

The Religious Tradition of Ishaq ibn Ali al-Ruhawi: The Author of the First Medical Ethics Book in Islamic Medicine¹

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Summary

After 5th century A.D. cities of Urfa (Edessa or Ruha as is known in the history) and Harran had become to be a distinguished centres for science. In those centuries the books written in the Ancient Greece was translated into Arabic at the 'School of Harran', but later many original books were written by the scholars at this school. Among these scholars Ishaq ibn 'Ali Al-Ruhawi and his key text *Adab al-Tabib* have a special relevance to the History of Medicine.

This work aims to examine the unique and only hand-written Arabic copy of *Adab al-Tabib* and its English translation made by Martin Levy. The study not only demonstrates the revolutionariness and farseeingness of er-Ruhawi's deontological treaties but also critically analyses the English translation of the book as well as the western literature on it. The paper demonstrates how important it is to have some basic knowledge about the tradition and the belief of the writer whom you translate his book. Otherwise it is inevitable to misinterpret not only the concepts but also the words.

Key Words; Islamic Medicine, Medical Ethics, Al-Ruhawi, Urfa, Ruha.

The areas laying between the rivers Dicle and Firat (Tigris and Euphrates) is called Mesopotamia, and has cradled many civilisations for centuries. The most distinguished part of the region, Diyar-i Mudar, includes Urfa and Harran, and had been an important centre of learning in the history (1-3). Urfa, a southeaster city in Turkey, is known in the history as Edessa in Greek, Orhai in Syriac and al-Ruha in Arabic. Many different civilizations governed the city, from Assyrians to Romans, from Persians to Seljuks. Muslim governing came to Urfa in 639 B.C. (4).

The history of being a learning center goes back to 5th century. When the Constantinople patriarch Nestorius declared that Christ is the son of Mary not the son of God, so go against trinity, he and his followers forced to leave the city. Nestorius and his followers, collectively called Nestorians, moved to Edessa. They established a school in Edessa and turned the city to a learning centre (5,6). They started with the translation of Ancient Greek texts into Arabic, which had contributed a lot to the advancement of learning in the region (7).

Although the academic and elite language was Arabic in the city there were scholars from various races and religions i.e. Arabs, Persians, Turks, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Sabians. Despite this diversity there was a great harmony that can be a good example to every generation in the history. Even after the migration of Nestorians from Edessa to Jundishapur Harran and Edessa continued to be an attraction center for scholars from different fields.

Edessa and Harran are better know with the translations made in these places but after the 8th century, where it became to be known as Ruha, there were scholars who had written original books with a good review of previous writers. Among them Ishaq bin Ali al-Ruhawi and his book *Adab al-Tabib* has a special relevance to the History of Medicine.

This paper aims to examine the unique and only hand-written Arabic copy of *Adab al-Tabib* and its English translation made by Martin Levy. Our study will not only demonstrate the revolutionariness and farseeingness of al-Ruhawi's deontological treaties

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but also show how important it is to have some basic knowledge about the tradition and the belief of the writer whom you translate his book. Otherwise it is inevitable to misinterpret not only the concepts but also the words. We intend to critically analyse the English translation of the book as well as the western literature on it, so to come to a reliable conclusion.

Unfortunately, not much is known about Ishaq bin Ali al-Ruhawi. He is mentioned only in an indirect fashion in Ibn abi Usaibi'a's biographic dictionary '*Uyun al-Anba*'. We know that he lived in Ruha at the end of 9th century. He wrote 3 books other than *Adab al-Tabib*. 1) A compilation of first 4 books of Alexandrian Canons; 2) Introduction to Dialectics for Beginners and 3) On Examination of Physicians (8). Literature available about al-Ruhawi in this century is very limited. They are only Levey's articles (9,10), Bürgel's chapters(8,11) and Sezgin's book on the 'History of Arabic Literature' (12). In fact we are thankful to all these writers for introducing us such an important scholar and his work. Especially Levey's English translation of the *Adab al-Tabib* was a significant contribution to medical history literature. However with all due respect to Levey and his work, we believe that it is a duty for us to re-examine his translation and define the points that we think he made some mistakes, intentionally or unintentionally, in interpreting al-Ruhawi.

While Levey was introducing al-Ruhawi in his book, in the second sentence he wrote;

"Al-Ruhawi was probably from Ruha, a city in Northwest Mesopotamia. It is also known that al-Ruhawi was a Christian" (10).

Although the religious affiliation of a scholar may not be relevant or important for some people, it must be imperative for Levey that he mentioned this in his very first sentences. Nevertheless it is not unique to Levey, also Bürgel tells about al-Ruhawi's religious affiliation in the introduction part of both of his articles (8,11), and he writes al-Ruhawi was a Jewish. We do not wish to be perceived as religious take-siders but both of these information are needed to be re-evaluated since, at least one of them is wrong, if not both.

None of the authors give any evidence why they think he was a Christian, or a Jewish. We do not want to assume that it was a traditional reflex of a western orientalist medical historian just not to give the credit of a valuable medical text to a Muslim scholar. We wish they live and answer this question. Since they cannot speak for themselves contemporary medical historians like Dr. Lawrance Conrad, who also suggests that al-Ruhawi was a Christian, may enlighten us.

Anyone who reads the Arabic original of the book (13), or even read the English translation of it, without looking at the footnotes can easily understand that al-Ruhawi was a learned Muslim scholar. Al-Ruhawi begins his book with the words;

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent and the Compassionate in Whom I have trust and for Whose help I ask"

Every medical historians who has some basic knowledge about history of Islamic Science knows that this is a very typical introduction for a Muslim writer. We can argue that it is not possible to find any non-Muslim writer in the history who starts his book the way al-Ruhawi starts, since this is not familiar to non-Muslim world.

Al-Ruhawi use the word 'Allah' hundreds of time in his book, though Levey mostly prefer to translate it as God, and the other names and attributes of Allah, like Exalted, Beneficent, Compassionate, Life Giver, Healer, Creator, etc. As it is known that there are 99 names and attributes of Allah (Asma al-Husna) in Islamic understanding, which is not the case neither in Christianity, nor in Judaism. The frequent usage of these phrases is also an evidence of al-Ruhawi's religious belief. Levey, may be to strengthen his claim, tells in the very first footnote that

"Use of the word Allah is not meant particularly to designate the Muslim idea of God. Further, the words Muslim, Arabic, and Islamic are generally used synonymously to designate the period."

We see this as a useless effort since it is very obvious that the word Allah is meant, for an objective reader, to designate the Muslim idea of God.

There is another part of the text that leaves no doubt about the religious affiliation of al-Ruhawi. He writes in the introductory part of the first chapter that;

"The first thing in which a physician must believe is that all in this world has only one able creator who performs all deeds wilfully....."

The second article of faith in which a physician must believe is that he have credence in the great Allah with a firm affection, and is devoted to Him with all his reason, soul, and free will.....

The third faith which a physician must posses is that Allah sent His messengers to mankind to teach them what is good since the mind alone is not sufficient. Thus, without His apostles, it is not enough for man.....

In all these matters, the physician must truly believe since all the holy books and ancients affirm them. No believer can deny them."

As it is apparent, al-Ruhawi summarizes exactly the five pillars of Islam. After this statement it is hard to understand why Levey and Bürgel suggest al-Ruhawi not to be a Muslim.

Both authors use two things as an evidence to claim that al-Ruhawi was critical to Islam. One of them is his statement on drinking wine. Normally, it is assumed that a Muslim physician should not advise to drink alcohol. But al-Ruhawi writes that;

"Wine is good both for the healthy and ill. For healthy people, it is quicker nourishment than other foods because of its quick ripening, its penetration into the liver, and its changing into...."

“It is useful for the ailing if they use it appropriately, in moderation both in quality and quantity.”

They rightly suggest, by looking at these statements that he is not a Muslim. But they fail to consider the following part of the statement wherein al-Ruhawi tells about the harmful affects of wine. He says;

“The damages are so great that the listing and description of them would be quite lengthy. When you investigate the harm and vice brought to victim, they are so abundant and apparent that even one who is not a physician is fully aware of them. How many healthy people it makes ill! How many kinds of death it causes! From the brain, it takes away its memory, corrupts its understanding and renders its imagination turbid! How much it dries up the nerves! How much it makes the limbs tremble and the senses weakened! How many kinds of evil changes it causes the soul in his sleep!.....These are the end results of the vices of wine drinking and the end results of its addiction. This is so that you will understand the details which I do not see fit to discuss.”

When we consider al-Ruhawi’s statement on wine in whole, it just indicates that he was an open-minded Muslim physician, who tells the good and bad sides of everything without paying any attention whether it is forbidden or encouraged in Islam. As a good physician his primary concern is nothing but to be beneficial to the patients as well to protect the health of the people.

Due to time constraints we will not be able to go further to exhibit other misinterpretations of Levey. But this is the subject of another article we are currently working on.

As a conclusion it is possible to say that, Levey, Bürgel and other western medical historians were wrong on religious affiliation of al-Ruhawi. Although the scientific and intellectual contribution of a scholar is more important than his religious affiliation, both Levey and Bürgel misstate in their writings that al-Ruhawi was not a Muslim. Therefore I want to take this as a duty to correct this mistake, for the sake of future medical historians, and show the concrete evidences that he was a learned and open-minded Muslim physician.

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