of non-Arabic speakers who learn to recite the Qur’ān with advanced sensitivity to syntax, register, and cadence, yet are unable to parse the Arabic grammar. Rather than employing an awkward combination expression such as hearer/listener/reader or substituting the hearer/

listener for the reader, I will refer instead to the qur'ānic "audient," where one might otherwise refer to the "reader."¹⁰

The Qur'ān continually refers to its own discursive performance.¹¹ It does not simply present different accounts of particular events but also performs the events in differing modes of narration, address, and dialogue and with differing mixtures of poetic, dramatic, and expository functions. These performances involve extra-qur'ānic exegesis (exegesis of versions of events in biblical, post-biblical, or other traditions), intra-qur'ānic exegesis (in which one qur'ānic passage fills in, explains, builds upon, or in some cases complicates further a qur'ānic performance that would appear to have come earlier), as well as an intra-qur'ānic performativity manifested in a variety of ways, including the way in which the Qur'ān presents different performances of what is in some way the same story, but each in a different key, with differing thematic, homiletic, polemical, and narratological features. We may not be able to determine definitely which performance preceded or followed upon the other, but with the exception of those passages that display a sense of imminent or actual closure of the revelation process, the Qur'ān presents itself, emphatically, as discourse in progress.

In regard to the prevalence of the poetic mode within qur'ānic discourse – with greater or lesser degrees of intensity – and the malleability of its verse, rhythm, and rhyme, we confront an unknown. There may have been one or more pre-Islamic Arabic traditions of *non-shi'r* poetic-prophetic discourse in various genres as well as discourses with malleable rhythm, rhyme, and verse length amid which the Qur'ān developed and against which it was measured by its early audients. Beyond a few examples of *saj'* (sometimes translated as "rhymed prose"), the post-qur'ānic tradition did not see fit to remember or record it.¹²

The Narrative Mode in ṬāHā 9–79

Among the early Mūsā accounts, ṬāHā stands out as distinctive in several areas. Most immediately evident is composition. It features various verse styles: mid-length verses, extra-long verses jammed with action verbs, and even the irruption of a prayer in the hymnic or incantatory style most often associated with the prophet's earliest pronouncements. It presents sets of dialogues with short statements and responses but also some open-ended dialogues in which a response turns gradually into a prophetic address. And it makes intensive use of embedding, with addresses couched within addresses, narratives within narratives, and quotations within quotations, along with some dramatic moments in which the nested frames collapse into one another. ṬāHā also stands within a field of transtextual or, as I would prefer, transdiscursive resonance with two qur'ānic passages in which it is the qur'ānic prophet rather than Mūsā who is being addressed: Q 58:1–18 and Q 94:1–8.¹³ Through the multiple and compounded echoes between a section of ṬāHā and the addresses in Q 53 and Q 94, the story of Mūsā (and Mūsā's mother) and that of the prophet – past prophecy and prophecy as it is unfolding in the qur'ānic present – are enfolded into one another.

With the exception of verse 40, ṬāHā 9–79 makes sparing use of the perfect tense associated with straightforward narrative. The first part of the early Mūsā story in ṬāHā (vv. 9–49), which relates the life of Mūsā from birth to the midpoint of his confrontation with Fir'awn, is narrated to Mūsā (and simultaneously to the prophet, and of course to us as implied and actual audients) with Mūsā standing near the fire in the valley of Ṭuwā. The stories of the infant Mūsā and the ark, Mūsā's homicide, and Mūsā's stay in Madyan are recalled to Mūsā *retrospectively* as if or as he is still standing near the fire. The journey to Fir'awn's court and the first part of the confrontation and dialogue with Fir'awn are told in *prophetically prospective* time, as commands to Mūsā (and Mūsā-Hārūn). Although the qur'ānic audient may surmise that these commands will have been fulfilled, the narrative tension created by the fact that the address is still situated at the temporal and spatial moment of the revelation in Ṭuwā remains. The spell is not broken until a voice irrupts into the prospective time with present-tense direct speech (v. 49): "And who is this lord of the two of you, Mūsā?" (*wa man rabbukumā yā mūsā*). Those words fit perfectly into the prospective dialogue given to Mūsā, but now they are coming from another party, unnamed but identifiable through inference as Fir'awn. Once that question is sounded, what were commands to Mūsā are resituated as narratives of what in fact did happen.

The narrative complexity of ṬāHā 9–49 emerges most clearly if we compare it to the performance of the same events in Sūra 28 (al-Qaṣaṣ). That sura begins with the narrator speaking in the first-person plural, stating that "these are verses of the book that makes clear (*al-kitāb al-mubīn*), wherein we measure out (*natlū*) to you a portion of the authentic story of Mūsā and Fir'awn." In contrast to ṬāHā, al-Qaṣaṣ presents events in a strictly chronological sequence and with minimal use of embedding. The relevant incidents could be given the following subtitles: *Umm Mūsā and the Tābūt (Ark)*, *Mūsā's Act of Homicide*, *Mūsā in Madyan*, and *Mūsā at the Fire*. The section on Mūsā at the fire is made up of chronologically ordered subunits involving the revelation and then the mission bestowed upon Mūsā, the signs of the staff/snake and white hand, Mūsā's petition to have Hārūn help him, Mūsā's (and Hārūn's) confrontation with Fir'awn, and Mūsā's splitting of the sea. In addition, al-Qaṣaṣ relies strongly on third-person perfect verbs: X did (or said) this, then Y did (or said) that, then Z did (or said). Al-Qaṣaṣ even fills in the prehistory of the story by recounting Fir'awn's order that Israelite male newborns be killed, thus providing an explanatory context for Umm Mūsā's divinely commanded act of placing her infant in an ark and setting the ark adrift on the waters. To be sure, in this case, as in other cases of narrative gaps or suspension, the audients who came after the compilation of the full qur'ānic text would be aware of the details of the Mūsā story that are left out of any single qur'ānic narration of it. And the pre-compilation audients would likely have been aware of Mūsā lore circulating with and around the nascent qur'ānic community. However, the gap between ṬāHā and al-Qaṣaṣ in terms of discursive strategies is striking. The measured nature of al-Qaṣaṣ in this regard is further enhanced by its regular cadence, based on verses that are balanced in length and that form themselves consistently around the rhyme in *īm* and *īn*.

To return now to ṬāHā: the second part of the Mūsā story in ṬāHā (46–79) proceeds in chronological sequence but continues to thwart direct narrative expectations. In the discussion that follows later in this essay, this section of ṬāHā will be contrasted with the narration in Q 26 and Q 7 of the same events. In ṬāHā, the speeches by Mūsā and by the converted magicians serve as instances of prophetic ambiguity. The speakers begin their orations by speaking in a manner that emphasizes their own human frailty, then move into a confident, powerful proclamation of the core truths of the Qur'ān, and at some point (not easily identified by exegetes), are eclipsed by the divine voice breaking into what appears to be their discourse. The *tafsīr* tradition and the history of qur'ānic translations demonstrate the difficulty of determining where the human speaker ceases to speak and where the divine speaker takes over and, by taking over, interrupts into the story through several temporal and narrative frames: addressing the Fir'awn/magicians, Mūsā, the prophet, and “us” – the implied secondary audients (or overhearers) of the Qur'ān.

The ṬāHā account also intensifies the ambiguity or ambivalence of number and identity at key narrative moments. Nearly identical commands are given, one to Mūsā and then one to Mūsā and Hārūn, and the tension between singular and dual agency is heightened throughout the confrontation with Fir'awn and then compounded further when the divine narrator enters into the story it is telling as a protagonist on the side of Mūsā/Hārūn. Similar tensions mark the side of the antagonist(s). Fir'awn speaks as if he is surrounded by allies or agents, but they are not identified. He “marshals,” but there is no object indicating the forces that he marshals. Then an unspecified “they” confer in secret and then come forth. No magicians are mentioned as being present at the court or being summoned to the court; indeed, the magicians are explicitly mentioned only in the wake of the performance of magic: they take on a distinct identity as magicians only in their act of renouncing magic as they are transformed from agents of the antagonist to agents of the protagonist. Finally, the event at the very culmination of the duel of staff casting, toward which the entire sura had been building, is never in fact narrated; instead, the force of the verb “cast” is displaced onto the magicians who are cast to the ground in positions of worship.

Each of these points will be examined through a closer look at the relevant ṬāHā passages in comparison with other qur'ānic narratives of the same events. In that regard, an invaluable window into the early Mūsā narrative in ṬāHā is provided by an eleven-verse passage in Sūra 79 (an-Nāzi'āt, vv. 15–26), which stands as a condensed doublet for a major part of ṬāHā.¹⁴

A Window into ṬāHā (Q 79:15–26)

Has the story of Mūsā reached you? (15)

How his lord called him in the holy valley Ṭuwā:

Go to Fir'awn – he's transgressed –

Ask him: would you wish to be made pure
and that I guide you and that you know awe?

He showed him the greatest sign (20)

but he called lie, then disobeyed,
and then turned his back, quickening,
then marshaled, then called out
and said: I am your lord most high
Then Allāh seized him as a warning for the here-after
and the here-before (25)
In that there is a lesson for those who know awe.

hal atāka ḥadīthu Mūsā (15)

idh nādāhu rabbuhu bi-l-wādi l-muqaddasi ṭuwā

idhhab ilā fir'awna innahu ṭaghā

fa-qul hal la-ka ilā an tazakkā

wa-ahdiyaka ilā rabbika fa-takhshā

fa arā-hu l-āyata l-kubrā (20)

fa-kadhhaba wa-'aṣā

thumma adbara yas'ā

fa-ḥashara fa-nādā

fa-qāla ana rabbukumū l-a'lā

fa-akhadhahu llāhu nakāla l-ākhirati wa-l-ūlā (25)

inna fī dhālika la-'ibtratan li-man yakhsā

An-Nāzi'āt is a forty-six-verse sura composed in the hymnic and incantatory style, with short verses, tight rhymes, and dense employment of assonance, nasalization, and consonance – features associated with the first period of the Qur'ān, although its multiple rhyme schemes and one or more apparently misplaced verses have led to disagreement over its place in the chronology of the Qur'ān and over whether it in fact constitutes a single prophetic unit, that is, a passage composed or proclaimed as a unit at one particular point in the prophet's career.¹⁵ The trans-discursive relationship between the early Mūsā sections in an-Nāzi'āt and ṬāHā will be demonstrated here, even as the interdiscursive relationship between them (i.e., which one is quoting, partially imitating, recasting, alluding to, or evoking the other) will remain open.

The an-Nāzi'āt Mūsā section can be outlined as follows:

- 1 The *call* by Mūsā's lord to Mūsā
- 2 The *commission* enjoined upon Mūsā, which includes
 - a The *command* to go to Fir'awn
 - b The *message* Mūsā is to bear
- 3 The *display* of the greatest sign, which is commonly interpreted as referring to Mūsā's display of the sign to Fir'awn, although the nature of the sign remains unspecified
- 4 Fir'awn's *reaction*, which includes
 - a A series of *frenetic but vaguely defined actions* (called lie, disobeyed, turned away, quickened or bestirred, marshaled)
 - b His *call or claim* to be your [p] lord

- 5 The divine *reaction*
 6 A metanarrative declaration that the story contains an *'ibra* or admonition for those who know awe

The passage is a narrative addressed to the prophet. Within that narrative is an embedded address to Mūsā, within which an address to Fir'awn is embedded. Mūsā's lord calls him and gives him a mission (to go to Fir'awn) and a reason for it (Fir'awn has transgressed). The transformative action is indicated by the sentence "He showed him the greatest sign" (*al-āyat al-kubrā*). The reaction by Fir'awn is narrated through a rapid-fire set of third-person, perfect-tense verbs: he called lie, turned away, quickened or sprang into action, marshaled or assembled (a transitive verb lacking a direct object that would indicate who is being assembled), and called out, thereby countering Mūsā's invitation to be guided to his (Fir'awn's own) lord with the claim that "I [Fir'awn] am your [pl] lord most high." Fir'awn rushes around engaging in various actions: retreating, coming forward, marshaling no one in particular, and calling out – to no one in particular or at least to no one this narration deems worth mentioning – that he is their lord. The deity, by contrast, reacts simply and effortlessly, not by smiting Fir'awn but by seizing him as an example for this life and the afterlife, as if the divine power simply reached in and plucked him out of his own history in progress to transform him into a historical and eschatological paradigm.

Many of the words ending in long ā in this passage form sound-meaning units, that is, combinations of sound and sense that take on a meaning beyond what is denoted or connoted by a word outside of that pattern or at least outside of the formative instance of that pattern. Thus *ṭaghā*, [*ta*] *tazakkā*, *takhshā*, *'aṣā*, *a'lā*, and *yas'ā* clarify one another through their contrastive relationships within the phonological, rhetorical, semantic, and symbolic field they establish. What was it that Fir'awn did to transgress (*ṭaghā*)? It is never stated here, and even in the more extended narration in ṬāHā, it is never made explicit, although the text invites us to infer that Fir'awn's subsequent reaction to the message delivered by Mūsā, which includes his claim to be some group's lord, may offer a clue concerning the original transgression.

Two words pose special difficulties for translation: *takhshā* and *yas'ā*. As will be seen from analogous passages in ṬāHā, the reverential fear denoted by *khashiya* contrasts, within the early Mūsā accounts, to the more ordinary fear denoted by *khawf*. Modern English lacks a verbal equivalent to *khashiya* as it is used here to denote a state of coming into reverential fear, or being in a state of reverential fear, but without any stated object of that fear. "To dread," which can be used in such an intransitive fashion, might be one possibility, but in modern English, dread and awe, which may have largely overlapped connotatively, have diverged, with dread used for the fear of a monstrous or demonic force. (No need here to tarry over the devaluation of the adjective "awesome" in contemporary slang.) At any rate, the experience of awe is evoked by the invitation to Fir'awn to know, experience, or stand in awe (*takhshā*) and by an address to the prophet that occurs at the penultimate verse of an-Nāzi'āt that *does* include an object (Q

79:45): "You are only a warner for those who know awe before it [the hour of reckoning]" (*innamā anta mundhiru man yakhshāhā*). Such reverential fear as an immersive attentiveness of life-or-death intensity appears as both a result of and a precondition for the acceptance of guidance (*hudā*).

Ṭaghā is given both an acoustic and a semantic location, on the other hand, through its relationship to *'asā* and through the semantically contrastive rhyme words *tazakkā* and *takhshā*. What is Mūsā suggesting to Fir'awn to do in asking him if he would self-purify (*tazakkā*)? Once again we are neither told here nor is the answer made explicitly clear in ṬāHā. And what is the greatest sign (*al-āyat al-kubrā*), and who displayed it to whom? The answer may seem clear in retrospect, but as we will see, it is in fact given different answers in the Qur'ān, with the displayer identified as either the deity or Mūsā and the one who receives the display as either Mūsā or Fir'awn. In the passage under consideration here, exegetes have taken the subject as Mūsā and the indirect object as Fir'awn. However, in ṬāHā, Mūsā is given the most glorious signs (in the plural), and it is the divine narrator/addresser/protagonist who shows them to Fir'awn (*araynāhu*).

As for *rabbukum al-a'lā* ("your lord most high"), a variant of it in ṬāHā echoes provocatively against it when the deity declares to Mūsā, who is anxious upon confronting the power of Fir'awn: *innaka anta l-a'lā* ("Lo you, you are the highest"). Here we find a combination of two emphatics, the repeated pronoun (lo you, you) and an elative (the highest) rarely used in regard to creatures in the Qur'ān, except transgressively.

The most difficult challenge in the case of these key rhyme words is that posed by *yas'ā*. Like *khashiya*, *sa'y* is used in several cases without a complement. It can mean "to hasten, strive, stir oneself, become busy about," or "to move into intense or concerted activity." In ṬāHā, the word will be used repeatedly, and in several of those cases, it means something like "to come alive" or "to move as if alive." To translate any single word in a long literary text with one word in the target language is difficult to do without a sense of artificiality, but in the limited case of the early Mūsā narrations, I have determined that "quickened," which can encompass all of the meanings mentioned, may serve in this instance to reflect what is common to the various instances of *sa'y*.¹⁶

Of course any set of end rhymes will be poetically marked. Incantatory suras such as Q 79 differ in this regard from both classical Arabic poetry, with its regularity of meter, rhyme, and verse length, and suras with the more discursive verse-style endings in *ūn/in/im*. The intense use of interior assonance in such suras, their malleability in terms of both metrics and rhyme patterns, and the shortness of their verse length gives end rhymes and other sound clusters a particular intensity; that intensity is heightened here by the use and placements of transitive verbs lacking in an objective complement. In calling these expressions sound-meaning units, I do not mean to suggest that without the acoustical elements, they could not ever be used intransitively within a mutually defining lexical field but to emphasize that there is a residue or surplus of signification within them and that their acoustical and formal relationship with one another within an-Nāzi'āt and within ṬāHā, respectively, intensifies the importance of that surplus.¹⁷ Figure 5.2

indicates how the eleven verses from the Mūsā section in an-Nāzi'āt, as well as other verses from the same sura, serve as a poetic, narrative, and proclamatory major chord for the much longer and more complex performance of the early Mūsā story in ṬāHā.

Note that the sound-meaning units in an-Nāzi'āt that reverberate within ṬāHā include elements outside of the Mūsā section. Among them, I would point to the following particularly important examples. Two verses in an-Nāzi'āt (27, 33) echo the themes, form, arguments, and rhetoric in ṬāHā 53–54. Verse 34 of an-Nāzi'āt has humans remembering, at the hour of reckoning, what they have quickened to (*yas'ā*) during their lives, a point that is stressed in ṬāHā during the account of

Sūra 79 (an-Nāzi'āt)	Sūra 20 (ṬāHā)
15 <i>hal atāka ḥadīthu Mūsā</i>	9 <i>hal atāka ḥadīthu Mūsā</i>
16 <i>idh nādāhu rabbuhu</i> 16b <i>bi-l-wādi l-muqaddasi ṭuwū</i>	11 <i>fa-lammā atāhā nūdiya yā-mūsā</i> 12 <i>innī anā rabbuka fa-khla' na' layka</i> <i>innaka bi-l-wādi l-muqaddasi ṭuwū</i>
17 <i>idhab ilā fir'awna innahu ṭaghā</i>	24 <i>idhhab ilā fir'awna innahu ṭaghā</i> 43 <i>idhhab ilā fir'awna innahu ṭaghā</i>
18 <i>fa-qul hal laka ilā an tazakkā</i> 19 <i>wa-ahdiyaka ilā rabbika fa-takhshā</i>	76b <i>wa dhālika jazā'u man tazakkā</i> 44 <i>qūlā lahu qawlan layyinān</i> <i>la'allahu yatadhakkaru aw yakhshā</i>
20 <i>fa-arāhu l-āyata l-kubrā</i>	23 <i>li-nuriyaka min āyātina l-kubrā</i> 56a <i>wa la-qad araynāhu āyātina kullahā</i>
21 <i>fa-kadhhaba wa-'aṣā</i> 23 <i>thumma adbara yas'ā</i> 24 <i>fa-ḥashara fa-nadā</i>	56b <i>fa-kadhhaba wa abā</i> 60 <i>fa-tawallā fir'awnu</i> <i>fa-jama'a kaydahū</i> <i>thumma atā</i>
22 <i>fa-qāla anā rabbukumū l-a'lā</i>	68 <i>qulnā lā takhaf</i> <i>innaka anta l-a'lā</i>
26 <i>inna fī dhālika la-'ibratan li-man yakhshā</i>	54 <i>inna fī dhālika la-āyātīn li-ulī n-nuhā</i> 128c <i>inna fī dhālika la-āyātīn li-ulī n-nuhā</i>
30 <i>wa l-arḍa ba'da dhālika dahāhā</i>	53 <i>al-ladhī ja'ala lakumū l-arḍa mahdan</i> <i>wa-anzala min as-samā'i mā'an</i> <i>fa-akhrājnā bihi azwājan</i> <i>min nabātīn shattā</i>
31 <i>akhrāja minhā mā'ahā wa-mar'āhā</i> [32 <i>wa-l-jibāla arsāhā</i>] 33 <i>matā'an lakum wa li-an'āmikum</i>	54 <i>kulū wa-r'ū an'āmikum</i>
34 <i>yawma yatadhakkaru l-insānu mā sa'ā</i>	3 <i>illā tadhkiratan li-man yakhshā</i>
42 <i>yas'alūnaka 'ani s-sā'ati ayyāna mursāha</i> 43 <i>fī-ma anta min dhikrāhā</i>	15a <i>inna s-sā'ata ātiyatun</i> 15b <i>akādu ukhfihā</i>
45 <i>innamā anta mundhiru man yakhshāhā</i>	15c <i>li tujzā kullu nafsin bi-mā tas'ā</i>

Figure 5.2 Transdiscursivity in Sūra 79 and Sūra 20

the revelation to Mūsā at the fire. The penultimate verse of an-Nāzi'āt (Q 79:45), “You are only a warner for those who know awe before it” (*man yakhshāhā*), reverberates with the opening two verses of ṬāHā, “We did not send down the Qur'an to you that you be troubled, but only as a reminder for whoever knows awe before it” (*man yakhshāhā*). It also recalls the divine command to Mūsā to invite Fir'awn to follow Mūsā's guidance that “you might know awe” (*fa takhshā*) (Q 79:19) along with its parallel verse in ṬāHā (Q 20:44), “Speak to him courteously that he might be reminded and know awe” (*fa yakhshā*).

A Close Hearing of Early Mūsā in ṬāHā (Q 20:1–79)

No judgment is made here upon redaction questions or upon chronological issues in cases of dense transdiscursivity. It is hoped that the close hearing, by temporarily bracketing such issues, may allow a closer attention to the text as it is, that such attention may in turn inform discussions of chronology and redaction, and finally but perhaps more importantly, may contribute to an understanding of the rhetorical, literary, and prophetic qualities of this section of ṬāHā as the text has come down to us.

In the translations, I refrain from employing end stops and make sparing use of punctuation. The aim is to follow the Qur'anic syntax and discursive flow without filling in with punctuations the poetic or non-discursive spaces that are left open in the Arabic text. As mentioned earlier, I also refrain from employing uppercase to mark pronouns with antecedents or implied antecedents that reflect divine agents. Nor do I employ quotation marks to indicated direct speech. In the latter case, the issue of embedded direct speech is precisely at issue in the analysis, and each section of the translation will be preceded or followed by discussion of the issue of when and how the embedded direct speech opens or closes within the passage in question.

Qur'anic discourse can challenge efforts a simple division. Thus, a division by theme may be in tension with a division by address. In the first case of such tension encountered in what follows, the opening address (from the divine addresser to the prophet) takes up verses 1–11. From the last part of verse 11 through much of the early Mūsā section, the address shifts to divine address and narration to Mūsā (which of course is embedded in the address to the prophet). Thematically, however, verses 1–8 form a clear unit as a prologue to what will follow, with the Mūsā story proper beginning at verse 9. Because such overlaps are precisely what is at issue in the following analysis, the divisions are meant to be working divisions rather than claims of inherent structure. One consequence of such a working division will be the need to represent overlaps in both the translation and analysis. At the end of this essay, I append the full translation of Q 20:1–79 that will have been discussed and analyzed section by section. By placing it at the end, I aim to have explained the various features of the translation during the earlier close hearing and also to allow for a synoptic view of the full passage after the section-by-section discussion.

ṬāHā consists of 135 verses, which can be given a working division as follows:

1–8	Prelude: Address to the Prophet
9–79	Early Mūsā
80–98	Later Mūsā
99	Admonition for Mūsā Story
100–112	Day of Reckoning and Resurrection Argument
113–14	Second Admonition
115–23	Adam and the Angels
124–28	Third Admonition
129–30	Demands for a Sign and Divine Response ¹⁸

The discussion that follows takes up the following passages, with each passage given in translation and, in the case of those passages discusses most intensively, in transliteration as well. In regard to transliteration, I endeavor to represent the basic vowel elisions of the Arabic and also to employ hyphens to clarify where needed the relationship of pronouns and particles to the expressions in which they occur. At the end of the essay, the full text is presented in translation, with the aim of offering a synoptic overview of the issues (including translation issues) discussed earlier.

Q 1–8, 99	Prelude and Admonition
Q 20:9–16	The Call
Q 20:17–41; Q 53:1–18; Q 96	Sign, Commission, Prayer, and Revelation
Q 20:42–56	Word
Q 20:56–64	The Gathering
Q 20:65–70	The Casting
Q 20:71–76	The Testimony
Q 20:77–79, 124–128	The Enveloping

Prelude (Q 20:1–8)

ṬāHā

We have not sent down the Qur'ān to you that you be troubled
 Only a reminder for one who knows awe
 Sent down from the one who created the earth and high heavens
 The compassionate has taken his place upon the throne (5)
 To him belong what is in the heavens and what is on the earth,
 what is between them and what is beneath the soil
 If you pronounce openly
 still he knows what is hidden, and has concealed
 Allāh no god is but he
 To him belong the most beautiful names

Three notes from the prelude will be elaborated throughout ṬāHā's distinctive performance of the early Mūsā story. The first, in verse 3, is the statement that the Qur'ān is sent down as a reminder for whoever knows, experiences, or stands in awe (*yakhshā*); and awe, as it was in an-Nāzi'āt, will become a core theme in ṬāHā. The second is the rather enigmatic statement to the prophet in verse 7, *wa in tajhar bi-l-qawli fa innahu ya'lamu s-sirra wa akhfā* ("and if you pronounce openly, still he knows what is hidden and *akhfā*"). The expression *wa akhfā* has provoked considerable commentary; and given that the verb is transitive, has no stated object, can mean "has concealed" or "has revealed," and may also be an elative, it is not surprising that many suggestions have been offered. Because the use of transitive verbs without their direct objects is a core feature of both an-Nāzi'āt and, even more so, ṬāHā, and because the theme of concealment is a guiding theme within the early Mūsā account in ṬāHā, I translate the verse as, "If you pronounce openly, still he knows what is hidden and has concealed."

The third key note in the prelude is the *tahlīl*. Verse 8 begins "Allāh no god but he" (*allāhu lā ilāhā illā hu[wa]*). Verse 98 of ṬāHā, which serves in part as a comment on the Mūsā narrative, begins, "Your only god is Allāh – there is no other god than he" (*innamā ilāhakumu llāhu lladhī lā ilāha illā hu[wa]*). The *tahlīl* thus frames the Mūsā story, and the Mūsā story proper begins with a revelation that emerges as a rare qur'ānic first-person divine proclamation of the *tahlīl* in a form, *immanī ana llāhu lā ilāha illā ana* ("I am, I am Allāh no god but I"), which is unique within the Qur'ān.

The Call (Q 20:9–16)

Has the story of Mūsā reached you?
 How he saw a fire and told his people: Stay, (10)
 I sense a fire. Perhaps I'll find an ember
 or encounter guidance at the fire
 Then as he drew near, he was called: Mūsā!
 I am, I am your lord
 Remove your shoes
 You are in the holy valley Ṭuwā
 I have chosen you
 So listen to that being revealed
 I am, I am Allāh no god but I
 Worship me and perform the prayer, remembering me
 The hour is coming. I hide it nearly (15)
 that each may be rewarded with that to which he quickens
 Do not let them turn you from it – they who deny it,
 following their inclination – you to perish

wa hal atāka ḥadīthu mūsā
idh ra'ā nāran fa-qāla li-ahlihi mkuthū (10)
innī ānastu nāran la'allī ātīkum minhā bi-qabasin
aw ajidu 'ala n-nāri hudā