

Michael Ebstein. *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-'Arabī, and the Ismā'īlī Tradition*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. 276 pages. ISBN: 9789004255364.

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**Translated by Aykut Muştak**

We can mark M. Asin Palacios' 1914 monograph on Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931) and his studies on Ibn al-'Arabī as a jump start for modern studies in the intellectual history of theoretical mysticism in Andalusia.<sup>1</sup> Palacios, who died in 1944, argues that this mystical thought, which started with Ibn Masarra and flourished with Ibn al-'Arif (d. 536/1141), Ibn Barraĵān (d. 536/1142), and Ibn Qasī (d. 546/1151), reached a new level with Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240). In this context, we may speak of three interrelated religious and intellectual currents that originated around mystics and were suggested to have historical continuity vis-à-vis their teachings: the schools of Masarra, Almería, and Murcia.

Researchers have expanded the relevant debates in various contexts, either for or against, to a great extent within the framework drawn by Palacios. A major topic in this regard is the said mystics' philosophical and religious origins and the degree of relation and influence with the mystical movements that emerged in the eastern Islamic world. Palacios talks about a general Pseudo-Empedoclean influence in Ibn Masarra's teachings and a Shiite-Bāṭini hue on themes of leadership (*imāma*) and sanctity (*walāya*). He also mentions a similar content and impression in Ibn al-'Arabī, whom he regards as the Murcia school's founding thinker. His writing style has engendered a great deal of speculation as to the sources of his thought within the specialist studies dedicated to him. Numerous names can be counted as part of the debate, starting with Abū al-'Alā 'Afīfī (d. 1966) and Henry Corbin (d. 1978) and including Michel Chodkiewicz and Claude Addas, who take a more conservative

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1 Miguel Asin Palacios, *Abenmasarra y su escuela: Orígenes de la filosofía hispano-musulmana* (Madrid, 1914); Miguel Asin Palacios, *El Islam cristianizado: Estudio del "sufismo" a través de las obras de Abenarabi de Murcia* (Madrid: Editorial Plutarco, 1931); Miguel Asin Palacios, *Vidas de santones andaluces: La "Epistola de la santidad" de Ibn 'Arabi de Murcia* (Madrid: Impr. de E. Maestre, 1933).

stance than others. Michael Ebstein's book, the subject of this review, contributes to these briefly mentioned scholarly studies.

This work comprises five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The introduction briefly overviews Andalusia's importance in Islamic history in terms of its scientific-cultural legacy and originality. In the author's opinion, its genuine character in every field likewise shows itself in mysticism. The two most important figures in this regard, whose influence is attested to at different levels in both the Sunnī and Shiite spheres, are Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī. However, their influence is not just confined to Muslim thought and society, for twelfth- and thirteenth-century Andalusia also witnessed the birth of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystic-esoteric tradition, and the Zohar, its fundamental text.

As Ebstein places his study in this context, he focuses on the Ismā'īli tradition as a probable source that facilitates the formation of a mystic milieu in Andalusia and the relation between the worldviews of Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī (3). At this point, the introduction briefly touches upon the Ismā'īlis' history in Andalusia, the transmission of the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* to the region, and their impact on Muslim and Jewish writers, Ibn Masarra and his successors, the debates that emerged from his school, and the nature of the relation between him and Ibn al-'Arabī. Moreover, the method and approaches of the studies on Andalusian mystical-philosophical thought receives a general assessment.

One of the author's main theses is the lack of any serious treatment of the relation and connections between Sunnite mysticism and Ismā'īli thought, a reality that is also partially stressed by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406). Even though there are significant referrals to the topic in the works of Corbin, 'Afifi, and Kāmil Muṣṭafā al-Shaybī (d. 2006), we cannot speak of the presence of versatile approaches and studies of the said relation. Ismā'īli influence on Andalusian mystical-philosophical thought was demonstrated, to a certain extent, in Jewish studies. In fact, some scholarly articles on Jewish thought and Kabbalah focus on the Ismā'īli tradition's influences and its conceptual structure in some of the Jewish writers. But according to Ebstein, many of those who study Andalusian mysticism in general and Ibn al-'Arabī in particular are not interested in answering "what were the historical factors behind the emergence in al-Andalus of the unique type of mysticism which is reflected in the writings of Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī?" (16).

This gives rise to certain methodological constraints and problems. Ebstein sums up the basic reasons for this omission in five categories, the first two of which correlate more with each other vis-à-vis the adopted methodological perspective than with the others. The first is Corbin's ahistorical approach. His

awareness of the significance of historical questions on the relation between the Ismā'īlī tradition and the writings of these two mystics notwithstanding, he purposely avoids discussing the subject in a philological and historical framework by employing a phenomenological and anti-historical methodology. In his opinion, the Ismā'īlī tradition and Ibn al-'Arabi's thought are intellectual phenomena that are independent from the historical and juxtaposed solely with respect to their intellectual aspects. Therefore, the researcher must seek to analyze these phenomena by analyzing their concepts directly, rather than employing such external-analytical categories like "history" and "chronology."

Thus, Corbin transforms the said phenomena from being objects of scholarly research to being elements that convey messages to the modern individual. But if that is the case, then what is the value of the aforementioned phenomena in and of themselves? In his opinion, Christian Gnostics and Protestant mystics, or thinkers from the Ismā'īlī tradition and Sunni theosophists who lived in different times and places, belong to the same esoteric family and are members of the ahistoric group that is responsible for safeguarding the esoteric truth.

According to Ebstein, the second perspective is traditionalism. The perspectives of the traditionalists and Corbin partially resemble each other and are prone to similar questions in scholarly studies. The former group asserts the existence of a single universal esoteric truth taken from the same primordial source and shared by all religions. Hence, its researchers also refrain from employing the historical-linguistic research method.

Ebstein then discusses three further categories: "The Problematic Relations between the Shi'a and the Sunna," "The Political Interpretation of the Shiite Phenomenon," and the "Lack of Communication between Scholars in the Fields of Jewish Mysticism and Islamic Mysticism," respectively. The introduction concludes by justifying the different vistas used by the author to define Islamic mystical traditions (i.e., Sufism, Shiite-Ismā'īlī mysticism, philosophical mysticism, Ismā'īlī neo-Platonism, and Sunnī Andalusī mysticism) and assess the main sources used in the study.

Ebstein reserves one chapter each for the subjects that will provide a sound reflection of the Ismā'īlī tradition and the relation between Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabi. The first chapter, "The Word of God and the Divine Will," is built on the concepts of word (*kalima*), the divine fiat "be!" (*kun*), command (*amr*), and will (*irāda*). Before analyzing their counterparts in the Ismā'īlī tradition and the thought of these two mystics, Ebstein marks, as he does in all chapters, their counterparts in the religious tradition and their places in philosophical thought, primarily their

Hellenistic legacy and the Qur'anic background, as well as their positions within the neo-Platonic tradition in the Arabic language. Here, the author takes care to attend to the concepts' cosmological-cosmogonic aspects in the corpus discussed by him. Nonetheless, he does not neglect the other religious connotations with respect to people and society, since those connotations are integral to the discussion. He applies the same approach in all of his study's chapters.

In the second chapter he expounds upon the subject and the science of letters, which are regarded as the building blocks of creation. The value of Ibn Masarra's *Khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* vis-à-vis mystical literature and his influence on Ibn al-'Arabī are also discussed at various places. One of the basic claims that Ebstein set out to prove here is the vast differences between the science of letters articulated by Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī and its prevailing conception in the eastern Islamic lands (120).

The third chapter focuses on the debates revolving around *walāya* (friendship with God). The two primary topics of discussion in the literature are the nature of the relation between sainthood (*rijāl al-ghayb*) and prophethood as well as the identity of the Prophet's heirs or followers. Ebstein analyzes sainthood's hierarchical structure as found in the framework of the *ḥadīth* of the substitutes (*abdāl*) and dwells on the counterparts of *walāya* in the Ismā'īlī tradition and Ibn al-'Arabī's texts. According to his claim, Ibn al-'Arabī, although influenced by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 320/932), is closer to Ismā'īlī thought in his narrative of *walāya* than he is to mysticism. The close connection between the Ismā'īlī concept of the speaker (*nāṭiq*) and the conception of the pole (*qutb*) can be cited as an example. Another topic that can be associated with sanctity is the perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).

In the fourth chapter, Ebstein goes over the qualities of human such as encompassing being (*jāmi'*), deputy, microcosm, and being created in the image of God. The fifth and final chapter elaborates upon the influence of the Ismā'īlī corpus over Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī by means of the leitmotif of microcosm and macrocosm, which the author calls "parallel worlds."

Ebstein's study of source and origin, which is based on primary texts and central concepts, is far removed from the crude reductionism found in comparative studies. After meticulously identifying the points of contact and connection, he astutely refrains from making any judgment on the degree of one tradition's assimilation by the other. In short, the author is not keen to distance both mystics from the Sunnite tradition and presenting them as thinkers of the Shiite-Ismā'īlī tradition based on the conceptual relations and similarities that he detected.

According to Ebstein, Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī adapted mystical-philosophical thoughts of Ismā'īlī origin to their own systems and made them integral to their Sunnite worldviews. Thus, an independent and particular style of mysticism reflecting on their works emerged thanks to the Ismā'īlī tradition. This style, Ebstein suggested, has a character that differs somewhat from the content of the primary mystical texts that prevailed in the central and eastern Islamic lands before Ibn al-'Arabī.

In broad lines, the great majority of eastern Islam's mystical texts focus on the person's moral side and ethical behavior, because their main goal was to perfect the individual's moral behavior and counter the ego. The mystical discourse of Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī that flourished in the western Islamic lands, however, had an additional component: a new theosophical discourse that was articulated by blending neo-Platonic mystical philosophy, cosmogonic-cosmological speculations, and occult sciences (e.g., the science of letters and astrology).

To sum up, Ebstein's book is a product of painstaking industry with respect to the method followed, the context of the discussion, and his conclusions, notwithstanding the continuing presence of aspects open to question in the final remarks of all studies dedicated to identifying the sources and origins of any thought.