

SARAH STROUMSA, *ANDALUS AND SEFARAD: ON PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORY IN ISLAMIC SPAIN*, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, PRINCETON–OXFORD 2019 (JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS FROM THE ANCIENT TO THE MODERN WORLD, 3), XXI + 220 PP., ISBN: 9780691176437.

GODEFROID DE CALLATAÏ
UCLouvain



The subject of this book is not new, as her author readily admits (p. 189: « the story that I have presented here has been told many times »), but its interest lies in its revolutionary approach, combined with the exceptional expertise of Sarah Stroumsa. Indeed, if works, more or less well informed, on the history of philosophical thought in al-Andalus exist today in profusion, it is infinitely rarer to have in one's hands a study in which the cultural components of this history are not investigated side by side but in an integrated manner. Thus, contrary to the usual treatment of discussing in separate chapters the Muslim, Jewish and Christian contributions – the famous 'España de las Tres Culturas,' according to the time-honoured and somewhat overused formula –, such artificial separations are nowhere to be found here. Referring in her introduction to an article she previously wrote in the same field, Stroumsa makes her point as follows:

What we call Islamicate philosophy was created and developed by Muslims, Jews, and Christians. The flow of ideas between these communities was never unilateral or linear, but rather dialectical and interactive. It created what I have proposed to call 'a whirlpool effect', where, when an idea falls, like a drop of coloured liquid, into the turbulence, it eventually colours the whole body of water, changing its own colour in the process. To fully understand the development of philosophy among Muslims, therefore, one must also study its development among Jews and Christians (...). Furthermore, to the extent that Muslim, Jewish, and Christian medieval philosophies were forged in the same historical context, they must be studied together, like the interlaced warp and weft of a single, multicoloured fabric, woven on a single loom. (p. 11–12)

The title *Andalus and Sefarad* given to this essay reflects both its focus and its main objective. Assuming with right that in terms of cultural development the contribution of the Christians was, if we except the medical art, considerably less important than that of the other two communities of the Iberian Peninsula,

Stroumsa reserves most of her attention to the role played by the Jews from the tenth to the twelfth century. She also contends that, far from being a mere appendix to the intellectual history of the Andalusī Muslims, those Jewish thinkers, whether poets, philosophers, theologians, or scientists, actively participated in this history and proved to be instrumental in a more original and to a much greater extent than has ordinarily be assumed thus far.

Preceded by an introduction that usefully sets the tone and contextualizes the discussion, and in so doing challenges certain preconceived notions such as *convivencia*, five chapters make up this resolutely decompartmentalized survey which in no way claims to be an exhaustive treatment of the history of philosophy in al-Andalus. Chapter 1 (« Beginnings ») is concerned with the tenth century and the emergence of philosophy and rational thinking within the Peninsula, stemming from the East. Discussing there the works of Ibn Masarra, whose controversial but influential figure paved the way for much of this development, Stroumsa observes various reminiscences from the *Sefer Yešira* (the Book of Creation), suggesting that the Jewish compound was present from the very beginning of philosophy in al-Andalus. Reminding us that philosophy in medieval Islam never was detached from theology and law and that the scholars' affiliations were usually better defined to these theological schools than to the philosophical ones, Chapter 2 (« Theological and Legal Schools ») is essentially concerned with what the author calls « the phantom of Andalusian Mu'tazila » (p. 73). Contrary to what many modern scholars have assumed, Stroumsa argues that there never was such thing as a fully-developed Mu'tazilī school on the Iberian soil. Rather, she shows that « the Karaite community of al-Andalus provides a definite link that can explain the introduction of a substantial body of Mu'tazilite books and ideas to al-Andalus, which became present not just as floating notions or anxious rumours but as full-fledged works containing coherent teachings » (p. 76). Chapter 3 (« Intellectual Elites ») brings us back to philosophy, showing through the examples of Averroes, Maimonides, and others how similar were the philosophers' intellectual backgrounds, models, concerns and aspirations, regardless of whether they were Muslims or Jews, sometimes leading to genuine friendships such as that of Ibn Bājja and the Jewish physician Abū Ja'far Yūsuf Ibn Ḥasdāy. Chapter 4 (« Neoplatonist Inroads ») retraces the development and survival of Neoplatonism across the Peninsula. Incorporated through the introduction to al-Andalus of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, the *Nabatean Agriculture*, the Jābirian corpus and other syncretic works permeated with Ismā'īlī compounds, Neoplatonism appears at first to be vigorously endorsed by 'bāṭinī' thinkers such as Ibn Masarra or Maslama Ibn Qāsim al-Qurtubī, the author of the *Rutbat al-ḥakīm* and the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*. Later on, due to the threat posed by the competing Fāṭimids to the Sunnī central power al-Andalus, and to the resulting fear of persecution for those within the Peninsula overtly adopting Ismā'īlī-inspired ideas, we see this Neoplatonism

keeping a low profile for various generations only to re-emerge later, and in more diffused manner, with someone like Ibn Ṭufayl. But this is only part of the story. The flame of Neoplatonism continued to be kept alive in al-Andalus by a constellation of Jewish scholars – let us limit here to recall the names of Ibn Gabirol, Moses Ibn Ezra, and Judah Halevi, but there were countless others – who were not targeted by the same anathemas as their Muslim companions. In the history of this ‘two-pronged philosophical trajectory’ that Stroumsa narrates, an emblematic case is the eleventh/twelfth Muslim philosopher al-Baṭalyawsī, whose *Kitāb al-dawā’ir* is known in at least five medieval translations into Hebrew, whereas it remained mostly ignored among Muslims. Chapter 5 (« Aristotelian Neo-Orthodoxy and Andalusian Revolts ») is equally of a great value. It shows how the philosophical map of al-Andalus was extensively redrawn and how « largely in response to Platonizing authors (especially Avicenna) as well as to the challenges presented by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Andalusian *falāsifa* explicitly identified with the Peripatetic tradition, and strove to strengthen the authority of Aristotle and his commentators » (p. 124). Stroumsa shows that, if the names of the major Andalusī philosophers of the twelfth century – Ibn Ṭufayl, Averroes, and Maimonides – are indeed inextricably linked to the Almohads, it would be wrong to regard the Almohad state as a carefully and strategically planned philosophical regime and even more erroneous to view the above scholars as the philosophical arm of this regime:

Both Ibn Ṭufayl and Averroes were recruited to serve the Almohads, but their thought – whether Neoplatonic or Aristotelian in character – did not replace the Almohads’ mostly Ash‘arite doctrine. Moreover, both of them disagreed with the Almohad on fundamental points of dogma. As for Maimonides, as a (crypto-)Jew, he was of course not part of the Almohad administration, and escaped from their territory in 1165, apparently as soon as had the opportunity to do so. (p. 146–147).

With her relentless erudition (perceptible throughout in an impressive array of notes and as well as in a list of bibliographical references that occupy more than forty pages), her gift for lucid exposition of rich and often complex material, and her talent for offering new research perspectives, Sarah Stroumsa has definitely succeeded to write an essay which will remain for decades as a major contribution to the history of medieval philosophy.