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 pervasive trend in the contemporary Muslim world attempts to find scientific data in the Qurʾān and the Prophetic Hadith. Numerous books claim to discover a Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾānic 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 to be a spent force, most Muslim scholars and political leaders felt an acute sense of their own downfall, and both tried to find reasons for their sorry state. This probing led many to believe that the real cause of their decline was their lagging behind Europe in the twin 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 crises, but military conquest of their lands due to 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 modern science and an enormous sense of inferiority in the Muslim mind. Over the course of the twentieth century, this soul-searching led to psychological, intellectual, and emotional crises, which, in turn, produced books, articles, websites, conferences—even institutions—attempting to demonstrate that Islam was, in fact, a religion of science;

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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 Qurʾān.

A side product of the same enormously complex phenomenon of this attitude toward modern 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 the so-called scientific exegesis of the Qurʾān, *al-tafsīr al-ʿilmī,* is also an attempt to find a place for modern science in the Qurʾān as an encouragement to Muslims to acquire it.[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 two books under review are not burdened

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 fiʾl-Nabāt waʾl-Maʿādin 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-Mufassirūn*, 3 vols., 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Wahba, 1985). Also of interest are Muḥammad ʿIffat al-Sharqāwī, *Ittijāhāt al-Tafsīr fī Miṣr fiʾl-ʿAṣr al-ḥadīth* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Kīlānī, 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,

by the aforementioned attitude, as the author's focus is on the identification and properties of the plants mentioned in the Qurʾān and the Prophetic Hadith, but the laudatory prologues and endorsements included in the book come from that mindset.

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] The plants, fruits, and vegetables mentioned in the Qurʾān appear in a context and for a specific purpose. The author of the books under review is not interested in the Qurʾānic context or the purpose for which these plants and fruits are mentioned; he is only interested in the plants and this creates 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 Most High. In all three instances where the Qurʾān mentions *al-mann*,[4] it uses one of the variants of the verb *nazala*, which linguistically emphasizes that the *mann* was actually sent down—but if it is to identified with the naturally growing plant *Alhagi maurorum 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—an emphatic Qurʾānic description that is further strengthened by the lexical meaning of *mann* ("favor"). Perhaps it would have been better to say that *al-mann* of the Qurʾān was similar to such and such plant

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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).

3. *al-Baqarah*: 25.

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

grown on earth, as many classical commentators say, rather than insist on its identification with an earthly plant; the same is true for the heavenly *Sidratul-muntahā* of *Suratun-Najm*.

The author is on firmer grounds where the problem of relationship of the plant mentioned in the Qur'ān with an earthly plant 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 fruits, 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 are certainly useful. The books would be greatly improved if the pictures accompanying the descriptions were of a higher quality and the works were more aesthetically pleasing.

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.

Such work needs to be produced by institutions where scholars from various disciplines can collaborate. It needs financial support to publish beautifully designed books. The author of the two books under review has carried out his research alone and published the books under difficult financial circumstances and as such, his contribution deserves support.

Muzaffar Iqbal
Center for Islam and Science
Sherwood Park, AB
Canada