Introduction

The commentary studied in this article is ascribed to al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāhīm (d. 105/723), a scholar who was active in Khurāsān in the first century of Islam.1 As is the case with so many other early commentaries on the Qurʾān, the edition published by Muhammad Shukrī Ahmad al-Zāwiyyatī in 1999 in two volumes is actually a compilation of comments attributed to al-Ḍaḥḥāk by later sources. The fact that this Tafsīr is a compilation makes it difficult to decide directly about its authenticity. In this respect, it is no different from other collections, such as the ones attributed to Sufyān al-Thawrī or Mujāhid. In his study of the early sources, Herbert Berg distinguishes between two approaches to such material, the “sanguine” and the “skeptical” approach: the former uses the content and the chains of transmission in order to reconstruct the transmission history and ultimately to arrive at a reconstruction of the original texts. The latter rejects the use of the chains of transmission and assumes that all transmitted texts from the early period date from the end of the 2nd century of the Hijra at the earliest.2 In a recent study, entitled “The origins of Muslim exegesis: A debate”, Harald Motzki states that the difference between the two approaches is less radical than Berg assumes. On the basis of

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1 Abū Muḥammad al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāhīm al-Hilālī al-Khurāsānī was born around the year 20 A.H., probably in Balkh; he died in Khurāsān in 105/723 (according to some sources he died in 102 or 106). For an extensive list of biographical notices see the introduction to the edition, 43–4, n. 1; a study of al-Ḍaḥḥāk’s work by Muhammad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Basyūnī Ghurāb, Al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāhīm ḥayāṭuhu wa-manhajuhu fi l-tafsīr min khilāl marwiyyātihi fi Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī, Tanta, 2000, was not available to me.

an analysis of exegetical comments on Q. 15: 90–91, he states that—at
least in this case—both approaches arrive at an early dating, with a
temporal gap between them of at most fifty years. His own isnād-cum-
matn analysis leads him to date a particular textual fragment to the last
quarter of the 1st/7th century, while the “skeptical” approach would
place it in the second quarter of the 2nd/8th century. He concludes:

Both approaches can of course also exist side by side. One of them stud-
ies the sources exclusively as literary accounts, refraining from drawing
historical conclusions, the other examines the history of the sources on
the basis of all available evidence in order to distinguish earlier from
later texts.3

The approach taken here is more modest. It is based on the assump-
tion that the compiled database of comments—i.e. the collection of
comments ascribed to one particular scholar by later sources—may
serve as a starting point for the study of exegetical activities in the
early period of Islam. Of particular interest are traces of metalinguistic
awareness and grammatical terminology. The early exegetes worked in
a period when grammatical terminology had not yet been standardised
according to one predominant model, that of the Başran grammarians.
Consequently, later compilers tended to replace the “deviant” gram-
matical terminology they found in the early commentaries with their
own terms, for instance by using (Başran) jarr (genitive) rather than
(Kūfan) khafḍ. In such cases, the use of a term does not tell us much
about the availability and use of these terms in an earlier period. But
every so often, later compilers “forgot” to replace the terms because
they wished to preserve the integrity of the text. This is what hap-
pened to other commentaries from the early period, for instance those
of Muqātil, Mujāhid, Zayd b. ʿAlī, Muḥammad al-Kalbī and Sufyān
al-Thawrī.4

3 In: Harald Motzki (with Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort & Sean W. Anthony),
Analysing Muslim traditions: Studies in legal, exegetical and maghāzī ḥadīth, Leiden,
2010, 296. For the development of the discussions about authenticity see also Harald
Motzki, Die Anfänge der islamischen Jurisprudenz: Ihre Entwicklung in Mekka bis zur
Mitte des 2./8. Jahrhunderts, Stuttgart, 1991; id., “The question of the authenticity of
Muslim traditions reconsidered: A review article”, in: Herbert Berg (ed.), Method and
4 Kees Versteegh, Arabic grammar and Qurʾānic exegesis in early Islam, Leiden,
1993; for Zayd b. ʿAli’s commentary, see id., “Zayd ibn ʿAli’s commentary on the
Qurʾān”, in: Yasir Suleiman (ed.), Arabic grammar and linguistics, London, 1999; for