

philosophy and religion. The English translation reproduces the arguments of the thinker – based on morphological and semantic considerations internal to the Arabic language – with philological precision. Transliteration is extremely rare and is limited only to instances where it is essential to highlight derivation patterns, within the same Arabic root, between two or more words. Where the discussion becomes more technical, as in the definition of *tamkīn* “enabling” (p. 155), the translators offer an alternative version in note (nr. 37) that is more conservative and adherent to the original. The apparatus of succinct and punctual notes does in fact provide key information for understanding the text and guides the reading in view of further investigation without weighing down the translation.

In conclusion, this publication not only offers a new critical reference edition of the Arabic text, but also, through an elegant and fluent English translation, makes this unique work accessible to an audience of non-specialists.

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OMID GHAEMMAGHAMI:

Encounters with the Hidden Imam in Early and Pre-Modern Twelver Shīʿī Islam.

(Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts.) xii, 276 pp. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020. ISBN 978 90 04 34048 0.

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A long-standing tendency in Islamic studies has been to study and document religious schools and ideas separately from their political contexts. Many representative works treat the thought of various schools with little or no recourse to the interests of authors and to the polemical contexts in which they operated. Many writings on Islamic thought offer minute philological observations, analyses of authorship and dating, and other information useful to situate a text or an idea in space and time, and describe the contours of its thought content. Few, however, situate ideas in their historical context, exploring how authors have responded to external stimuli.

Omid Ghaemmaghmi’s thoroughly researched monograph avoids all of these pitfalls. It offers a well-documented and well-argued historical contextualization of a central idea in Twelver Shiism: whether it is possible for a mortal to see the twelfth Imam, who was believed to have gone into occultation as a child after the death of his father, the eleventh Imam Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī. The strength of the book is that it combines thorough philological groundwork with broad historical contextualization. The central question it explores is how the vagaries of the Twelver Shii community between the ninth and seventeenth centuries have informed the evolution of the idea of encounters with the Hidden Imam. As Ghaemmaghmi convincingly shows, the historical factors that have influenced how this idea was formulated at one time or another included politics within the Twelver community and the interests of its leadership; polemics between the Twelvers and other schools of thought; eschatological fears arising from the Mongol invasion; and the emergence of the Twelver Shii scholars as a separate class with corporate interests in the early modern period.

The book is divided into four chapters arranged in chronological order. The first centres on the earliest Twelver Shii sources to have addressed the issue of the

occultation of the twelfth Imam, and the question of whether seeing him is a possibility. These sources include the earliest Shii *ḥadīth* compilations and the earliest Shii Quran commentaries, and what unifies these texts is that they were composed shortly after the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, at a time when a cogent theological elaboration of this event had not yet been offered. Ghaemmaghami's conclusion is that the dominant position among the Twelvers of this period was the impossibility of seeing the hidden Imam, or at least the impossibility of recognizing him. The second chapter offers a close philological analysis of three *ḥadīth* from the early period, which have later been used by Shii thinkers to justify the possibility of encountering and recognizing the Imam.

Chapter 3 moves into more interesting territory, surveying how the leadership of the Twelver community dealt with changing historical realities. Three important points are noted here: the political implications of the presence of a virtual hidden Imam in the life of the community; polemics with other Shii groups, the Zaydis and the Ismailis, both of which posed a threat to the Twelvers, the latter attracting many of their number into their fold; and the encounter with the intellectual milieu of Baghdad dominated by rationalist methods of theological argumentation.

A few decades after the Imam had absconded, the realization that he was not returning soon prompted the leaders of the Twelver community to issue a so-called final rescript (*tawqīf*), which precluded any further contact with him until the end of times. As Ghaemmaghami insightfully notes, members of the powerful Nawbakhtī family and other Twelver authorities “decided it was wiser for the Shī‘a to have an invisible – and more importantly and prudently – an unreachable Imam to whom they could keep their spiritual allegiance, than to continue the failing and politically hazardous experiment of living emissaries and representatives of the Imam”. Indeed, the two centuries following the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam were a period when Twelver Shii thinkers and leaders were reimagining the place of the Twelver community as part of the broader community of Muslims. And the encounter with Mu‘tazili rationalism in cosmopolitan Baghdad in the eleventh century prompted Shii thinkers to move away from the traditionalist argumentation towards rationalist methods of inquiry. Writing in this vein, some Twelver authors abandoned the tradition-based argument for the impossibility of seeing the Imam for the rationally formulated one which claimed that this is at least theoretically possible.

Chapter 4 explores how the door to the possibility of seeing the Hidden Imam, unlocked by the rationalist Shii theologians, was pushed fully open by later scholars in response to momentous historical developments. One of these, the author argues, was the scare of the Mongol invasion and the resultant expectation that the end of the world was nigh. This eschatological vision, followed by the expectation of the Imam's return, led a leading thirteenth-century Shii thinker, Ibn Tāwūs, to emphasize that many individuals had encountered the Imam personally. During the Safavids the possibility of seeing the Hidden Imam became an established part of the Twelver tradition, a doctrinal development that reflected the interests of the Twelver Shii ulama in the Safavid and the Qajar states, who now positioned themselves as the Imam's living representatives.

Encountering the Hidden Imam is a well-researched and a thoroughly argued contribution to the religious and intellectual history of pre-modern Islam: it explores both the big picture of political and social change and the detailed small picture of the texts where this change is reflected. Nonetheless, I would like to offer a few critical remarks regarding the book's methodology and emphases. My main concern is that readers may find it difficult to see the forest for the trees. Thus discussions of how politics and society have influenced the development of thought are often

cursory and pushed to the background, hidden behind philological discussions of texts and terminology elaborated in minute detail (see especially chapter 2). As a reader, I would that the order were reversed. This is not because I think philology is unimportant – it is one of the most important tools in the historian’s toolkit. But it is a *tool*, a means for understanding documents of the past in order to propose plausible interpretations. Meanwhile, the Orientalist patrimony that students of pre-modern Islam have inherited gives centre-stage to texts at the expense of historical analysis, thus confusing the aim of historical scholarship with its means. Focusing on the aim, first and foremost, would not only make for a more engaging read, it would also make our writings more broadly accessible outside the confines of Islamicist and Arabist scholarship, and attractive to historians working on places and times other than the Islamic Near East in the Middle Ages.

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VENETIA PORTER with NATASHA MORRIS and CHARLES TRIPP:

Reflections. Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa.

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The British Museum started its collection of modern and contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa in the 1980s, following former director David Wilson’s concerns regarding a possible art-historical continuity between the production in previous decades and the current one. This growing interest encouraged a collecting practice mainly focused on artistic experimentations around Arabic letters as a linking thread between works from different times and parts of the region. In 2006 the exhibition *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* displayed some of them. This event triggered the widening of the collection in broader directions and the foundation of the Contemporary and Modern Middle Eastern Art acquisition group (CaMMEA), a committee that since 2009 has supported this enlargement process. The artworks will eventually “enable future generations to look back and see what was being produced during a particular time as well as to record significant moments in the history of the Middle East”, as Dounia Nadar puts it. A decade later, this book comes to celebrate a growing collection that will soon be exhibited at the British Museum.

As Venetia Porter explains in *Reflections*, the collection consists of works on paper and photographs by established and emerging artists from, based in, or otherwise connected to countries that include Egypt, Tunisia, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, or Syria. The works operate as a polyphonic response to both shared and particular concerns relating to the region’s sociopolitical, historical, cultural, or religious context tackled from personal experience. As such, and in line with the historicist focus of the British Museum, Charles Tripp and Venetia Porter highlight the alternative historical narrative the pieces provide, evidencing the power of art to revisit the past, comment on the present and imagine other possible futures.

The core of the carefully edited publication is a selective catalogue of artworks classified in seven major topics: 1) Figure and figuration; 2) Abstraction, geometry