

Travis Zadeh: *Wonders and Rarities: The Marvelous Book That Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos*

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Travis Zadeh's exquisite and deeply erudite book tells the story of the composition and reception of Zakariyā al-Qazwīnī's *ʿAjāʾib al-makhlūqāt* – translated here as “Wonders and rarities” – the most influential and popular medieval Islamic account of natural history. At the centre of this book about a book is the notion of wonder as a worldview: wonder as an “aesthetic stance, performance of piety, a cognitive state” (p. 3). Zadeh sets out to compose a poetic response to the al-Qazwīnī phenomenon, and thereby produce a road map for reading Islamic history through the “prism of emotions and sensibilities” and a riposte to modernist assessments of al-Qazwīnī's book as a strange and beautiful relic of an age of ignorance and superstition.

Al-Qazwīnī completed *Wonders and Rarities* shortly after the Mongol conquest of Wāsit, where he served as a Shāfiʿī judge since 1252 CE, and his patron was ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn al-Juwaynī (d. 681/1283), a Persian bureaucrat for the new Ilkhānid rulers. Al-Qazwīnī makes no mention of the cataclysmic fall of Iraq, but his work captures the breadth and diverse cultural influences of medieval Islamic learning at this key turning point in Islamic history. Zadeh draws attention to al-Qazwīnī's command of Persian, his familiarity with Zoroastrian writings, and to the early circulation of a Persian version of *Wonders and Rarities*, a version that included a new section dedicated to talismanic sciences.

Zadeh devotes considerable space to al-Qazwīnī's grounding in Islamic philosophy. His teacher in Mosul was Athīr al-Dīn al-Abhārī (d. c. 663/1264), a disciple of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī who composed a treatise entitled *Hidāyat al-ḥikma*. The Arabic *ḥikma* – translation for Sophia – became associated with divine design, indicating the centrality of natural science for understanding Creation. Divine *ḥikma* was coupled with *nazar*, the philosophical contemplation of creation: “beholding the rare and wondrous is a pious and moral endeavour designed to purify the soul” (p. 113).

In this contemplation of the cosmos, marvels and miracles have a key role to play. Al-Qazwīnī states that his book included marvels that “a negligent idiot might reject, but that the soul of a rational man would readily accept” (p. 116). Ibn Sīnā's imprint is everywhere in *Wonders and Rarities*, and most importantly, according to Zadeh, through the belief that miracles can be explained in scientific terms (p. 117). Talismans, for example, mix celestial forces with earthly bodies, and thus produce extraordinary reactions on Earth. Spells, amulets and potions are effective through interaction with *nīranjāt*, the unique properties of elemental bodies (pp. 122, 179). For al-Qazwīnī, magic is a natural phenomenon in the physical world. Techniques of self-discipline allow a basis for the transformative occult power by creating connections with celestial powers and elemental properties.

Zadeh employs al-Qazwīnī to bat off chauvinistic claims that medieval Islamic sciences were precursors of modernity, most notably regarding the limits of al-Qazwīnī's astronomical and geographical knowledge. For al-Qazwīnī, Earth was at the centre of the cosmos, and there was no western hemisphere. Zadeh emphasizes the lack of

Arabic geographical knowledge of the Atlantic, which continues through the fifteenth century. Eventually, when Pīrī Re'īs learns of the New World from European sources early in the sixteenth century, he visualized it as a place of wonders and marvels.

The final part of the book provides a rich account of reading al-Qazwīnī in early modern India and Central Asia. A seventeenth-century manuscript from Herat contains an illuminated verse adaptation of al-Qazwīnī, woven with Sufi precepts of piety, awe at the majesty of God's wonders, and frequent turns to magic and talismans. Later copies made in India include marginal notes taken from the Bhagavad Gita, redacted in Persian by a Sufi. While exotic titillation was part of the text from the very beginning, illuminated copies of early modern India become increasingly daring. Zadeh makes the compelling argument that al-Qazwīnī perfectly accommodated currents in Islamic thought and art that developed centuries after his death, always with a focus on the "power of occult learning to harness hidden forces in the world" (p. 290).

European encounters with al-Qazwīnī offer a fascinating window into colonial culture. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Orientalists discovered him as the "Pliny of the Orient". But the Europeans themselves became the objects of contemplation, as a treatise on wonders printed in Lucknow in 1864 represented modern Europeans as strange curiosities. Zadeh insightfully notes the popularity of lithograph reproductions, which captured the calligraphy better than standard movable type print. Remarkably, al-Qazwīnī's attitude to the occult chimed with nineteenth-century European enthusiasm for Mesmerism, the belief that the human soul can exercise magnetic power over others, which subsequently became very popular in India too.

Ultimately, Zadeh strives to rehabilitate al-Qazwīnī's worldview, or at least to allow modern readers to appreciate its internal logic. Al-Qazwīnī's value is not in what he bequeathed to modernity, as some Islamic reformers have argued in vain, but rather in offering an alternative and unified vision of the natural world. In this alternative vision, wonder at Allah's creation – whether at the familiar bee, at the extraordinary rarity, or at the supernatural miracle – should be the prism of human observation of the cosmos.

Not all readers will find this argument compelling, and Zadeh could have tried to slim down this hefty volume and to make the admittedly poetic language more accessible. The art history of the illustrations accompanying manuscript copies of Wonders and Rarities, so integral to the reception of al-Qazwīnī, receives less attention; Persis Berlekamp's monograph on this topic (*Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam*, Yale UP, 2011) does not receive the attention that it deserves. Nonetheless, Zadeh's book is an imaginative and beautifully presented work of truly impressive scholarship, which is based on immense research in medieval Islamic science and philosophy as well as early modern and modern archival sources. It provides the reader with a synthesis and analysis of the importance of wonder and awe to medieval Islamic understanding of the cosmic order of existence.

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