

***The Quṣṣās of Early Islam***, by Lyall R. Armstrong, (Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts, 139), (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2017), xii + 341 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-33551-6 (hb) & 978-90-04-33552-3 (e-book), €135.00 / \$165.00 (hb)

This meticulously researched, thoroughly developed book about *quṣṣās* and *qaṣaṣ* in the Islamic traditions represents a long established literature discussing the elusive nature and role of *quṣṣās* in the classical period of Islam. I. Goldziher, J. Pedersen, Ch. Pellat, C.E. Bosworth, K. ‘Athamina and many others in both the Western world and the Arab world have previously attempted at finding some answers. Armstrong’s book however is probably the most accomplished version of them all due perhaps to the diligence and erudition of what is originally a PhD dissertation.

Written in five chapters (in addition to an introduction, a conclusion and an appendix revealing the biographical sketches of many *quṣṣās* up to the year 750 AD) the author attempts to draw a detailed portrait of the *qāṣṣ* in early Islamic period (up to the late Umayyad period). He tries to provide some answers concerning the identity of *quṣṣās*, their origins and their function, their affiliations with the reigning religious and political currents and he even identifies the nature of their *qaṣaṣ* which is according to him either religious, martial, or religio-political. He depicts in details their skills and conduct and the amount of their knowledge and oratory skills that included their linguistic abilities (*lisān*), rhetorical skills (*bayān*), and religious knowledge (*‘ilm*), then he attempts to analyze their role whether they were considered innovators (*aṣḥāb bid‘ah*) or religious conformists. Armstrong attributes this contrast of either both images to the evolving nature of their work and the diverse influences of the community. He concludes that some were innovators and others were conformists, but he believes, based on data he collected, that most of them were mainly conformist scholars working within an evolving religio-political environment that sometimes questioned their value in the society.

Moreover, the author demonstrates that the good reputation of a *qāṣṣ* is related to his performance which in its turn depended on his skills. If he balanced the above mentioned three skills and kept his

sessions under reasonable control he could join the ranks of best scholars. Armstrong finally describes how the *quṣṣās*, from different parties, were seriously involved in the political and religious debate during the Umayyad period.

The scope of research undergone by Armstrong to complete his work is impressive. He resorts to all possible primary sources in Islamic history to complete his research such as *ḥadīth*, chronicles, Qurʾān commentary, and biographical dictionaries and others thus showing a great mastery of his sources. But he limits his research to those texts that denotes clearly one of the derivation of the word *quṣṣās* such as *qaṣaṣ*, *qiṣṣa*, or *qaṣṣa* in order to avoid confusion as he says.

In general, this book is an attempt to rectify the misconceptions about the *quṣṣās*. He concludes that they were not unreliable fabricators of traditions or simple storytellers but many of them were predominantly mainstream scholars with various religious backgrounds either in the field of Qurʾānic commentary, trustworthy *ḥadīth* transmission, or were reputable jurists (*fuqahāʾ*) and judges (*quḍāt*), orators (*khuṭabāʾ*) and others; accordingly they were by no means simple popular religious teachers or populist storytellers targeting the simple masses and thus had their important contribution in the evolution of the foundations of the Islamic religion and culture.

Armstrong has succeeded to a good extent in bringing out a better understanding of the definition and role of the *qāṣ* that remained ambiguous and prone to many misconceptions in modern and classical academia, however, the full meaning remains elusive due to its versatile nature and function as corroborated by the author himself. For instance, Armstrong asserts, the *qāṣ* could be of a certain group of people, i.e. “the common folk” (*al-ʿāmmah*) or “the community” (*al-jamāʿah*) or a certain leader. The type of relationship expressed by the designation can only be determined based upon the associations between the two parties. Some appear to have been martial or ideological spokespeople to certain leaders, or seem to have been personal *qāṣ* of the court, or could be men of religion who taught the people of a certain region or city. Their roles varied, their discourses changed too, consequently, the definition itself evolved through time and geographical space.

Despite the magnitude of the monograph and the extensive research conducted by its author and the different attempts to analyze and reconcile the obvious contradictions of the concept *qaṣaṣ* and *quṣṣāṣ* the final image remains unclear. What is really a *qāṣṣ* and what makes a *qiṣṣab*? The answer, I believe, remains indefinable. The book resembles more a long historical sketch than an analytical attempt to reconsider the term itself. Naturally this is perhaps due to the ambiguous and evolving nature of the sources themselves. Our historian tried to reach some final conclusions which seemed more imposed than true necessary; the *quṣṣāṣ* were religious motivators that resemble the modern day preachers, Armstrong concludes, who were more adept at the spoken word and its impact on the audience. But the *quṣṣāṣ* often were also *qurrā'*, *ḥadīth* transmitters, military commanders, political leaders, and activists. Did people listen to them as *quṣṣāṣ* or because they held other positions? The nature of their careers reflected conflicting objectives for their *qaṣaṣ*, one might say a *qiṣṣab* to send a political message while another might state hundreds of them as part of a religious career. Was Abū Sufyān for instance a *qāṣṣ* since sources depicted him *yaquṣṣ* during the battle of al-Yarmūk? (in case this incident really happened!). Why did people listen to him? Is it because he was a *qāṣṣ* or was he an important leader who exercised a lot of influence on many Syrian tribes who shifted alliances from a pro-Byzantine to an anti-Byzantine stance? Are his stories equal in eloquence and spirituality to those uttered by *al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī* for instance? These remarks notwithstanding the work of Armstrong remains an important contribution that brought serious clarifications to our shortcomings in this field and represents a solid bedrock upon which historians can build on in the future.

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