
BOOK REVIEWS

Dr. M. I. H. Farooqi, *Plants of the Qur'an* (Lucknow: Sidrah Publishers, 6th revised edition 2003), 224 pp, Pb, ISBN 81-900290-9-6

Dr. M. I. H. Farooqi, *Medicinal Plants in the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad: Scientific Study of the Prophetic Medicine, Food and Perfumes (Aromatics)* (Lucknow: Sidrah Publishers, 3rd revised edition, 2004), 208 pp, Pb, ISBN 81-900290-5-3

A popular and most pervasive trend in the contemporary Muslim world is to find scientific data in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic tradition. Numerous books claim to discover a Qur'ānic foundation for scientific data and theories. This trend is not new. It goes back to the nineteenth century when an attempt was made to incorporate Western science into the tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis. At that time, almost the entire Muslim world was under colonial occupation and the political, economic, and social conditions were such that the colonizers considered Islam a spent force, while most Muslim scholars and leaders felt an acute sense of their own downfall and sought reasons for it. This probing led many of them to believe that the real cause of their decline was that they had lagged behind Europe in the fields of science and technology. To be sure, their lack of competence in science and technology was not the cause, but a consequence of another long, complex, and multi-faceted crisis from which the Islamic polity had been suffering for the three centuries prior to the seventeenth, but European advances in science and technology provided a readily available and directly observable "reason", allowing them to ascribe everything to this "reason". This created an awe for as well as an enormous sense of inferiority in the Muslim mind regarding Western science and technology, and over the course of the twentieth century it manifested itself in the psychological, intellectual, and emotional realms, producing books, articles, websites, conferences, and even institutions attempting to demonstrate that Islam was, in fact, a religion of science; that the European Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century was actually rooted in and due to the Islamic scientific tradition; that everything discovered by modern science was already mentioned in the Qur'ān; or some other variation of

these and similar claims.

A side product of the same enormously complex phenomenon of this attitude toward Western science is to translate the Qurʾānic word for ‘knowledge’ (*ʿilm*) as ‘science’, and to use the Qurʾānic exhortations to the believers to gain knowledge as a command to acquire science and technology. The emergence of so-called scientific exegesis of the Qurʾān, *al-tafsīr al-ʿilmī*, with the aim of finding a place for modern science in the Qurʾān in order to encourage Muslims to acquire it, further supported this process.¹

While the trend of writing scientific *tafsīr* seems to have abated, the publication of secondary literature on the Qurʾān and modern science is on the rise.² The actual text of the two books under review is, in general, not burdened by the aforementioned attitude, as the author’s focus is more on the identification and properties of the plants mentioned in

1. The first major attempt was made by an Egyptian physician, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Iskandarānī, who published a full commentary of the Qurʾān in 1297/1880, *Kashf al-Asrār ʿan al-Nūrāniyya al-Qurʾāniyya fī mā yataʿallaqu biʾl-Ajrām as-Samāwiyya waʾl-Arḍiyya waʾl-Ḥaywanāt waʾl-Nabāt waʾl-Jawāhir al-Maʿdaniyya* (*The unveiling of the luminous secrets of the Qurʾān in which are discussed celestial bodies, the earth, animals, plants, and minerals*), 3 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Wahba, 1297/1880); also his *Tibyān al-Asrār al-Rabbāniyya fīʾl-Nabāt waʾl-Maʿādīn waʾl-Khawāṣṣ al-Haywaniyya* (*The Demonstration of Divine Secrets in the Vegetation and Minerals and in the Characteristics of Animals*) (Damascus: n.p., 1300/1883). For a useful survey of scientific exegesis, see Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr waʾl-Mufasssīrūn*, 3 vols., 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Wahba, 1985). Also of interest are Muḥammad ʿIffat al-Sharqāwī, *Ittijāhāt al-Tafsīr fī Miṣr fīʾl-ʿAṣr al-ḥadīth* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Kilānī, 1972); J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974); and J. M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation, 1880-1960* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961).

2. This literature is being produced in all languages and from all countries. A few examples of such works are: Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Bārr, *Khalq al-Insān bayn al-Ṭibb waʾl-Qurʾān* (*The Creation of Human Being in Medicine and the Qurʾān*), (Jeddah: al-Dār al-Saʿūdiyyah, 1986); Ghulam Jilani Barq, *Dô Qurʾān* (*Two Qurʾāns*) (Lahore: Shaykh Ghulam Ali, n.d.); S. Bashir ud-Din Mahmood, *Doomsday and Life After Death* (Islamabad: Holy Qurʾān Research Foundation, 1991); Syed Sibte Nabi Naqvi, *Islam and Contemporary Science* (Karachi: World Federation of Islamic Missions, 1973); Z. R. El-Naggar, *Sources of Scientific Knowledge: The Geological Concept of Mountains in the Qurʾān* (Herndon: The Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers and The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991).

the Qurʾān and the Prophetic tradition, but the laudatory prologues and comments included in the book come from the same mindset. The content of the two books, however, suffers inadequacies in the accuracy of certain information, formatting and presentation, and grammatical and linguistic problems.

First of all, the author provides no theoretical framework for his study. No mention has been made of the fact that whatever plant we find here on earth is but a remote shadow of its original in Heaven, so that whenever the people of Paradise will be given fruits there from, they will call out: “*It is this that in days of yore was granted us as sustenance’—and they were given something resembling that*”.³

Further, though the Qurʾān mentions a certain number of plants, fruits, and vegetables, it mentions them in the flow of its own narrative, in a peculiarly Qurʾānic context, and with a specific purpose. The author of the books under review is not interested in the Qurʾānic context or its purpose but only in the plant itself, and this creates the difficulties of the transference of data from one context to another. This lack of proper context becomes especially problematic in cases where the identification of a given Qurʾānic plant, vegetable, or fruit is based on conjecture.

The *mann*, for instance, is a case in point. Sent down to the Banī Isrāʾīl as a special Divine favor, *al-mann* is mentioned in the Qurʾān in the context of the transgression of the children of Isrāʾīl despite the various favors and blessings bestowed upon them by Allah. In all three instances where the Qurʾān mentions *al-mann*,⁴ it uses one of the variants of the verb *nazala*, to emphatically state that the *mann* was actually sent down—but if it is to be found as a naturally growing plant *Alhagi mauro-rum Medic* of the Leguminosae family, or as *Tamarix mannifera Bunge* of the Tamaricaceae family, then how can we account for the Qurʾānic account that it was a special blessing to the Children of Israel—a Qurʾānic description that is further strengthened through a linguistic relation between the fruit mentioned by the Qurʾān and one of the meanings of the word name given to it; *mann* means “favor”. This was clearly understood by all classical Qurʾān commentators explaining why the author finds none of these scholars making an attempt to “identify the actual plant source” (p. 23). Even the Heavenly *Sidratul-muntahā* of *Suratun-Najm* has not been spared identification in both books.

The author is on more firm grounds where the problem of identifi-

3. *al-Baqarah*: 25.

4. *al-Baqarah*: 57; *al-Aʿrāf*: 160; and *Tā-Hā*: 80.

cation of the plant, fruit, or vegetable mentioned in the Qurʾān is not a major issue, and in these instances—which fortunately constitute a major portion of the book—we do have a useful summary of the properties of the plants and their produce, albeit with some generalizations and unsubstantiated claim such as: “It is assumed that the domestication and cultivation of date-palm started 6000 to 8000 years back in Mesopotamia. Probably no other fruit plant was in cultivation at that time anywhere in the world...” (p. 42). The medicinal properties of the plants mentioned by the author further enhance these descriptions. The books would be greatly improved if the pictures accompanying the descriptions were of a higher quality and the entire text was set with aesthetic considerations.

Medicinal Plants in the Traditions of Prophet Muhammad shares the problem of identification with its complimentary volume, but here the problem is not as acute as in the other volume under review and the book does provide a useful source of Prophetic traditions dealing with health, medicine, and the use of plants and fruits.

This kind of work is best produced by institutions where scholars from various disciplines can collaborate to produce well-researched and beautifully designed books free from such defects, but the author of these books has carried out his research alone and published it under difficult financial circumstances and as such, his contribution should be granted the accord his effort deserves.

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