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Quss Ibn Sā'ida in Shī'ite-Imamite Theological Literature

Quss Ibn Sā'ida al-Iyādī was a half-legendary bishop of Nağrān in Yemen. He was supposedly, according to the mediaeval sources, "the most eloquent of all Arabs" and also "the first man in the *gāhilyya* who believed in the One God". His life was so strongly mythologized that even the date of his birth is difficult to establish. What can only be made is to attempt to verify the data concerning this man of wisdom and great orator contained in the sources presently available. But the sources agree about no more than one thing — Quss had died before Prophet Muḥammad was born.¹

The earliest Arabic literary works which mention Quss come from the 9th century (As-Siğistānī, *Kitāb-al mu' ammarīn*, Ibn Hīšām, *Kitāb at-tiğān*). These are exclusively works of Sunnite authors. As to the Shī'ite literary output, Quss was not mentioned there until the late 10th century to become more popular in the 11–12th centuries, although his popularity was limited to the imamite circles. This was the time of prolific legal and theological literature, and it is these works that feature Quss most frequently. Another source can be found in the works created under the Safawid rule, but these are clearly of secondary nature, being basically compilations and repeating what was already known from earlier writings.

Chronologically, the earliest Shī'ite writer to have conveyed information about Quss Ibn Sā'ida is Abū Ġa'far Ibn Bābawayh (Bābu'ya) al-Qummī, also known as Aš-Šayḥ aṣ-Ṣadūq (d. 991). He is the author of one of the

¹ *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New ed., Leiden from 1960, vol. V, p. 528; F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, Leiden 1967–1984 vol. I, pp. 180–182. M. M. Dziekan, *Quss Ibn Sā'ida al-Iyādī. Legenda życia i twórczości*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 3–13.

four canonical collections of Shī'ite Tradition entitled *Kitāb man lā yaḥḍuruḥu āl-faqīh*.

Ibn Bābawayh writes about Quss in another work of him, *Ikmāl ad-dīn wa-itmām an-nīma*. Very little is known about the author himself. A son of a Shī'ite scholar, he was a prolific writer whose literary legacy comprises 300 books on law and theology.²

The *Ikmāl ad-dīn* has two *habars* connected with Quss. The first is a story of outstanding popularity among not only the Shī'ite but also the Sunnite writers. It tells about the arrival of a deputation from one of the tribes, in this case Bakr Ibn Wā'il, to Prophet Muḥammad in the 9th year of the Hīgra, called the year of the deputation (*sanat al-wufūd*). During the audience, the Prophet first asks the new arrivals whether they know Quss Ibn Sā'ida al-Iyādī and then recollects his meeting Quss in a market in 'Ukāz, reciting from memory Quss' famous *huṭba* (oration) which begins with the dictum: *man 'āsa māt wa-man māta fāt* ("that who lived will die, that who died is already gone"). The story also contains a verse closely connected with the oration and being in its essence a reminder (*Fī ād-dāhibīna āl-awwalīna lanā baṣā'ir*):

"Through our grandfathers who departed from this world
ages ago we gain experience.
I saw profuse springs of death
rising in an unknown place.
I also saw people streaming to them —
Both greybeards and youngsters.
The past will never come back to me,
and those who depart will not run away from those who stay.
I have become convinced that I will doubtlessly
follow the path paved for me by other people."³

Another version of this story has a similar historical framework, with the only exception that the Prophet grants an audience to a different tribe, that of Iyād this time, which is Quss's native tribe. The story contains a tri-bayt verse of an eschatological type (*yā nā'ī āl-mawtī...*) and a *huṭba* on an *ubi sunt* theme, in which Quss confesses his faith in the One God (*kallā bal huwa Allāh wāḥid*) and recalls the tribes of 'Ād and Ṭamūd. The oration also includes swearing "by the Lord of Al-Ka'ba" (*wa-rabb al-Ka'ba*). The fact that the Prophet asks the visiting tribes about Quss, enhances the latter's knowledge and wisdom — such is the conclusion drawn by Ibn Bābawayh.⁴

² *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. II, pp. 726–727; D. Thomas, *Two Muslim-Christian Debates from the early Shi'ite Tradition*, "Journal of Semitic Studies", 1988, vol. 33, fasc. 1.

³ Al-Maḡlisī, at-Ṭānī, *Bihār al-anwār*, wyd. Ğ. 'Alawī, M. al-Aḥwandi, Teheran, vol. XV, pp. 183–184; Ar-Rubay'ī, *Quss Ibn Sā'ida al-Iyādī. Hayātuhu, Huṭubuhu. Šī'ruhu*, Bagdad 1974, pp. 290, 292.

⁴ Al-Maḡlisī, op. cit., p. 185; Ar-Rubay'ī, op. cit., p. 357.

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Towards the end of the story the author portrays Quss providing his brief *nasab*. He also reminds the reader that Quss was the first who believed in the One God before the rise of Islam, the first who leaned on a stick during the sermon, who knew the Prophet and had predicted his coming, and — what is most important here — who suggested using *taqiyya* in particularly difficult situations. According to Ibn Bābawayh, Quss must have lived 600 years.⁵

Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad al-ʿAyyāšī (d. 1010), about whom I have failed to find more detailed biographical data, was the author of *Al-Muqtaḍab*, a work quoted by Al-Maḡlisī in the encyclopaedia entitled *Bihār al-anwār*. Not unlike the transmissions of Ibn Bābawayh, Al-ʿAyyāšī's accounts are connected with a deputation sent to the Prophet, in which Al-Ġarūd Ibn al-Mundir al-ʿAbdī appears as the main hero.⁶

This deputation was sent by the tribe of ʿAbd al-Qays, and it was also asked by the Prophet about Quss. This is what Al-Ġarūd told the Prophet:

"Quss Ibn Saʿida was one of the chiefs of Arab tribes. He lived 500 years and summoned people to prayer like Jesus did. He did not enjoy immobility, he derived no pleasure from his house, he had no neighbours. He made the monkhood more powerful, believed in the One God, was wearing a hair shirt and eating ostrich eggs during his pilgrimages. He praised light and shadow, was a clairvoyant, his wisdom became proverbial. He lived at the time of Apostles Simon (Simʿān), Luke (Lūqā), and John (Yūḥannā), following their precepts. He fled from the sins of mundaneness and despised impiety."⁷

Next, Al-ʿAyyāšī introduces the *ḥuṭba* emphasizing Quss' monotheism: "[...] He is the One God, unborn and nonbearing, who puts to death and brings to life, who created Man and Woman. He is the Lord of this and the next world." Another fragment of the same oration is the verse "My heart has recalled His Love" (*dakara ʾāl-qalbu min ǧiwāhi adkāru*) of a religious nature, followed by another *ḥuṭba* consisting of some parts. The first one is of an *ubi sunt* type, while the other describes the power of Supreme God and contains elements of monotheistic eschatology. The oration ends with an eschatological verse *yā nāʿī ʾāl-mawti...* somewhat differing from the one in Ibn Bābawayh's version. Here, the verse comprises four *bayts*.⁸

In Al-ʿAyyāšī's transmission one can find the first account of the prophecies made by Quss Ibn Sācīda about the twelve Shīʿite Imams and naturally about the Prophet himself. It is a further part of the narrative about the same deputation. Al-Ġarūd relates the story told by Salmān al-Fārisī, a Companion of the Prophet, a participant of the famous Battle of Moat. The text is known

⁵ Al-Maḡlisī, op. cit., p. 186.

⁶ Head of ʿAbd al-Qays tribe.

⁷ Al-Maḡlisī, op. cit., p. 244.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 244–245.

as the *Huṭbat al-istisqā'*, or 'A sermon intended to bring rain'. Salmān's story runs: "One day I saw Quss leave the meeting place of the Iyād tribe and go towards a plain grown with conifers, acacia and cedars [...]. He stopped, and the night was very clear, lifted his face to heaven, and I went close to him and heard him saying: «The Lord of seven spaces and fertile Earth! By Muḥammad and three other Muḥamnads! By four 'Alis, by Saint Sayyid⁹, by the Eloquent and the Holy!¹⁰ By the broad way, by those who handed down the Gospel and who remembered the Revelation [the Koran! — M.M.D.!] By the number of the Israeli leaders, by those who wiped out the Evil and destroyed the falsehood, and also by the faithful kings of Yemen! It is they who hold in their hands the Hour, and it is from them that one can get forgiveness! Their force they got from God, send us, oh, the Lord, a heavy rain! [...]"

Then he wiped his tears. At that time the bells began to ring for the matins (...) and he said:

«Quss is taking an oath without hiding.

Had he lived two thousand years he would not have gone so high.

He would not have met Aḥmad and the noble men of wisdom.

They will be the heirs of Aḥmad, the most faultless man under the Sun!

In their presence the faithful will lose their vision, and they will be the light for the blind!

I am not equal to the people of whom I was talking, even death will not bring me closer to them!¹¹»

Another Shī'ite author whose writings contain information about Quss is Muḥammad Ibn an-Nu'mān al-Mufīd, known as Aš-Šayḥ al-Mufīd (d. 1022). He was a leading scientist of the Baghdad school at the time of the Buyyids, the founder of the imamite theology based on the *kalām* principles and opposed to the *mu'tazila* tendencies which are not alien to e.g. Ibn Bābawayh's views.¹² Al-Mufīd is the author of many significant theological and juristic works, one of them being the *Kitāb al-iḥtišās*, sometimes identified with his other treatises.¹³ Unfortunately, the story of Quss told by Al-Mufīd in his work has not survived in a complete form. The 1971 edition contains only the last two *bayts* of the *Fī ād-dahibīna* verse, which still can be taken as an indication that Al-Mufīd must have incorporated in his *Al-Iḥtišās* the narrative about the deputation to the Prophet as well Quss' well-known *huṭba*, since both episodes are inseparably

⁹ Ġa'far aṣ-Ṣādiq, the sixth Shī'ite Imam.

¹⁰ Mūsā al-Kāzīm, the seventh Imam.

¹¹ Al-Maḡlisī, op. cit., pp. 246-247.

¹² W. Madelung, *Religiöse Literatur des Islam, Die šī'a*, in: *Grundriß der arabischen Philologie*, vol. II, Wiesbaden 1987, pp. 365-367.

¹³ K.-H. Pampus, *Die theologische Enzyklopädie Biḥār al-anwār des Muḥammad Bāqir al-Maḡlisī (1037-1110) A.H. — 1627-1699. Ein Beitrag zur Literaturgeschichte der šī'a in der Šafawidenzeit*, Bonn 1970, p. 174.

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linked with the above verse in classical literature. A similar suggestion is advanced by the publisher of the work, for in a footnote he quotes these episodes as a supplement, in the version offered by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi.¹⁴

One more author whose writings tell us about Quss was a disciple of Aš-Šayḥ al-Mufīd, Abū al-Faḥ Muḥammad Ibn ʿAlī Ibn ʿUtmān al-Karāḡakī (d. 1038), associated with the second period of history according to the Shīʿite Gnosis.

His work *Kanz al-fawā'id* consists of five parts and contains miscellaneous information from such areas as theology, jurisprudence, history etc. The book is said to have been written for his cousin.¹⁵ Al-Karāḡakī renders two stories. One of them transmits the narrative about a deputation of the tribe of ʿAbd al-Qays visiting the Prophet together with the *huṭba* and the *Fī ad-dāhibīna* verse. Al-Maḡlisī maintains that Al-Karāḡakī's text is identical with that of Ibn Bābawayh, with the exception of the *isnād*¹⁶ but, according to A. Ar-Rubayʿī, there are numerous, though small changes in both the texts.¹⁷ The other story includes the text known as the *Huṭbat al-istisqāʾ*. Ar-Rubayʿī posits that Al-Karāḡakī used Al-ʿAyyāšī's version without mentioning his work *Al-Muqtaḍab* as the source.¹⁸ Since I have had no direct access to Al-Karāḡakī's book, I find it difficult to formulate a judgement concerning the above criticism. The *isnāds* agree in part, given the difference in the time when each of the authors lived.

The last exponent of this period in the history of Shīʿite religious literature is Abū Ḡaʿfar Ibn Šahrāšūb (d. 1192), an outstanding theologian and lawyer, held in high esteem even by the Sunnites. His *Manāqib Āl Abī Ṭālib*, the book which interests us the most, is, according to B. Scarcia Amoretti, "a theoretical-apologetical treatise about the Imams rather than a work on genealogy or a collection of traditions".¹⁹ The chapter *Fī ān-nuṣūṣ al-wārīda ʿalā sādātīnā* contains a story with a prediction of the coming of the twelve Imams and a chain of authorities similar to those transmitted by Al-ʿAyyāšī and Al-Karāḡakī.²⁰ Quite notable is also the fact that the texts of the *huṭba* show a minor difference. In place of "by Saint *sayyid*, by the Eloquent and the Holy" as Al-ʿAyyāšī has it, Ibn Šahrāšūb quotes simply: "by Ḡaʿfar and by Mūsā"²¹, which makes the symbolism much more straightforward, shedding light on the "dark places" in the text attributed to Quss.

¹⁴ Aš-Šayḥ al-Mufīd, *Al-Ihtisāṣ*, wyd. Al-Hurāsānī, An-Naḡaf 1971, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵ A. B. Tahrānī, *Ad-Darīʾa ilā taṣānīf aš-šīʿa*. Teheran-An-Naḡaf from 1947, vol. XVIII, p. 161.

¹⁶ Al-Maḡlisī, op. cit., p. 184; Ar-Rubayʿī, op. cit., pp. 309-310.

¹⁷ Ar-Rubayʿī, op. cit. pp. 292-295, 309-311.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 383.

¹⁹ *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. II, p. 935.

²⁰ Ibn Šahrāšūb, *Manāqib Āl Abī Ṭālib*, An-Naḡaf 1956, pp. 246-247.

²¹ Ibid., p. 247.

Most of the transmissions discussed above are to be found in the Shī'ite theological encyclopaedia, *Bihār al-anwār* compiled by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Maḡlisī, called Al-Maḡlisī at-Tānī (d. 1699), an exponent of the Shī'ite literature in the Safawid period. The *Bihār*... comprises texts by Ibn Bābawayh, Al-ʿAyyāšī and Al-Karāḡakī. But it also contains one more text absent from the works of other Shī'ite scholars. It is a fragment of the "testament" (Arabic *waṣīyya*) attributed to Quss, who supposedly left it for his son: "Do not seek advice from someone who is busy, no matter how wise he is, or from someone who is hungry, no matter how learned he is, or from someone who is horror-struck, no matter how good a councillor he is. Do not put on a necklace which you cannot take off without injuring yourself. When taking part in an argument, be fair; when making an utterance, weigh your words".²²

Another work from the Safawid period is *Anwār ar-rabiʿ fī anwāʾ al-badīʿ* by Ibn Maʿṣūm. In the fourth part of his book the author quotes a story about a deputation of the tribe of Bakr Ibn Wā'il paying visit to the Prophet.²³ The narrative includes the *ḥuṭba* and the verse *Fī ād-dāhibīna*... recited by the would-be caliph Abū Bakr, which part is lacking in all other earlier Shī'ite accounts, but is often present in the works by Sunnite authors.

The way Quss is shown in the Mediaeval Shī'ite theological writing is rather one-sided, with the religious aspects of his life and activity being deliberately put in the foreground. But even this type of description has certain constraints. While none of the authors expresses any doubt as to Quss' being a Christian, it is Al-ʿAyyāšī alone who stresses this fact, even mentioning that he was a disciple of one of Christ's Apostles. What other sources emphasize is Quss' monotheism and his prophetic qualities. None of the Shī'ite authors introduces the theme of Quss as the bishop of Naḡrān. But it is in the Shī'ite writings alone that the motif appears about Quss recommending the use of *taqiyya*, a Muslim theological principle recognized by the Shī'ite imams. It allows one to conceal one's faith in order to avoid religious persecution.

As was mentioned earlier, Shī'ite writers tended to stress the prophetic motifs in Quss' biography. This tendency accounts for the choice of episodes from his life to become part of the narrative. The Shī'ite texts select only those stories which are immediately connected with Islam, especially with the Prophet and the twelve Imams whose coming Quss supposedly predicted before the rise of Islam. Quss' other productions are lacking, e.g. his famous *qaṣīda* telling the story of the ancient Yemen or his verse rhyming in *-kumā*, both cited very often indeed by the Mediaeval erudite scholars from the Sunnite circles. This may be evidence of an instrumental treatment of Quss by the Shī'ites.

²² Al-Qummī, *Safīnat al-bihār*, Teheran, vol. II, 428; Al-ʿAskarī, *Kitāb al-awā'il*, ed. M. al-Miṣrī, W. Qaṣṣāb, Damascus 1975, vol. I, pp. 85-86.

²³ Ibn Maʿṣūm. *Anwār ar-rabiʿ fī anwāʾ al-badīʿ*. An-Naḡaf 1969, pp. 305-306.

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The earliest Shī'ite text featuring Quss Ibn Bābawayh's *Ikmāl ad-dīn*, contains only the story about the Ibn Wā'il deputation visiting the prophet. The chain of authorities offered by this author differs significantly from the *isnāds* quoted by later scientists as it begins with Abū Ġa'far. At the same time, in a different place of this very book Ibn Bābawayh relates a similar story with an *isnād* identical with the one to be found in the works by Sunnite authors and starting with Ibn 'Abbās. A similar chain is cited later by Al-Karāḡakī. This discrepancy suggests that the narrative had two sources: the first must have been the same as the Sunnite authors used, while the other is difficult to establish for the *isnād* beginning with Abū Ġa'far is quoted by Aṣ-Ṣadūq alone.

The other story which predicts the coming of the Prophet and the twelve Imams appears in Shī'ite literature fairly late. The first author to quote it is Al-ʿAyyāšī. It obviously draws from only one source, as the chains of authorities transmitted by all the remaining writers are the same as the one related in *Al-Muqtaḍab*. This *ḥabar* is of a distinctly Muslim nature. Both the oration and the verse which follows it manifest graphic influence of the style typical of Muslim religious texts, including the Koran. The fact of this *ḥabar*'s late appearance together with its showing distinct contextual limitations, on the one hand, and a conspicuously Muslim character, on the other, suggests that the text is not authentic, that it was rather created for a specific purpose (this remark applies to other Quss' texts appearing in Sunnite literature).

The works in which Quss is present are either textbooks or encyclopaedias or compendia of theological and legal knowledge. The context of the narrative with the prophecy predicting the appearance of the twelve Imams suggests that this *ḥabar* is an echo of a Christian-Muslim controversy. Many disputes of this kind found their way into both Shī'ite and Sunnite theological writings of the 8th century. What is essential is the fact that the story is related by Al-Ġārūd, who turned Muslim, while in the *ḡāhilyya* he was a Christian. In this way he manifests the superiority of Islam over the faith of Jesus. One of the reasons of his conversion was — says Al-Ġārūd — the prediction made by Quss.

The events in the story take place in the year 609, and Quss is believed to be a Christian. Therefore his prediction concerning the coming of the twelve Imams acquires all the features of objectivity, through the time perspective and also through his different confession. On the one hand, Quss confirms the prophecy of Muḥammad (like in the Sunnite versions of the story), and on the other, that of the Shī'ite Imams. It should be noted that in this particular account the Prophet himself affirms their coming when he explains the meaning of Quss' oration to Al-Ġārūd.²⁴ Thus one can get another proof of the legitimacy of the Shī'ite Imams' power.

²⁴ Al-Maḡlisī, op. cit., p. 247; Ibn Šahrāšūb, op. cit., p. 247.

The fact that the Prophet remembers and praises Quss, a Christian, in both Shī'ite and Sunni accounts, is a sign of great respect to the Christian religion, of tolerance for '*ahl al-kitāb*', in spite of presenting Christianity as ancillary to Islam.

The existence of the story of this kind may also be in some way related with the famous discussion around Parakletos/Paraklutos, as it confirms the Muslim version of the utterance of John the Baptist and even expands it considerably. Salmām al-Fārisī says to Al-Ġārūd: "All of them are recalled in the Torah, the Gospel and the Psalms".²⁵

As in his other works, Ibn Šahrāšūb, among others, also makes references to this problem. This might be of some relevance to the story about Quss.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid. In Ibn Šahrāšūb's work it is the speech of Al-Ġārūd.

²⁶ Thomas, op. cit., passim.

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