

The Written World of God

*The Cosmic Script
and the Art of Ibn 'Arabī*

by

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PART ONE
THE COSMIC SCRIPT

PART ONE The Cosmic Script

*Existence is a letter, you are its meaning.
And in creatures I have no hope – other than
Him.*

Ibn ‘Arabī¹

¹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Meccan Revelations* vol.2, p.127.

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THE COSMIC SCRIPT

1.1. Introduction

Apart from God, Ibn ‘Arabī believed, a man can speak, an angel can speak and a jinni can speak. However, human beings are the only ones with the potential to come to terms with the secret properties of letters. The science of letters (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*) represents one of the central elements of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings. Until today, it also tends to be perceived as one of his most abstruse. Ibn ‘Arabī identified the science of letters as familiarity with letters, the Qur’anic revelation and everything in the world of nature. To study the letters was to follow the visual signs pointing to the mysteries of existence.² In many ways, this book is a commentary on, and an exposition of this statement. Ibn ‘Arabī’s impact on Islamic intellectual history was extensive, a fact that is reflected in the continuing scholarly interest in his works. Nevertheless, a comprehensive study on his contributions to the Islamic science of letters has never been systematically undertaken. The absence of such discussions is regrettable as Ibn ‘Arabī’s meditations on language and letters, even when analysed on their own, apart from other elements of his teachings, offer a comprehensive insight into his notions of the world and its Creator.

In the Akbarian tradition, the world was perceived as everything other than God (*kull mā siwā Allāh*).³ In accordance with the Islamic

2 Ibn ‘Arabī’s magnum opus *The Meccan Revelations (al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya)* was also intended to serve the same purpose. *Fut.*I:94; *al-Manṣūb*, 1/187; *FM.*I:57.

3 al-Qayṣarī, *Foundations of Islamic Mysticism*, p.118. See also De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought*, p.178.

normative tradition, Ibn ‘Arabī held that the world is a product of God’s speech. In his works, the world is commonly compared to a book inscribed on parchment unrolled (*al-raqq al-manshūr*). While the face of this parchment was thought to contain the Most Beautiful Names of God, its lower side stands for the world of nature.⁴ From this perspective, the act of genesis unfolds as ontological speech and writing. As early as the ninth century CE, grammarians of the Baghdad school believed they had found correspondences between the rules and regulations of Arabic grammar and the laws that govern the structure and nature of the universe. In the eyes of the early Arab grammarians, Arabic was a pure, flawless language, whose origins were traditionally perceived as divine. In Islamic culture, theories of the divine origins of the language were primarily based on 1) the Qur’anic revelation and 2) the presumed qualities of Classical Arabic. The overview of arguments these theories have been based upon was compiled by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in the fifteenth century CE:

[Abū al-Aswad] al-Du’alī stated that if the language was not the achievement of God, it would either have to be a product of agreement between the people or an invention of a single man. However, no one in his generation or in generations before his time has ever heard of an agreement and/or invention such as this – not even men as competent as the companions of the Prophet. Hence, language must have appeared with the appearance of the first human being in the world and it must have been created by God. (...) Abū ‘Alī al-Fārisī, God have mercy on him, said to me one day: ‘it (i.e. the Arabic language) comes from God’ and he based his argument on the words of the Exalted One: ‘He taught Adam the names, all of them.’ This leaves no space for contradiction as it is possible that the interpretation of these words is ‘He (i.e. God) enabled Adam to start it (the language)’. Therefore, the idea that the language comes from God, praise be to Him, leaves no place for doubts. Even if a contradiction was to occur, it would inevitably crumble with the help of this argument.⁵

4 *Fut.*I:158, 551. al-Manṣūb, 1/187; *FM.*I:101,366.

5 Quoted according to Czapkiewicz, *The Views of the Medieval Arab Philologists on Language and its Origins*, pp.26, 46. Among the early Arab grammarians, a rare opposition to the theory of the divine origins of language came from al-Sirāfī, who believed that the origins of the Arabic language are to be sought in the human soul instead. See al-Sirāfī, *Sharḥ Kitāb Sībawayh* vol.3, p. 124.

Introduction

In Islamic intellectual history, grammarians, philosophers and religious scholars have been actively trying to come to terms with the properties of the Arabic language and its relation to thought and reality. Ignorant people have no clue on the importance of grammatical analyses, noted Ibn ‘Arabī on the matter.⁶ Seven centuries later, a similar stand was advocated by Louis Massignon. ‘It is useless to examine the works of Muslim mystics,’ Massignon wrote, ‘unless one has studied very closely the mechanism of Arabic grammar, lexicography, morphology, syntax.’⁷ In reverence for the spoken and written language, Sufis have been long known for their habit of salvaging every scrap piece of paper with the Arabic letters on it, in fear of its power being desecrated otherwise. According to Annemarie Schimmel, this custom survived in Bengali rural areas even today.⁸

Originally proposed by grammarians of the Baghdad school,⁹ popular analogies between the rules and regulations of the Arabic grammar and the structure and nature of the universe subsequently led Sufis to identify nature studies as the reading of a macrocosmic book. Apart from the universe, the great book of the macrocosm, Sufi works on the science of letters equally focused on the physiognomy and nature of human beings (i.e. on the microcosm) and the text of the Qur’anic revelation. These were the main research objects of the Islamic science of letters, which are traditionally referred to as the three great books. Sufis like al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) maintained the belief that familiarity with the content of the three great books could be achieved through familiarity with the letters of the Arabic alphabet. ‘Contained in the

6 *Fut.*I:165; al-Mansūb, 1/334; *FM.*I:106.

7 Massignon, *The Passion of Al-Hallāj* vol.3, p. 79.

8 Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, p. 190. See also Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul*, p. 307.

9 Prior to the mid-ninth century, leading experts in Arabic grammar studies were chiefly conducting their analyses in Basra and Kufa. As a result, the Arabic grammar tradition speaks of the rival schools of Basra and Kufa. However, from the mid-ninth century, notable grammarians gradually started moving to Baghdad, the capital of the ‘Abbasid Empire. The Kufan grammarian Tha‘lab (d. 291/904) and his rival, the Basran grammarian al-Mubarrad (d. 285/898) both lived and worked in Baghdad – and it was here that their students and successors developed the normative, prescriptive grammar system that is sometimes referred to as the Baghdad school of grammar. Due to the predominance of Basran elements in the post-ninth century development of Arabic grammar, scholars like Carter identify the Baghdadian school as the continuation of the Basran school of grammar. According to Carter, all opposing elements to the Basran system have been traditionally identified as something ‘Kufan’. However, later studies clearly indicate that the Baghdad school of grammar assimilated elements from both scholarly traditions. See Bernards, *Establishing a Reputation: The Reception of Sībawayh’s Book*, p. 9 and Carter, ‘Šarf et khilāf, contribution à l’histoire de la grammaire arabe’, pp. 299–304.