



An Overview on Alkindi's Translations at House of Wisdom: An Islamic Philosophical Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Acquisition, utilization, preservation, and dissemination of important knowledge to desirable audience are part of the major targets of academic works particularly in an Islamic exposition. These could only be achieved if centers and institutions responsible are duly established and designed for educational development as done in Baghdad at the House of Wisdom by the Abbasid Caliphs (Al-Mamun). The contribution of Al-Kindi which is recorded as the first of its kind in the Arab world is virtually a companion for reflection to every researcher aiming to convey knowledge. Al-Kindi translated philosophical Greek works into Arabic, and therefore makes it useful to not only the Arabs, but also all those in contact with Arabic language. Relying on secondary data, the research work gives an overview on the significance of Bayt Al-Hikma, enclosing the effort of Al-Kindi for preserving and disseminating important knowledge. Therefore, the research work presented some philosophical views of Al-Kindi, though; he contributed in different aspect of sciences. It in the main, calls for reflection to services rendered at Bayt Al-Hikma with special consideration to the effort of Al-Kindi.

Keywords: Overview, Al-Kindi, Translation, House-of-Wisdom

0.1 INTRODUCTION

Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi was from the Arab tribe of Kinda, whom historically contributed significantly in the early history of Islam. His philosophical exertions made him to be known as the "philosopher of the Arabs" (Muhammad, 1929 & Abu al-Qasim, n.d.:137&59). Al-Kindi was a great Islamic philosopher, his father and grandfather had been the governor of Kufa and their descendants continued to hold important court positions in Muslim times. He was employed by Abbasid Caliphs specifically al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim. Al-Ma'mun had appointed him to work at a recognized centre for Greek philosophical and scientific texts translation in Baghdad known as House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikma*). His services in the House of Wisdom marked his enormous contribution in not only philosophical works, but also education in general (Sami, H., n.d.:329). His intellectuality composes not only a single aspect of knowledge; he was an Arab Muslim philosopher, polymath, mathematician, and physician, and was the first of the Muslim peripatetic philosopher (Nasr, 2006:137-8). Following footsteps of notable scholars, and initiating educational legacy for development of present and future generation should be part of the main focuses of any research designed for knowledge dissemination. It is therefore the objective of this study to:

- i. give an overview of the historical background of Bayt Al-Hikma while identifying the major services rendered therein.
- ii. highlight the Islamic philosophical contributions of Al-Kindi with specific reference to Bayt Al-Hikma, and
- iii. proffer the commendable points from Bayt Al-Hikma, and Contributions of Al-Kindi for the contemporary and future generations while concluding.

1.2. Brief Biography of Al-Kindi

Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq-Sabbah al-Kindi was born in Kufa to an aristocratic family of the Kinda tribe, descended from the chieftain al-Ash'ath ibn Qays, one of the companion of Prophet (S.A.W.) (Crone, 1980:110-11). His father Ishaq was the governor of Kufa, and al-Kindi received his preliminary education there, and later furthered his studies in Baghdad. (Sami, H., n.d.:329)

2.0 Brief Historical Background of Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom)

In 766 the caliph al-Mansur founded his new capital of Baghdad, caliph Harun al-Rashid (ruled from 786 to 809) established a library in Baghdad where manuscripts were collected from ancient Athens and Alexandria, these manuscripts include Greek mathematical and scientific texts. Caliph Al-Mamun (813–833), established a research institute known as Bayt Al-Hikma which applies a program of translating the manuscript into Arabic (Aysha *et al* 2015:np).

Staff in the Bayt Al-Hikma, include: Translators, Scientist, Scribes, Authors, Writers, and Copyist. The languages spoken, read and written in Bayt Al-Hikma include Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, Latin, and Indian. The major contribution of Bayt Al Hikma is translating books into Arabic. The most prominent translators were; the renowned scholar Abu Yusuf Ya'qub Al-Kindi who was a physician, philosopher, mathematician, geometer, logician, and astronomer. He translated the works of Aristotle. He had his own personal library at home, which was referred to as “*Al-Kindiya*”; Youhanna bin Al-Batriq Al-Turjuman also translated Book of Animals (*Kitab Al-Haywan*) by Aristotle; Hunayn bin Ishaq (Isaac) Al'Ibadi translated many books from Farsi, Greek and Syriac; Muhammad bin Musa Al-Khawarizmi; Thabit bin Qurra were also among the translators. (Aysha, *et al* 2015:n.p)

The house of wisdom had crucial role to play in linking the Islamic world fronts in east and west and in introducing the heritage in its perfect form to Muslims in order to preserve it from loss and deterioration. Meanwhile, the house of wisdom had gained a great fame in the Islamic world for it was the first scientific and educational of its kind, thus, it assembled scientists, scholars and translators, and researchers (Adel & Mawloud, 2017:184). House of wisdom had become an exemplary model for other Caliphs and princes who tried to simulate and to found new libraries that can compete with the one in Baghdad, this contest had attained intellectual and scientific advancements in every sphere in the Islamic world. (Adel & Mawloud, 2017:184).

3.0 Some of the Islamic Philosophical Contributions of Al-Kindi

At the end of the first century (A.H.), Islamic translators initiated the translation activities; however, the translation movement started from the middle of the second century and reached its heyday in the third centuries (A.H.), and that referred to as the Golden Age of Islam and continued until the end of fifth century (A.H.), and thereby, Muslims were engaged in translating scientific, philosophical, literary and religious works of the ancient civilizations for more than three centuries. They took the advantage of the languages of that time, which include Hebrew, Syriac, Persian, Latin and the most importantly Greek. A scientific center called the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma) was established for sheltering the translators and preserving their works (Rahim. *et al* 2012:1274)

The effort of Al-Kindi particularly at the House of Wisdom attracted many researchers to be committed and engaged in striving to know the number of his works, apparently, such could not be precisely stated, but it is clearly known that Al-Kindi has done an assortment of important works, though, he has a very good background that elevated him to be employed at the House of Wisdom, but his contact to Greek Works, translation and interpretation of such works to Arabic has contributed to his vast knowledge in different aspects, and corroborated his effort to have numerous works. Educationally Al-Kindi wrote more than two hundred and thirty nine titles including books and short treatises (Amber, 2004:361). However, according to Ibn al-Nadim, al-Kindi wrote at least two hundred and sixty books, among which thirty two books were on geometry, twenty two books on medicine, and twenty two books on philosophy, nine books on logic, and twelve books on physics (Klein-Frank, *et al* 2001:172-3). With philosophical notion, Al-Kindi is credited with writing two hundred and forty one books in the different disciplines, among the books, nine were on logic, eleven on mathematics, sixteen on astronomy, twelve on physics, thirty two on geometry, twenty two on medicine, seven on music, and many on Philosophy. (Nazeer, A., 2018:n.p.),

However, some of the survived works of Al-Kindi include; On First Philosophy, On the Intellect, Discourse on the Soul, On Sleep and Dream, On Dispelling Sorrows, On the Definitions and Descriptions of Things, On the Proximate Agent Cause of Generation and Corruption, On the Bowing of the Outermost Sphere, Benefits for Bodies and Souls, On the Oneness of God and On the Quiddity of What Cannot be Infinite, and On the Prostration of the Outermost Sphere (Adamson, n.d.: n.p)

The central theme underpinning al-Kindi's philosophical writings is the compatibility between philosophy and other Islamic sciences, particularly theology. Among the important role he played was making philosophy available and accessible to Muslim intellectuals. This made him to be known as the *Philosopher of Arab*. Many contemporary scholars failed to imitate the most attractive effort of Al-Kindi by translating significant works. There are many important books written in English language, but some of local learned people in both urban and rural areas who could not understand English language do not have access to. If researchers could be able to translate some published articles, books, and other written documents to Arabic language, or a specific native language, such knowledge would be useful and utilized widely. It is rampant to have many books originally written in Arabic translated in to English, French, Chinese, or any other popular language, but translations into Arabic and native languages are very view, and mainly found in Arab countries.

Thus, translation means rendering of something into another language or into one's own from another language (Dictionary.com 2018). Islamic Education is originally being thought in Arabic language, and therefore, formal and or informal knowledge of Islam is being understood and learned from its original Arabic source or accurately translated to the language of a specific community (the native language). For a message to be properly conveyed, there must be clear understanding of language, the greatest contribution of Al-Kindi to the development of Islamic philosophy was his efforts to make Greek thought both accessible and acceptable to Muslim audience. He carried out this mission from the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma), an institute of translation and learning patronized by the Abbasid Caliphs, in Baghdad. (Corbin, 1993:155)

Al-Kindi translated many important texts, much of what was to become standard Arabic philosophical vocabulary. Indeed, if it had not been for him, the work of philosophers like Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and al-Ghazali might not have been possible (Adamson, 2006:32-33) Thus, he simplifies the raise of many important scholars and philosophers to the interplay of Islamic philosophical knowledge.

4.0 Some of Al-Kindi's Philosophical views

Al-Kindi's philosophical view derived from the works of Greek philosophers ignites the inception of Muslim Philosophers to come into philosophical discussion. In his writings, Al-Kindi believed revelation was a superior source of knowledge to reason because it guaranteed matters of faith that reason could not uncover. He successfully incorporated Aristotelian and neo-Platonist thought into an Islamic philosophical framework. This was an important factor in the introduction and popularization of Greek philosophy in the Muslim intellectual world. (Klein-Frank *et al*, 2001:166-7).

According to Al-Kindi, the goal of metaphysics is the knowledge of God. For this reason, he does not make a clear distinction between philosophy and theology, because he believes they are both concerned with the same subject (Adamson, 2006:34). Central to Al-Kindi's understanding of metaphysics is God's absolute oneness, which he considers an attribute uniquely associated with God and therefore not shared with anything else. By this, he means that while we may think of any existent thing as being "one", it is in fact both "one" and "many". For example, he says that while a body is one, it is also composed of many different parts. A person might say "I see an elephant", by which he means "he saw one elephant", but the term 'elephant' refers to a species of animal that contains many. Therefore, only God is absolutely one, both in being and in concept, lacking any multiplicity whatsoever. Some feel this understanding entails a very rigorous negative theology because it implies that any description which can be predicated to anything else cannot be said about God (Leaman, 1999:21).

In addition to absolute oneness, Al-Kindi also described God as the Creator. He described that God acts as both a final and efficient cause. Unlike later Muslim Neo-Platonic philosophers who asserted that the universe existed as a result of God's existence (Klein-Frank, *et al*, 2001:67).

Al-Kindi also theorized that there was a separate, incorporeal and universal intellect (known as the "First Intellect"). It was the first of God's creation and the intermediary through which all other things came into creation (Klein-Frank, *et al*, 2001:168). It was also crucial to al-Kindi's epistemology,

which was influenced by Platonic realism. According to Plato, everything that exists in the material world corresponds to certain universal forms in the heavenly realm. These forms are really abstract concepts such as a species, quality or relation, which apply to all physical objects and beings. For example, a red apple has the quality of "redness" derived from the appropriate universal. However, al-Kindi says that human intellects are only potentially able to comprehend these. This potential is actualized by the First Intellect, which is perpetually thinking about all of the universals (Adamson, 2006:40-41).

To explain his theory, he made example of wood and fire. Wood, he argues, is potentially hot (just as a human is potentially thinking about a universal), and therefore requires something else which is already hot (such as fire) to actualize this. This means that for the human intellect to think about something, the First Intellect must already be thinking about it. Therefore, he says that the First Intellect must always be thinking about everything. Once the human intellect comprehends a universal by this process, it becomes part of the individual's "acquired intellect" (Adamson, 2006:40).

Al-Kindi viewed that prophecy and philosophy were two different routes to arrive at the truth. He contrasts the two positions in four ways. Firstly, while a person must undergo a long period of training and study to become a philosopher, prophecy is bestowed upon someone by God. Secondly, the philosopher must arrive at the truth by his own devices (and with great difficulty), whereas the prophet has the truth revealed to him by God. Thirdly, the understanding of the prophet being divinely revealed is clearer and more comprehensive than that of the philosopher. Fourthly, the way in which the prophet is able to express this understanding to the ordinary people is superior. Therefore, al-Kindi says the prophet is superior in two fields: the ease and certainty with which he receives the truth, and the way in which he presents it. However, the crucial implication is that the content of the Prophet's and the philosopher's knowledge is the same, as he described both as ways of arriving to the truth (Corbin, 1993:156).

In addition to this, al-Kindi adopted a naturalistic view of prophetic visions. He argued that, through the faculty of "imagination" as conceived of in Aristotelian philosophy, certain "pure" and well-prepared souls were able to receive information about future events. Significantly, he does not attribute such visions or dreams to revelation from God, but instead explains that imagination enables human beings to receive the "form" of something without needing to perceive the physical entity to which it refers. It is precisely this idea, amongst other naturalistic explanations of prophetic miracles that al-Ghazali attacks in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. (Adamson, 2006:47).

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Al-Kindi was a master of many different areas of thought and was held to be one of the greatest Islamic philosophers of his time. His influences in the fields of knowledge were far-reaching and lasted for several centuries. Al-Kindi was unique in his knowledge of all the ancient sciences. His books deal with different sciences, such as logic, philosophy, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy etc. He is connected with the natural philosophers. Al-Kindi's major contribution was his establishment of philosophy in the Islamic world and his efforts in trying to harmonize the philosophical investigation along with the Islamic theology and creed. Therefore, his greatest contribution to the development of Islamic philosophy was his efforts to make Greek thought both accessible and acceptable to Muslim audience by translating and simplifying works into Arabic for Muslim audience of not only his time, but also of the contemporary time. His exertions capitalized from the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma) which was founded in the effort of Abbasid Caliphs particularly Al-Mamun. Services rendered at Bayt Al-Hikma immensely contributed in the understanding, preservation, and dissemination of important knowledge among Muslim. The importance of the interrelation of Al-Kindi and Bayt Al-Hikma in educational process is vital and indispensable. As such, it is recommended that:

- i. Establishment of reliable saving sections of research works preserved knowledge, and thus, makes it useful for many generations. Byat Al-Hikma restored intellectual works, and brought them in to use for different people of different tribes and languages. Arabs in particular, and the globe at large, is benefitting from theses scientific, philosophical, social, cultural, and economical knowledge derived from the services rendered at Bayt al-Hikma. Establishment, preservation, and utilization of similar centers, libraries, and institutions are therefore recommended. These would give access for the future generation to have knowledge of

- intellectual works, and help in furthering research.
- ii. The contemporary Muslim scholars should put more effort in understanding different language to have access to different kind of knowledge, due to the fact that knowledge is a lost property of a Muslim believer, and thus, intellectual works has been carried out in different languages without which one could not have access to.
 - iii. Al-Kindi is known to be a peripatetic Muslim scholar and philosopher, for that, he obtained vast knowledge of different aspect including Science of the *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, geometry, medicine, philosophy, music, logic, and physics among many others. The contemporary Muslim scholars should therefore have knowledge of not only their environment, but also different places, locations, and countries, this would aid accumulation of useful knowledge that can only be obtained at diaspora.
 - iv. Useful knowledge should if obtained, convey to the understanding of Muslim audience. This would enhance Islamic educational development of individual, community, state, and the globe at large. Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, Latin, and Indian, were known to be among the languages used at Bayt al-Hikma, these does not limit the translation or interpretation of knowledge to or from these languages, but also expressed the importance of simplifying and dissemination of useful knowledge. It is therefore, urged to encourage translation and interpretation of works to the understanding language of particular community or country as did at Bayt al-Hikma where many books were translated into different languages including Arabic as partook by Al-Kindi.

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