

Book Reviews

Encyclopedia of Islamic Herbal Medicine

John Andrew Morrow

*Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2011, pbk,
225 pages.*

For anyone interested in researching herbs mentioned in the religious texts of Islam, the *Encyclopedia of Islamic Herbal Medicine* by John Morrow offers an abundance of information and insights. By combining information gleaned from the Quʿrān and the Sunnah, as well as the sacred writings of the Twelve Imams, Morrow proposes an authoritative reference to Prophetic medicine – medicine based solely on the religious texts of Sunni and Shīʿah Islam.

The first chapter acts both as a general introduction to the topic and a comprehensive critique of the origins and history of Islamic medicine in a broad-sweeping account that encompasses the many forms of oriental medicine from ancient to modern, including a defense of the role of herbal and holistic therapies in general against BigPharm and the medical establishment. Great Arabic physicians such as Ibn Sīnī and Al-Rāzī developed scientific principles for the prescription of medicines that are still adhered to by Western physicians –while the Unani Tibb and Ayurvedic traditions have indelibly influenced herbal medicine and phytotherapy as currently practiced in the Western world. However for most non-Muslim readers the role of the Prophet Muḥammad (ṢAAS) and the place of Prophetic medicine are quite unknown.

The *Encyclopedia* itself includes descriptions of around one hundred herbs mentioned by the Prophet and the imams. Many of these herbs are in fact familiar fruits, vegetables, and other foods. The monographs are quite comprehensive – including sections on nomenclature, safety rating, properties, and uses, issues of identification, and scientific studies. The major

focus, however, is on the Prophetic prescriptions. For this section, it would have been helpful if scriptural references were summarized under separate headings for the Qu'rān, Sunnah and Twelve Imams, allowing the reader to identify the religious source, quickly and easily.

Had the author focused on the details of scriptural references, his work would have been an excellent resource for readers interested in sources. The discussions regarding traditional words used for each herb are also quite interesting; however, Morrow moves on to attempt to identify and legitimize these herbs within a Western context, drawing his own (sometimes very subjective) conclusions. For example, in his treatment of *Narcissus* spp., he notes it is “reputed” to be effective against cancer, then surmises this may be due to the presence of laetrile-like compounds (no reference given). What follows is an instructive discussion (fully referenced) on anti-HIV studies and the anticholinesterase activity of some daffodil alkaloids including galathamine – the molecular precursor of the current generation of drugs used to slow down neurological degeneration in Alzheimers Disease. Surprisingly perhaps, given the main focus of the text, it is quite a good source of current scientific research information for many of the herbs and foods covered. To choose another example – fenugreek – the Prophetic description section is one paragraph long, while the scientific studies section is about three pages, comprehensive by any standard. However, by contrast black seed (*Nigella sativa*) includes two pages of Prophetic prescription and issues of identification (asserting that this species is indeed the ‘black seed’ referred to by the Prophet and in the Bible), but less than a one-half page of scientific studies.

In some cases, the species appear to have been selected more for its available scientific support than for traditional botanical or phytochemical associations. With thyme, for example, Morrow acknowledges that there is some debate regarding the identification of *za'ar*, which he classifies as a thyme labeled both as *Thymus serpyllum* and as *T. vulgaris*. In his properties and uses section for thyme, he refers research on *Thymus vulgaris* and *T. quinquecostatus*, as if they were all interchangeable. There is a brief mention of *T. spicata*, but not *T. syriaca*, *T. capitatus*, *Satureja thymbra*, *Calamintha incana*, or *Nepeta curviflora*, all of which are also known as *za'ars*.¹

Most of the medicinal uses, safety ratings, and nomenclature are not referenced, reflecting more of a literary approach than a scientific one – although the introductory chapter does include a general list of reference texts and a discussion of their relative merits, as well as a bibliography. Other works with stronger scientific references include Bashar Saad and

Omar Said's *Greco-Arab and Islamic Herbal Medicine*² and A. Shafaghat's work on Qurānic plants.³

Overall, this is a very interesting book for anyone interested in further explorations into Prophetic medicine. The medical references, however, should be examined very carefully and researched fully before using the work as a reference for herbal medicines.

Notes

1. Jo Ann Gardner, "Za'tar: whatever that stuff is, it's delicious!" *The Herb Companion*, October/November, 1992, <http://www.herbcompanion.com/Cooking/Zatar.aspx>.
2. Bashar Saad and Omar Said, *Greco-Arab and Islamic Herbal Medicine: Traditional System, Ethics, Safety, Efficacy and Regulatory Issues*. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2011).
3. A. Shafaghat, "Phytochemical Investigation of Quranic Fruits and Plants." *Journal of Medicinal Plants* 9 (2010): 35.

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