

Ibn Sab‘in and The Sicilian Questions

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Abstract

Ibn Sab‘in (c. 1216-c. 1269) is one of the most important thinkers of medieval Arabic philosophy. He is the author of several books and his main work is entitled *The Sicilian Questions* which he wrote for the famous emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. This paper refers to this outstanding figure of the Middle Ages and analyzes the philosophical currents that flow into the intellectual universe of this illustrious writer.

Keywords: Ibn Sab‘in, Arabic medieval philosophy, Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, Sufism, 13th century.

1. Introduction

The philosopher Ibn Sab‘in is one of the most important thinkers of medieval Arabic philosophy and, together with Ibn ‘Arabi, is one of the leading representatives of Andalusian mysticism. He occupies a prominent place around the 13th century cultural panorama of both the Islam and the Christianity. His doctrines are marked by the influence of two main philosophical currents, the peripateticism [1] and the Sufism [2], what turns him into a very interesting figure for researchers and experts.

His major work is entitled *The Sicilian Questions* (*al-Masa’il al-Siqiliyya*, in Arabic) and was defined by Professor Dario Cabanelas as "a symbol in the intellectual relations between the Christian medieval Europe and the Islamic world" [3].

2. Life and Works of Ibn Sab‘in

This well-known Spanish-Muslim philosopher lived between al-Andalus, which was then dominated by the Almohad dynasty of North African, and East. His full name is Abu Muhammad ‘Abd Al-Haqq b. Ibrahim b. Muhammad b. Nasr Al-‘Akki Al-Mursi Al-Riquti Al-Ishbili Al-Qastallani Al-Sufi Qutb Al-Din. He used the name Ibn O, i.e. Ibn Dara, whence the name Ibn Sab‘in with which he is known in the history of Islamic thought [4]. The information about the dates of his birth and his death is very confused and the biographers do not agree on them [5][6][7]. He was born in the Valley of the Ricote, in Murcia, in 1216 or 1217, and died in Mecca for the years 1269 and 1271. He was born into a

rich noble family, received a thorough training and a careful education, and got a broad culture in different areas of science and knowledge such as grammar, humanities, philosophy, theology and religion, etcetera. But he was endowed with a spirit solitary, tormented and bitter, and his life was marked by controversy, persecution and exile, only mitigated by the loyalty of his disciples, the *sab'iniyya* [8].

Due to the harassment received by the religious fanaticism of the ulemas, the alfaqihs, the muftis and the theologians, the powerful classes of the Almohad period [9], Ibn Sab'in had to leave al-Andalus in 1244/45 together with a group of followers, and he established in Ceuta, where apparently married a wealthy woman and where wrote the famous *Sicilian Questions*. Soon there spread the rumor of which he was a philosopher, frowned condition in the social and cultural context of the moment, and so was expelled from the city. He took the way Eastward across Bades, in Morocco, and later Bougie, in Algeria, where found Al-Shustari [10], who would turn into his more faithful disciple. Then he went to Tunis, and, due to the hostility of the ulemas, he went in exile again. From here he went to Gabes, in Tunisia, and later to Cairo; but in the capital of Egypt he did not feel sure due to the objections of the Mameluke sultan Baybars I (1223-1277), influenced by the strong propaganda and the superstition of the people for his innovative activities. So, Ibn Sab'in decided to go to Mecca, where ended his days delivered to his devotions and to spread the doctrines between those who were coming to listen to him from all the parts of the Islamic world. He died committing suicide like the stoics, that is to say, he opened his veins.

The biographers of Ibn Sab'in attribute him a considerable number of works, between treatises, epistles and dissertations [11], and according to Amari [12] the most important ones were composed during his stay in the Maghrib.

We have, among others:

a) In the field of philosophy:

- *Budd al-'arif* (Knowledge of the Gnostic) [13]: in this work Ibn Sab'in exposes diverse aspects of his mystical doctrine that are not in other his books, and he approaches three main topics: the logical science, the intellect and the soul [14].
- *Rasa'il* (Epistles) [15].
- *Risala al-'ahd* (Epistle of the initiation).

b) In the field of the philology:

- *Kitab al-safar* (Book of the spiritual trip).
- *Lisan al-falak al-natiq 'an-wajh al-haqa'iq* (Language of the rational thing from the aspect of the realities).
- *Lamha al-huruf* (Seeing the letters).

In addition, Ibn al-Khatib attributes him some other writings such as *Risala tartib al-suluk* (Epistle of the disposition of the ascetic route) and *Risala wasayat al-'aqa'id* (Epistle about the ordained one in the articles of the faith).

But, between his writings determined by the ideologies of the peripateticism and the sufism, stands out the work known as *al-Masa'il al-Siqiliyya* (The Sicilian Questions), which contains the response given by him to a few philosophical questions formulated by the famous emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250) [16].

3. The Sicilian Questions

The Sicilian Questions is the greatest work of Ibn Sab'in and it is collected into an only manuscript, the Arabic manuscript no.534 of Bodleian Library at Oxford, which was edited in facsimile by Serefattin Yaltkaya in 1941 [17] and which was fully translated into several foreign languages such as Turkish [18], Italian [19] and Spanish [20]. There are also partial translations into French [21], Italian [22], Spanish [23] and German [24].

As I said, this philosophical treatise was defined by the celebrated arabist Dario Cabanelas as "a symbol in the intellectual relations between the Christian medieval Europe and the Islamic world". It is divided in: a) a prologue, which maybe wrote some disciple his, where the origin of the correspondence is explained; b) the response given by Ibn Sab'in to the four philosophical questions raised by Frederick II; c) an appendix that refers to five different topics; and, d) an epilogue or colophon. These parts are of variable extension and are subdivided, in turn, in several sections.

The structure of the work is as follows:

- a) Prologue.
- b) Response to the four questions:
 - b1) Question I: *On the eternity of the world* which is subdivided into eight sections.
 - b2) Question II: *On the Divine Science* which is subdivided into ten sections.
 - b3) Question III: *On the categories* which is subdivided into three sections.
 - b4) Question IV: *On the soul* which is subdivided into five sections.
- c) Appendix.
- d) Epilogue.

In The Sicilian Questions, the author mentions books of other writers, especially those of the classic Antiquity; among them we find, for example, like the most relevant ones: Plato's *Phaedrus*, and those belonging to Aristotle's logic. Equally, Ibn Sab'in refers to some philosophers and to thinkers of the Antiquity as well as to his coreligionists and to followers of other beliefs, representatives of the most varied theories and ideologies, who are explained or commented in the work: Avempace, Al-Farabi, Al-Ghazali Al-Hallaj, Alexander de Aphrodisias, Galen, Anaxagoras, Euclid, Crates, Theophrastus, Zeno of Elea, Diogenes, Socrates, Pythagoras, Themistius, Iamblichus, Plato, Melow and Theophrastus, etcetera [25] are mentioned in this interesting treatise. All this turns the book into a rich crucible of the scientific knowledge of the epoch and defines the philosophical universe of Ibn Sab'in as a mixture of Aristotelian doctrine [26], Neo-Platonism [27] and Sufi mysticism [28]. Aristotle stands out between all these philosophers, for the volume of the appointments that is done on his thought and his writings.

Conclusion

Ibn Sab'in occupies a prominent place in the history of medieval philosophy and his work entitled *The Sicilian Questions* is one of the most representative books of Islamic Sufi mysticism, as well as a referent of the philosophical knowledge in the Middle Ages.

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