

‘Ā’ishah al-Bā‘ūniyyah • *The Principles of Sufism* • Translated by Th. Emil Homerin • New York University Press • 2016 • ISBN: 978-0-8147-4528-1 (HB) • 978-0-8147-4516-8 (e-book)

This bi-lingual edition of *al-Muntakhab fī uṣūl al-rutub fī ‘ilm al-taṣawwuf* by the Damascene Sufi master ‘Ā’ishah al-Bā‘ūniyyah (d. 923/1517) brings to English readership a rare feast: a short treatise on four fundamentals of the Sufi path—Repentance, Sincerity, Remembrance, and Love—strung together with copious quotations from the works of great masters such as al-Kalābādihī (d. 380/995), al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074), Ibn al-‘Arīf (d. 536/1141), ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), and Ibn ‘Aṭā’ al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309). The somewhat simplified version of the original Arabic title notwithstanding, the translation reads well and additional notes, which trace the original quotations in ‘Ā’ishah’s work back to their authors and sometimes other Sufi works, enhance the value of the translation.

The original title, “A Selection of the Principles of the Stations in the Science of Taṣawwuf,” indicates the author’s desire to present a selection of the wisdom of Sufi masters, which she does by using the traditional structure of such works, which had been fully explicated by her time: each of the four sections begins with relevant Qur’ānic verses and their commentary by Sufi masters, followed by selected Ḥadīth, almost always sourced to the collections where they appear; this is followed by the sayings of the pious forbears (salaf); and finally the sayings, aphorisms, and stories of the later Sufi masters are woven into a narrative that inspires and instructs.

Born in Damascus to a noble family of religious scholars and poets, hailing from the small village of Bā‘ūn in southern Syria, ‘Ā’ishah spent her childhood in the loving care of her father, Yūsuf b. Aḥmad b. Nāṣir al-Bā‘ūniyyah (d. 880/1475), a Shāfi‘ī jurist, who became the chief judge of Damascus. By the time she was eight, she had memorized the Qur’ān and her fine intellect and poetic abilities were already evident. She and her five brothers received traditional education. Her life was to take a major turn when as a teenager or young woman, she went on Hajj with her family.

While in Makka, one Friday night she felt restless and went to the Ḥaram. There, as she reclined on a couch on an enclosed veranda, overlooking the Ka’ba and the sanctuary courtyard, she heard a man recite a poem on the life of the Prophet, and other voices rose, sending blessings upon the Prophet. “Then, I could not believe my eyes—it was as if I was standing among a group of women. Someone said, ‘Kiss the Prophet!’ and a dread came over me that made me swoon until the Prophet passed before me. So I sought his intercession and, with a stammering tongue, I said to God’s Messenger, ‘O my master, I ask

you for intercession.’ Then I heard him say calmly and deliberately, ‘I am the intercessor on the Judgment Day’” (p. xiv, quoted from ‘Āishah’s *al-Mawrid al-ahnā fī-l-mawlid al-asnā*).

This early experience was to shape her life. She joined the Qādiriyyah Sufi Order, to which her family belonged. The translator’s brief note on her life quotes her own words, stating how her education took shape: “My education and development, my spiritual effacement and purification, occurred by the helping hand of the sultan of the saints of his time, the crown of the pure friends of his age, the beauty of truth and religion, the venerable master, father of the spiritual axes, the axis of existence, Ismā‘īl al-Ḥawwārī, may God sanctify his heart and be pleased with him, and then by the helping hand of his successor in spiritual states and stations, and in spiritual proximity and union, Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-‘Urmawī, may God continue to spread his ever-growing spiritual blessings throughout his lifetime, and join us every moment to his blessings and succor” (p. xiv).

Married to Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Naqīb al-Ashrāf (d. 909/1503), another devotee of Shaykh Ismā‘īl al-Ḥawwārī, ‘Āishah had two sons and a daughter. After the death of her husband, she went to Cairo, where she was employed at the Mamlūk chancellery, studied jurisprudence with a number of scholars, and eventually returned to Damascus, where she died.

The well-structured short treatise is full of insights of an accomplished Sufi master, who lived a life devoted to worship and Sufi practices. As she brings to life four chosen aspects of Sufi path, ‘Āishah weaves into her narrative wonderful sayings of the previous Sufis. She quotes Yaḥyā ibn Mu‘ādh al-Rāzī, who said, “One slip for a penitent after his repentance is more odious than seventy before it” (p. 13). Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī said, “The repentance of the common people is for sin. The repentance of the people of spiritual distinction is for heedlessness, and the repentance of the prophets is for regarding the weakness of others who fail to attain what they did.”

‘Āishah’s treatise is full of wisdom, culled from centuries of reflection on this well-trodden path. In her chapter on “Sincerity”, she quotes from al-Damīrī’s *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān* (*The Lives of Animals*):

When God sent Adam, peace be upon him, down to Earth, a herd of gazelles came to him. So he prayed for them and stroked their backs. As a result, musk bags appeared on them. Then another herd asked them the cause of this musk, and they replied, “We visited Adam, peace be upon him, and he prayed for us, and stroked our backs.” So the other herd went to him, and he prayed for them and stroked their backs, but they found no musk. Later, they said to the first herd: “We did as you did, but received no musk in return,” and they replied: “We

visited him for God's sake, but you did that for the sake of musk!" (p. 59)

ʿĀishah ends her chapters with her own couplets. Concluding the third chapter, "Remembrance", she states: "Regarding the proper conduct for remembrance, God inspired the following couplet:

All of recollection's rules, I will tell you,  
 So listen, remember, and choose success:  
 Repentance, humility, ecstasy, friendship, and fear,  
 Truth, presence, purity, fidelity, and flowing tears.

Her greatest personal contribution to the treatise is in the "Epilogue on Love", about which she says: "At the conclusion of this book, God the Exalted inspired us with mystical truths, in both poetry and prose, regarding this very special love. They are appropriately placed here as an epilogue to this work. We ask God's help, and He Suffices us and is the best trustee" (p. 143). The twenty-page epilogue consists of wonderful insights of a mature and accomplished Sufi master. She calls love, "God's most wondrous secret, the result of being chosen, the effect of designation, the means to proximity, and the ascension to union (*mi' rāj al-waṣl*)" (p. 143).

The translation reads well, but for certain usual breaks in the flow of the text, which reduce the force of the original—perhaps arising from a concern for ease of reading in English. A case in point is the just-quoted translation (paragraph 2, p. 142). Whereas the original paragraph has no pauses and advances into ever-increasing depth, filled with the force of Divine love and self-effacement, recording station after station, until it outpours into the loving recall of a Qur'ānic verse, the translation is broken up into five sentences, requiring addition of extra particles, thus reducing the impact of the original. Likewise, certain technical terms such as *jafā'*, *ṣafā'*, *jalāl*, and *jamāl*—rendered respectively as "mystical state of estrangement", "state of purity", "glory", and "beauty"—could be more eloquently translated. Yet these are minor points compared to the enormous benefit of having this wonderful book in an Arabic-English edition. Notes and bibliography, a specially designed and clear typeface for the Arabic text (DecoType Naskh by Thomas Milo and Mirjam Somers) and a delicate font for the English text—both uniformly used for all books in the Library of Arabic Literature Series of NYU Press—enhance the aesthetic quality of production.

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