



***Islamic Mysticism and Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī: The Role of the Heart*** by Saeko Yazaki. (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. xiv+196., £85.00 (Hardback), ISBN 978-0-41567110-1.

Reviewed by Imran Iqbal  
London (UK).

**Published in the Summer 2013 Volume of  
The Muslim World Book Review**

***Islamic Mysticism and Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī: The Role of the Heart*** by Saeko Yazaki.  
(London: Routledge, 2013), pp. xiv+196., £85.00 (Hardback), ISBN  
978-0-41567110-1.

Abu Hamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) is ubiquitously deemed as one of the most influential medieval figures and his monographs, in various domains of Islamic scholarship and in particular Sufism, are essential reading. A good deal of academic research has demonstrated the influences of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 431/1037) on the Ghazālīan theological and philosophical corpus. Avicennian studies has long been established as an independent discipline and has yielded many nuanced insights into the precise details of how aspects of Avicenna's neo-platonic thought were naturalised and appropriated by Ghazālī. However, crucial questions still persist as to the pivotal figures that may have influenced the Ghazālīan Sufi-centric synthesis in his *Ihyā ulūm al-dīn* (The revival of religious sciences; henceforth *Ihyā*). Ghazālī informs the reader of his autobiography *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl* (Deliverance from error) that he benefited from the *magnum opus* of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.386/996), *Qūt al-qulūb* (The nourishment of hearts; henceforth *Qūt*). Furthermore, it has been argued that the *Qūt* was the archetypal and kernel foundation which Ghazālī utilised and extracted significantly in order to compose his own *Ihyā*. Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's is profoundly venerated within the Sufi scholastic tradition, where his influence is deeply entrenched. Consequently, it is utterly astonishing that research into this influential Sufi figure is essentially non-existent in western academic circles apart from a few sparse explorations as Saeko Yazaki illustrates '...few studies have carried out a critical analysis of al-Makkī and his work, and no single monograph has yet been published on the subject.' (p. 2). Yazaki's critical and erudite monograph attempts not only to impart an intricate exposition of the role and the importance of the 'heart' within the thought of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī but also to initiate the discipline of Makkīan studies by elaborating several themes as prospective trajectories for further multifaceted and meticulous research. The monograph is a revised version of Yazaki's doctorate thesis submitted to the University of Edinburgh and consists of an introduction, nine chapters and a conclusion.

The introduction proffers a concise elaboration of the state of academic Makkīan scholarship, an overview of Yazaki's research and details vis-à-vis the manuscripts and translations of the *Qūt* editions available and utilised in her analysis. The nine chapters are conveniently organised into four general themes: the life and works of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī; a selected summary translation of section 30 of the *Qūt*; the influence of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī on the Muslim scholastic milieu; and finally discussion of the possible influence of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's thought and the *Qūt* on Judaic scholarship through a comparison with the Jewish Andalusian judge Ibn Bāqūdā (d.1080) and his opus *Kitāb al-hidāya ilā farā'id al-qulūb* (The book of

guidance to the religious duties of the hearts; henceforth *al-hidāya*). The first two chapters 'set the scene' (p. 4) and proffers intricate chronological and biographical details which are constructed from various *ṭabaqāt* and modern sources. Subsequently, Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's teachers and the several monographs which comprise his scholastic corpus are evaluated. Yazaki explores the *Qūt* elaborating on its content and also emphasising on its essentially ethical and piety centric nature. An analysis of the religious authorities cited in the *Qūt* demonstrate according to Yazaki '...his inclination to Ḥadīth scholars and past masters, not necessarily Sufi masters...his inspiration in writing the *Qūt* are the Qur'ān, Sunna and sayings of pious ancestors...' (p. 45). This synchronic analysis of the *Qūt* is utilised to demonstrate how Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī appreciated the metaphysical and symbolic nature of the heart as '... a moral judge and the linkage between the human and the Divine.' (p. 29).

Chapters three and four are an '...annotation and selective and paraphrastic translation' of an extract from section 30 of the *Qūt* which according to Yazaki constitutes Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's thought related to the heart and its kernel function within his and the Sufi intellectual milieu. Even though this is not a complete translation of the section it nonetheless provides a lucid exposition of the 'metaphorical image of the heart' (p. 47) proffered by the *Qūt*. The section is supplemented with copious footnotes elaborating on specific technical Sufi terminology utilised within the text as well as clarifying ambiguous passages and referencing with both classical and modern sources. The fifth chapter attempts to further contextualise Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's thought via a comparison of his *Qūt* with the contemporaneous *Luma' fi'l-taṣawwuf* (The sparking lights in Sufism) of al-Sarrāj (d.378/988) and the *Al-ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* (Acquaintance with the path of the Sufis) of al-Kalābādhī (d. 385/995). This analysis imparts various significant insights which include 'In point of objective, structure and main topics, the *Luma'* and *Al-Ta'arruf* show more resemblance to each other than *Qūt*, with the former two being scholarly works on Sufism, while the *Qūt* is a moral guide full of warning and sermons. Categorising al-Makkī, al-Sarrāj and al-Kalābādhī as Sufis and classifying their works as Sufi manuals might not be completely on the wrong path, but seems to be too simplistic and could be misleading' (p. 94).

The next two chapters investigate the influence of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī within the medieval Sufi and Ḥanbalī scholastic traditions in addition to the general *ṭabaqāt* and hadith literature. Yazaki demonstrates that a fascinating transformation in the image of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī occurred over the course of Islamic intellectual history. As prior to al-Ghazālī he was not alluded to in the Sufi hagiographical literature. Nevertheless, afterwards his reputation as an eminent Sufi master and sage was decisively established. Furthermore, the *Qūt* came to be deemed a vastly influential and an indispensable hallmark of Sufi literature. The *ṭabaqāt* literature provided a more expansive image of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī as Yazaki notes '...these compilers describe al-Makkī in different ways, such as a Sufi writer and Hadith scholar, a preacher and an ascetic' (p. 125). Finally, Yazaki explores the verisimilitude between the supposed polemic and antagonism that transpired between the Sufi

and Ḥanbalī traditions. This conflict is discerned through the reception of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's thought amid the foremost proponents of the Ḥanbalī tradition. This reception was not always monolithic and indeed was vastly convoluted as Yazaki explains 'the heavy influence of the *Qūt* can be seen in the writing of the first two authors, Ibn al-Farrā' and 'Abd al-Qādir, while Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Taymiyya demonstrate both criticism and acceptance of al-Makkī' (p. 140).

The final theme investigated by Yazaki in chapters eight and nine is the potential inter-religious influence of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī in the relationship between Sufism and Judaic spirituality and ethics. Yazaki elaborates on the 'Jewish-Arab symbiosis' (p. 144) which was essentially based on the shared Arabic vernacular. She then expounds on the life and influence of Ibn Bāqūdā within the Judaeo-Arabic intellectual milieu, which is coupled with an exposition of the *al-Hidāya* and its scholastic reception. Yazaki asks whether 'the *Qūt* and the *al-Hidāya* are an example of a Muslim-Jewish dialogue?' and via a strict analytical *modus operandi*, she establishes the following tentative inference 'The present study could not establish a direct link between *al-Hidāya* and the *Qūt*; however, it finds no evidence to rule out this possibility. It is important not to force the comparison, but it seems to be equally important not to avoid it' (p. 173). These nine chapters are followed by a general conclusion which provides a concise overview of the entire research (pgs. 174-176).

The main criticism of the monograph is that Yazaki does not attempt to critically explore the notion of Sufism, or any of its other concomitant terms and themes or the sub-traditions which constitute it with a greater level of diachronic and synchronic analysis, nuance and intricacy as a preamble for her research. Her ephemeral and rudimentary analysis is elaborated in only a few sporadic remarks. Establishing this preamble as a framework would have been useful in facilitating Yazaki to further differentiate, dichotomise and accurately expound Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's thought, and also to discern his subsequent influence within the heterogeneous spectrum of Sufi sub-traditions which range from 'sober' forms based closely on scriptural sources to antinomian forms to overtly neo-platonic theosophical forms to various other forms. Yazaki's monograph does proffer a scholarly attempt to understand his influence, and it even attempts to explain how Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's thought was naturalised, appropriated, and in some instances even re-imagined by a plethora of Sufi masters. Nevertheless, these attempts were too broad and could have been further optimised and fine-tuned. This effort was impeded both by the lack of explicit textual sources available and significantly Yazaki's overtly cautious attitude to not 'pigeonhole' Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī as a Sufi. This discretion is laudable however to return to Ghazali who has gone through several academic 'phases', from being understood primarily as an Über-Ash'arī, to a traditionalist theologian via his final monograph *Iḥṣān al-'awām 'an 'ilm al-kalam* (Averting the Muslims laity from scholastic theology), to a crypto-Avicennian philosopher and most recently as a dialectically Ash'arī-Avicennian philosophical theologian. Another instance of such changing understanding is the case of the Ḥanbalī juristic theologian Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), thus

such tentative 'pigeonholing' via a meticulous approach is not intrinsically detrimental and can and does lead to vast academic exposition and insight. Yazaki insists that Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī was not a self-declared Sufi, though he did employ Sufi terms in the *Qūt* and also he influenced Sufis of various sub-traditions. Related critical underlying questions are not considered: what were the essential or common denominating features of Sufism which permeated the thought of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī and other Sufi theorists? Why is Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī's usage of certain terms in his *Qūt* deemed Sufi-centric in nature? What was the exact relationship between mysticism, ethics, and spiritual piety and how did they interact in his thought and within the broader Sufi tradition? In not providing any analysis or evaluation of such and other similar questions, Yazaki's monograph does lead to some unnecessary obfuscations and ambiguities. On the importance of this point Yazaki states "This view depends on the way in which we interpret al-Makkī's understanding of *taṣawwuf*, Sufism, which raises a further question of how we examine Islamic mysticism. The definition of the term 'Sufism' is beyond the scope of the present work;" (pgs. 3-4). Yet the methodological question raised here endures throughout the research.

Yazaki's monograph is an ambitious research endeavor that attempts to elaborate on four general themes which it could be argued were too many to proffer any *bona fide* or substantial academic insight and that it should have only focused on two or at most three themes via a more exhaustive analysis and *modus*. Although not all the themes are dealt with exhaustively and some themes are more compelling than others, nevertheless, various tentative insights are suggested which justify Yazaki's expansive approach. Consequently, this would be an iniquitous criticism of an impressive piece of academic research which will be a foundational oeuvre upon which subsequent investigations will be established for many decades. Yazaki's monograph definitely proffers the intellectual impetus for the further establishment and development of Makkīan studies in western academic circles, and will hopefully be soon supplemented with other research including H. bin Ramli's Oxford doctorate thesis on the study of early Sufism with special reference to the epistemology and theology in the *Qūt* of Abu Ṭālib al-Makkī provided that it does not get lost in the laborious transition process between thesis and academic publication. Fascinating and thought-provoking times seem to lie ahead for this nascent but vastly significant sub-discipline within Sufism.

Reviewed by Imran Iqbal  
London (UK).