



## The Synthesis of Love and Sin in the Thought of Ibn 'Ajība

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Research Article

Arrival Date: 30.08.2019

Acceptance Date: 21.12.2019

### Abstract

This article studies how Ibn 'Ajība explained the mystical relationship between love and sin in his esoteric commentary on the Qur'ān. I also will compare his mystical interpretation of these themes with other Sufi writers, mainly al-Qushayrī and Rūzbihān al-Baqī, who are two of the exegetes that Ibn 'Ajība quotes extensively, in order to determine his contribution to these themes.

**Key words:** Sufism, divine love, Islam, Ahmad Ibn Ajība, sin

### Introduction

Aḥmad ibn 'ajība (d. 1224/1809) is one of the prominent sufi mystics who lived in morocco during the 13th/17th century. His importance in sufi scholarship is a reflection of the fact that he is one of the original sufi scholars who contributed immensely to elucidating ambiguous sufi concepts that were, by their very nature, enigmatic and only accessible through sufi adepts. He also stood out as an intellectual theoretician in the science of qur'ānic esoteric hermeneutics because he was one of the few scholars who managed to convey theoretical concepts and esoteric theories of qur'ānic interpretation in a language that could be accessed by those with an average level of intellect.

This article analyzes ibn 'ajība's discussion of the paradoxical relationship between love and sinning. While some scholars maintain that acting in disobedience to god negates any claims that the devotee may make to god's love (by virtue of the fact that the lover should always act in accordance with his beloved), ibn 'ajība adopted a different perspective and instead proposed to focus upon the origin and intention of the sin. If the sin originated from the heart – and this is the case with sins of arrogance, objection to the decrees of providence and so forth – any claim to love has indeed been negated. However sins which originate from the promptings of the passions of the lower self which may lead to deep repentance and a

remorseful heart, may draw the individual closer to god.

### Ibn 'ajība's mystical perspective on sin & divine love

This section will explore ibn 'ajība's mystical doctrine of sin and its relationship with divine love. Ibn 'ajība's dichotomy of sins of the body vs. Those of the heart will be explored, along with the phenomenon of turning sins to acts of obedience and vice-versa. The discussion will also further elaborate the proposition that sinning enables the individual to come closer to god, which is a particularly important reference point because it so clearly diverges from the classical understanding, in which sins set the individual apart – in the form of banishment and remoteness - from god. After ibn 'ajība's views on these subjects are broached, the perspectives of classical sufi scholars will be set out in more detail, with particular emphasis upon 'abd al-kaṛīm al-qushayrī and rūzbihān al-baqī, two of the most heavily quoted scholars in ibn 'ajība's mystical commentary. This comparison will bring out the originality and influence that ibn 'ajība's mystical qur'ānic commentary evidences when it discusses themes of sin and divine love.

Ibn 'ajība initially elaborated his doctrine of sin by noting that the concept of divine love must provide the foundation of any religious interpretation of sin. One of the concomitants of love is that the lover does not wish to hurt or offend his beloved. In expounding this

concept, Ibn 'Ajība referred to the Christian and Jewish claim that they are God's beloved ones. God's response was provided in verse: "the Jews and the Christians said: 'we are the sons of God and his beloved ones. Say: 'then why does he chastise you for your sins?' ...."<sup>1</sup> This verse clearly establishes that, by virtue of the presence of love, the lover does not torment or irritate his beloved due to committing sins.

Upon turning to the commentaries of the two most quoted exegetes by Ibn 'Ajība, the reader finds that al-Qushayrī, in his commentary on this verse (5:18), reiterated that the folk of love (*ahl al-mahabbā*) are safeguarded from punishment and torture.<sup>2</sup> Rūzbihān stated that whoever reaches the state of prophethood through gnosis and love is relieved of the trials of the passions of the lower self and the egoistic tendencies of the physical body.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to al-Qurshayrī and Rūzbihān, Ibn 'Ajība emphasized that just because God does not punish those whom he loves, this does not entail that individuals, in citing the name of love, can, so to speak, 'get away with sin'.<sup>4</sup> He presented his opinion in the following terms:

"when God loves a devotee, he makes him immaculate or preserved from committing sins. If he decreed a sin for him, he would inspire him to repent from that sin, which would wipe it away, for the one who repents is loved, God says, 'indeed God loves those who repent'.<sup>5</sup>

ولكنه لما أحبه عصمه أو حفظه، وإذا قضى عليه بشئٍ ألهمه التوبة،  
وهي ماحية للذنوب،  
وصاحبها محبوب، قال تعالى: "إن الله يحب التوابين".

This establishes that God's call for the sinner to immediately repent is one of the concomitants of love. By virtue of repentance, not only all sins are forgiven, but also the act of repentance brings the repentant sinner closer to God and His love.

### Sins of the body vs. Sins of the heart

Ibn 'Ajība discusses the issue of sin further in his commentary on the verse, "and Adam disobeyed his Lord and so he erred".<sup>6</sup> He observes that the real sin pertains to the heart – such sins encompass displays of vanity and contemptuousness towards others and being discontent with the decrees of providence. With

regard to the sins of the body, if they are not committed persistently (*isrār*) they can become a means of drawing closer to God. If the sinner's heart is full of remorse, he can be granted God's love which leads him back to repentance. Ibn 'Ajība supports his views about the seriousness of the heart's sin by referring to the example of Satan who was expelled from heaven due to the sin of arrogance, which he contrasted to that of Adam, who was forgiven and earned proximity to God because he had merely committed a sin of the body.<sup>7</sup> Satan's dialogue with God was recorded in this verse:

"said he, 'Iblis, what prevented thee to bow thyself before that I created with my own hands? Hast thou waxed proud, or art thou of the lofty ones?' said he, 'I am better than he; thou createdst me of fire, and him thou createdst of clay.' said he, 'then go thou forth hence; thou art accursed. Upon thee shall rest my curse, till the day of doom.'<sup>8</sup>

In referring to Adam and Satan, Ibn 'Ajība clearly distinguishes sins of the heart from those of the body. In this regard he states:

Whatever draws the devotee closer to God and drives him to a state of servanthood and humility ennobles him and leads him to perfection. By the same token, whatever strengthens the existence of the self and its egoistic tendencies is a source of deficiency and distance (from God). Therefore, 'finding immaculate purity' and being 'preserved from sin' only stems from 'sins of the heart', or from persistence in this regard. Sins of the body were in general decreed for the devotee by providence: they do not demote him, but rather contribute to his perfection. In this sense, you can understand that what had occurred from the prophets (peace be upon them) which outwardly appeared to be a sin, on closer inspection is not a deficiency in reality, but rather perfection.<sup>9</sup>

كل ما يرد العبد إلى مولاه، ويحقق له العبودية والانكسار، فهو شرف له وكمال، وكل ما يقوى وجود النفس ورفعتها فهو نقص وإبعاد، كأننا ما كان، فالعصمة والحفظ إنما هي من المعاصي

<sup>1</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Mā'ida (5:18).

<sup>2</sup> Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya li'l-Kitāb, 2000), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, vol.1, p. 258.

<sup>3</sup> Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān fi ḥaqā'iq al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2008), vol. 1, p. 307.

<sup>4</sup> Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, ed. Aḥmad al-Qurashī Raslān, Cairo: Maṭba'at Ḥasan 'Abbās Zakī, 1999, vol. 2, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Ṭaha (20: 121).

<sup>7</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.3, pp. 430, 431.

<sup>8</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Ṣad (38: 75-78).

<sup>9</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.3, pp. 430, 431.

القلبية، أو من الإصرار، وأما معاصي الجوارح فيجرى على العبد ما كتب، ولا تنقصه، بل تكمله، فالتزويه إنما يكون من النقائص، وهي التي توجب البعد عن الحق، لا مما يؤدي إلى الكمال، وبهذا تفهم أن ما وقع من الأنبياء-عليهم السلام- مما صورته المعصية، ليس بنقص، إنما هو كمال.

Now that ibn 'ajība's perspective upon the relativity of sins of the body vis-à-vis those of the heart have been set out, it will be instructive to compare his views to those classical scholars who he cites extensively, which will in turn provide us with an insight into the level of originality that is evidenced within his work. It is instructive, for example, to note that ja'far al-ṣādiq's esoteric commentary on the same verse "and adam disobeyed his lord and so he erred"<sup>10</sup> closely resembles that of ibn 'ajība. While adam's heart was not distracted by the bounties of heaven, his eyes did indulge in admiring its beauty. Thus, god rebuked adam for making the error of contemplating the bounties of heaven with his physical eyes. However, ja'far adds that if adam had observed the beauties of heaven with the eyes of his heart, he would have been banished forever.<sup>11</sup> to put it differently, if adam's heart had been attached to heavenly beauties and its lofty rewards, he would have never been forgiven by god. This interpretation indicates the gravity of sins committed by the heart in comparison to those which originate within the passions of the lower soul.

Al-qushayrī's commentary on the same verse (20:121) explains that adam's sin enables the reader to realize that the seriousness of sins does not relate to their number, but instead relates to the sacrilegious affront that has been given to god's majesty and august dignity (*'izami qadrihī*). Al-qushayrī further clarifies that god chose adam for vicegerency (*khilāfa*) despite his sin. He adds that this choice is not surprising because adam, prior to sinning, had been chosen to be god's vicegerent for no apparent reason: thus, adam's election after slipping into sin should not occasion wonder.<sup>12</sup> to put it differently, falling into sin is not, *per se*, a sufficient reason for expulsion or banishment, as long as the sin does not relate to the heart.

Rūzbihān, adopts the same approach as al-qushayrī when he states that 'being of the elect' (*al-iṣṭifā'iyya*) does not necessitate being free of sins.<sup>13</sup> this proposition that an individual can be a member of the elect irrespective of the sins committed first appeared

in the exegesis of ja'far al-ṣādiq in his commentary on the following verse:

"then we bequeathed the book on those of our servants we chose; but of them some wrong themselves, some of them are lukewarm, and some of them are outstrippers in good works by the leave of god; that is the great bounty".<sup>14</sup>

Ja'far al-ṣādiq explains that god divides the believers into three categories and then connects them to him by addressing them, through his grace, as "our servants". The selection of some individuals to be members of the elect occurs despite god's knowledge that the believers differ in their spiritual states; furthermore, he is well aware that some of them transgress by committing sin; however, this again serves to reiterate that falling into sin does not negatively affect god's selection of believers in pre-eternity.<sup>15</sup>

Ibn 'ajība concurs with al-qushayrī and rūzbihān that adam's sin did not negatively impact god's (pre-eternal) choice of adam to be his vicegerent on earth. However, their approach to handling the issue of adam's sin is largely dependent on the perspective of the decrees of providence – this relates to god's divine knowledge in pre-eternity of his choice of adam for vicegerency regardless of his sin. Ibn 'ajība however differed in going beyond the concept of divine pre-eternal decrees (which uphold the principle that individual's destinies are decided irrespective of sins committed); he therefore sought to explore why one sin can result in eternal banishment, whereas another sin can serve as a means that brings about a closer proximity to god. The answer can be found in his doctrine which distinguishes sins of the heart from those of the body.

### Sin and proximity to god

The committing of a sin can become a reason for the attainment of divine election (*khuṣūṣiyya*). In his commentary on the verse "then came a man from the furthest part of the city, running, he said, "moses, the council are conspiring to slay you. Depart, i am one of the sincere advisers to you",<sup>16</sup> ibn 'ajība referred to moses's sin in killing the copt, which was the reason for his departure from egypt and his subsequent travel to madyan, where he met prophet shu'ayb and attained the spiritual training needed for prophethood. By the

<sup>10</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Taha (20: 121).

<sup>11</sup> Farhana Mayer, *Spiritual Gems: The Mystical Qur'an Commentary ascribed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq as contained in Sulamī's Ḥaqa'iq al-tafsīr*, (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol.2, p. 280.

<sup>13</sup> Ruzbahān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 2, p. 507.

<sup>14</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Fātir (35:32).

<sup>15</sup> Farhana Mayer, *Spiritual Gems*, p. 218

<sup>16</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Qaṣaṣ (28: 20).

same token, despite adam's sin of eating from the forbidden tree he still could assume the role of god's vicegerency on earth. These examples further reiterate that all matters, including sin, which cause a state of humility and submissiveness, ultimately bring about a closer proximity to god.<sup>17</sup>

Earlier scholars also offered their opinion about sins providing a means for divine elevation. It is therefore significant to note that al-qushayrī's commentary on this verse (28:20) does not acknowledge that mooses's sin served as a means of elevation to a higher spiritual status; his view contrasts in this respect with that of rūzbihān, who states that god made mooses seek refuge in him by causing him to sin, thus bringing him closer to god's proximity. Maybudī also concurs with ibn 'ajība's opinion about the need for self-abasement in preparation for divine proximity when he comments on the verse: "satan caused them to slip" (2:36). He indicates that the perfection of adam required his exile to earth in order for him to feel helpless and weak before god. Adam's slip was therefore necessary for the full manifestation of god's love and mercy. Maybudī quoted this sacred tradition in this content, "the sobbing of the sinner is dearer to me than the chanting of those who praise me".<sup>18</sup>

This vision of sin, which renders it as a prelude to humility, self-abasement and a higher spiritual status, is emphasized by ibn 'ajība in his commentary on god's command to both adam and satan to descend to earth after adam had, with the active encouragement of satan, eaten from the forbidden tree "and we said, get you all down, each of you an enemy of each...".<sup>19</sup> he comments that whatever casts the soul down to the abasement of servanthood (*'ubūdiyya*) causes its elevation to the witnessing of the light of lordship (*rubūbiyya*), "*kul mā yanzil bil-rūh ilā qahriyyat al-'ubūdiyya fa huwa sabab ilā al-taraqqī li-shuhūd nūr al-rubūbiyya*".<sup>20</sup>

Examination of al-qushayrī's and rūzbihān's views of the same verse (2:36) in their qur'ānic commentaries, clearly demonstrates the fact that both exegetes did not mention the doctrine of the abasement of servanthood as being a means of witnessing the grandiosity of

lordship, and in this respect, as has already been noted, they clearly contrasted with ibn 'ajība.

This spiritual rule which guides the relationship between servanthood and lordship, and in which sin plays an essential role, is also emphasized by ibn 'ajība in his commentary on verse "certainly, we tried solomon, and we cast upon his throne a mere body; then he repented."<sup>21</sup> ibn 'ajība writes that every sublime state comes after a trying calamity that befalls one's body, possessions or faith; however if this sublime state is to be realized, the calamity must be accompanied by remorse and penance. When god wills a devotee to rise to a great spiritual state, he first brings him down to the abasement of servanthood in order to then prepare him for being elevated to witness the grandiosity of lordship.<sup>22</sup>

After commenting on earlier scholars' interpretation of the same verse (38:34), rūzbihān, to take one example, did not consider the calamity which befell solomon as a preparatory stage for kingdom and prophethood. He instead identified the reason underlying solomon's calamity as being his admiration of the beauty of the king's daughter and falling in love with her. In other words, solomon's sin was due to his distraction with her outer physical beauty, as opposed to the spiritual meanings of divine beauty reflected on her; this explains why he was deprived of his kingdom until he repented.<sup>23</sup> al-qushayrī in his commentary on the same verse, enumerated several possible reasons for solomon's sin; however he did not, in noticeable contrast to ibn 'ajība, comment on its mystical connotation.<sup>24</sup>

### Infidelity and the sins of the heart

Ibn 'ajība explained how sins of the heart can lead to infidelity in his commentary on the following verse: "[a]nd when we said to the angels, bow yourselves to adam, so they bowed themselves save iblis, he refused and waxed proud and so he became one of the unbelievers".<sup>25</sup> he further elaborates that god's rebuke to satan was not caused by mere sinning – this applied because sins by themselves do not amount to disbelief. Satan's disbelief instead came from his heart, which rejected god's commands and belittled his rulings; it

<sup>17</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 4, p. 240.

<sup>18</sup> Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'ān Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī*, pp. 136-138, see also al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī: Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'ān*, trans. Annabel Keeler & Ali Keeler, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Baqara (2: 36).

<sup>20</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Šād (38: 34).

<sup>22</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 5, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Ruzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 3, p. 194.

<sup>24</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 3, pp. 104, 105, see al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī: Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'ān*, trans. Annabel Keeler & Ali Keeler, (Amman: Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought & Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), p. 168.

<sup>25</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Fātiḥa (1: 34).

was his arrogance that led him to infidelity (*kufri*), and not merely his unwillingness to bow down before adam.<sup>26</sup>

Ibn 'ajība provides another example of sins of the heart that lead to infidelity in his commentary on the verse relating to the israelites' objections to mooses: "he (mooses) said, would you have in exchange what is meaner for what is better? Get down to egypt and you shall have what you demanded. And abasement and poverty were pitched upon them and they were laden with the burden of god's anger...".<sup>27</sup> he explains that the main sin of the israelites was their discontent with god's eternally decreed destiny (*al-qisma al-azaliyya*) and their open challenge to divine power (*al-qudra al-ilāhiyya*) by not being satisfied with divine providence and provision. The belief that one's own plans, wishes and demands for oneself are better than those provided by god is a major sin of the heart which results in infidelity.<sup>28</sup> while both al-qushayrī and rūzbihān presented the israelites' sin (their dissatisfaction with god's preordained decrees), they did not, in the same terms as ibn 'ajība, suggest that this sin of the heart leads to infidelity.<sup>29</sup>

Ibn 'ajība further provides another example to prove his point that the real sins that cause distance and punishment are the sins of the heart through his commentary on the following verse: "and lot, when he said to his people, "what, do you commit indecency with your eyes open?".<sup>30</sup> he states that lot's reproach to his people was due to their indulging in lusts that encompassed their hearts; accordingly, they did not feel any remorse or need to repent. In contrast to the sins of the body, which are accompanied with humility and penance and can therefore be converted back to obedience, sins of the heart cover up the lights of the unseen (*anwār al-ghuyūb*) and therefore produce rejection and remoteness from god.<sup>31</sup> while al-qushayrī did not mention that the sin of lot's people is related to the heart and thus leads to banishment and remoteness from god, he did offer an important observation in relation to his interpretation of the verse before the one

in question, "those are their houses, all fallen down because of the evil they committed, surely in that is a sign for a people who have knowledge."<sup>32</sup> al-qushayrī explained that the corruption of spirits occurs through prevalence of lusts; the corruption of the hearts through heedlessness and harshness (*qaswa*); the corruption of the soul through veiling (*al-ḥajb*); and the corruption of the transconscious interior being (*asrār*) through absence and loneliness (*al-waḥsha*).<sup>33</sup> rūzbihān followed al-qushayrī's approach as the latter also discussed the corruption of hearts in relation to the same verse (27:52); observing that hearts are corrupted by heedlessness, whereas the transconscious interior being is corrupted by indulging in sensual lusts.<sup>34</sup> neither al-qushayrī nor rūzbihān, in reflecting upon the verses 27: 52-54, mentioned the significance of the lot's people's sin or its relation to the heart, and in this respect, they both diverged from ibn 'ajība.

After citing multiple examples of sins of the heart, ibn 'ajība sums up the issue by referring to one of the greatest sins of the heart in his commentary on the following verse: "so glory be to him, in whose hand is the dominion of everything, and unto whom you shall be returned."<sup>35</sup> here he clearly establishes that defying the divine will and objecting to the divine providence is a great sin. He proceeds to argue that when the servant believes that his plan to arrange his own affairs is wiser or better than god's, he appears to claim that his level of knowledge is equal to god's and thus puts himself in direct rivalry with god. This frowardness negates any belief in god's wisdom and knowledge and constitutes a grave sin.<sup>36</sup>

A closer engagement with the commentaries of both al-qushayrī and rūzbihān on this verse (36: 83) clarifies that their views do not reflect the gravity of defying god's will or challenging his eternal decree. They instead contented themselves with the traditional interpretation of this verse, which emphasizes the grandiosity of god's divine power by which all creation comes to existence;<sup>37</sup> this clearly contrasted with ibn 'ajība, who went beyond the classical interpretation of

<sup>26</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Baqara (2: 61).

<sup>28</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 114.

<sup>29</sup> See al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 49, see also Ruzbahān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Naml (27: 54).

<sup>31</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 4, p. 206.

<sup>32</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Naml (27: 52).

<sup>33</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 2, p. 422.

<sup>34</sup> Ruzbahān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 3, pp. 70, 71, see also al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, p. 144.

<sup>35</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Yāsīn (36: 83).

<sup>36</sup> Ibn 'Ajība emphasized the gravity of challenging divine Providence when he cited the story of one of the righteous people who kept crying in remorse for forty years over an event that he wished had never happened. This clearly reiterated the seriousness of rejecting God's pre-eternal decrees, a sin directly related to the heart.

<sup>37</sup> See al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 3, p. 85, see also Ruzbahān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol.3, pp. 173-174.

the verse to reflect upon the inner meaning of challenging divine providence.

The argument of Ibn 'Ajība, which defines a real sin as one committed by the heart is lent further credence by his esoteric interpretation of the act of prostration of the forehead, which is invoked in the verse: "only those who believe in our signs, when they are reminded, fall down, prostrate and proclaim the praise of their lord, not waxing proud".<sup>38</sup> he considered the act of prostration to be a symbolic act that indicates the submission of the heart to god's grandeur and majesty. If the body prostrates in worship while the heart remains arrogant and resistant to surrender, worship is merely a means without end, an empty formality devoid of reality.<sup>39</sup> al-qushayrī and rūzbihān rendered precisely the same interpretation when they maintained that the true prostration of the body can only take place if the heart's humility and love are present.<sup>40</sup>

Ibn 'Ajība also discussed the prostration of the heart and its distinction from the prostration of the body in a commentary which addressed the following verse: "be watchful over the prayers, and the middle prayer and stand obedient to god".<sup>41</sup> Ibn 'Ajība maintains that the body prostrates in prayer in order to fulfill the obligatory devotional acts of worship; in contrast, the heart's prayer gives witness to the greatness of lordship (*rubūbiyya*). Once the heart submits itself to god's majesty in prostration, it will never rise again. Ibn 'Ajība also associated the prostration of the body with compliance with the *sharī'a*; in contrast, the prostration of the heart corresponds to divine reality (*ḥaqīqa*).<sup>42</sup> rūzbihān renders precisely the same meaning in his commentary on the same verse, which Ibn 'Ajība evidently followed here.<sup>43</sup>

### Committing sins while claiming god's love

If god, for his part, forgives the sins of those who he loves, this still leaves the sinner who deliberately sins while loudly asserting his love for god. Ibn 'Ajība discusses this issue in his commentary on the following verse: "say if you love god, follow me and god will love you and forgive your sins and god is the most forgiving".<sup>44</sup> Ibn 'Ajība asserts that disobeying god while claiming his love is inherently an unsound position. The individual who fails to honor the

invocation of god in practice renders what is essentially a lie because whoever professes god's love or the prophet's love without obeying and embodying their ethics, is not authentic in his claim.<sup>45</sup> In reiterating this point, Ibn al-mubārak observed:

You disobey the lord yet pretend to his love  
This is impossible and logically strange  
If your love was sincere you would have  
obeyed him  
For the lover is submissive before the one  
whom he loves<sup>46</sup>

تعصى الإله وأنت تظهر حبه  
لو كان حبك صادقاً لأطعته  
هذا محال في القياس يبيع  
إن المحب لمن يحب مطيع

A number of the scholars who Ibn 'Ajība quotes also discuss the issue of sinning while professing god's love. Al-qushayrī, for instance, briefly references the issue of sinning and reasons that because god's love for his devotee takes precedence over the devotee's sin, it is possible for god to love a devotee despite his sins, insofar as one of the concomitants of love is the forgiveness of sins.<sup>47</sup> While rūzbihān's commentary on the same verse (3:31) extensively discusses the features and meaning of love, he – in contrast to al-qushayrī and Ibn 'Ajība – does not discuss sinning and the associated question of whether it negates any claims of divine love.<sup>48</sup>

Ibn 'Ajība's adamant refusal to associate the sinner's claim of loving god with true divine love may ostensibly appear to be contradictory. In large part, this is due to his perception of the sins of the body, and more specifically his claim that they do not negate the sinner's love for god because they do not originate from the heart. It should also be remembered, as has been noted above, that sins of the body, when accompanied with remorse and repentance, may also culminate in god's forgiveness of the sinner. It is however possible to reconcile the two views by asserting that if the sinner evidences an appropriate level of remorse and the heart enters a state of awe and yearning for forgiveness, this sin in reality can enable the sinner to move closer to god's love. However, if the sin does not leave any traces of anxiety and sorrow in

<sup>38</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Sajda, (32:15).

<sup>39</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 4, p. 393.

<sup>40</sup> See al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 3, p. 26, see also Rūzbihān al-Baqī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 3, p. 130.

<sup>41</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Baqara, (2:238).

<sup>42</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 266.

<sup>43</sup> See Rūzbihān al-Baqī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 94.

<sup>44</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Ā-Imrān (3:31).

<sup>45</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 345

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 142.

<sup>48</sup> See Rūzbihān al-Baqī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 1, pp. 142-143.

the heart, the sinner's claim of god's love is merely a lie.

Ibn 'ajība points to another aspect related to sins by referring to sins committed by some people who indulge themselves in lust under the false pretense that they are protected from punishment due to their association with a certain gnostic who will intercede with god in order to ensure their salvation. Ibn 'ajība asserts the contrary in his commentary on the following verse: "not so, whoso earns evil and is encompassed by his transgression, those are the inhabitants of the fire, there they shall dwell forever",<sup>49</sup> Ibn 'ajība clearly and concisely summarizes the attitude of those who freely and carelessly indulge in sins in the belief that a certain holy man will intervene on their behalf. According to Ibn 'ajība such claim is both false and arrogant. In supporting his position, he quotes a ḥadīth in which prophet muḥammad advises fāṭima, his daughter, to remain steadfast in worship as he cannot protect her from god's wrath. Ibn 'ajība adds that the role of the gnostic is not to provide false protection to the devotee who freely indulges in sins; rather it is instead to grant safety and protection to those who are vigilant in upholding god's decreed laws and who perform required acts of obedience while refraining from forbidden actions. Those who align themselves with divine commands become the lovers of god. Divine love protects the devotee from sins and insisting on repeating them. Ibn 'ajība adds that this is the meaning of the following prophetic ḥadīth: "when god loves a devotee, sins do not hurt him". This establishes that sins do not leave traces in his heart because god inspires him to repent immediately and those who repent are beloved by god. The repentant sinner is therefore loved by god.<sup>50</sup>

Ibn 'ajība's strong opposition to indulging in sins while depending on the intercession of a gnostic or a sufi mentor for the sins to be forgiven, should not leave us under the impression that Ibn 'ajība dismisses the importance of the issue of intercession (*shafā'a* and *tawaṣṣul*) of the gnostics and sufi shaykhs all together. On the contrary, in his interpretation of verse (5:35), he emphasized that the closest and greatest means (*wasīla*) to god's proximity is the companionship of the gnostics (*suḥbat al-'arīfīn*), sitting with them and serving them.<sup>51</sup>

he clarified further in his commentary on verse (19:87) that intercession is granted to the people of obedience (*ahl al-ṭā'āt*), the people of certitude (*ahl al-yaqīn*) and finally to the people of gnosis (*ahl al-ma'rifa*) (those being the highest degree).<sup>52</sup> Ibn 'ajība reinterprets the issue of intercession from a literal understanding that views it as being admitted to heaven, to its spiritual connotation of being permitted to enter the divine precinct and enjoy the divine presence (*al-ḥadra al-ilāhiyya*). This spiritual admission requires the intercession of a gnostic or a sufi shaykh who guides the devotee's way to god's proximity through rigorous invocation of god (*dhikr*).<sup>53</sup>

A closer examination of the commentaries of both al-qushayrī and rūzbihān clearly demonstrates that the commentaries of both exegetes upon the same verse (2:81) did not discuss the issue of a devotee indulging in sins while counting on his association with a certain gnostic to protect him from god's wrath. Rather they briefly mention that whoever views his acts of obedience as a means of proximity to god should relinquish this thought because there is no way to god except through him.<sup>54</sup> Ibn 'ajība's originality as a commentator is once again here in evidence.

Ibn 'ajība elaborates the meaning of repeating a sin after repentance and explains how it is different from insisting on committing sin without repentance; both points are conveyed in his commentary on the following verse:

"[w]ho, when they commit an indecency or wrong themselves, remember god, and pray forgiveness for their sins-and who shall forgive sins but god? -and do not persevere in the things they did wittingly".<sup>55</sup>

Ibn 'ajība defines persistent sins as occurring in the absence of any attempt to remorsefully seek forgiveness. In support of this definition, he cites the following ḥadīth: "whoever seeks forgiveness (for his sins) is not persistent (in committing them) even if he returns (to sins) seventy times a day".<sup>56</sup> god's wrath is not therefore focused upon the sin itself, but rather the arrogance of the sinner, which leads him, in the pronounced absence of an aching repenting heart which yearns for forgiveness, to continuously sin.

<sup>49</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Baqara, (2: 81).

<sup>50</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, p. 126.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, vol. 2, p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, vol. 3, p. 364.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, vol. 3, p. 422.

<sup>54</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 54, see also Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 55.

<sup>55</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Ā-Imrān (3:135).

<sup>56</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, p. 409.

Al-qushayrī's and rūzbihān's commentaries on the same verse do not address the question of repetition versus persistence in sin; rather, they instead reiterate that the sins referenced in this verse are related to observing one's acts of obedience with smugness and conceit, which clearly embodies remoteness from the divine presence, and is itself a sin worthy of repentance.<sup>57</sup> rūzbihān adds that the sin that is referred to in this verse might be the sin of attending the mystical circle of *samā'* while pretending to be in a spiritual state of *wajd*. This state results from the descent of divine manifestations in the heart of the sincere novice. Such a state is to be distinguished from that of the novice who in reality still struggles with his own lower self and worldly attributes yet pretends to be the locus of such divine manifestations.<sup>58</sup>

### God's forgiveness of sinners

Ibn 'ajība cites many passages from the qur'ān in order to draw attention to god's compassion, forgiveness and magnanimity when addressing himself to repenting sinners. One reference point is the story of joseph's brothers who conspired to kill him because of his favored position in their father's (jacob) heart. They therefore threw joseph in a well and mixed his shirt with blood in an attempt to convince their father that he was killed by a wolf. Jacob in turn responded to their heinous act by saying, "... he said: nay, but your minds have beguiled you into something. (my course is) comely patience. And allah it is whose help is to be sought in that (predicament) which ye describe".<sup>59</sup>

Ibn 'ajība observes that this verse brings great hope to sinners who seek high spiritual stations after being in a state of forgetfulness and wrongdoing. He went further in expounding the story. He noted that joseph's brothers' heinous act of attempting to kill joseph and throw him in the well, was followed by their remorseful repentance, indicated in this verse, "they said, 'our father, ask forgiveness of our crimes for us; for certainly we have been sinful.'"<sup>60</sup> their repentance was accepted by god and he brought them into his close proximity.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to ibn 'ajība's commentary which extends hope to repenting sinners, rūzbihān's commentary on the same verse focused on the false blood in joseph's shirt which was brought by his brothers in an attempt

to convince their father that the wolf killed joseph. Rūzbihān explains that the false blood in the shirt alludes to the hypocrisy of those who pretend to be lovers of god and who claim that they would shed their blood for the sake of his love; however, when their sincerity is tested, the blood shed turns out to be fake and their claims mere lies.<sup>62</sup>

Ibn 'ajība cites another example of god's forgiveness of sins which are accompanied by a remorseful heart when he provides a commentary on the story of the battle of uḥūd. Muslim forces committed a number of sins during the battle, which included disobeying the prophet's commands and evidencing an over-eagerness to collect the spoils of war, both of which were serious offences. This event was described in this verse: "those of you who turned away the day the two hosts encountered -satan made them slip for some of what they have earned, but god has pardoned them; god is all-forgiving, all-clement."<sup>63</sup> ibn 'ajība therefore reiterates that, although the sins were numerous and grave, they approached god with hearts full of awe; as a consequence, their repentance was accepted.<sup>64</sup>

A further example of an instance in which sin led to repentance and proximity to god was provided by ibn 'ajība when he referred to the story of prophet david, who admired the beauty of another man's wife and thus asked the husband to forsake her, so he would then, in accordance with the customs of the israelites, be able to marry her. God's rebuke of david is clearly explained in the following verse:

"he (david) said, assuredly he has wronged you in asking for the ewe in addition to his sheep and indeed many intermixers do injury one against the other, save those who believe and do deeds of righteousness- and how few they are. And david thought that we had only tried him; therefore, he sought forgiveness of his lord, and he fell down bowing, and he repented. Accordingly, we forgave that, and he has a near place to our present and a fair resort".<sup>65</sup>

Ibn 'ajība explains that prophet david sinned by admiring the sensual beauty manifested in forms (e.g.

<sup>57</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 172.

<sup>58</sup> Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 1, pp. 196, 197.

<sup>59</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Pickthall, Yūsuf (12:18).

<sup>60</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Yūsuf (12: 97).

<sup>61</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 2, p. 581.

<sup>62</sup> Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 2, pp. 153, 154.

<sup>63</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Ā-Imrān (3:155).

<sup>64</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, p. 424.

<sup>65</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Ṣād (38: 24,25).



A woman). He had exclusively fixated his attention at this point on outer forms, rather than engage with the eternal and spiritual beauty of transcendent meanings that lie beyond the limitation of ephemeral forms and substances. Once he realized his mistake, David turned to God with a remorseful heart, and it was said that he kept crying in prayer for forty days until God granted him forgiveness. Ibn 'ajība stated that whoever turns to God with humiliation, crying, remorse and repentance after sinning, will gain God's forgiveness. This is because a sin decreed for a devotee by providence can lead him back to God if he has remorse.<sup>66</sup> The commentaries of both al-qushayrī and rūzbihān which are addressed to the same verse make exactly the same point.<sup>67</sup> Ibn 'ajība also explains how the sinner should be treated in his commentary on the following verse:

"[a]nd when those who believe in our signs come to you, say "peace be upon you. Your lord has prescribed for himself mercy. Whosoever of you does evil in ignorance, and thereafter repents and makes amends, he is all-forgiving, all-compassionate".<sup>68</sup>

He explains that the sense of humbleness which fills the broken soul of the sinner elicits warmth and empathy from the gnostics, who comfort the lamenting sinners by drawing their attention to God's vast mercy and limitless compassion. He also cites a practical example by the Sufi gnostic, abū al-'abbās al-mursī, who used to greet repenting sinners with open arms; significantly, he did not extend the same attention to scholars or ascetics who came to visit him. Al-mursī explains that the sinners come with broken hearts as they see no spiritual rank or status for themselves; in contrast, those who are "obedient" depend on their "obedience" and therefore have no need for additional care or support.<sup>69</sup> al-qushayrī reasserts the same point in his commentary on this verse – here he briefly discusses the general meaning of forgiving of sinners without, however, alluding to the gnostics' treatment of sinners.<sup>70</sup> rūzbihān similarly comments that the sins of those who were selected through God's mercy in pre-eternity are accidental and contingent, and do not affect God's ongoing mercy and love for them.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 5, p. 19.

<sup>67</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 3, pp. 102, 103, see also Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 3, pp. 189-191, see also al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, p. 168.

<sup>68</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-An'ām (6: 54).

<sup>69</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 2, p. 124.

<sup>70</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 297.

<sup>71</sup> Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 366.

Ibn 'ajība explains that the subtlety of God's mercy towards sinners extends even to the Qur'ān's linguistic choice of verbs. In his commentary on the verse, he states: "seek help in patience and prayer, for grievous it is, save to the humble ones who reckon that they shall meet their lord and that unto him they are returning",<sup>72</sup> Ibn 'ajība observes that God prefers to use the verb "reckon" or "think" (*yadhun*) instead of "believe" or "assure" (*yūqin*) - this indicates a high level of certitude and suggests that he did not wish to exclude sinners whose hearts are not fully certain, but instead wanted to comfort them with his mercy and compassion.<sup>73</sup>

Ibn 'ajība also states in his commentary on the verse, "forgiver of sins, acceptor of penitence..."<sup>74</sup> that God's mercy for repenting sinners has two elements. The first indication of God's mercy is the acceptance of the sinner's repentance, which is considered to be an act of obedience; the second mercy is using this accepted repentance to wipe away all sins, so that the sinner can start over with a clean slate as if he had never sinned before.<sup>75</sup> al-qushayrī and rūzbihān both provide a similar interpretation in their commentary on this verse.<sup>76</sup>

#### **Actions of the heart vs. Actions of the body**

A sin, in and of itself, is not something repulsive that negates God's love. This is so as long as the heart of the sinner is filled with yearning for God and remorse for the committed sin. The heart, for Ibn 'ajība, possesses a prime state. He therefore emphasizes the uniqueness of the actions performed by the heart to draw near God and clearly contrasts them with the actions of the physical body. This is evidenced in his commentary on the following verse:

"[t]he likeness of those who expend their wealth in the name of God is as the likeness of a grain of corn that sprouts seven ears, in every ear a hundred grains. So God multiplies unto whom he will; God is all-embracing, all-knowing".<sup>77</sup>

In his interpretation, Ibn 'ajība explains that the reward for physical devotional actions, including those performed by the tongue, is multiplied numerous times. Financial devotional acts, for example, elicit a

<sup>72</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Baqara (2: 45-46).

<sup>73</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, p. 102.

<sup>74</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, Ghāfir (40: 3).

<sup>75</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 5, p. 110.

<sup>76</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 3, p. 129, see also Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 3, p. 228.

<sup>77</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Baqara (2:261).

reward that is multiplied by a factor of seven hundred. In the case of acts performed by the heart, the reward exceeds quantitative measurement. In other words, patience, fear, hope, submission, reliance, gnosis and love, in addition to other lofty stations are not rewarded by material gains (e.g. Heaven and its palaces) but rather by the acquisition of god's contentment, love and proximity.<sup>78</sup> al-qushayrī provided a similar interpretation in his commentary on the same verse.<sup>79</sup>

In explaining the differences between acts performed by the heart and those fulfilled by other means, ibn 'ajība refers to two groups. The first are those who are at the degree of *ihsān* or beautiful-doing, which is the third dimension of religion after *islām* (submission) and *īmān* (faith). The main purpose of *ihsān* doing 'what is beautiful' or acting 'fairly', which is to perfect the soul and purify the heart in order for it to become a locus for the divine attributes.<sup>80</sup> at this stage, the devotee's love for god and being loved by him reaches perfection – this is consistent with the ḥadīth in which the prophet defines *ihsān* as "worshipping god as if you see him".<sup>81</sup> the second group is normally pious folk (*ahl al-yamīn*) who are still at the stage of *islām* or *īmān* and are not elevated to the highest level (*ihsān*). He presents the distinction between the two groups in the following terms:

"the actions of the people at the stage of *ihsān* are heart-related (*qalbī*), featuring (virtues such as) generosity, forgiveness and restraining anger (*kaẓm al-ghayz*). As for the *ahl al-yamīn*, their actions are physical (*badanī*) and hover between obedience and disobedience, heedlessness and wakefulness. And if they commit a sin they repent and ask for forgiveness, and if they perform an act of obedience, they are happy and cheerful. As for those at the stage of *ihsān*, they are absent from taking notice of both their acts of worship performed and their very own existence, unlike the *ahl al-yamīn* who are fixated upon their acts and become hopeful when performing acts of obedience, whereas sins bring their hopes down. Conversely, those at the stage of *ihsān* are annihilated from their own selves and subsist solely with god. On the

other hand, the self-existence of the *ahl al-yamīn* remains intact and they still pay regard to their own acts. Thus, those at the stage of *ihsān* are beloved, whereas the *ahl al-yamīn* are lovers. Those at the stage of *ihsān* are annihilated from outer forms and customs as their eyes are fixated upon witnessing god, almighty and transcendent, whereas for the *ahl al-yamīn* the created things (*akwān*) still exist and the suns of gnosis are hidden from their hearts. Those at the stage of *ihsān* worship god through direct contemplation and witnessing, in contrast to the *ahl al-yamīn* who worship god through the veils of rational proof and reasoning".<sup>82</sup>

أهل مقام الإحسان عملهم قلبي، كالسخاء والعفو وكظم الغيظ، وأهل اليمين عملهم بدني، بين طاعة ومعصية وغفلة ويقظة، إذا فعلوا فاحشة تابوا واستغفروا، وإذا فعلوا طاعة فرحوا واستبشروا، أهل مقام الإحسان غائبون عن رؤية أعمالهم ووجودهم، وأهل اليمين معتمدون على أعمالهم، إذا فعلوا طاعة قوى رجاؤهم، وإذا زلوا نقص رجاؤهم، أهل مقام الإحسان فانون عن أنفسهم باقون بربهم، وأهل اليمين أنفسهم موجودة وأعمالهم لديهم مشهودة، أهل مقام الإحسان فنيبت عندهم الرسوم والأشكال، وبقي في نظرهم وجود الكبير المتعال، وأهل اليمين: الأكوان عندهم موجودة، وشموس المعارف عن قلوبهم مفقودة، أهل مقام الإحسان يعبدون الله على نعت الشهود والعيان، وأهل اليمين يعبدون الله من وراء حجاب الدليل والبرهان.

Here it is possible to observe ibn 'ajība's esoteric spiritual hierarchy, in which *ihsān* is placed at a higher level than *ahl al-yamīn*. He further expands his position by comparing the type of acts performed by the two groups. For example, the acts of those at the stage of *ihsān* are related to the heart whereas those of the *ahl al-yamīn* are related to the body. Whereas the first group is immersed in witnessing the beloved, and thus pays no attention to the acts performed; the latter group is instead fixated upon their deeds, whether good or bad, and their mental state consequently vacillates between hopefulness and sadness.

Ibn 'ajība proceeds to provide further insight into the different meanings that the two groups (those at the stage of *ihsān* and those at the stage of *ahl al-yamīn*) ascribe to the word 'obedience'. He expounds the distinction in his commentary on the verse, "whosoever obeys god and the messenger are with those whom god has blessed from prophets, just men, martyrs, the righteous and indeed they are good

<sup>78</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 296.

<sup>79</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 123.

<sup>80</sup> William C. Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 212-213.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 410.

companions".<sup>83</sup> he explains that the formal physical, sensible obedience (*al-tā'a al-hissiyya*) leads to a state of togetherness in those physical, sensible forms (*ma'iyya hissiyya*) – this is the characteristic of the *ahl al-yamīn*. The inner obedience of the heart (*al-tā'a al-bāṭiniyya qalbiyya*) produces a constant state of spiritual togetherness (*ma'iyya rūhiyya*), and no separation occurs among lovers.<sup>84</sup>

A closer examination of the aforementioned verse - "[t]he likeness of those who expend their wealth in the name of god is as the likeness of a grain of corn that sprouts seven ears, in every ear a hundred grains. So, god multiplies unto whom he will; god is all-embracing, all-knowing."<sup>85</sup> - in al-qushayrī's and rūzbihān's commentaries indicates that neither author addresses the issue of physical acts of worship performed by the body versus those done by heart. Al-qushayrī makes brief reference to the fact that all the elevated spiritual states granted to the devotees are not attributable to a certain reason or caused by specific acts, but are instead a sheer gift and grace from god.<sup>86</sup> rūzbihān adds that the essence of obedience is love and love does not occur until god is truly witnessed. It is only at this point that the lover is deemed to be worthy of enjoying the company of the prophets and the sufi gnostics.<sup>87</sup>

After discussing the elevated status of acts of worship performed by the heart (of gnostics) over the ones of the body (performed by the normal and pious individuals) ibn 'ajība turns to the issue of sinning. He draws an essential distinction between sins committed by people of proximity (*ahl al-qurb* – e.g. Gnostics) and those committed by individuals estranged from god. This theme is further elaborated in his commentary on the following verse: "god shall turn only towards those who do evil in ignorance, then shortly repent; god will return towards those; god is all-knowing, all-wise".<sup>88</sup> ibn 'ajība explains that god commits a great amount of time to the generality of people (*al-'awāmm*), with the intention of encouraging them to repent. The elect (*al-khawāṣ*), in contrast, are punished in case they delay their repentance – the degree and force of rebuke depends on their level of proximity to him.<sup>89</sup> rūzbihān's commentary on this verse extensively discusses how a sinner who falls into disobedience can

only repent through god's grace and mercy – however, he does not distinguish between the repentance of the general public and those of the advanced spiritual state.<sup>90</sup> al-qushayrī, briefly mentions that no forgiveness can be extended when sins are persistently committed. However, he does not, in contrast to ibn 'ajība, define the precise meaning of 'persistent'. Al-qushayrī refers to the sin of the elect (*khawāṣ*) and defines it as their desire to attain advanced spiritual states, possess miraculous works (*karāma*) and count upon their acts of obedience. This understanding is considered to be a sin and a reflection of their low status; they clearly contrast in this respect with gnostics, who understand that there is no way to reach god except through him. This is why no one should depend on his acts of worship as a means of obtaining proximity to god.<sup>91</sup>

After establishing the high status of acts of worship of the heart, ibn 'ajība established a connection between the state of the heart and the physical forms of devotional acts. This connection was clearly conveyed in his commentary on the following verse:

"and the likeness of those who spend their wealth in search of god's pleasure, and for the strengthening of their souls, is as the likeness of a garden on a height. The rainstorm smiteth it and it bringeth forth its fruit twofold. And if the rainstorm smite it not, then the shower. God is seer of what ye do".<sup>92</sup>

The reward of devotional acts is thus in proportion to the degree of purity within the mystical state (*aḥwāl*) of the heart. If the novice is advanced in the path of god and has an elevated spiritual station (*maqāmāt*), his acts will be amplified and rewarded in due proportion. Ibn 'ajība reiterates this argument by noting that even saying "glory be to god" (*subḥān allāh*) once is commensurate to the whole existence; its significance, along with all the acts of the gnostics, henceforth becomes immeasurable. The reason for the greatness of the gnostic's acts is because they are done by god, from god and to god. They are therefore characterized by perfection and involve no deficiency. The gnostics therefore maintain that all their contemplative moments of meditation (*awqāt*) are as special as the night of power (*laylat al-qadr*). Furthermore, all of their

<sup>83</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Nisā' (4:69).

<sup>84</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 525.

<sup>85</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Baqara (2:261).

<sup>86</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 214.

<sup>87</sup> Rūzbihān al-Baqī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 1, pp. 259, 260.

<sup>88</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Nisā' (4: 17).

<sup>89</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, p. 480.

<sup>90</sup> Rūzbihān al-Baqī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 236.

<sup>91</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 199.

<sup>92</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Pickthal, al-Baqara, (2: 265).

places are as blessed as mt 'arafat and all of their breaths are purified.<sup>93</sup> al-qushayrī, in his commentary on the same verse (2:265), briefly contrasts the sincere (who spend their money for god's sake) and hypocrites (who spend their money on vanities).<sup>94</sup>

Ibn 'ajība provides a practical example to further explain the essentiality of acts performed by the heart. This is rendered through his commentary on the following verse: "...[a]nd pilgrimage to the house (ka'ba) is a duty upon mankind owed to god for those who can afford it...".<sup>95</sup> he explains that the performance of ḥajj has two meanings; the first is physical and the second is spiritual. The hearts of gnostics provides the ka'ba around which divine lights and sublime revelations circulate. Because divine lights reside in their heart, they have no need to go to the physical ka'ba to seek out lights; they directly contrast with those whose heart is void of divine light and who therefore continually yearn to attend the physical ka'ba.<sup>96</sup> al-ḥallāj eloquently expressed this meaning in verse, when he said:

O you who blame me, don't blame me for my love to him  
 If you had witnessed what I did, you would not have blamed me  
 People go on pilgrimage and I have mine in my residence where  
 Sacrifices are offered and I sacrifice my heart and blood  
 The mystics circumambulate the house that has no forms  
 They circumambulate by god so he suffices them from pilgrimage to the sacred house<sup>97</sup>

يا لانمي لا تلمني في هواه فلو      عاينت منه الذي عاينت لم تلم  
 للناس حج ولي حج إلى سكني      تهدي الأضاحي، وأهدى مهجتي ودمي  
 يطوف بالبيت قوم لا بجارحة      بالله طافوا فأغناهم عن الحرم

The sanctity of the lover's heart is viewed as a sacred place within which god resides. This impression is reproduced within the story of majnūn when he was asked about the direction of prayer. He said: "if you are an ignorant clod of earth, then it is the stone of the ka'ba. For the lovers it's god, for majnūn the face of laylā".<sup>98</sup>

#### 4.1) Conclusion: the coexistence of sin and obedience

This article has demonstrated ibn 'ajība's belief that obedience and sin can coexist together – this logically applies by virtue of his position that sin and obedience are interdependent, and one cannot exist without the other. He eloquently explains this in his commentary on the following verse: "that is because god makes the night to enter into the day and makes the day to enter into the night; and that god is all-hearing, the all-great".<sup>99</sup> he clarifies that, in the presence of pride and conceit, the darkness of sin can easily infiltrate an act of obedience and turn it into sheer sin to the same extent, if a sin is followed by humility and remorse, it can become transformed into an act of obedience.<sup>100</sup> he provided further insight into this concept by adding a quotation from abu al-'abbās al-mursī to his commentary on the following verse "he makes the night to enter into the day and makes the day to enter into the night and he has subjected the sun and the moon, each of them running to a stated term",<sup>101</sup> Here al-mursī explains that whenever the protagonist of an act of obedience looks at his act with admiration (while belittling those who did not perform the same act of obedience and requesting god's compensation for it), this act of obedience becomes a sin. On the contrary, whenever the sinner commits a sin and then takes refuge in god and asks god to forgive him and feels shame at his sinful act while thinking highly of

<sup>93</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 299.

<sup>94</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Latā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, p. 123.

<sup>95</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, *Āl-Imrān* (3:97).

<sup>96</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 385.

<sup>97</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol.1, p. 385, Some people might argue against Ibn 'Ajība's position, which ostensibly appears to suggest that the gnostic does not need to undertake pilgrimage, which is one of Islam's obligatory rituals. Ibn 'Ajība attempts to defend his position by arguing that the essential purpose of pilgrimage is to purify the heart in order to enable divine lights to manifest. Gnostics, however, no longer need to seek these lights by going to the physical Ka'ba to perform pilgrimage: their elevated spiritual status means that the divine lights already shine in their hearts. In my view, Ibn 'Ajība was misinterpreted in this regard. It is clear that he does not

seek to deny the obligation of the ritual of pilgrimage, as established by the *Sharī'a*. Rather, he instead addresses a higher level of the Truth (*ḥaqīqa*), and therefore expresses the belief that the utter purity of the gnostic's heart institutes the abode of God on which divine secrets are descending. By virtue of the continual witnessing of the divine lights, the gnostic does not need to acquire these lights by traveling to other locations, such as the Ka'ba.

<sup>98</sup> Hellmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World, and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din 'Attar*. Translated by John O'Kane and Bernd Radtke. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 539.

<sup>99</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, *al-Ḥajj* (22:61).

<sup>100</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 3, p. 549.

<sup>101</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, *Fāṭir* (35: 13).

those who were preserved from falling into the abasement of his sin, then this sin can turn into obedience. Al-mursī proceeds to ask which of these two acts is the real sin and which is quickly turned into obedience?<sup>102</sup> here we notice how ibn 'ajība combines theological and jurisprudential meanings of a term with their mystical counterparts. Al-qushayrī, in discussing the aforementioned verse (22:61) does not, in comparison to ibn 'ajība, allude to the possibility of the coexistence of obedience and sin; rather he instead refers to different spiritual states such as contraction (*qabḍ*) and expansion (*bast*), while associating the former with night and the latter with the day.<sup>103</sup>

In this section I will conclude by highlighting two types of sins which are associated with creation in general and humankind in particular. In rūzbihān's view, all created beings are sinful because they lack complete knowledge of god's grandiosity. Commenting on the following verse: "and vie with one another, hastening to forgiveness from your lord...",<sup>104</sup> rūzbihān observes that no created being is excluded from such sin, even the angels who are infallible by nature – this applies because they also lack the complete gnosis of god. This verse is therefore addressed to all beings because they need to seek forgiveness for their insufficient knowledge of god.<sup>105</sup>

The second type of sin is the sin of one's very "being" or "existence" which ibn 'ajība elaborated on in his commentary on the following verse: "surely, we have given you a manifest victory, that god may forgive you the former and the latter sins, and complete his blessings upon you, and guide you on a straight path, and that god may help you with mighty help".<sup>106</sup> ibn 'ajība states that the grand victory in this verse refers to overcoming the duality of existence between god and man through revealing the secrets of the divine essence and the light of attributes along with the beauty of divine actions in order for the devotee to become absent from his own being and distanced from his image and form. He also quotes al-qushayrī's view that 'the sin of self-existence' is due to the self's co-existence with god. This sin is forgiven by god by covering one's existence with the divine lights of oneness which this dispels the darkness of duality. Ibn 'ajība believed that when this stage of oneness is established, the devotee is able to combine witnessing the grandeur of lordship with performing the obligations of servanthood.<sup>107</sup>

In conclusion, after analyzing ibn 'ajība's doctrine of sin the current article has arrived at the conclusion that sin, in essence, does not negate loving god. The incorporation of the two most-frequently cited sufi qur'ānic exegetes (al-qushayrī and rūzbihān) among previous sufis has paved the way to provide additional insight into ibn 'ajība's specific stance on this subject. This stance reflected ibn 'ajība's concern with balancing god's forgiveness of sins of sinners who repent due to his love for them, and the sins of sinners who do not repent, maintaining the pretense that their love for god will save them from his punishment. This balance between these two opposite outlooks on sin was less clearly defined by both al-qushayrī and rūzbihān as we have seen. For instance, when it comes to the famous example of adam's sin of eating from the forbidden tree, both al-qushayrī and rūzbihān focused entirely on the pre-eternal divine decree according to which adam was chosen in pre-eternity to be god's vicegerent on earth despite his sin. Unlike these two exegetes, ibn 'ajība focused on the idea of sin as a means and symbol of the abasement of servanthood and the virtue of humility that prepare the heart to witness the grandeur of lordship. This mystical perspective places such a strong emphasis upon sin because sin plays an indispensable role in the transformation of the human being from a creature restricted by a physical body to an angelic being defined by heart consciousness.

It was also noted that ibn 'ajība made a clear and sharp division between sins of the body and those of the heart. He stressed that the former may lead to god's proximity if accompanied with remorse; in direct contrast, the latter may lead to remoteness and banishment due to the veiling by the sin of one's heart and thus obscuring the light of divinity within. In clearly distinguishing himself from other sufi exegetes, ibn 'ajība also refers to numerous examples of the two types of sins, and thus brings out the key and essential distinction in fuller perspective.

Ibn 'ajība also emphasizes the importance of the heart and expounds the type of sins related to it, along with the type of good deeds associated with it to emphasize its unique status as the abode of god (*bayt al-rabb*). He therefore clearly distinguishes between the good deeds of the people at the stage of *ihsān* and those at the level of the *ahl al-yamīn* – this is particularly important

<sup>102</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 4, p. 528.

<sup>103</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 2, p. 329.

<sup>104</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, *Āl-Imrān* (3:134).

<sup>105</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 1, pp. 408, 409.

<sup>106</sup> Qur'ān, trans. Arberry, al-Fath (48: 1-3).

<sup>107</sup> Ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd*, vol. 5, p. 385.

because it indicates the central position of 'actions springing from hearts' (*a'māl al-qulūb*).

In addition, the article also clarifies that 'ibn 'ajība's mystical commentary continually points to the danger of defying god's will and challenging divine power – this, he notes, is a grave sin of the heart which led satan to be subjected to god's wrath and banishment. Ibn 'ajība's views on this issue were again far clearer than the other two exegetes. It is also important to note that ibn 'ajība succeeded in establishing a clear distinction between repeating sins while possessing a remorseful heart and sacrilegiously persisting in committing sins without feeling regret at heart: this was particularly important because these two major concepts were not clearly elaborated by the other two exegetes.

Finally, ibn 'ajība provided insights which clearly demonstrate how both sin and an act of obedience can coexist together: accordingly, one can lead to the other and vice-versa. This presents a formidable challenge to the classical understanding of sin, understood almost exclusively as generating distance from god, whether in the form of banishment or remoteness. Ibn 'ajība's insistence that the inner state of the heart is the only criterion which establishes whether an act is a sin, is particularly important because it further reiterates the requirement that we must not pass moral judgements with undue haste. The outer crust of an act of obedience which conceals a heart full of conceit and defiance to god's will, is but a sin in disguise. To the same extent, an outer act of sin which conceals the internal breaking of a remorseful heart, is frequently an act of obedience in disguise.

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