



Book Review: Early Philosophical Şūfism; The Neoplatonic Thought of Ḥusayn Ibn Manşūr al-Ḥallāğ, Saer El-Jaichi (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2018), p. x + 222. ISBN: 978-1-4632-3917-6

Veysel Kaya

The present book is a revised version of the author’s doctoral thesis, submitted and defended at the University of Copenhagen in 2016. The book starts with an introduction and continues with four chapters, titled respectively “God’s Unknowability: *Tanzīh* as Neoplatonic *Via Negativa*”, “The Theophanic Creator-God: The *Mu‘ill* as One and Multiple”, “The Experience of Divine Love, Creation, and Cosmology”, “The Neoplatonic Role of the Primordial Muḥammad in Ḥallāğ’s Cosmology”. The book is finalized with a conclusion which summarizes all the chapters. As the above-mentioned chapter headings already stress, the introductory section announces to the readers the author’s strong and persistent stance on placing the writings of Ḥallāğ’s in the Neoplatonist backdrop. As the author explicitly states, this is a book to “analyse and reconstruct Ḥallāğ’s sufi thought through a Neoplatonic lens” and to try and present Ḥallāğ’s own version of Neoplatonism. The author opposes those who have studied Ḥallāğ’s texts in the Quranic and Islamic setting and have allegedly “neglected the Hellenised context in his mysticism” (p. 2), including the writer of the main work in the Ḥallāğ studies, i.e., Louis Massignon.¹ This is of course to set aside all the classical Muslim pioneers of theoretical mysticism after Ḥallāğ, such as Ibn Arabi, Qūnawī, Dāwud Qayşarī, Mulla Fanārī, Ruzbihan Baqlī, Mulla Şadrā etc., none of whom saw in Ḥallāğ a representative of the Arabized falsafā in Islam, as they did in the case of Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. Finally, the author goes so far as to state that he will deal with Ḥallāğ as “a Neoplatonist philosopher”, hence “Ḥallāğ’s philosophy” (p. 9). The author offers five basic texts for consideration in order to look for Ḥallāğ’s roots in Neoplatonism, all

1 *La Passion d’al-Hallaj, martyr mystique de l’Islam* (I-II, Paris 1922; I-IV, 1975)

* **Corresponding author:** Veysel Kaya (Assoc. Prof. Dr.), Istanbul University, Faculty of Theology, Department of Philosophy and Religious Sciences, Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail: veysel.kaya@istanbul.edu.tr ORCID: 0000-0003-0057-3995

To cite this article: Kaya, Veysel. “Early Philosophical Şūfism; The Neoplatonic Thought of Ḥusayn Ibn Manşūr al-Ḥallāğ.” Review of Early Philosophical Şūfism; The Neoplatonic Thought of Ḥusayn Ibn Manşūr al-Ḥallāğ edited, by Saer El-Jaichi. *darulfunun ilahiyat* 31, 1 (2020): 179–183. <https://doi.org/10.26650/di.2020.31.1.0017>



of which are well-known texts of the Greco-Arabic Neoplatonism compendium: Pseudo-Aristotle's *Theology, Letter on the Divine Science, Fragmentary Sayings Attributed to the Greek Sage (Plotinus), On the Pure Good, Proclian Propositions (Mabādi' al-Ilāhiyyāt)*. The author does not explain whether he has applied a certain criteria in the selection of these titles, nor whether he simply finds in these texts the similarities he has been looking for. Thus the question remains open about whether one should add another text that is relevant to the subject.

The first chapter about God's unknowability attempts to analyze Ḥallāj's vocabulary on the transcendence of God in comparison with the Neoplatonist notion of deity. According to Ḥallāj, no one will do justice to the ineffability of God when they offer human descriptions about the essence of God. Still according to him, a true proponent of the *tawḥīd* must believe in God and His attributes, stick to unity, affirm the attributes of God, and negate *ta'īl* and *tashbīh* (p. 21). A reader, who is familiar with the history of Kalām, can easily notice that this stance of Ḥallāj is in full accordance with the common orthodox Kalām, whether Mutazilite or Ash'arite. However, the author insists on seeing Ḥallāj's highly emphatic tone of human inadequacy in the light of the Neoplatonic terms, alluding to the concept of "*aphairesis*" (negation). According to the author, Ḥallāj's understanding of *tanzīh* sets God as a non-being in the Neoplatonist context. God is free from all aspects of human discourse, whether they be descriptions, adverbs, pronouns, or conjunctions etc. (p. 39)

In the second chapter, the author puts into focus al-Ḥallāj's description of God as "mu'ill". The word literally means "the maker of the cause", and it may well imply a criticism against those philosophers who see God as the first cause (p. 50). For instance, in his interpretation of the Sura Najm 53:43 ("And to your Lord where it ends"), Ḥallāj explains that God is the maker of the causes of everything (*mu'ill al-kull*)², and when one says "God is the First", one means all things that have been caused perish and the Mu'ill (their maker) endures. And this is the true meaning of *tawḥīd*.³ Thus, instead of the 'illa-ma'lūl dichotomy, Ḥallāj has mu'ill-malūl, a choice which brings Ḥallāj's stance much closer to

2 Ḥallāj's word choice can be paralleled with that of the Brethren of Purity, in *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Ṣafā*, 5 vols, ed. Ā. Tāmīr, Éditions Oueidat, Beirut-Paris 1995, IV, 175, where the Brethren names God "the maker of the cause of the causes" (*mu'allil al-'ilal*). The relationship between the Epistles and Ḥallāj can be seen in other contexts as well.

3 Qāsim Muhammad al-'Abbās, *al-Ḥallāj al-A'māl al-Kāmila*, Beirut: Riad el-Rayyes Books, 2002, 148. However, the author's interpretation of the mu'ill is as follows: it is "something acts as a cause for something else. From this perspective, God is always present in the world as the primordial source of creation." (p. 76). In the following chapters, the author gives the role of this primordial creativity to Muhammad (s.a.w.) as well.

that of the theologians. Nonetheless, the author is inclined to interpret the mu‘ill as an explanation of the so-called “theophanic creator”, thus giving this original word a rather Christian scent. For him, the mu‘ill has the connotation of God’s disclosure and immanence in other beings, and this notion blurs the distinction between God and His creation. This time, it is the Aristotelian concept *theoria* which works here (see Nicomachean Ethics, Book 10): God is the source of the hierarchical emanation of the Neoplatonian universe that is essentially based on the divine intellectual activity. “The Neoplatonic notion of divine self-contemplation should be the starting point of any philosophical examination of the term Mu‘ill”. (p. 76) Be that as it may, in the author’s eyes, it is not possible to see Ḥallāj as a pantheist, since Ḥallāj’s understanding of the *tajallī* rather proposes the “created” beings’ overflowing from the divine entity, not vice versa.

The third chapter on divine love is the further development of the notion of divine contemplation, but this time putting more emphasis on the relationship between God and human beings. The chapter is rich in that it takes into consideration a vast array of the common philosophical and mystical concepts, such as union with God, incarnation (*ḥulūl*), final causality, ecstasy (*wajd*), ethical goodness, and identity (*huwiyya*). Blending such terms with a uniform methodology, not surprisingly, the author aims to support his view that “Ḥallāj’s mysticism, i.e., his account of man’s salvation and union with God, depends on a Neoplatonic ideal of union” (p. 94). In Neoplatonism, God is the one who is the ultimate goal of beings and the way of perfection is through one’s spiritual journey to his source, that is, God. In Neoplatonism, God is the ultimate good and this is settled by the divine simplicity and by the natural inclination of all existent beings towards the One. In Neoplatonism, God is “submerged” in His sublime majesty and splendor, a state from which all other aspects of His magnitude emerge, such as knowledge, power, love, wisdom, beauty. All these notions are interwoven by the author into the rubric of Ḥallāj’s mystical prose and poetry, the man who is famous for his saying *ana’l-Haqq*, “I am the Truth”. The author seems so engaged and busy with drawing parallelisms between the Great Muslim mystic and Neoplatonism, to the degree that a clear allusion to the Quranic verse in Ḥallāj’s text Parag. 95 (53a) evades him: the allusion is to the verse Luqmân 31:27 (p. 142).

The fourth and the last chapter on the so-called “Primordial Muhammad” delves into a context in which Ḥallāj’s ideas on the al-Ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya has exerted essential influence on subsequent sufi thought in Islam.⁴ The author says he would deal with the issue of Muhammad’s being “a primordial cosmic being”,

4 In the Islamic context, an alternative rendering of the term “al-Ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya” might be “the Universal Reality/Truth belonging to Muhammad” (s.a.w.).

as is understood in the section “Ta-Sîn of the Lam” in the Hallajian Corpus. As this title suggests, the idea of the primordial Muhammad is fully in accordance with the Neoplatonic metaphor “the Light and its shining from the sun throughout the Universe”. Therefore, Muhammad is the light in the Neoplatonist sense (p. 161); he participated in God’s emanating of the light (p. 162); and he is the place where union (*ittiḥād*) with the divine occurs (p. 177). This is all exemplified in the concept of the attainment of unity by means of *arkhe* and *telos* in the Greek origin.

Now let’s take one step back and look at some methodology. The well-founded method in studies in the research field “Greek into Arabic” is the application of a textual investigation which portrays “textual parallelisms”. It is the touchstone. First, we need to see the relevant Arabic text (i.e., Ḥallāj) in its entirety, and we need to be informed in what context the base text flows. Second, we are immediately presented with the structure and the content of the Greco-Arabic text (i.e., the Plotinus Arabus) in comparison with the later Arabic one. In what way is the Arabic text related to the Greco-Arabic text? Is the context the same, or different; and if so, why does the Arabic part company from the original? (Is it because the author is addressing another *epistemic* realm?). And most importantly, what words are repeated or rephrased in the Arabic text? Here are the textual parallelisms. The reader must follow the traces of influence and see it for himself word by word, sentence by sentence. If the text is not suitable for this kind of analysis, as is the case with the writings of Ḥallāj, all the author can do is read the Arabic text through a predetermined perspective at the back of his mind, and then strive to find the mirrors of influences in the Greco-Arabic literature. In the case of perspective, only common *images* can be traced back to the original, not *concepts*. For concepts can only move from one text to another through a concrete bridge, which is the textual parallelism.

This seems to be the case in the present book: there are no concrete bridges built in order to show the relationship between the two areas. Readers who want to delve into such an intriguing subject already know that there is something “Neoplatonic” in the tasawwuf corpus, and wish to see one more example about how Neoplatonism blends into Islamic culture.⁵ When we label someone as “Neoplatonist”, we need to see that his ideas are initially contextualized in Neoplatonism, in other words, we need to see the underlying philosophical mechanism doing its work. But in our case, the first impression that comes to the reader of the Ḥallājian corpus is that these texts are essentially Quranic, poetic, mystic, theosophic, enigmatic, and

5 In this regard, as an example, one should consider Richard M. Frank’s article, “The Neoplatonism of Jahm ibn Safwān”, *Le Museon* 78 (1965), 395-424. This title is absent in the bibliography of the present book.

with all that in mind, Islamic. It would be a somewhat difficult interpretation to say that these are “Neoplatonic”, for every aspect of his vocabulary can best be conceptualized and explained in the writings of his milieu, not in the writings of Greco-Arabic corpus. The vocabulary is that of Islamic culture at that time; it is not specifically Neoplatonic. One example is the author’s understanding of the concept “the primordial Muhammad”, that is, the al-Haḳīqa al-Muḥammadiyya, as it is known in sufi literature. The author links the concept to the Neoplatonist emanation theory and thinks that it is the metaphor of the sun and its light that we should see in the “ontological status” of Muhammad. In sum, Muhammad is the emanation of the First and he has a “demiurgic/creative role”. This interpretation totally misses the rationale behind the conceptualization of the Muhammadan Reality, a situation which is stressed in all hadith and tasawwuf traditions: Muhammad is the first creation of God, not any emanation of God. The key concept here is creation (*khalq*)—there is an essential difference between the Creator and his creation. This is clearly stated by Ḥallāj as well in several places. For instance, see al-A‘māl al-Kāmila, p. 126: “God made the Prophet (s.a.w.) as the greatest creation, for his character” p. 225: “God is uniquely different (*tafarrada*) from the creation with His eternity; thus, all creation differs from God in terms of their origination”, and so many other places. With all this in mind, Muhammad, as the origin of creation, or the crown of creation, is in a completely different context from the Neoplatonist emanation theory.

Saer El-Jaichi’s work on Ḥallāj is indeed a thought-provoking book. It is well-structured, to the point, and authored with a very clear prose. It presents to the modern reader a rich material to be discussed. It will be a valuable source for advanced researchers on Islamic philosophy and mysticism.

