THE QUR’AN AND THE PROPHET’S POET: 
TWO POEMS BY KA’B B. MĀLIK

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Qur’anic scholars have repeatedly deplored the absence of a body of literature engaged in direct interaction with the Qur’an and thus fit to shed credible light on the way the latter was received, appropriated, and understood within Muhammad’s lifetime. The following article argues that the immediate historical context from which the Qur’an emerged, and which it addressed, can be illuminated by recourse to the poetry contemporary with the Qur’an. In order to illustrate this claim, two poems of Ka’b b. Mālik—a Medinan poet who seems to have substantially contributed to legitimizing Muhammad’s politics at Medina—will be discussed.

Ka’b b. Mālik and his Generation

Ka’b b. Mālik belongs to the younger generation of poets living in the direct environment of Muhammad. He was probably born around 595 ce (about 27 before the Hijra) and grew up in Yathrib (Medina). Genealogically, he belonged to the tribe of al-Khazraj, who together with the Aws had conquered Medina a few generations before his birth and had subsequently become sedentary.¹

Even though these tribes had settled down permanently, their tribal heritage continued to imprint their everyday life. Rather than having fully embraced a “civic,” an urban way of life, their tribal code of honor and shame, their kinship relations and their dislike of any centralized hierarchy were still the determining factors of their social life. Even tribes that had become sedentary a much longer time ago, such as the Quraysh at Mecca, had remained Bedouin in many aspects. The form of social organization which was typical of settlements conquered by previously nomadic tribes, such as Mecca and Medina, was

¹ For his biography see Hāshimī, Ka’b b. Mālik, 51ff.; Diwān, 128ff.; Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, Kitāb al-aghānī, 15, 26–32.
the “inchoate early state”: having assimilated to urban life as much as necessary, they preserved not only their traditional value system but also the established medium for transmitting and revising their collective memory, namely, poetry.

As I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, the reluctance of the tribes to embrace Islam was not so much due to a conflict between *dīn* and *muruwwa*, in the sense of umbrella concepts for diverging ethical outlooks, but rather a conflict between *dīn* and tradition: Bedouin norms of behavior, as based upon the notions of honor and shame, were defined by tradition, whereas the concept of prophecy challenged this justification of values by recourse to tradition. Thus, it was a new kind of legitimacy accorded to certain values, rather than new values as such, that lay at the root of the conflict. An examination of the early panegyrics on the Prophet, such as those authored by Ka‘b b. Zuhayr or Ḥassān b. Thābit, reveals that the poets remain pre-Islamic in style, language, motives, and world view, even if they had already embraced Islam and probably were practicing Muslims. It is not an uncommon phenomenon that the earliest adherents of a new religious system, even though they may be acting according to the new rules, do not easily assume its new view of the world. Similarly, most of the poets in Muhammad’s environment continued to adhere to the pre-Islamic system of honor and shame rather than having profoundly changed their understanding of God, man, and the world.³

The younger generation of urban Arabs, however, was more likely to have an interest in breaking with traditional values, realizing that they could only profit from the social change that took place when Muhammad came to political power in Medina. Ka‘b b. Mālik may be considered as a poet representative of this younger generation who did not challenge the function of poetry as the established medium of preserving and revising values. Yet the values he proclaimed differed strongly from those endorsed by Ḥassān and his contemporaries.⁴ This change is paralleled by a noticeable difference in language and style: Poets such as Ka‘b b. Mālik, who were in close contact with the Prophet, were distinctly influenced by the diction, motives, and world view of the Qur’an.

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³ See Imhof, *Religiöser Wandel*, esp. the chapter on Ḥassān b. Thābit (159–218) and passim.