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Beards of Paradise: Hair in the Muslim Eschaton

Abstract: This chapter examines a late-medieval Arabic treatise by the Syrian scholar Ibrahim al-Naji (d. 900/1494) devoted to the question of whether the blessed in paradise sport beards, as well as repercussions of the discussion in a number of late-medieval Islamic compilations of eschatological hadiths. At first glance, al-Naji's treatise may seem no more than an amusing oddity. However, as I argue, al-Naji does not use eschatological imagery to make predictions about a future afterlife (at least not primarily) but to cultivate an orthodox cultural and religious identity in the here-and-now. A seemingly obscure eschatological question thus can be shown to serve distinct ideological aims: al-Naji's denial of the ideal of beardless beauty can be read as an instance of the age-old rejection of the Greco-Roman background from which Islam arose, as well as as a reorientation, championed by certain scholars of the Mamluk period, of Islam toward its Arabo-Semitic origins. My contribution thus seeks (1) to contribute to the study of Islamic eschatology as narrative mythology, and (2) to make an historical argument about the changing parameters in Arab-Muslim facial sensitivities and identity formation in the Mamluk Near East.

Around the end of the Mamluk reign, in the late 9th/15th and early 10th/16th centuries, a debate occurred among the learned men of Egypt and Syria about the question whether the inhabitants of paradise sport beards, or whether they are beardless (Arab. *amrad*, pl. *murd*).¹ At least two scholars, the traditionist Ibrāhīm al-Nājī (d. 900/1494) and the jurist and historian Shams al-Dīn Ibn Ṭulūn (d. 953/1546), both of whom had studied in Cairo but made a career in Damascus,

devoted epistles to the subject. At first sight, these two short texts appear to be no more than an erudite oddity. However, beards weigh heavily as identity markers, and should therefore be taken seriously as objects of study. This appears to be particularly the case in Islam, where there is, as Abdalwahab Bouhdiba has claimed, a “fetishism of hair”.² Identity is a multilayered concept, and so is the beard, speaking as it does to issues of sexuality and gender relations, of modernization and secularization, of interreligious relations, but also of inner-Muslim controversies over orthodoxy, that is, arguments used by Muslims against other Muslims as to what constitutes true Islam. Occasionally, all of these layers of meaning are involved at the same time, such that the beard becomes a “condensed symbol”.³ Mamluk society appears to have invited, perhaps to a hitherto unprecedented degree in the history of Islamic societies, such an accumulation of symbolic significance attributed to beards.

Beards under the Mamluks (Egypt and Syria, c. 7th/13th-10th/16th c.)

The debate over beards in paradise was not the only instance in the Mamluk period in which beards played a role in measuring Muslim orthodoxy. In Mamluk Egypt and Syria, the context

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the support and hospitality provided by the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Wassenaar, the Netherlands, during the time in which this study was written.
2. BOUHDIBA 2008, p. 35.

3. Cf. RIDGEON 2010, p. 21. OLIVELLE 1998, p. 40–41, defines a “condensed symbol” as a symbol that is “so powerful that it encapsulates all the diverse aspects of the symbolized.”

in which al-Nājī and Ibn Ṭulūn wrote, grooming and shaving a beard were in fact highly controversial and contested public practices. The Qalandariyya Sufi order, which proliferated during the period, was known for the scandalous practice of shaving off not only the beard and moustache, but also the hair on the head, as well as the eyebrows. As has been suggested, the Qalandars shaved because they believed that the human face reflected divine beauty,⁴ in the same way in which the gazing at the enticing faces of beardless boys (Pers. *shāhidbāzī*), from early Islamic times, had served Sufis as a reminder of God's beauty.⁵ The "fourfold shave" of the Qalandars elicited severe condemnation from Mamluk-era scholars, who saw in it a challenge to the system of normativity on which Islamic society was to be built.⁶ "Those beard-shaving Qalandars," fumed the famous scholar from Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), "are misguided and ignorant; most of them ... do not declare sacrosanct what God and His messenger have declared sacrosanct".⁷

The Qalandars, however, were not the only ones to arouse the angst and ire of the Mamluk-era proponents of beards. Another group of beardless figures worried them at least as much. These were the Mongols, the sworn military enemies of the Mamluk sultans. The Mongols entered Damascus twice, in 658/1260 and 699/1300. On the second occasion, large parts of the city were occupied and plundered; the distinguished center of scholarly activity, the Dār al-Ḥadīth of Nūr al-Dīn, built in the 6th/12th century, also suffered damage. Even though the Mamluk army drove the Mongols out of Syria in 702/1303, the threat of warfare and invasion lingered. The specter of Mongol aggression came violently alive again when the army of the Central Asian conqueror, Temür, whose proclaimed aim it was to re-establish the Mongol empire, repeatedly invaded Anatolia and

Syria from the 790s/1390s onwards, devastating Damascus in 803/1401. On all these occasions, the old apocalyptic prophecy about the coming of the Turks, found in canonical collections of *ḥadīth* and repeated by Mamluk scholars, must have resonated. "The Hour will not be established until you fight with the Turks," the prophecy read, continuing to describe the Turks as "people with small eyes, red faces, flat noses, and faces that look like shields coated with leather."⁸ On such evidence, in 7th/13th and 8th/14th-century Syria it could plausibly be suggested that the hordes of the Mongol warlords Hülägü and Temür signaled the coming of the antichrist and his armies, people with beardless, smooth, leather-like faces, barbarians whom the Muslims must fight at all cost. The Mongol problem encouraged scholars like Ibn Taymiyya to militate in favor of a re-orientation of Islam towards its Arab origins, towards the Arabic language in particular—according to Ibn Taymiyya, the Qur'ān must not be read in any language other than Arabic—, but also, more generally speaking, towards the exemplary behavior of the bearded Arab heroes, the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, who helped to spread Islam in the mythic age of conquest.⁹ As for Ibn Ṭulūn, he experienced the transition of power from the Mamluks to the Ottomans; and although he does not seem to have been greatly perturbed by this pivotal political event,¹⁰ the coming of a new Turkish dynasty may have spurred his interest in the question of beards, and of the authority that came with them.¹¹

Traditions in favor of a beardless afterlife

This situation forms the backdrop to the epistles of al-Nājī and Ibn Ṭulūn discussed here. Of these two texts, unfortunately only one has come

4. KARAMUSTAFA 1994, p. 22.

5. SCHIMMEL 2000, p. 274–7.

6. Scholarly condemnations of the practice are discussed in RITTER 1955, p. 459–77. See also WILSON 1988, p. 93–121; RIDGEON 2010.

7. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Majmū'*, vol. I, p. 52.

8. See COOK 2002, p. 84–91.

9. IBN TAYMIYYA, *Iqtidā'*, vol. I, p. 148. On beards, see *ibid.*, p. 158–9, 83, 136.

10. CONERMANN 2004, p. 119.

11. Ibn Ṭulūn's treatise on beards, *al-Durar al-fākhira*, appears to have been penned in the last years of his life, that is, after the Ottoman takeover, as it is not listed among his works in his autobiography, *al-Fulk al-mashhūn*.

down to us. This is the epistle of al-Nāǧī, which is preserved in a manuscript in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin.¹² Relatively little seems to be known about al-Nāǧī. He was a traditionist who transmitted hadith from Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449). Like his teacher, who compiled a *summa* of hadiths about the afterlife,¹³ al-Nāǧī cultivated an interest in eschatological topics. He wrote a commentary (*taʿlīq*) on the “Book of Stimulation and Intimidation” (*K. al-Tarḡīb wa-l-tarḥīb*) of al-Mundhirī (d. 656/1258), as well as an epistle on the question of intercession (*shafāʿa*).¹⁴

The other epistle, written about half a century later by Ibn Ṭulūn, is entitled “The Precious Pearls regarding those who have Beards in the Otherworld” (*al-Durar al-fākhira fī dhikr man lahu lihya fī l-ākhirā*). It is mentioned by the Ottoman bibliographer Katip Çelebi (Ḥāǧǧī Khalīfa) in the 11th/17th century,¹⁵ but seems to be lost.¹⁶ Like al-Nāǧī, Ibn Ṭulūn was active in the area of eschatological *ḥadīth*; one of his surviving works is titled “The Firmly Established Record regarding the Conditions of the Isthmus [between Death and Resurrection]” (*al-Taḥrīr al-murasakh fī aḥwāl al-barzakh*).¹⁷ Ibn Ṭulūn is also the author of an epistle entitled “In Support of Those Wishing to Shave their Moustaches” (*Iʿtimād al-rāǧhib fī ḥalq al-shārib*).¹⁸ Among the problems that occupied medieval Muslim scholars writing about beards were, next to the question of the beards of paradise, issues that touched on the etiquette of coiffure: the licitness of dyeing the beard, of combing it, or of shaving the moustache, as well as the correct length of the beard.¹⁹ Ibn Ṭulūn contributed works to two of these dis-

puted questions. We cannot extrapolate from the titles of his two epistles how Ibn Ṭulūn thought about otherworldly beards, but his great interest in facial hair seems beyond doubt. It also should be noted that Ibn Ṭulūn studied with the polymath al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in Cairo, an acclaimed scholar with Sufi leanings who considered himself, and was considered by others, the renewer (*mujaddid*) of the ninth century of the Muslim calendar.²⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, in turn, is the author of several compendia of eschatological *ḥadīths*, one of which contains a section on the question of otherworldly beards.²¹ It is perhaps not too far-fetched to assume that Ibn Ṭulūn and al-Suyūṭī took a similar view on the matter, and in the course of this paper I shall be referring to al-Suyūṭī on several occasions.

The question of beards in the afterlife is hairy because there is a Prophetic *ḥadīth* that states that “the people of paradise are thirty years old, they are hairless (*jurd*) and beardless (*mur*), and they have eyes adorned with collyrium; they resemble Adam, who was sixty ells tall.”²² It is sometimes suggested that Iranian ideas stimulated the emergence of this tradition. According to Iranian mythology, in the ideal kingdom of the just king Jamshīd, fathers and sons have the same youthful age, and are undistinguishable, whether by beards or other bodily features.²³ This theory of an Iranian pedigree is not implausible; several of the earliest transmitters of the saying came from the Yemen, an area that in Late Antiquity was under the sway of Persia. The *ḥadīth* was transmitted by the South Arabian nobleman al-Miqdām ibn Maʿdīkarib al-Kindī, a fighter in the wars of conquest who had settled in Ḥims.²⁴ The

12. See AHLWARDT 1887, vol. II, p. 649 (# 2698).

13. Ibn Ḥajar’s “Brilliant Pearls in the Explanation of the Conditions of People in the Otherworld” (*al-Durar al-zāhira fī bayān aḥwāl ahl al-ākhirā*) is preserved in manuscripts housed in Bankipore, Cairo, and Gotha (fragm.). See BROCKELMANN 1943–49, vol. II, p. 83; Suppl. II, p. 74.

14. KAḤḤĀLA, *Muʿjam*, vol. I, p. 69.

15. ḤĀǧǧĪ KHALĪFA, *Kashf*, vol. III, p. 217. See IBN ṬULŪN, *Fulk*, p. 145.

16. According to Stephan Conermann, of the 750 titles mentioned in Ibn Ṭulūn’s autobiography (IBN ṬULŪN,

Fulk), “probably less than 100 have been preserved”. See CONERMANN 2004, p. 121.

17. IBN ṬULŪN, *Tahrīr*.

18. See IBN ṬULŪN, *Fulk*, p. 79.

19. For a survey, see FUDGE forthcoming.

20. See GEOFFROY 1997.

21. On al-Suyūṭī’s contribution to eschatological *ḥadīth*, see LANGE 2016, p. 88–9.

22. ʿABD AL-RAZZĀQ, *Muṣannaf*, vol. XI, p. 416.

23. CHRISTENSEN 1917–34, vol. II, p. 69; RITTER 1955, p. 186.

24. VAN ESS 2001, p. 176.

earliest known collector of *ḥadīth* to include the tradition is ‘Abd al-Razzāq of Ṣan‘ā’ (d. 211/827), a scholar whose family came from Iran and was probably Zoroastrian before converting to Islam.²⁵ Be that as it may, the *ḥadīth* entered the canonical collection of al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), and was also given the stamp of approval by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), the 3rd/9th-century hero of piety and eponym of the Ḥanbalī school of law.²⁶ The tradition thus enjoyed a sounder pedigree than the one according to which the Prophet Muḥammad, during his heavenly journey, saw God in paradise in the shape of a beardless young adolescent (*amrad*), adorned with golden sandals, sitting on a green meadow—a tradition that was widely rejected.²⁷

In the early centuries of Islam, there is no shortage of statements hostile to beards, and approving of a beardless afterlife. For example, al-Suyūfī relates that the pious Companion Abū l-Dardā’ (d. c. 32/652) once grabbed his beard in exasperation and exclaimed: “May God take away beards!” When asked how this was going to happen, he joyfully replied: “When I enter paradise!”²⁸ That the beard is a kind of punishment for men, not an embellishment, also comes across in certain, possibly early, versions of the Islamic Adam legend. In paradise, as is asserted in the “Tales of the Prophets” (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*) of al-Kisā’ī (fl. 3th/9th c. [?]), Adam had no beard, rather he was “like a polished mirror”. When he was banished to earth, suddenly he grew one, much to his surprise, and discomfort. “Lord,” he protested, “what is this? I did not know it in paradise”. God replied: “It is because of your sin.”²⁹ According to the traditionist, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), Adam was beardless (*amrad*); it was only his sons who grew beards.³⁰

There are more such statements regarding the undesirability of beards, certainly in this life. In the 3rd/9th century, the essayist and polemicist of

Baghdad, al-Jāḥiẓ, rather maliciously wrote that a long beard is often attached to a dumb head.³¹ Irreverence towards beards also characterizes the view of later medieval Muslim authors, as can be observed, for example, in the “Séances” (*Maqāmāt*) of the 4th/10th-century author al-Hamadhānī. In one of the “Séances”, witty short stories written in rhymed prose, the trickster-hero takes revenge on a group of treacherous friends by inviting them to a banquet in his house in Baghdad, getting them drunk, and then calling in the barber: “In one hour,” the story concludes, “he shaved off fifteen beards, and the people became hairless and beardless (*jurd murd*) like the people of paradise.”³² As late as the 9th/15th century, the time of Ibn Ḥajar, al-Suyūfī, al-Nāǧī, and Ibn Ṭūlūn, poets and *littérateurs* took great license in ridiculing beards. In one story told by the Tunisian *littérateur*, Muḥammad al-Nafzāwī (fl. early 9th/15th c.), a scholar wants to test the correctness of al-Jāḥiẓ’s dictum about the reverse relationship between beards and intelligence. He decides to burn half of his beard, to see whether his intelligence increases by the same margin. Predictably, his beard goes up in flames entirely, and his chin is burned. The scholar concludes that, although he has not become more intelligent, he is more knowledgeable than before.³³ In Friedrich Rückert’s brilliant rendering,

*weiser ward er nicht darum,
sondern nach wie vor so dumm
blieb er und so hochgelahrt,
ohne jetzt, wie sonst mit Bart.*³⁴

Opinions in favor of beards in the afterlife

How then, in the presence of convincing proof-texts, and in the face of the ridicule leveled at beards by the likes of al-Jāḥiẓ, could anybody claim there were beards in paradise, and why

25. MOTZKI 1997.

26. See WENSINCK 1992, vol. I, p. 337.

27. SUYŪFĪ, *La‘ālī*, vol. I, p. 29–30.

28. SUYŪFĪ, *Budūr*, p. 591.

29. KISĀ’Ī, *Qiṣaṣ*, p. 52–53.

30. IBN QUTAYBA, *Ma‘ārif*, p. 17.

31. ḤUṢRĪ, *Jam‘*, p. 188.

32. HAMADHĀNĪ, *Maqāmāt*, p. 213.

33. See MEIER 2003, p. 169 n. 71.

34. RÜCKERT 2003, p. 168–9.

should one wish to do so? The answer is simple: the notion that men in paradise will be beardless clashed with the high esteem for beards that prevailed in other strands of Islamic culture. As M. J. Kister has noted, in Islam two contradictory ideals of male beauty coexisted cheek by jowl: the young beardless ephebe and the man with a full black beard.³⁵ The absence of beards in paradise was a conundrum that scholars, bearded ones in particular, were at pains to resolve. A case in point is the Damascene Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), the eminent student of Ibn Taymiyya. He relates the argument of someone seemingly keen on undermining the value of beards:

If the hair of the beard were an embellishment, women would deserve [to wear beards] more than men, because they need to embellish themselves, and, in order to distinguish [the sexes], men should forfeit them; the inhabitants of paradise would also deserve [to wear beards] more, even though it is decreed that they shall be hairless and beardless!

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's answer is as contorted as it is speculative:

The answer is that women are the object of physical enjoyment and embracing (*maḥall al-istimtā' wa-l-taqbīl*). Therefore, it is more beautiful and fitting that they forfeit beards, for the object of physical enjoyment, when freed of hair, is more perfect (*atamm*). And this is also the reason – but God knows best! – why the people of paradise are beardless, [*viz.*] in order that their wives can enjoy them in the same way in which they [the men] enjoy their wives. Also, in this way the beauty of faces is more easily appreciated, because hair conceals that which is beneath. It is pleasant, however, to touch the skin of women. But God knows best what His wise intentions are in shaving [beards in paradise]!³⁶

A key text in praise of beards, quoted at length by al-Nājī, is found at the end of the chapter on ritual purity in the “Revivification of the Religious Sciences” (*Iḥyā' ulūm al-dīn*) of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). Al-Ghazālī writes that

to pluck out the hairs [of the beard] when they begin to grow is a manner of assimilating oneself to beardless young boys (*murd*). This is one of the grave sins. Beards serve to beautify men. God has angels who swear an oath “By Him Who beautifies Adam's progeny with beards!” In fact, beards belong to [the category of] perfection in creation (*min tamām al-khalq*). Through it, men are distinguished from women. A subtle point of exegesis is that God's saying [in the Qur'ān] “He gives increase to whatever He wishes in creation” (*yazīdu fī l-khalq mā yashā*, Q 35:1) refers to the beard. The friends of al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays used to say: “We would love to buy al-Aḥnaf a beard, even if it cost 20,000 [dinars]!” Shuraykh the judge said: “I would pay 10,000 [dinars] for a beard!” How then can beards not be liked? Through them men are magnified. The bearer of a beard is credited with knowledge and dignity, and given an exalted position in public sessions. Dignitaries seek his company, he is made a leader of the community, and he is protected from public shame, for when he is insulted, he wards off [the insult] by virtue of his beard, provided he has one.³⁷

As al-Nājī explains, al-Aḥnaf (d. 67/686–7), a general in the conquest of Iran who was celebrated in later times for his sagacity, was beardless like a shark.³⁸ (Also in reference to his beardless face, the fourth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, was known colloquially as “Akbar the Shark”.) The high value al-Ghazālī attributes to beards is manifest. In a congenial spirit, the jurists of Islam, across the spectrum of the legal schools, condemned punitive shaving of beards as an act of mutilation.³⁹ Given such fervent protectiveness and such glowing encomium, it is hardly surprising that defenders of beards in the tradition of al-Ghazālī sought to come up with ways to ensure that honorific beards were carried over from this life into the next. Let it be added that, in Islamic contexts, not only honor but also virility is measured by the beard, the full manifestation of which marks the end of youth.⁴⁰ The beard, in Everett Rowson's phrase, is “the cardinal symbol

35. KISTER 1993, pp. 139–40.

36. IBN QAYYIM AL-JAWZIYYA, *Tibyān*, p. 196.

37. GHAZĀLĪ, *Iḥyā'* vol. I, p. 251. The passage is replicated, with minor differences and additions, in NĀJĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 12a, l. 1–10.

38. NĀJĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 12a, l. 6. On al-Aḥnaf, see PELLAT 1960.

39. E.g. KĀSĀNĪ, *Badā'i'*, vol. II, p. 141. See the references in LANGE 2007, p. 442 n. 115.

40. VON HEES 2007.

of masculinity in traditional Islamic culture”.⁴¹ It is well known that the Muslim paradise is a place where virility is not just present, but celebrated.⁴² According to an eschatological tradition recorded by al-Suyūṭī, every man in paradise is given seventy wives, and in order to be able to satisfy them sexually, he enjoys the potency of a hundred men.⁴³ So, as the defenders of beards might have argued, how on earth, or rather, how in heaven, can the blessed not have beards?

Here is where al-Nājī and, presumably, Ibn Ṭūlūn come in, because their discussion essentially revolves around the degree to which the *ḥadīth* on beardlessness in Paradise, whose authenticity was not open to challenge, can be softened and in fact subverted by the introduction of a certain number of exceptions. The first such exception is Adam.⁴⁴ To destigmatize his beard, it was suggested (in the spirit of al-Ghazālī) that God’s granting a beard to Adam served to demonstrate God’s forgiveness and to embellish Adam and his male offspring.⁴⁵ Alternatively, and contrary to some of the stories quoted in the preceding text, it was taught that Adam *did* have a beard in paradise. This, as one might add, is borne out by a number of medieval Persian illustrations that show Adam in paradise with a beard.⁴⁶ Qalandar texts picked up on this idea by stating that Adam shaved his beard *after* the banishment from paradise, to show contrition.⁴⁷ In regard to the future, eschatological paradise, certain traditions came to affirm that Adam will have a beard when he returns to the Garden. According to a tradition quoted by al-Suyūṭī, Adam is the only person in the future paradise to sport a beard, a black one that reaches down to his navel.⁴⁸

The second exception that al-Nājī discusses is Aaron, brother of Moses.⁴⁹ Al-Nājī reports that

the Prophet saw Aaron in the fifth heaven, with a beard reaching down to his navel, half white and half black.⁵⁰ And when Aaron is granted a beard in heaven, it is not far-fetched to think that his more highly esteemed brother Moses should have one, too. Al-Nājī and al-Suyūṭī relate a *ḥadīth*, declared “weak” (*daʿīf*) by their contemporary, al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497),⁵¹ stating that “the people of paradise are hairless and beardless, they do not have beards except Moses the son of Imrān; he has a beard that bounces on his chest.”⁵²

Next in line in al-Nājī’s discussion is the prophet Abraham. Again, certain *ḥadīths* grant him a beard in the hereafter. Al-Nājī quotes his teacher, Ibn Ḥajar, who was once asked why one should think that Abraham has a beard in paradise. “It seems,” was Ibn Ḥajar’s answer, “that the point of this is that ... Abraham occupies the rank of a father to all Muslims. It was he, after all, who called them [i.e. his believing progeny] by the name [‘Muslims’] and ordered them to follow his community (*milla*).”⁵³ Ibn Ḥajar reiterates a common theme in Muslim literature: the great honorability of, and respect due to, Abraham as the forefather of all monotheists. According to the historian and Qur’ān commentator al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Abraham was the first man on earth to sport a white beard, and this was in order to indicate the degree of his “modesty, gravitas, intelligence and gentleness”.⁵⁴ The final exception discussed by al-Nājī concerns the Companion of the Prophet and first caliph, Abū Bakr. Al-Nājī notes that, as in the case of Abraham, the view that Abū Bakr has a beard in paradise is found in “some Persian books”.⁵⁵ It appears relevant to note here that in the illustrations of an Uighur manuscript of the Prophet’s heavenly journey, produced in the 15th century in Herat,

41. ROWSON 1991, p. 53.

42. AL-AZMEH 1995, p. 220, 224; LANGE 2016, pp. 151–2.

43. SUYŪṬĪ, *Budūr*, p. 562.

44. NĀJĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 11b, l. 14–24.

45. See the references in KISTER 1993, p. 139 n. 138.

46. An example is the illustration contained in a MS of al-Bīrūnī’s “Chronology of Ancient Nations” (*al-Āthār al-bāqīya*), produced in Tabriz around 700/1300 (MS Edinburgh Or. 161, fol. 48v).

47. RIDGEON 2010, p. 12.

48. See the references in KISTER 1993, p. 139 n. 139.

49. NĀJĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 12a, l. 11–17.

50. NĀJĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 12a, l. 16–17; GHAZĀLĪ, *Ihyāʾ*, vol. I, p. 251.

51. SAKHĀWĪ, *Maqāṣid*, p. 196.

52. NĀJĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 12b, l. 1–3; SUYŪṬĪ, *Budūr*, p. 591.

53. NĀJĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 13b, l. 1–2.

54. ṬABARĪ 1964–65, vol. I, p. 66.

55. NĀJĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 13a, l. 22.

all prophets encountered by Muḥammad, with the sole exception of Joseph, are bearded.⁵⁶

The beards of paradise recalibrated

To sum up, one senses that manifesting itself in the background of al-Nāǧī's (and, again presumably, of Ibn Ṭulūn's) discussion is a certain pressure, a growing pressure perhaps, to affirm the orthodoxy of beards, and to extrapolate from there the existence of beards in the next life. Not long after the time of al-Nāǧī and Ibn Ṭulūn, in the early modern European *Bildersturm*, statues were defaced, as Protestant iconoclasts erased the facial features of the saintly figures depicted in medieval European art. Rather the opposite seems to be happening in the discussion that forms the backdrop to al-Nāǧī's and Ibn Ṭulūn's epistles: facial features are not eliminated but added, in the form of beards. In a manuscript of the "Séances" of al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122), preserved in the National Library in Paris (MS Arabe 5847) and dated to the 7th/13th century, practically all men are depicted as wearing beards; but if one looks closely, one cannot but think that a later hand has in several instances added beards to formerly beardless faces.⁵⁷

However, while beards might be added easily by a simple stroke of the pen in the manuscript of al-Ḥarīrī's "Séances", the matter was less easily adjusted when dealing with *ḥadīth* literature, as the genre remained answerable to the strict criteria of medieval Muslim *ḥadīth* criticism. The Mamluk scholars of Damascus, in particular, had revived the thorough examination of the trustworthiness of eschatological *ḥadīths*, a corpus of traditions that in earlier centuries had been allowed somewhat laxer standards.⁵⁸ Some Mamluk scholars therefore preferred to

take an agnostic viewpoint. For example, the *ḥadīth* scholar from Cairo al-Sakhāwī, like al-Nāǧī a student of Ibn Ḥajar, relates *ḥadīths* about the paradisiacal beards of Aaron and Moses and simply states that "I don't know anything with certainty about this."⁵⁹

As for al-Nāǧī, he rejects most of the exceptions he discusses. He grants a paradisiacal beard without reservation only to Aaron, while denying a beard to Adam, Abraham, Moses and Abū Bakr. This is first and foremost based on technical considerations concerning the reliability of the chains of transmitters of the relevant *ḥadīths*;⁶⁰ but al-Nāǧī buttresses his view with some logical considerations. For example, al-Nāǧī relates an argument against attributing a beard to Moses in paradise on the authority of the 6th/12th-century Baghdad Ḥanbalī, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201). Ibn al-Jawzī reasoned that if Moses is honored with a beard in paradise, the Prophet Muḥammad deserves one, too. As there are no indications in the revealed scriptures that he has one, *a fortiori* Moses cannot have one either⁶¹—although it remains unclear why the argument should not be applied to Aaron as well. As for Abū Bakr's beard in paradise, al-Nāǧī quotes the opinion of his teacher Ibn Ḥajar that this would impinge on the status granted to Abraham.⁶² Anyway, when it comes to the beard of Abū Bakr, which signals a transition from Prophetic beards to the beards of non-prophetic figures, a line seems crossed for al-Nāǧī. After denying that Abū Bakr has a beard in paradise, he concludes his epistle rather abruptly: "This is enough," he declares, "more cannot be said about [the question]."⁶³

By contrast, al-Suyūṭī simply reports the *ḥadīths* about the beards of Moses and Aaron, without providing any commentary. From this

56. See the reproductions in SÉGUY 1977 (plates 8, 13, 16, 17, 20, 23, 24, 26).

57. I owe this observation to Jan-Just Witkam, Leiden.

58. See LANGE 2016, p. 85–9, 162.

59. SAKHĀWĪ, *Maqāsid*, p. 196.

60. For *ḥadīth* critics rejecting Moses's paradisiacal beard, see also DHAHĀBĪ, *Talkhīṣ*, vol. I, p. 353; IBN ḤAJAR, *Lisān*, vol. XV, p. 25.

61. NĀǪĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 13a, l. 18–19.

62. NĀǪĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, fol. 13b, l. 3–4.

63. NĀǪĪ, *Ḥuṣūl*, 13b, l. 13.

we can conclude that he and his student Ibn Ṭulūn may have held a more permissive view of the matter. Al-Suyūṭī also relates a *ḥadīth* according to which the inhabitants of paradise can spot the white hairs in the black beards of men over great distances—a tradition that appears to imply that *all* men in paradise will have beards.⁶⁴ Other late-medieval collections of eschatological traditions also mention facial hair as one of the privileges enjoyed by the blessed. The men in paradise, states the anonymous “Subtle Traditions about Paradise and Hell” (*Daqā’iq al-akhbār fī dhikr al-janna wa-l-nār*), the most widely circulated popular text on the afterlife of the Islamic Middle Period, possess beautiful, “neatly bifurcated” moustaches, of a greenish color (green being a poetic convention to describe the color of the beards of young, virile men).⁶⁵

Conclusions

In conclusion, a couple of observations can be made. The first pertains to the relevance of studying the eschatological imagination of the Islamic tradition. As the epistles written by al-Nāḥī and Ibn Ṭulūn demonstrate, eschatological literature is not simply concerned with making predictions about the things to come in the far future, after the Final Judgment; rather, it serves as a matrix to pass judgment on current issues. As I have argued elsewhere, the enduring promise of paradise and hell in Islam is not the escape to an unreal world of dreams, but the ability of the otherworld to sanctify life in the here and now.⁶⁶ To my mind, this “presentist” function of Islamic eschatology remains a field of research ripe with promise.

Secondly, in the case of the Mamluk scholars discussing the existence of beards in paradise, the debate deals with correct Muslim identity and true Islam. This concerns, on the one hand, the limits of Islam in the doctrinal sense: not only are certain Sufis (those, for example, who talk of the vision

of God as a beardless young boy in paradise, and “pre-enact” the unbearded bliss of the blessed by shaving in this world) delegitimized and branded as deviant, but certain standards in *ḥadīth* criticism are also defended against positions that are deemed too lenient (such as al-Suyūṭī’s tolerance of *ḥadīths* granting a beard to Moses, or even to all denizens of paradise). On the other hand, Islam is framed politically, or ethnically, in the sense of contrasting Arab beardedness, and the beards of the prophets and the *salaf*, with the beardlessness of the Turks. At the dawn of the Ottoman conquest of the Arab world, the issue is particularly poignant. Whether Ottoman scholars ever revisited the question of the beards of paradise remains to be investigated. While most late-medieval illustrations, such as are contained in the “Books of Omen” (*Fālnāmeḥs*) produced at the courts of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals, appear to show only beardless faces in paradise, the illustrated manuscript of an Ottoman text entitled “The Conditions of the Resurrection” (*Aḥvāl-e qiyāmat*) depicts men in paradise with “neatly bifurcated” moustaches (MS Staatsbibliothek Berlin Or. Oct. 1596).

Thirdly, a certain hardening of the position that there are beards in paradise, a position that also underlines the necessity of having a beard in *this* life, seems to take place in the Mamluk period. One suspects that the worrying presence of beardless Qalandars and Mongols may have triggered this. No learned epistles or treatises on paradisiacal beards are known to have been written in earlier centuries of Islam, which indicates that the question acquired a certain topicality in Mamluk society. One should also note, however, that the late Mamluk period sees a general move towards the production of specialized epistles (*rasā’il*), not least in the area of eschatological *ḥadīth*.⁶⁷ The existence of two epistles written about the beards of paradise therefore does not carry enough weight in itself to prove the hypothesis of a wider process of beardification in Mamluk society.

64. SUYŪṬĪ, *Budūr*, p. 592.

65. ANON., *Daqā’iq*, p. 82. On this text, see LANGE 2016, p. 108–112; TOTTOLI 2008.

66. LANGE 2016, p. 288.

67. BAUER 2002, p. 432.

Postscript: Beards of paradise today

The problem of beards in the afterlife continues to occupy the minds of practitioners to this day. E-fatwas on the topic are relatively easy to find. In the early 2010's, for example, the website of the Qatari Ministry for Religious Affairs (islamweb.net) issued two fatwas in the span of less than two years dealing with the question. In one of them, the questioner asks: "There are some people who infer the licitness of shaving [in this world] from the hadith [about the inhabitants of paradise having no beards], so what should one answer them?" The Mufti first confirms the reliability of the *ḥadīth* and that being beardless is forbidden in this life, but allowed in the next,⁶⁸ thus likening the issue to the drinking of wine or men's wearing of gold and silk garments. The Mufti writing the second fatwa argues that the wisdom (*ḥikma*) of revealed knowledge is often inaccessible to human reasoning, suggesting that this may also be the case regarding the beardlessness of men in paradise, in other words, that one should simply accept the notion without speculating about ulterior reasons. He then ventures the opinion, however, that having no beards is "more perfect in terms of beauty" (*akmalu fī l-ḥusn wa l-jamāl*).⁶⁹

Salafis are the champions of male beards in the contemporary Islamic world, and islamweb.net is a Salafi website. This may seem ironic. Salafis, who one suspects would cherish a decent beard in the afterlife, submit to the discursive power of the *ḥadīth* and thus accept that beardlessness is what awaits them in paradise. In fact, they may even grant, as an afterthought, that a shaved face is actually more beautiful. But they are forced to accept their beardless future only on the basis of traditionist criteria, not on strength of esthetic considerations. They do not enjoy the freedom of St. Augustine, with whose appreciation of beards they would otherwise have been likely to agree, who could simply reason that beards are beautiful and therefore must be a part of paradise.⁷⁰ As for the modern scholarly argument that the

ḥadīth most likely entered Islam from non-Islamic sources, this is of no concern to Salafis. It is enough that the *ḥadīth* be part of the Salafi scriptural canon; as such it cannot be rejected. After all, iconic proto-Salafi figures of the Middle Ages never doubted the tradition. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, for example, weaves the *ḥadīth* into his great didactic poem, the *Nūniyya*.⁷¹

The interpretive conundrum produced by the *ḥadīth*, however, remains difficult to resolve for the proponents of beards. This is a problem that did not go unnoticed, throughout Islamic history, by the critics of beards, who, in order to underscore the desirability of shaving in this life, could joyfully invoke the *ḥadīth*, while citing the example of the Companion, Abū l-Dardā', who cursed beards, or irreverently recommending that women should grow beards, if facial hair was indeed a sign of beauty, as al-Ghazālī and countless other male scholars had maintained.

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68. QATARI MINISTRY FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS 2012.

69. QATARI MINISTRY FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS 2013.

70. See BYNUM 1995, p. 99.

71. See IBN 'ĪSĀ, *Tawdīh*, vol. II, p. 487.

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