
Sīdī Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajiba (d. 1809) was a Moroccan Sufi master with a vision which far surpassed many of his contemporary teachers. He was a scholar of Islamic sciences and, by his own account, was drawn to mystical knowledge and the esoteric path after encountering the work of Ibn ‘Aṭāʾ Allāh (d. 709/1309)—the author of *Kitāb al-Ḥikam*—and Ibn ‘Abbād of Ronda’s (d. 792/1390) commentary on and interpretation of *al-Ḥikam*. These writings on Islamic piety and spirituality appeared to have made a deep impression on Ibn ‘Ajiba and inevitably caused a major shift in his life. He became interested in praxis more than the theoretical aspects of Sufism. Later he would be initiated into the Darqāwi Sufi order (founded by the Moroccan saint Mūlay al-ʿArbī) at the hands of the famous Sufi teacher of the time, Sīdī Muḥammad al-Būzīdī. Ibn ‘Ajiba apparently underwent a “rigorous course of training (tarbiyya)” under al-Būzīdī (xvii) and eventually earned his place as a “spiritual master in his own right” (xviii).

Ibn ‘Ajiba was known among his contemporaries as a true man of the spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*) and as an ascetic. He is also credited with having inspired a new Sufi order—*al-ṭarīqat al-darqāwīyya al-ʿajībiyya*—which continues to this day as a branch of the spiritual lineages of the more well-known Shādhili and Darqawī orders (xviii). Ibn ‘Ajiba’s works number more than forty, some of which became well-known in the Arabic speaking world. Many of his writings that appeared after he joined the *ṭarīqa* display a sense of deep compassion for those who were either drawn to or were already involved in Sufism. Ibn ‘Ajiba wanted to provide a road map of the spiritual path, as it were, for beginners, as well as for all others.

The work presently under review is an annotated translation—the first in English—of a manual for seekers of God (*fuqarā*) so that they may familiarize themselves with the contours of the path (*ṭarīqa*). The journey requires knowledge of both the source and destination as well as what one might expect to encounter along the way. Ibn ‘Ajiba called his work *Miʿrāj al-tashawwuf ilā ḥaqāʾiq al-taṣawwuf* because he believed, like many of his predecessors on the path, that a “seeker’s journey to God” is likened to the Prophet’s ascension (*mīrāj*) through seven heavens, culminating in the Prophet’s experience of “the divine presence” (xxii). Similarly, a seeker must know and traverse
through the various “states” (aḥwāl) and “stations” (maqāmāt), such as repenance, patience, gratitude, detachment, love and gnosis (the list goes on) in the hope of attaining nearness (qurb) to God. As Ibn ‘Ajiba noted, Sufism involves “….knowing the terminology and language which the Sufis use…. [and] knowing what constitutes a ‘state’ or ‘inspiration’ or ‘station’…” (xix), so as to facilitate one’s spiritual journey. Thus, the Miʿrāj is essentially a “lexicon of Sufic terminology” (xv). It was written for anyone seeking to undertake the spiritual journey or embark on the spiritual path and who may or may not be a scholar. In its time, it was the most accessible and the shortest of such texts, especially when compared to al-Qushayrī’s (d. 465/1072) Risāla, which Ibn ‘Ajiba acknowledges profusely in his work, and which is roughly ten times longer (xxiv).

The Miʿrāj was completed in two versions with a nearly thirteen-year gap in between. The earliest version, which includes a hundred terms, was heavily reliant on al-Qushayrī’s work. However, Ibn ‘Ajiba was not just copying information from the Risāla, he actually provided a very concise version, much of it phrased for easier comprehension and memorization by a novice. Ibn ‘Ajiba’s contribution is important because the Miʿrāj filled the need and appealed to a wider audience precisely because it was concise and “easy to copy and distribute” (xxiv), and it contained few distractions in the form of detailed references and explanations (xxv). The final version, dated 1806 (xv), contained 143 entries on technical terms (xxi), and explanation of “states” (aḥwāl) and “stations” (maqāmāt). The present translation corresponds to this later and fuller Arabic version. Even though the total number of terms discussed in the Miʿrāj is 143 (they were not numbered in the original) some of these were grouped together and therefore the numbered items in the English translation only come to seventy-nine entries. The later Arabic version also includes Ibn ‘Ajiba’s significant additions (not found in al-Qushayrī’s Risāla) which may have been inspired by other Sufi manuals (xxvi). Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ajiba’s unique manner of defining these items appears to have been the result of his own experience on the path. Even though concise, he provides three levels of meanings for seekers in various stages of their journey (xxv).

Similar to how the Miʿrāj filled a real need at the time, the present translation provides a valuable service to those on the path, but also to students—especially those unfamiliar with Arabic—who seek an understanding of Sufism and the inner workings of this critical dimension of Islam. At the same time it is also most helpful for a student of the Arabic language since the text of the original Arabic (“largely voweled,” xxviii) is included in this volume. This, in fact, is one of the features that distinguishes this translation of the Miʿrāj from an earlier one (in French) by Jean-Louis Michon (1973), which did not contain