Avicenna on Theology

By

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My father was a man of Bālākh, and he moved from there to Bukhara during the days of Nūh ibn Mānṣūr; in his reign he was employed in the administration, being governor of a village-centre in the outlying district of Bukhara called Kharmaitan. Near by is a village named Afshana, and there my father married my mother and took up his residence; I was also born there, and after me my brother. Later we moved to Bukhara, where I was put under teachers of the Koran and of letters. By the time I was ten I had mastered the Koran and a great deal of literature, so that I was marvelled at for my aptitude.

Now my father was one of those who had responded to the Egyptian propagandist (who was an Ismaili); he, and my brother too, had listened to what they had to say about the Spirit and the Intellect, after the fashion in which they preach and understand the matter. They would therefore discuss these things together, while I listened and comprehended all that they said; but my spirit would not assent to their argument. Presently they began to invite me to join the movement, rolling on their tongues talk about philosophy, geometry, Indian arithmetic; and my father sent me to a certain vegetable-seller who used the Indian arithmetic, so that I might learn it from him. Then there came to Bukhara a man called Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Nāṭili who claimed to be a philosopher; my father invited him to stay in our house, hoping that I would learn from him also. Before his advent I had already occupied myself with Muslim jurisprudence, attending Ismā‘īl the Ascetic; so I was an excellent enquirer, having become familiar with the methods
of postulation and the techniques of rebuttal according to the
usages of the canon lawyers. I now commenced reading the
Isagoge (of Porphyry) with al-Nāṣīli: when he mentioned to
me the definition of *genus* as a term applied to a number of things
of different species in answer to the question "What is it?"
I set about verifying this definition in a manner such as he had
never heard. He marveled at me exceedingly, and warned my
father that I should not engage in any other occupation but
learning; whatever problem he stated to me, I showed a better
mental conception of it than he. So I continued until I had read
all the straightforward parts of Logic with him; as for the
subtler points, he had no acquaintance with them.

From then onward I took to reading texts by myself; I
studied the commentaries, until I had completely mastered the
science of Logic. Similarly with Euclid I read the first five
or six figures with him, and thereafter undertook on my own
account to solve the entire remainder of the book. Next I
moved on to the Almagest (of Ptolemy): when I had finished
the prolegomena and reached the geometrical figures, al-Nāṣīli
told me to go on reading and to solve the problems by myself;
I should merely revise what I read with him, so that he might
indicate to me what was right and what was wrong: The
truth is that he did not really teach this book; I began to solve
the work, and many were the complicated figures of which he
had no knowledge until I presented them to him, and made
him understand them. Then al-Nāṣīli took leave of me, setting
out for Gurganj.

I now occupied myself with mastering the various texts and
commentaries on natural science and metaphysics, until all the
gates of knowledge were open to me. Next I desired to study
medicine, and proceeded to read all the books that have been
written on this subject. Medicine is not a difficult science, and

naturally I excelled in it in a very short time, so that qualified
physicians began to read medicine with me. I also undertook
to treat the sick, and methods of treatment derived from practical
experience revealed themselves to me such as baffle description.
At the same time I continued between whiles to study and dispute
don law, being now sixteen years of age.

The next eighteen months I devoted entirely to reading;
I studied Logic once again, and all the parts of philosophy.
During all this time I did not sleep one night through, nor
devoted my attention to any other matter by day. I prepared
a set of files; with each proof I examined, I set down the
syllogistic premisses and put them in order in the files, then
I examined what deductions might be drawn from them. I
observed methodically the conditions of the premisses, and pro­
ceded until the truth of each particular problem was
confirmed for me. Whenever I found myself perplexed by a problem,
or could not find the middle term in any syllogism, I would
repair to the mosque and pray, adoring the All-Creator, until
my puzzle was resolved and my difficulty made easy. At night
I would return home, set the lamp before me, and busy myself
with reading and writing; whenever sleep overcame me or
I was conscious of some weakness, I turned aside to drink a
glass of wine until my strength returned to me; then I went
back to my reading. If ever the least slumber overtook me,
I would dream of the precise problem which I was considering
as I fell asleep; in that way many problems revealed themselves
to me while sleeping. So I continued until I had made myself
master of all the sciences; I now comprehended them to the
limits of human possibility. All that I learned during that time
was exactly as I know it now; I have added nothing more to
my knowledge to this day.

I was now a master of Logic, natural sciences and mathe-
I therefore returned to metaphysics; I read the *Metaphysica* (of Aristotle), but did not understand its contents and was baffled by the author's intention; I read it over forty times, until I had the text by heart. Even then I did not understand it or what the author meant, and I despaired within myself, saying, "This is a book which there is no way of understanding." But one day at noon I chanced to be in the booksellers' quarter, and a broker was there with a volume in his hand which he was calling for sale. He offered it to me, but I returned it to him impatiently, believing that there was no use in this particular science. However he said to me, "Buy this book from me: it is cheap, and I will sell it to you for four dirhams. The owner is in need of the money." So I bought it, and found that it was a book by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī *On the Objects of the Metaphysica*. I returned home and hastened to read it; and at once the objects of that book became clear to me, for I had it all by heart. I rejoiced at this, and upon the next day distributed much alms to the poor in gratitude to Almighty God.

Now the Sultan of Bukhara at that time was Nāṣr ibn Malik, and it happened that he fell sick of a malady which baffled all the physicians. My name was famous among them because of the breadth of my reading; they therefore mentioned me in his presence, and begged him to summon me. I attended the sick-room, and collaborated with them in treating the royal patient. So I came to be enrolled in his service. One day I asked his leave to enter their library, to examine the contents and read the books on medicine; he granted my request, and I entered a mansion with many chambers, each chamber having chests of books piled one upon another. In one apartment were books on language and poetry, in another law, and so on; each apartment was set aside for books on a single science. I glanced through the catalogue of the works of the ancient Greeks, and asked for those which I required; and I saw books whose very names are as yet unknown to many—works which I had never seen before and have not seen since. I read these books, taking notes of their contents; I came to realize the place each man occupied in his particular science.

So by the time I reached my eighteenth year I had exhausted all these sciences. My memory for learning was at that period of my life better than it is now, but to-day I am more mature; apart from this my knowledge is exactly the same, nothing further having been added to my store since then.

There lived near me in those days a man called Abū l-Ḥasan the Prosodist; he requested me to compose a comprehensive work on this science, and I wrote for him the *Mujtahid* ("Compendium") which I named after him, including in it all the branches of knowledge except mathematics. At that time I was twenty-one. Another man lived in my neighbourhood called Abū Bakr al-Barqī, a Khwarizmian by birth; he was a lawyer at heart, his interests being focused on jurisprudence, exegesis and asceticism, to which subjects he was extremely inclined. He asked me to comment on his books, and I wrote for him al-Ḥāṣīl wa-l-muḥṣīl ("The Import and the Substance") in about twenty volumes, as well as a work on ethics called al-Birr wa-l-imān ("Good Works and Sin"); these two books are only to be found in his library, and are unknown to anyone else, so that they have never been copied.

Then my father died, and my circumstances changed. I accepted a post in the Sultan's employment, and was obliged to move from Bukhara to Gurgan, where Abū l-Ḥusain al-Sahlī was a minister, being a man devoted to these sciences. I was introduced to the Amir, 'Ali ibn al-Ma'mūn, being at that time dressed in the garb of lawyers, with scarf and chain-
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they fixed a handsome salary for me, amply sufficient for the like of me. Then I was constrained to move to Nasa, and from there to Baward, and thence successively to Tus, Shagqan, Samanqan, Jajarm the frontier-post of Khurasan, and Jurjan. My entire purpose was to come to the Amir Qabīs; but it happened meanwhile that Qabīs was taken and imprisoned in a fortress, where he died.

After this I went to Dihistan, where I fell very ill. I returned to Jurjan, and there made friends with Abū 'Ubaid al-Jùžjānī.

BIOGRAPHY OF AVICENNA

By Abū 'Ubaid al-Jùžjānī

(In continuation of the "Autobiography")

FROM this point I mention those episodes of the Master's life of which I was myself a witness during my association with him, up to the time of his death.

There was at Jurjan a man called Abū Muḥammad al-Shirāzī, who loved these sciences; he had bought for the Master a house near where he lived, and lodged him there. I used to visit him every day, reading the Almagest and listening to him lecturing on Logic; he dictated to me al-Mukhtār al-ansāt ("The Middle Summary") on that subject. For Abū Muḥammad al-Shirāzī he composed al-Muḥāda 'wal-maʿād ("The Origin and the Return") and al-ʿArqād al-kullīya ("The General Observations"). He wrote many books there, such as the first part of al-Qānūn ("The Canon"), the Mukhtār al-Majāṣī ("Summary of Almagest") and many essays. Then he composed in the Jebel country the rest of his books.

After this the Master removed to Ra'ī, where he joined the service of al-Sayyida and her son Majd al-Daula; they knew of him because of the many letters he brought with him containing appreciations of his worth. At that time Majd al-Daula was overcome by melancholy, and the Master applied himself to treating him. At Ra'ī he composed the Kitāb al-Maʿād ("Book of the Return"), staying there until Shams al-Daula attacked the city following the slaying of Hālāl ibn Badr ibn Ḥasanawah and the rout of the Baghdad army. Thereafter
circumstances conspired to oblige him to leave Ra'ii for Qazwin, and from Qazwin he proceeded to Hamadhán, where he entered the service of Kadhblnuya in order to investigate her finances. Shams al-Daula then became acquainted with him, and summoned him to his court because of an attack of colic which had afflicted him; he treated him, until God cured him of the sickness, and he departed from his palace loaded with many costly robes. So he returned home, having passed forty days and nights at the palace and became one of the Amir's intimates.

Now it came to pass that the Amir went up to Qarmisiu, to make war on 'Anāz, the Master accompanying him; but he was routed, and returned to Hamadhán. They then asked him to take the office of vizier, and he accepted; but the army conspired against him, fearing for themselves on his account; they surrounded his house, haled him off to prison, pillaged his belongings, and took all that he possessed. They even demanded of the Amir that he should put him to death, but this he refused, though he was agreeable to banishing him from the State, being anxious to conciliate them. The Master concealed himself for twenty days in the house of Abū Sa’ād ibn Dakhdūk; at the end of which time Shams al-Daula was again attacked by colic, and sent for him. He came to court, and the Amir apologized to him profoundly; so the Master applied himself to treating him. As a result he continued in honour and high consideration at court, and was appointed vizier a second time.

Then it was that I asked him to write a commentary on the works of Aristotle; but he remarked that he had not the leisure at that time, adding, "If you will be satisfied for me to compose a book setting forth the parts of those sciences which I believe to be sound, not disputing therein with any opponents nor troubling to reply to their arguments, I will gladly do so." This offer I accepted, and he began work on the physical sections of the Kitāb al-Shifa' ("Book of the Remedy"). He had already composed the first book of the Qanun; and every night students gathered in his house, and by turns I would read the Shifa' and another the Qanun. When we had finished the allotted portion the various musicians would enter; vessels were brought out for a drinking party; and so we occupied ourselves. The studying was done by night because during the day his attendance upon the Amir left him no spare time.

We continued after this fashion for some while. Then the Amir set out for Tarm, to fight the prince of that place. Upon this expedition the colic again visited the Amir near Tarm; the attack was severe, and was aggravated by complications brought on by his irregular habits and his disinclination to follow the Master's advice. The army feared he would die, and at once returned towards Hamadhán carrying him in a cradle, but he died on the way. Shams al-Daula's son was thereupon sworn in as Amir, and the army now requested that the Master should be appointed vizier, but this he declined; he corresponded in secret with 'Aṭā' al-Daula, seeking to come to his court and join his service. Meanwhile he remained in hiding in the house of Abū Ghālib the Druggist. I requested him to complete the Shifa', and he summoned Abū Ghālib and asked for paper and ink; these being brought, the Master wrote in about twenty parts (each having eight folios) in his own hand the main topics to be discussed; in two days he had drafted all the topics, without having any book at hand or source to consult, accomplishing the work entirely from memory. Then he placed these parts before him, took paper, and began to examine each topic and write his comments on it. Each day he wrote fifty leaves, until he had completed the natural sciences and metaphysics save for the books of zoology and botany. He commenced work on the logic, and wrote one part of this; but then Tāj
al-Mulk suspected him of corresponding with 'Alá' al-Daula, and disapproving of this instituted a search for him. The Master's whereabouts were betrayed by an enemy, and he was committed to a fortress called Fardjil, where he remained for four months.

Then 'Alá' al-Daula attacked and captured Hamadhan; Táj al-Mulk was routed, and passed into the very same fortress. Presently 'Alá' al-Daula withdrew from Hamadhan; Táj al-Mulk and the son of Shams al-Daula returned, carrying with them the Master, who took up his lodging in the house of al-'Alawi and busied himself with composing the logic of the Shifál. While imprisoned in the fortress he had written the Kitáb al-Hikýa ("Book of Guidance"), the Kitáb Haýy ibn Yaqúa ("Treatise of Living the Son of Wakeful") and the Kitáb al-Qadílaj ("Book of Colic "); as for ad-Da'íya al-qul'ilýa ("The Cardiac Remedies"), this he composed when he first came to Hamadhan.

So some time elapsed, and Táj al-Mulk was all the while encouraging him with handsome promises. Then it seemed good to the Master to betake himself to Isfahan; he went forth in disguise, accompanied by myself, his brother and two slaves, in the habit of Sufis, and so we reached Tabaran at the gate of Isfahan, having suffered great hardships on the way. Friends of the Master, and courtiers of 'Alá' al-Daula came out to welcome him; robes were brought, and fine equipages, and he was lodged in a quarter called Gun-Gundah at the house of Abú Allah b. Babá; his apartment was furnished and carpeted in the most ample manner. At court he was received with the respect and consideration which he so richly merited; and 'Alá' al-Daula appointed every Friday night a meeting for learned discussion before him, to be attended by all the scholars according to their various degrees, the Master Abú 'Alá among them; in these gatherings he proved himself quite supreme and unrivalled in every branch of learning.

At Isfahan he set about completing the Shifál; he finished the logic and the Almagest, and had already epitomized Euclid, the arithmetic and the music. In each book of the mathematical section he introduced supplementary materials as he thought to be necessary; in the Almagest he brought up ten new figures on various points of speculation, and in the astronomical section at the end of that work he added things which had never been discovered before. In the same way he introduced some new examples into Euclid, enlarged the arithmetic with a number of excellent refinements, and discussed problems on music which the ancient Greeks had wholly neglected. So he finished the Shifál, all but the botany and zoology which he composed in the year when 'Alá' al-Daula marched to Sabur-Khowat; these parts he wrote en route, as well as the Kitáb al-Najít ("Book of Deliverance").

The Master had now become one of the intimate courtiers of 'Alá' al-Daula. When the latter determined to attack Hamadhan, the Master accompanied him; and one night a discussion took place in the Amir's presence concerning the imperfections that occur in the astronomical tables according to the observations of the ancients. The Amir commanded the Master to undertake observations of the stars, supplying him with all the funds he might require; so he began this new work, deputing me to select the instruments and engage the skilled assistants needed. So many old problems were elucidated, it being found that the imperfections in the former observations were due to their being conducted in the course of many journeys, with all the impediments resulting therefrom.

At Isfahan the Master also wrote the 'Alí'í (an encyclopaedia named after 'Alá' al-Daula). Now one of the remarkable things
about the Master was, that during the twenty-five years I accompanied and served him I never saw him take a new book and read it right through; he looked always for the difficult passages and complicated problems and examined what the author had said on these, so as to discover what his degree of learning and level of understanding might be.

One day the Master was seated before the Amir, and Abū Maṣūr al-Jabban was also present. A philological problem came up for discussion; the Master gave his views as they occurred to him. whereupon Abū Maṣūr turned to him and remarked, “You are a philosopher and a wise man but you have never studied philology to such an extent that we should be pleased to hear you discourse on the subject.” The Master was stung by his rebuke, and devoted the next three years to studying books on philology; he even sent for the Tahdhib al-Insāha of Abū Maṣūr al-Azhari from Khurasan. So he achieved a knowledge of philology but rarely attained. He composed three odes full of rare expressions, as well as three letters—one in the style of Ibn al-'Amīd, one after the fashion of al-Dalīl, and the third imitating al-Sābī; then he ordered these to be bound, and the indigil to be rubbed. So he suggested to the Amir that he should show this volume to Abu Maṣūr and remarking that “we found this volume in the desert while hunting, and you must look it through and tell us what it contains.” Abū Maṣūr examined the book, and was baffled by many passages occurring in it. The Master suggested to him that “all you are ignorant of in this book you will find mentioned in such-and-such a context in the works on philology,” naming books well known in that science; for he had memorized these phrases from them. Abū Maṣūr merely conjectured as to the words which the Master introduced, without any real certainty as to their meaning; then he realized that the letters had really been composed by the Master, and that he had been induced to do so by the affront he had offered him that day; he therefore extracted himself from the situation by apologizing to the Master. The latter then composed a work on philology which he entitled Lisān al-'Arab (“The Arab Language”), the like of which was never composed; he did not transcribe it into a fair copy, so that at his death it was still in the rough draft and no man could discover a way to put it in order.

The Master had many remarkable experiences in the course of the various treatments he undertook, and he resolved to record them in the Qānūn; he had actually annotated these on some quires, but they were lost before the Qānūn was completed. At Jurfān he had composed al-Mukhtasar al-Qāghar (“The Smaller Epitome”) on Logic, and it is this that he afterwards placed at the beginning of the Nāfīḥ. A copy of this came to Shiraz, where it was examined by a group of scholars; they took objection to a number of points, and wrote their observations upon a separate quire. The Cadi of Shiraz was one of their persuasion, and he forwarded the quire to Abu 'l-Qāsim al-Kirmānī, the friend of Ibrahim ibn Abīl-Dailamī, who had much to do with esoteric matters; the Cadi enclosed a letter of his own to Abu 'l-Qāsim, and delivered the two documents into the hands of a post-messenger, with the request that he should present the quire to the Master and elicit from him his answers. Abu 'l-Qāsim came to the Master when the sun was yellowing upon a summer’s day; he showed him the letter and the quire; the Master read the former and returned it to Abu 'l-Qāsim, while the latter he kept before him, examining it while a general conversation was in progress. Then Abu 'l-Qāsim went out; and the Master commanded me to bring fair parchment and cut some quires. I sewed up five quires for
him, each of ten folios of a generous format. We prayed the evening prayer; candles were brought, and the Master ordered drinks to be laid out. He made me and his brother sit with him and drink, while he commenced to answer the questions that had been propounded to him. So he continued writing and drinking until half the night was gone, when I and his brother were overcome by sleep; he therefore bade us depart. In the morning a knock came at the door, and there was the Master's messenger summoning me. I found him at his prayers, and before him the five quires completed. "Take them," he said, "and go with them to Abu 'I-Qāsim al-Kirmāni; tell him I made haste to reply, so that the post-messenger might not be delayed." When I brought the communication to him he was most astonished; he dispatched the messenger, and informed his friends of the circumstances of the matter. The story became quite an historic occasion.

While engaged upon his astronomical observations the Master invented instruments the like of which had never been seen before; he also composed a treatise on the subject. I remained eight years engaged upon this work, my object being to verify the observations which Ptolemy reported on his own account, and in fact some part of these were confirmed for me. The Master also composed the Kitāb al-Injīf ("Book of Rectification"), but on the day when Sultan Ma'ān came to Isfahan his army plundered the Master's luggage; this book was part of it, and was never seen again.

The Master was powerful in all his faculties, and he was especially strong sexually; this indeed was a prevailing passion with him, and he indulged it to such an extent that his constitution was affected; yet he relied upon his powerful constitution to pull him through. At last in the year when 'Alī al-Daula fought Tāḥ Farrāsh at the gates of al-Karkh,
to manage me is incapable of managing me any more; so it is no use trying to cure my sickness."

So he continued some days, and was then transported to the Presence of his Lord. He was buried at Hamadhan, being 58 years old; his death occurred in the year 428.

ON THE NATURE OF GOD

**That there is a Necessary Being**

Whatever has being must either have a reason for its being, or have no reason for it. If it has a reason, then it is contingent, equally before it comes into being (if we make this mental hypothesis) and when it is in the state of being—for in the case of a thing whose being is contingent the mere fact of its entering upon being does not remove from it the contingent nature of its being. If on the other hand it has no reason for its being in any way whatsoever, then it is necessary in its being. This rule having been confirmed, I shall now proceed to prove that there is in being a being which has no reason for its being.

Such a being is either contingent or necessary. If it is necessary, then the point we sought to prove is established. If on the other hand it is contingent, that which is contingent cannot enter upon being except for some reason which sways the scales in favour of its being and against its not-being. If the reason is also contingent, there is then a chain of contingents linked one to the other, and there is no being at all; for this being which is the subject of our hypothesis cannot enter into being so long as it is not preceded by an infinite succession of beings, which is absurd. Therefore contingent beings end in a Necessary Being.

Of the Unity of God

It is not possible in any way that the Necessary Being should be two. Demonstration: Let us suppose that there is another