

Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism

Atif Khalil

Albany: SUNY Press, 2018. 272 pages.

If one does not repent, God will whet his sword.

—Psalm 7:12

Repent ... otherwise iniquity will be your ruin.

—Ezekiel 18:30

Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is He who has torn, and He will heal us; He has struck down, and He will bind us up.

—Hosea 6:1

He is gracious to those who turn in repentance to His law.

—II Esdras 9:11

A tradition found in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim (d. 875) states that the Prophet Muḥammad told his companions, “O people, turn to God in *tawba*. Verily, I engage in *tawba* with Him one hundred times a day.” Many similar reports are scattered throughout the *ḥadīth* corpus, with one pertinent tradition even stating that the Prophet went so far as to christen himself the *nabī al-tawba*, that is, the “prophet of *tawba*.” Of course, this spiritual concept plays no less an important role in the Qur’ān, with the word’s root *t-w-b* appearing in the scripture eighty-seven times over sixty-nine verses. In light of all this, it is rather strange that no full monograph dealing with *tawba* has ever been published prior to the work being reviewed here. Thankfully, Atif Khalil’s remarkable *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism*—a meticulously researched study that is as profound and poignant in its insights as it is scrupulous and rigorous in its scholarship—goes a long way in filling this conspicuous “scholarly lacuna” (2) in Islamic studies.

Khalil’s work focuses on “early Sufism,” here referring loosely to the period from the eighth through eleventh centuries. The book is divided into two main parts, with the former (comprising the first two chapters of the book) offering an analysis of the semantic field of *tawba* in view of how the word has traditionally been interpreted in the Islamic tradition. In

chapter 1—titled “Is *Tawba* ‘Repentance’?”—the author provides a masterly discussion on the legitimacy of rendering the Arabic term by that word which is most “commonly accepted as its equivalent” in English (13). Although this preliminary survey is primarily a lexicological study—one that analyzes “the meaning of *tawba* on the basis of a survey of the classical lexicons” (23) and other relevant pre-modern sources, including the works of Khalil b. ʿAyn (d. 776–791), Ibn Durayd (d. 933), Ibn ʿAbbād (d. 995), Ibn Fāris (d. 1004), al-Jawharī (d. 1007), al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1060), Ibn Sīda (d. 1065), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), al-Ṣaghānī (d. 1261), Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311), al-Fayyūmī (d. 1368), al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 1413), and al-Zabidī (d. 1790)—it is greatly enriched by Khalil’s method of approaching the titular matter from myriad points of view (including the theological and philosophical) prior to reaching a final position on the issue (6).

In the second chapter, Khalil offers a rigorous study of the use of “*tawba*” specifically in the Qurʾān. It makes perfect sense to include such a survey before the more specialized chapters, as “many of the issues brought up for discussion by the early Sufis had strong scriptural precedents” (6), with their discussions on *tawba* in particular being firmly grounded in the Qurʾān (cf. 23). A major analytical tool employed by Khalil in this chapter is the *sprachliche Weltanschauungslehre* technique developed by the German linguist Johann Leo Weisgerber and used most famously by the great Toshihiko Izutsu in his own studies of Islam’s sacred text. Consequently, this chapter strives to define the semantic field of the Qurʾānic use of *tawba* by way of “an internal analysis of the text” (23) in an Izutsian manner, all with the final aim of mapping “out the ethical and ontological worldview” (25) within which the concept of *tawba* operates in the scripture. To be more precise, Khalil explores the Qurʾānic understanding of *tawba* not independently but, rather, in an open discourse with various related concepts such as *iṣlāḥ* (“rectification,” 27–31) and *istighfār* (“seeking forgiveness,” 31–37), all the while providing painstakingly detailed analyses of the lexicological nuances of the Arabic roots from which we derive all these words and the ideas they entail.

Thus, we are presented with insightful mini-studies of the roots *gh-f-r* (31–37), *ʿf-w* (41–42), *ṣ-f-ḥ* (42–44), *r-d-d* (47), *ḍ-l-l* (47), *z-l-m* (47–48), *n-d-m* (49–51), *r-j-ʿ* (51–52), *n-w-b* (52–54), and *a-w-b* (54–56), along with overviews of the various *tawba*-related concepts to which they give rise. Impressive as all this is, perhaps the most notable thing about the second chapter is the skillful manner in which Khalil surveys the nature of what

he calls “divine *tawba*” (see 32, 35-36, 44-46, 56, etc.), which is the type of *tawba* the Qur’ān attributes to God no less than thirty-four times—in fact, in more than a third of the total scriptural references to the word. Khalil’s thoughtful analysis of this type of *tawba* alone constitutes reason enough to purchase his book.

By the end of chapter 2, Khalil explicates the close connection between human *tawba* and *iṣlāḥ*, the intimate connection between divine *tawba* and divine mercy, and how the concept of *istighfār* unites human and divine *tawba*. At the same time, the author also provides valuable remarks on the issues scholars face when translating certain words in the usual manner (see 57, where he discusses the problems with interpreting the notion of divine *tawba* as “forgiveness”, and 21 for the “relative adequacy” of interpreting human *tawba* as “repentance”). Lastly, it should be noted that Khalil’s use of the Izutsian analytical method in this chapter does not prevent him from referring to various classical and modern exegetes—including al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201), al-Rāzī (d. 1210), al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273), al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286), Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), and Abdullah Yusuf Ali (d. 1953)—when he feels they may provide valuable insight to the discussion at hand. In this way, his study never operates in a vacuum devoid of references to the rich tradition of *tafsīr*.

The second part of the book consists of five chapters dealing with early Sufi approaches to the idea of *tawba*. Chapter 3 surveys the different ways in which early ascetics and Sufis embodied the idea of *tawba* as a type of “interior conversion”—one through which the previously nominal or sinful believer was made fit to begin his or her path towards *wilāya*. Although Khalil explores this idea of “interior conversion” by way of surveying some of the most famous early Sufi *tawba*-narratives—such as those of Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 777-78) and al-Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyād (d. 803)—it is important to note that his objective in doing so is expressly not “to scrutinize or determine the veracity of these conversion narratives, which from a purely historical perspective remain suspect, but to observe instead how the narratives were presented in the tradition” (8). In other words, his essential aim in this chapter is to “highlight the various ways through which the Sufi tradition depicted the life-altering *tawba* and conversion experiences of some its most important early figures” (8). Although the classical lexical authorities often included the general concept of conversion within the semantic field of *tawba* (see 15 and 61), the author here deals specifically with the notion of converting to a deeper life in the faith (61).

The third chapter—rich in references to both early and late Sufi authors (including, among others, al-Sulamī [d. 1021], Abū Nu‘aym al-Isfahānī [d. 1037], al-Hujwīrī [d. 1071], al-Qushayrī [d. 1074], ‘Aṭṭār [1220], Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh [d. 1309], Jāmī [d. 1492], and al-Sha‘rānī [d. 1565])—analyzes the notion of “interior conversion” by way of classifying the numerous hagiographic examples of this branch of *tawba* according to type. Thus, Khalil touches upon “interior conversions” brought upon through: (1) “an external admonition or word of kindness” (67-70), (2) “an internal admonition” (70), (3) “an act of compassion toward another” (70-72), (4) “an act of pious devotion to God” (72-73), and, finally, (5) “a miraculous call from on high or through a supernatural experience” (74). On these five types of hagiographic “interior conversions,” Khalil remarks: “The five categories should not be seen as water tight. In many instances, more than one of the factors is clearly at work in inducing the interior conversion” (75). The primary aim of this chapter—which is to present a useful, if not rigorously binding, “taxonomy of *tawba* types in early Sufism” (75)—is realized in lucid fashion.

Chapter 4—titled “The States, Stations, and Early Sufi Apothegmata”—is divided into two parts. The first of these further explores the idea of “*tawba* as a life-transforming alteration” (8) with reference to the Sufi conceptions of spiritual ascension or progression on the path, as these notions are embodied in the ideas of “the states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*)” (8) of the wayfarer. This first part is followed by a concise analysis of the role proverbs and wisdom sayings (*ḥikam*) “played in the transmission of early Sufi ideas, as well as what they reveal to us about early notions of *tawba*” (8). It is important to note that Khalil always begins his discussions of particular Sufi ideas with references to relevant Qur’ānic passages. Thus, we find him opening his analyses of both *maqāmāt* and *manāzil* by examining the Qur’ānic verses in which these and similar terms appear, despite their usage in the scripture often differing significantly from the standardized interpretations they would come to acquire in Sufi literature. On account of this “scripture-heavy” method of analysis, Khalil manages to demonstrate his substantial grasp of Arabic, with a good example of his linguistic-cum-analytic skills appearing where he provides a fine study of the Sufi concept of *ḥāl* (which does not appear in the Qur’ān) and the scriptural use of the verb *ḥāla* (79).

In chapter 5, Khalil explores *tawba* in the thought of four key figures from the early period, namely al-Tustarī (d. 896), al-Kharrāz (d. 899), Ju-

ayd (d. 910), and al-Wāsiṭī (d. 936). Al-Kharrāz was chosen on account of the importance of his *Kitāb al-ṣidq* to *tawba*-related thought; Junayd due to the “central role he played in the theoretical formation of the early tradition” (despite us possessing “very few of his sayings on repentance,” 9); al-Tustarī by virtue of “the central place he assigned *tawba* in the spiritual life” (9); and al-Wāsiṭī because “his ideas of repentance represent the most theoretically sophisticated views of the subject from the early period with respect to the metaphysics of *tawba*” (9). Khalil subdivides this chapter into four parts, with each section focusing on one of the four Sufis and, in particular, on the specific aspect of *tawba* especially prevalent in that Sufi’s thought. Thus, the section on al-Kharrāz (97-100) deals with “the requirements of *tawba*” (97); that on Sahl (100-106) with “the obligatory nature of *tawba*” (100); that on Junayd (106-115) with *tawba* “as the forgetting of one’s sins” (106); and, finally, that on al-Wāsiṭī (115-119) with “*tawba* from the claim to act” (115). Khalil’s fundamental aim in this chapter—which is to “to get a deeper sense of the nature of the discussions and debates regarding *tawba* that were taking place in early Sufism” (119-120)—is well achieved, with his survey laying a suitable foundation for the last few chapters of the book.

The sixth and seventh chapters deal, respectively, with the ways in which al-Hārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857) and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996) understood the idea of *tawba*. According to Khalil, the former’s most important contribution to the Sufi tradition was the crucial “role he played in developing a science of moral psychology” (9), which in turn influenced his understanding of *tawba* (see 125-126). His thought—characterized by a practical Sufism “concerned not so much with mystical experiences” (9)—is given an independent chapter on account of his works offering a “relatively comprehensive treatment of *tawba* in the early period” (9). During the course of his study, the author dismisses the view of those academics who assert that al-Muḥāsibī was merely a “moralizing theologian” (125)—a view that reflects, according to Khalil, “an ignorance of the nature and scope of medieval Sufi literature” (125), which, he points out, was often more concerned with discussing practical, ethical, and moral virtues than describing ecstatic and mystical experiences. In response to those scholars who “de-Sufify” al-Muḥāsibī, Khalil argues that the contemplative can, in fact, be called a *bona fide* Sufi. Although he devotes only a few pages to this specific issue, one can actually read the entire sixth chapter as an implicit affirmation of al-Muḥāsibī’s place within the Sufi tradition. One thing Khalil does not touch upon in this chapter is the extent to which later Ash‘arite

theologians (who often revered al-Muḥāsibī on account of his early use of *kalām*) were influenced by his work on *tawba* in particular. Both this issue and the matter of whether the Ḥanbalites ever found his writings on *tawba* useful—despite Ibn Ḥanbal’s (d. 855) seeming dismissal of him—are two interesting questions that warrant further research by scholars.

The seventh and penultimate chapter (if we count the conclusion) offers an analysis of *tawba* in the thought of that man whom the staunch Ḥanbalite *ḥadīth* master al-Dhahabī (d. 1348) extolled as a “leader, ascetic, and gnostic, the *shaykh* of the Sufis” (145), namely Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī. According to Khalil, the thirty-second chapter of al-Makkī’s *Qūt al-qulūb* “represents the longest single sustained treatment of repentance, written from a Sufi perspective, currently available to us from the first four centuries of Islam” (146). Khalil makes the perceptive assertion that the work may even be described as “something of a *tafsīr* in a different key” due to how deeply the Qur’ān is “interwoven” into the text. While he agrees with Alexander Knysh that the *Qūt al-qulūb* “simply brims with long-winded quotations” (148), Khalil suggests reasons for why the work’s structure makes perfect sense in the context of the era in which al-Makkī penned it. As both al-Muḥāsibī and al-Makkī have similar ways of focusing on the “practical concerns” and “moral psychology” of the spiritual path, there is considerable topical overlap between chapters six and seven. Even so, the seventh chapter never feels repetitive, as Khalil brings out the nuances and subtleties in al-Makkī’s thought (e.g., at 166–167, where he provides an insightful comparison between al-Makkī’s fourfold *tā’ibūn* classification system and al-Muḥāsibī’s threefold schema of the believers). The two chapters are all the richer for their dynamic engagement with Sufi works penned both before and after the main authors under consideration.

Khalil’s book on “early Sufism” is, then, a study of roots—of intellectual seeds that would later sprout into trees of astonishing splendor and diversity a few centuries later. *Tawba* has always been a foundation stone of Islamic spirituality, yet our academic libraries were lacking a single solid English work on the matter. As such, we owe the author a deep debt of gratitude—not only for publishing the first monograph on the matter, but also for ensuring that this first work embodies all that is best about scholarship. *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* represents a major service to Sufi studies.

Imad Jafar

MA student, Islamic Societies and Cultures
School of Oriental and African Studies, London, UK