



Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Epistle of Forgiveness or A Pardon to Enter the Garden, by Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī, vol. 1: A Vision of Heaven and Hell Preceded by Ibn al-Qāriḥ's Epistle by Geert Jan van Gelder and Gregor Schoeler

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The Epistle of Forgiveness or A Pardon to Enter the Garden, by Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, vol. 1: A Vision of Heaven and Hell Preceded by Ibn al-Qāriḥ's Epistle. Edited and translated by GEERT JAN VAN GELDER and GREGOR SCHOELER. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013. Pp. xxxviii + 423. \$40.

This translation of the first of two parts of Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī's (d. 449/1057) (henceforth M) celebrated *Risālat al-ghufrān* (henceforth *R*) appears as a volume in the admirable, bilingual (Arabic–English) Library of Arabic Literature series (Philip F. Kennedy, gen. ed.). It is the first complete translation of *R* in any language. It includes the lengthy discussions about lexicography and poetics in which the protagonist, a grammarian and *ḥadīth* scholar from Aleppo named Ibn al-Qāriḥ, engages in the course of his wanderings in paradise and hell. The translators' introduction (pp. xv–xxxviii) gives a succinct summary of M's life and oeuvre, and discusses some of the main themes of scholarship on M. This is followed by an edition and translation of the epistle written by Ibn al-Qāriḥ to M (pp. 2–63). The inclusion of this letter is a particularly welcome feature, despite the fact that it is a rambling missive that makes for rather unpleasant reading. Ibn al-Qāriḥ liberally incriminates and anathematizes others, including figures beloved to both M and scholars of Islam, such as al-Mutanabbī and al-Ḥallāj. Worse, he indulges in a heavy dose of self-pity, adding apologetic passages in which he belittles his own misdeeds, stereotypical phrases of *contemptus mundi* (*dhamm al-dunyā*), and sycophantic praise of M. All this goes a long way in clarifying what propelled M to write his lengthy response (pp. 66–323). The text of *R* is followed by notes (pp. 325–69), a glossary of names and terms (pp. 370–91), as well as a thorough bibliography to which a useful list of “Further readings” is appended (pp. 392–403). Certain items appear in both the bibliography and the list of further readings, for example, Margoliouth's 1902 article on M's veganism. (The same author's *The Letters of Abu 'l-ʿAla'* [Oxford 1898], on the other hand, finds no mention in either.) The book is rounded off by a comprehensive index of names and terms (pp. 404–23).

The translation reads exceptionally well. *Sajʿ* passages are rendered into exquisite English rhyme prose; a particularly lyrical example occurs toward the end of p. 143 (Ar., p. 142, henceforth only the translation is referenced), when a virtuoso heavenly songstress enraptures Ibn al-Qāriḥ. On the last page of the introduction (p. xxviii), the translators note “how difficult it is to classify” *R*, a text that lacks “organic unity,” seeing that it plugs into so many different discourses. On the one hand, *R* is a letter addressed to Ibn al-Qāriḥ, whose hypocrisy and lack of sincere repentance M subtly and ironically criticizes. On the other hand, *R* is “not . . . intended to be read only by the addressee,” and contains entertaining anecdotes, philological and poetological discussions one would expect to find in the genre of philological “dictations” (*amālī*), as well as witty references to Islamic eschatological teachings, of both the *ḥadīth* and *kalām* kind. The latter, eschatological aspect may not be the most important feature of *R*—in fact, what makes *R* arguably so wonderful is that it uses an eschatological framework but is blatantly uninterested in religion, except in an accidental and playful way—nevertheless, here focus is paid to the ways in which *R* relates to Islamic eschatological doctrines. Many readers will likely come to this translation from the perspective of the study of religion. For them, a fuller annotation with references to the Muslim religious literature would have been useful. However, the translators, both of whom are known first and foremost as literary scholars, deserve no blame—they were asked by the publisher to keep annotations to a minimum (p. xxxiii). Since the secondary literature on *R* is rich, studies such as that by Asín Palacios (1919, Engl. tr. 1926) are relatively easy to come by and may conveniently be consulted.

First, there is the issue of repentance (*tawba*) and forgiveness, a theme that is clearly central to the text, as *R*'s very title indicates. In the introduction to his partial translation in German of *R* (*Paradies und Hölle* [München 2002], 29), Gregor Schoeler aptly observes that “[d]as Motiv der Reue Ibn al-Qāriḥs ist der Schlüssel für das Verständnis des ganzen Werkes.” In *R* (p. 189) M states that Ibn al-Qāriḥ shows repentance “in the nick of time” (*bi-ākhiratin min al-waqt*). The translators infer that M aims to press upon Ibn al-Qāriḥ that he has not truly repented but that there is still time to do so (p. xxiii). One might instead see in this a reference to debates about the proper moment of repentance, and about whether God will in fact accept repentance shortly before death (see, among others, M. Pomerantz, in *A Common Rationality* [Würzburg 2007], ed. Adang et al., 463–93). Also striking,

and likewise not noted in the introduction or the notes, is the role M assigns to ‘Alī as well as Fāṭima and the *ahl al-bayt* (pp. 185–91) during Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s inquisition at Resurrection. ‘Alī is also instrumental in the rescue from hellfire of the poet al-A’shā (p. 105), a passage that has the translators note that in “popular belief” ‘Alī assists Muḥammad on the Day of Judgment (n. 238). One might add that in Shi‘i *ḥadīth* ‘Alī holds the keys to paradise and hell; he is the “divider” (*qasīm*) between the two abodes (see Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār* [Qum 2009], 7: 243, 8: 505). While M does not go so far as to quote these traditions, and while it would perhaps be exaggerated to speak of Shi‘i motifs in *R*, there may be more to it than just “popular belief.”

A second point concerns M’s indebtedness to traditional Muslim eschatology. With regard to his descriptions of the physical phenomena and bodily delights and tortures in paradise and hell, the translators assert that M “does not introduce anything in his descriptions of Paradise and Hell that has not been, or could not be, imagined or written by pious Muslims” (p. xxiv). This seems true enough, and Aziz al-Azmeh’s 1995 *JAL* article “Rhetoric for the Senses,” which provides spectacular examples of the Muslim eschatological imagination, should have deserved a reference in this context. As Ibn al-Qāriḥ (as *ḥadīth* scholar) would have realized, the genre of eschatological *ḥadīth*s provides some of the most striking parallels to *R*’s depictions of the wonders in heaven and hell. In their otherwise helpful notes, the translators do not always do their own observation justice, preferring to trace motifs to non-eschatological literary precursors and providing parallels from *ḥadīth* in no more than a handful of cases. For example, following an idea of R. Nicholson (*JRAS* [1902]: 76), they speculate that the work of Lucian (d. ca. 180 C.E.), in which the motif of a tree woman appears, inspired a passage in *R* where Ibn al-Qāriḥ breaks open a quince from which a *hourī* emerges who declares that she is his promised companion in paradise (p. xxv, cf. 223f.). *Houris* emerging from the fruits in paradise, however, is a notion found in both Sunni and Shi‘i eschatological *ḥadīth*s (see Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira*, ed. al-Saqā, 2: 176; Majlisī, *Bihār*, 8: 344), which should perhaps be considered the more proximate source. Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s wish that the posterior of this quince-born *hourī* be a bit bigger is instantly granted—her rear is enlarged to the size of “the hills of ‘Ālij”—whereupon Ibn al-Qāriḥ entreats God “to reduce the bum of this damsel to one square mile, for Thou hast surpassed my expectations with Thy measure!” (p. 225). The translators (n. 468) explain that “[h]eavy posteriors are part of the ideal beauty in classical Arabic love poetry”; in fact, Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s letter provides further examples of such poetic usage (pp. 7 [cf. n. 14], 157). It bears mentioning, however, that the motif is also part and parcel of *ḥadīth*-based eschatology. Al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505) reports a vision by the Syrian renunciant (*zāhid*) al-Dārānī (d. 215/830) in which the *houris* wait for their companions in sumptuous tents on the shores of heavenly rivers, “their large posteriors rising over the edges of their seats” (Suyūfī, *Budūr*, ed. al-Shāfi‘ī, 561). Connecting this motif to Arabic love poetry neutralizes the effect; when read as a calque on the pious literature on paradise, M’s ironical anti-traditionism becomes clear.

Lastly, M quotes the divine saying (*ḥadīth qudsī*) “I have prepared [in paradise] for My believing servants things no eye has seen nor any ear has heard” (p. 225). The note (n. 485) refers readers to the Gospel (1 Cor 2:9), even though the instances of this adage in Talmudic and in Christian Syriac and Coptic literature seem at least as relevant (*Sanhedrin* 99a, Aphrahat’s homilies, the Gospel of Thomas, etc.), not to mention the many examples in *ḥadīth* (beginning with [pseudo-?] Hammām b. Munabbih’s [d. ca. 102/719-20] *Ṣaḥīfa*, no. 30).

With appropriate nuance, the translators suggest that “for al-Ma‘arrī . . . the expected delights of Paradise are not primarily sensual but intellectual,” and that “the pleasure of poetry and philological pedantry are taken, on the whole, rather more seriously, even though here, too, a modicum of mockery is not altogether absent” (p. xxvii). The mockery seems to consist, first and foremost, in the unremitting lack of interest shown by the poets interviewed by Ibn al-Qāriḥ to discuss their poetry with him (e.g., p. 169). Also at stake, however, may be philosophical and mystical speculations about different grades of intellectual and spiritual felicity in the afterlife, such as proposed by Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) but also appearing in the eschatological thought of more mainstream figures such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). In al-Ghazālī’s memorable phrase, the corporeal pleasures in paradise are only for those inhabitants of the Garden who are like “beast[s] let loose in a pasture” (*Iḥyā’*, k. *al-mawt*, tr. T. Winter [Cambridge 1989], 251); the true seekers only desire one thing, namely, the vision of God. According to a *ḥadīth* that was popular with Sufi authors but is also quoted in the medieval eschatological handbooks, “most

of the people of paradise are simpletons (*bulh*)” (Suyūfī, *Budūr*, 594; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira*, 2: 71). One hears an echo of this tradition in *R*, when from the depths of hell the poet Tarafa sighs, “I wished I had entered paradise with the riffraff and idiots” (*wadīdu annī . . . dakhaltu l-janna ma‘a l-hamaḡ wa-l-ṡaghām*). The translators choose to render this sentence as “I wish . . . I had entered Paradise with the mob and the vulgar herd” (p. 281), but the translation of *ṡaghām* as “idiots, stupid ones” (cf. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v.) is more apt, if one assumes an intertextual reference to the *bulh*-tradition. This reading seems to clash with another passage in *R* (p. 113), where M states that “anyone who lives in the Garden has a clever mind; stupid people you will never find!” (*ahlu l-janna adhkiyā‘, lā yukhālīṡuhum al-aghbiyā‘*). The fact that this is said about (or by?)—the translators interpret the sentence as M’s gloss the pre-Islamic poet ‘Abid b. al-Abrāṡ, however, suggests that the “Garden” that is meant here is not that of ordinary Muslims, but rather the “true” garden of the intellectually gifted.

To conclude, in addition to recommending this superb translation to both the general and the specialized reader, I append a list commenting on certain choices made in the translation and the notes. These alternative interpretations were surely considered and decided against for good reasons; still they may be worth bringing to the attention of readers. I take the opportunity also to add some references to eschatological *ḡadīṡh*s (with thanks to *JAOS* for not requesting me to keep such annotation to a minimum). Below, the first page number refers to the Arabic text, the second to the translation:

p. 68/69: M speaks of his “two ragged robes” (*ṡimrān*), and the translators (n. 164) suggest that this refers, in a figurative way, to M’s clothes and his body. Mention might be made as well of the *ḡadīṡh*, “Many a disheveled, dust-colored one dressed in two rags (*dhū ṡimrayni*), were he to entreat God, He would grant it” (Bayhaqī, *Shu‘ab al-īmān*, ed. al-Nadwī, 13: 89; cf. Tirmidhī, *Sunan* [k. *al-manāqib* 54], ed. Shākir, 5: 692).

p. 80/81: “When I was in Baghdad I saw (*shāhadtu*) a bookseller,” but M was blind!

p. 98/99: *bi-yaqīn al-tawba*, translated as “on account of true repentance,” or should this be “with the certitude of [having performed] repentance”?

p. 102/103: *ṡirtu min jahannam ‘alā shafīr*, translated as “I was already on the brink of Hell’s damnation,” but *shafīr* simply seems to mean the “brink” of the hell funnel around which the sinners kneel on the Day of Judgment (cf. Q 19:68–72, although the meaning here is not entirely clear), not the “brink of damnation.”

p. 124/125: The stories about the oryx and ass in paradise show M’s empathy with animals, but it is also worth noting that Mu‘tazilite theologians argued that God’s justice (*‘adl*) required Him to reward and punish animals (cf. Goldziher, *Richtungen* [Leiden 1920], 160); Shi‘ī *ḡadīṡh*s lean in the same direction (e.g., Majlisī, *Bihār*, 8: 399, 476).

p. 158/159: Al-Nābigħa al-Ja‘dī’s claim that the Prophet promised him that they would go to paradise together usurps a Prophetic promise usually said to have been given to Abū Bakr, sometimes to other Companions. Cf. Nābulusī, *Ahl al-janna wa-ahl al-nār* (Cairo 2002), 16 (Abū Bakr) and passim.

p. 160/161: *man ta‘azzā bi-‘azzā‘ al-jāhiliyya fa-laysa minnā*, translated as “He who is patient in the manner of the pre-Islamic period is not one of ours!” but “He who asserts his relationship [of the son of so-and-so] in the manner of the pre-Islamic period is not one of ours!” seems to fit the context better (al-Nābigħa al-Ja‘dī gets upset about a man from the crowd who challenges his genealogy). For the translation of this *ḡadīṡh*, cf. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. ‘*q-d-ḡ*, under 4.)

p. 196/197: The poet Ḥumayd b. Thawr, formerly one-eyed, sees one of his friends in the eastern parts of paradise while he himself is in the western regions, many years of traveling away from him. According to al-Suyūfī (*Budūr*, 592), the people of paradise can spot the white hairs in the black beards of men from a distance of 1,000 years.

p. 210/211: Rosewater and pebbles of camphor rain down from a cloud in paradise. According to the *ḡadīṡh*, a sweet smell and even houris rain down on the blessed (Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, ed. al-A‘zamī, 475 [no. 239]; Suyūfī, *Budūr*, 563).

p. 216/217: Geese are eaten, then regain their former shape. This is a common motif, cf. Suyūfī, *Budūr*, 537, 580–81; Majlisī, *Bihār*, 8: 319, 337; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira*, 2: 208.

p. 224/225: The addition *balha mā aṡla‘tuhum ‘alayhā* at the end of the *ḡadīṡh qudsī* “I have prepared [in paradise] for My believing servants [etc.]” (see above), which appears inter alia as part of the tradition in the paradise chapter in Muslim’s *ṡaḡīḡ* and in al-Zamakhsharī’s Quran commentary

(ad 32:17), should not be rendered as “let alone that I should have told them about it!” but rather as “beyond that which I have told them about.”

p. 246/247: *fī aqṣā l-janna*, translated as “in the furthest paradise,” or should this be “at the furthest end of paradise”?

p. 246/247: Ṣakhr, brother of the poetess al-Khansā², has flames on his head: “boiling brains,” according to some *ḥadīths*, is the “lightest punishment” in hell (Suyūṭī, *Budūr*, 458; Majlisī, *Bihār*, 8: 471, 487).

p. 250/251: *zabāniya*, translated as “angels of hell” (cf. p. 290/291: “Angels of hell”): In the exegetical literature, the *zabāniya* get conflated with hell’s angels, but at least initially, in the Quran, they seem to be a different class of hellish punishers. Angelika Neuwirth (*Handkommentar* [Berlin 2011], 273) has suggested the translation “Wehr ab.”

p. 264/265: “He is poet” > “He is a poet” (the only typesetting error I spotted in this meticulously and beautifully produced volume).

p. 276/277: *buhm*, translated as “uncircumcised”: The translators note (n. 629) that *abham* in the classical dictionaries means “speaking a foreign language.” This makes good sense if one assumes that people speak Syriac in the graves, a notion found in Suyūṭī, *Budūr*, 593; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira*, 2: 200.

p. 282/283: *nārun tūqadu, wa-banānun yuʿqadu*, translated as “A fire has been kindled, fingers have been crossed,” with the caveat in the note (n. 644) that the meaning of *banānun yuʿqadū* is “not wholly clear.” Seeing that *nārun tūqadu* refers to a Quranic verse (104:6: “The fire of God, kindled [*nār Allāh mawqūda*]”), perhaps one should think of a connection with Q 75:3: “Does man think that We shall not gather together his bones? Of course We shall, We are able to form his fingertips [again] (*nusawwī banānahu*).” The sentence in *R* would then mean something like “A fire has been kindled, fingertips have been gathered.”

p. 288/289: *hajartu l-ābida*, translated as “I avoided any great sin,” but *al-ābida* hardly means “great sin.” Cf. *awābid al-dunyā*, “the Wonders of the World.” In mainstream theology, as long as grave sins (*kabāʿir*) are avoided, minor sins will be forgiven; the poet would, in consequence, not find himself in hell.

p. 300/301: For the non-Arabist, it might have been worthwhile to note that the name Taʿabbaṭa Sharrā means “he who carries evil in his armpit.”

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The Expeditions: An Early Biography of Muḥammad by Maʿmar Ibn Rāshid according to the Recension of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī. Edited and translated by SEAN W. ANTHONY. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014. Pp. xlv + 372. \$35.

The book is part of the Library of Arabic Literature (LAL) series (general editor: Philip F. Kennedy), and it is going to be one of the most elegant books in your library, thanks to the commendable efforts of the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute. The lovely DecoType Naskh Arabic font (designed by Thomas Milo and Mirjam Somers) and the DecoType Emiri font used in the footnotes (designed by Mirjam Somers), the quality paper, the binding, and the jacket contribute to the appearance and feel of this lovely book. The Arabic original and the English translation appear side by side (pp. 2–281). It is accompanied by notes (pp. 283–314), a glossary (pp. 315–44), and an up-to-date bibliography with items published in 2013 (or even 2014, in the case of the prolific editor/translator himself). A timeline, two maps, and a genealogical chart of the Quraysh tribe are welcome additions. Moreover, at www.libraryofarabicliterature.org/extra-2, the LAL site offers lists of errata, which will encourage readers to send in their comments for the sake of future reprints.

This “early biography of the Prophet Muḥammad that dates to the second/eighth century” (p. xv) is actually a collection of accounts linked to the Prophet Muḥammad in one way or another. For some reason these accounts were chosen from among thousands of similar accounts to form this specific