

# Seeking Refuge from Evil: The Power and Portent of the Closing Chapters of the Qur'an

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The two closing chapters of the Qur'an, suras 113 and 114, are referred to in Arabic and in Arabic-Islamic literature as *al-mu'awwidhatān* ('the two suras of taking refuge from evil', or literally, 'the two protecting ones').<sup>1</sup> They are so called because of the use of the verb *'ādhā* (from the root *'-w-dh*, implying protection and refuge)<sup>2</sup> in the formula with which both suras begin, namely '*qul a'ūdhu bi-rabbi al- ... min ...*' (Say/Repeat: I seek refuge with the Lord of ... from/against ...).<sup>3</sup> These two consecutive suras are recited in order to dispel any and all forms of evil: the work of the devil (*shayṭān*), mischievous spirits (*jinn*, *'ifrīt* and the like), black magic (*sihr*), the evil eye (*'ayn*), and so on.<sup>4</sup> This use has a Prophetic precedent. The *Mu'awwidhatān* are said to have been revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad in order to counteract a spell laid on him:<sup>5</sup> this account is elaborated in Qur'anic exegesis,<sup>6</sup> and forms part of the basis of at least one objection by an early Qur'an reader to the inclusion of the *Mu'awwidhatān* as part of the final Qur'anic codex.<sup>7</sup>

The Prophet Muḥammad is said to have used numerous formulae to protect himself, his family, his companions and his community from mischief before suras 113 and 114 were revealed, but thereafter used only them. In one account, he enjoins his fellow Muslims as follows: 'Recite [Sura 113], for you are not able to recite any other sura which is as loved and as speedily accepted by God as this one'.<sup>8</sup> In another account he refers to both Sura 113 and Sura 114 as unparalleled in beauty and excellence.<sup>9</sup> He was evidently not only aware of their efficacy but also very struck by their rhythmic beauty.

## II

In spite of the fact that they are paired in revelation, paired together at the end of the Qur'anic text, paired in ritual recitation, paired in invocation, and *appear* to be similarly structured, I should like to argue that suras 113 and 114 are in actuality quite different, certainly more different than is acknowledged. Although they clearly can and do function as a pair, I find the differences between the two suras as striking as the similarities. This is true linguistically as well as stylistically.

**Sura 113: 'The Dawn' (*al-Falaq*)**

Repeat: 'I seek refuge with the Lord of dawn,  
 from the evil of His Creation,  
 from the evil of nightgloom when it blots,  
 from the evil of sorceresses, spitting on knots,  
 and from the evil of the envier when he plots.'

**Sura 114: 'Humanity' (*al-Nās*)**

Repeat: 'I seek refuge with the Lord of humanity,  
 the King of humanity,  
 the God of humanity,  
 from the evil of the Whisperer, stealthily  
 whispering in the hearts of humanity,  
 of jinn and humanity.'

In Sura 113, rhyming prose (*sajʿ*) is used. Final (i.e. pausal) phrases end with the following words and sounds (of which an approximation has been attempted in the English translations):

— <i>falaq</i>	— dawn
— <i>khalaq</i>	— Creation
— <i>waqab</i>	— blots
— <i>ʿuqad</i>	— knots
— <i>ḥasad</i>	— plots

Note the sequence of final sounds —*aq*; —*aq*; —*ab*; —*ad*; —*ad* in the Arabic, and the assonant appearance of the *q*-root in the first four of the five end-words.

In Sura 114, on the other hand, it is not a question of end-rhyme, but of the use of the very *same* rhyme word five out of six times, or rather – since the one exception incorporates that rhyme word – the use of the same rhyme throughout:

— <i>nās</i>	— humanity
— <i>nās</i>	— humanity
— <i>nās</i>	— humanity
— <i>khannās</i>	— stealthily
— <i>nās</i>	— humanity
— <i>nās</i>	— humanity

The level of rhyme is even higher if we count the word *waswās* which occurs in the middle of line four.

In Sura 113, the phrase 'from the evil of' occurs four times, and lines three and five are parallel:

*from the evil of His Creation,  
from the evil of nightgloom when it blots,  
from the evil of sorceresses, spitting on knots,  
and from the evil of the envier when he plots.*

In Sura 114, however, the 'corresponding' lines are not similar; the only parallelism is that of the first three short phrases characterising God:

the Lord of humanity,  
the King of humanity,  
the God of humanity.

In Sura 113, different kinds of evil are described and the focus is therefore not on God, but on the evil that His creation hides.<sup>10</sup> In Sura 114, God is described in order to put into relief the Whispering Satan.

### III

The explanation for the difference in the two suras lies, therefore, in their different elaborations: Sura 113 may be said to be about Evil, and Sura 114 may be said to be about the Devil. That the Devil, rather than Evil, is very much the focus of Sura 114 is underscored in his ubiquitousness as conveyed by the subtle grammatical difficulty of the closing line:

<i>al-ladhī yuwaswisu fī ṣudūri'l-nās</i>	whispering in the hearts of humanity,
<i>min al-jinnati wa'l-nās</i>	of jinn and humanity.

The difficulty lies in the interpretation of *min* in the passage. As Ibn al-Jawzī notes:<sup>11</sup>

There are two views about the meaning of this verse: One of them is 'yuwaswisu fī ṣudūri'l-nāsi jinnatihim wa nāsihim' wherein the *jinn* are here effectively called *nās*, just as they are so called when the Almighty says 'ya'ūdḥūna bi-rijālin min al-jinn' [72:6] ... According to this view the Whisperer whispers to *jinn* just as he whispers to humankind. The second view is that the Whisperer, 'who whispers in the hearts of humanity', is himself '*min al-jinnati*', who are [a kind] of *jinn*. The meaning [of the verse] is: 'from the evil of the Whisperer who is one of the *jinn*'. Then, the Almighty's use of '*wa'l-nās*' and '*al-waswās*' is to be regarded as conjoined [in this view], yielding the meaning: 'from the evil of the Whisperer, and the evil of humanity', as if He is commanding a seeking of refuge from *jinn* and humanity.

The Devil is no stranger to the reader or reciter of the Qur'an. The description of him as an unsavoury intimator in Sura 114 simply echoes what has come before in the revelation and in the text. In one of the Qur'an's most famous passages (4:117–20), he is described as follows:

It is but an obstinate Satan they invoke,  
 Condemned by God, who then spoke:  
 'I shall take from your worshippers my allotted stake,  
 I shall not fail to mislead them and give them false hope  
 I shall order, and they shall obey and slit the ears of beasts.  
 I shall order and they shall alter God's very creation.

If in Sura 114 reference is made to Satan's whispering, including an allusion to his leading astray of Adam and Eve through the use of the root *w-s-w-s* (see Q. 20:120), it is from passages such as the one quoted above that we get an explicit statement, in Satan's words, of his mischief. Sura 114 is a characterising of the insinuations of Satan by God and in turn by the righteous uttering the call for protection; 4:117–20 on the other hand, details the kind of evil in which Satan indulges.

Now, if the Devil – as the disobedient Iblīs who refuses to bow to Adam (2:34, 7:11, 15:30–2, 17:61, 18:50, 20:116, 38:73–5), as the Accursed Satan (3:36, 15:17, 15:34, 16:98, 38:77, 81:25), as the Great Deceiver (2:36), and in other guises – has made many earlier appearances in the Qur'an, evil, on the other hand, is a concept that has not so far been characterised at all. Indeed, before its use in Sura 113, the word for evil, *sharr*, occurs only 24 times in the Qur'an and in all instances refers to things or matters that are 'bad', not to things that are 'evil' (e.g. in 3:180 the phrase *bal huwa sharrun lahum* – 'but, rather, it is bad [i.e. worse] for them').<sup>12</sup>

This lexical infrequency is mirrored by another lexical peculiarity: five words – *falaq* (dawn), *ghāsiq* (nightgloom), *waqab* (blots), *naffāthāt* (whispering sorceresses) and *'uqad* (talismanic knots) – appear in the Qur'an *only* in Sura 113. By contrast, Sura 114 has only *one* word that appears in it and nowhere else in the Qur'an, namely *khannās* (stealth[il]y). This is another of the many ways in which the reader or reciter of the Qur'an can be sensitised to the differences between the suras, rather than the similarities.

#### IV

In order to characterise, or perhaps more accurately, to synthesise evil, Sura 113 appeals to four dimensions which I (heuristically) term the Natural, the Unnatural, the Supernatural, and the Mortal.

Natural Evil is 'the evil of His Creation', that is, things God has created in Nature that

can bring evil. The authoritative (and widely used) commentary known as the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* glosses this as malefic animals, such as snakes and the like.<sup>13</sup>

I term 'the evil of nightgloom when it blots' Unnatural Evil, because it is presumably such a night which conceals the forces of darkness.

'The evil of sorceresses, spitting on knots' is self-evidently Supernatural Evil. These sorceresses tied knots in cord or rope and then whispered incantation and imprecation upon them. Certain commentators actually identify these sorceresses, naming among others the daughters of a certain Labīd; this is the very same man whose casting of a spell on the Prophet Muḥammad is said to have occasioned the revelation of suras 113 and 114.<sup>14</sup> Labīd and his daughters are reported to have tied eleven knots in a cord which they hid in a well. The cord was retrieved (by °Alī in some accounts) and they came undone, one by one, as each successive verse was recited, five in Sura 113, and six in Sura 114.

Mortal Evil is 'the evil of the envier when he plots', the most widespread of all evils, as it is the one that can be harboured, practised or done by quite ordinary mortals, the reply to which is, rather nicely, the very recitation of suras 113 and 114. Another riposte to Mortal Evil is abiding by one of Islam's defining exhortations: to want for one's peers what one wants for oneself. Or, to invoke a Qur'anic phrase (e.g. 3:110) recited in every Friday sermon: to enjoin good, and to shun evil.

## V

The similarities between suras 113 and 114 are undeniable. They both begin with similar formulae; those formulae make of them both invocations to be pronounced for the Almighty's protection from evil that may befall the righteous and God-fearing; the opening words make of them both passages enjoined by God; they are both short; they are referred to in reports of the Prophet Muḥammad as a pair; they are described in the exegetical literature as having been revealed together; they are used liturgically as a pair; and they do, after all, sit next to one another in both recitation and collation. Why argue then for differences between them?

The answer is that the similarities are largely historical and structural, for want of a better word. Lexically and thematically, stylistically one might say, the differences are quite striking: the use of *saj*<sup>c</sup> in Sura 113 contrasted with the use of mono end-rhyme in Sura 114; the repetition of one set of phrases in Sura 113 contrasted with the repetition of a different set in Sura 114; the emphasis on evil in Sura 113 contrasted with an emphasis on the Devil in Sura 114; five *āyāt* in Sura 113 contrasted with six *āyāt* in Sura 114; and, perhaps most interesting of all, the inclusion of so many hapax legomena in Sura 113 and of only one in Sura 114.

Why the suras differ (or, for that matter, why they resemble each other) is a matter of speculation. But I should like to propose a possible explanation for the hapax legomena: hapax legomena are more frequent in Qur'anic passages where the thing described is either dreadful (e.g. 'humaza' in Q. 104:1) or wondrous (e.g. several words in Sura 76) in order to make the description more memorable. Sura 113 does indeed describe terrible and dreadful phenomena – the night when it blots out all light; the incantations of sorceresses; and envy – all, I would argue, in memorable language. Sura 114 describes God and restricts the hapax legomenon to a characterisation of another dreadful phenomenon, Satan.

All in all, I would argue that the beauty, to reprise the Prophet Muḥammad's characterisation, of suras 113 and 114, resides not only in the apparent symmetry that the pair create but also in the differences which that pairing hides.

#### NOTES

\* My thanks to Bābā Nūr Muḥammad Qādirī for guidance. Translations from the Qur'an are mine.

1 The plural of *al-mu'awwidh*, viz. *al-mu'awwidhāt*, is also used when reference is being made to the last *three* suras of the Qur'an, i.e. with the addition of Sura 112, *al-Ikhlāṣ* (Sincerity [of Faith]): see e.g. Bukhārī, *al-Sahīḥ*, 'da'awāt,' ch. 12. However, Sura 112 is not *sensu stricto* a *mu'awwidh* as it does not open with 'qul a'ūdhu' but only with 'qul'. Nevertheless, the Prophet Muḥammad is said to have recited all three suras before going to sleep, thus ensuring that they would all be regarded as able to offer protection – even if Sura 112 does not employ a *‘-w-dh* root verb or involve any kind of request for protection (*isti'ādha*). In [Shaykh Hakim] Moinuddin Chishti, *The Book of Sufi Healing*, rev. ed. (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1991), the Appendix (II) entitled 'Some Useful Short Sūrah's of the Holy Qur'ān' (pp. 167–70), consists solely of suras 112, 113 and 114; nonetheless, in ritual recitation suras 113 and 114 are often preceded by suras 109 and 112. Suras 109, 112, 113 and 114 all begin with the word *qul*, literally 'Say!'. Because they begin with *qul*, they are sometimes collectively referred to as 'the four Quls', thus expanding the *Mu'awwidhatān* pair, and the *Mu'awwidhāt* trio, into a tetrad. As a tetrad, they are recited by children at bedtime (and upon waking) just as the Prophet is reported to have done (see for instance the prescriptive entry in the following children's book: Ahmad von Denffer, *A Day with the Prophet* [Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1979], p. 80, where a *ḥadīth* reported by Abū Dāwūd and Tirmidhī is quoted as follows: 'Abdullāh b. Khubaib said that Allah's Messenger said to him: "Read 'Qul huwa llāhu aḥad' [Sura 112], and the last two chapters [suras 113 and 114] (of the Qur'ān) morning and evening three times. This is sufficient for you in all respects"; recited as part of the ritual invocation over the dead before they are to be buried; and often to be found printed or embroidered together on wall hangings. In all cases, the idea is to ward off the evils and mischief that may befall the innocent, the unwary, the vulnerable and the unprotected.

2 This root is used seventeen times in the Qur'an.

3 Before ritual recitation of the Qur'an, or upon learning about or discovering something unholy, the phrase *a'ūdhu bi-llahi min al-shayṭān al-rajīm* (I seek refuge with God from the accursed Satan) is pronounced. This formula (the use of which is elicited at 16:98), which also uses the verb *‘ādha*, is commonly referred to as the *ta'awwudh*. *Ta'wīdh* (Urdu, *tāvīz*), on the

other hand, is the word used to describe a charm or amulet bearing a Qur'anic inscription (letters, words, phrases, as well as the *asmā'*, names [i.e. attributes] of God), worn to ward off evil. See e.g. Chishti, *The Book of Sufi Healing*, pp. 131–40; and materials in the *al-ṭibb al-nabawī* (Medicine of the Prophet) genre. A comprehensive selection may be found for instance at: <www.islamicmedicine.org/prophet.html>

4 On the use of the Mu'awwidhatān to avert the evil eye in particular, see e.g. E.W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: John Murray, 1899), p. 259.

5 The *mu'awwidhatān* are also held to be either Meccan or Medianan. Cf. art. 'al-Mu'awwidhatāni' in *EL*<sup>2</sup>, vol. 7, pp. 269–70.

6 See e.g. Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an haqā'iq al-tanzīl wa 'uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta'wīl*, 4 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, n.d.), vol. 4, pp. 243 ff.; Hillī and Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1987), p. 604, lines 22–5; Suyūṭī, *Kitāb Lubāb al-nuqūl fī asbāb al-nuzūl* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1987), p. 636.

7 For the codex of Ibn Mas'ūd, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. R. Tajaddod (Tehran: Marvi Offset Printing, 1971), p. 29 [=The *Fihrist of al-Nadīm*, trans. B. Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), vol. 1, p. 57]; for details, see A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937), pp. 20–113; and J.C. Vadet, art. 'Ibn Mas'ūd' in *EL*<sup>2</sup> vol. 3, pp. 873–5.

8 Jazarī, *al-Hisn al-ḥasīn*, English trans. M.R. Hathurani (Karachi: Darul Isha'at, 1993), p. 271.

9 Jazarī, *al-Hisn al-ḥasīn*, p. 270. This characterisation is a far cry from Nöldeke's (emphasis mine): 'To fix the date of these two Suras (cxiii and cxiv) is a most difficult task. *This is due to the grotesqueness of the style adopted in such superstitious productions*, which allow of no safe conclusion', cited in E.M. Wherry, *A Comprehensive Commentary of the Qur'ān, comprising Sale's Translation and Preliminary Discourse ...*, 4 vols (London: Trubner & Co, 1886), vol. 4, p. 296.

10 For an example of the argument that it is unreasonable that God is asking people to seek protection with Him from 'His' evil, and consequently from Him, see Daniel Gimaret, *Une Lecture Mu'tazilite du Coran: Le Tafsīr d'Abū 'Alī al-Djubbā'ī (m. 303/915) Partiellement Reconstitué à partir de Ses Citateurs* (Louvain: Peeters, 1994), s.v. 'surah al-Falaq'.

11 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr*, 8 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1994), vol. 8, p. 348.

12 By contrast, the word *khayr*, 'good', appears 176 times.

13 Hillī and Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, p. 604. For interesting glosses on the various kinds of *sharr*, see e.g. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, vol. 8, pp. 344–6.

14 See the accounts in e.g. Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, 20 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1967), vol. 20, pp. 253–4; Suyūṭī, *Kitāb lubāb al-nuqūl*, pp. 635–6.