

Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, Das Buch der Unterscheidung. Judäo-arabisch—Deutsch, übersetzt und eingeleitet von Wolfgang von Abel, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005. (= Herders Bibliothek der Philosophie des Mittelalters Bd. 5), 384 pp., € 40,00, ISBN: 3-451-28688-2

In the eleventh century Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, a native of Iraq or Persia, composed his *Kitāb al-Tamyīz* (*the Book of Distinction*), a work of Jewish Kalām. This work is divided into two parts, the first of which deals with divine unity, the second with divine justice.¹ In the volume *Yūsuf al-Baṣīr: Das Buch der Unterscheidung*, Wolfgang von Abel presents the first part of the *K. al-Tamyīz*:² He provides the Arabic text in Hebrew characters with a German translation and a commentary. In the appendix, he adds the text of two further chapters (ch. 21 and 22) which—in the original, more elaborated version—also belonged to the first part. This version—and with it ch. 21 and 22—are only preserved in the Hebrew translation of the *K. al-Tamyīz*. Von Abel provides the Hebrew text without German translation. Apart from his edition, translation and commentary, von Abel introduces the author Yūsuf al-Baṣīr and his works, concentrating on the *K. al-Tamyīz*, its extended version—the *Kitāb al-Muḥtawī*—and its Hebrew translations. Furthermore, he gives some brief remarks about the *Kalām* and the *Muṭazila*. In this context and in addition to von Abel's few references [to secondary literature (43, note 123), the reader might have also appreciated the inclusion of a short account of the Karaites, the Jewish group to which Yūsuf al-Baṣīr belonged. Von Abel discusses the extant manuscripts of the *K. al-Tamyīz* elaborately, most of which are only preserved in fragments. He also provides an Arabic-German glossary of the terminology, but it is not comprehensive and lacks some terms which might have been of interest to the reader, e.g. *ḡawhar*. An index lists individuals of Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

¹ The first scientific research on this work was done in the 19th century by P. T. Frankl in his *Beiträge zur Literaturgeschichte der Karäer: 1. Nachricht über das arabische Original des Muḥtawī Josef al Basīrs.*—Bericht über die Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums: Berlin, 1887. This research volume was apparently not widely circulated. I have not been able to locate a copy, nor does Abel discuss it here.

² The fact that only the first part of the *K. al-Tamyīz* is dealt with is not made sufficiently clear and might escape the reader on first perusal of this volume.

The decision to edit the Arabic text of the *K. al-Tamyīz* in Hebrew characters is perfectly understandable given the fact that only 3 out of 25 manuscript fragments are written in Arabic script (cf. 96). However, editing the text in Arabic would have been more reader-friendly.³ At the beginning of each chapter of the *K. al-Tamyīz*, von Abel provides a detailed account of the extant manuscript fragments which contain the chapter in question. The German translation of Yūsuf al-Baṣīr's difficult *Kalām* text is meritorious, but it sometimes lacks the necessary consistency to give the reader a reliable reconstruction of the original text: e.g. *al-naẓar* is rendered as “das kritische Nachdenken” (103), “das kritische Denken” (107), and “das kritische Betrachten” (in the glossary, 383). Furthermore, the rendering of *al-ta'ammul* as “das Nachdenken” (105) might cause additional confusion. In some cases, von Abel's choice of the German terms should have been more extensively discussed: e.g. *ṣiḥḥat al-fīl* as “Möglichkeit zur Durchführung einer Handlung” or *ḡawhar* as “Atom”. This latter translation might, for example, be irritating for those readers who are more familiar with the philosophical terminology than with that of the *Kalām*. The expression “(Substanz-) Atom”, which von Abel employs in his commentary, is more obvious.

The arrangement of the German translation and the corresponding notes is slightly disadvantageous, because the notes are not given as footnotes⁴ but rather as endnotes. That way the reader must take into account three different pages when reading the translation, its notes and the corresponding commentary simultaneously.

The commentary is in most cases enlightening, but on several occasions more cross references might have facilitated the understanding of the text: e.g. the mediate and immediate action of ch. 8 (155–57) are more thoroughly explained in ch. 18 (217).

Several inconsistencies are noticeable throughout the volume. The value of von Abel's work does not suffer seriously from them, but they could have been avoided easily: e.g. the short titles *Tamyīz* and *Muḥṭawī* sometimes have the article, sometimes they lack it (e.g. 27);

³ A typing mistake in the transcription-list of the Arabic-Hebrew characters (97: Hebrew *pe*, 97: Hebrew *pe* instead of *hey* for Arabic *fa*) might cause additional difficulties for those not acquainted with Judaeo-Arabic writings.

⁴ The notes to the Arabic text are given as footnotes and are therefore more reader-friendly.