The Words of God to Prophet Muhammad: Forty Sacred Sayings

John Andrew Morrow
Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2015. 282 pages.

Sayyid Hasan Shirazi, a member of the famed Shirazi clerical family of Iran and Iraq, is best remembered for establishing the first Damascene Twelver seminary in the 1970s and his unfortunate 1980 assassination in Beirut. Along with his involvement in many political endeavors and leading dissident movements against both the Iraqi Baathists and the Saudi royals, Sayyid Hasan was notable for his efforts to reconcile Syria's heterodox Alawite community with the more orthodox Twelver Shi'i community. But beyond these leadership roles, he was a prolific scholar. One of his works that received much praise in the Arabic-speaking world, his twenty-five-volume *Kalimat* series, covered a wide array of selected narrations ranging from those of God Himself to the Ahl al-Bayt and the Twelve Imams, their companions, and previous prophets. The first volume, *Kalimat Allāh*, is a compilation of *al-aḥādīth al-qudsīyah*, which are not considered part of the Qur'an. A selected translation of *Kalimat Allāh* is the focus of this review.

Unfortunately, much of the Anglosphere was deprived of Hasan Shirazi's work until John Andrew Morrow, a full professor of foreign languages, produced the first "proper" selected translation from this vast compilation. The first actual translation of this work into English was done by the Canadian Shi'i clergyman Sayyid Zaki Baqri. However, his much-appreciated translation was rather sub-par, for although it may be considered precise, it was rather inaccurate due to its many mistakes in terms of syntax and grammar. In contrast, Morrow's translation is refreshingly accurate, possesses none of the linguistic shortcomings found in the preceding work, and is perfectly intelligible.

All the same, Morrow does take some instruction from Baqri's translation. For example, he maintains Baqri's selection of forty narrations from Shirazi's original extensive compilation. This framework is a result of the largely agreed upon tradition that memorizing forty narrations is extremely meritorious, an opinion for which they cite the supposed prophetic glad-tiding that "whoever memorizes and preserves forty hadith relating to religion, God will resurrect that person on the Day of Judgment as a jurist and religious scholar." This eschatological promise, in turn, gave rise to a sub-genre of hadith literature known as *arba'īnīyāt* (forty hadith), the custom of compiling and memorizing

forty narrations. Notable among these works are al-Nawawi's (d. 1277) *Al-Arba'īn al-Nawawīyah* and Khomeini's (d. 1989) *Chihil Hadith*. Given this background, it seems that Morrow's objective is spiritual, as opposed to academic, and, as such, is intended primarily for average Muslims or non-Muslims who want to learn something about Islam.

Delving into the work thematically, the vast majority of the narrations cited begin with "O son of Adam," implying that the Almighty is addressing humanity and, more specifically, individual humans. Consequently, the narrations are instructional in nature, for they seek to present moral guidance as to how one should live a proper life. In order to achieve this, one notes a common pattern among many of them: the juxtaposition of good and bad, positive and negative. For example, consider Hadith 5: "O son of Adam! Do not be like the one… who promotes the good (*amr bi al-khayr*) yet does not do it himself, who prohibits evil (*nahy 'an al-sharr*) yet does not prohibit himself from doing so" (p. 105). Whether it is to inspire one toward desirable actions or to draw one away from undesirable actions, the end result is a harmonious balance that leads to success both in the temporal world and in the afterlife. Additionally, as the above excerpt indicates, implementing the moral guidance offered will benefit both Muslims and non-Muslims, regardless of any specific creed or belief system, for it is not unique to Muslims.

But despite his diligence, Morrow's book lacks congruity. Each one of its three parts – preface, translation, and commentary – can stand alone, but when they are joined together, the end result seems inharmonious. Morrow begins by writing a preface that presents an excellent short discussion on *al-aḥādīth al-qudsīyah*; however, it is too academic for laypeople to understand. Moreover, his decision not to provide the *isnād* or even a citation of the translated *aḥādīth* renders them academically unfit. Hasan Shirazi provided such information.

The book's third and final part is rather unusual, in that Morrow incorporates commentaries of the American Sufi poet Charles Upton to expound upon the narrations. Although rather alluring, these commentaries prolong the work unnecessarily. When combined with the Arabic and Morrow's translation, the text becomes rather long-winded. Additionally, as the included *aḥādīth* themselves are rather lengthy and advisory in nature, not to mention self-explanatory, there is little need to try and derive any esoteric meaning for them. Another issue is the font used, which promotes reader fatigue. A more aesthetically pleasing one would not only enliven the text, but also do a great deal to fulfill its objective: to acquaint the reader with Islamic spirituality. If the meaning of the words are beautiful, then their appearance should also be beautiful.

Even so, these issues can easily be remedied in a new edition. If emphasis is placed on the translations, and the other parts are possibly abrogated or shortened, this book could very well achieve its stated goal. Morrow has produced a proper translation, one that should be given prominence over the rest.

Shabbir A. Abbas
Graduate Student, Department of Religion
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ