Muslim Social Values and Literary Criticism: Reflections on the Ḥadith of Umm Zarʿ

Rudolf Sellheim zum 65. Geburtstag

The lengthy Prophetic tradition known by its principal character as Ḥadīth Umm Zarʿ (UZ) describes in artful literary terms how eleven women praised or criticized their respective husbands. It found extraordinary attention in Muslim religion and literature and deserves, as I hope will become clear in the following pages, another look from the Orientalist point of view. It is not that there remains anything essential for me to contribute to what a multitude of Muslim scholars have said about it during the course of more than a millennium, but a discussion of it is clearly part of the Orientalists’ main task to promote a sound understanding of the intellectual history of Islam through the publication and interpretation of solid data from the sources, even if these data may be but insignificant drops in a vast ocean.

UZ, of which a tentative translation will be given in an appendix below, had the good fortune of becoming attached to the Prophet himself. The claim was made that the Prophet had compared himself to the (fictional) husband of a (fictional) Umm Zarʿ with respect to his own treatment of his beloved ʿĀʾishah—a comparison, by the way, recognized by Muslim scholars as rather ambiguous (see below, pp. 38 ff.). UZ was included by al-Bukhārī and Muslim in their collections soon to become the most authoritative ones for Sunni Islam.1 It entered the mainstream of the ḥadīth literature and was always commented on in detail by an endless chain of learned scholars who were obviously fascinated by it. From the outset, it also had the attention of philologists/historians who valued it as a precious, representative example of early Arabic prose literature. The process of combining all these aspects reached a high point in the monograph on UZ by Judge ʿIyāḍ in the first half of the 6th/12th century, entitled Bughyat ar-rāʾid li-mā taḍammanahū ḥadīth Umm Zarʿ min | al-fawāʾid, a true masterpiece of Muslim critical

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1 I have no information on the popularity of UZ in Shiʿite circles, if, as may be doubted, it found much attention there with its focus on ʿĀʾishah.
research. The scope of his work is summarized at the end (pp. 214 ff.) in these words:

Our discourse has dealt with fine remarks on scholarly disciplines and unusual aperçus on various kinds of literature. We have brought out here about twenty problems of jurisprudence and a similar number of problems of Arabic grammar and syntax. We have, moreover, mentioned much of what the commentators and interpreters of (UZ’s) meanings (ażhāb al-ma‘ānī) have said, and we have established what we consider more correct and produced, thanks to my knowledge and power of memory, much that has not been said before. In most of my linguistic remarks, I have

2 The text of ʿIyāḍ’s Bughyah I have before me indicates neither date nor town. The clearly Northwest African printing appears to have been reproduced in Cairo from an edition published in Morocco in 1975; the reprint is to be dated in 1983 (I owe this information to S. Samoeil and A. Zamouri). The edition includes, on pp. 217–233, as-Suyūṭi on UZ. On ʿIyāḍ’s work, see M. Talbi, Biographies Aghlabides extraites des Madārik du Cadi ʿIyāḍ, 17 f. (Tunis 1968). See also id., in EP, s.v. For an incidental reference to the Bughyah, see, for example, the Spaniard al-Balawī, Alif bāʾ, I, 41 (Būlāq 1287), who describes it as a “booklet (sifr ṣaghīr).” He refers to UZ as a source for the inclination toward joking and playfulness of the Prophet and the early Muslims, see below, n. 72.

It deserves notice that UZ was often treated in monograph form. In the bibliography given by Ibn Ḥajar in his Fatḥ, he expressly mentions some, cf. F. Rosenthal, “On medieval authorial bibliographies,” in the festschrift for J.A. Bellamy, 255–274 (Princeton 1993). A monograph entitled Rayʿ al-farʿ fī sharḥ hadith Umm Zarʿ was written by Ibn Nāṣir-ad-dīn (777–842/1375–1438), cf. as-Sakhāwī, Dawʾ, VIII, 104, line 20 (Cairo 1353–1355). Usually, quotations from authors of works not preserved can be assumed to be derived not from monographs but from commentaries on al-Bukhārī. Thus Ibn ad-Damāmīnī, of the same period, who is quoted by al-Qasṭallānī, was the author of a philological commentary on the Ṣaḥīḥ (as-Sakhāwī, Dawʾ, VII, 185, line 6 from bottom); since he was active as a litterateur, it would be interesting to know whether he had anything special to say about the literary character of UZ.

One famous scholar, the great ʿṬabarī, is unlikely to have been the author of a monograph on UZ, although he is listed as such in the Catalogue of the Manuscripts of the Köprülü Library, by Ramazan Şeşen and others, I, 551 (Istanbul 1404/1986), see also C. Gilliot, Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam: L’Exégèse coranique de Tabari, 67 (Paris 1990). My colleague G. Böwering was kind enough to obtain for me a microfilm of it. The few pages are certainly not something āt-Ṭabarī would have written (Majmūʿah 1080/3, fols. 155h–158h, dated 18 Rabīʿ II, 969/26 December 1561). Moreover, the younger Ibn al-Anbārī and the much later al-Jawhārī (Ṣiḥāḥ, IV, 1512 [Cairo 1377], for ūbāqū in statement VII) are quoted. It is rather unlikely that the Ṭabarī who played a role in the later transmission of Muslim could be meant. The sequence of the statements is the same as in al-Bukhārī/Muslim, but the proper names of the women are included.