Ibn `Arabī

Muḥammad ibn `Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-ʿArabī al-Ṭāʾī al-Ḥātimī

Date of Birth: 28 July 1165
Place of Birth: Murcia, Spain
Date of Death: 10 November 1240
Place of Death: Damascus

Biography

Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn `Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-ʿArabī al-Ṭāʾī al-Ḥātimī, as he signs himself, stands at a critical juncture in the history of Islam and Islamic thought, during the flowering of Almohad, Ayyubid and Anatolian Seljuk power. As an exceptional mystic and writer, he exerted an unparalleled influence on later Sufis and scholars throughout the Muslim world. His numerous writings bridge the divide between a largely oral, informal spiritual culture and an increasingly written and formalized one, in which the Sufi ṭarīqas were to play a dominant role. One of several prominent figures who left before the collapse of Arab rule in al-Andalus and came to live in the Levant, he can be regarded as the major exponent of ṭasawwuf (Sufism) of his age, a veritable ‘reviver of the religion’ (Muḥyī l-dīn), as he was known even in his own lifetime.

Ibn `Arabī’s life is unusually well-documented, primarily through his own testimony but also through the details incidentally furnished by the samāʿ certificates on his numerous works (listing the names of those present at the readings, the place and date of the reading, etc.). It can be divided into three discrete phases: born in south-eastern Spain, he spent the first 35 years of his life in the Maghrib, the western lands of Islam that stretched from al-Andalus to Tunis; he then embarked on the pilgrimage and spent the next three years in or around Mecca, where a series of dramatic experiences initiated the writing of several works including his magnum opus, the Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya; the final phase of his life was spent in the Levant (Mashriq) and Anatolia, where he raised a family and, in addition to an unceasing literary output and instruction given to numerous disciples, became adviser to kings and rulers. He settled in Damascus, where he lived and taught for 17 years. According to his own testimony, he wrote nearly 300 works, of which over 100 survive in manuscript: these include many classics such as the encyclopaedic Futūḥāt in 37 volumes (in two recensions) and the quintessence of his teaching, the Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam, which generated numerous commentaries by writers over the centuries. He died at the age of 75 in 1240 and was buried in the Şālihiyya district by Mt Qāsiyūn. The present-day tomb complex was established by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I in 1516, and remains an important place of pilgrimage.

Ibn `Arabī’s visionary capacity was in evidence from a very early age, and he describes his spiritual journey in terms of following in the footsteps of the prophets, beginning with Jesus
whom he calls ‘my first teacher, who never neglects me for an instant’ and ending with Muḥammad (Futūḥāt i.223; ii.49; iv.77). In his early teens, at a time when he had undergone no formal preparation or study, he experienced a dream-vision of Jesus, Moses and Muḥammad, as a consequence of which he had his famous meeting with Ibn Rushd (see Hirtenstein, The unlimited mercifier, pp. 53-58). This impelled him to dedicate his life entirely to God and to abandon the career laid out for him by his father, of serving in the entourage of the Almohad sultan. Having given away all his belongings to his father, he embarked on a 17-year course of spiritual training at the hands of various masters, men and women, in al-Andalus and the Maghrib, many of whom he describes in his Rūḥ al-quds. He describes his first teacher, al-ʿUraybī, as being of a Christic (ʿīsawī) spiritual disposition, whose first instruction shows a remarkable similarity to gospel teaching (see Rūḥ, p. 76; Sufis of Andalusia, p. 63; Matthew, 6:6). His many spiritual experiences are detailed in various works, including a vision in Cordova in which he saw the spiritual realities of all the prophets from Adam to Muḥammad (Fuṣūš, 110).

The Jesus that Ibn ʿArabī describes appears very much a Muslim prophet, although he is at pains to point out his special saintly qualities. In his ‘Anqāʾ mughrib, written in 1199 while he was still in al-Andalus, he gives a lengthy and complex exposition of the Seal of Universal Sainthood, a personage whom he would later openly identify as Jesus but one that he was careful to only refer to in coded letters in the ‘Anqāʾ – which gives an indication of the sensitivities that existed in the face of the threat from the Christian north in his homeland. He viewed Jesus’ second coming, eagerly awaited by Christians and many Muslims, as the appearance of the Saint par excellence, who ‘will descend at the end of time as heir [to Muḥammad] and seal’, clarifying the inner meaning of religion for all believers. Equally, he viewed himself as the heir of both Jesus and Muḥammad, being the Seal of Muhammadian Sainthood (Futūḥāt i.244, ii.49; Hirtenstein, The unlimited mercifier, pp. 139–41). He also describes what he calls the particular spiritual knowledges that Jesus possesses: the knowledge of letters and breath, the science of the creative fiat (kun), the reviving of the dead (physically and spiritually).

In other places Ibn ʿArabī touches on medieval Christian beliefs and spirituality, especially noting the tendency towards withdrawal from the world and worshipping God through representing Him in a sensory form, although he affirms the Islamic imperative of worshiping without external imagery (see ch. 36 in his Futūḥāt). He even declares openly that friends of God, i.e. saintly men and women, are to be found everywhere, in synagogues and churches at least as much as in mosques (Tajalliyāt, 80), a sentiment that demonstrates not only his own interfaith position but also the widespread tolerance and openness in Muslim society prior to the Mongol invasions of the Levant.

Primary Source

Selected bibliography of works by Ibn ʿArabī with reference to Jesus:


Letter to Kaykāʾūs

Date: Uncertain; in or just after 1212-13

Original Language: Arabic

Description
In one of the rare places where Ibn ʿArabī directly discusses the Christian community, he appears to be unusually orthodox in his approach. In a letter of advice to the Seljuk Sultan Kaykāʾūs I (Keykavus, r. 1211-20), written in response to the sultan’s letter to him dated 1212-
13, he exhorts the ruler to act justly towards his subjects according to Islamic law, and to use his power to exalt the religion of Islam. He states: ‘I tell you that among the worst things that can befall Islam and Muslims – and how few they are – are the ringing out of church bells, the public display of unbelief and the elevation of words of *shirk* (worship of other than God)’, in contravention of the Pact of Ṭabar (q.v.), the conditions of which he lists. He supports this view with a hadith of the Prophet Muḥammad, which states that ‘No church should be built in Islam, nor those of them which have fallen into ruin be restored’.

**Significance**

Although he refers to *ahl al-dhimma*, it is clear from this passage that Ibn Ṭarabī primarily means Christians, who were by far the most numerous religious community in Anatolia after centuries of Byzantine rule, and his apparently categorical statement should therefore be interpreted within that context. As he writes of himself earlier in the letter, ‘It is incumbent on him [Ibn Ṭarabī] to respond with religious counsel and divine political advice *according to what is suitable to the moment*’ (italics added). The mention of the conditions supposedly agreed between Christians and the second caliph becomes understandable as an exact parallel to the situation in which Kaykāʾūs found himself: a minority Muslim government in a primarily Christian environment. Furthermore, it was a time of great instability, in which the sultan was having to contend with a rebellion organized by his younger brother in alliance with the Christian king of Cilicia.

Ibn Ṭarabī’s stance might also reflect his earlier experience of the turbulent conditions in al-Andalus, where Christian power in the north was the major fear and was already beginning to spell the end of Islamic rule in Spain. Whether this should be viewed as less than tolerant depends on how religious tolerance is defined: the institutionalized discrimination in traditional Islamic societies was intended to prevent persecution and to allow for gradual conversion (cf. the experience of Jews and Muslims in Spain after the Christian conquest), and Ibn Ṭarabī’s advice to the sultan should no doubt be seen in that light.

**Manuscripts**

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**Editions**

The text of the letter can be found in *Al-futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, iv. 547.

**Studies**

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