The present work is the fifth volume of Islamic Philosophy and Theology: Texts and Studies series edited by Hans Daiber and in Binyamin Abrahamov's adaptation of a part of his Ph.D. thesis entitled Theological Epistles of al-Kasim ibn Ibrahîm (originally in Hebrew). Kitâb al-Dalîl al-Kabîr is one of the epistles which deals with the argument for the existence of God and the creation of world. For a proper appreciation of his epistles, the times of al-Qasim ibn Ibrahîm ibn Ismâ'îl ibn Ibrahîm ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Hasan ibn 'Ali (CE 785–860) should be kept in mind. Binyamin Abrahamov has translated this epistle. The original Arabic text has been reproduced side by side with Binyamin Abrahamov's translation. In his Introduction and in footnotes the writer discusses the theo-philosophical position of al-Qasim, and contrary to Madelung's view he considers him a Mu'tazilite, as the definition of Mu'tazilism in those initial phases was rather flexible.

The main theme of the present epistle is the argument from design to prove the existence of God. In his Introduction, Binyamin Abrahamov discusses the argument from the historical point of view and informs us that the Mu'tazilites (for example, al-Nazzâm) used this argument not only to prove God's existence but also His unity, wisdom, knowledge and power. Later the Ash'arîtes and other philosophers and thinkers also resorted to it. In the Introduction he does not critically examine the argument from design as such and does not compare it with present philosophical views. His aim is simply to state the exact historical position in Muslim medieval era. He informs us that 'the main theological issues discussed by al-Kasim are: the arguments for the existence of God and creation of the world, God's unity and attributes, theodicy, belief and unbelief, the imamate.' (p. 7) He also talks of other epistles of al-Qasim. Al-Qasim asserts that there are evident signs of creation, therefore, the world is created and secondly as the signs are perfect, therefore only God is the creator. Binyamin Abrahamov shows his disagreement with Madelung in interpreting the position of Mu'tazilite school and also that of al-Qasim. For example, on the authority of the present epistle he claims that al-Qasim held that God's qualities are infinite in number, unlimited and absolute. But he further opines that this does not go against al-Qasim's view that these eternal qualities are not separate from God's essence. By the way, this reminds one of Spinoza (1632–1677).

For al-Qasim, God's qualities prove His oneness, i.e., in the identification of qualities with God Himself. His absolute dissimilarity with everything else proves that He is one. Binyamin Abrahamov attempts to find al-Qasim's solution to the opposition between God's unity and simplicity and multiplicity of qualities. Strictly speaking, no solution is possible, if we adhere to the traditional way of looking at things, i.e., absolute distinction between substance and quality. This becomes all the more evident in the futile and misguided controversy of creation of the Qur'ân between Mu'tazilites and Ash'arîtes. Binyamin Abrahamov devotes also some thoughts to al-Qasim's refutation of anthropomorphism and tahabbâh and beatific vision. He argues to show how strongly the Mu'tazilites influenced al-Qasim. He also informs us that for understanding the Qur'ân, al-Qasim relies on Arabic language, the various interpretations given by other scholars, and on the recorded sayings of the Companions of the Prophet (peace be on him).

Binyamin Abrahamov, while discussing God's justice, brings home his point once again that al-Qasim was a Mu'tazilite. He ably argues that al-Qasim holds that God is just and He rewards people for their deeds. He also discusses al-Qasim's views on belief and his view that a believer is protected from grave sins and that believing means obeying God, but this is impossible without knowing Him. Thus "whoever denies a precept due to lack of knowledge or denial of its having been
revealed is considered to be an unbeliever”. But his definition of unbeliever and its cognate terms are not always consistent with each other.

Binyamin Abrahamov also discusses the connections between al-Qāsim and Zaydiyyah and his views on Khilāfah and Imāmah. There is no doubt that the Introduction itself is a scholarly work and worth reading.

The Arabic text of the epistle along its translation is very useful for having first-hand knowledge of al-Qāsim and of religio-philosophical climate of that era.

The title of the epistle, Kitāb al-Dalīl al-Kabīr, (The Epistle of Great Proof) aptly shows its contents. It concerns proof for the existence of God and is admixture of both philosophical and theological cogitations and argumentations. Al-Qāsim’s main philosophical argument, viz. Argument from design, may be expressed in his own words:

God has established to know Him the perfect signs of His wisdom which He has manifested in things. These signs come only from wise well-doer, one who makes signs perfectly and they are beautiful and perfect manifested pieces of evidence for His providential design.

Unless this method of arguing is strengthened and made more sophisticated through philosophical analysis and by bringing in modern scientific researches, this argument from design cannot hold water. Designs in nature may be explained by cosmological and biological theory of evolution and by the process of natural selection. Furthermore, the argument, in its present form, cannot stand philosophical analysis. But obviously this is not the purpose of the editor, Binyamin Abrahamov, in his Introduction and in presenting the Arabic text and its translation. The purpose obviously is only to present an important thinker of medieval times in medieval religio-philosophical setting. And in this he has been quite successful.

Al-Qāsim quotes extensively from the Qur’ān, e.g., “Have you considered the water you drink, do you bring it down from the clouds, or are We the bringers? Had we wished, we would have made it salty. . .” (56:68-70) After describing the changes he asserts that there must be one who brings the changes. In several cases al-Qāsim commits the mistake of taking or confusing analytical propositions as factual ones. For example, he says: “Every separated thing must necessarily have one who separates it, just as every united thing must have one who unties its ties”. (p. 99) Again he says: “According to the senses and reason, (even) in the opinion of a person blinded by insanity, there must be a builder, either hidden or seen, for each building, a raiser and flattener of each raised. . .”

It is interesting to note that al-Qāsim, in order to prove the unity of God, uses an argument which smacks of ontological argument which St. Anselm (1033–1109) used to prove the existence of God — the divinity of one Lord is superior and more perfect than that which belongs to two Lords and is divided between them. Such divinity is superior, since had it belonged to two (Lords), each of the two would lack (a part of divinity), and the lack. . .

Al-Qāsim lays emphasis on acquisition of certain knowledge. He says that a certain knowledge of anything can only be had if one has certain knowledge of God. Again, “If you know God with certainty you will perform good works and if you perform good works, you will believe”. It appears that al-Qāsim moves towards certain Coherence theory of Truth and Belief, although he does not elaborate this with any reasoning. Ultimately he holds that knowledge of God can truly be had through correct understanding and believing in the Qur’ān.

The translator deserves praise for introducing an important work from the Muslim medieval period — the golden age of Muslim philosophy.

Intisar-ul-Haque