Article

Dead Men Talking: Ibn 'Arabī's Interactions with Messengers and Saints

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Abstract: The mystical thinker Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) had many audiences with the dead. This article explores who Ibn 'Arabī interacted with, and how. Usually as dreams and visions, the meetings Ibn 'Arabī had with messengers were generally at key milestones in his life, or to confer particular distinctions upon him. A special subset of these visions was of Prophet Muḥammad specifically, and these were to derive a legal ruling from him, or because he was under the special care of the Prophet. Conversely, the audiences he had with departed saints were largely to do with more quotidian issues, either regarding his relationship with spiritual masters, or to correct a misapprehension about someone. Finally, but more seldom, he had physical interactions with corporealised spirits from beyond. As these betrayed a higher rank than mere visions, they were reminiscent of his audiences with messengers in that they confirmed his exalted spiritual rank.

Keywords: Ibn 'Arabī; dead; dreams; visions; prophets; saints

1. Introduction

The Sufi Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), who is regarded as one of the most important mystical thinkers in Islam, and is revered and reviled in both Sunni and Shi'ite denominations (Abū Zayd 2002; Hirtenstein 1999; Knysh 1999; Landau 2008; Nasr 1970), had many audiences with the dead. In fact, for a time, he spent so much time in cemeteries that his spiritual master at the time, Yūsuf ibn Yakhlaf al-Kūmī (Chittick 1989, p. 229; Elmore 1999, pp. 69–70; Austin 2008, pp. 69–73), quipped that he had given up on the company of the living and preferred the company of the dead. Ibn 'Arabī disabused him of that notion by inviting him to join him, after which Kūmī realised that the physically dead who Ibn 'Arabī conversed with were not dead at all (Addas [1989] 1993, p. 91).

The interactions Ibn 'Arabī had with those who were no longer inhabiting the physical plane, however, were not all the same. At times, he would meet prophets and messengers; at others, he would see saints and spiritual masters. Most often, these meetings were in the form of visions or dreams, yet sometimes they were physical encounters. The rank of the people he met and the type of interactions he had were heavily correlated to the events that were occurring in his life and the message that was either imparted to him, or that he wanted to impart to his followers.

This study demonstrates that when the events were of the utmost significance—either a mystical conversion, conferral of a high distinction, or an especially onerous trial—Ibn 'Arabī had visions of the most revered prophets and messengers. If the nature of the event in his life was not as significant and had more to do with quotidian issues, the mystical thinker would have audiences with saints and Sufi masters. Finally, there were even physical encounters with corporealised spirits, which served to confirm his spiritual rank much like his meetings with messengers (see Figure 1). This work does not purport to provide an exhaustive inventory of all of Ibn 'Arabī's encounters with the dead; rather, it aims to taxonomise his encounters and analyse why he had some seminal meetings when he did with the people that he did. We begin by interrogating Ibn 'Arabī's most important interactions, the ones he had with prophets and messengers.
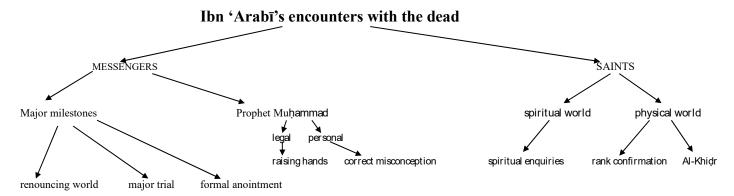
Ibn 'Arabī's encounters with the dead

Figure 1. Ibn 'Arabī's interactions with the dead.

2. Ibn 'Arabī's Audiences with Prophets and Messengers

The type of interactions Ibn 'Arabī had with prophets and messengers[1] should be divided into (1) his general meetings with all prophets, including Prophet Muḥammad, and (2) his legal meetings with Prophet Muḥammad. While the majority of his meetings were with various prophets and messengers, including Prophet Muḥammad, and pertained to major events in his life, he also had legal meetings with Prophet Muḥammad specifically to ask him about certain juristic issues (see below). Of his general meetings with prophets and messengers, the first was what galvanised him to renounce his worldly life.

2.1. First Milestone: Renunciation of Worldly Life and Adoption of the Spiritual Path

The first major event that Ibn 'Arabī recounts of his spiritual life is the renunciation of his previous life of luxury and distractions, and his adoption of the spiritual path (Addas [1989] 1993, pp. 11–39). On the first major milestone of his life, he met with Prophet 'Īsā (Jesus), who was to be one of the most powerful influences on his spiritual life (Addas [1989] 1993, p. 39; Chodkiewicz 1993). Indeed, Ibn 'Arabī states in his magnum opus, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya (The Meccan Revelations)* that 'I used to meet with him often' (*kunt kathīr al-ijtimā' bih*) (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 12, p. 123). 'Īsā was one of the spiritual masters of Ibn 'Arabī who straddled the physical world and the spiritual world concomitantly. Ibn 'Arabī had numerous masters in the sensible world, but he also had masters in the spiritual world, or the plane of imagination (*'ālam al-khayāl*) (Corbin [1993] 1997).[2] Indeed, in many ways, Ibn 'Arabī regarded the knowledge afforded in the plane of imagination to be of a higher order than that obtained in the physical world, as Michel Chodkiewicz observes (Chodkiewicz [1992] 1993, p. 83).

There was a reason Ibn 'Arabī singled out 'Īsā for the meeting of his conversion to the spiritual path. Besides being one of his major influences, Ibn 'Arabī identified 'Īsā as the prophet of spirituality, just like his illustrious predecessor Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) had previously (Khalidi 2003). For Ibn 'Arabī, there was a dual dimension to religion: the manifest (*ẓāhir*) dimension, and the inner (*bāṭin*) dimension (Lala 2019, 2021). While he never neglected the manifest, formal dimension and went to extremes in assiduously maintaining it (Chittick 1992, pp. xii–xiii; De Cillis 2014, p. 189; Ghurāb 1981; Mayer 2008), he nevertheless emphasised that this formal dimension was merely an exteriorisation of spirituality (Lala 2022a; Winkel 1996). In an apparent reference to the Qur'an in which God describes Himself as 'the Manifest' (*al-Ẓāhir*) and 'the Hidden' (*al-Bāṭin*) (Qur'an 57:1), Ibn 'Arabī writes, 'God is manifested (*ẓāhir*) in every comprehensible thing while He is hidden (*bāṭin*) from all understanding' (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 68). It is only through our own outer and inner realities that we can access the Manifest and the Hidden (Takeshita 1983, p. 88).

The inner reality is therefore paramount, and it is this very dimension that is required when transitioning from a worldly life to a spiritual one. Ibn 'Arabī declares that because 'Īsā was the prophet of spirituality, he 'repented at his hand' of his former life that—although it still adhered to the formal aspects of religion—was completely bereft of spirituality (Ibn

'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 12, p. 123). Further, he claims that 'Īsā commanded him to practise asceticism (*zuhd*) and self-divestment (*tajrīd*) (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 12, p. 123) because these are conduits to spiritual excellence. If the command to practice asceticism by a prophet who was known for this, and as a remedy to excessive worldly fascination is axiomatic, the command to practice self-divestment is somewhat more ambiguous. Su'ād al-Ḥakīm writes in her excellent lexicon of Ibn 'Arabī's terminology that 'self-divestment' (*tajrīd*) is a stage that is initiatory and part of a duality that ends with 'solitude' (*tafrīd*). This is because one must divest oneself of all their externality to God before one can be in absolute solitude with Him (Ḥakīm 1981, pp. 878–79).

This means that the two commands were not tautological; the first command was regarding divestment of worldly belongings, and the second was about divesting the perception of there being anything besides God. These were commands that Ibn 'Arabī took very seriously as, after this vision, he renounced all his worldly possessions and gave them to his father (Addas [1989] 1993, pp. 39–40). Yet this vision, which marked the renunciation of his former life, was only a preliminary vision that presaged his true embarkment on the spiritual path. Due to his absolute asceticism, Ibn 'Arabī subsequently had a vision of 'Īsā (again), Mūsā (Moses), and Prophet Muḥammad, and this was the true moment of Ibn 'Arabī's initiation (Addas [1989] 1993, pp. 41–42).

The immediate question is why Ibn 'Arabī selected these three prophets for his formal arrival on the spiritual path. The presence of 'Īsā, as the spiritual personification of asceticism, has already been explained. Mūsā's attendance is also significant because he represents the formal aspect of religion, or the *ẓāhir*. Ibn 'Arabī vehemently rejected antinomianism, as stated. The fact that Mūsā is afforded such a prominent role in Ibn 'Arabī's formal initiation demonstrates that Ibn 'Arabī saw no conflict between the outward aspect of the religion and the inner. Indeed, this also explains why Prophet Muḥammad was there. In addition to being the prophet of this nation, Prophet Muḥammad embodies the harmonious amalgamation of the manifest (*zāhir*) dimension of religion and the inner (*bāṭin*) dimension. This means that although there are some scholars who, following 'Īsā, only accentuate the spiritual dimension of religion, and others who, following Mūsā, only underscore the formal aspect, Ibn 'Arabī highlighted both simultaneously. Zachary Markwith explains the three types of scholars thus:

> A Mūsawī friend of God may emphasize the Law, justice, or display a radiant countenance as did Moses, while the 'Īsawī tends to accentuate the spiritual path of Islam or Sufism, mercy, and inwardness. The Muḥammadan saint generally combines in his or her teachings and presence an emphasis on both the Law or the outward (*al-ẓāhir*), and the spiritual path or the inward (*al-bāṭin*). (Markwith 2015, p. 90)

It is true, as Josef van Ess astutely observes, that orthopraxy was seen as a legitimisation of credal orthodoxy. He writes, 'For Islam, orthopraxy is more important that orthodoxy. At the level of action, in the liturgy and in daily life, details counted a great deal' (Van Ess [2002] 2006, p. 16). Yet for Ibn 'Arabī, the two were never seen as separate; they were two sides of the same coin (Lala 2022a; Winkel 1996). That is not to say, however, that Ibn 'Arabī did not pay special attention to the spiritual dimension. The fact that 'Īsā was chosen as his first teacher (Addas [1989] 1993, p. 39; Chodkiewicz 1993, p. 121), the one most conspicuously responsible for his initiation, signified that Ibn 'Arabī had a particular proclivity for this dimension of the religion. Nor was he the only one. Prophet Muḥammad had previously designated some of his companions as having a 'Christic' personality due to their emphasis on spirituality and asceticism (Markwith 2015, pp. 91–93). In one tradition, he remarks,

> Whoever it would please to see someone resembling (*shabīh*) 'Īsā ibn Maryam, in terms of outward form (*khalqan*) and disposition (*khuluqan*), let them see Abū Dharr [al-Ghifārī], may God be pleased with him'. (Ṭabarānī 1994, vol. 2, p. 149)

For Ibn ʿArabī, this spiritual aspect was especially significant because it was through this dimension of the religion that he was afforded a rank that the juristic dimension could not grant: the seal of Muhammadan sainthood. Being the seal enabled him to bond with ʿĪsā in a way that others could not, and it was why ʿĪsā was so pivotal to his spiritual journey. This is because ʿĪsā was the seal of absolute sainthood (Ibn ʿArabī n.d.a, vol. 12, pp. 119–21). The concept of a seal exists in the exoteric dimension of the religion only in reference to Prophet Muḥammad, who is the 'seal of the prophets'. The Qurʾan proclaims, '*Muḥammad is not father to any of your men, but he is the messenger of God, and the seal of the prophets (khātam al-nabiyyīn)*' (Qurʾan 33:40). Yohanan Friedmann casts doubt on whether this was understood by the early community as Prophet Muḥammad being the last of the prophets, preferring instead the interpretations that he was a verifier of previous prophets, or the best of all prophets. He writes,

> The idea that Muḥammad verifies, authenticates the messages brought by former prophets has the advantage of being attested in the Qurʾān. . . . The understanding which carries the most direct praise for Muḥammad, and should therefore be given closer consideration than it has hitherto received, is "the best prophet". (Friedmann 1986, p. 214)

However, the commentary tradition seems to be very explicit on this matter. The commentator generally regarded as being the first to compile a full commentary of the Qurʾan, Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767) (Sinai 2009, 2014)—even though there is still some debate about this (Berg 2005, 2010)—states in his commentary of Q33:40 that 'seal of the prophets' signifies that Prophet Muḥammad was 'last of the prophets; there will be no prophets after Muḥammad, peace be upon him' (Ibn Sulaymān 2002, vol. 3, p. 498). Nevertheless, the early exegete Yaḥyā ibn Sallām (d. 200/815), who died around fifty years after Muqātil, writes in his commentary of this verse that ʿĀʾisha bint Abī Bakr (d. 58/678), wife of Prophet Muḥammad, commanded people not to say that there would be no prophet after Muḥammad because ʿĪsā would return at the end of days. Instead, they should say that Muḥammad sealed prophethood since ʿĪsā would only return as a follower (Ibn Sallām 2004, vol. 2, p. 723). But Ibn Sallām also mentions a tradition from Prophet Muḥammad in which he says,

> The [final] Hour will not be established until close to thirty lying devils (*dajjālūn kadhdhābūn*) emerge, each of them claiming that he is a prophet while there is no prophet after me, and I am the seal of the prophets. (Ibn Sallām 2004, vol. 2, p. 723)

Ibn Sallām therefore also maintains that the verse ostensibly means Prophet Muḥammad is the last of the prophets, but that does not preclude the return of ʿĪsā in a non-prophetic capacity. The early traditionist and exegete, ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/827) concurs, stating rather succinctly that 'seal of the prophets' means 'last of the prophets' (Ṣanʿānī 1998, vol. 3, p. 41). This means that the dominant signification of 'seal of the prophets' in the incipient commentary tradition was that Prophet Muḥammad was the last of the prophets.

There was no parallel to the 'seal of the prophets' in the esoteric tradition until one of the most influential early mystics, Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 320/869?) (Masud 1965), coined the term (Chodkiewicz 1993, p. 116). Ibn ʿArabī was heavily influenced by this, and clearly understood the primary denotation of 'seal' as bringing finality to sainthood, in accordance with the commentary tradition that emphasised the finality of prophethood with Prophet Muḥammad—the seal of the prophets. It is the dual fact of ʿĪsā's focus on spirituality—emblematised by his spiritual birth through the archangel Gabriel (Chodkiewicz 1993, p. 118)—and that he would return at the end of days in a non-legislative capacity that led to his status as the absolute seal of sainthood according to Ibn ʿArabī. He writes,

> If you ask: Who has the right to be the seal of the saints (*khātam al-awliyāʾ*), just as Muḥammad, peace be upon him, is the seal of the prophets? We would say in

response: 'The seal' is actually two seals: A seal through which God seals saint-hood absolutely (*'ala'l-iṭlāq*), and a seal through which He seals Muḥammadan sainthood (*al-wilāya al-muḥammadiyya*). As for the seal of (absolute) sainthood, it is 'Īsā, peace be upon him, for he is a saint with absolute prophethood (*al-nubuwwa al-muṭlaqa*) in the time of this nation, legislative prophethood (*nubuwwa al-tashrī'*) and messengerhood has become inaccessible to him. He will thus descend in the end of days as an heir, a seal. There will be no saint with absolute prophethood [after him], just as Muḥammad, peace be upon him, is the seal of prophets, there is no legislative prophethood after him. (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 12, pp. 119–20)

Ibn 'Arabī immediately established a tripartite bond between the legislative seal of prophets (Prophet Muḥammad), the non-legislative seal of saints generally ('Īsā), and the non-legislative seal of Muḥammadan sainthood (which, as it turned out, would be him; Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 12, p. 120). It was the fact that 'Īsā would return with 'absolute prophethood', that is, non-legislative prophethood, and as a follower and an 'heir' of Muḥammadan law—a law to which the Muḥammadan seal is clearly committed—that created a bond between these two seals and set them apart from the lawgiver, Prophet Muḥammad. Ibn 'Arabī then made the bond between him—as the Muḥammadan seal—and 'Īsā—as the absolute seal—even more explicit:

So ('Īsā) will descend as a saint with absolute [non-legislative] prophethood, within which the Muḥammadan saints will participate, so he is from among us, and he is our leader! . . . So there will be two resurrections for him on the Day of Resurrection: a resurrection with us, and a resurrection with the messengers and prophets. (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 12, p. 120)

As the seal of absolute sainthood, 'Īsā was the leader of the saints, and the Muḥammadan seal participated in his spirituality, as Ibn 'Arabī made clear. This is the reason Ibn 'Arabī was so profoundly influenced by 'Īsā and why he was present at every major milestone on his spiritual journey to becoming the Muḥammadan Seal of Saints.

But the journey to becoming the Muḥammadan Seal of Saints was not going to be without trials. And on the first major trial, he had a vision of one of the other great prophets: Ibrāhīm (Abraham).

2.2. First Major Temptation: Family in Need

The first major trial Ibn 'Arabī faced concerned his family. When Ibn 'Arabī renounced the worldly life, his father was alive and well, and he had two unmarried sisters, one of whom had already been betrothed to the emir (Addas [1989] 1993, p. 123). It thus seemed like the renunciation of his worldly life would not be to the detriment of his family. As the head of the household, his father, was in good health, there was no need for Ibn 'Arabī to take up the duties of finding suitable matches for his sisters. Additionally, the eldest had already been paired with the emir. However, Ibn 'Arabī's master had warned him that both his father and the emir to whom his sister was betrothed would pass away and it would then fall to him to look after his sisters and mother (Addas [1989] 1993, pp. 123–25). Ibn 'Arabī recounts how he saw a vision of the Abrahamic station about this trial when 'an unveiling light' (*nūr mukāshif*) subsided and he realised that it was the 'spiritual vision of divine friendship' (*mashhad khalīliyy*) (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 3, p. 488). This vision was significant because as Ibn 'Arabī says, 'I knew that I was the heir (*wārith*) of the nation from that moment' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 3, p. 488).

There are many reasons Ibn 'Arabī saw an Abrahamic vision when he was about to be tested with his greatest trial: the trial of family. This is because Ibrāhīm had also been tested through his family, particularly when he was commanded by God to leave his wife and infant son in the desert (Qur'an 14:37). In the same way, Ibn 'Arabī was ostensibly abandoning his family by not taking up his duty to look after them. But just like Ibrāhīm's sacrifice meant that he became the father of nations, Ibn 'Arabī saw in the vision that he was the 'heir of the nation'. In other words, his duty was to the whole nation and not just to his immediate family.

The vision Ibn 'Arabī saw was '*khalīliyy*', which is usually translated as 'friendship' because '*khalīl*' denotes an intimate friend, but Ibn 'Arabī believes it derives from form V, which means something 'entered, or penetrated, or passed through the . . . interstices . . . of a thing' (Lane 2003, vol. 2, p. 778). He writes in the *Fuṣūṣ*, 'The Intimate friend [Ibrāhīm] was called that because he had permeated (*takhallala*) and encompassed all that by which the divine essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhiyya*) is characterised' (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 80). One of the early exegetes of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Mu'ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 700/1300?), who wrote the formative commentary on the work (Todd 2014, p. 23), explains that this means Ibrāhīm was completely permeated by absolute divine love (Jandī 2007, p. 288). Ibn 'Arabī analogises this absolute permeation to food that is consumed: 'when food permeates the essence of the one who is nourished, no part of him remains that is not permeated. So food pervades all parts of the one nourished' (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 84).

The pure divine love that permeated every fibre of Ibrāhīm meant that whenever he was subjected to trials, he faced them with forbearance. This forbearance was the corollary of the divine forbearance with which he was completely permeated. It is for this reason, says Ibn 'Arabī, that God describes Him in the Qur'an as 'forbearing' (*ḥalīm*), which is derived from His divine Name 'the Forbearing' (*Al-Ḥalīm*) (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 1, p. 722). Ibn 'Arabī observes that this is the *fa'īl* form, which is used for 'intensification' (*mubālagha*), meaning there has to be (1) overt manifestations of forbearance, and (2) numerous manifestations of forbearance. Therefore, reasons Ibn 'Arabī, he would be subjected to (1) onerous trials which he would bear with forbearance even though he could have exercised his immense spiritual authority over his tormentors—these would be overt manifestations of forbearance—and (2) he would be subjected to many such trials (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 1, p. 722). One observes the hyperliteralism of Ibn 'Arabī at play here; the form of *ḥalīm* informs the nature of the trials that he would be subjected to, and the frequency. It is this kind of 'literality' that is the hallmark of his exegesis of the Qur'an and prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), as James Morris notes (Morris 1987a, p. 7).

Since this was the first major test of his resolve, Ibn 'Arabī had an Abrahamic vision that connected him to the archetype of familial trials: Ibrāhīm. In the overall scheme, this also meant that he had now had visions of four of the five most highly regarded prophets in Islam: 'the ones with resolve of the messengers' (*ulu'l-'azm min al-rusul*) (Qur'an 46:35). The Qur'an conspicuously differentiates between the ranks of prophets. And the exegetical tradition generally highlights that Nūḥ (Noah), Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, 'Īsā, and Prophet Muḥammad are the five messengers 'with resolve' (Qurṭubī 1964, vol 16, p. 220; Ṭabarī 2000, vol. 22, p. 145). Nevertheless, there is a difference of opinion about this, with some exegetes claiming that all messengers had resolve (Ṭabarī 2000, vol. 22, p. 145). Others explain that even though all messengers had resolve, this verse refers to those with the *most* resolve (Nasafī 1998, vol. 3, p. 319). In any case, Ibrāhīm is singled out as certainly being among the highest-ranking messengers (Ṭabarī 2000, vol. 22, p. 145).

Next, however, Ibn 'Arabī would have the honour of meeting *all* the prophets as he was formally anointed as the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood.

2.3. Most Significant Milestone: Formal Anointment as the Seal of Muḥammadan Sainthood

The formal anointment of Ibn 'Arabī as the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood is explained by Chodkiewicz and James Morris in admirable detail (Chodkiewicz 1993; Morris 1987b, 1988). My purpose here is not to tread familiar ground by describing the spiritual ascension (*mi'rāj*) that Ibn 'Arabī had at this time. His spiritual ascension was a mirror of the physical ascension that Prophet Muḥammad had when he ascended to the seven heavens on his way to meeting God. Although there is a difference of opinion as to whether this journey was physical (Buckley 2012), Ibn 'Arabī is of the opinion that it was. He recounts his conversations with each of the prophets in the heavens that correlate with the most rigorously authenticated accounts of Prophet Muḥammad's ascension (Addas [1989] 1993, pp. 153–57; Morris 1987b, 1988). The prophets he met were Ādam in the first heaven, 'Īsā and Yaḥyā (John) in the second, Yūsuf (Joseph) in the third, Idrīs (Enoch) in the

fourth, Hārūn (Aaron) in the fifth, Mūsā in the sixth, and Ibrāhīm in the seventh. However, there are reports that contradict this version (Bukhārī 2001, vol. 9, p. 149), which have led commentators to speculate that Prophet Muḥammad had numerous ascensions ('Asqalānī 1959, vol. 13, pp. 485–86; 'Aynī n.d., vol. 25, p. 172).

My purpose in this section is to explicate the conversation Ibn 'Arabī had with Hūd in an annunciatory vision of this formal anointment. This vision included all the prophets since it was such a momentous occasion for Ibn 'Arabī. He mentions it in the chapter of Hūd in the *Fuṣūṣ*:

> Know that when God allowed me to behold and bear witness to the essences (*a'yān*) of His messengers, peace be upon them, and all His prophets of humankind from Ādam to Muḥammad, peace be upon them, in a vision, I was in Cordoba in the year 586 AH. No one from among that group talked to me except Hūd, peace be upon him, who told me the reason for their gathering. (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 110)

The reason for their meeting was naturally to confer on Ibn 'Arabī the rank of being the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood (Addas [1989] 1993, pp. 75–76). The fact that it was Hūd who informs him of this is not incidental.

Ibn 'Arabī emphasises the 'oneness of being' (*waḥdat al-wujūd*)—a term that was coined later by his followers to refer to his doctrine of the essential unity of existence (Chittick 2012, p. 81)—more in this chapter than in any other (Austin 2008, p. 129). He writes,

> His [God's] saying, '*There is nothing like Him*' (*laysa ka mithlihī shay'*) [Qur'an 42:11] is still imposing a delimitation (*ḥadd*) if we take 'like' (*kāf*) [the first of two particles of comparison along with *mithl*] as being superfluous (*zā'ida*) to denoting a negation of the description. [This is because] he who is contrasted to what is delimited is likewise delimited, since he is not the delimited thing. So being free from delimitation is delimitation (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 111).

The fact that there are two particles of comparison side by side in the part-verse (*kāf* and *mithl*) is usually chalked up to a redundancy by most linguists. However, Ibn 'Arabī disagrees because this would mean that God is delimited by being directly contrasted to that which is delimited, i.e., the creation. His logic goes like this:

(1)   There is no thing like Him.
(2)   A thing is delimited.
(3)   Thus, God is delimited by being other than that thing. He is therefore a thing but just not *that* thing.

However, if there is no redundancy—which Ibn 'Arabī advocates as it aligns with his hyperliteralistic hermeneutics (Morris 1987a, p. 7)—then the verse means that 'there is no thing like God's likeness'. A being that has 'God's likeness', says Ibn 'Arabī, is the Perfect Man (*Al-Insān al-kāmil*) as it has the capacity to be a locus of manifestation for all the divine Names (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, pp. 48–49; Jīlī 1997; Morrissey 2020). The part-verse thus confers that there is no thing like the thing that is able to manifest all the divine Names, to say nothing of God Himself since, in His essence, God is completely beyond all comparison. It is a statement of the utter apophasis and ineffability of God because His essence cannot be articulated, even in terms of dissimilarity; He is entirely beyond the ken of human comprehension (Murata 1992, p. 49). The oneness of existence is for the manifestations of the divine Names in the phenomenal realm since all creatures are disparate loci of God's most beautiful Names mentioned in the Qur'an (Lala 2019). Ibn 'Arabī is very careful to make this distinction (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 54).

It is for this reason that Hūd is the one chosen to speak to Ibn 'Arabī at this momentous occasion, as it confers to him the ultimate reality that his essence is no different to the essences of all prophets and messengers who came before him. This is why Ibn 'Arabī also refers to himself as the 'heir' (*wārith*) of Muḥammadan sainthood because there is fundamentally a oneness of existence of all created beings, which in no way violates the absolute existence of the divine essence, an existence that defies all comprehension

and articulation. The prophet, whose inner wisdom (*ḥikma*) communicates this most perspicuously (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, pp. 106–14), is the one most worthy of speaking to him at that moment.

2.4. Ibn 'Arabī's Juristic and Personal Interactions with Prophet Muḥammad

We have hitherto only interrogated the major events that took place in the life of Ibn 'Arabī when he saw visions of prophets of God that either helped him to embark on the path to spirituality, gave him resolve when he was tested, or conferred on him a special rank. Yet there was also a more intimate way in which he interacted with prophets, especially Prophet Muḥammad. This took the form of Prophet Muḥammad correcting misconceptions and misapprehensions that Ibn 'Arabī had, or they were interactions that were initiated by Ibn 'Arabī and pertained to specific juristic questions, such as raising the hands during formal prayer (*rafʿ al-yadayn*). Since the latter has been dealt with extensively elsewhere, I will not detail those interactions here (Lala 2022b). Suffice it to say that Ibn 'Arabī had recourse to the highest authorities when it came to specific juristic problems, as is also evident from the questions he was able to ask prophets when he had his spiritual ascension (Addas [1989] 1993, pp. 153–57; Morris 1987b, 1988). Yet his interactions with Prophet Muḥammad sometimes betrayed the particular attention that he paid to Ibn 'Arabī, especially when he appeared to him unbidden because Ibn 'Arabī had erred. He recounts one such event in the *Futūḥāt*:

> I saw the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, in the year 590 AH in a dream in Tlemcen [Algeria], while it had reached me from a man that he had fallen out with others about the spiritual master Abū Madyan—and Abū Madyan was of the greatest of gnostics (*ʿārifīn*)—and I believed in him and I knew of his state from spiritual insight (*baṣīra*). So I began to dislike that man for his dislike of the spiritual master Abū Madyan.

> The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, said to me 'Why do you dislike so-and-so?' I replied, 'Due to his dislike of Abū Madyan'. He asked me, 'Does he not love God, and love me?' I answered him, 'Yes, O Messenger of God! Surely He loves God and loves you'. So he said, 'Why do you then dislike him for his dislike of Abū Madyan and do not love him for his love of God and His messenger?' I replied to him, 'O Messenger of God! I have surely made a mistake and been heedless. Now I repent, and from now on he is of those people most beloved to me. Indeed, you have cautioned me and advised me, may blessings be upon you'.

> So when I woke up, I grabbed the extremely expensive clothes that I had, or items, I don't remember which, and I rode to his house and informed him of what occurred. He wept and accepted the gift, and took the vision as admonition (*tanbīh*) from God, so the dislike he had for Abū Madyan disappeared, and he began to love him.

> I wanted to know the reason of his dislike of Abū Madyan, despite the fact that he had acknowledged that Abū Madyan was a righteous man, so I asked him. He replied, 'I was him in Béjaïa [Algeria] when meat came to him from the Eid sacrifices. He distributed it to his companions and did not give me any of it. That was the reason for my disliking him and disparaging him. I have now repented. Just look at how wonderful the instruction of the Prophet, peace be upon him is!' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 4, pp. 498–99)

The first point worthy of note is that Prophet Muḥammad intervenes in what seems to be a very trivial dispute between Ibn 'Arabī and a man who disparaged his spiritual master Abū Madyan (Cornell 1996; Lings 1975, p. 113). Ibn 'Arabī begins to develop a hatred for the man because he does not revere Abū Madyan. Prophet Muḥammad advises him to focus on their mutual love for God and His messenger instead. Ibn 'Arabī immediately accepts Prophet Muḥammad's admonition and repents. When he subsequently goes to

the man, he, too, repents and begins to love Abū Madyan. In other words, the source of their hatred is also removed and the man sees things as Ibn 'Arabī saw them, which means that Ibn 'Arabī was initially correct in his assessment that Abū Madyan was wrongfully disparaged, but he was wrong to let such inconsequential things cause division between them. What is also significant is that Prophet Muḥammad's admonition does not stop Ibn 'Arabī from inquiring as to why the man developed a hatred for Abū Madyan in the first place, despite the fact that he knew Abū Madyan was a pious man. This, too, turns out to be a petty reason. Therefore, the whole episode was a small dispute between Ibn 'Arabī and a man, predicated on insignificant, quotidian affairs. Yet Ibn 'Arabī was under the personal care of Prophet Muḥammad to such an extent that he chose to intervene even when the matter was so trifling.

This means that even though Ibn 'Arabī usually had visions of major messengers at momentous milestones in his spiritual life, he was not abandoned by Prophet Muḥammad in the intervening periods and had regular interactions with him about juristic problems he was encountering and small disputes he was having. Yet it was more common for him to have meetings with his spiritual masters at such times. Of these, the most important is arguably the enigmatic figure of Al-Khiḍr.

3. Ibn 'Arabī's Audiences with Spiritual Masters and Others

3.1. Interactions with Al-Khiḍr

Henry Corbin declares that 'Ibn 'Arabī was above all the disciple of Khiḍr' (Corbin [1993] 1997, p. 32). Al-Khiḍr was 'the invisible spiritual master, reserved for those who are called to a direct unmediated relationship with the divine world' (Corbin [1993] 1997, p. 55). Corbin overstates the influence and the rank of Khiḍr in light of some Shi'ite texts (Corbin [1993] 1997, pp. 53–67), which have been questioned by other scholars (Addas [1989] 1993, p. 39). Nevertheless, the influence he had on Ibn 'Arabī was significant.

In one way, Al-Khiḍr represents the half-way house between Ibn 'Arabī's interactions with prophets and his interactions with saints. In another, he falls in between Ibn 'Arabī's rank-confirming encounters with corporealised spirits in the sensible world (see below), and his more trivial encounters with saints in the spiritual world. This is because Al-Khiḍr has the unique rank of uniting both these realms. There has been a great deal written about the status and significance of Al-Khiḍr, which lies beyond the scope of this study (Wheeler 1998). The debate surrounding his rank stems from the fact that in Q18:65–82, Mūsā clearly approaches him in the subordinate role of a student to the teacher. The fifth-century exegete Abu'l-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), who took huge strides in Islamic political theory (Baghdadi 1981), explains that when the Qur'an states that Al-Khiḍr received 'mercy' (*raḥma*) from God, it could refer to four things: (1) prophethood, (2) divine grace (*ni'ma*), (3) he had been made completely obedient to God, or (4) he had been granted a prolonged life (Māwardī n.d., vol. 3, p. 324). It is clear that Ibn 'Arabī subscribes to many of these opinions, most notably, the prolongation of life (see below). The Shafi'ite jurist and exegete Abū Muḥammad al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) writes that even though Al-Khiḍr was granted esoteric knowledge through divine inspiration, he was not a prophet according to most scholars (Baghawī 1997, vol. 5, p. 188). Yet 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar al-Bayḍāwī (d. 719/1319), who came to represent orthodox Sunnism (Saleh 2021), avers that Al-Khiḍr was a prophet and that the mercy referred to in Q18:65 is revelation and prophethood (Bayḍāwī 1997, vol. 3, p. 287).

Whether he was a prophet or not, Qur'anic exegetes and Ibn 'Arabī agree that Mūsā was superior to Al-Khiḍr (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, pp. 205–6). The influential Medieval exegete 'Imād al-Dīn ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) (Mirza 2014) explains that the only reason Mūsā went to Al-Khiḍr as a student was that when he was about to deliver a lecture to his people, he was asked who the most knowledgeable person was, and he replied that it was him. Now, even though this was true, as Ibn Kathīr explicitly points out, it did not behove Mūsā to not have deferred the matter to the judgement of God, which is why he was censured and God remarked, 'I have a servant where the two seas meet who knows more than you' (Ibn Kathīr

1998, vol. 5, p. 157). In addition to this, Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), whose commentary represents the pinnacle of classical tradition-based commentary (Hidayatullah 2014, pp. 25–26; Saleh 2016), and who influenced Ibn Kathīr (Calder 1993), mentions that it could also have been because Mūsā asked God to show him someone from whom he could gain more knowledge than he already possessed (Ṭabarī 2000, vol. 18, p. 63). During his subsequent interaction with Al-Khiḍr, the latter performs acts that are contrary to religious law or defy common sense, but have a deeper meaning that he only apprises Mūsā of afterwards (Qurʾan 18:65–82). Al-Khiḍr has thus become emblematic of a spiritual esoteric knowledge that in many ways transcends exoteric religious law (Wheeler 1998).

Ibn ʿArabī clearly subscribes to Al-Khiḍr's status as the archetype of esoteric knowledge (Ibn ʿArabī 2002, pp. 205–6), and his interactions with him should be analysed with this in mind. He mentions that 'God prolonged his age (aṭāl Allāh ʿumrah) until now' which is why he had three audiences with him (Ibn ʿArabī n.d.a, vol. 1, p. 186). The first occurred when Ibn ʿArabī had only just embarked on the spiritual path. He had a disagreement with his spiritual master at the time Abu'l-ʿAbbās al-ʿUraybī (d. 580/1184?) about the identity of a person. Even though Ibn ʿArabī was correct and ʿUraybī was not, Al-Khiḍr appeared to him and told him, 'O Muḥammad! Believe your spiritual master Abu'l-ʿAbbās in what he has mentioned to you about so-and-so' (Ibn ʿArabī n.d.a, vol. 1, p. 186). Al-Khiḍr was thus teaching Ibn ʿArabī the proper etiquette towards the spiritual master because the latter was still a spiritual neophyte and did not realise that his rejection of his master's opinion had wounded him.

The second time Ibn ʿArabī met Al-Khiḍr was when he was out at sea and he observed Al-Khiḍr walking on water, taking huge strides towards him. Al-Khiḍr spoke to him 'in a language that he had' (kalam kān ʿindah) and then left on his way 'perhaps to our spiritual master, Jarrāḥ ibn Khamīs al-Kinānī' (d. 590/1194?) (Ibn ʿArabī n.d.a, vol. 1, p. 186). In this visit, then, since Ibn ʿArabī does not even deem it significant enough to elaborate on what Al-Khiḍr said, it would seem safe to assume that the main detail here is a confirmation of Kinānī's spiritual rank as someone who was also frequented by Al-Khiḍr.

The third time Ibn ʿArabī met Al-Khiḍr was when Ibn ʿArabī was with someone who did not believe that saints could perform miracles. At this time, he saw Al-Khiḍr 'take a small mat (ḥaṣīr) that was in the alcove of the mosque and spread it out seven cubits in the air. He then stood on the elevated mat and offered his supererogatory prayers'. After he finished, he remarked, '"I did not do what you saw except for the benefit of this denier", and he indicated to my companion who used to deny miracles' (Ibn ʿArabī n.d.a, vol. 1, p. 186). The purpose of this interaction was therefore just to disabuse Ibn ʿArabī's companion of the notion that miracles could not be performed by saints.

If we analyse these three interactions, we observe that all of them pertain to trivial events: (1) to teach correct etiquette towards the spiritual master, (2) to affirm the spiritual rank of another gnostic, and (3) to prove the miracles of saints for someone who rejected them. These interactions are not like the ones he generally had with messengers, which occurred at momentous milestones. Further, in none of these cases did Al-Khiḍr actually tell Ibn ʿArabī anything he did not already know: he knew that he was correct when he and ʿUraybī disagreed and the latter changed his mind and agreed with Ibn ʿArabī afterwards, he knew the spiritual rank of Kinānī, and he believed in miracles of the saints. This is different to even his trivial interactions with Prophet Muḥammad in which the Prophet teaches him points of Islamic law that he did not know, such as how many times and when hands should be raised in formal prayer (Lala 2022b), or whether humans or angels are superior (Addas [1989] 1993, pp. 274–75). There is some complementarity, nevertheless, between Ibn ʿArabī's first interaction with Al-Khiḍr when he makes the mistake of contradicting his spiritual master, and Prophet Muḥammad's interaction with him when he formulated an erroneous opinion of a spiritual master. In both these cases, Ibn ʿArabī is admonished—however subtly—for a *faux pas*.

3.2. Interactions with Masters for Enquiries in the Spiritual World

Generally, Ibn 'Arabī had audiences with masters in the spiritual world when it came to trifling matters, much like his audiences with Al-Khiḍr, which were distinct from his encounters with messengers. But unlike his encounters with Al-Khiḍr listed above, usually, these meetings were to ask specific questions about the spiritual path. This is most conspicuously betrayed in his *Kitāb al-tajalliyāt* in which he recounts meetings with many of the Sufi masters of the past (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.b), like Dhu'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 246/861), who was 'one of the most important figures in the history of Sufism, and is considered to be the first Sufi to have spoken theoretically about gnosis (*ma'rifa*) and the stations (*maqamat*) and states (*ahwal*)' (Rustom 2009, p. 69). Ibn 'Arabī also spoke with Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), the author of arguably the first mystical commentary of the Qur'an (Musharraf and Lewisohn 2014, pp. 180–81). Some scholars dispute this, however, because Tustarī's work was assembled after his death (Böwering 1980, pp. 110–27; Keeler and Keeler 2011, p. xi). Ibn 'Arabī also met with Abu'l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910), who is regarded as the principal representative of orthodox mysticism (Abun-Nasr 2007, p. 37). He met more controversial figures, too, like Al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), who was brutally executed for his misunderstood mysticism (Massignon 1982), as well as making serious political enemies (Karamustafa 2007, pp. 25–26). While these non-corporeal meetings in the spiritual realm were more common, there were times when Ibn 'Arabī met spiritual masters in the sensible world.

3.3. Interactions with Masters for Enquiries in the Sensible World

3.3.1. Interaction with Al-Sulamī

In his meetings with spiritual masters, Ibn 'Arabī asks them about the minutiae of the spiritual path. He recounts one such meeting with Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), whose Sufi commentary provides a meticulous inventory of major Sufi exegeses of the Qur'an (Böwering 1996, p. 39), and thus represents the pinnacle of early Sufi commentaries (Böwering 1991, p. 42). Ibn 'Arabī says that he entered a station (*maqām*) on the spiritual path that delighted him, but he found that he was the only one there and that distressed him. He continues,

> Suddenly, the shadow of a person appeared, so I got up from my bed and went to it that I may find freedom from my grief (*faraj*). It embraced me and I looked carefully at it (*ta'ammaltuh*): it was Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī whose spirit had corporealised (*tajassadat*) for me. God had sent him to me as a mercy for me. I said to him, 'I see that you are [also] in this station'. He replied, 'In it [i.e., this place] was my soul seized, and upon it [i.e., this station] did I die, so I will continue to be in it'. I mentioned to him my loneliness (*waḥsha*) and lack of close friend (*anīs*) in it. He remarked, 'the foreigner (*gharīb*) always feels lonely. After divine providence (*al-'ināya al-ilāhiyya*) has already granted you this station, praise God. And who else, O brother, is granted this? Does it not please you that Al-Khiḍr is your companion in this station?' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 2, p. 261)

This interaction is reminiscent of Ibn 'Arabī's interaction with 'Īsā when he first embarked on the path. On that occasion, 'Īsā had provided him with the support he needed to adopt the lonely spiritual path and renounce his worldly life. Now, as an advanced spiritual master, Ibn 'Arabī again found himself alone. This loneliness caused him great distress, which is why God sent Sulamī to console him. It is noteworthy that Sulamī assumes a corporeal form to interact with Ibn 'Arabī. This means he can console him fully. First Sulamī comforts him physically, with an embrace, and then he consoles him verbally by telling him that the feeling of solitude he feels is natural when he is not a permanent resident of that station, but that it is an exalted station that very few humans are granted. The solitude Ibn 'Arabī feels is one that is endemic to the highest stations of spirituality because as he ascends the ranks, he finds fewer and fewer people in them. It is for this reason, says Sulamī, that he should praise God and rejoice because Al-Khiḍr is also in that

station. In other words, he dispels the source of Ibn 'Arabī's grief by telling him that (1) it is lonely, but that is only because he has attained such a high station, and (2) he is not really alone because Al-Khiḍr is also there, he just has not met him there yet.

The interaction with a corporealised spirit, therefore, seems to be of a higher order than his general meetings with spiritual elites because it represents a higher rank. Ibn 'Arabī makes a point to highlight that Sulamī was corporealised and that God sent him as a mercy. This meeting is closer in nature to the meetings with messengers that occurred at major milestones. Indeed, the station that Ibn 'Arabī was granted *was* a major milestone because it represented the highest station of sainthood, just below the station of prophecy (Addas [1989] 1993, p. 175). Ibn 'Arabī, who did not know what the station was called, asked Sulamī about its name, to which the latter replied that it was the 'station of divine closeness' (*maqām al-qurba*) (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 2, p. 261). This emblematises the dominant motif of Ibn 'Arabī's interactions with spiritual elites: to gain knowledge. While this was the case even in his meetings with prophets (see above), it was relegated to a secondary status in those situations. Here, too, the name of the place is subordinate to his feeling of loneliness. Sulamī is dispatched by God in order to first banish Ibn 'Arabī's loneliness. It is only after this is achieved that Ibn 'Arabī asks him about the name of the station. Nevertheless, ultimately, the meeting is to announce to Ibn 'Arabī that he has attained the station to divine closeness. It is an affirmation of his spiritual rank. In this sense, it is the counterpart to the meetings with the prophets and messengers at the time of his anointment as the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood (see above). Ibn 'Arabī seems to have these special meetings with corporealised spirits to generally affirm his spiritual rank from the highest members of the Sufi echelon *on the physical plane*. The same pattern may be observed in his meeting with the son of Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 193/809).

3.3.2. Interaction with the Son of Hārūn al-Rashīd

Ibn 'Arabī recounts his meeting with the son of Hārūn al-Rashīd numerous times in the *Futūḥāt* (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 1, p. 638; vol. 2, p. 15; vol. 4, pp. 11–12). But it is only in the most detailed version of this event that we find out the true reason for it. In this interaction, too, it seems that the purpose of the meeting is for Ibn 'Arabī to gain knowledge, but that is just a secondary consideration, which is revealed only at the end of the conversation. Ibn 'Arabī elaborates that while he was circumambulating the Ka'ba during the pilgrimage (ḥajj), he saw a man who was of 'handsome appearance' (*ḥusn al-hay'a*), inspired 'awe' (*hayba*), and had a 'deportment that commanded respect' (*waqār*) (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 4, p. 12). He looked carefully to see if he could recognise the man, but he could not. Then, he witnessed something miraculous: 'I saw him pass through two men who were sticking together (*mutalāṣiqayn*) while circumambulating the Ka'ba. He passed through them without separating them and they did not perceive [his presence]' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 4, p. 12). Ibn 'Arabī followed him closely and then something even more wondrous occurred: 'I passed through the two men who were sticking together (whom he had passed through), and I went past them, following him, just as he had gone past them without separating them, so I was astonished by that' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 4, p. 12). The significance of this only becomes apparent at the end of the story.

Ibn 'Arabī eventually catches up to the man and, after he completes his circumambulation, starts a conversation with him. He says, 'I know that you are a corporealised spirit (*rūḥ mutajassad*)'. He replies, 'You are correct.' 'So who are you, may God have mercy on you?' enquires Ibn 'Arabī. The man answers, 'I am Al-Sabtī, son of Hārūn al-Rashīd'. Ibn 'Arabī then remarks, 'I want to ask you about the [spiritual] state you were in during the days of your life in this sensible world' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 4, p. 12). Al-Sabtī consents, and Ibn 'Arabī asks that while he is apprised that Al-Sabtī only worked on Saturdays when he was alive, he does not know the reason for that. Al-Sabtī responds that he was emulating the divine creative week when God created the world in six days. Just as God had occupied Himself with His creation for those six days, Al-Sabtī would occupy himself exclusively with God for six days and tend to his own needs on Saturdays (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 4, p. 12).

At this point, Ibn 'Arabī says that he was granted an 'opening' (*fatḥ*), which is a term he employs to refer to 'mystical unveiling' (*mukāshafa*) from God, according to Ḥakīm (Ḥakīm 1981, p. 864). He was thus divinely inspired to ask Al-Sabtī, 'who was the "mystical pole" (*quṭb*) of your time?' The 'mystical pole' is 'the source of saintliness for all those close to God', and 'in the Sufi tradition every age was thought to have its own mystical pole' (Ryan 2000, p. 214). Al-Sabtī replied that, without bragging, he was the mystical pole. Now the main point of the conversation is revealed, Ibn 'Arabī declares 'Likewise, has the announcement (*ta'rīf*) been made to me'. Al-Sabtī confirms, 'Whoever has told you has spoken the truth' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d.a, vol. 4, p. 12). Now, there are two possibilities as to what Ibn 'Arabī means here. Either he affirms that he has been informed that Al-Sabtī was the mystical pole of his time, but that would be unlikely because he was inspired to ask this question, and that would not be the case if he already knew the answer. The more likely explanation is that Ibn 'Arabī is proclaiming that just as Al-Sabtī was the supreme mystical pole in his time, Ibn 'Arabī is the supreme mystical pole in his. This is the reason Ibn 'Arabī had the unique ability to pass through the two men in the same way as Al-Sabtī. What is more, Al-Sabtī corroborates that Ibn 'Arabī is the mystical pole. Thus, he is obtaining confirmation from a previous mystical pole that he is now the mystical pole. This interaction, then, even though it seems like it is to acquire information about Al-Sabtī's choice of Saturday as his day of work, is actually to confirm Ibn 'Arabī's spiritual rank. The information he gains is a secondary consideration, just as it was with Sulamī. Therefore, this meeting, too, is redolent of his audiences with messengers in which his spiritual status is affirmed.

Although Ibn 'Arabī's interactions with the dead oftentimes affirm his exalted spiritual status, as the foregoing has demonstrated, his more quotidian meetings with the dead, especially as dreams and visions, fall squarely into what was deemed to be a usual part of life for many pre-modern Sunni Muslims.

4. Communication with the Dead in Pre-Modern Sunni Islam

Communication with the dead was seen as being part and parcel of everyday life in the pre-modern Sunni tradition based on Q39:42, which states that God takes the souls of the dead and the sleeping, but returns the ones that were sleeping and keeps the ones that died. Since both the dead and the sleeping end up in the same place, argued Sunni exegetes, they could meet each other. And while this interpretation would be consonant with Sufi commentaries such as those of Ni'mat Allāh al-Nakhjiwānī (d. 920/1514) (Nakhjiwānī 1999, vol. 2, p. 249) and Aḥmad ibn 'Ajība (d. 1224/1809) (Ibn 'Ajība 1998, vol. 5, p. 83), it is significant that it is by no means restricted to these commentaries and the same interpretation is given by exoteric commentators like Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/ 923) (Ṭabarī 2000, vol. 21, p. 298). Indeed, the ubiquitous Sufi and polymath Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) writes that dreams constitute a dynamic space for interaction between the living and the dead (Davoudi 2022; Ghazālī 2023). It is in this sense that pre-modern Sunni Muslim communities bear a resemblance to modern Japanese communities in which there is a far more direct interaction with the dead (Klass and Goss 1999). However, the nature of this interaction and the cultural context is entirely different. Ibn 'Arabī's encounters may be far more numerous, more vivid, and more multi-faceted than other pre-modern Sunni Muslims, but he was by no means the only one who interacted with the dead.

5. Conclusions

Ibn 'Arabī had many encounters with the dead, but these encounters were not all the same. We can generally divide the encounters he had into those he had with messengers and prophets, which occurred at major milestones in his life, whether that was to induce him to renounce the worldly life and embark on the spiritual path, or to give him resolve when confronted with his greatest trial, or, most importantly, to affirm his exalted spiritual rank as the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood. While he also asked prophets questions all the

time, his specific encounters with Prophet Muḥammad added legal weight to his juristic opinions. Prophet Muḥammad also paid special attention to Ibn ʿArabī and guided him even in quotidian matters, like correcting his behaviour towards someone who loved God and His prophet. These more mundane issues, however, were usually the remit of the spiritual elite and saints who would apprise Ibn ʿArabī about the spiritual realm. More uncommonly, Ibn ʿArabī would see corporealised spirits of saints who had the higher task of confirming his exalted spiritual rank in the same way as the messengers. Since Al-Khiḍr was given a prolonged life, Ibn ʿArabī's interactions with him fall in between his interactions with corporealised spirits and his interactions with saints. This is because even though they generally pertained to trivial issues, they occurred on the physical plane.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

[1] There is a difference of opinion as to what the distinction is between prophets and messengers. While the latter are generally regarded to be of a higher rank than the former, the reasons for this vary. Some believe that while prophets only receive divine revelation, messengers have the added responsibility of propagating God's religion as well (Marjūnī 2012, p. 310). The distinction between them lies beyond the scope of this study in which the two terms are largely used interchangeably.

[2] On the five planes of existence according to Ibn ʿArabī and his followers, see William Chittick, 'The Five Divine Presences' (Chittick 1982).

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