
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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THE QUR'ĀN AND ITS WORLD: I. THE PROBLEM OF RECONSTRUCTING ANCIENT ARABIAN COSMOGONIC AND ANTHROPOGENETIC LORE

For an adequate interpretation of the concept of the world as reflected in the Qur'ān it is necessary first of all to understand in what way the Qur'ānic ideas are linked to the corresponding system of notions, traditions, and symbols of the pre-Islamic culture of Arabia. This link but occasionally appears as a direct inclusion of corresponding notions into the system of early Islamic culture. Usually we come across statements negating the foundations of the pagan Arabian culture and at the same time explaining the ideas introduced by the Qur'ān as a restoration of the forgotten creed of the ancestors [1]. These notions, however, usually contained only a new interpretation of the principal cultural elements of the past. Sometimes this link has a more complicated structure, especially when it comes to the system of cosmogonic and ethnogenetic myths included into the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ānic ideas connected with the origin of mankind have been described, to some extent, in several works [2]. P. A. Gryaznevich, who studied the system of corresponding notions reflected in *jāhiliyya* poetry, in Arabic tribal ethnonyms and in the Qur'ānic text, came to the conclusion that there had never been any common Arabic myth, or any Arabic myth at all dealing with the origin of mankind or of the world as a whole [3]. The available sources allow us to state that in pre-Islamic Arabia there was no notion like the Primal Man or "the primary ancestor" current among the pagan Arabians. The history of every clan or tribe was being derived from a certain, usually deified, ancestor. This determined the discreteness of ethnic consciousness, which was the characteristic feature of the pagan Arabian ideology.

Certainly, Arabian Christians and Jews were familiar with the Old Testament ideas on the origin of the human race and the primary ancestor Adam. We can take for example the *qaṣīda* ascribed to the poet-Christian 'Adī b. Zayd, which presents a narrative very close to the passages from the Genesis telling about the creation of the world and the mankind [4]. 'Adī b. Zayd's text as a whole leaves us no doubt about its pre-Islamic origin. One of its passages is especially noteworthy. Verses 11—12 of the *qaṣīda* correspond to Gen. III.1: "Now the serpent was more subtil (*'rum*) than any beast of the field which the

Lord God had made". There is, however, a strange deviation from the Old Testament text in 'Adī b. Zayd's poem:

And the serpent was spotted (*raqshā'* — "black-and-white")
when it was created,

Like you see the image of a camel or a she-camel...

It is worth noting that the verse that follow this passage are again close to the verse of the Bible.

The Hebrew *'rum* ("more subtil") is replaced in the Arabic text by *raqshā'* ("spotted"), one of the traditional appellatives for a serpent in the pre-Islamic poetry. If we take into account that Arabic *a'ram* corresponding to *'rum* in the text of the Bible meant "spotted (black-and-white)", when applied to a serpent in *jāhiliyya* poetry [5], it explains the use of the term *raqshā'* — the synonym of *a'ram* [6]. In this way the "subtil" serpent became "spotted". This transition evidently leads the poet to associate the serpent before its punishment by God with a camel, to whom the appellative *raqshā'* could also be applied [7]. All this brings us to the conclusion that, first of all, the text ascribed to 'Adī b. Zayd is authentic, and that it goes back directly to the Hebrew text.

Similar "mistakes" might probably explain some other strange features present in the Qur'ānic lore deriving from the Old Testament tradition.

So we read in 'Adī b. Zayd's poem:

(7) He accomplished his creation in six days

And in the last of them created the man.

(8) And He called to him [rising] his voice: "Adam!",

and he answered him,

Because into the body created [by Allah] the breath

of life had been placed.

(9) Then He gave him Paradise, for him to live there,

And made wife for him, creating her from his rib.

To this very tradition Muḥammad appealed in his sermons. The Old Testament image of "Adam the forefather", which had developed many centuries before due to the victory of monotheism in a different cultural and ethnic environment, featured for a while in the centre of Muḥammad's disputes with his opponents. Muḥammad again and again speaks about Adam: Allah had made