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The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam by Louis Massignon; Herbert Mason
Review by: Todd Lawson

International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 1997), pp. 280-281

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/164021>

Accessed: 02/09/2014 14:32

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LOUIS MASSIGNON, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, abridged edition, ed. and trans. Herbert Mason, Bollingen Series XCVIII (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). Pp. 326.

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When Louis Massignon died almost thirty-five years ago, he left behind some very impressive “traces.” He is best known as the scholar of Hallaj, or the rescuer of Hallaj, who becomes in his treatment an Islamic reflection of Jesus. Massignon’s work raises questions about the name and nature of scholarship in general. On the one hand, his breathtaking erudition and sensitivity are lauded and admired universally; on the other, his “existential” presuppositions are frequently singled out as the major flaw in his oeuvre—because of which his writings may not be considered scholarly, scientific, objective. The effect of this on his contribution is incalculable. From this point of view, the works on Hallaj, rather than illuminating the subject, constitute something of a church wall inside which the subject is imprisoned.

The fact remains, however, that Massignon’s work has made Hallaj one of the five or six most recognizable Muslim names by the general Western audience, after Muhammad, Harun al-Rashid, maybe Ghazali, “Saladin,” and Omar Khayyam. It is therefore a good thing that Princeton University Press has brought out a work that will “render more accessible to the non-specialist reader the dramatic life and radical thought of this extraordinary 10th-century Muslim mystic” (p. xiii). The famous four-volume study was abridged by its English translator, a student and friend of Massignon himself, Professor Herbert Mason. But the result is really less an abridgement of the four volumes than a précis of volume one, with some intermittent material from volume two, and we are warned about this in Mason’s foreword.

Since this review concentrates on the work at hand, we will take for granted that people reading this journal are aware of Massignon's truly monumental learning (and the fluent and skillful translation of it by Mason), and that they are also aware of how Massignon's devotion to a single—perhaps marginal—figure produced one of the real classics of European Orientalism. In the process of “fleshing out” Hallaj, Massignon also gave us an intimate view of the center of the Islamic world in one of its most crucial periods and places—9th- and 10th-century Baghdad—and the formulation of the official Sunni creed against a background of many competing interpretations of Islam.

The drama and fervency of this certainly comes through even in the present abridgement. Whether ultimately it will be a satisfying experience for the general reader is another question. It was an editorial mistake to forgo a glossary and index and at least some basic bibliographical references and brief explanatory footnotes. There is also inconsistency in the dates: sometimes both Hijri and common-era dates are given; sometimes only one or the other is given, frequently without designating which system the number represents. Although this should pose no real problem for those familiar with the two calendars, I am taking seriously the above-quoted statement that this book is also aimed at a non-specialist readership, perhaps one interested in comparative religion and mysticism. There are also scores of Arabic technical words, and sometimes whole phrases are transliterated without accompanying translation. The following example (by no means unusual) from page 91 illustrates many of these criticisms:

Next, concerning the motive: “*Kāna yad^cū ilā al-riḍā min Āl Muḥammad*”: this expression puts Hallaj among those who, without naming any ^cAlid pretender (contrary to the orthodox Imamites), nevertheless made use of legitimist propaganda. It is used in Baladhuri for the sending of the Rawandite da^ci M-B-Khunays into Khurasan by Abu Riyah Maysara of Kufa, in the name of the ^cAbbasid pretender (wasi) M-b-^cAli (d. 124): “*fa-amarahu an yad^cū ilā-riḍā min Āl Muḥammad, walā yusammi aḥadan*.” And it reappears in the year 281, which directly concerns us, in the great qasida of ibn al-Mu^tazz (verse 211) to characterize the rallying of. . . .

In addition to translations for the transliterated phrases—which will certainly weary the “non-specialist”—answers to the questions, What is an ^cAlid? What is Baladhuri? What is a Rawandite da^ci? and so on, would be useful. None of these reasonable “elementary” questions is answered in this book. The specialist will prefer using volume one of the four-volume set; others will have to wait for a proper introduction to Massignon and Hallaj.