

Literary and Sufi Analysis of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Poem “al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā”: A Philosophical Educational Approach

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Abstract—The present paper offers a new approach to the poetry of the Egyptian Sufi poet 'Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (576-632AH/ 1181-1235AD). This approach is based on the text of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Great Sufi Poem, al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā, in which the poet expresses in full his spiritual experience. First, the basic hermeneutical question is discussed, e.g., what is the way of approaching a literary text in order to understand the experience of the poet? Also, it deals with a Sufi text, its context and the relationship between text and experience. To what extent does the author express his inner world verbally? In the end, there is a distance between the interior experience of a Sufi and his verbal expression. Eventually, this method is applied to the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ. He describes his Sufi experience as a journey through three steps: from separation (*farq*) to unity (*ittihād*) to universal union (*ḡam'*). On such a partition, ten basic units are highlighted, forming the structure of his Sufi poem.

Index Terms—poetry, 'Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ, mysticism, Sufi poetry, learners

I. INTRODUCTION

'Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632 AH/ 1235 AD) is a well-known poet in the Arabic Islamic Sufi and literary milieu. For his unprecedented lofty poetic expression of the Divine Love, the Egyptian Sufi poet was deservedly called *sultān al-ʿāshiqīn* (i.e., the Prince of Lovers). A careful reading of his poetry shows that love is not the essential theme of his Sufi poetic experience, though it seems so, and that his poetry hides more secrets than it tells. This is why the grandeur of his love mystique has probably driven many ancient commentators and modern researchers to approach his difficult and mysterious language; in fact, there are numerous explanations and studies on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry, trying to decipher its meaning. The present study adopts the hermeneutical and semantic approach in order to highlight the meanings of words in the direct context of the text without recalling the 'foreign' readings, if any. The paper, thus, focuses on some significant results of their own research work on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Dīwān*, especially those related to their hermeneutical analysis of “al-Tā'iyyat al-Kubrā,” so that they should call for a new approach of comprehending and analyzing Sufi texts.

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry has been the subject of plentiful serious debates among his commentators and researchers throughout history. They are triggered because of the lack of a clear-cut method of analysis, suitable for reading and understanding Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry. Three reasons could explain the misreading dilemma, however. Firstly, Ibn al-Fāriḍ, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, wrote nothing but his collection of poems to distill his Sufi experience. Secondly, biographies and data about his life are very few, let alone untrustworthy. Thirdly, his poetic language proves vague and/or mysterious, as mystical as Sufi (i.e., mystical) experience ought to be.

Even worse, the disciples of al-*ṣayḥ* al-akbar Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638 AH/ 1240 AD) incorporated their master's ideas and terminology into their explanations of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry in a manner that projected Ibn al-ʿArabī's Sufi theory onto Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem “al-Tā'iyyat al-Kubrā.” That method was widely adopted by Ibn al-ʿArabī's school to enrich the Sufi tradition with insights and ideas and to attribute them all to the big canonical works of their master. Consequently, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi experience risked losing its particular identity and genuine vision when explained and comprehended in Ibn al-ʿArabī's Sufi terms and vision, not in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's counterparts. Here comes the significance of re-reading Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poems in general, and his masterpiece “al-Tā'iyyat al-Kubrā,” in particular.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. *The Sufi Approach: Experience and Language*

In dealing with a Sufi text, "one has to have some acquaintance with the Sufi language, its formation, and its complexity" (Gilliot, 2002, p. 110). The Sufi language, in fact, developed in the course of history into a vocabulary of its own, reaching a great degree of symbolism, understood many times only by those initiated into it. The Koranic text has been from the very beginning the center of Muslim life. From the beginning of Islamic history, understanding the Koranic text has been a main concern for Muslim scholars, and its exegesis (tafsīr) has been a major issue for them (Massignon, 1999, p. 104). In the same way, the Koranic text has been the starting point of the Sufi experience and language. This fact is now generally accepted by scholars, East and West. Louis Massignon (d. 1962) rightly pointed to the important role the continuous recitation (tilāwa) of the Koranic text, its interiorization (istinbāt) through repetition and meditation played a great role in the life of the first Muslim ascetic circles, similar in this to the practice of the lectio continua (the continuous reading of Scripture) of Christian monks (Nwyia, 1970, pp. 312-313).

On his part, Paul Nwyia, while agreeing with Massignon on the importance of the technique of istinbāt, underlines also the weight personal experience (tağrība, dawq) had as a way for Sufis to 'delve' into the Koranic text in search of its deepest meanings. Sufi language, he says, has been born out of a lived experience, in which words and realities are reconciled, and images and symbols are continuously re-created by ever-new experiences. In his view, Sufis much more than poets and scholars managed to create a true language of experience (Nwyia, 1968, pp. 181-230).

Sufi language developed also in other two important directions. The first is the science of letters (ğāfr), dealing with the symbolic meaning of letters; the second is the language of love (ḥubb), which took the traditional love images of Arabic love literature as symbols for Sufi love. Such developments appeared already quite clear in Sufi authors of the III/IX c., such as Abū l-Ḥasan al-Nūrī (d. 295AH/ 907AD), al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥallāğ (d. 309AH/ 922AD), al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidī (d. 320AH/ 932AD), later on in Abū Ḥamid al-Ġazālī (d. 505AH/ 1111AD) and others.

Sufi hermeneutical effort was taken to its highest level by the 'greatest Sufi master' (al-šayḥ al-akbar) Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638AH/ 1340AD) (Ibn ʿArabī, 1966, pp. 43-44). Ibn al-ʿArabī, in fact, had a large recourse to symbolic language throughout his enormous literal output, adding new developments and insights. A typical example of his symbolic exegesis is the commentary he wrote on his own collection of love poems (Tarğumān al-ašwāq), which he composed in Mekka, in praise of a beautiful princess he fell in love with. Ibn al-ʿArabī explains every single word of his verses (such as doves, branches, colors, sounds, shapes and nouns of places, etc.) to signify various spiritual states and Divine manifestations (Scattolin, 1993, p. 331).

In fact, Ibn al-ʿArabī's school produced a considerable number of commentaries and explanations, enriching the Sufi tradition with new insights and ideas. However, one has to remark that such an exegetical work was always in danger of simply projecting Ibn al-ʿArabī's Sufi vision in all Sufi texts, making them say whatever one wanted from them. In this way, any Sufi text could become just a pre-text in order to express Ibn al-ʿArabī's Sufi views, far beyond the capacity of the textual wording. This was the method Ibn al-ʿArabī's school adopted in its approach to Ibn al-Fārid's poems.

However, Ibn al-Fārid's language has proved to be a particularly complicated and intricate problem for many reasons. Firstly, we don't know much about the poet's Sufi background. Then, we are left with only his collection of poems (Dīwān), and nothing else that could help us in understanding his Sufi vision. In fact, many of these scholars avow that Ibn al-Fārid's poetical language was for them a particularly challenging test. The Italian scholar, Carlo Alfonso Nallino, confessed that for him Ibn al-Fārid's poetical language was "a continuous puzzle"; the British scholar, Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, noted that "much of it is enigmatic to the last degree", as if done so as "to put to the test the cleverness of any reader" (Nicholson, 1921, pp. 166-167); and, finally, another British scholar, Arthur John Arberry avows that he found it "a peculiarly stubborn problem" (Arberry, 1952, p. 7).

The Structure of the Poem: Finding a structure in the 761 verses of the Tā'iyya is no easy task. Its verses seem, at first reading, to have been heaped up together with no apparent order. The poet seems to enjoy leaping, without any evident explanation, from the first to the second and to the third person in a very twisted and apparently confusing method. Some attempts at outlining the poem's structure have been made by Nallino, Nicholson and Arberry in their studies. The poem can be alienated into ten main sections, which can be further subdivided into smaller units. As a result of this partition, the main stages of the poet's mystical experience have been highlighted and expressed in the terms the poet himself used in his text. These three stages are:

al-farq (separation): at this stage, the poet experiences to be in a state of separation from his Beloved.

al-itihād (absolute unity): At this point, the poet feels completely united with his Beloved, as shown by phrases like "I am She" and "She is My-self", ultimately leading to a complete sense of self-identity as "I am My-self".

al-ğam' (universal union): at this stage, the poet involvements to be in a state of universal union or synthesis of the One and the Many, the Self (anā) and the whole.

These three stages are interwoven in ten units of the poem, in a progressive movement that represents the progressive journey of the poet in the discovery of the dimensions or the true identity of his own self (anā). It must be noticed also that the movement of the three stages in the poem is not just horizontal, nor merely ascendant, but actually is like a spiral movement, elevating towards higher stages. In this way, it appears that the poet has described his mystical

experience in the poem as a sequence of stages that takes the shape of a journey (a quite common concept in the Sufi language), or as a dynamic progression from the state of division and duality to that of the utmost unity, al-ḡam':

And take (the mystical knowledge) from a sea into which I plunged,
while those of old stopped on its shores, in reverence to me
(Scattolin, 2004, v. 288)

B. *The Journey Beyond Love*

Ibn al-Fāriḍ has been praised in Sufi writings as (Sulṭān al-'āšiqīn), suggesting that love was the central focus of his spiritual journey. Contrary to all that tradition, on the basis of an accurate semantic analysis of the poem, such an interpretation appears inaccurate. From the analysis of the eighteen roots of the synonyms of love, it has clearly appeared that the vocabulary of love in the poem is centered on three main roots:

i - (Ḥ B B): from which important terms, such as 'love' (ḥubb, maḥabba), 'lover' (muḥibb), 'beloved' (habīb) and, of course, the verb 'to love' (aḥabba), and other derivatives come.

ii - (H W Y): from which drive terms such as 'passion' (hawā/ pl. ahwā') and the verb 'to be passionate' (hawia, yahwā), and other derivatives come.

iii - (W L Y): from which terms such as 'friendship' (walā'), a basic term in Sufism meaning 'nearness to God or sainthood' (walāya), and 'friend of God or saint' (walī) come. The semantic analysis has also shown that precisely the derivatives of the root (W L Y) have the most extensive semantic usage.

While the derivatives of (Ḥ B B) are not used beyond the second stage, the terms of the root (W L Y), on the contrary, have a larger semantic spectrum, which covers all three mystical stages. The reason for such preference is given, throughout the poem, in the relationship of the terms of the root (W L Y) with the pre-eternal agreement (mīṭāq) between God and human souls, mentioned in Koran 7, 172. For many Sufis, especially since al-Ġunayd (III H/X CE), such pre-eternal covenant has been considered the starting point as well as the ultimate goal of their Sufi experience. In fact, they saw in that primordial bond the original witness of the Divine and transcendent Unity of God that has been sealed forever in human souls, through the mysterious dialogue between them and their Lord mentioned in the Koranic verse: "Am I not your Lord? They answered: Yes, indeed! So that you will not say in the day of resurrection: I did not know" (A lastu bi-Rabbi-kum? Qālū: balā!; allā taqūlū yawma al-qiyāma: innā kunnā 'an ḍālika ḡāfilīn).

On this basis, it seems that the traditional designation of Ibn al-Fāriḍ as *Sulṭān al-'āšiqīn* does not fully express the highest point of his Sufi experience. Presumably, this title should be changed to "The Poet of Universal, all-comprehensive Union (ḡam'). Love, important as it may be in his poetry, is but a stage in his mystical path towards such universal union, a stage that must be overcome for a higher one.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Into the depth of Universal Union

Immersed in the depths of universal unity (biḥār al-ḡam'), Ibn al-Fāriḍ articulates his remarkable encounter using a diverse range of language and imagery, as if ascending with complete freedom into a realm not bound by the ordinary rules of our everyday lives. He communicates to his apprentice his elevated condition, stating:

And haughtily sweep with thy skirts, the skirts of an impassioned lover,
who in his union (with the Beloved) trails over the Milky Way.
And pass through the various degrees of Oneness (ittiḥād) and do not join a party,
that lost their life in something different (from that Oneness)
(Nicholson, 1921, vv. 300-301)

Out of the great variety of words and images, the poet uses to describe this stage, a number of them play a fundamental role in defining the characteristics of such stage of universal union (ḡam'), and they clearly constitute the basic semantic vocabulary of this section of the poem. These words are derivatives of a number of linguistic roots on which the poet builds the vocabulary of this section. They are:

i. (W Ġ D): from which terms such as waḡd (ecstasy) and wuḡūd (the act of finding, existence) derive.

ii. (Š H D): from which terms such as šuhūd (vision) and mušāhada (contemplation) derive.

iii. (W Ḥ D): from which terms such as ittiḥād (union as self-identity) and tawḥīd (the profession of unity), waḥda (unity) derive.

iv. (Ġ M '): from which terms such as ḡam' (universal union) and other terms derive.

It is to be noted that, in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry, the term wuḡūd is related to multiplicity and duality, and so to the first stage of his mystical ascension, that of separation (farq). In the poem, in fact, the term wuḡūd connotes the encounter (wuḡūd, from waḡada, "to find, to come across") or the experience of reality, but still in a stage of multiplicity, division, and so of imperfection. The experience of wuḡūd, therefore, is described as a state that must be overthrown to reach the true and real vision (šuhūd) of reality, that of unity (waḥda). Only through such a true vision does the poet enter into the world of unity, in which he discovers firstly his identity with his beloved (ittiḥād), and then reaches the full awareness of his universal union (ḡam'). The two terms wuḡūd and šuhūd, in fact, are always opposed in the poem as two contradictory states of experience and never is wuḡūd connoted with ontological qualifications such as real (ḥaqq), absolute (muṭlaq) and universal (kullī). Therefore, one should translate the Fāriḍian wuḡūd not with 'being', but as an

'empirical finding or experiencing' of realities of the perceptible world of senses, while the Fāriḍian *šuhūd* should be translated as the 'true vision of the Real in its deepest unity'.

The second stage of the same journey is characterized by the experience of unity, in the sense of self-identity, indicated by the derivatives of the root (W Ḥ D) and, in particular, by the term *ittiḥād*, which is one of the key terms of the poem. In this stage the poet becomes aware of his union, but of his identity with his Beloved.

During this phase, the poet realizes that his individual self (*anā*) is not just the origin of all things, but it exists within everything, transcending the constraints of space and time. With this newfound perception of reality and becoming one with it, the poet is able to create new, unfamiliar melodies that may be unsettling for some, but captivating and intriguing for others. The ultimate source of such an extraordinary and transcendent union is to be found in the reality of *ḡam'* of which the poet is now fully conscious, as he declares:

But for me, no existence (of the visible world) (*wuḡūd*) would have come into being,
nor would there have been vision (of unity) (*šuhūd*),
nor would religious covenants (*'uhūd*) have been taken in fidelity.
(Scattolin, 2004, vv. 638)

There are, however, some others that play an important role in the poem and to which those semantic fields are constantly referred: they are 'soul' (*nafs*), 'spirit' (*rūḥ*) and 'essence' (*ḡāt*). These terms are called 'pivotal terms', as they are constantly referred to the whole vocabulary of the poem. They have been often understood as expressions of concepts such as One Being, One Soul, One Spirit, and One Essence as if a monistic language was the basis of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's vocabulary.

Firstly, when examining the terms *nafs* (commonly translated as soul) and *ḡāt* (commonly translated as essence), it becomes evident that they frequently appear in the poem in connection with the term *anā* (I, my-self), to the extent that they can substitute it at various points. On the contrary, the term *rūḥ* (often translated as spirit) is used differently, as it is never employed as an identity term for *anā*. Instead, it typically signifies certain attributes of *anā*, particularly the spiritual ones as opposed to the sensory ones, which are then linked to the term 'soul' (*nafs*).

The Main Partitions of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Great Sufi Poem, al-Tā'īyyat al-kubrā.

To better understand Ibn Fāriḍ's *al-Tā'īyyat al-kubrā*, a partition of the poem is analyzed according to the three main stages (*farq* - *ittiḥād* - *ḡam'*) of the poet's mystical journey.

1. *The Love Prelude or the final Introduction* (vv. 1-116)

Resorting to the traditional language of Arabic love poetry, since long adopted by Sufis to express their spiritual experience of Divine love, the poet proclaims his ardent love. Imitating the stock vocabulary of love poets, he describes the pains of his passion: this is burning inside him, wasting him away, moreover, the poet swears to be well prepared to die and be utterly annihilated for his Beloved's sake. Answering him back, the Beloved, resorting likewise to the traditional vocabulary of love poetry, rebukes the poet, showing that his words are not sincere and that he is still far away from true self-annihilation (*fanā'*) in love.

The hand of my eye has given me to sip
the ardent wine of love,
my cup was the face of Her
that [all] beauty transcends.
(Borg, 2001, vv. 1)

2. *A Description of Union* (*ḡam'*) (vv. 117-196)

In a crescendo of images, the poet discloses the feelings stirred in him by the Beloved's presence in his inmost self. Finally, it is in prayer that his secret comes to light: in prayer, the poet discovers and becomes fully aware of his radical identity with his Beloved: in prayer lover and Beloved become one and the same, each of them being prostrated to their one reality. Moreover, the poet realizes that such a union has been the one and the same since eternity.

In prayer, my eye beholds Her
in front of me,
whilst my heart beholds me
that I am imām of [all] my imāms.
(Scattolin, 2004, vv. 149)

3. *Description of his Mystical State* (vv. 197-285)

Furthermore, the poet describes again how he has reached the stage of union with his Beloved. He explains that it was after a long ascetic journey that he could reach the state of true vision where all visible perceptions are obliterated. In such a state of union, he has become aware too of his own deepest reality, because in it, as he says: "My essence (*ḡāt-i*) became endued with my essence ((Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'īyyat al-kubrā*, v. 212). This stage of union is called here *ittiḥād*, which means 'union of identity' because in it the poet discovers his identity with his Beloved: the two are one essence.

Then, I became a beloved,
nay, one in love with one's own self,
and not, as I said before,
that my soul was my Beloved.

(Scattolin, 2004, v. 205)

4. *The Sublimity of a Mystical State* (vv. 286-333)

The poet begins by describing the transcendence of the mystical state he has achieved and declares that this state has lifted him beyond all aspects of love. He has moved beyond the state of unity-identity of 'I am She' (anā iyyā-hā) and "I am I, My-self" (anā iyyā-ya), and his journey is now directed towards the vast and all-encompassing union of the univer.

The realm of the highest degrees of love
is my possession,
their realities are my army
and all lovers are my subjects.
(Scattolin, 2004, v. 293)

5. *The Contraries Become One* (vv. 334-440)

In this part, the poet initiates the revelation of what can be termed as 'the marvels of union'. He introduces it with a fresh 'love prelude (tağazzul)' (vv. 334-387) that parallels the one at the beginning of the poem (vv. 1-116). However, at this point, the significance of the love symbols has become more apparent: the two, lover and Beloved, are essentially one and the same entity that manifests itself to itself and loves itself through itself.

Were She to dissolve my body,
She would see that in every atom of it
there is every heart,
in which there every love dwells.
(Scattolin, 2004, vv. 387)

6. *The Poet as the Supreme Pole of Existence* (vv. 441-503)

In this part, the poet expands his perspective until he recognizes that he is the focal point of the entire universe: all the worlds revolve around him because he is the supreme Pole (quṭb) of existence. As the Pole of existence, all religious worship is directed towards him, and all of creation derives its movement from him. Additionally, all spiritual levels are granted through him, embodied in the spiritual qualities of prophets and saints throughout history.

I have indicated by means
of what the expression can yield,
and that which remains hidden
I have made it clear by a subtle allegory.
(Scattolin, 2004, v. 494)

7. *The Wonders of Union* (vv. 504-588)

This section starts with verses about love (tağazzul) in which the poet expresses his love for his Beloved, now in a state of complete intoxication (sukr) from their union. All pronouns are changed to the first person, creating unique and captivating sounds and images. The poet then shifts to a more theological tone, stating that his union transcends all distinctions known in classical theology, such as the difference between God's essence (dāt) and his attributes (ṣifāt), names (asmā') and acts (af'āl):

I seek Her from myself,
though She was ever beside me:
I marveled at the way
She was hidden from me through myself.
(Borg, 2001, v. 512)

8. *The Wonders of Union: The Poet's anā (I, Myself) Extends Through Space and Time Beyond All Limits* (vv. 588-650)

While in this state of union, the poet realizes that as the ultimate Pole (quṭb) of the universe, his actions go beyond any limits of space and time. He is the one who has performed all the miracles (muğizāt) attributed to the prophets and the wonders (karāmāt) attributed to the saints in every time and place. Above all, he embodies the greatest Divine qualities, such as majesty (ğalāl), beauty (ğamāl), and perfection (kamāl), in a way that includes all of them together.

I survey all the horizons [of the earth]
in a flash of thought,
and I pass through all the seven layers of heaven
in one step. (Borg, 2001, vv. 593)

9. *The Wonders of Union: Examples and Explanations of Such a Sublime State* (vv. 651-731)

In this part, the poet once more shares with his disciple his mystical encounter, which may seem illogical to a rational mind: How can unity and multiplicity coexist? How can he be present in everything and everything be present in him? To illustrate his point, the poet uses examples from everyday experiences. Then, in a lengthy passage (vv. 677-706), he presents a description of the 'play of the shadows' (ḥayāl al-zill) as the most suitable example to carry his meaning.

Whatever you have contemplated [in the play]
was in fact the act of only one, alone [agent],

only [enwrapped] in the veils of occultation.

(Borg, 2001, vv. 704)

10. *The Wonders of Union: The Poet's anā (I, Myself) is the Goal of All Religions which are but Its Self-Manifestations throughout Human History* (vv. 732-761)

In fact, Ibn al-Fāriḍ seems to reveal a glimpse of the deep mystery that is presented in his verses. He explicitly states that he has realized that he is one and the same with the 'Eternal Light', which is a recognized Sufi reference to the 'Eternal Light of Muḥammad' (al-nūr al-muḥammadī) or the 'Eternal Reality of Muḥammad'. This same idea was immersed in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's time by the 'greatest Sufi Master' (al-Ṣayḥ al-akbar), Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), with the idea of the 'Perfect Man' (al-insān al-kāmil).

In all religions humans' eyes

have not gone astray,

neither have their thoughts deviated

in every religious belief.

(Borg, 2001, vv. 738)

IV. CONCLUSION

Hermeneutics is a never-ending work. In fact, it is an approach to reality through language, but reality always lies beyond any language, any expression and any interpretation. Here, one unavoidably enters into the well-known hermeneutical circle, i.e., hermeneutics as an ever-going process of interpretation. In fact, after all the work is done, one becomes all the more aware that in order to understand reality, one should become that reality. Being and logos are one, said the Greek philosophers, and only in such unity true understanding is reached. The 'fusion of horizons', prospected by Gadamer, can never be really achieved, unless there is also a 'fusion of beings'. Here lies the basic problem of hermeneutics, which eluded many times in many ways. A pure intellectual, technical approach to mystical texts, though necessary, will never be adequate to understand the mystical experience expressed in them.

In the end, it's interesting and important to mention a highly expressive saying attributed to 'Alī b. Abū Ṭālib (d. 40AH/ 661AD), the cousin of Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam. During the battle of Siffin (37AH/ 657AD), the army of Mu'awiyya (d. 60AH/ 680AD), his opponent, raised some sheets of the Koranic text on the top of their spears, claiming God's judgment upon the dispute for the caliphate. 'Alī's supporters were impressed by such a move and were inclined to accept the proposal. Then, 'Alī pronounced his famous sentence: "This Koran is a text written (masṭūr) between two covers; it does not speak, it is in need of an interpreter (tarḡumān). It is people who speak on its behalf" (Alī b. Abū Ṭālib, 1951, p. 5). This sentence summarizes the core of the hermeneutical question. Texts, even the revealed ones, are in themselves silent, it is their readers that make them speak, for good or evil. They are the interpreters of the texts.

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