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## Adelard of Bath: The Impact of Muslim Science

### Preface to His Very Difficult Natural Questions, [Dodi Ve-Nechdi] c. 1137

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*Many texts of Greek science and philosophy were first translated into Syriac, then Arabic, before becoming available in the Latin. But Arab science was not only matter of conveying Greek ideas, but was also open to Persian and Indian science, as well as its own internal creativity. In some respects - for instance problems arising from a belief in a personal creator God - Arab/Muslim thinkers were the first to deal with issues they had in common with Christian and Jewish thinkers. The Englishman Adelard of Bath (d. post 1142) was the first significant popularizer of Muslim science in the West. He studies and then taught at schools in France, and traveled throughout the Mediterranean. In particular he introduced Euclid and aspects of astronomy.*

*As well as more technical treatises, he wrote Natural Questions - the selections here are from its preface and part of the body - which expresses his fundamental belief that God should not be invoked to explain what human knowledge can.*

On my return the other day to England, in the reign of Henry [Henry I, r. 1100-35-, son of William,-it was he who had long maintained me abroad for the purpose of study-the renewal of intercourse with my friends gave me both pleasure and benefit.

After the first natural inquiries about my own health and that of my friends, my particular desire was to learn all I could about the manners and customs of my own country. Making this then the object of my inquiry, I learnt that its chief men were violent, its magistrates wine-lovers, its judges mercenary; that patrons were fickle, private men sycophants, those who made promises deceitful, friends full of jealousy, and almost all men self-seekers: this realised, the only resource, I said to myself, is to withdraw my thoughts from all misery.

Thereupon my friends said to me, "What do you think of doing, since you neither wish to adopt this moral depravity yourself, nor can you prevent it?" My reply was "to give myself up to oblivion, since oblivion is the only cure for evils that cannot be remedied; for he who gives heed to that which he hates in some sort endures that which he does not love." Thus we argued that matter together, and then as we still had time left for talking, a certain nephew of mine, who had come along with the others, rather adding to the tangle than unraveling it, urged me to publish something fresh in the way of Arabian learning. As the rest agreed with him, I took in hand the treatise which follows: of its profitableness to its readers I am assured, but am doubtful whether it will give them pleasure. The present generation has this ingrained weakness, that it thinks that nothing discovered by the moderns is worthy to be received -the result of this is that if I wanted to publish anything of my own invention I should attribute it to someone else, and say, "Someone else said this, not I." Therefore (that I may not wholly be robbed of a hearing) it was a certain great man that discovered all my ideas, not I. But of this enough.

Since I have yielded to the request of my friends so far as to write something, it remains for you to give your judgment as to its correctness. About this point I would that I felt less anxiety, for there is no essay in the liberal arts, no matter how well handled, to which you could not give a wider range. Grant me, therefore, your

sympathy. I shall now proceed to give short answers to questions put by my nephew.

Here begins Adelard's treatise to his Nephew.

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ADELARD: You will remember, Nephew, how seven years ago when you were almost a child in the learning of the French, and I sent you along with the rest of my hearers to study with a man of high reputation, it was agreed between us that I should devote myself to the best of my ability to the study of Arabic, while you on your part were to acquire the inconsistencies of French ideas.

NEPHEW: I remember, and all the more because, when departing, you bound me under a solemn promise to be a diligent student of philosophy.

The result was that I applied myself with great diligence to this study. Whether what I have said is correct, the present occasion will give you an opportunity of discovering; since when you have often set them forth, I, as hearer only, have marked the opinions of the Saracens, and many of them seem to me quite absurd; I shall, therefore, for a time cease to exercise this patience, and when you utter these views, shall attack them where it seems good to me to do so.

To me it seems that you go too far in your praise of the Arabs, and show prejudice in your disparagement of the learning of our philosophers. Our reward will be that you will have gained some fruit of your toil; if you give good answers, and I make a good showing as your opponent, you will see that my promise has been well kept.

ADELARD: You perhaps take a little more on you than you ought; but as this arrangement will be profitable not only to you but to many others, I will pardon your forwardness, making however this one stipulation, that when I adduce something unfamiliar, people are to think not that I am putting forward an idea of my own, but am giving the views of the Arabs. If anything I say displeases the less educated, I do not want them to be displeased with me also: I know too well what is the fate which attends upon the teachers of the truth with the common herd, and consequently shall plead the case of the Arabs, not my own.

NEPHEW: Let it be as you will, provided nothing causes you to hold your peace.

ADELARD: I think then that we should begin with lighter matters, and if here I fail to give you a reasonable account, you will know what to expect in more important subjects. Let us begin then at the bottom, and so proceed upwards. . . .

ADELARD: It is a little difficult for you and me to argue about animals. I, with reason for my guide, have learned one thing from my Arab teachers, you, something different; dazzled by the outward show of authority you wear a head-stall. For what else should we call authority but a head-stall? Just as brute animals are led by the head-stall where one pleases, without seeing why or where they are being led, and only follow the halter by which they are held, so many of you, bound and fettered as you are by a low credulity, are led into danger by the authority of writers. Hence, certain people arrogating to themselves the title of authorities have employed an unbounded licence in writing, and this to such an extent that they have not hesitated to insinuate into men of low intellect the false instead of the true. Why should you not fill sheets of paper, aye, fill them on both sides, when to-day you can get readers who require no proof of sound judgment from you, and are satisfied merely with the name of a time-worn title? They do not understand that reason has been given to individuals that, with it as chief judge, distinction may be drawn between the true and the false. Unless reason were appointed to be the chief judge, to no purpose would she have been given to us individually: it would have been enough for the writing of laws to have been entrusted to one, or at most to a few, and the rest would have been satisfied with their ordinances and authority. Further, the very people who are called

authorities first gained the confidence of their inferiors only because they followed reason; and those who are ignorant of reason, or neglect it, justly desire to be called blind. However, I will not pursue this subject any further, though I regard authority as matter for contempt. This one thing, however, I will say. We must first search after reason, and when it has been found, and not until then, authority if added to it, may be received. Authority by itself can inspire no confidence in the philosopher, nor ought it to be used for such a purpose. Hence logicians have agreed in treating the argument from authority not as necessary, but probable only. if, therefore, you want to bear anything from me, you must both give and take reason. I am not the man whom the semblance of an object can possibly satisfy; and the fact is, that the mere word is a loose wanton abandoning herself now to this man, now to that.

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### *How the Globe Is Supported in the Middle of the Air*

NEPHEW: . . . I will put the first question that comes into my head: How is it that this earth of ours which supports all weights (I am speaking not of simples, but of compounds), how is it that it remains in the same place, or by what is it supported? If all heavy bodies, such as stone, wood, etc., require support, and cannot through their weight be supported by the air, then much more does the earth, which is heavier than everything else put together, require to be supported, nor can it be held in position by so unstable a body as the air. Hence it is contrary to reason that it should maintain its position.

ADELARD: Certainly it is inexpedient that it should fall, and that we also shall not fall along with it. I will show that its remaining in its position is in accordance with reason. From the character of its primary qualities, we know that the earth has weight; that which has weight is more secure in the lowest position; and everything is naturally fond of that which preserves its life, and tends towards that for which it has a liking. It follows therefore that everything which is earthy tends towards the lowest possible position. But in the case of anything round, it is clear that the middle and the lowest are the same, and therefore all earthy things tend towards the middle position. Now the middle position is a simple and indivisible middle point, and it is therefore clear that all earthy things tend towards a local and simple point. But this local point is not several but one, and must necessarily be occupied by one thing, not by several; but to it, as has been said, all things tend: consequently each one thing presses on something else, since all and sundry are hastening to the same point. Now the point to which all weighty bodies are hastening is that to which they are falling, for the fall of weighty bodies is merely a hastening to a middle point. By the point to which they are falling I mean the fixed middle point. The place to which they are falling-the middle point -remains fixed; and therefore, while falling into a stable position, they yet remain fixed, unless some force be impressed on them as a result of which they are diverted from their natural course. The very opposite then is the case to what you thought; and you will now see clearly that it is what you thought to be a reason for falling which gives stability and coherence to heavy bodies. They are, therefore, in some way supported by the point to which they are hastening; and if it should move in any direction, all the things which are affected towards it would also of necessity move, though of course in that selfsame spot we have not the first but the second cause of stability: for, in accordance with the reason previously given, the first cause of this equilibrium is the property of the subject, the second the stability of the point which it makes for.

From Adelard of Bath, *Dodi Ve-Nechdi*, ed. and trans. H. Gollancz, (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), pp. 91-92, 98-99, 137-138

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