

THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD, LABĪD AL-YAHŪDĪ AND THE COMMENTARIES TO SŪRA 113*

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1 Introduction

One of the most unusual stories associated with a Qurʾānic *sūra* regards one Labīd b. al-ʿĀsim al-Yahūdī¹ who, according to many accounts, managed briefly to bewitch the Prophet Muḥammad, leaving him in a catatonic state. He was unable to function until God provided the text of *sūra* 113, *al-Falaq*, which was used, according to the account, in order to counteract the effects of the magic spell. Although nominally a Muslim,² Labīd belongs to the small group of Jews who, according to the Muslim reports, converted to Islam in order to subvert it, or to cause physical damage to its leading figures during the time of the Prophet and the first caliphs. These include such figures as Ibn al-Sayyād, ʿAbdallāh b. al-Sabāʾ and Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, who are occasionally the objects of conspiracy theories in Christian literature as well.³ One of the few accounts about Labīd not connected with the story related below is that the doctrine of the creation of the Qurʾān was first formulated by him, and was passed on to his nephew Tālūt (i.e. Shaul, apparently a converted Jew) to the forefathers of the Muʿtazila sect.⁴ Few Western scholars have considered the

* I would like to thank Shari Lowin for reading this manuscript and making corrections.

¹ Virtually all the historical material is in Michael Lecker, 'The Bewitching of the Prophet Muḥammad by the Jews: A Note *a propos* ʿAbd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb's *al-Mukhtaṣar fi al-Ṭibb*', *al-Qantara* 13 (1992), 561–9.

² His 'conversion' is described in Muḥammad b. Saʿd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭāʾ (Beirut 1990), II, 152. Here the Jews claim that they have already tried to bewitch the Prophet several times, but were unable to do so.

³ On Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, see Sidney Griffith, 'Muhammad and the Monk Bahira', *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995), 146–74; and for the others, see below.

⁴ Ibn Manzūr, *Mukhtaṣar Tāʾriḫ Madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Rūḥiyya Naḥḥās (Beirut 1989), VI, 51 [this section is apparently very abridged in the original of

story of Labīd to be historical and it rarely appears in modern biographies of the Prophet, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.⁵ Nor is Labīd mentioned in the lists of the *ṣaḥāba* (Companions of the Prophet), even though other admittedly bad Muslims (like ʿAbdallāh b. Ubayy and Ibn Sayyād) are listed. It is as if there is a total divorce between the biographical and the exegetical genres on the point of his existence.

The verses of the Qurʾānic passage in *sūra* 113 (verses 1–5) in question read as follows:

I take refuge with the Lord of the dawning,
from the evil of that which He has created,
and from the evil of the dark of night when it overspreads,
and from the evil of the females who blow upon the knots,
and from the evil of the envier when he envies.⁶

This *sūra* and the following final *sūra* have been controversial in Islam; some early copies of the Qurʾān did not include them as part of the authoritative text (like the codex of Ibn Masʿūd).⁷ The language and grammatical style of the *sūra* are difficult,⁸ and can be explained only by twisting the rules of Arabic grammar as is done for the purpose of an incantation.⁹

However, much though the grammar pained the commentators, it was the story of Labīd al-Yahūdī and his bewitching of the Prophet Muḥammad which made them the most uncomfortable. The idea that the Seal of the Prophets, the infallible Messenger of God, could be treated in this manner, even for a short time, was unacceptable to the majority of scholars. This article will explore the commentary on this

Ibn ʿAsākir and could not be traced further there]; only one of the connecting personalities between Labīd and the Muʿtazila could be traced (Labīd to Tālūt to Abān b. Simʿān to Jaʿd b. Dirhām, about whom Ibn Ḥajar, *Lisān al-mizān* [Beirut 1987], II, 133–4 [no. 1948].

⁵ William Muir alone, of all those surveyed, included this story, which he doubts is historical, but says ‘that Mahomet was by nature superstitious’: *Life of Mahomet* (London 1861), IV, 80–82.

⁶ *The Koran: Selected Suras*, trans. A. Jeffery (New York 1958), 207.

⁷ A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qurʾān* (Leyden 1938), introduction; and see *EP* (Leyden 1960–) s.v. ‘Kurʾān’ (A. Welch), section 3b ‘Variant Readings’.

⁸ See A. Rippin, ‘Qurʾān 78/24: A Study in Arabic Lexicography’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 28 (1983), 315–20 where he discusses the difficulties of the root *gh-s-q*; and also William Worrell, ‘The Case of Muhammad’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 48 (1928), 136–46.

⁹ As usual, the most cogent grammatical explanation is in al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq al-tanzīl* (Beirut n.d.), IV, 820–22.

short *sūra*, which is usually interpreted in the light of this single story and will examine how commentators deal with a theologically uncomfortable, but popular story associated with a group of Qurʾānic verses.

2 Early Commentators (Before Al-Ṭabarī)

Since the story about Labīd is one which developed over a long period of time, one should deal with it chronologically, tracing it through the centuries as the commentators grappled with it and sought to overcome the difficulties inherent therein for the Muslim. One of the earliest such commentators is Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/762), and we bring his account in full:

[in giving the reasons for the revelation of the last two *sūras* of the Qurʾān] ... and was this [because] Labīd b. Aʿṣam b. Malik, or it is said, Ibn Aʿṣam al-Yahūdī, bewitched the Prophet with eleven knots on a string (*watar*) and placed it in a well in which there were seven stones, by means of a spathe of a [male] palm tree that the Prophet would lean against. The bewitchment spread through him [the Prophet] and it intensified for three days until he was very sick, and the women [his wives] became anxious [for him], and the *sūras* of taking refuge [= the two *sūras* being discussed] were revealed ... As the Prophet was sleeping, he saw as if there were two angels who came to him, and one of them was [sitting] at his head, and the other at his feet. One of them said to his companion: ‘What ails him?’ and the companion said: ‘Enchantment’. He said: ‘Who enchanted him?’, and the other said: ‘Labīd b. Aʿṣam al-Yahūdī’. ‘By what [means]?’ ‘By [means] of a husk of palm’. ‘Where [is it]?’ ‘In the well of so-and-so’. ‘And what is the cure?’ ‘Remove the water from the well, and take out the husk of palm and burn it, and the knots will break, each knot at the reading of the *muʾawwidhatayn* [the verses of taking refuge, the last two *sūras* of the Qurʾān], and that will heal him’. When the Prophet woke up, he sent ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib to the well, and the magical device was removed, and he brought it, and burned that husk.

Then the angel Gabriel revealed the verses, and the Prophet was healed and the news was brought to the women.¹⁰

Several problematic points about this early version of the story need to be addressed. Most notably it has absolutely no connection with the verses of the Qurʾān with which it has been associated. One

¹⁰ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. Maḥmūd Shihāta (Cairo 1983), IV, 923–4. Another early source describes him as a member of Banū Qurayza: Aḥmad b. Yūsuf al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashraf*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamidullāh (Cairo 1959), I, 285.

notices this immediately upon reading the verses. Even the one verse that might conceivably be connected to Muqātil's account, that which speaks of 'women blowing on knots' (113:4) receives no mention in the story. No women are involved except these wives of the Prophet himself, and they are obviously not malevolent.¹¹

Muslim scholars see other difficulties in the story. For example, though the *sūra* is universally declared to have been revealed during the Meccan period of the Prophet's life (before the immigration to Medina in 622), the milieu is obviously Medinan.¹² There were no Jews to speak of in Mecca, no palm trees, and not very many wells. The Prophet's numerous wives also date from the Medinan period of his ministry; he only had two wives ('Ā'isha and Sawda) when he came to Medina, and 'Ā'isha was a very young girl,¹³ and previous to them, only Khadīja. All of these things create difficulties, both for Western scholars trying to track down the story's true origin, and for later Muslim scholars, who were aware of these inconsistencies. Frankly, it is not at all clear why exactly the *sūra* is declared to be Meccan, since there do not seem to be *any* obvious reasons why this could be true, under any scheme of interpretation.

Many other early commentators mention this story in detail. Abū 'Ubayda (d. 210/825), the famed philologist who was himself of Jewish descent, does not mention this in the extant version of his *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, though his version is quoted by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in his commentary. Sahl b. 'Abdallāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) gives a much shorter version of Muqātil's tradition, but adds a few details. He says that the name of the well in which the device was placed was one which belonged to Banū Bayḍā' (it is interesting that

¹¹ Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, ed. Muṣṭafā Shukrī (Cairo n.d.), XXX, 383 is aware of this problem, which he solves by the dual thrust of saying that one of the Prophet's women helped Labīd, and because this is the type of things that women do — magic and other tricks — *ghalaba al-mu'annath 'alā al-mudhakkār hunā, wa-huwa jā'iz 'alā ma faṣalahu al-Khifājī ...* 'the feminine overrides the masculine in this case, which is permissible according to what al-Khifājī [the grammarian] laid down ...'

¹² Indeed, Ibn Sa'd dates the story to the period immediately following Hudaibiyya (8/628): Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, II, 152; al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, *Subul al-hudā wa-l-rashād* (Beirut 1993), X, 57; al-Zurqānī, *Sharḥ al-mawāhib al-laduniyya* (Beirut 1996), IX, 441–53; and the *asbāb al-nuzūl* in al-Dhahabī, *Siyār a'lām al-nubalā'* (Beirut 1982), II, 468 would seem to indicate it as well.

¹³ See al-Hindī, *Kanz*, ed. Bakrī Ḥayyānī (Beirut 1989), XIII, 694 (no. 37774); and al-Ṭabarī, *The Foundation of the Community*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (Albany 1987), VII, 7 [= al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. De Goeje *et al.* (Leyden 1879–1901)], I, 1262.

the name of this clan and the Banū Zurayq also mentioned are names of colours). However, he does not discuss the effects of the magic on the Prophet, nor does he mention the Prophet's vision of the two angels.¹⁴ Al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) knows even less than al-Tustarī; he does not mention that the Jews are the guilty party, and only says that the Prophet suffered for an undefined length of time, then had a vision of two angels.¹⁵

A number of the *ḥadīth* and biographical works include this story, including al-Bukhārī, who cites the most serious charge: the Prophet was sexually unable to approach his wives.¹⁶ Early biographers, including Ibn Hishām, also mention the story.¹⁷ Al-Bayhaqī relates a number of accounts, although usually without any hint of the impotence motif.¹⁸ However, by the time the story reaches the Shī'ī commentator al-Furāt b. Ibrāhīm al-Kūfī (lived third/ninth centuries — 874–941) it has become much more elaborate:

Labīd b. A'ṣam al-Yahūdī and Umm 'Abdallāh al-Yahūdiyya bewitched the Messenger of God with a knot of silk (! *qazza*) red, green and yellow, and tied it for him [the Prophet] with eleven knots, and then placed it on a spathe of palm — he said in other words, the husks of almond (?) — and then he put it in the well of a wadi in Medina in the stepping-stone of the well beneath the *ra'ūfa*, meaning the outer stone.¹⁹ The Prophet went for three [days] without eating, drinking,

¹⁴ Sahl b. 'Abdallāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm* (Cairo n.d.), 131.

¹⁵ Yahyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* (Cairo 1970), III, 301.

¹⁶ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut n.d.), IV, 20–21; and see the commentaries in Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1448–9), *Fath al-bārī fi sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut n.d.), X, 221–2, 226–332; Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad al-'Aynī (d. 855/1451–2), *'Umdat al-qārī* (Beirut n.d.), XXI, 279–82; and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Qasṭalānī (d. 923/1517), *Irshād al-sārī* (Baghdād n.d.), VIII, 404–8; and for a good selection of the traditions: *Marwiyyāt al-Imām Aḥmad b. Hanbal fi al-tafsīr* (Riyāḍ 1994), IV, 424–5; and Abū Ya'lā, *Musnad* (Damascus 1985), VIII, 290–1.

¹⁷ Lecker, 'Bewitching', 563.

¹⁸ al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, ed. 'Abd al-Muḥī Qal'ajī (Beirut 1985), VI, 248; VII, 92–4; and see also al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, *Subul al-hudā wa-l-rashād*, III, 410–15; X, 56–7.

¹⁹ This is probably a foreign word, the identification of which would clear up the story's origin considerably; it is usually defined as 'the stone at the bottom of the well, upon which the water-drawer sits (?)': 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Beirut 1988), 310. Variants are *ar'ūfa* (Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, II, 152); *raghūfa* (al-Biqā'ī, *Nizām al-durar* [Cairo 1996], XXII, 416), and *ra'ūtha* (al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, XXX, 282). It is possible that this the Aramaic–Syriac word *r'f-ra'ūfat* 'a glazed tile' (see Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi* [London 1903], s.v.; and C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum* [Halle 1928], s.v.), but what meaning this gives is unclear.

hearing or seeing anything or going to women [for sexual intercourse]. Then Gabriel came down to him, and brought down with him the *mu'awwidhatayn*, and said to him: 'O Muḥammad, what is the matter with you?' He said: 'I do not know; I am as you see!' And then he said: 'Umm 'Abdallāh and Labīd b. A'ṣam bewitched you', and he informed him of the magical device's location.

Thereupon the Prophet recited the verses of the *suras*, and the binding cords of the magic fell off.²⁰ Then the Prophet sent for Labīd and remonstrated with him, and afterwards cursed him, saying that he would not leave this world in good health (*sālīman*). Shortly thereafter, his hand was cut off for some minor offence, and then he dies.²¹

This embellished account contains several new bits of information. First of all, it is the only account in which silk is mentioned, indicating it is removed from the milieu of Medina. More importantly for our purposes, for the first time we have mention of women; that Labīd has a woman helper, though the relationship between the two is unclear, and her name does not enable us to identify her.²² The other women who are mentioned are those of the Prophet, those to whom the magic denies him access. This is a serious side-affect of the bewitchment for Muḥammad. The Prophet's sexual abilities are frequently noted to be impressive, and constitute a proof of his elevated office. Thus, we find:

The Prophet was given the sexual powers of forty-five men; that he did not stay with any one woman of them for a whole day, but he would go into this one for a time and this one for a time, and would go around among them like that for the whole day, until when the evening came he apportioned to each woman her night.²³

²⁰ For the process here: T.M. Johnstone, 'Knots and Curses', *Arabian Studies* 3 (1970), 79–84; and see al-Dhahabī, *Siyār a'lām al-nubalā'*, V, 349 where the nightly practice of the Prophet is described in this regard.

²¹ al-Furāt b. Ibrāhīm al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr*, ed. Muḥammad al-Kāzīm (Tehran 1990), 619–20; and Muḥammad al-Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār* (Beirut 1983), XVII, 366–7.

²² One should note that Umm 'Abdallāh was the name of the mother of the Jewish Dajjāl, Ibn Sayyād in al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, LII, 196. Perhaps the stories were connected at some point.

²³ 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanā'nī, *Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Rahmān al-'Azamī (Beirut 1970–72), VII, 507 (nos. 14051); see also al-Daylamī, *Firdaws al-akhbār* (Beirut 1987), III, 8 (no. 3699); Abū Ya'lā al-Mawṣilī, *Musnad*, V, 318–19; al-Muttaqī al-Hindī, *Kanz*, VII, 216 (nos. 18685–6); Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Maṭālib al-'uliya* (Kuwait 1973), IV, 27 (no. 3869); and Nūr al-Dīn al-Haythamī, *Majma' al-zawā'id* (Beirut 1982), IV, 293; though al-Daylamī, I, 207–8 (no. 617) gives a different approach.

In the same vein we read:

The Prophet said: 'I was given the *kufayt*'.²⁴ It was said: 'And what is the *kufayt*?' He said: 'The power of thirty men in sexual intercourse', and he had nine wives and would go around to all of them during a night.²⁵

Nor are these the only traditions in which these abilities are magnified; some say that he was given the power of sixty (see below in the conclusions).

Qur'ānic material about the magician's ability to deny sexual pleasure is documented, when in connection with the teachings of the enigmatic angels Hārūt and Mārūt it is said 'so they learn from them the means by which they separate man and wife' (2:102). While the commentators do not give many details on this verse, one may well assume that this sort of magic provides the basis for the story of Labīd al-Yahūdī.²⁶ Thus, for a magician to manifest the ability to deny the Prophet this power is evidence of great power, and an issue with which later commentators felt very uncomfortable. The Prophet does not come off looking very impressive here: he cannot perform any of the normal functions and he does not know what has happened to him to boot. The Muslim reader is left with mixed feelings at the end of the story, for the punishment that Labīd receives for this heinous act is not very great (though it is far greater than any meted out in earlier versions in which nothing is mentioned about the aftermath).

A number of early commentators do not mention this story. For example, two early Shī'ī commentators, 'Alī al-Qummī (d. c. 307/919) and Muḥammad al-'Ayyāshī (d. 320/932) are silent. This is a tendency which is strong among the Shī'a. Among the early Sunnīs, in addition to the aforementioned Abū 'Ubayda, Aḥmad b. Shu'ayb al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915–16), the collector of the *ḥadīth* collection, did not include this account,²⁷ nor did the Sufi al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072),²⁸ Hūd b. Muḥkam al-Hawwārī (d. c. third/

²⁴ Probably meaning something like 'sufficiency', although the word is far from clear. In al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, *Subul*, IX, 74 an attempt to explain the word as a vial of some sort with which the Prophet is supplied (containing an aphrodisiac) is obviously meant to clear up this foreign word.

²⁵ 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaḥ*, VII, 507 (no. 14052); in Abū Ya'lā, *Musnad*, V, 307, the number of wives is eleven.

²⁶ Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, I, 127.

²⁷ Aḥmad b. Shu'ayb b. 'Alī al-Nasā'ī, *Tafsīr* (Cairo 1990), II, 623.

²⁸ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm Bassayūnī (Cairo 1971), VI, 353–4.

tenth century),²⁹ nor did the greatest Qur'ānic commentator, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922).³⁰ Of all of these the real puzzler is al-Ṭabarī. In all likelihood Abū 'Ubayda did write about the subject, but his writings have come down to us only in the form quoted by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Al-Nasā'ī, al-Qushayrī and al-Hawwārī only wrote partial commentaries, while the Shī'ites were influenced by the rationalistic school of the Mu'tazila. The reason for al-Ṭabarī's omission of this tradition from his compendium, which is quite remarkable since he makes a rule of at least mentioning almost all the exegetical traditions current in Iraq at his time, remains a question which cannot be answered. Probably, he too, like a number of later commentators was protective of the honour of the Prophet, and considered the story beneath note.

3 Commentators During the Middle Period (300–700/912–1300)

Other commentators mention the issue of sexual domination by the magician as well. Al-Samarqandī (d. 375/985) in one of the two versions that he quotes, follows Muqātil in a shortened form which adds nothing to our discussion. However, in a second tradition he introduced new elements. He writes:

Labid b. A'sam made a puppet (*lu'ba*) of the Prophet, and he [Muḥammad] was taken from 'Ā'isha and the Messenger of God was made impotent (*afḥala*), and then he placed on the puppet eleven knots and threw it in a well and threw a stone upon it. He [Muḥammad] suffered from this terribly.

The two angels then come to give the Prophet their advice, which he heeds, as in Muqātil's version.³¹ Here we have a more precise description of how the act was accomplished, and what its immediate effects were, also with the sexual element as above. Other commentators from this period sum up the beginnings of another development in this story-line. Al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) adds that it was not a single

²⁹ Hūd b. Muḥkam al-Hawwārī, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-'azīz* (Beirut 1990), IV, 544.

³⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (n.p., n.d.), XXX, 198–202. His discussion is mostly linguistic.

³¹ Naṣr b. Muḥammad al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr (Baḥr al-'ulūm)*, ed. Muḥammad Mu'awwād (Beirut 1993), III, 526–7; and other versions of this simply say *ukhida 'an al-nisā'* 'he was taken from the women': Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, II, 153.

person that accomplished the feat, but a group (*qawm*). Other than that, he used Muqātil's story.³²

Al-Ṭūsī, the Shī'ī (d. 460/1067), is the first commentator to recognize the danger that this story presents to several dogmatic issues connected with the Prophet. He says:

It is not possible that the Prophet was bewitched like certain Sunnī street-preachers (*al-quṣṣās al-juhhāl* – also the ignorant street-preachers) say, because one who describes him as bewitched, his mind is confused and God denies this in his Word: 'And the evil-doers say you are just following a bewitched man' (17:47). But it is possible that one of the Jews tried to do this and could not, and God informed his Prophet of what he did so that he took what he had made out of the water.³³

Al-Ṭūsī's comments are the first mention of this Qur'ānic verse (17:47) in connection with the bewitching of the Prophet, and his commentary shows awareness of the popularity of the story and its logical ramifications regarding the doctrine of the Prophet's infallibility. Fortunately, he is able to attribute the story to the ignorant masses, ignoring the weight of scholarly opinion, which had accepted the story uncritically until this point (even among Shī'ītes). Al-Ṭūsī's opinion was not accepted at the time, nor for a long time afterwards.

Al-Wāhidī (d. 468/1075) embellishes the story even further, adding new elements:

A Jewish youth served the Messenger of God, and the Jews came to him [the youth], and continued [to harass] him, until he took the combing hairs [the Prophet's hair that had fallen out during the combing process] and some teeth of his comb, and gave them to the Jews, whereupon they bewitched him with them [the hair]. The one who was in charge of this was Labīd b. A'ṣam al-Yahūdī, then he concealed it in a well belonging to Banū Zurayq called Dharwān, and the Messenger of God sickened and his hair fell out. He would think that he went into his women, when he did not go into them.

The two angels then come in a vision, give Muḥammad the expected advice, and three messengers of the Prophet — 'Alī, al-Zubayr b. al-'Awwām, and 'Ammār b. Yāsir — go to the well and draw out the water, which was like diluted henna (*ka-annah nuqā'atu al-binnā* — in other words, very thick, so that nothing could be seen inside).

³² 'Alī b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī, *Tafsīr*, ed. Khidr Muḥammad Khidr (Kuwait 1982), IV, 550–51; and see also 'Izz al-Dīn 'Abd al-'Azīz 'Abd al-Salām al-Sulaymī al-Dimashqī (d. 660/1261–2), *Mukhtaṣar tafsīr al-Māwardī* (Beirut 1996), III, 509–11.

³³ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr al-ṭibyān*, ed. Aghā Bozorg Khān (Najaf, 1957–65), X, 434.

They find the spathe with eleven knots tied, the comb, the hair, and the string with a needle stuck in it.³⁴

Though the story appears here in its complete form, we find it with an attempt to change, or modify, the idea that the magician gained power over the Prophet's sexual activities. Instead, he hallucinates things. The suffering is real, but much of it is psychological. This is a definite trend in later commentary. Another item that should be noted is that with al-Samarqandī's and al-Wāhidi's accounts we have typical magical devices using hair and puppets, which are known the world over, in addition to the palm spathe, which was probably only used in the desert oasis setting of Medina. These were probably added in order to facilitate reader understanding, since by the third and fourth centuries the significance of the palm spathe may not have been clear to everyone. Also, this story adds the added element of the grand conspiracy. The Jewish servant of the Prophet is in on the plan, as is Labīd himself, and later on his daughters are introduced as well (who are presumably Jews), all of whom are part of a concerted attempt to disqualify the Prophet from his God-ordained office. One commentator who deserves a separate note is the anonymous author of the early Persian 'Cambridge' *Tafsīr* who says (quoting Ibn al-Kalbī):

They [unnamed] bewitched the Prophet, and he suffered a complaint. Then suddenly, when he was sleeping between [the states of] sleep and wakefulness ... [describing the way that the Prophet slept] ... two angels descended, one sat at the head of his bed and one sat at the foot of his bed ... one angel said to the other: 'What is this man suffering from?' He said: 'They bewitched him'. He [the other] said: 'Who did it?' He said: 'Labīd b. A'ṣam al-Yahūdī'. He said: 'Where is it [the means of bewitchment] placed?' He said: 'In the well of Dhī [= Dhū] Arwān'.³⁵

The story continues from this point, but it nowhere mentions by which exact magical means the bewitchment was achieved, nor does

³⁴ 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāhidi, *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Beirut 1988), 310; and see al-Hindī, *Kanz*, VI, 742–43 (no 17651). In Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqāt*, II, 151; and Abū Ya'lā, *Musnad*, VIII, 290–91 it says that he was bewitched such that *kāna yukhayyilu ilayhi annahu yaṣan'u al-shay' wa-lam yaṣna'hu* 'he would imagine for himself that he had done things, while having not done them'. See also al-Ḥumaydī, *Musnad* (Medina n.d.), I, 125–7, no 259); al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il*, VII, 88; and al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmi, *Subul al-hudā*, X, 57, where only a man from the Anṣār (not even specifying that he is Jewish) is mentioned.

³⁵ 'Cambridge Anonymous' *Tafsīr*, ed. Jalāl al-Matsīnī (Tehran n.d.), II, 657–8. It is unclear to what year exactly this important volume should be dated (the manuscript is from the early 1200s, but clearly the text is much older), though without question it is the oldest *Tafsīr* in Persian.

it reveal the identity of the bewitched (though we know it is the Prophet, the angels never show any such awareness).

The next group of commentators follow in the steps of the early ones. Al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) quotes al-Wāḥidi in one of the two versions that he brings. In the other, he does not mention Labīd at all, rather an unnamed Jewish man. The main point of this very short story is that the Prophet suffers and then is released.³⁶ By this time several Shīʿī commentators had become sceptical, probably under the influence of the Muʿtazila. One should note, for example, that Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 528/1133) makes no mention of this story in his commentary. Nasarī (d. 520/1126), in the section actually penned by al-Maybūdī, relates the story, but relates it to the Prophet's 'proofs of prophethood' (*dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*); therefore, he says that the manner in which God protected Muḥammad is the strongest demonstration of the truth of his prophecy.³⁷ Al-Maybūdī has no problem with the idea of the Prophet's impotence, saying that it was God's provision to keep the Prophet from ʿĀʾisha (who is one of the most deadly enemies of the Shīʿa) for a complete year!³⁸ On the other hand, al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153) quotes al-Wāḥidi's tradition, adding on a direct quote from al-Ṭūsī: such a thing is not possible where the Prophet is concerned.³⁹ Clearly by the middle of the sixth century Shīʿites were having difficulty with the truth of the story. It is interesting that al-Ṭabrisī would adduce it at all, since in most cases he follows in the footsteps of al-Ṭabarī.

Sunnīs also continue to mention the story. Al-Naysābūrī combines several traditions, adding only the mistake in the place name (Dharwān = Dhī Arwān). He is aware of the protests of the Muʿtazila against this story. He responds, saying: 'the answer is that the total loss of control [of the faculties] in such a way as would preclude the fulfilment of the mission is not possible', but he allows that some of the limbs of the Prophet were out of his control for a time.⁴⁰ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) quotes the mistake about the place name; otherwise he holds to al-Wāḥidi.⁴¹ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī

³⁶ al-Ḥusayn b. Masʿūd al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr (Maʿālim al-tanzīl)*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh al-Nimr (Riyād 1992), VIII, 593–4.

³⁷ ʿAbdallāh Naṣarī, *Kashf al-asrār wa-ʿuddat al-abrār* (Tehran 1960), X, 668–9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 669.

³⁹ al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān* (Beirut 1954), XXX, 234–5.

⁴⁰ al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Qummī al-Naysābūrī, *Tafsīr gharāʾib al-Qurʾān* (Beirut 1996), VI, 598–9, 601.

⁴¹ Abū al-Faraj b. al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fi ʿilm al-tafsīr*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAtāʾ (Beirut 1990), VIII, 332–3.

(d. 638/1240) also continues this mistake, and though he words the tradition differently, he adds no new content.⁴² Neither he nor Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 604/1207) sees fit to reject the story, although they do not emphasize it either. Al-Rāzī is one of the first to introduce the 'daughters of Labīd', presumably to get the story more in line with the verse, as was already noted above, and takes this opportunity to speak about magic in general.⁴³ Apparently, the issue of the daughters enables the commentators to present Labīd as the leader of a grand conspiracy to incapacitate the Prophet. It also in a certain way balances out the equation, since the Prophet is not bewitched by some second-rate magician, but by an entire group dedicated to this task.

Sulaymān b. 'Umar al-'Uqaylī launches the strongest attack on the idea that the *sūra* was revealed in Mecca, saying that 'magic was only in Medina, and there is no reason to entertain the idea that it is Meccan'. He then cites al-Wāqidī's tradition on the subject, which appears to be a combined report from a number of different earlier traditions. Al-'Uqaylī does not mention the issue of impotence nor does he discuss the exact effect of the enchantment upon the Prophet. It is difficult to define what exactly his position is on the question of whether the event actually happened, but he uses previous sources to strongly attack the idea that this story is false.⁴⁴

Already at this early stage, the Andalusian Ibn 'Aṭīyya (d. 546/1151) blames Labīd's daughters for the act of bewitchment.⁴⁵ His fellow Andalusian, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), knows the stories about this episode which are in al-Bukhārī (quoted in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*), and does not comment on whether he thinks that the event really happened, though he permits himself an extensive discussion on magic.⁴⁶ He does, however, mention a totally new tradition about Jewish women

⁴² Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bijawī (Beirut n.d.), IV, 1996.

⁴³ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (= *al-Taḥfīr al-kabīr*) (Beirut n.d.) XXXII, 189–96. (The introduction of Labīd's daughters appears outside the exegetical field much earlier. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, II, 152; and Lecker, 'Bewitching', 563.).

⁴⁴ Sulaymān b. 'Umar al-'Uqaylī, *al-Furūḥāt al-Ilāhiyya* (Beirut 1994), VIII, 458–62.

⁴⁵ 'Abd al-Ḥayy b. Ghālib Ibn 'Aṭīyya, *al-Muḥarrir al-wajīz* (Tarodant 1991), XVI, 385; see also Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Juz'ā' al-Kalbī al-Gharnāṭī (d. 741/1340–41), *al-Tashīl li-'ulūm al-tanzīl* (Beirut n.d.), 815, who has difficulties with the story for rationalistic reasons as well; his fellow Andalusian Aḥmad b. al-Zubayr al-Gharnāṭī (d. 708/1308–9), *Malak al-ta'wīl*, ed. Maḥmūd Kāmil Aḥmad (Beirut 1985), II, 964–6 does not mention the story at all.

⁴⁶ Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr* (= *al-Jāmi' li-l-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*) (Cairo n.d.), VIII, 7343–4.

bewitching the Prophet, with our exact story-line.⁴⁷ This is probably indicative of the scholarly uneasiness felt during this period regarding the tenuous connection of the story with the verses.

4 Late Medieval Commentators (700–1300/1300–1882)

Commentators in this period are mostly either sceptical or ignore the story altogether. Al-Nasafī (d. 701/1301) chooses the later option. However, he does not detail his reasons, which are obviously not rationalistic, since he takes this opportunity to chastise the Muʿtazila for their disbelief in magic.⁴⁸ Unusually for this period, al-Khāzin al-Baghdādī (d. 725/1324–25) details the story in full, recording the version of the Jewish servant of the Prophet noted above, and including the element of the Prophet's sexual difficulties (citing al-Bukhārī). Far from feeling uncomfortable with the story, al-Baghdādī accepts it in full, and in the strongest terms denounces those who reject it as 'innovators'. He feels that the methods of *hadīth* criticism proved the truth of the story, and that it does not detract in the slightest from the proofs of Muḥammad's prophethood, which have already been proved overwhelmingly through other means. However, al-Baghdādī is not quite as comfortable with the issue of the Prophet's sexual difficulties with his wives. But he maintains that if the difficulties were bodily only (and did not affect his mind or psyche), then there are no implications for his prophetic office.⁴⁹

Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 745/1353) saw fit to emphasize the connection with Mecca (a connection we have already rejected), and quotes al-Wāḥidī.⁵⁰ Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1374) does not comment on the story; he simply confines himself to quoting al-Bukhārī and al-Thaʿlabī.⁵¹ This is to be expected in light of the fact that the idea of the Prophet's bewitchment clearly did not find favour with Ibn Kathīr's master, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who ignored it altogether in his own commentary.⁵² Like Ibn Kathīr, al-Bayḍawī (d. 791/1388)

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7349.

⁴⁸ ʿAbdallāh b. Aḥmad al-Nasafī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Jalīl* (= *Tafsīr al-Nasafī*) (Beirut n.d.), V, 412.

⁴⁹ ʿAlā al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Baghdādī (al-Khāzin al-Baghdādī), *Tafsīr al-Khāzin* (= *Lubāb al-taʾwīl fī maʾānī al-tanzīl*), ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad ʿAlī Shāhīn (Beirut 1995), VI, 536–7.

⁵⁰ Ibn Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ* (Beirut 1993), VIII, 533–4.

⁵¹ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr* (Beirut 1970), VII, 420–21.

⁵² Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut 1988), VII, 591–3.

mentions the main facts only briefly.⁵³ More and more as the period progresses, scholars record the version with Labīd's daughters without a good deal of explanation.⁵⁴ And parallel to the daughters motif, in extra-exegetical material we also find mention of Labīd's sisters. Thus Labīd himself, far from being the all-mighty magician, is reduced to being their helper, who obtains the necessary items for the bewitchment secretly from the Prophet.⁵⁵

It is not until we get to al-Biqā'ī (d. 880/1475), that we find new elements added to the story. Al-Biqā'ī's alternate version states that Muḥammad himself went to the well, and found it impossible to see anything inside. He came back to 'Ā'isha and ordered a man of the Anṣār to remove the water from the well, which he did, in order to remove the magical items located there.⁵⁶ Obviously he could not have been very sick if he himself went to the well. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) mentions this story in both of his commentaries. Characteristically, he adds nothing of his own, though we find quoted there an interesting tradition which states that al-Wāḥidī's unnamed Jewish youth was Labīd! (which is not possible according to the wording).⁵⁷ He also mentions an image (*timḥāl*) in place of the puppet mentioned in the tradition of al-Samarqandī.⁵⁸ Abū al-Su'ūd (d. 982/1574–5) repeats the story about the group of Jews trying to bewitch the Prophet; more effort is put into the whole issue on the part of the Jews, and they manage to accomplish a lot less.⁵⁹ In sum, this period is one in which, if the story did not develop very much, neither were the commentators very enthusiastic about it. However, none of the Sunnī commentators dared to come out and say that it was wrong. They either ignored it, like Ibn Taymiyya, or let it go without comment.

⁵³ al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl* (Beirut 1988), II, 632; and see Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Khifājī, *Hāshiyat al-shihāb 'ināyat al-qāḍī wa-kifāyat al-rāḍī 'alā tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī* (Beirut n.d.), VIII, 416–17.

⁵⁴ For example, Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1391), *al-Burhān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Beirut 1972), I, 25; and al-Tha'labī (d. 802/1468), *Jawāhir al-ḥisān* (Beirut 1996), III, 537–8, who tells a tale about a similar occurrence in the Maghreb.

⁵⁵ al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, *Subul al-hudā*, X, 57.

⁵⁶ al-Biqā'ī, *Niẓām al-durar*, XXII, 415–16, 417–18.

⁵⁷ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Durr al-manḥūr* (Cairo n.d.), VI, 467–8; and *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Beirut n.d., though this section was actually written by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Mahallī), 817: mentioning that the Prophet was sick; and see al-Sāwī, *Hāshiyat al-Sāwī 'alā Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Beirut n.d.), IV, 367–8.

⁵⁸ al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, VI, 468. A well of Banū Ma'mūn is mentioned here uniquely.

⁵⁹ Abū Su'ūd b. Muḥammad al-'Āmadī al-Ḥanafī, *Tafsīr Abī al-Su'ūd*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad 'Aṭā' (Riyāḍ n.d.), V, 593–4.

As time progresses, the Shī'a become less hostile to this story. Al-Kāshānī (d. 1071/1660) uses the event to glorify the position of 'Alī as someone who is trusted by the Prophet. No mention is made of any Prophetic suffering; instead Gabriel comes to him without any warning, tells him that he has been bewitched, and that he should send the most trusted man that he has to destroy the magical device. This turns out to be none other than 'Alī, who performs the mission successfully.⁶⁰ Al-Baḥrānī (d. 1107/1598–9) quotes the story in full, including the element of the Prophet's impotence, and accepts the story without reservation (at least any personal reservation; he does cite al-Ṭabrisī for reasons why the story should be rejected).⁶¹ Al-Qummī (d. 1125/1713) repeats the same Shī'i traditions, adding that 'it is not possible that the Jew or his daughters, according to what is related, exerted themselves in this'.⁶² Al-Lāhijī (d. c. 1100/1688–9) does not mention the story at all, but curses the enemies of the Shī'a fluently (such as 'Ā'isha, who as it will be recalled, was one of the women denied to the Prophet).⁶³ A number of versions of the story are brought in the *Tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* of 'Abd al-'Alā Juma' al-'Arūsī (d. eleventh/seventeenth century) without any comments whatsoever.⁶⁴ Despite their increasing acceptance of the tale, only al-Baḥrānī of all these commentators mentions the issue of the Prophet's impotence.

On the other hand, the Sunnī commentators progressively become more and more sceptical. Al-Bursāwī (d. 1166/1752), although he tells the story in its traditional form (even adding some new details), does so only in the context of a discussion of whether it is really possible to bewitch the Prophet. He does not come to a final conclusion in the matter, but he certainly opened the door for those who would.⁶⁵ Al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834) mentions the story in the

⁶⁰ al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, *Tafsīr al-ṣāfi* (Beirut 1982), V, 396. This new trend is illustrated by the inclusion of the story in al-Majlisī, *Bihār*, XVIII, 69–71 (where he quotes previous Imāmī opinion to the effect that the story is not to be relied on, though he himself does not indicate any opposition to it, and merely states that it is *mashhūr* [well-known] that prophets cannot be bewitched), XXXVIII, 302–3 (where he does not comment on the story at all), and XV, 364–7.

⁶¹ Hāshim al-Ḥusaynī al-Baḥrānī, *al-Burhān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Qumm 1996), V, 813–16.

⁶² al-Mirza Muḥammad al-Mashhadī al-Qummī, *Tafsīr kanz al-daqa'iq* (Qumm n.d.), XI, 636–7.

⁶³ Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Lāhijī, *Tafsīr-i Sharīf-i Lāhijī* (Tehran 1340/1921), 890–91.

⁶⁴ 'Abd al-'Alā Jumā' al-'Arūsī, *Kitāb tafsīr nūr al-ithaqalayn*, ed. Hāshim al-Rasūlī al-Mahārātī (Qumm n.d.), V, 718–20.

briefest possible terms, omitting even the name of the perpetrator.⁶⁶ Al-Alūsī (d. 1270/1853), on the other hand, relates all (or virtually all) the versions, and then decries the story as impossible and condemns it in the strongest terms available. Though he claims that *ahl al-sunna* stands behind him in this, factually speaking, he does not quote even one classical Sunnī commentator to back him up.⁶⁷

5 Modern commentators

The commentators for the modern period generally continue these trends. The Shī'ite al-Ṭabā'ṭabā'ī quotes al-Suyūṭī, and seemingly accepts the story. He is aware of the reasons for the rejection of the story, and points out that the story indicates bodily not psychological incapacitation (which is not entirely true according to some of the above accounts).⁶⁸ This reasoning suffices for him to accept the story as a possibility, if not to welcome it with open arms. Other Shī'ites reject it, though Muḥammad al-Ṣadīqī relates:

Among the other stories of the Banū Isrā'īl, the stories of the Church, the stories of the idolaters (*al-wathaniyyāt*) and assorted lies which entered and penetrated into the transmissions [of prophetic *ḥadīth*], is what we will hereby relate: that the Messenger was bewitched, bewitched by Labīd b. al-A'ṣam al-Yahūdī in Bī'r Dharwān, and 'he would think that he was having intercourse, and was not having intercourse, and would try and get to the door, and not be able to see it until he could touch it with his hand'.⁶⁹

This is a comparatively rare example of a modernist commentator who actually mentions the motif of the Prophet's impotence as a result of Labīd's bewitching. However, it is mentioned only to cast doubt on the whole story, since al-Ṣadīqī considered it fantastic that the Prophet would have had this humiliating restriction placed upon him.

Modernist Sunnī commentators, however, more than make up for this admission by writing extremely negative remarks about the story.

⁶⁵ Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī al-Bursāwī, *Tafsīr rūḥ al-bayān* (Damascus 1989), IV, 613–15.

⁶⁶ Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Shawkānī, *al-Fath al-qadīr* (Beirut n.d.), V, 519.

⁶⁷ al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, XXX, 282–4.

⁶⁸ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ṭabā'ṭabā'ī, *al-Mizān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut 1974), XX, 393–4.

⁶⁹ Muḥammad Ṣadīqī, *al-Furqān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut 1977), XXX, 539.

Al-Qāsimī (d. 1333/1914) demonstrates discomfort with this story, in adding a long warning to it in which he enumerates all the reasons why one should reject it.⁷⁰ Al-Marāghī also finds it impossible that the Prophet could be assailed in this manner, although he admits that the accounts are well documented according to the fashion of *ḥadīth* criticism.⁷¹ Makhlūf ignores the story altogether.⁷² Persian, Turkish and Urdu writers in general ignore the episode⁷³ or mention it in brief terms.⁷⁴ It is clear that they too do not feel comfortable with it. Maḥmūd Aḥmad (d. 1965), the Aḥmadī *khalīfa*, cites the story in full and appears to accept its validity, though with the same reservations as the Sunnī commentators.⁷⁵ The Tunisian Ibn Badīs (d. 1940) deals with this *sūra* at length. He is full of praise for the mystical value of it, but a little weak on explaining the historical circumstances of its revelation. At the very end of his comments, he simply says the story (of Labīd, one assumes) is not impossible, but he does not even tell what exactly the story is!⁷⁶ Ibn ‘Ashūr includes an extensive discussion on the connection between women and magic (in which he says that women are natural magicians because they do not really have anything to do except prepare food and clean up!)⁷⁷; however, although he promises to tell the story of Labīd al-Yahūdī, he never gets around to it.

Most contemporary commentators are extremely hostile in their comments on the story. For example, Maghiyya (writing c. 1970), after

⁷⁰ Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, *Maḥāsīn al-ta’wīl*, ed. Muḥammad Fu ‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo n.d.), XVII, 6308–10; see also Muḥammad ‘Abduḥ’s attitude in *al-Manār* 12 (1909–10), 697.

⁷¹ Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr al-Marāghī* (Cairo 1936), XXX, 261.

⁷² Ḥusayn Muḥammad Makhlūf, *Ṣafwat al-bayān li-ma’ānī al-Qur’ān* (Beirut n.d.), II, 579–80; and so does Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Bazwārī, *al-Ghayb wa-l-shahāda* (Beirut 1987), VI, 416.

⁷³ *Maḥmūd-i al-Qur’ān* (Lahore n.d.), III, 1398–9; Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Jamāl, *al-Tafsīr al-farīd li-l-Qur’ān al-majīd* (Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd n.p., n.d.), IV, 3375; ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn Ṭayyib, *Atyab al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (n.p., n.d.), XIV, 271–2; Aqayī Ḥājī Mirza Muḥammad Thaqafī Tehrānī, *Ravān-i javīd va-tafsīr-i Qur’ān-i majīd* (Tehran n.d.), V, 455–6; and al-Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī al-Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Uzaymī, *Tafsīr Ithnā’ ‘asharī* (n.p., 1342 *shamsī*), XIV, 389–94.

⁷⁴ Murād ‘Alī, *Tafsīr-i yāsir* (n.p., n.d.), II, 1044–6; Amīr ‘Alī Malīḥabādī (d. 1919), *Mawāhib-i rahmān* (Lahore n.d.), XXX, 1112–14; and Mehmet Vehbī, *Hulāṣatul beyān* (Istanbul 1969), XV, 6624–6.

⁷⁵ Maḥmūd Aḥmad, *Tafsīr-i kavīr* (n.p. 1986), X, 539–42.

⁷⁶ ‘Abd al-Majīd b. Muḥammad b. Badīs al-Ṣanhājī, *Tafsīr Ibn Badīs*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ṣālīḥ Ramaḍān (Beirut 1995), 375.

⁷⁷ Muḥammad b. al-Ṭāhir b. ‘Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wa-l-tanwīr* (Tunis 1984), XXX, 628.

telling the story briefly, says that it must be rejected on both legal and rational grounds, citing Muḥammad ‘Abduh.⁷⁸ For Muḥammad Ḥijāzī (c. 1968), the whole episode was one made up by the Jews so that people would doubt the Prophet.⁷⁹ The fundamentalist Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1386/1966) rejects it with increasing contempt, saying:

These transmissions are in opposition to the basis of prophetic infallibility in action and in proclamation [of the divine message], and are not compatible with the belief that every action of his [the Prophet’s] actions, and every utterance of his utterances is *Sunna* and *Shari‘a*, just like it conflicts with the denial of the Qur’ān that the Messenger is bewitched.⁸⁰

And this despite the fact that he admits that the tradition is *ṣahīḥ*!

The exceptions here are two well-known preachers. Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭaṇṭawī, the famous Egyptian preacher, whose commentary on these verses does not mention the story of the bewitching of the Prophet, although he alludes to it by saying ‘the *‘ulamā’* spoke in depth on their interpretation of the words ‘from the evil of the females who blow on the knots’ [113:4, the key verse in this regard] about magic, and among them are those who have tended to say that there is no truth to it, and that it is all imagination.⁸¹ It is clear that he is uncomfortable with the story. In his presentation, he is ambiguous about what the *‘ulamā’* considered to be imagination: was it the unmentioned story or was it magic as a whole? It is not very clear. Abū Bakr Jābir al-Jazā’irī, a preacher in the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, is much more certain; for him the whole story occurred literally as related and he exhibits no sign of doubt or theological problems with the content of it.⁸² However, like so many before him, he makes no mention of the nature of the Prophet’s illness. The Shi‘ite leader Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh omits the story completely from his monumental commentary, but speaks about the effects of magic on the human being.⁸³ Sa‘īd Ḥawwa, the Jordanian fundamentalist, accepts the

⁷⁸ Muḥammad Jawād Maghiyya, *al-Tafsīr al-Kāshif* (Beirut 1970), VII, 625–6.

⁷⁹ Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ḥijāzī, *Tafsīr al-waḍīḥ* (Cairo 1968), XXX, 97.

⁸⁰ Sayyid Quṭb, *Fi zilāl al-Qur’ān* (Beirut 1974), VI, 4006–9, at 4008.

⁸¹ Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭaṇṭawī, *Tafsīr al-wāsīt* (Cairo 1986), XV, 545. Other conservative scholars like Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Ṣābūnī, *Ṣafwat al-tafsīr* (Beirut 1980), III, 624 accept the story without reservation, even though some of the medieval commentators they summarize rejected it.

⁸² Abū Bakr Jābir al-Jazā’irī, *Aysar al-tafsīr* (Jedda 1987), IV, 714.

⁸³ Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, *Min waḥy al-Qur’ān* (Beirut, 1990), XXIV, 561–5.

story, but says that God allowed it to happen only with the express purpose of humiliating the Jews.⁸⁴

6 Conclusions and Some Comments on the Nature of the Story

Some comments are in order about the nature and limitations of Muslim commentary. It is very unlikely that the story of Labīd al-Yahūdī, as it now stands, was connected with this *sūra* from the beginning. The context is wrong and too many elements of the *sūra* do not fit with the story. However, it is very likely that the story of a Jewish magician was not attached to these verses arbitrarily, and that the story itself is older than that of the *tafsīr* tradition. Jewish magic has a long and distinguished history, and Labīd is very likely the focal point of a story not unlike the ‘Seven Solomonic Covenants’, in which the biblical figure of wisdom, Solomon, captures an avatar of the evil eye in the guise of an old woman, who places herself within his power, and gives him the formula with which the believer can exorcize her. There is a striking similarity between this magical story and the one related about Labīd al-Yahūdī. The circumstances of the story are not that important (at least to the original formulators of it; later on it was more problematic); it is the efficaciousness of the formula contained within it which counts.⁸⁵

For the Muslim, there are quite a number of difficulties with the way in which the story of Labīd al-Yahūdī communicates these ideas. First of all, there is necessity to cast doubt upon the abilities of the Prophet, who, although he overcomes the malevolent forces of the Jewish magician in the end, is temporarily incapacitated by them. This is a crucial point, since in order to give the story its strength, the Prophet has to suffer *some* setback. Otherwise the all-pervasive forces of the magician are not revealed to be as strong as everyone knows them to be in the real world (seeing the situation from the perspective of a Muslim of the pre-modern age). However, by the same token, while the revelation of the strength of the forces of the magician gives the story weight and significance, it also reduces the position of the Prophet.

Without question the most uncomfortable ideas here swirl around the issue of the Prophet’s infallibility, a doctrine which early on

⁸⁴ Sa’īd Hawwa, *al-Assās fi al-tafsīr* (Amman 1985), XI, 6763–4.

⁸⁵ H. Winkler, *Salomo und die Karina* (Stuttgart 1931).

gained pan-Islamic support (i.e., from both Sunnīs and Shī'ites). In this regard, there is a striking similarity to the notorious story of the 'Satanic Verses', which were supposedly revealed in the context of Qur'ān 53:19–23).⁸⁶ However, as with the story above, there remain a number of accounts which do not entirely square with this dogma.⁸⁷ Although certain commentators see no difficulty with this issue, they are distinctly in the minority. Even those who accepted the story and found ways to balance the two matters (frequently using a truncated version of the story) were oftentimes uneasy with the implications for the Prophet; in any case, he appears in a less than favourable light.

With the figure of Labīd al-Yahūdī, the classical Jewish conspiracy theory in Islam is complete: 'Abdallāh b. Sabā', who brings in the extremist Shī'ite beliefs;⁸⁸ Ka'b al-Aḥbār, who is the peddler of biblical legends and apocalyptic traditions;⁸⁹ Ibn Sayyād, who figures as the Jewish Dajjāl (the Antichrist);⁹⁰ and now Labīd who takes his place as the forefather of the Mu'tazila. All these figures converted to Islam either during the Prophet's lifetime or immediately afterwards and supposedly influenced the course of the nascent faith in devious and manipulative ways. This is in contrast to Daniel Pipes, who says that

⁸⁶ See for example, J. Burton, 'Those are the High-Flying Cranes ...' *Journal of Semitic Studies* 15 (1970), 246–65, who almost uniquely among Western scholars doubts the veracity of the tale.

⁸⁷ See Arthur Jeffery, 'Was Muhammad a Prophet from his Infancy?' *Muslim World* 20 (1930), 226–34; and M.J. Kister, 'A Bag of Meat', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 33 (1970), 267–75; and for an overview *EP* 'Isma' (E. Tyan); and W. Bijlefeld, 'A Prophet and more than a Prophet?' *Muslim World* 59 (1969), 1–28.

⁸⁸ See on him *EP* 'Abdallāh b. al-Sabā' (M. Hodgson); and now M. Moosa, *Extremist Shi'ites* (Syracuse 1988), 69–70. M. Hamidullah continues in the path of the early Muslims, saying 'After years of research and without the least preconceived notions, I have reached the conclusion that the murder of 'Uthmān and the wars of the succession were a teleguided affair, and that 'Alī, Mu'āwiyah and 'Ā'isha etc. all fought in good faith, and had absolutely no personal ambitions', in 'The Jewish Background of the Battles of Jamāl and Ṣiffin', *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 36 (1982), 235–51, at 251.

⁸⁹ On Ka'b, see M. Perlmann, 'A Legendary story of Ka'b al-Aḥbār's Conversion to Islam', in *The Joshua Starr Memorial Volume* (New York 1953), 85–99; and idem, 'Another Ka'b al-Aḥbār Story', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 45 (1954), 48–58; and for a modern Muslim's approach to Ka'b, see G.H.A. Juynboll, 'Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (1892–1958) and his Edition of Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad*', *Der Islam* 49 (1972), 234–47, at 239–41.

⁹⁰ David Halperin, 'The Ibn Sayyād Traditions', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96 (1976), 213–25; and see my comments in 'The Hour Shall not Arrive Until ...' (forthcoming in *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* [Princeton]).

classical Islam does not suffer from any conspiracy theories.⁹¹ On the contrary, here is a well-formulated conspiracy theory designed to show that *all* the major heresies adversely effecting Sunnī Islam during the early centuries were deliberately placed there by the Jews. The personalities mentioned place the matter of the history of conspiracies in Islam in a different light, since it is clear that the idea of the Jewish conspiracy to destroy Islam is a well-rooted one.

We find also a strong connection between Jews, women, curses and sexuality which does not appear by chance. Women are said to be the majority of the inhabitants of hell because of their excessive cursing.⁹² The curse is also uniquely attached to the Jews as well. ‘Ibn Mas‘ūd said: “When men mutually curse each other, and one of them curses the other, the curse returns to the one deserved of it; if neither of them is deserved of it then it goes to the Jews, who concealed what God revealed” [i.e., the description of the Prophet Muḥammad].⁹³ In a similar vein we read: ‘Whoever does not have [the means to pay] the *ṣadaqa* (obligatory charity) let him curse the Jews’.⁹⁴ In addition, the Jews are said to have envied the Prophet’s sexual powers:

The Prophet was given the power of sixty some youths [for sexual intercourse] and thus the Jews envied him, and God most high said: ‘Do people envy on the basis of what God has given them from His bounty?’ [Qur‘ān 4;54] ... the Messenger of God was given the power of forty in sexual intercourse.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle Eastern Fears of Conspiracy* (New York 1996), 294–5. Another Jewish conspiracy was the origin of the Fatimid dynasty: see al-Wazīr al-Sarrāj, *al-Hulal al-sundusiyya fi al-akhbār al-Tūnisīyya* (Beirut 1984), II, 19–20.

⁹² Abū Ya‘lā, *Musnad*, IX, 49, 77 (and the references of the editor), XI, 462–4; and compare al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā‘ir wa-l-dhakhā‘ir*, ed. Wadād al-Qāḍī (Beirut 1988), III, 182; and see Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāgha*, ed. Muḥammad Abū Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Beirut 1967), VI, 214f.; and the modern collection of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Shināwī, *al-Nisā’ akthar ahl al-nār* (Cairo 1996); for similar attitudes in Judaism, Simcha Fishbane, “Most Women Engage in Sorcery”: An Analysis of Sorceresses in the Babylonian Talmud’, *Jewish History* 7 (1993), 27–42. For ‘feminist’ opinions, see Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh*, VII, pp. 363–4; and Bahshal, *Tārīkh Wāsīt*, 83–4, 203, which strongly attack the above traditions from a woman’s point of view.

⁹³ I. Goldziher, *Abhandlungen zur arabischen Philologie* (Leyden 1896), 118; and compare al-Hindī, *Kanz*, III, 617 (no 8192).

⁹⁴ al-Jarrāḥī, *Kashf al-khifā wa-muzīl al-ilbās* (Cairo n.d.), II, 277 (no 2605); Ibn Ḥajar, *Lisān*, III, 408.

⁹⁵ al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, *Subul al-hudā*, IX, 73.

The Jews' bewitching the Prophet and causing his impotence results directly from their sexual envy.

The idea of Jewish magic is also deeply rooted in the Muslim tradition. In my judgement, this story is a reflection of that fact, and has been influenced by the need to have the Prophet face down a Jewish magician. Ka'b al-Aḥbār bears witness to this need to defend oneself from the magic of the Jews. As he says, 'If it were not for words [of magic] that I say at sundown and-sunrise, the Jews would have transformed me into a barking dog or a neighing donkey. I take refuge in the protecting words of God, which neither righteous nor evil [people] can pass'.⁹⁶

We have here a classical magic story, designed to give a context to a magical protection text. The enemy which most frightened the people for whom this story was intended was blind, senseless hatred and envy from an anonymous foe. It should be noted that the effects of the spell are rather indefinite in many of the accounts, while in others they are many and specific. This allows for the multi-purpose nature of these amulets (which is what the final two *sūras* of the Qur'ān are). Just as in classical bowl magic, a story is frequently the main feature of the protection; the one using the amulet would be protected in the same way as the person or persons in the story.⁹⁷ Even the greatest sceptic will note that in all accounts the Prophet uses the verses in order to break the spell. These are basically the 'instructions' on the outside of the box, along with the Prophet's seal of approval. This story shows the continuity of the idea of the Jew as magician.⁹⁸

In considering this story it is important to note what is and is not here. First of all, the balance of the Sunnī commentators accept the notion of Jewish bewitchment of the Prophet, or at least do not actively reject it. Those that do reject it, do so on the grounds that the event is beneath the honour of the prophetic office and do not

⁹⁶ Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Hilyat al-awliyā'* (Cairo 1935), V, 377–8; and Ibn Manzūr, *Mukhtaṣar*, XXI, 184–5.

⁹⁷ J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls* (Jerusalem 1985), 188–205, and idem, *Magic Spells and Formulae* (Jerusalem 1993), 139–40.

⁹⁸ For example, E.A.W. Budge, *St. George of Lydda* (London 1888), 249–52; S. Griffith, 'Bashir/Bešer: Boon Companion of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III: The Islamic Recension of his Story in Leiden Oriental Ms. 951 (2)', *Le Muséon* 103 (1990), 225–64, at 297–8; and some cases in the Muslim tradition: al-Tha'labī, *Ārā'is al-majālis* (Beirut n.d.), 43 (for the beginnings of Jewish magic), and al-Iṣfahānī, *Hilyat al-awliyā'*, III, 288; and Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam* (Beirut 1992), XIII, 374; and also the laws of how to deal with their magicians: 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, X, 368–9 (nos. 19394–5).

attack the story itself as one which is entirely implausible. Mostly, they rely on rational arguments stemming from this presupposition. It is amazing how many Muslim scholars do in fact accept this story, given its obvious defects; indeed, until the beginning of this century the balance of the commentators *did* accept it. As the use of magic has become more and more obnoxious to religious scholars and rationalistic tendencies have come to the fore, there is less need to defend a line of interpretation about which, in all likelihood, many of their predecessors were embarrassed.

