

## CONTROVERSIES OVER IBN AL-'ARABĪ'S *FUṢUṢ*: THE FAITH OF PHARAOH <sup>1</sup>

CARL W. ERNST

"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."<sup>2</sup> 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'ānic 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 . . . ."<sup>3</sup> Commentators and story-tellers 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."<sup>4</sup>

Yet in mystical circles, this common-sense interpretation has not always been upheld. A characteristic example of Sufistic interpretation of the Qur'ān revolves around the case of the faith of Pharaoh, according to the analysis of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. A.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 al-'Arabī's thesis of the validity of Pharaoh's confession of faith, which occupies only a couple

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(1) An earlier version of this article was read at the American Academy of Religion's conference at Chicago in 1984.

(2) Al-Qur'an, X : 90.

(3) *Ibid.*, X : 91-2.

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

of pages in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, 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 practised by Ibn al-'Arabī and his school?

Many authors have written on Ibn al-'Arabī's theory of the faith of Pharaoh, in the dozens of commentaries that have been written on the *Fuṣūṣ*, and in the many polemical works written for and against his theories.<sup>5</sup> Yet perhaps the most convenient example is a brief treatise on "The Faith of Pharaoh" that the 15th century Iranian philosopher Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawwānī<sup>6</sup> wrote in defense of Ibn al-'Arabī's view; this work was systematically refuted in a detailed commentary by the 16th century jurist 'Alī al-Qārī al-Harawī,<sup>7</sup>

- (5) Cf. Ibn Taymīyah (d. 721/1328), *Risālah fī Imān Fir'awn*, and Badrān ibn Aḥmad al-Khalīlī (d. c. 1103/1691), *Natījat al-Tawfiq wa al-'Awn fī al-Radd 'alā al-Qā'ilīn bi-Ṣiḥhat Imān 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*, vol. 13, no. 4, Oct. 1939, pp. 446-49); Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghumrī, also known as Ṣibt al-Marsafī (d. 970/1562), *Tanzīh al-Kawn 'an Itiqād Islām Fir'awn*, cf. Osman Yahya, *Histoire et Classification de l' Oeuvre d' Ibn al-' Arabi, Etude Critique* (Institut Francais de Damas, Damascus, 1964), vol. i, p. 117; 'Abd Allāh al-Rāmī al-Busnawī (d. 1054/1644), *Risālat al-Busnawī fī Imān Fir'awn*, MS. Azhar, 2794 (halim) 33397/27-28, cf. Yahya, vol. i, p. 120. In the catalogue of the Yahuda MSS. by Rudolf Mach (*Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts [Yahuda Section] in the Garret Collection, Princeton University Library*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J. 1977), there are five treatises on this subject: 2179, *Sharḥ Qawl Ibn al-' Arabī fī Haqq Imān Fir'awn*, by Muḥammad ibn Quṭb al-Dīn al-Iznīqī (d. 885/1480), cf. Osm. Muall. vol. i, p. 160 (shelflist 4602, ff. 14b-19a); 2182, *Risālah fī Bayān Imān Fir'awn*, by Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Qarābāghī (d. 942/1535), (shelflist 3091, ff. 44b-45a); 2183, *al-Muntakhab min al-Ta'yīd wa al-'Awn li al-Qā'ilīn bi Imān Fir'awn*, selections made by Nasrī ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥusrī from the *Ta'yīd* of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Rasūl al-Barzanjī (d. 1103/1691), Berlin 3399 (anon.), (shelflist 518, ff. 60b-63a); 2184 *Risālah fī Imān Fir'awn*, by Akmal al-Dīn [al-Bābartī ?] (shelflist 4129, ff. 53b-55b); 2185, *Risālah fī 'Adm Qubāl Imān Fir'awn*, anon.
- (6) D. 907/1501, cf. *GAL*, vol. ii, p. 217.
- (7) D. 1014/1605 in Mecca, cf. *GAL*, vol. ii, p. 394. He also wrote several treatises critical of Ibn al-'Arabī (*ibid.*, vol. ii, pp. 395/40-41),

who called his refutation *The Flight for Relief from Those Who Claim Pharaoh's Belief*.<sup>8</sup> Dawwānī follows Ibn al-'Arabī 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. 'Alī al-Qārī, on the other hand, views Pharaoh's confession of faith as the most treacherous deception, but due to his respect for Ibn al-'Arabī'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 al-'Arabī's mystical interpretation of Pharaoh is so contrary to the Sunnī consensus that even a sympathetic conservative Sufi like 'Alī al-Qārī only explains it away with difficulty.

Ibn al-'Arabī's discussion of the faith of Pharaoh is almost in the nature of an aside in the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*, 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 al-'Arabī comments that this refers to Pharaoh's eventual submission to God, which would render him sinless. Elsewhere, in the chapter on Solomon, Ibn al-'Arabī 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.<sup>10</sup> After discussing at length the meaning of Moses' encounter with Pharaoh, Ibn al-'Arabī 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 they see the punishments of hell before them.

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(8) *Imān Fir'awn wa al-Radd 'alayhi li al-'Allāmah 'Alī ibn Sul ān Muḥammad al-Qārī wa Ta'yīd Sayyidī Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī li al-Imān*, ed. Ibn al-Khaṭīb, Gharā'ib al-Musannafāt (n.p. al-Maṭba' at al-Misriyah wa Maktabatuhu, Cairo, 1383/1964).

(9) Al-Qur'ān, XXVIII : 9.

(10) Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, ed. Abū al-'Alā' 'Afīfī (Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, Beirut, 1365/1946), vol. i, p. 201; *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, New York, 1980), pp. 195, 255.

Thus God both saved him from the punishment of the afterlife and preserved his body from the flood. Ibn al-'Arabī acknowledges that most people consider Pharaoh among the damned, but points out that no verse of the Qur'ān clearly states this, though the case is different with Pharaoh's people. Numerous Qur'ānic passages refer to the punishment of Pharaoh's people in hellfire, but Pharaoh himself is never explicitly condemned in this way.<sup>11</sup>

Dawwānī, writing some two and a half centuries after Ibn al-'Arabī, 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 al-'Arabī 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'aṣṣub*), 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?,"<sup>12</sup> is grammatically interpreted as God's courteous reproof to a no longer rebellious convert. Dawwānī is particularly eager to show that Pharaoh's faith is not the "faith of despair" (*īmān al-ya's*) that is invalid because professed during the actual death throes or afterwards at the resurrection. In an ingenious deduction, Dawwānī points out that Pharaoh confessed his faith in a fairly long sentence, so it is unlikely that the death-rattle had yet begun.<sup>13</sup>

Going further, Dawwānī 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 Bayḍāwī as maintaining this view. This is curious, since Bayḍāwī held no such opinion. Kāshānī, 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 the Red Sea, according to Dawwānī, was

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(11) *Fuṣūṣ*, vol. i, pp. 211-12; trans., p. 265.

(12) Al-Qur'ān, X: 91.

(13) *īmān Fir'awn*, pp. 14-20.

a deliberate self-sacrifice, though he admits that there is no evidence regarding Pharaoh's ability to swim. In conclusion, Dawwānī asserts that all of the Qur'ānic references to the death of Pharaoh are liable to interpretation (*iḥtimāl*), with the exception of his confession of faith. Those who accuse Ibn al-'Arabī of heresy (*ilhād*) 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 al-'Arabī on this question is therefore tantamount to restricting the divine mercy.<sup>14</sup> The main lines of Dawwānī's interpretation agree with the conclusions of the principal commentators on the *Fuṣūṣ*, such as Dā'ūd al-Qaysarī (d. 751/1350) and 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 730/1330).<sup>15</sup>

'Alī al-Qārī eagerly responded to Dawwānī'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'ān and *Sunnah*, and the consensus of the '*ulamā*'. The main tenor of 'Alī al-Qārī's remarks is theological, but as a practised 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 Dawwānī's opening invocation in the *bism Allāh*: Dawwānī's use of the phrase "the straight path" (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) does not mean he is on it. 'Alī al-Qārī points out further that Dawwānī's announced intention to proceed without "imitation" (*taqlīd*) 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 *ḥadīth*, "He who speaks of the Qur'ān from his opinion (*ra'y*) should mark out his place in hellfire." Finally, 'Alī al-Qārī cannot resist pointing out the egotism that underlies Dawwānī's use of phrases like, "from my praised Lord," instead of saying "the praised Lord of all." In short, the position that 'Alī

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(14) *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

(15) Dā'ūd al-Qaysarī, *Kitāb Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam* (n.p. [Tehran], 1299), pp. 451-52; 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *Sharḥ 'alā Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam* (2nd ed. Shirkah Maktabah wa Maṭba'ah Mustafā al-Bābi al-Ḥalabī, Egypt, 1386/1966), pp. 310, 322.

al-Qārī establishes at the beginning employs *ad hominem* arguments to question Dawwānī's credentials.<sup>16</sup>

‘Alī al-Qārī next proceeds to question systematically nearly every one of Dawwānī's assumptions. He strenuously objects to Dawwānī 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 ‘*ulamā*’, and the unlearned will be misled by such a brash assertion of a stupid heresy. Theologically, Dawwānī'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 Muḥammad's prophethood). ‘Alī al-Qārī 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 Dawwānī calls sincere, ‘Alī al-Qārī calls a lie.<sup>17</sup>

Through many other arguments, ‘Alī al-Qārī 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, ‘Alī al-Qārī returns to Dawwānī's stated purpose of refuting the imputation of heresy to Ibn al-‘Arabī. First of all, the charges against Ibn al-‘Arabī are justified in this case. To Dawwānī's charge that the critics do not understand the Sufi terminology, ‘Alī al-Qārī coolly replies that externalist ‘*ulamā*’ may not know Sufi terminology, but esoteric ‘*ulamā*’ are ignorant of the basic points of Arabic grammar. In any case, this subject concerns Qur’ānic problems (*mabāḥith*) and theology, not Sufi terminology.<sup>18</sup>

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(16) *Imān Fir‘awn*, pp. 26-27, 32.

(17) *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 38-39, 43-44.

(18) *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 83.

‘Alī al-Qārī still has one formidable problem to deal with, and that is his basic respect for Ibn al-‘Arabī as one of the classical masters of Sufism. Dawwānī he can dispense with, but ‘Alī al-Qārī’s own master, Shaykh Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Bakrī (d. A.D. 1547), frequently praised Ibn al-‘Arabī in his assemblies. ‘Alī al-Qārī then recounts the ambivalent feeling that many of the conservative modern Sufis have displayed toward Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theories. He quotes the Qur’ān commentator Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) on the dispute over Ibn al-‘Arabī — among his supporters, his critics, and those who are totally confused. Suyūṭī’s solution to the problem, based on a dubious remark attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabī, is belief in his sainthood and 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 al-‘Arabī 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 policy current in Egypt today, where the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī are proscribed by order of the authorities of al-Azhar). ‘Alī al-Qārī then cites the interesting view of the *ḥadīth* scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1448) on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thesis of the faith of Pharaoh. “God bereft this man [Ibn al-‘Arabī] 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’”<sup>19</sup> (a saying that recalls the adage of Euripides, “Those whom God wishes to destroy, He first drives mad”).

‘Alī al-Qārī has saved one scholarly shot with which to blast Dawwānī. He states that Ibn al-‘Arabī himself, in the sixty-second chapter of the *Futūḥāt*, mentioned Pharaoh along with Nimrūd as one of the sinners who claimed divine lordship for themselves and are hence in hellfire eternally. It is ‘Alī al-Qārī’s opinion that Ibn al-‘Arabī did not really contradict this correct view in the *Fuṣūṣ*, but only meant that the proof of Pharaoh’s infidelity appears less than decisive. Ibn al-‘Arabī here suffered from a *lapsus calami*, and a slip of the foot. ‘Alī al-Qārī has inverted the usual argument about not

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(19) *Ibid.*, pp. 85-90.

interpreting Sufi technical terminology by ordinary standards; Ibn al-'Arabī's clear statement that Pharaoh was of the faithful was after all just a mistake — he really did not mean it.<sup>20</sup>

'Alī al-Qārī's predicament was typical of later conservative Sufis, who actually disagreed with Ibn al-'Arabī'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 Dā'ūd al-Qayṣarī in his commentary on this passage. "There is no objection to the Shaykh [Ibn al-'Arabī] regarding his remarks on this subject, because he was ordered to say this, since everything that is in the book [*Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*] was written at the order of the Prophet. Thus, he is excused, as the deluded objector is excused."<sup>21</sup> Qayṣarī is referring to Ibn al-'Arabī's own statement at the beginning of the *Fuṣūṣ*, that the Prophet Muḥammad gave him the book in Damascus in 627/1229, so the contents of this work are inspired. In effect, this constitutes a license for mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān, beyond the consensus of the traditional 'ulamā', and this is where Ibn al-'Arabī and Dawwānī both differ radically from 'Alī al-Qārī. The faith of Pharaoh actually must be understood in the context of the *Fuṣūṣ*, where it concludes 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 al-'Arabī's reading of the Scripture. Like the Christian philosopher Origen (A.D. 185?-254?), who foresaw even the salvation of Satan when "God shall be all in all"<sup>22</sup> (I Cor. 15:28), Ibn al-'Arabī 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.

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(20) *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 91-92.

(21) Qaysari, pp. 451-52.

(22) Pierre Batiffol, "Apocatastasis," *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. i, pp. 599-600 (1907), notes that this doctrine was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 543.