Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mun

Michael Cooperson.
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This outstanding study discusses the origins, development, and function of pre-modern Arabic biography through an examination of the biographies of four figures of the late second and early third Islamic centuries whose life stories have been contested in interesting ways: the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 198–218 AH/813–833 AC). [Chapter 2]; the Shi`ite imam `Ali al-Rida (d. 203 AH/818 AC) [Chapter 3, and an appendix on the circumstances of his death]; the renowned scholar of Hadith, Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH/855 AC).[Chapter 4]; and the ascetic Bishr al-Hafi (d.227 AH/842 AC). [Chapter 5]. These figures were chosen because they lived during the same period and their careers intertwined and overlapped, thus bringing to the fore the contests over religious authority between the societal groups they represented. Although the caliph al-Ma'mun is famous for having appointed `Ali al-Rida, his heir apparent, a move which has puzzled many historians, since he is also accused of murdering the Shi`ite imam.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal's fame rests on his resistance to the Abbasid/Mu`tazili Inquisition which al-Ma'mun inaugurated: despite imprisonment and flogging, he upheld the opinion that the Qur'an is eternal and not created. Bishr al-Hafi, the famous barefoot ascetic, was trained as a Hadith specialist in his youth but gave it up for what he saw as a more moral life. The association of Bishr al-Hafi with Ibn Hanbal, equally renowned for his religious scrupulousness, provides fertile ground for comments on the relative merits of the groups and religious approaches that they represent.

Chapter 1, "The Development of the Genre," addressing the history of the biographical genre, argues, following Tarif Khalidi and against the traditionally accepted view, that biography did not originate as a by-product of the Hadith scholars' obsession with *isnad* criticism. Rather, it originated in the work of *akhbaris* or "collectors of reports," in essence the first historians of the Islamic period, who drew on pre-Islamic oral models, combining genealogies and name-lists with narrative material. Biographies, in Cooperson's view, are fundamentally intertextual: the reader naturally compares the accounts in one biography with alternative versions presented in other texts. Each serves to mold and comment on the interpretation of oth-

ers. In addition, the inclusion of "secret" accounts serves to establish the authority of the particular version a biographer has constructed.

The main thesis of the book is that the genre of Arabic biography has been constructed, to a great degree, around two related concepts: the transmission of religious knowledge and "heirship to the prophets." In the course of the third and later centuries, the professionalization of scholars and other groups increased. Societal and professional categories, termed *sinf* (category) or *ta'ifah* (group) became more clearly demarcated and proposed more and more forceful justifications of their own authority. Chief among their arguments was the claim to be "heirs to the prophets" in some sense. In biographies, various groups claimed authority by showing that their particular tradition went back in an unbroken chain through exemplary figures like the ones discussed here, ultimately to the Prophet Muhammad. The chief metaphor through which they expressed the coherence of their category was the transmission of knowledge from the Prophet to future generations.

The particular groups on which Cooperson focuses attention are caliphs, imams, Sunni scholars, and (proto-)Sufis. Combining judicious use of historical sources with the tools of literary criticism, and insightful readings of biographical accounts show how the biographical persona of the four figures addressed were created, modified, and contested by later scholars who used these accounts as a language in which to make important arguments not only about historical figures and events but also about religious authority. Claims to authority are most evident when contested, and Cooperson's choice of characters who interacted and came into real or imagined conflict allows him to show how the biographical tradition has tried to bolster, undermine, or reconcile the authorities of the groups in question. His analyses are cogent and compelling, his examples adroit, and his translations superb. He has also provided a useful glossary of technical terms.

This compelling analysis of the origins and development of the genre of biography also represents an important contribution to our understanding of Islamic religious history. The *ta'ifahs* that Cooperson addresses came into conflict not only in biographical texts but in society at large; each promoted its own version of "correct" Islam as well as its own interpretation of religious authority. The *ta'ifah* model provides a better tool for the understanding of historical Islam as a dynamic system of competing authoritative groups, whereas the subject has often been hopelessly oversimplified or misinterpreted in our textbooks and histories of Islam as

monolithic, iridescent, or a synthesis of two possible sub-traditions, such as al-Ghazali's supposed synthesis of Islamic law and mysticism.

While recognizing the advantages of this approach, one could imagine a set of competing groups somewhat different from that which Cooperson chooses to put forward for examination, and certainly including more than four members. In his presentation, Ahmad ibn Hanbal comes to represent Sunni scholars as one super *ta'ifah*, whereas during the third/ninth century, the lines between Hadith-scholars, jurists, and theologians were being drawn, and there is fertile ground for discussing their competing claims to authority and the various accommodations they made with each other in the biographical tradition. Certainly it would have been interesting to have had a theologian or a jurist, figure in this study.

A particularly interesting theologian-cum-jurist would have been Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ad al-Iyadi (d. 240 AH/854 AC), the Mu`tazili who served as chief judge of Baghdad during the inquisition and came into obvious conflict with Ibn Hanbal and many other scholars of the period. The author may be excused for this omission, however, by the paucity and one-sidedness of extant information about Ibn Abi Du'ad, which would probably have precluded a thorough analysis.

One may criticize, however, the representation of caliphs and imams as separate *ta'ifahs*, which arguably reflects a later, and chiefly Sunni, view that caliphs and Shi›ite imams are quite distinct in their claimed attributes, modes of asserting legitimacy, religious authority, and function. Rather than characterize the conflict between caliph and imam as one between two competing *ta'ifahs*, one could characterize it as a struggle between rival claimants to leadership of the same *ta'ifah*. The well-known animosity between the Shi›ites and the Umayyad caliphs, then the Abbasids, results from the fact that the Shi›ite imams and the caliphs asserted their right to the same position and not two separate positions with rival yet distinct claims to religious authority. Both were termed imam or *sahib hadha al-amr* in the sources, both received the *bay`ah* or oath of allegiance from their followers, and both were, in theory at any rate, the single leaders of the Muslim community, in addition to claiming one type of heirship of the prophets. In view of this equivalence, al-Ma'mun's decision to appoint `Ali al-Rida his heir, while still a surprising move, makes more sense.

This book richly deserves to be read by historians and scholars of religion, for it address seriously the ideas behind the construction of the bio-

graphical texts that have so often been used naively as unproblematic raw material for the writing of Islamic history.

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