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Scripture as Literature: The Bible, the Qurʾān, and Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq

Rana Issa

American University of Beirut

ri38@aub.edu.lb

Abstract

This article explores Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq's treatment of Christian and Islamic dogma in his linguistic and literary works, *al-Sāq 'alā al-sāq fī mā huwa al-Fāryāq* and *Mumāḥakāt al-ta'wīl fī munāqaḍāt al-injīl*, among others. A convert to Islam, al-Shidyāq is a notorious critic of Christian doctrine and scripture. I draw parallels with his Bible critique to show how he thwarts the Qurʾān's stronghold on the Arabic language. Borrowing from Mu'tazilah doctrines, al-Shidyāq proposes that language is a human creation—and meaning a human relation—and blames Arabic philologists for conflating language with submission to the divine. Through the technique of *iqtibās*, al-Shidyāq perforates the scriptural authority of the Bible and the Qurʾān by treating them as literary texts. Al-Shidyāq underscores the scriptures as products of the human, and not the divine, mind. His parodic play with *iqtibās* underscores literary rigor against authoritative discourse. Al-Shidyāq provides us with exquisite examples of how radicalness may be diffused, asserted, curtailed and covered up through word choice as well as conditions of book production, to affect a critique of authority that would long outlast his time.

Keywords

Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq – Nahḍah – modern philology – religious critique – the Qurʾān – the Bible

Few writers in the nineteenth-century Arab *Nahḍah* demonstrated a critical engagement with the Arabo-Islamic literary tradition to rival that of Syro-Lebanese author Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1804-1887). Unlike the majority

of his contemporaries, al-Shidyāq's critical explorations of the classical linguistic and literary canon were uncelebratory and yet deeply discursive. He drew attention to the historicity of linguistic, religious and literary texts, when a more nostalgic treatment of the classics was dominant. He used *iqtibās*, a technique generally known in quranic readings, to subvert the Bible; and he deployed the Arabic lexicon against the hegemony of the Qur'ān. While his contemporaries looked for an earlier epoch, a *salaf*, to venerate, whether the 'Abbāsids for Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819-1883), or the Greco-Egyptians for Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-1873), al-Shidyāq's reception of tradition boldly departed from strict adherence to the interpretations advanced by the orthodox establishments.¹

I preview al-Shidyāq's use of *iqtibās* to analyze how he subverts the scripture to separate its impact on the Arabic literary and linguistic fields. His background as the son of a scribe provided him with the necessary familiarity with Arabic classics to handle *iqtibās* deftly. His adult training was shaped by his contact with British and American Protestant missionaries where he produced less memorable works for teaching Arabic to foreigners, translations of Christian tracts, and other such teaching books. Two foundational texts stand out from this period: *The Book of Common Prayer* (1848) that he worked on with George Badger in Malta; and his translation of the Bible (1857), in London. When still in Cambridge, al-Shidyāq circulated a manuscript entitled *Mumāḥakāt al-ta'wīl fī munāqadāt al-injīl* (Disputing the Interpretation of the Bible, 1851). Eventually, al-Shidyāq moved from London before his translation of the Bible was even finished, and as soon as he relocated to Paris he published his unique, and highly critical, literary monument *al-Sāq 'alā al-sāq fī mā huwa al-Fāriyāq* (1855; *Leg Over Leg*, 2013-2014).

In recent scholarship, al-Shidyāq's subversiveness has been identified in his writings on Christian texts and clergy; however, his views on Islam and its clergy remain obscured because of his conversion to Islam a few years after he translated the Bible.² Conversion's assertive expression of faith has overshadowed the subversiveness of al-Shidyāq's treatment of classical texts, par-

1 Buṭrus al-Bustānī, "Khuṭbah fī ādāb al-'arab," in *al-Mu'allim Buṭrus al-Bustānī: dirāsāt wa-wathā'iq*, ed. Jean Dayeh (Beirut: Majallat Fikr, 1859, 1981), 81-111. Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Tārīkh miṣr wa-l-'arab qabla al-islām*, ed. Muhammad 'Amārah (Cairo: Maktabat al-Urah, 2010).

2 For analyses of al-Shidyāq's writings on Christianity, see Muḥammad-Hādī al-Maṭwī, *Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1801-1887): Ḥayātuh wa-āthāruh fī al-naḥḍah al-'arabiyyah al-ḥadīthah*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1989), 741-745; Nadia al-Bagdadi, "The Cultural Function of Fiction: From the Bible to Libertine Literature. Historical Criticism and Social Critique in Aḥmad Fāris Al-Šidyāq," *Arabica* 46.3 (1999), 375-401.

ticularly in how al-Shidyāq drew attention to the production of lexical and linguistic treatises under conditions of faith that ultimately curtailed the limits of thinking about language. This article charts those moments in al-Shidyāq's textual corpus that attempt to dismantle dogma in both religious traditions. I argue that al-Shidyāq's theorization of scripture as a literary genre underscored its human temporality against modern practices that upheld scripture's transcendent relevance as eternal iteration, and demonstrated through various methods that scripture's meaning is a human relation that is contingent on the historical variables of its time.

Recent scholarship has debated al-Shidyāq's place in the canon of world literature. For Rebecca Johnson, al-Shidyāq becomes a figure who mistranslates "the Frankish way" of Christian as well as secular European literature, to produce a modernity that "does not enter the world map so much as it incorporates the world within it."³ This negotiation with the world allows him to critique the emerging nationalism of the *Nahḍah*. His acute perception of the world's socioeconomic inequalities, and its universally humanist character, keep him even today, an unhoused writer where, as Johnson puts it, "the 'world' in world literature is not a given; it must be manufactured."⁴ Al-Shidyāq's sensibility for the world has prompted Stephen Sheehi to argue that scholarship on al-Shidyāq constitutes a "distraction" from understanding the literary history of the *Nahḍah*. In his definition of the *Nahḍah* as delimited by the regional borders of the Arabophone Middle East, Sheehi may be correct. Yet the *Nahḍah*, as Peter Hill argues is "unique local variant of a global process of Enlightenment, patriotic awakening, and the propagation of 'civilization.'"⁵ Seen in this way, al-Shidyāq, as Tarek El-Ariss shows, "launches a final assault against civilization as a coherent and fixed structure, homogeneous and one with itself."⁶ His attack is irreducible to a fixed point of origin emanating from a single cultural expression, but rather, it is deterritorialized to include critiques of the European societies where he lived, where he criticized Western social inequalities as well

3 Rebecca Johnson, "Archive of Errors: Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, Literature, and the World," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 20 (2017), 31-50; 40. Also Nadia Al-Bagdadi, "Registers of Arabic Literary History," *New Literary History* 39.3 (2008), 451.

4 Rebecca Johnson, "Foreword," in *Leg over Leg. Or the Turtle in the Tree: Concerning the Fāriyāq, What Manner of Creature Might He Be*, trans. Humphrey Davies (New York: New York University Press, 2013), xxx.

5 Peter Hill, "The Arabic Adventures of Télémaque: Trajectory of a Global Enlightenment Text in the Nahḍah," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 49 (2018): 171-203, 173.

6 Stephen Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of Al-Nahḍah: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43. 2 (2012); Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 81.

as Ottoman social practices.⁷ In the face of the modern global civilizations he encountered, al-Shidyāq spoke of “the passion that stoked [his] love for this brilliant language, that is the tool to all the sciences and arts, *‘ulūm* of this world and the next.”⁸

This pride in his language and his commitment to addressing the challenges it faced precipitated a lifetime engagement with literary tradition and a palpable love for the Arabic tongue, a love that he shared with other *Nahḍah* writers. This love has prompted Fawwaz Traboulsi and Aziz al-Azmeh to speculate that it lies at the heart of his conversion to Islam. As they write, al-Shidyāq’s conversion to Islam was “a declaration of identity more than it was an act of faith.”⁹ Kamran Rastegar goes on to argue that al-Shidyāq’s conversion asserted the agency to idealize the “community from the elements which he drew his consistent points of reference—Arabic literature, language and its related categories of the humanities.”¹⁰ Muslim identity emanated from his deep appreciation of Arabic language and culture. In this appreciation, al-Shidyāq echoes the Qur’ān’s emphasis on Arabic as not only a central feature of divinity but also as an organizing principle of human identity. As *Sūrat al-nahl* states, “And We certainly know that they say, ‘It is only a human being who teaches the Prophet. The tongue of the one they refer to is foreign, and this Qur’ān is [in] a clear Arabic language.”¹¹ The Quranic edict that stipulated that the construction of group belonging is linguistically rooted was being subverted by al-Shidyāq who sought: 1) erudition in Arabic as an assertion of belonging, but 2) disarticulated this Arabic from discourses that position it as secondary to the Qur’ān.

The religious historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith provocatively argues “scriptures are not texts,” in order to shift the focus to “a new understanding of scripture [as] the recognition that no text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way.”¹² Scripture is venerated—and the resulting affect in the believers is the constituent, and only, convention of the genre. It

7 El-Ariss, 62.

8 Aḥmad Fāris Shidyāq, *Sirr al-layāl fī al-qalb wa-l-ibdāl: al-muqaddimah wa-mukhtārāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1868), 114.

9 Fawwāz Ṭarābulṣī and ‘Azīz al-‘Azmah, “Ṣu’lūk al-naḥḍawīyyīn al-‘arab,” in *Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq*, ed. Fawwāz Ṭarābulṣī and ‘Azīz al-‘Azmah (Beirut: Riyāḍ al-Rayyīs, 1995), 22.

10 Kamran Rastegar, *Literary Modernity between the Middle East and Europe: Textual Transactions in Nineteenth-Century Arabic, English, and Persian Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2007), 124.

11 Tarif Khalidi, *The Qur’an: A New Translation* (Penguin Classics, 2008).

12 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture?: A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), Kindle edition, chapter 1.

is in line with what Roland Barthes identified as a “work,” in the sense that it “closes on a signified ... considered to be secret, ultimate, something to be sought out ... [and] functions as a general sign” that represents its institution and mode of civilization.¹³ The relationship between the community of believers and the official interpretation defines scripture and erodes its potential for textual openness vis-à-vis a plurality of interpretation. It is that scriptures are not texts that al-Shidyāq attacked, through reconstituting them as literature.

To do this, al-Shidyāq recuperated a scriptural reading tradition that was at odds with contemporaneous efforts to actively reposition scripture’s relation to modernity. The *Nahḍah*, especially in its Levantine axis to which al-Shidyāq belonged, can be traced to the arrival of American missionaries to Lebanon and their consequent work in the flagship textual project of translating the Bible to Arabic.¹⁴ This translation of the New Testament was published in 1860, three months before civil war between the Christians and the Druze of Mount Lebanon broke out, and the full text was published in 1865.¹⁵ This Bible, like the other versions of the Arabic Bible published in the middle decades of the nineteenth century,¹⁶ was part of a global movement of Bible translation efforts by Anglophone Protestant missionaries. These missionaries worked with competent local scholars wherever they went. In Arabic, their choice fell on men that

13 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

14 George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1969); Samir Kassir and M.B. DeBevoise, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Hishām Sharābī, *al-Muthaqqafūn al-‘arab wa-l-gharb* (Beirut: Dār Nilson, 1970); S. Moreh, *Studies in Modern Arabic Prose and Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

15 For more on this Bible, see David D. Grafton, *The Contested Origins of the 1865 Arabic Bible: Contributions to the Nineteenth Century Nahḍa* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Rana Issa, ed., *A‘mal al-mu‘tamar al-dawlī, bi-munāsabat murūr 150 sanah ‘alā al-tarjamah al-‘arabiyyah al-injiliyyah lil-kitāb al-muqaddas* (Beirut: Bible Society, 2018); Sara Binay, “Revision of the Manuscripts of the ‘so-called Smith-Van Dyck Bible.’ Some Remarks on the Making of the Bible Translation,” in *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text-Critical, and Literary Aspects*, ed. Sara Binay and Stefan Leder (Beirut: Ergon Verlag, 2012), 75-84. For a critical history of missionary engagement in Lebanon, see A.L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800-1901: A Study of Educational, Literary and Religious Work* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

16 For an index of modern Arabic Bibles, see Ghassan Khalaf, “Tarjamah al-kitāb al-muqaddas ilā al-‘arabiyyah wa-l-mu‘athirāt,” in *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text-Critical, and Literary Aspects*, ed. Sara Binay and Stefan Leder (Beirut: Ergon Verlag, 2012), 7-24.

would come to define in key ways the discourse of modernity that we refer to as the *Nahḍah*. One of those men was al-Shidyāq. His recasting of scripture as literature broke with the *Nahḍah*'s teleological eschatology, from its missionary iterations of end-of-time narratives to the more secular determinisms of its promise of progress. He positioned scripture instead within a textual tradition that functioned, as Rebecca Johnson observes, as an archive of literary history that "does not proceed along a straight line to modernity. It does not pass at all but accumulates."¹⁷ Rather than stacking textual references in an evergrowing archive that the metaphor of accumulation suggests, al-Shidyāq turns scripture into literature in order to facilitate its sedimentation, and burial into forgetfulness, in the great archive of the modern that Johnson identifies.

For Marco Bologna, historical sedimentation in the archive derives from an "intentional decision deeply rooted in its historical context," and is an initiation into forgetfulness.¹⁸ Al-Shidyāq's sedimentation of the Bible in the literary archive was such a process. He responded to his time's paradoxical tension between a missionary millennial eschatology that critiques the modern optimism of progress, and a capitalist form of progress that becomes eschatological in its promises of a better life. This paradox turned religion into the binary opposite of the secular, in the *Nahḍah* and in other cultures of modernity. As Talal Asad argues "in the discourse of modernity 'the secular' presents itself as the ground from which theological discourse was generated (as a form of false consciousness) and from which it gradually emancipated itself in its march to freedom."¹⁹ This sharp separation is inverted in the case of missionaries; Marwa Elshakry argues that "scripture truth may be inculcated in connection with science," by "attracting the attention of natives to the superiority of Western knowledge."²⁰ Compared to the equally foundational importance of his compatriot al-Bustānī and figures like Naṣīf al-Yāzījī and his son, and the younger generation of writers involved with the periodicals *Al-Muqṭataf* and *Ḥadīqat al-Akḥbār*, al-Shidyāq's literary altercations with scripture rejected the teleological veneration in origin narratives without outright dismissing them as mythological misguides. His was not a median position, but rather one that reinvented how one constructs literary history through the archive.

17 Johnson, "Archive of Errors."

18 Marco Bologna, "Historical Sedimentation of Archival Materials: Reinterpreting a Foundational Concept in the Italian Archival Tradition," trans. Gabriella Sonnewald, *Archivaria* 83 (2017), 35-57.

19 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 192.

20 Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 57.

Johnson has suggested that al-Shidyāq and al-Bustānī share a conceptualization of literary history “as an accumulation of resources in the wide plane of [modern] knowledge.”²¹ This is only partially the case, for al-Shidyāq took Arabic as the metropolitan standard. All the other languages orbited as global vernaculars valued to the extent that they enriched an epistemic inquiry into Arabic as a language whose attributes were generalizable into a theory about language in the modern world. Whereas al-Bustānī by contrast maintains the Biblical story as the origins of language in his *Khuṭbah fi ādāb al-‘arab*, al-Shidyāq reformulates and builds on the Mu‘tazilah theory of language as a human creation that underscores the role of human agency in the generation of meaning.²²

Al-Shidyāq’s insistence on the human in the genesis of meaning began with the recasting of scripture as text, in a process that accumulated and sedimented, acknowledged as well as deposited the holy books in the diachronic literary archive. Through this process, al-Shidyāq recuperated a practice of reading the scripture as part of the genre of *iqtibās*, or quotation. *Iqtibās, sariqah*, or *intizā‘* is a genre of text that was first collected and indexed in Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha‘ālibī’s (d. 1030) literary anthology *al-Iqtibās min al-Qur’ān al-karīm*, which, as Bilal Orfali explains, established troping the Qur’ān as a shared rhetorical practice among writers ranging from *udabā’* who “are being frivolous, [and] intend to shock their audience ... to the litterateurs [who] also employ Qur’ānic verses to raise the stylistic register of the literary piece.”²³ Polemical types of *iqtibās*, such as *mu‘āraḍāt al-Qur’ān*, or the altercations with the Qur’ān, as Josef Van Ess has noted, were associated with groups like the Zaydīs (middle of eighth century to middle of ninth) as well as with the Mu‘tazilah (eighth to tenth centuries), whose linguistic theory al-Shidyāq digested and transformed in order to cultivate linguistics as an autonomous discipline that must be separated from religious faith.²⁴

Al-Shidyāq’s *iqtibās* complemented his parody of how modern readers, like missionaries and some of their local employees, venerated scripture. His use of *iqtibās* engaged scripture as a text for literary ends, and effectively elided the

21 Johnson, “Archive of Errors,” 36.

22 al-Bustānī, 81-112; Rana Issa, “The Arabic Language and Syro-Lebanese National Identity: Searching in Buṭrus Al-Bustānī’s *Muḥīt Al-Muḥīt*,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 62.2 (2017), 465-484.

23 Bilal Orfali, “In Defense of the Use of Qur’ān in Adab,” in *The Heritage of Arabo-Islamic Learning: Studies Presented to Wadad Kadi*, ed. Maurice A. Pomerantz and Aram A. Shahin (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 500.

24 Josef van Ess and John O’Kane, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra: A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 39.

modern binary between the religious and the secular. Al-Shidyāq distinguished himself from his predecessors by turning *iqtibās* into an engagement with the Bible and not the Qurʾān. Thus he recovered a device from Arabic literary tradition in response to the aggressive promotion of the Bible as a globally available scripture. His biblical *iqtibās* disarticulated the authority of missionaries as pedagogical agents, teaching local scholars, like himself, the technologies and languages that mattered in modernity. To borrow a phrase from Michael Allan, al-Shidyāq's biblical *iqtibās* "entextualized" the Bible,²⁵ as well as the Qurʾān, as literature, by displacing veneration and proposing a way of reading these texts that engendered more than exegetical epiphanies.

The world al-Shidyāq manufactured was made to orbit around Arabic. His passion for Arabic emphasized its Islamicate pedigree at a time when the language was becoming incommensurable to itself. Sectarian violence since the 1840s culminated in the 1860 war and disarticulated, mistranslated, and miscommunicated neighboring communities speaking the same dialect.²⁶ As Christian communities gained privileges through the Western attention to their plight, al-Shidyāq's conversion to Islam doubly rejected the local Christian celebration of these privileges but simultaneously he did not spare Islam from critique. Just like his altercations with Christianity, Islam's world was also questioned. Al-Shidyāq did not directly address the creeds of Islam; however, he deployed *iqtibās*, attended to human fallacy, as well as emphasized agency in the creation of meaning, as methods that organized his critique of religious power.²⁷ In such works as his linguistic treatises, *Sirr al-layāl fi al-qalb wa-l-ibdāl* (The Secrets of Morphology and Metathesis, 1868) and *al-Jāsūs ʿalā al-qāmūs* (Spying on the Lexicon, 1882), al-Shidyāq challenges Islamic dogma consistently on its position on language. Thus, even though his corpus does not include a work that directly addresses Islam as a religious institution, he nevertheless initiated a critique of Islam that is analogous to his attacks on Christianity. Specifically, al-Shidyāq provided a critique of Islamic orthodox views on language that, had they been carried to their logical conclusion, would have emphasized the need for a historical entextualization of the Islamic holy book in ways similar to his reading of the Bible. Al-Shidyāq theorized language in ways that also critiqued certain Islamic doctrines that had become dominant in his time. Learning from the Muʿtazilah, but also discovering the rhetorical

25 Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

26 On this war, see Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Oakland, CA: EScholarship, California Digital Library, 2003).

27 Johnson, "Archive of Errors."

usage of linguistic arguments to disguise religious polemics (particularly in authors whom he admired and about whom he wrote like the lexicographer Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad bin Ya‘qūb al-Fayrūzabādī), al-Shidyāq used *lughah* to attack Islam.²⁸ The locations of these instances of critique of Islamic dogma in his work are embedded within a complex web of engagements with the Islamic tradition that far exceed religious polemic. Even so, I maintain that his position was unambiguous, and that his attitude toward Islamic established truths is consistent with his attacks on Christianity. In order to chart his position on Islam, I start by analyzing al-Shidyāq’s Bible citation as an instance of religious critique, and then proceed to how he performed similar operations on Islam, albeit in less confrontational ways.

Literary Ethics in the Context of Globalization

Al-Shidyāq showed relentless interest in the question of religion. His writings on religion as well as his multiple conversions effectively elide any easy categorization of his religious belonging. Contrasted with more permissive treatments of religion that we find during the same period, his views were idiosyncratic. His textual corpus reveals that he was both well versed in religion, but also that he spent a lifetime subverting religious authority through his literary schemes. Through literature, he constructed an alternative ethics from which to counter monolithic interpretations of both scriptures. His early career with British and American missionaries and his study with Muslim ‘*ulamā*’ in Egypt provided him with comprehensive knowledge in various theological traditions.²⁹ Rather than revere his tutors, al-Shidyāq evaluated his acquired knowledge by constantly extracting religion’s established truths from the classical tradition, thereby constructing a form of literary authority that doesn’t ally itself with religious orthodoxy to legitimate its utterance.

Such is the case with his manuscript, the *Mumāḥakāt*, written when al-Shidyāq was translating the Bible as employee of British missionaries and

28 Strotmann identifies such polemics by arguing that al-Fayrūzabādī’s linguistics covered his ulterior religious motives. As she writes: “Although it is not unfounded to say that Al-Fayrūzabādī was much more educated in *lughah* than in legal matters, it is noteworthy that al-Qārī uses *lughah* to discredit the scholar rather than criticising his legal abilities. This also shows that some of the critique levelled against al-Fayrūzabādī’s *Qāmūs* may have been motivated by dispute in fields other than lexicography.” See Vivian Strotmann, *Majd al-dīn al-Fayrūzabādī (1329-1415): A Polymath on the Eve of the Early Modern Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 159.

29 For his biography, see al-Maṭwī, *Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq*, 2.

supervised by the Chair of Oriental Studies at Cambridge, Samuel Lee (1783-1852).³⁰ Before the published translation of the Bible was printed, al-Shidyāq circulated the *Mumāḥakāt*, an anti-Bible polemic, in manuscript form.³¹ As Nadia Al-Bagdadi argues, this little book was a prelude to his work in *al-Sāq* and that these two texts, “of which at least the novel is considered to be a cornerstone for nineteenth-century Arab literature, should be read as complementary in the formation of the free-thinker al-Shidyāq.”³² This manuscript, first printed more than a century after it began circulating, was a highly controversial text for a Bible translator to write.

By keeping it as a manuscript, the author limited the circulation of the text. As Al-Bagdadi contends, the choice to keep *Mumāḥakāt* in manuscript reveals more “the general forms of repression, at a time which saw tendencies for overcoming certain taboos and censorship, tendencies which were particularly evident in print.”³³ Briefly put, he wrote a book with such a polemical title to forestall any misunderstanding that would place him on the side of the pious, and kept it in manuscript to control its readership.

Mumāḥakāt was the first book that al-Shidyāq published without a commission from the missionaries. It was a prelude to *al-Sāq* in terms of legitimizing a literary autonomy for him as an author, and his first attempt at contemplating the nature of narrative form. In *Mumāḥakāt*, al-Shidyāq focuses on two main problems with the Gospels. Firstly, he points out that eyewitnesses did not write the Gospels. Secondly, through an exhaustive deployment of *iqtibās*, al-Shidyāq aligns extensive biblical quotations according to their contradictions to show that the Gospels dispute one another, indicating for him that they must have been written by more than one author. This was a radical pronouncement in Arab circles, yet its radicalness was diffused by the limited circulation of *Mumāḥakāt* at a time when industrial printing had begun to dominate the book market.

The style of this manuscript conformed to how al-Shidyāq envisioned his literary creativeness. In his definition of what he calls “the productive

30 Al-Shidyāq finished the translation in 1850, yet with the death of Samuel Lee, his supervisor and editor in 1852, the publication of the Bible was delayed. The work was published in 1857 in London by the British Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge.

31 This text remained in manuscript form until it was printed in 2003. Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, *Mumāḥakāt al-ta'wīl fī munāqadāt al-injīl*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad 'Amāyah (Amman: Dār Wā'il lil-Nashr, 1851, 2003).

32 Nadia Al-Bagdadi, “The Cultural Function of Fiction: From the Bible to Libertine Literature. Historical Criticism and Social Critique in Aḥmad Fāris Al-Šidyāq,” *Arabica* 46.3 (1999), 378.

33 Nadia Al-Bagdadi, “Print, Script, and the Limits of Free-Thinking in Arabic Letters of the 19th Century: The Case of Al-Shidyāq,” *Al-Abhath* 48-49 (2000-2001), 116.

imagination" (*al-mukhayyilah al-muntijah*), al-Shidyāq argues that literary creation stems from the writer's ability to select elements from reality. In his own words, from an article in the newspaper he owned and edited, *al-Jawā'ib*, he writes:

المخيّلة المنتجة هي التي تضيف إلى الذاكرة تأليفاً وروية فتكون طوراً مقربةً إلينا الأشياء البعيدة وطوراً مميزةً لما اختلط منها ومؤلفة لها ومغيرة حتى يظنّ أنّها محدثة لها بالأصالة مع أنّها إنّما ترتبها ترتيباً فقط إذ ليس للإنسان أن يوجد في تصوّرات من عنده وإنّما له أن يؤلّفها على كفيات مخصوصة.

The productive imagination adds to the innovation and pensiveness of memory so we can either observe distant things a little closer, or we can distinguish between things and create (*mu'allifah*) them. This has led to the thought that [the productive imagination] invents the origins (*al-aṣālah*) of things even though all it does is to arrange and organize things. Man has no perceptions (*taṣawwurāt*) of his own; he only creates according to particular methods (*kayfiyāt makḥṣūṣah*).³⁴

The productive imagination must therefore process existing material in new directions. This imaginative process rearranges the elements constitutive of an object "sometimes bringing distant objects closer, and sometimes when objects become conflated, it distinguishes them through composition and transformation, leading one to think that [the product of the imagination] was an original invention, *muḥdithah lahā bil-aṣālah*."³⁵ Al-Shidyāq termed this rearrangement *method*, or *ālah*, and tool. *Mumāḥakāt* is an example of this method of rearrangement and assemblage. By unveiling the relationship between the Gospels and their authors, al-Shidyāq effectively rejected divine revelation as the author of scripture but he also provided insight into narrative form.

By assembling the Gospels according to their contradictions, this manuscript makes the Bible divulge its nature as being composed of dissimilar books that oppose one another on key events. In his introduction to *Mumāḥakāt*, al-Shidyāq closely reads Matthew, the Gospel most known among literate Arabic readers,³⁶ against the grain of the other three Gospels. He writes:

34 Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, "Fī al-mukhayyilah aw al-takhayyul," in *Kanz al-rahā'ib fī muntakhabāt al-jawā'ib*, ed. Salīm Fāris al-Shidyāq (AUB Special Collections, 1881), 12.

35 Ibid.

36 Būlus al-Khūrī, *al-Kitāb al-muqaddas fī nusūsih al-'arabiyyah al-qadimah* (Jounieh: al-Maktabah al-Būlisiyyah, 2012).

وليعلم أنّ دعوى النصارى بكون هذه الأسفار الموجودة الآن بأيديهم وحيًا، داحضة فارغة وأنّ مؤلّف هذا الإنجيل لم يكن شاهدًا بمرأى العين ما نقله، وإنّما قلّد في ذلك بعض الرواة في عصره مجازفة [...] فهل كانا يعلمان أنّ هذه الأنجيل الأربع يُجمع في مجلّد واحد حتى يعرف الناس منها كلّ المهمّ من أحوال عيسى؟ ... كما أسلفنا آنفًا: إنّ هؤلاء المؤلّفين لم يكونوا مشاهدين بمرأى العين ما شهدوا به، وإنّما هي روايات مختلفة عن عيسى، طارت في البلاد، فقلّها كلّ منهم بحسب ما بلغته من أفواه الرواة في بلده.

Let it be known that Christian claims [which state that] these books between their hands were revealed, are empty falsifications and that the author of this Gospel [Matthew] was not an eyewitness. Rather he recklessly imitated some narrators, *mu'allifūn*, of his era, where he was one among them. [...] Did they know that these four Gospels were going to be collected in one book to enlighten people on the important events in 'Īsā's [Jesus'] life.... As we mentioned, those writers were not eyewitnesses; these are divergent narratives on 'Īsā, that spread in the land, and each [of the apostles] copied what he received from the mouths of storytellers in his land.³⁷

Positing a rhetorical question about the collation of the Gospels, al-Shidyāq begins by creating a gap between the Evangelists' writing and the time of emergence of the Bible as scripture. He historicizes the limits of what the apostles could foresee as the impact of their writing. When they recorded the oral tales circulating during their lifetime, did they know that their work was going to be promoted as divine revelation upon the institutionalization of Christianity? Al-Shidyāq lets the question linger unanswered, and then moves into a textual critique of the Gospels. As he lists the contradictions in the four Gospels in bulleted format, al-Shidyāq does not express any view on Jesus himself. Instead, he suggests that by presenting such contradictory accounts of the life of Jesus, the evangelists implicitly attacked his person, and rendered him into a less-than-divine figure.

Al-Shidyāq's criticism of narrative style in the Gospel of John is one example of the arguments he makes against their divinity:

37 Al-Shidyāq, *Mumāḥakāt*, 14, 21.

وذكر يوحنا تجرد عيسى بعد العشاء عن ثيابه، وتحزّمه بمنشفة لغسل أقدام تلاميذه، فهذا يوهّم أنّ عيسى وقتئذ كان قد سرت فيه الخمر، حتى لم يكن يدري ما يفعل، فإنّ غسل الأقدام لا يوجب التجرد عن الثياب.

John recounts that after the supper, ʿĪsā [Jesus] took off his clothes and tied a towel around his waist to wash the feet of his disciples. This implies that, at the time, ʿĪsā was drunk; that he did not know what he was doing, for the washing of feet does not require removing one's garments.³⁸

For al-Shidyāq, John's presentation of the sequence of events detracts from the intended image. Whether Jesus was indeed naked or drunk is irrelevant from the perspective of the rhetorical argument presented in *Mumāḥakāt*. It is John's style that is at fault here; Jesus is but a character in a narrative plot. For al-Shidyāq, the evangelist was not a successful storyteller. Al-Shidyāq points out the weaknesses of John's narrative to emphasize the possibility of an error in the book and consequently casts his Gospel as a faulty biography of Jesus. This foregrounding of error evokes a human image of John, against his veneration as an infallible apostle, which also has the double effect of accentuating John's authorship. The emphasis on the human fallibility of the apostles puts into critical tension the entire sequence of Gospels, and subverts any thinking of the Bible as a revealed text. Moreover, al-Shidyāq shows the writers contradicting one another in the "most important issues," like the case of "ʿĪsā's birth, resurrection, and ascension."³⁹ Written by four different authors, the Gospels suffer from narrative inconsistencies. As historical narrative, their work fails.

After a short introduction, the rest of *Mumāḥakāt*—which can also be described as a long list of quotations without analytical synthesis—has a startlingly quiet authorial presence. Paradoxically, al-Shidyāq's frugal presence in the text sobers the polemics of the critique by providing very little analysis and contenting itself with a collage of quotations. With minimal interventions in these lists, al-Shidyāq directs the reader's gaze to critique as assemblage, but does not himself provide cogent analysis that could lend this text its theoretical coherence. By rarely intervening to analyze what he has quoted, al-Shidyāq invites his readers to make their own critical judgments about the contradictions in the Gospels. In general, he maintains the quotes in a state

38 Ibid., 18.

39 Ibid., 21.

of interpretive vacuum, best captured by his alternative title for this book, *No Interpretation of the Bible!* (*Lā ta'wīl 'alā al-injīl*).⁴⁰

Al-Shidyāq's claim that the Bible is not a revealed text but was written by mortals is not housed in a particular tradition of reading the Gospels. Crucially, his views contradict Islamic views on the Bible. Evidence from the Qur'ān, as well as from the famous interreligious polemics of the 'Abbāsīd courts, holds that the Bible is a divinely revealed text, but that human hands have corrupted the divine message.⁴¹ Al-Shidyāq advances a more radical argument. For him, the apostles were unable to tell an identical story about the life of Jesus, nor were they infallible in their narrative technique. Stripped thus of its divine credentials, the Bible that he re-assembles in *Mumāḥakāt* emerges as a human creation: a set of narratives comparable to other narratives.

Mumāḥakāt indexed the distance that al-Shidyāq constructs in relation to the dictates of missionary and Church institutions. Less than five years later, he wrote an autobiographical work, *al-Sāq 'alā al-sāq* (1855), that was clearly inspired by the multitude of genres that are grouped in the Bible. *Al-Sāq* was the first independently authored text that he published in print, and it is a fitting sequel to the anti-Bible manuscript. It follows the technique of assemblage deployed in *Mumāḥakāt*, and it contains a more explicit attack on the Bible and on Christian institutions. In this book, the author ponders the change from manuscript to print as it impacts the production of ideas.

Al-Sāq and the Bible

Al-Shidyāq was astutely aware of the relationship between technology and the proliferation of meaning. He began his training as a scribe, a practice he continued when he visited European libraries and augmented his collection by copying their books.⁴² As Geoffrey Roper describes him, "Al-Shidyāq was always surrounded by books and built up a large collection of his own."⁴³ Having spent his youth working the press in Malta, and later operating his own press in Istanbul, al-Shidyāq often commented on the shifting materiality of books

40 Al-Maṭwī, *Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq*, 215.

41 For analysis on Muslim Bible polemics, see Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scripture of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), Chapter 6.

42 Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, *al-Wāsiṭah ilā ma'rifat aḥwāl māltah wa-kashf al-mukhabba' 'an funūn urubbā* (Beirut: Kutub, 1866).

43 Geoffrey Roper, "Ahmad Fāris Al-Shidyāq and the Libraries of Europe and the Ottoman Empire," *Libraries and Culture* 33.3 (1998), 234.

and the consequences of this shift on inculcating a new reading public. He constantly alerted his readers to these shifts, particularly to how they transformed the relationship between author and readers. He writes in *al-Sāq*: “As you can see I’ve now made (that is to say written not printed or bound) this book and placed it before you.”⁴⁴ By highlighting the materiality of bookmaking in the industrial age, he distanced himself from the totality of the chain of production. He only wrote the book, and thus his responsibility was mediated through an industrial form of knowledge-production that he did not control. Purposefully exposing the materiality of the bookmaking process—a process not without its errors—limited his responsibility as author of the book.⁴⁵ This process as Jeffrey Sacks remarks, “teaches us that reading, if also understanding, *fahm*, may not be separated from the materiality of letters.”⁴⁶

Al-Shidyāq’s allusion to the independent stages in book production—writing, printing, and binding—reflect the changing reality of bookmaking at the time. Authorial labor was only one stage in a complex process that included the reader’s decision to purchase the book in an emerging cheap book market. His emphasis on the various stages involved in industrial bookmaking exposed the possibility of human error in the text. With his attention to error as a mainstay of knowledge production, al-Shidyāq even underlined his own fallibility in the writing of the book. He demanded that his readers not judge *al-Sāq* wholesale, but that “they ask about what’s good in it and what’s not.... If, though, they find in it only a few shortcomings, they shouldn’t burn it, for we all have many shortcomings.”⁴⁷ His insistence on his own fallibility complemented his treatment of the Bible’s authors in *Mumāḥakāt*. In *al-Sāq*, the critique touches the heart of the human condition. Through *iqtibās*, he uncovers the dissonance between the Bible and reality, and delivers another blow to the Church and the Bible as institutions that stipulate ethical positions in the world.

The first mention of the Bible comes at the end of the first quarter of *al-Sāq*. The Bible here frames a reflection on the state of the homeland that al-Shidyāq

44 Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, *Leg over Leg. Or the Turtle in the Tree: Concerning the Fāriyāq, What Manner of Creature Might He Be*, trans. Humphrey Davies, vol. 4 (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 409. See also his description of how he almost lost the opportunity to correct the proofs of *al-Sāq* in the same volume.

45 This book was printed in Paris by Rophael Kahla, who prepared new fonts specific to this work. See al-Shidyāq, *Kashf al-mukhabba’*, 270.

46 Jeffrey Sacks, *Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, Al-Shidyāq to Darwish* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 108.

47 Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, *Leg over Leg. or The Turtle in the Tree: Concerning the Fāriyāq, What Manner of Creature Might He Be: Vol. 4* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 409.

has abandoned, and its erupting civil violence from the 1840s onwards. He writes:

أيجوز الآن لأمير الجبل إذا شاخ ولم يعد التدثر بالثياب يدقته أن يتكوى
بنت عذراء جميلة أي يتدقأ بها ويصطلي بحر جسدها كما فعل الملك داود *
أم يجوز له إذا حارب الدروز وانتصر عليهم أن يقتل نساءهم المتزوجات
وأطفالهم ويستحي أبقارهم لتفجر بهنّ فحول جنده * كما فعل موسى بأهل
مدين على ما ذكر في الفصل الحادي والثلاثين من سفر العدد * أم يجوز لأحد
من القسيسين أن ينكح زانية ويولدها النغول كما فعل النبي هوشع * فإن يكن
دين النصرارى يحلل قتل الرجال والنساء والأطفال والفجور بالأبكار من النساء
ويسمح الثوب على عقار الغير من دون دعوة إلى الدين بل مجرد عتو وظلم كما
كان يحلله دين اليهود فلاي سبب نسخه وأبطل أحكامه * لكنّ دين النصرارى
مبني على مكارم الأخلاق * وغايته من أوله إلى آخره إبقاء السلم بين الناس .

Should the Emir of the Mountain, once he's grown old and wrapping himself up in his clothes is no longer enough to keep him warm, be permitted to cozy up to a beautiful virgin girl, i.e., warm himself with her and heat himself with the warmth of her body, like King David? When he makes war on the Druze and God grants him victory over them, is he permitted to slay their married women and their children and leave their virgins alive for the stud bulls among his troops to debauch, the way Moses did to the people of Midian, as stated in Numbers chapter 33?.... If the religion of the Christians makes lawful the slaying of men, women, and children and the debauching of virgins ... why did the first abrogate the second and declare its laws null and void? In fact, though, the Christian religion is built on high moral values and its aim from beginning to end is to maintain peace among men.⁴⁸

If David and Moses are entitled to voracious violence by virtue of their position as prophets, the prince of the mountains does not partake in the same immunity and his acts will not be rewarded "by a Christian religion founded on the best of morals." The rhetorical play with Christian moral goodness reveals how the world lacks such values. By deploying a typical rhetorical technique of

48 Al-Shidyāq, *Leg over Leg*, vol. 1, 289.

contrast, al-Shidyāq withholds any solid example from the Bible to reveal it to be a text of moral strength.

By drawing parallels of violence between prophets' acts and those of ordinary mortals, al-Shidyāq demands of the reader, as he did with *Mumāḥakāt*, to come to her own conclusions about Christian ethics. In *Mumāḥakāt*, the Gospels are mirrored against one another, while in *al-Sāq*, the Bible is mirrored against the historical realities of Syro-Lebanese violence that erupted between the Maronites and the Druze in 1841. The congruency of biblical violence with the social context of Syro-Lebanon topples the legitimacy of the Bible as an ethical foundation for the modern world. Al-Shidyāq's rhetorical comparisons position a humanist commitment as the basis through which to judge political actions. He recollects those women, children, and men whose integrity was violated by lascivious old men in the course of war to question whether "the religion of Christians makes lawful the slaying of men, women and children," and the Church's moral responsibility in such goings on.⁴⁹ Having rendered the Bible into a literary anthology of varying narrative quality in *Mumāḥakāt*, his critique in *al-Sāq* is directed against the institutional deployment of the Bible to sanction murder, rape, and the abandonment of political and ethical responsibility.

Debunking the Myth of a Divine Arabic Tongue

The Bible is not the only scripture that is cited in *al-Sāq*. This text also marks the beginnings of al-Shidyāq's engagement with the tradition of Islamic thought, especially the exegetical tradition and its supporting apparatus in the literary field, the Arabic lexicon. In his treatment of Islamic orthodoxy, al-Shidyāq rejects the idea that the Arabic language is revealed from God. He treats language in his book *Sirr*, and in numerous places in his textual corpus, like "other manufactures (*ṣanāʿī*) and agreed conventions (*mawḍūʿāt*)."⁵⁰ This position, as his biographer Muḥammad al-Maṭwī points out, is in line with key philologists and linguists in the Islamic and European traditions.⁵¹ Yet in his attempt to reveal the Western influences on al-Shidyāq, al-Maṭwī assumes that the Islamic linguistic tradition was a homogeneous body of literature, when in reality, the

49 Ibid.

50 Al-Shidyāq, *Sirr al-layāl*, 184.

51 Muḥammad-Hādī bin al-Ṭāhir al-Maṭwī, "al-Taʿrīf bi kitāb *Sirr al-layāl*," *Sirr al-layāl fī al-qalb wa-l-ibdāl: al-muqaddimah wa-mukhtārāt*, ed. Muḥammad-Hādī bin al-Ṭāhir al-Maṭwī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1868, 2006), 31.

issue of language constituted a central debate among Islamic philosophers. Thus, whereas al-Maṭwī identifies the Muʿtazilah influences on al-Shidyāq's theory of language (without calling the authors whom he mentions by that name), he contradicts himself when he claims that al-Shidyāq's theory of semantics is "divinely revealed and inspired by God."⁵² Instead al-Shidyāq's work remains unambiguous about the human origins of language, and indeed his critiques of the Islamic tradition maintain an especially polemical position on this point.⁵³

Al-Shidyāq's engagement with the works of prior Islamic philologists culminated in his methodological use of key Muʿtazilah philologists and linguists such as Abū al-Faḥḥ ʿUthmān Ibn Jinnī (d. 1002), and others.⁵⁴ The doctrine that Ibn Jinnī represents valorizes rationalism and free will in the understanding of Muslim creeds. One of the main issues that defines the intellectual identity of this school is the question of the origins of language (and through logical consequence, the question as to whether the Qurʾān was revealed or created).⁵⁵

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd provides a good summary of their position. He writes that for the Muʿtazilah,

[l]anguage is a human invention because relating sound to meaning is a social convention. Language never refers directly to reality, but reality is conceived, conceptualized, and then symbolized by the sound system.... The Muʿtazilah, therefore, saw the Qurʾān as a divinely created action, and not an eternally existing text. Even in the Qurʾānic language, the relation between the signifier and the signified existed only by human convention; they maintained there is nothing divine in this relationship itself.⁵⁶

From the point of view of a critique of Islamic orthodoxy, al-Shidyāq's deployment of Muʿtazilah notions of language in his later lexical works maintained

52 Ibid., 23.

53 On al-Muʿtazilah, see Sabine Schmidtke, "Muʿtazilah," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill Online, 2015).

54 Aḥmad Bayḍūn, *Kalamun: min mufradāt al-lughah ilā murakkabāt al-thaqāfah* (Beirut: Dār al-Jadīd, 1997), 27-28. On Ibn Jinnī's *iʿtizāl*, see C. H. M. Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought III: The Arabic Linguistic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1997), 75-83.

55 The latter position, which the Muʿtazilah advanced, proposed that the Qurʾān, like other godly creations, has a beginning and an end, while the orthodox view held that the Qurʾān is immutable and therefore eternally capable of informing the value system of the historical world.

56 Naṣr Abu-Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qurʾān," *Alif* 23 (2003), 36-37.

unchanged their rejection of the orthodox claim that the Qurʾān is an immutable text. Yet their influence on his thinking is present as early as *al-Sāq*. What we can find in *al-Sāq* is his treatment of language as a human invention, and by extension, a deftly ambiguous suggestion that the Qurʾān is an object created by the productive human imagination. *Al-Sāq* shows that al-Shidyāq treated both scriptures as the result of human activity, and therefore amiable for his reinvention.

The Qurʾān's *Sūrat al-qiyāmah* (Q 75) resonates in the title of al-Shidyāq's work. Verse 29 contains the phrase "wa-iltaffat al-sāq bil-sāq" to describe the mangled bodies on the Day of Judgment, which Tarif Khalidi's Qurʾān translation renders as "and leg is entwined with leg."⁵⁷ Al-Shidyāq changed a mere preposition (*over* replaces *with*), to rearrange the legs, and parody the apocalyptic contours of the Qurʾānic verse into the literary postures of polite society, and perhaps even anticipating in the title the playful sexual undercurrent that runs through the rest of "*al-sāq 'alā-sāq*." In al-Shidyāq's age, Judgment Day calculations were in vogue, especially among the missionaries whose millenarianist ideology provided the motivational force to travel to the Levant. Awaiting the apocalypse was in many respects a peculiar zeitgeist of the age of industrial modernity.⁵⁸ Perhaps, al-Shidyāq meant to pun on the Qurʾān's apocalyptic worldview.

Equally plausible is that the title is a satire of a now-forgotten text that was circulating among the American missionaries in Beirut in the late 1840s.⁵⁹ Found in the personal papers of Eli Smith, who notes that this text is a "striking peculiarity of [the Muslim] religion," a tiny scrap of paper is said to have been found tucked into the *ṭarbūsh* of an Egyptian soldier who died in battle near al-Ḥosn, in Syria. It contained an erotic *iqtibās* from the Qurʾān that puns on *Sūrat al-qiyāmah*. The scrap quotes verses 29-32 from this *Sūrah*, and then follows these lines with a rhyming invocation: "And leg is entwined with leg, to your Lord that Day is the rounding up,⁶⁰ and If a woman comes to you, uncover her right ankle and it will show your love and lover, your motivation and inspiration; and then pull it toward you and say, 'I give my face to the light of

57 Tarif Khalidi, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), 489.

58 On the millenarianist ideology of al-Shidyāq's missionary employers, see William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For a more local history of the missionary engagement with the al-Shidyāq family, see Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*.

59 I am calculating the date based on the scarce information in the scrap itself on Egyptian troops in Syria.

60 Underlined are the direct quotes from the *sūrah*:

my Lord, the creator of land and sky, as a Ḥanafī Muslim...”⁶¹ The text, which could possibly be a *hijāb*, or amulet—perhaps to increase the chances of its bearer in love—was making scandal in Beirut that originated with the French consul, who seems to have acquired it from one of his soldiers. The missionaries had it transcribed by their secretary Nāṣif al-Yāzījī, who also corrected the colloquial Arabic in the text to make it conform to the conventions of standard written Arabic.⁶² Could it be that the scandalous airs that surrounded this text were the writing prompt al-Shidyāq needed for his magnum opus? Or is it mere coincidence that Chapter 20 in book 4 concludes with an *iqtibās* of the same verses?:

فمن شاء أن يدعو له أو عليه فجزاؤه يوم تلتق الساق على الساق * ويقال إلى
ربك يومئذ المساق * فإما من دعا له بعود زواجه هذه المرة وفي الحياة أرماق
* فإني أضمن له أن يدعو له إلى مأدبة حولها وفيها كل ما شاق وراق * ممّا
ذكر في هذا الكتاب بالانتساق على سرور وأطباق.⁶³

Humphrey Davies translates these lines thus:

any who wishes to bless [al-Firyāq] or curse him shall, when “leg is intertwined with leg” and it is said, “unto thy Lord that day shall be the driving,” receive his *wages*. As for [the reader] who prays for the restoration of [al-Firyāq’s] marriage before he breathes his last, I guarantee he’ll invite you to a banquet around and upon whose table will be set out, in proper order, everything this book mentions that the appetite may *stimulate* or the eye *captivate*, be it presented on couch or on *dinner plate*.⁶⁴

Three possible readings converge in how the *hijāb* and al-Shidyāq’s text share an *iqtibās* that bolsters their authors’ desire for a woman. Al-Shidyāq’s punning on the *sūrah* subverts the Qur’ān’s scriptural status, and reappropriates it as a literary text. Secondly between a scrap of text that was an expression of

61 فإذا التفت الساق بالساق إلى ربك يومئذ المساق فإذا جاءت المرأة إلى عندك فكشف عن ساقها الأيمن بين لك حبك ومحبوبك وغايتك ومطلوبك فاجذبه صوبك وجهت وجهي إلى نور مولاي فاطر السماوات والأرض حنيفا مسلها.

62 Eli Smith. “Walaffat al-sāq scrap,” Undated, *Eli Smith Arabic Papers*, Call number: ABC 50. Houghton Library. Harvard University.

63 Al-Shidyāq, *al-Sāq ‘alā al-Sāq*, 404.

64 Al-Shidyāq, *Leg over Leg*, vol. 4, 426.

folk religion and al-Shidyāq's own treatment of the scripture, the missionary scriptural approach to the Bible is confronted with *iqtibās*, as a tradition of Muslim treatment of scripture as text. Thirdly, his *iqtibās* from the Qur'ān is also a polemical stance against Islamic orthodoxy. Turning *Sūrat al-Qiyāmah* on its head, the title of his book frames the entirety of *al-Sāq* as a sustained *iqtibās* that also rejects the limiting of the Qur'ān to scripture.

His disarticulation of the Qur'ān from the notion of scripture becomes more apparent in later works, including in his major lexical treatises, *Sirr* and *al-Jāsūs*. In the former, al-Shidyāq's proximity to the Mu'tazilah ideas on language are clearest, while in the latter text, which is also al-Shidyāq's last major work, he subjects the lexicographic tradition of the Arabs, along with some of its supporting sciences, to a thorough critique that further advances his position on language as a human invention. It is to his ideas on language that I now turn.

Toward a Modern Arabic Lexicon

Al-Maṭwī describes *Sirr al-layāl fī-l-qalb wa-l-ibdāl* as "a semantic and signifying lexicon and not a linguistic lexicon as many seem to think."⁶⁵ Its entries are arranged according to semantic relations between words that reveal hidden or unexpected associations, instead of the customary lexical arrangements, with each entry defining a lexeme's semantic range and its grammatical constructs. Al-Maṭwī's significant observation reveals that al-Shidyāq's linguistic treatise was less concerned with producing a reference text, and more with arguing for new methodologies for analyzing the Arabic language.

In *Sirr*, al-Shidyāq surveys the linguistic treatises of earlier Arabic philologists, especially from the Mu'tazilah school. He builds on those authors who claim that language is a human invention and that the invention of words is originally modeled on mimicking the natural world. Al-Shidyāq takes the Mu'tazilah argument further by being less interested in the origins of language, and engages instead with the question of its beginnings, focusing his imagination on a time when language was already in use by speakers. For him, the beginnings of language can be traced back to a limited and knowable glossary of words. Those words have evolved throughout centuries of human use to form the colossal body of words that we collect in lexicons.

To prove his thesis, al-Shidyāq couples this argument with contemporary language use to recollect how some of the most mundane words in current

65 Al-Maṭwī, "al-Ta'rif bi Kitāb *Sirr al-layāl fī-l-qalb wa-l-ibdāl*," 47.

use can be traced back to a mimetic relationship with the desert world where Arabic made its first evolutions. Through comparing Arabic (in both its standard and vernacular forms) to newer Western vernaculars, al-Shidyāq advances the argument that language universally mimics its natural surroundings. He writes, “All languages are necessarily predicated on manifest senses [*al-ḥawās al-zāhirah*] that inspire the latent senses [*al-ḥawās al-bāṭinah*] to think and imagine.”⁶⁶ This position continues with the Mu‘tazilah philosophy.⁶⁷ Al-Shidyāq goes further—and brings his undivided focus on human agency in his theory of the beginnings and evolution of language.

For al-Shidyāq, linguistic construction is like building a house. The builder must first “cut [*qaṭ*'] that with which to build a house from stone or wood, etc.”⁶⁸ Then after cutting what one needs, one gathers [*jama*'] the material, “for gathering is not devoid of cutting.”⁶⁹ In this imaginative process of cutting and gathering phonemes and words to make meaning, the language-user forges meaning out of existing sound material. We have no access to the *tabula rasa* where the mimicking of the natural world through language was initiated. But there is evidence that humans have built on the lexicon derived from natural metaphors throughout the generations. Here lies al-Shidyāq’s expansion of Mu‘tazilah thought. Whereas the Mu‘tazilah were more interested in the origins of human language, al-Shidyāq’s focus on beginnings analyzed how subsequent generations participated in the expansion of the Arabic lexicon. In his interest in beginnings, al-Shidyāq described the move from natural sounds to meaning-making as involving two types of processes: “A tale of sound [*ḥikāyat ṣawt*], or a tale of an attribute [*ḥikāyat ṣifah*].”⁷⁰ As tales, those processes have narrators. The narrator is the language-user who creates meaning based on what is available to him in the material world. He illustrates the “tale of a sound” through the word *būṣah*, where the word emulates the phonetic sound made by puckered lips planting a kiss. For the “tale of an attribute,” al-Shidyāq recounts the story of the word *hadhab*, or “polite.” He reports that the linguists are all in agreement that the word comes originally from the act of pruning a tree, which is another proof that “the spiritual or immaterial issues [*al-umūr al-ma‘nawīyyah aw al-aqliyyah*] are taken from material things

66 Al-Shidyāq, *Sirr al-layāl*, 141.

67 See, for example, Van Ess’s exposition of Ibrāhīm Nazzām’s argument’s about perception and knowledge, in *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra. Volume 2: A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 270.

68 Al-Shidyāq, *Sirr al-layāl*, 130.

69 Ibid., 132.

70 Ibid.

[*ashyā' ḥissīyyah*].⁷¹ If words are tales of sound or attributes, then they are phonetic metaphors for lived experience. The sociologist Aḥmad Bayḍūn remarked that al-Shidyāq's linguistic contribution can be termed "the science of phonetic tropes," where the sign phonetically tropes a referent, a process that for Bayḍūn emphasizes human agency, contrary to the norms of structuralist linguistics.⁷² The emphasis on agency here is key, if we are to understand what al-Shidyāq has carried over from his earlier works into his linguistic writings.

For al-Shidyāq, then, meaning is generated by human agents and is not given *a priori* to human need. Yet here as well, al-Shidyāq remains silent about the radical possibilities of his theories; he does not carry his argument to its logical breach with dominant theologies of language. By collecting his findings in a semantic lexicon, al-Shidyāq claims that in the beginning, there were but a few words. Yet as the needs of man multiplied and he manufactured more tools, he evolved new words to fit his context. This is universal to all languages, even though Arabic maintains the strongest links to the history of its semantic development. With those insights about the evolution of language, al-Shidyāq moved on to *al-Jāsūs*, where he faulted prior lexicographers for their inconsistencies in the treatment of language as a human tool.

In *al-Jāsūs*, al-Shidyāq sifts through lexicons from the classical canon in order to critique the normative idea that Arabic is the language of the divine. *Al-Jāsūs* faults the lexicographic dependence on religious authority over meaning. In contrast to his critique of Christianity that belittles both Church and missionaries, al-Shidyāq's analysis of the impact of Islamic dogma singles out the ways in which the scientific basis of lexicography has been hampered by Muslim faith. Here, the ethical field of Islam is critiqued for interfering in the soundness of scientific tools. As al-Shidyāq shows through an inventory of examples, Islamic religious dogma has impeded the development of precise definitions in the semantic field of mundane words and failed to provide definitive interpretations of basic concepts, including Islamic ones.

Al-Jāsūs is a significant contribution to Arabic lexicography. The book begins with a detailed overview and analysis of the development of the Arabic lexicographic tradition, from al-Khalīl bin Aḥmad's (718-786) inaugural *Kitāb al-Ayn* until the arrival of the most popular work of al-Shidyāq's own time, Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad bin Ya'qūb al-Fayrūzabādī's (1328-1414) *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*.⁷³ This latter lexicon had been one of the most popular lexicographic

71 Ibid., 141.

72 Bayḍūn, 60-61.

73 For a history of Arabic lexicography, see Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); John A. Haywood, *Arabic Lexicography: Its History, and Its*

works in the Arabic language since its publication in the fourteenth century. So powerful was its status that its title became synonymous with the very idea of a dictionary, and, as the full title of *al-Jāsūs* indicates, this *qāmūs* was the main object of al-Shidyāq's analysis. Al-Shidyāq's critique is so thorough that it almost becomes a word-for-word obsession, and yet he is restrained enough to attempt a systematic analysis organized first by theme to summarize his findings and to contextualize al-Fayrūzabādī's work within the lexical tradition. He then provides a dictionary of errors alphabetically, amounting to more than eight hundred pages. These themes range from word parsing and semantic arrangement, to claiming that al-Fayrūzabādī's criticism of his predecessors was motivated by his patrons' political interests, and not scientific loyalties. More generally, *al-Jāsūs* parodies the Islamic exegetical tradition, *tafsīr*, recollecting the historical transformations that affected the Arabic language, as well as bookmaking. Al-Shidyāq uses those examples to conclusively contend that the classical tradition of Arabic lexicography subjected itself to the power of religious exegetes instead of asserting an authoritative linguistic discipline.

As al-Shidyāq notes, the Arabic script in use today has undergone many transformations since the collation of the Qur'ān. One important transformation was the decision to include diacritics to distinguish the different sounds signified by a single grapheme. Before the addition of diacritics "Arabic writing was not skillful nor precise, but it risked, even in our age, distortion and misplacement [*taḥrif wa-taḥīf*]."74 So the ambiguities and misunderstandings that arose from earlier versions of the script continue until today, because they were transmitted through tradition, and because we may still encounter such manuscripts that lack diacritical marks. To reveal the extent of those misunderstandings, al-Shidyāq humorously recollects the possibility of error in the reception of foundational Islamic texts. In one example, al-Shidyāq proceeds to quote a tale that he encountered reading al-ʿAskarī, who in turn quoted it on the authority of Abū ʿAlī al-Rāzī, about a shaykh "who read from *ḥadīth* and he was stupid [*min al-mughaffalīn*]."75 Al-Shidyāq legitimizes his anecdote

Place in the General History of Lexicography (Leiden: Brill, 1965); Amidu Sanni, "The Arabic Science of Lexicography: State of the Art," *Islamic Studies* 31.2 (1992); Stefan Wild, "Arabic Avant La Lettre Divine Prophetic and Heroic Arabic," in *Approaches to Arabic Linguistics: Presented to Kees Versteegh on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. C.H.M. Versteegh, E. Ditters, and H. Motzki (Leiden: Brill, 2007). For more on lexicons, and al-Shidyāq's engagement with lexicographers, see Muhsin al-Musawī, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 92-94.

74 Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, *al-Jāsūs ʿalā al-qāmūs* (Istanbul: al-Jawāʿib, 1882), 6.

75 *Ibid.*, 5.

through *isnād* (al-‘Askarī, al-Rāzī) in line with the literary conventions that corroborate that the story came from authoritative sources. He then subjects his readers to a description of the Prophet Muḥammad “may Allah honor him and grant him peace, *wa-innamā yaghsilu khaṣā ḥimāriḥ* [as he washes the testicles of his donkey],” before correcting himself by saying that diacritics were introduced so that this sentence would be accurately read as saying that the prophet “*yaghsilu ḥaṣā jimāriḥ* [washes the pebbles of his passion.]”⁷⁶ Al-Shidyāq’s *isnād* shelters him from anticipated criticism and humorously subverts the grave airs of tradition. Thus, the importance of critiquing tradition is assured, for the errors made by the authorities could be seriously funny and sometimes downright disgraceful.

This is what al-Shidyāq is claiming when he discusses the conflict over the derivation of the word “Qurʾān.” According to ḥim, the conflict originated in the variable orthography of the Arabic letter *alif* (ا). The letter *alif*, which changes its sound and shape depending on where it is located in a word, caused debate over the word’s root. Some lexicographers argued that it was a light *alif* and therefore semantically close to *qirān* or to “gather and compare” and others argued that Qurʾān meant the “twining of letters, words and verses” and yet none of them thought to include it under any other entry than the one for the radical *qāf* / *rāʾ* / *alif* which is semantically about reading.⁷⁷ The lack of consensus was problematic, not because it existed, but mainly because none of the lexicographers dared to break with established tradition by placing the word under a different radical root, a move that would have more accurately reflected their linguistic opinion. Thus, they censored their linguistic judgment in favor of upholding traditional truth. Another conflict centers on the Arabic name for God, *Allāh*, which al-Shidyāq frames as follows: “[The lexicographers] should not have disagreed over the name of the divine, so that neither the Syrians nor the Jews could claim that [*Allāh*] is taken from their language, for in Syriac it is *alūhū* and in Hebrew *elūhīm* in the plural.”⁷⁸ This indeed was what al-Shidyāq’s contemporary, Buṭrus al-Bustānī, wrote in his lexicon *Muḥīṭ al-muḥīṭ* (1870), when he suggested that *Allāh* has etymological roots in the biblical Semitic languages. As al-Bustānī wrote, the word is derived “from the Syriac *alāhā*, where the last *ā* was dropped and the [definite article] *al* was added so it became *Allāh*.”⁷⁹ Whether al-Shidyāq agreed with al-Bustānī

76 Ibid., 5.

77 Ibid., 46.

78 Ibid.

79 Al-Bustānī mentions this word under the radical *alif* / *lām* / *hāʾ*. See Buṭrus al-Bustānī, *Muḥīṭ al-muḥīṭ* (Beirut: 1870).

is unclear, for his phrasing carefully maintains a studied, if scathing critique, of the lexicographic tradition. In their inability to defend their semantic studies by breaking out of orthodox opinion, or their incapacity to reach a consensus over words with foreign-sounding relationships, the lexicographers, as al-Shidyāq claimed, were more concerned with satisfying Islamic truths than with submitting to scientific method.

In the example of *Allāh*, the recalling of the ‘*ajamī*’ origins of certain words in the Arabic lexicon illustrates how religion obscures an evidence-based argument about etymology. For, if the Arabic language is “almost devotional” in nature (“*takād takūn ta‘abbuddiyyah*”), then the solution is to submit to its “deviations, exceptions, stasis, and derivation [*shudhūdh wa-istithnā’ wa-jumūd wa-ishṭiqāq*].”⁸⁰ The key term here is *ta‘abbuddiyyah*, for it suggests a language worshiped by the people who speak it, without venturing to say that the language itself is *muqaddasah*, or divine. Thus, if the language is as worthy of devotion as its speakers think, then al-Shidyāq blames the lexicographers for not submitting themselves to its movements, but instead approaching it with predetermined ideas and methods deriving from religious orthodoxy. As he observes, foundational texts like lexicons are often read to “satisfy a need, or a desire to follow tradition [*taqlīd*] rather than to innovate [*ijtihād*].”⁸¹ The lexicon is a normative text that dictates how the world has traditionally been perceived through lenses acquired externally to language rather than through perspectives showing a commitment to the history of language use.

Al-Shidyāq proceeds to question the continued eminence of al-Fayrūzabādī’s *al-Qāmūs* on the bookshelves of his contemporaries, for al-Fayrūzabādī derived his lexical authority from his numerous theological writings. His fame in theology “significantly positioned him in the science of language [*anzalathu fī ‘ilm al-lughah manzilah khaṭīrah*].”⁸² Al-Fayrūzabādī subjected language to the authority of religious dogma and inverted the relationship between religion and the lexicon. His work, as al-Shidyāq claims, contributed nothing to Arabic lexicography except for the “addition of superstition [*al-khurāfāt*].”⁸³ Moreover, the lexicon is difficult to use, and intimidating to readers. For al-Shidyāq, this makes the task of critiquing it more urgent, because the lay user can be easily duped by its convoluted expressions and organization.

Al-Shidyāq’s critique of al-Fayrūzabādī, as well as of the other lexicographers, is also a summons to contemporary language experts “to author in our

80 al-Shidyāq, *al-Jāsūs ‘alā al-qāmūs*, 26.

81 Ibid., 5.

82 Ibid., 53.

83 Ibid., 54.

age a book of language that is simple in its organization and clear in its definitions, inclusive of the words of literary figures and writers and everyone who is a famous author."⁸⁴ Al-Shidyāq is calling for a lexicon that does not limit its examples to a handful of texts taken from the revered traditions of the pre-Islamic *Jāhiliyyah* period, the Qur'ān, and the *ḥadīth*, but extend the reference list to literary figures regardless of their proximity to Islam's historical emergence or their views on religion. With his eye on the history of language use, al-Shidyāq demands a lexicon that selects well-known current authors, coupled with a simplified lexical organization, and maintaining a robust Arabic tongue at a time when many intellectuals were adopting Western tongues.

Al-Shidyāq's attack on the Arabic lexical tradition was motivated by a naturalistic theory of language that focused on language users. His deployment of the Mu'tazilah tradition radicalized his treatment of Islamic orthodoxy. He faulted the prevalence of orthodox religious views in the lexicons as hurdles to knowing the language. The *Nahḍah*-inspired interest in rejuvenating language that dominated the thoughts of his contemporaries becomes more radical in his writings. His linguistic theory disenchanting Arabic and critiqued the hegemony of the Islamic establishment over the control of its semantic possibilities. Al-Shidyāq's writing on Christianity and his attacks on its scripture saliently express a dismissal of its orthodox practices and creeds in turn. His position on Islam was consistent with his rejection of the hegemony of religious dogma. Through *iqtibās*, he rendered scripture into literature, and opened it up for a plurality of interpretation. He limited his attack on Islam to Arabic, and effectively rejected the idolatry that often surrounds that language. Al-Shidyāq severed language from the dictates of religion and demanded a lexicon free of its authority. His comical subversions of the tradition of Islamic thought reveal his commitment to the improvement of Arabic. His reception of the Mu'tazilah tradition that he augmented through his focus on human agency revealed his criticality towards foundational texts in modernity, and his interest in debunking orthodox positions on the Qur'ān. In this context, al-Shidyāq's conversion to Islam signals a deeply thoughtful alliance with the Mu'tazilah tradition, a school that continues to inspire radical thinkers in the Arab world today. As al-Shidyāq quoted the classics, he underscored the human hands that produced literary heritage.

84 Ibid., 3.