

Yousef Casewit. *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barrajan and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 353 pages. ISBN: 9781107184671.

*Noah Gardiner**

The Sevilan thinker Ibn Barrajan (Abū al-Ḥakam ‘Abd al-Salām b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Abī al-Rijāl Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Lakhmī al-Ifriqī al-Ishbīlī, d. 536/1141), much like his Cordoban predecessor Ibn Masarra al-Jabalī (d. 319/931), has appeared in modern scholarship mostly as a silhouette in the penumbra of the great Sufi thinker Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240). Among the many merits of this monographic study by Yousef Casewit, currently the assistant professor of Qur’anic studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School, is the evidence it provides that much of what has been perceived as the unique product of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s genius in fact reflects his indebtedness to a tradition of Andalusian “mysticosophical” (2) thought and practice that well pre-dated him. This tradition was known as *i’tibār* (contemplation), and at least some of its practitioners self-identified as *mu’tabirūn* (contemplatives) (3). As elucidated by the author over the course of the introduction, eight chapters, and a brief conclusion, the *i’tibār* tradition embodied an interrogation of the relationship between the divine and the manifest world as fiercely original and visionary as anything produced by classical Sufism.

As Casewit reconstructs it, this tradition comes into historical view in the works of Ibn Masarra, whose concept of contemplation “rests on the idea that the herebelow and the hereafter are parallel worlds with associative correspondences,” such that “[r]eading the book of nature and contemplating God’s signs (*āya*) with the intellect (*‘aql*) enables the contemplative to gradually ascend the ladder of knowledge of divine unity (*tawḥīd*)” (36). Casewit’s discussion of Ibn Masarra’s

* Assist. Prof., University of South Carolina, Department of Religious Studies.
Correspondence: noah.d.gardiner@gmail.com.

doctrine is entirely adequate, if not especially groundbreaking. More original is his contextualization of the Cordoban sage and *masarri/mu'tabirī* thinkers of later generations within a wider tradition of Andalusian renunciant-intellectuals (*al-munqabiḍūn*) who pointedly withdrew to the countryside and eschewed engagement with the state and the Mālikī divines who were often deeply entangled with it (25-33). Ibn Barrajan, who at forty abandoned his life as an urban scholar for one of farming, contemplating God and nature, writing, and teaching small coterie of students, certainly fits this pattern (33-39). It was in this pastoral setting that he authored his major works in which his contemplative vision of the Qur'ān and the cosmos is recorded.

Casewit dedicates Chapter 4 (128-70) to introducing these works, which include *al-Irshād ilā subul al-rashād*, a work on the concordance between the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* literature that, although well-received up into the Mamlūk period, now appears lost; *Sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, a lengthy and highly original commentary on the divine names; *Tanbīh al-afhām ilā tadabbur al-kitāb al-ḥakīm wa-ta'arruf al-āyāt wa-l-naba' al-'aẓīm*, his major Qur'ān commentary (often erroneously labelled and cataloged as *al-Irshād*); *Idāḥ al-ḥikma bi-aḥkām al-'ibra*,¹ an important supplement to *al-Tanbīh* in which many of Ibn Barrajan's most distinctive teachings are found; and a possible fifth treatise entitled *'Ayn al-yaqīn*, which, if it ever existed, now appears to be lost. Casewit's overviews of these works are detailed, and he pays due attention to evaluating the surviving manuscripts as well as published versions.

Among Casewit's fundamental arguments is that the *i'tibār* tradition emerged and developed largely independently of the major eastern traditions of Sufism and philosophy (*falsafa*), arising instead from an admixture of elements peculiar to the intellectual environment of medieval al-Andalus (much of Chapter 2; 57-90, is dedicated to this argument). He joins some other recent scholars in postulating that Ismā'īlī Neoplatonism and the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-ṣafā'* exercised a strong influence on otherwise Sunni Andalusian thought, especially on certain ideas of the *mu'tabirūn* up to and including Ibn Barrajan.² Peripateticism, however, seems to factor in not at all with Ibn Barrajan and company.

1 Recently edited by Casewit and Gerhard Böwering as *A Qur'ān Commentary by Ibn Barrajan of Seville (d. 536/1141): Īdāḥ al-ḥikma bi-aḥkām al-'ibra, Wisdom Deciphered, the Unseen Discovered* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

2 The most noteworthy recent example is Michael Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-'Arabi and Ismā'īlī Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), a book with which Casewit is frequently in dialogue in the footnotes.

Casewit also expends significant effort on discussing the impact—or lack thereof, in Ibn Barraġān’s case—of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) *Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn*, which Almoravid authorities notoriously ordered burned (50-56 and 57-66). This is a matter of pressing interest, given Ignaz Goldziher’s (d. 1921) influential hypothesis of al-Ghazālī’s foundational importance to western-Islamicate mysticism.³ Per Casewit, Goldziher was fundamentally mistaken in postulating that Ibn Barraġān, along with contemporaries like Ibn al-‘Arīf (d. 536/1141) and Ibn Qasī (d. 546/1151), was a champion in the west of the Ghazalian fusion of Sufism and Ash‘arism (57 ff.). Rather, he argues that Ibn Barraġān’s thought was already well-developed prior to the *Iḥyā’*’s introduction to the peninsula; neither does al-Ghazālī’s *al-Maqṣad* inform the Sevillian thinker’s work on the divine names (150-54). Furthermore, while Ibn Barraġān is obviously aware of Sufism, he refers to it in the third person, as it were, as a path distinct from his own (2 and 67 ff.). In short, Casewit argues, Ibn Barraġān would not have considered himself part of the spiritual/intellectual lineage deriving from al-Junayd (d. 298/910) and al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072–3), much less al-Ghazālī.

Among the root causes of misconceptions such as Goldziher’s—and, arguably, Miguel Asín Palacios’ (d. 1944) influential notion of an “Almerian school” of Sufism (67-68)—is that later Sufi biographical works such as Ibn al-Zayyāt al-Tādilī’s (d. 627/1229–30 or 628/1230–1) *al-Tashawwuf ilā rijāl al-taṣawwuf*, written only after Abū Madyan (d. 589/1193 or 594/1198) and company had firmly sown Sufism à la al-Junayd in the west, were compiled by scouring the past for westerners who could be claimed as saints or otherwise affiliated with the Sufi tradition. Ibn Barraġān was perhaps particularly appealing in this regard, due to his alleged martyrdom at the hands of the Almoravids—a narrative Casewit carefully revisits (121-27). By appropriating Ibn Barraġān and others, Sufi biographers obscured the autonomy and integrity of the *i’tibār* tradition. It lends considerable weight to Casewit’s argument that the Sufi biographical tradition’s tendency to retroactively assimilate competing mystical schools and figures is well known from eastern examples (i.e., the al-Karrāmiyya and al-Malāmatiyya movements, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī [d. probably 298/910], etc.). Of course, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s absorption and reframing of major elements of the *i’tibār* tradition and his subsequent elevation to the position of the “greatest shaykh” of Sufism aided in this obfuscation.

3 Ignaz Goldziher, *Le livre de Mohammed ibn Toumart. Mahdi des Almohades: Texte arabe accompagné de notices biographiques et d'une introduction* (Algiers: Imprimerie Orientale Pierre Fontana, 1903), pp. 22-43.

The strongest evidence of Casewit's contention that the *i'tibār* tradition should be considered an independent mysticophilosophical current lies in the sometimes radical alterity of Ibn Barrajan's thought, which the author introduces in far greater length and detail than previous scholarship. Ibn Barrajan's ideas about hierarchical levels of meaning in the Qur'an suffice as an example. Taking as a point of departure classical Sunni notions of the Qur'an having been sent down from the "Preserved Tablet" (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*) and/or the "Mother of the Book" (*umm al-kitāb*) as a "whole" (*jumla*) that was subsequently revealed piecemeal by the Prophet, Ibn Barrajan conceptualizes the holy text as possessing an internal hierarchy of emanative levels, but not in the *zāhir/bāṭin* sense familiar from Sufi and Shi'i commentaries (see 221-38 for the main discussion of this and what follows).

The most important of these levels are the ontologically superior "Supreme Qur'an" (*al-Qur'an al-'aẓīm*), consisting of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa, the "disconnected letters" (*al-muqaṭṭa'āt*), divine names, and certain synoptic verses; and the derivative "Exalted Qur'an" (*al-Qur'an al-'azīz*) that comprises the bulk of the text and consists of differentiations or specifications (*tafṣīlāt*) of the higher truths of the former. This distinction seems to more or less map onto his unique understanding of the well-known exegetical terms *muḥkam* (compact) and *mutashābih* (consimilar), derived from Qur'an 3:7. The compact verses "are intermediaries between the archetypal source of revelation and the Qur'an, since they are fixed in the Mother of the Book and descend to the Qur'an" (228), whereas the *mutashābihāt*, which in his view form the majority of the text, are differentiations of the former.

By way of illustration, at one point Ibn Barrajan likens the *muḥkamāt* to the waters that fall from the heavens and the *mutashābihāt* to the various tracts of vines, fields, and palms to which the waters grant life (229-30). Just as the *mu'tabir* contemplates the harmonies of nature to ascend to an understanding of the divine, the exegete contemplates the *nazm* ("arrangement") of the Qur'an—its internal harmonies and interconnections (209 ff.)—to discern its gradations of meaning and ultimate rootedness in the transcendent Preserved Tablet/Mother of the Book. The *ḥadīth* play a vital role in Ibn Barrajan's parsing of the Qur'an's levels, mostly as confirmations of his cosmo-exegetical insights (191-92). He also reads the Qur'an through the lens of Jewish and Christian scriptures, to which he accords roughly the same authority as the *ḥadīth*. Casewit, who dedicates a separate chapter to the topic of non-Muslim scriptures in Ibn Barrajan's thought (Chapter 7; 245-65), goes so far as to propose that "the Sevillian master seems to be the first Qur'anic exegete to seriously engage with the Bible nonpolemically and through actual extended quotations" (247).

Ibn Barrajān's emanative image of the Qur'ān is of a piece with his cosmological thought, another subject to which Casewit devotes a great deal of attention. Two doctrines of particular importance in this regard are "the Universal Servant" (*al-'abd al-kullī*) and "the Reality upon Which Creation is Created" (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi al-khalq*), abbreviated as HMBK throughout most of the book. As Ibn Barrajān was not a systematic writer, mentions of these concepts run scattershot through his corpus, and Casewit devotes most of a chapter to synthesizing them (Chapter 5; 171-205). The Universal Servant is "the initial, all-comprehensive reality that brings together all things," though it "cannot be categorized as a created existent, nor as part of the divine Essence per se, since it occupies an intermediate station between God and the world of creation" (173-74). Casewit sees it as echoing the Brethren of Purity's "Universal Human" (*al-insān al-kullī*) as well as (Ismā'īli) Neoplatonism's "Universal Intellect" (*al-'aql al-kullī*). I would add that its similarity to Kabbalistic notions of Adam Kadmon is also striking.

Ibn Barrajān finds evidence for the Universal Servant in various Qur'ānic figures: the "single soul" (*nafs wāḥida*) of Qur'ān 31:28 and the "all things" (*kull shay'*) that God creates and measures out in Qur'ān 25:2. He also conjures various images to describe it: a macrocosmic man standing in prayer before God and a ship sailing on the seas of nonexistence "engulfing all created existents within its hull," just like Noah's Ark carried all of Earth's species during the Flood (176). The Universal Servant is created in God's form (*ṣūrat al-ḥaqq*), with God's names and qualities pervading it. Its microcosmic counterpart "the Particular Servant" (*al-'abd al-juz'ī*) is exemplified by Adam, his form (*ṣūra*) fashioned "according to the form of the Real" (*ṣūra 'alā ṣūrat al-ḥaqq*).

As for the HMBK, the concept is intimately tied in with that of the Universal Servant; but whereas the Universal Servant is the pre-existential form of the totality, the "HMBK expresses the intrinsic harmoniousness, equilibrium, and beauty of the created world" and "is thus an outward manifestation (*ẓāhir*) of the intrinsic, nonmanifest (*bāṭin*) and nondifferentiated qualities contained in the Universal Servant" (186). Put another way, the HMBK is the totality of God's signs (*āyāt*) as they show forth in scripture and in nature at each moment.

Together, these concepts constitute the conditions under which the praxis of *i'tibar* is possible. Relying on the three books—the Qur'ān, the book of the self, and the book of nature—the *mu'tabir* relies on the signs of the HMBK as he strives to ascend the ladder of being back to the original proximity to the divine that is

the Universal Servant. It is with regard to such cosmological concepts that Ibn al-‘Arabi’s significant debt to Ibn Barraĵān becomes clear. As Casewit puts it, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “Perfect Man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) is a “fuller elaboration” of the doctrine of the Universal Servant (171). The idea of the three books is also central to Akbarian thought, particularly as it was systematized by al-Qunawī (d. 673/1274). Indeed, although Casewit does not take the argument this far, one wonders if Ibn Barraĵān was, in fact, the most important conduit of Ismā‘īlī Neoplatonism, the ideas of the Brethren, etc. to the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabi and the other western Sufis of that era whom he influenced.

As Casewit devotes the final full chapter of the book to exploring, Ibn Barraĵān was also quite concerned with notions of divinely determined cycles— “the cycles of God’s ordinances” (*dawā’ir ḥikam Allāh*) or “cycles of determination” (*dawā’ir al-taqdīr*)—governing the creation at biological, ritual, historical, cosmic, and metaphysical scales (283 ff.), concepts that no doubt owe much to the *Epistles* of the Brethren or similar sources. The most famous instance of Ibn Barraĵān’s employment of such concepts is his accurate prediction that Jerusalem would be retaken from the Crusaders in 583/1187, penned in *al-Tanbih* in 522/1128. Because the logic of the prediction is relatively simple and “so perfectly rooted in [Ibn Barraĵān’s] cosmology and theory of cycles,” Casewit argues that it was an actual prediction rather than a posthumous addition (295) and includes a lengthy translation of the section of the *Tanbih* in which it is found. He demonstrates that Ibn Barraĵān relied on neither astrology nor the science of letters (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*) to arrive at this date, but rather on a close reading of Qur’ān 30:1-6 through the filter of his own cosmology.

Indeed, Casewit argues throughout that Ibn Barraĵān had little interest in either discipline, at least not in the sense that Ibn Masarra and other “lettrists” granted the letters a role in constituting and occultly influencing the cosmos.⁴ Nonetheless, there is no mistaking the influence of Ibn Barraĵān’s ideas on cosmic cycles and related topics on Ibn al-‘Arabi, Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 622/1225 or 630/1232-3), and others associated with the science of letters as it flourished during the millenarian-tinged occult revival of the late medieval and early modern periods. This is just one aspect of the Sevillan master’s *Nachleben* that remains to be explored in greater depth, and Casewit’s study provides an excellent point of departure for such lines of inquiry.

4 This is not to say that Ibn Barraĵān did not regard letters as important. See pp. 148-50, 230-34, and *passim*.

The book fits well within the important “Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization” series, which seems to be particularly productive in recent years. It is probably too advanced for most undergraduate classes, but it should be considered an essential addition to graduate-level syllabi on medieval Islamic intellectual history, Andalusian thought, Sufism, Qur’an exegesis, and so on. The book’s chapters are fairly self-contained and could be assigned piecemeal without too much scaffolding on the instructor’s part. It is occasionally too apparent that the book is based on a dissertation⁵; for example, there is some repetitiveness between the introduction and first chapter, and an egregious number of typos. Despite these flaws, however, the book is an excellent contribution to the field of premodern Islamic studies, and by all rights it should have a significant and lasting impact.

5 Yousef Casewit, “The Forgotten Mystic: Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141) and the Andalusian Mu’tabirūn” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2014).