

Book Reviews

The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunni Scholasticism: ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunni Identity in the Second Islamic Century

Feryal Salem

Leiden: Brill, 2016. 174 pages.

The book reviewed here is a welcome addition to the library of works seeking to construct a richer picture of the early Islamic landscape after the wane of radical revisionist theories of Islamic origins of Islam. Salem has presented a thoughtful study of the scholar-ascetic-warrior ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), and what the outlines of his life reveal about the proto-Sunnī milieu of the second Islamic century. Whereas early academic explorations of the development of Sunnī orthodoxy focused on theology and law, with Scott Lucas later highlighting the crucial role of *ḥadīth*, Salem has focused on the hitherto neglected dimension of ethics. The book is well laid out with an introduction, then a chapter outlining Ibn al-Mubārak’s life, followed by chapters analyzing his activities in the fields of *ḥadīth*, *jihād*, and *zuhd* respectively, wrapped up with a brief concluding chapter.

Chapter 1 begins with a succinct overview of the ‘descriptive’ and ‘skeptical’ approaches among scholars of early Islamic history, followed by the relevant observation that interpretation of source material almost inevitably reflects some of the assumptions of the scholar interpreting them. Salem makes the (unobjectionable) assertion that the contents of historical reports in early sources are indicative of attitudes and conceptions that existed among Muslims at the time of authorship, regardless of whether they are historically genuine in all their details. She then presents a representative selection of biographical details that paint Ibn al-Mubārak as a devout worshipper with high moral character, a scholar of *ḥadīth* and *fiqh*, yet also a wealthy and philanthropic trader and a brave man who spent much time

guarding the frontiers. Nathan Hofer, in his review of the book, has correctly pointed out that the historical sources Salem draws on span eight centuries, and criticizes her for failing to distinguish between material from different time periods. This criticism could have been avoided had Salem included an acknowledgment of this fact, along with a brief exposition of her assumptions about the nature of the sources and transmission into later biographies of materials not found in extant earlier chronicles. It is likely that excluding later biographical sources would not radically alter Salem's central arguments—but the historiographically curious reader might wonder about some of the details, such as (for example) the genuineness of attribution of certain theological positions to Ibn al-Mubārak, given the highly-charged sectarian tensions that emerged in subsequent centuries, and the rather diverse early milieu that makes it difficult—as hadith master al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) observed—for adherents of later orthodoxy to find pure ideologues from that early period.

Chapter 2 details Ibn al-Mubārak's prowess in hadith. The sources seem to be in agreement that he amassed a large number of hadiths, a feat that Salem traces to a combination of his wide travels in search of knowledge and his readiness to write down hadiths at a time when such recording was still controversial. (Chapter 3 brings up a third relevant factor: his interactions with other scholars while guarding the frontiers.) We are also given a useful overview of Ibn al-Mubārak's works, both unpublished (including lost) and published. The absence of mention of one edited version of the *Kitāb al-Zuhd* (Sa'īd al-Asmarī's 824-page MA dissertation at Umm al-Qurā University from 2012) is understandable given it was not yet available at the time Salem finished her initial manuscript. This survey is followed by a sketch of Ibn al-Mubārak's scholarly network, including both his major teachers and prominent students. Salem asserts that these networks show the importance of both direct teacher-to-student transmission of knowledge, a mutual awareness among its members, and acknowledged (theological and ethical) criteria amongst them for legitimation of scholarly authority through acceptance in this network. Salem has made reference to Lucas' important work on this, but does not reference William Graham's essay on Traditionalism, a source that I think deserves mention regarding the continuity of the Islamic scholarly tradition.

Chapter 2 also contains some important historiographical observations. Salem finds that the biographical sources show an internal consistency and coherence that strongly suggest their overall reliability, and make it difficult to accept revisionist theories that dismiss them entirely as later

inventions that were back-projected. For example, the critique of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as a hadith narrator, in spite of the near-unanimous praise for his piety, suggests the hadith biographers were resistant to the natural tendency to “aggrandize” popular persons. Salem also rightly observes that the information from biographical dictionaries can undermine some of Schacht’s assumptions, but I would have liked to have seen more engagement with the academic debates (involving Schneider, Berg, Motzki and others) over whether the biographical dictionaries are actually independent sources of information.

In Chapter 3, Salem argues that although the concept of martial valor as a form of piety was well known in the Late Antique Near East, it is a mistake to assume that post-expansion Muslims simply adopted it from the Christians they came in contact with. She cites Qur’ānic references to these concepts as well as numerous narrations in Ibn al-Mubārak’s *Kitāb al-Jihād* that chronologically mention battles in which the Prophet Muhammad was involved, as evidence that early pietist-martial men like Ibn al-Mubārak saw their activity as a continuation of indigenous Islamic teaching and practice regarding noble and ethical combat (granted of course that their understanding may have continued to evolve under other influences). For Islamic scholars to participate in guarding the frontiers, she adduces, was considered a superior form of piety than for them to live a luxurious city life. The existence of ‘religious scholars’ and ‘Qur’ānic reciters’ as a distinct class of people during this time ties in well with Salem’s assertions in the previous chapter about the transmission of religious knowledge. It might have been useful for her to cite here the work of Mustafa Shah and others who have discussed the early *qurrā’* communities. A significant part of Chapter 3 discusses selected hadiths from the *Kitāb al-Jihād* with regard to how Ibn al-Mubārak (and the community at that time) perceived *jihād*.

In Chapter 4, Salem shows, through a comparative analysis of the early *zuhd* literature, that the virtuous ideal of *zuhd* was interpreted in diverse ways in the early community. Ibn al-Mubārak, in his own *Kitāb al-Zuhd* as well as in what biographical sources coherently tell us about his personal life, was a proponent of a “sober and moderate” form of *zuhd* as detachment of the heart from material things, along with an overarching attitude of piety, so that there is no contradiction between being wealthy and practicing *zuhd*. This stands in sharp contrast to more austere interpretations of *zuhd* (such as that of his contemporary, Mu’āfā ibn Ibrāhīm) who advocated a renunciation of the things of this world. While this latter group might

well have been influenced by Christian ascetic practices, Salem credibly argues that a major sector of the community (typified by Ibn al-Mubārak) viewed *zuhd* as a broad ethical framework taken from the teachings of the Qurʾān and the Prophet Muhammad. This normative early *zuhd* literature, she proffers, formed the kernel of what later became Sufism, although later Sufism (and in particular the *ṭarīqas*) came to differ in sometimes significant (and potentially problematic) ways from the earlier *zuhd* tradition. Hence, Salem makes a case for a “primitive” Sufism that represents a primal ethical core of Islam, in contrast to later Sufism that probably did syncretically incorporate beliefs and practices from other (non-Islamic) religious traditions.

Even though the book is geared towards bigger-picture arguments more than details, there could have been more precision in translation in some cases. I understand the pressures of completing a dissertation and the impossibility of perfection, and hence these critiques should not be taken to undermine the book’s worth. I found rather jarring the anachronism of translating *ṣannafa/taṣnīf* as “printing” (rather than the expected “authoring” or “compilation”) when attributed to figures in the early centuries of Islam. A description of the famous Egyptian judge Ibn Lahīʾah (d. 174/790) as *muḍṭarib...yuktabu ḥadithuhū ‘alā al-i’tibār* (59), is correctly identified by Salem as a critique of his accuracy in hadith transmission, but is rather opaquely translated as “problematic....wrote hadiths for recognition.” I personally would have preferred that titles like “al-Ḥāfiẓ”, “al-Imām”, and “al-ʿAlam” (at 10, for example) be translated, or at least placed before the actual name of the person in question, rather than risk non-specialists assuming these to be part of the name (though I understand that the book is directed towards specialists). Vocalizations of uncommon Arabic names are sometimes inaccurate (e.g. “Sammāk” should be “Simāk”), but Salem has been exceptionally meticulous in marking in diacritics. She demonstrates a solid grasp of the overall framework of hadith-sciences and of the Arabic language, and so there are no imprecisions so egregious as to undermine her broad arguments and conclusions. Grammatical errors are extremely few.

I understand that Salem’s more recent work focuses on later time periods, but I would welcome further articles from her that leverage her experience with the figure of Ibn al-Mubārak and her familiarity with the source materials. One possible area of further exploration for which the constraints of the dissertation did not allow but which would be useful, is some quantitative prosopographical data analysis. This could include studies of the narrators of *ḥadiths* in Ibn al-Mubārak’s books as well as a the-

matic classification of all the narrations therein, which might show more clearly that the data she has cited in support of her assertions is indeed representative of the overall contents.

Salem's conclusion reads extremely well, and she has adeptly summarized her major findings and observations. In my estimation, the major contribution of her book has been to articulate a two-pronged centrality of ethics and morals in Sunnī orthodoxy: first, that the early *zuhd* genre of literature was the carrier of ethics before being subsumed later by the field of *taṣawwuf*; and second, that the living practice of morality and ethics by identified individuals in early society was central to the processes of legitimation, authority, and formation of orthodoxy (as shown by the importance of moral accreditation for being an acceptable transmitter of knowledge).

Suheil Laher
Dean of Academics and Senior Instructor
Fawakih Institute for Classical Arabic