

## Article

# Ibn ‘Arabī’s Metaphysics in the Context of Andalusian Mysticism: Some Akbarian Concepts in the Light of Ibn Masarra and Ibn Barrajān

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to trace the origins of some of the key concepts of Ibn Arabī’s metaphysics and cosmology in earlier Andalusian Sufi masters. Within the context of the seminal works on Ibn Arabī’s cosmology and metaphysics produced from the second half of the 20th century onwards and through a comparison of texts by the Sufi masters Ibn Masarra and Ibn Barrajān, we will see which elements are taken from previous sources and how they are transformed or re-interpreted by Ibn ‘Arabī in a philosophical-mystical system that would become the point of reference for the later Eastern and Western Sufi tradition.

**Keywords:** Sufism; al-Andalus; Ibn Arabi; metaphysics; cosmology; islamic mysticism; Ibn Masarra; Ibn Barrajān



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## 1. Introduction

We believe that the optimal methodology for the study and interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work is self-exegesis, based on a comparison of his texts and on the reconstruction of his organic and dynamic thought, the keys to which are distributed throughout his extensive work. Commenting on Ibn ‘Arabī through Ibn ‘Arabī emerges as the only possible method to understand an author who is the creator of his own worldview and language. However, it is also evident that certain pre-existing ideas found in authors writing before the mystic may have been a point of reference for him, although establishing the origin and parentage of a certain idea or term is always a risky undertaking. A fundamental clue is provided logically, by the explicit mentions in his texts of works and authors that were reference points for him, which, however, does not apply where philosophers, not Sufis, are concerned. We can gain an idea of Ibn ‘Arabī’s learning background from the first part of his *Ījāza li-l-mālik al-Muzaffar*<sup>1</sup> which reveals the fundamental role played by the science of the hadith in his education. Among the scholars included in this work are traditionists, exegetes, philologists, writers, faqīhs, judges, etc.; philosophy is absent and scholastic theology (*kalām*) has a very minor presence. The most famous example of the

<sup>1</sup> Edited by (Badawi 1955). “Autobibliografía de Ibn ‘Arabī”. *Al-Andalus*, XX.2, pp. 107–28; Badawi. 1979. Paris; S. ‘Abd al-Fattāh. 1995. Cairo. A comprehensive list of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works is to be found in (Aladdin et al. 2009).

attitude that Ibn 'Arabī showed towards philosophy is probably the passage in *Futūḥāt* that indirectly alludes to Alfarabi, whilst avoiding explicitly saying his name<sup>2</sup>.

Without entering here into the complex issue of the relationship between Akbarian thought and philosophy, in the sense of *falsafa* of Greek origin, it is sufficient to quote two passages from *Futūḥāt* that reflect quite concisely his opinion of this discipline, the usefulness and truth of which he underplays without completely rejecting it:

Philosopher means lover of wisdom because the word Sophia (Sūfīyā), means wisdom in Greek; philosophy, therefore, means love of wisdom. Everyone who is endowed with intelligence loves wisdom. However, people who think reflectively are wrong more often than they are right with regard to divine sciences (*ilāhīyāt*), both if they are philosophers and if they are Mu'tazilites or Ash'arites. (Ibn 'Arabī 1999a, vol. 4, pp. 227–28)

Don't let yourself be turned off, when you come across a problem that was mentioned by a philosopher or a mutakallim or a speculative scholar in any discipline of knowledge, to such an extent that you would say about the person who mentions it and who is a truthful insightful (*muḥaqqiq*) Ṣūfī that he is a philosopher, just because the philosopher (*al-faylasūf*) mentioned that very problem and discussed and believed it. (And don't say) that the (Ṣūfī that discusses it) derived it from the philosophers, or that he has no religion, because the philosopher who had no religion (and was no Muslim) stated it earlier. Don't do that friend! It would be an inconsequential argument. For not all the philosopher's knowledge is untrue, and that particular problem may just involve some truth he possesses. ( . . . ) Your statement that the philosopher has no religion does not mean that everything he possesses (in the way of knowledge) is untrue. Every intelligent person would perceive that right away. (Ibn 'Arabī 1999a, vol. I, p. 56 and Rosenthal 1988, p. 12)

The influence of philosophy on the thought of the master from Murcia is a matter that has been discussed at great length. Philosophy was—initially at least—officially supported by the Almohad rulers (see Fierro 2016; Fierro and Fitz 2005) and Sufism was not persecuted unless the messianic intentions of its leaders posed a challenge or potential danger to the authorities (Ferhat 2005). At the time when Ibn 'Arabī began his journey on the mystical path and developed his doctrine, a cultured Sufism already existed in Al-Andalus, personified in the outstanding figures of Ibn al-'Arīf (d. 536 H/1141 CE), Ibn Barrajjān (d. 536 H/1141 CE), and Ibn Masarra (d. 319 H/931 CE). It appears that this feeling of rejection or reservation towards philosophy that we see in Ibn 'Arabī was widespread in Western Sufism at this time—Ibn al-'Arīf would refer to this discipline in his *Miftāḥ al-sā'āda* as a “reprehensible doctrine” (*madhab madhmūn*) (see Shafik 2012 and Ibn al-'Arīf 1993, pp. 90–91)—which does not mean that we cannot find philosophical elements in the work of these mystics: tools like syllogism<sup>3</sup> and notions such as the ten

<sup>2</sup> “I have seen an infidel declare in a book called *The ideal city* (I had found this book which I had not seen previously, at the home of an acquaintance of mine in Marchena of the Olives had picked it up to see what it was about and came across the following chapter: ‘In this chapter I wish to examine how to postulate [the existence of a divinity in this world]. He had not said God (Allah)! I was amazed and threw the book at its owner’s face.” (Addas 1993, p. 108 and Ibn 'Arabī 1911, III, p. 178). On the one hand, Addas (1993, p. 109) tells us that “to this lack of knowledge of Arab philosophy we must add a blatant ignorance of Greek philosophy.”; and on the other, researchers like J. A. Pacheco Paniagua assert that “judging by his intercession in the debate on substance, accidents and their relationship with continuously renewed creation, Ibn Arabī raises the arguments adduced by the former [Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites] and rejects them with a highly philosophical demonstration and with terminology with clear Aristotelian roots”. (Pacheco Paniagua 2019, p. 227, transl. by the author; see also Pacheco Paniagua 2017). Ibn 'Arabī would frequently return to this “philosophy-illuminative experience” dialectic and works like *The alchemy of happiness* or even episodes in his life such as the supposed encounter with Averroes will act as allegories on the limitations of exclusively rational thought.

<sup>3</sup> “The test always entails a triple composition and inevitably and because of this, two isolated elements and the meeting of them make up the third aspect, which must be found in each of the two premises (*muqaddimatayn*) to obtain the conclusion (*intāf*). For example,  $a = b$  and  $b = c$ , repeating  $b$ , the proof is made up of three elements  $a$ ,  $b$  and  $c$ , and the unifying aspect is  $b$  as it is repeated in the two premises. The result is  $a = c$ .” (Ibn 'Arabī 1999a, p. 104). On the use of syllogism and other philosophical and mathematical elements in Ibn 'Arabī, (Pacheco Paniagua 2007, 2012, transl. by the author).

Aristotelian categories<sup>4</sup> (*māqūlāt*), “generation and corruption”<sup>5</sup> (*al-takwīn wa-l-fasād/genesos kai fthoras*), first intellect<sup>6</sup> (*al-‘aql al-awwal*), etc., can be found clearly, to a greater or lesser degree, in the work of Ibn ‘Arabī. The works through which Aristotelian and, above all, Neoplatonic concepts and doctrines entered Al-Andalus may have been not strictly philosophical but rather theosophical in nature, such as the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*.

The master cited the most times in *Futūḥāt* is Abū Madyan<sup>7</sup> (d. 594 H/1194 CE), a shepherd from the town of Cantillana in Seville, who gained enormous recognition as a spiritual master in the Islamic West. His written work comprises poetry, prayers, an initiation manual (*Bidāyat al-murīd*), and a creed (*‘aqīda*), i.e., devotional and wisdom works but not speculative writings. Ibn ‘Arabī provides a brief biography of the Andalusian masters of whom he was a direct disciple in his *Rūḥ al-Quds*<sup>8</sup>, a work written as an apologia for Western Sufism in the face of Eastern Sufism which may well be interpreted as a declaration of intent in favor of an illiterate but authentic Sufism as opposed to a more bookish and speculative yet superficial one. It could be said, therefore, that the Sufi masters who receive greater and more explicit recognition from Ibn ‘Arabī are those who, a priori, lack education and philosophical intention.

Theology (*kalām*) was also considered by Sheikh al-akbar to be a limited science which, in trying to defend religion from attacks based on rationalist arguments, had resorted to using the same tool to respond (Ibn ‘Arabī 1972, pp. 34–36). A theologian of the stature of Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE), however, is inevitably present in the work of Ibn Arabī. His presence is controversial at times because he reproaches him for his speculative arguments about God and His Names and Attributes, thus revealing significant differences between the two thinkers. He is, in fact, the theologian who probably had the greatest influence on his metaphysics<sup>9</sup>.

Regarding the self-affiliation of Ibn ‘Arabī to a specific discipline, W. Chittick (Chittick 2020) states that he never referred to himself as a Sufi—a term widely used by modern scholars—and that “he can be considered the greatest of all Muslim philosophers, provided we understand philosophy in the broad, modern sense and not simply as the discipline of *falsafa*”. The term Sufi, however, is explicitly mentioned in the introduction to *Futūḥāt* (in the fragment quoted above) in which he asserts that the fact that a philosopher and a realized Sufi (*ṣūfī muḥaqqiq*) may concur on some matters does not mean that the latter derived from the former. It is logical to think that Ibn ‘Arabī included himself in that category of *ṣūfī muḥaqqiq* and, indeed, his own disciples considered that to be the case, for example, ‘Abd al-Ganī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143 H/1731 CE) (Al-Nābulusī 1995, pp. 137–38). The *muḥaqqiq* is regarded in another passage in the same work as a higher level within the category of Sufi: “I mean by our companions the possessors of hearts, witnessings and unveilings, not the worshippers (*al-‘ubbād*), nor the pious renouncers (*al-zuhhād*), nor the Sufis without restriction -only those among them who are the people of realities and verification (*taḥqīq*)” (see Ibn ‘Arabī 1972, p. 261 in Chittick 1989, p. 392)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, v. III, p. 10 and Chittick 1998, p. 360).

<sup>5</sup> (Ibn ‘Arabī 1919, p. 71).

<sup>6</sup> (Ibn ‘Arabī 1919, pp. 72, 74).

<sup>7</sup> See Cornell (1996). *The Way of Abū Madyan. Doctrinal and Poetic Works of Abū Madyan Shu‘ayb ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Anṣārī* (c. 509/1115-16-594/1198). Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society.

<sup>8</sup> *Rūḥ al-quds fī muḥāsabat al-naḥs*. 2004. Edited by Ali b. Ahmad Sasi. Tunis: Dār al-kutub li-l-kitāb. Translated by Asín Palacios in 1933 as *Vidas de santones andaluces: la “Epístola de la santidad” de Ibn Arabī de Murcia*, Madrid: Estanislaio Mestre; English translation together with *Al-durrat al-fākhira* by R. W. J. Austin, 1971. *Sufis of Andalusia: the Rūḥ al-Quds and the Dhurrat al-fākhira*, London: Allen and Unwin.

<sup>9</sup> See (Zine 2004; Nakamura 1994; Addas 1993, pp. 102–3).

<sup>10</sup> Unlike Ibn Masarra or Ibn Barrajān, Ibn ‘Arabī did consider Ibn al-‘Arīf a *muḥaqqiq*. See (Addas 1992, p. 926).

## 2. Ibn Masarra

### 2.1. Cosmogony, Language and Prime Matter

Ibn Masarra al-Jabalī, from Córdoba, (d. 319 H/ 931 CE) is considered to be the first Sufi and, in general terms, the first speculative thinker in Al-Andalus. Although it was underpinned by Eastern foundations, Western Sufism, “in contradistinction to the psychologically-oriented and ethically-minded Sufi tradition that developed in the East, the discourse of Ibn Masarra and his Andalusī heirs can be defined as “theosophical”, not in the modern-spiritual sense of the word, but rather as it is used in the academic study of Kabbalah” (Ebstein 2020, p. 41). In his indispensable *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus*, Ebstein (Ebstein 2014) argues that the flourishing of Sufism and Kabbalah in Spain in the 12th and 13th centuries is largely explained by the presence of the Ismaili tradition in the neighbouring lands of Africa where the Fatimid dynasty had established itself. Ismaili literature comprised the middle link between Eastern Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and Pythagoreanism and the Andalusian mystics. One of the arguments advanced by Ebstein (Ebstein 2014, pp. 10, 11)<sup>11</sup> in favor of Shiite Ismaili influence on Ibn Masarra and Ibn ‘Arabī is the fact that they were accused of being Shiites by some authors, most notably Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808 H/1406 CE). Caution should be exercised when evaluating accusations of this type because, as Alexander Knysh (Knysh 1999) showed, the controversy against Ibn ‘Arabī occurred after his death and was instigated mainly by Ibn Taymiyya and, as regards Ibn Khaldūn, Knysh maintains that the Tunisian’s stance towards Sufism became more radical, probably for political reasons, while he was holding important official posts in Egypt. In addition, some of the Akbarian doctrines criticised by Ibn Khaldūn such as Mahdism, were taken not from Ibn ‘Arabī directly, but from supposed disciples of his such as Ibn Abī Wātil<sup>12</sup>.

Leaving aside the extent of Fatimid political influence in the Islamic West, the truth is that Ismaili doctrines spread throughout al-Andalus due to the early arrival of both the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (c. between C9 and C11 CE)—which were introduced, according to the idea most widely accepted by researchers, by al-Majrīṭī (d. c. 468 H/1007 CE)<sup>13</sup>—and from the corpus of alchemical texts attributed to Jābir b. Ḥayyān (d. 200 H/815 CE?)—a set of treatises that are also heavily steeped in Shiite, specifically Qarmation Ismaili, ideology<sup>14</sup>.

Two works by Ibn Masarra have survived to this day: *The Epistle on Interpretation*<sup>15</sup> and *The Book of the Properties of Letters, Their True Nature And Their Origin*<sup>16</sup>. It is in this domain, the Science of Letters, that Ibn ‘Arabī acknowledges his debt to Ibn Masarra without referring to any specific titles (Stroumsa 2016), while also recognising his reservations regarding this discipline. There is at least one explicit mention of the *Book of The Properties of Letters* in *Futūḥāt* when he puts forward the idea of the Kaaba and the black stone as interpreters of the various levels of Revelation, an idea which, however, does not appear in the version of Ibn Masarra’s text that has reached us (Stroumsa 2016, p. 87).

Ever since Asín Palacios published *Abenmasarra y su escuela* (Asín Palacios 1914) and attributed to the philosopher from Córdoba an intellectual affiliation with the work of the Pseudo-Empedocles, Ibn Masarra has been associated with many currents of thought: Mu’tazilism, Bāṭinism, Neoplatonism, Sufism, Ismailism, etc., even after his manuscripts—which were considered lost—were discovered in the seventies. The rejection of Asín Palacios’s hypothesis by most Arabists during the 20th century has given way to recog-

<sup>11</sup> See also (De Callatay 2014–15, Brown 2006; Al-Affifi 1964 and Tornero Poveda 1985).

<sup>12</sup> On Ibn Khaldūn’s position on Sufism (Knysh 1999, pp. 184–97).

<sup>13</sup> Fierro (1996) maintains that they were introduced even earlier by Abū l-Qāsim Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī, (353 H/964 CE). See Fierro, *Bāṭinism in al-Andalus*, pp. 106–8. On Jābir ibn Ḥayyān see (Lory 1989).

<sup>14</sup> See Lory (2004). *Alchimie et mystique en Terre d’Islam*. Paris: Gallimard.

<sup>15</sup> Critical editions in (Kenny 2002 and Ibn Masarra 2007a).

<sup>16</sup> See English translation of the former in (Stroumsa and Sviri 2009), Spanish translation in (Garrido Clemente 2008c) and a summary of the contents of the latter in (Tornero Poveda 1993).

dition from a significant strand of studies over the last decade that, beyond the influence of Empedocles or pseudo-Empedocles, Asín was right in associating Ibn Masarra with Neoplatonic doctrines. The elements of the cosmos as it appears in Ibn Masarra's work are arranged in tiers, contemplation of which can allow humans to ascend through them and bear witness to the great chain that unites beings to the final link, the creator:

The world, then, with all its creatures and signs is a ladder (*daraj*) by which those who contemplate ascend to the greatest signs of God on high. He who climbs, must climb from the lower to the higher. They climb by means of the intellects [ . . . ] Thereupon you will find your Lord and Creator; you will meet Him in yourself. (Stroumsa and Sviri 2009, p. 224)

For Ibn 'Arabī, in a similar way to Ibn Masarra, the world is "arranged in degrees (*marātib*)" and this orderly and hierarchical arrangement of the cosmos is specifically what makes it intelligible to human beings (Ibn 'Arabī 1919, p. 95), but with no "occasional or causal succession" between its elements (Ibn 'Arabī 1919, p. 49). On this subject, however, Ibn 'Arabī explains:

We have been silent with regard to explaining the true nature of the causes so that anyone who speculates on them will not imagine that we are among those who attribute the action to someone other than God or those who attribute the action to God, associating the causes to Him. [ . . . ] He creates the thing by way of a cause if He wants to, or if He does not want to, He does not create a cause for it, because in His wisdom He has already planned to create it in this way, as we explained earlier. And it is impossible for it to be otherwise, because it is impossible for a thing to be different from how it is known [by God]. For this reason, we have not made special mention of anything relating to the causal relationship between the Pen and the Tablet because it has already been discussed by those who support the Revealed Law, the People of Truth, who consider the adherents of [the doctrine] of "the cause and the caused" to be ungodly. (Ibn 'Arabī 1919, p. 81)

Two of the fundamental elements of the Ibn Masarra's cosmogony are, on the one hand, Prime or Universal Matter (*habā'*) and, on the other, the Word or Logos (*kalima*). In Ibn Masarra's emanationist system, the first hypostasis was formed of "an intelligible, intangible prime Matter (*'unṣur*), coeternal with God, from which God made all particular beings arise" (Lory 2006, p. 834), which is also identified with letters:

Sahl al-Tustarī said: Letters are the Primordial Dust (*al-habā'*) and the origin of things and the beginning of their creation. From them was created order and the dominion became manifest." (Ibn Masarra 2007b, pp. 62–63)

The letter *hā'* is the Primordial Dust, it is the totality of letters, from which things are created. It is located below *kun*. (Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 68)

Without assigning it such a central value in the genesis of creation as Ibn Masarra, Ibn 'Arabī speaks cryptically and succinctly in his work of a Supreme Element (*'unṣur a'zam*)<sup>17</sup>, which may well relate to that of his predecessor from Córdoba:

"[The Supreme Element] kept in the most hidden of the hidden (...) is the most perfect of created beings and were we not to have a pact of concealment that prevents us from explaining its essential reality, we would speak more extensively about it, showing how all creation (*mā siwā Allāh*) is united to it." (Ibn 'Arabī 1919, p. 50)

<sup>17</sup> Regarding this see López Anguita, Gracia (López-Anguita 2018). "Notas en torno al concepto de Elemento Supremo (*'unṣur a'zam*) en Ibn 'Arabī y su escuela" in *Ibn Arabi y su época*. Edited by G. López-Anguita. University of Seville.



“We have made the centre [of the Universe] the receptacle of the Supreme Element as a warning that the higher rules over the lower.”<sup>18</sup> (Ibn ‘Arabī 1972, v. II, p. 317)

This Element, which is closely related to water<sup>19</sup> and the Divine Name al-Ḥayy al-Qayyūm (The Living One; the Self-Subsisting), is needed to produce life in creation and for the step from potential to action:

“Through the Supreme Element, the essences of the potential worlds [that remained] in a present with no before or after [i.e., outside the world of the contingent, unaffected by the passage of time] became manifest, until God decided to see them as concrete beings.” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1919, p. 44)

Although Ibn ‘Arabī does not directly identify this element with the prime matter (*habā’* / *hayūlā/madda ūlā*, etc.), that is how some of his Eastern commentators and disciples understand it: “The Supreme Element is the Singular Prime Matter that balances the essences of the four elements. It is the matter of the heavens and the earth” (Qashānī 2005, p. 535)<sup>20</sup>; “God made manifest the form of the universe from the Dust and separated the heavens and the earth from the *ratq*<sup>21</sup> called the Supreme Element” (Qunawī 1983, p. 19). Considering that Ibn ‘Arabī identifies the term *habā’* with the intermediate reality in which beings exist, potentially also called Muhammadan reality (*ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*), Breath of the Merciful (*nafas al-Raḥmān*), Cloud (*‘amā’*) or even Immutable Entities (*a’yān thābita*) or Divine Names, etc., it should be confined to a metaphysical reality more than the concept of Prime Matter as understood by alchemists, for example, in which case Supreme Element seems more appropriate<sup>22</sup>.

The interrelation of the concept of the Word of God (*kalima*), the imperative *kun*<sup>23</sup> (be), the Divine command (*amr*), and the Divine will (*irāda*) as the beginning of creation in Ibn Masarra and Ibn ‘Arabī and Ismaili writings, along with their Biblical and Greek forerunners, has been extensively studied by Ebstein (2014). The use of the term *dhikr*<sup>24</sup> is characteristic of Ibn Masarra and relates to both remembering and mentioning, evoking the Platonic theory of reminiscence. The *dhikr* is synonymous with First Intellect and ontologically is below the *kun* (see Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 88). Creation through the Divine word is also very present in the work of Ibn ‘Arabī, who uses the term *kalima*—among others like *kalām*—to refer to the Word of God, frequently placing it in a Christic context<sup>25</sup>,

<sup>18</sup> Cf. this idea with Ibn Masarra, *Risālat al-i’tibār*: “( . . . ) the one who brings them together despite their differences and makes them perform contrary to their nature must be above them, encompassing them, higher and greater than them.”; “the testimony of innate knowledge requires that he who governs them should be above them and encompass them.” (Stroumsa and Sviri 2009, p. 220).

<sup>19</sup> See the cosmogonic importance of water in *Risālat al-i’tibār* by Ibn Masarra: “The first thing to be created was the Throne and the water” (Stroumsa and Sviri 2009, p. 224).

<sup>20</sup> See also his glossary of sufi terms *-Iṣṭilāḥāt-* (Qashānī 1992)

<sup>21</sup> A Qur’anic concept (Qur’an 21:30) that literally means “stitched” and refers to the homogeneous whole that formed the earth and the heavens before God tore them apart (*fataqa*) and made them separate. The attribution of the two works referred to here (*Mir’at al-‘arīfīn* and *Laṭā’if al-i’lām*) is disputed, but they undoubtedly belong to the Eastern Akbarian school.

<sup>22</sup> It seems difficult to draw a definitive conclusion concerning this concept; based on the Akbarian texts, the Prime Matter—expressed under many names—may conform to a greater or lesser extent to a philosophical, alchemical or another kind of definition. In his *Kitāb ‘Anqā’ Mugrib* and *R. Ittilḥād al-kawnī* he uses the symbol of the griffin or phoenix (*‘anqā’*) to refer to *habā’*, highlighting its spiritual and ineffable character: “I am the ‘Anqā’ Mugrib, my home is in the West, in the middle station, on the shore of the Surrounding Ocean. Glory contains me from both sides and no finite essence reveals me.” (Ibn ‘Arabī 2006, p. 46). Ebstein (2014, p. 92 ff.) sees a clear influence of the work of the alchemist Jābir ibn Ḥayyān in the Akbarian concept of *habā’*. Pierre Lory also proposes points in common with Jābir although he considers that the doctrinal depth of Ibn ‘Arabī goes far beyond the Jābirian identification between the name of a thing and its essence. (Lory 2004, p. 118).

<sup>23</sup> Reference to Qur’an 16:40: “The only words We say to a thing, when We desire it, is that We say to it: Be! (*kun*) and it is.”

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that in the Ḥadīth we find the term *dhikr* with the meaning of Qur’an or Divine Register, close to that used by Ibn Masarra: “His throne was on the water, he wrote all things in the *dhikr* and created the heavens and the earth”. (Al-kutub al-sitta 2000, Bukhārī, Bad’al-khalq, 3191).

<sup>25</sup> “Know that the existent beings are the worlds of Allāh which do not cease. [Allāh] exalted be He, said concerning the existence of Jesus, peace be upon him, that he is [the messenger of God] and His word (*kalima*) which He has cast unto Mary [Q 4:171]; this is Jesus, peace be upon him. So this is why we say that the existent beings are the word of Allāh”. Ibn ‘Arabī, II, p. 385, translation by (Ebstein 2014, p. 53).

identifying it with the imperative *kun*<sup>26</sup> or using it as a synonym for universal human being as microcosm (*kalima jāmi'a*, comprehensive Word)<sup>27</sup>. In other passages of *Futūḥāt* and *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* the divine words (*kalimāt*) correspond to Immutable Entities, a specifically Akbarian concept that refers to beings in a potential state of creation (*mumkināt*)<sup>28</sup>: “There is no changing the words of God’ (Q 10:64), and the Words of God are no more than the Immutable Essences of things that have appeared in existence”<sup>29</sup>. The Christological dimension that we highlighted above is not merely confined to the identification of Jesus with the Word of God as expressed in the Holy Qur’an 4:171 but is also closely related to the articulation of letters through breathing. This subject is addressed in chapter 2 of *Futūḥāt*, in chapter 198 “The Breath of the All-Merciful” and in chapter 20 “On the science particular to Jesus”. When he talks about vowels and how their existence facilitates articulation of the consonant *ductus*, he explains that they are what puts words into motion and, ultimately, gives them life. Giving life or causing resuscitation by exhaling air is, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s words, knowledge that corresponds to Jesus:

Know—and may God help you in your search for knowledge—that the science particular to Jesus is the science of letters (*ḥurūf*). For this reason, Jesus received the power of breathing in life (*naḥakh*)<sup>30</sup> which consists of the air that comes from the depths of the heart and is the spirit of life. Since breath makes stops on the path of exhalation to the mouth, we call these places [where the air] stops, letters, and that is where the entities inherent in the letters manifest. When these form<sup>31</sup>, tangible life manifests in intelligible meanings (*ma’ānī*) and this is the first thing the Divine Presence manifests to the world. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999a, vol. 1, 256 cf. with Valsan 2016, p. 136).

Earlier we pointed out the transcendent qualities and macrocosmic implications of the letters of the Arabic alphabet; through the expression of His will God creates a universe that, in addition to being intelligible, is intellective and “speaking”: “The cosmos, in its entirety, is rational, alive and rationally expressed (*nāṭiq*)” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999a, vol. I, p. 185); “The heavens were made endowed with reason (*‘āqila*), hearing and obedient, and for each star and planet a path was drawn for it to follow.” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999a, vol. 6, p. 179). This idea connects in a certain way with the text of Qur’an ayah 17:44: “The seven heavens and the earth, and whosoever in them is, extol Him. Nothing is, that does not proclaim His praise, but you do not understand their extolling. Surely He is All-clement, All-forgiving.”

The science of letters is covered in general terms in chapters 2 and 198 of *Futūḥāt* and in *K. al-Mabādi wa-l-gayāt fī ma’ānī l-ḥurūf wa-l-ayāt* and, regarding specific letters in particular, in booklets such as *K. al-mīm wā wa-l-nūn* and *K. al-yā’ /al-hurwa*.<sup>32</sup> As we indicated above, the mysticism of the letters of the alphabet ranks among the most characteristic

<sup>26</sup> “All existent things are the inexhaustible words of God (Q 18:120) that come from the divine Command *kun*, and *kun* is the word of God.” *Fuṣūṣ*, 142 in (Ḥakīm 1981, p. 976).

<sup>27</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 50; *Futūḥāt* 146 in (Ḥakīm 1981, p. 977). This expression echoes the hadith “[Prophet Muḥammad] was given the synthesis of all-comprehensive words (*jawāmi’ al-kilām*)” (Bukhārī 20/7099), in the sense that—according to Ibn ‘Arabī— he received the whole of the Revelation including the former prophets, knowledge of the first and last people, everything that the human being has gained in this world; not only all the names of the patterns of the cosmos -adamic knowledge- but also their essences. Furthermore, he has the ability to synthesize words, whereby each law is manifested and all knowledge is inherent to Muḥammad, at all times, for every messenger and prophet, from Adam until the Day of Judgement (Chittick 1998, pp. 216, 222, 246). This idea has to do with Muḥammad’s role of Seal of Prophecy (Chittick 1989, p. 241).

<sup>28</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, 65 in (Ḥakīm 1981, p. 976).

<sup>29</sup> (Ibn ‘Arabī 2009, p. 257).

<sup>30</sup> Allusion to the Qur’anic episode in which Jesus gives life to some clay birds by breathing into them: Q 3:49. That is none other than the breath from the All-Merciful.

<sup>31</sup> The verb that is used means to compose harmoniously *ta’ allafa*. Cf. this use with Ibn Masarra (2007b, p. 63).

<sup>32</sup> *K. al-mīm* and *K. al-yā’* published in the *Rasā’ il Ibn ‘Arabī*, Hayderabad, (Ibn ‘Arabī 1948), the former re-published in an edition by Charles André Gilis, Beirut, 2002 and the latter by M. Fawzī al-Jabr, Beirut, 2004. The *K. al-mabādi* was edited by ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ, Beirut, 2006. The *Kitāb al-alif* or *Kitāb al-aḥadiyya*, centring on divine unity symbolised in the first letter of the alphabet, could be included in this group. Compare with Ibn Masarra’s identification of the letter *alif* with unity: “*Alif* is the first proof of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) as it is isolated at the beginning [of the word] and does not join with any of the other letters [that follow it]” (Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 64).

contributions made by Ibn Masarra's thought and it is the one that gained him the most explicit recognition in later authors such as Ibn 'Arabī. In his *K. al-mīm wa-l-wāw wa-l-nūn* (*The Book of the letters mīm, waw and nūn*), he quotes Ibn Masarra, cautiously distancing himself from the realm of magic or theurgy<sup>33</sup>: "Our discourse is about the secrets [of the letters] in the manner of Ibn Masarra al-Jabalī and others, and not about their operative virtues [*khawāṣṣ*], since a discourse on the operative virtues of things leads in most cases to the author being suspected of imposture." (Ibn 'Arabī 2001b, K. al-mīm, p. 87). Indeed, the relationship between lunar mansions and letters, the esoteric interpretation of isolated letters at the head of some surahs of the Qur'an and the symbolic interpretation of the pen strokes of letters in Ibn 'Arabī show a clear influence of *K. Khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* by Ibn Masarra. This basis, added to other influences and a brilliant reworking, take this idea of the universe as a "linguistic structure" even further. It is striking, however, that other texts that address this issue omit the name of Ibn Masarra and cite the famous Iraqi Sufi al-Ḥallāj<sup>34</sup> (d. 309 H/922 CE), a follower of Sahl al-Tustarī—the first reference in the Science of Letters—about whose teachings he provides little new information, other than regarding the doctrine of *kun*. This is the mention that Ibn 'Arabī makes of this author:

When you hear someone on our path speak of letters and say that a certain letter is so many fathoms or so many spans in height or length, as al-Ḥallāj and others do, know that by "height" they mean operative virtues (*fi'l*) in the world of spirits and "length" refers to their operative force in the world of bodies (... ) this technical terminology (*iṣṭilāḥāt*) was introduced by al-Ḥallāj. Those among the realised Sufis (*muḥaqqiqūn*) who understand the deep reality of *kun*, possess the science of Jesus (*'ilm 'isawī*)<sup>35</sup>. (Ibn 'Arabī 1972, vol. 3, p. 95 cf. transl. Valsan 2016, pp. 141–42)

Chapter 2 of *Futūḥāt* (see partial translation, commentary and study of the background to the mysticism of letters in Gril 2004) explains these doctrines in an exhaustive and intricate way, taking into account the mathematical implications of the combination of letters, cycles of time, and movements of the celestial spheres on the basis of which, according to his theory, letters are created. In *K. al-mīm* he cites Pythagoras (Fīthāgurus) as the precursor of this discipline that operates with letters and numbers, and the numerologists (*'adadiyyūn*). In the same way that human beings are made of spirit, soul and body, words also have a triple dimension: they can be thought, articulated, or written (Lory 2004, p. 119). This triplicity is recurrent and we also find it in the commentary on the isolated letters *alif*, *lām*, *mīm* at the head of the Surah of the Cow: "There are three archetypes of books: the "drawn" (*mastūr*) book, the "inscribed" (*marqūm*) book and the "unknown" (*majhūl*) book." (Gril 2004, p. 173)

In addition, Ibn 'Arabī's use of Arabic grammar rules to support explanations of certain metaphysical questions does not appear to be found in Ibn Masarra. In his prophetic work *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* we find an example of this when he explains the hadith "I have been made to love three things in this world: women, perfume and prayer"<sup>36</sup> saying that Prophet Muḥammad gave priority to the feminine by mentioning the word three in the feminine form (*thalāth*), instead of the masculine form (*thalātha*) which would have been correct, from the grammatical point of view, in an enumeration including a masculine element and he goes on to explain that whichever theological or philosophical school you follow, the terms that express metaphysical principles are feminine in gender; (divine attribute, *ṣifa*; capacity, *qudra*; cause, *'illa*; essence, *dhāt*, etc.) because they allude to

<sup>33</sup> He would not show this critical attitude when speaking of his teacher Nuna Fāṭima bint al-Muthanna who mastered the science of letters to such a point that she had the power to press the Surah *Fātiḥa* into her service (Ibn 'Arabī 1971, p. 143).

<sup>34</sup> For al-Ḥallāj the highest knowledge was that granted by the letters as they appear in the Qur'an: "The knowledge of all things resides in the Qur'an, and the knowledge of the Qur'an resides in the letters that are placed at the beginnings of the suras." (Al-Ḥallāj 1936, p. 95 in Gril 2004, p. 139).

<sup>35</sup> The 1999a edition reads *'ilm 'ulwī* (science of the higher spheres) vol. 1, p. 257.

<sup>36</sup> Hadith quoted with variants in *Al-kutub al-sitta* 2000 Nisā' 1, *Kitāb 'ashara al-nisā'*, 36: 1, hadith No. 3391.



the ontological priority of the feminine in creation (see Ibn 'Arabī 1946, pp. 214–15)<sup>37</sup>. Conversely, he derives grammatical rules from his metaphysics. In this regard, see the arguments regarding Arabic desinential inflection (*i' rāb*) in *Futūḥāt*: the words that decline are *mutalawwin*, either complete—with three case vowels—or incomplete—diptotes—while the invariable words are *mutamakkin* (Gril 2004, p. 185), *talwīn* being the continuous passage from one spiritual state to another and *tamkīn* that of consolidation in a specific state.

With regard to precedents outside al-Andalus for this type of speculation about letters, Ebstein indicates that they cannot be found in the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, but he attributes to them, nevertheless, an Ismaili origin: the North African works *Kitāb al-'ālim wa-l-gulām* and *Kitāb al-Kashf*, of C10 CE or other writings by Rāzī and Sijistānī (Ebstein 2014, p. 237). In addition to the aforementioned authors, Ibn Arabi mentions other Eastern figures such as Ḥākim Tirmīdhī or the imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq as references in the science of letters (see Ibn 'Arabī K. *al-mīm*, pp. 83, 86)<sup>38</sup>.

## 2.2. Throne and Angelology

The First Intellect/Pen and the Universal Soul/Protected Tablet are two fundamental principles in Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology. From the Intellect, which represents the first being created by God, arises<sup>39</sup> the Soul, and from the interaction that takes place between the two by way of writing, the Pen being the active and luminous element that projects onto the Tablet, the passive and dark element, arises everything that occurs in creation. This same idea, referring to the intellect and the human soul, is expressed by Ibn Masarra through the metaphor of the sun and the moon: the rational human soul (*nafs nāṭiqā*) receives the light of the Intellect, as the moon receives it from the sun (Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 69). Knowledge is found synthetically in the Intellect and analytically in the Tablet; the Tablet is “the receptacle (*maḥall*) of the dictate of the Intellect”<sup>40</sup>. Ibn Masarra had previously put forward this schema, and he added to this pair of opposite terms a third consisting of the Throne and the Footstool (*'arsh-kursī*), two classic elements of Islamic cosmology that symbolized the sphere that encompassed the entire universe beyond which lay the realm of the divine. Sometimes he equates both the Pen and the Tablet with the Intellect (see K. *Khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* ed. Ja'far pp. 154, 164 in Ebstein 2014, pp. 52, 53). “The *Dhikr* (word/remembrance) is the Universal Intellect designated by God—may He be exalted—for the Universal Soul, which is the Pedestal.” (Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 88).

The Throne (*'arsh*), finally, is also understood as a Tablet by Ibn Masarra: “[In the ayah] ‘And it is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His Throne was upon the waters.’ (Q 11:7), ‘He’ is an allusion to His essence and ‘Throne’ is an allusion to the letter *lām* and the Tablet.” (Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 77). The Intellect, in the words of Ibn Masarra, is submerged (*mustagriq*) in the Soul and the latter, in turn, in the universal Body. For Ibn 'Arabī the Soul arises from the Intellect, part of which was breathed into it at the time of its creation (Ibn 'Arabī 1919, p. 55). For both of them, the Soul depends on the Intellect and there is a total correspondence between them and a continuous provision of knowledge from one to the other (Stroumsa and Sviri 2009, p. 237).

Despite the polyhedral cosmology that Ibn 'Arabī displays in his work, the Throne and the Footstool usually appear with a clear distinction and, unlike Ibn Masarra, the

<sup>37</sup> See this type of analysis also in the K. *al-yā'* when he explains the relationship between the divine essence and the notion of self symbolised in the pronouns *huwa* (he) and *hiya* (she).

<sup>38</sup> See also (Ebstein and Sviri 2011).

<sup>39</sup> As we saw when causality was discussed, although it is true that in some passages of his work, Ibn 'Arabī implies that some elements of creation arise through or from others, at the same time he rejects the idea of intermediate cause and, we believe, avoids frequent use of the term “emanation” (*fayḍ*) when speaking of creation. When he does use it, he tries to distance himself from its Neoplatonic meaning by mentioning Divine Will immediately afterwards. “The Supreme Pen bestowed spirits [upon created beings, *insha'āt*] and God entrusted their custody to it. [These spirits] are a marvellous emanation (*fayḍ*), essential with regard to the Pen and voluntary as regards God—may he be exalted. The Tablet was expressly created by the will of God.” (Ibn 'Arabī 1919, p. 56). “[The Pen] radiates emanations (*fayḍ*) from both sides: an emanation [relating to the] essence, and an emanation [relating to the] divine Will.” (Ibn 'Arabī 1919, p. 51).

<sup>40</sup> (Ibn 'Arabī 1919). *Uqlat al-mustawfiz*. Edited by Nyberg. Leiden.

Throne is identified with the Pen or Intellect but not with the Tablet (even though Intellect and Soul are usually considered realities above the Throne and Footstool):

Therefore, from this point of view, [it is called] Intellect; from the point of view of the world of Inscription and Archetypal Writing, it is called Pen; from the point of view of the government of the world (*taṣarruf*), Spirit; from the point of view of the Divine Seat (*istiwāʿ*), Throne; and from the point of view of Divine Calculation (*iḥṣāʿ*), Evident Guide (*imām mubīn*)<sup>41</sup>. (Ibn ʿArabī 1919, p. 52).

Ibn ʿArabī uses the symbol of the Throne profusely in a number of treatises, relating it to various realities, various degrees of the same reality, or various modes of the manifestation of divine omnipotence. To the quintessential throne—the *ʿarsh al-Raḥmān* or Throne of the Merciful mentioned in the Qurʾan—with its already varied symbology, the following uses of the term should be added: The Delimited Throne (*maḥḍūd*), which is nothing but the human being itself, the Throne of the Spirit (*ʿarsh al-rūḥ*), referring to the rational human soul, the Throne of the Cloud (*al-ʿamāʿ*), the Throne of the Ruling and the Decree (*al-faṣl wa-l-qaḍāʿ*) which alludes to the throne on which God will reveal himself on Judgement Day (*yawm al-ḥaṣhr*), the Throne of the Qurʾan referring to the heart of the believer or the Throne of Manifestation (*takwīn*) that corresponds to the sphere that encompasses all created beings<sup>42</sup>.

Speaking of the Throne-bearing angels in chapter 13 of *Futūḥāt* “On the Divine Throne” and in *ʿUqlat al-mustawfiz*, Ibn ʿArabī explicitly acknowledges that he is following Ibn Masarra:

We have related, following Ibn Masarra al-Jabalī, who was one of the greatest men of the Sufi Way both in knowledge and in spiritual state and enlightenment (*kashf*), that the transported Throne refers to the dominion (*mulk*). And this is reduced to spirit, body, sustenance and grade. Adam and Israfil bear the forms, Jibril and Muḥammad, the spirits, Mikāʿil and Ibrāhīm, the provisions, and Mālik and Riḍwān, the eschatological rewards and punishments. (Ibn ʿArabī 1972, vol. 2, p. 348)

He made—praise be upon Him—eight bearers to carry the Throne on the day of Resurrection. Today four angels carry it: One under the image of Israfil, the second under the image of Gabriel, the third under the image of Michael, the fourth under the image of Riḍwān, the fifth under the image of Mālik, the sixth under the image of Adam, the seventh under the image of Abraham and the eighth under the image of Muḥammad—God’s peace and blessings be upon him. These are the images of their spiritual station, not the images of their constitution. When Ibn Masarra al-Jabalī—God have mercy on him—mentioned them in the same way that we mention them, he said [the following] regarding this: Israfil and Adam [are in charge] of the images, Muḥammad—God’s peace and blessings be upon him—and Gabriel of the spirits, Mikāʿil and Abraham of the favors (*arzāq*) [of Providence]. Riḍwān and Mālik [are in charge] of the reward and the threat [of punishment]. The Throne, in Ibn Masarra, is an expression that alludes to the dominion (*mulk*). (Ibn ʿArabī 1919, p. 58)

If we turn to the work of Ibn Masarra, we find that this idea appears in quite succinct form in the *K. Khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* and the distribution of angelological functions attributed to him by Ibn ʿArabī is not present:

Four angels carry the Throne of God, and four carry the Footstool, this makes eight. Seven carry the seven heavens and the worlds. Each heaven has an angel

<sup>41</sup> The identification (to be found in Ibn Barrajān as well as Ibn ʿArabī) of *imām mubīn* with divine calculation (*iḥṣāʿ*) is supported by Q. 36:12, “Lo! We it is Who bring the dead to life. We record that which they send before (them), and their footprints. And all things We have kept (*aḥṣaynāhu*) in a clear Register”. Trans. Pickthal.

<sup>42</sup> Ṣuʿād Ḥakīm lists fourteen types of thrones. (See Ḥakīm 1981, p. 791).

that transports it, thanks to whom the sphere moves and who is in charge of establishing order in it. (Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 84)

The fact that there are four now and eight in the Other Life suggests, as Asín Palacios deduced (Asín Palacios 1914, pp. 72–75), that each of these four functions has a dual reality: an exoteric one that manifests in this life and an esoteric one that will be shown in the Other Life. In the case of the first three pairs, at least, which combine a prophet (external reality) and an angel (internal reality), this theory seems to hold<sup>43</sup>. Regarding the identification of the dominion (*mulk*) with the Throne that Ibn ‘Arabī also attributes to Ibn Masarra, we can ascertain that this identification occurs not with the Throne—to which the letter *lām* and the Tablet (*lawh*) correspond—but with the Footstool. Talking about the letter *mīm*, a letter associated with Will (*mashī‘a*), the dominion of the physical (*mulk*) and with place (*makān*), Ibn Masarra tells us that in every heaven there is a footstool (*kursī*), given that what makes the heavens and the earth stand firm are the attributes Al-Ḥaqq and al-Mulk (Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 81)

Returning to chapter 13 of *Futūḥāt*, Ibn ‘Arabī alludes once more to the master from Córdoba, stating that:

What is told about the form of these bearers is approximately the same as that which Ibn Masarra stated. One is said to have a human form, the second that of a lion, the third an eagle, and the fourth a bull. This [bull] was the one the Samaritan saw, imagining that it was the god of Moses. That is why he built a calf for his people and said: “This is your God and the God of Moses,” according to the story [in the Qur’an]. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1972, p. 355)

Once more, the works by Ibn Masarra that have survived do not include this description—which is, however, found in Ibn Barrajān<sup>44</sup>—although this does not prevent us from thinking that they are in lost works or were transmitted orally by his disciples. This is the opinion held by Stroumsa (Stroumsa and Sviri 2009, pp. 96–97) who, moreover, has studied the biblical echo of this description in the vision of the chariot in Ezekiel and Jewish and Christian elaborations (Stroumsa 2006, pp. 103–5).

Ibn ‘Arabī defines the Footstool as the place of the two feet [of God] using Ibn Masarra’s term *mawḍi‘*. The Word (*kalima/kalām*), according to Akbarian doctrine, is one on the Throne and divides into two on the Footstool, thereby introducing the principle of multiplicity in creation, and it continues to expand downwards, doubling itself: “His Word acquired a fourfold character with the creation of the fourth sphere [i.e., the sphere of the fixed stars]” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1919, p. 69). The Footstool constitutes the differentiation necessary for the unity represented by the Throne of God to manifest. Each of the two feet is related to two groups of opposing divine attributes (Ibn ‘Arabī 1919, p. 59). In the *Risāla al-i‘tibār* (*Epistle of contemplation*), Ibn Masarra speaks of the Throne as the first being created and, in this case, he does identify it with the Intellect.

<sup>43</sup> This distribution of functions can be explained as follows: Adam, the first phenomenal manifestation of the body, and Isrāfīl, are in charge of bodies in the future life, to be understood in close connection with the trumpet—*ṣūr*—that sounds on the Day of Resurrection, since it shares a lexical root—*ṢWR*—with *ṣuwar* (images), as explained in *‘Uqla* (Ibn ‘Arabī 1919, p. 86). The realm of creative imagination—understood not as a faculty but as a realm of creation—is identified with the trumpet of light that will be sounded by Isrāfīl on the Day of Resurrection. The Arabic word for trumpet coincides with the plural of the word image, thus, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, when Isrāfīl blows the trumpet he will also breathe life into those images. The upper, broader part of the trumpet reaches to the Cloud (*al-‘amā‘*) and the lower part to the ground. Abraham’s function as a provider seems more evident; described in the Qur’an as the intimate of God, he is also known for the biblical and Qur’anic episode in which he offers food to his guests without knowing that they are angels. He will be joined by Mikā‘īl, probably because he is responsible for the subsistence of the Self. Muḥammad—whose pre-existence in the form of Muḥammadan reality prior to Adam himself grants him pre-eminence in the spiritual world—joins Gabriel, the highest of the angels. The last pair consists of two angels, Mālik and Ridwān, the guardians of hell and paradise, respectively. See also *The alchemy of happiness* (Ibn ‘Arabī 2019) and chapter 167 of *Futūḥāt*, where the functions of the Throne-bearing angels are explained again. (López-Anguila 2014). Regarding the throne in Ibn Masarra see also (Garrido Clemente 2008a, 2008b).

<sup>44</sup> “It is frequently said in the ancient books (*kutub muta‘addima*) and primal knowledge (*‘ilm awwal*) that the carriers of the throne are four angels. One of them resembles a human, the others an ox, lion, and eagle.” (Ibn Barrajān, Tanbih in Casewit 2014). Could Ibn ‘Arabī have derived this idea from Ibn Barrajān and not from Ibn Masarra?

We can say that in Ibn Masarra the denotation of divine sovereignty is shared by the Throne (‘arsh) and by the Footstool (kursī), an identification fostered by the Qur’an itself, in which both terms are merged in the same meaning (Q 11:7; Q 2:55).

### 3. Ibn Barraĵān

Thanks to the research carried out over the last two decades<sup>45</sup> that led, among other things, to the publication of previously unpublished works by Abū l-Ḥakam Ibn Barraĵān of Seville (d. 536 H/1136 CE), we have an idea of not only the thought of one of Al-Andalus’s most important and least known mystical authors<sup>46</sup> but also the intellectual environment from which thinkers such as Ibn ‘Arabī developed. The available works by this master, dubbed “the Ghazālī of Al-Andalus”<sup>47</sup> in some sources, are a *Commentary on the Names of God* (*Sharḥ al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā / Tarjumān lisān al-Ḥaqq*), widely circulated in the East, which lists one hundred and forty Divine Names, and the commentaries on the Qur’an *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (or *Tanbīh*) and *Īdāḥ al-ḥikma fī aḥkām al-‘ibra* (translated by Böwering and Casewit as *Elucidation of Wisdom*). Ibn Barraĵān is considered to have introduced into Al-Andalus a new way of doing hermeneutics, which some classical historians identify with the Sufi method<sup>48</sup>.

We know that Ibn ‘Arabī studied Ibn Barraĵān’s Qur’an commentary, *Īdāḥ al-ḥikma* together with his master al-Mahdawī (d. 621H/1224 CE) in Tunis in 590 H/1194 CE although, according to Addas (Addas 1993, he may have had prior knowledge of this work through ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Ishbilī (d. 581 H/1185 CE). Ibn ‘Arabī refers to this *tafsīr* in a letter to Mahdawī as *The Book of Wisdom* (*K. al-Ḥikma*) (see Ṭāhir Hasanayn 1985, p. 12 and Elmore 2001, p. 611). Ibn Barraĵān is cited explicitly in *Futūḥāt* when he speaks of the mystic making the Names of God his own<sup>49</sup> and as a precursor of the notion “The Truth through which creation exists” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, vol. 2, p. 649; vol. 3, p. 77), and in *Mashāhid al-asrār, Mawāqī’ al-nujūm* (González Costa 2009, p. 58) and *Tadbīrāt al-ilāhiyya* (Ibn ‘Arabī 1919, p. 125) Ibn Barraĵān is cited as a reference for other doctrines, in addition to these two. See for example: “That is what the Gnostic master Abū l-Ḥakīm Ibn Barraĵān was referring to with the expression *imām mubīn* (evident guide) which is the Protected Tablet alluded to in the expression “everything” in verse 7:145 “we wrote for him on the Tablets of everything an admonition, and a distinguishing of everything.” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1919, p. 125).

<sup>45</sup> Of which we would single out the following: (Ibn Barraĵān 2000). *Sharḥ asmā’ Allāh al-Ḥusnā. Comentario sobre los nombres más bellos de Dios*. Edition and introductory study by Purificación de la Torre. Madrid: CSIC-AECI; González Costa, Amina. (González Costa 2009). “Un ejemplo de la hermenéutica sufi del Corán en Al-Andalus: *Īdāḥ al-ḥikma* de Ibn Barraĵān de Sevilla (m. 536/1141)” in *Historia del Sufismo en Al-Andalus y el Magreb* edited by (González Costa and López-Anguaita 2009). Córdoba: Almuzara; Bellver (2013). “Al-Ghazālī of al-Andalus: Ibn Barraĵān, Mahdism and the Emergence of Learned Sufism on the Iberian Peninsula”. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 133 (4): 659–81; Gril (2007). “La lecture supérieure du Coran selon Ibn Barraĵān et Ibn ‘Arabī” in *Symbolisme et herméneutique dans la pensée de Ibn ‘Arabī*. Edited by Bakri Aladdin. Damascus: IFPO. pp. 147–61; Küçük (2013a, 2013b). “Light Upon Light in Andalusian Sufism: Abū al-Ḥakam Ibn Barraĵān (d. 536/1141) and Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) as Developer of His Hermeneutics. Part I: Ibn Barraĵān’s Life and Works,” *ZDMG* 163 (2013a), pp. 87–116 and 2013b “Part II: Ibn Barraĵān’s Views and Legacy,” *ZDMG* 162, pp. 383–409; Böwering, Gerhard and Yousef Casewit. 2015. *A Qur’ān Commentary by Ibn Barraĵān of Seville (d. 536/1141). Īdāḥ al-Ḥikma bi-aḥkām al-‘ibra (Wisdom Deciphered, the unseen Discovered)*; Yousef Casewit (2017). *The Mystics of al-Andalus. Ibn Barraĵān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century*. Cambridge University Press. For a full bibliographic review (Casewit 2012–13). On Ibn Barraĵān’s use of the Bible in his *tafsīr* (Casewit 2016).

<sup>46</sup> Despite being educated as a jurist, he would be remembered as a mystic and an exegete. On sources from which to extract biographical information on Ibn Barraĵān, (González Costa 2009, pp. 49–52; Küçük 2013a; Casewit 2017).

<sup>47</sup> With regard to his ascription to a specific school of thought, Küçük notes that “while Ibn Barraĵān was presented by earlier researchers as a follower of Ibn Masarra, biographers or hagiographers say nothing about his “Bāṭinī” beliefs or his Mu’tazilī tendencies, as they do for Ibn Masarra.” (Küçük 2013b, p. 405). For a study of the life and work of Ibn Barraĵān, especially his exegesis, we would point to the exhaustive works of Casewit and Böwering (Casewit 2017; Ibn Barraĵān 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Zubayr said about his *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*: “It follows a method that has never had precedents, lingering over strange ayahs and invisible beings [questions]. He obscured expression in such a way that none can attain his meaning but those who know his words, his thousands of allusions and his inspiration” (Ibn Zubayr, *Ṣila*, n° 45, p. 32 in González Costa 2009, p. 57).

<sup>49</sup> In particular, the controversial doctrine of the adoption of the Names of God by the believer (*takhalluq bi-l-asmā’* called *ta’abbud* by Ibn Barraĵān) (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, *Futūḥāt*, II, p. 649). On Ibn ‘Arabī and Divine Names see (Ibn ‘Arabī 1997).



The notion of contemplative interpretation, superior reading (*tilāwa ‘uliyā*, see Gril 2007) or symbolic transposition, ascending and in degrees, introduced into al-Andalus by Ibn Masarra, also constitutes the essence of Ibn Barrajān’s hermeneutics. At first glance, this hermeneutics is included in the tradition, which had already begun in the East, of *ta’wīl* (esoteric or allegorical interpretation. Literally, the term means to remit an element to its beginning) or *tafsīr bi-l-ishāra* (exegesis by allusions) but for some researchers such as Casewit (2017, p. 207), it belongs to another type: the *‘ibra* or *i’tibār*. The meaning that underlies this lexical root is that of crossing or passing from one shore to another, i.e., from the external form of a word, an ayah or any sign of Nature, to its interior meaning. Indeed, reading the book of nature and contemplating God’s signs (*ayah*) with the intellect (*‘aql*) enables those who contemplate to gradually ascend<sup>50</sup>. Hell and paradise, according to his dual vision of reality, underlie or coexist in this plane of existence: “Ibn Barrajān rejects the common understanding of the unseen world (*ghayb*) as a transcendent abode that is “out there” spatially, and “yet-to-come” temporally. (. . . ) the visible world both conceals and reveals the invisible. This world signals the next world because it is an integral part of it.”<sup>51</sup> (see Böwering and Casewit’s introduction to Ibn Barrajān 2015, p. 40) Compare with the Akbarian idea: “everything in this world is a model of the things in the other world” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, vol. 4, p. 206). Ibn Barrajān suggests, moreover, that the meanings of the elements of nature are not univocal. Fire, for example, is a reminder of hell and, at the same time, of divine Mercy:

Among the traces of this Book in existence is its allowing fire to exist, despite its burning power (. . . ). But at times fire, by the wisdom that remains in the content, erupts and acts as a warning to servants who thus heed the warning and remember the house of the hereafter and, as such, gain knowledge and certainty about the existence of this house. And by contemplating how Mercy stops this exhalation of hell and how [Mercy and fire] then alternate, they understand wisdom and the mandate that is within it (...) The reason why punishment exists is that it is necessary for the Mercy (*rahīma*) that descends to appease that anger to manifest itself; in the alternation of both is that which enables life. (Ibn Barrajān, *Īdāh*, fol. 9a in González Costa 2013, pp. 259–60, transl. by author)

Ibn Masarra seems to prefigure and inspire Ibn Barrajān’s concept of *i’tibār* but, according to Casewit, the former places more emphasis on the ability of the human intellect to operate without revelatory guidance in its quest for the truth (Casewit 2017, p. 37)<sup>52</sup>. Far from being arbitrary, the exercise of *i’tibār*, when we refer to the revealed text, does not disrespect literality or internal coherence. Neither is it univocal, since for each *mu’tabir* there will be a personal reading of the Koran. The idea of interpretation as crossing from one shore to another appears in one of the most markedly visionary Akbarian works, *Mashāhid*, where we find the expression “boat of interpretation” (Ibn ‘Arabī 2001b, p. 81) in this sense. This sequence of observation (*naẓar*, *baṣar*) of Nature, meditation (*i’tibār*), and ascent is present in a similar fashion in Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Masarra and Ibn Barrajān:

The delights are in the nourishments, the nourishments in the fruit, the fruit in the boughs [. . . ] and the order issues from the Lordly Presence. Ascend from here, look (*unẓur*), enjoy yourself but do not speak. Then he said to me ‘Preserve the intermediaries’. (Ibn ‘Arabī 2001b, pp. 87, 92)

<sup>50</sup> On *i’tibār* as a ladder of cognitive ascension see (Altmann 1967; De Callatay 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Nature as a book is an idea developed extensively by Ibn Barrajān: “If it is arranged thus and it enables life and our existence, this is because it contains a warning and a call to believers to remember through those signs what is within eternal life and to gain knowledge and certainty of the existence of the other world” (González Costa 2013, p. 259, transl. by author).

<sup>52</sup> “Whereas the term *i’tibār* was used by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 338/950), the Brethren of Purity, and Avicenna (d. 428/1037) to mean the inductive method that equips the philosopher with tools to demonstrate God’s existence, Ibn Masarra’s is a method of meditative ascension which differs from the purely cerebral process of discursive reasoning. Indeed, his conception of *i’tibār* foreruns Ibn Ṭufayl’s (d. 581/1185) autodidact, Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān, and is also Sufi-inspired since only the spiritually purified saints are endowed with this gift.” (Casewit 2017, pp. 37–38).



The observer may examine (*yanzuru*) one of the three [genera]: animals, plants and inanimate beings. He observes the plant and sees an inanimate, [ . . . ] As he observes this nutrition, he sees that it ascends upwards and spreads sideways [and finally] he finds the place of the footstool and the place of the spirit to be permanent and encompassing. (Ibn Masarra 2007a, 93 transl. Stroumsa and Sviri 2009, pp. 219–21)

[Water] descends from heaven, even though it is not manifest (*zāhir*) heaven itself today, it is therein in a non-manifest (*bāṭin*) manner. Just as creatures that are engendered from water are from heaven. (Ibn Barrajān, *Tanbīh*, vol. 5, p. 241 transl. Casewit 2014)

The higher corresponds (*yantazim*) to the lower. (Ibn Barrajān, *Īdāh* in Casewit 2014, p. 297)

#### *Ḥaqq, khalq, raqīqa*

One of the most seminal concepts in Ibn Barrajān's work is *al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi al-ʿālam/al-samawāt wa-l-arḍ* (the truth through which is created the world / creation / the heavens and earth or The Real according to Creation is created) which appears in the three works mentioned above. This idea, based on various Qur'anic ayahs (Q 10:15; 15:85; 44:38–39) which imply that the *ḥaqq* is an instrument of God in creation, would find a significant echo in Ibn ʿArabī. This idea had already appeared in Ibn Masarra when, speaking of the letter *ḥā*, he explained that it represents *al-Ḥaqq*, the Truth or Reality with which God created the heavens and the earth (Ibn Masarra 2007b, pp. 68, 81). Truth, Ibn Masarra tells us, is the Name through which God creates the seven heavens and the earth, and is based on the ayah "It is He who created the heavens and the earth in truth; and the day He says 'Be', and it is; His saying is true. And His is the Kingdom the day the Trumpet is blown ( . . . )" (Q 6:73) to explain that, as the two attributes that support and hold the heavens and the earth are *al-ḥaqq* and *al-mulk*, each heaven has a footstool (Ibn Masarra 2007b, p. 87). "According to Ibn Barrajān, the Quran, the universe and mankind are three aspects of the same reality (*al-Ḥaqq*), since *al-Ḥaqq* is everything." (Küçük 2013b, p. 385).

The attribute or Divine Name *al-Ḥaqq* (The Truth / The True / The Real) which in Ibn ʿArabī—probably, as we said earlier, under the influence of Ibn Barrajān—frequently appears linked to creation, designated in the first exegesis the action of God in the world. It was used as a synonym for *islām*, *dīn*, *hudā*, Qur'ān and was in opposition to *bāṭil* (vain, useless). It is also understood as something that ensues (*kāʿin*) and indeed is considered synonymous with the end of the world because, according to the Qur'an, it is something that necessarily must happen. Constructed with the preposition *bi* in front and in combination with verbs like create or reveal, it has the meaning that God did not create the world for nothing (Nwiya 1970, pp. 41–42). According to Akbarian cosmology, we can find multiple correspondences of *al-ḥaqq* with other elements: Truth equates to First Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-awwal*), Pen (*al-qalam*), Spirit (*Rūḥ*), Glorious Throne, Evident Guide (*al-imām al-mubīn*), Interpreting Spirit (*mutarjim*) of God, Universal Spirit (*Rūḥ kullī*), Justice (*ʿadl*), "The Truth through which Creation exists", Muḥammadan Reality, Spirit of Spirits, and even "every thing"<sup>53</sup>. It is also alluded to symbolically as Eagle (*ʿuqāb*) and White Pearl. The expression *al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bi-hi* which, as we saw above, had been coined by Ibn Barrajān from the Qur'an ayah "We created not the heavens and the earth, and all that is between them, save in truth (*al-ḥaqq*)" (Q 15:85), is adopted by Ibn ʿArabī, acknowledging the explicit attribution to his master, in *Futūḥāt* (Ibn ʿArabī 1911, vol. 2, pp. 60, 104; vol. 3, p. 77).

This "Truth through which creation takes place" would become, in Akbarian ontology, a mode of expression of the *barzakh*, an indispensable doctrine to understand any aspect of the thought of Ibn ʿArabī. This isthmus or intermediate realm, which shares in the two

<sup>53</sup> (See Ḥakīm 1981, pp. 111–13; Ibn ʿArabī 2002, p. 109). In his *Īdāh*, Ibn Barrajān mentions *ḥaqq mubīn* or *kitāb mubīn* rather than *imām mubīn* (González Costa 2013, p. 234).

realities that it separates, which can have a temporal, spatial, ontological, and epistemological meaning, is fundamental when it comes to relating the eternal and the contingent or God with creation. The following excerpt explains the ambiguous nature of this *ḥaqq* and the extent to which it is related to the Breath of the Merciful or the Cloud, denominations of the realm in which beings are brought from non-existence to existence: “The Cloud is the Real through whom takes place the creation of everything. It is called the Real (*Ḥaqq*) since it is identical with the Breath. And the breath is hidden within the Breather—for this is what one understands from “breath”. Hence the Breath has the property of non manifest, but when it becomes manifest it has the property of the Manifest.” (Ibn ‘Arabi 1911, vol. 2, p. 310, translated by Chittick 1989, p. 134)

These two extremes *khalq* and *ḥaqq* are connected through *raqā’iq*, subtle bonds that, according to some of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works, are in charge of uniting the Divine Names with each other and with created things, forming a kind of dialogue<sup>54</sup> and providing knowledge and existence continuously to created things (Ḥakīm 1981). This “cosmogonic drama” is set forth in *K. Inshā’ al-dawā’ir* where it is explained that thirty bonds that extend from the Names of God, crossing each other and grouping together until they descend to the inhabitants of Hell and Paradise, keep creation alive. (Ibn ‘Arabi 1919, pp. 40–41). The *raqā’iq* are no more than relations, and they pre-exist created things: “God created rank (*makāna*) before He created place (*makān*). Then He stretched tenuities (*raqā’iq*) from rank to specific places ( . . . ) then He brought into existence the things in their spaces” (Fut. II 528.26, trans. Chittick). These rays—as Ibn Arabi sometimes calls them—can introduce a principle of differentiation into beings: “Masculine and feminine, which are united in the *ḥaqīqa* but ordered in the circle of creation, have differentiated their ranks by means of the different *raqīqa-s*” (Ḥakīm 1981). It is in the perfect man and in the Supreme Element (*‘unṣur a’zam*) where these threads will “tie together”:

God has made the human being as the sum of the subtle connections of the whole world. And from him to everything in the world a subtle relation is extended (*mumtamadd*). (Ḥakīm 1981, p. 536)

That *raqīqa* between the servant and every part (*juz’*) of the world ( . . . ) exists according to an affinity/ what is appropriated (*yunāsib*) with the world and what has an affinity with him (*munāsib*). (Ḥakīm 1981, p. 536)

[From the First Intellect] its subtle relations (*raqā’iq*) are extended to the Soul, the Prime Matter, the Body, the fixed stars, the center [of the Universe] and the elements, and through an ascending movement, [they reach] ( . . . ) engendered beings, the human being, and the Greatest Element -where [the subtle relations] tie together (*in’iqād*), that is the origin of 46.656.000 subtle relations. (Ibn ‘Arabi 1919, p. 52)

In relation to the sphere of the world, the Greatest Element would be the [central] dot, and the circumference would be the Pen while the Table is what is between them. And in the same way the dot comprehends the circumference in its essence, this Element comprehends in its essence all the facets of the Pen which constitute those subtle relations we talked about before, they are one in the Element and they multiply themselves in the Intellect according to the diverse modes of reception of the [Element] in the [Intellect]. That’s why the Greatest Element is stronger when recognising the unity of its Creator. (Ibn ‘Arabi 1919, p. 82)

These subtle threads appear in the most diverse contexts. Discussing letters, he explains that the three letters of God (*alif, zayn, lam*) and the three letters of man (*nun, sad, dad*) multiplied by the three worlds of *mulk, malakūt, and jabarūt* result in nine spheres in which the knowledge of God is projected towards man (*aflāk al-ilqā’*) and nine spheres of reception that correspond to man (*aflāk al-talaqqī*) and “from each of the essential realities

<sup>54</sup> (Ibn ‘Arabi 1999b, pp. 353–71).

of the nine spheres subtle bonds extend out toward the nine human spheres, and from this, reciprocally go back to the divine spheres.” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, vol. 1, p. 51 trans. Gril 2004, p. 156). This element of Akbarian cosmology also has angelological implications:

There are subtle threads which extend from the Universal Soul to the Throne (. . . ) these are like ladders (*ma‘ārij*) for the angels, while the meanings that descend in these tenuities are like angels. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, vol. 3, p. 582, Trans. Chittick 1989, p. 406)

(. . . ) Wherever these bonds meet (*ijtima*’), the angel itself is the meeting point and it is there where the angel comes to existence (*hadatha*). This newly arrived fact is thus the angel itself. If it bows with its whole being toward one of the sets of nine spheres, the other side attracts it. It thus comes and goes from one to another (*yataraddadu*). (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, vol. 1, p. 51, Trans. Gril 2004, p. 156)

This cosmological elaboration of the *raqīqa* does not appear to be present in Ibn Barrajan although the similar concept of *athar*—also used by Ibn ‘Arabī—can be found, i.e., the effect or “trace” of a Divine Name in Creation as a way of connecting *ḥaqq* with *khalq*. These traces that “are in the whole existence” (Ibn Barrajan, *Idāh*, fol. 59b), can also be used as ladders to ascend by contemplation to the Divine Presence (Casewit 2017, p. 146). Applying Ibn Masarra’s *i’tibār* to the genre of the Commentary on the Divine Names is one of the innovative aspects of Ibn Barrajan’s thought. According to his doctrine, the effects of the Names in creation can be apprehended by human beings and used in the contemplative ascent.

Along with the notion of *al-Ḥaqq al-makhlūq bi-hi*, that of Universal Servant (*al-‘abd al-kullī*), is probably the one that had the greatest influence on the work of Ibn ‘Arabī. Ibn Barrajan’s definition of Universal Servant as the one “who possesses the *nūr al-mubīn*, which is the essence of the [prophetic] news (*inbā’*) and the Divine Revelation (*wahy*)” is close to what Tustarī or Tirmidhī refer to as muḥammadan light or muḥammadan reality (*Īdāh*, Mahmut Paşa 3, fol. 254b in González Costa 2013, p. 234). Although Ibn ‘Arabī usually uses the expression Perfect Man (*insān kāmīl*) for that same notion, in some passages we can find it cited in the manner of Ibn Barrajan:

Perfect Man (*insān kullī*) is more perfect than the cosmos in its totality, since he is a transcript of the cosmos letter by letter, and he adds to it the fact that his reality does not accept shrinking (...). Shrinking only takes place in relation to a precedent elevation, but the Universal Servant (*al-‘abd al-kullī*) has no elevation in his servanthood. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1972, vol. 2, p. 615 in Chittick 1989, p. 371)

It is, in point of fact, his condition of total servant—for he serves God in an all-encompassing way, through all His Names—that elevates him to the rank of perfect man. Other points in common between both mystics and Ibn Masarra have been highlighted by Küçük (Küçük 2013b), such as the concept of light and wisdom, the metaphor of knowledge of the internal realities of the human being as anatomical dissection, as well as order and correspondence between the three levels of reality: universe, Qur’an and human being<sup>55</sup>.

From the partial comparison of elements of Andalusian mysticism outlined here, it can, however, be concluded in general terms, building on the line of argument pursued by previous researchers, that there exists an explicit recognition by Ibn ‘Arabī of the influence of certain doctrines of Ibn Masarra and Ibn Barrajan on his thinking, along with a tacit presence of other elements (with names that may differ) originating from these authors. Ibn Arabi’s texts also suggest a desire to distance himself or remain silent with regard to questions with which he is familiar, but which could draw him towards philosophy or theurgy. If the spiritual authority of Ibn Masarra and Ibn Barrajan over Ibn ‘Arabī is clear, the extent of the intellectual heritage with which Ibn ‘Arabī engages in dialogue,

<sup>55</sup> Man as microcosms is the interpreter of the verses and the letters of the Book of Existence by means of an ascendant path of meditation, reflexion and transposition (*i’tibār*) and through an analogical reading of both the Qur’an and the signs of the Cosmos as a divine discourse that aims to uplift the reader to this higher reading (*al-tilāwat al-‘ulyā*) to contemplate the cosmic and inner dimension of the Qur’an. (González Costa 2009; Gril 2007).

rejects or re-adapts his own cosmological and hermeneutical system can still lead to new developments, especially in light of the recent “discovery” of the figure of Ibn Barrajān and his extensive work. This comparison of mystics at local level must also be understood, as has been the case in recent years, within a broader framework, as a result of the influence of the earlier mysticism of the Islamic East upon that of the West.

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