

Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi

Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), born to a wealthy family, experienced a “spiritual awakening” when he was 15 years old. He spent the rest of his life refining this original, ecstatic event, ultimately studying with more than 90 different Sufi masters and penning over 850 books!

Where al-Ghazali was known as the “Renovator of Islam,” Ibn Arabi was the “Distiller,” taking 500 fertile years of Sufi thought, borrowing liberally from Jewish antecedents and creating a unified vision of Islamic mysticism, influencing virtually all of Islamic spirituality that postdated his fertile life span – and much of Jewish mysticism, as well.

Perhaps due to his open-minded attitude, Ibn Arabi’s mystical theology veered between Jewish and Muslim antecedents, and slipped easily into the stream of Jewish Kabbalistic learning. Such ideas as his theory of the mystical import of language; the concept that man is a complete microcosm of the macrocosmic God and specific interpretations of grammar and prayer – all of which became central to the Kabbalah – were eagerly ingested from Ibn Arabi by Jewish mystics, translated into Hebrew and recast as specifically Jewish ideas, either “long lost” or recently elucidated.

Ibn Arabi’s ideas can be traced to Jewish precursors, as well. In addition to borrowing specific ideas from Moses Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*, he also used Jewish history to justify his own Sufi ideas. When he was called before the Islamic judicial authorities to defend himself against the charge of “nonconformity,” he turned to the Jewish scriptures, and specifically Solomon’s “erotic” Song of Songs, to prove that his ecstatic language of mystical love not only had precedent, but also was officially viewed as metaphor (and thereby non-threatening) by the

Jewish authorities of ancient Israel.