
Umm al-Kitāb could, in Pakistan, lay claim to the scholars' attention from the simple fact that two of its few available manuscripts were found in as unexpected places as Chitral (1928) and Hunza (1932). The best copy, though, came from the region of the Upper Oxus (Amu-Darya, USSR) and was collated and published by W. Ivanow in Der Islam (23, 1936, p.1 fl.). In an article (REI 4, 1932, p. 419 fl.) the same author made a first approach to the mystery of this text, analyzing its contents, probing its relevance for our knowledge of early heterodoxy in Islam. The fact that the book was kept sacred by an Ismāʿīlī group of the Upper Oxus seemed to indicate kinship with Ismāʿīlī beliefs, but Ivanow's findings showed that the differences by far outweighed any possible common traits. Instead, he identified links with speculation of the Khaṭṭābiya group, analogies with the Nuṣayri doctrine, Manichean influences and other elements of uncertain origin.

As a result, Ivanow wondered whether Umm al-Kitāb would not contain a version of the little known Qarāmīṣa doctrine. As regards authorship and dating of its origin Ivanow, from the very scarce historical and the somewhat more revealing geographical records of the book, conjectured it was written by a Persian living in southern Mesopotamia or in Syria at the end of the 11th century at the latest.

With P. Filippani-Ronconi's presentation and translation of Umm al-Kitāb we now have gained new ground for the exploration of this difficult text. Not only has he, in spite of the many deficiencies of the Persian original, tried to provide a coherent reading, but he also has, by means of an extensive introduction and a wealth of foot-notes, offered us an attempt at interpretation based on his wide competency in the field of comparative history of religions. (Prof. Filippani is indeed author of studies in Indian and Chinese religious thought and shows an impressive familiarity with Persian, Tibetan, Arabic and Hebraic sources.)

Umm al-Kitāb being of a very complex nature, it cannot be said that Ivanow's questions and assumptions have now received any definitive solution. They still remain, inviting more inquiry in a context which Filippani has greatly widened and enriched with new vistas of the multiplicity of factors involved in the history of this book. As a result, it can now be thought of as the work of several authors instead of one, and the date of its origin might fall as early as the 8th or 9th century. It also appears possible that the Persian author(s) drew from an Arabic original, although not by way of translation. As regards likely relationship to the Khaṭṭābiya, Filippani assigns to its influence a more or less adventitious role. The basic beliefs of the sect gathered around the teachings of Umm al-Kitāb were pre-Islamic. When extremist Shiʿite currents of thought spread into the sect's remote territory, presumably through Khaṭṭābi refugees from Kūfah or some isolated Ismāʿīlī propagandist, they met there with mystico-religious conceptions which were analogous with their own and had derived their common features from Manichean preaching that had taken place centuries earlier in Eastern Iran as much as in Southern Mesopotamia. This original kinship created a situation favourable to the 'Islamization' of the Umm al-Kitāb sect. It did not bring any fundamental innovation, but rather took

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the form of a gradual symbiosis between related elements. Formal integration into reformed Ismāʿīlism may have followed at a considerably later stage, perhaps under the influence of Naṣir-e Khosrau's *daʿwat* in Badakhšān (d. towards 1072). As a support of his hypothesis, Filippani refers to similar processes of amalgamation between Zoroastrian, Mazdean and extreme Shiʿite beliefs that occurred in the first 150 years of the Hijra era in Iran as a sequel to movements like those of Bihāfrīd, Abū Muslim, Sindbād, al-Mukhtār, al-Mughīra a.o. (p. XII). Filippani considers the Islamizing impact of the Shiʿite extremists on the *Umm al-Kitāb* sect as of so little weight as to affirm that if one were to replace the Arabic names in the book with Iranian ones, the names of the five legal Muslim prayers with the corresponding five Mazdean ones, the titles of certain sūras with titles of gnostic and Manichean works, and if one were to take away all ejaculatory prayers and Qurʿānic quotations (which mostly have nothing to do with the ideas exposed,) then the question of the 'Islamicity' of *Umm al-Kitāb* would not even arise. "The book then would appear as nothing more and nothing less than a gnostico-Manichean work bearing strong influences of opposing currents from Tantrism and Qabbala" (p. XXXIV). The only possible exception which Filippani would concede is that Ismāʿīlī influence of the time when the sect joined formally reformed Ismāʿīlism, may have accentuated the universality of the soteriological role ascribed to the *Imāms* (p. XXXV).

Finally, as regards the vicinity of *Umm al-Kitāb* to Shiʿite extremism in non-Islamic speculation, it would seem greatest in respect of al-Mughīra, and not of Abūʾl-Khaṭṭāb who figures in the book mainly as a "mystico-religious abstraction" (p. XXXIII). Instead, *Umm al-Kitāb* shares with al-Mughīra (who died in 737, twenty years earlier than Abūʾl-Khaṭṭāb) his belief in the symbolic value of the letters of the alphabet, the secret science of the *jafr*. (Cf. part of the introduction of *Umm al-Kitāb* and question II.) Like al-Mughīra *Umm al-Kitāb* also professes the divinity of Imām Bāqir, whereas Abūʾl-Khaṭṭāb ascribed divinity to Bāqir's son, Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, and was punished for it by execution (p. XXXIII).

It may be justifiable to remark (as J. van Ess does in *Der Islam*, 46, 1-2, 1970, p. 98) that Filippani's research in the direction of Islamic connections between *Umm al-Kitāb* and Shiʿite extremism leaves a number of lacunae. What might account for this, could well be his extraordinary acquaintance with the world of non-Islamic religious systems. Their spell on the scholar would be all the more understandable as up to the foundation of Baghdad they had been thriving in southern Mesopotamia. On the other hand, Vajrayāna Buddhist theories and mystical practices were very common in Gandhāra, an area contiguous to that Pāmir region where the teachings of *Umm al-Kitāb* keep followers even in our days. Both these factors together must have been like a challenge for Filippani to seek the interpretation of this multi-faceted book preferably in the light of parallels and correspondences with these systems. His research gives evidence that he moves in their realm with versatile mastery.

What then is *Umm al-Kitāb* according to him? Its contents, divided into a preface and 38 questions, represent for him an esoteric creed. Its language is an archaic form of neo-Persian with distinctive features (as f. ex. the contamination between the prepositions *ba*, *be* and *az*) characterizing its use in areas close to Indian linguistic regions. Language analysis shows two fundamental data: on the one hand the text uses a popular style of expression, on the other a profuse philosophico-religious nomenclature destined
to convey highly sophisticated and at times abstruse theories. The presence of these suggests that in a summary form the *Umm al-Kitāb* reflects the anterior teaching of masters profoundly versed in esoteric knowledge of various kinds: neo-Pythagorean, Qabbalistics Mazdean, Manichean, Vajrayāna and others. This authorizes Filippani to assume the coming together in *Umm al-Kitāb* of two main currents of thought: the one gnostic, originating from Mesopotamia (Nisibīn, Gondeshāhpur, Harrān) where the late speculation of antiquity resulted in a mystico-philosophical synthesis which will henceforward offer food for philosophical thought to the early Islam up to the encyclopedia of the Ikh wān aṣ-Ṣafā, - the other mystical, drawing from the Gandhārian Vajrayāna and incorporating elements of yoga practices into the course of doctrinal teaching (p. X/XI). For the book not only communicates secret knowledge, but also aims at the transformation of its reader. It wants doctrine to become living experience in this precise sense that at the level of his somatic and psychical dimensions he is enabled to realize the cosmic dramas and metamorphoses to which the gnostic teaching initiates him. Filippani calls this the most distinctive feature of the whole book. He sees in it a clear resemblance to the manner of the Indian schools of philosophy and mysticism where the teaching of theory also involves communication of 'discipline', i.e. of that method by which the initiate will arrive at the immediate perception of what is revealed to him in terms of doctrine. The initiate of *Umm al-Kitāb* thus is summoned to enter, ecstatically, into the dazzling mysteries of the ‘drama in heaven’ of which he receives cognition in the symbols that arise within the psycho-somatic sphere of his being and form an intermediary world (‘meso-cosmos’, says Filippani) between himself and the cosmic totality. Later Islamic mysticism names this ‘imaginative conscience’ (H. Corbin) the ‘ālam al-mithāl (p. VIII/IX).

Taking all together, *Umm al-Kitāb* appears, in the Italian scholar’s hypothesis, as a text of a Persian school of Manichean-Mazdaic origin, combining the teaching of Syro-Mesopotamian gnosis with a soteriological technique derived from Shīva-Vajrayāna Buddhism. If this is correct, *Umm al-Kitāb* as a book unique of its kind, would then have a good chance of shedding light on certain teachings involving esoteric actualization through ecstasy as they can be found in Persian sūfism from al-Bīštāmi down to the modern Shaykhi schools. Their possible source would be Indian (p. XI).

In as far as the book’s connection with proto-Ismā’īlīsm is concerned, Filippani lists three reasons for it: first, because it also exposes theories and concepts that will become peculiar to the Ismā’īli sects; second, because its esoteric teaching is dispensed by Imām Bāqir; and third, because, as already mentioned, *Umm al-Kitāb* is held sacred by a sect that professes itself Ismā’īli. But he thinks that these facts are nothing more than “an interplay of perspectives” and offer no hold for any essential relationship (p. XXXV). Nor do the Imām’s questioners, a motley group of supposed disciples whose identity and historical records are replete with problems, do so. (Cf. J. van Ess, loc. cit., pp. 96-97.)

There remains the question of the basic themes of *Umm al-Kitāb*. They are cosmological, soteriological and eschatological, - a sum of knowledge proposed in symbolic language. Its ciphers, the book stresses, give way only to the devotee willing to prepare his psyche for it through ascetical exertion. Inner realization by man of the symbolic truth alone lets him participate in the cosmic reality. For it is the spell of this symbolic truth over the human soul which in the act of concentration by the initiate enables him
to establish the link between the universal macrocosmos and his own individual microcosmos. The language of the symbols thus is intermediary between the two cosmic orders and serves as the medium that brings mystically man's sensory capacity into communion with the transcendent archetypes. Ismā'īlī speculation calls this the ta'wil, the unique way to tawhid, taking the word in its proper etymological meaning (awwala) of "reconduction of a being to its principle, its archetype" (p. XXXVI). The ta'wil, in the psyche's act of realization of the symbols, becomes fath, i.e., it 'overcomes' what separates the symbols from the archetypes.

After this, the modern reader of Umm al-Kitāb must make allowance for a large deal of speculation on the structure of the two cosmic orders: the archetypal creative ideas of the Pleroma, its constellations and angelical hierarchies, its lights and colours, its problematic barzakh, i.e., the limiting screen on which the archetypes seem to be reflected thus giving intelligibility to the underlying world of negativity, exile of Adam imprisoned under Ahriman's action. Lavish symbolism attaches to the human heart. It represents the condition of earthly life. Immersed in it is Adam fallen from his primordial bliss. It marks the point of intersection between the divine creativity (conscience) from above and Ahriman's negative counter-action (concupiscence) from below. Harbouring therefore a share in divine light, it is destined, in the event of qiṣyāma (resurrection), to regain eventually a celestial function (pp. 346-54). Man's redemption consists in his being liberated from relationship to the material world to which he remains fettered as long as he does not renounce his sexual appetite. Woman, at this earthly level at least, is the symbol and instrument of sin. In the heart also is perpetuated that 'spirit of resistance' which caused Adam's fall at the instigation of his two tempters, the serpent and the peacock. The prototype of man remains however in heaven, unaffected by sin and decay. Adam thus exists in three forms: the heavenly one (ka'fūri or dā'im, cf. p. 222) who is in no need of redemption, - Adam in the human heart, capable of salvation (habst or mu'tariq, cf. p 156), - and Adam delivered up to the instincts (madhmrim, cf. p. 55 and passim) for whom there is no possible salvation. Redemption begins when the 'Spirit of acquiescence' which resides in the heart and has Muḥammad for heavenly archetype, turns to the Imām of the Time, a sort of emanation of Salmān al-Fārisī. Salmān whose identity and function are extremely multiform (p. XLIII), then descends into the heart and operates its overturn. (Cf. question IX and XXV). "The sun now rises from the West" symbolically indicates the beginning of the qiṣyāma, i.e., Adam's return to his archetype. Thanks to Salmān's intervention he recovers his self-consciousness and can set out on the inner ascension from the heart to the brain and to heaven. Umm al-Kitāb identifies it with Muḥammad's mi'rāj (p. 137). This process is not that of an individual, however. It involves the 'man-universe' and must be understood as the "re-integration of the universe into its primordial principle" (p. XLIII) and hence "is nothing else than the way back, in reverse, of the epiphany of the worlds" described in question V of the book.

Indefatigably, Filippani in his vast effort of interpretation labours to bring consistency into all this and to elucidate its links and correspondences with the presumed sources of Umm al-Kitāb. How intricate this task is, - not least on account of a "hopelessly perverted text" (Ivanow), - may be seen from just one example. As one of its many 'heresies', if considered from the Islamic point of view, our book professes the belief in man's repeated earthly lives (karrat o ra'jat, p. 210). But they mean not only a progression
through future existences, they can also be repetitions of lives in the past. In this view each cycle of time, while being perfect and closed in itself, reflects the function of a celestial hierarchy which manifests itself in a particular prophet as its type. The cycle thus does not vanish in an indefinite 'past', but can be re-lived in its archetype by anybody who has an inner affinity with any one of the respective prophets, past or future, as f. ex. the spirit of 'resistence' in Adam's cycle, the spirit of 'domination' in Moses's cycle, etc. (p. XXXIX). This recurrence comes to an end only when the light that remained imprisoned in the lower faculties of the individual is completely re-absorbed in the azal (pre-existent eternity) of the divine light.

This singular theory denotes, according to Filippani, a mixture of at least three different theories: the Buddhist and Hindu concept of the repetition of earthly lives, the Manichean liberation of the light from the psyche entrapped in matter, and the Iranian-Ismā'īli doctrine of salvation through successive cycles of prophets (p. XXXIX).

For the historian of religions Filippani's work on Umm al-Kitāb makes highly fascinating reading. The merits of his painstaking handling of such difficult matter can but elicit admiration and thankfulness from the student. Whether his interpretation, though, will prove sound in all its parts, is a question that requires the test of further investigation. As it stands, it is not free of a number of text misreadings. (Cf. J. van Ess, loc. cit., p. 98).

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