



EBN QOTAYBA, ABŪ MOḤAMMAD ‘ABD-ALLĀH

EBN QOTAYBA, ABŪ MOḤAMMAD ‘ABD-ALLĀH b. Moslem DĪNAVARĪ, (213-276/828-889), important early philologist in the widest sense of the term and author of numerous works on what is known as the “Arab sciences,” including the religious sciences dealing with the Qur’ān and Hadith.

Of the *nesbas* ascribed to him, only Dīnavarī appears to occur in self-reference, namely at the beginning of the *‘Oyūnal-akbār* and the *Ma‘ānī al-še‘r* (this may, however, merely be a scribal addition) and even more uncertain, in the transmission history of his *al-Masā‘el wa’l-ajweba*. It is supposed to go back to his long-term judgeship in **Dīnavar** (Bīrūnī, *Āṭār*, p. 238, refers to him as al-Jabalī). Other *nesbas* such as Marvazī or Kūfī reflect a search for biographical data. In later literature, he is sometimes cited as Qotabī or Qotaybī.

The dates for his lifetime show minor variants but are generally accepted as indicated. Although he is listed in all relevant and general biographical works, practically no biographical information is available, except for the circumstances of his death. The reason may be that the collection of data of scholarly biography in or close to a humanist’s lifetime was not yet as routine as it soon became. Oral authorities for his biography from his lifetime are very few; anecdotes involving him are almost non-existent. He appears to have been born in Kūfa rather than Baghdad, where he spent most of his life except for the years of his judgeship in Dīnavar and a doubtful brief *maḏālem*



appointment to Baṣra (Dahabī). No legal *madḥab* is indicated for him. He seems to have been inclined to Malekism. His son Aḥmad (whose son ‘Abd-al-Wāḥed is also recorded) held the Malekite judgeship in Egypt for three months before his death in Rabī‘ I, 322/February-March 934. Aḥmad functioned as the premier transmitter of his father’s works.

Ebn Qotayba’s views on past and contemporary intellectual conditions can be partly reconstructed from his works. Those views no doubt contributed to some early negative opinions on him. He appears in full agreement with what was later known as the orthodoxy of Ebn Ḥanbal, his elder by only one generation. He was clearly opposed to *kalām* and Mu‘tazilite thought. Yet, he was very much his own man and cannot be pigeonholed into categories which in his time were not as firmly set as they were later thought to have been.

A most remarkable passage occurs in his work on Šo‘ūbīya tendencies, published in part as *Ketāb al-‘Arab* in the *Rasā‘el al-bolaḡā’* (ed. M. Kord ‘Alī, Cairo, 1331/1913, p. 278). The work’s title is given variously, as fixed titles were unusual in Ebn Qotayba’s time (see Bīrūnī, *Āṭār*, p. 238). In it, he seems to refer, if the text is correctly understood, to his own Persian (*‘ajam*) descent and declares himself to be by nature not prejudiced for or against either Arabs or Persians. His father or family seems, indeed, to have come from Marv (hence the *nesba* Marvazī). He himself was, however, an eloquent spokesman for Arab civilization and in intellectual makeup was totally committed and assimilated to it. He often quotes the “Books of the Persians” for historical information as well as wisdom sayings and stories, occasionally using more precise titles such as *Sīar al-‘Ajam*, *Ketāb al-ā‘īn* (see *Ā‘ĪN-NĀMA*), or *Ketāb al-tāj*. They were available to him in their Arabic recensions, and such quotations were nothing extraordinary in his time and environment. The same applies to his limited use of Persian words. There is no indication that he was more familiar with Persian than his contemporaries in Iraq, but we have to assume that he knew the language and was able to communicate in it. He expressed more positive or neutral than negative attitudes toward things Persian; occasionally, he would associate the ‘Ajam with something he basically disliked such as philosophy (*falsafa*, see the beginning of *Ketāb al-anwā’*, where he no doubt understood ‘Ajam as Persians, not Greeks). His pronounced interest in cultural interaction, as also exemplified, for instance, by his many quotations from Jewish and Christian Scriptures (cf. H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, Princeton, 1992, pp. 79f.), is generally imbued with fairness.



The laudatory epithet *ṣāḥeb al-taṣānīf* “author of (many well-known) works” is characteristically applied to him in biographical notices. His writings, rich in insights and information, are preserved to a large extent and, while often not the first to deal in detail with their subjects, they have had lasting influence as early sources. Many of them have programmatic introductions that give some insight into their author’s thinking. His handbook for government officials on linguistic skill, *Adab al-kāteb*, was considered a model of its genre (one of the four basic works in the field of literature according to Ebn Ǧaldūn) and extensively commented upon. Its introduction discusses the right approach to knowledge in general and to the secretary’s profession, while the main text, as was no doubt considered appropriate by the author, is concerned exclusively with lexicography arranged according to subject matter, orthography, and noun and verbal formations in their relation to meaning. The *Ketāb al-še’r wa’l-šo’arā’* (ed. A. Šāker, 2 vols., Cairo, 1364-69/1945-50), listing biographies and poems of individual poets, has found much attention for its lengthy introduction which rejects the dogma of the superiority of ancient over modern poetry, elaborates on the limitations of literary criticism, and calls for impartiality in its exercise (for a brief overview of the debate on the meaning of the introduction, see S. A. Bonebakker, “Poets and Critics in the Third Century A. H.,” in G. E. von Grunebaum, ed., *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, Wiesbaden, 1970, pp. 86-111). The introduction of the large *adab* encyclopedia *Oyūn al-aḳbār* (ed. A. Zakī ‘Adawī, Cairo, 1343-48/1925-30) makes the point that the work is addressed to all kinds of readers, and it contains a plea for ethics and politics having their proper places in the entertaining literature just as stories and amusing material (cf. G. Lecomte’s tr. in *Mélanges à la mémoire de Philippe Marçais*, Paris, 1985, pp. 171-80).

The topics recurring in poetry are exhaustively assembled and discussed in the *Ketāb al-ma’ānī al-še’r* (2 vols., Hyderabad, 1368/1949). Important essays on wine drinking (*Ketāb al-ašreba*, ed. M. Kord ‘Alī, Damascus, 1366/1947) and, especially, the ancient Arabian lottery game (*Ketāb al-mayser wa’l-qedāḥ*, ed. M. Ǧaṭīb, Cairo, 1343/1924), while carefully dealing with the religious prohibitions, principally present the relevant information from poetry and anecdotes. The *Ketāb al-anwā’* (ed. M. Hamidullah and Ch. Pellat, Hyderabad, 1956) studies the astral terminology of the ancient Arabs as well as atmospheric phenomena mainly as enshrined in poetry (P. Kunitzsch, in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* XI, pp. 246 f.).

His large lexicographical works on the Qur’ān and Hadith are likewise to be



understood as works of philology but foreshadowing his growing interest in a more profound penetration into their subject matter. This process culminated in the *Ta’wīl ektelāf (moḵtalef) al-ḥadīṭ*, which undertakes the defense of Hadith scholars against attacks based upon supposedly contradictory traditions and other conflicts in the religious writings.

A concise survey of world history, *Ketāb al-ma’āref* (ed. T. ‘Okāša, Cairo, 1960) is rather singular in the Ebn Qotayba canon, but it also enjoyed tremendous popularity. Its treatment of Persian material, especially in the concluding chapter on the Persian kings, is too brief to support the assumption that the information it offers is in any way unusual.

Some of the works circulating under his name have been recognized as not being by him. Most prominent among them is the much reprinted *Ketāb al-sīāsa wa’l-emāma* of unknown authorship (cf. *Ketāb talqīn al-mota’allem al-naḥw*; see *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain d’Études Orientales* 20, 1991, p. 325).

See also [ADAB](#).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For cited works not given in detail, see “Short References.”)

The watershed in modern Ebn Qotayba studies is marked by the many fundamental books and articles of Gérard Lecomte, especially *Ibn Qutayba. L’homme, son ōuvre, ses idées*, Damascus, 1965. See also his translation of the *Ektelāf* as *Le traité des divergences du Ḥadīṭ*, Damascus, 1962, and his article “Ibn Qutayba” in *EI*² III, pp. 844-47. Of now obsolete treatments, we may mention Brockelmann, *GAL*, S I, pp. 184-87; I. M. Huseini, *The Life and Works of Ibn Qutayba*, Beirut, 1950; and the introduction of A. Ṣaqr’s ed. of *Ta’wīl moṣkel al-Qor’ān*, Cairo, 1373/1954, repr. 1393/1973.

Biographical notices printed after Lecomte are again little productive: cf. Dahabī, *Ta’rīḵ al-Eslām*, ed. ‘O. ‘Abd-al-Salām Tadmorī, Cairo, 1412/1992, XXIV,



pp. 381-83; Şafadī, *Wāfi*, ed. D. Krawulsky, Wiesbaden, 1402/1982, XVII, pp. 607-09.

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M. J. Kister, "The Interpretation of Dreams, an Unknown Manuscript of Ibn Qutayba's *Ībārat al-ru'yā*," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4, 1974, pp. 67-103.

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J. Sadan, "Nouveaux documents sur scribes et copistes," *Revue des études islamiques* 45/1, 1977, pp. 41-87 (on *al-kaṭṭ wa'l-qalam* connected to Ebn Qotayba).

For some general works on Ebn Qotayba, see M. R. Jarbī, *Ebn Qotayba wa maqāyīsoh al-balāḡīya wa'l-naqḍīya*, Tripoli, 1393/1984, and the discussion and reprinting of *al-Ekṭelāf fi'l-lafẓ wa'l-radd 'ala'l-Jahmīya wa'l-Mošabbaha*, by K. Koṭayṭ, Beirut, 1990.

Cf., further, Sezgin, *GAS*, indexes of all volumes published so far and, in particular, III, p. 376; IV, p. 344; VII, pp. 350 f.; VIII, pp. 161-65; IX, pp. 154-58, p. 246.