

6 Hospitality

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In the sura *al-Ṭūr* ‘The Mount’ in the Qur’ān, we come across another divine Name, *al-barr* البَرّ (LII,28), interpreted by the commentators as ‘the Benefactor’ or ‘the Charitable One’ (*al-muḥsin* المحسن), ‘Kind to His servants’ (*al-laṭīf* اللطيف), ‘He who maintains His promise of paradise’. This is a Name that is also reflected in ‘The Cow’ sura’s recommendation to the good believer. It is a celebrated passage, and with good reason:

It is not true piety [*birr* بَرّ], that you turn your faces to the East and to the West. True piety is this: to believe in God, and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one’s substance, however cherished, to kinsmen, and orphans, to the needy, the son of the road [*ibn al-sabīl* ابن السبيل] and to beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform your prayers, to give alms. And they who fulfil their word when they have entered into a covenant, and endure with fortitude misfortune, hardship and peril; these are they who are true in their faith, these are the truly godfearing. (II,177)

‘True piety’ or ‘fear of God’ or simply ‘righteousness’ are all expressions that can translate the Arabic *birr*, a very capacious term: it ranges from articles of faith through legal ethics to the domain of personal virtues, and thus bespeaks religion but at the same time the whole realm of goodness. Commentators variously explain *birr* as obedience, adherence to prophecy and covenant with God, conversion, truth, goodness and justice; some – such as al-Ṭabarī in his *Compendious Discourse* – link *birr* to praxis, *doing* what pleases God in word and deed.

Be that as it may, according to the sura ‘The Mount’, an element of ‘true piety’ is to share one’s possessions with the ‘son of the road’ (*ibn al-sabīl*), a

figure whom the commentators are unanimous in identifying as the wayfarer, or the guest (*ḍayf* ضيف), the traveller who “passes by”, as al-Ṭabarī himself explains,¹ or “the guest who lodges with the Muslims”, in Ibn Kathīr’s formulation;² or again, according to the modern Yemeni exegete Muḥammad al-Shawkānī in *The Victory of the Almighty*, the traveller on an involuntary stopover.³

6.1 Hospitality and Giving

The Qur’ān recognises wayfarers as belonging to a special protected category; it thus aligns hospitality with goodness (*iḥsān*) and makes it one of the good Muslim’s highest values, a cornerstone of his faith, a gateway to paradise. In the sura ‘The Cow’ we read:

They will ask you what they should give in charity. Say: Whatever wealth you spend, be it for parents and the near of kin and orphans and the needy and the son of the road, and whatever good you do, God will surely know it. (Qur’ān II,215)

Also a passage in the sura ‘The Women’ insists on the rights of the wayfarer, and here the dutiful welcoming of a guest is a repayment or at least a return for God’s generosity towards the wealthy:

Be kind to parents, and to kinsmen, and to orphans, and to the needy, and to the neighbour who is of kin, and to the neighbour who is a stranger, and to the son of the road, and to the slave. Surely God loves not the proud and boastful and those who are miserly, and bid other men to be miserly, and themselves conceal the bounty that God has given them. (IV,36)

We have already noted how the Qur’ānic definition of a Muslim involves various heterogeneous elements ranging from legal behaviour, to belief and to the ethics of virtue: ‘true piety’ (*birr*) is shown by one who believes, is generous, prays, gives alms, keeps his word and is patient (II,177). Among these components, generosity towards guests has a very high moral significance: what one should give to another is not the superfluous or the insignificant, but precisely what one loves. The servants of God, says the sura *al-Insān* ‘The Man’,

give food, in spite of their love for it, to the poor, the orphan, and the captive: – We feed you for God’s sake only and we do not want any reward or thanks from you. (Qur’ān LXXVI, 8-9)

Charity must therefore be freely given. We call giving to others without demanding a price in return or any restitution a gift, of course, and in Qur’ānic thought, hospitality, exactly because it is a gift, does not expect reciprocity and is untouched by worldly considerations.

¹ Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, glossing Qur’ān LII,28.

² Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, glossing Qur’ān LII,28.

³ Al-Shawkānī 1431/2010, glossing Qur’ān LII,28.

6.2 Disposition, Incorporation, Definition

Which brings us to the preferred Arabic term for ‘guest’: *ḡayf*. Unlike in Latin (and Latin-derived languages), the Arabic term is unidirectional and refers only to those who seek and obtain hospitality⁴ – as in the classical dictionaries by such as Ibn Fāris (m. 395/1004) in his *Maqāyīs al-luġha* or ‘Analogical Templates of Language’,⁵ and later Ibn Manẓūr in *The Language of the Arabs*.⁶ Both authors proffer some interesting pointers: since verbs close to the noun *ḡayf* or ‘guest’ are used to indicate the setting of the sun, or its decline towards the horizon or the downward trajectory of an arrow due to the force of gravity, ‘guest’ has to do with tilt, curvature and deflection. Thence, these ancient lexicologists read between the lines that visiting someone to ask for hospitality is a detour from one’s path, possibly involuntary and necessary like the sunset, like natural laws, because it is dictated by the law of survival. It does not take a lot of imagination to grasp the relationship between hospitality and the need to stay alive: one only need think of the immense desert spaces of the Arabian Peninsula, the scarcity of inhabited centres, the rare encampments, both in the age of Revelation and still even today. Seeking hospitality, being unavoidable, invokes the right to protection; and it may be that the legal institution known as *dhimma* ذمّة or ‘protection pact’, under which Islamic Law protects members of other revealed religions, can also be seen as a consequence of the duty of hospitality.

At the same time, still according to classical dictionaries, *ḡayf* or ‘guest’ also brings in the suggestion of addition, union and connection: the guest is said to be such because he *adds* himself to the family, because he joins them, because he receives food together with them.⁷ Anyone familiar with the rudiments of the Arabic language cannot fail to think of *iḏāfa* إضافة or ‘annexation’, from the same verbal root, a grammatical construction by which a noun determines the meaning of another if it is added to it and put in the genitive case. This observation is not merely pedantic, because it serves to further clarify how hospitality is seen in Islamic culture: the guest is first and foremost one who deviates from his path, his deviation being, nonetheless, necessary; he is the one who temporarily adds himself to the table, that is, to someone’s family; and it is he who defines the one who welcomes him in and offers him charity as an authentic Muslim, who shows ‘true piety’.⁸

6.3 Believers and Their Guests

The Qur’ān refrains from emphasising the moral importance of hospitality, which it clearly assumes its audience will take for granted, but does nod to it on a number of occasions, almost always relating to Abraham’s guests (Qur’ān XV,51; LI,24; cf. LIV,36-7; XV,68; XI,78). If we think back to the

⁴ The reciprocal meaning of ‘one who offers hospitality’ is only found much later, cf. Lecerf 1971.

⁵ Ibn Fāris 1399/1979, root ḡ-y-f.

⁶ Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root ḡ-y-f.

⁷ Lane 1968, root ḡ-y-f.

⁸ This idea, of the guest as a ‘discriminator’, and of his presence as a ‘catalyst for the definition of his host’, cannot but bring to mind the speculations of Derrida 1997.

contents of hospitality we have pointed out via the suggestions of the early lexicographers and a few linguistic notes – that is, the involuntary deviation and its capacity to define virtue – it is clear that Abraham’s hospitality, and then Lot’s, elevate them particularly to the exalted status of ‘true piety’:

Tell them about Abraham’s guests who entered his house saying: – Peace be with you.

And he replied: – We are fearful of you.

– Do not fear – they replied – we are here to announce the arrival of a wise child.

He replied: – You bring me this happy news now, when I am old? What are you telling me? (Qur’ān XV,51-4)

Thus the sura ‘The Rocky Tract’. A very similar passage can be found in the sura *al-Dhāriyāt* ‘The Scatterers’:

Have you heard the tale of Abraham’s honoured guests? When they came in to him and said: – Peace be with you. And he answered: – Peace – and they were strangers. He withdrew into the house and returned with a fatted calf which he offered them. He asked: – Will you not eat? – and he became uneasy. – Do not be afraid – they said, and announced to him the birth of a wise child. (Qur’ān LI,24-8)

As in the Old Testament account (*Genesis* 18,1-9), the announcement concerns the belated birth of Isaac, and Abraham’s guests are angels. What stands out in the Qur’ānic version of the story – and represents a substantial difference from the biblical version – is the insistence on the foreboding and fear of the worst that the arrival of the foreign travellers produces in Abraham. Since the gift of food is a formal obligation of hospitality, and its refusal may conceal an aggressive intent (cf. Qur’ān XI,70), the patriarch’s initial apprehension is only reinforced by the angels’ refusal, but this does not distract him from the duty of offering. In this way, the Qur’ān illuminates the truest and noblest face of hospitality: it is a pure act of trust, utterly devoid of social guarantees, which on the one hand exposes one to risk, but on the other allows the manifestation of a revelation. Paul’s *Letter to the Hebrews* teaches the same lesson: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”. Where hospitality is rendered φιλοξενία, that is, ‘love for the stranger’ (*Hebrews* 13,2).

Following the Qur’ān, the Tradition or Sunna also focuses on the figure of Abraham in the context of hospitality, and has the Prophet Muḥammad say that Abraham himself, the father of monotheists, was also the first to give hospitality. Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, among others, reports as much in his *Kitāb qirā al-ḥayf* or ‘The Book of Hospitality to Guests’.⁹ The early author repeatedly states, through numerous quotations, that Abraham is a hero, a prince of hospitality: he is the one who wanted a mansion with four doors, one for each point of the compass, the more easily to welcome all wayfarers, wherever they might come from;¹⁰ he is the one who, before his meal,

⁹ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 18.

¹⁰ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 18.

would travel a mile or more in search of someone to eat with him;¹¹ he is the one who honoured his guests personally and waited on them with his own hands, which is why the Qur'ān refers to 'the honoured guests of Abraham' (cf. Qur'ān LI,24).¹² Among the copious material he has collected, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā includes a well-known story about the poor but resourceful man to whom the Prophet entrusts a guest. This man takes the guest to his home and, when they arrive,

his wife asks him: – Who is this?

The man answers: – He is a guest of the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him.

The woman says: – I swear to you on He who revealed the Qur'ān to Muḥammad, for this evening we only have left one bun, that could only feed you or me, or the guest or the servant.

Her husband said: – Divide it into pieces, dress it with a little dripping and bring it to the table; then ask the servant to blow out the lamp.

In the dark the man and his wife proceeded to smack their lips so that the guest would think they too were eating.

The following morning [...] the Prophet asked where the man was who had welcomed his guest. Three times he asked and at last the man, who had remained silent until then, spoke up: – It was me.

– Gabriel – the Prophet said to him – told me that when you told the servant to blow out the lamp, the Most High and Excellent God himself laughed.¹³

Immediately after this very episode, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā teaches, God revealed a verse from the sura *al-Ḥaṣhr* 'The Gathering':

And those who live in the faith love those who emigrate to them, and have no jealousy in their breasts for what they are given, and give them preference over themselves, even if they are in need. And those who save themselves from their own souls' covetousness are those who will prosper. (Qur'ān LIX,9)¹⁴

The tales in *The Book of Hospitality to Guests* are innumerable, often informal, even pungent. For example, the following, which tells of a real generosity contest between a Companion of the Prophet, 'Abd Allāh Ibn Ja'far, and a Bedouin:¹⁵

We set out with 'Abd Allāh Ibn Ja'far and camped near a woollen tent, which belonged to a Bedouin *sayyid* from the tribe of 'Udhra. While we were there, the Bedouin came over, leading a camel, stopped in front of us and said: – You, give me a knife. We handed him a knife, he slit the camel's throat and said: – This is for you.

¹¹ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 19.

¹² Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 18-19.

¹³ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 19-20.

¹⁴ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 20.

¹⁵ The following translations have been pared of some redundant material, and are therefore not strictly literal.

We stayed there a second day, and again the ‘Udhri came over with another camel. You – he said – get me out a knife. We answered him that, as he could see, we still had meat from the day before, but he exclaimed: – It will never be that you eat stale meat from me, get the knife out. We handed it to him, he slit the camel’s throat and then said: – This is for you, do with it what you will.

We stayed a third day and again the ‘Udhri came with a camel. He stopped in front of us and said again: – You, get me out a knife. We answered him: – But don’t you see that we still have meat?! He exclaimed: – It will never be that you eat stale meat from me, I will think the less of you, give me the knife. We gave him the knife, and once again he slit the camel’s throat, and then as usual he said to us: – This is for you, do with it what you will.

Finally, we were ready to set off again. Ibn Ja’far asked his young quartermaster what riches we had brought with us, and the answer was a bale of clothes and four hundred gold coins; Ibn Ja’far ordered him to take it all to the ‘Udhri. So, the boy returned to the woollen tent and found a young woman there. – Take these things – he told her – they are a gift from Ibn Ja’far. The young woman replied that they could accept no reward in return for hospitality, so the quartermaster, taking the gifts with him, returned to us and informed us of the matter. But Ibn Ja’far ordered him to go back one more time to the woman, and if she accepted the gifts, well and good, otherwise the quartermaster would have to leave everything in front of the tent entrance. So, the young man went back again to the woman and, as soon as she saw him, she cried out to him: – Go away, God bless you, we do not accept any reward in return for hospitality: if my husband returns and sees that I have accepted these gifts, he will surely punish me. The quartermaster, as agreed, left the bale of clothes and the bag of coins at the entrance of the tent.

We resumed our journey, and had only travelled a short distance when we became aware, behind us, of something that the mirage made to seem sometimes tall and sometimes low. When it approached, we saw that it was the ‘Udhri *sayyid*, who had brought us back the bale and the bag. He threw it in our direction without a word, then turned and left. We waited watching him from behind, and do you think he turned around? Not a bit of it. Ibn Ja’far used to say: – No one has ever outdone me in generosity, except that Bedouin from the tribe of the ‘Udhra. ¹⁶

A very similar tale, which again sees the Companion Ibn Ja’far confronted with the incomparable hospitality of the desert Arabs, puts a greater stress on the moral and cultural virtues of the nomadic woman:

Ibn Ja’far set off on a pilgrimage. At a certain point he decided to go on ahead of the caravan on his camel to look for somewhere to camp. Finding a Bedouin woman who was sitting at the entrance to her tent, he dismounted from his camel to wait for his companions. When the woman saw him, she got up and exclaimed: – It must be God who has directed thee to me, to lodge in the dwellings of the virtuous. Ibn Ja’far, admiring her eloquence, approached the woman, who for her part handed him

¹⁶ Ibn Abi l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 23-4.

a leather cushion; he sat down while she went off to a goat tied to the corner of the tent and in no time at all she had served him a leg of meat, which he began to eat. When his companions arrived and saw him, they too dismounted and the woman served them what was left of the goat [...].

After three days Ibn Ja'far decided it was time to move on. He called over his steward and asked him: - Do you have some of my money with you?

- Yes - he answered.

- How much?

- A thousand gold coins - said the young man, and Ibn Ja'far ordered him to give half to the woman.

But she refused to accept them and kept saying: - No, no, as God is my witness, I do not want my husband to scold me - but the steward insisted so stubbornly that in the end the woman capitulated.

Ibn Ja'far and his companions had hardly left when they saw a camel heading for the woman's tent.

- Here comes just what the woman was afraid of - said Ibn Ja'far - one of you leave the caravan immediately and go back to see what is going on, without being recognised, then come back and tell me.

One of them left the caravan, and went back towards the tent. In the meantime, the woman had also seen the Bedouin arriving and had approached him, reciting in flowery verses that - she swore on her father and mother - she had done everything in her power not to accept the gifts.

- What a terrible thing you have done - the husband shouted at her - in the name of the Eternal God, you who should shelter our guests have sold your duty for this pittance! miseries!

The woman replied: - What you say is just what I feared. I was afraid you would scold me.

Then he: - Wife of mine, you feared my scolding when you should have feared the shame! Tell me what direction that traveller went in.

She pointed the way and he told her to saddle him a horse.

- What are you going to do? - the woman asked.

- I am going to catch up with those people - he answered - and if they do not give me what is due, I will fight them.

She begged him: - In the name of God, do not harm them!

But he turned on her: - You have failed in your duty. And he mounted his horse, brandishing his lance.

Ibn Ja'far's companion, who had witnessed the scene, spurred his own horse to ride alongside the Bedouin: - I doubt if you will be able to catch up with those people - he suggested, but the other replied that in the name of God he would reach them even if they continued to the ends of the earth, and since he went on repeating as much, Ibn Ja'far's companion tried to placate him:

- Keep calm, let me catch up with those people and tell them what you have to say. So, he hurried on ahead to Ibn Ja'far, and told him the whole story. Ibn Ja'far said to him: - You did well, it was a way to forestall a disaster.

Meanwhile the Bedouin had caught up with them. He greeted them and Ibn Ja'far returned his greetings and assured him that his wife had behaved very well and had done her best to refuse the gifts. But the other replied that he did not agree with him at all, and kept on talking, and arguing, and refusing, and would not under any circumstances accept all that money. When Ibn Ja'far saw that this was the case, he said:

- Let's try to understand what it is you want to do, but I do not want you to give back what I have given.

Meanwhile the Bedouin had risen and gone off to one side and prayed twice.¹⁷

When he had finished, he mounted his horse and pulled out his bow and some arrows. Ibn Ja'far asked him the reason for those prayers.

- In those two prayers - the Bedouin replied - I asked my Exalted and Most High Lord to inspire me as to what to do with you, whether to fight you or not.

Ibn Ja'far asked him: - And what did the Lord suggest?

- He pointed me - replied the Bedouin - in the righteous direction, that is, that you take back your largesse and so give us back what you owe us.

- We will do so - Ibn Ja'far replied at that point - and ordered everything to be taken back.

The Bedouin was about to take his leave when Ibn Ja'far made him a last request:

- Can we not at least give you some food for your return journey?

- And what would be the reason for that? - he answered; - I do not live far from here and you do not now owe me anything.

- There is in fact something we owe you - replied Ibn Ja'far.

- And what is that? - asked the other.

- Some recompense for all your wife's chiding and scolding when you tell her how badly you have behaved towards us.

The Bedouin laughed and rode off.¹⁸

As these quoted passages suggest, the hospitality sought, and willingly granted, is for three days, and this duration of hospitality is taken up by Ibn Abi l-Dunyā in other, more concise passages; as in, for example, the two Prophetic sayings that follow:

Let him who believes in God and the Last Day honour his guest. Obligatory hospitality is for one day and one night; recommended hospitality is for three days - any longer and it becomes almsgiving. To stay with someone so long as to cause him embarrassment is an abuse.¹⁹

The Prophet said: - It is not permissible for anyone to stay with his brother so long as to cause him to sin. - And how would we cause him to sin? He answered: - By staying with him longer than he can afford to be hospitable.²⁰

Another proverbial figure in the anecdotal literature on hospitality is the wealthy Companion of the Prophet Sa'd Ibn 'Ubāda, a prominent notable among the Medina converts; and naturally his name, a byword for hospitality, also appears in *The Book of Hospitality to Guests* by Ibn Abi l-Dunyā:

¹⁷ More precisely, he had performed two '*raka'a*', a term indicating a given set of movements and declarations that, reiterated several times, form each *ṣalāt* or legally valid prayer.

¹⁸ Ibn Abi l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 24-6.

¹⁹ Ibn Abi l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 17.

²⁰ Ibn Abi l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 17.

When the dinner hour arrived, there were some who invited one poor person, some who invited two, and some who invited five. For his part, Sa'd Ibn 'Ubāda invited eighty every evening.²¹

Every day, the Messenger of God would receive a bowl of soup from Sa'd Ibn 'Ubāda, which was brought to him wherever he was, with whichever wife he was staying the night. At the end of one of the prescribed prayers, Sa'd Ibn 'Ubāda would say: – My God, give me money to help me in my deeds, for it is only money that makes the deed pure.²²

I came upon Sa'd Ibn 'Ubāda, may God Most High be pleased. He was standing on his terrace and shouting: – Whoever wants fat and meat, come to Sa'd Ibn 'Ubāda! Then I came upon his son, who was doing the same, like him inviting others.²³

6.4 Celebrating the Guest

To return to the Holy Book and the accounts of Abraham's guests: as in the Bible story (*Genesis* 19,1-11), the angels leave Abraham and move on to Lot to warn him of the punishment that God has prepared for the people of Sodom. And here it should be noted that the iniquity of Lot's people is presented by the Qur'ān in the first instance as a dereliction of the obligations of hospitality. The sura *al-Qamar* 'The Moon', for example, states that Lot's fellow citizens "doubted the divine warnings and wanted Lot to hand over his guests to them" (Qur'ān LIV,37). It is clear in this verse that the rejection of the angelic hosts is a consequence or symptom of a preexisting impiety (cf. "doubted the divine warnings"); the repudiation of a guest is equivalent to repudiation of the Prophet, it denies the reality of the Prophecy. In other words, Lot's people lack 'true piety' (*birr*):

Lot said to them: – They are my guests, do not shame me; have fear of God and do not disgrace me. They said: – Did we not forbid you to welcome anyone at all? (XV,68-70)

Thus the sura 'The Rocky Tract'. To confirm that in Islamic thought rejection of a guest goes hand in hand with unbelief, while welcoming a guest is a part of faith, there is a Prophetic saying quoted again by Ibn Abi l-Dunyā in *Hospitality to Guests*: "Let whoever believes in God and the Last Day, honour his guest".²⁴

The Qur'ān thus relates hospitality to religion and makes the expectations of the guest an aspect of the expectations of God. Another way in which the Holy Book affirms the religious dignity of hospitality is through the link between hospitality and the offering of food. When Abraham welcomed the travelling strangers, "He withdrew into the house and returned with a fatted calf which he offered them" (Qur'ān LI,26). The act of offering

²¹ Ibn Abi l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 29.

²² Ibn Abi l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 29.

²³ Ibn Abi l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 29.

²⁴ Ibn Abi l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 16.

is expressed here by an Arabic verb pregnant with meaning – *qarraba* قَرَّبَ: starting from the meaning of ‘to approach’ or ‘to allow to approach’, *qarraba* can mean man approaching closer to God or, conversely, God approaching closer to man, and eventually comes also to mean the offering of a sacrifice. This is the case in the Qur’ānic story of the sons of Adam, where *qarraba* is made even stronger by the copresence of a related noun that indicates precisely a sacrificial offering (*qurbān* قربان): it is said in the sura *al-Mā’ida* ‘The Table Spread with Food’ that Abel and Cain “sacrificed a sacrificial offering” (*qarrabā qurbānan*), one a lamb and the other an ear of corn, and that God accepted one’s offering and refused the other’s (V,27). Understandably, Christian Arabs employ *qarraba* to mean the celebration of the Eucharist.

The sura ‘The Repentance’ also speaks of approaching divinity, in this case through almsgiving:

And some of the Bedouins believe in God and the Last Day, and believe what they expend for offerings brings them near to God, and the prayers of the Messenger. (IX,99)

Then again, and once more linking to the idea of proximity, *qarraba* can also be understood as welcoming someone into one’s family; ‘people of proximity’ (*ahl al-qurbā* أهل القربى) is in fact the commonest way of referring to relatives. And this brings us back to hospitality and the sense of addition, inclusion and annexation. On this, Ibn Manẓūr’s glosses are as useful as ever; we read in *The Language of the Arabs* that to host someone properly means: “You let someone stay with you as a guest, you let him deviate towards you and approach you, you take him in as one of the family and add him to your table”.²⁵

In Qur’ānic, or more generally, Islamic thought, hospitality is thus clearly understood as an act of worship, since it brings with it the approach of God and to God. Consenting to the approach of the other, and especially of a stranger, hospitality takes on the lineaments of a sacred function in which the guest is celebrated through the sharing of food. And it is precisely this last aspect, the dividing up and distribution of whatever subsistence is available viewed as a religious duty, capable of bringing about the union of the participants as if they were members of a single family, that most forcefully strikes those belonging to other cultural traditions.

²⁵ Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root ḍ-y-f.