



## EBN RĀVANDĪ, ABU'L-ḤOSAYN AḤMAD

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**EBN RĀVANDĪ** (or Rēvandī), ABU'L-ḤOSAYN AḤMAD b. Yaḥyā (d. 298/910?), Mu'tazilite theologian and "heretic" of Korāsānī origin. While still young, he went to Baghdad, where he had relatives. Apparently, he was already an accomplished theologian by then, for in the capital he studied not *kalām* but grammar. He attended the courses of the philologist Abu'l-'Abbās Moḥammad Mobarrad (d. 286/900) and transmitted his *Ketāb al-moqtaḏab* (A'sam, 1975, p. 181; 1978-79, pp. 464, 468). He joined the ascetic wing of the Mu'tazilites, the circle around Īsā b. Hayṭam Ṣūfī and Abū Ḥafṣ Ḥaddād (Ḳayyāṭ, p. 73). This may have brought him into conflict with Jāḥeẓ, who represented "bourgeois" Mu'tazilism and did not share the Sufi critique of the government. Besides, Ebn Rāvandī was a Shi'ite whereas Jāḥeẓ followed al-Motawakkel's new policy and attacked the Rāfeẓa (lit. "dissenters, the unorthodox," particularly applied to the Shi'ites). Jāḥeẓ had written a book called *Fazīlat al-Mo'tazela*, where, among other topics, he turned against Hešām b. Ḥakam, a Shi'ite theologian of the previous century, who had a reputation for being especially anti-Sunnite (cf. the text in van Ess, *Theologie* V, pp. 37 ff., tr. pp. 54-60). Ebn Rāvandī, who had written on Hešām b. Ḥakam's doctrine, attacked Jāḥeẓ in a book called *Fazīḥat al-Mo'tazela*, listing points on which the most famous Mu'tazilites had deviated from orthodoxy. The reaction came not from the elderly Jāḥeẓ but from the younger generation. Abu'l-Ḥosayn Ḳayyāṭ in Baghdad wrote his well-known *Ketāb al-entešār*, and Jobbā'ī in Baṣra (or 'Askar Mokram), who may never have met Ebn Rāvandī, circulated the story that he had died in the



house of a Jew named Ben Levi while hiding from the police (A'sam, 1975, pp. 158-59). This story spread rapidly in several contradictory versions. Even Kayyāṭ in his *Ketāb al-enteṣār* (around 269/882-83) assumed that Ebn Rāvandī had already died. In reality, he seems to have secretly returned to Persia, where he lived for several decades. He retained a high reputation with Eastern theologians (a fact that indicates a later date of death) not only with Mu'tazilites such as Abu'l-Qāsem Ka'bī, but also with Moḥammad Mātorīdī, Abu'l-Yosr Pazdavī, and the Karrāmīya (Ḥākem Jošamī, p. 134).

Ebn Rāvandī was a prolific writer; Ebn al-Nadīm (ed. Tajaddod, pp. 216-17) credits him with more than fifty titles, and Mas'ūdī says that he wrote 114 books (*Morūj*, ed. Pellat, V, p. 23). Šāḥeb b. 'Abbād had his books in his library at Ray (A'sam, 1975, p. 81). His Mu'tazilism tinged with Morje'ism suited the Hanafite milieu of eastern Persia. He wrote a *Radd 'ala'l-Mo'tazela fi'l-wa'īd wa'l-manzela bayna'l-manzalatayn*, for he held that Muslims remained believers in spite of mortal sin and would not be punished eternally in hell. He equated belief (*īmān*) with assent (*taṣdīq*), thus defining it on a purely intellectual level without reference to works. Like several earlier Morje'ite theologians, he held that the Koranic verses mentioning eternal punishment referred only to unbelievers, finding in this context new criteria to distinguish universal and individual statement (Aš'arī, *Maqālāt*, p. 445). He was interested in epistemological questions and seems to have been the first theologian to write about the art of disputation (*adab al-jadal*; cf. van Ess, 1980). In Iraq, however, he was quickly branded a heretic. This was not due to his attack on the Mu'tazilites, soon to be "unorthodox" themselves, but to a series of dialectical exercises demonstrating that doctrines such as creation in time, prophecy, the inimitability of the Qur'ān, and the justice and retribution of God could not be proven with certainty. Such thought experiments were popular among the Mu'tazilite Sufis of Baghdad, who cultivated a certain anti-intellectualism and who had reservations about the theologians and jurists who defined the Prophet mainly as a "man of this world." In this Ebn Rāvandī followed the controversial free-thinker Abū 'Isā Warrāq, whose views he also tried to refute. Later he refuted even his own writings in order to show their playful and hypothetical character (Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, p. 217). This side of the affair was largely overlooked in Iraq; only Persian writers such as Mātorīdī in his *Ketāb al-tawḥīd* or Shi'ites like Šarīf Mortazā (p. 13) still knew, and did not conceal, Ebn Rāvandī's original intention. The books he had produced in this spirit (*Ketāb al-tāj*, *Ketāb qaṣīb al-dahab*, *Ketāb al-dāmeḡ*, *Ketāb al-zomorrod*, *Ketāb al-marjān*, *Ketāb al-lo'lo'a*, and *Ketāb al-farīd*) were



called the *kotob mal'ūna* (the accursed books) and led Ebn al-Jawzī to class him with Abu'l 'Alā' Ma'arrī and Abū Ḥayyān Tawḥīdī as the archenemies of Islam (A'sam, 1975, pp. 167, 170). In reality, he marks the crisis of Mu'tazilite dialects before its final turn to scholasticism; numerous refutations of the *kotob mal'ūna* prove the shock he had caused (cf. van Ess, *Theologie* VI, chap. XXXV b)

Ebn Rāvandī's personality is still a matter of discussion. The evaluation given in the Sunnite sources has been taken up by P. Kraus, H. S. Nyberg (pp. 133 ff.), F. Gabrieli (pp. 33 ff.), M. Plessner (pp. 8 ff.), and G. Vajda, and recently by J. L. Kramer (pp. 167ff.) as well as by S. Strouma. The diverging interpretation given above tries to take into account the East Persian theological texts not yet known, especially Mātorīdī's *Ketāb al tawḥīd*.

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(For a thorough discussion of *Ketāb al-zommorod*, see S. Stroumsa, "The Blinding Emerald: Ibn Rāvandī's *Ketāb al-Zomurrud*," *JAOS* 114/2, 1994, pp. 163-85).

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