

Book Reviews

The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad

Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych

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Non-Muslims, perhaps blinded by the claims of their own faiths, have long underestimated Muslim reverence for the Prophet Muhammad. By the same token, they have paid relatively little attention to Muslim traditions of praising the Prophet, whether it be the *naths* sung by Sufi *qawwali* musicians in South Asia, the *maulid* lectures on the first twelve days of Rabi al-Awwal – or the biographies of the Prophet, which have become so numerous over the past century. This is unfortunate because, intermingled with praise for the Prophet, there are often other messages, which non-Muslims need to note if they are better to understand their Muslim neighbors.

The Mantle Odes contains translations, and interpretations in their context, of three of the most highly prized poems in the Arab-Islamic tradition in praise of the Prophet. One poem dates from the time of the Prophet, the second from the thirteenth century AC under the Mamluks, and the third from Egypt under colonial rule in the early twentieth century. The author's aim is "to bring these Islamic devotional masterpieces into the purview of contemporary literary interpretation in a way that makes them culturally relevant and poetically effective for the modern reader, whether Muslim or non-Muslim" (xi).

The first poem is the "Qasidat al-Burdah" of Ka'b ibn Zuhayr. Ka'b was a celebrated pre-Islamic poet who faced death for refusing to convert to Islam. Eventually, however, he submitted to the Prophet, presented a poem of praise, and the Prophet as a sign of his protection and acceptance

of Ka‘b submission bestowed his mantle upon him. Stetkeyvich explains that Ka‘b’s panegyric was part of an exchange ritual in which bonds of mutual obligation and allegiance were created between the poet and patron. The panegyric also had a specific shape on which its performative functions were based. In time, she suggests, that not only the art of the panegyric “transforms an actual event or circumstance (the conversion of the pagan Arab tribes to Islam) into ritual or myth thus changing it from an ephemeral or transient occurrence to a permanent and transcendent message” (31), but also it provided “a spiritual model for Muslims seeking redemption” (xii).

Found in thousands of manuscripts, translated into all the languages of the Muslim world, credited with talismanic powers, and used for liturgical purposes – the second poem, al-Būṣīrī’s “Qasidat al-Burdah,” is one of the most influential pieces of Arabic literature. This panegyric follows the same form as that of Ka‘b. The ritual exchange for this poem, however, becomes the expectation of the Prophet’s intercession on the Day of Judgment. Stetkeyvich then argues that the praise section of the poem promotes an ideology of what she terms “Islamic Manifest Destiny,” a ‘worldly dominion that serves as an earthly counterpart or complement to the other-worldly concern with Judgment Day” (xiii).

The third poem, the “Nahj al-Burdah” (The Way of the Mantle), of Ahmad Shawqi (d. 1932), the Egyptian poet of the Arab Renaissance, is an imitation of al-Būṣīrī’s “Burdah.” Stetkeyvich places the poem in the context of an Egypt caught between a moribund Ottoman empire and an oppressive British occupation. Although ostensibly it was written to celebrate the Hajj of Shawqi’s patron, the Khedive ‘Abbas Hilmi, it was also a passionate protest against the West. He writes against the destructiveness and hypocrisy of the Christian West. Like the Reformist Muslims of his day, he asserts the Islamic tradition as the true source of the humanism and science of the West’s Enlightenment. The rule of the Shar‘iah and the glory of Baghdad are presented as a preferable form of empire to those of the Ottoman empire and the West. The ritual exchange he seeks for his panegyric is the return of Islamic this worldly domination. How deeply he is hurt by the shame of the present is echoed in these lines:

So, for the sake of the Messenger of the worlds, be gracious unto us;
Do not deepen the humiliation of his people and their disgrace. (225)

Down to the present, Shawqi’s “Burdah” continues to have a powerful impact on Arabs – in part, because it became a prominent song in the repertoire of the greatest Arab singer of the twentieth century, Umm Kulthum

– but in part, too, because its anti-colonial spirit speaks as strongly to Arabs in the early twenty-first century as it did in the early twentieth. State departments and intelligence services could benefit by spending more time studying and considering the significance of poems in praise of the Prophet.

This is an exciting and outstanding piece of scholarship. Its readership should not be confined to those interested in Arabic literature and religious studies. It should be read by all those historians, political scientists, and others who wish more fully to understand Arab and Muslim responses to the modern world.

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