

‘Umar II and His Epistle against the Qadariya*

In his *Ḥilyat al-auliya*’ Abū Nu‘aim finishes his chapter dedicated to ‘Umar b. ‘Abdal‘azīz with a letter (*kitāb*) addressed by the caliph to a group of people who “had written”, as he says, “unseemly things”; they had “rejected (certain statements of) the Holy Scripture, they had denied the efficiency of (God’s) Decrees (founded) in His prescience ..., and they had criticized the Religion of God and the *sunna* of the Prophet valid in his community” (v 346 ff.). The people meant are Qadarites, although the term itself is not yet used. The treatise is not very well attested; Ibn Sa’d does not mention it in his biography of the caliph (*Ṭabaqāt* 242 ff.) nor do Ṭabarī or Balāḍurī. Some excerpts are found in the *Manāqib ‘Umar b. ‘Abdal‘azīz* by Ibn al-Ġauzī (37, 6 ff. Becker), but they are apparently taken from Abū Nu‘aim. The early *Sīrat ‘Umar b. ‘Abdal‘azīz* written by ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abdalḥakam (died 214/825) and preserved in the redaction of the latter’s son Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh (died in 268/882) does not, in its printed version, refer to the letter; but the Istanbul manuscript of the work contains the complete text in loose connection with the book itself (Ahmet III 2906, fol. 99^b–105^a). Once again this might be taken from Abū Nu‘aim, because the preceding *isnād* corresponds precisely to the one he mentions and this goes far beyond the time of Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam. The *isnād* contains some rather famous *muḥaddiṭūn*; but unfortunately the first two transmitters are completely untraceable in our biographical sources.

On the other hand, there are testimonies which seem to speak in favor of a wider circulation of the document. ‘Abdalqāhir al-Baġdādī mentions in his *Uṣūl ad-dīn* ‘Umar’s efficient refutation of the Qadariya, and calls him therefore the first theologian of the *ahl-as-sunna* (307, 11 f.); the Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī had got the *iğāza* for such a book in Damascus (cf. GAS 1/594). Ġāḥiẓ notes the fact that ‘Umar wrote | books about the *qadar* “in the way of the Ġahmīya”, which means when said by a Mu‘tazilite, “with deterministic tendency” (*Rasā’il* [Cairo 1933] 90 and 106; cf. Abbott, *Arabic Papyri* I 19); we may assume that Ġāḥiẓ, because of his contrary theological view, would not have turned down an opportunity to point to their inauthenticity. There is, however, no decisive proof that these

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latter references really mean the text preserved in Abū Nu‘aim; the question of its authenticity will have to be solved by a comparison of its contents.

As proved by the introductory sentence, the discussion turns around the question whether God’s prescience possesses predetermining power. This was rejected by the theologians attacked by ‘Umar. Their doctrine may be reconstructed to a certain degree from the quotations and allusions given at several places in the epistle. According to their view, “the divine prescience neither forces man into the sins he does” nor “detains him from the work of obedience he omits”; God rather “knows as well that they will sin as that they can omit to do so” (*Hilya* v 347, 4 ff.). Their final decision “does not belong to His knowledge until it has proceeded from man as his action” (346, -7). In other words: God’s knowledge has only a commemorative function; it is *ḥāfiẓ* “retentive”, not *nāfiḍ* “operative” (350, 1 f. and 350, 3). God neither affects man through His guidance (*hudā*) nor through His leading astray (*ḍalāla*; 351, 1 and 348, 14); he does not distinguish anybody by His mercy: “by one’s own potency (*qudra*) one does one’s good works, and by one’s own potency one omits the sins” (348, 10 ff.). “By His own will God wanted to leave good and bad deeds to your discretion” (*tafwiḍ* 352, 2 f.); he “does not lead anybody astray until this one goes himself astray” (350, 11). There is something like predestination; but the human deeds are exempted from this. It only comprises “wealth, plenitude, and luck” (348, 13 f.); terrestrial riches may fall to man’s share without his activity, but not his salvation in the world to come. Death, too, is predestined, but only if it is not caused by the voluntary interference of man; “murder is not identical with the term (*aḡal*; 352, 18)”. If, concerning one’s own salvation, one had to submit to God’s prescience, this would be compulsion (*ḡabr*), but compulsion is injustice (*ḥaiḥ*; 351, 8).

21 The authenticity of the letter presupposed, there is only one document of qadarite provenance earlier than these quotations: Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s *Risāla* to the caliph ‘Abdalmalik. It is obviously written | between the years 75 and 80 H.,¹ thus one quarter of a century earlier. The difference of doctrine is quite distinct: the theses proffered by the opponents of ‘Umar II are more radical. According to Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, only the evil is put at the disposal of man (cf. Schwarz in: *Oriens* 20/1967/23); according to them, however, the good, too. While Ḥasan considers divine guidance (*hudā*) as self-evident (*ib.* 22), they avoid the term as they avoid its contrary, *ḍalāla*, or interpret both of them as subsequent reaction of God towards a corresponding challenging action of man. Ḥasan combined divine prescience and human free will (*ib.* 29); in our treatise both gape apart.

1 After the arrival of Ḥaḡḡaḡ in Irak and before the revolt of Ibn al-Aṣ‘at.

Here God does no longer know beforehand that certain people will vote for unbelief through their own choosing, he only knows that they have the choice between good and evil; the result of their decision, however, is known to him only a posteriori. The problem of murder was not yet touched by Ḥasan. Certain new terms have emerged: *qūwa*, the “power to act” and *tafwīḍ*, the “conveying” of this power to man. It is this last word that seems to have been considered as characteristic: Malaṭī, or rather his source, the heresiographer Ḥuṣaiṣ b. Aṣram (died 253/867), knows among the Qadarites a group whom he calls *mufawwiḍa* and differentiates from other circles, among them also the adherents of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (*Tanbīh* 133, 1ff.).

ʿUmar had the impression that their doctrine was something new; he begins his letter with the remark that they had written him something which before this moment (*qabla l-yaum*) had never been uttered (346, 8). It is all the more interesting then that they dared to address him at all and that they even blamed him for his own view (*ankartum dālika ʿalaiya*, he says; 346, 16); the authors of the new doctrine seem to have considered their ideas as self-evident, in no way extreme or heretical. This might have something to do with the fact that their main thesis, the inefficiency of God’s prescience, seems to have been proffered at an earlier date: by the Ḥārīḡite Šabīb b. Yazīd an-Naḡrānī, who was drowned in the river Tigris when fleeing from al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ in the year 77, that means in the time when Ḥasan al-Baṣrī wrote his *Risāla*; this is at least what Ḥuṣaiṣ says in a rather isolated passage (cf. Malaṭī, *Tanbīh* 133, 22f.). But we should expect then that ʿUmar knew something about this relationship – which he did not; he would not have lost the opportunity to point out the revolutionary past of the doctrine. For the moment, then, this amazing ingenuousness remains unexplained. ʿUmar stigmatizes it as “novelty” (*bidʿa*) and “exaggeration” (*ḡulūw*), whereas he sees himself as following | the “*sunna* of the Prophet valid in his community” (348, 7 and 16; 349, 7; 346, 7). 22

But what does he mean by this word: *sunna*? Evidently not the Ḥadīṭ: he quotes explicitly only one tradition (353, 6ff.), and he alludes to a second one (346, 9f.); a third one which was to become rather famous afterward, is mentioned in a more rudimentary form as an anonymous *ḥabar* (351, 9f.). Besides that we encounter four sayings of Companions; two by Ibn ʿAbbās, one by ʿUmar I and one by Sahl b. Ḥunayf (347, 10ff.; 350, -8ff.; 346, 10ff.). In first line, *sunna* seems to be something else: the right interpretation of the Koran, corresponding to that of the two earlier generations. ʿUmar quotes the Scripture thirty times, and with reason he can pretend here to follow a certain usage: deterministic exegesis was already aimed at by the polemics of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. It seems all the more astonishing then that the verses quoted in ʿUmar’s epistle are – with one exception – altogether different. But we must not forget

that the aim of the treatise is different too: concerning the problem of the Divine prescience, 'Umar has to look for new arguments which he takes from the Koran; concerning the old alternative, whether divine omnipotence or human free will, he restricts himself to some general speculations which are based on the Koran, but do not quote it explicitly.

In the fashion of all polemicists, he stresses the bad consequences of the doctrine he refutes: if man decides according to his will, this means for him that God would have to share His power with a partner (*šarik*; 348, -9f.). 'Umar tries to drive his opponents into the avowal that there may be something God does *not* know; we are not quite sure whether they really believed this or whether it is mere consequence-making. But he also brings forward a positive argument: as everything which is mentioned in the Koran belongs to the prescience of God, it must have been unchangeable from the beginning, because otherwise the Holy Text would be subject to alteration. There are, for instance, the names: when God evokes Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Sura 38/45, this means that also in their historical existence they could not have had other names. Or the deeds of man: when it is said in Sura 59/10 that certain *muhāğirūn* will come later to Medina and will ask for God's mercy, they could never have behaved differently (349, 7ff.); even their asking for God's mercy – and this means: precatory prayer which was frequently used by the Qadarites as an argument for the possibility
 23 of human impact on | divine Decree – is comprised here in the prediction. In the same way, Pharaoh and Satan are predestined by the wording of God's revelation (349, 14ff. and -5ff.). And last but not least, violent death: if God talks about the death of John Baptist in Sura 19/15 this death must have formed part of his world plan, although John Baptist was murdered (352, -8ff.).

All this remains comprehensible only under one condition which is never explicitly uttered: that the Koran is eternal. If 'Umar II had thought it to be a temporal entity which came into existence only with the revelation to Muḥammad, he would not have been able to formulate his argument of the predestination of the names Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; these personalities belong to the time before Muḥammad, and if their names are predestined by the Koran, then by a Koran existing before Muḥammad. The idea seems to have been rather recent; we can prove that Ḥasan al-Baṣrī did not yet know it. The Qadarites had only one possibility to escape it: the *ḥalq al-Qur'ān*, the doctrine of the createdness of the Koran. It is not yet developed here; otherwise 'Umar would have mentioned it in his attack. But 'Amr b. 'Ubaid who dies nearly half a century later, in 144, has it; and we know that for him only those verses remained problematic which predicted the destiny of somebody who still lived *after* the historical revelation: Abū Lahab for instance who was execrated in Sura III (cf. my *Traditionistische Polemik*, Beirut 1967, 16f.).

All of a sudden thus our ventilations have changed into a certain proof for the authenticity of the treatise. It reflects a stage of dogmatic development which could not easily be forged in later time. But there are other ones. I mentioned the rather discreet role played by Ḥadīṭ in our text. This is in contrast to the importance of tradition in later deterministic literature; it somehow corresponds, however, to the situation found in the treatise of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and in other contemporary documents which do not quote Ḥadīṭ at all. Our document distinctly belongs to a period of transition: in order to evoke *sunna*, the authority of the *ṣaḥāba* is sufficient; the prophet is only slowly replacing them. No *ḥadīṭ* is quoted with an *isnād*, and the Qadarites can still declare one of them as a forgery, obviously without giving any special reason (350, 3ff.). ʿUmar does not share their view, but his reaction is void of that kind of prolific indignation we would have met with later *muḥaddiṭūn*. We are still in the midst of that well-known process described by Schacht for juridical literature: | the text still contains sayings of the *ṣaḥāba* which were later on developed into words of the Prophet. Let me give you one very instructive example: ʿUmar quotes ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbbās as having said “when the doctrine of qadar (*al-qaul bil-qadar*) arose: That is the beginning of polytheism in this community. By God, their ill-consulted subjectivity (*sūʿu raʿyihim*) will end up with their excluding God from the predetermination of good, just as they excluded Him from the predetermination of evil” (351, -8ff.). This is found in the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal in the following, much broader version: “They said to Ibn ʿAbbās: There is a man who came to us denying the divine Decree. He said: Guide me to him! for at that time he was already blind. They asked him: What do you want to do with him, O Ibn ʿAbbās? He answered: By the one who holds my soul in his hand, if I come to get hold of him I will bite his nose off ... For I heard the Prophet say: ... That is the beginning of polytheism in this community. By the one who holds my soul in His hand, their ill-consulted subjectivity will end up with their excluding God from the predetermination of good, just as they excluded Him from the predetermination of evil” (1 330, 4ff.). What in our text are still the words of Ibn ʿAbbās, are here the words of Muḥammad; in compensation, Ibn ʿAbbās is conceded some nice aggressive remarks.

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In both versions the saying shows a clear and outspoken tendency, a tendency against those who believed that God preordains the good, but does not preordain the evil. Ibn ʿAbbās, and afterward the Prophet, are depicted as foreseeing the bad consequences of such a concession. Now this is exactly the doctrine of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī; ʿUmar does not seem to have much sympathy for it. Another passage, however, makes us modify this judgment in a characteristic way: “Your venerated predecessors (*aʿimma*)”, ʿUmar addressed his adversaries, “Your *aʿimma*, *ahl as-sunna* as they were, said: The good deed comes from God

in virtue of preceding knowledge, and the bad deed comes from ourselves in virtue of preceding (divine) knowledge" (351, 15 ff.). Once again Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's doctrine is quoted, but with the explicit acknowledgement that this was still the dogma of *ahl as-sunna*, the development of the saying of Ibn 'Abbās into a *ḥadīṭ* thus did not only mean a change of wording, but also a change of spirit; whereas the later *ḥadīṭ* simply attacks all Qadarites, the word of Ibn 'Abbās was understood as to attack only one extremist group of them. And whereas in later deterministic sources Ḥasan al-Baṣrī is either passed over in silence or submitted to serious re[touches of his ideas, he is here still regarded as orthodox. The cloak of the *sunna* is still very wide; the opinions are not yet polarized. Again this seems to be a proof of authenticity. It explains the ingenuousness with which the Qadarites proffered their doctrine. And it gives us the reason why there are so few quotations of the Koran common to 'Umar and the predestinarian adversaries of Ḥasan; like Ḥasan, 'Umar wanted to preserve that state of suspense between human responsibility and divine omnipotence which could so perfectly be lived, but could only very imperfectly be put into theological terms. And it might also be the reason why later on, when Ḥasan's doctrine came to be considered heretical, 'Umar's epistle fell into oblivion; it was – at least as long as the problem held some actuality – not radical enough.

This smoothness was felt all the more strongly, as especially 'Umar II became connected, in the pietistic tradition, with more rigorous measures against the Qadarites. It was reported that he had summoned the Qadarites to repentance, in default whereof they should be beheaded or exiled (cf. Ibn al-Ġauzī, *Manāqib* 35, 16 ff.); and there was his famous controversy with Ġailān ad-Dimašqī who lived at his court and who is depicted as having recanted in his presence (cf. my *Traditionistische Polemik* 35 ff.). But this story also gives us the key by which to explain all these later assertions. Ġailān was sentenced to death under Hišām; the shock of this first execution for religious motives in Islam stirred up a wave of self-justification. All these stories are nothing else but later projections. In default of a detailed analysis let me prove this by a hasty comparison with the reports about 'Umar's attitude towards other sects given in the same sources. These are said to have been treated most leniently: the caliph receives a delegation of the 'Irāqian Murġī'ites (cf. Madelung, *Qāsīm ibn Ibrāhīm* 233), and even the Ḥārīġites are supposed to have corresponded or discussed with him (cf. Ibn 'Abdalḥakam, *Sīra* 75, 5 und Ibn al-Ġauzī, *Manāqib* 31, ult.; also Ibn 'Abdalḥakam 108, 3 ff.). Here the historians preserve their image of 'Umar as the pious sovereign who tries to restore the original unity of Islam, an image derived from the belief of his generation that he was to be the Mahdī of the year 100 who would introduce justice all over the earth. Only in that one special respect this ideal picture loses its preestablished harmony: through the

influence of the political clash with the Qadarites in the time of Hišām, 'Umar here ceases to be, in later tradition, the moderator of diverging religious passions (*ahwā'*) one wanted to discover in him. His epistle proves both pictures to be | wrong: living in a particular and unrepeated historical situation he had drawn a limit between *sunna* and novelty which was soon displaced in the generation to come. 26