



Vefeyât / Obituary

Harald Motzki (1948-2019)

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When Harald Motzki joined our Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the Radboud University of Nijmegen in 1991, we all expected our new colleague, with his background in Religious Studies, to be an old-fashioned German Islamologist. According to the traditional division of labour in departments like ours, he was supposed to take over the classes of Islam, whereas the other staff members would be responsible for teaching Arabic. Yet, things turned out differently. This particular Islamologist was an accomplished Arabist in his own right and, while he did not teach courses of Arabic grammar, he trained his students thoroughly in Classical Arabic grammar in his classes on Islamic source texts.

It soon became clear to us, too, that our new colleague had introduced an innovatory way of looking at these early sources of Islam. In the debate about the authenticity of the adith literature, the prevailing trend in Western scholarship has often been a strong scepticism. Scholars like John Wansbrough (d. 2002) and G. H. A. Juynboll (d. 2010) were very reluctant to accept the historicity of adith, which they believed to have been collected not earlier than at the end of the second century of the Hijra.

Against this scepticism Motzki presented a careful analysis of both the content and the form of the adiths he studied. In his first major work, *Die Anfange der islamischen Jurisprudenz: Ihre Entwicklung in Mekka bis zur Mitte des 2./8. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1991), translated into English as *The origins of Islamic jurisprudence: Meccan fiqh before the classical schools* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002) he dealt in particular with the traditions transmitted by ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Šan‘anı (d. 211/826-27) in his *Muřannaƒ*. By analyzing both the

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pattern of the *isnāds* and the textual variation in these traditions he was able to show that most of them actually went back to a much earlier period than the sceptics assumed. This combined focus on *isnād* and *matn* became known as the '*isnād-cum-matn* analysis'.

This is not the place to go into the details of Harald's method. Suffice it to say that his research was widely hailed as innovating and that it generated many debates in the scholarly literature. Rather than engaging in these debates, I should like to mention here one of the things I personally learnt from Harald's approach. His conclusions were always couched in the most careful language. Many were the times that I attempted to draw him out about a particular ḥadīth. 'But surely, with all these data, you should be able to conclude that it goes back to the time of the Prophet!', I would try to tempt him to speculate, without ever succeeding.

Even in his famous article on the provenance of ḥadīths about cats, "The *Prophet and the Cat: On dating Mālik's Muwaṭṭa* ' and legal traditions" (published in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 22, 1998: 18-83), Harald refrained from saying anything about the historical reality of the traditions. Given his personal love of cats, one might have expected him to indulge in some speculation in this particular case - but he didn't. The article concludes that the traditions about the Prophet and the cat go back at least to the last quarter of the seventh century, but it does not go into the question whether the tradition actually goes back even further, to the Prophet.

It was not until much later that I understood the reason for Harald's caution. In order to maintain the strength of his analysis he could not afford to draw any unwarranted conclusion, and he had to limit himself to state what could be proved with the available data. When asked whether he believed that some of the ḥadīths he had studied went back even further, to the Prophet himself, he retorted that it was irrelevant what he believed: in his research counted only what could be proved. When the data at our disposal do not allow us to go further back, there is no room for speculation. In hindsight, I am sure that this was the right attitude: acting otherwise would have compromised his method.

When supervising his students, Harald applied the same yardstick to their work as he did to his own research. When they submitted a paper or essay, regardless of whether they were undergraduate or graduate students, he filled the margins of the pages with detailed comments in his microscript, including copious references to sources from the entire Islamic literature. His approach stimulated many of them to engage in similar studies of early Islamic history, even beyond the field of ḥadīth, in exegesis, the biography of the Prophet, and historiography, and covering many different aspects of the legal and exegetical

traditions. Perhaps closest to his own interests was the dissertation by Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, *Between history and legend: The biography of the prophet Muḥammad by Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī*, which she defended at the University of Nijmegen in 2012, and in which he took extraordinary pride.

It should be added, that Harald supervised dissertations on contemporary topics with the same care and erudition. Joas Wagemakers' dissertation *A quietist Jihadi-Salafi: The ideology and influence of Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī*, defended at the University of Nijmegen in 2010, dealt with a thoroughly modern topic. Yet, the ideology of Salafi thinkers was of special interest to Harald because of the Salafi habit to argue on the basis of texts, which was the kind of argumentation he was familiar with.

Nor did Harald shrink from writing about contemporary issues himself, always looking for their basis in the text of the Qur'an and in the Ḥadīth literature. A prime example is his 2004 article on dress code in Islam, entitled "Das Kopftuch: Ein Symbol wofür?" [The headdress: Symbol for what?] (*Religion-Staat - Gesellschaft* 5: 2, 2004: 175-201), in which he gave a remarkably simple interpretation of the Qur'anic verse 24/31, which enjoins women not to show their *zīna*. This verse is often quoted as the basis for the injunction for women to wear a scarf, but Harald concluded on the basis of careful analysis of the text and the exegetical literature that the word *zīna* in this verse literally referred to the ostentatious showing of ornaments by wealthy women. For me, this exemplary analysis of the Qur'anic text and the exegetical literature was an eye-opener.

When we, Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, Joas Wagemakers and myself, dedicated a collection of studies to Harald in 2011, *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 2011), we expressed at the end of the introduction our hope that he might enjoy its contents. Little did we realize at the time that he would be given such a short time to do so.

With Harald, a great scholar has passed away. And, as is the case with all great scholars, he leaves behind an important legacy. Perhaps the most important lesson is that rejecting the evidence about the early Islamic period out of hand is mistaken, unwarranted, and counterproductive. Picturing him working behind his desk, one is reminded of the words of the grammarian Ibn Fāris:

نديمي هرتي وسرور قلبي دفاتر لي ومعشوقتي السراج

"My cat is my companion, my notebooks are my joy, and the lamp is my beloved."