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LEXICOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE QUR'ĀN IN THE LIGHT OF IBN QUTAYBA’S EXEGESIS

Thesis of PhD Dissertation

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I. SUBJECT-MATTER AND THE MAIN OBJECTIVES

The subject of the research project is the *tafsīr* commentaries, mainly adopting a lexicographical approach, of the versatile scholar Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889). Ibn Qutayba lived during the reign of caliph al-Ma‘mūn (199/813-218/833) which was also the peak of the power of the Abbasid caliphs. When deciding on the texts, we kept in mind that these Qur’an commentaries of Ibn Qutayba are commentaries by a philologist of vast and versatile knowledge, who for almost 20 years dealt with religious law, Qur’an interpretation, and the science of hadith not only theoretically but in practice as well, indeed we may also say he pursued it as his profession when working as the judge *[qādī]* of Dinawar.

There is no doubt that as far as the interpretation of the Qur’an is concerned we have here an outstanding scholar whose fastidious approach to the vocabulary of the Qur’an also meant a defence of it against philosophical scepticism, as we can see in his two writings, *Tā’wīl muškil al-qur’ān* and *Tafsīr *̲g̲ār̲īb al-qur’ān*, which earned him the outstanding position he had among the sunnah scholars. He was regarded by the caliphs, governors, scholars, and of course by the people as a scholar who was equal to the best, like for example al-Ǧazālī, or al-Rāzī.

Ibn Qutayba lived during one of the most important periods, the historical turn of the history of Islam, during the second great turn of the Abbasid dynasty, when those religious and cultural directions within the society took shape which led to the victory of those who adhered to the prophetic traditions and community *[ahl al-sunna wa-l-ḡamā‘a]* and which thus brought intellectual victory to the sunnah for centuries, although by the end of the 3rd/9th century the power of the Abbasid caliphs started to weaken.

The Qur’an interpretation of Ibn Qutayba was widely accepted mainly because the outstanding scholar was a contemporary person of the process during, which the caliph al-Ma‘mūn tried to grab not only political but religious power as well, which he wanted to claim for himself, and for this reason he was willing to stand up even against honoured sunnah scholars.

When the rationalist mu‘tazilis won the patronage of the Abbasid dynasty, al-Ma‘mūn published a decree on the created nature of the Qur’an and wanted the scholars of *[ahl al-sunna wa-l-ḡamā‘a]* to accept it, lest they should be inflicted with a penalty.

Scholars keeping the traditions – among others Ibn Qutayba – insisted on the eternity of the Qur’an asserting that the interpretation of the teachings was their inherited right, with no one, not even a caliph, being entitled to taking their rightful place.
Thus the conflict between the scholars and the caliphs became inevitable. Al-Ma’mūn was followed on the throne by his brother al-Mu’tāṣim (218/833-227/842) who continued his predecessor’s policy. During his reign started the so-called ‘inquisition’ [mihna] against those sunnah scholars who did not accept the mu’tazili views and stuck to the traditions.

In the end, during the reign of the caliph al-Mutawakkil (232/847-247/861), after a widespread anti-mu’tazilah riot, in 232/847 the caliph changed the official state ideology, and instead of the mu’tazili ideas he advocated the ahl al-sunna wa-l-ġamā‘a ideology.

Ibn Qutayba was not only a witness of these changes, he also expressed his strong opinion, being as he the ideological advocate of the ideas shared by most of the sunnah scholars. That is to say he protected the new state ideology, the doctrine of the ahl al-sunna wa-l-ġamā‘a, and in works based on the traditions, he protected the Qur’an and the prophetic traditions, the sunnah against the rational approach of the mu’tazilis as well as the discrediting efforts and accusations of philosophical scepticism. Therefore it can be said that the interpretations of the Qur’an by Ibn Qutayba had an important role in the victory of the classical traditions, his ideas spread across the society, and were accepted against the mu’tazili al-Ġāḥiẓ. The ideological battle was won by the theological viewpoint of the ahl al-sunna wa-l-ġamā‘a represented by Ibn Qutayba’s writings.

No wonder therefore that Ibn Qutayba is regarded as the third greatest author of the Arab-Muslim world, the first being Ibn al-Muqaffā‘ (d. 759) and the second al-Ġāḥiẓ (d. 868), both of whom wrote prose, even though later Ibn Qutayba’s works focused on religious literature, especially on the interpretation of the Qur’an.

Ibn Qutayba was one of the earliest Qur’an lexicographers, he even preceded the commentators thought to be the most influential, the sunni al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) the mu’tazili al-Zamaḥšarī (d. 1144), the shiite al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1153), and the mystic Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240). Ibn Qutayba’s works left a mark on the philological works of the following centuries, since primarily he was a philologist [min fuqahā‘ al-luġah], however, a deeper analysis of his commentaries on the Qur’an proved how outstandingly effective he was in mixing text explanations based on linguistics and tradition.

The scientific importance of the works of Ibn Qutayba can be seen, as is discussed in the thesis, in his lexicographic commentaries as they are the ‘missing link’, the transition between the early interpretations based on the legacy of Muhammad’s contemporaries and fellow followers [al-ṣahāba] - that is the interpretations based on tradition, like the commentaries ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbās - , and the philological, lexicographical commentaries as well as the subsequent classical commentaries. In the course of time the latter rather than distinguish between the philological, historical or religio-juridical considerations, tried to clamp these aspects. The classical Qur’an
commentaries often relied on Ibn Qutayba’s commentaries. This was the also in the case of al-
Ṭabari, who in his work Ġāmiʿ al-bayān ‘an [wuğūh] ta’wil āy al-Qur’ān often refers to Ibn
Qutayba.

Thus the aim of the thesis is, first, to summarize the works of Ibn Qutayba, second to
appraise his commentaries, and last but not least, to bring forward his role in lexicography and in
the Qur’an commentary literature, as well his place among the commentators of the Qur’an. We
argue that his role is eminent; yet despite that eminence it is not a widely explored or dealt with in
relevant scholarly literature.

From the very beginning of the research project it was thought inevitable to sum up the
works pertaining to the study of the Qur’an by this outstanding scholar, about whom there were
misunderstandings in scholarly circles. Our aim was to focus on the importance of his
commentaries written a philological, especially lexicographical, approach – which falls outside the
interest of the Oriental studies - and the importance of his often unique opinion about the
terminology of the Qur’an. We also strove to give a new understanding of his interpretation of the
Qur’an.

II. RESEARCH HISTORY, MAIN PROBLEMS

In the beginning phase of writing this thesis, while quarrying sources and finding the first
biographic data, it became obvious that those writings of Ibn Qutayba which approach the Qur’an
from a philological point of view are almost unknown to researchers of Oriental studies or Arabic
studies. Also, there is not a single article or publication in Hungarian which would treat analyse in
an analytical matter Ibn Qutayba’s legacy, his linguistic and lexicographic approach to the Qur’an,
nor are there any publications in other languages that would seriously analyse or appraise this part
of Ibn Qutayba’s work. The only appraisement, limited in scope, was written almost a century ago
by Ignacz Goldziher, who, in his elaborate and exhausting book on the Qur’an commentaries,
published also in English, pointed out that the works of Ibn Qutayba written in polemic against to
the mu’tazilis are ample sources for those philological and theological argumentations which can be
dated back to the early period of the mu’tazili understanding of the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{1}

To unravel the picture, it is worth mentioning that while al-Ḡazālī has been dealt with by
Hungarian Orientalists, and several of his books have been translated into Hungarian, Ibn Qutayba
has only been mentioned a few times because of his writings in \textit{adab} genre – here we should
mention the lectures held in the Department of Arabic Studies and the text books – although Ibn

\textsuperscript{1} Goldziher Schools of Koranic Commentators p. 76.
Qutayba was one of the most prominent personalities who argued against the mu’tazili philosophy and generally against speculative philosophy as such. Not to mention the fact by virtue of his eminent scholarly and social role in the formative period of classical Islamic thinking he was ahead of his time at least three centuries and anticipated Ḥazālī. Ibn Qutayba was present when Ibn Ḥanbal fought his theological battle against the Abbasid rulers, consistently supported the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-ḡamā’a* even during the seriously dangerous *miḥna* period; what is more, he advocated the sunni traditionalist thinking in the 3rd/9th centuries.

The more deeply absorbed we came to be in the investigation of the sources and publications concerning the Qur’an commentaries of Ibn Qutayba, the clearer it became that the sources useful from the point of view of the present thesis – to get a comprehensive picture of how he contributed to the exegesis of the Qur’an with his literary and lexicographic writings – should be mainly those written in Arabic. During the research period it became quite obvious that this latter part of his works did not get much attention.

Gerard Lecomte was the person who did the most to raise Western scholars’ awareness in this respect, and he was also the one who wrote Ibn Qutayba’s bibliography: *Ibn Qutayba mort en 276/889: L’Homme, son ouvrage, ses idées*. He is the author of the article *Ibn Qutayba* published in the 2nd edition of the *The Encyclopeadia of Islam*. He also cursorily studied some religious aspects of Ibn Qutayba’s works, yet unfortunately he did not consider the contribution of Ibn Qutayba important enough to dedicate a book to it, whereas as far as the hadiths are concerned, Lecomte wrote several books and articles. For example he translated Ibn Qutayba’s *Ta‘wil muḥtalīf al-ḥadīth* [Explanations of the contradictory hadiths] into French.

John Wansbrough’s book *Qur’anic Studies* also deserves to be mentioned, in which the famous Orientalist discusses the importance of the *Ta‘wil muškil al-Qur’ān*, although he did not go into detail. Thus except for the bibliographical data the publications of Orientalists provided relatively little information.

On the basis of the data of the Arab sources one may say that one of the earliest important thesis which analysed and criticised Ibn Qutayba’s work concerning the exegesis is the work of Abū Bakr ibn al-Qāsim al-Anbārī (d. 940), who was a member of the philological school of al-Kūfa. His *Risālat al-muškil* is an answer to, and criticism of, Ibn Qutayba’s *Ta‘wil muṣkil al-Qur‘ān* as well as Ibn Qutayba’s master, Abū Ḥātim al-Siḡistānī. Mention must also be made of Muḥammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muṭarrraf (d. 997) who collected and published Ibn Qutayba’s commentaries the *Ta‘wil muṣkil al-Qur‘ān* and the *Taftsir ḡarīb al-Qur‘ān* under the title: *al-Qarṭāyn*. However from a scholarly point of view this volume is not significant, since it only combined two volumes into one.

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1 Ibn Qutayba *Ta‘wil muṣkil al-qur‘ān* p. 32; *Taftsir ḡarīb al-qur‘ān*, p. 3.
According to our research, among the early scholars only al-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr analysed in depth the *Taʾwil muṣkil al-Qurʾān* and the *Tafsīr ǧarīb al-Qurʾān*.

From among the latest scholars Muhammad Zaǧlūl Sallām’s two publications need to be mentioned: *Aḥar al-qurʾān fī taṭawwur al-naqd al-adabī* and *Ibn Qutayba*. Both of this publications closely examined the life and work of Ibn Qutayba especially the *Taʾwil muṣkil al-Qurʾān*.

III. SOURCES

The main sources of our research are as follows: the commentaries of Abū Muḥammad, ‘ʿAbdullāh Ibn Qutayba *Taʾwil muṣkil al-Qurʾān* [*The interpretation of the ›problematic parts‹ of the Qurʾān*] and the *Tafsīr ǧarīb al-Qurʾān* [*The explanation of the ›foreign parts‹ of the Qurʾān*]. Both commentaries were edited by al-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr who also wrote valuable notes on the basis of the available manuscripts. The greatest challenge was to understand rich vocabulary of the commentaries and text explanations and make a selection thereof. The selection of the material and the alignment of the research were very important; focusing on the main questions is a prominent concern; otherwise the thesis would have been too diversified, too long and difficult to follow.

The focus of the thesis is lexicography. This means that during the research work the rhetorical analysis of the texts, that is the exegesis of the rhetoric of the Qurʾān was not examined. This approach can be successful since the analysed texts were divided into separate chapters, thus the rhetorical exegesis appears only in the first part of the *Taʾwil muṣkil al-Qurʾān*. Therefore mainly the second part and the *Tafsīr ǧarīb al-qurʾān* were in focus. However, it was not as easy as it may sound, because introducing the terminology and arguments of the Qurʾān interpretations of Ibn Qutayba does not belong strictly to the analysis of lexicography. Nonetheless this approach was inevitable to fully understand the methods of commentary applied by Ibn Qutayba.

It is shown in the thesis that although Ibn Qutayba was mainly interested in spelling, proper pronunciation, Arabic linguistics and poetry, he often wrote about current religious, political-social-moral questions, as is proven by his manifold works, a considerable literary legacy the analysis of which is still going on since the authorship of some of it has not yet been proven. From this point of view it seems to be the right thing to have chosen Ibn Qutayba as the subject of the present thesis, since by doing so, one of the most outstanding figures of Arab literature and Islamic studies and his commentaries on the Qurʾān can be (re)discovered for Oriental studies.

In the thesis the commentaries of the Qurʾān by Ibn Qutayba have been described and appraised. It was also pointed out that these commentaries are among the rare documented examples of the early Qurʾān interpretations, whereas the lexicographical commentaries of Ibn
Qutayba are the transition, the ‘missing link’ between early tradition and the linguistically-based interpretations of the Qur’an on one side, and the meticulously analysed commentaries of the 4th/10th century from the other side, which have already been analysed by scholars, and which are often based on the commentaries of Ibn Qutayba, such as the commentary of al-Ṭabarî.

It should be noted that on the basis of recent research the first independent, early and authentic lexicographical work was the Tafsīr ġarīb al-Qurān by Ibn Qutayba with which he laid the foundation of the discipline together with the Garīb al-Qurān by Abū ʿAbdullāh al-Yazīdī (d. 925). The lexicography of both follows the order of the suras of the Qur’an.3

The first lexicographic analysis of the Qur’an can be read in the Taʿwīl muṣkil al-Qurān by Ibn Qutayba. He wrote it even before the Tafsīr ġarīb al-Qurān, and therein he gives a lexicographic analysis of a great part of the text of the Qur’an. His analysis, however, goes beyond the commentaries of the Tafsīr ġarīb al-Qurān, since, as it is repeatedly pointed out in the thesis, besides the ġarīb [foreign, odd] type vocabulary of the Qur’an he was also interested in the muṣkil [problematic] vocabulary, and his textual interpretations were based on these lexemes. Ibn Qutayba analysed several lexemes in his Taʿwīl muṣkil al-Qurān [interpretations of the ›problematic parts‹ of the Qur’an], which – although it mainly focuses on the rhetoric of the Qur’an, advocates the uniqueness of it, and by philological means reveals the meaning of the ayas, which contemporary scepticism regarded as to be ambiguous or contradictory – also shows elements of lexicographic analysis.

The most important chapter of the Taʿwīl is the Bāb taʿwīl al-ḥurūf allatī udduʿiya ʿalā al-qurān bihā al-istiḥāla wa fasād al-nuṣūm [Chapter on Those Words on Account of Which the Qur’an was Accused of Having Stated Impossibilities and Having a Corrupted Text]. In this chapter Ibn Qutayba presents a lexicography-based analysis of the Qur’an in which he expresses some very distinct opinions.4

The traditional lexicography can be traced more significantly in the Tafsīr ġarīb al-Qurān because he applies the muṣḥaf order of the Qur’an as opposed to the method followed in the Taʿwīl where Ibn Qutayba did not find it relevant to follow that order, preferring to arrange the suras according to certain topics chosen by him. Ibn Qutayba arbitrarily quotes the muṣkīl ayas which were found controversial, and sometimes he returns to certain suras again to explain another aya with it.

Ibn Qutayba at the beginning of the Taʿwīl refers to the problem of the sabʿat aḥrūf [seven “letters” - ḥarf – seven linguistic forms] then he studies in detail the maḡāz [metaphorical] meanings

3 Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics, p. 34.
of the Qur’an; the features of Arab rhetoric in the Qur’an. He also considers the words and phrases with opposite meanings which are exemplified by quotations from the Qur’an and explains them with the help of the šawāhid [quotations to underpin the text] of poetry and of Arabic idioms. Ibn Qutayba then discusses expressions with multiple meanings, that is the lexemes belonging to the al-wuğūh wa-l-nazā’ir fi al-Qur’ān [homonyms and synonyms in the Qur’an]. He does not follow the alphabetical order of the Arabic letters when he gives the chosen meanings of 44 lexemes. In his commentaries Ibn Qutayba does not undertake to analyse the complete vocabulary of the Qur’an: the explanation of seven suras are left from the Ta'wil [61., 65., 107., 108, 110., 112., 114.], while thirty-two suras are left out from the Tafsīr [1., 8., 29., 45., 49., 53., 60., 61., 63., 70., 71., 78., 82., 84., 85., 90., 91., 93., 95., 96., 97., 98., 100., 103., 105., 106., 108., 109., 110., 112., 113., 114.].

Comparing the list if the suras left out, it turned out that suras 61., 107., and 108. were not dealt with at all, whereas it can be seen that the Tafsīr often quotes the explanations given in the Ta'wil [for example Qur’an 22:15] or refers to a lexeme and its explanation [for example Qur’an 26:118 and 7:89 ayas].

As we proceeded with the research work it became obvious that our choice was verified by the result, since Ibn Qutayba was an outstanding philologist who excelled in Arab poetry, linguistics, historiography, adab genre, religious law and theology. But first of all he towers over his contemporaries by his linguistic and lexicographic approach when writing his commentaries of the Qur’an. We must not forget that he lived in the 3rd/9th century, during the Abbasid era, in the so-called ‘Golden Age’, or the formative age of the Islamic sciences, to which he contributed significantly, just as to the formation of the classical Islamic studies.

The thesis pointed out that although Ibn Qutayba was basically a traditional Muslim scholar his opinion sometimes contradicted the majority of some of the tradition-based forerunners as well as his contemporaries, as happened in the case of the problems in lafż al-Qur’ān, the sab’at aḥruf and the qirā‘āt. Concerning the pronunciation of the words in the Qur’an [lafţ al-Qur‘ān] the ahl al-sunna wa-l-ğamā‘a says that the Qur’an is God’s word [kalām Allāh], it is absolutely and wholly uncreated, be it read, written, heard or kept in the heart. Nevertheless at some point Ibn Qutayba was not as strict as that, since he did not regard this problem as something that should cause someone to be bannished from ahl al-sunna.5

As far as the term sab’at aḥruf is concerned, Ibn Qutayba did not accept the opinion of the majority that they are the text variations of different Arab dialects (al-luqāt al-sabh), because he thought them to be the starting-point, which changed in the course of time. His analysis reveals that this term for him meant the wuğūh al-tağāyur; with which he referred to the different linguistic

5 Lecomte, Art, Ibn Ḫutayba, EI², p. 846.
forms of the final text of the Qur’an, based on one dialect.

Ibn Qutayba therefore was of the opinion that there were dialectal variants of the Qur’an. However, many scholars were afraid of the fact that, as time went by, different dialectal variations and text variants of the Qur’an might emerge or circulate, leading to endless quarrels, conflicts and finally to schism within the forming Muslim community. It seems to us that this is why Ibn Qutayba announced to the wider audience that the Qur’an is a revelation through the dialect of the Qurayš tribe, while in his works meant to be read by scholars he stressed the advantages of the dialectal variations. Ibn Qutayba therefore accepted that there were dialectal variations of the Qur’an, but this idea of his not tantamount to the notions expressed by the term al-aḥruf al-sabʿa because his view was that it meant ṭuḡūḥ al-ṭaḡayur, that is to say different linguistic forms.

His view was based on his deep linguistic and poetic knowledge thanks to which he often expressed his independent opinion while writing on the lexicography of the Qur’an. His thinking was influenced both by his own linguistic observations and by his knowledge of traditional Arabic rhetoric and the šawāhid of poetry, all of which authentically verified the meanings he attributed to the problematic texts. This adaptation of the Arabic language and poetry belongs to the methodology of the tafsīr bi al-dirāya [explanation through deduction]. This and his respect of naql, that is the dissemination of tradition, resulted in his accepting the authentic hadiths he applied in his commentaries, a method which, on the other hand means the tafsīr bi al-riwāya [tradition-based explanation] approach.

Ibn Qutayba formed his independent opinion on the basis of his linguistic knowledge while he never lost his belief in naql, and used the authoritiveness of the hadiths while forming his interpretation of the Qur’an. He often used prophetic hadiths beside rhetorical explanations and the šawāhid of poetry. He often quotes sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad – which are published without the isnād (chain of authorities) - or commentaries attributed to the scholars of the first generation after Muhammad [al-tābiʿūn].

Although Ibn Qutayba as a philologist regarded himself a representative of the category aṣḥāb al-ḥadīṯ [traditionalists] who stucked, as fit his opinion, to the Qur’an and to the prophetic hadiths. At this point it is worth referring back to the fact that Ibn Qutayba argued for naql (traditionalism) or, to use another word, for riwāya in his work Kitāb taʿwīl muḥtālif al-ḥadīṯ [Book of Explanations/Commentaries of the Contradictory Hadiths]¹

In his commentaries Ibn Qutayba combined the methods of tafsīr bi al-dirāya and tafsīr bi al-riwāya in a unique way, thus creating a balance between the two trends and avoiding extremism. This cautious approach can also be seen in the way he dealt with Christian and Jewish writings. Not

¹ Ibn Qutayba Kitāb Taʿwīl muḥtālif al-ḥadīṯ, p. 13.
only did he know well the Old and New Testament in Arabic, but he used them as references in his own writings. However, he refrained from using the rabbinical, so-called isrāʾīliyyāt-literature.

At the same time, Ibn Qutayba used two different styles: in the Taʾwīl by the help of his concepts of theology and social reforms along with his wide knowledge of linguistics and poetry as well as his extensive lexical knowledge of the Qurʾān, he argued against all those anti-traditionalists and anti-religious ideas – the philosophical rationalism and relativist approaches – which he perceived as threatening his community, although at a first glance one may have had the idea that his aim was to defend the linguistic integrity, content and rhetoric of the Qurʾān. In the Tafsīr ḡarīb al-Qurʾān, first of all he focused on lexicography, as the book was edited for scholars of that field and for those interested in understanding the different meanings of the unusual words used in the Qurʾān. Therefore the book is a comprehensive commentary, used later by many other commentaries.

The thesis analyses in detail the stylistic features of Ibn Qutayba’s commentaries of the Qurʾān, starting from a review of the way the author understood the fact of his belonging to the ahl al-sunna. We have arrived at a picture of a scholar who was far from being a fanatically religious person; on the contrary, he was a highly educated, many-sided, versatile and moderately religious man, a learned, sophisticated linguist and a man of letters open to dialogue.

IV. Bibliography

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