JOURNAL OF THE MUHYIDDIN IBN ʿARABI SOCIETY

Abstract

Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysical framework demonstrates that his hermeneutical approach to the Qurʾan represents a vision of what constitutes objective reality. Such a vision, though rooted in traditional sources, is explicated in a highly theoretical language, and is ultimately predicated on the epistemic modes of unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*mushāhada*) as the most certain forms of existential or divine knowledge. This study seeks to characterize Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutics in light of his teachings on the intellect (*ʿaql*) and the faculty of imagination (*khayāl*). The paper examines the implications of Ibn ʿArabī's method by employing a comparative reading of verse 44 from Surah *al-Isrāʾ* in the *Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya* with the interpretation by the notable Ashʿarite theologian and contemporary of Ibn ʿArabī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.606/1210). By situating the discussion within themes of the mainstream exegetical tradition (*tafsīr*), the assessment further highlights Ibn ʿArabī's unique and radical contribution to the field of Qurʾanic hermeneutic.

'Cosmos as Revelation'

Reason, Imagination and the Foundations of Ibn 'Arabī's Scriptural Hermeneutics

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If all the trees were pens, and if the sea and seven more added to it (were ink), the Words of God would not be exhausted. Truly God is Mighty and Wise. (Q.31:27)

Say, 'If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the like thereof to replenish it.' (Q.18:109)[1]

The verses depicting the trees as pens and the sea as ink are often cited to express the inexhaustible endeavor of Qur'anic exegesis and interpretation in the Islamic intellectual tradition. The immaculate arrangement of volumes of *tafsīr* or formal commentaries, running the length of entire walls in homes, libraries and bookshops, all claim to testify to the belief among Muslims up until the present day that the meanings contained in the speech of an infinite and absolute Being cannot be limited to several lines on a page, or a single book bound between two covers. While several of the most well-recognized examples of interpretative engagements with the Qur'an are to be found within works of formal commentaries by individuals bearing the title of exegete (*mufassir*), a vast corpus of writings throughout Islamic history from legal texts, ethics, literature (*adab*), philosophy and mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) are undoubtedly demonstrative of the centrality of the Qur'an but also the tradition's relentless endeavor to imagine the ideal forms of hermeneutical orientation with divine speech. One of the most notable works in this regard from the medieval period, and the main reference for this study, is the highly influential and revered Andalusian mystic and master,

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1. All Qur'anic translations are taken from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran* (New York, 2015), unless cited within quoted matter.

or Shaykh al-Akbar, Ibn ʿArabī's (d.638/1240) *magnum opus, The Meccan Openings* (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya*). Though not deemed a formal commentary on the Qurʾan, it arguably provides one of the most compelling theoretical frameworks and experiences for ascertaining the elusive relationship between finite beings and the infinite Being.

Several of the most notable scholars on Ibn ʿArabī have drawn attention to literalism as a key hermeneutical principle in the author's approach to the Qurʾan. Qualified variously as 'hyper literalism,' 'spiritual literalism' and 'strict literalism,' the terms are meant to convey not only the Shaykh's insistence on the non-duality of form and meaning but also the speaker from his speech and creation from its creator.[2] The so-called hidden (*bāṭin*) meanings of the Qurʾan, often deemed the object of mystical interpretations, are not behind or separate from the outer form (*ẓāhir*) but are precisely in them. Such a hermeneutical approach to scripture is then not to be understood as a plain literal reading, neither is it devoid of the hermeneutical sources and concerns of traditional exegesis (*uṣūl al-tafsīr*). This particular kind of literal reading is in fact demonstrative of Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysical framework for it necessitates the role of the faculty of imagination (*khayāl*) and its exclusive ability to grasp the immanence of God through His speech in the created realm.

In this study, I analyze the role of the human faculties of the intellect (*ʿaql*) and imagination (*khayāl*) to deconstruct Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutical approach to scriptural language. The author's approach, rooted in his metaphysical vision of the Qurʾan as objective reality, is predicated on the epistemic modes of unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*mushāhada*) as the most certain forms of existential or divine knowledge. I examine the implications of Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutics through a comparative reading of Q.17:44 in the *Futūḥāt* with the interpretation of the same verse by the

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2. Kristin Sands refers to it as 'hyperliteralism,' James Morris as 'spiritual literalism,' William Chittick as 'literalism' and Chodkiewicz as 'strict literalism.' William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, 1989), xvi (henceforth: *SPK*); Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn ʿArabī, the Book, and the Law* (Albany, 1993), 24; Rizwan Zamir, 'Tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi'l Qurʾān: The Hermeneutics of Imitation and *Adab* in Ibn ʿArabī's Interpretation of the Qurʾān,' *Islamic Studies*, 50/1 (2011), 5–23; see also nn.16, 10.

notable Asha'rite theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.606/1210) in his renowned commentary (*tafsīr*), *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (*The Keys of the Unseen*). The respective interpretations contest the nature of glorification (*tasbīḥ*) by inanimate beings and whether such beings can possess rational speech. Central to Ibn 'Arabī's argument is that one cannot reason their way into grasping the complete nature of non-delimited reality, *Wujūd*, and hence divine speech. While it is befitting for the intellect ('*aql*) to conclude on the transcendence (*tanzīh*) and incomparability of the divine attributes, it evidently cannot grasp the immanence (*tashbīh*) of its conclusions. This deficiency of the intellect is precisely what makes it perfect in Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysical framework, and thus necessitates the function of the imagination (*khayāl*) that can grasp the non-delimited nature of *Wujūd* and complete a perfect vision of reality as it is, that is, without separating or foregoing the form (*lafẓ*) from its meaning (*ma'nā*). This leads Ibn 'Arabī to insist on a literal reading of Q.17:44 and argue in favor of inanimate beings possessing rational speech (*nuṭq*), a conclusion vehemently opposed by the rational assertions of al-Rāzī's theological convictions. The assessment further highlights Ibn 'Arabī's unique and radical contribution to the field of Qur'anic hermeneutics and raises analytical challenges in the study of Qur'anic interpretation outside of the formal commentarial tradition (*tafsīr*) such as mystical treatises.

The question of literal interpretation versus a non-literal or allegorical one is the subject of a long-standing discourse and debate in Islamic intellectual history inspired by Q.3:7. The exegetical concern raised here proposes a categorization of verses in the Qur'an into the *mutashābihāt* or ambiguous verses and the *muḥkamāt* or clear verses. There is far from any consensus about which verses fall in each category, and each exegete is understood to apply their classification presumably favoring their own theological and ideological convictions.[3] The normative approaches in the tradition, however, describe the *mutashābihāt* as those verses whose literal or exoteric sense (*ẓāhir*) defies common reason and therefore must be foregone in favor of its

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3. Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, 'The Hermeneutics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,' in *Coming to Terms with the Qur'an: A Volume in Honor of Professor Issa Boullata*, ed. Khaleel Mohammed and Andrew Rippin (North Haledon, NJ, 2007), 139.

hidden or esoteric (*bāṭin*) meanings through allegorical interpreta-
tion (*ta'wīl*). This is juxtaposed to the existence of *muḥkamāt* or clear
verses that only convey a single meaning apparent in the literal form
(*naṣṣ*). Ibn ʿArabī, whose thought and Qurʾanic interpretation are
generally associated with esoteric or mystical approaches, is in fact
vehemently opposed to allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*) as practiced
by the discursive theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and the philosophers
(*falāsifa*) of his milieu.[4] At the same time, he also appears to condemn
those who are content with the plain literal meaning alone especially
in their promotion of anthropomorphic understandings (*tajsīm*) of
verses describing God in the Qurʾan.[5]

Ibn ʿArabī's own position in this debate cannot be neatly classi-
fied with reasonable reference to the normative exegetical positions
even though he affirms the existence of the two types of verses and
is well-informed of established exegetical concerns. This is because
the Shaykh's hermeneutical approach to the Qurʾan, unlike the main-
stream exegetical discourse, is bound within his metaphysical thought
on the nature of existence. Subsumed under the doctrine of *waḥdat
al-wujūd* (unity of existence) the nature of all existence is fundamen-
tally conscious.[6] While the doctrine itself can be understood to imply
this claim in its declaration that all of existence or our perceived

4. *Ta'wīl* is a Qurʾanic word that literally means to return something to its origin
and denotes the technical meaning of 'interpretation' of revelation and dreams.
Though both words *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* represent Qurʾanic exegesis in early Islamic
history, they acquire a distinction in the formal genre during and after the tenth
century. *Tafsīr* represents interpretative approaches more broadly carrying an
exclusive association with exoteric exegesis, whereas *ta'wīl* comes to denote esoteric,
symbolic and allegorical interpretation, especially of more equivocal verses. Maria
Dakake, '*Ta'wīl* in the Qurʾan and the Islamic Exegetical Tradition: The Past and the
Future of the Qurʾan,' in *The Enigma of Divine Revelation: Between Phenomenology
and Comparative Theology,* Volume 7, ed. Jean-Luc Marion and Christiaan Jacobs-
Vandegeer (Cham, 2020), 237–59.

5. Syamsuddin Arif, 'Ibn ʿArabi and the Ambiguous Verses of the Quran:
Beyond the Letter and Pure Reason,' *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies*,
4/2 (2019), 227.

6. It is well established that the term *waḥdat al-Wujūd* (oneness of Being or
unity of existence) does not appear in Ibn ʿArabī's own writings but he is regarded to
be the founder of the school of the same name. The idea suggests that there is only
one Being and all existence is a manifestation or disclosure of this single Being. See
SPK, 79; and Caner K. Dagli, *Ibn al-ʿArabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture: From
Mysticism to Philosophy* (London, 2016), 2.

reality is only but a manifestation of a single conscious Being, it is, however, Ibn 'Arabī's use of the term *wujūd* that helps highlight the primacy of consciousness to existence.

The term *wujūd* as employed in this worldview conveys both the objective meaning of reality as being or existence but also its subjective and conscious experience as finding and awareness.[7] This unity of ontology and epistemology is also unique to the Akbarian tradition especially in contrast with early Ash'arite thought.[8] The concept of *wujūd* as both 'existence' and 'finding' finds its most comprehensive and complete expression in the central Islamic tenant of revelation (*waḥy*) or divine speech.[9] Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutical approach to revelation is thus predicated on the assertion that human inquiry into fundamental questions of being, such as 'who am I?' and 'what is existence?', is synonymous with attempts to uncover the meanings in scriptural language.

ON THE NATURE OF REALITY AND REVELATION

When we speak about God in our daily language, we are often not referring to God at the level of sheer Being given its complete transcendence (*tanzīh*) attested by the verse 'Nothing is like unto Him' (Q.42:11).[10] Rather our relation to this being is only on the levels or subsequent degrees of its entifications (*ta'ayyun*) such as our relation to God, the Creator (*al-khāliq*), the All-powerful, the All-knowing and other attributes.[11] These attributes, however, are not distinct from the divine essence or superadded (*zā'id*) to it, neither do they

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7. William C. Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford, 2005), 45.

8. Akiro Matsumoto, 'Unity of Ontology and Epistemology in Qayṣarī's Philosophy,' in *Consciousness & Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, ed. Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani, Hideichi Matsubara, Takashi Iwami and Akiro Matsumoto (Leiden, 2000), 368.

9. When referring to the term *wujūd* in the works of Ibn 'Arabī, I follow Chittick's convention of using *Wujūd* (uppercase) to refer to Being/God and all of existence, and *wujūd* (lowercase) to designate the created realms alone. *SPK*, 6–7.

10. Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī, *The Horizons of Being: The Metaphysics of Ibn al-'Arabī in the Muqaddimat al-Qayṣarī*, trans. Mukhtar H. Ali (Leiden, 2020), 28/29 (Arabic/English pages).

11. According to al-Qayṣarī, *Horizons of Being*, 'Manifestation at the Degree of Unity (*al-wāḥidiyya*),' 32/33.

limit nor restrict the singular essence. While the divine essence is unrestricted and pervades (*sāriyān fī al-wujūd*) all things, its loci of manifestations (*maẓhar*) can be said to be limited and restricted to a particular time and place. Therefore, there is no separation between Being qua Being and all that can be said to exist, for there is nothing in existence except Him/sheer Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), 'There is nothing in *wujūd* but God. In the same way, if you were to say, "There is nothing in the mirror, except the one who is disclosing himself to it," you would be speaking the truth…There is nothing in *wujūd* but He, and *wujūd* is acquired only from Him. No entity of any existent thing becomes manifest except through His self-disclosure.'[12]

The statement that there is nothing in existence but *Wujūd* reasonably conjures up the confusion of accounting for multiplicity in creation. The important points to note in this regard are that the unitary reality of *Wujūd* at the level of essence does not change as it takes on multiplicity in its manifestations; the two are not in opposition. Additionally, multiplicity in manifestations is not superadded to essence but rather originates in Being qua Being. The manifestation of Being at the level other than its essence is referred to as individuation (*ta'ayyun*). These individuations refer to the Being at different levels of its manifestations such that the single form of white light may manifest as blue in the sky or green on a leaf, but in essence it is a single ray of light inclusive yet distinct from its myriad manifestations. The physical world we occupy is the furthest degree of individuation from Being and it is described by extreme multiplicity and also extreme darkness (nonexistence) relative to Being.[13] From the perspective of being human, it is inconceivable to know Being in its non-delimitedness because it cannot be qualified or described with any condition that the intellect can grasp. While its necessary existence is intuitive, it remains transcendent to human experience until it discloses itself at the level of 'witnessing' (*shuhūd*) or the conscious and perceptive human experience.

The seekers of reality (*ahl al-taḥqīq*) come to understand that reason in the form of pure rational reflection is incapable of grasping

12. William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany, 1998), 15.

13. Mukhtar H. Ali, *Philosophical Sufism: An Introduction to the School of Ibn al-'Arabī* (Abingdon, 2022), 37.

the nature of reality at the level of the non-delimited, sheer Being, or reality as it is. The intellect can only come to know of things by their quiddities (*māhiyya*) after they come into being, whereas *Wujūd*, whose existence is necessary, can only be known by itself and nothing else. Therefore, the human experience cannot claim to know God at the level of sheer Being for that would negate the conditions set for its unrestricted and undefinable essence. Yet, human beings also have a palpable experience of *Wujūd* in its endless and continuous manifestations through our existence as conscious and living beings. An encounter that simultaneously holds and affirms the presence of Being while also testifying to its absence (He/Not He) is sure to endow the seeker with a state of metaphysical perplexity (*ḥayra*). The association between perplexity and knowledge of the ultimate reality is significant in the writings of Ibn ʿArabī. Contrary to offering a remedy to alleviate or absolve a seeker of their perplexity, the author interestingly substitutes the word 'knowledge' (*ʿilm*) with 'perplexity' (*ḥayra*) in a prayer he cites from the Qurʾan, 'O Lord increase me in thy perplexity.'[14] It is then only in the promise of verbal revelation, which presents a clear and concise explication of *Wujūd*, that human beings can find a way to gain such knowledge and affirm their experience.

The Qurʾan, through its various names of mercy (*raḥma*), guidance (*hudā*) and discerner (*furqān*), highlights the purpose of revelation to guide mankind towards actualizing his perfection, a central theme in Ibn ʿArabī's teachings.[15] William Chittick, in *Ibn ʿArabi: Heir to the Prophets*, summarizes the role of scripture for human salvation by saying, 'Scripture is the key that opens the door to the universe and the self...Without recourse to it, people will not be able to fathom themselves and the cosmos. If they do not come to know and recognize themselves, they will not know God.'[16]

The entirety of the cosmos, as the self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of the absolute divine essence, is nothing but engendered speech as testified

14. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York, 1980), 79.

15. William C. Chittick, 'The Qurʾan in the Thought of Ibn ʿArabī,' in *The Routledge Companion to the Qurʾan*, ed. George Archer, Maria M. Dakake and Daniel A. Madigan (New York, 2022), 285.

16. Chittick, *Heir to the Prophets*, 45.

in the iconic verse 'His Command when He desires a thing is only to say to it, "Be!" and it is' (Q.36:82). Clearly, Ibn 'Arabī does not regard this as a figurative expression for God's will (*irāda*) but rather uses the Qur'anic reference to affirm the ontological reality of the cosmos as literal words that then must be read as such.[17]

Just as human speech is articulated when the breath takes on distinct sounds passing through the throat and mouth, the combination of different letters in the Breath of the All-Merciful (*nafas al-raḥmān*) manifests itself in the multiplicity of existent things.

The analogy between the Breath of the All-Merciful and the human breath serves as an example of the creative process, and it is the first level of entification (*al-ta'ayyun al-awwal*) of sheer Being and the mode through which human beings come to know and relate to it. Existent things are then actual words articulated in the Breath of the All-Merciful: 'The cosmos is the words of God,' 'All existence is the words of God,' 'There is nothing in existence but God, for the existent things are God's words.'[18] While each existent thing represents a word or letter, it is the entire cosmos, the human being and revelation that represent the most comprehensive (*jāmi'*) manifestations of divine speech. The entirety of existence (all except God) in this sense is the engendering (*takwīn*) of God's command, 'Be!' This concept can be summarized using several statements in Ibn 'Arabī's writing such as, 'Through it that to which He says, "Be!" becomes manifest…Thereby the entities become manifest with the Breath of the All-Merciful, just as letters become manifest within the human breath.'[19] Also, 'The Breath of the All-Merciful is the substance of the engendered things'[20] and 'The substance of the cosmos is the All-Merciful Breath, within which the forms of the cosmos become manifest…'[21]

The Breath as the intermediary or the *barzakh* is the locus of God's self-disclosure and where His attributes take on forms or where He reveals Himself so that human beings get to know Him, 'His descent into limitation that we may conceive of Him in imaginal form (*tamthīl*) and place Him before our eyes with our hearts, our *qibla*,

17. *SPK*, 54.
18. Ibn 'Arabī, cited in Chittick, 'The Qur'an,' 284.
19. *SPK*, 128.
20. *SPK*, 181.
21. *SPK*, 182.

and our imagination, just as if we see Him.'[22] In ontological terms, the *barzakh*, also the World of Imagination (*khayāl*), exists between two things but is neither of those two and thus possesses an inherently ambiguous and unconstrained quality. One cannot say that anything in creation is divine because that would limit the absolute essence whereas at the same time the essence of everything is divine. Arriving at this conundrum, the formula He/Not He (*huwa/lā huwa*) is what explains the inherent ambiguity of existence, and its reconciliation marks the perfect knowledge of *Wujūd*. So essential is this concept that it is used to describe the entirety of existence, 'There is nothing in existence but *barzakh*s, since a *barzakh* is the arrangement of one thing between two other things…existence has no edges.'[23] It is important to note that the *barzakh* in the writings of Ibn 'Arabī can refer to two contexts: as all of existence within the cosmos; and as the imaginal world situated between the spiritual and corporeal realms of the macrocosm. There is also a third context, that of the microcosm (*al-'ālam al-ṣaghīr*), referring to the human soul (*nafs*) as the *barzakh* between the body and the spirit. It is the Supreme *Barzakh* (*al-barzakh al-a'lā*)*,* also referred to as the Breath of the All-Merciful, that denotes the entirety of existence (non-delimited imagination) (*al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*) between pure Being (*Wujūd*) and nothingness.[24]

The Breath as the *barzakh* between pure Being (*Wujūd*) and pure nothingness allows it to be the domain of divine disclosure (*tajallī*) and manifestation of all His names and creative acts.[25] Ibn 'Arabī explains:

> The breath of the breather is none other than the nonmanifest of the breather. Then the breath becomes manifest as the entities of letters and words. It does not become manifest through anything superadded to the nonmanifest, so it is identical with the nonmanifest…For the letters are not other than the Breath, nor are they the same as the Breath; the word is not other than the letters, nor is it the same as the letters.[26]

22. *SPK*, 180.
23. *SPK*, 14.
24. *SPK*, 15.
25. *SPK*, 125.
26. *SPK*, 129–30.

Everything other than God is perpetually suspended in this ambiguous state of being and nonbeing (*huwa/lā huwa*), disclosing God in one respect yet concealing Him in another. No given moment is the same, for every disclosure reveals something new about the absolute Being. Described by Chittick as 'the ontological locus (*maẓhar*) for *tashbīh*,' it is only through this intermediary realm that created things come to experience and speak of God's immanence or similarity.[27] And this knowledge of similarity, unlike the knowledge of incomparability, can only be accessed through God revealing Himself. This is why the *barzakh* is also described by Chittick as the 'cosmos as revelation.'[28]

SCRIPTURAL HERMENEUTICS

While the Qur'an in the daily lives of Muslims, and for much of the world, has come to strongly if not exclusively represent a physical object, a holy text or scripture, Ibn 'Arabī stresses the significance of the Qur'an as the most concise and clear articulation of objective reality. Since everything in existence is a word (*kalima*) articulated in the Breath of the All-Merciful, the entirety of the cosmos is akin to a book that bears all manifestations of the divine names. Drawing on one of the meanings of the word Qur'an as *jāmiʿ* (comprehensive), the cosmos is the most comprehensive and complete disclosure of the divine name *Allāh*, which is also the most comprehensive name (*al-ism al-jāmiʿ*). Hence, the entirety of the cosmos/existence itself takes on the title of the 'Great Qur'an' (*al-Qurʾān al-aʿẓam*) in Ibn 'Arabī's thought: 'Existence is all letters, words, surahs, and verses. Hence it is the Great Quran, "to which the unreal comes not from before nor from behind."'[29]

The key to understanding Ibn 'Arabī's approach to scripture lies in the author's conception of the speaker. The following statement helps demonstrate the pre-eminence of the knowledge of the speaker for the author in order to understand the intended meanings in His speech:

27. *SPK*, 181.
28. *SPK*, 143.
29. Q.41:42, quoted by Ibn 'Arabī, in Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 70–2; see also 192–3, 196–8.

You should distinguish between understanding the speech (*kalām*) and understanding Him who is speaking. It is the second comprehension that must be sought, which can be obtained only by him upon whose heart the Qur'ān descends; while the first belongs to the common people. Those who seek to understand the speaker will understand His speech, whereas those who understand only the word might not be able to grasp what the speaker exactly means.[30]

Knowledge of the speaker as a hermeneutical principle may not be a novel concept, but as established in preceding discussions, an understanding of the speaker of revelation is fundamentally a pursuit of ascertaining the metaphysical foundations of existence.

Critical in the parallel between a conscious awareness of existence and hermeneutical approaches to scripture is the claim that the relationship between things in existence and the words (*kalimāt*) of revelation is not metaphorical or allegorical but rather they ought to be strictly literal. Before delving into discussions elaborating on this central claim, it is important to acknowledge that there is no definitive evidence to demonstrate whether the author rules out the significance of philological discussions or interpretations based on standard practices in the formal exegetical tradition. It is, however, certainly not the focus in the approach he has laid out for himself and nor for his intended audience of those with lofty aspirations, striving to realize the nature of reality (*ahl al-ḥaqq* or *muḥaqqiqūn*). The author's hermeneutical approach to scripture hence must then be analyzed solely within his purpose to uncover aspects of reality (*Wujūd*) that are otherwise veiled through obfuscation or restriction. Despite Ibn 'Arabī's own assertions regarding his commitment to the Qur'an, Hadith and the philological sciences, he is no stranger to criticism and accusations of distorting the Qur'anic language (*taḥrīf maʿānī al-Qurʾān*), allegedly trying to fit it within his own doctrinal convictions.[31] While I do not survey or examine the nature of the criticism against Ibn 'Arabī's Qur'anic interpretations in this study, it is nonetheless an important context to bear in mind when confronting

30. *Fut*.III.128–9, trans. Arif, 'Ambiguous,' 236.
31. Reference to Abū al-ʿAlā ʿAfīfī and Ibn Taymiyya, in Michel Chodkiewicz, 'Some Remarks about the Role of the Quran in Ibn Arabi's Writings,' in *Contemporary Relevance of Sufism*, ed. Syeda Saiyidain Hameed (New Delhi, 1993), 40.

challenges posed by comparisons to purely linguistic interpretations
and the debates within the normative exegetical tradition.

INTELLECT (*'AQL*)

For Ibn 'Arabī, all human faculties must be made subservient to the
single and only purpose of realizing *Wujūd*. To that effect, the intel-
lect (*'aql*), which collects knowledge through reflection and the five
senses, represents one necessary yet partial encounter with the Real.
It is for this reason that Ibn 'Arabī deems the rational faculty to be
'one half the knowledge of God.'[32] The intellect in the writings of
the Shaykh has an affinity towards affirming God's transcendence/
incomparability (*tanzīh*) because it categorically rejects the possibil-
ity of anything other than God to be associated with His qualities.
Supported by the reflective faculty (*al-quwwa al-mufakkira*), the
intellect is only able to prove the dissimilarity of the divine through
argumentation but cannot provide rational proofs for how Being can
be like anything in creation. For example, the intellect can only negate
the possibility of God having hands, eyes or a face, but it cannot grasp
or accept this notion without relying on allegorical interpretation.
The intellect's hyper-emphasis effectively separates and maintains an
unbridgeable gap between the human being and God. This tendency
of the rationalists (proponents of *kalām* and *falsafa*) to create a
distance between God and themselves and to view God from a 'far
place,' according to Ibn 'Arabī, is what explains their predicament to
allegorically interpret (*ta'wīl*) the words of revelation.[33]

   In a discussion of Q.3:7, which holds paramount significance in
the exegetical tradition (*tafsīr*), Ibn 'Arabī points out the inability
to accept the clear (*muḥkam*) and ambiguous (*mutashābih*) verses
of the Qur'an without interpretation (*ta'wīl*) as a sign of weak faith.
The author remarks, 'Let us accept everything that the Prophet has
brought, for if we interpret any of it saying, "In fact, this is what the
Speaker meant by His words," then the degree of faith will disappear
from us.'[34] The weakness of faith is because the rationalist interpreter

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32. *SPK*, 74.
33. Ibn 'Arabī makes a reference to Q.41:44; see *SPK*, 71.
34. *SPK*, 201.

has faith in his own interpretation, 'Then reason's faith is in its own interpretation, not in the report…' As we will see in a discussion of Q.8:17, Ibn 'Arabī's stance on reason has two dimensions: there is the one who is described as the 'intelligent person of faith', and then there is a damning reference to the one who reasons in a manner that displays 'no faith.'[35] The difference between the two highlights the use of sound reason to determine its own limits, 'He rationally declares the incomparability of God to anything other than Him, while accepting the incapacity to grasp the message of revelation brought by the prophets in terms of reason alone.' Whereas the one who is under the constant domination of the need to reflect (*naẓar*) is only fixated in his own abilities to resolve the ambiguities of revelation and is not open to any other way of knowing such as God's bestowal of insight and unveiling (*kashf*).[36] It is this distinction that helps us further understand the spiritual significance of *ḥayra* (perplexity or bewilderment), for it is only the ones with 'sound rational faculties'[37] that are bewildered, whereas the people of interpretation (*ahl al-ta'wīl*) are 'intoxicated by his proof and demonstration.'[38]

Another enlightening discussion on the role of the intellect comes up with reference to Q.8:17, 'You did not throw when you threw, But God threw that He might test the faithful (with a good test).'[39] In addressing the theological problem posed by this verse, the rational theologians are bound to a single position on the matter, for whom either one of those possibilities can be rationally upheld; either God threw (Ash'arite) or man threw (Mu'tazilite). This strict limitation of God, on part of the theologians (*mutakallimūn*), is diametrically opposed to Ibn 'Arabī's definition of *Wujūd*. It is, instead, the strivers (*mujāhidūn*), in the author's writing, who struggle against the limitations of their own thought, 'They are the strugglers through God, who does not possess the attribute of delimitation, so struggling through Him takes place in all things. It is the all-pervasive struggle…'[40] Hence,

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35. *SPK*, 201.
36. *SPK*, 202.
37. *SPK*, 74.
38. *SPK*, 198.
39. *SPK*, 211.
40. *SPK*, 211.

a *mujāhid* who follows his heart fluctuates between the two positions and affirms both God's presence in the act but also negates it.

The struggle of such a spiritual striver (*mujāhid*) in contrast to the rational theologians is noteworthy for the main reason alluded to the discussion in reference to Q.3:7. The spiritual striver reaches perfect knowledge precisely because of engaging his intellect and recognizing the (im)possibility of the independent claims of both positions. It is, arguably, also a function of reason that supports his struggle against himself in trying to not restrict *Wujūd* to either one. In this sense, Ibn ʿArabī's critique of the rational theologians is not to be understood on the basis of their use of reason per se; rather, it appears to be directed at the use of reason for a purpose other than struggling 'through God.'[41]

The spiritual striver, on the other hand, employs reason for the sole purpose of attaining perfect knowledge. Represented in reaching the state of *ḥayra*, he uses the intellect to relinquish his attachments to any ideas of him being able to resolve it on the account of reason. Ibn ʿArabī calls this the 'good test,'[42] whereby in such a moment the spiritual striver would be correct in whatever option he may have chosen for himself. My argument is further supported by the author's statements regarding the *ḥayra* of the rationalists, 'Tasting and tradition allow no doubt as to the fact that there will be vision of God. But reason doubts this, since vision of God is one of the things which throws rational faculties into bewilderment and concerning which they come to no conclusions...'[43]

In another section, the author commends those with sound reason to plunge into bewilderment by recognizing the majesty of God, while criticizing those who use reason (*ahl al-taʾwīl*) to circumvent the possibility of bewilderment in employing allegorical interpretation.[44] It is, therefore, the incapacity of reason to resolve the bewilderment inherent to *Wujūd* that appears to be the fine point. In other words, while reason is necessary for the journey towards establishing the incomparability of *Wujūd*, its function flips to one of self-limitation in order to receive the knowledge of its immanence.

41. *SPK,* 211.
42. *SPK*, 211.
43. *SPK*, 215.
44. *SPK*, 74.

The person of 'faith' in the writings of Ibn 'Arabī is the one who approaches revelation in exactly the way that it is revealed without any interpretative imposition.[45] This requires certain preparation and receptivity to the reality of *wujūd*, as disclosed in the speech of creation and the language of revelation. While all human effort and faculties need to be employed towards cultivating this receptivity, ultimately the only duty is to relinquish any attachment to restricting one's encounter of *Wujūd*. The proper use of the intellect, including its self-restraint, plays a crucial part in cultivating this state of receptivity, also known as *ḥayra*. Ibn 'Arabī's criticism against *ta'wīl* and his favoring of a strict literalism is to be positioned within the context of immersing one's self in such a state of metaphysical perplexity and reading the speech of God *as it is.*

IMAGINATION (*KHAYĀL*)

Perfect knowledge of the divine is only possible in combining the incomparability of God, expressed in the verse 'Nothing is like unto Him' (Q.42:11), with His immanence in creation, 'Withersoever you turn, there is the Face of God' (Q.2:115), and also the Prophetic narration 'Worship as if you see Him.'[46] Since the intellect is helpless beyond affirming God's transcendence (*tanzīh*), it is complemented by the faculty of imagination (*khayāl*) in order to affirm His immanence (*tashbīh*). The author describes the intellect as a 'plain creature' (*khalq sādhij*) that can only ascertain discrete and mutually exclusive concepts, such as God's incomparability to anything other than Him.[47] The intellect is also perfectly capable of grasping the knowledge of God's incomparability without the need for revelation. Chittick notes that this characteristic of the intellect is often emphasized in Ibn 'Arabī's writings, whereby the intellect, through reflecting on the signs (*āyāt*) and denotations (*dalā'il*), affirms (*thubūt*) the temporal origination (*ḥudūth*) of the cosmos while negating their eternity (*qidam*) to affirm God as the source

45. Chittick has a section titled 'Seeing Things as They Are' under which he makes a brief reference to the literal significance of revelation for Ibn 'Arabī; see *SPK*, 29.

46. *SPK*, 277, 339.

47. *SPK*, 163.

of existence.[48] Without revelation, however, the knowledge of God remains incomplete because one only knows God by what He reveals about Himself. Additionally, the purpose of revelation is not to inform the human being about knowledge he can deduce on his own from using common sense or reflection.[49] Therefore, imagination and sense perception are needed to comprehend God's similarity that is brought into being as God's engendered and verbal speech of revelation.

The role of imagination is fundamental if not the most salient feature of Ibn 'Arabī's scriptural hermeneutics. This is because it provides the key to resolving the conundrum posed by the metaphysical assertion about the nature of reality being suspended between Being and nonbeing. The faculty of imagination, which, though it bears a sense of non-delimitation, is after all created with the same stuff, so to speak, as the intermediary realm (*barzakh*). This makes the role of imagination uniquely capable of perceiving God's similarity within the forms of existent things, and it has no trouble encountering the ambiguity of divine speech. Ibn 'Arabī insists on preserving the ambiguity in scripture precisely because it is the most accurate explication of reality. The entirety of existence, as an intermediary realm or *barzakh*, is in fact the same nature as scripture, where God reveals Himself through words or speech. It is also the realm of God's self-disclosure in terms of His similarity and immanence. It is through His speech that He invites human beings to come to know Him beyond the intellectual affirmation of His existence. The reality of the *barzakh* allows access to a complete encounter of God as both manifest (*ẓāhir*) and hidden (*bāṭin*) even as the experience remains unfixed and changing. Similarly, revelation itself as a *barzakh* mirrors this nature of the cosmos in binding the letter and its spirit together in order to maintain its perfection as divine speech. This quality is unique to scripture, and it must not be distorted by imposing meanings that contradict or ignore the outward form.[50]

In a vehement critique of allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*), Ibn 'Arabī emphasizes the necessity to read the speech of God as it is

48. *SPK*, 164.
49. *SPK*, 232.
50. *SPK*, 244.

revealed and without altering the way in which those who speak the language understand it. Employing the Qur'anic reference condemning linguistic distortion (*taḥrīf*), the author levels another critique saying that 'we do not force upon them meanings which are not understood by the people in whose language the words were revealed. Then we would be among these who "distort words from their meanings."'[51] The significance of a literal reading for Ibn 'Arabī is hence also defined by a reverence for the form or letter in the same vein as the emphasis by the *ahl al-ta'wīl* on the meaning or spirit. In this approach, the form of the divine word (*lafẓ*) cannot be restricted to a single meaning nor circumvented nor discarded. The author's method requires a continuous relation between the form and its meaning. The method takes the letter to its spirit and refutes the case of those who forego the outward (*ẓāhir*) in their crossing over (*'ubūr*) to the inner senses (*bāṭin*).[52]

The form, in Ibn 'Arabī's literal reading, displays non-delimited qualities as that of meaning since there can be no separation between them, yet they are still distinct and separate. The form and meaning are intertwined in such a way that it is impossible to suppose God to say anything whose meaning He does not intend. At the same time, limiting the literal form to a single meaning is equally implausible. This defining feature of the author's approach to literalism, whereby all the possible meanings are intended by the author, is not true for all types of speech. Ibn 'Arabī is clear in setting forth the context of his claim by saying, 'This situation is not found outside God's speech. Even though the words might support a sense, it may be that it was not intended by the speaker; for we know that he is incapable of encompassing all senses of the word...'[53] The relationship between form and meaning in divine speech is unique because in this case the letter *is* the spirit, yet they are also distinct. In this manner, the characteristic ambiguity of divine speech mirrors the perplexing encounter of *wujūd*.

The elusive and dynamic relationship between the form and meaning marks a strong parallel to the author's discussion on

51. Reference to Q.4:46 in *SPK*, 277.
52. *SPK*, 245–6.
53. *SPK*, 244.

beholding the liminal space between but also inclusive of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, described previously as the *mujtahid*'s arrival at the 'place of bewilderment.'[54] Just as the knowledge of the perfect servant combines God's transcendent and immanent qualities in attaining a bewildering yet complete witnessing of *Wujūd*, the perfect reading of divine speech by the folk or friends of God never abandons the *ẓāhir* sense of the word, allowing them to perfect their perplexity through a literal reading of scripture. The perfection described in this sense lies in entering the intermediary realm, *barzakh*, which possesses the qualities of both the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin* but is also neither of the two. Therefore, it is precisely for this kind of hermeneutical engagement that the human being is endowed with the faculty of imagination.

Unlike the intellect's affinity for delimitation, the imagination being an intermediary itself is suited for the task of combining the apparently limited form with the non-delimited meaning. The imaginative faculties, writes Ibn 'Arabī, 'demand by their [sensory and imaginative] essences to see Him who brought them into existence…'[55] It is, hence, the function of imagination to give form to the meanings in the intermediary realm. Without employing the imagination, a human being may never truly grasp the purpose of revelation, which is to bestow knowledge of God that would otherwise be completely inaccessible. In fact, according to Ibn 'Arabī, it would render the entire creedal tenet of prophecy invalid. He says, regarding the Prophet being 'unlettered,' 'In our view, that person is "unlettered" who does not employ his reflective consideration and his rational judgment to bring out the meaning and mysteries which the Qur'an embraces. He does not use rational proofs to attain the knowledge of divine things.'[56] This leads to the conclusion that attaining perfect knowledge of *Wujūd*, which is only possible through revelation, is predicated on the acknowledgment and use of the faculty of imagination (*khayāl*).

54. *SPK*, 211.
55. *SPK*, 75.
56. *SPK*, 235.

READING BETWEEN *KASHF WA-MUSHĀHADA* AND *KALĀM*

In the attempt to further elucidate the significance and critical nature of Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutics, it is important to consider its practical dimensions. After all, what significance and implications, if any, does Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysical hermeneutical framework bear on the act of exegesis, especially in comparison with contemporaneous and well-recognized approaches within the field? In this section, I will seek to establish the more tangible implications of Ibn 'Arabī's *Wujūd*-based metaphysical framework for Qur'anic exegesis through a compara-tive reading of Q.17:44 in the *Futūḥāt* and al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. To facilitate a constructive comparative analysis of the two interpre-tations, it is essential to consider the core epistemological contention underlying each author's exegetical activity: for al-Rāzī, the acquisi-tion of knowledge through discursive reason (*kalām*), is in contrast with Ibn 'Arabī's claim to the highest forms of knowledge obtained through the experience of direct witnessing (*mushāhada*) and mysti-cal unveiling (*kashf*).

The knowledge acquired by the soul through acquisition (*kasb*) 'does not find the sweetness of generosity (*jūd*) and bestowal (*wahb*),' declares Ibn 'Arabī, in a letter he wrote to the great Ash'arite theo-logian, philosopher and exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.606/1210).[57] There is no evidence to suggest that the two great figures ever met, neither is there a record of a reply or receipt by al-Rāzī, and any other form of correspondence or influence between the two is deemed purely speculative.[58] Scholars, however, infer through references in the *Futūḥāt* and the information disclosed in the letter itself that Ibn 'Arabī had probably encountered al-Rāzī's reputation during his travels in the East and was familiar with the latter's works via the theologian's students.[59]

Ibn 'Arabī continues in his critique and counsel in his letter, urging al-Rāzī towards loftier aspirations (*himma*) in his pursuit of divine

57. Mohammed Rustom, 'Ibn 'Arabī's Letter to Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī: A Study and Translation,' *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 25/2 (2014), 127.

58. Rustom, 'Letter,' 119.

59. Ayman Shihadeh, 'The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,' in *Sufism and Theology*, ed. Ayman Shihadeh (Edinburgh, 2007), 102.

knowledge, stating that the people who only nourish themselves with acquired knowledge are 'amongst those who eat from beneath themselves. But a spiritual man (*rajul*) is one who eats from above himself, as He [God] says, "Had they observed the Torah and the Gospel and that which was sent down unto them from their Lord, they would surely have received nourishment from above them and from beneath their feet (Q 5: 66)."'[60] The highest level of knowledge about reality, for Ibn 'Arabī, is the knowledge bestowed (*wahb*) on prophets and saints. Even though he commends al-Rāzī for his erudition and intellectual prowess, the Shaykh is relentless in his reminder that the knowledge of God's existence and the knowledge of God are two separate matters. The intellect is certainly necessary to establish God's existence, but knowledge of Him gained through reflection (*fikr*) and rational consideration (*naẓar*) is liable to doubt and a symptom of deficient aspirations. Understandably, knowledge categorized by the visceral experiences of 'taste' and 'witnessing' cannot be explicated to anyone especially in a letter. It is, however, intriguing to investigate and interrogate the ramifications of what is at stake for Ibn 'Arabī.

Before turning to the comparative analysis in this section, it is important to note the literary and structural contexts within which we draw each author's discussion. Al-Rāzī's massive exegesis, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, has been described as the 'most important theological commentary ever written on the Qur'ān.'[61] Per the norms of the literary genre, the commentary follows a format of lemma and comment for each verse in the sequence of the text (*muṣḥaf*). On the contrary, verses of the Qur'an in the *Futūḥāt*, similar to their usage in mystical literature, are not discussed with any recognizable format. Verses can often be found inconspicuously embedded into a discussion, at times even being used to complete partial sentences. Furthermore, the *Futuḥāt* is an extraordinary work not only in terms of its sheer volume, spanning 560 chapters and covering over 17,000 pages, but also in its compositional history and organizational complexity.[62]

The contents of the text were reportedly a result of direct mystical inspirations experienced during Ibn 'Arabī's pilgrimage to Mecca in

60. Rustom, 'Letter,' 128.

61. El-Tobgui, 'Hermeneutics,' 131.

62. *SPK*, xi; Ibn 'Arabī, *The Meccan Revelations*, trans. William C. Chittick and James W. Morris (New York, 2005), 7.

598/1202; the work was then orally dictated, written and revised over a period of thirty-six years.[63] The inspirational nature of the work is also testified by the vast compendium of diverse literary forms including visual images and diagrams found across the *Futūḥāt*.

The difficulties posed by the text's structure are further compounded by complex and often paradoxical language, concepts and richness of interdisciplinary thought. This makes it difficult in unedited texts to recognize instances when the author's speech stops and when a verse begins, in addition to the difficulty in comprehending its theoretical claims.[64] Moreover, a single verse may be discussed several times in entirely different contexts, demonstrating the principle of non-repetition in God's self-disclosure and the multiple experiences the same verse can impart commensurate with the state and preparation of the reader at that particular moment of time.[65] This close adherence between the author's own writing and experience with verses of the Qur'an is yet another exegetical feature of mystical literature serving to collapse the dichotomy between the author's experience of reality and the existential nature of divine speech, that is, between the mystical vision and the Qur'anic realm.

The verse from Sūrat al-Isrā' (The Night Journey) selected for this comparison is reminiscent of a theme found throughout the Qur'an regarding the collective participation of all animate and inanimate beings in creation in the glorification of their creator, 'The seven heavens and the earth, and whosoever is in them glorify Him. And there is no thing, save that it hymns His praise, though you do not understand their praise. Truly He is Clement, Forgiving' (Q.17:44).[66] The verse raises a simple yet critical hermeneutical question: does the

63. Eric Winkel, 'Understanding, and Translating, the *Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*,' *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 55 (2014), https://ibnarabisociety.org/understanding-and-translating-the-futuhat-eric-winkel/, accessed 19 April 2023; *Meccan Revelations*, 8.

64. Even the famous Persian mystic, theologian and poet 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d.898/1492), who is credited with disseminating Ibn 'Arabī's teachings in the Indo-Persianate context, is recounted in a hagiographical work of the first masters of the Naqshbandiyya, about his struggles with understanding sections in the *Futūḥāt*. Chodkiewicz, 'Some Remarks,' 41.

65. Q.17:44 is referred to in several contexts by Ibn 'Arabī; see *SPK*, 66, 157, 246, 340, 344.

66. See Q.13:13, 13:15, 16:49–50, 22:18, 57:1.

glorification and extolling of praise by inanimate beings constitute an actual phenomenon of rational speech? Or, since this statement is opposed to common reason, should such an expression be interpreted metaphorically? It is precisely this question that becomes the point of schism between Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysically grounded literalism and al-Rāzī's * taʾwīl*.

The concept of glorification (*tasbīḥ*) as an existential quality of all beings is attested firmly in the interpretations of both authors. For Ibn ʿArabī, glorifying and magnifying God on the part of contingent beings is beginningless and eternal and is unconditioned by coming into physical existence, 'In the state of their beginningless non-existence (*al-ʿadam al-azalī*) the possible things never cease knowing Him who is the Being Necessary through His Essence. They glorify and magnify Him with a beginningless glorification and an eternal and inherent magnification.'[67] Therefore, it is impossible for contingent entities to lose their quality to speak in the state of corporeal existence, and as manifested beings they continue to participate fully in the glorification of God with rational speech (*nuṭq*). The association of rational speech with inanimate beings is necessitated as a marker and proof of God's knowledge, which is inherent and eternal, of all possible beings in the realm of witnessing. Otherwise, things in creation need to be qualified by ignorance and deemed to be nonexistent, 'Ignorance (*jahl*) is non-existence, while knowledge is verified existence (*wujūd muḥaqqaq*).'[68]

The above conclusion is further supported by Ibn ʿArabī's creative reading of the phrase 'though you do not understand their praise,' paired with the divine names 'Concealer' (*ghafūr*) and 'Clement' (*ḥalīm*). The author does not take the statement to suggest the impossibility of comprehending the language (*lisān*) of praise for all human beings. Since such speech is the marker of realization on the part of inanimate beings, its hearing too is made possible by reaching a state of spiritual realization on the part of the listener. In Ibn ʿArabī's epistemology, the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of a thing or a word is its immutable entity (*ʿayn thābit*) or as it exists within God's knowledge. Therefore, the reality of a thing is its non-manifest dimension seen by

67. *SPK*, 246.
68. *SPK*, 91.

the fully realized human beings, known as the people of witnessing, and unveiling (*ahl al-kashf*).[69] Ibn ʿArabī continues that since God is aware of the inability of all people to overcome their shortcomings to witness reality fully and hence get to know Him, His clemency allows for a delay in accountability.

Since reason maintains that God cannot be restricted, while the actual situation demands the existence of restriction, He describes Himself at the end of the verse as 'Clement.' Hence, He will not take to task – though He has power to do so – him who supposes that the Real is exclusively such-and-such and does have some other description. 'At the end of the verse, He describes Himself as "Concealing" since He curtains their hearts from knowledge of Him – except those of His servants He wills…Every group other than the Folk of Allah have declared Him incomparable with such and such.'[70]

The author's comment is especially directed at what he deems as the error or perhaps even obstinacy of the rational thinkers (*al-ʿuqalāʾ*) and those enslaved to discursive reflection (*naẓar*). The basis for the critique harks back to the restriction and delimitation of *Wujūd* represented in separating the outward sense (*ẓāhir*) from the inward (*bāṭin*) of Qurʾanic speech. While the two can be separated in the mind, the word (*lafẓ*) and its meaning (*maʿnā*) are one and inseparable. True knowledge is then in reaffirming the complete unity between word and its meaning. Therefore, in Ibn ʿArabī's reading of scripture, there is no crossing over (*ʿitibār*) from the outer to the inner such that a Qurʾanic verse acquires a meaning or expression (*ʿibāra*) not attested by its literal sense.

Al-Rāzī's interpretation of the same verse in his *tafsīr* states that human beings (*al-ḥayy al-mukallaf*)[71] glorify God in two ways: through rational speech, such as by saying, 'Glory be to God', and through their very contingent existence, pointing (*dalīl*) towards the oneness and exaltedness of God.[72] When it comes to animals (*bahāʾim*) and inanimate objects (*jamādāt*), however, they can only

69. *SPK*, 246, 340.

70. *SPK*, 340.

71. *Al-ḥayy al-mukallaf* refers to beings that are religiously accountable in terms of Islamic law but ultimately divine judgment in the hereafter.

72. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (*Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*), 32 vols. (Beirut, 1981), Q.17:44.

be said to glorify God in the second sense, and attributing rational speech is impossible in their case. In fact, making such claims amounts to denial (*kufr*) and ignorance (*jahl*). Al-Rāzī argues that inanimate beings, who otherwise do not fulfill the condition for the essential attribute of life (*ḥayāt*), cannot be said to manifest the divine attributes of power (*qudra*) and knowledge (*ʿilm*), for that is impossible to say about the divine order and therefore amounts to unbelief. He goes on to support his assertion regarding the nonrational glorification of inanimate beings by citing the phrase from the same verse 'though you do not understand their praise,' to substantiate the fact that the precise nature of glorification of inanimate beings remains unknown to us. Al-Rāzī's elaboration on this point, however, goes on to focus on the human incomprehensibility in terms of what can be understood as the divine order of physical, chemical and biological laws governing inanimate matter rather than anything concerning the existence of rational speech.[73]

Al-Rāzī's hermeneutical approach to this verse and the Qur'an, in general, is best understood through his engagement in the customary debate instigated by Q.3:7 over the interpretation of the technical exegetical concepts of the *muḥkam* (clear) and *mutashābih* (ambiguous) verses. The discussion brings into focus the role of reason in interpreting revelation and establishing certain knowledge (*yaqīn*) in addition to using intra-Qur'anic references (*tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān*) and Prophetic narrations. According to al-Rāzī's argument, if evidence from a literal reading contradicts an established rational proof, then 'either the scriptural evidence cannot be said to be sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) or it can be said to be sound but what was intended by it is not its literal meaning (*ghayru ẓawāhirihā*).'[74] First, in such a case, one should reconcile the contradiction by interpreting scripture allegorically (*taʾwīl*) and in agreement with rational evidence. Second, one should entrust its meaning to God.[75] The supremacy of reason is undoubtedly the primary principle when determining whether nonapparent meanings supersede the apparent ones; in other words,

73. Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Q.17:44.

74. Al-Rāzī, quoted in Shalahudin Kafrawi, 'Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's Sources of *Taʾwil*: Between Revelation and Reason,' *The Islamic Quarterly*, 43/3 (1999), 186–202.

75. Kafrawi, 'Sources,' 192; see also nn.46, 198.

reason is the scale that weighs the decision between an allegorical (*ta'wīl*) and a literal reading.[76]

Ibn 'Arabī's position on *ta'wīl* and the role of the intellect is abundantly clear with reference to al-Rāzī's hermeneutics. While al-Rāzī, too, levels the accusation of unbelief against those who assign rational speech to inanimate objects, Ibn 'Arabī is equally critical about rational approaches that doubt the accuracy of the ambiguous verses and hence lack faith in what God has clearly articulated. Instead of recognizing the failure of their own reason, Ibn 'Arabī sees *ta'wīl* on the part of the rationalists as a failure to comprehend scripture. The issue for Ibn 'Arabī is whether there can be an intermediary or separation imposed by, say, reason between God and everything other than Him such as His word and creation. In other words, is there anything other than *Wujūd* or a speaker and listener other than God?

The conclusions drawn by the two scholars in their respective interpretations is only one example that needs to be expanded to include other verses to construct a thorough hermeneutics. This discussion does, however, prove sufficient in illustrating a stark rift between the two distinct perceptions of reality and hence the Qur'anic language. The contention between the two interpretations is not to set a precedence to read the words in the verse literally or metaphorically or to ask whether one can substantiate or refute the claim concerning the rational speech of inanimate beings using the Qur'an. Rather, the comparison is meant to highlight the stakes with which one's ontological conception of scripture can fundamentally inform the reality they inhabit and perceive. The argument regarding the speech of inanimate beings speaks more to the existential experience of the reader than it does about the nature of inanimate beings themselves.

Furthermore, in light of Ibn 'Arabī's ontological conception of creation as speech, it is crucial not to reduce the contrast between the two interpretations to a purely linguistically bound debate between a literal versus metaphorical approach. Instead, comparative studies of Ibn 'Arabī's scriptural hermeneutics need to be assessed with reference to his metaphysical conception of reality that does not find a place in the interpretations of the mainstream exegetes (*mufassirūn*) and arguably the genre of exegetical commentaries.

76. El-Tobgui, 'Hermeneutics,' 141.

CONCLUSION

In seeking to answer how finite beings can grasp the meanings inherent in the speech of an infinite Being, we are reminded by Ibn ʿArabī to reconsider our own being and to establish the very nature and hence purpose of reading scripture before we can begin. His writings compel us to reflect and ask: is the purpose of scriptural interpretation to know what God means or is it perhaps emblematic of a desire that seeks to understand the meaning inherent in our own asking? It is this recognition of imminence and intimacy between the seeker and the sought that we find flowing through the heart of Ibn ʿArabī's scriptural hermeneutics. The essence of his hermeneutical approach is also wonderfully captured in his own words, 'The descent of the Qurʾān into the heart of the servant is the descent of God into him; God then speaks to him "from him and in him" (*min sirrihi fī sirrihi*).'[77]

The absence of an extant formal Qur'anic commentary in the Shaykh's corpus may not be a mere coincidence just as his claims to the divinely decreed order are hidden within his vast and mysterious arrangement of chapters and thoughts. After all, conducting Qur'anic exegesis within the bounds of the formal genre (*tafsīr*), which is further mediated by principles (*uṣūl*) instituted by the normative tradition, enforces an inevitable distance between the exegete and the Qur'an, something that Ibn ʿArabī sees as ontologically being one and the same through the faculty of imagination (*khayāl*). Not only does the format and strict exclusivity to those principles not conform to his vision of metaphysical reality, the idea of placing one's existential experience within a confined and sequential verse-by-verse format also appears antithetical for someone claiming to speak from a place so intimate and enclosed that he himself requires it to be unveiled (*kashf*) for him.

Ibn ʿArabī's theory of scriptural hermeneutics is a compelling and radical approach that subverts both our commonly held conception of scripture and also the relationship between the reader and the book. In this paradigm, neither is scripture merely a text nor is the

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77. Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ʿArabī* (Cambridge, 1993), 91.

reader the sole subject in the act. Instead, we find the entire cosmos to be a literal book and the reader, too, as the object of her own reading. In characteristically Akbarian fashion, we find ourselves within an experience that is at once ambiguous and enchanting, namely, of reading a book that in fact is reading you.

Similar to the apparent disorder and disjointedness of mystical writing and even the Qur'an, we also experience a remarkable and perplexing (*ḥayra*) level of multiplicity, complexity and constant change in existence around us. What in daily language has come to be described as randomness, chance or even serendipity is, in Ibn 'Arabī's view, an intricately crafted story and a masterful narrative. Nothing exists without serving its precise purpose in the cosmic sentence of being or existence (*wujūd*). But this will not be unveiled to us until we muster the courage to dive into the perplexities inherent in our existence and scripture. The confusions and disorientations of life must be savored and listened to with an attentive witnessing (*mushāhada*), fueled with an aspiration (*himma*) and a relentless desire to know that which is truly existent (*al-ḥaqq al-wujūd*).