



RĀĠEB EŞFAHĀNI

RĀĠEB EŞFAHĀNI, Abul’-Qāsem Ḥosayn b. Moḥammad b. Mofaẓẓal (d. early 5th/11th cent.), scholar, littérateur, and author of works on Islamic ethics, Qur’anic exegesis, Islamic theology, and Arabic philology, as well as anthologies. Next to nothing is known about his life, since he is hardly mentioned in major biographical dictionaries; and if he is mentioned at all, it is without any essential data, neither do his own works, several of which are extant, offer significant clues about him. The lack of information is illustrated by the remark of Šams-al-Din Moḥammad Ḍahabi (d. ca. 749/1348), who expressed hopes that Rāġeb might be still alive (Ḍahabi, XVIII, p. 121). It is often stated, without any clear evidence, that he died in 502/1108 (e.g., Ḥāji Ḳalifa, s.v. *Mofradāt alfāẓ al-Qor’ān*), and one source places his death in 565/1169-70, but Wilferd Madelung’s study has confirmed that Rāġeb lived “in the first part of the fifth century” (Soyuṭi, II, p. 297). Nevertheless, the later date still persists in many modern publications. Rāġeb cites in his Arabic anthology *Moḥāẓarāt al-odabā’* (1999, I, p. 152) some of his own verses that were addressed to a certain Abu’l-Qāsem b. Abi’l-‘Alā’, who has been identified by Madelung as the poet Abu’l-Qāsem Ġānem b. Moḥammad b. Abi’l-‘Alā’ Eşfahāni, who belonged to the circle of Şāḥeb b. ‘Abbād (d. 385/995). This identification is supported by the fact that Rāġeb’s anthology contains many quotations from the same period and the same circle, whereas later poets, even famous ones such as Abu’l-‘Alā’ Ma’arri, are wholly absent. One may assume on the evidence of Rāġeb’s *nesba* that he was born in Isfahan. It is said, again without any supporting evidence, that he lived in Baghdad (Esmā’il Pasha, I, col. 311), but it is not known if he was active elsewhere. The scarcity



of data about him seems to suggest that he was not attached to any important patrons. That he knew Persian seems likely, but it is not known if Persian was his native tongue, since all his extant works are written in Arabic. A few very short passages in Persian are found in his anthology *Moḥāzarāt al-odabā'*, however (1999, I, p. 242).

Soyuṭi, who calls him (wrongly, it seems) al-Mofaẓẓal b. Moḥammad al-Eşbahāni al-Rāġeb and who includes him in his dictionary of grammarians and philologists, lists three of his works, including *Mofradāt al-Qor'ān*, *Afāni al-balāġa*, and *al-Moḥāzarāt*. He also adds that he used to believe, with many others, that Rāġeb was a Mo'tazelite until he found that the celebrated theologian Faḵr-al-Din Moḥammad Rāzi (d. 606/1209), had considered him a leading scholar of the Sunna to be linked with [Abu Hāmed Moḥammad Ġazāli](#); in fact Rāġeb does attack Mo'tazelite and Shi'ite views in some of his works (Rowson, p. 390; Mohamed, p. 62). Linking him with Mo'tazilite ideas is, in a sense, understandable, since he stresses the role of reason, particularly in his works on ethics (see, e.g. Fakhry, pp. 179-81).

The three works mentioned by Soyuṭi belong to the philological and literary side of Rāġeb's production. The first, more often entitled *Mofradāt alfāz al-Qor'ān*, is a very useful alphabetical dictionary of Qor'anic Arabic; it has been printed several times and even exists in a modern shortened version for students. It has been described by Badr-al-Din Moḥammad Zarkaši (d. 794/1392) as one of the best works on Qor'anic lexicography, in that the author "hunts the meanings from the context," taking into account fine nuances of meaning and connotations. Thus he notes, for instance, that the word *qalb* "heart" is always associated with reason (*'aql*) and knowledge (*'elm*), whereas *şadr* "breast" may also refer to emotions such as lust and anger; or that whenever the word "mouth" is used in connection with speaking, it implies lying. Another, much shorter work that combines lexicographic and semantic interests with religion (Qur'an and dogmatics) is his *Resālat fi dekr al-wāḥed wa'l-aḥad*, in which he deals with the two divine epithets (*al-wāḥed* "the one" and *al-aḥad* "the only") and their difference.

The second work mentioned by Soyuṭi is unknown and may have been a treatise on rhetorical figures, although it is possible that it is identical with the extant *Majma' al-balāġa*, which in turn can probably be identified with *Ketāb al-ma'āni al-akbar*, listed by Ḥāji Ḳalifa (V, p. 616; Rowson, p. 389). This work is an equally useful thesaurus of Arabic literary idioms, expressions, synonyms, paraphrases, metaphors and tropes, all thematically arranged. It is organized



in seventeen chapters, each one divided into many subdivisions, including reason (*‘aql*) and its antithesis, speech, war, love, beauty and ugliness, food and drink, marriage and divorce, piety, heaven, stars, etc., animals, etc. The work overlaps to some extent with *Moḥāẓarāt al-odabā’ wa-moḥāwarāt al-šo‘arā’ wa’l-bolaḡā’*, the third book mentioned by Soyūṭi, which is one of the outstanding anthologies of Arabic poetry and prose in the tradition of *‘Oyun al-aḡbār* of Ebn Qotayba (d. 276/889) and *al-‘Eqd al-farid* of Ebn ‘Abd Rabbeh (d. 328/940). Ḥāji Ḳalifa (s.v. *Moḥāẓarāt al-odabā’*) calls it a main source in its genre. It has been published several times and also exists in a drastically curtailed and expurgated modern version, apparently for the use of students. According to Ḥāji Ḳalifa (ibid.), there existed also an earlier abridged version that was made in the Ottoman Empire by a certain Maḥmud b. Moḥammad, but it is not known to be extant. A critical and properly indexed edition is still sorely lacking. Like *Majma’ al-balāḡa*, it is thematically subdivided. The twenty-five chapters, called *ḥodud*, each of which is subdivided into numerous sections dealing with intellectual and moral virtues and their opposites, and also treating human behavior and relationships such as love and marriage (in separate chapters, nos. 13 and 15) as well as more concrete subjects such as eating, drinking, clothing, animals, and human body. One chapter (no. 16) is devoted to bawdiness (*mojun*), obscene, and scatological themes. As is usual in such anthologies, the author’s presence is mostly limited to the selection and arrangement of the material. Thesis and antithesis provide the major organizing principle; thus a section on speech and silence in the first chapter (on reason, knowledge, ignorance, etc.) quotes statements preferring speech and prolixity to silence, followed by its opposite in praise of listening. The implicit view of the compiler is obvious from the order of the sections and their relative lengths.

Rāḡeb, as the writer on ethics, is no less important than Rāḡeb the philologist. Some of his works on ethics are lost or remain unpublished, such as a treatise on “rules of conduct for intercourse with people” (*Resālat fi ādāb moḡālaṡat al-nās*), but two important titles are preserved and have been edited. The better known of the two is *al-Ḍari‘a elā makārem al-šari‘a*. In his introduction the author explains that, besides the legal rulings and judgments (*aḡkām*) of Islamic law, one ought to know its *makārem*, that is, the underlying ethical foundations of the law (p. 58). The book discusses in detail what being human implies, with chapters on the several moral and intellectual virtues and vices and their relationship with the human faculties. He stresses the close links between ethics, worship (*‘ebāda*), and social virtues, which he calls *‘emārat al-*



arż (e.g., p. 93, cf. the chapter on crafts and trades, pp. 374-415). Zahir-al-Din Bayhaqī (d. 565/1169-70) says with some justification that Rāġeb “combined the Islamic law (*šari‘a*) and philosophy (*ḥekma*) in his works” (p. 112). It is obvious that Rāġeb is influenced both by Greek ethics and by his Muslim predecessors, but it is striking that he virtually never quotes or refers to earlier authors, which gives a strong impression of independence and originality. He does, however, quote the Qur’an very frequently, as well as Hadith and some poetry. With these characteristics and with its fusion of philosophy and religion the work differs, for instance, from Abu ‘Ali Aḥmad Meskawayh’s famous *Tahḏib al-aḳlāq*, which is strongly “Greek” in its outlook, and regularly quotes Aristotle and other philosophers while ignoring the Qur’an, Hadith, and Arabic poetry; and also from Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Ali Māwardī’s *Adab al-donyā wa’l-din*, which is far less philosophical and more literary and anthological, containing much poetry and anecdotal material without the more discursive style of Rāġeb. Ġazālī admired the *Ḍari‘a* and used it extensively, often quoting passages verbatim, though without acknowledging his source, in several of his works, especially his *Mizān al-‘amal* and his *magnum opus*, the influential *Eḥyā’ olum al-din*. According to Madelung’s estimation (p. 153), as much as half of *Mizān al-‘amal* is derived from Rāġeb’s *Ḍari‘a*, and much of it also found its way into Ġazālī’s later *Eḥyā’ olum al-din*, where it is incorporated in mystical ethics.

A related work is the shorter *Tafṣil al-naš‘atayn wa-taḥṣil al-sa‘ādatayn*, in which the two “births” or “growths” (*naš‘atayn*) refer to birth on earth and rebirth in the hereafter (see e.g. Qur’an 53:47, 56:61-62) and the two kinds of happiness (*sa‘ādatayn*) are those associated with both lives. Again, the Qur’an, Hadith, and poetry are quoted, but other authorities are almost totally absent, and, just as in the *Ḍari‘a*, Rāġeb explains in detail what being human implies; the word *al-ensān* “human being” is so much a key word in the entire text that it prompted a modern editor (Najjār) to use it as a subtitle on the title-page.

Of Rāġeb’s commentary on the Qur’an, which Majd-al-Din Moḥammad Firuzābādi (p. 91) has called a “large *tafsir* in ten books, extremely well executed,” only the beginning has been published, comprising the *Fāteḥa* and the first five verses of the chapter (*sura*) *al-Baqara*, together with Rāġeb’s important introduction (*Moqaddemat jāme‘ al-tafāsir*) on the semantics and the methodology of Qur’anic exegesis. This introduction includes sections on, for instance, ambiguity, apparent contradiction, figurative versus non-figurative speech, the difference between *tafsir* and *ta’wil* (allegorical or esoteric

exegesis), logical argumentation in the Qur'an, and its inimitability (*e'jāz*). Rāġeb's treatise on Islamic dogmatic theology, which seems to have been entitled *Taḥqīq al-bayān fī ta'wil al-Qorān*, has been edited twice as *Resāla fī'l-e'teqād* and *al-E'teqādāt*.

Several other titles are attributed to Rāġeb (see editors' introductions to *Mofradāt*, pp. 2-6, and to *Resalat fī dekr al-wāḥed wa'l-aḥad*, pp. 19-23, who mention 23 and 20 titles, respectively), some of which are extant in manuscript, while others are known only by their titles. These lists may not even be complete, for they do not list, for instance, the *Maqāmāt*, which is mentioned by Firuzābādī (p. 91). Nothing is known about these *maqāmāt*, but if the attribution is correct, it would make Rāġeb an early representative of this important genre in Arabic literature.

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