



## DU'L-NŪN MEṢRĪ, ABU'L-FAYẒ ṬAWBĀN

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**DU'L-NŪN MEṢRĪ**, ABU'L-FAYẒ ṬAWBĀN b. Ebrāhīm (b. Akmīm in Upper Egypt, ca. 175/791, d. Jīza [Giza], between 245 and 248/859 and 862), early Sufi master. He lived mainly in Lower Egypt (Meṣr) and is known to have visited Mecca and possibly also Yemen, as well as traveling extensively in Palestine and Syria, becoming familiar with Syrian asceticism. During his active years he was opposed by two groups: the Mālekī jurists of Egypt, particularly 'Abd-Allāh b. 'Abd-al-Ḥakam (d. 214/829), who condemned him for public teaching about mystical experience, and the Mo'tazilites, whose persecution during the *meḥna* forced him to flee Egypt in 228/843 (van Ess, p. 100). He preached at the court of al-Motawakkel (232-47/847-61) in Samarra and visited Sufi circles in Baghdad on his way there; he may have been imprisoned in Baghdad for a short while, presumably for maintaining the "uncreatedness" of the Qur'ān, but was released on al-Motawakkel's orders and returned to Egypt.

Extant primary sources include traces of two strands of tradition on Du'l-Nūn. The Egyptian strand is reflected in *Ta'rik 'olamā' ahl Meṣr* by Ebn Ṭaḥḥān (d. 416/1025), who derived his sparse information from *A'yān al-mawālī al-meṣrīyīn* by Abū 'Omar Kendī (d. 360/971; GAS I, p. 358). References by Abū Bakr b. Moḥammad Mālekī (d. 356/967; p. 223) to the Mālekī ascetic Abū 'Alī Ṣaquerān b. 'Alī of Qayrawān (d. 186/802?) as a teacher of Du'l-Nūn, repeated by Abū Zayd Dabbāg (d. 696/1296; I, p. 209, with reference to Solamī's lost *Ta'rik al-ṣūfiya*), raise chronological and geographical difficulties. Du'l-Nūn's



transmissions of prophetic Hadith, which he received through intermediaries on the authority of Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), Layṭ b. Sa'd (d. 175/791), and Sofyān b. 'Oyayna (d. 198/814) appear historically plausible, however. Accounts of his ability to read hieroglyphs (Mas'ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, I, p. 307; Abū No'aym, IX, pp. 339, 367), though untenable, may function as a topos expressing his links with an Egyptian Hellenistic wisdom tradition.

Large segments of the Syrian and Iraqi tradition were preserved by Abū No'aym Eşfahānī (d. 430/1038; IX, pp. 331-95, X, pp. 3-4), Ebn Kāmīs Mawşelī (d. 522/1157; fols. 17a-34a), and Ebn 'Asāker (d. 571/1176; facs. ed., VI, pp. 147-71; ed. Badrān, V, pp. 271-88; cf. Ebn Manzūr, VIII, pp. 246-54). In addition, many of Du'l-Nūn's sayings are scattered throughout the works of Abū Naşr Sarrāj, Abū 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Solamī, Abu'l-Qāsem Qoşayrī, K'āja 'Abd-Allāh Anşārī, and Ebn al-Jawzī; Farīd-al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār collected and embellished many anecdotes about him (I, pp. 114-34). In two later hagiographies of Du'l-Nūn, by Ebn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) and Jalāl-al-Dīn Soyūṭī (d. 911/1505), selected anecdotes and sayings are accompanied by extensive glosses. Conjectures that Fāṭema of Nīşāpūr (d. 223/838) was Du'l-Nūn's spiritual master at Mecca, derived from incidental references in these sources (Deladrière, pp. 21-22), have a weak historical basis. More reliable is information on the transmitters of Du'l-Nūn's sayings, among whom Sa'īd b. 'Oṭmān (d. 294/906-07) and Yūsof b. Ḥosayn Razī (d. 304/916-17) were the most important. Claims of a master-disciple relationship between Du'l-Nūn and Sahl Tostarī (d. 283/896) are tenuous (cf. Böwering, pp. 50-55) and his purported role as redactor of Ja'far al-Şādeq's commentary on the Qur'ān (Massignon, p. 206) unsubstantiated.

It is impossible to be certain whether or not Du'l-Nūn studied medicine, alchemy, and magic, though he is cited as the author of alchemical writings from the 9th century onward (GAS, I, pp. 643-44, IV, p. 273; Ullmann, pp. 196-97; cf. Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, p. 423). Du'l-Nūn combined knowledge of Islamic tradition with profound mystical experience; his most influential contributions to Sufism remain his teachings on ecstasy (*wajd*) and gnosis (*ma'refa*) and his description of the soul's journey to God along a path of stages (*maqāmāt*) and states (*aḥwal*), frequently called the "seven steps" of the Sufi path. He defined gnostics (*ārefūn*) as those who exist in God and contemplate His face within their hearts, so that He reveals Himself to them in a way not accorded to others. It appears that Du'l-Nūn's notion of *ma'refa* reflected his own experience of the inner knowledge of God, rather than simply a Hellenistic theory of gnosis. Persian mystics, however, tended to view him as a



Muslim exponent of Hellenistic tradition. Yaḥyā Soḥravardī (d. 587/1191) dubbed the wisdom tradition of the ancient sages “the pre-eternal leaven” (*al-kaṃīra al-azalīya*) and considered his own philosophy of illumination (*ešrāq*) as having arisen from the confluence of the two principal strands of this wisdom tradition, the Greek (transmitted through Hermes) and the Persian (transmitted through Kaykōsrow). For Soḥravardī Ḍu’l-Nūn and Tostarī were transmitters of the Greek strand, Muslim mystics who handed the Neoplatonic and Neopythagorean wisdom tradition on to Sufi philosophical circles (Böwering, p. 52).

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