CHAPTER FOUR

A ‘PERIOD OF INTENSE CANONICAL PROCESS’: IMAGINATION AND THE STUDY OF THE ṢAHĪḤAH IN THE LONG FOURTH/TENTH CENTURY

Introduction

With the exception of Deuteronomy’s revelation to the court of King Josiah in II Kings, canonical texts do not fall intact from the heavens. Whether scriptural or literary, they pass through phases of use and study within a community before their canonization. Scripture must earn the devotion of a congregation before priests can declare it authoritative, and a body of critics must first study and explore literary works before dubbing them classics. Books are thus not written as canons. This status is bestowed upon them by a community engaged in a process of self-identification or authorizing institutions. The books of the New Testament were not all written as scripture, a role already played in early Christian communities by the Greek edition of the Hebrew Bible. What became the canonized New Testament was a diverse selection of writings used in services that eventually became widely recognized guides to Christian devotion. The usage of the word canon as ‘list’ in the first centuries CE originated in this roster of familiar books.¹ The books of the New Testament canon had therefore already proven effective at conveying a particular understanding of Christ’s mission to a certain audience.

This process of use and familiarization was not limited to passive reception. Paul’s canonical epistle to the Corinthian congregation (2 Corinthians) probably originally consisted of at least two separate letters written at different times and later pasted together for circulation amongst Paul’s churches.² Such editorial activity highlights the role of clerics or scholars in molding proto-canonical texts after they have left the hands of their authors. In the words of James Sanders, this “period

of intense canonical process” between the crafting of a text and the stabilization of a discrete canon represents a crucial interaction between text and audience. It is in these periods that audiences “shaped what they received in ways that rendered [the texts] most meaningful and valuable for them.”

Periods of intense canonical process are thus periods of intensive study. Before the emergence of a canon, texts must receive critical attention from scholars who catalog their contents, detail their merits and build around them that edifice of oral or written scholarship that distinguishes the familiar and valued from the banal or unknown. Beyond the valorization that a scholarly class bestows on written works, in pre-modern times intense study was required merely to produce a coherent text. The folkloric tradition of the Trojan War thrilled multitudes of small Greek audiences for most of the first millennium BCE. Yet as a scattered and diverse body of oral epic the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* could never have become classics of Hellenistic literature or cornerstones of the Western literary canon. The first ‘edition’ of the Homeric epics was produced by Antimachus of Colophon (fl. 410 BCE) after centuries of fermenting as an oral-formulaic tradition. In the great Hellenistic Library of Alexandria, scholars like Zenodotus of Ephesus (fl. 270 BCE) initiated the first studies of the Homeric epics, editing and collecting manuscripts, creating lexicons and producing a standardized vulgate tradition. Alexandrian scholarship on Homeric works continued unabated in the following decades, with great writers and critics such as Apollonius of Rhodes and Rhianus of Crete debating and producing critical editions. It was these relatively standardized texts that Hellenistic scholars declared the ‘canons’ of Greek language worthy of imitation.

Certain Muslim scholars recognized that an intensive familiarization with a text was a prerequisite for its canonization. Shāh Wāli Allāh of Delhi (d. 1762) felt that the treatment a book received after its composition was a crucial characteristic of a mainstay authentic ḥadīth collection. In addition to its author purposing a work of authentic ḥadīths and succeeding in that task, such a book must be studied, its rare or difficult (*ghariḥ*) words explained and its legal implications derived. It

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3 Sanders, 30.