

Body of Light: Ibn ‘Arabi’s Account of His Father’s Death

In chapter 35 of the Meccan Illuminations,¹ Ibn ‘Arabi gives a fascinating account of his father’s death—and at the same time, of his spiritual state and role in his life—which deserves closer attention, especially in light of the growing interest in the Shaykh’s own biography. This long and instructive chapter is entitled “Concerning the Inner Knowledge of the Person Who Has Realized the Waystation of the Breaths, and His/Its Secrets After His Death.” Since it is clear by the end of this chapter (where the anecdote of his father’s death is actually retold) that Ibn ‘Arabi considers his own father to have become one of these particularly accomplished “knowers,” it is helpful to start by quoting the opening poetic lines and introductory prose of this chapter:

“The (true) servant is the person whose state already while living / is like his state after the death of the body and spirit.

The (true) servant is the person who, while still in a state of veiling (by the body) / was already a light, like the sun’s illuminating the earth.

For the state of death is not accompanied by any pretense, / just as life has its open pretensions (to “lordship” and divinity)”....

“You must know—May God inspire you with the Holy Spirit!--that this person who has realized the waystation of the Breath, whoever that person may be, that their state after their death is different from the states of the others who die. So we will begin by mentioning the different ways that the people of God take their knowing from God..., and then we will mention their ultimate fate and the effects of what they take (from God) upon their essential realities.”

Near the end of this chapter, Ibn ‘Arabi goes on to develop a general principle regarding these “People of the Breaths” which has wide-ranging practical consequences with regard to the later “cult of the saints”—in Islam and other world religions--and the realities underlying the complex influences, guidance and mediation of those holy figures: “Therefore among their states after death is that they are living with that essential Life—that ‘Life of the divine Breath’ (*al-*

¹ All passages quoted from Kit b Al-Futuh t al-Makk ya (O. Yahya ed.), vol. III, pp. 333 and 353-355.

hay t al-nafs ya) through which every creature is praising (God).” By way of illustration, he mentions several cases of the way the influences of the worship and devotion of a saint or prophet continue to be manifest in their places of worship (and at their tombs) long after their death. In one of those illustrations, someone who inadvertently profanes the shrine of Bayazid Bastami finds his clothes “burning” him without any visible fire. In the other case, Ibn ‘Arabi recalls how the Prophet, during his celebrated spiritual Ascension, saw Moses praying at his tomb, while at the same time they had their famous conversations in the heavens concerning the proper number of canonical prayers. Then he continues:

“So among the states of this person (who knows the divine Breaths) after their death are things like these: there is no difference in respect to such a person between their life and their death, for they were already in the form of a dead person during the time of their life in this world, in the state of death. So God made them, in the state of their death, like the person whose state is alive.”

A second remarkable sign of those who realize this “Station of the Breaths” is the apparent incorruptibility or agelessness of their physical body:

“And among the attributes of the master of this spiritual station (of the Breaths) after their death is that when someone looks at their face, once they are dead, he will say that person is surely alive--even though the lack of pulse indicates they are dead! So the person who sees them is bewildered.

Now I saw that (happen) with my father—God have mercy on him!--, so that we almost didn’t bury him, we were so unsure, because his face seemed so alive, even though his lack of pulse or breathing indicated he was dead. Some fifteen days before he died, he told me that he was dying and would die on a Thursday, and that is how it was. When the day of his death came—and he was terribly ill—he sat up without any support and said to me: ‘O my son, today is the journey and the meeting (with God)!’

So I said to him: ‘May God grant you a safe journey in this, and may He bless your meeting (with Him)!’

He rejoiced in that and said to me: ‘May God bestow good on you from me, o my son! Everything I used to hear you telling me and didn’t understand, and which I sometimes even denied: now I am (directly) witnessing it!’

Then there appeared on his forehead a glowing whiteness, different from his skin color or any scar, shimmering with light. My father felt that, and then that glowing luminescence spread over his face until it covered his whole body. Then I kissed him and said farewell and left him, telling him: ‘Now I’m going to the main mosque, until they come to announce your death.’

Then he said to me: ‘Go, and don’t let anybody come in to me,’ and the family and daughters were summoned. Now the announcement of his death came at noon, and I came to him and found him—or so someone seeing him would wonder—(still) between life and death, and that is the state in which we buried him. And he had an extraordinary tomb-shrine (*mashhad*).”

Then Ibn ‘Arabi concludes: “For the person who is in this spiritual station, his living and his dying are all the same. [I.e., he has already realized the Prophetic injunction to ‘die before you die!'] And everything we have mentioned in this chapter concerning the Knowing of the person in this station is from the Knowing of the (divine) Breaths.”