
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

E. A. Rezvan

THE QUR'ĀN AND ITS WORLD: II. THE MIRACLE OF THE BOOK (THE QUR'ĀN AND PRE-ISLAMIC LITERATURE)

According to the traditional point of view, the Qur'ān as a literature work remains aside of the main trends of the literary activities of the Arabians, being connected with them only by the use of the common language and *saḥ* as a literary form. No serious attempt was undertaken, however, to study the Qur'ānic text in connection with the literary tradition preceding or contemporary with it. Meanwhile this attitude, in our opinion, could elucidate not only the specific features of the contents and the form of the Qur'ān but also explain some key points of the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'ān by medieval Muslim authorities.

In the mid-1980s Andrew Rippin implored to view the text of the Qur'ān within the continuum of literary experience [1]. The main stress, however, was put by him on the necessity of exploring the Qur'ān within the literary tradition it had created, first of all the *tafsīr* literature, taking into account the changes in the perception of the Qur'ānic text which had occurred in the course of centuries.

Recognising the fruitfulness of this approach for the study of the history of Islam and of the Muslim civilisation as a whole, we would like to observe the place of the Qur'ānic text not within the literary tradition it created, but within the one which produced the Qur'ān.

Everyone knows that the Qur'ānic text as a historical, cultural and literary phenomenon has not come out of nowhere. By the seventh century the literary tradition of the Inner Arabia was already several hundred years old; different texts had been created and circulated there. Only a small part of the literary works of the last pre-Islamic century has survived, being conveyed through a later tradition. Those are for the most part tribal poetry, tribal lore, proverbs and sayings (*amthāl*) and small fragments of religious texts. Let us try to define each of these types of texts, making a simplified model of the real situation.

Tribal poetry was called tribal for that very reason that it served the interests of one clan inconsistent with the interests of others. A poet was the herald of his tribe, the

embodiment of its public opinion and the protector of its interests. The term *shā'ir*, as it is known, at that time meant not only poet but also wizard; his connections with the other world he used to practice magic arts — to harm the enemy and to help his kinsmen. That was how the traditional genres — *hijā'* (satire, abuse), *madḥ* (panegyric), *fakhr* (self-praise) — functioned [2].

Poetry, as a rule, was directed outside but was preserved and transferred within the tribe, being its valuable property which they were proud of, which they exposed as a banner, when trading with other tribes, and used as a weapon in the forum of justice. This function of poetry ensured the development of the common language of literature, a kind of inter-tribal poetical *koinē*.

Arabian lore which is preserved in *Ayyām al-'Arab* ("The [Battle] Days of the Arabs") was also, like poetry, a pure tribal phenomenon. Unlike poetry, however, the legends were directed not outside but mainly inside, being a way of preserving and conveying the collective historical experience of the ancestors, a record of tribal history. Much of this lore is a collection of precedents going back to the stories of tribal arbitrary judges. Here the experience important both for the tribal unit and for inter-tribal relations was refined. The "external" function of the *Ayyām* was not, however, the dominating one. It was first of all one of the foundations upon which the tribesmen were realising their unity. Arabian lore in the *Ayyām* was, to some extent, a factor of ethnic consolidation and ethnic distinction. Tribal lore included poems and war-songs, orations made by tribal war-leaders (sing.: *qā'id*, *ra'īs*, *'aqīd*), tribal chiefs (sing.: *sayyid*), fiery orators (sing.: *khāṭib*) [3], soothsayers (sing.: *kāhin*, *'arrāf*), arbitrary judges (sing.: *ḥakam*), texts of treaties between tribes.

Though the *Ayyām* were recorded only in the second century A.H./eighth century A.D. and the manner of rendering the material was distorted by the literary standards of that time, it is still possible to consider them, as a whole, as a very reliable source preserving both the