

Book Review

Hollenberg, David, and Mushegh Asatryan. *The Nusayri Path of Knowledge: A Study and Critical Edition of ʿIṣmat al-Dawla’s (thrived 11th century) Manhaj al-ʿilm wa l-bayān wa-nuzhat al-samʿ wa l-iʿyān*. Shii Islam: Texts and Studies, vol. 4. Leiden: Brill, 2024. ISBN 9789004703209. 71 pp. (English), 462 pp. (Arabic). \$128 cloth.

DANIEL DE SMET

CNRS, Laboratoire d’études sur les monothéismes

David Hollenberg and Mushegh Asatryan, well-known authorities in the field of early Shīʿī studies, present here the first printed edition of an important religious work belonging to the literature of the Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawī community. The Nuṣayrīs live mainly in Syria, Lebanon, and the Hatay province of southeastern Turkey (region of Antakya, ancient Antioch) and must not be confused with the Turkish and Kurdish Alevis in eastern Anatolia. They are the direct heirs of the Shīʿī *ghulāt*, the so-called “extremists,” a complex network of heterodox movements going back to the first centuries of Islam professing the deification of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the cousin of the Prophet Muḥammad, along with the allegorical interpretation of the Qurʾān and Islamic law.

By chance, Hollenberg discovered in the library of the University of Pennsylvania a manuscript of the *Manhaj al-ʿilm wa-l-bayān* copied in 1854 and purchased in Syria by an Evangelical missionary. A copy of a slightly older manuscript, dated 1810 and kept in a private collection in Jerusalem, was provided to the editors by Meir Bar-Asher, one of the leading scholars in the field of Nuṣayrī studies. Moreover, Asatryan found on the internet a PDF version of a third manuscript, of unknown provenance and undated, which in the meantime has been removed from the web. The editors used the Pennsylvania manuscript as the base for their edition and compared it with the two other manuscripts, noting significant variants in the apparatus.

With its 462 pages in the printed edition, the *Manhaj*, written by a hitherto unknown author of the eleventh century, is by far the largest Nuṣayrī text accessible today. It provides an in-depth exposition of Nuṣayrī theology, including the unfolding of God in

three hypostases—the “essence” (*maʿnā*) ‘Alī, the “name” (*ism*) Muḥammad, and the “gate” (*bāb*) Salmān—and the complex relations between them; their manifestations in a human shape throughout history; the allegorical interpretation of the Qurʾān and the prescriptions of Islamic law leading to antinomianism (the initiate who knows the “real” meaning of a command or an interdiction is not compelled to apply it); and finally the reincarnation of unpurified human souls in a new human or animal body.

However, the *Manhaj* is more than an abstract treatise on theology, as the author includes in it personal comments on his initiation into the secret doctrine, his readings and intellectual formation, and his relations with learned people inside and outside the community, thus giving a unique insight into the organization of the Nuṣayrī sect during the eleventh century. As his initiation took place in Cairo, the author provides us with some precious information about the Egyptian Nuṣayrī community in that period, which remains sparsely documented. Moreover, the book contains many quotes from older sources, some of them previously unknown, thus contributing in a significant way to our understanding of the extent of Nuṣayrī literature.

Given the length and the rich contents of the text, a thorough study of the *Manhaj* is a desideratum. The English introduction of 53 pages provides a useful summary of the text, its contents, and manuscripts. The next priority now is the publication of the translation, which the two editors have already prepared. The index to the Arabic text is a first step to give easy access to it, but unfortunately it does not include the technical terms of Nuṣayrī doctrine, such as *maʿnā*, *ism*, *bāb*, *maskh*, or *raskh*.

The edition of the Arabic has been done with care, providing a readable and sound text. In their introduction (pp. 51–53), the editors admit that they were confronted with a problem, which seems recurrent when editing this kind of text. Some of the manuscripts, or parts of a single manuscript (for instance, the Pennsylvania manuscript was written by different hands), present characteristics of post-classical or “middle” Arabic (*tāʾ marbūṭa* is rendered with the letter *tāʾ*; *ḍāl* and *zāʾ* are confused; the accordance between numbers and their subject, or between the subject and the verb in a sentence, anticipate modern standard Arabic), while others follow the rules of classical Arabic. As all the manuscripts are quite recent, it is impossible to determine if these “middle” Arabic features go back to the author and were partially “corrected” by zealous scribes, or if they were introduced at a later date during the transmission of the text. Hollenberg and Asatryan decided to transpose the whole text into classical Arabic, which is perhaps the best solution, but on the other hand this creates a false picture of the actual transmission of the text and obliterates the historical evolution of the Arabic language. I had the same problem when editing Druze and Ismāʿīlī texts and must confess that I found no better solution than transcribing the whole text in classical Arabic.

The volume further contains an encompassing bibliography on (recent) Nuṣayrī studies. One important title is however missing: Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky, ed. and trans., *The ʿAlawī Religion: An Anthology* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021).

In conclusion, David Hollenberg and Mushegh Asatryan have made a major contribution to early Shīʿī and Nuṣayrī studies by having made accessible this important primary source.