

**The World Could Not Contain the Pages:
A Sufi Reading of the Gospel of John
Based on the Writings of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240 CE)**

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences**

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2016

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Abstract

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This dissertation addresses the question: how might the Sufi master, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240 CE), have read the Gospel of John? Although the Gospel of John belongs originally to the Christian tradition, this dissertation is a contribution to Islamic Studies, endeavoring to illuminate Ibn al-‘Arabī’s distinctive manner of reading religious texts and to highlight features of his negotiation of a dual heritage from Jesus and Muḥammad. To set Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought against an Islamic backdrop and situate it in an Islamic context, this dissertation adopts the device of constructing a commentary, guided by seminal passages in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s written corpus, on an Arabic translation of the Gospel of John: the Alexandrian Vulgate, widely circulated in the Arab world during Ibn al-‘Arabī’s time. This amounts not only to a comparison between Johannine doctrines and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines, but also a comparison between the latter and historical Muslim commentaries on the Christian scriptures—particularly the Biblical commentary (in circulation by the thirteenth century) attributed to the famed Sufi theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, and the fourteenth-century Muslim Biblical commentary by Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316 CE). Part I of the dissertation establishes a foundation for the commentary, inquiring into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s general attitudes towards non-Islamic religions, then considering autobiographical accounts of his relationship to Christianity, the question of his familiarity with the New Testament, and illustrations of his creative engagement with Christian doctrines. Part II of the dissertation constitutes the commentary, considering Ibn al-‘Arabī’s possible views on a number of Johannine doctrines: Jesus’ claim to have been the son of God; Jesus’ claim to have

been one with God; the doctrine that Jesus was the embodied Word; the expiatory and epistemic functions of the embodied Word (paralleled by a dialectic relationship between two divergent kinds of witnessing); and the rumor, at the end of the Gospel of John, that the Beloved Disciple would never die.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for my advisor, Peter Awn, who has stood by me with unwavering support throughout the various challenges, interruptions, and setbacks I have faced on this long and zigzagging road to completing my dissertation. Without his dependability, guidance, and encouragement, going above and beyond for me, I could never have reached the other side of these obstacles. I would also like to express my gratitude for all the members of the faculty at the Department of Religion at Columbia University and the Department of Religion at Barnard College, as well as members of the administration at Columbia's Department of Religion and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, for their ongoing support and their generosity in giving me every opportunity I needed to complete this trek. I would like especially to thank the members of my defense committee—Elizabeth Castelli, Rachel McDermott, Wayne Proudfoot, and Bob Somerville, in addition to Peter Awn—for a very stimulating and pleasurable conversation at my defense.

I would like to voice my gratitude for various key players in this process who have, in unofficial capacities, offered me insightful guidance in my work on this dissertation: Eric Winkel, who read drafts of my dissertation and liberally shared with me his expertise in Akbarian studies, as well as his permission to cite his prepublished translation of the *Futūḥāt*; Michael McCoy, who directed me to crucial resources at precisely those moments when I needed them; Joshua Falconer, who engaged me in long discussions of the Gospel of John and the Odes of Solomon; the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, for nurturing ever-deepening explorations of Ibn al-'Arabī, with special acknowledgement of Stephen Hirtenstein for generously sharing drafts from his prepublished new translation (with Cecilia Twinch and Jane Clark) of the *Fuṣūṣ*; Zahra' Langhi, who directed my attention to aspects of current research in Christian-Islamic relations;

and Father John Bethancourt at Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Santa Fe, for enriching my understanding of the Gospel of John from an Orthodox perspective.

I also wish to express my appreciation for: Abdulaziz Sachedina at the University of Virginia, who first introduced me to Ibn al-‘Arabī in 1995; Chorouq, who gave me the gift of Ibn al-‘Arabī in Arabic; the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order, especially Shaykha Fariha Fatima al-Jerrahi and Baqi Atman, for their spiritual guidance; Wahid Miller, who welcomed me into his home on the mountain and shared with me his teachings; Penny Russell, who has patiently taught me the Mevlevi turn; St. John’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where I have taught since 1999, for giving me an exceptionally extended leave of absence to pursue my studies at Columbia University; Laura Cooley, Librarian at Meem Library at St. John’s College, upon whom I depended heavily for numerous interlibrary loans; Andrea D’Amato and Isla Prieto at the St. John’s College Bookstore, for making it the best bookstore in Santa Fe; my students at St. John’s College, who have been a cheering section for me; Molly Padgett, whose hospitality made my return trips to the city warm and comfortable; my dear friends, Andrew Beckham and Carol LaRocque, Bill and Natalie Blais, and Kevin Groark, for their affectionate and knowing camaraderie over the years; my daughter, Lila, who constantly inspires me and challenges me to keep up with her; and my parents, Dewey and Carol, who have always believed in me and have given me their love and encouragement every step of the way. Above all, I’d like to express my gratitude to God for the wondrous and unforeseen ways the stars have lined up, making it possible for me to compose this dissertation in a very narrow window of time.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated with love and gratitude

to the memory of my father Dewey

(1946-2009)

and to my mother Carol.

Part I
Background

Chapter 1

The Opening Question

1.1 How Might Ibn al-‘Arabī Have Read the Gospel of John?

*He has sent down upon thee the Book with the truth, confirming what was before it, and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel aforetime, as guidance to the people... — Qur’ān 3:3-4*¹

We begin our study with the end of the Gospel of John. This is how the final verse of that Gospel reads in the Revised Standard Version:

But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25 RSV)²

This is how the same verse reads in Arabic—

Wa fa‘ala yasū‘ hadhā wa umūr kathīra law annahā kutibat wāḥdatan wāḥdatan zanantu an lam yasa‘uhā al-‘alām ṣuḥufan al-maktūba. (John 21:25, Alexandrian Vulgate)

—and in our English translation from the Arabic:

And Jesus did this and many things; if they were written one by one, I suppose that the world could not contain the pages of the things written.

From the outset we note that the Gospel of John might be read as a text that resists coming to a conclusion, announcing that its subject matter exceeds the limitations of a bound book and perhaps striving to reach beyond the confines of its own inscription.

¹ In this study, we will use A. J. Arberry’s translation of the Qur’ān (Arberry 1955). Deviations from Arberry’s translation within the text of the study will be noted. When citing verses from the Qur’ān, we will employ the Egyptian numbering system. Although Arberry’s own numbering system differs slightly from the Egyptian system, we have chosen to favor the standard numbering system: “The Egyptian numbering system, first introduced under King Fu‘ad and originally published in 1925, has become the standard used throughout most of the Muslim world today” (Saeed 2008, 51-52).

² When citing English translations of the Greek New Testament, we will usually cite the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (May and Metzger 1977). Wherever we cite the Revised Standard Version, we will use the label “RSV.”

The pages of another book, in this case from the Islamic tradition, press similarly to break out of their bindings. This is the compact volume of mystical insights known as *The Signets of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*). The author, Ibn al-‘Arabī, was an Andalusian-born, thirteenth-century teacher belonging to the Sufi tradition. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes at the head of his book’s table of contents:

...I have placed in this book what was set out for me, but not that to which I have attained, for indeed that could not be encompassed in a book nor by the present existent world. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 16)

Here we find the same tension between limits and limitlessness—or closure and open-endedness—as found at the end of the Gospel of John, symbolized with virtually the same turn of language.

In this shared image of a book that exceeds encompassment, at an intersection of Christianity and Islam, we introduce the opening and guiding question of our study: how might the Sufi master Ibn al-‘Arabī have read the Gospel of John? That is, how might *we* read this Gospel in accordance with the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī? To answer this question, this study will adopt the imaginative conceit of constructing an Akbarian³ commentary, reading the Gospel of John through the lens of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings—primarily the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* and his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings*). To construct this commentary, we will draw on passages in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works that directly address Jesus and his teachings, as well as passages that explicate his larger perspective—passages that, while not referring directly to the teachings of Jesus, enter readily into dialogue with Johannine doctrines. We have

³ We will use the adjective “Akbarian” (as used by Michel Chodkiewicz, Claude Addas, etc.), meaning “related to Ibn al-‘Arabī” or “reflecting or influenced by the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī.” Other scholars, such as Reza Shah-Kazemi, use the synonymous adjective, “Akbari,” adhering to its Arabic form. The term is derived from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s honorific, al-Shaykh al-Akbar, as defined on the next page.

chosen to frame this study as an Akbarian commentary in the hope that such a device will shed light on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s idiosyncratic views (including his interest in and attitudes towards Jesus’ teachings) more effectively than a conventional comparative study might.

Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-‘Arabī al-Ṭā’i al-Ḥātimī, designated by the honorific Muḥyī al-Dīn (“the reviver of religion”) and popularly known as al-Shaykh al-Akbar (the Greatest Master),⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī was an eminent teacher in the tradition of Sufism—a “broad” and “protean” dimension of Islam (Schimmel 1975, 3), frequently (and inadequately) described as “Islamic mysticism.” Ibn al-‘Arabī⁵ was born in the city Murcia (in eastern Andalusia, which is now southern Spain) in 1165 CE; but he spent much of his adult life traveling widely (eastward across North Africa, on to Jerusalem, Mecca, Medina, Baghdad, Mosul, Konya, Malatya, and Aleppo) before settling in Damascus, where he died in 1240 CE.⁶ During his youth in Andalusia⁷ and throughout his adult life, Ibn al-‘Arabī absorbed learning from numerous contemporary Sufi masters from all walks of life; he also reported direct interactions with his Sufi forebears (in visionary dialogues).⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī, in turn, acquired

⁴ Because he is known as al-Shaykh al-Akbar, we will frequently refer to Ibn al-‘Arabī in this study simply as “the Shaykh.”

⁵ We will use the form “Ibn al-‘Arabī.” It is found in other forms in the literature: “Ibn ‘Arabī” (especially in articles published by the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society) as well as “Ibnul‘Arabī,” etc.

⁶ The best biography of Ibn al-‘Arabī is Claude Addas’ thoroughly-researched and impressively-analyzed work, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Addas 1993); other valuable perspectives on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s life are Stephen Hirtenstein’s *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Hirtenstein 1999) and William C. Chittick’s *Ibn ‘Arabī: Heir to the Prophets* (Chittick 2005).

⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī’s recollections of seventy-one of his teachers in his youth are gathered in R. W. J. Austin’s *Sufis of Andalusia* (Austin 1971).

⁸ See Binyamin Abrahamov’s *Ibn ‘Arabī and the Sufis* (Abrahamov 2014) for a number of such reports.

many disciples, and left an enormous and enduring impact on the Islamic world through his prolific written output, writings that embrace and transcend genres.

A leading authority on Ibn al-‘Arabī, William C. Chittick, has remarked that we might consider the Shaykh a philosopher, a theologian, or a jurist—if it were not for the fact that he was all of these and none of these.⁹ Chittick sums up Ibn al-‘Arabī’s impact on Islam by calling him “at once the most influential and the most controversial Muslim thinker to appear over the past nine hundred years” (Chittick 2005, 1). This verdict has been complemented by the observations of fellow scholars like Samer Akkach, Alexander Knysh, and ‘Uthman Yahya:

As one of the most influential figures in the history of Islam, Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought and teachings have preoccupied Muslim thinkers for centuries. He had such an imposing presence in the Islamic world that for centuries after his death almost every scholar of note found himself forced to define where he stood in relation to Ibn ‘Arabi and his legacy (Knysh, 1999). In about 250 years following his death, over 300 legal opinions were issued by various jurists on the status of his faith and teachings (Yahya, 2001, 20). (Akkach 2007, 11)

Chittick concludes:

In fact, we are dealing with an approach in Islamic learning that is remarkably original, so much so that he has no real predecessor. Certainly, there were important authors during the previous century who also expressed Sufī teachings with theoretical sophistication, but compared even to the greatest of these, such as Ghazali, Ibn ‘Arabi represents a radical break. (Chittick 2005, 2)

As we will see, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s highly creative and original thought defies orthodoxy and continues to be a controversial figure; he has been—and continues to be—counted by many Muslims to be a heretic. Eric Winkel has rightly described Ibn al-‘Arabī as *sui generis*.¹⁰

⁹ William C. Chittick’s opening remarks at the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society Symposium, “A Living Legacy: Ibn ‘Arabi in Today’s World,” at Columbia University, October 23, 2015.

¹⁰ Personal communication. Eric Winkel is the translator of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Asrār al-ṭahāra*, published as *Mysteries of Purity* (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1995), the author of *Islam and the Living Law: The Ibn al-‘Arabī Approach* (Winkel 1997), and the author a number of articles about Ibn al-‘Arabī.

Although Ibn al-‘Arabī never wrote a commentary on the Gospel of John, and although it is difficult to determine how familiar he was with the New Testament, we will suggest that he took seriously certain Christian doctrines that are all strongly Johannine in character. These doctrines include: 1) that Jesus claimed to be the son of God; 2) that Jesus made utterances asserting his identity with God; and 3) that Jesus died on the cross. All three of these doctrines are objectionable from a traditional Islamic point of view. We will argue that Ibn al-‘Arabī was not a traditional Muslim, but a boldly innovative thinker whose inventive and synthetic habits of thought moved in an orbit far from the Islamic center. This study will attempt to demonstrate that the Shaykh was driven by a motivation to narrow the gap between Christianity and Islam. The following chapters will explore ways in which he might have found accommodations for these Christian doctrines and that, moreover, these doctrines served as catalysts in the evolution of his wider theological outlook. As we will suggest, Ibn al-‘Arabī was less interested in showing the compatibility between conventional Christianity and conventional Islam than in establishing a stance in between, an unconventional perspective deviating from both traditions in their conventional forms. In addition to addressing these specific Johannine doctrines, we will explore the more comprehensive perspective Ibn al-‘Arabī might have brought to the Gospel as a whole, a perspective informed by the Shaykh’s proclivity for dialectical readings—primarily the dialectic between closure and open-endedness. We will label this interpretive lens “‘Īsawī,”¹¹ or “Christic,” appropriating a term Ibn al-‘Arabī used and applied to himself. Thus our project can be described as both an Akbarian commentary and, more narrowly, an ‘Īsawī commentary.

¹¹ The meaning of the Arabic word *‘Īsawī* will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3. This word is an adjective meaning “related to Jesus,” from the Arabic name for “Jesus,” *‘Īsā*. Given the frequency with which we will use this term in this study, we will capitalize the word and write it without italics.

While this project is a form of comparative study, we will keep in mind that it involves a comparison between sibling traditions. Thus this will be a study of traditions closely related to one another, already historically engaged in dialogue with one another. This brings to mind the work of Richard Bulliet in *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (Bulliet 2006). In Bulliet's book, he endeavors to stake out an alternative to the perspective enshrined in Samuel Huntington's popular expression, "Clash of Civilizations." Arguing against a view of Christianity and Islam as reified, mutually exclusive, and essentially antagonistic civilizations, Bulliet lays the groundwork for a view of these traditions as fluid, overlapping, and symbiotic. As he states in his introduction,

the term "Islam-Christian civilization" denotes a prolonged and fateful intertwining of sibling societies enjoying sovereignty in neighboring geographical regions and following parallel historical trajectories. Neither the Muslim nor the Christian historical path can be fully understood without relation to the other. (Bulliet 2006, 10)

Emphasizing the common heritage of these cognate religious traditions, Bulliet proposes a revised narrative of their historical trajectories, detailing the ways in which those trajectories mirror one another. He sees this work, and future work in this direction, as vital steps toward resolving present fears and animosities between the two traditions. Admittedly, Ibn al-ʿArabī's stance cannot be seen as representing the mainstream Islamic tradition (despite his wide and enduring influence). Considering the peculiarity of Ibn al-ʿArabī's attitude toward Christianity, his work might be viewed as a particular episode in the larger story of Islamo-Christian sibling relationships.

To be clear, while the central text in this study, the Gospel of John, belongs originally to the Christian tradition, the reading we will pursue here belongs to Islamic Studies, and this study is intended specifically as a contribution to studies of Ibn al-ʿArabī. What we are highlighting here is a perspective on the Gospel as received in an Islamic context. While understanding Ibn

al-‘Arabī as an outlier, we do not wish to engage in this Akbarian commentary in isolation from the broader context of the Arabic Muslim world in which the Shaykh lived. For this reason, we will take into account historical Muslim commentaries on the Christian scriptures, especially commentaries dating from the centuries immediately bracketing the thirteenth century, in which Ibn al-‘Arabī lived and wrote. We will give closest attention to two Muslim Biblical commentaries: *A Fitting Refutation of the Divinity of Jesus from the Evidence of the Gospel* (*Al-radd al-jamīl li-ilāhiyyat ‘Īsā bi-sarīḥ al-injīl*), which was in circulation by the thirteenth century and has been attributed (perhaps falsely) to the famed Persian Sufi Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE); and that by the Cairo-based commentator, Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316 CE). Thus we will not frame our project simply as a comparison of the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī with the Gospel of John, but also a comparison of an Akbarian commentary on the Gospel with historical Muslim commentaries on the Gospel. Our hope is to throw into relief the distinctiveness of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought against the background of other Muslim thinkers, and to sharpen our understanding of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s peculiar relationship to Christianity. Moreover, to enter as far as possible into the terms and Islamic context of our opening question, we will take up as the basis of our commentary not the Greek version of the Gospel of John, but an Arabic translation of the Gospel (the Alexandrian Vulgate), a translation widely available to Muslims in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s era. This is the same Arabic translation of the Gospels with which we have opened this chapter; it is also the same translation used in the Biblical commentary attributed to Ghazālī and the commentary by Ṭūfī. We will discuss these choices more fully below.

In addition, we will find a precedent and model for our study in Reza Shah-Kazemi’s brief Akbarian interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels in his 2001 article, “Jesus in the Qur’ān:

Selfhood and Compassion.” We will examine in detail Shah-Kazemi’s article after a general review of comparative studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

1.2. A Review of Comparative Studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī

*But it is incumbent upon the Folk of Allah to know the doctrine of every sect and creed concerning God... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Futūḥāt III 161.13*¹²

In this review, we will give special attention to comparative studies written in English, French, and Spanish in the period since 1911, when R. A. Nicholson first brought academic attention to Ibn al-‘Arabī with his English translation of the Shaykh’s *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq (The Interpreter of Desires)* (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911).¹³ As we enter the second century of academic studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī, a review of the past century of Akbarian studies highlights various nodes at which new directions and aims have emerged. Early studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī have been dominated by a handful of singular, monumental figures, producing ingenious readings colored (or marred) by their individual personalities. To illustrate this point, we will begin with the enormously influential work of Henry Corbin.¹⁴

¹² This is William C. Chittick’s translation (Chittick 1989, 110). Throughout this study, we will preserve the citation numbers employed by the translator or author we are citing. Unless noted otherwise, citation numbers will refer to the Bulaq edition. Citation numbers referring to Osman Yahia’s edition will be labeled as “OY,” and citation numbers referring to Abd-Aziz Sultan al-Mansoub’s edition will be labeled as “AM.”

¹³ Broader overviews of interpretations of Ibn al-‘Arabī have been produced. For example, James W. Morris has performed a valuable task, reviewing interpretations dating from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s immediate successors up to French scholars in the middle of the 1980’s (Morris 1986a; Morris 1986b; Morris 1987a).

¹⁴ Steven M. Wasserstrom has produced an extensive and incisive study of Henry Corbin, Gershom Sholem, and Mircea Eliade in his book, *Religion After Religion* (Wasserstrom 1999). Characterizing Corbin’s hermeneutic principle (which Wasserstrom traces back to Friedrich W. J. von Schelling), he writes: “One may call this view ‘the tautological sublime.’ What is sublime in this view is its liberating apathy. Released from a need to deliver religious phenomena to a meaning outside themselves, ancient spiritual phenomena are now let be... They are now allowed to be themselves; they are themselves meaning; they mean themselves. These traditional symbols demand to be read in their own terms” (Wasserstrom 1999, 56).

Amidst a voluminous output of scholarship on Avicenna and other Persian philosophers (and driven by a special interest in and sympathy for Shī'ite thought), Corbin made his deepest impression on studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī with his publication of *L’Imagination créatrice dans le Soufisme d’Ibn ‘Arabī* (Corbin 1958), published in English as *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Corbin 1969).¹⁵ The work has made an enduring mark on successive generations of scholars; but this work has also been hampered by Corbin’s strongly personal interpretations, making it difficult to sort out this scholar’s voice from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own distinctive voice. Among those presently leading in this field, Michel Chodkiewicz and William C. Chittick have paid their respects to Corbin, while tempering acknowledgements of their debt with criticism of his peculiar interpretations. Chodkiewicz remarks:

Corbin [was] by far the most subtle of all these exegetes... Nevertheless, in his persistent attempts to uncover a clandestine Shī'ite in the writings of this self-confessed Sunnī, he presents a picture of him which in many respects needs correction. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 5)

Likewise, Chittick honors Corbin, noting that he “has bequeathed to us the word ‘imaginal’” and the concept of the “‘imaginal world’ or *mundus imaginalis*” (Chittick 1989, ix). This terminology is prominent in Chittick’s own work. Yet he recognizes Corbin’s limitations:

Corbin performed the great service of introducing the Western world to many uniquely Islamic ways of expressing philosophical positions, but it is beyond the capacity of a single individual to bring out everything worthy of consideration. Moreover, in his zeal to revive the honor due to the imaginal realm, Corbin tended to de-emphasize the cornerstone of Islamic teachings, *tawhīd*, the “declaration of God’s Unity.” It is as if Corbin was so entranced by the recovery of the imaginal that he had difficulty seeing beyond it. (Chittick 1989, x)

Corbin’s rhetorical flourishes and passion for his subject put his work into a unique category...But Corbin...has certain limitations...Corbin is concerned with his own philosophical projects, as elaborated in dozens of books, several of which have now been translated into English. Any reader of *Creative Imagination* soon begins to wonder where

¹⁵ Reissued as *Alone with the Alone* in 1997.

Ibn al-‘Arabī ends and Corbin begins. The lines are not clear, especially if one does not have access to the Arabic texts. (Chittick 1989, xix)

Chittick’s wife, Sachiko Murata—who has also done valuable research on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings—says rather bluntly that Corbin “does not pay close attention to the texts” (Murata 1992, 178, footnote 178).

Less solitary than Corbin has been the influence of the Traditionalists or the Perennialists (the two terms sometimes used interchangeably). In the latter half of the twentieth century, the association of universalism and religious pluralism with Sufism—and Ibn al-‘Arabī in particular—was perpetuated by scholars who confessed a personal allegiance to Sufism as well as an intellectual commitment to “Perennial philosophy.” The founder of this lineage was René Guénon (1886-1951 CE). While Guénon was initiated into the Shādhilī Sufī order and adopted the Muslim names Abd al-Wahid and Abd al-Haq, he was not a practicing Muslim (Sedgwick 2004, 60); more formative in developing his thinking were new religious movements of the turn of the twentieth century that emphasize Hindu philosophy. Mark Sedgwick suggests that Guénon derived his “Vedanta-Perennialism” from the Martinist Order, founded around 1890 by Gérard Encausse (known as “Papus”) and joined by Guénon in 1906 (Sedgwick 2004, 40). According to Sedgwick,

Encausse and Martinism were linked not only to feminism but also to most of the other alternative causes of the time: homeopathy, anarchism, animal rights, and of course anything related to alternative spirituality—Masonry, hermetic occultism, Vedanta, Baha’ism, alternative science; almost anything, in fact, save Roman Catholic Christianity. (Sedgwick 2004, 48)

Sedgwick also notes that Guénon’s familiarity with Ibn al-‘Arabī was limited:

Guénon remained not only a universalist in his beliefs, but a Traditionalist rather than a Muslim in his writings. There are few references to Islam in his work before 1930, and despite a slight increase in references after 1930, Islam never became an important source for him. Nor was it an important element of his reading: his private library contained some 3,000 volumes at the time of his death, but four times as many on Hinduism as on

Islam, and few or perhaps none in Arabic. When Guénon wanted to refer to the works of the great Sufi theorist Ibn al-Arabi, he wrote for references to a follower in Paris who knew Ibn al-Arabi well. In fact, it is likely that Guénon did not read Arabic. (Sedgwick 2004, 77)

The index to *The Essential René Guénon* (Guénon 2009) lists only three references to Ibn al-‘Arabī. The intermingling of Perennialism with studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī was executed less by Guénon than by successors influenced by him.

Turning to those in Guénon’s train, Carl Ernst asserts that the Perennial philosophy has its roots in nineteenth century French Catholicism, but posited

a primitive or primordial revelation that was not limited to Christianity...Sacred traditions could be numbered in the plural, and thus all religions were to be regarded as manifestations of a Perennial Philosophy that is one and eternal... (Ernst 1994, 176)

Significantly, Ernst notes that, “despite their theoretical respect for Catholicism, most of the [twentieth-century] adherents of the Perennial Philosophy were attracted to Islam.” This group has included a number of Europeans who converted to Islam and received initiation in Sufi orders—such as Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, and Martin Lings.

An especially prolific interpreter of Sufism in Perennialist terms is the Iranian Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He has authored numerous books and essays on Sufism, Persian philosophy, and the relevance of Islam to modernity. Under his editorial mentorship, leading (and often like-minded) scholars of Sufism contributed a wealth of material to the two volumes of *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (Nasr 1986) and *Manifestations* (Nasr 1997). Ernst highlights the fact that “[t]hese two volumes on Islam have sought to avoid historicism and rationalistic skepticism, both of which tendencies are described as alien to Islam” (Ernst 1994, 179).

These Perennialists have exerted a powerful influence on twentieth-century studies of the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Burckhardt, for example, conveyed a large portion of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ* into French as *La Sagesse des Prophètes* (Ibn ‘Arabī 1955); and Nasr made his mark with

a discussion of *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardī, Ibn ‘Arabī* (Nasr 1964). Michel Chodkiewicz and William C. Chittick have both exhibited the influence of the Perennialists, at least in their first introduction to the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Chodkiewicz remarks:

Here I must acknowledge, with no hope of repaying, the debt that I owe to Michel Vâlsan. It was he who, forty years ago, introduced me to the work of Ibn ‘Arabī, of which his own knowledge was both extensive and penetrating, and aided my groping attempts at understanding. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 15-16)

Sedgwick identifies Vâlsan as a student of Mircea Eliade and “an important figure in the history of Traditionalism” (Sedgwick 2004, 110). As for Chittick, one of his earliest books, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi* (Chittick 2005) — originally published in Tehran in 1974, prior to his establishment as one of the foremost authorities on Ibn al-‘Arabī — is peppered with references to Guénon, Schuon, Burckhardt, Lings, and Nasr. Although Chittick later expresses caution about reading Ibn al-‘Arabī through any theoretical lens, he also calls Ibn al-‘Arabī “a true representative of the ‘perennial philosophy’” (Chittick 1989, 233).

The relevance of Perennialism to this present study, beyond the general influence on Akbarian studies in the latter half of the twentieth century, is its suspected influence on *comparative* studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī. These comparative studies, which we will review in a moment, have been motivated in part by a widespread understanding of Ibn al-‘Arabī as an advocate of religious pluralism. Chittick stands prominently among those advocating such an understanding, and his prolific publishing history might be well represented by his book, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Chittick 1994). As we will see in Chapter 2, where we address the question of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitudes towards religious pluralism, critics who deny that Ibn al-‘Arabī was a pluralist accuse Chittick and like-minded scholars of distorting Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings with anachronistic Perennialist impositions.

In the last four decades, the study of Ibn al-‘Arabī has reached beyond the circle of the Perennialists and has moved away from the dominating personalities of relatively insulated interpreters (such as Corbin) to foster more collaborative work rooted in a growing community of scholars, a development spearheaded largely by the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society. Founded in Oxford in 1977, the Society was an offspring of the Beshara School (Taji-Farouki 2007, 177 ff.), established in Scotland in 1975 by the Turkish aristocrat Bulent Rauf. Rauf led an effort to popularize the work of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the English-speaking world, having Burckhardt’s French translation of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* retranslated into English (by Rauf’s wife, Angela Culme-Seymour) and producing his own English translation of İsmail Hakkı Bursavî’s Turkish commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* in four volumes (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1986b; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1987b; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1989; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1991). Rauf’s promotion of the popularity of and scholarship on the Shaykh greatly expanded under the auspices of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, which launched a journal in 1982 (now published twice a year) and led to the formation of Anqa Publishing in 1998; both have, among other projects, provided a platform for English translations of previously untranslated works by Ibn al-‘Arabī. As a result these new forums, the multiplication of scholarly voices has greatly moderated the influence of individual scholars, fostering a more well-rounded understanding of the Shaykh’s work.

While the trajectory of the past century of study has been qualified by evolution and transformation, we can detect from the outset a constant and abiding interest in comparative studies, placing Ibn al-‘Arabī into dialogue with diverse traditions of thought. The broad spectrum of comparative studies has included philosophical studies that set Ibn al-‘Arabī in dialogue with European philosophers; we find, for example, comparisons with Plato (Bashier 2003; Bashier 2004), Kierkegaard (Askari 2004), and Derrida (Almond 2003; Almond 2004), as

well as more general approaches to the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the context of modern philosophy (Coates 2002). These comparative studies have contributed to a trend of reading Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought as essentially philosophical, going back to A. E. Affifi’s early effort to extract philosophical notions from their literary context (Affifi 1938), or more recent studies of the development of Akbarian thought in the history of Islamic philosophy (Chittick 1981; Dagli 2006).

Another (and more recent) trend bridges disciplines by comparing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought with developments in the natural sciences, especially physics. This trend has been signaled by Mohamed Haj Yousef’s book-length study of *Ibn ‘Arabī — Time and Cosmology* (Yousef 2008), as well as studies by Caner K. Dagli (Dagli 2007) and Eric Winkel (Winkel 2012). This approach appears still to be in its early stages, with many possibilities yet open for exploration.

While these examples demonstrate the reach of such ventures, comparative studies over the past century have concentrated chiefly on dialogues between Akbarian thought and non-Islamic religious thought. In some cases, such comparative studies juxtapose Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought with religious traditions far afield from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s time and place. Among these are comparisons with Chinese thought. In Toshihiko Izutsu’s *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Izutsu 1983), Izutsu analyzes the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī and the writings attributed to the Taoists (Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu); Izutsu treats the two sides of the comparison separately and discretely, engaging in a relatively brief comparison at the end of the book. Sachiko Murata’s *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Murata 1992) devotes considerable attention to ideas of gender in the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī and other Sufis, sprinkled with scattered comparisons with Chinese thought.

Other studies have been devoted to dialogues between Ibn al-‘Arabī and Indian thought. This includes R. C. Zaehner’s *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, in which Zaehner brings a hierarchical perspective to his reading of historical forms of mysticism. Zaehner insists on viewing Sufism through the lens of Hinduism, calling the former “Vedānta in Muslim Dress”:

The mystical approach does not come naturally to anyone schooled in a monotheistic creed. It is, on the other hand, the very stuff and substance of the religions that have grown up in India. (Zaehner 1969, 3)

Zaehner is less interested in Ibn al-‘Arabī than in early Sufis, such as the ninth-century mystic Abū Yazīd Bisṭāmī; he meticulously catalogues the homologies between Vedantic maxims and Bisṭāmī’s ecstatic utterances and explaining these matches by postulating direct influence (Zaehner 1969, 93).¹⁶ He gives cursory attention to the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī, whose writings Zaehner reads approvingly through a double lens of Neoplatonism and Vedānta:

The introduction of Neo-Platonic ideas into Ṣūfism from philosophy was, of course, made much of by Ibn al-‘Arabī, who systematized them into something very like Śaṅkara’s version of the Vedānta. (Zaehner 1969, 174)

More recently, scholars have been less hasty to read Ibn al-‘Arabī as a Neoplatonist; but an interest in juxtaposing Ibn al-‘Arabī with Śaṅkara has returned in Reza Shah-Kazemi’s *Paths to Transcendence* (Shah-Kazemi 2006). Shah-Kazemi has explored common concepts in the writings of the two masters, without Zaehner’s insistence on historical influence. Very recently, Carl W. Ernst has raised the historical question, “How would a Hindu scholar understand Sufism, and in particular Ibn ‘Arabī?”, looking at the commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* by the early nineteenth-century Indian scholar Sital Singh (Ernst 2013).

From an early stage, scholars have been especially drawn to constructing dialogues between Ibn al-‘Arabī and Christianity. As evidence of the vitality of this interest, we might look

¹⁶ Annemarie Schimmel expresses skepticism towards Zaehner’s thesis and method (Schimmel 1975, 47).

at the parallel themes of two conferences hosted by the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society in 2014. “Jesus and Mary: A Mystical Perspective” was the theme of the Annual Conference in England (at St Anne’s College in Oxford, May 24-25, 2014), and “Symbols of Transformation: Jesus and Mary in the Teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi” was the theme of the Annual Conference in the United States (at Zaytuna College in Berkeley, November 14-15, 2014). These conferences drew contributions from a dozen scholars, including Zahra’ Langhi’s “Virgin Maryam in the Akbarian Perspective;” Michael Sells’ “Life in Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘Ringsetting of Prophecy in the Word of Jesus;” and Cyrus Ali Zargar’s “Bird from the Garden of Meanings: Soul and Speech in Ibn ‘Arabi’s Reading of Jesus.” Four of these lectures have been published in 2015 as articles in the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* (Volume 57, 2015): Jaume Flaquer’s “The Akbarian Jesus: The Paradigm of a Pilgrim in God” (Flaquer 2015); Denis Gril’s “Jesus, Mary and the Book, according to Ibn al-‘Arabi” (Gril 2015); Stephen Hirtenstein’s “Reviving the Dead: Ibn ‘Arabi as heir of Jesus” (Hirtenstein 2015); and Zachary Markwith’s “Jesus and Christic Sanctity in Ibn al-‘Arabi and Early Islamic Spirituality” (Markwith 2015). This list exhibits the manifold facets of the current interest in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s relationship to Christianity, shedding light on a field that still remains largely unmapped. We will retrace some of the steps taken in this direction over the decades to indicate how far we have come and how we have arrived at our present standing.

The earliest academic studies have prioritized the question of influence, concerned to trace Christian and Neoplatonic influences on the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabi and other Sufis. R. A. Nicholson speculated in his book, *The Mystics of Islam*:

Ibn al-‘Arabi claims that Islam is peculiarly the religion of love, inasmuch as the Prophet Mohammed is called God’s beloved (*Ḥabīb*), but though some traces of this doctrine occur in the Koran, its main impulse was unquestionably derived from Christianity. While the oldest Sufi literature, which is written in Arabic and unfortunately has come

down to us in a fragmentary state, is on fear of Allah, it also bears conspicuous marks of the opposing Christian tradition. As in Christianity, through Dionysius and other writers of the Neoplatonic school, so in Islam, and probably under the same influence, the devotional and mystical love of God soon developed into ecstasy and enthusiasm which finds in the sensuous imagery of human love most suggestive medium for its expression. (Nicholson 1914, 111-112)¹⁷

Perhaps the first scholar to delve deeply into the question of mutual influences between Ibn al-‘Arabī and Christianity was the Spanish-born Roman Catholic priest Miguel Asín Palacios. He announced his interest in Christian-Islamic relations in “Logia et agrapha domini Jesu apud moslemicos scriptores, asceticos praesertim, usitata,” a collection of passages from Islamic texts attributing sayings to Jesus.¹⁸ At the same time, his theory that Ibn al-‘Arabī influenced Dante’s composition of *The Divine Comedy* was first published in Madrid as *La Escatologia musulmana en la “Divina Comedia”* (Asín Palacios 1919), published in English in 1968 as *Islam and the Divine Comedy* (Asín Palacios 1968). In 1931 Asín Palacios made his greatest impact on studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī with *El Islam cristianizado* (Asín Palacios 1931), later translated into French as *L’Islam christianisé* (Asín Palacios 1982).¹⁹ Michel Chodkiewicz unpacks Asín Palacios’ notion of “Christianized Islam” in these terms:

That pious ecclesiastic Asín Palacios skilfully practises what we would today call the art of rehabilitation: Ibn ‘Arabī is a Christian without Christ and owes to the Desert Fathers what all unknowingly he was to restore to Catholic spirituality. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 5)

While James W. Morris has written favorably of *El Islam cristianizado*, he acknowledges the book’s “evident limitations”:

¹⁷ The question of Christian influence (as well as Neoplatonic influence) on developments in the history of Sufism has been explored more fully by other scholars. See Annemarie Schimmel (Schimmel 1975, 10) and Julian Baldick (Baldick 2000, 15-24) for examples.

¹⁸ *Patrologia Orientalis*, 13 (1919), 335-431; and *Patrologia Orientalis*, 19 (1926), 531-624. It has recently served as one of the three main sources for Tarif Khalidi’s book, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Khalidi 2001).

¹⁹ Michel Chodkiewicz has complained that the French translation “leaves much to be desired” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 4).

...[D]espite the age of the original (1931) and the evident limitations of the approach suggested by its title, [*El Islam cristianizado*] still remains the best available introduction to Ibn ‘Arabī’s own life and spiritual practice, and to those crucial practical and experiential aspects of his work which were shared with earlier Sufism (and ultimately with mystics of many religious traditions). (Morris 1986, 542; bracketed phrase inserted by us)

Sharper criticisms of this work have been expressed by Claude Addas (the daughter of Michel Chodkiewicz) in her masterful biography of Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Red Sulphur*. Granting that Asín Palacios was “more of a pioneer” than his contemporaries (Addas 1993, 1), Addas accuses him of infecting the following generations of scholars with faulty research and persistent biographical errors (Addas 1993, 2-5). Most relevant to the present study, Addas voices a scathing criticism of Asín Palacios for misrepresenting Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitudes towards Christianity. Dismissing his work, “which apart from its major deficiencies is also extremely prejudiced” (Addas 1993, 8), Addas opines:

But here one’s agreement with Asín Palacios’ views must come to an end, because he goes on to express indignation at Ibn ‘Arabī’s advice in one of his letters to Kaykā’ūs about Christians. He is entitled to his reaction—which, coming from a pious ecclesiast trained in a seminary on the Iberian peninsula during the nineteenth century, is perfectly understandable. But when he declares that ‘the *Futūhāt* exude political hatred for the Christians’, no attentive reader of Ibn ‘Arabī can possibly take him seriously. And historians will be even more amazed to find Ibn ‘Arabī assert a little later on—quite peremptorily and without citing any evidence—that Ibn ‘Arabī’s reason for returning to Anatolia in 612 was ‘to supervise the Empire’s anti-Christian policy’. (Addas 1993, 234)

With a generation of scholars (such as Michel Chodkiewicz, Claude Addas, James W. Morris, and William C. Chittick) rising to prominence in the closing decades of the twentieth century, studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī have shied away from questions of influence, as in Asín Palacios’ work, and have turned towards what we might call “lateral” comparative studies, drawing side-by-side analogies between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought and Christian thought without suggesting historical influence in either direction. Prominent have been comparisons of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings with those of late medieval Christian mystics. Andrey V. Smirnov has written a

comparative study of Ibn al-‘Arabī and the fifteenth-century Christian mystic, Nicholas of Cusa (Smirnov 1993a);²⁰ Michael A. Sells’ *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Sells 1994) includes chapters on Ibn al-‘Arabī and the early fourteenth-century Christian mystics, Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete. Comparisons with Eckhart have been especially popular. Eckhart has served as a magnet to scholars seeking a representative Christian proponent of negative theology to place into dialogue with Ibn al-‘Arabī. For instance, Ian Richard Netton has called Ibn al-‘Arabī “the Meister Eckhart of the Islamic tradition”:

He had, for example, much in common with the Western medieval friar and mystic Meister Eckhart (circa AD 1260-1327): indeed, that great Dominican, with his doctrine of a divine spark within every man, would have found much to enjoy in the mystical corpus of Islam’s Doctor Maximus. Eckhart, too, was seen by many of his enemies, or those who did not understand his work, as a pantheist, and similarly condemned by many who took unto themselves the badge of ‘orthodoxy.’ Like Ibn al-‘Arabī, he too has been rehabilitated in recent times. (Netton 1994, 293)

In Reza Shah-Kazemi’s *Paths to Transcendence*—the same book in which Shah-Kazemi compares key concepts in the work of Ibn ‘Arabī and Śaṅkara—Eckhart is given equal time as a third point of comparison (Shah-Kazemi 2006). The *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* has published two recent articles focusing on Eckhart: “Divine Needs, Divine Illusions: Preliminary Remarks Towards a Comparative Study of Meister Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabi” (Almond 2008) and “Interreligious Dialogue: Ibn ‘Arabi and Meister Eckhart” (Kakaie 2009). Most recently, Robert J. Dobie has written a book-length study, *Logos & Revelation: Ibn ‘Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics* (Dobie 2010).

Thus we have seen comparative studies that fall into two broad categories: those that argue for Christian influence on the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī (or vice versa), and lateral comparative studies that juxtapose Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought with other traditions, without

²⁰ Smirnov has also written a comparison of Ibn al-‘Arabī with the twentieth-century Russian philosopher and Christian existentialist, Nikolai Berdiaev (Smirnov 1993b).

assuming that either exerted influence on the other (or at least without raising the question). The present study will in some respects resemble both approaches, while in other respects should be distinguished from both. On the one hand, our study can be viewed as a lateral comparison of the Gospel of John with the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Because we cannot insist that Ibn al-‘Arabī had any direct contact with the Gospel of John, the Gospel and the Shaykh’s writings must be viewed as historically segregated texts, in which we will seek commonalities and resonances without supposing any influence of the former on the latter. The comparison will be our own work, bringing the texts together imaginatively.

On the other hand, we are taking a further step than most lateral studies, facilitating our study by adopting a hypothetical conceit: we will frame our study as an imaginatively constructed Akbarian commentary, adhering to our opening question: how would Ibn al-‘Arabī have read the Gospel of John? Although our conceit will be fictional, the hermeneutic framework we adopt will facilitate an inquiry into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective, seeking to illuminate the contours of the Shaykh’s thought. Reading the Gospel through an Akbarian lens, we are less interested in the object of interpretation than in the lens itself.

Moreover, unlike merely lateral studies, in which we compare Ibn al-‘Arabī with thinkers (such as Chuang Tzu or Meister Eckhart) of whom the Shaykh had no knowledge, we cannot rule out the possibility that Ibn al-‘Arabī encountered the Gospel of John directly. Even if we dismiss this possibility, we can with certainty suppose that Johannine doctrines filtered down to Ibn al-‘Arabī through the veils and buffers of the Islamic tradition—in the form, for example, of Muslim repetitions of doctrines attributed to Christians, or Muslim appropriations of Christian saying repackaged as Islamic sayings.

As we will see in Chapter 3, an inquiry into Christian influences on Ibn al-‘Arabī is vexed by ambiguities and does not lead to a decisive answer. We can, however, assert with confidence that Ibn al-‘Arabī was influenced by Christianity *as he understood it*, however well or poorly informed he was by the views of actual Christians. We will argue that this notional Christianity played an important role in shaping not only Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitudes about the relationship between Christianity and Islam, but also the development of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own distinctive and peculiar Islamic theology. We will suggest that a seminal notion of Christianity insinuated into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s early thought, and that this came to fruition in various ways over the course of his writing career.

Central to our understanding of this fertile influence is the notion of the ‘Īsawī, a label applied by Ibn al-‘Arabī to figures who belong properly to neither conventional Christianity nor conventional Islam, but straddles the two. Perhaps better, the ‘Īsawī (and Ibn al-‘Arabī himself) stood on his own ground, staking out a third position in between these conventions. We will see, in Chapter 3, that Ibn al-‘Arabī claims to have been an ‘Īsawī as a young man, at the start of the spiritual path; while he claims to have moved, over the course of his life and thought, beyond this youthful ‘Īsawī stage toward his mature destination as a Muḥammadī, we will argue that he remained self-consciously loyal to a dual heritage from Jesus and Muḥammad, persistently motivated to narrow the gap between Christianity and Islam.

Thus, while we share criticisms (by Addas and others) of scholars like Asín Palacios, we will not evade questions of the influence exerted on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought by his personal notions of Jesus and Christianity. Treating this comparative study as an Akbarian commentary, we hope to display the features of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective in sharper relief than if we had treated it as a merely lateral comparison. In order to lend our hypothetical conceit as much

verisimilitude as possible, we will take into account precedents offered by historical Muslim commentaries on the Christian scriptures. Prior to discussing these historical precedents, however, we will consider the relatively recent precedent given in Reza Shah-Kazemi's 2001 article, "Jesus in the Qur'an: Selfhood and Compassion, an Akbari Perspective."

1.3. An Akbarian Reading of the Synoptic Gospels

*This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it... — Matthew 22:38-39 (KJV)*²¹

While the title points to the Qur'ān, Shah-Kazemi's article takes a significant detour in the direction of the New Testament, sketching an incipient exercise in reading the Gospels from Ibn al-'Arabī's point of view:

Through the Akbari perspective on ontological compassion, one comes to appreciate deeper aspects of Christ's *biblical* injunctions... (Shah-Kazemi 2001, 71; emphasis ours)

Two aspects of this digression are worth noting. The first is that Shah-Kazemi presents this Akbarian approach to the Gospels as an exercise in narrowing the gap between Islamic and Christian understandings of Jesus:

In this connection, Ibn 'Arabi alerts our attention to an extremely important analogy. The Qur'an tells us that Jesus was indeed God's Word, "cast unto Mary, and a spirit from Him" (IV:171): Ibn 'Arabi comments upon this, saying that Gabriel transmitted this Word to Mary just as a prophet transmits God's Word to his community. Ibn 'Arabi thus shows that there is something in the very substance of Jesus that is, in and of itself, a revelation, "a sign for mankind," as the Qur'an says (XIX:21). Such a view of Jesus narrows, in certain respects at least, the gap that separates a Muslim from a Christian conception of the "message" of Christ. (Shah-Kazemi 2001, 59)²²

²¹ In this section we are using the Authorized Version, also known as the King James Version (Brindle 1988), because this is the version used by Shah-Kazemi. Wherever we quote this version, we will use the label "KJV."

²² In a footnote, Shah-Kazemi adds, "Meister Eckhart may be said to have made the inverse movement, by coming close to an 'Islamic' conception of Christ, in some of his pronouncements" (Shah-Kazemi 2001, 57, footnote 4).

In the coming chapters, we will suggest that the effort to reconcile Ibn al-‘Arabī with the Christian understanding of Christ is not only Shah-Kazemi’s or our interest, but also Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own interest.

The second point will emphasize a contrast between Shah-Kazemi’s article and the present study. Shah-Kazemi’s Akbarian reading of the Gospels focuses exclusively on the Synoptic Gospels. He is led to the Gospel of Mark, for example, by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reflections on the connection between the worshiper’s self-love and God’s love for us. Shah-Kazemi quotes Chittick’s translation from *Futūḥāt* III 429 to make his point:

God is qualified by love for us, and love is a property that demands that he who is qualified by it be merciful towards himself. (Shah-Kazemi 2001, 70)

Shah-Kazemi recognizes a resonance between this sentence from the *Futūḥāt* and Jesus’ primary commands in the Synoptic Gospels:

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:29-31 KJV)

Having recounted the version in the Gospel of Mark, Shah-Kazemi applies an Akbarian interpretation:

The meaning of “loving oneself” is altogether transfigured in Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysics of Self-compassion. It is also significant that the second commandment is described as “like” the first. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective, it is likely that the word *‘ayn* would be used: it is identical to the first. For he would stress that there is but one God, one reality; thus love of God must be directed to the divine nature in itself, above and beyond all creatures, but also to the divine nature immanent within all creatures, the divinity that constitutes the true being of the creatures. Both modes of love relate to the one and only Beloved. (Shah-Kazemi 2001, 71)

Shah-Kazemi then extends his Akbarian notions of love and mercy to include the Gospels of Luke and Matthew (Shah-Kazemi 2001, 71-72):

[Jesus said,] But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you... But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. (Luke 6:27-28, 35-36 KJV)

[Jesus said,] But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:44-45 KJV)

Shah-Kazemi's reading of the Gospels takes into account the implications of both Christian morality and Akbarian metaphysics:

Compassion, in turn, should be understood not only morally but also, and a priori, metaphysically, in terms of the bestowal of life: God gives life to the cosmos out of compassion for His own hidden qualities that long to be known; and man participates in this process both positively—through being compassionate towards his own self, as well as towards others—and inversely, by enlivening his own soul and that of others through the knowledge of God. (Shah-Kazemi 2001, 57)

Shah-Kazemi's citations from the Gospels are limited to moral commandments; that is to say, the metaphysical considerations are entirely on the Akbarian side, finding in Ibn al-ʿArabī a metaphysical lens through which to read Christian ethics. The Gospels' metaphysical claims—particularly those of the Gospel of John—are left out of the discussion.

This exclusion of the Gospel of John from Shah-Kazemi's discussion is surprising, given the prominence he places on the Islamic understanding that "Jesus was indeed God's Word." The notion that Jesus is the Word is certainly a Qur'ānic claim:

People of the Book, go not beyond the bounds in your religion, and say not as to God but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. (Qur'ān 4:171)

Ibn al-‘Arabī certainly devotes considerable attention to this Qur’ānic equation and places emphasis on the assertion that Jesus was unique among humans in being equated with God’s

Word. We can see this in Chapter 15 of the *Fuṣūṣ*:

For the proponents of these positions, [Jesus] will be as determined by what predominates over them: he is the Word of God, and he is the Spirit of God, and he is the slave of God. This is the case for no other in the domain of sensorial form. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163)

Among the four Gospels, therefore, it is the Gospel of John that would seem to recommend itself most readily as a point of comparison with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of Jesus. It is John rather than the Synoptic Gospels that declares:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 1:14, KJV)

One might speculate that Shah-Kazemi avoided discussion of this Gospel because it is this Gospel that poses the most daunting obstacles to reconciling Christianity with Islam. Among the four Gospels, John alone presents Jesus claiming to be the son of God and to be one with God, and the Evangelist himself declares at the outset that “the Word was God.” The Qur’ānic verse quoted above (4:171) points to a simultaneous overlap and conflict with the Gospel of John. The Qur’ānic verse calls Jesus “the Word of God,” but goes on to state a central Islamic objection to those aspects of traditional Christian theology most strongly supported by the Gospel of John:

So believe in God and His Messengers, and say not, ‘Three’. Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God. Glory be to Him—That He should have a son! (Qur’ān 4:171)

Thus John presents us with both the greatest potential for a fruitful dialogue with Ibn al-‘Arabī and the thorniest problems in any search for common ground between Christians and Muslims. As we are making the Gospel of John the focal point of our Akbarian commentary, we must keep in mind both this promise and this admonition.

1.4. Muslim Objections to Johannine Doctrines

Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" — John 6:60 (RSV)

In the Christian and Islamic traditions there are a number of places where understandings of Jesus overlap, posing no conflict. The Qur'ān honors Jesus (or Arabic *ʿĪsā*) with a number of titles; Geoffrey Parrinder's study, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (originally published in 1965, reprinted in 1995), sums up these titles:

The Qur'ān gives, a greater number of honourable titles to Jesus than to any other figure of the past. He is a 'sign', a 'mercy', a 'witness' and an 'example'. He is called by his proper name Jesus, by the titles Messiah (Christ) and Son of Mary, and by the names Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word and Spirit of God. The Qur'ān gives two accounts of the annunciation and birth of Jesus, and refers to his teachings and healings, and his death and exaltation. Three chapters or sūras of the Qur'ān are named after references to Jesus (3, 5 and 19); he is mentioned in fifteen sūras and ninety-three verses. Jesus is always spoken of in the Qur'ān with reverence; there is no breath of criticism, for he is the Christ of God. (Parrinder 1995, 16)

There is thus far no cause for disagreement between the two traditions. However, a thorough examination of verses in the Qur'ān reveals a mixed relationship between the first Muslims and Christians, including theological tensions.

While the Qur'ān criticizes the disputes between Jews and Christians²³ and reprimands them for following aberrant versions of the religions handed down to them²⁴, the book also recognizes pious members among their communities²⁵ and reiterates promises of rewards for

²³ "The Jews say, 'The Christians stand not on anything'; the Christians say, 'The Jews stand not on anything'; yet they recite the Book. So too the ignorant say the like of them. God shall decide between them on the Day of Resurrection touching their differences." (Qur'ān 2:113)

²⁴ "Never will the Jews be satisfied with thee, neither the Christians, not till thou followest their religion. Say: 'God's guidance is the true guidance.' If thou followest their caprices, after the knowledge that has come to thee, thou shalt have against God neither protector nor helper." (Qur'ān 2:120)

²⁵ "Yet they are not all alike; some of the People of the Book are a nation upstanding, that recite God's signs in the watches of the night, bowing themselves, believing in God and in the Last Day, bidding to honour and forbidding

Jews and Christians who follow their own religions.²⁶ While on occasions the Qur'ān expresses suspicion towards both Jews and Christians²⁷, it expresses elsewhere a special affection for Christians, showing them preference over the Jews and the Idolaters.²⁸

A mutual fondness and respect between Christians and Muslims is depicted in the early biography of Muḥammad composed by Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 769 CE). Stories giving Christians credit for recognizing and supporting Muḥammad's prophethood are scattered throughout the biography. Among those who anticipated the coming of an Arab prophet, Ibn Ishāq mentions the Arab Christian Waraqa (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 69), as well as the Christian monk Baḥīrā, who recognized Muḥammad as the anticipated prophet when he was only a boy (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 79-81). A prominent event in the early formation of the Islamic community is the emigration of a portion of the first Muslim community to Abyssinia, where they were taken into the protection of the Negus, the Christian king. The Negus is described as sympathetic toward the new religion, inciting his Abyssinian subjects to suspect him of abandoning Christianity. In Ibn Ishāq's account, the Negus held a private creed expressed in a distinctively Islamic idiom:

dishonour, vying one with the other in good works; those are of the righteous. And whatsoever good you do, you shall not be denied the just reward of it; and God knows the godfearing." (Qur'ān 3:113-115)

²⁶ "Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Christians, and those Sabaeans, whoso believes in God and the Last Day, and works righteousness—their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be on them; neither shall they sorrow." (Qur'ān 2:62; cf. 5:69)

²⁷ "O believers, take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other. Whoso of you makes them his friends is one of them. God guides not the people of the evildoers." (Qur'ān 5:51)

²⁸ "Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men to the believers are the Jews and the idolaters; and thou wilt surely find the nearest of them in love to the believers are those who say 'We are Christians'; that, because some of them are priests and monks, and they wax not proud; and when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize. They say, 'Our Lord, we believe; so do Thou write us down among the witnesses. Why should we not believe in God and the truth that has come to us, and be eager that our Lord should admit us with the righteous people?' And God rewards them for what they say with gardens underneath which rivers flow, therein dwelling forever; that is the recompense of the good-doers." (Qur'ān 5:82-85)

He testifies that there is no God but Allah and that Muḥammad is His slave and apostle; and he testifies that Jesus, Son of Mary, is His slave, His apostle, His spirit and His word, which He cast into Mary. (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 155)

Perhaps most startling is the tie Ibn Ishāq establishes between Christianity and the center of Islamic worship, the Ka‘ba. In one account of Muḥammad’s destruction of the icons in the Ka‘ba following his victory over the Quraysh, Muḥammad spares a Christian icon from erasure:

Quraysh had put pictures in the Ka‘ba including two of Jesus son of Mary and Mary (on both of whom be peace!)...The apostle ordered that the pictures should be erased except those of Jesus and Mary. (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 552)²⁹

Despite such idealized stories of mutual sympathy between Christians and early Muslims, the developing Muslim community in the following centuries strove to distinguish itself more sharply from Christians and widen the gap between the two communities. While the Qur’ān validates Christianity as a forerunner to Islam, Muslims eventually articulated the doctrine of abrogation or supersession (*naskh*). This was based upon Qur’ān 2:106, which states, “for whatever verse We abrogate or cast into oblivion, We bring a better or the like of it.” The doctrine of *naskh* broadened the verse’s implications, declaring that the advent of Islam rendered all previous religions obsolete. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh describes this development in these terms:

In polemical theological literature against Judaism and Christianity, the idea of abrogation was used in the same manner against earlier religions and their Scriptures, without denying their heavenly source. Muslim authors argued that Christianity abrogated, by God’s preordained decree, earlier Judaism, and that Islam, being the most recent of the three religions, and containing God’s final and valid dispensation for mankind, abrogated the other two...

The first detailed Muslim discussions of this subject in Arabic literature, however, stem from the end of the tenth or early eleventh century—for example, by the Mu‘tazilite Qaḍī ‘Abd al-Djabbār (d. 1025), and especially by the Ash‘arite theologian Al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013). These authors discussed the idea of abrogation, not only in the polemical context against earlier religions, but also in the more general, highly developed Muslim framework of theology discussing the attributes of God and the difficult problem of the change of what was considered to be good at one time (His commandments in Judaism)

²⁹ This is found in Azraqī’s version of Ibn Ishāq; Ibn Hishām’s recension apparently deletes the reference to preserving the icons of Jesus and Mary. See Guillaume’s footnote (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 552).

into disobedience at a later time...The concept of *Naskh* was accepted by Sunni theologians, however, and was explained as part of God's preordained change in history. In polemical terms, this meant that God had preset a time limit for the validity of each of the true religions that preceded Islam. Christianity was meant to abrogate Judaism as Islam was destined to abrogate both in due course; thus there was no need to attribute a change of mind to God. (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 37-38)

In light of the doctrine of *naskh*, Qur'ānic criticisms of Christian deviations from God's revealed doctrines took precedence over other verses emphasizing compatibility among the three religions. The Qur'ān's most vigorous rebuttals of Christianity revolve around Christian creeds that attribute to Jesus a filial relationship with God and elevate him to godhood. The Qur'ān takes the Christians to task for claiming that Jesus was the offspring (*walad*) of God. This cardinal objection forms the core of the shortest *sūra* of the Qur'ān:

Say: 'He is God, One,
God, the Everlasting Refuge,
who has not begotten, and has not been begotten,
and equal to Him is not any one.'
(Qur'ān 112)

While the *sūra* might be understood as a rebuttal to Arabic polytheists who attributed daughters to God (cf. Qur'ān 53:19-21), the criticism of Christianity is made explicit elsewhere:

That is Jesus, son of Mary, in word of truth, concerning which they are doubting.
It is not for God to take a son unto Him. Glory be to Him! When He decrees a thing, He but says to it 'Be,' and it is. (Qur'ān 19:34-37)

It is noteworthy that the Qur'ān does not challenge the Christian doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth (although Parrinder describes this as a matter of debate).³⁰ However, in the Qur'ān's version of the Annunciation, the conception of Mary is distinguished from divine procreation:

'Lord,' said Mary, 'how shall I have a son seeing no mortal has touched me?' 'Even so,' God said, 'God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing He does but say to it "Be," and it is...' (Qur'ān 3:47)

³⁰ "Whether the whole Quranic narrative can be interpreted of a natural or a virgin birth will continue to be debated" (Parrinder 1995, 72).

To clarify the point, the Qur'ān's reiterated formula—'Be', *and it is*—is posed as an analogy with the creation of Adam:

Truly, the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness; He created him of dust, then said He unto him, 'Be,' and he was. (Qur'ān 3:59)

While such an analogy between Adam and Jesus is not absent from the Bible (as in Luke 3:38, "Adam, the son of God"), Christian theology poses, in the form of the Nicene Creed, an offense to the Qur'ānic understanding of Jesus. The Nicene Creed (The First Council of Constantinople, 381 CE) describes Jesus as "the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all the ages...begotten, not made" (Pelikan and Hotchkiss 2003, 163). The Qur'ān challenges this notion when it describes Jesus as created in time.

The offense is exacerbated when the same creed defines Jesus as "consubstantial with the Father" (Pelikan and Hotchkiss 2003, 163). The Christian notion of Jesus as divine—together with the related doctrine of the Trinity—is viewed by Muslims as an inexcusable violation of the Qur'ānic understanding of God's unity. This is a recurrent judgment in the Qur'ān:

They are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Messiah, Mary's son.' (Qur'ān 5:17; cf. 5:72)

They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God, and the Messiah, Mary's son—and they were commanded to serve but One God; there is no god but He; glory be to Him, above that they associate. (Qur'ān 9:31)

Guided by the Qur'ān, Muslims have found it difficult to accommodate the words of the Gospel of John. In addition to announcing plainly, "and the Word was God," the Gospel's opening verses seem to credit Jesus with a role in creating the world "in the beginning." This is not the only place where the Gospel appears to recognize Jesus as existing prior to his earthly birth. The Evangelist places these words in the mouth of John the Baptist:

This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.' (John 1:30 RSV)

The notion of Jesus' preexistence is even more challenging when the Gospel puts these words into the mouth of Jesus himself:

The Jews then said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." So they took up stones to throw at him... (John 8:57-59 RSV)

For Christians, this declaration (including the present tense "I am") is traditionally read as a claim to divinity. This utterance offends Muslims, just as it offended the Jews in the Gospel narrative. It contradicts not only the Qur'ān's denial of Jesus' divinity, but also the Qur'ān's apparent insistence that Jesus never *claimed* divinity for himself:

And when God said, 'O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, "Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God"?' He said, 'To Thee be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it, knowing what is within my soul, and I know not what is within Thy soul; Thou knowest the things unseen. I only said to them what Thou didst command me: "Serve God, my Lord and your Lord." And I was a witness over them, while I remained among them...' (Qur'ān 5:116-117)

Thus it should be clear that, while all four Gospels present challenges to Qur'ānic and traditional Islamic views, the Gospel of John stands out as especially challenging. The Synoptic Gospels never quote Jesus describing himself as "son of God." Rather, the title is bestowed on Jesus by others, from devils, scoffers, and accusers (Mark 3:11; Matthew 4:2, 4:6, 8:29, 26:63-64, 27:40, 27:43; Luke 4:3, 4:9, 4:41, 8:28, 22:70) to Jesus' disciples (Matthew 14:33, 16:16) to a centurion who witnessed the crucifixion (Mark 15:39, Matthew 27:54). This appellation is given additional weight and authority by a voice from heaven calling Jesus "my beloved son" (Mark 1:11, Matthew 3:17, Luke 3:22), and one Synoptic Evangelist baldly states that Jesus was the son of God (Mark 1:1). Nonetheless, the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as reluctant to embrace the title, preferring to call himself the "son of man." By contrast, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is not only called the "son of God" by the Evangelist (John 20:31) and others (John the

Baptist in John 1:34, Nathanael in John 1:49), but Jesus himself seems to embrace the title (John 3:18, 5:25, 9:35, 10:36, 11:4).

In light of the Qur'ānic verse above ('O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men...?'), the way the fourth Gospel utilizes the term "son of God" seems to stand in especially sharp conflict with the Qur'ān. Moreover, the Gospel of John is most explicit among the four in making an equation between sonship and divinity. This equation—as well as objections to Jesus' boasts—appears in Chapter 10 of the Gospel of John, where the Jews of Jerusalem resemble an anticipation of the Qur'ān's protests:

[Jesus answered them,] "...I and the Father are one." The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?" The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." (John 10:30-38 RSV)

When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no crime in him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God." (John 19:6-7 RSV)

We will consider one other area of friction between traditional Islam and all four Gospels—but perhaps in discord with the Gospel of John to a greater degree than the others. This revolves around the Evangelists' assertion that Jesus died on the cross. From a Christian point of view, the narrative of Jesus' earthly mission is unthinkable without his crucifixion and his

subsequent resurrection.³¹ Nonetheless, Muslims traditionally deny these climactic episodes in Jesus' story.

The Qur'ān does not always openly contradict the conclusion of the Gospels. In one place, the Qur'ān quotes Jesus speaking from the cradle, anticipating the terminus of his life in a manner that appears compatible with the Gospels:

Peace be upon me, the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!
(Qur'ān 19:33)

Elsewhere, the Qur'ān presents God addressing Jesus with words that sound consistent with Christian notions of Jesus' death and resurrection, as well as Christian eschatological predictions:

Jesus, I will take thee to Me and will raise thee to Me and I will purify thee of those who believe not. I will set thy followers above the unbelievers till the Resurrection Day. Then unto Me shall you return, and I will decide between you, as to what you were at variance on. As for the unbelievers, I will chastise them with a terrible chastisement in this world and the next; they shall have no helpers. (Qur'ān 3:55-56)

Parrinder (Parrinder 1995, 106) notes that the words "I will take thee to Me" (or alternatively, "I will bring thy term to an end") translate the word *mutawaffika*, and he understands the word to mean "cause to die;" the verb is used elsewhere in the Qur'ān to speak of the dying (2:240, 6:60), and is used again with reference to Jesus ("when Thou didst take me to Thyself," Qur'ān 5:117).³²

Yet, at odds with this apparent harmony between the Bible's and the Qur'ān's stances on the death of Jesus, a single passage in the Qur'ān has provided a basis for Muslim denials of the

³¹ The crucifixion is recounted in Mark 15:22-41, Matthew 27:33-56, Luke 23:33-49, and John 19:16-30. The resurrection is presented in Matthew 28, Luke 24, and John 20-21; but the manuscript variants in the Gospel of Mark raise questions about whether or not it originally included an account of the resurrection.

³² In E. H. Palmer's translation of the Qur'ān, he renders these words as "I will make Thee die" (Palmer 1900).

crucifixion. This passage presents an account of the crucifixion in the words of the Jews, and then proceeds to refute those words:

‘We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God’—yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them. Those who are at variance concerning him surely are in doubt regarding him; they have no knowledge of him, except the following of surmise; and they slew him not of a certainty—no indeed; God raised him up to Him; God is All-mighty, All-wise. (Qur’ān 4:157-158)

Parrinder recounts various traditional readings of the words “only a likeness of that was shown to them”:

Traditional Muslim interpretation has been that the Jews tried to kill Jesus but were unable to do so. One story tells of Jesus hiding in a niche in a wall and one of his companions being killed in his place... Another popular story, recounted by Wahb, tells of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, the trial, and the preparation of the cross. But then it is said that the cloud of darkness came down, God sent angels to protect Jesus, and Judas was crucified in his place. (Parrinder 1995, 109)

The idea of a substitute for the crucifixion has been adopted by many Muslim writers. Not only Simon of Cyrene, but Judas, Pilate, a disciple, or even an enemy of Jesus have been suggested for this office. (Parrinder 1995, 111)

While these readings run against the grain of the canonical Gospels, Parrinder remarks that precedents for such readings can be found in early Christian extra-Biblical texts,³³ concluding:

These and later writers were Docetic, they held that Jesus in his person, or at least in his suffering, only ‘seemed’ (*dokein*) to be physical. Needless to say, this is not the point of view of the Qur’ān or the Gospel. (Parrinder 1995, 110)

If, in the traditional Islamic view, Jesus was not crucified, the resurrection alluded to in Qur’ān 19:33 (“the day I am raised up alive”) is not read as a reference to the event depicted at

³³ “Ignatius, writing about A.D. 115, said that some believed that Jesus ‘suffered in semblance’... The apocryphal Acts of John, about the middle of the second century, said that Jesus appeared to John in a cave during the crucifixion and said, ‘John, unto the multitude below in Jerusalem I am being crucified and pierced with lances and reeds, and gall and vinegar is given me to drink. But unto thee I speak.’ And later it is said, ‘Nothing, therefore of the things which they will say of me have I suffered... I was pierced, yet I was not smitten; hanged, and I was not hanged; that blood flowed from me, and it flowed not.’” (Parrinder 1995, 109-110)

the end of the Gospels, but the general resurrection on Judgment Day.³⁴ On this reading, both the death and resurrection of Jesus are yet to take place:

...[E]arly Islam soon interpreted his death as to occur after his second coming. Baiḍāwī said that after the future descent of Jesus he would remain for forty years and then die and be buried by Muslims. This burial, legend has long held, would be at Medina... It must be said that the Qur'ān knows nothing of these elaborations. (Parrinder 1995, 105)

Denial of the crucifixion would certainly pose a serious obstacle to a sympathetic reading of any canonical Gospel. For the Gospel of John, this might be particularly difficult, given that Gospel's frequent anticipations of the crucifixion and its reiterated emphasis on Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice for the sins of humanity. A few verses from that Gospel will illustrate this point:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 RSV)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17 RSV)

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11 RSV)

A Muslim reader of the Gospel of John would have to contend not only with its assertion that died on the cross, but also with the Evangelist's, John the Baptist's, and Jesus' own understanding of that death as a general payment for human sins and a means for achieving eternal life. Thus the Johannine understanding would be drawn up short by the Qur'ān's insistence that each individual bears his own sins and cannot transfer that burden to another:

Every soul earns only to its own account, no soul laden bears the load of another. (Qur'ān 6:164; cf. 17:15, 35:18, 39:7, and 53:38)

³⁴ As Parrinder notes, this verse is read alongside the similar words of John the Baptist in Qur'ān 19:15: "Peace be upon him, the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he is raised up alive!" (Parrinder 1995, 105) According to this reading, the resemblance of Jesus' and John's utterances undermine the notion that Jesus' resurrection is a special, individual event.

In sum, despite the fact that the Qur'ān nominally affirms and endorses the Gospel,³⁵ Muslim readers would encounter multiple challenges in any of the four Gospels of the canonical New Testament. Above all, the Gospel of John would present Muslims with many instances of what the Gospel calls a “hard saying” (John 6:60). Its verses in which Jesus claims to be the son of God, verses that seem to elevate Jesus to divinity, and verses that describe the crucifixion as an expiatory sacrifice would all constitute stumbling blocks. It is to this most difficult of Gospels that we will apply an Akbarian interpretation, testing (among other things) the extent and the limits of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ability to accommodate these Johannine doctrines.

1.5. Muslim Commentaries on the Gospel of John

...[H]e is accepting the Gospels while rejecting Christian theology. — Saleh and Casey, on Biqā‘ī

Hava Lazarus-Yafeh has stated that Muslim exegesis of the Christian Bible “never became a literary genre on its own, nor did it ever play an important role in Muslim medieval theology” (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 110). Though comparatively rare and exceptional, precedents for Muslim readings of the New Testament stretch back for more than a millennium. We would benefit from reviewing some of these commentaries—giving particular attention to Muslim commentaries on the fourth Gospel—before turning our hand to an Akbarian commentary.

A 2008 article by Mark Beaumont, “Muslim Readings of John’s Gospel in the ‘Abbasid Period,” provides an excellent overview of classical Islamic commentaries on John, providing a scheme for sorting out the difficulties raised in that Gospel (the very difficulties that might have steered Shah-Kazemi away from addressing the Gospel of John directly in his Akbarian reading of the Gospels). Beaumont writes:

³⁵ Qur'ān 3:3; 3:48; 5:46-47; 5:66-68; 5:110; 7:156-157; 9:111; 48:29; 57:27.

The main concern of Muslim interpreters of the gospels was the Christian claim that the gospels show clearly that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God. They noticed that the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, were capable of providing plenty of supporting evidence for the Qur'anic portrait of a servant subordinate to God (Beaumont, 2005b). But it was John's Gospel that posed the most serious challenge to Muslim beliefs that Jesus was one of the prophets sent by God to the Jews, and was not the Son of God or one who had an equal status with God. Those Muslims who wanted to show that the gospels were in agreement with the Qur'an either restricted their quotations from John's gospel to texts that supported a prophetic role for Jesus, or gave metaphorical interpretations to texts that Christians took literally to teach the divinity of Jesus. Those who were disposed to rejecting the Gospels had particularly good reason to do so from the claims made for Jesus in the fourth Gospel. (Beaumont 2008, 180)

Beaumont divides these commentaries into three categories. In the first category are those that focus on "texts in John's Gospel that are in agreement with the way Jesus is portrayed in the Qur'an, but does not mention passages that imply Jesus' divinity" (Beaumont 2008, 179).

Beaumont's primary example is the *Radd 'ala al-naṣārā (Refutation of the Christians)* of 'Alī al-Ṭabarī' (d. ca. 855 CE), a former Christian converted to Islam. While highlighting the ways Muslims can accept the Gospel's claim, Ṭabarī's apologetic project is to address Christians and draw out the contrasts between Islam and the Nicene Creed. Beaumont observes, "If al-Ṭabarī was to separate Christians from their creed, he would need to separate the Christ of the creed from the Jesus of the Gospel of John" (Beaumont 2008, 181).

Among the seven "unanswerable questions" Ṭabarī poses to Christians, three touch on the Gospel of John. One question addresses the doctrine of the Trinity, as Beaumont recounts:

...[H]ow can the creed uphold three gods when the gospels do not? In John 17.3, Jesus said, 'You are the one true God and you sent Jesus Christ.' Al-Ṭabarī comments, 'This is the genuine statement of oneness (*al-tawhīd*) and the acknowledgement that he was sent, and this is the faith of all the prophets' (Khalifé & Kutsch, 1959, p. 122). This was confirmed by Jesus, when he declared in John 6.38: 'I did not come to do my will but the will of the one who sent me.' In other words, according to al-Ṭabarī, the personal testimony of Jesus was that he was submitted to the only God, the only creator of the universe, and as a result, the idea propagated by the creed, that Christ himself was the Eternal Creator (*al-āzalī al-khāliq*) can hardly withstand the clear witness of Jesus concerning his self understanding, and is simply an outright slander (ibid). (Beaumont 2013, 182)

A similar concern is reflected in another of Ṭabarī's questions:

...[H]ow can the creed say that Jesus is 'true God of true God' when Jesus never said it? John 20.17 recorded Jesus' last words to his disciples in these terms: 'I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'...This particular Johannine text featured regularly in subsequent Muslim treatments of Christianity to make exactly the same point (Accad, 2003). (Beaumont 2008, 182)

Yet again Ṭabarī asks:

...[H]ow can the creed claim that Jesus is the Eternal Creator (*al-āzalī al-khāliq*) and that he is both divine and human, when he affirmed that the Creator sent him? John's Gospel furnishes instances where Jesus spoke of being sent by his Father: John 14.24: 'My words are those of the one who sent me', and 14.31: 'As my Father commanded me so I do.' Then Jesus also wanted to bring glory to his Father in John 14.28: 'My Father is more glorious and greater than I am'... Al-Ṭabarī concludes, 'Whoever says that Jesus is not Eternal Creator but is created (*makhlūq*) agrees with the Messiah and his disciples, and whoever disagrees with this is in disagreement with them' (Khalifé & Kutsch, 1959, p. 125). For Al- Ṭabarī therefore, the way Christianity developed was in a completely wrong direction and Christians should turn back to the original teaching of Jesus in their own gospels. Read properly, the Christian scriptures testify to the truth that Christ was a prophet sent by God to proclaim the oneness of God. (Beaumont 2008, 183)

Beaumont proceeds to criticize Ṭabarī for selectively citing John to support his argument, while dodging passages that would have undermined his thesis. To support this point, he highlights Ṭabarī's incomplete quotation of John 1:18; Ṭabarī quotes only the first half of the verse, "No one has ever seen God," omitting the second half of the verse, "the one and only Son, who is truly God and is at the Father's side, has made Him known." This prompts Beaumont to respond:

But this disregard for the contextual meaning of these Johannine texts leaves al-Ṭabarī's argument lacking in persuasiveness...Did al-Ṭabarī really think that Christians would take his stripped down version of the Johannine Jesus seriously? (Beaumont 2008, 183)

Beaumont's second category of Islamic readings of the Gospel of John focuses on the Andalusian religious scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064 CE):

Like al-Ṭabarī, he had an intimate knowledge of Christianity (Sweetman, 1955, p. 180; Watt, 1991, p. 66) and made extensive use of the gospels, but instead of attempting to

persuade Christians to read their gospels in an Islamic way, Ibn Ḥazm thought he could demonstrate that the gospels were so riddled with inconsistencies that no sane person could accept them as genuine portraits of Jesus. Perhaps his being an Andalusian Muslim with Christian ancestry provided him with a particularly polemical context for his treatment of the gospels (Pulcini, 1998). (Beaumont 2008, 185)

In his *Book of the Classification of Religious Communities, Sects and Creeds (Kitāb al-faṣl fī-al-milal wa-al-ahwā' wa-al-niḥal)*, Ibn Ḥazm writes:

The Gospel sent down (*al-injīl al-munzal*) by God, great and glorious, disappeared (*dhahaba*), except for a few sections that God almighty left behind (*abqā-hā*) as evidence (*ḥujja*) against them to shame them. (Beaumont 2008, 185)

Beaumont sums up his contrast between the first and second categories of Islamic readings of the Gospels:

Ibn Ḥazm's methodology for discovering the genuine fragments seems to be to look for those statements of Jesus that accord with what the Qur'an reveals about him and to repudiate anything that does not. But the results of this search are much less positive than al-Ṭabarī's similar quest, because Ibn Ḥazm discovers all kinds of discrepancies between the Qur'an and the gospels which al-Ṭabarī hardly noticed. Not only so, but Ibn Ḥazm's comparisons between the four gospels bring to light countless inconsistencies in their telling of the same stories, with the result that the Andalusian can barely find the original Jesus amid all that confusion. His conclusion is that the writers of the four gospels set out deliberately to deceive people, and that their gospels are 'the work of unfaithful liars' (*ibid.*, p. 54). (Beaumont 2008, 185)

Singling out the Gospel of John, Beaumont writes that Ibn Ḥazm's "readings of the fourth gospel are of three kinds: texts that contradict information in other gospels; texts that contradict the teaching of the Qur'an, and fragments that reflect the real Jesus of the Qur'an" (Beaumont 2008, 186). Touching on the contradiction between the Qur'an and John's elevation of Jesus to divinity, Ibn Ḥazm's polemic becomes particularly acerbic:

When Ibn Ḥazm turns to the opening chapter of the Gospel of John he can only describe it as the worst example of the depravity of this account, which is itself 'the greatest of the gospels in unbelief (*kufṛ*), the biggest in contradictions (*tanāquḍ*) and the most complete in frivolity (*ru'ūna*)' (*ibid.*, p. 61). This is because John's Gospel defines the difference between God and Jesus in such open terms. Ibn Ḥazm applies the logic of the transcendence of God to the opening passage of the Gospel to elaborate a series of contradictions in the chapter. How can the Word be God himself yet be with God? How

can the life of God be created in the Word made flesh, when the Word is said to be God who is uncreated? How can the Messiah be in the world but at the same time the world be made through him? How can God be said to create the world by using an instrument? ‘Far be it from God to create with an instrument, but as He says in His revealed speech (*fī wahī-hi al-nāṭiq*) to His faithful messenger whose words were not contradictory nor his pronouncements incompatible, “when He wills a thing, He only needs to say ‘be’ and it exists” (ibid., p. 62). For Ibn Ḥazm all of this is clear evidence of the wilful deception of John, whose guilt is far greater than that of the other three gospel writers who did not stoop to such wickedness. ‘If the Word is God then the Word is human according to the text of this depraved John, may the repeated curses of God be on him’ (ibid.). (Beaumont 2008, 187)

These first two categories in Beaumont’s scheme highlight the obstacles to a sympathetic Islamic reading of the Gospel of John, steering the commentator either to avoid these obstacles by cherry-picking verses from John that agree with the Qur’ān while studiously avoiding verses that disagree (as does Ṭabarī) or confronting the obstacles and dismissing as counterfeit those verses that disagree (as does Ibn Ḥazm). It is Beaumont’s third category that illustrates the nearest precedent for an Akbarian reading of John, and to this category we will give closer attention. The centerpiece of this category is *A Fitting Refutation of the Divinity of Jesus from the Evidence of the Gospel (Al-radd al-jamīl li-ilāhiyyat ‘Īsā bi-sarīḥ al-injīl*, henceforth referred to as the *Radd*). The *Radd* is attributed to the prominent Sufi and theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). This attribution has been challenged by Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, who contended “that Al-Ghazzālī could never have written this book and that it seems to have been composed by someone formerly a Christian (probably a Copt), who became a convert to Islam” (Lazarus-Yafeh 1975, 260). Other scholars have accepted the attribution to Ghazālī, beginning with Louis Massignon, who first drew academic attention to the *Radd* (Massignon 1932). The various views on both sides of the debate have been recounted by Maha El-Kaisy Friemuth (El-Kaisy Friemuth 2007); we will not take a side in this debate, but will note that the *Radd* was in

circulation by the thirteenth century (Lazarus-Yafeh 1975, 463), the same century as many prominent Sufi writers, including Ibn al-‘Arabī.

Despite the polemic implications of the work’s title, the *Radd* is both more receptive to the Christian text than Ibn Ḥazm and more comprehensive than Ṭabarī. Beaumont calls the *Radd* “the most inclusive Muslim interpretation of the Gospel of John in the ‘Abbasid period” (Beaumont 2008, 188). As in the Akbarian commentary we will pursue in this study, the *Radd* accords a central status to the Gospel of John and the Christological problems it presents for the sympathetic Muslim reader. While the *Radd* “accepts that Jesus spoke of being one with his Father and that the Father was in him in some sense” (Beaumont 2008, 188), the *Radd*’s approach to reconciliation with the Gospel is to read its words as *metaphors*.³⁶

The author says he chose to interpret the Gospel of John because this gospel is believed by Christians to contain the clearest proof for the divinity of Jesus. However, the texts that they appeal to show in reality Jesus using metaphorical language about himself which Christians have wrongly understood literally, so that they believe that he claimed divinity when in fact he did not. (Beaumont 2008, 189).

The *Radd* opens by appealing to Johannine verses to shore up the Islamic stance that Jesus was merely human, citing various verses from the Gospel of John that draw a distinction between Jesus and God. Having established this point, the *Radd* directly takes on those passages in John that are interpreted by Christians as expressions of Jesus’ divinity, and repeatedly points to metaphorical readings to cast these passages in an acceptable light. The *Radd* first addresses the passage from Chapter 10 in which Jesus announces, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30), remonstrating with the Christians, accusing them of blindly following the Jews’ understanding of

³⁶ The Arabic word translated by Chidiac as “metaphore” and Beaumont as “metaphor” is *majāz*. According to Lane, it means, “A trope; a word, or phrase, used in a sense different from that which it was originally applied to denote, by reason of some analogy, or connexion, between the two senses” (Lane 1863).

Jesus' words. Asserting that Jesus' words were a declaration of his intimacy of God, the *Radd* quotes the *ḥadīth* of the famed Sufi Ibrāhīm ibn Adhām (d. 778 CE):

Whoever wants to come close to me will come closest by performing what I have prescribed for him. Then the worshipping servant will continue to come close to me by performing more than I have prescribed, and so I will love him. When I love him I will be the ear with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the tongue with which he speaks and the hand with which he strikes. (Chidiac 1939, 10; Beaumont 2008, 190)

In line with this *ḥadīth*, the *Radd* understands the ear, eyes, tongue, and hand of Jesus to be only metaphorically God's. The author criticizes Christians for failing to understand properly Jesus' unity with God when *Jesus himself* interpreted metaphorically (Beaumont 2008, 191).

The author then draws out the absurd ramifications of the Christian understanding when applied to John 17:11, in which Jesus prays, referring to his disciples, "that they may be one, as we are." The author of the *Radd* objects that "if his union (*waḥda*) with God is the reason for his entitlement to divinity (*al-ilāhiyya*), then he must have prayed that his disciples become gods (*āliha*)" (Chidiac 1939, 12; Beaumont 2008, 191). Beaumont remarks:

Cleverly, the author also refers to the Apostle Paul's saying in 1 Corinthians 6.17: 'Whoever clings to our Lord becomes one spirit with him.' Just as Paul intended the oneness of God and believers metaphorically, so did John. (Beaumont 2008, 191)

Turning to John 17:21, the *Radd* interprets the unity spoken of by Jesus as a unity of wills:

Making clear the metaphorical aspect he said, 'as you Father are dwelling in me and I in you may they also be one in us'. He intended to say, may their words and deeds be in agreement with your will. Your will is my will. We together are like one essence (*dhāt wāḥida*) with no disagreement in our wills.' (Chidiac 1939, 14; Beaumont 2008, 191)

Moreover, the *Radd* appeals to 1 John 4:12-15, which speaks of the spirit and love of God dwelling in believers; the author remarks that, just as the epistle speaks of the indwelling of God as spiritual rather than a matter of incarnation, the state of Jesus is analogous. Once again, the

Radd insists that John “understood these passages metaphorically” (Chidiac 1939, 16; Beaumont 2008, 192).

Beaumont’s concluding observation indicates the Sufi tone of the *Radd*’s interpretations of John:

This enables him to argue that Jesus was asking God to grant that union of love and will to his disciples and that this kind of union is possible for believers in principle. This sort of argument is an indication of Sufi thinking in the author (Massignon & Radtke, 2000, p. 315), and these references may lend support to the attribution of the work in some sense to al-Ghazālī, who was noted for his integration of Sufi ideas into Sunni orthodoxy (El-Kaisy Friemuth, 2007, pp. 291f.). (Beaumont 2008, 194)

The *Radd* is not the first Muslim commentary to take a metaphorical approach to John; an antecedent can be found in the *Kitāb al-ṭamhīd (Book of Introduction)* by Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013 or 1014 CE), mentioned above as a leading proponent of the doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*). Drawing on the work of R. J. McCarthy (McCarthy 1957), Beaumont provides several illustrations of Bāqillānī’s inventive interpretation. With respect to John 10:30 (“I and my Father are one”) and John 14:9 (“he that hath seen me hath seen the Father”), Bāqillānī posits Islamic alternatives to reading these verses as proof of Jesus’ divinity:

...Muslims should say to Christians that what Jesus meant by ‘my Father’ was ‘my teacher and my sender’, and that this was the one that people had encountered when they ‘had seen him and heard his wisdom and his commands and his prohibitions’. (McCarthy 1957, 102; Beaumont 2008, 189)

Beaumont describes Bāqillānī’s reading of John 8:58 (“I was before Abraham,” as translated by Beaumont) thus:

Muslims ought to reply that Jesus may have meant that there were many of his religion and law before Abraham who followed previous prophets, or that he may have meant that he was known before Abraham by the angels, or that he would be raised on the day of resurrection before Abraham (Beaumont 2008, 189)

Nor is the *Radd* the last historical Muslim Biblical commentary to take this metaphorical approach; a post-*Radd* Muslim commentary on the Bible worth consideration is that by the

fifteenth-century polymath Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā‘ī (d. 1480 CE). In 2012, Saleh and Casey opened up new research on Biqā‘ī; according to them, “Al-Biqā‘ī’s *apologia*, *al-Aqwāl al-qawīmah fī ḥukm al-naql min al-kutub al-qadīmah*, is the most extensive discussion of the status of the Bible in Islam” (Saleh and Casey 2012, 86). Biqā‘ī was a vigorous critic of Ibn al-‘Arabī (Knysh 1999, 209-223), which might seem to preclude us from turning to him as an exemplar for an Akbarian commentary. Nonetheless, we will find in Biqā‘ī a model for our project. Despite Biqā‘ī’s hostility towards Sufism, his commentary (as depicted by Saleh and Casey) is marked by elements to which Ibn al-‘Arabī would probably have been sympathetic:

Although most of the quotations are made in a positive spirit, there are instances where al-Biqā‘ī is compelled to engage in polemics against certain Christian doctrines, namely the divinity of Jesus. Yet, even in such cases, al-Biqā‘ī accepts the textual integrity of the Gospels and argues by using them against the Christian doctrine in question. In this sense he is accepting the Gospels while rejecting Christian theology. This mode of argument is thus more in the manner of biblical interpretation rather than polemical argumentation. To al-Biqā‘ī the Gospels do not support the elaborate Christian theology of the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus or conclusively prove the veracity of the crucifixion. The seriousness with which he takes the integrity of the Gospels’ language is clear from his handling of their filial language. Al-Biqā‘ī addresses the language of sonship and fatherhood. On the one hand, he can see that it was used metaphorically and that, as such, that usage reflected a certain religious sensibility that Muslims, though not allowed to indulge in, should be capable of understanding; on the other hand, he edits some of this language in his quotations. (Saleh and Casey 2012, 87)

Biqā‘ī, like the *Radd* (and by contrast with Ibn Ḥazm), does not challenge “the textual integrity of the Gospels;” Biqā‘ī and the *Radd* both treat the language of the Gospels metaphorically in an effort to make the Biblical text acceptable from an Islamic perspective. In one respect, we will adopt a similar approach in our Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John; the commonality in our approach is articulated concisely by Saleh and Casey: “In this sense he is accepting the Gospels while rejecting Christian theology.” An Akbarian commentary might go further than the *Radd* or Biqā‘ī in accommodating foundational Christian texts and notions, but the general approach would look similar: while adhering to a “filial” attitude towards the Gospel

text, an Akbarian approach would challenge or reformulate the Christian theology built on the Gospels. As we will see in the Chapter 3 of our study, Ibn al-‘Arabī embraces even extra-Biblical terminology from Christian theology, embracing, for example, the concept of the Trinity, while proposing an Islamic reformulation of this concept. Such an innovative approach is typical of the Shaykh’s writings; even when he interprets the Qur’ān and other foundational Islamic texts, he scrupulously follows the letter of the text, but he takes that text as a springboard for original and surprising interpretations that often run counter to conventional Islamic orthodoxy.

Having followed Beaumont’s scheme thus far, we would supplement Beaumont’s work by noting that some Muslim Biblical commentaries do not fit his tidy division. There are, for example, Muslim commentaries that take a mixed approach, adopting the metaphorical approach of the *Radd* and *Biqā‘ī* towards some Biblical verses, while rejecting other Biblical approaches as counterfeit.³⁷ One such mixed approach is found in the commentary by the Egyptian scholar, Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316 CE). In her 2013 study of Ṭūfī’s exegesis of the Christian scriptures, Lejla Demiri highlights Ṭūfī’s pioneering accomplishment in writing both a Qur’ānic and a Biblical commentary:

With this extraordinary work, Ṭūfī emerges as the first Muslim theologian to have produced a commentary on the scriptures of each tradition, Muslim and Christian. In both his commentaries, Ṭūfī’s exegetical undertaking is focused on his doctrinal readings of the scriptures. (Demiri 2013, 52)

³⁷ A closer look at Ibn Ḥazm himself might defy the category to which Beaumont has assigned him. While Beaumont draws a sharp distinction between the *Radd* and the work of Ibn Ḥazm, placing them in discrete categories in his tripartite scheme, there is some overlap between the *Radd*’s metaphorical approach to John’s Christology and that of Ibn Ḥazm. In Theodore Pulcini’s account of Ibn Ḥazm’s critique, “The New Testament extends the error of filiation even further, attributing it not only to Jesus but to other human beings as well. John’s gospel, for instance, asserts that those who believe in Jesus’ name were born not of human will but of God (Jn. 1:12-13). Has God engendered all these people [2:63]? Elsewhere in the same gospel Jesus, in responding to the accusation that he was blaspheming by calling himself the son of God, cites the Psalms to the effect that all human beings are gods (Jn. 10:33-38; cf. Ps. 82:6) [2:67]. If the Christians dare to respond that here such statements are metaphorical then why do they take similar statements about Christ literally?” (Pulcini 1998, 107)

As with the *Radd*, Ṭūfī challenges Christian Christology by criticizing their literalism and advances a metaphorical approach as an alternative reading. When Ṭūfī counters, for example, the Christian doctrine that God is Jesus’ father, he recommends a metaphorical approach, “presuming that what is found in these Gospels is actually from Christ’s words”:

Giving them a metaphorical interpretation is more befitting than giving them an absurd interpretation. The decision to do so entails taking (Jesus’) expressions ‘Father’ and ‘son’ to correspond to our expressions ‘Lord’ and ‘servant’. (Jesus’) declaration in the Gospel that God, the Glorified, is his God, will shortly be brought forth. The guiding principle when giving a metaphorical interpretation is the fact that a shared value exists between being a ‘lord’ and being a ‘father’; that is to say, the lord’s mercy for his servant and the father’s mercy for his child... It is a rule of metaphorical usage that the expression be connected to a contextual indicator (*qarīna*), which implies the metaphorical meaning and precludes according it a literal meaning. (Demiri 2013, 127)³⁸

Yet on other occasions, Ṭūfī disposes with the metaphorical approach, objecting that Christ “did not say this...All these reports are fairy tales. I swear, without making any exception, that Christ did not say any of this!” (Demiri 2013, 315)

In the coming pages of our Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John, we will find it productive to set our Akbarian commentary in dialogue with two of these historical Muslim commentaries on the Bible: the *Radd* and the commentary by Ṭūfī. Thus, our comparative study will be framed not simply as a comparison between the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Gospel of John, but also as a comparison between an Akbarian perspective on the Gospel of John and the perspectives of other Muslims on that Gospel. Among other points of contrast, we will highlight the ways in which Ibn al-‘Arabī would have been unlikely to adopt a strictly metaphorical approach to the Gospel—at least not in the way exhibited by the *Radd* and Ṭūfī. It might be useful to clarify this difference in advance.

³⁸ As in the *Radd*, Ṭūfī’s word translated by Demiri as “metaphor” is *majāz*.

Both literal and metaphorical approaches are evident in the Shaykh's writings. With respect to literal approaches, William C. Chittick has described Ibn al-ʿArabī as a literalist when reading the Qurʾān, but not in the ordinary sense:

Because the Book in its actual, revealed form is the embodiment of the divine mercy and guidance, Ibn al-ʿArabī displays tremendous reverence for the literal text. The linguistic form of the text takes precedence over all else. Certain Western scholars have portrayed Ibn al-ʿArabī as a great practitioner of esoteric commentary (*taʿwīl*), whereby the literal meaning of the text becomes a window through which one looks into the invisible realm. One can agree with this statement, so long as it is understood that no Muslim commentator has been as concerned as the Shaykh to preserve the Book's literal sense. Ibn al-ʿArabī never denies the literal and apparent meaning. But he frequently adds to the literal sense an interpretation based upon an opening which transcends the cognitive limitations of most mortals. He often tells us that God may unveil meanings of the text to the gnostic which others have never perceived, and these unveilings can be trusted as long as they do not gainsay or contradict the literal meaning. (Chittick 1989, xvi)

We shall have to consider in the coming chapters the extent to which Ibn al-ʿArabī would have been willing to read the Christian texts literally. From the outset, we will agree with Chittick that Ibn al-ʿArabī's unconventional readings of texts display minute attention and fidelity to the words on the page. We will assume that Ibn al-ʿArabī would have displayed such respect for the text of the Gospel of John. Yet this fidelity to the words on the page does not prevent Ibn al-ʿArabī from interpreting these words in ways that go against the grain of ordinary readings, and the Shaykh's playful engagement with words on the small scale often leads to startling results on the large scale. Moreover, a sensitivity to both the letter and the spirit, on both the minute scale and the grand scale, is required of us as readers of Ibn al-ʿArabī's works, just as Ibn al-ʿArabī has shown towards texts by others. Eric Winkel writes of "the need to take Ibn al-ʿArabī's words literally while understanding the total (vast) context" (Winkel 2014, 3). A proper understanding of Ibn al-ʿArabī sometimes depends on attention to a single sentence or even a single word, and at the same time might depend on something Ibn al-ʿArabī wrote many pages remote from the

passage at hand. On a given occasion, the Shaykh might conceal or downplay his real topic, revealing his intentions more openly elsewhere.

With respect to metaphorical approaches, Ibn al-‘Arabī employs the word “metaphor” (*majāz*) in a peculiar way that distinguishes him from the *Radd* and other Muslim Biblical commentaries. For the Shaykh, metaphor is not merely a manner of reading texts; rather, it is a manner of reading the world. He makes the radical ontological claim that the cosmos we inhabit is metaphorical. Chittick describes Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of existence (*wujūd*) thus:

If the entities are nonexistent in their own essences, how is it that we see them in the cosmos and refer to them as “existent”? Ibn al-‘Arabī answers this question in many ways. He tells us, for example, that we do not in fact see the things existing in the cosmos. The expression existent entities is employed conventionally. *Wujūd* is ascribed to the cosmos in a metaphorical sense (*majāz*), not in reality (*ḥaqīqa*). What we see is not the cosmos, but *wujūd* itself, the Real, since nothing else has existence to allow it to be seen. (Chittick 1994, 17)

In addition, to anticipate our Akbarian reading of John in the subsequent chapters, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s conception of the relationship between our metaphorical existence and the reality of God will inform our sense of Akbarian Christology. In the words of the *Futūḥāt* (II 241.28):

All character traits are divine attributes, so all of them are noble. All of them are found in man’s innate disposition (*jibilla*). That is why God addresses Himself to them. One of those who has no knowledge of the realities maintains that the character traits in man are an “assumption of traits,” while in God they are actual traits. But this shows the speaker’s ignorance of the true situation, unless he means that as a metaphor (*majāz*) or he maintains it in respect to the priority of God’s Being over the servant’s existence. (Chittick 1989, 286)

Thus, while we will see echoes of the *Radd* and other Muslim Biblical commentaries in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s manner of reading and his use of the word *majāz*, the results of an Akbarian commentary is likely to venture further than those commentaries, with surprising outcomes.

1.6. Arabic Translations of the Gospel of John

Say: 'The Holy Spirit sent it down from thy Lord in truth, and to confirm those who believe, and to be a guidance and good tidings to those who surrender' ...and this is speech Arabic, manifest.
— *Qur'ān 16:102-103*

This study will not, strictly speaking, be an Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John, if by the Gospel we mean the Koine Greek version of the text. Rather, we have chosen to focus in our study chiefly on an Arabic translation of the Gospel of John. While we will make references to the Greek New Testament (Aland et al. 1983), the primary basis of our commentary will be the *Alexandrian Vulgate*, an Arabic translation of the four Gospels published by Paul de Lagarde (Lagarde 1864). The reasons for our selection of this translation will be presented here, beginning by glancing at the history of scholarship on Arabic translations of the Bible.

In 1992, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh wrote the following words regarding the status of scholarship on Arabic translations of the Bible:

The history of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic has yet to be written, even though many scholars have dealt over the years with different aspects of this subject, and have analyzed repeatedly the same bits of information found in Arabic literature with regard to translations of the Bible from Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, Coptic, or Latin into Arabic. Here I wish only to draw attention to some neglected aspects of this history... (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 111)

While Lazarus-Yafeh's primary interest was in the Jewish Scriptures, analogous remarks could have been made about Arabic translations of the New Testament, accompanied by similarly modest confessions of the limitations of the scholarship accomplished thus far. In the two decades since Lazarus-Yafeh's words, considerable contributions have been made to the field, notably Sidney H. Griffith's ambitious study, *The Bible in Arabic*, published in 2013. The impressive scope of this work includes chapters on historical endeavors by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readers of the Bible, reaching back to the earliest Arabic translations. Griffith has accomplished admirable work, taking the multitude scattered data and situating them in a

conversation about the context surrounding and the motivations behind the translations. Even here, however, Griffith acknowledges the limitations of his chapter on Christian translations of the Bible into Arabic (the aspect of his work most relevant to the present study):

In the present chapter, we shall review some of the features of the numerous Bible translations into Arabic done by Christians in the period from the ninth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century. We make no effort to list and describe all or even most of the Christian translations. (Griffith 2013a, 128)

Our own interest in the subject has been driven by the question: what Arabic translations of the Gospels might have been available to Ibn al-‘Arabī? Our research began by looking at the history of Arabic translations of the Bible available in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s homeland, Andalusia, finding a start in work by scholars like P. Sj. van Koningsveld (van Koningsveld 1994) and Hanna Kassis (Kassis 1997), alongside the more recent work by Griffith. We have hoped to narrow down the search by focusing on Arabic translations of the New Testament read by Muslims—turning, for example, to critical commentaries on the New Testament by Ibn Ḥazm, who was also an Andalusian. This quest has been frustrated, however, by the multiplicity and the elusiveness of these translations. For example, Griffith observes:

While Ibn Ḥazm displays a detailed knowledge of the biblical text, the sources of his extensive quotations are unknown; they do not seem to have come from any translation of the Bible into Arabic that has so far come to the attention of scholars. But in al-Andalus, as in other parts of the Arabic-speaking world, it is clear that by the ninth century Arabic translations of the Bible were commonly available among Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. And many more of them must have been in circulation than have survived in the available manuscript collections or have so far been discovered by researchers. (Griffith 2013a, 199)

Moreover, narrowing the field to Andalusia has not necessarily been appropriate for a study of Ibn al-‘Arabī; despite the fact that he was born in and spent his formative years in Andalusia, the Shaykh spent most of his adult life traveling widely, across North Africa, through Mecca, as far afield as Konya and Mosul, and eventually settling in Damascus. Evidence of his

possible familiarity with the New Testament—as we will see in Chapter 3 of our study—comes from the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt*, written at the end of these travels. If Ibn al-‘Arabī held at some point an Arabic translation of the New Testament in his hands, he could have encountered the book at any point in his travels. In any case, as we will see in Chapter 3, the question of whether Ibn al-‘Arabī ever in fact read the New Testament cannot be decisively resolved. Lazarus-Yafeh writes, perhaps discouragingly:

Bible translations into Arabic were usually made by Jews and Christians for the use of Jews and Christians. Muslim authors may not have had easy access to these written texts, most of which were kept in Christian monasteries—the eighth-century Basrian Sufi author Malik b. Dinar mentions explicitly the library of a Christian monastery in this context. (The texts may not have been widespread even among Jews or Christians themselves!) (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 115)

Nonetheless, for reasons spelled out below, we will prefer to employ a translation of the Gospel of John circulated in the Muslim Arabic-speaking world at Ibn al-‘Arabī’s time.

The translation that fits our criterion has been found in Demiri’s study of Ṭūfī. Demiri’s work has brought back into the spotlight Lagarde’s 1864 publication of the *Alexandrian Vulgate*, a tenth-century (or earlier) Arabic translation of the four Gospels.³⁹ Demiri observes that this translation “was so widely disseminated, copied and read among the Arabic-speaking Christians that even the Muslim readership made use of this version...” (Demiri 2013, 65). The *Radd*, Ṭūfī, and Biqā‘ī all made use of the *Alexandrian Vulgate*. Comparisons carried out by Robert Chidiac in 1939 show that Biblical quotations in the *Radd* correspond to this translation (Chidiac 1939, 71-77). We will recall that the *Radd* was available by the thirteenth century, the century in which Ibn al-‘Arabī lived the latter half of his life. Demiri has shown that the *Alexandrian Vulgate* was the version cited in Ṭūfī’s commentary, written at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth

³⁹ Georg Graf (in 1944) and Hikmat Kashouh (in 2011) agree that the *Alexandrian Vulgate* was translated by the tenth century CE (Demiri 2013, 65).

centuries (Demiri 2013, 66-70). Moreover, Biqā'ī adopted the *Alexandrian Vulgate* as his source text for all of the Gospel quotations used in his fifteenth-century Qur'ān commentary, *Nazm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa'l-suwar*. In fact, were the *Alexandrian Vulgate* to be lost, the citations that appear in al-Biqā'ī's *tafsīr* could be used to reconstruct this translation.⁴⁰ This all testifies to the wide availability of the *Alexandrian Vulgate* to Muslims in the century in which Ibn al-'Arabī lived, as well as the two following centuries. If we have defined our study in terms of the question, "How might Ibn al-'Arabī have read the Gospel of John?", this translation is perhaps the best candidate for our hypothetical scenario.

Two other points will be made in support of choosing the *Alexandrian Vulgate*. The first is that, by choosing the same version of the Bible employed by the *Radd* and the commentary by Ṭūfī, we will facilitate comparisons between our Akbarian commentary and those historical Muslim commentaries. Thus, we will ensure that we are working from a common text. Secondly, reading the Gospel in the same idiom as Ibn al-'Arabī's writings will more readily highlight fruitful points of resonance and tension that might have been lost in the distance between the Greek and the Arabic text. This point will become clearer in the coming chapters of our study, particularly in Chapter 5.

To summarize, we have offered three reasons for employing the *Alexandrian Vulgate* version of the Gospel in our Akbarian commentary. First, in order to maintain fidelity to the hypothetical scenario of Ibn al-'Arabī reading the Gospel of John, we have identified a version of the Gospel that might have been available to the Shaykh. We will hold to this hypothesis, even if we cannot assume that Ibn al-'Arabī actually had direct contact with the Gospel. Second, we

⁴⁰ Personal communication from Michael McCoy, a third-year DPhil student at the University of Oxford in the Faculty of Theology and Religion. He also earned an MPhil from Oxford in the Oriental Institute, where he studied the Biblical and Qur'ānic exegesis of al-Biqā'ī under the supervision of Dr. Nicolai Sinai.

have adopted the version of the Gospel cited in historical Muslim commentaries on the Bible, in order to facilitate comparisons between our Akbarian commentary and those historical commentaries. Third, we have prioritized the Arabic text over the Greek text in order to facilitate our identification of resonances between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings and the Gospel of John, highlighting shared vocabulary and phrasings that might have otherwise been missed.

1.7. Editions of the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt*

In addition to Lagarde’s edition of the *Alexandrian Vulgate*, two other Arabic texts will figure prominently in this study. One is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s short, densely concentrated book, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, each of whose twenty-seven chapters meditates on the wisdom associated with a particular prophet. Ibn al-‘Arabī began writing this book in December 1229 CE in Damascus. The title means *The Signets of Wisdom*, and it has been variously translated into English as *The Bezels of Wisdom* or *The Ringstones of Wisdom*;⁴¹ henceforth we will refer to this book as the *Fuṣūṣ*. In this study we will employ the Arabic edition published in Beirut by Dar Sader (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2005).

We will also consult multiple English and French translations of the *Fuṣūṣ*. We will consult Titus Burckhardt’s partial French translation, *La Sagesse des Prophètes* (Ibn ‘Arabī 1955), as well as the English translation by Angela Culme-Seymour from Burckhardt’s French version, *The Wisdom of the Prophets* (Ibn ‘Arabī 1975). We will also consult three complete English translations from the original Arabic, those by R. W. J. Austin (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980), Caner K. Dagli (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b), and Binyamin Abrahamov (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2015a). We will

⁴¹ *Fuṣūṣ* is the plural of *faṣṣ*, and *faṣṣ* refers to the signet on a signet ring. Caner Dagli observes that “the *faṣṣ* is that part of the ring which is either the central gemstone or is the object into which a design is carved for the purpose of imprinting a seal” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, ix). The word *ḥikam* is also plural, so a strict translation might be *The Signets of the Wisdoms*.

note, in addition, that a project to produce a new English translation has been undertaken by Cecilia Twinch, Jane Clark, and Stephen Hirtenstein of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2015b); Hirtenstein has made the incomplete and prepublished draft available to us. When quoting the *Fuṣūṣ* in this study, we will usually quote Dagli’s very fine (and very literal) translation, with occasional revisions (which we will note).

The other work by Ibn al-‘Arabī widely referenced in this study will be *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings* or *The Meccan Revelations*); we will refer to it as the *Futūḥāt*. This is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *magnum opus*, a sprawling, monumental text; Ibn al-‘Arabī composed the work over 36 years, from 1202 CE to its 1238 CE, and in its final form it spans 37 volumes, 560 chapters, and over 10,000 pages. In this study we will consult the incomplete critical edition of the original Arabic text by Osman Yahia, covering the first 14 books, published from 1972-1985 (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1985a; 1985b; 1985c; 1992b; 1977; 1978; 1981; 1983; 1985d; 1986; 1987; 1988; 1990; 1992a).

English translations published thus far do not cover more than one sixth of the work; but over the past three decades a number of partial translations have appeared. Among those we consult will be the bilingual French-English edition of *Les Illuminations de la Mecque*, translated by Michel Chodkiewicz, William C. Chittick, Cyrille Chodkiewicz, Denis Gril, and James W. Morris (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1988b), and the two-volume, English-language revised edition (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b; Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004a). We will consult Chittick’s translations in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Chittick 1989) and *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Chittick 1998b), as well as Morris’ translations in *The Reflective Heart* (Morris 2005). In addition, we will consult translated passages in the pages of the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi* and *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi: A Commemorative Volume* (Hirtenstein and Tiernan 1993).

A positive advance in the last few years has been the frequency of published English translations of large, sustained sections of the *Futūḥāt*, such as Aisha Bewley's complete translations of the Introduction, Chapter 50, Chapters 67-71, and Chapter 560 (Ibn-ʿArabī 2002; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2009a; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2009b; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2009c). Two very recent and ongoing developments are worthy of special attention. Mohamed Haj Yousef⁴² has completed English translations of the Introduction and Volume 1 of the *Futūḥāt*, published in 2012 and 2013 via Kindle. The other development is Eric Winkel's ambitious project, currently underway, to render the entire *Futūḥāt* into English (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016). Winkel has reflected upon the unique challenge posed by his task to carry Ibn al-ʿArabī's Arabic over into English:

The level of expertise required even to understand this huge, complicated work has certainly been an obstacle to translation. The *Futūḥāt* is not a conceptually organized text, and key themes and terms are not explained when they first appear. Instead, Ibn al-ʿArabī seems to be speaking extemporaneously. Thus, in order to understand what Ibn al-ʿArabī is saying in any particular instance, the translator must know (and reference for the reader) the full context, drawn from the entire text. In a sense the *Futūḥāt* is an oral work, and explanations are needed to fill in the contextual gaps which a contemporary listener, in tune with Ibn al-ʿArabī and his subject matter, would not have needed. (Winkel 2014, 1-2)

Winkel instills a modest caution in any scholar making use of the *Futūḥāt*, and his assistance is a valuable resource. His progress thus far in this project has been impressive; though these translations have not yet been published, he has generously permitted us to consult his prepublished drafts. With his permission, we will quote his translations in this study.

1.8. An Overview of the Coming Chapters

We will conclude this chapter with an overview of the remaining chapters:

⁴² As noted above, Mohamed Haj Yousef is the author of *Ibn ʿArabī — Time and Cosmology* (Yousef 2008).

In Chapter 2 we will examine the question of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitudes towards non-Islamic religions in general, scrutinizing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reputed endorsement of religious pluralism.

In Chapter 3 we will turn to Christianity in particular, focusing on the autobiography of Ibn al-‘Arabī, his development of the concept of the ‘Īsawī (Christic) saint, and his application of the ‘Īsawī label to himself. We will consider evidence in his writings of direct exposure to the New Testament. We will then discuss Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the concept of the Trinity, as an illustration of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s general approach to appropriating and reformulating Christian doctrines. This will conclude Part I of our study, outlining the background required for our Akbarian commentary.

In Part II we will embark on our Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John. In Chapter 4, we will begin with Jesus’ declaration in John 10:30, “I and my Father, we are one.” Our interpretation of this declaration will divide into two inquiries: first we will ask how Ibn al-‘Arabī might have understood the Johannine claim that God was his father; second we will ask how Ibn al-‘Arabī might have understood the Johannine claim that he and God were “one.” Much of this discussion will draw on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reflections on Jesus in Chapter 15 of the *Fuṣūṣ*. We will further interrogate these Johannine doctrines not merely as purported statements of fact, but also as acts of speech on Jesus’ part. That is, from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s point of view, we will redirect our attention from the question whether Jesus was, as the Evangelist claims, the son of God and one with God, to the question of whether Jesus himself could have uttered these claims. Our approach to this question will revolve around the Sufi tradition of *shaṭḥiyyāt* or “unruly utterances,” utterances expressing the speaker’s identity with God. We will inquire

whether Ibn al-‘Arabī might have understood Jesus as a forerunner of Sufis, like Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī, famous for uttering such *shaḥīyyāt*.

Chapter 5, our longest chapter, will focus on the words in John 1:14, “the Word became flesh” (RSV)—or, according to the Alexandrian Vulgate, “the Word, he became a body.” Our topic in this chapter will divide into two inquiries: we will inquire into an Akbarian understanding of Jesus as the Word (*kalima*) as well as inquiring into an Akbarian understanding of Jesus’ body (*jasad*). This chapter will also explicate Ibn al-‘Arabī’s dialectic understanding of two different kinds of witnessing, one of which leads to closure while the latter leads to open-endedness at the end of the Gospel. This dialectic of two kinds of witnessing will be paralleled by a dialectic of two functions fulfilled by the embodiment of Jesus: the expiatory work of the embodied Word and the epistemic work of the embodied Word.

This will lead to our discussion, in Chapter 6, of the closing verses of the Gospel of John. There, our study will focus on the rumor reported John 21:23, “Then this word went out among the brothers that that disciple would not die” (Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation). We will examine Ibn al-‘Arabī’s account of undying disciples of Jesus and their relationship to the undying teacher of the Sufis, Khidr. We will consider the dispute—between Henry Corbin and Claude Addas—over whether Khidr or Jesus was Ibn al-‘Arabī’s primary teacher. We will suggest that, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, Khidr is a figure straddling the distance between followers of Jesus and followers of Muḥammad—thus attempting to demonstrate that the disagreement between Corbin and Addas amounts to a false dichotomy.

In Chapter 7, we will bring our study to a close by summarizing our conclusions and indicating directions for inquiry beyond the scope our present study.

Chapter 2

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Views on Religious Pluralism

2.1. Popular and Academic Understandings

My heart is capable of every form... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Tarjumān Ode 11

Prior to narrowing our inquiry to explore Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitudes towards Jesus and Christianity, we cannot skip over the question of his more general outlook towards non-Islamic religions. In scholarship as well as more popular understandings of Ibn al-‘Arabī during the past century, the Shaykh has been widely perceived in the west as an advocate of religious tolerance and pluralism. While this perception has been commonplace, even dominant, it has not been uncontested. Disagreements over Ibn al-‘Arabī’s stance on religious diversity divides along various fault lines. On the one hand, there are opposing camps that agree in describing Ibn al-‘Arabī as a religious pluralist, while disagreeing whether Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views are compatible with orthodox Islam; among those who conclude that his views are incompatible with orthodoxy, some champion Ibn al-‘Arabī as opponents of orthodoxy while others (particularly among certain Muslim critics) condemn him as a heretic. On the other hand, there are opposing camps that agree in defending the orthodoxy of Ibn al-‘Arabī, while dividing over the question of whether he endorsed religious pluralism; many Western academics have described Ibn al-‘Arabī as both orthodox and a religious pluralist (arguing that pluralism is not incompatible with orthodoxy), while others (particularly among certain Muslim defenders of Ibn al-‘Arabī) argue that he was orthodox and that he rejected religious pluralism. We will start parsing these positions by examining an ode by Ibn ‘Arabī that has been popularly quoted in the interest of portraying the

Shaykh as a religious pluralist, and will begin with a few typical illustrations of the way this ode has been cited.

One month after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan appeared on the Larry King Show to promote the image of Islam as a tolerant and pluralistic religion.⁴³ In support of his case, the Prince recited a few lines from Ode 11 of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, a collection of sixty-one odes modeled on a tradition dating back to pre-Islamic Arab love poetry. Here we quote from R. A. Nicholson’s translation:

My heart is capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols and the pilgrim’s Ka‘ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion and my faith.
(Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, 67)

A similar employment of these lines in the wake of the September 11 attacks can be seen in the work of the Egyptian scholar, Nasr Abu Zayd (1943-2010 CE). Regarding Abu Zayd, Carl Ernst writes:

Abu Zayd developed a literary interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi that attempts to deal with some of the key problems of modernity, particularly in terms of religious pluralism and the relationship between religion and the intellect. The significance of Abu Zayd’s argument needs to be appreciated in relation to the persecution that he himself suffered for his academic writings. (Ernst 2015, 1)⁴⁴

In Abu Zayd’s introduction to his 2002 publication, *Thus Spake Ibn ‘Arabī (Hakadhā takallam Ibn ‘Arabī*, Abu Zayd 2002)—which Ernst describes as “one of the most original recent

⁴³ See transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0110/13/lklw.00.html.

⁴⁴ Ernst substantiates this allusion to persecution by quoting Abu Zayd’s website, as it appeared in 2008: “In 1995 a Cairo appeals court ordered Abu Zaid divorced from his wife on the ground of his alleged apostasy. With his wife he has been living in The Netherlands since” (Ernst 2015, 2-3).

interpretations of the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi” (Ernst 2015, 1)—he writes of the relevance of Ibn al-‘Arabī to current social and political issues:

Having devoted over two decades to the study of Ibn ‘Arabi, Abu Zayd asked himself whether the Andalusian master could be considered modern. A sort of answer came when he discovered, to his delight, that there were circles of readers in Europe and America (such as the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society) who demonstrated a strong contemporary interest in the Shaykh, even to the extent of distributing audio recordings of the poetry of Ibn ‘Arabi. At this point, Abu Zayd breaks into a citation of the famous verse by Ibn ‘Arabi, ‘my heart has become a receptacle of every form,’ which concludes with the celebrated couplet, ‘I follow the religion of love; wherever its camels turn, love is my religion and my faith.’ Abu Zayd observed that, indeed, love is the root of religion. (Ernst 2015, 4-5)

Ernst goes on to note the relevance of Abu Zayd’s readings of Ibn al-‘Arabī to the September 11 attacks:

...Abu Zayd related that he completed the book in June of 2001, only a short time before the events of September 11, 2001, which, as he remarks, reverberate in the preface that follows. While Professor Schimmel was to him an example of faith in the unity of human civilization from the perspective of spiritual experience, the contrary and highly ideological notion of a ‘clash of civilizations’ was predominating at this point in Europe and America. In his only reference to the book’s title, Abu Zayd stated, ‘*Thus Spake Ibn ‘Arabi* is about civilizations, cultures, and religions; this is the subject of the book which I was honored to introduce to the Arab reader’ (p. 15). The book then finally appeared in Arabic in 2002. (Ernst 2015, 5-6)

The lines from the *Tarjumān* recited by Prince Hassan and Abu Zayd are frequently cited by progressive Muslims in dialogue with the non-Muslim West, offering them as precedents for twenty-first century liberal values within the Islamic tradition. Among sympathetic non-Muslims in the English-speaking world, these lines are perhaps repeated more often than any other quotation by Ibn al-‘Arabī. We must ask how well the popular western image of Ibn al-‘Arabī as a religious pluralist squares with the image the Shaykh presents in the wider range of his writings.

During the past three decades, American scholarship on Ibn al-‘Arabī has been dominated by the work of William C. Chittick and James W. Morris, both of whom have

generated a copious outpouring of works on Ibn al-‘Arabī in the form of articles in academic journals and books from academic presses. Both Chittick and Morris have supported the image of Ibn al-‘Arabī as a religious pluralist. Perhaps the most visible marker of this stance has been Chittick’s 1992 book, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity*, a slim collection of essays that touch, to greater or lesser degrees, on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings about “the unity and diversity of the religious heritage of humanity” (Chittick 1994, 4). Chittick takes pains, here and elsewhere, to defend two key contentions about Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings on this subject. His first contention is that these teachings are vitally relevant to us in the postmodern West:

In accepting the truth of the diverse perspectives on reality offered by human beings, the Shaykh announces the radical relativity of all things and all perceptions, even perceptions that are informed by prophetic wisdom. In this respect, his approach has a deep resonance with certain currents of postmodernism. However, he does not fall into doubt about the absolute demands made upon human beings by the nature of the Real. (Chittick 1994, 11)

Chittick’s other contention is that, while granting validity to religions other than Islam, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views are consistent with and representative of normative Islam:

By and large, in fact, most Muslims have less difficulty accepting that there is something natural, normal, and providential about differences of religious opinion than, for example, most Christians. Appropriate proverbial sayings, typically attributed to the Prophet, are easy to find in Islamic literature: “The divergence of the religious scholars is a mercy.” “There are as many paths to God as there are human souls.” (Chittick 1994, 4)

Sufi teachings are often looked upon as a departure from “orthodox” Islam, but this view typically rests upon a misuse of the term orthodox and an ignorance of the exact contents of the teachings in question. More careful examination suggests that the specifically Sufi explanations of Islamic teachings are not made to subvert the dogma but to support it and to open the way to faith for those individuals who find the unidimensional explanations offered by theologians and jurists intellectually and spiritually stultifying. (Chittick 1994, 97)

Elsewhere, Chittick argues for the Qur’ānic underpinnings of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s stance:

Ibn al-‘Arabī frequently affirms the validity of religions other than Islam, and in so doing he is simply stating the clear Koranic position. (Chittick 1994, 171)

In short, the Koran declares that the essential message of every prophet is the same, while the details of each message are unique. Hence the universality of religious truth is an article of Islamic faith. It is true that many Muslims believe that the universality of guidance pertains only to pre-Koranic times, but others disagree; there is no “orthodox” interpretation here that Muslims must accept. (Chittick 1994, 124)

Both Chittick and Morris have supported their arguments in favor of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s orthodoxy by underscoring his passionate devotion to the literal text of the Qur’ān, as well as his deep and thoughtful commitment to the *sharī‘a* (Islamic Law). Morris observes:

Not surprisingly, much of the historical influence of Ibn ‘Arabī throughout Islamic history can be explained precisely by that fundamental rootedness of his thought in every detail of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s teachings...Accordingly, one would normally expect that dense scriptural and symbolic allusiveness to form an almost impenetrable barrier to serious comprehension of his ideas by those from other civilisational and religious backgrounds. (Morris 2001, 90)

Yet Morris goes on to indicate

the mysterious—but certainly indispensable—alchemical ‘translation’ of the Shaykh’s intentions into more understandable Western terms and diverse creative expressions, in various domains of life...[T]he extraordinary success of that process of ‘translation’, in so many different recent non-Islamic settings, surely has something to do as well with the essential intentions underlying and orienting all of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work. (Morris 2001, 90)

Like Chittick, Morris draws a direct connection between the widening embrace of Ibn al-‘Arabī by non-Muslims and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own openness to the “*multiplicity of paths* of realization” (Morris 1990, 91; the italics are in the original). Chittick’s and Morris’ understanding of Ibn al-‘Arabī as inclusive and tolerant has become the dominant reading of Ibn al-‘Arabī in Western academia since Nicholson’s translation of the *Tarjumān* in 1911, where he wrote in the introduction:

The Divine substance remains unchanged and unchangeable amidst all the variety of religious experience. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, vi)

Since all things are a manifestation of the Divine substance, it follows that God may be worshipped in a star or a calf or any other object, and that no form of positive religion contains more than a portion of the truth. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, vii)

A rare exception in Western academia is provided by Henry Corbin. Though writing, “To the gnostic all faiths are theophanic visions in which he contemplates the Divine Being” (Corbin 1969, 198), Corbin understood Ibn al-‘Arabī as voicing a less inclusive perspective than typically attributed to him. Quoting Corbin (Corbin 1958, 180), Annemarie Schimmel writes:

Ibn ‘Arabī is usually praised as the advocate of religious tolerance, and everyone who tries to underline the “mystical ideal of tolerance” and indifference to exterior forms and rituals quotes his verses:

My heart is capable of every form...

But this seemingly tolerant statement contains, rather, a statement about the author’s own lofty spiritual rank: “The form of God is for him no longer the form of this or that faith exclusive of all others, but his own eternal form which he encounters at the end of his *tawāf*.” It is highest self-praise, acknowledgment of an illumination that is far beyond the “illumination of the names,” but not tolerance preached to the rank and file. (Schimmel 1975, 271-272)

Yet Corbin’s challenge seems to be posed primarily against notions of Ibn al-‘Arabī as egalitarian; this might be regarded as a modification rather than a flat denial of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s pluralism.

Disagreement in the academy tends not to split over the question of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s religious pluralism, but over the question of his orthodoxy. In defending Ibn al-‘Arabī’s orthodoxy, Chittick briefly registers—and rejects—a long line of outspoken Muslim critics of Ibn al-‘Arabī, among whom is the Ḥanbalī scholar Tāqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Chittick takes to task certain recent Western devotees of Ibn al-‘Arabī who view Ibn al-‘Arabī as a pluralist while agreeing with Ibn Taymiyya’s assessment that this pluralism is incompatible with Islam; the primary difference between these Western devotees and Ibn Taymiyya is that the

former view this unorthodoxy as a virtue whereas the latter views it as a vice.⁴⁵ As Chittick quips, “Ibn Taymiyya must be saying from his grave, ‘I told you so’” (Chittick 1989, 298).

Chittick’s strong defense of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s orthodoxy is a comparatively recent development in academia; earlier Western scholars did not hesitate to declare the Shaykh beyond the pale of orthodox Islam. One example is A. E Affifi, who did not oppose his judgment to that of Ibn Taymiyya:

In the East, on the other hand, various authors have discussed Ibnul ‘Arabī and written treatises on him. But what concerned them most was the question of his orthodoxy; not so much his mysticism or philosophy as such, as how far such philosophy agrees or disagrees with Islamic dogmas. Controversies on this subject occupied the minds of the Muslims for centuries, and books were written by such men as Ibn Taymiyya, Jalālud-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, Fayrūzābādi, Makhzūmī, Taftāzānī, etc., etc., to defend Ibnul ‘Arabī’s orthodoxy or prove his infidelity (kufr). There has never been such a diversity of opinion on the orthodoxy of a man before. He has been regarded by some people as one of the greatest saints of Islam, and by others as a heretic of the worst type. (Affifi 1938, xiv)

While Affifi is appreciative of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s work, and thus stands in opposition to Ibn Taymiyya, he readily agrees with the latter’s assessment that the Shaykh’s thought stands beyond the pale of Islam:

There is no possible means of reconciling his philosophy with Islam. The orthodox garb with which he so persistently drapes his pantheistic ideas is a sham appearance purposely put there. (Affifi 1938, xi)

What is rare in Western academia is the perspective that Ibn al-‘Arabī was not only an orthodox Muslim but also a non-pluralist. Western scholarship has been nearly monolithic in its treatment of Ibn al-‘Arabī as a religious pluralist, taking the point for granted; those voicing the contrary perspective have gone almost totally unheard in the West. In this unexamined

⁴⁵ For Ibn Taymiyya’s objection to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s religious pluralism, in the form of the latter’s generous portrayal of idolaters in his chapter on Noah in the *Fuṣūṣ*, see Knysh’s *Ibn ‘Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Knysh 1999, 106). It should be noted that Ibn Taymiyya’s criticisms of Ibn ‘Arabī were not solely or even chiefly concerned with the question of religious pluralism; the fact that this dimension of Ibn Taymiyya’s criticism has come to the foreground in recent years may say more about our interests than it says about Ibn Taymiyya’s interests.

uniformity lies one weakness of the scholarship that has been carried out to date, as well as an indication of work that remains to be done on this subject. To find recent arguments that Ibn al-‘Arabī was not a religious pluralist, we will turn to two proponents of this perspective outside of the western academic circle, Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller and Mahmoud al-Ghorab.

2.2. Keller’s Dissenting Views

Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Futūḥāt III 153.12

During the same decades (the 1980’s to the present) in which Chittick and Morris established their authority in western academic circles, a number of dissident voices, resounding primarily from Sufi circles in or connected to Damascus, have vehemently denounced Chittick’s and Morris’ portrayals of Ibn al-‘Arabī as a religiously pluralist. These are passionate advocates of the Shaykh, steadfastly defending him against charges of heresy while adhering to the assumption that religious pluralism would be equivalent to heresy. An example can be found in the writings of Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller (formerly Noah Keller). Born and raised in the northwestern United States, Keller converted to Islam in his early twenties (Keller 2001). After training for a number of years under the Shādhilī Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Shāghūrī in Damascus, Keller himself became a Shaykh of the Shādhilī order. He has been based in Amman, Jordan, where young, mostly Western Muslims flock to receive oral teachings in English at his *zāwiyya*.

Keller’s written teachings circulate in the form of published books, unpublished manuscripts, online essays, and downloadable audio recordings. Ibn al-‘Arabī holds an honored place in Keller’s esteem, though Keller devotes the majority of his attention to questions of *fiqh*. In fact, most of his observations on the Shaykh are scattered and unsustained. Yet at least two of

Keller's writings—a disproportionately extended biographical note on Ibn al-ʿArabī appended to his translation of a manual of *fiqh* (Misri 1994) and in his own manual of Sufism, *Sea Without Shore* (Keller 2011)—serve as concentrated and efficient introductions to arguments against the dominant academic perspective on Ibn al-ʿArabī. Keller equips his readers with batteries of rhetorically forceful debating points that demand and deserve a response.

In his 2011 book, Keller responds directly to Chittick's *Imaginal Worlds*. Having made his case that *naskh* (the abrogation of all other religions by Islam) is the only orthodox position, Keller argues that deviating views have shallow historical roots:

Orthodoxy exists, it is unanimously agreed upon by the scholars of Muslims...that to believe anything else is unbelief. As for "others disagree," it is true, but is something that has waited for fourteen centuries of Islamic scholarship down to the twentieth century to be first promulgated in Cairo in the 1930s by the French convert to Islam René Guénon, by his onetime disciple Frithjof Schuon, and then by writers following these two. Who else said it before? And if no one did, and the ulema consider it *kufur* [unbelief], on what basis should it be accepted? (Keller 2011, 325; bracketed word inserted by us)

He scrutinizes Chittick's efforts to challenge the notion of abrogation, accusing him of mishandling a passage from Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Futūḥāt* III 153.12 to make his point. The passage, as translated by Chittick, runs thus:

All the revealed religions (*sharāʿi*) are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muhammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the light of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null (*bāṭil*) by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant. (Chittick 1994, 125)

In his explanation of the passage, he comments that Ibn al-ʿArabī

does not draw the conclusion that many Muslims have drawn—that the coming of Islam abrogated (*naskh*) previous revealed religions. Rather, he says, Islam is like the sun and other religions like the stars. Just as the stars remain when the sun rises, so also the other religions remain valid when Islam appears. (Chittick 1994, 125)

Keller is quick to recognize and bring to light the flaws in Chittick’s commentary and—more impressively—Chittick’s translation of the passage. He baldly states that Chittick’s interpretation of the passage “is false, and could have been corrected by a more faithful and fuller translation of the passage he has quoted from the *Futuhat*” (Keller 2011, 323). He then demonstrates his point by translating the latter portion of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s text—the passage immediately following the point at which Chittick stopped in his own translation. Among the sentences that Chittick has failed to translate are the following:

So all paths return to look to the Prophet’s path (Allah bless him and give him peace): if the prophetic messengers had been alive in his time, they would have followed him just as their religious laws have followed his law.

For he was given comprehensiveness of word (*jawami‘ al-kalim*), and given [the Koranic verse] “And that Allan might succor you an invincible triumph” [Koran 48:3], “the invincible” [*al-‘aziz*, also meaning rare, dear, precious, unattainable] being he who is sought but cannot be reached. When the prophetic messengers sought to reach him, he proved impossible for them to attain to—because of his [being favored above them by] being sent to the entire world (*bi‘thatihi al-‘amma*)... (Keller 2011, 323-324; the passages in the brackets are Keller’s)

Moreover, Keller revises key elements of Chittick’s translation. Notably, where Chittick’s rendering holds that previously-revealed religions “are not rendered null (*batil*) by abrogation,” as Keller’s revision holds that they “did not turn into falsehood by being abrogated.” Keller concludes,

The passage, when read carefully, is merely an affirmation that Allah’s messengers (upon whom be peace) were true, and everything they brought was true, which is believed by every Muslim. It further avers that everything their laws—*shara‘i‘*, plural of *shari‘a*, means nothing else—contained has not only been abrogated, but is thereby implicitly contained in the new revelation...

Professor Chittick’s omission of the second half of the passage, which is plainly punctuated at the end by the words “so know this,” is puzzling, for it is highly material to the topic, and in spirit and in letter (“because of his being sent to the entire world (*bi‘thatihi al-‘amma*)”) plainly contradicts the professor’s suggestion that Ibn al-‘Arabi

does not believe “that the coming of Islam abrogated (naskh) previously revealed religions.” (Keller 2011, 324-325)

In short, Keller accuses Chittick of misrepresenting Ibn al-‘Arabī by means of selectively citing the latter’s words, avoiding those portions that contradict his thesis. This echoes an accusation that Keller made previously against “various groups of interpreters...who have posthumously made Ibn al-‘Arabi an honorary Mason;” among the passages in the *Futūḥāt* which they overlook is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of jihad “in what is unmistakably a treatment of its outward military aspect and rules, believer against unbeliever, sword against sword” (Misri 1994, 1081). To this Keller adds another citation from the *Futūḥāt* (I 301), in which

the sheikh clearly explains that while disobedient Muslims (*‘usat*) will one day leave the hellfire, those who associated others with Allah (*mushrikun*) and the Jews and Christians (*Ahl al-Kitab*) who did not accept the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) after his coming will remain in hell forever—which is as far from the universal validity of all religions as anything could be. (Misri 1994, 1081)

2.3. Religious Pluralism in the *Fuṣūṣ*

The water’s color is that of its container. — Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ Chapter 27*

These passages certainly pose significant obstacles to any reading of Ibn al-‘Arabī as a religious pluralist; in order to be complete, any such reading would have to address these passages forthrightly and provide a persuasive account of them. Keller’s charge that Chittick picks and chooses his passages deserves a fair hearing. Yet at the same time, it is fair to note that Keller himself is not completely innocent of the same charge. Keller (and, as we will see, other Muslim scholars from this Damascus circle, such as Mahmoud al-Ghorab) is equally guilty of overlooking passages that challenge his interpretation. The fault on Keller’s side is most starkly evident in his treatment of the *Fuṣūṣ*. The *Fuṣūṣ* will be a crucial focal point for this discussion, for two reasons. First, the contents of the *Fuṣūṣ* probably present material for the strongest

argument in favor of the view that Ibn al-‘Arabī held some form of religious pluralism. Second, the passage with which we began this section, Ode 11 from the *Tarjumān*, is something of a decoy from the far more substantial and significant *Fuṣūṣ*. Anyone (such as Keller) attempting to debunk Chittick’s view will have to contend with a number of passages that punctuate the *Fuṣūṣ* and, taken as a whole, appear to constitute repeated and sustained expression of a doctrine of religious pluralism.

We might sharpen our recognition of this doctrine in the *Fuṣūṣ* by dividing it into several distinct claims: 1) Ibn al-‘Arabī recognizes that human beings hold highly individual beliefs regarding God and admonishes his readers not to interfere with those beliefs; 2) Ibn al-‘Arabī urges the reader not only to tolerate the beliefs of others, but also to receive and embrace those beliefs himself; 3) God endorses and is pleased with these diverse views of God; 4) that God destines no human to eternal torment, regardless of his individual relationship with God.

We will begin with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s observation that humans hold individual, personal views of God, and his prohibition on interfering with others’ views. Our starting point will be the final chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Chapter 27, which focuses on Muḥammad. One of the longer chapters, it concludes the chapter and the book by invoking a saying attributed to the renowned Sufi master Junayd (d. 910 CE):

This is the divinity of beliefs. It is variegated in accordance with the preparedness of the locus, as in Junayd’s saying, when asked about the knower and knowledge of God, “The water’s color is that of its container.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 292)

Junayd (according to Qushayrī, the eleventh-century Sufi who recorded this saying in his collection) meant by it that “the nature of the gnostic is always determined by the nature of his state at a given moment” (Qushayri 1992, 322). Thus, for Junayd the “water” represents the transparent and fluid nature of the gnostic, who has no attributes of his own.

Sometimes Ibn al-‘Arabī is faithful to Junayd in his use this maxim, interpreting the water as representing the gnostic, who “assumes the character traits of God” (Chittick 1989, 149). More often, however, Ibn al-‘Arabī reverses this interpretation, identifying God as the colorless one and representing the human worshiper as a cup, coloring God with his own attributes. This interpretation accounts for the variegation of “the divinity of beliefs,” and it points to the mediated way in which we know God—filtered through our concrete particularities. It also indicates the mediated way in which God knows us, as Ibn al-‘Arabī continues:

Thus, what we are for Him is a function of our state, and He looks to us through none other than the form we bring to Him. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 292-293)

Ibn al-‘Arabī presents this mediated nature of our relationship to God as inevitable, insofar as we always praise and worship an image of God that we ourselves create, and never encounter God in his unmediated essence:

Recall that we have said, concerning the object of one’s beliefs, that one praises none other than the divinity of his beliefs and attaches his soul to it. He has no action that does not come from himself, and so he lauds only himself, for without doubt whosoever praises the product praises the artisan, for its excellence or lack thereof depends upon its artisan. The divinity of beliefs, crafted by he who contemplates it, is his own production. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 293)

The inevitability of this mediation is expressed elsewhere in the *Fuṣūṣ* with the metaphor of the mirror: when we view God, we only view our own reflection. Thus, according to Chapter 2, the chapter on Seth:

Thereafter the object of self-disclosure sees nothing but his own form in the mirror of the Real, and it is not possible that he should see Him, although he knows that it is only in Him that he sees his own form... Do not entertain any hopes and do not tire your soul in trying to ascend to something higher than this degree; there is no such thing at all, and there is nothing after it but pure non-existence. He is your mirror for your vision of yourself, and you are His mirror for His vision of His Names—which are none other than Himself—and the manifestation of their determinations. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 25-26)

Yet a third metaphor is employed by Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chapter 9, on Joseph, comparing our filtering of God to light passing through a colored glass:

It is like light in relation to a glass that veils it from an onlooker, and whose color it takes on. In reality it has no color. Yet it is in this way that you see Him, in a similitude of your reality in relation to your Lord. If you were to say that the light is green due to the greenness of the glass, you would be speaking truthfully and sensory perception would bear you witness. If you were to say that it is neither green nor any other color, in accord with what a proof might grant you, you would also be speaking truthfully, and sound intellectual reasoning would bear you witness. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 101)

These multiple citations drive home, by means of various metaphors, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding that we always dress God in our own colors. In the Shaykh’s view, the human relationship to God is inherently personal and particular.

Moreover, Ibn al-‘Arabī encourages an accommodation of divergent perspectives, and he insists that we make concessions towards the views of others. Thus, according to the Shaykh, we ought not to permit our attachment to our own production to lead us to blame others for adhering to images of God that do not match ours:

His praise for the object of his belief is his praise for himself, and this is why he counts as blameworthy the beliefs of another. If he were fair-minded he would not have done so. There is no doubt that he who has this specific object of worship is being ignorant in this, for he rejects the other through his belief in God. If he knew what Junayd had said, namely that, “The water’s color is that of its container,” he would have allowed every holder of a belief his belief, and would have known God in every form and in every belief. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 293-294)

The last admonition, that the gnostic “would have known God in every form and in every belief,” begins to point in the direction of our second point, urging us not only to tolerate diverse forms but also to be receptive to those forms in ourselves.

Lest we think that these points are unique to the *Fuṣūṣ*, we should note that Ibn al-‘Arabī returns to the same points on a number of occasions in the *Futūḥāt*, as indicated by the two following excerpts. The first is from *Futūḥāt* III 161.24:

Junayd said this to let you know that you will never judge your object of knowledge except by yourself, since you will never know anything but yourself. Whatever may be the color of the cup, water becomes manifest in that color. The person without knowledge judges that the water is like that, since sight gives that to him. Water discloses itself in the forms of all the cups in respect to their colors, but it does not become delimited in its essence. You only see it that way. (Chittick 1989, 341)

The second is from *Futūḥāt* II 211.29:

In reality, you worship nothing but what you have set up in yourself. That is why the doctrines concerning God are diverse and the states change. One group says, “He is like this.” Another group says, “He is not like that, He is like this.” A third group says concerning knowledge, “The water takes on the color of its cup.” The third position holds that the cup affects the proof, thus affecting Him in the view of the eye.

So consider the bewilderment that pervades every believer. The perfect human being is he whose bewilderment has intensified and his regret is continuous—he does not reach his goal because of that which is his Object of worship, for he strives to achieve that which cannot possibly be achieved and he threads the path of Him whose path is not known.

He who is more perfect than the perfect is he who believes every belief concerning Him. He recognizes Him in faith, in proofs, and in heresy (*ilhād*), since *ilhād* is to deviate from one belief to another specific belief. So if you want your eye to hit the mark, witness Him with every eye, for He pervades all things through self-disclosure. In every form He has a face and in every knower a state. (Chittick 1989, 349)

To demonstrate the forcefulness and extent of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of religious diversity as expressed in the *Fuṣūṣ*, it may be worthwhile to work through a lengthy passage from Chapter 10 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, the chapter on Hūd, pausing at moments to demonstrate the ways in which this passage is echoed in other places in the *Fuṣūṣ* as well as other writings by Ibn al-‘Arabī. The passage begins:

At all events, it must be that each individual be possessed of a belief regarding his Lord, by means of which he returns to Him and within which he seeks after Him. The Real discloses Himself to him within it and acknowledges it. If He disclosed Himself to him as something else he would deny it and seek refuge from it, and would, in reality, be showing bad *adab*⁴⁶ with Him, although in his own eyes he is conducting himself with *adab* with Him. One only believes in a divinity through what he has made within his own

⁴⁶ *Adab* means “courtesy, good manners, comportment” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 8, footnote 25). Dagli chooses not to translate this word. One ought to show *adab* towards other human beings, but Ibn al-‘Arabī is also frequently concerned about displaying *adab* towards God.

soul. The divinity of beliefs comes about through this making. They see naught but their own souls and what they have made therein. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 115)

This segment clearly resonates with the passage we cited from Chapter 27, with its metaphor of the water and container, when Chapter 10 tells us, “One only believes in a divinity through what he has made within his own soul. The divinity of beliefs comes about through this making.” It also resonates with statements elsewhere in the *Fuṣūṣ*. For example, when Chapter 10 tells us that everyone is “possessed of a belief regarding his Lord,” this should be read keeping in mind Chapter 7, the chapter on Ishmael, which develops Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the word “Lord”:

His unity is His entire totality in potency. Happy is he who is well-pleasing to his lord, and there are none who are not well-pleasing to their lord, for that lord’s lordship abides by him. Therefore that lord is well-pleased with him, and he is happy. Of this Sahl said, “There is a mystery to lordship,” which is you, and he is addressing every identity... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 79-80)

Our claim above, that God is pleased with the diversity of human relationships with God, is underscored here in Chapter 7, where Ibn al-‘Arabī announces that “there are none who are not well-pleasing to their lord.” Ibn al-‘Arabī goes on to clarify that “his lord” refers not to God in his own essence, but to the individually-fabricated image of God. The servant of God is pleasing to his own God, but not to another’s:

“Well-pleasing” refers to the acts, for every doer and producer is well-pleased with what he has done and with what he has produced, for indeed he has fulfilled his obligation in giving full due to his act and to his production... It is thus that every existent is well-pleasing to its lord.

Although every existent is well-pleasing to its lord, as we have explained, it does not then become necessary that it should be well-pleasing to the lord of some other slave... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 80)

The passage from Chapter 10 continues with Ibn al-‘Arabī expanding on the statement, “If He disclosed Himself to him as something else he would deny it and seek refuge from it...”:

So contemplate the fact that the hierarchy of mankind in their knowledge of God is their very hierarchy in terms of their vision on the Day of Resurrection. I have taught you the reason that makes this necessary. Beware lest you bind yourself with a specific belief and reject others, for much good will escape you. Indeed, the knowledge of reality *as it is* will escape you. Be then, within yourself, a *hyle*⁴⁷ for the forms of all belief, for God is too vast and too great to be confined to one belief to the exclusion of another... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 115-116; the italics are in Dagli’s translation)

There are two points to be made about this selection. The first is a reiteration of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s caution that we should not reject the beliefs of others. This caution is illustrated elsewhere in the *Fuṣūṣ*, as in Chapter 3, on Noah, where Ibn al-‘Arabī speaks approvingly of the idolaters to whom Noah was sent as a prophet. There, Ibn al-‘Arabī interprets Noah’s message to the idolaters as “praising them through the language of blame” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 42). With respect to the idolaters’ refusal to abandon their idols, Ibn al-‘Arabī commends them, saying:

Had they left them, they would have been ignorant of the Real in the measure of what they had left. The Real has a face in every object of worship; whosoever knows it knows it, and whosoever is ignorant of it is ignorant of it... The man of knowledge knows who is worshipped, and in what form He is manifest in order to be worshipped, and that separation and multiplicity are like the bodily parts of a sensible form or the spiritual faculties of a spiritual form. Naught but God is worshipped in any object of worship. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 45-46)

Ibn al-‘Arabī concludes by interpreting the idolaters drowning in the Deluge as having “drowned in the sea which the knowledge of God is” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 46). Similarly, Ibn al-‘Arabī rehabilitates Pharaoh in Chapter 25, on Moses:

He was a comfort to Pharaoh through the faith God bestowed upon him when he drowned. He took him pure and purified, with no wickedness, for he took him at the moment of his faith, before he could earn any sins. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 258)

⁴⁷ *Hylē* is a Greek word that means “like Lat. *materia*, *stuff of which a thing is made*” and “in Philosophy, *matter*” (Liddell and Scott 1889). The word was used to describe a thing’s matter (as opposed to its form) by, for example, Aristotle, and the word was passed down to the Islamic philosophical tradition, where its Arabic form is *hayūlā*, “primordial matter; matter, substance” (Wehr and Cowan 1976). This Arabic form is the word used by Ibn al-‘Arabī. In a footnote, Dagli notes: “According to Qaysarī, *hyle* is here the universal *hyle* that receives the forms of all existents. He points out that in *Inshā’ al-dawā’ir* Ibn al-‘Arabī says that it (*hyle*) is substance (*jawhar*). This is not substance in the sense of substance-accident, but of the receptive principle that is common to all things” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 134-135, footnote 49).

The second point regards Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reference to the hierarchy of mankind’s “vision on the Day of Resurrection.” This is a reference to a *ḥadīth* (Muslim 1:299), which reads in part:

God, blessed and transcendent is He, will come to them in other than the form which they know. He will say, ‘I am your Lord.’ They will then say, ‘We seek refuge in God from you. We will stay here until our Lord comes, glorified and majestic is He. When our Lord comes we will know Him.’ Then God, blessed and transcendent is He, will come to them in the form which they know, and will say, ‘I am your Lord.’ They will then say, ‘Thou art our Lord.’” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 126, footnote 8)

Ibn al-‘Arabī quotes and discusses this *ḥadīth* in Chapter 22, on Elijah:

You know absolutely, if you are a believer, that the Real discloses Himself on the Day of Resurrection in a form that is known, then transmutes Himself into another form and is denied, then transmutes Himself from that into a form and is known. It is He who discloses Himself—He and no other—in each form. And it is known that one form is not some other form. It is as though the one Identity is a mirror. When the onlooker looks upon the form of his belief in God, he recognizes it and acknowledges it. If it happens that he sees therein the belief of another he will deny it, just as in a mirror he will see his own form and that of another. The mirror is a single identity and the multiple forms are within the eye of the seer. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 232)

For Ibn al-‘Arabī, one reason “much good will escape you” if you are too restrictive in your image of God, unreceptive to the multiplicity of images, is that you will fail to recognize God on the Day of Resurrection. Encouraging receptivity in a passage from the *Futūḥāt* (III 161.33), Ibn al-‘Arabī urges his reader to be one of the “Folk of Allah,” rather than a mere “person of faith,” and to learn the diversity of images of God in other religions:

The science of the sects (*niḥal*) and the creeds (*milal*) is a science which the person of faith need not study or consider. But it is incumbent upon the Folk of Allah to know the doctrine of every sect and creed concerning God, in order to witness Him in every form and in order not to stand in the place of denial. For He permeates existence, so no one denies Him except those who are limited. But the Folk of Allah follow Him whose folk they are, so His property flows over them. And His property is the lack of delimitation. Hence He possesses all-pervading Being (*wujūd*), while they possess all-pervading witnessing (*shuhūd*). That person who delimits His Being delimits the witnessing of Him; he is not one of the Folk of Allah. (Chittick 1989, 110-111)

This brings us back to the passage we have been considering from Chapter 10, which continues with a citation of a verse from the Qur’ān to describe the complementarity between

submission to the direction of prayer dictated by Islamic Law and a recognition that the Face of God is to be found in every direction:

...[F]or indeed He says, *Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God.*⁴⁸ He did not mention one “wheresoever” as opposed to another. He said that, *there is the Face of God*, and the face of thing is its reality...Now, although he knows this, in his manifest form and qualified state the perfect slave perseveres in turning his face in Prayer to the direction of the Sacred Mosque. He believes that God is present in his *qiblah*: while he is in Prayer, for it is one of the stations of the Face of the Real spoken of in, *Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God*. The direction of the Mosque is included in this, for therein is the Face of God. But do not say that He is only there. Rather, stay with what you perceive and persevere in the *adab* of facing the direction of the Sacred Mosque, and persevere in the *adab* of not confining the Face to that particular wheresoever, for it is one amongst the totality of wheresoever’s to which one may turn. It has become clear to you, from God most high, that He is in the ‘wheresoever’ of every direction. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 115-116)

We will conclude our consideration of Chapter 10 with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s startling claim that that God destines no human to eternal torment (which might be read as an extension of the claim in Chapter 7 that “every existent is well-pleasing to its lord”):

There is nothing but beliefs, and all are right, and he who is right is rewarded, and he who is rewarded is happy, and he who is happy is well-pleased because of it, though he may suffer for a time in the Abode of the Hereafter. The Folk of solicitude, though we know that they are happy, these Folk of the Truth, do become ill and suffer pain in the life of this lower-world. Among the slaves of God are those who will be seized by this suffering in the life of the Hereafter, in the abode called Hell. None amongst the Folk of knowledge, those who unveil the affair as it is, deny that they shall have an enjoyment particular to them in that abode. Either the pain they were experiencing shall be lifted from them, their enjoyment consisting of the relief from the consciousness of that pain, or they shall have a separate and independent enjoyment, such as the enjoyment of the Folk of Paradise within Paradise. And God knows best. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 116-117)

This last passage brings us back to the charge that Keller is guilty of selectively overlooking passages that contradict his representation of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Insisting that Ibn al-‘Arabī condemns Jews and Christians to eternal torment, Keller marginalizes passages in which Ibn al-‘Arabī softens this judgment. With respect to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s forecast that the torment

⁴⁸ Qur’ān 2:115.

(*adhāb*) of the damned will be turned to sweetness (*udhūba*),⁴⁹ Keller records in his spiritual diary,

...I asked Sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman when he visited Jordan last year if anything bad would happen to me if I didn’t believe this position. He told me, “No, the sheikh is just philosophizing here.” (Keller 1993, 130)

With permission from his shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Shāghūrī, Keller sweeps away this challenging passage by dismissing it as mere “philosophizing.” As we will see in the next section, Keller deploys another tactic for weeding out offending passages in the *Fuṣūṣ*.

2.4. The *Fuṣūṣ* vs. the *Futūḥāt*

*And so I realized my hope...to present this book as set out to me by the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, with neither addition nor omission. — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Fuṣūṣ Introduction*⁵⁰

It is difficult not to fall into this kind of selectivity when dealing with an author as prolific—and, apparently, self-contradictory—as Ibn al-‘Arabī. It is tempting to smooth out the Shaykh’s views into some kind of self-consistency, and such temptations are prone to result in readings that are one-sided and incomplete. This is most problematic if a fair hearing is not given to both sides of a contested reading. But if we read Chittick and Keller side-by-side, we may find that they serve as useful mutual foils, complementing and exposing one another’s biases, as well as highlighting the need for a more comprehensive account of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines than either of them has provided.

One tactic that Keller employs to impose some consistency onto Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings is to pit the *Fuṣūṣ* against the *Futūḥāt*, using the latter as a test of the canonicity of the former. To justify this move, Keller suggests that the text of the *Fuṣūṣ* may have been corrupted, its more

⁴⁹ A bit of wordplay in which Ibn ‘Arabī indulges in Chapter 10 of the *Fuṣūṣ*.

⁵⁰ See Dagli’s translation (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 1).

scandalously pluralistic passages having been inserted into the original to discredit the Shaykh. He alludes to “a promulgation by the Supreme Ottoman Sultanate exonerating the author of the statements of unbelief (*kufur*) it said that Jews had interpolated into the work” (Misri 1994, 1081).

Apparently taking this Ottoman promulgation at face value, Keller buttresses its conclusions with an appeal to the work of another current dissident in the field of Ibn al-‘Arabī studies, Mahmoud al-Ghorab. Keller describes him as

an Ibn al-‘Arabi specialist of Damascus who has published more than twelve books on the sheikh’s thought, among them... *Sharh Fusus al-hikam* [Exegesis of “The precious stones of the ring-settings of the wisdoms.'], in which Ghurab indicates eighty-six passages of the *Fusus* that he believes are spurious, adducing that they contradict the letter and spirit of *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*, which must be given precedence because we possess a manuscript copy in the author’s own handwriting, while there are no such copies of the *Fusus*. (Misri 1994, 1081)⁵¹

As in Keller’s case, al-Ghorab’s views on Ibn al-‘Arabī have been largely ignored by Western academics; but al-Ghorab’s case is by far the more striking one because he has produced so much work on Ibn al-‘Arabī during the past four decades. As Keller notes, al-Ghorab “has published more than twelve books on the sheikh’s thought;” but none of them has been translated into English. As far as we know, his only English-language publication has been a chapter tucked into *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi: Commemorative Volume*, published by the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society (Ghorab 1993). In French, Michel Chodkiewicz has written reviews of two of his books and has made brief allusions to his work in *Ocean without Shore* (Chodkiewicz 1993a); but apart from these glancing notices by Chodkiewicz, al-Ghorab’s books do not appear to have shown up on the academic radar.

⁵¹ The claim that “we possess a manuscript copy [of the *Futūhāt*] in the author’s own handwriting, while there are no such copies of the *Fusus*” is at odds with Austin’s claim, “Fortunately, a manuscript copy of [the *Fuṣūṣ*] exists which bears his signature of approval” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980, vii).

Admittedly, there appear to be good reasons not to treat al-Ghorab's scholarship as equal in quality to that of scholars like Chittick and Morris. Chodkiewicz complains of one of al-Ghorab's books, "This anthology, quite summarily annotated and completely without references, is unfortunately of little use to researchers" (Chodkiewicz 1993a, 148). Moreover, like Keller, al-Ghorab displays a naïve tendency to give credit to dramatic conspiracy theories regarding corruptions of the original text of the *Fuṣūṣ*.

But as damning as these flaws appear to be, a case may nonetheless be made that a valuable resource is being overlooked if we neglect al-Ghorab's research—in particular, his commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ*. Al-Ghorab's side-by-side comparison of passages from the *Fuṣūṣ* with apparently contradictory passages from the *Futūḥāt* may serve as a useful lens through which to identify certain fault lines within Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought. Moreover, portrayals of Ibn al-ʿArabī as a thoroughgoing pluralist often lean heavily on certain passages in the *Fuṣūṣ* (such as those have cited in the previous section); al-Ghorab's questioning of the uncritical application of these passages, and his privileging of the *Futūḥāt*, may stimulate previously unasked questions about these portrayals.

Both Keller and al-Ghorab appear to be locked into a dynamic established early on by Ibn al-ʿArabī's critics. Alexander Knysh, in his study of the history of polemical attacks on Ibn al-ʿArabī's doctrines, observes that almost all of the Shaykh's writings

have been overshadowed by the controversial *Fusus*. No wonder that this work has elicited most of the polemical responses that are discussed in the chapters that follow. As we shall see, in the polemic over Ibn ʿArabī's legacy, his other writings were rarely, if ever invoked. (Knysh 1999, 10-11)

Because the *Fuṣūṣ* has been such a lightning rod for criticism of Ibn al-ʿArabī over the centuries, it is unsurprising that the Shaykh's present-day defenders would make a special effort to question the authority and even the authorship of this text.

In her biography of Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Quest for the Red Sulphur*, Addas seconds Knysh’s observation:

In fact all the attacks which were to be launched on Ibn ‘Arabī by exotericists from the eighth century down to the present day (and probably on to the end of time) have been focussed on this particular work of his and on the themes it expounds. (Addas 1993, 278)

Significantly, however, Addas adds:

And yet not one of the themes tackled in the *Fuṣūṣ*—the Unity of Being, the final salvation of the Pharaoh, the non-eternity of infernal punishments, and so forth—is absent from the *Futūḥāt*. But in the one case they are given expression and in a sense diluted over thousands of pages, where they intermingle with a whole crowd of other notions; in the other case they are concentrated and expounded more systematically in a mere hundred pages or so. It was for this reason that—due allowance being made for the intellectual laziness of the jurists, who were generally happy simply to cite the ‘condemnable propositions’ already catalogued by Ibn Taymiyya—the *Fuṣūṣ* lent themselves to criticism far more readily than the *Futūḥāt*. (Addas 1993, 278)

If Addas is correct, then the contradictions documented by al-Ghorab between the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt* may in fact point to self-contradictions within the *Futūḥāt*—that is, to pervasive contradictions running throughout Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought. If this is the case, even if we bracket the *Fuṣūṣ* (as al-Ghorab would like us to), we would still be faced with the challenge of providing a coherent reading of an author whose thoughts on non-Muslim religions are far from consistent. The challenge posed by this task is both inviting and risky, and all endeavors to provide a comprehensive analysis of this material should be viewed with a touch of skepticism.

This brings to mind a moment in the work of Sachiko Murata; while she is not concerned primarily with the question of religious pluralism, her relationship with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings exemplifies a frequent strain we find in scholarship on his work. Murata acknowledges (Murata 1992, 183) that it is impossible to determine a consistent position in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussions, because any position he takes in one passage appears to be contradicted in another. But at the same time, she seems reluctant to portray Ibn al-‘Arabī as contradicting himself, noting at one

point, “Though he seems to be contradicting what he said in the above passage, in fact he is merely adding some precision...” (Murata 1992, 180). In our own analysis, we will display no such reluctance to portray Ibn al-‘Arabī as contradicting himself—on the topic of religious pluralism or any other. Not only does Ibn al-‘Arabī contradict himself; we believe that he does so deliberately, often placing a thesis into juxtaposition it with its antithesis, permitting both to be accepted. This is no fault in the development of his thought; rather it is a dialectical dynamic that brings his thought to life. With many of the topics to which Ibn al-‘Arabī put his authorial hand, he resists being pinned down to a single perspective, and actively courts seemingly incompatible points of view.

It is clear in any case that an ad hoc approach, picking and choosing texts from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s corpus on a case-by-case basis, would be inadequate. We shall have to seek a more panoramic approach to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s written corpus—including the *Tarjumān*, the *Fuṣūṣ*, and the *Futūḥāt*—by which we can make sense of an author who appears to lend support to those on both sides of the argument. Because this task exceeds the reach of any single scholar, all such endeavors, including our own, should be regarded as provisional and incomplete.

2.5. The Generations Following Ibn al-‘Arabī

The religion of Love is apart from all religions... — Rūmī, Mathnawī II 1770

As for Keller’s assertion that an understanding of Islam as compatible with religious pluralism “has waited for fourteen centuries of Islamic scholarship down to the twentieth century to be first promulgated in Cairo in the 1930s” (Keller 2011, 325) by the Perennialists, Keller seems not only to deny any inclination for pluralism in the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī, but also to deny such inclinations in the generations of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s followers up until the Perennialists. It is true that Guénon, Schuon, and other Perennialists have exerted a strong influence on Western

readers of Ibn al-‘Arabī, as we have noted above in Chapter 1. Yet to deny that earlier readers of Ibn al-‘Arabī had pluralistic inclinations would be, in our view, a misleading elision of more than seven centuries of writings by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s successors. Not all academic readings of Ibn al-‘Arabī as a pluralist are dependent on the influence of the Perennialists. As we have noted above, Nicholson describes Ibn al-‘Arabī as a pluralist and a pantheist in his introduction to the *Tarjumān*, two decades in advance of Guénon’s writings on Ibn al-‘Arabī. As our selection of passages from the *Fuṣūṣ* might indicate, it would be difficult not to notice a suggestion of pluralism in these writings. Nicholson makes this point:

Of course the offending passages admit of more than one interpretation, and the author would doubtless have repudiated the construction put upon them by theologians. Their pantheistic import, however, cannot be explained away. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, iv)

Yet more instructive than consulting the origins of twentieth-century academic studies might be a review of prominent Sufis over the course of seven centuries who have inherited ideas from Ibn al-‘Arabī and developed their own thought in the shadow of the Shaykh’s influence.

We might begin such a review with the famous Persian poet and Sufi shaykh Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273 CE). There are frequent moments in Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* in which the poet seems to be advocating a version of religious pluralism. A prominent example is the narrative of “Moses and the Shepherd” in *Mathnawī* II 1720-1815 (Rūmī 1926a, 310-314). In this story, Moses reprimands a shepherd for holding humble and misplaced conceptions of God, prompting God to reprimand Moses in the following words:

Thou hast parted My servant from Me.
Didst thou come (as a prophet) to unite, or didst thou come to sever?...
I have bestowed on every one a (special) way of acting: I have given
to every one a (peculiar) form of expression...
In the Hindoos the idiom of Hind (India) is praiseworthy; in the Sindians
the idiom of the Sind is praiseworthy...
The religion of Love is apart from all religions: for lovers, the (only)
religion and creed is—God.

(Rūmī 1926a, 311-312)⁵²

Many other examples could be cited from the *Mathnawī* to the same effect. However, the influence of Ibn al-‘Arabī on Rūmī is not definitively established. The question of whether Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī ever met in person has been a point of longstanding debate, one that will probably never be decisively settled. One article pursuing this question observes:

It seems safe, for now, to posit that Rūmī and Ibn al-‘Arabī in all likelihood *did* meet in Damascus during the time Mawlānā was studying there, although for whatever reason Rūmī was not attracted to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s circle as a follower. The hagiographic accounts about Rūmī’s intimate circle do reveal that they were indeed studying Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt*, although there is no evidence that Rūmī himself did so. (Safi 1999, 87; italics Safi’s)

While Rūmī does not appear to have studied directly with Ibn al-‘Arabī, he may have come under Ibn al-‘Arabī’s influence through his acquaintance with Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (1270-1273 CE), Ibn al-‘Arabī’s adopted son and designated successor. Qūnawī came to Konya (where Rūmī had settled and spent most of his life) in 1254 CE, prior to Rūmī’s composition of the *Mathnawī*,⁵³ and several encounters between the two are recorded by Rūmī’s biographer Aflākī (Lewis 2000, 285). Franklin Lewis remarks:

Sadr al-Din helped spread Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine (CBa80), and the influence of the school of Ibn ‘Arabi on Rumi has long been assumed...Certainly Rumi was at least aware of Ibn ‘Arabi.

Rumi and Ibn ‘Arabi seem to have certain assumptions in common, including the unity of being (*vahdat al-vojud*), a notion generally described in Western works as a kind of pantheistic monism...Of course, such ideas may well have been part of the wider zeitgeist among mystically minded Muslims, and Rumi may have imbibed them from a number of other sources...[T]he fact that most of the major *Masnawi* commentaries of the

⁵² Ibn al-‘Arabī’s line from *Tarjumān* 11.15, with which we opened this chapter—“I follow the religion of Love...that is my religion and my faith”—bears some resemblance to Rūmī’s words here, “The religion of Love is apart from all religions: for lovers, the religion and creed...” There is, however, some difference in a comparison of the original Arabic and Persian. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s “religion of Love” is *dīn al-ḥubb*, whereas Rūmī’s “religion of Love” is *millat-é ‘ishq*. These are near synonyms, but not identical.

⁵³ According to Franklin Lewis, Rūmī began composing the second book of the *Mathnawī*, in which the story of “Moses and the Shepherd” appears, between November 1263 and October 1264 CE (Lewis 2000, 304).

pre-modern period approach Rumi's book informed by the assumption of Ibn 'Arabi's school of thought, [creating] the impression that Ibn 'Arabi was an important influence on Rumi...

But Bausani has pointed out (BPR 267-9) that Ibn 'Arabi's influence, if any, must have been rather external, more philosophical than religious...Chittick concludes (CBa 92-4) that Ibn 'Arabi "exercised no perceptible influence on Rūmī," insofar as Rumi never uses the specific terms and ideas of Ibn 'Arabi as set forth in the writings of Sadr al-Din... (Lewis 2000, 285-286)⁵⁴

A better established example from the same generation is that of Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī (ca. 1213-1289 CE). 'Irāqī was a disciple of both Rūmī and Qūnawī, consolidating teachings from both masters (and perhaps reinforcing the mutual familiarity between the two). 'Irāqī composed his work, *Divine Flashes*, while attending Qūnawī's lectures on the *Fuṣūṣ*, and 'Irāqī's work reflects Ibn al-'Arabī's concepts as well as his poetic idioms; he makes extensive use of the trope of the religion of Love, with its attendant notion that all humans inevitably worship and love God, regardless of their religious tradition:

It is not so much wrong as impossible to love other than Him, for whatever we love (aside from that love which springs from the very essence of the lover, the cause of which is unknown), we love either for its beauty, or its goodness—and both of these belong to Him alone. ('Iraqi 1982, 85)

While the Persian literary expressions of both Rūmī and 'Irāqī are certainly compatible with a liberal, Akbarian understanding of the relationship between humans and God—and might perhaps support the notion that those belonging to the generation after Ibn al-'Arabī were receptive to a notion of religious pluralism—we must look to succeeding generations to find more explicit theological articulations of religious pluralism and attributions of those ideas to Ibn

⁵⁴ We agree with Chittick that Rūmī's writing bears almost no resemblance to the writings of Qūnawī, whose style tended to be more philosophical and systematic than that of his stepfather and teacher. This should be distinguished however from the question of Qunawī's possible influence on Rūmī as a conveyer of Ibn al-'Arabī's own writings. While it is difficult to pin down evidence in Rūmī's biography of his sitting down to read these works, one might find a number of points of similarity in concepts and specific turns of phrase expressing these concepts in the compositions of Ibn al-'Arabī and Rūmī.

al-‘Arabī. One example is the Persian Sufi poet Maḥmūd Shabistārī (d. circa 1340 CE). In his book-length study of Shabistārī, Leonard Lewisohn writes that

the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s theosophy on Shabistārī’s prose and poetry is visible throughout all works. By his own admission Shabistārī spent a long time absorbed in deciphering his thought. (Lewisohn 1995, 146)

Lewisohn adds that Shabistārī was conscious of and disquieted by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s daring doctrines:

Shabistārī was no doubt also aware of the violent debates prompted by Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings in Egypt during the same period in which [Shabistārī’s] *Sa‘ādat-nāma* was composed...No doubt such ritual book-burnings of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works and the inquisition of his followers by the mediaeval Egyptian mullahs also lay heavy on Shabistārī’s mind when he reflected that there was “something disturbing” about the books of al-Shaykh al-Akbar. On the other hand, his reservations about Ibn ‘Arabī were fashioned most likely for the consumption of non-specialist readers; they were directed at the ‘vulgar masses’ or ‘common folk’ (‘*amm*) rather than Sufi adepts. (Lewisohn 1995, 148-149)

The influence of these doctrines on Shabistārī’s poetry might be perceived in the poet’s celebration of idolatry as a manifestation of the One God:

All infidelity has Faith inside;
within each idol’s heart a soul resides
and every heresy has hymns and litanies
and daily, infidelity recites the rosary—
“Verily, all which is, does hymn his praise.”
So, where’s your enmity?
In what I say—have I digressed or missed the Way?
Say “‘God!’—and leave these fools in vanity and play.”
Who else but God could gild its face
or give an idol such finesse and grace?
Unless it be his will, who’d be an idol’s votary?
The Doer, Orator and Agent-actor too—
all these were him. He acted not amiss, he spoke
aright, and was in fact, both well and good.
‘See One, say One, know One:’ this axiom
sums up the root and branches of *Imān*.
The Koran’s word attests to this, not I alone
confess to it: “No fault exists,” the Scripture says,
“in the creation of the All-Beneficent.”
(Lewisohn 1995, 87)

Lewisohn comments that “Shabistarī’s doctrine aims to achieve a mystical realization of the theophany of God everywhere and in every form,” and adds (citing R. J. W. Austin and Michel Chodkiewicz respectively):

Shabistarī’s recognition of symbolic value, and hence, religious truth within non-Islamic faiths is especially conspicuous in his treatment of Christianity. His understanding of the *communio sanctorum* of the Sufi notion of saintship (*walāya*), conceived of in the Akbarian tradition as “an all-inclusive and universal function thill never comes to an end,” dogs Ibn ‘Arabī’s belief in the authentic spirituality, which, the latter believed, could still be found in certain ‘Christ-like saints’. This conception lead [*sic*] the Shaykh al-Akbar “to depict *walāya* in a way which is far more inclusive than the definitions which confine it within the framework of a sociological Islam.” Shabistarī’s attitude towards Christianity clearly reflected this liberal Akbarian perspective. (Lewisohn 1995, 88)

To further illustrate the influence of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s pluralistic outlook on later generations, we might consider the writings of ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641-1731 CE), who was born and died in Damascus. According to Samer Akkach’s study of Nābulusī, “The young ‘Abd al-Ghani was inspired by Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas, avidly read his work, and defended him vigorously against his critics” (Akkach 2007, 11); Nābulusī regarded Ibn al-‘Arabī as his spiritual master and has even been said to have been “predicted” by Ibn al-‘Arabī and regarded as “a re-manifestation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s presence and a reviver of his doctrine” (Akkach 2007, 10-11). In Akkach’s account, Nābulusī had a life-long concern with conflicting claims between Islam as a superior and exclusive religious path and more ecumenical views that recognize a universal validity in all religions. For Nābulusī, this conflict and its resolution were framed in terms of the discrepancy between the approach of the law (*sharī‘a*) and the approach of the truth (*ḥaqīqa*) (Akkach 2007, 110).

This interest led Nābulusī into a debate originating with the Baghdad-born Sufi ‘Abd al-Karīm Jīlī (1366-1403 CE). According to Akkach,

In the last chapter of his widely circulated work, *The Universal Man*, al-Jili articulated his philosophy of religion, expanding many of the ideas that Ibn ‘Arabi had introduced... He argued for the transcendent unity of religions, explaining that all religions are but different pathways leading to the same end, and that all people worship—by necessity and providence, not by choice—one and the same God. To maintain the superiority of Islam, however, al-Jili presented an interesting analysis of ten different religious dogmas from the Islamic perspective, which he, of course, upheld to be the best pathway to follow. Al-Jili's ecumenical perspective did not impress the jurists, prompting the leading scholar of Medina, Ahmad al-Qushashi...to write a commentary dismissing his claims.

Disturbed by al-Qushashi's views, ‘Abd al-Ghani responded with *The Disclosure and Clarification of the Secrets of Religions (Bayan)*. In this text he criticized al-Qushashi's misunderstanding, clarified al-Jili's intentions, and articulated his own approach to the philosophy of religions. The main question that underlined this work was how to resolve the conflicting demands of the ecumenism of the Unity of Being with the exclusivity of the Islamic faith. One is rational, demanding an egalitarian and inclusive understanding; the other is dogmatic, demanding a discriminatory and exclusive attitude. (Akkach 2007, 111-112)⁵⁵

The upshot of Nābulusī's defense of Jīlī is articulated thus by Akkach:

Thus, from the ecumenical, universal perspective of the Unity of Being, all beings (or creatures) necessarily have an equal relationship to Being, the very foundation of their existence. In this respect, ‘Abd al-Ghani asserts, “all are on the straight path and right in their states, speeches, and deeds, because they are all, in this regard, the acts of the most high and the traces of his most beautiful names” (*Bayan*). (Akkach 2007, 112)

Nābulusī's words quoted here are certainly informed by Ibn al-‘Arabī's words in Chapter 10 of the *Fuṣūṣ*:

Mankind consists of two groups. Among mankind are those who walk upon a path, knowing it and knowing its final end; for them it is a straight path. And among mankind are those who walk upon a path in ignorance of it and in ignorance of its final end, *yet it is the same path the other class of people know*. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004, 109; italics ours)

This Akbarian heritage of religious pluralism has been passed all the way down to the twentieth-century, as exemplified by Tierno Bokar (1875-1939 CE), the early twentieth-century Malian teacher and Tijānī shaykh. Brought to western attention by his student Amadou Hampâté

⁵⁵ See the partial translation of Jīlī's *Universal Man* by Titus Burckhardt and Angela Culme-Seymour (Jīlī 1983).

Bâ and the American anthropologist Louis Brenner, Tierno Bokar has become emblematic of pluralist views in West African Islam. For instance, Bâ quotes his teacher as saying, “To believe that one’s race or one’s religion is the only possessor of the truth is an error” (Bâ 2008, 129).

Tierno Bokar states on another occasion:

That which varies in the diverse forms of Religion—for there can only be one Religion—are the individual contributions of human beings interpreting the letter with the laudable aim of placing religion within the reach of the men of their time. (Bâ 2008, 133)

On another occasion, Tierno Bokar tells his students, “[Do] not harass the follower of Moses,” and, “Neither should you harass the follower of Jesus” (Bâ 2008, 127-128); elsewhere he cites a precedent in the founder of the Tijānī order, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (1735-1815 CE), who, according to Tierno Bokar, declared, “Yes, God loves infidels” (Bâ 2008, 125).

Significant for our inquiry is Bâ’s observation that “the *Meccan Revelations* of the great Andalusian spiritual master Ibn Arabi was [Tierno Bokar’s] favorite book” (Bâ 2008, 21). One certainly cannot ignore Tierno Bokar’s context, living and teaching under French colonialism, nor his exposure to Western liberalism. Yet we might recognize Tierno Bokar as an inheritor of a legacy that can be traced back to the first generation of readers of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt*.

From Rūmī and ‘Irāqī in the immediate wake of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s life to Jīlī and Shabistarī in the fourteenth century to Nābulusī in the eighteenth century to Tierno Bokar in the early twentieth century, this cursory historical overview might give us an indication that generations of Sufis have striven to work out versions of accommodation for religious pluralism, and have done so in the name of Ibn al-‘Arabī. We are not suggesting that these views are uniform, nor are we able here to work through all the intricacies of their variations or the extent of their dependence on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings. We would suggest, however, that this history should give us pause before accepting Keller’s characterization of pluralist readings of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s as a late

interpretation innovated by Perennialists in the 1930's. Ultimately, the reader must return to the *Futūḥāt*, the *Fuṣūṣ*, and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s other writings to determine whether such interpretations are an imposition or are supported by these source texts themselves.

2.6. Poetic Tropes vs. Doctrinal Positions

And at one time I am called the herdsman of the gazelles in the desert, and at another time I am called a Christian monk and an astrologer. — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Tarjumān Ode 12

An alternative mode of challenging the dominant academic view that Ibn al-‘Arabī was a pluralist might be to draw a distinction between the Shaykh’s prose statements of creed and his poetic celebration of “the religion of love.” This is an intelligent strategy; whereas Keller and al-Ghorab have raised a specter of doubt around the received text of certain passages in the *Fuṣūṣ*, one might, more subtly, appeal to the nature of poetry to render the offending lines of the *Tarjumān* innocuous. The fact that this latter strategy might enjoy greater respectability in academic venues than the former may be indicated by its currency in the work of Cambridge University-based, Muslim theologian Timothy Winter. While Winter, like Keller and al-Ghorab, swims against the academic tide by arguing that Ibn al-‘Arabī was no pluralist, his tone is more sensitively attuned to the conventions of academic argumentation. In his article, “The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths,” Winter demonstrates, in addition to his thorough knowledge of the history of Islamic theology, a well-rounded acquaintance with recent reformist developments in both Islamic and Christian theology. With clarity and precision, he dissects the arguments of liberalizing Muslim thinkers like Farid Esack, Mahmoud Ayoub, Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani, and Fazlur Rahman. With respect to these last two, he accuses them of failing to respect “consensus” (*ijmā’*):

Both men apparently broke with the consensus of Sunnī and Shīʿī scholarship to hold that the detailed formulations of Judaism and Christianity are to be esteemed as fully adequate vehicles of salvation even after the historical advent of Islam... (Winter 1999, 135)

Spelling out the Sunnī consensus alluded to in this passage, Winter quotes al-Ghazālī: "...[T]he Jews, Christians, and the followers of all the religions, whether Zoroastrians, idol-worshippers or others, are all to be considered unbelievers [*kāfir*] as is specified in the Koran and agreed upon [*ijmāʿ*] by the Muslim community [*umma*]" (Winter 1999, 135, footnote 3). Winter also cuts these reformist arguments down to size by exposing their shallow historical roots:

At the very least, to secure their case the pluralists must relinquish fundamental methodological principles which for centuries have overlaid the texts with a unifying exegetic template, including such features as...the centrality of the canonical hadith discourse and the theory of scholarly consensus (*ijmāʿ*) as a transhistorical expression of God's will. In place of these, Esack and others propose a new exegetic turn which occludes some texts by means of others on grounds...of fidelity to consciences shaped by a late twentieth-century egalitarian and 'liberative' ethos. (Winter 1999, 136)

In setting up the terms of his discussion, Winter makes a noteworthy decision about the relevance of Sufi discourses to his formulation of this critique. He explains:

In what follows it has seemed wise to limit the discussion to the formal exoteric theology (*kalām*) of mainstream Sunnism...Islamic mysticism has been excluded, not because it is less normatively Islamic than the *kalām* but because of the difficulties posed by the elusive informality of much Sufi discourse, with its tropical and hyperbolic features of poetic licence whose aim is typically to interpret or arouse transformative affective states rather than to chart fixed dogmatic positions. (Winter 1999, 134)

Although he does not explicitly mention Ibn al-ʿArabī here, he alludes to Ibn al-ʿArabī in a footnote to this sentence:

A consideration of Sufi approaches to Koranic abrogationism would focus on thinkers such as the Andalusian mystic Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), although the widespread readings of him as a 'pluralist' need to be tempered by a survey of his less eirenic statements. For instance, in two of his works Christians are described as *mushrikūn* (polytheists)... (Winter 1999, 134, footnote 2)

Winter sidesteps the challenging task of accounting for Ibn al-ʿArabī's views on the matter, giving the Shaykh the briefest of nods and redirecting the reader to an article by Muhammad

Legenhausen (Legenhausen 1997) that Winter advertises as debunking pluralist readings of Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī.⁵⁶

But in the act of dodging the issue, Winter hints, in his notion of “poetic licence,” at some promise of resolving the apparent contradictions in the Shaykh’s writings. Because Winter says so little about it, this hint prompts a number of unanswered questions. How far is this rubric of “poetic licence” intended to stretch? Is it merely intended to cover Ibn al-‘Arabī’s generically poetic works like the *Tarjumān*? If so, this would seem to insist on a distinction between the *Tarjumān*, “whose aim is typically to interpret or arouse transformative affective states rather than to chart fixed dogmatic positions,” and Ibn al-‘Arabī prose works, placing the weight on the latter for an account of the Shaykh’s creed.

The *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (*The Interpreter of Desires*), consists of erotic odes modeled, as noted above, on pre-Islamic Arab love poetry. Celebrating the passionate longings of lovers like Qays (called *Majnūn*, “crazy”) the *Tarjumān* makes the madness of love its central motif. In the introduction to his translation of the *Tarjumān*, Michael Sells highlights Ibn al-‘Arabī’s adoption and transmutation of this motif:

For...Ibn ‘Arabi..., love-madness is analogous to the mystical bewilderment (*ḥayra*) that occurs as the normal boundaries of identity, reason, and will are melted. (Sells 2000, 21)

The publication of the *Tarjumān* stirred controversy with its boldness. The caution that characterizes much of the Shaykh’s writing style (marked on occasions by obliqueness and even obscurity), gives way, on other occasions, to bold and confrontational declarations that invite censure. This is true of the *Tarjumān*; but in this case the scandal arose less immediately due to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s creedal transgressions than due to the erotic raptures that color these odes. As we have seen (and will see again in the next chapter), Ibn al-‘Arabī was the object of sharp rebukes

⁵⁶ Legenhausen’s article does not in fact discuss Ibn al-‘Arabī in a sustained or substantial way.

for the theological content of his writings, but these rebukes were largely deferred until after his death; in his own lifetime, the odes “were condemned by some devout Moslems as ‘vain and amatorious’” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, 1-2). This condemnation incited Ibn al-‘Arabī to add his own commentary on the odes in the second and third recensions of the *Tarjumān*; there, he spells out his motivations for writing the commentary at the request of his friend Shams al-Dīn al-Nūrī. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s preface to the third edition, he writes,

He (Shamsu’ddīn) had heard some theologian remark that the Author’s declaration in the preface to the *Tarjumān* was not true, his declaration, namely, that the love-poems in this collection refer to mystical sciences and realities. “Probably,” said the critic,” he adopted this device in order to protect himself from the imputation that he, a man famous for religion and piety, composed poetry in the erotic style.” Shamsu’ddīn was offended by his observations and repeated them to me. Accordingly, I began to write the commentary... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, 5)

Yet the *Tarjumān* is not devoid of striking gestures that challenge conventional notions of Islamic orthodoxy. Amidst the erotic poetry, Ibn al-‘Arabī indulges in the theme of apostasy. Ode 11, with whose lines we opened this chapter—in which the poet declares his heart “a convent for Christian monks...a temple for idols...and the tables of the Tora”—is not alone in exemplifying of this theme. Consider Ode 2:

When she kills with her glances, her speech restores to life, as tho’ she, in giving life thereby, were Jesus.
The smooth surface of her legs is (like) the Tora in brightness, and I follow it and tread in its footsteps as tho’ I were Moses.
She is a bishopess, one of the daughters of Rome, unadorned: thou seest in her a radiant Goodness...
She has baffled everyone who is learned in our religion, every student of the Psalms of David, every Jewish doctor, and every Christian priest.
If with a gesture she demands the Gospel, thou wouldst deem us to be priests and patriarchs and deacons.
(Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, 49)

Another example is found in Ode 12:

And at one time I am called the herdsman of the gazelles in the desert, and at another time I am called a Christian monk and an astrologer.

My Beloved is three although He is One, even as the (three) Persons (of the Trinity) are made one Person in essence.
(Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, 70)

We will take a closer look at this latter example in Chapter 3. In the meantime, we must ask whether this literary dabbling in this transgressive theme is merely a poetic gesture. Such lines are certainly reminiscent of a trope found elsewhere in Sufi poetry. For instance, *The Speech of the Birds* by the Persian poet Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1221 CE) features the verse narrative of Shaykh Sam‘ān (lines 1186-1620), a Muslim elder who falls in love with a young Christian woman and abandons his faith:

Love for the girl ravaged his soul;
Infidelity from those locks poured to melt his faith.

The Shaikh surrendered the Faith and bought Christianity:
Sold blessedness, purchased shame.
(‘Aṭṭār 1998, 112)

In light of this poetic tradition, it would be easy to conclude that such gestures in the *Tarjumān* are merely poetic tropes.

These hyperbolic poetic expressions are certainly literary devices, and we ought not to take them literally. At the same time, a distinction between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s poetic works and his predominantly prose works becomes difficult to maintain when we notice the overlap between the *Tarjumān* and the *Fuṣūṣ*. Here we might return to an excerpt we have already looked at from Chapter 10 of the *Fuṣūṣ*:

Beware lest you bind yourself with a specific belief and reject others, for much good will escape you. Indeed, the knowledge of reality as it is will escape you. Be then, within yourself, a *hyle* for the forms of all belief, for God is too vast and too great to be confined to one belief to the exclusion of another, for indeed He says, *Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God*. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 115-116)

It is easy to recognize a resemblance between the *Fuṣūṣ* and the words of Ode 11, “My heart is capable of every form...whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion and my faith.”

When we recall, alongside this, Addas' testimony about the common doctrines of the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt*, we are inclined to acknowledge the thorough interlacing of Ibn al-ʿArabī writings, returning to the same themes in different texts. It is also noteworthy that Ibn al-ʿArabī inserts passages of verse into both the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt*, punctuating the prose and encouraging dialogue between the two genres of expression.

On the other hand, perhaps Winter intended “poetic licence” as an umbrella term to cover the whole (or at least the bulk) of Ibn al-ʿArabī's written corpus. If this is the case, how are we to avoid the conclusion that Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings constitute little more than a collection of extravagant tropes, ultimately empty of any creedal substance? Are we willing to deny Ibn al-ʿArabī's repeated and attention-demanding assertions the opportunity to be taken seriously as doctrinal claims? Perhaps (to repeat Ibn al-ʿArabī's own words) if you dismiss his boldly unconventional declarations as merely conventional literary devices, “much good will escape you. Indeed, the knowledge of reality as it is will escape you.” While Winter's notion of poetic license sounds plausible enough on first hearing, it begs for sharper delineation.

Moreover, there is a slippery ambiguity in Winter's phrasing. When he argues that the aim of many Sufi writings is “to interpret or arouse transformative affective states rather than chart fixed dogmatic positions,” Chittick and Morris would surely agree that this constitutes an accurate assessment of Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings. In fact, Morris goes so far as to say,

The essential thing here—and the choice of formulation is intentionally provocative, but also quite literally accurate—is that *Ibn ʿArabī* (like Plato) *has no ‘teachings’ or ‘doctrines’ of his own*. In other words, his constant emphasis is to force his ‘readers’ to undertake their own indispensable effort of *tahqīq* (both ‘verification’ and ‘realisation’). (Morris 2001, 95; the italics are in the original)

Yet Morris and Winter draw opposite conclusions from this shared observation. For Morris, to say that Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings do not “chart fixed dogmatic positions” would be roughly

equivalent to saying that he is a doctrinal pluralist; for Winter, it seems to be roughly equivalent to denying that his writings have any doctrinal import at all. On what grounds are we to determine which of these two outcomes is the more sensible inference from the fluid, shifting course that Ibn al-‘Arabī follows in his literary legacy?

This is a larger question than we can address with justice within the pages of this study.⁵⁷ This is not merely a question of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrinal stance (or lack thereof); it is a question of how to read Ibn al-‘Arabī in general. Given the enormous bulk of the Shaykh’s written corpus, answering the question of how to read Ibn al-‘Arabī may always remain an unfinished task. In any case, this is a question that is perhaps addressed better in practice than trying to articulate an answer fully in advance. We will proceed in this study with the assumption that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings do have doctrinal import, whether expressed in the predominantly poetic writing of the *Tarjumān* or the predominantly prose writing of the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt*. Moreover, we will not attempt to domesticate or neutralize the force of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s bolder declarations of receptivity to creeds that appear to violate conventional Islamic orthodoxy.

2.7. Less Eirenic Statements

The worst thing that Islam and Muslims suffer in your realm is the sound of bells, the manifestation of infidelity... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, letter to Kaykā’ūs I

Having discussed Winter’s notion of “poetic license,” there is one other point raised by Winter that must be addressed: as noted above, Winter cautions that “the widespread readings of [Ibn al-‘Arabī] as a ‘pluralist’ need to be tempered by a survey of his less eirenic statements” (Winter 1999, 134, footnote 2). In response to Winter, we will discuss three instances in Ibn al-

⁵⁷ A more adequate inquiry into this question might be found in a recent Ph.D. dissertation by Gregory A. Lipton, “Making Islam Fit: Ibn ‘Arabi and the Idea of Sufism in the West” (University of North Carolina, 2013). We have not yet had the opportunity to read this dissertation.

‘Arabī’s writings that speak to this point: 1) we will consider polemical statements found in the *Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ wa ‘aqīdat ahl al-ihtiṣāṣ*; 2) we will look at Ibn al-‘Arabī’s letter to King Kaykā’ūs I, giving the ruler advice on how to deal with Christians; 3) we will examine Ibn al-‘Arabī’s presentation of various creedal categories in the Introduction of the *Futūḥāt*.

The *Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ wa ‘aqīdat ahl al-ihtiṣāṣ*, attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabī, was published in a French translation by Roger Deladrière as *La Profession de Foi* in 1985. Chapter 9, dealing with the topics “Paradise and Hell: The Sects,” provides a list of sects damned to Hell as infidels owing to specific violations of orthodox creeds: the Khārijites, the Jahmiyya, the Qadariyya, the Shī‘ites, the Murjites, and the “anarchist heretics” are all condemned (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1985e, 254). Especially noteworthy for our interests is the condemnation of the Qadariyya because “they are brothers of the Christians (*ikhwān al-naṣārā*).” This passage certainly poses an obstacle for understanding the author as accommodating Christians and endorsing a universal destiny in post-life felicity.

This obstacle is overcome, however, when we take into account the reasonable doubt that the *Tadhkira* was actually composed by Ibn al-‘Arabī. In a review of Deladrière’s French translation upon its publication, Denis Gril (Gril 1984) presented a detailed argument for rejecting this attribution. Among the evidence in support of his argument, Gril notes that this title does not appear in either of the inventories (the *Fihris* and the *Ijāza*) compiled by Ibn al-‘Arabī of his own writings; moreover, two of the oldest manuscripts of the *Tadhkira* bear an attribution to a certain ‘Abd al-Ṣamad al-Qādirī (Gril 1984, 338). In her thoroughly-researched biography of Ibn al-‘Arabī, Addas reiterates and concurs with Gril’s judgment that the work has been falsely attributed to the Shaykh (Addas 1993, 326).

A more credible obstacle to the portrayal of Ibn ‘Arabī as tolerant of non-Muslims—Christians, in particular—is posed by a letter written by Ibn al-‘Arabī in 1212 CE to the Seljuk king Kaykā’ūs I (who ruled from 1211 to 1220). Addas characterizes Ibn al-‘Arabī’s correspondence with Kaykā’ūs as “more reminiscent of a father’s correspondence to his son than of a subject’s letters to his overlord” (Addas 1993, 234). In one letter, which Ibn al-‘Arabī records in the *Futūḥāt* (IV 547), the Shaykh offers the king advice on how to treat Christian subjects, and this letter is sometimes cited as evidence of limitations to Akbarian tolerance.

Addas quotes the challenging section of the letter:

The worst thing that Islam and Muslims suffer in your realm is the sound of bells, the manifestation of infidelity, the affirmation of an associate of God, and the disappearance of the rules instituted by the Prince of Believers, ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, regarding *dhimmīs*: namely that neither in the city itself nor in the surrounding regions are they to build new churches, monasteries or hermitages, that they are not to repair any of these buildings if they become dilapidated, that they are not to prevent any Muslim from being given food and shelter in their churches for a period of up to three days, that they are not to hide spies, that they are not to conspire in secret against Muslims, that they are not to teach the Qur’ān to their children, and that they are not to make public show of their polytheism. (Addas 1993, 235)

Various assessments of this letter have been registered by scholars of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s work. For Asín Palacios, the letter is consistent with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s “political hatred for the Christians” (Asín Palacios 1931, 97; quoted in Addas 1993, 234); more recently Muhammad Legenhausen (Legenhausen 1997) cites this letter in support of his portrait of Ibn al-‘Arabī as intolerant of non-Muslims. Addas’ own response (in opposition to Asín Palacios) brackets the letter by emphasizing the historical and political context in which it was written:

This attitude may seem shocking today, but for a man who considered himself the defender of the *sharī‘a* par excellence, entrusted by God with the mission of preserving it, it stems not from hatred but from a sincere concern to see the Sacred Law respected in every detail by everyone. Similarly, when he announces elsewhere that it is illicit for a Muslim to go to or stay in Jerusalem while the city is governed by Christians, his guiding motive is the desire to spare Islam and Muslims from humiliation. But, these considerations apart, we must also remember that Ibn ‘Arabī wrote the letter at a time

when Christianity represented a threat to Islam. While day by day the Spaniards gained more ground in Andalusia, and in the very same year that the letter was written (609/1212) annihilated the Muslims at Las Navas de Tolosa, in the East the Franks still occupied a part of the *dār al-islām* and Byzantium remained a power to be contended with. The man who addressed his words to Kaykā'ūs was not someone full of hatred: he was a Muslim who was quite justifiably disturbed by the conquests being made by the Christian armies, and was afraid of possible collusion with those armies on the part of their autochthonous co-religionists. (Addas 1993, 235-236)

Nasr Abu Zayd also emphasizes this historical context; but while Abu Zayd is generally sympathetic with Ibn al-'Arabī, he appears less ready than Addas to excuse Ibn al-'Arabī for what Abu Zayd views as a failing. Ernst observes:

Abu Zayd further criticized Ibn 'Arabi for indulging in a triumphalist reading of history, according to which political or military victory signifies divine approval...Ibn 'Arabi offered no explanation for the defeat of Muslims by non-Muslims, and he remained impatient in his rebukes to heedless kings. Thus there remains a tension between spiritual experience and its historical and political context. Moreover, one should not overlook Ibn 'Arabi's insistence that his own age was an apocalyptic one, in which the Mahdi and his helpers were desperately awaited... Nevertheless, elaborate fantasies of apocalypse still require explanation, and Abu Zayd remained unsatisfied with Ibn 'Arabi's political views on the non-Muslims of his day. (Ernst 2015, 10-11)

Multiple responses can be given to the apparent tension between this letter and Ibn al-'Arabī's statements elsewhere in favor of religious pluralism. Alongside Addas' defense of the letter and Abu Zayd's disappointment in the letter, one might simply call the letter a contradiction and an anomaly, counterbalanced by the far greater weight of Ibn al-'Arabī's numerous expressions to the contrary effect. A fuller response might emphasize the distinction between Ibn al-'Arabī's political views and his theological views, which appear to be somewhat insulated from one another in his thought. This distinction will be drawn more sharply in Chapter 3, where we will see Ibn al-'Arabī articulating an outward orientation of conformity to the Islamic Law while internally maintaining conformity to a different Law and a more accommodating attitude towards Christianity. Yet in identifying this accommodating attitude, we will qualify this accommodation. To argue, in the coming chapters, that Ibn al-'Arabī

accommodated the teachings of Jesus as expressed in the Gospels (especially the Gospel of John), this ought not to be confused with a receptivity to conventional Christian theology. We must not only draw a distinction in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitudes between Christians and Christian theology, but also a distinction between Christian theology and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s idiosyncratic understandings of Johannine doctrines. As we will see, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theological views ran against the grain of traditional Christian theology, even while he appropriated some of the doctrines and terminology of Christian theology.

At the same time, it will be evident that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s adoption of Johannine doctrines, as he understood them, ran against the grain of conventional Islamic theology. While highlighting the tension between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views and those of Christians, it would be a mistake to take this as evidence that Ibn al-‘Arabī resided securely in the fold of conventional Islamic orthodoxy. Ibn al-‘Arabī frequently exhibits a comprehensiveness and accommodation that stretches beyond the conventional limits of Islam. The *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt* offer an abundance of evidence of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s impulse for inclusiveness (in terms of diverse religious ideas, though not necessarily inclusiveness towards practitioners of diverse religions), and this evidence cannot be dismissed. But from another point of view, this inclusiveness, properly recognized, distanced Ibn al-‘Arabī from conventional theology on both the Christian and the Islamic sides. This inclusiveness was less a gesture of reconciliation and harmonization than a gesture marking out Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own *sui generis* stance, an inclusiveness that, in effect, amounted to self-exclusion from all available conventional positions.

Having addressed the *Tadhkirat* and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s letter to Kaykā’ūs, a third consideration should be taken up with respect to the limitations of Akbarian tolerance. At times, passages are plucked from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works—as in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s introduction to the

Futūḥāt—that might appear to endorse the conventional Islamic view that Islam is the only acceptable religious path. To understand such passages, these should be contextualized in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s taxonomy and hierarchy of expressions of faith. In his Introduction to the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn al-‘Arabī maps various creedal stances (‘*aqā’id*), assigning them to the following categories: 1) “the credo of the masses (‘*awwām*) among the people of outward submission (*islām*) and unthinking compliance (*taqlīd*), and the people of inquiry (i.e. *kalām*);” 2) “the credo of ‘the educated youth;” 3) “the credo of the elite among the people of God, the ‘verifiers’ (*muḥaqqiqūn*) among the people of the path of God, the people of (spiritual) unveiling and finding” (Morris 1993, 182). The point in drawing attention to this taxonomy is to caution the reader against taking every creedal statement recorded by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s as representing his own belief. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statements (including apparently polemic statements) are often contradictory, and the Shaykh alerts us to the fact that he speaks on multiple levels and presents multiple perspectives. It seems that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own perspective belongs to none of the three creedal categories outlined above, but to a fourth creedal category, the credo of the spiritual elite:

But as for presenting the credo of the quintessence (of the spiritual elite), I have not given it in detail in any one place, because of the profundities it contains. But I have given it scattered throughout the chapters of this book, exhaustively and clearly explained—but in different places, as we’ve mentioned. So those on whom God has bestowed the understanding of these things will recognize them and distinguish them from other matters. (Morris 1993, 82)

To gain a handle on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s beliefs, the reader is challenged to persist in reading diligently and follow the threads of his thought through the *Futūḥāt* at large; his statements of conventionally orthodox statements gathered under the credo of the masses should be read in dialogue with and in distinction from his scattered statements of the credo of the elite.

Much of the discussion in this chapter recounts debates over the orthodox or unorthodox status of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views. To be clear, it is not our place in this study to make normative

judgments about orthodoxy. Moreover, we are wary of inhibiting our inquiry by harnessing it to defenses of Ibn al-‘Arabī against accusations of heresy; we are suspicious of readings that force him into Procrustean notions of orthodoxy or resort (as we have seen above) to bowdlerized readings of the Shaykh’s texts that effectively censor his more scandalous statements. In addition, we will not undertake historical analyses of Islamic or Christian definitions of “orthodoxy.” While refraining from making normative judgments about the “orthodoxy” or “unorthodoxy” of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views, we will prefer the term “unconventional” to identify the originality and nonconformity of his views—that is, to identify the ways in which those views lie within or without the mainstream of either Islamic or Christian thought.

When we identify Ibn al-‘Arabī as unconventional, we should note that this mirrors the Shaykh’s own self-understanding. He defined himself as a non-conformist. For instance, in a dialogue with God recorded in his *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries*, Ibn al-‘Arabī openly admits his relationship to Islam as defying conformity:

Then He said to me, “Are you a Muslim by mere tradition or do you have your own standard of judgment?”

I answered, “I am not a [blind] imitator nor do I follow my own [rational] opinion.”
(Ibn ‘Arabī 2001, 24)⁵⁸

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s self-description is disruptive to both orthodoxy and reason. The latter response, “nor do I follow my own [rational] opinion,” is self-evident in the dialogue itself: Ibn al-‘Arabī claims to be the recipient of special revelations and visionary encounters, including conversations with God. He frames his source of knowledge as transcending rational argumentation. The former claim is more relevant to the present inquiry: Ibn al-‘Arabī is, by his

⁵⁸ In a comment on this passage, Sitt al-‘Ajam bint al-Nafis writes (in a commentary composed less than half a century after Ibn al-‘Arabī’s death): “Neither the blind imitators, nor those who follow their own rational judgment, succeed in discovering the truth. The negative response to both possibilities indicates that this spiritual station of the contemplations, which comes after entry into the station of knowledge and the unveiling of the mysteries beyond the comprehension by the intellect, is above erudition and argument.” (Ibn ‘Arabī 2001, 27)

own account, no “Muslim by mere tradition.” He understands his own views as bold, unprecedented, and highly idiosyncratic. As we proceed, we will understand Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings in the same light.

The scope of our present study is, in any case, comparatively restricted in its ambitions. The main thrust of our study is not to address Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitudes towards religious diversity in general, but to inquire more narrowly into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitudes towards Jesus and Christianity. In our next chapter we will detail the ways in which Ibn al-‘Arabī demonstrates in his autobiographical narratives a strong attachment to Jesus. This attachment dates from his first steps on the spiritual path, under the guidance of his first teacher, Abū’l-‘Abbās al-‘Uryabī. A focal point of the chapter will be the meaning of *‘Īsawī*, a term that Ibn al-‘Arabī applies both to ‘Uryabī and to himself. In addition, we will take up the question of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s direct familiarity with the New Testament, and will offer illustrations of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s adoption and revision of concepts from Christian theology, particularly the concept of the Trinity. This will provide a foundation on which we can build, in the succeeding chapters, an Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John, endeavoring to infer from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings how he might have read that Gospel.

Chapter 3

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Relationships to Jesus and Christianity

3.1. The Meaning of ‘*Īsawī*

...*I am the heir of the Hāshimite and of the Messiah.* — *Ibn al-‘Arabī, Futūḥāt I 244*

We might gain a better understanding of Ibn ‘Arabī’s attitudes towards Jesus and Christianity by examining his use of the Arabic term ‘*īṣawī*, including his notion of the “‘*Īsawī* saint”⁵⁹(*walī ‘īṣawī*), and giving special attention to the role that this notion plays in his autobiography. This adjective ‘*īṣawī*, (and, by extension, a substantive for those described by this adjective) meaning “related to Jesus,” from the Arabic form of the name “Jesus,” ‘*Īsā*. It has been variously translated as “Christic” (by, for example, Claude Addas and Caner Dagli) or “Christ-like” (by Titus Burckhardt and Michel Chodkiewicz). One might also coin the term “Jesuic” to translate this word, adhering more closely to its etymological root. We will usually leave the word untranslated.

To begin our review of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of this word, we will consider the titles of the chapters of the *Fuṣūṣ*. Each of the twenty-seven chapters is named after a prophet.⁶⁰ The chapter titles follow a standard formula, including the adjectival form of the prophet’s name, as in, “The

⁵⁹ In the context of Sufism, the Arabic word *walī* is perhaps most frequently translated into English as “saint.” Some have employed alternative translations to adhere more closely to the original Arabic meaning, such as “friend of God” or “near to God” (Geoffroy 2010, 37) or Michael Sells’ neologism, “godfriend” (Sells 1996, 8). The notion of *walāya* (“sainthood”) was introduced by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 932 CE): “According again to Hujwīrī, it was actually al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī who in the ninth century introduced the term into the technical vocabulary of Sufism, where it had not previously existed” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 27). Tirmidhī’s writings on *walāya* can be found in Bernd Radtke and John O’Kane’s *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Mysticism* (Radtke and O’Kane 1996).

⁶⁰ These figures are of course acknowledged as prophets in the Islamic tradition; not all of these figures are traditionally recognized as “prophets” by Jews and Christians.

Signet of the Wisdom of Divinity in the Adamic Saying (*kalima ādamiyyaa*)”⁶¹ or “The Signet of the Wisdom of Odd-Numberedness in the Muhammadan Saying (*kalima muḥammadiyyaa*)”⁶². Thus we encounter the term ‘Īsawī in the title of the chapter on Jesus, “The Signet of the Wisdom of Prophethood in the Christic Word (*kalima ‘īsawiyaa*)”⁶³. The expression “Christic Word (*kalima ‘īsawiyaa*)” also appears in the body of the chapter:

When the Real confronted this Christic word [*al-kalima al-‘īsawiyaa*] in the station of *That we may know*—and He does know—He asked it whether what had been attributed to it was true or not, although he already knew whether or not this thing had happened. He said, *Didst thou say unto men, “Take me and my mother as divinities apart from God?”* (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 169; the Arabic in brackets is inserted by us)

In this sentence (an illustration of the complicated syntax typical of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writing style), it is no easy matter to identify the referent of this “Christic word.” Does it indicate something said *by* Jesus, does it indicate something said *about* Jesus, or is the Christic word Jesus himself, insofar as he is God’s Word? We will return to this question in Chapter 5. In the meantime, we will note the flexibility and ambiguity of the term ‘Īsawī.

Our glance at the chapter titles of the *Fuṣūṣ* prompts a question: was Jesus, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, just one prophet among the twenty-six others to whom he devoted chapters; or did the Shaykh grant Jesus a special status and prominence in his attitude towards the prophets? We must also ask: when Ibn al-‘Arabī wrote of Jesus, did he think of Jesus in strictly Islamic terms

⁶¹ Various translations as “De la Sagesse Divine (*al-hikmat al-ilāhiyyah*) dans le Verbe Adamique” (Burckhardt), “The Wisdom of Divinity in the Word of Adam” (Austin), “The Ringstone of the Divine Wisdom in the Word of Adam” (Dagli), and “The bezel of the wisdom of divinity exists in the essence of Adam” (Abrahamov).

⁶² Various translations as “De la Sagesse de la Singularité (*al-hikmat al-fardiyyah*) dans le Verbe de Mohammed” (Burckhardt), “The Wisdom of Singularity in the Word of Muhammad” (Austin), “The Ringstone of the Wisdom of Uniqueness in the Word of Muhammad” (Dagli), “The bezel of the wisdom of uniqueness exists in the essence of Muḥammad” (Abrahamov), “Elevation/Prophecy Wisdom in a Word of Jesus” (Twinch, Clark, and Hirtenstein).

⁶³ Various translations as “De la Sagesse de la Prophétie (*al-hikmat an-nubūwiyyah*) dans le Verbe de Jésus (*‘Aīssā*)” “The Wisdom of Prophecy in the Word of Jesus” (Austin), “The Ringstone of the Wisdom of Prophethood in the Word of Jesus” (Dagli), and “The bezel of the prophetic wisdom exists in the essence of Jesus” (Abrahamov).

(referring to the Jesus of the Qurʾān and Islamic sayings), or did he also extend his interest to the Jesus of the Gospels? In this chapter, we will observe that, speaking biographically and chronologically, Ibn al-ʿArabī was first an ʿĪṣawī, and his more comprehensive orientation towards other prophets (with the exception of Muḥammad) was secondary. We will consider the possibility that this expansive, pluralistic outlook came afterwards not only chronologically, but also as a consequence of his youthful attachment to Jesus—that this attachment might have been a catalyst and motivator for extending his embrace to all prophets. In other words, having embraced and given primacy to Jesus in his youth, Ibn al-ʿArabī may have taken a first step towards a more comprehensive embrace of pre-Islamic prophets and the religions they brought. We will suggest in this chapter that Ibn al-ʿArabī’s attraction to Jesus might have fostered an interest in Christianity (at least rhetorically), and that this might have motivated him to articulate a more general theory of religious pluralism.

In his book *Seal of the Saints*, Michel Chodkiewicz has written perhaps the most thorough discussion thus far of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion of the saint (*walī*), someone singled out as a special “inheritor” from a particular prophet. While we will focus in this section on the ʿĪṣawī saint, who inherits from Jesus, a topic to which Ibn al-ʿArabī devotes a whole chapter in the *Futūḥāt*,⁶⁴ a saint can inherit from any of a number of prophets; Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks of saints in his lifetime who inherited from various saints, such as the Mūsawī saint Abū Yaʿzā, who inherited from Moses.⁶⁵ There are saints “even combining in himself several of these

⁶⁴ Chapter 36 of the *Futūḥāt*; Chodkiewicz spends Chapter 5 of *Seal of the Saints* attempting to sort out “the sometimes disconcerting order in which Ibn ʿArabī discusses the various aspects of the subject” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 75).

⁶⁵ Ibn al-ʿArabī writes in *Futūḥāt* IV 50-51: “When Moses returned from his Lord, God clothed his face in light as a sign of the authenticity of that which he declared; and so fierce was this light that no one could look on him without being blinded, so that he had to cover his face with a veil in order that those who looked in his face would not be taken ill when they saw him. Our teacher Abū Yaʿzā in the Maghrib was [a] Moses-like [type of saint] (*mūsawī al-*

‘inheritances’” (Addas 1993, 277); Ibn al-‘Arabī himself falls into this category, inheriting from different prophets at different times in his life.

Speaking generally of saints, Chodkiewicz remarks:

The quality of being heir to a prophet...essentially means conforming to the particular spiritual type represented by that prophet. Yet the relationship which is established between the saint and the prophet who is his model is not a vague ‘patronage’, but may rather be compared to the transmission of a genetic inheritance. It confers a precise and visible character on the behaviour, virtues and graces of the *walī*. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 75)

With respect to the behavior of ‘Īsawī saints, “whatever religion they may profess, [their behavior is] remarkable for its compassion and gentleness” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 80). ‘Īsawī saints are also credited with the power to walk on water (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 79) and other Christ-like miraculous abilities:

They can also be distinguished by a spiritual energy (*himma*) which operates effectively on men and on things—a probable allusion to the power of Jesus (Qur’ān 3:49) to heal the blind and the lepers and to bring the dead back to life. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 80)

Crucial to our discussion is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s articulation (in *Futūḥāt* I 223) of his own ‘Īsawī orientation at the moment of his initiation into the spiritual path by his first master: “My master Abū’l-‘Abbās al-‘Uryabī was Christic (*‘īṣawī*) at the end of his life, whereas I was at the beginning” (Addas 1993, 51). The same passage notes that, as Ibn al-‘Arabī progressed along the spiritual path over the course of his life, he eventually inherited from all the prophets: “I was then taken to the solar *mūsawī* illumination. Then I was taken to Hūd, and after that to all the prophets. Thereafter I was taken to Muḥammad” (Hirtenstein 1999, 68). Acknowledging the sweep and comprehensiveness of Ibn al-‘Arabī inheritance, we emphasize his points of departure and destination on this path; the ‘Īsawī and Muḥammadī orientations that demarcate Ibn al-

wirth), and God had bestowed on him the same miraculous sign” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 74). Although Ibn al-‘Arabī refers to Abū Ya‘zā as “our teacher,” Ibn al-‘Arabī says later in the same passage that he had never met him.

‘Arabī’s life were especially influential in giving definition and form to his distinctive theological outlook. With respect to the starting point, Addas writes:

The fact that Ibn ‘Arabī defines himself as having been a ‘Christic’ type in his youth is hardly surprising in view of the major role which Jesus clearly played at the start of his spiritual vocation. And yet, as we will soon discover, this relationship with the Son of Mary also had another aspect. For the moment it is enough to remember that, through the intermediary of his first teacher who was also ‘Christic’, Ibn ‘Arabī was under the influence of Jesus. (Addas 1993, 51)

To understand this ‘Īsawī starting point, we will need to look more closely at Abū’l-‘Abbās al-‘Uryabī.⁶⁶

Addas describes ‘Uryabī as “the first *murshid* whom Ibn ‘Arabī frequented on the Path” (Addas 1993, 49), whom Ibn al-‘Arabī met when he was around twenty years old. In the *Rūḥ al-quds*, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reports that he first met ‘Uryabī “when I was just beginning to acquire knowledge of the Way... He knew, immediately he met me, the spiritual need that had brought me to see him.” (Austin 1971, 63). Chodkiewicz makes the general observation, “The *‘īsawī* saint sees the best in all things” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 80), and this is true of ‘Uryabī in particular. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, ‘Uryabī stated, “God has told me that in every soul weighed in the balance on the Last Day there is something worth saving from the fire” (Austin 1971, 64)—perhaps anticipating Ibn al-‘Arabī’s later view that all humans are destined for felicity in the afterlife (as we saw in the previous chapter).

Ibn al-‘Arabī writes of ‘Uryabī with great reverence, crediting him with the extraordinary perspicacity and “power of Concentration” (*himma*) typical of the ‘Īsawī saint:

Although he was an illiterate countryman, unable to write or use figures, one had only to hear his expositions on the doctrine of Unity to appreciate his spiritual standing. By means of his power of Concentration he was able to control men’s thoughts, and by his words he could overcome the obstacles of existence. (Austin 1971, 63)

⁶⁶ Austin (Austin 1971, 63) and Hirtenstein (Hirtenstein 1999, 68) call him al-‘Uryanī; Addas (Addas 1993, 49) and Chodkiewicz (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 77) call him al-‘Uryabī. We will follow the lead of Addas and Chodkiewicz.

In return, ‘Uryabī recognized his disciple’s loyalty. Ibn al-‘Arabī reports that ‘Uryabī addressed him with these words:

Welcome to a filial son, for all my children have betrayed me and spurned my blessings except you who have always acknowledged and recognized them; God will not forget that. (Austin 1971, 65)

While Addas emphasizes ‘Uryabī as Ibn al-‘Arabī’s first teacher, his *murshid al-awwal* (Addas 1993, 61), she places equal emphasis on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s claim (in *Futūḥāt* III 341) that Jesus himself “was my first teacher, the master through whom I returned to God (*shaykhunā al-awwal alladhī raja ‘nā ‘alā yadayhi*); he is immensely kind towards me and does not neglect me even for an instant” (Addas 1993, 39). In *Futūḥāt* III 208, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes, “My master Abū l-‘Abbās al-‘Uryabī was ‘on the foot’ of Jesus (*‘alā qadam ‘Īsā*)” (Addas 1993, 51), and goes further in *Futūḥāt* I 365, declaring of ‘Uryabī, “It was said to our master, ‘You are Jesus the son of Mary’” (Addas 1993, 51, footnote 68). Thus, in Addas’ analysis, the assertion that ‘Uryabī was Ibn al-‘Arabī’s first teacher and the assertion that Jesus was Ibn al-‘Arabī’s first teacher are inseparable and equivalent.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s initiation by Jesus was not only mediated by ‘Uryabī; according to his account in *Futūḥāt* IV 172, he also met Jesus and other prophets in dream visions:

When I returned to this Path, it was accomplished through a dream-vision (*mubashshira*) under the guidance of Jesus, Moses and Muhammad. (Hirtenstein 1999, 53)

In *Futūḥāt* II 49, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes of Jesus:

I have had many meetings with him in visions, and at his hands I turned (to God). He prayed for me that I be established in the religious life (*dīn*), both in this world and in the hereafter, and he called me beloved (*ḥabīb*). He ordered me to practise renunciation (*zuhd*) and detachment (*tajrīd*). (Hirtenstein 1999, 53)

According to Chapter 10 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-‘Arabī experienced a crucial vision in 1190 CE in which he met all the prophets:

Know that when the Real showed me and made me witness the identities of His Messengers and His Prophets, peace be upon them, those givers of glad-tidings, from Adam to Muḥammad, may God bless all of them and grant them peace, in a locus of witnessing I was made to occupy in Cordoba in the year five-hundred and eighty-six, not one within that group spoke to me except Hūd, upon him be peace. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 111)⁶⁷

Beyond mere visions, Ibn al-‘Arabī notes in *Futūḥāt* IV 77 that he developed a personal, embodied companionship with a handful of prophets, including Jesus:

I became intimate with [some of the] prophets, Muhammad, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Hūd and David, while with the rest it was a matter of vision, not company. (Hirtenstein 1999, 86)

As we have noted, *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36 informs us that, while ‘Uryabī, was an ‘Īsawī at the end of his life, Ibn al-‘Arabī was an ‘Īsawī at the beginning his spiritual path and arrived, at the end, as a Muḥammadī (*Futūḥāt* I 629); we should not, however, understand this trajectory to a Muḥammadī endpoint as implying that he left behind his special commitment to Jesus. We should take into account the biographical detail that, after years of traveling, Ibn al-‘Arabī settled in Damascus to live out the last days of his life; in Jaume Flaquer’s view, the Shaykh may have chosen this city as his final residence because Damascus is predicted in the Islamic tradition to be the site of Jesus’ descent at his Second Coming (Flaquer 2015, 1). We would argue that Ibn al-‘Arabī defined the whole of his spiritual path in terms of these two brackets, ‘Īsawī and Muḥammadī, holding and shaping the whole of his doctrinal outlook.

⁶⁷ In another vision, in 1198 CE, Ibn al-‘Arabī embarked upon an ascension through the seven heavens, modeled after Muḥammad’s *mi‘rāj*, in which he encountered eight prophets who preceded Muḥammad: Adam in the first heaven, Jesus and John in the second, Joseph in third, Idrīs in the fourth, Aaron in the fifth, Moses in the sixth, and Abraham in the seventh; see James Winston Morris’ two-part article, “The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn ‘Arabī and the Mi‘rāj” (Morris 1987a; Morris 1987b). Elsewhere Ibn al-‘Arabī associates of these prophets with the seven planets (Adam with the Moon, Jesus with Mercury, Joseph with Venus, Idrīs with the Sun, Aaron and John with Mars, Moses with Jupiter, and Abraham with Saturn); see Pablo Beneito and Stephen Hirtenstein’s introduction to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *wird* in *Seven Days of the Heart* (Ibn ‘Arabī 2000). This was part of an enduring cosmic organizing scheme for Ibn al-‘Arabī; see William C. Chittick’s *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Chittick 1998, xxxi),

Ibn al-‘Arabī repeatedly speaks of his prophetic inheritance as a dual heritage. Among the small circle of prophets with whom Ibn al-‘Arabī enjoyed special intimacy, the privileged status of Jesus and Muḥammad is highlighted in *Futūḥāt* I 244:

I am, without any doubt, the Seal of Sainthood
In that I am the heir of the Hāshimite and of the Messiah.
(Chodkiewicz 1993b, 129)

As Chodkiewicz clarifies, “The ‘Hāshimite’ obviously means the Prophet Muḥammad, and the Messiah is one of the Qur’ānic names for Jesus...” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 129). The expression “the Seal of Sainthood” is a challenging concept that recurs in numerous places in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings. Chodkiewicz has carried out an impressive task tracing its tortuous and elusive trajectory in those writings. We will sum up Chodkiewicz’ conclusions: on the model of the traditional understanding that Muḥammad was the Seal of the Prophets, after whom there will be no further prophets, Ibn al-‘Arabī developed the notion of the Seal of the Saints, after whom there will be no more saints. It is dauntingly difficult, however, to pin down the identification of the Seal of the Saint; in fact, there are two: Ibn al-‘Arabī himself is the Seal of Muḥammadī Sainthood, after whom no further saints will inherit from Muḥammad in particular, whereas Jesus, at the end of time, will become the Seal of Universal Sainthood (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 128-140). Thus, as Chodkiewicz underscores, Ibn al-‘Arabī and Jesus perform analogous roles.

Chodkiewicz buttresses this point by quoting a poem from Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Dīwān* (p. 259):

I was created to assist the religion of God—
But the assistance comes from Him, as it is laid down in the Books—
For I come of Ḥātimī’s lineage, and so I am generous
And of Ṭā’ī and of ‘Arabī—ancestor after ancestor.
...I am the Seal of all who follow him [i.e. the Prophet Muḥammad]
...Jesus, I say this without lying, is the Seal of those who went before.
(Chodkiewicz 1993b, 130)

Having established multiple points of contact and the strong bond between Ibn al-‘Arabī and Jesus, we must ask whether the Jesus privileged in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding should be read strictly as a Muslim Jesus (the Jesus of the Qur’ān), or whether Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion of Jesus extends to include the Jesus of the Gospels. On the side of emphasizing the Muslim Jesus, we should take into consideration a remark by Chodkiewicz. Citing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Risalat al-Anwar*, Chodkiewicz writes:

Ibn ‘Arabī also warns his readers against the misunderstandings to which the behaviour of a *walī* may give rise: for example, his special relationship with a pre-Islamic prophet may cause him, on the point of death, to call on the name of Moses or Jesus, and thus make him wrongly suspected of having become a Jew or a Christian. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 81)

The apologetic tone of this observation is evident, and we should keep in mind the history of Sufis who have been condemned to death due (in part) to suspicions that their affiliation with Jesus constituted apostasy. In this context, Chodkiewicz draws an analogy between Ibn ‘Arabī’s notion of the ‘Īsawī saint and the famous martyr Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922 CE), whose execution has inspired comparisons with the crucifixion of Jesus.⁶⁸ Chodkiewicz also cites the example of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī:⁶⁹

Another easily recognized ‘*īsawī* saint, similar in many ways to Ḥallāj, is ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī, a disciple of Aḥmad Ghazālī. He was accused of being a *zindīq* (heretic) and of laying claim to the dignity of a prophet, and was hanged at Hamadhān in 525/1131 at the age of thirty-three—the same age as Jesus, and the age, according to one *ḥadīth*, of all the chosen people in Paradise; and later Sufī writers have often said of him: ‘*īsawī ‘l-mashrab wa maṣṣūrī ‘l-maslak*, ‘His source was Jesus, his way was the way of Mansur (al-Ḥallāj).’ (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 81-82)

Although we can recognize Ibn al-‘Arabī’s circumspection in his defense of saints who call out on the name of Moses or Jesus—the kind of discretion that spared Ibn al-‘Arabī the

⁶⁸ For a thorough account of Ḥallāj’s death, see Louis Massignon’s *La Passion d'al Hallâj* (Massignon 1922).

⁶⁹ Hamid Dabashi has written an extensive study of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī, *Truth and Narrative* (Dabashi 1999).

violent death suffered by Ḥallāj and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt—he did not entirely avoid scandal. In the generations following the death of Ibn al-‘Arabī, some Muslim jurists accused him of being a *zindīq* (Knysh 1999, 75). This includes Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), whom we encountered in the last chapter; he detected in the Shaykh’s writings a strong sympathy for Christianity. In a sweeping denunciation, Ibn Taymiyya clusters Ibn al-‘Arabī together with the poet ‘Afif al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 1291) in his accusation, as recounted in Alexander D. Knysh’s words:

...Ibn ‘Arabi’s teaching, in Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion, resembles the doctrine of mainstream Christian theology, especially the Melkites, who hold that divine and human natures form one substance with two different hypostases (*uqnuman*), he likens al-Tilimsani to the Jacobites (Monophysites), who posit that divine nature assumes human characteristics (*yatadarra*) in the person of Christ. On the whole, both the Christian theologians and the supporters of unificationism share one thing in common: their argumentation throws them into the state of permanent perplexity and confusion (*hayra*), which Ibn ‘Arabi indeed continually invoked in his writings. (Knysh 1999, 95)⁷⁰

We will recall that accusations against Ibn al-‘Arabī did not wait until after his death; he attracted scandal during his life upon the publication of his *Tarjumān*. We will also recall that

⁷⁰ Ibn Taymiyya’s insinuation—that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines might owe something to Melkite theology (or at least to Islamic portrayals of Melkite theology)—might merit a sustained investigation. The *Radd* provides a brief (and antagonistic) sketch of the Melkites, presenting some features that resonate with features in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings. According to the *Radd*, for example, the human and divine natures are distinct in Jesus, but are united in the “Universal Human Being”, *al-insān al-kullī* (Chidiac 1939, 32); this notion is explained by the ninth-century Muslim skeptic, Abū ‘Isā al-Warraḡ, in these terms:

... [T]he Melkites claim that the Son united with *the* temporal human being... And when the Melkites say “*the* human being” they mean the substance which is common to all human individuals. This is because, according to them, the Son in fact united with the universal human, and not a particular, in order to save everyone, as they claim. The Melkites say: If it had united with one human being then it could only have intended to save this individual and not everyone. (Thomas 2013, 65)

One might recognize here an analogy to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion of the “Complete Human Being”, *al-insān al-kāmil*, which appears prominently in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 1 (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 6) and elsewhere. The *Radd* also attributes to the Melkites the notion that the Universal Man has no objective existence; Jesus’ relationship to the Universal Human Being exists only in the mind (*al-dhihn*) (Chidiac 1939, 32-33). This anticipates another key concept, alongside that of the Complete Human being, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 1: “Know that universal entities [*al-umūr al-kullīyya*], though not possessing existence in themselves, are still known and intelligible in the mind [*al-dhihn*]” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 8; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us). For a fuller account of the Melkites and their interactions with Muslims, see Sidney H. Griffith’s “The Melkites and the Muslims: The Qur’ān, Christology, and Arab Orthodoxy” (Griffith 2013b). For a thorough exploration of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of the Complete Human Being, see Masataka Takeshita’s dissertation, *Ibn ‘Arabi’s Theory of the Perfect Man and Its Place in the History of Islamic Thought* (Takeshita 1987).

Ibn al-‘Arabī added commentaries to the second and third recensions of the *Tarjumān* to rebut accusations that he had overstepped the line; again we see Ibn al-‘Arabī adopting an apologetic stance to deflect suspicion. Whereas in the instance of the *Tarjumān* the cause for scandal was the erotic *ḥayra* (perplexity) that colors of the odes rather than the odes’ theological *ḥayra*, Ibn al-‘Arabī has clearly been sensitized to criticism, and the perils indicated by the examples of Ḥallāj and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt might have prompted Ibn al-‘Arabī to veil his intentions on some occasions, while indulging in bolder utterances on others. We will discover, as we delve further into the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt* in the coming chapters, a mixture of guardedness and forthrightness in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theological expressions. As Ibn al-‘Arabī puts it in the *Fuṣūṣ*, he speaks “both in secret and openly” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 68).

The question still remains: was the Jesus to whom Ibn al-‘Arabī oriented himself at the start of the spiritual path (and, in many respects, remained oriented over the course of his life) strictly the Muslim Jesus, or did Ibn al-‘Arabī to enter into dialogue with the Jesus of the Christian Gospels? Commenting on the Shaykh’s discussion of those Sufis who have special relationships with Jesus or Moses, Zachary Markwith writes:

It is clear from the above passage that Sufis or other Muslims who take their sanctity from Jesus, Moses or another prophet do not leave the religion of Islam. We do not mean to imply that a Christian or Jew cannot attain sanctity through Christianity or Judaism, only that Ibn al-‘Arabī and other *‘Īṣawī* friends surveyed here reached this nearness to God through the spirituality of Islam, within which the prophets and luminaries of the Bible are also present and accessible. (Markwith 2015, 90-91)

Of course, there is no single Jesus for Muslims, as there is no single Jesus for Christians; there is a plurality and diversity of versions of Jesus on both sides. For instance, some Sufis have gone beyond the Jesus of the Qur’ān to orient themselves towards the allegorized “Jesus of one’s being” (Markwith 2015, 86) or the “Jesus of the heart” (Lewisohn 1995, 86). The point is, when some Sufis fashion an intimate relationship with an internal Jesus, this does not necessarily

imply a withdrawal from or a venture beyond their Islamic framework. Yet if we limit ourselves to Markwith's observation, we risk oversimplifying Ibn al-ʿArabī's relationship to Jesus. In our view, Ibn al-ʿArabī regarded his relationship with Jesus as one that pointed beyond the confines of his Islamic home. We would suggest that Ibn al-ʿArabī consciously negotiated a personal understanding of Jesus that encompassed elements of both the Christian and the Muslim Jesus. Our hope is to lend support to this suggestion by engaging in an Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John in the coming chapters of our study. Prior to embarking on this commentary, we will take into account three additional considerations.

First, to return to ʿUryabī and his pivotal role as a catalyst in Ibn al-ʿArabī's youth, we should note a significant event that brought ʿUryabī into direct contact with Christianity. In Ibn al-ʿArabī's sketch of his teacher, he includes the following details:

Once he was taken captive, along with others, by the Christians. He knew that this would happen before it took place and he accordingly warned the members of the caravan in which he was travelling that they would all be taken captive on the next day. The very next morning, as he had said, the enemy ambushed them and captured every last man of them. To him, however, they showed great respect and provided comfortable quarters and servants for him. After a short time he arranged his release from the foreigners for the sum of five hundred dinars and travelled to our part of the country. When he had arrived it was suggested to him that the money be collected for him from two or three persons. To this he replied, 'No! I would only want it from as many people as possible...' (Austin 1971, 63-64)

A few details from this brief account might be highlighted. First, Ibn al-ʿArabī's narrative describes ʿUryabī as entering into captivity knowingly; second, that he delayed his release. Austin adds that in the more detailed version of the story reported in *al-Durrat al-fākhīrah*, ʿUryabī spent six months held in captivity by the Christians (Austin 1971, 64, footnote 1). The narrative does not tell us whether ʿUryabī understood himself to be an ʿĪsawī prior to or after his captivity (or, for that matter, whether the label "ʿĪsawī" was applied to ʿUryabī by himself or only by Ibn al-ʿArabī).

It is tempting to speculate that there might have been a connection between ‘Uryabī’s firsthand exposure to Christianity while in captivity and his strong affiliation with Jesus. One might also wonder what knowledge of Christianity he might have acquired and conveyed to his student. However far we might speculate in this direction, we should keep in mind that the teachings ‘Uryabī offered to Ibn al-‘Arabī would have been merely oral in form, because ‘Uryabī was illiterate (Austin 1971, 63).⁷¹ While ‘Uryabī was a forceful source of inspiration and played a formative role in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s education, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s lettered education had to come from other sources. In the next section of the present chapter we will take up the question of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s direct familiarity with the texts of the Christian Gospels. The most we can say here is that ‘Uryabī was a Muslim who was not insulated from contact with Christianity.

Second, we might consider the fact that Ibn al-‘Arabī applies the term “‘Īsawī” not only to certain Muslim saints, but also to the first disciples of Jesus (Hakim 2002, 26).⁷² In the latter case, the term designates those among the first disciples of Jesus still living among us (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 75). Chodkiewicz says that these long-lived disciples

are numbered among the saints of the Muḥammadan community, even though the content of the Revelation brought by the Prophet did not reach them in the ordinary way... The existence of such beings is the reason why the Prophet forbade the killing of monks

⁷¹ This is not to downplay the role of illiterate teachers as conveyers of spiritual knowledge. Muḥammad himself is traditionally considered to have been illiterate: “This word *ummī* is generally translated ‘illiterate’. In *Sūra* 7.157 and 158 Muḥammad calls himself ‘the gentile prophet’; but practically all Arab writers claim that he meant that he could not read or write...” (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 252, footnote 1) Moreover, Chodkiewicz writes:

The *ahl al-ṣuffa* of Medina, exemplary figures in the nascent community, were mendicants; the great saints of later hagiography were often, like their disciples, blacksmiths, cobblers, or even slaves. They were often poor and frequently unlettered. This is true equally of the most renowned figures of the ‘golden age’ in the third century of the Hegira as of Ibn ‘Arabī’s masters whom Asín Palacios, translating the *Rūḥ al-quds*, calls ‘santones’, and who were extraordinary men of God. The new element in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was not the different proportion of saints among the patricians and the plebeians, the learned and the ignorant. In any case, the saints, whether scholars or illiterate, are always those who possess knowledge, the true ‘*ulamā*’, not just miracle-workers and rain-makers. This knowledge, in fact, is their most essential feature. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 13)

⁷² Hakim cites *Futūḥāt* I 223 as well as *Futūḥāt* 3 380 OY.

(*ruhbān*), who live apart from other created beings to be alone with their Lord, and ordered that they should be left to devote themselves in peace to their worship. The duty of *tablīgh* or transmission of the faith, which is normally imposed on believers, does not need to be performed in their case, for they already possess ‘evidence which comes from their Lord’ (Qur’ān 6:57).

Ibn al-‘Arabī remarks that cases like these, in which God takes over the instruction of exceptional people..., resolve the apparent contradiction between the Qur’ānic affirmation that the Prophet is ‘sent to all men’ (7:158), and the indisputable fact that his message has not reached all of humanity. We can guess the significance that this elliptical statement has in relation to the esoteric status, in the Islamic economy, of the spiritual élites who by exoteric criteria belong to Revelations which have been abrogated. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 78-79)

Thus these still-living disciples of Jesus, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, bridge the divide between Christianity and Islam, standing in both categories. We will discuss them more fully later in this study.

Third, we might ask regarding the relationship between Christianity and Islam in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of Jesus: what is the status of the teachings of Jesus with respect to the Islamic Law (*sharī‘a*)? As we have noted in our first chapter, by the eleventh century Islamic scholars developed the doctrine of abrogation or supersession (*naskh*), according to which the divine Law of previous religions were rendered obsolete by the advent of Islam. As seen in our second chapter, Keller has insisted that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views are consistent with the doctrine of *naskh*. A passage from the *Futūḥāt* I 150 might appear to support Keller:

When Jesus descends at the end of time, he will judge only according to the Law revealed to Muḥammad. He is the Seal of the Saints. One of the favours accorded to Muḥammad was that the sainthood of his community and sainthood in general should be sealed by a noble Messenger Prophet... On the day of the Resurrection, Jesus will be present in two groups simultaneously: with the Messengers in as much as he is one of them, and with us [i.e. with the Muḥammadan community] in as much as he is a saint. This is a station with which God has honoured only him and Elijah, and no other prophet. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 120)

However, it would be too facile to read Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the relationship between Christian Law and Islamic Law as a matter of the latter nullifying the former. Rather,

Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to have a bifocal perspective on the relationship between the Law of Jesus and the Law of Muḥammad, a perspective that appears to permit both laws to coexist in the Seal of the Saints. Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī writes in the *Fuṣūṣ*:

Even though the Seal of the Saints follows the prescriptions of the Law brought by the Seal of the Messengers [Muḥammad], this does not impinge upon his station, nor does it contradict the position we hold; he [the Seal of the Saints] is lesser [than the Seal of the Messengers] from one point of view, just as he is more exalted from another. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 27; parenthetical insertions ours)

Ibn al-‘Arabī continues to develop this theme later in the same chapter, employing metaphors; the Seal of the Messengers (Muḥammad) is visualized as a brick placed into a final vacant space in a brick wall, while the Seal of the Saints is visualized as a pair of bricks made of gold and silver. Ibn al-‘Arabī returns to the theme of the Law:

As for the reason that necessitates his seeing two bricks, it is that he follows outwardly the law of the Seal of the Messengers. This is the place of the silver brick, that is, his manifest aspect and the rulings that he follows, but he receives from God the secret of what he follows in outward form, for he sees the reality *as it is*, and it must be that he sees it this way, while being inwardly the place of the golden brick. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 29; italics Dagli’s)⁷³

⁷³ Here the image seems not to be that of two bricks filling two gaps in the wall, but that of a silver brick filling a single gap in the wall, while the gold brick resides inside the silver brick. This image of the Seal of the Saints being externally silver while internally gold is reminiscent of an image in *The Guide of the Perplexed* of the Jewish teacher Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 CE). Born a generation ahead of Ibn al-‘Arabī in Andalusia, Maimonides composed *The Guide* in Arabic (transcribed in the Hebrew script). Ibn al-‘Arabī followed much of the same itinerary across North Africa as Maimonides. Ibn al-‘Arabī traveled from Fez—where Maimonides’ former residence is a short walk from the al-Azhar Mosque in Fez, the site where Ibn al-‘Arabī had a pivotal visionary experience in 1197 CE (Addas 1993, 149; Hirtenstein 1999, 114-115)—to Fuṣṭāṭ in Egypt—where Maimonides settled around 1168 CE and Ibn al-‘Arabī arrived in 1201-1202 (Addas 1993, 194), shortly before Maimonides’ death. The image in question is from Maimonides’ Introduction to the First Part of *The Guide*:

The Sage has said: *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings [maskiyyoth] of silver.* Hear now an elucidation of the thought that he has set forth... The Sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. Now see how marvellously this dictum describes a well-constructed parable. For he says that in a saying that has two meanings—he means an external and an internal one—the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning... When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold. The parables of the prophets, peace be on them, are similar. (Maimonides 1974, 11-12)

In other words, while the Seal of the Saints follows the Law of Muḥammad (the silver brick) externally, he follows some other Law (the golden brick) internally and secretly. As we have noted above, the title “Seal of the Saints” refers both to Jesus (the Seal of Universal Sainthood) and to Ibn al-‘Arabī himself (the Seal of Muḥammadī Sainthood). If this passage from the *Fuṣūṣ* refers to Jesus, it might explain how “at the end of time, [Jesus] will judge only according to the Law revealed to Muḥammad,” while internally remaining faithful to the Law he himself brought. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings on the Seal of the Saints are frequently evasive and ambiguous; it is possible that here he deliberately left this allusion open to include both Jesus and Ibn al-‘Arabī. If Ibn al-‘Arabī is referring to himself in the passage from the *Fuṣūṣ*,⁷⁴ this would allow Ibn al-‘Arabī to abide outwardly by Islamic Law by maintaining an inward commitment to another Law.

Here it is worth noting the dual orientation that Ibn ‘Arabī expresses in a passage from the *Fuṣūṣ*, cited in Chapter 2, where Ibn al-‘Arabī draws a distinction between the insightful Muslim’s practical allegiance to the Islamic Law by facing the *qibla* in prayer while harboring a recognition that *Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God*:

Now, although he knows this, in his manifest form and qualified state the perfect slave perseveres in turning his face in Prayer to the direction of the Sacred Mosque. He believes that God is present in his *qiblah*: while he is in Prayer, for it is one of the stations of the Face of the Real [*al-ḥaqq*]... The direction of the Mosque is included in this, for therein is the Face of God. But do not say that He is only there. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 116; bracketed Arabic inserted by us)

It might be worth noting, in addition, that Moses Maimonides’ son Abraham was accused of integrating Muslim practices with his Jewish practices (Chodkiewicz 1993, 11, footnote 24), as well as the fact that the Jews of Damascus (where Ibn al-‘Arabī eventually settled) studied *The Guide* under the direction of the thirteenth-century Sufi Ibn Hūd (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 83). We do not know if Ibn al-‘Arabī came into contact with *The Guide* or might have been influenced by this image, but there was certainly familiarity with *The Guide* in some Sufi circles in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s time and place.

⁷⁴ The latter interpretation is well supported by a vision Ibn al-‘Arabī reports in the *Futūḥāt* I 318-319: “In the top row a gold brick was missing, and in the row beneath a silver one. Then I saw myself placed in the gap made by these two missing bricks” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 128).

Recall, also from Chapter 2, Nābulusī's understanding religious pluralism in terms of the difference between the Islamic Law (*sharī'a*) and the truth (*ḥaqīqa*) (Akkach 2007, 110).

Nābulusī seems to be faithful to his master, Ibn al-ʿArabī, insofar as the Shaykh followed an internalized truth not evidenced by his external conformity to Islamic Law.

Did Ibn al-ʿArabī see himself as following the Law of Jesus internally? In a passage cited by Chodkiewicz from the *Futūḥāt* (a passage to which we will return in Chapter 5 of this study), we might find a concrete illustration of this point. In this passage, Ibn al-ʿArabī appears to be working out a complementary relationship between the two laws:

In fact, Jesus was not born of a male belonging to the human species, but of a Spirit who manifested himself (*tamaththul*) in a human form; that is why, in the community of Jesus the son of Mary more than in any other, the doctrine of the legitimacy of images predominates. Christians fashion representations of the divinity and turn towards them in order to worship, because the very existence of their prophet proceeded from a Spirit who clothed himself in a form; and so it is to this day in his community. But then came the Law of Muḥammad, which forbade symbolic representations. Now Muḥammad contains the essential reality of Jesus and the Law of Jesus is encompassed within his own. The Prophet thus tells us 'to worship God as though we were seeing Him', thereby causing Him to enter our imaginative faculty (*khayāl*). This is the only lawful mode of figurative representation for Muslims. But this representation, which is permissible and even commanded when it operates within the imagination, is prohibited in the sensible world, and it is forbidden to the Muḥammadan community to give God a sensible form. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 76)

Noteworthy is Ibn al-ʿArabī's allusion to the "the doctrine of the legitimacy of images," a

phrasing that does not appear to condemn the Christian practice of visually depicting God.

Moreover, while recognizing this practice as forbidden to Muslims, Ibn al-ʿArabī mitigates the antithesis between Christian practice and Islamic practice by interpreting Islamic practice as a modification rather than a nullification of Christian practice. The Christian practice of fabricating icons becomes, in Ibn al-ʿArabī's view, internalized rather than rejected. This recalls the words we quoted in the last chapter from the *Fuṣūṣ*: "The divinity of beliefs, crafted by he who

contemplates it, is his own production,” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 293), and, “The divinity of beliefs comes about through this making. They see naught but their own souls and what they have made therein” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 115). What initially looks like a general theory of religious belief looks, in this context, like a theory modeled directly after the Christian practice of making icons. Once again we suggest that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s expansive embrace of religious beliefs developed not only chronologically after his initial adherence to Jesus, but also that it developed as an extrapolation of this ‘Īsawī starting point. In any case, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, the Christian practice of making icons has been annexed, internalized, and validated, inasmuch as “Muḥammad contains the essential reality of Jesus and the Law of Jesus is encompassed within his own.”⁷⁵

To round out our question about the bearing of Christianity on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion of Jesus, we will take up two further considerations before undertaking an Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John. First, we will inquire into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s familiarity with the Christian scriptures. Second, we will explore one example of Ibn al-‘Arabī appropriating terminology from Christian theology, digesting and refashioning it to suit his idiosyncratic Islamic theology.

3.2. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Familiarity with the New Testament

Jesus emerged out of humility, so much so that it is prescribed for his community that...when one amongst them is struck on the cheek they should offer the other... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Fuṣūṣ Chapter 15

We must now inquire into the routes by which Ibn al-‘Arabī might have received his understanding of Christian doctrines. Two broad routes are readily suggested: 1) representations of Christian doctrines (accurate or not) in Islamic sources, such as the Qur’ān or the *ḥadīth*

⁷⁵ Incidentally, the present consideration might give us a new perspective on the letter from Ibn al-‘Arabī to King Kaykā’ūs, examined in our last chapter. Ibn al-‘Arabī has exhorted Kaykā’ūs not to permit Christians “to make public show of their polytheism;” in addition to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s political concerns, this exhortation might be influenced by his sense that the Law of Jesus should be internalized when situated in an Islamic context.

literature; 2) the Gospels themselves (either complete texts or extracted passages). As for the former route, representations of Christian doctrines in the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* literature were certainly familiar to Ibn al-ʿArabī and were employed in his discussions of the nature of Jesus in the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt*. While Muslims have used these sources to drive wedges between Islamic and Christian understandings of Jesus (and were depended upon as authorities to refute Christian doctrines), Ibn al-ʿArabī innovatively interpreted the Qur'ān (sometimes against its surface grain) in order to bring it closer in line with his understanding of the Jesus of the Gospels, even where the Gospel appears to be contradicted by the Qur'ān. Yet while Ibn al-ʿArabī implicitly treats the Christian Gospels as a counterbalance to the Qur'ān, this does not necessarily mean that he actually encountered the Gospels verbatim. One possibility is that he might have rhetorically set the Qur'ān against a merely notional Gospel, inferred and imagined based upon an understanding of Christianity filtered through traditional Islamic sources. We must turn to the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabī in order to see if there is any evidence that he might have actually held and read the pages of the New Testament directly.

We have shown, in Chapter 1 of this study, that a translation of the four Gospels into Arabic, the *Alexandrian Vulgate*, was widely circulated in Ibn al-ʿArabī's time, was even read by Muslims, and that this translation seems to have been favored by Muslim authors of commentaries on the Christian scriptures. While the *Alexandrian Vulgate* could have been read by Ibn al-ʿArabī, evidence of his familiarity with the Christian Bible is scarce. Our inquiry into this evidence will take into account a handful of passages in his writings that resemble quotations from the New Testament, beginning with an ostensible quotation, not from the Gospels, but from the Apostle Paul. This occurs in Chapter 339 of the *Futūḥāt*:

God is lauded only through His Most Beautiful Names. His names cannot be encompassed in knowledge, for we know that in the Garden there is *ʿWhat no eye has*

seen, what no ear has heard, and what has never passed into the heart of any mortal;
and we know that none of us knows ‘what comfort is laid up’ for us ‘secretly’ (Qur’an
32:17). (Chittick 1993, 104; italics ours)

This looks like a verbatim quotation from Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians:⁷⁶

But, as it is written,

*“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him,”*

God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the
depths of God. (1 Corinthians 2:9-10 RSV; italics ours)⁷⁷

Here we might imagine, at first glance, that Ibn al-‘Arabī has juxtaposed Paul’s words, referring
to “what God has prepared for those who love him,” with a verse from the Qur’ān:

No soul knows what comfort is laid up for them secretly, as a recompense for that they
were doing. (Qur’ān 32:17)

However, in a footnote to his English translation of this passage, Chittick identifies the
quotation as a *ḥadīth*; he observes that “[t]his hadith is not found in the usual sources, but it is
‘sound’ according to Ibn al-‘Arabi” (Chittick 1993, 120, footnote 46). We have been unable to
track down the original source of this *ḥadīth*; but we have found the same *ḥadīth* cited in
Ghazālī’s preface to his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (Ghazālī 1997, 1) and in Ibn
Tufyal’s *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* (Ibn Tufayl 2003, 149). Lenn Evan Goodman remarks on the
appearance of this *ḥadīth* in *Ḥayy*:

⁷⁶ Incidentally, it also bears some resemblance to Saying 17 of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas: “Jesus said, ‘I shall give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what not hand has touched, and what has not arisen in the human heart’” (Meyer 1992, 29).

⁷⁷ We might hear in Paul’s words an echo of Isaiah 64:4, which reads:

From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides thee,
who works for those who wait for him. (RSV)

This description of the beatific vision, emphasizing its ineffability, is adapted from a *ḥadīth qudsī* or “sacred tradition,” that is a saying of Muḥammad related on the authority of God himself. (Ibn Tufayl 2003, 219, footnote 205)

It is probable, then, that Ibn al-‘Arabī encountered Paul’s words only indirectly, as did Ghazālī and Ibn Tufayl: an Islamic appropriation of Paul’s words, trickled down to the Shaykh in the guise of a *ḥadīth*.

We must note the frequency with which apparent quotations or paraphrases from the New Testament quotations reappear in Islamic literature (such as *ḥadīth* collections), represented as native Islamic texts. This greatly complicates our inquiry into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s direct familiarity with Christian scriptures. Tarif Khalidi outlines a category of Islamized Gospel quotations:

The second group consists of sayings and stories that have a Gospel core but that have expanded or changed in such a way as to acquire a distinctly Islamic stamp. On the face of it, these Gospel sayings would appear to have belonged originally to a corpus of Jesus sayings, perhaps to a lectionary, or else to a common stock of Gospel materials widely known in Muslim circles of piety. This core includes such sayings as “You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13); “Look at the birds in the sky” (Matthew 6:26); “When you fast, put oil on your head” (Matthew 6:17); “Your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:3); “Store up treasures for yourselves in heaven” (Matthew 6:19); “Happy the womb that bore you” (Luke 11:27-28); “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 12:29). The impression one obtains from this Gospel core is that much of it comes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.

This Gospel core was then Islamized in various ways. Thus, whereas the Jesus of Matthew, in answer to the woman who blesses him, says, “Happier those who hear the word of God and keep it,” the Jesus of the Muslim gospel is more specific: “Blessed is he who reads the Qur’an and does what is in it.” Again, and in order to establish authenticity, we find comments inserted on the speaking style of Jesus, as in the following: “Jesus said to his disciples, ‘In truth I say to you’—and he often used to say ‘In truth I say to you.’” But let us consider the following: “Jesus was asked: ‘Prophet of God, why do you not get yourself an ass to ride upon for your needs’? Jesus answered, ‘I am more honorable in God’s sight than that He should provide me with something which may distract me from Him.’” We have difficulty determining whether such a saying, apart from its obvious ascetic slant, is or is not connected with the entry into Jerusalem and the Muslim denial of the whole Passion narrative, of which there is hardly any trace in the Muslim gospel. (Khalidi 2001, 33-34)⁷⁸

⁷⁸ An opposite scenario is illustrated in several sayings gathered by Javad Nurbakhsh in *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis*. He quotes a number of sayings by Muslims (Qushayri, Sa‘di, Kāshānī) attributed to “the Gospel,” which in

Khalidi highlights the fact that “much of it comes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.” Among the passages we have found in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings that resemble the New Testament, these most frequently appear to be quotations from the Gospel of Matthew. We will look at four such instances, inquiring whether they might derive from Islamic sources.⁷⁹

One such place is in Chapter 15 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, the chapter specifically devoted to the wisdom of Jesus. There, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of Jesus (citing Qur’ān 9:29) leads to the following observation:

Jesus emerged out of humility, so much so that it is prescribed for his community that, *They shall pay the tax, humbling themselves*, and that when one amongst them is struck on the cheek that they should offer the other to the one who struck him and not rise up against him or seek revenge against him. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 161)

This appears to be a paraphrase of Matthew 5:39, from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

And I say to you, “Do not oppose the evil one. But to whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other.” (Matthew 5:39 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)⁸⁰

Yet Khalidi finds an Islamized parallel to Matthew 5:39 in *al-Zuhd* (no. 481) by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), the founder of the Ḥanbalī school of Islamic jurisprudence:

Jesus was walking by the Pass of Afīq with one of his disciples. A man crossed their path and prevented them from proceeding, saying, “I will not let you pass until I have struck each of you a blow.” They tried to dissuade him but he refused. Jesus said, “Here is my cheek. Slap it.” The man slapped it and let him pass. He then said to the disciple, “I will not let you pass until I have slapped you too.” The disciple refused. When Jesus saw this, he offered him his other cheek. He slapped it and allowed both to go. Jesus then said, “O God, if this is pleasing to You, your pleasure has reached me. If it does not please You,

fact do not appear in the New Testament (Nurbakhsh 1992, 68). Nurbakhsh speculates: “References to the Gospel in Sufī writings seem to stem from what Christian orthodoxy would call the ‘apocryphal’ tradition.”

⁷⁹ Incidentally, Khalidi quotes several sayings attributed by Ibn al-‘Arabī to Jesus, drawn from *Kitāb muḥāḍarat al-abrār* and the *Futūḥāt* (Khalidi 2001, 202-204). None of these sayings bear any resemblance to the words of Jesus in the New Testament, nor does Ibn al-‘Arabī attribute these sayings to the scriptures. Thus these sayings do not bear directly on the present question.

⁸⁰ All of our translations from the Alexandrian Vulgate in this study will be based on Paul de Lagarde’s *Die Vier Evangelien Arabisch aus der Wiener Handschrift Herausgegeben* (Lagarde 1864).

You are more worthy of righteous anger.” Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855), *al-Zuhd*, p. 145 (no. 481). (Khalidi 2001, 88-89)

Close examination, however, of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words describing Christians—“that when one amongst them is struck on the cheek that they should offer the other to the one who struck him and not rise up against him or seek revenge against him”—looks more faithful to the original verse in Matthew than Ibn Ḥanbal’s reformulation. Whereas Ibn Ḥanbal’s version is framed as an irregular episode in which Jesus’ disciple resists the slap and Jesus submits grudgingly, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s presentation of a normative Christian practice more accurately reflects the Gospel’s command, going further to capture Jesus’ imperative, “Do not oppose the evil one.”

Another ostensible quotation from the Sermon on the Mount is found in Chapter 24 of the *Fuṣūṣ*. Ibn al-‘Arabī inserts the following observation into his discussion of the Golden Calf:

And indeed Jesus said to the Children of Israel, “O Children of Israel, the heart of each man is with his treasure [*māl*], so place your treasures [*amwāl*] in the heavens, and your hearts shall be in the heavens.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 246; revised, with brackets inserted by us)⁸¹

A very similar passage also appears in Chapter 70 of the *Futūḥāt* (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2009c, 153). On a first reading, these passages resemble another utterance by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, verses 6:20-21, also from the Sermon on the Mount:

Treasure for yourselves treasures (*kunūz*) in heaven, where it is not to be eaten. and no mothworm will corrupt (it), and no thief will break in and steal (it). For where your treasures (*kunūz*) are, there your hearts are. (Matthew 6:20-21 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)⁸²

⁸¹ We have revised Dagli’s translation; his translation has singular “thy,” whereas the original Arabic indicates the plural “your;” we have also amended Dagli’s second “treasure” to “treasures”.

⁸² The word “your” is plural here in the Arabic. Note the difference between *kunūz*, the Arabic word employed for “treasures” in the Alexandrian Vulgate, and the word Ibn al-‘Arabī uses in the *Fuṣūṣ*, *amwāl*—which might be translated as “treasures,” but would more typically be translated as “possessions.”

Khalidi also finds an Islamized parallel to Matthew 6:21 in Ibn Ḥanbal's *al-Zuhd* (no. 313):

Jesus said, "Place your treasures in heaven, for the heart of man is where his treasure is" (Khalidi 2001, 71).

Khalidi further points to a parallel Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Futūḥāt* II 812. It is difficult to conclude whether Ibn al-ʿArabī drew his words from Matthew, Ibn Ḥanbal, or some third Islamic source we have yet to identify.

A third passage from the *Fuṣūṣ* that echoes the Gospel of Matthew turns up in Chapter 17, where it might be read as an extended meditation on Jesus' preface to the Sermon on the Mount. While much of the sermon is framed in terms of "You have heard... But I say to you...," Jesus warns against reading his teachings as an abrogation of the teachings of Moses:

Do not consider that I intend to unbind the law (*nāmūs*) and the prophets. I come not to unravel (them), but to consummate (them). I say truly to you that heaven and earth will pass away, and not one iota or one stroke of the law (*nāmūs*) will pass away until all of this comes to be. (5:17-18 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Ibn al-ʿArabī articulates a similar response, turning to the example of Jesus to illustrate a larger question about the relationship between previous prophets and later prophets:

Do you not see that when the Jews imagined that Jesus, upon him be peace, was not going to add to Moses...they believed in him and affirmed him, and that when he added a ruling or abrogated one established by Moses—since Jesus was a messenger—they could not bear it because it went against their belief? The Jews were ignorant of the matter as it was, and therefore sought his death. This is part of his story as told to us by God in his sublime Book, about him and about them. Since he was a messenger he could receive increase, either by removing an established ruling, or by adding one, although this removal is without doubt an added ruling itself. The vicegerency of our day does not possess this degree. It can only remove from or add to the Law established through juridical reasoning, and not to the Law articulated by Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 195)

Here Ibn al-ʿArabī is primarily concerned with Islamic juridical reasoning and the Law established by Muḥammad, but seems to find assistance in the illustration of Jesus' relationship

to Mosaic Law and Jesus' avowal that he did not come "to unbind the law and the prophets." Because Ibn al-'Arabī appeals to Jesus' "story as told to us by God in his sublime Book," it is not improbable that the sublime Book Ibn al-'Arabī has in mind is the Gospel. This raises the possibility that Ibn al-'Arabī may have encountered the Gospel of Matthew, even to have read the Sermon carefully enough to find it relevant to Islam. Confirming the Gospel's prohibition against reducing the Mosaic Law, Ibn al-'Arabī notes that Jesus, as a messenger, "could receive increase" but not abrogation, opining that "this removal is without doubt an added ruling itself." We have found no parallel to Matthew 5:17-19 in Khalidi's collection. Thus the possibility remains open that Ibn al-'Arabī had some direct contact with the Gospel.

The fourth and last parallel to Matthew we have found in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabī points beyond the Sermon on the Mount. This is an instance of resemblance to Matthew 25:41-46, in which Jesus will come in glory and gather the resurrected dead for judgment:

Then he will say to those on his left, "Go from me, crafty ones, into the endless fire prepared for the Devil (*iblis*) and his armies. *I was hungry and you did not feed me*, and I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, and I was a foreigner and you do not welcome me, and naked and you did not clothe me, and *sick* and imprisoned *and you did not visit me*." Then they will answer and say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a foreigner or naked or sick or imprisoned and did not serve you?" Then he will answer and say to them, "Truly I say to you, *when you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me*." Then they will go to continuous torment, and the righteous to endless life. (Matthew 25:41-46 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation, emphasis added)

Similar words appear repeatedly in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabī, such as the following passage from *Futūḥāt* II 596.6:

When one of His servants is hungry, He says to the others, "*I was hungry, but you did not feed Me*." He says to another of His servants, "*I was ill but you did not visit Me*." When the servants ask Him about this, He replies to them, "Verily so-and-so was ill; if you had visited him, you would have found Me with him. So-and-so was hungry; *if you had fed him, you would have found Me with him*..." This is one of the fruits of love, when He descends to us. (Chittick 1989, 72; italics ours)

Another instance is in *Futūḥāt* II 173.8:

Were it not for the fact that the obligatory yields that, it would not be established that He has said, “*I was hungry, and you did not feed Me,*” and “I am more intense in my yearning to meet My servant than he is in desiring Me.” For He is “nearer” to us “than the jugular vein” (50:16)... (Chittick 1989, 330; italics ours)

In this latter passage, Ibn al-‘Arabī places these words in dialogue with words from a verse from the Qur’ān:

We indeed created man; and We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein. (Qur’ān 50:16)

In another passage (in *Futūḥāt* II 173.8), Ibn al-‘Arabī draws a connection between this quotation and a *ḥadīth* frequently cited by Ibn al-‘Arabī and other Sufis, the famous “*Ḥadīth of Supererogatory Works*”:

When the servant performs his obligations completely, he has fulfilled the servitude which is the rightful claim of Lordship upon him. The obligatory works result in an affair higher than that the Real should be his hearing. For when the Real is the hearing of the servant, this is a state of the servant, but the property of obligatory works comes between him and this state, for their property is that he becomes the hearing of the Real. Then the Real hears through the servant. This is pointed to by His words, “*I was hungry, but you did not feed Me.*” (Chittick 1989, 329)

The *ḥadīth* in question, from Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, reads:

Narrated Abū Hurairah: Allāh’s Messenger said, “Allāh said ‘I will declare war against him who shows hostility to a pious worshipper of Mine. And the most beloved things with which My slave comes nearer to Me, is what I have enjoined upon him; and My slave keeps on coming closer to Me through performing Nawāfil (praying or doing extra deeds besides what is obligatory) till I love him, then I become his sense of hearing with which he hears, and his sense of sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grips, and his leg with which he walks; and if he asks Me, I will give him, and if he asks My Protection (Refuge), I will protect him (i.e., give him My Refuge); and I do not hesitate to do anything as I hesitate to take the soul of the believer, for he hates death, and I hate to disappoint him.’” (Bukhārī 1997, 275-276; 6502)⁸³

⁸³ Rūmī similarly puts this same *ḥadīth* from Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī into dialogue with the words, “Truly, I was sick (and you didn’t visit (Me)),” in *Mathnawī* II 1737-1739. Nicholson translates the lines thus:

And if these words (of yours) are (meant) for His servant, of whom God said, ‘He is I and I myself am he’; (For him) of whom He (God) said, ‘Verily, I was sick and thou didst not visit Me,’ (that is), ‘I became ill, not he (the sick man) alone’;
(For him) who has become seeing by Me and hearing by Me—this (talk of yours) is foolish nonsense even in regard to that servant.
(Rūmī 1926b, 310-311)

While it is tempting to read Ibn al-‘Arabī as setting up a dialogue between the Gospel of Matthew and the *Ḥadīth* of Supererogatory Works, it is more likely that he is setting up a dialogue between two passages from the *ḥadīth* literature. The evident quotation from Matthew 25:41-46 seems more likely to have been derived from a *ḥadīth* in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*:

It was narrated that Abū Hurairah said: “The Messenger of Allāh said: ‘Allāh, Glorified and Exalted is He, will say on the Day of Resurrection: “O son of Adam, *I fell sick and you did not visit Me.*” He will say: “O Lord, how could I visit You when You are the Lord of the Worlds?” He will say: “Did you not know that My slave so-and-so was sick, but you did not visit him? *Do you not know that if you had visited him you would have found Me with him?* O son of Adam, *I asked you for food and you did not feed Me.*” He will say: “O Lord, how could I feed You when You are the Lord of the Worlds?” He said: “Did you not know that My slave so-and-so asked you for food, but you did not feed him? *Do you not know that if you had fed him, you would have found that with Me?* O son of Adam, I asked you for water and you did not give Me to drink.” He will say: “O Lord, how could I give you to drink when You are the Lord of the Worlds?: He will say: “My slave so-and-so asked you for water, and you did not give him to drink. *If you had given him to drink you would have found that with Me.*””” (Ibn al-Ḥajjāj 2007, 437 Ḥadīth 6556; italics ours)

These four illustrations suggest that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s exposure to the Gospel of Matthew may have come to him only indirectly, framed as Islamized sources. Among these four instances, the only indication we have found that the Shaykh had the Gospel itself in mind is his allusion to “[God’s] sublime Book, about [Jesus];” this evidence is not strong, and were this our only evidence, we might have concluded that Ibn al-‘Arabī had never crossed paths with the Gospel in its original form. Yet new evidence has given fresh life to the question, making us hesitant to draw this conclusion. Our inquiry has been reopened by the very recent scholarship of Yousef Casewit and Gerhard Böwering (Böwering and Casewit 2016; Casewit 2016) on the twelfth-century Andalusian mystic and Qur’ān commentator, Ibn Barrajān (d. 1141 CE).⁸⁴

⁸⁴ We are indebted to Michael McCoy for these sources.

Böwering and Casewit underscore the strong connection between the two Andalusians, Ibn Barraĵān and Ibn al-‘Arabī, separated by a generation. Böwering and Casewit note the influence of the former on the latter; with respect to Ibn Barraĵān’s doctrine of the Universal Servant (*al-‘abd al-kullī*), they write:

This doctrine, like so many others in Ibn Barraĵān’s work, anticipates and inspires Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings on the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), building a bridge between the ideas of *nūr Muḥammad* and *al-insān al-kāmil*. (Böwering and Casewit 2016, 41)

Another doctrine that Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to have inherited is Ibn Barraĵān’s doctrine of *al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi l-samāwāt wa-l-ard* (“The Reality By Virtue of Which the Heavens and Earth Are Created”):

This idea has its roots in the writings of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā and finds an echo in the works of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers. Ibn ‘Arabī and his disciples used this concept to illustrate cosmogonic notions of the divine Word (*kalima*) and command (*amr*), the “Reality of Realities” (*ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqā’iq*), and the “Existentiating Breath of the All-Merciful” (*al-naḥas alraḥmānī al-wujūdī*). (Böwering and Casewit 2016, 42)

Böwering and Casewit even highlight the similarity of the two mystics’ writing styles:

Much like the doctrines of Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Barraĵān’s doctrines demand a close reading of the totality of his works from beginning to end. (Böwering and Casewit 2016, 37)

Casewit also notes that, according to the famed historian Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406 CE), Ibn Barraĵān’s writings were consigned to the book-burners’ flames alongside those of Ibn al-‘Arabī (Casewit 2016, 37).

Most relevant to our present inquiry is Ibn Barraĵān’s direct familiarity with the Gospel of Matthew and the fact that he passed quotations from that Gospel down to Ibn al-‘Arabī. In his Qur’an commentary, *Īdāḥ al-ḥikma bi-aḥkām al-‘ibra* (*Wisdom Deciphered, the Unseen Discovered*), Ibn Barraĵān quotes from the Gospel of Matthew (but not from the other Gospels):

Although Ibn Barraĵān was interested in the Bible already when he wrote his commentary on the names of God, the *Īdāḥ* marks his most pronounced and extensive engagement with biblical material in all his works. The biblical verses Ibn Barraĵān quotes are taken

primarily from the Gospel of Matthew and the Book of Genesis, on the basis of what appears to be a Mozarab translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate. (Böwering and Casewit 2016, 35-36)

In terms of the New Testament, Ibn Barrajān quotes only from the Gospel of Matthew (chapters 4, 11, 13, 20, and 24). He does not evince any knowledge of the existence of Mark, Luke, and John (*al-anājīl al-arbaʿ*) and, similarly, there are no indications that he had access to an Arabic translation of the Diatessaron, such as Ibn al-Ṭayyib's so-called Arabic Gospel Harmony. He equates the Gospel (*injīl*) with Matthew, and emphasises that the Qur'an acclaims it as a source of *guidance, light, and admonition...* (Casewit 2016, 8)

Böwering and Casewit inform us that Ibn al-ʿArabī studied the *Īdāh* in Tunis in 1194 CE under the direction of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Mahdawī (d. 1224 CE); they describe Mahdawī as “a favored teacher of Ibn ʿArabī” (Böwering and Casewit 2016, 18). While this does not indicate that Ibn al-ʿArabī ever encountered a complete translation of the Gospel of Matthew (and the four instances of ostensible quotations from Matthew we cited above are not included among Ibn Barrajān's quotations), we do have evidence here that Ibn al-ʿArabī encountered passages from Matthew explicitly identified as coming directly from the Gospel, not disguised as Islamic texts concealing their sources. Moreover, given Ibn Barrajān's decisive influence on Ibn al-ʿArabī, the latter might have inherited the former's active interest in the Christian scriptures. Thus we cannot dismiss Ibn al-ʿArabī's motivation (and possible opportunity) to read the Gospels intact in an Arabic translation.

Given, however, our interest in constructing an Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John, we must acknowledge that even our tentative speculations here point only to the Gospel of Matthew. Apart from the rough resemblance we noted, at the beginning of our study, between the final verse of the Gospel of John (“I suppose that the world could not contain the pages of the things written”) and Chapter 1 of the *Fuṣūṣ* (“that to which I have attained...could not be encompassed in a book nor by the present existent world”), we have seen no indication of a direct

encounter between Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Gospel of John. This solitary resemblance is not sufficiently distinctive to count in support of such an encounter, and may well be coincidental.

Thus the evidence we have reviewed has turned out to be too thin and ambiguous to conclude that Ibn al-‘Arabī ever read the Christian Bible or the Gospel of John in particular. While it is clear that Ibn al-‘Arabī had some familiarity with Christian doctrines (including Johannine doctrines in particular), his knowledge of Christianity appears to have been largely mediated by the Islamic tradition, handed down in the form of traditional Muslim sayings and similar second-hand sources. In addition to Muslim literary sources, we might take into account this remark by Lazarus-Yafeh:

...Muslim authors relied mainly on oral transmission from Jews and Christians, and later often copied the same verses from each other. Not only do these authors quote the same verses for generations, but they quote them totally out of their Biblical context and never show any knowledge of the verses immediately preceding or following the quotations. How could this have happened if the authors had actually read through the scrolls of fuller translations? (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 118)

Lazarus-Yafeh alerts us to the possibility that Ibn al-‘Arabī might have received indirect exposure to the New Testament from oral sources in addition to written sources (a possibility highlighted when we recall that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s first teacher, ‘Uryabī, was an illiterate captive who spent six months among Christians). We therefore recognize multiple possible routes by which fragments of the New Testament might have reached Ibn al-‘Arabī, while acknowledging that we have found no clear evidence of direct contact with a complete text of any of the Gospels. This recommends caution to keep in mind that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of Christianity may not have been an accurate reflection of actual Christian creeds.

Having noted this, we will suggest that the Shaykh has striven to go beyond his sources, whatever those sources might have been; the degree to which his own understanding of Jesus has departed in various ways from Christians creeds has been due not only to distortions resulting

from indirect transmission, but also to the creativity and originality with which Ibn al-‘Arabī has worked out his own Christology, pushing against both Islamic and Christian doctrines (as he understood them) while attempting to incorporate elements from both. Moreover, we would argue that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines display a more forceful resonance with John’s theology than with Matthew’s, as we hope to demonstrate in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this study. Distinctively Johannine doctrines—such as Jesus’ self-declared identity with God and his presentation as the embodied Word of God—are worked out in a peculiar fashion in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings, regardless of how many degrees of removal stood between him and the source. Our Akbarian commentary will strive then to attend faithfully to the writings of the Shaykh to inform our guesses on how he might have read the Gospel of John, had he been given the opportunity.

3.3. Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Trinity

My Beloved is three although He is One... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Tarjumān Ode 12

Before embarking on an Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John in the next chapter, we will conclude the present chapter with a discussion of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s treatment of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. In the mainstream Islamic tradition, the doctrine of the Trinity has been a persistent sticking point and obstacle for reconciliation with Christians, and Muslims have frequently criticized this doctrine as both incoherent and a violation of God’s unity. Illustrating this point, Mona Siddiqui’s recent book, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (Siddiqui 2013), cites the objections of the Muslim rationalist Qāḍī Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī al-Asadābādī (932-1025 CE). According to Siddiqui, ‘Abd al-Jabbār studied in Basra, a center of Mu‘tazilite learning, and was “the leading and the last of the great Mu‘tazilite thinkers of his time” (Siddiqui 2013, 110). In his polemical work against Christians, the

Confirmation of the Proofs of Prophethood (Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwa), 'Abd al-Jabbār tackled a wide range of topics, criticizing Christianity in a fashion “both different from and similar to those of his colleagues” (Siddiqui 2013, 111). Among these topics 'Abd al-Jabbār wrote the following critique of the doctrine of the Trinity—which, according to Siddiqui, amounted to an accusation of a polytheistic innovation that reduced God to anthropomorphism (Siddiqui 2013, 111):

Do you see that you are saying: a god who is the Father, begetter, Living, Omnipotent, Without Beginning, Knowing, Creator and Provider; and a god is the Son, Begotten, Word, Living, Without Beginning, Creator, Provider, neither the Father nor the Begetter, and that it is not possible that he be the Begetter or the Father; and god who is the Holy Spirit, Living, Knowing, Without beginning, Creator and Provider? Then you say these are three hypostases. You say that each one of them is a god and a Lord, Without Beginning...The only thing that prevents the Christians from putting forth the statement that there are three, separate, different gods (which they have given in meaning) is that they affirm the Books of God, Mighty and Exalted, which Jesus affirmed. They are filled with monotheism, they declare that He alone is Without Beginning and that he does not resemble [created] things. (Siddiqui 2013, 111-112)

Against this tide of Islamic criticism of the doctrine of the Trinity, Siddiqui cites the counterexample of Ibn al-'Arabī. She writes:

While the Incarnation and divinity of Jesus continued to be a contested topic between Sunnī orthodox Muslims and Christians, not all Muslims saw the Trinity as a doctrine which divided God's unity. In the world of poetry and Ṣūfī spirituality, it is important to note that Jesus was given a particularly important place. The great Andalusian mystic, poet and philosopher Ibn al-'Arabī (1165-1240) and other Persian Ṣūfī poets saw the Trinity and the Incarnation as symbolic ways of speaking about the Absolute. (Siddiqui 2013, 140)

Substantiating Siddiqui's understanding that, according to Ibn al-'Arabī, “number did not beget multiplicity in the Divine substance” (Siddiqui 2013, 140), she quotes Toshihiko Izutsu's seminal work on Ibn al-'Arabī, in which Izutusu clarifies the difference between two of God's Arabic names, *al-Aḥad* and *al-Wāḥid*, both meaning “the One”, but in different senses. Izutsu writes:

The *Aḥad* is the pure and absolute One—the reality of existence in a state of absolute underdetermination, the prephenomenal in its ultimate and unconditional prephenomenality—whereas the *Wāḥid* is the same reality of existence at a stage where it begins to turn toward phenomenality. (Siddiqui 2013, 141)

To support and expand Siddiqui’s observation, we will look broadly at the impact of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought, which the Shaykh develops into a general meditation on the relationship between God’s unity and plurality. This investigation will exemplify Ibn al-‘Arabī’s general approach to Christian doctrines, neither embracing nor rejecting such doctrines out of hand, but adopting these doctrines and refashioning them for his own use. We hope to demonstrate, in addition, that such doctrines are abiding and persistent catalysts in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought; he does not merely take up such a doctrine momentarily, giving it his own peculiar twist and setting it aside. As we scan across Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings at different times in the development of his thought, we find that he returns time and again to such Christian doctrines, working and reworking his creative engagement with these notions. This demonstrates Ibn al-‘Arabī’s enduring fascination with triadic structures, especially in the *Fuṣūṣ*, a fascination we can trace back to his earlier engagement with the Trinity in the *Tarjumān*, composed about fifteen years earlier than the *Fuṣūṣ*.

We have previously looked at, and will now examine more closely, the following lines from Ode 12 of the *Tarjumān*:

And at one time I am called the herdsman of the gazelles in the desert, and at
another time I am called a Christian monk and an astrologer.
My Beloved is three although He is One, even as the (three) Persons (of the
Trinity) are made one Person in essence.
(Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, 70)

As we have noted earlier, Ibn al-‘Arabī, in later recensions of the *Tarjumān*, added his own commentary on the Odes. His commentary on these lines is revealing:

He says, ‘Number does not beget multiplicity in the Divine substance, as the Christians declare that the Three Persons of the Trinity are One God, and as the Koran declares (xvii, 110): “Call on God or call on the Merciful; howsoever ye invoke Him, it is well, for to Him belong the most excellent Names!’ ‘The cardinal Names in the Koran are three, viz. Allah and ar-Raḥmān and ar-Rabb, by which One God is signified, and the rest of the Names serve as epithets of those three. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, 71)

While this is how Nicholson translates Ibn al-‘Arabī’s commentary, one should note that, in the original Arabic, the commentary does not actually employ the Arabic term for “Trinity,” *al-thālūth* (Lane 1863), which designates the Christian doctrine; he actually says *al-aqānīm al-thalātha* (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1966, 46), “the three hypostases.”⁸⁵ Yet Ibn al-‘Arabī’s allusion to the Christians (*al-naṣārā*) leaves no doubt that the Trinity is what Ibn al-‘Arabī has in mind. As we have seen, the Qur’ān adopts a polemical stance against the doctrine of the Trinity:

So believe in God and His Messengers, and say not, ‘Three.’ Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God. (Qur’ān 4:171)

Yet Ibn al-‘Arabī does not simply refuse to say “Three,” as the Qur’ān commands, but affirms a kind of threeness of God. While expressing criticism of the Christian understanding of the triadic nature of God, Ibn al-‘Arabī spells out an alternative interpretation of the way in which God is both “One” and “Three.” He does this by appealing to the Qur’ān’s doctrine of God’s names, identifying the triad of *Allāh* (God), *al-Raḥmān* (the Merciful), and *al-Rabb* (the Lord) as the threefold root of all of God’s other names.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Gloton’s French translation reads: “Le nombre (‘*adad*) n’engendre pas de multiplicité dans l’essence (*kathra fī al-‘ayn*), ainsi que les chrétiens le professent au sujet des trois Hypostases (*aqānīm thalātha*)...” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1996, 131-132)

⁸⁶ In the Qur’ānic verse to which Ibn al-‘Arabī appeals (17:110), only the names *Allāh* (God) and *al-Raḥmān* (the Merciful) appear; he appends *al-Rabb* (the Lord). One might have expected the third member to be *al-Raḥīm*, pointing to the *bismillāh*, the phrase that opens the whole of the Qur’ān as well as all of but one of the Qur’ān’s *sūras*: “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate” (*bismillāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*). Rather, Ibn al-‘Arabī appears to be thinking of the first full sentence of the Qur’ān, following the *bismillāh*, “Praise belongs to God (*Allāh*), the Lord (*al-Rabb*) of all Being, the All-merciful (*al-Raḥmān*), the All-compassionate” (Qur’ān 1:2-3). As for the relationship between *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, Ibn al-‘Arabī develops an interpretation of these cognate and closely-related names in Chapter 16 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, the chapter on Solomon (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 177-189), refining the distinction. In a footnote, Dagli culls this observation from statements by Ibn al-‘Arabī elsewhere: “As is

To show how this brief excerpt from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s commentary on the Ode bears on his wider theological views, we might note that the doctrine of the divine names permeates a wide range of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings. Ibn al-‘Arabī announces this topic in his first sentence of Chapter 1 of the *Fuṣūṣ*:

The Real willed, glorified be He, in virtue of His Beautiful Names, which are innumerable, to see their identities...in a comprehensive being that comprises the whole affair... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 3)⁸⁷

The dominance of his theory of the divine names is also evident in the *Futūḥāt*. Early in Chittick’s compendium of passages from the *Futūḥāt*, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Chittick makes this general observation:

It must be concluded—from the above and a great deal more evidence that will present itself naturally in the course of the present book—that the divine names are the single most important concept to be found in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works. Everything, divine or cosmic, is related back to them. Neither the Divine Essence nor the most insignificant creature in the cosmos can be understood without reference to them. It is true that the Essence is unknown in Itself, but it is precisely the Essence that is named by the names. There are not two realities, Essence and name, but a single reality—the Essence—which is called by a specific name in a given context and from a particular point of view. A single person may be father, son, brother, husband, and so on without becoming many people. By knowing the person as “father” we know him, but that does not mean we know him as brother. Likewise, by knowing any name of God we know God, but not necessarily in respect of another name, nor in respect to His very Self or Essence.

In the same way, God’s creatures must be known in terms of the divine names for any true knowledge to accrue. Every attribute possessed by a creature can be traced back to its ontological root, God Himself. The existence of the creature derives from God’s Being, its strength from God’s power, its awareness from God’s knowledge, and so on. Obviously there are many more attributes in creation than those delineated by the ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names. So the task of explaining the divine root of a thing through language is not at all straightforward. If it were, the *Futūḥāt* would fill 100 pages instead of 17,000. However this may be, it is sufficient for present purposes to realize that the Essence manifests Itself in the divine names, and the names in turn are revealed through the divine acts. (Chittick 1989, 10-11)

mentioned in other places, *al-Raḥmān* is a Name of the Essence, while *al-Raḥīm* is a Name of a Quality or Act” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 178, footnote 4).

⁸⁷ Here and elsewhere we should keep in my mind that Ibn al-‘Arabī very frequently refers to God as “the Real” (*al-ḥaqq*). We will give closer attention to this appellation in the next chapter of this study.

As Chittick's overview indicates, Ibn al-ʿArabī's theory of the names is at the basis of his effort to reconcile the unitary and manifold aspects of God. Further on, Chittick characterizes Ibn al-ʿArabī's perspective this way:

There is but a single Being, yet the names represent a multiplicity of faces that Being assumes in relation to the created things. The Essence Itself, or Being considered without the names, is what Ibn al-ʿArabī sometimes calls the Unity of the One (*aḥadiyyat al-aḥad*) in contrast to Being considered as possessor of the names, which is the Unity of Manyness (*aḥadiyyat al-kathra*). God as such, taking both perspectives into account, is then the "One/Many" (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*). Here Oneness precedes manyness, since, without Being the many things cannot exist. In the same way, light precedes the colors, and mercy precedes wrath. (Chittick 1989, 25)

Chittick's account is frequently illustrated in the words of the *Futūḥāt*, as in *Futūḥāt* II 61.10, where he says that "the divine names go back to His Essence, and the Essence is One. But ranking in degrees demands manyness" (Chittick 1989, 57). Moreover, Ibn al-ʿArabī frequently formulates God's manyness as a threefold structure. Thus Henry Corbin writes:

Three degrees of theophany may be distinguished. The first is a theophany of which it is possible to speak only allusively; that is the epiphany to itself of the Divine Essence as absolute monad in its solitude. In the mystery of its undifferentiated oneness (*aḥadiyya*) no description nor qualification can attain it, since it is absolute being, pure and simple, and everything that is other than being is nonbeing, pure and simple... The second theophany (*tajallī thānī*) is more precisely the totality of theophanies in which and through which the divine Essence is revealed to itself under the forms of the divine Names (*asmāʾ ilāhiyya*), that is to say, in the forms of beings in respect of their existence in the secrecy of the absolute mystery (*fī bāṭin al-ghayb al-muṭlaq*). The third is theophany in the forms of concrete individuals (*tajallī shuhūdī*), which lend concrete and manifest existence to the divine Names. (Corbin 1969, 295, footnote 15)

Superficially, Ibn al-ʿArabī's speculations do not appear to be far afield from the Christian affirmation of God's unitary and manifold aspects through the doctrine of the Trinity; it is clear, however, that Ibn al-ʿArabī's approach plays out differently from mainstream Christian theology. The Shaykh's preoccupation with God's unity and plurality is a prodigious topic, and we can only touch on the tip of this iceberg. For our purposes, we will focus on a sampling of

places where Ibn al-‘Arabī formulates his doctrines in terms of triadic structures, repeatedly revisiting and reinventing this structural motif. We will offer these passages to support our suspicion that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity lurks in the background as one motivator of the development of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought.

Such an instance in his writings is the threefold “constitution and arrangement” of the numinous Youth⁸⁸ who manifests to Ibn al-‘Arabī and initiates his composition of the *Futūḥāt*.

This is recounted in the *Futūḥāt*’s opening chapter:

I said to him: “Reveal to me some of your secrets that I may be one of your scribes!” He replied: “Observe the details of my constitution and the arrangement of my form, and you will find the answer to your inscribed within me. For I am neither speaker nor spoken to. My knowledge is not of other than Me, and My Essence is no different to My Names. For I am Knowledge, the Known and the Knower. I am Wisdom, the giver of Wisdom and the Wise!” (Hirtenstein 1999, 152)⁸⁹

A variant of this formula recurs in the next generation of Akbarians, as in ‘Irāqī’s *Divine Flashes*, which (we will recall) ‘Irāqī composed while attending Qūnawī’s lectures on the *Fuṣūṣ* and bears the indelible marks of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings. *Divine Flashes* opens with the words:

“Lover” and “Beloved” are derived from “Love,” but Love upon Its mighty Throne is purified of all entification, in the sanctuary of Its Reality too holy to be touched by inwardness or outwardness. Thus, that It might manifest Its perfection (a perfection identical both with Its own Essence and Its own Attributes),...the names “lover” and “Beloved,” the attributes of seeker and Sought, then appeared. (‘Iraqi 1982, 73)

While this triad of Love-Beloved-Lover in the first chapter of the *Divine Flashes* clearly echoes the triad of Knowledge-Known-Knower in the first chapter of the *Futūḥāt*, ‘Irāqī fashions his

⁸⁸ We will return to a discussion of the Youth in Chapter 5 of our study.

⁸⁹ This particular instance of a threefold structure may owe less to Christian influence than to the influence of Islamic philosophers like Avicenna, whose writings in turn reflect Neoplatonic influences. For instance, Avicenna writes in his *Metaphysics* (VIII.6.7) that the essence of the Necessary Existent is “intellect, intellectual apprehender, and intelligible” (Avicenna 2005, 285). In the academic literature, Ibn al-‘Arabī is sometimes described as conforming to Neoplatonic Christianity; we will look more closely at this description in Chapter 5 of our study, where we will lay out our stance that, while Ibn al-‘Arabī employs terminology inherited from Neoplatonic philosophers like Avicenna, academic association of the Shaykh with Neoplatonism has been exaggerated.

own poetic innovation, calling God “Love” (as opposed to “the Real,” which is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s typical label for God). While both the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Divine Flashes* open with innovative creation stories, the threefold structure in ‘Irāqī’s creation story seems more indebted to the beginning of the *Futūḥāt* than the beginning of the *Fuṣūṣ*.

Ibn al-‘Arabī presents yet another alternative creation story in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 11, in which he articulates a triadic structure in God, mirrored by a triadic structure in created beings, indicating that the world shares in God’s threefold nature. After a brief poem, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes in the first prose sentences of Chapter 11:

Know, may God grant thee success, that reality is built upon odd-numberedness. Oddness owns ternariness, proceeding from three onwards. Three is the first odd number. It is by virtue of this divine presence that the world exists. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 119)

Recalling Ibn al-‘Arabī’s answer to the Christian Trinity in the *Tarjumān*, we note that Chapter 11 is a meditation on a cluster of three divine attributes—in this case, Essence (*dhāt*), Will (*irāda*), and Speech (*qawl*)—expressed in God’s mode as Creator:

God most high says, *Our Word to a thing when We desire it is ‘Be!’*, and it is. This is an Essence [*dhāt*], owning Will [*irāda*], and Speech [*qawl*]. That thing would not be if it were not for the Essence, Its Will—which is the attribution that denotes attention being turned in a specific way towards the bringing into being of something—and if not for His saying *Be!* upon this attention being turned towards that thing. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 119; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

The italicized words in this passage quote Qur’ān 16:40: *Our Word to a thing when We desire it is ‘Be!’*, and it is. These words are also reminiscent of two Qur’ānic verses that recount the birth of Jesus:

‘Lord,’ said Mary, ‘how shall I have a son seeing no mortal has touched me?’ ‘Even so,’ God said, ‘God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing He does but say to it “Be,” and it is...’ (Qur’ān 3:47)

Truly, the likeness of Jesus, in God’s sight, is as Adam’s likeness; He created him of dust, then said He unto him, ‘Be,’ and he was. (Qur’ān 3:59)

As we will see in the next two chapters of this study, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s account of divine creation is intimately tied to his understanding of Jesus.

Spelling out the other side of this version of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s creation story, Chapter 11 pivots to a cluster of three attributes—thinghood (*shay’iyya*), listening (*samā’*), and obedience (*imtithāl*)⁹⁰—in created beings, tracing the way in which God’s threefold structure is impressed upon the receptive material of the world:

Moreover, the oddnumberedness of ternariness is also manifest in that thing; from its standpoint it is through oddnumberedness that its being brought into being and its taking on the quality of existence can become a fact. This is its thingness [*shay’iyya*], its audition [*samā’*], and its following [*imtithāl*] the Command of Him who brought it into being through existentiation. Thus one ternary stands opposite another. Its immutable essence [*dhātuhu al-thābita*] in its state of non-existence corresponds to the Essence of the Existentiator, its audition corresponds to the Will of its Existentiator, and its obedient receptivity to the Command of bringing into being corresponds to His saying *Be!*, and thus it *is*. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 119-120; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

Just as the Essence (*dhāt*) precedes God’s manifestation in His attributes or names, the not-yet-created thing’s thinghood (*shay’iyya*) precedes its manifestation in existence. As God’s Will (*irāda*) is prior to speaking His command, the not-yet-created thing’s listening (*samā’*) denotes listening *for* the command (as opposed to listening *to* the command, which has not yet been spoken), attentively anticipating the command. Lastly, at the moment when God’s Speech (*qawl*) enunciates the command, the thing answers with obedience (*imtithāl*) and conformity to the command, responding to the command “Be!” by entering existence.

To understand this creation story, one should be familiar with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion of the *‘ayn thābita*, which refers to the created thing’s preexistent state. The expression *‘ayn thābita* has been variously translated as “latent essence” (Austin), “fixed entity” (sometimes Chittick),

⁹⁰ This word is built on the root *m.th.l.*; in addition to “obeying” a command, it has connotations of “imitating” or “copying a model.”

“immutable entity” (sometimes Chittick), and “immutable identity” (Dagli); we would translate it as “established entity” or “preestablished entity.” Ibn al-‘Arabī has this term in mind when he speaks, in the quotation above, of the uncreated thing’s “immutable essence [*dhātuhu al-thābita*] in its state of non-existence...” Chittick defines this term thus:

One of the more common and probably best known terms that Ibn al-‘Arabī employs for the nonexistent objects of God’s knowledge is “immutable entity” (*‘ayn thābita*). Entity here is synonymous with “thing” (*shay’*), and “thing,” as should be apparent from the way I have been employing the term all along, is “one of the most indefinite of the indefinites” (*min ankar al-nakirāt*), since it can be applied to anything whatsoever, existent or nonexistent (though it is not normally applied to God as Being). The “existent things” are the creatures of the cosmos (though never ceasing to be nonexistent objects of God’s knowledge). (Chittick 1989, 11-12)

Ibn al-‘Arabī repeatedly returns to his innovative narrative of creation, providing an account of how each preestablished entity comes into existence. One variant, from Chapter 66 of the *Futūḥāt*, tells the story of the divine motivation for creation:

But they found nothing created, governed, differentiated, or nourished. They said, “What can be done so that the entities within which our own properties become manifest may become manifest that thereby our authority may become manifest?”

Hence the divine names—which are demanded by some of the realities of the cosmos after the manifestation of the entity of the cosmos—had recourse to the name Originator. They said to him, “Perhaps you can give existence to these entities so that our properties may become manifest and our authority established, for the presence within which we now dwell does not receive our effects.” (Chittick 1994, 130)

Similarly, in Chapter 12 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes:

That by whose existention He first granted release for lordship—through His Breath, which is attributed to the All-Merciful—was the world, which is required by lordship in its reality as well as by all of the divine Names. In this way it is established that His Mercy encompasses all things, thus encompassing the Real. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 126)

By this account, God’s creation of the world was an expression of mercy towards uncreated things (awaiting creation) and towards His own names, which required created things in order to exercise their effects upon the world.

One aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s response to the Christian Trinity serves to work out the relationship between the transcendent Creator and the imminent, created world; one might draw an analogy here between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theology and Christian theology, insofar as the Trinity also negotiates the relationship between God and creation. Moreover, the significance of Speech as one term in this formulation of divine triplicity brings to mind the Word as a member of the Christian Trinity. We will return later to theme of the creative Word in our Akbarian commentary on John 1:3, according to which all things came into being though the Word.

We will dwell on one more instance of the motif of triplicity in the *Fuṣūṣ*, in this case Chapter 27. Like Chapter 11, Chapter 27 opens by foregrounding the importance of odd-numberedness, and threeness in particular. The title of this chapter is typically translated into English to emphasize singularity: “The Wisdom of *Singularity* in the Word of Muhammad” (Austin), “The Ringstone of the Wisdom of *Uniqueness* in the Word of Muhammad” (Dagli) and “The bezel of the wisdom of *uniqueness* exists in the essence of Muḥammad” (Abrahamov). We suspect that these translations are misleading. It is true that the Arabic adjective *fard* means “single, sole, only” (Lane 1863); thus, the noun in the title, *fardiyya*, could be translated as something like “singularity.” Yet *fard* also denotes odd-numberedness, and the title might perhaps be better translated as “...the Wisdom of *Odd-Numberedness*...,” as made clear in the opening sentences of Chapter 27:

[Muḥammad’s] Wisdom is that of uniqueness [or odd-numberedness; *fardiyya*] because he is the most perfect existent in this species of man. That is why the affair begins with him and is sealed by him. He was a prophet “while Adam was between water and clay.” Then he was the Seal of the Prophets in his elemental makeup. The first of odd-numbered things [*al-afrād*] is the ternary [*al-thalātha*], and all other individuals after this initial instance derive from it. He was, upon him be peace, the best proof of his Lord, for he was given the all-comprehensive words, which are those things named by the names of Adam. He resembled a proof in his ternariness, and this proof is a proof of himself. Since his reality grants the initial odd-numberedness by virtue of which he is ternary in makeup, he said, speaking of love, which is the principle of existent things, “Three things have been

made worthy for me to love,” through the ternariness within him. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 277; bracketed words inserted by us)

We will endeavor to show that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of threefoldness in this chapter is informed, in part, by this Qur’ānic verse:

And when God said, ‘O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, “Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God”?’ (Qur’ān 5:116)

On the basis of this verse, Ibn al-‘Arabī may have in mind, in Chapter 27, the triad of God, Mary, and Jesus.

According to Parrinder, some have read this Qur’ānic verse as an accusation that Christians included Mary in the Trinity. Parrinder points to the example of Ibn Iṣḥāq:

Ibn Iṣḥāq said that Christians of the Byzantine rite declared of Christ, ‘he is the third person of the Trinity, which is the doctrine of Christianity... They argue that he is the third of three ... He is He and Jesus and Mary. Concerning all these assertions the Qur’ān came down.’ (Parrinder 1995, 134)

But Parrinder counters this interpretation:

Next, the exaltation of Mary as a god seems to be a reference to heretical practice. Christian commentators have often seen in this verse an indication that the Trinity was conceived of as Father, Mother and Son, a divine family. But the Quranic verse need not mean that; it is a simple rebuttal of a practice that is repugnant to any monotheist. (Parrinder 1995, 134-135)

Yet Parrinder acknowledges that the Qur’ānic verse, if taken as a description of Christian practice, is not entirely baseless.

...[I]t must be simply stated here that such a statement would be a Christian as well as an Islamic heresy.

Yet there was undoubtedly a tendency in this direction in the Christianity of that time. In the fifth century Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, had protested against the growing use of the title ‘Mother of God’ (*theotokos*, god-bearer) applied to Mary. He said that it should be ‘mother of the man’ Jesus (*anthropo-tokos*), or ‘mother of Christ’ (*christo-tokos*). (Parrinder 1995, 62-63)

There is room in this debate for mutual accusations of misunderstanding: accusations that the Qur'ān has misunderstood the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and accusations that the Qur'ānic verse has been misunderstood. Setting aside these questions of misunderstanding, we will suggest that Ibn al-ʿArabī saw, among various triadic permutations, significant theological potential in the triad of God, Mary, and Jesus, and that this triad lies in the background of his discussion of the ternary motif in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27. Admittedly, Chapter 27 never mentions either Mary or Jesus by name; thus it will take some analysis to show their connection and relevance to that chapter.⁹¹

Chapter 27 is by no means a simple piece of writing. It appears to embrace a number of different (and, as we shall see, seemingly contrary) perspectives on the relationship between men (represented typically by Muhammad and Adam) and women. The chapter is easily broken down into parts, because it follows a tripartite scheme derived from a *ḥadīth*. Ibn al-ʿArabī structures his discussion around Muḥammad's profession of a love for women, perfume, and prayer:

“Three things have been made worthy for me to love,” through the ternariness within him. Then he mentioned women, perfume, and that his comfort has been placed in the Prayer. He began by mentioning women and ended with the Prayer, because woman is a part of man in the principle of her identity's manifestation. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 277)⁹²

Launching his discussion from the basis of this *ḥadīth*, Ibn al-ʿArabī displays considerable ingenuity in spinning out unexpected conclusions from Muḥammad's words. In our discussion we will deal chiefly with the portion of the chapter devoted to “women,” and will gather the perspectives Ibn al-ʿArabī expresses there under two competing claims: 1) women stand hierarchically below men; 2) women stand hierarchically above men. Over the course of his

⁹¹ Some elements in the following argument will draw on and revise material from our paper, “Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Dynamics of Gender,” submitted to Muhsin al-Musawi at Columbia University in 2004 (Wolfe 2004).

⁹² Dagli identifies the *ḥadīth* as Nasā'ī 36:1.

discussion in Chapter 27, Ibn al-‘Arabī successively entertains and endorses both of these competing views.

To understand Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion, we should begin with two points: Ibn al-‘Arabī asserts that we require a concrete and visible image in order to contemplate God,⁹³ and he advocates contemplating God in the image of a woman.

Thus his witnessing Him in woman is more complete and more perfect since he witnesses the Real with respect to being both active and passive; in himself it is only with respect to his being passive. That is why the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, loved women, owing to the perfection of his witnessing the Real in them, since the Real is never witnessed separate from a matter, for the Essence of God is beyond need of the worlds. Now, since it is impossible in that respect, and since witnessing can only take place in a matter, witnessing the Real in women is the greatest and most perfect witnessing. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 282)

To make sense of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reference to women’s activity and passivity, we need to step back a little earlier in the chapter. There, Ibn al-‘Arabī bases his argument on the story that Eve was formed from a portion of Adam,⁹⁴ making Adam the origin of her existence, just as God is the origin of Adam’s existence:

⁹³ We will explore this observation more fully in Chapter 5.

⁹⁴ This might be an allusion to Qur’ān 4:1, “Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women...” But of course Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion is reminiscent of the account in Genesis 2:21-24, which says:

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. (RSV)

As in our discussion of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s familiarity with the Christian scriptures, apparent allusions to passages from the Jewish scriptures might in fact refer to Islamic sources. In this case, it resembles a *ḥadīth*:

For him and from him He cleaved an individual in his image and named her woman. She manifested in his image, and he yearned for her with the yearning a thing has for itself, and she yearned for him with the yearning a thing has for its homeland. Thus women were made worthy for him to love. Indeed God loves the one He created in His Image, and to whom the luminous angels did prostrate, even with the grandeur of their measure, their rank, and the exaltedness of their natural makeup. From this comes the correspondence, though the Image is greater, more resplendent and more perfect in terms of correspondence, for it is a mate, which is to say it makes even-numbered the existence of the Real, just as woman, with her existence, makes man even-numbered, thus making of him a mate. Thus the ternary is manifest: Real, man, and woman. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 280-281)

At this moment in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion, his formulation runs thus: man loves woman in the same way that God loves man, as one loving one’s own image. At the same time, woman loves man in the same way the man loves God: as one loving one’s place of origin. From this analogy one might derive the metaphor of a mathematical proportion:

God : man :: man : woman⁹⁵

Act kindly towards woman, for woman is created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is its top. If you attempt to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it, its crookedness will remain there. (Saḥīḥ Muslim 3468, translated by Abd-al-Hamid Siddiqui)

It is noteworthy that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion better matches the account in Genesis and the *ḥadīth* than the Qur’ānic account, in part because the word “soul” (*nafs*) in the Qur’ānic verse is feminine in Arabic. Moreover, in the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn al-‘Arabī explicitly refers to the story of Eve being formed from Adam’s rib: “Eve received the activity of Adam and was taken out and engendered from his shortest rib” (Murata 1992, 179).

⁹⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī does not use the language of a mathematical proportion, but we feel that this is an accurate representation of what his prose describes. A figure that Ibn al-‘Arabī actually appeals to (among others) is that of the middle term in a logical syllogism. In *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 11, he writes:

Thus, the principle of bringing into being stands on ternariness. That is to say, it comes from three from two sides: the side of the Real and the side of creation. This also holds true in the existentionation of meanings arrived at by proof. A proof must be made up of three things, following a specific ordering and specific conditions, and from which one will necessarily yield a result. That is to say, a thinker will construct his proof from two premises, each premise containing two single terms, there thus being four. One of these four is repeated in the two premises in order to connect one of them to the other, a kind of wedding, so that there are three of them and no more, due to the repetition of one of them therein. One arrives at the conclusion when there occurs this specific kind of ordering, which is that one of the two premises should be bound to the other through the repetition of that one single term by which ternariness becomes a fact. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 120-121)

In *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27, Ibn al-‘Arabī appears to be hearkening back to this figure of a syllogism when he writes:

[Muḥammad] resembled a proof in his ternariness, and this proof is a proof of himself. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 277)

That is, God is to man as man is to woman. It is important to note that man stands in the middle of this proportion, in a dual relationship to both God and woman. On the one hand, man loves God; on the other hand, man loves in the same way that God loves. With respect to this latter dimension of love, when a man loves his wife, he does so in the same way that God loves man, as Ibn al-‘Arabī says of Muḥammad:

...for his love was attached to his Lord, whose image he is, even in his love for his wives. He loved them with the love of God for him, with divine virtue. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 281)

This subtle shift from man’s love *for* God and to his love *in the manner of God* is the key to understanding Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thesis about activity and passivity in male-female relationships.

This thesis is spelled out most explicitly in the following passage:

When man witnesses the Real in woman, it is a witnessing in a passive thing. When he witnesses Him in himself with respect to woman’s manifesting from him he witnesses Him in an active thing. When he witnesses Him in himself without the presence of any form that has been existentiated out of him, his witnessing is only of something that is passive, without intermediary, in relation to the Real. Thus his witnessing Him in woman is more complete and more perfect, since he witnesses the Real with respect to being both active and passive; in himself it is only with respect to his being passive. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 282)

This passage provides an innovative argument regarding the need to worship God in a form that one can see. If one contemplates God in oneself alone, “without the presence of any form,” one is stuck in the position of being seen by God, but not seeing Him. Man feels himself to be purely the passive object of God’s seeing; because he cannot see God he feels incapable of becoming an active subject in this relationship. In order to overcome this passivity, man must contemplate God in someone he can actively see—that is, in another human being.

But man feels himself to be passive before God in more than one respect: he feels that he is not only seen by God, but also that he owes his very existence to God. Thus, if man is to engage in active contemplation, he does so best by contemplating the being who owes her very

existence to *him*: woman. When man does this, he is reminded of her passivity with respect to him, insofar as she owes her existence to him (according to the story of Eve's origin from Adam); this reminds man that he is like God, and this places him in an active position. Yet he is also reminded of his own passivity before God, insofar as woman's origin from man resembles man's origin from God. Thus, when man relates to a woman, he sees himself simultaneously in an active role (as her origin) and a passive role (as the object of God's creation).

In this relationship, woman is never given more than a passive role. Insofar as she reminds man of his activity, she is the object of that activity; insofar as she reminds man of his passivity, she is the analogue of that passivity. In both respects, she occupies the bottom rung of the hierarchy of creation and contemplation. By occupying the middle term of the proportion—

God : man :: man : woman

—only man is credited with both activity and passivity. To be clear, this is not Ibn al-ʿArabī's final view on the matter; he articulates this view in the first half of his discussion in Chapter 27 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, only to revise his view in the latter half of his discussion.

Nor is this the only place in Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings where he emphasizes the conjunction of passivity and activity in man. In a passage from the *Futūḥāt* IV 243.8, Ibn al-ʿArabī says of Adam, "Hence God gave him the power of activity just as He gave him the power of receiving activity" (Murata 1992, 184-185). Elsewhere, in the *Futūḥāt* I 85, Ibn al-ʿArabī contrasts Adam with Eve by emphasizing her passivity and receptivity: "Adam is for the totality of attributes, and Eve for differences among beings, since she is the receptacle of Act and of dissemination" (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004a, 117).

In various places in Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings, the passivity of women is paralleled by the notion that she is *secondary* to man—in temporal, ontological, and logical order. For example,

shortly after the passage from Chapter 27 of the *Fuṣūṣ* we have just discussed, Ibn al-‘Arabī engages in a creative interpretation of the Arabic word for “women”: *al-nisā’*. He notes that the word comes from a root meaning “to come after,” and from this temporal meaning he draws conclusions regarding the rank of women in the ontological hierarchy. Speaking of Muḥammad’s love for women, he says:

Nus’ah means “postponement”...That is why he said “women.”

He loved them by virtue of their degree and by virtue of their being a locus of passivity. They were to him as nature is to the Real, in which he opened the forms of the world through turning His Face to them with His Will and divine Command, which is marriage within the world of elemental forms, willpower in the luminous spiritual world, and the ordering of premises to reach a conclusion in the domain of meanings. All this is the marriage, in each of these modes, of the first odd-numberedness. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 283)

Ibn al-‘Arabī extends the metaphor: women are passive in creation just as they are passive in conjugal union; women are derivative from men just as a conclusion is derivative from logical premises.

Shortly after this passage, Ibn al-‘Arabī appeals to the Qur’ānic claim that men “have a degree above” women (Qur’ān 2:228). In the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to buttress and reify this hierarchical relationship in *Futūḥāt* II 171.4 when he says: “The degree is ontological [*wujūdī*], so it does not disappear” (Murata 1992, 178). In fact, Ibn al-‘Arabī makes much of this Qur’ānic claim in several passages in his *Futūḥāt*. For example, he writes:

We have found that the degree by which heaven and earth are more excellent than the human being is exactly the same as that by which the man is more excellent than the woman...That which receives activity does not possess the strength of the one that acts upon it.

In the same way, we find that Eve received the activity of Adam and was taken out and engendered from his shortest rib. By that she fell short of reaching the degree of him who acted upon her. Hence, she knows the level of the man only to the extent of that from which she was created, that is, the rib. Hence her perception falls short of the reality of the man...

That is why women fall short of the intelligence of men. They understand only to the measure that the woman takes of the creation of the man at the root of configuration... Woman's preparedness falls short in of the preparedness of man, since she is a part of him. (Murata 1992, 179)⁹⁶

Another Qur'ānic verse that Ibn al-'Arabī brings into play is 112:4, which states that God "has no equal." Commenting upon this verse in *Futūḥāt*, III 181.35, Ibn al-'Arabī brings us back to the paradigm of Eve and Adam:

The cosmos is the locus that receives God's activity, so it is not God's equal. Eve is the locus that receives Adam's activity, so he has the degree of activity over her. Hence she is not his equal in this respect. (Murata 1992, 180-181)

Yet, to repeat, this is not Ibn al-'Arabī's only or final word on the matter. Ibn al-'Arabī lays down this relationship of men to women only to assert its antithesis. Thus far, Eve has been the model of passivity, at the bottom of the gender hierarchy. As we move to the next step of Ibn al-'Arabī's discussion in Chapter 27, we find the triadic hierarchy reconfigured, placing woman above man. Moreover, we would suggest that Ibn al-'Arabī has Mary's relationship to Jesus in mind when she reconfigures the triad, positing Mary as a model alternative to Eve. Looking beyond *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27, we find that elsewhere in his writings Ibn al-'Arabī recognizes Mary's parental status above Jesus, effectively putting her in an active role as the reciprocal image of Eve's relationship to Adam.

As we have remarked, Chapter 27 of the *Fuṣūṣ* is organized around a tripartite scheme of "women, perfume, and prayer." Our discussion thus far has centered on the "women" portion of this chapter, in which Ibn al-'Arabī appears to work out a strictly passive role for women. Yet a shift in his thinking on the matter can be detected the moment we moves on to his discussion of "perfume." There, Ibn al-'Arabī turns his argument on its head, reversing the ontological

⁹⁶ Here Murata does not provide specific citations for these quotations from the *Futūḥāt*.

hierarchy between man and woman. Whereas Ibn al-‘Arabī has previously granted man the central role in his proportion—

God : man :: man : woman

—he now undertakes a fresh perspective on the matter, which may be spelled out thus:

God : man :: woman : man.

That is, God is to man as woman is to man.

This abrupt turning point, setting woman above man, is marked by the following sentence:

Now, the Prophet, upon him be peace, had the feminine dominate over the masculine because he wanted to bring out its importance, saying, “Three [in the form indicating the feminine],” not saying, “Three [in the form indicating the masculine],” using the suffix for enumerating what is masculine in gender. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 285; the bracketed phrases are in Dagli’s translation)

Ibn al-‘Arabī is playing here with Arabic grammar, and his shift to the prevalence of the feminine depends on a clever analysis of a minute grammatical point: in the *ḥadīth*, when Muḥammad speaks of the “three things” that have been made beloved to him, the Arabic adjective “three” is *thalāth*—a form of the adjective that is reserved for groups of exclusively feminine things. According to the rules of Arabic grammar (as with many languages that employ grammatical gender), if there are any masculine nouns in a group, the adjective used to describe that group must be masculine. However, there is an apparent breach of this rule in the *ḥadīth* cited here; while “women” and “prayer” are indeed grammatically feminine in Arabic, the word for “perfume” is masculine. Therefore the adjective used to describe this group should be masculine; but in fact, in this *ḥadīth*, the adjective “three” has a feminine form.

Rather than accusing Muḥammad of committing a careless grammatical error, Ibn al-‘Arabī takes a much more inventive approach, assuming that this breach of the rule is deliberate.

He speculates that Muḥammad employed the feminine adjective in order to make a point about the precedence of the feminine over the masculine in the ontological hierarchy:

He began with “women” and ended with “Prayer,” which are both feminine, and the “perfume” was between them as it is in existence, for indeed man falls between the Essence, from which he manifests, and woman, who manifests from him. He is thus between two femininities: the femininity of the Essence and true femininity. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 285-286)

“Essence” is one of many synonyms for God. Ibn al-‘Arabī goes on to note that, in addition to the Arabic word for “Essence” (*dhāt*), a number of other Arabic expressions associated with God are feminine: *ṣifa* (attribute), *qudra* (power), *‘illa* (cause). He goes on to write:

Follow any path you wish, you shall always find that the feminine comes first, even among the people of causation who consider the Real to be the Cause of the existence of the world. “Cause” is feminine. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 286)

This line of thought is complemented by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s declaration, in *Futūḥāt* I 424.34, “I sometimes employ the feminine pronoun in addressing God, keeping in view the Essence” (Murata 1992, 199). Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī forges a close connection between God and femininity, justifying the analogy:

God : man :: woman : man.

Man is no longer portrayed as standing in an active role above the created feminine; here he is placed in a passive role below the creative feminine.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s elevation of the feminine is not limited to an identification of God with the feminine. At moments in his writings, he elevates the status of female humans above that of male humans. For example, in *Futūḥāt* III 89.22, he writes:

Women share with men in all levels, even in being Pole. You should not let yourself be veiled by the words of the Messenger of God, “A people who give the rule of their affairs to a woman will never prosper.” We are speaking about the rulership given by God, not the rulership given by people, while the hadith speaks of someone who is given the rulership by the people. If the only thing that had reached us concerning this matter were the words of the Prophet, “Women are the likes of men,” that would be enough, since it

means that everything to which a man can attain—stations, levels, or attributes—can also belong to any woman whom God wills, just as it can belong to any man whom God wills.

Do you not notice God’s wisdom in the extra which He has given to the woman over the man in the name? Concerning the male human being, He says *mar’*, and concerning the female He says, *mar’a*; so He added an *a*—or an *at* in construct form—to the name *mar’* given to the man. Hence she has a degree over the man in this station, a degree not possessed by him, in contradistinction to the degree given to men in the verse, “Men have a degree above them” [2:228]. Hence God blocked that gap [alluded to in the verse] with this extra in *mar’a*. (Murata 1992, 183)

This is clearly the antithesis of the Qur’ānic claim that men “have a degree above” women (2:228).

This leads to our argument that Mary stands in the background Chapter 27. Admittedly, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statements regarding Mary are not altogether consistent (just as he modulates dialectically among contradictory configurations of the gender triads in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27). On some occasions, he resists attributing activity to Mary, preferring to give her the same passive role as Eve, as in *Futūḥāt* III 181.35:

Since He said, ‘The men have a degree above them,’ He did not allow Jesus to be the locus that receives the activity of Mary, lest the man should be the locus that receives the activity of the woman, as Eve had received that of Adam. Hence Gabriel or the angel ‘became imaginalized to her as a mortal man without fault’ [19:17]... Thus Jesus received the activity of the angel who was imaginalized in the form of a man. (Murata 1992, 181)

In this passage, we can see that Ibn al-‘Arabī is careful to attribute the active role in the creation of Jesus to the angel Gabriel, and not to Mary.

Elsewhere, in *Futūḥāt*, III 87.18, Ibn al-‘Arabī cites the examples of Mary and Asiyya (Pharaoh’s wife) as examples of women reaching the perfection of men, though denying that they exceed men in messengerhood:

The Messenger of God said, “Many have reached perfection among men, but among women only Mary the daughter of ‘Imran and Asiyya the wife of Pharaoh.” Hence men and women come together in the degree of perfection. But men are more excellent in the degree of most-perfectedness [*al-akmaliyya*], not that of perfection. For though men and women are both perfect through prophethood [*nubuwwa*], men are more excellent

through messengerhood [*risāla*] and “being sent” [*ba’tha*], since no woman has had these two degrees. (Murata 1992, 180)

In the *Futūḥāt* II 471.21, Ibn al-‘Arabī claims that even “perfect” women cannot rival the spiritual attainments of men:

But everything else in the phenomenal world falls short of this level, just as the woman falls short of the man by the degree that stands between them. Even if the woman becomes perfect, this degree means that her perfection will not be that of the man...The fact is that the woman is the locus that receives activity, while the man is not like that. The locus that receives activity does not possess the level of activity, so it falls short. But in spite of the falling short, there is dependence upon it and inclination, toward it, since it receives activity in itself and with itself. (Murata 1992, 180)

Nonetheless, Henry Corbin argues that Ibn al-‘Arabī sometimes attributes to Mary “the active creative function,” comparing Eve’s relationship with Adam to Jesus’ relationship with Mary. This is spelled out in a structure that Corbin labels the “quaternity”:

In the person of Maryam the Feminine is invested with the active creative function in the image of the divine Sophia. Thus the relation of Maryam to Jesus is the antitype to the relation of Eve to Adam. Thus, says Ibn al-‘Arabī, Jesus and Eve are ‘brother and sister,’ while Maryam and Adam are the two parents....What this *quaternity* expresses (with the exchange of the qualifications of masculine and feminine) is the symbol and ‘cipher’ of the sophiology which we shall here analyze. (Corbin 1969, 163)

Cutting through Corbin’s peculiar jargon, we may find that Corbin has convincingly discovered feminine subordinacy alongside feminine superiority in the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī. But we must note that this is not a conjunction of subordinacy and superiority in a unified feminine nature; rather it is a dialectical alternation between the subordinacy of one woman (Eve) and the superiority of another (Mary). Moreover, it is also a dialectical alternation between the superiority of one man (Adam) and the subordinacy of another (Jesus). Thus, Ibn al-‘Arabī successfully achieves a structure that is both mobile and far-reaching, as he emphasizes in two passages from the *Futūḥāt*. The first is from *Futūḥāt* IV 84.22:

Jesus’s reception of activity from Mary became manifest opposite Eve’s reception from Adam. “Surely in that is a reminder for him who has a heart” [50:37]. Thereby such a

person can understand God's words, "O people, We created you from a male," as in the case of Eve, "and a female" [49:13] as in the case of Jesus, and from both together, as in the case of the rest of the offspring, the children of Adam. This encompasses the creation of all people. (Murata 1992, 186)

The other passage is from *Futūḥāt* I 136.13:

God brought Jesus into existence from Mary. Hence Mary settled in the station of Adam, while Jesus settled in the station of Eve. For just as a female came into existence from a male, so a male came into existence from a female. Hence God finished with the like of that through which He began, by bringing into existence a son without a father, just as Eve came to be without a mother. Hence Jesus and Eve are two siblings, while Adam and Mary are their two parents. (Murata 1992, 178)

Both of these passages, with their emphases on *encompassing* and *finishing*, express Ibn al-ʿArabī's desire to achieve a perspective that is thorough and complete. Unlike the previous quotations we have analyzed, which strive for a sequential dialectic (successively adopting and rejecting alternative stances), the present passage manages to encompass the full range of superiority and subordinacy in a single familial structure:

Adam : Eve :: Mary : Jesus.

This brings us back to the two alternative proportions in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27. In the first, Ibn al-ʿArabī configured the triad in such a way as to place the man prior to the woman:

God : man :: man : woman.

Ibn al-ʿArabī explicitly applies to this triad the relationship between Adam and Eve, so the first triad could also be expressed thus:

God : Adam :: Adam : Eve.

Subsequently in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27, Ibn al-ʿArabī rearranges the terms of the triad, reversing the relationship of woman to man:

God : man :: woman : man.

Because the gender reversal in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27 mirrors the *Futūḥāt*'s proportion—

Adam : Eve :: Mary : Jesus

—we might continue following this lead to its conclusion, mapping the *Futūḥāt*'s relationship of Mary to Jesus onto the second triad from *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27, thus:

God : Jesus :: Mary : Jesus.

That is, God is to Jesus as Mary is to Jesus.

If we have correctly collated passages from the *Futūḥāt* with passages from the *Fuṣūṣ*, we can draw out multiple possible ramifications from this result. We will consider here just one possible reading: both God and Mary have, in a sense, a parental relationship to Jesus, recalling the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus as the son of both God and Mary. All Muslims regard Mary as Jesus' mother; in the next chapter, we will scrutinize more closely Ibn al-ʿArabī's attitude towards the Christian claim that God is Jesus' father. To conclude our present chapter, we will return to our thesis that Ibn al-ʿArabī might have had Qur'ān 5:116 in mind when he wrote *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27. As we have indicated earlier, this verse presents (and rejects) an unconventional version of the Trinity that includes Mary. To clarify why we suspect that this version of the Trinity might lurk behind *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27, let us review the key points in our argument: Ibn al-ʿArabī states at the outset of *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27 that the chapter is devoted the threefold relationship of God, man, and woman; the chapter's initial formulation of this triad places man above woman, a triad modeled after Adam's relationship to Eve; the chapter proceeds to an alternate formulation of the triad, placing woman above man; lastly, Ibn al-ʿArabī—not in the *Fuṣūṣ*, but in the *Futūḥāt*—presents Mary's relationship to Jesus as the reciprocal counterpoint of Adam's relationship to Eve. Thus we might infer that *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27 has its roots in an effort to work out a sympathetic understanding of the Trinity as God, Mary,

and Jesus⁹⁷—an expansion and a refinement of Mona Siddiqui’s general observation that Ibn al-‘Arabī recognized rich potential in the doctrine of the Trinity.

While, as Parrinder observes, Christians and Muslims both reject this version of the Trinity as heretical, we have already seen that Ibn al-‘Arabī does not respond to such heresies by simply distancing himself. Rather, as we have seen in the *Tarjumān*—where he adopts and recasts the Trinity as three names of God: *Allāh*, *al-Raḥmān*, and *al-Rabb*—he embraces such doctrines and plays with them creatively. In *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 27, he seems to play once again with this same doctrine, fashioning new variants of the scheme.

Even if these conclusions are not decisively persuasive in all of their details, we hope that this discussion has provided ample evidence of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s restless and multifaceted engagement with the motif of triads, an engagement that, in the *Tarjumān*, explicitly points to the Christian Trinity as its inspiration. We have undertaken this discussion to demonstrate how fertile and creative Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interaction with a Christian doctrine can be, and to show how far this pursuit can deviate from both conventional Christianity and conventional Islam. Taking this discussion as a foundation, we will now take our first steps in constructing an Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John, beginning in the next chapter with the Johannine doctrine that Jesus was the son of God and the Johannine doctrine that Jesus was one with his father.

⁹⁷ Incidentally, this might also provide a basis for an Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John 2:3-5, in which Jesus’ mother exerts her authority and incites Jesus to perform his first miracle at the Wedding at Cana; or 19:27, in which Jesus instructs the Beloved Disciple to regard Jesus’ mother as his own mother.

Part II

An Akbarian Commentary on the Gospel of John

Chapter 4

Sonship and Oneness

4.1. Views on the Sonship of Jesus in Muslim Biblical Commentaries

I and the Father, we are one! — John 10:30 (Alexandrian Vulgate)

There are various points at which the Qur'ān and the Gospel of John enter readily into agreement; yet these points of agreement also frequently stand side-by-side with obstacles to agreement. Let us consider, for example, Qur'ān 5:75, which says of Jesus:

The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away...

This echoes the Gospel of John's designation of Jesus as the Messiah—in the voice of the Evangelist (John 1:17; 20:31) and in the voices of those who encounter Jesus in the narrative (1:41; 4:29; 7:31; 7:41; 9:22). This is a designation to which Jesus himself assents, both obliquely and directly (4:25-26; 10:24-25; 17:3). Yet the Gospel of John also pairs the title "Messiah" with the title "son of God," as in the testimony of Martha:

Yes, master, I believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God, the one coming into the world. (John 11:27 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

While the Qur'ān recognizes Jesus as the "son of Mary," it appears to balk at the title "son of God," insisting that Jesus "was only a Messenger" like messengers sent before.

Similarly, Qur'ān 19: 30 presents opportunities for both harmony and disharmony between the Qur'ān and the Gospel of John. In this verse, the Qur'ān quotes Jesus as saying:

Lo, I am God's servant; God has given me the Book, and made me a Prophet.

The Gospel of John too appears to represent Jesus as a prophet. The Samaritan woman at the well tells Jesus:

Master, I see you are a prophet. (John 4:19 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Jesus seems to accede to this description later in the same chapter, in an apparently self-referential observation:

For Jesus bore witness that a prophet is not honored in his city. (John 4:44 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

But as for describing Jesus as “God’s servant,” there is some tension between the language of the Qur’ān and the language of the Gospel of John. The Qur’ānic appellation “servant” is certainly consistent with Jesus’ description of himself as obedient to God’s commands:

...I do not do anything from myself, but what my Father has taught me I speak likewise. (John 8:28 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

The Johannine Jesus embraces service, serving not only to God but also his own disciples, as when he washes the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper (John 13:5). Yet the Johannine Jesus also frequently deploys the master-servant model to describe himself as the master, designating his disciples as his servants:

Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant (*‘abd*) is not greater than his master (*sayidihi*), and the one sent is not greater than the one who sent him. (John 13:16 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

If anyone serves me, he must adhere to me, and where I am, my servant is there, and the one who serves me, the Father honors him. (John 12:26 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Only near the end of the Gospel narrative does Jesus revise this language of servanthood, placing himself on a more level standing, inviting his disciples into a relationship of mutual friendship:

Now I do not call you servants (*‘abīdan*) because the servant does not know what his master (*sayiduhu*) does; but I have called you my beloved ones (*aḥibbā’ī*) because I have informed you what I have heard from my Father. (John 15:15 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Jesus' promotion of himself in the Gospel of John as "master" runs most directly in opposition to the Qur'ān when Jesus seems to claim to be divine. The forcefulness of this Qur'ānic objection appears to leave little room to accommodate the equation of Jesus with God:

They are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Messiah, Mary's son.' For the Messiah said, 'Children of Israel, serve God, my Lord and your Lord. Verily whoso associates with God anything, God shall prohibit him entrance to Paradise, and his refuge shall be the Fire; and wrongdoers shall have no helpers.' (Qur'ān 5:72)

In verse 10:30 of the Gospel of John, we run up against a compact stumbling block to reconciliation with Islam: "I and the Father, we are one!" Here, the Gospel captures concisely, in six Greek words (*Egō kai ho patēr hen esmen!*) or five Arabic words (*Anā wa 'l-ābu wāḥidun nahnu!*), two of the central points of dispute between Christians and Muslims: the Christian doctrine that Jesus is the son of God and the Christian doctrine that Jesus is one with God. The former doctrine readily leads to the latter, and in the Gospel of John the claim that Jesus is the son of God is rarely remote from the question of Jesus' divinity. This is already evident in the Judean criticisms of Jesus recorded in this Gospel, criticisms (anticipating objections repeated in the Qur'ān):

Thus the Jews answered him, saying, "It is not on account of the good doings [or: the beautiful doings, *al-a 'māl al-ḥasana*] that we stone you [or: we curse you, *narjumuk*], but on account of blasphemy, and while you are a human being you make yourself a god [*ilāhan*]." (John 10:33, our translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate)

To this Jesus replies that they accuse him of blasphemy "because I said to you that I am the son of God [*ibn allāh*]" (John 10:36, our translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate). Both the Jews and Jesus recognize here the link between Jesus' explicit claim to be God's son and Jesus' implied claim to be divine.⁹⁸ When the Jews later accuse Jesus of blasphemy in his trial before Pilate, their accusation is:

⁹⁸ It may be noteworthy that in the Alexandrian Vulgate, the Jews accuse Jesus of making himself *a god (ilāhan)* and not *God (allāh)*.

We have a law [*nāmūs*], and according to what is in our law he deserves death because he made himself the son of God [*ibn allāh*]. (John 19:7, our translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate)

Apparently, from the perspective of the Judeans, claiming to be a god and claiming to be the son of God are interchangeable.

While we will attempt in the present chapter to discuss these two doctrines distinctly and separately, the doctrine of Jesus' sonship will inevitably blur into the doctrine of Jesus' divinity. In both the Qur'ān and the writings of Ibn al-'Arabī, as with the Judeans in the Gospel of John, these doctrines go hand in hand. First, however, let us attempt to sort out, independently from the question of Jesus' divinity, Muslim attempts to interpret the Gospel's claim that God is Jesus' father. Later in this chapter, we will address Ibn al-'Arabī's understanding of this doctrine.

As we have already seen in Chapter 1, while the Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus as the son of God and present Jesus as implicitly endorsing this claim, the Gospel of John alone presents Jesus as employing the title "son of God" to describe himself. Moreover, while both the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John ascribe to Jesus use of the expression "Father" to describe God (including "our Father" and "your Father"), the Gospel of John is much more explicit than the Synoptics in characterizing Jesus' relationship to God as unique.

In addition to describing himself and God as "I and the Father" in John 10:36, Jesus appears to apply the title "son of God" to himself in the following verses:

Jesus...said to him, "Do you believe in the son of God [*ibn allāh*]?" (John 9:35, our translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate)

Thus when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness is not a sickness to death, but on account of the glory of God and for the glory of the son of God [*ibn allāh*] on account of it." (John 11:4, our translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate)

These claims, placed in the mouth of Jesus, are echoed by the Evangelist himself:

This is written about these (signs) in order that you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God [*al-masīḥ bin allāh*]...” (John 20:31, our translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate)

Where Jesus is identified in Greek as *ho huīos tou theou*, “the son of God,” the Alexandrian Vulgate translates this phrase as *ibn allāh*. The choice to use *ibn*, rather than another Arabic word for “son,” *walad*, might provide room for Muslim interpreters to resort to a metaphorical interpretation of Jesus’ sonship. The word *ibn* is sometimes employed elsewhere in Islamic literature in a metaphorical sense, as in the expression *ibn waqt*, a common Sufi epithet:

The Sufi has therefore been called *ibn al-waqt*, “the son of the present moment,” i.e., he gives himself completely to the moment and receives what God sends down to him without reflecting about present, past, and future. (Schimmel 1975, 130)

The Arabic word *walad*, on the other hand, is more tightly connected to the meaning of “offspring,” cognate with the verb *walada*, “to beget, generate, procreate” (Wehr and Cowan 1976); had the Alexandrian Vulgate chosen this word to translate the Greek word *huīos*, it would have more likely offended Islamic sensibilities, as stressed in the 112th *sūra* of the Qur’ān:

Say: ‘He is God, One,
God, the Everlasting Refuge,
who has not begotten [*yalid*], and has not been begotten [*yulad*],
and equal to Him is not any one.’
(Qur’ān 112)

Elsewhere, the Qur’ān protests:

It is not for God to take a son [*walad*] unto Him. Glory be to Him! (Qur’ān 19:35)

Moreover, as we have seen in Chapter 1, the Qur’ān presents Jesus’ birth to Mary as the result of an act of divine creation rather than an act of divine procreation. This account is framed as an analogy to the creation of Adam. Thus the verse we have just quoted is completed with the words:

When He decrees a thing, He but says to it ‘Be,’ and it is. (Qur’ān 19:35)

A similar expression is found elsewhere in the Qur'ān:

Truly, the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness; He created him of dust, then said He unto him, 'Be,' and he was. (Qur'ān 3:59)⁹⁹

Some historical Muslim commentators on the Gospels have in fact availed themselves of a metaphorical approach to Jesus' sonship, as seen in two of the Biblical commentaries we considered in Chapter 1 of this study: the *Radd* attributed to Ghazālī and the commentary by Ṭūfī. The *Radd* devotes considerable attention to the claim in John 10:30, "I and the Father, we are one!" Most of this attention is given to the question of Jesus' oneness with God (to which we will return later in this chapter). Very briefly, however, the *Radd* concludes its discussion of John 10:30 by remarking on the verse's use of the terms "fatherhood" (*abuwwa*) and "sonship" (*banuwwa*). The *Radd* argues that each of these terms should be read as a "metaphor" (*majāz*), and accuses the Jews of misunderstanding Jesus' words as literal (Chidiac 1939, 25)¹⁰⁰

The *Radd* returns later to the terms "son" and "father" (Chidiac 1939, 40-43), dwelling longer on the topic and employing two tactics to challenge Christian notions of Jesus' relationship to God. One tactic is to generalize this notion of sonship, undermining the sense that Jesus' relationship to God is unique. The *Radd* cites several passages from the Hebrew scriptures in the service of this approach; for example, it juxtaposes Psalms 82:6, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you" (RSV), with John 20:17, "I ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God" (Chidiac 1939, 41; our translation). The other tactic is to explicate a metaphorical reading of "son" and "father." Thus the *Radd* explains:

⁹⁹ This comparison between Jesus and Adam is not incompatible with the genealogy outlined in Luke 3:38, "...the son of Adam, the son of God." It is noteworthy, however, that the Alexandrian Vulgate's version of Luke 3:38 avoids using the word "son": *adām min allāh*.

¹⁰⁰ We note that Chidiac's page numbers here refer to the Arabic text and the French translation; he assigns separate pagination to the main body of the book on the one hand and the text and translation on the other.

(Jesus') disciple John used the same language when he understood the metaphorical sense that we give it. In fact he said in his letter (1 John 5:10): "Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah is born (*mawlūd*) of God." The sense in which he used the metaphor, while stating that he did not understand it in its literal sense, is that the father (*al-ab*) is naturally disposed to have intense affection, clemency, mercy, and compassion towards his son (*waladihi*), that he is attentive to draw to him all sorts of goods and to turn away all evil, that he strives to guide him in the ways of happiness...This is the nature of the father (*al-ab*), as we see it.

As for the son (*al-ibn*), his nature is to be respectful to his father (*abihi*), deferential towards him, full of restraint in his presence, obedient to his commands...

Moreover, the respectful attitude toward God of the prophets, their restraint with him, their docility towards whatever he commands, their submission to whatever he forbids—his reverence in this respect is more admirable than the conduct of children (*ibnā'*) towards their fathers (*ābā'ihim*). God is for them the most merciful father (*ab*) and they are for him the most dutiful son (*walad*). This is the deeper meaning of metaphor when using these terms. So when Jesus uses metaphor in designating God as "the Father" (*ab*), the meaning is that God is merciful and gracious in this respect; and when he ascribes "sonship" (*al-banuwwa*) to himself the meaning is that it is full of deep respect and reverence for God...This is also the meaning of the words of his disciple: "This one is born of God ..." (Chidiac 1939, 41-42; our translation)

Here the *Radd* uses both the terms *ibn* and *walad* when detailing the general pattern of sons in their relationship to their fathers, but carefully reserves the term *banuwwa* ("sonship," from *ibn*) for the relationship of Jesus to God. Moreover, the *Radd* reads Jesus' *banuwwa* as an exemplification of the general prophetic attitude towards God. Jesus is foremost a prophet, and the prophets' relationship to God is perhaps a special case of all believers' relationship to God (as described in 1 John 5:10), a relationship the *Radd* views insistently as metaphorical.

Ṭūfī takes a similarly metaphorical approach to the terms "son" and "father." We should note however that Ṭūfī does not immediately grant that Jesus even claimed to be the son of God; he does not display the automatic fidelity to letter of the Gospels we find in the *Radd* (or *Biqā'ī* for the matter, as we noted in Chapter 1). Ṭūfī writes:

With regard to these four Gospels that are in the possession of the Christians, no part of them is identical to the Gospel revealed to Jesus Christ son of Mary. In reality they are only books of biography compiled by the disciples, containing information about the

nature of Christ's birth, his calling people to faith, and the nature of his ascension to heaven after his crucifixion, as they claim. (Demiri 2013, 101)

Moreover, Ṭūfī asserts that “the words that are found in the Gospels consist of the words of the disciples and the followers, with only a small proportion of them representing the actual words of Christ” (Demiri 2013, 103). Ṭūfī explicitly denies that the Trinitarian formula he finds at the opening of each Gospel, “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God,” accurately represents the teachings of Jesus, concluding:

No intelligent person can doubt that had Christ heard this statement from them, he would have invoked (God) against them, so that they would have turned into apes and swine; in sum, he would not have approved of it. (Demiri 2013, 105)

Among arguments Ṭūfī puts forward against the Christian understanding of Jesus as the son of God, he builds on the Qur'ānic analogy between Jesus and Adam.

...He brought Adam into existence in the manner of a craftsman, not from a father or mother. The Noble Qur'ān has indeed explicitly declared the comparability of Jesus with Adam, where God, Glorified is He, says: ‘Verily, the likeness of Jesus before God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him, ‘Be’, and he was.’ And then He brought the majority of his progeny into existence from two parents. These are two extremes, while between them are two intermediate cases: the first one is Eve, who was derived from Adam's body, but had no mother; and the second one is Christ, may the blessings of God be upon him, whom He brought into existence from Mary through the impregnation of the Holy Spirit by a breath he breathed into the neckline of her garment. Thus, she became pregnant with him through pre-eternal omnipotence, not in the conventional human way. The Holy Spirit is Gabriel, one of God's angels and one of His creation, but neither an attribute subsisting in the essence of God nor a third concept [i.e. hypostasis] of God's essence, as the misguided and ignorant Christians have supposed. (Demiri 2013, 113)¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, having considered arguments that Jesus never claimed to be the son (*ibn*) of God and that such a claim would appear to contradict the Qur'ān, Ṭūfī goes on to entertain the

¹⁰¹ Ṭūfī's analogy between the Adam-Eve relationship and the Mary-Jesus relationship clearly recalls Ibn al-'Arabī's analysis of these relationships, as we have discussed in our previous chapter. One might speculate that Ṭūfī has been influenced by Ibn al-'Arabī here.

possibility that Jesus might have made such a claim. On this supposition, he resorts to a metaphorical interpretation not unlike the interpretation given by the *Radd*. He proceeds

by presuming that what is found in these Gospels is actually from Christ's words, except that they are to be understood as an obvious and common metaphor. Giving them a metaphorical [*alā majāz*] interpretation is more befitting than giving them an absurd interpretation. The decision to do so entails taking (Jesus') expressions 'Father' [*al-ab*] and 'son' [*al-ibn*] to correspond to our expressions 'Lord' [*al-rabb*] and 'servant' [*al-'abd*]... The guiding principle when giving a metaphorical interpretation is the fact that a shared value exists between being a 'lord' and being a 'father'; that is to say, the lord's mercy for his servant and the father's mercy for his child. Similarly, a shared value exists between being a son and being a servant, namely, the servant's deep respect for his master and the son's deep respect for his father. This is especially so in the case of Christ, may the blessings of God be upon him, since he did not have a human father and therefore God undertook his upbringing and attended to his affairs as a father would for his child. Thus, the existence of a metaphorical relation is confirmed. (Demiri 2013, 127; bracketed words inserted by us)

Much as the *Radd* understands "son" as a metaphor broadly applicable to many, Ṭūfī generalizes the metaphor. While Ṭūfī acknowledges that Jesus is unusual (for the term "son" applies "especially so in the case of Christ...since he did not have a human father"), he denies that Jesus is exclusive in his relationship to God. For both the *Radd* and Ṭūfī, Jesus is different in degree, not in kind, from other servants of God. This generalized notion of sonship certainly finds support in many verses of the New Testament, including the Gospel of John:

Thus to whoever received him, he gave them power (*sulṭānan*) to become sons of God (*banī Allāh*)... (John 1:12 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Nonetheless, the Gospel of John seems to reserve a singular and incomparable status for the sonship of Jesus, repeatedly calling him the *unique* (Greek, *monogenēs*) son of God. This claim to uniqueness runs against the interpretations of the *Radd* and Ṭūfī, and it is not easily ignored.

The Greek word *monogenēs* has been understood to mean "only-begotten, single" (Liddell and Scott 1889); in the Revised Standard Version, it is always translated as "only."

Three times the Evangelist (possibly in his own voice) indicates the exclusive nature of Jesus' relationship to God:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:14 RSV)

No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1:18 RSV)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 RSV)

In addition, the Evangelist attributes the following words to Jesus himself:

He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:18 RSV)

In all four of these verses, the Alexandrian Vulgate uses the adjective *waḥīd*, which is defined as “alone; by himself; apart from others; solitary; lonely” (Lane 1863) as well as “sole, only, exclusive; singular, unique; matchless, unequalled, incomparable” (Wehr and Cowan 1976). Thus, in the Alexandrian Vulgate, John 1:14 calls Jesus “the only one from God” (*al-waḥīd alladhī min al-ab*), John 1:18 calls him “the only son” (*al-ibn al-waḥīd*), John 3:16 calls him “his only son” (*ibnuhu al-waḥīd*), and John 3:18 calls him “the only son of God” (*ibn allāh al-waḥīd*.)” Ṭūfī directly addresses this description of Jesus in John 1:18, again applying a metaphorical interpretation against the traditional Christian understanding:

We have already explained earlier that the intended meaning of his saying ‘the Son’ is metaphorically ‘the servant’. His being described by oneness does not mean that God has no son other than him, but rather, it means that he is alone in his messengership to the people, in that, there is no similar messenger beside him in his era other than him. And his saying: ‘who is in the bosom (*ḥiḍn*) of his Father,’ means that (Jesus) is under (God’s) care and protection from enemies until the determined time. And (God) is the One Who supports him with powers and miracles. Therefore, it is appropriate that all this be interpreted in the sense of upbringing (*ḥiḍāna*), because God, Exalted is He, takes care of His messengers just as someone who brings up a child (*ḥāḍin*) would take care of his child. (Demiri 2013, 307)

These metaphorical interpretations stand out in contrast with Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the sonship of Jesus. We will turn now to the question of how Ibn al-‘Arabī might have dealt with the Gospel of John’s designation of Jesus as the unique son of God, and will find multiple points on which the Shaykh would most likely have differed with both the *Radd* and Ṭūfī. In support of our speculative answer to this question, we will focus on Chapter 15 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, “The Signet of the Wisdom of Prophethood in the ‘Īsawī Saying,” in which Jesus devotes considerable attention to questions of Jesus’ sonship, his uniqueness, and his oneness with God.

4.2. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Views on the Sonship of Jesus

That his relationship to his Lord would hold true... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Fuṣūṣ Chapter 15

In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares to a Judean audience, “You all are from below, I am from above; you all are from this world, I am not from this world” (John 8:23 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation). This appears to be in line with several boasts Jesus makes in that Gospel to be the son of God (*ibn allāh*). Even when Jesus refers implicitly to himself as the “son of man” (*ibn al-bashar*), he describes himself as connecting heaven above with the world below, speaking of angels ascending and descending on the son of man (John 1:51) and claiming that the son of man ascends to heaven because he has descended from heaven (John 3:13).

For Ibn al-‘Arabī too, Jesus connects the higher with the lower in a way that invites questions of his parental origin. He writes in Chapter 15 of the *Fuṣūṣ* that Jesus’ “relationship to his Lord would hold true,” and that by this “he would affect the high and the lowly” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 157). Our aim here is to decipher what Ibn al-‘Arabī means when he speaks of Jesus’ “relationship to his Lord,” and to inquire how this relationship compares with the Gospel’s understanding that Jesus is the unique (*monogenēs* or *waḥīd*) son of God, a mediator between heaven and earth. We will attempt to construct a plausible interpretation that Ibn al-

ʿArabī considers Jesus to have a one-of-a-kind filial relationship to God, an understanding compatible with the words of the Gospel of John, but an understanding different from the conventional Christian understanding of this relationship. In articulating this relationship, Ibn al-ʿArabī will also demonstrate a departure from traditional Islamic understandings.

As we have noted, Muslims typically buttress the thesis that Jesus is a created being (rather than the offspring of God) by pointing to the Qurʾānic simile comparing Jesus with the creation of Adam. By contrast, Ibn al-ʿArabī adopts, in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, the unusual tactic of driving a wedge between Jesus and Adam. He makes his case by parsing two points of dissimilarity in their nature and origin. First, he writes:

Jesus was not [like Adam], for the inbreathing of the spirit was incorporated into the fashioning of his body [*jismihi*] and mortal form. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 163; bracketed clarifications inserted by us)

Although Ibn al-ʿArabī uses the word *jism* here for the “body” of Jesus, he sharpens the point elsewhere by using the word *jasad*. In a 2002 article, Souad Hakim takes note of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s choice of the word *jasad* to designate Jesus’ body:

Jesus “is closer to being a form (*jasad*) than a body (*jism*). His case is thus like that of the angelic and fiery spirits who take form and become visible to the eye, so that the eyes see these bodies, while he [i.e. each individual spirit] remains in himself a spirit.” (Hakim 2002, 8-9)

We will return to the question of Jesus having a *jasad* rather than a *jism* in Chapter 5, where we will discuss it in more detail. For our present purposes, we will simply register the fact that Ibn al-ʿArabī regards Jesus as not having a natural human body, and note that it constitutes one important contrast between Jesus and Adam.

Second, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s account of the engendering of Jesus emphasizes its resemblance to a *procreative* act as opposed to the creative act that brought Adam into existence. Impressing

this (perhaps startling) emphasis in the *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, Ibn ‘Arabī draws on the Qur’ānic narrative of Mary’s pregnancy following the visit of the angel Gabriel:

And mention in the Book Mary when she withdrew from her people to an eastern place, and she took a veil apart from them; then We sent unto her Our Spirit that presented himself to her a man without fault. She said, ‘I take refuge in the All-merciful from thee! If thou fearest God...He said, ‘I am but a messenger come from thy Lord, to give thee a boy most pure. She said, ‘How shall I have a son whom no mortal has touched, neither have I been unchaste?’ He said, ‘Even so thy Lord has said: “Easy is that for Me; and that We may appoint him a sign unto men and a mercy from Us; it is a thing decreed.”’ So she conceived him, and withdrew with him to a distant place. (Qur’ān 19:16-22)¹⁰²

As we have just seen, Ṭūfī recounts the encounter between Mary and Gabriel (“the Holy Spirit”) in these terms:

...and the second one is Christ, may the blessings of God be upon him, whom He brought into existence from Mary through the impregnation of the Holy Spirit by a breath he breathed into the neckline of her garment. Thus, she became pregnant with him through pre-eternal omnipotence, not in the conventional human way. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 113)

¹⁰² This Qur’ānic account differs from accounts in the Gospels, but it bears the strongest resemblance to the Gospel of Luke’s story of the appearance of Gabriel to Mary and Gabriel’s forecast of the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). In the Qur’ānic account the angel Gabriel seems to be conflated with the Holy Spirit in the Gospel’s words, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Luke 1:35 RSV). Moreover, Gabriel’s prediction and the conception of Jesus seem to be conflated as a single occasion in the Qur’ānic verse (and certainly are in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the verse), as are also sometimes conflated in Christian understandings of Luke.

It is noteworthy that the Gospel of John contains no narrative of the conception and birth of Jesus to Mary. Rather, that Gospel states in John 1:14 that “the Word became flesh”—or “the Word, he became a body” in the Alexandrian Vulgate’s Arabic translation—without mention of Jesus’ mother. Moreover, John (as opposed to the narratives in both Luke and Matthew) seems uncommitted to defending the claim that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem (see John 7:42). Nonetheless, Jesus’ (unnamed) mother plays an important role in two key episodes in the Gospel of John (2:1-5 and 20:25-27), leaving the reader of that Gospel to wonder how Jesus’ mother came to be pregnant with him, and to wonder why he is called the son of God.

Given the distance between the Gospel of John and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s commentary on the Qur’ānic account of Jesus’ birth, one might ask about how the latter would be relevant to an Akbarian commentary on the Gospel of John. Initially, our question in this chapter has addressed Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the Christian claim that Jesus was the son of God (a question that can be applied to any of the Gospels), and particularly the Christian claim that Jesus was the *unique* son God (a question especially applicable to the Gospel of John). As our discussion proceeds, we will find that Ibn al-‘Arabī considers the Christian doctrine of Jesus’ sonship to be inseparable from the Christian doctrine of Jesus’ divinity, an inseparability that applies most directly to the Gospel of John. Thus, our exploration of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interpretation of the birth of Jesus lays the groundwork for assessing how Ibn al-‘Arabī might have read the Gospel of John, most focally addressing the dual implication of Jesus’ filial relationship to God and his identity with God in the utterance, “I and the Father, we are one” (John 10:30).

By contrast with Ṭūfī’s assertion that Mary “became pregnant with...not in the conventional human way,” Ibn al-‘Arabī makes one of his more surprising assertions in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15 when he writes that this pregnancy took place “in only the usual way” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 160). He emphasizes the Qur’ānic claim that Gabriel approached Mary in an adopted human form, as “a man without fault” (Qur’ān 19:17), and describes Mary as perceiving Gabriel’s intentions as sexual:

When the *trusted spirit*—that is, Gabriel—appeared to Mary, upon them both be peace, as a man without fault, she imagined that he was a man intent on lying with her, so she sought refuge from him in God with all she had, knowing as she did that such a thing was forbidden. She attained complete presence with God, which is the spirit and meaning. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 158)¹⁰³

According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, upon attaining “complete presence with God,” Mary became receptive to Gabriel, when “[d]esire [*shahwa*] flowed in Mary” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 159; bracketed word inserted by us). *Shahwa* means “desire, or longing, or yearning” and may be rendered as “appetite,” “carnal lust,” or “the gratification of venereal lust” (Lane 1863). Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī makes more explicit the resemblance of this encounter to coitus than Ṭūfī does (for whom Gabriel “breathed into the neckline of her garment”). Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī concludes that Jesus

emerged in the form of a mortal man because of his mother and because of Gabriel’s appearance in the form of a mortal man, so that existentiation would take place for the species of man in only the usual way. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 160)

This is not to deny that, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, the birth of Jesus is incomparable. In another chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* (Chapter 20), Ibn al-‘Arabī endorses the typical Christian and Muslim understanding that Jesus was born to a virgin:

...Mary gave birth to Jesus without a male, without the usual union with a man as normally considered. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 216)

¹⁰³ This description of Gabriel as a “trusted spirit” is from Qur’ān 26:193.

In Chapter 15, Ibn al-‘Arabī makes this assertion even stronger, stating that the manner of Jesus’ birth “was the case for no other” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163)—truly unique. What makes the birth of Jesus unique is the convergence of two simultaneous claims: the claim that Jesus, unlike most humans, had no human father, and the claim that Jesus, unlike Adam, was conceived by an act of apparent procreation. This portrayal of Mary’s pregnancy as both ordinary and extraordinary makes Ibn al-‘Arabī’s account even stranger and perplexing than we might have previously thought.

Ibn al-‘Arabī does not appear to steer away from the more challenging implications of Jesus being a *walad* (“offspring”), refusing to take advantage of the metaphorical interpretation permitted by the Arabic word *ibn* (“son”). In fact, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s orientation to the notion of metaphor marks a stark departure from the *Radd*, Ṭūfī, and similar commentators. As we have noted in Chapter 1, Ibn al-‘Arabī does employ the word metaphor, *majāz*, in his writings, but uses this term for purposes very differently from those Biblical commentators. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, “metaphor” is an ontological term rather than a hermeneutical term; he typically treats the term “metaphorical” (*majāzī*) as the antonym of “real” (*ḥaqīqī*), using the former term to describe the whole of the created world and using the latter to describe God (whom Ibn al-‘Arabī very frequently calls “the Real,” *al-ḥaqq*). But in his discussion of Jesus’ sonship in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, Ibn al-‘Arabī does not structure his discussion around the dichotomy of the real and the metaphorical, but around the dichotomy of reality (*ḥaqq*) and conjecture (*wahm*).

While, in his translation of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Caner Dagli renders *wahm* as “imagination,” this is a bit misleading; the word “imagination” is better reserved to translate *khayāl*, which speaks in the stricter sense of imagination as a visionary or sensorial experience: “forming an image”

(Lane 1863).¹⁰⁴ The word *wahm* means “delusive imagination, erroneous impression, fancy, delusion; belief, guess, surmise; conjecture” (Wehr and Cowan 1976). We will translate *wahm* as “conjecture” (generally meaning “mistaken conjecture”), and will translate the adjective *mutawahham* “conjectured.” In *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15 Ibn al-‘Arabī employs the opposition of reality and false conjecture to draw a distinction between Gabriel’s and Mary’s roles in engendering Jesus:

The body [*jism*] of Jesus was created from the real [*muḥaqqaq*] water of Mary and from the conjectured [*mutawahham*] water of Gabriel...and emerged in the form of a mortal man because of his mother and because of Gabriel’s appearance in the form of a mortal man, so that existention would take place for the species of man in only the usual way. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 159-160; Dagli’s translation revised by us)

While Ibn al-‘Arabī portrays the collaboration of Gabriel and Mary in the existention of Jesus as an act of apparent coitus, he also emphasizes the fact that there is a merely conjectural aspect to this act. He states the plain fact that “indeed he was the son [*ibn*] of Mary” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 162; bracketed word inserted by us), reflecting the standard Qur’ānic appellation of Jesus; but by calling Gabriel’s contribution “conjectural” he undermines the notion that this is a real act of procreation. This is further undermined by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s description of Gabriel’s human form (*ṣūrat al-bashar*) when he writes that Gabriel merely “appeared [*tamaththala*] to Mary” and that she “she imagined [*takhayalat*] that he was a man [*bashar*] intent on lying with her” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 158; bracketed words inserted by us). It is evident that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s pursuit of the question of Jesus’ parentage leads him to affirm Mary as his real mother and to deny Gabriel as his real father.

¹⁰⁴ *Khayāl* is a rather rich term frequent elsewhere in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings; it forms the kernel of an elaborate ontological theory for which Henry Corbin coined the adjective “imaginal.” Dagli uses the word “imagination” to translate both *khayāl* and *wahm*, and he translates the adjective *mutawahham* as “imaginational.” When Dagli translates *wahm* and its cognates, he marks his translation with a subscript *w* to distinguish it from *khayāl* and its cognates.

This opens two possible directions in our understanding of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s claim. One possibility is to read Ibn al-‘Arabī as meaning that Jesus had no father at all. He frames his depiction of Jesus’ origin as an image of begetting only to erase that image, leaving Mary as Jesus’ sole real parent. Alternatively, and perhaps more controversially, we might read Ibn al-‘Arabī as representing Gabriel as a surrogate for God. By this account, Gabriel’s paternal relationship to Jesus is merely conjectural, while God’s paternal relationship to God is real; God is the real agent in the creation of Jesus, a Creator resorting to an imaginal act of procreation in the guise of Gabriel.

To support this latter interpretation, we will turn to the brief poem that opens *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, where Ibn al-‘Arabī concisely defines and frames his central question in this chapter:

From the water of Mary or the inbreathing of Gabriel
 In the form of a man that came to exist out of clay,
 The spirit took on existence in a purified essence
 Out of the nature you call Sijjīn—
 That is why he was destined to reside
 Therein over a thousand years—
 A spirit from God, not another; and because of this
 Did he give life to the dead and make birds from clay,
 That his relationship to his Lord would hold true
 And by which he would affect the high and the lowly.
 God purified him bodily, and made him untouched in spirit
 And made him a likeness of bringing into being.¹⁰⁵
 (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 157)

These verses constitute one long sentence, with several subordinate clauses and free-floating pronouns (all of which is typical of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writing style), and some parsing will be required to clarify Ibn al-‘Arabī’s point. Stripped to its bare bones, the sentence states, “The

¹⁰⁵ This is based on Dagli’s translation (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 157), but we have revised Dagli’s punctuation. Dagli translates the poem as a question, but the original Arabic is not framed as a question; thus we have presented it as a statement. In doing this we have followed the lead of other translators who present it as a statement: Burckhardt (Ibn ‘Arabī 1975, 68), Austin (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980, 174), and Abrahamov (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2015a, 104), and Twinch, Clark, and Hirtenstein (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2015b).

spirit took on existence,” and it is clear from the prose that makes up the body of the chapter, the sentence is concerned with the existentionation of Jesus. However, the secondary phrases and clauses give sharper clarity to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s central question: do we attribute the origination of Jesus to “the water or Mary or the inbreathing of Gabriel”? Midway through the poem, Ibn al-‘Arabī answers the question: Jesus is “[a] spirit from God, not another.” More to the point, he asserts that Jesus’ “relationship to his Lord would hold true.” It is on this latter assertion that we will focus, and will suggest that Ibn al-‘Arabī might be articulating a claim that Jesus was the son of God.

The clause, “[t]hat his relationship to his Lord would hold true,” translates *hattā yaṣiḥḥa lahu min rabbihi nasabun*. Dagli translates *nasab* as “relationship;” it typically means, more narrowly, “[r]elationship; relation, kindred; consanguinity; [family; race; lineage; parentage; pedigree; genealogy; origin; reputed relationship or lineage or origin,]...with respect to father and mother;...or with respect to fathers only” (Lane 1863; the bracketed phrases are in the original). This should be contrasted with the cognate noun *nisba*, which can mean “relationship” in a more general sense; its meanings include “proportion; comparison; with respect to quantity, measure, and the like” (Lane 1863). Ibn al-‘Arabī frequently uses the word *nisba* elsewhere in the *Fuṣūṣ*; but on this occasion he chooses *nasab*, with its genealogical connotations, to designate the relationship of Jesus to God, readily calling to mind the relationship of a son to a father. To verify whether Ibn al-‘Arabī has this filial relationship in mind, we will look at his use of the cognate verb *nasaba*—“to relate”—elsewhere in the same chapter.

Bearing most directly on this question is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of *nasaba* when he frames the question of Jesus’ paternity, relating Jesus to Gabriel, on the one hand, and to God, on the

other. The following passage clearly sets the two relationships against one another and against Jesus' filial relationship with his mother:

Differences of opinion arose among the sects as to what Jesus was. There are those who argue from his mortal, human form, saying that he is the son of Mary. There are those who argue from the represented mortal nature and associate him with Gabriel [*fayunasibahu li jibra'il*]. Some make an argument based on the quickening of the dead which became manifest from him, and associate him with God [*fayunasibahu ilā'llāh*] through the aspect of spirit, saying that he is the Spirit of God, meaning that by him life manifests from those in whom he breathes. Sometimes God is conjectured to be in him, sometimes the angel is conjectured to be in him, and sometimes the human and mortal aspects are conjectured to be in him. (Ibn al-'Arabī 2004b, 163; Dagli's translation revised by us, bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

The expression *nasabahu ilā* followed by the name of person can be translated as “[h]e asserted him to be related to such a one,” “he referred his lineage, or origin, to such a one,” or “[h]e named him, or called him, in relation, or reference, to such a one; meaning an ancestor” (Lane 1863). From the context, it seems that when Ibn al-'Arabī writes *fayunasibahu ilā'llāh*, he means, in effect, that one “asserts Jesus to be related to God” as a son to a father. When Ibn al-'Arabī highlights those “among the sects” who assert this relationship, he is plainly referring to the Christian doctrine that Jesus is the son of God.

At times, Ibn al-'Arabī uses the verb *nasaba* to relate Jesus not to persons but to his miraculous powers. Here too the Shaykh is concerned with the nature of Jesus' relationship to God; Jesus' relationship to the power to heal is intimately connected with his relationship to God.

Such is also the case with, *And thou healed the blind and the leper*, and all else that is attributed [*yunsabu*] to him and to *the leave of God*, as well as to the leave alluded to in His Words such as, *By My leave*, and, *By the leave of God*. (Ibn al-'Arabī 2004b, 160)

Thus Ibn al-'Arabī uses *nasaba* to articulate a dual relationship, relating such powers to both Jesus (as the apparent agent) and to God (as the bestower of permission and the real agent). This relationship raises challenging doctrinal questions; it calls to mind the Christian citation of Jesus'

power to quicken the dead to prove his filial relationship with God, and it recalls the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John:

As the Father resurrects the dead and enlivens them, the son likewise enlivens whom he wishes. (John 5:21 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

In *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of Jesus’ power to quicken never strays from the question of Jesus’ parental origins. Consider the following passage, in which Jesus’ relationship with Gabriel is once again juxtaposed with the question of Jesus’ relationship to God:

Jesus emerged and quickened the dead, for he was the Spirit of God. The quickening was that of God, while the inbreathing belonged to Jesus, just as the inbreathing belonged to Gabriel while the Word was God’s. Jesus’ quickening of the dead was a real quickening with respect to what manifested from his inbreathing, as was the case when he became manifest out of the form of his mother. However, his quickening was also conjectured with respect to its coming from him, for it was naught but God’s. He brought them together by virtue of the reality he was created to be. As we have said, he was created from conjectured water and real water, so quickening is attributed to him [*yunsabu ilayhi*] in a real way from one point of view and in a conjectured way from another. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 160; Dagli’s translation revised by us, bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī repeatedly connects one question—whether power to quicken the dead should be attributed to Jesus or God—with another question—to whom Jesus’ origin should be attributed. Just as “the inbreathing belonged to Jesus” in Jesus’ act of raising the dead, “the inbreathing belonged to Gabriel” in Gabriel’s act of bringing Jesus into existence; but in both instances, this inbreathing is merely conjecturally attributed to Jesus and Gabriel, while it really belongs to God. With respect to the question of Jesus’ origin, Ibn al-‘Arabī does not frame the question in terms of whether or not Jesus had a father; rather he frames it in terms of whether Gabriel or God was Jesus’ father. This is a question framed in terms of Jesus’ conjectured father as opposed to his real father.

Elsewhere, Ibn al-‘Arabī explicitly uses the verb *nasaba* to relate Jesus to the Christian doctrine of Jesus’ divinity:

This has led some to hold the position of the incarnation, and to hold, by virtue of the dead he brought to life, that he is God. For this reason they have been associated [*nusibū*] with unbelief...One who hears this might imagine that they attribute [*nasabū*] divinity to the form, making it identical with the form... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 162; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

In our analysis of the verse with which we opened this chapter, “I and the Father, we are one!” (John 10:30), we have attempted to distinguish the question of Jesus’ sonship from the question of Jesus’ divinity, treating these questions separately. The *Radd* and *Ṭūfī* in fact divorce these two questions, affirming a metaphorical understanding of Jesus’ sonship that denies Jesus’ divinity. But this is an artificial division for the Gospel of John, where the claim that Jesus is the son of God implies the claim that he is God. Ibn al-‘Arabī himself views these two questions as intertwined. In addition to the quotation we have just drawn from *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, a passage later in the same chapter cites Qur’ān 5:116, interrogating the connection between the ‘Īsawī word and the claim that Jesus is God:

When the Real confronted this Christic [‘*ī*sawī] word...He asked it whether what had been attributed [*nasaba*] to it was true or not...He said, *Didst thou say unto men, “Take me and my mother as divinities apart from God?”*” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 169; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

It is not immediately evident in either of these passages that Ibn al-‘Arabī is affirming the Christian doctrine of Jesus’ divinity; rather, he appears to be holding this doctrine at arms’ length. He labels the attribution of divinity to Jesus as “unbelief,” and his citation of Qur’ān 5:116 is an apparent condemnation of the doctrine. We will return to the question of unbelief later in this chapter. At this point, it should be clear that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s description of Jesus’ “relationship to his Lord [*rabbīhi nasabun*]” is never distant from his concern with Christian doctrines.

If we are correct in reading the expression, “his relationship to his Lord,” as a reference to the Christian doctrine of Jesus’ filial relationship with God, we must strive for more clarity

regarding Ibn al-‘Arabī’s comportment towards that doctrine. Again, the clause, “[t]hat his relationship to his Lord would hold true,” translates *ḥattā yaṣiḥḥa lahu min rabbihi nasabun*. We must now consider the word *yaṣiḥḥa* (translated by Dagli as “would hold true”), a conjugation of *saḥḥa*. The verb primarily means “was, or became, healthy, or sound;” its secondary meaning is “was, or became, [or proved,] sound, valid,...true, right,...correct, just or proper,...free...from everything that might that would occasion doubt or suspicion or evil opinion” (Lane 1863; the bracketed phrases are in the original).

One approach in translating Ibn al-‘Arabī’s poetic line would be to follow the secondary meaning. Recalling that *nasab* includes among its definitions the meaning “reputed relationship or lineage or origin,” and keeping in mind *saḥḥa*’s penumbra of “suspicion,” we might translate *ḥattā yaṣiḥḥa lahu min rabbihi nasabun* thus: “in order that [Jesus’] (reputed) parental origin from his Lord might be proved valid (or free from doubt or suspicion).” Binyamin Abrahamov’s translation of the *Fuṣūṣ* appears to follow this meaning of *saḥḥa*: “Till his association with His Lord...became valid” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2015a, 104). If this reading is correct, Ibn al-‘Arabī could be read as taking a bold stance in favor of the Gospels’ claim that Jesus is the son of God, validating this claim in the face of Islamic orthodoxy’s repudiation of this claim.

We should, however, keep in mind the other definition of *saḥḥa*: “was, or became, healthy, or sound;” from this point of view, Ibn al-‘Arabī could be read as correcting a Christian misunderstanding of Jesus’ relationship to God. We suspect that Ibn al-‘Arabī is taking both approaches simultaneously, both validating and correcting the Christian claim that Jesus is the son of God. That is, we understand Ibn al-‘Arabī to be affirming that Jesus was the son of God, but revising and rectifying that claim, recasting that filial relationship in his own peculiar fashion. As we have seen in the case of the Trinity in the previous chapter, Ibn al-‘Arabī

sometimes embraces Christian terminology only to spin out his own idiosyncratic interpretations, standing at some distance from both Islamic and Christian traditional theology.

To substantiate this reading as both validating and rectifying the doctrine of Jesus' filial relationship to God, we will have to dig further into *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15. Ibn al-ʿArabī's argument in this chapter unfolds in a somewhat arcane manner; his arguments often look initially like a series of non sequiturs, leaving it up to the reader to make explicit the unstated connections. One link in his argument is to establish Jesus' dual genealogical debt to both Mary and Gabriel:

If it were not for the fact that there is conjecture and true reality in the matter, this form would not allow of these two aspects. Nay, it has these two aspects because it is so accorded by the makeup of Jesus. Jesus emerged out of humility, so much so that it is prescribed for his community... This aspect stems from his mother, for lowliness belongs to woman, as does humility, for she is below man both legally and physically. Any power he possessed to give life or to heal came from the aspect of Gabriel's breath into the form of a mortal. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 161; Dagli's translation revised by us)

It is clear here that Ibn al-ʿArabī is not thinking of Jesus as owing his life and his traits to a single parent, as would be the case if Mary were considered to be Jesus' only real parent.

Another link in the argument is Ibn al-ʿArabī's allusion to a story from *Sūra* 20 of the Qur'ān; that story briefly recounts an incident in which a Samaritan seizes a handful of dust from the ground (where the angel Gabriel had trodden) and casts the dust on the Golden Calf to bring it to life (Qur'ān 20:96). According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the power that brings the Golden Calf to life might conjecturally be attributed to the Samaritan; that power more properly belongs to Gabriel, who left a trace of his power in the dust seized by the Samaritan.

A third link in the argument is Jesus' own power to engender new life, as in Ibn al-ʿArabī's opening poem, drawing a link between that power and Jesus' relationship with God. For Jesus emerges from "[a] sprit from God, not another"—that is, not "[f]rom the water of Mary or the inbreathing of Gabriel;" thus

Did he give life to the dead and make birds from clay,
That his relationship to his Lord would hold true...
(Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 157)

Ibn al-‘Arabī repeatedly draws analogies between the life-giving power of Gabriel and the life-giving power of Jesus, suggesting a way that the reader might link together his central argument. Just as the power conjecturally attributed to Jesus actually comes from God, the power conjecturally attributed to the Samaritan actually comes from Gabriel. Yet, in this latter instance, that power in reality belongs to God, not Gabriel. By the same argument, the power to engender Jesus conjecturally belongs to Gabriel, insofar as he breathed into Mary at the conception of Jesus; but in reality, that power belongs to God, who conveys that power to Mary through Gabriel as a medium. It is with this in mind that we revisit to this passage:

The quickening was that of God, while the inbreathing belonged to Jesus, just as the inbreathing belonged to Gabriel while the Word was God’s. Jesus’ quickening of the dead was a real quickening with respect to what manifested from his inbreathing, as was the case when he became manifest out of the form of his mother. However, his quickening was also conjectured with respect to its coming from him, for it was naught but God’s. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 60; Dagli’s translation revised by us)

Because Ibn al-‘Arabī makes a point of portraying Gabriel as taking human form to beget Jesus—albeit imaginally—“so that existentionation would take place for the species of man in only the usual way” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 160), it is difficult to overlook his representation of Jesus as having a father. Yet Gabriel is merely the surrogate father; in the end, Ibn al-‘Arabī skips over Gabriel as the middle term between Jesus and God, resulting in a portrait of Jesus as the son of God and validating Jesus’ filial-paternal relationship to his Lord.

We must then inquire once more into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the Qur’ānic comparison of Jesus to the creation of Adam. We will recall once again the wording of Qur’ān 3:59, which says:

Truly, the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness; He created him of dust, then said He unto him, 'Be,' and he was.

Ibn al-ʿArabī might have an unconventional understanding of the proposition that Jesus' likeness (*mathala ʿīsā*) is like Adam's likeness (*kamathali ādam*). The opening poem of *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15 concludes with the assertion that God made Jesus "a likeness of bringing into being" (*mithlan bi takwīn*), which we take to be an allusion to Jesus' likeness in Qur'ān 3:59. Yet this likeness can be understood two different ways. If we understand this to mean that Jesus is *brought into existence* in the same manner as Adam, we would have the traditional Islamic understanding that there is virtually no difference between the creation of Jesus and the creation of Adam. If, however, if we understand this to mean that Jesus *brings into existence*, and that Jesus' action resembles God's action in bringing Adam into existence, Jesus would not be the object of creation but the subject of creation (while keeping in mind that God is the ultimate agent of Jesus' creative activity). From this perspective, God's creation of Adam would not resemble the birth of Jesus so much as Jesus' creation of birds from clay (as in Qur'ān 3:49 and 5:110).

We suspect that this latter likeness is what Ibn al-ʿArabī has in mind when he calls Jesus "a likeness of bringing into being," an understanding possibly supported elsewhere in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15:

All existent things are the inexhaustible Words of God; all come from *Be!*, and *Be!* is a Word of God. Is the Word related to God with respect to what He is, its quiddity thus being unknown, or does He descend, transcendent is He, into the form of the one who says, *Be!*, the utterance *Be!* being the reality of that form into which He descends and in which He is manifest? Some knowers hold the first view, and some the other, while others experience bewilderment in the matter and know not. This matter can only be known through taste, as when Abū Yazīd breathed into an ant he had killed, giving it life. Upon that he knew who breathed, and so breathed. He was Christic [*ʿīsawī*] in his locus of witnessing. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 164)

Jesus is the Word of God (Qur'ān 4:171), and Jesus is "Be!" in a dual sense; he is called into existence by the Word of God, and he also calls living beings into existence. From one point of

view, the existentiating Word is essentially “unknown;” from another point of view, this Word is “the reality of that form into which He descends and in which He is manifest”—the manifest form of Jesus, into which God’s Word descends.

However we might sort out this question, it seems clear that Ibn al-‘Arabī insists on asserting a difference between Adam and Jesus. For he writes of Jesus:

...[H]e is the Word of God, and he is the Spirit of God, and he is the slave of God. This is the case for no other in the domain of sensorial form. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163)

He continues, observing that humans in general are called the children of their human fathers, from whom they receive their bodies, not the children of God, from whom they receive their spirits:

Indeed, all individuals are related to their form-possessing father, and not to one who breathed his spirit while in the form of a mortal man. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163)

He goes on to explain that Adam, though having no human father, is not the son of God, but is related to God in the same manner as humans in general, because we distinguish between Adam’s body and the spirit he owes to God:

When God fashioned the body of man, spoken of in His Saying, *And when We fashioned him*, He breathed into him, transcendent is He, of His Spirit. Thus the spirit, as far as his being and his identity are concerned, is associated with Him, transcendent is He. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163)

He concludes by remarking that the case of Jesus is not like that of Adam. Jesus is singular in his relationship with God, from whom he received his spirit, because there is no distinction between Jesus’ body and his spirit:

Jesus was not so, for the inbreathing of the spirit was incorporated into the fashioning of his body and mortal form. As we have already mentioned, this was the case for no other. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163)

This means that Jesus is not simply fashioned and breathed into (like Adam), nor similar in nature to any other human being, but utterly exceptional.

Thus there may be a plausible case to be made that Ibn al-‘Arabī would have affirmed Jesus as the unique son of God, and that if Ibn al-‘Arabī were to encounter the Gospel of John, he would have found much to agree with in that Gospel’s description of Jesus as *ho monogenēs huios theou* or *ibn allāh al-waḥīd*. Yet even if Ibn al-‘Arabī were to endorse the Gospel’s description, he would certainly have understood this description in a manner quite different from conventional Christianity. In addition to this, Ibn al-‘Arabī would probably have acknowledged the intertwined implications of Jesus’ filial relationship with God and his equation with God, as expressed in the Johannine utterance of Jesus, “I and the Father, we are one;” but here too his understanding of this utterance would have departed from the typical Christian interpretation. In the remainder of this chapter, we will attempt to explicate Ibn al-‘Arabī’s peculiar understanding of this equation of Jesus with God.

4.3. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Views on the Oneness of Jesus and God

It used to be said upon his quickening of the dead, ‘It is He, it is not He.’ — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Fuṣūṣ Chapter 15

It should be clear at this point that, while Ibn al-‘Arabī makes space for an understanding of Jesus as the son of God, he certainly does not understand Jesus’ sonship in terms of an eternal, uncreated relationship; for Ibn al-‘Arabī, Jesus is not one of the three persons of the Trinity, but a human being whose special relationship with God results from a unique act of creation that bears, in an unparalleled way, a resemblance to procreation. Despite this departure from conventional Christology, Ibn al-‘Arabī frames this exceptional relationship in a way that permits an equally exceptional manifestation of divinity in Jesus’ humanity. To gain some understanding of how Ibn al-‘Arabī might have understood Jesus’ claim that he and God were one (*wāḥid*, John 10:30 Alexandrian Vulgate), we must step back to survey the larger picture of

Akbarian ontology. Ibn al-‘Arabī expresses in his writings an ontological view that has been frequently labeled as a doctrine of “Oneness of Being” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). In an essay entitled “Oneness of Being,” Chittick reviews the history of the use of the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* and its application to the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī. He writes that

even if the Shaykh al-Akbar never employs the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he frequently makes statements that approximate it, and we are certainly justified in claiming that he supported *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the literal sense of the term. However, we cannot claim that “Oneness of Being” is a sufficient description of his ontology, since he affirms the “manyness of reality” with equal vigor. Hence we find that he often refers to *wujūd* in its fullness as the One/Many (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*). (Chittick 1994, 15)¹⁰⁶

We will find later in this discussion that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s central concern with the paradoxical notion of the One/Many (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*)—designating an ontological state that is simultaneously singular and plural—will bear directly an Akbarian understanding of the Christian doctrine that Jesus was one with God.

The first word in the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd*, *waḥda*, means “oneness” or “unity.” The second word, *wujūd*, is translated as “being” or “existence.” Though, as Chittick notes, Ibn al-‘Arabī never used the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he treated the individual terms *waḥda* and *wujūd* in distinctive ways, and his perspective on these words merits closer attention. Regarding *wujūd*, Chittick observes:

The term *wujūd* has typically been translated into English as “being” or “existence,” and this often does justice to the way it is employed in Islamic philosophy and Kalām (dogmatic theology). However, the primary sense of the term is “finding” or “to be found,” and Ibn al-‘Arabī never forgets this...

The different senses in which the term is employed have to do with the different modalities in which the single reality of *wujūd* manifests itself. On the highest level,

¹⁰⁶ Chittick notes that the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* is not native to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own writings, but was applied retroactively to those writings by his disciples in an effort to integrate his ideas with Peripatetic philosophy (Chittick 1994, 178-179, footnote 1). These disciples include Ibn al-‘Arabī’s adopted son and designated successor, Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, who was both more systematic and more philosophically-inclined than his master. We are cautioned not to read Ibn al-‘Arabī ontological theories through the lens of Greek philosophy. See also Chittick’s article, “Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī on the Oneness of Being” (Chittick 1981b).

wujūd is the absolute and nondelimited reality of God, the “Necessary Being” (*wājib al-wujūd*) that cannot not exist. In this sense, *wujūd* designates the Essence of God or of the Real (*dhāt al-ḥaqq*), the only reality that is real in every respect. On lower levels, *wujūd* is the underlying substance of “everything other than God” (*mā siwā Allāh*)—which is how Ibn al-‘Arabī and others define the “cosmos” or “universe” (*al-‘ālam*). Hence, in a secondary meaning, the term *wujūd* is used as shorthand to refer to the whole cosmos, to everything that exists. It can also be employed to refer to the existence of each and every thing that is found in the universe. (Chittick 1994, 15-16)

Ibn al-‘Arabī understands the unity of the existence of the cosmos as an affirmation of the singularity and unity (*tawḥīd*) of God. Chittick continues:

In short, the later Islamic tradition is correct to ascribe the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* to Ibn al-‘Arabī, because he affirms that *wujūd* in its truest sense is a single reality and that there cannot be two *wujūds*. Here he is following in the footsteps of a number of earlier thinkers, like the famous Ghazalī, who glossed the declaration of God’s unity (*tawḥīd*)—the statement, “There is no god but God”—to mean, “There is nothing in *wujūd* but God.” (Chittick 1994, 16)

As for “oneness,” *waḥda*, Ibn al-‘Arabī has a nuanced understanding of this term and of the related word *wāḥid*, the number “one”—the same word used in the Alexandrian Vulgate to describe the relationship of Jesus with his Father in John 10:30. Ibn al-‘Arabī draws a distinction between *wāḥid* and another Arabic for “one,” *aḥad*. Of *aḥad*, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes in his *Kitāb al-Alif* (3-4):

The *aḥad* does not accept association, and no worship is directed toward it. On the contrary, worship belongs to the Lord, so pay attention to giving the station of Lordship its full due and leaving unity in the *tanzīh* to which we have alluded. The *aḥad* is exalted, forbidden through its unreachability, and it remains forever in obscurity. There can never be any self-disclosure through it, for its reality forbids that. It is the “face” that possesses the “burning glories.” What is it like?! So, my brothers, never hope to lift this veil! (Chittick 1998b, 168)

The term *tanzīh*, “incomparability,” indicates the respect in which God transcends and is untouched by God, by contrast with *tashbīh*, “similarity.” In Chittick’s account of these two terms in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought, he writes:

Wujūd as *wujūd* is unknowable, which is to say that the Essence of the Real remains forever curtained. This perspective correlates with *tanzīh*, the assertion of God’s

incomparability. However, God shows Himself through His creative activity, so creation is *wujūd*'s self-disclosure. *Wujūd* can be known inasmuch as it is bound and constrained by the entities. From this point of view, we are justified in saying that God is, in a certain sense, similar to the things (*tashbīh*). These two viewpoints, then—*tanzīh* and *tashbīh*—are the “two eyes” by means of which the Folk of God look upon all things. They are the perspectives of reason, which declares God absent from things, and imagination, which sees Him present. (Chittick 1998b, 53)

Thus “one” in the sense of *aḥad*, in its *tanzīh*, could not have been disclosed in the form of Jesus or in any other being in the created world. *Wāḥid*, on the other hand, is a quality by which we can find similarity between God and created being. In the same passage from *Kitāb al-Alif*, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes regarding *wāḥid*:

So everything in *wujūd* is a *wāḥid*. Were a thing not a *wāḥid*, it could not affirm that oneness belongs to God, for it can only affirm for its Existence-Giver what it has itself. Thus it has been said,

In each thing He has a sign
signifying that He is one.

This sign that is found in each thing signifying God’s oneness is the thing’s oneness, nothing else. There is nothing in *wujūd*, whether inanimate object or anything else, high or low, that does not recognize the unity of its Creator, so it is *wāḥid* inescapably. (Chittick 1998b, 168)

With respect to the question of how Ibn al-‘Arabī would have regarded Jesus’ Johannine claim, “I and the Father, we are one (*wāḥid*),” we are struck by the historical point that critics of the Shaykh used the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a pejorative term to associate Ibn al-‘Arabī with Christian heresies. Recall the observation of Alexander Knysh, cited in the previous chapter, that

Ibn ‘Arabi’s teaching, in Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion, resembles the doctrine of mainstream Christian theology, especially the Melkites, who hold that divine and human natures form one substance with two different hypostases (*uqnuman*)...[T]he Christian theologians and the supporters of unificationism share one thing in common: their argumentation throws them into the state of permanent perplexity and confusion (*hayra*), which Ibn ‘Arabi indeed continually invoked in his writings. (Knysh 1999, 95)

A footnote to Chittick’s article on “Oneness of Being” highlights a similar point:

Then the Hanbalite jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), well-known for his attacks on all schools of Islamic intellectuality, seized upon the term as a synonym for the well-known heresies of *ittiḥād* (“unificationism”) and *ḥulūl* (“incarnationism”). From Ibn Taymiyya’s time onward, the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* was used more and more commonly to refer to the overall perspective of Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers. For jurists like Ibn Taymiyya it was a term of blame, synonymous with “unbelief” and “heresy,” but many Muslim intellectuals accepted *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a synonym for *tawḥīd* in philosophical and Sufi language. (Chittick 1994, 179, footnote 1)

The terms *ḥulūl* (“incarnationism”) and *ittiḥād* (“unificationism”)—the latter being derived from the same root as *waḥda* and *wāḥid*—both designate doctrines frequently attributed either to Christians or to Muslims who have been sympathetic to Christian views. Any Muslim endorsing the words of Jesus, “I and the father, we are one,” would have been susceptible to being charged with these doctrines. In light of Ibn Taymiyya’s accusation, we will have to ask if Ibn al-‘Arabī would have endorsed Jesus’ claim to be one with God, and whether he has been justly accused of the doctrines of *ḥulūl* or *ittiḥād*.

Relevant to this point is Carl Ernst’s discussion of Sufis who have been accused of heresy and charged with uttering “words of ecstasy” or *shaḥīyyāt* (a topic to which we will return later in this chapter). Ernst recounts the history of such Sufis falling under suspicion of *ḥulūl*:

This type of behavior has been termed *hulul*, “indwelling,” by the heresiographers, who saw it as equivalent to the Christian term “incarnation” (Greek *enoikesis*)... [But] it should be pointed out that the incidents referred to are not part of a systematic doctrine of indwelling divinity borrowed from Christianity, but the expression of a sudden and intimate experience of God... (Ernst 1985, 100-101)

While *ḥulūl* is sometimes closely associated with *ittiḥād*, it is worth noting that some Sufis have drawn a distinction between the two terms. In the present section of this chapter, we will find that Ibn al-‘Arabī himself criticizes those guilty of *ḥulūl* (though in terms we might find surprising); in the next section, we will find Ibn al-‘Arabī speaking more favorably of *ittiḥād* in utterances attributed to Jesus.

As preparation for examining in detail Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of Jesus’ declarations of oneness with God, let us note how the *Radd* and Tūfī have dealt with such declarations in the Gospel of John. As we noted in Chapter 1, the *Radd* “accepts that Jesus spoke of being one with his Father and that the Father was in him in some sense” (Beaumont 2008, 188), but, as with the question of Jesus’ sonship, understands the unity of Jesus and God in metaphorical terms, arguing strenuously against the Christian understanding of this doctrine as literal. Thus the *Radd* reads John 17:21 metaphorically as indicating a unity of Jesus’ and God’s wills:

Making clear the metaphorical aspect he said, ‘as you Father are dwelling in me and I in you may they also be one in us’. He intended to say, may their words and deeds be in agreement with your will. Your will is my will. We together are like one essence (*dhāt wāḥida*) with no disagreement in our wills.’ (Chidiac 1939, 14; Beaumont 2008, 191)

Much of the *Radd*’s argument is driven to expose the absurdities and contradictions one inevitably runs into when taking a literal notion of unity to its logical conclusions. For example, when Jesus prays in 17:11, “that they may be one, even as we are one,” the *Radd* concludes by highlighting the absurdity that “if his union (*waḥda*) with God is the reason for his entitlement to divinity (*al-ilāhiyya*), then he must have prayed that his disciples become gods (*āliha*)” (Chidiac 1939, 12; Beaumont 2008, 191).

Drawing a distinction between the divinity and oneness (*al-ilāhiyya wa-al-waḥdāniyya*) of God on the hand, and the messengership (*al-risāla*) of Jesus on the other, the *Radd* musters various sayings by Jesus in the Gospel of John as evidence that Jesus distinguished between himself and God. He cites, for example:

Father, I thank you that you listen to me. (John 11: 41 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Believe in God and believe in me. (John 14:1 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

The *Radd* argues that Jesus' distinction between himself and God is incompatible with claims that Jesus is one with God, concluding that this obstacle to traditional Christology is so evident "it cannot be hidden from anyone except a blind person who is unable to see the moon" (Chidiac 1939, 22-23; Beaumont 2008, 190).

Ṭūfī similarly spotlights misguided Christian appeals to the Gospel of John for support of their doctrine of Jesus' divinity. Ṭūfī's critique is more direct than that of the *Radd*; whereas the *Radd* wields quotations from the Gospel of John to show contradictions between the Gospel and Christian theology, Ṭūfī finds contradictions and absurdities in the words of the Evangelist himself. Thus Ṭūfī returns to his initial tactic of questioning the reliability of the Gospel texts, particularly regarding sayings the Evangelist places in the mouth of Jesus. Rather impatiently, he objects that Jesus "did not say this...All these reports are fairy tales. I swear, without making any exception, that Christ did not say any of this!" (Demiri 2013, 315)

Moreover, Ṭūfī finds calumny in accusations by the Jews recorded in the Gospel, accusations with which Christians have naïvely agreed. He cites John 5:18 as an example:

'The Jews wanted to kill Jesus, because he used to violate the Sabbath against them by healing the sick on it, and because he used to say that he was the Son of God and used to equate himself with God.'

I say: This is a lie against Christ. To say that he claimed to be equal with God stands in contradiction to the statement he made [in Matthew 26:39] when they bound him in order to crucify him: 'My God, let this cup pass away from me. Yet let it not be according to my will, but according to Your will.' For had he been (God's) equal, his will would have equaled (God's). The fact that God's will prevailed over his will indicates the invalidity of this report from him. Moreover, this is a confusion created by (the Christians), for it is these people who claim that he is God, while the equal of God cannot be identical with Him, but rather must be other than Him. (Demiri 2013, 313; bracketed citation inserted by us)

However impatient Ṭūfī is with deceit, his fundamental impatience is with absurdity. For example, Ṭūfī tackles the first verses of the Prologue (John 1:1-3), challenging it on the grounds

that “part of [it] is sound and part of [it] is wrong and incoherent” (Demiri 2013, 303; bracketed words insert by us). Ṭūfī expands his objection to the Gospel’s incoherence:

As for the incoherent part of it, it is his saying: ‘and the Word was with God, and God was the Word.’ ...[T]his is a statement wherein diversity and unity are joined together in one single case from one single perspective. It is self-contradictory and absurd. The two ways by which we have established the incoherence are in reality one and the same, or inseparable from one another. (Demiri 2013, 305-307)

Again, responding to places where the Gospel depicts Jesus declaring that “whoever has seen me has seen the one who sent me” (John 12:45 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation; cf. John 14:9),

Ṭūfī protests:

Here one might fall into the delusion that the two are one, just as the Christians claim. However, this is not the case, for he had explicitly stated in more than one place that his Father is in heaven, while he himself is on earth. Therefore, it is an unintelligible absurdity to unify the two in spite of that. (Demiri 2013, 329)

This leads Ṭūfī to articulate a general rule of intelligibility:

...[T]he intellect is a criterion by which the absurd is distinguished from that which is not absurd. So, the intellect of any intelligent person, by its intuition [i.e. perceptive insight], rules that such a circumstance is impossible whenever it is presented. And there is no evidence beyond intuition. Therefore, whoever denies its ruling becomes like a man with an excess of bile who cannot taste the sweetness of honey, and like a blind man who cannot perceive sunshine. (Demiri 2013, 333; the bracketed phrase is in Demiri’s translation)

While the tactics of the *Radd* and Ṭūfī at times differ (and Ṭūfī’s own tactics are various), these tactics display a pervasive motivation to expose contradictions and incoherence in Christian readings of the Gospel. For both commentators, paradoxical assertions are clearly unacceptable and must be rejected. Ibn al-‘Arabī, on the other hand, does not share their aversion to paradox. Far from finding fault with incoherence, Ibn ‘Arabī plunges headfirst into unabashed declarations of self-contradiction. He finds a virtue in the bewilderment (*ḥayra*) to which these declarations lead, for there he finds the true nature of the relationship between God and the created world, and especially the relationship between God and Jesus. Ibn al-‘Arabī encapsulates

these paradoxical relationships in the formula, “He/not He,” a formula that recurs in various writings of his. As we delve further into *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, Ibn al-‘Arabī will lead us to this formula and into its consequent bewilderment, perhaps leading to a sympathetic understanding of the very doctrines that the *Radd* and Ṭūfī find offensive.

For Ibn al-‘Arabī, much of this bewilderment stems from the identification of Jesus as a spirit from God. This identification is rooted in Qur’ān 4:171, a verse that reads in part:

The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him.

This verse is traditionally read by Muslims as a refutation of traditional Christian Christology; but Ibn al-‘Arabī turns the verse on its head and deploys it as a defense of incoherent claims equating Jesus with God. Ibn al-‘Arabī gives two reasons for the identification of Jesus as God’s spirit and its perplexing ramifications. The first is the fact that Jesus’ birth results from the inbreathing of the spirit (as we have examined in the previous section). Thus Jesus was conceived when Mary “attained complete presence with God, which is the spirit and meaning” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 158). Therefore the spirit and the body are uniquely merged in Jesus:

[Jesus] is the Word of God, and he is the Spirit of God, and he is the slave of God. This is the case for no other in the domain of sensorial form...[F]or the inbreathing of the spirit was incorporated into the fashioning of his body and mortal form. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163)

Insofar as the spirit of God has come to reside in the body of Jesus, both humanity (*nāsūt*) and divinity (*lāhūt*) have been recognized in him:

That measure of life flowing in things is called *lāhūt* [divinity], and *nāsūt* [humanity] is the locus where that spirit resides. *Nāsūt* [is] called spirit by virtue of what resides in it. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 158; bracketed words inserted by us)

It is noteworthy that when Jesus, as the spirit of God, is called “divinity (*lāhūt*)”, this is not necessarily an endorsement of that appellation; but it is perhaps more noteworthy that Jesus is

only *called* “humanity (*nāsūt*)”. Both appellations, divinity and humanity, result from the baffling spectacle of the spirit in bodily form, and Ibn al-‘Arabī highlights the difficulty of sorting out the truth of Jesus’ nature.

The second reason for identifying Jesus as the spirit of God is his ability to instill life in others and bring beings into existence. This recalls the opening poem from *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15 and other passages in that chapter:

The spirit took on existence in a purified essence...
A spirit from God, not another; and because of this
Did he give life to the dead and make birds from clay...
God purified him bodily, and made him untouched in spirit
And made him a likeness of bringing into being.
(Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 157)

Jesus emerged and quickened the dead, for he was the Spirit of God. The quickening was that of God, while the inbreathing belonged to Jesus... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 160)

This dual attribution of quickening to both God and Jesus results in bewilderment, bringing the reader to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s paradoxical formula:

It used to be said upon his quickening of the dead, “It is he, it is not he.” Bewilderment occurred when one looked upon him, as will happen for any intelligent being in his discursive reasoning upon seeing an individual mortal give life to the dead, since it is a special prerogative of the Divine to give life to reason... The onlooker is left bewildered when he sees divine effects coming from a mortal man. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 161-162)

The utterance, “It is he, it is not he,” reads in Arabic as “he/not he” (*huwa lā huwa*). When Dagli translates this with the lowercase initial, “he,” it appears to describe the spectator’s bewilderment (*ḥayra*)¹⁰⁷ and uncertainty whether to attribute the power to *Jesus* or not. But we might equally well translate this as “He/not He,” with the capital initial, indicating bewilderment and uncertainty whether the power should be attributed to *God*. Either way, “[t]he onlooker is left bewildered when he sees divine effects coming from a mortal man.”

¹⁰⁷ In the passage cited here from the *Fuṣūṣ*, “bewilderment” is *ḥayra*, and “bewildered” is *ḥā’ir*.

The latter translation, “He/not He,” recalls Ibn al-‘Arabī’s frequent use of this phrase in the *Futūḥāt* to sum up concisely a general metaphysical bewilderment about the relationship between God and the created world. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, this points to Qur’ān 8:17, which recalls the confusion inspired by God’s agency in Muḥammad’s action on the battlefield:

You did not slay them, but God slew them; and when thou threwest, it was not thyself that threw, but God threw...

In *Futūḥāt* II 444.13, the Shaykh draws general metaphysical implications from this verse:

When you consider, you will see that the cosmos is with the Real in this manner. This is a place of bewilderment (*ḥayra*): He/not He. “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw.” ...Would that I knew who is the middle, the one who stands between the negation—His words “You did not throw”—and the affirmation—His words “But He threw.” He is saying, “You are not you when you are you, but God is you.” This is the meaning of our words concerning the Manifest and the loci of manifestation and the fact that He is identical with them, even though the forms of the loci of manifestation are diverse. (Chittick 1989, 114-115)

By “the loci of manifestation,” Ibn al-‘Arabī indicates the diverse phenomena of the created world;¹⁰⁸ “He/not He” describes not only the relationship between God and Muḥammad, but the relationship between God and all of creation. The agency behind all activity in the world belongs, in one sense, to God; in another sense, it does not belong to God. This ambiguity is expressed when Ibn al-‘Arabī affirms that God is unitary and “identical with them,” yet also affirming that “the forms...are diverse.” Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī writes in *Futūḥāt* II 438.20:

If you say concerning it, “It is God,” you have spoken the truth, for God says, “but God threw.” If you say concerning it, “It is creation,” you have spoken the truth, for He says, “when you threw.” So He clothed and bared, affirmed and negated: He/not He, unknown/known. “To God belong the most beautiful names” (7:180), and to the cosmos belongs becoming manifest through them by assuming their traits (*takhalluq*). (Chittick 1989, 114)

¹⁰⁸ In this context, this is reminiscent of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statement in *Futūḥāt* I 138.29, “The spirits are all fathers, while Nature is the Mother, since it is the locus of transmutations” (Chittick 1989, 142). One might wonder how this bears on the question of parental origins in the previous section.

Thus, when Ibn al-‘Arabī speaks of the bewilderment of those witnessing Jesus raising the dead, that bewilderment might be understood as a specific instance of witnessing the general metaphysical state of the created world, a state also manifested in the prophetic career of Muḥammad.

Elsewhere, in Chapter 10 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-‘Arabī expresses this bewilderment in different terms, using the expression “Real-creation” to make the same point regarding the simultaneous identity and non-identity of God with the created world:

If you so wish, you may say that it is creation, and if you so wish you may say that it is the Real, and if you so wish you may say that it is the Real-creation, and if you so wish you may say that in no respect is it the Real and in no respect is it creation, and if you so wish you may speak of bewilderment in this...If there were no delimitation, the Messengers would not have informed us of the Real’s self-transmutation in forms, nor would they have described Him as divesting Himself of forms. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 114-115)

This also calls to mind Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the term metaphor as a metaphysical and ontological term. In his use of the term, metaphor (*majāz*) is opposed to reality (*ḥaqīqa*), a cognate of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*). William Chittick sums up Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view when he writes that existence (*wujūd*) “is ascribed to the cosmos in a metaphorical sense (*majāz*), not in reality (*ḥaqīqa*). What we see is not the cosmos, but *wujūd* itself, the Real, since nothing else has existence to allow it to be seen” (Chittick 1994, 17). This brings us back to Chittick’s discussion of *wahdat al-wujūd*:

If the entities are nonexistent in their own essences, how is it that we see them in the cosmos and refer to them as “existent”? Ibn al-‘Arabī answers this question in many ways. He tells us, for example, that we do not in fact see the things existing in the cosmos. The expression existent entities is employed conventionally. *Wujūd* is ascribed to the cosmos in a metaphorical sense (*majāz*), not in reality (*ḥaqīqa*). What we see is not the cosmos, but *wujūd* itself, the Real, since nothing else has existence to allow it to be seen. (Chittick 1994, 17)

Thus, whereas the *Radd* and *Ṭūfī* appeal to a metaphor to deny the *divinity* of Jesus, Ibn al-‘Arabī appeals to a notion of metaphor to deny the *reality* of Jesus (and all of the created world) as anything separate from God, for God is the only reality properly called “existence.”

While this general ontological outlook applies to the whole cosmos, this understanding is particularly acute in the case of human beings and the question of whether we can attribute divine attributes to humans. In *Futūḥāt* (II 241.28) Ibn al-‘Arabī writes:

All character traits are divine attributes, so all of them are noble. All of them are found in man’s innate disposition (*jibilla*). That is why God addresses Himself to them. One of those who has no knowledge of the realities maintains that the character traits in man are an “assumption of traits,” while in God they are actual traits. But this shows the speaker’s ignorance of the true situation, unless he means that as a metaphor (*majāz*) or he maintains it in respect to the priority of God’s Being over the servant’s existence. (Chittick 1989, 286)

While this understanding applies to all humans, it takes on a special significance in the case of Jesus, who is unique in his embodiment of this metaphysical reality and bears an exceptional likeness to both divinity (*lāhūt*) and humanity (*nāsūt*).

It should be kept in mind that Ibn al-‘Arabī refuses to come down on a single understanding of Jesus’ relationship to humanity and divinity. While in some respects he seems to accommodate Christian Christology, Ibn al-‘Arabī resists being hemmed in by either Christian or Islamic theology. In the passage cited above from *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 10, Ibn al-‘Arabī permits the reader, “you may say” any of four different propositions regarding the relationship between the Real and creation, propositions equally applicable to the relationship between God and Jesus. If anything, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s final word on the matter may be: “you may speak of bewilderment in this.” This bewilderment does not indicate a confusion that needs to be straightened out or resolved; this unsettled, dynamic bewilderment is, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, an accurate and honest

comportment towards a general metaphysical fact. This inability to settle on a single description of this fact is inherent to the nature of creation.

For this reason, in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 3—the chapter on Noah, a chapter to which we will return repeatedly to shed light on Chapter 15 and the present discussion—Ibn al-‘Arabī cites a traditional Sufi utterance, “Increase me in my bewilderment in Thee.” In doing so, he writes charitably of the bewildered idolaters who rejected Noah and drowned in the Deluge:¹⁰⁹

...[F]or the bewildered one there are orbits and orbital motions around the pole, which he never leaves...He is possessed of the most complete existence, and is bestowed with the all-comprehensive words and with wisdom...[This is] what drove them on to be drowned in the sea which the knowledge of God is, and which is bewilderment. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 47; brackets inserted by us)

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s equation of “knowledge of God” with “bewilderment” might be read as a collision with Ṭūfī, who writes, as we have seen above, that “the intellect is a criterion by which the absurd is distinguished from that which is not absurd,” adding that “there is no evidence beyond intuition. Therefore, whoever denies its ruling becomes...like a blind man who cannot perceive sunshine” (Demiri 2013, 333). As if anticipating such objections, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes of “the weakness of intellectual reasoning” in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 22, remarking:

The judgment of the intellect is sound when one is on his guard in what he thinks...None are more intelligent than the messengers, the blessings of God be upon them, and they said what they said in their narrations from the Divine. They affirmed what was affirmed by the intellect and added what the intellect cannot independently perceive, as well as what the intellect considers absurd at first but acknowledges in self-disclosure. When it is alone with itself after the self-disclosure it is bewildered by what it sees. If one is the slave of the Lord, the intellect will defer to Him, but if he is a slave of speculation, the truth will defer to its judgment. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 234-235)

Here we see the stark divergence between the *Radd* and Ṭūfī on the one hand and Ibn al-‘Arabī on the other; whereas the former rest their arguments on illuminating contradictions in

¹⁰⁹ For Ibn Taymiyya’s criticism Ibn al-‘Arabī’s generous portrayal of the *kāfirūna* in Chapter 3 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, again see Knysh’s *Ibn ‘Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Knysh 1999, 106).

Christian claims, Ibn al-‘Arabī not only tolerates contradictions that offend the intellect, but embraces them. As exhibited by inherently self-contradictory formulae “He/not He,” “the Real-creation,” and “the one/many,” Ibn al-‘Arabī sees this as the only available lens through which to see God. While Ibn al-‘Arabī takes this stance in opposition to reason, he stands on the authority of a long line of Sufi forerunners. For instance, in Chapter 4 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-‘Arabī leans on the authority of the ninth-century Sufi Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz (d. 899 CE) to support his paradoxical position:

Al-Kharrāz¹¹⁰, may God most high have mercy upon him, who was a face of the Real and a tongue by which He spoke of Himself, said that God can only be known through the uniting of opposites... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 154)

This line of consideration leads Ibn al-‘Arabī to comment particularly on the Christian doctrine that identifies Jesus with God. It is immediately following his introduction of the formula “He/not He” in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15 that Ibn al-‘Arabī presents us with a crucial and challenging passage, a passage we have glanced at earlier:

This has led some to hold the position of the incarnation [*ḥulūl*], and to hold, by virtue of the dead he brought to life, that he is God. For this reason they have been associated with unbelief [*kufr*], which is a covering [*ṣatr*], for they cover [*satarū*] God, who gives life to the dead, with the mortal form of Jesus. He, most high, said, *They disbelieve, those who say that God is Christ the son of Mary.* (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 162; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)¹¹¹

It is unsurprising to find a Muslim writer accusing incarnationists of being unbelievers. Yet Ibn al-‘Arabī uses the terms incarnation (*ḥulūl*) and unbelief (*kufr*) in unusual ways. To focus on

¹¹⁰ Although Kharrāz is not mentioned in the discussion of Jesus in the *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, it is evident that Ibn al-‘Arabī views Jesus through the lens of Kharrāz. This is evidenced by *Futūḥāt* VI 16.117, where Ibn al-‘Arabī introduces his discussion as “the creative process of Jesus.” What follows in that discussion runs parallel to the investigation laid out in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, and, in the course of that discussion, Kharrāz and his words regarding “the uniting of opposites” are directly linked to Jesus’ paradoxical status as “He/not He.” The greater relevance of Kharrāz to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of Jesus will become clearer in the next section of the present chapter.

¹¹¹ Here Ibn al-‘Arabī cites Qur’ān 5:17.

kufr, we might be struck by the fact that Ibn al-‘Arabī defines this word as a synonym for “covering” (*satr*). Here the Shaykh is playing with the fact that the verb *kafara* (cognate with *kufr*) means “to cover, hide” (Wehr and Cowan 1976). Chapter 15 of the *Fuṣūṣ* is not the first place where Ibn al-‘Arabī engages in this wordplay; it also appears in Chapter 3, where he also brings into play the words *ghafr* (forgiveness) and *ghufra* or *ghifāra* (cover):

He called to [the unbelievers] so that He might forgive them, and forgiveness [*ghafr*] is a covering [*sitr*]...so that the benefits may spread universally, just as the supplication was universal. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 48; bracketed words inserted by us)

Ibn al-‘Arabī continues this line of thought with a comment on Qur’ān 7:26-27, which reads:

And Noah said, ‘My Lord, leave not upon the earth of the unbelievers even one. Surely, if Thou leavest them, they will lead Thy servants astray...’

Ibn al-‘Arabī interprets this verse with an extension of generosity towards the unbelievers (*kāfirūn*), finding a virtue in bewilderment:

If Thou leavest them, that is, call them and leave them, *they will lead Thy slaves astray*, that is, they shall cause them bewilderment and shall take them from the slavehood to the secrets of dominicality contained within them, and thus they shall look upon themselves as lords after having seen themselves as slaves, being then slave-lords. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 48)¹¹²

Nonetheless, while Ibn al-‘Arabī reads *kufr* as “covering” in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 3 in order to cast the unbelievers (*kāfirūn*) in a forgiving light, his similarly innovative reading of *kufr* in Chapter 15 is less decisively charitable. In the latter context, Ibn al-‘Arabī goes on to attribute not only “covering” (*kufr*), but also “error” (*khaṭa’*), to those who hold the doctrine of incarnation (*ḥulūl*):

They bring together both error and unbelief when they say all of these words, because they do not do so in saying that he is God, nor in saying that he is the son of Mary. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 48)

¹¹² This passage was one cause of Ibn Taymiyya’s criticism of Ibn al-‘Arabī. According to Knysh, “Ibn Taymiyya cites Ibn Arabi’s interpretation of the *surat Nuh* (71), which depicted the Qur’ānic polytheists (*mushrikun*) as the ‘true gnostics’ (*‘arifun*), who went beyond the ‘one-sided’ transcendent vision of God propagated by the prophet Noah” (Knysh 1999, 106).

Ibn al-‘Arabī certainly finds error in the doctrine of incarnation; but he does so in a surprising way. This is a challenging sentence, and the meaning is a little obscure in both Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Arabic and in Dagli’s translation. We read it as meaning, “They bring together both error and unbelief...*but do not commit error* in saying that he is God, nor in saying that he is the son of Mary.” The Shaykh does not find error in either declaration, but finds error in the separation that distinguishes these two declarations, failing to unite Jesus and divinity in a single identity. This is filled out in the succeeding sentences:

With respect to the dead being brought to life, they turned from God—while enclosing Him—to a *nāsūt* mortal form with their words, “the son of Mary,” for indeed he was the son of Mary. One who hears this might imagine that they attribute [*nasabū*] divinity to the form, making it identical with the form, but this is not what they do. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 162; bracketed Arabic word inserted by us)

When the incarnationists call Jesus “the son of Mary,” they turn away from the divinity in Jesus, attributing the quickening to a merely mortal form. Ibn al-‘Arabī criticizes this as a misunderstanding of Jesus. One might assume that the error of the incarnationists lies in identifying the form of Jesus with divinity, “but this is not what they do.” In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, they fail to identify Jesus with divinity, and in that failure lies their error.

To see this more clearly, we might once again observe an analogy in Chapter 3 of the *Fuṣūṣ*. There Ibn al-‘Arabī recalls Noah’s words in the Qur’ān:

I have called my people by night and by day, but my calling has only increased them in flight. (Qur’ān 71:5)

Again, Ibn al-‘Arabī expresses sympathy for the *kāfirūn* who flee Noah, finding fault with Noah’s formulation of the call:

Noah called his people *by night* in virtue of their intellects and their spiritual aspects, and these are invisible. *By day*, that is, he also called them in virtue of their manifest forms and their senses. He did not achieve a synthesis in his call... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 42-43)

In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, the failure of Noah’s call lay in not synthesizing the “night” aspect of his call with the “day” aspect of his call. Ibn al-‘Arabī accounts for this with an unconventional etymology of the word *qur’ān*. He traces the word not to the verb *qara’a* (“to recite”), which is typical, but to *qarana* (“to connect or combine”), and sets *qur’ān* dialectically against *furqān* (“to separate”):

[The *kāfirūn*] also know that they did not respond to his call because of the *Furqān* contained within it; now, the reality of things is *Qur’ān*, not *Furqān*. One who stands firm in the *Qur’ān* pays no heed to *Furqān*, though it be within it. *Qur’ān* contains *Furqān*, but *Furqān* does not contain *Qur’ān*. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 42; bracketed words inserted by us)

That is, the *kāfirūn* were right to reject Noah’s call because it separated “night” and “day” rather than combining them.

With this in mind, we will have to attend closely to the wording in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s next sentence in the *Fuṣūṣ*, which comes to the main point in the paragraph we are considering:

Rather, they begin by placing the divine Selfhood in the mortal form that is the son of Mary, thus making a distinction between the form and the object of their judgement. Yet, they [do not] make the form identical with the object of their judgment. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 162-163; bracketed words inserted by us)

Note that we have inserted the words “do not” in this excerpt from Dagli’s translation; those words do not appear in his translation. Thus, the translation presented by Dagli has the opposite purport from the revision we offer here. We believe that Dagli has mistranslated Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words, which in Arabic run thus: *lā annahum ja’alū al-ṣūrata ‘ayna al-ḥukmi*. Dagli overlooks the word *lā*, and this omission from his translation makes all the difference.¹¹³ We will depart

¹¹³ For the record, other translators translate this sentence to the effect opposite that of Dagli.

Burckhardt’s translation reads: “...ils distinguaient donc la forme [humaine] comme telle d’avec le principe [dont elle est une manifestation] et n’identifiaient pas la forme [christique] essentiellement à ce principe [qui se manifeste par la vivification des morts]...” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1955, 115-116)

Austin’s translation reads: “Thus they distinguished between the form and its determination, but did not make the form the same as the determining principle.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980, 178)

from Dagli's translation, and will arrive at a different conclusion from him: Ibn al-ʿArabī faults the incarnationists because they fall short of a true identification between Jesus' form and his divinity.

We will also depart from Dagli's interpretation regarding the following sentences, which we read as expanding the point we have just brought forward:

Remember the case of Gabriel, who, while in the form of a mortal man, did not breathe and then did breathe, a distinction being made between the form and the breathing. The breath came from that form, which was when the breath was not; thus the breath is not part of its essential definition. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 162-163)

We do not quibble in this instance with Dagli's translation, but disagree with the interpretation he offers in his footnote to these sentences. There Dagli comments:

The breathing carried out by the form that Gabriel assumed was not essential to that form, since it was there for a time without that breathing. This is used to illustrate that point that the form of Jesus could not be an essential aspect of the divine Selfhood, since the divine Selfhood was before that form ever existed. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 163, footnote 32)

In our view, Ibn al-ʿArabī's intention in citing the example of Gabriel is not to indicate a parallel to the nature of Jesus, but to establish a contrast between Gabriel and Jesus. We read Ibn al-ʿArabī as meaning:

The breath came from [Gabriel's] form, which was when the breath was not; thus the breath is not part of [Gabriel's] essential definition.

That is, this breathing was not essential to Gabriel's form, which was merely a contingent human guise; but this breathing *was* essential to Jesus' form. For this reason Ibn al-ʿArabī concludes, as

Abrahamov's translation reads: "Hence, they distinguished between the form and its appearance (literally: its aspect); they did not identify the form with its very appearance..." (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2015a, 107).

The republished translation by Twinch, Clark and Hirtenstein reads: "...and so they differentiated between the form and the property. They did not make the [bodily] form [itself] identical to the [life-giving] property..." (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2015b)

we have seen, that “the inbreathing of the spirit was incorporated into the fashioning of [Jesus’] body and mortal form...[T]his was the case for no other” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163).

If we have read this correctly, we have found Ibn al-‘Arabī in close proximity to endorsing Jesus’ words, “I and the Father, we are one!” In rejecting incarnationism (*ḥulūl*), Ibn al-‘Arabī may have ended up affirming a unity of humanity and divinity, albeit a unity based on terms quite different from those of Christian theology. In the next section, we will look more closely at another heretical doctrine of which Ibn al-‘Arabī has been accused, unificationism (*ittiḥād*). We will endeavor to show that, while Ibn al-‘Arabī rejects *ḥulūl*, he endorses *ittiḥād*.

4.4. Jesus and *Shaḥīyyāt*

I am the Path, the Real, and the Life! — John 14:6 (Alexandrian Vulgate)

As we have seen, Ibn al-‘Arabī represents Jesus, on the one hand, as unique in his relationship to God and, on the other hand, as representing the universal ontological fact that the created world is both “He” and “not He.” Between this uniqueness and universality, the Akbarian Jesus can also be seen as a representation of—and model for—extraordinary human beings who have experienced and expressed momentary states of unification (*ittiḥād*) with God. Those voicing such ecstatic experiences rank among the Sufi saints (*awliyyā’*; singular: *walī*), Sufis who enjoy a peculiar closeness and intimacy with God. In addition to being the Messiah, a prophet, and a messenger, Jesus is counted among the saints (in the Islamic sense of this term); indeed, from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s point of view, all prophets and messengers are also saints, and their status as saints endures beyond the termination of their roles as prophets and messengers:

Now, the functions of messenger and prophet—and I refer to the prophethood of a law and its message—both come to an end, but sainthood never ends. The Messengers, due to their being saints, only see what we have spoken of from the niche of the Seal of the Saints... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 27)

We will recall that the title, “Seal of the Saints,” is among those titles conferred on Jesus by Ibn al-‘Arabī.

The Shaykh is not unusual among Sufis in recognizing a special relationship between Jesus and Islamic saints; Sufis have traditionally looked to Jesus as the epitome of Sufi saintship:

Generally, Jesus is seen by the Ṣūfīs as a model wayfaring ascetic and wisdom teacher. As a ‘proto-Ṣūfī’, he is reported to have worn woollen clothing. Ṣūfī traditions about Jesus’ self-denial abound. (Leirvik 2010, 84)

The frequency of the close association between Jesus and Sufi asceticism (*zuhd*) is demonstrated by Annemarie Schimmel, who cites illustrations in the works of Sanā’ī (d. 1131), Khāqānī (d. 1199), Nizāmī (d. 1209), ‘Attār (d. 1220), Rūmī (d. 1273), and other Persian poets (Schimmel 2013). In this tradition, the path of Jesus represents the way of celibacy and separation from the world, despite Muḥammad’s admonition that “there is no monkery, *rahbāniyya*, in Islam;” by contrast with Muḥammad, those unsuited to a married life “are advised to go to the desert and follow the way of Jesus by living far away from the world to achieve at least something of the spiritual path” (Schimmel 2013, 279). Schimmel adds:

One understands well why the saying “The world is a bridge; pass over it but do not stay on it” was attributed to Jesus; it has been quoted frequently by the Sufīs and is written in fine calligraphy over the gate of Akbar’s palace city Fathpur Sikri. Rūmī therefore tells his audience, “Become a Jesus—if you have no house, let it be so!” (D 20645) Such stories and images are often connected with Jesus’ dwelling place in the fourth heaven. Rūmī claims, “I am not bound to a house, for like Jesus, my dwelling place is in the fourth heaven” (D 18388). (Schimmel 2013, 280)

In this vein, Rūmī also writes in *Mathnawī* III 298 of the Sufi’s table:

The table of the spiritual is (like) the cell of Jesus...
(Rūmī 1926b, 20)

In this chapter, we will focus on the connection traditionally drawn between Jesus and those Sufi saints famed for their daring declarations known as *shaḥīyyāt* (singular: *shaḥ*). The term *shaḥ* has been variously translated as “ecstatic expressions” (Ernst), “unruly utterances”

(Chittick), “theopathic locutions” (Massignon), or “inspired paradoxes” (Corbin). Chittick details the history and etymological source of this term:

According to Abū Nasr Sarrāj, the term in its original sense implies a strong movement; it is employed in describing the water of a stream which has gone out of control and overflowed its banks. In the same way, a Sufi overcome by ecstasy may say things that overflow the boundaries of reason and the Law. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 150)

Such utterances have often been heard as claims to unification with God, and have invited censure for their evident infidelity, including the death penalty.

Preeminent among such Sufis, Al-Ḥusayn ibn Mansūr al-Ḥallāj (858-922 CE)—remembered for his sensational execution (or martyrdom) at the hands of the Abbasids—invites comparisons with the scandal incited by Jesus’ similarly bold pronouncements in the Gospel of John, as well as his consequent crucifixion. The reasons for Ḥallāj’s execution are complex, including both doctrinal and political dimensions. We are interested here not in the historical fact of Ḥallāj’s execution, but in the way his death has been memorialized in the writings of later generations of Sufis. As a literary figure, Ḥallāj’s unruly and fatally scandalous utterances have posed enduring riddles about the nature of the self, meditations on the relationship between the self and God, and the question of the defensibility or indefensibility of these utterances.

Ernst has pointed to the conflicted relationship between Ḥallāj and the contemporary and subsequent communities of believers who have taken offense at his words, a conflict between “the limitations of rigid legalism” and the “nature of mystical gnosis”:

Ecstatic expressions (*shathiyyat*) constitute a pivotal problem for the understanding of Sufism. Post-scriptural inspiration is ambiguous; for the mystic it can be the key to divine revelation, but to outsiders it can be a blasphemous parody of scripture...Popular imagination has always associated the execution of Hallaj with his saying “I am the Truth”; this has given rise to a kind of historiography of martyrdom in which the mystic’s expressions inevitably collided with the revealed law. The relationship between the spirit and the letter, in any case, has given rise to ambiguity. This very ambiguity has led some of the mystics to express their state in terms that paradoxically placed them outside the community of the faithful. The tension between the spirit and the letter could, and did,

grow to an unendurable pitch, leading Hallaj (d. 309/922) to say, “I became infidel to God’s religion, and infidelity is my duty, because it is detestable to Muslims”... This should not be misunderstood as a deliberate rejection of God or the Islamic faith, nor as any kind of secularism or nihilism. To impose such a superficial modern ideology on a mystical paradox would be absurd. Ecstatic sayings need to be interpreted in terms of the mystical vocabulary of the times. From this perspective, Hallaj’s saying points to the limitations of rigid legalism just as it underlines the controversial nature of mystical gnosis. Though at first sight difficult to interpret, nonetheless the ecstatic sayings on faith and infidelity offer an intriguing perspective on the whole problem of inspired speech. (Ernst 1985, 3)

We might notice that Ernst’s account seems to recapitulate Christian critiques of the “rigid legalism” that delimited the perspective of Jesus’ persecutors, just as Ḥallāj is often viewed as walking in Jesus’ steps to death by crucifixion. In the arc of the narrative in the Gospel of John, the crucifixion is depicted as the penalty of scandals stirred up by Jesus in his public preaching; the two attempts to stone Jesus in that Gospel are provoked by Jesus’ public pronouncements, “I was before Abraham was!” (John 8:58; Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation) and “I and the Father, we are one!” (John 10:30), leading to and culminating in Jesus’ capital trial before Pilate (John 19:7). These lethal consequences play no small role in the tradition of identifying Ḥallāj with Jesus—or triangulating Ḥallāj and Jesus with other Sufis like ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, who was executed in 1131 CE (when he was thirty-three years old) for his reckless, God-intoxicated outbursts. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt (who, as we have seen, is counted by Chodkiewicz as an ‘Īsawī saint) has been memorialized with the words, “His source was Jesus, his way was the way of Mansur (al-Ḥallāj)” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 82).

In this chapter we will inquire into the seemingly *shatḥ*-like character of Jesus’ words, and in doing so we will find Ḥallāj inescapable. Ḥallāj’s contributions to the canon of *shatḥiyyāt* are disproportionately numerous. Ecstatic utterances by forty-five Sufis are gathered in the *Sharḥ-i Shatḥiyyāt* of Rūzbihān Baqlī (1209 CE), a twelfth-century Sufi who was “the pre-

eminent authority on shath in Sufism;” one third of the *shatḥiyyāt* collected by Baqlī were uttered by Ḥallāj (Ernst 1985, 15). Ḥallāj looms large as

a man who deeply influenced the development of Islamic mysticism and whose name became, in the course of time, a symbol for both suffering love and unitive experience, but also for a lover’s greatest sin: to divulge the secret of his love. (Schimmel 1975, 63)

Some scholars have claimed, however, that Ḥallāj’s importance has been exaggerated and that his influence has been inflated, due largely to the work of the twentieth-century French scholar Louis Massignon. Michael Sells brings some clarification to this controversy when he writes that “Hallaj cannot be considered a classical Sufi in the sense of having his teachings passed on formally through Sufi schools,” but adds that “his work is classic in another sense; among some Sufis and throughout Islamic culture, the writings and the story of Hallaj have continued to generate controversy and creativity down to the present day” (Sells 1996, 266-267). In the context of our present inquiry, we will ask more specifically about Ibn al-‘Arabī’s debt to Ḥallāj and his perspective on *shatḥiyyāt* in general.

Alongside Ḥallāj, we will take into account another Sufi famed for uttering *shatḥiyyāt*, Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 874 C. E.). Ibn al-‘Arabī has exhibited a stronger tendency to associate Jesus with Bisṭāmī than with Ḥallāj. In *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15 Ibn al-‘Arabī characterizes Bisṭāmī as “Christic [*‘īṣawī*] in his locus of witnessing” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 164). Binyamin Abrahamov, who has recently written a book-length study the Shaykh’s attitudes towards his Sufi predecessors, substantiates this depiction of Bisṭāmī by tracing it to additional writings by Ibn al-‘Arabī:

Abū Yazīd appears in the *Futūḥāt* and *Mawāqī‘ al-nujūm* as a man with the ability to perform miracles. Comparing Abu Yazīd to ‘Īsā (Jesus), who had the noble knowledge of how to heal the blind and the leprous and revive the dead, Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that when Abū Yazīd killed an ant inadvertently, he immediately blew upon it and it came back to life. (Abrahamov 2014)

Because notorious utterances by Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī bear such a strong resemblance to some of the bolder pronouncements by Jesus in the Gospel of John, we might find grounds for speculation on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s hypothetical response to that Gospel by looking at his assessments of these two Sufis and others like them. In fact, though we have no evidence that Ibn al-‘Arabī ever read that Gospel (and thus seems never to have encountered overtly *shaṭḥ*-like utterances by Jesus), the Shaykh frames his discussion of Jesus’ speech in terms of *shaṭḥiyyāt*, juxtaposing Jesus with the likes of Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī.

At the forefront of our discussion of *shaṭḥiyyāt* is the question of the underlying condition of Sufis who utter them, a question revolving around claims to or expressions of unification (*ittiḥād*) with God. According to Ernst, Baqlī embraces *ittiḥād* as a rubric for one stage on the way to “the unveiling of divine subsistence in gnosis” (Ernst 1985, 85). In Baqlī’s words, these stages are demarcated in the following manner:

Then is the station of unification (*ittiḥād*), of which the beginning is annihilation (*fana’*), the middle subsistence (*baqa’*), and the end essential union (*‘ayn al-jam’*). Annihilation is the veil of subsistence, and subsistence is the veil of annihilation, but essential union is pure unification. The appearance of God (*zuhur al-haqq*) from this (station) is by the quality of essential manifestation (*bi-na’ t ‘ayn al-tajalli*), which, in the experience of *tawhid*, is the infidelity of reality. (Ernst 1985, 94)

Schimmel notes that other influential Sufis have analyzed *shaṭḥiyyāt* in terms of varying levels of *ittiḥād*, raising questions of God’s agency and identity in making these utterances:

Hujwārī speaks of three kinds of *tauḥīd*: “God’s unification of God, i.e. His knowledge of His Unity; God’s unification of His creatures, i.e. His decree that a man shall pronounce Him to be one, and the creation of unification in his heart; man’s unification of God, i.e. their knowledge of the Unity of God” (H 278). For the orthodox mystics, *tauḥīd* meant, first of all, the recognition that there is no agent but God and that everything and everybody are dependent upon Him. This idea could easily lead to the acknowledgment that only He had real existence and that only He had the right to say “I”—that God is the only true subject. (Schimmel 1975, 146)

The use of the pronoun “I” is a key marker of the *shaṭḥ*; it indicates God as the first-person agent and speaker in the mystic’s state of “the Unity of God.” A similar lens might be applied to an

understanding of Jesus' more daring utterances in the Gospel of John. We might consider the two following quotations from the Gospel of John to illustrate the distinction between third-person propositions and the first-person speech acts exhibited in *shaḥīyyāt*. In the first quotation, from John 1:15 (cf. John 1:30), John the Baptist is the speaker and his utterance describes Jesus:

He comes after (*ba'da*) me and was before (*qabla*) me because he preceded me. (our translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate)

In the second quotation, from John 8:58, Jesus is the speaker and is describing himself:

I was before Abraham was! (*annanī qabla an yakūn Ibrāhīm*; our translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate)¹¹⁴

The two statements are roughly parallel in terms of propositional content; both propositions can be read as asserting Jesus' temporal (or logical) priority with respect to those who were born before Jesus. Yet it is the latter declaration, formulated as an act of self-revelation, that more emphatically anticipates the category of *shaḥīyyāt*. In light of this, we will shift our discussion away from the third-person "He/not He" paradox observed by Jesus' spectators, towards a discussion of the first-person paradox exhibited in Jesus' speech acts.

¹¹⁴ The tense of the Arabic could be translated as either "I was before Abraham was!" or "I am before Abraham is!" The Greek text would be translated as, "Before Abraham was, I am!"

Ibn al-ʿArabī finds a similar ambiguity in the *ḥadīth*, "God was, and nothing was [*kān*] with Him." In *Futūḥāt* IV 413.28, the Shaykh writes regarding the tense in this *ḥadīth*, "But concerning essential necessity, you will say in every state, 'God was and nothing was with Him, and He is now, and there is nothing'" (Chittick 1998b, 20). Again, in *Futūḥāt* II 56.3, he makes a similar point to collapse the distinction between past tense and present tense: "The word *kān* denotes a temporal limitation [since it is a past tense form—and is usually translated as 'was']. But in this saying that limitation is not meant. What is meant by the word is the 'being' (*kawn*) which is existence (*wujūd*)" (Chittick 1989, 88; the bracketed insertion is by Chittick). Chittick comments in his footnote to this passage, "...the Shaykh points out, the verb *kān* here is a word which denotes existence (*ḥarf wujūdī*), without temporal implication" (Chittick 1989, 393, footnote 13). That is, even when we say that "God was," it is closer to the truth to understand this statement as being outside of time—and perhaps that the statement "God is" would be an equal or better formulation of the intent.

In light of this, Ibn al-ʿArabī might have been inclined (as is the case with Christians and was the case with the Jews who heard Jesus speaking these words) to understand Jesus' statement of atemporal or extratemporal existence as an assertion of unity with God. Therefore Jesus' words here would readily lend themselves to be read by Sufis as an example of *shaḥīyyāt*.

Carl W. Ernst highlights the centrality of selfhood in *shathīyyāt*—as both a theme and a theoretical problem. Ernst writes:

Probably the most important topic of early *shathīyyat* was, as Ruzbihan pointed out, the question of selfhood, or in his terminology, “I-ness (*ana’iyyat*).” Over one third of the nearly two hundred *shathīyyat* in Ruzbihan’s collection are spoken in the first person, making some statement about the nature and experience of the self. Bayazid and Hallāj are most prominent in speaking on this subject. (Ernst 1985, 25-26)

This repeats a pattern seen in Jesus’ audacious “I am” declarations in the Gospel of John, as can be seen in a comparison with the two most famous instances of *shathīyyāt*, attributed to Bisṭāmī and Ḥallāj. To Bisṭāmī has been attributed the boast, “Glory be to Me! (*Subḥānī!*) How great is My dignity!” This utterance is readily compared with a number of places in the Gospel of John (John 12:23; 13:31-32; 14:13; 16:14; 17:1; and 17:4-5) where Jesus asserts his claim to glorification “with the glory I had with You from before the world” (*bi’l-majdi aladhī kāna lī ‘andaka min qabla al-‘ālam*; John 17:5 in the Alexandrian Vulgate). Ḥallāj is famed for having ejaculated, “I am the Real!” (*Anā’l-ḥaqq!*), words encompassed within Jesus’ famous avowal: “I am the Path, the Real, and the Life!” (*Anā huwa al-ṭarīqu wa al-ḥaqqu wa al-ḥayā!*; John 14:6 in the Alexandrian Vulgate).¹¹⁵ It is thus understandable that Ernst has observed the similarity between Jesus’ pronouncements in the Gospel of John and such Sufi utterances:

The sayings of Jesus are remarkably similar to some of the highest *shathīyyat*, especially those that take the form of “I am” statements. I have heard a Muslim scholar advance just

¹¹⁵ Here we are emphasizing the inclusion of the word *ḥaqq* in the Alexandrian Vulgate version of John 14:6, but the other two self-identifiers in this verse, *ṭarīq* and *ḥayā*, deserve a brief nod. *Ṭarīq* literally means a “path” or “road;” it calls to mind its close cognate, *ṭarīqa*, “way” or “method” (Wehr and Cowan 1976), a term commonly used to designate a Sufi fraternity. The juxtaposition of *ṭarīq* with *ḥaqq* in the Arabic translation of John 14:6 evokes the traditional scheme of *sharī‘a* (religious law), *ṭarīqa*, and *ḥaqīqa* (“reality,” a close cognate of *ḥaqq*), which recurs in Sufi literature (Schimmel 1975, 16). As for *ḥayā*, “life,” it is a close cognate and synonym of *ḥayy*, which is traditionally listed as one of the ninety-nine names of God. *Ḥayy* is traditionally paired with another name of God, *qayyūm* (“Everlasting,” “Self-sustaining”), a pairing traced back to the Qur’ān: “God, there is no god but He, the Living (*al-ḥayy*), the Everlasting (*al-qayyūm*)” (Qur’ān 2:255). This pairing recalls another of Jesus’ “I am” declarations in the Gospel of John, “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25). The Alexandrian Vulgate’s translation of this declaration, *anā huwa al-qiyāma wa’l-ḥayā*, is built upon the same etymological roots as the paired divine names *ḥayy* and *qayyūm*.

this suggestion, saying, “Who was the ‘I’ who said, ‘Before Abraham was, I am’? It was certainly not the carpenter from Nazareth!” (Ernst 1985, 135)

Thus in this resemblance we might discover a fruitful theoretical framework for an Akbarian interpretation of Jesus’ words as *shaḥīyyāt*.

A common point of reference for Ibn al-‘Arabī’s and Ernst’s discussion of *shaḥīyyāt* might be found in the views of Kharrāz. We have already noted that Ibn al-‘Arabī calls on Kharrāz to support the claim that “God can only be known through the uniting of opposites.” In the same passage from the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-‘Arabī draws further on the authority of Kharrāz:

None sees Him other than He, and no one is hidden from Him. He is the Manifest in Himself, and the Hidden from Himself. He bears the Name of Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz, among other names belonging to things that come to be. The Hidden says *No* when the Manifest says *I*, and the Manifest says *No* when the Hidden says *I*. This is so with every opposite: the speaker is one and is the same as the listener...The identity is one while the determinations differ. There is no way of failing to know the likes of this, for every man knows this in himself. Each is a form of the Real. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 54)

Kharrāz has been historically tied to the tradition *shaḥīyyāt*; he has been reproached for this practice by critics like the Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200), reproaching Kharrāz among others for their unruly utterances. Kharrāz also provides a theoretical platform for a defense of *shaḥīyyāt*, as when Ernst writes, “Only God has the right to say ‘I.’ This important point would later be stressed by Sufis such as Abu Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz (d. 279/892)...” (Ernst 1985, 10). Thus when Ibn al-‘Arabī follows the lead of Kharrāz in writing that “the speaker is one and is the same as the listener,” he is drawing on the tradition of *shaḥīyyāt*. Given his evidently approving citations of Kharrāz, one might expect that Ibn al-‘Arabī would have defended *shaḥīyyāt* as events in which God is the true agent and speaker behind such outbursts. One might further imagine that, if Ibn al-‘Arabī were to encounter the Gospel of John, he would have applied the same interpretation to similar statements by Jesus; we might suppose that Ibn al-‘Arabī would

have identified the speaker of these statements not as Jesus, but as God speaking through the Jesus in a momentary condition of *ittiḥād*.

Moreover, in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 20, when Ibn al-‘Arabī comments on the miraculous speech of the infant Jesus in the cradle (Qur’ān 19:29-33, discussed more fully below), he describes this utterance as “more perfect in unification (*akmal fī’l-ittiḥādi*)” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 216). This application of the expression *ittiḥād* to Jesus’ words calls to mind the condition frequently attributed to those who utter *shaṭḥiyyāt*. It is noteworthy that while Baqlī often employs the term *ittiḥād* in a favorable way, he shuns the term *ḥulūl* (Ernst 1985, 17); this mirrors Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own rejection of the term *ḥulūl* in his account of Jesus’ relationship to God (as we noted in the previous section of this chapter) and his adoption of the term *ittiḥād* to interpret Jesus’ speech. Thus we cannot help noticing the parallel between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s application of the term *ittiḥād* to Jesus and the similar use of this term in the *shaṭḥ* literature.

In addition, Ibn al-‘Arabī says that the speech of the infant Jesus “shows his nearness to God” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 216). This brings to mind another intersection between Ibn al-‘Arabī and the *shaṭḥ* literature; it recalls the “drawing near” captured in the famous *Ḥadīth* of Supererogatory Works. Writing of the relevance of this *ḥadīth* to the interpretation of *shaṭḥiyyāt*, Ernst writes:

In these canonical *hadith*, there are some that emphasize the possibility of close contact between man and God... The most famous of these Divine Sayings is the saying on supererogatory worship (*hadith al-nawafil*), which expresses an experience in which the worshipper feels the divine presence so strongly that his volition is taken up by God, and all his actions are performed by God. The essential section is the following: “And My servant continues drawing nearer to Me through supererogatory acts until I love him; and when I love him, I become his ear with which he hears, his eye with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks.” The importance of this Divine Saying for Sufism can scarcely be overestimated. (Ernst 1985, 9-10)¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ This *ḥadīth* appears in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (Bukhārī 1997, 275-276; 6502).

An alternative version of this *ḥadīth*, traced back to Ibrāhīm Ibn Adhām (d. 778 CE) and cited in the *Radd*, includes the phrase “I will be the tongue with which he speaks” (Chidiac 1939, 10); there, the *Radd* employs this *ḥadīth* to interpret Jesus’ Johannine declaration, “I and the Father, we are one!” This touches on a rare point of commonality between the *Radd* and Ibn al-‘Arabī, for in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15 the Shaykh appeals repeatedly to “the divine narration that, ‘I will be his tongue by which he speaketh’” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 170)¹¹⁷ to explain Jesus’ distinctive acts of speech. Ibn al-‘Arabī concludes his chapter on Jesus with a sentence that again alludes to the *ḥadīth*:

If He allows you to ask with your tongue, He will have you hear with your ears, and if He allows you to do so as meaning, then He will have you hear with your hearing. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 175)

Moreover, Abrahamov takes note of the fact that Ibn al-‘Arabī connects this *ḥadīth* to Ḥallāj and to the Arabic word *kun* (“Be!”), the divine imperative of creation:

In like manner, Ibn al-‘Arabī agrees with al-Ḥallāj’s interpretation of the phrase ‘in the name of God’ (*bi-smi Allah*). This phrase, says al-Ḥallāj, relates to the human being as the word *kun* relates to God, which means that ‘in the name of God’ is a phrase of creation. Al-Ḥallāj adds that the greatest human beings may use the divine word *kun*, because the tradition of the supererogatory works (*ḥadīth al-nawāfil*) applies to them. In this tradition it is stated that God becomes the hearing, the seeing and the speaking of the individual. Hence, the individual can utter the word *kun*. (Abrahamov 2014, 92-93)

Thus it appears that, on questions of Jesus’ unification with and nearness to God, Ibn al-‘Arabī draws on the same sources as traditional interpretations of *shaṭhiyyāt*, compelling us to ask whether the Shaykh might have regarded Jesus’ utterances as *shaṭhiyyāt*.

4.5. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Criticisms of *Shaṭhiyyāt*

But we mean no boasting in this, lest a defect come over us... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Futūḥāt Chapter 397

¹¹⁷ “Divine narration” is a translation of *ḥadīth qudsī*, a tradition in which God is the speaker.

This line of speculation collides, however, with an obstacle when we recognize that Ibn al-‘Arabī, on at least some occasions, adopts a stridently scolding attitude towards the practice of uttering *shatḥiyyāt*. Ernst has underscored Ibn al-‘Arabī’s remark that *shatḥiyyāt* are “vain self-indulgence, the product of uncontrolled and subjective ecstasy” (Ernst 1985, 22), illustrating this stance with a quotation from *Futūḥāt* II 2.338. Here Ibn al-‘Arabī writes:

Ecstatic expressions indicate one’s degree relative to God by following the path of pride (*fakhr*). That is done by likenesses and images. God forbid that His people get mixed up with likenesses or start boasting! For this reason *shath* is a frivolity of the carnal soul... (Ernst 1985, 40)

Elsewhere, Ibn al-‘Arabī appears to fault the likes of Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī for succumbing to heedlessness (*ghafla*) and failing to preserve courtesy (*adab*). In *Futūḥāt* I 276.2, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes:

Do you not see that when the spirit is heedless of itself, it intrudes upon and is audacious toward the Divine Station? Then it claims lordship, like Pharaoh. When this state overcomes it, it says, “I am Allah” or “Glory be to me!”, as one of the gnostics has said. This is because he was overcome by a state. That is why words like this have never issued from a messenger, or a prophet, or a friend who is perfect in his knowledge, his presence (*ḥuḍūr*), his clinging to the door of the station which belongs to him, his courtesy, and his observance of the material (*mādda*) within which he dwells and through which he becomes manifest. (Chittick 1989, 320)

This criticism complicates the question of how Ibn al-‘Arabī might have read some of the more daring utterances attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John. Jesus is a prophet, a messenger, and a perfect friend (saint, *walī*), and Ibn al-‘Arabī writes that “words like this have never issued from a messenger, or a prophet, or a friend who is perfect in his knowledge.” We must ask then: if the Shaykh were confronted with the Gospel of John, would he have been drawn up short in the face of the seemingly unruly declarations of Jesus in that Gospel? Would he have approved or disapproved of these declarations as *shatḥiyyāt*? While Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to endorse the view of onlookers that they encountered divinity in Jesus, in the form of the paradox “He/not

He,” it seems a different matter to defend first-person claims like “I and the Father, we are one!” or “I am the Path, the Real, and the Life!” Would Ibn al-‘Arabī then have rejected as counterfeit the Gospel of John’s portrayal of Jesus, protesting as Ṭūfī does when he insists, “Christ did not say any of this!”? If he were to acknowledge the authenticity of that portrayal, would he have felt compelled to criticize the Johannine Jesus for heedlessness?¹¹⁸ Or would he have defended the Johannine Jesus by articulating a difference between his utterances and the transgressive utterances of Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī?

A close inspection of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s analysis of *shaḥīyyāt* in Chapter 195 of the *Futūḥāt* exposes some noteworthy tensions in his stance. Here Ibn al-‘Arabī clarifies the point that the

¹¹⁸ Criticism of prophets is a sensitive topic, and we can touch only briefly here on the relevance of this topic to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings. On one occasion in the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-‘Arabī uses the expression “the Inerrant One” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 68) an apparent allusion to Muḥammad. This is not at odds with recognizing the limitations of Muḥammad’s knowledge:

The Prophet recognized, may God bless him and grant him peace, that his Companions knew better than he what was beneficial in the lower world, for in this case he had no expertise. It was knowledge acquired through experience and through practice, and the Prophet, upon him be peace, did not occupy himself in acquiring it. Nay, he was busy with the most important of things. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 266)

Similarly, Ibn al-‘Arabī defends Moses’ inerrancy in the *Fuṣūṣ*, despite Moses’ apparent sin in killing an Egyptian. In his defense of Moses, Ibn al-‘Arabī draws a distinction between Moses’ externality and internality:

God first afflicted [Moses] in the killing of the Egyptian, something God supported and inspired him to do in his mystery, though he did not know it. Now, in his soul he was not interested in killing him, although he did not cease until his Lord’s command had been fulfilled in this, for a prophet is inwardly inerrant in a way of which he is not aware until he is given news, that is, until he is informed of it. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 260; bracketed word inserted by us)

There are occasions in the *Fuṣūṣ*, however, where Ibn al-‘Arabī is surprisingly bold in his apparent criticism of prophets. In the previous section of the present chapter, we have noted Ibn al-‘Arabī’s charitable attitude towards the *kāfirūna* and the failure of Noah’s prophetic mission, apparently blamed on Noah’s failure to synthesize the polarity in his call. In *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 6, on Isaac, Ibn al-‘Arabī highlights Abraham’s failure to interpret a dream from God, a failure of insight that nearly resulted in filicide. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes that Abraham’s dream was a test from God,

that is, a test of knowledge: would [Abraham] have knowledge of the interpretation that the domain of dreams demands or not? [God] knows that the domain of imagination requires interpretation, but [Abraham] was not mindful and thus did not fulfill the rights of this domain. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 72; bracketed words inserted by us)

This topic clearly merits a fuller investigation than we can pursue in the present study.

propositional content of *shatḥiyyāt* is “true,” but reprehensible because its utterance is a violation of proper behavior. Moreover, Ibn al-‘Arabī complements his condemnation of the taint of *fakhr* (“pride” or “boasting”) with the observation that *shatḥiyyāt* have been uttered independently from a divine command:

An unruly utterance is the soul’s claim through nature because of a remnant of the effects of self-will within it.
This is when the unruly words are true, have not been commanded, and are spoken by a master of understanding.

Know—God confirm you—that an “unruly utterance” is a justified claim (*da‘wā bi’l-ḥaqq*) which expresses the speaker’s position with God bestowed upon him by God but which [is made] without a divine command and by way of boasting (*fakhr*). (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 151)

Here there is a suggestion of a discrepancy between theory and practice in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s judgment, as well as a partition between private opinions and public expression. This would by no means be the first instance where we have seen of Ibn al-‘Arabī insulating his internal perspectives from external behavior; it brings to mind our discussion in Chapter 2 of this study, where Ibn al-‘Arabī speaks of his own external conformity to the Islamic Law (symbolized as a silver brick), while his internal state (symbolized as a gold brick) conforms to a different law.

In *Futūḥāt* Chapter 397, Ibn al-‘Arabī clarifies his criticism of the objectionable behavior exhibited in *shatḥiyyāt*, framing this criticism in terms of “discourtesy,” *sū’ al-adab* (Chittick 1998b, 301):

As for those who display unruly utterances through God toward God, they show more courtesy to God than do those who make unruly utterances toward their peers. After all, God receives unruly utterances concerning Himself, because He receives all forms. But the created thing does not receive unruly utterances concerning it, because it is tied to a divine station at God that is unknown in respect of the specific face. Thus, the person whose utterance is unruly toward him might be lying without aiming and intending to. But one cannot lie concerning God—like the All Hyle that receives every form in the cosmos. Whatever form you ascribe to it or make manifest, you have spoken the truth in the ascription, and the manifestation is truthful, for the forms make the ascription manifest. As for artifactual hyle, it does not receive this. It receives only specific forms.

So it is possible that someone may be ignorant in ascribing things to it, so he ascribes forms to artifactual hyle that it does not receive. So also is the affair in what we have mentioned concerning unruly utterances toward God and the Folk of God, the companions of the waystations. (Chittick 1998b, 302-303)

What is striking in this passage is that the offense committed in voicing *shatḥiyyāt* is no offense against God; God accepts what is uttered in the *shatḥ*, for “one cannot lie concerning God...Whatever form you ascribe to it or make manifest, you have spoken the truth in the ascription, and the manifestation is truthful...” Rather, the offense is due to a lack of courtesy towards the human hearers confronted by the unruly utterance.

Continuing with *Futūḥāt* Chapter 397, we find Ibn al-‘Arabī qualifying this offense as a violation of the limits laid down by Islamic Law (*sharī‘a*):

I have seen some people making unruly utterances toward God and toward the Folk of God on the basis of a witnessing in an imaginal Presence. We have nothing to say to them, for they have been driven from the door of the Real and made distant from the Seat of Truthfulness. You will see that in most of their states they give no notice to the Shari‘ite rulings, nor do they halt at God’s limits, even through the rational faculty for which prescription is made is found in them. (Chittick 1998b, 303)

Elsewhere (in Chapter of 136 of *Futūḥāt* II 223.3), Ibn al-‘Arabī cites the case of the famed Sufi ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166 CE) to distinguish between the divine truth contained by a *shatḥ* and the transgression committed in its utterance. He makes this point by contrasting the “state” (*ḥāl*) of truthfulness with the “station” (*maqām*) of truthfulness. Ibn al-‘Arabī illustrates this by juxtaposing the *state* of Jīlānī with the *station* of Jīlānī’s disciple, Su‘ūd ibn Shibl:

According to what has been transmitted to us of his states, the Imam ‘Abd al-Qādir possessed the state of truthfulness, not its station. The companion of the state has unruly utterances [*shatḥ*], and indeed he did—God be pleased with him! But the Imam Abu’l-Su‘ūd ibn Shibl, the student of ‘Abd al-Qādir, had the station of truthfulness, not the state. In the cosmos he was an unknown man who was not recognized, an ignored one who did not let himself be known—in contrast to ‘Abd al-Qādir. This was a realized incapacity, because he had ability in the station of truthfulness with God. In the same way, ‘Abd al-Qādir was a realizer and was given the ability in the state of truthfulness. God be pleased with both of them! We have not heard in our own time that anyone is the

like of ‘Abd al-Qādir in the state of truthfulness, nor the like of Abu’l-Su‘ūd in the station of truthfulness. (Chittick 1989, 381)

In the cases of Jīlānī and Su‘ūd ibn Shibl, both are “realizers” of truth. Symptomatic, however, of the contrast between the former’s state and the latter’s station is the fact that Su‘ūd ibn Shibl was “an ignored one who did not let himself be known.” Thus while Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to endorse the propositional import of unruly utterances like Jīlānī’s, he seems to object to Jīlānī’s speaking such things publicly.

This is reminiscent of the opinion of Abdullāh Anṣārī (1006-1089 CE), who regarded himself as a spiritual heir of Ḥallāj (Knysh 2000, 138). In his *Intimate Conversations (Munājāt)*, Anṣārī flaunts this association with Ḥallāj provocatively:

Hallaj said, “I am God” and crowned the gallows.
Abdullah said, “God” and was crowned.
What Hallaj said I too have said.
He said it aloud.
I, silently.
(Ibn ‘Ata’llah and Ansari 1978, 217)¹¹⁹

Elsewhere, while validating the content of Ḥallāj’s words, Anṣārī refuses to “condone al-Ḥallāj’s ‘betrayal’ of the divine mystery” (Knysh 2000). There is a peculiar tension in criticizing Ḥallāj for breaking silence while boasting of keeping silence.

There might be a similar tension in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitude towards *shatḥiyyāt*, alternately criticizing these utterances as vain indulgences, while approving their contents—and perhaps even, on occasion, showing himself susceptible to similar lapses of discretion. We might consider Ibn al-‘Arabī’s inconsistent orientation to his identification as the Seal of the Saints; at

¹¹⁹ Admittedly, it can be dangerous to draw conclusions from a passage like this; as Thackston cautions in the introduction to his translation, “no two printed versions of the Munajat agree with regard to the material included” (Ibn ‘Ata’llah and Ansari 1978); moreover, the chapter from which this quotation is taken has been flagged as suspect (lecture notes, Peter Awn’s course on Classical Sufi Texts, October 8, 2004). Thus, claims regarding Anṣārī should be viewed as provisional.

times he circumspectly disavows this status, while on other occasions openly boasting, “I am, without any doubt, the Seal of Sainthood” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 129). Ibn al-‘Arabī seems conscious of his own risk and susceptibility to boasting; he writes, simultaneously revealing himself and checking himself:

God has favored us in our vicegerency
through the seal of the property that He specified for no mortal.
But we mean no boasting in this, lest
a defect come over us, or He join someone else to us.
(Chittick 1998b, 301)¹²⁰

Moreover, despite Ibn al-‘Arabī’s critical stance towards *shaḥīyyāt*, Ernst notes that later generations of Sufis have tended to interpret *shaḥīyyāt* in light of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theories; moreover, “[t]he historian al-Dhahabi noted that Ibn ‘Arabi did not employ *shath* in his writings, but still he supposed that Ibn ‘Arabi must have done so privately in states of intoxication” (Ernst 1985, 22).

Considering Ibn al-‘Arabī’s mixed judgment of *shaḥīyyāt*, we might recognize in Ibn al-‘Arabī a conflicted kinship with Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī, and we will find the Shaykh’s rebukes to be interspersed with apologetic and appreciative evaluations of these two saints. Thus, while Ibn al-‘Arabī comes down against utterances like “‘Glory be to me!’, as one of the gnostics has said” (Chittick 1989, 320)—apparently referring to Bisṭāmī’s most famous *shaḥ*—he also exhibits the highest regard for Bisṭāmī, whom he regards “as a model of ethical behaviour” (Abrahamov 2014) and “a man of scrupulousness or *wara*” (Abrahamov 2014). As for Ḥallāj, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s attitude is more ambiguous and requires more sustained scrutiny.

At one end of the spectrum, A. E. Affifi has represented Ḥallāj as holding considerable clout with Ibn al-‘Arabī:

¹²⁰ Again, this is from *Futūḥāt* Chapter 397.

Of all the Sufis who may be said to have inspired Ibnul ‘Arabī’s doctrine, Ḥallāj seems to have exerted the greatest influence. Ibnul ‘Arabī seems to have been thoroughly acquainted with Ḥallāj’s mystical sayings, and he is even supposed to have written a commentary on Ḥallāj’s terms entitled “As-Sirāj al-Wahhāj fī Sharḥ Kalāmīl Ḥallāj.” He also refers to him in many places in his *Futūḥāt*, quoting him on several points and either supporting them and reading into them his own pantheistic notions or refuting them. (Affifi 1938, 188)

Recently, however, Binyamin Abrahamov has adopted a stance at the opposite end of the spectrum, arguing that “al-Hallaj’s doctrine left no important traces in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings in comparison to other of his predecessors” (Abrahamov 2014, 96) and has specifically challenged Affifi’s argument. He recalls that Affifi digested nine points of doctrine in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works and marked them as inherited from Ḥallāj;¹²¹ but Abrahamov (drawing on the work of Mastaka Takeshita) argues that Ibn al-‘Arabī does not necessarily owe these doctrines to Ḥallāj, for some of these ideas were widely circulated among the Sufis and the theologians. Abrahamov further challenges Affifi on the basis of the comparative infrequency with which Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works mention Ḥallāj (by contrast with Bisṭāmī, whom the Shaykh mentions far more frequently). As evidence of this scarcity, he notes that “al-Ḥallāj’s name is absent from *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, which summarizes Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought” (Abrahamov 2014).

We do not, however, find Abrahamov’s rebuttal entirely persuasive. While Abrahamov is correct to note that Ḥallāj does not appear in the *Fuṣūṣ* by name, *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 6 does use the expression “I am the Real,” unquestionably a reference to Ḥallāj’s most famous *shaṭḥ*. The rate

¹²¹ These nine points of doctrine are: 1. The doctrine of the One and the Many (or *lāhūt* and *nāsūt*); 2. Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of the *logos*; 3. The nature of esoteric knowledge as deriving from the Light of Muhammad; 4. The unity which belongs to God *per se* and the unity as attributed to Him; 5. The phenomenal world as a veil of the Real; 6. Divine love; 7. The difference between the terms *mashī’a* and *irāda*; 8. The unknowability of God; and 9. Esoteric interpretation of the Qur’ān (Abrahamov 2014, 91-92; cf. Affifi 1938, 189). To Affifi’s list we might add Ibn al-‘Arabī’s terminology of the “height” and the “breadth” of the cosmos, as explicated in *Futūḥāt* I 169.1: “This knowledge [discussed in this chapter] is connected to the height of the cosmos—I mean the spiritual world, which is the world of meanings and the command. It is also connected to the breadth of the cosmos, which is the world of creation, nature, and bodies. And all belong to God” (Chittick 1998b, 260). Chittick comments that “Ibn al-‘Arabī considers al-Ḥallāj as the first to use the terms *height* and *breadth* in this sense...” (Chittick 1998, 404, footnote 14).

of appearances of Ḥallāj's name seems a rather imprecise metric for determining the extent of his impact on Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings. In addition, Abrahamov acknowledges that Ibn al-ʿArabī cites eighteen of Ḥallāj's poems in his writings; yet Abrahamov dismisses these citations as "demonstrating Ibn al-ʿArabī's literary taste but not necessarily indicating any influence on his thought" (Abrahamov 2014). This distinction between literary and doctrinal influence could be a false dichotomy in Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings (as we have observed in Chapter 2 of this study). We consider it safer to hold that, while Affīfi seems to have overestimated the force of Ḥallāj on Ibn al-ʿArabī's thinking, Abrahamov seems to have underestimated that force.

In addition to the question of Ḥallāj's presence in Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings, we must ask about the Shaykh's favorable or unfavorable attitudes towards Ḥallāj. Abrahamov places emphasis on the fact that Ibn al-ʿArabī criticizes Ḥallāj during a visionary dialogue with his predecessor, as recorded in Paragraph 57 of *Kitāb al-Tajalliyyāt* (Abrahamov 2014). Abrahamov argues that this "shows that our author rejects the latter's views" (Abrahamov 2014). Yet this part of his argument requires closer attention. The visionary dialogue between Ibn al-ʿArabī and Ḥallāj touches on two points; on the former point, Ibn al-ʿArabī agrees with Ḥallāj, while on the latter Ibn al-ʿArabī challenges Ḥallāj's perspective. These varying responses clearly do not constitute a general rejection of Ḥallāj.

Moreover, though emphasizing Ibn al-ʿArabī's criticism of Ḥallāj, Abrahamov notes that the Shaykh is wont to criticize those Sufi forebears by whom he is influenced and whom he reveres. We have already noted Ibn al-ʿArabī's mixed attitude towards Bisṭāmī. We might consider, in addition, the case of Kharrāz. Abrahamov notes that Ibn al-ʿArabī holds Kharrāz "in high esteem" (Abrahamov 2014); but Ibn al-ʿArabī also puts Kharrāz to shame (during a

visionary dialogue),¹²² saying, “You preceded us in time, but we preceded you in our awareness;”¹²³ Abrahamov comments on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s “tone of somewhat moderate reproof” with the remark that Ibn al-‘Arabī “does not hesitate to criticize his predecessors whenever he considers such criticism appropriate” (Abrahamov 2014). We might add that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s boast of his own superiority to Kharrāz might be read as a kind of fraternal rivalry, vying to excel those he finds most worthy of respect. As this applies to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s relationship with Kharrāz, a similar point might apply to his relationship with Ḥallāj—and indeed with other Sufis associated with the tradition of *shaḥīyyāt*. Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to enter into this tradition of *shaḥīyyāt*, adopting ideas and terminology from that tradition, while competitively leaving his own mark on that lineage.

In sum, we will find a double-edged use for Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī in our attempts to dissect Ibn al-‘Arabī’s appraisal of Jesus’ *shaḥ*-like pronouncements. As we will see, Ibn al-‘Arabī has taken care to carve out a distinction between Jesus’ words and *shaḥīyyāt*, striving to defend Jesus from charges of discourtesy; but we will also find the analogy between Jesus’ words and the *shaḥīyyāt* of Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī constructive in our efforts to work out an Akbarian perspective on the bolder utterances of the Johannine Jesus.

4.6. Jesus and *Ta’rīfāt*

O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, ‘Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God’? — Qur’ān 5:116

¹²² This is recorded in Paragraph 65 of *Kitāb al-Tajalliyyāt*, the same book that records Ibn al-‘Arabī’s visionary dialogue with Ḥallāj.

¹²³ This is, incidentally, a boastful inversion of John the Baptist’s modesty in the Gospel of John 1:15, “He comes after me and was before me because he precedes me” (Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation).

We will proceed then to examine Ibn al-‘Arabī’s move to distance Jesus from speakers of *shatḥiyyāt*. Returning to Chapter 195 of the *Futūḥāt*, we find that Ibn al-‘Arabī distances Jesus’ utterances from *shatḥiyyāt* by introducing an alternative category of speech acts that, while resembling *shatḥiyyāt* in some respects, yet constitute no violation. Ibn al-‘Arabī labels such a lawful utterance as a “communication” (*ta’rīf*, plural *ta’rīfāt*; literally “making known”).

If the speaker is commanded to utter the claim, then he expresses through it a communication (*ta’rīf*) by divine command without intending any boast. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 151)

This opens the possibility that Ibn al-‘Arabī would have deemed any Johannine pronouncement like “I and the Father, we are one!” or “I am the Path, the Real, and the Life!” as a *ta’rīf* rather than a *shatḥ*, so long as Jesus’ words are not only true in their propositional content, but also commanded by God and untainted by pride in the act of their expression. Chittick makes this very point in his commentary on *Futūḥāt* Chapter 195:

...[Ibn al-‘Arabī] acknowledges that such expressions will be justified if, and only if, God has commanded the person to speak them, as in the case of certain sayings of the prophets. As one example he offers an interesting commentary on a long Qur’ānic passage that quotes the words of Jesus, words which would have been “unruly utterances” if spoken without the divine command. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 150-151)

The long Qur’ānic passage to which Chittick alludes is the record of Jesus’ miraculous speech from the cradle, which we touched on briefly above and will now examine more fully:

Then she brought the child to her folk carrying him; and they said, ‘Mary, thou hast surely committed a monstrous thing! Sister of Aaron, thy father was not a wicked man, nor was thy mother a woman unchaste.’

Mary pointed to the child then; but they said, ‘How shall we speak to one who is still in the cradle, a little child?’

He said, ‘Lo, I am God’s servant; God has given me the Book, and made me a Prophet. Blessed He has made me, wherever I may be; and He has enjoined me to pray, and to give the alms, so long as I live, and likewise to cherish my mother; He has not made me arrogant, unprosperous. Peace be upon me, the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!’ (Qur’ān 19:28-33)

Perhaps the first point we might note about this passage is that, by contrast with the Johannine quotations we have been considering, there is little in the words of the infant Jesus to suggest the infamy associated with *shatḥiyyāt*. There is apparently nothing in the statement, “I am God’s servant; God has given me the Book, and made me a Prophet,” to suggest identification with God; on the contrary, this Qur’ānic quotation might be cited in opposition to Jesus’ seemingly vaunting words in the Gospel. Nonetheless, Ibn al-‘Arabī seems conscious that non-Qur’ānic utterances attributed to Jesus have been shadowed by scandal, and employs these apparently innocent Qur’ānic words as a platform for addressing broader questions of Jesus’ speech acts and their relationship to *shatḥiyyāt*.

Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī explicates his distinction between a *shatḥ* and a *ta’rīf* by first applying this distinction to the words of the Prophet Muḥammad:

Unruly utterances are the slips (*zalla*) of the Verifiers (*al-muḥaqqiqūn*) when they are not commanded to speak the words as the Prophet was. Hence he clarified [his words] by saying, “without boasting”; in other words, “I know that I am God’s servant, just as you are God’s servants, and the servant does not boast before the servant when their master is the same.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 151)

He then applies the point to the words of the infant Jesus:

The words of Jesus were similar. He began with servanthood, which corresponds to the Prophet’s words, “without boasting.” In order to exonerate his mother and because he knew through the light of prophecy within his own preparedness that he would certainly be called the son of God, he said to his people, “*Lo, I am God’s servant*” (Qur’an 19:31). Hence at the outset of his communication and testimony he began with a state about which those like him ordinarily do not speak. He meant: I am not the son of any man, and my mother is pure, a virgin. Nor am I the son of God; just as He does not accept a consort, He does not accept a son. Rather, I am God’s servant like you. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 151)¹²⁴

¹²⁴ At this point, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion turns to a discussion of the temporal aspects of Jesus’ prophethood, a discussion that we find difficult to follow; but it might shed light on a possible Akbarian reading of the Johannine declaration, “I was before Abraham was!” or “I am before Abraham is!” (John 8:58 Alexandrian Vulgate). Ibn al-‘Arabī distinguishes Jesus’ prophecy “at its time in his own eyes” from Jesus’ prophecy “in the eyes of those present.” Parsing the Qur’ānic words, “Blessed He has made me, wherever I may be,” Ibn al-‘Arabī continues by observing:

Ibn al-‘Arabī concludes by enumerating those features in Jesus’ utterance that distinguish it as a *ta’rīf* rather than a *shah*:
shah:

All these [words of Jesus], if they had not derived from the Divine Command, would have been unruly utterances on the part of their speaker, for they are words that show his degree with God by way of boasting of it before his equals and likes. But far be it from the Folk of Allah to distinguish themselves from their likes or to boast! Hence unruly utterances are a frivolity of the self (*ru’ūna nafs*); they never issue from a Verifier, for he has no object of contemplation but his Lord, and he does not boast before his Lord, nor does he make claims. On the contrary, he clings to his own servanthood, ready for the commands that come to him. He hastens to obey them, and he looks upon everything in engendered existence in this manner. So if he makes an unruly utterance, he has been veiled from that for which he has been created and is ignorant of himself and his Lord. Even if he possesses every power (*quwwa*) that he claims, so that he gives life and death and appoints and dismisses, still he has no [special] place with God... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 154-155)

We must ask again why the question of *shahīyyāt* should even arise in this discussion of Qur’ān 19:28-33. True enough, Jesus’ utterance is not a *shah* because he speaks without boastfulness and speaks in obedience to God’s command; but why would a reader ever be tempted to compare these words with utterances like those of Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī? We might gain some insight into an answer when we turn to another of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussions of Qur’ān 19:28-33. In *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 20 (the chapter devoted to John the Baptist), Ibn al-‘Arabī dwells on a contrast between the infant Jesus’ words—

Peace be upon me, the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!
(Qur’ān 19:33)

Jesus spoke all of this in the past tense, but he meant the present and the future... The past tense in his words “*wherever I was*” shows that this was a communication of this fact to him from God, just as in the case of Muhammad when he said, “*I was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay;*” so he knew his rank with God when Adam’s bodily form had not yet come into existence. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 152)

There is an evident similarity between the Johannine Jesus’ words in John 8:58 and Muḥammad’s words, “I was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay;” in fact, several Muslim commentaries on the Gospel of John interpret John 8:58 through the lens of this *ḥadīth*, such as Bāqillānī’s eleventh-century commentary (Beaumont 2008, 193) and the *Radd* attributed to al-Ghazālī (Chidiac 1939, 54). Similarly, Ṭūfī appeals to this *ḥadīth* as a basis for interpreting John 1:30 (Demiri 2013, 307). It seems that Ibn al-‘Arabī has availed himself here of the same *ḥadīth* to understand the Qur’ānic Jesus’ account of his prophethood, an approach we might extend to an Akbarian interpretation of John 8:58.

—and the similar wording found in God’s greeting to John the Baptist:

Peace be upon him, the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he is raised up alive! (Qur’ān 9:15)

Whereas the quotation in Qur’ān 9:15 issues directly from God, the quotation in Qur’ān 19:33 issues from the mouth of the infant Jesus. This shift from a third-person declaration in the former to a first-person declaration in the latter draws our attention, beyond the contents of these nearly identical propositions, to the question of the speaker’s agency.

Ibn al-‘Arabī suggests that God is the speaker in both instances, insinuating that the words of Jesus are colored by unification (*ittiḥād*) and raising the specter of *shaḥīyyāt*. As we noted earlier, Ibn al-‘Arabī describes the miraculous utterance of the infant as “more perfect in unification (*akmal fī l-ittiḥādi*);” but he describes God’s utterance regarding John as “more perfect in unification and faith, and more sublime with respect to interpretations (*akmal fī l-ittiḥādi wa fī l-i-tiqādi wa arfa ‘u li l-ta wīlāti*)” (our translation). To make sense of these mutually superior forms of perfection, we might gain some traction by consulting Austin’s liberal translation of this passage; according to Austin, God’s greeting to John the Baptist is “better in that it combines the notion of identity and belief, which is less susceptible to misinterpretation” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980, 220). Ibn al-‘Arabī appears to be concerned that the unification manifest in Jesus’s speech might offend creedal principles and give rise to heretical interpretations; he might therefore have in mind the risks typical of the utterance of *shaḥīyyāt*. The breath of scandal that attaches to this speech act seems to depend less on the meaning of the words than on God’s identity as the real speaker. What troubles orthodoxy is the implicit agency of God speaking in the first-person through the human infant. Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī places his emphasis on this implication: “For Jesus, the miracle lay only in his speaking; his intellect was

enabled and perfected at that moment in which God made him speak” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 216).

This brings us to what may be the most peculiar moment in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of Qur’ān 19:28-33 in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 20. Recall Ibn al-‘Arabī’s observation that the propositional content of a *shatḥ* might be true, though its utterance might be blameworthy due to boastfulness and disobedience; Jesus’ words do not constitute an act of *shatḥ* precisely because they are free of this boastfulness and because they arise in obedience to God’s command. We have yet to address the question of the truthfulness of Jesus’ words. Is it possible that, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, Jesus’ utterance stands in contrast with a *shatḥ*, not only in terms of proper behavior, but also in its propositional content. That is, if a *shatḥ* is a discourteous act of truthful speech, might the utterance of the infant Jesus be a courteous act of *untruthful* speech? To recall the discussion from *Futūḥāt* Chapter 195, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes there:

In order to exonerate his mother and because he knew through the light of prophecy within his own preparedness that he would certainly be called the son of God, he said to his people, “*Lo, I am God’s servant*” (Qur’an 19:31)...He meant: I am not the son of any man, and my mother is pure, a virgin. Nor am I the son of God; just as He does not accept a consort, He does not accept a son. Rather, I am God’s servant like you. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 151)

Yet we have argued earlier, on the basis of *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, that Ibn al-‘Arabī holds (in a manner divergent from Christian theology) that Jesus was the son of God. One way to reconcile these seemingly contradictory observations would be to posit that the infant Jesus lied in denying that he was the son of God, resorting to duplicity in order to protect his mother from suspicion.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ This suggestion might also point to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words earlier in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 20: “...the remembrance of God should abide in his progeny [*‘aqibihī*], for the son [*walad*] is the secret [*sirr*] of his father” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 215; Arabic words in brackets inserted by us). In this context, Ibn al-‘Arabī refers to Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist; these words are thus to be understood primarily as meaning, “the remembrance of God should abide in Zachariah’s son...” Yet the structure of this chapter manifestly sets up a parallel between John the Baptist

On the face of it, this audacious suggestion stretches beyond plausibility. Yet this may be supported by the following remark, appearing in the midst of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion (again, in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 20) of Jesus’ miraculous speech from the cradle:

It does not necessarily follow that one who is made able to speak—whatever be his state—be truthful in what he says...If a prophet were to say, “My sign and my miracle is that this wall shall speak,” and if the wall were to speak and say in its speaking, “You have lied. You are not the Messenger of God,” the sign would still be valid, and by means of this it would be confirmed that such a one is the Messenger of God, and one would not take into account what the wall had said. Now since this possibility is contained in the words of Jesus, which were prompted by his mother’s act of gesturing to him while he was in the cradle, God’s greeting of peace upon John is more exalted in this respect. The purpose was to prove that he was God’s slave, because there are those who say he is the Son of God and there are those who side with prophethood and say that he is God’s slave; the fact of his speaking alone carried out this proof. Whatever was left of that theoretical possibility remained until his truthfulness became manifest in the future, concerning everything of which he had spoken in the cradle. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 216-217)¹²⁶

and Jesus, thus encouraging a secondary reading, according to which “the remembrance of God should abide in God’s own progeny...” Thus the conclusion of the sentence, “the son is the secret of his father,” might suggest that Jesus’ divine paternity is a secret to be concealed, even at the expense of compromised forthrightness in Jesus’ public statements.

We might find some illumination of this point in the introduction of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, by Ibn Tufayl, the twelfth-century Andalusian Muslim philosopher. There, he writes that “the joy, delight and bliss of this ecstasy are such that no one who has reached it or even come near it can keep the secret or conceal the mystery” (Ibn Tufayl 2003, 95). Translator Lenn E. Goodman notes (in a comment on this sentence) that the Arabic word *sirr* does not only imply secrecy, but has also taken on the meaning of “the inmost core of being” (Ibn Tufayl 2003, 169, footnote 5), which may be the meaning Ibn al-‘Arabī has in mind when he writes of “the secret of his father.” It is possible that both meanings are in play with Ibn al-‘Arabī, as seem to be the case with Ibn Tufayl. In another passage from *Ḥayy*, Ibn Tufayl writes:

Fearing that the weak-minded, who throw over the authority of prophets to ape the ways of fools, might mistake these notions for the esoteric doctrines which must be kept secret from those unfit to know them, and thus be all the more enticed to embrace them, I decided to afford them a fleeting glimpse of the mystery of mysteries to draw them to true understanding and turn them away from this other, false way.

Nonetheless I have not left the secrets set down in these few pages entirely without a veil—a sheer one, easily pierced by those fit to do so, but capable of growing so thick to those unworthy of passing beyond that they will never breach it. (Ibn Tufayl 2003, 165-166)

Goodman notes that “Ibn Tufayl follows the example of the prophets, less because of any fear that “to reveal God’s secret is unbelief...than because he takes the content of his teaching and theirs to be ultimately ineffable” (Ibn Tufayl 2003, 220, footnote 207). While emphasizing the latter motivation over the former, dual intentions may be evident in the motivation for secrecy.

¹²⁶ Another passage touching on this point, in *Futūḥāt* Chapter 195, states with respect to Jesus’ words from the cradle:

This decoupling of denotation from connotation, divorcing speech as articulated meaning from speech as divine action, leaves open the possibility for contradictory proofs following from a single speech act. Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī might be suggesting that, in one utterance, its propositional content might deny Jesus’ filial relationship with God, while the miracle itself speaks to the opposite effect. That is, this *act* of speech might speak louder than the *words* spoken.¹²⁷

With apparently similar concerns in mind, Ibn al-‘Arabī includes the following observation in *Futūḥāt* Chapter 195:

What pertains to the present is his words in testimony concerning the innocence of his mother and in admonition and instruction to those who wanted to call him the son of God. Hence he declared God incomparable (*tanzīh*) [i.e., in respect to such an ascription], and this is equivalent to his exoneration of his mother from what they were ascribing to her. So his words are a declaration of Incomparability for God and an exoneration for his mother. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 152)

We should take into account the fact that, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, Jesus’ admonition of those who would call him the son of God amount to a declaration that God is incomparable. Reading this in the broader context of the Shaykh’s teachings, we know that any declaration of God as incomparable would be lopsided, telling only half of the story. Chittick points to a prevalent theme in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings when he notes:

The Shaykh al-Akbar constantly alternates between these two points of view. He maintains that true knowledge of God and creation can only come through combining the two perspectives. He commonly refers to them as (the declaration of God’s) incomparability (*tanzīh*) and (the declaration of His) similarity (*tashbīh*). (Chittick 1989, 69)

Given the correlation between a declaration of incomparability and denial of Jesus’ filial relationship with God, we might infer that that the other half of the story would be a declaration of comparability and an affirmation of Jesus’ filial relationship with God. Between this denial and affirmation that Jesus is the son of God, it might be the case that Ibn al-‘Arabī “alternates between these two points of view.”

¹²⁷ Perhaps it is not unusual to imagine a good son lying to protect his mother from scandal; no doubt the situation is more complicated when we ask whether Jesus—or any prophet—can be accused of deception. On this point, we might recall Jesus’ evasiveness in the Gospel of John. In John 7:2-10, Jesus’ brothers urge him to go to Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles to reveal himself publicly; Jesus responds that he would not go to Jerusalem, but follows this denial by traveling secretly to Jerusalem. This perhaps opens Jesus to accusations of duplicity, and we might ask whether Ibn al-‘Arabī would have had any objection to Jesus’ concealment of his intentions. On the Islamic side, the question brings to mind some relevant verses in the Qur’ān. Qur’ān 3:161 states, “It is not for a Prophet to be fraudulent (*yaghulla*);” we might ask if there is a distinction to be drawn between fraudulence and deception (*kidhb*). Qur’ān 3:54 employs the verb *makara* to designate God’s activity: “And they schemed (*makarū*), and Allah schemed (*makara*): and Allah is the best of schemers (*al-mākirīna*);” *makara* means, “He practiced deceit, guile, or circumvention...” (Lane 1863). We might also recall here several instances from Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (Volume 4, 3028-3030) in which Muḥammad declares that “War is deceit (*khad‘a*)” (Bukhārī 1997a, 165). All of this may bring us more questions than answers, and we must confess that we are not all certain we have caught Ibn al-‘Arabī’s intentions in his illustration of the speaking wall.

Such is the situation of unruly utterances if they are justified, when they are still blameworthy. So what if they should issue from a liar (*kādhīb*)? If it is asked: How can he be a liar in an unruly utterance if he displays acts and effects? We reply: How excellent a question! As for the answer: The Folk of Allah, if they are Folk of Allah, produce effects only through veracious [spiritual] states (*al-ḥāl al-sādiq*). They name this [effect, when expressed verbally], an unruly utterance if it is not connected to a divine command that commands it, as is realized in the case of the prophets. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 155-156)

With this superimposition of “veracious states” on acts of lying, Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to be sketching a nearly illegible palimpsest of overlapping truth and falsehood. The only certain guideline Ibn al-‘Arabī leaves us with to distinguish the speaker of unruly utterances from the speaker of divine communications may be the criterion of God’s command: he makes clear that the infant Jesus speaks through God’s command and by God’s agency, thus validating his speech, regardless of its content.

We will consider here one last discussion of the nature of Jesus’ speech in the *Fuṣūṣ*, in this case returning to Chapter 15. In that chapter Ibn al-‘Arabī analyzes a dialogue between God and Jesus in Qur’ān 5:116-118. The Qur’ānic passage runs thus:

And when God said, ‘O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, “Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God”?’ He said, ‘To Thee be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it, knowing what is within my soul, and I know not what is within Thy soul; Thou knowest the things unseen. I only said to them what Thou didst command me: “Serve God, my Lord and your Lord.” And I was a witness over them, while I remained among them; but when Thou didst take me to Thyself, Thou wast Thyself the watcher over them; Thou Thyself art witness of everything. If Thou chastisest them, they are Thy servants; if Thou forgivest them, Thou art the All-mighty, the All-wise.’

Once again Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to be considering Jesus’ words on an analogy with *shaḥīyyāt*. Here, however, we find that Ibn al-‘Arabī does not think of Jesus’ speech solely in terms of unification and nearness; rather, in this chapter he explores the dialectic of “union” (*al-jam‘*) and “separation” (*al-tafriqa*). Ibn al-‘Arabī casts this Qur’ānic exchange as a confrontation between the Real and “the Christic (*‘īsawī*) word,” the latter of which might denote either the speech of

Jesus (“didst thou say”) or Jesus himself (insofar as he is the word of God). In either case, this dialogue amounts, in effect, to a dialogue between God and His own word; thus Ibn al-‘Arabī emphasizes the fact that God knows the answer to his own inquiry: “He asked it...although he already knew...” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 169).

Ibn al-‘Arabī delineates the paradoxicality of this circular dialogue in the following terms:

...He disclosed Himself to [Jesus] in this station and in this form, it demands wisdom of response, in separation while in union (*fī’l-tafriqati bi ‘ayni’l-jam’*) itself. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 169-170; bracketed word inserted by us)

Jesus initially expresses separation between himself and God, marking their difference with the distinction between the pronouns “I” and “you”:

[Jesus] spoke to Him, beginning with the assertion of incomparability, “*To Thee be glory!*” He delimited it with the pronoun, which necessitates there being an encounter as well as an address. “*It is not mine,*” insofar as I am mine and not Thine, “*to say what I have no right to,*” that is, it is required neither by my selfhood nor my essence. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 170; bracketed word inserted by us)

Subsequently, however, Jesus asserts his unity with God in the act of speech, a unity that effaces Jesus’ self-awareness in his merger with God:

“*If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it,*” for Thou art the tongue by which I speak. Recall that the Messenger, may God bless him and grant him peace, told us in the divine narration that, “I will be his tongue by which he speaketh.” He thus made His Selfhood the very tongue of the speaker, and related the speech to His slave. Then the righteous slave finished his response by saying, “*Thou knowest what is in my soul—the speaker is the Real—and I know not what is within it.*” He denied knowledge to Jesus’ selfhood as such, though not with respect to his being a speaker or producer of effects. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 170)

Ibn al-‘Arabī concludes that Jesus blends separation with unity, resulting in a paradox reminiscent of the ontological theory of “He/not He”:

He divided and unified, made one and made many, widened and constricted, and then said, completing his response, “*I spoke not to them except what Thou didst command*”

me.” He first used negation, indicating that he was not. Then he responded to His words, having *adab* with the Questioner. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 170)

Ibn al-‘Arabī seems here to be sensitive to the fact that Jesus never directly answers the question, *didst thou say?* Rather, Jesus replies:

If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it, knowing what is within my soul, and I know not what is within Thy soul; Thou knowest the things unseen. I only said to them what Thou didst command me...

This is not a denial of divinity, and by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interpretation, *If I indeed said it*, the tongue by which Jesus spoke would have been the tongue of God Himself. In such a moment of union, there would have been virtually no difference between commanding “Serve me” and “Serve God,” for God would have been the true speaker. The Qur’ānic conversation takes place, however, after Jesus’ emergence from unity into separation; thus Jesus respects the distinction between him and God and responds only indirectly, keeping courtesy (*adab*) before his Lord and offering neither avowals nor disavowals in response to the question.

To further illustrate this dynamic of union and separation, Ibn al-‘Arabī points to the model of Ḥallāj. He writes in *Futūḥāt* Chapter 507:

But He has become distinct for us, through us, and from us, just as we have become distinct for Him, through Him, and from Him. So we have come to know who we are and who He is. If a state overcomes us, that state says with its own tongue [in the words of al-Ḥallāj],

I am the one I love,
and the one I love is I.

It is sufficient for him, in respect to the strength of the trace of the limits, to differentiate between “I” and “the one I love,” even if he loves himself. Thus his state of loving, while he is the actor, is not the same as his state of being loved, while he is the one acted upon. Thus the limits have clarified the states, just as they clarify the entities. (Chittick 1998, 80; the bracketed words are inserted by Chittck)

This recalls a seminal theme that recurs in the words of Ḥallāj: the dialectic of nearness and distance. Ernst traces this dialectic and its bearing on the riddle of identity in several excerpts from Baqlī's collection and from Ḥallāj's poetry:

Hallaj has also given many subtle comments on identity in his *shathiyyat*. In one place he said, "I wonder at You and me. You annihilated me out of myself into You. You made me near to Yourself, so that I thought that I was You and You were me"...In a bolder metaphor, Hallaj said, "My spirit mixes with your spirit, in nearness and in distance, so that I am You, just as You are I." This is actually a truncated version of a poem in the Diwan, which is even more remarkable in its imagery: "Your spirit was mixed in my spirit, just like wine and clear water, and if something touches You, it touches me, for You are I in every state." (Ernst 1985, 27)

Among other things, Ḥallāj was a poet caught in an extended negotiation of identity. While Ḥallāj's *shathiyyāt* often issue from a state of apparent immersion in God, others are spoken from a point in time after this ecstatic state has already passed. In this oscillation, the collapsed singularity of "I am the Real!" opens up once again to the more dynamic relationship of "I" and "You;" his distance from the moment of union is sufficient for him to reflect upon the nearness with wonder, even while affirming its enduring validity. A more extensive excerpt from another of Ḥallāj's poems demonstrates the restless dynamism of his reflections on the nature of his selfhood. Here Ḥallāj's selfhood proves to be both resilient and unstable, and the moment of resolution of "I" and "You" has either fled or been postponed:

Is it You or I? That would be two gods in me;
far, far be it from You to assert duality!
The "He-ness" that is Yours is in my nothingness forever;
my "all" added to Your "All" would be a double disguise.
But where is Your Essence, from my vantage point when I see You,
since my essence has become plain in the place where I am not?
And where is Your face? It is the object of my gaze,
whether in my inmost heart or in the glance of my eye.
Between You and me there is an "I am" that battles me,
so take away, by Your grace, this "I am" from in between.
(Ernst 1985, 27-28)

This oscillation of personal identity is encapsulated in the “delicate question” of the “identity of the speaker,” as Ernst puts it:

The problematic nature of the ego in an intense confrontation with God is probably the most sensitive topic raised by the *shathīyyat* of Hallaj and Bayazid. When the contemplative is experiencing annihilation of his ego and direct converse with God, it is a very delicate question, from moment to moment, as to the actual identity of the speaker. (Ernst 1985, 17)

In sum, while Ibn al-‘Arabī does not seem to think of Jesus’ utterances as *shathīyyāt*, his two analyses in Chapters 20 and 15 proceed to treat those utterances as analogous to *shathīyyāt* in multiple respects. While these analyses are applied to quotations of Jesus’ words in the Qur’ān, it seems probable that Ibn al-‘Arabī would have applied a similar approach to utterances attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John, utterances that bear a far stronger resemblance to *shathīyyāt* than those in the Qur’ān. Moreover, applying this Ḥallājīan dialectic to Jesus, we might find an additional response to the objection raised by the *Radd* and Ṭūfī, namely that Jesus could not have claimed to be God if, on other occasions, he spoke to and of God as standing separate from the speaker. For the *Radd* and Ṭūfī, this looks like a flat logical contradiction and a blunt obstacle to further conversation. But for Sufis like Ḥallāj, the tension between identity with and distinction from God comprise a fruitful paradox and a robust riddle. With Ḥallāj in the background, an Akbarian approach might thus cultivate a living, poetic engagement with Jesus’ alternating modes of speech in the Gospel of John, sometimes confessing that “I am” God, sometimes discoursing on God as “He,” and sometimes praying to God as “You.”

We have yet, however, to answer the question directly: would Ibn al-‘Arabī have blamed or excused the Johannine Jesus for making public proclamations that resound with implications of *ittihād*? While we cannot answer this question definitively, a possible answer is recommended by this study. We might imagine that Ibn al-‘Arabī would have applied to the daring statements

of the Johannine Jesus the same defense he applied to the utterances of the Qur'ānic Jesus: that whatever Jesus says has been commanded by God. Yet no doubt the boldness of Jesus' words in the Gospel would have more severely tested Ibn al-'Arabī's tolerance than Jesus' words in the Qur'ān; to establish our speculative answer on more solid ground then, we would benefit from taking one last look at the Shaykh's attitudes towards the boldest outbursts of the Sufi saints. Here we turn our attention not to Ḥallāj, but to Bisṭāmī. Whereas Ibn al-'Arabī has reproached the latter for announcing, "Glory be to me!", we should note that this has not been his sole stance on Bisṭāmī. As we have noted above, Ibn al-'Arabī regarded Bisṭāmī as "as a model of ethical behaviour" (Abrahamov 2014) and "a man of scrupulousness or *wara*" (Abrahamov 2014); moreover, the Shaykh seems to adopt an approving countenance towards him in various places in the *Futūḥāt* (II 205; I 516). Abrahamov recounts:

When asked whether the gnostic (*al-'arīf*) disobeyed God, Abū Yazīd answered by quoting Quran 33:38, 'God's commandment is predetermined decree'. Ibn al-'Arabī points out that Abū Yazīd's answer was an example of most correct behaviour (*adab*), for he did not answer either in the affirmative or the negative. According to our author, this correct behaviour stemmed from Abū Yazīd's general perfection of state, knowledge and behaviour. The phrase 'May God be pleased with him and others like him' concludes Ibn al-'Arabī's appreciation of Abū Yazīd's personality. (Abrahamov 2014)

Just as Ibn al-'Arabī defends Jesus as one whose speech issues from God's decree, he portrays Bisṭāmī as offering a parallel defense: "God's commandment is predetermined decree." Moreover, Ibn al-'Arabī's account of Jesus in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15 resonates with his portrayal of Bisṭāmī on two key points. First, in response to God's Qur'ānic question—"O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, 'Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God'?"—Ibn al-'Arabī represents Jesus as "having *adab* with the Questioner" (Ibn al-'Arabī 2004b, 170), just as Bisṭāmī displays *adab* from his "general perfection of state, knowledge and behavior." Second, Ibn al-'Arabī presents Jesus as never directly answering the Qur'ānic question, "diddst thou

say...?”, just as he presents Bisṭāmī answering neither in the affirmative nor in the negative. Given the correspondence between Jesus’ and Bisṭāmī’s replies to challenging and accusatory questions, we might envision Shaykh’s disposition towards the Johannine Jesus in a similar manner. Neither approving nor condemning utterances like “I and the Father, we are one!”, we might imagine Ibn al-‘Arabī maintaining courtesy towards the Johannine Jesus, merely remarking, “May God be pleased with him and others like him.”

Chapter 5

The Word and the Body

5.1. The Testimony of Two Witnesses

That is why He appointed for man two eyes... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Futūḥāt III 274.28

As the reader might recall, we opened this study by pointing to the closing words of the Gospel of John. The Gospel’s closing verses identify the Evangelist and sum up the character of his Gospel, remarking that its subject matter exceeds the limitations of the written word, suggesting that this text might stand in tension with itself. In the Alexandrian Vulgate, these verses are:

Hadhā huwa ‘l-tilmīdhū ‘lladhī shahida bi hadhā wa katabahu wa naḥnu na ‘lamu an shahādatahu hiya ḥaqq. Wa fa‘ala yasū‘ hadhā wa umūr kathīra law annahā kutibat wāḥdatan wāḥdatan zanantu an lam yasa‘uhā al-‘alām ṣuḥufan al-maktūba. (John 21:24-25, Alexandrian Vulgate)

This is how we translate these verses into English:

This is the disciple who bore witness to this and wrote it and we know that his testimony is true. And Jesus did this and many things; if they were written one by one, I suppose that the world could not contain the pages of the things written.

As we have indicated at the outset, the conclusion of the Gospel resonates with a similar turn of phrase Ibn al-‘Arabī uses in Chapter 1 of the *Fuṣūṣ*. There the Shaykh describes the discrepancy between the *Fuṣūṣ* he received as a book in a dream and the *Fuṣūṣ* he actually inscribed on the pages. The Shaykh introduces his table of contents with the following words:

...I have placed in this book what was set out for me, but not that to which I have attained, for indeed that could not be encompassed in a book nor by the present existent world. What I have witnessed and placed in this book, as determined for me by the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, consists of [Ibn al-‘Arabī’s table of contents]. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 16)

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words here have a dual resonance with the ending of the Gospel. The Gospel emphasizes the claim that the Evangelist was a witness: “This is the disciple who bore witness to

this....” Similarly, Ibn al-‘Arabī claims that his book records things “I have witnessed and placed in this book.” Witnessing—as an act of seeing (as an eyewitness) and as an act of writing (giving testimony)—is a recurrent and important theme in both the Gospel of John and in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī. There is, moreover, a resonance between the *Fuṣūṣ* and the final verse of the Gospel in their claims that their subject matter surpasses their ability to transcribe. The Gospel’s final words declare that “the world could not contain the pages of the things written” about the acts of Jesus. With a similar turn of phrase, Ibn al-‘Arabī concludes that his subject “could not be encompassed in a book nor by the present existent world.” In both instances, the tension inherent to the activity of witnessing is observed in the fact that what is seen by the eyewitness vastly exceeds the capacity of the written word. Adopting an Akbarian perspective, we might interpret the text of the Gospel of John as an imperfect and deficient transcription of the embodied Word. With these two points of resonance in mind, we will devote this chapter to discussing the dialectic between seeing and writing—that is, between two kinds of witnessing—in the Gospel of John. Thus far, we have focused on specific, thorny obstacles in the Gospel of John, finding ways in which Ibn al-‘Arabī might have narrowed the gap between his idiosyncratic Islamic perspective and elements of Johannine Christology. As we proceed into the last two chapters of this study, however, we will consider ways in which we might apply Akbarian thought more globally to the Gospel narrative as a whole, drawing out a tension between two kinds of witnessing as an important dialectic in the Gospel text.

To set the stage for this reading, we will step back to remark on various dialectical binaries that pervade Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings. His attraction to such binaries—and his drive to encompass both sides of these dialectical pairs—are illustrated by his reports in the *Futūḥāt* (I 153 and II 372) of an anecdote from his youth. According to these reports, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s father

introduced him to the renowned Andalusian philosopher Averroes (Abū al-Walīd Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198 CE). Scholars have frequently cited and commented on the enigmatic nature of the dialogue between the young mystic (whose gifts were just beginning to attract attention) and the eminent elder:

One day I went to Cordoba to visit the *qāḍī* Abū al-Walīd Ibn Rushd. He wanted to meet me personally because of what he had been told concerning what God had revealed to me in my retreat, for he showed great astonishment at what he had heard. So my father, who was one of his friends, sent me to him on the pretext of doing some errand or other, but really in order for him to meet me. At the time I was still a boy, without any hair on my face. When I entered, he rose from his place, greeting me with great warmth and honour. He embraced me and said: “Yes!”, to which I replied: “Yes!” He was even more pleased with me because I had understood him. Then I became aware of what had given him pleasure and said to him: “No!” At this consternation gripped him, the colour went out of his cheeks and he seemed to doubt his own thought. He asked me: “What kind of solution have you found through divine unveiling and illumination? Is it identical with what we have reached through speculative thought?” I replied: “Yes-No! Between the Yes and the No, spirits take wing from their matter, and necks are separated from their bodies.” Ibn Rushd turned pale, started to tremble and murmured the phrase: “There is no power or strength save in God.” For he knew what I had alluded to. (Hirtenstein 1999, 57-58)

Setting aside numerous paths of inquiry we might have taken into this narrative, we have recounted it here to pluck out one central point: Ibn al-‘Arabī represents himself as, from his earliest days on the spiritual path, being driven to adopt a paradoxical stance in the face of Ibn Rushd’s rational thought, defying logical prohibitions on self-contradiction. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s binary perspective is sometimes paradoxical, while on other occasions his perspective might be regarded as dialectic, oscillating between two contrary perspectives. Whether they are paradoxical or oscillating, the Shaykh frequently seeks and highlights such binary tensions. We might even highlight this binary and generative perspective as a primary paradigm to which Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought has tenaciously conformed, in multifarious ways, through the thousands of pages he wrote over the succeeding decades.

In the previous chapter of this study, we have already encountered several manifestations of this dialectical pattern in his thought. There, we were presented with the paradox of the unitary and the manifold exhibited in Jesus' relationship with God; there the Shaykh encapsulated this feature in the expression, "He/not He." Our exploration of this relationship then shifted from a third-person perspective to the oscillating identity of "I" and "You," played out dynamically in union and separation. We will look now at several dialectical pairs recurring in Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings. In his 1998 article, "Between the Yes and the No: Ibn al-ʿArabī on *Wujūd* and the Innate Capacity" (Chittick 1998a), Chittick gathers and articulates a number of such pairs, including the dialectic of God's immanence and transcendence—or in Ibn al-ʿArabī's vocabulary, God's similarity (*tashbīh*) and incomparability (*tanzīh*) with the created world (as we have mentioned in the previous chapter). Chittick also recounts Ibn al-ʿArabī's stance on the classical Sufi dialectic between subsistence (*baqāʾ*) and annihilation (*fanāʾ*) (Chittick 1998a, 105-108), a theme we will examine in the next chapter of this study.

First, however, we will examine Ibn al-ʿArabī's seminal trope of "the Possessor of Two Eyes," a trope that might be applied to an Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John as a general framework for our commentary. Ibn al-ʿArabī extracts this trope from Qur'an 9:8-10—"Have We not appointed to him two eyes, and a tongue, and two lips, and guided him on the two highways?"—and develops it in the service of his own peculiar ontological and epistemological theories. Chittick makes the following observations in his introduction of Ibn al-ʿArabī's treatment of this theme:

Wherever the gnostic looks, he sees the One God, but, dwelling as he does in manyness, he sees Him from two points of view. On the one hand, he witnesses God as incomparable. Everything he sees is but a sign saying, "God is not this." On the other hand, he witnesses Him as similar. Everything he sees says, "God is like this; God is disclosing Himself in this; God is not other than this; God is this."

As the insight of the spiritual traveler is gradually illuminated by the light of faith and unveiling, he comes to see God from various perspectives, all of which go back to incomparability or similarity. On every level, he sees God as one or the other; rarely does he see Him as both. Only the perfect gnostics transcend the limitations of vision and see God with every eye and in every object of vision. When the gnostic attains this highest station, he deserves to be called the “Possessor of the Two Eyes” (*dhu’l-‘aynayn*).

Every human being possesses two eyes to some degree, since everyone sees God as present and absent, whether he knows it or not. And everyone is included in the “man” to which the pronoun goes back in the Koranic verse, “Have We not appointed for him two eyes..., and guided him on the two highways?” (90:8-10). Ontologically speaking, one eye sees Being and the other perceives nothingness. Through the two eyes working together, man perceives that he himself and the cosmos are He/not He. (Chittick 1989, 361-362)

Chittick goes on to illustrate this theme by citing *Futūḥāt* III 274.28, in which Ibn al-‘Arabī considers the dual nature of humankind as a *barzakh* (“isthmus”) between light and darkness:

The Real is sheer Light while the impossible (*al-muḥāl*) is sheer darkness (*ḡulma*). Darkness never turns into light, nor does light turn into darkness. Creation is the Barzakh between Light and darkness. In its essence it is qualified neither by darkness nor by light, since it is the Barzakh and the Middle (*al-wasaṭ*) which has a property from each of its two sides. That is why He appointed for man two eyes and guided him on the two highways, since he exists between the two paths. Through one eye and one path he accepts light and looks upon it in the measure of his preparedness. Through the other eye and the other path he looks upon darkness and turns toward it.

In himself, man is neither light nor darkness, since he is neither existent nor nonexistent. He is the firm impediment which prevents sheer light from dispelling darkness, and he prevents sheer darkness from taking away sheer light. He receives the two sides through his own essence, and he acquires, through this reception, that light whereby he is described as “existent” and that darkness whereby he is described as “nonexistent” So he shares in both sides and protects both sides. (Chittick 1989, 362)

The light/darkness dialectic expressed in this passage might enter readily into dialogue with a similar dialectic at the outset of the Gospel of John:

And by Him was life [*al-ḡayā*] and the life was the light of humankind. And the light shined in the darkness [*al-ḡulma*], and the darkness did not overtake (or comprehend) it.” (John 1:4-5 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

We will not dwell at length on this “light of humankind” (though we could have devoted an entire chapter to the topic).¹²⁸ We will note briefly that this light, for Ibn al-‘Arabī as for the Evangelist, is closely associated with God’s creative action, drawing our attention to the incipient moment of creation that brought nonexistence into existence in “the beginning” (John 1:1). The Shaykh writes elsewhere in the *Futūḥāt* (II 587.32):

The engendered things (*al-kawn*) emerge from an existence, i.e., that which is comprised by these treasuries, to another existence. In other words, they become manifest from these treasuries and to themselves through the light by which their selves are unveiled. In the darkness of the treasuries they had been veiled from the vision of themselves, since they were in the state of their own nonexistence. (Chittick 1989, 87-88)

This topic of divine creation will be prioritized in the coming pages of this chapter.

Rather than tracking further implications of the trope of light and darkness, we will emphasize the broad applicability of the trope of “two eyes.” The trope points to the action of seeing God in created forms found in the world. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, these forms are “imaginal”—

¹²⁸ Various lines of inquiry into this topic are readily suggested. One might consider, for example, the analogy between this Johannine Light and the Sufi (and Shī‘ite) concept of the preexistent Light of Muḥammad. To take one illustration of this enduring theme, Ḥallāj writes this of Muḥammad in his *Kitāb al-Ṭawāsīn*:

All the lights of the Prophets proceeded from his light; he was before all, his name the first in the book of Fate; he was known before all things, all being, and will endure after the end of all. By his guidance have all eyes attained to sight...All knowledge is merely a drop, all wisdom merely a handful from his stream, all time merely an hour from his life... (Schimmel 1975, 70)

Orientalists have been quick to trace the Light of Muḥammad back to Christian and Neoplatonic sources, a path of transmission prominently asserted by the influential Hungarian scholar Ignác Goldziher (Goldziher 1909). A few years after Goldziher, R. A. Nicholson wrote:

This corresponds to the Logos—the animating principle of all things—and is identified with the Prophet Mohammed. An interesting parallel might be drawn here between the Christian and Sufi doctrines. The same expressions are applied to the founder of Islam which are used by St. John and St. Paul, and, later, mystical theologians concerning Christ. Thus, Mohammed is called the Light of God... (Nicholson 1914, 82; see also Nicholson 1921, 87)

Later in this chapter, we will pull away from Nicholson’s notion of the Logos; we will endeavor to distinguish between an Akbarian approach to the Gospel of John and Nicholson’s Neoplatonic framework for understanding the Johannine Word.

a term coined by Henry Corbin to characterize the Shaykh's doctrine that the created forms that make up the world are forms of imagination (*khayāl*). Ibn al-'Arabī uses the term "imagination" in varying ways, and Chittick writes of imagination as the mediating *barzakh* connecting the spirit and the body:

One of the more useful of his expressions is the word "imagination" or "image" (*khayāl, mithāl*), which he applies on several levels extending from individual consciousness to everything other than God. In general, he uses the term to refer to anything that has an intermediate and ambiguous status. In the broadest sense, it means that everything in existence hangs between sheer Reality and utter nonbeing...

As a faculty of the soul, imagination brings together sensory things, which have shapes and forms, and consciousness, which has no shape or form. Its nature can easily be grasped by reflecting on dreams, which for most people provide the most direct experience of imagination's nature and power...Every image brings together the multiplicity of the external world and the unity of the subject; each is an isthmus (*barzakh*) between the darkness of the bodily world and the luminosity of spirit...In a slightly more extended sense, Ibn al-'Arabī employs the term "imagination" to refer to the whole domain of the soul, the intermediate level of consciousness between spirit and body that makes up ordinary awareness. The term "soul" or "imagination" then refers to the intermediate domain of the microcosm that is neither luminous nor dark, neither alive nor dead, neither subtle nor dense, neither conscious nor unconscious, but always somewhere between the two extremes. (Chittick 1998a, 100)

This notion of the formal, imaginal isthmus between the spirit and the body will inform our Akbarian reading of the Johannine declaration that the Word has become a body (John 1:14), as we will discuss below in this chapter.

This theme of imagination comes into focus in Ibn al-'Arabī's claim that God is simultaneously unknowable and knowable. While God is eternally unseen in his noumenal essence (*dhāt*), irremediably removed from contact with us by God's incomparability, God is known through His phenomenal self-disclosure in the created world, delimited and made similar to us.

Ibn al-'Arabī's ontological theory is intimately connected to his epistemological theory. His notion that the created cosmos is ontologically imaginal underlies the importance he places

on knowing God through the activity of *witnessing* (*shuhūd*) the unseen God in images. A passage from *Futūḥāt* III 470.26 illustrates the point that Ibn al-‘Arabī specifies the term “witnessing” to designate the activity of seeing the invisible in the visible forms, as well as highlighting the dual nature of witnessing:

Everything manifest in the cosmos is an imaginal, engendered form that conforms to a divine form. For He discloses Himself to the cosmos only in accordance with that which corresponds (*munāsaba*) to the cosmos... Thus you see the immutable through the immutable, and that is “unseen” in respect to you and Him. You see the manifest through the manifest, and that is the “witnessed, the witnesser, and the witnessing” in respect to you and Him...

Hence we come to know that there are two eyes, as God said: “Have We not appointed for him two eyes?” (90:8). One eye is that through which he who undergoes transmutation is perceived, while the other eye is that through which the transmutation itself is perceived. These are two different paths which God has made clear to the Possessor of Two Eyes, as He said, “And guided him on the two highways” (90:10), that is, made clear for him the two paths. (Chittick 1989, 362)

By employing the tropes of the “two paths” and the “two eyes,” Ibn al-‘Arabī voices the imperative to witness simultaneously the mutability and the immutability of God. The immutable aspect of God is “unseen” by us; nonetheless, God is manifested to us in the mutable forms of the imaginal world (that is, the created world we inhabit): “You see the manifest through the manifest, and that is the ‘witnessed, the witnesser, and the witnessing’...”

In Arabic (as in Greek and English), “to witness” is a verb that encompasses two rather different kinds of activity. It is a verb of seeing, in the sense of being an eyewitness. It is also a verb of speaking when it means “bearing witness” or “testifying” as an act of speech. Both activities are embraced by the Arabic verb *shahida*. These meanings might appear independently and alternatively, separating its aspects as seeing and saying; or it might appear simultaneously in a single act, as in the definition: “*He told, or gave information of, such a thing, as having witnessed it, or beheld it with his eye*” (Lane 1863).

The verbal nouns *shuhūd* and *mushāhada*, “witnessing,” are often used by Ibn al-‘Arabī as synonyms for other Arabic words for “sight” or “knowledge acquired by direct experience,” as Chittick notes:

In many passages Ibn al-‘Arabī explains the difference between two basic kinds of knowledge: That which can be acquired by the rational faculty, and the “gnosis” which can only come through spiritual practice and the divine self-disclosure. In general, he refers to this second kind of knowledge as “unveiling” (*kashf*), “[direct] tasting” (*dhawq*), “opening” (*fath*), “insight” (*baṣīra*), and “witnessing” (*shuhūd, mushāhada*)... (Chittick 1989, 168)

On some occasions, Ibn al-‘Arabī sharpens a distinction between witnessing and other activities of vision. Chittick writes:

Ibn al-‘Arabī often distinguishes witnessing from vision (*ru’ya*) by referring to another well-known term of the Sufi vocabulary, *shāhid* or “witness,” that is, that which gives information or testimony about what has been seen. In *Iṣṭilāhāt* 7, Ibn al-‘Arabī defines “witness” as “The trace which witnessing (*mushāhada*) leaves in the heart of the witnesser (*mushāhid*). This is the witness, and in reality, it is what the heart retains from the form of the witnessed (*mashhūd*).”...In other words, the divine self-disclosure leaves a trace in the heart, which gives testimony and “witnesses to” what has been seen. (Chittick 1989, 227)

Highlighting the enduring trace of the experience, giving rise to testimony, Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to endeavor to catch the actions of both seeing and saying in his definition of *mushāhada*, in opposition to verbs of seeing that are merely verbs of seeing. On many occasions, however, Ibn al-‘Arabī treats verbs of witnessing interchangeably with other verbs of seeing, disregarding the distinction (Chittick 1989, 228).

The preeminent noun in the Islamic vocabulary to denote the action of testifying is *shahāda*, the formula by which Muslims testify to the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) and the messengership of Muḥammad. Chittick recounts Ibn al-‘Arabī understanding of the first half of the *shahāda*, “There is no god but God,” as a dual testimony of negation and affirmation:

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s dialectic of negation (*nafy*) and affirmation (*ithbāt*) is hardly new in Islamic thought...The most concise traditional expression of the form of this dialectic is

found in the Muslim declaration of faith, the “witnessing” (*shahāda*), “[There is] no god but God,” which is made up of both negation and affirmation and is considered the definition of tawhid, the “declaration of God’s Unity” that is the heart of Islam. (Chittick 1989, 113)

The Shaykh perhaps takes this coincidence of negation and affirmation in the declaration of Islamic creed and extends it to all acts testifying, as he writes in *Futūḥāt* II 567.10:

Hence in witnessing there occurs admission and denial, but there is nothing in vision but admission, never any denial. The witness is called by that name because it gives witness to the viewer of the correctness of his belief. Hence every witnessing is a vision, but not every vision is a witnessing, “but they do not know” (Koran 2:13). (Chittick 1989, 227)

There is something inherent to the act of testifying that precludes and negates, affirming one version of a story while staving off and shutting out alternative versions.¹²⁹ By contrast, firsthand witnessing as an action of seeing appears to be purely affirmative, compelling affirmation without the denial that accompanies spoken testimony. Whereas witnessing-as-speech seeks definition and finality, witnessing-as-vision takes place in the mutating progress of present time, demanding sustained openness to new sights.

An additional related Arabic word should be taken into consideration here. This is the noun *shahīd*, which denotes a person who bears testimony. Broadly, the word indicates “a witness;” more narrowly, the word means “a martyr,” one “*who is slain in the cause of God’s religion*” (Lane 1863). Various reasons have been traditionally offered for the connection between the action of giving testimony and the passion of suffering death (often on the

¹²⁹ We wish to draw attention to a difference between, on the one hand, the juxtaposition of affirmation and negation in the giving of testimony, and, on the other hand, the evident coincidence of affirmation and negation in paradoxical binaries such as “He/not He.” In the former case, affirmation and negation seem to be framed in terms of an either/or proposition; when one account is affirmed, alternative accounts are denied (on the assumption that both accounts cannot stand simultaneously). In binaries such as “He/not He,” Ibn al-‘Arabī seems to be advocating a stance of both/and, simultaneously affirming one perspective and its opposite (in violation of the logical prohibition on non-contradiction). Thus, in holding to a stance “between the Yes and the No,” Ibn al-‘Arabī defiantly occupies the middle forbidden by the law of excluded middle, whereas the giving of testimony conforms to the principle of non-contradiction. While one might read “He/not He” as including both affirmation and negation, it might be more accurate to describe the Shaykh’s stance as ruthlessly affirmative, affirming the ostensible denial in “not He” on the grounds of inclusiveness rather than exclusion.

battlefield); explanations have included, “because God and the angels are witnesses for him of his title to a place in Paradise,” or “because he is one of those who shall be required to bear witness on the day of resurrection” (Lane 1863). Pursuing an Akbarian interpretation, we will take a different approach to the connection between testifying and dying; while this approach will not be drawn directly from the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī, we hope it can be understood as an extension of those teachings. We will suggest that testimony, as an act of speech, not only contains negation in its verbal contents, but also an inherent impetus towards the negation—or death—of the one bearing testimony (as we will spell out more fully below).

Turning to the theme of witnessing in the Gospel of John, the importance that this Gospel places on the activity of seeing can be indicated by a quick statistical comparison with the Gospel of Matthew in the original Greek. The Gospel and Epistles of John¹³⁰ combined contain nearly the same number of words as the Gospel of Matthew.¹³¹ But when we look specifically at the various Greek verbs that mean “to see”—*eidō*, *horaō*, *theoreō*, *theaomai*—we find that these verbs occur about twice as often in the Gospel and Epistles of John as they do in the Gospel of Matthew.¹³² Clearly, the theme of seeing is of exceptional importance to the Gospel and Epistles of John.

¹³⁰ The First, Second, and Third Epistles of John are traditionally attributed to the author of the Gospel of John, and in many respects reflect the style and content of that Gospel. We are not, however, making any claims here about the authenticity of the attribution of the Epistles and the Gospels to the same author.

¹³¹ There are 18,230 words in the Greek texts of the Gospel and Epistles of John combined; there are 18,345 words in the Greek text of the Gospel of Matthew.

¹³² These four verbs occur a total of 188 times in the Gospel and Epistles of John, 93 times in the Gospel of Matthew. A fifth Greek word for seeing, *blepō*, actually occurs about equally often in both cases—16 times in the former and 17 times in the latter; this is the only Greek verb for seeing that is used more frequently in Matthew than in the Johannine literature.

The Gospel and Epistles of John devote special attention to another verb of seeing: *martureō*. This verb and its cognates appear about ten times as often in the Gospel and Epistles of John as they do in the Gospel of Matthew; so if we wish to come to a proper understanding of the Johannine texts, we must inquire into this word's significance.¹³³ Literally, *martureō* means "to be a witness, to bear witness, give evidence" (Liddell and Scott 1889), a definition that emphasizes that it is a verb of speaking, perhaps placing less emphasis on the act of seeing than the Arabic verb *shahida* does. Where *martureō* and its cognates occur in the Greek text of the Gospel, the verb *shahida* and its cognates appear in the Alexandrian Vulgate. Moreover, as the Arabic word *shahīd*, denotes a "martyr," the Greek verb *martureō* is related to martyrdom; indeed, the English word "martyr" is a cognate with this Greek word. Thus the dialectic nature recognized by Ibn al-ʿArabī in the Arabic word *shahida* maps onto the use of this word in the Alexandrian Vulgate, and to a certain extent onto *martureō* in the Greek text as well.

This duality of saying and seeing is repeatedly emphasized in the Gospel of John, as these two examples show:

... we pronounce what we know, and we bear witness to what we have seen... (John 3:11 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

And he who saw bore witness, and his testimony is true, and he knows that he says the truth, that you may believe. (John 19:35 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

While the Evangelist uses the notion of witnessing to span both saying and seeing, our Akbarian perspective on the text will emphasize a tension between its two aspects and will treat this tension as a key theme in the Gospel. Regarding the Gospel as entertaining two rival and complementary perspectives on what it means to be a witness, our approach will clearly reflect Ibn al-ʿArabī's trope of seeing with "two eyes." Yet we need not depend solely upon a trope

¹³³ This verb appears 59 times in the Gospel and Epistles of John, 6 times in Matthew.

external to the text of the Gospel, for reading the Gospel through an Akbarian lens would seize upon the Johannine theme of “two witnesses.”

On two occasions in the Gospel of John—in Chapters 5 and 8—Jesus points to the legal requirement that two witnesses¹³⁴ give concordant testimony in order for their testimony to be accepted as valid in a criminal case. If these witnesses are not in agreement, they undermine one another’s authority. In John 8:17, Jesus tells his listeners in Jerusalem:

It has been written in your law (*nāmūs*) that the testimony of two men is true. (John 8:17 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

This is apparently a reference back to Deuteronomy 19:15, which says:

A single witness shall not prevail against a man for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed; only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained. (RSV)

While Jesus cites this element of the Mosaic Law as “your law,” he seems to adopt the requirement as his own, subjecting himself to its rule and deploying it as a rhetorical device.

Here Jesus appeals to his Father as a second witness to buttress his testimony:

I bear witness in favor of myself, and my Father who sent me bears witness in favor of me. (John 8:18 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

¹³⁴ Whereas the Gospel of John presents a requirement for two witnesses rather than three, when a similar theme appears in the First Epistle of John the requirement is triadic: “There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree” (1 John 5:8 RSV). Some editions of the First Epistle insert additional clauses between the words “witnesses” and “the Spirit”, the “Johannine Comma”: “...in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth...” This latter passage has been widely rejected by Biblical scholars as a corruption of the Biblical text (Cross and Livingstone 1997, 880)

We might add here that Ibn al-‘Arabī himself describes the infant Jesus as one of two witnesses testifying to Mary’s innocence in the face of slanderous accusations; the second witness is the palm tree that provided nourishment to the pregnant Mary (Qur’ān 19:24-26). The Shaykh writes in *Futūḥāt* IV 127: “Jesus rendered justice to his mother, whom God had absolved both by the word of the child and by the palm tree’s compassion towards her. However, most judgments are based on the testimony of two truthful witnesses; and there is none more truthful than these two witnesses” (Hayek 1959, 85; our translation from the French).

Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus cites the testimonies of John the Baptist and his works alongside the testimony of the Father:

If I am bearing witness to myself, my testimony is not truth, but there is another who bears witness to me and I know that his testimony, to which he bears witness for my sake, is truth. You sent to John, and he bore witness to the truth in my favor. Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say this to redeem you...And I have a testimony greater than the testimony of John. As for the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, these works that I work bear witness for my sake that the Father has sent me. And the Father who has sent me bears witness in my favor, and you have never heard his voice, and you have not known him, and you have not seen him. (John 5:31-34, 36-37 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

In addition, the Gospel as a whole appears to subject itself to this standard. The Gospel offers itself to the reader as an eyewitness testimony. Evidently referring to the Evangelist in the third person, the Gospel reports:

And he who saw bore witness, and his testimony is true, and he knows that he says the truth, that you may believe. (John 19:35 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

By its own articulated criteria, one might expect the Gospel offer itself as the testimony of two witnesses. That is, the Gospel ought not to be offered as the testimony of a sole author; it should be seconded by another eyewitness. With this standard in mind, one reading of the Gospel might highlight the shift from singularity to plurality in a similarly phrased attestation at the Gospel's conclusion:

This is the disciple who bore witness to this and wrote this, and *we* know that his testimony is true. (21:24 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Moreover, this shift from "he" to "we" calls to mind the opening chapter of the Gospel, which also expresses its testimony in the first person plural:

And the Word, he became a body and alighted among us; and *we* saw his glory, the glory like that of the unique one who is from the Father, full of grace and reality. (John 1:14 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Tradition identifies the primary witness, the writer of this Gospel, as John, the son of Zebedee, and the Alexandrian Vulgate repeats this attribution; internal to the Gospel is the identification of this Evangelist as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” first so designated in the account of the Last Supper (John 13:23) and identified as the primary witness at the end of the Gospel. We will not at this point address the question of whether our commentary will regard the Beloved Disciple as John; we will postpone this question until the next chapter of our Akbarian commentary. At the moment, we will merely establish, in an effort to read the Gospel in line with Ibn al-‘Arabī, a perspective on the Gospel as based on the authority of two witnesses framing the text as a whole in terms as a dialectic between two kinds of witnessing.

In the spirit of the Mosaic requirement for two witnesses, these witnesses should, no doubt, be understood as collaborators. They must not be at odds with one another, but must lend mutual support and validity to their testimonies. Nonetheless, if we are to take up the theme of “two witnesses” as a trope analogous to the Akbarian trope of “two eyes,” we will regard the Gospel as a text pitting two rival notions of witnessing against one another in a dialectical fashion. To mark this discrepancy, we will coin labels for these two notions of witnessing. The first we will call “Cephastic witnessing,” named for the apostle Cephas (that is, Peter or Simon); the latter we will call “Thomastic witnessing,” named for the apostle Thomas.¹³⁵ Our reasoning for these terms will become clear in the coming pages of this and the next chapter. In the end the reader might find our labels too schematic in reducing our chosen representatives to exaggerated types; but our intention is merely to avail ourselves of a device to amplify a dialect faithful to the

¹³⁵ Elements of this argument will draw on and revise material from our lecture, “The Testimony of Two Witnesses: Openness and Closure in the Gospel of John,” delivered at St. John’s College, Santa Fe, New Mexico, on November 4, 2009 (Wolfe 2009).

Shaykh's perspective rather than striving to capture these apostles in all of their nuance and complexity.

Under the category of "Cephastic witnessing" we will group the themes of testifying (in speech or writing), absence, annihilation, and closure; by contrast, under the rubric of "Thomastic witnessing" we will cluster the themes of seeing, presence, subsistence, and open-endedness. This line of thought will lead us, in the next chapter of our study, to the divergent commands Jesus gives to different disciples in John Chapter 21; there, we will see that two different kinds of witnessing will prompt two different commands, one of which demands annihilation in physical death, while the other demands subsistence in earthly life. The former kind of witnessing, particularly where the witness is slain, might properly be called a "martyr." Martyrdom is intimately tied to testimony as an activity of speech: the primary focus here is on preaching one's testimony, and sticking to that testimony until death. This kind of witnessing encourages closure, since the person who gives such testimony always speaks of events seen in the past and endeavors to give a definitive account of these events. For the martyr, death represents the victory of fixity over fluidity; by dying, the martyr defeats any temptation to recant, revise, or enlarge his testimony. The martyr vanishes into death, but what he leaves behind is a stable, unchanging affidavit that we are called upon to embrace in faith. By contrast, witnessing as an act of seeing is open-ended, resisting closure, because the act of seeing can only take place in the flux of the present moment. While the former kind of witnessing commands the hearer of testimony to place faith in the report of someone claiming to have previously seen Jesus, the latter commands the spectator to see Jesus with one's own eyes right now. In our Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John, we will throw into relief the tension between these two facets of saying and seeing.

In the present chapter, we will strive to illuminate the ways that these two kinds of witnessing run parallel to two key functions performed in the Gospel of John by Jesus as the embodied Word: his expiatory work and his epistemic work. Before looking more closely at these two functions, we will have to explicate an Akbarian understanding of the Johannine claim that Jesus was the embodied Word.

5.2. The Word

The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary... — Qur'an 4:171

A focal point for this notion of the embodied Word will be found in John 1:14. We cited this verse a moment ago, and will now look more closely at its underlying Arabic in the Alexandrian Vulgate:

And the Word (*al-kalima*), he became a body (*jasad*) and alighted (or took up residence) among (or in) us; and we saw his glory, the glory like that of the unique one who is from the Father, full of grace and reality (*ḥaqq*). (John 1:14 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Our inquiry would be served by approaching this verse with this question: why did the Word become embodied? Two answers are readily recommended by the Gospel. As may be evident from the verse itself and the following verses, the Word was embodied so that we might come to know the otherwise unknown God. This may be indicated by the phrasing in the second half of the verse, “we saw,” as well as the wording of John 1:18, which we have cited in translation from the Alexandrian Vulgate:

God, no one has seen Him; only the unique son of God, who is in the breast of his Father, he has made (Him) known.

This function, making the unseen God known, is what we will identify as the *epistemic work* of the embodied Word, and this serves as one answer to the question of why the Word was embodied.

In addition, the embodied Word evidently has a second function, the *expiatory work*. That is, we might answer the question by replying: the Word was embodied in order to perish on the cross and expiate the sins of the world. Our application here of the label “expiatory” is derived not from the Gospel, but the First Epistle of John:

....we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2 RSV)

One might read these words as an expression of similar verses in the Gospel of John, such as:

God thus loved the world so he sacrificed (*badhala*) his only son, so that anyone who believes in him will not perish, but endless life will be his. Indeed God did not send his son to the world to condemn the world but to entrust the world to him. (John 3:16-17 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Moreover, we might recognize similar intentions in the words of John the Baptist, “This is the lamb of God who eliminates the faults of the world!” (John 1:29 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Each of these two answers to the question—why was the Word embodied?—posits a solution that claims to be unique and indispensable; only Jesus’ sacrifice could have expiated the sins of the world, and only Jesus could have revealed his Father to the world. Moreover, we will argue that each answer represents a perspective that refuses to be subordinated to the other. For much of the Gospel, these parallel answers coexist, apparently with no tension or conflict. As we proceed in this chapter, we will explore the ways in which the expiatory work and the epistemic work concord, respectively, with Cephastic witnessing and Thomastic witnessing. We will suggest that these are not merely complementary, but are rival perspectives on the nature of

witnessing, in competition with one another, and that there might be a conflict between the expiatory and epistemic functions of the embodied Word.

We will, from an Akbarian perspective, articulate this conflict more fully in the final two sections of this chapter. First, however, we will take a moment to examine the wording used in John 1:14. We will note the divergent connotations of the Greek and Arabic versions of this verse, and will observe resonances indicated between the Arabic version and the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī. The Greek text reads—

kai ho logos sarx egeneto...

—or as the Revised Standard Version translates the Greek:

And the Word (*ho logos*) became flesh (*sarx*)...

The Arabic translation of the same verse in the Alexandrian Vulgate reads—

wa’l-kalimatu šāra jasadān...

—which we translate as:

And the Word (*al-kalimatu*), he became a body (*jasadan*)...¹³⁶

We will address in the next few pages our reasoning for preferring *kalima* to *logos* in our discussion the “Word” of this verse, and in the next section will touch on the significance of the Alexandrian Vulgate’s choice of the word “body” (*jasadan*) where the Greek text uses “flesh” (*sarx*).

Let us first address our scruples against use of the term *logos* in our Akbarian reading of the Gospel, scruples that stem for the history of using this term in academic studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī. In some of the earliest of these studies, the expression “Islamic Logos doctrine” was

¹³⁶ Although “Word” (*kalima*) is feminine, the verb “became” (*šāra*) is masculine, a change of gender that violates standard Arabic grammar. For this reason, we insert the word “he.” This might be explained by carrying forward the masculine gender of God (*allāh*) from John 1:1, which reads in part, “...and God was the Word,” or, “...and God became the Word.” We will discuss our translation of John 1:1 below.

applied to the Shaykh's teachings, an application that has left its mark on scholarship from the early twentieth century up till the present. R. A. Nicholson, for example, in his endeavor to tie Christian and Neoplatonic influences to developments in Islamic thought, uses the term "Logos" to describe Sufi notions of Muḥammad as the pre-existent and Perfect Man. In his *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Nicholson 1921), Nicholson writes:

...[Jīlī] depicts Mohammed as the absolutely perfect man, the first-created of God and the archetype of all other created beings. This, of course, is an Islamic Logos doctrine. It brings Mohammed in some respects very near to the Christ of the Fourth Gospel and the Pauline Epistles. But if the resemblance is great, so is the difference. The Fatherhood of God, the Incarnation, and the Atonement suggest an infinitely rich and sympathetic personality, whereas the Mohammedan Logos tends to identify itself with the active principle of revelation in the Divine essence. Mohammed is loved and adored as the perfect image or copy of God: "he that has seen me has seen Allah" says the Tradition. (Nicholson 1921, 87-88)¹³⁷

In the following year, Nicholson writes in his *The Idea of Personality in Ṣūfism* (Nicholson 1922):

At an early date the dogma of [Mohammed's] pre-existence established itself among the Shī'ites, and ere long the Sunnīs too adopted it. We find it in many sayings attributed to Mohammed; for example, in the famous Hadith, "I was a prophet whilst Adam was still between the water and the clay," i.e. before Adam's body was created. The pre-existent form of Mohammed, which is the first thing that God created, was conceived as a celestial light: this light (*nūr Muḥammadī*) became incarnate in Adam and in the whole series of prophets after him from generation to generation until its final appearance, according to the Sunnīs, in Mohammed himself; according to the Shī'ites it passed from Mohammed to 'Alī and the Imāms of his House. The Ṣūfīs make use of this doctrine in their own way. By them the Light of Mohammed is identified with the Divine Spirit, which God breathed into Adam, with the Neoplatonic *voῦς* which is the first emanation from the One, and with the Logos which, according to some Christian Gnostics, becomes incarnate in the prophets and carries on the cycle of Revelation. The Islamic Logos doctrine, as it may fairly be called, assumes various shapes and is set forth in such a mystical fashion that its details are often difficult to understand. But the main features are clear enough. Mohammed, that is, the essential Idea (*ḥaqīqat*) of Mohammed as opposed to earthly manifestation, is regarded, firstly, as the centre and animating principle of the whole created universe, the spirit and life of all things, and secondly as the Mediator of

¹³⁷ Nicholson cites this *ḥadīth* to demonstrate a parallel with John 14:9, in which Jesus says: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father..." (RSV)

Divine grace, the channel through which God imparts knowledge of Himself to his worshippers and endows them with every spiritual gift. (Nicholson 1922, 58-59)¹³⁸

This passage goes on to associate this Islamic Logos doctrine with Ḥallāj, which in turn, according to Nicholson, influenced Ibn al-‘Arabī and Jīlī:

Ibnu’l-‘Arabī in the 13th century a.d. and ‘Abdu’l-Karīm al-Jīlī in the 14th made the Ḥallājian theory a basis for far-reaching speculations in which the place of Adam is occupied by Mohammed, who, as the Logos, is now identified with the ideal type of humanity, the Perfect Man (*ἄνθρωπος τέλειος*). (Nicholson 1922, 60-61)

Whereas Nicholson connects the term “logos” to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the Arabic word *kalima* (“word”) in the chapter titles of the *Fuṣūṣ* (Nicholson 1921, 161), he elsewhere connects it to the Arabic word *amr* (“command”) in the usage of Jīlī:¹³⁹

According to the Koran (xvii. 87), the spirit (*al-rūḥ*) belongs to the *Amr* of God, and Jīlī, a famous mystic of the fourteenth century, says that one of the names of the Divine Spirit, the Spirit of which Mohammed is the perfect manifestation, is *Amr Allah*, i.e. the “Command” of God, the Logos. (Nicholson 1922, 46)¹⁴⁰

Writing less than two decades later, A. E. Affifi devoted an entire chapter in his 1938 book *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid-Din Ibnul ‘Arabi* to discussing “Ibnul ‘Arabi’s Doctrine of Logos” (Affifi 1938, 67-101).¹⁴¹ Repeating some of Nicholson’s points, he greatly

¹³⁸ In the same book (Nicholson 1922, 6), Nicholson connects Qur’an 3:29—“Say: ‘If you love God, follow me, and God will love you, and forgive you your sins; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate’” (Arberry’s translation)—with John 16:27—“For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father” (RSV).

¹³⁹ Two recent books by Samuel Zinner have engaged in comparative studies of Christian and Islamic esoteric thought: *Christianity and Islam* (Zinner 2010) and *The Gospel of Thomas* (Zinner 2011). In both works, Zinner makes much use of the term “Logos” in his comparisons, and he equates “Logos” with both of the Arabic terms *kalima* and *amr*. In his essay, “Some Notes on the *Rūḥ* and the *Amr*—Spirit and Word” (Zinner 2010, 87-95), he connects Logos with *amr* on the analogy of the Aramaic term *memra*. While we will refrain from using the Greek term “Logos” (or the Aramaic term *memra*) in our Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John, we will concur with Zinner in using the terms *kalima* and *amr* interchangeably, on the grounds that Ibn al-‘Arabī treats these two terms as synonyms or near synonyms.

¹⁴⁰ In his translation of selected passages from Jīlī’s book *Universal Man (al-insān al-kāmil)*, Titus Burckhardt uses “Order” to translate *amr* (Jīlī 1983, 61) and “Word” to translate *kalām* (Jīlī 1983, 67).

¹⁴¹ In a footnote to our previous chapter, we noted that Affifi attributed this Logos doctrine to the influence of Ḥallāj.

expands his application of the Logos doctrine. Affifi opens the chapter by claiming there are “no less than twenty-two terms which Ibnul ‘Arabī uses to designate what one might call a Mohammedan Logos;” he lists eighteen of these terms, such as “The Reality of Realities (*al Ḥaqīqatu’l Ḥaqā’iq*)” and “The Most Mighty Spirit (*al Rūḥ al-A‘zam*)” (Affifi 1938, 67). Only later in the chapter does Affifi equate Logos with the term *kalima*: “Ibnul ‘Arabī calls everything a Logos in so far as it participates in the universal principle of Reason and Life, i.e. everything is a ‘word’ (*kalimah*) of God” (Affifi 1938, 92). Affifi seems less interested in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the term *kalima* than in tracing Hellenistic precedents for the Shaykh’s wider vocabulary: “As a purely metaphysical category it is called the First Intellect: Plotinus’ *Noūs* or the Universal Reason of the Stoics...” (Affifi 1938, 67),¹⁴² and when he arrives at citations of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of *kalima*, the connection to Neoplatonic and Stoic doctrines seems tenuous. We confess that we are skeptical of Affifi’s Neoplatonic analogies, and resist his casting of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings in the words of Plotinus’ *Enneads* (V, 1, 9): “Like Plotinus, Ibnul ‘Arabī believes that “to think itself belongs to the Mind (which is *Ḥaqīqatu’l Ḥaqā’iq* here) not to the One” (Affifi 1938, 90).¹⁴³

¹⁴² To exemplify the persistence of Affifi’s characterization of Ibn al-‘Arabī as a Neoplatonist, as well as the extension of this characterization beyond the specialization of Akbarian studies, we would point to Neal Robinson’s 1991 book, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* as well as David Emmanuel Singh’s 2011 article, “The Roles of Humanity and Jesus in the Sainthood of Ibn ‘Arabi.” Both write about Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views on Jesus, though neither is a specialist in Akbarian studies. In both cases, their understandings of the Shaykh are filtered through a Neoplatonic lens. In the section of his book addressing Sufi notions of Jesus, Robinson writes justly of the Shaykh’s “cryptic statements about Jesus” and “the significance which Ibn al-‘Arabi attached to Jesus” (Robinson 1991, 57). In addition, Robinson’s account couples Christianity with Neoplatonism in the Shaykh’s “theosophical system, which owes much to Neoplatonism;” he goes on to write that, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, “divine knowledge has been transmitted by the universal rational principle—also called the ‘the Spirit of Muhammad’, ‘the Muhammadan Reality’, ‘the Perfect Man’ and ‘the Cosmic Pole’—which roughly corresponds to the *Logos* in Christian Platonism” (Robinson 1991, 57). Similarly, Singh writes that Ibn al-‘Arabī explains “two complementary processes: creation of beings bound in time and space and their return to the spiritual reality (as for instance denoted by the idea of *logos* or the Neoplatonic Soul or Intellect)” (Singh 2011, 129). Both instances evidently reflect Affifi’s influence.

¹⁴³ To take up, by way of illustration, one aspect of superficial resemblance between Plotinus and Ibn al-‘Arabī, we might speak of the latter’s fondness for the saying, “He who knows himself knows his Lord”—a *ḥadīth* which, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī, is not established by transmission but is nonetheless considered sound on the basis of

While efforts to characterize Akbarian thought as Neoplatonic have become less frequent over the century since Nicholson first brought academic attention to Ibn al-‘Arabī, use of the term “Logos” in academic studies of Ibn al-‘Arabī has persisted up until recent times. A recent effort to reform this usage has been Robert J. Dobie’s 2010 book, *Logos & Revelation*, a comparative study of Ibn al-‘Arabī and Meister Eckhart. In that context, Dobie challenges the dominance of Neoplatonic frameworks in readings of Ibn al-‘Arabī, giving priority to the Christian and Islamic scriptures and articulating the two masters’ pursuits of the scriptures’ “inner meaning.” Dobie is to be commended for identifying the Greek philosophical terminology appropriated by Ibn al-‘Arabī (via Islamic philosophy) without subordinating the latter manner of thought to the former:

Ibn ‘Arabi, to be sure, makes use of philosophical concepts inherited from both the Peripatetic and Neoplatonic traditions in order to draw out, make clear and render universal and hence available for inner appropriation the inner meaning of Scripture. Revelation for him is not simply philosophy or science decked out in symbolic guise to make these truths all the more accessible to the masses. The “real truth” of revelation is not some collection of scientific or historical facts and theories. Rather it is the inverse: by making use of philosophy to explicate Scripture, the “real truth” of philosophy (or science or history) is revealed and disclosed out of Scripture. For it is in Scripture that the lived, inner sense of anything whatsoever is disclosed and that lived, inner sense is how the thing, idea or self relates back to God, its source and end. (Dobie 2010, 22)

unveiling (Houédard 1992, 1). Similar notions have a long history among Greek philosophers and their intellectual heirs. For example, in recounting the philosophy of Plotinus, Elmer O’Brien writes:

True knowledge of self and true knowledge of God are so intimately linked within the soul that, if the soul is purified of all that is not in itself, it knows at one and the same time itself, and in itself, God. (Plotinus 1964, 29)

True to the negativist approach of the Neoplatonists, the self spoken of in Plotinus’ *Enneads* is the colorless self, stripped of all its adventitious and distinguishing characteristics. But in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interpretation of the *ḥadīth*, the self spoken of in “He who knows himself” is the idiosyncratic self, the self in all its embodied and localized individuality. As a corollary, in the phrase “knows his Lord,” the object of knowledge is not God as He is in Himself, but a limited manifestation that is determined by the individual believer’s character. As Chittick says, “This is the God who discloses Himself to the soul, and the self-disclosure is different from that experienced by any other soul” (Chittick 1989, 344).

For this and other reasons, we are cautious about appealing to Plotinus and other Neoplatonists to illuminate Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings, an appeal apt to disfigure those teachings and blur their distinctive features. In our paper, “Theories of Mysticism and the Teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī” (Wolfe 2007b), submitted to Peter Awn in the spring of 2007, we have written a fuller critique of characterizations of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought as Neoplatonic.

Thus, Dobie rightly privileges revelation over philosophical metaphysics in the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī, giving priority to the revelation (in both literal inscription and created beings) that captures the mind rather than being captured by the mind:

In short, what Ibn ‘Arabi and Meister Eckhart are doing, as mystical writers, is thinking back, not to being as such, but to the primal revelation of being. What they both assert is that prior to any concept we might have of “being” is the revelation of being, its “presencing” to us. As Eckhart puts it, the Gospel of John does not say, “In the beginning was being,” but rather, “In the beginning was the Word (Logos).” “Being” or “existence” as such cannot be captured by our finite minds, but rather our finite minds must be captured by it, conformed to it. Hence, for both Ibn ‘Arabi and Eckhart, revelation as such becomes the main datum of their thinking. This does not mean that they dispense with a science of being or metaphysics; rather, it means that, in order for us to have a proper understanding of being or existence, in order to be conformed to pure being or existence, we must be open completely to its revealed character. This is not a retreat into irrationalism. To the contrary, it is a recognition that all creatures, insofar as they exist, are intelligible and, when the mind is conformed to them, all creatures are causes of truth. (Dobie 2010, 2)

While Dobie’s book serves as a valuable rectification of the usage of “Logos” in decades of scholarship on Ibn al-‘Arabī, we will, in our Akbarian commentary, steer clear of the term “Logos” altogether, along with its associated Hellenistic baggage, and will strive to avoid intermediary filters of Greek language and thought.¹⁴⁴ Because Ibn al-‘Arabī thought and wrote in Arabic, we will endeavor to dwell in the Shaykh’s Arabic idiom,¹⁴⁵ and for this reason we

¹⁴⁴ This is not to deny that Ibn al-‘Arabī inherited a sophisticated and well established Arabic philosophical vocabulary, largely translated from the Greek. One can recognize terms in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings that use terms recognizably shared, for instance, with Avicenna. Yet there are at least two reasons to resist using the original Greek terms underlying the Arabic terms employed by the Shaykh. First, where we encounter terms evidently borrowed from Islamic philosophy, we ought not to miss the point that Ibn al-‘Arabī turns those terms to his own, idiosyncratic purposes, often at odds with those philosophical trends to which he owes this vocabulary. Second, with respect to the term *kalima* in particular, it is not at all evident that the Shaykh is taking up this term from the philosophical tradition; more likely he is following the lead of the Qur’an here. In any case, we will not prematurely suggest connections between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *kalima* doctrine and Hellenistic philosophy by translating the term with “Logos;” nor are we tempted, in the context of the present study, to read the “Word” in the Gospel’s Prologue through the lens of Hellenistic philosophy.

¹⁴⁵ We will also, incidentally, distance our study from expressions like “Logos theology,” highlighted in non-Akbarian studies such as Daniel Boyarin’s book, *Border Lines* (Boyarin 2004).

have chosen the text of the Alexandrian Vulgate rather than the Greek text of the Gospel as the subject of our commentary.¹⁴⁶ Our focus here then will be not on a “Logos doctrine” but on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *kalima* doctrine, attempting to maintain fidelity to the Shaykh’s perspective.

Let us look, then, at the Alexandrian Vulgate’s choice of the word *kalima* in its translation of John 1:14. While it is unsurprising to find *kalima* as the translation of *logos*, the terms have differing semantic ranges in the two languages. Liddell and Scott’s entry for *logos* (Liddell and Scott 1889) begins with “*that which is said or spoken*” and includes “*a reason, ground, plea*” and “*account of a thing,*” all of which is related to the Greek verb *legō*, “*to say, speak.*” These meanings are mirrored in the Arabic word *kalima*: “*A word...an expression...proposition: a sentence...an argument... an expression of opinion*” (Lane 1863), also related to a verbal root meaning “*to say, speak.*” But secondary meanings of *logos* cluster under meanings of unspoken cognition: “*ratio, thought, reason;*” in this latter sense the term *logos* has developed a rich history in Greek thought. When reading this term through the prism of Greek thought, we are inevitably reminded of the Gospel of John’s antecedent and contemporary philosophical trends, as employed by Stoic writers as well as the first-century Middle Platonist philosopher Philo. These are the associations that tend to gather around the expression “Logos doctrine.” But this penumbra of notions associating *logos* with unspoken thought are less emphasized in the Arabic word *kalima*, and do not come to the fore when we read the Gospel of John in Arabic.

This point might be made clearer if we juxtapose these words with two additional words in the Greek and Arabic lexicons. We might pair the Greek word *logos* with the Arabic root

¹⁴⁶ There is, of course, a history of reading the Greek text of the Gospel of John against the backdrop of Hellenistic philosophy. See, for example, Raymond E. Brown’s overview of this approach (Brown 1966, 519-520), pointing to use of the term *logos* in the writings of the Stoics and Philo.

n.ṭ.q., on the one hand, and pair the Greek word *rhēma* with the Arabic root *k.l.m.*, on the other. The Arabic word *nāṭaqa* is a synonym for *kalima*, but the cognate terms *nuṭq* and *nāṭiqiyya* mean “rationality” (Lane 1863), capturing the secondary meanings of *logos* better than *kalima* does. On the other hand, *kalima* well matches the more circumscribed meanings of Greek *rhēma*—“that which is said or spoken, a word, saying” (Liddell and Scott 1889)—that is, externalized expression without the connotations of internalized ratiocination. Thus, though there is an overlap between the meanings of *logos* and *kalima*, we risk being misled by the implications of the word *logos* when we apply an Akbarian perspective to the Gospel; shedding the Hellenistic baggage carried by *logos*, we will be less distracted by the connotations of *thinking* and *reasoning*, and more attentive to the connotations of *voicing* and *addressing* in the word *kalima*.

Moreover, *kalima* stands in close kinship with its cognate *kalām*, which can mean “Speech... parlance; talk; discourse” in general (as opposed to particular words); it is also affiliated with non-cognate words like *qawl*, “Diction, or speech” (Lane 1863), and *amr* “A command; an order” (Lane 1863). This neighborhood of terms for general and specific speech acts invites us, for example, to draw into our discussion Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the term *qawl* in Chapter 11 of the *Fuṣūṣ*. We will recall, from Chapter 3 of our study, that *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 11 lays out a trifold scheme—Essence (*dhāt*), Will (*irāda*), and Speech (*qawl*)—of divine attributes highlighted in God as creator; this is mirrored by a trifold scheme in created beings—thinghood (*shay’iyya*), listening (*samā’*), and obedience (*imtithāl*). The meeting of these reciprocal schemes takes place in the moment of God’s creative activity. While we presented these schemes in Chapter 3 to illustrate Ibn al-‘Arabī’s playful and persistent engagement with triads, possibly influenced by the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, we wish to take care not to equate *qawl* with the Christian notion of Jesus-the-Word, one of the three preeternal persons of the triune God. For

Muslims in general, and for Ibn al-‘Arabī in particular, Jesus is a created being, not one of the *uqnuman* (the Arabic word for the persons of the Trinity, as well as for the three hypostases of Plotinus).¹⁴⁷

To understand the connection between Jesus and various terms for Word (*kalima*, *qawl*, or *amr*) in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings, we must recognize that the Shaykh has a particular Word in mind—namely, the command: Be! (*kun!*). This is the utterance by which God summons created beings into existence, a command designated (apparently synonymously) in the Qur’an by the roots *q.w.l.* and *a.m.r.*:

The only words We say [*qawlunā*] to a thing, when We desire it, is that We say to it ‘Be,’ and it is. (Qur’an 16:40)

His command [*amruhu*], when He desires a thing, is to say to it ‘Be,’ and it is. (Qur’an 36:82)

Ibn al-‘Arabī uses both Qur’anic verses in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 11, as when he writes—

God most high says, *Our Word* [*qawlunā*] *to a thing when We desire it is ‘Be!’*, and it is. This is an Essence owning Will and Speech [*qawl*]. That thing would not be if it were not for the Essence, Its Will—which is the attribution that denotes attention being turned in a specific way towards the bringing into being of something— and if not for His saying *Be!* upon this attention being turned towards that thing. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 119; bracketed Arabic words supplied by us)

—and when he writes:

Now, if, upon this Word [*qawl*], it were not the case that it came from its own power of bringing into being, it would not have been brought into being. Upon the Command of bringing into being nothing brought this thing into being, after its having not been, other than itself. Thus the Real most high acknowledges that the bringing into being belongs to the thing itself and not to the Real. What belongs to God in its regard is a specific Command [*amr*]. It was thus that He related of Himself, *Our Command to a thing We desire is but that We say “Be!” and it is*, thus attributing bringing into being to the thing itself upon the Command of God [*amr allāh*]. He is truthful in His Words [*fi qawlihi*], and this is in reality how they are to be understood. It is like a master, who is feared and therefore not shown disobedience, saying to his slave, “Stand!” The slave stands, obeying the order of his master. The master has no part in this slave’s standing except his

¹⁴⁷ For Plotinus’ three principal hypostases—the One, the Intellect, and the Soul—see Plotinus’ *Enneads* V, 1 (Plotinus 1964, 91-104) and Lloyd P. Gerson’s *Plotinus* (Gerson 1994, 15-64).

command to have him stand. The standing is an act of the slave, not of the master. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 120; bracketed Arabic words supplied by us)

This latter quotation is a provocative attribution of creative power to the created thing; God issues the command, at a moment in time, and the created being hears and responds by entering into existence. While the command belongs to God, the act of existing belongs to the created thing. It is perhaps because of the created things’ share in its own creation that Ibn al-‘Arabī deems each created thing to be a “Word” (*kalima*) of God. The Shaykh frequently makes this point in the *Futūḥāt*, as well as in the chapter on Jesus, Chapter 15, in the *Fuṣūṣ*:

All existent things [*mawjūdāt*] are the inexhaustible Words [*kalimāt*] of God; all come from *Be!*, and *Be!* is a Word [*kalima*] of God. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 164; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

Thus, from one point of view, the Word *Be!* is an attribute of God; from another point of view, the Word is the created thing itself. The Word properly belongs to both the Creator and the creation, from these alternative perspectives.

Chittick, drawing broadly from the Shaykh’s writings, provides a useful overview of the Akbarian notion that all of the created world consists of God’s words:

The evanescent and changing nature of existence, or the cosmos as ever-renewed creation and never-repeated divine self-disclosure, is evoked by one of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s best-known names for the substance of the universe, the “Breath of the All-merciful” (*nafas al-rahmān*). God breathes out, and while breathing, He speaks. But only His Speech is eternal, not His spoken words as words. Every word appears for an instant only to disappear from the created cosmos forever (though it remains immutably present in His knowledge). Every part of every existent thing is a “letter” (*ḥarf*) of God. The creatures are words (*kalima*) spelled out by the letters, the trajectory of a creature’s existence is a sentence (*jumla*), and each world a book (*kitāb*). All the words and all the books are uttered by the All-merciful, for God “embraces all things in mercy and knowledge” (Koran 40:7). (Chittick 1989, 19)

In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own words (in *Futūḥāt* II 395.1), we can see the intricate figurative vocabulary developed by the Shaykh in the service of spinning out an original creation myth,

weaving together figures of both spoken and written language (including the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet), the symbol of Breath, and the image of the creative Cloud:

All these words are the human breath—twenty-eight letters precisely, because the entities of the divine words issue forth from the All-merciful Breath as twenty-eight words, each having many faces. They issue from the Breath of the All-merciful, which is the Cloud within which our Lord came to be before He created the creatures. (Chittick 1989, 129)¹⁴⁸

As divine words, all created things derive from the primal word *kun*, even from the two consonants that make up the word *kun*, according to *Futūḥāt* II 439.17:

This goes back to the existence of Nature’s two active principles...the two letters of the divine word “Be!”... (Chittick 1989, 360)¹⁴⁹

This brings us to the Johannine account of creation and the overlap found between the Gospel and Ibn al-‘Arabī in this notion of the creative Word. This brief creation account accompanies the first the appearance of the Word (*kalima*) in Gospel’s opening verses:

In the beginning [*al-bad’*] was [*kāna*] the Word [*al-kalima*], and the Word was [*kāna*] with God, and God was [*kāna*] the Word. This was [*kāna*] in antiquity [*qadīman*] with God. All was [*kāna*] by Him, and without Him there was [*yakun*] not a thing that was [*kāna*]. (John 1:1-3 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Here is our first draft of a translation of these verses. A slightly different translation might be given, however, recommended by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the symbol of the Cloud. Unlike the Word, the image of the Cloud is alien to the Gospel of John. Nonetheless, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interpretation of the Cloud bears on our Akbarian interpretation of John 1:1-3. As indicated in our quotation from the *Futūḥāt* above, the Cloud is that “within which our Lord *came to be* before He created the creatures”—and this notion that our Lord “came to be” will

¹⁴⁸ See also Chittick’s discussion of the cosmic significance of the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet in his *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Chittick 1998b, xxviii-xxxii), as well as Beneito and Hirtenstein’s translation of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *wird*, *The Seven Days of the Heart* (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2000, passim).

¹⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that, according to *Futūḥāt* Chapter 20, Ibn al-‘Arabī regards the Science of Letters as the Science of Jesus (*al-‘ilm al-‘isawī*) (Gril 2015, 22), with a special emphasis on the letters in the word *kun* (Gril 2015, 21-27).

have an impact on our approach to the opening of the Gospel. Let us recall Chittick's words, cited earlier in this chapter:

Ibn al-'Arabī refers to the Real inasmuch as it is nondelimited, incomparable, and eternally unknowable as the Essence (*dhāt*), while he refers to it inasmuch as it assumes all limitations and is similar to all things by such terms as the Real Through which Creation Takes Place, the Cloud, or the Breath of the All-Merciful." (Chittick 1998a, 99)

By assuming the role of Creator, God assumes limitations that are not inherent to his Essence. That is, God's act of creating entails a condescension from his nondelimited transcendence to limited imminence. Moreover, this condescension entails a transition from his aloof atemporality into temporality. This temporal transition is highlighted in the Shaykh's treatment of the image of the Cloud; as Chittick writes, Ibn al-'Arabī adopts this image from a *ḥadīth*, and in doing so gives a peculiar turn to the central verb in this *ḥadīth*:

The Prophet was asked, "Where (*ayn*) did our Lord come to be (*kān*) before He created the creatures (*khalq*)?" He replied, "He came to be in a cloud, neither above which nor below which was any air (*hawā*)" ... This hadith is normally translated, 'He was in a cloud,' but Ibn al-'Arabī makes clear that "He came to be"—a meaning equally allowable by the Arabic—is how he understands it" (Chittick 1989, 125)

Following Ibn al-'Arabī's interpretation of the *ḥadīth*, we might thus retranslate the opening verses of the Gospel, varying our translation of *kāna* in an effort to reflect the Shaykh's perspective:

In the beginning the Word *came to be* [*kāna*], and the Word *came to be* [*kāna*] with God, and God *became* [*kāna*] the Word. This *was* [*kāna*] in antiquity with God. All *came to be* [*kāna*] by Him, and without Him there *came to be* [*yakun*] not a thing that *came to be* [*kāna*].¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ This latter translation gives additional weight to the inversion of the word order in the second and third clauses of John 1:1. In Greek, the second and third clauses are "*kai ho logos ēn pros ton theon, kai theos ēn ho logos*;" in the former, "the Word" precedes "God," but in the latter, "God" precedes "the Word." Nonetheless, the definite article in the third clause makes clear that the subject is "*ho logos*" and the predicate is "*theos*;" thus this clause is correctly translated from the Greek as "and the Word was God." But in Arabic, with a similar word order (*wa allāh huwa al-kalima*), the subject is "*allāh*" and the predicate is "*al-kalima*." Thus we translate the Arabic as, "God became the Word," and not as, "the Word became God."

If we privilege the latter translation, preferring “came to be” to “was,” we will inevitably draw more sharply into focus the question of the temporality or atemporality of the Word. To facilitate this question, we should keep in mind that our Akbarian reading of John 1:1 equates the Johannine Word with the creative command *kun*; this equation is supported by the sweeping claim in John 1:2 that all of creation came to be through this Word. By this reading, the opening phrase, “In the beginning,” would certainly resonate with the phrase that opens the Bible as a whole: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1 RSV). This appeal to Genesis further brings to mind the formula, “‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:3 RSV), which is paralleled by the Qur’anic formula, “‘We say to it ‘Be’ (*kun*) and it is” (Qur’an 16:40). We would thus recognize the “beginning” in both John 1:1 and Genesis 1:1 as a marker of the primal instant of time, rather than as a gesture towards the Word’s preeternity. Consequently, the Word might be regarded as temporal in character, coming to be only when the order *kun* is voiced, summoning the created world into existence.

In the interest of pursuing this question further, we might bring Ṭūfī’s Biblical commentary back into our discussion. Regarding the opening verses of the Gospel of John, note that Ṭūfī holds these verses to be partly sound and partly wrong and incoherent (Demiri 2013, 303). While Ṭūfī faults as wrong the claim that the Word became embodied, and faults as incoherent the claim that the Word was identical with God (Demiri 2013, 305), we will focus here on those aspects of these verses that he accepts to be true. Ṭūfī writes:

As for the correct part of it, it is his saying: ‘In the beginning [*al-bad*]’ was the Word.’ For truly, the speech of God, the Glorified, is one of His attributes, which according to the Muslims, is pre-existent through His pre-existence [*qadīm bi qidamihi*]. His saying: ‘and the Word was with God’ is also correct, because the Word is His attribute, and an attribute (*ṣifa*) subsists in the one who is characterised by it (*mawṣūf*). Hence, it is correct to apply the expression of ‘being with’ (God) to it [i.e. the attribute, the Word]. Also, his saying: ‘This was in pre-existence [*qadīman*] with God,’ means what was mentioned. (Demiri 2013, 303)

Note that Demiri translates *qadīman* as “in pre-existence,” whereas we have translated the same word, more literally, as “in antiquity.” Demiri is not incorrect in translating *qadīman* this way; she is evidently faithful to Ṭūfī’s perspective. For Ṭūfī, the speech (*kalām*) of God, as one of His attributes, is “pre-existent through His pre-existence” (*qadīm bi qidamihi*). Note that Ṭūfī appears to draw no distinction between “in the beginning [*al-bad’*]” and “in pre-existence” [*qadīman*], despite the fact that *qadīman* is traditionally associated with “beginninglessness” (*al-azal*). Eliding the difference between “in the beginning” and “without beginning,” Ṭūfī seems intent on preserving the transcendence of God (and His attributes) above and beyond time.

As we have seen, Ibn al-‘Arabī shows a contrary proclivity. While Ṭūfī goes against the grain to read the Johannine Word as atemporal, Ibn al-‘Arabī goes against the grain to read *kāna* as meaning “came to be” in the *ḥadīth* of the Cloud. Far from preserving God from contact with temporality, the Shaykh seems bent on asserting a temporal aspect in the divine Word’s relationship to the world. This inclination is not one-sided, however. Reflecting Ibn al-‘Arabī’s fondness for dialectics, he draws on Qur’an 21:2 to capture the dialectic of the temporal and the atemporal in *Futūḥāt* II 63.2:

God says concerning His beginningless and eternal Speech, “There comes not to them a remembrance from their Lord temporally originated (*muḥdāth*), [but they listen to it yet playing, diverted their hearts]” (21:2). Hence He described His Speech as temporally originated, since it came down upon a temporally originated person, in respect to whom there originated in time something which he did not know. So it is temporally originated for him, without doubt. (Chittick 1989, 138)

He further elaborates on this dialectic in *Futūḥāt* II 557.11 (where Chittick translates *al-qidam* as “eternity”):

In our view there is no disputing the fact that the Essence is unknown. To It are ascribed descriptions that make It incomparable with the attributes of temporal things (*al-ḥadath*). It possesses eternity (*al-qidam*), and to Its Being is ascribed beginninglessness (*al-azal*).

But all these names designate negations, such as the negation of beginning and everything appropriate to temporal origination. (Chittick 1989, 62)

These negative attributes apply to God's incomparable Essence; yet we are dealing, in John 1:1, not with the Essence, but with the Creator who condescends to limitation and comparability to bring the world into existence. As we focus on 1:1, Ibn al-'Arabī would incline us to look at the temporal aspect of the creative Word, and in 1:3 on the temporality of the created beings themselves, of which the Gospel says, "All *came to be* by Him, and without Him there *came to be* not a thing that *came to be*." In Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, these are the inexhaustible Words of God, which bear "the attributes of temporal things (*al-ḥadath*)." We might imagine Ibn al-'Arabī finding both temporal and atemporal aspects in the Gospel's opening verses, counterpoising the temporality implied by the clause in 1:1, "In the beginning the Word *came to be*," with the preeternity implied by the clause in 1:2, "This *was* in antiquity with God."

To be clear, Ibn al-'Arabī would not have understood the "beginning" as a singular, initial moment in time, as our appeal to Genesis 1:1 might have led the reader to understand. In the Shaykh's view there is not just one creative "beginning." Just as the created beings are the inexhaustible Words of God, there are countless, recurrent instances in which the world is created anew—that is, innumerable beginnings. From an Akbarian perspective, our understanding of the temporal-and-atemporal character the Word in John 1:1 would apply not just to the first moment, but to every moment in time. Anticipating our discussion below in this chapter of the epistemological role of the embodied Word, we will note here the intimate and consequential link between the temporal aspect of the Word and the ways we know (or witness) God.

While our discussion applies to all moments in time, we should not miss the importance of two key instances of creation, standing out among the inexhaustible Words in Ibn al-'Arabī's

creation story. One is the creation of humanity, spelled out at the outset of the *Fuṣūṣ* as a pivotal moment in the larger narrative of the world’s generation. There the Shaykh relates how the world—“a comprehensive being that comprises the whole affair” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 3)—is created as a mirror in which the Real can see His identity, culminating in the creation of Adam, identified as “the very clearness of this mirror and the spirit of this form” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 5). Bearing in himself the nature of the creative command, Man is called the “separative and unitive Word” (*al-kalima al-fāṣila al-jāmi‘a*):

And so the aforementioned was called Man and Vicegerent. As for his being Man, it refers to the totality of his makeup and his encompassment of all realities. In relation to the Real man is like the pupil in relation to the eye, through which vision occurs; one calls this the faculty of sight. For this reason he was called Man, and through him the Real looks upon His creation and shows mercy upon them. He is Man, who comes to be [*al-ḥādīth*] and is beginningless [*al-azālī*], who is perpetual [*al-dā‘im*] and endless [*al-abadī*] in his makeup, who is the separative [*al-fāṣila*] and unitive [*al-jāmi‘a*] Word [*kalima*], and who is the subsisting of the world through his existence. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 5; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

This comprehensive character, both temporal and atemporal, descends from Adam to his progeny—especially those who bear the title, “the perfect man” or “complete human being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), whose presence sustains the cosmos and preserves it from dissolution (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 5).¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Citing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s employment of a *ḥadīth* echoing Genesis 1:27, Chittick remarks:

Hence, says Ibn al-‘Arabī, God created the cosmos in His own image, or, to use a better translation of the Arabic term *ṣūra*, in His own “form.” So also, as the Prophet reported, ‘God created Adam upon His own form.’ Hence the universe is a great man (*insān kabīr*), while man is a ‘small universe’ (*‘ālam ṣaghīr*).” (Chittick 1989, 16)

Thus the Shaykh writes in *Futūḥāt* II 170.6:

God created Adam upon His own form. Hence He ascribed to him all His Most Beautiful Names. Through the strength of the Form he was able to carry the offered Trust. The reality of the Form did not allow him to reject the Trust in the way that the heavens and the earth refused to carry it. (Chittick 1989, 276)

Moreover, he writes in *Futūḥāt* II 124.17:

The other key moment demanding our attention is the creation of Jesus, and thus we return to John 1:14 and the acute intersection between Akbarian and Johannine perspectives on Jesus-as-Word. While we have followed the Shaykh's lead in interpreting the Word in John 1:1 as God's general creative command *kun*, without any special reference to Jesus, there is no escaping the reference to Jesus in John 1:14, with its announcement that the Word became embodied. From an Akbarian perspective, the transition from John 1:1 to John 1:14 might be read as a transition from the generality of the world-creating Word in 1:1 to the particularity of the "Īsawī Word" in 1:14, a transition supported by Ibn al-ʿArabī's explicit connection between these two perspectives on the Word in *Futūḥāt* II 459.1:

The Breath of the All-merciful bestows existence upon the forms of the possible things, just as the human breath bestows existence upon letters. Hence the cosmos is the words of God in respect to this Breath, as He said, "His word that He cast into Mary" (Koran 4:171), a word which is the very entity of Jesus. God reported that His words will not be spent, so His creatures will never cease coming into existence and He will never cease being a Creator. (Chittick 1989, 131)

As we have already seen in Chapter 4 of this study, Ibn al-ʿArabī follows Qur'an 4:171 in calling Jesus the Word of God, and he understands this title as belonging to Jesus in a special sense. There are two reasons for deeming this title special. The first reason is that Jesus, though a created being, exhibits this in an exceptional way insofar as he was created without a human father. (In one sense, the creation of Jesus is like that of Adam, but in another sense unlike that of Adam, as we have seen in Chapter 4 of our study.) Because the relationship between the Creative Word *kun* and Jesus (as the object of creation) is more evident than in other created things.¹⁵²

Then He brings it all together in the Prophet's words, "God created Adam upon His own Form." Hence perfect man looks with the eye of God. This is indicated by His words, "I am his sight through which he sees" and so on. In the same way, he receives joyfully with God's joyful receiving, he laughs with God's laughter, he rejoices through God's rejoicing, he becomes wrathful through God's wrath, and he forgets through God's forgetting. (Chittick 1989, 327)

¹⁵² This is one point where Ibn al-ʿArabī would have stood in agreement with Ṭūfī's commentary. Commenting on the Prologue of John Chapter 1, Ṭūfī remarks that

The second reason for distinguishing Jesus as the Word of God in a special way is the fact that Jesus bears an exceptional power to reiterate the Word *kun*. He wields this command to bring other things into existence, creating living birds from clay and bringing the dead back to life. Thus Jesus, in a way no other created being can claim, Jesus is the Word *kun* as both the object and the subject of creation. (We should keep in mind, however, that when Jesus brings other beings into existence, it is in fact God working through Jesus; God is always the ultimate agent of creation.)

Viewing Jesus as the subject of creation, Ibn al-‘Arabī regards Jesus as an exceptional “likeness of bringing into being” (*mithlan bi takwīn*) (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 157). From this angle, the Shaykh would probably have heard an expression of the command *kun* in “the voice of the son of God”, as in the following passage from the Gospel of John:

Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour will come, and it now is, when the dead hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in his essence, likewise the son has been given life to have in him....Do not be astonished at this, that the hour will come when the entirety of those in the tombs hear his voice and come out... (John 5:25-26, 28-29 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Similarly, Ibn al-‘Arabī would probably have heard this creative power in the narrative of the raising of Lazarus, according to which Jesus “yelled with a great voice to Lazarus, ‘Come out!’” (John 11:43 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation).

Moreover, while identifying Jesus as the ‘Īsawī (Christic) Word *kun*, Ibn al-‘Arabī has emphasized the tie between the specifically ‘Īsawī (Christic) nature of this Word and the status

...the Word, according to our opinion, is ‘be,’ and it is the imperative form of ‘it was— it is’ [i.e. the verb ‘to be’] and by it Christ came into being. He was named a ‘Word’ only because he was brought into being by the Word. He was more worthy of this appellation than anyone else, because the affect of the (divine) power was more evident in him due to his being born from no human (father). (Demiri 2013, 303-305)

of all created beings as the Words of God. To underscore this point, we will repeat here a passage we have considered from *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15:

All existent things [*mawjūdāt*] are the inexhaustible Words [*kalimāt*] of God; all come from *Be!*, and *Be!* is a Word [*kalima*] of God. Is the Word related to God with respect to what He is, its quiddity [*māhiyyatuhā*] thus being unknown, or does He descend, transcendent is He, into the form [*ṣūra*] of the one who says, *Be!*, the utterance [*qawl*] *Be!* being the reality of that form into which He descends and in which He is manifest? Some knowers hold the first view, and some the other, while others experience bewilderment in the matter and know not. This matter can only be known through taste, as when Abū Yazīd [Biṣāmī] breathed into an ant he had killed, giving it life. Upon that he knew who breathed, and so breathed. He was Christic [*ʿīṣawī*] in his locus of witnessing [*mashhad*]. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 164; bracketed Arabic words inserted by us)

The question posed by Ibn al-ʿArabī—is the Word related to the transcendent, unknown God, or does God descend into “the form of the one who says *Be!*...in which He is manifest”?—the answer seems to be framed in Christic [*ʿīṣawī*] terms. This is to say, Ibn al-ʿArabī might have been receptive to the words of John 1:14, “the Word became a body,” as expressing the descent of the Word of God in form. We should however take care not to conflate this with the Christian doctrine that Jesus is one of the three preeternal persons (*uqnuman*) of the Trinity, the eternal son of God, “begotten from the Father before all the ages,” as expressed in the Nicene Creed (First Council of Constantinople, 381 CE; Pelikan and Hotchkiss 2003, 163). Rather, Ibn al-ʿArabī more probably would have understood the clause, “the Word became a body,” to mean that Jesus was first brought into being when the Word *kun* summoned Jesus’ body into existence.

This is not to deny that Jesus is a manifestation of God, as expressed by the Akbarian formula He/not He. This point is also highlighted by Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion the Words making up the created world simultaneously *are* and *are not* the Breath of the All-merciful. Ibn al-ʿArabī points this out in *Futūḥāt* II 396.27:

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. (Chittick 1989, 130)

Nor is it to deny that Jesus participates in both temporality and atemporality, as is true of all of creation (and humanity in particularity).¹⁵³ Yet Jesus is created, from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s point of view. He is a special manifestation of God’s general, ongoing creative work, and thereby more worthy than the rest of creation to be called the “son of God.”

As we carry these ontological doctrines forward to our examination of the epistemic role of the embodied Word, we will find an illustration of the dynamic of circumscription and boundlessness, or closure and open-endedness, in our Akbarian of the Gospel of John. Prior, however, to investigating this epistemic work, we will take a moment to inquire into the latter half of the claim, “the Word became a body.” When the Alexandrian Vulgate refers to the body of Jesus, how might have the Gospel have entered into dialogue with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the body?

5.3. The Body

From this waystation I came to know the difference between corporeal bodies and corporeous bodies. — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Futūḥāt III 186.27

As we have seen, the Alexandrian Vulgate version of the Gospel of John translates 1:14 into Arabic as:

¹⁵³ As for Jesus’ Johannine utterance, “I was before Abraham was!” (John 8:58), we have addressed this in the previous chapter of this study, in the context of *shaḥīyyāt*. That discussion might be considered complementary to the present discussion of Jesus’ atemporal aspect. The question of the pre-existence of Jesus is, however, complicated by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of *al-a‘yān al-thābita*, which Chittick translates as “immutable entities” and we would translate as “established essences.” Chittick writes:

One of the more common and probably best known terms that Ibn al-‘Arabī employs for the nonexistent objects of God’s knowledge is ‘immutable entity’... These things or entities are immutable because they never change, just as God’s knowledge never changes. He knows them for all eternity... An ‘immutable entity’ is a nonexistent possible thing. If God ‘gives preponderance’ (*tarjih*) to the side of existence over nonexistence, it becomes an existent entity, an existent possible thing. (Chittick 1989, 11-12)

In light of this doctrine, we might speak of Jesus as having been an “immutable entity” or “established essence” prior to God’s command to bring Jesus into existence. We would hold, in any case, that such an understanding would have stood in contrast with the Christian doctrine that Jesus existed before all time as one of the persons of the Trinity.

wa'l-kalimatu šāra jasadān

Here we will consider the implications of the Alexandrian Vulgate's surprising choice to translate the Greek word *sarx*—the Greek term for “*flesh*” (Liddell and Scott 1889)—as *jasad* (body). We might have expected an Arabic translation of John to translate *sarx* with *lahm*, which means “*flesh, meat*” (Wehr and Cowan 1976). This is in fact the Arabic word we find in the Alexandrian Vulgate's rendition of John 1:13, which speaks of “the desire of the flesh (*lahm*).” In every other instance, however, where *sarx* appears in the Greek version of John, the Alexandrian Vulgate uses the Arabic word *jasad* (and its derivative adjective, *jasadī*). *Jasad* means: “*The body, with the limbs or members, [or whole person,] of a human being, and of a jinnee (or genie), and of an angel*” (Lane 1863). A closer Greek analogy to *jasad* might have been *sōma*, “*the body of a man*” (Liddell and Scott 1889), a word that rarely appears in the Greek Gospel. Thus, translating John 1:14 faithfully from the Alexandrian Vulgate, our result would not be, “the Word became flesh,” but, “the Word became a *body*.”¹⁵⁴

In addition to the *Alexandrian Vulgate*'s peculiar choice of *jasad* rather than *lahm*, we should take into consideration another Arabic word: *jism*. *Jism* means “*the whole body and limbs or members of a man, ...and of a beast, a camel, and the like, ...and of any other species*” (Lane 1863). Ordinarily, there is little distinction between the words *jasad* and *jism*; in many cases the words are interchangeable. While both words can be used to denote the body of a man, a distinction might be found in the applicability of the former to the body of a *jinn* or angel while the latter can apply to the body of an animal.

Ibn al-ʿArabī sometimes seems to treat the two words interchangeably. For instance, when the Shaykh speaks of Jesus' body in the *Fuṣūṣ*, he uses the word *jism*:

¹⁵⁴ The Old Syriac version of John 1:14 also has “body” instead of “flesh” (Wilson 2002, 675); see Robert Murray's discussion of the Syriac phrasing, “the Word became body” (Murray 1975, 71-72).

The body [*jism*] of Jesus was created from the real water of Mary and the conjectural water of Gabriel. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 159; Dagli’s translation revised by us and bracketed word inserted by us)

Jesus was not so, for the inbreathing of the spirit was incorporated into the fashioning of his body [*jism*] and mortal form. As we have already mentioned, this was the case for no other. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 163; bracketed word inserted by us)

This is the case here, despite the fact that *jasad* might have been more appropriate to his point that Jesus’ body was produced in part by the angel Gabriel and constituted in part by the spirit.

On other occasions the Shaykh favors the word *jasad* to denote Jesus’ body. Souad Hakim (citing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Kitāb al-Alif*) writes that

Jesus is not like other men, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, since they are composed of two bodies: a dark, dense body and a light one, which is carried within the dense one and is its spirit, like a vapour emanating from the cavities of the heart and spreading to the rest of the body. Ibn ‘Arabī intimates that Jesus’s form is imaginary, or that his form is an incarnation of his spirit. Jesus “is closer to being a form (*jasad*) than a body (*jism*). His case is thus like that of the angelic and fiery spirits who take form and become visible to the eye, so that the eyes see these bodies, while he [i.e. each individual spirit] remains in himself a spirit.” (Hakim 2002, 8-9)¹⁵⁵

When Ibn al-‘Arabī refers to Jesus’ body as a *jism*, he seems not to speak with the precision with which he speaks on other occasions, disregarding any distinction between the two words; when, however, he explicitly points out the distinction, he states the Jesus’ body “is closer to being a

¹⁵⁵ Compare the words of Dara Shikoh (1615-1659 CE), the heir apparent of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan; Scott Kugle writes that Dara Shikoh “was both a Sufi sage and a prince of the Mughal royal family” (Kugle 2012, 20). Among his writings is a text on Sufi meditation, “The Compass of Truth” (*Risāla Haqq-Nūma*), in which Dara Shikoh claims to present the essence of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt* and *Fuṣūṣ*, among other Sufi classics. “The Compass of Truth” includes the following reflection:

This is because the human being consists of both spirit (*ruh*) and body (*badan*). If a person is more drawn to the body than to the spirit, then that person’s spirit takes on the quality of the body and becomes more dense and obscure and coarse. But if, on the other hand, a person is more drawn to the spirit than to the body, then the body itself takes qualities of the spirit and it becomes more subtle, clear and light. As an illustration, the holy Prophet, that Leader of men, inclined more towards the spirit and exerted control over the body, such that his body itself had become extremely rarified and refined—so much so, that no fly ever landed on him and he did not cast any shadow on the ground...And it is similarly understandable that Jesus (may God’s peace be upon him) is in the heavens in a physical body. For truly, “Our spirits are bodies and our bodies are our spirits.” (Kugle 2012, 140-142)

jasad.” Thus Ibn al-‘Arabī would have probably agreed with the Alexandrian Vulgate’s choice of *jasad* rather than *jism* or *lahm* in translating 1:14. We must then examine, from an Akbarian point of view, the significance of choosing to call Jesus’ body a *jasad*.

Whereas Hakim marks the difference between *jasad* and *jism* by translating the former as “form” and the latter as “body,” Chittick translates *jasad* as “corporeous body” and *jism* as “corporeal body” (Chittick 1998b, 280-281). The distinction between the two terms appears recurrently in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings, where the term *jasad* is broadly applicable, beyond the topic of Jesus (as in *Futūḥāt* I 149.5):

These corporeous forms, within which become manifest the jinn, the angels, and the nonmanifest human domain, are manifest in dreams and in the forms of the Market of the Garden. (Chittick 1998b, 357)¹⁵⁶

The term also shows up in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s autobiography to mark his superior spiritual insight (as in *Futūḥāt* III 186.27):

In this waystation I became a light, just as the Prophet said in his supplication, “Make me into a light.” From this waystation I came to know the difference between corporeal bodies and corporeous bodies. (Chittick 1998b, 352)

Most helpful to our discussion are Ibn al-‘Arabī’s explicit definitions of *jasad*, as recounted by Chittick:

In his glossary of Sufi terminology, Ibn al-‘Arabī defines *jasad* as “any spirit or meaning that becomes manifest in a luminous or fiery body” (*Iṣṭilāḥāt* 14). Although the definition seems to imply that the spirit itself is the corporeous body, other passages that we have quoted suggest that the Shaykh means that the corporeous body is the luminous or fiery body within which the spirit appears. In the parallel passage in the *Futūḥāt*, he writes that a corporeous body is “every spirit or meaning that becomes manifest in the form of a luminous or elemental body such that it is witnessed by the other” (II 130.3). Again the

¹⁵⁶ While Ibn al-‘Arabī applies the term to jinn, angels, and “the nonmanifest human domain,” the term *jasad* has also been used, outside the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī, to denote the body of Adam. The *ḥadīth* asserting that Muḥammad was a prophet when Adam was “between water and clay”—the version cited by Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chapter 11 of the *Fuṣūṣ* (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 277)—has a variant according to which Muḥammad was a prophet when Adam was “between spirit and body (*bayna’l-rūḥ wa’l-jasad*);” Michel Chodkiewicz notes that this less well known version of the *ḥadīth* has been reported by Ibn Ḥanbal and Tirmidhī (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 61).

passage is somewhat ambiguous, but it seems to mean that when a spirit becomes manifest in the form of an angel or a corporeal thing—such as Gabriel in the form of a bedouin—and is witnessed by “the other,” which is anything other than God, then the witnessed form is called a “corporeous body.” This interpretation is supported by a saying of the imaginal personage “‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq” that the Shaykh offers in *Kitāb al-‘abādila*: “The corporeous bodies derive from the world of imagination and imaginalization...” (57). (Chittick 1998b, 281)

Ibn al-‘Arabī reports a number of autobiographical incidents in which he met and conversed with imaginal personages such ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq. In *Futūḥāt* I 755.7, the Shaykh sums up an observation about these encounters:

One embodied himself to me in the earth, another in the air.
One embodied himself wherever I was,
another embodied himself in heaven.
They gave knowledge to me, and I to them, though we were not equal,
For I was unchanging in my entity,
but they were not able to keep still.
They assume the form of every shape,
like water taking on the color of the cup.
(Chittick 1994, 83)

Among these encounters we might include the Shaykh’s meetings with Jesus himself (as noted in Chapter 3 of our study); we might also include his meeting at the Ka‘ba with the mysterious Youth (*fatā*) who initiated Ibn al-‘Arabī’s composition of the *Futūḥāt*. We will return to the topic of the Youth in a moment, and will inquire into his relevance to the notion of Jesus as an embodied Word. First, however, we must address a concern that might arise regarding Jesus’ kinship with such imaginal personages, who “are manifest in dreams” and “assume the form of every shape.” Such a kinship might raise suspicions that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Christology is characterized by Docetism, a charge that might set the Shaykh in opposition to the Gospel of John.

Regarding Docetism, Raymond E. Brown provides the following account of this doctrine and its apparent conflict with this Gospel:

It has also been suggested that the Fourth Gospel was directed against Docetism. Docetism was not so much a heresy by itself as it was an attitude found in a number of heresies. Its central contention was that Jesus did not truly come in the flesh, for his flesh was only an appearance—he only seemed to be a man... Certainly there are passages in John that may have an anti-docetic thrust. “The Word became flesh” (i 14) springs to mind immediately. The scene in xix 34 would be shattering to the docetic cause, for the realism of the blood and water pouring from the side of the wounded Jesus militates against any theory that he was a phantasm. That this is an important scene in John is underlined by the editorial parenthesis in the next verse (35) which claims eyewitness verification... The difficulty is that all these passages are perfectly understandable even without the anti-docetic interpretations. An honest judgment would be that an anti-docetic motif is possible and even probable in the Gospel, but it has no great prominence. (Brown 1966, lxxvi-lxxvii)

While Brown’s final verdict might soften the judgment that Docetism would place Ibn al-‘Arabī squarely at odds with the Gospel, the question remains whether the term “Docetism” properly describes the Shaykh’s perspective on Jesus.

It is certainly true that charges of Docetism have been leveled against Islamic doctrines regarding Jesus, particularly doctrines regarding the crucifixion. As we have noted in Chapter 1, the chief Qur’anic verse at the center of these accusations is Qur’an 4:157, which says:

...and for their saying, ‘We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God’—yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only *a likeness of that was shown to them (shubbiha lahum)*.

In his recent book-length study of Muslim views on the crucifixion, Todd Lawson quotes Henry Corbin as declaring, “Finally, the Qur’an (4:157) is resolutely ‘docetist’” (Lawson 2013, 4) and finds support in the words of the Sunnī exegete al-Tha‘labī (d. 1035 CE), who represents Jesus as saying: “But God has raised me up and nothing but good has befallen me. This person was but a likeness for them” (Lawson 2013, 5). Lawson goes on to remark:

But even if our reader were not an actual, out and out Docetic (if such an identity may be conceptualized), and was merely a believing Christian, it is not likely that reading the above verse—isolated from the early, formative Muslim exegesis—would necessarily cause much alarm. Apart from the Johannine texts referred to above, there are many passages in the New Testament that are susceptible of such a reading. One that comes

very close to paralleling the Qur’anic language in 4:157-8 is found in the hymn embedded in Philippians 2:5-11. (Lawson 2013, 5)¹⁵⁷

We do not wish at this point to sort out the larger question of Islamic views on the crucifixion (though we will return briefly to this question in the next section of this chapter). To address, however, the shift from *sarx* to *jasad* in the Alexandrian Vulgate translation of John 1:14, as well as the implications of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reading of the word *jasad*, we would suggest that importing and applying the term “Docetism” from Christian history would be misguided in this context. Understandably, to follow the lead of the Shaykh and place Jesus’ body on the same level as a dream might incite objections; one might suspect that this reading would hollow out the substantiality of Jesus’ body and reduce it to an illusion. Nonetheless, we will argue—for two reasons—that the term “Docetism” would be an ill fit for the Shaykh’s doctrines.

One reason against applying this term is that, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontological doctrine, the created world *in general* is imaginal (or, as we have noted earlier, metaphorical); the Shaykh even speaks of the world of waking life as a dream. He makes this point in Chapter 9 of the *Fuṣūṣ* (the chapter on Joseph), where he builds on the *ḥadīth*, “Indeed mankind is asleep, and when they die, they awaken.”¹⁵⁸ There, he writes:

Everything one sees while awake is like this, though the states may vary...Anything one encounters is like this and is called the world of imagination, and for this reason is to be interpreted. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 95)

Further in the same chapter, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes:

¹⁵⁷ The passage to which Lawson points includes a description of Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8 RSV).

¹⁵⁸ A footnote by Chittick observes, “Though frequently cited by the Shaykh and other Sufis as a *ḥadīth*, it is not found in the standard collections. Abū Ibrāhīm Mustamlī Bukhārī (d. 434/1042-43) attributes it to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (*Sharḥ-i Ta’arruf* [Lucknow, 1328], III, p. 98)” (Chittick 1989, 396, footnote 7).

We say: Know that what one calls ‘other than the Real’ and which is referred to as ‘the world’ is, in relation to the Real, as a shadow is to an object. It is the shadow of God. It is in just this way that existence is attributed to the world, for without doubt that shadow is existent in the sensory domain, albeit only when there is something wherein the shadow is manifest. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 98)

Both Jesus’ body and bodies in general are described in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s terminology as shadows of God rather than material bodies independent from God. If we assert that Jesus’ body is merely imaginal, we will not make that body less real than the rest of the world. Moreover, if we highlight the distinction between a *jasad* and a *jism*, this distinction will not be firm and sharp. Any distinction between Jesus’ imaginal form and the rest of the world will be a difference of degree, not a difference of kind. Chittick makes a similar point when he writes, in the context of his discussion of imaginal personages:

...I need to remind the reader that we should not think of the basic characters in this drama—spirit and body—as discrete and autonomous things. Rather, the two terms designate configurations of certain tendencies found in existence, or certain divine qualities that are reflected in the created worlds. Both spirit and body are associated with a series of attributes, and no absolute distinction can be drawn between the two sides. The discussion of imagination itself alerts us to the fact that the qualities of spirit and body—which at first sight appear completely different—interpenetrate and intermingle. There can be no absolute differences, except when God as *wujūd* is contrasted with cosmos as nonexistence. Within the many worlds existentiated by the Breath of the All-merciful, things can be different only in a relative sense. (Chittick 1994, 84)

Thus, if the term “Docetic” is intended to draw a sharp contrast between Jesus’ illusory body and the material world, this term would be inapplicable to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine, for the Shaykh does not draw this sharp contrast.

Our second reason for resisting the term “Docetic” addresses Ibn al-‘Arabī’s motivation for speaking of Jesus’ body as a *jasad*. The Shaykh seems not motivated to buffer Jesus from contact with the material world or spare him from the passion of the crucifixion. Rather, what seems to impel the Shaykh’s view on the body of Jesus is his sense that a *jasad* manifests *meaning* more brightly and lucidly than ordinary bodies. As noted above, Ibn al-‘Arabī defines a

jasad as “any spirit or meaning that becomes manifest in a luminous or fiery body.” In various other places, the Shaykh writes generally of meanings clothed in concrete images; in *Futūḥāt* II 66.14, for example, he writes that imaginal beings “are the meanings that assume shape (*tashakkul*) in sensory forms; they are given form by the form-giving faculty (*al-quwwat al-muṣawwira*), which serves the rational faculty” (Chittick 1989, 115).

For Ibn al-‘Arabī, all created bodies are laden with meaning. They are Words presenting themselves to our senses, addressing us and communicating with us; none are mute, inert objects. They ask to be read and open themselves up to interpretation. To underscore a sentence from the passages we have just cited from the *Fuṣūṣ*, “Anything one encounters is like this and is called the world of imagination, and for this reason is to be interpreted.” This would be especially true of Jesus’ body, the paramount instance of the embodied Word. As a *jasad* brought specially into existence by the command *kun*, bodily impressed with this command, Jesus’ body is exceptionally worthy of recognition as bearing God’s meaning. This is to say, Jesus’ visible and tangible form is eminently readable as a divinely inscribed Word.

The heightened lexical character of Jesus’ body might be illuminated by drawing an analogy with the Youth (*fatā*) in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s autobiography. As we have indicated, this meeting with the Youth at the Ka‘ba catalyzed the Shaykh’s writing of the *Futūḥāt*; his account of this encounter (in Chapter 1 of the *Futūḥāt*) captures the book-like character of the Youth’s body as well as the relationship between his body and the written text that issues from their meeting. Ibn al-‘Arabī begins by detailing the composition of the Youth’s body, comparing his body to configured stones; he then represents the text of the *Futūḥāt* itself as a transcription or rubbing taken from this stone configuration. The Youth himself does not speak in articulated utterances; he is thus called “the Silent Speaker” by Henry Corbin (Corbin 1969, 279). Ibn al-

‘Arabī writes the following observation regarding the Youth’s silent expression in *Futūḥāt* 1 168

AM:

He pointed to me with an enigmatic gesture; he was innately configured such that no one speaks with him except in metaphor, and such that he speaks only metaphorically. When you know him, and verify him for yourself, and you understand him, you know that the purest language of the pure speakers does not perceive him, and his articulation is not attained by the eloquence of the most eloquent. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016)

The Shaykh goes on to record his dialogue with the unspeaking Youth in *Futūḥāt* 1 169 AM:

I said to him, “Show me some of your mysteries, so that I would be one to transcribe your beauties.” He said, “Observe the sectioned segments of my cobbled-stoned whole and at the ordered arrangement of my shape and you will find what you are asking of me to be imprinted throughout me, for I am neither a *mukallim* [who speaks for himself] nor a *kalīm* [who speaks for another; an epithet for Moses], and my knowledge is not anything but me, and my Substantive (*dhāt*) is not different from my names (nouns). I am knowledge, the known, and the one who knows...” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016)

If we recognize an analogy between the Youth and Jesus,¹⁵⁹ the peculiar relationship between the configured body of the Youth and the inscribed text of the *Futūḥāt* might raise questions about the relationship between the body of Jesus and the inscribed text of the Gospel. On this analogy, we might regard the Gospel as a transcription of the visible and tangible presence of Jesus. This relationship would raise questions about a parallel relationship between witnessing-as-seeing (the activity of the eyewitness seeing the embodied Word) and witnessing-as-testifying (the activity of the speaker or writer bearing testimony). The Evangelist, by the

¹⁵⁹ Stephen Hirtenstein has recently raised the possibility that the Youth might be Jesus himself, finding a parallel between the Youth and Jesus, who “in his first coming is akin to a Book, made up of chapters and words, exemplifying the life of a true human being in this world” (Hirtenstein 2015, 55). Hirtenstein presents the following support for this identification:

Ibn al-‘Arabī does not identify this Youth any further, leaving his readers to ponder on who It might really be. He is certainly a personification of Spirit. But not Gabriel, since he specifies that he was ‘not one of the angels, but rather he was human’. If human, could it be Jesus? Certainly many of the descriptions could be directly applied to Jesus: for example, ‘the Spirit from the details of whose constitution I took what I was made to record in this book’, ‘... living, of uncontainable might, unique in time, none like him’; not part of the mortal realm; the mention of his Right-hand or Yemen (the direction which is associated with Jesus). (Hirtenstein 2015, 53)

Gospel's own account, both sees Jesus firsthand and testifies as a writer. Yet, as we will see, there is a tension between these two forms of witnessing.

If we define Thomastic witnessing as an act of seeing and Cephasic witnessing as an act of speaking or writing testimony, the Thomastic perspective would assert that the latter is inadequate to capture the former, and (pushed to an extreme) might regard spoken and written testimony as no valid substitute for a personal encounter with Jesus. By analogy, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s account of his encounter with the Youth might speak to the superiority of what he has verified firsthand in *Futūḥāt* 1 168 AM:

When you know him, and verify him for yourself, and you understand him, you know that the purest language of the pure speakers does not perceive him, and his articulation is not attained by the eloquence of the most eloquent. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016)

We might thus read John 1:14 as a celebration of the superior knowledge of those who have seen Jesus in the body. To return to John 1:14 in full, the complete verse reads thus in Arabic:

Wa’l-kalimatu šāra jasadān wa ḥalla fīnā wa ra’īnā majdahu majdan mithla dhī’l-waḥīd aladhī min al-ab al-mumtālī’ ni‘matan wa ḥaqqan.

This is how it reads in English:

And the Word (*al-kalimatu*), he became a body (*jasadan*) and alighted (*or* took up residence) among (*or* in) us; and we saw his glory, the glory like that of the unique one who is from the Father, full of grace and reality.¹⁶⁰

What is emphasized in this verse by an Akbarian reading is the verb *saw*, a verb indicating the epistemic work of the embodied Word: those among whom Jesus resided *saw* Jesus for themselves, reading the meaning of the Word in his body and not on the page. The visible

¹⁶⁰ Another possibility is permitted by the words *ḥalla fīnā*, which we have translated as “alighted among us;” according to Wehr, the phrase *ḥalla fī* can mean, at least in Modern Arabic, “(God) became incarnate in (someone)” (Wehr and Cowan 1976). Thus we might translate the verse as: “And the Word, he became a body and became incarnate in us...”

manifestation of Jesus' glory is thus understood as speaking louder than the content of Jesus' spoken preaching or the content of any testimony spoken or written after the fact.

The superiority of this appeal to the senses is echoed in the opening verses of the First Epistle of John:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you... (1 John 1:1-3 RSV)

This sentence stumbles and spills over with the blessedness of witnessing the embodied Word of Life; it appeals not only to our sense of hearing, but to all of our senses. The author of these verses, amplifying the Johannine theme of the Gospel's first chapter, boasts of this blessing, and he rests his authority as an eyewitness upon this seeing and touching. There is an impulse running through the Gospel urging potential believers to see for themselves. Thus, Andrew follows his testimony to his brother Cephas by bringing him to see Jesus in person (John 1:42); Philip does the same thing with Nathanael (John 1:46); and the woman at the well in Samaria concludes her report by exhorting her fellow citizens to see Jesus, who had told her everything she had done (John 4:29).

The Gospel might display the most acute illustration of this impulse in the person of the disciple Thomas. We will make clear here our reason for labeling this form of witnessing as "Thomastic," calling to mind the story for which Thomas is best known. This story begins on the day of Jesus' resurrection. The resurrected Jesus has presents Himself, fresh from the grave, to the gathered apostles:

And Thomas, one of the Twelve,...was not with them when Jesus came. Then the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." Then he said to them, "If I do not look into the nail-mark in his hand and place my finger into the nail-mark and let my hand into his side, I will not believe."

And after eight days, the disciples were again inside, and Thomas was with them. Then Jesus came—and the doors were bolted—and he stood in the midst of them, and said to them, “Peace.” Then he said to Thomas, “Bring your finger here, and see my hand; and bring your hand and put it into my side, and be not unbelieving, but believing.” Then Thomas answered and said, “My lord and my god! (*rabbī wa ilāhī!*)” Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.” (John 20:24-29 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Over the past two millennia, this apostle has been memorialized and censured as “doubting Thomas,” and it has generally been assumed that this story is intended to portray Thomas in a negative light. We might assume that when Jesus tells Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed,” the implication is that Thomas himself is not blessed, or at least less blessed than those who have not seen.

In Thomas’ defense, however, we will articulate several respects in which Thomas’ perspective appears to reflect trends in the attitudes of both the Gospel and Jesus himself. We would begin by noting that criticism of Thomas would be unjust if it implies a contrast between him and his fellow disciples, for the fellow disciples believe only because they have seen the resurrected Jesus. In fact, instances of faith in this Gospel are almost always consequent upon seeing Jesus. We should recall that the Johannine Jesus does not reprimand those who equate seeing with believing; rather, he reserves his condemnation for those who have seen, but do not believe. We can see this in the Gospel’s sixth chapter, when Jesus scolds the hard-hearted Galileans with these words:

But I said to you that you have seen me and you have not believed. (John 6:36 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

A few verses later, Jesus says,

But this is the pleasure of my Father, that everyone who sees the son and believes in him will have endless life, and I will resurrect him on the last day. (John 6:40 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

In these words, Jesus appears to praise and promote the idea that seeing is—or should be—believing. Thomas seems to endorse the equation of seeing with believing, insisting on being an eyewitness and not to accept anyone’s testimony secondhand. His most poignant desire is to see and touch his resurrected Lord, and his desire is fulfilled. One might say that Thomas is more blessed than those of us who have never seen or touched Jesus. For the reader sympathetic to Thomas, the fulfillment of Thomas’ desire is to be celebrated, rather than scorned.

Ibn al-‘Arabī himself might also have been sympathetic to Thomas, had he encountered the Gospel. This is probable not only because of the Shaykh’s habit of bringing a sympathetic reading to figures traditionally reviled (such as the idolaters in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 3, the chapter on Noah, or Pharaoh in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 25, the chapter on Moses). More significantly, Ibn al-‘Arabī shows, in his epistemological doctrines, a strong proclivity for Thomastic witnessing. Given Ibn al-‘Arabī’s habit of recognizing binary dialectics, the Shaykh would probably have given due respect to both Thomastic witnessing (firsthand seeing) and Cephastic witnessing (spoken or written testimony) in his reading of the Gospel; but it does not follow that he would have given equal status to both kinds of witnessing. There is reason to believe that the Shaykh would have upheld direct experience of sensory forms—such as Jesus’ *jasad*—as the privileged means of encountering the Word.

To be clear, however, the compatibility between Thomastic witnessing and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines is not without limits, and on a key point this compatibility will run into an obstacle, as we will see in the last section of this chapter, where we will explore the relationship between the epistemic work of the embodied Word and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of “the renewal of creation,” in order to see their bearing on Thomastic witnessing. We should recall, however, that there are two eminent functions of the embodied Word: epistemic and expiatory. Prior to

concluding our discussion of the epistemic work, we will examine the expiatory work of the embodied Word and its harmonious relationship with Cephastic witnessing.

5.4. The Expiatory Work of the Embodied Word

I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd sacrifices himself for the lambs. — John 10:11 (Alexandrian Vulgate)

This brings us to the final two sections of our present chapter. Following this line of thought through to the widest ramifications of an Akbarian reading of the embodied Word, we will examine, in this section, the expiatory work and its concordance with Cephastic witnessing; in the next section, we will examine the epistemic work, and will highlight its compatibility with Thomastic witnessing. Pursuing the implications of these two functions (on Jesus' part) and two kinds of witnessing (on the part of Jesus' disciples), we will run into a conflict that will leave the epistemic work and Thomastic witnessing in an unresolved crisis. In the final chapter of this study, we will consider one possible resolution of this crisis, a resolution located at a point of resonance between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought and the closing chapter of the Gospel.

By the “expiatory work” of the embodied Word, we are referring to the work Jesus completes in his crucifixion. Jesus’ death on the cross might be viewed as the central event in the narratives of all four Gospels; the Gospel of John particularly emphasizes this moment, which it presents as a blood sacrifice for the sins of the world:

This is the lamb of God who eliminates the faults of the world! (John 1:29, Alexandrian Vulgate our translation)

God thus loved the world so he sacrificed (*badhala*) his only son, so that anyone who believes in him will not perish, but endless life will be his. (John 3:16 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

I am the good (*ṣalāh*) shepherd, and the good shepherd sacrifices (*yabdhilu*) himself for the lambs. (John 10:11 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

As we have observed in Chapter 1 of our study, the mainstream Islamic tradition denies that Jesus perished on the cross, but ascended to heaven alive, bypassing and postponing his death until after his Second Coming at the end of the world. The conventional Islamic doctrine stands sharply in opposition to the stance of the Gospel of John. For this reason, in our pursuit of an Akbarian reading of this Gospel, we must address the question of whether Ibn al-‘Arabī would have accepted the Gospel’s claim that Jesus in fact died on the cross.

The Qur’anic wedge that has been conventionally driven between Islamic and Christian tellings of the trajectory of Jesus’ story has been found in this Qur’ānic verse:

‘We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God’—yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them. (Qur’ān 4:157)

We returned to this verse briefly earlier in this chapter to address the charge that Muslims have traditionally adopted a Docetic reading the words, “only a likeness of that was shown to them.” There, we cited Todd Lawson’s observation, in *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an* (Lawson 2013), that even Docetic interpretations of this Qur’ānic passage do not always stand starkly in contrast with the New Testament, for some New Testament verses seem to recommend themselves to a Docetic reading. Here, we will direct our attention to Lawson’s larger argument that Islamic interpretations of the crucifixion account are by no means uniform. While in the minority, some Muslims have adopted readings of Qur’ān 4:157 that accommodate the Gospels’ account and affirm the claim that Jesus died on the cross. We will glance at one of these accommodating interpretations, leading to the question whether Ibn al-‘Arabī himself might have been receptive to the Gospel of John’s representation of Jesus’ death.

However we read Qur’ān 4:157, we might mark one point of harmony between the Qur’ān and the Gospel of John: the clause from 4:157, “yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him,” can be read as an expressing defiance of human pretenses to power. The Qur’anic

denial of the Jews' ability to kill Jesus might resonate with the Johannine denial of Pilate's power, communicated in Jesus' response to Pilate's interrogation.

Then Pilate said to him, "Why will you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have the power (*sultānan*) to set you loose, and the power to crucify you?" Then Jesus answered him, "You would not have power over me were it not given to you from above..." (John 19:10-11 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

By the traditional Islamic reading, the Qur'ānic passage expresses the Jews' failure to bring about their aim to kill Jesus, for Jesus escaped crucifixion. In the context of the Gospel of John, Jesus' words capture the impotence of Pilate, who is merely a pawn in a divine plan, and vaunts in the face of the Jews' apparent victory over Jesus' dead body. To bring the Qur'ānic verse closer to the Johannine account, we must consider how this verse might be consistent with affirming the fact of Jesus' death on the cross.

As Lawson notes, Islamic interpretations that affirm Jesus' crucifixion sometimes read Qur'ān 4:157 through the lens of Qur'ān 2:154 and Qur'ān 3:169. These latter verses offer an alternative understanding of the word "slain":

And say not of those slain [*taqūlū*] in God's way, 'They are dead [*yuqталu*]'; rather they are living, but you are not aware. (Qur'ān 2:154)

Count not those who were slain [*qutilū*] in God's way as dead, but rather living with their Lord... (Qur'ān 3:169)

The key terms highlighted in these verses—*taqūlū*, *yuqталu*, and *qutilū*—are mirrored in Qur'ān 4:157, "We slew [*qatalnā*] the Messiah..." This is to say, we might understand, in light of 2:154 and 3:169, that the Jews' claim in 4:157 to have slain Jesus is false, not because Jesus did not die on the cross, but because a perspicacious view of the crucifixion would include its post-resurrection outcome: Jesus, though having died on the cross, should be counted as living with his Lord. To illustrate the pedigree of this reading, Lawson points to historical examples of Muslims reading 4:147 in this fashion; he points, for example, to the controversy between the

Ismā‘īlī philosopher Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 933-934 CE) and the renowned physician Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyya al-Rāzī, known as Rhazes (d. ca. 925 or 935 CE):

The problem of the crucifixion is encountered in the text when the Isma‘īlī philosopher responds to the great sceptic and physician, who in his *Kitāb makhāriq al-anbiyyā* had attacked the Qur’an precisely for denying the crucifixion and contradicting the unanimous view of both Christians and Jews...as a proof that revealed religion is untrustworthy and probably causes more problems than it solves. How, he asks rhetorically, can we be expected to honour such books as holy and revealed if they cannot agree on a simple matter of history and, though not stated explicitly but in the context implied, one that is so pivotal in the respective identities of their followers. It is of extreme interest here that Abū Ḥātim, the Isma‘īlī missionary, does not invoke the easily available doctrine of textual corruption...Rather, his response is based on a much more subtle and radical hermeneutic. He holds that the key to understanding the verse is in its sequel, 4:158: AND THEY DID NOT REALLY (YAQĪNA) KILL HIM, GOD HAS RAISED HIM UP TO HIMSELF. This must be read in conjunction with two other important verses in which it is promised that martyrs do not die, but rather remain alive with God (Q. 2:149 and 3:169), inasmuch as Jesus died a martyr.

He then points out to Rhazes that in fact both scriptures, the Qur’an and the Gospels, agree in letter and spirit. He refers to the Gospel of John (*Bushrā Yuḥannā*), which he quotes as ‘the Messiah died in the body [*bi-al-jasad*], whereas he is alive in the spirit [*bi-al-rūḥ*]...’ (Lawson 2013, 82)

Turning to Ibn al-‘Arabī, we will find the Shaykh employing a tactic different from that of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī. We might read the Shaykh, like Rāzī, as affirming the fact of Jesus’ crucifixion. Moreover, both the Shaykh and Rāzī allude to the deaths of martyrs in Qur’ān 2:154 and Qur’ān 3:169 to make his point. Yet the logic of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s argument runs counter to that of Rāzī, for Ibn al-‘Arabī denies that Jesus died as a martyr. The relevant passage in the Shaykh’s writings comes from Chapter 195 of the *Futūḥāt*. This is an excerpt from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s extended commentary on Qur’ān 19:33 (cited above), in which Jesus announces, “Peace be upon me, the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!” The Shaykh comments:

Then Jesus said, “*And safety* (salām [i.e., “peace”]) *be upon me, the day I was born...and the day I die*”...[that is,] I become safe from the slaying that will be attributed to me by those who think that they slew me. This refers to the words of the Children of Israel, “We

slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary.” God declared them liars with His words, “*They did not slay him, neither crucified him, but it seemed so to them.*” So Jesus said to them that safety was upon him on the day that he died, safe from being slain. For if he had been slain, he would have been slain in martyrdom, and the martyr is alive, not dead, just as we have been prohibited from saying that, a command that still remains [in effect]. So Jesus gave news that he died and was not slain, since he mentioned safety upon him on the day he died.

Then he mentioned that safety is upon him on the day that he is raised up alive (Qur’an 19:34), i.e., at the resurrection, which is the abode of safety for those who are free of every evil, like the prophets and other people of grace (*ināya*). So Jesus possesses safety in all these places. Nor is there a third abode; there is only life in this world and life in the next, and between the two death. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 154)

Here, Ibn al-‘Arabī asserts that Jesus “died and was not slain”—and therefore was not a martyr.

We should note that the Shaykh places Jesus’ death in the past tense, despite the fact that the Qur’ānic words, “the day I die,” is in the present tense. One possible reading of this passage is that the death and the resurrection of Jesus are located in past history.¹⁶¹ By this reading, Ibn al-‘Arabī would seem intent on staving off any false understanding that Jesus did not actually die—a false understanding that might be fostered by placing Jesus in the category of martyrs, for whom being slain amounts to survival. Challenging the more conventional Islamic understanding that Jesus ascended to heaven still alive, Ibn al-‘Arabī appears to refuse to skip over Jesus’ death, treating death as a necessary step towards ascension to the next world. This might be implied by the words, “there is only life in this world and life in the next, and between the two death.” Such a reading would establish a doctrine (entirely consistent with the Gospel’s narrative) that Jesus has fully participated in all three turning points of life—birth, death, and resurrection. It would also forge a chronological sequence of death, resurrection, and ascension (as in the Gospel), unlike the traditional Islamic doctrine that Jesus’ ascension precedes his death and resurrection.

¹⁶¹ This reading is complicated, however, by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words earlier in the same chapter, regarding a different verse, stating that “Jesus spoke all of this in the past tense, but he meant the present and the future” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 152). There’s something vertiginous in the way the Shaykh revises the tenses in these verses, and we are thus tentative about drawing definitive conclusions here.

If this is an accurate reading of the purport of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words, his intentions might be understood as echoing the evident motivation of the Evangelist, who chooses the event of the crucifixion as a key moment to draw attention to himself as an eyewitness, so as to preclude any erroneous report that Jesus escaped death:

...and when they came finally to Jesus they saw that he had died and they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his right side with a spear, and at that moment water and blood came out. And he who saw bore witness, and his testimony is true, and he knows that he says the truth, that you may believe. (John 19:33-35 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

For the Evangelist, his testimony to Jesus’ death seems to weigh with as much gravity as his testimony to Jesus’ life among us (in John 1:14) and his testimony to Jesus’ resurrection (in John 21:24).

The event of the crucifixion is certainly worthy of a fuller inquiry than we can pursue in the present study. Were we to delve more deeply into an Akbarian reading of the crucifixion, we would have to inquire into the Shaykh’s possible attitude towards the notion that the crucifixion was an expiatory sacrifice. As we have noted in our opening chapter, the idea of the crucifixion as an atonement for sins might stand in conflict with traditional Islamic teachings that no one can bear the burden of another’s sins, as expressed at various points in the Qur’ān:

Every soul earns only to its own account, no soul laden bears the load of another. (Qur’ān 6:164; cf. 17:15, 35:18, 39:7, and 53:38)

In the context of our present line of investigation, however, we will take it for granted that Jesus perished on the cross (and subsequently ascended to his Father), as reported in the Gospel of John, and will not ask whether Ibn al-‘Arabī would accept or challenge the Gospel’s presentation of the crucifixion as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. We will limit ourselves to exploring the consequences of the crucifixion for the disciples, examining the friction between Cephas and Thomastic witnessing and the relationships between these two kinds of witnessing and Jesus’

impending absence at the end of the Gospel. That is, we will apply an Akbarian lens to the friction between the expiatory work and the epistemic work of the embodied Word.¹⁶²

On this reading, Cephastic witnessing is in harmony with the expiatory work and it hears its fulfillment in Jesus' words on the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). It is noteworthy that in the Alexandrian Vulgate's version of John 19:30, Jesus' final words are not merely, "It is finished," but, "The writing has been finished," or, "The scripture has been accomplished" (*tamma al-kitāb*) (John 19:30 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translations).¹⁶³ Mirroring this emphasis on writing, Cephastic witnessing is oriented towards the act of giving testimony—initially in speech, but ultimately in writing. It has an impetus towards closure and finality, even towards the death and annihilation of the witness. The goal is a fixed and stable testimony of events that have already receded into the past tense, as opposed to the act of eyewitness seeing in the present tense. This finality, overcoming the flux and changeability of the living present, can only be

¹⁶² Given the opportunity, we would further pursue an Akbarian understanding of John the Baptist's designation of Jesus as the "lamb of God" (John 1:29). We would consider, for instance, Ibn al-'Arabī's words in *Futūḥāt* I 352 (cf. III 133, and IV 319), according to which John the Baptist, on the Day of Resurrection, will advance towards a gray sheep (representing Death), bearing a blade to kill the sheep (Hayek 1959, 59; our translation from the French).

We might also read the Baptist's epithet through the lens of *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 6, the chapter on Isaac. There, Ibn al-'Arabī asks how a ram could have served as a surrogate in Abraham's sacrifice: "I know not how a single small ram could itself take the place of the Vicegerent of the All-Merciful" (Ibn al-'Arabī 2004b, 67). Ibn al-'Arabī proceeds to discuss the dream (in Qur'ān 37:102) that prompts Abraham to attempt sacrificing his son (apparently Isaac—not Ishmael, as is more commonly understood in the Islamic tradition). According to the Shaykh's retelling of the event, Abraham dreams of sacrificing his son, erroneously taking the dream at face value. Abraham is faulted for failing to interpret dreams—and specifically failing to interpret the dream image of his son as a symbol of the ram. An inquiry into the applicability of this chapter to the Johannine "Lamb of God" would revolve around one peculiar sentence the chapter: "If he had seen the ram in his imagination, he would have interpreted it as his son or something else" (Ibn al-'Arabī 2004b, 72). The context of the surrounding chapter suggests that this sentence means, "If Abraham had seen the ram in his imagination, God would have interpreted it as his son or something else." The sentence is ambiguous, however, regarding whose son the ram represents: Abraham's son or God's son?

¹⁶³ The most obvious reading of *tamma al-kitāb* refers to the fulfillment of a scriptural prophecy. The Arabic word for "scripture" in the Alexandrian Vulgate version of the Gospel of John is *kitāb* (or plural *kutub*) (John 2:22, 5:37, 5:39, 7:42, 13:18, 17:12, 19:24, 19:37, 20:9) or *maktūb* (John 10:35, 19:28, 19:36); the Alexandrian Vulgate sometimes uses the verb *tamma* to indicate the fulfillment of a scriptural prophecy (John 13:18, 17:12, 19:28, 19:36). A Cephastic perspective might be inclined to extend Jesus' last words to writing in general, drawing out a general impulse in writing that seeks the closure and completion of the words committed to a page.

accomplished with the death of the witness. Until death, there will always be a risk of compromising his allegiance to his testimony, even temptation to revise or recant. If at death, however, the witness leaves behind an enduring report testifying to the bodily presence of Jesus, the witness becomes a martyr.¹⁶⁴ In an effort to make this point clearer, we will explain our intentions by coining the term “Cephastic,” and why we have chosen Cephas as the emblem of this version of witnessing.

Cephas—also known as “Peter” (the Greek form of the Aramaic nickname “Cephas” or “rock”) and “Simon”—dramatizes a tendency toward instability in bearing testimony. This is true of Cephas’ character in all four Gospels; here we will trace Cephas’ trajectory solely in the Gospel of John. Two key plot points in this trajectory are John 6:68-69 and John 18:17, 25-27. In the former incident, Cephas declares his faith in and fidelity to Jesus:

Master, to whom will we go? And you have the speech of eternal life and we have believed and have known that you are the Messiah, the son of God, the Life. (John 6:68-69 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ On the importance of testifying to the bodily presence of Jesus, see 1 John 4:1-3, which reads:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. (RSV)

There is some ambiguity in the verb “confess;” does this refer to the affirmation of a point of creed (not necessarily by an eyewitness), or does it refer to bearing firsthand testimony to having seen Jesus in the body? In favor of the latter possibility, we might note the apparently interchangeable use of the verbs “testify” and “confess” in 1 John 4:14-15, which reads:

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. (See also John 1:19-20.)

There is of course room to ask whether the stance in the First Epistle of John is consistent with the stance of the Gospel of John; we suspect, in any case, that verses such as John 1:14 illustrate the criterion expressed in 1 John 4:1-3.

¹⁶⁵ Note this difference from the Greek, according to which (in the Revised Standard Version of the translation), Cephas calls Jesus not, “the Messiah, the son of God, the Life,” but, “the Holy One of God” (John 6:69 RSV). The Old Syriac version of John 6:69, incidentally, has “the Messiah, the son of God” (Wilson 2002, 738)

In the latter instance, however, Cephas wavers in his loyalty, disavowing Jesus in the face of interrogation:

And the (female) gatekeeper in charge said to Simon, “Are you one of the disciples of this man?” And he said to her, “No.” (John 18:17 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

A few verses later, Cephas disavows Jesus twice more, “and in that moment, the rooster crowed” (John 18:27 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation).

Cephas’ vulnerability is exposed in the stark contrast between these two moments. The true test of his fortitude will be upholding his testimony in the face of death. Cephas himself declares death to be this criterion:

Simon Cephas said to him, “Where are you going, master?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you are not now able to follow me, but you will come to me later.” Peter said to him, “Master, why am I not now able to follow you? Now I will sacrifice (*abdhilu*) myself for you.” Jesus answered him, “Will you sacrifice (*tabdhilu*) yourself as a sacrifice (*fidā’ī*)? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow until you disavow me three times.” (John 13:36-38 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)¹⁶⁶

Cephas’ words, “I will sacrifice (*abdhilu*) myself for you,” points to the inherent impulse towards death in Cephastic witnessing; becoming a martyr is the ultimate validation of the testimony he bears. Jesus immediately rebuts Cephas by forecasting his failure. Yet, in the closing scene of the Gospel, Jesus prompts Cephas to revisit both the disciple’s promise and his failure, giving him an opportunity to redeem himself. In John 21:15-17, Jesus asks Cephas three times if he loves him, echoing Cephas’ three denials.¹⁶⁷ The repetition of the question troubles Cephas; Jesus concludes that exchange with a prediction that might be read as either troubling or reassuring:

¹⁶⁶ This is perhaps more explicit in the Greek; in the Revised Standard Version, Cephas says, “I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37 RSV).

¹⁶⁷ In the Greek version of John 21:15-17, there is an interesting interchange between two different verbs for “love,” *agapaō* and *phileō*. In the Alexandrian Vulgate, there is no such variation; the Arabic verb for “love” in these verses—as throughout the Alexandrian Vulgate version of the Gospel of John—is consistently *ḥabba*.

...Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded your loins yourself and you walked where you wished, but when you are old, you will spread out your hands and another will gird your loins for you and he will take you away where you do not wish.” (And he said this to inform him by what manner of death it was determined for him to glorify God.) Then when he had said this, he said, “Follow me!” (John 21:18-19 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

While this invitation to follow Jesus as far as and into death, perhaps even imitating Jesus by submitting to a violent death, might further trouble the heart of Cephas. Yet there is an implicit promise of martyrdom here for the disciple, which would constitute a validation of Cephas’ self-imposed criterion (in John 13:37) as well as victory in his mission to bear testimony. Cephas’ vacillation will be resolved in his annihilation and withdrawal from the world; he will then leave behind his testimony to the presence of Jesus as a fixed and abiding legacy.

The closure announced by Jesus on the cross anticipates the closure of Cephas’ own life; as they run in parallel to a violent death, Jesus’ expiatory work and Cephas’ testimonial work are concordant. In the last section of our present chapter, we will delve more deeply into the Akbarian perspective on the epistemic work of the embodied Word. We will endeavor to show that, whereas this epistemic work is concordant with Thomastic witnessing, the epistemic work and the expiatory work are at odds with one another, resulting in catastrophe for Thomastic witnessing. The epistemic work, as Thomas might understand it, requires open-endedness and continuity in the present tense; his knowledge of God is dependent upon Jesus’ dwelling among the disciples in the body, available to be seen and touched. But the closure announced by the words, “The writing has been finished” (John 19:30), and the absence of Jesus in its imminent sequel, drives knowledge of the embodied Word into the past tense. This appears to be the inevitable parting of the ways between Cephasic and Thomastic witnessing, between the closure implied by writing and the open-endedness implied by seeing. Nonetheless, we will attempt to follow Ibn al-‘Arabī’s lead in embracing both the Cephasic and Thomastic dimensions of

witnessing, giving due respect to both sides, and holding the dialectic without permitting their tension to dissolve in a false resolution.

5.5. The Epistemic Work of the Embodied Word

You take your knowledge dead from the dead, but we take our knowledge from the Alive who does not die! — Abū Yazīd Bisṭāmī

We should note that, according to the Shaykh, imaginal forms are theophanies, communicating knowledge of the otherwise unknown God.¹⁶⁸ “Theophany” translates the Arabic word *tajallī*—elsewhere translated as “epiphany” or “self-disclosure”—is a key and frequent term in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings. Chodkiewicz explains the term this way:

At the core of the vocabulary of spiritual experience, there is, therefore, in the Shaykh al-Akbar’s doctrine, a term which is its key: *tajallī* (a word that, for the Arab Christians, designates the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor)...*Tajallī* is a divine act and it is by virtue of this divine act that man can attain a direct perception of God, whatever degree or form that may take. (Chodkiewicz 1993c, 58)

Chittick explains the term in various ways. For example he states in one place:

He employs the term to mean that God shows Himself to the universe inasmuch as *wujūd* is present in all things, or inasmuch as His names and attributes display traces (*āthār*) and properties (*aḥkām*) in the cosmos; the configurations and forms left by these traces and properties are then known as “the creatures”...At other times he employs the term self-disclosure as a synonym for unveiling, thereby stressing the awareness or “witnessing” (*shuhūd*) that is the human perception of God’s self-display. (Chittick 1989, 52)

Elsewhere, Chittick writes:

¹⁶⁸ When we speak of our “knowledge” of God and “the epistemic work” of the embodied Word, we should keep in mind a distinction between two Arabic words for “knowledge.” One word, *ilm*, tends indicate the knowledge of facts; the word is translated, in some contexts, as “science.” The other word, *maʿrifa*, leans more in the direction of “familiarity,” “acquaintance,” and “recognition,” and indicates the kind of knowledge people have of people; the word can be translated as “an acquaintance, a friend” (Wehr and Cowan 1976). This distinction might be compared with similarly paired words for “knowledge” in French (*savoir* and *connaître*) and German (*wissen* and *kennen*). While Ibn al-‘Arabī does not strictly distinguish these two words, our discussion of Akbarian epistemology will emphasize knowledge in the sense of *maʿrifa* and its cognates, as in a *ḥadīth* frequently cited by the Shaykh, “He who knows (‘*arafa*) himself knows (‘*arafa*) his Lord.” Our emphasis here will not be on knowing propositional claims about God, but on recognition of God, particularly in human form.

Ibn al-ʿArabī refers to the Real inasmuch as it is nondelimited, incomparable, and eternally unknowable as the Essence (*dhāt*), while he refers to it inasmuch as it assumes all limitations and is similar to all things. (Chittick 1998, 99)

For the Shaykh, God, in His Essence, is noumenal, eternally inaccessible to humans and other members of the created world; yet one may attain to knowledge of God is by viewing His phenomenal manifestations. To drive this point home, Henry Corbin borrows a bold statement by the First Shīʿite Imam: “I should never worship a God I did not see” (Corbin 1969, 335, footnote 37). While we disagree with Corbin on many points regarding his theory of “theophanic vision,” and are also skeptical of his citation of a Shīʿite source in support of this claim, we do believe that the general point here is well supported by various passages from the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt* regarding God’s visibility in human and other concrete forms.

Ibn al-ʿArabī takes on directly the question of whether or not humans are capable of seeing God. He writes in *Futūḥāt* III 255.8:

Hence he who says, “I have seen nothing but God” speaks the truth. He who says, “I have seen nothing but the cosmos,” speaks the truth....

As for him who says, “I have never seen anything without seeing God before it”—well, that is what we say...[W]hen the command arrives to come to be, it finds nothing but the Being of the Real. It becomes manifest within Being to itself, seeing God before it sees itself. When the Being of the Real clothes it, it sees itself at that time. Then it says, “I have never seen anything without seeing God before it,” that is, before it comes to be within Him. So the Real receives the form of that thing. (Chittick 1989, 102)

Ibn al-ʿArabī appropriates the words, “I have never seen anything without seeing God before it,” from the first caliph, Abū Bakr (*Futūḥāt* II 514.28; Chittick 1989, 395), and deploys it to elaborate his doctrine of seeing God.

We should note, however, that Ibn al-ʿArabī’s doctrine stands in opposition to a strong tendency in Islam denying that humans are capable of seeing God. This Islamic denial

sometimes cites God's forbidding refusal to Moses in the Qur'ān. In his 1993 article, "The Vision of God," Michel Chodkiewicz writes:

'You shall not see Me!' (*lan tarānī*). The divine reply to Moses' request (*arinī unzur ilayka*) 'Let me see, so that I can behold You', Q. 7:143), seems final... Another verse seems, moreover, to extend to all creatures the impossibility of seeing the Face of God, as the Prophet of the Banu Isra'il was informed: *lā tudrikuhu 'l-absār wa huwa yudriku 'l-absār*, 'The looks do not reach Him but it is He who reaches the looks' (Q. 6:103). (Chodkiewicz 1993c, 53)

Chodkiewicz goes on to review the diverse and contrary answers Muslims have offered to the question of whether humans can see God, concluding that "Ibn 'Arabī is the heir of this long and complex tradition" (Chodkiewicz 1993c, 56). Chodkiewicz touches on a range of historical voices in Islamic history, from the views of Ṭabarī (839-923 CE) to those of Qurtūbī (1214-1273 CE), from the Mu'tazilites to the Ash'arites, to various Sufis preceding Ibn al-'Arabī (Chodkiewicz 1993c, 53-56). Arriving at Ibn al-'Arabī, Chodkiewicz comments on an important facet of the Shaykh's epistemology, indicating the means by which humans are capable of seeing God:

...[T]heophanies which proceed from the divine name al-Zāhir, the Apparent never cease, even if men do not know it, since the universe is only the theatre where they are shown and our look, wherever it may turn, only meets with them. If this world is varied, if it is perpetually changing, it is because God does not appear twice in the same form, nor in the same form to two beings.

But the perfect gnostic (*al-'ārif al-kāmil*) recognises God in all these forms, unlike other men who only recognise Him when He presents Himself to them in the form of the mental image that they make of Him. (Chodkiewicz 1993c, 58)¹⁶⁹

These theophanic images are innumerable, individually unique, and unrepeatable; they arise ceaselessly in the present tense, successively displacing and being displaced by other

¹⁶⁹ Chodkiewicz counterbalances this account by underscoring another facet of Ibn al-'Arabī's epistemology: "Tajallī can appear in a sensible form or in an imaginal form. It can also be a manifestation transcending all form" (Chodkiewicz 1993c, 59). As we are interested here in an Akbarian understanding of Jesus, in whom God was manifested in sensible form, we will not dwell upon the notion of God's formless manifestation.

images. The epistemic challenge posed by Ibn al-‘Arabī to the aspiring knower of God is to cultivate a fluid and open-ended receptivity to the stream of new manifestations, resisting closure and overcoming attachment to expired images after they have passed.

It is in this flux of formal manifestations that Ibn al-‘Arabī finds the “divine shadow,” the phenomenal image of God’s noumenal Essence, revealing “the form of the unknown visible.”

The Shaykh puts it thus in Chapter 9 of the *Fuṣūṣ*:

This divine shadow’s locus of manifestation, which we call the world, consists only of the identities of contingent things. This shadow extends over them, and you perceive this shadow in the measure of what extends over it—namely this Essence’s existence. Yet it is by virtue of His Name Light that the perception occurs. This shadow extends over the essences of contingent things in the form of the unknown invisible. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 98)

Here we see the flipside of the visibility of the theophanic form: were it not for this form, God would remain unknown to us.

For the purposes of our Akbarian commentary, this notion resonates sympathetically with Thomas’ insistence on seeing and touching the body of the resurrected Jesus, in whose form alone he can recognize: “My Lord and my God!” A concise expression of this Thomastic perspective may be found encapsulated in John 1:18, which equates (in the Alexandrian Vulgate) *seeing* Jesus with *making God known* (*khabbara*):

Allāhu lam yarahu aḥad qaṭṭu al-ibnu al-waḥīdu aladhī huwa fī ḥiḍni abīhi huwa khabbara.

God, no one has ever seen Him; the unique son of God, who is in the breast of his Father, he has made (Him) known (*khabbara*). (John 1:18 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Whereas the verb *khabbara*—“to notify, advise, apprise, inform, tell” (Wehr and Cowan 1976)—ordinarily refers to an act of speech, its root meaning indicates “know by experience” (Wehr and Cowan 1976), and the emphasis on sight in this verse brings the empirical character of *khabbara* to the fore. Jesus’ body plays an exceptional role (perhaps unique from Thomas’ point of view)

in revealing God as “the form of the unknown invisible.” Here again, Jesus makes God known to us most effectively and forcefully by showing (visibly and tangibly) rather than telling.

To underscore the harmony between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion of theophany and the Christian emphasis on seeing the divine in Jesus’ body, we will return to a passage we cited in Chapter 3 of our study, a passage from the *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36, in which the Shaykh reflects on the complementarity between Christianity and Islam:

In fact, Jesus was not born of a male belonging to the human species, but of a Spirit who manifested himself (*tamaththul*) in a human form; that is why, in the community of Jesus the son of Mary more than in any other, the doctrine of the legitimacy of images predominates. Christians fashion representations of the divinity and turn towards them in order to worship, because the very existence of their prophet proceeded from a Spirit who clothed himself in a form; and so it is to this day in his community. But then came the Law of Muḥammad, which forbade symbolic representations. Now Muḥammad contains the essential reality of Jesus and the Law of Jesus is encompassed within his own. The Prophet thus tells us ‘to worship God as though we were seeing Him’, thereby causing Him to enter our imaginative faculty (*khayāl*). This is the only lawful mode of figurative representation for Muslims. But this representation, which is permissible and even commanded when it operates within the imagination, is prohibited in the sensible world, and it is forbidden to the Muḥammadan community to give God a sensible form. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 76)

While this segregation of Christian practice from Islamic practice comes down to a distinction between externalized and internalized representations of God, the contrast draws our attention to the commonality in the Shaykh’s understanding of the two prophetic heritages. Ibn al-‘Arabī retains from Christianity its rule to worship God in visible forms, while adopting from Islam the rule of honoring God as invisible. According to the *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36, these complementary rules divide up the two halves of Gabriel’s imperative to Muḥammad (according to a *ḥadīth* in Bukhārī): the first half of this imperative, “Worship God as if you see Him...” represents, in the Shaykh’s interpretation, the conventional Christian doctrine that God can be seen in the form of Jesus, while the latter half, “...if you do not see Him, He sees you,” respects the conventional Islamic doctrine that God cannot be seen. Accommodating the visible and imaginal in his

epistemological doctrine, the Shaykh develops a version of Islam that, despite the practical distinction, appears closer to Christianity than mainstream Islam would ordinarily permit.

Moreover, given Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion that the created world as a whole is imaginal in nature, his distinction between externalized and internalized imagery is blurred; thus the distinction he has drawn between Christianity and Islam is similarly blurred. For example, the silently speaking Youth in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s narrative seems to straddle the gap between external and internal imagination; we cannot locate the Youth’s appearance firmly in the space surrounding the Ka‘ba or within the Shaykh’s imaginative faculty, and in key respects the Youth resembles Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion of Jesus. We should keep in mind here that the Youth’s body is not only a kind of Word—a readable book—but also a visible form of God, and as such seems to be an Islamic correlate to the theophanic body of Jesus.

Situating Ibn al-‘Arabī’s narrative of the Youth in its Islamic context, we should note that this narrative harkens back to a saying attributed to Muḥammad, in which Muḥammad says that he saw his Lord “in the form of a youth.” Ibn al-‘Arabī cites this *ḥadīth* in a passage from *Futūḥāt* II 379.3, where he explains that the youth’s appearance to the Prophet as an imaginal *jasad* in which God is manifest:

The Prophet said, “I saw my Lord in the form of a youth.” This is like the meanings that a sleeper sees in his dreams within sensory forms. The reason for this is that the reality of imagination is to embody that which is not properly a body (*jasad*); it does this because its presence (*ḥadra*) gives this to it. (Chittick 1989, 116)

This calls to mind the fact that Ibn al-‘Arabī regards Jesus as a manifestation of the Creator, revealing the Word of creation in his bodily limbs as well as the creative actions he carries out. Yet it also recalls the Shaykh’s view that Jesus’ body is only one manifestation of something true of other human bodies and of the cosmos as a whole.

We might benefit from looking more closely at the correlation between the human body and the cosmos in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings. There are, according to the Shaykh, two ways of coming to know God through external theophanic images. He makes this point by extrapolating from the Qur’anic verse: “We shall show them Our signs on the horizons (*fī al-afāqi*) and in themselves (*fī anfusihim*), till it is clear to them that He is the Real (*al-ḥaqqu*)” (Qur’an 41:53).¹⁷⁰ For the Shaykh, these two modes of knowing God point to the human form (“in themselves”) and to the forms of the surrounding world (“on the horizons”).¹⁷¹ In Chapter 3 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, he lays out this dual approach:

It was for this reason that the Prophet established a link between the knowledge one has of God and the knowledge one has of oneself, saying, “Whosoever knoweth himself knoweth His Lord.” And God most high says, *We shall show them Our signs in the horizons*, which is what lies outside of you, *and in themselves*, which is your identity, *till it is made clear to them*, that is, to the onlooker, *that He is the Real*, that is, by virtue of you being His image, and of His being your spirit. You are to Him as your corporeal form [*al-ṣūra al-jismiyya*] is to you, and He is to you as the governing spirit is to the form of your body [*ṣūrati jasadik*]. The definition comprises both your manifest and hidden aspects...Just as the manifest form of man praises its spirit and its governing soul with its tongue, so too did God make the forms of the world to glorify with His praises, although we do not understand their glorification, since we do not wholly grasp the forms of the world. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 39-40; we have modified Dagli’s translation of Qur’ān 41:53 and inserted the bracketed Arabic phrases)¹⁷²

One’s own bodily form (speaking of both *al-ṣūra al-jismiyya* and *ṣūrati jasadik*), which embodies the divine spirit, gives form and visibility to the invisible God. This is a human

¹⁷⁰ We have modified Arberry’s translation. The phrase, “He is the Real,” is ordinarily translated as, “it is the truth,” but the Arabic permits both translations. We suspect that our modification better reflects Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reading of the verse.

¹⁷¹ The words *fī anfusihim* can also be interpreted as “in their souls;” such a translation might suggest that this would indicate, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, the internal imaginative faculty or the activity of the heart (a topic to which the Shaykh devotes considerable attention). However, the context of the quotation cited here from the *Fuṣūṣ* suggests that Ibn al-‘Arabī has the human form in mind rather than (or perhaps in addition to) the human heart. As we are focusing here on the ways Ibn al-‘Arabī might have read the Gospel of John, we will emphasize his views on the human form, and will not dwell on his extensive discussions of the internal faculties.

¹⁷² Dagli notes that the *ḥadīth*, “Whosoever knoweth himself knoweth His Lord.,” is “a tradition that is not found in the major collections, although frequently cited especially in Sufi sources” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 39, footnote 8).

privilege, for according to a *ḥadīth* (which the Shaykh repeatedly quotes), “God created Adam upon His own form.”¹⁷³ In *Futūḥāt* II 325.25, Ibn al-‘Arabī remarks on this connection in terms of love:

Know that love cannot absorb (*istighrāq*) the whole of the lovers unless their beloved is God or one of their own kind, a woman or a man. But no other love can absorb a human, being totally. We say this because in his essence a human being stands exactly opposite nothing but him who is upon his own form...When he loves a form within the cosmos, he turns toward it through the corresponding part in himself; the rest of his essence remains sober in its own occupation.

Man becomes totally absorbed in the love of God because he is upon His form, as reported in the *ḥadīth*. Hence he turns toward the Divine Presence with his whole essence. That is why all the divine names become manifest within man. (Chittick 1989, 286)

This describes the connection between knowledge and love, which is true of both humans and God.

On God’s side, this is recognized as God’s desire to be known, the love that spurred Him to create the world and humans in particular. Thus the Shaykh writes in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 25:

The motion which is the world’s existence is the motion of love. The Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, called our attention to this by relating, “I was a hidden treasure and loved [*aḥbābtu*] to be known.” Were it not for this love the world would not have been manifest in His Identity. Its motion from non-existence into existence is the motion of its Existentiator’s love for it. The world also loves to witness itself in existence as it did in immutability. In every respect its motion from immutable non-existence into existence is a motion of love from the side of the Real and from its own side. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 261; modified, with bracketed Arabic word inserted by us)¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ This clearly recalls Genesis 1:27, and we have remarked on this *ḥadīth* in a footnote earlier in this chapter.

¹⁷⁴ We have slightly modified Dagli’s translation; in his translation, the English wording is “I was a hidden treasure and *desired* to be known.” Our translation is more literal.

On the human side, love of the human body is the superlative means of witnessing God in a theophanic form. The Shaykh asserts this when he writes of Muḥammad’s love of women in

Fuṣūṣ Chapter 27:

That is why the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, loved [*aḥabba*] women, owing to the perfection of his witnessing the Real in them, since the Real is never witnessed separate from a matter, for the Essence of God is beyond need of the worlds. Now, since it is impossible in that respect, and since witnessing can only take place in a matter, witnessing the Real in women is the greatest and most perfect witnessing. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 282; bracketed Arabic word inserted by us)

The erotic tone of this passage might distance Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective from the Johannine perspective on the disciples’ relationship to the embodied Word. Yet we might extract a larger principle from the passage: “the Real is never witnessed separate from a matter, for the Essence of God is beyond need of the worlds,” and for this reason “witnessing can only take place in a matter”¹⁷⁵—preeminently in the matter of the human body.

If we raise our eyes to the manifestation of God “on the horizons,” this redirection of our focus from the human body to the world at large would not be a change of topic but a shift to a grander scale. The world is itself a body; according to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the world is, as it were, a human body writ large—and like the human form, it bears the form of God. We will cite here

¹⁷⁵ Reflecting on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the word “matter” (*mawādd*) in these clauses, R. W. J. Austin writes in his article, “Image and Presence in the Thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī”:

That word is, in the Arabic, *mawādd*, which might superficially and baldly in the modern context be translated as “materials,” “substances”... The basic meaning of the root verb *madda* means, as alluded to above, to extend, to prolong. This basic meaning however, becomes elaborated to mean also to succour, to provide. Its related words mean also oil for the lamp, the threads of a web and, very interestingly in our context today, ink; that ink by which the pen of the divine Intellect writes the creative words on the Guarded Tablet of primal matter. My point here is that the word used by Ibn al-‘Arabī to indicate that thing without which God, the Real, may not be perceived or experienced denotes not merely image or form in some abstract sense, but a combination of the extension of otherness with the substance of fluid impressionable matter, ever ready to receive the divine imprint and reveal it as His image... Thus, the concept of the Imagination in Ibn al-‘Arabī is not limited to mental and spiritual abstractions, but includes the substantial. (Austin 1992, 4-5)

two among multiple instances in which Ibn al-‘Arabī speaks of the world as a body inspired by God. Our first instance comes from *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 3:

The Real has a special manifestation in every created thing. He is the Manifest in every object of understanding, and is the Hidden from all understanding, though He is not hidden from the understanding of one who holds that the world is His Image and His Selfhood. This is the Name the Manifest, just as He is, in meaning, the Spirit of what is manifest, and thus is the Hidden. His relationship to the manifest forms of the world is that of governing spirit to form. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 38)

Our second passage, from *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 10, sharpens this point by calling the world “the Great Man,” while connecting this to our general question of witnessing God:

...[F]or He is the Witnesser in the witnesser and the Witnessed in the witnessed. The world is His Image, and He is the governing Spirit of the world, which is the Great Man. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 113)

Despite bonds of like-mindedness between Akbarian and Thomastic views, we become conscious here of those places where Ibn al-‘Arabī and Thomas are at odds with one another. While they share in giving priority to witnessing God in a living, human form, Thomas’ commitment to this form of theophany is far narrower than Ibn al-‘Arabī’s. For Thomas, the body of Jesus would seem to be the only possible locus of divine manifestation. While Ibn al-‘Arabī might have commended Thomas for recognizing the human form as a theophanic form, he might have faulted Thomas for clinging singularly to the body of Jesus. Whereas the Shaykh might uphold Jesus’ body as an exceptional and extraordinary manifestation of God, he would not have held this form as exclusive. He seems to extend this epistemic role to all human forms (“in themselves”) as well as the surrounding world (“on the horizons”). For Ibn al-‘Arabī, the cosmos presents a far vaster range of visible and tangible forms than Thomas acknowledges as loci of God’s revelation. For the Shaykh, this might constitute the one truly appropriate reprimand of the doubting disciple.

The breadth of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective offers a possible solution to the crisis of Jesus’ absence, pointing to theophanies beyond the body of Jesus; yet the vast scope of this solution imposes a daunting responsibility on Thomas and others seeking to see God. The image of the world as a grand human body might lead the seeker to expanding horizons of new possibilities, but might also daunt the seeker with the magnitude of the epistemic task set before us by the Shaykh. The Akbarian duty to know God in all created forms—“the inexhaustible Words”—is truly open-ended, both spatially and temporally, and it demands a comparable openness from the aspiring knower of God.

The exorbitance of this challenge is founded on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of the “renewal of creation at each instant” (*tajdīd al-khalq fi’l-ānāt*) (Chittick 1989, 18)—the notion that the world is continuously annihilated and recreated, moment by moment. Just as the universe never endures for two successive moments, God never appears in the same form to two different witnesses, nor appears twice in the same form to the same witness. The Shaykh observes in *Futūḥāt* II 432.12:

He who knows the Divine Vastness knows that nothing is repeated in existence; rather, it is imagined that the existence of things similar in form is identical to that which is past. But these are their similars, not their exact entities; what is similar to a thing is not identical with it. (Chittick 1989, 104)

While we might recognize a tension between the exclusive and circumscribed vision sought by Thomas in the body of Jesus and the open-ended vision the Shaykh urges us to in “the Divine Vastness,” we should not imagine this merely as a conflict between Johannine and Akbarian perspectives. An Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John might be inclined to view this tension as inherent to the Gospel itself. To elucidate this reading, we will take a close look at three Qur’ānic bases for Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of the renewal of creation. Examining the Shaykh’s

interpretations of these Qur'ānic verses and considering their application to the Gospel of John, we might find clues to the ways he might have interpreted the Gospel.

The first Qur'ānic verse we will consider is Qur'ān 50:15, a verse central to the Shaykh's doctrine of the renewal of creation:

What, were We wearied by the first creation? No indeed; but they are in uncertainty as to the new creation.

The word *labs*, which Arberry translates as “uncertainty,” might be translated more strongly as “confusedness,” from a verbal root meaning “become entangled” or “become confounded, or confused” (Lane 1863). In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interpretation, the verse captures the confusion of the mind that cannot grasp the doctrine of “new creation,” or the ever-renewed creation of the world.

When Ibn al-‘Arabī discusses the renewal of creation in *Futūḥāt* II 372.20, he equates this confusion with heedlessness:

In reality, the situation is new forever, so there is nothing that returns...The Divinity is vaster than that It should cause anything to return, but the similar things are veils upon the eyes of the blind, those “who know an outward significance of the present life, but of the next they are heedless” (Koran 30:7). That “next” is the existence of the entity of the second similar. They are “heedless,” so “They are in confusion as to a new creation” (50:15). But the possible things are infinite, God’s power exercises its influence, and the Real is Ever-creating. (Chittick 1989, 99)

Elsewhere in the *Futūḥāt* (IV 320.3), Ibn al-‘Arabī discusses the confusion inspired by the perpetual disappearance and reappearance of the created human individual:

However, there is another sense in which the creation of individual human beings is in fact infinite, though not everyone is aware of it. It is referred to in His words, “No indeed, but they are in confusion as to a new creation” (50:15). The entity of each individual is renewed (*tajaddud*) at each instant, and necessarily so, for the Real never ceases being the Agent (*fā’il*) of existence in the possible things. This is shown by the diversity of properties of the entities in every state. The entity which has this specific state cannot be the same as the entity which had that state, the passing and disappearance of which was witnessed. (Chittick 1989, 97)

One might detect an analogy between the confusion regarding recurrent creation and the confusion of Nicodemus in Chapter 3 of the Gospel of John, where Jesus confronts the Pharisee with his imperative to be “born anew.” We quote the relevant passage here from the Revised Standard Version:

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can this be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?...” (John 3:1-12)

An Akbarian interpretation of this exchange might be read in light of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concurrent ontological and epistemological doctrines of ceaselessly renewed existence and knowledge.¹⁷⁶

From the Shaykh’s point of view, Nicodemus, like all created beings, is already being repeatedly born anew; but the central point for both the Shaykh and the Johannine Jesus is Nicodemus’ perplexity in the face of this teaching, as implicit in Jesus’ reprimand, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?”

We should be cautious, however, about this interpretation, as John 3:3 is ambiguous in both the Greek and the Arabic versions of the Gospel. In the Greek, from which the Revised Standard Version is translated, the words translated as “unless one is born anew” are *ean mē tis gennēthē anōthen*. There is a range of meanings for the Greek word *anōthen*: “from above, from

¹⁷⁶ Incidentally, we might also hear in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s language an echo of the Apostle Paul, who uses the expression “new creation” in Galatians 5:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:17.

on high” and “from the beginning” as well as “over again, anew” (Liddell and Scott 1889). Thus the Greek might permit, for example, the translation: “unless one is born from above.” In the Alexandrian Vulgate, rather than “born again,” the Arabic is *lam yūlad min dhī qibalin*, which might be translated as “born from what is to come” or “born from what will face you.”¹⁷⁷ However we read the adverbial qualification, it is evident (in both the Greek and the Arabic) that Jesus is urging Nicodemus to understand the requirement for rebirth, a notion that Nicodemus misunderstands as an imperative to enter the womb and be born a second time.¹⁷⁸

In any case, Ibn al-‘Arabī appeals to Qur’ān 50:15 to account not only for the churning creativity underlying quotidian appearances, but also for miracles. In Arabic, a miracle is sometimes called “breaking the habit” (*kharq al-‘āda*) (Chittick 1989, 99)—that is, a departure from the norm. But for Ibn al-‘Arabī, thinking of miracles in this way is to fail to recognize that there is no norm for even ordinary events; our impression of normalcy masks the ongoing renewal of creation. In light of this, we might see Ibn al-‘Arabī’s point in *Futūḥāt* III 288.14:

For the Verifiers, these acts are not the “breaking of habit,” but rather the bringing into existence of engendered things (*kawā’in*). The reason is that in reality, there are no habits, since there is no repetition. So nothing returns. This is referred to in God’s words concerning the people of habits, “No indeed, but they are in confusion as to a new creation” (50:15). He says: They do not know that in every instant they are in a new creation, so what they see in the first instant is not identical to what they see in the second instant. They are in confusion about this. (Chittick 1989, 99)

¹⁷⁷ We are indebted to Eric Winkel for this insight into the Arabic.

¹⁷⁸ As for, “born of water and the Spirit,” we are reminded of the creation of the world according to Genesis 1:2, “...and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” See also the allusion to the creation of life in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 3:

Know that the mystery of life lies in water. It is the principle of the elements and the pillars, and for this reason God made *from water every living thing* [Qur’ān 21:30]...Do you not see how the Throne is above water, for it was existentiated out of it, floating upon it and protected by it from below? (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 207; Qur’ānic citation inserted by us)

On this basis, one might argue that Jesus' resurrection was not, strictly speaking, a return from the dead, but a special and highly dramatic instance of ongoing creation. From this perspective, we might highlight two facets of the motivation underlying Thomas' desire to see the resurrected Jesus. The first is the desire—shared by Thomas and other disciples—to *continue* seeing Jesus their lord and teacher, in an ongoing fashion, just as they saw him prior to the crucifixion. This is a wish to keep Jesus in the present tense, not permitting him to recede into the past tense. Whether the disciples recognize this or not, their desire might be read, from an Akbarian point of view, as a desire for the open-endedness of continuous creation. We might associate this motivation with the exclamation of the disciple Mary upon recognizing the resurrected Jesus—"My lord!" (*Rabboni* in Aramaic)—as well as her gesture of clinging to Jesus' body (John 20:16-17). We might hear an echo of this in Thomas' own exclamation when he sees the resurrected Jesus (John 20:28); thus we might recognize parallel motivations in Mary and Thomas. But Thomas does not only exclaim, "My lord!" (*rabbī* in the Alexandrian Vulgate); he also exclaims "My god!" (*ilāhī* in the Alexandrian Vulgate). This second half of Thomas' exclamation might point to the doctrine that most distinctively defines Thomastic witnessing: the stance that Jesus is the only possible locus of theophanic forms and that, when Jesus departs, the disciples will no longer be able to see God. We might then understand Thomas as desiring the ongoing presence of Jesus, both as a beloved master and as a theophanic form.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Ibn al-ʿArabī distinguishes the word "lord" (*rabb*) from "god" or "divinity" (*ilāh*) in different ways at different times. On one occasion, in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 3, he spells out the distinction in a way that might be applicable to our discussion of Thomas' exclamation: "Noah said, *My Lord [rabb]!* He did not say, 'My divinity [*ilāhī*]!' Now, 'Lord' has immutability, while 'the divinity' is variegated through the Names and *Every day is He upon some labour*" (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 47). The Shaykh quotes Qurʾān 55:29 here, the verse to which we now turn in our discussion.

To further explicate the connections between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontological doctrine and his epistemological doctrine, we will turn to a second Qur’ānic verse. This is another verse that Ibn al-‘Arabī frequently cites in support of his doctrine of the renewal of creation:

Whatsoever is in the heavens and the earth implore Him; every day He is upon some labour. (Qur’ān 55:29)

The Shaykh’s interpretation of this verse sheds additional light on the way he might have read the Gospel of John; to facilitate this, we will juxtapose this Qur’ānic verse with John 5:17. In the Alexandrian Vulgate, the Johannine verse reads this way:

Abī ḥattā al-ān ya ‘malu wa anā a ‘malu.

Our English translation from the Arabic is:

My father is working until now and I am working.

This scandalous claim incites Jesus’ critics to level two accusations against him: first, that he violated the Sabbath (by healing a sick man on the Sabbath), and second, that he claimed equality with God. We have already discussed the latter charge at length, and have noted that Ibn al-‘Arabī would have perceived Jesus as sharing in God’s creative work by wielding the command, *kun*. Here we would like to focus on the former charge, that Jesus violated the Sabbath.

One might read Jesus’ words and his critics’ response as raising this question: has God’s creative work been concluded, or is it as an ever-present, open-ended task? The exchange between Jesus and his critics might point back to the creation story in Genesis 1, which itemizes God’s six days of creation and culminates in this punctuation at the beginning of Genesis 2:

And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation. (Genesis 2:2-3 RSV)

These verses from Genesis might suggest that, after six days, God has ceased his creative work, and that His retirement from creating should be taken as a model for our own Sabbath rest. In his defense, Jesus' reasoning seems to be that his own creative work—for healing the sick is an act of creation—is permitted because God himself persists in the activity of creation.

Ibn al-ʿArabī would probably have been sympathetic to Jesus' defense. By reviewing various instances in the Shaykh's writings in which he spins out his interpretation of Qur'an 55:29—"every day He is upon some labour"—we might, on analogy, find a clue to how he would have interpreted the Johannine Jesus' words, "My father is working until now." Adopting an Akbarian interpretation of John 5:17, we might read the word "now" as meaning every present moment—not only the "now" of Jesus' mission, but also the moment in which we live as readers of the Gospel. This reflects the way Ibn al-ʿArabī interprets the words "every day" in Qur'an 55:29, as he writes in *Futūḥāt* II 539.2:

The support of the "present moment" (*waqt*) in the divine things is the fact that He describes Himself with the words, "Each day He is upon some task" (55:29). (Chittick 1989, 38)

In *Futūḥāt* III 198.33, all such present moments are encompassed by God as Time Himself:

We know that one of the attributes of Time (*al-dahr*) is transmutation (*tahawwul*) and fluctuation (*qalb*) and that "God is Time." It has been established that He undergoes transmutation in forms and that "Each day He is upon some task" (55:29). (Chittick 1989, 107)¹⁸⁰

In light of these passages, Ibn al-ʿArabī would most likely have read the Johannine words, "My father is working until now," as an expression of the ceaseless "transmutation

¹⁸⁰ Chittick notes, "God is called 'Time' according to the *ḥadīth*, 'Say not, "Oh, the disappointment of time!" [or, in another version, "Curse not time"], for God is time.' Muslim, *Alfāz* 4, 5; cf. Bukhārī, *Adab* 101; *Muwattaʿ*, *Kalām* 3; *Aḥmad* II 259, 272, 275, 318, 934" (Chittick 1989, 395, footnote 7).

(*taḥawwul*) and fluctuation (*qalb*)”¹⁸¹ of God’s temporal engagement with the world. This ontological proposition poses an epistemic challenge to the lover of God, urging the lover to keep pace with God’s creation in every present moment. This can be seen in *Futūḥāt* II 113.33:

For the heart fluctuates from state to state, just as God—who is the Beloved—is “Each day upon some task” (55:29). So the lover undergoes constant variation in the object of his love in keeping with the constant variation of the Beloved in His acts. (Chittick 1989, 109)

Ibn al-‘Arabī understands God’s “task” as the specific work of disclosing himself through perpetual creation, as is evident in *Futūḥāt* III 254.23:

The Real described Himself by saying, “Each day He is upon some task” (55:29). The “tasks” are diverse...The *Saḥīḥ* has mentioned His self-transmutation in forms on the Day of Resurrection when He discloses Himself to His servants. And self-transmutation (*taḥawwul*) is identical with transmutation (*istiḥāla*), there is no difference between the two in manifestation.

Were this not so, it would not be correct for the cosmos to have a beginning; rather, it would be coextensive (*musāwīq*) with God in existence. But this is not so in actual fact. Just as God accepted to manifest Himself to His servants in diverse forms, so also at first He did not create, then He created... (Chittick 1989, 101)

Through this ongoing labor, God not only makes Himself known to created beings, but also makes created beings known to one another. In *Futūḥāt* II 304.33, Ibn al-‘Arabī elaborates on this point:

“Each day He is upon some task” (55:29)...The entities see their forms within the One Entity; parts of the cosmos witness other parts within It...[F]or the entities of the cosmos never cease seeing each other in that Self-disclosing Entity. (Chittick 1989, 104)

This suggests an Akbarian approach to the complement of Jesus’ words in John 5:17, “...and I am working.” God’s work in the world is fulfilled not only by Jesus’ creation of new bodies for the sick; it is also fulfilled in the mutual recognition of Jesus and those he heals. This mutual

¹⁸¹ There is a pun in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the word *qalb*; *qalb* is a synonym for *taqallub*, “fluctuation,” but it is also the Arabic word for “heart” (Chittick 1989, 106). In the Shaykh’s wordplay, he challenges those seeking knowledge of God to synchronize their hearts with the flux of God’s transmutations.

recognition is an important component of Jesus' acts of healing (which are scarce and individualized in the Gospel of John, by contrast with the Synoptic Gospels). This is exhibited in the exchange between Jesus and the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:6-9); it is also exhibited in Jesus' healing of the blind man:

Jesus answered, "...It behooves us to work the works of him who has sent us as long as it is day. The night will come, when no one is able to work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Saying this, he spat on the dirt, and made clay from his spittle and daubed the eyes of that blind man with the clay. (John 9:3-6 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Following the blind man's healing, his being twice interrogated by the Pharisees, and his being expelled from the synagogue, Jesus seeks out the formerly blind man to speak with him again:

He found him and said to him, "Do you believe in the son of God?" That man answered and said to him, "And who is he, master, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks with you." And he said to him, "I have believed, master," and he bowed down before him. (John 9:35-38 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

For Jesus, it is not sufficient to grant sight to the blind man; it is crucial to present himself to the blind man a second time, to offer the blind man a chance to see him and recognize him. This is complemented by Jesus' superior knowledge of fellow humans. At times, characters in the Gospel narrative are brought to faith not only by seeing and recognizing Jesus, but also by being seen and recognizing by Jesus. One outstanding example is that of Philip. Jesus tells Philip that, prior to their meeting, "*I saw* you under the fig tree" (John 1:49 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation; 1:48 in the standard Greek text); yet Jesus goes on to say, "*You will see* greater things than this" (John 1:51 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation; 1:50 in the standard Greek text). Mutual knowledge of one creation by another—"seeing each other in that Self-disclosing Entity," as the Shaykh frames it—is expressed as a complement of *seeing* with *being seen* in Jesus' words to Philip.

This mutuality is matched by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of God’s own knowledge.

According to *Futūḥāt* II 385.8, God’s creation in order to disclose Himself to the world is correlated with disclosing the world to Himself and disclosing Himself to Himself:

“Each day He is upon some task” (55:29)...At each task He creates a divine form. Hence the cosmos became manifest upon the form of the Real. That is why we say: The Real knows Himself, and hence He knows the cosmos. (Chittick 1989, 297-298)

We have already alluded above to the *ḥadīth qudsī* (“divine narration”), “I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known”—a *ḥadīth* that concludes with the words, “so I created the world.”¹⁸² Ibn al-‘Arabī expands this creation story in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 1, portraying God creating the world as a mirror in which He comes to know Himself by knowing His creation:¹⁸³

For the vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like the vision a thing has of itself in another thing, which will be like a mirror for it...

God had existentiated the entire world as a body made ready, in which there was no spirit, and so it was like an unpolished mirror...

The situation required that the mirror of the world be clear, and Adam was the very clearness of this mirror and the spirit of this form. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 3-5)

¹⁸² According to Annemarie Schimmel, “Later tradition ascribed to God the words *kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan*, ‘I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known, so I created the world.’ God, in His eternal loneliness, wanted to be known, so he created a world in which man is the highest manifestation. Man is the microcosm and is created—again according to a *ḥadīth qudsī*—for God’s sake, who in turn created everything for man’s sake” (Schimmel 1975, 189).

¹⁸³ The question regarding God’s knowledge of the created world is a salient topic in Islamic philosophy, occupying the inquiries of Avicenna (980-1037 CE) and his philosophical heirs. In the version of *The Metaphysics* in Avicenna’s *Shifā’*, the philosopher writes in 8.7 that the Necessary Existent “intellectually apprehends things all at once, without being rendered multiple by them in His substance, or their becoming conceived in their forms...” (Avicenna 2005, 291). This notion is consequent upon Avicenna’s stance in 8.6, “The Necessary Existent is pure intellect because He is an essence dissociated from matter in every respect” (Avicenna 2005, 284). Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine might be viewed, in part, as a rebuttal to the Avicennan tradition, insofar as the Shaykh asserts that the Real knows creation in its particularity and not only in its universality. Moreover, Ibn al-‘Arabī frames the Real’s knowledge as a consequence of the event of creation; by creating and adopting forms, the Real enables a self-knowledge He could not have achieved had he remained aloof from forms and matter. A similar line of thought might be extended to a reading of the Gospel of John, in which Jesus, as the embodied Word, knows the world in all of its concreteness, and thereby brings gravity and texture to God’s own knowledge.

The mirror image is symmetrical, for while *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 1 represents humans as a mirror to God, *Fuṣūṣ* represents God as a mirror to humans:

He is your mirror for your vision of yourself, and you are His mirror for His vision of His Names—which are none other than Himself—and the manifestation of their determinations. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 26)

In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, Jesus might have served as such a mirror—to those whom he healed (like the blind man) and to his disciples (like Thomas).¹⁸⁴ The Shaykh might have interpreted the work of God and the parallel work of Jesus as limitless, not only in terms of the cosmos’ spatial and temporal boundlessness, but also in the image of two infinitely reflecting mirrors coming face to face.¹⁸⁵

This infinitude drives home the unrelenting epistemic duty imposed by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontological doctrine, and it leads us to the third of the three key Qur’ānic sources of the Shaykh’s doctrine of the renewal of creation. This is the Qur’ānic source of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s expression “the inexhaustible Words,” an expression we have already cited as a descriptor of the superabundance

¹⁸⁴ A Christian precedent to this Akbarian interpretation of Jesus might be found in the apocryphal Odes of Solomon, an apocryphal collection (by some accounts) of early Christian poetry. We will examine these Odes more closely in the next chapter of our study. At the moment, we will note that Ode 7:6 might refer to the appearance of Jesus in human form so as to reveal God to us:

Like my nature He became, that I might learn Him,
And like my form, that I might not turn back from Him.
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 240)

Ode 13:1-2, on the other hand, might refer to our vision of Jesus as revealing us to ourselves:

Behold! the Lord is our mirror:
Open your eyes and see them in Him.
And learn the manner of your face...
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 276)

¹⁸⁵ Compare the multiplying effect of mirrors in the writing of Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī, the disciple of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s successor Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī: “To the eye of true Witness, no more than One is to be seen—but since this One Face shows Itself in two mirrors, each mirror will display a different face. But one face: multiply the mirrors, make It many” (‘Iraqi 1982, 73).

of created beings. This source consists of two Qur'ānic verses—Qur'ān 18:109 and 31:27—similarly phrased:

Say: 'If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent, though We brought replenishment the like of it.' (Qur'an 18:109)

Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea-seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the Words of God not be spent. God is All-mighty, All-wise. (Qur'an 31:27)

Recall that in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15, the chapter specially devoted to discussing Jesus, Ibn al-ʿArabī bridges the theme of the inexhaustible Words with the theme of Jesus as the word *kun*, which the Shaykh calls the “ʿĪsawī Word” or “Christic Word (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 164).¹⁸⁶ In *Futūḥāt* II 280.31, Ibn al-ʿArabī again identifies the inexhaustible Words with the word *kun* as well as “the Word of Presence” (*kalimat al-ḥaḍra*):

Hence He gives to engendered existence in accordance with the fact that He is Ever-creating perpetually because of the reality of His Level, while engendered existence is poor and needy perpetually. Hence all existence is perpetually in motion, in this world and the hereafter, since bringing to be does not take place from stillness. On God's part there are perpetual turnings of attentiveness and inexhaustible words... With God there is turning of the attentiveness; that is His saying, “[Our only speech to a thing] when We desire it [is to say to it ‘Be!’, and it is]” (16:40). [By inexhaustible words we mean] the

¹⁸⁶ We should note that Ibn al-ʿArabī especially connects Qur'an 18:109 and Qur'an 31:27 with the Prophet Muḥammad. For instance, in *Futūḥāt* II 171.1 (Chittick 1989, 240), he singles out Adam and Muḥammad, underscoring the comprehensive knowledge of the inexhaustible Words by these two prophets. Elsewhere, the Shaykh writes, in *Futūḥāt* II 65.21:

The Prophet's station in the sciences is to encompass the knowledge of every knower of God, whether those who went before or those who came after...He was singled out for six qualities never given to any prophet before him...The second of these qualities is that he was given “the all-comprehensive words.” “Words” is the plural of “word,” and “The words of God are not exhausted.” Hence he was given the knowledge of that which is infinite. (Chittick 1989, 330)

We do not, however, feel restricted from applying an Akbarian understanding of these verses to Jesus and to the Gospel of John. The point here is not to claim that Jesus possesses “the all-comprehensive words,” a gift specially applied to Muḥammad, but that Jesus *is* the Word of God. We might faithfully adopt an Akbarian perspective on Jesus not by highlighting his knowledge of God's manifestation, but by being God's manifestation. The emphasis here is on the significance of Jesus as an object, not a subject, of perception. Consider in this light the following passage from *Futūḥāt* III 506.30:

Jesus is a Muhammadan. That is why he will descend at the end of time...He is God's spirit and His word, and the words of the Real are never exhausted. So the Muhammadan has no ultimate goal in his mind which he might reach. (Chittick 1989, 377)

Word of the Presence (*kalimat al-ḥaḍra*), that is, His word “Be!” to every thing He desires, in the meaning that is appropriate for His majesty. (Chittick 1989, 102)

In *Futūḥāt* II 552.12, Ibn al-‘Arabī once more extends the parallel between the ongoing act of creation and the endless task of knowledge:

God never ceases creating within us ad infinitum, so the knowledges extend ad infinitum... “The words of God are never exhausted;” these “words” are the entities of His existent things. Hence the thirst of the seeker of knowledge never ceases. He never experiences “quenching,” because his preparedness (*isti‘dād*) seeks to gain a knowledge. Once this knowledge has been gained, it gives to him the preparedness for a new knowledge, whether engendered or divine. What he gains lets him know that there is something demanded by the new preparedness—which has been occasioned by the knowledge acquired through the first preparedness—, so he becomes thirsty to gain this [new] knowledge. Hence the seeker of knowledge is like him who drinks the water of the sea. The more he drinks, the thirstier he becomes. Bringing to be (*al-takwīn*) is never cut off, so objects of knowledge are never cut off, so knowledges are never cut off. (Chittick 1989, 153)

Thus, from an Akbarian point of view, Thomas’ own thirst to see Jesus permits no “quenching.” As the thirst for seeing Jesus is bottomless, the creative Word of Presence is inexhaustible. There would have been a perfect match between the desire of Thomas and the manifestation of Jesus if this embodied form of the inexhaustible Words had endured in the world. However, the Thomastic crisis arises from the withdrawal of the body of Jesus from the world. This dilemma is signaled by the collision between the words, “My father is working until now and I am working,” with Jesus’ last utterance on the cross, “The writing has been finished.” These words declare the fulfillment and victory of the expiatory work of the embodied Word. But these same words announce a harsh reality from the perspective of the epistemic work of the embodied Word, for it signals the disruption to the “now” of Jesus’ presence and the discontinuity of his availability as a theophanic form.

As the Gospel rushes to its crisis and denouement, the forthcoming retreat of God’s only visible form would leave Thomas with an acute dilemma, and it is not immediately clear whether

the Gospel provides any resolution of this dilemma that would satisfy Thomas. The Gospel foreshadows this crisis already in Jesus' preface to healing the blind man, "It behooves us to work the works of him who has sent us as long as it is day. The night will come, when no one is able to work" (John 9:4 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation). A few chapters later, just prior to its account of the Last Supper, the Gospel reports:

Then the crowd answered him, "We have heard in the law (*nāmūs*) that the Messiah continues (*yadūmu*) endlessly. How do you say that the son of humanity will be lifted up? Who is this son of humanity?" Then Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a time continuously; so go continuously with the light as long as the light is for you, lest you perceive only darkness, because the person who walks in the darkness does not perceive what he is facing." (John 12:34-35 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

As this time ebbs, the forecasted loss of light looms over the Last Supper (Chapters 13-17 of the Gospel), during which Jesus repeatedly troubles his disciples by speaking to them of his imminent departure from their sight: "...I am departing to the Father, and you will not see me" (John 16:10 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation). While Thomas might sense the threat of this crisis most acutely, he is not the only disciple to sense it. Nor do the disciples take much comfort from Jesus' reassurance that they will see him again:

Some of his disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little bit, and you will not see me, and again a little bit, and you will see me,' and, 'I go to the Father'?" And they said, "What is this 'a little bit' that he says?..." (John 16:17-18 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Thomas' contribution to the discussion gives voice to an anguished question:

Thomas said to him, "Master, we do not know where you are going. And how are we able to know the path (*al-ṭarīq*)?" (John 14:5 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

However, Jesus' response might only highlight the insolubility of Thomas' crisis and the inconsolability of his anguish:

Jesus said to him, "I am the Path, the Real, and the Life! No one comes to the Father, but by me. And if you had known me, you would also have known my Father. And from now

you know him and also have seen him. (John 14:6-7 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

No doubt, Thomas has taken these words to heart, as well as Jesus reply to Philip's follow-up question:

Philip said to him, "Master, show us the Father, and it will be enough for us." Jesus said to him, "I am with all of you all this time and you do not know me, Philip? Whoever sees me has seen the Father, so how do you say, "Show us the Father"?" (John 14:8-9 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

If Thomas' later insistence on seeing the resurrected Jesus is indicative, he may well have understood Jesus' speech at the Last Supper as meaning: "...no one can *see* the Father, except in the embodied Word." He may thus have heard both the assurance and the exclusivity of this claim. From this point of view, humans could not see the Father prior to the embodiment of Jesus, but with his arrival, humans could see Him, know Him, and love Him. For Thomas, the embodiment of Jesus would have amounted to a unique and indispensable solution to the invisibility and unknowability of God. Though Jesus offers comfort in the promise that Thomas and the other disciples will see him again, he will appear only briefly after the resurrection; after that, untold years of absence will stretch forth between his ascension to heaven and his Second Coming. How will Jesus' disciples fill in those years of absence, when they can no longer see God?

We might ask, hewing closely to the Gospel's self-description, why cannot the written record of Jesus' appearance serve as a substitute for the eyewitness experience of the disciples, who did in fact see and touch Jesus and conveyed their experience to us in their inscribed testimony? The Gospel itself traces the path from direct experience to the inscribed testimony, and suggesting that the written word might be adequate to lead the reader to faith in Jesus:

And he who saw bore witness, and his testimony is true, and he knows that he says the truth, that you may believe. (John 19:35 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Jesus did many other signs in front of his disciples, not written in this book; and this is written about these (signs), in order that you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God. (John 20:30-31 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

This raises the question whether a written account of Jesus' presence (such as the Gospel of John itself) can substitute for Jesus' bodily presence—effectively substituting inscribed testimony for eyewitness experience. It is clear that Thomas would not have accepted this substitute. A hint at the unacceptability of this solution to Jesus' absence might be detected in the closing words of the Second and Third Epistles attributed to John:

...I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. (2 John 1:12 RVS; cf. 3 John 1:13-14)

While we might regard the closing of these epistles as a formulaic salutation, it would be consistent with Ibn al-'Arabī to read this closing as significant and revelatory, extending a central Johannine theme found in the Gospel. To clarify Thomastic witnessing from an Akbarian perspective, we should highlight the incapacity of the written word to communicate the face-to-face encounter with the embodied Word.

From a Thomastic perspective, there is a crucial difference between words on the page and the divine Word inscribed in the body: whereas the former are fixed in their finality, the latter manifest in a living flow of constantly changing configurations; the latter is like an unbound book, demanding to be read and reread in every moment. Thomastic witnessing is motivated by an impulse to see God in the unfinished manifestation of the embodied Jesus, and it resists the inferior substitution offered by spoken or written testimony. Written testimony, even more than spoken testimony, is always frozen in the past tense, belonging to the absent and the dead as opposed to present revelation of the "now."

This perspective is perhaps voiced in Jesus' response to the religious scholars who criticized him for healing on the Sabbath day. Attempting to redirect the attention of the scholars away from the written word and towards the embodied Word, Jesus says:

You examine the scriptures, in that you think you have endless life in them, and they bear witness for my sake. You do not want to come to me in order that you many have life. (John 5:39-40 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

One reading of this response might be magnified by Saying 52 from the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, in which Jesus reprimands his disciples, perhaps making the same point in sharper terms:

His followers said to him: "Twenty-four prophets have spoken in Israel, and they all spoke of you."

He said to them: "You have disregarded the living one who is in your presence and have spoken of the dead." (Meyer 1992, 43)

The contrast asserted in Saying 52, taken in the starkest terms, might be read thus: the embodied Word is living but the written word of the prophets is dead. If we take this as a validation of the stance adopted by the apostle Thomas in the Gospel of John—rejecting secondhand testimonies and accepting only a direct confrontation with the living Jesus—we might recognize another parallel between Thomastic and Akbarian perspectives. Ibn al-ʿArabī, in *Futūḥāt* I 279.7, cites a saying from Abū Yazīd Bisṭāmī to make a similar point against the religious scholars:

One of the characteristics of the exoteric scholar in defending himself is that he is ignorant of him who says, "My Lord has given me to understand." He considers himself superior to the one who says this and to the true possessor of knowledge. But he who is of the Folk of Allah says, "God has cast into my inmost consciousness what He meant by this ruling in this verse." Or he says, "I saw the Messenger of God in an Incident, and he gave me news of the soundness of this report which has been related from him and what it signifies for him."

Concerning this station and its soundness, Abū Yazīd addressed the exoteric scholars with his words, "You take your knowledge dead from the dead, but we take our knowledge from the Alive who does not die!" (Chittick 1983, 249)

The resonance between Bisṭāmī's words and these Christian precedents (in both John 5:39-40 and Thomas Saying 52) suggests a parallel between Ibn al-ʿArabī's allusion to a visionary appearance in which the witness says, "I saw the Messenger of God in an Incident," and the face-to-face encounter with Jesus sought by Thomas. In both instances, written scriptures are not rejected; but both perspectives are darkened by suspicion of written records when they obstruct unmediated vision.

For Thomastic witnessing, Jesus as Word cannot be pinned down as a final word in any given moment, nor can he be reduced or subordinated to ink and paper. For this reason, witness-as-testimony fails to capture witness-as-seeing. The secondhand record is no substitute for firsthand eyewitness beholding. Cephastic witnessing, by contrast, has an inherent impulse towards the fixity of inscription on the page. It strives to leave behind both the moment of seeing and even the witness himself, insofar as both seeing and witness are in flux, susceptible to changeability. Thomastic witnessing finds a virtue in the changeability of the living and subsisting witness, responsive to the inexhaustible revelation of God in the ongoing flow of the visible and concrete present. Whereas Cephastic witnessing finds its fulfillment and liberation in testimonial writing, Thomastic witnessing finds failure and constriction in the conclusive nature of writing.

From the Thomastic perspective, we might recognize a paradox in the Gospel of John's account of itself as a written text—a conflicted struggle to overcome its own textuality. We are confronted with the startling way the Gospel strives to break through the limitations of writing, to transcend its own fixity, and to postpone the end of its story. The Gospel acknowledges that its subject matter overflows its pages and exceeds the reach of its pen, and its final verse amounts to a confession of its own inadequacy:

And Jesus did this and many things; if they were written one by one, I suppose that the world could not contain the pages of the things written. (John 21:25)¹⁸⁷

Thus this final verse is an ending that resists coming to a conclusion—or as expressed in the

Qur'anic idiom:

Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea-seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the Words of God not be spent. (Qur'an 31:27)

While written words would not satisfy the Thomastic impulse, Jesus does offer an alternative means to maintain a testimony among his disciples during his bodily absence: he offers the gift of the Holy Spirit:

¹⁸⁷ Recalling that Ibn al-'Arabī uses similar wording at the outset of the *Fuṣūṣ*—"for indeed that could not be encompassed in a book nor by the present existent world"—we might speculate about the Shaykh's understanding of his own book. One speculation might pursue the possibility that the Shaykh deliberately designed the book as an incomplete work. The book contains twenty-seven chapters, each named after a prophet. However, Ibn al-'Arabī has exhibited in his writings a persistent fascination with the number twenty-eight, the number of letters contained in the Arabic alphabet. For example, the Shaykh has mapped a scheme of twenty-eight letters onto the hierarchical levels of the cosmos (Chittick 1998b, xxviii-xxxii). Moreover, Ibn al-'Arabī composed a series of prayers associated with each letter of the Arabic alphabet, *Tawajjuhāt al-hurūf*, leading Stephen Hirtenstein and Pablo Beneito to observe, "The contemplative knowledge that underpins all others in Ibn 'Arabī's teaching, and is the prerogative of the saints, is the science of the letters" (Ibn 'Arabī 2000, 23). It is noteworthy that 'Irāqī, the disciple of Ibn al-'Arabī's successor, Qūnawī, composed *Divine Flashes* while attending lectures on the *Fuṣūṣ* by the latter ('Iraqi 1982, 45). 'Irāqī's work consists of twenty-eight chapters; translators Chittick and Wilson assert, "When 'Iraqi had finished his work, which, like the *Fusus*, consists of twenty-eight chapters, he submitted it to Qunawi for approval" ('Iraqi 1982, 46), erroneously stating the number of chapters in the *Fuṣūṣ*. Even the famously meticulous Annemarie Schimmel commits the same error in her tally (Schimmel 1975, 379), highlighting an understandable expectation that the *Fuṣūṣ* should have twenty-eight chapters. This suggests the possibility that the final chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* is "missing" (by the author's design), stopping short at the twenty-seventh chapter.

One possible theory regarding that the missing chapter might be that, had it been written, the twenty-eighth would have been dedicated to Ibn al-'Arabī himself. At first glance, it might be shocking to count Ibn al-'Arabī as a prophet among the prophets to whom the twenty-seven chapters are dedicated. Ibn al-'Arabī himself writes in the *Fuṣūṣ*, "I am neither prophet nor messenger, but an heir..." (Ibn al-'Arabī 2004b, 2). We should, however, keep in mind that Ibn al-'Arabī also regards all prophets as saints: "The Messengers, due to their being saints, only see what we have spoken of from the niche of the Seal of the Saints..." (Ibn al-'Arabī 2004b, 27). Thus we might more accurately understand the chapters of the *Fuṣūṣ* as devoted to twenty-seven saints (or perhaps twenty-seven types of saints, devoted to twenty-seven different prophets). Thus the unwritten twenty-eighth chapter might have been reserved for Ibn al-'Arabī insofar as he identified himself as the Seal of the Saints. Identifying himself with the missing chapter would be analogous to the Shaykh identifying himself with the missing gap in the wall representing the saints, awaiting the Seal of the Saints to fill this final gap (Ibn al-'Arabī 2004b, 27-29)

Regardless of the conclusion of this speculation, the notion that the *Fuṣūṣ* was designed to stand incomplete might influence our Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John, interpreting its final words as marking its unfinished character, inherently falling short of the subject matter to which it points.

And I will ask from the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete (*fāraqliṭ*) in order to strengthen you until eternity, a spirit of the Real whom the world will be unable to bear, because they will not see him and they will not know him, while you know him because he is standing before you and he is affirmed in you. (John 14:16-17 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

When the Paraclete (*fāraqliṭ*) comes, whom I send to you, the spirit of the Real, which pours out from the Father, he will bear witness for my sake. And you bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)¹⁸⁸

Yet Thomas would not have been satisfied by a spirit without the visible, tangible body of Jesus. From this perspective, the embodiment of the Word is a unique and indispensable solution to a radical problem. For Thomas, if God could have been made known in the spirit just as well as in the body, the embodiment of the Word would seem to have been an unnecessary and superfluous solution to the invisibility of God. Thomas demands a theophanic form in order to know God, and without this form the spirit would fall short of this requirement. A solution that might appeal more effectively to Thomas' need for a sensory manifestation might be offered by the Eucharist; we would have to deal, however, with the fact that the Gospel of John (alone among the four

¹⁸⁸ This Counselor or Comforter (*paraklētos*) has been the subject of a distinctive Islamic tradition of interpreting the Gospel of John. This interpretation appears, for example, in the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad by Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 769 CE). Ibn Ishāq writes (citing a variant of John 15:23-16:1):

Among the things which have reached me about what Jesus the Son of Mary stated in the Gospel which he received from God for the followers of the Gospel, in applying a term to describe the apostle of God, is the following. It is extracted from what John the Apostle set down for them when he wrote the Gospel for them from the Testament of Jesus Son of Mary: 'He that hateth me hath hated the Lord. And if I had not done in their presence works which none other before me did, they had not had sin; but from now they are puffed up with pride and think that they will overcome me and also the Lord, But the word that is in the law must be fulfilled, "They hated me without a cause" (i.e. without reason). But when the Comforter has come whom God will send to you from the Lord's presence, and the spirit of truth which will have gone forth from the Lord's presence he (shall bear) witness of me and ye also, because ye have been with me from the beginning. I have spoken unto you about this that ye should not be in doubt.'

The *Munahhemana* (God bless and preserve him!) in Syriac is Muḥammad; in Greek he is the paraclete. (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 103-104)

We have seen no evidence that this interpretation has exerted any influence on Ibn al-ʿArabī; thus it will play no role in our Akbarian interpretation of the Gospel of John.

Gospels) does not include the establishment of the Eucharistic rite at the Last Supper.¹⁸⁹ For similar reasons, we should not seek a solution for Thomas in the tradition of Christian iconography, both because this tradition is not explicitly indicated in the Gospel, and because icons would not have satisfied the disciple who wishes both to see with his eyes and touch with his hands.

Thomas might sound excessively tenacious; but Ibn al-‘Arabī, in his drive for inclusiveness, would most likely have wished to give due respect to his perspective. Given these limitations, is it possible to find a solution that would maintain a subsistent and living testimony to the presence of God in the embodied Word that ameliorates the withdrawal of Jesus from sight and overcomes the constrictions of the written word? Is there a solution faithful to Thomas’ need for a human, theophanic form and faithful to our Akbarian approach, presenting Thomas with a form on a smaller scale than the vast and intimidating vision of the cosmos to which Ibn al-‘Arabī adheres?

There may be an affirmative answer to all of these questions. From an Akbarian perspective, we might recognize in the Gospel an unusual solution to this problem, a solution that maintains openness in the face of apparent closure, staying true to Thomas’ attachment to

¹⁸⁹ In the Gospel of John, Jesus does say on the day following his feeding of the five thousand:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. (John 6:51, 53-55 RSV).

This might be understood as alluding to and affirming the ceremony of the Eucharist. However, from another point of view—a point of view more faithful to Thomas—these words might be heard as the converse of the words with which the Eucharist is instituted. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus institutes the Eucharist by telling his disciples that bread is his body and wine is his blood (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20); in the Gospel of John, however, Jesus reverses the equation, asserting that his body is bread and that his blood is wine. From a Thomastic perspective, this might be heard as asserting the primacy of Jesus’ human form, offering sustenance in this form and not in the form of bread.

the presence of a living, human body. The solution to this problem arrives, at the end of the Gospel, in the form of a rumor: the rumor that the Evangelist himself—the “Beloved Disciple”—will not die, but will remain on earth until Jesus comes back. We will consider the possibility that this disciple might fill the empty gap left behind by Jesus’ disappearance and take over, in his own body, the epistemic work of the embodied Word. In the next chapter of this study, we will sketch an Akbarian account of this solution and will ask how Ibn al-‘Arabī might have regarded this rumor of the Undying Disciple.

Chapter 6

Annihilation and Subsistence

6.1. The Disciple Who Would Not Die

If I wish that this one subsist until I come, what is it to you? — John 21:22 (Alexandrian Vulgate)

An important episode in both Christian and Islamic eschatological narratives is the Second Coming of Jesus. The Second Coming seems to be projected in Jesus' own words in the Gospel of John:

Do not agitate your hearts. Believe in God and believe in me. Indeed there are many dwelling places in my Father's house; if that were not so, I would not have said to you that I depart to prepare a place for you. And when I have gone and prepared a place for you, I will come to take you to be where I am. And you know where I am going and you know the path (*al-ṭarīq*). (John 14:1-4 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

While these words stir up trouble in the heart of Thomas—

Thomas said to him, "Master, we do not know where you are going. And how are we able to know the path (*al-ṭarīq*)?" (John 14:5 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

—Jesus may have provided some comfort to Thomas and similar disciples, posting a representative, in visible and human form, to fill the interval between Jesus' departure and his return. We will suggest that such an implication might be read in Jesus' words at the Gospel's conclusion, where Cephas notices another disciple following him and inquires of Jesus:

"Lord, what of this one?" Jesus said to him, "If I wish that this one subsist (*yabqa*) until I come, what is it to you? Follow me!" Then this word went out among the brothers that that disciple would not die. And Jesus did not say that he would not die, but, "If I wish that this one continue (*yadūm*) until I come, what is it to you?" (John 21:21-23 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

The disciple—"that disciple whom Jesus loved, he who had settled down on his breast at the supper" (John 21:20 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)—is identified (in John 21:24) as the

Evangelist himself. In this chapter we will inquire into the Evangelist's ostensible identity, the implications of taking seriously the rumor that the disciple would not die, how such a disciple might serve as a representative of Jesus in his absence, and how Ibn al-ʿArabī might have regarded such a figure.

Let us recall the important role that Islam upholds for Jesus in its eschatological narrative. Geoffrey Parrinder sums up the Islamic account of the return of Jesus, remarking on the influence of Christianity:

A fleshly resurrection of Jesus and bodily ascent to heaven has been held in Christianity. The 'resurrection of the flesh' of all men has been held by Muslims and Christians down to modern times... In the past Muslims saw no objection to a physical ascension of Jesus to heaven. In the famous story of the night journey of Muhammad to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven, the Prophet saw in the second heaven Jesus, son of Mary, and John, son of Zachariah. Ibn Ishāq said that this was a true revelation, 'whether he was asleep or awake'...

Muslim tradition has long thought that Jesus will come again to restore all things and reign as a just king, and it seems that it was affected by early Christian hopes of a Second Advent. The Qurʾān has none of this, though there are hints which suggest Jesus as an eschatological figure...

Bukhārī in his version of the Traditions said that the Son of Mary would descend among men as a just judge. He would break the crosses, kill the swine, suppress the poll-tax, and make wealth so abundant that nobody would wish for any more. Baiḍāwī said that Jesus would descend in the Holy Land, that he would kill al-Dajjāl, the Anti-Christ, and go to Jerusalem, worshipping there, killing swine and all who do not believe in him, reign in peace for forty years, and finally die and be buried in Medina. An empty place beside the tomb of Muhammad in Medina was thought to be reserved for Jesus. (Parrinder 1995, 123-124)

This Islamic notion of the Second Coming of Jesus is shared by Ibn al-ʿArabī, and is tied to his notion of Jesus as the Seal of Universal Sainthood; that is, the Akbarian doctrine is that there will be no more saints when the Universal Sainthood "is sealed by Jesus when he returns at the end of time" (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 138).¹⁹⁰ However, as we have noted in the previous

¹⁹⁰ As this point in his discussion, Chodkiewicz is summing up the doctrines of the emir ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazaʾirī (1808-1883 CE); he speaks of the emir "as representing Akbarian tradition in its purest form," and that the emir's

chapter of this study, Ibn al-‘Arabī might have imagined Jesus as having undergone crucifixion and resurrection, rather than postponing his death until after the Second Coming (as in the more general Islamic notion of the Second Coming).

From Ibn al-‘Arabī’s vantage point in history, as well as ours, centuries have stretched out since Jesus’ departure from our world in the early first century of the Christian era. The imminence and urgency of the Second Coming suggested by some New Testament verse seems to have been belied by the years that have lapsed in the intervening wait. While the Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus as admonishing us that “of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matthew 24:36 RSV), Jesus also promises that “this generation will not pass away till all these things take place” (Matthew 24:34 RSV). Similarly, the Apostle Paul writes, “We shall not all sleep”—by which he seems to mean, “We shall not all *die*”—“but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52 RSV). These verses might have suggested to some readers that Jesus would come back during the lifetimes of Jesus’ and Paul’s contemporaries. By most accounts, Jesus has not yet returned, and from where we stand now, this return may appear to be long overdue.

The Gospel of John brings an especially acute sense to the urgency of the Hour of Resurrection, which might be equivalent to the hour of judgment and Jesus’ return:

Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour will come, and it now is, when the dead hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in his essence, likewise the son has been given life to have in him....Do not be astonished at this, that the hour will come when the entirety of those in the tombs hear his voice and come out... (John 5:25-26, 28-29 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

teaching “on every point conforms to the scattered information provided by Ibn ‘Arabī himself” (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 137).

In his Muslim commentary on the Gospel of John, Ṭūfī criticizes the apparent temporal absurdity of the promise, “the hour will come, and it now is.” He objects:

This is a statement that brings together absurdity, contradiction and faulty reasoning. As for absurdity, it relates to his saying: ‘Verily, an hour shall come’. He meant by it the Hour of Resurrection, when the people will be resuscitated and judged. His saying: ‘which is now already present,’ is also absurd, for this hour of ours, for instance, is not the Hour of Resurrection. This statement is incorrect, except in the case of an extremely far-fetched interpretation, which is to suppose that: ‘The power by which the dead shall live in the Hour of Resurrection already exists now.’ (Demiri 2013, 315)

By contrast, Ibn al-‘Arabī would seem not to have been troubled by the supposition that the Hour of Resurrection “now is.” In *Futūḥāt* Chapter 73, the Shaykh attempts to compose an answer to a question about the Hour of Resurrection posed by his Sufi predecessor Hakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 932 CE). Tirmidhī asks how it could be that “the matter of the Hour is as a twinkling of the eye, or nearer” (quoting Qur’ān 16:77)? Citing a *ḥadīth* according to which “when someone dies his Resurrection has already begun,” Ibn al-‘Arabī expands his reply:

Now no one is truly aware of this “nearness” but the person who is aware of God’s power [as manifested] in the existence (*wujūd*) of the Imagination (*al-khayāl*) in the natural world, who is aware of the vast extent of the matters that are found, in a single breath or blink of the eye, by someone who knows [God’s power manifested in] the Imagination. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 114)

So far, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s response to Tirmidhī might appear compatible with Ṭūfī’s “far-fetched interpretation” of John 5:25, pointing to the present *power* of the Resurrection. Ibn al-‘Arabī goes further, however, than merely thinking of the Resurrection as a present potentiality; he points to the bewildering nature of temporality and the actuality of all time in the presence:

Then [such a person actually] sees the effect of that in sense perception, with the eye of the Imagination, so that he is truly aware of this nearness and the “folding up” of years into the smallest instant of the time of the life of this world. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 114)

The Shaykh illustrates this claim by telling the story of an Egyptian baker named Jawharī who fell into a reverie while performing his ablutions. He dreamed an entire lifetime in Baghdad—

including marrying and fathering several children—before waking again and resuming his daily activities. Several months later, Jawharī encountered, in waking life, the wife he had married and the children had fathered in his dream (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 114-115).¹⁹¹ Whereas Ṭūfī finds “absurdity, contradiction and faulty reasoning” in the claim that the Hour of Resurrection exists now, Ibn al-‘Arabī would probably have comfortably explained this Johannine claim in terms of “the ‘folding up’ of years.”

At the same time, however, Ibn al-‘Arabī is conscious of and sensitive to the long delay between Jesus’ ascension and his return at the Second Coming. This delay is evidently the referent of his remark at the opening of *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 15:

The spirit took on existence in a purified essence
Out of the nature you call Sijjīn.
That is why he was destined to reside
Therein over a thousand years.
(Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 157)

In a footnote to these lines, Dagli remarks, “At the time of Ibn al-‘Arabī, Jesus would have ascended to heaven in his body over a thousand years previously” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 157, footnote 3). While, at the time of the Gospel’s composition or redaction,¹⁹² the Second Coming might have been expected within the lifetime of some of its contemporaries; but the interval’s excess of a millennium has been incorporated into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thirteenth-century perspective. It is with this extended duration in mind that we must approach Thomas’ and successive disciples’ longing for the absent Jesus, and our Akbarian interpretation will proceed in light of

¹⁹¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī states that he inherited this story from the ninth-century Sufi Dhū al-Nūn al-Misrī; but according to translator James W. Morris, “we have not been able to locate another reference to this story...in the classical Sufi texts concerning Dhū al-Nūn” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002, 287, footnote 76). We might note that the story of Jawharī bears a strong resemblance to the story of Gādhi in the Indian epic, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (Arya 2003, 343-368), and we suspect that these tales are cognate narratives.

¹⁹² For theories regarding “The Unity and Composition of the Fourth Gospel,” see Raymond E. Brown’s overview of the question (Brown 1966, xxiv-xxxix).

this. This long expectation will define our understanding of Thomas' problem, and will also define the solution to his problem. If our suggestion is that the solution arises in the form of the Evangelist's embodied endurance, this endurance would have to stretch wondrously across centuries, taking seriously the rumor that the Evangelist would hold his post in the world until Jesus returns.¹⁹³ We will indeed take this rumor seriously for the purposes of this study—despite the Evangelist's caution, “And Jesus did not say that he would not die, but, ‘If I wish that this one continue (*yadūm*) until I come, what is it to you?’” (John 21:23 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)—to discover where taking this rumor seriously might lead us.¹⁹⁴

If we adopt the hypothesis that Jesus really did mean that the Evangelist would live until his return, we will quickly collide with the hypothesis that this Evangelist is John, the son of Zebedee, as Christian tradition has held. Thus far, we have respected the title of our text, “The Gospel of John,” and every Muslim commentary on the Gospel we have consulted uses this title. Yet there is an improbability in the Gospel's words, “this word went out among the brothers that that disciple would not die,” if we wish to square this Gospel with the Synoptic Gospels. It would be extraordinarily unnatural that this rumor should circulate about any disciple, and even more unlikely to spread such a rumor about John, for Jesus seems to predict martyrs' deaths for him and his brother James (Matthew 20:20-24; Mark 10:35-41). Because the Gospels of Matthew and Mark report that the other apostles were aware of this prediction, it is hard to

¹⁹³ Raymond E. Brown remarks, “Imaginative traditions grew up about John, identified as the Beloved Disciple, for instance, that he has been wandering through the world throughout the centuries, or that he sleeps in his grave at Ephesus and the movement of the earth's surface above it attests to his breathing (Augustine *In Jo.* cxxiv 2; [Patrologia Latina (Migne)] 35:1970)” (Brown 1970, 1110).

¹⁹⁴ Some elements in this chapter will draw on and revise material from our paper, “The Disciple Who Would Not Die” (Wolfe 2007a), submitted to Peter Awn at Columbia University in 2007.

conceive that those same apostles would have speculated that John might be immune to death.¹⁹⁵ We will permit ourselves, then, to suspend our identification of the Evangelist as John, referring to him as “the Beloved Disciple” or “the Undying Disciple.” Suspending this identification might enable us to recognize ways the rumor of the disciple’s longevity might have taken on a life of its own beyond the Christian tradition.

If we consider the Beloved Disciple as a possible answer to Thomas’ need, the tension between Cephas and Thomastic witnessing might be translated, in the closing chapter of the Gospel, into a rivalry between Cephas and the Beloved Disciple. Such a rivalry might be perceived on several occasions in the Gospel, a rivalry that repeatedly gives the Beloved Disciple the upper hand over Cephas. Altogether, there are five instances in which variants of the epithet, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” are used in the Gospel: once during the Last Supper (13:23); once at Jesus’ crucifixion (19:26); once when Jesus’ tomb is found empty (20:2); and twice when the risen Jesus appears to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias (21:7; 21:20). In four of these five instances, the Beloved Disciple is paired with Cephas in a way that brings out the disparity between these two disciples.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Raymond E Brown notes: “There is a tradition that John son of Zebedee died as a young man. Both summarized evidence drawn from Philip of Side (430) and George Hamartolus (9th century) attribute to Papias the tradition that John was killed by the Jews along with his brother James (who died in the 40s). Two martyrologies from Edessa and Carthage (5th-6th centuries) have the same tradition.” Brown goes on to express the opinion that “the reliability of these sources is not particularly impressive. In part the tradition probably results from confusion of John the Baptist with John son of Zebedee, and in part from an overliteral interpretation of Mark x 39, where Jesus predicts that the sons of Zebedee will share in his suffering” (Brown 1966, lxxxix).

¹⁹⁶ If there is indeed a rivalry between Cephas and the Beloved Disciple, we should note that no such rivalry is evidenced in the close companionship of Cephas and John (as reported in the Acts of the Apostles). Thus the traditional identification of the Beloved Disciple with John would mask any such rivalry in the Gospel of John.

Moreover, as we have suggested in the previous chapter, the Beloved Disciple, as the ostensible Evangelist, might stand in partnership with a second witness, fulfilling Jesus’ repetition of the requirement that a testimony must be validated by two witnesses who harmonize in agreement. There, we noted that the Gospel might express this partnership when it avows that “we saw his glory” (John 1:14) and “we know that his testimony is true (John 21:24). This might find support in the fact that both the opening and closing chapters of the Gospel include in the narrative a pair of anonymous disciples. Chapter 1 introduces two disciples of John the Baptist who leave the Baptist

We might begin reviewing these instances by looking at the first appearance of this epithet, in the Gospel's thirteenth chapter. During the Last Supper, Jesus announces that one of his disciples will betray him. Amidst the confusion, suspicion, and offended feelings that ensue, Peter turns to Jesus' closest companion at the table:

One of his disciples was leaning on the breast of Jesus. He was the one Jesus loved. Then Simon Cephas gestured to him to ask him about whom he was speaking. (John 13:23-24 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

From the outset, the allusion to this unnamed disciple marks him as privileged. He occupies a privileged place at the table, reclining at Jesus' breast; he seems to enjoy greater intimacy with Jesus than the other disciples; above all, his designation as Jesus' beloved would seem to

to follow Jesus (John 1:35-37). A few verses later (in John 1:40), one of the two disciples is explicitly named as Andrew, the brother of Cephas. The Gospel of John recognizes Andrew as outrunning his brother, following Jesus before Cephas does and giving Andrew the credit for leading Cephas to Jesus (John 1:41). The other disciple of John the Baptist remains unnamed, which leaves open the possibility that the other disciple might be the Beloved Disciple. In the Gospel's last chapter, in its final scene on the Sea of Tiberias, the narrative tells us about seven of Jesus' disciples gathered in a fishing boat. While five of the disciples are named, "two others of his disciples" remain anonymous (John 21:2). Of the four fishermen among Jesus' apostles, only Andrew is unnamed; thus we might expect that one of the two unnamed disciples is Andrew. Again, the other of the two anonymous disciples might be the Beloved Disciple (who is later identified as one of the seven disciples in the boat). Appearances of these paired disciples in Chapters 1 and 21 would, according to this reading, bracket the Gospel as a whole and represent the paired witnesses who report the Gospel's events.

To be clear, we are not making claims about the original intentions underlying the Gospel's composition (or redaction). Whether this framing device is deliberate is a question beyond the scope of our study. Rather, we are presenting an interpretation of the received text, an interpretation informed by Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrines, in an effort to draw attention to the Shaykh's proclivity for binary readings.

In any case, a close affiliation between the purported Evangelist and the apostle Andrew might date back as early as the second century CE, as evidenced by the Muratorian Fragment, usually dated around 170 CE. This fragment includes the following observation:

(9) The fourth of the Gospels is that of John, [one] of the disciples. (10) To his fellow disciples and bishops, who had been urging him [to write], (11) he said, 'Fast with me from today to three days, and what (12) will be revealed to each one (13) let us tell it to one another.' In the same night it was revealed (14) to Andrew, [one] of the apostles, (15-16) that John should write down all things in his own name while all of them should review it. (Metzger 1987, 305)

To extend this speculation a step further, we might regard the rivalry between the Beloved Disciple and Cephas as running parallel to a sibling rivalry between Andrew and Cephas—a rivalry that repeats the familiar theme of vying siblings in the book of Genesis. This rivalry would stand in contrast with the relationship between the Beloved Disciple and Andrew, who stand together harmoniously in delivering their testimony.

highlight his special status in Jesus' affection. His intimacy with Jesus appears to rival that of Cephas, the leader of the Twelve; nobody ranks higher than Cephas among the Apostles, but it is noteworthy that Cephas' access to the meaning of Jesus' words might be inferior to that of the Beloved Disciple.¹⁹⁷

The second episode explicitly pairing of Cephas with the Beloved Disciple is that of the disciples' investigation of Jesus' empty tomb. On the Sunday morning following Jesus' crucifixion, Mary Magdalene is the first disciple to discover the empty tomb. The story continues:

Then she dashed and came to Simon Peter and the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and she said to them, "They have borne off the Lord and I do not know where they left him." Then Peter and the other disciple went out towards the tomb. And they were running and the other disciple outstripped Cephas and, running, came first to the tomb. Then he looked and saw the wrappings laid down and did not enter. Then Simon Cephas came, following him, then he entered the tomb, then he saw the wrappings laid down. And the kerchief that had been on [Jesus'] head was not with the wrappings, but it was rolled up singly in another place. At that time the disciple, who came first to the tomb, entered, and he saw and believed. (John 20:2-8 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

This is the second occasion on which Cephas' insight might be regarded as inferior to that of the Beloved Disciple, for Cephas only "saw the wrappings," but the Beloved Disciple "saw and believed."

A third incident showing the Beloved Disciple's perspicacity to be superior to that of Cephas takes place in the Gospel's final chapter. In this chapter, the resurrected Jesus suddenly appears on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias while seven disciples—Cephas, Thomas, Nathanael, John, James, and two unnamed disciples (John 21:2)—are gathered in a fishing boat on the sea. The Beloved Disciple is apparently the first disciple to recognize the resurrected Jesus, for it is he who informs Cephas, "It is the Lord!" Cephas, stripped for the work of fishing, responds to

¹⁹⁷ It is perhaps necessary to note that, according to the Gospel of John, the gathering of disciples at the Last Supper is not limited to the Twelve Apostles.

this announcement by grabbing his clothing, covering his exposed body, and leaping into the sea (John 21:7). The Beloved Disciple serves once more as a mediator, conveying recognition of Jesus to Cephas. Moreover, the image of Cephas donning his clothes and leaping into the sea might be interpreted as an unflattering portrayal. While this reaction is open to multiple interpretations, one approach might read this as an expression of shame, recalling the impulse of Adam and Eve to conceal their naked bodies after eating from the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3:8-10).¹⁹⁸

By contrast, the Beloved Disciple's ability both to see and stand boldly before the resurrected Jesus might bring to mind two verses from the First Epistle of John:

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. (1 John 2:28 RSV)

A few verses later in the Epistle, we encounter this verse:

¹⁹⁸ Another possible instance of contrasting Cephas with the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John, to Cephas' disadvantage, might be the episode leading up to Cephas' three denials. Following the Last Supper, as Jesus is taken away by the Roman cohort and the Jewish officers, we read:

Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. As this disciple was known to the high priest, he entered the court of the high priest along with Jesus, while Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the maid who kept the door, and brought Peter in. (John 18:15-16 RSV)

It seems plausible to us that "other disciple" is the Beloved Disciple. The appellation closely reflects phraseology in John 20:2, "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved." What stands out in this passage is the fact that the "other disciple" is "known to the high priest" and appears to have privileged access to the court, a privilege denied to Cephas (an unrefined Galilean fisherman and a foreigner to the court). The Old Syriac version of John 18:16 goes so far as to state that the "other disciple" is "the kinsman of the high priest" (Wilson 2002, 830). There is some poignancy in the image of Cephas stranded at the high priest's door, waiting for "the other disciple" to use his influence with the doorkeeper to give him entry.

We would, however, lose much of this poignancy if we regard "the other disciple" as John. For there is no difference in public status between Cephas and John; John, too, is a humble, uneducated fisherman from Galilee, and it would require a stretch of the imagination to see how John might be familiar with the high priest at all. We might refer here to the appearance of Cephas and John before the high priest and members of the high-priestly family in the Acts of the Apostles: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). Here the members of the high priest's court clearly recognize no difference in status between Cephas and John.

Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2 RSV)

These verses seem to look ahead to eschatological events: the words, “when he appears...at his coming,” seem to reach forward to Jesus' Second Coming, and the words, “when he appears we shall be like him,” perhaps anticipate the general resurrection of believers. Yet the Beloved Disciple, in his unagitated stance and in his quickness to perceive Jesus “as he is,” seems already to bear the traits commended to and predicted for the resurrected believer.

From an Akbarian perspective, the contrast between the Beloved Disciple and Cephas recalls Ibn al-‘Arabī's interpretation of a *ḥadīth* (Muslim 1:299) regarding the Day of Resurrection. We have looked at this *ḥadīth* in Chapter 2 of this study, and will revisit it here:

God, blessed and transcendent is He, will come to them in other than the form which they know. He will say, ‘I am your Lord.’ They will then say, ‘We seek refuge in God from you. We will stay here until our Lord comes, glorified and majestic is He. When our Lord comes we will know Him.’ Then God, blessed and transcendent is He, will come to them in the form which they know, and will say, ‘I am your Lord.’ They will then say, ‘Thou art our Lord.’” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 126, footnote 8)

Ibn al-‘Arabī comments frequently on this *ḥadīth*, to which he refers as “the hadith of theophany” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 180); to recall one of Ibn al-‘Arabī's comments on the *ḥadīth*, previously visited in Chapter 2, the Shaykh writes:

You know absolutely, if you are a believer, that the Real discloses Himself on the Day of Resurrection in a form that is known, then transmutes Himself into another form and is denied, then transmutes Himself from that into a form and is known. It is He who discloses Himself—He and no other—in each form. And it is known that one form is not some other form. It is as though the one Identity is a mirror. When the onlooker looks upon the form of his belief in God, he recognizes it and acknowledges it. If it happens that he sees therein the belief of another he will deny it, just as in a mirror he will see his own form and that of another. The mirror is a single identity and the multiple forms are within the eye of the seer. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 232)

In short, the Beloved Disciple's recognition of the resurrected Jesus as his Lord (and recognizing him as a theophanic form) harmonizes with Ibn al-‘Arabī's description of the mirror-like

character of those who recognize the Lord in varying theophanic forms on the Day of Resurrection. That is, the Beloved Disciple both recognizes and mirrors Jesus' resurrected form—or as the words of the Epistle express it, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” This stands by contrast with Cephas, who both hesitates to acknowledge this form and reacts by concealing his own form.

Foremost, however, we will highlight the final instance of contrast between Cephas and the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John. We will remember that in Chapter 21 of the Gospel, Jesus calls Cephas to a martyr's death:

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded your loins yourself and you walked where you wished, but when you are old, you will spread out your hands and another will gird your loins for you and he will take you away where you do not wish.” (And he said this to inform him by what manner of death it was determined for him to glorify God.) Then when he had said this, he said, “Follow me!” (John 21:18-19 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

What follows is the exchange that catalyzes the rumor of the Beloved Disciple's miraculous longevity. Cephas asks Jesus about the Beloved Disciple:

“Lord, what of this one?” Jesus said to him, “If I wish that this one subsist (*yabqa*) until I come, what is it to you? Follow me!” Then this word went out among the brothers that that disciple would not die. (John 21:21-23 Alexandrian Vulgate, our translation)

Here, perhaps most starkly, Cephas and the Beloved Disciple stand as a dialectical and antithetical pair. Evidently, the two disciples have been called to opposite missions. In charging Cephas with the mission of following him into death, Jesus has called upon him to glorify God by dying; in charging the Beloved Disciple with the mission of dwelling on earth until his return, Jesus has called upon him to glorify God by living.

The antithesis between the missions of the two disciples reflects a binary in the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī and of a number of other Sufis: the dialectic between *fanā*’ (annihilation) and *baqā*’ (subsistence). As we have noted already, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s epistemology revolves around the

dual fact that God is unseen and seen. In traditional doctrines of the Sufis, the question of the occultation and manifestation of God meets the question of the occultation and manifestation of the human devotee. The interplay between the alternate goals of annihilation and subsistence has been central to Sufi theory and practice from the early days of Sufi history, as is evident in a statement attributed to the ninth-century Sufi Dhū'l-Nūn (d. 859 CE)—“Nothing sees God and dies, even as nothing sees God and lives, because His life is everlasting, and who ever sees Him, remains in Him and is made everlasting” (Schimmel 1975, 44). While the expressions *fanā'* and *baqā'* frequently refer to spiritual conditions rather than literal death or life, we would suggest that the metaphorical and literal meanings of these terms might sometimes blur together.

Annemarie Schimmel notes that the first theoretical articulation of this question has been attributed to Kharrāz (d. 899 CE) and his widely-influential disciple Junayd (d. 910 CE) (Schimmel 1975, 55)—both of whom we have encountered previously in this study. Junayd is credited with inciting debate among the Sufis about the ultimate goal of the mystical path: is *fanā'* or *baqā'* the mystic's final destination? Schimmel writes that, in Junayd's view, the advanced mystic will follow the stage of annihilation with an even higher stage, that of subsistence (Schimmel 1975, 59). But in the thought of other classic Sufi masters, such as Ḥallāj and Bisṭāmī, annihilation often appears to be the highest and most coveted goal.

The contrary attractions of these two goals is well illustrated in the thirteenth century by the divergent emphases of Ibn al-'Arabī and his younger contemporary, Rūmī. Rūmī repeatedly points to his final destination not as a place, but as the placelessness of annihilation. Rūmī writes in the *Mathnawī* (V 1553-1554):

One must have an eye which cuts through secondary causes and tears aside all veils,
To the end that it may see the First Cause in No-place and know that exertion, earnings,
and shops are nonsense. (Chittick 1983, 21)

For Ibn al-‘Arabī, *fanā*’ is an important but lower stage on the path that is superseded by the enduring stage of *baqā*’. The priority that Ibn al-‘Arabī gives to *baqā*’—often overlooked by scholars of his work, but emphasized by recent leading scholars like Chittick (Chittick 1989, 105) and Morris (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2002b, 108-109, 284)—is clearly articulated in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own words:

Subsistence [*baqā*’] is a relationship that does not disappear or change. Its property is immutably fixed in both the Real and the creature. It is a divine attribute. But annihilation [*fanā*’] is a relationship that disappears. (Chittick 1989, 321; bracketed words inserted by us)

While Ibn al-‘Arabī perpetuates the Sufi tradition by continuing the debate about *fanā*’ and *baqā*’, he distinguishes himself from some other heirs of that tradition by emphatically insisting on the ultimacy of the latter goal. At the same time, he distinguishes himself by striving to reconcile *fanā*’ and *baqā*’ in such a way as to give both terms their due.

As we have argued earlier, the predicted annihilation of Cephas goes hand-in-hand with what we have labeled as Cephastic witnessing; we have now arrived at its Thomastic complement, illustrated by the rumored subsistence of the Beloved Disciple.¹⁹⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī’s inclusive approach shapes our reading of the Gospel of John; from this perspective, the Gospel provides places for both Cephas (as the sign of annihilation) and the Beloved Disciple (as the sign of subsistence), while giving the Beloved Disciple the final word. Perhaps more accurately, we might say that, as the Gospel reaches beyond any final word, this Undying Disciple (both as the ostensible Evangelist and as a character in the narrative) maintains an open-endedness defying any requirement to come to a conclusion.

¹⁹⁹ Note that, in the Alexandrian Vulgate, Jesus’ final words regarding the Beloved Disciple are, “If I wish that this one subsist (*yabqa*) until I come, what is it to you?” The verb *yabqa* and the noun *baqā*’ are built on the same root.

In his open-ended subsistence, the Undying Disciple might provide the key to solving Thomas' crisis at the end of the Gospel of John, filling the interval between Jesus' ascension and his Second Coming.²⁰⁰ The Undying Disciple might, in fact, fulfill a dual role as a witness. On the one hand, he might continue providing an eyewitness testimony to the bodily presence of Jesus—well beyond the lifespans of Thomas and others who had lived in Jesus' presence. On the other hand, the Undying Disciple, as a mirror to Jesus, might even serve as a visible representative of Jesus on earth during the Lord's absence. That is, this disciple might fill two roles simultaneously, by speaking and being seen.

Below, we will address explicitly how Ibn al-ʿArabī might have understood the rumor of the Undying Disciple's longevity. First, however, we will sketch a portrait of Khidr—a numinous figure in Sufi lore, reputed never to die and rumored to have instructed generations of Sufis over the centuries—and will show how he might have served a role in the broader Sufi tradition parallel to that of the Undying Disciple at the end of the Gospel. Having discussed the general relevance of Khidr to Sufism, we will examine, in the last section of this chapter, the ways in which Khidr was an especially important and pivotal figure in Ibn al-ʿArabī's

²⁰⁰ Ibn al-ʿArabī might have brought an additional nuance to this understanding the Undying Disciple; he might have imagined that the Undying Disciple not only filled the interval until the end of the world, but also that he prolonged this interval. We suggest this on the analogy of the Shaykh's notion of the Complete Human Being (*al-insān al-kāmil*) as presented in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 1. The Complete Human Being, by enduring in the world, seems to postpone the end of the world and protect it from dissolution:

And so the world shall always be protected so long as this Perfect Man is found in it. Do you not see that, when he withdraws and is separated from the storehouses of the lower-world, there shall remain none of what God had stored therein, and that what had been there shall depart away, and that each of the parts shall join one another, and that the affair shall be brought to the Hereafter, over whose coffers he shall be set as an eternal seal? (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 6)

In the same paragraph, Ibn al-ʿArabī perhaps points to the compatibility, in the person of the Complete Human Being, of the epistemic work and the expiatory work of the embodied Word. According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, knowledge and mercy are conjoined and effected through the Complete Human Being, for “through him the Real looks upon His creation and shows mercy upon them” (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2004b, 6). This complementary relationship between knowledge and mercy might suggest that epistemic and expiatory drives have a common root.

autobiography; there we will argue that the Shaykh represented Khidr in his writings as a figure bridging the Christian and Islamic traditions.

6.2. The Undying Disciple and Khidr

He sat on the barren earth and made it green. — Ḥadīth, on Khidr

Traditionally, Khidr (or Khaḍir; Khizr in Persian) has been identified with the nameless wise “servant” in Qur’ān 18:60-82, from whom Moses seeks instruction, only to be repeatedly baffled. The servant admonishes Moses not to question or impeach him; he then proceeds to thwart Moses with a sequence of three bizarre actions (each concealing a deeper wisdom): he bores a hole in a boat to sink it, he slays an apparently innocent boy, and he repairs a wall in a city that had refused hospitality to Moses and the servant. Moses’ frustration with the servant’s inexplicable behavior incites him to challenge each action, leading the servant to reply:

This is the parting between me and thee. Now I will tell thee the interpretation of that thou couldst not bear patiently. (Qur’ān 18:78)

Yet the explanation arrives too late, and the parting between the two fulfills the servant’s prediction:

Assuredly thou wilt not be able to bear with me patiently. And how shouldst thou bear patiently that thou hast never encompassed in thy knowledge? (Qur’ān 18: 67-68)

In line with the tradition of identifying the servant as Khidr, Henry Corbin offers the following interpretation of Khidr’s knowledge and Moses’ inability to encompass it:

[Khidr] is represented as Moses’ guide, who initiates Moses “into the science of predestination.” Thus he reveals himself to be the repository of an inspired divine science, superior to the law (*sharī‘a*); thus Khidr is superior to Moses so far as Moses is a prophet invested with the mission of revealing a *sharī‘a*. He reveals to Moses precisely the secret, mystic truth (*ḥaqīqa*) that transcends the *sharī‘a*, and this explains why the spirituality inaugurated by Khidr is free from the servitude of the literal religion. (Corbin 1969, 55; bracketed clarification inserted by us)

Once again we are presented with the kind of dialectical relationship of which Ibn al-‘Arabī is so fond. In this case, the story of Moses and Khiḍr resonates with the tension we have just outlined in the encounters between Cephas and the Undying Disciple. Similar themes might be implied in both narratives: an exceptional and liminal figure exhibits extraordinary insight and access, an insider while standing on the margin of the newly formed religious community (the Israelites or the Apostles). His superior perception gives him the upper hand over the appointed leader (Moses or Cephas) of the new religious community, whose failure to grasp the true significance of the facts before him repeatedly casts him in the shadow.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s typical inclusiveness and generosity to both sides of the dialectic prompts the Shaykh to extend charitability towards Moses in this exchange. In Chapter 25 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, the chapter on Moses, Ibn al-‘Arabī recognizes mutual superiority and mutual courtesy (*adab*) in the apparently testy exchange between Moses and Khiḍr. Moreover, he acknowledges divergent forms of perfection in the discernment of both men:

Khiḍr knew that Moses was a Messenger of God, and so paid close attention to whatever he said, so that he might fulfill all the demands of *adab* with the Messenger... When all three incidents had come to pass, [Khiḍr] said, “This is the separation between us.” Moses did not say to him, “Do not do this,” and did not seek his company, knowing the measure of the rank that was occupied by him and which made him turn away his companionship. Moses was then silent and they separated. Contemplate the perfection of these two men, both in knowledge and in fulfilling the demands of divine *adab*, and also the just discernment of Khiḍr in recognizing what Moses possessed in saying, “I have knowledge God hath taught me and which ye know not, and thou hast knowledge God hath taught thee, which I know not.” That Khiḍr should tell Moses this was the balm for the wound inflicted by, “*And how shouldst thou bear patiently that thou hast never encompassed in thy knowledge?*” though he knew the exaltedness of his degree of messengership. That degree was not possessed by Khiḍr. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 265; bracketed clarification inserted by us)

The Qur’ānic story of Moses and the servant is only the cusp of an enormous body of legends that have grown up around the name of Khiḍr within the Islamic tradition, especially within the Sufi tradition. Khiḍr has been as baffling to scholars inside and outside Islam as he

was to Moses. Inside the Islamic tradition, controversies about Khidr have revolved around two central questions: Is Khidr a prophet or a saint? Is he still alive? These have remained vivid and contentious questions in Islamic theology up until the present, with strikingly innovative opinions being published by influential Muslims as recently as the twentieth century. For example, the Pakistani theologian Abū'l-A'ālā Mawdūdī (founder of the Jamā'at-i Islāmī party) has proposed that Khidr was an angel (Franke 2000, 366-368), whereas the Egyptian intellectual Sayyid Quṭb (of the Muslim Brotherhood) went so far as to deny any Qur'ānic basis for the story of Khidr, reducing Khidr to a mere “fantasy” (Franke 2000, 368-369).²⁰¹ In orientalist circles, similarly intractable debates have revolved around questions of Khidr's identity. Orientalists have associated Khidr with Elijah (an identification shared by some Muslim exegetes), Phineas, St. George, Moses' father-in-law Jethro, and the Wandering Jew,²⁰² and they have traced his literary origins to the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Alexander Romance (Omar 1993, 280-282).

Amidst the wide-ranging legends about Khidr and equally wide-ranging approaches to reading these legends, the theme of Khidr's unnatural longevity remains one of the most common denominators. Although, as just noted, Muslim theologians still debate the question of whether or not Khidr is still alive—with recent publications arguing that it is “unislamic” to believe that Khidr is still alive (Franke 2000, 365)—it is common in classical (especially Sufi) literature to attribute some form of deathlessness to Khidr. Some count him—along with Jesus, Elijah, and Idrīs—as one of four recipients of the gift of immortality (Wolper 2011, 122). He is

²⁰¹ The word “fantasy” is our translation of *Hirngespinst* in Patrick Franke's German.

²⁰² The late medieval Christian legend of the Wandering Jew does indeed bear some traits in common with the Khidr legend—but these same traits are more immediately available to medieval Christians in the rumors surrounding the Undying Disciple in the Gospel of John. We would speculate that all three of these legendary figures—the Gospel's Undying Disciple, Khidr, and the Wandering Jew—are part of a complex of overlapping influences.

held not only to be a contemporary of Moses, but also of the Sufis themselves, many of whom claim to have met and been initiated into secret teachings by Khidr.²⁰³ He transcends identification with any particular prophetic era, and thus exceeds the scope of both Mosaic and Muḥammadan Law; at the same time, his longevity makes him well-suited for identification with the Gospel of John's Undying Disciple.

Just as we have suggested in the case of the Undying Disciple, Khidr represents the pole of subsistence in the dialectic of annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*). Paralleling the longstanding Sufi debate surrounding this binary, Khidr has been a figure of some controversy for the Sufis. Although, as we have noted above, many Sufis (notably Ibn al-ʿArabī) have boasted that they have met, been taught by, and been initiated by Khidr, one might imagine that those Sufis who favor the goal of *fanā'* would regard Khidr with a measure of resistance. It is true that, despite widespread respect for Khidr among the Sufis, there is a Sufi tradition of disavowing association with Khidr. For example, according to Julian Baldick, Anṣārī of Herat was told by his master, Kharaqānī (d. 1034 CE), “If you associate with Khidr, then repent of that...” (Baldick 1993, 21). Moreover, both Qushayrī (d. 1074 CE) and Hujwērī (d. ca. 1071 CE) record the claim of the Iraqi Sufi Ibrāhīm al-Khawwās (d. 904 CE):

Al-Khidr [upon whom be peace] met me and asked to keep me company, and I was afraid lest my trust in God might be corrupted by my staying with him. So I parted from him. (Qushayri 1992, 119; cf. 23, where a similar speech is attribute to an anonymous speaker)²⁰⁴

²⁰³ For example, according to Hujwērī, Ibrāhīm ibn Adhām (d. 778 CE): “was a disciple of the Apostle Khidr” (Hujwērī 2000, 103). Hujwērī also relates that “Khidr used to visit [Tirmidhī] every Sunday, and...they conversed with each other” (Hujwērī 2000, 141). See also Julian Baldick's discussion, under the rubric of “Uwaysī” initiation, of certain Central Asian Sufis who claimed to have been initiated by Khidr (Baldick 1993, 42-46). Hagiographical accounts of the life of Rūmī report that while he was in Damascus he was sometimes spotted in the company of Khidr (Lewis 2000, 247), and that Khidr “used to converse regularly with Rumi and ask Rumi for guidance concerning the secret mysteries of truth which remain hidden from this plane of existence” (Lewis 2000, 260)—a boast that raises questions about who the master was and who the disciple was in this relationship.

²⁰⁴ In Hujwērī's telling of this anecdote, Khawwās provides a fuller explanation of his motives: “Not that I desired a better companion, but I feared that I should depend on him rather than on God, and that my trust in God would be

Here, al-Khawwās turns the tables on Khidr; whereas Khidr is famed for withdrawing from Moses’s company with the words, “This is the parting between me and thee” (Qur’ān 18:78), the Sufi takes the initiative of withdrawing from Khidr’s company.

Though the reasons given in these eleventh-century records for rejecting Khidr’s company are not explicitly connected to Khidr’s role as a symbol of *baqā’*, this connection later becomes manifest in the poetry of ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1220 CE). Early in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Speech of the Birds* (verse 801-819), as the various birds are offering their excuses not to accept the hoopoe’s invitation to seek the Simurgh, the parrot protests that his desire for Khidr trumps all:

I...
Am from desire for the Water of Khizr pining...
Would that I were able the Water of Life to drink!
I can’t muster strength for the Simurgh’s sake...
(‘Aṭṭār 1998, 75)

In reply, the hoopoe reprimands the parrot, highlighting the folly of his priorities by telling the tale of a man who, devoted solely to God, rejected Khidr’s companionship:

Khizr addressed him, “O Perfect Man
Are you looking to this, that you might be my comrade?”
He answered, “With you my affair wouldn’t benefit:
You’ve drunk the Water of Life habitually,
That your life might be forever prolonged.
My aim is that I might be rid of life,
For without the Beloved I cannot bear it.
While you’re halted in life’s preservation,
I’m everyday poised to sacrifice it.
Better it were that, like birds eluding a snare,
We far from each other be, so Farewell!”
(‘Aṭṭār 1998, 76)

impaired by consorting with him, and that in consequence of performing a work of supererogation I should fail to perform a duty incumbent on me” (Hujwārī 2000, 153-154). But Khawwās’ motives are explained differently elsewhere in Hujwārī’s book: Khawwās is asked about “the reality of faith,” and he points to this exchange with Khidr as his answer to the question (Hujwārī 2000, 289-290), and Khawwās is said to have refused Khidr because “he was unwilling that his feelings should be engaged by anyone except God” (Hujwārī 2000, 342).

Even among Sufis who, on the contrary, view a visitation from Khidr as a grace rather than a snare, there are some who consider Khidr's longevity to be a snare to Khidr himself. Thus Tirmidhi (d. 932 CE) writes of the longing and loneliness implicit in Khidr's interminable sojourn:

And they [the friends of God] converse with Khaḍir who wanders across the earth on land and sea, in the plains and in the mountains, searching for someone like himself out of passionate longing for him. Khaḍir's relationship to the Friends of God is a strange one, indeed! (Halman 2013, 204)

In these varying perspectives on the blessings and curses of immortality, we may have discovered more than an inert relic of a dimly-remembered tradition; as the signifier and bearer of live theological controversies, Khidr appears to have perpetuated the question of the Sufi's highest goal, giving the question fresh vigor within a new imaginative context.

Consistent with Khidr's image as a symbol of life, his name frequently evokes the image of thriving verdure. The name *Khaḍir*—a variant on *Khidr*—means “green, verdant; verdure, greenery; young green crop” (Wehr and Cowan 1976). Thus, in her article, “Khidr and the Changing Frontiers of the Medieval World,” Ethel Sara Wolper introduces Khidr in these terms:

From his first named appearance in Muslim sources, he is described as a transformer of landscapes. According to an often-cited ḥadīth, “He sat on the barren earth and made it green.” (Wolper 2011, 123)

To this image of transforming the soil—and its ready assimilation to fertility figures in other cultures—Wolper lists two additional key features of Khidr's symbolic significance:

A second characteristic that made Khidr of such importance in this period is his ability to understand and explain change. Modern literary scholars describe him as a figure who roams the earth invisibly and appears at unexpected moments to serve as a *deus ex machina* revealing the meaning of enigmatic places and events. The third is his ability to take on different forms. This last characteristic makes him both difficult to recognize and easily assimilated into different environments. (Wolper 2011, 123)

According to Wolper, these three features “inform Khidr’s role as a symbol of contact and conversion” (Wolper 2011, 123), especially evident in his tendency to grow and spread across borders between cultures.

Especially relevant to our discussion, Wolper points out multiple cases of artistic portrayals of Khidr that merge imagery from Christianity and Islam. For example, starting in the twelfth century, Khidr was consolidated with Christian saints like St. George and St. Theodore in frontier regions:

This new type of Khidr took material form in Anatolia and the Levant as Khidr composite buildings located in frontier zones. Some of these are described with names fusing Khidr to other figures, while others explain Khidr as a Muslim version of a Christian saint. (Wolper 2011, 137)

While Wolper cites artistic examples dating well into the development of Islamic history, we will suggest that the hybrids Khidr cultivates between Christianity and Islam might have older and deeper roots.

In addition to Khidr’s association with greenery, we should note his association with the “water of life.” Khidr is undying because he has drunk the water of life, and this motif is a standard one for Khidr; it accompanies him in his literary appearances more often than not. A very typical example can be seen in the following couplet from the *Mathnawī* (VI 127-128) of Rūmī:

Every plant that turns toward the spirit drinks from the fountain of life, like Khidr.
Then when the spirit turns toward the Beloved, it spreads its bedroll in everlasting life.
(Chittick 1983, 78)

The prevalence of this trope among the diverse tellings of Khidr’s story suggests a possible approach to resolving the academic question of this figure’s historical origin: find the source of the “water of life,” and we might find the historical source of Khidr.

Of course, the character of Khidr probably springs from more than one source. He may well have been from the outset a composite figure, absorbing formerly distinct and separate personages into a single identity—just as Wolper observes that Khidr continues to absorb new elements in later centuries. In any case, providing a comprehensive theory of Khidr’s origins will clearly be beyond our means. The vast scope of the topic of Khidr has been illustrated by Patrick Franke’s book-length study of Khidr, *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im Traditionellen Islam* (Franke 2000), a magisterial volume that draws on a wealth of source material, reviewing theories regarding Khidr’s meaning and historical origins, as well as gathering 151 reports of meetings with Khidr over the centuries. A similar illustration is Hugh Talat Halman’s recent book, *Where the Two Seas Meet: The Qur’anic Story of al-Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance* (Halman 2013), which spans across a broad spread of literary sources. Our ambition here is not so comprehensive; our approach in this brief discussion will be selective and circumscribed. Rather than attempting to trace all the various tributaries that have fed into the broad current of Khidr’s story, we will limit ourselves here to tracing one major artery, the trope of the water of life. We hope that this will bring us closer to one of Khidr’s primal sources, a Christian source that might imply a connection between Khidr and the Johannine Undying Disciple.

Scholars have suggested diverse origins for the motif of the water of life. Some have traced Khidr and the water of life all the way back to the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*; see, for example, the article on Khidr in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, which recounts the salient points of similarity thus:

Overcome with melancholy at the death of his friend Engidu, the hero Gilgamesh sets out on a series of travels to look for his ancestor Utnapishtim (Khasisatra, Xisouthros) who lives at the mouth of the rivers and who has been given eternal life. Gilgamesh wants to

ask him about the plant of life which will save man from the power of death. (Wensinck 2007)

Yet despite the evident influence of *Gilgamesh* on the Hebrew scriptures, we wonder if the epic's provenance might be too remote chronologically from the development of Islam to have had much direct influence on the formation of the Khidr myth.

More convincing might be the connection drawn between the myth of Khidr and the Alexander Romance. Again, the article on Khidr in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* identifies their shared features:

The fish episode (with which we are here concerned), which shows Alexander on the search for the spring of life, is found in greatest detail in Syriac literature, in the Lay of Alexander... Alexander is accompanied by his cook Andreas... During the laborious journey through the land of darkness Andreas on one occasion was washing a salted fish in a spring; the contact with the water made the fish live again and it swims away. Andreas jumped in after it and thus gained immortality. When he told Alexander his adventure, the latter at once realised that this was the well of life. All attempts to find it again failed: Alexander is denied the immortality which becomes the lot of the unfortunate cook, who does not know what to do with it. (Wensinck 2007)

We are persuaded that the Alexander Romance did indeed exert an influence on the development of the Khidr story. (This is particularly evident in Qur'ān 18:60-64, which opens the passage that is traditionally regarded as the *locus classicus* of the Khidr story: "When we took refuge in the rock, then I forgot the fish...and so it took its way into the sea in a manner marvellous.") But if, upon arriving at the Alexander Romance, we halt our search for Khidr's origins, we may fall short of our goal. The version of the Alexander Romance with which we are concerned took shape in a Syriac-speaking Christian milieu in the centuries leading up to the advent of Islam; both this romance and the Islamic myth of Khidr may point back to an earlier Christian precedent, a precedent that has exerted its influence both directly and indirectly (via the Alexander Romance) on the unfolding development of the Khidr story.

We would argue that this precedent might be found in the Gospel of John and early Christian literature closely associated with that Gospel. The theme of the water of life enjoys special prominence in Johannine literature, reflecting and duplicating the Undying Disciple's functions as a sign of abundant life; this suggests that Johannine literature might be one among multiple sources for the *Khiḏr* legend. By "Johannine literature," I have in mind—in addition to the Gospel of John—the Book of Revelation (which explicitly attributes itself to John and is thus traditionally regarded as coming from the same hand as the Gospel) and the apocryphal Odes of Solomon, a collection of early or middle second-century Christian hymns composed in Syriac.²⁰⁵ Both of these latter texts employ the Johannine formula equating Jesus with the Word;²⁰⁶ both also seem to have seized upon and expanded the Johannine theme of the water of life.

The expression "living water" appears in two places in the Gospel of John.²⁰⁷ The first of these appearances is situated in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, where

²⁰⁵ According to Charlesworth, most scholars date the Odes to the middle of the second century; but Charlesworth himself calculates that "the most probable date is not far from 100 CE" (Charlesworth 1998, 22-23).

²⁰⁶ The most obvious (but by no means the only) resonance in these texts with the Gospel of John is their apparent designation of Jesus as "the Word." See Revelation 19:13, "He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God" (RSV). See also the 41st Ode of Solomon, vv. 13-15:

The Son of the Most High appeared
In the perfection of His Father;
And light dawned from the Word
That was beforetime in Him;
The Messiah is truly one;
And He was known before the foundations of the world,
That He might save souls for ever by the truth of His name...
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 400)

²⁰⁷ In addition to these two appearances of "living water," water has symbolic value in two other passages in the Gospel and First Epistle of John: "Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:5 RSV), and, "This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood" (1 John 5:6 RSV).

it is contrasted with the heritage of the Hebrew patriarchs—implying, perhaps, that the concept has no precedent in the earlier Hebrew tradition.

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?” Jesus said to her, “Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:10-14 RSV)²⁰⁸

The second instance of this expression, on the other hand, suggests that there is a precedent for “living water” in “the scripture”:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38 RSV)

But this latter quotation poses an intriguing problem for interpreters, because the statement, “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water,” is not to be found in the Hebrew scriptures. Thus, as Raymond E. Brown has noted, “commentators have had to use a certain ingenuity in tracking down passages that are at least similar” (Brown 1966, 321). Given the scarcity of the phrase “living water” in the Hebrew scriptures,²⁰⁹ this phrase—with its variant, “water of life”—may perhaps be regarded as a distinctive and characteristic marker of Johannine theology.

²⁰⁸ In this section, because we are stepping back from our Akbarian commentary and inquiring into the possible origins of Khidr, we will refer to the original Greek text of the Gospel of John. The English translations presented here will come from the Revised Standard Version.

²⁰⁹ The only exact match in the Hebrew scriptures is Zechariah 14:8, “On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea...”

As far as we know, the nearest pre-Christian Jewish anticipation of this Johannine theme is found in one of the Thanksgiving Hymns that were discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the revised edition of Geza Vermes’ translation, the trope of water runs through Hymn 18 (Formerly 14), including: “...they took root/and sent out their roots to the watercourse/that its stem might be open to the living waters/and be one with the everlasting spring;” and “But Thou, O my God, hast put into my mouth as it were rain for all [those who thirst]/and a fount of living waters which shall not fail./When they are opened they shall not run dry...” (Vermes 2004, 284-285). Vermes says that this collection of Thanksgiving Hymns “probably attained its final shape during the last pre-Christian century” (Vermes 2004, 250), and this particular hymn appears as if it may be a forerunner to certain of the Odes of Solomon.

In addition, this phrase turns up repeatedly in the Book of Revelation (7:17; 21:6; and 22:1). But perhaps the most lavish use of this trope in early Christian literature is to be found in the Odes of Solomon; this is especially interesting given the importance of these Odes to our understanding of the Gospel of John. The origin and nature of the Odes have been and continue to be subject to controversy, giving rise to divergent and wide-ranging theories. Among these, James H. Charlesworth and R. A. Culpepper have asserted, “The *Odes of Solomon* are a neglected key for unlocking the historical and theological enigmas of John” (Charlesworth 1998, 232). Having noted that the Odes had been used extensively in studies of the Gospel of John in the first half of the twentieth century, followed by a decline of this trend in the second half of the century, Charlesworth and Culpepper recount a list of scholars (H. Leclercq, J. Wellhausen, C. Bruston, M.-J. Lagrange, C. F. Burney, F. M. Braun, R. Schnackenburg, J. H. Bernard, R. E. Brown, W. H. Raney, R. Bultmann, and others) who have suggested that the Odes depended on the Gospel of John or vice versa (Charlesworth 1998, 251-256). Charlesworth and Culpepper argue in favor of rediscovering the importance of the Odes to Johannine research.

Among several important shared themes in the Gospel and the Odes, Charlesworth and Culpepper highlight the concept of “living water” (Charlesworth 1998, 247-252). For example, the entirety of Ode 30 is devoted to this theme:

Fill ye water for yourselves from the living fountain of the Lord:
For it has been opened to you:
And come all ye thirsty and take a draught;
And rest by the fountain of the Lord.
For fair it is and pure;
And it gives rest to the soul.
Much sweeter is its water than honey;
And the honeycomb of bees is not to be compared with it.
For it flows from the lips of the Lord,
And from the heart of the Lord is its name.
And it came unlimited and invisible;
And until it was set in the midst they did not know it.

Blessed are they who have drunk therefrom;
And rested thereby.
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 366)²¹⁰

Moreover, the Johannine theme of enduring life converges in the Odes with the theme of resurrection in the symbol of the water of life. For example, in this excerpt from Ode 6, the water is said to revive both the spirits and the bodies of those who are on the point of death:

All the thirsty upon earth were given to drink (of it):
And thirst was done away and quenched:
For from the Most High the draught was given.
Blessed then are the ministers of that draught,
Who have been entrusted with that water of His:
They have assuaged the dry lips,
And the will that had fainted they have raised up:
And souls that were near departing
They have held back from death:
And limbs that had fallen
They have straightened and set up:
They gave strength to their coming
And light to their eyes.
For everyone knew them in the Lord,
And they lived by the water an eternal life.
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 233)

There is also a strong suggestion in Ode 11 that the water grants perpetual life, as even the water itself is described as undying:

And speaking waters drew near my lips
From the fountain of the Lord plenteously.
And I drank and was inebriated
With the living water that doth not die...
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 266)

²¹⁰ This Ode echoes the invitations to the thirsty in Revelation 22:17 and in John 7:37-39. As for the latter passage, the Ode's expression—the water “flows from the lips of the Lord”—finds its counterpart in the Gospel's strange notion of living water flowing out from within the body of the believer (literally, “out of his belly;” the Greek text has *koilia* and the Alexandrian Vulgate has *batn*). Also compare Saying 108 in the Gospel of Thomas, according to which Jesus said, “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that person” (Meyer 1992, 61).

As Ode 11 continues, it ties the Odist's expectation of perpetual life to the symbol of vegetative life:

And from above He gave me rest without corruption;
And I became like the land which blossoms and rejoices in its fruits...
And I said, Blessed, O Lord, are they
That are planted in thy land,
And that have a place in thy Paradise,
And that grow in the growth of thy trees...
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 266-267)

Similarly, Ode 38 connects the image of immortal vegetation with irrigation by the Lord's water:

And [the Truth] became to me a Haven of Salvation;
And set me on the arms of immortal life...
For He set the root:
And watered it and fixed it and blessed it:
And its fruits will be for ever.
It struck deep and sprang up and spread wide,
And it was full and was enlarged.
And the Lord alone was glorified,
In His planting and His husbandry:
In His care and in the blessing of His lips;
In the beautiful planting of His right hand.
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 391-392)

The complementarity of life-giving water with abundant vegetation in the Odes further recalls

Jesus' words from the Gospel:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5 RSV)

The dual themes of resurrection and enduring life are underscored frequently in the Odes—too frequently to be dealt with comprehensively here. What we wish to note here is the multiplicity of parallels between the Odes and *Khidr*. *Khidr* has been viewed not only as a symbol of unbounded life, water, and verdure; according to Hugh Talat Halman, *Khidr* is also as a figure of resurrection. Halman argues that *Khidr* embraces and reiterates the theme of resurrection in two Qur'ānic stories that bracket the story of Moses and *Khidr* in *Sūra* 18:

Within the Qur'ān's chapter of the Cave (Sūrat al-Kahf, 18), the story of Moses' journey with al-Khiḍr is complemented by two narratives popular in late antiquity: the story of the Companions of the Cave (*ashāb al-kahf*) (18:9-26) and the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn, often identified with Alexander the Great, which immediately follows the narrative of al-Khiḍr (18:83-101). Together these stories treat themes of resurrection and intimations of immortality. The story of the Companions of the Cave suggests God's power to resurrect life; the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn bears a relationship to the legend of Alexander's quest for the waters of eternal life. The prevailing classical and popular identification of al-Khiḍr as Alexander's deputy and cook, who discovers and drinks the waters of eternal life, coupled with the sequential order of the stories of al-Khiḍr and Dhū l-Qarnayn in the Qur'ān, creates a juxtaposition that invites an intertextual examination of the two narratives. (Halman 2013, 44-45)

Halman also substantiates the connection between Khiḍr and resurrection in a *hadīth* narrating a story of Dajjāl, the Islamic version of the Antichrist:

The Antichrist, who is unable to enter Medina, will be visited by one of the best men of the community, who will tell the Antichrist that he recognized him. The Antichrist will then ask if the man's opinion would change if he were to kill and restore a human being to life. The virtuous man will say, "No." The Antichrist will then kill and raise a man back to life. The virtuous caller will maintain his opinion. In a second attempt, the Antichrist will fail to kill the man again. One of the narrators, Abū Ishāq, explains that the man will be al-Khiḍr. Here again the death motif of the Antichrist killing and resurrecting al-Khiḍr the first time, but failing to kill him the second time underscores the story's themes of death and immortality. (Halman 2013, 66)

We would supplement Halman's illustrations of Khiḍr's association with resurrection by citing an additional Qur'ānic story. According to this story, God demonstrates the reality of resurrection to a skeptic by killing the skeptic and restoring him to life, turning the skeptic into a proof to himself of the resurrection to come:

Or such as he who passed by a city that was fallen down upon its turrets; he said, 'How shall God give life to this now it is dead?' So God made him die a hundred years, then He raised him up, saying, 'How long hast thou tarried?' He said, 'I have tarried a day, or part of a day.' Said He, 'Nay; thou hast tarried a hundred years. Look at thy food and drink—it has not spoiled; and look at thy ass. So We would make thee a sign for the people. And look at the bones; how We shall set them up, and then clothe them with flesh.' So, when it was made clear to him, he said, 'I know that God is powerful over everything.' (Qur'an 2:259)

This Qur'ānic story does not tell us the name of the skeptic who returns from the dead as “a sign for the people” (and as a sign for himself). However, Islamic tradition frequently gives him the name ‘Uzayr. This name, in fact, occurs only once in the Qur'ān—at 9:30 (which we will examine below). But Mahmoud Ayoub notes regarding the resurrected skeptic, “According to early authorities going back to Ibn ‘Abbās, who in turn related it on the authority of Ka‘b al-Aḥbār, the man was ‘Uzayr” (Ayoub 1986, 7). While Ayoub remarks that other names have been proposed by the tradition, the name of ‘Uzayr seems to have predominated; as Ronald Nettler remarks, “even a cursory survey of the main works of *tafsīr*” will confirm this (Nettler 2003, 138). Despite the frequency of this identification, the twelfth-century Iranian scholar Zamakhsharī, in his commentary on Qur'ān 2:259, includes a second possible identification the resurrected skeptic. Zamakhsharī says that he is “‘Uzayr or al-Khiḍr” (Nettler 2003, 389)—hinting, perhaps, that there is a link between ‘Uzayr and Khiḍr, further extending Khiḍr’s association with resurrection. To understand this possible link better, we might benefit from taking a closer look at ‘Uzayr.

‘Uzayr is typically equated in the Islamic tradition with the Old Testament scribe Ezra, who figures prominently in the story of the Israelites’ return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. However, the equation of ‘Uzayr with Ezra has generated considerable confusion, because the Qur'ānic ‘Uzayr has so little in common with the Old Testament scribe. As far as we know, no pre-Qur'ānic precedent regards the Biblical Ezra as having been resurrected from the dead. Perhaps even more baffling is the one passage in the Qur'ān that uses the name ‘Uzayr:

The Jews say, ‘Ezra [‘Uzayr] is the son of God’; the Christians say, ‘The Messiah is the son of God.’ That is the utterance of their mouths, conforming with the unbelievers before them. God assail them! How they are perverted! They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God, and the Messiah, Mary’s son... (Qur'ān 9:30-31)

This passage is traditionally held to be a criticism of idolatrous claims made by both Jews and Christians; but the specific accusation against the Jews has resulted in substantial puzzlement, since it does not seem to match any documented Jewish belief. This puzzlement may be decomposed into two distinct questions: Why would the Jews of Muḥammad's time single out any human being as deserving the epithet "the son of God"? Why would anyone single out Ezra in particular as deserving this epithet?

According to Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, accusations of idolatry, in both the Qur'ān and the later Islamic traditions, regard the Christians (and not the Jews) as the standard targets of criticism:

The name 'Uzayr does not usually appear in these contexts, however, whereas Jesus, son of Mary, or Al-Masīḥ, is mentioned in many of these polemic verses...In later Islamic literature as well, usually only the Christians are accused of worshipping a human being. (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 52)

To solve the puzzle of Qur'ān 9:30's mention of the Jews, various academic attempts have proposed alternatives to the identification of 'Uzayr with Ezra. In 1924, Paul Casanova suggested that the name 'Uzayr may have originated as a misreading of 'Uzīl, which is an alternative name of the angel Azazel; along the way, he dismissed as impossible Mohammed Magdi Bey's 1908 thesis that 'Uzayr is, in fact, the Egyptian God Osiris (Casanova 1924, 359-360). More recently, Gordon Newby has argued that Enoch is the missing link between Ezra and the title "son of God." Newby (Newby 1988, 59-61) cites an apocryphal tradition that Ezra, like Enoch, did not die but was translated alive to God, as well as popular stories that Enoch was transformed into the angel Meṭatron and the fact that Meṭatron is the chief of angels known as the "sons of God" (*Bene Elohīm*). While we are impressed with the chain of connections that Newby has strung between Ezra and "the sons of God," we believe that his thesis runs into trouble when it comes to the resurrection story in Qur'ān 2:259. In fact, the narrative that Newby

has pieced together—namely, that Ezra was spared death altogether and was perhaps transformed into an angel—would seem to represent the polar opposite of the post-death return to earthly life depicted in 2:259.²¹¹

We will dare to jump into this fray and venture our own thesis regarding the origin of ‘Uzayr, suggesting a connection to the Gospel of John. In our effort to make our thesis credible, we will put it to the same test that we have applied to Newby’s thesis: does it suit *both* Qur’ānic passages—2:259 and 9:30-31? It is incumbent upon us to ask whether we can make sense of the Islamic tradition that ‘Uzayr has been restored from the dead as well as the claim that “‘Uzayr is the son of God.” We will have to resort to some speculation to answer this question in the affirmative; but we hope that our case will prove to be more compact, at least as coherent, and no more speculative than Newby’s.

Our thesis will rest upon the observation that ‘*Uzayr* is the diminutive form of ‘*Āzar* (Haywood and Nahmad 1965, 341); ‘*Āzar* is the Arabic form of the name Lazarus (Catafago 1858)²¹²—that is, the name of the disciple raised by Jesus from the dead in the Gospel of John Chapter 11.²¹³ Thus ‘Uzayr could be read as “little Lazarus”, and this diminutive could be

²¹¹ This is not to deny that these two fates—resurrection and direct translation to heaven—are sometimes confused or interchanged with each other. There are examples of figures to whom, on different occasions, both fates have been attributed. A particularly stark example is that of Jesus: whereas Christians have held that Jesus died on the cross and was bodily resurrected from the grave, Muslims (and some Gnostic Christians) have held that Jesus bypassed death altogether and was raised directly to heaven. But even the traditional Christian narrative includes Jesus’ ascension into heaven shortly after his resurrection, facilitating the transformation of this narrative into one that resembles the fate of Enoch. The narrative in Qur’ān 2:259, however, gives no hint of ascension into heaven; the destiny depicted in that verse is clearly a post-death return to earth.

²¹² ‘*Āzar* is the form found in the Alexandrian Vulgate as well as in other Islamic Arabic sources.

²¹³ It is also the name of the beggar in Luke 16:19-31. In Luke’s story, the dead rich man in Hades begs Abraham to send the beggar Lazarus back from the dead. The story culminates in this exchange:

And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:30-31 RSV)

understood either as an expression of endearment (on the part of the Christians of Arabia) or as an expression of contempt (on the part of their Jewish antagonists) (Haywood and Nahmad 1965, 341). If we compare the resurrected man in Qur’ān 2:259 with Lazarus in the Gospel of John, the resemblance is immediately evident; while Lazarus was no skeptic, we might understand how Muslims might have conflated the two resurrected men. Moreover, the fact that the resurrected man in the Qur’ān serves as “a sign for the people” recalls the way Lazarus is portrayed as a sign for the people (John 11:44-48, 12:9-11, 12:17-19). It remains, however, to ask why, according to Qur’ān 9:30, the Jews would have argued, “Lazarus is the son of God.” In our effort to propose a sensible explanation, we will differ from previous scholars (both traditional and academic), who read Qur’ān 9:30 as a report of an alleged Jewish doctrine. We would speculate, rather, that the Qur’ānic verse records a polemical move made by the Jews of Arabia in their debates with their Christian neighbors; that is, we imagine that the Jews might have said, “Lazarus was the son of God,” not as a matter of Jewish doctrine, but as an argumentative tactic—a *reductio ad absurdum*—employed to expose a fallacy in Christian apologetics.

In his translation of Ibn Ishāq’s biography of Muḥammad, A. Guillaume remarks upon this very practice in debates between the Jews of Medina and the new Muslim community. Ibn Ishāq writes:

Abū Bakr went into a Jewish school and found a good many men gathered round a certain Finḥās, one of their learned rabbis, and another rabbi called Ashya’. Abū Bakr called on the former to fear God and become a Muslim because he knew that Muḥammad was the apostle of God who had brought the truth from Him and that they would find it written in the Torah and the Gospel. Finḥās replied: ‘We are not poor compared to Allah but He is poor compared to us. We do not humble ourselves to Him as He humbles Himself to us; we are independent of Him while He needs us. Were He independent of us He would not ask us to lend Him our money as your master pretends....’ (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 263)

In both the Gospels of Luke and John, the name “Lazarus” is associated with resurrection—in Luke with the failed proposal to bring Lazarus from the dead, in John with the actual restoration of Lazarus from the dead.

Guillaume remarks on the debating tactic employed by Finḥās:

The key to this seemingly blasphemous utterance is in the words ‘as your master pretends’. Later Muslim scholars would have called it an *ilzām*, a form of the *argumentum ad absurdum* in which an opponent’s proposition is adopted and followed to its (absurd) conclusion. (Ibn Ishāq 1955, 263, footnote 2)

To present one further piece of support for our thesis, we would note that the Muslim scholar Ṭabarī (839-923 CE) stated that this same rabbi Finḥās was the only Jew to have claimed, “‘Uzayr is the son of God” (Lazarus-Yafeh 2007). We might thus speculate that Finḥās’ statement amounts to a challenge to the Christian doctrine that Jesus was the unique son of God; if Christians argue that Jesus was “designated son of God...by his resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4 RSV), Finḥās might have argued that, by the same logic, Lazarus was the son of God, undermining the Christian insistence that Jesus was unique.

If this speculative connection between ‘Uzayr and Lazarus is solid—or at least as solid as previous theses intended to account for ‘Uzayr—might we also succeed in connecting Khiḍr with Lazarus? Here we are on shakier ground. We have noted Halman’s suggestion that Khiḍr is a symbol of resurrection; we have also noted Zamakhsharī’s comment that the resurrected skeptic is “‘Uzayr or al-Khiḍr.” The only additional piece of evidence we have unearthed to connect Khiḍr with Lazarus is another etymological argument. As we have noted, *Khiḍr*—or in the form *Khaḍir*—means “green” in Arabic. An alternative etymology, however, has been offered by the early twentieth-century Dutch Jewish theologian, Meijer de Hond. In his 1914 publication on the topic of Khiḍr, *Beiträge zur Erklärung der Elḥiḍr-legende und von Ḳorān*, de Hond has argued that *al-Khiḍr* (or *Elḥiḍr* in de Hond’s transcription) is an Arabized form of the Hebrew name *Eliezer* or *Elazar* (de Hond 1914, 2). De Hond’s intention was to connect Khiḍr with Abraham’s servant, Eliezer of Damascus, in Genesis 15:2 (de Hond 1914, 5); but we might notice that Lazarus (or Greek *Lazaros*) is a Hellenized form of Hebrew *’el-’āzār* (Freedman 2000, 796), or

Elazar. If we accept de Hond's etymological analysis, but apply this analysis to a different Biblical figure, we might speculate that Khidr, like 'Uzayr, has old roots in the Gospel of John's story of Lazarus.

While tracing these leads to Lazarus, the goal of our quest has been to find our way back to the Gospel's ostensible author, the Undying Disciple. Our series of links is admittedly growing long and increasingly tenuous; we will, however, add one more link, asking whether readers in the Islamic or pre-Islamic milieu might ever have understood the Gospel author not to be John, but Lazarus. In his book *The Beloved Disciple* (Charlesworth 1995, 185-192), Charlesworth reviews various arguments that have been presented in favor of Lazarus' identification with the alleged Evangelist, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Charlesworth himself does not himself accept this identification, but he lists thirteen Biblical scholars (from 1900 to 1992) who have advocated it. While we are unaware of any scholars advancing this thesis prior to 1900, our review of the argument in favor of the thesis might suggest that the thesis could have arisen before—especially outside of the Church, where readers would have been less bound by Christian tradition.

The core argument in favor of this identification is built upon the Gospel's repeated professions of Jesus' love of Lazarus. We have already counted five cases in which the Gospel refers to the Evangelist as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20); in two of these cases, the Gospel adds that this disciple reclined upon the breast of Jesus at the Last Supper (John 13:23; 21:20). In Chapter 11, two chapters prior to the account of the Last Supper, the reader is first introduced to the character of Lazarus of Bethany, as well as his two sisters, Mary and Martha. This chapter opens with the following words:

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ...So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." (John 11:1, 3 RSV)

It is instructive that the messenger need not name Lazarus; he simply describes him to Jesus as “he whom you love,” and the message is understood.

This fact alone might mark Lazarus as a candidate for identification with the Beloved Disciple; but the Gospel goes on to drive the point home. Two verses later, we are informed that:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. (John 11:5 RSV)

Although this Gospel describes Jesus as the manifestation of God’s love to the entire world (John 3: 16), these are the only three people, anywhere in the New Testament, who are singled out by name as having been loved by Jesus.²¹⁴ The singling out of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus would be redundant if Jesus’ love for them were not somehow distinctive and exceptional; and if repetition constitutes emphasis, then Jesus’ love for Lazarus is emphasized above that for his sisters. For we are told only once that Jesus loved Martha and Mary, but this is the second time in rapid succession that we have been told that he loved Lazarus. The Gospel goes on to remind us twice more before the chapter’s end.

The third occurrence arrives a few verses later, where Jesus himself calls Lazarus “beloved”:

Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep. (John 11:11 RSV)

The words “our friend” might have been translated as “our beloved.” In Greek, the words are *ho philos hēmōn* in Greek, and the Alexandrian Vulgate uses the word *ḥabībunā*; in both Greek and Arabic, the word “friend” is derived from a verb meaning “love.”

Lastly, Jesus’ love for Lazarus is underscored dramatically at the latter’s funeral:

²¹⁴ Mark 10:21 informs us that, when approached by a wealthy inquirer, Jesus looked upon him and loved him; yet this rich man remains anonymous.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:33-36 RSV)²¹⁵

Chapter 11 reaches its climax when Jesus expresses his exceptional love for Lazarus by raising him from the dead—a singular and unprecedented miracle in this Gospel, matched only later by Jesus’ own resurrection.

The following chapter, Chapter 12, commences with a description of a supper served by Martha at the home of the three siblings’ home, six days prior to the Last Supper. The Gospel tells us, incidentally, that Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Jesus (John 12:2). This might at first seem to be a throwaway detail; but on closer inspection it might appear to prepare us, along with the repeated avowals of Jesus’ love for him in the previous chapter, to recognize Lazarus as the Beloved Disciple reclining on Jesus’ breast at the Last Supper (John 13:23).

We would ask then what the consequences of identifying the Beloved Disciple with Lazarus might be. How might one read the Gospel differently as a result? One outcome might be that the rumor of the Beloved Disciple’s deathlessness in Chapter 21 would be more coherent. As common sense and the Epistle to the Hebrews hold, “it is appointed for men to die once” (Hebrews 9:27 RSV). Given the fact that Lazarus has already died once, and has already been granted a resurrection like that promised to all believers, it is hardly surprising that suspicions might arise regarding his insusceptibility to a second death.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Note that in the Greek version of the Gospel of John, the verbs *phileō* and *agapaō* (both meaning “love”) are used with respect to both “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and Lazarus. With respect to “the disciple whom Jesus loved”, *phileō* is used in John 20:2; *agapaō* is used in John 13:23; 19:26; 21:7; and 21:20. With respect to Lazarus, *phileō* (or *philos*) is used in 11:3; 11:11; and 11:36; *agapaō* is used in 11:5. In every instance of the Alexandrian Vulgate’s versions of these verses, the Arabic verb *ḥabba* and its cognates are used.

Moreover, this identification might enrich our thesis that the Beloved Disciple could serve as a visible representative of Jesus, fulfilling Thomas' requirement to continue witnessing Jesus' resurrected body. From the Thomastic perspective, the glory of the embodied Word cannot be translated to the spoken word, much less to the written word. Nor can that glory be translated from body to spirit. Yet perhaps it can be translated from body to body—from one resurrected body to another. Thus Lazarus could remain as both an eyewitness and a visible testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, long after Jesus has departed from this world. The Gospel might hint at this possibility if we read its crucifixion account through the lens that equates the Beloved Disciple with Lazarus:

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" (John 19:26-27 RSV)

On the one hand, Lazarus might rightly regard Jesus' mother as his own mother, as he owes his life to Jesus and Jesus owes his life to his mother. On the other hand, directing his mother's attention to Lazarus and ordering her, "Behold your son!", Jesus may be extending a powerful

²¹⁶ Father John Bethancourt at Holy Trinity Orthodox Church (an Antiochian Orthodox Church Archdiocese of North America) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, has shared with me that "the Orthodox consider the case of Lazarus' death to be different in kind from the other deaths and resuscitations that took place in other parts of the scriptures—which are also miraculous, to be sure, but in the category of what we might now call 'near death experiences'. The four days was considered to be a complete and final separation of the soul from the body and his resurrection foretells the general resurrection of the body and the soul which will come at the 'great and fearful Second Coming'" (personal communication). Father Bethancourt supports this claim by quoting several hymns from the Troparion of the Feast, sung on both Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday:

Who has ever known or heard of a man raised from the dead, when his corpse already stank? Elijah and Elisha raised the dead, yet not from the tomb or four days after death.

Joining dust to spirit, O Word, by Thy word in the beginning Thou hast breathed into the clay a living soul. And now by Thy word Thou has raised up Thy friend from corruption and from the depth of the earth.

By raising Lazarus from the dead before Thy Passion,
Thou didst confirm the universal resurrection, O Christ God!
Like the children with the palms of victory,
we cry out to Thee, O Vanquisher of Death:
Hosanna in the highest!

consolation to his mother as she watches her son perish on the cross. Lazarus has already served as visible sign to the people of Jesus' power to overcome death, activating faith in the general resurrection—from Lazarus' sister Martha (John 11:23-27) to the multitudes responding to the report:

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him; but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." (John 11:44-48 RSV)

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came, not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus also to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. (John 12:9-11 RSV)

The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead bore witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see that you can do nothing; look, the world has gone after him." (John 12:17-19 RSV)

Lazarus can be seen as the fullest and most immediate expression of the resurrection, prefiguring Jesus' own emergence from the grave. In similar fashion, as Jesus' mother watches him bleed on the cross, his words to her, "Woman, behold your son!", might be interpreted as meaning, "Take comfort. Just as Lazarus has risen from the dead, so too will I, your son, rise from the dead."

Beyond the Gospel of John, we would note two other indications in the early Christian tradition that Lazarus stood as prefiguring Jesus' own resurrection. One of these, an apocryphal account of Christ's descent into hell, has come down to us in slightly different forms (in Greek and Latin versions) as the *Acts of Pilate*. Some scholars date the account back to the fifth or sixth century CE (Elliott 1993, 165). Included in this account is an anxious debate, immediately prior to Christ's death on the cross, between Satan "the heir of darkness, son of perdition" and the "all-

devouring and insatiable Hades.” Satan, anticipating victory, exhorts Hades to prepare to receive and secure the dead Jesus; but Hades nervously balks at the notion that he can secure a man who can heal the sick and even raise the dead:

If then he freed others from the grave, how and with what power will he be held by us? A short time ago I devoured a certain dead man called Lazarus, and soon afterwards one of the living drew him up forcibly from my entrails with only a word. And I think it is the one of whom you speak. If, therefore, we receive him here, I fear lest we run the risk of losing the others also. For, behold, I see that all those whom I have devoured from the beginning of the world are disquieted. My belly is in pain. Lazarus who was snatched from me before seems to me no good sign. For not like a dead man, but like an eagle he flew away from me, so quickly did the earth cast him out. Therefore I adjure you by your gifts and mine, do not bring him here. For I believe that he comes here to raise all the dead. And I tell you this: By the darkness which surrounds us, if you bring him here, none of the dead will be left for me. (Elliott 1993, 187)²¹⁷

From the point of view of Hades, the resurrection of Lazarus is “no good sign.” As in the Gospel of John, Hades’ dialogue with Satan underscores Lazarus’ role as a sign of Jesus’ forthcoming resurrection; but to a greater degree than the Gospel, this dialogue emphasizes Lazarus’ role as a sign of the resurrection of all humanity. Here, the resurrection of Jesus and the general resurrection are, in effect, collapsed into a single event: “For I believe that he comes here

²¹⁷ Compare the poetry of the fourth-century Syriac poet, Ephrem the Syrian:

“Your consolations are of little help,”
said the Evil One to his followers,
“How can Death contain
the man who has raised up dead Lazarus...”

Death peered out from inside his cavern,
astonished to see our Lord crucified,
“Where are you now, O raiser of the dead?
Will you be food for me in place of the tasty Lazarus,
whose taste I still have in my mouth?...”
(Ephrem the Syrian 2006, 149)

to raise all the dead.” The boldest novelty of this account is the way it turns Lazarus from a sign instructing humanity into a sign instructing Hades itself.

The other apocryphal account we will cite here is a fragment of an otherwise lost Coptic Gospel, published as “Sahidic Fragment III” in J. Armitage Robinson’s *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels* (Robinson 1896, 168-176). It might be read as a revised draft of the Johannine story of Lazarus’ resurrection, told from the point of view of the apostle Thomas. We might also take it as a literary commentary on the Gospel of John, as well as a satisfying literary invention in its own right. We will focus here on the way that it creatively revisits and revises the request of “doubting Thomas” for a sign of the resurrection, and the way Lazarus is offered as a satisfaction of the requirements of Thomastic witnessing.

This Coptic account commences with Thomas (or Didymus) submitting to Jesus his request for assurance that the resurrection will take place:

13. Thomas saith unto Jesus, My Lord, behold thou hast shewn all favours unto us in Thy goodness. There is one thing in which we wish that Thou shouldest assure us. We wish, O my Lord, to see dead men sleeping in the tombs raised by Thee, for a sign of Thy resurrection which shall take place...

15. Jesus saith to Thomas, Thomas My friend, ask Me and thy brethren concerning everything that thou desirest; and I will hide nothing from you... Full well didst thou seek after a sign of the resurrection. For I have told you already, I am the resurrection, and the life...

16. If ye also do not see with your eyes, your heart is not assured. Did not I say to you, Blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed, rather than they that have seen, and have not believed? Ye see how many signs and wonders I have wrought before the Jews, and they have not believed on Me.

Whereas the canonical version of Thomas’ request, in John 20: 24-29, takes place after the death of Jesus, the Coptic account freely plays with a twist in the chronology, backdating Thomas’ request and reaching its climax, not in the resurrection of Jesus, but in the resurrection of Lazarus. Whereas, in the canonical account, Thomas’ request is fulfilled when he is confronted

with the risen Jesus, this Coptic version provocatively substitutes the risen Lazarus as visible proof. Note that here Jesus does not scold Thomas for doubting. Jesus observes that, “If ye also do not see with your eyes, your heart is not assured,” and contrasts “they that have not seen, and have believed” with “they that have seen, and have not believed”—leaving open the possibility that the highest class are those who have both seen and believed. Generously and reassuringly, Jesus tells Thomas, “I will hide nothing from you...Full well didst thou seek after a sign of the resurrection.”

Intent on bringing home the importance of Lazarus as a sign of the coming resurrection, this reworking of the Johannine text embellishes in visceral detail its account of the resurrection of “My friend” Lazarus:

17. Now therefore, O brethren, ye know Lazarus the man of Bethany, who is called My friend. Behold four days I abide with you, and I have not gone to visit his sisters: for to-day is the fourth day since Lazarus died. Now therefore let us go unto him, that ye may comfort them concerning their brother Lazarus.

18. Didymus, come with Me, that we may go to Bethany, and that I may shew thee the figure of the resurrection at the last day in his tomb; and your heart shall be assured that I am the resurrection, and the life. Come with Me, O Didymus, that I may shew thee the bones which have been dissolved in the tomb gathered together again. Come with Me, O Didymus, that I may shew thee the eyes of Lazarus which have been hollowed out sending forth light.

19. Come with Me, O Didymus, unto the mount of Bethany, that I may shew thee the tongue of Lazarus, which was wasted away by reason of corrupt matter, and that I may make it speak with thee again. Come with Me, O Didymus, unto the tomb of Lazarus, that thou mayest see the corruption of his bones and his shroud, which the worms have destroyed, that thou mayest see that which befalls him by the voice wherewith I call him.

20. Come with Me, O Didymus, unto the tomb of Lazarus—to-day is the fourth day since he died—that I may raise him up alive again. Thou hast sought after the sign of My resurrection, O Thomas. Come that I may shew it thee in the tomb of Lazarus.

21. Thou hast sought to see how bones are joined together. Come with me to the tomb of Lazarus, that thou mayest see them going and coming from the door of his tomb.

22. Thou hast sought for hands to be stretched out.²¹⁸ Come, that I may shew thee the hands to be stretched out. Come, that I may shew thee the hands of Lazarus, bound in grave-clothes, and wrapped in the linen cloths, set upon them alone, coming forth from the tomb.

23. Didymus, My friend, come with Me to the tomb of Lazarus, for My mouth hath desired that of which thou hast sought. For to-day is the fourth day of Lazarus, and Martha and Mary are waiting for Me to go and enquire of them concerning their brother.

This passage represents stark evidence that some early Christians not only upheld Lazarus as the preeminent “figure of the resurrection at the last day,” but also saw in him, as Jesus says here, “the sign of My resurrection.” The resurrection of Lazarus and that of Jesus are so closely identified, the former is treated as sufficient proof of the latter to satisfy Thomas’ scruples. This might verify our previous suspicion that the command, “Woman, behold your son!”, was in fact an invitation for Jesus’ mother to perceive in Lazarus her son’s coming resurrection.

We will conclude this section of our inquiry by reviewing the efforts we have made to connect the Johannine Undying Disciple with the Islamic Khiḍr. We have endeavored to trace a lineage of connections consisting of three links: connecting Khiḍr to ‘Uzayr; ‘Uzayr to Lazarus;

²¹⁸ With this motif of the stretching-forth of hands, the Sahidic fragment nicely bridges the story of Lazarus with the Odes of Solomon, as well as underscoring Lazarus’ close identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The unbinding of Lazarus’ hands is presented in rather perfunctory fashion in the Gospel of John: “The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go’” (John 11:44 RSV); but unbinding becomes a central theme in the Odes. See Ode 17:3-4 for example—

The choking bonds were cut off by His hand:
I received the face and the fashion of a new person
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 289)

—as well as Odes 21:1, 25:1, and 42:22.

Similarly, the stretching out of hands becomes a key theme in Ode 42:1-3, perhaps recalling the stretching out of Jesus’ hands on the cross:

I stretched out my hands and approached my Lord;
For the stretching out of my hands is His sign;
And my expansion is the outspread wood
That was set up on the way of the Righteous One.
(Harris and Mingana 1920, 403)

and Lazarus to the Undying Disciple. Reviewing this endeavor, there are multiple suggestive but speculative connections here, made more tenuous by the multiplicity of the links. Moreover, we consider the connection of Khiḍr to ‘Uzayr to be the weakest link in this sequence. We must acknowledge then that Khiḍr stands partially revealed, but remains largely obscure to us, eluding us and concealing his sources. The evidence we have reviewed insinuates promises of new discoveries in this complex and composite figure, but leave our search finally tentative and inconclusive. In any case, whatever ground we have gained or failed to gain in this section, our conclusions here will not be crucial for our progress as we proceed to the next and final section of this chapter. In the coming section we will change our tactics and limit the scope of our question, shifting from the broad, historical question of possible connections between the Gospel of John and Khiḍr, to the narrower question how Ibn al-‘Arabī personally understood Khiḍr, and how this might bear on our Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John.

6.3. Ibn al-‘Arabī and Khiḍr

Similarly, I myself had also been the companion of al-Khaḍir... — Ibn al-‘Arabī, Nasab al-khirqa

We have discussed the possibility that the subsistence of the Johannine Undying Disciple might satisfy the Thomastic need for an enduring, visible, human, theophanic form in the world after Jesus’ departure. The Evangelist’s open-ended presence in the world parallels the Gospel’s own resistance to coming to a closure; the Gospel’s subject matter exceeds the pen’s reach, and “the world could not contain the pages” recording the actions of Jesus. We would suggest that this excess might even be embodied in the endurance of the Undying Disciple. In this last section of our chapter (and the end of our study), we will recognize an additional Akbarian motivation for keeping the door permanently open for the Undying Disciple: from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s point of

view, the Undying Disciple might bridge two prophetic eras. This is to say, the endurance of the Undying Disciple might not only sustain the legacy of Jesus' presence as the embodied Word, but also extend the disciple's reach to receive a the prophetic heritage of Muḥammad. In this last section, we will consider evidence that Ibn al-ʿArabī regarded Khidr as a figure with one foot in each of two traditions. Reflecting Ibn al-ʿArabī's sense of himself as an inheritor from both prophets, the Shaykh seems to regard Khidr too as inheriting this "double recompense" (Qur'ān 34:37), negotiating his way in the gap between Christianity and Islam. By the end of this section, we will also consider evidence that the Shaykh connects Khidr, the Undying Teacher, with the Evangelist, the Undying Disciple.

We will commence this investigation by remarking on a controversy between two esteemed scholars of Akbarian studies, Henry Corbin and Claude Addas. Corbin focuses on Khidr's initiatory role, and his discussion revolves around two questions: "*Who is Khidr?*" and "*What does it mean to be a disciple of Khidr?*" (Corbin 1969, 55). Corbin's quest for answers to these inquiries wanders widely, including his proposed connection between Khidr—whom he calls "the Spring of Life, the Eternal Youth" (Corbin 1969, 60)—and the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Corbin even refers to the pair with a single, hyphenated label: Khidr-Elijah (Corbin 1969, 57). Corbin's question, "*What does it mean to be a disciple of Khidr?*", bears most directly on our inquiry as we examine his claim that Ibn al-ʿArabī was a disciple of Khidr.

To support Corbin's claim that Ibn al-ʿArabī was a disciple of Khidr, we will look at the Shaykh's autobiographical writings. According to Ibn ʿArabī, his initiation by Khidr took place in two ways. One took place by way of an investiture ceremony.²¹⁹ He reports in his *Nasab al-khirqa* that he was invested with the "initiatic mantle of Khidr" (*khirqā khaḍiriyya*):

²¹⁹ On the Sufi tradition of investing disciples with the *khirqā* or mantle, see Annemarie Schimmel's account:

LIKEWISE, I invest you, also, with the Mantle which I received at the hand of Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Lāh Ibn Jāmi‘ (in his garden in al-Miqlā, on the outskirts of Mosul, in the year 601 [= 1204-05]). Ibn Jāmi‘ had been the companion of al-Khaḍir (Peace be upon him!), whose Moral instruction he followed and from whom he acquired Knowledge. (On the same spot that Ibn Jāmi‘ donned the Mantle he invested me with it, and in the exact same manner—without addition or omission). (Elmore 1999, 29-30)

Reception of this mantle signals that the Shaykh was inducted into the pedagogical lineage of Khaḍir and also that he was authorized to induct others into Khaḍir’s line. Corbin interprets this report in the following words:

...Ibn ‘Arabī was to attribute to his own investiture with the “mantle” of Khaḍir, a happening which he relates to the general significance of the rite, for its effect indeed is to identify the *spiritual* state of him who receives the investiture with the spiritual state of him who confers it upon him. (Corbin 1969, 60)

The other, and perhaps more important, way Ibn al-‘Arabī became Khaḍir’s disciple is recorded by the Shaykh in multiple anecdotes, according to which he had direct, personal encounters with Khaḍir. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes about these encounters in the *Nasab*:

SIMILARLY, I myself had also been the companion of al-Khaḍir (Peace be upon him!), whose Moral instruction I followed and from whom I learned [by way of advice (*waṣiyyah*) which he entrusted to me orally] correct submission to the pronouncements of masters (*al-taslīm li-maqālāt al-shukūkh*)—as to the letter [if not the spirit], ‘from his mouth to my mouth’—and other points of Knowledge. (I have seen al-Khaḍir perform three miracles: I saw him walk on the water, ‘roll up’ the earth, and pray in the air). (Elmore 1999, 31)²²⁰

After the adept had performed the three years of service he might be considered worthy of receiving the *khirqā*, the patched frock, “the badge of the aspirants of Sufism.” The relation of the novice to the master is threefold: by the *khirqā*, by being instructed in the formula of *dhikr* (recollection), and by company (*suhbat*), service, and education. In investing the *murīd* with the patched frock, Sufism has preserved the old symbolism of garments: by donning a garment that has been worn, or even touched, by the blessed hands of a master, the disciple acquires some of the *baraka*, the mystico-magical power of the sheikh. Later Sufism knows two kinds of *khirqā*: the *khirqā-yi irāda*, which the aspirant gets from the master to whom he has sworn allegiance, and the *khirqā-yi tabarruk*, the “frock of blessing,” which he may obtain from different masters with whom he has lived or whom he has visited during his journeys—if a master considered him worthy of receiving some of his *baraka*. The *khirqā-yi irāda* is bestowed upon him only by his true mystical leader, who is responsible for his progress. (Schimmel 1975, 102)

²²⁰ Elmore’s footnote to the expression, “from his mouth to my mouth,” offers this explanation:

That is, submit to the rightful authorities externally even if they are wrong (unless, of course, it is a matter of Divine law), but reserve your internal assent, allowing al-Khaḍir to speak through your mouth, as it were, with the proper intent...” (Elmore 1999, 31, footnote 149)

We will consider two of these three miracles more closely below.

We will not adopt Corbin's interpretation of these associations between the Shaykh and Khidr (filtered through Corbin's favored Shi'ite lens); we wish merely to highlight the primacy Corbin grants to Khidr as Ibn al-'Arabī's foremost master, "a symbol guiding the curve of his life" (Corbin 1969, 53):

Finally, it is to the order of things implied by theophanies that we must relate the dominant trait of Ibn 'Arabī's character, the trait which made him not only, like most of the Ṣūfīs, a disciple of human masters, but above all and essentially the "disciple of Khidr." (Corbin 1969, 53)

In opposition to the importance Corbin places on Khidr in the formation of young Ibn al-'Arabī's character, Addas stresses the greater influence of Jesus (ʿĪsā):

Here history encounters metahistory, for it was in the presence of Jesus, his real 'first teacher', that Ibn al-'Arabī claims he underwent conversion: 'It was at his hands', he states in the *Futūḥāt*, although without dating the event, 'that I was converted (*'alā yadihi tubtu*): he prayed for me that I should persist in religion (*dīn*) in this low world and in the other, and he called me his beloved. He ordered me to practice renunciation (*zuhd*) and self-denial (*tajrīd*). Elsewhere he says again about Jesus: 'He was my first teacher, the master through whom I returned to God (*shaykhunā al-awwal alladhī raja 'nā 'alā yadayhi*); he is immensely kind towards me and does not neglect me even for an instant'. The mutual affection and the privileged relationship which were established from the very start between Ibn al-'Arabī and the prophet 'Īsā... (Addas 1993, 39)

As we have made clear in Chapter 3 of our study, we concur with Addas' assessment of Jesus' importance in the initial steps and the overall shape of Ibn al-'Arabī's spiritual walk. Addas concludes the paragraph cited above by posing her stance against that of Corbin:

But even if this was not so, it would still be surprising— in view of the frequency and extreme explicitness of these references to 'Īsā and to his role as 'first teacher'— that Henry Corbin missed the significance of the relationship, insisting instead on making

Elmore concludes this footnote by alluding to Luke 12:11-12, which says:

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. (RSV)

Khaḍīr the ‘initiator’ of the Shaikh al-Akbar. The intervention of Khaḍīr was certainly very real. However, it occurred much later and was considerably less decisive. (Addas 1993, 39)

Addressing both Corbin and Addas, we will offer in this section a possible resolution to their dispute. While siding with Addas and disagreeing with much in Corbin’s analysis, we nonetheless feel compelled to endorse Corbin’s sense that Khaḍīr’s role in the Shaykh’s development was too important to dismiss. Rather than having to choose between the views of the two scholars, we will argue, in the following pages, that the alternative between giving primacy to Khaḍīr or Jesus is a false dichotomy. We will propose that Khaḍīr has, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, a close connection with Jesus and stands as a figure straddling the divide between Christianity and Islam.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s views on Khaḍīr are not always consistent. In Chapter 25 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, he plainly identifies Khaḍīr as the companion of Moses, as in the story from Qur’ān 18:60-82; in *Futūḥāt* III 336, he also writes:

Khaḍīr’s name is Balyā b. Malikān...He was in an army and was sent by the commander in search of water, which they had run short of. He discovered and drank from the Source of Life, and so it is that he is still living now... (Addas 1993, 63)

Reflecting the multi-faceted nature of Khaḍīr (whether his elements are complementary or inconsistent), Ibn al-‘Arabī frequently speaks of Khaḍīr not as a Mosaic figure or a soldier but as a Christic figure having a close affiliation with the disciples of Jesus. This is to say, we will sharpen our sense that Ibn al-‘Arabī was originally and fundamentally an ‘Īṣawī, a commitment he brings to his understanding of Khaḍīr. As an illustration of the close connection between Khaḍīr and Jesus in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings, each of his three reports of having had personal encounters with Khaḍīr points to this association. All three of these anecdotes are recorded in *Futūḥāt* I 186, and we will take them up individually, drawing out their ‘Īṣawī character.

The earliest anecdote in the chronology of the Shaykh's autobiography dates from his youth in Andalusia:

A difference of opinion arose between me and my master Abū l-‘Abbās al-‘Uryabī, regarding the identity of a person whose coming the Prophet had announced. He [Shaikh ‘Uryabī] said to me, “The reference is to so-and-so, son of so-and-so,” and he mentioned someone whom I knew by name... I expressed scepticism and refused to accept what the shaikh said about this individual, because I had an infallible perception (*baṣīra*) regarding the man in question. As it happens, there can be no doubting the fact that later the shaikh changed his opinion. But he suffered inwardly [as a result of my attitude], although I was unaware of this because at the time I was only in my early stages. I left him to return home. On the way I was accosted by someone whom I did not know. First of all this person greeted me, with a great deal of love and affection in his gesture. Then he said to me: “Accept what Shaikh Abū l-‘Abbās says about so-and-so!” I understood what he was asking. I immediately returned to the shaikh to let him know what had happened to me. When I appeared before him he said to me: “Oh Abū ‘Abd Allāh, is it going to be necessary for Khaḍir to come to you every time you hesitate to admit what I say, and tell you: ‘Accept what so-and-so says’? And how is that going to happen each time you refuse to accept my opinion?” I replied: “The door of repentance is open.” He said: “The repentance is accepted.” (Addas 1993, 62-63)

This story is clearly a rich commentary on discipleship; Addas addresses this aspect of the narrative, remarking that it “testifies to the paradoxical nature of the master-disciple relationship in Ibn ‘Arabī’s case” (Addas 1993, 64). Addas notes that, despite the fact that Ibn al-‘Arabī rightly claimed an insight superior to that of his master ‘Uryabī (as is also made clear in a parallel telling in *Futūḥāt* III 36), Khaḍir’s lesson is that the disciple ought to respect the hierarchical superiority of his master.

Yet the story might communicate an additional lesson, according to which ‘Uryabī was superior in his attainment: ‘Uryabī seems to enjoy an unusually close relationship with Khaḍir. The narrative does not make clear whether or not Ibn al-‘Arabī recognized Khaḍir when they met; ‘Uryabī clearly did perceive this when he heard Ibn al-‘Arabī’s report, and the parallel telling in *Futūḥāt* III 36 even portrays ‘Uryabī as saying to Ibn al-‘Arabī, “Oh Muḥammad, does this mean that every time you contradict me *I will have to ask Khaḍir* to instruct you in submission to the

masters?” (Addas 1993, 64; the italicized emphasis is ours) This prompts us to ask how ‘Uryabī and Khiḍr came to enjoy this exceptional connection, such that the former requestw favors from the latter.

As we will recall from Chapter 3 of our study, ‘Uryabī was Ibn al-‘Arabī’s first master on the path, and he has been distinguished as an ‘Īsawī. As we noted in that chapter, Ibn al-‘Arabī says of ‘Uryabī, “My master Abū l-‘Abbās al-‘Uryabī was ‘on the foot’ of Jesus (‘*alā qadam ‘Īsā*”)” (Addas 1993, 51), and even recalls, “It was said to our master, ‘You are Jesus the son of Mary”” (Addas 1993, 51, footnote 68). ‘Uryabī’s acute inclination towards Jesus might suggest that his closeness with Khiḍr was based on a common bond; that is, ‘Uryabī’s connection with Khiḍr might have been forged by a common ‘Īsawī identity.

The second anecdote, dated by Addas (Addas 1993, 116) and Hirtenstein (Hirtenstein 1999, 90) as taking place in 1194 CE, discloses the fact that Khiḍr walks on water:

I was in the port of Tunis, on a small boat at sea, when I was gripped by a pain in the stomach. While the other passengers slept I went to the side of the boat to look out at the sea. Suddenly, in the light of the moon which on that particular night was full, I caught sight of someone in the distance who was coming towards me walking on the water. As he drew level with me he stopped and lifted one foot while balancing on the other; I saw that the sole of his foot was dry. He then did the same with his other foot, and I saw the same thing. After that he spoke to me in a language which is unique to him; he then took his leave and went off in the direction of the lighthouse which stood at the top of a hill a good two miles away. It took him three paces to travel the distance. (Addas 1993, 116)

Ibn al-‘Arabī identifies this mysterious figure as Khiḍr: “I have seen al-Khaḍir perform three miracles: I saw him walk on the water...” (Elmore 1999, 31; see also the next anecdote). The reader cannot miss this anecdote’s resemblance to the episode of Jesus walking on water in three of the Gospels (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52; and John 6:16-21): Jesus strides amidst a storm to arrive at his disciples’ boat, midway across the Sea of Tiberias. It is noteworthy that Khiḍr replicates not only Jesus’ miraculous feat of treading across the surface of the sea, but also

Jesus' ability to traverse distances with unnatural speed—for, according to the account from the Gospel of John, as soon as Jesus joins the disciples in the boat, the boat immediately reaches the opposite shore. In *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36, Ibn al-ʿArabī himself tells us of the miracles by which one can distinguish an ʿĪsawī saint from a Muḥammadī saint. There the Shaykh attributes to ʿĪsawī saints the ability to walk on water, just as Jesus did, but he denies them the ability to ascend vertically; according to the Shaykh, ascent is the special mark of the Muḥammadī saint, because of Muḥammad's night journey and ascension to heaven (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 79-80). Ibn al-ʿArabī makes a similar point in his *Risālat al-Anwār*, to which alludes Jaime Flaquer when he connects this with the “ability to cross great distances in a moment”:

The Image of the pilgrim as offered by Jesus is based on...the knowledge of certain miracles that are related to his horizontal movement. Particularly surprising is his ability to cross great distances in a moment. This is the special gift of Khidr which the Christic saints also share because of their trust (*tawakkul*) in God...Probably this gift must be placed in the context of Jesus's spiritual nature. As spirit, he is neither affected by spatial nor temporal restrictions. (Flaquer 2015, 11)

Thus, the fact that Khidr took “three paces to travel the distance” to the lighthouse in Ibn al-ʿArabī's anecdote marks him as an ʿĪsawī.

While Khidr is marked as an ʿĪsawī by his ability to walk on water, he also levitates in the narrative of the third meeting between Ibn al-ʿArabī and Khidr (also taking place in 1194 CE); this latter ability suggests that Khidr spans both ʿĪsawī and Muḥammadī forms of sainthood—much as Ibn al-ʿArabī identifies himself as both an ʿĪsawī and a Muḥammadī. This recalls Wolper's observation that Khidr tends, in Islamic art, to bridge the divide between Christianity and Islam (Wolper 2011). The third anecdote, more complex than the other two, runs thus:

Some time later [i.e. after the second encounter with Khaḍir in Tunis] I set off on a journey along the coast in the company of a man who denied the miraculous power of the saints. I stopped off in a ruined mosque to perform the midday prayer together with my

companion. At the same moment a group of those who wander remote from the world entered the mosque with the same intention of performing the prayer. Among them was the man who had spoken to me at sea and whom I had been told was Khaḍir; there was also another man of a high rank who was hierarchically superior to Khaḍir (*akbar minhu manzilatan*). I had already met him previously, and we had become bound by ties of friendship. I got up and went to greet him; he greeted me in turn and expressed his joy at seeing me, then he moved forward to direct the prayer. After we had finished the prayer the imām started to leave; I followed him as he moved towards the door of the mosque, which faced to the west and looked out over the ocean in the direction of a place called Bakka. I had just started talking with him at the door to the mosque when the man whom I said was Khaḍir took a small prayer rug which was stored in the *miḥrāb*, stretched it out in the air seven cubits above the ground and got onto it to perform the supererogatory prayers. I said to my travelling companion: “Do you see that man and what he is doing?” He asked me to go over and question him, so I left my companion and went over to see Khaḍir. When he had finished his prayers I greeted him and recited some verses to him ...He said to me: “I only did this for the sake of that unbeliever!”, and he pointed to my companion who denied the miracles of the saints and, sitting in a corner of the mosque, was watching us...We then left for Rota. (Addas 1993, 125-126)

In addition to exhibiting clear Muḥammadī and Islamic traits—praying miraculously in the air and, in another sense, performing the supererogatory prayers in the ordinary Islamic fashion—a key feature of this story suggests a close connection between Khaḍir and Jesus. This lies in the detail that Khaḍir was accompanied by “another man of a high rank who was hierarchically superior to Khaḍir.” We would argue that this man of high rank is Jesus, and that the pairing of Khaḍir with Jesus in this scene points to their close companionship.

To recount our reasons for this identification, we would begin by asking who could be suited by the description, “hierarchically superior to Khaḍir.” Khaḍir’s status is one of many long-disputed questions in Islamic history, framed as a question whether Khaḍir is a prophet or merely a saint, with voices heard on both sides of the controversy (Franke 2000, 306-323). According to Addas, Ibn al-‘Arabī regards Khaḍir as a prophet (Addas 1993, 65); but whether Khaḍir stands either as a prophet or on the border of prophethood and sainthood, it seems that the man ranking higher than Khaḍir must himself be a prophet. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s additional observation regarding the

man of high rank, “I had already met him previously, and we had become bound by ties of friendship,” narrows the list of candidates among the prophets, for the Shaykh states:

I became intimate with [some of the] prophets, Muhammad, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Hūd and David, while with the rest it was a matter of vision, not company. (Hirtenstein 1999, 86)

Of these six prophets, Ibn al-‘Arabī has remarked on the special intimacy he enjoyed with Jesus; as we have noted, the Shaykh claimed that Jesus called him “beloved,” and Ibn al-‘Arabī called Jesus

my first teacher, the master through whom I returned to God; he is immensely kind towards me and does not neglect me even for an instant (Addas 1993, 39).

A further consideration increases the probability that the high-ranking man was Jesus.

This deals with the Shaykh’s scheme of the Four Pillars (*awṭād*). Addas writes that the Four Pillars are

first of all the Pole (*quṭb*), followed by the ‘Imām of the Left’, then the ‘Imām of the Right’ and finally the fourth Pillar. The true holders of these functions are the four prophets, who are considered by Islamic tradition to be always living: Idrīs, Jesus, Elijah and Khaḍīr. Idrīs is the Pole, Jesus and Elijah are the two Imāms, and Khaḍīr the fourth Pillar...The Pillars...belong to the category of *afrād*, or ‘solitary ones’...

No one has authority over the Pillars: they know and acknowledge God alone, who Himself takes charge of teaching them. (Addas 1993, 65-66)

The man of high rank in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s anecdote is most likely one of the Four Pillars, for no other prophet would seem to rank higher than Khaḍīr; Addas shares this opinion:

He must surely have been either the Pole (*quṭb*) or one of the two Imāms who are hierarchically superior to Khaḍīr, the fourth *watad* or ‘pillar’. (Naturally the question of superiority only arises with regard to the function performed: as far as the actual spiritual level of the *afrād* or ‘solitary ones’— and that includes the ‘pillars’— is concerned, they are equal to the Pole.) Perhaps then we should read this account in the light of another passage in the *Futūḥāt* where Ibn al-‘Arabī declares that during the course of his wanderings (*fī ba‘di siyyāḥātī*) he had met and seen with his own eyes the Imām of the Right, who among his other duties is responsible for training the *afrād*. (Addas 1993, 126)

As neither Idrīs nor Elijah is listed among the six prophets with whom Ibn al-‘Arabī enjoyed companionship, only Jesus fits all of the criteria; this would further clarify Jesus’ identification with the Imām of the Right, who trains the *afrād* or the “solitary ones.”

We might in this context make one additional remark regarding the Four Pillars: these four split into two pairs of closely-associated Pillars. Despite Henry Corbin’s pairing of Khiḍr with Elijah—even employing the single, hyphenated label, Khiḍr-Elijah (Corbin 1969, 57)—this pairing does not seem true to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s schematic grouping. For Ibn ‘Arabī, Elijah is more closely tied to Idrīs than to Khiḍr, stating in *Fuṣūṣ* Chapter 22 that Elijah *is* Idrīs (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 227);²²¹ Idrīs-Elijah is a single personage with a dual prophetic career, dwelling twice on earth and ascending twice to heaven, under two different names. By analogy, the other half of the Four Pillars, Jesus and Khiḍr, would seem to form a similarly tight pair. While Jesus dwells in heaven, his double and representative dwells on earth as Khiḍr.

The coherent picture that emerges on the basis of these three anecdotes is an Akbarian portrait of Khiḍr that maps fairly readily onto the figure of the Undying Disciple in the Gospel of

²²¹ Idrīs is, like Khiḍr, a rather obscure figure; but in the Islamic tradition he is frequently equated with Enoch. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, he lived prior to the Deluge as Idrīs, returning later as Elijah: “Elias was Idris, and was a prophet before Noah. God raised him to a high place” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 227). The notion that Enoch was raised to a high place can be traced back to Genesis 5:24, “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” (RSV). The terse and enigmatic clause, “God took him,” later became a source of much speculation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

As for the ascension of Elijah, see 2 Kings 2:1-12, according to which, “And as they still went on and talked, behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, ‘My father, my father! the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!’ And he saw him no more” (2 Kings 2:11-12 RSV). It is noteworthy that, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, some held John the Baptist to be Elijah (Matthew 16:14 and Mark 8:28). According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said that the Baptist was Elijah (Matthew 11:14; 17:11-12), though according to the Gospel of John, the Baptist disavowed this identification (John 1:21). In the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-‘Arabī devotes separate chapters to Idrīs (Chapter 4) and Elijah (Chapter 22), but clusters the chapter on Elijah with the chapters on John the Baptist (Chapter 20) and his father Zachariah (Chapter 21).

It appears that Idrīs and Elijah form a pair because both rose into heaven without having died, whereas Jesus and Khiḍr appear to form a pair because both were resurrected from the dead—if, as we have suggested in Chapter 5, Ibn al-‘Arabī accepted the Christian doctrine that Jesus was crucified, and if Halman is correct in recognizing Khiḍr as a figure associated with resurrection.

John. On top of the traits that the Undying Disciple shares with the general Islamic image of Khiḍr (such as his reputation for supernatural longevity), Ibn al-‘Arabī fortifies this connection by presenting Khiḍr as an ‘Īsawī saint and a companion of Jesus. Thus one can recognize the validity in both Corbin’s and Addas’ sides of their controversy. Corbin is correct in counting Ibn al-‘Arabī as a disciple of Khiḍr; but insofar as Khiḍr is allied with and subordinate to Jesus, Addas commands the larger perspective on Ibn al-‘Arabī as a disciple of Jesus.

There is, however, an important additional feature of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s portrayal of Khiḍr, not to be overlooked. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s portrayal, Khiḍr also conforms to the image of a Muslim and bears the special trait of carrying out distinctively Muḥammadī miracles. What might be most salient in the Shaykh’s version of Khiḍr is his ability to move between Christianity and Islam, altering the defining boundary lines of both traditions. That is, the Akbarian Khiḍr holds a kind of dual ‘Īsawī and Muḥammadī citizenship, not unlike Ibn al-‘Arabī himself.

To round out this observation and conclude this chapter, we will turn our attention to *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36, whose title is “On the Knowledge of the ‘Īsawiyyūn [plural of ‘Īsawī] and their Poles and their Roots.” This chapter ties together, in a single place, a number of strands we have pursued in this study. Looking at this chapter, we will revisit some important material we have considered before, as well as encountering for the first time a narrative important to an Akbarian understanding of the Undying Disciple in the Gospel of John.

Futūḥāt Chapter 36 reminds us that, while his first master, ‘Uryabī, ended up as an ‘Īsawī at the end of his life, Ibn al-‘Arabī set out on his spiritual path as an ‘Īsawī and ended up as a Muḥammadī (*Futūḥāt* 1 629 AM). Crucial to our understanding of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines and overall project, we must keep in mind these two endpoints as well as his efforts to maintain fidelity to both halves of his dual heritage from Jesus and Muḥammad. According to *Futūḥāt*

Chapter 36, this dual heritage is also true of a special class of the *ʿĪsawiyyūn*—called the “first *ʿĪsawiyyūn*”—and identified by the Shaykh as *ḥawāriyyūn* (*Futūḥāt* 1 628 AM). The expression *ḥawāriyyūn* appears in several Qur’ānic verses (such as 3:52, 5:112, and 61:14), where Arberry translates the term as “Apostles.” The word does not literally mean “Apostles” (which would be *rusul* in Arabic); according to Eric Winkel’s footnote to *Futūḥāt* 1 627 AM, *ḥawāriyyūn* means “whiteners (launderers) of clothing, based on the trade of the apostles of Jesus” (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016). The *ḥawāriyyūn* are not necessarily limited to the Twelve; rather it seems to be a general term for the first disciples of Jesus. In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s account in *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36, among those he calls *ḥawāriyyūn* or the first *ʿĪsawiyyūn* are some still alive “today,” in the thirteenth century (*Futūḥāt* 1 628-629 AM).

Ibn al-ʿArabī’s claim that there are still first-generation disciples of Jesus living among us, more than anything we have considered previously in our discussion, demonstrates strongly suggestive evidence that the Islamic tradition has assimilated the rumor in John 21 that his Beloved Disciple would outlive his fellow contemporary disciples. The multiple Undying Disciples in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s discussion both received teachings from Jesus firsthand and also lived long enough to receive the teachings of Muḥammad. Employing a phrase from Qur’ān 34:37, the Shaykh says that the still-living *ḥawāriyyūn* have received a “double recompense;” drawing on *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36, Chodkiewicz paraphrases Ibn al-ʿArabī’s view that the *ḥawāriyyūn*

possess two inheritances, one received directly from Jesus and the other received indirectly from him through the intermediary of Muḥammad. As a result, they have the privilege of two *fath*—illuminations—and of knowing two modes of spiritual experience (*dhawq*). (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 76)

To substantiate his claim that some of Jesus’ disciples are still alive, Ibn al-ʿArabī repeats a *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn ʿUmar, the son of the caliph ʿUmar bin al-Khaṭṭāb. This *ḥadīth* is

perhaps the heart of *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36, and we will quote much of it as it appears in that chapter, drawing from Eric Winkel’s prepublished translation (*Futūḥāt* 1 629-630 AM):²²²

During our time period, today, there is a group of companions of Jesus, peace on him...

...[I]t is something told in a ḥadīth of...Ibn ‘Umar, who said,

‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb wrote to Sa‘d bin Abī Waqqāṣ while he was in al-Qādasiyyah, that Naḍlah bin Mu‘āwiyyah al-Anṣārī be dispatched to Ḥalwān al-‘Irāq, to attack its outskirts. He said, So he dispatched Sa‘d Naḍlah on 300 horses, and they went out until they reached Ḥalwān al-‘Irāq, and they attached its outskirts, and they got booty and women. They turned their attention to selling the booty and the women, until the ‘aṣr (prayer time) overtook them, and the sun had almost set. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016)

With the onset of the ‘aṣr prayer, the *ḥadīth* comes to the heart of the narrative: Naḍla (the military officer serving under the second caliph, ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb) is drawn into an exchange with a mysterious figure addressing him from the mountain.

Naḍlah took the booty and women, to guard them, to the foot of a mountain, then stood up to give the *adhān* (call to prayer). He said, *Allāhu akbar Allāhu akbar*. He (the narrator) said, He was answered from the mountain with the response: You have declared great the Great, O Naḍlah. Then he said, *ashhadu an lā ilāha illā Allāh*, and he said, It is the word of *ikhhlāṣ* [purely cleared from, e.g., having partners, cf., *qul huwa Allāhu aḥad*], O Naḍlah. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016)

After testifying, “There is no god but God (*ashhadu an lā ilāha illā Allāh*),” the mysterious figure than addresses Naḍla with a testimony regarding both Muḥammad and Jesus:

He said, I testify that Muḥammad is a messenger of God. He said, He is the religion and he is the one Jesus son of Mary gave good tidings to us of, peace on them both, and at the head (end) of his community will come the End time. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016)

A few lines later in the text, following the call to prayer, the figure calling out from the mountain reveals himself:

He (the narrator) said, when he finished with his call to prayer, we got up and said, Who are you, God be kind to you? Are you an angel? Or an associate of the *jinn*? Or one of the creatures of God, and you made us hear your voice; but we see you are a person? We, we

²²² A paraphrase of this narrative appears in Chodkiewicz’s *Seal of the Saints* (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 78). The ellipses in the translation are ours.

are delegates of God and delegates of Messenger of God, and delegates of ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb.

He said, There broke off the mountain from the top like a round cloud, white of head and beard, wearing two tattered rags of wool, someone who said, *al-salāmu ‘alaykum wa raḥmatu Allāhi wa barakātuhu*. We answered, And to you peace and God’s kindness and His blessing! Who are you, God be kind to you? He replied, I am Zurayb bin Barthamlā, the trustee of the right creature Jesus son of Mary, peace on both of them. I live on this mountain. He called me to stay a long time until his descent from the sky, when he will kill the pig, break the cross, and free himself from what the *naṣārī* (Christians) have wrongly ascribed to him. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016)

Ibn al-‘Arabī takes a special interest in the strange man revealed in the *ḥadīth*, the man who announces himself as Zurayb bin Barthamlā. The Shaykh underscores this part of the exchange: Zurayb informs Naḍla that he is “the trustee of the right creature Jesus son of Mary,” and that Jesus “called me to stay a long time until his descent from the sky,” as Jesus’ “trustee (*waṣī*)”. We would note that this language resonates with the Johannine saying of Jesus regarding the Undying Disciple: “If I wish that this one subsist (*yabqa*) until I come, what is it to you?” (John 21:22) In his commentary on the *ḥadīth*, Ibn al-‘Arabī assures the reader, “This *‘Isawī trustee* Ibn Barthamlā is still in that mountain worshipping, living with no one else” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016; *Futūḥāt* 1 631 AM). Yet, while a trustee of Jesus, Zurayb exhibits his dual allegiance by responding to Naḍla with Islamic formulae, even affirming that “Muḥammad is a messenger of God;” he also protests that, when Jesus returns, Jesus “will free himself from what the *naṣārī* (Christians) have wrongly ascribed to him.” While Zurayb stands among the first disciples of Jesus, he is no ordinary Christian. Zurayb spans Christianity and Islam, and claims for himself an inheritance from both Christianity and Islam. Yet Zurayb does not seem to belong to either religious tradition in its conventional form.

All of this is evident in the *ḥadīth* itself; it is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s commentary on the *ḥadīth* that ties the story of Zurayb to Khidr. Ibn al-‘Arabī comments that Zurayb’s “path in getting

knowledge is a path of Khidr, the companion of Moses, peace on him...” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016; *Futūḥāt* 1 631 AM). Ibn al-‘Arabī also notes in the same chapter of the *Futūḥāt* that, while the still-living *ḥawāriyyūn* have received Jesus’ teachings directly from Jesus, they have received Muḥammad’s teachings indirectly, through an intermediary. That intermediary is Khidr.

Recapitulating Ibn al-‘Arabī’s remarks, Chodkiewicz writes:

In his commentary on this strange story, the Shaykh al-Akbar points out that this person and all those who, like him, are the still living ‘representatives’ or ‘executors’ (*awṣiyyā*) of past prophets, are numbered among the saints of the Muḥammadan community, even though the content of the Revelation brought by the Prophet did not reach them in the ordinary way, but was received by them from Khaḍir in person, the teacher of the ‘solitary ones’ (*afrād*). The existence of such beings is the reason why the Prophet forbade the killing of monks (*ruhbān*), who live apart from other created beings to be alone with their Lord, and ordered that they should be left to devote themselves in peace to their worship. The duty of *tablīgh* or transmission of the faith, which is normally imposed on believers, does not need to be performed in their case, for they already possess ‘evidence which comes from their Lord’ (Qur’ān 6:57).

Ibn al-‘Arabī remarks that cases like these, in which God takes over the instruction of exceptional people (who are not necessarily *mu‘ammarūn* like Ibn Barthalmā, i.e. men from a pre-Islamic past endowed with supernatural longevity), resolve the apparent contradiction between the Qur’ānic affirmation that the Prophet is ‘sent to all men’ (7:158), and the indisputable fact that his message has not reached all of humanity. (Chodkiewicz 1993b, 78-79)

This discussion thus suggests a few possible routes by which Ibn al-‘Arabī might have approached the Johannine Undying Disciple. If Ibn al-‘Arabī were to read the Gospel, he would most likely have counted the Undying Disciple among the *ḥawāriyyūn* discussed in *Futūḥāt* Chapter 36; we might imagine him comparing this Disciple to a man like Zurayb bin Barthalmā, one of the *afrād* or “solitary ones,” maintaining the commission given him by Jesus to subsist alone in the world until the Second Coming. Our discussion also suggests a strong connection between the Johannine Undying Disciple and Khidr, insofar as the Shaykh considers Khidr the Undying Teacher of the *afrād*, playing a leading role in mediating their relationship between the living tradition of Jesus and the new tradition of Muḥammad. Beyond these observations, we

cannot guess with confidence how the Shaykh might have filled out the connection between the Undying Disciple and Khiḍr. While Ibn al-‘Arabī repeatedly describes Khiḍr in ‘Īsawī terms, he nonetheless also honors the Islamic tradition that Khiḍr was “the companion of Moses.”

Wherever our speculations might lead, it should be clear that the *‘Īsawiyyūn* in general, and Khiḍr in particular, mirror Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own self-representation. As we have suggested throughout this study, the Shaykh’s peculiar mission in the world has been to stake out a place in the gap between conventional Christianity and conventional Islam, working out his own idiosyncratic doctrine, drawing from both traditions but conforming to neither.

Chapter 7

Closing Thoughts

Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea-seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the Words of God not be spent. — Qur'an 31:27

Our aim in this study has been to clarify the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī by practicing an exercise in Akbarian reading. In order to do this, we have endeavored to apply doctrines from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings as an interpretive tool, sharpening these doctrines against the whetstone of the Gospel of John in an effort to define more distinctly the outlines of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought. The Gospel of John has been an apt subject for our project, for multiple reasons. This Gospel has served our purposes well because, more than the other Gospels, it stands out starkly against conventional Islamic theology, opening up an apparently wide gap between Christianity and Islam. As Mark Beaumont has written, Muslim commentators on the Christian Bible

noticed that the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, were capable of providing plenty of supporting evidence for the Qur’anic portrait of a servant subordinate to God. But it was John’s Gospel that posed the most serious challenge to Muslim beliefs that Jesus was one of the prophets sent by God to the Jews, and was not the Son of God or one who had an equal status with God. Those Muslims who wanted to show that the gospels were in agreement with the Qur’an either restricted their quotations from John’s gospel to texts that supported a prophetic role for Jesus, or gave metaphorical interpretations to texts that Christians took literally to teach the divinity of Jesus. Those who were disposed to rejecting the Gospels had particularly good reason to do so from the claims made for Jesus in the fourth Gospel. (Beaumont 2008, 180)

Central to our thesis here has been that Ibn al-‘Arabī was motivated to narrow the gap between Christianity and Islam; the Gospel of John has provided a pronounced challenge to any such effort, and thus offered an especially severe test of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ability to embrace and work with non-Islamic doctrines. Thus part of our goal has been to expose the breadth and openness of the Shaykh’s tolerance and accommodation.

When we suggest that Ibn al-‘Arabī has been motivated to narrow the gap between Christianity and Islam, we mean to indicate two idiosyncratic features in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines. First, we mean to indicate Ibn al-‘Arabī general theory of religious pluralism, which we have explored in Chapter 2 of this study. There, we have argued that the Shaykh’s writings have set forth a daring and sweeping embrace, at least in theory, of religious beliefs in general, far beyond the tolerance expressed in mainstream Islam. While Ibn al-‘Arabī represents a minority perspective (regarded as heretical by some Muslims), he has also left an enduring mark on the Sufi tradition; we have presented examples of half a dozen heirs of the Shaykh’s attitude towards religious pluralism (worked out in various ways) from the thirteenth century to the twentieth century. We suspect that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s general doctrine of religious pluralism has been an outgrowth of his initial sympathy, in his youth, for Christianity in particular. As we have suggested in Chapter 3, the Shaykh’s esteem for Jesus stands well above his esteem for other non-Muslim prophets, an esteem inherited from his first Sufi master, ‘Uryabī. We might even speculate that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s formulation of his pluralistic attitude, expressed as a theory that God reveals Himself to different believers in various images, has been an extension of the Christian emphasis on witnessing God in imagery. By thinking and writing in terms of images, the Shaykh might be implicitly attesting to the fundamental and abiding influence of Christianity on his thought.

Second, we have intended our Akbarian reading to be more than a test of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s capacity to tolerate foreign theological ideas; we have striven to show that he has embraced Christian doctrines and has permitted them to alter his own thinking. We have chosen the Gospel of John in particular because we have suspected a particular resonance between Johannine doctrines and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines. Gathered in the Gospel of John are teachings that Jesus

was the son of God and that he died on the cross—doctrines shared by the other Gospels, but are given perhaps a higher priority in the Gospel of John. Whereas the Islamic tradition typically rejects these Christian doctrines, we have hoped to show ways in which Ibn al-‘Arabī accommodated these doctrines. More important to our reading, however, have been those distinctively Johannine elements—the teaching that Jesus was one with God, the teaching that Jesus was the embodied Word, the importance this Gospel places on the activity of witnessing, and the Gospel’s rumor that one of his disciples would never die—that seem to play key roles in the content and manner of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s distinctive teachings. In short, we have hoped to highlight a Johannine bent to the Shaykh’s doctrines.

This is not to say, however, that Johannine doctrines are equivalent to Christian theology. What Christian theologians have extracted from the Gospel of John and those facets of that Gospel that seem to have trickled down to Ibn al-‘Arabī have been disparate and divergent. Any Johannine seeds inherited by the Shaykh appear to have been cultivated into unfamiliar fruits. Even if we imagine—as we cannot demonstrate and cannot claim—that Ibn al-‘Arabī had come into direct contact with the Gospel of John, we might imagine that he would have read the Gospel in ways wildly different from mainstream Christianity. We might borrow the words Walid A. Saleh and Kevin Casey have used to describe the fifteenth century Muslim Biblical commentator, Biqā‘ī: “In this sense he is accepting the Gospels while rejecting Christian theology” (Saleh and Casey 2012, 87). This description might apply equally well to Ibn al-‘Arabī. His doctrines are, as Eric Winkel has asserted, *sui generis*. This is to say, while his doctrines draw from both Christianity and Islam, he has staked out a position belonging to neither conventional position.

We must acknowledge, in any case, that our efforts to show that Ibn al-‘Arabī had direct familiarity with the New Testament in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings have been inconclusive. Apparent citations from the Gospel of Matthew or from the Apostle Paul in the Shaykh’s writings may well have been passed down to him indirectly, reformulated as Islamic sources. Despite recent evidence that Ibn al-‘Arabī encountered direct citations from the Gospel of Matthew (Böwering and Casewit 2016), we have yet to find evidence that the Shaykh ever held in his hands a complete translation of the Gospels, such as the Alexandrian Vulgate translation (Lagarde 1864) we used as the basis of our commentary. While we suspect that his notions of Jesus might have had an underlying Johannine source, Ibn al-‘Arabī may have stood several degrees removed from that source. We cannot connect the dots from the Gospel to Ibn al-‘Arabī in any detail. Our approach then has been to amplify resonances between the Gospel text and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ideas, indicating echoes without knowing their proximity or distance from the original sound.

In this effort, we have striven to engage with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings in two ways. We have, initially, targeted those places in his writings where he explicitly discusses Jesus, and have sought indications there of his sympathy towards specific Christian doctrines, such as Jesus’ filial relationship with God. As we have proceeded in our study, we have attempted to broaden our scope, taking into consideration the more global ways in which the Shaykh might have manifested an inclination for Johannine perspectives even where he does not name Jesus. An example of this has been the Shaykh’s championing the notion of seeing God in a visible form. In both these targeted and global approaches, we hope we have remained faithful to the trends of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines, and while our commentary on the Gospel has at times been speculative, we hope we have constructed a plausible Akbarian reading and have shed light on the Shaykh’s manners of reading.

As we draw our study to its conclusion, we would mark out areas that deserve further study than we have been able to pursue within the scope of our present work. We have noted in Chapter 3, for example, that Ibn Taymiyya accused Ibn al-‘Arabī of borrowing doctrines from Melkite Christian theology; we would like to explore more fully the evidence that might support this accusation. We suspect that this line of inquiry would lead to a fuller exploration of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of the “Perfect Man” or “Complete Human Being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), prominently discussed in Chapter 1 of the *Fuṣūṣ*; we might find fruitful a comparison of this Akbarian doctrine with the Melkite doctrine of the “Universal Human Being”, (*al-insān al-kullī*) (Chidiac 1939, 32). In Chapter 5, we have also touched briefly on the Christian account of the crucifixion and have observed in passing that Ibn al-‘Arabī might have stood among the minority of Muslims to accept this account. We would like to inquire into the Shaykh’s possible attitudes towards the Christian doctrine that the crucifixion was an expiatory sacrifice. Such an inquiry might focus on Chapter 6 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, the chapter on Isaac. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s observation there—“I know not how a single small ram could itself take the place of the Vicegerent of the All-Merciful” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 67)—might resonate in provocative ways with the Christian notion that Jesus was the Lamb of God. Like our question about Melkite Christianity, our inquiry into the notion of Jesus as an expiatory sacrifice might lead us more deeply into the doctrine of the Complete Human Being. In Chapter 1 of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-‘Arabī writes of the Complete Human Being, “through him the Real looks upon His creation and shows mercy upon them” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004b, 6). It is noteworthy that the Complete Human Being seems to draw together, captured in a single sentence, the epistemic and expiatory functions of the embodied Word.

In addition to these pointers for further study, we would like to raise one additional realm of study demanding an extensive discussion: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings on love, and the

provocative ways those teachings enter into dialogue with the Gospels. At the outset of our study, we recalled Reza Shah-Kazemi's Akbarian reading of Jesus' teachings on love in the Synoptic Gospels, a reading that has served as a precedent to our own Akbarian reading of the Gospel of John. In that context, Shah-Kazemi sampled Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings on love; we would single out *Futūḥāt* III 429.4 and Shah-Kazemi's application of this passage to Mark 12:29 (Shah-Kazemi 2001, 70-71). Here we will quote more fully from this passage:

God is qualified by love for us, and love is a property that demands that he who is described by it be merciful toward himself...So nothing emerges from Him except the mercy "which embraces all things" (7:156). It extends to the whole cosmos, that which is and that which has not yet come to be, ad infinitum. (Chittick 1989, 132)

Whereas Shah-Kazemi has found it fruitful to apply this Akbarian passage to the teachings on love in the Gospel of Mark, we would like to apply an Akbarian lens to the teachings on love in the Gospel of John, where the declaration that "God thus loved the world" (John 3:16) may stand at the center of all else it teaches.

We would like to make one last point. We have, at various points in our study, encountered inconsistencies or apparent contradictions in Ibn al-ʿArabī's teachings and his attitudes towards Jesus and Christianity in particular. While we have endeavored to expose and sharpen the trajectories of his ideas, we do not wish to misrepresent or rectify the quirks in his sometimes deviating lines of thought. We have repeatedly noted the Shaykh's fondness for dialectical thought, a fondness for challenging logical self-consistency (by contrast with Biblical commentaries like the *Radd* or that of Ṭūfī). It is clear that Ibn ʿArabī sees the ability to embrace seemingly incompatible notions as a virtue and a matter of principle. We would add, however, that we imagine this not simply a matter of principled commitment on the Shaykh's part. We do not wish to miss the point that the Shaykh was caught up in a restless rumination on a live and never quelled question, driving him to adopt differing perspectives over the course of his lifelong

effort to answer the question. This question has been how to reconcile his double heritage from Jesus and Muḥammad. In our view, his negotiation between these contrary pulls was ceaseless for him, and he might never have arrived at a final resting place. It has perhaps been the tension implicit in his dual commitment that has been the energy and rationale behind his prodigious productivity as a writer and his ceaselessly dialectic work as a thinker.

Adhering to the Shaykh's own sense that his labor was perpetually open-ended, we have endeavored to approach the Gospel of John as a text unbounded and inexhaustible. Out of respect for both the Gospel and Ibn al-ʿArabī, we wish to underscore the incompleteness of our own study. We will conclude then by keeping mindul of the Gospel's final observation that "the world could not contain the pages of the things written," as well as the Qur'ānic profession, "Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea-seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the Words of God not be spent."

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