

Article

The Science of Letters and Alchemy in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Jesus

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Abstract: This article briefly presents what the science of letters and alchemy meant for Ibn ‘Arabī and explains why this Sufi mystic attributes the highest degree of these sciences to Jesus. We will see how the science of letters is a knowledge of God’s creation, which He creates with His Word, where the existential verb, *Kun* (Be!), plays a fundamental role. This imperative pronounced by God when He wants something to exist appears in the Qur’ān in reference to Jesus. This prophet, being a word and a breath that have their origin in God, receives the knowledge of every word, which is formed by letters. Through this knowledge, Jesus can participate in God’s creative power with His permission, and with the knowledge of alchemy, he will have transformative and healing powers. As this is a science of healthy proportions, Ibn ‘Arabī credits Jesus with the knowledge of alchemy due to the impeccable balance he maintained between his human and spiritual natures. This article results from reading his immense work, approached from both theological and religious science methodologies.

Keywords: Sufism; Christology; Islam; interreligious dialogue; alchemy

1. Introduction

In the 20th chapter of the major work titled *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, the revered Sufi master Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240) presents the “science of letters” as the science of Jesus. If we relate this chapter to the numerous references to the Son of Mary in Ibn ‘Arabī’s vast oeuvre as a whole, an extraordinary coherence and interconnection between various elements opens up before us: the fact of the active participation of the angel in the formation of Jesus in Mary’s womb; Jesus being a composite being (human and divine, *lāhūt*)¹; the Son of Mary being called “Spirit of God” or “Word from Him”; Jesus speaking at the moment of birth to defend his mother, possessing the science of letters, and being a master of alchemy²; that the existential verb *KuN* is mentioned in the Koran (pronounced by God) in connection with the appearance of the angel to Mary; the life-giving capacity of Jesus’s miracles, or the fact Jesus’ heavenly abode is precisely that of Mercury; and Wednesday is exactly the auspicious day of the scribes.

The relevance of this article lies in the novelty of putting all these elements together and elucidating their coherence. Thus, we see a fully Islamic Christology—not a Christian one, since the whole science of Jesus must be included in the Muhammadan science—with which Christianity can enter into dialogue.

2. Jesus, Master of the Science of Letters

2.1. A Science of Creation

The science of letters (*al-sīmiyā*) is a true grammar of creation³. Its importance in the Shaykh’s thought is highlighted by the fact that the second chapter of the *Futūḥāt* was already devoted to this subject: “On the knowledge of letters, its degrees, and vowels (*ḥarakāt*)⁴”. If this immense work, where each chapter (*bāb*) is like a door that opens us to a revelation, begins with this subject, it is because knowledge of the science of letters is synonymous with knowledge of Reality. For Pythagoras, the world was composed of numbers. For Ibn ‘Arabī, it was composed of letters, each with a numerical value. The basic



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principle of the science of letters is that “the letter is the body; the number is the spirit” (Lory 2004, p. 42).

God creates the world through His merciful Breath⁵. This Breath pronounces the names of things, and they come into existence. As God is the only existing being in the strict sense, the names of things are divine Names according to a certain degree of manifestation-occultation. The written and phonetic representation of these names is not arbitrary, neither in Sufism nor in Kabbalah (Berg 2013, p. xii). On the contrary, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, the word used to designate a thing reveals the identity of that thing to one who knows the science of letters, not only the phonetic expression of the word but also the form of its writing.

The *alif*, for example, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, is the symbol of divine Unity because its numerical value is one. Similarly, the form of the *alif* manifests the axial function of the Pole, or Caliph of God, because this letter is written with a vertical stroke. “Allāh” and “Adam” both begin with this letter (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 65). The science of letters consists in knowing all this symbolism of the letters so one can combine them to accomplish miracles.

2.2. The Christic Science Is the Science of Letters

Ibn ‘Arabī devotes one of the chapters of the *Futūḥāt* to “Christic science”. Although elements of this science are scattered throughout his work, this chapter, the twentieth, contains the essential features (Gloton 2006): the science of the imperative *kun* (be!) and the reminder of the conception of Jesus by the Breath of the Merciful. This science is the knowledge of creation. All the chapters of his magnum opus begin with a poem. The opening poem of chapter 20 is entirely dedicated to Jesus:

The science of Jesus is one whose value is unknown to creatures.
It is through it that he brought back to life a being whose tomb was the earth (...)
His hidden divine aspect (*lāhūt*) was his kinship (*ṣihr*),
An embodied Spirit, whose secret God revealed (...)
He became a creature while also being Spirit. Then God illuminated him (...)
God has already magnified the reward of those who become like him.
(Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, v. I, p. 168)

We see here that this science belongs to Jesus, but not exclusively. The last verse of this initial poem warns against its uniqueness: some saints can be like Jesus, not having his same status, for he is the only Seal of universal holiness⁶, but inheriting this exact science of letters. Ibn ‘Arabī mentions the name of Ḥallāj, for example. This idea is reiterated in the body of the chapter:

Among the beings of spiritual realization, the one who knows the reality of *kun* possesses the science proper to Jesus⁷, and the one who gives existence to beings generated by his spiritual energy (*himma*) does so thanks to this science.
(Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 168)

Ibn ‘Arabī relates the breath, the generation of letters according to the stopping points of the air passing through the throat, and the appearance of creatures in existence:

Know, and may God strengthen you, that the science concerning Jesus is that of the Letters (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*), and for this reason, he received the Breath (*naḥḥ*), which is the air coming out from the inside of the heart and is the Spirit of Life. When this air is interrupted in its process of exiting up to the mouth of the body, the places where its stops occur are called ‘letters’ (...), and these emission points manifest the essential entities of the letters (*a’yān al-ḥurūf*). When these letters combine, sensible life is produced under the effect of intelligible realities. (...)
God thus formulates this imperative: “Be” (*kun*). Then, they became existing

beings and manifested themselves as determined entities. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 168)

Ibn ‘Arabī compares here the composite character of creatures, in contrast to divine simplicity, with the composition of letters, which is the origin of words, and, therefore, of sensible life. These created things have a particular mode of existence in their non-manifestation state, allowing them to hear the divine order to exist (*kun*).

2.3. The Creative Word: Kun (Be!)

Being a science of creation, the science of letters implies a particular knowledge of the imperative verb that makes things exist. All creation comes into existence through the word *kun*. Looking at this word, we see that it is unique, but looking at its effects, we find its multiplicity (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. III, p. 284). In addition, the word *kun*, even though it is unique, contains within itself multiplicity as it is formed by three letters. Ibn ‘Arabī develops the mysteries of these three letters on several occasions. The importance of the first odd number, three, in creation is significant for interreligious theological dialogue, notably with Christianity. He says: “The generation (*kaʾwn*) comes from the odd (*farḍ*) and not from the one (*al-wāḥid*)” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 168), that is to say, creation comes from the number three and not from the divine unity expressed by the number one.

One of the main peculiarities of the verb *KuN* that caught Ibn ‘Arabī’s attention is the occultation, in writing, of the *wāw* that is between the other two letters. The verb “be” (*KĀNa-yaKŪNu*) usually shows a long vowel (ā, ū), but it disappears in its imperative form. According to the Shaykh, all creation and every creature have an outer and inner aspect, a visible and manifested aspect, and a hidden or esoteric aspect. This constitution of reality finds a reflection in the creative verb, with the *kāf* and *nūn* that we see in writing as symbols of the visible world and the *wāw* representing the invisible world:

The manifested form of the word *KuN*, Be! comprises the two consonants *K* (*kāf*) and *N* (*nūn*). Similarly, the manifested or present world (*‘ālam al-shahāda*) has two aspects, one apparent, the other interior. The first aspect is symbolized by the letter *N*, the second by the *K* (. . .) The spirit of the animated being is thus an occulted reality, the *W* having no proper existence in the present reality (*shahāda*), given that this letter, in the imperative of the verb to be, *KuN*, Be! is elided. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. II, pp. 131–33)

In this case and many others, the reflection on the verb *kun* comes after a mention of the life-giving power of Jesus. This is the case with another text where it is said that the verb *kun*, to create, requires that the body of the word (*jism*), that is, its writing, be accompanied by the spirit (*rūḥ*). That is why a person can pronounce this verb without creating anything if they have not received the Breath and permission of God like Jesus (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 635).

The letter *nūn* of the word *kun* is also the subject of a detailed analysis. This letter “N” is written in Arabic as a half-circle with a dot in its center (ن), and it is called *nūn*, with two N’s and a *wāw* separating them. The writing of this letter suggests a complete circumference, of which only the lower half is visible. The fact that the letter separating them is the *wāw*, the same one found in the verb *kun* and in the personal pronoun indicating the Hidden, “Him” (*Huwa*), and which in Sufism refers to God, opens up a whole esoteric meaning: the verb *kun*, thanks to the *nūn*, makes half of reality appear, while the other half remains hidden (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 74–75, §. 18).

The symbolism continues. The shape of the *nūn* is similar to a container, and therefore, like “the Inkwell which contains the principal ink by means of which the Pen distinctly traces the letters of writing” (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 91, n. 15). The numerical value also plays a role here. The value of the *nūn* is fifty. If we add the other half of the sphere, we get one hundred, which is “equivalent to the one hundred divine Names corresponding to the one hundred degrees of Paradise . . . ” (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 78–79, §. 20).

Ibn ‘Arabī’s constant association of the imperative *kun* with Jesus, seeing the latter often appearing in the development of the secrets of this creative verb, finds its place of inspiration in the Qur’ān. They are already related in the Qur’ān, notably in Q. 3, 59. The two reference verses for the whole previous reflection:

“Verily, the likeness of Jesus before *Allāh* is the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then (He) said to him: “Be!”—and he was.”. (Q. 3, 59)

“Verily! Our Word unto a thing when We intend it, is only that We say unto it: “Be!”—and it is.”. (Q. 16, 40)

So, this is the science of the creative verb, a Christic science obtained by God’s grace through inheritance. That is why Ibn ‘Arabī ends this reflection in *The Book of the Mīm* . . . saying:

To go further on its subject [=the letter *nūn*] would lead me to expose what is not permitted to me . . . (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 78–79, §. 20)

And it is not permitted because it is a secret science. He says:

The science of letters is a secret science which is the privilege of the Initiates with pure hearts among the prophets and saints. (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 27–28, § 3)

2.4. The World as a Written Book

If the science of letters is the science of creation, we can understand why, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the entire world is like a Book where each thing or each event is like one of its words. Jesus holds the secret of the world’s existence.

The world is compared with a parchment written on both sides, one side facing up and the other facing down. The image clearly expresses the two aspects of reality, the spiritual and the material, which Jesus synthesizes through his two natures, angelic and human. Attempting to answer the question of whether someone in a state of impurity can hold a volume of the Qur’ān, Ibn ‘Arabī reasons:

The entire world is formed by the words of God that have been made existent⁸. The Most High has said about the reality of Jesus: ‘ . . . His Word which He bestowed on Mary . . . ’ (Q. 4, 171). The Most High has also said: ‘ . . . the words of God shall not be exhausted.’ (Q. 31, 27). And again: ‘To Him ascend (all) the goodly words, and the righteous deeds exalt it.’ (Q. 35, 10). The word *kalim* is the plural of *kalima*. When the Most High wants a thing to exist, He says to it: ‘Be!’ and that thing takes on a form and becomes (*fa- yakūn*). In existence, there is a parchment (*riqq*) unfolded (*manshūr*), and in the world, there is a written book (*masṭūr*). Furthermore, this book is embroidered on both sides (*marqūm*) because it has two faces [marked]: one seeks the divine Names and the upper world, and the other seeks the lower world and nature (*tabī‘a*). (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 366)

The term *marqūm* can mean “numbered” or “written,” but the context suggests that it refers to a single action on the parchment that has a different result on each side⁹. That is why we have translated it as “embroidered”. It could also be a printed medium that allows the writing on the back to show through. In any case, the text obliges us to understand a single reality with two faces. Therefore, the parchment is not written on both sides, as one would do today, but rather is a single embroidered or printed text that presents a different aspect on each side.

This book with two faces is undoubtedly the Perfect Man¹⁰, as an intermediary (*barzakhī*) between the upper world and the lower world¹¹, and Jesus in particular, through his two aspects: spiritual and earthly. Man is called the “Comprehensive Book”, or globalizer, *Kitāb al-jāmi‘* (Ibn ‘Arabī 2005, vol. IV, p. 123). Specifically, Ibn ‘Arabī, based on prophetic tradition, points to the heart of Man as the only place that can contain God, while neither the heavens nor the earth can contain Him (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. IV, 83)¹². That is why he says that people who are on the path of God (*ahl Allāh*) have made their hearts like

a Volume of the Qur'ān (*muṣḥaf*) that contains the Word of God (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 365).

As a Book, this Perfect Man is simultaneously a reflection of the world, a synthesis, and a microcosm. Thus, the world conceived as the Universal Man (*al-Insān al-Kabīr*) is a Book with two faces.

Ibn 'Arabī is even more explicit when he considers the world as a Great Volume of the Qur'ān (*muṣḥaf*) whose writing never ends because it is the Book of the manifestations of God—which are the creatures themselves—and the infinity of God necessitates infinite theophanies:

... the world ... is for us the Great Volume of the Qur'ān (*al-muṣḥaf al-kabīr*) that God recited to us as a succession of spiritual states (*tilāwat ḥāl*)¹³, just as the Qur'ān is, for us, a recitation of Words (*tilāwat qawl*). For the world is formed by written and embroidered letters (*ḥurūf makḥṭūṭā marqūma*) on the parchment (*riqq*) of extended existence (*al-manshūr*). The writing in it [= the parchment] never stops, without ever having an end. (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 101)

The one who writes this Book is the Pen that takes the ink from the inkwell to write on the Preserved Tablet. The letters in the inkwell are in a state of unity, as everything is one in God and diffracts when things come into existence, at the moment they are written (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. III, p. 12).

The words are inexhaustible, as if they came from a vast sea of ink. The reference is Qur'ānic, and the corresponding verses serve Ibn 'Arabī to open the short 524th chapter of the *Futūḥāt*:

God, the Almighty and Majestic, has said: 'Even if all the trees on earth were pens, and the ocean were ink, with seven more oceans added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. Indeed, God is Exalted in Might and Wise.' (Q. 31, 27) And the Most High has also said: '... His Word which He bestowed on Mary and a Spirit coming from Him ...' (Q. 4, 171). The words of God are nothing but the forms of creatures that have the possibility of existing (*al-mumkināt*)¹⁴, and these never end; and what does not end, does not exhaust, nor can existence (*al-wujūd*) encompass it. (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. IV, pp. 166–67)

Notice the numerous mentions of Jesus throughout the development of concepts related to the Breath, the Spirit, writing, the Word, or the Book of the world.

We can find a parallel development outside of the *Futūḥāt*, particularly in the *Kitāb al-Tadbīrāt al-ilāhiyya fī iṣlāḥ al-mamlaka al-insāniyya* (The Divine Governance in Reforming the Human Kingdom)¹⁵. One of its chapters talks about the "attributes and obligations of the scribe," using the image of one of the most important functions in the courts of the kingdoms of the Middle Ages. Ibn 'Arabī reminds us here that Idrīs was the first prophet to write with a pen.

The Shaykh also speaks here of the parchment with two sides but adds that they are two books, one written in the language of the Lord and the other in the language of humans. Man can only read the latter, usually, written on the side facing downward.

Furthermore, the science of letters is the science of existence and creation. Its knowledge enables Jesus to perform miracles and opens up the possibility of magic and exorcisms through specific combinations of letters. That is why the science of letters, *al-sīmiyā'*, has become synonymous with "white magic" in modern Arabic (Lory 2004, pp. 92–112). Ibn 'Arabī, having the most outstanding expert in the science of letters (Jesus) as his first master and being the Seal of the one who had "received all the words" (Muhammad), was also supposed to have a place among the masters of this science. This is why he recounts that in a dream, while he was in Béjaïa during Ramadan 597, all the letters were presented to him, and he joined them individually and in composition (Ibn 'Arabī 2000, vol. I, p. 465).

3. Jesus, Word of God

3.1. Jesus as a Word of God, Both One and Multiple

Jesus receives a Book from God, like all the other messengers with a new law for their people, and he is the master of the science of letters. But his personal relationship with the Word means that he not only has words but is the Word. His wisdom and the words he received from God in the form of the Gospel are not external to his identity. He himself is a Word pronounced by God and coming from Him. Sufism, and notably the thought of Shaykh al-Akbar, takes into consideration this attribute, which confers upon him an unparalleled dignity. Against his uniqueness, we have seen that ultimately all things are Words of God, for all have the Breath of the Merciful as their origin:

[The Most High] said about Jesus that he is the Word of God, and He said about creatures that they are the Words of God. (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 656)

Jesus is the paradigm of a quality of all created reality: to be a word exhaled by God that is called to return to Him. Jesus represents the model of the Sufi mystic who comes from Him, lives in Him, and returns to Him (Flaquer 2015).

However, Jesus is the only one to receive this appellation in the Qur'ān, which gives him a particular distinction. Jesus is also a paradigmatic manifestation of a universal reality: all Words come from Him and return to Him. The Qur'ānic verse is often quoted in this regard, as we have seen: “: ‘To Him ascend (all) the goodly words, and the righteous deeds exalt it.’ (Q. 35, 10).

In one of the texts, Ibn 'Arabī reflects on the fact that Mary, on the one hand, received the Word from God, and, on the other hand, the Qur'ān acknowledges that she trusted (*ṣaddaḡat*) the Words of her Lord. The Shaykh mentions this after a new reflection on the unity and multiplicity of God's Words.

God described Himself as having Words, in the plural. It is necessary to distinguish the units of this plurality. Then, His unique Word is presented as multiple in the Qur'ānic verse: ‘When We will something, Our only Word is “Be”. And it is.’ (Q. 16, 40). [The word *kun*] contains three letters, two visible, the *kāf* and the *nūn*, and one hidden and concealed. (. . .) The Perfect Human is in this degree (*martaba*) as a delegate of God (*ḥaqq*), separating the previous and the next Word. (. . .) God said about Jesus: ‘His Word which He bestowed on Mary’ (Q. 4, 171). And He said about her: ‘She testified to the truth of the Words of her Lord’ (Q. 66, 12). These are none other than Jesus himself. The Qur'ān speaks of Words because Jesus is multiple in relation to his external and internal constitution. Even though he has two aspects, the outer and the inner, he is a single Word. That is why the Qur'ān said about him: ‘She testified to the truth of the Words of her Lord’ because Jesus is the Spirit of God (*rūḥ Allāh*), concerning his entirety (*jumlati-hi*), and concerning the unity of his plurality (*aḥadiyyat kathrati-hi*), which corresponds to the Word: ‘His Word which He bestowed on Mary’. (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. III, p. 283)

This reflection is extraordinarily rich: the word *kun* is unique and creates a multiplicity of Words, which correspond to creatures. It also contains a multiplicity within itself through the three letters of its writing. One of them is an intermediate letter, which corresponds to the Perfect Human. This letter is also a *wāw*, one of the essential letters of the personal pronoun of the Hidden, Him (*Huwa*). God, like the *wāw* of *kun*, hides behind creation. That is why, if Man is this *wāw*, it is because he has the degree of the Caliphate of God. Therefore, Jesus is also related to this *wāw*, as he is also a Perfect Man. A recent Ph.D. dissertation confirms that Ibn 'Arabī “seems to identify the son of Mary with the hidden—pronounced but not written—letter ‘*wāw*’ in the divine creative command *kun*, between the *kāf* and *nūn*.” (Hussein 2019, p. 86).

Furthermore, Jesus is compared with the verb *kun* in its entirety because, on the one hand, he is a Word projected onto Mary, while on the other hand, he is multiple in himself, through his manifest aspect and his hidden aspect. The duality of Jesus is clear in this text:

[Jesus] was half-human, half-purified spirit, angelic; for it was Gabriel who, in the form of a perfected man, granted him to Mary. (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. IV, p. 195)

Ibn 'Arabī considers that the Qur'ān confirms this inner multiplicity of Jesus with the verse "She had declared the Words of her Lord to be true"; Jesus is a unique and multiple word.

3.2. "He Gave Me the Book"

The Qur'ān confesses that Jesus received a Book from God. This is not an extraordinary fact because all messengers received it. The pattern of the revelation of the Law for all messengers is similar. This Book is the Gospel in the singular: "It is He Who has sent down the Book to you [=Muhammad] with truth, confirming what came before it. And He sent down the Torah and the Gospel." (Q. 3, 3). Jesus explicitly acknowledges having received it, saying: "Verily I am a slave of God, He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet" (Q. 19, 30). Moses also received "the Book," but it is Jesus' confession that inspires the Shaykh's reflection that relates the fact that Jesus is a Word, that he received a Book, and that the books are a composition of letters and Words. Jesus is identified with what he has received:

[Jesus] is the Word of God (*kalimat Allāh*). And, the word is a collection of letters! (. . .) God has informed us that He gave him the Book. By this, He means the Gospel, but He also means the station (*maqām*) of his existence, in relation to the fact that he [=Jesus] is a Word, and that the Book is a combination (*ḍamma*) of embroidered letters¹⁶ so that the word can be seen; or it is a combination of meanings and forms of letters that point to it. There is necessarily a composition (*tarkīb*). That is why Jesus recalled that God gave him the Book, similar to the word: "Our Lord," said Moses, "is He Who gave to each thing its form and nature." (Q. 20, 50). (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 387)

The citation of the last Qur'ānic verse in this context gives the key to the interpretation of the Shaykh. Using a syllogism, we can say God gives everything its own nature; God gave Jesus the Book; therefore, the nature of Jesus is that of being a Book, because like the book, he is of a composite nature, and he also is the Word of God.

3.3. The Speech of God (*Al-Kalām and Al-Qawl*)

Jesus is *kalimat Allāh*, the Word of God. Why is he not *qawl Allāh*? The modern Arabic language would have difficulties distinguishing between the two expressions, but Ibn 'Arabī explains a difference between the *kalām* of God and His *qawl*: the *qawl* is the word of God—or His speech—addressed to non-existing beings, and the *kalām* is His word addressed to creatures:

Second part, on the Speech of God (*kalām Allāh*) and His words (*kalimāti-hi*): *al-kalām* and *al-qawl* are two characteristics (*na't*) of God. The *qawl* is the speech that the non-existent (*ma'dūm*) hear, which corresponds to the word of the Most High that says: 'Our Word unto a thing when We intend it, is only that We say unto it: "Be!"—and it is.' (Q. 16, 40). On the other hand, the *kalām* is the speech that is heard by creatures, which corresponds to the word of the Most High: 'And to Moses God spoke (*kallama*) directly (*taklīman*).' (Q. 4, 164). It is possible to apply the concept of *kalām* to a translation in the language of the translator¹⁷ and to attribute the *kalām* to the one who also listens to it. The *qawl* is a speech that has an influence on the non-existent, and this influence is existence. The *kalām*, on the other hand, has an influence on existent beings, and this influence is science (*al-'ilm*). (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 400)

The Shaykh continues by saying that *kalām* is a discourse that can be altered or transformed. *Kalām* also applies to the language of animals and is also used to talk about creatures. Ibn 'Arabī calls them the words of God (*kalimāt Allāh*). Ibn 'Arabī then returns to Jesus:

The Most High said: ‘... His Word which He bestowed on Mary’ (Q. 4, 171). This Word is Jesus himself, nothing else was projected onto Mary, and it is the only thing she learned [from God]. If the divine Word (*al-kalima al-ilāhiyya*) had been a word of God like that to Moses, Mary would have rejoiced and would not have said: ‘... and she said: ‘Would that I had died before this, and had been forgotten and out of sight!’ (Q. 19, 23). But the divine Word projected onto her was only Jesus himself, the Spirit of God and His Word (*kalimatu-hu*). He is His servant and he spoke, in an unusual manner, to exonerate his mother [from the accusation of adultery] and to be a sign [of God]. His speech was a *kalām Allāh* contained in the Breath of the Merciful. For God relieved (*naffasa*) the mother of Jesus through this uttering ... (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 400)

The Word that Mary received is Jesus himself. That is why Ibn ‘Arabī says that if the word addressed to Mary had been the one addressed to Moses, she would have rejoiced because the word addressed to Moses was not a child. She would have been spared the accusations of adultery. Finally, through the speech of Jesus in the cradle, she is relieved. Note that this verb “to relieve” (*naffasa*) comes from the same root as *nafas*, breath. Ibn ‘Arabī wants to point out that the Breath of the Merciful relieves Mary, as God had relieved the Prophet through the support of the inhabitants of Medina. The Shaykh’s reasoning continues:

The Mu‘tazila¹⁸ said: He who speaks is he who creates his speech (*kalām*). But when it comes to something that does not have the ability to speak, its speech must be attributed to God. This is the case with minerals, plants, and Jesus in his situation [as a newborn]. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 400)

The Mu‘tazila attribute the act of speaking to humans when they can speak and to God when inanimate beings speak. That is why they attribute the speech of Jesus in the cradle to God. In contrast, Ibn ‘Arabī always attributes this act to God because all speech comes from God.

The end of the Shaykh’s reasoning takes up the fundamental idea of everything he has said: The word (*kalima*) identifies with the named thing, just as the Word projected onto Mary was only Jesus himself (*illā ‘ayn ‘Īsā*). In the conclusion, the Shaykh identifies the Word of God with God himself:

We have clarified for you the meaning of the discourse of God, *kalām Allāh*, and the significance of His Words, *kalimāti-hi*. The discourse of God, *kalām Allāh*, is His knowledge, and His knowledge is himself (*dhātu-hu*). It is not possible that His discourse (*kalāmu-hu*) is not Him. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 400)

This reflection is of extraordinary philosophical significance. Christian theology also had to discuss the identity between the Word of God and Himself, hence the resulting Christology of the Ecumenical Councils. For Ibn ‘Arabī, identification means that all creatures, by virtue of being Words of God, are also Words about God. And even more, they are Words of God about Himself.

Everything is endowed with speech, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, even stones. Nothing has been created without this capacity to speak. All creation sings the Glory of God¹⁹:

We heard, at the beginning of our spiritual life, the stones glorifying God and invoking Him. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 382)

For Ibn ‘Arabī, since speech is a breath coming from the Breath of the Merciful, the only one who in reality exercises the action of speaking is God himself. The only agent in the world is God, and God is the only speaker too. He speaks, and He speaks to Himself through the creatures.

3.4. God Speaks through Jesus and Jesus through God

Just as the breath with which Jesus heals and revives the dead is the Breath of God, his word is also the Word of God. God, therefore, speaks through Jesus when he speaks.

This is explicitly stated in a commentary on the Qur'ānic verse where God asks Jesus if he has commanded his community to take him and Mary as gods besides God himself. Jesus' response, "If I said it, You knew it for sure", is interpreted to mean that if God is the origin of speech, then every word spoken by Jesus is ultimately a divine Word. He must, therefore, know it. But the text goes even further, saying that Jesus speaks with the "tongue of God". In a commentary on the Qur'ānic dialogue between God and Jesus regarding whether he said, "O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say unto men: 'Worship me and my mother as two gods besides God!'" (Q. 5, 116), we read:

[Jesus] responded, beginning with (mentioning) transcendence: 'Glory be to You! ... ' (...) ' ... it was not for me ... ' from the point of view of the individual self separated from You ' ... to say what I had no right to say ... ', that is, what is not implied by my ipseity or my archetypal essence. ' ... Had I said such a thing, You would surely have known it ... ' for You are 'the one who speaks', and whoever says something knows what he says. It is You who are the tongue with which I speak, as taught by the Messenger of God—may grace and peace be upon him!—on behalf of his Lord in a hadith of divine origin: 'I am his tongue with which he speaks,' identifying His ipseity with the tongue of the speaker while attributing it to His servant. (Ibn 'Arabī 1951/1370 h)²⁰

3.5. Adam, Moses, and Muhammad

To give Jesus his due value in the Shaykh's thought, it is also necessary to consider the status of other prophets. Regarding speech, the mention of Adam, Muhammad, and Moses is essential. These three prophets also possess the gift of speech.

Ibn 'Arabī often repeats the Qur'ānic verse regarding Adam: "He [=God] taught Adam all the names (of all things)" (Q. 2, 31). Since names are intrinsically related to the essence of the named thing, teaching names is a transmission of the secrets of creation. Furthermore, if creatures speak of God and if things are a diffracted reflection of divine Unity, learning names is actually a teaching of the divine Names.

Muhammad, the comprehensive prophet, is placed above Adam in this matter. Ibn 'Arabī often quotes the prophetic statement that confesses, "I have received all the Words" (*jawāmi' al-kalim*) or, if you will, "I have received the entirety of the divine discourse". Even if this seems equivalent to the reception of all the Names, Ibn 'Arabī distinguishes them very clearly. God taught Adam all the Names, but it is Muhammad who bears the meaning of these Names, their interiority, and their hidden aspect (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. I, p. 109). In addition, Adam, according to the Shaykh, receives the Names one after the other, individually, while Muhammad receives them comprehensively (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. III, p. 409).

Moses is not called *kalimat Allāh* (Word of God) but *kalīm Allāh*. The verbal form of *kalīm* indicates an intensive form of the verb, which indicates a reiteration of the verbal action as well as a perfect accomplishment. In the case of Moses, he received this name because he was a privileged interlocutor of God, mediating between God and the Children of Israel. In one text, Ibn 'Arabī affirms that Moses is alive through Jesus because he is the spirit of the Son of Mary and one of the words he had spoken. That is to say, Moses had spoken of Jesus with God and had announced his coming, just as Jesus announced the coming of Muhammad.

... from there, the mystery of the preparation (*tamhīd*) of the coming of Jesus made by Moses, explained in the 36th chapter: [the men] of the Torah were the first generation to believe in the Gospel (...) Moses is alive through Jesus because he is the spirit of Jesus, one of the words of Moses²¹. He became like a bright light. "And to Moses God spoke directly" (Q. 4, 164). (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. IV, p. 334)

Ibn 'Arabī himself sings of his approximation to this Mosaic station of intimate and direct conversation with God in one of the poems of the '*Anqā'* *mughrib*, saying: "God came

to me one night, speaking directly" (Ibn 'Arabī 2005, vol. IV, p. 107). G. Elmore, however, points out that for Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, "the Seal of saints is the only one who speaks with God face to face in the sessions of the kingdom" (Elmore 1999, p. 322, n.39). Moses does it directly, without an intermediary, but behind a veil.

3.6. Jesus Possesses the Charisma of Speech

Jesus possesses the charisma of speech. Through it, he is capable of speaking with the heavenly world, the spirits, and the angels, but also of knowing events before they are accomplished (Asín Palacios 1990, p. 404). If events occur by divine order, and an order is a word that "descends", the charisma of speech allows knowledge of this order before it is put into practice. According to Ibn 'Arabī, Jesus also possesses knowledge of omens through ornithomancy, which is certainly related to the vivification of birds.

The charism of speech allowed Jesus to speak while still in the cradle (Q. 19, 30–31). According to a tradition followed by the Shaykh, Jesus will not speak again until he has reached the usual age of speech. An extra-Qur'ānic story of apocryphal Christian origin presents Jesus in school, teaching his teacher the alphabet and the esoteric meaning of the letters. According to the story, when the teacher wrote *alif*, Jesus said, *Allāh*, and when he wrote *bā*, Jesus said, *Bism Allāh*, and so on (Al-Tha'labī 2001/1422 h). Ibn 'Arabī does not mention this story, but he could not have been unaware of it.

Another story of tradition, which also does not appear in the texts of Ibn 'Arabī to our knowledge, is the story of a Jesus who is able to make a skull speak (Hofman Vannus 2005, pp. 5–9). This miracle combines Jesus' gift of speech with his ability to bring the dead back to life, his humility in not despising a skull, and his spiritual quality of always having the subject of death in his mind.

3.7. Jesus, a Master of Silence

However, it is not possible to have the charisma of speech without also being a master of silence, not only because one has the right words to say but also because one knows where these words come from. One knows who is the One who speaks when one speaks, and who is the One who responds when someone answers. Ibn 'Arabī assures that silence (*al-ṣamt*) is one of the four fundamental spiritual elements (*arkān*) of the *abdāl*, the Substitutes, in addition to solitude, hunger, and vigil (Ibn 'Arabī 1997a, pp. 508–9).

These four spiritual qualities are deeply experienced by Jesus, especially the quality of fasting, because of his constant state of presence and constant invocation of God. The quality of silence also implies speaking only with God and knowing that there is no speaking being other than the One who created speech (*al-kalām*) and who has placed it in His servants. The servant is silent by nature and speaks from an accidental quality (*bi-l-'araḍ*) within him. At the same time, from another perspective, and considering that the creature is obliged to invoke God, there is no absolute silence (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 180).

Likely influenced by monastic spirituality, the Muslim tradition has collected several stories showing Jesus as a master of silence and spiritual retreat. Al-Ghazālī relates several of them:

Jesus Christ was once asked: "Teach us such thing by virtue of which we can enter paradise". He said: "Don't talk". They said: "We shall not be able to do it". He said: "Then don't talk except good". (Al-Ghazālī 1993, p. 92)

Jesus Christ said: "There is ten portions of divine service, nine of which are in silence, and the remaining one is in loneliness." (Al-Ghazālī 1993, p. 93)

Ibn 'Arabī does not mention them because he emphasizes the gift of speech, but that does not mean he denies this attribution.

3.8. Jesus Remains in the Mercury Sky, *al-Kātib*

The planet Mercury is called differently by Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Kātib*²². This was a specific appellation from the Maghreb and Andalusia in the Middle Ages, which means precisely “Writer” or “Scribe.” This meaning is one of the reasons why Jesus is in the Mercury sky. Jesus, the master of speech, and even more so, the one who is the Word, remains in the sky of the Scribe, who exerts influence over the scribes on Wednesday.

In addition, we see on this planet, in accordance with the science of the time, that the dual nature of Jesus corresponds to the duality of Mercury. It is the only planet considered hermaphroditic, behaving as male or female depending on its conjunction with other planets (Al-Bīrūnī 1934, p. 234). The relationship between Jesus and Mercury is clear in this text:

God has made the star (*najm*)²³ of the second heaven—counting from our position—a mixed star (*mumtazaj*). It is the Scribe (*al-Kātib*), and that is why God has made Jesus live there, because he is a mixture of the two worlds. Jesus appeared between the angelic world and the human world, between Gabriel and Mary. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, vol. III, p. 201)

4. Jesus, Master of Alchemy

4.1. The Science of Measurements and Transformations

Alchemy is the science of measurements and transformations. Its importance in Ibn ‘Arabī’s work is such that he devotes an entire chapter of the *Futūḥāt* to this topic, the 167th chapter (Ibn ‘Arabī 1997c), and treats the subject in many other places. The starting point is the idea that disease is caused by an incorrect balance of the elements forming parts of the body. Alchemy seeks to heal and transform based on the knowledge of the exact proportions that an object must have. The science of letters, on the other hand, allows us to know the intimate structure of things through the composition of the letters of their names. It seeks, as well, to transform reality through correct combinations of letters that have a surprising, even magical, effect on reality.

4.2. Jesus, Master of the Two Paths of Alchemy

Jesus, being the ultimate healer, has an eminent role in alchemy, as was intended. He is the master of this science, alongside with, according to other authors, Hermes Trismegistus, who also ascended to heaven. If we add to Jesus the gift of the Breath, the science of letters, and his knowledge of the ideal proportions of a being’s components, it makes him a prophet with incredible abilities, close to magic²⁴.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, Jesus is undoubtedly the master of alchemy. The chapter of the *Futūḥāt* on the knowledge of *Kīmiyā’ al-sa’āda* (The Alchemy of Happiness) could not be more explicit on this subject:

Jesus is the ‘Spirit of God’ (*Rūḥ Allāh*) and to John the Baptist belongs the ‘Life’. Now, just as the ‘Spirit’ and the ‘Life’ are inseparable, so these two prophets, Jesus and John the Baptist, are inseparable since they both carry together the burden of this mystery. For truly, Jesus holds the two paths of alchemical science. (The first path is) that of ‘production’, which for Jesus consists of creating the bird of clay and blowing life into it. The form of the bird was produced by his two hands, and its flight by the virtue of the breath which is the soul. This is the ‘path of demiurgic work’ in the science of alchemy, which has been explained at the beginning of the chapter. As for the second path, it consists of ‘removing ailments’. Then it is Jesus healing the blind and the leper from the blindness and leprosy with which they were struck in the maternal womb, and which are among the imponderables of the process of generation. From there, this follower can acquire the ‘science of natural and spiritual proportion and balance’, since Jesus brings together both in his person. (Ibn ‘Arabī 1997c, p. 274)²⁵

The relationship between Jesus and John is constant in Shaykh's thought, which is why they are placed together in the same second heaven of Mercury. It is not the case in other Sufi writings.

Jesus is the master of both paths of alchemy. This does not only mean that he knows the exact ideal proportions of beings, but that he himself is a balanced and proportionate being. On the one hand, the angel appears to Mary as a complete, proportionate, and balanced young man. This is the meaning of the term *basharan sawiyyan*. And on the other hand, Jesus is a being composed of a divine nature from God and a human nature from Mary, which unite in him with an ideal and perfect balance. It is said in some texts that there is a predominance of the Spirit, which corresponds to the superiority of the Spirit over the body. Jesus' spiritual traits are also of exemplary balance.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Ibn 'Arabī had Jesus as his first teacher. Therefore, he must have also received from him the science of letters, the science of alchemy, and other Christic sciences related to divination, augury, and ornithomancy (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, vol. II, p. 365).

5. Conclusions

Jesus is called Word and Spirit because he was conceived by an exhalation that has its origin in the Breath of the Merciful One. Being himself a breath, he can vivify the clay birds in a similar way to God's Breath upon Adam. As the Breath of the Merciful is responsible for creation through the word *KuN*, Jesus also possesses the science of creation. If the created world is a "Book" with a spiritual upper side and a bodily lower side, it makes sense that Jesus is a spiritual and bodily being and that he possesses the science of letters, the science of creation. What are words but sets of spoken letters? It is therefore not surprising that in the book *Tarjumān*, Ibn 'Arabī points out that "the Christic science is received from the side of the mouth" (*fahwāniyya*) of the "river of Jesus", that is, from the place where words are born (Ibn 'Arabī 1995, p. 204).

Thus, we can see that the fact that Jesus ascends to the second heaven to await his descent at the end of time is not arbitrary. This heaven is the heaven of Mercury, known to be a messenger. The sciences possessed by this heaven, according to Ibn 'Arabī, confirm this hypothesis. It is even more significant that the auspicious day for the scribes is precisely the day of Mercury.

Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabī bestows on Jesus the science of alchemy, which is the science of the correct proportions to give health to bodies and minerals, as well as spiritual health. Jesus derives this science from his own being, which is a perfect balance between his spiritual part and his material part. With his science of alchemy, and not only with his life-giving breath, he is also able to perform miracles of healing.

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Notes

¹ But not "perfectly human" nor "perfectly divine".

² There is an alchemy that seeks to give health to the body by restoring the proportions of its fundamental elements; an alchemy of minerals that aims to transform them into gold, considering it as a state of health; and a spiritual alchemy whose goal is also to heal and transform it into gold, that is, capable of reflecting the divine Names.

³ P. Lory studied this subject extensively in his various studies. For a general introduction to this subject, see his book: *La science des lettres en islam*.

⁴ Arabic grammar does not speak of vowels but "movements" to express the different movements that letters or consonants can make (a, i, u). When there is no movement, that is when a consonant has no vowel, it is called a "pause" (*sukūn*).

⁵ God is seen as someone who exhales and creates by his Breath.

⁶ Paradigmatic example of holiness or friendship of God.

- I am following here the reading of Osman Yahia (Ibn 'Arabī 1972–1991, v. III, p. 95) and the one of (Gloton 2006): “*al-‘ilm al-‘īṣawī*”. Other editions rather read: “*al-‘ilm al-‘ulwīyī*”: (Ibn 'Arabī 1853–1856), (Ibn 'Arabī 1980) (Ibn 'Arabī 1998/1418 h).
 “*kalimāt Allāh fī-l-wujūd*”.
- Ibn 'Arabī explains the meaning of *raqama* in another work: “The term *raqama*, used here, means both marking and embroidering a fabric. In this occurrence, it takes on the meaning of penetrating, perforating (*nufūdh*) and then implies an argument (*dalāla*) about God” (Ibn 'Arabī 1996, XXX/20, p. 316).
- The man who has been invested with the Divine Names. There is always, at least one in each time on earth.
- Ibn 'Arabī affirms that *barzakh al-barāzikh* has a face towards the existing world (*al-wujūd*) and a face towards non-existence (Ibn 'Arabī 1980, v. III, p. 46).
- W. Chittick writes: “This hadith is frequently cited in Sufi texts, as well as by al-Ghazālī, but it is not acknowledged as authentic by most of the exoteric scholars” (Chittick 1989, p. 396, n. 20).
- “To recite” shares the same root as “to succeed” because recitation is a succession of spoken words.
- Al-mumkināt*. Literally: “the possible things”. This is a concept in classical philosophy. Things have the possibility of existing according to the divine will, as opposed to God who exists necessarily because He is the only one whose foundation of being is in Himself.
- G. Elmore recommends using the critical edition of Ibn 'Arabī (1993), based on two manuscripts (Elmore 2004, p. 377).
- Raqīma*. Here we find the word that we translate as “embroider” in the sense that it is a writing that has an impact on both sides of the parchment.
- Al-mutarjim*. “Translator” or “interpreter”. When God speaks to Moses, he must do so in a language that Moses understands.
- A rationalistic Muslim philosophical current. The Shaykh usually criticizes them because they emphasize free will and attribute the actions of men to men themselves and not to God.
- This idea is already present in biblical literature and is shared by the Quran (Q. 17, 44). Numerous hadiths assert that the stones will speak on the Day of Judgment.
- I am following the French translation of Gillis (Ibn 'Arabī 1997b).
- ‘*Isā kalima min kalim Mūsā*. But with *shadda* (*kllm Mūsā*) in (Ibn 'Arabī 1993, v. IV, p. 107).
- Regarding the ancient use of the names al-Kātib and al-Muqātil for the planets, see: (Al-Battani (sive) Albatennii (Al-Battani (sive) Albatennii) Al-Battani (sive) Albatennii 1903–1907, p. 291).
- The use of the term “*najm*”, “star”, proves that the ancients did not know the modern distinction between planets and stars. The Sun and the Moon are sometimes called “planets”. They made the distinction based on their movement in the sky. If counted from the top, Mercury is the sixth planet.
- The Brothers of Purity wrote: “He who, like Christ, can resurrect the body after death produces an immense magic that souls have difficulty believing and reason authenticating, and yet it is a certain truth and an evident magic” (Marquet 1988, p. 37).
- Using the French translation offered by Ruspoli.

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