

a position of authority in one sphere but not in another.

Yoffee in his concluding chapter suggests that it is the very flexibility of the term city-state which makes it useful. He also makes the important point that the cultural sphere is often very much larger than the political one, a point which is amply demonstrated in today's world as it was in the Indus valley of 4,000 years ago. Archaeologists have traditionally been more interested in the urban world, which yields richer pickings, and it is salutary to be

reminded of the importance of the rural hinterland. The city-state, however defined, is much more than its urban centre. Perhaps one lesson to be drawn from this book is that it is vital that archaeologists take a holistic view of ancient societies rather than concentrating their focus on the purely urban. It also has to be accepted that in the absence of good textual evidence inferences on ancient political systems will remain in the realms of informed speculation.

HARRIET CRAWFORD and WARWICK BRAY

THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

WILLIAM C. CHITTIK: *The self-disclosure of God: principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmology.* (SUNY Series in Islam.) xl, 483 pp. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998. \$24.95.

This is in every way an excellent book. Ibn al-'Arabī is a notoriously difficult thinker to understand and translate, and Chittick has both explained his central ideas and provided us with a splendid translation of some of the central passages of *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* ('The Meccan Openings'), one of his most significant long works. Quite understandably the tendency so far has been to translate and comment on Ibn al-'Arabī's shorter works and essays, and these are not always that representative of his thought as a whole. Ibn al-'Arabī is not exactly the most pellucid of thinkers, and so there has also been plenty of scope for interpreters to make him out to say very much what they themselves would like him to have said. There has also been a tendency to skip what have seemed to be the most difficult passages, those which might be regarded as more poetic than philosophical and so inessential to the nature of the argument being offered in the text. Chittick does his best to avoid these problems, and while readers will have disagreements about the precise rendering of particular passages, there is no doubt but that he has presented us here with an excellent translation of part of this vitally significant text. He has also identified, as Ibn al-'Arabī of course does not, the quranic passages and the *ahādith* which are used in the text, and has made extensive notes on the passages which he translates. The clarity of Chittick's text, both the translation and the commentary, is remarkable.

In his introduction Chittick reminds us that Ibn al-'Arabī should not be seen as an ordinary philosopher presenting theses and arguments but as someone who felt himself to be on a personal and spiritual mission. There are dangers, he suggests, in trying to get to the point which Ibn al-'Arabī is trying to make, since 'Ibn al-'Arabī has no specific point to which he wants to get. He is simply flowing along with the infinitely diverse self-disclosures of

God, and he is suggesting to us that we leave aside our artificialities and recognize that we are flowing along with him' (p. xi). Hence, presumably, the title of the book. But throughout the book Chittick quite rightly leaves this claim on one side by explaining precisely what Ibn al-'Arabī's point is, how it is connected with an earlier point and what role it plays in his cosmology. The whole notion of a cosmology, the theme of the book, is based on the idea of a rational organization of reality, rational in the sense that it is directed in some way and has a reason for its structure. It is certainly true that it is not enough, according to Ibn al-'Arabī, to understand intellectually the point he is trying to make and that one often needs to experience reality in the right sort of way to understand properly what is going on, yet we need, and we do get, argument from him that leads us to this point. It is fortunate that Chittick ignores his own theory since he proceeds to show how Ibn al-'Arabī moves from one point to another throughout the text, analysing scriptural passages, Traditions and so on, in order to explore the meaning of the crucial terms and show how a deeper understanding of them permits us to engage in a more significant way with the nature of reality. It is certainly the case that Ibn al-'Arabī is not just a philosopher, but he is indeed a philosopher along with the other roles he seeks to adopt, and much of his text is replete with analysis of a very high order. There is nothing irretrievably mysterious about his theory, and despite his view that Ibn al-'Arabī is just trying to flow with reality, Chittick explains how he is to be examined and understood in a predominantly rational manner.

Chittick makes some interesting remarks in his discussion of how to translate some of the key Arabic terms. He is no longer satisfied with the rather abstract English terms he selected in his past translations of Ibn al-'Arabī, and now prefers more concrete equivalents, trying in this way to replicate more accurately the balance between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, between our distance and our nearness with respect to God. This is after all a constant theme in the cosmology of Ibn al-'Arabī himself, as is the notion of the *barzakh* or bridge which attempts

to mediate between the dialectical aspects of reality. A more concrete terminology does bring out nicely Ibn al-'Arabi's intention to be more than just a philosopher and to appeal to more than the intellect of his readers. A language which eschews abstraction insofar as this is possible also replicates to a degree the style of the Quran itself, the text which is so often the subject of the *Futūhāt*. It is worth pointing out that like all major thinkers, Ibn al-'Arabi not only used language but also changed it to make it more appropriate to explaining how his readers should change their view of the nature of reality.

The problem with translating a thinker like Ibn al-'Arabi lies not only in the difficulty of his arguments and the poetic nature of his language but also in the fact that he has not up to now been translated sufficiently often for a tradition of translation to have developed. To a certain extent Chittick is creating such a tradition by going back to his previous translations and reflecting on whether he has produced the right expressions for the key terms. It is this thoughtful and genuinely critical ethos which runs throughout the book and makes it so impressive.

For anyone who is interested in Ibn al-'Arabi this book will be indispensable. For anyone not interested in him, a reading of this book may induce a change of mind. It takes the exegesis of this key Islamic thinker to new heights.

OLIVER LEAMAN

PAUL B. FENTON: *Philosophie et exégèse dans Le jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn 'Ezra, philosophe et poète andalou du XII^e siècle*. (Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, Tome XIX.) xv, 459 pp. Leiden, New York and Cologne: E. J. Brill, 1997. Guilders 264.50, \$165.50.

The main topic of this outstanding book is a detailed analysis of Ibn Ezra's *Maqālat al-ḥadiqa fī ma'nā'l-majāz wa'l-ḥaqīqa*, his *Treatise on the Garden of metaphor and true meaning*. Moses Ibn Ezra lived during what has come to be known as the 'Golden Age' of Spain but his life, like that of many of the inhabitants of that age, was marked by political and personal insecurity. He spent much of it in exile from his beloved Granada (where he was born around 1055), the repository of the Jewish cultural world which he so admired and to which he made such a large contribution. He died in Christian Spain in either 1135 or 1138, feeling himself very much in exile.

Moses Ibn Ezra is chiefly known as a poet, and he was obviously part of a cultural community which was interested not only in creating poetry but also understanding how it was to be constructed and what forms might be borrowed from other languages, in particular, Arabic. From what we know of contemporary discussions, the question of the relevance of Hebrew *vis-à-vis* Arabic as a language of both philosophy and poetry was much debated,

and in his poetry Ibn Ezra sought to show how Hebrew had the conceptual depth to represent Arabic poetic forms perfectly. One assumes that a motive behind this exercise was to rebut the frequent claims of Muslims that Arabic was a superior language, indeed, the very best language of all; and Jews within the Islamic intellectual world wanted to demonstrate that the intellectual strengths of Islamic poetry and philosophy could be incorporated into Jewish culture without replacing it. As a poet Ibn Ezra constantly uses metaphor, of course, and as a reader of Jewish texts he would have frequently had to ask himself whether a point was being expressed metaphorically or simply.

There are two main parts to the text, the first being largely philosophical and concerned with the orthodox Neoplatonic curriculum of topics, namely, the unity of God, the nature of movement, nature, the different intellects and the distinction between religious and rational laws. Fenton does a fine job of identifying many of the authors and texts which Ibn Ezra uses in this part, and the influence which it had on later Jewish philosophy. It is certainly true that there is nothing particularly novel about the arguments which Ibn Ezra produces, but it is interesting to see how a poet presents philosophical arguments in prose. One somehow expects a more poetic or aesthetic representation of ideas, yet the result here is quite the reverse—it is almost as though Ibn Ezra feels himself to be constrained by a prose context which sets constant limits on what he can say.

It is in the longer, exegetical part of the text that he really lets himself go, as it were, since this deals largely with lexicographical and rhetorical issues which one assumes were closer to his heart than philosophical theory. He follows up the idea of humanity representing in microcosm the macrocosm of the universe, and develops arguments for linking particular aspects of human physiognomy to larger theoretical issues about how to interpret and understand the deeper meaning of such terms for physical objects.

Both Islam and Judaism, of course, possess highly complex theories of metaphor and the related set of concepts which explain how a term may be used in a variety of different contexts. In religion this issue is of far more than just literary significance since it touches very closely on the meaning of the religious texts themselves, and Ibn Ezra was part of a Jewish cultural movement which sought to demonstrate in Arabic that the conceptual machinery of Arabic was at least equalled by the language of the Hebrew Bible.

Fenton describes this part of the book as humanist, and in a sense it is, since it interprets the Bible through the language in which it is written, as though it were just a text, and applies to that text lexicographical, philological, philosophical, exegetical and aesthetic rules which seem to stem largely from profane literature. It is hardly surprising, perhaps, that this part, by contrast to the first philosophical section, did not receive much attention in the subsequent cultural world of the Jewish community. As before, Fenton identifies the definite and probable sources of Ibn Ezra's arguments,