This latest book in the New York University Press’ Library of Arabic Literature Series brings together two of the oldest surviving travel books in Arabic. Both books are published with Arabic text on facing pages, which is an admirable feature of the Series. In his “Forward”, Tim Mackintosh-Smith, the editor-translator of the first book—Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī’s akhābār al-ṣīn wal-hind (Accounts of China and India)—sets the scene for both books, which came into existence in “an extraordinarily mobile world in which a tailor from Baghdad can end up as the Bulghār king’s couturier, a wanderer from present-day Pakistan can end up hanging from a tree in a northern forest, and a refugee from Basra can drop in, apparently on a whim, on the Tang emperor of China.” (p. ix-x)

Fabulous and rich in anecdotes, yet not unreal tales spun by sailors or imaginative leaps like those of Sindbad (which would appear later in Arabic literature), these two travel accounts are rich in ethnographic details. They also provide first-hand accounts of life at the two interwoven levels of narrative, the first dealing with real human beings in small settings, the second providing a panoramic view of the emerging international trade between the Muslim empire and its neighbors to the east.

Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī, the author of the first of the two books (Accounts of China and India) wrote about “the Sea of India and China, in whose depths are pearls and ambergris, in whose rocky isles are gems and mines of gold, in the mouth of whose beasts is ivory, in whose forest grow ebony, sapan wood, rattans, and trees that bear aloe-wood, camphor, nutmeg, cloves, sandalwood, and all manner of fragrant and aromatic spices, whose birds are parrots and peacocks, and the creeping things of whose earth are civet cats and musk gazelles, and all the rest that no one could enumerate, so many are its blessings.” (p. 4).

This quote from the book has been matched by the editor/translator of
Accounts of China and India who describes the book as: “It is a short book, but it has a sweeping perspective, from the Swahili coast to a rather mistily glimpsed Korea. It is therefore one of those books that seems bigger than it is. And, like the ports of that immense Afro-Asiatic littoral, its pages are busy with people and piled with goods, not just with the luxuries listed above but also with a priceless cargo of information, especially on China. Here are the first foreign descriptions of tea and porcelain, and a whole panorama of Chinese society, from the Son of Heaven and Confucian ethics down to toilet paper and bamboo urinals.” (p. 5).

As if to make this volume of two books more interesting, the first book (Accounts of China and India) is, in fact, two books, probably written by two different authors. Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī, the confirmed author of the second book, says that the first book was given to him “to look carefully through it, and to verify the information I find in it”. He does not tell us who gave him the book and asked him to verify its content. But it was in the course of looking into the marvelous account of the first book, that he wrote the second book. The first book, written in 237/851-52, is thus, without a real author, although both books contain accounts of travels handed down to their authors by informants who were the eyewitnesses of what they relate—a fact indicated by the word ākhbār in the title.

While the Accounts of China and India presents to general readers a marvelous book of travels, it simultaneously brings to the connoisseurs of Arabic literature and historians an edition of a critical work which opens new vistas to understand the world of the Abbasids, whose second caliph, al-Manṣūr, had famously proclaimed “while standing on the bank of the river of the recently founded imperial city and watching the silks and porcelain unloading, “Here is the Tigris, and nothing bars the way between it and China”. (p. 7)

The translation is fluid. Notes, glossary, and bibliography add to the understanding of the context, weights and measures, unfamiliar things and places and historical personage mentioned in the work.

The second book of the volume, Ibn Faḍlān’s Kitāb Ahmad b. Fuḍlān (Book of Ahmad b. Fuḍlān, renamed Mission to the Volga by the translator), written during a particularly unstable period of turmoil, is, in some ways, far less interesting than the accounts of traveler’s put together by Abū Zayd, but nevertheless it provides numerous insights into the relationship between the decaying Abbasid empire and regions on its borders. The translation, introduction, as well as annotations and notes have a different flavor than the first book. The first is the work of a serious scholar tied to his desk, demonstrating focused attention, bringing insights from long years of study, while most of the work on Mission to the Volga “has been done on flights between London and Abu Dhabi or New York, in the InterContinental Hotel Abu Dhabi, and in various restaurants, hotels, and bars in Greenwich Village and SoHo.” (p. 166).
difference is obvious in the translated text, although Mission to the Volga reads well in translation, it lacks the polished and chiseled narrative force of Accounts of China and India. The editor-translator makes sweeping, commonplace statements in the Introduction without substantiating them with scholarly references (for instance, the remarks about the execution of al-Hallaj, which could have benefited from the Massion’s magisterial four-volume work); it raises seriously scholarly concerns about the raison d’être of the work, but fails to provide a fully articulated and historically grounded answer. Perhaps such scholarly discussions are not needed in a work that has been presented as a travel account rather than a historical document; yet the series in which the volume has been published claims scholarly attention. The translation reads well in general, but at places it does not correspond to what is being said in the original text, or the manner in which certain phrases have been translated does not convey the intent of the original (e.g., “they had built a wooden masjid to pray in” for *wa qad banū lahum masjidan min khushab*, which may be better translated as “they had built a masjid with wood” (p. 233); on the same page, we have “did not know how to read the Qur’an”, whereas the intent of the original is to indicate that they did not know the correct recitation during obligatory prayer, *al-qirāʾat*, p. 233). At other places unintelligible words appear (e.g., *W*rʿ* on p. 237). Notwithstanding these reservations, Mission to the Volga does have its merits and reading it in translation, with parallel Arabic, allows one to enter into that enchanted world of discoveries and descriptions of strange people and things.

YASHAB TUR


This monograph focuses on “angels in Hadith literature” through the lens of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Ḥabāʾik fī akhbār al-malāʾik*, which—the author erroneously claims —consists of approximately 750 Hadith related to angels (p. 21; see below for more on this) and a substantial postscript, *khātima*, on theological issues related to angels. Al-Suyūṭī actually has 810 narrations, not all of which are Hadith, and these narrations are of all categories of authenticity, including *marfūʿ*, *mawqūf*, *maqṭūʿ* . Thus, it is not correct to say that this monograph deals with angels in Hadith literature.

The format of the monograph follows standard academic pattern: Part I consists of a survey of scholarship on angels and it places al-Suyūṭī in his historical and scholarly context; Part II focuses on themes in Islamic angelology;
Part III presents a translation of *al-Ḥabāʾik fī akhbār al-malāʾik*; and Part IV contains “Conclusions”. Supplemented by two appendices, notes, bibliography, and indices, this monograph aims to fill an important gap on a relatively neglected area of research in Western scholarship.

More significantly, the author is aware of the previous unsatisfactory approaches of Western scholarship on angelology in Islam, both in terms of their paucity and problematic approaches, some of which are mentioned by him, and others are only alluded to. In general, these approaches have either focused on “the Jewish or Christian provenance of particular angels and, secondly, the development of Islamic angelology and its relation to pre-Islamic religion, both usually relating to the study of the Qurʾān” (p. 9). The author also shows critical insight about the “aims of these investigations” which “are often associated with some degree of polemic, or, at least an intention to place the development of the Qurʾān within a specific locale: by associating vocabulary with Syriac, or any other language, it is possible to argue that the Qurʾān was not the divine word, as is implied by Christoph Luxemburg” (p. 9). The author also briefly mentions some heterodox modern Muslim views on the subject, though his list is not comprehensive.

Given this clarity of thought and author’s admirable detachment from certain enduring biases of Western scholarship on Islam, one would expect a totally different treatment of the subject compared to what has been done so far. Sadly, this is not the case. Having stated the obvious biases of secular, polemical, or religiously motivated “scholarship” which studies Islam and its foundational texts as if they were plagiarized versions of the Jewish and Christian texts, the author actually does exactly the same in the very first chapter of the monograph, “Angels in Classical Islam and contemporary scholarship”: he makes sweeping, unfounded statements, such as, “The Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptural traditions do not present a systematic homogenous dogma of angels” (p. 3), which lumps together the three monotheistic religions and which is all the more surprising given that the very foundation of Belief (Īmān) in Islam mentions angels as the second of the six required components of Belief in the Hadith of Jibril, which the author cites later on and a Qurʾānic verse states: *The Messenger believes in what has been sent down to him from His Lord, and so do the believers. Each believes in Allah, His Angels, His Scriptures, and His Messengers* (Q 2:285).

The same chapter has an astonishing quotation from A. J. Arberry (p. 19), without any comment, which states that “It must have been a very elaborate card-index of traditions and traditionists that al-Sakhāwī kept, with such excellent cross-references that he was obviously able at very short notice to compile a new treatise on the subject…”]; this displays a less than full understanding of the Hadith scholarship of pre-modern Muslim scholars, who did not need index cards to produce their works, as they lived with their
source material, internalized these texts, and transmitted and received Hadith texts and commentaries as if they were living, breathing, pulsating texts, which could be quoted from memory whenever needed. Furthermore, to say that the Qurʾān does not contain a fully developed, and fully articulated angelology is surprising, especially because “angels are explicitly mentioned 88 times in the Qurʾān, 73 of which in the (mostly definite) plural form (malāʾika), 13 times in the singular, and twice in the dual—besides other-named mentions”.

“Al-Suyūṭī and his works”, the second chapter of the book, is a fairly standard historical account of the time and intellectual milieu of al-Suyūṭī (849-911/1445-1505), although one would have expected a further elaboration on his intellectual pedigree, especially in reference to how al-Suyūṭī’s work benefited from those of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) and how these two most important scholars of Mamluk Egypt contributed to the classical heritage on angelology in Islam. A useful comparison is made of sources used by al-Suyūṭī in his various books, the comparison between the al-Ḥabāʾik and al-Hayʾa al-sanniyya fīʾl-hayʾa al-sunniyya—his major work on Qurʾānic cosmology—is especially insightful (p. 19-25).

Part II of the book, consisting of four chapters, seriously undermines claims which the author made in Part I, as it heavily draws on previous Western works without any critical examination, and in stark isolation from the Islamic sources. For instance, Burge makes a comparison between naming of angels in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions and concludes by stating: “This, in itself, suggests that angels and their names were incorporated into Islam in different ways and the origins and development of Islamic beliefs about angels are more complex than some scholars have believed…” (p. 33), without even hinting at the Islamic belief that named angels who appear in the Qurʾān are an exception, because Muslims believe that all that is in the Qurʾān—including the names of the angels—is revealed knowledge and, thus, no human agency is involved in naming those angels.

To make matters worse, several chapters and sections begin with the patent orientalist way of presenting Judeo-Christian content before mentioning Islamic content, with the underlying implication that Islam borrowed these from the Judeo-Christian sources, misreading of source material abounds and juxtaposition of methods and interpretive frameworks of Biblical scholarship on the Qurʾān leads to cul-de-sacs, such as the attempt to blur the firmly established lexical distinction associated with the word malak, leading to the intractable situation where the author has to provide a literal translation of the description of Prophet Yūsuf by the ladies in Potiphar’s house and construe malak karīm as noble angel (p. 53-57)—an interpretation which no Muslim scholar could even imagine. In addition, in a monograph of this nature,

1. See Gibril Fouad Haddad’s entry “Angels” in The Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān (IEQ).
one would expect source-based discussion of the main word (malak) for an angel, rather than Biblical usage. Malak, as Gibril F. Haddad points out in his excellent entry in The Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān, is “the Qurʾānic word for “angel” (used both for the individual and the collective), plural malāʾik(a), is a hamza-suppressed derivation of malʿak, itself a hamza-lām substitute form of maʿlak, the masʿal form of the root verb ā-l-k, literally “to chew” (aorist yalūku, infinitive nouns alīk and ulūk), the nouns alīk(a) and maʿlūk(a) signifying “message,” which indicates the aural nature of messengership and, as for rasūl, “messenger,” and nabī in the sense of “bringer of news,” presupposes the existence of a tremendous unseen but communicative sender (Farāhīdī, ‘Ayn, sub m-l-k; Ibn Manẓūr, Lisān, sub ā-l-k; Bayḍāwī, Tafsīr, sub Q 2:30).  

Most non-Muslims approach Hadith texts from a perspective diametrically opposed to that of Muslim scholars of Hadith and Burge’s translation, notes, and commentary on al-Suyūṭī’s al-Ḥabāʾik fī akhbār al-malāʾik displays the same lack of training in reading Hadith texts. He makes the right decision to translate chapters, rather than selections: “Instead of bowdlerizing the collection and making selections from across the collection, whole chapters have been translated to retain the integrity of each chapter of the work.” (p. 111), yet the very next sentence indicates lack of understanding of the raison d’être of specialized Hadith collections, such as al-Suyūṭī work he studies and translates: “As al-Suyūṭī provides no personal comments about the ḥadīth that he includes, it is only through an appreciation of his selection and contextualization that one can begin to understand al-Suyūṭī’s agenda for the work.” Included in the whole range of Western biases toward Hadith literature—which underline this statement—is the assumption that every Hadith collector has an agenda. Furthermore, this statement and comments about the organization of al-Ḥabāʾik that follows betray a total lack of understanding of an existing hierarchical arrangement which al-Suyūṭī uses for organizing his selection of Hadith: The book is, in fact, arranged on the pattern of other Hadith collections of similar type which had existed for well over five hundred years before al-Suyūṭī undertook to do what he did with this particular book. Thus, chapters are not simply “logically” arranged (p.111); rather, they are hierarchically arranged, following a certain order of priority and spiritual etiquette prevalent in Hadith scholarship, especially given that “belief in the angels is second only to belief in Allah Most High among the pillars of faith (arkān al-imān). This is shown by the sequences taught in the Qurʾān, Each one believes in Allah, His Angels, His Books, and His Messengers (Q 2:285), and the Prophet’s definition in the famous “Hadith of Jibrīl” narrated from ‘Umar (d. 23/644) and Abū Hurayra (d. 57/681)—Allah be well-pleased with them—in Bukhārī, Muslim, Nasāʾī, Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, and Ibn Mājah (the six authoritative hadith collections together known as the kutub sitta): ‘Belief is that you believe in Allah, His angels,
His books, His Messengers, and the Last Day; and to believe in foreordained destiny, for better or worse,” in Muslim’s wording (Īmān, bayān al-īmān wal-islām wal-iḥsān). It is also obligatory to believe in the inward and outward attributes by which the angels are described in the Qur’ān…”

The main section of the monograph, dealing with the partial translation of al-Suyūṭī’s al-Ḥabā‘īk, is where one would expect the author to provide a critical evaluation of the book based on what it contains, yet it is here that his scholarly apparatus simply disappears; Burge makes no attempt to provide the reader with any critical analysis of the text, the purpose of its compilation, the details about opinions of Hadith masters on the narrations it contains, and—most importantly—its reception in the scholarly circles since it was written some five hundred years ago. Because all of this is missing from the monograph, one is left with just the partial translation of the selected chapters, and erroneous claims such as “there has been relatively little study of al-Suyūṭī and his approach to ḥadīth (p. 21). This can only be true if Burge simply wants to ignore hundreds of works on the author of al-Ḥabā‘īk which exist in Islamic scholarship and which continue to emerge. Burge prefaces his translation with two and a half page introduction in which he provides description of the two manuscripts he used and he states (twice) that “the text is written in a clear nakhsh with a text box containing…” (p. 112 and 113); one wonders what it means, as there is no such style of calligraphy; perhaps the manuscripts were written in naskh.

YASHAB TUR

3. Ibid, p. 171.