

# İlahiyat Studies

A Journal on Islamic and Religious Studies

ISSN: 1309-1786

■ Volume 6 ■ Number 1 ■ Winter / Spring 2015

Bursa İlahiyat  
Foundation



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## ILAHİYAT STUDIES

A Journal on Islamic and Religious Studies

www.ilahiyatstudies.org

Volume 6, Number 1, Winter / Spring 2015

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*Ilahiyat Studies* is published in print (ISSN: 1309-1786) and online (e-ISSN: 1309-1719) biannually by Bursa İlahiyat Foundation, Hacılar Mh. Eceler Sk. Sema Apt. No: 6/5, Osmangazi, Bursa-Turkey.

**Aims and Scope:** *Ilahiyat Studies* is an international, peer-reviewed multidisciplinary journal dedicated to publishing scholarly articles on all aspects of Islam and the Muslim peoples and on religious studies. Available in print and online, and published twice a year, the journal aims to become one of the leading platforms in the world for new findings and discussions of all fields of Islamic and religious studies.

**Annual Subscription:** Annual subscription for each volume of two issues (print edition) is ₺130, \$100 (US) for institutions; ₺30, \$30 (US) for individuals, and ₺20, \$20 (US) for students. An institutional subscription to the print edition includes free access to the online for any number of concurrent users across a local area network.

**Abstracting & Indexing:** *Ilahiyat Studies* is currently indexed in and abstracted by *ATLA Religion Database®*, *Scopus*, *Index Islamicus*, *Index Copernicus International*, *Religious and Theological Abstracts*.

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***The Proofs of Prophecy***, by Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, (A Paralel English-Arabic text translated, introduced, and annotated by Tarif Khalidi (Islamic Translation Series – al-Ḥikma), (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2011), xxiii + 266 + 243 (Arabic text) pp., ISBN: 978-0-8425-2787-3, \$39.95 (hb)

This book introduces the reader to one of the most intriguing debates that took place between two important thinkers of the tenth century (AD), namely the famous *Ismā‘īlī dā‘ī* (religious missionary) Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. ca. 322/933) and the even more celebrated physician and philosopher Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925). The translator of this text, Tarif Khalidi, is a well-known scholar of Islamic history, who has previously translated the sacred scripture of Islam, the Qur’ān. The book, in the original Arabic, was authored by Abū Ḥatim who engages in a bitter polemic with Abū Bakr on several important issues such as prophecy, the eternity of the world, faith and reason, imitation (*taqlid*) of the philosophers, evolution of the sciences, and so forth.

As the translator of this book points out, this is a “triumphalist” text (p. xxi) in that its author takes every opportunity to reduce the arguments of its opponent (i.e. Abū Bakr) to a set of meaningless babbles, and proclaims its own self-fulfilling victory. This is also amply indicated by the derogatory use of the word “heretic (*mulḥid*)” when referring to the opponent. Nevertheless, Abū Ḥātim states that although he does not produce verbatim what transpired during the debate between him and Abū Bakr, he attempts to reconstruct the main arguments from memory. However, he includes several incidental details so as to contextualize the debate in real time, and convince his reader in the process.

According to Abū Ḥātim, Abū Bakr shows utter contempt for all religions and prophets, describing them as consisting in nothing more than myths and superstitions. Moreover, Abū Ḥātim’s account of Abū Bakr narrates that the latter considers religions to be the cause of enmity and hatred among mankind since they only divide people. Astonishing as they may seem, these daring views stand out in the context of the tenth century Islam, when such “free-thinking” was certainly not the usual standard of the day. And to this day, numerous

studies made on Abū Bakr al-Rāzī paint a “heretic” out of him, in which he is portrayed as a thinker who denied the truth of prophecy. However, there is one big caveat with such an interpretation of Abū Bakr, and the translator seems to grasp this point very well when he states that it depends on accepting Abū Ḥātim’s account of the former as “authentic” (p. xvii). This becomes even more problematic as such supposedly “heretical” views of Abū Bakr are not found anywhere in his extant works. Thus we have no way to ascertain if Abū Bakr had indeed proclaimed such views. Unfortunately, the translator’s introduction does not treat this issue in any considerable detail. The picture, however, is further complicated by a recent study on Abū Bakr by an Iranian scholar, who claims that none of Abū Ḥātim’s charges about the former bear any substance.<sup>1</sup> According to this study, Abū Bakr was an orthodox thinker who never denied prophecy and other related doctrines.

The book is divided into seven parts, each consisting of a number of chapters. The work on the whole is characterized by a high degree of polemical attacks. Abū Ḥātim seizes on the opportunity to not only lambaste his opponent’s views, but also to provide proofs for prophecy, miracles, and the doctrine of *imāmate* (leadership) and “preach” the superiority of Islam over all other religions, and Christianity in particular. The text thus is replete with citations from both Old and New Testaments, showing Abū Ḥātim’s wide-ranging familiarity with the Bible. Such familiarity has helped him to selectively quote from these sacred texts, which best suited his polemical purposes.

According to Abū Ḥātim, Abū Bakr does not accept the validity of sacred scriptures, and argues instead that they are replete with mutual contradictions. As for example, the Law of Moses was abrogated by Jesus, while the Law of Jesus was superseded by the Prophet Muḥammad. The Torah contains anthropomorphic descriptions of God, which would go against reason. In response, Abū Ḥātim debunks all of Abū Bakr’s arguments by pointing out that the writings of the Greek philosophers, whom the latter valorizes, also contain contradictory statements. He then argues that religions do not differ in essence, but only in outward manifestation. Abū

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<sup>1</sup> On this issue, see Aḥadfarāmarz Qarāmalikī, *Nazariyyi-yi akblāqī-yi Muḥammad b. Zakariya Rāzī* (Tehran: The Iranian Institute of Philosophy, 2013).

Ḥātim also informs his readers that Abū Bakr denies the inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Qurʾān, and faults its superstitious and contradictory nature. In Abū Bakr's view (as Abū Ḥātim would have it), the works of famous classical scientists such as that of Euclid, Ptolemy, and Galen are more rational in content and substance than the Holy Scripture. For his part, Abū Ḥātim responds by declaring the superiority of the Qurʾān over all other religious scriptures, and by arguing how the latter contains guidance for all humanity, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Another novel suggestion put forth by Abū Ḥātim is that the true originators of "the rational sciences" are the prophets rather than the scientists. Abū Ḥātim quips that if the sources of the sciences had been other than a single source, i.e. God, then the scientific principles, so "well-ordered and harmonious," would have been diverse and full of contradictions (p. 225). Abū Ḥātim also suggests that the authors of great scientific books such as Hippocrates, Euclid, Galen, Ptolemy, and so forth are in reality "metonyms" for the names of the wise men who actually wrote these books. In other words, behind these famous names lie the names of unknown "prophets" who had penned these books. He attempts to prove his point by having Abū Bakr say that the real author of the book written by Apollonius for instance, was a believer in creationist theories. Moreover, he points out that Hermes, who is counted among the philosophers, is, in fact, the prophet Idrīs, as he is known in the Qurʾān. It is however striking to note that Abū Ḥātim concedes that these great scientific books do contain valuable principles (p. 207).

Abū Ḥātim belabors to show that philosophers disagree a great deal concerning principles in philosophical sciences. He also exhibits elementary knowledge of the history of philosophy, as can be seen from his treatment of the topic and the mentioning of the names of numerous ancient philosophers such as Thales, Anaximenes, Anaximander, Democritus, Philochus, Melissus, and Pythagoras. However, his cursory knowledge of Greek philosophy becomes apparent from his statements regarding Plato and Socrates and other Greek philosophers. For instance, he states that Plato and Socrates believed in three principles, namely God, form, and matter (p. 98). Concerning Thales he mentions that the former is of the opinion that God is intellect/mind (*ʿaql*) with respect to the world.

Tarif Khalidi's translation of *A'lam al-nubuwwa* of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī is standard, exact, and accurate, apart from a few stylistic errors which need not concern us here. The introduction at the beginning of the book also provides the reader with a helpful context of the tenth century Islam of the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate. All in all, *The Proofs of Prophecy* is an important contribution to the burgeoning body works in Islamic intellectual history, and as such, it would be of interest to both students and scholars of Islamic philosophy and comparative religion.

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ISSN: 1309-1786



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