Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 58 (2004)

Heft: 4

Artikel: Agriculture vs. ascesis : late antique pagan asceticism in an anti-ascetic tractate from around 900 A.D.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147654

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AGRICULTURE VS. ASCESIS

Late antique pagan asceticism in an anti-ascetic tractate from around 900 A.D.

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Abstract

The question of asceticism is controversial in Sufism and it often centred on the question of tawakkul "reliance on God." Our knowledge of ascetic Sufism in the 8th and 9th centuries is mainly based on later manuals and hagiographies, which very often either play asceticism down to save Sufism from any claims of un-Islamic behaviour or, on the other hand, exaggerate the ascesis of early Sufis as a mark of their extreme piety. There are, however, few contemporary sources to describe these ascetics. One such description is found in the *Nabatean Agriculture* by Ibn Waḥshiyya (d. 318/931) which gives an almost unique criticism of Sufi ascesis from an agriculturalist viewpoint. Those who criticized asceticism did it usually from a staunch Sunni viewpoint, urban and learned. Ibn Waḥshiyya's criticism, on the contrary, is connected with his tendency of exalting agriculture and the farmers who toil on their fields. The crucial passage on ascesis is translated and discussed in the article, keeping an eye on its Near Eastern background.

The ascetic tradition in the Near East is ancient and has certain characteristics which the ascetic movements of various Near Eastern religions share with each other and which later traditions may have, in at least some cases, inherited from earlier ones. We know full well that different religions had sometimes very close contacts between each other, and that influences were easily passed across religious boundaries.[1] Thus, e.g., self-castration which we know already from Mesopotamia[2] was still practised among Christian ascetics even as late as 410 A.D.[3] and the topic surfaces yet again in Islam where it is reported to have been

1 Obviously, e.g., Indian asceticism shares many features with different varieties of Near Eastern asceticism. In many cases, one should probably not seek for a historical link but take these features as universals.

2 For emasculation and Mesopotamian ascetic practices related to the cult of Ishtar in general, see Parpola (1997): XXXIV and, especially, notes 137–141, with copious references to further literature.

3 Vööbus (1958): 273–274.

prohibited by the prophet Muḥammad.[4] Likewise, the rather remarkable form of asceticism best known from Symeon the Stylite seems to derive from pagan practices in the area.[5]

The Syrian tradition of Christian asceticism was not mere emulation of the Egyptian Fathers but we can speak of a "genuinely native heritage" of asceticism and monasticism in early Syrian Christianity, from the time before Egyptian influence.[6] The Syriac interest in asceticism may also be perceived in the fifth and sixth century translations of Greek texts connected with ascesis. An ascetic trend influenced Syrian Christianity; unkemptness was seen as a mark of great piety.[7]

In and around Christianity, asceticism is strongly connected with Gnosticism and its disawoval of the material world. Recent studies on Gnosticism[8] have shown that the earlier emphasis on dualism in Gnosticism (all Gnostic movements saw a complete difference between the good spiritual world and the evil material world) is exaggerated. This is certainly so, but the basic fact remains that Gnostic movements were suspicious of the body and prone to asceticism.

Likewise, Manichaeans saw a clear dichotomy between body and soul, which easily led to asceticism: if the body is merely the earthly prison for the heavenly, or divine, soul, it should be ignored or even tortured in various ways.

4 Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ,* no. 5075 (*K. an-Nikāḥ, Bāb Mā yukrah min at-tabattul wa'l-khiṣāʾ*), where the companions of the Prophet ask for his permission to castrate themselves. The Prophet prohibits this, referring to Qur. 5: 87. For more hadiths concerning castration, see Wensinck (1992) II: 38, s.v. KHṢY. Note that the existence of hadiths often implies that some seventh- or eighth-century practice was either fought against or propagated. Thus, a hadith against self-castration cannot, *prima facie*, be taken as evidence for the situation on the Arabian Peninsula in the first decades of the seventh century. In very many cases, its real context is Syria or Iraq in the later seventh or the eighth century.

5 Trembley (2001) I: 162. For references to pagan ascetics in the area of Syrian monasticism, see Brock (1973): 12. Cf. also the still useful and convenient collection of Koch (1933).

6 Brock (1973): 3. See also Vööbus (1958) and (1960). Vööbus (1958): 146, strongly voices his opinion that "monasticism originated independently among the Syrians in Mesopotamia and Persia and can thus be looked upon as an autochthonous phenomenon." The independence of early Syrian Christianity may also be seen on a more general level. The Classic study on Syriac Christianity is Walter Bauer's *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei* (1964), originally published in 1934, which, though clearly overstating its case, drew attention to earlier trends within Syrian Christianity, predating Roman Christianity.

7 Cf. Ephrem the Syrian's respect for "the filth and dirt that has accumulated on their bodies" (Vööbus 1960: 27).

8 Cf., e.g., Williams (1996): 96–162.

Mortifying the body leads to the revivification of the soul. Thus, e.g., Mani was against washing and bathrooms.[9] Similarly, the later Manichaean attitude towards agriculture was rather negative, even if Vööbus exaggerates when writing (1958: 158) that Manichaeism: "[...] extinguished the natural human desires to plant and sow and till the soil, and uprooted every kind of work." In theory, though obviously not in practice, "[...] tilling the soil, [...], came to be regarded by the [Manichaean] monks as a crime equal to murder."[10]

For Manichaeans, the rather necessary sin of cultivating the earth, committed by auditors, could be compensated by the spiritual profit acquired by feeding the elects.[11] The idea of acquiring spiritual profit through feeding saintly men is also familiar from as widely different groups as Christian monks or Buddhist mendicants. Still, one has to remember that Mani's background was not anti-agrarian, as shown by the *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis*,[12] which describes the baptising sect of Elchasaites among whom Mani grew up.

Mesopotamia seems to have been "a veritable playground for extremely radical ascetic ideologies [...]."[13] There is a certain tension between early Christian attitudes towards labour and the radical aversion of the Syrian ascetics towards worldly toil.[14] Zoroastrians, on the contrary, had a more positive view of tilling and toiling, the farmer working side by side with Ahurā Mazdā, against Angra Mainyu. The maintenance of life falls within the realm of good and "in order to maintain life one must earn one's living by means of cattle-raising and agriculture, and one must procreate."[15] Although an Iranian religion, the influence of Zoroastrianism was, of course, strong in Iraq, which Sasanian kings ruled for centuries.

In Islam, early Sufism was strongly ascetic in character. In the eighth and ninth centuries, many Sufis continued the ascetic traditions of the Near East, in their turn being influenced by Christian Syrian saints, who had been influenced

9 Cf. Vööbus (1958): 122–123. The views of Vööbus should be corrected in the light of more recent studies, cf., e.g., BeDuhn (2000).

10 Vööbus (1958): 134, quoting Augustinus.

11 Cf. Vööbus (1958): 131.

12 See Lieu (1985): 30–31. The text is conveniently available in Gnoli (2003).

13 Vööbus (1958): 161.

14 Cf. Vööbus (1958): 157: "It must certainly have been a strong outward influence which succeeded, even at the very vital points [...], in replacing the Christian conception of the value of manual toil with a directly contrary view [...]."

15 Duchesne-Guillemin (1970): 147.

by the earlier pagan tradition.[16] Islamic history, though, tends to see the Sufi tradition as indigenous within Islam, going back to those companions of the prophet Muḥammad who were known as the *ahl aṣ-ṣuffa*. But it seems rather probable that the asceticism of the first-generation Muslims has been much exaggerated in Muslim sources and the origins of Muslim ascesis should be sought from earlier Syrian and Mesopotamian traditions.[17] Muslim sources also retroject much of later discussions on the Prophet Muḥammad himself, and one thus finds both ascetic features and an open rejection of extreme asceticism in the *sunna*.

The complicated interdependence of various ascetic movements and the universal tendencies towards asceticism make it very difficult to pinpoint the exact relations between these movements, when we do not have conspicuous details such as we have in the case of Symeon the Stylite. All we can do is to refer to family resemblance: the Near Eastern forms of ascesis are, in a general way, cognate with each other.

At the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth century, Islamic mysticism went through a period of crisis, exemplified and perhaps partly even caused by the eccentric al-Ḥallāj, who was executed in 922. After his execution, Sufis tried to convince the ᶜulamāᵓ that Sufism was a respectable and orthodox doctrine within mainstream Islam. This led to the period of classical Sufi manuals, aimed at an audience of outsiders. More extreme ascetic features gave way, at least in these handbooks, to sober abstinence and quiet piety.

The question of asceticism, though, remained controversial in Sufism. and it often centred on the question of *tawakkul* "(extreme) reliance on God". For the proponents of *tawakkul*, humankind's endeavour to provide for themselves were proof of their lack of reliance since it is God who takes care of all humans. For those who wanted to integrate the Sufis into the society, this form of *tawakkul* was, on the contrary, not real reliance on God but a way of living at the expense of others[18] and they insisted on the responsibility of the Sufi for providing for

16 On nascent Sufism and its relations with earlier traditions, see Baldick (2000): 13–24. See also Seppälä (2003).

17 Partly, of course, Sufism also exhibits universal tendencies towards ascesis.

18 In pro-*tawakkul* texts, even this argument is countered. Many hagiographical texts tell how the mystic refuses to accept food from men and is rewarded by God who provides for him directly, without human intermediaries: the food was lowered for him from heaven, or he found a bag of food waiting for him.

himself (*iktisāb*). Thus, even the most ascetic Sufis are later said to have earned their own living.[19]

A typical case in hagiographies is Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, who is reported to have been accustomed to collecting firewood during the week and selling it every Friday, earning his loaf of bread for the next week, at the same time using the opportunity to attend the Friday prayers.[20] This also emphasises the relevance of communal prayers: asceticism has to be disrupted in order to take part in communal service. The ascetic has to interrupt his *khalwa* (seclusion) and even his *dhikr* (remembrance of God and repetition of His name or other formulae) to attend the congregation. Such stories are found by the dozen in hagiographies and Sufi biographies.

The seclusion of ascetics, or monks, from the community was a problem discussed also by Christian authors, many of whom criticised this habit and insisted on the necessity of participating in communal service on Sundays and church festivals.[21]

In later centuries, which fall outside our theme, Sufis time after time reestablished extreme ascetic habits, which they either hid from their possible critics, or like the Qalandars, displayed openly, challenging the society and its accepted norms.[22]

Our knowledge of ascetic Sufism in the 8th and 9th centuries is mainly based on later manuals and hagiographies, which very often either play asceticism down to save Sufism from any claims of un-Islamic behaviour or, on the other hand, exaggerate the ascesis of early Sufis as a mark of their extreme piety. There are, however, few contemporary sources to describe these ascetics.

One such description is found in a perhaps unexpected source, the *Nabatean Agriculture* (*al-Filāḥa an-Nabaṭiyya,* pp. 252–262) by Ibn Waḥshiyya (d. 318/931). The whole book is still somewhat of an enigma. It claims to be an Arabic translation of an ancient text in some form of Syriac.[23] The question of authenticity has been discussed by me in Hämeen-Anttila (2002–2003) with

19 For *tawakkul*, see Reinert (1968) and Knysh (2000): 33–34, 88–99.

20 See, e.g., ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ* I: 85–88, translated in Arberry (1966): 63–66.

21 See, e.g., Vööbus (1958): 181–182, with reference to *Liber graduum*. Vööbus (1958: 166), incidentally, sees Manichaean influence on Christian monasticism behind the divorce of the ascetic and the congregation and adds: "[...] we cannot adequately evaluate the implications arising from the idea that the ascetic is no longer bound to the church with its institutions and sacraments."

22 For these extremists, see Karamustafa (1994) and Knysh (2000): 272–274.

23 I have translated the preface of the text in Hämeen-Anttila (2002c).

some corrections in Hämeen-Anttila (forthcoming). To sum up the contents of these articles, it seems that Ibn Waḥshiyya did work with an older Syriac text, or group of texts themselves partly going back to Greek originals, and thus the work is not to be dismissed as a mere tenth-century pseudepigraph.[24] However, the exact role of Ibn Waḥshiyya in the parts which he claims merely to have translated from Syriac is still far from clear.[25] There is no problem in dating those parts which Ibn Waḥshiyya admits as his own additions to around 900, the time when the controversy involving al-Ḥallāj was at its height. The text translated below consists of two parts. The first (pp. 252–258) claims to have been translated from the Syriac original, while the second (pp. 258–262) is admittedly an addition from the pen of Ibn Waḥshiyya.

This latter part gives an almost unique criticism of Sufi ascesis from an agriculturalist viewpoint. Those who criticized asceticism did it usually from a staunch Sunni viewpoint, urban and learned. Ibn Waḥshiyya's criticism, on the contrary, is connected with his tendency of exalting agriculture and the farmers who toil on their fields.[26] In the roughly contemporary *Rasāʾil Ikhwān aṣ-ṣafā* (I: 284–285), a text also in other ways closely related to the *Nabatean Agriculture* even though their exact relations are difficult to assess, there is a similar respect for labour: farming, weaving and building (*al-ḥirātha wa'l-ḥiyāka wa'l-bināʾ*) are given as the three basic professions, whereas in Arabic literature they are usually seen as paragons of lowliness.[27] The farmers are uncouth boors, and weavers are proverbial for their stupidity in the mainly urban and courtly Arabic literature.[28]

24 Let it be added that even if it were to prove to be a pseudepigraph it would still retain its high value for the study of early tenth-century countryside in Iraq. For the earlier history of the controversy about Ibn Waḥshiyya, see Hämeen-Anttila (2003) and GAS IV: 318–329.

25 In the following, I will call the author of the passages which Ibn Waḥshiyya claims to have translated from Syriac "the Syriac author."

26 The glorification of agriculture and farmers is a recurrent theme in the book, see, e.g., p. 702, for a concise formulation. Farmers of Northern Iraq were still at the time to a great extent non-Arabic speakers and thus the themes of farming and the Mesopotamian heritage became entangled.

27 Note that the very same three professions are exalted in the *Nabatean Agriculture*, p. 254 (translated below). The *Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā*, on the other hand, were, of course, clearly elitist, see Marlow (1997): 54.

28 Cf., e.g., Marlow (1997): 33. The anti-agrarian attitude was retrojected back to the Prophet, see Marlow (1997): 26, note 66. — The Iraqi al-Kāmil al-Khwārizmī (d. after 1117) parodied base Nabatean boors in one of his maqāmas, translated in Hämeen-Anttila (2002a): 435–436.

Ibn Waḥshiyya, by contrast, sees ascetics as freeloaders in a society which lives on the toils of the rural population. This viewpoint was perhaps more easy to adopt in the countryside. In cities, with their urban poor, the ascetics were not as conspicuous. In urban environments, too, much of the population was, in any case, alienated from the immediate sources of food production: soldiers, the learned, even to some extent merchants, did not, after all, produce their own food. In the countryside, on the contrary, the relation of man and the source of his nourishment was more direct, more visible.

The main societal problems were not, though, caused by the ascetics. As was to come clear in the latter part of the tenth century, society began to collapse, even though the Buyid period was a renaissance from a cultural point of view.[29] The alienation of the owning class from their *ḍiyāʿ* through the system of *iqṭāʿ* was starting to devastate the agricultural basis of Iraq,[30] later to be completed by the Mongol conquests and the subsequent Ottoman maltreatment of Iraq.[31]

Ibn Waḥshiyya, however, was not a far-sighted visionary who would have realised where the symptoms visible in his time would lead. For him, the peasants were underestimated – a rare attitude in his time, or in later Islamic culture, for that matter – and he saw the anti-worldly asceticism of the Sufis as a blatant example of this.

Against this background it is rather surprising that in many sources Ibn Waḥshiyya himself is called *aṣ-Ṣūfī*.[32] This seems to originate with the *Nabatean Agriculture* itself where (p. 1132) Ibn Waḥshiyya's student az-Zayyāt adds a note to the effect that "Abū Bakr Ibn Waḥshiyya inclined towards the doctrines (*madhāhib*) of the Sufis and followed their way (*ṭarīq*)." As the institution of Sufism had not yet consolidated at the time, it seems that az-Zayyāt's note has to be read in a vague sense, referring to Ibn Waḥshiyya's

29 See Kraemer (1992) who draws much attention to the discrepancy between economic problems piling up on the horizon and the cultural heyday.

30 Similar developments had afflicted societies in ancient times. Columella, in his *De Re Rustica* I.1.18–20 and I.2.1–2, quoting the Phoenician Mago, criticised landowners for acquiring estates but living in a city.

31 In a late *maqāma* by Abū'l-Fatḥ Naṣrallāh al-Ḥusaynī (d. 1753) (see Hämeen-Anttila 2002a: 348–349), there is some criticism of the system but it seems to me that one should refrain from taking this *maqāma* as a serious critique of the system, even though one might be tempted to do so from a modern viewpoint. It seems more probable that the author was writing in a light humorous mood. Few Arabic authors took peasants seriously.

32 See Hämeen-Anttila (2002–2003) and (2002b).

interest in esoterica, magic and, perhaps, astral speculation in which he was, indeed, not so far from Sufis such as al-Ḥallāj, even though his aversion towards ascetics is obvious.

In his own note (p. 1245), Ibn Waḥshiyya seems rather to distance himself from *jamāᶜa min ṭawāᵓif aṣ-Ṣūfiyya* whom he mentions among the people he had met and with whom he had discussed matters pertinent to revelation (*waḥy*) and epistemology.

The dating of the first part of the following text is unfortunately complicated. In many ways, the text does fit a Syriac context before the Islamic conquest of Iraq or directly thereafter, as I have provisorily dated the original(s) from which Ibn Waḥshiyya translated passages.[33] Thus, there is nothing in the text to disqualify a dating of the original to, e.g., the sixth century. Unfortunately, though, there is nothing to prove this, either, since the Near Eastern ascetic tradition is too homogenous to allow us to exactly date the picture it gives of ascetics. I find it, though, slightly improbable that Ibn Waḥshiyya would have expressed himself so thoroughly, first masking himself as an ancient author and then addressing his audience directly as himself. One cannot, of course, say that this would have been impossible but I do find it improbable and, perhaps more importantly, not in line with his usual procedures, as he rather rarely openly duplicates the text he has, he says, translated.

If the first part of the text is, as I believe it is, a translation from Syriac, it still leaves the date somewhat open and it also remains less than certain that the ascetics described in it are indeed pagans. The original Syriac author might have been influenced by the strong local ascetic tradition within Christianity which, or details of which, he might have projected onto pagan ascetics. Yet it is quite possible that this part provides us with some information about late pagan ascetics. If this really is so, it is an extremely rare piece and most valuable for understanding late paganism, which has left us unfortunately few traces of itself.

The first part of the text is, thus, extremely difficult to set in context. Yet however we might try to contextualise it, it is a valuable and neglected piece of evidence in the history of Near Eastern asceticism.[34]

33 See Hämeen-Anttila (2002–2003).

34 In the annotation, I have addressed a twofold audience. For Arabists, some of the notes may seem superfluous. They are there for the benefit of the non-Arabist. For the non-Arabist, some of the, especially lexicographical, notes may, on the other hand, appear somewhat esoteric and he may well ignore these. The style of Ibn Waḥshiyya is very often repetitive, clumsy, and far from elegant. In minor details I have cautiously tried to make the text run at

Some of the central ideas of the text, unrelated to asceticism, need more elucidation, which is given in the Commentary after the translation of the text itself, with reference to the pagination of the Arabic text given in square brackets in the translation. Minor notes are given as footnotes. The ascetic habits described in the text and similar to other Near Eastern respective habits discussed above are not separately discussed and the reader is referred to the above sketch where I have tried to highlight some of the aspects of Near Eastern ascesis relevant from the point of view of the present text.

Translation of the text of the Nabatean Agriculture (pp. 252–262)

I. The Syriac original in Ibn Waḥshiyya's Arabic translation (pp. 252–258)

[p. 252] [...] Now, the sun is the actor, as we have explained, and all things are objects of his action. The owners of the estates (*arbāb aḍ-ḍiyāᶜ*) and their managers (*al-quwwām ᶜalayhā*) who help the owners and act as their stewards (*qahārima*), as well as the farmers and fieldworkers, all these are servants of the plants and fields who make the trees and the fruits thrive.

Thus, they are also the servants of the Sun (*khadam ash-Shams*) and obedient to him (*ahl ṭāᶜatihi*).[35] They are the best of people and theirs is the greatest rank and highest position because they make the earth prosper and take care of it. All people, different kinds of animals, birds and others, quadrupeds and all other animals live from what grows forth from the earth, thanks to the care of the farmers and the efforts of the owners of the estates and their helpers.

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least a bit more smoothly but I have refrained from any major simplifications, such as abbreviating the unnecessary repetitions in the text.

There is no controversy concerning the fact that the Arabic text is from the hand of Ibn Waḥshiyya, who was not a conscientious translator of the calibre of the great Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq (d. 873). On the contrary, his text is probably likely to be more of a paraphrase than a word-to-word translation. Thus, even in passages which ought to derive from the Syriac original, Ibn Waḥshiyya sometimes uses clearly Islamic expressions and adds Islamic formulae, such as *jalla wa-ᶜazza* after the name of God – these latter, though, may equally well be attributable to copyists and they, indeed, often vary in the manuscripts. This does not imply that the original would have been of an Islamic provenance. It merely shows that Ibn Waḥshiyya worked in an Islamic literary context, as we are fully aware.

35 The Sun in this passage, as elsewhere in the book, is sometimes spoken of as masculine, sometimes as feminine.

If all would have to content themselves with what grows by itself in the steppes (*ṣaḥārā*) and the mountains, that would not suffice the least number of people, not to speak of animals (*bahāʾim*[36]), birds and creeping animals (*dabīb*). Even all creeping animals, despite their differences, from the least, which is the ant, to the biggest, which are various vipers and snakes, and all crawling and creeping species in between, live from the surplus of what the earth produces through cultivation. They live from the toil and travail of others.

So it is also with the great number of animals (*bahāʾim*) which – like the creeping animals and all human beings, other than the owners of the estates or their helpers – live from the surplus [p. 253] of the owners of the estates, farmers and managers. All people and all animals thus need them necessarily because they stay alive through them, and the food which keeps them alive comes from them. Thus, the owners of the estates and their helpers are the best of people and their leaders (*ruʾasāʾ*). All people and animals live from their surplus and their toil and their caring for what others neglect. These turn away from what others, that is to say the farmers and the sowers (*muzāriʿūn*), take care of.

Every group (*ṭāʾifa*) of people occupy themselves with some profession (*ḍarb min at-tijārāt wa'ṣ-ṣanāʾiʿ*). There are drapers (*bazzāzīn*) and money changers (*ṣayārifa*), druggists (*ʿaṭṭārīn*) and brass founders (*ṣaffārīn*) and other kinds of merchants and artisans and sellers and dealers (*al-banādira li-mā yubandar*).[37] The sustenance and the matter (*mādda*)[38] of all these comes from the owners of the estates and the farmers.

In addition, we see that their merchandise and its matter comes from plants and from what comes forth from the earth[39] and farmers are the ones who bring all this out from its hiding places. Thus, for example, is the case of the drapers, whose product people need most after their nourishment because they provide them cover for the genitals (*ʿawra*) and other parts of the body against heat and cold, to protect them against the harm caused by heat and cold. Their trading articles come from the cloth woven from cotton and linen (*kattān*) which grow in the estates and which the farmers take care of. If the managers would not take care of the cotton and the linen in the estates they would not grow to become clothes which all people use.

36 Roughly "mammals."

37 Cf. Dozy, s.v. *bandar*, possibly from Persian *bundār*, cf. Steingass, s.v.

38 For this use of *mādda*, cf. also *ar-Risāla al-jāmiʿa*, p. 86: *shajarat al-burr hiya aṣl qiwām al-ʿālam wa-māddat ghadhāʾihim*.

39 Minerals and metals belong to this class, too.

If the farmers do not take care of the edible grains, no (grain) merchant could proceed with his profession and thus grain is their material from two viewpoints and it comes from the farmers and the managers of the estates. This is the way of all other merchants. Brass founders need the food produced by the farmers as do all other people, too, and their merchandise comes from what the earth produces in mines, whence it is brought to them by workers (*ṣunnāᶜ*) who are similar to farmers.

The art of pharmacists (*ṣayādina*) is to prepare drugs and medicines which mostly come from plants and trees and from the minerals which the earth produces and what comes (*yanqaṭiᶜ*) from the air onto trees and other (plants). People collect these and bring them to pharmacists. The same goes for druggists in their trade, as well as for fruit sellers and greengrocers who sell plants as such, without working on them, and artisans who work on them, like cotton and linen spinners and weavers, or [p. 254] date sellers and those who sell seeds (*as-saqaṭ*)[40] and raisins and sugar and different fruits, fresh and dried, as well as vendors of wood who sell different kinds of wood which the earth produces and which people use as firewood and for heating (ovens) for baking. If someone said that all these merchants are the slaves (*ᶜabīd*) of the owners of estates and the farmers, that would not be far from truth and if someone said that their life depends on farmers, he would hit the mark.

If one thinks about this and starts listing those who sell things that originally derive from plants and come from farms which the farmers cultivate, he will find this too much for him and he will see that this is obviously so. Or if he thinks about artisans, he will realise that they are servants of the owners of estates and the farmers: their sustenance and trade depends on them. This holds true for blacksmiths and carpenters, weavers of cloth and those who make something out of date palm (and its production). They are numerous, and even if one would content oneself with thinking about the trades whose commodities come directly from the farms and are from the production of the farmers, he would find them many and he would realise that their occupations depend on farmers and farms.

If someone would like to count those who live only by (the production of the) date palm, or the vine, or fruit-bearing, or other, trees or various edible grains, one by one, or those who get their living from aromatic plants (*rayāḥīn*) or potherbs (*buqūl*), one by one, species by species, he would find out that it comprises the majority of all people and he would find out that all their

40 Cf. Lane, s.v. *saqaṭ*.

occupations and causes of living depend on farmers. If these would refrain from cultivating plants, the professions of all the others would come to nothing as would the arts of the artisans. That would further cause all human things to come to nothing, destroying the organised society and its hierarchies (*fasād niẓāmihā wa-khtilāf tartībihā*). If that would happen, everything on earth, both men and animals, would come to nothing and no one would remain on the face of the earth. What would be on the earth would look different from what it does now.

If the sower did not sow, the builder could not build, and if nothing were sown nor built, the weaver could not weave and the states of all people would come to nothing and through their nullification the animals (*bahāʾim*) and what they eat would come to nothing, as would also happen to birds and creeping animals, and all living things that crawl on the earth. This is what one calls nullification (*buṭlān*), destruction (bawār) and perdition (*halāk*).

Thus, it has become clear that preserving people in a laudable condition depends on farmers and fieldworkers (*al-akkarūth*)[41] who are the root of all this and its support and matter. Because of this they are the most excellent of all people. They are the people [p. 255] who obey God – He is noble and mighty[42] – and they are the friends of God (*awliyāʾ Allāh*) and He is pleased with them. They have taken hold of the rope reaching God (*bi'l-ḥabl al-muttaṣil bi-llāh*), He is exalted, mighty and noble. They possess all the numerous virtues (*faḍāʾil*) which we have enumerated and ascribed to them.

This is the relationship of common people with them. Next we will speak about the king, kingship and its means of subsistence (*asbāb*). The owners of estates and the farmers are also the support (*mādda*) of the king and of his subsistence (*qiwām*), and they elevate his kingship and keep intact its means of subsistence. The king is in the same relationship to the farmers as are other people and various kinds of animals. They are the subsistence of all and the means for their life, they uphold them and take care of their needs. Who confers a benefit[43] on someone else is also his superior (*raʾīs*) and above him. Who is superior and eminent, to him belongs the most majestic (*ajall*) position and the highest and most noble place and through this he has rights (*al-wājib al-ḥaqq*) incumbent on the one on whom he confers benefits and to whom he gives

41 Probably to be emended to <*aṣḥāb*> *al-akkarūth* in which sense the word *akkarūth* "agriculture" is found elsewhere in the book (cf., e.g., pp. 198, 199, 214, 217. 314) from Syriac *akkarūthā* (e.g., Payne Smith, s.v.).

42 This formula is not only Islamic but is also used by Christians, cf., e.g., *Akhbār baṭārika*, pp. 15; 84.

43 Reading *mufḍil*.

nourishment. Thus, the one living in the shade of someone more excellent has responsibilities (*wajaba ḥaqquhū*) towards the other one and he must respect and extol him.

This is why we say that they are higher and more noble (than others). Even if they only deserved this praise and have this excellence because they are always intent on what pleases God – He is noble and mighty – (that would be enough), because God – He is mighty and noble – is pleased with the cultivation (*ᶜimāra*) of this earthly world (*hādhā l-ᶜālam al-arḍī*) and He resents those who are active in ruining it or help to corrupt it.

Farmers and fieldworkers are (the cause of) the cultivation of the earth and they provide for all animals and they make the plants prosper. Their opposites are those who refrain (*yatabaṭṭalūn*) from all work (*aᶜmāl*) and leave all trades and professions, wandering around in the wilderness (*aṣ-ṣaḥārā*),[44] loving solitude and seclusion and calling themselves ascetics (*zuhhād*) and servants (of God) (*ᶜubbād*).[45] They do not come to the temples except on festive days (*aᶜyād*). There are even some among them who attend only the two great festivals (*al-ᶜīdayn al-kabīrayn*), the festival of the Birth on the 24th of Kānūn I and the New Year festival (*ᶜīd raʾs as-sana*).[46] They say: "We attend these two festivals in congregation (*fī tajmīᶜ*) because one of them is the day of the birth and rejuvenation (*tajaddud*) of time (*az-zamān*) and the other is the New Year's festival because it, too, is related to the Sun. Thus, they are the two most excellent festivals." This is why, so they say, we attend them.[47]

I say that they are the people of disobedience (*maᶜāṣī*) towards God – He is mighty and noble – and they set aside obedience to him. Who sets aside obedience has also set aside his pleasure, and who has set aside his pleasure moves around (*yataqallab*) in his wrath (*sakhaṭ*), may God protect us and our beloved ones from all this!

If all people would do like they do and follow their way of inauspicious mortification (*al-qashaf al-mashʾūm*),[48] refraining from caring for the earth,

44 For *yahīmūna fī ṣ-ṣaḥārā*, cf. Qur. 26:225 (about poets): *a-lam tara annahum fī kulli wādin yahīmūn.*

45 The harsh criticism against ascetics is the general trend in the *Nabatean Agriculture*. Only Yanbūshādh among the respected ancients is seen as an ascetic. See, e.g., p. 559: "his doctrine (*madhhab*) for the whole of his life was the doctrine of ascetic wanderers."

46 See Commentary.

47 Reading *ḥaḍarnāhumā*.

48 The term *qashaf*, with its derivatives, refers to mortification and extreme forms of asceticism, both in this passage and elsewhere in the *Nabatean Agriculture*, cf. , e.g., p. 542

sowing and plowing, building and weaving, everything on the face of earth would perish and people would become like irrational animals. Thus, they want to ruin the world and bring it to nothing and they strive for this. They move around in [p. 256] the wrath and hatred of God and they are the followers of the inhabitants of the Hell (*atbāᶜ sukkān az-Zamharīr*),[49] the people of punishment. They want us to praise them and, through them, to draw closer to God, as they claim. Their claims are false, untrue and lies when they say: "We are like angels[50] and we walk on water because of the purity of our intentions and because we are like unto God[51] – He is noble and mighty – in not caring for the world."[52]

They tell lies about God! The proof of my words that they disobey God is that the prophets (*anbiyāᵓ*) of God – He is exalted – who all are truthful have said the opposite to what these liars claim. The prophets have ordered us to care for the world and to help (others) against the miseries we have there. If we do not help one another, we will perish. That we should have pity on one another and feel compassion for one another and help one another in the trials into which we have been pushed (*ᶜalā jahdinā lladhī dufiᶜnā* [*fīhi*]) brings us closer to God and obliges him more than if we would do as these liars do, withdrawing into seclusion in deserts and fleeing from people without pursuing a profession that would benefit the sons of our species (*abnāᵓ jinsinā*) and instead would wander, like those liars about God, in the wilderness and deserts, without cleansing

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(*az-zuhhād* and *al-mutaqashshifūn*) or p. 559 (*as-suyyāḥ al-mu(ta)qashshifūn*). Islamic theory sometimes makes a distinction between *zuhd* "ascesis; abstinence" as a virtue, and *qashaf* "mortification" as an extreme and disapproved form of ascesis, see, e.g., Gobillot (2002): 560a.

49 The term *az-zamharīr* "intense cold" is also used in the Qurᵓān (76:13). Zoroastrian Hell was cold, as is well known. Also Manichaeans knew that the Devil was as close to ice as he was to fire, see, e.g., Puech (1995): 99.

50 In Syrian Christianity monks are also called angels.

51 Cf. also Orthodox *theōsis*.

52 The last two phrases, of course, remind one of the New Testament: first the walking on water and then, perhaps, reminiscent of Luke 12: 22–26 and parallel passages. One might also draw attention to the difference between the passive Deus absconditus and the active Demiurge.

The verb in the last phrase could also be read in the first stem (*naᶜmuru* instead of *nuᶜammiru*). Then the last sentence should be translated: "in that we do not live in this world," i.e., our veritable life is already targeted at the world to come (or the spiritual world), not this earthly world of matter and dirt.

ourselves or taking care of our bodies which are corpses full of stench and filth, because they are mines of filth.[53]

This is not even enough for them. They go on to claim that they are pious (*abrār*) and that they are better than we are and more virtuous and that we have fallen short of their position because we are not able to reach it, so they claim, and that theirs is the good way and we are just incapable of following it.[54] They are right: being wise we cannot at the same time do to ourselves things which madmen (*majānīn*) do, becoming madmen ourselves, clothing ourselves in wool (*ṣūf*) like madmen do and letting our hair and nails grow long like the hair and nails of madmen, without entering a bath (*ḥammām*)[55] or letting water, cold or warm, touch us or without cleansing ourselves from the dirt of our bodies.

This is what madmen do, those who have no reason! Madmen act in such a way because they do not know the measure of the mercy (*niᶜma*) which God has shown and bestowed upon his servants. This is because they lack intellectual capacity (*at-tamyīz al-ᶜaqlī*) with which they could distinguish between good and bad. Those who call themselves ascetics (*zuhhād*) and consider themselves wise, act like these madmen! Shame on them! How enormously badly they act towards themselves by making their life a misery in this world and by consuming their life in hardship and mortification. They take it on themselves to

53 Literally understood, the author claims that our bodies are unconditionally filthy. This may be so in the thought of the Syriac author, which would mean that he sees the material world as basically filthy, even though his conclusions from this are opposite to those of the ascetics. For him, one should keep oneself clean to counteract the filthiness of the body.
On the other hand, it is, of course, possible that he refers to the uncleansed bodies of the ascetics which thus become filthy. This, however, would mean that we should discard the literal meaning and base our translation on an emended reading. This would not, in fact, need much emendation.

54 One might either take this as a general belittling of their abilities, or one might see in this a kind of predestination, an idea familiar not only from Manichaeism but also from certain varieties of Christian and Islamic thought.

55 Bathing is a recurrent theme in the whole book. It is well known that especially for Christian authors bathing, with its Hellenistic background, was a suspicious habit, just as was going to the theatre. In Islamic times, bathing had lost much of this suspicion, although public baths were often seen as places of dubious character a theme which Mediaeval erotic literature used with delight (cf., e.g., at-Tīfāshī, *Nuzha*, pp. 186–187). Yet, a negative attitude towards bathing itself is clearly less typical to Islamic ascetics, to whom ritual purity is important and who, moreover, were accustomed to regular washing, if not bathing. Thus, this passage can be taken to favour a non- and presumably pre-Islamic provenance for this tractate.

wander in the wilderness and deserts in extreme cold or heat wearing coarse clothes, eating and drinking coarse food and drink. How I pity them for this![56]

[p. 257] Once I saw a handsome young man from among them in the temple of the Sun at the festival of the birth of the time (*az-zamān*) in Kānūn I. I felt pity[57] for him because of his young age and his perfection. So when the Sun had set and we had completed the second prayer, I said to him: "I want to speak with you. Come aside with me." He withdrew with me towards the House of intelligible images (*aṣ-ṣuwar al-ᶜaqliyya*) and I asked him: "What is your name?" "Sanbādā,"[58] he answered, and I continued: "Why do you cause trouble to yourself and rend apart your life with this misery and hardship?"

He had kept his eyes closed like these people always do, feigning humility and deep ascesis. Now he opened his eyes which were sound[59] and beautiful and he let them sparkle (*barraqa*) to my eyes, answering: "Woe to you! How little you know about the bliss (*naᶜīm*) in which I and my likes live and which you and your likes among people do not know (*tuḥiss*)!" I asked him: "Why do you lie? What bliss are you in? With such a body and such clothes? The dirt on your hands and feet and arms is clearly visible for everyone who sees you! What has blindfolded your heart so that you claim in your self-afflicted affliction that you live in bliss?"

He closed his eyes and tried to force out some tears but not a drop came out because of the extreme dryness and mortification and desiccation which the cold had caused him. Then he jumped up and ran out of the temple as if he were fleeing my words. I felt very compassionate for him and I regretted what I had said to him. I sent after him but my messenger (*rasūl*) did not find him. So he had gone away without praying the third prayer.

I stood up and went out asking about him but I did not hear anything about him and found no traces of him. Then came the hour of the (third) prayer and I hurried into the temple where the prayer had already started (*wa-qad qāmat aṣ-*

56 This translation is based on an emendation *"mā ashaddanī raḥmatan lahum min ajlihi."*

57 Reading *raqqētu* (Middle Arabic < RQQ).

58 Without making too much of this speculation, one might note that the Assyrian name Sīn-uballiṭ proved long-lived, and we find it in later sources as Sanballat (Nehemia 2:10.19; 13:28; also in Josephus). The identification of Nabatean names is usually hopeless, and here, too, the resemblance may, of course, be accidental.

59 This might be taken to mean that the young man had been feigning blindness. Crying one's eyes out is, again, equally well known from Islamic (starting with the father of Joseph, in Surah 12) as it is from Christian, Jewish and Mesopotamian (see Parpola 1997: XXXIV) ascetic sources.

ṣalāh).[60] I came to the temple, sad and sorry because I had not been able to catch him after having said to him what I had said.

These, o my brothers and beloved ones, are those whom *ādamā*[61] called the enemies of themselves and whom Anūḥā the prophet (*an-nabī*) called luckless (*al-manḥūsīn*). Both of them were right in calling them by these names, yet these people think that they are above everybody else and that others should seek blessing through them and listen to their words and seek healing from them.

They even claim that they can see in wakefulness what we see in dreams.[62] In this they partly lie, partly tell the truth. They tell the truth in that their extreme emptiness caused by hunger and the following weakness of their nature (*ṭabāʾiʿ*), as well as the extreme mortification and misery and exertion cause them to see false visions (*khayālāt kādhiba*) and so they do see them in wakefulness even though they have never (really) seen anything.

They lie when they claim that not only the idols, but also the stars speak to them[63] and that the idols love them and call them, so they claim, "beloved ones." How [p. 258] great is their lie and how curious their fabrication and how little their shamefulness! That specifically the stars would speak (to them), as they claim, is most absurd[64] and they are great liars in saying so. The stars have never spoken to anyone. When some of our ancestors set down in their books the speech of the stars and how they address people or some people, they did so as a simile and for teaching and narrating about the origins of the sciences which have come (down) to people, as that was how they acquired them.[65] Thus, also some of the professions have come through inspiration (*ilhām*) to people. It has never happened and it will never happen that the stars would speak (directly) to any human being.

60 This seems to be the intended meaning. We could, also, translate "the prayer had already ended" in which case one should translate the continuation as "[...] sad and sorry because of what I had lost of it (i.e., the prayer) when speaking with him."

61 See Commentary.

62 The ability to observe the *ʿālam al-khayāl, mundus imaginalis*, when awake, separates prophets from ordinary people according to many Muslim theoreticians. The verb used in the text, *ʿāyana*, implies direct seeing.

63 See Commentary.

64 For *amḥalu muḥāl*, see Dozy, s.v. MḤL.

65 I.e., the sciences ultimately derive from the gods – the stars – and this has been told by the ancestors in similes, depicting stars as the ultimate source of knowledge as if they would have directly spoken to these ancestors. Cf. also below, note 86.

They also claim that the idols call them their beloved ones and that when they come to[66] the idols and bow down in front of them, the idols love them. The idols have indeed spoken to some men and it may be that they have also addressed these liars at some time but that must be of rare occurrence. But that they would love them and call them beloved ones, I swear – and I am truthful in my oath – that they have never called them beloved ones. Especially the idols of the Sun, the Moon, Jupiter[67] (*al-Mushtarī*) and Mercury (*ᶜUṭārid*) [and Venus (*az-Zuhara*)][68] should call them their enemies and their hated ones, not their beloved ones. I also swear – and I am truthful – that the idols of Saturn (*Zuḥal*) and Mars (*al-Mirrīkh*) have never said to any of them that they would be their beloved ones and they have never greeted them with a greeting. It is only that, due to the corruption of their brains because of hunger and continuous fasting, they imagine that some idol has addressed them and called them beloved ones.

The idols of the five (gods) which I just mentioned hate them, without the slightest doubt, according to the common opinion of all Kasdānians and even themselves (*wa-ijmāᶜihim maᶜahum*). But the idols of Saturn and Mars hate them even more.[69] If my exposition of this did not become too long and so, because of its length, exceed too far the limits of a book (*kalām*) on agriculture, I would give a definitive (set of) argument(s) against them and I would clarify that which proves that they are liars and sinful when some of them claim that they are more excellent than the prophets and some say that they are equal to them.[70]

66 Literally: "meet" (*laqū*).

67 Read so!

68 This emendation seems necessary in the light of what is later said about the idols of "these *five* gods."

69 The first five gods are not nefarious and thus their antipathy towards ascetics should be obvious. The nefarious Saturn and Mars (*an-Naḥsayn*), on the other hand, could be imagined to favour the stern ascesis of these, which explains why the text emphasises that they, too, hate the ascetics. On p. 51, it is said that these two may incidentally cause damage on earth (*yattafiqu lahumā ᶜalā ṭarīqi l-ᶜarḍi bi-ḥarakatihimā kharābu l-bilādi wa-bawāru l-ᶜibādi wa-nuqṣānu ᶜadadi l-ḥayawāni wa'n-nabāt*), although the Sun, god of gods, counteracts their nefarious influence to keep the world intact (cf. also p. 1097). The same root, NḤS, is used for the ascetics (cf. above, p. 257, *manḥūsīn*, translated as "luckless").

70 The question of the hierarchical positions of prophethood vis-à-vis sainthood was heatedly discussed in Islam. The later standard teaching was that the status of the prophets, and especially of the prophet Muḥammad, also encompasses within itself sainthood. Despite this, Sufis have always found ways to raise Sufi saints above the prophets, by one way or another. Among Shiites, the same discussion involved the Imams.

How ignorant these people are and how insolent their lies! The civilised (*muhadhdhab*) people are prevented from killing them only because they feel compassion for them and consider them madmen who should not be punished. Otherwise the correct opinion is that they should be imprisoned until they die in prison, so that they could not corrupt other people by taking them into their religion (*milla*) and by inducing them to follow their way. Yet the kings have thought that what they do to themselves is caused by loss of reason and (the imbalance of their) temperament (*akhlāṭ*). The reason for this is that (imbalance) has entered their brains and corrupted them.

II. Note added by Ibn Waḥshiyya (pp. 258–262)

Abū Bakr ibn Aḥmad ibn Waḥshiyya, the translator of this book from Nabatean into Arabic, says: In our times and the time before it, there have been groups (*ṭawāʾif*) of these, (similar to those) who lived in the ancient times among the Nabateans as ascetics or (God's) servants (*zuhhādan aw ʿubbādan*). The same kind of lying people are found in India, where people call them *ar-Rashiyya*.[71] Some of them always go naked[72] never wearing clothes. They cover their private parts (*sawʾa*) with the big leaves of a tree which they call in India *yahrīmān*. Among Indians, they are the people of charms (*aṣḥāb ar-ruqā*).

Among them there are also others like these, many kinds of brahmins (*barāhima*)[73] and others who mortify their lower soul[74] and torture it with various punishments, living a most miserable life. People in India call them "servants" (of god, *ʿubbād*). They lead a solitary life on high mountains and some of them wander around in the wilderness without retreating into houses or huts and without cleansing themselves. Nay, they are like animals.

71 The word might be related to *rashi* (*ṛṣi*). Cf. al-Bīrūnī, *Kitāb mā li'l-Hind*, p. 81 (*rashīn*), translated in Sachau (1910) I: 106.

72 The naked *gymnosophistai* have always intrigued the imagination of neighbouring peoples. For Greek and Latin testimonies, see Karttunen (1997): 55–64 and (2002).

73 The *barāhima* are discussed in Stroumsa (1999): 145–162. Abrahamov (1987) took the *barāhima* to be connected with Sabian Ibrāhīmiyya. Cf. also Calder (1994), though his article is written in an unnecessarily polemical tone. Early on Chwolsohn (1856) II: 503 identified the barāhima with those Harranians who believed in Abraham. The present passage is clearly connected with India, not Harran, though. In the *Picatrix*, or *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* by (pseudo)-al-Majrīṭī, p. 228 (translated in Ritter–Plessner 1962: 241), the Harranian sage Barthīm al-Barhamī is given as the eponymous ancestor of the Indian *barāhima*.

74 Literally, "kill themselves", but a metaphorical reading is preferable here.

Some of them torture themselves by continuously plucking their (facial) hair.[75] Each of these carries with him an instrument similar to tweezers (*min-qāsh*) – actually it is a kind of tweezer – and he plucks his hair with it his whole life, even his eyebrows! When one of us sees them from afar, he thinks that they must be apes because their bodily hair grows long and visible, veiling the whole of their body, and their nails are long like the nails of animals, such as the claws of lions or dogs.

Some of these whom the Indians call ascetics and servants scorch themselves with fire and abase themselves with different kinds of mortifications.[76] But it would take a long time to describe those who in India resemble these who in ancient times lived among Nabateans and Kasdānians.[77]

Like them are also those monks (*ruhbān*) of the Christians who wander around as starving ascetics; yet few of them do this. Most of them confine themselves to hermitages (*ṣawāmiᶜ*) or cells (*qallāyāt*),[78] staying up at night, fasting and avoiding meat. They claim that they know secret things (*al-ghayb*) and they predict things that will happen in the future; this they call *kalyānāt*.[79] They also make other great claims about themselves.

Some of the Muslims, our co-religionists (*ahl millatinā*), are also like them. They call themselves Sufis (*Ṣūfiyya*) and claim that they are practising abstinence (*zuhd*) from this world and that they are relinquishing the world. They also claim that they are the special friends of God (*awliyāᵓ Allāh*) from among all other people and that they are higher than other Muslims and lead a more enjoyable (*aṭyab*) life and are more relaxed of heart and have less worries. They also claim that abstinence from the world is the heart's relaxation from worries. They say that they lead a more comfortable (*ahnaᵓ*) life than do the kings.[80] Yet they lie in all this, just as the Nabatean, Indian and Christian ascetics did.

75 In the Islamic world, the same form of ascesis gained ground some centuries later, when some Qalandars became famous for similar feats. The Persian *chahār ḍarb*, the shaving of the hair, moustache, beard and eyebrows, was especially spectacular.

76 Again, I prefer a metaphorical reading, although it cannot be excluded here that Ibn Waḥshiyya speaks of real suicides. The famous suicide of Calanus by burning himself impressed the Classical world, see Karttunen (2002): 135, and Karttunen (1997): 64–67.

77 I.e., Chaldaeans.

78 Cf. Dozy, s.v.

79 From the Syriac *gelyūnā*. This is also mentioned in *Akhbār baṭārika*, pp. 84–85, where the Syriac word is written as *jalyānāt*.

80 Sufis have often referred to themselves as kings. This has been especially favoured in Persian (*shāh*), but note also the Arabic title *Adab al-mulūk* for a Sufi manual. Ibn ᶜArabī, in

It should be said to these Sufis who are our coreligionists – the others we need not address – and agree with us concerning the bipartite creed,[81] eating the meat of (ritually) slaughtered animals and facing the qibla: "Tell us: Is there among you anyone whom the world has approached, giving him some gifts so that he could have turned away from it and abstained from it after having had access to it, so that he left it and divested the robe of bliss from himself and gave all his property away in alms and ran away to seclusion and isolation?[82]

No, you are people from whom the world has turned away and fled, and you have striven to get hold of some of it, but you have not been able to. When you realised this, you, out of dire need, have taken it to yourselves to wear shabby, worthless clothes and long-lasting, low-priced wool.[83] Then you took a (beggar's) bowl (*rakwa*) and carried it in your hands and took shelter in mosques so that you would not have to pay the rent because you have no money at all, and then you say that you are ascetics and servants (of God)!"

Now we say to you: "Nay, in this you are liars and deceivers (*dajjālūn*)! Abstaining (*zuhd*, ascesis) from the world is for the one who secludes himself after having had access to it, even though this, too, would be a kind of stupidity and ignorance. Yet you are no ascetics. You are people from whom the world has turned away and abstained, leaving you with the calamities which have come to you (*anākhat ʿalaykum*). Bad luck (*idbār*) has come to you. When you have no influence [p. 260] on the world you claim that you abstain from it, whereas, in fact, it is the world that turned away from you! Do not try to beguile and trick (*tumakhriqū*) people; they will not make the same mistake as you did! Your case is just like people use to say: 'When the cat did not get the meat it comforted itself, saying that it was rotten'."[84]

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his *Dhakhāʾir*, p. 327, explicitly says that ascetics are the kings of earth (*inna z-zuhhād mulūk al-arḍ*).

81 *Shahādatayn*, i.e., the twin confessions of "There is no god but God and Muḥammad is his messenger."

82 The Sufis could well have answered by taking up the name of, e.g., Ibrāhīm ibn Adham. The viewpoints of the authors of the Sufi handbooks and Ibn Waḥshiyya are diametrically opposed. Whereas in Sufi literature, the history is always full of such pious Sufis, Ibn Waḥshiyya obviously would appreciate one actual case in his immediate vicinity. He would have been triumphant, had he heard that Ibrāhīm ibn Adham's life actually only copies the legend of the conversion of Gautama Buddha.

83 As it is usually the Sufis or people who admire them who comment on the origin of the use of wool, this is a refreshing new viewpoint on the matter.

84 I have not been able to locate this proverb in the collections which, of course, are very classicising in tenor. The *Nabatean Agriculture* contains a considerable amount of

Now when an intelligent man considers this, he will find out that bodies cannot persist without nourishment and that they have to have a cover and a shelter from heat and cold; only this will maintain life in them. Now, which is better and more rational: to earn it by one's own toil and labour or to put one's trust in other people and seek nourishment from them by begging and mendicancy? Some of those who claim this barren (*bārid*) ascesis go even further with their tricks and deceptions and cunning and claim that they abstain from this world and desire the other world.

They say: "Earning (*takassub*) is prohibited (*maḥẓūr*) and gainings (*makāsib*) are forbidden because God – He is noble and mighty – has vouched to nourish his servants; he did not say that their nourishment comes to them through earning. When people opposed him and insisted on earning, he left them in the misery and toil which they had drawn upon themselves. If they had trusted (*tawakkalū*) in God – He is noble and mighty – as they should have done, he would have given them their daily needs without them having to trouble their bodies or contrive through work or labour or misery."

Now if these people were sincere they would find refuge in mountain caves or the shadow of trees and they would eat of the wild fruits which are not cultivated nor taken care of. One should answer to them: "Tell us: is it not so that in your opinion that life which you engaged in, is right and proper?" This they must admit, and then one should continue: "Then you should consider this right for everybody and everybody should be pleased with this." This, too, they must admit. Then one should say to them: "If everyone left ploughing and sowing and all trades, as well as progeny and seeking to have children, and if they joined you and accepted your way, what would become of all people? Would not that mean the destruction, perdition and ruin of this world? Has not God – He is noble and mighty – said: 'No sooner do they leave you than they hasten to cause destruction on earth, destroying crops and cattle. God does not love destruction.'[85]"

Now God – He is sublime, noble and mighty – has called the destroying of crop and cattle "destruction" (*fasād*) and he has said that he "does not love destruction." If they are so unashamed as to say that (if everyone would commit himself to *tawakkul*), God would send upon them from heaven and call forth from earth ready-made shirts and baked loaves from which they could eat and

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folkloristic material, which should be gleaned to gain some information about rural folklore, an otherwise little-known field.

85 Qur. 2: 205.

other ugly stupidities like this, then we will say to them: "So why does he not do that for you, O ascetics, who claim to trust on him and to be content with little? The like of you should seek shelter in mountain caves or wander around in deserts. Why do we see you coming naked to people, so that [p. 261] people would give you an old shirt or a woollen garment as alms?"

No, you do not know the real knowledge (*maᶜrifa*) of God – He is sublime – and the way (*kayfiyya*) of his actions. If God – He is blessed and sublime – would not want his servants to (have to) earn (their living), he would not have guided them to different kinds of agriculture and trades, such as weaving and mining (*istikhrāj dhawāt al-maᶜādin*) and the preparation of tools and instruments which God – He is noble and mighty – has taught to his servants, as he – He is noble and mighty – knew that his servants could not invent (*istikhrāj*) them by themselves.[86]

How and with what intellect should man have come to the idea that wheat needs to be cultivated through ploughing and sowing, being covered by soil at a certain time, then at times watered evenly so that it starts growing, and that then it should be left to itself until harvesting, then harvested, threshed and winnowed, ground and kneaded and baked?

The origin of all this is with the toil of the owners of estates and the farmers and fieldworkers who labour patiently, despite severe cold or heat, through great toil and misery. The owner of the estate works hard to collect the money he needs for the upkeep of his estate and he endures the heat of the sun and the cold of the winds in order to make the estate prosper, together with his helpers, such as the farmers and fieldworkers and different kinds of artisans (*ṣunnāᶜ*).

(Meanwhile), you are heedless, keeping your hands in your armpits, idle, playing and laughing in your ignorance. The owners of estates, farmers and fieldworkers toil and labour in misery until their crop has matured. Then they harvest and winnow and clean and purify, grind and bake, and you come to them like hungry eagles, saying: "Feed us and give us drink because your living comes to you through us."[87]

You are lying, you deceivers (*dajjālīn*), men of little faith, tricksters! God – He is noble and mighty – is the one who feeds us from the superabundancy of

86 Divine inspiration as the ultimate origin of sciences is a topos in Near Eastern literature, beginning with the Sumerian *apkallus* and Oannes, about whom Berossus tells a famous Late Babylonian legend (see Burstein 1978: 13–14, and Bottéro 1992: 246–250, as well as Greenfield 1995, with further bibliography). Ibn Sīnā made inspiration (*ḥads*) a central theme in his epistemology (see Gutas 1988: 159–176).

87 I.e., through the *baraka* inherent in them.

his mercy to us. If he wished us to withdraw from agriculture and other travails like you do, he would not have taught us the various works of agriculture, ploughing, professions, caring for and nurturing date palms and other fruit-producing trees, all that to which we would not have been guided by our own reason without him opening a door to it. If he had not wanted us to do these things, he would not have guided us to mine workable metals (*ajsād*) from their sources, like gold, silver, copper, iron and lead, and he would not have guided us to weave embroiderings and make different kinds of clothes from embroidered material and silk brocade (*dībāj*).

He would not have taught us how to gain access to the knowledge of the moving (*sayr*) of the sun, the moon and the stars and the organisation (*tarkīb*) of their spheres and the differences of their movement, nor would he have taught us the effects on our bodies of plants and medicinal materials (*ᶜaqāqīr*) which grow in both the East and the West.

All this we could not have reached by our own reason, o people, had not God – He is sublime – guided us to it, either through revelation (*waḥy*) to one of his prophets or through inspiration (*ilhām*) to them. Then they (i.e., their followers and the prophets themselves) pondered upon (what God had taught them) and added by the invention of their own reason to that which God had donated them, deducing many things from what had (originally) been given to them. In this there is a clear indication that God – He is sublime – quite obviously wants his servants to earn their living and toil for their daily needs and that he never did prohibit earning.

Now tell us who is better: the man who toils[88] and labours, making the earth prosper, cultivating it so that both he and others may live from the surplus of what his toil has produced, [p. 262] thus becoming the leader of others, or the man who is idle and plays, saying in his shamelessness: "I have left the world and its cultivation (*ᶜimāra*)." Then he comes to the one who has toiled and laboured and asks from his surplus, living himself in a most ignoble state.

I could go on speaking about this, because there is more to say than just this, but what I have already said should be enough. Now we return to the words (*ḥikāya*) of the original author of this book on agriculture.

88 I read *kadda*, as in the facsimile (I: 246, l. 17), for the edition's *karra*.

COMMENTARY

p. 255:

*The 24th of Kānūn I is not only Christmas eve but also the eve of solar festivities. Note that in this text both festivals are attributed to the Sun. Already Columella, *De Re Rustica* XI.2.94, mentions that "on December 24th is the winter solstice as observed by the Chaldaeans." The 24th of December and the New Year Eve were also celebrated by the Harranians.[89] The New Year's Eve in Harranian and Nabatean tradition has been discussed in Hämeen-Anttila (2002b).

As Drijvers (1980: 146) notes, the festivities of Sol Invictus on December 25th were easily reanalysed as a Christian festival. This is a good example, because it both shows the tenacity of religious traditions and serves as a *caveat*: celebration of Christmas may hardly be seen as evidence for the continuation of the cult of Sol Invictus in the 21st century even though the older tradition has passed on both the date and some details in the celebrations. Likewise, the peasants in our text surely had religious festivals at these times, but as long as we do not have a more detailed description of the festivities we should not rush into too much speculation.

The term *ᶜīd al-mīlād* is, of course, used for Christmas in Arabic, cf., e.g., *yawm ᶜīd al-mīlād* (*Akhbār baṭārika*, p. 24, l. 14).

p. 257:

*The pseudo-Biblical *Ādamā* of the *Nabatean Agriculture* has not much to do with the Biblical or Qurʾānic Adam to whom he merely owes his name, position as an early sage, and a few other details, such as being the father of Seth (*Īshīthā*). However, later Islamic authors made this identification without hesitation, as shown in the benediction formula often added after his name, and they even accepted some lore about Adam from the *Nabatean Agriculture*. A particularly clear case is Quṭbaddīn al-Lāhījī's *Maḥbūb al-qulūb*, p. 150, where a passage from the *Nabatean Agriculture* and transmitted from Ādamā is quoted in a chapter dedicated to Adam.

Adam is also depicted in the *Nabatean Agriculture* as a traveller who brought plants from foreign countries to Iraq and described them. In this he parallels Androsthenēs, who described exotic flora in the countries from the Indus to the Persian Gulf and from whose *Paraplous tēs Indikēs* fragments have been preserved in Theophrastus' *De Causis Plantarum*. In one tale of the

89 Cf. Green (1992): 153, and Hjärpe (1972).

Nabatean Agriculture (pp. 448–453),[90] Adam is described as a cultural hero who introduced wheat to a people who had not known it, cf. p. 261, translated above.

The theme of travel to foreign or mythical countries specifically in search of medical plants or the Tree of Life is well attested in Near Eastern literatures. According to a Jewish story, Aesculapius, the father of Greek medicine, travelled to India in search of the Tree of Life, although to no avail.[91] In another Jewish story, it is claimed that all medical books go back to Noah to whom this knowledge was revealed by Raphael; Noah was thus also the origin of Indian medical knowledge.[92] The travels of the itinerant Mani and the tale of Dhū'l-Qarnayn in the Qurʾān (18: 83–98) have also helped to combine legendary journeys with religious characters.

The "Nabatean," and non-Arabic, personal names fall into two classes. The first is a set of names highly reminiscent of Biblical ones (such as Adam and his son Seth), even though the persons they designate are described in a radically different way from their Biblical counterparts. The second are "coded," Nabatean names (such as *Yanbūshādh*) which do not coincide with any name-giving tradition and which have for some reason been invented by the author of the Syriac original (or less probably by Ibn Waḥshiyya).[93]

*In the Syriac original of the *Nabatean Agriculture* astral divinities speak to men through their images, or idols (*ṣanam*). Often it is specifically the Moon who transmits the divine messages to the idols to be further delivered to men.[94]

The theory of revelation (*waḥy*) is discussed in more detail in the *Nabatean Agriculture*, especially on pp. 1236–1246, where (pp. 1242, 1244) it is stated that revelation comes from gods to men either through dreams when sleeping or through inspiration (*ilhām*) when awake. The intermediatory role of *ṣanam* is also mentioned, e.g., on pp. 1192 (the image of the Moon appears in a dream to a man who had prayed to the image), 1255 (the image of Jupiter in a dream).[95]

90 Translated and discussed in Hämeen-Anttila (2004).

91 Ginzberg (1998) I: 174.

92 Ginzberg (1998) I: 173.

93 For a discussion of these names, see Hämeen-Anttila (2002–2003) and (forthcoming).

94 Cf. Tubach (1986): 386.

95 Dream revelation was common in the pre-Islamic Near East. For Hatra, cf. Tubach (1986): 272–273. For the role of the Moon (Sīn), see Tubach (1986): 403; the Moon (Selene) was also closely connected with plants (Tubach 1986: 450–451), as in the Nabatean *Agriculture*,

This is stated especially clearly on p. 49: "Some of these things we have learned through experimentation (*bi't-tajriba*), some through revelation given by the gods (*waḥy al-āliha*) to our forefathers (*aslāfinā*), some they have revealed to us and some they have inspired (*bi-ilhāmihā*) to us or to their images (*li'l-aṣnām*) and the images have taught it to us (*fa-ᶜallamatnā*), some through dreams from the gods (*bi'r-ruᵓyā min al-āliha*) although dreams may also come from the images (*wa-rubbamā kāna ruᵓyā min al-aṣnām*)."

The author of the Syriac original claims a similar chain of inspiration for himself (p. 11): "Know that he (i.e., Saturn) is the one who gives (success in) cultivation of the earth and growth or its opposite to the plants. He revealed (*awḥā*) to the Moon what I have put down in this book of mine and the Moon revealed it to his (own) image, and I was taught it by the image of the Moon, just like I now teach it to you (pl.)."

On p. 155, the *ṣanam* of Mercury is identified with the marsh mallow (*khiṭmī*) and similar identifications are also found elsewhere. In the *Nabatean Agriculture ṣanam* has a wide range of meanings including image or idol (unequivocally a statue, as on p. 1003: the great *ṣanam* of the Sun is to be sent to the King of Yemen), the symbolic tree belonging to an astral divinity, or the actual star (*kawkab*, in modern terminology this refers to the five planets known by the ancients, and to the Moon and the Sun) as well as a dream image of such a god, whether as a tree, an idol or in some other shape. What ties these meanings together is the idea of invisibility, even mental invisibility, of the gods, which makes it necessary for them to adopt a (whether physically or mentally) visible form to communicate with mortals.

Ṣanam, in the wide sense in which it is used in the *Nabatean Agriculture*, is cognate to Suhrawardī's use of the same word. Walbridge–Ziai (1999: 198) define Suhrawardī's *ṣanam* as "A sublunar existent considered in relation to its archetype." In general, Suhrawardī is sometimes remarkably close to the *Nabatean Agriculture* and Sabian ideas, and it is quite possible that he was acquainted with some such sources.[96]

Likewise, the Chaldaean Oracles, which were considered divine revelation,[97] mention the use of sacral statues, *agálmata*, as symbolic bridges.[98] Naturally, on a more general level, the neo-Platonic idea of the One too sublime

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too. The importance of dreams was, of course, well known in Islamic times, cf., e.g., Fahd (1966): 247–367, *Akhbār baṭārika*, p. 2, or Gutas (1988): 183 and note 81.

96 See Corbin (1971–1972) II: 144–145, and Walbridge (2000): 173–174.

97 See Lewy (1978): 6.

98 See Fauth (1995): 124–125.

to be in any direct connection with the cosmos belongs to the same thought pattern.

Much of the criticism in the text translated above is repeated on pp. 1244–1245. Here, the text distinguishes between a prophet (*nabī*) who receives revelation on the basis of his natural receptivity (*li-man taqaddama lahu muqaddamāt min jihati ṭabᶜihi mūjibāt li-qubūl dhālika*), whereas soothsayers (*kuhhān*) use continuous solitude, seclusion and hunger to induce visions which may, however, still be true (*khayālāt ṣaḥīḥa ṣādiqa*). Here a *kāhin* is clearly more or less identical with the ascetic in the passage translated in this article. The terminology of the *Nabatean Agriculture* is not very accurate in general, and it is quite possible that the polyvalence is at least partly due to a difference of provenance between the individual passages. Partly, though, it seems to be caused by the carelessness of Ibn Waḥshiyya.

In addition to these two types, the text (p. 1245) adds yet another, that of philosophers who receive wisdom on their own, without revelation. These are considered, so the text says, by some as superior to prophets and by others as equal or inferior to them.

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