Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice
ISSN: 1948-9137, e-ISSN: 2162-2752
Vol 17 (1), 2025
pp. 753 - 768

Ṣūfī Travel as Ontological and Ethical Journey: Ibn ʿArabī, Abū Madyan, and the Architecture of the Soul

Jamal Assadi

College of Sakhnin for Teacher Education

Abstract

This article explores the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of *safar* (travel) in Islamic mysticism through a comparative study of two foundational Ṣūfī figures: Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan Shuʿayb. While both affirm the transformative role of travel in the seeker's journey toward the Divine, they articulate it through different registers—one cosmological and metaphysical, the other ethical and ascetical. The study adopts a thematic-comparative framework grounded in five axes: source and transmission, conceptual vocabulary, metaphysical language, ethical orientation, and symbolic structure. Through this framework, it analyzes how Ibn ʿArabī's model of spiritual ascent, rooted in concepts such as *barzakh*, *fanāʾ*, and *waḥdat al-wujūd*, contrasts with Abū Madyan's emphasis on *zuhd*, *faqr*, and *adab*. The article situates these teachings within prophetic models of journeying, broader intercultural traditions of sacred travel, and classical Ṣūfī conceptions of the soul's path. Ultimately, it argues that for both mystics, *safar* is not merely movement but meaning—a method of transformation through which the human being becomes a vessel of divine nearness.

Keywords: Ṣūfism; safar; Ibn ʿArabī; Abū Madyan; fanāʾ; barzakh; maqāmāt; zuhd; waḥdat al-wujūd; insān al-kāmil; spiritual travel; Islamic mysticism; sulūk; ethics; metaphysics.

Received: 10 Apr 2025 **Revised**: 19 May 2025 **Accepted** : 02 June 2025

Introduction

The concept of *safar* (travel) occupies a central place in Islamic thought, bridging the domains of law, ethics, and spirituality. In Islamic jurisprudence, it is associated with divine facilitation and legal concession, grounded in the maxim *al-mashaqqa tajlib al-taysīr*—"hardship brings ease." This principle is reflected in the permissions granted to travelers, including the shortening (*qaṣr*) and combining (*jamʿ*) of prayers, as well as the allowance to break the fast during Ramadan (*fiṭr*) [Qurʾān 4:101]. The Prophet Muḥammad regularly shortened his prayers while traveling and referred to this concession as a divine gift: "This is a charity that Allah has given to you, so accept His charity" (Muslim n.d., ḥadīth no. 686). Despite the Qur'anic mention of fear as a possible condition, the Prophet's consistent practice—and the understanding of companions such as ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb—established that *safar*, in and of itself, justifies these dispensations.

Yet defining *safar* has long been the subject of scholarly debate. Classical jurists variously interpreted it as a three-day camel journey (Ḥanafīs, based on Muslim n.d., ḥadīth no. 1339), a two-day trip (Mālikīs and others, Mālik n.d., Book 1, ḥadīth no. 3), or even a single day's travel (al-Bukhārī 1999, ḥadīth no. 1088). Others, such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn ʿUthaymīn, rejected fixed distances, arguing that *safar* is defined by preparation, separation from routine, and the cultural perception of journeying (Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, 24:15). The very root of the word *safar* conveys exposure or unveiling, suggesting that travel in Islam is not merely geographical, but an existential and transformative state—an outward dislocation that mirrors inward unveiling.

The prophetic journeys of the Prophet Muḥammad—especially the *Isrāʾ wa al-Miʿrāj*—provide the foundational model for sacred movement in Islamic thought. As recounted in the Qurʾān (17:1) and elaborated upon in ḥadīth and mystical literature, the journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and onward through the celestial spheres exemplifies the fusion of geographical displacement with spiritual elevation. Ṣūfī thinkers such as al-Ghazālī, al-Sulamī, and Ibn ʿArabī viewed this ascent as more than a historical event; they interpreted it as a symbolic map of the *ṭarīq*—the soul's progression through revelation, trial, and unveiling (Schimmel 1975, 72).

The metaphor of sacred travel resonates beyond Islam. Across religious and philosophical traditions, movement serves as a metaphor for transformation: from the pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to Plato's allegorical ascent in the *Republic*, from the Hindu *sādhu* to the itinerant Buddhist monk, travel embodies a form of awakening through detachment, solitude, and inner clarity. These global parallels underscore the universality of *safar* as both an ontological condition and an ethical method.

In Ṣūfī thought, *safar* (spiritual travel) is more than physical displacement; it is a sacred imperative that serves as both a metaphor for the seeker's inward striving and a disciplined method of existential refinement. The Ṣūfī path (*ṭarīq*) unfolds through *sulūk*, a disciplined journey across *maqāmāt* (spiritual stations), guided by a master and aimed at achieving *maʿrifa* (divine knowledge). Within this framework, travel becomes a ritualized process of inner transformation, where movement through the world echoes the unraveling of the self. The convergence of legal, ethical, and metaphysical meanings in Ṣūfī discourse renders *safar* not just a spiritual symbol, but a method of becoming.

This article investigates the architecture of *safar* by comparing two seminal Ṣūfī figures: Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240), the Andalusian metaphysician, and Abū Madyan Shuʿayb (1126–1198), the Maghribī master of spiritual discipline. Both articulate the transformative power of travel, but from distinct vantage points. Ibn ʿArabī constructs a metaphysical system grounded in *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being), *barzakh* (the imaginal threshold), and *fanāʾ* (annihilation of the self), while Abū Madyan emphasizes *zuhd* (renunciation), *adab*, and ethical *sulūk*. Together, they offer complementary blueprints for the soul's unfolding, balancing cosmological vision with moral action.

To structure the forthcoming analysis, the article draws on four interrelated dimensions based on four interrelated elements: (1) the foundational role of prophetic travel; (2) the conceptualization of *safar* as ethical and ontological journey; (3) the symbolic and literary dimensions of spiritual movement; and (4) the comparative reading of Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan through their respective approaches to *ṭarīq*, *sulūk*, and *barzakh*. The study argues that while the two mystics differ in sources—written corpus versus oral transmission—and metaphysical emphasis, they converge in positioning *safar* as a methodology of divine encounter and transformation.

Thus, the Ṣūfī journey is a movement through space that initiates inner transformation—crossing thresholds of self and spirit. For both figures, the road is not simply a route to an endpoint; it becomes the very arena in which identity unravels and the Real discloses itself.

Methodological Framework: Comparing Paths, Concepts, and Textual Legacies

This article adopts a comparative-mystical methodology grounded in conceptual clarification, textual specificity, and narrative coherence. Rather than juxtaposing two spiritual figures in general terms, the study examines the internal logic of each thinker's framework and identifies how their visions of *safar*—spiritual travel—diverge, overlap, and illuminate broader dimensions of Ṣūfī practice and metaphysics. The comparative lens is built upon five key elements: source type, conceptual focus, metaphysical language, ethical orientation, and symbolic trajectory.

First, the **nature of the sources** must be acknowledged at the outset. *Ibn ʿArabī's* writings constitute one of the most expansive and systematic mystical corpora in Islamic history, allowing for detailed exegesis of terms like *al-barzakh* and *waḥdat al-wujūd*. In contrast, *Abū Madyan's* teachings were primarily transmitted through oral sayings, short maxims, and hagiographical records preserved by his disciples. These

differences necessitate a distinction between formal metaphysical discourse (Ibn ʿArabī) and practical ethical guidance (Abū Madyan).

Second, the article focuses on key Ṣūfī concepts that serve as comparative anchors in analyzing the spiritual frameworks of Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan. Central among these is *safar* (travel), the article's core theme, which is examined both in its literal manifestations—pilgrimage, migration, and movement across space—and its symbolic dimensions as a journey of the soul toward divine realization. Closely related is the concept of *sulūk* (spiritual wayfaring), which denotes the seeker's progression through stages of inner refinement under the guidance of a spiritual master. The structure of this progression is articulated through *maqāmāt* (stations) and *aḥwāl* (states), which mark stable psychological or ethical achievements and transient spiritual experiences, respectively. The concept of *barzakh*—a liminal threshold between realms—emerges prominently in Ibn ʿArabī's cosmology as a metaphysical and imaginal boundary, while in Abū Madyan's teachings it appears more subtly through an ethic of self-effacement and moral humility. Finally, the principles of *fanāʾ* (annihilation of the self) and *zuhd* (detachment from the world) are treated as complementary disciplines of negation that facilitate the soul's readiness to receive divine presence.

Third, the study is sensitive to the **language and genre** employed by both figures. Ibn ʿArabī's works, especially *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, fuse philosophical rigor with mystical poetics, often constructing layered ontologies through allegory and metaphysical mapping. Abū Madyan's discourses, by contrast, rely on instructive parables, aphorisms, and spiritual counsel grounded in lived communal experience.

Fourth, the article considers the **ethical and pedagogical function** of travel for each thinker. For Ibn ʿArabī, *safar* is a metaphysical imperative—traversing cosmic realities to attain the gnosis of unity. For Abū Madyan, it is a moral training—a shedding of pride and worldly distraction through acts of renunciation, silence, and service. The divergence between abstraction and embodiment is read not as contradiction but as complementary emphasis.

Finally, attention is given to **symbolism and narrative structure**. Both mystics deploy stories of journeys—literal pilgrimages, spiritual ascents, encounters with saints or divine presence—as vehicles for articulating their respective visions. The analysis draws on both explicit teachings and the narrative tropes that shape each figure's legacy, thus reinforcing the literary and performative dimensions of *safar* as required by the scope of the special issue.

By articulating these distinctions while respecting the shared framework of the Ṣūfī path (*ṭarīq*), this study presents a grounded and integrated comparison. It avoids flattening the two figures into one typology, while illuminating the shared cosmology of movement that binds them. Travel serves as the subject of analysis while simultaneously shaping the method—enabling movement across texts, ideas, and lives in pursuit of clarity, resonance, and spiritual insight.

Sacred Itineraries: The Prophetic and Historical Foundations of Ṣūfī Travel

To understand the conceptual depth and ritual richness of *safar* in the Ṣūfī tradition, one must begin with the prophetic model. The Prophet Muḥammad's journeys—particularly the *Isrāʾ wa al-Miʿrāj*, the Hijrah to Madīnah, and his role in facilitating early migrations—established a sacred precedent for understanding movement as both a spiritual obligation and a theological metaphor. His journeys shaped Islamic ritual, law, and social organization, and they inspired a mystical framework where travel functions as a means of inner purification, unveiling, and drawing near to the Divine. This foundational vision—later elaborated by saints, jurists, and philosophers—became the wellspring from which thinkers like Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan would draw. Before turning to their specific contributions, this section examines the sacred, symbolic, and historical journeys that define Islam's understanding of transformative movement.

The mystical significance of travel in Ṣūfī thought finds its highest model in the journeys of the Prophet Muḥammad, particularly the *Isrāʾ* and *Miʿrāj*, which mark the sacred intersection of physical movement and spiritual elevation. As referenced in the Qurʾān: "Exalted is He who took His servant by night from al-Masjid al-Ḥarām to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing." (Qurʾān 17:1)

This journey, in which the Prophet Muḥammad was miraculously transported from Mecca to Jerusalem (*Isrāʾ*), and then ascended through the celestial realms to the Divine Presence (*Miʿrāj*), is foundational to Islamic spirituality (Bradlow 2007; Vuckovic 2005). While Islamic theology affirms the miraculous nature of the *Miʿrāj*, Ṣūfīs interpret it as a symbolic prototype for the inner journey of the soul—a spiritual map outlining the *maqāmāt* (stations) and *aḥwāl* (states) that the seeker must traverse to attain union with God (Gardet 2011).

The *Miʿrāj* was not simply a miraculous event—it was a turning point in the Prophet Muḥammad's own spiritual development and empowerment. Occurring after the sorrowful "Year of Grief" (*ʿĀm al-Ḥuzn*), which saw the deaths of both his beloved wife Khadījah and his protector Abū Ṭālib and the boycott which prohibited all types of ties and trade with Muhammad's family, the journey served as divine consolation and reaffirmation of his mission. It elevated his certainty (*yaqīn*) (Sūrat al-Ḥijr, 15:99), deepened his experiential knowledge (*maʿrifa*), and prepared him for the trials to come (Lings 2006, p. 98; Armstrong 2007, p. 13).

Ibn ʿArabī regarded the *Miʿrāj* as more than a historical miracle; he understood it as a profound metaphysical emblem—a cosmic event that encapsulates the inner journey of the soul and reveals the ultimate potential of the *insān al-kāmil* (the perfected human). In his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, he draws an extended parallel between the Prophet Muḥammad's celestial ascent and the spiritual journey of the *insān al-kāmil*, the individual who traverses all levels of existence to attain full experiential knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of the Divine (Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, vol. 1). Each level encountered by the Prophet during the *Miʿrāj* corresponds to a distinct *ʿālam* (realm of being) and *maqām* (spiritual station), which the seeker must interiorly traverse on the path toward self-realization. In Ṣūfī thought, a *maqām* (pl. *maqāmāt*) denotes a structured stage in the journey toward God, achieved through sustained inner effort and ethical discipline. As noted in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, these stations represent steps in the soul's spiritual ascent, each grounded in both mystical experience and compliance with Sharia (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2011). Classical formulations commonly include seven principal stations: *tawba* (repentance), *waraʿ* (scrupulousness), *zuhd* (detachment), *faqr* (poverty), *ṣabr* (patience), *tawakkul* (trust in God), and *riḍā* (contentment). These are not abstract ideals but practical stages rooted in everyday spiritual struggle. As Michael Sells explains, they form the "grounds of the spiritual life," in which daily life becomes the arena for inner purification and divine approach (Sells 1996, 196–211).

Louis Gardet highlights that each *maqām* is often accompanied by a *ḥāl* (state)—a temporary condition granted by divine grace rather than human effort (Gardet 2011). Maqāmāt require conscious striving, whereas aḥwāl arrive unexpectedly, offering brief glimpses into deeper realities. The *Miʿrāj* serves as a sacred model for the Ṣūfī path; each stage of the Prophet's celestial journey mirrors the seeker's inner progression through spiritual stations. For Ibn ʿArabī, the Prophet's ascent serves as both a cosmic occurrence and a symbolic journey toward union with the Divine, encapsulating the ontological potential of the *insān al-kāmil* (the perfected human) to reflect and embody the Divine Names.

For Ibn ʿArabī, the Prophet Muḥammad is the *insān al-kāmil* in its supreme and universal form. This concept is further elaborated in his late work, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*), where the opening chapter, "The Wisdom of Divinity in the Word of Adam," offers a metaphysical explanation of why Adam—and by extension, humanity—was created. The cosmos, he asserts, was like an unpolished mirror, diffuse in its ability to reflect the Divine Names. Only with the creation of Adam, who received the divine spirit, did the cosmos become a fully reflective surface. Humanity thus holds the unique potential to bring unity and focus to the scattered lights of the Divine attributes (Ibn al-ʿArabī [after 1229], *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. Affifi 1946; trans. Austin 1980, 49–52).

While all human beings carry this potential, only prophets and saints achieve it in practice by actualizing the Divine Names in balanced perfection. These are the *awliyāʾ*, the spiritual elite who polish the cosmic mirror and manifest the traits latent in all humanity. Among them, Muḥammad stands as the paragon—the *insān al-kāmil* par excellence. Drawing on the *ḥadīth*, "I was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay," Ibn ʿArabī introduces the notion of the *ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* (the Muhammadan Reality): the

primordial light or essence from which all prophetic and saintly realities unfold. In this view, Muḥammad transcends the role of a historical figure and embodies the ontological root of all revelation, identified with the First Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-awwal*)—the unifying essence of the immutable archetypes (*aʿyān thābita*) (Glassé and Smith 2003, 216; Ibn ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*; Corbin 1993, 97–98).

The *Fuṣūṣ* presents each prophet as a "bezel" (*faṣṣ*) of divine wisdom, a unique form through which a facet of the *ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* shines. Although historically distinct, all prophets derive their spiritual reality from this primordial light. After their earthly missions, they continue to exert spiritual influence through the *awliyāʾ*, the saints who inherit their inner knowledge and actualize their truths in later ages. This model of spiritual hierarchy establishes a metaphysical framework in which *safar* functions as a horizontal movement through physical landscapes and, at the same time, as a vertical ascent through existential and epistemic realities. The Prophet's *Miʿrāj* becomes the prototype for the mystic's path, where bodily and spiritual ascent converge in the realization of God. In this schema, the perfected human reflects the Divine Names and ultimately becomes a conscious mirror of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), serving as a locus for divine manifestation in the world.

The belief that the Prophet Muḥammad undertook the *Miʿrāj* bodily was used by scholars and mystics to assert his unique status. Ṣūfī thinkers argued that while saints could only reach divine proximity in spirit, Muḥammad reached it in body—prompting debates about whether he saw God with his eyes or heart (Schimmel 1985, 247). His unwavering gaze—"his eye neither swerved nor turned away"—was contrasted with Moses' fainting at the burning bush to demonstrate his superiority. Al-Sulamī's *The Subtleties of the Ascension* preserves sayings from early mystics affirming this view (Colby 2002). For Muḥammad Iqbāl, the *Miʿrāj* exemplified the essential difference between a Ṣūfī and a prophet: a Ṣūfī seeks permanent union, while a prophet returns to the world with transformative force (Schimmel 1985, 247–48).

But the *Isrāʾ* and *Miʿrāj* were not the Prophet's only transformative journeys. Two other migrations—the *Hijrah* to Abyssinia and the *Hijrah* to Madīnah—played decisive roles in shaping the Islamic ethic of travel. The first *Hijrah* to Abyssinia was undertaken by a group of early Muslims seeking refuge from Qurayshī persecution (Watt 1961, 66; Budge 2014, vii). The Prophet did not accompany them but selected a Christian land ruled by the just king al-Najāshī, reflecting his interfaith diplomacy and understanding of spiritual geography.

The second *Hijrah*, the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Yathrib (Madīnah), marked the formal beginning of the Islamic calendar and the institutionalization of the ummah (Shaikh 2001, 51–52; Marom 2017, vii). It was a journey from persecution to protection, from private devotion to public governance. This event resonates deeply in Ṣūfī thought, symbolizing the moment the inward seeker becomes a vessel of collective transformation.

These journeys complement the *Miʿrāj*: where the *Miʿrāj* is vertical (ascension to God), the Hijrahs are horizontal (migration through the world). Together, they frame the Ṣūfī's vision of travel as both transcendent and terrestrial.

This ethos of travel was embodied by the four Imams of Sunni jurisprudence—Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik, al-Shāfiʿī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal—who traveled widely in pursuit of knowledge and piety. Their journeys combined intellectual pursuit with spiritual purpose, reflecting the ideal of *riḥla fī ṭalab al-ʿilm* (travel in search of knowledge). Likewise, al-Bukhārī's extensive journeys across the Islamic world in search of *ḥadīth* mirror the Prophet's own pursuit of truth, both celestial and terrestrial (Al-ʿAsqalānī 2000; Britannica 2025). The Ṣūfī tradition inherited and expanded these legacies. Figures such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn ʿArabī mapped travel across deserts as well as through the inner dimensions of the soul. Travel became a metaphor for inner refinement and outer struggle, with the *murīd's* path representing a continual movement from *ẓāhir* (outer form) to *bāṭin* (inner reality) (Bayman 2003, 200; University of Oxford 2008).

Global traditions also reinforce the link between travel and transformation. Pre-Islamic Arabian poets, Greek philosophers like Plato, Hindu *sādhus*, and Buddhist monks all depict travel as a journey of self-

stripping and awakening. These parallels contextualize Islamic *safar* within a wider mystical grammar of movement—suggesting that to walk is not only to approach, but to become.

Thus, before we examine how Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan reinterpret *safar* in their distinct mystical vocabularies, it is crucial to recognize the sacred and symbolic architecture of journeying that shapes the Islamic mystical imagination. This background provides the cosmological and ethical scaffolding upon which their visions are built.

Sacred Journeys before Islam and Across Cultures

The idea that travel leads to wisdom, liberation, or divine encounter is deeply rooted in human culture and religious history. Long before the rise of Ṣūfīsm, traditions across civilizations understood movement—particularly arduous and purposeful journeys—as a catalyst for spiritual refinement and existential awakening. These traditions created fertile ground for the Ṣūfī conception of *safar* as more than physical displacement—understood instead as *sulūk*, a disciplined and transformative path toward truth.

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the motif of travel permeated poetry and tribal experience. Desert poets often wandered in exile or in search of lost love and meaning. Their compositions, especially in the *qaṣīda*'s *raḥīl* section, portray the physical journey through desolate landscapes as a metaphor for inner desolation and longing. Ibn Qutaybah notes that this poetic structure mirrored a culture in which travel and endurance were deeply intertwined with dignity and spiritual resilience (Ibn Qutaybah 1983). A striking example can be found in the *qaṣīda* of **Imruʾ al-Qays**, who writes:

A friend stood at the ruins and wept, and I wept too,
for the memory of loved ones in a vanished encampment.

Qifā nabki min dhikrā ḥabībin wa-manzili
Bisiquṭi al-liwā bayna al-Dakhūli fa-Ḥawmalī

I passed the night where the winds moaned over the tents,
and the sands shifted like the ache in my chest.

Fa-Tūḍiḥa fa-al-Miqrāti lam yaʿfu rasmuha
Limā nasajathā min janūbin wa-shamʾali

(Imruʾ al-Qays 2008, 3–4)

This poetic passage illustrates how the physical landscape of the Arabian desert becomes inseparable from emotional loss and spiritual searching. The *raḥīl* thus serves not merely as a literal account of journeying, but as a symbolic articulation of inner turbulence and the pursuit of meaning through exile and motion.

Heavenly journeys are also common in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. As Jan Bremmer observes, these traditions often depict visionary ascents and descents as revelations of divine truth (Bremmer 2014). The Book of Enoch, for example, describes a celestial tour led by an angelic guide. Brooke Olson Vuckovic suggests that such Judaic motifs may have informed early Islamic interpretations of the *Miʿrāj*, particularly among mystical readers (Vuckovic 2005, 46).

In medieval Christianity, one of the most influential depictions of sacred travel appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, where pilgrims journey to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket, narrating tales that reflect their moral and inner states. The road becomes a narrative space where transformation unfolds—a dramatic structure that parallels the Ṣūfī understanding of *ṭarīq* as a crucible of self-purification and divine encounter.

Eastern traditions further enrich this heritage. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the figure of the wandering ascetic (*sādhu* or mendicant monk) exemplifies a life of renunciation and perpetual motion. These individuals forsake worldly possessions to journey from temple to mountain to sacred river, seeking *moksha* or *nirvana*. Their travel is neither for possession nor pilgrimage but for transcendence—an

embodied humility not unlike the Ṣūfī *murīd*'s annihilation of self in pursuit of the Divine (Klostermaier 2007, 299).

Greek philosophy also treats travel as a moral and epistemological metaphor. Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* depicts the soul's ascent from illusion to truth as a journey from shadow to light, while Socrates' public wanderings through Athens become a philosophical model of constant questioning and movement through ideas (Plato 2007, 365–401).

Scholars have noted parallels between *Miʿrāj* narratives and earlier Zoroastrian literature. Although some argue for direct influence, others caution that relevant Zoroastrian texts likely postdate Islam, complicating the direction of transmission (Islamic Awareness 2004). Still, the structural similarities to the *Miʿrāj*—as seen in texts like the *Arda Wiraz Namag*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and Greco-Roman visions like the *Dream of Scipio*—reveal a mythological matrix in which celestial ascent becomes a universal metaphor for union with the divine (Eliade 1959; Widengren 1960; Zaehner 1961; Walker 1952).

These global and pre-Islamic traditions reflect a shared intuition: to move is to transform, and those who remain stationary risk remaining veiled from deeper truths. The Ṣūfī tradition draws on this ancient grammar of movement, yet it reshapes it through Qur'ānic revelation and prophetic example. The spiritual journeys of Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan carry forward this archetypal legacy, grounding it within an Islamic metaphysical and ethical framework. Through their respective visions, *safar* becomes not only a sacred metaphor, but a precise and lived methodology of unveiling, self-discipline, and divine nearness.

Sources and Transmission: Textual Systems and Embodied Legacies

A meaningful comparison between Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan must begin with an acknowledgment of the fundamental difference in the nature and transmission of their teachings. This divergence reflects two distinct models of spiritual authority and directly influences the way their concepts of *safar*, *sulūk*, and the mystical path are expressed, transmitted, and understood.

Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240), known as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (The Greatest Master), produced one of the most comprehensive and systematic mystical corpora in Islamic history. His writings—most notably *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*—represent a highly structured, self-aware metaphysical project. They are dense, often visionary texts filled with elaborate ontologies, cosmological diagrams, and layered hermeneutics. In works such as *al-Futūḥāt*, Ibn ʿArabī explicitly narrates his own journeys, encounters, and spiritual disclosures, framing his experience within a cosmic architecture of ascent and unveiling (Chodkiewicz 1997, 10). His output reflects a metaphysical vision and a deeply textualized mysticism, designed to be interpreted across time and space. As Claude Addas notes, Ibn ʿArabī "wrote for posterity," crafting a self-contained system whose internal logic resists reduction to didactic formulas and instead invites contemplative immersion in the imaginal realm (Addas 2019, 16).

In contrast, Abū Madyan Shuʿayb (1126–1198), though only a generation older, represents an entirely different model of spiritual transmission. His teachings were primarily preserved through oral sayings, short epigrams, and the testimonies of his disciples—particularly through the *manāqib* literature and spiritual lineages that revered him as *Shaykh al-Mashāyikh* (Master of Masters) of the Maghrib (al-Mazidi 2010, 150). Unlike Ibn ʿArabī's monumental metaphysical project, Abū Madyan's words appear in maxims, letters, and sermons remembered and transmitted by others. His legacy survives through influence rather than authorship, through embodiment rather than exposition. Abū Madyan's role in Maghribī Ṣūfism was not theoretical but transformative—his charisma shaped generations of disciples, including the later Shādhilī order, and his emphasis on *adab*, humility, and renunciation was expressed more in the form of lived behavior than philosophical writing (Assadi, Naʿāmneh, and Sindawi 2025).

This contrast—between textual cosmology and embodied pedagogy—defines much of the difference in how Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan approach *safar*. For Ibn ʿArabī, the path is mapped through a metaphysical system, where every journey corresponds to a station in Being. For Abū Madyan, the path is enacted in behavior, discipline, and the ethical refinement of the *murīd*. One teaches through books that disclose layers

of divine truth; the other through presence, silence, and the transmission of *baraka* (spiritual grace) from heart to heart.

Yet these modes are not opposed—they reflect the dual structure of Ṣūfī knowledge itself: *ʿilm al-kashf* (knowledge through unveiling) which refers to the experiential disclosure of divine truths to the purified heart, beyond rational knowledge. It is often linked to *tajallī* (manifestation), where divine realities are illuminated to the seeker through inner spiritual insight and *ʿilm al-tarbiyah* (knowledge through spiritual nurturing) (Gardet 2012; Gülen 2004, 108). Ibn ʿArabī, with his intricate metaphysical vocabulary, offers a symbolic and imaginal architecture of the path. Abū Madyan, by contrast, models a community-based ethic where travel is a practice of humility and accountability. Together, their modes of transmission illustrate the range of Ṣūfī pedagogies—from cosmological to communal, from the written word to the silent gesture.

***Safar* and *Sulūk*: Movement and Inner Transformation**

In Ṣūfī thought, *safar* (travel) is never limited to physical displacement. It is both a symbol and a method of transformation—a spiritual journey that mirrors the movement of the soul from multiplicity to unity, from the illusion of self to the reality of the Divine. Both Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan engage deeply with the notion of *safar*, yet they approach it from fundamentally different perspectives: one through the metaphysical ascent of the soul within a cosmic architecture, the other through ethical discipline rooted in embodied humility.

For Ibn ʿArabī, *safar* (spiritual travel) is simultaneously ontological and epistemological—a dynamic unfolding of being and knowing. In *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, he describes the spiritual journey as a movement through realms of existence (*ʿālam*) and shifting modes of perception, where the seeker ascends through degrees of realization in order to witness the unity of all things (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). This inner progression is frequently mirrored by outer movement—pilgrimage, exile, or wandering—all of which reflect the interior path toward *maʿrifa* (experiential knowledge). As Ibn ʿArabī writes, "The journey is from the illusion of distance to the certainty of nearness," collapsing spatial metaphors into metaphysical realization (Ibn ʿArabī, quoted in Chittick 1989, 130). Thus, *safar ilā Llāh* (the journey to God) is not toward a remote destination, but toward the unveiling of nearness that has always been latent.

This notion of travel as unveiling is central to Ibn ʿArabī's cosmological and spiritual worldview. In *The Secrets of Voyaging* (*Kitāb al-Isfār ʿan Natāʾij al-Asfār*), he presents journeying as a fundamental rhythm of the cosmos and of the soul. The text opens with metaphysical reflections on the nature of voyaging, then moves through scriptural contemplations of prophetic figures—Muḥammad, Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses—each of whom embodies a unique dimension of the divine journey. As the work's translators note, voyaging for Ibn ʿArabī "never ceases" and extends across all worlds and dimensions (Ibn ʿArabī 2015, xxii). A well-known Ṣūfī saying quoted in the introduction captures this ethos: "The spiritual journey is called *safar* because it *yusfiru* (unveils) the character of the Men of God" (Ibn ʿArabī 2015, xxiii).

In this framework, the act of travel becomes a theological structure: each outward movement signals a corresponding inner unveiling, and each *maqām* (spiritual station) discloses a deeper dimension of divine reality. As James Morris observes, Ibn ʿArabī's conception of *safar* is not merely a metaphor for spiritual striving, but a lived cosmology in which each stage of the journey reconfigures perception and ultimately restructures the self (Morris 2002, 106). Travel, in this sense, is not escape from the world but encounter with its hidden truth—an ontological revelation lived step by step.

Abū Madyan, in contrast, grounds *safar* in the ethics of *sulūk*—a term which, in Ṣūfī terminology, refers to the disciplined journey of the soul toward God, undertaken through spiritual states and stations under the guidance of a master. It is described as a methodical path of return to the Divine, grounded in divine longing and human receptivity (ElSenossi n.d.). Elsewhere, *sulūk* is defined as the moral and spiritual progression from ignorance to realization, emphasizing personal refinement through structured spiritual education (Rifai Sufi Order n.d.). Recent ethnographic research further highlights *sulūk* as a vehicle for self-

purification and for cultivating social piety—embedding spiritual discipline within communal responsibility and ethical presence (Nasrudin 2021).

Building on this ethical foundation, Abū Madyan conceives of travel not as a metaphysical ascent, but as a means of emptying the self of pride, attachments, and illusion. In his collected sayings and hagiographic accounts, *safar* is repeatedly associated with *takhallī* (divestment), *zuhd* (detachment), and *ṣabr* (patience). To travel, in his view, is to place oneself in situations of vulnerability and to embrace the discomforts that strip away the ego's defenses. "Die before you die," he is reported to have said, echoing the idea that true movement occurs only when the self is suspended and replaced by receptivity to the Real (Naʿāmneh, Assadi, and Sindawi 2025).

While Ibn ʿArabī's *safar* maps a symbolic ascent into divine reality, Abū Madyan's path is marked by surrender and descent into ethical purification. One ascends into knowledge; the other descends into service. The metaphysical traveler encounters imaginal thresholds, while the moral traveler embraces physical exile and social marginality as stations of sincerity. Yet both ultimately point to transformation: whether through unveiling or endurance, the traveler becomes a different being.

What unites the two is their recognition that movement is essential to the spiritual path—though not for its own sake. For Ibn ʿArabī, the journey leads to the realization that the Divine is the true traveler, manifesting through the seeker's perception. For Abū Madyan, it leads to the surrender of illusion and the embrace of *faqr* (spiritual poverty), understood as both outward destitution and inner detachment—a necessary condition for union with God. This vision is clearly expressed in his *Qaṣīda Lāmiyya*, where he urges the seeker to "renounce all you possess, and become poor, that you may be enriched by the Lord of the Throne" (Ayad 2022, 74). For Abū Madyan, *faqr* is not merely a virtue, but an ontological stance: a divestment that leads to *fanāʾ* (annihilation of self) and *baqāʾ* (subsistence in God), allowing the seeker to "see with God's eye, hear with His hearing, and act by His will" (Ayad 2022, 77). The *Lāmiyya* thus places *faqr* at the heart of the Ṣūfī journey—as the portal to divine presence.

Barzakh and Liminality: Between Vision and Surrender

The concept of *barzakh*—the intermediate or liminal realm—is central to Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysical system. It represents a threshold where dualities meet: spirit and body, presence and absence, this world and the next. In his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn ʿArabī defines the *barzakh* as a "thing that possesses the properties of two opposites," yet is identical to neither (Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, vol. 1). It is both a metaphysical reality and an epistemological necessity: the site where unveiling (*kashf*) occurs, where the Real is glimpsed but not grasped. The *barzakh* enables the mystic to witness paradox without collapse—to dwell in the space between being and non-being.

For Ibn ʿArabī, *barzakh* transcends its literal spatial connotation and functions as an ontological and epistemological threshold—a mode of perception through which the seeker apprehends the realities of the divine. It functions as a station of radical receptivity, where the veils are lifted and the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) is disclosed in imaginal form (*ʿālam al-mithāl*). This concept is most clearly explored in his treatment of the *insān al-kāmil*—the perfected human who serves as the living *barzakh* between God and creation, embodying the divine names in balanced manifestation (Chittick 1994, 118). In this framework, *barzakh* operates as a cosmological principle while also constituting a personal reality; the seeker is called to embody it by inhabiting contradiction and relinquishing the desire for definitive resolution.

Abū Madyan, by contrast, does not develop a systematic metaphysics of *barzakh*—at least not in the language of ontology or imaginal cosmology. His teachings, preserved in maxims and transmitted sayings, speak instead to the ethical experience of liminality: the moment when striving ends and surrender begins. In one of his most famous sayings, he advises the seeker to "leave behind even the desire for arrival," a counsel that encapsulates his awareness of the limits of volitional effort and the necessity of grace (Assadi, Naʿāmneh, and Sindawi 2025). Here, *barzakh* remains unnamed, yet it is perceptible—as a spiritual pause marked by humility before the ineffable.

While Ibn ʿArabī conceptualizes *barzakh* as a metaphysical threshold—an ontological zone of paradox and unveiling—Abū Madyan gestures toward a parallel reality through lived experience: through silence, surrender, and *ḥāl*, those spontaneous spiritual states that interrupt the seeker's striving and open the heart to divine proximity. In his vision, *barzakh* emerges less as a theoretical formulation and more as a lived moment of spiritual depletion, in which the self—stripped of illusion—stands in receptive stillness at the threshold between exertion and divine response. Rather than a space of visionary disclosure, *barzakh* in this context signifies a condition of ethical stillness—an interior pause that enables receptivity to the Real (Cornell 1998, 79–83)

Despite these different modes of articulation, both mystics recognize that the path to the Divine must pass through a zone of indeterminacy—an interval where identity, certainty, and agency dissolve. For Ibn ʿArabī, the *barzakh* is a necessary structure of reality, and mystical knowledge (*maʿrifa*) emerges through its acceptance. For Abū Madyan, the *barzakh* is a lived experience of humility, where the traveler yields to that which cannot be named or controlled. In this light, the *barzakh* becomes more than a metaphysical concept: it is the shared horizon of all *safar*—the veil between effort and grace, language and silence, seeking and surrender.

Fanāʾ, Zuhd, and Self-Emptying: Ontological Annihilation and Ethical Poverty

At the heart of Islamic mysticism lies the transformative notion of ***fanāʾ*** , often translated as annihilation or dissolution of the self. While the literal meaning of *fanāʾ* in Arabic implies perishing or vanishing, in mystical contexts it refers to a spiritual condition where the ego is effaced, and the seeker becomes radically oriented toward the Divine. In this state, the attachments to selfhood, ego, and worldly identity fade, making space for an awareness that is wholly attuned to God. This goes beyond entailing metaphysical nonexistence; it marks a reorientation of vision and being, where the self, rather than vanishing, is reshaped in the nearness of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*)—no longer a sovereign ego, but a polished mirror reflecting divine presence.

In Sufi metaphysics, *fanāʾ* is viewed as a necessary stage in the seeker's journey toward God. It is the process through which the seeker is emptied of the lower self (*nafs*) and its veils, so as to realize God's presence—transcendent above creation and immanent within the heart of consciousness. This process of ego-dissolution is often coupled with *baqāʾ*—subsistence in God—where the mystic, having been annihilated from self-centered perception, is reinstated as a purified instrument of divine will. Sufi masters such as Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, al-Hujwīrī, and al-Ghazālī developed layered interpretations of *fanāʾ*.

Al-Sarrāj, in his foundational work *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, defines *fanāʾ* as "the passing away of the attributes of the lower self (nafs), and the passing away of the repugnance to, and reliance upon, anything that may happen" (Mat 1978, p. 23). Likewise, al-Hujwīrī distinguishes between remembrance of the "other" and the exclusive remembrance of God. For him, *fanāʾ* signifies "the annihilation of all remembrance of other than God," while baqāʾ is "the subsistence of the remembrance of God alone" (Mat 1978, p. 24). Al-Ghazālī further frames *fanāʾ* within a spiritual progression toward certainty: from *ʿilm al-yaqīn* (knowledge of certainty) to *ʿayn al-yaqīn* (vision of certainty), and finally to *ḥaqq al-yaqīn* (truth of certainty), culminating in *fanāʾ fī al-tawḥīd*, the annihilation in divine unity (Yaran 2004, p. 82).

Some interpretations, however, veered into controversial territory, especially when *fanāʾ* was presented as a form of mystical union (*ittiḥād*) with the Divine. This interpretation led to accusations of heresy, as in the case of al-Ḥallāj, who was executed after declaring *"Ana al-Ḥaqq"* (I am the Truth) (Britannica 2024). Classical Sufi authors like al-Sarrāj cautioned that such statements, if taken ontologically, blur the distinction between Creator and creation. True fanāʾ, he asserted, is not fusion with God but surrender to His will: *"God does not descend into the soul, but what descends is faith in God and belief in His unity"* (Mat 1978, p. 28).

The Qur'anic foundation for *fanāʾ* is often cited from Surah al-Raḥmān (55:26–27): *"All that is upon it [the earth] will perish, and there will remain the Face of your Lord, full of Majesty and Honor."* (Qur'an 55:26–27).

This verse affirms the transient nature of all created things and the eternal permanence of God, forming the metaphysical basis for fanāʾ in Sufi cosmology (Yaran 2004, p. 49).

Among the most profound contributors to the concept of *fanāʾ* in Islamic mysticism is Ibn ʿArabī, whose vision recasts annihilation not as existential erasure, but as epistemological awakening. In his *magnum opus Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, he describes *fanāʾ* as "the annihilation of the servant's vision of his own acts, and the recognition that they subsist only through God" (Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, vol. 2, p. 133). The mystic, in this state, does not cease to act; he perceives his actions as entirely sourced in divine agency. He further characterizes *fanāʾ* as "witnessing the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) without the creatures"—a perceptual state in which the veil of multiplicity is lifted, and only God's unity remains visible (Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, vol. 2, p. 133). Crucially, Ibn ʿArabī is consistent in rejecting any reading of *fanāʾ* that implies ontological union. In *Futūḥāt*, he states: "The servant is the servant and the Lord is the Lord. There is no union or incarnation; whoever claims such is afflicted by disease" (Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, vol. 1, pp. 80–81).

Thus, *fanāʾ* in Ibn ʿArabī's system is fundamentally a transformation of how the mystic sees the world, not a transformation of the world itself. Multiplicity remains ontologically intact, but it becomes invisible in the mystic's consciousness due to the dominance of divine witnessing (Shamshaki 2012, pp. 17–18). The mystic reaches the realization that all things are *maẓāhir*—manifestations—of the One, and thus perceives only the *āyāt* (signs) of God in existence (Shamshaki 2012, pp. 21–23).

Ibn ʿArabī's framework of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (Unity of Being) supports this vision: reality is one, and what appears as multiplicity is nothing but God's self-disclosures (*tajalliyāt*). The mystic's journey thus culminates not in extinction, but in clarity—a return to ontological vision unmarred by ego or illusion. This view, as Shamshaki shows, is in harmony with the later development of transcendental theosophy (*al-ḥikmah al-mutaʿāliyyah*) in the works of Mulla Ṣadrā and others, where graded existence (*tashkīk al-wujūd*) makes room for unity without obliterating multiplicity (Shamshaki 2012, pp. 22–23).

By reframing *fanāʾ* as the annihilation of perception rather than being, Ibn ʿArabī offers a theologically grounded and experientially rich vision of mystical transformation. Divinity is never assumed by the mystic; what dissolves is the illusion of separation, unveiling the ever-present and enduring reality of the One.

While Abū Madyan al-Ghawth (d. 1198) does not define *fanāʾ* in overt metaphysical terms like Ibn ʿArabī, his *Qaṣīda Lāmiyya* and aphoristic corpus reflect a parallel vision of self-effacement rooted in lived ethics, spiritual comportment (*adab*), and ontological dependence on the Divine. In this vision, fanāʾ, zuhd, and faqr emerge as deeply integrated stations (*maqāmāt*) along the Ṣūfī path toward Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*), rather than isolated concepts. In his celebrated poem, Abū Madyan opens with the line:

Say 'Allāh!' and let go of existence with all it contains,

if you desire the attainment of perfection.

This directive frames *zuhd* as more than renunciation of worldly pleasures—it is an ontological release, a detachment from the illusion of self-sufficiency and multiplicity. As Omneya Ayad explains, Abū Madyan's disassociation from the world "reflects the fundamental insubstantiality of creation," which is described in the poem as "nothing, whether in part or as a whole" (Ayad 2022, 70–71).

Zuhd, in this context, is the conscious discipline of inner emptiness. It is a process of spiritual purgation whereby the heart is emptied of attachments in order to become receptive to the Divine. Abū Madyan embodied this principle in both doctrine and daily practice. Biographers note that he refused even to carry a cane or begging bowl, stating that "*dhikr* was his bowl, and *tawḥīd* his cane"—a symbolic expression of complete reliance on divine presence rather than material means (Ayad 2022, 65).

This detachment aligns with *faqr*, or spiritual poverty, which Abū Madyan defines as the soul's recognition of its absolute dependence upon God—a state grounded in awareness, not in material lack. In his writings, *faqr* is described as "a sign of divine unity and a proof of singularity (*al-faqr amāra ʿalā al-tawḥīd wa dalāla ʿalā al-taʿḥīd*)" (Ayad 2022, 70–71). Poverty, then, is not a social or psychological condition—it is an

existential truth rooted in Qurʾānic revelation: "O people, you are the ones who are in need of God, and God is the Self-Sufficient, the Praiseworthy." (Qurʾān 35:15)

In this understanding, *faqr* and *zuhd* are preparatory states leading to *fanā'*. In line six of the *Qaṣīda Lāmiyya*, Abū Madyan writes:

The gnostics have been annihilated;

they perceive nothing but the Imperious, the Most Exalted.

Ayad interprets this as an articulation of *fanā' fī Allāh*, wherein the seeker no longer perceives even his own being, but witnesses only the Divine (Ayad 2022, 70). In one of his aphorisms, Abū Madyan similarly asserts: *"*No one sees the Truth unless he dies." This "death" refers to the death of the ego—the effacement of the lower self (*nafs*)—a necessary precondition for witnessing divine reality.

Unlike Ibn ʿArabī, who locates *fanā'* in the context of ontological unity and epistemological unveiling, Abū Madyan's *fanā'* is practical and ethical. It unfolds through the discipline of self-erasure in daily life—through humility, service, and silence. His disciples were instructed in doctrine and disciplined in the enactment of poverty—embodying humility, restraint, and inward surrender, emptying themselves of pride, ambition, and the longing to be seen. As Ayad notes, "the poverty Abū Madyan teaches is the soil in which divine presence quietly takes root" (Ayad 2022, 70).

This emphasis on inner transformation over speculative knowledge is reflected in another aphorism: "The *faqīr* is not the one who owns nothing, but the one who is owned by nothing." This definition affirms *faqr* as the negation of attachment, a precondition for the heart's capacity to host divine light. It also situates *fanā'* as spiritual receptivity—the dissolution of illusion that prepares the soul for *baqā'*, the enduring state of divine proximity.

In Abū Madyan's vision, then, *fanā'*, *zuhd*, and *faqr* form a coherent trilogy of mystical transformation. *Zuhd* detaches the heart from the world, *faqr* reveals the soul's ontological vulnerability, and *fanā'* completes the process by annihilating the self in divine witnessing. As Ayad concludes, *"*annihilation of the self frees one from limited temporal qualities, which are replaced by divine attributes*"* (Ayad 2022, 70). This transformation enables the mystic to move beyond understanding Divine Unity and to become a mirror that reflects it.

While Ibn ʿArabī interiorizes and universalizes *fanā'* through metaphysical unveiling, and Abū Madyan grounds it in ethical restraint and devotional discipline, both Sufis ultimately chart a path toward the dissolution of illusion—the vanishing of the self as a separate, self-sufficient entity. For Ibn ʿArabī, *fanā'* clears the perceptual field for visionary realization of Divine Unity; for Abū Madyan, *zuhd* and *faqr* clear the heart for the descent of divine grace. One moves through ontological insight, the other through moral purification. Yet in both, the death of the self is not an end, but the necessary precondition for presence—for *baqā'*, for nearness, for the soul to mirror the Real without distortion.

The Perfect Human and the Prophetic Archetype: Cosmology and Exemplarity

The notion of the *insān al-kāmil*—the Perfect Human—represents the apex of Ṣūfī anthropology and the culmination of the mystical journey. It is here that the visions of Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan converge around the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad, yet diverge in how they interpret his role and function in the spiritual life of the seeker. For Ibn ʿArabī, the Prophet is the ontological axis of creation; for Abū Madyan, he is the ethical paradigm to be followed in humility and presence.

Ibn ʿArabī's concept of the *insān al-kāmil* is inseparable from his doctrine of *ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* (the Muhammadan Reality). As articulated in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, this Reality is the primordial light or archetype through which all other beings and prophets derive their existence and spiritual identity. The Prophet Muḥammad is the final messenger in historical time and the first reality in ontological order —"I was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay" (Ibn ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ*; Glassé and Smith 2003, 216). As the locus of all divine names and attributes, the *insān al-kāmil* becomes the *barzakh* (isthmus) between the

Unseen and the manifest, between the Divine and the world (Chittick 1998, 394–96). In Ibn ʿArabī's thought, the journey of *safar* culminates in the actualization of this archetype—the moment when the seeker realizes that their perfected self is nothing other than a reflection of the Muhammadan Light.

This vision is deeply cosmological. The Prophet stands as the exemplar and the very ground of being. To walk the path is to unveil his reality within oneself. As Claude Addas notes, Ibn ʿArabī's understanding of the Prophet is metaphysical rather than merely symbolic: "Muḥammad is the guide and the destination" (Addas 2019, 57). Through *fanāʾ* and *maʿrifa*, the seeker transcends individuality and returns to the source of all prophecy and sainthood—the Muhammadan essence as the mirror of divine unity.

By contrast, Abū Madyan approaches the Prophet less as an ontological principle and more as an ethical model (*uswa ḥasana*). While he affirms Muḥammad's spiritual primacy, he does so through the language of conduct rather than metaphysics. The Prophet's humility, poverty, patience, and trust in God form the template for the seeker's behavior. In his *maqālāt* and attributed aphorisms, Abū Madyan urges his students to emulate the Prophet's interior states and outward comportment, emphasizing moral imitation over metaphysical ascent. As Suwito et al. (2023) note, Abū Madyan's influence produced a form of Muḥammadan piety deeply rooted in Maghribī ethics, where the Prophet is encountered through daily acts of *adab*, restraint, and sincerity—expressed in lived practice instead of abstract archetypes.

Whereas Ibn ʿArabī calls the seeker to become a mirror of the Divine through actualization of *ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*, Abū Madyan calls the seeker to disappear in the Prophet's example through annihilation of pride and self-will. In this way, each envisions a different mode of perfection: one metaphysical, the other moral; one contemplative, the other practical.

Yet both affirm that the spiritual path finds its fulfillment in proximity to the Prophetic archetype. Whether as cosmic light or ethical exemplar, the Prophet Muḥammad represents the horizon toward which *safar*, *sulūk*, and *fanāʾ* all converge. The Perfect Human, in their respective visions, is not an ideal to be admired from afar, but a reality to be realized, embodied, and lived.

Conclusion: Movement as Meaning in Ṣūfī Thought

This study has explored *safar*—spiritual travel—as a central motif in the teachings of Ibn ʿArabī and Abū Madyan, revealing how movement functions as a method of inner refinement and a pathway to divine encounter. In their respective visions, travel serves as a framework through which the soul is dislocated from illusion and reoriented toward truth.

Ibn ʿArabī presents *safar* through a cosmological lens. His system maps the seeker's progression across levels of being, where movement is guided by the metaphysical principles of *fanāʾ*, *barzakh*, and *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Within this framework, travel emerges as a process of unveiling, in which perception is purified, multiplicity dissolves, and the *insān al-kāmil*—the Perfect Human—emerges as the conscious reflector of the Divine Names. His writings trace the rhythm of ascension, where the inner journey corresponds to ontological realization and metaphysical clarity.

Abū Madyan, in contrast, grounds *safar* in the ethical demands of *sulūk*. His teachings emphasize humility, renunciation, and spiritual poverty as the guiding disciplines of the path. The movement he describes is lived through restraint, silence, and service—an ongoing practice of self-emptying that prepares the heart for grace. Through his *Qaṣīda Lāmiyya* and aphorisms, Abū Madyan envisions the path as one shaped by behavior and inner integrity, where each step deepens the seeker's receptivity to the Real.

Despite the distinct vocabularies each thinker employs, their teachings converge in affirming transformation as the purpose of the journey. Travel, in this context, does not center on geographic relocation or doctrinal exposition; it becomes an existential method through which the soul is reshaped. Movement, whether across cosmological thresholds or along ethical terrain, becomes the condition through which divine proximity unfolds.

The Ṣūfī understanding of *safar* thus unites ontology and ethics, perception and action, insight and humility. It is a process through which the seeker sheds the veils of self and prepares the heart to receive the light of

the One. In both Ibn ʿArabī's visionary ascent and Abū Madyan's ethical descent, the journey becomes a sacred rhythm of becoming—one that echoes the primal longing for return and the promise of nearness to the Divine.

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