

**Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. Sciences of the Soul and Intellect Part I. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 32-36**

*Paul E. Walker, Ismail K. Poonawala and David Simonowitz, Godefroid de Callatay, eds./trans. Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2016. 434 pages.*

Since I and others have already commented on this project's significance in terms of producing critical editions and annotated translations of the intriguing corpus of texts produced in southern Iraq during the tenth century by a collective calling itself the Brethren of Purity, I shall not focus on that or even repeat my quibble that I would far prefer to have the Arabic on the facing page to the English translation (whether on the left like the Library of Arabic Literature or on the right like the Islamic Translations Series is immaterial).

With this publication, the project has now published at least one epistle from each of the four parts of the corpus. The present volume is from the third

quartile on the “sciences of the soul and the intellect,” which constitutes a preparation for the higher theology of the last quartile. The epistles’ arrangement is progressive, from the exact sciences moving onto the observable sciences and then from the external phenomena to those internal to the human subject. The five relatively short epistles collected here cover the Brethren’s metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, psychology, and cosmology. Each epistle is introduced by the editor/translator with comments on the text followed by the annotated translation. The Arabic texts are then gathered at the end of the volume.

Throughout the text, as we can see in the other volumes, there is a *mélange* of philosophical and scientific analysis alongside the citation of ancient tradition and Qur’anic versions and ideas. What is, however, desperately needed is an overall introduction that says something about the last quartile’s theme and why these particular treatises have been put together. In his brief preface, only the last two pages of which address this volume, Nader el-Bizri attempts to draw the works together as constituting the ways in which the Brethren’s “epistemic and cosmological directives in combining Islamic revelation with key notions in Hellenic philosophy” are elucidated. He then summarizes each treatise in a single sentence; for example, treatise 34 deals with the homologies of the microcosm and the macrocosm, and treatise 35 engages with the theory of the intellectual faculties of the rational soul.

Epistles 32 and 33 are edited and translated by Paul Walker. Epistle 32, on the principles of Pythagorean analysis of the intellect, is further extant in two versions: a and b. Walker offers one useful point to bear in mind: The absence of the Brethren’s corpus in Fatimid writings suggest that the Ismaili Tayyibi reverence for the text must have emerged later in the Yemeni period, from which the majority of the manuscript corpus dates. The text itself rarely mentions the Imams, and even when it does it does not name them, leading some to question their Ismaili provenance.

This pair of texts deals with Pythagorean principles, although much of Walker’s introduction deals with issues of establishing the textual and problems therein. Treatise 32a has two parts. The first develops the Pythagorean principles of numbers and their ranks, which constitute the hierarchy of the cosmos, and the second deals with a more Neoplatonic hierarchy of being that privileges the intelligible over the sensible, prime matter over other matter, and nods to the scheme of emanation of the cosmos whose first link, or the first thing issued, is the *nous* that arises out of the Creator’s “generosity,” followed by the soul. This notion of the *jūd al-bāri*’ is a clear reference to the language of the *Theologia Aristotelis*’ paraphrase of Plotinus’ *Enneads*. While

it is a tough game to parse every phrase and look for sources, this is perhaps too obvious to avoid mentioning.

Epistle 32b is somewhat different on Pythagorean principles, albeit as brief. It is divided into three chapters. The first one presents the brief idea that Pythagoras believed that all being was ranked in numbers and thus number analysis was the route to making sense of the cosmos. The next chapter analyzes sets of numbers in the cosmos such as fours, eights, and fives, as naturally occurring phenomena. The final one considers why the world is spherical.

Epistle 33 is slightly longer and divided into eight chapters, beginning with two on the scheme of emanation: the One followed by the *nous*, followed by the soul, followed by a sphere, and then the nine spheres of the observable cosmos in its Ptolemaic order – a process that moves from the most imperceptible and immaterial to the most coarse and material. The next four chapters examine the universal soul and its relationship with individual human souls and its effect upon them in conjunction with the spheres, and hence there is an implicit connection to astrology amid talk of “governing” powers of the soul or angels that affect individual souls. The final chapter in this epistle develops further the importance of emanation as a volitional act, one in which the cosmos is an eternal effect of the Creator and the source of the immaterial and immortal soul, which is quite unlike the material body. Dualism is thus present here, as is the sense of the Platonic theory of the pre-existence of human souls prior to the body that was rejected by most of the classical Islamic philosophers.

Epistle 34, edited and translated by Ismail Poonawala and David Simonowitz, engages the theme of the homologies of the macrocosm and the microcosm. Poonawala’s introduction is very useful – not only conjecturing on the sources of the Brethren, especially the *Theologia Aristotelis*, but also tracing the reception of the epistles among the later Yemeni Tayyibi tradition, not least their claim that the author of the epistles was one of the hidden Ismaili Imams (against the Qaramitah theory of Samuel Stern and Wilferd Madelung). Poonawala promises to provide further evidence in his introduction to epistle 44, which now becomes essential reading. Apart from exemplifying different types of homologies, this epistle shows an alternative strategy for establishing teleological arguments for God’s existence.

Epistle 35, edited and translated by Walker, deals with the nature of the intellect. Walker points out that, consistent with many early discussions, the treatise seems to conflate the ontological discussion of intellect as the first

emanation from the One and intellect as an internal human psychic faculty. The text itself describes the epistle as the parallel to epistle 24 (on the nature of the sensible). The first chapter already mentions that the intellect has two senses, the first of which is existent and a human faculty. What is critical is to demonstrate that the “category” of existent, or thing, and our ability to “pick it out” encompasses three possible methods: by sense perception, by intellection, and by (syllogistic) demonstration.

Chapters 3 to 9 deal more with the nature of hylemorphism and the analysis of what a thing is. Then chapters 10 to 16 revert to the faculties of the soul and its contemplative activity all within the rubric of the human microcosm. Already immanent here are the much discussed two theories of intellection of the middle period: knowing through the impression of the forms of things in the soul, and knowing through the identity thesis of the intellecting subject and object, which ultimately comes from the reception of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics Lambda*.

Epistle 36, edited and translated by de Callatay, has a far more extensive introduction, analyzes astronomical cycles and conjunctions, and relates to the other epistles on astronomy (3) and astrology and magic. What seems to be suggested here is that the intelligible scheme of the cosmos reaches its apogee and true understanding (reflective of a properly *bāṭinī* approach) through the astrological and the magical as expressions of the activity of the universal soul and the intellect. De Callatay’s introduction should be read alongside epistle 3, upon which it expands quite extensively. He successfully examines sources and compares the presentation to the major theories of Abu Ma’shar and Masha’allah. The technical tables are highly instructive.

From the perspective of the Brethren themselves, these epistles usher in the section of texts where things start to become interesting and indicate what is properly of philosophical and scientific significance in conjunction with a *bāṭinī* reading of the revelation. As is often the case, the work of the editors and translators varies rather extensively, and one wishes that the general editor – or perhaps one of the editors of the epistles presented in this volume – had attempted a grander synthesis to explain why these five epistles (or six, if one takes 32b as separate) are gathered together in one volume. I look forward to the remaining epistles that deal with the nature of the soul and the intellect.

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