

Marwan Rashed. *Al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, Commentary on Aristotle "De generatione et corruptione"*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015. 438 pages. ISBN: 9783110443646.

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This book offers the critical edition, with translation and commentary, of a *talkhīṣ*¹ on Aristotle's *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Although it is anonymous in the two manuscripts known so far, the editor Marwan Rashed is convinced that it was authored by the Baghdad theologian Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī (d. ca. 307/920). The book is divided into three main parts: The Arabic text and its translation into English (6-66), Rashed's commentary (67-340), and an excursus on the work's supposed author (343-92). The book is completed by a bibliography (393-407) and useful indexes of the Arabic terms (409-22), names (423-28), and quoted passages (429-38).

Information about this theologian, as well as the titles of his works, are provided at the beginning of the third part. Only his *Kitāb firaq al-shī'a*, which was edited by Hellmut Ritter (d. 1971)² during the 1920s (346, n. 13), has come down to us. A list of other titles is available, one that includes theological treatises of *imāmī* inspiration as well as writings of controversy against "people influenced by foreign, especially Greek learning," and Mu'tazilite theologians (347-48).

The edition is based on two sixteenth-century manuscripts: Istanbul, Topkapı Ahmet III 1584 (hereinafter "ms. A") and Gotha 1158 (hereinafter "ms. G"). The introduction presents the edition's principles and a brief account of the history of

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1 The title of this particular work, *Talkhīṣ kitāb al-kawn wa-l-fasād*, is attested to in only one of the two extant manuscripts. The other one bears no title.

2 Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, *Kitāb firaq al-shī'a*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul-Leipzig: 1931).

the two manuscripts used, which is based upon the Topkapı library's³ catalogue and W. Pertsch's work on the Oriental collection at the library of Gotha⁴, respectively (1-5). According to Rashed, the two manuscripts are "clearly independent from one another." No list of *errores disjunctivi* is given, but the editor prefers ms. A, which is "slightly older" and "has a better text than ms. G" (5).

Rashed lists the scholars who credited Avicenna (d. 428/1037) with this work and explains why this cannot be the case. The reasons why Avicenna cannot be the author amount to the following: 1) the work is anonymous; 2) it is not mentioned in Avicenna's ancient lists of works; 3) its literary form and style differ from Avicenna's; 4) Avicenna discusses the issue of atomism at length, whereas this commentary does not address it directly; and 5) the doctrine on mixture, as presented in this work, differs from Avicenna's (3-4, 343-46).

The book's main thesis, mirrored also in its title, is that this commentary was actually the work of al-Nawbakhti, who is presented as follows:

From this brief survey of the titles transmitted emerges the figure of a scholar deeply engaged in the theological debate of the second half of the 9th century. [...] It is often said that in his only work transmitted to us, the *Kitāb firaq al-shī'a*, al-Nawbakhti was remarkably neutral and objective. This does not mean, however, that he was not working as an apologist in it. [...] Al-Nawbakhti also devoted one work specifically to the refutation of the extremists of his party. [...] He also dedicated a treatise to the refutation of those who ended the lineage of the Prophet at the seventh Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim, holding that he never died [...] or, perhaps more likely, he wrote this treatise to refute their contemporary imitators. As to al-Nawbakhti's position with regard to Mu'tazilism, I believe that J. van Ess got it right to suggest that his numerous criticisms of leading personalities of the school should not conceal his general indebtedness to their learning and methods. [...] A Mu'tazilite surely he was, but of an independent mind, and with his own theological agenda: adapting the dialectical refinement and methods of the Mu'tazilite school to the project of a rational defense of Imamism. (349-50)

Thus, the question that naturally springs to mind is why such a scholar, one mostly engaged in intra-faith polemics, might have delved into the intricacies of Aristotle's *Gen. et Corr.* (GC). Rashed promises to address this question; however, his so-called *pars construens* does not entirely meet the reader's expectations. Rashed lists "eight arguments in favour of al-Nawbakhti being the author" (346), the most convincing of which is, in this reader's opinion, the fact that Ibn al-Nadīm

3 F. E. Karatay, *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi Arapça Yazmalar Kataloğu* (Istanbul: 1966).

4 W. Pertsch, *Die orientalischen Handschriften der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Gotha* (Wien: 1880).

(d. ca. 385/995) credits him with an abridgment (*ikhtiṣār*) of Aristotle's *GC*.⁵ Indeed, the last seven arguments are as follows: 2) "The author is at home in Baghdad *kalām*" (352-54), 3) "The author knows the Greek commentators well" (354-55), 4) "The author was probably acquainted and coeval with the translator Qusṭā b. Lūqā" (355), 5) "The author probably used Abū 'Uthmān al-Dimashqī's translation of Aristotle's *GC*" (355-58), 6) "The author was an atomist" (358-59), 7) "The author adopts a markedly anti-Kindian stance" (359), and 8) "The style of the introduction is reminiscent of that of the introduction of the *Kitāb firaq al-shi'a*" (360-61).

However, the points 2 to 8 sound rather generic and might fit the profile of any number of scholars of the same age and milieu. Admittedly, these seven listed arguments became significant only in the light of, and in relationship, to the first one, namely, Ibn al-Nadīm's record. This is also Rashed's conviction, for he concludes his survey of the eight arguments by claiming that "these features correspond strikingly to everything we know about al-Nawbakhtī, to whom, to say it once more, an abridgement of *GC* is explicitly attributed by Ibn al-Nadīm" (361).

Thus, it is important to pause and consider what Ibn al-Nadīm actually says, especially in consideration of the fact that the work edited by Rashed does not perfectly match the record in the *Kitāb al-fihrist*. As we have seen before, the work is entitled *Talkhīṣ kitāb al-kawn wa-l-fasād*, whereas the record in the *Kitāb al-fihrist* differs. Rashed addresses this mismatch in the following manner:

... al-Nadim mentions an "Abridgement" (*ikhtiṣār*) of Aristotle's *GC*. There is little doubt that that is the literary genre of our treatise. It could scarcely be objected that in ms. A the work is designated as a *talkhīṣ* and not as an *ikhtiṣār*, although it is true that each term refers to something slightly different. [...] But this objection is easily overcome. First, such distinctions between generic terms are never perfectly strict. [...] Second, and more decisively, it is far from certain that the "title" in ms. A is authentic, as it has no parallel in ms. G and is not accompanied in ms. A by an author's name. As such, it looks more like a mere indication of content than a title. [...] I believe, therefore, that the indication in ms. A is not genuine, and that the correct title should have contained the word *ikhtiṣār* [...]. It seems safe to conclude, then, that the indication in al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* matches the textual evidence rather well. (351-52)

Even if one is ready to grant that the title in ms. A is not a title, and even if one is also ready to grant that the work's contents elicit its description as an *ikhtisār*,

5 Ibn al-Nadim, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Riḏā Tajaddud (Tehran: Marvi Offset Printing, 1973), 226 (line 1); *Kitāb al-Fihrist mit Anmerkungen*, eds. Gustav Flügel, J. Rödiger, and A. Müller (Leipzig: F.C.W. Vogel, 1871-1872), 177 (lines 16-17).

some problems remain as regards the alleged match with the record in the *Kitāb al-fihrist*. As a matter of fact, only in R. Tajaddud's edition – the one used in this book – is the work attributed to al-Nawbakhti labelled *Kitāb ikhtiṣār al-kawn wa-l-fasād li-Aristālis*. This label also sounds strange to Rashed (351). In Gustav Flügel's⁶ 1871-72 edition, the title runs: *Ikhtiṣār ikhtiṣār al-kawn wa-l-fasād li-Aristālis*, an even stranger title that attracted a note in the second volume of this edition of the *Fihrist*. August Müller, the writer of this note, remarks that in his own list al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067)⁷ removes one of the two instances of *ikhtiṣār*,⁸ in all likelihood because otherwise al-Nawbakhti would have authored an abridgement of an abridgement of Aristotle's work.

The only conclusion that one can safely derive from all of this is that the title of al-Nawbakhti's work, as recorded in the *Kitāb al-fihrist*, is uncertain; hence, any deduction based upon it is speculative. In sum, on the one hand we have a trace of an interest by al-Nawbakhti in Aristotle's *GC*, probably related – in a way that is difficult to determine whatever title one prefers – to an abridgement of it, and, on the other hand, an anonymous commentary on the same work. But this does not diminish the importance of Rashed's edition, regardless of the author's actual identity.

6 See the preceding note.

7 The 'Ṭūsī' involved in Müller's remark is the 'Shaykh al-Ṭayfa' (Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī) who authored the *Fihrist kutub al-shi'ā*. Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Tusy's List of Shy'ah Books: Bibliotheca Indica*, ed. Aloys Sprenger, Mawlawy 'Abd al-Haqq (repr. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009).

8 Ibn Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist mit Anmerkungen*, ed. Gustav Flügel, et al., vol. 2, 67 (line 16), 177.