CHAPTER 2

The Shukūk: Aporetic Commentary

In the following chapters, we conduct four case studies in which the contents of five sections of the Shukūk are closely examined. Here in the present chapter, we offer an overview of the organisation and contents of al-Masʿūdī’s work, and a reading of the broader motives and method that underlie the book, partly by drawing on some of the findings of the ensuing chapters.

2.1 Two Genres: Aporetic Commentary (Shukūk), Exegetical Commentary (Sharḥ)

The broader intellectual context within which al-Masʿūdī operated, comprising exponents and critics of Avicennan philosophy, has already been explored at the outset of our previous chapter; and that is certainly the most important background against which the Shukūk must be interpreted. As we shall see in detail in what follows, al-Ghazālī’s Tahāfut and Abū l-Barakāt’s Muʿtabar are the only sources explicitly referenced in the book, alongside the Ishārāt (and in one place Euclid). Besides these intellectual trends and sources, we must also consider the textual genealogy of al-Masʿūdī’s work, in particular where it is positioned in relation to two distinct commentarial traditions, namely the genre of philosophical and scientific aporetic commentaries and the tradition of exegetical commentaries dedicated to individual Avicennan philosophical texts.1

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1 My proposed distinction between aporetic and exegetical commentaries differs from Robert Wisnovsky’s distinction between ‘problem commentaries’ and ‘system commentaries’ (‘Avicennism and Exegetical Practice’; ‘Avicenna’s Islamic Reception’, 198–199); the former distinction focuses on the function of a commentary, whereas the latter focuses primarily on scope. Wisnovsky classes al-Rāzī’s response to the Shukūk, the Jawābāt, and Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī’s response to al-Rāzī’s comprehensive commentary on the Ishārāt, Kashf al-tamwīḥāt, as problem commentaries, whereas I class them as exegetical commentaries, as I shall explain shortly. It should be noted here that the distinction between aporetic and exegetical commentaries is meant not as an exhaustive taxonomy, but first and foremost to delineate aporetic texts as a discrete genre. The distinction seems to become less applicable in post-thirteenth-century Arabic philosophy.
1. The tradition of aporetic commentaries (*shukūk*). Al-Masʿūdī originally conceived his book within the genre of aporias, which had already become a small, but well-established specialist genre in Arabic science and philosophy. The two most important earlier representative texts, originating respectively from the early fourth/tenth and early fifth/eleventh centuries, are Abū Bakr al-Rāзи's *al-Shukūk ‘alā kalām fāḍil al-atientbā‘ jālīnas fi l-kutub allatī nusibat ilayhi* (*Problems Raised Concerning Views of Galen, the Most Eminent of Physicians, in the Books Attributed to Him*) and Ibn al-Haytham's aporias on Ptolemy, *al-Shukūk ‘alā Baṭlamyūs*. Al-Masʿūdī is very likely to have been familiar with the latter book, in view of his interest in the mathematical sciences, especially astronomy. In the preface to his astronomical work the *Kifāya*, he names Ibn al-Haytham's highly influential book *Hayʾat al-ʿālam* as one of his principal sources, and later on in the same work cites his treatise on ‘winding motion’ (*ḥarakat al-iltifāf*).

So how do aporetic texts differ from refutations, which may be marked by a variety of labels, such as *ibṭāl*, *radd* and *naqḍ*, depending on discipline and context? To answer this question, I propose that the expression *shakk* (pl. *shukūk*) denotes a problem, or objection, that tends to be relatively narrow in scope and limited in its implications. The import of the expression, accordingly, depends on whether an author employs it with reference to objections that he himself raises, or to objections raised against views which he supports.

The former sense gives us dedicated aporetic works, which typically consist of collections of problems, or puzzles, that the author raises concerning views, mostly of a theoretical nature, propounded by an eminent individual in one or more of his works. The target individual and his works will always be responsible for laying the foundations of a major system within a certain field of scholarship, and will therefore have an authoritative status in that field. The author of the aporetic text is normally an insider to the field, but one who nonetheless is more or less unsatisfied with the authoritative system in question. Being