

THE HANDS OF ABŪ LAHAB AND THE GAZELLE OF THE KA‘BA

Uri Rubin
Tel Aviv University

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

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

I have surveyed all these interpretations in a previous study published quite a few years ago, in the strong belief that one of them — about Abū Lahab’s support for al-‘Uzzā — reflects the “true” meaning of verse 1.¹ But this tradition too seems to me now as no more than a midrashic elaboration on the Qur’ānic text as well as on Abū Lahab’s name, ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā.

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

¹For details see Rubin, “Abū Lahab.”

which has not yet been taken into account in the discussions about the meaning of this *sūra*.

The tradition is the one which may be called “the gazelle tradition.” Its most comprehensive version is provided by Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 245/859) in his *Munammaq*.² It relates that Abū Lahab participated in a crime which reportedly caused great commotion in pre-Islamic Mecca. He and his drinking companions, whose names are given in the report, took part in an act of desecration of the Ka‘ba. They reportedly used to convene in the house of Miqyas b. ‘Adī of the Banū Sahm of the Quraysh. Miqyas had two singing girls who used to entertain his companions at their drinking parties. Once they ran out of money and could not buy more wine, so Abū Lahab suggested they steal a golden gazelle which had been donated to the Ka‘ba by his father, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib. The latter is said to have retrieved it from the ground while he was digging the well of Zamzam.³ So they went to the Ka‘ba and stole the precious gazelle under cover of darkness and took it apart and divided it among themselves, giving some parts to the singing girls, and buying wine with other parts. When the Quraysh found out that the gazelle was missing they became enraged; ‘Abdallāh b. Jud‘ān was especially furious. The gravity of the crime is illustrated by the fact that the gazelle is described by the Quraysh as “the gazelle of your God” (*ghazāl rabbikum*).⁴

Eventually the thieves were tracked down by some members of the clan of Hāshim (Abū Ṭālib, al-‘Abbās and others), who belonged to the Qurayshī alliance of the Muṭayyabūn. The latter demanded of the rival alliance of the Aḥlāf (to whom Miqyas, owner of the singing girls and member of the Sahm, belonged), that the thieves be punished by having their hands cut off. Finally the Aḥlāf ransomed some of the thieves by blood money that was paid to Abū Ṭālib and al-Zubayr, sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib who had donated the gazelle to the Ka‘ba. Other thieves escaped and some years later joined the Quraysh in their battles against the Prophet. Still other participants in the act of desecration were punished and one hand of each of them was cut off according to the law of Quraysh.

As for Abū Lahab, his hand was reportedly spared due to his noble status.⁵ According to Ibn Ḥabīb, his maternal uncles from Khuẓā‘a

²Ibn Ḥabīb, *Munammaq*, pp. 59–70. See also his commentary on Ḥassān’s *Dwān*, vol. 2, pp. 115–27.

³Cf. Hawting, “Zamzam.” Other reports maintain that the gazelle was donated to the Ka‘ba by the Persian ruler Isfandiyār who had heard about the reputation of the Ka‘ba as a place of pilgrimage. See ‘Askarī, *Awā‘il*, p. 35. See further, Rubin, “Ka‘ba,” pp. 115–7.

⁴Ibn Ḥabīb, *Munammaq*, p. 63.

⁵‘Askarī, *Awā‘il*, p. 35.

protected him. Their protection is alluded to in a poetic verse recorded by Ibn Ḥabīb, saying that they protected the senior member of ‘Abd Manāf [Abū Lahab] when he already saw the blade of the knife hovering above the fingers of his hand.⁶ Abū Lahab came to be known as *sāriq ghazāl al-Ka‘ba* — “the one who stole the gazelle of the Ka‘ba.”⁷

Allusions to this affair can be found in other sources. Al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892) has recorded a concise version of the event,⁸ as well as brief references to some of the thieves.⁹ One of them, namely, Abū Ihāb b. ‘Azīz of the Dārim [Tamīm] is described by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) as “one of those who stole the gazelle of the Ka‘ba with Abū Lahab and his friends.”¹⁰ Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819) refers to Miqyas b. ‘Adī, owner of the two singing girls, and says that the gazelle of the Ka‘ba was taken apart and divided in his house.¹¹

The event was also known to al-Mas‘ūdī. According to him, the gazelle was stolen from the Ka‘ba when the shrine was demolished by floods, a few years before Muḥammad’s first revelation. Al-Mas‘ūdī does not say who the thieves were.¹² Reference to a treasure (*kanz*) that was stolen from the Ka‘ba is also made by Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/768)¹³ and Ibn Sa‘d (d. 230/845).¹⁴

A good idea about the impact of the crime can be gained from a report claiming that the alliance called *ḥilf al-fuḍūl* came into being as a result of “the affair of the gazelle that was stolen from the Ka‘ba.”¹⁵ This alliance included the Banū Hāshim as well as several other clans of the Quraysh, and was established in the house of ‘Abdallāh b. Jud‘ān. It was designed to replace the former alliances of the Muṭayyabūn and the Aḥlāf, and to defend moral values and act against any manifestation of injustice in Mecca, irrespective of the social position of the instigators.¹⁶

The gazelle tradition gained access into chapters dealing with the law of cutting off one’s hand as punishment for theft.¹⁷ According to Ibn

⁶Ibn Ḥabīb, *Munammaq*, p. 70.

⁷Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ārif*, p. 55. See also Ḥalabī, *Sīra*, vol. 1, p. 35.

⁸Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. 4, pp. 414–15.

⁹*Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 401 (al-Ḥārith b. ‘Āmir b. Nawfal); vol. 12, p. 54 (Abū Ihāb b. ‘Azīz).

¹⁰Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamhara*, p. 232.

¹¹Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamhara*, p. 101.

¹²Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. 2, p. 278.

¹³Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 1, pp. 204–5.

¹⁴Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, p. 145. For the treasure of the Ka‘ba see further, M. Lecker, “Was Arabian idol worship declining on the eve of Islam?”, in *idem*, *People, tribes and society in Arabia around the time of Muhammad* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), no. III, pp. 12–13.

¹⁵Abū l-Faraj, *Aghānī*, vol. 16, p. 67.

¹⁶See, *EI*², s.v. “Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl” (Ch. Pellat).

¹⁷‘Askarī, *Awā‘il*, pp. 34–5.

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

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

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

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

¹⁸Ibn Ḥabīb, *Munammaq*, p. 421; *idem*, *Muḥabbar*, p. 328.

¹⁹Ḥassān, *Dīwān*, vol. 1, pp. 135, 370. See *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 213, where a similar address is made to Abū Ihāb. See also Ibn Ḥabīb, *Munammaq*, p. 69. Cf. Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. 12, p. 54.

²⁰The suggestion that the Qur’ānic curse of Abū Lahab alludes to the gazelle tradition is indirectly supported by the fact that Ḥassān b. Thābit, too, when addressing one of the other thieves of the gazelle, curses him with the expression *tabban li...* (Ḥassān, *Dīwān*, p. 135 line 5; p. 370, line 11).

been removed from the Ka‘ba, and Muḥammad himself was described as wiping out with a wet cloth pre-Islamic paintings (*taṣāwīr*) that were inside that shrine.²¹ A golden gazelle was no less intolerable, even if not in the Ka‘ba, and according to some traditions, the Prophet ordered his wife Umm Salama to get rid of one such golden gazelle which she possessed, and give it away as charity.²²

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

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

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²¹Ṭabarānī, *Kabīr*, vol. 24, no. 811; Haythamī, *Majma‘ al-zawā‘id*, vol. 5, pp. 176–7.

²²Ṭabarānī, *Kabīr*, vol. 23, no. 648; Haythamī, *Majma‘ al-zawā‘id*, vol. 5, p. 177. Some examples of studies of the Muslim context of iconoclasm are: Patricia Crone, “Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm,” *JSAI* 2 (1980): 59–95; G.R.D. King, “Islam, Iconoclasm, and the declaration of doctrine,” *BSOAS* 48 (1985): 267–77 (without due attention to Islamic iconoclastic traditions).

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