

the standpoint of created existence, is the supreme act of divine giving and generosity, all other particular gifts of God being aspects of that original gift of existence, since each particular gift to a particular creature serves only to confirm that existential covenant by which God affirms the ontological significance of the Cosmos. It is the universal gift of becoming that is the gift of the Essence, while the gift of the Names is the particular manifestation of that supreme Self-giving of God. Ibn al-'Arabī returns to this theme in the chapter on the Prophet David.

As already mentioned, this notion of divine giving is closely related by Ibn al-'Arabī to the concept of latent predisposition *in divinis*. This means that the quality and nature of one's existence as creature, in general and in detail, may be no more or less than that which it is eternally predisposed to be in one's latent essence. Furthermore, not only the gift or response but also the making of the request itself is determined by the latent predisposition to do so.

Awareness or knowledge of what one is disposed to be *in aeternis* is, for Ibn al-'Arabī, an essential part of what he calls *ma'rifaḥ* or gnosis, since it involves the knowledge of oneself that is, at the same time, knowledge of the divine Reality of which one is, latently and essentially, inescapably an aspect, which is the meaning of the saying "Whosoever knows himself, knows his Lord." Gnosis, according to our author, is not the acquired knowing of profane learning, but rather, as the Arabic root suggests, an immediate recognition and grasp not of something new or strange but rather of the state and status of things as they really are, have always been, and eternally will be, which knowledge is inborn in man but later covered over and obscured by the spiritual ignorance encouraged by preoccupation with ephemeral and partial data.

It is precisely this gnosis, which is potential in all humankind, that is the realized spiritual heritage of the saints, prophets, and apostles, and particularly of the Seal himself. Indeed, it is the normative cognition of the Perfect Man who perceives all difference and identity in terms of the Reality, other than which nothing is or exists.

Ibn al-'Arabī concludes this chapter with a curious prediction concerning the fate of man as defined in his teachings. He says that the last true human, in the line of Seth, will be born in China and that he will have an elder sister. He goes on to prophesy that thereafter men will become as beasts, bereft of spirit and law, until the coming

CHAPTER II

THE WISDOM OF EXPIRATION IN THE WORD OF SETH

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The chapter named after Seth deals with two main topics, that of divine giving and the subject of the respective functions of the Seal of Saints and the Seal of Apostles. In connection with the first of these topics, Ibn al-'Arabī touches also on the subject of latency and predisposition and the possibility of knowing one's own predisposition.

In the first part of the chapter he deals with the question of divine giving and favor. He divides the divine giving in various ways and discusses the whole relationship between requesting and giving in response to a request, whether uttered or implicit.

This first topic of the chapter provides, perhaps, a clue to the title of the chapter, *The Wisdom of Expiration in the Word of Seth*. The Arabic word used for "expiration" is from the root *nafakha*, which literally means "to blow." Now, the divine gift par excellence is that of existence itself, the bringing about of which is closely related to Ibn al-'Arabī's concept of the creating Mercy, which creativity is often termed the Breath of the Merciful [*nafas al-rahīmān*]. In other words the blowing referred to in the title is precisely that outgoing projection inspired by the divine desire for Self-consciousness which, from

of the Hour. Thus, he indicates that that particular human synthesis of spirit and nature, of which we are all a part, will come to an end and the link be broken.

THE WISDOM OF EXPIRATION IN THE WORD OF SETH

Know that the [divine] gifts and favors manifest in the realm of determined being, whether through His servants or not, are divided into two kinds, gifts of the Essence and gifts of the Names, just as there are those gifts [bestowed in answer] to a specific request and those [given in answer] to a general request. There are those gifts also that are bestowed without any request, whether they derive from the Essence or the Names.

An example of a request for something specific is one who says, "O Lord, grant to me such and such," specifying something to the exclusion of anything else. An example of a general request is one who says, "Grant to me what You know to be in my interest, whether for my subtle or physical being."

Those who ask are of two kinds: The first kind is urged to make a request by a natural eagerness, for, *Man was created hasty*,⁹ while the second kind is moved to make the request because he knows that there are certain things with God that cannot, in accordance with the divine Prescience, be obtained except by asking for them. He says [to himself], "Perhaps what we are about to ask for from God is of this kind." Thus his request is by way of taking full account of the possibilities inherent in the divine Command [the thing asked for]. He cannot know what is in the knowledge of God, nor can he know his own eternally determined predisposition to receive, for to be, at each instant, aware of one's [eternal] predisposition is one of the most difficult kinds of knowledge. Indeed, were it not for that with which the predisposition imbues the request, he would not make the request at all.

For those practicing the Presence of God who do not usually know this, the most they attain to is to know it [their predisposition] at the time [of receiving or asking]. This is because, by reason of their presence with God, they know what the Reality bestows on them at

9. *Qur'an*, XXI:37.

that time and they know that they receive it only because of their predisposition to receive it. They are of two kinds: those who know their predisposition by knowing what they receive, the others knowing what they [will] receive by knowing their predisposition. Of these, the latter is the more complete knowledge of the predisposition.

There are also those who ask, not because of any natural impulse, nor yet through knowledge of the possibilities, but simply to conform with God's command, *Call upon Me and I will answer you*.¹⁰ Such a one is eminently a servant, for in such a supplication there is no trace of self-interest, the concern being directed solely to conformity with the behest of his Master. If his state necessitates a request on his part, he asks for more servanthood, whereas if it necessitates silence and resignation, he is silent.

Job and others were sorely tried, but they did not ask that their affliction from God be lifted from them. At a later time their state necessitated their making such a request and God answered them. The speed or tardiness in granting what is requested depends entirely on the measure appointed for it with God. If a request is made at just the right moment for it, the response is swift, but if its time is not yet due, either in this life or until the next life, the response will be postponed until that time. By this is meant the granting of the thing requested, not the principle of divine response, which is always, "I am here," so consider well.¹¹

As regards our reference to those gifts bestowed without any request being made, I meant a request that is articulated, for in the case of any [divine] action [gift] there must be a request [a recipient], whether it be expressed in words or is inherent in the state or predisposition.

Similarly the praising of God usually means its articulation, whereas in the inner sense the praise is necessitated by the [spiritual] state, for that which impels you to praise God is that essential element in you that binds you to a Divine Name, whether expressing His activity or transcendence. The servant is not aware of his predisposition, but only of the spiritual state, which he knows as that which impels him, since knowledge of the predisposition is the most hidden. Those who [receive God's gifts and] do not make a request omit to make a request only because they know that God possesses, in respect

10. *Ibid.*, XL:60.

11. *Ibid.*, II:186.

of them, predetermining knowledge. They have made themselves ever ready to receive whatever comes from Him and have withdrawn completely from their separative selves and their aims.

Of these persons there are those who know that God's knowledge of them, in all their states, corresponds to what they themselves are in their state of preexistent latency. They know that the Reality will bestow on them only that which their latent essences contribute to Him [as being what He knows Himself to be]. Thus they know the origin of God's [predetermining] knowledge concerning them. Of the Folk there are none higher or more intuitive than this kind [who do not ask], for they have grasped the mystery of the divine Premeasurement. This group is itself divided into two parts: those who possess this knowledge in a general way and those who have a detailed knowledge, the latter [knowledge] being more elevated and complete. In this case he knows what God knows concerning himself, either because God informs him of what his essence has contributed to His knowledge of him, or because God has revealed to him his essence in all its infinite fluctuations of spiritual state. This is higher than the general knowledge.

Such a one, in respect of his knowledge of himself, knows himself as God knows him, since the object [of knowledge] is the same in both cases. However, in respect of his creatureliness, his knowledge is nothing but a favor from God, one of a multitude of predetermined [spiritual] states [inherent] in his essence. The recipient of such a revelation recognizes this fact when God shows to him the states [inherent] in his essence; for it is not possible for a creature, when God shows to him the states of his essence, on which the created form will be cast, to look on it as the Reality looks on the latent essences in their state of nonbeing, since they are formless attributions of the Essence.

If all of this is understood, we can say that this parity [in knowledge, as between God and the servant] is a divine favor predetermined for that servant. In this regard is His saying, [*We will try you until we know [wabiḥ of you strive]*],¹² which bears a very exact meaning, quite other than that imagined by those who have no direct experience [of the divine mysteries]. Concerning this verse, the most the transcendentalist could say, using the highest of his mental powers, would be that the [apparent] temporality in God's knowledge is due to its dependence [on creatures], except that he maintains the distinc-

12. *Ibid.*, XLVII:31.

tion of the knowledge from the Essence, and so ascribes the dependence to it and not to the Essence. By this he is distinguished from the true knower of God, the recipient of revelation.

Returning to the subject of the divine gifts, we have already maintained that these stem either from the Essence or from the Divine Names. As for favors or gifts of the first kind, they can result only from a divine Self-revelation, which occurs only in a form conforming to the essential predisposition of the recipient of such a revelation. Thus, the recipient sees nothing other than his own form in the mirror of the Reality. He does not see the Reality Itself, which is not possible, although he knows that he may see only his [true] form in It. As in the case of a mirror and the beholder, he sees the form in it, but does not see the mirror itself, despite his knowledge that he sees only his own and other images by means of it. God makes this comparison so that the recipient of a divine Self-revelation should know that it is not Him Whom he sees. The analogy of a mirror is the closest and most faithful one for a vision of a divine Self-revelation.

Try, when you look at yourself in a mirror, to see the mirror itself, and you will find that you cannot do so. So much is this the case that some have concluded that the image perceived is situated between the mirror and the eye of the beholder. This represents the greatest knowledge they are capable of [on the subject]. The matter is [in fact] as we have concluded, and we have dealt with it also in *The Meccan Revelations*.¹³ If you have experienced this [in the spirit] you have experienced as much as is possible for a created being, so do not seek nor weary yourself in any attempts to proceed higher than this, for there is nothing higher, nor is there beyond the point you have reached aught except the pure, undetermined, unmanifested [Absolute]. In your seeing your true self, He is your mirror and you are His mirror in which He sees His Names and their determinations, which are nothing other than Himself. The whole matter is prone to intricacy and ambiguity.

Some of us there are who profess ignorance as part of their knowledge, maintaining [with Abū Bakr] that "To realise that one cannot know [God] is to know."¹⁴ There are others from among us, however, who know, but who do not say such things, their knowl-

13. *Futūḥāt*, I, p. 162ff.

14. Cf. Abū Nar al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-lama'*, ed. R. A. Nicholson, 1914, p. 36 [Arabic text].

edge instilling in them silence rather than [professions] of ignorance. This is the highest knowledge of God, possessed only by the Seal of Apostles and the Seal of Saints.¹⁵ Thus, none of the prophets and apostles can attain to it except from the Niche of the Seal of Apostles, nor are any of the saints able to attain to it except from the Niche of the Seal of Saints, so that, in effect, none of the apostles can attain to it, when they do so, except from the Niche of the Seal of Saints.

This is because the office of apostle and prophet [by prophet I mean the bringer of Sacred Law] comes to an end, while Sainthood never ceases. Thus the apostles, as being also saints, attain only to what we have mentioned from the Niche of the Seal of Saints, this being even more the case with the lesser saints. For, although the Seal of Saints follows the Law brought by the Seal of Apostles, this does not in any way diminish his station or contradict what we have said, since he is, in one sense, below the apostle and, in another sense, higher. What we have maintained here is supported by events under our own dispensation, as when 'Umar's judgment was the better one in respect of the prisoners taken at Badr, as also in the matter of the pollination of palms.¹⁶

It is not necessary for one who is perfect to be superior in everything and at every level, since men of the Spirit have regard only to precedence in the degrees of the knowledge of God, which is their [sole] aim. As for the passing phenomena of created beings, they do not concern themselves with such things. Therefore, mark well what we have said.

The Prophet likened the office of prophet to a wall of bricks, complete except for one brick. He himself was the missing brick. However, while the Prophet saw the lack of one brick, the Seal of Saints perceived that two bricks were missing. The bricks of the wall were of silver and gold. Since he saw himself as filling the gap, it is the Seal of Saints who is the two bricks and who completes the wall. The reason for his seeing two bricks is that, outwardly, he follows the Law of the Seal of Apostles, represented by the silver brick. This is his outer aspect and the rules that he adheres to in it. Inwardly, however, he receives directly from God what he appears [outwardly] to follow, because he perceives the divine Command as it is [in its essence], represented by the golden brick. He derives his knowledge

15. Cf. al-Tirmidhī, *Kiṭāb khawm al-awṣiyā'*, ed. O. Yahya, Beirut, 1965.

16. Cf. A. Guillaume, *Life of Muḥammad*, O.U.P., 1955, p. 301.

from the same source as the angel who reveals it to the Apostle. If you have understood my allusions you have attained to the most beneficial knowledge.¹⁷

Every prophet, from Adam until the last of the prophets, derives what he has from the Seal of Prophets, even though he comes last in his temporal, physical manifestation, for in his [essential] reality he has always existed. The Prophet said, "I was a prophet when Adam was between the water and the clay,"¹⁸ while other prophets became such only when they were sent forth [on their missions]. In the same way the Seal of Saints was a saint "when Adam was between the water and the clay," while other saints became saints only when they had acquired all the necessary divine qualities, since God has called Himself *the Friend [al-Wāfi]*, *the Praised One*.¹⁹

The Seal of Apostles, as being also a saint, has the same relationship to the Seal of Saints as the other prophets and apostles have to him, for he is saint, apostle, and prophet.

As for the Seal of Saints, he is the Saint, the Heir, the one whose [knowledge] derives from the Source, the one who beholds all levels [of Being]. This sainthood is among the excellencies of the Seal of Apostles, Muḥammad, first of the Community [of apostles] and Lord of Men as being he who opened the gate to intercession. This latter is a state peculiar to him and not common [to all apostles]. It is in this state that he precedes even the Divine Names, since the Merciful does not intercede with the Avenger, in the case of those sorely tried, until intercession has been made [to It]. It is in the matter of intercession that Muḥammad has attained to preeminence. Whoever comprehends the levels and stations will not find it difficult to understand this.

As for favors deriving from the Names of God, they are of two kinds: a pure mercy, such as a good pleasure in the world that leaves no taint on the Day of Resurrection, which is bestowed by [God] the Merciful, or a mixed mercy, such as an evil-tasting medicine that brings relief, which is a gift of God in His Divinity, although in His Divinity He always bestows His gifts through the medium of one of the holders of the Names.

Sometimes God bestows a gift on His servant in His Name the Merciful, in which case the gift will be free of all that is contrary to

17. Cf. Bukhārī, LXI:18.

18. *Ibid.*, I, XXV/III:119.

19. *Qur'an*, XLII:28.

the servant's nature at the time, or of anything that might fail him. Sometimes God gives in His Name the Encompassing, so that the effect is universal, while at other times He gives in His Name the Wise, to serve the best interests of His servant. He may give in His Name the Bestower, in which He gives as an [unsolicited] favor, so that the recipient is under no obligation to render thanks or to perform works to merit the favor. He may give in His Name the Powerful, in which case His action is in accordance with the requirements of the situation. He may give in His Name the Forgiver, in which He considers the situation or state as it is at the time. If punishment is merited, He will [under this Name] protect the servant from it, and if no punishment is merited, He protects from a state that would incur punishment.

In this way are such servants [the saints] spoken of as being immune and protected [from sin]. The giver is God as Keeper of the treasures [of His Grace], which only He dispenses according to a prescribed measure through the appropriate Name. *He bestows [appropriately] on all He has created,*²⁰ in His Name the Just and similar attributes.

The Names of God are infinite because they are known by all that derives from them which is infinite, even though they derive [ultimately] from a [known] number of sources, which are the matrices or abodes of the Names. Certainly, there is but one Reality, which embraces all these attributions and relations called the Divine Names. This Reality grants that every Name, infinitely manifest, should have its own reality by which to be distinguished from every other Name. This distinguishing reality is the essence of the Name [the Name itself], not that which it may have in common [with others]. In the same way every [divine] gift is distinguished from every other by its own individual quality; for, even though all derive from a single source, it is evident that one gift is not the same as another. The cause of that is the mutual distinction of the Names, there being no repetition on the Plane of Divinity with all its extensiveness. This is the indisputable truth.

Such was the knowledge possessed by Seth and it is his spirit that moves every other spirit expressing this kind of truth, except the spirit of the Seal, for his spiritual constituent comes directly from God and not from any other spirit. Further, it is from his spirit [the Seal]

²⁰ Ibid., XX:50.

that all other spirits derive their substance, even though the Seal may not be aware of the fact while in the physical body. In respect of his essential reality and his [spiritual] rank he knows it all essentially, whereas in the body he is ignorant of it. He at once knows and does not know, taking on himself the attribution of opposites, as does the Source Itself, as being at once the Majestic and the Beautiful, the Manifest and the Unmanifest, the First and the Last, this [*coincidentia oppositorum*] being his own essence. He knows and does not know, he is aware and he is not aware, he perceives and yet does not perceive.

It is because of this knowledge that Seth is so named, his name meaning "Gift of God." In his hand is the key to the [divine] gifts in all their variety and their relations. God bestowed him on Adam, as his first unconditional gift, bestowing him as coming from Adam himself, since the son is the inner reality of the father, issuing from him and to him returning. Thus it is nothing alien to him that comes [as God's gift]. He whose understanding is inspired by God will know this.

Indeed, every gift in the manifested universe is after this fashion. There is nothing in anyone from God [as other], and there is nothing in anyone but what comes from his own self, however various the forms. Though this be the eternal truth of the matter, none knows it [directly] save certain of the elite of the saints. Should you meet one who possesses such knowledge you may have complete confidence in him, for he is a rare gem among the elite of the Folk.

Whenever a gnostic receives a spiritual intuition in which he looks on a form that brings him new spiritual knowledge and new spiritual graces, [he should know] that the form he contemplates is none other than his own essential self, for it is only from the tree of his own self that he will garner the fruits of his knowledge. In the same way his image in a polished surface is naught but he, although the place or plane in which he sees his image effects certain changes in the image in accordance with the intrinsic reality of that plane. In this way something big appears small in a small mirror, long in a long mirror, and moving in a moving mirror. It may produce the inversion of this image from a particular plane, or it may produce an exactly corresponding image, right reflecting right [and left reflecting left]. However, it is more usual with mirrors for the right to reflect the left. In contradiction to this, however, the right sometimes reflects the right and reversion takes place. All this applies [equally] to the

modes and properties of the plane in which the divine Self-revelation occurs, which we have compared to a mirror.

Whoever has knowledge of his [eternal] predisposition knows what [divine gifts] he will receive, although not every one who knows what he will receive knows also his predisposition except after he has received, even though he may know it in a general way.

Certain theorists of weak intellect, having agreed that God does what He wills, go on to state things about God that contradict Wisdom and the truth. They go so far as to deny contingency as also self-sufficient and relative essential being. The one who truly knows confirms contingency and knows its plane; he knows what is the contingent and in what way it is so, even though it be in its essence self-sufficient [necessary] by virtue of something other than it, as also [he knows] in what way its [source] may be considered as "other," when it makes it self-sufficient [necessary]. Only those possessing special knowledge of God understand this in detail.

It will be in the line of Seth that the last true Man will be born, bearing his mysteries [of divine Wisdom], nor will such be born after him. He will be the Seal of Offspring. There will be born with him a sister who will be born before him, so that his head will be at her feet. He will be born in the land of China and will speak the language of that land. Sterility will then overcome the men and women of this land and, although there will be much consorting, there will be no bringing forth of children [as true men]. He will call them to God without success and when God has taken him and those of his time who believed, the others will remain living like beasts with no sense of right and wrong, given over to the law of the [lower] nature, devoid of intellect and Sacred Law. The Last Hour will overtake them.

CHAPTER III

THE WISDOM OF EXALTATION IN THE WORD OF NOAH

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This is, perhaps, the most difficult and controversial of the chapters of *The Bezels of Wisdom* by reason of the unusual and extraordinary interpretations of the Qur'an that feature in it. Certainly, from the standpoint of esoteric theology, Ibn al-'Arabī's approach to the Qur'anic material in this chapter is, at best, reckless, and, at worst, flagrantly heretical. The chapter is also unusual among the chapters of this work in that it not only confines its subject matter to the situation of the Prophet Noah, named in the title, but draws almost all its quotational material from the *Sūrah* of Noah in the Qur'an. Thus, this chapter is in effect a commentary on the issues raised in that *Sūrah*.

The situation described in the *Sūrah* concerns Noah's attempts to persuade his people of their folly and wickedness in worshipping their idols and of the urgent necessity to repent and recognize the transcendent unity of the true God. Throughout the *Sūrah* Noah calls on God to vindicate him and to punish his heedless and stubborn contemporaries. Ibn al-'Arabī uses this situation not so much to confirm the rightness of Noah but rather to explore and expound on a whole series of polar concepts, the relationship of which he discusses from the point of view of the Oneness of Being.