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The Letters of 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr

Nine letters attributed to 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr, one of the famed "seven jurists [*fuqahā*] of Medina," (d. ca. A.H. 93–94/711–13 C.E.), may constitute the earliest extant written sources about the life of Muḥammad. The letters are potentially extraordinary not just for how early they are but also for who wrote them (assuming they are authentic). 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr was the son of one of the more prominent Companions of the Prophet, al-Zubayr ibn 'Awwām (d. 36/656), and, through his mother Asmā', a grandson of the first caliph, Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (r. 11–13/632–34). He belonged to the Asad clan of the tribe of Quraysh, and, hence, to the upper echelons of the conquest élite of early Islamic and Umayyad society, and lived most of his life in the Ḥijāz, the region of Islam's original seat of power and its cultural epicenter. He was thus ideally placed to know the earliest traditions about Muḥammad's life.

Although addressed to two Umayyad caliphs, 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 65–86/685–705) and his son and successor, al-Walid I (r. 86–96/705–715), the letters attributed to 'Urwah presumably reflect what he taught his students in his public *majlis*, or "sitting session." If authentic, 'Urwah's correspondence with these caliphs certainly postdates 73/692, the year of his political reconciliation with the Umayyads in the wake of 'Abd al-Malik's crushing defeat of his elder brother, 'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr, whose failed bid to become the leader of the early Islamic polity 'Urwah had supported.

That victory was a watershed event for the Umayyads. It put a decisive end to the Zubayrids' efforts to seize the caliphate from their grasp and inaugurated a new stage in the ideological orientation of the early Islamic polity under Umayyad leadership. Henceforth the Umayyads placed confessions of God's oneness and of Muḥammad's messengership front and center in an array of state-commissioned

public manifestations of their far-reaching, imperial power. 'Urwah himself abandoned Mecca and returned to Medina, the city of his birth, where he spent the remainder of his life as a scholar and teacher. The historicity of 'Urwah's residence in Medina during this time seems beyond reasonable doubt. Maysā' al-Ghabbān has recently discovered an inscription on the Ḥismā plateau dated A.H. 80—which is to say during 'Urwah's lifetime—that mentions him by name.¹

The original copies of 'Urwah's letters do not survive, and neither likely does their exact wording, given the vagaries of their transmission. All that remains of them are citations and excerpts embedded in later works, most completely in the works of Abu Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarir al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). The authenticity of most (although not all) of these letters was endorsed by Aloys Sprenger (1813–1893) and Josef Horowitz (1874–1931),² and it has more recently been vigorously defended by Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler,³ but 'Urwah's authorship of the letters is also ardently contested, most prominently in recent years by Stephen Shoemaker.⁴

My intent here is not to settle this debate over the letters' authenticity but, rather, to make them more accessible to a broad readership, since, to my knowledge, no attempt has hitherto been made both to collate this corpus and to translate it in its entirety into English.⁵ However, I must confess that the very process of translating and gathering these texts has mitigated much of my own skepticism about the authenticity of this corpus—or, rather, what remains thereof. A number of the letters' internal features argue in favor of their authenticity, or at least that of most of them. As Görke has observed, in terms of sheer content the letters are quite "matter-of-fact . . . [and] contain almost no miracle stories and very few embellishments"—hence, they strike a reader of the broader *sīrah-maghāzī* corpus as an early, even relatively primitive, sampling of the historical memory of the

1. Ghabbān 2016–17, 206–7 (no. 139). My thanks to M.S.M. Saifullah for drawing my attention to this inscription. This graffito, by Ḥabīb ibn Abi Ḥabīb, a non-Arab client (*mawlā*) of 'Urwah's, begs God's forgiveness and asks that Ḥabīb be granted the honor of being martyred while fighting in the Path of God. On the theme of martyrdom and religious warfare in early Islamic graffiti, see Lindstedt forthcoming a.

2. See Sprenger 1850, 108; Horowitz [1927–28] 2002, 26.

3. Görke and Schoeler 2008.

4. Shoemaker 2011; cf. the riposte in Görke, Motzki, and Schoeler 2012. See also the doubts expressed by Prémare 2002, 14–16, and the confidence expressed in Azmeḥ 2004b, 34, 87ff.

5. Translations of some of the letters into Italian appeared in Leone Caetani's monumental *Annali dell'Islām*; see Caetani 1905–26, 1: 267–68 (§269), 307–8 (§ 324), 471 (§ 30) and 2 (1): 105–7 (§39), 151–52 (§ 113), and 166–67 (§139). A German translation of the letters appeared in the first substantial Western study of the traditions attributed to 'Urwah, Stülpnagel 1957, 61–83, but Stülpnagel's study and his translation have long been neglected, especially in anglophone scholarship. The sections of the letters that appear scattered throughout the *Tārīkh* of Ṭabarī have also been translated into English. I note where this is the case below.

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Sean William Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: the Making of the Prophet of Islam*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. **ISAM DN. 294886.**

became his intimate and familiar associates. This became known to 'Abd al-Malik, and he therefore prevented the people from performing the Ḥajj.²³

Ibn al-Zubayr's stranglehold on Mecca and the Ḥajj, which he led for as many as nine consecutive years (A.H. 64–72),²⁴ exacerbated the precariousness of 'Abd al-Malik's position in Syria for years to come. For as long as Ibn Zubayr remained in power, this meant that, as Chase Robinson notes, "many Muslims outside of Syria never regarded 'Abd al-Malik as anything other than a usurper and tyrant."²⁵ 'Abd al-Malik's alleged fear that even after Ibn al-Zubayr's defeat, the tales of the Prophet and his Companions in Abān's *Maghāzī* would introduce unwelcome volatility into the mix of the Syrian armies and might even undermine the Umayyads' claim to the caliphate seems well-grounded, given the political struggles of the recent past.

Beyond the relentlessness with which 'Abd al-Malik pursued the defeat of the Zubayrids—culminating in the shocking siege of Mecca by his general al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf al-Thaqafi in 73/692—he responded to the Zubayrid challenge with ever more ambitious projects and reforms to bolster his legitimacy, which he continued to pursue even long after Ibn al-Zubayr's defeat, such as building the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem,²⁶ reforming and Islamicizing the empire's coinage,²⁷ reforming its script and recompiling the Qur'an,²⁸ and Arabicizing the administrative bureaucracy.²⁹ These initiatives redounded to Umayyad legitimacy and profoundly shaped the trajectory of early Islam, bequeathing to the religion not merely the first icons of its imperial power but also the earliest symbols of Islamic identity itself.³⁰

Such was the political context of 'Abd al-Malik's opposition to the dissemination of Abān ibn 'Uthmān's book of *maghāzī*, so no wonder he found the project troublesome. However, despite the caliph's apparent opposition to the public dissemination of *maghāzī* traditions, he himself was not aloof to the topic of Muḥammad's campaigns or details about his life. Indeed, the earliest written corpus of *maghāzī* materials to survive to our day may actually date from 'Abd al-Malik's era, albeit not in the form of a publicly disseminated book. Rather, this early corpus survives somewhat surprisingly in the form of a series of letters between the caliph 'Abd al-Malik and the brother of his rival for the caliphate, 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr (d. ca. 93–94/711–13).

23. Elad 1993, 34 (Eng.), 53 (Ar.).

24. Elad 2008, 191.

25. Robinson 2005, 35.

26. Elad 2008; Levy-Rubin 2017.

27. Treadwell 2009; Heidemann 2011; Treadwell 2017.

28. Hamdan 2006; Sinai 2014.

29. Qāḍī 2010.

30. TG, 1: 9ff.

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'ABD AL-MALIK IBN MARWĀN AND
'URWAH IBN AL-ZUBAYR

The pairing of 'Abd al-Malik and 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr—scions of two rival houses of Quraysh with a history of enmity and violence—might seem improbable, given the antipathies between them throughout the conflict of the Second Civil War, but both men were equally products of the Medinan Qurashī élite, a milieu that bound them together at an early age just as much as its rivalries would later divide them in adulthood. Although the Umayyads and Zubayrids would eventually face each other in a titanic struggle for the leadership of the early Islamic polity, 'Abd al-Malik once knew the Zubayrid brothers as merely his fellow Medinans and had even been on intimate terms with them during his youth in Medina. 'Abd al-Malik studied alongside 'Urwah as a peer. Qabisah ibn Dhu'ayb used to recount how he, 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr, and others gathered each night in Medina's mosque in a study circle (*ḥalqah*) comprised of the city's youthful élite. Qabisah allegedly distinguished himself with the knowledge he had gained from the Prophet's scribe, Zayd ibn Thābit al-Anṣārī, but Qabisah admitted that 'Urwah outstripped them all in his knowledge, because he, as a nephew of the Prophet's widow, 'Ā'ishah bint Abī Bakr, could freely visit and learn from her.³¹

The following pious legend about a meeting between 'Abd al-Malik and the Zubayrid brothers presciently captures the irony of their future conflict in light of their amicable youth:

The Sacred Mosque [in Mecca] had brought together 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, 'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr, and his two brothers, in the days that they held each other in mutual affection during the reign of Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān. One of them said, "Come now, let's say what we desire in the future!"

'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr said, "My desire is to one day rule the two sanctuaries [*al-haramayn*] and to attain the caliphate!"

Muṣ'ab said, "My desire is to one day rule over the two Iraqs [i.e., Basra and Kufa] and marry the two noblest women of Quraysh, Sukaynah bint al-Ḥakam and 'Ā'ishah bint Ṭalḥah."

'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān said, "My desire is to succeed Mu'āwiyah as caliph and rule over the whole earth."

'Urwah said, "I'm not after any of those things that you are. I desire renunciation [*zuhd*] in this life and success in the Hereafter and to be ranked among those who pass on knowledge [*'ilm*]."

31. Ibn 'Asākir, *Dimashq*, 40: 248–49 (citing a recension of Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt* that seems no longer extant). 'Urwah was the only one of the men who could approach 'Ā'ishah because, after Muḥammad's death, his wives were cloistered and could only be approached by males who were of their kin (Q. Aḥzāb 33: 32, 55).

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