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

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1 Introduction

One of the most unusual stories associated with a Qur'ānic sūra regards one Labīd b. al-‘Āṣim al-Yahūdī1 who, according to many accounts, managed briefly to bewitch the Prophet Muhammad, 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, 'Abdallāh b. al-Sabā‘ and Ka‘b al-Ahbar, 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 Qur‘ān 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 Mu‘tazila sect.4 Few Western scholars have considered the

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2 His ‘conversion’ is described in Muhammad b. Sa‘d, Kitāb al-tabaqāt al-kubrā, ed. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā‘ (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 Ka‘b al-Ahbar, see Sidney Griffith, ‘Muhammad and the Monk Bahira’, Oriens Christianus 79 (1995), 146–74; and for the others, see below.
4 Ibn Manẓūr, Mukhtasar Tā‘rīkh Madinat Dimashq, ed. Rūhiyya Nahhās (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. Nor is Labīd mentioned in the lists of the sahāba (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 Qur’ānic 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.

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

However, much though the grammar pained the commentators, it was the story of Labīd al-Yahudī and his bewitching of the Prophet Muhammad 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 ʿAbān b. Simʿān to Jaʿb b. Dirham, about whom Ibn Hajar, 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.


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


9 As usual, the most cogent grammatical explanation is in al-Zamakhshari, al-Kashshāf‘an haqāʾiq al-tanzil (Beirut n.d.), IV, 820–22.
short ṣūra, 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 Qur’ānic verses.

2 Early Commentators (Before Al-Ṭabari)

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 ṣūras of the Qur’ān] ... and was this [because] Labīd b. A’sam b. Malik, or it is said, Ibn A’sam 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 ṣūras of taking refuge [= the two ṣūras 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. A’sam 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 mu’awwidiyatayn [the verses of taking refuge, the last two ṣūras of the Qur’ān], and that will heal him’. When the Prophet woke up, he sent ‘Ali 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 Qur’ān with which it has been associated. One

notices this immediately upon reading the verses. Even the one verse that might conceivably be connected to Muqatil'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 sura 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 ('A'isha and Sawda) when he came to Medina, and 'A'isha was a very young girl,13 and previous to them, only Khadija. 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 sura 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. Abu 'Ubayda (d. 210/825), the famed philologist who was himself of Jewish descent, does not mention this in the extant version of his Majaz al-Qur'an, though his version is quoted by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi in his commentary. Sahl b. 'Abdallah al-Tustari (d. 283/896) gives a much shorter version of Muqatil'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 Banu Bayda' (it is interesting that

11 Shihab al-Din Muhammad al-Alusi, Ruh al-madm, ed. Mustafa Shukri (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 Labid, and because this is the type of things that women do — magic and other tricks — 'ghalaba al-mu'annath 'alâ al-mudhakkar bunâ, wa-huwa jâ'iz 'alâ ma fa'salahu al-Khifajj... 'the feminine overrides the masculine in this case, which is permissible according to what al-Khifajj [the grammarians] laid down...'

12 Indeed, Ibn Sa'd dates the story to the period immediately following Hudaybiyya (8/628): Ibn Sa'd, Tabaqat, II, 152; al-Salihi al-Shami, Subul al-hudâ wa-l-rashd (Beirut 1993), X, 57; al-Zurqani, Sharh al-mawâhib al-laduniyya (Beirut 1996), IX, 441-53; and the asbâb al-nuzul in al-Dhahabi, Siyar al-lâm al-nubalâ' (Beirut 1982), II, 468 would seem to indicate it as well.

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.\textsuperscript{14} Al-Farra\textsuperscript{a} (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.\textsuperscript{15}

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

Labīd b. Aḥmad b. Aḥmad and Umm ʿAbdAllah al-Yahūdīya bewitched the Messenger of God with a knot of silk (\textit{qazz} 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 (\textit{naṣīḥ}?) — and then he put it in the well of a wadi in Medina in the stepping-stone of the well beneath the raʿūfa, meaning the outer stone.\textsuperscript{19} The Prophet went for three [days] without eating, drinking, eating, drinking,

\textsuperscript{14} Sahl b. ʿAbdAllah al-Tustarī, \textit{Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿasīm} (Cairo n.d.), 131.

\textsuperscript{15} Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farraʾ, \textit{Maʿānī al-Qurʾān} (Cairo 1970), III, 301.


\textsuperscript{17} Lecker, \textit{‘Bewitching’}, 563.


\textsuperscript{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 (?):' ʿAlī b. Ahmad al-Wāḥīdī, \textit{Ashāb al-nuzūl} (Beirut 1988), 310. Variants are \textit{ar'-ūṣ} (Ibn Saʿd, \textit{Tabaqāt}, II, 152); \textit{raḡhūf} (al-Bīqāʿī, \textit{Nizām al-durar} [Cairo 1996], XXII, 416), and \textit{raʾīša} (al-ʿAlūsī, \textit{Rūḥ al-maʿānī}, XXX, 282). It is possible that this the Aramaic-Syriac word \textit{rj-f-raʾīʃ} 'a glazed tile' (see Jastrow, \textit{A Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi} [London 1903], s.v.; and C. Brockelmann, \textit{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 Muhammad, what is the matter with you?’ He said: ‘I do not know; I am as you see!’ And then he said: ‘Umm ‘Abdallāh and Labid b. A’sam 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. Then the Prophet sent for Labid and remonstrated with him, and afterwards cursed him, saying that he would not leave this world in good health (sāliman). Shortly thereafter, his hand was cut off for some minor offence, and then he dies.

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 Labid has a woman helper, though the relationship between the two is unclear, and her name does not enable us to identify her.

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.

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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.
22 One should note that Umm ‘Abdallāh was the name of the mother of the Jewish Dajjāl, Ibn Sayyād in al-Majlīsī, Bihār, LII, 196. Perhaps the stories were connected at some point.
In the same vein we read:

The Prophet said: 'I was given the kufayt'.\textsuperscript{24} It was said: 'And what is the \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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'\textsuperscript{anic} 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.\textsuperscript{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 Shi\textsuperscript{i} commentators, \textit{All\= al-Qum\=ml} (d. c. 307/919) and Mu\text{\=\}h\=ammad al-'Ayy\=ash\=i (d. 320/932) are silent. This is a tendency which is strong among the Shi\textsuperscript{a}. Among the early Sunn\=is, in addition to the aforementioned Abū 'Ubayda, Ahmad b. Shu\text{\=a}yb al-Nasā\=tī (d. 303/915–16), the collector of the \textit{hadīth} collection, did not include this account,\textsuperscript{27} nor did the Sufi al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072),\textsuperscript{28} Hūd b. Mu\text{\=h}kam al-Hawwārī (d. c. third/}

\textsuperscript{24} Probably meaning something like 'sufficiency', although the word is far from clear. In al-Sālihī al-Shāmī, \textit{Subāl}, 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.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Abd al-Razzaq}, \textit{Musannaf}, VII, 507 (no. 14052); in Abū Ya'\text{a}lā, \textit{Musnad}, V, 307, the number of wives is eleven.

\textsuperscript{26} Muqatil, \textit{Tāfīr}, I, 127.

\textsuperscript{27} Ahmad b. Shu\text{\=a}yb b. 'Alī al-Nasā\=tī, \textit{Tāfīr} (Cairo 1990), II, 623.

tenth century), nor did the greatest Qur'anic commentator, Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/922). Of all of these the real puzzler is al-Tabari. In all likelihood Abu 'Ubayda did write about the subject, but his writings have come down to us only in the form quoted by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. Al-Nasafi, al-Qushayri and al-Hawwari only wrote partial commentaries, while the Shi'ites were influenced by the rationalistic school of the Mu'tazila. The reason for al-Tabari'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-Samarqandi (d. 375/985) in one of the two versions that he quotes, follows Muqatil 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 (Muhammad) was taken from A'isha and the Messenger of God was made impotent (afhala), and then he placed on the puppet eleven knots and threw it in a well and threw a stone upon it. He (Muhammad) suffered from this terribly.

The two angels then come to give the Prophet their advice, which he heeds, as in Muqatil's version. 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-Mawardi (d. 450/1058) adds that it was not a single

31 Nasr b. Muhammad al-Samarqandi, Tafsir (Bahr al-'ulam), ed. Muhammad Mu'awwad (Beirut 1993), III, 526–7; and other versions of this simply say ukhida 'an al-nisaa' 'he was taken from the women': Ibn Sa'd, Tabaqat, II, 153.
person that accomplished the feat, but a group (qiyaam). Other than that, he used Muqatil's story.\footnote{32}

Al-Tusi, the Shi'i (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 Sunni street-preachers (al-qussad al-juhdāl – 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.\footnote{33}

Al-Tusi's comments are the first mention of this Qur'\'anic 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 Shi'ites). Al-Tusi's opinion was not accepted at the time, nor for a long time afterwards.

Al-Wahidi (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 Labid b. A'sam al-Yahudi, then he concealed it in a well belonging to Banu Zurayq called Dharwan, 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 Muhammad the expected advice, and three messengers of the Prophet — 'Ali, al-Zubayr b. al-'Awwam, and 'Ammar b. Yasir — go to the well and draw out the water, which was like diluted henna (ka-annahu nuqa'at al-hinna — in other words, very thick, so that nothing could be seen inside).
They find the spathe with eleven knots tied, the comb, the hair, and the string with a needle stuck in it.\textsuperscript{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-Samarqandi's and al-Wāhīdi'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' Ta'fīr 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'sam al-Yahūdī'. He said: 'Where is it [the means of bewitchment] placed?' He said: 'In the well of Dhi [= Dhū] Arwān'.\textsuperscript{35}

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

\textsuperscript{34} Alī b. Ahmad al-Wāhīdi, 	extit{Ashāb al-muzūl} (Beirut 1988), 310; and see al-Hindī, 	extit{Kanz}, VI, 742–43 (no 17651). In Ibn Sa'd, 	extit{Tabaqāt}, II, 151; and Abū Ya'la, 	extit{Muṣnad}, VIII, 290–91 it says that he was bewitched such that 	extit{kāna yakhayyīla ilayhi annahu yasannu al-shay' wa-lam yašna'ahu 'he would imagine for himself that he had done things, while having not done them'. See also al-Ḥumaydī, 	extit{Muṣnad} (Medina n.d.), I, 125–7, no 259); al-Bayhaqī, 	extit{Dālā'il}, VII, 88; and al-Ṣāḥīḥ al-Shāmī, 	extit{Subūl al-hudūd}, X, 57, where only a man from the Anṣār (not even specifying that he is Jewish) is mentioned.

\textsuperscript{35} 'Cambridge Anonymous' 	extit{Ta'fīr}, 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 	extit{Ta'fīr} in Persian.
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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-Baghwā (d. 516/1122) quotes al-Wāhīdī 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 Shi‘ī commentators had become sceptical, probably under the influence of the Mu‘tazilas. One should note, for example, that Muhammad b. 'Umar al-Zamakhshārī (d. 528/1133) makes no mention of this story in his commentary. Nasārī (d. 520/1126), in the section actually penned by al-Maybūdī, relates the story, but relates it to the Prophet's 'proofs of prophethood' (dalā’il al-nubuwwa); therefore, he says that the manner in which God protected Muhammad 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 'Ā‘īsha (who is one of the most deadly enemies of the Shi‘a) for a complete year!38 On the other hand, al-Tabrisī (d. 548/1153) quotes al-Wāhīdī's tradition, adding on a direct quote from al-Tūsī: such a thing is not possible where the Prophet is concerned.39 Clearly by the middle of the sixth century Shi‘ītes were having difficulty with the truth of the story. It is interesting that al-Tabrisī would adduce it at all, since in most cases he follows in the footsteps of al-Tabārī.

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 Mu‘tazilas 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-Wāhīdī.41 Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī

38 Ibid., 669.
(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-Wāqīdī’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 ‘Atiyya (d. 546/1151) blames Labīd’s daughters for the act of bewitchment.\(^{45}\) His fellow Andalusian, al-Qurtubl (d. 671/1272), knows the stories about this episode which are in al-Bukhārī (quoted in his Sahīh), and does not comment on whether he thinks that the event really happened, though he uses previous sources to strongly attack the idea that this story is false.\(^{46}\) He does, however, mention a totally new tradition about Jewish women


\(^{43}\) Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Majālis al-ghayb (= al-Tafsīr al-kabīr) (Beirut n.d.) XXXII, 189–96. (The introduction of Labīd’s daughters appears outside the exegetical field much earlier. Ibn Sa’d, Tābaqāt, II, 152; and Lecker, ‘Bewitching’, 563.).


bewitching the Prophet, with our exact story-line. 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-Nasafi (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 Mu'tazila for their disbelief in magic. Unusually for this period, al-Khazin al-Baghdadi (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-Bukhari). Far from feeling uncomfortable with the story, al-Baghdadi accepts it in full, and in the strongest terms denounces those who reject it as 'innovators'. He feels that the methods of hadith criticism proved the truth of the story, and that it does not detract in the slightest from the proofs of Muhammad's prophethood, which have already been proved overwhelmingly through other means. However, al-Baghdadi 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.

Ibn Hayyan (d. 745/1353) saw fit to emphasize the connection with Mecca (a connection we have already rejected), and quotes al-Wahidi. Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1374) does not comment on the story; he simply confines himself to quoting al-Bukhari and al-Tha'labi. 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 Kathir's master, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who ignored it altogether in his own commentary. Like Ibn Kathir, al-Baydawi (d. 791/1388)

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47 Ibid., 7349.
mentions the main facts only briefly.\(^{53}\) More and more as the period progresses, scholars record the version with Labid’s daughters without a good deal of explanation.\(^ {54}\) And parallel to the daughters motif, in extra-exegetical material we also find mention of Labid’s sisters. Thus Labid 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 Muhammad 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 Labid! (which is not possible according to the wording).\(^ {57}\) He also mentions an image (*timthād*) in place of the puppet mentioned in the tradition of al-Samarqandi.\(^ {58}\) 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.


\(^ {55}\) al-Salihī al-Shamlī, *Subul al-ḥudā* (X, 57).


\(^ {57}\) Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Durr al-mantūr* (Cairo n.d.), VI, 467–8; and *Tafsīr al-Jālālīn* (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, *Ḥāshiyyat al-Sāwī: alā Tafsīr al-Jālālīn* (Beirut n.d.), IV, 367–8.

\(^ {58}\) al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, VI, 468. A well of Banū Ma‘mūn is mentioned here uniquely.

As time progresses, the Shi'a become less hostile to this story. Al-Kashānī (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-Bahrānī (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-Qumml (d. 1125/1713) repeats the same Shi'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 Shi'a fluently (such as 'A'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 Taṣfīr bi-l-mā'thūr of 'Abd al-'Alā Juma' al-'Arusi (d. eleventh/seventeenth century) without any comments whatsoever.⁶⁴ Despite their increasing acceptance of the tale, only al-Bahrānī 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

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⁶⁰ al-Fayd al-Kashānī, Taṣfīr al-taṣfīr (Beirut 1982), V, 396. This new trend is illustrated by the inclusion of the story in al-Majlīsī, Bihār, XVIII, 69–71 (where he quotes previous Imamī 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.


briefest possible terms, omitting even the name of the perpetra-
tor.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{ahl al-sunna} stands behind him in this, factually speaking, he does not quote even one classical Sunnī commentator to back him up.\textsuperscript{67}

5 Modern commentators

The commentators for the modern period generally continue these trends. The Shi'ite al-Ṭabāʾībaʾī quotes al-Suyūtī, 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).\textsuperscript{68} This reasoning suffices for him to accept the story as a possibility, if not to welcome it with open arms. Other Shi'ites reject it, though Muḥammad al-Ṣadiqī relates:

Among the other stories of the Banū Isrāʾīl, the stories of the Church, the stories of the idolaters (\textit{al-wathaniyyāt}) and assorted lies which entered and penetrated into the transmissions [of prophetic hadith], is what we will hereby relate: that the Messenger was bewitched, bewitched by Labīd b. al-ʿAṣam al-Yahūdī in Bīr 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'.\textsuperscript{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-Ṣadiqī 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.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65} Ismāʾīl Ḥaqqī al-Bursāwī, \textit{Tafsīr rūḥ al-bayān} (Damascus 1989), IV, 613–15.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Muḥammad b. ʿAṭī b. Muḥammad al-Ṣhawkānī, \textit{al-Fath al-qādir} (Beirut n.d.), V, 519.
\item \textsuperscript{67} al-Aluṣī, \textit{Rūḥ al-maʿāni}, XXX, 282–4.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāʾībaʾī, \textit{al-Mizān fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān} (Beirut 1974), XX, 393–4.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Muḥammad Ṣādiqī, \textit{al-Furqān fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān} (Beirut 1977), XXX, 539.
\end{itemize}
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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{hadith} criticism.\textsuperscript{71} Makhlūf ignores the story altogether.\textsuperscript{72} Persian, Turkish and Urdu writers in general ignore the episode\textsuperscript{73} or mention it in brief terms.\textsuperscript{74} It is clear that they too do not feel comfortable with it. Maḥmūd Ahmad (d. 1965), the Aḥmādī \textit{khalīfa}, cites the story in full and appears to accept its validity, though with the same reservations as the Sunnī commentators.\textsuperscript{75} The Tunisian Ibn Badīs (d. 1940) deals with this \textit{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!\textsuperscript{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!)\textsuperscript{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

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\item\textsuperscript{70} Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, \textit{Maḥāsin al-taʿwil}, ed. Muḥammad Fuʿād 'Abd al-Baqī (Cairo n.d.), XVII, 6308–10; see also Muḥammad 'Abduh's attitude in \textit{al-Manār} 12 (1909–10), 697.
\item\textsuperscript{71} Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, \textit{Tafsīr al-Marāghī} (Cairo 1936), XXX, 261.
\item\textsuperscript{72} Ḥusayn Muḥammad Makhlūf, \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ al-bayān  li-maʿānī al-Qurʿān} (Beirut n.d.), II, 579–80; and so does Muḥammad 'Alī al-Bazwārī, \textit{al-Ghayb wa-l-shahāda} (Beirut 1987), VI, 416.
\item\textsuperscript{74} Murād Alī, \textit{Tafsīr-i yāsir} (n.p., n.d.), II, 1044–6; Amīr Alī Malīḥābādī (d. 1919), \textit{Maḥāhib-i rāhman} (Lahore n.d.), XXX, 1112–14; and Mehmet Vehbī, \textit{Ḥulāṣatul bāyān} (İstanbul 1969), XV, 6624–6.
\item\textsuperscript{75} Maḥmūd Ahmad, \textit{Tafsīr-i kāvīr} (n.p. 1986), X, 539–42.
\item\textsuperscript{77} Muḥammad b. al-Ṭāhir b. Ṭāhir, \textit{Tafsīr al-taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr} (Tunis 1984), XXX, 628.
\end{itemize}
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telling the story briefly, says that it must be rejected on both legal and rational grounds, citing Muhammad 'Abduh. For Muhammad Hijazi (c. 1968), the whole episode was one made up by the Jews so that people would doubt the Prophet. 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 Sharī'a, just like it conflicts with the denial of the Qur'an that the Messenger is bewitched.

And this despite the fact that he admits that the tradition is sahih! The exceptions here are two well-known preachers. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, 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 'ulama 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. It is clear that he is uncomfortable with the story. In his presentation, he is ambiguous about what the 'ulama' considered to be imagination: was it the unmentioned story or was it magic as a whole? It is not very clear. Abu Bakr Jābir al-Jaza'iri, 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. However, like so many before him, he makes no mention of the nature of the Prophet's illness. The Shi'ite leader Husayn Faḍlallāh omits the story completely from his monumental commentary, but speaks about the effects of magic on the human being. Sa'id Ḥawwa, the Jordanian fundamentalist, accepts the

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79 Muhammad Mahmūd Hijāzhī, Tafsīr al-wadīb (Cairo 1968), XXX, 97.
80 Sayyid Quṭb, Fī zilāl al-Qur'ān (Beirut 1974), VI, 4006–9, at 4008.
81 Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, Tafsīr al-wāsit (Cairo 1986), XV, 545. Other conservative scholars like Muhammad 'Ali al-Ṣābūnī, Ṣafsawat al-tafsīr (Beirut 1980), III, 624 accept the story without reservation, even though some of the medieval commentators they summarize rejected it.
83 Husayn Faḍlallāh, Min wahy 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{85} H. Winkler, Salomo und die Karina (Stuttgart 1931).
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gained pan-Islamic support (i.e., from both Sunnīs and Shi‘ītes). In this regard, there is a striking similarity to the notorious story of the ‘Satanic Verses’, which were supposedly revealed in the context of Qurʾān 53:19–23). However, as with the story above, there remain a number of accounts which do not entirely square with this dogma. 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 Labd al-Yahūdī, the classical Jewish conspiracy theory in Islam is complete: ‘Abdallāh b. Saba’, who brings in the extremist Shi‘īte beliefs; Ka‘b al-Abbār, who is the peddler of biblical legends and apocalyptic traditions; Ibn Sayyād, who figures as the Jewish Dajjal (the Antichrist); and now Labd 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.


88 See on him EP ‘‘Abdallāh b. al-Saba’ (M. Hodgeson); and now M. Moosa, Extremist Shi‘ītes (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 tele guided affair, and that ‘Ali, Mu‘ awiyah and ‘A’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.


classical Islam does not suffer from any conspiracy theories. 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. 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 Muhammad]. In a similar vein we read: ‘Whoever does not have [the means to pay] the sadaqa (obligatory charity) let him curse the Jews’. 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?’ [Qurān 4; 54] … the Messenger of God was given the power of forty in sexual intercourse.


92 Abū Ya'la, Musnad, IX, 49, 77 (and the references of the editor), XI, 462–4; and compare al-Tawhīdi, al- Başā'ir wa-l-dhakhā’ir, ed. Wadād al-Qādī (Beirut 1988), III, 182; and see Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, Sharh Nahj al-balāgha, ed. Muḥammad Abū Fadl Ibrāhīm (Beirut 1967), VI, 214f.; and the modern collection of 'Abd al-‘Azīz al-Shināwī, al-Nisīr ‘ akhbat abī 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 'Aṣākir, Tārīkh, VII, pp. 363–4; and Bahshah, Tārīkh Wāsit, 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-khīfā’ wa-muzūs il-bās (Cairo n.d.), II, 277 (no 2605); Ibn Ḥajar, Lisan, III, 408.

95 al-Ṣāliḥi 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-Ahbar 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 suras of the Qur’an 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 Sunni 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


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.