MÉTHODES ET DÉBATS

CHARACTER AND AUTHENTICITY OF THE MUSLIM TRADITION ON THE LIFE OF MUHAMMAD

BY

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A comprehensive discussion of my book Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds, by Herbert Berg, appeared in Journal of the American Oriental Society 119 (2), 1999, pp. 315-317. This discussion seems at first sight to be thorough and professional, and it is to be commended that the criticism raised by the reviewer is presented in a tone which is moderate and not polemical.

This positive initial impression dwindles, however, when Berg’s remarks are put under the magnifying glass. It is then seen that his discussion exhibits not only errors of fact as well as errors and imprecision in the portrayal of my methodology, my argumentation and my results, but also that he has failed to explicitly point out the primary instrument of my investigation and the most important arguments for the “middle position” I maintain on the question of the authenticity of early Islamic tradition, let alone discussed them in detail.

As regards the primary instrument of my investigation, it consists in the compilation of complete corpora of traditions; in the present case, in particular all existant versions of two traditions traced back to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (the first revelatory experience of Muḥammad and the narrative of the slander of ‘Ā’ishā [scandal story]). For assessing the isnāds, suffice it to say here that their correctness—including the correctness of the common link that they display—is not just simply accepted, but rather tested in the investigation against the texts (mutān). The analy-

sis of the texts is done analogously to the investigation of manuscripts whose interdependence is to be ascertained: interdependencies are determined from the structure (abbreviations, additions, gaps) and wording of these texts. If the text analyses show that the isnâeds correctly indicate the interdependencies and that all of the present versions indeed lead back to a common archetype—the common link of the isnâeds—then—and only then—can it be regarded as proved that the tradition was disseminated by the transmitter who turned out to be the common link. The content (generally, however, not the exact wording) of the tradition spread by the common link transmitter can then be approximately determined by means of the diverse, often considerably differing, further transmissions of this tradition.

In a fundamental treatment of my theses, which is what Berg wanted to accomplish, the instrument of the corpus, its compilation, examination and evaluation needed absolutely to have been clearly pointed out and discussed. This instrument, or rather the correct handling of it, is a protection against arbitrary assessments of individual traditions; as it enables the comparison of texts, it very often allows the distinguishing of good transmissions of a tradition from bad ones, it identifies adulterations of texts and forgeries, it shows the mutual core of a tradition which developed differently through different transmitters, etc.

After the presentation of my most important scientific instrument, my main argument will be expounded and clearly emphasized in the following: The total corpus of traditions traced back to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (died ca. 712 A.D.) must in great part be seen as being “genuine”, i.e. the overwhelming majority of these reports do indeed have their origins with ‘Urwa. (Whether the contents of ‘Urwa’s traditions are historical in each case is another matter). A test of genuineness is always possible when an individual tradition attributed to ‘Urwa has been further transmitted by his two primary transmitters, his son Hišām and his master pupil al-Zuhrī. A substantial portion of the ‘Urwa traditions has in this way undergone a “two-tracked” transmission (sometimes a third transmission is even found). A comparison of texts of the same tradition in the two (or three) transmissions leads more often than not to the result that 1. both texts have indeed been transmitted independently of one another (they always have an “own face”) and 2. they indeed can be traced back to a common source, namely ‘Urwa. (The corpus does however also allow for the recognition of erroneous attributions, fraudulent traditions and forgeries!) But since ‘Urwa—as the son of one of the first disciples and close relatives of the Prophet and