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**THE SPIRITUAL PATH TO CELESTIAL SYMPHONY: RAMBAM,  
ABRAHAM BEN MOSES BEN MAIMON, MOSES BEN SHEM TOV DE  
LEON, ABŪ SA‘ĪD AL-KHARRĀZ**

– Abstract –

During the Ayyubide dynasty (1171-1260), founded by the sultan Saladin or Salah-ad-din (1137-1193), the son of Moses ben Maimon, Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon (1186-1237), followed his father as leader of the Jewish community in Egypt, nagid (Hebrew), al-ra'īs or al-rayyis (Arabic). In accordance with the analysis of Elisha Russ-Fishbane, Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon, in the work *The Sufficient [Guide] for the Servants of God*, continued Moses ben Maimon's arguments in *Moreh nevukhim* on prophetic gift as reaching human perfection. Unlike his father, who used as bibliographic background the system of thought whereby Al-Fārābī (ca. 870-950) had evinced ontological continuity due to which divine inspiration animates the political ideal of the "king philosopher" as a hypostasis of reason and the theocratic ideal of the "legislator-prophet-imām" as a hypostasis of imagination, Abraham opted for a limited proximity to the mystic theology of medieval Sufism.

*Keywords:* Moses ben Maimon; Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon; Jewish medieval pietism; medieval Sufism.

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Moses ben Maimon<sup>1</sup> or RaMBaM (ca. 1135 / 1138 – 1204), in *Moreh nevukhim* or *The Guide for the Perplexed*, described the gift of prophecy as

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<sup>1</sup> Universal spirit, *towering figure* of medieval Judaism, Moses Maimonides brought a vast essential contribution to the religious literature of Judaism, in both philosophy and *Halakhah*. Cf. Sylvie-Anne Goldberg, Geoffrey Wigoder (éd.), *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du judaïsme*, Paris, Cerf, 1993, pp. 684-690. Also, Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, "Maimonides, Moses (Moses ben Maimon; known in rabbinical literature as RaMBaM)", in: Cecil Roth, Geoffrey Wigoder (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 1996, vol. XI, pp. 754-780.

“emanation sent forth by the Divine Being through the medium of the Active Intellect, in the first instance to man’s rational faculty, and then to the imaginative faculty”, and this “divine influence” bestows on humans the theocratic privilege of thinking through the various gradations of intelligence<sup>2</sup>. The influence of the Active Intellect ontologically and gnoseologically defines two categories of human beings: the ones receiving the emanation of the Divine Being through the logical-rational faculty, and those who receive the emanation of the Divine Being through the imaginative faculty. By divine will, each of the two categories is further divided into two sections: human beings receiving the divine emanation to the purpose of reaching perfection individually, and human beings receiving divine emanation to the necessary extent to achieve their own perfection and the perfection of the communities to which they belong. The prophetic gift centred on to the being of the prophet completes the Adamic immersion of the divine revelation by the professed prophetic gift, which is disseminated linguistically and ontologically into the beings of the community members meant to receive, to understand, not to understand or to kill the prophets: “A person may receive a prophecy enabling him to perfect himself, but not others; but he may also receive such a prophecy as would compel him to address his fellowmen, teach them, and benefit them through his perfection<sup>3</sup>.” In Maimonides’ vision, the gift of prophecy is the seal of human perfection, which is theocratically determined.

During the Ayyubide dynasty (1171-1260), founded by the sultan Saladin or Salah-ad-din (1137-1193), the son of Moses ben Maimon, Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon (1186-1237), followed his father as leader of the Jewish community in Egypt, *nagid* (Hebrew), *al-raʿīs* or *al-rayyis* (Arabic). In accordance with the analysis of Elisha Russ-Fishbane, Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon, in the work *The Sufficient [Guide] for the Servants of God*<sup>4</sup>, continued Moses ben Maimon’s arguments in *Moreh nevukhim* on prophetic gift as reaching human perfection. Unlike his father, who used as bibliographic background the system of thought whereby Al-Fārābī (ca. 870-950)<sup>5</sup> had evinced ontological continuity due to which

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Moses Maimonides, *Moreh nevukhim*, II, XXXVI – XXXVII, M. Friedländer (trans.), *The Guide for the Perplexed*, New York, Dover Publications, 1956, pp. 225-229.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, II, XXXVII, p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> Whose first chapter was reconstituted, translated into Hebrew, and edited by P. Fenton.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Fārābī, Alfarabius or Avennasar was a famous Muslim philosopher, author of the treatises entitled *Kitāb al-siyāsa al-madaniyya* or *The Book on Political Regime*, *Fī mabādiʿ arāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila* or *Treatise on the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the City of Virtue* and *Kitāb taḥṣīl al-saʿāda* or *The Book on Reaching Happiness*. Cf. Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2001, pp. 56-170. Also, Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp. 122-142; Richard Walzer, *Greek*

divine inspiration (*wahy*) animates the political ideal of the “king philosopher” as a hypostasis of reason and the theocratic ideal of the “legislator-prophet-*imām*” as a hypostasis of imagination, Abraham opted for a limited proximity to the mystic theology of medieval Sufism<sup>6</sup>.

The doctrine of Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon on reaching prophetic perfection, on accessing or reaching (*wuṣūl*) the destination of the prophetic-theocratic ontology is close to the *Ṣūfī* doctrine on covering the “stages” and “stations” making up the path (*sulūk*) to God’s consummate contemplation. Just like the adepts of Sufism (*ṣūfiyya, mutaṣawwifa*), the pietists (*ḥasidut*) in the Judeo-Egyptian community led by Abraham in his position of *nagid* or *al-raʿīs* considered themselves and were considered as travellers (*sālikūn*) on the path of contemplating the Divine Being. From this perspective, Abraham described the moment when Joshua reached the prophetic climax of the spiritual path by “attaching” himself to God: “Joshua remained in continuous solitary meditation in this tent, pursuing the unique path (*sulūk*) aimed at attaining an attachment to God (*wuṣūl wuṣlat allāh*), may He be exalted, afterward, namely the attainment of prophecy (*wuṣūl al-nubūwah*). (...) ‘But I am continually with You; You hold firm my right hand. (*Psalms* 73, 23): [This is] an allusion to one’s state following the attainment of complete perfection<sup>7</sup>.” According to Russ-Fishbane, Abraham extended the semantic field of the concept of reaching-attachment or “attainment” – “arrival at the destination” (*wuṣūl*), which RaMBaM occasionally uses in *Moreh nevukhim*, to the purpose of building the identification to the Hebrew term *devekut*, to define the ontological climax of the prophet’s closeness to God at the moment of the prophecy, the experience of the theocratic closeness of the prophet in the proximity of the Divine Being<sup>8</sup>. Moshe Idel took *devekut* as the power of the human soul to “attach” to God by receiving an influx from the divine universality<sup>9</sup>.

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*into Arabic. Essays on Islamic Philosophy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1962, pp. 206-219.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Elisha Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 8, p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P. Fenton, “The Doctrine of Attachment of R. Abraham Maimonides: Fragments from the Lost Section of *The Sufficient [Guide] for the Servants of God*” (Hebrew), in: *Da ‘at* 50 / 2003, pp. 107-119, quoted in Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism*, p. 192, p. 192, n. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism*, pp. 192-193.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1988, pp. 35-58 (Chapter 3, “Varieties of *Devekut* in Jewish Mysticism”). See also, Moshe Idel, “Universalization and Integration: Two Conceptions of Mystical Union in Jewish Mysticism”, in: Moshe Idel; Bernard McGinn (ed.), *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. An Ecumenical Dialogue*, New York, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1999, pp. 27-30.

The thinking system of Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon includes the mystical climax of confirming the prophetic perfection by adhering to angelic perfection, by visual-auditory access to the angels' ontological level, hypostases of pure intellect. The emanation sent by the Divine Being through the Active Intellect is revealed as bright light or celestial symphony so that the souls of the travellers-seekers exude with spiritual ecstasy. In this context, Abraham described the celestial symphony based on the divine-angelic vision in *Isaiah*, 6, 1-3<sup>10</sup>: "But this call and response and [celestial] symphony are not with voices like our voices or with a tongue like ours or with words like our words, but "with the words of the living God" (*be-divre elohim hayyim*)... This mystery [is] something which those who have reached perfection (*al-kāmilūn*), who are recipients of [divine] grace, understand...<sup>11</sup>"

The continuity of epistolary communication between the Jewish communities in Provence-Castille and the Jewish community in Egypt between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries included several rhetorical networks, from polemic discourse to amicable discourse. In a letter from 1235, six years after the crusade against the Cathars or Albigensians (1229), Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon accused the Jews in Provence of having repudiated the monotheism of Israel's ancestors by contamination with the heresies of European Christians. Abraham's epistolary reaction was an answer to the solidarity between a group of Jews from Provence and the Catholic ecclesiastical authorities in Provence in regard to condemning RaMBaM's writings and predestining them to autodafe. By comparison, Abraham praised the strict monotheism of the Jews inhabiting the territories ruled over by Ishmael, under the power of Islam, from the Far East to the Far West<sup>12</sup>.

Contemporary with Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon, Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon (*ca.* 1240-1305)<sup>13</sup>, the author of the *Book of Splendor* or *Sefer ha-Zohar*, ordered in 1264 the copying of an issue of RaMBaM's philosophical treatise, *Moreh nevukhim* or *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Between 1270 and 1305,

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<sup>10</sup> "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the Temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory." (*King James Version*)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon, *Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam: Sefer ha-Maspik le-'Ovdey Hashem, Kitab Kifayat al-'ābidīn* or the *Sufficient [Guide] for God's Servants/ the Book on What is Enough for the Faithful* (Part II, Volume II), N. Dana (ed., transl.), Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University, 1989, source quoted by Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism*, p. 1, pp. 70-88.

<sup>13</sup> Illustrious master of the *Kabbalah*. Cf. Goldberg, Wigoder (ed.), *Dictionnaire*, pp. 768-769, pp. 1227-1231.

Moses ben Shem Tov was attracted to the Kabbalistic thinking of the School of Gerona, resided in Guadalajara and Avila, drew up *Sefer ha-Zohar*<sup>14</sup> and circulated copies of the work that marked the mystical thinking of Judaism. *Sefer ha-Zohar*, II, 195b – 196a, mentions that three angel shifts guard the three four-hour divisions of the twelve hours of the night. The first angel shift glorifies God during the first third of the night, while ecstatic souls travel from the mountain of the terrestrial Temple to the court of the celestial Temple: “But the souls of the righteous wander through the world above, and doors are opened for them and they are brought up to the place called “the mount of the Lord”. (...) From there they enter the place called “His holy place”, where the souls all appear before their Master. (...) When the souls are standing there it gives their Master joy to prepare for them the place called “the Holy of Holies”, where their deeds and their merits are inscribed.” The angels in the second shift intonate a lamentation about the destruction of the Temple at the beginning of the second division of the night, “during the two hours before midnight, when the Holy One, blessed be He, enters the Garden of Eden”: “The Holy One, blessed be He, has no rest until He enters the Garden of Eden and takes delight in the souls of the righteous (...) When The Holy One, blessed be He, enters the Garden of Eden, all the trees in the garden and all the souls of the righteous begin by reciting “Lift up your heads, O you gates... Who is the King of glory?... Lift up your heads, O you gates...” (*Psalms 24, 7-9*) (...)”. Through their song, the angels in the third division watch over the return of the souls of the righteous in the material bodies, in the terrestrial realm, after the nocturnal ecstatic trip, and the celestial symphony that goes on until dawn unites the voices of stars, planets, and angels: “And we have learned that the third camp say this during the last four-hour period, and they continue singing until the break of day, for then all the stars and planets and celestial angels who rule by day praise their Master<sup>15</sup>.”

In accordance with *Sefer ha-Zohar*, II, 18b, *Midrash ha-Ne’elam*, God created the heavens with His right hand, and the Earth with His left hand, and His wish was that the world be ruled over by the attribute of divine Love through day, and by the attribute of divine Judgement through night: “When the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, it was His desire to create the heavens with His right hand and the earth with His left. (...) He therefore created angels to fulfil their role through His love during the day, and angels to fulfil their role by uttering songs

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York, Dorset Press, 1987, pp. 213-243, pp. 432-434.

<sup>15</sup> Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon, *Sefer ha-Zohar* or *The Book of Splendour*, Isaiah Tishby (ed.), Fischel Lachower (ed.), David Goldstein (transl.), *The Wisdom of the Zohar. An Anthology of Texts*, I-III, Oxford, The Littman Library & Oxford University Press, 1991, II, pp. 638-640.

at night.” This is the Zoharic meaning of *The Song of Songs* and the wisdom of king Solomon: “This is the explanation of *The Song of Songs*, that is, the song of those singers in the realms above, the song that contains all the matters of *Torah* and wisdom, and power and might with regard both to that which has been and to that which will be, the song that the singers above sing<sup>16</sup>.”

*Zohar Ḥadash*<sup>17</sup>, *Bereshit* 5d, *Midrash ha-Ne’elam*, takes the Hebrew word *bereshit* (“beginning”) in a hermeneutical sense as an anagram for the Hebrew syntagm *shir ta’ev* (“song of desire”): “When He created heaven and earth, The Holy One, blessed be He, created songs of desire, so that He might be glorified and praised as the Creator of all (...). Furthermore, the whole world desires and rejoices to glorify their Creator when they see His wonders in heaven and earth (...). The Songs of Degrees uttered by King David, peace be upon him. These are the songs of the degrees that constitute the heavens (...). David desired them, and uttered them, and this is the significance of “a song of desire.” By Biblical-Zoharic rewriting, “His degrees in the heavens” (*Amos*, 9, 6) are identified with “the angels who utter a song in the Creator’s presence every night during the three watches of the night”<sup>18</sup>.

Paul Nwyia noticed that to the *Ṣūfī* mystics, religious life is revealed as the path (*sulūk*) to God, an ontologic-theocratic pilgrimage made up of “stations” (*maqāmāt*) meant to actualize or achieve proximity (*qurb*) between the soul of the travelling-seeking human being and God. To exemplify this *Ṣūfī* doctrine, Nwyia chose the work by Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz (m. ca. 890-899)<sup>19</sup>, entitled *Kitāb al-ḍiyā’* or *The Book on Bright Light*. Al-Kharrāz described the seven classes (*ṭabaqāt*) of mystics (*tāha*) lost in the ocean of divine uniqueness, emerged in the absolute perplexity (*ḥayrūriya*) of the spirit facing the essence of divine reality or ‘*ayn al-‘ayn* (*ahl tayhūhiya wa-ḥayrūriya*): “Being removed from what constituted their own remoteness and out their own self, they united to the Loved One (*Ḥabīb*), settled in the splendour of His uniqueness and perplexed in the light. God lifted the

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, II, pp. 640-642.

<sup>17</sup> Collection of Kabbalistic writings imitating *Sefer ha-Zohar*, put together prior to 1328, when it was first quoted. Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 213-219.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, II, pp. 637-638.

<sup>19</sup> Famous teacher of the *Ṣūfī* School in Baghdad, disciple of Sarī al-Saqāfī (d. 867), praised by ‘Abdullah Anṣārī (1006-1088) in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiya* as sheik of the sheiks in the “science of unification” and master of Abu ‘l-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad al-Junayd (835-910). Cf. Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, Beyrouth, Dar El-Machreq, 1991, pp. 231-232, pp. 252-253. Also, Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, Paris, Cerf, 1999, pp. 300-303.

veils off their hearts and appeared in front of their spirits, revealing Himself to their comprehension powers<sup>20</sup>.”

The ocean of light of divine uniqueness is the destination of the seven categories of travellers (*sālikūn*). The first category consists of *ahl al-ishārāt*, the ones seeking God through the symbolic power of allusion (*ishāra*). The second category is constituted by those who are able to reach divine presence through the continuous purification effort of official science (*‘ilm*), to the extent of their acknowledging the limits of the language the scientists have consented upon, and striving to overcome them by the revelation provided by the vision. The third category includes those who practise the spiritual fight with generosity (*ahl al-mujāhada*), sacrificing their own beings through sincere love for divine almightiness, and thus divine almightiness is revealed to them as reality. The fourth category contains the privileged (*ahl al-khuṣūṣiya*) to whom God gives the gift that makes them reach Him through Him, on the only path of theocratic ontology as negation of the knowledge of cognoscible things and negation of the knowledge of the universe, as the paths of profane knowledge are not apt to lead to divine attributes. The fifth category consists of those experiencing absolute denudation (*ahl al-tajrīd*) by extraction from the world, from the mundane realm dominated by temporal trauma: God leads them beyond the oceans of sincerity, towards unification through the aquatic continuousness of love. The sixth category is dedicated to those who may master their own spiritual states by the stability provided by the proximity of divine uniqueness (*ahl istilā wa-tamkīn*): God transforms them into beings absent for the world accessible to knowledge, into beings present to the non-cognoscible world, and when He manifests Himself through theocratic ontology, they experience passing into nothingness, then return to themselves in order to have the revelation of being invested as chosen by God<sup>21</sup>.

Upon describing the six categories of travellers or spiritual pilgrims (*rūḥāniyūn*), whom God “purified through His epiphany (*tajallī*)” and received through “the gates of His vision (*ru’ya*)”, who experience an exodus towards God, limited in time and followed by return to mundane-physical life, Al-Kharrāz singles out the seventh category, the travellers who are absorbed into the reality of divine predilection (*ahl al-muḥābāt*), into an absolute ontological-theocratic exodus without return: “Since God revealed the reality of predilection to them, they undertook a radical exodus to Him and were led by Him there where there is no “there”. All their ties being severed, they are no longer attached to anything. God invested them through a special choice and opened the gates of His splendour, the

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz, *Kitāb al-diyā’* or *The Book on Bright Light*, source quoted by Nwyia, *Exégèse*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, pp. 235-236.

treasures of His essence, and the houses of His light. He allowed them to rest close to Him, and from this proximity (*qurb*) they contemplate His kingdom and His majesty. (...) They disappeared into His majesty and settled in the realm of His eternity, floating on the ocean of His uniqueness until they manage to reach the essence of His essence, the source of certifying His uniqueness. Then they have become prisoners within His splendour, as from this moment they have passed beyond their own pilgrimage and are waiting at the gates of divine generosity. (...) As while they were, in point of their manner of being, qualified by their manner of being, all their attributes find themselves abolished, being entwined with God's attributes by their opening towards His hidden meaning (*gayb*). They find themselves alone in a total vision, unified in the realities of direct vision, appropriate the principles of uniqueness attestation and the testimonies of the science of certitude<sup>22</sup>." In the *Ṣūfī* tradition, Al-Kharrāz is considered the first master to formulate the doctrine on "annihilation" (*fanā*) and "perpetual living into God" (*baqā*)<sup>23</sup>.

Against the background of Maimonides' mystic philosophy about the manifestation of the prophetic gift as a touch of human perfection, Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon's spiritual leadership built a limited proximity between the Judeo-Egyptian pietism and the mystic theology of the mediaeval Sufism from the perspective of the human-theocratic ontology of the spiritual path and stations-stages able to allow for the human soul's access to the vision-presence of the Divine Being.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, pp. 236-237.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 55.