

25 The bezel of the wisdom of exaltation exists in the essence of Moses¹

(197) The wisdom of (Pharaoh's) slaying the boys was destined to support Moses through the life of every slain boy, who was killed as if he were Moses. (In this act), there was no ignorance, for the life of every slain boy was necessarily returned to Moses. Each life was pure, because its inborn trait (*fiṭra*) of the primordial covenant of *balā*² was unimpaired by selfish aims. Moses was the combination of the lives of all the boys who were killed as if each one was Moses, hence, every spiritual predisposition of each slain boy inhered in Moses. God particularized Moses in an unprecedented manner, for he possessed many kinds of wisdom. I shall present successively, if God wills, some of these in this chapter in measure of the occurrence of the divine instruction (*amr ilāhī*)³ in my thought.

The above notion was the first thing I was told (*shūfihtu bihi*)⁴ in this chapter. When Moses was born, he was the sum of many spirits and active powers, because the small part (of the human being) acts on the large part. Do you not see how the infant, with his special trait, acts on the adult so that the latter comes down from his leading position and plays with the infant, rocking him and appearing before the infant as his equal in understanding? Thus, the adult becomes subject to the infant without being aware of it. Also, the child occupies the adult with his rearing, protection, looking after his interests, and making his life easy, so that he will not be anxious. All this pertains to the ways the younger acts on the older, because of the power of the child's state, for the child has been recently acquainted with his Lord, for he is closer to his birth (198), while the older is more distant from this acquaintance. Thus, whoever is nearer to God subordinates the one more distant from Him, just as by virtue of their closeness to the king, his highest officials subordinate those

1 For a partial discussion of this chapter, see Ronald L. Nettler, "Ibn 'Arabi and the Qur'an: Some Passages Concerning Mūsa in the Fusūs al-hikam," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 20(1996):53–66.

2 Qur'ān 7:172.

3 Since Ibn al-'Arabī was inspired to write this book and its content was dictated to him, it is advisable here to render *amr* as instruction, that is, what God taught him, and not a command.

4 The verb *shāfaha* means to speak mouth to mouth (face to face), and one can deduce from the use of this verb the notion of direct revelation to Ibn al-'Arabī who only transmitted what he was told.

more remote from him. God's Messenger used to bare himself to the rain uncovering his head so that the rain touched him; then he said the reason is that the rain recently had contact with God. Think of the Prophet's knowledge of God – how exalted, high, and clear it is. The rain subjugates the best people, because of its proximity to its Lord; it was like a messenger who sends down inspiration to the Prophet calling him directly by his essence, and the Prophet bared himself to him to receive what he brought from the Lord. Had the Prophet not received a divine benefit from the touch of the rain, he would not have exposed himself to it.⁵ Thus, this is the message of the water from which God made every living thing,⁶ so understand!

As for the wisdom of putting him (Moses) in the ark (*tābūt*) and throwing him into the river,⁷ (its meaning is the following): The ark alludes to his humanity, while the river is the symbol of the knowledge he attained through his body. Only via the body, composed of the four elements, can the human soul be supplied with the faculties of reasoning, sensation, and imagination. When the soul resides in the body and is ordered to act on and direct the body, God makes these faculties tools through which one can fulfill what God wants from him in directing his humanity (*tābūt*) in which God's presence (*sakīna*) inheres.⁸ He was cast into the river in order to attain different kinds of knowledge through these faculties. God taught him that even though the spirit which directs him is his ruler, the spirit directs him through these faculties. God made these faculties, which reside in humanity (expressed through the *tābūt*), associate the human being through allusions and kinds of wisdom.

In like manner, God directs the cosmos; He allows it to direct itself by itself or by its form,⁹ just as the existence of the child depends on his father's bringing him into existence (*ijād al-wālid*), the effects on their causes, the conditioned things on their conditions, the objects of knowledge on knowledge,¹⁰ the notions that are proved on their proofs, and the unquestionable notions (199) on their truths. All these things pertain to the cosmos and this is God's direction of it; He let it direct itself by itself. As for our saying "by its form," meaning the form of the cosmos, I mean the Most Beautiful Names and the highest attributes through which God is named and described. We find the meaning and the spirit of each of His names by which He is named in the cosmos. Thus, He directs the cosmos only through its form.

For this reason, He said regarding the creation of Ādam, who is the model (*namūdhaq*)¹¹ that includes the qualities of the divine Presence, that is, the Essence,

⁵ Cf. Muslim, IX:13 (898).

⁶ Cf. for example, Qur'ān 21:30: "We made every living thing from the water" (trans. AH). Ebstein and Sviri, p. 250.

⁷ Cf. Qur'ān 20:39. In this verse the word *yamm* (literally: sea) appears.

⁸ On the notion that the *sakīna* resides in the *tābūt*, see Qur'ān 2:248.

⁹ According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, everything is directed by the rules inherent in it and by God's names.

¹⁰ Read here *al-maʿlūmāt ʿalā ʿulūmihā* instead of *al-maʿlūlāt ʿalā ʿilalihā* (effects on their causes), which repeats what was already said.

¹¹ For the use of this word instead of the word *barnāmaj* (plan) in Affīfī's text, see Kāshānī, pp. 506f.

the attributes and acts: “God created Ādam in His image.”¹² His image is only the divine Presence. In this noble archetype, which is the Perfect Human Being, He brought into existence all the divine names and the realities that are brought forth from him in the macro-cosmos outside him. God made him (Ādam) the spirit of the cosmos and subordinated to him the high and the low things, because of his perfect form. Just as everything in the cosmos praises Him,¹³ so everything in the cosmos is subordinated to this human being, because of the reality of his form. God said: “He has subjugated all that is in the heavens and the earth as a present for you” (Qur’ān 45:13). Thus, everything in the world is subject to the human being; the one who knows this is the perfect human being, while the human being who is like an animal does not know it.

Putting Moses in the ark and casting the ark into the river was an external form of destruction; however, from an inward perspective, it saved him from being killed. He lived just as the souls live because of knowledge, (escaping) the death of ignorance as God said: “Or whoever was a dead person” (Qur’ān 6:122), meaning because of ignorance, and “We restored him to life” (ibid.), meaning because of knowledge, and “We gave him light by which he can walk among people” (ibid.), meaning guidance (light), “Is this person like one who walks in darkness” (ibid.), meaning going astray, “unable to escape it” (ibid.), meaning that he can never be rightly guided, for going astray is inherent in his soul, and there is no other aim which can make him act otherwise.

Guidance means that the human being (200) is led to perplexity (*hayra*),¹⁴ so that he knows that (divine) matter involves perplexity, and perplexity is anxiety and motion, and motion is life. Hence, there is neither rest nor death; there is only existence and (therefore) no nonexistence. In like manner God said, regarding the water by which the earth lives and moves: “It (the earth) quakes” (Qur’ān 22:5), and concerning the earth’s pregnancy, He said: “(The earth) swells” (ibid.), and as for its giving birth, He said: “It brings forth every joyous pair” (ibid.). This means that the earth gives birth only to that which is like it, that is, natural like it. Pairing (*zawjiyya*, *shafiyya*) is the basis of what the earth gives birth and what appears from it.

Likewise, the existence of the Real (is attested) through the multiplicity of the cosmic phenomena and His many names, and the form of the world requires the realities of the divine names. Through the cosmic phenomena and their creator, the Unity of Manyness (*aḥadiyyat al-kathra*) is proved. (The Real) is One in His entity with respect to His Essence, just as the substance (*jawhar*) of primary matter is one with respect to its essence and many with respect to all the forms which appear through it and for which it serves as their substrate. Similarly, the Real is many, because of the forms of His self-manifestation; however, He is the manifestation of the cosmic forms, notwithstanding His intelligible Unity. Think how good is this divine instruction through which God particularizes whomsoever among His people He wishes him to learn (this idea).

¹² Bukhārī, LXXIX: 1 (6227). See [ch. 12](#), n. 23.

¹³ Cf. Qur’ān 17:44.

¹⁴ See [ch. 3](#), n. 28, above.

Since Pharaoh's family¹⁵ found him in the river by the tree, Pharaoh called him Mūsā (Moses). In Coptic *mū* means water, and *sā* is a tree, thus he called him after the place where he found him, for the ark stopped at the tree in the river. Pharaoh wanted to kill him, but his wife – who was inspired by a divine speech (201) and whom God created for perfection, as the Prophet said about her when he acknowledged her and Maryam, the daughter of 'Imrān, as possessing perfection which (usually) pertains to males – said to her husband regarding Moses that he “is a delight for me and you” (Qur'ān 28:9). Thus, she was delighted by him through her perfection which was granted to her, as we said, and he (Moses) was a delight for Pharaoh through the belief God granted him as he was drowning.

God made him die when he was pure, immaculate, and free of evilness, because He put him to death being a believer before he acquired any sin. (Acceptance of) Islam erases what (one did) before.¹⁶ God made it a sign of his providence for whomsoever He wishes, so that no one despairs of God's Mercy, “for only unbelievers despair of God's Mercy” (Qur'ān 12:87). If Pharaoh had been one of those who despair, he would not have hastened to believe in God.

As Pharaoh's wife said, Moses was a “delight for me and you . . . maybe he will benefit us” (Qur'ān 28:9). So it happened, for God benefited both of them through Moses even though they did not know that he was the prophet who would be responsible for the destruction of Pharaoh's kingdom and people. When God protected him from Pharaoh, “the heart of Moses' mother became empty” (ibid., 10) of the anxiety which had affected her. Then God prevented him from being suckled until he was brought to his mother's breast, and she suckled him and so God made her pleasure in him complete.

In like manner, God taught (humanity) the religions, as He said: “We have made a law (*shir'atan*) and a path (*minhājan*) for each of you” (Qur'ān 5:48), meaning a way (*ṭarīq*). *Minhājan* means that from this way (*minhā*) each one came (*jā'a*).¹⁷ This statement makes an allusion to the sources (*aṣl*, literally: root) from which it came. This source (religion) is his sustenance, just as the branch of a tree is nourished only from its root.

What is prohibited in one law may be permitted in another, that is, with respect to the form. I mean (202) my saying that this is permitted.¹⁸ Essentially, a thing is not the same as it was, because everything is created anew, and there is no repetition (in creation). We have (already) called your attention to this (notion).¹⁹

¹⁵ The Qur'ān (28:9) speaks of Pharaoh's wife, as it is written here below.

¹⁶ According to a doctrine of *muwāfāt*, the status of one's belief or unbelief is established before one's death. The human being, who becomes a believer before his death, is considered a believer throughout his whole life. For a thorough discussion of this doctrine, see Etan Kohlberg, “Muwāfāt Doctrines in Muslim Theology,” *Studia Islamica* 57(1983):47–66.

¹⁷ The author divides the word *minhājan* into two words: *minhā* (from it, from the way) and *jā'a* (each one came).

¹⁸ Ibn al-ʿArabī means that a thing is not permitted or forbidden by virtue of itself, but by God's command. Thus, things have no intrinsic nature.

¹⁹ Ibn al-ʿArabī here adopts the Ashʿarite doctrine of continuous creation. See pp. 91f.

God refers to this (notion) regarding Moses when He forbade employing a wet nurse,²⁰ because his mother was really the woman who suckled him, not the woman who bore him. The mother, who bore him, did this as one who receives a trust; the child was produced in her and nourished by her menstrual blood. She did not will this, so that she was not indebted to him, for he was nourished, and if he were not nourished by what nourished him and the menstrual blood did not come from her, this would destroy her or make her ill. Hence, the mother was indebted to the fetus, because it was nourished by this blood and it protected her from injury, which she would experience, if this blood did not come from her and if her fetus was not nourished by it. The wet nurse is different, because by her suckling the child, the aim is to give him life and preserve it. God gave this advantage to Moses' mother, and no other woman enjoyed this advantage except his mother, so that she would be delighted in rearing him and seeing him grow at her bosom, "that she might not grieve" (Qur'ān 28:13).

God rescued him from the anxiety of the ark, and Moses broke the darkness of nature because God granted him divine knowledge even if he did not go beyond of it (nature). God subjected him to trials,²¹ that is, put him to the test in many circumstances, so that he would realize patience in himself when God tempted him. The first trial God subjected him to was killing the Egyptian, for God inspired him to do this and made it fit his innermost part (his soul), even though Moses was unaware of this. However, he did not care to kill the Egyptian and did not wait to receive God's order to kill him, for the prophet is inwardly protected and is unaware (of it), until he prophesies, that is, is informed by God. For this reason, al-Khiḍr showed him the killing of the youth,²² which Moses disowned, forgetting his killing of the Egyptian.

Then, al-Khiḍr said to Moses: "I did it not of my own bidding" (Qur'ān 18:82, trans. Arberry), calling Moses' attention to his (al-Khiḍr's) degree before he was informed that he was protected regarding this very event, even though he was not aware of this protection. Also he (al-Khiḍr) showed him making a hole in the vessel (and as a result its sinking), which outwardly was its destruction, while inwardly it was saved from being plundered. Al-Khiḍr made this (event) (203) correspond to Moses' ark, which was in the river. Outwardly it signified destruction, while inwardly deliverance. His mother did it, looking at Pharaoh out of fearing his violence, because he could slaughter him in order to cause her harm.²³ She did it with the help of God's inspiration, without having been aware of it. She felt in herself a desire to suckle him; however, when she feared for his safety, she cast him into the river, for the proverb says: "If the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve." She did not fear for him because of what she saw, or grieve for him upon looking at him. Probably she thought that God would restore him to her because she had a good opinion of Him. She lived with this thought in herself, as hope,

²⁰ Qur'ān 28:12.

²¹ Qur'ān 20:40.

²² Qur'ān 18:74.

²³ Read *ḍayran* (al-Kāshānī and al-Qayṣarī).

fear, and despair were blended (in such a situation). For this reason, when she was inspired, she said: "Perhaps this is the messenger who will destroy Pharaoh and his people." She lived enjoying this fancy, and with respect to her, this assumption essentially amounted to knowledge.

Then, Moses was sought (by the Egyptians) and he came out of the city, escaping from (his persecutors), outwardly out of fear, but inwardly for love of deliverance. That is because movement is always caused by love, and the one who looks at movement is prevented from seeing this cause, for (he has in his mind) other causes, that are not (the real cause). This can be explained by the fact that the origin (of all things) is the movement of the cosmos from nonexistence, in which it resides, to existence. For this reason, it is said that the whole cosmos derives from movement after its being at rest.²⁴ Movement, which is the existence of the cosmos, derives from love. God's Messenger called (our) attention to this, saying: "I was a hidden and unknown treasure and (therefore) I loved (or wanted) to be known."²⁵ Had this love not existed, the cosmos itself would not have appeared. Its movement from nonexistence to existence derives from love which brings it into existence, and the cosmos too loves to see itself in concrete existence, as it saw itself in a hidden fixed state (*thubūt*). Hence, in every respect its movement from fixed nonexistence to existence derives from the love of both the Real and the cosmos, because (204) perfection is loved by virtue of itself (*al-kamāl maḥbūb li-dhātihi*).²⁶ And His knowledge of Himself with respect to His ability to dispense with (all) things belongs to Him (alone) by virtue of His essence (*huwa lahu bi-dhātihi*). What remains is only to complete the degree of knowledge through the knowledge of what comes into being (*al-ʿilm al-ḥādīth*) based on the concrete entities, the entities of the world, when they exist (literally: are found – *wujidat*). The form of perfection is manifest through the knowledge of things that come into being and knowledge of the eternal things; the degree of knowledge becomes perfect through both aspects. The degrees of existence are perfected similarly, for existence is divided into the eternal and noneternal; the latter is what comes into being. The eternal is the existence of the Real by virtue of Himself, and the non-eternal is the existence of the Real in the form of the concrete (*thābit*) world. The non-eternal is called coming into being (*ḥudūth*), because parts of it appear to others, and appear in the form of the world. Thus, existence becomes perfect, and the movement of the world derives from love of perfection, so understand!

Do you not see how He relieves the constriction of the divine names²⁷ from the nonexistent manifestation of their effects in what is called the world? God loves

²⁴ Very probably by this phrase (at rest), Ibn al-ʿArabī means the state of the cosmos as a thought God had before His self-manifestation took place.

²⁵ The present tradition was considered spurious by the experts of Ḥadīth; hence, Ibn al-ʿArabī ascribed its authenticity to unveiling. SPK, p. 391, n. 14.

²⁶ This notion is reminiscent of al-Ghazālī's theory of love in which the love of a thing because of its perfection is the most important cause of love. Abrahamov, *Divine Love*, pp. 46–50.

²⁷ Cf. *Futūḥāt*, Vol. IV, p. 174. SPK, p. 130.

case, and He reaches it only through the existence of the forms, the highest and the lowest. Thus, it is proved that movement derives from love, and there is no movement in Being except that which stems from love.²⁸ Among the learned people some know this and some others are veiled from knowing it, because they consider the proximate cause which dominates their soul and makes them decide according to it.

Moses' fear because he killed the Egyptian was evident. (At the same time) this fear implied the will (love) of deliverance from being killed. (Outwardly) he escaped because he feared; however, inwardly he escaped because he willed (loved) to be rescued from Pharaoh and what he would do to him.²⁹ (The Qur'ān) mentions the evident and proximate cause, which was (in relation to the real cause), as the form of the body is to the human being. And the will (love) to be rescued was implicit in him, just as the spirit which directs the body is implicit in the body.

When the prophets turn to the people, they use external and general expressions and base their address on the understanding of the knower and the listener.³⁰ The messengers take into account only the common people, because they know the degree of their understanding, as the Prophet called attention to (205) this degree in the chapter of gifts and said: "I will give a gift to a man, even though another gift is dearer to me, for fear that God will throw him into the Fire."³¹ Thus, he took into consideration the low-minded who are driven by greed and natural desires.

Thus, the knowledge the prophets brought was covered with a garment (*khiṭ'a*)³² fitted to the lowest understanding, so that whoever cannot penetrate this cover would say how good is this garment and regard it as the last aim. However, the one who possesses subtle understanding and who dives to reach the pearls of wisdom, which he deserves to find, says: "This is a garment given by the king." Thereafter, he examines the value of this garment and its kind among other garments. He then realizes the value of the one on whom it was bestowed and finds a knowledge which others cannot attain, because they do not know the value of this garment.

Since the prophets, messengers, and (their) heirs knew that in the world and among peoples of the world there are such persons, they intended to express (their messages) in an outward understandable manner, one which both the common and the elite share. The elite person understands what the common people understand

²⁸ For love as a cause of motion, see Aristotle, *Physics*, I, 192a. Very probably this notion goes back to Plato, *Symposium*, pp. 186–189. Abrahamov, *Divine Love*, p. 4.

²⁹ "So Moses left the city, fearful and wary, and prayed, 'My Lord, save me from people who do wrong'" (Qur'ān 28:21).

³⁰ Here Ibn al-ʿArabī follows the philosophers who claim that the Qur'ān expresses itself in a style which can be understood by the common people. Consequently, part of the Qur'ān, for example the descriptions of Paradise and Hell, should be interpreted metaphorically. Walbridge, *God and Logic*, p. 80.

³¹ Bukhārī, II, 19 (27).

³² The literal meaning of this word is "robe of honor." However, by this metaphor, our author means the outward cover of the prophets' statements that only the subtle scholar may penetrate.

and more, thus he is rightly called one of the elite and through this additional understanding he distinguishes himself from the common people. For this reason, those who transmit knowledge are satisfied (with this state of affairs). This is the wisdom in Moses' saying: "I escaped from you out of fear" (Qur'ān 26:21); he did not say I fled from you out of love of safety and well-being.

Thereafter, he came to Madyan and found two maidens and "he watered (their flocks)" (Qur'ān 28:24) without (asking) payment, "then he turned to the shadow" (ibid.) of God and said: "My Lord, I need the good You sent down to me" (ibid.). Thus, he made his act of watering the same as the good God sent to him, and described himself as one in want of God regarding the good that is with Him.

Al-Khiḍr wished to build a wall without (asking) payment, and Moses reproved him for that.³³ (As a response) al-Khiḍr reminded him that he watered the flocks without asking payment and other things he did not mention, until Muḥammad wished that Moses would have been silent and not raised objections, so that God could tell him of Moses' and al-Khiḍr's affair. (206) Hence, Muḥammad would know through God's story the place to which Moses was led without his being aware of this. Had Moses known (the role of al-Khiḍr), he would not have disapproved of al-Khiḍr's deeds. God made al-Khiḍr's deeds true in the eyes of Moses, purified him, and led him to the right way. Notwithstanding, Moses ignored al-Khiḍr's purification and the condition the latter had laid down so that Moses could follow him.³⁴ This (story) will shed God's Mercy on us, if we forget God's (hidden aims).³⁵ Had Moses known (the hidden meanings of al-Khiḍr's acts), al-Khiḍr would not have said to him "(How could you have patience in) matters beyond your knowledge" (Qur'ān 18:68, trans. AH.)? By this al-Khiḍr meant: I attained knowledge through mystical experience (literally: taste – *dhawq*), which you (Moses) could not attain, just as you possessed knowledge which I could not attain. Thus, al-Khiḍr was just to Moses.

As for the wisdom in al-Khiḍr's separation from Moses, it is (reasoned) in God's saying: "Accept whatever the Messenger gives you, and abstain from whatever he forbids you" (Qur'ān 59:7, trans. AH). Those who know God and the value of the Message and the Messenger stop at these words. Since al-Khiḍr knew that Moses was God's messenger, he began to watch Moses' sayings, so that he might behave with good manners toward the messenger as he deserved. Then Moses said to him: "From now on, if I ask you something, do not follow me" (Qur'ān 18:76). Thus, he forbade al-Khiḍr to be in his company. When Moses reacted to al-Khiḍr's act the third time, al-Khiḍr said: "This is the separation between me and you" (ibid., 78). Moses did not say to him do not act, nor did he ask al-Khiḍr to stay in his company, because he knew the value of his position, which told him

³³ Qur'ān 18:77.

³⁴ Al-Khiḍr stipulated that Moses would not ask him about his acts until he would inform him. Qur'ān 18:70.

³⁵ The author seems to say that whenever a human being does not understand God's acts, he should remind himself of the story about Moses, who did not realize the wisdom in al-Khiḍr's acts until he was informed.

to forbid al-Khiḍr's company. Moses remained silent, and the separation took place.

Look at the perfection of the knowledge of these two persons. Moses maintained divine good manners and al-Khiḍr was just to Moses in acknowledging before Moses the (following): "I possessed knowledge which God taught me and you did not know, and you possessed knowledge which God taught you and I did not know." This announcement of al-Khiḍr regarding Moses constituted a remedy for the injury he caused Moses when he said: "How could you have patience about matters beyond your knowledge" (Qur'ān 18:68, trans. AH)? Al-Khiḍr said this though he knew the lofty position Moses held because of his mission and that he (al-Khiḍr) lacked such a position. This became manifest in the Muḥammadan community in the tradition of the pollination of the palm trees, concerning which Muḥammad told to his Companions: "You know best the interests of your worldly affairs."³⁶ No doubt, the knowledge of a thing is better than ignorance of it. For this reason, God praises Himself that "He (207) absolutely knows everything" (Qur'ān 29:62). Thus, Muḥammad admitted to his Companions that they are more cognizant of the worldly affairs than he, because he possessed no experience in these matters, for these things require experience and practice, and he did not find time to learn them, because he was engaged with more important things. In sum, I have called your attention to this important behavior which will benefit you if you use it.

God's saying: "My Lord bestowed on me authority (*ḥukm*)" (Qur'ān 26:21) means the vicegerency (*khilāfa*), "and made me one of the messengers" (ibid.) means the mission (*risāla*), for not every messenger is a vicegerent. Because the vicegerent fights with the sword, dismisses and appoints (officials), whereas the messenger is different, for he must transmit the message with which he is sent. If he fights for the message and protects it with the sword, he is (then) both a vicegerent and a messenger. Thus, just as not every prophet is a messenger,³⁷ so not every messenger is a vicegerent; that is, (not every messenger) is given kingship and the ability to handle it.

As for the rationale of Pharaoh's question regarding the divine essence,³⁸ it did not arise from ignorance, but from seeking information (*ikhtibār*), so that he could consider Moses' answer in the light of the latter's claim for God's mission. Pharaoh knew the messengers' degree of knowledge and he sought to prove by Moses' answer the truth of his claim. Pharaoh asked a question to let those present know – without being aware of (the nature of his question), as he was aware of it – (that Moses was ignorant). When Moses answered him as a learned person answers, Pharaoh showed, because he wished to preserve his position, that Moses had not answered him properly, so that those present came to know, because of their weak understanding that Pharaoh knew more than Moses. For this reason,

³⁶ See p. 31 above.

³⁷ For a theological and philological discussion of this point, see al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, pp. 153f.

³⁸ "Pharaoh said: 'What is the Lord of all things?'" (*rabb al-ʿālamīn*). Qur'ān 26:23.

since Moses answered what he did not need to answer – and outwardly it was not the answer to the question he was asked, and Pharaoh knew that he (Moses) would answer as he did – Pharaoh said to Moses’ companions: “Your messenger who was sent to you is mad” (Qur’ān 26:27); that is, the knowledge I asked him about is concealed from him, for it is absolutely inconceivable that he should know. The question was legitimate, for asking (208) what-a-thing-is (*māhiyya*) is a question about the essence of what is sought, which must characterize the thing itself and no other. As for those who made definitions composed of genus and differentia (*jins wa-faṣl*),³⁹ (this procedure) applies to all things that are characterized by equivocality (*ishtirāk*). However, (God) who has no genus must have a specific essence not shared by others. Thus, the question is legitimate according to the people of truth, correct knowledge, and sound intellect, and Moses’ answer to it is the only correct answer.

Here is a great mystery, for Moses actually answered one who had asked for an essential definition, and for this reason, he (Moses) made the essential definition his reference to the forms of the world through which God manifests Himself, or the forms of the world in which He is manifest. One can understand his answer to the question “What is the Lord of all things?” (*rabb al-‘ālamīn*) (Qur’ān 26:23), as if Moses said: “The one in which the high forms of the world are manifest, that is, the heaven, and the low (forms), that is, the earth, “if you know for certain” (ibid.), or He manifests Himself through them. When Pharaoh said to his companions “he is mad” (ibid., 27), as we said above, Moses added (a phrase) to his explanation, so that Pharaoh would know Moses’ rank in divine knowledge, because Moses knew that Pharaoh would realize this. Thus, Moses said: “The Lord of the east and the west” (ibid., 28), conveying (the idea) of what is manifested and what is concealed,⁴⁰ that is, the outward (*ẓāhir*) and the inward (*bātin*), and “what is between them” (ibid.), and this is His saying, “(He) absolutely knows everything” (Qur’ān 29:62). “If you understand (*ta’qilūn*)” (Qur’ān 26:28), meaning if you are people who limit (*aṣḥāb taqyīd*), because the intellect (*‘aql*) limits (*yuqayyidu*). Thus, the first answer (Qur’ān 26:24) is for the people who know for certain, that is, the people of unveiling (*kashf*) and finding (*wujūd*). He (Moses) said to him (Pharaoh): “If you know for certain” (ibid.), that is, (you) the people of unveiling and finding, for I have informed you of what you knew for certain in your witnessing and finding. If you do not belong to this kind, (that is), if you are people of limit, restriction, and restraint, I shall respond with the second answer. Also (you should know) that the Real (that you know) is according

39 “For Aristotle, a definition is ‘an account which signifies what it is to be for something’ (*logos ho to ti ên einai sêmainei*). The phrase ‘what it is to be’ and its variants are crucial: giving a definition is saying, of some existent thing, what it is, not simply specifying the meaning of a word.” Robin Smith, “Aristotle’s Logic,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/#Def>. Each definition is composed of genus and differentia. For example, the definition of the term “human being” is an animal (genus), whose differentia is having the ability to reason.

40 The east is the direction of sunrise, hence it is the manifest thing, and the west is the direction of sunset, hence it is the concealed thing.

to the proofs of your intellect. Moses brought these two aspects to light so that Pharaoh would know Moses' excellence and truthfulness. Moses knew that Pharaoh had known this, (209) or would know this, because Pharaoh asked about the essence, and he knew that his question was not based on the way of the ancient sages to ask "what," hence Moses answered as he did. Had he known something different, he would have regarded the question as an error. Since Moses identified the entity about which Pharaoh asked with the world, Pharaoh addressed him as he did, while the people (who were present) did not realize it.

Pharaoh said to Moses: "If you take a god other than me, I will place you among the prisoners (*masjūnīn*)" (Qur'ān 26:29). Now, the letter *sīn* in *al-sijn* (prison) is one of the redundant letters,⁴¹ (hence) the meaning is "I shall conceal you," for you answered me in a manner that helped me express such a saying. If you say to me: "O Pharaoh, by threatening me, you act unknowingly, because the Essence is one, and how can you separate it?" I (Pharaoh) will say: "The ranks in existence separate the Essence, while the Essence, in principle, is not separated nor divided." "My rank" (Pharaoh continues), "is in actuality to dominate you, while I and you (are the same) through the Essence, but different in rank (in concrete existence)." When Moses understood Pharaoh's statement, he referred to what Pharaoh deserved, saying to him that he could not carry out (his threat). However, Pharaoh's rank attested to his ability to do this and to affect (Moses' state), for concerning Pharaoh's rank, the Real is the outward form that can dominate the rank of the form of Moses' appearance in this session.

Moses said, showing Pharaoh what can prevent him from attacking Moses: "Even if I show you something manifest?" (ibid., 30), to which Pharaoh could only say to Moses: "Bring it then, if you are truthful" (ibid., 31). (Pharaoh said this) for fear of appearing unjust and consequently one to be doubted in the eyes of his people, who were weak-minded. Pharaoh made those people unsteady,⁴² and as a result they obeyed him "because they were wrongdoers" (Qur'ān 43:54); that is, through using their sane intellect, they did not deny Pharaoh's claim,⁴³ which was expressed in clear and intelligible language, (210) for the intellect cannot go beyond its limit. However, one who possesses unveiling and certainty can exceed this limit. For this reason, Moses answered in a way which could be accepted by both one who knows for certain and another who knows by using his intellect. "Then, he (Moses) cast his rod" (ibid., 32). This was the form of Pharaoh's transgression which was expressed in his refusal to respond to Moses' claim "and behold, it became a clearly seen snake" (ibid.), that is, a manifest snake. Thus,

⁴¹ In this case, the letters which remain are *j.n.*, and if one adds, as Ibn al-ʿArabī did, another *n*, one gets the verb *janna*, which means "he concealed." Kāshānī, p. 523. For kinds of etymology adduced by medieval Muslim scholars, see Ignatz Goldziher, *On the History of Grammar among the Arabs – An Essay in Literary History*, trans and ed. Kinga Dévényi and Tomas Ivanyi, Amsterdam 1994, ch. 5. I am grateful to Dr. Almog Kasher, who supplied me with this reference.

⁴² This rendering is based on Arberry's translation of Qur'ān 43:54.

⁴³ Pharaoh claimed that he is a god.

the disobedience, that is, the evil deed, became obedience, that is, good deed, as He said: "God will change their evil deeds into good deeds" (Qur'ān 25:70), that is, regarding his judgment.⁴⁴ Here the judgment appeared as a particular entity in one substance (*jawhar*), that is, the rod, which is (also) the snake and the manifest snake. As a snake, Moses' rod swallowed up the snakes, and as a rod, it swallowed up the rods. Thus, Moses' argument overcame Pharaoh's arguments in the form of rods, snakes, and ropes (*ḥabl*, pl. *ḥibāl*), and the magicians had ropes,⁴⁵ which Moses did not have. *Al-ḥabl* means (also) a small hill (*tall ṣaghīr*);⁴⁶ that is, their abilities in relation to Moses' abilities are like small hills to lofty mountains.

When the magicians saw that, they realized Moses' degree of knowledge and that what they saw could not derive from human capability. Even if it was in the power of a human being, it would only be one who is distinguished in his unquestionable knowledge and who is free of imagination and obscurity. Consequently, they believed in the Lord of all creatures, the Lord of Moses and Aaron, that is, the Lord Moses and Aaron called upon, because they understood that the people knew that Moses did not call upon Pharaoh. Since Pharaoh was the ruler of his time and the vicegerent wielding the sword, even if he deviated from the conventional laws, he said: "I am your loftiest Lord" (Qur'ān 79:24); that is, even if all are lords in some respect, I am higher than them, because, taking into account the external aspect, I was given dominion over you. Because the magicians realized truth in his words, they did not contradict him, and indeed agreed with him and said: "You can judge only the life of this world, (211) so judge as (you wish)" (Qur'ān 20:72),⁴⁷ for the state is yours. For this reason, his statement "I am your loftiest Lord" is true. Even though he was identified with the Real, the form was Pharaoh's. He cut off hands and feet and crucified (people)⁴⁸ through a true essence in false form in order to attain the ranks which are only attainable through such acts.

That is because in no way can causes be canceled, for the fixed entities (*ʿāyān thābita*) require them. The fixed entities appear in existence in the same form as their existence in their state of fixity, for God's words (*kalimāt*) cannot be changed (*tabdīl*).⁴⁹ God's words are nothing but the entities of the existents; because of their permanence one ascribes them to eternity, and because of their (concrete) existence and appearance one ascribes to them coming into being (*ḥudūth*). As you can

44 The rod (*ʿaṣā*) stands for Pharaoh's transgression (*ʿiṣyān*) and the snake (*ḥayya*) for his obedience. Ibn al-ʿArabī exploits the same root ʿ.ṣ.y on which *ʿaṣā* and *ʿiṣyān* are built in order to connect the two words. He also claims that the *ḥayya* derives from *ḥayāt* (life) which, in turn, signifies knowledge which brings about obedience. One's act has no moral value without God's judgment, which permits or forbids. Hence, Pharaoh's act can change from transgression into obedience. Affifi, II, p. 313.

45 Qur'ān 26:44.

46 Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Vol. I, p. 505.

47 Ibn al-ʿArabī reversed the position of the two phrases of the verse which begins with "judge whatever . . ."

48 Qur'ān 26:49.

49 The last phrase is based on Qur'ān 6:115: "No one can change (*lā mubaddila*) His words" (trans. AH). See also Qur'ān 10:64.

say, a person or a guest appeared in our (house) today; however, it does not follow from his appearance that he had no existence before his appearance (*hudūth*). For this reason, that is, the appearance of His words notwithstanding their eternity, God said in His venerable speech: “(Whenever) a new (*muḥdath*) reminder comes to them from their Lord, they listen to it while they play” (Qur’ān 21:2). “(Whenever) a new reminder comes to them from the Merciful, they deviate from it” (Qur’ān 26:5). And the Merciful comes only with mercy, and whoever deviates from God’s Mercy may meet punishment, which derives from absence of mercy. As for His saying, “When they saw our injury (punishment), their belief would not benefit them, this was always God’s way of treating His servants” (Qur’ān 40:85), “except for the people of Jonah” (Qur’an 10:98). Because of the exception expressed in the second verse, the first verse does not prove that their belief will not benefit them in the next world. God wished to say that this exception does not absolve them of blame in this world, and for this reason Pharaoh was blamed, notwithstanding the existence of belief in him. This would have been correct, had he been certain of his death in this moment. The situation proves that he was not sure of his death, because he saw the believers walking on the dry land which became manifest, because Moses struck the sea with his rod. Because Pharaoh believed, he was not certain of his destruction, contrary (212) to the dying person, so that one cannot combine the two cases (of Pharaoh and the dying person).

Pharaoh believed in what the Children of Israel believed, that is, the indubitable belief in deliverance. Of that which did take place he was certain; however, not in the manner he wanted. God saved his soul from the punishment of the next world, and (also) saved his body, as He said: “Today we shall save only your corpse as a sign to all posterity” (Qur’ān 10:92, trans. AH), because had his form (corpse) disappeared, perhaps people would have said that he became hidden.⁵⁰ He appeared as a dead person, in the usual form, so that people would know that it was he. Thus, his deliverance combines both the tangible and spiritual aspects.

Whoever deserves the punishment of the Hereafter does not believe in it, even though every sign comes to him.⁵¹ “until they see the painful punishment” (Qur’ān 10:97), that is, until they taste the punishment of the next world. Pharaoh did not belong to this kind of people. This is the plain meaning (*zāhir*) the Qur’an conveys (to us). After that, we shall say further that God decides in this matter, because the common people had no doubt regarding his suffering (in the Hereafter); however, they had no text to support their claim in this issue. As for his family, their judgment is different, but here is not the place to discuss it.

Also, you should know that God does not cause persons who are dying to expire unless they believe and trust in the divine messages. For this reason, sudden death and killing an inadvertent person are detested. Sudden death is defined as (a state in which) the internal breath comes out, while the external breath does not enter. This is sudden death, which is not the state of the dying person. It is like

⁵⁰ Very probably Ibn al-‘Arabī had in mind the Shi’ite concept of the occultation of the twelfth imam.

⁵¹ This phrase is based on Qur’ān 10:96.

killing a heedless person by striking his neck from behind, while he is unaware. Thus, such a person dies in a state of either belief or unbelief. For this reason, the Prophet said: “He will be gathered in the state in which he dies,”⁵² just as he will die in the state of (either belief or unbelief). However, the dying person is a witness (of God’s messages), hence he believes as we have said, and he dies only in-the-state-in-which-he-is (*‘alā mā kāna ‘alayhi*), for the verb *kāna* as a word designating existence entails time only when it is connected with circumstances. Hence, one should differentiate between the dying unbeliever and the unbeliever who is killed while being inadvertent or one who died suddenly, as we have said in the definition of sudden death.

As for the wisdom of God’s self-manifestation and (His) speech (213) in the form of fire, it (happened) because Moses willed it. God manifested Himself in keeping with Moses’ wish, so that he would accept the revelation and not deviate from it. Had He revealed Himself in a form different from Moses’ desire, he would have deviated from God, because his interest was concentrated on a specific demand. Had he deviated, his act would have been fruitless and God would have turned away from him. However, he was the chosen and the favorite person. Because of that, God manifested Himself to him in keeping with his request, while he was unaware of this.

He saw this as the core of his need, like the fire of Moses/while it was God, and he did not know.

⁵² I could not find the source of this tradition. See n. 16 above.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam

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