Ismail ALBAYRAK,
*Approaches to Ibādī Exegetical Tradition*

Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020, xii, 158 p., ISBN: 9783447114325

**Mots-clés**: ibadisme, exégèse, tafsīr, Coran, Basra

**Keywords**: ibadism, exegesis, tafsir, Koran, Basra,

Ismail Al Bayrak is Professor at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. He has been studying Islamic theology and exegesis for two decades. This present book deals with the little-known field of Ibādī studies. Scholars are increasingly beginning to appreciate Ibādī materials as these sources offer new perspectives to understand the formative period of Islam. The texts produced by the communities either in North Africa or in Arabian Peninsula are better known and most of them are now edited. Nevertheless, within this yet poorly studied field, exegetical sources are the least studied documents. Ibādī tafsīr never attracted scholars until now and I. Al Bayrak’s book is, as far as we know, the first to deal exclusively with this theme. The bibliography on Ibādīsm in English is wealthy but essentially concerned with the history of Ibādī communities and juridical thought produced in Basra and elsewhere. In French, works on Ibādīsm have mostly been dealing with the history of North African communities and local laws since the colonial experience in the 19th century. This might explain why the author is building upon recent works written for the most part in Turkish and Arabic.

This book comprises four chapters. Both of them have been written by I. Al Bayrak, whereas two are from the main author along with Sulayman al-Shueili, who is Professor at Sultan Qaboos University (Muscat). One can regret not to be forewarned more clearly of this cooperation, as the contribution of S. al-Shueili is barely mentioned in a footnote. Each of these chapters is originally an article that was published earlier and can be read separately from the rest of the book.

The first chapter is dedicated to a large though extensive historical overview of Ibādī tafsīr tradition. I. Al Bayrak divides the period under study into four sections: the formative, the early classical, the late classical and the modern period. To each period, he surveys the historiographical production, with a particular attention to tafsīr; or what could be considered as being somewhat a tafsīr. One could have expected a better definition of what is supposed to be the early classical and late classical period regarding Ibādī history. I. Al Bayrak never really exposes how he built up this classification. Nevertheless, this survey allows him to show how the exegetical tradition is underrepresented within the Ibādī school of thought. No more than five tafsīr books are counted between Hūd’s one purportedly writing at the end of the 9th century – the author probably died in 893 – and al-Kindī’s (d. 1792). The imbalance is also a geographical one, as the Omani tradition has remained mainly oral. Consequently, most of the Ibādī tafsīr have been composed in North Africa.

Stretching back to the blurred origins of Ibādīsm in the city of Basra, I. Al Bayrak considers Jābir b. Zayd as the first Ibādī exegete, although his role of founding father of the school is still debated. Unfortunately, the author never draws upon J. Wilkinson’s recent book (1) in which the hierarchy between the first ulama who composed the Basran community is questioned. Thus, some arguments appear to be flimsy and lack a critical study of sources that are now lost.

The part dedicated to the history of North African and later Omani tafsīr is much better. The author goes back to the life of Hūd b. al-Muhakkam and then to minor authors. Eventually, the inquiry leads him to assert that premodern Ibādī exegetical tradition is very close to the Sunni one. One can easily find a common interest shared between modern authors for promoting reformist readings of the Qurān. Even if previous studies have already demonstrated how far and deep Ibādīsm was impacted by pan-Arabian ideas during the 19th and 20th centuries (2), I. Al Bayrak shows, in a compelling way, that Ibādī scholars were connected to intellectual networks that played a critical role in promoting a common interest for exegetical tradition. We learn for example that Sheikh Ahmad al-Khalili (born in 1942), the current mufti of Oman, wrote a yet unfinished tafsīr where he severely condemns the Isrā‘īlyāt, and tries to use exegesis as a tool for reforming humanity. A close reading of his work reveals Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Ridā’s rational legacy, as they promoted reason above revelation.

However, specific issues prove to be critical for Ibādī authors, viz. the walāya (association) and barā‘a (dissociation), one of the corner stone ideas within the early Ibādī political and theological thought. Likewise, modern authors tried to lower

---


the importance of abrogated verses as well as to bypass the madhâhib, the juridic schools of law, that have sometimes been considered a hindrance to the establishment of a broader Islamic community. At the end, I. Albayrak notes that all modern Ibadi exegetes were jurists. Consequently, their books are descriptive as well as prescriptive.

The second and the fourth chapter are dedicated to theological issues, that is Ibadi approach to the methodology of ṭasfîr and the question of Jesus’s return (nuzûl Ḭisâ) in Ibadi exegetical tradition.

Considering Ibadi way of thought, it is worth noting that Ibadi exegetes have remain close to the Sunni tradition. In a first part, I. Albayrak reminds his reader the Ibadi perceptions of the Revelation and the Qur’ân. He devoted few pages to the issue of the creation of the sacred text (khalq al-Qur’ân), its collection (jâmî‘), and the existence of various reading (aḥrûf) within the Ibadi ṭasfîr. Then, he moved to theological issues (‘ulûm al-Qur’ân), but remains descriptive. He comes back to each of the themes that are specific to the Ibadi tradition or that benefits from a greater development within Ibadi exegetical books, as the occasions of Revelation (asbâb al-nuzûl), the Qur’ânic narratives, like the Isrâ’îlîyyât, and the thematic and structural unity among Qur’ânic suras and Verses (al-tanâsûb). The chapter ends with a lengthy development around the issue of abrogation (al-nastkh wa-l-mansûkh) and on the nature of the ambiguous verses. Both are critical themes described as “the artery of Ibadi ta’wil”.

However, I. Albayrak’s inquiry through these basic notions used by authors is sometimes dull as it lacks historical perspective. Reading such exegetical books, one would legitimately ask how and why these concepts have evolved and were transformed between the medieval period and the late modern one. Accordingly, it would have been appreciable to expose the main contribution of authors as famous as Atfayyish (d. 1914). Unfortunately, I. Albayrak does not provide any answer, though he seems to have a good knowledge of this tough corpus.

The fourth chapter is stimulatating and questions a peculiar issue of Ibadi tâsîr. Here, I. Albayrak and S. al-Shueili expose critical differences between the North African tradition and that of Oman. The lack of sources in Oman before the modern period makes it difficult if not impossible to know precisely what the position of scholars in the Middle Ages was. However, the authors rely on an assertion found in al-Ṭabarî’s exegesis and attributed to Jâbir b. Zayd where he says that Q. 43:61 is a clear reference to the return of Jesus. Omaní ulama strongly rejected it, based on the disputed reliability of its transmitter. I. Albayrak and S. al-Shueili thus considered the Middle Ages as the very origin of this dispute between North African and Oriental tradition. Below, they consider al-Bisyâwî, a famous Omani Ibadi scholar who probably died in the 10th century, as the first to clearly express doubt regarding Jesus’s return. But this assertion is based on a later citation from the Kitâb lubâb al-athâr, written by Muhânnâ b. Khalîfân b. Muḥammad al-Īsâ’îdî (d. 1835), and reflected an apologetic approach that lacks a critical examination of ancient and modern sources. The picture is easier to catch for the modern period. In the 18th century, al-Kiindi proved to be hesitant in front of this notion, and it is not before Nâṣîr b. Nabḥân that we find a clear and accurate rejection of Jesus’s return. Then, modern exegetes seem to have found a common ground to dismiss this notion and its theological implications: al-Ṣiyâbî as well as al-Khâlíî one after another have tried hard to argue against it. The muftî of Oman did not hesitate to rely on non-Ibadi exegetical books in order to do so. Where does this rejection come from? A historical sketch helps understanding how far reformist ideas had penetrated Ibadi school in Oman. It is doubtless following ‘Abdul and rationalist scholars that Ibadi ulama decided to throw this notion out.

Here, North African Ibâdis followed a completely different path. I. Albayrak and S. al-Shueili focus on Atfâyysh’s position, which reveals itself peculiar and rich, as he never refused the idea of Jesus’s return. Moreover, he addresses the issue of the Jews when Jesus will return and links the question with that of Jesus’s status among the prophets. In Atfâyysh’s paradigm, Muḥammad remains the seal of the prophets (khâṭîm al-nabîyyîn). Hence, when coming back on earth, the son of Mary will follow the sharî‘a and will turn towards the Ka‘ba. Atfâyysh, despite his great influence within the North African Ibadi circles and beyond, did not manage to impose his view on nuzûl Ḭisâ. Examining how the notion survived in two others Ibadi tâsîr-s written in the 20th century by Muḥammad b. Ibrâhîm Sa‘îd Kabsâg, and Ibrâhîm b. ‘Umar Bayyûd, the authors show that the understanding of this polemical theme is far from being unique.

Ka‘bâsh slightly discusses the critical aspects, considering this issue to be related to the unseen world and suggest not to go beyond the literal meaning of the verses. On the other hand, Bayyûd in his book Fi rihâb al-Qur’ân adopts an unequivocal position, refusing to see in Q. 43:61 any allusion to Jesus’s return as most of the Qur’ân exegetes have done. His approach is thus strongly tinged with rationalism and Omani tradition of Jesus’s return tradition.

In the third chapter of the book, I. Albayrak develops an interesting reflexion on the perception of Khâриjism and Ibâdiism in the Muslim exegetical
tragedies. The author takes as his starting point the verses and the hadiths that speak on the Kharījites for the Sunni exegetes. These texts helped Sunni exegetes to otherize these so-called heretics. Differing from the groups that composed mainstream Islam, Khārijism is doomed to fail due to its theological positions, especially that of allowing political murder. When Ibādī scholars claimed that ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī’s murders were lawful, Sunni and Shi‘ī writers linked them with Khārijism, which soon became a slanderous label used to excommunicate rebellious groups. This process is perfectly illustrated by Ibn Taymiyya who defined Khārijism as “a social phenomenon that may appear in any situation and at any time, rather than as the name of a specific group which existed in a specific period”. On that topic, one would have appreciated to find reference to the pioneer work of Jeffrey Kenney. He has fascinating pages in his PhD where this phenomenon is described and studied with details (3).

This dark legend of Khārijism takes root in the heresiographical genre of the milal wa-l-nihāl and crystallized until its spreading within the whole narrative sources. Though Ibādī scholars have tried hard throughout history to isolate Ibādism from Khārijism, the association is still a theme commonly find within the theological and rhetoric texts until now. This topic has recently been studied by Cyrille Aillet as well as Hanna-Lena Hagemann, though their papers focused on Sunni rhetoric (4). Conversely, I. Albayrak suggests that Shi‘ī narratives on Khārijism are slightly taken into account and that one could gain very interesting view by focusing on these materials, that is to study how the Kharījites were otherized by a group that was itself otherized by the other. Unfortunately, this idea remains a vain wish in the book.

To sum up, this book will undoubtedly be useful for Ibādī studies, as I. Albayrak undertakes a large study of poorly known sources. However, one can regret the lack of fundamental bibliographical references that would have been welcomed. Moreover, some assertions remain close to Ibādī narratives and would have deserve to be critically analyse.

A lot remains to be done on that topic, especially to better show how Ibādī ulama got inspiration from other religious movements, but also to revaluate the impact the growing of tafsīr field have had on Ibādī theology in the modern period.

Enki Baptiste

Université Lumière Lyon 2, CIHAM
UMR 5648
