
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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THE QUR'ĀN AND ITS WORLD: VI. EMERGENCE OF THE CANON: THE STRUGGLE FOR UNIFORMITY*

In previous papers in this series we have attempted to show that the Qur'ān, born in inner Arabia, was not only the natural result of the religious and social development of Arabian society, but also reflected the deep-laid links which tied the culture and religious and social ideas of the Arabians to the culture and historical experience of the peoples of Anterior Asia.

It was, after all, only superficially that Arabia was part of the "barbaric periphery" of the civilised world. Over a period of centuries, it was not only surrounded by highly developed states, but formed a part of them to a certain degree. One can recall in this regard Nabatea, Hatra, Palmyra, the states of ancient Southern Arabia, the chain of semi-nomadic kingdoms which stretched along the caravan route from Yemen to Iraq (Kinda, al-Azd, Ghassān, Nizār and Ma'add, Tanūkh), the Ḥimyarite state and the "new" Kindian kingdom, the attempt in the 560—570s to create a new Bedouin Hath'amite or Khuzā'ite kingdom, dependent on Ṣan'ā', "in the manner of Kinda" [1], the vassal principalities of the Ghassanids and Lakhmids. The latter, as we know, moved actively toward the South. In the sixth century, somewhere in the Ḥulubān region lay the border between the Lakhmid and Southern Arabian zones of influence. Finally, in the sixth and early seventh centuries, Southern Arabia was administered at first by an Ethiopian and latter by a Persian governor. Central Arabia then covered by savannah plant growth, over a period of nearly two millennia ensured trade connections between the most developed countries of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Commercial colonies were created and thrived in the ports of the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. One should not forget that in the Northeast, linguistically and culturally Arab tribes inhabited the area between the rivers in Mesopotamia, penetrated to the plains of Khūzistān, and in the Northwest roamed the plains of Syria and the Transjordan. It is no accident that Ptolemy, following the ancient scholarly tradition, included in Arabia Felix all of Central Arabia and a part of Northern Arabia.

This Arabians' historical memory preserved legends about the "ancient peoples", tracing lines of cultural continuity. Social practice and ideas of power were rooted in a layer of historical experience common to many peoples of Anterior Asia. There is nothing surprising in the fact that the content structure of the Qur'ān coincides in its basic outlines with the structure of Phoenician sacred literature and Old Testament. We see, on the whole, records of myths, historical narratives, and prophetic texts.

The Arabian "prophetic movement" was a natural stage in a pattern of social and ideological development typical of the Near East. One can easily find Old Testament parallels (for example, Psalms 15 [14]; Amos 8, 5—6; Parables 23:10—11) for certain accusations of those who "transgress in the balance" (55:8), "devour usuary" (2:275) or "approach the property of the orphan" (6:152) typical of Qur'ānic utterances.

Over thousands of years, the belief took shape in the Syrian-Palestinian region that all work for the ruler, all activity for his benefit, including service at court or as a high-ranking military leader, was unacceptable from the point of view of society's basic values. All work for the ruler was viewed as slavery (see Judges 9:8—5, 1 Sam [1 Kings] 8:11—18). In accordance with beliefs based on clan-tribal democracy (recorded, as we have seen, in the Qur'ān), only the most worthless and useless person could hunger for ruling power and strive to oppress and trample others beneath him [2].

I. Sh. Shifman has shown how the Qur'ānic mythology of Allah, which summed up the extended preceding development not only of Arabian but also of Anterior Asian Semitic mythology, was rooted in deep Near Eastern antiquity [3]. Such basic Qur'ānic mythologems as *garden—paradise—dwelling of God* had clear parallels in the ancient Near East ("And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden" (Genesis 2:8), in the gardens of Adonis of Phoenicia, in the veneration of local gods in the gardens of Palmyra).

* Tables for the current article were prepared by Maria E. Rezvan.