

LANGUAGE AND THEOLOGY OF ABŪ BAKR IBN AL-‘ARABĪ (543/1148) BY ILYASS AMHARAR: BOOK REVIEW

AHMAD ARIF ZULKEFLI^{1*}

^{1*} Department of Usul al-Din & Comparative Religions, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia.
Correspondent Email: ahmadarif@iium.edu.my

Received: 07 October 2024

Accepted: 30 November 2024

Published: 19 December 2024

The book *Language and Theology of Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī (543/1148)* (Langage et théologie chez Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī) by Ilyass Amharar is a comprehensive research work on the life and contributions of one of the key figures in Islamic philosophy and mysticism, Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī (543/1148). Written with a meticulous approach, this book thoroughly examines the historical context of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s life, his intellectual influences, and the cultural landscape of al-Andalus during that time, based on biographical sources. This review will explore the structure, themes, and significance of the book’s content, as well as highlight the author’s detailed research and engaging narrative style.

Amharar provides valuable insights into the sources that underpin Ibn al-‘Arabī’s biography. By referencing the major works authored by Ibn al-‘Arabī himself, such as *Riḥla*, *Qānūn*, and *Sirāj al-Murīdīn*, he constructs a narrative rich with anecdotes illustrating the interactions, travels, and impact of Ibn al-‘Arabī on his contemporaries. This narrative not only allows us to feel the life of his time but also elucidates the character, beliefs, and intellectual endeavors he undertook.

The author adds an additional dimension to this biographical study by critically analyzing primary sources. While he acknowledges the potential bias from direct students, the author emphasizes the importance of later writings that provide different perspectives on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s life. For example, the writings of Ibn Baskwāl and Ibn ‘Asākir, produced some time after Ibn al-‘Arabī’s death, allow for a more reflective and neutral assessment of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s contributions and the controversies surrounding his interpretations, particularly regarding Hadith.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE FALL OF TĀ’IFAH AND THE RISE OF THE AL-MURĀBIṬĪN

One of the strengths of this book is its explanation of the historical context of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s life, particularly during the era known as *Tā’ifah*. Amharar clarifies how the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate in Córdoba led to a diffusion of authority and the emergence of small kingdoms that always competed with one another. The implications of this political instability are critical to understanding what motivated Ibn al-‘Arabī’s scholarly efforts and the cultural dynamics of his time. The book emphasizes some important historical events, including the rise of Muḥammad b. ‘Abbād from the ‘Abbānite dynasty and the threats posed by the army of al-

Murābiṭīn. This foundation sets the stage for Ibn al-‘Arabī’s youth time, showing how the political situation impacted his intellectual journey and the philosophical issues he faced. The author stresses that the socio-political volatility of the time not only forced Ibn al-‘Arabī to migrate but also shaped his notions of divinity, knowledge, and power.

Amharar describes a detailed and broad study of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s early life, including his birth in Seville, where he was brought up in a setting filled with scholarly and political influence. The author also highlights the educational environment prepared by his father, ‘Abd Allāh, who understands the importance of a comprehensive education for his son. This early time is vital because it prepared Ibn al-‘Arabī for a scholarly life and instilled the importance of knowledge as an instrument to achieve social advancement and impact.

This book details Ibn al-‘Arabī’s achievements in his early time, including his proficiency of the Quran, Ḥadīth and Arabic literature at the age of nine. The focus on his education in *‘ilm al-falak* and the use of instruments such as the *rub ‘u al-mujayyab* shows his interest in the knowledge. This point indicates how Ibn al-‘Arabī’s early education developed him for his future contributions to philosophy and Islamic thought.

INTELLECTUAL AND POLITICAL JOURNEYS

Amharari highlights Ibn al-‘Arabī’s journey that began when he was just 16 years old. This significant time in his life is projected not only as a physical journey but also as a exploration for wisdom and self-understanding. This book mentions that this journey was caused by some scholarly ambitions and the unstable political climate involving his family, creating a tension. As he explored some countries, Amharar provides key incidents that moulded his intellectual growth. One of the important shaykhs he met was Shaykh Abū al-Qāsim al-Sayyūrī in Mahdiyya, where Ibn al-‘Arabī learned *‘ilm al-kalām* (Islamic theology) and *ādāb al-baḥth wa al-munāẓarah* (debate). This marks a turning point in his knowledge of theology and philosophy, showing the level of his engagement with various *madhhabs*.

THE INFLUENCE OF AL-GHAZĀLĪ

Amharar provides the details of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s engagement with prominent scholars, such as al-Ghazālī, who influenced Ibn al-‘Arabī’s philosophical thoughts. The pursuit of knowledge during this time was not only academic but also together with the socio-political situation. Ibn al-‘Arabī tried to restore the reputation of his family and marked their position in the shifting power movement of al-Andalus.

This narrative illustrates Ibn al-‘Arabī’s intellectual curiosity and his desire to engage with the best thinkers of his time. The author notes that these meetings not only enriched Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of Islamic jurisprudence but also prompted him to critically evaluate the beliefs and traditions he inherited. This learning phase is described as a groundbreaking phase where Ibn al-‘Arabī began to digest multiple ideologies, provide the foundation for his future contributions to *taṣawwuf* and philosophy.

The book also discusses several of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s controversial ideas, particularly concerning traditional Islamic interpretations. The author critically assesses the reactions of contemporary scholars and later critics, depicting the ongoing dialogue about Ibn al-‘Arabī’s legacy in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

This book also reflect on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s enduring impact on thought in both the East and the West. Amharar stresses how Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought surpassed geographical and cultural boundaries, influencing not only Islamic philosophy but also Christian mysticism and modern philosophical discourse. The book encapsulates Ibn al-‘Arabī’s dual identity as a scholar rooted in Islamic tradition and as a thinker engaged with the broader intellectual currents of his time.

The author also emphasizes the role played by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s students and supporters in ensuring that his ideas were passed on to future generations. The contribution of Ibn al-‘Arabī founded not only through his books but also through the scholars who continue his philosophical and *taṣawwuf* works.

Overall, *Language and Theology of Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī* by Ilyass Amharar provides a thorough study of the life, contributions, and legacy of one of the most influential individuals in the history of Islamic thought. The author’s narrative, organized around primary sources and critical analysis, offers valuable insights into understanding the complexity of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s personality and the historical and intellectual context in which he lived. This book is important not only for scholars in the field of Islamic studies but also for anyone interested in the intellectual and philosophical history of the Islamic world.