Offprint from

JERUSALEM STUDIES IN ARABIC AND ISLAM

33(2007)

Uri Rubin

The hands of Abū Lahab and the gazelle of the Ka‘ba

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM
THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
THE HANDS OF ABŪ LAHAB AND THE GAZELLE OF THE KA'BA

Uri Rubin
Tel Aviv University

Qurān 111:1 deals with Abū Lahab, one of Muhammad’s paternal uncles, and a prominent figure among the Banū Hashim of the Quraysh. Verse 1 places a curse upon his two hands: Tabbat yadā Abū Lahab... “Perish the two hands of Abū Lahab...” (the form tabbat is usually explained as du‘ā’, “imprecation”). Various interpretations were put forward to explain such a harsh attack on Muhammad’s uncle. The most common asbāb al-nuzūl tradition says that when Abū Lahab heard some of Muhammad’s first public sermons he said: Tabbān laka (“curse be upon you”), whereupon the sām was revealed. But from this neat story it is still not clear why the Qur’ān turns to Abū Lahab’s hands, instead of keeping to Abū Lahab’s own style and saying: Tabbān bi-Abī Lahab. Other interpretations provide an answer to the problem by taking the “hands” literally and by describing various physical acts which Abū Lahab supposedly committed against Muhammad and his followers.

One exceptional tradition connects this Qur’ānic chapter not so much to Abū Lahab’s enmity to Muhammad as to his devotion to the worship of the goddess al-‘Uzza whose sanctuary was outside Mecca, in Nakhla. The two hands are explained metaphorically in the sense of ni‘ma, “benefaction.” It is related that Abū Lahab supported the goddess al-‘Uzza as well as the Prophets, and hoped to be rewarded by at least one of the two parties. The sām is said to have been revealed in order to prove his hopes futile.

I have surveyed all these interpretations in a previous study published quite a few years ago, in the strong belief that one of them — about Abū Lahab’s support for al-‘Uzza — reflects the “true” meaning of verse 1. But this tradition too seems to me now as no more than a midrashic elaboration on the Qur’ānic text as well as on Abū Lahab’s name, ‘Abd al-‘Uzza.

Nevertheless, it seems that a possible clue as to the significance of Qurān 111:1 is to be found outside the field of tafsīr, in a tradition

---

1For details see Rubin, “Abū Lahab.”
which has not yet been taken into account in the discussions about the meaning of this ṣūra.

The tradition is the one which may be called “the gazelle tradition.” Its most comprehensive version is provided by Ibn Habīb (d. 245/860) in his Munammaq.\(^2\) It relates that Abī Lahab participated in a crime which reportedly caused great commotion in pre-Islamic Mecca. He and his drinking companions, whose names are given in the report, took part in an act of desecration of the Kaʿba. They reportedly used to convene in the house of Miqyas b. `Abd of the Banū Saḥm of the Quraysh. Miqyas had two singing girls who used to entertain his companions at their drinking parties. Once they ran out of money and could not buy more wine, so Abī Lahab suggested they steal a golden gazelle which had been donated to the Kaʿba by his father, `Abd al-Muṭṭalib. The latter is said to have retrieved it from the ground while he was digging the well of Zamzam.\(^3\) So they went to the Kaʿba and stole the precious gazelle under cover of darkness and took it apart and divided it among themselves, giving some parts to the singing girls, and buying wine with other parts. When the Quraysh found out that the gazelle was missing they became enraged; `Abdallāh b. Judān was especially furious. The gravity of the crime is illustrated by the fact that the gazelle is described by the Quraysh as “the gazelle of your God” (ghazāl ṭabākum).\(^4\)

Eventually the thieves were tracked down by some members of the clan of Ḥāshim (Abī Tālib, al-ʿAbbās and others), who belonged to the Quraysh alliance of the Muṭṭayyabūn. The latter demanded of the rival alliance of the Ahlāf (to whom Miqyas, owner of the singing girls and member of the Saḥm, belonged), that the thieves be punished by having their hands cut off. Finally the Ahlāf ransomed some of the thieves by blood money that was paid to Abī Tālib and al-Zubayr, sons of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib who had donated the gazelle to the Kaʿba. Other thieves escaped and some years later joined the Quraysh in their battles against the Prophet. Still other participants in the act of desecration were punished and one hand of each of them was cut off according to the law of Quraysh.

As for Abī Lahab, his hand was reportedly spared due to his noble status.\(^5\) According to Ibn Habīb, his maternal uncles from Khuzaʿa

---

\(^2\) Ibn Habīb, Munammaq, pp. 59–70. See also his commentary on Ḥassān’s Dīwān, vol. 2, pp. 115-27.

\(^3\) Cf. Hawting, “Zamzam.” Other reports maintain that the gazelle was donated to the Kaʿba by the Persian ruler Isfandiyār who had heard about the reputation of the Kaʿba as a place of pilgrimage. See `Askār, Auṣār, p. 35. See further, Rubin, “Kaʿba,” pp. 115–7.

\(^4\) Ibn Habīb, Munammaq, p. 63.

\(^5\) `Askār, Auṣār, p. 35.
protected him. Their protection is alluded to in a poetic verse recorded by Ibn Ḥabīb, saying that they protected the senior member of ʿAbd Manṣūr [Abū Lahab] when he already saw the blade of the knife hovering above the fingers of his hand. ʿAbū Lahab came to be known as sāriq ʾghazil al-Kaʿba — “the one who stole the gazelle of the Kaʿba.”

Allusions to this affair can be found in other sources. Al-Baladhurī (d. 279/892) has recorded a concise version of the event, as well as brief references to some of the thieves. One of them, namely, Abū ʿIyāb b. ʿAzīz of the Dārīm [Tanām] is described by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) as “one of those who stole the gazelle of the Kaʿba with Abū Lahab and his friends.” Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819) refers to Miqyā as b. Adī, owner of the two singing girls, and says that the gazelle of the Kaʿba was taken apart and divided in his house.

The event was also known to al-Masʿūdī. According to him, the gazelle was stolen from the Kaʿba when the shrine was demolished by floods, a few years before Muhammad’s first revelation. Al-Masʿūdī does not say who the thieves were. Reference to a treasure (kanz) that was stolen from the Kaʿba is also made by Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/768) and Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845).

A good idea about the impact of the crime can be gained from a report claiming that the alliance called ḥilf al-fudūl came into being as a result of “the affair of the gazelle that was stolen from the Kaʿba.” This alliance included the Banū ʿHāšim as well as several other clans of the Quraši, and was established in the house of ʿAbdallāh b. Judān. It was designed to replace the former alliances of the Mutayyabūn and the Ahfāf, and to defend moral values and act against any manifestation of injustice in Mecca, irrespective of the social position of the instigators.

The gazelle tradition gained access into chapters dealing with the law of cutting off one’s hand as punishment for theft. According to Ibn

---

6Ibn Ḥabīb, Munṣūmaq, p. 70.
7Ibn Qutilayba, Maṣāḥif, p. 55. See also Ḥalāfat, ʿSām, vol. 1, p. 35.
10Ibn Ḥazm, Jāmḥara, p. 232.
16See, EI², s.v. “Ḥilf al-fudūl” (Ch. Pellet).
17Askarī, Aswāq, pp. 34–5.
Uri Rubin

Habīb, those whose hands were cut off as punishment for stealing the gazelle were Mulayḥ b. Shurayḥ of the 'Abd al-Dār of the Quraysh, and Miqyas.18

The gazelle tradition is purely non-Qur'ānic, and is utterly unaware of the revelation of sūrah 111. In other words, this tradition does not seem to have been inspired by Qur'ān 111:1 but rather to have been in circulation already before the commencement of Muhammad's prophecy. In fact, the Prophet's poet Hassān b. Thābit already refers to the gazelle tradition as a well-known memory of the pre-Islamic past. In some verses recorded in his Dīwān, Hassān addresses one of the thieves (al-Hārith b. 'Āmir) and asks him to hand over the stolen gazelle.19

It therefore may be suggested that the two opening verses of sūrah 111 — with Abū Lahāb's hands as their leitmotif — can and should be understood against the background of the gazelle tradition which was probably well known to the first audience of the Qur'ān. The subtext of the verses seems to imply that even though Abū Lahāb once managed to desecrate God's holy shrine without being punished with the usual punishment reserved for theft, God will see to it that in the future the appropriate punishment shall be inflicted on both his hands (v. 1) This time neither his noble status nor his wealth and all his other enterprises will save him (v. 2). Such interpretation of the sūrah means that it alludes to a dark chapter in Abū Lahāb's life in pre-Islamic times, when his might enabled him to act insolently against God and desecrate the sacred gazelle of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Muhammad's grandfather and Abū Lahāb's own father. This old history regained relevance when Abū Lahāb showed his enmity to the Prophet, so that the sūrah is designed to denounce him for all his old and new sins against God and his apostle, respectively.20

Why cannot we find any explicit clue in the tafsīr materials leading from sūrah 111 to the gazelle tradition? The answer is simple. The idea that the Qur'ān should consider stealing from the Ka'ba and desecrating a golden gazelle as a grave sin became inappropriate as soon as the patterns of tafsīr were established. The scholars who shaped the tafsīr were already committed to the iconoclastic patterns of thinking that had established themselves during the first century of Islam. According to these ideas, all kinds of statues and images of living creatures should have

---

18 Ibn Habīb, Munammaq, p. 421; idem, Muhābbar, p. 328.
19 Hassān, Dīwān, vol. 1, pp. 135, 370. See ibid., vol. 1, p. 213, where a similar address is made to Abū Ḥāšib. See also Ibn Ḥabīb, Munammaq, p. 69. Cf. Baladhurī, Annāb, vol. 12, p. 54.
20 The suggestion that the Qur'ānic curse of Abū Lahāb alludes to the gazelle tradition is indirectly supported by the fact that Hassān b. Thābit, too, when addressing one of the other thieves of the gazelle, curses him with the expression tabbān li... (Hassān, Dīwān, p. 135 line 5; p. 370, line 11).
The hands of Abū Lahab and the gazelle of the Ka‘ba

been removed from the Ka‘ba, and Muhammad himself was described as wiping out with a wet cloth pre-Islamic paintings (taswīr) that were inside that shrine. A golden gazelle was no less intolerable, even if not in the Ka‘ba, and according to some traditions, the Prophet ordered his wife Umm Sulama to get rid of one such golden gazelle which she possessed, and give it away as charity.

From an iconoclastic perspective, removing a golden gazelle from the Ka‘ba, even by theft, was no longer as sinful as the pre-Islamic Meccans originally had thought it was, and therefore the exegesis of the Qurʾān could not turn Abū Lahab’s gazelle affair into tafsīr material. In order to explain the reasons for the revelation of sūrah 111, Abū Lahab had to be furnished with other sins more in accordance with the usual patterns of direct opposition to the Prophet. The interpretations which the Qurʾān exegetes preferred to record are based on a variety of midrashic elaborations on Abū Lahab’s “two hands.” The sūrah was thus detached from all pre-Islamic circumstances and was confined exclusively to the tension between Abū Lahab and Muhammad.

In conclusion, the above discussion has tried to unveil a sub-textual discourse between the Qurʾān and some traditions which were well known in pre-Islamic Mecca. These traditions did not become part of Islamic tafsīr because new (iconoclastic) ideas that were shaped during the first Islamic era rendered them irrelevant to the accepted interpretation of the Qurʾān. An instructive byproduct of the discussion is the observation that the earliest literary origins of at least some parts of the Qurʾān are indeed rooted in pre-Islamic Mecca and not elsewhere.

Bibliography


---


Uri Rubin


