Ismail Albayrak,
Approaches to Ibāḍī Exegetical Tradition

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Ismail Albayrak 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 Ibadi studies. Scholars are increasingly beginning to appreciate Ibadi 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. Ibadi *tafsīr* never attracted scholars until now and I. Albayrak's book is, as far as we know, the first to deal exclusively with this theme. The bibliography on Ibadism in English is wealthy but essentially concerned with the history of Ibadi communities and juridical thought produced in Basra and elsewhere. In French, works on Ibadism 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. Albayrak, 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 Ibadi *tasfīr* tradition. I. Albayrak 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 *tasfīr*; or what could be considered as being somewhat a *tasfīr*. One could have expected a better definition of what is supposed to be the early classical and late classical period regarding Ibadi history. I. Albayrak never really exposes how he built up this classification. Nevertheless, this survey allows him to show how the exegetical tradition is underrepresented within the Ibadi school of thought. No more than five *tasfīr* 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 Ibadi *tafsīr* have been composed in North Africa.

Stretching back to the blurred origins of Ibadism in the city of Baṣra, I. Albayrak considers Jābir b. Zayd as the first Ibadi 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 Baṣran 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 *tasfīr* is much better. The author goes back to the life of Hūd b. al-Muḥakkam and then to minor authors. Eventually, the inquiry leads him to assert that premodern Ibadi exegetical tradition is very close to the Sunnī one. One can easily find a common interest shared between modern authors for promoting reformist readings of the Qur'ān. Even if previous studies have already demonstrated how far and deep Ibadism was impacted by pan Arabian ideas during the 19th and 20th centuries (2), I. Albayrak shows, in a compelling way, that Ibadi 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 Aḥmad al-Khalīlī (born in 1942), the current *muftī* of Oman, wrote a yet unfinished *tasfīr* where he severely condemns the *Isrā'īliyyāt*, and tries to use exegesis as a tool for reforming humanity. A close reading of his work reveals Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā's rational legacy, as they promoted reason above revelation.

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

(1) J. Wilkinson, *Ibâḍism: Origins and Early Development in Oman*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.
(2) See for example A. Ghazal, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism. Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (1880s-1930s)*, New York, Routledge, 2010 for the Eastern part, and A. Jomier, *Islam, réforme et colonisation : une histoire de l'ibadisme en Algérie (1882-1962)*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020.

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the importance of abrogated verses as well as to bypass the *madhāhib*, 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 *tasfīr* and the question of Jesus's return (*nuzūl ʿĪsā*) 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'ān. He devoted few pages to the issue of the creation of the sacred text (*khalq al-Qur'ān*), its collection (*jamʿ*), and the existence of various reading (*aḥruf*) within the Ibadi *tasfīr*. Then, he moved to theological issues (*ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*), 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 (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the Qur'ānic narratives, like the *Isrāʾīliyyāt*, and the thematic and structural unity among Qur'ānic suras and Verses (*al-tanāsub*). The chapter ends with a lengthy development around the issue of abrogation (*al-naskh wa-l-mansūkh*) and on the nature of the ambiguous verses. Both are critical themes described as "the artery of Ibadi *ta'wīl*".

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 Aṭfayyish (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 stimulating and questions a peculiar issue of Ibadi *tasfīr*. 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-Ṭabarī's exegesis and attributed to Jābir b. Zayd where he says that Q. 43:61 is a clear reference to the return of Jesus. Omani 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-Bisyāwī, 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 *Kitāb lubāb al-athār*, written by Muhannā b. Khalfān b. Muḥammad al-Būsaʿīdī (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-Kindī proved to be hesitant in front of this notion, and it is not before Nāṣir b. Nabhān 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-Siyābī as well as al-Khalīlī one after another have tried hard to argue against it. The *muftī* 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 doubtlessly following ʿAbduh and rationalist scholars that Ibadi ulama decided to throw this notion out.

Here, North African Ibadis followed a completely different path. I. Albayrak and S. al-Shueili focus on Aṭfayyish'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 Aṭfayyish's paradigm, Muḥammad remains the seal of the prophets (*khātim al-nabiyyīn*). Hence, when coming back on earth, the son of Mary will follow the *sharīʿa* and will turn towards the Kaʿba. Aṭfayyish, despite his great influence within the North African Ibadi circles and beyond, did not manage to impose his view on *nuzūl ʿĪsā*. Examining how the notion survived in two others Ibadi *tafsīr*-s written in the 20th century by Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Saʿīd Kaʿbāsh, and Ibrāhīm b. ʿUmar Bayyūḍ, the authors show that the understanding of this polemical theme is far from being unique.

Kaʿbash 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, Bayyūḍ in his book *Fī riḥāb al-Qur'ān* adopts an unequivocal position, refusing to see in Q. 43:61 any allusion to Jesus's return as most of the Qur'ān 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 Khārijism and Ibadism in the Muslim exegetical

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traditions. The author takes as his starting point the verses and the hadiths that speak on the Khārijites for the Sunni exegetes. These texts helped Sunni exegetes to otherized 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 Ibadi scholars claimed that ʿUthmān and ʿAlī's murders were lawful, Sunni and Shīʿī 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-niḥāl* and crystallized until its spreading within the whole narrative sources. Though Ibadi scholars have tried hard throughout history to isolate Ibadism 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 Shīʿī 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 Khārijites 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 Ibadi 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 Ibadi narratives and would have deserve to be critically analyse.

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

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(3) J. T. Kenney, *Heterodoxy and Culture: The Legacy of the Khawarij in Islamic History*, unpublished thesis defended under the supervision of Juan E. Campo, Santa Barbara, University of California, 1991.
(4) C. Aillet, « Le kharijisme : catégoriser et théoriser la dissidence en Islam médiéval », in *Contester au Moyen Âge : de la désobéissance à la révolte*, Éditions de la Sorbonne, Paris, 2019, p. 47-60; H.-L. Hagemann, *The Kharijites in Early Islamic Historical Tradition. Heroes and Villains*, Edinburg, Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

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