

Literature Review

Ibn Sabʿīn and Islamic Orthodoxy: A Reassessment

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Among the various images contemporary scholars paint of Ibn Sabʿīn (c. 614–668/1217–1270), most widely known for his responses to questions posed by Frederick II, the majority could be considered pejorative. It has been suggested that he was a Neoplatonic philosopher, a Peripatetic philosopher, a Pythagorean philosopher, a Hermeticist, a Kabbalist, an alchemist, a heterodox Sufi, a crypto-Shīʿī, a plagiarizer, a pantheist, and an arrogant seeker of fame. It may be that Ibn Sabʿīn was one or more of these things. Yet almost no attempt has been made to examine him in light of accepted Islamic doctrine. In this article I endeavor to show that some of the accusations against Ibn Sabʿīn result from de-emphasizing the centrality of Islamic doctrine in his work.

The anti-Ibn Sabʿīn polemic has a long history. It probably started during Ibn Sabʿīn's lifetime. However, as Knysh has shown,¹ the history of the anti-Ibn Sabʿīn polemic has a long connection with the anti-Ibn ʿArabī polemic, with the two often mentioned side by side and subjected to the same criticism for allegedly espousing a strong form of monism, seen by some as inconsistent with the Islamic view of *tawḥīd*.² As Knysh shows, those who criticized

1 Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), *passim*.

2 *Ibid.*, *passim*. Knysh discusses individuals such as Ibn al-Qaṣṭallānī (d. 686/1287) who grouped figures such as al-Ḥallāj, Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Ibn ʿArabī, al-Shushtarī, al-Tilimsānī, and Ibn Sabʿīn together, “whom he disparagingly dubbed the ‘adherents of nothingness’ (*laysiyya*)” (169). Knysh also highlights individuals such as Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1375) who felt that “Ibn Sabʿīn was a much more consequential figure for Western Islamic mysticism than the Greatest Master” (198) for while it was felt that Ibn ʿArabī “simply continued the old mystical tradition . . . Ibn Sabʿīn was the creator of an original philosophical system” (198). Furthermore, Eric Geoffroy, in *Le Soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie* (Damascus: l’Institut Français d’Études Arabes de Demas, 1995), mentions

figures such as Ibn ʿArabī and Ibn Sabʿīn often did so without an in-depth knowledge of their works, such that “on the surface, we are dealing with a purely theological controversy that may or may not conceal an underlying conflict of interest.”³ A case in point is ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq al-Bādisī (ca. 1311), a critic of Ibn Sabʿīn, who, upon revealing his ignorance of the intended audience of the latter’s *Budd al-ʿārif*, proved “beyond any doubt that he had not read the book before criticising it,” which Vincent Cornell sees as “typical of the *ad hominem* arguments against Ibn Sabʿīn that one finds in Islamic writings.”⁴ Yousef Casewit writes that many of the accusations against Ibn Sabʿīn “are invalidated by Ibn Sabʿīn’s own writings, and suggest that some of our author’s critics were not even familiar with his works.”⁵ Despite this, these accusations are repeated in much of the literature with little to no attempt to either contextualize or refute them. By repeating these accusations, despite evidence to the contrary, the image of Ibn Sabʿīn as a controversial thinker is maintained, thus increasing the difficulty of establishing another, less controversial, image of him.

Ibn Sabʿīn’s status as a misrepresented thinker is widely acknowledged. Several writers note that “most reports about him by pre-modern Muslim scholars, hagiographers and Sufis are derogatory.”⁶ Yet, despite this, characterizations of him as a “bitter and tormented spirit” by Louis Massignon and as a “bold and tormented philosopher” by Henry Corbin are oft-repeated.⁷ Cornell acknowledges that the

Ibn Sabʿīn only in conjunction with Ibn ʿArabī, as if the two were one entity. While Johnson refutes this conflation, indicating that there is an important distinction between Ibn Sabʿīn and Ibn ʿArabī, see N. Scott Johnson, “Ibn Sabʿīn, Shushtari and the Doctrine of Absolute Unity,” *Sufi* (1995) 25, 27.

3 Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabī*, 45.

4 Vincent J. Cornell, “The Way of the Axial Intellect,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society* 22 (1997), 47.

5 Yousef A. Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics in Ibn Sabʿīn’s Answers to the Sicilian Questions,” *Iqbal Review* 49 (2008), 102.

6 *Ibid.*, 101.

7 In Anna A. Akasoy, “Ibn Sabʿīn’s *Sicilian Questions*: The Text, Its Sources, and Their Historical Context,” *al-Qantara* 29 (2008), 116; Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 102; Cornell, “The Way,” 42; Louis Massignon, *Recueil De Textes Inédits Concernant L’Histoire De La Mystique En Pays D’Islam* (Paris:

“negative image of Ibn Sabʿīn has hardly improved over time”⁸ and that he is “one of the most misunderstood figures in the history of Islamic thought,” so much so that “nearly everything that has been written about Ibn Sabʿīn is problematical.”⁹ As a result “he remains among the least understood and most disparaged figures in Islamic history.”¹⁰ However, despite the acknowledgment of such problems, the literature that highlights these issues maintains the problematic status of Ibn Sabʿīn by advancing interpretations without examining viable alternatives. It is difficult to see what is gained by doing so. Cornell provides a clear example of this in an attempt to list the negative images of Ibn Sabʿīn:

What is one to make of this enigmatic figure? Was he a crypto-Shiʿite, a poser, a seducer of women as al-Badisi maintains? Was he a subversive philosopher whose doctrines incited unrest? Was he a pseudo-Sufi who sought fame at bargain-basement prices by plagiarizing the works of mystics with more established reputations? Or was he a reckless monist who flirted with heresy, as Ibn Khaldun suggests?¹¹

While these are all possibilities, they are all, to varying degrees, derogatory. I now draw attention to two interpretive perspectives that contribute to maintaining Ibn Sabʿīn’s status as a controversial thinker. The first perspective characterizes him as leading a life filled with controversy; this is maintained by emphasizing and utilizing particular readings of Ibn Sabʿīn’s life at the expense of other, less controversial, readings. Second, and more importantly, his works are considered controversial and heterodox in that they espouse a non-Islamic doctrine when examined on their own grounds. While changing the image of Ibn Sabʿīn as “controversial thinker” would

Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1929), 123; and A. Faure, “Ibn Sabʿīn,” *EP*, 3:921–922.

8 Cornell, “The Way,” 42.

9 Vincent J. Cornell, “The All-Comprehensive Circle (*al-Ihata*): Soul, Intellect, and the Oneness of Existence in the Doctrine of Ibn Sabʿīn,” in *Sufism and Theology*, ed. A. Shihadeh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 31.

10 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 112.

11 Cornell, “The Way,” 49.

require more than can be presented here, I attempt to show that the current hermeneutic paradigms applied to Ibn Sabʿīn are problematic. I address the issue of his biography, then focus on content by showing that some of the labels mentioned above are refuted by the subjects of Ibn Sabʿīn works, and finally examine his death.

Reassessing Ibn Sabʿīn's Life

Little is known of Ibn Sabʿīn's life, though there is intrigue. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq b. Sabʿīn was born in Ricote Valley, Murcia, in 613/1216 or 614/1217, a region from which Ibn ʿArabī was also born (560/1165), though “neither figure mentions the other in their writings, nor is there evidence of the two great mystics ever having met or having read each other's works.”¹² The events of his life that are known show times of trial and hardship as well as times of relative ease. However, some scholars persist in making statements such as “his life consisted of misfortune and suffering,”¹³ which could be summed up as “consisting entirely of controversies, quarrels and persecutions, [such that it] seems to have been a long and painful trial.”¹⁴ To sum up Ibn Sabʿīn's life in this way, without further evidence, is inadequate. Furthermore, a statement such as “around 1250 AD he left for Cairo, where for some time he was left in peace”¹⁵ problematizes the view that he was constantly harassed. Although “almost nothing is known about other members of Ibn Sabʿīn's family,” it is known that the political situation in which he grew up was dominated by turmoil and the rapid collapse of Almo-had authority on the Iberian Peninsula, causing him to move “in the direction of Granada first and then to Ceuta.”¹⁶ This is generally accepted as the first of many changes in residence. While various reasons for these multiple relocations could exist, instead, it has been suggested that “time and time again, it seems, he triggered

12 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 102.

13 Maha Friemuth, “Ibn Sabʿīn, ʿAbd Al-Haqq,” *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Civilization and Religion*, ed. I. Netton (London: Routledge, 2008), 265–266.

14 Faure, “Ibn Sabʿīn,” 921. This passage is repeated verbatim by N. Hanif, *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Sufis: Africa and Europe* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2002), 77.

15 Friemuth, “Ibn Sabʿīn,” 265–266.

16 Akasoy, “Ibn Sabʿīn's Sicilian Questions,” 117–118.

suspicious, confrontations and open hatred among the local political authorities and *‘ulamā*, and he was forced to continue his journey further eastwards,” though in fact, “it is difficult to reconstruct a coherent picture of Ibn Sab‘īn’s career and especially to explain why exactly he was forced to leave his place of residence so many times.”¹⁷ He finally came to reside in Mecca, where, it is said, “Ibn Sab‘īn’s tranquil life in Mecca gave him leisure to accomplish some of his writings.”¹⁸ Ibn Sab‘īn died there in 668–669/1270.

Even given the lack of evidence regarding Ibn Sab‘īn’s career, scholars continue to project controversy into his life. One of his first moves was to Ceuta. Here, the *Budd al-‘ārif* was “received rather controversially,” which has led to “claims that Ibn Sab‘īn was expelled from Ceuta after the publication of that text”—this despite the fact that “modern scholarship has not yet been able to reconstruct the exact circumstances of these events.”¹⁹ It has been intimated that during Ibn Sab‘īn’s sojourn he was financed by questionable sources and surrounded by disreputable people. This adds to the controversy by suggesting that Ibn Sab‘īn’s income was unlawful, voiding any eschatological benefit that may result from it. Evidence for this is that Ceuta’s governor Ibn Khalāṣ (r. 635–643/1238–1246), who financed his intellectual and artistic pursuits by skimming tax revenues from the city’s custom-houses was also Ibn Sab‘īn’s patron.²⁰ Ibn Khalāṣ’ retinue of protégés “included the poet Ibn Sahl (a Jewish convert to Islam and notorious homosexual) and Ibn ‘Amira, the Chief Judge (*qāḍī al-jama‘a*) of Sabta [Ceuta], who was respected for his intelligence, but distrusted as a politician” and of whom “the common people of Sabta were scandalized by their ideas and behaviour.”²¹ It is among these figures that Cornell places Ibn Sab‘īn.

17 Akasoy, “Ibn Sab‘īn’s *Sicilian Questions*,” 118.

18 Abu ‘l-Wafa al-Taftazani and Oliver Leaman, “Ibn Sab‘īn,” in *HIP*, Nasr and Leaman, 346.

19 Anna Akasoy and Alexander Fidora, “Ibn Sab‘īn and Raimundus Lullus—The Question of the Arabic Sources of Lullus’ Logic Revisited,” in *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages*, eds. A. Akasoy and W. Raven (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 436.

20 Cornell, “The Way,” 43.

21 *Ibid.*

There are apparently two pieces of evidence for including Ibn Sabʿīn among Ibn Khalāṣʿ entourage. First, Cornell suggests that Ibn Sabʿīn's work *Budd al-ʿarīf* "was in fact written for a legalist (*faqīh*),"²² suggesting that "it is likely that Ibn Sabin's interlocutor was Ibn ʿAmira, the Chief Judge of Sabta."²³ While tenuous, this reading is one possibility, but it ignores the Sufi tradition of calling attention to what is perceived as the narrow interpretation of Islam by the exoteric jurists.²⁴ Second, much weight is placed on the view that "Ibn Khalāṣ solicited Ibn Sabʿīn's help in answering philosophical questions put to the caliph by Frederick II von Hohenstaufen (r. 1215–50)."²⁵ However, contrary to this suggestion that Ibn Khalāṣ used Ibn Sabʿīn, it has been suggested that Frederick II "was told about a man in the West, Ibn Sabʿīn, to whom he sent his questions through the Almohad caliph al-Rashīd (r. 630/1232–640/1242) and his governor in Ceuta, Ibn Khalāṣ."²⁶ and again that the questions came to al-Rashīd "addressed to Ibn Sabʿīn as a scholar whose reputation had reached even the Sicilian court."²⁷ This alternate version sees Ibn Sabʿīn being sought out by Frederick II rather than him being enlisted by Ibn Khalāṣ, which throws doubt on Ibn Sabʿīn's supposedly disreputable associates and allowance.²⁸ The first

22 Ibid., 47.

23 Ibid., 47n21.

24 A further example of this can be found in Ibn ʿAṭāʿ Allāh's comment against the shallow-minded doctors of Islamic exoterism is most often read as referring to Ibn Taymiyya, without even considering that it could refer to those who, like Ibn ʿAṭāʿ Allāh in his youth, felt that beyond the letter of the law there was nothing else to seek.

25 Cornell, "The Way," 44.

26 Akasoy, "Ibn Sabʿīn's *Sicilian Questions*," 120.

27 Duncan B. Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory* (Lahore: Premier Book House, 1903; rep. 1960), 263–264.

28 This is predicated on an acceptance of Frederick's authorship of the initial questions. While Macdonald (*Muslim Theology*, 263) calls the story "tolerably authentic," Akasoy ("Ibn Sabʿīn's *Sicilian Questions*," 121) suggests that the whole story is contestable, writing that "a closer look at the time and place of composition of the *Sicilian Questions* reveals just how problematic the assumption of an authentic enquiry from Frederick might be." If Frederick's authorship of the questions is doubtful, then Cornell's inclusion of Ibn Sabʿīn among Ibn Khalāṣʿ disreputable entourage becomes equally doubtful. This is

version of the story is also questionable, since “it is hardly conceivable without further explanation that Ibn Khalāṣ commissioned Ibn Sabʿīn with the composition of the *Sicilian Questions* if he banished him from the city only a little later for having composed a quite similar text.”²⁹ Thus, scholars opt to advance one view of Ibn Sabʿīn, without examining the alternatives, and thereby maintain his status as a controversial figure.

Ibn Sabʿīn’s final place of residence was Mecca. Here it is said that he was “adviser to its ruler, the Shārif Abu Numayy ibn Abī Saʿīd (r. 652–701/1254–1301),”³⁰ or in the very least “succeeded in gaining a certain influence over the Shārif.”³¹ This relationship with the ruler is the only evidence supporting the accusation that Ibn Sabʿīn was Shīʿī. While it is accepted that the ruler was a patron of Zaydī Shīʿīs,³² there is no evidence that indicates Ibn Sabʿīn’s explicit conversion and no evidence indicating that the ruler influenced Ibn Sabʿīn’s views. Despite this, the accusation that Ibn Sabʿīn converted to Shīʿī Islam, originally made by his detractor al-Bādisī, is repeated. While there is caution in these reports, which suggest that he “may have converted”³³ to and that he has “been accused”³⁴ of Shīʿī Islam, it is enough to throw doubt on Ibn Sabʿīn. If Ibn Sabʿīn was as thoroughgoing a monist as is suggested then it is unlikely that he would have had time for many of the propositions that are distinctly Shīʿa. Furthermore, this accusation is invalidated by Ibn

rendered further problematic with Anna A. Akasoy (“Reading the Prologue of Ibn Sabʿīn’s *Sicilian Questions*,” *Schede medievali* 45 (2007), 16) stating that “we can exclude the possibility that the contact with the Emperor from Sicily was entirely invented by a disciple of Ibn Sabʿīn, as is sometimes suggested” while it has been suggested that “Akasoy characterizes the work as a fictitious correspondence invented for dialectic purposes,” Jules Janssens, “A Remarkable Thirteenth-century Compendium of Aristotelian Philosophy: Ibn Sabʿīn’s *Sicilian Questions*” *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale* 49 (2007), 55.

29 Akasoy, “Reading the Prologue,” 22.

30 Cornell, “The Way,” 47.

31 Akasoy, “Ibn Sabʿīn’s *Sicilian Questions*,” 118.

32 Richard T. Mortel, “Zaydi Shiʿism and the Hasanid Sharifs of Mecca,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19 (1987), 455–472.

33 Cornell, “The Way,” 47.

34 al-Taftazani and Leaman, “Ibn Sabʿīn,” 346.

Sabʿīn imploring “his disciples to diligently observe the *Sharīʿa* and the *Sunna* of the Prophet” as well as “his reverent prayers on behalf of the Prophet.”³⁵ Thus, again, the inclusion of details such as these in reporting the life of Ibn Sabʿīn, especially when left unexamined, contributes little to our understanding. These details do, however, convey the impression that he was a most controversial individual and generate questions about his Islam.

Reassessing Ibn Sabʿīn’s Work

Ibn Sabʿīn’s work has received a critical reception. Issue has been taken with both its content and tone. In this part three issues will be addressed: Ibn Sabʿīn’s mode of expression, his alleged Hermeticism, and his alleged pantheism. An attempt will be made to show that, while there may be elements in his works that support such allegations, these issues arise from analyzing elements of Ibn Sabʿīn’s work independently rather than examining them as part of an integrated whole.

Among these issues it is his mode of expression that has caused the most confusion. In some of his works Ibn Sabʿīn’s style is philosophical without any attempt to highlight the Islamic nature of his thought. Macdonald acknowledges this, stating that “he was as much a mystic as Ibn ʿArabī but was apparently more deeply read in philosophy and did not cast his conceptions in so theological and Qurʾanic a mould.”³⁶ The result of this is that he has been accused

35 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 102.

36 Macdonald, *Muslim Theology*, 263. While this may be true for the *Sicilian Questions*, it is understandable given that he was apparently writing for a non-Muslim audience. However, this view would not hold if Ibn Sabʿīn’s criticisms of the Islamic jurists and theologians were considered. His criticism of these groups is that they have gone too far away from the root of Islam, being Qurʾān and Sunna, in their arguments for “he who remains with the root does not undergo transferal or transformation; he remains fixed in his knowledge and his realization. But he who stays with the branch undergoes transformation and transferal; things become many in his eyes, so he forgets and becomes negligent and ignorant” (Ibn Sabʿīn in William C. Chittick, “Rumi and *Wahdat al-Wujud*,” in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, ed. A. Banani, R. G. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 83.

of being “the last representative of the Arab peripatetic school,”³⁷ a “Hellenizing philosopher” and an “Aristotelian Sufi” whose “Sufism was suspect,”³⁸ that “perhaps the closest description of him would be that he was [a] Hermetic philosopher who was attached to Islam and Sufism,”³⁹ and that “this enigmatic mystic is seen to represent the darker, more heterodox side of Islamic esoterism.”⁴⁰ While it is true that “in his replies [to Frederick II] he certainly displays a very complete and exact knowledge of the Aristotelian and neo-Platonic systems” this in no way implies that Ibn Sabʿīn’s commitment to Islam was suspect, especially considering that he was “less a blind follower of Aristotle than is Ibn Rushd.”⁴¹ One possibility for this is that Ibn Sabʿīn’s philosophically-oriented works and modes of expression were “for a public audience” as other works “display him primarily as a Sufi” whose writing style is “reminiscent of the saying of the earlier Sufis.”⁴² The categorization of Ibn Sabʿīn as a ‘philosopher’ has even been called into question for “although he displays a mastery of philosophical learning . . . these considerations are dominated by the ‘mystical’ component.”⁴³ As a result, the critical reception of Ibn Sabʿīn’s work, combined with varying opinions regarding its categorization, has further blurred an accurate understanding of his position.

Ibn Sabʿīn’s alleged Hermeticism also requires further discussion. Without denying that “no understanding of Ibn Sabʿīn will be complete without examining the influence of Hermeticism on his thought” and that his worldview “was shaped not only by Sufi doctrines, but also by Hellenistic and Hermetic teachings”⁴⁴ it does not follow that “it is not difficult to argue that Ibn Sabʿīn was more of a Hermetist than a Sufi,”⁴⁵ especially when his commitment to Islam

37 Chittick, “Rumi and *Wahdat al-Wujud*,” 82.

38 Faure, “Ibn Sabʿīn,” 921.

39 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 112.

40 Cornell, “The Way,” 41.

41 Macdonald, *Muslim Theology*, 264.

42 Chittick, “Rumi and *Wahdat al-Wujud*,” 82.

43 N. Scott Johnson, “The Doctrine of Absolute Unity,” 25.

44 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 101.

45 Cornell, “The Way,” 58.

and his insistence on “the *Shari‘a* and the *Sunna* of the Prophet”⁴⁶ are overlooked. If these were considered, it is possible that the label of “Hermetist” would seem misapplied to Ibn Sab‘in.

The attribution of Hermeticism to Ibn Sab‘in seems to be recent.⁴⁷ Cornell develops a case for reading Ibn Sab‘in as a Hermetist⁴⁸ and it has been readily taken up by others. Shihadeh believes that “Ibn Sab‘in represents an elitist, primarily Hermetic mystical tradition, which exhibits little regard for orthodoxy and confessional boundaries.”⁴⁹ While Casewit holds that “perhaps the closest description of him would be that he was [a] Hermetic philosopher who was attached to Islam and Sufism.”⁵⁰ Ibn Sab‘in’s thought apparently “reveals its Hermetic roots in its doctrinal eclecticism” for “he cites a vast array of Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers.”⁵¹ Even if “doctrinal eclecticism” is a key feature of Hermeticism, one possibility for the citation of “Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers” in Ibn Sab‘in’s work is to increase its receptivity among a variegated audience as has been acknowledged with regard to his more philosophically-oriented modes of expression.⁵² The acknowledgment of Hermes at the beginning of the *Budd al-‘arif* is taken as Ibn Sab‘in’s recognition of “Hermes Trismegistos as the key to the sciences of spiritual realisation and illumination” and that “the revealed scriptures of the Prophets replicate Hermes’ teachings.”⁵³ While Ibn Sab‘in does mention Hermes at the beginning of the *Budd al-‘arif*, to categorize Ibn Sab‘in as a Hermetist due to this overlooks the passages that

46 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 102.

47 Though it may be traced back to Massignon, who stated that “Ibn Sab‘in considered Hermes (= Idris) as the first philosopher spiritualist” (in André-Jean Festugière, *La Révélation D’Hermès Trismégiste* (Paris: Librairie Lecoq, 1949–1954), vol. 1, 400). Massignon also indicates that, within Islam, Hermes is understood to be Prophet Idris or Enoch, a point that is not taken up by latter commentators on Ibn Sab‘in’s Hermeticism.

48 See Cornell, “The All-Comprehensive Circle.”

49 Ayman Shihadeh, *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 6.

50 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 112.

51 Cornell, “The All-Comprehensive Circle,” 35.

52 Chittick, “Rumi and *Wahdat al-Wujud*,” 82.

53 Cornell, “The All-Comprehensive Circle,” 46n18.

mention the Prophet Muḥammad both prior to and proceeding from this passage.

Those who advance the view of Ibn Sabʿīn as a “Hermetist” claim that Ibn Sabʿīn disregarded Islamic orthodoxy. The charge that Ibn Sabʿīn held “disregard for the Prophet Muhammad and Islamic law” is long-standing, with Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) charging him with “heresy, unwarranted innovations, and the most extravagant of detestable interpretations of orthodox doctrine.”⁵⁴ Evidence for the supposed disregard and decentralization of Muḥammad in Islam comes from the *Budd al-ʿārif* where Ibn Sabʿīn writes that “the function of the prophets is not to originate doctrine but to reaffirm a primordial wisdom that transcends all of the revealed religions.”⁵⁵ This passage is taken to mean that “by positing the origins of this wisdom to a period long before the advent of Islam, Ibn Sabʿīn diminishes the centrality of Muhammad as a source of religious precedent”⁵⁶ and that Hermes “appears to take precedence over Prophet Muhammad.”⁵⁷ To further support this interpretation another section of the *Budd al-ʿārif* is included which states that “the only disagreement is over the establishment of revealed laws [i.e., religions] and rules of conduct, which, in any case, are of one nature because they all guide and urge [man] towards the Truth.”⁵⁸ While this is one interpretation, to see these passages as decentralizing and diminishing the role of Muḥammad is only valid if the Islamic context is ignored because it overlooks the Qurʾānic statement that *The messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and [so have] the believers. All of them have believed in God and His angels and His books and His messengers (2:285)*. Thus, if the above quoted passages of Ibn Sabʿīn are read in conjunction with this Qurʾānic verse then Ibn Sabʿīn suddenly appears more orthodox. This is further supported by passages wherein “to his disciples

54 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 101.

55 In Cornell, “The Way,” 58–59.

56 *Ibid.*, 59.

57 Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 11.

58 In Cornell, “The Way,” 59n69.

Ibn Sabʿīn recommends his followers to seek harmony between the mystical path and religious law,” stating “Do not differentiate between them, for they are synonyms,” from which it could be said that “Ibn Sabʿīn values jurisprudence also higher than theology (*kalām*) and philosophy since it is concerned with the very basics of the Islamic religion.”⁵⁹ His imploring “his disciples to diligently observe the *Shariʿa* and the *Sunna* of the Prophet,” coupled with “reverent prayers on behalf of the Prophet,”⁶⁰ reduces the validity of allegations regarding a dismissal of Muḥammad and a disregard for Islamic law.

Ibn Sabʿīn is also accused of having pantheistic tendencies. It is suggested that “his Sufi doctrines were suspect because of his belief of God as the entire reality of all existing things, which implies a pantheistic tendency”⁶¹ and that in his works “he demonstrates his concept of pantheism.”⁶² It is also asserted that “the pantheism of Ibn Sabʿīn is based on the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the idea that only God really exists” meaning that “there [is] no real basis to the distinction between the existence of God and everything else.”⁶³ It is also implied in statements such as Ibn Sabʿīn’s view of *waḥdat al-wujūd* “claims identity of the existence of Creator and creation.”⁶⁴ The controversy implicit in this doctrine is its conflation of creation and Creator, which is contrary to Islamic orthodoxy. The view that “the Sufis generally recognise a degree of existence relative to creation, but the proponents of ‘Absolute Unity’ (*al-waḥda al-muṭlaqa*), with Ibn Sabʿīn (d. 1270) at their head, make no concession and consider the universe as a pure illusion”⁶⁵ contradicts the accusation of conflation.

59 Anna Akasoy, “The *muḥaqqiq* as Mahdi? Ibn Sabʿīn and Mahdism Amongst Andalusian Mystics in the 12th/13th Centuries,” in *Endzeiten. Eschatologie in der monotheistischen Weltreligionen*, ed. W. Brandes and F. Schmieider (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 319.

60 Casewit, “The Objective of Metaphysics,” 102.

61 Friemuth, “Ibn Sabʿīn,” 265.

62 Ibid., 266.

63 al-Taftazani and Leaman, “Ibn Sabʿīn,” 347.

64 Akasoy, “The *muḥaqqiq* as Mahdi,” 316.

65 Eric Geoffroy, “L’apophatisme chez les mystiques de l’Islam,” *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 72 (1998), 399.

tion, for while creation is considered “pure illusion” the reality of the Creator is affirmed. As a result a distinction has to be made between Creator as reality and creation as illusion. While further research needs to be done, there are indications that the label of pantheism does not capture the subtlety of Ibn Sabʿīn’s position.⁶⁶ Chittick states that Ibn Sabʿīn’s use of the phrase “Allah alone” (*Allāh faqat*) “is not a statement of a philosophical position, but an incitement to his readers to follow the Koranic injunction, ‘Say “Allah,” then leave them to themselves, playing their game of plunging’ (Sura 6:91).”⁶⁷ While this would require further examination, it does indicate that the use of “Allah alone” (*Allāh faqat*) is not indicative of pantheistic tendencies.

Further, his position of *waḥda al-muṭlaq*, unity of the Non-delimited, problematizes the label of “pantheist.” It becomes incredible that he held pantheistic views as creation is considered limited to its illusory nature while *waḥda al-muṭlaq* posits the unity of that which has no limits or boundaries. As has been recognized, “pantheism emphasises one aspect of the divinity, namely immanence.”⁶⁸ Yet, *waḥda al-muṭlaq* rejects the bias toward the immanent by pushing the focus beyond the immanent and limited to that which is non-delimited (*muṭlaq*). Thus, this preliminary investigation indicates that “pantheism” inadequately captures Ibn Sabʿīn’s position.⁶⁹

Further, Ibn Sabʿīn is accused of usurping the position of the Prophet Muḥammad.⁷⁰ This is one of the more severe accusations, for it puts Ibn Sabʿīn against the orthodox Islamic view of Muḥammad

66 The inadequacy of the label of “pantheism” with regard to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s work has been shown by Mohammed Rustom, “Is Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Ontology Pantheistic?” *JIP* (2006) 2.

67 Chittick, “Rumi and *Wahdat al-Wujud*,” 82. Though Johnson (“The Doctrine of Absolute Unity,” 26) seems to disagree with this, stating that “Allah alone” (*Allah faqat*) entails a position that surpasses “all attributes and distinctions; [for] anything else posits dualism.”

68 Rustom, “Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Ontology,” 66.

69 This is without dismissing the possibility that Ibn Sabʿīn holds a sort of pantheistic position. Though this would require further study, it cannot be simply dismissed on the same grounds of rejecting “pantheism,” as has been suggested, see Rustom, “Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Ontology,” 64.

70 Macdonald, *Muslim Theology*, 263.

as the final prophet. Macdonald writes that “he is accused of posing as a prophet” though “it may be said that he had no need of the actual title, ‘prophet’; [for] many mystics held – heretically, it is true – that the *walī* stood higher than the prophet, *nabī* or *rasūl*.”⁷¹ Leaving aside this oft misquoted and misunderstood view, there is no evidence that Ibn Sabʿīn held this view. Rather, as Macdonald goes on to acknowledge, Ibn Sabʿīn holds the opposite view that “as distinguished from Ibn Rushd, the prophet, with Ibn Sabʿīn, takes higher rank than the sage.”⁷² Rather than contributing to our understanding of Ibn Sabʿīn, this assertion, though retracted, throws doubt, albeit uncritically, on Ibn Sabʿīn’s acceptance of Islamic doctrine.

Reassessing Ibn Sabʿīn’s Death

Even Ibn Sabʿīn’s death is embroiled in controversy. Akasoy tentatively writes that “in approximately 668/1270 Ibn Sabʿīn died in the holy city, apparently under suspicious circumstances.”⁷³ There are two descriptions of his death, one that states that he was poisoned and another that reports that he committed suicide. Despite the mutually exclusive versions, it is the more controversial suicide adopted by Massignon⁷⁴ and Corbin⁷⁵ that is repeatedly reported. According to this version it is said “that he took his life in the manner of the Stoics, by opening the veins of his wrists, is in no way improbable” for “it was the ultimate way of uniting himself with the Beloved, of fleeing a world that rejected him.”⁷⁶ Corbin’s graphic description stating that “he opened his veins, let the blood drain out, and breathed his last on the 2nd Shawwal 669/19th May 1270”⁷⁷

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., 264.

73 Akasoy, “Ibn Sabʿīn’s *Sicilian Questions*,” 118. Though Akasoy (“The *muhaqqiq* as Mahdi,” 327) does mention that Ibn Sabʿīn was “a man who died in Mecca in 1270, according to some sources by slitting his wrists” without including the possibility of his poisoning.

74 Akasoy, “Ibn Sabʿīn’s *Sicilian Questions*,” 118.

75 *HIP*, Corbin, 264.

76 Faure, “Ibn Sabʿīn,” 922. Corbin (*History*, 264) states that “Ibn Sabʿīn chose of his own free will” to commit suicide “because he desired to be united with God.”

77 *HIP*, Corbin, 264.

is an almost verbatim report of Amari's earlier assertion.⁷⁸ It has also been stated that his suicide was an "alleged attempt to test the doctrine of reincarnation"⁷⁹ despite the fact that reincarnation has no place in Islam. The attribution of suicide to Ibn Sab'īn is doubly condemnatory for it suggests that he violated both "the prohibition on killing within the sacred precinct as well as the prohibition on taking one's own life."⁸⁰ This story is repeated even though previous scholars have stated that "there is a poorly authenticated story that he died by suicide."⁸¹

There is further evidence leading us to reject the story of Ibn Sab'īn's suicide. Casewit states that "his alleged suicide seems untenable firstly because it was related by one of Ibn Sab'īn's foes, and secondly because suicide is wholly contrary to both Islamic law and Ibn Sab'īn's philosophical beliefs."⁸² This is beyond doubt given that it was one of Ibn Sab'īn's detractors, al-Bādīsī, who "informs us that Ibn Sab'īn did not commit suicide in Mecca, but ended his days as an adviser to its ruler, the *Shārīf* Abu Numayy ibn Abi Sa'id (r. 652–701/1254–1301)" though he does add that this ruler "may have converted him [Ibn Sab'īn] to Shi'ism."⁸³ Al-Bādīsī further reports that Ibn Sab'īn's demise was most likely from poisoning, for he treated a serious head wound Abū Numayy received from "the ruler of Yemen, al-Malik al-Muzaffar (r. 647–94/1250–95), a Sunni Muslim and ally of the Mamluks of Egypt, [who] had Ibn Sab'īn poisoned."⁸⁴ It has also been suggested that Ibn Sab'īn "was on good terms with the Yemeni ruler. . . but his relationship with [the ruler's] vizier, who was an anthropomorphist, was naturally strained" and as a result "he was poisoned by the vizier."⁸⁵ Despite the evidence against Ibn Sab'īn's alleged suicide, it is still reported, thus giving

78 Michele Amari, "Questions philosophiques adressées aux savants musulmans par l'empereur Frédéric II," *Journal Asiatique* 5 (1853), 256.

79 Cornell, "The Way," 42.

80 Sirriyeh, *Sufi Visionary*, 11.

81 Macdonald, *Muslim Theology*, 265.

82 Casewit, "The Objective of Metaphysics," 104.

83 Cornell, "The Way," 47.

84 Ibid.

85 al-Taftazani and Leaman, "Ibn Sab'īn," 346.

the figure of Ibn Sabʿīn as controversial an ending as his life and work were purported to be.

Much work remains to be done in order to gain a fuller understanding of Ibn Sabʿīn. Modern scholars suggest how to approach and what to examine from the work of Ibn Sabʿīn, with one suggestion being to examine what “actual knowledge of the *Guide* of Maimonides Ibn Sabʿīn had and to what extent the Andalusian philosopher borrowed from this author.”⁸⁶ Another scholar, acknowledging that “from time to time one may regret that Akasoy [in her study of the *Sicilian Questions*] has not paid more attention to the texts that have served as Ibn Sabʿīn’s sources.”⁸⁷ Though Akasoy admits that “it is possible, even likely, that future research will create an image of Ibn Sabʿīn which differs substantially from the image we have developed until now.”⁸⁸ Yet, without invalidating these suggestions, it seems that, given his controversial status, a more fundamental issue needs to be researched, namely the degree to which he was influenced by and affirmed the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth and how this is expressed in all of his works, for this would help us to reassess this intriguing figure and open further avenues of research regarding the foundations of his thought. On this issue, it has been suggested that the manuscript of *Sicilian Questions* has been rearranged⁸⁹ and that “it is likely that the original contained a defence of membership of the Islamic community, and perhaps some critical remarks on monasticism.”⁹⁰ However, this scarcely constitutes a shift in the hermeneutic paradigm. If there was such a shift in the hermeneutic paradigm, as has been suggested here, then this would stem the tide of the production of predominantly pejorative images of Ibn Sabʿīn.

86 Patrizia Spallino, “Les questions siciliennes de Ibn Sabʿīn: nouvelles perspectives de recherche,” *Schede medievali* 45 (2007), 100.

87 Janssens, “A Remarkable Thirteenth-century Compendium,” 65.

88 Akasoy, “The *muhāqqiq* as Mahdi,” 320.

89 D. Urvory and M. Th. Urvory, “Les thèmes chrétiens chez Ibn Sabʿīn et la question de la spécificité de sa pensée,” in *Studia Islamica* 44 (1976), 103, states that “they have certainly been rearranged,” while Akasoy (“Ibn Sabʿīn’s *Sicilian Questions*,” 123n26), believes that the fifth question “is not part of the original text” and that “at a certain stage the order of the pages of the manuscript containing the *Sicilian Questions* became mixed up with pages of the same or another manuscript.”

90 Urvory and Urvory, “Les thèmes chrétiens,” 103.

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