

Ibn al-Jawzī, *Virtues of the Imam Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* • Edited and Translated by Michael Cooperson • Two Volumes • Library of Arabic Literature • New York University Press, 2013 • HB • Volume 1 ISBN 978-0-8147-7166-2 (cl: alk. paper) • 978-0-8147-7188-4 (e-book) • Volume 2 ISBN 978-0-8147-3894-8 (cl: alk. paper) • 978-0-8147-3787-3 (e-book)

This is perhaps one of the most important translations so far in the Library of Arabic Literature Series which offers bilingual editions of key works of classical and premodern Arabic literature as well as anthologies and thematic readers. Philip F. Kennedy, the General Editor of the Arabic Literature Series, notes the purpose of the series is to include “texts from the pre-Islamic era to the cusp of the modern period, [encompassing] a wide range of genres, including poetry, poetics, fiction, religion, philosophy, law, science, history, and historiography (iii).

The admirable *himmā* of the translator is immediately apparent in the “Introduction”: “Leaving aside the matter of length, this book was not particularly difficult to translate” (xvii). Even if it is not an understatement, Michael Cooperson is to be congratulated for translating this work by the indefatigable Abū-l-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), the outstanding scholar of the twelfth century who wrote over 400 works in fields as diverse as Hadith, Tafsīr, History, Linguistics, and Fiqh.

One hundred chapters and over 150,000 words of *Munāqib Abī ‘Abd Allāh Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal* pulsate with energy; these pages are vibrant with events of extraordinary nature, and they contain hundreds of facets of individual and collective lives of a bygone era; Cooperson’s translation captures the soul of the book, which he rightly says “is a book by and about people who believed in simple truths expressed in simple language—even if some of that simplicity has been lost to us with the passage of time” (xvii).

Conscious of the living record that the book carries, he says, “What I most wish I could have reproduced is the voices. Ibn Ḥabal’s life is told as a series of

reports, each narrated by an eyewitness, or by Ibn Ḥanbal himself. If the words on the page really are transcriptions of speech, each report should represent a distinct voice. In practice, though, there does not seem to be much variation in register, possibly because reports originally narrated in informal Arabic, and perhaps even other languages, have been put into literary Arabic of a more or less uniform kind by one or another of the transmitters. Beyond the voices of the eyewitnesses, we also have the voices of all the people they quote. These include everyone from caliphs, judges, and jailors to doctors, grocers, and bandits” (xvii).

To be sure, it is this plethora of voices which make the original such a fascinating reading, even though the text has been standardized. Ibn al-Jawzī marvelously captures the life of one of the greatest scholars of Islam through first-hand reports narrating immediate and heart-felt reactions to events, and, above all, through a magical synthesis which seamlessly presents various “voices” as if they are all narrating the same story of heroism and indefatigable courage and humility of a man who died in the 241st year of Hijrah, and whose love for the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, and what he did to safeguard the Book revealed to him from deviatory constructs were to become legendary. His concern with the collection and verification of the Hadith reports, his uprightness, his creedal certainty and his courage pulsates through the pages of Ibn al-Jawzī’s work and the translation captures it in an easy-to-read language, with only occasional lapses (see below).

Cooperson’s short “Introduction” (p. xi-xx) and three-and-a-half pages of “Note on the Text” provide ample information about his methodology, customs, and schema of the book and immediately usher readers into the complex and enchanting world of Baghdad of the time of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal through the preliminary remarks of Ibn al-Jawzī, lucidly translated:

Praise God, Who did all things create with skill unmatch’d and chose of men who would come first and who behind. From humankind He raised His prophets and His seers, and of them both did make the righteous scholars heirs. Then of those knowing men did He a lesser number find, and to those few with gen’rous hand a special virtue give. May God bless and keep Muḥammad, of those who alight in desert lands the noblest rider of his race; and bless and save the ones who in joining him touched greatness, and those who followed him in faith, until the Day when He shall set this tott’ring world aright. (3)

Cooperson has a special knack for translating dialogues:

[Al-Naysābūrī:] Aḥmad once said to me, “Some morning, come by early and we’ll compare our copies of Renunciation.”

So I went to see him early one morning. I asked his son’s mother to

bring me a mat and a pillow, and I put them out in the anteroom. Then Aḥmad came out with the book and his inkpot. When he saw the mat and the pillow, he said, “What’s this?”

“For you to sit on,” I said.

“Take it away,” he said. “We can’t study renunciation without renouncing.”

So I took the things away and Aḥmad sat down on the ground.

Admirable quotes from the work include the following:

[Al-Marrūdhī:] One morning I went in to see Aḥmad and asked him how he was.

“How can a man be,” he answered, “with his Lord imposing obligations, his Prophet demanding that he follow the sunnah, his two angels waiting for good deeds, his soul clamoring for what it wants, the Devil goading him to lust, the Angel of Death seeking his life, and his family asking for money?” (2:27)

Only occasionally one is jolted to read in translation an idiom foreign to the text. Examples of such “jolts” include Cooperson’s use of words like “hello” (“say hello to a great Muslim,” (p. 39)), “daddy” (“My daddy said I can’t.” (71)), and wording like, “damn you” (2:111)—where more literal, may God break your hands would have been better for *qaṭaʿ-Allāhu yaduka*.

Occasionally there are missing words, critical to the text. For instance, the missing translation for *Allahumma* in “We were at Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal’s, and I asked him to pray for us. He said, [O our Allah], You know that we know that You desire for us most of what we seek for ourselves...” (2:43).

All in all, these two volumes make an excellent reading and the bilingual edition will be cherished by lovers of great works.

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