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ABŪ LAHAB AND SŪRA CXI

By Uri Rubin

The studies of Sūra CXI [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 CXI deals with Abū Lahab, whom all the Muslim sources identify as Muḥammad's paternal uncle, 'Abd al-'Uzzā 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-Wāqidī (d. 207/823).[3] This tradition is about al-'Uzzā, the greatest deity of Quraysh, whose sanctuary was at Nakhla, near Mecca. Quraysh also worshipped al-Lāt whose sanctuary was at al-Ṭā'if. A third deity, Manāt, whose sanctuary was at Qudayd, was worshipped mainly by the people of Yathrib (al-Madīna). All three were known as 'daughters of Allāh' (*banāt Allāh*).[4]

The tradition of al-Wāqidī relates that the custodian (*sādin*) of the sanctuary of al-'Uzzā was Aflaḥ b. al-Naḍr al-Shaybānī of the tribe of Sulaym.[5] Before his death, Aflaḥ told Abū Lahab that he was afraid lest al-'Uzzā 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-'Uzzā triumphs, I have already earned a "hand" [6] which she has (to my credit) with her, for attending upon her,[7] and if Muḥammad triumphs over al-'Uzzā—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 CXI.

This tradition had been noticed by Barth,[8] but he seems to have overlooked its great significance. Al-Wāqidī chose to record this tradition within

[1] J. Barth, 'Abū Lahab', *EI*, first ed.; A. Fischer, *Der Wert der vorhandenen Koranübersetzungen und Sura* CXI, Leipzig, 1937; D. Künstlinger, 'Eschatologisches in Sura 111', *OLZ*, XLI, 7, 1938, 407–10; T. Lohmann, 'Abū Lahab (Sura CXI)', *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistwelt Geschichte*, XVIII, 1966, 326–48; R. Paret, *Der Koran, Kommentar und Konkordanz*, Stuttgart, 1971, 529. J. Wansbrough in his *Quranic studies* (Oxford, 1977) does not refer to our sūra. This is quite disappointing, because a scholar who denies any historical connexion between the Qur'ān and the 'Arabian prophet' ought to say something about the identity of Abū Lahab and his wife.

[2] References to the commentaries quoted in the following pages: al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Būlāq, 1323/1905, XXX, 217–21; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Beirut, n.d., XXX, 266–71; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl*, Cairo, 1968, IV, 295–7; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta'wīl*, Cairo, 1955, 317; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, repr., Tehran, n.d., XXXII, 166–73; Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīt*, Cairo, 1328/1910, VIII, 524–7; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, Beirut, 1966, VII, 399–402; al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, repr., Beirut, n.d., XXX, 259–65.

[3] See al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, ed. J. M. B. Jones, London, 1966, III, 874. See also al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, ed. Wüstenfeld, I, 81–2.

[4] Details about those deities are to be found in J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, Berlin, repr. 1961, 24 ff.

[5] The Banū Shaybān of Sulaym were the confederates of the clan of Hāshim. See Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. al-Saqā, al-Abyārī, Shalabī, four vols., repr., Beirut, 1971, I, 86.

[6] The meaning of 'hand' will be explained below.

[7] *in tazhar al-'uzzā, kuntu qad ittakhadhtu yadan 'indahā bi-qiyāmī 'alayhā.*

[8] Barth, loc. cit. Fischer did not refer to it at all.

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a chapter dealing with the destruction of the sanctuary of al-'Uzzā in the year 8/629, shortly after the conquest of Mecca. This led Barth to conclude that according to al-Wāqidī, Abū Lahab was still alive after the conquest of Mecca.[9] 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 Aflaḥ b. al-Naḍr were still alive, that is, before the Hijra of Muḥammad to al-Madīna.[10] Al-Wāqidī placed this tradition within a later chapter dealing with the actual destruction of al-'Uzzā, after the conquest of Mecca, because the conversation between the *sādin* of al-'Uzzā and Abū Lahab referred to the same subject, i.e. the forthcoming end of al-'Uzzā.

A second version of the same story is recorded by Ibn al-Kalbī.[11] 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-'Uzzā, 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).[12]

Ibn al-Kalbī relates that Muḥammad's denial of al-'Uzzā was a great blow to Quraysh (*fa-shtadda dhālika '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 Uḥayḥa Sa'īd b. al-'Āṣ, and not Aflaḥ b. al-Naḍr. At the time of the declaration of the ' Satanic verses ', this Abū Uḥayḥa was a very old man.[13] Ibn al-Kalbī's version contains some remarkable details. According to this version, Abū Lahab assured Abū Uḥayḥa that the veneration of al-'Uzzā would not cease after his death. Thereupon Abū Uḥayḥa 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-Wāqidī is that Sūra CXI was revealed in Mecca after Muḥammad no longer recognized al-'Uzzā, 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 Isḥāq,[14] our sūra was revealed after Abū Lahab had abandoned Muḥammad and the rest of the Hāshimites in the ravine (*shi'b*) 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-'Uzzā. 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 Aflaḥ b. al-Naḍr was Abū Lahab's contemporary, and not the last *sādin* of al-'Uzzā who was killed by Khālid after the conquest of Mecca, was already pointed out by Wellhausen, op. cit., 38. The last *sādin* was named Dubayya b. Ḥaramī, see Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-aṣnām*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī Bāshā, Cairo, 1914, 25 ff.

[11] *Aṣnām*, 23; cf. also Wellhausen, op. cit., 36.

[12] On the ' Satanic verses ', see al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XVII, 131 ff. (on Qur'ān XXII, 52); *idem*, *Tārīkh*, Cairo, 1939, II, 75–7 (from Ibn Isḥāq and other sources); Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa 'l-nihāya*, repr., Beirut, 1974, III, 90–1; al-Zurqānī, *Sharḥ al-mawāhib al-laduniyya*, repr., Beirut, 1973, I, 279 ff.; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib Āl Abī Ṭālib*, Najaf, 1375/1956, I, 46; al-'Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Būlāq, 1300/1883, VIII, 332–4; al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, *al-Shifā' bi-ta'rīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā*, Cairo, 1950, II, 106 ff.; Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, Beirut, 1960, I, 205–6; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *'Uyūn al-athar*, repr., Beirut, n.d., I, 120–1; W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford, 1953, 102 ff.; Paret, op. cit., 461.

[13] See Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 205. On his last illness see ibid., IV, 95–6.

[14] Ibn Hishām, op. cit., I, 376.

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short time after the abrogation of the ' Satanic verses '.[15] 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.[16] This codex reportedly contained an additional verse, located between verses 1 and 2 of our sūra:

ḥālafa 'l-bayta 'l-waḍī'a 'alā 'l-bayti 'l-rafī'i
fa-shughila bi-nafsihi, 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.[17] 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.[18] Both these verses and Ubayy's verse allude to the fact that Muḥammad was deeply injured when Abū Lahab abandoned him.[19] 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 yadā Abī Lahabin wa-tabba*

The most intriguing phrase in verse 1 is *yadā Abī Lahabin* ' the two hands of Abū Lahab '. According to the above-mentioned tradition of al-Wāqidī, 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 ittakhadhtu 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[20] as follows: ' He did to them a benefit,

[15] According to al-Wāqidī, the proclamation of these verses occurred in the fifth year, i.e. two years before the boycott of Hāshim (Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 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.

[16] A. Jeffery, *Materials for the history of the text of the Qur'ān*, Leiden, 1937, 180. Quoted from Jeffery by Fischer, p. 10, without any comment.

[17] See Ḥassān b. Thābit, *Dīwān*, ed. W. 'Arafāt, London, 1971, I, p. 390, no. 214.

[18] *wa-lākinna Liḥyānan abūka warithtahū/ wa-ma'wā 'l-khanā minhum fa-da' 'anka hāshimā/ samat hāshimun lil-makrumāti wa-lil-'ulā/ wa-ghūdirta fī ka'bin mina 'l-lu'mi jāthimā.*

[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 Hishām, 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 *shi'b* is mentioned in the last verse.

[20] *An Arabic–English lexicon*, s.v. *a.kh.dh.*

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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-Wāqidī's tradition leads to the conclusion that the Qur'ān has labelled Abū Lahab's attendance upon al-'Uzzā as *yad*, that is to say, an honourable act of help and support, for which he deserved a due recompense from this goddess.

The Qur'ān, 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.[21] Still, although the Qur'ān refers to all Abū Lahab's good deeds, it has nevertheless preferred the dual form, *yadā*, to the plural, *aydī*. *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,[22] this was quite to be expected of him. Ibn Isḥāq has preserved for us some early verses in which Abū Lahab appears as a most generous and helpful person.[23] The verses are ascribed to Ḥudhayfa b. Ghānim, whom Abū Lahab redeemed after he had been seized for a debt of 4,000 dirhams. We shall adduce but one verse.[24] In this verse Abū Lahab is called Ibn Lubnā, after his mother Lubnā bint Hājar of Khuzā'a:[25]

wa-lā tansa mā asdā bnu Lubnā fa-innahū
qada sdā[26] *yadan maḥqūqatan minka bi 'l-shukrī*
'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-Wāqidī, but also in some rare exegetical traditions included in the direct commentaries on our sūra. The commentary of al-Ālūsī (p. 261) contains the following passage:

wa-fī 'l-ta'wīlāt al-yadu bi-ma'nā 'l-ni'ma. wa-kāna yuḥsinu ilā 'l-nabī (*ṣ*) *wa-ilā quraysh wa-yaqūlu: in kāna 'l-amru li-Muḥammadin fa-lī 'indahu yadun, wa-in kāna li-qurayshin fa-ka-dhālika*
'There are some interpretations saying that *yad* denotes benefaction. (Abū

[21] Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 211. It is related that Abū Lahab protected Muḥammad only after Abū Ṭālib 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 Shī'ī tendency to promote the impression that as long as Abū Ṭālib ('Alī's father) was alive, he was Muḥammad's only protector. At any rate, both Abū Ṭālib and Abū Lahab are said to have earned something in return for their kind attitude towards Muḥammad. Abū Ṭālib, who died as an unbeliever, was said to be only in the shallow fire of hell (*ḍaḥḍāḥ*). 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-Suhaylī, *al-Rawḍ al-unuf*, ed. 'Abd al-Ra'ūf Sa'd, Cairo, 1971, III, 67; al-'Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī*, IX, 124–5. On Abū Lahab and Thuwayba see also al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo, 1958, VII, 12; Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 108; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, ed. Muḥammad 'Uthmān, Cairo, 1969, I, 120; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Wafā bi-aḥwāl al-Muṣṭafā*, ed. 'Abd al-Wāḥid, Cairo, 1966, I, 107; al-'Asqalānī, *al-Iṣāba fī ma'rifat al-ṣaḥāba*, ed. al-Bijāwī, Cairo, 1970, VII, 549; al-Zurqānī, op. cit., I, 138.

[22] See e.g. Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 93: *wa-kāna jawādan.*

[23] Ibn Hishām, op. cit., I, 184 ff.

[24] ibid., 187.

[25] ibid., 115; Ibn Sa'd, loc. cit.

[26] For: *qad asdā.*

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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 " '.[27]

Finally, it may be remarked that *yad* denoting benefaction, occurs in a further Qur'ānic passage as well. Qur'ān IX, 29 says: *qātilū 'lladhīna lā yu'minūna bi-llāhi . . . mina 'lladhīna ūtū 'l-kitāba ḥattā yu'ṭū '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 Abī 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 recompensed.

Our sūra is directly connected with Sūra LIII which abrogates Muḥammad's former recognition of al-'Uzzā's existence. Verse 1 conveys the idea that the ' hand ' which Abū Lahab believed he had to his credit with al-'Uzzā, has become worthless; he can no longer count on al-'Uzzā'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),[30] 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 *tatbīb* is replaced by *takhsīr* (Qur'ān XI, 101: *wa-mā zādūhum ghayra tatbībin*; XI, 63: *fa-mā tazīdūnanī ghayra takhsīrin*). According to a further interpretation recorded on the authority of Yamān b. Ri'āb,[31] *tabbat* means: ' have become devoid of any benefit (*ṣafirat min kulli khayrin*) '.[32] Similarly, one of al-Ṭabarsī'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'nāhu annahu lam taktasib yadāhu khayran qaṭṭu, wa-khasira ma'a dhālika huwa nafsuhu, ay tabba 'alā kulli ḥālin*) '.

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,[33] ' 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-Kashshī, d. 292/904, see Sezgin, *GAS*, I, 162), as quoted by al-Rāzī, says that *yadā abī lahabin* means his fortune (*ya'nī mālahu*) which is also denoted by the expression *dhāt al-yad*. This interpretation is close to the interpretation of *yad* as *ni'ma*, in the sense of material support.

[28] See M. M. Bravmann, *The spiritual background of early Islam*, Leiden, 1972, 199 ff.

[29] See M. J. Kister, ' " '*An yadin* " (Qur'ān, IX, 29) ', *Arabica*, XI, 3, 1964, 272–8.

[30] Sezgin, *GAS*, I, 31 ff.

[31] On whom see al-Dhahabī, *Mīzān al-i'tidāl*, Cairo, n.d., IV, 460.

[32] See al-Ṭabarsī, al-Rāzī, and Abū Ḥayyān.

[33] Lohmann, art. cit., 334.

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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.[34] Abū Lahab's case, however, is different. Al-'Asqalānī [35] 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-mujarradihā 'alā 'l-ta'ẓīm bal qad yakūnu 'l-ismu ashrafa mina 'l-takniya*)'. This, indeed, seems to be true: the Qur'ān, 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 Qur'ān 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-yaṣlā nāran dhāta 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.[36] 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 Qur'ānic 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 Muḥammad 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 sorcerer (*sāḥir*). 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,

[34] Goldhizer, *Muhammedanische Studien*, Halle a.S., I, 1889, 267 (English tr., *Muslim studies*, I, London, 1967, 242).

[35] *Fatḥ al-bārī*, VIII, 387.

[36] This verse seems to be the main reason for the Mu'tazila's rejection of our sūra, because it excludes from the outset any possibility of repentance on the part of Abū Lahab. See e.g. al-Rāzī on this verse. This point has not yet been explained by Western scholars who dealt with the Mu'tazilī attitude towards our sūra. See I. Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam*, 207; Fischer op. cit., 15 ff.; Barth, art. cit., 329.

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when Sūra CXI was revealed, Abū Lahab 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 Muḥammad 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 'Aṭā': ' *tabbat* means: " has been defeated (*ghulibat*) "; (Abū Lahab) 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 Abū Lahab's worldly sins against the prophet, but also with his prospective punishment in hell. Al-Ṭabarsī interprets: ' his deeds have proved unsuccessful, and he himself has failed, being condemned to hell ' (*khasira 'amaluhu wa-khasira huwa bi 'l-wuqū'i fī 'l-nār*).[37]

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 Abū Lahab in hell. This interpretation is reflected in the reading (*qirā'a*) of 'Abdullāh b. Mas'ūd: *tabbat yadā abī lahabin wa-qad tabba*; ' may the hands of Abū Lahab 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. Al-Ṭabarī adduces two examples of this structure: *ahlakaka 'llāhu wa-qad ahlakaka; ja'alaka ṣāliḥan wa-qad ja'alaka*.[38]

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.[39] 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 tustaqal
tabbat yadā ṣāfiqihā 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! '[40]

[37] See also al-Suhaylī, op. cit., II, 109.

[38] Regarding *tabbat* as an invocation, Fischer considered this *qirā'a* to be the original one. Paret (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. Goldziher, *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 lahabin* 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 Baydara; 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, *Jamharat al-lugha*, Hyderabad, 1344/1925, I, 23.

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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 *tabbat yadā abī lahabin* forms an antiphony to the invocation *tabban lahu* uttered by Abū Lahab himself before the revelation of the sūra. One of the earliest of these traditions is that of Ibn Isḥāq.[41] According to Ibn Isḥāq, 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 (*tabban lakumā*). 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 *tabban li-hādhā min dīnin tabban*, 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-andhir 'ashīrataka 'l-aqrabīna* . . .), 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 (*tabban laka*)'. Thereupon Sūra CXI was revealed. This story implies that Sūra CXI 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 *isnād* 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 CXI.[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-Bayḍāwī, 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-Ṭabarsī and al-Rāzī quote a tradition on the authority of the *ṣaḥābī* Ṭāriq al-Muḥāribī,[48] according to which Abū Lahab used to follow the

[41] Ibn Hishām, op. cit., I, 376.
[42] Sezgin, *GAS*, I, 38.
[43] ibid., 9.
[44] See al-Bukhārī, op. cit., VI, 140, 221–2; al-Tirmidhī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (in *'Āriḍat al-aḥwadhī*, by Ibn al-'Arabī), XII, 259. See also Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 74–5, 200.
[45] e.g. al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, Cairo, 1968, 261–2.
[46] See al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, II, 62–3 (from Ibn Isḥāq). Cf. also Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 187.
[47] A similar story is told about the wife of Abū Lahab who, after the revelation of the sūra, intended to throw a big stone at Muḥammad. Allāh, however, concealed the prophet from her. See Ibn Hishām, op. cit., I, 381–2. Cf. al-'Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī*, VIII, 567; al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *al-Mustadrak 'alā 'l-ṣaḥīḥayn*, Riyāḍ, 1388/1968, II, 361; al-Bayhaqī, op. cit., I, 443–4; Ibn al-Jawzī, op. cit., I, 325; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Khaṣā'iṣ al-kubrā*, ed. Harās, Cairo, 1967, I, 318–19; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, op. cit., I, 102–3; Ibn Shahrāshūb, op. cit., I, 61; al-Khargūshī, *Sharaf al-Nabī*, MS BM Or. 3014, fols. 40a, 127a.
[48] On whom see *Iṣāba*, III, 511.

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prophet and throw stones at him, when the latter preached Islam to Arab tribesmen in the market of Dhū 'l-Majāz.[49] This tradition was already recorded by al-Tirmidhī.[50] 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 sūra.[51] A further tradition, recorded by al-Rāzī, relates that Abū Lahab had torn off the 'hands' (i.e. the front legs) of a kid (*jady*) that believed in Muḥammad, and this brought about the cursing of his own hands in the Qur'ān. This legendary tradition applies the most aggressive touch to Abū Lahab's negative image.[52]

The view that verse 1 invokes evil upon Abū Lahab eventually caused a considerable change in the meaning of *tabbat* and *wa-tabba*. Al-Zamakhsharī explains these verbs not in the meaning of *khasira*, but rather in the sense of *halaka*, i.e. 'to perish'. Al-Bayḍāwī explains that *tabāb* means *khusrān* (i.e. failure or loss) that brings about *halāk* (i.e. perdition).

The shift from *khasira* to *halaka* accords with the general tendency illustrated above, to conform verse 1 to the eschatological spirit of verse 3. This tendency is most evident in one of Bayḍāwī's interpretations, to the effect that the perdition of Abū Lahab's two hands stands for his own total perdition in this world as well as in the world to come (*dunyāhu wa-ukhrāhu*). This interpretation is closely connected with another interpretation offered by al-Zamakhsharī.

> *wa 'l-murād: halāk jumlatihi ka-qawlihi ta'ālā: bi-mā qaddamat yadāka*
> 'The meaning (of the perdition of Abū Lahab's hands) is the perdition of his whole person; this is like the verse (Qur'ān XXII, 10): "for what your two hands have done"'.

This interpretation takes the 'two hands' to be a synecdoche, i.e. denoting the whole person to whom they belong. It may be noted, however, that the

[49] A Shī'ī tradition relates that al-'Abbās participated with Abū Lahab in these deeds. Abū Ṭālib defended the prophet against them both. See Ibn Shahrāshūb, op. cit., I, 51.

[50] Quoted from al-Tirmidhī in *Iṣāba*, loc. cit.

[51] See Ibn Hishām, op. cit., II, 64–5; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, op. cit., I, 101; Ibn Kathīr, op. cit., III, 41; Ibn Shahrāshūb, op. cit., I, 51. Cf. also Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 216. In the course of time, Abū Lahab's name was included in the list of those Qurashīs who plotted to kill the prophet before the Hijra. See Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., I, 228. In Ibn Hishām, II, 125, his name is still absent from that list. Similarly, later sources (Ibn Shahrāshūb, I, 66–7, cf. Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, I, 113) include his name in the list of the *mustahzi'ūn*, from which his name is still absent in the earlier sources (e.g. Ibn Hishām, II, 50–1; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XIV, 48–9. See also al-Bayhaqī, op. cit., II, 85–6; al-Suyūṭī, op. cit., I, 365; Ibn al-Jawzī, op. cit., I, 329–30; al-Khargūshī, 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 Makhzūm), probably due to the likeness of the names. In the earlier sources it is related that Abū Jahl plotted to kill Muḥammad 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-Khargūshī, op. cit. (BM), fol. 114b; Wensinck, *A handbook of early Muhammadan tradition*, 7, and also the commentaries on Sūra CXVI). In later sources the same story is transferred from Abū Jahl to Abū Lahab. See Ibn Shahrāshūb, op. cit., I, 68–9.

[52] Finally Abū Lahab has become the archetype of Muḥammad'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., *passim*, Lohmann, art. cit., 339, 331–2. It is interesting to observe, however, that certain circles (probably of the Shī'a) produced several traditions to the effect that Muḥammad 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' (*ibnat ḥaṭab al-nār*). According to some traditions the prophet announced on that occasion that his intercession (*shafā'a*) would save all his blood relations at the Last Judgement. See al-'Asqalānī, *Iṣāba*, VII, 634 ff.; al-Khargūshī, op. cit. (Tübingen), 18b, (BM) 50b–51a; al-Zurqānī, op. cit., I, 185–6; Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *al-Ṣawā'iq al-muḥriqa*, Cairo, 1965, 172.

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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 (*qaddamat*).[53]

4. *Verse 2: mā aghnā 'anhu māluhu wa-mā kasaba*

The crucial phrase in verse 2 is *wa-mā kasaba*. Barth translated: '. . . und was er erworben hat'. Fischer (p. 25) and Lohmann (p. 326) followed suit. The truth is, however, that the verb *kasaba* 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 *kasaba* has been pointed out by Western scholars,[54] it has not yet been noticed that *kasaba* has the same meaning in our sūra as well. The phrase *wa-mā kasaba* refers to Abū Lahab's grand deeds, namely his service to al-'Uzzā 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 *wa-mā kasaba* 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-Zamakhsharī. It says: '(*mā kasaba* 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 'llādhī ẓanna annahu minhu 'alā shay'in ka-qawlihi: wa-qadimnā ilā mā 'amilū min 'amalin*)'. 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.[55]

In close association with the grand works of Abū Lahab, the Qur'ān also mentions his wealth (*māluhu*). In this context *māluhu* 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 to bestow camels upon the needy, among them the above-mentioned Hudhayfa b. Ghānim.[56] Abū Lahab's *māl* was probably spent also for the sake of al-'Uzzā. That *māl* was indeed used for such religious purposes, is indicated by a passage in al-Azraqī's *Akhbār Makka*.[57] 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-'Uzzā.

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-'Uzzā and Muḥammad.

[53] Fischer also believes that *yadā* is a synecdoche, hence, *yadā Abī Lahabin* 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 (*tabbat*) and of Abū Lahab himself (*wa-tabba*). This repetition can be intelligible only if a clear distinction between the 'hands' of Abū Lahab and the person himself is assumed.

[54] Paret, op. cit., 22; Bravmann, op. cit., 107 ff.

[55] cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XIX, 3. Commenting on Qur'ān XXV, 23, al-Zamakhsharī 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'māluhum 'llatī 'amilūhā fī kufrihim min ṣilati raḥimin wa-ighāthati malhūfin wa-qirā ḍayfin wa-mannin 'alā asīrin wa-ghayri dhālika min makārimihim wa-maḥāsinihim*). And see further Qur'ān XIV, 18, where the *'amal* of the unbelievers is mentioned in connexion with their *kasb*: *mathalu 'lladhīna kafarū bi-rabbihim a'māluhum ka-ramādin ishtaddat bihi 'l-rīḥu fī yawmin 'āṣifin lā yaqdirūna mimmā kasabū 'alā shay'in.*

[56] Ibn Hishām, op. cit., I, 185, l. 12. As an owner of a large number of camels, Abū Lahab was able to practise *qimār*; see *Aghānī*, Būlāq, repr. Beirut, 1970, III, 100, IV, 19.

[57] I, 81.

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This idea is conveyed by the phrase *mā aghnā 'anhu*. Al-Bayḍāwī explains: *nafyun li-ighnā'i 'l-māli 'anhu ḥīna nazala bihi 'l-tabābu* ' 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 Qur'ān 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. Qur'ān XV, 84 reads: *fa-mā aghnā 'anhum mā kānū 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-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 105/723),[58] as quoted by al-Zamakhsharī, 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-Ḍaḥḥāk 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 Qur'ānic 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-Ṭabarī. 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 home. 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-kasba '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-Ṭabarsī 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-Zamakhsharī adds a *ḥadīth* 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-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXV, 86, where *mā kasabū* is explained as *māl wa-wuld*. In other cases, however, al-Ṭabarī did not refrain from explaining *kasaba* in the sense of '*amila*. See e.g. XIV, 34; XXIV, 9, 57.
[62] See also al-Nabhānī, *al-Fatḥ al-kabīr*, Cairo, n.d., I, 292 (from al-Bukhārī's *Tārīkh*, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī, and Ibn Māja). Cf. al-Sulamī, '*Uyūb al-nafs*, ed. E. Kohlberg, Jerusalem, 1976, 101.

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With the accommodation of verse 2 to the eschatological meaning, the expression *mā-aghnā 'anhu* was no longer conceived as past tense but rather as referring to Abū Lahab's future punishment in hell. Al-Ṭabarsī interprets: 'neither his wealth nor his *kasb* helped him against Allāh's punishment (*ay mā nafa'ahu wa-lā dafa'a 'anhu 'adhāba 'llāhi māluhu wa-mā kasabahu*'. Al-Ṭabarī regards *mā aghnā* as an interrogation denoting the question: 'what was the benefit of his wealth and to what extent did it protect him from Allāh's anger?'. It is interesting to observe, however, that elsewhere in the Qur'ān, al-Ṭabarī usually interprets *mā aghnā* as an ordinary past tense, denoting *lam yughni*.[63] In our sūra the eschatological point of view caused him to deviate from his usual manner of interpretation.[64]

6. *The miraculous aspects of the sūra*

The sons of Abū Lahab played a special role in Muḥammad's life. According to Ibn Qutayba,[65] Muḥammad's daughter Ruqayya had been married to Abū Lahab's son 'Utba, but by order of his father he broke off the marriage. Muḥammad's daughter Umm Kulthūm had been married to Abū Lahab's son 'Utayba, and he also was ordered by his father to do the same. According to Ibn Sa'd, this conduct on the part of Abū Lahab was caused by the revelation of our sūra.[66]

One of Abū Lahab's sons paid a heavy price for thus insulting the prophet. A legendary tradition relates that Muḥammad invoked Allāh 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 Sūra LIII.[68] The connexion with Sūra LIII is not surprising, as this is the very sūra 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-'Uzzā.

The legendary story of the end of Abū Lahab's son finally found its way into the commentaries on Sūra CXI. Al-Bayḍāwī labels this sūra as *ikhbār 'an al-ghayb*, thus associating it with a long series of miraculous stories about Muḥammad's outstanding powers to forecast the future, which are to be found in almost every book dealing with Muḥammad's prophet signs (*dalā'il al-nubuwwa*).[69] Al-Bayḍāwī explains that the sūra foretells the end of Abū

[63] Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, VIII, 142 (on Qur'ān VII, 48); XXIX, 40 (on LXIX, 28); XIV, 34 (on XV, 84); XXIV, 9 (on XXXIX, 50); XXVI, 18 (on XLVI, 26); XII, 68 (on XI, 101).

[64] In two more cases al-Ṭabarī has interpreted *mā kasaba* as an interrogation and not as past tense, due to interrogative pronouns found in the Qur'ānic text. See ibid., XXIV, 57 (on Qur'ān XL, 82), XIX, 71 (on XXVI, 207).

[65] *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, ed. al-Ṣāwī, Beirut, 1970, 62.

[66] Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., VIII, 36, 37. According to another source (*Aghānī*, XV, 2) it was the wife of Abū Lahab who ordered the breaking off of the marriage.

[67] Al-Suhaylī, op. cit., III, 68; al-Bayhaqī, op. cit., II, 96–7. See also al-Khargūshī, op. cit. (Tübingen), fol. 87b, (BM) fol. 124b. Another source says that Abū Lahab's son was killed by the lion because of his being one of the *mustahzi'ūn* (p. 21, n. 51, above); see al-Ṭabarī, *al-Dīn wa 'l-dawla fī ithbāt nubuwwat al-Nabī Muḥammad*, ed. 'Ādil Nuwayhiḍ, Beirut, 1973, 67. A distinction must be made between the son that was killed by a lion and the other two sons of Abū 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: 'Utba, 'Utayba, and Mu'attib. See al-Suhaylī, loc. cit. Sometimes the sources mention a son named Lahab, obviously a secondary derivation from the father's nickname. See *al-Dīn wa 'l-dawla*, loc. cit.; al-Naysābūrī, *Mustadrak*, II, 539; al-Bayhaqī, op. cit., II, 96.

[68] Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXVII, 24; see also al-Suyūṭī, op. cit., I, 367–9; Ibn Shahrāshūb, op. cit., I, 71. Cf. *Aghānī*, XIII, 153.

[69] See e.g. *al-Dīn wa 'l-dawla*, 76 ff.; al-Suyūṭī, op. cit., II, 372 ff., III, 3 ff.; Ibn al-Jawzī, op. cit., 305 ff.; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, VI, 182 ff.

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Lahab's son, to whom the expression *wa-mā kasaba* refers. In the same context, Bayḍāwī 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-Ḥākim,[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 ḥammālata '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 appelation *ḥammālat 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 (*qawlu qatādata: innahā kānat tu'ayyiru rasūla 'llāhi bi 'l-faqri fa-'uyyirat bi-annahā kānat taḥṭaṭibu*)'. 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'ḍuhum: wa-kānat tu'ayyiru rasūla 'llāhi bi-l-faqri wa-kānat taḥṭibu fa-'uyyirat bi-annahā kānat taḥṭibu*)'.[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-'Uzzā. Isaak identifies al-'Uzzā with *Kawkabta*, i.e. Venus who was also named 'the queen of heaven'. Isaak compares the Arab worship of al-'Uzzā with the Jewish

[70] Concerning his death, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, II, 159–60 (from Ibn Isḥāq); Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., IV, 73–4; al-Suhaylī, op. cit., III, 66 ff.; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, op. cit., I, 267 ff.; *Aghānī*, IV, 32–3.

[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 *ḥammālata 'l-ḥaṭabi*, which signifies *dhamm*, and not on *ḥammālatu '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.

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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 appelation *ḥammālat al-ḥaṭab* 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 appelation *ḥammālat al-ḥaṭab* gained a new meaning, more appropriate to the wife of a person who was believed to have been Muḥammad's enemy. The original meaning of this appelation, 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 *ḥammālat al-ḥaṭab*, 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 tanqulu 'l-aḥādītha min ba'ḍi 'l-nāsi ilā ba'ḍin* ' She used to pass on rumours from one person to another '. *Ḥammālat al-ḥaṭab* 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 'l-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 *ḥaṭab* as fire-wood—neither concretely nor metaphorically—but rather as a bundle of thorns (*ḥuzmat shawk*), which the woman allegedly used to throw in Muḥammad's way, thus wounding his feet. This interpretation of *ḥammālat al-ḥaṭab* was preferred by al-Ṭabarī, who has recorded several traditions of this kind, tracing them back to Ibn 'Abbās, al-Ḍaḥḥāk, Ibn Zayd, and others.[76]

Al-Zamakhsharī 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-taṣwīran lahā bi-ṣūrati ba'ḍi 'l-ḥaṭṭābāti min al-mawāhini*). In other words, al-Zamakhsharī holds that *ḥaṭab* 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'ayyiṭ. 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-Katikānī, *Tahsīr al-burhān*, on our sūra (reference from M. J. Kister). This tradition seems to express the anti-Umayyad feelings of the Shī'a.

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explains likewise (*taṣwīran lahā bi-ṣūrati 'l-ḥaṭṭābati 'llatī taḥmilu 'l-ḥuzmata wa-tarbiṭuhā fī jīdihā taḥqīran li-sha'nihā*).[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 Muḥammad. Interpretations to this effect are given by al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī. They interpret *ḥaṭab* as signifying the trees and thorns of hell, i.e. the *Zaqqūm* and *Ḍarī'* (Qur'ān XLIV, 43; LXXXVIII, 6).

9. *Verse 5: fī jīdihā ḥablun min masadin*

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.[78] Therefore, Qatāda's interpretation of this verse seems, once again, to be faithful to its original meaning. His interpretation is recorded by al-Ṭabarī. It says that *ḥablun min masadin* stands for *qilāda min wad'in*—'a necklace made of sea-shells'.[79] According to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) as quoted by Abū Ḥayyān, the necklace was made of *kharz*, which is the same as *wad'*.

Abū Ḥayyān also quotes the explanation of Ibn 'Aṭiyya [80] to the effect that the necklace was described by the Qur'ān as a cord of fibres in order to reproach the woman and to stress how detestable it was to use it (*wa-innamā 'abbara 'an qilādatihā bi-ḥablin min masadin 'alā jihati 'l-tafā'uli lahā wa-dhikri tabarrujihā fī hādhā 'l-sa'yi 'l-khabīthi*).

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

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-'Uzzā. The Qur'ān views these practices as common, despicable actions suitable for women of the lowest rank.

[77] Fischer, op. cit., 35, holds that *ḥammālat 'l-ḥaṭab* 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-Bayḍāwī. But neither seems to support his view, as they both assume that *ḥammālat al-ḥaṭab* stands for a real action carried out by the woman, be it gathering of fire-wood (Qatāda) or of thorns (al-Bayḍāwī). Strangely enough, Fischer (p. 32) places al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation in a separate group, notwithstanding its resemblance to al-Bayḍāwī's interpretation, which is actually an abstract of the former.

[78] Al-Suhaylī, op. cit., II, 113.

[79] Fischer has totally ignored this outstanding interpretation.

[80] D. 542/1147. See Brockelmann, *GAL*, Supp. I, 732.

[81] *Reste*, 159 ff.

[82] ibid., 165.

[83] See Qur'ān CXIII, 4.

[84] Wensinck, op. cit., s.v. 'magic'.

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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 Sa'īd 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 lahā qilāda fākhira min jawhar fa-qālat: la-unfiqannahā fī adāwat Muḥammad*)'. This tradition is recorded by al-Ṭabarsī, 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-Ḍaḥḥāk, as quoted by al-Ṭabarī, interprets: '... this was the cord which she used for gathering the fire-wood'.[85] This interpretation is, however, impossible; as was already mentioned, the word *jīdihā* 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 Qur'ān speaks of carrying loads the word used is not *jīd* but rather *'unuq*.[86]

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 Qur'ān LXIX, 32 which speaks of a 'chain whose length is seventy cubits (*silsila dhar'uhā sab'ūna dhirā'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.[87]

Most of the eschatological traditions of this kind, as recorded by al-Ṭabarī, 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.[88] 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-Ṭabarī). Summing up, al-Ṭabarsī 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.

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