Another Contribution to Koranic Exegesis

The Sūra of the Poets (XXVI)*

Sūra XXVI is the locus classicus for the study of Islam's attitude to poetry. In a previous contribution,1 the present writer has analyzed three of the crucial verses on the poets, namely, vv. 224, 225, 227, and postponed the analysis of the best known of the four verses, v. 226, for a future contribution. Since then some relevant works have appeared on the subject2 and one major article has come to the knowledge of the present writer, which had not been published when the typescript of CKE was already in press.3 These are necessary to discuss and the careful examination of the views expressed in these works have convinced the present writer more than ever of the importance of arriving at a correct exegesis of these four elusive verses, so seemingly simple and yet fraught with difficulties and puzzles. Even the most cursory reading of the commentaries on these verses in tafsīr works reveals the many, often conflicting, interpretations given, for instance, to verse 224 by the early Muslims, from which later muḥallāt, taking the line of least resistance or swayed by some other reason, chose what became the conventional one.

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2 Notably F. Gabrieli, "Religious Poetry in Early Islam", in Arabic Poetry: Theory and Development, ed. G. E. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden, 1973), pp. 5-17; and "La poésie religieuse de l'ancien Islam", in REI, XL1, fasc. 1, (1973), pp. 7-17; henceforth cited as RP and PR respectively; PR consists of four lectures delivered at the Collège de France and printed in REI, but only the first lecture cited above is relevant to discuss in this article; Michael Zwettler, The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: its Character and Implications, (Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1978), henceforth cited as OT. Some valuable work on the general theme of early Islam and poetry has appeared in Arabic by the Iraqi scholar Dr. Yahyā al-Jubūrī, but it is only indirectly relevant to the theme of this article.

3 See R. Blachère's "La poésie dans la conscience de la première génération musulmane", in Annales Islamologiques (Cairo), IV, 1963, pp. 93-103; henceforth cited as PC. CKE appeared in print in 1965, consequently the author of PC could not avail himself of the intensive analysis of verses 224, 225, 227, and the new interpretations given to them in CKE.
In the case of 226, the poets themselves gave vogue to a peculiar interpretation in order to escape punishment and the *mufassirün* swallowed this, but what suited the poet al-Farazdaq and appealed to the Caliph Sulaymān* in the interpretation of verse 226 should not nowadays necessarily count or form an element in the exegetical effort to unlock the secrets of this verse.

Without a correct understanding of these crucial verses in the *sūra* of the poets, three important chapters in the history of Arabic civilization will remain in an unsatisfactory condition:* one in Koranic exegesis, another in Arabic literary criticism and theory, and a third in the rise and development of Arabic Muslim religious poetry. Only an intensive analysis of these verses will uncover the difficulties which these verses present and only a full confrontation with all these difficulties can result in an accurate exegesis. The present study will, therefore, address itself not only to a close examination of verse 226, but also to making further observations on the verses already analyzed in *CKE*, 224, 227, taking into account recent work on the subject.

I. Al-Ğāwūnā

### A

The argument for the new interpretation of *al-ğāwūnā* presented in *CKE* (pp. 566-69) may be supplemented with the following observations:

1. The still-current translation of verse 224 which conceives of *al-ğāwūnā* as an erring group of human beings following the poets does not correspond with the facts of pre-Islamic Arab literary and social life, in which there was no place for poets with followers. The utter improbability of this presumed situation was felt by one of the exegetes, 'Ali b. Ibrāhīm, who apparently could not help exclaiming, "Have you ever seen a poet followed by anyone?"*6

2. In addition to what has been said in a different context about the Prophet’s exclamatory remark on Zuhayr and his *shaytān* (*CKE*, p. 574, n. 2), there is a *hadith* included in the two *Sahīhs* recording another of his exclamatory remarks when he saw a poet in al-‘Arj: “Get hold of the *shaytān*”.*7 This may be added to others not only on the Arab conception

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*5* Some of the cultural dimensions of the problems raised by these verses were explored in *CKE*, pp. 563-64.


*7* This is the opening sentence of the *hadith*, often quoted as evidence of Muhammad’s hostility towards poetry but without this opening part; for a detailed discussion of it, see