ABŪ LAHAB AND SŪRA CXI

By URI RUBIN

The studies of Sūra cxı ¹ have not yet arrived at satisfactory results, hence the meaning of this sūra is still obscure. The present study tries to present a better basis for its understanding.²

1. The date and background of the sūra

Sūra cxı deals with Abū Lahab, whom all the Muslim sources identify as Muḥammad’s paternal uncle, ‘Abd al-‘Uzza b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib of the clan of Hāshim.

The clue to the date and background of this sūra is to be found in a tradition recorded by al-Wāqīdī (d. 207/823).³ This tradition is about al-‘Uzza, the greatest deity of Quraysh, whose sanctuary was at Nakhla, near Mecca. Quraysh also worshipped al-Lat whose sanctuary was at al-Ṭa’if. A third deity, Manāt, whose sanctuary was at Qudayd, was worshipped mainly by the people of Yathrib (al-Madina). All three were known as ‘daughters of Allāh’ (banāt Allāh).⁴

The tradition of al-Wāqīdī relates that the custodian (sādiḥ) of the sanctuary of al-‘Uzza was Aflah b. al-Nadr al-Shaybānī of the tribe of Sulaym.⁵ Before his death, Aflah told Abū Lahab that he was afraid lest al-‘Uzza should be neglected once he was dead. Upon hearing this, Abū Lahab said: ‘Do not grieve; I shall attend to her after you go’. After that, Abū Lahab used to say: ‘If al-‘Uzza triumphs, I have already earned a “hand”’ which she has (to my credit) with her, for attending upon her,’ and if Muḥammad triumphs over al-‘Uzza—which I do not believe will happen—then be it my nephew (who has a “hand” to my credit with him)’. Thereupon, Allāh revealed Sūra cxı.

This tradition had been noticed by Barth,⁶ but he seems to have overlooked its great significance. Al-Wāqīdī chose to record this tradition within

⁴ Details about those deities are to be found in J. Wellhausen, Reste arabischen Heidentums, Berlin, repr. 1961, 24 ff.
⁵ The Banī Shaybān of Sulaym were the confederates of the clan of Hāshim. See Ibn Hīshām, al-Sūra al-nabawiyya, ed. al-Saqqā, al-Abāyīrī, Shalābī, four vols., repr., Beirut, 1971, 1, 86.
⁶ The meaning of ‘hand’ will be explained below.
⁷ In tāḥār al-ʿuzzā, kunut qad ilākhaḍhu yadam ‘indahā bi-qiyyāmi’ alayhā.
⁸ Barth, loc. cit. Fischer did not refer to it at all.
a chapter dealing with the destruction of the sanctuary of al-'Uzza in the year 8/629, shortly after the conquest of Mecca. This led Barth to conclude that according to al-Waqidi, Abū Lahab was still alive after the conquest of Mecca.  

Thereby he rejected this tradition as a false one, because Abū Lahab had actually died long before, immediately after the battle of Badr. The truth is, however, that this tradition belongs to the time when both Abū Lahab and Ḥafṣa b. al-Nadr were still alive, that is, before the Hijra of Muḥammad to al-Madīna.  

Al-Waqidi placed this tradition within a later chapter dealing with the actual destruction of al-'Uzza, after the conquest of Mecca, because the conversation between the sūdina of al-'Uzza and Abū Lahab referred to the same subject, i.e. the forthcoming end of al-'Uzza.  

A second version of the same story is recorded by Ibn al-Kalbī. Ibn al-Kalbī located the story in its proper chronological place, that is, immediately after the abrogation of Muḥammad’s temporal recognition of the ‘daughters of Allāh’. This event was known as the affair of the ‘Satanic verses’. In these verses, Muḥammad had recognized the divinity of al-Lāt, Manāt, and al-'Uzza, and especially their authority to intercede with Allāh for their believers. Some time later, these verses were abrogated, being ascribed to Satan’s influence upon the prophet. They were replaced by new verses denying the existence of these three deities (Qur’ān liii, 19–23).  

Ibn al-Kalbī relates that Muḥammad’s denial of al-'Uzza was a great blow to Quraysh (fa-shadda dhālikā 'alā Quraysh); thereafter he recounts the story about Abū Lahab. According to Ibn al-Kalbī, however, the person to whom Abū Lahab talked was Abū Ḫayyāna Sa‘īd b. Abī 'Āṣ, and not Ḥafṣa b. al-Nadr. At the time of the declaration of the ‘Satanic verses’, this Abū Ḫayyāna was a very old man. Ibn al-Kalbī’s version contains some remarkable details. According to this version, Abū Lahab assured Abū Ḫayyāna that the veneration of al-'Uzza would not cease after his death. Thereupon Abū Ḫayyāna said: ‘Now I know that I have a successor (khalīfa)’. And he admired Abū Lahab’s eagerness for her worship.  

The conclusion to be drawn from Ibn al-Kalbī and al-Waqidi is that Sūra cx1 was revealed in Mecca after Muḥammad no longer recognized al-'Uzza, when Abū Lahab, on his part, took it upon himself to defend and support this goddess against Muḥammad’s new monotheistic course. In this connexion it may be noted that according to Ibn Iṣḥāq, our sūra was revealed after Abū Lahab had abandoned Muḥammad and the rest of the Ḥāshimite in the ravine (shīb) of Abū Ṭālib, where they had been put under a boycott by Quraysh. Abū Lahab had joined Quraysh in expressing his wish to support al-'Uzza. These events took place in the seventh year of Muḥammad’s prophecy, i.e. only a  

---  

9 See also Lohmann, art. cit., 330.  
10 That Ḥafṣa b. al-Nadr was Abū Lahab’s contemporary, and not the last sūdīn of al-'Uzza who was killed by Khalīd after the conquest of Mecca, was already pointed out by Wellhausen, op. cit., 38. The last sūdīn was named Ḥuwayyā b. Ḥarami, see Ibn al-Kalbī, Kitāb al-aṣrām, ed. Ahmad Zakī Bāshā, Cairo, 1914, 25 ff.  
11 Asmā‘, 23; cf. also Wellhausen, op. cit., 36.  
13 See Ibn Sa‘d, op. cit., i, 205. On his last illness see ibid., iv, 95–6.  
14 Ibn Ḥishām, op. cit., i, 376.
short time after the abrogation of the ‘Satanic verses’. Abū Lahab was probably anxious to secure his economic position which was threatened by the boycott of his clan. By leaving the ravine of Abū Ṭālib, he could maintain his connexions with Quraysh and their sanctuaries.

That the revelation of Sūra cxi was caused directly by Abū Lahab’s departure from Hāshim, may also be concluded from the Qur’ānic codex of Ubayy b. Ka’b. This codex reportedly contained an additional verse, located between verses 1 and 2 of our sūra:

ḥālafā 'l-baytā 'l-wadī‘a 'alā 'l-bayti 'l-rafi‘i
fa-shughila bi-nafešīh, thumma shughila
‘He became allied to the inferior house against the exalted house, and he was occupied only with himself, and indeed he was’.

By the ‘exalted house’ the clan of Hāshim is probably meant, which Abū Lahab abandoned, allying himself with a certain unspecified clan, which is considered inferior to Hāshim. Some early verses ascribed to Ḥassān b. Thābit shed more light on the matter. These verses condemn Abū Lahab for forsaking Muḥammad and stress at the same time that Abū Lahab was not a true son of Hāshim, being, in fact, the son of a person from the tribe of Liḥyān (to whom his mother had been married before marrying ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib). The clan of Hāshim is described as being high with noble traits, while Abū Lahab is described as being low with his shame. Both these verses and Ubayy’s verse allude to the fact that Muḥammad was deeply injured when Abū Lahab abandoned him. This may lead to the conclusion that before leaving Muḥammad, Abū Lahab had bestowed his protection upon the prophet and extended to him much aid and support. Muḥammad’s attack upon the ‘daughters of Allāh’ and the boycott of Hāshim forced upon Abū Lahab a completely different attitude towards the prophet. Muḥammad’s dismay was fully expressed in Sūra cxi which was then revealed.

2. Verse 1: tabbat yaddā Abī Lahabīn wa-tabbā

The most intriguing phrase in verse 1 is yaddā Abī Lahabīn ‘the two hands of Abū Lahab’. According to the above-mentioned tradition of al-Waqīḍī, Abū Lahab had supported al-Uzzā and thus gained a ‘hand’ which was with her to his credit. The Arabic clause expressing it runs as follows: kuntu qad ittakhadu yadan ‘indahā. Yad here means ni‘ma, that is to say: ‘favour’ or ‘benefaction’. The meaning of the whole clause is: ‘I did her a favour (yad) and she is obliged to reward me for it’. The expression ittakhadha ‘indahum yadan is explained by Lane as follows: ‘He did to them a benefit,

15 According to al-Waqīḍī, the proclamation of these verses occurred in the fifth year, i.e. two years before the boycott of Hāshim (Ibn Sa‘d, op. cit., 1, 206, 209). Therefore the abrogation must have happened shortly before the boycott. Al-Ṭabarī, on his part, mentions the affair of the ‘Satanic verses’ only after the beginning of the boycott. See Tārīkh, ii, 74, 75 ff. See also al-Zurqānī, op. cit., i, 278 ff.
18 wa-lakīnna Liḥyānīn abāka wa-rū’ā wa-‘alā ‘l-khānā minhum fa-dā‘ anka ḥāšimā/ samat ḥāšimīn il-lakārumati wa-‘alā ‘l-khādīja fi kā‘ba mina l-mā‘ jāhimā.
19 That Abū Lahab’s conduct during the period of the boycott of Hāshim had a serious effect on Muḥammad is indicated also in some early verses ascribed to Abū Ṭālib (Ibn Ḥishām, op. cit., ii, 11). In these verses Abū Ṭālib urges Abū Lahab not to abandon his nephew, stressing the importance of his protection. Abū Ṭālib swears by the ‘house of Allāh’ (the Ka‘ba) that the Hāshimites will protect the prophet till the end. The background of these verses can easily be established, as the abīb is mentioned in the last verse.
20 An Arabic–English lexicon, s.v. a. kh. dh.
or favour, as though he earned one for himself in prospect, making it to be incumbent on them as a debt to him'. It follows that *yad* in this context denotes simultaneously the benefaction and its prospective reward. Al-Wāqidi's tradition leads to the conclusion that the Qurʾān has labelled Abū Lahab's attendance upon al-'Uzza as *yad*, that is to say, an honourable act of help and support, for which he deserved a due recompense from this goddess.

The Qurʾān, however, mentions the 'two hands' of Abū Lahab. This is due to the fact that not only a single act of support is meant, but rather all Abū Lahab's good deeds, including those which were performed for Muḥammad's sake. For there is some evidence that at a certain stage, Abū Lahab bestowed protection upon Muḥammad. Still, although the Qurʾān refers to all Abū Lahab's good deeds, it has nevertheless preferred the dual form, *yadā*, to the plural, *aydā*. *Yadā*, it seems, was much more natural, since the concrete meaning of *yad* (a hand) had not been wholly neglected. Hence, it was impossible to mention more than two 'hands' of a single person.

Abū Lahab had indeed several 'hands' to his credit in Mecca. As a generous wealthy man, this was quite to be expected of him. Ibn Iṣḥāq has preserved for us some early verses in which Abū Lahab appears as a most generous and helpful person. The verses are ascribed to Ḥudhayfah b. Ǧhānīm, whom Abū Lahab redeemed after he had been seized for a debt of 4,000 dirhams. We shall adduce but one verse. In this verse Abū Lahab is called Ibn Lubnā, after his mother Lubnā bint Ḥājar of Ḳuḥūzā':

```
wa-lā tansa mā asdā bnu Lubnā fa-innahū qada sād 26 yadan mahqūqatan minaka bi 'l-shukrī
t

'And do not forget what Ibn Lubnā has granted, for he has granted a “hand” that deserves your thankfulness'.
```

The original meaning of the phrase *yadā Abī Lahabin* was preserved not only in the above-mentioned tradition of al-Wāqidi, but also in some rare exegetical traditions included in the direct commentaries on our sūra. The commentary of al-ʿAlūsī (p. 261) contains the following passage:

```
wa-fī 'l-ta'wilat al-yadu bi-ma'nā 'l-nī'ma. wa-kāna yuhsīnu ilā 'l-nābi (s)
wā-lī quraysh wa-yayqūlu: in kāna 'l-amrū bi-Muḥammadin fa-li 'indahu yadun, wa-in kāna li-qurayshīn fa-ka-dhālīka

'there are some interpretations saying that *yad* denotes benefaction. (Abū

---

21 Ibn Saʿd, op. cit., i, 211. It is related that Abū Lahab protected Muḥammad only after Abū Tālib had died, i.e. much later than the revelation of Sūra CXI. It is more likely, however, that Muḥammad had enjoyed the protection of Abū Lahab before the revelation of this sūra which marked the end of the friendly relations with his uncle. The present form of the account apparently reflects a Shiʿi tendency to promote the impression that as long as Abū Tālib ('Ali's father) was alive, he was Muḥammad's only protector. At any rate, both Abū Tālib and Abū Lahab are said to have earned something in return for their kind attitude towards Muḥammad. Abū Tālib, who died as an unbeliever, was said to be only in the shallow fire of hell (*dabāḥah*). Abū Lahab was said to have water to ease his torture in hell as a reward for setting free his slave Thuwayba, who was Muḥammad's wet-nurse. See al-Sulayyīl, al-Rawāl as-ṣarīf, ed. 'Abd al-ʿAlī Saʿd, Cairo, 1971, vii, 67; al-ʿAṣqalānī, Fath al-bārī, ix, 12–5. On Abū Lahab and Thuwayba see also al-Bukhārī, Sahīh, Cairo, 1958, vii, 12; Ibn Saʿd, op. cit., i, 108; al-Bayhaqī, Dalāʾil al-muwāsaa, ed. Muḥammad ʿUthmān, Cairo, 1969, i, 120; Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Wafā bi-al-wāfā al-Muṣṭaṣfī, ed. ʿAbd al-Wāḥīd, Cairo, 1966, r, 107; al-ʿAṣqalānī, Ṭaba fi maʿrifat al-ṣahāba, ed. al-Biājwī, Cairo, 1970, vii, 549; al-Zurqānī, op. cit., i, 138.


23 Ibn Hishām, op. cit., i, 184 ff.

24 Ibid., 187.

25 Ibid., 115; Ibn Saʿd, loc. cit.

26 For: *qud asdā*.

---

This content downloaded from 132.66.223.134 on Fri, 02 Oct 2015 06:40:23 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions
Lahab) used to perform good deeds for the benefit of the prophet and Quraysh. He used to say: ‘if the victory is with Muḥammad, I have a ‘hand’ to my credit with him, and if the victory is with Quraysh, the same applies to them’.

Finally, it may be remarked that yad denoting benefaction, occurs in a further Qur'ānic passage as well. Qur'ān ix, 29 says: qātīlū 'l-adhīna lā yu'mišina bi-l-lāhi . . . mina 'l-ladhīna tātā 'l-kitāba KeyCode1 hātā yu'tū 'l-jizyata 'an yadin. The true meaning of the phrase al-jizyata 'an yadin has been pointed out by M. M. Bravmann.28 Bravmann, contrary to Kister’s opinion,29 renders this verse as follows: ‘combat those non-believers who are possessors of a book (i.e. Christians and Jews) until they give the reward due for a benefaction (since their lives are spared)’. There is, however, some difference between the two verses. The phrase yadā Abū Lahabin refers mainly to the supporter himself, i.e. Abū Lahab, whereas the expression ‘an yadin refers to those who were granted the benefaction, who must make a reward for it. Besides, in Qur'ān ix, 29 yad means a benefaction consisting in sparing somebody’s life, whereas in our sūra, yad means benefaction in the sense of material support. In both cases the benefaction must be duly rewarded or recouped.

Our sūra is directly connected with Sūra lxxi which abrogates Muḥammad’s former recognition of al-‘Uzza’s existence. Verse 1 conveys the idea that the ‘hand’ which Abū Lahab believed he had to his credit with al-‘Uzza, has become worthless; he can no longer count on al-‘Uzza’s reward for serving and supporting her, as she became a false goddess due to the abrogation of the ‘Satanic verses’. At the same time, the Qur'ān, as a retaliation against Abū Lahab who abandoned Muḥammad for his own interests, proclaims the end of his credit with Muḥammad, the latter being no longer obliged to reward Abū Lahab for his former protection. The word which signifies the new condition of Abū Lahab’s ‘hands’ is tabbat. Qatāda (d. 118/736),26 as quoted by al-Ṭabarī, interprets it as khasirat, i.e. ‘failed to produce profits or reward; became worthless’. The explanation of tabbat as khasirat accords with the Qur'ān itself, in which the infinitive tabbīb is replaced by takḥīr (Qur'ān xi, 101: wa-mā zādīhum ghayra tabbībīn; xi, 63: fa-mā tażīdīnānī ghayra takḥīrin). According to a further interpretation recorded on the authority of Yamān b. Rī'āb,21 tabbat means: ‘have become devoid of any benefit (ṣafirat min kulli khayrin)’.22 Similarly, one of al-Ṭabarī’s interpretations says that verse 1 means: ‘his hands have not gained any benefit at all, and he himself incurred loss as well, i.e. he has been lost in all respects (wa-ma’na nahu annahu lam taktaṣib yadāhu khayran qattu, wa-khāsara ma’a ḍhālika huwa nafṣuhu, ay tabba ‘alā kullī hālīn)’.

The final thing to be explained concerning verse 1 is the meaning of the name ‘Abū Lahab’, i.e. ‘the father of flame’. According to Lohmann,23 ‘Abū Lahab’ stands for the person who was first to kindle the fire, that is to say, the first person of Quraysh to break off friendly relations with Muḥammad.

27 Abū Muslim (probably al-Kashāhi, d. 292/904, see Sezgin, GAS, i, 162), as quoted by al-Rāzī, says that yadā Abū Lahabin means his fortune (ya’nī māḏahu) which is also denoted by the expression dhāl al-yad. This interpretation is close to the interpretation of yad as ni’ma, in the sense of material support.
30 Sezgin, GAS, i, 21 ff.
31 On whom see al-Dhahabi, Mīzān al-‘ītīdāl, Cairo, n.d., iv, 460.
32 See al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, and Abū Ḥāyyān.
33 Lohmann, art. cit., 334.
This explanation cannot be accepted for the simple reason that there is nothing to suggest that ‘fire’ symbolizes the conflict with the prophet, since this conflict, in its early stages, was by no means warlike. On the other hand, Lohmann is quite correct in assuming that ‘Abū Lahab’ has become the name (kunya) of Muḥammad’s uncle only as a result of this sūra, not being known before. In general, a man’s kunya is mentioned in his honour. Thus Lahab’s case, however, is different. Al-‘Aṣqalānī explains: ‘the kunya in itself does not indicate glorification, since in some cases, the personal name may be more honourable than the kunya (... inna ‘l-takniya lā‘ tadullu bi-mujarradīhā ‘alā ‘l-ta‘zīm bal qad yakānū ‘l-ismu ashrafīa mina ‘l-takniya)’. This, indeed, seems to be true: the Qurʾān, in order to degrade Abū Lahab, has refrained from addressing him by his personal name, ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, which signified his honour as servant of al-‘Uzzā. The Qurʾān has chosen to name him ‘the father of flame’, thus suggesting that instead of being rewarded by al-‘Uzzā at the Last Judgement for his service, he, being deprived of the intercession of that false goddess, will burn in the flames of hell. Thus the surname ‘Abū Lahab’ fits in with the general context of verse 1.

In conclusion, verse 1 may be rendered as follows: ‘Abū Lahab’s credit for his grand deeds has been lost, and he (himself) has been lost’.

3. Other interpretations of verse 1

The greater part of the Muslim commentaries on verse 1 contains new interpretations deviating from its true meaning. This deviation seems to be due to a deliberate modification of the meaning of this verse. The reason for this seems to be connected with verse 3 of our sūra: sa-yasalā nārān dhātā lahabin ‘He shall be burned in a fire of flame’. Originally, this verse describes Abū Lahab’s failure to gain his prospective reward for serving al-‘Uzzā, on the one hand, and for protecting Muḥammad, on the other. Being deprived of his reward, the fire of hell has become his only prospect. After Muḥammad’s death, however, Muslim theologians gradually developed a new perception of verse 3, and consequently of the whole sūra. Their postulate was that Abū Lahab, being mentioned in a special Qurʾānic chapter, relating also his fate in hell, must have sinned greatly against Muḥammad and Islam, for which hell was to be his punishment.

This view had much bearing on verse 1. Firstly, the meaning of the ‘hands’ of Abū Lahab was changed from grand deeds of favour and support to hostile actions carried out by those hands against no other than Muhammad himself. Thus the ‘hands’ regained their concrete meaning, while tabbat came to signify the failure of those hostile deeds. In this way Abū Lahab grew akin to the rest of the Qurashīs who had allegedly persecuted the prophet in Mecca.

The first step towards this new understanding of verse 1 seems to be reflected in a tradition traced back to Ibn ‘Abbās. This tradition is recorded by al-Rāzī: ‘Ibn ‘Abbās said: he (i.e. Abū Lahab) used to send away people who had come to see (the prophet), saying that (Muḥammad) was a soothsayer (sāḥīr). Those people used to turn back, not suspecting the truth of his words, since he was the head of the clan, and used to treat Muḥammad like a father. However,
when Sūra cxl was revealed, Ābu Lāhāb became angry and showed his enmity, causing people to grow suspicious and to disbelieve in what he had said about the prophet. Thus his efforts (against the prophet) failed, and his aim was missed. And perhaps the “hand” has been mentioned because he used to strike with it on the shoulder of the person who had come to see the prophet, saying: “‘turn back, for Muhammad is possessed (majnūn)”’. Usually, when a man sends another man away, he puts his hand on the latter’s shoulder, pushing him away’. Al-Rāzī records a further interpretation on the authority of ‘Ātā: ‘tabbat means: “has been defeated (ghulabat)”’; (Ābu Lāhāb) believed that his hand would (triumph) over (Muḥammad), and he would expel him from Mecca, humiliating and defeating him (but his own hand has been defeated’.

Verse 3 of our sūra has a pure eschatological significance. This stimulated more new interpretations attaching a similar meaning to verse 1 as well. Thereby, verse 1 was treated as though dealing not only with the failure of Ābu Lāhāb’s worldly sins against the prophet, but also with his prospective punishment in hell. Āl-Ṭabarānī interprets: ‘his deeds have proved unsuccessful, and he himself has failed, being condemned to hell’ (khasira ‘amaluhu wa-khasira huwa bi ‘l-wuqū‘ī fi ‘l-nār’).

Verse 1 was eventually interpreted as if referring solely to the world to come, tabbat being no longer interpreted as denoting a present worldly disadvantage, but rather as an invocation (du‘ā) for the same, due to come upon Ābu Lāhāb in hell. This interpretation is reflected in the reading (qirā‘a) of ‘Abdullāh b. Mas‘ūd: tabbat yadā abī laḥabin wa-qad tabba; ‘may the hands of Ābu Lāhāb be lost, and indeed he has been lost’. This qirā‘a is based on a structure of invocation common in old Arabic; it contains two verbs, the latter being preceded by wa-qad, denoting the inevitability of the invocation expressed by the first. Āl-Ṭabarānī adduces two examples of this structure: ahlakaka ‘llāhu wa-qad ahlakaka; ja‘alaka sāliḥan wa-qad ja‘alaka.

In acquiring the meaning of invocation, the phrase tabbat yadāhu was assimilated later on to genuine Arabic phrases of invocation connected with ‘hands’, such as shallat yadāhu and taribat yadāhu. Unlike the Qur’ānic expression tabbat yadāhu, these phrases are to be found in many verses of old Arab poetry. In the following rajaz verse, the Qur’ānic phrase tabbat yadāhu has already been adapted to its new usage of invocation. According to Lisān al-‘Arab (s.v. tbb), this verse refers to somebody who has bought fasw, i.e. a commodity from which no great utility is derived.

akhsir bihā min ṣafqatin lam tusqaqal
tablāt yadā sāfiqihā mādhā fa‘al
‘What a great loss (was caused by) this deal that was not abrogated,
May the hands of him who made this deal be lost, what has he done!’

37 See also al-Suhaylī, op. cit., ii, 100.
38 Regarding tabbat as an invocation, Fischer considered this qirā‘a to be the original one. Parey (op. cit., 529), however, has shown that the lectio difficilior is not wa-qad tabba (Ibn Mas‘ūd) but rather wa-tabba, thus affirming that Ibn Mas‘ūd’s reading is secondary. The qirā‘a of Ibn Mas‘ūd was indeed known as an ‘easy’ one, containing many explanatory additions to the original text. See al-Suhaylī, loc. cit. See also I. Goldzieher, Richtungen, 8 ff.
39 See references in Fischer, op. cit., p. 20, n. 1.
40 Fischer, loc. cit., adduces this verse as an illustration that tabbat yadā abī laḥabin is an invocation. This verse, however, seems to be a later reflection of a somewhat similar rajaz verse included in the original story about the person who bought fasw. This man, so the story goes, was named Baydār; he bought the fasw of the tribe of Iyād. The original rajaz verse referring to him does not yet have tabbat yadāhu but still: shallat yadāhu. See e.g. Ibn Durayd, Jamhatā al-lughā, Hyderabad, 1344/1925, i, 23.
The view that verse 1 invokes evil upon Abū Lahab is put forward by many traditions, some of which are widely current in the various commentaries on our sūra. This view represents, in fact, the consensus (ijmā‘) of the Muslim scholars with regard to the meaning of verse 1. The main idea of the traditions presenting this view is that the phrase tabbān yarda abū lāhabin forms an antiphony to the invocation tabbān lahu uttered by Abū Lahab himself before the revelation of the sūra. One of the earliest of these traditions is that of Ibn Iṣḥāq.41 According to Ibn Iṣḥāq, Abū Lahab used to say: ‘Muḥammad promises me things that I do not see, which he says will come after my death. What has he actually put in my hands (except promises)’? Then he would blow on his hands and say: ‘May you be lost (tabbān lakaμa). I see in you nothing of what Muḥammad says’. Therefore Allāh revealed the sūra.

According to more developed traditions, Abū Lahab directed the imprecation not to his own self, but rather to the Islamic religion. A tradition to this effect is recorded by al-Ṭabarī on the authority of Ibn Zayd (d. 182/798).42 Abū Lahab allegedly uttered the words tabbān li-hādhā min didīn tabbān, when Muḥammad refused to grant him an exceptional position among the Muslims, as a reward for his embracing Islam.

The most current traditions, however, are those relating that Abū Lahab’s curse was directed to Muḥammad himself. These traditions say that when Muḥammad was ordered to start warning his nearest relations of the Last Judgement (Qur’ān xxvi, 214: wa-andhīr ‘ashirataka ‘l-qarabīna . . .), he summoned them all in order to convey his mission. Upon hearing his words, Abū Lahab said: ‘Is this what you summoned us for? May you be lost (tabbān laka)’. Thereupon Sūra cxı was revealed. This story implies that Sūra cxı was revealed at the very beginning of Muḥammad’s prophetic activity. Al-Ṭabarī records no less than five versions of this story, four of which are from al-A‘mash (d. 148/765),43 with an ‘insād traced back to Ibn ‘Abbās.

This story was admitted into the canonical ḥadīth,44 as well as into books of asbāb al-nuzūl.45 Its secondary nature is attested most clearly by the fact that in the earlier versions of the story about the beginning of Muḥammad’s mission among his fellow tribesmen, there is not a single word concerning Sūra cxı.46

In later versions of the above traditions, Abū Lahab’s hostile acts against the prophet assume a more aggressive nature. According to al-Zamakhsharī and al-Baydawī, Abū Lahab not only abused the prophet, but also picked up a stone with the intention of throwing it at him, thus provoking the Qur’ānic damning of his hands.47 Explaining why the Qur’ān has mentioned the hands of Abū Lahab, al-Ṭabarī and al-Ṭabarī quote a tradition on the authority of the šaḥābī Tāriq al-Muḥāribī,48 according to which Abū Lahab used to follow the

41 Ibn Ishāhīm, op. cit., i, 376.
42 Sezgin, ḠAS, i, 38.
43 Ibid., 9.
44 See al-Bukhārī, op. cit., vu, 140, 221-2; al-Tirmidhī, Sāḥīh (in ‘Āriqat al-aḥwadth, by Ibn al-‘Arabī), xvi, 290. See also Ibn Sa‘d, op. cit., i, 74-5, 200.
45 E.g. al-Wāhīdī, Asbāb al-nuzūl, Cairo, 1968, 261-2.
48 On whom see Isbīgī, iii, 511.
prophet and throw stones at him, when the latter preached Islam to Arab tribesmen in the market of Dhū 'l-Majāz.\footnote{A Shi'i tradition relates that al-'Abbās participated with Abū Lahab in these deeds. Abū Ṭalīb defended the prophet against them both. See Ibn Shahrahshūb, op. cit., i, 51.} This tradition was already recorded by al-Tirmidhī.\footnote{Quoted from al-Tirmidhī in Isbēka, loc. cit.} An earlier version of the same story, however, does not mention any such act on the part of Abū Lahab, nor is there any allusion to the connexion of this event with our sûrā.\footnote{See Ibn Hishām, op. cit., ii, 64–5; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, op. cit., i, 101; Ibn Kathīr, op. cit., iii, 41; Ibn Shahrahshūb, op. cit., i, 51. Cf. also Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., i, 516. In the course of time, Abū Lahab’s name was included in the list of those Qurashi who plotted to kill the prophet before the Hijra. See Ibn Sa’d, op. cit., i, 228. In Ibn Hishām, p. 125, his name is still absent from that list. Similarly, later sources (Ibn Shahrahshūb, i, 66–7, cf. Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, i, 119) include his name in the list of the musta‘ṣirūn, from which his name is still absent in the earlier sources (e.g. Ibn Hishām, p. 50–1; al-Tabarī, Ta/fsir, xiv, 48–9. See also al-Bayhaqī, op. cit., ii, 55–6; Ibn al-Jawzī, op. cit., i, 365; Ibn al-Jawzī, op. cit., i, 329–30; al-Khārgūshī, op. cit., MS Tübingen M.A. VI, 12, folios 44b–45a). It is also worthy of note that in later sources Abū Lahab is said to have performed deeds which were ascribed originally to Abū Jahl (of Makhāzūn), probably due to the likeness of the names. In the earlier sources it is related that Abū Jahl plotted to kill Muhammad with a stone, while the latter was absorbed in prayer (Ibn Hishām, op. cit., i, 319–20; see also al-Bayhaqī, op. cit., i, 438–40; al-Suyūṭī, op. cit., i, 315–16, 320–1; Ibn al-Jawzī, op. cit., i, 327; al-Khārgūshī, op. cit. (BM), fol. 114b; Wensinck, A handbook of early Muhammadan tradition, 7, and also the commentaries on Sūra cxxi). In later sources the same story is transferred from Abū Jahl to Abū Lahab. See Ibn Shahrahshūb, op. cit., i, 68–9.} Finally Abū Lahab has become the archetype of Muhammad’s enemies, whom all the Muslims are urged to curse. Ibn Kathīr (Bidāya, iii, 41) informs us that Sūra cxi was recited on the minbars being included in the exhortations and the Friday sermons. And see further Fischer, op. cit., accessim, Lohmann, art. cit., 339, 331–2. It is interesting to observe, however, that certain circles (probably of the Shi’a) produced several traditions to the effect that Muhammad had forbidden the Muslims to curse the members of his own family. This had been done after Abū Lahab’s daughter had complained to the prophet of being insulted by the Muslims for being the offspring of the ‘fire-wood of hell’ (ibnbat tabah al-nár). According to some traditions the prophet announced on that occasion that his intercession (ṣaf’a) would save all his blood relations at the Last Judgement. See al-‘Aṣqalānī, Isbēka, vii, 634 ff.; al-Khārgūshī, op. cit. (Tübingen), 18b, (BM) 50b–51a; al-Zurqānī, op. cit., i, 185–6; Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, al-Ṣawā'id al-mubīqa, Cairo, 1965, 172.}
comparison with Qur'ān xxii, 10, is unjustified, since yadāka there and elsewhere in the Qur'ān, has its own independent meaning, being used in a figurative sense, in connexion with the performance of deeds (gaddamat).\textsuperscript{53}

4. Verse 2: \textit{mā aqmē ṣāhu mālūku wa-mā kasabā}

The crucial phrase in verse 2 is \textit{wa-mā kasabā}. Barth translated: ‘... und er erworben hat’. Fischer (p. 25) and Lohmann (p. 326) followed suit. The truth is, however, that the verb \textit{kasabā} in the Qur'ān does not usually denote ‘to gain’ or ‘to earn’, but rather ‘to act’ or ‘to perform deeds of some importance’. Although this metaphorical usage of the verb \textit{kasabā} has been pointed out by Western scholars,\textsuperscript{54} it has not yet been noticed that \textit{kasabā} has the same meaning in our sūra as well. The phrase \textit{wa-mā kasabā} refers to Abū Lahab’s grand deeds, namely his service to al-‘Uzza and his protection of Muḥammad. These were the works that did credit to him and provided him with the ‘hands’ mentioned in the previous verse.

This true meaning of \textit{wa-mā kasabā} was preserved for us in one tradition only. This tradition is recorded on the authority of Qatāda, the same Qatāda whose interpretation of verse 1 also preserved some of its original meaning (see above). The tradition of Qatāda is recorded by al-Zamakhshāri. It says: ‘(mā kasabā means) his deeds which he believed were of some benefit to him. It is like (Allāh) said (Qur'ān xxv, 23): “and we turned to the deeds they had performed ...” (amaluhu ‘lādhi žanna avnahu minghu ‘lā shay’in ka-gavelīhī: wa-qadīmīn ila mā ‘amilū min ‘amalīn’). The ‘amal of Qur’ān xxv, 23, which, according to Qatāda, resembles the ‘amal of Abū Lahab, consists indeed in grand works which are proclaimed worthless by the Qur'ān because of the disbelief of those who carried them out.\textsuperscript{55}

In close association with the grand works of Abū Lahab, the Qur'ān also mentions his wealth (mālūhu). In this context mālūhu must be taken as referring to the fortune Abū Lahab spent to perform his grand works of aid and support. Māl consisted mainly of camels and sheep, and Abū Lahab indeed used such camels upon the needy, among them the above-mentioned Hudhayfa b. Ghānim.\textsuperscript{56} Abū Lahab’s māl was probably spent also for the sake of al-‘Uzza. That māl was indeed used for such religious purposes, is indicated by a passage in al-Aṣqā’ī’s 

\textit{Akbār Makka}.

Khālid b. al-Walīd, it is related, once told Muḥammad that his father used to offer up his best wealth (bi- khayri mālihi) to al-‘Uzza.

The main idea of verse 2 is that neither the wealth Abū Lahab had spent, nor the grand works he had performed could prevent the ultimate loss of the ‘hands’ he hoped to preserve to his credit with both al-‘Uzza and Muḥammad.

\textsuperscript{53} Fischer also believes that yadāa is a synecdoche, hence, yadā Abī Lahabīn denotes: Abū Lahab. But this explanation is obviously wrong, as it does not explain why the Qur'ān speaks both of the hands of Abū Lahab (tabbāt) and of Abū Lahab himself (wa-tabbā). This repetition can be intelligible only if a clear distinction between the ‘hands’ of Abū Lahab and the person himself is assumed.

\textsuperscript{54} Varet, op. cit., 22; Bravmann, op. cit., 107 ff.

\textsuperscript{55} Cf. al-Tabari, \textit{Tafsir}, xix, 3. Commenting on Qur'ān xxv, 23, al-Zamakhshāri says that the works of the unbelievers were such as doing good to the kindred, helping the suffering, entertaining guests, redeeming prisoners, and other such noble and good deeds (wa-a'mālūku 'lātī 'amilūhā fi kufrīhīn min šīlāt ruhīm wa-ṣāhātī qarībīn wa-māsīhīn min wa-qirībīn wa-māshīhīn). And see further Qur'ān xiv, 18, where the ‘amal of the unbelievers is mentioned in connexion with their kasab: malhālu 'lādīna kafārā bi-'arba'bīhīn a'mālūhīn ilā yaddkā bi-hī l-rūhī fi yasīmīn 'ṣāfīn lā yahdūrūna minmūd kasabā 'lā shay'in.\textsuperscript{56} Ibn Hishām, op. cit., 1, 185, l. 12. As an owner of a large number of camels, Abū Lahab was able to practise \textit{qimār}; see Aghāni, Būlāq, repr. Beirut, 1970, iii, 100, iv, 19.

\textsuperscript{57} ibid., 81.
This idea is conveyed by the phrase mā aghnā 'anhu. Al-Bayḍāwī explains:

naṣfun li-īgnā'i 'l-māli 'anhu ḥīna nāzala bihi 'l-tabāбу 'Negation of the benefit of his wealth when the loss (of his hands) was inflicted upon him'.

It is important to remark that with much the same words the Qurʾān denies elsewhere the benefit of the grand works of the ancient people of Thamūd who had erected monuments of stone for their protection, which, however, were soon destroyed. Qurʾān xv, 84 reads: fa-mā aghnā 'anhum mā kānī yaksibūna. And see also xxxix, 50; xl, 82.

Finally, verse 2 may be thus translated: 'the fortune (that he had spent) and the grand works that he had performed did not help him (to preserve his hands').

5. Other interpretations of verse 2

The same reasons as caused the above-mentioned changes in the meaning of verse 1 have produced like changes in the meaning of verse 2. Like yadā Abī Lahabin, the phrase wa-mā kasaba was soon presented as denoting Abū Lahab’s hostile actions against the prophet. Al-Daḥḥāk (d. 105/723),58 as quoted by al-Zamakhshārī, says that the phrase wa-mā kasaba means Abū Lahab’s ‘evil deeds i.e. his conspiracy against the messenger of Allāh (wa-‘amaluhu ‘l-khabīthu ya‘nī kaydahu fī ‘adāwati rasūl allāh)’. The interpretation of Al-Daḥḥāk perceives the phrase wa-mā kasaba in the meaning of ‘amal al-khabīth, which expression, like kasb al-khabīth, was quite common in pre-Islamic poetry.59

This interpretation soon adjusted itself to the eschatological meaning which became dominant in all the further interpretations of verse 2. Wa-mā kasaba, in the meaning of kasb al-khabīth, was associated with Abū Lahab’s children, on grounds of some Qurʾānic passages containing the idea that at the Last Judgement neither wealth (māl) nor children (awlād) would save the unbelievers from hell (e.g. III, 10, 116; LVIII, 17). No less than five traditions putting forth this meaning of wa-mā kasaba are recorded by al-Taḥārī. The most detailed one is recorded on the authority of Ma‘mar b. Rāshid (d. 154/770).60 This tradition relates that Abū Lahab’s two sons once quarrelled with each other while at Ibn ‘Abbās’s bed. On trying to stop them, Ibn ‘Abbās was pushed by them on to his bed. Then he ordered that Abū Lahab’s evil kasb be sent out of his house (akhrijū ‘annī ‘l-kasab ‘l-khabītha). In short, this tradition ascribes to Ibn ‘Abbās the interpretation that the phrase wa-mā kasaba stands for Abū Lahab’s children.61

The same interpretation of wa-mā kasaba is widely current in later commentaries. Al-Taḥārī furnishes us with the following explanation: ‘it means his sons because the sons of a man are part of his earnings (kasb). They were mentioned because Abū Lahab had said: “if what Muḥammad says about hell is true, I shall redeem myself (from hell) by means of my wealth and my sons”’. Al-Zamakhshārī adds a hadīth ascribing to the prophet the following statement: ‘the best food that man eats is that which comes from his earnings (kasb); his children are part of his earnings’.62

58 Sezgin, GAS, i, 29.
59 Bravmann, op. cit., 110 ff.
60 Sezgin, GAS, i, 290.
61 See also al-Taḥārī, Taṣfīr, xxv, 86, where mā kasabah is explained as māl wa-urul. In other cases, however, al-Taḥārī did not refrain from explaining kasaba in the sense of ‘amīla. See e.g. xiv, 34; xxiv, 9, 57.
With the accommodation of verse 2 to the eschatological meaning, the expression mā-aghnh ā-nhu was no longer conceived as past tense but rather as referring to Abū Lahab’s future punishment in hell. Al-Ṭabarî interprets: ‘neither his wealth nor his kasb helped him against Allâh’s punishment (ay mā nafa’ahu wa-lā dafa’u ā-nhu ṣadhiba ṣalāhu wa-mā kasabahu’). Al-Ṭabarî regards mā aghnh as an interrogation denoting the question: ‘what was the benefit of his wealth and to what extent did it protect him from Allâh’s anger?’ It is interesting to observe, however, that elsewhere in the Qur’ân, al-Ṭabarî usually interprets mā aghnh as an ordinary past tense, denoting lam yughnh. In our sûra the eschatological point of view caused him to deviate from his usual manner of interpretation.

6. The miraculous aspects of the sûra

The sons of Abū Lahab played a special role in Muhammad’s life. According to Ibn Qutayba, Muḥammad’s daughter Ruqayya had been married to Abū Lahab’s son ʿUtayba, but by order of his father he broke off the marriage. Muhammad’s daughter Umm Kulthûm had been married to Abū Lahab’s son ʿUtayba, and he also was ordered by his father to do the same. According to Ibn Saʿd, this conduct on the part of Abū Lahab was caused by the revelation of our sûra.65

One of Abū Lahab’s sons paid a heavy price for thus insulting the prophet. A legendary tradition relates that Muhammad invoked Allâh to make Abū Lahab’s son be killed by a predatory animal. Before long, this son was mauled by a lion.67 Earlier versions of this story relate, however, that Abū Lahab’s son suffered this fate because he had announced his rejection of Sûra LIII.68

The connexion with Sûra LIII is not surprising, as this is the very sûra which abrogates the ‘Satanic verses’. It is a further indication that Abū Lahab and his family took much interest in securing the worship of al-ʿUzzâ.

The legendary story of the end of Abū Lahab’s son finally found its way into the commentaries on Sûra cxI. Al-Baydawî labels this sûra as ikhbâr ‘an al-ghayb, thus associating it with a long series of miraculous stories about Muhammad’s outstanding powers to forecast the future, which are to be found in almost every book dealing with Muhammad’s prophet signs (dala’il al-nubuwwa).69 Al-Baydawî explains that the sûra foretells the end of Abū

---

63 Al-Ṭabarî, Taṣfîr, viii, 142 (on Qur’ân vii, 48); xxix, 40 (on lxix, 25); xiv, 34 (on xv, 84); xxiv, 9 (on xxxix, 50); xxv, 18 (on lxi, 26); xiI, 68 (on xi, 101).

64 In two more cases al-Ṭabarî has interpreted mā kasaba as an interrogation and not as past tense, due to interrogative pronouns found in the Qur’ânic text. See ibid., xxiv, 57 (on Qur’ân xi, 82), xix, 71 (on xxvi, 207).


66 Ibn Saʿd, op. cit., vii, 36, 37. According to another source (Aghnî, xv, 2) it was the wife of Abû Lahab who ordered the breaking off of the marriage.

67 Al-Suhayli, op. cit., iii, 68; al-Bayhaqî, op. cit., ii, 96-7. See also al-Khârûshâ, op. cit. (Tûbingen), fol. 87b, (BM) fol. 124b. Another source says that Abû Lahab’s son was killed by the lion because of his being one of the muṣtâkî’un (p. 21, n. 51, above); see al-Ṭabarî, al-Dîn wa l-dawla fi ikhbâr nubuwwat al-Nabî Muḥammad, ed. ʿAbî Nuwaḥyd, Beirut, 1973, 67.

68 A distinction must be made between the son that was killed by a lion and the other two sons of Abû Lahab who survived their father and embraced Islam after the conquest of Mecca. The Muslim traditionists are a little puzzled as to what the exact name of each of the sons was, as their names were quite similar: ʿUtba, ʿUtayba, and Muʿatib. See al-Suhaylí, loc. cit. Sometimes the sources mention a son named Lahab, obviously a secondary derivation from the father’s nickname. See al-Dîn wa l-dawla, loc. cit.; al-Naysîbûrî, Muṣṭâradd, ii, 539; al-Bayhaqî, op. cit., ii, 96.

69 Al-Ṭabarî, Taṣfîr, xxvii, 24; see also al-Suyûṭî, op. cit., i, 367-9; Ibn Shahrašîb, op. cit., i, 71. Cf. Aghnî, xiii, 153.

Lahab’s son, to whom the expression *wa-mā kasaba* refers. In the same context, Baydāwī also relates the story of the end of Abū Lahab himself, who died shortly after Badr,70 as though the sūra predicts his own death as well. Thus the sūra obtained its miraculous nature, and in some cases, as in the *Mustadrak* of al-Ḥakim,71 a version of the story about the son of Abū Lahab 72 is given predominance over other traditions.

The miraculous features of our sūra as viewed by Muslim scholars are illustrated to the full in a passage in Ibn Kathīr’s commentary: ‘The learned men say that there is an evident miracle in our sūra and a clear proof of the prophecy, because since the revelation of the verses in which the misfortune and disbelief of Abū Lahab and his wife were foretold, they have not been led to embrace Islam, neither secretly nor openly. Thus it was the strongest of all the dazzling hidden proofs of the visible prophecy.’

7. *Verse 4*: *wa-'mra'atuhu hammālatu 'l-ḥaṭabi*

Verse 4 runs as follows: ‘And his wife (shall also burn); She is a fire-wood carrier.’ 73

This verse deals with the wife of Abū Lahab who, being the sister of Abū Sufyān, belonged to the highest rank of Meccan society. The original significance of the appellation *hammālat al-ḥaṭab* given to her in the Qur’ān was again preserved for us by Qatāda. His interpretation as quoted by al-Rāzī, reads: ‘She (i.e. the wife of Abū Lahab) used to condemn the prophet for being poor, therefore she was condemned for being a wood gatherer (qawlū qatādāta: *innahā kānat tu'ayyiru rasūla 'l-lāhī bi 'l-faqri fa-'uyyirat bi-annahā kānat taḥtibu’).’ A more complete version of the same interpretation is recorded by al-Ṭabarī, without, however, mentioning its source: ‘Some say: “she used to condemn the prophet for being poor, herself being in the habit of gathering wood, therefore she was condemned for being a wood gatherer” (wa-qāla ba’dhum: *wa-kānat tu'ayyiru rasūla 'l-lāhī bi-l-faqri wa-kānat taḥtibu fa-'uyyirat bi-annahā kānat taḥtibu’).’74

Qatāda’s interpretation implies that the wife of Abū Lahab used to perform such works as were connected with the gathering of fire-wood, which occupation gave the Qur’ān an opportunity for dishonouring her. It must be remembered that wood gathering was regarded as one of the most despicable works, carried out by women of the lowest rank.75 The question arises, how did it come about that a woman of the rank of Abū Lahab’s wife did such work. The explanation (al-Ālūsī, 263) that she was too miserly to employ servants to do the work for her, seems to be over-simplified.

The real solution is to be found in Wellhausen’s *Reste arabischen Heidentums*. On pp. 40–1 Wellhausen quotes a passage from Isaak of Antioch (fifth century A.D.) about the ways in which the Arabs used to worship al-‘Uzza. Isaak identifies al-‘Uzza with *Kawakaba*, i.e. Venus who was also named ‘the queen of heaven’. Isaak compares the Arab worship of al-‘Uzza with the Jewish

---

71 *Mustadrak*, ii, 539.
72 See the same version also in al-Bayhaqī, op. cit., ii, 96; Ibn al-Jawzī, op. cit., i, 348.
73 This translation is based on the reading *hammālat al-ḥaṭabi*, which signifies *dhamm*, and not on *hammālatu 'l-ḥaṭabi*. For further details see the commentaries.
74 Fischer, op. cit., 34, quoted Qatāda’s interpretation from al-Rāzī, without noticing its complete version in al-Ṭabarī. Therefore he seems to have misunderstood its significance. See below, p. 27, n. 77.
75 Fischer, op. cit., 35 ff.; Lohmann, art. cit., 344.
worship of the 'queen of heaven' as described in Jeremiah vii, 18. The passage in Jeremiah seems to be most instructive: 'The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough to make cakes to the queen of heaven...'. Wellhausen finds evidence that the Arab customs of the worship of al-'Uzzā indeed resembled Jeremiah's description. This may well lead us to believe that the appellation hammālat al-ḥātab refers to the active part Abū Lahab's wife took in the worship of al-'Uzzā. Unlike Jeremiah, the Qur'ān assigns the task of gathering the fire-wood not to Abū Lahab's children, but rather to his wife, thus exposing the despicable nature of the works this aristocratic woman used to carry out in honour of al-'Uzzā, together with her whole family.

At this stage a more coherent understanding of the significance of the surname 'Abū Lahab' is possible. Perhaps it does not so much refer to the fire of hell in which he is doomed to burn, as to the fire he used to kindle when worshipping al-'Uzzā. This observation produces a significant correlation between his surname 'Abū Lahab' and his personal name, 'Abd al-'Uzzā.

8. Other interpretations of verse 4

The secondary interpretations of verse 4 are based on patterns similar to those of the secondary interpretations of the previous verses of our sūra. The appellation hammālat al-ḥātab gained a new meaning, more appropriate to the wife of a person who was believed to have been Muhāammad's enemy. The original meaning of this appellation, denoting religious action for the sake of al-'Uzzā, was totally neglected.

The following tradition seems to mark the first step towards the new understanding of hammālat al-ḥātab, presenting it as referring to hostile actions Abū Lahab's wife allegedly carried out against the prophet. This tradition, recorded by al-Ṭabarī, is also traced back to Qatāda: kānat tanqulul ʿl-ahādītha min baʾdi ʿl-nāsī ilā baʾdi ʿl-nāsī 'She used to pass on rumours from one person to another'. Hammālat al-ḥātab is understood here in its metaphorical sense, i.e. 'the rumours carrier', or rather 'the slanderer'. The same interpretation, in much more explicit words (kānat tamshī bi ʿl-namīma) is recorded by al-Ṭabarī on the authority of Mujāhid (d. 104/722) and 'Ikrima (d. 105/723).

Far more elaborate are the traditions which no longer conceive of ḥātab as fire-wood—neither concretely nor metaphorically—but rather as a bundle of thorns (ḥuzmat shawāk), which the woman allegedly used to throw in Muḥammad's way, thus wounding his feet. This interpretation of hammālat al-ḥātab was preferred by al-Ṭabarī, who has recorded several traditions of this kind, tracing them back to Ibn 'Abdās, al-Ḍabhdāk, Ibn Zayd, and others.76

Al-Zamakhshāri explains that the action of throwing the bundle of thorns was described by the Qur'ān as the gathering of fire-wood in order to expose its inferior nature (... wa-taṣawwirin lahah bi-ṣūrat bi ʿl-ḥaṭṭātī min al-mawāhibīn). In other words, al-Zamakhshāri holds that ḥaṭṭā t really denotes fire-wood but only in a figurative sense, symbolizing the bundle of thorns. Al-Bayḍāwī

76 See also Ibn Hishām, op. cit., 1, 380. A similar action, namely the throwing of offal in front of Muḥammad's door, is ascribed to Abū Lahab and 'Uqba b. Abī Mu'ayyit. See Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., 1, 201. It may be further remarked that in some later traditions Abū Lahab's wife is even presented as taking an active part in the plots of Quraysh to kill the prophet. The person who allegedly defended the prophet against this woman was no other than Abū Lahab himself. See al-Katikāni, Tahāʾīr al-burkhān, on our sūra (reference from M. J. Kister). This tradition seems to express the anti-Umāyyad feelings of the Shi'a.
explains likewise (taswīrān lahā bi-ṣūrātī 'l-ḥaṣūbahati 'llatī taḥmilu 'l-ḥuzmāta wa-tarbiṭuḥā fī jīdiḥā ṣahīrān li-ṣha'nihu)\textsuperscript{77}.

Like the former verses of our sūra, verse 4 was finally interpreted in the eschatological sense. The wood gathering was presented as the woman's punishment in hell for her worldly sins against Muhammad. Interpretations to this effect are given by al-Zamakhsharī and al-Baydāwī. They interpret ḥatab as signifying the trees and thorns of hell, i.e. the Zaqqūm and Ḍarī' (Qurʾān XLIV, 43; LXXXVIII, 6).

9. Verse 5: fī jīdiḥā ḥablun min masādin

Verse 5 may be thus translated: 'On her neck there is a cord made of fibres'.

The word jīd usually denotes a woman's neck from the aesthetic viewpoint, i.e. the place on which ornaments and the like are hanging.\textsuperscript{78} Therefore, Qatāda's interpretation of this verse seems, once again, to be faithful to its original meaning. His interpretation is recorded by al-Ṭabārī. It says that ḥablun min masādin stands for qulāda min wād'in—'a necklace made of seashells'.\textsuperscript{79} According to al-Ḥasan al-Ḍaṣūrī (d. 110/728) as quoted by Abū Ḥāyān, the necklace was made of kharz, which is the same as wād'.

Abū Ḥāyān also quotes the explanation of Ibn ʿĀṭiyāya\textsuperscript{80} to the effect that the necklace was described by the Qurʾān as a cord of fibres in order to reproach the woman and to stress how detestable it was to use it (wa-innāmā 'abbāra 'an qulādatiḥa bi-ḥabīn min masādin 'alā jīhātī 'l-tajf'ulī lahā wa-dhikrī tabarrūjihā fī ḥadhā 'l-ṣa'yī 'l-khabīthī).

The reason for the Qurʾān's disapproval of the woman's necklace becomes clear in the light of Wellhausen's survey of old Arab practices of magic and witchcraft.\textsuperscript{81} Wellhausen\textsuperscript{82} mentions that magic powers were attributed to all kinds of ornaments and especially to sea-shells, viz. kharz, wād', or jās'. Hence it is clear that the Qurʾān disapproves of the woman's necklace because of its magical intentions. It was probably regarded by its owner as securing the protection of al-'Uzza against evil powers. The usage of such a necklace was reproached by the Qurʾān as a part of its general rejection of witchcraft,\textsuperscript{83} which was considered in Islam the core of Paganism.\textsuperscript{84} The Qurʾān brings this magical necklace down to the rank of an ordinary simple cord (ḥabl) made of rough fibres (min masādin).

The correlation between verses 4 and 5 is now obvious: both verses reprove the Pagan practices carried out by the wife of Abū Lahab who participated with her husband in the veneration of al-'Uzza. The Qurʾān views these practices as common, despicable actions suitable for women of the lowest rank.

\textsuperscript{77} Fischer, op. cit., 35, holds that ḥammālāt 'l-ḥatab is a mere curse directed to that aristocratic woman in order to humiliate her by alleging her to be a wood-carrier. He (p. 34) believes he finds this meaning in the interpretations of Qatāda and al-Baydāwī. But neither seems to support his view, as they both assume that ḥammālāt 'l-ḥatab stands for a real action carried out by the woman, be it gathering of fire-wood (Qatāda) or of thorns (al-Baydāwī). Strangely enough, Fischer (p. 32) places al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation in a separate group, notwithstanding its resemblance to al-Baydāwī's interpretation, which is actually an abstract of the former.

\textsuperscript{78} Al-Suhaylī, op. cit., II, 113.

\textsuperscript{79} Fischer has totally ignored this outstanding interpretation.

\textsuperscript{80} D. 542/1147. See Brockelmann, GAL, Supp. 1, 732.

\textsuperscript{81} Revet, 159 ff.

\textsuperscript{82} ibid., 165.

\textsuperscript{83} See Qurʾān cxiii, 4.

\textsuperscript{84} Wensinck, op. cit., s.v. 'magic'.

VOL. XLII. PART 1. 3.
10. Other interpretations of verse 5

The tendency to confine the meaning of our sūra to the hostility of Abū Lahab and his wife towards the prophet gave rise to new interpretations of ḥablun min masadin as well. A tradition traced back to Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab (d. 94/713) says: ‘She (i.e. Abū Lahab’s wife) had a luxurious necklace of pearls, and she said: “I shall disburse it for the assault on Muḥammad” (kānat laḥā qilāda fākhīra min jawhar fa-qālat: la-unfīqannah fī adāwāt Muḥammad).’ This tradition is recorded by al-Ṭabarṣī, Abū Ḥayyān, and Ibn Kathīr.

Another interpretation seems to be based simply on an erroneous understanding of the context of our verse. The cord was quite naturally associated with the fire-wood of the former verse, as though being used for tying and carrying it. Its original figurative sense was eventually neglected. Thus, al-Ḍahḥāk, as quoted by al-Ṭabarṣī, interprets: ‘... this was the cord which she used for gathering the fire-wood’. This interpretation is, however, impossible; as was already mentioned, the word jīdīhā indicates clearly that ḥablun does not stand for a load with which the woman’s neck is burdened, but rather for a certain kind of ornament hanging on her neck, having no relation to the fire-wood of the former verse. Whenever the Qurʾān speaks of carrying loads the word used is not jīd but rather ‘umuq.

The most current interpretation of ḥablun min masadin is again the eschatological one. Although not assuming any connexion between the cord and the wood, it nevertheless considers our verse as speaking of a heavy load which the woman shall carry in hell as a punishment for her worldly sins. The jīd is understood in the meaning of raqaba, namely a neck carrying a burden, while the cord is conceived of as the load itself. The whole scene is inspired by Qurʾān lxix, 32 which speaks of a ‘chain whose length is seventy cubits (silsila ḍhar’uḥā sab‘āna ḍhirā’an)’, which is used in hell for torturing sinners. Thereby masad is understood as denoting ‘iron’. This word, originally denoting the rope of the well, gained the meaning of ‘iron’ because it occurs in old poetry in close association with the iron axis of the pulley of the well, around which the rope is coiled.

Most of the eschatological traditions of this kind, as recorded by al-Ṭabarṣī, are traced back to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 94/713). These traditions relate that ḥablun min masadin stands for ‘an iron chain whose length is seventy cubits’. A tradition on the authority of Sufyān says that it stands for ‘a rope on her neck, in hell, like a collar, seventy cubits long’. The original significance of masad being the rope of the bucket, is preserved in a further eschatological tradition recorded by al-Suhaylī. It says: ‘she will be handled in hell like a bucket. She will be lifted to the top of hell by the rope on her neck, then downwards to its bottom again, and so on for ever and ever’. As an integral part of hell, the ḥabl is sometimes depicted as though made of fire (al-Ṭabarṣī). Summing up, al-Ṭabarṣī interprets masad as a cord of rough fibres, burning like fire, heavy like iron, with which her neck is burdened to increase her torture.

Thus, the eschatological spirit finally overwhelmed all the parts of our sūra.

85 See also Fischer, op. cit., 35, 42; Lohmann, art. cit., 346; Künstlinger, art. cit., 408.
86 e.g. xvii, 29; xxxiv, 33; etc.
87 e.g. al-Suhaylī, op. cit., ii, 111 ff.
88 ii, 111.