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AVICENNA AND THE QUR'ĀN A SURVEY OF HIS QUR'ĀNIC COMMENTARIES (*)

by

Jules JANSSENS

Almost at the very beginning of his Autobiography, Avicenna states: «I was born there [i.e. at Afshana], as was my (younger) brother, and later we moved to Bukhārā. I was provided with a teacher of the Qur'ān and a teacher of literature, and when I reached the age of ten I had finished (the study) of the Qur'ān and of a great deal of literature, to such an extent that I evoked great amazement»¹.

Given the fact that Avicenna was born into a muslim family (albeit one that had sympathies for a radical Ismā'īlī movement), it comes as no surprise that his education began with the study of the Qur'ān. But it is perhaps surprising that he would have completely mastered it by such a young age as ten, as he claims. However, as Gutas has shown², Avicenna is here referring to the strength of (his) intuition, and hence to the ability of some people to learn in an uncommonly quick manner. The intention of his claim is to offer a sort of concrete illustration of what is one of Avicenna's most innovative, and, for him, most important doctrines, i.e., his theory of *ḥads*. The latter theory constitutes a further development of Aristotle's discussions

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1. See GOHLMAN, W., *The Life of Ibn Sīnā*, New York, Albany, SUNY, 1974, p. 18. I use the English translation (slightly modified) by GUTAS, D., *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, Leiden, Brill, 1988, p. 23.

2. *Op. cit.*, p. 23, n. 3.

of *eustochia* (and the related concept of *anchinoia*)³. Thus, *hads* is the ability to grasp almost spontaneously the middle term of a syllogism, and therefore implies the ability to learn very quickly. This ability is not a purely theoretical one; it actually happens to certain people. By the present claim, as well as many others in the *Autobiography*, Avicenna clearly wants to show the very reality of this kind of profound «intuition».

But is the historical context of the claim still reliable? It seems to me that one may seriously doubt it. Even if one accepts, with Gutas, that «it is not the self-congratulatory bombast of a megalomaniac» (p. 173), it still remains possible that Avicenna is somehow trying to glorify himself by presenting himself as the master of intuition and as having possessed certain kinds of knowledge at a very young age, knowledge which the vast majority of people, even the learned, only acquire at a much later age. In this respect, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that Avicenna confesses in the *Physics* of the *Shifā'* that he has not understood well a particular doctrine⁴, despite his claim in the *Autobiography* that he mastered all the philosophical sciences (logic, mathematics, physics and metaphysics) at the age of eighteen. Even if the *Physics* is the earliest volume of the *Shifā'* in date of composition, Avicenna was clearly much older than eighteen at the time of writing⁵. So, there is little doubt that he has embellished the data of his «(self-)education», probably by positing key-ages (ten, eighteen) as those at which he had «accomplished» his acquisition of a certain kind of knowledge. At any rate, it is striking that Avicenna places the Qur'ān at the very beginning of his education, and thus as relatively easy to master and, moreover, as a study open to the grasp of intuition in a way similar to the quick learning of the sciences and philosophy. Hence, it would appear that the Qur'ān was for Avicenna a book of a fundamentally propaedeutic nature.

Is this really the case for Avicenna? At first reading, one would incline to believe that it is. In fact, the Qur'ān is replete with images which above are all directed at the (ignorant) masses who are unable to understand the full (philosophical) truth. Avicenna clearly adheres to such an idea. But, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, Avicenna, in sharp contrast to his famous predecessor al-Fārābī, is not reluctant to use Qur'ānic denominations when speaking about God, as, for example, Al-

3. For more details, see *ibid.*, p. 159-176.

4. See, e.g., *Shifā'*, *Al-Samā' al-tabī'ī*, Ed. Zayed, S., Cairo, 1983, p. 90.

5. If one accepts 980 as the year of his birth (but some scholars have given some serious arguments in favour of an earlier datation, see, for instance, GUTAS, D., «Avicenna's *Madhab*, with an Appendix on the Question of his date of Birth», *Quaderni di studi arabi* 5-6 (1987), p. 323-336 and MASUMI, M., «Fresh Light on Ibn Sīnā's *Sarguzasht*», *Indo-Iranica* 34 (1981), p. 20-40, and if one dates the redaction of the *Physics* to his stay in Hamadhān, i.e. between 1015 and 1024, Avicenna was at least thirty-six at the time of its writing.

lāh (in contexts of God's greatness and providence, or man's recognition of both) and *al-ḥaqq* (when using the expression *al-ḥaqq al-awwal*, a Neoplatonic ring is detectable, but this is absent in other applications of *al-ḥaqq*)⁶. Furthermore, I have tried to prove that for Avicenna human reason is by its very nature a limited one, and that, therefore, in practical matters Revelation unconditionally prevails⁷.

Finally, the introduction to the *Easterners* may contain an indication that Avicenna held in special esteem the Islamic sciences, and thus their very basis, i.e. the Qur'ān. However, the text is problematic and I therefore present my interpretation with due prudence. Even if my interpretation is at clear variance with the one Gutas has offered⁸, I do not pretend that the latter is mistaken or even impossible. What I want to show is that it is not the only one, and, eventually, not even the most probable. Here I translate the passage, indicating where I deviate from Gutas' understanding:

«As for ourselves, coming to understand what they said has been very easy from the very moment when we [first] occupied ourselves with it [i.e. the examination of the doctrine of the Ancients, especially Aristotle]. But (G.: since *-wa-*), it is not unlikely that [philosophical] sciences may have come to us without regard to the Greeks [*min ḡhayri jihati l-yūnāniyyīn* — G.: from a direction other than that of the Greeks]. The time [or: period] during which we were occupied with these things (lit. «that» — *dhālika*), was in the prime of our youth (G.: we were occupied with it in the prime of our youth), and thanks to God's help [*min tawfiq Allāh*], we have found thereby [*mā...bi-sababihi*] the time of intellection of what they [i.e. the Greeks] have bequeathed has been shortened for us [G.: and were granted such success by God that we were able thereby to come to comprehend in a short time what they bequeathed]».

Let me first remark that the arabic «*min jihati*» is a fixed expression which may signify «from the direction of», but also, and probably more usual, «with respect or regard to»⁹. However, there is no fundamental contradiction between the two translations and thus there is at most a small difference in accentuation involved, the former translation being positive, the latter negative. But how is one to understand Avicenna's claim? In order to answer this delicate question, it is necessary to examine

6. See my «Ibn Sīnā's Ideas on Ultimate Reality and Meaning. Neoplatonism and the Qur'ān as Problem-Solving Paradigms in the Avicennian System», *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 10 (1987), p. 252-271.

7. See my «Ibn Sīnā (āvicenne): un projet "religieux" de philosophie?», in: J. Aertsen and A. Speer (Eds), *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter?* (M.M., 26), Berlin, New-York, 1998, p. 863-870.

8. See GUTAS, D., *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, op. cit. n. 1, p. 46.

9. See LANE, E., *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, London, 1893, Repr. Beirut, 1997, p. 3050, col. 2. Comp. WEHR, H., *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, Ed. by J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed., Wiesbaden, 1979, p. 1233.

what follows. In the next sentence, Avicenna first states that he was occupied with «that» in the prime of his youth (*ray'ān al-ḥādatha*). In my view, the «that» refers to all what precedes, i.e. both what has been transmitted by the Greeks and what was without any regard to them. Avicenna then concludes with a clear evocation of his discovery of «intuition» and how it works. Thus, it would be quite normal to consider with Gutas that the conclusion encompasses the whole passage and that the «other direction than that of the Greeks» refers to an union with the Agent Intellect through intuition. However, if one accepts this interpretation, there would appear no real progress in Avicenna's exposé. Moreover, one has the impression that Avicenna is suggesting in the present fragment that he only discovered «intuition» after some time, and that he did so at least partly by paying attention to what was «without regard to the Greeks». As we know from the *Autobiography*, in his youth Avicenna dealt not only with philosophical sciences, but as well with the Qur'ān and other Islamic sciences, such as *fiqh* (law). Thus I wonder whether the «sciences without any regard to the Greeks» might not refer to the Islamic sciences, or, when using Gutas' terminology, whether the «direction other than that of the Greeks» might not refer to that of the Islamic Revelation? The «thanks to God's help» in the final claim may then constitute more than a simple rhetorical device. It might be that Avicenna «sensed» the possibility intuition held for the philosopher by reflecting that God's Revelation gives to the (illiterate) prophet direct access to the Truth. This might appear far-fetched, but I believe it all but possible in view of Avicenna's acceptance of the prophet as occupying a rank higher than the philosopher, and that the prophet, though he uses images in order to address the masses, also knows the (philosophical) truth beyond them.

How did Avicenna concretely address Revelation and more specifically the Islamic Revelation in its actual wording, i.e. the Qur'ān? The best way to address this question is to examine closely those fragments in which he explicitly deals with Qur'ānic texts. Although not many, a few such fragments have reached us. Six (or perhaps more correctly, five) such fragments seem to have circulated as independent treatises and have been edited by 'Āṣī¹⁰. They concern s. 24, v. 35 (the famous «Light-verse»); s. 41, 11-12a (Then He directed Himself...)¹¹; s. 87 (The Most High)¹²; s. 112 (Purity)

10. AL-'ĀṢĪ, *al-Tafsīr al-qur'ānī wa l-luġha al-ṣūfiyya fī falsafat Ibn Sīnā*, Beirut, 1983, p. 84-125. (hereafter abbreviated to 'Āṣī).

11. Another more critical edition, together with a French translation, is present in: MICHOT, J., «Le commentaire avicennien du verset: *Puis il se tourna vers le ciel*. édition, traduction et notes», *MIDEO* 14 (1980), p. 317-328.

12. For a slightly annotated English translation, see M. 'ABDUL HAQ, «Ibn Sīnā's Interpretation of the Qur'ān», *Islamic Quarterly* 32 (1988), p. 46-56.

and S.113-114 («Dawn» and «Man»), which constitute a unity in Avicenna's comment as we will show. To these fragments, we may add the second part of the Treatise *On the Proof of Prophecies*, which explains the symbols of several Qur'ānic verses, i.e. 24, 35 (again the Light-verse!); 69, 17; 74, 30-31 and 15, 44 (as well as one *ḥadīth*, or prophetic tradition)¹³. Finally, one may add a «pointer» from the *Ishārāt* in which Avicenna once again interprets the «Light-verse»¹⁴.

Let us first concentrate on Avicenna's explanation, or rather explanations of the Light-verse. That there are at least two «explanations» is evident in the fact that the one edited by 'Āṣī seems to have nothing in common with that presented in *On the Proof of Prophecies* and the *Ishārāt*. It must be stressed that the commentary edited by 'Āṣī is extant in only one, relatively late¹⁵ manuscript, i.e., Istanbul University A. Y. 1458.

In the explanation edited by 'Āṣī, the very first affirmation, to wit that God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth, receives a double «exegesis».

The first¹⁶ is as follows. The existence of the possible Beings is the result of a connection (*irtibāt*) with God's essence (*dhāt*), not out of a separation (*infīṣāl*) from it. It is stressed that the undoing of the connection inevitably leads to non-existence. In other words, the connection with God's existence ensures the subsistence of the possible beings. Except for the very notion of «possible being», the terminology one encounters here is rather unusual for Avicenna. As near as I can determine, the notion of «connection» only occurs once in the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'*, *in concreto* in ch. IX, 5, p. 410, l. 14. However, there it is used to explain how supra-lunary things may somehow form a unity. In fact, it states that things, which are essentially characterized by multiplicity, can only be «one» due to a connection with «something one», this «something one» being given from above, i.e. from the separate Intelligences, and, more particularly, from the last of them, the Agent Intellect. So, connection here is used to explain a «relative» unity, but one which lacks any existential value, as

13. See *Fī ihbāt al-nubuwwāt*, Beirut, Ed. M. Marmura, 1968, p. 48-61 (hereafter abbreviated to *Ihbāt*). English translation: ID., «Avicenna. On the Proof of Prophecies and the Interpretation of the Prophet's Symbols and Metaphors», in: R. Lerner and M. Mahdi (eds), *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, Toronto, 1967, p. 112-121, p. 116-121.

14. See *Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa l-tanbihāt*, Leiden, ed. J. Forget, 1892, p. 125-127, Cairo, ed. S. Dunya, 1968, t. II, p. 387-392 (hereafter abbreviated to *Ishārāt*, F. ..., S.D. ...); French translation in GOICHON, A.-M., *Livre des Directives et Remarques*, Paris, Beyrouth, 1951, p. 324-326.

15. ANAWATI, G.C., *Mu'allafāt Ibn Sīnā*, Cairo, 1950, p. 144 gives the date 1242 H., but D. Reisman, after having reexamined the colophon of the manuscript, proposes in a private communication the date 1246 H. / 1830-1.

16. 'Āṣī, p. 86, l. 1-10.

is clearly the case in the present commentary¹⁷. As to the notion of *infiṣāl*, separation, I have found no instance of it in a context similar to the present one. The closest usage by Avicenna seems to be the case in which he (both in the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'*, VIII, 5, p. 350-351 and in the *Comm. on s. 112*, p. 111) emphatically denies that something similar to God is generated from Him through separation. But in these instances the real concern is with God's unity¹⁸, not with His relation to the created realm. But even if these notions are atypical of Avicenna in their actual wording, this does not automatically mean that the attribution of the text to Avicenna has to be denied. The two terms mentioned above may be understood in a rather loose sense, so that the whole statement has no other intention than to indicate that creatures have nothing in common with God, but that they are nonetheless entirely dependent upon Him with regard to their existence and subsistence. Such an interpretation is consistent with both an creationistic and an emanationistic perspective and thus also consonant with what I would call (for the sake of simplicity) «the emanationistic creationism» of Avicenna¹⁹. Finally, the passage concludes, somewhat mystically, that God's Light shines on the «Temples» (*hayākil*) of the possible beings. This is clearly figurative language, which says nothing about the current of thought to which the author ultimately may adhere.

The second exegesis²⁰ comprises an essentially teleological proof for the existence of God based on the presence of «order» in creation. It is insisted that God enlightens and embellishes the Heavens (The Tablet, the Archangels, etc.) and the Earth (the Ka'ba, the mosques, the prophets, etc.). This second explanation is outspoken religious, and undoubtedly fits within a kalamī (or, ultimately, mystical) context.

What follows²¹ only confirms this impression: the «niche» is identified with the prophet Muḥammad, the «glass» with his benedicted heart, the «lamp» with the knowledge (*'ilm*) and belief (*imān*), which are by the gift of God, etc. All of this has hardly anything in common with Avicenna's usual philosophical doctrine(s) and lacks even any philosophical undertone. By contrast, whenever Avicenna treats religious

17. al-Fārābī also seems to limit the notion of *irtibāt* to a connection between created beings, see WALZER, R., (ed., introd., transl. and comm.), *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985, p. 96-97. Acc. to Walzer, *irtibāt* renders in al-Fārābī the Greek *syndesmos*, see *ibid.*, p. 361, n. 158.

18. It would be interesting to examine whether or not the notion so conceived has its ultimate origin in Islamic polemics against the Christian idea of Trinity.

19. For a more critical and detailed analysis of the way in which Avicenna tries to combine creationism and emanationism, see my «Creation and Emanation in Ibn Sīnā», *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale*, 8 (1997), p. 455-477.

20. 'Āṣī, p. 86, l. 11-87, l. 2.

21. 'Āṣī, p. 87, l. 3-88.

matters, for instance, mysticism in the last parts of his *Ishārāt*, it is always in a thoroughly philosophical manner²². Therefore the present work looks spurious. However, if after a throughout examination (which is beyond the scope of the present study) the final analysis suggests that it might be an authentic Avicennian work, then it would most likely to be the work of a very young Avicenna, and the direct result of his study of *kalam*²³. *A priori*, one could also consider a possible late date of composition, but this would imply a very radical rupture in the final phase of Avicenna's thought, a rupture for which, in my opinion, there appears to be neither historical nor doctrinal evidence.

An examination of Avicenna's commentary of the very same verse in the treatise *On the Proof of Prophecies*²⁴ and in the *Ishārāt*²⁵ indicates that it is very similar in both works, and very different from the one just discussed. Avicenna's theory of the intellect and of intellection constitutes the framework of interpretation in these two works. Thus, Avicenna says that the «niche» symbolizes the material intellect, the «lamp» the acquired intellect in action, the «glass» the intellect *in habitu* (in *Proof of Prophecies* it is indicated as what is between the material and acquired intellect), the «olive tree» with the faculty of thought (*al-fikr*), the «oil» with «intuition», *ḥads*²⁶ (this is lacking in *Proof of Prophecies*), and, finally, the «fire» with the Agent Intellect (*Proof of Prophecies*: universal intellect, which is another denomination of the Agent Intellect²⁷). It may be noted that in the *K. al-mabda wa l-ma'ād*, one of his earliest works, Avicenna already offers a psychologisizing interpretation of the Light-verse, but in a very primitive and condensed form in which fire is the Agent Intellect, and that the phrase «almost gives light, though fire touch it not» refers to the soul, it being the intellectual power of man²⁸. This last identification seems to have more in common with the one offered in *On the Proof of Prophecies*, where this expression is seen as a «glorification (*madḥ*) of the thinking power (*al-quwwa al-fikriyya*)»²⁹ than

22. GARDET, L., *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne*, Paris, Vrin, 1951, p. 143-195, correctly qualifies Avicenna's mysticism as a «mystique à fondement philosophique».

23. Avicenna's great familiarity with *kalām*, esp. the mu'tazilite *kalām*, has been demonstrated by JOLIVET, J., «Aux origines de l'ontologie d'Ibn Sīnā», in: JOLIVET, J., and RASHED, R., (éds.), *Études sur Avicenne*, Paris, 1984, p. 19-28. This topic also formed one of the central themes of my Ph-D. Thesis *Avicenna : tussen Neoplatonisme en Islam*. Leuven, 1984.

24. *Ihbāt*, p. 48-52.

25. *Ishārāt*, F., p. 126-127, S.D., p. II, 388-392.

26. For a thorough analysis of this notion in Avicenna, see D. Gutas, *op. cit.*, p. 159 sqq.

27. See e.g., Avicenna's *Compendium on the Soul*, Ed. and transl. S. Landauer, «Die Psychologie des Ibn Sīnā», *Z.D.M.G.* 19 (1876), p. 335-418, p. 371 (Ar), 417 (German), where the universal soul is presented as a substance with which the soul remains connected after death.

28. See *K. al-mabda wa l-ma'ād*, Ed. A. Nūrāni, Tehran, 1984, p. 117.

29. *Ihbāt*, p. 52.

with that of the *Ishārāt*, where it is specified in terms of a sanctified power (*quwwa qudsiyya*)³⁰.

Here, a noticeable difference is apparent between the version of *On the Proof of Prophecies* and that of the *Ishārāt*. In the former work, the thinking faculty (which is one of the inner senses, specific to man, since enabling him to «abstract» universals from sense-data) appears to be highly emphasized and is even presented as constituting the sole access to intellection. The absence of any reference to the notion of «intuition» thus appears to be most significant and all but the result of an unfortunate oversight. At the time he wrote *On the Proof of Prophecies* Avicenna had most probably not yet «discovered» his theory of intuition, it is thus not surprising that he puts such a great emphasis on the faculty of thought. But in the *Ishārāt*, the perspective has changed radically; it is now clearly stated that intuition prevails over «thought». Intuition is presented as a kind of «holy power», a designation that is not without an evocation of the notion of «holy intellect» (*al-'aql al-qudsī*) found in the *De Anima* of both the *Shifā'*³¹ and the *Najāt*³². As in the *Ishārāt*, Avicenna clearly had already elaborated his doctrine of «intuition» in these latter works; this comes as no surprise since one finds elements of it already in the *K. al-mabda wa l-ma'ād*³³. Giving these facts, *On the Proof of Prophecies* is probably to be considered an early work³⁴. At any rate, it is clear that Avicenna directed his attention to interpreting the Light-verse from a rather early period through to his mature period³⁵ within the framework of a philosophical theory of intellection. This makes the 'Āṣī-version still more suspect, or, at the very least, pushes its composition to a very early period of Avicenna's literary activity.

We may now take a brief look at the other fragments of Qur'ānic exegesis in *On the Proof of Prophecies*. Commenting on s. 69, v. 17³⁶, Avicenna evokes the world of the higher spheres («the eight bearers») and rejects the idea that God, as the First

30. *Ishārāt*, F., p. 126, S.D., p. II, 390-391.

31. Ed. F. Rahman, London, 1959, p. 248; see also *Avicenna Latinus. De Anima* IV-V, Ed. S. Van Riet, Louvain, Leiden, 1968, p. 151, 84-85 («intellectus sanctus»).

32. Ed. Cairo, 1937, p. 167.

33. Ed. *cit.*, p. 116.

34. M. Marmura, in the English introduction to his edition, p. XI, inclines toward a late datation of composition based on a terminological consideration, but he formulates his hypothesis with the requisite prudence. If I have correctly described the doctrinal perspective, a late date is almost impossible.

35. Even if one accepts with MICHOT, J., «La réponse d'Avicenna à Bahmanyār et al-Kirmānī », *Le Muséon* 110 (1997), p. 143-221, p. 153-164, that the *Ishārāt* does not belong to the last period of Avicenna's philosophy, there is no doubt that the major lines of his philosophical system were developed when he composed it.

36. *Ibbāt*, p. 53-55.

Mover, has to be «incarnated» in the highest sphere («the throne»). It is worthwhile to note that Avicenna hereby explicitly refers to the last part of Aristotle's *Physics* (*Sam' al-Kiyān*³⁷, in concreto to VIII, 10, 467b 5-9). As for the notion of *yawma'idhin*, «that day», Avicenna sees in it an allusion to the day of resurrection. Basing his exposition on the famous *ḥadīth* that «the bridge over hell is sharper than a sword and finer than a hair»³⁸, and Q. 74, 30-31 and 15, 44, Avicenna³⁹ presents a spiritual-intellectual interpretation of the life in the Hereafter. Paradise is identified with the intellectual world (*al-'ālam al-'aqlī*), while Hell is said to be the imaginative-estimative world (*al-'ālam al-khayyālī al-wahmī*). To hell, there are «seven gates», i.e., the five external senses plus imagination plus estimation, whereas to Paradise there are eight of them, i.e. the same seven plus intellect ('*aql*). It has to be stressed that by admitting that the same seven faculties may be gates to either Heaven or Hell, Avicenna makes it evident that they are all but superfluous. In fact, they are for him the «bridge», but to traverse the bridge one needs external guidance, that of the intellect. However, when the animal and not the rational soul predominates, i.e. when «estimation» becomes the guiding force, the human soul will experience «hell», since while the desire to perfect itself will still be present, there will no longer be the instrument to do so. One gets the strong impression that in all of this discussion Avicenna is limiting the survival of the soul to that of its rational part. But in later works, he seems to have developed a theory of imaginary, or rather better put, imaginal afterlife⁴⁰ (through a connection with the Agent Intellect), perhaps a result of his own strong emphasis on the unity of the soul⁴¹.

Let us now examine the other fragments of Qur'ānic commentary by Avicenna, which seem to have circulated as independent treatises.

The commentary of S. 41, v. 11-12a («Then He directed Himself to the Heaven...»)⁴² highlights Avicenna's acceptance of Aristotle's hylemorphism. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on the notion that there is a major difference between

37. This is the older appellation of Aristotle's *Physics* (in the later tradition it would be replaced by *as-Samā' al-ṭabī'ī* - this being the title of the concerned part in the *Shifā'*). This seems to offer further evidence for an early dating of *On the Proof of Prophecies*. For instance, Avicenna uses the same title in his correspondence with al-Bīrūnī, which took place before 1000; see *al-As'ila wa al-Ajwibah (Questions and Answers)*, Ed. with Engl. and Persian Introd. by NASR, S.H., and MOHAGHEGH, M., Kuala Lumpur, ISTAC, 1995, pp. 18, 23.

38. MUSLIM, *imān*, Cairo, 1956, 306.

39. *Iḥbāt*, p. 55-61.

40. See the authoritative study of MICHOT, J., *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne*, Louvain, Peeters, 1986.

41. Whether he succeeded in his attempt is a question that deserves a fuller investigation of its own.

42. MICHOT, J., «Le commentaire avicennien du verset: *Puis il se tourna vers le ciel*», édition, traduction et notes, *MIDEO* 14 (1980), p. 317-328; 'Āṣī, p. 91-93.

matter in the supra-lunar world and matter in the infra-lunar world. With Michot⁴³, I can only observe how absolutely convenient the actual order of the Qur'ānic words is for Avicenna, but also how he is absolutely not reluctant to offer an outspoken rational-philosophical interpretation of these very same words.

As to s. 87 (The most High), Avicenna distinguishes three major parts in it: proof(s) for God's existence (v. 1-5); prophecy (v. 6-15) and *ma'ād*, resurrection (v. 16-19).

The proof of God's existence⁴⁴ is splitted in two parts, but is essentially one and the same. The existence of creatures — on the one hand, animals (having a specific measure (*miqdār*) and a soul, which guides (*hadā*) the specific composition of each of the animal powers) and, on the other hand, plants — indicates the existence of a willing maker (*fā'il mukhtār*). Further, there is an indication that the proof based on plants is somehow implicit in that based on animals, and it is stressed that animals are superior to plants. Finally, it is stated that the great variety of organs, etc. in animals indicates that their Maker must possess power (*qudra*) and free choice (*ikhtiyār*). As with the proof in the 'Āhī-version of the Light-verse, the present proof is teleological in nature and its natural locus is thus kalām rather than falsafa. Equally surprising is the strong emphasis on God's will, the latter being conceived in terms of free choice rather than in terms of rational knowledge of the best possible. All of this is not very Avicennian, but let us first examine the two other points in order to determine whether or not the general «tenor» of the treatise is non-Avicennian.

In the second part⁴⁵, it is stated that the prophet is perfect — since God wills it! — both in the theoretical and in the practical powers of his soul (the prophet having a «holy soul», *nafs qudsiyya*). By accepting the call of the prophet, man may acquire through the knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and the invocation (*dhikr*) of God the perfection of his own soul. Again, one is confronted with some atypical Avicennian elements: the insistence on God's will regarding the prophet's perfection, the calling the prophet's theoretical perfection a «holy soul», and not a «holy intellect», the absence of any reference to the mode of prophecy by perfection of the imaginative faculty⁴⁶, and the description of the path to the soul's perfection in rather mystical terms.

In the third and final part⁴⁷, which deals with the topic of resurrection, it is explained that other-worldly pleasures, which are spiritual (*rūḥānī*) in nature, are more

43. *Art. cit.*, p. 325.

44. 'Āsī, p. 96-97, 16.

45. 'Āsī, 97, 17-102, 1.

46. Avicenna distinguished three modes of prophecy, see ELAMRANI-JAMAL, A., «De la multiplicité des modes de la prophétie chez Ibn Sīnā», in: J. Jolivet and R. Rashed (éds.), *Études sur Avicenne*, Paris, 1984, p. 125-142.

47. 'Āsī, p. 102-103.

essential than the pleasures of this world, which are essentially bodily (*jismānī*). In the everlasting Hereafter, there is no place for sensual pleasures, since they completely disappear with the death of the body. Although a spiritual interpretation of the life in the Hereafter accords with Avicenna's general view, its articulation in terms of «spirit», and not of «intellect» is far from usual with him.

We may now try to arrive at a conclusion regarding the authenticity of the present commentary. In all three parts, we see the presence of atypical Avicennian elements. In fact, there is almost nothing explicitly philosophical in it, with the possible exception of the theoretical-practical division of the powers of the soul. As already indicated, the proof(s) of God's existence is rather kalamī, and the exposé on prophecy has a slightly mystical undertone. Let us add that a «spiritual», non-physical interpretation of the life in the Hereafter was not only held by the philosophers, but also defended in gnostico-mystical circles such as the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'⁴⁸. Hence, it seems to me that this comment is spurious, on exactly the same grounds as the 'Āṣī-version of the Light-verse appeared to be so. But in this case as well I have found no definite proof of its inauthenticity. Avicenna may be its author, but if this is the case, I believe, contrary to 'Abdul Ḥaq⁴⁹, that it then would belong to Avicenna's early period, since it is quite obvious that Avicenna had yet not founded his mature philosophical system, including his theories of «intellectual intuition» and of «imaginary (imaginal) resurrection».

As to the commentaries on the last three sura's, they are highly philosophical in content. In the commentary on s. 112⁵⁰, the divine essence is highlighted from an outspokenly metaphysical point of view. Notwithstanding the philosophical orientation, the commentary remains very literal, i.e. the very order of the words of the Qur'ān is fully respected. So, Avicenna begins his exegesis by emphasizing the first word of the sura, i.e. the personal pronoun *huwa*, «he»⁵¹. For him, the very fact that it is mentioned as *the* first word is not arbitrary, but rather indicates that God is an «He He», in other words, his ipseity is absolute, since His quiddity (*māhiyya*) is identical with his being, or existence (*wujūd*). A direct consequence of this is that God is not knowable to His creatures in Himself, but only through the mediation of His concomitants, which are either negative (e.g. unity means that there is no multi-

48. See *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, Beirut, 1983, vol. III, p. 66 sqq. Islamic thinkers may have derived such a spiritualistic interpretation of resurrection from certain of their Christian colleagues, see PINES, S., and SCHWARZ, M., «Yahyā ibn 'Adī's Refutation of the Doctrine of Acquisition (*iktisāb*)», in: *Studia orientalia D. H. Baneth dedicata*, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1979, p. 49-84, p. 67, 77 (repr. in *Coll. Works S. Pines*, vol. III, Jerusalem, 1996, p. 110-155, p. 128, 138).

49. 'ABDUL ḤAQ, *art. cit.* n. 12, *passim*, rightly stresses the «Islamic» character of the commentary, but I think he is mistaken when he considers it to be a work of the «mature» Avicenna.

50. 'ĀṢĪ, p. 106-113.

51. 'ĀṢĪ, p. 106-107, 2.

plicity in Him) or relational (e.g. power in relation to creatures). These statements do not differ essentially with what Avicenna says elsewhere regarding the divine essence. The doctrinal basis remains identical to that of the *Ilāhīyāt* of the *Shifā'*, with the possible exception that in the *Ilāhīyāt* a third possibility is added with regard to the divine concomitants, namely, that they may result from a combination of relation and negation⁵².

A more significant change is apparent on the terminological level: instead of the *wujūd* of the commentary, the *Ilāhīyāt* offers the somewhat enigmatic notion of *anniyya* (*anitas* of the Latin tradition). The difference between the two terms is subtle, but in my view not without importance. Whereas *wujūd* means Being (or: existence) in a comprehensive way, *anniyya* refers specifically to the Being of God, or more precisely, to His being an absolute «I am», with a particular emphasis on the «am», and thus expressing that God is a plenitude of Being⁵³.

As to the name «Allāh»⁵⁴, the second word of the sura, it encompasses all the divine concomitants and constitutes as such the «explanation» of the *huwa*, «He». Special attention is thus given to the fact that there are absolutely no constitutive elements (*muqawwimāt*) in God, that God as the First simple One is a Necessary Being and that in God knower, knowledge and known are one and the same. Moreover, Avicenna insists that from the One no more than the one can proceed⁵⁵, but at the same time he adds: except along the order (*tartīb*) which descends from Him in a long and accidental way. In this addition one cannot but find an allusion to his theory of «mediated emanation», there being in the present context not the slightest indication for a first creationistic moment, as clearly formulated is some of his major works⁵⁶.

Further⁵⁷ Avicenna specifies that «One» means that God is one in every respect, i.e. His is the perfect «one», and that His being *aṣ-ṣamad* (which signifies both «Lord» and «solid, not hollow»)⁵⁸ amounts to the negation of any quiddity in Him, but also implies that He is the principle of all things.

52. see *Ilāhīyāt*, p. 367-368.

53. see my Ph.-D. Thesis, *op. cit.* n. 23, p. 1, 130-133. As I remarked there, Avicenna's theory might prefigure the notion of «esse subsistens» in Thomas of Aquinas, but this requires a more detailed examination.

54. 'Āṣī, p. 107, 3-109, 12.

55. Although the Neoplatonic inspiration of this adagium is more than evident, Avicenna appears to be the first thinker to have formulated it in this explicit way, see DAVIDSON, H., *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes, on Intellect*, New York, Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1992, p. 75, n. 3.

56. See my «Creation and Emanation in Ibn Sīnā», *art. cit.* n. 18, p. 470-476.

57. 'Āṣī, p. 109, 13-110, 17 (One), 110, 18-111, 6 (*aṣ-ṣamad*).

58. See LANE, E., *Arabic-English Lexicon*, p. IV, 1727.

That God «begets not, not is begotten»⁵⁹ is the direct result of His absolute ipseity, which excludes any possibility that He was «born», and hence that He gives birth, since that would imply separation (*infīṣāl*)⁶⁰, and thus «passion» (*infī'āl*). However, Avicenna insists that this in no way contradicts the fact that God is the giver (*al-mu'īṭ*) of all being to all existents, or the «overflowing» (*al-fayyād*) of existence to each quiddity. It should be noted that while the wording of this declaration is not typical Avicennian, it does not contradict his general conception, unless the «overflowing of existence» would imply the pre-existence of the quiddity toward which it is directed. However, while the context does not completely exclude the latter interpretation, neither does it offer any serious indication in favour of it. One has the impression that it is simply intended to present God as the ultimate cause of all Beings.

Finally⁶¹, «none is like Him», signifies that nothing participates in God, neither by a specific quiddity nor by a generic quiddity.

In assessing the entire commentary⁶², it becomes obvious that its basic goal is to demonstrate God's absolute ipseity. This was an important item in Avicenna's theology. Furthermore, the statements made in his commentary are, on the whole, in accordance with what he emphasizes elsewhere on this topic. Although it is far from easy to date the work, on terminological (e.g. *wujūd* instead of *anniyya*) and doctrinal grounds (e.g. absence of the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*), I would be inclined to place it before the redaction of the *Ilāhīyāt* of the *Shifā'*⁶³.

As for the commentary on the last two suras, there is no doubt that it forms a unity. This is evident from the following three indications:

1. in the very beginnings of the comment on s. 114⁶⁴, Avicenna reminds the reader that he has already discussed the notion of *rabb*, «Lord», which he has in fact elaborated in his exposé on s. 113;

59. 'Āṣī, p. 111, 7-112, 4.

60. For this notion, see *supra*, p. 5 and especially n. 18.

61. 'Āṣī, p. 112, 5-16.

62. At the end of the commentary, Avicenna offers a synthesis of his own, see 'Āṣī, p. 112, 17-113.

63. However, according to the manuscripts (Nuruosmaniye 4894, Ahmet III 3447 and Zāhiriyya 3512) used by 'Āṣī (but not according to the text in *Jāmi' al-Badā'ī*, Cairo, 1917), Avicenna states with regard to one issue, i.e. the knowledge of concomitants linked in the mind with the divine essence being similar to the knowledge of constitutive elements in composed things, that «a complete analysis of this principle is (or: will be) given in the Logic of one of my compositions, in *Kitāb ash-Shifā'*» (see 'Āṣī, p. 109, 11-12). If this is not a later addition, it suggests that Avicenna was at least preparing to write the *Shifā'* or had actually completed one of its logical parts (but I looked in vain in the logical parts of the *Shifā'* for a «locus» dealing with that precise topic). It has to be noted that only when the latter interpretation reveals to be the correct one, and, moreover, the concerned logical part is not the *Isagōgē*, it is obviously mistaken to state that the commentary has preceded the *Ilāhīyāt* of the *Shifā'*.

64. 'Āṣī, p. 123, 2-3.

2. in the midst of the same commentary⁶⁵, he lists the main points for both suras;
3. at its very end, he simply mentions: «these two suras»⁶⁶.

Thus, it is very likely that they formed together an independent treatise. And while they may have part of a larger whole, it is also clear that for Avicenna they were to be treated together.

As might be expected, the problem of evil constitutes the central issue in the «exegesis» of S. 113⁶⁷. Avicenna deals with the issue not only in a moral sense, but also, and even in a primary manner, in an ontological sense. He insists that the primordial divine decree (*al-qadā*), which includes the overflowing (*ifāda*) of the Light of existence onto the shadow of non-existence of the possible quiddities, is fundamentally free of any evil. It is only on the level of the concrete realisation of it, i.e. on the level of «destiny» (*qadar*), that evil appears. More precisely, it happens in those beings which need to receive measure and determination, in other words, those which possess matter. Moreover, Avicenna stresses that the actual occurrence of evil is not willed by a first, but only by a second intention. In all of this, the presence of a certain Neoplatonic undertone cannot be denied, especially in the apparently direct link between evil and matter. However, Avicenna does not say that matter as such is evil, but rather he suggests that matter allows for some imperfect being and thus for some kind of relative non-being. Next, it is not quite clear in what way precisely the expression «overflowing of the light of existence» is to be understood. Either it has the sense of a strictly necessary emanation⁶⁸, or, more likely in my view, it is simply a metaphorical expression⁶⁹. If the latter view is correct, then Avicenna brings to the fore the radical contingency of the possible beings, whose existence can only be conceived in the «light» of God. This is indeed the case when he states that the possible beings seek refuge from the «Lord»⁷⁰ of Dawn and that this means that they need

65. 'ĀṢĪ, p. 124, 16-18.

66. 'ĀṢĪ, p. 125, 11.

67. 'ĀṢĪ, p. 116-120.

68. See GOICHON, A.-M., *La distinction de l'essence et de l'existence selon Avicenne*, Paris, 1937, p. 202-205. Goichon's interpretation was partially based on an introductory part added by a later scribe, which is present in the old printed edition of Cairo (*Jāmi' al-Badā'ī*, p. 24-25, 3) but correctly omitted by 'ĀṢĪ. However, Goichon's view does represent the interpretation common among contemporary scholars of Avicenna. For instance, the problem of evil in Avicenna's theodicy has been analyzed with just such a perspective by INATI, SH., «An Examination of Ibn Sīnā's Theodicy: Dissolving the Problem of Evil», *New Scholasticism*, 58 (1984), p. 170-186.

69. See my «Creation and Emanation», *art. cit.* n. 18, p. 461. Note that there I did take into account the later added introductory part (see preceding note) and that my argument is only strengthened when it is omitted from consideration.

70. Here Avicenna makes a kind of dialectic distinction between the Lord (*al-rabb*) and the servant (*al-marbūb*). Characteristic of this relationship is the need of the servant for the Lord, while in the

God's «overflowing» for both their existence and their subsistence. While I would not deny the Neoplatonic undertone, it seems to me that Avicenna is also elaborating a new interpretation of the divine overflowing light within an Islamic framework⁷¹. However, this does not mean that his entire doctrine is necessarily genuinely Islamic. Its «Islamicity» consists in the notion that God, despite His being the source of all being, is not responsible for the existence of evil, since He has realized the best possible world, i.e. a world which contains the maximum level of being⁷². As for moral evil, Avicenna insists that the human soul remains pure as long as it subjugates the objective data of the common sense and the two commemorative powers to the judgment of the intellect. It makes itself vulnerable to the powers of «darkness» only by submitting itself to the animal powers of imagination and estimation. One can easily recognize the same basic idea encountered already in a similar context in *On the Proof of Prophecies*⁷³.

As for the commentary on sura II4, it concentrates on the human soul. It shows that the human soul longs for a connection with the proximate principle, i.e. the *Wāhib aṣ-ṣuwar*, the «Dator formarum»⁷⁴. It also raises the problem of the precise place of each of the powers of the soul according to a hierarchical order that proceeds from the vegetative to the animal to the rational soul. A certain cardiocentrism is also evident, since the heart is presented as the first link with the soul.

This condensed overview of the most essential characteristics of the soul is very Avicennian; no further comment appears necessary. I stress that the commentary on

relationship between the Godhead (*ilāh*) and servant, the Godhead wants to be worshipped. One may detect here a similarity with the dialectic between slave and master found in Aristotle's *Politics*, but it is so vague as to exclude the possibility that Avicenna was inspired by it. In this regard, it should be noted that there probably never existed an Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Politics*, see BRAGUE, R., «Note sur la traduction arabe de la *Politique*, derechef, qu'elle n'existe pas», in: P. Aubenque (ed.), *Aristote politique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1993, 423-433.

71. It is perhaps not insignificant that the only other text in which Avicenna uses the expression «the overflowing of light» is the treatise *Fulfilment of Prayer, and how to visit Tombs*, another treatise with an outspoken religious content. See my «Creation and Emanation», *art. cit.* n. 18, p. 460-461.
72. Certainly, the notion of «the best possible» entails some necessity («best») but also some choice («possible»). Without entering into details here, it is readily apparent that the involved necessity is not just a «bare and blind necessity». In that sense, I doubt whether INATI, SH., *art. cit.* n. 68, p. 186, is right when she states that God cannot be blamed for the existence of evil since it has not been produced by free choice. But I agree with her in doubting whether Avicenna actually «solved» the problem of evil (on the ontological level), although for a different reason, namely that «accidental non-being» seems, in Avicenna's conception, to escape God's power; it is worth wondering whether the latter is, in such a case, so all-encompassing?
73. See *supra*, p. 8.
74. This notion is present, *inter alia*, in the *Ilāhīyāt* of the *Shifā'*, IX, 5, but also in several of his other writings, e.g. *at-Ta'liqāt*, ed. A. Badawi, Cairo, 1973, p. 54, 58 etc., and *al-Mubāḥathāt*, ed. M. Bidār Far, Qom, 1371 h.s., p. 254, n° 742 and p. 266, n° 772.

S. 113-114 is typically Avicennian and so its authenticity is almost assured. As for its date of composition, this proves more difficult. But I may note that nothing points toward an early date for the work, contrary to the general drift of the other Qur'anic commentaries.

The Avicennian, or pseudo-Avicennian, fragments of Qur'anic exegesis discussed here are most interesting, particularly in their combination of a philosophical reading with a great respect for the literal order of the revealed words. They are rich in content — much more so than the very basic outline I have traced here. I might only hope that I have shown that they are philosophically interesting and thus worthy of further investigation, regardless of the question of authenticity — though this too deserves close analysis.