

***Humor in Early Islam***, by Franz Rosenthal, with an introduction by Geert Jan van Gelder (Brill Classics in Islam: 6) (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2011), xviii + 154 pp., ISBN: 978-90-04-21148-3, €75.00 / \$107.00 (hb)

This book by Franz Rosenthal, a scholar in Arabic and Semitic studies, was first published in 1956 and did hardly lose any of its significance until the present day. Therefore it was a splendid initiative to have it re-edited, this time with an intelligent introduction by Geert Jan van Gelder.

Nowadays hardly anybody would easily associate the concept of “humor” with the religion of Islam. The images and faces that we see in the media reflect anger and grimness. Islamic “reality” seems to consist of all too serious debates about the prominent position of Islam and of the socio-political consequences of never ending conflicts in the Middle East.

But whatever the situation may be, the cultural history of the communities in the Muslim world cannot be completely understood without a description of laughter and joy and one of the factors that caused these: humor.

The title of the book is well chosen: with any other title like “Humor in the Muslim World” or “Arab Humor” we would run into the problem of fixing boundaries in time and space. The concept of “Early Islam” rightly links the book to a limited geographical area and also to an Arabic speaking environment.

In his introduction Geert Jan van Gelder puts a number of things in perspective: first of all the character of Muslim scholarship that was a mixed body of all kinds of knowledge in which the phenomenon of jokes was never an abstruse outsider, nor was the theory of laughter and humor. As always Arab scholars had a lot of remarkable things to say about these subjects. He also touches upon the difficulty of cross cultural appreciation of jokes, a well known problem. Jokes and anecdotes will easily fall flat by lack of knowledge of various aspects of another culture, of the referential field. This might be less true for the art of comic ambiguity as I will try to explain later.

Rosenthal too starts his introduction with some noteworthy reflections about humor and he stresses the universality of this phenomenon, also within the context of the “otherworldliness” of Islam. He puts this “otherworldliness” in perspective however by pointing to “cheerful humanity” as one of the character traits of the prophet Muḥammad.

His inventory of the Arabic material is extremely useful and complete up to the date of the publication of this book. Meanwhile other sources have emerged, of course, which are easily accessible. Useful too is his enumeration of the Arabic terminology for various kinds of humor like anecdotes, jokes, tomfooleries etc. (pp. 6-7, n. 3 and 4) and his lists of humorists in early Arab history.

The main part of his book focuses on the stories connected with one of these humorists, Ash‘ab ibn Jubayr (d. 154/771). Rosenthal divides his biography of this humorist into two chapters: the “historic” and the legendary Ash‘ab. Most of the material has been taken from the same source as where the translated stories come from: the *Kitāb al-aghbānī*, which serves as a comprehensive collection for earlier sources.

The historic Ash‘ab enjoyed close relationships within the elite in Medina, especially it appears with Sukayna, the granddaughter of ‘Alī, a position that allowed him a “Bohemian” lifestyle. Within the rich and culturally aware circles of Medina at the time Ash‘ab worked as a successful singer who earned considerable amounts of money, a capital that only increased due to his proverbial greed. And it is his greed that forms the core of many of the anecdotes about this man.

Apart from the many anecdotes about Ash‘ab’s greed Rosenthal translated and commented upon other anecdotes that can be divided into categories like: political, religious, ritual, and anti-clerical. Apart from these themes many of his jokes are situated in an urban environment and are often so recognizable that Rosenthal calls them “applicable in our time.” A number of jokes must simply be considered as plainly vulgar.

In his conclusion Rosenthal distinguishes between the historical Ash‘ab, a singer and entertainer, and the legend which served as “a convenient peg to hang all kinds of jokes on.” In this case this distinction is certainly meaningful and wise.

The largest part of the book contains Rosenthal's translations of the stories about Ash'ab (pp. 36-131). He arranged these stories as follows: 1. Chronologically following the biography of our hero in the *Kitāb al-aghānī*; 2. A few other stories about Ash'ab from elsewhere in the *Aghānī*; 3. Stories taken from other sources in the chronological order of these sources.

Are these stories worth reading? Yes they are because they convey an interesting representation of everyday life in early Islam. Are they funny? Not all of them, certainly. And if something, they often produce not more than a smile. But they add to our knowledge and understanding of this part of Arab cultural history, for instance the story (p. 86) about Ash'ab being forced to go on *ḥajj* and regretting it all the way. This is part of mistreatment he faces from the governor who is forcing him to join his pilgrimage; one of the dirty tricks this governor plays is to let Ash'ab almost die from starvation whereas he himself enjoys a copious meal in secret.

Whatever the quality of these anecdotes, one thing about the translation might be considered a bit annoying: I think that the reader would benefit if the translator would have chosen to shorten the *isnād* at the beginning of each story into some kind of a formula. The *isnāds* show a variety in length, but even the shorter ones distract from the content of the anecdote. The average reader cannot be expected to find any useful information in these *isnāds*.

The book concludes with a short appendix on the theory of laughter in the Greek, early Christian, and Arab philosophical tradition.

Some valuable lexicographical work that Rosenthal has done is contained in his "Index of Selected Rare or Explained Words." This index will probably be a useful source for understanding other texts of the same kind.

More recently another study in the field of humor in the widest sense of the word appeared: Thomas Bauer's *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islam* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, 2011). Why are books on this subject so important? Because they offer a major contribution to understanding the (cultural) history of Islam from a point of view that seems to be neglected by many modern scholars in the Arab/Islamic world. They show the human and "humanist" sides of a great civilization, aspects that are all too easily forgotten. The book on ambiguity has

one advantage compared to Rosenthal's study: understanding ambiguity is less depending on our knowledge of the "there and then," the circumstances and "otherworldliness" mentioned earlier. It relies more on the knowledge of the language and the understanding of its double meanings (*double entendre*) together with a general awareness of an all too human background which we more often than not share with Muslim civilization.

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