

Review of Lejla Demiri, *Muslim Exegesis of the Bible in Medieval Cairo*

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Lejla Demiri. *Muslim Exegesis of the Bible in Medieval Cairo: Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī's (d. 716/1316) Commentary on the Christian Scriptures: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation with an Introduction*. History of Christian-Muslim Relations 19. Leiden: Brill, 2013. xvi + 566 pp., €158,00/\$220.00 (hardback), ISBN 9789004243163

This richly documented Arabic/English publication of Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī's *Commentary on the Christian Scriptures* is a major contribution to the history of both Muslim–Christian polemic and Muslim biblical studies. Written prefatory to a refutation of a Christian polemical treatise, the work starts out focusing almost exclusively on refuting Christological doctrines, but ends with a detailed commentary on Genesis that addresses many different aspects of the biblical text and reconciles it with parallel narratives in the Qur'an. The translator's extensive notes locate the work very effectively within the history of Muslim–Christian polemic, but much remains to be said about its place in the history of biblical and qur'anic exegesis.

The Introduction presents Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī as a creative and outspoken but very mainstream Sunni thinker – not, as some have suggested, a Shī'ī or a radical proponent of rational jurisprudence. The editor offers no overall synthesis of his thought, or even of his distinctive contribution to religious polemics, but she summarizes the main arguments and methods of his *Commentary* and identifies very carefully both the polemical text to which he was responding and the Arabic version of the Bible that he was using.

From the outset, al-Ṭūfī's *Commentary* is obsessed with Christology. Even "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" prompts a refutation of Christ's divine sonship (180–181). As he works sequentially through selected passages from the four Gospels, al-Ṭūfī mercifully does not repeat his arguments but simply refers back to them and begins to explore ancillary issues such as Christ's denial of marriage at the resurrection, which he repeatedly refutes by highlighting references to physical aspects of heaven such as eating and drinking (196–205, 216–217, 254–255, 296–297, 376–377). Al-Ṭūfī is most frustrated with the Gospel of John, whose mystical language must be taken figuratively lest it result in a complete mishmash of mutual indwelling between God, Christ, and his followers (338–339).

Having rejected Christian interpretations of the Christology of the Gospels, al-Ṭūfī turns to the books of Isaiah, Hosea, Jonah, Habakkuk, Malachi, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, largely accepting the Christian view that passages such as Isaiah 52–53 are prophecies about Christ, but arguing that Christians have drawn the wrong conclusions from them. Along the way, al-Ṭūfī becomes less preoccupied with the Bible's Christological implications and more attentive to other exegetical issues. He finds numerous allusions to the Prophet Muhammad, most notably in Habakkuk and in Daniel's interpretation of the dream about the stone that becomes a mountain. He even backtracks to point out a prediction of Muhammad that he had overlooked when working through the Christological implications of Isaiah (420–423). He also begins to pursue non-polemical matters such as astrology, science and God's predetermination of human actions (402–403, 406–407).

By the time he has exhausted the Old Testament prophecies about Christ and Muhammad, al-Ṭūfī has developed enough interest in other aspects of the Bible to start over with a detailed commentary on Genesis, in which he scarcely mentions Christology but focuses instead on reconciling biblical narratives with the Qur'an and Hadith. He does not hesitate to reject as forgeries passages for which he can find no acceptable interpretation, and he is quick to ridicule the Jews and the Christians for their gross misinterpretations and misapplications of other passages, but he is equally willing to reject weak Hadiths and the opinions of Muslim commentators if that allows him to reconcile a biblical text with the Qur'an. One of his goals is to escape Christian charges of inaccuracy in the Qur'an, but his interest is more than apologetic. He addresses topics ranging from the divine image in humans (424–425) to how Jacob managed to breed speckled livestock (492–495). One feels that al-Ṭūfī has become interested in the Bible

for its own sake, and one wonders whether he was not tempted to continue his *Commentary* beyond Genesis, even though his original goal of undermining Christian polemic had long since been achieved.

The editor and translator of this important work has accomplished a monumental task. The Arabic text is generally solid, and even minor variations in the manuscripts are scrupulously documented. The typeface is excellent, though it could have been made much larger without increasing the size or cost of the book. The translation is free and explanatory enough to be very readable for non-Arabists, though it occasionally falls short of idiomatic English (on p. 301, for example, Christians are criticized for not being “upon” the religion of Christ). Here and there it obscures some of al-Ṭūfī’s more technical vocabulary and arguments (for example, the definition of *‘aql* on p. 109, extrapolation from the visible to the invisible world and the types of causation on p. 111, the proof that the divine nature said to reside in Christ cannot be a substance on p. 147, and *‘umūm* and *istighrāq* on p. 313). The work’s greatest strength lies in the English notes, which make it very accessible even for readers unfamiliar with Muslim–Christian polemic. References are given not only for allusions to the Bible, Qur’an, Hadith, poetry and proverbs, but also for obscure names, places and foodstuffs. Demiri’s explanatory notes are particularly rich in the section on the four Gospels, where they provide a very helpful historical context by pointing out parallel arguments, not only in al-Ṭūfī’s other works but also in the works of other Muslim polemicists. When al-Ṭūfī turns to less polemical matters, however, the notes become much shorter, leaving it for someone else to locate his comments in the context of Qur’an commentaries and the Tales of the Prophets literature.

Lejla Demiri’s work is an admirable contribution that makes available an unusual and important work. To the field of Muslim–Christian polemics (for which it was primarily intended) al-Ṭūfī’s *Commentary* contributes an innovative commentarial format and several unusual ideas about Christ, but the reader who continues to the end will also find much that is of great interest for the study of Qur’anic exegesis, the Tales of the Prophets, and the Bible itself.