

Tributes to al-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asir

(In chronological order)

He is ash-Shaykh Yūsuf bin ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḥusayni al-Asīr, also known as al-Azharī. He was born in Sidon in 1230 AH, where he was raised in the bosom of his father. He learned the basics of religious sciences and memorized the Quran by the age of seven. Although his father was a trader, Yūsuf did not possess a liking for trade, and rather gravitated towards the pursuit of education [...].

He lived in Beirut, where he worked as a teacher and become more engrossed in writing, with most of his focus on language and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). He wrote a book on *fiqh* entitled *Rā'id-ul-Farā'id* (The Champion in Duties), authored a commentary on the book *Atwāq-udh-Dhahab* (Collars of Gold) by Az-Zamakhsharī, and composed a lot of poems, most of which were published in his eponymous anthology.

He was also gentle and peaceful, easy to get along with and of good company, loving of knowledge and supportive of scholars. He was of the Shafī'ī doctrine and followed in the steps of his predecessors, who held the torch of seeking and spreading knowledge for the greater benefit of mankind. He lived by his faith, steadfast in following the sacraments of religion, not wrapped up in the material world but did not withhold to provide the necessities for his own home. He had a lot of passion for reciting and listening to recitations of the Quran on a daily basis.

He was a tall, medium build, dark-skinned, black-haired man with a thick beard. He was genuine with his promises, possessed good memory and was able to answer any questions on any subject, and in a manner that makes the topic more comprehensible to the listener.

He passed away in 1307 AH at the age of seventy-seven and was buried in the Bashūra cemetery in Beirut. He left behind five sons and two daughters and bequeathed naught to

them but his good name. And the people of Beirut and the rest of the Levant regretted his loss, for many of them had studied under him and considered him an authority in his field up until his death.

Jurjī Zaydān,

“Sa’ir Rijāl-il-‘ilm wa-l-Adab: ash-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr, wulida sanat 1230 AH wa tuwuffiya sanat 1307 AH.” In *Tarājimu Mashāhīr-ish-Sharq fil-Qarn al-Tāsi* ‘Ashar. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. Egypt: Maṭba‘at-ul-Hilal bi-l-Fajjāla, 1911, pages 187-185.

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He was the editor-in-chief of *Thamarāt-ul-Funūn* (The Fruits of the Arts) and *Lisān-ul-Hāl* (Voice of the Present) newspapers for some time. He passed away on 28 November 1889 (1307 AH) and was remembered by everyone for his gentle character, ascetic way of living, and devotion to spreading knowledge. Those who studied under his direction, towards the end of his life, included the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch Gregory IV and Doctor Martin Hartmann, Professor of Arabic at the School of Oriental Languages in Berlin. Poets and masters of journalism throughout Istanbul, Syria and Egypt wrote eulogies for him, all of which were collected and published by Shaykh Qasim al-Kasti in a book. Of the masterpiece hymns, which he had composed for the American missionaries, is a hymn on “The Ten Commandments of God.”

Viscount Phillipe de Tarrazi,

Ash-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr, one of the editors of the official newspaper *Lubnān* and *Thamarāt-ul-Funūn* and *Lisān-ul-Hāl*. In *Tārīkh aṣ-Ṣihāfa al-‘Arabiyyah*. Vol. 1. Beirut: al-Maṭba‘ah-l-Adabiyyah, 1913, page 138.

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Ash-Shaykh Nāṣīf Al-Yāzījī, from a masterpiece poem paying tribute to the translator [Ash-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr], and composed an encomium praising the anthology *al-Rawḍ-ul-Aryaḍ* (The Verdant Garden). Here is an excerpt:

The captive of justice stood for fairness / that we knew not his beloved from his loathed
He would examine matters from all sides / and meet people with his lenient spirit
The master of poetry invents his rhymes / with the might of his verses, he shields himself
All praise for him may not suffice, even if, / from the Verdant Garden, his rhymes and
verses borrowed

Al-Shaykh Nāṣif al-Yāzījī,

Quoted in: Viscount Phillippe de Tarrazi. Ash-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asūr, one of the editors of the official newspaper *Lubnān* and *Thamarāt-ul-Funūn* and *Lisān-ul-Ḥāl*. In *Tarikh as-Ṣihafa-l-‘Arabiyyah*. Vol. 1. Beirut: al-Matba ‘a-l-Adabiyyah, 1913, page 138.

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The following lines are from a poem that Shaykh Salīm al-Jarūdī had delivered after his funeral prayers [Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asūr] at the Grand ‘Umarī Mosque:

From this world al-Asūr has walked away /and unto the after world; verily! A splendid
journey
An imam who was the pivot of all graces /around which they would all orbit
uninterrupted
Calamity has hit the realm of knowledge /and every light in the universe waxed dim

Ash-Shaykh Salim al-Jarudi,

Quoted in: Viscount Phillippe de Tarrazi. Ash-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asūr, one of the editors of the official newspaper *Lubnān* and *Thamarāt al-Funūn* and *Lisān-ul-Ḥāl*. In *Tarikh as-Ṣihafa-l-‘Arabiyyah*. Vol. 1. Beirut: al-Matba ‘a-l-Adabiyyah, 1913, page 138.

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Yūsuf Al-Asūr (1815 – 1889) was born in Sidon and educated at Al-Azhar. He was then appointed judge in Tripoli, then mufti of Acre, then public prosecutor in Lebanon under Dāwūd Pasha. He was also an instructor in the Arabic language at the *Dār al-Mu‘allimīn* al-Kubra (the Higher Normal School) in Istanbul before returning to his country and teaching at the Patriarchal School in Beirut and the Syrian Protestant College. He then

published *Thamarāt-ul-Fanūn* (The Fruits of the Arts), which was the first newspaper to be started by a Muslim (1875). In addition to all of that, he used to give private lessons in Islamic jurisprudence and he edited and commented in al-Majallah (Beirut, 1904). He was also one of the scholars who taught an elite of lawyers.

Philip Ḥittī,

“Al-Tali‘a fi-l-‘Ulama’ wal-‘Udaba’.” In *Lubnān fit-Tārikh mundhu Aqdam al-‘Usūr ila ‘Aşrinā al-Hādir*. Translated by Anīs Frayḥah. Edited by Nicholas Ziyādah. Beirut; New York: Mu‘assasat Franklin li-ṭ-Ṭiba‘a wa-n-Nashr, 1959, page 563.

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Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr was at the forefront of the men who lead the modern *nahda* (awakening). He was a well-versed linguist and had studied and delved deep into the heritage of the *salaf* (revered ancestors), albeit not adding to it. He composed classical poetry and was highly distinguished in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and an authority to turn to in solving matters. He was involved in polemics and dialectics with some of his contemporaries such as Shaykh Nāşīf Al-Yāzījī and Sa‘īd Ash-Shartūnī and he supported Ash-Shidyaq in his dialectics with Shaykh Ibrahim Al-Yāzījī. Al-Asīr was a self-made man who rejected and rebelled against the realities of life and thus he went to study at al-Murādiyya School in Damascus and al-Azhar in Egypt. He deepened his knowledge in the sciences of his times and served in different positions in the government drawing the attention of statesmen in the Ottoman Empire. He taught generations of young men during the *nahda*. He also played a role in the revival of olden heritage and facilitated the learning of the Arabic language. Yet he was not able to loosen the noose of the past.

Muḥsin al-Aḥmar,

Ash-Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asir, 1815-1889 AD / 1230-1307 AH, Ḥayātuḥu wa Nitājuḥu. Thesis submitted for the certificate of competence for secondary education, supervised by Dr. Jabbūr ‘Abd-un-Nūr, Lebanese University, 1970.

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And he finally decided to move to Beirut “for the quality of its climate and settled there for good,” during which time he served as chief clerk at the sharia court in Beirut and educated many students and people who sought him. He was also gentle and peaceful and had a big heart and an open mind and thus welcomed Christian learners on a par with Muslims. He departed from inherited tradition and rushed to teach Christians the Arabic sciences that used to be considered exclusive to Muslims, contributing in great value to this *nahda* that has gone down in history for its importance. He also served as mufti in Acre before he was summoned to Bteddine by Dāwūd Pasha, Lebanon’s first Muṭaṣarrif, and installed as public prosecutor of Lebanon. He then travelled to Istanbul to assume the position of chair of the examining panel at the Ministry of Education. He attained high standing within the Ottoman society and was offered a high-level position and a high salary by the Ottoman government. However, he declined to accept the offer in order to pursue his scholastic ambitions and protect his health as he found the cold weather of Istanbul difficult to bear. And so he returned to Beirut, where he taught and wrote until his death in November of the year 1889. This generous Shaykh specialized in the Arabic language and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and so he wrote *Rā’id-ul-Farā’id*, and edited *Atwaqu-dh-Dhahab* and he published his classical, *muwashshah* (poem of quantitative meters in nonstandard patterns), and sapiential poems in an anthology entitled *al-Rawd-ul-Aryād*.

Asad Rustum,

“Wa Ashyākhunā.” In Lubnān fī ‘Ahd-ul-Muṭaṣarrifiyyah. Beirut: Dār an-Nahar li-n-Nashr, 1972, pages 283-282.

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Our Shaykh was light-spirited and of pleasant company. He was a poet like al-Aḥḍab, even if he did not possess alike an abundance of literary material. His poetry is clear and eloquent, mostly panegyrics and those of his friend Aḥmad Fāris occupying a quarter of his anthology. He had also written amusing criticisms when the literary battle ensued between al-Shidyāq and al-Yāzījī and al-Bustānī, and the Shaykh reigned victorious in his defence of his ally al-Shidyāq [...].

[...] Not to mention that Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr was a glorified poet, and his anthology holds his classical, *muwashshahāt* (plural of *muwashshah*), and sapiential poems, and below are some of what he wrote of the poets of his time:

My two fellows, how many a poet endeavoured / but failed to compose an enduring verse
or poem

And the finest poetry is that which is polished / and eloquent, in which delights the alive
and the perished

And enchants the ears, whoever the reciter may be / and becomes repeated on many a
pleasant tongue

Also Shaykh al-Assir composed verses describing Lebanon and its modern *nahda* (awakening) following the massacres of the year 1860, the period after which was characterized by somewhat of an intellectual independence:

We see Lebanon now worthy of praise / for it wallows in safety and hope earned
A heaven on earth, whoever in it sets foot / contented and delighted will be their spirit
For Lebanon has bestowed knowledge / upon the books, disciplines and sciences
Cables¹ now in place to spread the news / and printing presses for the finest papers

The Shaykh's literary repertoire includes epistles and this was a bandwagon that a man of letters at that time had to ride.

Mārūn 'Abbūd,

"Al-Shaykhān al-Aḥdab wa-l-Asīr." In *Ruwwād al-Nahḍah al-Ḥadīthah*. Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1977, pages 103-104.

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He was one of those who lead the way in the modern *nahda* (awakening). He was silver-tongued, imaginative narrator, precise man of letters, masterful in prose and poetry and a jurisconsult trained in the science of *farā'id* (ordained quotas). He also taught many

¹ He means telegraphic wires and journals.

generations of authors at the institutions where he lectured, such as: the American school at 'Abayh, the Arab Protestant College in Beirut and the Hikma School.

He was insightful and pedantic having placed his trust in jurisprudence and the Arabic sciences. He also exchanged epistles (poems or prose in the form of a letter) with authors of his time such as Shaykh Ibrahim al-Ahdab, Ahmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, and Shaykh Nāṣif al-Yazji.

Yūsuf As 'ad Dāghir,

Maṣāḍir al-Dirāsah al-Adabiyya, V.II , al-Fikr al-'Arabi al-Ḥadīth fī Siyari A'lamih al-Rāḥilūn (1800-1955). Beirut: Manshūrat al-Jāmi'ā al-'Arabiyya, Qism al-Dirāsāt al-Adabiyya, 7, 1943, page 126.

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Yūsuf al-Asūr (1815) was born in Sidon and after having learned the sciences in his homeland and then at al-Azhar, he was then appointed judge in Tripoli, then mufti of Acre, then public prosecutor in Lebanon under Dāwūd Pasha. He was also an instructor in the Arabic language at the *Dār al-Mu'allimīn* al-Kubra (the Higher Normal School) in Istanbul before returning to his country and teaching at the Patriarchal School in Beirut, the Syrian Protestant College and the Hikma School. He was insightful, silver-tongued and masterful in prose and poetry, and his accomplishments include a commentary on *Aṭwāq al-Dhahab* by al-Zamakhshari, publishing *Thamarat al-Funūn* (The Fruits of the Arts) newspaper, and edited and commented in *al-Majalla* in 1904. He composed classical, *muwashshah* (poem of quantitative meters in nonstandard patterns), and sapiential poems, which he published in an anthology entitled *al-Rawd al-Aryāq*.

Fu'ād al-Khūrī,

“Al-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asūr.” In *Min Mashārif al-Mi'ah, Lubnān: Wujuh Ḥadāriyyah*. Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Jāmi'ah al-'Arabiyyah, Qism al-Dirāsāt al-Adabiyya, 73, 1987, page 289.

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However, Yūsuf al-Asir, unlike Nāṣif al-Yāzījī and Buṭrus al-Bustānī, was a Sunni Muslim scholar adept in fiqh and the Islamic sciences. Born in Sidon and educated at al-Azhar, he held the office of judge in Tripoli several times, then mufti in Tyr, and then public prosecutor of Lebanon under Dāwūd Pasha. He also taught Arabic at Istanbul for a period of time, before returning to Beirut, where he taught at the Patriarchal School and the Syrian Protestant College. Yūsuf al-Asīr did not gain the importance of Yāzījī and Bustānī in literature and scholarship, but he nevertheless became Van Dyck’s right hand after 1857 in the translation of the Arabic Bible. Van Dyck held al-Asīr’s scholarship and literary prowess in high regard. Al-Asīr was the first Muslim in Lebanon to be associated with the Arabic literary awakening that was led by Christians and with time influenced other Muslims in the country. His works include poetry in varied styles and a commentary on the Ottoman Code that was published posthumously. Al-Asīr, like his colleague al-Bustānī, was a pioneer of journalism as he established *Thamarat al-Funūn* (The Fruits of the Arts) in 1875, which was the first newspaper published by a Muslim.

Kamal Salibi,

“Al-Yaqadha al-Lubnāniyya.” In *Tārīkh Lubnān al-Ḥadīth*. 7th ed. Beirut: Dar an-Nahār li-l-Nashr, 1991, pages 188-189.

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The ‘*Allāma* (most learned) scholar and the one who is a fathomless ocean of perception. The first of distinguished intellectuals and the conclusion of all great linguists. A genius of his time and one of a kind. The most knowledgeable scholar of his time. Acknowledged for his great kindness and good manners. An eminent imaginative professor and a well-versed writer. The late Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr, may Allah rest his soul in peace and make paradise his eternal abode.

Front Cover of the book **Sharḥ Ra’id al-Farā’id** by al-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr, B’abda: al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Uthmāniyyah, 1318 AH.

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