

Keys to the Arcana: Shahrastānī's Esoteric Commentary on the Qur'an – A translation of the commentary on Sūrat al-fātiḥa from Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī's Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābīḥ al-abrār, by Toby Mayer, with the Arabic text reproduced from the edition by M. A. Adharshab (Quranic Studies Series: 6) (London & New York: Oxford University Press, in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2009), xvi + 267 (English text) + 122 (Arabic text) pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-953365-7, \$110.00 (hb)

Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (c. 1086-1153) is the well-known heresiographer, author of the *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal*, one of the most important sources for the knowledge of the religious sects in Medieval Islam. Perhaps, he is less studied as a theologian, although his *Nibāyat al-iqdām* has a distinguished position in the history of philosophical *kalām*. As a theologian, al-Shahrastānī wrote a Qur'ānic commentary whose title is *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābīḥ al-abrār* (*Keys of the Secrets or Arcana*), virtually an unknown work. This book provides the edition and the English translation of a section of the Commentary by Toby Mayer.

In a sense, Mayer's task has been made easier by the fact that the *Mafātīḥ* survives in a unique manuscript held at the Library of the National Consultative Assembly in Tehran. The manuscript has been edited by M. A. Adharshab and Mayer had made use of Adharshab's work for his own enterprise producing a nice book well articulated in a long Introduction (pp. 3-59), an accurate English translation with notes, bibliography, and indexes (pp. 61-267), the original Arabic text neatly printed at pp. 1-122 (Arabic numeration). The manuscript of the *Mafātīḥ* contains (1) twelve introductory chapters, (2) the commentary on the Exordium (*al-Fātiḥa*, Q 1), and (3) the commentary on the chapter of the Cow (*Sūrat al-baqara*, Q 2). (1) and (2) are presented in this volume, respectively providing a full exposition and a good sample of al-Shahrastānī's hermeneutics (p. 19). Albeit selective, the choice is nonetheless useful to outline the many exegetical problems of al-Shahrastānī's writing and to introduce in his intellectual world. Actually, the approach to the text is particularly difficult, but Toby Mayer's care in exploring, analyzing, and commenting the linguistic and theoretical folds of the text is of much help for the

reader in order to appreciate the complexity of al-Shahrastānī's argumentation.

One of the main questions in studying *Mafātīḥ*'s author – or perhaps *the* main question – is to decide if he was a Sunnī or an Ismāʿīlī. His biographical and bibliographical data are somewhat ambiguous. For instance, he studied in the Nizāmiyya school of Baghdād, a strongly Sunnī institution. Later he lived for a number of years in Merv under the Sunnī Seljuq rule and “the city gave hope of solid backing for [his] projects” (p. 8). Moreover, his *Nibāyat al-iqdām* is defined by Mayer as “a plenary treatment of Ashʿarī orthodoxy” (p. 9). The *Kitāb al-milal* is remarkably objective, although “the differential of the ... sections of the book is clearly presented in term of the principle of contrariety. Moreover, the organisation of the material *within* these sections explicitly builds on the leitmotif of both hierarchy and contrariety (*al-tarattub wa-l-taḍādd*). And again ... the account moves from the general level (*ʿumūm*) to the specific (*kbuṣūṣ*). These characteristic contours of the *Milal* ... are conceptual talismans with wide and profound applications throughout Shahrastānī's thought ... with their arguably Ismāʿīlī stimulus” (pp. 9-10).

Following Toby Mayer's analytical guide, we are led to read the *Mafātīḥ* as an Ismāʿīlī document, fully belonging to this specific intellectual tradition. Many clues take us in this direction. The technical concepts and terminology like “accomplished” (*mafrūgh*) and “inchoative” (*mustaʿnaf*) have a likely Ismāʿīlī character (see translation p. 108, Arabic text p. 50). Two particular points are worth stressing however. The first is a page (translation p. 65, Arabic text p. 3) where, on the one hand, al-Shahrastānī exalts ʿAlī as a precious source of teaching and hermeneutics, while, on the other, attributes the substantial merit of his formation to an unnamed teacher: “So I [al-Shahrastānī speaking] searched for the ‘truthful’ as passionate lovers might search. And I found one of God's virtuous slaves, just as Moses (peace be upon him) searched with his young man: “Then the two of them found one of Our slaves whom We bestowed as a mercy from Us, and We taught him knowledge from Our presence’ [*Sūrat al-kahf*, Q 18]. I learnt from him the ways of creation and of the Command, the degrees of contrariety and hierarchy, the twin aspects of generality and specificity, and the two principles of the accomplished and the inchoative. I thus satisfied myself with this single bellyful, not those which are the foods of error and the starting points of the ignorant. I

quenched my thirst from the fountain of submission with a cup whose blend was from Tasnīm.” Who was this master is left unnoticed, but Mayer asks: “It follows that behind the mystagogue’s intentionally blurred image may lie a living authority in Ismā‘īlī teaching, a learned *dā‘ī* – a henchman, perhaps, of the inceptor of Nizārī Ismā‘īlism, al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124), or even the man himself?” (p. 7). In any case, it is clear that al-Shahrastānī presents the Ismā‘īlī concept of *ta‘līm* (instruction of authority) as a pivotal moment of his formation, with the Ismā‘īlī categories of contrariety and hierarchy fully operating in his methodology.

The second point is not autobiographical but theological and involves *taḥbīd*. We have to connect together a few passages of the commentary through the synthesis of Mayer. The start is Qur’ānic and especially the *āyas* 26-27 of the *Sūrat al-rahmān* (Q 55): “This then is held by our author [al-Shahrastānī] to refer to the great complement to God’s attribute of majesty or transcendence, namely, His ‘bounty’ or ‘creative largesse’ (*ikrām*) – a complementary rooted in Q 55: 26-27: ‘All that is in the world will pass away and your Lord’s face (or ‘self’) alone will endure in His majesty and bounty’ (*dhū l-jalāl wa-l-ikrām*). The impact of these two attributes of majesty and bounty is later spelt out in al-Shahrastānī’s statement: ‘He is veiled from them through His majesty, so they may not perceive Him, and He manifests Himself to them through His bounty, so they may not deny Him’ [translation p. 159, Arabic text p. 96]. So it is that these two affirmations [...] capture the paradox that God is at once incomprehensible *and* undeniable, or as al-Shahrastānī puts it: ‘Insofar as He is He (*huwa*) He is ungraspable and insofar as all belongs to Him (or is due to Him, *lab*^h) He is undeniable’ [translation p. 144, Arabic text, p. 82]” (p. 38). We can emphasize at least two aspects: 1) divine ipseity (Allah is Himself, *Allāh huwa huwa*) warrants His transcendence in respect to contingent things of sublunary world: in this sense, God is separated and ungraspable; 2) divine sovereignty relates all the creatures to God: in this sense, God is undeniable as “that dimension which makes other dimensions possible” (F. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an* [Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989], 4). Both these theological presuppositions are potentially Ismā‘īlī, but in general Islamic. The same Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), an acknowledged Sunnī thinker, argues in his *al-Maṣṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ ma‘ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā* that “You should realize that He [God] is hidden in His manifestation by the intense way in which He

is manifest, for His manifestness is the reason for His being hidden, as His very light blocks His light” (*The Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God* [translated with notes by David Burrell and Nazih Daher; Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995], 134). Both in the Ismā‘īlī al-Shahrastānī and in the Sunnī al-Ghazālī *tawḥīd* describes God as simultaneously out of and within reality. This conclusion has a firm Qur’ānic ground, for, on the one hand, “There is nothing like Him” (Q 42:11), while, on the other, “We [God] are closer to him [man] than his jugular vein” (Q 50:16; translations by M. Abdel Haleem).

The Ismā‘īlī commitment of al-Shahrastānī in the *Mafātīḥ* can be reasonably accepted however. But the exegetical key is by no means exclusively esoteric. Al-Shahrastānī devotes chapter 8 of his own Introduction to the discussion of *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*, arguing that the best exegesis is a synthesis of *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*. Actually, *Mafātīḥ* is partly a classical *tafsīr* and partly an esoteric *ta’wīl*. It is a *tafsīr* as far as it discusses topics like lexicography, grammar, and semantics making good use of the prophetic and *ṣaḥāba*’s traditions (e.g.: “Abū Sa‘īd al-Maqburī transmitted from Abū Hurayra on the authority of the Prophet that he said...”, p. 136; “Al-Rabī‘ ibn Anas transmitted on the authority of Shahr ibn Ḥawshab on the authority of Ubayy b. Ka‘b who said...”, p. 161, etc.). It is a *ta’wīl* in so far as, going up to the origins (*ta’wīl* derives from *awwala*), it discloses the arcana of the Qur’ānic text in an esoteric – and often philosophical – way. From this point of view, it is interesting to underline that on the whole al-Shahrastānī’s attitude is rationalistic. Toby Mayer says that, on the one hand, “A seeming trait of Shahrastānī’s biography is that despite the mystical zeitgeist and the impingement of Sufi influences throughout his milieu, the Sufi strain of Islamic esoterism leaves no trace on his reputation or extant writings” (pp. 4-5); while, on the other, “the Ismā‘īlī stimulus of his thought most shows ... a concept of truth in which the religious and the philosophical wholly unite, a complete mergence of both ‘wisdoms’ (*jāmi‘ al-ḥikmatayn*)” (p. 46).

Mafātīḥ al-asrār is a very stimulating Commentary, be it Ismā‘īlī or not, and Toby Mayer has to be congratulated to have made available such a remarkable piece of work.

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