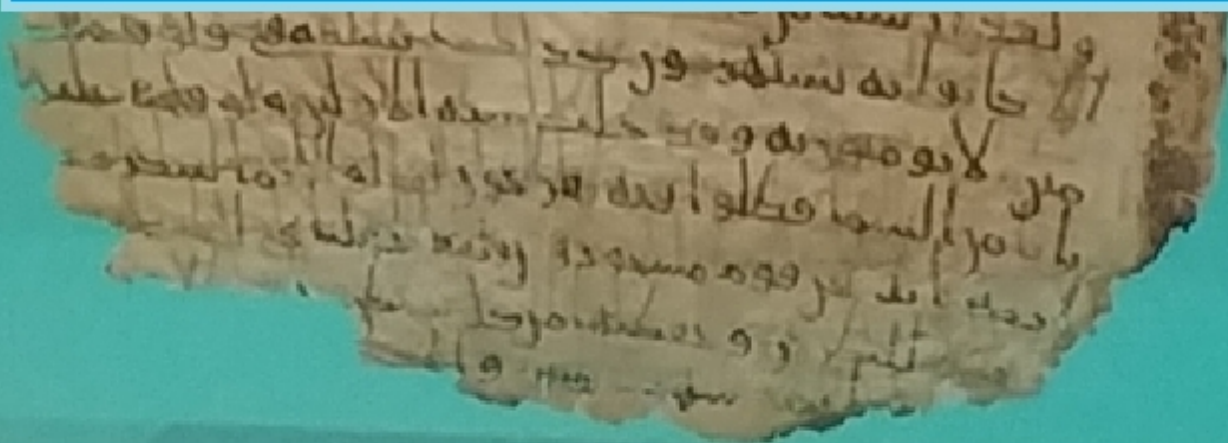


# Narrative Contradictions in the Quran

By Avnar Sidiche



# Narrative Contradictions in the Quran

## Introduction

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A well known feature of the Quran is that it often repeats the same stories in greater or lesser detail in multiple surahs. This investigation is the result of a careful comparison of the parallel narrative passages in the Quran, inspired by work of the academic scholar Joseph Witztum, from whom a couple of examples herein are used. Witztum is a scholar particularly interested in examining the differences between intra-Quranic parallels in order to illuminate the relative chronological order of surahs and other aspects of their composition.

He notes that the traditional Islamic approach tends to read these parallel passages harmonistically and that “Though the harmonistic approach is at times convincing, in itself it is insufficient. It cannot easily explain blatant contradictions between parallel versions and does not explain why the Quran chooses to present a given story slightly differently each time.”<sup>1</sup>

In this article I simply document well over a dozen cases of such contradictions. In some cases there are possible harmonistic arguments which might have some merit and are discussed. The Sahih International translation is used throughout.

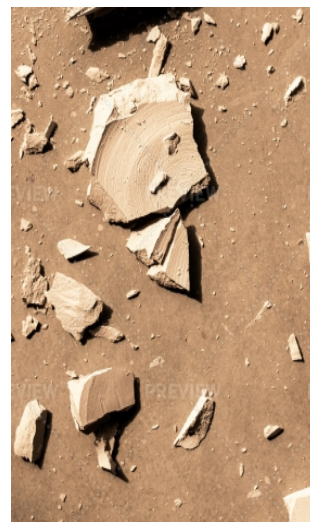
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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Witztum. Variant Traditions, Relative Chronology, and the Study of Intra-Quranic Parallels. In *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*. Edited by Behnam Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein and Robert G. Hoyland. Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp. 5-6.

## Abraham and the idols

Two somewhat different narratives appear in Q. 21 al-'Anbiyā' and Q. 37 aṣ-Ṣāffāt concerning Abraham's smashing of the idols after challenging his father and his people. I focus here on one aspect. The author neglects to be consistent on the locations where the events unfold. In the simpler story of Q. 37, the events all take place at the location of the idols. Notice especially "Then" (fa<sup>2</sup>) in Q. 37:94, indicating that the people returned straight to Abraham. "Then they came toward him, hastening" (fa-aqbalū ilayhi yaziffūna ) mirrors their earlier departure in verse 90 "Then they turned away from him, departing" (fatawallaw 'anhu mud'birīna). In Q. 21, Abraham is back among the idols from verse 62 onwards (he refers to "this" idol, they refer to "these" idols). Yet in the previous verses he is plainly no longer there when they arrive and they send a party to bring him back for questioning, so it is instead Abraham who comes to them where the idols are.



21:57-68	37:87-97
<p>21 57 And [I swear] by Allah, I will surely plan against your idols after you have turned and gone away."</p> <p>21 58 So he made them into fragments, except a large one among them, that they might return to it [and question].</p> <p>21 59 They said, "Who has done this to our gods? Indeed, he is of the wrongdoers."</p> <p>21 60 They said, "We heard a young man mention them who is called Abraham."</p> <p>21 61 <u>They said, "Then bring him before the eyes of the people that they may testify."</u></p> <p>21 62 They said, "Have you done this to our gods, O Abraham?"</p> <p>21 63 He said, "<u>Rather, this - the largest of them - did it</u>, so ask them, if they should [be able to] speak."</p> <p>21 64 So they returned to [blaming] themselves and said [to each other], "Indeed, you are the wrongdoers."</p> <p>21 65 Then they reversed themselves, [saying], "You have already known that these do not speak!"</p> <p>21 66 He said, "Then do you worship instead of Allah that which does not benefit you at all or harm you?"</p> <p>21 67 Uff to you and to what you worship instead of Allah. Then will you not use reason?"</p> <p>21 68 They said, "Burn him and support your gods - if you are to act."</p>	<p>37 87 Then what is your thought about the Lord of the worlds?"</p> <p>37 88 And he cast a look at the stars</p> <p>37 89 And said, "Indeed, I am [about to be] ill."</p> <p>37 90 <u>So they turned away from him, departing.</u></p> <p>37 91 Then he turned to their gods and said, "Do you not eat?"</p> <p>37 92 What is [wrong] with you that you do not speak?"</p> <p>37 93 And he turned upon them a blow with [his] right hand.</p> <p>37 94 <u>Then the people came toward him, hastening.</u></p> <p>37 95 He said, "Do you worship that which you [yourselves] carve,</p> <p>37 96 While Allah created you and that which you do?"</p> <p>37 97 They said, "Construct for him a furnace and throw him into the burning fire."</p>

2 Edward William Lane's Arabic-English Lexicon entry for the conjunction fa (pp. 2321-2323) explains that in such usage as we see here, fa conveys proximate and uninterrupted succession.  
<https://www.studyquran.org/LaneLexicon/Volume6/00000105.pdf>

## Abraham and the angels

Numerous differences in the passages narrating the visit of the angels to Abraham and his wife have been analysed in an article by Joseph Witztum.<sup>3</sup> I focus here on four contradictions: The timing of Abraham's fear, the way in which the glad tidings are given, whether of Isaac or both Isaac and Jacob, and a sequence problem to do with the point at which the angels tell Abraham of their mission to the people of Lot.

11:69-76 (see also 29:31-32)	15:51-60	51:24-34
<p>11 69 And certainly did Our messengers come to Abraham with good tidings; they said, "Peace." He said, "Peace," and did not delay in bringing [them] a roasted calf.</p> <p>11 70 <u>But when he saw their hands not reaching for it, he distrusted them and felt from them apprehension. They said, "Fear not. We have been sent to the people of Lot."</u></p>	<p>15 51 And inform them about the guests of Abraham,</p> <p>15 52 <u>When they entered upon him and said, "Peace."</u> [Abraham] said, "Indeed, we are fearful of you."</p> <p>15 53 [The angels] said, "Fear not. Indeed, we give you good tidings of a learned boy."</p>	<p>51 24 Has there reached you the story of the honored guests of Abraham? -</p> <p>51 25 When they entered upon him and said, "[We greet you with] peace." He answered, "[And upon you] peace, [you are] a people unknown.</p> <p>51 26 Then he went to his family and came with a fat [roasted] calf</p> <p>51 27 And placed it near them; he said, "Will you not eat?"</p> <p>51 28 <u>And he felt from them apprehension. They said, "Fear not," and gave him good tidings of a learned boy.</u></p>
<p>11 71 <u>And his Wife was standing, and she smiled. Then We gave her good tidings of Isaac and after Isaac, Jacob.</u></p> <p>11 72 <u>She said, "Woe to me! Shall I give birth while I am an old woman and this, my husband, is an old man? Indeed, this is an amazing thing!"</u></p> <p>11 73 They said, "Are you amazed at the decree of Allah? May the mercy of Allah and His blessings be upon you, people of the house. Indeed, He is Praiseworthy and Honorable."</p>	<p>15 54 He said, "Have you given me good tidings although old age has come upon me? Then of what [wonder] do you inform?"</p> <p>15 55 They said, "We have given you good tidings in truth, so do not be of the despairing."</p> <p>15 56 He said, "And who despairs of the mercy of his Lord except for those astray?"</p>	<p>51 29 <u>And his wife approached with a cry [of alarm] and struck her face and said, "[I am] a barren old woman!"</u></p> <p>51 30 They said, "Thus has said your Lord; indeed, He is the Wise, the Knowing."</p>
<p>11 74 <u>And when the fright had left Abraham and the good tidings had reached him, he began to argue with Us concerning the people of Lot.</u></p> <p>11 75 Indeed, Abraham was</p>	<p>15 57 [Abraham] said, "Then what is your business [here], O messengers?"</p> <p>15 58 They said, "Indeed, we have been sent to a people of criminals,</p>	<p>51 31 [Abraham] said, "Then what is your business [here], O messengers?"</p> <p>51 32 They said, "Indeed, we have been sent to a people of criminals</p>

3 Joseph Witztum. "Thrice upon a Time: Abraham's Guests and the Study of Intra-Quranic Parallels". In Holger Zellentin (ed.), *The Quran's Reformation of Judaism and Christianity: Return to the Origins*. London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 277–302.

<p>forbearing, grieving and [frequently] returning [to Allah]. 11 76 [The angels said], "O Abraham, give up this [plea]. Indeed, the command of your Lord has come, and indeed, there will reach them a punishment that cannot be repelled."</p>	<p>15 59 Except the family of Lot; indeed, we will save them all 15 60 Except his wife." Allah decreed that she is of those who remain behind.</p>	<p>51 33 To send down upon them stones of clay, 51 34 Marked in the presence of your Lord for the transgressors."</p>
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Witztum observes that in Q. 15:52 Abraham immediately expresses fear when he exchanges peace greetings with the angels upon their arrival. They reassure him that they have been sent to him with good tidings (the food is not mentioned in that version). In Q. 51 and Q. 11 his fear comes after they do not take the food and it is at that point that they reassure him of their angelic mission (either to bring him good tidings or to the people of Lot). Al-Razi sought to harmonise by suggesting that his fear strengthened in stages, though Witztum (footnote 68) notes this as “unsatisfactory and artificial”.

Another difference noted by Witztum is that Q. 11 has the good tidings given directly to Abraham's wife, whereas in Q. 51, Abraham is directly told the good tidings and then (fa) his wife comes forward having overheard (Q. 15 doesn't mention his wife at all). A further difference he notices is that in Q. 15:53 and Q. 51:28 Abraham is only given tidings of a learned boy (singular), whereas in Q. 11:71 his wife is told both of Isaac and of their future grandson, Jacob.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, both Q. 11:72 and Q. 51:29 record her same immediate reaction, in one case having been told directly that she is to have a son and grandson, the other having overheard only tidings of a son.

Witztum notes Nicolai Sinai's harmonistic proposal that she overheard the tidings of a son and then was told of Isaac and Jacob directly, but comments that this “presumes a fairly sophisticated audience, who upon hearing a passage, was able to keep in mind all the earlier passages and create a synoptic reading to harmonize them. I find this interpretation unnecessary. It seems simpler to accept that each sura relates a slightly different version of events, albeit in similar language.”

A separate problem that Witztum doesn't mention concerns Q. 11:70 when the angels respond to Abraham's fear by revealing that they are messengers sent to the people of Lot, before giving his wife the good tidings. After this and when his fear has passed he argues with them on behalf of the “people of Lot” (qawmi lūṭin), possibly having already grasped their intention in Q. 11:70 which mirrors the same phrase.<sup>5</sup> However, in Q. 15 and Q. 51 the angels instead respond to Abraham's fear by revealing that they are messengers bringing him glad tidings without yet mentioning Lot's people. Later, in Q. 15:57 and Q. 51:31, he asks them what their next business is (“Then what”; famā), apparently at that point unaware that they have business with the people of Lot.<sup>6</sup>

4 Gabriel Said Reynolds notices that Jacob (Ya‘qūb) was probably added to maintain the ī/ū final vowel rhyming scheme of the passage. See Reynolds, G.S. *The Qur’ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018, p. 354.

5 Al-Qurtubi in his tafsir for Q. 11 suggests that after the angels eased Abraham's fear in Q. 11:40 by mentioning that they were sent to the people of Lot, his subsequent arguing in Q. 11:74 was triggered when the angels began to detail this mission as narrated in Q. 15:58 and Q. 51:32 (see also Q. 29:31-32).

6 If instead we harmonize that Abraham asked the angels their next business in Q. 15 and Q. 51 in the hope that they would elaborate on their earlier comment that they were going to the people of Lot in Q. 11:40, that was not sufficiently clear by the time of Al-Razi, who in his tafsir for Q. 15:57 catalogues proposed explanations as to why Abraham would ask the angels their next business, none of which appeal to Q.11:40.

## Lot and the angels

After meeting Abraham and his wife, the angels travel to Lot to save him and his family before the punishment planned for the people there.

Three contradictions occur in the sequence of events and in the circumstances by which the angelic messengers reveal their mission to Lot. In Q. 15, the angels tell Lot when they first arrive that they are there to save him from the punishment to come. A mob arrives trying to take the angels (who they thought were men) and Lot tries to placate them by offering his daughters.

In Q. 11, the sequence of events is very expressly the other way around.

15:61-74	11:77-83
<p>15 61 And when the messengers came to the family of Lot,</p> <p>15 62 He said, "Indeed, you are people unknown."</p> <p>15 63 They said, "But we have come to you with that about which they were disputing,</p> <p>15 64 And we have come to you with truth, and indeed, we are truthful.</p> <p>15 65 <u>So set out with your family during a portion of the night and follow behind them and let not anyone among you look back and continue on to where you are commanded.</u>"</p> <p>15 66 And We conveyed to him [the decree] of that matter: that those [sinners] would be eliminated by early morning.</p> <p>15 67 <u>And the people of the city came rejoicing.</u></p> <p>15 68 <u>[Lot] said, "Indeed, these are my guests, so do not shame me.</u></p> <p>15 69 <u>And fear Allah and do not disgrace me."</u></p> <p>15 70 They said, "Have we not forbidden you from [protecting] people?"</p> <p>15 71 <u>[Lot] said, "These are my daughters - if you would be doers [of lawful marriage]."</u></p> <p>15 72 By your life, [O Muhammad], indeed they were, in their intoxication, wandering blindly.</p> <p>15 73 So the shriek seized them at sunrise.</p> <p>15 74 And We made the highest part [of the city] its lowest and rained upon them stones of hard clay.</p>	<p>11 77 And when Our messengers, [the angels], came to Lot, he was anguished for them and felt for them great discomfort and said, "This is a trying day."</p> <p>11 78 <u>And his people came hastening to him, and before [this] they had been doing evil deeds. He said, "O my people, these are my daughters; they are purer for you. So fear Allah and do not disgrace me concerning my guests. Is there not among you a man of reason?"</u></p> <p>11 79 They said, "You have already known that we have not concerning your daughters any claim, and indeed, you know what we want."</p> <p>11 80 He said, "If only I had against you some power or could take refuge in a strong support."</p> <p>11 81 <u>The angels said, "O Lot, indeed we are messengers of your Lord; [therefore], they will never reach you. So set out with your family during a portion of the night and let not any among you look back - except your wife; indeed, she will be struck by that which strikes them. Indeed, their appointment is [for] the morning. Is not the morning near?"</u></p> <p>11 82 So when Our command came, We made the highest part [of the city] its lowest and rained upon them stones of layered hard clay, [which were]</p> <p>11 83 Marked from your Lord. And Allah's punishment is not from the wrongdoers [very] far.</p>

A harmonising point could be that Q. 15:67 begins with the “And” conjunction (Arabic: wa), which does not necessarily indicate that the mob danger occurred after the angelic introduction. Noticing the problematic chronology, that argument was put forth by Ibn Kathir in his tafsir. He also claimed that Lot would not have described them to the crowd merely as his “guests” in 15:68 if they had already introduced themselves to him as angelic messengers by that point. This is not at all convincing, especially since even the previous episode (Q. 15:51 and Q. 51:24) introduced them as the story of “the guests of Abraham” (dayfi). More generally, it could be said that the story sequence makes less sense in Q. 15, though a forgetful author or editor could have failed to notice.

The sequence in Q. 11 is certainly explicit beyond question and matches that of Genesis 19. In Q.11:80-81 Lot only learns of the angelic status and mission of his visitors after lamenting his powerlessness against the mob. The suspicion of contradiction in Q. 15 arises from the textual sequence of the elements in what is, after all, a narrative, and from what reads very much like the angels explaining themselves upon their arrival in the first few verses, even in terms of the way Lot addresses them.<sup>7</sup>

Another contradiction concerns the circumstances in which the angels reveal their mission. In Q. 15, Lot remarks to them when they come to his family that they are unknown / strange, so they explain why they have come to him, alluding in verse 63 to the people's rejection of Lot's pleadings as narrated in other passages (Q. 7:80-82, Q. 26:160-169, Q. 27:54-56, and Q. 29:28-30). In Q. 11 they instead reveal their mission in response to Lot expressing his fear about the mob.

Yet another contradiction occurs in the sequence when Lot addresses the mob. In Q. 11:78 he says "these are my daughters" then asks them to "fear Allah and do not disgrace me". This contradicts the sequence of Q. 15:68-71 where instead he asks them to "fear Allah and do not disgrace me", the mob responds, and then comes the "These are my daughters" element.

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<sup>7</sup> As part of his analysis of the relative chronology of these parallels in "Thrice upon a Time", Witztum notices that whereas Abraham in Q. 51:25 addresses the angels as "qawmun munkarūna" (people unknown / strange) when they first arrive, in the Q. 15 version of the Abraham-Lot episode it is Lot who addresses them with those words. For these purposes, the mirrored phrase in Q. 15:62 is a further strong indication that Q. 15:61-66 are intended to depict Lot's initial encounter with the angels "when they came to the family of Lot" as stated in the previous verse.

## Pharaoh or his council ask about Moses

A particularly glaring contradiction occurs in a dialogue between Pharaoh and his council which appears twice, in Q. 7 al-'A'rāf and Q. 26 ash-Shu'arā', in both cases immediately after Moses had first demonstrated the miracles of his staff turning into a snake and his hand turning white. In one version, Pharaoh asks his council what do they instruct/advise (famādhā tamurūna?), and in the other, it is his council who ask it, apparently to themselves.<sup>8</sup> This contradiction has been discussed by Witztum and other academic scholars.<sup>9</sup> He observes that Muslim exegetes sought to harmonise by suggesting that Pharaoh's council repeated or independently asked his question to themselves, a “far from compelling” attempt to solve the problem.

7:109-112	26:34-37
7 109 Said the eminent among the people of Pharaoh, "Indeed, this is a learned magician 7 110 Who wants to expel you from your land [through magic], so what do you instruct?" 7 111 They said, "Postpone [the matter of] him and his brother and send among the cities gatherers 7 112 Who will bring you every learned magician."	26 34 [Pharaoh] said to the eminent ones around him, "Indeed, this is a learned magician. 26 35 He wants to drive you out of your land by his magic, so what do you advise?" 26 36 They said, "Postpone [the matter of] him and his brother and send among the cities gatherers 26 37 Who will bring you every learned, skilled magician."

The same question at the same point of the same dialogue. Apart from the contradiction concerning the questioner, the passages are identical in Arabic except for the addition of “by his magic” (bisiḥ'rihi) in Q. 26:35 and “send” (ib'ath) instead of its synonym (arsil) in 26:36.

Related passages are Q. 20:57 in which Pharaoh asks on the same occasion, “Have you come to us to drive us out of our land with your magic, O Moses?” and Q. 10:78 in which the council ask Moses a fairly similar question. In the next verse, Q. 10:79, Pharaoh utters the instruction to bring every learned magician, suggested by his council in the above quoted parallels.

In Q. 20:63, set after this occasion, on the day of the arranged competition, either the council or magicians confer and say, “Indeed, these are two magicians who want to drive you out of your land with their magic and do away with your most exemplary way.”



The passages continue in parallel to record the arrival of the magicians gathered to compete with Moses. Interestingly, in most of the canonical reading traditions, both Q. 7:113 and Q. 26:41 record that the magicians asked Pharaoh, "Is there indeed for us a reward if we are the predominant?"

However, in the readings of Hafṣ (which is dominant today), Nafi, Ibn Kathir, and Abu Jafar, the magicians instead say it as a statement rather than a question: “Indeed for us is a reward if we are the predominant.” (inna instead of 'a-'inna). Pharaoh's answer in the next verse is the same in both versions.

<sup>8</sup> In both versions the addressee of the question is plural, and the addressee of the answer is singular (presumably answering to Pharaoh).

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Witztum. Pharaoh and His Council: Great Minds Think Alike. Journal of the American Oriental Society 139.4 (2019)945 (Open access on the [Lockwood online journals website](https://www.lockwoodonlinejournals.com/)). He notes that whereas mala “eminent ones” is mentioned this one time in Q. 26, mala are mentioned eight times in Q. 7, seven of which are speaking roles and three in an Egyptian context, which explains the mistake, whether it arose in original composition, editing or transmission.



## None believed in Moses except Pharaoh's magicians or some youths

After Moses confounds the tricks of the magicians some days later by performing the snake miracle, three surahs narrate that the magicians then professed their belief in Moses, even defying threats made towards them from Pharaoh. However, Q. 10 Yūnus narrates the same occasion but only mentions the tricks by the magicians without a miracle from Moses. It says that then none believed Moses<sup>10</sup> except for youths/offspring from his people.<sup>11</sup>

Exegetes discussed whether “his people” in Q. 10:83 refers to the people of Moses or (awkwardly as al-Tabari notes, since he is only named subsequently) the people of Pharaoh, but either way, it contradicts the other surahs in which the magicians now believed in him.

26:38-51 (see also 7:113-129 and 20:60-76)	10:80-86
<p>26 38 So the magicians were assembled for the appointment of a well-known day.</p> <p>26 39 And it was said to the people, "Will you congregate</p> <p>26 40 That we might follow the magicians if they are the predominant?"</p> <p>26 41 And when the magicians arrived, they said to Pharaoh, "Is there indeed for us a reward if we are the predominant?"</p> <p>26 42 He said, "Yes, and indeed, you will then be of those near [to me]."</p> <p>26 43 Moses said to them, "Throw whatever you will throw."</p> <p>26 44 So they threw their ropes and their staffs and said, "By the might of Pharaoh, indeed it is we who are predominant."</p> <p>26 45 Then Moses threw his staff, and at once it devoured what they falsified.</p> <p>26 46 <u>So the magicians fell down in prostration [to Allah].</u></p> <p>26 47 <u>They said, "We have believed in the Lord of the worlds,</u></p> <p>26 48 <u>The Lord of Moses and Aaron."</u></p> <p>26 49 [Pharaoh] said, "You believed Moses before I gave you permission. Indeed, he is your leader who has taught you magic, but you are going to know. I will surely cut off your hands and your feet on opposite sides, and I will surely crucify you all."</p> <p>26 50 They said, "No harm. Indeed, to our Lord we will return.</p> <p>26 51 Indeed, we aspire that our Lord will forgive us our sins because <u>we were the first of the believers."</u></p>	<p>10 80 So when the magicians came, Moses said to them, "Throw down whatever you will throw."</p> <p>10 81 And when they had thrown, Moses said, "What you have brought is [only] magic. Indeed, Allah will expose its worthlessness. Indeed, Allah does not amend the work of corrupters.</p> <p>10 82 And Allah will establish the truth by His words, even if the criminals dislike it."</p> <p>10 83 <u>But no one believed Moses, except [some] youths among his people,</u> for fear of Pharaoh and his establishment that they would persecute them. And indeed, Pharaoh was haughty within the land, and indeed, he was of the transgressors</p> <p>10 84 And Moses said, "O my people, if you have believed in Allah, then rely upon Him, if you should be Muslims."</p> <p>10 85 So they said, "Upon Allah do we rely. Our Lord, make us not [objects of] trial for the wrongdoing people</p> <p>10 86 And save us by Your mercy from the disbelieving people."</p>

10 famā āmana limūsā illā (Then not they believed Moses except). This structure appears also at the end of Q. 11:40.

11 The first word in the phrase dhurriyyatun min qawmihi (youths / offspring from his people) can mean more generally, descendants, though that doesn't make obvious sense in this context and the main opinion reported by al-Tabari was that it meant youths from the people of Moses, which also fits the general pattern of reflecting Muhammad in earlier Prophets (this is a Meccan surah). Another report was that it meant members of Pharaoh's household in order to accommodate his believing wife (Q. 66:11) and the unnamed believer in Q.40:28. However, Moses addresses his people in the very next verse, Q. 10:84, urging them as believers to rely on Allah, so it seems that the main view is correct.

## Moses meets Allah at the fire

In this example, three passages narrate Allah introducing himself to Moses at the fire (see also Q. 4:164 regarding the nature of the interaction: “And Allah spoke to Moses with [direct] speech.”<sup>12</sup>), but the degree of difference in the wording and in the sequence of elements illustrates that these narratives are freely invented each time by the author. A more general observation is that such narratives usually draw from Biblical or post-Biblical stories and exegesis, with a few changed details and development for its own purposes, but cautiously little attempt to mimic a reservoir of completely fresh elements available to someone present at or knowledgeable of the purported events.

In all three versions, “O Moses, Indeed, I am Allah” is a common element, identical in the Arabic. But the differences are readily apparent. For example, in Q. 27 an-Naml, Allah is introduced as “Lord of the worlds” in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person and then introduces himself with the common element and another title. In Q. 28’al-Qaṣaṣ we see the opposite sequence and with the “Lord of the Worlds” title used in the 1<sup>st</sup> person after the common introduction.

20:10-16	27:7-9	28:29-30
<p>20 10 When he saw a fire and said to his family, "Stay here; indeed, I have perceived a fire; perhaps I can bring you a torch or find at the fire some guidance."</p> <p>20 11 And when he came to it, he was called, "<a href="#">O Moses, 20 12 Indeed, I am your Lord</a>, so remove your sandals. Indeed, you are in the sacred valley of Tuwa.</p> <p>20 13 And I have chosen you, so listen to what is revealed [to you].</p> <p>20 14 <a href="#">Indeed, I am Allah</a>. There is no deity except Me, so worship Me and establish prayer for My remembrance.</p> <p>20 15 Indeed, the Hour is coming - I almost conceal it - so that every soul may be recompensed according to that for which it strives.</p> <p>20 16 So do not let one avert you from it who does not believe in it and follows his desire, for you [then] would perish.</p>	<p>27 7 [Mention] when Moses said to his family, "Indeed, I have perceived a fire. I will bring you from there information or will bring you a burning torch that you may warm yourselves."</p> <p>27 8 But when he came to it, he was called, "Blessed is whoever is at the fire and whoever is around it. <a href="#">And exalted is Allah, Lord of the worlds.</a></p> <p>27 9 <a href="#">O Moses, indeed it is I - Allah, the Exalted in Might, the Wise.</a>"</p>	<p>28 29 And when Moses had completed the term and was traveling with his family, he perceived from the direction of the mount a fire. He said to his family, "Stay here; indeed, I have perceived a fire. Perhaps I will bring you from there [some] information or burning wood from the fire that you may warm yourselves."</p> <p>28 30 But when he came to it, he was called from the right side of the valley in a blessed spot - from the tree, "<a href="#">O Moses, indeed I am Allah, Lord of the worlds.</a>"</p>

12 Al-Razi in his tafsir for Q. 20:12 describes the various views of the Mu'tazilites, Al-Ash'ari and al-Maturidi on the nature of the words or the means by which they were conveyed to Moses.

## Moses expresses his fears and asks Allah about Aaron

In this sequence contradiction, Allah has revealed himself at the fire to Moses, who expresses his worries and makes a request. In the Q. 26 version, Moses expresses his fear that the people of Pharaoh will deny him; he requests that he be assisted by his brother, Aaron; and finally, Moses mentions that the Egyptians want revenge for someone he had killed. In Q. 28, these three elements occur in the reverse order.

26:10-17	28:33-35
<p>26 10 And [mention] when your Lord called Moses, [saying], "Go to the wrongdoing people -</p> <p>26 11 The people of Pharaoh. Will they not fear Allah?"</p> <p>26 12 He said, "My Lord, indeed I fear that they will deny me</p> <p>26 13 And that my breast will tighten and my tongue will not be fluent, so send for Aaron.</p> <p>26 14 And they have upon me a [claim due to sin, so I fear that they will kill me."</p> <p>26 15 [Allah] said, "No. Go both of you with Our signs; indeed, We are with you, listening.</p> <p>26 16 Go to Pharaoh and say, 'We are the messengers of the Lord of the worlds,</p> <p>26 17 [Commanded to say], "Send with us the Children of Israel.'""</p>	<p>28 33 He said, "My Lord, indeed, I killed from among them someone, and I fear they will kill me.</p> <p>28 34 And my brother Aaron is more fluent than me in tongue, so send him with me as support, verifying me. Indeed, I fear that they will deny me."</p> <p>28 35 [Allah] said, "We will strengthen your arm through your brother and grant you both supremacy so they will not reach you. [It will be] through Our signs; you and those who follow you will be the predominant."</p>

## Pharaoh's army covered by or thrown into the sea

In the verses shown on the left column, particularly Q. 10:90, we are told that the Egyptians pursued the Israelites across the sea “until when” (ḥattā idhā) they were drowned. They had pursued them along a “dry path through the sea” (Q. 27:77), “Then” (fa) the sea covered them (Q. 20:78) which had towered on each side (Q. 26:63).



However, verses Q. 28:40 and Q. 51:40 on the right column state instead that Allah took (akhadhnāhu) Pharaoh and his army then threw them (fanabadhnāhum) into the sea (fī l-yami).

<b>10:90</b>	<b>28:40</b>
And We took the Children of Israel across the sea, and <u>Pharaoh and his soldiers pursued them in tyranny and enmity until, when drowning overtook him</u> , he said, "I believe that there is no deity except that in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am of the Muslims."	So We took him and his soldiers and threw them into the sea. So see how was the end of the wrongdoers.
<b>20:77-78</b>	<b>51:40</b>
20 77 And We had inspired to Moses, "Travel by night with My servants and strike for them a dry path through the sea; you will not fear being overtaken [by Pharaoh] nor be afraid [of drowning]." 20 78  <u>So Pharaoh pursued them with his soldiers, and there covered them from the sea that which covered them,</u>	So We took him and his soldiers and cast them into the sea, and he was blameworthy.
<b>26:63-66</b>	
26 63 Then We inspired to Moses, "Strike with your staff the sea," and it parted, and <u>each portion was like a great towering mountain.</u> 26 64 And We advanced thereto the pursuers. 26 65 And We saved Moses and those with him, all together. 26 66 Then We drowned the others.	

This contradiction has a parallel in the Biblical book of Exodus, which is discussed in detail by Pamela Barmash.<sup>13</sup> Exodus 14:23-28 contains a prose narrative of the episode, considered by academic scholars to be composed of more than one source. The Egyptians follow the Israelites into the midst of the sea. God “shakes off” (naar) the Egyptians in the midst of the sea as they flee the returning waters. Then it says the returning waters cover their chariots, horsemen and all the forces of Pharaoh. The next chapter, Exodus 15, contains the poetic “Song of the Sea”, in which the piled up waters return and cover the Egyptians in verses 8-10, but elsewhere employs a repeated refrain that God has hurled them into the sea as well as other poetic imagery of shattering them with his fist and of burning them like straw. These images combine to give a metaphor of God as a warrior. Barmash observes that “A historical account is replaced by poetic articulation of religious exuberance”.

<sup>13</sup> Pamela Barmash. 2017. Through the Kaleidoscope of Literary Imagery in Exodus 15: Poetics and Historiography in Service to Religious Exuberance. Hebrew Studies Vol. 58 (2017) pp. 145-172  
PDF downloadable at <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:25907/>

## Moses berates Aaron

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After the golden calf incident, Moses grabs Aaron, who makes two very different pleadings. It is possible with some awkwardness to harmonise that he gave the two different excuses, one after the other, though it is further worth noting that in both accounts Aaron's protest begins with the common address "O son of my mother" as Moses grabs him.

7:150	20:90-95
<p>And when Moses returned to his people, angry and grieved, he said, "How wretched is that by which you have replaced me after [my departure]. Were you impatient over the matter of your Lord?" And he threw down the tablets and seized his brother by [the hair of] his head, pulling him toward him. [Aaron] said, "<u>O son of my mother</u>, indeed the people oppressed me and were about to kill me, so let not the enemies rejoice over me and do not place me among the wrongdoing people."</p>	<p>20 90 And Aaron had already told them before [the return of Moses], "O my people, you are only being tested by it, and indeed, your Lord is the Most Merciful, so follow me and obey my order." 20 91 They said, "We will never cease being devoted to the calf until Moses returns to us." 20 92 [Moses] said, "O Aaron, what prevented you, when you saw them going astray, 20 93 From following me? Then have you disobeyed my order?" 20 94 [Aaron] said, "<u>O son of my mother, do not seize [me] by my beard or by my head.</u> Indeed, I feared that you would say, 'You caused division among the Children of Israel, and you did not observe [or await] my word.' " 20 95 [Moses] said, "And what is your case, O Samiri?"</p>

## Israelites killed by a thunderbolt at Mount Sinai

A sequence contradiction concerns the story of a thunderbolt that (temporarily) killed a group of Israelites, either before or after the incident of the golden calf.

In Q. 2 al-Baqarah, a long sequence of events is narrated in chronological order. In this list, the thunderbolt incident is mentioned just after Moses admonishing the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf. However, in Q. 4:153 the thunderbolt incident occurs, then they took the golden calf for worship.

A possible harmonistic argument is that Q. 2:55 begins with the “And” conjunction (Arabic: wa). In itself this conjunction needn't indicate sequence. However, the entire passage from Q.2:47 to 74 is a chronological catalogue of events surrounding the exodus from Egypt, in which all other verses are in chronological order (as far as can be identified using parallel Quranic passages) despite each episode beginning with “And” (wa). This is almost the only exception. Another probable example is the miracle of the 12 springs in verse 60 (compare with Q. 7:160-161). The only other element that breaks the chronology in the long sequence is the raising of the mount in verse 63, though this is clearly deliberate to introduce another episode about sabbath covenant breaking after the interruption of verse 62 (this combination has a parallel in Q. 4:154).

It is perhaps worth noting that in his tafsir for Q. 2:55, Ibn Kathir notes a report elaborating on the story such that the thunderbolt had killed seventy men after they had worshipped the calf.

An alternative harmonising would be that “Then” in Q. 4:153 (Arabic: thumma) is meant in the sense “Moreover” rather than its more typical and obvious (in this context) indication of sequence.

2:54-56 (see 2:47-74 for the larger context)	4:153
<p>2 54 And [recall] when Moses said to his people, "O my people, indeed you have wronged yourselves by your taking of the calf [for worship]. So repent to your Creator and kill yourselves. That is best for [all of] you in the sight of your Creator." Then He accepted your repentance; indeed, He is the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful.</p> <p>2 55 And [recall] when you said, "O Moses, we will never believe you until we see Allah outright"; so the thunderbolt took you while you were looking on.</p> <p>2 56 Then We revived you after your death that perhaps you would be grateful.</p>	<p>4 153 The People of the Scripture ask you to bring down to them a book from the heaven. But they had asked of Moses [even] greater than that and said, "Show us Allah outright," so the thunderbolt struck them for their wrongdoing. <u>Then they took the calf</u> [for worship] after clear evidences had come to them, and We pardoned that. And We gave Moses a clear authority.</p>

## The destruction of Thamud

In Q. al-Qamar 54:26, Allah tells Salih that tomorrow the people of Thamud will know he is not a liar. If this refers merely to the sending of the she-camel, that seems to contradict other parallels where the she-camel does not lead to them accepting Salih as truthful. See Q. 91:11-14, where the same root for liar appears as a verb (kadhabūhu) in “But they denied him and hamstrung her” after Salih presents the she-camel, and at the end of Q. 11:65 where it appears as a noun (makdhūbin).

It could instead mean that they are to be destroyed that next day and thereby learn that Salih is not a liar. However, according to verse 65 of the Q. 11 story, their destruction will instead come three days after they hamstrung the she-camel.<sup>14</sup>

54:23-31 (see also 91:11-14)	11:64-58
<p>54 23 Thamud denied the warning                      54 24 And said, "Is it one human being among us that we should follow? Indeed, we would then be in error and madness.                      54 25 Has the message been sent down upon him from among us? Rather, he is an insolent liar."                      54 26 <u>They will know tomorrow who is the insolent liar.</u>                      54 27 Indeed, We are sending the she-camel as trial for them, so watch them and be patient.                      54 28 And inform them that the water is shared between them, each [day of] drink attended [by turn].                      54 29 But they called their companion, and he dared and hamstrung [her].                      54 30 And how [severe] were My punishment and warning.                      54 31 Indeed, We sent upon them one blast from the sky, and they became like the dry twig fragments of an [animal] pen.</p>	<p>11 64 And O my people, this is the she-camel of Allah - [she is] to you a sign. So let her feed upon Allah 's earth and do not touch her with harm, or you will be taken by an impending punishment."                      11 65 <u>But they hamstrung her, so he said, "Enjoy yourselves in your homes for three days. That is a promise not to be denied."</u>                      11 66 So when Our command came, We saved Salih and those who believed with him, by mercy from Us, and [saved them] from the disgrace of that day. Indeed, it is your Lord who is the Powerful, the Exalted in Might.                      11 67 And the shriek seized those who had wronged, and they became within their homes [corpses] fallen prone                      11 68 As if they had never prospered therein. Unquestionably, Thamud denied their Lord; then, away with Thamud.</p>



Al-Hijr (“The rocky tract”), also known as Mada’in Salih, has long been identified with the ruined palaces and skillfully rock-carved homes of Thamud mentioned in the Quran (al-Hijr is even connected this way in hadiths). These are now understood to be Nabatean tombs, carved in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC - 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD according to the UNESCO website.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Razi and Al-Qurtubi mention a view that “tomorrow” is just a turn of phrase to indicate the future. Such an explanation is very dubious given that the next verse promises a specific event (the sending of the she-camel) and given that a clearly literal timescale is given to the same people in 11:65.

## The destruction of Aad

Two contradictions are notable here. The first concerns the nature of Aad's destruction. Q. Fuṣṣilat 41:14-17, like several other passages, mention the wind and thunderbolt which afflicted Aad and destroyed Thamud, respectively. It may be significant that the wind in verse 16 is only mentioned as a punishment on Aad, without explicitly stating that this was the ultimate means of their destruction, for in verse 13, Aad was destroyed in the same way as Thamud, by a thunderbolt (sa'iqatan, a word which can refer to the sound of a thunderbolt or the lightning bolt itself).<sup>15</sup>

The same word is used in Q. 51:44, where the thunderbolt seized Thamud as they looked on. Similarly, the instantaneous death of the people of Thamud by a thunderous blast (ṣayḥatan) appears in Q. 11 and Q. 54 quoted above, and by a single blast (ṭāghiyati) in Q. 69:5. They were killed by an earthquake in Q. 7:78, though the word l-rajfatu, needn't mean a literal earthquake, and can mean a convulsion or jolting according to Lane's Lexicon. Thus with some harmonising effort we have a story of sudden thunderous death for the people of Thamud.

However, all other descriptions of Aad's destruction say it was by means of a violent wind over a day or number of days, which uprooted its people like trees and left only ruined homes.

41:13-17	46:24-26				
<p>41 13 But if they turn away, then say, "I have warned you of a <u>thunderbolt like the thunderbolt [that struck] 'Aad and Thamud.</u></p> <p>41 14 [That occurred] when the messengers had come to them before them and after them, [saying], "Worship not except Allah." They said, "If our Lord had willed, He would have sent down the angels, so indeed we, in that with which you have been sent, are disbelievers."</p> <p>41 15 As for 'Aad, they were arrogant upon the earth without right and said, "Who is greater than us in strength?" Did they not consider that Allah who created them was greater than them in strength? But they were rejecting Our signs.</p> <p>41 16 <u>So We sent upon them a screaming wind during days of misfortune to make them taste the punishment of disgrace in the worldly life; but the punishment of the Hereafter is more disgracing, and they will not be helped.</u></p> <p>41 17 And as for Thamud, We guided them, but they preferred blindness over guidance, so the thunderbolt of humiliating punishment seized them for what they used to earn.</p>	<p>46 24 And when they saw it as a cloud approaching their valleys, they said, "This is a cloud bringing us rain!" Rather, it is that for which you were impatient: <u>a wind, within it a painful punishment,</u></p> <p>46 25 <u>Destroying everything by command of its Lord. And they became so that nothing was seen [of them] except their dwellings. Thus do We recompense the criminal people.</u></p> <tr> <th style="background-color: #e0e0e0;">51:41-45</th> <th style="background-color: #e0e0e0;">54:19-20</th> </tr> <tr> <td> <p>51 41 And in 'Aad [was a sign], when <u>We sent against them the barren wind.</u></p> <p>51 42 <u>It left nothing of what it came upon but that it made it like disintegrated ruins.</u></p> <p>51 43 And in Thamud, when it was said to them, "Enjoy yourselves for a time."</p> <p>51 44 But they were insolent toward the command of their Lord, so the thunderbolt seized them while they were looking on.</p> <p>51 45 And they were unable to arise, nor could they defend themselves.</p> </td> <td> <p>54 18 'Aad denied; and how [severe] were My punishment and warning.</p> <p>54 19 Indeed, <u>We sent upon them a screaming wind on a day of continuous misfortune.</u></p> <p>54 20 <u>Extracting the people as if they were trunks of palm trees uprooted</u></p> </td> </tr>	51:41-45	54:19-20	<p>51 41 And in 'Aad [was a sign], when <u>We sent against them the barren wind.</u></p> <p>51 42 <u>It left nothing of what it came upon but that it made it like disintegrated ruins.</u></p> <p>51 43 And in Thamud, when it was said to them, "Enjoy yourselves for a time."</p> <p>51 44 But they were insolent toward the command of their Lord, so the thunderbolt seized them while they were looking on.</p> <p>51 45 And they were unable to arise, nor could they defend themselves.</p>	<p>54 18 'Aad denied; and how [severe] were My punishment and warning.</p> <p>54 19 Indeed, <u>We sent upon them a screaming wind on a day of continuous misfortune.</u></p> <p>54 20 <u>Extracting the people as if they were trunks of palm trees uprooted</u></p>
51:41-45	54:19-20				
<p>51 41 And in 'Aad [was a sign], when <u>We sent against them the barren wind.</u></p> <p>51 42 <u>It left nothing of what it came upon but that it made it like disintegrated ruins.</u></p> <p>51 43 And in Thamud, when it was said to them, "Enjoy yourselves for a time."</p> <p>51 44 But they were insolent toward the command of their Lord, so the thunderbolt seized them while they were looking on.</p> <p>51 45 And they were unable to arise, nor could they defend themselves.</p>	<p>54 18 'Aad denied; and how [severe] were My punishment and warning.</p> <p>54 19 Indeed, <u>We sent upon them a screaming wind on a day of continuous misfortune.</u></p> <p>54 20 <u>Extracting the people as if they were trunks of palm trees uprooted</u></p>				

15 Edward William Lane's Arabic-English Lexicon entry for sa'iqatan (p. 1690). Al-Tabari in his tafsir for Q. 41:13 claims that sa'iqatan is a catch all term for anything that destroys something, while al-Qurtubi claims that the wind *was* the sa'iqatan. <https://www.studyquran.org/LaneLexicon/Volume4/00000414.pdf>



There is possibly a second contradiction whereby in Q. 54:19 shown above, the wind was sent on a single day of continuous misfortune (yawmi naḥsin mus'tamirrin), extracting its people like trees, whereas Q. 41:16 says it was sent on days of misfortune (ayyāmin naḥisātin) plural (both quoted above) and Q. 69:7 says it was imposed for seven nights and eight days in succession.

<b>69:4-8</b>
69 4 Thamud and 'Aad denied the Striking Calamity.
69 5 So as for Thamud, they were destroyed by the overpowering [blast].
69 6  <u>And as for 'Aad, they were destroyed by a screaming, violent wind</u>
69 7  <u>Which Allah imposed upon them for seven nights and eight days in succession, so you would see the people therein fallen as if they were hollow trunks of palm trees.</u>
69 8 Then do you see of them any remains?

Exegetes discussed the word “continuous” in Q. 54:19. Al-Tabari and al-Zamakhshari said the misfortune continued until they were destroyed. Al-Razi mentioned the relevant verses and in order to harmonize them, interpreted “continuous” as indicating further days. He considered two views, that “continuous” relates to the word day or to the word misfortune, preferring the former. The verse itself mentions a “day” singular and the preceding Arabic about when the wind was sent is the same in this verse as in Q. 41:16, which then instead says “days”:

arsalnā ‘alayhim rīḥan ṣarṣaran fī yawmi naḥsin mus'tamirri / ayyāmin naḥisātin  
 We sent upon them a screaming wind in a day of continuous<sup>16</sup> misfortune / days of misfortune.

16 Edward William Lane's Arabic-English Lexicon (p. 2702) has some discussion of the word mus'tamirrin (“continuous”) as used in this verse and in Q. 54:2 where it is used in the phrase (“passing magic”) in the same grammatical form. <https://www.studyquran.org/LaneLexicon/Volume7/00000230.pdf>

## The forgiveness of Adam

Academic scholars have noticed that Q. 2:36-39 appears to be an editing together (by the original author or otherwise) of Q. 7:22-25 and Q. 20:121-124, with the awkward result that Allah tells Adam and company to go down from paradise twice, in verses 36 and 38.<sup>17</sup> Q. 7 mentions Adam's request for forgiveness but does not say whether Allah did so. Rather, it immediately proceeds to the order to descend in Q. 7:24, used word for word by Q. 2:36 in the Arabic. Q. 20 on the other hand has Adam forgiven before the order to descend (part of a longer section narrated chronologically). Q. 2 appears to fix the ambiguity in Q. 7 by inserting Allah's forgiveness after (fa) the part of the descent order taken from Q. 7:24, which also partly appears in Q. 20:123 where the forgiveness has already occurred.<sup>18</sup>

2:36-39	7:22-25	20:121-124
<p>2 36  But Satan caused them to slip out of it and removed them from that [condition] in which they had been. And We said, "Go down, [all of you], as enemies to one another, and you will have upon the earth a place of settlement and provision for a time."</p> <p>2 37  <b>Then Adam received from his Lord [some] words, and He accepted his repentance. Indeed, it is He who is the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful.</b></p> <p>2 38  We said, "Go down from it, all of you. And when guidance comes to you from Me, whoever follows My guidance - there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve.</p> <p>2 39  And those who disbelieve and deny Our signs - those will be companions of the Fire; they will abide therein eternally."</p>	<p>7 22  So he made them fall, through deception. And when they tasted of the tree, their private parts became apparent to them, and they began to fasten together over themselves from the leaves of Paradise. And their Lord called to them, "Did I not forbid you from that tree and tell you that Satan is to you a clear enemy?"</p> <p>7 23  They said, "Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers."</p> <p>7 24  [Allah] said, "Descend, being to one another enemies. And for you on the earth is a place of settlement and enjoyment for a time."</p> <p>7 25  He said, "Therein you will live, and therein you will die, and from it you will be brought forth."</p>	<p>20 121  And Adam and his wife ate of it, and their private parts became apparent to them, and they began to fasten over themselves from the leaves of Paradise. And Adam disobeyed his Lord and erred.</p> <p>20 122  <b>Then his Lord chose him and turned to him in forgiveness and guided [him].</b></p> <p>20 123  [Allah] said, "Descend from Paradise - all, [your descendants] being enemies to one another. And if there should come to you guidance from Me - then whoever follows My guidance will neither go astray [in the world] nor suffer [in the Hereafter].</p> <p>20 124  And whoever turns away from My remembrance - indeed, he will have a depressed life, and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind."</p>

17 Witztum, Joseph. 2011. [The Syriac Milieu of the Qur'an: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives](#). Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA. pp. 69-79

18 I am grateful to an anonymous correspondent who pointed out to me this contradiction, to which I have added commentary analysis.

## Noah receives instructions

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The Quran gives two accounts as to the time at which Noah received instructions about the passengers of the ark. In Q. 11:40, Noah is told who to take with him when the ark has already been built and Allah has commanded the flood. In Q. 23:27, instead he receives the instructions before he has built the ark, learning what he will need to do when the flood is commanded in the future.<sup>19</sup>

11:37-40	23:27
<p>11 37  <u>And construct the ship under Our observation and Our inspiration and do not address Me concerning those who have wronged; indeed, they are [to be] drowned.</u>"</p> <p>11 38  And he constructed the ship, and whenever an assembly of the eminent of his people passed by him, they ridiculed him. He said, "If you ridicule us, then we will ridicule you just as you ridicule</p> <p>11 39  And you are going to know who will get a punishment that will disgrace him [on earth] and upon whom will descend an enduring punishment [in the Hereafter]."</p> <p>11 40  <u>[So it was], until when Our command came and the oven overflowed, We said, "Load upon the ship of each [creature] two mates and your family, except those about whom the word has preceded, and [include] whoever has believed."</u> But none had believed with him, except a few.</p>	<p>So We inspired to him, "Construct the ship under Our observation, and Our inspiration, <u>and when Our command comes and the oven overflows, put into the ship from each [creature] two mates and your family, except those for whom the decree [of destruction] has proceeded. And do not address Me concerning those who have wronged; indeed, they are to be drowned.</u></p>

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19 I am again grateful to my anonymous correspondent for this further example.