

Muslim Exegesis of the Bible in Medieval Cairo. Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī's (d. 716/1316) Commentary on the Christian Scriptures. A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation with an Introduction. By Lejla Demiri. Leiden: Brill, 2013. Pp. xiv + 566. €158 (cloth).

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The scholar Najm al-Dīn Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Qawī al-Ṭūfī (d. 716/1316) has a slightly subdued reputation in classical biographical literature, despite the fact that his oeuvre is not only strikingly impressive and diverse, it is also highly original.¹ He is credited with the authorship of some fifty works, among which a significant portion has survived and been published. Included among the repertoire of his extant works are acclaimed treatises on law, exegesis, theology, hermeneutics, Ḥadīth and even poetry, while also ascribed to him are tracts on language, logic, grammar and ethics.² Although conventionally described as a jurist affiliated to the Ḥanbalite school of law whose views on the concept of *maṣlaḥa*, or public interest, attracted censure, the fact that he made sophisticated and influential contributions to the subjects pored over in his writings serves as testimony to the breadth and depth of his scholarship.³ The book under review is a

¹ Al-Ṭūfī was born in Ṣarṣar, a district near Baghdad; he spent periods studying in the capital before traveling to Damascus for a year or so, where various sources refer to his contact with Ibn Taymiyya. He then moved to

² See the excellent summary of these works provided in Appendix One, pp. 529–35.

³ His acclaimed commentary on the Qur’an broached the text using select conceptual constructs: Abū’l-Rabī Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī, *al-Ishārāt al-ilāhiyya ilā’l-mabāḥith al-uṣūliyya*, ed. Ḥasan ibn ‘Abbās ibn Quṭb, 3 vols. (Cairo:

further illustration of the extent of his expertise. It is a critical edition of al-Ṭūfī's "*al-Ta'liq 'alā'l-Anājīl al-arba'a wa'l-ta'liq 'alā al-Tawrāh wa-'alā ghayrihā min kutub al-anbiyā'*," a polemical commentary on the Gospels and selected Biblical materials. The critical edition was edited by Lejla Demiri and is based on two manuscripts preserved in Istanbul.⁴ It was originally the subject of her PhD thesis, completed at Cambridge University in 2008, which included a survey of the scholarly achievements of al-Ṭūfī and a study of the manuscript. An annotated translation of the Arabic text was subsequently prepared for the purposes of the published edition. In her preface Demiri mentions that her study makes al-Ṭūfī's Biblical commentary available for the first time; however, it is worth noting that recently in the Islamic world al-Ṭūfī's works have also been the focus of intense interest and full critical editions, and studies of the *Ta'liq* have been the subject of two unpublished dissertations, the first of which, a PhD thesis, was completed at the National University of Malaysia in 2004 and was authored by Sāmī 'Alī al-Qulayṭī, while the second, an MA thesis, was submitted by Mohamed al-Zahrānī to Cairo University in 2008.⁵ Demiri describes al-Ṭūfī's work as being "an extraordinary commentary on the Christian scriptures" and feels that his work on Christianity has not received the wider academic attention its

al-Fārūq al-Ḥadītha Li'l-Ṭibā'a wa'l-Nashr, 2002). And his work on hermeneutics, *al-Iksīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr* or *al-Iksīr fī qawā'id al-tafsīr*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir Ḥusayn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1977).

⁴ The Süleymaniye Library (2315/4) and Köprülü Library (795/2). The manuscripts include a number of his other works.

⁵ See the online catalogue of the King Fahd National Library for al-Qulayṭī's edition (kfnl.gov.sa), ref. number: 1425/5742; al-Zahrānī's MA thesis was completed at the Kulliyat Dār al-'Ulūm. His thesis was entitled *Manhaj al-Ṭūfī fī muqāranat al-adyān*, which included the critical edition of the *Ta'liq*.

impressiveness truly warrants. She takes the apposite opinion that the commentary remains an important source for the study of the history of Muslim-Christian dialogue and polemics.⁶ Indeed, al-Ṭūfi's commentary belongs to a rich vein of writings that have their origins in the early Islamic literary tradition and continued to flourish across medieval periods and beyond.

A study of the significance of al-Ṭūfi's life and the actual text is provided in chapter 1, and this includes an assessment of the debates surrounding his theological convictions; his attitude towards disciplines such as *taṣawwuf*, *kalām* and philosophy; a synopsis of his arguments on the concept of *maṣlaḥa*; and an appraisal of Ṭūfi's work within the context of Muslim-Christian relations. In chapter 2, the focus switches to a review of the relative significance of al-Ṭūfi's commentary on the Gospels. Topics tackled in the chapter include the interreligious milieu of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, which comprises a historical overview of classical polemical literature; Ṭūfi's interest in Christianity and its scriptural sources; the background to the authorship of the commentary and its structure; the date of its composition and the relevance of the work's title; the exegetical methodology employed within the text; and a brief discussion of the

⁶ For a different classical approach to the use of the Bible as a proof text see the work of Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480): Walid A. Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible, a Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqā'ī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden, 2008). And for further context see Walid Saleh, "A Fifteenth-century Muslim Hebraist: al-Biqā'ī and his Defense of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qur'ān," *Speculum: Journal of Medieval Studies* 83.3 (2008): 629–54.

sources upon which al-Ṭūfī relied. Finally, in this chapter, notes are provided on the critical edition, the extant manuscripts, and issues pertaining to the translation. With regards to the critical edition, the Arabic text is placed in parallel with the English translation, which together extend over some 432 pages. It should be borne in mind that al-Ṭūfī's style of language is frequently ornate, delicately combining elegance with concision, and in places in the commentary the countenance of the arguments is often intricate. Such elements make the task of translating the text a somewhat challenging endeavor. Within the confines of this brief review, it is difficult to offer a thorough appraisal of the translation, although Demiri has made every effort to convey with clarity and a concern for context an unpretentious rendition of the original text; given the length of the text and its florid diction, this is quite an achievement. Interestingly, al-Ṭūfī's reasons for composing the text are elaborated upon in the exordium, where he refers to a desire for this critical exposition of the Gospels to antecede his authorship of a separate treatise he intended to devote to a refutation of a Christian polemical text entitled *al-Sayf al-murhaf fi'l-radd 'alā'l-muṣṣḥaf*. He explained that this commentary would serve as a substrate for the arguments fleshed out in the refutation, which he gave the imposing title *al-Intiṣārāt al-Islāmiyya fī daḥ al-shubha al-Naṣrāniyya*, and which is itself a substantial work.

The *Ta'liq* consists of an exordium that outlines the contextual bases and objectives of the work ; this is proceeded by extended commentaries on the actual Gospels, that are

followed by a series of briefer expository chapters including a disquisition on the authenticity of the Prophethood of Muḥammad and commentaries on the Books of Isaiah, Hosea, Malachi, Ezekiel, Daniel and Genesis, interspersed among which are chapters on the Prophecies of Jonah, Habakkuk and Jeremiah. In his treatment of the commentaries al-Ṭūfī frequently employs a dialectical format, forensically expounding upon selected passages from the adduced texts using Islamic doctrinal points to clarify, contextualize, and, where appropriate, refute objectionable points which feature in the cited pericopes, and therein his marshaling of the subtle detail is all too impressive, while the tone of the discussions frequently takes a tenaciously assertive turn. Examining the question of the Arabic Gospels read and relied upon by the author when he composed the commentary, Demiri illustrates through a careful comparison of the various passages from the different texts that although al-Ṭūfī does not explicitly identify his source of reference for the passages which are cited in the *Taʿlīq*—he simply avers when discussing the Gospel of Matthew that he used ‘an authentic and accurate copy’—it was the *Alexandrian Vulgate* from which the attested passages were derived (pp. 62ff).

One point emphasized in the study is that within the classical Islamic tradition, among the constellation of texts devoted to the sphere of interfaith polemics and dialogue, al-Ṭūfī’s commentary appears distinctive owing to its “original format, structure and literary style” (p. x). And in this respect Demiri makes the pertinent distinction that in the

commentary al-Ṭūfī is not perfunctorily repeating the arguments distilled from the works of previous scholars on the themes and questions he broaches, but frequently producing a creative and yet sometimes controversial synthesis of the materials, and this indicates the distinctiveness of his scholarship and the importance of his commentary. Thus, for example, attention is drawn to al-Ṭūfī's espousal of an "unusual position concerning the angelic nature of Jesus" (p. 74); and an "eccentric view on the resurrection of Jesus" (p. 74) (these are discussed in the manuscript on p. 261 and p. 152, respectively).

On the more general point of the issue of exegetical methodologies and strategies used by al-Ṭūfī, Demiri does proffer the view that with regards to classical structures and the notion of *al-tafsīr bi'l-raʿy*, which she translates as "interpretation based on individual reasoning" and *tafsīr bi'l-maʿthūr* ("interpretation based on transmitted sources"), al-Ṭūfī's activity falls within the confines of *al-tafsīr bi'l-raʿy*, which is qualified by the statement that "the line between the two modes of interpretation is not firmly drawn" (p. 52). It would be contended by some that the division of *tafsīr* into *maʿthūr* and *raʿy* categories is somewhat redundant and opaque when speaking of early and classical exegesis: the division is not grounded in any historical reality as far as the literature of classical *tafsīr* is concerned; and Demiri's frank observation about al-Ṭūfī's modes of interpretation not being "firmly drawn"

is itself evidence of this fact.⁷ With regards to his actual use of Biblical and extra-Biblical material in the course of his commentary, Demiri argues that al-Ṭūfī was willing to rely upon reports linked to figures such as Kaʿb al-Aḥbār (d. c. 32–35/652–53) and Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110/728) both of whom she argues “are known for bringing *isrāʾīliyyāt* into the corpus of Islamic religious literature” (p. 56) and that in this regard he is distinguished from a number of his contemporaries such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), who disapproved of the unregulated use of such sources (pp. 56f). Notwithstanding the fact that some would posit that both Kaʿb and Wahb were figures to whom dicta were spuriously ascribed, al-Ṭūfī was probably following the convention nurtured within the primitive exegetical tradition, which accepted the citation of *isrāʾīliyyāt* for paraenetic and illuminative purposes when it deemed them to be of utility; ironically, this was common even among certain later exegetes who avidly criticized the resort to *isrāʾīliyyāt* for interpretive usage. From an epistemological perspective, judgments and inferences solely sourced from such materials remained speculative and carried little theoretical weight.

In chapter 1, Demiri does review the question of al-Ṭūfī’s theological allegiances, which over the centuries remained a topic of controversy due to the fact that a number of reliable classical biographical sources claimed he harbored Shīʿite leanings; this included

⁷ Mustafa Shah, ed., *Tafsīr: Interpreting the Qurʾān*, Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies, vol. 1 (London, 2013), 28–32.

the works of cynosures such as al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1347), Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1393), Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) and Ibn al-ʿImād (d. 1089/1679). The claim that he had Ashʿarite sympathies likewise surfaces in the discussions, although such a contention appears to emanate from arch-traditionist circles who disapproved of the school’s brand of philosophical theology together with the dialectical strategies and paradigms upon which it relied. Following a survey of his extant works and the doctrinal arguments he expressed in them, Demiri echoes the conclusions reached by many recent researchers that rather than revealing any affinities with Shīʿism, these primary materials actually betray his unswerving commitment to Sunnism. It is rather surprising that so many classical authors gave credence to the claims apropos his theological convictions. Still, a treatise and various pieces of poetry ascribed to him in which Shīʿite sympathies were gleaned led to recriminations, although Demiri explains with regards to the verses of poetry that these may well have included citations from which al-Ṭūfī was simply quoting. Dicta do refer to his actually being briefly imprisoned and punished too, before being suspended from his teaching duties and ultimately leaving Cairo.⁸ However, Demiri convincingly explains that personal rivalries and competition may account for the array of prejudiced and distorted views about his doctrinal and personal loyalties, culminating in his ordeal. Unfortunately, it appears that the ignominy surrounding the events in Cairo may have adversely impinged

⁸ See Ibn al-ʿImād Shihāb al-Dīn, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab*, ed. Maḥmūd al-Arnāʾūṭ, vol. 8 (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1998), 72–73.

upon attitudes towards his work over later years. Accentuating the theme of the distinctiveness of al-Ṭūfī's scholarship, Demiri does observe that his approach to disciplines such as *taṣawwuf*, *kalām* and philosophy does not exhibit the forthright aversion and opprobrium that are supposedly typical of the stance adopted by Ḥanbalīte luminaries towards these traditions, and she explains that this shows the qualities of initiative and resourcefulness that are characteristic of his work. Besides, additional evidence of his intellectual individuality is reflected in the view he espoused on the primacy of the legal principle of *maṣlaḥa* and its efficacy as an independent source of law, which was articulated in a commentary on a Prophetic tradition (pp. 21–23). His musings on the subject, despite attracting criticism, did have an impact upon discussions germane to reform in Islamic law.

The volume has many merits and deserves to be commended: not only does the lucid study of al-Ṭūfī succeed in providing a genuine sense of the scale of his legacy, but it also serves as a valuable introduction to the commentary. Its publication with the translated text will allow a wider readership to engage with and appreciate the fascinating debates which were a predominant feature of medieval Muslim-Christian discourses, thereby helping to shed light on how the Bible was read and expounded upon as a proof text by Muslim scholarship.

