

# Magic in the *ḥadīths*

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## Abstract

The *ḥadīths* reporting on the incident where the Prophet was bewitched vary significantly in detail. An analysis of the details reveals varying attitudes towards magic in the Muslim community portrayed in the *ḥadīths*. The efficacy of magic was recognised but according to some *ḥadīths*, God's power was sufficient to counter the power of magic whereas according to other *ḥadīths*, protective spells were necessary tools to ensure that an act of witchcraft lost its power to do harm. In the *ḥadīths* magic is seen as a power distinct from God, whereas in the Qur'ān magic is a power that is ultimately subject to God's will.<sup>2</sup>

Keywords: Hadith, magic, spell, ritual, reponse to magic

## Introduction

In the study of religion magic has been a problematic issue, a category that is difficult to define. Especially the relationship between magic and religion has been controversial. From the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, some scholars refused to recognise magic as a meaningful category considering magic as a culturally biased Western concept. In their opinion, there was no distinction between religion and magic; both of them served similar functions, relied on supernatural forces and resorted to ritualistic behaviour.<sup>3</sup> The rejection of magic as a category proved to be untenable, and gradually it has become increasingly acceptable to define certain actions as magic. However, magic still remains a diffuse category, and some scholars refrain from providing universal definitions<sup>4</sup> whereas others favour open ended definitions.<sup>5</sup> Regarding magic's relationship to religion, Dorothy Hammond maintains that magic is not a category distinct from religion but a term subordinate to religion. Magic is a term that describes one type of ritual behaviour

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<sup>2</sup> If not otherwise indicated, all the *ḥadīths* quoted in this article have been found at the *ḥadīth* database at [www.al-islam.com](http://www.al-islam.com) (last retrieved in December 2012). The reference numbers and the titles of the chapters in the collection are quoted as given in the database. The English translations of the Qur'ānic verses quoted in this article are by Yūsuf 'Alī. The translation is available at [http://www.muslimaccess.com/quraan/translations/yusufali/yusuf\\_ali.htm](http://www.muslimaccess.com/quraan/translations/yusufali/yusuf_ali.htm) (last retrieved in December 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The various scholarly views on magic are discussed in more detail in Versnel 1991: 177-181.

<sup>4</sup> Bailey 2006: 23: "The goal should not be to revise and reassert grand theories and sweeping definitions of magic [...] Rather the goal should be to understand more completely how human societies and cultures have conceived, constructed, and reacted to magic."

<sup>5</sup> Versnel 1991: 186-187.

and can be contrasted to other rituals or rites, but not to religion as a category.<sup>6</sup> According to Hammond, magical practices express the belief that human beings have inherent power and will to influence the world around them. Therefore, within a religious system considering human beings as wholly dependent on powerful gods, magical practices would be viewed negatively.<sup>7</sup>

Also Jesper Sørensen defines magic as action and not a system of thought.<sup>8</sup> Magical actions are rituals that are performed outside the control of established religions. Magic is a competing source of efficient rituals, and the competition leads to a conflict between controlled authorised ritual actions that are based on established religious doctrine, and magical practices that are uncontrolled, representing an alternative ritual context. The competition forces the established religions to react, and Jesper Sørensen lists three general types of reaction: appropriation, rejection and segregation. When magical rituals are appropriated, they are included in the established ritual systems and provided with interpretations that are compatible with the religious doctrine. Segregation represents a state of truce where magic is kept outside of the scope of the established religion but accepted as a practice among certain marginal social groups. Rejection is expressed by actively combating magical practices, either by rejecting the efficacy of the magical rituals or by accepting their efficacy but condemning them evil and immoral. Forcing the established religions to react, magic becomes an innovative force that causes changes in the existing religions, or the magic rituals evolve into foundations of a new religion. Thus magic and religion are not two equal systems that oppose each other, but instead they have a dynamic relationship. Magic with its concrete goal-oriented rituals challenges the symbolic interpretations provided by the established religions forcing them to re-evaluate and even change their traditional ritual systems.<sup>9</sup>

Islam's doctrine recognises the existence of magic (*sihr*) and according to the Qur'ān, it was the devils and two angels – Hārūt and Mārūt – who taught people magic (Q 2:102). The verse places magic partly in the domain of the devils, but at the same time it is knowledge that is taught by angels who, by definition, are God's faithful servants.<sup>10</sup> The angels taught magic, but at the same time they warned people from blasphemy that would endanger their salvation. This indicates that it was permitted to learn about magic, but the danger lay in

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<sup>6</sup> Hammond 1970: 1355.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 1334, 1335.

<sup>8</sup> Sørensen 2007: 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 188-191.

<sup>10</sup> In later Islamic literature Hārūt and Mārūt became angels that had succumbed to temptations and subsequently suffered an eternal punishment (s.v. "Hārūt and Mārūt" (William M. Brinner) in: *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*).

using it and trusting powers other than God. The verse further underlines that the powers the magic users resorted to were ultimately subject to God's will: "But they could not thus harm anyone except by God's permission" (Q 2:102). If the verse is analysed on the basis of Jesper Sørensen's categories, the attitude expressed in it is a rejectionist one, i.e. the existence and power of magic is acknowledged, but it is condemned as evil and danger to salvation. However, at the same time, the verse can also be seen to promote accommodation, as the magic users and the power they wield are made dependent of God's will and power. Their evil actions will only take place if God allows it, and magic becomes a part of God's creation, like good deeds and bad deeds; like belief and unbelief. In this way magic is accommodated to Islam's doctrinal structure that is based on an omnipotent God.

The *ḥadīth* collections and Qur'ān commentaries contain reports that can be connected with magic. The most obvious one is the story about how the Prophet himself was bewitched. There are several variants of the story, and the aim of this article is to examine them and discuss the reaction patterns that they display.

### Bewitching of the Prophet

According to the *ḥadīth* reports, the Prophet was bewitched by a man and the witchcraft caused him physical suffering.<sup>11</sup> One of the shortest versions of the story is given by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) in his *al-Musnad*:

The Prophet was bewitched by a Jew. The Prophet suffered from it for days. Gabriel came to the Prophet and said: "A Jew has bewitched you. He tied a knot against you and placed it in such and such well. Send someone to fetch it." The Prophet sent 'Alī who retrieved the knot, brought it with him and disassembled it. The Prophet got up as if he had been released from shackles. The Jew was not told and the Prophet never met him.<sup>12</sup>

Other versions of the *ḥadīth* give further details: The caster of the spell is identified as Labīd ibn A'ṣam<sup>13</sup> but he is not always a Jew. According to one version he is an allied to the Jews and a hypocrite (*munāfiq*), i.e. a person converted to Islam but not a true believer.<sup>14</sup> Other versions are silent of his

<sup>11</sup> The *ḥadīth*s have been studied earlier by Lecker 1992 and Cook 2000. Lecker focuses on Labīd, the practitioner of magic, whereas Cook examines how the story is presented and discussed by Qur'ān commentators, representing various time periods.

<sup>12</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Awwal musnad al-kūfīyīn, nr. 18781. The transmitters of the *ḥadīth* are Abū Mu'āwiya from al-A'mash from Yazīd ibn Ḥayyān from Zayd ibn Arqam. The same *ḥadīth* is also quoted by al-Nasā'ī (d. 915) *al-Sunan*, Kitāb al-taḥrīm nr. 4080.

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the patronym is given as al-A'ṣam.

<sup>14</sup> al-Bukhārī, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṭibb, nr. 5432: "*ḥalīf lil-yahūd wa-kāna munāfiq.*"

religious identity but only mention that he belonged to Banū Zurayq. Regardless of his religious affiliation it is clear that he was hostile towards the Prophet, and Ibn Hishām (d. 828 or 833) in his biography of the Prophet recognised this and listed him among the enemies of the Prophet, only shortly referring to the bewitching itself: “Among the Jews of Banū Zurayq [there was] Labīd ibn A‘ṣam who bewitched the Prophet.”<sup>15</sup> Apart from naming the caster of the spell, Ibn Hishām also mentions the effects of the spell by stating that the enchantment “kept [the Prophet] away from his wives.”<sup>16</sup> This must mean that the witchcraft caused impotence, an effect that is referred to in the *ḥadīth* variants that use expressions such as “he used to think (*kāna yarā*) that he comes to his wives but he does not”<sup>17</sup> or less explicitly “he used to imagine (*kāna yukhayyalu ilayhi*) that he did something but did not do it.”<sup>18</sup> The latter expression is also quoted by al-Ṭabarī (d. 922) in his Qur’ān commentary,<sup>19</sup> but he also quotes a further variant that stresses the hallucinatory character of the ailment: it led the Prophet “deny his sense of vision (*ḥattā kāna [...] yankuru baṣara-hu*).”<sup>20</sup>

Some of the *ḥadīth* variants describe the “knot” used by Labīd in great detail: it consisted of a comb (*mushṭ*) and some hair (*mushāta*) or scrap of cloth (*mushāqa*).<sup>21</sup> Even though it is not explicitly mentioned, the comb and hairs must be those of the Prophet, as it is a usual practice in magic to use ingredients that are part of the intended victim or have been used by him. The scrap of cloth mentioned in some versions would then accordingly come from the Prophet’s clothing. The ingredients were packed in the spathe of a spadix of a male date palm (*juff ṭal‘at nakhlat dhakar*). As Michael Lecker has pointed out, the use of the spathe is a strong indication that the intention was indeed to harm the Prophet’s sexual ability. The spadix can be connected to male sexuality as it produces the pollen which is white and has a strong odour that lexicographers have described being similar to that of sperm.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the *ḥadīths* do not inform of the time the Prophet suffered from the

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Hishām 1375/1955: 1:515.

<sup>16</sup> Idem.

<sup>17</sup> al-Bukhārī, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṭibb, nr. 5432.

<sup>18</sup> The expression appears in several variants, e.g. al-Bukhārī, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṭibb, nr. 5430 and Ibn Māja, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṭibb, nr. 3545.

<sup>19</sup> al-Ṭabarī 1420/2000, 2:437, *ḥadīths* nr. 1692-1693. Cook 2000: 330, claims that al-Ṭabarī did not quote the bewitchment *ḥadīths* in his *tafsīr*. Cook focused on the commentaries on Sūra 113 and, indeed, al-Ṭabarī does not refer to the Prophet’s bewitchment in that context but he quotes the traditions when commenting the verse 2:102.

<sup>20</sup> al-Ṭabarī 1420/2000, 2:438, *ḥadīth* nr. 1694.

<sup>21</sup> al-Bukhārī, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṭibb, nr. 5430 and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Bāqī musnad al-anṣārī, nr. 23826 have comb and hair, whereas al-Bukhārī, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb badhī’ al-khalq, nr. 3095 and ibid. Kitāb al-ṭibb, nr. 5432 have comb and scrap of cloth.

<sup>22</sup> Lecker 1992: 563.

effects of the spell, but Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal quotes a variant where the Prophet's ailment is said to have lasted for six months.<sup>23</sup> In the above translated variant, also quoted by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, the ailment is said to have lasted for several days, and Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 762), an early Qur'ān commentator, agrees with the short time span stating that the witchcraft spread through the Prophet, and its effect intensified for three days until the Prophet became very ill.<sup>24</sup> The Prophet prays and receives a vision, where he is advised how to counter the spell and be relieved of its effects. In the above translated version, angel Gabriel appears to him and tells the Prophet what to do, but in most variants the Prophet has a dream vision of two unidentified men or angels who talk to each other about his condition. The Prophet listens to the conversation and learns about the spell and its caster. He also learns that the magical object is hidden in a well. After waking up, the Prophet acts upon the information that he had been given. In some variants the Prophet sends 'Alī<sup>25</sup> or some unidentified persons<sup>26</sup> to the well to retrieve the object, but in most variants he goes there himself, either alone or together with some of his companions. In these latter variants the Prophet returns from the well and goes to 'Ā'isha to tell her about what he saw and did at the well.

In the variants, the Prophet's exchange with 'Ā'isha falls into three main groups, where the Prophet's words remain the same but 'Ā'isha's questions or words to him vary. First the Prophet describes to 'Ā'isha what he saw when he arrived: the water of the well was red like diluted henna, and the palms were like heads of devils. The place was clearly tainted by evil: the water was murky – maybe red or green – and the palm trees are reminiscent of the Zaqqūm tree of Hell that “springs out of the bottom of Hell-Fire, the shoots of its fruit-stalks are like the heads of devils” (Qur'ān 37:64-65).<sup>27</sup> 'Ā'isha then asks the Prophet what he did. In some of the variants the question is phrased: “Did you take it out (*istakhrajta-hu*)?” or “Why did you not take it out (*a-fa-lā istakhrajta-hu / fa-hal-lā akhrajta-hu*)?”<sup>28</sup> In another set of *ḥadīths*, the verb 'Ā'isha uses is *aḥraqa*, ‘to burn’: “Why did you not burn it (*a-fa-lā aḥraqta-hu*)?”<sup>29</sup> or “Burn it (*iḥriq-hu*)!”<sup>30</sup> In yet another set of variants, it is explicitly mentioned that the charm was

<sup>23</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Bāqī musnad al-aṅṣārī, nr. 23826.

<sup>24</sup> Muqātil ibn Sulaymān 1423: 4:933. Cook 2000: 325 provides a shortened version of the story in English translation.

<sup>25</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Awwal musnad al-kūffyīn, nr. 18781.

<sup>26</sup> al-Nasā'ī, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb al-taḥrīm, nr. 4080.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī 1418/1997: 10:282-283 (Kitāb al-ṭibb), comments on the colour of the water and compares the palms to Zaqqūm.

<sup>28</sup> al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb badhī' al-khalq, nr. 3095; *ibid.* Kitāb al-ṭibb, nr. 5430; *ibid.* Kitāb al-da'wāt, nr. 6028.

<sup>29</sup> al-Muslim, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-salām, nr. 2189. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Bāqī musnad al-aṅṣārī, nr. 23779.

<sup>30</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Bāqī musnad al-aṅṣārī, nr. 23827.

retrieved from the well, and in these *ḥadīths* ‘Ā’isha’s question deals with a counter spell (*nushra*): “Why did you not make a counter spell?”<sup>31</sup> The formulation is either: *a-fa-lā ay tanashsharta* or *fa-hal-lā ta’nī tanashsharta*, where an explanatory *ay* ‘or’ or *ta’nī* ‘she means’ is placed between the interrogatory expression *a-fa-lā* and the verb.

Ibn Ḥajar explains the explanatory words within ‘Ā’isha’s lines as inclusions that are meant to underline the fact that the verb used by the transmitters of the *ḥadīth* may not have been exactly the one that was used by ‘Ā’isha, but the question was indeed about a counter spell (*nushra*). However, Ibn Ḥajar also notes that the verb *tanashshara* may not only be interpreted as a derivative of the noun *al-nushra* ‘spell,’ but also from the noun *al-nashr* that means unfolding or publication. Thus, in Ibn Ḥajar’s interpretation, ‘Ā’isha’s question would not relate to a spell but, instead, have the same meaning as *a-fa-lā akhrajta-hu* “Why did you not take it out?”<sup>32</sup> The problem with accepting Ibn Ḥajar’s alternative interpretation is that in the *ḥadīth* variants where the verb *tanashsharta* appears, the charm has already been retrieved from the well before ‘Ā’isha asks her question. This indicates that she expected some further action, separate from the retrieval, to ensure that the charm would become harmless. She could have inquired about using a counter spell, as in my translation above, or she may have meant that the charm should be destroyed. If the verb *tanashsharta* is used in the sense of ‘unfolding,’ ‘Ā’isha’s question could be translated: “Why did you not break it up?”<sup>33</sup>

The Prophet’s answer in all the variants remains the same: “God, He is powerful and great, has already cured me and I did not want to expose people to the evil in it.” Finally, in all of these variants, the Prophet orders the well to be covered.

### Magic and God’s power

It is obvious that the community as portrayed in these *ḥadīths* believed in the existence and efficacy of magic. The reports tell that the spell caster was actually considered powerful enough to cause physical harm. On the outset, this seems to limit the power of the Prophet’s God who was not able to prevent the effect of magic, but is the power of magic equal to the power of God? The various reports offer different answers to the question. They do it by including a dialogue between ‘Ā’isha and the Prophet. The Prophet’s words that identify God as the one who

<sup>31</sup> al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-ṭibb, nr. 5432; ibid. Kitāb al-adab, nr. 5716.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī 1418/1997: 10:288 (Kitāb al-ṭibb).

<sup>33</sup> In Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Bāqī musnad al-anṣārī, nr. 23826. The verb is *intashara*, ‘to unfold, to scatter.’

cured his ailment, are given slightly different meanings depending on the questions posed by ‘Ā’isha. In the variants where ‘Ā’isha asks whether the Prophet took the magic object out of the well, the Prophet’s negative answer and his reference to God as the healer indicate that God’s power is stronger than the magic influence. It was not necessary to take the object out of the well or destroy it, because the power of the magic had been broken by God. However, the magic is not rejected as ineffective: the story itself illustrates its efficiency on the physical wellbeing of the Prophet. In addition, even though God’s power had rendered the charm ineffective, some residue of power seems to have lingered on the charm, because the Prophet ordered the well – and the charm – covered up.

The variants where ‘Ā’isha inquires whether the Prophet had burned the charm, or where she actually requests him to burn it, reflect an attitude where the magic object is seen to retain power. It may well be that the Prophet has been cured by God, but it is still safest to destroy the object. The Prophet refuses to burn the object underlining that it had been sufficient to retrieve the object from the well. That action together with God’s healing broke the power of magic. The third variant with ‘Ā’isha asking whether the Prophet had made a counter spell against the charm retrieved from the well, adds a further nuance by suggesting that magic has to be countered by magic. Here the Prophet’s negative answer is used to reject the notion that God’s power should be supplemented by resorting to magic, i.e. to powers other than God.

### Magic countered with magic

In the above discussed long version of the story, God’s power alone is sufficient to heal the Prophet and no human effort is needed: no counter spell is needed nor is it necessary to destroy the charm. This is underlined by the Prophet’s words: “God has already cured me.” In the beginning of the article, I gave an English translation of a short version recorded in Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal’s *Musnad*. The short version differs significantly from the long version of the story. The major difference is that the Prophet’s statement – “God has already cured me” – is absent and, instead, the Prophet’s healing is closely tied to the breaking of the magic charm: “[‘Alī] retrieved the knot, brought it with him and disassembled it. The Prophet got up as if he had been released from shackles.” It is obvious that the magic charm remained powerful and human action was needed to cancel its power. It was only when the charm was broken that its harmful effect disappeared and the Prophet was healed. God’s intervention seems to restrict itself to sending Gabriel to guide the Prophet to proper action.

The early Qur’ān commentator Muqātil ibn Sulaymān tells in his *Tafsīr* a

variation of the story that combines many of the details in the above discussed long version and the short report recorded by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. The details of the dream vision as reported in the long version are all there, whereas in keeping with Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's short version, it is 'Alī who is sent to the well to retrieve the object. In Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's version the magic charm is called "a knot" but no further details are given. According to Muqātil ibn Sulaymān the charm did not consist of the Prophet's comb and hair but was instead a string with eleven knots. The knotted string was placed in the husk or spathe (*qishr / juff*)<sup>34</sup> of a spadix of a palm and the package hidden in the well. The angels in the Prophet's dream vision instructed him to dry the well, retrieve the husk and burn it. After that the Prophet had to recite the two last Sūras of the Qur'ān, the so called *al-Mu'awwidhatān*, 'the Two Protectors.' Together, the Sūras contain eleven verses and the recital of each verse broke a knot. When the Prophet had broken all the eleven knots, he was free of the witchcraft.<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, to counter the magic tied in the knotted string a mere physical burning would not have sufficed, but stronger action was required. In the story, the reciting of the two Sūras becomes a counter spell that finally voids the effect of the charm, and the Prophet is healed. According to Jesper Sørensen, any ritual that is performed in order to influence the physical world involves magical agency. By reciting the verses, the Prophet performed a ritual which was expected to expel the physical symptoms that he experienced, and to make him well. The power which the Prophet resorted to, was God and thus his action was acceptable within the doctrinal frame of Islam. Jesper Sørensen further describes the magic action as a process of transferring sacred power to a ritual space, where the profane and sacred blend to make the ritual effective. Magical agency is the element that transfers the sacred power to the ritual space.<sup>36</sup> When the Prophet performed the ritual, his intentional act of reciting became the magical agency that blended the sacred into the profane. The verses represent God's words and by reciting them in the context of the ritual, the Prophet tapped into the power of God and blended it into his recitation. In this way, God's power is harnessed to counter the magic power tied in the knots.

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<sup>34</sup> Both words appear in Muqātil's version of the story: *juff ṭal'a*, *qishr ṭal'a*.

<sup>35</sup> Muqātil ibn Sulaymān 1423: 4:933. Muqātil does not present any chain of transmitters to his version of the story.

<sup>36</sup> Sørensen 2007: 85-87 illustrates the theory by showing how in the Catholic ritual of Eucharist, the mythic actions and real world actions of the priest come together and blend in the ritual space. The magical agency needed for reaching the goal of the ritual is invested in the priest.

### Reaction patterns

When the *ḥadīth* variants are analysed using Jesper Sørensen's categories of responses to magic, they seem to contain characteristics of two types of response, i.e. segregation and rejection. The variants that identify the caster of the spell as a Jew, an ally to the Jews or a hypocrite, are in fact confining magic practices to a particular group, namely enemies of Islam and the Prophet. Thus they define magic to be a custom of a marginal group and regard it as a practice of non-Muslims or hypocrites who may follow some of the outer requirements of religion, but have not truly internalised the faith.

The portrayal of magic as a non-Muslim practice is further underlined in the variants where the Prophet refuses to retrieve the charm or destroy it, but instead points out to 'Ā'isha that God is the one who has the true power: "God has already cured me." The reaction can be identified as that of segregation which is the situation of truce between the established religion, here nascent Islam, and the practitioners of magic, the "others." The truce like situation is further illustrated by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's short variant, where it is specifically mentioned that the Prophet never confronted the spell caster or punished him in any way: "The Jew was not told and the Prophet never met him." As is befitting of segregation, the Prophet allowed the Jew and other spell casters to keep their magic practices, but by refusing to cast a counter spell he made it clear that magic is not a practice that Muslims should resort to.

In most of the variants magic is characterised as evil: the descriptions of the well and its surroundings underline the wrongness caused by the charm. The connection between magic and evil is typical of the rejection of magic. Rejection does not necessarily mean that magic is denounced as ineffective; it may also mean that the power of magic is recognised but condemned as evil.

The acceptance of the efficacy of magic makes people feel exposed to it, which creates a need of protection against the power of magic. Jesper Sørensen sees this need of protection as the moment where magic comes to exert influence on the established religion. The acceptance of magic's inherent power leads to a development of new rituals, or changes existing rituals from symbolic to more goal-oriented actions.<sup>37</sup> This development is illustrated by Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's story, where the reciting of *al-Mu'awwidhatān* becomes a ritual that effectively dispels magic.

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<sup>37</sup> Sørensen 2007: 190.

## Conclusion

*Ḥadīths* are not necessarily authentic reports of historical events which took place in the Prophet's time; rather they reflect issues that were discussed by the Muslim community in the first two centuries of Islam. The *ḥadīths* telling about the bewitching of the Prophet are not evidence that the incident actually took place. The story is preserved in a number of variants indicating its wide dispersal and popularity. Obviously magic was a phenomenon known to the Muslim community, and the *ḥadīth* variants express the different ways that the community dealt with the issue. The above discussed variants portray magic as an activity of the enemies of the Prophet and Islam. In some of the variants, God intervenes with His healing power countering the effect of the spell. In other variants, the Prophet has to use God's words as a strong spell to counter the magic.

In the Qur'ān verse on the origins of magic, the believers are warned against the danger of blasphemy inherent in the magical practices: resorting to powers other than God endangers the individual's soul and salvation. Similar danger of eternal punishment is reflected in the *ḥadīth* variants where it is the enemies of the Prophet and not the true believers who resort to magic. Further, the Qur'ān verse places magic within the power of God. As bad actions in general, also magic is dependent of God's will. In this regard, the *ḥadīth* variants are less clear. In the stories, God's power ends up stronger than the evil magic, but magic remains distinct from God's power.

The idea of magic being subject to God's power is rather abstract and belongs to the established religion's tendency to interpret rituals symbolically rather than considering them goal oriented effective tools. For example al-Dhahabī (d. 1348) considered it permissible for a Muslim to wear protective amulets or use incantations as long as the person did not believe in the power of the amulet or the incantation itself.<sup>38</sup> He should rather consider them as means of seeking refuge in God and remember that ultimately everything depended on His will.

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<sup>38</sup> al-Dhahabī s.a.: 199.

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