Journeys for God in Ṣūfī and Judeo Arabic Literature

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Zusammenfassung

Das Konzept der drei Reisen als einen Weg zur spirituellen Entwicklung wurde von einem der Gründerväter der islamischen Mystik, Dhu al-Nun, eingeführt. Später wurde die Anwendung des Konzepts verfeinert, indem es mit der sufischen Technik verschiedene Präpositionen hinzuzufügen kombiniert wurde, um dadurch zwischen den spirituellen Stufen zu unterscheiden. Mit der Verwendung der Wörter Reise (Safar) und Gott (Allah) und dem Hinzufügen einer Präposition zum Wort Gott konnten sufische Schriftsteller die verschiedenen Wege zu Gott oder die Stationen (Maqamat) auf diesem Weg aufzeichnen. Ibn al-ʾArabi spricht Anfang des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts von drei verschiedenen Wegen: von Gott, zu Gott und in Gott. Am Ende des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts spricht der jüdisch-arabische Bibelkommentator Tanchum ha-Yerushalmi von den drei Reisen als drei Stationen eines kontinuierlichen Weges. Eine nahezu identische Beschreibung ist eine Generation danach beim muslimischen Gelehrten Qayyim al-Jawziyya zu finden. Aus den drei Reisen werden im vierzehnten Jahrhundert in den Schriften des sufischen Schriftstellers al-Qashani vier, wobei das Schema der drei Präpositionen beibehalten wurde. Kurz vor dem Ende des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts sind in den Schriften von R. David ha-Nagid nur noch zwei Reisen zu finden: zu Gott und in Gott. All dies zeigt uns, dass uns die jüdisch-arabische Literatur dabei helfen kann die geschichtliche Entwicklung der sufischen Ideen genauer nachzuzeichnen.

Abstract

The concept of three journeys as a way to denote spiritual development was introduced by Dhu al-Nun, one of the founding fathers of Islamic mysticism. The use of this concept was later refined by combining it with the Sufi technique of adding different prepositions to a certain term, in order to differentiate between spiritual stages. By using the words journey (Safar) and God (Allah) and inserting a preposition before the word God, Sufi writers could map the different roads to God or the stations (Maqamat)

on this road. Ibn al-ʿArabi, in the beginning of the thirteenth century, speaks of three different ways: from God, toward God and in God. Tanchum ha-Yerushalmi, the Judeo Arabic biblical commentator from the end of this century, speaks of the three journeys as three stations of one continuous way. A nearly identical description we can find in the writing of the Muslim scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, a generation later. Later in the fourteenth century, in the writing of the Sufi writer al-Qashani, the three travels become four, although the scheme of three prepositions is preserved. Near the end of the fourteenth century, in the writings of R. David ha-Nagid, we find only two journeys: to God and in God. All this tells us that Judeo Arabic literature can help us map with greater precision the historical development of Sufi ideas.

1.   Sources

The concept of the journey (safar) is a frequent topic of discussion in Ṣūfī literature where it is often employed in a dual sense – for the physical and the spiritual realm. Al-Qušayrī, a prominent eleventh century Ṣūfī teacher, says: "You should know that there are two kinds of journeys: a bodily journey, signifying motion from one place to another, and a journey of the heart, signifying ascension from one [spiritual] quality to another".[1] The physical journey was important for the Ṣūfīs as their lifestyle involved traveling from place to place in search for masters to learn from. The spiritual journey was an expedition the Ṣūfī undertook within his own soul, from one spiritual station (maqām) to another, in search of the place that would eventually connect him to God.

The concept of the three journeys, which leads to the highest level of spiritual knowledge, was present in Ṣūfī literature from the earliest times onwards. According to a saying attributed to Ḏū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, an early Muslim mystic of the ninth century:

> "I have made three journeys. From the first journey I brought back knowledge that both the common folk (ʿāmm) and the elite (xāṣṣ) can understand. From the second journey I brought back knowledge that only the elite can understand. From the third journey I brought back knowledge that neither the elite nor the common folk can understand".[2]

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[1]   Maʿrūf Zurayq / ʿAlī al-Balṭanjī (ed.): Al-Risāla al-Qušayriyya li- ʿAbd al-Karim al-Qušayrī, Bayrūt 1990, p. 89.
[2]   ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (ed.): ʿIlm al-Qulūb li-Abī Ṭālib al-Makkī, Bayrūt 2004, p. 82.

The word 'journey,' here, probably carries a dual meaning: it describes the three physical journeys the mystic made to three different locations (assumedly, for the purpose of learning from three different teachers); at the same time, it also alludes to his journey along the path of gaining spiritual knowledge he is unable to share with others – not even with those considered to be (or who considered themselves to be) members of a spiritual and religious elite.

Another concept – or rather, stylistic technique – found in Ṣūfī literature from early onwards, is the use of a series of changing prepositions for a given term as a way of distinguishing between the different spiritual stages. A story, referred to in several Ṣūfī compilations and attributed to the tenth century Ṣūfī teacher al-Sarrāj, illustrates this technique. The story tells of an early Muslim mystic of the ninth century, al-Šiblī and discusses one of the key concepts of Ṣūfī thought: that of patience (ṣabr), or the ability to withstand hardship. The story reads as follows:

> "A man stood in front of al-Šiblī, God rest his soul, and asked: What form of patience is hardest, [even] for those who possess patience? He [al-Šiblī] answered, 'Patience in things relating to God (ṣabr fī Allāh).' The man said 'No.' Then [al-Šiblī] said, 'Patience for God (ṣabr li-Allāh).' [The man said, 'No.'] He then said: 'Patience with God (ṣabr maʿa Allāh).' The man again said, 'No.' Al-Šiblī grew angry and shouted: 'Damn you, what is it then?' The man told him: 'Patience without God (ṣabr ʿan Allāh)'".[3]

According to al-Qušayrī, patience in matters relating to God denotes one's obedience to God; patience for God denotes the enduring of pain and torment for God, while patience with God denotes the ability to withstand the torments our desire for God induces;[4] whereas patience without God probably means feeling abandoned by God. This story illustrates the literary convention of inserting various prepositions between two terms (in this case: 'patience' and 'God'). Thus, the writer is able to differentiate between various kinds of spiritual processes. This literary technique, combined with the notion of the three journeys, gave rise to the idea of the three distinct journeys to God, which are distinguished by three different prepositions.

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3   ʿImād al-Bārūdī (ed.): Al-Lumaʿ fī al-Tārīx al-Islāmī li- ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAlī al- Sarrāj, Al-Qāhira (without a date), p. 54.
4   Zurayq / Al-Balṭanjī, Al-Risāla, pp. 185–186.

2.   First Appearance

This concept seems to have appeared first in the writings of the famous Muslim mystic Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), who, in an epistle on the subject of the journeys, says: "There are three journeys precisely determined by God; there is no fourth journey. There is a journey from Him (min ʿndihi), a journey toward Him (ilayhi) and a journey in Him (fīhi)". Ibn al-ʿArabī goes on to explain that the journeys from and to God have limitations (ġāya), whereas a journey in God is boundless. According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, each of these journeys can be divided into several categories. The journey from God is divided into three categories: the journey of those whom God has rejected; the journey of those who fled for shame, i. e. feeling unworthy of His presence; and the journey of those sent by God. The journey toward God is also divided into three categories: The journey of those who sin by considering God to be corporeal and by worshiping other forces besides God; the journey of those who commit other sins; and the journey of those who do not sin. The journey in God is divided into two categories: the journey of those who are guided by their own intellect and therefore lost their way (i. e., the philosophers) and the journey of those who follow God's guidance (i. e., the prophets and the righteous).[5] According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, these three journeys are both physical and spiritual, and can be positive or negative depending on whether or not the traveler embarks on the journey with a pure heart.

3.   The Three Stations

The concept of the three journeys also occurs in the writings of Tanchum Ha-Yerushalmi, a Jewish lexicographer and Biblical commentator, who died in Egypt in 1291. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Tanchum comments on the verse, "Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the doe of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires", which appears three times in the Song of Songs (2:7, 3:5, 8:4). Tanchum explains that the bride in the Song of Songs (symbolizing the human soul) addresses the forces of the body and the soul (i. e. the bodily desires), and enjoins to not separate her from her lover, the groom (i. e. the intellect). He further explains

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[5]   Muḥammad ibn al-ʿArabī: "Kitāb al-Isfār ʿan Natāij al- Asfār", in: Rasāil ibn al-ʿArabī, vol. 2, Ḥaydar Abād 1948, pp. 3–7.

that the reason the phrase appears three times is because it symbolizes three spiritual stages or stations (maqāmāt) through which the soul moves. The first stage is the initial encounter between soul and intellect, which Tanchum describes with the words "May the Lord bless you and keep you" (Numbers 6:24). At this stage, the soul is still weak and not yet certain (yaqīn), liable to fall back and turn away from its "lover". In the second stage, the soul receives a divine light which verifies it (yuḥaqqiq laha) and consequently dispels its doubts. This is described with the words "May the Lord shine his face on you and be gracious to you" (Numbers 6:25). In the third stage, the soul attains the level of a certain truth (ḥaqīqa yaqīniyya) and experiences unification with its lover. This is signified by the words "May the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:26).[6] This explanation is probably taken from a Judeo-Arabic exegesis of the priestly benediction (Numbers 6:24–26), which was adapted by Tanchum in order to explain the triple usage of the bride's injunction in the Song of Songs. Later, Tanchum adds:

> "This is why those men of virtue who understand these spiritual stations and their stages and goals say, 'the journey is divided into three: a journey to God (ilā Allāh), signifying piety, spiritual training and spiritual struggle; a journey with God (maʿa Allāh), signifying constant worship and seeking of God; and a journey in God (fī Allāh), signifying arrival (wuṣūl) and a drowning in His love with full [mystical] knowledge".[7]

The expression "the men of virtue who understand these spiritual stations" (al-fuḍalā al-muṭṭaliʿin ʿalā hāḏihi al- maqāmāt) clearly refers to the Ṣūfīs. Tanchum may have copied this paragraph from a Ṣūfī text and incorporated it into his own commentary because he believed that the three journeys revolving around God resemble the three stages of certainty (*yaqīn*), symbolized by the three verses of the priestly benediction and the threefold injunction in the Song of Songs.

Similar adoptions of Ṣūfī terminology occur frequently in Tanchum's commentaries;[8] in fact, it plays an important role in his commentary on the Song

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[6]   Joseph Alobaidi (ed.): The Two Commentaries of Tanchum Yerushalmi. Text and Translation (Old Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs II), Bern 2014, pp. 19–20.

[7]   Alobaidi, The Two Commentaries, p. 20.

[8]   Paul Fenton: "The post Maimonidean School of Exegesis in the East", in: Magne Sæbø (ed.), Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. The History of its Interpretation, vol. 1/2, Göttingen 2000, p. 453.

of Songs. Of outmost significance here is Tanchum's use of the term isthmus (barzax): in his commentary on the Song of Songs 7:1, Tanchum describes the soul as being situated between the intellect and the corporeal, "like an isthmus between two seas" (fakainnahā al-barzax al-ḥājiz bayn al-baḥrayn),[9] an image that occurs in the Qurān (25:53). The concept of the isthmus as a middle ground, which both separates and unites opposites, also plays an important role in the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabī.[10] Similarly, he describes the human soul as an isthmus between matter (hayūlī) and the intellect. Matter is dark, the intellect is pure light, and the soul is an isthmus located between both light and darkness (kaal-barzax bayn al-nūr waal-ẓulma).[11] Here, Tanchum was clearly influenced by Ibn al-ʿArabī.

The next step in the development of the concept of the three journeys can be found in the writings of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in the early fourteenth century – more precisely, in his Madārij al-Sālikīn, a commentary on the Manāzil al-Sāirīn, a mystical work by the eleventh century Muslim scholar Al-Anṣārī al-Harawī. Al-Anṣārī spoke of three stages of verification (taḥqīq) the mystic passes through on his path to God, and Al-Jawziyya consequently expounded on these stages:

> "In the first [stage], his goal [i. e., his desire for God] becomes pure and clean [and separated] from everything else, and he clears his mind of everything else. In the second [stage], he attributes everything to Him only and [learns] that there is nothing else but Him, glorified be He. In the third stage, his revelations and his inability are all centered on Him only, so that He is within his goal. Therefore, the first [stage] is a journey to God (ilā Allāh); the second is a journey with God (bi-Allāh), and the third is a journey in God (fī Allāh)".[12]

Al-Jawziyya's use of the concept of the three journeys is almost identical to that of Tanchum, including nearly almost the same prepositions. Given that Al-Jawziyya was born in the year Tanchum died, the latter could not have borrowed from him; it is also extremely unlikely that Al-Jawziyya ever read

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[9] Alobaidi, The Two Commentaries, p. 74.
[10] William Chittick: The Self Discloser of God. Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabī's Cosmology, Albany 1998, pp. 258–262; Salman Bashier / Ibn Arabi's Barzkh: The Concept of Limit and the Relationship between God and the World, Albany 2007, p. 87.
[11] Muḥammad Maṭrajī (ed.): Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya li-Muḥammad ibn-ʿArabī, vol. (3), Bayrūt 2002, pp. 432–433.
[12] Muḥammad al- Fiqqī (ed.): Madārij al-Sālikīn li- Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, vol. 3, Bayrūt 1973, p. 390.

Tanchum's commentary on the Song of Songs. Therefore, both Tanchum and Al-Jawziyya probably borrowed from a common (Muslim) source that contains the concept of the three journeys – a concept, which they nevertheless employ in different ways: while Tanchum uses it to explain his three stages of 'certainty' (yaqīn), al-Jawziyya adopts it in order to explain al-Anṣārī's three stages of verification (taḥqīq). Yet, these two concepts are close in meaning. Tanchum employs both of them and mentions 'verification' in his discussion of the three stages of 'certainty'. Therefore, it seems likely that the common source for Tanchum and al-Jawziyya's discussions of the three journeys also included some reference to the three stages of certainty or verification. This explains why the two scholars incorporated this source into their writings on these concepts.

4.   Later Developments

During the course of the fourteenth century, the concept of the three journeys underwent a fundamental change. It was combined with another Ṣūfī concept: that of the four-stage spiritual development of which the third stage is known as 'extinction' (fanā) – the state in which the mystic loses his identity by being completely absorbed by and into God – while the fourth and highest stage is existence (baqā) – the state in which the mystic finds himself again, while still maintaining a connection to God. Most likely, this scheme originates from the twelfth century Ṣūfī scholar ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī;[13] but was not fully developed until two centuries later. In his explanation for the term 'journey' (safar) as outlined in his dictionary of Ṣūfī terms, the mid-fourteenth century Muslim scholar ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qāšānī speaks of four journeys:

> "The first is the walking to God (al-sayr ilā Allāh) from the resting place of the soul until the clear horizon […] The second is walking in God (al-sayr fī Allāh), adopting his properties […] The third is climbing toward the essence of unification […] The fourth journey is walking with God away from God (al-sayr bi-Allāh ʿan Allāh) for completion, and this is the station (maqām) of existence (baqā) after extinction (fanā) and of separation after unification".[14]

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[13]   Maḥmūd Bin al-Šarīf (ed.): ʿAwārif al-Maʿārif li- Šihāb al-Dīn ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī, vol. 2, al-Qāhira 2000, p. 279.

[14]   Nabil Safwat / David Pendlebury (ed.): A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms Compiled by Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani, London 1991, p. 87.

Al-Qāšānī preserves the pattern of adding prepositions in a threefold manner to the word journey (or its equivalent, walking – sayr) – yet he mentions four journeys. The third journey has no preposition, while the fourth journey contains two prepositions which remain mutually exclusive and oppositional by nature: "with" (bi), implying closeness, and "from" (ʿan), implying distance. Al-Qāšānī was probably seeking to preserve both patterns – the three journeys on the one hand, and the four stages of spiritual development, ending with the phenomena of extinction and existence, on the other. In doing so, he radically transformed the concept of the journey. In his new concept, the three journeys are no longer stages of a one-directional path toward the unification with God. The fourth journey signifies an oscillation between the attempt to simultaneously reach God and maintain a distance from Him. Al-Qāšānī's clarifies this idea in his explanation of the concept of 'the end of the journey' (nihāyat al-safar):

> "The end of the first journey is: lifting the veil of multiplicity and seeing uniformity. The end of the second journey is: lifting the curtain of uniformity and seeing multiplicity […]. The end of the third journey is the monism of the essence of unification. The end of the fourth journey is the monism of unification and separation […] in order to see the one essence in the multiple appearances and the multiple appearances in the one essence".[15]

Beholding the essence of reality, we see only one thing that really exists, and that is God. Yet the world as we know it is comprised of a great multiplicity. The mystic should be able to see the essence of God when he beholds the world's multiplicity, and vice versa, to see the multiplicity of the world when he contemplates God. The belief that all things in the world can be seen as both, as united with God and as individual components of the world, allows the mystic to experience a unification with God while he preserves his own separate, individual identity at the same time.[16]

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[15]   Safwat / Pendlebury, A Glossary, p. 80.
[16]   This scheme of the four journeys prevailed and was further developed by later Muslim mystics who were influenced by Ibn al-ʿArabī and his school. Al-Manāwī, an Egyptian mystic of the seventeenth century, repeated al-Qāšānī's explanation word for word, but added that the believer should move away from God at the fourth stage and turn back to the world in order to make God's creation complete (li-takmīl xalq Allāh); or in other words, God's creation is incomplete without the human beings who truly know God and bring God's blessing to the world. See: Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raūf al- Manāwī: Al-Tawqīf fī Umahāt al-Taʿārīf, Dimašq 1990, pp. 406–407.

The last stage in the development of the concept of the journey was added by David Maimonides (R. David ha-Nagid) II of the family of Moses Maimonides at the end of the fourteenth century. David Maimonides was one of the last leaders of Egyptian Jewry. In his book, al-Muršid ilā al-Tafarrud, he says: "There are two journeys, a journey to God (ilā Allāh) and a journey in God (fī Allāh). The first has an end, while the second is almost endless".[17] This description resembles Ibn al-ʿArabī's description of the three journeys, but with one crucial difference: David Maimonides omits the journey from God. Thus, only two instead of three journeys are mentioned. Ibn al-ʿArabī, in his description of the journeys, wrote about several groups of people, each traveling in their own way: some moving toward God, others moving away from Him. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and Tanchum, by contrast, described the three journeys as stations located along one long path toward God. David Maimonides adopts Ibn al-ʿArabī's description of the journeys, yet, by eliminating the "Journey from God", he also brings it closer to the concept of the single path toward God. As a result, the pattern of the three journeys is broken, leaving us with only two.

This passage is by no means the only instance of the use of Ṣūfī concepts and terminology in David Maimonides's works. His writings are filled with quotations from and allusions to Ṣūfī writings.[18] Although not always literal, these quotations are generally faithful to the original sources – only on rare occasions does the author alter them in significant ways. Therefore, it seems plausible that, rather than adapting and paraphrasing Ibn al-ʿArabī's description of the journeys himself, David Maimonides may be quoting an earlier Ṣūfī source that drew on and reshaped Ibn al-ʿArabī's ideas.[19]

Ultimately, the examination of the sources allows us to trace back the emergence of the concept of the three "journeys for God" in Ṣūfī literature to the early thirteenth century. Initially, the term 'journey' signified the movement of various groups of people toward and away from God – as in the work of Ibn al-ʿArabī. Later, at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the

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[17] Paul Fenton (ed.): Al-Muršid ilā al-Tafarrud waal-Murfid ilā al-Tajarrud. Moreh ha-Prishut by R. David Maimonides the Second, Jerusalem 1987, p. 62.

[18] See Fenton's introduction to al-Muršid ilā al-Tafarrud: Fenton, Al- Muršid, pp. 46–49.

[19] It should be noted that the concept of the two journeys, a journey to God and a journey from God (yet without using the journey "safar"), can be found in the Persian writings of the Muslim mystic of the late thirteenth century, ʿAzīz al-Dīn Nasafi. See: Lloyd Ridge (tr.): Persian Metaphysics and Mysticism. Selected Treatises of ʿAzīz Nasafī, Richmond 2002, p. 22.

fourteenth century, as reflected in Tanchum and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, the three journeys came to signify three stages on a single path to God. Later, in the second half of the fourteenth century, the concept underwent further fundamental transformations, including a change in the number of the journeys themselves.

5.   Conclusion

Ṣūfī motifs appear in Judeo-Arabic literature as early as the tenth century (i. e. Saadia Gaon).[20] Later, the writings of the Pietists (Chasidim) in thirteenth and fourteenth century Egypt were greatly influenced by Ṣūfī thought: the Pietists believed that through the adoption of Ṣūfī thought and practices, Judaism could be restored to being the true religion of the Bible and the Sages.[21] David Maimonides II was an important figure in the Pietist movement, and Tanchum, although not strictly speaking an adherent, lived together with and was influenced by Pietists in the Jewish community in Egypt.

Judeo-Arabic literature – in particular, that of the thirteenth and fourteenth century – complements our understanding of the history of the development of Ṣūfī ideas. Occasionally, Judeo-Arabic sources for Ṣūfī concepts predate Muslim Ṣūfī sources – as is the case with Tanchum's version of the three journeys concept, of which no Muslim sources from Tanchum's time exist. Yet, it remains almost identical to that of the later Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya. In other words, Judeo-Arabic texts preserve early stages of Muslim Ṣūfī traditions, and parallels can be found in Muslim texts of later periods. The Judeo-Arabic sources allow us to trace the development of these ideas back to a date prior to the one suggested by Muslim sources. They also tell us something about the diffusion and reception of Ṣūfī ideas, as illustrated by the appearance of Ibn al-ʿArabī's notions in Tanchum's writings. The diffusion of Ibn al-ʿArabī's ideas – a centuries-long process through which these ideas became gradually incorporated into mainstream Ṣūfī thought – was still at the very beginning in Tanchum's time, half a century after the death of the great mystic.[22]

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[20]   Israel Efros: "Saadia's General Ethical Theory and its Relation to Sufism", in: Jewish Quarterly Review, 75th Anniversary Volume (1967), pp. 166–177.

[21]   Paul Fenton: "Judaism and Sufism", in: Sayyed Hossein Nasr / Oliver Leaman (ed.), History of Islamic Philosophy, vol. 1, London 1996, pp. 755–768.

[22]   The most important stages of this process occurred in the fourteenth century. See: William Chittick: "The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qunawi to al-Qaysari", in: The Muslim World,

Tanchum's use of Ibn al-ʿArabī's concept of isthmus (barzax) reveals that already by the end of the thirteenth century, Ibn al-ʿArabī's ideas were so widespread in Egypt that they were known not only to Muslims, but also to Jews.

These and the other examples discussed in this paper serve to illustrate the importance of Judeo-Arabic sources and intend to contribute to a fuller understanding of the history of Ṣūfī thought.

72 (1982), pp. 107–128. See also: James Morris: "Ibn Arabi and his Interpreters (Part 3)", in: Journal of the American Oriental Society, 107 (1987), pp. 101–119.