Jesus and Enoch in the *Barzakh* of Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-ʿArabi

Role playing and Myth weaving in the Drama of Creation

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Muhammad Ibn al-ʿArabi, whose honorific title was Muhyi al-Din said: 'Those people [the ancient Egyptians] believed in the transmigration of souls. Therefore, they set the pyramids up as their *ʿalāma* [signpost], in order to mark the age in which they departed from this world [from the one] in which they [expect to] return.'[1]

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.[2]

INTRODUCTION

For *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (The Greatest Master), Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-ʿArabi (d.638/1240), etymology was a vehicle for crossing over from the tombstone of words and letters to the infinite living meanings that reside beneath the surface. In the above excerpt, mentioned by the Muslim geographer al-Qazwini (d.682/1283) in his *Athar al-Bilad* (The Remnants of Cities), Ibn al-ʿArabi ushers us into one such journey with his use of *ʿalāma* (signpost) to refer to the pyramids of Egypt.

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1. Al-Qazwini, Zakariya b. Muhammad, *Athar al-Bilad* (Beirut: Dar Sadir li-l-Tibaʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1960), p. 269.

2. Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Works: As You Like It* (New York: Portland House, 1997), p. 239.

The significance of these signposts emerges in Ibn al-ʿArabi's magnum opus, *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings*). There, the Andalusian mystic informs us that:

> The *ʿālam* (world) refers to everything except *al-ʿalīm* (God), and [the world] is naught but the possible things, whether existent or not. They are in themselves *ʿalāmāt* (signs) of *ʿilmunā* (our knowledge) or *ʿilm* (knowledge) of the necessary existent, who is God … It is for this reason that it was called *ʿālam* (world), from *ʿalāma* (sign), because it is a proof of the Maker. So know this![3]

In this way, Ibn al-ʿArabi sacralizes the entire cosmos as a matrix of signs that allude to God. Indeed, this is but one way to describe the Andalusian mystic's Weltanschauung of – what will be later called – *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the oneness of Being): the cosmos in its entirety is but a procession of *tajalliyāt* (theophanies) of God's names and attributes.

Ibn al-ʿArabi, like many Sufis before and after him, adheres to the famous hadith where God says: 'I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known, so I created the creation so that I may be known to – and by – them.' This primordial divine imperative to know oneself in the mirror of the other carries over, as Claude Addas informs us, into Ibn al-ʿArabi's entire vision of God's communication with the world.[4] While the French specialist is interested in the intricate union between love and knowledge that is implicit in this hadith, I would like to focus instead on the divine creative process as a weaving of myth that finds mimesis in human speech.

At the center of Ibn al-ʿArabi's symbolic harmonization between God's creation of the world and human speech is the figure of Jesus as *kalimat Allāh* (the Word of God) and an archetype of divine creativity. Ibn al-ʿArabi also expands this network of symbols, via etymology once again, to include the prophet

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3. Ibn al-ʿArabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (Beirut: Dar Sader, n.d.), III:443 (henceforth, *Fut.*); (Beirut: Dar Sadir li-l-Tibaʿa wa-l-Nashr, 2010), vol. 6:262–3 (henceforth, *FM*).

4. Addas, Claude, 'The Experience and Doctrine of Love in Ibn ʿArabī' (*Expérience et Doctrine de l'Amour chez Ibn ʿArabi*), in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* (*JMIAS*), 32 (2002), 25–44.

Idris (biblical Enoch) as an enigmatic actor who exchanges various garbs in the grand cosmic narrative of gnosis and journey towards the divine presence. Through such cosmic role playing, these divinely ordained actors collapse 'person' into 'personality' and unfurl the script of creation in *waqt al-Ḥaqq* (time of the Real, or Real time).

ʿISA B. MARYAM, THE ARCHETYPAL *BARZAKH*

The ancient philosophical analogy between the universe and human being as macrocosm/microcosm is perhaps the best descriptor of Ibn al-ʿArabi's rich portrayal of Jesus in his writings. Although the figure of Christ is often times associated with Ibn al-ʿArabi's Saintology and the enigmatic post of *khatm al-walāya al-muṭlaqa/al-ʿāmma* (Seal of Universal Sainthood), that particular depiction has received ample discussion in works like Chodkiewicz's *Seal of the Saints* and others. Therefore, I would like instead to concentrate on Ibn al-ʿArabi's portrayal of the body of Jesus, his physiological makeup and the larger cosmic vision that results from that construction.

'Gabriel transmitted the Word of God to Mary just as a messenger conveys the Word of God to his people.'[5] With these words, Ibn al-ʿArabi establishes the correlation between God's utterance as text and body in *Fusus al-Hikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*). Jesus, as the 'Word made flesh', embodies God's communication with the world. Nevertheless, the Andalusian mystic distinguishes in the *Meccan Openings* between Jesus as *kalimat Allāh* (the Word of God) and God's other *kalām* (speech):

> God said: 'and His *kalima* (Word) which he sent to Mary' and it [the *kalima*] is nothing but the *ʿayn* (essence) of Jesus; He did not send to her [Mary] except that. For had the divine Word that was sent to her been like His speech to Moses, she would have rejoiced and not said: 'Would that I had died before this and been completely forgotten' (Q.19:23).[6]

5. Ibn al-ʿArabi, *Fusus al-Hikam* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-ʿArabi, 2002), p.139 (henceforth *Fusus*).

6. *Fut.*II:400; *FM*.4:53.

Beyond Ibn al-ʿArabi's theological motivation to delineate God's *kalām qadīm* (eternal speech) from His created utterance lies his attempt to present Jesus as an insight into the grammar of divine language. Like a word that is composed of many letters, Ibn al-ʿArabi tells us later that:

> And He said as regards Jesus, peace be upon him, that he is: 'His Word which He sent to Mary' and He also said about her: 'she believed in the *kalimāt* (Words) of her lord' and they [these Words] are nothing but Jesus. He made him as Words [plural] for her because he is abundant from the perspective of his outward and inward composition. Thus every part of him is a Word … It is like a human being when he utters the various letters that form each word that is intended by the speaker who seeks to create these words; so that they might express through them what is in their soul.[7]

Jesus, then, as God's utterance, represents an expression of divine creativity and allusion to that hidden treasure that is God's essence. Ibn al-ʿArabi's pedagogical use of Christ's physiology also masterfully posits an analogical relation between this divine act of speech and its mimesis in human communication.

Ibn al-ʿArabi makes this analogy vivid in the mythic account of his *miʿrāj* (ascension) that is mentioned in a few different places in his writings. In Chapter 167 of the *Meccan Openings* specifically, he describes what each of the seven heavens of his ascension represent. The second heaven, where Jesus and John the Baptist reside, is also 'the presence of oration, rhetorical meters and eloquence. It is also the heaven of mixtures and the appearance of a single meaning in many forms … it is also known from this presence the science of *sīmiyāʾ* that is concerned with letters and names … From here also is known the lofty status of words and the most encompassing of speech.'[8]

The significance of this association of Jesus with speech and eloquence comes to the fore in Chapter 367 of the *Meccan*

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7. *Fut*.III.283; *FM*.5:539.
8. *Fut*.II.274; *FM*.3:495.

Openings, where Ibn al-ʿArabi recounts his *miʿrāj* once again. Here, however, he clarifies that he 'achieved … the meaning of all the [divine] names, and so I witnessed them return to one named and one essence. That named was my own witnessing act and that essence my own being. Therefore, my journey was naught except in my own self and its proof is upon me.'[9] In this way, Ibn al-ʿArabi shows us how the cosmos of the self mimics the cosmos of divine creation, *nafas al-raḥmān* (the Breath of the Most-Merciful).

Most importantly, this analogy highlights Ibn al-ʿArabi's emphasis on the continuous coming-to-be of that primordial unfolding of the hidden treasure within the souls of human beings in their acts of speech. The human creative ability to produce letters, harmonize them into words and juxtapose them into allusions of meanings that reside in their souls is in itself a metaphor of God's ongoing drama of divine creation that began and still incessantly revolves around the singular *kun* (Be).

Moreover, like most of Ibn al-ʿArabi's analogies, this parable not only highlights human speech as a trace of the *tanzīh* (transcendence) of God's eternal speech, but also sustains God with the *tashbīh* (immanence) and clothing of an impeccable creative author. What carries us in the next section from this rich discourse on the Jesus principle of cosmic creativity is the following: if the cosmos is to be perceived as God's unfolding mythic tale, then who are the various characters in this play? What are the scenes and acts in this performance and how are they glimpsed in the procession of history?

PROPHET IDRIS AND THE SUPREMACY OF ROLE PLAY

It is fitting to the topic of this paper that al-Qazwini continues, after his mention of Ibn al-ʿArabi's statement about the pyramids, to state that:

9. *Fut*.II:428; *FM*.4:104.

And some people claim that *hirmis al-awwal* (Hermes Trismegestus) whom the Greeks call Enoch b. Yard b. Mahla'il b. Qinan b. Anush b. Shith b. Adam, may peace be upon him, who is Idris, is the one who built them. He knew of Noah's flood, either through revelation or gleaning that from the condition of planets. Thus, he ordered the building of the pyramids and the storing of wealth and books of knowledge therein out of fear of *al-durūs* (corruption)[10] and in order to preserve them.

The image of the pyramids that emerges from these two accounts is of a mathematical constant in an equation with many variables. In the world of plays and performances, such structures are markers that make clear the current act and scene in the chronology of history.

Our interest here should not be the authenticity of these two excerpts that al-Qazwini mentions, but rather the agency such beliefs exercise in the collective imagination of societies that adhere to them. In this regard, Ibn al-'Arabi highlights the unique position of the prophet Idris in this myth of constants and variables. Like his discussion on Jesus, the Andalusian mystic posits an intricate connection between Idris's unique station and its consequences in the social realm of Saintology and hierarchy of gnosis.

Although Ibn al-'Arabi allocates two separate chapters in the *Bezels of Wisdom* to Idris and Ilyas/Elias (Elijah), the author makes it clear in the first sentences of the chapter on the second figure that:

Elias is Idris. He was a prophet before Noah, and God raised him to a lofty status. He resides in the heart of orbits and that is the orbit of the sun. Elias, who was Idris, was given the example of the splitting of the mountain known as Lebanon (*lubnān*), from *lubāna*, which is desire or goal to have a chariot and all its trappings of fire. When he saw it, he rode it and desire left him. Thus, he became an intellect without desire. His understanding of the

10. The various meanings inherent in the word '*durūs*' and its mystical significance to the motif of suffering and redemption is a pivotal idea which will be revisited throughout the article.

Real was transcendence and so he had half of the gnosis of God
… However, if God gives gnosis through *tajallī* (theophany),
his gnosis of God will be complete. For then he would establish
tanzīh in its place and *tashbīh* in its place.[11]

Thus, behind the historical apparitions of Idris and Elias there
are two archetypal paths to divine gnosis, through transcend-
ence and immanence. Moreover, these two personas are not
independent or exclusive to one another. On the contrary, the
appearance of the first prepares the coming of the second; while
the emergence of the last fulfills a potentiality within the first.

Ibn al-'Arabi, in a similar manner to his discussion on Jesus,
extends this unique doppelganger-trait of Idris/Elias to the
hierarchy of saints. He informs us in Chapter 73 of the *Meccan
Openings* that:

God kept, after the messenger of God, may peace be upon him,
three messengers alive in their bodies in this world and they are:
Idris, may peace be upon him, who is living in his body and God
made him reside in the fourth heaven and note that the seven
heavens are a part of *ʿālam al-dunyā* (this world), for they remain
and perish with it … He also kept on this earth Elias and Jesus;
both of whom are messengers … As for Khidr, who is the fourth,
some people differ [whether he is a messenger] but we do not.
Therefore, these four all subsist with their bodies in this world
and they are *al-awtād* (pillars). Two of them are *imam*s and one of
them is the *quṭb* (pole) who is the site of the gaze of the Real upon
this world.[12]

Although Ibn al-'Arabi creatively collapses the seven heavens
into this material world, *dunyā*, he nevertheless distinguishes
between Idris and Elias as figures who reside in the fourth
heaven and earth, respectively. In this way, the *tanzīh* (tran-
scendence) of the Idris-persona is associated with the higher
heavens and *tashbīh* (immanence) of the Elias-persona with the
lower earth.

11. *Fusus*, p. 181.
12. *Fut*.II:5; *FM*:3:9.

It is a remarkable coincidence – or perhaps not – that in the biblical tradition, it is John the Baptist (Yahya) who is seen as a metaphorical parallel to Elijah (Elias). This is significant because during his aforementioned *miʿrāj*, Ibn al-ʿArabi recounts his meeting with John the Baptist in the second heaven with Jesus and proceeds to ask the former about his residence in that specific heaven:

> I said: 'Is this your heaven?' He said: 'No, I fluctuate between ʿIsa (Jesus) and Harun (Aaron), I am with this one sometimes and with the other one some other times and also with Yusuf (Joseph) and Idris (Enoch), may peace be upon them.' I said to him: 'Why have you singled out Harun out of all the prophets?' He said to me: 'Due to the sanctity of lineage. For I have not come to Jesus except that he is my cousin, so I visit him in his heaven. Then, I also visit Harun because my aunt (Mary) is also his [distant] sister in religion and lineage.'[13]

Although Ibn al-ʿArabi does not mention specifically why Yahya visits Idris and Joseph in their heavens, this excerpt nevertheless brilliantly extends the network of connectors that govern and direct various figures' transition from one epistemological and/or ontological sphere to another.

We need not force an intricate web of meaning that somehow connects Jesus, John the Baptist, Elijah and Enoch in Ibn al-ʿArabi's writings, for that is not the purpose of this paper. However, what is important to glean from the above is that, for Ibn al-ʿArabi, these prophetic figures are always traversing various bodily dwellings across archetypal guidelines of gnosis, kinship or a spiritual station in a cosmic hierarchy of saints. In the remaining concluding paragraphs, I would like to highlight a linguistic 'kinship' that further ties Jesus with Idris in Ibn al-ʿArabi's thought. This final investigation will allow us to tie some loose knots involving these two figures and God's hidden treasure manifesting as an endless play in the procession of history.

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13. *Fut*.III:347; *FM*.6:98.

JESUS AND ENOCH: SUFFERING AND REDEMPTION

These final paragraphs return us to Ibn al-'Arabi's masterful use of etymology as an episteme to achieve gnosis. Beginning with the Qur'anic description of Jesus as *kalimat Allāh* (the Word of God), Maurice Gloton and William Chittick both direct our attention to Ibn al-'Arabi's derivation of *kalm* (wound) from the root *k-l-m* of *kalima* (word).[14] The uttered *kalimāt* (words) of God imprint themselves upon the *habā'* (non-existent canvas of creation), just as ink imprints itself upon a blank sheet of paper and the human seed impregnates a womb.

Related to this term is an epithet that Ibn al-'Arabi uses as a descriptor of the *quṭb* (pole) of the spiritual hierarchy of saints. *Mudāwī al-kulūm* (the healer of wounds), as the Andalusian mystic informs us, is a characteristic trait of this figure who occupies the highest station of saints. However, the wounds that this pole heals are not necessarily physical, but as Ibn al-'Arabi tells us, he – or she – rather 'hides much secret knowledge from his students, out of gentleness and fear for them, and is thus called the healer of wounds.'[15] Ibn al-'Arabi masterfully uses the multifarious meanings inherent in *k-l-m* in order to transform physical wounds into epistemic-spiritual wounds produced through words.

Lingering behind this enigmatic post of 'healer of wounds' is actually none other than Enoch, the prophet Idris. For as Ibn al-'Arabi informs us numerous times in the *Meccan Openings* and elsewhere, Idris is the *quṭb* (pole) who occupies the fourth orbit of the sun and, thus – presumably – is the intended 'healer of wounds'. Therefore, we may posit here a remarkable exchange of garbs between Idris and Jesus: the sacrificial imprinting of the creative Word of God upon the cosmos and the redemptive

14. Cf. Gloton, Maurice, 'The Quranic Inspiration of Ibn 'Arabi's Vocabulary of Love: 'Etymological Links and Doctrinal Development' in *JMIAS* 27 (2000), 37–52; and Chittick, William C., 'The Cosmology of Dhikr', in 'Paths to the Heart' Conference Proceedings (University of South Carolina, 2012).

15. *Fut*.I:153; *FM*.1:386.

aspect of its healing through firm knowledge that is protected from the unlearned and unprepared.

Ibn al-ʿArabi would probably also concur that al-Qazwini's choice of *durūs* (extinction) to describe Enoch's mythic purpose behind building the pyramids, in order to protect knowledge from perishing, is hardly coincidental. For this same word also means lessons, from the root *d-r-s*. Like *tanzīh* (transcendence) and *tashbīh* (immanence) or *kalm* (wound) and *kalima* (word), Ibn al-ʿArabi seeks to highlight the inseparable twin halves of the circle of gnosis; the yin and yang manifesting itself throughout the cosmos: the redemptive spread of *durūs* (lessons of knowledge) is healing and redemption from *durūs* (extinction).

This pair of divine exhalation/inhalation that holistically forms *nafas al-raḥmān* (the Breath of the Most-Merciful) revealed itself throughout the preceding pages in the exchange of gnostic–bodily garbs between Enoch and Elijah, John the Baptist and Elijah and – also possibly– Enoch and Jesus. Placing this paradigm of role playing within Ibn al-ʿArabi's Weltanschauung allows us to perceive its three-pronged significances in the metacosm (God), macrocosm (universe) and microcosm (human being).

The divine exhalations and inhalations emanate, as an unfolding of the hidden treasure and unfurling of a divine script, into the cosmos and are performed through various actors, one after the other. Each of these performers sets a potentiality to be fulfilled through his successor. Ultimately, however, this entire process is also taking place within the heart of man. For as Ibn al-ʿArabi tells us, his ascension was naught but within his own self.

Thus, the sacrificial imprint of the Word (the Jesus principle), as manifest in human speech, is coupled with the redemptive and healing effect of firm knowledge (the Idris principle). However, the very unfolding of the hidden treasure itself is naught but the macrocosm and microcosm themselves. They are the immanent writing and performance of the play of creation in Real time, the time of the Real.

This short excursion into Ibn al-ʿArabi's performative Prophetology and role playing raises some key questions that

are worthwhile investigating in later studies. First, are there any other symbiotic relationships between prophet-pairs in Ibn al-ʿArabi's Weltanschauung? In other words, aside from the Jesus and Enoch principles, what other cosmic and recurring motifs does the Shaykh present us with in his writings? Second, how have Sufis utilized such prophetological principles with the notion of spiritual inheritance from various prophets that Ibn al-ʿArabi establishes in the *Meccan Openings* and *Bezels of Wisdom*?

In any given age, do *al-awliyāʾ al-ʿīsawiyyūn* (Jesus-like saints) perceive themselves as complements of *al-awliyāʾ al-idrīsiyyūn* (Enoch-like saints) or any other type of saints for that matter? Lastly, how can this prophetological apparatus increase our understanding of how messianism and millenarianism shape the agency that *awliyāʾ* have in contemporary Islamdom and throughout history? How do such prophetic archetypes and roles allow men of God to channel divine grace into the social sphere and become a *barzakh* between the timeless and timed?