CHAPTER SIX

THE ORIGINAL MEANING OF ARABIC WAZIR*

D. Sourdel, in his *Le vizirat ‘abbāside de 749 à 936 (132 à 324 de l’hégire)*, v. 1 (Damascus, 1959), p. 51, deals with the etymology of the word *wazir*: “L’étymologie du mot a retenu les philologues arabes dont les opinions ne méritent cependant pas de longs commentaires. Tandis qu’Ibn Qutayba (m. 276/889) fait dériver *wazir* de *wizr* ‘fardeau’ et le glose ‘celui qui porte le fardeau du pouvoir’, Abū Ishāq al-Zaḡţāg (m. 311/923) le rattaché à *wazar* ‘refuge’; plus tard, semble-t-il, se fait jour une nouvelle interprétation qui rattaché *wazir* à *izr* ‘dos’, sans qu’il soit jamais question d’un emprunt au persan. De ces explications, celle d’Ibn Qutayba est la plus plausible et *wazir* peut figurer comme un participe du verbe *wazara* qui signifie ‘porter un fardeau’.”

In this derivation of *wazir* from *wazara* “to carry a burden” and *wizr* “burden”, Sourdel follows de Goeje in Nicholson, *A literary history of the Arabs*, p. 256, and n. 2 (“burden-bearer”). Sourdel’s account of the various views of native philologists on the etymology of the word cannot be considered as complete. It omits the one etymology advocated by some of these philologists which, in this writer’s opinion, is the only correct one. *Wazir* appears in the Qur’ān in two passages in which Aaron is designated as *wazir* of his brother Moses: Sūra 21,30 and Sūra 25,37. Baidāwī, in his commentary on the first of these two passages (ed. Fleischer, I, p. 595) relates the various views of Arab philologists concerning the etymology of *wazir* as follows: ... *waštiqāgu l-*wazīrī ‘immā mina l-wizri li’annahū yaḥmilu l-tīqla ‘an ‘amīrīhi ‘au mina l-wazarī wahēva l-malğa’u li’anna l-*amīra ya’taṣimmu bira’yihī wayallāği’u fi ‘umūrīhī wa-minhu l-muwāzaratu waqīla ‘aṣlūhū ‘azīrūn mina l-*azri bita’na l-qūwati fa’ílun bima’nā muṣfā’īlin kal-*ašīri wal-ġalīsī qulībat hamzatuḥū ḥaqālbiḥā fī muwāzirin ... We translate that part of this statement which supplements Sourdel’s summary: “Some say: *wazir* is to be derived from *‘azir*, from *‘azr* in the sense of ‘strength’, [that is] *fa‘il* in the meaning of *muṣfā‘il* [hence: = *mu‘āzir* from

'ażara], like 'ašir [= mu‘āšir from ‘āšara] and ġalīs [= muġālīs from ġālasa]; and its hamza ('azir) was shifted [into w] (thus 'azir > wazir), as it (i.e., the hamza) has been shifted [into w] in muwāzir (< mu‘āzir)."

The derivation of wazir from wazara "to carry a burden" and wizr "burden" seems very far-fetched in view of the fact that we have, besides wazir, a verb wāzara and 'ażara, with the sense of "to help (someone)". Both variants just mentioned are substantiated by examples (see below). Wāzara must be considered as secondary as against 'ażara. The perfect wāzara has developed from forms of the imperfect and the participle like yuwāziru and muwāzir which, on their part, originated from yu'āziru and mu'āzir by way of a frequently occurring phonetic development. Cf. wāsā (equivalent in meaning with 'ażara, wāzara) beside the original 'āsā; wāsā is formed from yuwāsī, muwāsī < yu'āsī, mu'āsī; etc. Similarly, wazir—in place of a more original, not substantiable 'azir—must be considered as a new form which originated from yuwāziru and muwāzir. There seems to be no plausible reason to assume a connection of this verb with the meaning of "to help" with wazara "to carry a burden" and wizr "burden". We know of no other case in Arabic in which the concept of aid in war or other kinds of help which presuppose siding with a person or group is derived from the idea of "carrying a burden".

The relationship of wazir with 'ażara "to help" immediately leaps to the eye in comparing the following two passages. In Ibn Hišām’s Sīra, we read, in a passage which describes Ḥadiğa’s embracing of Islam (p. 155, 4 from bottom): wa‘āmanat bihi Ḥadiġatu bnaatu Ḥuwailidin wašā‘āqat bimā ġā‘ahū mina llāhi wa‘azarathu ‘alā ‘amrihi "and Ḥadiğa believed in him (that is, the Prophet) and recognized as true what had come to him from God and helped him (‘azarathu) in his mission (that is, in the propagation of Islam)." In another passage which describes Ḥadiğa’s death (ibid., p. 277, 7) we read: ʿumma ʿinna Ḥadiġata binta Ḥuwailidin wa‘Abū Ṭālibin halakā fi ‘āmin wāhidin ṣa‘atā‘at ‘alā rasūli llāhi l-maṣā‘ibu bihilki Ḥadiġata wakānat laḥū wazira ʿidqin ‘alā l-ISLĀMI ... waḥiḥulki a’mmīhī ‘Abī Ṭālibin ... "Thereupon Ḥadiğa, the daughter Ḥuwailid’s, and Abū Ģālib died in one year. And through Ḥadiğa’s death, who had been his (i.e., the Prophet’s) faithful assistant (wazir) in spreading Islam, and through the death of his uncle, Abū Ģālib, one blow of fate after another struck the Prophet.”