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IBN KHALDŪN'S USE OF HISTORICAL SOURCES *

1

The great legacy which Ibn Khaldūn has bequeathed to us consists of the seven volumes of his "Ibar" (of which the first volume is his famous "Muqaddimah"), of his "Ta'rīf", or "Autobiography", and of some other smaller works which have but recently become known such as his "Lubāb al-Muḥaṣṣal fī Uṣūl ad-Dīn" and his "Shifā' as-Sā'il li-Tahdhīb al-Masā'il".

The revival of an interest in this legacy, in the West as well as in the East, has manifested itself recently in new translations of his "Muqaddimah" into English, into Persian, Turkish, and Portuguese, and in the publication of a number of anthologies in various languages, and even in a reprinting of the Būlāq edition of his "Ibar" with valuable indices, and a new critical edition of the text of the "Muqaddimah" in progress.

Ibn Khaldūn's contributions to Islamic and general historiography, made in his Muqaddimah, which have been expounded from the very day of his "European discovery", are again being made to an ever increasing degree the topic of recent research.

Despite this revived interest in Ibn Khaldūn it must be stated that the most elementary aspect with which one actually should have started the study of Ibn Khaldūn as a historian has not yet been advanced, namely, the investigation of the sources he has used for his Universal History.

Ibn Khaldūn was not only a philosopher of history, he was an historian, who like any other Muslim or Western historian,

* For a full documentation with bibliographical and other details, see the author's forthcoming book «Ibn Khaldūn in Egypt—the Man and Scholar», to be published by the University of California Press, Berkeley.

was dependent on the records of the past, on the authorities which preceded him. One cannot evaluate and appraise Ibn Khaldūn as an historian and place him properly in the annals of Islamic and general historiography until and unless a thorough critical study has been made of the methods and ways in which he made use of all those sources he quoted and utilized, and this not only in his "Prolegomena", but in the totality of his historical writings.

The neglect of so elementary and primary a task is the more astonishing since Ibn Khaldūn is one of the few Muslim historians who has been most conscientious in mentioning, very scrupulously indeed, the authorities and sources from which he drew, and whose writings abound in countless quotations from and references to many sources of the past.

This oversight might be due to the generally held but erroneous view that Ibn Khaldūn had no precursors in regard to his socio-philosophical ideas and that his major sources were his own experiences and the reflection on them, and the abstraction of his acquaintance with the contemporary scene of the Arab and Berber dynasties. Even if this were so, it could be applied with a certain degree of justification only to his "Prolegomena", and not to the other six volumes of his "Ibar".

It is therefore one of the pressing tasks for a real understanding of Ibn Khaldūn as a historian to start with a new methodological approach and to investigate systematically the historical, biographical and geographical works (not to speak of his sources on Ḥadīth, Fiqh, Theology, and Science) used by him and expressly quoted, and furthermore to establish firmly not only *whom* he used, but also *how* he used his authorities. Such an investigation calls for monographic treatments of each and every important historical source on which Ibn Khaldūn relied, be it a Muslim, Christian, or Jewish source.

As a contribution to such an investigation, the present study attempts to deal only with a number of those historical sources which Ibn Khaldūn used explicitly for his treatment of non-Arabic and pre-Islamic history, and through which he could make a major contribution to the history of religion and to comparative religion as a whole.

2

It may be surprising to those who have regarded Ibn Khaldūn as an historian of the Islamic West and East, as predominantly an historian of the Berbers and Arabs, to hear him classified here as an historian of religion, as a scholar who made a contribution to comparative religion.

It is well known that Ibn Khaldūn's contribution to history did not confine itself to his philosophical and sociological ideas as expounded in his "Prolegomena", nor to the history of the Islamic West, the Berbers and Arabs in the Maghrib, in North Africa and Spain, nor even to the history of the Islamic East, the history of Barqūq and the Mamlūk Dynasty, of the Tartars and Mongols and the Eastern Caliphate.

His contribution to historical scholarship went beyond the confines of Islam and transcended his own Muslim civilization. It encompassed also to a large degree the non-Islamic world, the history of non-Arab and non-Islamic peoples. In his "Prolegomena" he had already demonstrated his interest in the history of ancient peoples and religions as proven by many scattered references to these aspects and by applying some of his socio-historical concepts to personalities and events of the non-Islamic world for the sake of comparison and illustration.

In examining and gathering all the scattered references in the totality of his works to religious movements, manifestations, and institutions of non-Islamic peoples one is bound to conclude that Ibn Khaldūn made enormous efforts to acquaint himself with the non-Islamic religions.

It is mainly the second volume of this "Ibar" which mirrors the results of these efforts. In it he presents the history of pre-Islamic and non-Arabic peoples and religions such as Babylonians, Egyptians, Nabataens, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Judaism, and Christianity, revealing an entirely new side of his scholarly personality, to which thus far sufficient consideration and attention have not been given.

The availability of uncounted literary treasures in Egypt, the access to new historical sources in the libraries of Egypt

and Syria, the contact with resident scholars as well as with travelling and visiting scholars in Egypt must have enabled and stimulated Ibn Khaldūn to make a substantial contribution towards the understanding of the history of the non-Islamic peoples.

It can hardly be claimed nor ascertained that all the material presented in the second volume is the result of his scholarly research in Egypt. Some of the sources he is quoting, mostly Muslim sources, were undoubtedly available to him even in the Maghrib, but some of the major Christian and Jewish sources which he has most meticulously quoted must have come to his attention only while in Egypt.

What were these Christian and Jewish sources which became accessible to Ibn Khaldūn during his stay in Egypt and which enabled him to deal so extensively with the non-Islamic world ?

(A) *Christian Sources*

His Christian sources can be divided into Western and Eastern.

Horosius.

The most frequently quoted Western Christian source for the history of the non-Arab and pre-Islamic world is the work of the pupil of St. Augustine, *Paulus Horosius* (5th century), whom he calls "the historian of Rome". Of his Latin-written "*Historae Adversum Paganos*", the first continuous history of the world from a Christian point of view, an Arabic translation had been made in the tenth century, which Ibn Khaldūn was able to use, quoting him incessantly as one of his major sources. The fact that Ibn Khaldūn did not make use of Horosius in his treatment of Western Islam and the Berbers and did not refer to him at all in his "Prolegomena" may well lend support to the assumption that a copy of the Arabic translation of Horosius became accessible to him only while in Egypt. He was apparently so impressed by this "historian of Rome", that he even supplies us with details about the translator of this work and informs us that it was translated into Arabic in the tenth century, in the time of "the Omayyad Caliph al-Ḥakam

II al-Mustansir (915-976), by the Christian Cadi of Cordova, Qāsim ibn Aṣṣbagh."

Ibn al-'Amīd.

The Christian sources of the East which Ibn Khaldūn has diligently used, mainly Melkite and Coptic authors, are classified by Ibn Khaldūn as "the historians of the Christians." The most prominent among them was Jirjis al-Makīn, known as Ibn al-'Amīd (d. 1273) and his Arabic-written World History, "Majmū' al-Mubārak". Notwithstanding the fact that Ibn Khaldūn refers to Ibn al-'Amīd in *one* place in the "Prolegomena"—which bears all the marks of having been added later—there can be little doubt that the history of Ibn al-'Amīd became known to him only in Egypt.

Ibn Khaldūn quotes from Ibn al-'Amīd almost as extensively and frequently as he does from Horosius, and he derived from him a great deal of information about the history of the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, and about post-Biblical Judaism and Christianity.

Along with Ibn al-'Amīd, Ibn Khaldūn used an Arabic-written work by a Coptic author, the "Ta'riḫ" of Abū Shākir Buṭrus, known as Ibn ar-Rāhib (d. 1282), and he referred steadily also to another Christian author, Ibn Musabbiḥī, or al-Musabbiḥī, all of whom he calls collectively, as noted above, the "historians of the Christians."

Apart from these Christian authors, Ibn Khaldūn used also the work of Eutychius (d. 940), the Melkite patriarch of Alexandria, known in Arabic as Sa'īd ibn Baṭrīq or (Biṭrīq), and he refers to a certain Abū Fānīyūs, behind which name is evidently hidden Epiphanes, the Coptic bishop of Cyrus; and to Yūḥannā Fam adh-Dhahab, identical with John of Antioch, the patriarch of Constantinople, known as John Chrysostomus (d. 407).

Proto-Evangel of Jacob.

In his search for the maximum of documentary coverage of his various topics, Ibn Khaldūn succeeded in many instances in discovering some unusual sources. Such an unusual source for his outline of the history of Jesus and Christianity was

“The book of Jacob, the Son of Joseph the Carpenter”, which helped Ibn Khaldūn to supplement his knowledge derived from the Canonical Gospels, and especially from the Gospel of Matthew. This “Book of Jacob” is apparently an apocryphal gospel, a Proto-Evangel of Jacob, of which early Arabic and Coptic translations are known to have existed, and which evidently came into his hands most likely through his contacts with Christian scholars in Egypt. Ibn Khaldūn made use of this source in his presentation of the origin and growth of Christianity and referred to it in five different places, introducing his statements with “I copied from this Book of Jacob...”, “I read in the Book of Jacob”, “It is written in the Book of Jacob”, etc.

As far as can be ascertained, no other Muslim historian before him had explicitly mentioned and used this source.

(B) *Unidentified Sources*

Ibn Khaldūn refers also to a number of other sources which thus far have not been identified, such as Bābā aṣ-Ṣābī al-Ḥarrānī and a certain Dāhir or Dahar whom he calls “the historian of the Syrians” and, in another context, “the historian of the Persian rule.”

(C) *Jewish Sources*

Ibn Khaldūn also made extensive use of Jewish sources. His major source was the “Taurāt”, quoting from it in many contexts, also referring specifically to the Book of Judges, the Books of the Kings, the Psalms, and to the “Isrā’īliyyāt”.

Under the term “Isrā’īliyyāt” he referred to a source at least of Jewish origin, and he regarded the transmitters of “Isrā’īliyyāt” as “people of the Taurāt”, Jews and Christians, who were living among the Arabs, mostly Himyarites converted to Judaism, who disseminated a great mass of stories, legends and traditions among the Arab people with the intention of glorifying the past of Israel and its Biblical heroes. Ibn Khaldūn realized, as others had done before him, that this mass of tradition formed an important factor which had molded many beliefs and ideas in Islam, a significant stream through

which Jewish thinking and Jewish influence penetrated into Islamic tradition and literature. Among the most prominent transmitters of "Isrā'īliyyāt" he mentions Ka'b al-Aḥbār, Wahb b. Munabbih, and 'Abdallāh b. Sallām.

Ibn Khaldūn discovered also an unusual Jewish source for his treatment of post-Biblical Jewish history, namely, the chronicle of a *Yūsuf ibn Kuryūn* which, as he states explicitly, became available to him only in Egypt and which became one of his most quoted non-Muslim authorities for post-biblical and Roman history. It was Ibn Khaldūn's enthusiasm at having found this source—apparently after a long search—which must have prompted him to give a very detailed account of the work and its author the like of which he has not done in any other case of his source material. Thus he writes:

"There came into my hands while I was in Egypt a book by one of the learned men of the Jews, one of the contemporaries of that very period, dealing with the history of the Holy Temple and of the two kingdoms during the periods between the first destruction by Nebuchadnezzar and the second destruction by Titus when 'the great exile' took place. The book contained the history of the two governments, that of the House of the Hasmoneans and that of the House of Herod. I have summarized its content as I have found it in the book, for I did not find anything about it from anyone else."

About the author of the book, Ibn Khaldūn states:

"He was called Yūsuf ibn Kuryūn and was regarded as one of the most influential of the Jews and one of their generals when the Romans marched against them. Vespasian, the father of Titus, attacked him and besieged him with force. Yūsuf fled to one of the mountain passes and hid himself there. He (Vespasian) succeeded then in capturing him but showed him favor and he remained with him; he had the same connection with his son Titus, under whose regime 'the children of Israel' were exiled from Jerusalem."

This Yūsuf ibn Kuryūn was according to Ibn Khaldūn identical with Josephus Flavius, the author of the "Bellum Judaicum". All the biographical details mentioned by Ibn Khaldūn apply to the life and career of Josephus Flavius.

Ibn Khaldūn calls him "one of the leaders of the Jews and one of their generals", "one of the priests of the Jews", "a friend of Vespasian and Titus", and above all, he calls him "the historian of the second restoration of the Temple before the great exile."

It is quite evident, however, that Ibn Khaldūn fell here victim to a confusion which was very common among medieval scholars, in not realizing that the work he was referring to and using so extensively, was not that of Josephus Flavius, but a Hebrew chronicle of the Middle Ages generally known as the Chronicle of Josippon, of which there existed a translation by a certain Zakarīyā' ibn Sa'īd, a Jew from Yemen, according to the testimony of the Turkish historian Ḥājjī Khalīfa (d. 1655 A. D.). It was the Arabic version of Josippon (with which Ibn Khaldūn became acquainted only in Egypt) which served him as the exclusive source for the outline of the history of the Maccabeans, the House of Herod, and the wars with the Romans until the destruction of the Temple in 70 A. D. Just as Ibn Khaldūn found in Horosius "the historian of Rome", and in Ibn al-'Amīd and others "the historians of the Christians", so he found in Yūsuf b. Kuryūn "the historian of the Jews" of the post-biblical period.

(D) *Muslim Sources: al-Mas'ūdī*

Of the many Muslim sources which Ibn Khaldūn used, one was of particular significance for his treatment of non-Islamic peoples, namely, al-Mas'ūdī.

In the writings of Ibn Khaldūn the work of al-Mas'ūdī occupies a privileged and preferential position. No other Muslim historian is quoted and epitomized by him so critically and extensively as al-Mas'ūdī. Despite Ibn Khaldūn's critical attitude toward some of Mas'ūdī's treatment of certain historical topics, he praises him in the highest terms and regards him as "one of the few historians whose work has been distinguished by universal acceptance... and as a model of history writing".

Ibn Khaldūn was so stimulated by al-Mas'ūdī's historiographical approach that he even made the following programmatic announcement at the beginning of his

“Prolegomena”: “There is need at this time that someone should systematically set down the state of the world among all regions and races, as well as the customs and sectarian beliefs of their adherents as they have developed, doing for this age what al-Mas‘ūdī did for his. This should be a model for future historians to follow.”

What attracted Ibn Khaldūn to al-Mas‘ūdī was not only the many facts which he could derive from his works concerning Islamic history, but his general historiographical approach which took due cognizance of the Arab as well as the non-Arab aspects of history. He lauds al-Mas‘ūdī because he “commented upon the conditions of nations and regions in the West and in the East in his time (which was) the three hundred and thirties (the nine hundred and forties). He mentioned their sects and customs. He described the various countries, mountains, oceans, provinces, and dynasties. He distinguished *between Arab and non-Arab groups*. His book thus became the basic reference work for historians, their principal source for verifying historical information.”

It seems that here lie the very bonds of affinity between the two historians, and it is most likely that al-Mas‘ūdī had first opened for Ibn Khaldūn the window to the non-Islamic world which enabled him to make his contribution to fields outside the confines of the Islamic civilization.

3

Ibn Khaldūn's Usage of His Sources.

Ibn Khaldūn used all these sources constantly and incessantly for almost every aspect of his history of non-Islamic peoples. He quotes them hundreds of times, all throughout his writings, whether he deals with the history of the tribes of Israel, the building of the Temple in Jerusalem or other aspects of Biblical or post-Biblical history, or whether he investigates the teachings of Christianity, the spread and divisions of the early Church, or whether he names the various sees and names of the patriarchs, or whether he deals with the Latin kings or the Byzantine Empire or the history of the Persian Achaemenids,

basing himself in the first place on Ibn al-'Amīd and the other Christian historians and on al-Mas'ūdī who guided him in his treatment of problems which he was determined to clarify.

Ibn Khaldūn not only quotes conscientiously all the historical data according to the source from which he derived them, but compares these authors with each other, checks their respective statements, notices their divergencies, differences or similarities, in order to establish the truth of every fact, be it a date, a name, a place, etc.

His approach reveals the historian of religion who digs into the past and unearths hitherto neglected or unusual sources. Never satisfied with only one source, he checks even the smallest and seemingly most trivial detail and compares it with an array of many other sources for the sake of establishing the maximum of exactitude and accuracy as to the names of rulers of all the various dynasties and peoples, the exact duration of their rule, their titles, etc., and above all for the sake of placing the events of history into their proper time and space.

What is even more characteristic, Ibn Khaldūn puts all these different categories of sources on an equal footing. He did not follow any of his sources uncritically, but always verified their statements very prudently and carefully. When checking by comparison with other sources, he even notices that, to mention one instance, Ibn al-'Amīd omitted a certain item which others had mentioned. In comparing genealogical or historical items, he comes in many cases to the conclusion, "This is far from the truth", "this is not correct", "this is contradictory", "this is impossible".

It is obvious that Ibn Khaldūn did not and could not add any new facts or data pertaining to non-Islamic history, but his individual contribution in this field lies in the special stress he laid on certain aspects, events and topics, in the selection of material which he deemed it worth while to include and accept out of the great mass of information at his disposal, or on the other side, to reject and omit. Such a selective approach by Ibn Khaldūn reveals that he was particularly interested not so much in the genealogical, dynastic, political or military aspects, in the dynastic changes of the non-Islamic

peoples (although he gave due attention to all of them), as in the religious and spiritual aspects, in the religious manifestations of the non-Arab peoples.

His presentation indicates a peculiar approach, a typical Khaldūnic tinge, which centers around such major aspects of the religious and spiritual history of mankind as (a) the religious founders and religious personalities; (b) the "holy books"; (c) their translation and transmission; (d) heresies, dissensions, sectarian movements of all kinds; (e) religious institutions and titles of leaders; (f) holy sites of the great religions; (g) the variety and multiplicity of chronology, the calendars of ancient peoples, etc.

Indeed, the most outstanding methodological feature in Ibn Khaldūn's treatment of the non-Islamic world is the great variety, diversity and multiplicity of sources he quoted and used for this purpose. In no other part of his monumental History is there such an abundance of documentary evidence from such a variety of sources, Christian, Muslim or Jewish, so conscientiously and diligently investigated, as in his treatment of non-Islamic peoples.

This may be due to the fact that while for the history of the Islamic peoples he could take for granted many details, in entering a new field, in treading upon new territory such as the treatment of the non-Islamic peoples, he had to refer to a great variety of reliable and authentic authorities. In not relying blindly and uncritically on any single source and by consulting many sources of different provenance, comparing, checking and weighing their respective arguments, his history of the non-Islamic world is on a broader documentary basis than all the attempts made by earlier Muslim authors who tried to approach this topic.

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