
Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shabrastānī (c. 1086-1153) is the well-known heresiographer, author of the Kitāb al-milal wa-l-nīḥal, one of the most important sources for the knowledge of the religious sects in Medieval Islam. Perhaps, he is less studied as a theologian, although his Nīḥāyat al-iqḍām has a distinguished position in the history of philosophical kalām. As a theologian, al-Shabrastānī wrote a Qurʾānic commentary whose title is Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maşābīḥ al-abrār (Keys of the Secrets or Arcana), virtually an unknown work. This book provides the edition and the English translation of a section of the Commentary by Toby Mayer.

In a sense, Mayer’s task has been made easier by the fact that the Mafātīḥ survives in a unique manuscript held at the Library of the National Consultative Assembly in Tehran. The manuscript has been edited by M. A. Adharshab and Mayer had made use of Adharshab’s work for his own enterprise producing a nice book well articulated in a long Introduction (pp. 3-59), an accurate English translation with notes, bibliography, and indexes (pp. 61-267), the original Arabic text neatly printed at pp. 1-122 (Arabic numeration). The manuscript of the Mafātīḥ contains (1) twelve introductory chapters, (2) the commentary on the Exordium (al-Fāṭiḥa, Q 1), and (3) the commentary on the chapter of the Cow (Sūrat al-baqara, Q 2). (1) and (2) are presented in this volume, respectively providing a full exposition and a good sample of al-Shabrastānī’s hermeneutics (p. 19). Albeit selective, the choice is nonetheless useful to outline the many exegetical problems of al-Shabrastānī’s writing and to introduce in his intellectual world. Actually, the approach to the text is particularly difficult, but Toby Mayer’s care in exploring, analyzing, and commenting the linguistic and theoretical folds of the text is of much help for the
reader in order to appreciate the complexity of al-Shahrastānī’s argu-
mentation.

One of the main questions in studying Mafātīh’s author – or per-
haps the main question – is to decide if he was a Sunnī or an Ismā‘īlī. His biographical and bibliographical data are somewhat ambiguous. For instance, he studied in the Niẓāmiyya school of Baghdād, a strongly Sunnī institution. Later he lived for a number of years in Merv under the Sunnī Seljuq rule and “the city gave hope of solid backing for [his] projects” (p. 8). Moreover, his Nihāyat al-iqdām is defined by Mayer as “a plenary treatment of Ashʿarī orthodoxy” (p. 9). The Kitāb al-milal is remarkably objective, although “the differential of the … sections of the book is clearly presented in term of the principle of con- trariety. Moreover, the organisation of the material within these sections explicitly builds on the leitmotif of both hierarchy and con- trariety (al-tarattub wa-l-ta’dādd). And again … the account moves from the general level (‘umūm) to the specific (khuṣūṣ). These char-acteristic contours of the Milal … are conceptual talismans with wide and profound applications throughout Shahrastānī’s thought … with their arguably Ismā‘īlī stimulus” (pp. 9-10).

Following Toby Mayer’s analytical guide, we are led to read the Mafātīh as an Ismā‘īlī document, fully belonging to this specific intellectual tradition. Many clues take us in this direction. The technical concepts and terminology like “accomplished” (mafrūgh) and “in- choative” (musta‘na‘f) have a likely Ismā‘īlī character (see translation p. 108, Arabic text p. 50). Two particular points are worth stressing however. The first is a page (translation p. 65, Arabic text p. 3) where, on the one hand, al-Shahrastānī exalts ʿAlī as a precious source of teaching and hermeneutics, while, on the other, attributes the sub- stantial merit of his formation to an unnamed teacher: “So I [al- Shahrastānī speaking] searched for the ‘truthful’ as passionate lovers might search. And I found one of God’s virtuous slaves, just as Moses (peace be upon him) searched with his young man: ‘Then the two of them found one of Our slaves whom We bestowed as a mercy from Us, and We taught him knowledge from Our presence’ [Ṣūrat al-kahf, Q 18]. I learnt from him the ways of creation and of the Command, the degrees of contrariety and hierarchy, the twin aspects of generali-
ty and specificity, and the two principles of the accomplished and the inchoative. I thus satisfied myself with this single bellyful, not those which are the foods of error and the starting points of the ignorant. I
quenched my thirst from the fountain of submission with a cup whose blend was from Tasnim.” Who was this master is left unnoticed, but Mayer asks: “It follows that behind the mystagogue’s intentionally blurred image may lie a living authority in Isma’ili teaching, a learned dā‘ī – a henchman, perhaps, of the inceptor of Nizārī Isma’īlism, al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ṣabbāh (d. 518/1124), or even the man himself?” (p. 7). In any case, it is clear that al-Shahrastānī presents the Isma’īli concept of ta’lim (instruction of authority) as a pivotal moment of his formation, with the Isma’īli categories of contrariety and hierarchy fully operating in his methodology.

The second point is not autobiographical but theological and involves tawḥid. We have to connect together a few passages of the commentary through the synthesis of Mayer. The start is Qur’ānic and especially the āyas 26-27 of the Sūrat al-raḥmān (Q 55): “This then is held by our author [al-Shahrastānī] to refer to the great complement to God’s attribute of majesty or transcendence, namely, His ‘bounty’ or ‘creative largesse’ (ikrām) – a complementary rooted in Q 55: 26-27: ‘All that is in the world will pass away and your Lord’s face (or ‘self’) alone will endure in His majesty and bounty’ (dbū l-jalāl wa-l-ikrām). The impact of these two attributes of majesty and bounty is later spelt out in al-Shahrastānī’s statement: ‘He is veiled from them through His majesty, so they may not perceive Him, and He manifests Himself to them through His bounty, so they may not deny Him’ [translation p. 159, Arabic text p. 96]. So it is that these two affirmations […] capture the paradox that God is at once incomprehensible and undeniable, or as al-Shahrastānī puts it: ‘Insofar as He is He (buwa) He is ungraspable and insofar as all belongs to Him (or is due to Him, lab)” He is undeniable’ [translation p. 144, Arabic text, p. 82]” (p. 38). We can emphasize at least two aspects: 1) divine ipseity (Allah is Himself, Allāh buwa buwa) warrants His transcendence in respect to contingent things of sublunary world: in this sense, God is separated and ungraspable; 2) divine sovereignty relates all the creatures to God: in this sense, God is undeniable as “that dimension which makes other dimensions possible” (F. Rahman, Major Themes of the Qur’an [Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989], 4). Both these theological presuppositions are potentially Ismā’ili, but in general Islamic. The same Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), an acknowledged Sunnī thinker, argues in his al-Maṣṣad al-asnā fi sharḥ ma‘ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā that “You should realize that He [God] is hidden in His manifestation by the intense way in which He
is manifest, for His manifestation is the reason for His being hidden, as His very light blocks His light” (The Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God [translated with notes by David Burrell and Nazih Daher; Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995], 134). Both in the Ismā‘īli al-Shahrastānī and in the Sunnī al-Ghazālī tawḥīd describes God as simultaneously out of and within reality. This conclusion has a firm Qur’ānic ground, for, on the one hand, “There is nothing like Him” (Q 42:11), while, on the other, “We [God] are closer to him [man] than his jugular vein” (Q 50:16; translations by M. Abdel Haleem).

The Ismā‘īli commitment of al-Shahrastānī in the Ṭabātib can be reasonably accepted however. But the exegetical key is by no means exclusively esoteric. Al-Shahrastānī devotes chapter 8 of his own Introduction to the discussion of ṭafsīr and ta‘wil, arguing that the best exegesis is a synthesis of ṭafsīr and ta‘wil. Actually, Ṭabātib is partly a classical ṭafsīr and partly an esoteric ta‘wil. It is a ṭafsīr as far as it discusses topics like lexicography, grammar, and semantics making good use of the prophetic and ṣahāba’s traditions (e.g.: “Abū Sa‘īd al-Maqbūrī transmitted from Abū Hurayra on the authority of the Prophet that he said…” , p. 136; “Al-Rabī‘ ibn Anas transmitted on the authority of Shahr ibn Ḥawshab on the authority of Ubayy b. Ka‘b who said…,” p. 161, etc.). It is a ta‘wil in so far as, going up to the origins (ta‘wil derives form awwala), it discloses the arcana of the Qur’ānic text in an esoteric – and often philosophical – way. From this point of view, it is interesting to underline that on the whole al-Shahrastānī’s attitude is rationalistic. Toby Mayer says that, on the one hand, “A seeming trait of Shahrastānī’s biography is that despite the mystical zeitgeist and the impingement of Sufi influences throughout his milieu, the Sufi strain of Islamic esoterism leaves no trace on his reputation or extant writings” (pp. 4-5); while, on the other, “the Ismā‘īli stimulus of his thought most shows … a concept of truth in which the religious and the philosophical wholly unite, a complete mergence of both ‘wisdoms’ (jāmi‘ al-ḥikmatayn)” (p. 46).

Ṭabātib al-asrār is a very stimulating Commentary, be it Ismā‘īli or not, and Toby Mayer has to be congratulated to have made available such a remarkable piece of work.

Massimo Campanini
University of Trento, Trento-Italy