IBN ḤAZM ON SINS AND SALVATION

Christian Lange

Ibn Ḥazm’s view of sins and salvation is laid out, next to the relevant passages of his great dogmatic work *K. al-Fiṣal fi l-milal wal-ahwā’ wal-niḥal* and to the credal prolegomenon of the *K. al-Muḥallā*, in a short treatise entitled “Concise epistle on the ways toward salvation” (*Risālat al-Talkhīṣ fi wujūh al-takhlīṣ*). The *Risālat al-Talkhīṣ*, which lies at the centre of the following discussion, was discovered by Hellmut Ritter in the Fāṭiḥ mosque in Istanbul (Ms. Arab. 2704) in the early 1930s, together with other epistles of the Ẓāhirī master. It was first brought to the attention of a wider circle of Ibn Ḥazm scholars by M. Asín Palacios in 1934. Asín Palacios, in his short paraphrase, also included some edited passages of the Arabic original.¹ A full edition was prepared by Iḥsān ‘Abbās and published in Cairo in 1960, together with *al-Radd ʿalā Ibn al-Naghrīla* and some other of Ibn Ḥazm’s minor works.² More recently, in 2003 and 2005, separate editions, complete with an extensive critical apparatus, have made the *Risālat al-Talkhīṣ* accessible to a broad reading public. These editions appear to reflect a growing interest in, and popularity of, Ibn Ḥazm in recent years.³

In an article published in 1977, Ralph Stehly drew attention to a passage in the *Risālat al-Talkhīṣ* in which, as he suggested, the Muslim Sunnī doctrine of sins and redemption is “excellement résumé.”⁴ The passage concludes the first of nine sections of the *Risālat al-Talkhīṣ*, a tightly argued exhortatory epistle which contains Ibn Ḥazm’s answers to a string of questions put to him in a letter sent to him by a group of “brothers” (*ikhwa*), followers of the Ẓāhirī school and students, like Ibn Ḥazm himself, of

---

Abū l-Khiyār Masʿūd b. Sulaymān b. Muflit al-Shantarīnī (d. 426/1035), a famous Ţāhirī scholar who had suffered, like his favourite pupil Ibn Ḥazm, persecution at the hands of the Mālikī fuqahāʾ in Cordoba. Ibn Ḥazm devotes a couple of touching lines to the memory of his respected teacher. This allows us to date the work to the twilight of Ibn Ḥazm’s career, that is, to the period in which he had withdrawn from government service to purely intellectual work in his home village of Munt Lisham, where he also ended his life.

The passage in question is as follows:

Know that God Almighty has given us five precious gifts (mawāhib) that ensure salvation except for those who are doomed (ḥālik). These are:

First: God Exalted pardons minor sins (ṣaghāʾir) as long as grave sins (kabāʾir) are avoided. Even if people came to the Place of Resurrection (ʿarṣat al-qiyāma) with enough minor sins to fill the earth, as long as they have not committed a grave sin, or have committed a grave sin but then repented it, God would not hold them responsible for any of them. God Exalted has said: “If you avoid the grave sins that are forbidden to you, We will acquit you of your evil deeds (nukaffir ʿankum sayyiʾātikum), and admit you by the gate of honour [into paradise]” (Q 4:31).

Second: If people’s grave sins are manifold, and if then God grants them sincere repentance (tawba) before death, [and if this is] in accordance with its [i.e. repentance’s] proper definition (ḥaqquhā) and conditions (shurūṭuhā), all of them [i.e. all grave sins] become void. God will not hold them responsible for any of them. This is a consensus (ijmāʿ) of the umma.

Third: Those who commit grave sins, in as much as God permits it, and then die persisting in them [i.e. without having repented], but whose good actions (ḥasanātuhu) and evil actions (sayyiʾātuhu) are equibalanced (istawat), no additional evil action having been committed by them, are forgiven and will not be held responsible for anything they have done. God Exalted has said: “The good deeds will drive away the evil deeds” (Q 11:114). And He Exalted has made reference to “those whose [good] deeds weigh heavy in the Balance” (Q 101:6).

Fourth: God counts an evil action once and a good action ten times, and [on top of this] God gives double measure to whom He pleases.

Fifth: For those whose transgressions are legion (man aḥātat bihi khaṭīʾatuhu), and in whom there is more evil than good, God has decreed

---

6 Risālat al-Talkhīṣ, p. 85.
8 Translations from the Qurʾān, with slight modifications, are those of Arthur Arberry (1955).