



The Religion of Abraham: Sufi Perspectives on the Abrahamic Reality

*H. İbrâhîm'in Dini:
İbrâhimî Hakikat Üzerine Sûfî Görüşler*

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Abstract

This essay examines the Qur'anic narratives of Abraham as interpreted by Ibn al-'Arabî and his followers. Ibn al-'Arabî was keen to identify the essential reality of the prophets in his famous work *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. While in the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-'Arabî focuses on his epithet *al-khalîl* (intimate friend) and his relation to the affirmative attributes of God, the Abrahamic reality is further gleaned from the ways in which the Qur'ân describes his spiritual trajectory. This central prophet of the three major world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islâm is at once an iconoclast and the paragon of divine unity (*tawḥîd*), but also represents true religion, life, light, the divine names of origination and the intellect.

Keywords: Prophet Abraham, Ibn al-'Arabî, *Fuṣuṣu'l-ḥikem*, divine unity (*tawḥîd*), Abrahamic reality.

Özet

Bu makale, İbnü'l-'Arabî ve takipçilerinin yorumları ışığında Hz. İbrâhim'in Kur'an'da anlatılan kıssasını incelemektedir. Bilindiği üzere İbnü'l-'Arabî, ünlü eseri *Füṣuṣü'l-ḥikem*'de, peygamberlerin ontolojik hakikatlerini açıklamaktadır. İbnü'l-'Arabî, *Füṣuṣ*'ta, Hz. İbrâhim'in halîl (yakın dost) vasfına ve Allah'ın sübûtî sıfatlarıyla olan ilişkisine odaklanırken, İbrâhimî hakikate dâir bilgiler de, Kur'an'ın, İbrâhim Peygamber'in mânevî yörüngesini tanımlama biçimlerinden hareketle anlaşılabilir hale gelir. Üç semâvî dinin (Yahudilik, Hıristiyanlık ve İslâm) merkez figürü olan bu peygamber, hem putları yıkmış hem de ilâhî birliğin (tevhîd) kusursuz bir örneği olmuştur; ancak diğer yandan Hz. İbrâhim, gerçek dini, yaşamı, nûru, ilâhî isimlerin hakikatlerini ve akli temsil eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hz. İbrâhim, İbnü'l-'Arabî, *Füṣuṣü'l-ḥikem*, tevhîd, İbrâhimî hakikat

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Who is better in religion than one who surrenders his face to God, does good, and follows the religion of Abraham in true faith? God took Abraham as an intimate friend. (Q 4:125)

Islām is founded on the principles established by Abraham and culminates in the character of Muḥammad. Although Abraham is revered amongst Muslims as the father of monotheism and progenitor of their own Prophet, effectively, the teachings surrounding Abraham are obscured in the allegorical nature of his mention in the Qur’ān. Often Muslims follow the *sunna* (way) of their own prophet to the exclusion of the *sunna* of other prophets. However, the Qur’ān teaches that even Muḥammad followed in the footsteps of Abraham, “Then, We revealed to you, [O Muḥammad], to follow the creed of Abraham (*milla*), a man of pure faith who was not a polytheist.” (16: 23) and further acknowledged that Muḥammad is worthy of Abraham insofar as he follows him, “Truly those who are the worthiest of Abraham are those who followed him, and *this* Prophet and those who believe.” (3: 68)

What then are the specific teachings concerning Abraham besides monotheism and what can be gleaned from his narratives in scripture? In Sufi tradition, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) and his followers held that each prophet has a specific station with God manifesting certain universal divine realities. Ibn al-‘Arabī was the foremost to identify the essential reality of the prophets within his doctrine of the Perfect Human. His most famous work, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Ringstones of Wisdom) describes the archetypal reality of twenty-seven prophets. He says, “The heart of the gnostic or the Perfect Human is like the setting (*maḥall*) for the stone (*faṣṣ*) of a

ring.”¹ The ringstone symbolizes the essential reality (*ḥaqīqa*), quintessence (*zubda*) and summary (*khulāṣa*) and wisdom is the true knowledge concerning each prophetic reality. Dawūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350) says,

If we take the *faṣṣ* to mean wisdom, then it is the summative knowledge received by each prophetic spirit mentioned, determined by the names that govern them and that which flows upon their spirits with respect to capacity and receptivity. If we take it to mean ringstone, then it is the heart within which is inscribed the knowledge specific to each, as [the Shaykh] says, ‘The *faṣṣ* of each wisdom is the Word (*kalima*) to which that wisdom is attributed.’²

While the Qur’ān instructs the faithful to believe equally in the prophethood of every prophet, saying, “We make no distinction between any of them.” (2: 136), it also asserts, “We favored some of these messengers above others. God spoke to some; others He raised in rank.” (2: 253) Ibn al-‘Arabī remarks, “Some are superior to others, but this superiority relates only to their spiritual knowledge, as there is no distinction to be made between them with regards to their office (*quṭbiyya*) and the government of the universe (*tadbīr al-wujūd*).”³ With respect to their diversity, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) explains:

Every prophet and saint—except the perfected among them—is a manifestation of one of the realities of the world and

1 Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. A. ‘Afifi (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub -al-‘Arabī, 1980), 120.

2 Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Ḥ. Āmulī (Qum: Bustān-i Kitāb, 2002), 1: 209.

3 Ibn al-‘Arabī, “*Kitāb manzil al-quṭb*” in *Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyya, 2001), 250, cited in Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn al-‘Arabī* (Cambridge: Islāmīc Texts Society, 1993), 95–96.

the divine names specific to that reality. This includes both the lowly creatures and the spirits of the Higher Plenum (al-malā al-a'lā), vis-à-vis their various degrees and relations in the higher world. The Prophet alluded to this in his statement, “Adam is in the first heaven, Jesus in the second, Joseph in the third, Enoch in the fourth, Aaron in the fifth, Moses in the sixth and Abraham in the seventh—peace be upon them all.” Their spirits are not localized, but the [Prophet] intends to point out the strength of their affiliation with respect to their degree, knowledge, state, and the level of their nation in that heaven which bears their state, that is, the governing properties of the heavenly degree. Accordingly, the great ones among God’s folk refer to certain saints as being “upon the heart” of Gabriel, some upon the heart Michael, and some upon the heart of Israfil—peace be upon them all.⁴

In this passage, Qūnawī propounds two key themes: that the prophets have a specific rank and reality according to the divine names that govern them, so they are the loci of specific theophany, and that their followers inherit these qualities.

On Spiritual Inheritance

Because they have affinity with their hearts and reflect their spiritual characteristics, they are linked to the prophets through spiritual lineages, as the hadith alludes, “The scholars are the heirs of the prophets”,⁵ or as Sufi tradition maintains, the saints as the heirs of the prophets. Even if one belongs to the

Muḥammadan community (Islām) he may drink from the spiritual wellspring (*mashr-ab*) of another. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492) explains the nature of the inheriting saint in the following:

The soundness and strength of the saint’s inheritance from the conferring prophet, helps him to take his benefactor’s place in that which he has been deputized, that is, in the place of the prophet who is, as it were, his benefactor. He takes knowledge, for example, from the same source as the prophet, from whom he inherits. Knowledge of the prophets is divine, bestowed, through the unveiling of theophany, and not acquired or procured. Thus, true inheritance must also be bestowed, not transmitted or intellectual, so that the inheritor-saint inherits his knowledge from the very source that the prophet and messenger had acquired their knowledge.

If the inheritor-saints partakes in the character traits and attributes of the prophet from whom he inherits, by transmitting it to others, or guiding the creatures to rectify them, it is as if he were identical to that prophet, just as the Prophet said, “The scholars of my community are like the prophets of the Children of Israel.”⁶

So, let the heir who inherits from the prophets before him consider from whom he inherits. For the heir is either Muḥammadan or not. The latter may be the heir of Moses, Jesus, Abraham or other prophets—peace and blessing be upon them all.⁷

4 Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, *al-Fukūk fī mustanadāt ḥikam al-Fuṣūṣ*, ed. M. Khwājāvī (Tehran: Intishārāt Mawlā, 1992), 284.

5 Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dawūd, Nasā’ī, Ibn Mājah, Aḥmad.

6 Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, VIII: 302; Naysabūrī, *Tafsīr*, I: 264. In another hadith, “The scholars are the inheritors of the prophets.” Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dawūd, Nasā’ī, Ibn Mājah, Aḥmad.

7 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ naqsh al-fuṣūṣ*, eds. W. Chittick and J. Ashtiyānī (Tehran:

The Qur'ānic narratives of Abraham indicate that he was a man of pure faith (*ḥanīf*)⁸ and possessed of generosity (*karam*), hospitality and chivalry (*futuwwa*). Among the early Sufi masters, Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. 320/932) defines *ḥanīf* as “one purified from the defilement of the world, pure for the sake of Truth in all that is manifested from him and in him.”⁹ Sahl b. 'Abdallāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) said that the religion of Abraham was “generosity, the spiritual state that lets go of everything other than God.” Abū-l-Qāsim Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) said, “Concerning the words of God Most High, ‘Have you heard the story of the honored guests of Abraham?’ (51: 24). The guests were honored because Abraham served them himself, and the guest of an honorable person (*karīm*) is himself honorable.”¹⁰ Ibn 'Ajība writes, “He who aspires to be Abrahamic and *ḥanīf*, let him shatter the idols of his ego, that is, all the individual parts to which he may incline or desire... At that moment God will reveal to him the kingdom of the heavens and the earth (cf. Q. 6: 75), and he will be established in certainty.”¹¹ Abraham was the first figure to be addressed as having a chivalric spirit (*futuwwa*), because, as Qushayrī asserts, “The *fatā* is one who breaks idols, as God says, ‘We heard a youth called Abraham talking about them’ (21: 60) ... ‘so he broke them to

pieces’ (21: 58). The idol of each person is his own ego, so he who fights his passions is the true spiritual knight (*fatā*).”¹² Describing Abraham’s particular mode of *futuwwa*, Ibn al-'Arabī says:

Among the manifestations of Abraham’s *futuwwa* is that he sacrificed himself for the right of the uniqueness of his Creator, not for the right of his Creator [to be worshipped without partners]. Since a partner does not negate the existence of the Creator, Abraham focused his attention entirely on the idolaters’ denial of God’s uniqueness [in that all power goes back to God].¹³

[...] This is why in the Quran Abraham embodies the model of *fatā*. He offered himself as sacrifice in the fire, and thus came to the perfect realization of divine unity.¹⁴

The Station of Abraham

In the technical terminology of wayfaring (*sulūk*), station (*maqām*) refers to an enduring and stable quality of the heart but can also refer to the ultimate degree and rank of a prophet or saint, as noted earlier by Qūnawī. The Station of Abraham, according to traditional sources, refers to the stone located near the Ka'ba on which his footprints are engraved.¹⁵ The Qur'ān mentions it as a place of prayer and links it to the rites of pilgrimage, “We made the House a meeting-place and sanctuary for the people, [enjoining them to] ‘Take for yourselves the station of Abraham

Iranian Institute of Philosophy, 2001), 265.

- 8 There seems to be no equivalent in English for the word *ḥanīf*, which derives from the verb *ḥanifa*, meaning to “incline”. In the Qur'ānic context it means uprightness, sincerity, devotion and inclining from a given religion and creed to the religion of truth (i.e., *tawḥīd*). The Prophet also enjoined, “Set your face toward the religion as a *ḥanīf* and be not among the idolaters.” (10: 105)
- 9 Cited in Francesco Chiabotti, “The Abrahamic Heritage in Medieval Sufism, Part 1: Futuwwa and Khulla”, *JMIAS* 65, (2019): 86.
- 10 Abū'l-Qāsim Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2001), 286.
- 11 Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, on XXI: 60, cited in Chiabotti, “Futuwwa and Khulla”, 89.

12 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 261.

13 Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), I: 243. Cited in Cyrus Ali Zargar, “A Daring Obedience: Ibn 'Arabī's Futuwwa on the Right Side of the Law”, *Journal of Islāmic Ethics* 4, (2020): 50.

14 Cited in Chiabotti, “Futuwwa and Khulla”, 92.

15 See J.M. Kister, “Maḳām Ibrāhīm”, *Encyclopedia of Islām* 2, 2010, VI: 104–7.

as a place for prayer', and We made a covenant with Abraham and Ishmael: 'Purify My House for those who complete the circuits, and those who cleave to it and those who bow and prostrate themselves.' (2: 125) As there is a geographical place for it, there is also a cosmic reality referring to its spiritual station, intimated by another verse, "Say, 'God speaks the truth. Follow the religion of Abraham, a man of pure faith (*ḥanīf*). He was not one of those who associate others with God. The first house established for the people was at Bakka, a blessed place and a guidance for created beings. In it are clear signs, [including] the Station of Abraham. Those who enter it are safe.'" (2: 125) According to verse, the Station of Abraham aligns with the attributes of truthfulness, pure faith and monotheism secured by clear signs and guidance. Qūnawī explains the significance of the first house established by Abraham:

The Ka'ba, which was the first house built for humanity, corresponds to the reality of the world, receptive of the first engendering from its Originator, with respect to attribute of power which is the First Intellect and its form. Responding to a question about the reality of the First Intellect and how it was created, the Shaykh [Ibn al-'Arabī] said, "It was created by the attribute of power and no other. That is why it was called the Pen, because the pen is attached to the hand, and the hand is the form of power." From this perspective, Abraham is the manifestation of the First Intellect which is the first existential and engendering cause.¹⁶

Ibn al-'Arabī's writing on the Station of Abraham in the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* comprehensively addresses Abraham's qualities mentioned in the Qur'ān. It was based on

¹⁶ Qūnawī, *Fukūk*, 211.

a vision that took place near the physical *maqām* in which he entered the spiritual Abraham station. He writes:

Know that, while I was writing these lines, near the *maqām* of Abraham, the *khalīl* whose station corresponds to God's words, "...and Abraham, who fulfilled" (53: 37) the vision of slaying his son—sleep overcame me, and all of a sudden, I heard one of the spirits of the Supreme Plenum (*al-mala' al-a'lā*) say to me on behalf of God: "Enter into the *maqām Ibrāhīm*" for he was tender-hearted (*awwāh*) and clement (*ḥalīm*). Then it recited to me the verse "Surely Abraham is tender-hearted and clement." (9: 114) I understood then that God would necessarily give me the strength that accompanies clemency, because we cannot show clemency except regarding someone whom we have power over. I also knew that God was bound to test me by means of the slanders that would be spoken against me by people towards whom—even though I had power over them—I would be obliged to show clemency, and that I would be deeply distressed, because God said *ḥalīm*, using the intensive form. Furthermore, Abraham was qualified as *awwāh*, a word properly applied to one who sighs greatly because of what he perceives of the divine Majesty and of his inability to render glory to this Majesty—for the originated is truly incapable of magnifying and glorifying the divine Majesty as it deserves!¹⁷

From the Station of Abraham: "He was a nation (*umma*), humble (*qānit*) towards God, of pure faith (*ḥanīf*) and not one

¹⁷ Translation by Claude Addas in *Quest for the Red Sulphur* (Cambridge: Islāmic Texts Society, 1993), 124, with emendations.

of those who associate, grateful (*shākir*) for the blessings he received. God chose him and guided him on a straight path” (16: 120–1). He was entirely free from *shirk* (polytheism), both the pardoned and the blameworthy types, which was ascribed to him when he said of the star: “This is my Lord.” (6: 76)

And from the Station of Abraham: he received the conclusive argument (*hujja*) against his people through the affirmation of God’s unity. He was grateful for the blessings that God chose for him, so he was chosen (*mujtabā*). He guided him, that is, granted him success by elucidating the way towards the straight path, which is the path of the Lord, as reported in Hūd’s statement, “My Lord is on a straight Path.” (11: 56)

From his Station: he was *hanīf*, inclining [to Him] (*mā’ilan*) in each of his states, from God to God through vision and eye-witnessing, and from himself towards God based on the divine command. He preferred the station and place of witnessing that came from God and everything that he was supposed to turn away from through God’s command.

From his Station: he was submitted (*muslim*) and obedient to God in every supplication that he made to Him, without interruption. The *umma* is one who teaches good, and we hope that this knowledge that we bring for people will be my share in the teaching of good, and that we are singled out and execute a single matter proceeding from God, that is, a knowledge of Him that belongs to us exclusively, namely, that we carry it out in the manner of an *umma* by standing alone in [the station], humble and obedient to God. So, I hope to be one of those who obey God secretly and

openly, and obedience is only linked to divine prescriptions and commands that come from a direct address, so I hope to be one of those whom God commands in their interior heart and obeys His prescriptions without any intermediary.

From the Station of Abraham: Righteousness (*al-ṣalāh*), which, for us, is the noblest of stations the servant may attain and be characterized by in this life and in the next. Righteousness is an attribute that God bestows on those He so qualifies among his elite. It is a quality that every prophet and messenger desires to achieve. We have tasted it through a sublime knowledge that we inherited from the prophets and have found in no other person. Righteousness is an angelic and spiritual quality, about which the Messenger of God—peace and blessing upon him—said: “When the servant says in the *tashahhud* (the seated recitation in prayer), ‘Peace be upon us and on the righteous servants of God’, this [prayer] reaches every righteous servant of God, in heaven and on earth.”

From the Station of Abraham: God granted him his reward in this life, as every prophet said, “My reward is only with God.” (11: 29), which the reward for their mission. His reward was God saving him from the fire, which He made a coolness and safety (21: 69). I hope from God that He will transform every offence and disobedience that came from me become like the fire of Abraham when he was thrown into it, as divine providential grace and not from any deed for “in the hereafter he will be among the righteous.” (2: 130) That is, because of this [divine grace] the reward that he had obtained in this world did not diminish in any way what he was to

obtain in the next.

From the Station of Abraham: Fulfilling promises (*wafā'*), because [Abraham] was one who fulfilled his promise (53: 36), and I hope to be among “those who fulfil God’s covenant and do not violate the agreement”, and “those who join what God has commanded to be joined and fear their Lord and are afraid of the woeful reckoning.” (13: 20–1) It is to this that I always guide people and in this I educate my companions. I do not allow any of my followers to break a promise he has made to God, whatever little or much good it may contain. And I do let him abandon it despite a dispensation (*rukḥṣa*) that would erase the sin in abandoning it. Therefore, he should fulfil his promise to God and not renege on it, [to reach] the highest station completely and perfectly. If a soul becomes accustomed to abandoning the covenant and finds therein a certain pleasure, nothing good ever comes out of it! All this is part of the Station of Abraham that God has ordered us to take as a place for prayer, and said, “Take the Station of Abraham as a place of prayer” (2: 125), that is, as a place of invocation [...] in order that we ask to obtain these Stations which were granted to Abraham the Intimate Friend, as we have noted.¹⁸

The First to Manifest the Affirmative Attributes

The divine attributes are divided into the transcendent and the affirmative, former denoting negative predications such as, “God is

Needless”, and the latter denoting positive predications such as, “God is Eternal”. Ibn al-‘Arabī defines transcendence as not attributing to God the qualities of the engendered, so it is a privative description, for He Himself has said, “God is exalted above what they describe. (37: 180)”¹⁹ Since prophethood is the gradual unfolding of theophany in the degrees of divine unity (*tawḥīd*), Jāmī says, “Abraham was the first mirror to reveal the properties of affirmative attributes and the first to embody their actualization.”²⁰ Thus, he was the first to reach the apogee of divine unity by perfecting the gnosis (*ma‘rifā*) of the Essence, for privative qualities alone do not yield perfect gnosis.²¹ Because the predominant quality of his predecessors Noah and Idrīs was the transcendence of God, Ibn al-‘Arabī titled their chapters, “The Wisdom of Glorification (*subbūh*) in the Word of Noah” and “The Wisdom of Holiness (*quddūs*) in the Word of Idris”. Just as “Holy” follows “Glorified” in the Prophet’s prayer, “The Glorified (*subbūh*), the Holy (*quddūs*), the Lord of the angels and the Spirit”,²² Idrīs’s transcendence follows Noah’s for it is more complete, encompassing the levels of both intellect (*‘aql*) and soul (*nafs*).

But since Abraham combined the knowledge of the transcendent and affirmative attributes, his was the comprehensive station of divine unity. Jāmī remarks that he “clothed” the Essence with the attributes, citing the hadith, “The first whom God will clothe on the day of Judgement is Abraham.”²³

18 Muḥyī-l-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, I-IV, ed. O. Yahia, (Beirut: Dar Ihyā Turath al-‘Arabī, 1998), I: 858. Translation by Francisco Chiabotti, “The Abrahamic Heritage in Medieval Sufism: Part 2: The Station of Abraham,” *JMIAS* 67, (2020), with emendations.

19 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II: 659.

20 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Beirut: Dār Kutub ‘Ilmiyya, 2004), 161.

21 Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ*, 149.

22 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 487a, in-book reference 5: 253.

23 Bukhārī 4625, Muslim 2860.

Annihilation in the Essence

The Qurʾān says, “God took Abraham as an intimate friend (*khalīl*).” (4: 125) Sharing the same Arabic root *kh-l-l*, the epithet *khalīl* relates to *takhallul* which means to permeate and infuse. In the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Ibn al-ʿArabī begins the chapter on Abraham saying, “He was called ‘friend’ (*khalīl*)” for permeating and encompassing everything by which the divine Essence is characterized, like a color that permeates its object and an accident (*ʿaraḍ*) with respect to its substance (*jawhar*). Alternatively, *takhallul* is God’s permeation in the form of Abraham.”²⁴ So, there an intrinsic reciprocity between God and man, where in the first case, Abraham permeates the divine form and in the second, God permeates the form of Abraham. Ibn al-ʿArabī explains further by employing some Arabic grammatical terms:

Know that nothing permeates a thing unless it is predicated by it. That which permeates—the active participle (*ism fāʿil*)—is veiled by that which is permeated—the passive participle (*ism mafʿūl*). The passive participle is manifest while the agent is hidden and concealed...If God is the one who is external, then creation is concealed in Him, so creation assumes all the divine names, His hearing, sight and all His perceptions and characteristics. If, however, creation is external, then God is hidden and concealed within it and God assumes its hearing, vision, hand, foot and of his faculties, as it is mentioned in an authentic tradition.²⁵

24 Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 80-1.

25 This is reference to the hadith *qudsī*, “The servant does not cease approaching me through supererogatory works until I love him, and when I love him, I am the hearing through which he hears, the sight with which he sees, the tongue with which he speaks, the hand with which he seizes and the foot with which he walks.” (Bukhārī 6502)

From either perspective, God pervaded Abraham and infused him with the divine character. Sufis also describe *khulla* as the state of annihilation (*fanāʾ*),²⁶ which according to Dawūd al-Qaysarī is the annihilation of the human aspect in the divine aspect. Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 787/1385) defines *fanāʾ* as the following: “Annihilation is the unveiling of the Essence from the veils of Beauty and Majesty, and the veil of seeing otherness is completely lifted, whereby one sees nothing other than God. Rather, one sees a singular Essence manifesting as infinite names.”²⁷ Annihilation is contrasted with subsistence (*baqāʾ*); in the former multiplicity is extinguished in unity in the latter, multiplicity is reflected in unity. When God desired to perfect Abraham, He showed him the dream in which he sacrifices his son. The intent therein was to slay “otherness” with the knife of intention. The Qurʾān also describes it as the transformation of fire into coolness when Nimrod threw him into the fire, “We said, ‘O fire be coolness and safety for Abraham.’” (21: 69), since fire represent the qualities of the *nafs*. His annihilation in the divine Essence and God’s pervasiveness (*takhallul*) within him earned him the title *khalīl*.

The Station of the Intellect

The station of Abraham is the intellect, as Qūnawī asserts,

Abraham is the manifestation of the first intellect which is the first existential and engendering cause. He was the precondition for establishing the house of ex-

26 The earliest usage in Sufism of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ* originates from Sufi Abū Sāʿid Kharrāz (d. 286/899), in his *Kitāb al-ṣidq*, “The Book of Truthfulness” which states, “To pass away from self is to realize that self does not exist.” Reynold Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 50.

27 Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Asrār al-sharīʿa wa anwār al-tarīqa*, ed. M. Khwājāvī (Qum: Bidar, 1984), 370.

istence built on the plane of contingency. Ishmael is the manifestation of the Soul, which is the Tablet insofar as it is the place of existential writing in detail form.²⁸

The intellect is also called the station of reality, which is to know things as they truly are, as the Prophet prayed, “My Lord, show me things as they truly are.”²⁹ The first intellect is the source of immediate knowledge that one perceives without interpretation because it reveals itself without form, materiality, image or representation. Knowledge received from the Imaginal requires interpretation, but Jāmī notes that whatever Abraham received from [the Imaginal world] was necessarily true, corresponded to reality and did not require interpretation.³⁰ Abraham’s ascension proceeded from the Imaginational world to the intellectual, and upon seeing the heavenly bodies he gained immediate knowledge of the reality of each world. The Qur’ān describes his ascent in the following allegory: “When the night grew dark over him he saw a star and said, ‘This is my Lord,’ but when it set, he said, ‘I do not like things that set. And when he saw the moon rising, he said, ‘This is my Lord.’ But when it set, he said, ‘Unless my Lord guides me, I will surely be among the people gone astray.’ Then he saw the sun rising and cried, ‘This is my Lord! This is greater.’ But when the sun set, he said, ‘My people, I disown all that you worship beside God.’” (6: 76-78) The stars refer to the Imaginal world as they are points of guidance for people, “... and landmarks and stars to guide people.” (16: 16) Thus, God granted Abraham the knowledge of the Imaginal world, represented by

the stars, so had immediate awareness of his own state when “he cast a glance at the stars and said, ‘I am ill.’” (37: 88–9)

Though the stars provide inward and outward guidance for mankind, owing to their elevated position, the Muḥammadan ascent surpasses it. Qur’ān describes his ascent in the following words, “By the star when it sets, your companion [Muḥammad] has not strayed, nor has he erred... Taught to him by one mighty in strength... on the highest horizon. Then [Muḥammad] drew near and became suspended until he was two bow-lengths away or even closer.” (53: 1-9) Having received direct knowledge from the highest horizon, the Prophet surpassed the guiding knowledge of the Imaginal world, so “the star set” but did not cause him to swerve or turn his gaze away from God.

Professor Almajid explains that the highest of spiritual stations is the [Muḥammadan] station of praise (*maqam al-maḥmūd*) which corresponds to the throne of the heart and the second is the Abrahamic station which corresponds to the throne of the intellect. You will find that between these two thrones, Abraham was governed by the station of the intellect, which corresponds in the outward to the sun and the moon. The praiseworthy station of Muḥammad was the heart and the sun, while the station of Abraham was the Intellect and the moon. And in the elemental world, his place of worship is represented by the *Ka’ba* and the place where he left his footprints in stone. “Take the standing place (*maqām*) of Abraham as a place of prayer.” (2: 125)³¹

Because of his correspondences with the luminous bodies, Abraham was the manifestation of the divine name the Light (*al-nūr*), which relates to his station of the intellect because the intellect

28 Qūnawī, *Fukūk*, 211.

29 Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Jāmi’ al-asrār wa manba’ al-anwār*, eds. H. Corbin and O. Yahya (Beirut: Mu’assasat Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 1969), 287.

30 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Sharh Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Beirut: Dār Kutub ‘Ilmiyya, 2004), 180-186.

31 Selection from Professor Almajid’s unpublished treatise on the Station of Abraham.

is a light as the Prophet said, “The intellect is a light God created for mankind. He made it illuminate the heart so that he could distinguish between the seen and the unseen.”³²

The Station of the Spirit

When the light of the intellect reaches perfection, it reaches the degree of the spirit. The spirit, which is the source of life sometimes refers to the intellect in religious discourse as the Prophet is reported to have said, “God created the Intellect from a hidden, treasured light in His ancient knowledge, of which neither a sent messenger nor a proximate angel had any awareness.”³³ The spirit is the manifestation of the divine name the Living (*al-ḥayy*), so when the intellect reaches perfection, it becomes endowed with life. Since the intellect is the defining characteristic of humankind, when God breathed the spirit into Adam, He endowed him with intellect. The Qurʾān connects light and life in the following verse: “Is he who was dead and We revived, having given him a light by which he walks amongst people, like one who is in inexorable darkness? Thus, the deeds of the unbelievers are made to seem alluring to them.” (6: 122)

Because of the correspondence between intellect and life, Abraham was drawn to the name the Living (*al-ḥayy*) so he asked, “‘My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.’ He said, ‘Do you not believe?’ He said, ‘Yes, but only so my heart is put to rest.’” (2: 260) Abraham wished to advance from the knowledge of certainty to the vision of certainty, so he resorted to the divine name the Living (*al-ḥayy*) which governs the world of spirits

32 Ibn Abī Jumhūr Aḥsāʾī, *ʿAwālī al-laʾālī*, ed. M. ʿIrāqī (Qum, 1985), I: 248, nr.4.

33 Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār li-durar akhbār al-ʿimmat al-aṭḥār* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1983), III: 94, ch. 4.

and the Intellect.

Abraham, the Leader (*imam*)

Since intelligence is the highest faculty in man, it is the *imam* (leader) in relation to the other faculties. Imamate (leadership) is one of the aspects of divine vicegerency (*khilāfa*), and exists without or without an intermediary. Abraham was given the imamate without intermediary God said, “‘I am going to make you a leader (*imam*) of mankind. Abraham asked, ‘Will You make leaders from my descendants as well?’ God answered, ‘My pledge does not include the unjust.’” (2: 124) The pledge does not include the unjust because justice is the principle by which the intellect governs the self and society. In spiritual discourse, those who are deficient in justice are deficient in intellect and are thus unfit for leadership. Qushayrī writes,

The station of leadership (*imām*) means that one understands from the Real, and then gives that understanding to created beings, so as to be a mediator between the Real (*ḥaqq*) and created beings (*khalq*). In his outward situation, [the Imām] is with created beings, and never ceases conveying the message. In his inner situation, he witnesses the Real. The clarity of his state does not waver, and he says to mankind what the Real says to him.³⁴

God also called Abraham a nation (*umma*) unto himself “‘Abraham was a nation, devoted to God, sincere in faith, and he was not among the idolaters.” (16: 120) Explaining this verse, Qayṣarī writes,

The spirits of the prophets are universal

34 Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt: Tafṣīr ṣūfī kāmīl li-l-Qurʾān al-karīm*, I-VI, ed. Ibrāhīm Basyūnī (Cairo, 1981), I: 133. Translation by Kristin Zahra Sands, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt: Subtle Allusions* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2017), 119.

and encompass the spirits of those under their governance and in their nation, just as the particular divine names are subsumed under the governance of the universal names...God has alluded to this by saying, 'Abraham was a nation [unto himself], devout' (16: 120)³⁵

Since nation refers to the collectivity of individuals, Abraham was the collectivity of all the spirits and intellects of his nation because he was the consummate intellect.

Decisive Speech and Argument

One of the characteristics of a superior intellect is compelling speech and a conclusive argument, as Imam 'Alī says, "The intellect of a person is ascertained by the words that flow from his tongue."³⁶ Ja'far al-Šādiq said, "God created the intellect out of four things: knowledge, power, light and volition."³⁷ Knowledge is intrinsic to the intellect, but it also has the power to communicate knowledge through speech. While the heart perceives realities in summary form (*jam'*), the intellect comprehends and articulates its detail (*tafṣīl*).

Abraham challenged the prevalent belief systems through proofs and argumentation, "When he said to his father and his people, 'What are these images to which you are devoted?' They said, 'We found our fathers worshipping them.' He said, 'You and your fathers have clearly gone astray.'" (21: 54) Abraham's first argument negates blind conformity because it perpetuates the cycles of ignorance and diametrically opposes the intellect. Blind conformity differs from spiritual

authority (*wilāya*) because knowledge, evidence, guidance and light endorse the latter but not the former. Abraham then proceeds to smash his people's idols, leaving one. "They ask, 'Was it you, Abraham, who did this to our gods?' He said, 'No, it was done by this one, the biggest of them. Ask them, if they are able to speak.' ... Confounded, they said, 'You know very well that they cannot speak' ... [Abraham said], 'Shame on you and the things you worship besides God. Have you no intelligence?'" (21: 62-67). Abraham's demonstration here exposes the absurdity of idolatry, an argument that appeals to their innate powers of reasoning (*dalīl fiṭrī*). The external, lifeless idol symbolizes a barren intellect. Just as the idol cannot speak, the intellect has lost the ability to reason.

So that his speech would prevail, God endowed Abraham with clarity of mind, sound judgment and compelling speech, as the Qur'ān states, "Such was Our argument We gave to Abraham against his people." (6: 83), and "to God belongs the conclusive argument." (6: 149) God confirmed Abraham, "We granted Our mercy to all of them and gave them a noble reputation (*lisāna ṣidqin 'aliyyan*)."³⁸ (19: 50) *Lisāna ṣidqin 'aliyyan* idiomatically refers to "a noble reputation", but literally translates to "sublime speech of truthfulness" which aptly describes Abraham's truthful and compelling speech, characteristic of his station of the intellect.

The Religion of Primordial Nature

Among the key characteristics of the intellect is primacy and origination, mentioned in the hadith of the Prophet, "The first thing that God created was the intellect"³⁸ and Ja'far al-Šādiq's statement, "God created the intellect as the first creation among the spiritual beings, proceeding from His light from the

35 Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, II: 1252.

36 'Abd al-Wāḥid Āmidī, *Ghurur al-ḥikam wa durar al-kalim* (Tehran: Daftar-i Nashr-i Farhang-i Islāmī, 2000), nr. 10957.

37 Muhammad b. Nu'mān al-Mufīd, *al-Ikhtisāṣ*, ed. 'Alī Akbar Ghaffārī, (Qum: Intishārāt Maktabat al-Zahrā, 1982), 244.

38 Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, LIV: 170; I: 97, nr. 7, 8.

right side of the divine throne.”³⁹ Since the intellect is the first principle in existence, it is a manifestation of the divine names of origination the Living (*al-ḥayy*), Light (*al-nūr*), and the Originator (*al-fāṭir*). Abraham’s worship of God through the divine name the Originator is highlighted in the following verses: “Your true Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, who originated (*faṭara*) them, and to Whom I am a witness.” (21: 56); “I worship Him who originated me and He will certainly guide me.” (43: 27); “Why should I not worship the One who originated me.” (36: 22); “I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who originated the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists.” (6: 79)

Abraham’s station corresponding to the attributes of original being also demonstrated his perfect monotheism because his gnosis was based on the intellect’s primordial relation to God. Being the first in creation, the intellect knew no other; it was the first to be addressed by God when He said, “By My Might and Majesty, I have not created anything better than you, nor more obedient to me, nor loftier, nor nobler nor more honorable than you. By you I impose, I bestow, I am acknowledged as One, worshipped, called upon, hoped for, yearned for, feared and warned against. Reward is through you and punishment is through you.”⁴⁰ Since it was the first, it was both the object of divine gaze and the exclusive witness to divine unity. This Abrahamic monotheism is also known as original nature (*fiṭra*), and the reason for his appeal to the divine name the Originator (*al-fāṭir*).

He was also described as *ḥanīf*, which in

39 Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, I-VIII, ed. ‘A. al-Ghaffārī, (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1983), I: 1.

40 Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, III: 94, ch. 4.

Qur’ānic discourse refers to pure faith in divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and righteousness, “Turn your face towards religion inclining to truth (*ḥanīf*)—in the primordial nature (*fiṭra*) from God upon which He originated mankind—there is no altering God’s creation; this is the immutable religion (*al-dīn al-qayyīm*), but most of mankind know not.” (30: 30) Here the Qur’ān indicates that true religion is man’s return to his innate nature which is predisposed to the knowledge of the Creator. Innate nature (*fiṭra*) when actualized is the intellect’s power to recognize divine unity.

This is the religion of Abraham: “Who is better in religion than one who submits his face to God, while being a doer of good, following the religion of Abraham and inclining toward truth?” (4: 125)

Conclusion

The narrative of Abraham in the Qur’ān, according to various Sufi interpretations reveals important unifying features of Abrahamic monotheism. He is at once an iconoclast and the paragon of divine unity (*tawḥīd*), but also represents true religion, life, light, the divine names of origination and the intellect. While all the prophets are characterized by possessing superior intellect as the hadith mentions, “God did not send any prophet or messenger until his intellect become perfected, and his intellect is superior to all the intellects in his nation.”⁴¹ Abraham is singled out for attaining its apogee and original glory. Thus, his journey, confirmed by divine guidance, “I am going unto my Lord Who will guide me.” (37: 99), exemplifies the station of reality and a degree of certainty attained through witnessing the truth. “Thus, We showed Abraham the kingdom of

41 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, I: 11.

the heavens and the earth, so that he might be among the certain.” (6: 75)

It is hoped that this brief survey of the Abrahamic station sheds light not only on the common ancestry of Judaism, Christianity and Islām, but also the shared principles and values these traditions collectively uphold.

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