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Controversies over Ibn `Arabi's *Fusus*: The Faith of Pharaoh¹

“I believe that there is no God but Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am of those who submit to God.”² These words of the Pharaoh of Egypt, spoken while the waters of the Red Sea were about to close over his head, appear in the Qur’anic account of the story of Moses, and they show the defiant opponent of the Prophet making one last effort to escape the doom that has befallen him. God’s words do not appear encouraging, however: “Now? When before you rebelled, and were of the evildoers? But today We will save you in your body, so you may be a sign to those who come after....”³ Commentators and storytellers have generally assumed that Pharaoh, though preserved bodily, was condemned to hell. As in Jewish legend, so in Muslim tales of the prophets, the angel Gabriel made Pharaoh wait until it was too late to make a valid confession of faith, by “cramming his mouth with slime.”⁴

¹ An earlier version of this essay was read at the American Academy of Religion’s conference at Chicago in 1984.

² Qur’an 10:90.

³ Qur’an 10:91–92.

⁴ A. J. Wensinck and G. Vajda, “Fir’awn,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. ii (1965), p. 917.

Yet in mystical circles, this common-sense interpretation has not always been upheld. A characteristic example of Sufistic interpretation of the Qur'an revolves around the case of the faith of Pharaoh, according to the analysis of Muhyi al-Din Ibn `Arabi's (d. 1240), probably the most prolific and influential of Sufi theorists. He himself was no stranger to controversy during his lifetime. His highly original views were provocative enough to rouse intense criticism also for many centuries after his death. Ibn `Arabi's thesis of the validity of Pharaoh's confession of faith, which occupies only a couple of pages in the *Fusus al-Hikam*, has attracted a remarkable amount of comment from both his supporters and detractors. What were the issues at stake in this controversy, and what does it reveal of the method of scriptural exegesis practiced by Ibn `Arabi's and his school?

Many authors have written on Ibn `Arabi's theory of the faith of Pharaoh, in the dozens of commentaries that have been written on the *Fusus*, and in the many polemical works written for and against his theories.⁵ Yet perhaps the most convenient example is a brief treatise on "The Faith of Pharaoh" that the fifteenth-century Iranian philosopher Jalal al-Din al-Davani⁶ wrote in defense of Ibn `Arabi's view; this work was systematically

⁵ Cf. Ibn Taymiyya (d.721/1328), *Risala fi iman Fir'awn*, and Badran ibn Ahmad al-Khalili (d. ca. 1103/1691), *Natijat al-tawfiq wal-'awn fi al-radd 'ala al-qa'ilin bi-iman Fir'awn*, the eighth and ninth treatises in MS. 4644 Arabic, India Office Library, London (see A. J. Arberry, "Notes on Manuscripts Recently Acquired by the India Office Library," *Islamic Culture* 13/4 [Oct. 1939], pp. 446-49); see Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghumri, also known as Sibṭ al-Marsafi (d. 970/1562), *Tanzih al-kawn 'an i'tiqad iman Fir'awn*, cf. Osman Yahya, *Histoire et classification de l'oeuvre d'Ibn al-'Arabi, Etude critique* (Damascus: Institute Français de Damas, 1964), 1:117; `Abd Allah al-Rumi al-Busnawi (d. 1054/1644), *Risalat al-Busnawi fi iman Fir'awn*, MS. Azhar 2794 (halim) 33397/27-28, cited by Yahya, 1:120. In the catalogue of the Yahuda MSS. by Rudolf Mach (*Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts [Yahuda Section] in the Garrett Collection, Princeton University Library* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), there are five treatises on the subject: 2179, *Sharh qawl Ibn al-'Arabi fi haqq iman Fir'awn*, by Muhammad ibn Qutb al-Din al-Izniqui (d. 885/1480); 2182, *Risala fi bayan iman Fir'awn*, by Muhammad ibn `Ali al-Qarabaghi (d. 942/1535), shelflist 3091, fols. 44b-45a; 2183, *al-Muntakhab min al-ta'yid wal-'awn lil-qa'ilin bi-iman Fir'awn*, selections made by Nasri ibn Ahmad al-Husri from the *Ta'yid* of Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Rasul al-Barzanji (d. 1103/1691), Berlin 3399 (anon.), shelflist 518, fols. 60b-63a; 2184, *Risala fi iman Fir'awn*, by Akmal al-Din [al-Barbati?], shelflist 4129, fols. 53b-55b; 2185, *Risala fi 'adm qabul iman Fir'awn*, anon.

⁶ D. 907/1501, see Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte Der Arabischen Litteratur*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1943), 2:217.

refuted in a detailed commentary by the sixteenth-century jurist `Ali al-Qari al-Harawi,<sup>7</sup> who called his refutation, *The Flight for Relief from Those Who Claim Pharaoh's Belief*.<sup>8</sup> Davani follows Ibn `Arabi and his chief commentators in seeing the case of Pharaoh as the most extreme example of the divine mercy, which saves even this worst of sinners when he repents at the last minute. `Ali al-Qari, on the other hand, views Pharaoh's confession of faith as the most treacherous deception, but due to his respect for Ibn `Arabi's reputation, he regards the Shaykh's positive evaluation of Pharaoh as an unfortunate mistake. The underlying issue, though not stated directly, is that of scriptural exegesis. Ibn `Arabi's mystical interpretation of Pharaoh is so contrary to the Sunni consensus that even a sympathetic conservative Sufi like `Ali al-Qari only explains it away with difficulty.

Ibn `Arabi's discussion of the faith of Pharaoh is almost in the nature of an aside in the 25th chapter of the *Fusus*, which is devoted to Moses. When Pharaoh's daughter prophesies that the infant Moses will one day be a consolation both to her and to Pharaoh,<sup>9</sup> Ibn `Arabi comments that this refers to Pharaoh's eventual submission to God, which would render him sinless. Elsewhere, in the chapter on Solomon, Ibn `Arabi suggests that Pharaoh's conversion was inspired by the example of his magicians, who were convinced by the miraculous powers that God entrusted to Moses and Aaron. In any case, Pharaoh's confession of faith shows that he did not despair of the divine mercy.¹⁰ After discussing at length the meaning of Moses' encounter with Pharaoh, Ibn `Arabi returns briefly to the subject of Pharaoh's confession of faith once more. He observes that Pharaoh was not certain of dying at that moment, and hence his confession was valid, unlike those who will belatedly protest their faith when

⁷ D. 1014/ 1605 in Mecca, cf. Brockelmann, 2:394. He also wrote several treatises critical of Ibn al-`Arabi; (*ibid.*, 2:395/40–41).

⁸ *Iman Fir'awn wal-radd `alayhi lil-'allama `Ali ibn Sultan Muhammad al-Qari wa ta'yid sayyidi Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi lil-iman*, ed. Ibn al-Khatib, Ghara'ib al-Musannafat (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Misriyya wa-Maktabuh, 1383/1964).

⁹ Qur'an 28:9.

¹⁰ Ibn `Arabi, *Fusus al-hikam*, ed. Abu al-`Ala' `Afifi (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-`Arabi, 1365/1946), 1:201; *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 195–255.

they see the punishments of hell before them. Thus God both saved him from the punishment of the afterlife and preserved his body from the flood. Ibn `Arabi acknowledges that most people consider Pharaoh among the damned, but points out that no verse of the Qur'an clearly states this, though the case is different with Pharaoh's people. Numerous Qur'anic passages refer to the punishment of Pharaoh's people in hellfire, but Pharaoh himself is never explicitly condemned in this way.¹¹

Davani, writing some two and a half centuries after Ibn `Arabi, begins his short treatise as the response to an inquiry from an unnamed eminent person, and states that it is his purpose to clear Ibn `Arabi of the suspicion of heresy that has arisen as a result of this thesis. After asking his readers to cast aside any sectarian prejudice (*ta'assub*), he attempts to prove that Pharaoh's confession of faith was legally valid as an act of assent in the heart and confession with the tongue, without coercion. This submission erased his previous sins, and Pharaoh's bodily preservation is a sign for others of divine forgiveness. God's reply to Pharaoh, "Now? When before you rebelled, and were of the evildoers?"¹² is grammatically interpreted as God's courteous reproof to a no longer rebellious convert. Davani is particularly eager to show that Pharaoh's faith is not the "faith of despair" (*Iman al-ya's*) that is invalid because professed during the actual death throes or afterwards at the resurrection. In an ingenious deduction, Davani points out that Pharaoh confessed his faith in a fairly long sentence, so it is unlikely that the death-rattle had yet begun.¹³

Going further, Davani maintains that drowning in the flood that inundated the Egyptians was the only punishment that Pharaoh had to suffer for his oppression of the Israelites, and he supports this by citing the commentator Baydawi as maintaining this view. This is curious, since Baydawi held no such opinion. Kashani, incidentally, admits that Pharaoh will probably suffer some limited punishment in hell for his crimes against the Israelites. But Pharaoh's leading of his people into the floor of

¹¹ *Fusus*, 1:211–12; trans., p. 265.

¹² Qur'an 10:91.

¹³ *Iman Fir'awn*, pp. 14–20.

the Red Sea, according to Davani, was a deliberate self-sacrifice, though he admits that there is no evidence regarding Pharaoh's ability to swim. In conclusion, Davani asserts that all of the Qur'anic references to the death of Pharaoh are liable to interpretation (*ihimal*), with the exception of his confession of faith. Those who accuse Ibn `Arabi of heresy (*ilhad*) are ignoramuses incapable of understanding his thought. Such a one speaks ignorantly without knowing his technical terminology, for "he who does not know a thing denies it." Opposing the view of Ibn `Arabi on this question is therefore tantamount to restricting the divine mercy.¹⁴ The main lines of Davani's interpretation agree with the conclusions of the principal commentators on the *Fusus*, such as Da'ud al Qaysari (d. 751/1350) and `Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani (d. 730/1330).¹⁵

`Ali al-Qari eagerly responded to Davani's treatise, a century after the latter's death. His initial reaction is that the whole idea of Pharaoh as a true believer is false according to the Qur'an and *Sunna*, and the consensus of the '*ulama*'. The main tenor of `Ali al-Qari's remarks is theological, but as a practiced polemicist he is not above casting satirical barbs at his opponent. For instance, his detailed commentary (which is over four times as long as the original text) begins with a tart remark about Davani's opening invocation in the *bism Allah*: Davani's use of the phrase "the straight path" (*al-siratal-mustaqim*) does not mean he is on it. `Ali al-Qari points out further that Davani's announced intention to proceed without "imitation" (*taqlid*) means that he arrogantly places himself in the rank of the masters of truth and subtlety. If he had been a follower of the traditional (*salaf wa khalaf*) commentators, he would not have fallen under the condemnation of the *hadith*, "He who speaks of the Qur'an from his opinion (*ra'y*) should mark out his place in hellfire." Finally, `Ali al-Qari can not resist pointing out the egotism that underlies Davani's use of phrases like, "from my praised Lord", instead of saying

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 23–24.

¹⁵ Da'ud al-Qaysari, *Kitab Sharh fusus al-hikam* (Tehran, 1299), pp. 451–52; `Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani, *Sharh `ala fusus al-hikam* (2nd ed., Cairo: Shirkat Maktaba wa Matba'a Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1386/1966), pp. 310, 322.

"the praised Lord of all". In short, the position that `Ali al-Qari establishes at the beginning employs *ad hominem* arguments to question Davani's credentials.¹⁶

`Ali al-Qari next proceeds to question systematically nearly every one of Davani's assumptions. He strenuously objects to Davani calling the case of Pharaoh's faith an open question on which there are differences of opinion; this question is in fact undisputed among the '*ulama*', and the unlearned will be misled by such a brash assertion of a stupid heresy. Theologically, Davani's assertion of the sincerity of Pharaoh's confession of faith is unsupportable. Pharaoh's own pretension to divinity makes his confession of the divine unity impossible. Furthermore, he omitted to say the second half of the creed, certifying that he believed in Moses' prophethood, so his confession is legally invalid (as is that of the Jew or Christian who has faith in God but not in Muhammad's prophethood). `Ali al-Qari also refutes the notion that Pharaoh would be spared damnation, since his submission has already been proved invalid. As a sign of divine forgiveness, Pharaoh would make a poor example because of his ignominious death (here the modern editor balks and points out that many prophets have suffered terrible deaths also). In short, what Davani calls sincere, `Ali al-Qari calls a lie.¹⁷

Through many other arguments, `Ali al-Qari pursues his opponent, asserting again and again that no one can prove the sincerity of Pharaoh, that he in fact was a clever and duplicitous atheist who sought to avoid his impending doom by a ruse. At the end of the treatise, `Ali al-Qari returns to Davani's stated purpose of refuting the imputation of heresy to Ibn `Arabi. First of all, the charges against Ibn `Arabi are justified in this case. To Davani's charge that the critics do not understand the Sufi terminology, `Ali al-Qari coolly replies that externalist '*ulama*' may not know Sufi terminology, but esoteric '*ulama*' are ignorant of the basic points of Arabic grammar. In any case, this subject

¹⁶ *Iman Fir'awn*, pp. 26-27, 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 38-39, 43-44.

concerns Qur'anic problems (*mabahith*) and theology, not Sufi terminology.¹⁸

`Ali al-Qari still has one formidable problem to deal with, and that is his basic respect for Ibn `Arabi as one of the classical masters of Sufism. Davani he can dispense with, but `Ali al-Qari's own master, Shaykh Shams al-Din Muhammad al-Bakri (d. A.D. 1547), frequently praised Ibn al-`Arabi in his assemblies. `Ali al-Qari then recounts the ambivalent feeling that many of the conservative modern Sufis have displayed toward Ibn `Arabi's theories. He quotes the Qur'an commentator Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) on the dispute over Ibn al-`Arabi—among his supporters, his critics, and those who are totally confused. Suyuti's solution to the problem, based on a dubious remark attributed to Ibn `Arabi, is to recommend belief in his sainthood while forbidding the reading of his books. The Sufi terminology is too difficult for most people to read without falling into heresy, but one who without proof accuses Ibn `Arabi of being a heretic runs the risk of incurring divine wrath by insulting one of God's saints. Therefore, it is simpler to forbid the reading of his books, since in any case spiritual experience cannot be produced by reading (this is essentially the situation current in Egypt today, where the works of Ibn `Arabi are periodically subjected to public condemnation). `Ali al-Qari then cites the interesting view of the *hadith* scholar Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. 852/1448) on Ibn `Arabi's thesis of the faith of Pharaoh. "God bereft this man [Ibn al-`Arabi] of his mind, and gave him no sense, and blinded him until that occurred That is the meaning of the saying of the Prophet, 'When God most high wishes to prosecute His decree, He deprives the intelligent of their intellects'"¹⁹ (a saying that recalls the adage of Euripides, "Those whom God wishes to destroy, He first drives mad").

`Ali al-Qari has saved one scholarly shot with which to blast Davani. He states that Ibn `Arabi himself, in the 62nd chapter of the *Futuhāt*, mentioned Pharaoh along with Nimrud as among the sinners who claimed divine lordship for themselves and are

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 80, 83.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 85–90.

hence in hellfire eternally. It is `Ali al-Qari's opinion that Ibn al-`Arabi did not really contradict this correct view in the *Fusus*, but only meant that the proof of Pharaoh's infidelity appears less than decisive. Ibn `Arabi here suffered from a *lapsus calami*, and a slip of the foot. `Ali al-Qari has inverted the usual argument about not interpreting Sufi technical terminology by ordinary standards; Ibn `Arabi's clear statement that Pharaoh was of the faithful was after all just a mistake—he really did not mean it.²⁰

`Ali al-Qari's predicament was typical of later conservative Sufis, who actually disagreed with Ibn `Arabi's theories though they revered his name. His solution was to avoid the issue by condemning the doctrine while praising the man. The real issue was stated more forcibly by Da'ud al-Qaysari in his commentary on this passage. "There is no objection to the Shaykh [Ibn `Arabi] regarding his remarks on this subject, because he was ordered to say this, since everything that is in the book [*Fusus al-hikam*] was written at the order of the Prophet. Thus, he is excused, as the deluded objector is excused."<sup>21</sup> Qaysari is referring to Ibn `Arabi's own statement at the beginning of the *Fusus*, that the Prophet Muhammad gave him the book in Damascus in 627/1229, so the contents of this work are inspired. In effect, this constitutes license for mystical interpretation of the Qur'an, beyond the consensus of the traditional '*ulama*', and this is where Ibn `Arabi and Davani both differ radically from `Ali al-Qari. The faith of Pharaoh actually must be understood in the context of the *Fusus*, where it follows the startling interpretation of Moses and Pharaoh as manifestations of polar tensions in the Divine Being. By virtue of his lordship on earth, Pharaoh had the right to question Moses while inwardly recognizing Moses' mission as complementary to his own. Though we cannot pursue this context here, it is clear that the faith of Pharaoh is merely one aspect of Ibn `Arabi's reading of the Scripture. Like the Christian philosopher Origen (185?–254 C.E.), who foresaw even

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 36, 91–92.

²¹ Qaysari, pp. 451–52.

the salvation of Satan when “God shall be all in all”²² (I Cor. 15:28), Ibn `Arabi felt that the divine mercy would suffer no limitation. The variance of this mystical interpretation from the standard consensus constitutes a perennial tension within each religious tradition.

²² Pierre Batiffol, “Apocatastasis,” *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, (1907), 1:599–600, notes that this doctrine was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 543.

It's Not Just Academic!

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