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## Controversies over Ibn 'Arabi's *Fusus*: The Faith of Pharaoh<sup>1</sup>

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN  
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

“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'anic 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 storytellers 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>

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was read at the American Academy of Religion's conference at Chicago in 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Qur'an 10:90.

<sup>3</sup> Qur'an 10:91-92.

<sup>4</sup> A. J. Wensinck and G. Vajda, “Fir'awn,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. ii (1965), p. 917.

106-114

Yet in mystical circles, this common-sense interpretation has not always been upheld. A characteristic example of Sufistic interpretation of the Qur'an revolves around the case of the faith of Pharaoh, according to the analysis of Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi's (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 'Arabi's thesis of the validity of Pharaoh's confession of faith, which occupies only a couple of pages in the *Fusus al-Hikam*, 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 practiced by Ibn 'Arabi's and his school?

Many authors have written on Ibn 'Arabi's theory of the faith of Pharaoh, in the dozens of commentaries that have been written on the *Fusus*, 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 fifteenth-century Iranian philosopher Jalal al-Din al-Davani<sup>6</sup> wrote in defense of Ibn 'Arabi's view; this work was systematically

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 721/1328), *Risala fi iman Fir'awn*, and Badran ibn Ahmad al-Khalili (d. ca. 1103/1691), *Natijat al-tawfiq wal-'awn fi al-radd 'ala al-qa'ilin bi-iman 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* 13/4 [Oct. 1939], pp. 446-49); see Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghumri, also known as Sibṭ al-Marsafi (d. 970/1562), *Tanzih al-kawn 'an i'tiqad iman Fir'awn*, cf. Osman Yahya, *Histoire et classification de l'oeuvre d'Ibn al-'Arabi, Etude critique* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1964), 1:117; 'Abd Allah al-Rumi al-Busnawi (d. 1054/1644), *Risalat al-Busnawi fi iman Fir'awn*, MS. Azhar 2794 (halim) 33397/27-28, cited by Yahya, 1:120. In the catalogue of the Yahuda MSS. by Rudolf Mach (*Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts [Yahuda Section] in the Garrett Collection, Princeton University Library* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), there are five treatises on the subject: 2179, *Sharh qawl Ibn al-'Arabi fi haqq iman Fir'awn*, by Muhammad ibn Qutb al-Din al-Izniqi (d. 885/1480); 2182, *Risala fi bayan iman Fir'awn*, by Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Qarabaghi (d. 942/1535), shelflist 3091, fols. 44b-45a; 2183, *al-Muntakhab min al-ta'yid wal-'awn lil-qa'ilin bi-iman Fir'awn*, selections made by Nasri ibn Ahmad al-Husri from the *Ta'yid* of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rasul al-Barzanji (d. 1103/1691), Berlin 3399 (anon.), shelflist 518, fols. 60b-63a; 2184, *Risala fi iman Fir'awn*, by Akmal al-Din [al-Barbati?], shelflist 4129, fols. 53b-55b; 2185, *Risala fi 'adm qabul iman Fir'awn*, anon.

<sup>6</sup> D. 907/1501, see Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte Der Arabischen Litteratur*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1943), 2:217.