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ALEXANDRIA UNIVERSITY

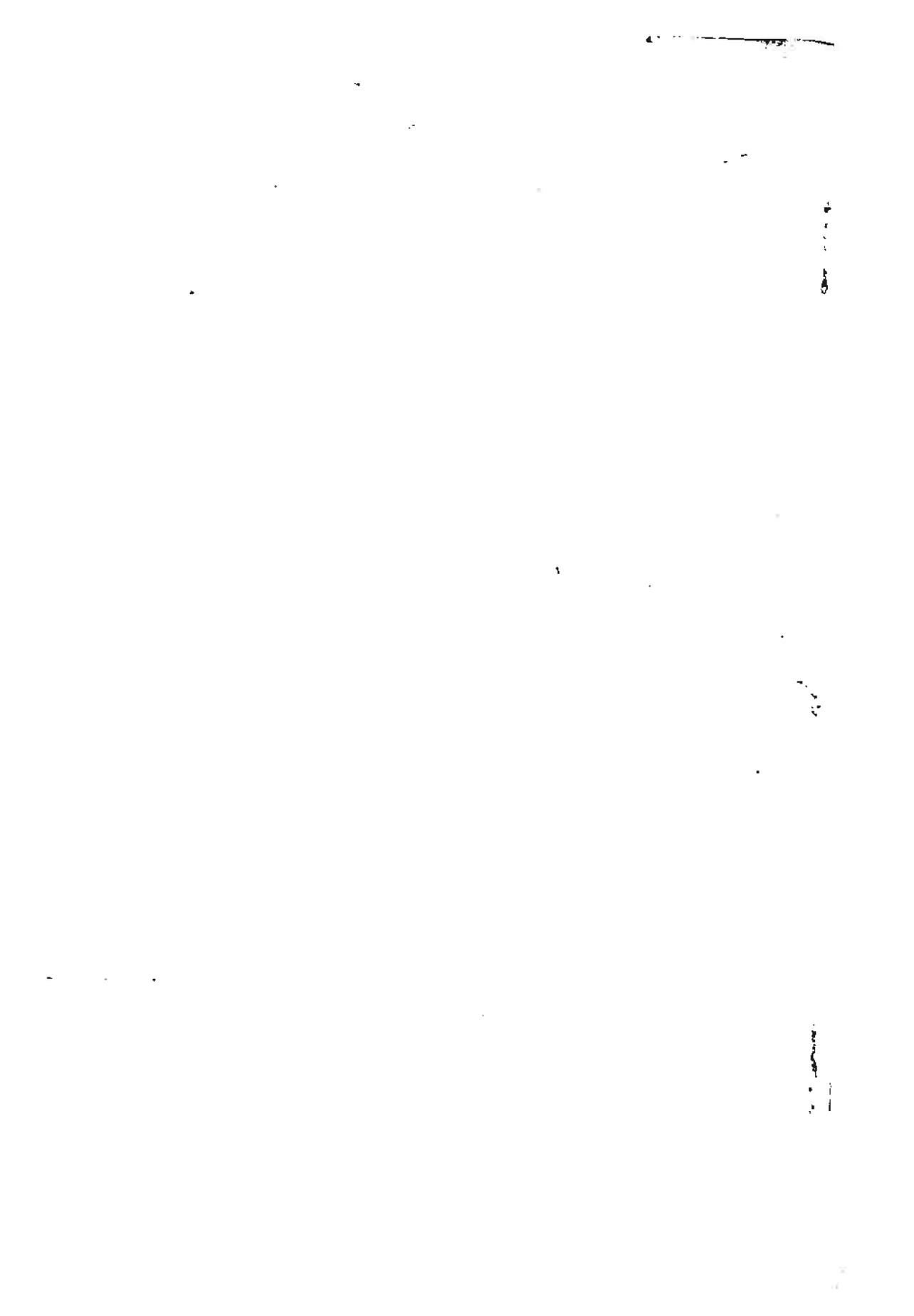


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Qur'anic Studies as an Important Factor in the
Development of Arabic Literary Criticism (1)

BY

M. KHALAFALLAH

The complete history of Arabic literary criticism has not yet been written. There is no such systematic comprehensive treatment of the subject as, for example, Saintsbury's history of European criticism. (2).

The aspects of Arabic criticism which have been studied by modern scholars are few, chief among them being : the theories of Al-Jāhiz and Abdel-Qāhir, the fourth century critics, and the influence of Greek writings on Arabic critical thought. (3)

1. (A paper presented to the 22nd. International Congress of Orientalists — Istanbul — September 1951).

2. G. Saintsbury, *A HISTORY OF CRITICISM AND LITERARY TASTE IN EUROPE*, 3 vols. 1900-1904.

3. See, for example :

M. Khalafallah, *ABDUL-QAHIR'S THEORY* in his *SECRETS OF ELOQUENCE — (A Psychological Approach) — Proceeding of the twenty first Orientalists Congress. Paris 1948.*

Gustave von Grunebaum, *Arabic CRITICISM IN THE TENTH CENTURY*. Journ. Am. Orient. Soc. 1941.)

For a number of years I have been interested in the study of the connection between Qur'anic sciences and Arabic literary criticism. (1) My attention was first drawn to this question through the study of general books on Arabic criticism and rhetoric, particularly those written in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries. With very few exceptions, these books have one notable common characteristic, namely, the tendency of their authors to look first and foremost to the Qur'an in the formulation and definition of their critical concepts. That observation led to the second step in the enquiry, namely : how far, and in what manner did Qur'anic studies influence the evolution of Arabic criticism, especially at the early stages of its development :

(A) — It is generally agreed that the Qur'an, from the beginning of its revelation, occupied the first place among Arabic literary productions.

The Prophet's biographies abound in descriptions of the puzzled wonder with which the Arabs listened to the Qur'an. (2)

Thus, from the dawn of Islam, two literary phenomena were connected with the Qur'an: first, an unqualified admiration by the Muslims of its literary merits; and secondly, a complete surrender to its unchallengeable excellence of composition. This, along with the fact that the Qur'an became the guide by which Muslim life was to be regulated, has naturally given priority to Qur'anic studies over all others. The moment Arabic thought reached a sufficient degree of intellectual maturity it began to apply itself diligently to Qur'anic studies, especially from the point of view of linguistic usage and art of expression.

(B) — General references (1) give long lists of books on different aspects of Qur'anic study by authors who were also specialists in Arabic grammar, philology, literature and literary criticism. Some of these books are still in manuscript form, and it was only recently that they became available for study. (2)

1. Four research students in the Arabic Section, Faculty of Arts, Alexandria are working on some aspects of this field for their M.A. and Ph.D.

2. See for inst. *The Biography of the Prophet (AL-SIRAH)* by Ibn Hisham.

1. See : *AL-FIHRIST* by Ibn-al-Nadim (first article-third section).

2. See : *CATALOGUES OF THE INSTITUTE OF PHOTOGRAPHED MANUSCRIPTS* (Cultural Administration — Arab League — Cairo — 1948 and after).

Three of these early manuscripts will be dealt with in this paper. But I wish to indicate what appears to me to be the general line of contact between studies of Qur'anic composition and general critical studies of Arabic Literature.

(C) — They seem — during the third and fourth centuries A.H., to have developed side by side mutually influencing each other. Very often, especially in the third century, the same author contributed to both branches of study. Al-Jāhiz, for example, wrote a book on the « Composition of the Qur'ān », and another on « Literary Expression and Exposition ». His contemporary Ibn-Qutubāh wrote on the « Problematics of the Qur'ān » as well as on « Poetry and Poets ». The masterly treatment of the question of Qur'anic unchallengeable excellence by Al-Baqillāni (who died in 403 A.H.) could also be regarded as a treatise on literary criticism. In the fifth century the treatment of the same question was made the basis for a science of rhetoric by Adbel-Qāhir al-Jurjāni (who died in 471 A.H.). Half a century later Al-Zamakhshari (who died in 538 A.H.) used the rhetorical approach in the interpretation of the Qur'ān and the discovery of the secrets of its excellence.

Al-Tabari in the third century opened a field of researches in Qur'ān interpretations which attracted scholars of widely different interests and approaches all through the centuries.

Another line of Qur'anic study, namely exegesis, contributed in no small measure to the enrichment of literary criticism. The monumental work of A-Tabari in the third century opened a field of researches in Qur'anic interpretations which attracted scholars of widely different interest and approaches all through the centuries.

(D). — Thus, in more than one way, the Qur'ān was responsible for a large share in the enrichment of Arabic critical writings. In fact Qur'anic considerations sustained Arabic literary criticism during the period when Arabic creative and critical impulses were at their weakest. From the seventh century A.H. down to the beginning of the present century interest in the original critical problems raised by the literary critics of the third and fourth centuries faded almost completely away. Such problems as ancient and modern in poetry, originality and imitation, flowing creativeness and craftsmanship, the comparative study of poetical schools....., all such problems were almost lost, during the later centuries. But, due to the Qur'ān, Arabic rhetoric was kept provided, during those centuries, with questions of composition which centered largely round the structure of the sentences, modes of expression, and ornaments of speech.

1. See : M. Khalafallah, *FROM THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STANDPOINT IN THE STUDY AND CRITICISM OF LITERATURE*, in Arabic — fourth chapter — Cairo, 1947.

In the fifth century, Abdul-Qahir tried with a large measure of success to formulate a basic theory of rhetoric built on structure which he took to be a function of the meaning.

Contrariwise, his contemporary Ibn Sinan, tried to discover the secrets of eloquence in word and sound. Less than two centuries later Ibnul-Athir tried to effect a balance between meaning and verbal expression, taking for his model and literary source of excellence, the composition of the Qur'an.

The interesting point to dwell upon here is the strong link between the critical problems raised by the early Qur'anic scholars, and the sciences of rhetoric as worked out and systematised by the later rhetoricians. The following analysis of three early manuscripts is intended to bring out this point.

The first is «Ma'ani-l-Qur'an» (Meaning of the Qur'an) by the Kufi grammarian Al-Farrā (who died in 207 A.H.) In this book the author gives critical observations of the Qur'anic style which can be grouped under five headings : direction philology, grammar, Qur'anic readings, and reasons for revelation. (2)

The second manuscript is « Majazu-l-Qur'an » (1) (Interpretation of Qur'anic Strange Usages » or « Qur'anic Ways of Expression ») by the famous literary transmitter « Abu-Obaidah » who died in 209 A.H. In his Introduction the author writes : The Qur'an was revealed in a clear Arabic medium. This is expressed in the Qur'anic verse « We have not sent a messenger except in his people's tongue ». The first Muslim generation did not feel the need for asking about the meanings and usages of the Qur'an. But the generations that followed were not in that happy position. They needed help and guidance in the understanding of the Holy Book. The author, then, proceeds to enumerate the Qur'anic metaphors of omissions and addition, shifting of words from their usual position in the sentence, and changing of verb references ... etc. Having done this he goes on to his main task of briefly interpreting the Qur'an in the light of his introductory observations, elucidating each usage by quoting literary examples, mostly from pre-Islamic poetry. By so-doing, Abu-Obaidah throws considerable

1. Faculty of Arts Library — Alexandria — No. 3182 B.

2. The same method is followed a century later in a book (manuscript No. 3183 — Faculty of Arts Library — Alex.) bearing the same title by another grammarian Al-Zajaj who died in 311 A.H.

1. Faculty of Arts Library, Alexandria, No. 3184 B.

light on the art of Arabic literary composition, and helps to create an Arabic science of literary criticism.

The third and most important of these manuscripts from the point of view of our present enquiry is « Mushkil al-Qur'ân » (1) (Problematic usages of the Qur'ân) by the literary author «Ibn-Qutaibah » who died in 276 A.H. This is a valuable treatise on Qur'anic style. It utilises all that was known up to that time in the field of Arabic criticism. The author shows a genuine appreciation of literary excellence, and a masterly ability to analyse a Qur'anic verse or a line of poetry. He stresses the fact that only those who possess a trained taste and wide knowledge of Arabic art of expression can hope to appreciate the unique excellence of the Qur'ân. Most of the basic concepts of the later sciences of rhetoric are to be met with in this book. Metaphor, simile, analogy, metonymy, trope, synecdoche, repetition, changing position, in the sentence, concealing, exhibiting, expressing by indication, expressing openly, these and others like them are ways artifices of Arabic expression, and the Qur'ân exhibits them all in the highest order. The above is the reason why the Qur'ân cannot be successfully and exactly translated into another tongue.

A reader of these third century treatises on the style of the Qur'ân feels justified in inferring that Qur'anic considerations were a determining and guiding factor in the course which Arabic literary criticism took in later centuries. (2)

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1. A copy in the Municipality Library, Alexandria, of a manuscript No. 663 Exegesis. Royal Egyptian Library, Cairo.
 2. Abu-Hilal al-Askari, one of the important fourth century writers on the general theory of criticism starts his book « Al-Sind'atayn » (the two Arts) by asserting that the most important branch of study after theology is the science of rhetoric without which the search for the secrets of the inimitable excellence of God's Book cannot be attempted.

RÉSUMÉ

This paper tries to put forward the suggestion that studies of the Qur'anic style and of its literary challenge to the Arabs played an important part in the rise and development of Arabic literary criticism.

The treatment of this hypothesis took the form of a historical analysis which brought out the following points :—

(A) — From Early Islamic times two Qur'anic phenomena stimulated critical studies, namely its sublime and effective style, and its challenge to Arabic literary ability to produce the like of it.

(B) — Two currents of criticism, one dealing with the Qur'an, another with Arabic prose and poetry went side by side in the third and fourth centuries, Qur'anic considerations, however, predominated in the general critical books of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries.

(C) — Problems which later Arabic rhetoric inherited and concentrated on were mostly those primarily arising from Qur'anic usages and explored by early Islamic authors.

(D) — The analysis of three early manuscripts which have recently become available for study shows the pre-occupation of Islamic authors in the second and third centuries A.H. with the study of Qur'anic diction and style.

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خلاصة باللغة العربية

هذا البحث يقصد الى ابراز أهمية الدور الذي لعبته دراسات اسلوب القرآن واعجازه في تطور النقد الادبي العربي .

ويسير البحث في معالجة هذه الفكرة سيرا تحليليا تاريخيا كما يلي :
اولا - ينبى الى ظاهرتين قرآنتين اتصانا بالنقد الادبي العربي منذ بدء الاسلام وزادت في ثروته وهما :

ا - اسلوب القرآن المؤثر .

ب - اعجازه فصحاء العرب وهم اهل اللسن والبيان - أن يجيئوا بمثله .

ثانيا - يسجل انه كانت هناك منذ بداية عصر التأليف حركتان نقديتان احدهما تعنى بالقرآن والاخرى بالادب العربي شعره ونثره - وانهما سارتا جنبا الى جنب في القرنين الثالث والرابع الهجريين . ولكن يبدو ان الاعتبارات القرآنية تغلبت في كتب النقد العامة في القرون الهجرية الخامس والسادس والسابع (في كتب عيد القاهر الجرجاني وابن الاثير وغيرها) .

ثالثا - يلفت النظر الى ان المسائل التي ورثتها البلاغة المتأخرة وركزت فيها اهتمامها هي خصائص تركيب الجملة وتنوع طرق الاداء ومحسنات الكلام وهي الموضوعات التي شق طريق البحث فيها علماء الدراسات العربية الاولى بوحى من نظم القرآن .

رابعا - يحلل ثلاث مخطوطات من كتب الدراسات القرآنية في نهاية القرن الثانى وفي الثالث الهجرى (مجاز القرآن لابن عبيده ومعانى القرآن للفراء ومشكل القرآن لابن قتيبه) ليبين عناية المؤلفين الاولين بنواحي الاستعمال القرآنى من جهة اللغة وخصائص الاسلوب . م . خلف الله