Book Review


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This book focuses on the (often neglected) *quṣṣāṣ* (pl., sg. *qāṣṣ*) of early Islam. Its main argument is that, despite their later image as unreliable storytellers, popular preachers, and innovators, the *quṣṣāṣ* of early Islam were, for the most part, reliable, reputable, and conformist religious scholars. Armstrong’s book joins a significant body of modern scholarship on early and later medieval Islamic preaching with the aim of re-defining the category of the

quṣṣāṣ and to re-assess their role in early Islamic society. For this reason the author keeps the term untranslated throughout the book, though he considers the most fitting label for them to be ‘preachers’ (p. 9). The difficulty in defining the quṣṣāṣ lies in the untidy landscape of early Islamic preaching, which the quṣṣāṣ shared with other figures such as the wuʿʿāẓ (admonishers), mudhakkirūn (reminders), or the khuṭabāʾ (orators). The sources do not draw clear boundaries between these categories and at times use some of these terms interchangeably.

However, Armstrong is concerned only with the quṣṣāṣ and sets out to nuance our understanding of them by addressing what he has identified as two main flaws in the treatment by modern scholarship of the quṣṣāṣ. First, the association of the quṣṣāṣ with storytelling (based on the lexical meaning of qaṣṣa “to tell stories”), is too limiting. Indeed, the quṣṣāṣ related material beyond narratives, such as verses of poetry, legal rulings, and short hadiths as he shows mainly in Chapter 1. Second, the broad definitions of the quṣṣāṣ as Islamic religious teachers, stemming from the sources’ treatment of preachers, render the term qāṣṣ void of any meaning of its own. To remedy this terminological imprecision, the author has opted for establishing a clear criterion of selection: an explicit association with the root q-ṣ-ṣ. So, while previous scholars in their discussions of the quṣṣāṣ mainly relied on what medieval compilations, the most influential among them being Ibn al-Jawzī’s (d.597/1200) Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-al-mudhakkirīn, have said about them, Armstrong has also collected his own pool of qaṣaṣ material. Drawing on a wide range of later narrative sources, such as chronicles, ḥadīth compilations, biographical dictionaries, literary works, and works on Sufism and asceticism, and setting an end date of 750, he has assembled all the instances in which a qāṣṣ is mentioned, in which the sources designate a certain statement as qaṣṣa, or

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2. A more precise translation would be something along the lines of “Those who call others to be cognizant of God,” as Armstrong refers to them on p.135.

3. The accepted meaning of qaṣṣa is indeed “to tell stories” as Armstrong notes (p.6); however, it seems that the term itself is wider than that. Etymologically, it means “to follow after the footsteps of, to trace someone.” Lane’s examples and translation of iqṭaṣṣa al-ḥadīthah hint at the logical connections between the two meanings: “he related the tradition, or story, in its proper manner […] as though he followed its traces, in pursuit, and related it accordingly.” In this way, qaṣṣa delivers a connotation of a more serious “storytelling,” which strives for precision and details and is not necessarily based on narrative. The etymological meaning of the term may perhaps serve in support of Armstrong’s thesis that the early quṣṣāṣ were not primarily narrators of entertaining and spurious stories.
in which they introduce it by a cognate phrase, such as käna yaqṣṣu fa-qāla (p.7). To compare, Armstrong created a list of 109 qaṣṣāṣ while Ibn al-Jawzī listed only 45 qaṣṣāṣ and the two lists overlap only partially (see table on p.12).

This collection of the vast body of material directly associated with qaṣṣāṣ that Armstrong has collected to support his argument, along with the clear presentation of this material with many quotations in Arabic with English translations, and the biographical sketches of the 109 qaṣṣāṣ in the appendix, are among the main strengths of the book.

Chapter One ("Qaṣaṣ: Textual Evidence") presents his collection of qaṣaṣ statements. These comprise 43 qaṣaṣ texts, which he divides into three main thematic groups of religious (34), martial (8), and religio-political qaṣaṣ (1). They display a wide array of themes, as they deal with the questions of divine will and human responsibility, death and afterlife, narrate exemplars from prophets’ lives, or instruct soldiers in military tactics and incite them to fight. Some qaṣaṣ statements also include verses of poetry, prophetic ḥadīth, and legal rulings. This wide range of themes and forms show that qaṣṣāṣ is not limited to the stories of prophets (qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ), which in turn should not be seen as originating with the qaṣṣāṣ (p. 38). This constitutes an important aspect of Armstrong’s effort to rid the qaṣṣāṣ of the label “storytellers,” though it would be unjust to say that all earlier scholars have considered the qaṣṣāṣ as such. But this chapter’s discussion of

4. Armstrong claims that many scholars have considered the qaṣṣāṣ to be popular preachers and storytellers, and this is undoubtedly true. However, taking the example of the two scholars who have the qaṣaṣ statements offers more than that. Especially the author’s presentation of qaṣṣāṣ in the martial context brings to light interesting material. Al-Ṭabarī’s and al-Azdī’s use of the term qaṣaṣ for Byzantine bishops, monks, priests, and deacons who exhorted the Byzantines to fight, or al-Ṭabarī’s report in which he recorded the Khārijite rebel Shabīb’s call for the qaṣṣāṣ and “he who recites the poetry of ‘Antara” (p. 69) before a battle, show the firm place that these oral ways of incitement and exhortation had in the turbulent environment of early Islam. Based on the diversity of themes among the 43 qaṣaṣ texts discussed in Chapter One, Armstrong reasons that the content was not the only thing that defined the qaṣṣāṣ but that its unifying factor was “the aim of eliciting a fervent response from the listener” (p. 74).

Chapter Two explores the qaṣṣāṣ’ associations with Qurʾān reciters (qurrāʾ), Qurʾān commentators (mufassirūn), Ḥadīth transmitters (muḥaddithūn), jurists (fuqahāʾ), judges (quḍāt), orators dealt with the issue and whom he includes among those holding such view (on p. 5, n. 17 and p. 151) Berkey and ‘Athamina, we can note that both views are much more nuanced than that. Berkey for his part and precisely on the point of the qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ notes that these should not be associated specifically with the qaṣṣāṣ because the major collections of them were compiled by exegetes like al-Thaʿlabī. Jonathan Berkey, Popular preaching and religious authority in the medieval Islamic Near East (Seattle, 2001), 40. And though Armstrong attributes to ‘Athamina the view that the qaṣṣāṣ were “popular religious teachers targeting the simple masses,” ‘Athamina also acknowledges the “broad spectrum of functions fulfilled by the qaṣṣ and the high erudition he must have possessed. See Khalil ‘Athamina, “Al-Qasas: Its Emergence, Religious Origin, and its Socio-Political Impact on Early Muslim Society,” Studia Islamica 76 (1992), 54.
Chapter Three, most interestingly, brings together reports and debates about the quṣṣāṣ’ performances: skills of effective quṣṣāṣ and their conduct and postures during the qaṣaṣ-giving and where and what time of the day it took place. It also discusses what he sees as ‘malpractices’ which harmed the quṣṣāṣ’ reputation, such as mixing of genders, loudness, raising hands, or fainting during the sessions. This chapter is especially valuable because it gives readers an insight into the variety of the qaṣaṣ performances and the discussions that surrounded them. And the qaṣaṣ performance was indeed varied: The quṣṣāṣ might stand on the pulpit, sit in a corner of the mosque or hold sessions outside of the mosque—in public places and in their homes; they might preach twice a day or twice a week. Raising hands, for example, seemed to have been a controversial issue, which was not limited to qaṣaṣ. It was also recorded during funeral processions, during an eclipse of sun, and upon seeing the Kaʿba during the ḥajj (p.181-182). And in terms of qaṣaṣ, it was not necessarily only the qāṣṣ who would raise his hands, Armstrong mentions two instances in which the audience would join him in this practice (p. 182). It would be extremely interesting to further investigate into a deeper meaning of such a practice.

Chapter Four and Chapter Five follow the quṣṣāṣ chronologically through the Rāshidūn era (Chapter Four) and through the Umayyad period (Chapter Five). Chapter Four engages with the reports that reject qaṣaṣ as innovation (bidʿa) that had no precedent in the time of the Prophet and thus represents a dangerous deviation from his sunna. Some of the most interesting attacks represent the reports that connect the emergence of

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qaṣṣāṣ with the Apocalypse (p. 225-229). The author counters the anti-quṣṣāṣ material by arguing that a body of traditions suggest that qaṣṣāṣ existed already in the time of the Prophet and with more positive representations of the quṣṣāṣ who lived under the first four caliphs.

Chapter Five follows the quṣṣāṣ and their increasing involvement in political affairs during the Umayyad period. The quṣṣāṣ were especially active in the caliphates of Muʿāwiya, ʿAbd al-Malik and ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, both for and against the Umayyads. Yet, the author cautions against considering them all as political figures, for some, including Bilāl b. Saʿd, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. al-Qāsim, or Mūsā b. Sayyār, remained politically disengaged, and dedicated themselves only to religious education.

To Armstrong, all the material he collected proves that the early Islamic qaṣṣāṣ were not exclusively or primarily storytellers but rather reputable religious scholars, who were part of the orthodox religious establishment, often praised for their contribution to a number of Islamic religious disciplines. Their bad reputation originated only during the Umayyad period as a result of some of their ‘malpractices’, political affiliations, and negative effects on the public. They were not popular preachers, because their audiences were not only the masses but in some instances also the students of ḥadīth; they were public speakers or simply “preachers,” and different elements set them apart from other public performers: qaṣṣāṣ was less formal than khaṭāba and wider in content and objective than waʿẓ and dhikr, as its use in martial contexts suggests. Armstrong concludes: “Indeed, the feature that seems to distinguish qaṣṣāṣ from other public pronouncements and that connected all of its varied expressions, be they religious, martial or religio-political, was exhortation. The objective of the early Islamic qaṣṣ was not simply to educate, it was to motivate.” (p. 282).

Armstrong’s methodology and treatment of the sources raises various questions. These are related to either of two issues: (1) a conflation of qaṣṣāṣ and quṣṣāṣ and (2) authenticity. First, he includes in his discussion of the quṣṣāṣ all those who at some point gave qaṣṣāṣ, qiṣṣa or qaṣṣū, yet it ought to be asked whether everyone who tells a qiṣṣa or engages in qaṣṣāṣ is a qāṣṣ. One could say that not everyone who writes is a writer. Armstrong’s criteria throw together disparate characters of early Islamic society: the Prophet Muḥammad, prominent Rāshidūn-era political figures like Abū Bakr and ʿAmr b. al-Ŷās and semi-legendary figures of early Islam like Tamīm al-Dārī and, Umayyad scholars, and what seem to have been semi-professional martial and partisan Umayyad qaṣṣāṣ. Based on these criteria, God Himself could have made it to Armstrong’s list. Armstrong’s criteria thus make for a too-large and too varied body of individuals to be discussed as a distinct sociological group, something that seems

6. In this regard, we may think of Steven Judd’s recent book *Religious Scholars and the Umayyads: Piety-Minded Supporters of the Marwānid Caliphate* (Abingdon, 2014) in which he argues that while pious scholars have been considered to have been opposed to the Umayyads, a sizeable number of them in fact supported the regime through their scholarly activities and public performance of piety.

7. The Qurʾān says “We do relate unto thee the most beautiful of stories” *naḥnu naqṣṣu ʿalayka aḥsana al-qaṣṣaṣi* Q 12:3.
to be Armstrong’s main concern here as he tries to redeem the quṣṣāṣ as reputable and conformist scholars.

Second, the later nature of sources is something that cannot be avoided, as we have no contemporary accounts of the quṣṣāṣ. Yet, the author discards the question of authenticity all too easily. He mentions the general problem in passing during his discussion of the qaṣaṣ statements (Chapter One): “For my part, I have accepted the attribution of the statement as a qiṣṣa recognizing that this, in itself, reveals the viewpoint of what constitutes a qiṣṣa in the mind of the author of the specific source text, if not of the Islamic community in general at the time of the compilation of the source, preserving an earlier view of the features of qaṣaṣ (p.15). Yet Armstrong does speak mainly about the quṣṣāṣ of early Islam, as the title clearly states, and not about their later perception. He also refers the reader to Aziz Al-Azmeh’s excellent essay that criticizes the overly critical approach to Arabic sources that has become characteristic of Western scholarship. But while Al-Azmeh is correct in his assessment of Western scholarship’s obsession with the issue of authenticity, this does not mean that we can stop being cautious about what the sources tell us or that we need to follow their argumentative lines. For example, Armstrong makes an effort to represent the quṣṣāṣ as “conformists,” rather than innovators, as they have been cast by some later sources. That’s why it is important for him to prove that quṣṣāṣ and qaṣaṣ existed in the time of the Prophet, something about which scholarship has been either divided or agnostic, and he concludes that rather than later back-projections “it seems more likely [...] that this miscellany [of perceptions and reports about quṣṣāṣ and qaṣaṣ] signifies that we have an authentic corpus of reports preserving the complex and evolving religious milieu of the early period.” (p. 206). I do not follow the author’s argument here: Why cannot the existence of diverse views on pre-Umayyad quṣṣāṣ reflect later attempts to legitimize or de-legitimize the practice of preaching, which was clearly a significant feature of Islamic society and a powerful tool of propaganda? Nor do I see the need to portray them as conformists. This contention stems from the author’s following too closely the later sources that engage in such debates. However, we cannot be sure that the discussion about the quṣṣāṣ as innovators took place during the early period of Islam (until 750). These debates might be of later origins and their application to the historical early quṣṣāṣ may thus be anachronistic.

These two issues—conflating qaṣaṣ and qāṣṣ and downplaying the problem of authenticity—raise further questions about Armstrong’s book. As far as the definition of qaṣaṣ is concerned, it may be asked whether all the instances in which the later sources preserved statements containing the verb qaṣṣa used it deliberately to refer to the practice of qaṣaṣ, and did not replace, for instance, akhbara at an earlier stage of transmission. And even if the term’s usage were constant, we may ask whether qaṣṣa meant the same thing in different time periods. Furthermore, if one of the author’s main goals is precisely to define

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qaṣaṣ, his conclusion (see above or p. 282) seems rather unsatisfying. “Exhortation” and “to motivate” are indeed objectives of most public speakers throughout human history; Aristotle considered rhetoric to be the art of persuasion (*Rhet.* I.2). If one of the main flaws of modern scholarly treatment of qaṣaṣ is too a broad definition, as he claims, he has not satisfactorily solved the problem. In any case, the main purpose of this book lies in correcting the other misconception that he sets to refute: the view of the quṣṣāṣ as storytellers. This is what leads us to the second point: Armstrong’s treatment of the material and his arguments turn his list of quṣṣāṣ into a homogeneous group, as it were. But as we have seen, the quṣṣāṣ were rather amorphous. Jonathan Berkey, talking about later medieval Islamic preachers, notes that using terms such as qāṣṣ and wāʿīẓ “is in a way misleading, because the quṣṣāṣ and wuʿūṣī did not necessarily form a discrete social or occupational category”; rather, their performances should be seen rather as “activities or even different aspects of the same activity.”

Such understanding of qaṣaṣ is even more plausible in early Islam before many occupations became professionalized. It is therefore warranted to ask whether the quṣṣāṣ existed as a separate social group. The third point would be that Armstrong, as we saw with his discussion of innovators and conformers, is perhaps too eager to pass value judgments. To give a more concrete example, he discusses the various forms of qaṣaṣ performance, such as hand raising or fainting, as ‘malpractices’ that harmed the reputation of the quṣṣāṣ rather than as extremely interesting evidence of the ritual and performative dimension of their work. And since his main focus lies in redeeming the reputation of the quṣṣāṣ, he casts, to this end, secular (storytelling) against religious, reputable against popular, and unorthodox against orthodox, creating dichotomies that did not necessarily exist.

Even readers unpersuaded by all aspects of Armstrong’s methodology will be grateful to him for collecting a comprehensive body of qaṣaṣ, qiṣṣa, and qāṣṣ material and for its clear presentation. It contains many excerpts in Arabic and in English translation and a helpful appendix of early Islamic figures engaged in qaṣaṣ activities. It is an indispensable work for any Islamicist or historian interested in early Islamic and medieval preaching.

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