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Approaches to Ibâdi 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 tafsir 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 tafsir 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 tafsir; or what could be considered as being somewhat a tafsir. 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 tafsir books are counted between Hûd’s one purportedly writing at the end of the 9th century – the author probably died in 893 – and al-Kindî’s (d. 1792). The imbalance is also a geographical one, as the Oman tradition has remained mainly oral. Consequently, most of the Ibadi tafsir have been composed in North Africa.

Stretching back to the blurred origins of Ibadism in the city of Basra, I. Albayrak considers Jâbir 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 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 tafsir is much better. The author goes back to the life of Hûd b. al-Muhakam and then to minor authors. Eventually, the inquiry leads him to assert that premodern Ibadi 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 Qur’ân. Even if previous studies have already demonstrated how far and deep Ibadism was impacted by pan Arab 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 Ahmad al-Khalîli (born in 1942), the current mufti of Oman, wrote a yet unfinished tafsir where he severely condemns the Isrâ’îlyâ’î, and tries to use exegesis as a tool for reforming humanity. A close reading of his work reveals Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida’s rational legacy, as they promoted reason above revelation.

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

the importance of abrogated verses as well as to bypass the madhāḥib, 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 Ibadī 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 Ibadī approach to the methodology of ṭafṣīr and the question of Jesus’s return (nuzūl ‘Īsā) in Ibadī exegetical tradition.

Considering Ibadī way of thought, it is worth noting that Ibadī exegetes have remain close to the Sunni tradition. In a first part, I. Albayrak reminds his reader the Ibadī 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 (jam‘), and the existence of various reading (aḥruf) within the Ibadī ṭafṣīr. Then, he moved to theological issues (‘ulūm al-Qur’ān), but remains descriptive. He comes back to each of the themes that are specific to the Ibadī tradition or that benefits from a greater development within Ibadī exegetical books, as the occasions of Revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl), the Qur’ānic narratives, like the Isrā’īlīyyāt, and the thematic and structural unity among Qur’ānic suras and Verses (al-tanāṣub). The chapter ends with a lengthy development around the issue of abrogation (al-nashk wa-l-mansūkh) and on the nature of the ambiguous verses. Both are critical themes described as “the artery of Ibadī 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 Aṯfa’yish (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 Ibadī ṭafṣīr. 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. Ṭayy 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 Ibadī 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. Khalīfān b. Muḥammad al-Būsā‘īdī (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-Kīndī 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-Khallīlī one after another have tried hard to argue against it. The muftī of Oman did not hesitate to rely on non-Ibadī exegetical books in order to do so. Where does this rejection come from? A historical sketch helps understanding how far reformist ideas had penetrated Ibadī school in Oman. It is doubtless-ly following ‘Abdulh and rationalist scholars that Ibadī ulama decided to throw this notion out.

Here, North African Ibadīs followed a completely different path. I. Albayrak and S. al-Shueili focus on Aṯfa’yish’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 Aṯfa’yish’s paradigm, Muhammad remains the seal of the prophets (khāṭim al-nabiyyīn). Hence, when coming back on earth, the son of Mary will follow the sharī‘a and will turn towards the Ka‘ba. Aṯfa’yish, despite his great influence within the North African Ibadī circles and beyond, did not manage to impose his view on nuzūl ‘Īsā. Examining how the notion survived in two others Ibadī tafsīrs written in the 20th century by Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm Sa’īd Ka‘bāsh and Ibrāhīm b. ‘Umar Bayyūd, the authors show that the understanding of this polemical theme is far from being unique.

Ka‘bāsh 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, Bayyūd in his book Fi rīḥāb 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’an 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 Khārījism and Ibadism in the Muslim exegetical
tradi
tions. 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 exe-
egetes 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 Ibadi scholars claimed that ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī’s
murders were lawful, Sunni and Shi’i writers linked
them with Khārijism, which soon became a slan-
derous label used to excommunicate rebellious groups.
This process is perfectly illustrated by Ibn Tāmiyya
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 nar-
native sources. Though Ibadi scholars have tried hard
throughout history to isolate Ibaidism 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’i narratives on Khārijism are slightly
taken into account and that one could gain very in-
teresing 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 refer-
ences that would have been welcomed. Moreover,
some assertions remain close to Ibadi narratives and
would have deserve to be critically analyse.

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(3) J. T. Kenney, Heterodoxy and Culture: The Legacy of the Khawarj in Islamic History, unpublished thesis defended
under the supervision of Juan E. Campo, Santa Barbara,
University of California, 1991.
(4) C. Aillet, « Le khawarijisme : catégoriser et théoriser la dis-
sidence 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,