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Three proverbs in Muslim and Jewish Arabic from Baghdad

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The aim of this short article is to present three proverbs in Muslim Baghdadi and Jewish Baghdadi dialects, characterized by conveying teachings and moral values that have parallels and similarities with concepts expressed in the Quranic text, and to offer their linguistic analysis and description in order to show some features of the two varieties. The interaction between language and religion is very significant for Arabic paremiology, as the Qurʾān is a rich source of proverbs. On the one hand, many Quranic verses are used as proverbs; on the other, many proverbs are mentioned and recalled in the Quranic text.

As far as the analysis of proverbs is concerned, the transcription in Latin characters and the translation into English will be undertaken by the author. For each proverb, a commentary on its use and on the message transmitted will be provided, along with the Quranic verses that convey similar concepts. Then, some phonological and morphological features of the two dialects will be described, taking the move from the analysis of the most significant expressions and terms of the proverbs; for this purpose and to better highlight the characteristics of the two varieties a comparison with Classical Arabic will be offered.

Keywords: Arabic, Arabic paremiology, Iraqi dialects, Muslim Baghdadi, Jewish Baghdadi.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to present three proverbs in Muslim Baghdadi (MB) and Jewish Baghdadi (JB) dialects, characterized by conveying teachings and moral values that have parallels and similarities with concepts expressed in the Quranic text, and to offer their linguistic analysis and description in order to show some features of the two varieties. The interaction between language and religion is very significant for Arabic paremiology, the Qurʾān being a rich source of proverbs. On the one hand, many Quranic verses are used as proverbs; on the other, many proverbs are mentioned and recalled in the Quranic text. Regarding the latter, some of them probably already circulated orally in pre-Islamic times in similar formulations and then, considered the Qurʾān's relationship with the ancient milieu in which

it arose, crystallized in the text. Undoubtedly, in societies characterized by a profound sense of the sacred and spiritual, a peculiar interaction between faith and culture is present, religious beliefs are in fact intertwined with pre-existing moral principles and practices, cultural traditions, social realities, family and community life, language and its various manifestations.

As mentioned above, three proverbs will be presented in two varieties: Muslim Baghdadi and Jewish Baghdadi. Based on a general areal classification, the dialects spoken in the region stretching from the Gulf along the Euphrates and the Tigris to the source of the two rivers are included in a language family called Mesopotamian Arabic. Mesopotamian Arabic and Iraqi Arabic have been divided by Blanc (1964: 5-7), the first scholar who scientifically studied Iraqi dialectology, into two groups: the *qaltu* dialects and the *gil't* dialects.¹ *Qaltu* varieties are spoken by the sedentary Muslim population in northern Iraq and by the non-Muslim population in both the north and the south of the country. *Gil't* dialects are spoken by the Muslim population (sedentary and non-sedentary) of southern Iraq and the non-sedentary Muslim population of northern Iraq (Blanc 1964: 6). In the city of Baghdad, the *gil't* variety spoken by the Muslim majority coexists with a *qaltu* variety spoken by the Christian community. Up to a few decades ago a second variety of *qaltu* was also present in the Jewish community, which has now almost entirely emigrated from Iraq.

As for the sources of the proverbs, in addition to my personal knowledge and experience as a Baghdadi native, I drew on the following collections. *Al-'amtāl al-baġdādiyya* ('Baghdad proverbs') by the Baghdadi philologist Ġalāl al-Ĥanafī (1914-2006), considered one of the most important literary and religious figures of the twentieth century. His work, written in Arabic language, was published in two volumes, in 1962 and 1964. It contains more than 3000 proverbs arranged alphabetically with a commentary on their meaning and, in some cases, the quotation of the proverb in Classical Arabic (CLA). *Al-'amtāl al-baġdādiyyah al-muqāranah: muqāranah ma'a 'amtāl 'aḥada 'asara quṭr^{an} 'arabiyy^{an}* ('Baghdad Proverbs Compared: A Comparison with Proverbs from Eleven Arab Countries') by 'Abdu r-Raḥmān at-Tikrītī (1914-1987), the most famous paremiologist in Iraq. It is composed of four volumes written in Arabic language, published from 1966 to 1969, and contains a comparative analysis of the proverbs of various Arab countries. And lastly, *'al neharōt Bavēl: oṭṣār ha-pitgamim šel yəhudey Bavēl* ('On the rivers of Babylon: Treasury of proverbs of the Iraqi Jews') by Yehuša' Mē'īrī. This collection, written in Hebrew language and published in 1997, contains 1303 proverbs divided by topic with

¹ *qaltu* and *gil't* < CLA قُلْتُ *qultu* 'I said.'

comments about their use and references to the proverbs in Muslim Baghdadi. However, all these collections lack an etymological, morphological, and phonological analysis.

Proverbs in Muslim Baghdadi will be presented in Arabic characters; those in Jewish Baghdadi will be presented in Hebrew characters, according to the *corpora* from which they are drawn. As far as the analysis is concerned, the transcription in Latin characters and the translation into English will be undertaken by the author. For each proverb, a commentary on its use and the message transmitted will be provided, along with the Quranic verses that convey similar concepts. Then, some phonological and morphological features of the two dialects will be described, taking the move from the analysis of the most significant expressions and terms present in the text of the proverbs; for this purpose and to better highlight the characteristics of the two varieties a comparison with Classical Arabic *fiṣḥā* will be offered.²

2. Proverb #1

MB:

لا مال الينفع ولا ولد اليشفع

JB:

לֹא מָאָל אֶלְיִנְפִיעַ וְלֹא וָלָד אֶלְיִשְׁפִיעַ

lā māl l-yinfa' wa-lā walad il-yišfa'

This proverb, attested in the collections of Al-Ḥanafī (1964: II, n. 2623, 193), At-Tikrītī (1968: III, n. 1822, 396) and Mē'irī (1997: n. 990, 349), can be translated 'Neither money to avail, nor child to liaise.' It is used to refer to difficult situations in which money is completely useless to face and solve problems, or in cases in which children do not take care of their parents and their needs. In a more general sense, the proverb is an exhortation to do good and behave righteously, and, at the same time, a warning to those who do evil.

The idea of uselessness of worldly goods, material resources and children for the salvation of the soul is present in several Quranic verses, including:

{يَوْمَ لَا يَنْفَعُ مَالٌ وَلَا بَنُونَ إِلَّا مَنْ أَتَى اللَّهَ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ}

² For more about the characteristics of Muslim Baghdadi and Jewish Baghdadi dialects through the analysis of proverbs, see Faraj (2023).

the day when neither wealth nor children will avail, except him who comes to Allāh with a sound heart (Q. XXVI:88-89),

where *yawm* stands for *يَوْمُ الدِّينِ yawmu d-dīni* ‘the Day of Judgment’³ (Newby 2002: 214b-215a) that is, the last day when humans will be judged by God for their deeds, and

(لَنْ تُغْنِي عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَالُهُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا ۗ)

neither their wealth nor their children will avail them anything against Allāh (Q. III:116).

Concerning the structure, the proverb is formed by two negative nominal sentences, characterized by a syntactic and rhythmic parallelism which increases their communicative effectiveness. Compared to the Quranic verses, the proverb has a shorter structure, which does not preclude the understanding of the concept conveyed. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the omission of elements or parts of speech is a peculiar feature of proverbs as a consequence of their conciseness.⁴ The rhetorical effect is created by the *ġinās nāqis fi naw‘ al-ḥurūf*, i.e., the alliteration with variation of consonants and same vocalization between the verbs *yinfa‘* and *yišfa‘*. This sound device captures and sustains the audience’s attention by means of a sound correlation.

MB and JB:

- *lā...wa-lā*: ‘neither... nor,’ negation particles used to negate two prepositional pseudo-verbal constructions. In proverbs and idiomatic expressions, there are many examples with this type of negative construction, a very common one is *lā walad wa-lā talad* used to indicate someone who has nothing or someone who has left nothing for their heirs. The same proverb is also attested in Jordan (Alzoubi 2020: 140b), in Baḥrayn in the variant *lā walad wi-lā talad* (Holes 2001: 566b), while in the language of Mardin it is used in an abbreviated form without the negative construction *lā...wa-lā* which remains implicit (Grigore 2007: 321). The noun *talad*, rhyming with *walad*, literally means ‘old furniture’ (Qafisheh 1977: 239) and, by extension, ‘object of little value,’ but it can also refer to the money inherited from ancestors, considered the origin of the wealth that one has in life. In the context of the proverb the word *talad* has the meaning of ‘nothing,’ thus *lā walad wa-lā talad* can be translated as ‘neither child nor anything.’

³ Among the various synonyms is *يَوْمُ الْقِيَامَةِ yawmu l-qiyāmati*, literally ‘the Day of Resurrection.’

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the structure of proverbs, see Pagnini (1998).

- *yinfa*^ʕ: ‘he avails,’ verb imperfect, I stem, 3M.SG (CLA *يَنْفَعُ yanfaʕu*), root *nf*^ʕ attested in Ugaritic *np*^ʕ with the meaning ‘to be fertile, useful; to flourish, to prosper’ and in some South Arabian languages.⁵
- *yišfa*^ʕ: ‘he liaises; he intercedes,’ verb imperfect, I stem, 3M.SG (CLA *يَشْفَعُ yašfaʕu*).

In JB a variant of the proverb with a more extensive structure is also attested, with a formulation similar to that of the Quranic verses, in which there is a third element introduced by the noun *ġēr*: *mā yinfa^ʕ lā māl wu-lā b^onīn ġēr ʾa^ʕmāl ʾšliḥīn* ‘neither money nor children are of any benefit, only the labor of the righteous.’⁶ Note the epenthetic vowels, which in JB are indicated with the superscript vowels (^{ʾ ʾ u}), according to the method commonly adopted by Arabic dialectology, to avoid consonant clusters at the beginning, within or at the end of a sentence.⁷

- *ġēr*: ‘other than, different (from), except (for), save (for), but, only’ (CLA *غَيْرٌ ġayr*) with monophthongization of the diphthong in CLA /ay/ into /ē/, phonological phenomenon characteristic of the MB and JB dialects.

Finally, it should be noted that the proverb is used in Kuwait (An-Nūrī 1961: II, 33), where the variant *lā mā^{īn} yinfa^ʕ wa-lā walad^{īn} yišfa^ʕ* is also attested with the two nouns ‘money’ and ‘child’ in the oblique.

3. Proverb #2

MB:

مَصَائِبُ قَوْمٍ عِنْدَ قَوْمٍ فَوَائِدُ

JB:

מִצָּאָבִיב קוּם עֵינֵי קוּם פִּינְאָד

mašāʾib qōm ʾinda qōm fawāʾid

The proverb, attested in the collection of Mēʾirī (1997: n. 656, 240), can be translated ‘The misfortunes of some are advantages for others.’ It explores human feelings and refers to all those situations in which

⁵ For more, cf. Gordon (1965: 298); Takács (2010: 92).

⁶ Assaf Bar-Moshe, personal communication, May 10, 2022.

⁷ For more about epenthetic vowels in Arabic dialects, cf. Durand (2018: 265-268).

a person feels joy and happiness for the misfortunes and failures of others due to envy and jealousy, or to the advantages that can issue from such misfortunes.

The proverb is a quotation from the second hemistich of a verse from a *qaṣīdah* ‘poem’ by al-Mutanabbī (303/915-354/965) (An-Naḥwī 2004: I, 809). It is the last poem in the third series of the second fifth of his *dīwān*,⁸ composed in *aṭ-ṭawīl* meter, whose *qāfiyah* ‘rhyme’ is a *dāliyyah*:

بِذَا قَضَتِ الْأَيَّامُ مَا بَيْنَ أَهْلِهَا
مَصَائِبُ قَوْمٍ عِنْدَ قَوْمٍ قَوَائِدُ

Thus, the days’ rule among mankind
the misfortunes of some are advantages for others.

This proverb also has a parallel in the Qur’ān; the feeling of ‘harm-joy’ for the misfortunes of others is present in the verse:

﴿إِنْ تَمَسَسَكُمْ حَسَنَةٌ تَسُؤْهُمْ وَإِنْ تُصِيبْكُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ يَفْرَحُوا بِهَا﴾

If some good should befall you, it upsets them, but if some ill befalls you, they rejoice at it (Q. III:120).

The proverb, featured by a symmetrical structure and a specular rhythm, is characterized by the presence of the pair of words *maṣāʾibu* / *fawāʾidu* with an identical morphological scheme and opposite semantic content and by the repetition of the term *qawm*ⁱⁿ (JB *qōm*) at very short intervals. This creates sound effects that emphasize the message conveyed.

MB:

- *maṣāʾibu*: ‘misfortunes, calamities, afflictions, disasters’ (CLA *مَصَائِبُ maṣāʾibu* ~ *مُصِيبَاتٌ muṣībāt^{un}* plural of paucity), F.PL (broken) diptote noun, derived from the F.SG form of the active participle *مُصِيبٌ muṣīb^{un}*,⁹ which gives the verb *أَصَابَ ʾaṣāba*, *يُصِيبُ yuṣību* (IV stem) ‘to catch, strike, reach

⁸ For more, cf. al-Mutanabbī (1981).

⁹ In CLA the form of the plural noun *مَصَائِبُ maṣāʾibu*, instead of *مَصَاوِبُ maṣāwibu* (also attested), depends on the Arabs’ tendency to compare the median radical *wāw* to the *hamzah*, but also to the erroneous assumption that the SG active participle is modeled after the pattern *فَاعِلَةٌ faʿīlat^{un}*, while, as argued by Sībawayhi, it is modeled after the pattern *مُفَاعِلَةٌ muʿīlat^{un}*, hence *مُصِيبَةٌ muṣībat^{un}*, see Sībawayhi (1977: II, 155; III, 462; IV, 160, 356). For more about the theories of Arabic grammarians on the pseudo-correct presence of *hamzah* in CLA, see Putten (2022: 157-168).

something (especially the target); to hit the mark, to guess; to do something well; to be right (opinion),’ from the root *ṣwb*. In MB, in addition to *maṣāʾibu*, the form *maṣāyib* is attested with the shift /āʾi/ > /āy/. This phonological phenomenon, called *at-tahfif* التَّخْفِيف ‘the lightening’ of the *hamzah*, is due to the sake of simplicity, i.e., to avoid the difficulty of pronunciation, and its origin dates back to the ancient Ḥiḡāzī dialect. In this regard, it should be noted that the proverb is reported by al-Ḥanafī (1964: II, n. 2087, 95) in the variant *maṣāyib qawm^m ʿinda qawm^m fawāʿidu*.

- *fawāʿidu*: ‘advantages, utility, interests, benefits,’ F.PL (broken) noun (F.SG فَائِدَةٌ *fāʿidah*), also with the phonetic variant *fawāyd* with the shift /āʾi/ > /āy/ due to the phonological phenomenon mentioned above.

JB:

- *qōm*: ‘people, folks,’ M.SG noun (CLA قَوْمٌ *qawm^m*, pl. أَقْوَامٌ *ʿaqwām^m*), with monophthongization of the diphthong CLA /aw/ into /ō/.

4. Proverb #3

MB:

ما يصيبك إلا نَصِيْبُكَ

JB:

מָא יִצִיבְךָ אֵלָּא נַצִיבְךָ

mā yiṣīb-ak ʾalla naṣīb-ak

The proverb, attested in the collections of al-Ḥanafī (1964: II, n. 1864, 57) and Mēʿirī (1997: n. 271, 97), can be translated ‘Nothing befalls you except your fate.’ It refers to destiny and is used in all circumstances in which a person fails to obtain something or achieve a result, to console and encourage patient endurance.

The concept of divine predestination of human acts, in Arabic قَدْرٌ *qadar^m* ‘destiny, fate, decree of Allāh,’ is present in the following Quranic verses:

﴿قُلْ لَنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا﴾

Say, ‘Nothing will befall us except what Allāh has ordained for us’ (Cor. IX:51).

and

(كُلَّ إِنْسَانٍ أَلْزَمْنَاهُ طَائِرَهُ فِي عُنُقِهِ وَنُخْرِجُ لَهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ كِتَابًا يَلْقَاهُ مَنشُورًا)

We have attached every person's omen to his neck, and We shall bring it out for him on the Day of Resurrection as a book that he will find wide open (Cor. XVII:13).

- *tāi'ra-hu*: (lit.: 'his bird') 'his destiny' with the meaning of 'amala-hu 'his action,' as the book contains his own written 'actions.' The reference is to the personal 'book' of every man where his actions, good or bad, are recorded and which will decide his fate. The Qur'an recalls the ancient Arabs' fatalism in the quoted verse. In fact, ancient Arabs used to divine omens from the flight of birds, cf. *tā'iru-kum* 'your bad omen, your misfortunes' (Q. XXVII:47). Cf. Aramaic *ṭayyār* 'bird; to draw auspices, to wish;' Hebrew *ṭiyyūr* 'divination' (see: Brockelmann 1966: 274a; Jastrow 1903: 526a; Zammit 2002: 275). In this regard, it is interesting to quote the saying of 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (died 95/713-4), great-grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad and fourth Imām in the Twelver Shiite doctrine, contained in his work *aṣ-Ṣaḥīfatu s-Saḡḡādiyyatu l-Kāmilatu: وَصَارَتِ الْأَعْمَالُ قُلَانِدَ فِي الْأَعْنَاقِ*: 'the deeds became garlands around the neck' ('Alī b. al-Ḥusayn 1983: 205; 2022: 118).

The structure of the proverb is characterized by two parts: an independent clause and a subordinate clause containing the particle of exception *illa / alla*, united by a 'morphological rhyme' constructed through the annexation of the same suffixed pronoun *-ak* (CLA كَ *-ka*) to the verb *yīṣīb* and the noun *naṣīb*.

MB:

- *yīṣīb-ak*: 'it befalls you,' verb imperfect, IV stem, 3M.SG + *ak*, suffix 2M.SG (CLA يُصِيبُكَ *yūṣību-ka*) from the root *ṣwb* 'to happen, overtake, fall.' In MB the verb also has a negative meaning 'to hit, to afflict (especially for the evil eye),' e.g.: *l-ʿēn ṣābat-ni* 'the evil eye has struck me.'
- *naṣīb-ak*: 'your fate, destiny; portion, part, piece, slice; opportunity,' M.SG noun in the construct state + *-ak*, suffix 2M.SG (CLA نَصِيبُكَ *naṣību-ka*). The word has undergone a semantic evolution in dialects, where it has come to mean also 'marriage' and 'job opportunity.'

In MB the proverb is also attested with the negation particle *ma-* instead of *mā*: *ma-yīṣīb-ak illa naṣīb-ak*. It is interesting to note that the particle *mā* (with long vowel) remains separate from the verb that follows it, while *ma-* (with short vowel) is a linked morpheme prefixed to the verb, as in *ma-yīṣīb*.

Another common variant with a slightly different construction is *ġēr naṣīb-ak ma-yiṣīb-ak* ‘nothing befalls you but your fate.’

JB:

- *alla*: ‘except (for), save (for), but (for),’ exception particle (CLA أَلَّا *ʾillā* composed by أَل *ʾin* + لَا *lā*) used after the negation *mā yiṣīb-ak* ‘it doesn’t befall you; nothing befalls you.’ Note the rendering of CLA /i/ as /ə/, characteristic of JB.

Finally, it should be noted that the proverb *mā yiṣīb-ak illa naṣīb-ak* is commonly used in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine (At-Tikrītī 1968: III, n. 1521, 212).

5. Conclusions

From the linguistic analysis presented in this study some peculiar features of Muslim Baghdadi and Jewish Baghdadi emerged, such as some phonological phenomena, including the monophthongization in MB and JB of the diphthongs in CLA /aw/ and /ay/ (e.g.: variant of the first proverb CLA *ġayr* > JB *ġēr*; second proverb CLA *qawm^{mn}* > JB *qōm*); the ‘lightening’ of the *hamzah* in MB (e.g.: variant of the second proverb CLA *maṣāʾibu* > MB *maṣāyib*), and the rendering of CLA /i/ in /ə/ in JB (e.g.: third proverb CLA *ʾillā* > JB *əlla*), all to ease pronunciation. On a morphological level, both varieties have the rendering of the suffixed pronoun of 2M.SG CLA كَ *-ka* in *-ak* (e.g.: third proverb CLA *naṣību-ka* > MB and JB *naṣīb-ak*), the prefix of 3M.SG CLA of the verb imperfect in I stem يَ *ya-* in *yi-* (e.g.: first proverb CLA *yanfaʿu* > MB and JB *yinfaʿ*) and that of the IV stem CLA يُ *yu-* in *y-* (e.g.: third proverb CLA *yuṣību* > MB and JB *yṣīb*), once again for sake of simplicity and brevity.

As regards the messages conveyed, these proverbs, currently used in spoken language according to my knowledge and experience as native of Baghdad, offer moral teachings that have parallels and similarities with the concepts expressed in some Quranic verses. As for Iraq, characterized by a cultural and religious pluralism, it is interesting to observe how the moral values conveyed by these proverbs have penetrated the social fabric of the entire society and are generally shared. A phenomenon of cultural osmosis has thus occurred: an interpenetration of attitudes and ideas, in which some general moral values transcend religious differences. Evidence of this can be found in the three proverbs analyzed, attested in both Muslim Baghdadi and Jewish Baghdadi varieties. Therefore, we can affirm that Iraqi society has a common collective culture and that different religious communities share the same way of feeling moral values relating to human behaviour while maintaining their own dogmas.

Abbreviations

CLA	Classical Arabic	MB	Muslim Baghdadi
F	Feminine	PL	Plural
JB	Jewish Baghdadi	SG	Singular
M	Masculine		

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