

Zünnun el-Misri

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Rectifying Pharaoh

Ibn 'Arabī, Dhū'l-Nūn and the Alchemy
of Red Sulphur

Alison M. Roberts

Part 1¹

The Lord said: 'I came to make the things below like the things
above and the things outside like the things inside. I have come to
unite them in that place.'

(*Gospel of Philip*)

And thereupon a colloquy took place
That I commend to all the chroniclers
To show how violent great hearts can lose
Their bitterness and find the honeycomb.

(*The Gift of Harun al-Rashid*, W.B.Yeats)

From Biblical times, the Exodus narrative, with its long struggle of Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt into the Promised Land, and the pursuing Pharaoh's defeat by drowning in the Red Sea, has profoundly shaped attitudes to ancient Egypt and its ruler. Celebrated year after year in the Jewish Passover Feast and the Christian Easter-Liturgy, it also features in several suras of the Quran, reinforcing Egypt as the place of slavery, ruled by a tyrannical harsh despot, a land to escape from, and a potent symbol of the soul's imprisonment in fleshly passions and appetites – a view rampant, too, amongst some early Gnostic sects.²

1. I am very grateful to David Hornsby who first showed me the chapter on Moses in the *Fuṣūṣ* and inspired this paper. I would also like to thank Stephen Hirtenstein for kindly referring me to relevant articles and patiently answering my Arabic queries, and Mohammed Rustom for his editorial assistance and for resolving an alchemical conundrum. My heartfelt thanks also to Khojeste Mistree for introducing me to the world of Ibn 'Arabī many moons ago.

2. See A. Roberts, *Golden Shrine, Goddess Queen: Egypt's Anointing Mysteries*. Rottingdean, 2008, 106–7.