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JOHN PHILIPONUS, YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ
AND TRITHEISM

BY
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The title of the paper I have the honour to present may sound strange. As a matter of fact, you are certainly aware that John PHILOPONUS, the eminent representative of Aristotelianism¹ finished his days (he died after 570 A.D.) as a champion of the tritheist theory, that is the view, that the Christian faith has to acknowledge the existence of three Gods - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One may put it into the words of Professor Henry CHADWICK, a CAMBRIDGE authority: "... that divine nature is a nature which has existence only as found in the concrete realities of Father, Son and Holy Spirit"².

On the other side, the first to connect YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI with tritheism, was, as far as I know, Harry Austryn WOLFSON, the late HARVARD historian of philosophy, and especially of Kalām³: In one of those short theological treatises, which have been published by Augustin PÉRIER in 1920, YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI defends the Trinitarian formula, that God "is one substance, three propria, called hypostases", as he puts it⁴. His opponents are not only Muslims - and maybe Jews, too - but also some ignorant Christians (*Ġuhhāl al-Naṣārā*), as he calls them⁵. These Christian hold the view that the concept of Trinity implies the existence of three Gods or substances⁶.

Of course, YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI disproves this thesis, and this is not the point I want to make. Nor I wish to answer the question if he really knew about tritheism as represented by John PHILOPONUS or by others. The theses I would like to submit are more general ones:

- 1) John PHILOPONUS and YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI share a common philosophical and especially logical background.
- 2) For the interpretation of the Trinitarian formula they adopt different positions.

1) Richard SORABJI (Ed.) *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (London, Duckworth, 1987).

2) Henry CHADWICK, "Philoponus the Christian Theologian", in Richard SORABJI (Ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (London, Duckworth, 1987) 54.

3) Harry Austryn WOLFSON, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass./London, Harvard University Press, 1979) 13-14.

4) YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI, "Maqāla fi Tabyīn ... al-qawl fi al-Bāri' innahū ḡawhar wāḥid dū ṭalāt ḡawāṣṣ tusammihā l-Naṣārā aqānim", in PÉRIER, *Petits traités apologetiques de Yahya ben Adi*, Paris, 1920, pp. 44-62.

5) PÉRIER, p. 45: 3.

6) PÉRIER, p. 45: 3-7.

3) Therefore, in order to escape tritheism, YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI has to hold divergent views on other philosophical issues.

4) As a whole, this discussion about the Trinity can also be understood as a discussion about fundamental problems of philosophy.

A. THE COMMON PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Let us begin with this common philosophical baggage, and therefore let us begin with Christology.

John PHILOPONUS and YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI share the view that the word “Nature” can be applied only to primary substances (*prôtai ousiai*), that is, roughly speaking, to individuals. John PHILOPONUS is quite clear on this point, as he declares on many occasions, that there is no difference between the expressions “Substance”, “Nature” and “Person”⁷. Here, my argumentation is a little bit weak, as I didn’t find any such equation YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI. But I think that he holds this view, too, and I will argue later, why he did so presumably. Anyhow, we can read on many occasions his theory, that God is only one substance⁸. You may understand this common doctrine more clearly, if you compare it with an other understanding of the word “nature”, for which I cite as a classical example BÆTHIUS, the author of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. For BÆTHIUS “nature” is that which gives form to each thing⁹, and accordingly, there is always a set of individuals which share a common “nature”¹⁰. It is clear that BÆTHIUS can adopt consequently a kind of class-logic, that is he operates with the assumption that there are general predicates, or universals, a view we find in Porphyry, too.

The difference between the two ways of thinking has far-reaching consequences, which I may clarify by using expressions of modern philosophy:

7) Cf. the instances collected by Theodor HERMANN, “Johannes Philoponus als Monophysit”, in *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 29 (1930) 214-218.

8) Cf. the little treatise mentioned above, note 4, and “Maqāla fī šihḥat iʿtiqād al-Našārā fī l-Bāri’ annahū ḡawhar wāḥid dī ṭalāṭ šifāt”, in PÉRIER, pp. 11-23.

9) BÆTHIUS, “Contra Eutychem et Nestorium”, see BÆTHIUS, *Die theologischen Traktate*, ed. Michael ELSÄSSER (Hamburg, Meiner, 1988), V. 57-58: *Natura est unam quamque rem informans specifica differentia* (cf. ARISTOTELES, *Phys.* 192 a, 30-31).

10) BÆTHIUS, *ibidem*, III. 4-5: “... personae est definitio: naturae rationabilis individua substantia”; cf. Henry CHADWICK, *Bæthius* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1981) 193.

John PHILOPONUS and YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI have as a common principle, that there are only individuals with their proper “substance” or “nature”. On the other side, BÆTHIUS acknowledges the existence of sets or classes of individuals, which are defined and which exist according to a common nature. I think, that this opposing understanding of the term “nature” in its philosophical setting is one of the keys for the Christological debate.

B. JOHN PHILOPONUS’ UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRINITY

Let us now consider the consequences of these views for the discussion about the Trinity.

As for John PHILOPONUS, he is rather consistent - that means that the fact that he ended up with tritheism was a logical result of the positions he had adopted previously. Although there are only a few Syriac fragments preserved from this tritheist period, now easily available thanks to Professor VAN ROEY¹¹, his position is quite clear: as there are only individuals which have a nature - or modern speaking, which exist naturally - all other kinds of things, p. ex., universals, exist only through our mental activities¹². Consequently, he simply applies this principle to the trinitarian dogma and finds that God’s unity is an abstraction of ours from the three concrete divine realities. The merit of this position is at least that it stresses - rightly as I think - that the concept of Trinity presupposes a mental activity from our side.

C. YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ AND NOMINALISM

As I have assumed previously, YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI shares the position of John PHILOPONUS, which traditionally we are used to call nominalism. Why? The answer is that he tries to modify this nominalism in such a way that allows him to escape tritheism. But, on the other side, these modifications only make sense if we assume that his starting point was some kind of nominalism. YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ operates on three levels, which are of course connected somehow:

11) Albert VAN ROEY, “Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon”, in *Orientalia Lovanensia Periodica* 11 (1980) 135-163.

12) Cf. *ibidem*, p. 148 (text), p. 158 (translation).

1. The first level is easily discernible in the treatise I mentioned previously¹³ and is often to be found in other texts, too. His main point is, as you may know, that one can speak of one thing or one person in more than one way. To cite his example: ZAYD, p. ex., may be the father of ʿAMR and he may be a doctor. But these different ways of speaking do not prevent that he is one person. So we can not conclude that God is a multitude of persons, if we speak of him in different ways.

The problem, YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ tackles, is a classical one, located p. ex. in PLATO's Parmenides. It is too, a crucial point in modern philosophy of language. I may cite the famous example of the morning star and the evening star: Both expressions refer to the same entity, that is the planet VENUS, but it is a least doubtful, if they can be used in exactly the same contexts. They have the same denotation, but different connotations.

2. The second level, on which YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ operates, is less easier to detect, but it is of main importance: He is certainly aware that he too, has to treat the problem of the universals and effectively we have a short treatise on the existence of the universals preserved twice in the Tehrān collections¹⁴.

YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ clearly formulates his initial dilemma: How to apply general predicates which are only in the soul, as he says, to individuals which are bound to matter? He recognizes that universals have their existence only in the human mind, but he doesn't conclude that they are pure nonsense. The way, he proceeds to find a solution is another one: As universals have no natural being (*wuġūd ṭabīʿī*), they nevertheless have a logical being (*wuġūd mantiqī*). This logical being, a kind of its own, comprises the operations of our mind. We may put it, too, in terms of modern philosophy; YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ points out that the universals without having a basis in reality, have nevertheless a constructive and regulative function. This is exactly what we call today conceptualism, a theory which is to be found in many varieties - to begin with WILLIAM OF OCKHAM.

13) YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ, "Maqāla fi Tabyīn ... al-qawl fi al-Bāri' innahū ġawhar waḥid dhū thalāth khawāṣṣ tusammihā l-Naṣārā aqānim", in PÉRIER, p. 48, 8ff.

14) YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ, "Maqāla fi Tabyīn wuġūd al-umūr al-ʿammiyya wa-l-naḥw alladī takūn maḥmūla wa-l-naḥw alladī taḥruġ bihi min an takūn maḥmūla", in Saḥbān HALIFĀT (Ed.), *Maqālāt Yahyā Ibn ʿAdī al-falsafīyya* (ʿAmmān, al-Ġāmiʿa al-urduniyya, 1988) 148-159.

3. The third level, on which YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI argues, is his epistemology, that is his position that universals are even necessary. His point is, that all kinds of science and of knowledge are possible only through universals - in this sense he cites the Posterior Analytics¹⁵. Universals, therefore, have to be assumed or to be constructed, if we wish to reach real science.

D. CONCLUSION

I may sum up: John PHILOPONUS and YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI have a common philosophical background, namely that universals have no natural existence. John PHILOPONUS has concluded from this, that the trinitarian God has his existence only through our mind and that there are, consequently, three Gods. My hypothesis is, that YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI had to deal with the same problem, but that he argued differently. He did so in virtue of three philosophical principles:

1. Things can be spoken about in different ways - they will nevertheless always be the same things.
2. Universals have no natural being, but a being of their own - called logical being.
3. Universals are necessary for the search of truth, the most noble human activity.

Obviously, there is only a small hint that YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADI wanted to refute tritheism. But we can detect that he tried to argue against some premises of tritheism. As tritheism is a philosophical theory, he did so on philosophical grounds - in this sense the discussion about the Trinity is also a discussion about basic philosophical issues.

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15) *Ibidem*, p. 156, 3-7. Cf. Carl EHRIG-EGGERT, *Die Abhandlung über den Nachweis der Natur des Möglichen von Yaḥyā b. ʿAdī (gest. A.D. 974 A.D.)* (Frankfurt, Institut für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften, 1990) 83-86.