Book Review

Amikam Elad, *The Rebellion of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in 145/762: Ṭālibīs and Early ʿAbbāsīs in Conflict*. Islamic History and Civilization 118 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 527 pp., map. ISBN 978-9-00422-989-1. Price: $257 (cloth or e-book).

Matthew S. Gordon
Miami University,
Oxford, Ohio

(gordonms@miamioh.edu)

Is an exhaustive treatment of the life and career of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya warranted? A quick browse of recent secondary literature—Maher Jarrar's bibliography ("Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbdallāh," *EI*[3]) is very useful in this regard—suggests that the need has been long-standing.[1] Does the present volume thus fill a lacuna? To my mind, only partly so. Elad has gone further than any other modern scholar in collecting the material required for the sort of book that would satisfy. For this reason, he deserves much credit. But I would have had him proceed many steps further. He has effectively cataloged what one can only think are the most relevant references in the early and medieval Arabic canon. But he holds back from drawing out full conclusions and, thus, from providing an account for any but the most interested specialists.

Most modern discussions center on the rebellion organized by al-Nafs al-Zakiyya ("the Pure Soul") and his reportedly talented full brother (Ibrāhīm) against the new Abbasid caliph, Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr, in 145/762. The Abbasids had only recently donned the caliphal mantle, and thus a concerted challenge from members of a key circle of elite Islamic society was no minor matter. To the contrary: it brought into question the very claims to office of the new regime. The episode also contributed an early and significant chapter to the long history of Middle Eastern messianism; we owe a goodly portion of the extant literature on al-Nafs al-Zakiyya to the interest of later Muslim

1. Maher Jarrar, "Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbdallāh," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill Online), https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ibrahim-b-abdallah-COM_32328.

writers in the messianic element of his rebellion. A puzzling feature of the present volume is that Elad says little about Ibrāhīm, despite the many indications that, like Raúl for Fidel, he sustained much of his brother's activity and, indeed, pressed on following Muḥammad's demise until his own death months later (Jarrar's reference to al-Yaʿqūbī's *Taʾrīkh* is to be amended).[2]

That modern scholarship is mostly concerned with the rebellion itself makes sense. The events of the uprising and, especially, its connection with messianic and sectarian patterns of early Islamic society are properly situated at the center of any account. Elad provides the stuff of a richer context, however, in bringing together a wealth of detail on, for example, the person and family of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya. The man's stutter, which he tried to control by slapping his thigh (pp. 34–36), and his prominent black mole, a sign of the Mahdi for biographers and followers alike (pp. 44–46), are details one is happy to have. They enrich the picture one has of the man and his career and of the ingredients of a nascent Arabic sectarian literary tradition; as with so much else in early Arabic letters, one is left to choose how best to account for such seemingly intimate information. Elad fills out our picture of the sociopolitical as well as the personal scene, very helpfully bringing together what the Arabic canon says of the seemingly profound impact that the uprising had upon local, that is, Hijazi/Medinan society (chapters 7 and 8). Clansmen and kin took sides, and thus civil divisions ensued, with both immediate and long-term consequences across subsequent local and imperial (Abbasid) history. Elad, in fact, concludes the volume (pp. 361–62) on this very point.

But for stutter and social antagonism alike, Elad declines the opportunity to tell us what to think of all this personal detail and social furor. He leaves it instead to "a future study" (p. 233), presumably to be written by other hands, to fill in the color, action, and, above all, conclusions. The book is in this sense a catalog. Is this right? One cannot, of course, insist that it be otherwise: we write the books we write. It is also the case that history is written ultimately in collaboration with the generations that follow (who may, of course, raise objections) as well as with those that precede. One throws out arguments and ideas for younger colleagues to chew on. On this score, Elad has performed a valuable service, and one cannot but be impressed by the doggedness with which he has worked through the Arabic sources. The volume is thick with references, nearly every page crowded with notes. A brief description of his method (pp. 11–12) points to his use of such large repositories of Arabic texts as *al-Maktaba al-Shāmila* and others. So he has prepared the way for a rounded recounting of an episode deeply significant to the rise of the Abbasid polity, to early Islamic sectarian history, and to the more local history of the Hijaz.

But, again, why stop so abruptly? Elad probably knows more about al-Nafs al-Zakiyya than any living scholar and,

2. Aḥmad b. Abī Yaʿqūb al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma as *Ibn Wadhih qui dicitur al-Ja'qubi Historiae*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1883). The correct reference is 2:246.

thus, would certainly seem to have much more to tell us. The many indications are there; in brief comments scattered through the book, he suggests perfectly cogent ways in which to consider the different "data" that he has so carefully collected. But there is also the view that we—scholars of Arab, Middle Eastern, and Islamic history, society, and religion—ought to do our utmost to reach an audience beyond our own circles. Consider quite a different version, Hugh Kennedy's pithy account of the uprising in *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*.[3] Granted, Kennedy wrote his book for a wider audience than that sought by Elad. The point, though, is that it is accessible and dramatic: one engages, so to speak, with al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and his challenge to the existing imperial order. But it has its problems. To my mind, Kennedy's version is too quick and too easy, and says little by way of conclusion regarding, say, the shaping of distinct models of Arabo-Islamic leadership or, more specifically, the Alid-Abbasid confrontation. Kennedy, quite unlike Elad, is also far too content to parrot one version—namely, al-Ṭabarī's—of the events. This is really the point: Elad is positioned to offer a nuanced and contextualized rendition of the rebel and his rebellion, in which we would grapple with a body of full and often disparate references. It would make for fine history.

3. Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), 21–26.