

HANDBOOK OF QUR'ĀNIC HERMENEUTICS

VOL. 3: QUR'ĀNIC HERMENEUTICS
FROM THE 13TH TO THE 19TH CENTURY

Edited by Georges Tamer



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Georges Tamer

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Muḥyī d-Dīn b. ‘Arabī

Gregory Vandamme

1 Introduction

Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. al-‘Arabī ṭ-Ṭā’ī l-Ḥātimī (1065–1240/560–638)¹ is certainly one of the most prominent figures of classical Sufi literature. Ibn ‘Arabī’s importance in the development of Sufi thought stems from his unique capacity to synthesize and enhance the doctrines and technical vocabulary of early Sufism, found in the writings of seminal figures such as Dhū n-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 856/245), Sahl at-Tustarī (d. 896/283) or Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 910/298).² But the scope of his numerous works goes far beyond the area of Sufism; rather, as Chittick observed, Ibn ‘Arabī actually addresses “every intellectual dimension of Islam” in a way that is “both intensely loyal to the tradition and exceedingly innovative.”³

Ibn ‘Arabī’s sophisticated works aroused such strong enthusiasm that he was later entitled *ash-Shaykh al-Akbar* (“the greatest master”) by his admirers. On the other hand, his thought-provoking works have been repeatedly placed at the center of polemical discussions about the “orthodoxy” of Sufi doctrines, often simply repeating the primary objections formulated by Taqī d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya (d. 1328/728).⁴ Despite those polemics, the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī on Islamic intellectual history remained undoubtedly strong, particularly in the Ottoman and Persianate worlds, through the numerous commentaries on his works written by significant figures such as Ṣadr ad-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274/673), ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Kashānī (d. 1330/730), Dāwūd

1 He is usually called “Ibn ‘Arabī” instead of the original “Ibn al-‘Arabī”, in order to distinguish him from the Andalusian jurist, Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī, see Stephen Hirtenstein, “Manuscripts of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Works: Names and Titles of Ibn (al-)‘Arabī,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* 41, (2007): 109–29.

2 For a succinct but profound overview on Ibn ‘Arabī’s life and thought, see Claude Addas, *Ibn Arabī et le voyage sans retour* (Paris: Points, 1996), and William C. Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabī: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005). These authors also wrote what are the most important scientific biographies and doctrinal synthesis on Ibn ‘Arabī to this day: Claude Addas, *Ibn ‘Arabī ou la quête du soufre rouge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), and William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New-York Press, 1989), and *The Self-Disclosure of God: principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmology* (Albany: State University of New-York Press, 1998). We must also mention here the important book by James W. Morris, *The Reflective Heart. Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Meccan Illuminations* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005).

3 William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London & New-York: Routledge, 2001), 497–98.

4 For an overview of these polemics, see Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition. The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New-York Press, 1999).

al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350/751), ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1412/815), and ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Jāmī (d. 1492/898).⁵

2 Life and Works

Ibn ‘Arabī was born in Murcia, Andalusia in 1165/560, to a prominent noble family linked to the local ruler and subsequently to the Almohad government, when they moved to Seville. After years of living the usual life of the elite youth, receiving a traditional education and enjoying various earthly pleasures, the young Ibn ‘Arabī experienced an existential crisis and spiritual calling that lead him to abandon his former life in order to devote himself to the spiritual path.⁶ Most of his adult life was then spent in travels, first between the Maghreb and Andalusia until 598/1201, and later through Hijaz and the Middle East, until he settled in Damascus in 620/1223, where he died in 638/1240. Ibn ‘Arabī was a very prolific writer. Although more than three hundred titles were ascribed to him,⁷ scholarship now considers 120 books to be a more accurate number. Among those, we find various short treatises and epistles (some gathered in various *Rasā’il* volumes), longer works such as his famous *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* and *Mawāqī‘ an-nujūm*, and a vast spiritual encyclopedia: *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*.

The unique writing style of Ibn ‘Arabī blends a large variety of intertwined genres: precise theological and philosophical reflections are punctuated by poetry or allusive and symbolic comments, and discussions on Islamic jurisprudence are filled with metaphysical or astrological notions. His works can be linked to a large extent with previous Sufi literature. For example, in his *Futūḥāt*, the long chapter 73 is dedicated to answering the 157 questions posed by al-Ḥaḳīm at-Tirmidhī (d. 930/360) in his *Khatm al-awliyā’*, and the first chapters of the section on the *mu‘āmalāt* follow precisely the order found in the *Risāla* of ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 1072/465).⁸ This is

5 For more details on his overall influence on later Islamic thought, see the series of articles by James W. Morris “Ibn ‘Arabi and His Interpreters Part I: Recent French Translations”; “Ibn ‘Arabi and His Interpreters Part II: Influences and Interpretations”; “Ibn ‘Arabi and His Interpreters Part II (Conclusion): Influences and Interpretations,” *JAOS* 106, no. 3 (1986): 539–51; 106, no. 4 (1986): 733–56; 107, no. 1 (1987): 101–19. See also the Introduction of Michel Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage. Ibn ‘Arabī, le Livre et la Loi* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 17–37.

6 See Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* 4, vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, no date), 4: 552. From now on cited: *Fut.* vol., pages.

7 See Osman Yahya, *Histoire et classification de l’œuvre d’Ibn ‘Arabī. Étude critique*, 2 vols. (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1964).

8 See Michel Chodkiewicz, “*Mīrāj al-kalima*. De la *Risāla Qushayriyya* aux *Futūḥāt Makkiyya*,” in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam. Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought. Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt*, ed. Todd Lawson (London/New-York: I.B. Tauris/The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005), 248–61.

not to mention the frequent references and quotations of both renowned and obscure Sufi figures throughout his works.

In addition to classical Sufi literature, intertextuality with more peculiar texts pertaining to the Andalusian milieu in which Ibn 'Arabī grew up can also be found in his works: he avowedly wrote his *at-Tadbīrāt al-ilāhiyya* as a spiritual comment to the famous pseudo-Aristotelian *Sirr al-asrār*,⁹ and he commented on passages of the *Khal' an-na'layn*, written by the proclaimed “Imam” who rebelled against the Almoravids, Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn b. al-Qāsi (d. 1151/546). Special attention should be given to the ambiguous case of the *Mu'tabirūn* (i.e. the proponents of a hermeneutical method called *i'tibār*, that could be translated as “symbolic transposition”), which is sometimes considered as a distinctive movement, although it has often been simply reduced to an Andalusian expression of Sufism.¹⁰ Its two major proponents, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Masarra (d. 931/319) and Abū l-Ḥakam b. Barraḡān (d. 1141/536), are quoted by Ibn 'Arabī in several works. The latter wrote a treatise on the divine names that seems to foretell the formulation of this central doctrine in Ibn 'Arabī's works, and more notably two Qur'ānic commentaries based on the notion of *i'tibār*, according to which both Revelation and Creation need to be interpreted in a spiritual sense. This approach will be extensively used by Ibn 'Arabī in his own Qur'ānic hermeneutics.¹¹ The *Mu'tabirūn* also developed an elaborate use of the science of letters (*ilm al-ḥurūf*) in their hermeneutics. This is already found in early Sufism, as shown in the compilation of references given by 'Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Sulamī (d. 1021/412) in his Qur'ānic commentary.¹² An epistle attributed – probably erroneously – to Sahl at-Tustarī was used by Ibn Masarra to write his own treatise on the subject, the *Kitāb Khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, in which he depicts the Arabic letters as the fundamental elements of the universe, giving a special importance to the fourteen “isolated” letters opening twenty-nine chapters of the Qur'ān.¹³ A very similar cosmological use of those letters will be found in the very dense second chapter of Ibn 'Arabī's *Futūḥāt*, dedicated to the science of letters.

9 See Ibn 'Arabī, *at-Tadbīrāt al-ilāhiyya fī iṣlāḥ al-mamlaka al-insāniyya*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2003), 20.

10 See Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barraḡān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

11 See Denis Gril, “La ‘lecture supérieure’ du Coran selon Ibn Barraḡān”, *AR* 47 (2000): 510–22; Denis Gril, “L’interprétation par transposition symbolique (*i'tibār*), selon Ibn Barraḡān et Ibn 'Arabī”, in *Symbolisme et herméneutique dans la pensée d'Ibn 'Arabī. Actes du colloque*, ed. Bakri Aladdin (Damascus: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2007), 147–61. See also José Bellver, “Ibn Barraḡān and Ibn 'Arabī on the prediction of the capture of Jerusalem in 583/1187 by Saladin,” *AR* 61, nos. 3–4 (2014): 252–86.

12 See Jean-Jacques Thibon, “L’herméneutique de Sulamī annonce-t-elle celle d'Ibn 'Arabī?,” in *Symbolisme et herméneutique dans la pensée d'Ibn 'Arabī*, 21–39.

13 See Michael Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus. Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-'Arabī and the Ismā'īlī Tradition* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014) 12–13 and 61–64.

The Shaykh al-Akbar regularly mentions *kalām* or *fiqh* doctrines from various schools, but usually refuses to come out in favor of one party, mostly advocating for a synthetic position without entering in a proper scholastic discussion. Although a number of textual and biographical elements seem to denote a certain attachment of Ibn ‘Arabī to the Zāhirī school of *fiqh*, through the works of his fellow country man Abū Muḥammad ‘Alī b. Ḥazm (d. 1054/456), this attachment should be carefully qualified, as Addas recently showed.¹⁴

Regardless of the variety of those influences, the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī should be seen overall as a synthesis and enhancement of earlier Sufi doctrines, rather than as an idiosyncratic and original appropriation of that heritage blended with miscellaneous heterogenic sources. His hermeneutical method does not sensibly differ from what we can find in the most seminal Sufi works of the previous generations, in that he stresses above all the need to base one’s understanding of every reality on one’s spiritual experience, rather than on the unquestioned adoption (*taqlīd*) of concepts and doctrines. The emphasis on actual spiritual realization (*taḥqīq*) is therefore at the core of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Qur’ānic Hermeneutics.

3 Ibn ‘Arabī’s Qur’ānic Hermeneutics: Approaching God through the Text

Qur’ānic hermeneutics is at the very center of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought. His oeuvre, taken in its entirety, could be considered as one immense commentary on the Qur’ān, approached by every perspective at hand: metaphysics, cosmology, linguistics, poetry, and even what one might call “mythology.”¹⁵ As he himself declares: “Everything we talk about – in my gatherings and my writings – comes from the presence of the Qur’ān and its treasures”.¹⁶

¹⁴ Claude Addas, “The ‘Radiant Way’. Ibn ‘Arabī and the Interpretation of the Law. Part I: The Legacy of Ibn Hazm”; “The ‘Radiant Way’. Ibn ‘Arabī and the Interpretation of the Law. Part II: The Law and its Interpretation,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* 65 (2019): 29–57; 66 (2019): 39–76.

¹⁵ See the “mythic dialectic” analyzed in Michael A. Sells, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Garden among the Flames: A Reevaluation,” *History of Religions* 23, no. 4 (May, 1984): 287–315, and Michael Ebstein, “‘In Truth You Are the Polytheist!’: Mythic Elements in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Teachings on the Divine Names,” *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 6 (2018): 359–87.

¹⁶ *Fut.* 3: 334.

3.1 Intertextuality between Ibn 'Arabī's Works and the Qur'ān

The intricate relation between the Qur'ānic text and Ibn 'Arabī's writings appears at least on three different levels. First, his abundant borrowing from the vocabulary and phrasing of the Revelation: his works are filled with direct quotations, and even more with allusions to Qur'ānic verses and motifs, not always obvious to a reader who is not as familiar with the Revelation as were Ibn 'Arabī and his audience. Second, his mimetic use of the perplexing structure – some might consider it an absence of structure – of the Qur'ānic text: Ibn 'Arabī's writings are far less systematically articulated than those of the Aristotelian philosophers for example, but the apparent disarray usually hides intentional cross-references and patterns, most of them directly related to the structure of the Qur'ānic text itself, as Miftāḥ and Chodkiewicz brilliantly showed.¹⁷ Third, Ibn 'Arabī draws from the Revelation itself one of his core conceptions, that is the intrinsic correlation between the “signs” (*āyāt*) – i.e. everything that can be known – in Qur'ān, Cosmos, and Human Being itself.¹⁸ When we take this last point into account, we understand that the nature of the commentary proposed by Ibn 'Arabī depends heavily on the correlation between the Qur'ānic text and those two analogous elements. In a certain way, he extended the approach of the *i'tibār* by adding a third object of contemplation and symbolic transposition, which is that of the human psychological and spiritual reality in itself.

No particular work of Ibn 'Arabī could be considered as a compendium of his Qur'ānic hermeneutics, and we have to look throughout his vast literary production in order to compile his different views on the Revelation.¹⁹ Historically authenticated *ijāzāt* indicate however that he wrote at least three Qur'ānic commentaries: *al-Jam' wa-t-tafṣīl fī asrār ma'ānī t-tanzīl* (sixty-four exegetical volumes covering the text until the middle of sura al-Kahf (the Cave, Q 18:59)), which is unfortunately lost; the *I'jāz al-bayān fī t-tarjama 'an al-Qur'ān*, which covers up to Q 2:253;²⁰ and the *Ishārāt al-Qur'ān fī 'ālam al-insān*, which provides elliptical allusions commenting on various verses presented in the canonical order of the chapters, and which was apparently written as an appendix to his *Kitāb at-tanazzulāt al-Mawṣiliyya*.²¹ It should be noted that none of these commentaries corresponds to the so called *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī* widely edited in the Muslim world, which is actually 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Kāshānī's *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*.

17 See Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, and 'Abd al-Bāqī Miftāḥ, *al-Mafātīḥ al-Qur'āniyya li-Kitāb at-Tarājīm wa-li-Kitāb ash-Shāhid li-Ibn 'Arabī* (Damascus: Dār Naynawā, 2019).

18 See Q 41:53: “We will show them our signs (*āyātina*) on the horizons and in themselves (or “in their souls”) (*fī anfusihim*) until it becomes clear to them that it is the Real”. (Translations from the Qur'ān are mine).

19 See for instance the compilation by Maḥmūd Ghurāb, *Raḥma min ar-Raḥmān fī tafsīr wa-ishārāt al-Qur'ān min kalām ash-shaykh al-akbar Muḥyī d-Dīn b. 'Arabī*, 4 vols. (Damascus: n.e., 1989).

20 For an edition of the text, see the first volume of Ghurāb, *Raḥma min ar-Raḥmān*.

21 For an edition of the text, see 'Abd al-Bāqī Miftāḥ, *Shurūḥ 'alā Kitāb Ishārāt al-Qur'ān fī 'ālam al-insān* (Damascus: Dār Naynawā, 2016).

In addition to those commentaries, several other works directly or indirectly comment on the Qur'ānic text. In his *Diwān*, a continued series of one hundred and fourteen poems are said to be inspired by “the spirits of the Qur'ānic chapters” (*arwāḥ as-suwar*).²² The fourth section of the *Futūḥāt*, covering chapters 280 to 393, is also based on the one hundred and fourteen chapters of the Qur'ān. Each chapter of this section is dedicated to a particular spiritual “dwelling place” (*manzil*) which is linked to a Qur'ānic chapter, following a reverse order (from sura 114, *an-Nās* (Mankind) to sura one, *al-Fātiḥa* (The Opening)).²³ Unlike the poems from the *Diwān*, the link between those chapters and the Qur'ān is not clearly stated in the section, and Ibn 'Arabī seems to expect his readers to discover by themselves the correlation. This kind of hermeneutical test seems to be part of Ibn 'Arabī's pedagogical plan to make the reader increasingly aware of the hidden intricacies of the Qur'ānic text itself: “The formalist scholar (*‘ālim ar-rusūm*) does not see (such verses) as correlated, because this belongs to the knowledge (*‘ilm*) of God. Yet we know that there is a correlation, even if it is deeply hidden”.²⁴ Several works of Ibn 'Arabī show a secret affinity with a particular passage of the Qur'ān, as for example the hidden relation between the various theophanies described in the *Kitāb at-Tajalliyāt* and the verses of the second sura of the Qur'ān, *al-Baqara* (The Cow).²⁵ As shown in the works of Chodkiewicz, the correlations between different passages of Ibn 'Arabī's writings revolving around the same Qur'ānic verse reveal in the last analysis a hidden pattern in his entire oeuvre.²⁶

3.2 Revelation, Manifestation and Allusion

For Ibn 'Arabī, the Qur'ānic revelation is to be considered as a particular modality of the universal Self-Manifestation of God. It is precisely named “*Qur'ān*” – from the root *q-r-* that carries the meaning of reading or recitation, but also of collecting and gathering – because it provides the hermeneutical keys to unify all the signs (*‘alam*, pl. *a'lām*) composing the universe (*‘ālam*). But it is also named “*Furqān*”²⁷ – from the root *f-r-q* that carries the meaning of division and distinction – because it provides the distinctive criterion that allows us to distinguish between the Creator, the Creation, and the different levels of Manifestation.²⁸ These two aspects are considered by Ibn 'Arabī

22 Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 104.

23 Ibid., 86–90

24 *Fut.* 3: 200.

25 Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 109–16.

26 Ibid., 118.

27 See Q 2:185 where it is directly associated with the descent of Revelation: “The month of Ramadan is the one in which the Qur'ān was sent down as guidance for mankind (*nās*), the explanation of the guidance, and the distinguishing-criterion (*al-Furqān*)”.

28 See *Fut.* 2: 88, and Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 240–41.

to be linked to the classical articulation between the outward or extrinsic (*ẓāhir*) and the inward or intrinsic (*bāṭin*) aspects of every reality. The Revelation is thus *Furqān* in its extrinsic aspect, in that it is made of distinctive letters, words and formulations, and it is *Qur'ān* in its intrinsic aspect, in that it carries universal meanings pointing to a unique Reality.

The hermeneutical method of Ibn 'Arabī consists therefore in a twofold approach to the Qur'ānic text, oscillating between the scrutiny of its apparent literal form and the scrutiny of the inner experience of the reader: "God – Most-High – said: 'We will show them our signs (*āyāt*) on the horizons and in themselves' (Q 41:53), which means 'the verses (*āyāt*) that are bestowed concerning the horizons and concerning themselves.' Every revealed verse therefore has two aspects: an aspect which they see within themselves, and an aspect which they see outside of themselves."²⁹ In other words, the Qur'ānic verses are providing synthetic allusions, that concern our experience of both the outside world and our own interiority.

This is why chapter 54 of the *Futūḥāt* is entirely dedicated to "knowledge of the allusions" (*ma'rifat al-ishārāt*).³⁰ Ibn 'Arabī explains there the difference between the exegetical approach of the "People of God" (*ahl Allāh*) and that of the "formalist scholars" (*'ulamā' ar-rusūm*). According to the Shaykh al-Akbar, the first are those who keep the balance between the interior and exterior aspects of the Qur'ānic verses, whereas the second "have preferred this world to the next, and the side of Creation to the side of the Real."³¹ The People of God, Ibn 'Arabī explains, name their exegetical method "allusions" (*ishārāt*)³² rather than "exegesis" (*tafsīr*), in order to prevent the condemnations of the formalist scholars, but their respective approach to the Qur'ānic text differs even more radically, in that People of God consider that their understanding must necessarily come from the same source as Revelation itself, rather than from their own human endeavor. In short, according to Ibn 'Arabī, the understanding of the Qur'ān presented by the People of God in their commentaries (*shurūḥ*) is revealed to them, and its formulation is nothing but a rendition of their direct experience of the text. It is therefore not the fruit of an intellectual process, nor a blind imitation of the understanding of their predecessors. This is exemplified precisely in the fact that, according to Ibn 'Arabī, the technical vocabulary (*iṣṭilāḥ*) they use in their commen-

²⁹ *Fut.* 1: 279.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 278–81. See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 246–50, and Kristin Zahra Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qur'ān in Classical Islam* (London/ New-York: Routledge, 2006) 39–41.

³¹ *Fut.* 1: 279.

³² This notion is already found in early Sufi sources. See for instance Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj aṭ-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Lum'a*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (Cairo: Maktabat ath-Thaqāfa ad-Dīniyya, 2002) 147–48. A famous example of a Qur'ānic commentary named after this notion is Qushayrī's *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*. On the specificity of Sufi exegesis, see Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries*, and Sara Sviri, "The Countless Faces of Understanding: On *Instinbāt*, Mystical Listening and Sufi Exegesis," in *The Spirit and the Letter. Approaches to the Esoteric Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, eds. Annabel Keeler and Sajjad Rizvi (Oxford/ New-York: Oxford University Press/Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2016) 51–85.

taries is not a “code” that could be taught or learned. It is only when one experiences by oneself the very reality to which a precise technical term refers that one understands the allusion of the text. This peculiar conception of terminology, Ibn ‘Arabī adds, is one of the characteristic features of the way of the People of God, and is nowhere to be found in other sciences.

The principle of “allusion” is actually rooted in the very nature of existence itself for Ibn ‘Arabī. Those who realize the true, unique and divine nature of being are forced to acknowledge the incapacity of language to tell things as they are in themselves. Our experience of the reality of being, as well as our repeated and always frustrating attempts to formulate an adequate ontology should lead us to realize that every formulation is nothing other than an “allusion”: “There is nothing in being (*wujūd*)³³ except God, whereas we are brought into existence (*mawjūdīn*). Our being is therefore by Him, and the one whose being is by another is under the rule of non-being (*‘adam*). The allusion is therefore established, and its rule appears: the clarification (*bayān*) of what is intended by it is inevitable.”³⁴

3.3 Interpreting the Text as an “Illiterate”

The foundational role of allusion probably explains why Ibn ‘Arabī is so reluctant about the use of the term “*ta’wīl*” and the kind of rational hermeneutical method to which it refers in his view. Contrary to the insistence of Henry Corbin on the centrality of the notion in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought,³⁵ we find the latter considering the “active” exegetical inquiry as the lowest level of interpretation, whereas the “passive” inspiration of those who are directly taught by God is the only exegetical approach that conforms to the famous Qur’ānic verse: “No one knows its interpretation (*ta’wīl*), except God and those firmly rooted in knowledge” (Q 3:7). In Ibn ‘Arabī’s own words, the former “makes the Book lie down after it had been standing” while the latter “makes the Book stand up after it had been lying down”.³⁶ Here again, we see how for Ibn ‘Arabī, the spiritual experience prevails over any doctrinal formulation or belief. This ex-

33 On the notion of *wujūd* in Ibn ‘Arabī and its ontological implications, see Gregory Vandamme, “L’ontologie corrélatrice d’Ibn ‘Arabī. Métaphysique de l’être et de ses relations”, in *La non-dualité: Perspectives philosophiques, scientifiques, spirituelles*, ed. Jean-Michel Counet (Louvain: Peeters, 2021) 89–102. On the legacy of the notion, see William C. Chittick, “Rūmī and *waḥdat al-wujūd*,” in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, eds. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian, and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 70–111.

34 *Fut.* 1: 279.

35 See the remarks in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 199–202. See also Michel Chodkiewicz, “Ibn ‘Arabī dans l’œuvre d’Henry Corbin,” in *Henry Corbin: philosophies et sagesse des religions du livre. Actes du colloque Henry Corbin, Sorbonne, les 6–8 novembre 2003*, eds. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Christian Jambet, and Pierre Lory (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 81–91.

36 *Fut.* 2: 644. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 54.

plains why the only valid form of *ta'wīl* is that which comes as a direct inspiration from God, and not as the fruit of an intellectual effort.

In Ibn 'Arabī's view, everyone should address the Qur'ān as an "illiterate" (*ummī*, or literally: "as one has been conceived by one's mother"³⁷), just as the Prophet who received the revelation is described in Q 7:158. But this does not mean that we should not use our rational faculties to understand the text, as long as one "does not employ one's rational examination and intellectual judgment to extract meanings and secrets which it embraces", and as long as "the heart is safe from reflective consideration."³⁸ In other words, to approach the Qur'ān as an "illiterate" consists in being able to suspend our rational preconceptions, in order to let the text provoke a spiritual experience that encompasses all the dimensions of the human reality.

Finally, it is also notable that, although Ibn 'Arabī considers the Qur'ān as the ultimate and all-comprehensive form of revelation, he nevertheless includes the other sacred books – at least those mentioned in the Qur'ān itself – in his hermeneutics of Revelation: "Every aspect of a verse from the Word of God – whether it be from the *Furqān*, the Torah, the Psalms (*zabūr*), the Gospel, or the Scrolls (*ṣaḥīfa*) – that can be supported by anyone who knows that language, is actually intended by God – Most-High – for that interpreter, because of his encompassing knowledge."³⁹ Ibn 'Arabī's use of the distinctive name "*Furqān*" in this passage seems to allude to the all-comprehensiveness of the "*Qur'ān*," in which are included the other revelations. The *Furqān* thus designates the *Qur'ān* considered as distinct from the previous revelations, whereas the *Qur'ān* is nothing but the *Furqān* considered as comprehending them all.

4 Travelling by the Qur'ān

The inspirational understanding of the Qur'ān should be considered as being part of the Revelation itself in Ibn 'Arabī's view. In what is probably one of his earliest works, "The Book of Uncovering the Results of the Journeys" (*Kitāb al-Isfār 'an natā'ij al-asfār*),⁴⁰ Ibn 'Arabī presents the process of revelation as an ongoing travel, in which everyone is still invited to participate.

³⁷ See for instance Q 16:78.

³⁸ *Fut.* 2: 644. See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 235.

³⁹ *Fut.* 2: 119.

⁴⁰ Ibn 'Arabī, *Kitāb al-Isfār 'an natā'ij al-asfār. Le dévoilement des effets du voyage*, ed. and trans. Denis Gril (Combas: L'éclat, 1994), XI–XII; and Ibn 'Arabī, *The Secrets of Voyaging. Kitāb al-Isfār 'an natā'ij al-asfār*, trans. Angela Jaffray (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2016). I will refer to the Arabic text provided by A. Jaffray (from now on: *Isfār*), as it is based on Gril's edition, partially collated with the (incomplete) autograph manuscript by Ibn 'Arabī, Yusuf Aga 4859, Yusuf Aga Library, Konya (Turkey). Translations are mine.

4.1 The Qur'ānic Journey

Ibn 'Arabī's depiction of "the journey of the glorious"⁴¹ Qur'ān (*al-Qur'ān al-'azīz*)⁴² is founded upon the verses: "We sent it down in the Night of Determination (*laylat al-qadr*)" (Q 97:1), and "We sent it down in the blessed night" (Q 44:3), and upon a well-known tradition, according to which that descent occurred in two different times, which represent for Ibn 'Arabī two distinct modalities of the descending journey of Revelation. As considered by the traditional exegesis,⁴³ the Qur'ān first descended all at once (*jumlatan wāḥidatan*) upon the heaven of this world (*as-samā' ad-dunyā*), before descending in a splintered way (*nujūman*)⁴⁴ on the heart of Muḥammad.⁴⁵ For Ibn 'Arabī, that second modality of descent never ceased, and never will cease, as long as the Qur'ān is "recited by the tongues, covertly or openly."⁴⁶ The Qur'ān is thus still journeying since its original descent, and the second moment – or modality – of that travel did not stop with Muḥammad: "In reality, the 'Night of Determination' is still ongoing for the servant, and it is (nothing other than) his soul (*nafs*) when it has been purified and refined."⁴⁷ From Ibn 'Arabī's perspective, the process of Revelation is still occurring to everyone who participates in the journey of the Qur'ān: "The Qur'ān never ceases to be sent down. Therefore, if a man were to say: 'The Qur'ān has been sent down on me!,' he would not have lied, for the Qur'ān does not cease to travel to the hearts of those who preserve it (*qulūb al-ḥāfiẓīna lahu*)."⁴⁸

The ongoing journey of the Qur'ān in its second modality of descent is in turn considered according to two different modalities by Ibn 'Arabī. He distinguishes between two types of descent: "the Qur'ān descending on the tongues," which remains hidden to the one who recites it "behind the veil of Nature"; and "the Qur'ān descended on the hearts," which "descends with the understanding" of its meaning. Such a conception of an inspired understanding of the Qur'ān, descending on the puri-

⁴¹ The root 'z-z carries the polysemic sense of being "tremendous", "powerful", "beyond compare", or "glorious". I have chosen the latter because it carries a theological aspect that combines the previous meanings.

⁴² *Isfār*, 58–61.

⁴³ See the various traditions in Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Medina: Majma' al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā'at al-Muḥṣaf ash-Sharīf, 2005), 268–75.

⁴⁴ Or, according to another transmission "*najman najman*", literally "bits by bits", or "star by star", the root *n-j-m* carrying the meaning of "star" or of "blade of grass". A. Jaffray translates it very poetically by "constellated fragments" (see *The Secrets of Voyaging*, 58), but I prefer to keep the more allusive and polysemic meaning of the Arabic term.

⁴⁵ See also Q 25:32: "The disbelievers say: 'Why is the Qur'ān not revealed to him all at once?' It is so, in order for Us to strengthen thereby your heart".

⁴⁶ *Isfār*, 58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 59. The word "*al-ḥāfiẓīna*" can also mean "those who memorize", and therefore actualize the journey of the Qur'ān in existence.

fied hearts of the spiritual elite, is already found in early Sufism, for example in the *Kitāb al-Luma'* of Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj (d. 988/378).⁴⁹ But, for Ibn 'Arabī, it has implications that even transcends the linguistic aspects of the text:

The one who receives the Qur'ān on his heart knows what he recites, even though it is in another tongue than his own. He knows the meanings of what he recites, even though he does not know the meaning of the terms elsewhere than in the Qur'ān. They do not belong to his language, but he understands it when he recites them.⁵⁰

As we can see here, this inner understanding of the meanings of the Qur'ān should definitely be linked to the method of allusion mentioned before.

4.2 The Perpetual Novelty of the Qur'ān

As a result, the Qur'ān that descends on the hearts is “always new and does not deteriorate, for it is the perpetual inspiration (*wahy*)”.⁵¹ This perpetual novelty implies for Ibn 'Arabī that “everybody finds in (the Qur'ān) what he desires; this is why the Shaykh Abū Madyān (Shu'ayb (d. 1194/590)) said: ‘The aspirant is not an aspirant unless he finds in the Qur'ān everything he desires.’”⁵² Thus, the reality of the Qur'ān cannot be restricted to any of its particular understandings, for Ibn 'Arabī. Rather, it encompasses all the understandings that its ongoing descend arouses: “Every speech that does not have that encompassing generality is not the Qur'ān in reality”.⁵³

If Ibn 'Arabī considers the Qur'ān as “an ocean without shore,”⁵⁴ it is not because he denies the constraints of its delimited external form, nor the heritage of the exegetical and linguistic traditions on which he himself relies abundantly. Rather, it is because those delimitations are the very water of that ocean, what makes the synthetic *Qur'ān* become the distinctive *Furqān*, when it reaches the “closest heaven” of the Cosmos and the Human Being. Such an approach to the Qur'ān does not regard the text as carrying determinate meanings. This would be an immobility in what is precisely regarded as an ever-moving reality. Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutical approach rather considers that our understanding must necessarily be renewed every time we read the text. As we have seen, the Qur'ān never ceases to descend on the hearts of those who welcome it, and this receptivity entails – among other things – that we constantly

⁴⁹ As-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma'*, 105–8.

⁵⁰ *Fut.* 3: 93–94. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 46–47

⁵¹ *Fut.* 3: 108.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Fut.* 2: 582. This idiomatic expression is an allusion to Q 18:109: “Say: ‘If the ocean were ink to (write down) the words of my Lord, the ocean would be exhausted before the words of my Lord, even if we brought a similar (ocean), for its aid’.”

renew our approach, by getting rid of the rational preconceptions that distance us from the ongoing instant of Revelation, and by coming back to our immediate experience of the text: “Inspiration is immediacy (*al-wahy huwa as-sur’a*)”.⁵⁵ As Ibn ‘Arabī declares in the *Futūḥāt*:

The servant whose inner vision (*baṣīra*) is illuminated – i.e., the one who is guided by ‘a light from his Lord’ (Q 39:22) – obtains, every time he recites a verse, a new understanding, distinct from that of his previous recitation and from what he will obtain in the next recitation (. . .) The one whose understanding is the same during two successive recitations (of the Qur’ān) is a loser. The one whose understanding is renewed at every instant is a winner. As for the one who recites without understanding anything: May God have mercy on him!⁵⁶

It follows that one should never restrict the level of comprehensiveness of a verse that is indefinite in its apparent wording, as the ambivalence of the discourse is intended by the divine speech, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s view. Ultimately, every possible interpretation of the Revelation is intended by the Qur’ānic text itself.⁵⁷ However, those interpretations should not be limited by one’s rational intellect, but should rather come as direct inspirations descending on one’s heart. In other words, one should address the Qur’ānic text as a passenger on the divine journey of Revelation, rather than travelling by oneself through the text: “Whoever is put into travel will be saved, and whoever travels without being put into travel is in danger.”⁵⁸ There are two types of travelers, according to Ibn ‘Arabī in his *Kitāb al-Isfār*: philosophers and their like, who are travelling through the reflection of their intellects, and therefore stray from the path of the divine journey, since they have no other guide than their rational faculty; and messengers, prophets, and the most elevated among the Friends of God (*awliyā*)⁵⁹, who have been “put into travel,” and therefore “realized the Real”.

5 Perplexity (*ḥayra*) and “Literalism”

The question remains: How are we supposed to be put into travel by the Qur’ān? The answer probably resides in what Ibn ‘Arabī considers to be the most perfect spiritual state: “Perplexity” (*ḥayra*). One of the most peculiar aspects of his Qur’ānic hermeneutics is that he considers that perfection of perplexity can only be attained through a literal approach of the text.

⁵⁵ *Fut.* 2: 78.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 128–29. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 47.

⁵⁷ See *Fut.* 1: 278–81, and Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 65–66.

⁵⁸ *Isfār*, 41.

⁵⁹ *Isfār*, 47. Ibn ‘Arabī names specifically here various seminal figures of early Sufism, in the following order: Sahl at-Tustarī, Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, Farqad as-Sabkhī, Junayd, and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

5.1 Perplexity as the Perfect Approach to the Qur'ān

According to Ibn 'Arabī, the aim of the Qur'ānic speech is to provide an experience of perplexity, which is the only way to approach the divine perfection, that can obviously not be grasped by reason. Only Revelation can inform us about divine perfection, whereas rational proofs can only bring us a half knowledge of God: his incomparability (*tanzīh*), i.e. the fact that he is ultimately other than everything. As for Revelation, it gives further information about God that is precisely “what intellect denies by its proofs”, by stating his similitude (*tashbīh*) with everything that exists through his being.⁶⁰ By affirming both the transcending incomparability of God – e.g. “Glory to your Lord, the Lord who exceeds what they describe” (Q 37:180) – and his similitude with everything that exists – e.g. “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God” (Q 2:115) – Revelation enlightens us about the perfection of Divinity. But this paradoxical perfection cannot be grasped by reason, and therefore the only real experience of its perfection we can have is precisely the perplexity of *ḥayra* brought by Revelation: “So the intellects are perplexed (*fa-ḥayyara*) and this is the divine perfection.”⁶¹

A detailed description of the perplexing nature of the Qur'ānic speech is given by Ibn 'Arabī in the following narrative passage of his *Futūḥāt*. He depicts here how the Qur'ān deliberately blends incomparability and similitude by crossing their respective points of view:

(God) addresses the senses and the imagination by his disengagement (*tajrīd*), to which the rational proofs point. The senses listen, so the senses and imagination are perplexed (*fa-ḥārat*), and they say: “We have nothing of him at our disposal!”. And he addresses the (rational) intellects by his similitude, to which the senses and imagination point. The intellects listen, so the intellects are perplexed (*fa-ḥārat*), and they say: “We have nothing of him at our disposal!”⁶²

The Qur'ān is thus the most perfect manifestation of the divine perfection that the Human Being can approach, precisely because it brings him the most perfect experience of perplexity: “(God) surpasses the perception by the intellects, the senses and imagination, and he isolates himself – glory to him! – in perfection by perplexity. So, no one knows him but himself, and no one witnesses him but himself.”⁶³

5.2 The Literal Approach

Such an experience of perplexity does not rise from what could be called an “esoteric” reading, based on a sophisticated interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the Qur'ānic text that would

⁶⁰ *Fut.* 2: 307.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

pretend to unveil its internal – or implicit – (*bāṭin*) meanings.⁶⁴ Rather, Ibn ‘Arabī’s general approach on that matter could be surprisingly summarized as consisting in the advocacy of a scrupulous literalism that pays attention to the external and immediately apparent – or explicit – (*ẓāhir*) aspect of the text. As mentioned before, the articulation between the external and the internal – what one could call the “esoteric” and “exoteric” – dimensions of the Revelation, actually concerns the experience of the reader, and not the text itself.⁶⁵ That is to say, the implicit aspect is nothing other than the inner experience of the reader, whereas the explicit aspect is the very text itself.⁶⁶ The literal approach advocated by Ibn ‘Arabī consists therefore in keeping the balance between the explicit and implicit aspects of the Qur’anic text: “Know that God addressed human being in its totality, without giving more importance to his exteriority (*ẓāhir*) than to his interiority (*bāṭin*), nor to his interiority than to his exteriority.”⁶⁷ For Ibn ‘Arabī, only such a method can protect the perplexing divine perfection of the Qur’anic text from our restrictive reading through a rational approach.⁶⁸

It is through a close attention to the details of the literal formulation of the Qur’ān that we can let the explicit and apparent aspects of the text reveal their meanings in our immediate interiority:

Every reality of the world is a sign orientating us towards a divine reality (. . .) Whenever God mentions the world (in the Qur’ān), pay attention to the divine name which he relates to it, and you will know which world it is. Whenever God designates himself by the singular and designates you by the plural, the verse is related to his Unicity and to your multiplicity (. . .) Whenever he designates himself by the plural, saying for example “*innā*” or “*naḥnu*” (intensive and nominal forms of “We”), this is related to God considered in regard to his Names. Whenever he speaks of you in the singular, he addresses you in regard to one of your aspects (*ma’nā*), and not to you as a whole. Therefore, know what, from yourself, is the receiver, and open your ears to his discourse.⁶⁹

The implicit aspect of the text is thus what its most explicit aspect – consciously taken into account – provokes in the interiority of the reader, without any hermeneutical mediation.

⁶⁴ On the “esoteric” aspect of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, see James W. Morris “Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Esotericism’: The Problem of Spiritual Authority,” *SI* 71 (1990): 37–64.

⁶⁵ This is already found in the section on the “science of the interior” (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*) of as-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma’*, 43–44.

⁶⁶ Such an understanding of the classical dichotomy between the *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* aspects of the text is surprisingly absent from Annabel Keeler and Sajjad Rizvi’s “Introduction” to *The Spirit and the Letter*, 1–47.

⁶⁷ *Fut.* 1: 334. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 44.

⁶⁸ In the last section of the *Kitāb al-Isfār*, Ibn ‘Arabī warns against rationalization and speculative interpretation of the Qur’ān. See *Isfār*, 124–25.

⁶⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-‘Abādila*, ed. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Aḥmad ‘Aṭā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1969), 42–43. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 56.

The “literalism” advocated by Ibn 'Arabī is not a rejection of the articulation between the internal and the external aspects of the text. Rather, it is a reminder that one should not mistake one aspect for the other, and misleadingly try to explain externally – i.e. through an interpretation of the extrinsic aspect of the text – a dimension of the reading that should always remain internal by nature – i.e. the intrinsic aspect of the reading which necessary remains in the innermost intimacy of the reader.

As Ibn 'Arabī often repeats, it is a matter of spiritual “good manners” (*adab*) to pay attention, to respect and protect the integrity of the literal aspect of the Qur'ānic text, and “the one who contradicts good manners is punished by ignorance.”⁷⁰ A perfect example of those good manners resides for Ibn 'Arabī in the fact that the Qur'ān itself instructed Muḥammad to respect the intermediacy of Gabriel, who was transmitting him the Revelation in the distinctive modality of the *Furqān*, even though Muḥammad had already received it directly from God in the synthetic modality of the *Qur'ān*.⁷¹ Following the prophetic example, one should always make sure that the distinctive aspect of the Qur'ān prevails:

Beware of the *Qur'ān*, unless you read it as a *Furqān*. For God ‘misleads many by it’ – that is to say that he makes them perplexed – and ‘guides many by it’ – that is to say that he grants them the understanding of it as it is, with its clarification. And ‘He misleads by it only the corrupt’, those who exceed its limits and its tracings (*rusūm*).⁷²

Ibn 'Arabī invites his readers to “travel by” the Qur'ān, but warns them about the dangers of such a journey:

Dive into the ocean of the glorious Qur'ān if your breath is wide enough. And if not, limit yourself to examining the commentaries on its apparent (aspect), but do not dive into it, for you would perish. The ocean of the Qur'ān is deep, and if the one who dives into it does not aim at the places that are close to the shore, he will never come back to you!⁷³

This echoes Ibn 'Arabī's insistence on the fact that one should always be “put into travel”, rather than traveling by oneself, mentioned earlier. By paying a close attention to the shores of the explicit aspect of the text, one is taken by the tides of its implicit meanings without risking sinking in the ocean of interpretation.

⁷⁰ *Fut.* 2: 644. On the importance of *adab* in Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutics, see Denis Gril, “Adab and Revelation ore One of the Foundations of the Hermeneutics of Ibn 'Arabī”, in *Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi. A Commemorative volume*, eds. Stephen Hirstenstein and Michael Tiernan (Shaftesbury/Rockport/Brisbane: Element, 1993). See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 231 and 237.

⁷¹ See Q 20:114: “Do not hasten with (the recitation of) the Qur'an before its revelation is completed to you, and say: ‘My Lord, increase me in knowledge!’”

⁷² *Fut.* 4: 401. This is an allusion to Q 2:26: “God is not ashamed to present an example, (like) that of a mosquito or what is even smaller. And those who have believed know that it is the truth from their Lord. As for those who have disbelieved, they say: ‘What did God intend by this example?’ He misleads many thereby and guides many thereby. But He misleads not, except those who forsake”.

⁷³ *Fut.* 1: 76. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 43.

5.3 Perplexing Outcomes of the Literal Approach

Ibn ‘Arabī’s approach to the Qur’ānic text does not consider it as carrying determinate meanings. His literal approach entails that our understanding must always be renewed each time we read the text, as we have already mentioned. Ibn ‘Arabī’s ever-renewed literal approach to the perplexing perfection of the text brings about paradoxical and unexpected readings of the Qur’ānic vocabulary. In a passage of the *Futūḥāt* wherein he describes various kinds of sainthood (*walāya*), he surprisingly draws his spiritual typology from the etymology of several Qur’ānic terms usually understood as “disbelievers” (*kāfirūn*), “impudent” (*fujjār*), “envious” (*ḥāsīdūn*) or “sorcerers” (*sāḥirūn*).⁷⁴ The verses containing those terms take thus a radically positive meaning according to this paradoxical – but always linguistically correct – “literal” reading. Ibn ‘Arabī justifies this reading by explaining briefly his method: “We take every blameworthy quality in its absolute meaning, and then we determine it so that it is praiseworthy.” But, he adds, this hermeneutical operation does not stem from his imaginative mind, as it is actually implied by the very wording of the Revelation: “All comes from the blessing of the Mother-Book (*umm al-kitāb*)”.⁷⁵ For the Shaykh al-Akbar, the radical ambivalence of the Qur’ānic vocabulary is an aspect of its perfection. Through this paradoxical semantics, the Revelation provides to the reader – if he pays a close attention to the etymology or grammatical details of its apparent wording – the profound and unique experience of perplexity that manifests its perfection.

What has probably been the most brilliant example of Ibn ‘Arabī’s paradoxical hermeneutics is unfortunately lost for us, but we know that his vast Qur’ānic commentary, *al-Jam‘ wa-t-tafṣīl fī asrār ma‘ānī t-tanzīl*, was composed according to three points of view, in relation to the classical Sufi dichotomy of the divine reality: (1) Majesty (*jalāl*) – i.e., its intrinsic, transcendent and intimidating aspect – (2) Beauty (*jamāl*) – i.e., its extrinsic, immanent and reassuring aspect – and (3) Perfection (*kamāl*) i.e., the synthetic reunion of the two perspectives.⁷⁶ For the Shaykh al-Akbar, this is the hermeneutical approach of “those who realize the Real” (*al-muḥaqqiqūn*), those who see things “with two eyes,”⁷⁷ for they apprehend at the same time the extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of the Qur’ānic text.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 134–39.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 138. See also Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 71–75.

⁷⁶ See Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, 104.

⁷⁷ See the conclusive chapter in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 356–80.

6 Ibn ‘Arabī’s Hermeneutical Legacy

The Qur’ānic hermeneutics legacy of Ibn ‘Arabī remained undoubtedly significant throughout later Islamic intellectual history, thanks to the numerous influential figures deeply – although not always openly – influenced by his works, that appeared in various cultural areas of the Muslim world.

The most famous example of an exegetical work profoundly marked by the hermeneutics of the Shaykh al-Akbar is probably the *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān* of ‘Abd ar-Razzāq Kāshānī, widely published today as “*Tafsīr Ibn ‘Arabī*.”⁷⁸ Kāshānī’s reading and use of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas stem clearly from what has usually been called the “Akbarī” school of thought, a label used for those who claimed to be part of the spiritual and intellectual lineage of the Shaykh al-Akbar, rather than a formal school with defined and coherent doctrines and methods.⁷⁹ It designates in fact a textual tradition of commentaries and original treatises revolving around the corpus and core ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī. The Akbarī school should probably be considered as emerging from the circle of Ibn ‘Arabī’s stepson and foremost disciple, Ṣadr ad-Dīn Qūnawī, rather than from Ibn ‘Arabī himself. Qūnawī wrote an extensive commentary on the *Fātiḥa*, the *Ijāz al-bayān fī ta’wīl umm al-Qur’ān*, that is profoundly infused with elements of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought.⁸⁰

Another pivotal figure is Dawūd Qayṣarī, who counted himself a disciple of Kāshānī.⁸¹ His works became the classical propaedeutic literature to approach Ibn ‘Arabī in the Ottoman world, especially through the influence of figures such as Muḥammad Hamza al-Fanārī (d. 1430/834), who became the first *Şeyhülislam* of the empire, and Isma‘īl Ḥaqqī l-Brūsawī (d. 1725/1137), whose famous Qur’ānic commentary, the *Rūḥ al-bayān*, is clearly infused with Akbarī hermeneutics. It is also mainly through the introductory works of Qayṣarī that Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas durably penetrated the Safavid intellectual milieu. A major figure such as Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1640/1050), who wrote several works on Qur’ānic hermeneutics and exegesis, was profoundly influenced by both Ibn ‘Arabī and Qayṣarī.

In the Arab world, Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutical ideas were also spread widely through the writings of mainstream and popular Sufis such as ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ash-Sha‘rānī (d. 1565/973) and ‘Abd al-Ghanī n-Nabūlūsī (d. 1731/1143).⁸² A good example of

78 See Pierre Lory, *Les commentaires ésotériques du Coran selon Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī* (Paris: Les deux océans, 1991), and “Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī”, in *EI*³, ed. Kate Fleet et al., accessed on November 4, 2023. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_22929.

79 See William C. Chittick, “The School of Ibn ‘Arabī,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 510–23.

80 See Richard Todd, “Qūnawī’s Scriptural Hermeneutics,” in *The Spirit and the Letter*, 299–324. Qūnawī apparently preferred to call it simply *Tafsīr al-Fātiḥa*.

81 See Caner Dagli, *Ibn al-‘Arabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture: From Mysticism to Philosophy* (London/New-York: Routledge, 2016), 120.

82 An-Nabūlūsī considered himself as “the suckling child” of Ibn ‘Arabī, who was his “milk-father”. See Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus. Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi, 1641–1731* (London/New-York: Routledge, 2005) 18–38.

the discreet yet recognizable appropriation of an Akbarī hermeneutical approach by proponents of mainstream strands of Sufism can be found in the Qur’ānic commentary by the Moroccan Aḥmad b. ‘Ajība (d. 1809/1224), *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-majīd*, which blends the classical exegetical approaches of the genre with peculiar Sufi readings that are sometimes clearly borrowed from the Akbarī tradition.⁸³

The importance of the diffusion of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works and ideas throughout the Muslim world is also demonstrated by the fierce reaction and opposition raised by Ibn Taymiyya and his circle, who were concerned with the growing influence exerted by the Shaykh al-Akbar after his death.⁸⁴ Interestingly enough, their attacks against his doctrines were concentrated on metaphysical and theological issues, but they rarely addressed his exegetical method per se. The polemical debates around the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī that have surfaced repeatedly until today – and that are for the most part no more than repetitions of the accusations made by Ibn Taymiyya – usually evoke Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretations of the Qur’ān as examples of his rhetorical justifications rather than as sources for his heretical doctrines.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the resurgence of controversies by proponents of the Wahhabi and Salafī movements, the interest in the hermeneutical method of Ibn ‘Arabī did not diminish in the Modern period, and has not been restricted to the Sufi milieu. A striking example of the renewed attraction exerted by Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutics is the study published in 1983, stemming from the PhD thesis of the famous Egyptian liberal scholar Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010/1431), *Falsafa at-ta’wīl: Dirāsa fī ta’wīl al-Qur’ān ‘inda Muḥyī d-Dīn b. ‘Arabī*.⁸⁵ Certainly, Abū Zayd’s call for a “humanistic” approach of the Qur’ānic text allowing for an “interpretational diversity” – which made him the target of Jihadist movements – was in part inspired by his study of Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutical method.

7 Conclusion

Ibn ‘Arabī’s Qur’ānic hermeneutics is a central link in the chain of the Sufi exegetical tradition, and a major milestone in Islamic intellectual history. The thought of the Andalusian Shaykh synthesized brilliantly the various hermeneutical methods found in the previous literature and went into their doctrinal and practical implications in

⁸³ On the question of Ibn ‘Arabī’s influence on Ibn ‘Ajība, see the “Introduction” in Jean-Louis Michon, *Two Treatises on the Oneness of Existence by the Moroccan Sufi Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība (1747–1809)* (Cambridge: Archetype, 2010), 19–34.

⁸⁴ See Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 87–111. See also Michel Chodkiewicz, “Le procès posthume d’Ibn ‘Arabī,” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested. Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, eds. Frederik De Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden, Boston and Köln: Brill, 1999), 93–123.

⁸⁵ See Michel Chodkiewicz, Review of *Falsafat al-ta’wīl: Dirāsa fī ta’wīl al-Qur’ān ‘inda Muḥyī d-Dīn b. ‘Arabī*, by Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *SI* 60 (1984): 177–80.

greater depth. The apparent peculiarities of his Qur’ānic interpretations should be considered as the result of his particular focus on core issues of the theology of Revelation, and as developments in the fundamentals of Sufi spiritual hermeneutics at large.

His hermeneutical approach does not aim at pushing the limits of the literal implication of the text. It aims rather at deepening the implications of the reader’s perspective. In other words, the Qur’ān is “an ocean without shore” for Ibn ‘Arabī, in that it mirrors the boundless dimension of human consciousness.

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