The History of Philosophy in Islam

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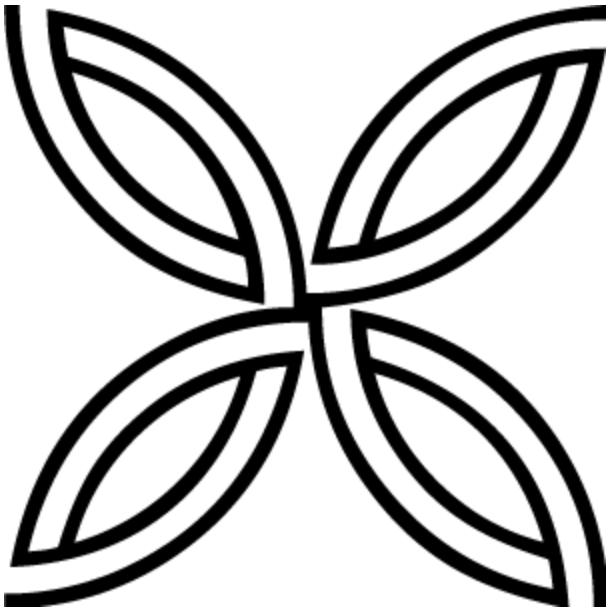

PREFACE.

The following is the first attempt which has been made, since the appearance of Munk's excellent sketch , to present in connected form a History of Philosophy in Islam. This work of mine may therefore be regarded as a fresh initiation,—not a completion of such a task. I could not know of all that had been done by others, in the way of preliminary study in this field; and when I did know of the existence of such material, it was not always accessible to me. As for manuscript assistance, it was only in exceptional cases that this was at my disposal.

Conforming to the conditions which I had to meet, I have in the following account refrained from stating my authorities. But anything which I may have taken over, nearly word for word or without testing it, I have marked in foot-references. For the rest, I deeply regret that I cannot duly indicate at present how much I owe, as regards appreciation of the sources, to men like Dieterici, de Goeje, Goldziher, Houtsma, Aug. Müller, Munk, Nöldeke, Renan, Snouck Hurgronje, van Vloten, and many, many others.

Since the completion of this volume an interesting monograph on Ibn Sina has appeared, which farther extends [VIII] its survey over the earlier history of Philosophy in Islam. It gives rise to no occasion, however, to alter substantially my conception of the subject.

For all bibliographical details I refer the reader to "die Orientalische Bibliographie", Brockelmann's "Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur", and Ueberweg—Heinze's "Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie" II 3 , p. 213 *sqq.* In the transcription of Arabic names I have been more heedful of tradition and German pronunciation, than of consistency. Be it noted only that *z* is to be pronounced as a soft *s* , and *th* like the corresponding English sound . In the

Index of Personal Names, accents signify length.
As far as possible I have confined myself to Islam. On that ground Ibn Gebirol and Maimonides have received only a passing notice, while other Jewish thinkers have been entirely omitted, although, philosophically considered, they belong to the Muslim school. This, however, entails no great loss, for much has been written already about the Jewish philosophers, whereas Muslim thinkers have hitherto been sadly neglected.
Groningen (Netherlands).
T. J. de Boer. [IX]

1 S. Munk, “ *Mélanges de Philosophie juive et arabe* ”, Paris 1859. ↑
2 Carra de Vaux, “ *Avicenne* ”, Paris 1900. ↑
3 [*Translator’s Note* : In this version the transliteration has been adapted as far as possible to English sounds.] ↑

I. INTRODUCTION.

1. The Theatre.

1. In olden time the Arabian desert was, as it is at this day, the roaming-ground of independent Bedouin tribes. With free and healthy minds they contemplated their monotonous world, whose highest charm was the raid, and whose intellectual treasure was the tribal tradition. Neither the achievements of social labour, nor the accomplishments of elegant leisure were known to them. Only on the borders of the desert, in regularly constituted communities, which often had to suffer from the incursions of those Bedouins, a higher degree of civilization had been attained. This was the case in the South, where the ancient kingdom of the Queen of Sheba continued its existence in Christian times under Abyssinian or Persian overlordship. On the West lay Mecca and Medina (Yathrib), by an old caravan route; and Mecca in particular, with its market safe-guarded by a temple, was the centre of a brisk traffic. Lastly on the North, two semi-sovereign States had been formed under Arab princes: towards Persia, the kingdom of the Lakhmids in Hira; and towards Byzantium the dominion of the Gassanids in Syria. In speech and poetry, however, the unity of the Arab nation was set forth to some extent [2] even before Mohammed’s time. The poets were the ‘men of knowledge’ for their people. Their incantations held good as oracles, first of all for their several tribes, but no doubt extending their influence often beyond their own particular septs.

2. Mohammed and his immediate successors, Abu Bekr, Omar, Othman and Ali (622–661) succeeded in inspiring the free sons of the desert, together with the more civilized inhabitants of the coast-lands, with enthusiasm for a joint

enterprise. To this circumstance Islam owes its world-position: for Allah showed himself great, and the world was quite small for those who surrendered themselves to him (Muslims). In a short time the whole of Persia was conquered, and the East-Roman empire lost its fairest provinces,—Syria and Egypt.

Medina was the seat of the first Caliphs or representatives of the prophet. Then Mohammed's brave son-in-law Ali, and Ali's sons, fell before Moawiya, the able governor of Syria. From that time dates the existence of the party of Ali (Shi'ites), which in the course of diverse vicissitudes,—now reduced to subjection, now in detached places attaining power,—lives on in history, until it finally incorporates itself with the Persian kingdom in definite opposition to Sunnite Islam.

In their struggle against the secular power the Shi'ites availed themselves of every possible weapon,—even of science. Very early there appears among them the sect of the Kaisanites, which ascribes to Ali and his heirs a superhuman secret lore, by the help of which the inner meaning of the Divine revelation first becomes clear, but which demands from its devotees not less faith in, and [3] absolute obedience to, the possessor of such knowledge, than does the letter of the Koran. (Cf. III, 2 § 1).

3. After the victory of Moawiya, who made Damascus the capital of the Muslim empire, the importance of Medina lay mainly in the spiritual province. It had to content itself with fostering, partly under Jewish and Christian influences, a knowledge of the Law and Tradition. In Damascus, on the other hand, the Omayyads (661–750) conducted the secular government. Under their rule the empire spread from the Atlantic to districts beyond the frontiers of India and Turkestan, and from the Indian Ocean to the Caucasus and the very walls of Constantinople. With this development, however, it had reached its farthest extension.

Arabs now assumed everywhere the leading position. They

formed a military aristocracy; and the most striking proof of their influence is the fact, that conquered nations with an old and superior civilization accepted the language of their conquerors. Arabic became the language of Church and State, of Poetry and Science. But while the higher offices in the State and the Army were administered by Arabs in preference, the care of the Arts and Sciences fell, first of all, to Non-Arabs and men of mixed blood. In Syria school-instruction was received from Christians. The chief seats of intellectual culture, however, were Basra and Kufa, in which Arabs and Persians, Muslims, Christians, Jews and Magians rubbed shoulders together. There, where trade and industry were thriving, the beginnings of secular science in Islam must be sought for,—beginnings themselves due to Hellenistic-Christian and Persian influences.

4. The Omayyads were succeeded by the Abbasids [4] (750–1258). To obtain the sovereignty, the latter had granted concessions to the Persians, and had utilized religio-political movements. During the first century of their rule (i.e. up to about 860), though only during that period, the greatness of the empire continued to increase, or at least it held its own. In the year 762, Mansur, the second ruler of this house, founded Bagdad as the new capital,—a city which soon outshone Damascus in worldly splendour, and Basra and Kufa in intellectual illumination. Constantinople alone could be compared to it. Poets and scholars, particularly from the North-Eastern provinces, met together in Bagdad at the court of Mansur (754–775), of Harun (786–809), of Mamun (813–833), and others. Several of the Abbasids had a liking for secular culture, whether for its own sake or to adorn their court, and although they may often have failed to recognize the value of artists and learned men, these at any rate could appreciate the material benefits conferred upon them by their patrons. From the time of Harun at least, there existed in Bagdad a

library and a learned institute. Even under Mansur, but especially under Mamun and his successors, translation of the scientific literature of the Greeks into the Arabic tongue went forward, largely through the agency of Syrians; and Abstracts and Commentaries bearing upon these works were also composed.

Just when this learned activity was at its highest, the glory of the empire began to decline. The old tribal feuds, which had never been at rest under the Omayyads, had seemingly given place to a firmly-knit political unity; but other controversies,—theological and metaphysical wranglings, such as in like manner accompanied the decay of [5] the East-Roman empire,—were prosecuted with ever-increasing bitterness. The service of the State, under an Eastern despotism, did not require men of brilliant parts. Promising abilities accordingly were often ruined in luxurious indulgence, or flung away upon sophistry and the show of learning. On the other hand, for the defence of the empire the Caliphs enlisted the sound and healthy vigour of nations who had not been so much softened by over-civilization,—first the Iranian or Iranianized people of Khorasan, and then the Turks.

5. The decline of the empire became more and more evident. The power of the Turkish soldiery, uprisings of city mobs and of peasant labourers, Shi‘ite and Ismaelite intrigues on all sides, and in addition the desire for independence shown by the distant provinces,—were either the causes or the symptoms of the downfall. Alongside of the Caliphs, who were reduced to the position of spiritual dignitaries, the Turks ruled as Mayors of the Palace; and all round, in the outlying regions of the empire, independent States were gradually formed, until an utterly astounding body of minor States appeared. The most influential ruling houses, more or less independent, were the following: in the West, to say nothing of the Spanish Omayyads (cf.

VI, 1

), the Aglabids of North-Africa, the Tulunids and Fatimids of Egypt, and the Hamdanids of Syria and Mesopotamia; in the East, the Tahirids and Samanids, who were by slow degrees supplanted by the Turks. It is at the courts of these petty dynasties that the poets and scholars of the next period (the 10 th and 11 th centuries) are to be found. For a short time Haleb (Aleppo), the seat of the Hamdanids, and for a longer [6] time Cairo, built by the Fatimids in the year 969,—have a better claim to be regarded as the home of intellectual endeavour than Bagdad itself. For another brief space lustre is shed on the East by the court of the Turk, Mahmud of Ghazna, who had become master of Khorasan in the year 999.

The founding of the Muslim Universities also falls within this period of petty States and Turkish administration. The first one was erected in Bagdad in the year 1065; and from that date the East has been in possession of Science, but only in the form of stereotyped republications. The teacher conveys the teaching which has been handed down to him by his teachers; and in any new book hardly a sentence will be found which does not appear in older books. Science was rescued from danger; but the learned men of Transoxiana, who, upon hearing of the establishment of the first Madrasah, appointed a solemn memorial service, as tradition tells, to be held in honour of departed science, have been shewn to be correct in their estimate.

1

Then,—in the 13 th century,—there came storming over the Eastern regions of Islam the resounding invasion of the Mongols, who swept away whatever the Turks had spared. No culture ever flourished there again, to develope from its own resources a new Art or to stimulate a revival of Science.

2. Oriental Wisdom.

1. Prior to its contact with Hellenism, the Semitic mind had

proceeded no farther in the path of Philosophy than the propounding of enigmas, and the utterance of aphoristic [7] wisdom. Detached observations of Nature, but especially of the life and fate of Man, form the basis of such thinking; and where comprehension ceases, resignation to the almighty and inscrutable will of God comes in without difficulty. We have become familiar with this kind of wisdom from the Old Testament; and that it was developed in like manner among the Arabs, is shewn to us by the Bible story of the Queen of Sheba, and by the figure of the wise Loqman in the Arab tradition.

By the side of this wisdom there was found everywhere the Magic of the sorcerer,—a knowledge which was authenticated by command over outward things. But it was only in the priestly circles of ancient Babylonia,—under what influences and to what extent we do not precisely know,—that men rose to a more scientific consideration of the world. Their eyes were turned from the confusion of earthly existence to the order of the heavens. They were not like the Hebrews, who never got beyond the wondering stage
2
, or who saw merely an emblem of their own posterity in the countless stars
3
; they resembled rather the Greeks who came to understand the Many and the Manifold in their sublunary forms, only after they had discovered the harmony of the All in the unity and steadiness of the movement of the heavens. The only drawback was that much mythological by-play and astrological pretence was interwoven with what was good, as in fact was the case also in Hellenism. This Chaldaean wisdom, from the time of Alexander the Great, became pervaded, in Babylonia and Syria, with Hellenistic and later with Hellenistic-Christian ideas, or else was supplanted by them. [8] In the Syrian city of

Harran only, up to the time of Islam, the old heathenism held its ground, little affected by Christian influences. (Cf. I, 3, § 4
).
2. Of more importance than any Semitic tradition, was the contribution made to Islam by Persian and Indian wisdom. We do not need to enter here upon the question as to whether Oriental wisdom was originally influenced by Greek philosophy, or Greek philosophy by Oriental wisdom. What Islam carried away directly from Persians and Indians may be learned with tolerable certainty from Arabic sources, and to this we may confine ourselves.
Persia is the land of Dualism, and it is not improbable that its dualistic religious teaching exercised an influence upon theological controversy in Islam, either directly or through the Manichaeans and other Gnostic sects. But much greater, in worldly circles, was the influence wielded by that system which, according to tradition, came to be even publicly recognized, under the Sasanid Yezdegerd II (438/9–457), viz. Zrwanism (Cf.
III, 1, § 6
). In this system the dualistic view of the world was superseded by setting up endless Time, (*zrwan* , Arab. *dahr*) as the paramount principle, and identifying it with Fate, the outermost heavenly sphere or the movement of the heavens. This doctrine, pleasing to philosophic intellects, has secured, with or without the guise of Islam, a prominent place for itself in Persian literature and in the views of the people, up to our own day. By theologians, however, and no less by philosophers of the Idealistic schools, it was disavowed as Materialism, Atheism and so forth.
3. India was regarded as the true land of wisdom. In Arab writers we often come upon the view that there the [9] birthplace of philosophy is to be found. By peaceful trading, in which the agents between India and the West were

principally Persians, and next as a result of the Muslim conquest, acquaintance with Indian wisdom spread far and wide. Much of it was translated under Mansur (754–775) and Harun (786–809), partly by means of the intervening step of Persian (Pahlawi) versions, and partly from the Sanskrit direct. Many a deliverance of ethical and political wisdom, in the dress of proverbs, was taken over from the fables and tales of India, such as the Tales of the Panchatantra, translated from the Pahlawi by Ibn al-Moqaffa in Mansur's time, and others. It was, however, Indian Mathematics and Astrology,—the latter in combination with practical Medicine and Magic,—that mainly influenced the beginnings of secular wisdom in Islam. The Astrology of the Siddhanta of Brahmagupta, which was translated from the Sanskrit, under Mansur, by Fazari assisted by Indian scholars, was known even before Ptolemy's Almagest. A wide world, past and future, was thereby opened up. The high figures with which the Indians worked produced a powerful, perplexing impression upon the sober Muslim annalists, just as, on the other hand, Arab merchants, who in India and China put the age of our created world at a few thousand years, exposed themselves to the utmost ridicule.

Nor did the logical and metaphysical speculations of the Indians remain unknown to the Muslims. These produced, however, much less effect on scientific development than did their Mathematics and Astrology. The investigations of the Indians, associated with their sacred books and wholly determined by a religious purpose, have certainly had a [10] lasting influence upon Persian Sufism and Islamic Mysticism. But,—once for all,—Philosophy is a Greek conception, and we have no right, in deference to the taste of the day, to allot an undue amount of space in our description to the childish thoughts of pious Hindoos. What has been advanced by these meditative penitents about the deceptive show of everything sensuous, may often possess

a poetic charm, just as it agrees perhaps with those observations on the evanescence of all that is earthly, which the East had access to in Neo-Pythagorean and Neo-Platonic sources; but it has contributed just as little of importance as these did, towards the explanation of phenomena or the awakening of the scientific spirit. Not the Indian imagination, but the Greek mind was needed to direct the reflective process to the knowledge of the Real. The best example of this is furnished by Arabic Mathematics. In the opinion of those who know the subject best, almost the only thing Indian in it is the Arithmetic, while the Algebra and the Geometry are Greek, preponderatingly, if not exclusively. Hardly a single Indian penetrated to the notion of pure mathematics. Number, even in its highest form, remained always something concrete; and in Indian Philosophy knowledge in the main continued to be only a means. Deliverance from the evil of existence was the aim, and Philosophy a pathway to the life of blessedness. Hence the monotony of this wisdom,—concentrated, as it was, upon the essence of all things in its One-ness,—as contrasted with the many-branched science of the Hellenes, which strove to comprehend the operations of Nature and Mind on all sides.

Oriental wisdom, Astrology and Cosmology delivered over [11] to Muslim thinkers material of many kinds, but the Form,—the formative principle,—came to them from the Greeks. In every case where it is not mere enumeration or chance concatenation that is taken in hand, but where an attempt is made to arrange the Manifold according to positive or logical points of view, we may conclude with all probability that Greek influences have been at work.

3. Greek Science.

1. Just as the commercial intercourse between India and China and Byzantium was conducted principally by the Persians, so in the remote West, as far even as France, the Syrians came forward as the agents of civilization. It was

Syrians who brought wine, silk &c. to the West. But it was Syrians also who took Greek culture from Alexandria and Antioch, spreading it eastward and propagating it in the schools of Edessa and Nisibis, Harran and Gondeshapur. Syria was the true neutral ground, where for centuries the two world-powers, the Roman and the Persian, came in contact with one another, either as friends or as foes. In such circumstances, the Christian Syrians played a part similar to the one which in later days fell to the share of the Jews.

2. The Muslim conquerors found the Christian church split up into three main divisions,—to say nothing of many sects. The Monophysite church, alongside of the Orthodox State-church, preponderated in Syria proper, and the Nestorian church in Persia. The difference between the doctrinal systems of these churches was perhaps not without importance for the development of Muslim Dogmatics. According [12] to the teaching of the Monophysites, God and Man were united in *one* nature in Christ, whereas the Orthodox, and in a still more pronounced manner the Nestorians, discriminated between a Divine nature and a human nature in him. Now nature means, above everything, energy or operative principle. The question, accordingly, which is at issue, is whether the Divine, and the human Willing and Acting are one and the same in Christ or different. The Monophysites, from speculative and religious motives, gave prominence to the Unity in Christ their God, at the expense of the human element: The Nestorians, on the other hand, emphasized, in contrast with the Divine element, all that is specially characteristic of human Being, Willing and Acting. The latter view, however, favoured by political circumstances and conditions of culture, offers freer play to philosophical speculations on the world and on life. In point of fact the Nestorians did most for the cultivation of Greek Science.

3. Syriac was the language both of the Western and of the

Eastern or Persian Church; but Greek was also taught along with it in the Cloister schools. Rasain and Kinnesrin must be mentioned as being centres of culture in the Western or Monophysite Church. Of more importance, at the outset at least, was the school of Edessa, inasmuch as the dialect of Edessa had risen to the position of the literary language; but in the year 489 the school there was closed because of the Nestorian views held by its teachers. It was then re-opened in Nisibis, and, being patronized by the Sasanids on political grounds, it disseminated Nestorian belief and Greek knowledge throughout Persia. [13]

Instruction in these schools had a pre-eminently Biblical and ecclesiastical character, and was arranged to meet the needs of the Church. However, physicians or coming students of medicine also took part in it. The circumstance that they frequently belonged to the ecclesiastical order does not do away with the distinction between theological study and the pursuit of secular knowledge. It is true that according to the Syro-Roman code, Teachers (learned Priests) and Physicians were entitled in common to exemption from taxation and to other privileges; but the very fact that priests were regarded as healers of the soul, while physicians had merely to patch up the body, seemed to justify the precedence accorded to the former. Medicine always remained a secular matter; and, by the regulations of the School of Nisibis (from the year 590), the Holy Scriptures were not to be read in the same room with books that dealt with worldly callings.

In medical circles the works of Hippocrates, Galen and Aristotle were highly prized; but in the cloisters Philosophy was understood to be first of all the contemplative life of the ascetic, and “the one thing needful” was the only thing cared for.

4. The Mesopotamian city of Harran, in the neighbourhood of Edessa, takes a place of its own. In this city, especially

when it began to flourish again after the Arab conquest, ancient Semitic paganism comes into association with mathematical and astronomical studies and Neo-Pythagorean and Neo-Platonic speculation. The Harranaeans or Sabaeans, as they were called in the 9 th and 10 th centuries, traced their mystic lore back to Hermes Trismegistus, Agathodaemon, Uranius and others. Numerous pseudepigraphs [14] of the later Hellenism were adopted by them in good faith, and some perhaps were forged in their own circle. A few of them became active as translators and learned authors, and many kept up a brisk scientific intercourse with Persian and Arab scholars from the 8 th to the 10 th century.

5. In Persia, at Gondeshapur, we find an Institution for philosophical and medical studies established by Khosrau Anosharwan (521–579). Its teachers were principally Nestorian Christians; but Khosrau, who had an inclination for secular culture, extended his toleration to Monophysites as well as to Nestorians. At that time, just as was the case later at the court of the Caliphs, Christian Syrians were held in special honour as medical men.

Farther, in the year 529, seven philosophers of the Neo-Platonic school, who had been driven away from Athens, found a place of refuge at the court of Khosrau. Their experiences there, however, may have resembled those of the French free-thinkers of the 18 th century at the Russian court. At all events they longed to get home again; and the king was sufficiently liberal-minded and magnanimous to allow them to go, and in his treaty of peace with Byzantium of the year 549 to stipulate in their case for freedom of religious opinion. Their stay in the Persian kingdom was doubtless not wholly devoid of influence.

6. The period of Syriac translations of profane literature from the Greek extends perhaps from the 4 th to the 8 th century. In the 4 th century collections of aphorisms were translated. The first translator, however, who makes his

appearance avowing his name, is Probus, “Priest and physician in Antioch” (1 st half of the 5 th century?). Possibly [15] he was merely an expounder of the logical writings of Aristotle, and of the Isagoge of Porphyry. Better known is Sergius of Rasain,—who died at the age of 70 or so, probably in Constantinople, about 536,—a Mesopotamian monk and physician, whose studies, which were probably pursued in Alexandria itself, took in the whole range of Alexandrian science, and whose translations not only embraced Theology, Morals and Mysticism, but even Physics, Medicine and Philosophy. Even after the Muslim conquest the learned activity of the Syrians continued. Jacob of Edessa (*circa* 640–708) translated Greek theological writings; but he occupied himself besides with Philosophy, and in answer to a question relative thereto he pronounced that it was lawful for Christian ecclesiastics to impart the higher instruction to children of Muslim parents. There was thus a felt need of culture among the latter.

The translations of the Syrians, particularly of Sergius of Rasain, are generally faithful; but a more exact correspondence with the original is shewn in the case of Logic and Natural Science than in Ethical and Metaphysical works. Much that is obscure in these last has been misunderstood or simply omitted, and much that is pagan has been replaced by Christian material. For instance, Peter, Paul and John would come upon the scene in room of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Destiny and the Gods were obliged to give place to the one God; and ideas like World, Eternity, Sin and the like were recast in a Christian mould. The Arabs, however, in subsequent times went to a much greater length with the process of adaptation to their language, culture and religion than the Syrians. This may perhaps be partly explained by the Muslim horror of everything [16] heathen, but partly too by their greater faculty of adaptation.

7. Apart from a few mathematical, physical and medical writings, the Syrians interested themselves in two subjects, —the *first* consisting of moralizing collections of aphorisms, put together into a kind of history of Philosophy, and, generally, of mystical Pythagorean-Platonic wisdom. This is found principally in pseudepigraphs, which bear the names of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plutarch, Dionysius and others. The centre of interest is a Platonic doctrine of the Soul, subjected to a later Pythagorean, Neo-Platonic, or Christian form of treatment. In the Syrian cloisters Plato is even turned into an oriental monk, who built a cell for himself in the heart of the wilderness, far away from the dwellings of men, and after three years' silent brooding over a verse of the Bible was led to a recognition of the Tri-Unity of God. A *second* subject of interest was added, in Aristotle's Logic. Among the Syrians, and for a longer period among the Arabs also, Aristotle was commonly known almost solely as a logician. This knowledge, just as in the early scholasticism of the West, extended to the Categories, the Hermeneutics, and the first Analytics as far as the Categorical Figures. They stood in need of the Logic in order to comprehend the writings of Greek ecclesiastical teachers, since these, at least in form, were influenced thereby. But as they did not possess it complete, as little did they possess it pure. They had it before them only in a Neo-Platonic redaction, as may be seen, for example, from the work of Paulus Persa, which was written in Syriac for Khosrau Anosharwan. In that work knowledge is placed above faith, [17] and philosophy is defined as the process by which the soul becomes conscious of its own inner essence, in which, like a God as it were, it sees all things.
8. What the Arabs owe to the Syrians is expressed by this circumstance amongst others,—that Arab scholars held Syriac to be the oldest, or the real (natural) language. The Syrians, it is true, produced nothing original; but their activity as translators was of advantage to Arab-Persian