Al-Maʾmūn, the Inquisition, and the Quest for Caliphal Authority. By John Abdallah Nawas. Resources in Arabic and Islamic Studies, vol. 4. Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2015. Pp. xvi + 340. $45 (paper).

Finally, and thankfully, John Nawas's dissertation (1993) that explores the inquisition (*miḥna*) through the reign of al-Maʾmūn has been published, but it supersedes the original. It has been tightened up, lightly reorganized, and includes well-marked updates to the bibliography and notes—now footnotes, which is much preferred so as not to miss the treasure trove of information contained in them. For all of the changes, the book maintains its elegantly concise and strongly supported argument while providing an excellent model for the judicious application of social science methodologies. Of particular note and value are the appendices—a comprehensive and annotated list of the seventy-two primary sources available on the *miḥna* arranged by the author's death date (pp. 83–94); a table identifying the forty-four individuals interrogated in the *miḥna*'s first phases (pp. 95–105); a brief timeline (p. 107); and in particular, added to this publication (pp. 131–340), a reprint of Walter Patton's classic book *Ahmed Ibn Hanbal and the Mihna* (1897). I applaud the wisdom of placing the two books together and appreciate that for the ease of citation Patton's pagination was maintained—his argument is still worth reading, and, as noted by the series editors (p. ix), he gathered in one place and quoted voluminously the primary sources on the *miḥna*. Unfortunately, there are a few, easily remedied, hiccups in the scan: p. 45, "al-Saḳatî (†253)"; p. 46, "two mentioned"; p. 51, "like his"; p. 52, "heterodoxy"; p. 53, "If I declare . . . and men will be . . . trouble"; and p. 67, "created . . . denying." Pencil those onto your copy and it is all sorted.

It is quite a testament that Nawas's dissertation remains an essential contribution to understanding al-Maʾmūn, the *miḥna*, and the early Abbasids. The basic questions underpinning the book are: Why did al-Maʾmūn declare the Quran created, and why did he initiate the *miḥna*? Viewing these two separately allows for recognizing the different motivations for each choice and thereby provides more sharply nuanced assessments. Halfway through (chap. four, p. 66) Nawas does express serious doubts about the six-year gap between al-Maʾmūn's first declaration on createdness (212/827) and the initiation of the *miḥna*, but he resists straying into speculation. In any case, his argument for dividing the two issues does not depend on the temporal distance between them.

The first two chapters provide the intellectual and political contexts leading up to the *miḥna*. Chapter one gives a brief introduction to the caliphate, highlights the main differences between the Shiʿa and the Sunnis, describes the Muʿtazila, defines the issue of createdness of the Quran, and outlines the *miḥna*. An underlying premise is that the *miḥna* was anomalous. It stands out because it was "the first time in Islamic history that a caliph declared a religious doctrine and enforced" it (p. 77). Chapter two sketches the framework for al-Maʾmūn's reign, giving emphasis to the crises arising from the civil war with al-Amīn and its aftermath. What clearly emerges is that al-Maʾmūn's position as caliph was fraught and tenuous. This necessary information for understanding the various theories within the field concerning al-Maʾmūn's motivation for the *miḥna* is followed by two chapters that explore them.

Impressively, Nawas concisely distills from the cacophony of scholarly voices four predominant hypotheses concerning the *miḥna*'s initiation—his dealing with three of them in the third chapter clearly indicates his preference. He adroitly refutes the arguments that al-Maʾmūn began the *miḥna* because he was a Muʿtazilite, or really a Shiʿite, or overly sympathetic to the ʿAlids. Nawas succinctly sends off the Muʿtazilism theory—a serious lack of evidence—and deals with the Shiʿi thesis equally handily—al-Maʾmūn's positions were not particularly Shiʿi and in some cases antithetical to them. The ʿAlid hypothesis proves more difficult because of al-Maʾmūn's manifest affinity for them (e.g., appointing the eighth Imam as heir), but Nawas astutely observes that the ʿAlid hypothesis fails to explain why ʿAlid proclivities would motivate an inquisition.

Chapter four engages the remaining overarching hypothesis, which is that al-Maʾmūn started the *miḥna* to assert his authority as caliph. This chapter is the core of the book. In it Nawas argues, within the context of, and differentiated from, previous scholars, that al-Maʾmūn propounded "a clear and coherent vision of the caliphate" throughout his reign (p. 54), asserting the power and authority of the caliph in the face of encroachments by the ulema, but he did not come to this stance (or the *miḥna*) in response to any one particular event. Nawas supports this by considering four "documents" that appeared at key points during the reign. He gives particular emphasis to the *miḥna* letters and explores the advantages of the createdness question for physically asserting a coherent vision of caliphal authority. He also considers who was tested and why. Those who were chosen were elite members of the ulema whose assent was expected to ripple outwards, squelching resistance. Ultimately Nawas argues that al-Maʾmūn designed the *miḥna* "to secure for the caliphal institution full control over religious matters" (p. 75), wresting from the ulema lost caliphal prerogatives. It was not enough to state the position; the caliph needed public assent to it by leading figures.

Chapter five brings all of the threads together and concludes the book. Nawas argues that it is only coincidental that al-Maʾmūn's theory bears strong resemblance to the Shiʿi conception of the Imamate; ultimately it is a Maʾmūnid creation that powerfully echoes his perceptions of the Rāshidūn. As well, attempting to bring the Abbasid and ʿAlid families together fit within al-Maʾmūn's theory of caliphal authority. Thus, the purpose of the *miḥna* was not necessarily to define a point

of doctrine but to enforce obedience. The createdness question "was merely a convenient pretext" to bring the ulema to heel and to remove them from their position as "spokesmen on religious affairs" who could veto the caliph (pp. 78–79).

Nawas makes a compelling and eloquent argument that requires our attention. To begin understanding the *miḥna*, one must start here. The editors of the series are to be commended for their efforts to gain the larger audience that is its due.

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The Tomb of Jesus and His Family? Exploring Ancient Jewish Tombs near Jerusalem's Walls. Edited by JAMES H. CHARLESWORTH. Grand Rapids, Mich.: WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO., 2013. Pp. xx + 585, illus. $48 (paper).

The book under review, edited by James Charlesworth of Princeton Theological Seminary, is the latest collection of studies to result from an international conference that he has convened. This collection focuses on a tomb in East Talpiot, south Jerusalem, accidentally uncovered and hastily excavated in 1980 and then brought to new prominence in 2007 by a television documentary and popular book in which it is argued that the tomb was the final resting place of Jesus, his mother Mary, his wife Mary Magdalene, their son Judah, and a number of other family members. Almost all historians and archaeologists reject these identifications. Nevertheless, Charlesworth in 2008 convened a conference in Jerusalem to explore and debate the matter further.

Although the rationale for the conference and the book is dubious, the actual results are for the most part helpful. The essays review the history of the find, a number of relevant sciences (such as petrology, DNA, prosopography, palaeography), and Jewish burial practices of late antiquity. One of the best essays in the volume is by Amos Kloner and Shimon Gibson, two of the three archaeologists who excavated the tomb. (The third and lead archaeologist was the late Joseph Gath.) They recount their work and carefully explain what was recovered. As have many, Kloner and Gibson conclude that "there is nothing to commend the Talpiot tomb as the family tomb of Jesus" (p. 51).

I have space to mention only a few other other contributions. Mordechai Aviam rightly underscores the importance of understanding the differences in Galilean burial practices. Given what we know of Galilean burials, he finds it difficult to believe that "the entire family [of Jesus], whose members probably died over the next thirty or forty years after Jesus, would also adopt the Judean practice of *ossilegium* and be brought to Jerusalem to be buried with Jesus" (p. 111).

Stephen Pfann correctly interprets the "Mary Magdalene" ossuary inscription to read, "Mariame and Mara" (pp. 190–99), not "Mary the Master." He also concludes that the name "Jesus" was not the original name inscribed on the "Jesus, son of Joseph" ossuary. It appears that another name, perhaps Yudan (short for Yehudah, or Judah), was partially effaced and then incorporated with the later inscribed Yeshua (Jesus). The evidence is quite curious on any reckoning. It seems that the person named Yeshua was placed in an ossuary already occupied by someone else (a brother?). Why this person's name was then effaced is impossible to say. In any case it seems doubtful that the remains of the most important figure in the family, a figure adored by a growing following, thought by this following to be Israel's Messiah, would be placed in a very plain ossuary, already occupied by the remains of someone else.

Christopher Rollston reviews several aspects of the relevant science, including statistics, and concludes that "it is certainly not tenable to suggest that the data are sufficient that this is the family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth" (p. 221). He rightly notes that we are hardly in a position to ascertain the true family relationships of the persons whose remains were found in the Talpiot tomb.

Amnon Rosenfeld, Howard Feldman, and Wolfgang Krumbein provide scientific evidence that strongly supports the authenticity of the inscription on the James Ossuary (i.e., "James son of Joseph brother of Jesus"). These scientists further argue that the geochemical footprints of the ossuary are consistent with what is known of the Talpiot tomb. From this they conclude that James Ossuary may have originally derived from the Talpiot tomb, which, if true, significantly increases the odds that the tomb was indeed the tomb of the family of Jesus. No doubt further research will be undertaken.

There is one glaring omission in the book under review: No study explains the prominent pointed gable and circle excised over the tomb's entrance. This artistic design is found on coins—as far back as the Hasmonean period—ossuaries, monumental tombs, and other forms of Jewish funerary art. It symbolizes the temple and has nothing to do with Jesus and his movement. Given the temple establishment's opposition to Jesus and his followers, such a symbol would have been a most unlikely choice as adornment for a tomb linked to Jesus or his family.

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A City from the Dawn of History: Erbil in the Cuneiform Sources. By JOHN MACGINNIS. Philadelphia: OXBOW BOOKS, 2014. Pp. 128, illus. $45 (paper). [Distributed by Casemate Academic, Havertown, Pa.]

This small attractive book was commissioned by the Kurdistan Regional Government to celebrate the