Ibn 'Arabî: La niche des lumières: 101 saintes paroles prophétiques

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It would be difficult to exaggerate the fundamental importance of hadith – the vast body of traditional reports concerning the sayings and actions of the Prophet – not only for the constitution and elaboration of Islamic law and theology (which are the uses of hadith most often emphasized by modern scholars), but also for Islamic piety and spirituality more generally, whether in their popular or more learned manifestations. This focus on the spiritual dimension of hadith, important as it is in Sufi literature in general, no doubt finds its most elaborate and rigorous expression in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi; it is especially evident in the Futûhât, where the Shaykh’s interpretation of those Prophetic sayings (on the most diverse subjects) provides the essential framework for dozens of chapters, being at least as important as – and indeed inseparable from – his understanding of the Koran itself.

Hence this new French translation, with facing Arabic text, of the Mishkât al-Anwar, Ibn ‘Arabi’s own personal selection of 101 hadith (or parts thereof), offers an invaluable aid for all serious students of his work, especially those without Arabic. For the particular hadith included in this selection recur constantly throughout his writings (including the Fusûs), like so many leitmotifs or themes around which his thought is constructed; yet those recurrent allusions (which are far more frequent than the cases of detailed exegesis) are rarely identified as such in most available translations. The near-scriptural importance of these particular hadith, as indicated by the Arabic title of the collection (“The Niche of Lights Concerning the Reports Which Are Transmitted From God”), also flows from the fact that they are all “divine” or “holy sayings” (hadîth ilâhî or qudsî), i.e. ones in which Muhammed (or in some cases
an earlier prophet) reports God's own words, either directly or as transmitted by Gabriel. Their contents, accordingly, are primarily centered on spiritual, ethical and eschatological questions, often reminiscent of Biblical passages; but their Islamic sources are in fact most often to be found in the respected "Six Books" or canonical collections of Sunni hadith.

Mr Válsan's very readable translation is limited strictly to Ibn 'Arabi's own prefatory remarks and the divine sayings themselves, with virtually no explanatory annotation or references to their uses and interpretations in Ibn 'Arabi's other works. (Only the first reporter [and eventual literary source] of the isnâd, or long chain of oral transmitters, has been translated in most cases; but the complete text is included in the fully vowelled Arabic version on facing pages.) However, the translator's compact introduction (pp.7-14) does provide some essential background: he points out the lifelong nature of Ibn 'Arabi's interest in hadith, mentioning the teachers and transmitters with whom he studied in many parts of the Islamic world; he cites the Shaykh's dozen or more other selections or studies of hadith (largely taken from the canonical collections), most of which are now lost and known only by their titles; he briefly alludes to his distinctive Sufi position (outlined in several passages of the Futûhât and other works) concerning the spiritual "authenticity" of hadith, as contrasted with the traditional Islamic methods of isnâd-criticism; and finally, he summarizes Ibn 'Arabi's own indications concerning the structure and sources of this particular selection. The Mishkât itself is divided into three parts: two sets of 40 hadith — thereby fulfilling the famous Prophetic injunction concerning the special merit of those who preserve and transmit 40 of his sayings — and an additional 21, for a total of 101 (because according to still another hadith [p. 104], "God loves the uneven number"); the first 40 hadith are given with the complete isnâd from Ibn 'Arabi's own teachers back to the Prophet, while for the others he cites only his literary sources (and their chain of sources).
Since the traditional corpus of "divine sayings" poses certain obvious problems concerning their nature and status in relation to both the Koran and the other Prophetic hadith, Mr Vâlsan had also included as an appendix a brief translation of a fascinating discussion of this question by two later Sufis (of the 17th/18th century). Apparently he was unaware of the far more elaborate examination of the Islamic literature on these questions — and of the hadith qudsi in its broader relations to the Koran and the other hadith — in Wm. Graham's Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam. If we mention that pioneering work here, however, it is because Professor Graham has actually provided detailed analyses and carefully annotated English translations (again with full Arabic texts) of roughly half the hadith from the Mishkât al-Anwâr in the latter half of his work (pp. 111-244), which is devoted to the many "divine sayings" found in the classical hadith collections; through it, even readers without French or Arabic can still discover many of these key sources of Ibn 'Arabi's reflection. Prof. Graham clearly identifies those canonical hadith from his sample which are included in some form in the Mishkât, but the usefulness of his work is not limited to supplying those translations. As a result of his careful comparison of the often quite different versions of a given saying in those early sources, readers interested in the literary or rhetorical composition of the Shaykh's works can more easily explore the often intriguing process by which he chose among those alternative versions: although his citations are indeed literal, it should not be surprising if what he leaves out or refrains from mentioning is sometimes as revealing as the text he actually chooses to quote.

In conclusion, these two complementary studies offer a fascinating insight into one of the most important (if still virtually unstudied) "sources" of the thought of Ibn 'Arabi, and ultimately of Sufism and Islamic spirituality in the broadest sense.

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