THE QORAN AND JOCULAR LITERATURE

BY

ULRICH MARZOLPH

Seminar für Arabistik und Akademie der Wissenschaften, Göttingen

The Ḥanbalite theologian and traditionary Ibn al-Ḡawzī in his entertaining study on stupid people (Aḥbār al-Ḥamqā wal-muğaffalān) on the authority of a certain Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥarbi1 relates the following anecdote:

Ibrāḥīm b. al-Ḥašīb was stupid (ahmaq). He owned a donkey, and whenever the people at night provided their steeds with a nosebag, he would take his donkey’s nosebag, recite above it the qoranic verse: «Say: He is God, One.» (Q 112:1).2 Then he would attach the empty bag to the animal while remarking: “May God curse anybody who thinks that a measure (kaylaḏo) of barley is better than the verse «Say: He is God, One.».” He continued to do so until his donkey died, whereupon he exclaimed: “By God, I never would have thought that the verse «Say: He is God, One!» kills donkeys! By God, I am sure it is even more lethal for humans, so I will not recite it again as long as I live!”3

This anecdote is the Islamicized version of a joke first attested in the post-classical Greek collection Philogelos where it is mentioned that an egghead (scholastikos) wanted to teach his donkey not to eat anything at all, so he did not supply it with fodder. When the donkey had starved to death, the stupid man remarked: “What a pity. Just as it had learned

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1 Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥarbi is also mentioned in al-Ḥusṭī, Ġamʿ al-ḡawāhir, ed. ʿA. M. al-Biḡawī, Cairo, 1372/1953, p. 195 (two anecdotes, the second anecdote of which is quoted in Ulrich Marzolph, Arabia ridens, Die humoristische Kurzprosa der frühen adab-Literatur im internationalen Traditionsgefl echt, I-II, Frankfurt am Main, 1992, at vol. 2, no. 501).
3 Ibn al-Ḡawzī, Aḥbār al-Ḥamqā wal-muğaffalān, ed. K. al-Muṣṭafār, 147; see Marzolph, Arabia ridens, II, no. 674, quoting one earlier version in at-Taḥdīdī, al-باشر ir, ed. W. al-Qāḍī, IV, p. 110, no. 354; cf. also Arabia ridens, II no. 973 (“Do not tell the horse I allowed you to feed it!”).
4 The English translation follows Andreas Thierfelder, Philogelos: Der Lachfreund, von Hierokles und Philagrios, Griechisch-deutsch mit Einleitungen und Kommentar heraus-
not to eat anything at all, it died!" The anecdote continued to be popular in the oral tradition of various European regions until the twentieth century, but the European versions differ decisively from the quoted Arabic version: The butt of the European versions clearly is the stupid man who does not feed his donkey at all and still expects it to live and work. The Islamicized version in general follows this outline, but it adds another ingredient: After all, the donkey is being fed—even if “only” by oral recitation—a qoranic verse. So, in some ways, the target of the joke has shifted, from the obvious stupidity of an interchangeable simpleton who ignores a basic presupposition of animal life to a more specific situation, resulting in a punchline that risks insinuating the conscious discrediting of the Muslim scripture.

But does the anecdote really make fun of the Qoran? Does it degrade the Muslim scripture to a mere requisite sharing the absurdity of the anecdote’s protagonist? Is the anecdote about the man who fed his donkey a qoranic verse an “anti-qoranic” anecdote? The obvious answer to these questions is: No, certainly not. Any consideration of humor about the Qoran from a Muslim point of view is strictly out of question and Ibn al-Ğaużi would certainly not have included any such anecdote in his collection. Joking about God and His divine revelation is blasphemy, and people daring to do so would be regarded as apostates in a way similar to the British Muslim author Salman Rushdie being condemned for satirizing the prophet Mohammad in his 1988 novel The Satanic Verses. The relevant passage in Rushdie’s book does not, by the way, necessarily derive from his own imagination. Already in 1767, Frances Sheridan in his Nourjahad, a moral tale in the Oriental mode,