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Ibn ‘Arabī’s Messianic Secret

From “the Mahdī” to the Imamate of Every Soul*

James Winston Morris

Ibn ‘Arabī has many ways of teaching his serious students to “read between the lines”, to seek out those most essential meta-physical teachings which – as he explains at the very beginning of his *Meccan Illuminations*¹ – he had intentionally scattered throughout that immense work and destined for his most qualified and well-prepared readers, the “quintessence of the elite”. Although we have no extended commentaries of large portions of the *Futūhāt* that explicitly attempt to build on Ibn ‘Arabī’s opening advice and separate out those most essential sections of his work, one of the obvious clues to the judgements of many earlier generations of well-informed students of Ibn ‘Arabī is those chapters which have been repeatedly discussed and mentioned (favourably or unfavourably) by subsequent authors. In the past, one of the most frequently discussed chapters of that immense work has of course been chapter 366,² on “the Mahdī

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 17th annual symposium of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society in the UK: “The Spirit of the Millennium”, Chisholme House, Scotland, 3–6 August 2000.

1. See the translation and discussion of those key programmatic passages from his *Muqaddima* in our article “How to Study the *Futūhāt*: Ibn ‘Arabī’s own Advice”, pp.73–89 in *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (Shaftesbury, Element, 1993). His model and inspiration for this structural device, as with so many of his unique rhetorical features throughout the *Futūhāt* and his other works, is of course to be found in the Qur’an itself.

2. One of the most dramatic recent illustrations of this phenomenon was the case of the famous “Mahdī” of Sudan, at the end of the nineteenth-century, who appointed his “ministers” (*wuzarā*) in a literal, self-conscious imitation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s discussions in this particular chapter. One of Ibn ‘Arabī’s most influential and persistent critics, the philosopher Ibn Khaldūn, likewise focused throughout his famous *Muqaddima* on what he claimed to be dangerously “messianic” tendencies encouraged by Ibn ‘Arabī’s

and His Helpers", which we have partially translated and separately commented – from the quite different perspective of his distinctive personal approach to the sources and interpretations of *fiqh* and "Islamic Law" – in earlier publications.³ Thus the annual Symposium dedicated to the general theme of "The Spirit of the Millennium", and the wider ambience of speculation and historical reminiscence surrounding that rarely repeated time, all help to highlight the deeper human significance and broader resonances, whatever one's own religious tradition, of the "messianic" issues which Ibn 'Arabī raises most explicitly – and perhaps also most problematically – precisely in this famous chapter.

At the same time, the interpretive approach applied in some detail in this new partial commentary on that same chapter also helps to illustrate concretely some of the basic hermeneutical steps and processes which any student of the *Futūhāt* needs to follow in order to piece together and integrate – both intellectually and existentially, as is always the case with the Shaykh – this author's distinctive way of gradually introducing and slowly unfolding his deeper understanding of almost any theme in that immense book. And as usual when reading and interpreting Ibn 'Arabī, we must begin with the specific Arabic language of the Qur'an.

DIVINE "GUIDANCE" AND THE MEANINGS OF *AL-MAHDI*

To begin with the most essential Arabic grammar and vocabulary, the term *al-mahdī*, in its original form, is simply the passive participle of the verb *hadā*, meaning "to lead or guide

writings and their misguided interpreters: see our forthcoming study of "Ibn Khaldūn's Critique of Sufism".

3. See our article (originally prepared as a commentary on chapter 366), "Ibn 'Arabī's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority", in *Studia Islamica*, LXXI (1990), pp. 37–64, and the long excerpts from chapter 366 translated and annotated in *Ibn 'Arabī: Les Illuminations de la Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations* (Paris, Sindbad, 1989), which will soon be more accessible in the forthcoming reprinted volume of English translations, *The Meccan Illuminations*, NY, Pir Publications (2002).

correctly, in the right direction": thus *al-mahdī* means literally "the rightly guided person". In the Qur'an, which here as always shapes and determines the key parameters of Ibn 'Arabī's thought, the "right direction" in question is always *God's*, and the various forms of this root occur some 330 times, indicating its centrality as one of the fundamental themes of Qur'anic thought.⁴ But curiously enough, the particular form *al-mahdī* doesn't occur in the Qur'an at all. And indeed it is only subsequent Islamic tradition that has struggled to discover hidden Qur'anic allusions to that figure and the related actors (the evil *al-dajjāl*, Jesus, etc.) mentioned repeatedly in the eschatological dramaturgies outlined in most of the collections of hadith. These basic facts turn out to be quite significant once we begin to explore Ibn 'Arabī's treatment of the Mahdi in his *Futūhāt*.

For when the theme of this recent Symposium was announced (as "The Spirit of the Millennium"), I returned with great interest to the wider text of the *Futūhāt*, assuming that this particularly appropriate "millenarian" subject must surely be treated at some length throughout Ibn 'Arabī's mature compendium of his teaching, particularly since scholars have recently been able to explore more readily his allusive youthful treatment of that same subject through the new edition and translation of his early '*Anqā' Mughrib*,⁵ a difficult work whose very title alludes to the Islamic traditions concerning the eschatological context of the Mahdi's appearance. In this case an initial query – aided by a new CD-ROM enabling one to quickly search the entire printed text of the *Futūhāt* – came up with some rather surprising results. In fact, the word "*al-mahdī*" occurs only 33 times in the entire book, and all but eight of those mentions are included in chapter 366.⁶

4. The importance of this Qur'anic theme becomes even more obvious if we also include the repeated forms (19 times) of the closely related Arabic root *r-sh-d*.

5. G. Elmore, '*Anqā' Mughrib*, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-'Arabī's 'Book of the Fabulous Gryphon'* (Leiden, Brill, 2000).

6. After chapter 366 there is only one final allusion to "the Mahdi" (in the messianic sense) in chapter 557 (vol. IV, 195), on the "Absolute Seal of the Saints [= Jesus]", where Ibn 'Arabī simply refers his readers to his detailed discussion of the spiritual rank of Jesus (as Seal) and of the Mahdi

However, when one looks more closely at the ways Ibn ‘Arabī actually had used that term on the seven occasions where he mentions it prior to chapter 366, an interesting discovery emerges: on each of those earlier occasions, that expression (*al-mahdī*) is used in an entirely *non*-technical sense, not as a sort of honorific title or proper name (as it usually is in the hadith that are the initial, apparent subject of chapter 366), but instead in the much more ordinary sense of any person who is spiritually “rightly guided”, who has received and actively assimilated some kind of inner divine guidance in various domains of life.

Now this distinctive method of “deconstructing” an overly fossilised, routinised theological or religious expression by returning to its deeper etymological roots and underlying network of subtle meanings in the Qur’anic Arabic is of course familiar to every student of Ibn ‘Arabī. And here, as in many of those other cases, he uses the same method to turn the attention of each of his readers towards their own specific existential meanings of the underlying “Reality” – in this case, the experiential manifestations of the divine Name *al-Hādī* (“the Guide”). Moreover, the particular way that these scattered uses of this term in preceding chapters would eventually orient the carefully attentive reader who actually follows Ibn ‘Arabī through the *Futūhāt* vividly illustrates the usefulness – if not indeed the necessity – of following the Shaykh’s own slow, explicitly “scattered” method of writing and revealing his deepest intentions.

In this case, the way Ibn ‘Arabī has introduced and treated this particular term in his earlier chapters inevitably creates a peculiar cognitive shock when the reader suddenly first encounters the mysterious – but often quite vividly detailed – discussions of “the Mahdi” as a very specific messianic character in the hadith that are quoted at length in the first pages of chapter 366. That shock is then heightened, or at least highlighted, when the reader then moves on from the hadith to Ibn ‘Arabī’s strange discussions of the characteristic spiritual gifts of this Mahdī’s

in his *K. ‘Anqā’ Mughrib*. Apart from the chapter title in his opening table of contents, the other seven uses of the term (all in a non-technical sense) preceding chapter 366 are in chapters 36, 72 (twice), 73, and 365 (twice).

"ministers" or "helpers" (*wuzarā*, themselves not even mentioned in the original hadith) that take up most of the remainder of this long chapter.⁷ To put it as simply as possible – which means setting aside for the moment the complex and highly subtle rhetorical tools Ibn 'Arabī uses to raise and pursue these questions – the thoughtful and well-prepared reader who has already navigated through some two-thirds of this oceanic work is rapidly forced to consider three basic alternative interpretations.

First, that Ibn 'Arabī is talking here about a particular militarily powerful, charismatic political figure – as described in the "obvious" sense of the hadith – who will appear at some remotely distant "end of time" (*ākhir al-zamān*, as the chapter title has it).⁸ In short, "al-Mahdi" here is the title of a specific historical individual (whether "mythical" or otherwise), and the immediate relevance of such speculations to most readers – and to the meanings of divine "Guidance" in their own lives – is apparently rather remote, fascinating and curious though such apocalyptic speculations might be.

A second possibility, which at least brings the discussions in this chapter closer to the existential concerns and responsibilities of Ibn 'Arabī's readers, is to *shift the time-frame* within which one reads these prophecies from the hadith and Ibn 'Arabī's interpretations sharply towards the present or the impending future – but still on the this-worldly, historical plane. In that case, the reader's focus is turned towards an understanding of the Mahdi's impending reign of justice as a much more immediate political and religious imperative, and towards a more

7. Vol. III, pp.327–40: the discussion of hadith (mixed with some powerful personal anecdotes) takes up roughly the first four Arabic pages, and Ibn 'Arabī's even more enigmatic and puzzling list of the distinctive divine gifts of "knowing" (*'ulūm*) characterising this particular spiritual stage (*manzil*) cover more than two pages at the end of the chapter.

8. For readers unfamiliar with the descriptions of the "Mahdi" found in most of the major Sunni hadith collections (or who do not have access to our summary and partial translation cited at n.3 above), that figure is described in terms that strongly echo many of the qualities of the expected "Davidic" messiah in Jewish and Christian eschatology.

practical focus on Ibn ‘Arabī’s discussions of the Mahdī’s “Helpers” and advisors as possible allusions to the conditions for bringing about a hoped-for radical transformation of this-worldly political and social arrangements – perhaps even to the roles of particular individuals (including Ibn ‘Arabī himself)⁹ in this prophesied transformation. It is important to note that there were ample historical antecedents for that kind of politico-religious perspective in Ibn ‘Arabī’s own Islamic milieu, both in his time (especially in Andalusia and the Maghreb) and in earlier and later periods.¹⁰ And in particular, the vividly anti-clerical rhetoric of much of this chapter¹¹ has been echoed in popular messianic movements, tensions and expectations far beyond the Islamic world as well.

Since the wider messianic resonances of this language – and the standard historical, religious and metaphysical assumptions

9. Chapter 366 is the site of some of Ibn ‘Arabī’s most open allusions to his self-conception as “Seal of the Muhammadan Saints”, and to his unique relationship with the Qur’an and its Source. It also contains some striking anecdotes about contemporary acquaintances of his who appear to embody various characteristics of the Mahdī’s Helpers. (For more details, see our translation and notes [at n.3 above], and the authoritative and exhaustive discussion of this key theme in M. Chodkiewicz’ *The Seal of the Saints* [see n.25].)

10. Many of the central terms of Ibn ‘Arabī’s discussion in this chapter (*imām*, *hujja*, and *mahdī* itself) had powerful, explicitly historical and political connotations in earlier Shiite movements and writings (one may mention in particular the *Rasā’il* of the *Ikhwān al-Safā’*, whose language is sometimes literally echoed in expressions used here). See the further historical references cited at n.2 above and in the notes to our translation (n.3), as well as the more extensive studies summarised by Maribel Fiero in her important article, “Opposition to Sufism in al-Andalus”, pp.174–206 in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. F. deJong and B. Radtke (Leiden, Brill, 1999). (Many of the other extensive studies in this same collection centre on the ongoing political and institutional importance of the issues highlighted in chapter 366 throughout many other regions of the Islamic world in the centuries following Ibn ‘Arabī’s death.)

11. See the ample illustrations in our partial translation (n.3), further explained and contextualised in our article on “Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Esotericism’: The Problem of Spiritual Authority”, n.3 above.

that underlie them – are probably apparent to everyone in this millennial period, it may be helpful to consider some of the ramifications and eventual weaknesses of either of these interpretive options. Because both of these possible understandings of the Mahdi are closely echoed by perennial tendencies in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought and expectation (and in particular by ostensibly “secular” messianic variants that have memorably ravaged most of the globe over the past century), the weaknesses, pitfalls and dangers – both worldly and spiritual – of both those options are widely familiar. Either one is left “*waiting for the Mahdi*” and his future apocalyptic struggle and eventual reign of justice, while the present age cycles downwards into deeper and deeper chaos;¹² or one could turn more actively to the requisite overt political “preparation” for that epiphany, an approach whose actually recurrent consequences, over the centuries, are and have been evident enough to anyone who might bother to look.

Now in the larger context of what we know of Ibn 'Arabī's life and his writings, neither of those recurrent interpretive options seems very persuasive. One certainly can't “disprove” such interpretations – especially since each has clearly had its own historical proponents in the Islamic world – but at the least they seem to raise all sorts of apparent contradictions. Within the context of chapter 366 itself, each of these first two interpretations highlights a particularly jarring contradiction: why this sudden emphasis on the unique role in religious guidance of *one particularly privileged historical individual* – whose political role and defining characteristics are nearly identical with those of the Prophet Muhammad, though in an indeterminate and brief future time (reigning only nine years, Ibn 'Arabī curiously emphasises) – when everything else in the *Futūhāt* (and indeed in Ibn 'Arabī's writings more generally) emphasises the *universality* and immediate *presence* of the revelation/inspiration of the Qur'an and the “Reality” of Muhammad, and the corresponding

12. A trans-historical perspective and approach to Ibn 'Arabī perhaps most familiar in the influential writings of René Guénon and some of his interpreters.

responsibility (and spiritual necessity) of *every* individual human being to seek out and begin to realise that “Guidance”?¹³

This question brings us directly to the third possible interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s intentions in chapter 366: the possibility that the *al-mahdī*, the “rightly guided one” in question here, far from referring to some particularly effective warrior and chieftain, is precisely – if only potentially at first – *each* properly prepared reader (and actor) who begins to realise that Guidance in action. That *al-mahdī* is whoever, by actualising that divine guidance, actually becomes the *imām al-waqt*, the “guide-of-the-present instant”, as Ibn ‘Arabī mysteriously describes that figure throughout the central sections of this chapter.¹⁴ In that case, those familiar messianic terms and stories – far from being solely about a particular historical group of actors, like each prophet and his supporters – are translated here into the facets or stages of a single repeated process of transformation. For actualising the spiritual qualities of the “Helpers” (the *wuzarā*), as Ibn ‘Arabī describes them here in detail, does necessarily make us “rightly guided” (*al-mahdī*), and by the same token it makes us a living guide and model (the literal meaning of *imām al-waqt* and *al-imām al-mahdī*) for all those with whom we interact. Indeed one has only to look at Ibn ‘Arabī’s own life and work – and especially at its ongoing and fascinatingly far-reaching influences, which continue to be amplified in our own day – to

13. It is important to note in this connection that assiduous (or perhaps personally initiated) readers of chapter 366 would be aware that this chapter corresponds in a pervasive and detailed symbolic way with the images, themes and detailed language of the Sura of the Cave (Qur’an 18), which is perhaps the single most influential Qur’anic source (especially because of the central section on Moses and his divinely inspired teacher) for the themes of divine “spiritual guidance” (*hudā, hidāya*, etc.). All students of Ibn ‘Arabī are particularly indebted to M. Chodkiewicz for explicitly pointing to this fundamental correspondence of each of the chapters in the *fasl al-manāzil* with a specific Sura of the Qur’an (in inverse order). The scope of this article did not allow us to explicitly develop those multiple symbolic connections, which are certainly indispensable for a more adequate commentary of the entire chapter.

14. See the detailed illustrations of this rhetorically striking and inevitably puzzling shift in our translated selections and notes (n. 3 above).

see precisely how that ongoing transformational process works. In fact, as he constantly points out, we can only genuinely see as much of that “eschatological” process as we have already begun to realise for ourselves.

Yet this is a process – as Ibn 'Arabī and the Qur'an alike insist – that ultimately engages each person. Without that divine guidance, each person is necessarily “guided” by a constantly shifting combination of inner impulses and fears, together with even more unstable social programming: within the individual and in larger groupings alike, both those sorts of purported “guidance” are in constant conflict, disorder and states of change. And it is precisely those providentially arranged perpetual conflicts which eventually lead people to seek and discover (and translate into practice) that genuine Guidance which moves them towards a different kind of order. Seen from this perspective, chapter 366 turns out to be a kind of epitome of the entire *Futūhāt* – or rather, the decisive point at which the responsible reader is openly challenged to translate its practical spiritual teachings, so carefully summarised there, into the kind of realised practice that is itself, in Ibn 'Arabī's perspective, the constantly repeated “end of time”: since each moment of awareness of that divine guidance takes place quite literally “beyond time” and returns there as the lasting (spiritual) “fruits” – the symbolism is centrally Qur'anic – of the rightly guided action and communication inevitably flowing from that enlightened awareness.

SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AND THE “END OF TIME”

What Ibn 'Arabī develops more fully here in chapter 366 is already dramatically foreshadowed in his discussion of each individual's *personal* “end of time” in chapter 274,¹⁵ a chapter which corresponds to his spiritual exegesis of the innermost meanings of the dramatically eschatological *sūrat al-Nasr*. The title of this chapter is “concerning the awareness of the spiritual stage (*manzil*) of the ‘appointed time’ (*al-ajal al-musammā*)”, a

15. Vol. II, 587–90; see n.13 for the Qur'anic correspondences of each chapter in this larger Section (*fasl*) of the *Futūhāt*.

recurrent Qur'anic expression popularly understood to refer to the moment of each person's bodily death. However, Ibn 'Arabī pointedly and unambiguously stresses here that this Qur'anic expression can in fact only refer in reality to the moment of each person's spiritual "*awakening*" (*ba'th*), an awareness which is beautifully expressed in the dramatic words of the corresponding *sūrat al-Nasr*. Thus he quickly moves on to a marvellous phenomenological description of that process, clearly referring to his own experiences and those of his own spiritual companions, which he refers to in a kind of technical shorthand as "the Greatest Providence" (*al-'ināyat al-kubrā*). The key term *'ināya* – one of Ibn 'Arabī's central spiritual and existential themes throughout the *Futūhāt* – refers specifically to God's "watching over" and taking care of each individual creature, and in this case specifically to the spiritual destiny and gradual perfection of each human soul.

Know, o (true) listener, that the people of God, when the Real One (*al-Haqq*) draws them toward Himself ... , He places in their hearts something calling them to seek their (true) happiness. So they seek after that and inquire about it (until) they find in their hearts a certain tenderness and humility and striving for peace and release (*salāma*) from the state of ordinary people (*al-nās*) with their (normal condition of) mutual envy, greed, hostility and opposition.

Then when they have completed the perfection of their moral qualities or have nearly done so, they find in their *nafs*¹⁶ something calling them toward solitary retreat and withdrawal from ordinary people. So some of them take to wandering (*siyāha*) and frequenting the (wild) mountains and plains, while others do their wandering between the towns and cities – moving from one to another as soon as they've come to know and get used to the people of a particular place – , while still others isolate themselves

16. It turns out that Ibn 'Arabī's stress here on the *nafs* (in the sense of the often distracting or deceiving "basharic soul"), rather than the *qalb* (the locus of truly divine inspiration and perception), is quite important, since this impulse to wandering or retreat turns out to be at best only a momentarily necessary stage in the process of each person's spiritual growth. (See detailed discussions cited in following note.)

in a room in their own homes, staying there alone and cut off from people.¹⁷ All of that is so that they can be alone and at ease with the Real One (*al-Haqq*) who has called them to Him – not in order to find any particular being or miraculous event, whether sensible or in their innermost selves.

Thus all of those we have mentioned continue like that until they are suddenly illuminated by something from God that comes between them and their *nafs* – which for some of them occurs in their *nafs*; for others in their imagination¹⁸; and for others from outside themselves. Then they are suddenly filled with longing from that occurrence and immediately seek the company of (other human) creatures Now there comes to them through that occurrence (*wārid*) a (divine) “addressing”¹⁹ and informing them of their state or of what (God) is calling them to, as with²⁰ Then they are given comfort and solace (*uns*) wherever they are

But all of this (comfort in their loneliness) is only a test (*ibtīlā*) unless God gives them comfort with (the company) of *the angelic*

17. The temporary role of spiritual retreat and “wandering” briefly alluded to here is developed in more detail in a number of passages from the *Futūhāt* which we have translated and discussed in the article “He moves you through the land and sea ...’: Learning From the Earthly Journey”, in *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī Society*, special edition “The Journey of the Heart” (1996), pp.41–69. Full translations of these and other related treatises of Ibn ‘Arabī (including his *K. al-Isfār*) are included in our forthcoming volume, *The Traveller and the Way: “Wandering” and the Spiritual Journey*.

18. I.e., in their *khiyāl*, which would include dreams, visions, intuitions and any other form of spiritual perception not conveyed in an outwardly material form.

19. The technical “phenomenological” language of spiritual experience Ibn ‘Arabī employs here (terms like *khitāb*, *ta’rīf*, and *ilqā*) are ones which he carefully discusses, in relation to their original Qur’anic contexts, in the translated selections from chapter 366 cited at n.3 above.

20. The extensive examples which Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to summarise here, mostly from earlier Sufi hagiography, include the story of the famous early Sufi Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, out hunting in his earlier life as a prince, when he encounters a deer who tells him “You weren’t created for this!” Other equally famous cases of this sort of “divine addressing” of a (future) saint which he mentions here include the following: “If you were to seek Me, you would lose Me at the first step” and “You are My servant”.

spirits of light. For this (alone) will bring about their spiritually successful labour (*ḥalāl*), indeed verifies and realises it, and this (alone) is “the good news (*bushrā*) from God” through which God’s Providence has come rushing to them in this way. As for anything else, it is an enormous danger, and they should struggle to separate from it ... (But if the person favoured with this enlightenment perseveres), then the (angelic) spirits continue to accompany them in the world of their imagination during most of their states, and (even) appear to them in sensible (form) at certain times. They shouldn’t make an effort (to hold on) to that or to avoid it, but rather should work to deepen their connection with that (source of inspiration) and to acquire the spiritual benefit (*ḥāḍida*) that comes from it. For that is what should be sought (*al-matlūb*).

So if (such a person) hears a (divine) address “**from behind the veil**” of their nafs, they should “**give heed, while He is witnessing**”, and remember what they were hearing.²¹ If that (divine) speaking requires a reply in accordance with the extent of your understanding, then respond as far as you understand. For if you are given (divine) *knowing* about that (proper response), that is “the Greatest Providence”²²

This allusion to the “Greatest Providence” is subsequently further elaborated in chapter 315,²³ where Ibn ‘Arabī explains

21. For the wider significance of these Qur’anic expressions, as they are developed in ‘Arabī’s longer explanations of the distinctive spiritual qualities of the Mahdī’s “Helpers” in chapter 366, see the translated selections cited at n.3 above.

22. And if you are not at first granted such an understanding of that divine “Addressing”, Ibn ‘Arabī hastens to add, then you should remember that experience and wait patiently until God reveals its intended meaning at the proper moment. In this particular context, the superlative form evidently alludes to the decisive spiritual importance of this event in each individual’s larger process of spiritual growth and perfection, since – from Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective – every moment and form of creation is in some way part of the same overall divine “providence” (*‘ināya*).

23. Vol. III, 57–60, on the spiritual station of understanding “the necessity of suffering” (*wujūb al-‘idhāb*), which corresponds symbolically (see notes 13 and 15 above) to the explicitly and dramatically eschatological Qur’anic Sura *al-hashr* (Sura 59). The following excerpt is quoted from the bottom of p.58 and top of p.59.

more openly his own personal mission and the specific qualities his readers and serious students need in order to benefit from his teaching:

For we are not “messengers from God” until we fulfil our responsibility to convey these kinds of knowing by *communicating* them (*tablīgh*).²⁴ And we only mention what we do mention of them for those who have both true faith and intelligence (*al-mu'minīn al-'uqalā'*), who are constantly occupied with purifying their souls) together with God and who constantly oblige their souls to realise (*tahaqquq*) the humility of servanthood and needfulness for God in all of their states. Then (for such individuals) the Light of God is their inner vision (*basīra*), either through knowing (from God) or through faith and surrender to what has come to them in the reports from God and His Books and Messengers. *For that (sort of active spiritual receptivity) is the Greatest Providence, the closest place (to God), the most perfect path and the greatest happiness. May God bring us together with those who are of this description!*

THE MAHDI'S “HELPERS”: MANIFESTING SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Needless to say, some kind of providence has certainly continued to bring Ibn 'Arabī's writings and influence together with readers of that rare description down through many centuries. And passages such as those we have just quoted – which taken together give a marvellous, endlessly intriguing phenomenological description of what is involved in discovering and then actualising the divine “Guidance” (*hudā*, etc.), or in other words, of gradually becoming *al-mahdī* – together make up a great proportion of his *Meccan Illuminations*. So such readers, when they encounter in chapter 366 the strange transition from the hadith

24. In the larger context here, it is clear that the specific “kinds of knowing” (*'ulūm*) Ibn 'Arabī is referring to here are those which form the subject of this chapter, *the necessity of suffering*. He goes on to explain that most ordinary, unenlightened people find this reality virtually impossible to understand on an existential level, while these spiritual knowers “have a vast capacity for this”.

descriptions of the Mahdi to the “Imam-Mahdi” (or simply the “Imam of the moment”) and his requisite qualities exemplified by the figure of his “Helpers”, would not likely be too puzzled. The subject of the chapter, after all, is “*the inner awareness of the spiritual stage (manzil) of the Mahdi*”, not a history lesson given in advance. And demanding as these requirements might seem, the realisation of this spiritual stage, as Ibn ‘Arabī describes it here, is surely the responsibility of anyone seeking right Guidance, whatever their circumstances may be. Indeed the realisation of that stage in itself *transforms* those outward circumstances, bringing about the “end” of earthbound, terrestrial “time” (*al-zamān*) for anyone who is even remotely aware of the realities and extent of the spiritual worlds.

Thus an attentive reader could not help being struck quite forcefully by the addition of a single key term in the title of chapter 366 recorded at this point, compared with the version given at the beginning of the work. Instead of speaking simply of “the Mahdi at the end of time described by the Prophet”, which sounds like a boring recapitulation of what was already given in the hadith on that subject, Ibn ‘Arabī here adds – and thereby strongly highlights – the key Arabic term “*appearing, becoming manifest*” (*al-zāhir*) at the end of time. What is so strikingly emphasised in that *new* title is precisely the ongoing, perennial task of realising and actualising – of actually *making* “manifest” – that ever-present spiritual guidance.

Whoever does so has *already* become an “Imam” and further source of spiritual guidance – and at the same time a pointed, unavoidable challenge, as he emphasises almost brutally throughout this chapter, to all those claiming wider public authority for their own imagined forms of guidance, interpretation and pseudo-“knowledge”. Particularly important in this regard are his detailed discussions at the end of the chapter on the severe limits of any sort of “disputation” or polemical argumentation (*jidāl*) with all those who are not properly prepared to benefit from the inspired knower’s illuminations. The “*mahdī*” in this very Qur’anic sense is a Reality that always exists – whatever names may be given to that Reality – and which is therefore always accessible to those who care to seek. The situation of that Reality

is not only analogous to the equally mysterious role of the "Seals" of sainthood: in reality it may actually refer to the same spiritual Source, as Ibn 'Arabī strongly hints at in several autobiographical passages in this chapter. For in this case, as with the mystery of the "Seals", it makes no sense to pose the question as referring "either" to some particular historical figure "or" to a trans-historical Reality: everything in Ibn 'Arabī's wider metaphysics of theophanies (*tajalliyāt*) – or of the "spiritual realities" (*rūhānīyāt*) and their recurrent earthly "representatives" (*nā'ib*), where the primordial spiritual figures are concerned²⁵ – points to the fact that those Realities can only be known through their manifestations.

Now the nine distinctively characteristic qualities of the Imam-Mahdi outlined in detail in the central section of chapter 366 all have to do either with the "reception" and comprehension of divine guidance (the first three qualities), or with the further "translation" of that guidance into effective action and responsible direction and guidance of others (the last six qualities discussed there). Far from being unique to a single Mahdi and his putative advisors, all nine of those spiritual qualities are clearly illustrated, at the very least, in what we all know of the lives and teachings of many of the prophets and saints, whatever the religious tradition and history in question. But what is practically important, for any serious reader – and surely only serious readers would ever reach this point deep in the *Futūhāt* – is the practical challenge of becoming and being an "*imām*", again in the universal, root sense of that term which Ibn 'Arabī carefully sets out here, not some particular imagined historical sense. While any adequate discussion of Ibn 'Arabī's compressed and evocative discussion of those distinctive spiritual characteristics – and of the related forms of "spiritual knowing" outlined in an extraordinary passage at the end of that chapter – would

25. See detailed illustrations and analysis of this point, which is indispensable for understanding Ibn 'Arabī's subsequent discussions of our "Imamate" and "khilāfa" in the passages quoted below, which is to be found throughout M. Chodkiewicz's *The Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī* (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993; or in the original French source of that translation).

require a much longer study,²⁶ readers who return to those passages (or to our partial translations) will quickly discover that in fact those descriptions do turn out in many cases to describe gifts and abilities which are sometimes so familiar that we mistakenly fail even to perceive them as “spiritual”, and thus to recognise the further responsibilities they actually entail.

THE “IMAMATE” OF EVERY SOUL

In that regard, it is noteworthy that in the remainder of the *Meccan Illuminations* Ibn ‘Arabī subsequently mentions *al-mahdī* (in the broad, “generic” sense) only once in passing, but that he repeatedly returns to the question of the “lesser Imamate” or “vice-regency” (*al-imāmat al-sughrā*, or *al-khilāfat al-sughrā*) which is incumbent on each truly human being (*insān*), each time amplifying his earlier remarks. Thus, soon after this point, in chapter 370, he discusses this question in terms clearly evoking his larger understanding of the cosmic spiritual hierarchy:²⁷

The *khilāfa* (responsibility of “vice-regency” or “standing-in” for God) is greater and lesser: for the greatest *khilāfa* is that than which there is no greater, which is the “greatest Imamate” over the world. The “lesser Imamate” is (a person’s) *khilāfa* over their own self.²⁸ And as for whatever falls between those two (extremes), that covers everything that is “lesser” in relation to what lies above

26. See the further discussion of those tasks of contextualisation and “realisation”, as they are developed by Ibn ‘Arabī and other related Islamic thinkers, in our forthcoming book *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation*.

27. Vol. III, 408; this chapter in the *fasl al-manāzil* corresponds to the Sura of Ibrāhīm (Qur’an 14).

28. Throughout the *Meccan Illuminations*, Ibn ‘Arabī normally uses the contrast of the “greater” and “lesser” (*kubrā*, *sughrā*) forms of a number of key Qur’anic symbolic expressions to convey the metaphysical relationships between larger cosmic “realities” and the perception or experience of those same metaphysical realities from the individual human perspective. This particular technical language is one of the basic keys to his understanding of the spiritual symbolism of Islamic eschatology in particular: see the Index and our translated selections from central eschatological chapters of the *Futūhāt* included in the volumes cited at n.3 above.

it, while that (particular level) is "greater" in relation to what is beneath it.

Echoing his short initial introduction of this theme in chapter 370, Ibn 'Arabī's explanation at the beginning of chapter 404 is far more explicit and all-inclusive:²⁹

God said: **Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds** (1:2), and He didn't say "Lord of Himself", because a thing isn't really "related" to itself. Now this (expression) is a divine admonition (*wasīya*) to His servants, inasmuch as He created them according to His Form ("according to the form of *al-Rahmān*, the All-Compassionate", in a famous hadith), and He gave to those among them to whom He gave it "the Greater Imamate"³⁰ and the lower world (*al-dunyā*) and all that lies between them (i.e., the *barzakh*, or boundless universe of the divine Imagination, *khiyāl*).

So that is (the explanation for) the Prophet's saying: "Each one of you-all is a shepherd (or 'guardian', *rā'ī*) and is responsible for his flock." Thus the highest of the shepherd-guardians is the "greater Imamate", and the lowest of them is the Imamate of (each) human being over his own actions; and what is between those two includes those who have the Imamate over their family and children and students and possessions.

For there is no human being (*insān*) who was not created according to His Form, and therefore the (responsibility of) the Imamate extends to *absolutely all* human beings, and that status applies to every single (human being) insofar as they are Imam. For what (each person) possesses (their "kingdom", *mulk*) is more or less extensive, as we have established. But the Imam is responsible for safeguarding the states of his possessions at every instant.

And this is the Imam who has truly realised the full extent of what God has granted him and entrusted to him.

29. Vol. IV, 5–6.

30. The wider context here makes it clear that Ibn 'Arabī is alluding to the famous Qur'anic account (at 33:72) of all human beings' – *insān*: thus the "completely Human Being" (*insān kāmil*) which is for Ibn 'Arabī the universal "Muhammadan Reality" – *unique*, primordial acceptance of the theomorphic divine "Trust" (*al-amāna*) of the Spirit, which was rejected by "the heavens and the earth". Readers even superficially familiar with Ibn 'Arabī will recognise the degree to which all of his thought and writing centres on the deeper understanding of that key Qur'anic passage.

Finally, in his immense concluding chapter 560 (IV, 462–3) of “spiritual advice for both the seeker and the one who has arrived”, Ibn ‘Arabī repeats the same injunction in terms that are even clearer and more direct – but whose full import can only be evident to someone who has actually read through these *Illuminations* and assimilated all the teachings which lead up to this outwardly simple conclusion:

You should uphold God’s “limits”³¹ with regard to yourself and whatever you possess, for you are responsible to God for that. So if you are a ruler (*sultān*), you have been designated for upholding God’s limits regarding all He has entrusted to you. For (in the words of the famous hadith) “*each one of you is a shepherd, and responsible for his flock,*” and (that responsibility) is nothing other than upholding God’s limits regarding them.

Therefore the lowest form of “right rulership” (*wilāya*) is your governance of your soul and your actions. So uphold God’s limits respecting them until (you reach) the “greater *Khilāfa*” – for you are God’s representative (*nā’ib*) in every situation regarding your soul/self (*nafs*) and what is above it!

31. The familiar Qur’anic expression used here (*hudūd*) is of course to be understood in the greatly expanded sense which it takes on in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, throughout these *Meccan Illuminations* and his other writings.