THE KORAN AS MAGIC

“This is the honorable Koran, written in the Preserved Book: let none touch it but the purified, it is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds.” Sura 56:76-79.

The Shi’ite Mohammedans treat their holy book with great respect. It is the custom to kiss it when taking it into the hands. They believe that the original came down from heaven and that it is the word of God. ¹ A person should not touch this book until he has performed his ceremonial ablutions. Some will not touch it then unless they have previously been to the bath. It should not be taken into any unclean place, and it is forbidden to take it where there is wine or gambling. It is said to have seventy thousand hidden meanings, which are known only to the Mahdi, or hidden Imam. It is claimed that it cannot be translated and that only God and the Imams know how to interpret it.

Like the sacred books of many religions, the Koran is believed to possess supernatural power, and it is used in various occult practices, which some claim the mullahs have instituted in order to hold their people in a state of superstition and ignorance, and to make use of their fears as a means to their own pecuniary ends. Whether or not the mullahs originated these practices, they have certainly in many cases encouraged the people to adhere to them. And the result is that among the masses there is probably more faith in the magical uses of the book than there is understanding of its contents.

The accepted forms of Koranic magic are: the “cutting the Koran” (istikhára); divination (fál); prayers, or portions written out and used as talismans; reading the

¹ Sura 85:21, 22.
The famous verse used against the evil-eye is in the center, (68:51-52); the Throne or kūrsī verse (2:256) is on the margins; the four declarations, chahār qawwūl (suras 109, 112, 113, and 114) are in the marginal corners and inside circles; and 'Ali is pictured with his sword, dhu'l-faqār, at the top.
Koran for magical results; and other special uses of the book itself.

The “cutting the Koran”, or istikhāra, is used to determine whether it is expedient to do a thing. An individual who is anxious about some matter of business, or about his health, when at a loss to know what to do, gets a Mulla or some one who has read a bit of the Koran to perform for him the istikhāra. Old women who know some of the Arabic characters will do most of this work for women and villagers, but in the towns and cities there are always professional “readers” available. One of these men will read the first sura, then pray in Arabic, “God, thou knowest what is hidden!” He will then repeat a part of sura 6:59; “And with Him are the keys of the secret things; none knoweth them but He; He knoweth whatever is on the land and in the sea”. Then he will give the salutation to Mohammed and his household, salalahu ‘alaihi wa ‘ala ahlihi wa sallam. “Prayer and peace be unto him and his people and his family”. He will close his eyes, turn his face upwards and utter the name Allah, while he draws his fingers from the back of the book up among its pages. He then opens where the fingers enter and reads the first sentence or part of a sentence on the page. From the character of the words, he gives his inquirer an answer as to the outcome of the matter he is contemplating.

Some Korans are especially prepared for this purpose and have their pages marked with letters which indicate what the answer is to be. Some have only three letters, kh for khair, meaning good; sh for shar, meaning bad or unfavorable; and mím for miána, signifying medium. Other copies have more details. Nine letters and combinations indicate very good, good, fair, medium, not good and bad. These signs simplify the reader’s task and relieve him of the responsibility for an unfavorable interpretation.

People resort to istikhāra most frequently in regard to matters of health and concerning medical or surgical treatment. They use it also in connection with business undertakings, [257] or in considering whether to accept employment, or form partnerships or make journeys. Nowadays it is commonly used to determine whether the particular automobile in which the journey is to be made is worthy.
As an example of its use in matters of health, a person goes to see a doctor and his case is diagnosed as one needing surgical treatment. He is so advised and arrangements are made for him to enter the hospital. But he excuses himself for the present, saying that he must go home and inform his family, and that he will return on the morrow. He does not return. Days, or maybe weeks, later he appears, ready for the operation. His story is that the istikhāra repeatedly came out against the operation and that he could not come until he had obtained a favorable result. Sometimes the patient will take one unfavorable cutting of the book as final and the hospital will not see him again.

In the Miftáh al-Jannán, pages 361-390 are devoted to detailed directions for performing the istikhāra with the Koran, as advised by the Imam Ja’far Şádík.

Divination, or fál, with the Koran is similar to the istikhāra, but goes a step farther. It determines not only whether it is expedient to do a thing, but it reveals the whole character and progress of the proposed undertaking. Some of the more progressive people say that the fál is now very little used, but careful inquiry shows that it has diminished only slightly in its popularity. The diviner opens the Koran in the same way as for the istihkára, but instead of reading the first words or statement on the page, he turns to the beginning of the passage. If it seems good it means that the beginning of the undertaking will be auspicious. He then turns to the end of the passage to learn what the final outcome will be, and reads where he first opened to ascertain the character of the matter while in progress. The meanings are usually sufficiently ambiguous to be construed to fit any and every situation.

The use of particular verses of the Koran as written prayers and talismans is exceedingly common. There is a tradition that the Imam Husain wore suras 113 and 114 about his neck as a talisman. Many people make their living as professional “prayer writers”. Books of instruction in the “science” are abundant and easily obtained.² They give all the necessary directions as to what verses

² As, for example, the Majma’ al-Dawát and the Jam‘ al-Dawát.
are efficacious and how they are to be prepared to meet different situations. Korans with marginal notes on the value of the verses opposite are also to be found. Often these books will not agree with each other as to the value of specified verses, and there are few of them that will be found to agree with the marginal notes in the Koran. Thus there is plenty of latitude for the prayer-writer.

As an example, the sura Yá Sín, which is much used in Koranic magic, since it is called “the heart of the Koran”, has the special value of each verse written on the margins of the pages in these prepared copies of the Koran. Not one of these directions agrees with those indicated in the Majma’ al-Dawát, which gives wide margins on three sides of nine pages to the values of the verses of Yá Sín. According to the Koran, verses 65 and 66 of Yá Sín are to be used as a protection from the tongues of slanderers, if they are properly written on deer-skin with saffron and rose-water. But the Majma’ al-Dawát advises that the same verses are to be written on a paper and bound to the side of a person suffering with pneumonia, or the paper is to be washed and the water given to a dysentery patient to drink.

The directions for using the verses of this sura alone cover all the experiences of life, from an easy birth to a painless and peaceful death, and the journey on to bliss in heaven. They provide cures for all of man’s illnesses, such as fevers, swellings, aches, blindness and insanity. If one is suffering from toothache, verse 78 to the end of the sura is written on paper and hung over the ear on the side of the aching tooth and it will cure the pain. There are verses which protect one’s property, his household and his person, from jinn, dív, and the evil-eye.

There are verses also from other suras that are as great an aid as those from Yá Sín. The suras most used are Yá [259] Sín (60) ; Merciful (55) ; The Victory (48) ; Daybreak (89) ; The News (78) and Jinn (72). If the last sura (114) be written out and put in a box containing valuables of any kind, nothing can harm them. Verse 267 of the sura “Cow”, if written on an earthenware vessel and put among clothing, will keep away moths. And verses 14 and 15 of
this sura, if one writes them on the back of a turtle’s shell and keeps it with him, then no one will be able to exercise the power of the evil-eye upon him. And if the entire sura Yá Sín be written out and hung up in a garden, that garden will produce in abundance. Moreover if it is kept on the person, no illness nor dangerous animal will afflict the wearer.

There are ways also whereby hidden treasure may be found. Verse 9 of sura 3, and all of sura 95, should be written on paper and tied to the neck of a white rooster with a double comb. The rooster is then let loose in a place where it is suspected that a treasure is hidden, and he will go and stand over the very place. If he is right he will die the next day and the treasure seeker may dig for the treasure with perfect assurance.

On journeys one may be kept from thirst by writing verse 6 of the second sura on a clean paper or on a glass dish. He should then wash the writing with spring water and put it into a glass. After three days he should mix it with attar of roses and the milk of a red goat, and he should boil this mixture until it becomes thick and black. Then if some of this is eaten every morning, the traveler will not thirst. If one is journeying on foot, he should bind verse 25 of the sura Yá Sín to his feet, and he can then walk any desired distance and not suffer fatigue. If he journeys by sea, storms may be calmed by using verses 256-260 of the sura “Cow” (2). These verses will also keep away beggars and derwishes on the road. Drought and famine and flood cannot harm the one who gives attention to the proper verses. For the one who wears verse 48 of Yá Sín, even though the whole world be flooded, not even the soles of his feet shall be wet. [260] A goodly number of verses protect from hunger and thirst here on earth, but there are more for that terrible thirst on the Day of Judgment. Plagues and pests can have no power if other specified verses are used. If the first two verses of sura 16 are written very finely on deer-skin, two hours after sunrise, on Thursday morning, and put under a stone set in a ring, or if they are written on the stone itself, no enemy can successfully plan anything against him. If one writes the 58th verse of Yá Sín, which is
called the heart of the sura and therefore the heart of the Koran, in
the form of a square at sunset, and keeps it on his person, no snake,
scorpion or other injurious animal will molest him. The desire for
physical strength, bravery, victory in war, wealth, position and
knowledge may be satisfied by the use of other parts. For example,
if the sura “Jonah” be written 21 times and kept on the person, the
wearer will not only be victorious in war, but he will win great
glory by his deeds of bravery. Physical strength is obtained by writ-
ing verse ten of sura Yá Sin on paper, then tying it up with blue
cord and burying it in an old grave. In the same way the memory
can be strengthened and ability to learn may be increased.

In fact a short road to learning is readily provided, for if one
writes verses 109-112 of the sura “Table” (5) on a black stone, on
the first Friday of the month, at the hour of sunset, and wears it
habitually, he will become famous as a scholar and will know the
secrets of sciences he never knew existed. Likewise the fearful may
be made courageous and calm, especially those who fear death and
the grave. Those who sorrow may again be happy. Light slumbers
may be had to enable one to rise for the stated prayers, and tasks
that are difficult may be made easy. Strength may be gained to con-
trol the temper and ability may be acquired to hold the tongue
against the desire to lie or slander.

Matters pertaining to marriage have not been omitted. If a young
man wants a wife, he should write verses 87-89 of the sura
“Women” (4) on a piece of a garment belonging [261] to a young
married woman, and this he should keep near him while investiga-
tions are being made to procure a wife for him. Thus he is sure to
get the right one and one who will love him. A woman who desires
to keep the love and respect of her husband can also find means
whereby her desire may be obtained. If two friends have quarreled,
reconciliation may be achieved by one of them writing on an
earthen vessel that is fresh from the kiln, with a reed pen that has
been dipped into unboiled honey, the name of the other person and
around it the tenth verse of the sura “Cow” (2). Then he must
throw the vessel into the well out of which the other party drinks,
and his heart will be made soft and they will soon again be friends.
Another’s secrets may be found out by writing verse seven of this same sura on a green mud bowl, washing it in rain-water and sprinkling it upon the person when he is asleep. The suspected one, should he be concealing a dark secret or be planning some evil deed, will tell it all. Also there are several other verses, which, if written on the skin of a frog and put upon the stomach of a sleeping person, will cause him to tell everything he is trying to conceal.

The malicious side of magic is sometimes indulged in. Provision is made to hinder the business undertakings of others; to bring about the destruction of an enemy’s house; or to cause his death. Write verses 122-124 of the sura “Imran” (3) on an old water-pot, or on a piece of horse-skin, put it into the enemy’s house and his property will be ruined. If the death of another is desired, read sura 2:256-260 twenty-nine times and it will happen. Or on Tuesday at sunset a man makes a mask of his enemy’s face out of plaster of Paris, writes verses 30-33 of sura 5 on the face of the image and the enemy’s name on the back of it. He sticks a dagger into the head where the name is written, at the same time saying, “O angels of God, do this to this person”, and the enemy will be struck dead. By similar performances they believe officers may be removed from their positions. If one has an enemy in prison, he writes verse 36 of sura “Araf” (7), together with the enemy’s name and his mother’s name, on the tanned skin of a red kid and buries it. As long as it remains buried the enemy will remain in prison.

Twenty-nine suras have Arabic characters, single or in combination, at their beginning. Rodwell remarks that they may be “private marks or initials of proprietors of copies furnished to Sá’íd, when effecting his rescension of the text under Othman. In the same way, letters prefixed to other suras may be monograms, or abbreviations or initial letters of the names of the person to whom the respective suras belonged”.

Some Persians say they are a form of riddle. Whatever their true significance, the Shi’ites have made commerce of them, claiming that these fourteen characters are light-possessing

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3 Rodwell’s Koran, p. 32, note 3.
and light-giving, and that they formed the code by means of which God gave his words to the Prophet. They are therefore called the “bright ones”. The power of this code, whether written or read, is believed to afford protection from thieves and from disaster at sea; to provide plenty of the means of living; and to safeguard a person from enemies, from plots, and from all injurious animals. It is written on four pages of paper and placed at the four cardinal points about a field or garden to cause locusts to leave the place.

To the substances already mentioned, on which verses are written, there may be added stones, dry clay, iron, silver and copper, which are also much used for these written prayers. Various kinds of cloth, such as white muslin, a war banner, red cloth from Kashmir or Indo-China, and linen or home-spun cloth from Yemen, are preferred for more unusual cases. If the whole of the sura Yá Sin be written on a white muslin shirt, no bullet can penetrate it. There is a story that when one of the border tribes were causing trouble several years ago in Khorasan, troops were sent to capture the leader, who had become notorious. When he was located, and the soldiers took aim to fire upon him, their guns would not go off. This is said to have happened repeatedly, until it occurred to one of the [263] soldiers that he was perhaps protected in some magical manner. The captain of the force then aimed at the brigand’s hand. His rifle responded, the brigand’s hand was shattered and they were soon able to capture him. They declared that he was protected by one of these bulletproof shirts, and only his hands were vulnerable.

There are also particular parts of animals, other than those mentioned, upon which prayers are sometimes written, such as camels’ bones, and the shoulder blades and the neck-vertebrae of sheep. Vegetable substances employed are the olive, fig and green-date woods, a few fruits and the date bud. Some foods are also good for this purpose, such as halwá, a sweetmeat that is made from whole wheat flour with grease and sugar; rock candy from Egypt; and a round loaf of saltless bread.

The liquids with which prayers are written are rose-water, musk, saffron, ink, honey, the juice of mint, the juice of the white grape
and grease. Rain water, spring water, water from a well that is low, or water which has been caught from a drain-pipe may be used to wash the written prayers. Usually this water is given to drink to the person who is concerned; and not infrequently the prayer itself, as the paper upon which the verse was written is called, must be eaten. Sometimes the water is poured over the person’s head as he faces Mecca.

Reading the Koran carries with it great merit. There are as many suggestions to be found in the marginal notes for reading whole suras, or selected verses, as there are for writing them. Most of this reading should be done at stated times and a stipulated number of times. Forty-one seems to be the favorite number, but 7, 21, 29, 40, 70 and 1000 are recommended almost as often. The reader of the first sura gains all the merit that is attached to the reading of the Taurát (the Pentateuch), the Zabúr (the Psalms), the Injíl (the Gospels), and, strange to say,— the Koran! It is related that Mohammed himself told some of his friends that if he should write out all the meanings of the first sura, it would take seventy camels to carry [264] the load. And he added that whoever reads this sura is free from the fires of Hell. From one of the traditions it is related that the entire Koran is in this first sura, and that all of the sura is in the first word, bismilla, “in the name of God”, and the entire meaning of it is in the dot of the first letter. And Ali said, “I am that dot”. Verse 256 of the second sura is called the Throne (kursí) verse. Whoever reads it will have all his needs supplied. It has ten pauses. When reading it, at each pause one should bend a finger into the palm of the hand, beginning with the little finger of the right hand and ending with the thumb of the left hand. When both hands are thus closed, the salutation to Mohammed and his household should be said three times. This should be followed by the reading of the first sura ten times, and after each reading one finger should be allowed to come out, but in the reverse order from that in which they were drawn in. Then all fingers should be pointed upward, and the suppliant should blow his breath upon them, and then express all his needs and desires. If this is done for forty days everything
will be his. Also the reading of the fourth sura, “Women”, is said to give the reader the merit of a martyr killed in the service of God, while the reading of the third sura, “Imran”, gives the merit of a thousand martyrs.

It is claimed that the importance of the number of times a sura is read is like following the directions for locating a hidden treasure. If the treasure is forty steps away it cannot be reached by thirty-nine, and forty-one will overstep it and it will not be found. It must be reached by forty.

If one is faced by a grave situation and reads verse 140 of the third sura forty times a day for forty days, the gravity of the situation will be removed. If he reads it 29 times a day for 29 days, his enemies will be removed. If he reads it 19 times a day for 19 days, he will be granted great physical strength. If he reads it ten times a day for ten days, he will become wealthy in flocks. And if he reads it five times a day for five days, he and his family will be granted health. [265]

Likewise the reading of the sura “Jinn” is most important. If a prisoner reads it, he will soon be set free. If a man with a bank account reads it, his money will be safe. But the greatest blessing from reading it is that one’s faith is greatly increased.

It is related that Mohammed said that on the Judgment Day, God will not account with the person who reads Yá Sín, but will grant him forgiveness and will make him an intercessor for many others. The sura al-Ṣaff (37), if combined with Yá Sín, and if read over the head of one who is dying, will quickly bring an end to his suffering and will allow him to pass away quietly.

The sura Yá Sín has seven parts, each ending with the word mubín, which means open or clear. If one has an enemy he wishes to harm, and that without injury to himself, or one whose love he wishes to gain, he reads this sura and at each mubín he ties a knot in a cord he has ready at hand. When the reading is completed he nails the cord into the ground, and he gets his desire.

Another tradition tells us that God grants forgiveness, not only to the parents of anyone who reads the book, but to seventy gener-
ations of his ancestors. A story is told of the Imam Ja’far Şádîk, that one day he saw a sinful man being tormented by the angels. He became angry, because the man was a believer. Later on, when one of his companions saw that his anger had subsided, he asked him the reason. The Imam answered that the man was no longer tormented, but was forgiven, and was receiving all the blessings of God. And why? Because his small son had gone to school and had read one verse from the Koran!

While most of the foregoing has had to do with the suras and verses of the Koran, there are other practices which require the book itself. At the vernal equinox, which is the Persian New Year, one should have a Koran in his lap when the gun gives the signal that “the year has changed”. This gives him good luck for the coming year. But this blessing may be increased if he has learning, for by reading the sura Yá Sin at this time, he is given the assurance that he will remain secure in his employment for the whole year.

The Koran, or a fragment of a few pages will suffice, is put under the pillow of a woman in child-birth, so the delivery will be made easy, and so the dreaded witch Ál will not be able to harm either the mother or child. For the same purpose the holy book is sometimes held over the woman’s head and the pages are slowly turned. Or water is poured over the cover of a Koran and allowed to drop from each corner into a bowl. This water is believed to possess the power to remove every evil influence. It will even remove the power of any of the verses of the Koran itself! The entire book, in a tiny edition, is often put into a gold or silver box and worn around the neck as an ornament. Or it is put into a case and bound upon the arm. This is considered a most efficient talisman and able to protect the wearer from all evil. But when it is contained in an iron box, then nothing in earth or heaven can harm the wearer!

_Meshed, Persia_   Bess Allen Donaldson.