

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Equinoctial Treatise

*An Isopsephical Treatment of the
Arcane Alphabetical Openings of the Quran*

Authored by:

The Headmaster of Logic and Philosophy (*al-Shaykh al-Ra'īs fī al-Mantiq wa al-Hikmah*): Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn b. 'Abd-Allāh b. al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Sīnā, known famously as Ibn Sīnā ('Avicenna')

Translated by:

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Translator's Introduction

“None knows them except Allah. And those who are consolidated in knowledge say, ‘We believe in it! All of it is from our Lord!’”

“None knows them except Allah and those who are consolidated in knowledge. They say, ‘We believe in it! All of it is from our Lord!’”

Depending on which scholar in history you asked, verse 7 of Sūrat Āl-‘Imrān might be translated either way.

Ibn Sīnā, however, would most definitely have opted for the latter.

Since the era of the Ṣaḥābah themselves, the *Ḥurūf Muqatta‘āt*, the arcane alphabetical openings to certain chapters of the Qurān, have remained a battleground of opinions (*ma‘rikat al-ārā’*). In his precocious *Ta’wīlāt*, for instance, Imām Māturīdī records over 10 different historically-rated opinions.¹ These include:

1. Acronyms of Divine declarations;
2. Abbreviations representing various chapters of the Qurān;
3. Abbreviations for Allah’s Names;
4. Abbreviations for Allah’s Attributes;
5. Alphabetical representations of entities, like archangels or prophets;
6. Oaths, whether by Allah’s Names, Attributes, created entities, or some other;
7. Et al.

Usually, these interpretations are *canonical* in nature; they source from some sort of report, usually attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنه, and they position that canonical source to serve as the primary basis of interpretation.

In this treatise, however, Ibn Sīnā takes a different approach. He approaches the verses from an *existential* context—i.e., from the order of being itself. Before asking what the letters signify, he establishes the realities to which they might refer: the First Principle, the Intellect, the Soul, Nature, and matter, together with the relations that bind them. The order of interpretation thus follows the order of existence.

¹ *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, pp. 27 - 28. Dār al-Mīzān

In this treatise, Ibn Sīnā's instrument of execution is isopsephy: the ancient Greek (and Hebrew (cf. gematria)) practice of drawing correspondences between letters or words through their numerical values. Here, these values follow the ancient Arabic *abjad* order, in which *alif* represents one, *bā'* two, *jīm* three, and so forth. Ibn Sīnā assigns these letters to existential ranks, then uses addition and multiplication to represent their relations. Thus, *alif-lām-mīm* becomes an oath by the First Principle, the Possessor of Command and Creation. In this respect, the treatise becomes Neopythagorean in character: number supplies a means of expressing the intelligible arrangement of the cosmos, and the relations between letters mirror the relations between beings.

Now, for Ibn Sīnā, interpretation must answer to what theoretical philosophy establishes concerning reality. Hermeneutics, itself a practical application of theoretical knowledge, consequently follows the necessities of metaphysics. If revelation is true, and a metaphysical conclusion has been demonstrated (i.e., logically proven) external to revelation, then the former must be intelligible in accordance with the latter. Ibn Sīnā's insistence on interpreting the *āyāt* through his cosmological scheme therefore follows from what he considers demonstratively necessary concerning God and existence. Within this framework, transmitted interpretations may corroborate the *theoria*, or furnish subsidiary meanings compatible with it, yet cannot ever contradict it or establish anything more primary than it, hence his concluding insistence that it is 'impossible' for the letters to signify anything besides (read: as primary as) the interpretation forthcoming.

As such, even where we disagree with his interpretation, there is much to learn from the theological questions Ibn Sīnā brings into view: divine unity, the dependence of creation, providence, and Allah as both the Principle and the End of existence. From a methodological perspective, reading the treatise attentively allows us to appreciate how seriously he took the harmony of reason and revelation, and the *Qurān*'s capacity to disclose an intelligible order of reality.

~ Translator

Preface

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate.

The Equinoctial Treatise, by the Headmaster: Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Abd-Allāh b. Sīnā. He composed it for the treasury of the Sayyid, the Emir, Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Abd-Allāh. He presented it as a gift on the Vernal Equinox (Nawrūz), so he gave it the title ‘The Equinoctial Treatise’ (al-Nawrūziyyah).

Every person strives with his ambition to serve our chief and patron—the Shaykh, the Leader, the Sayyid Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Abd-Allāh (may Allah perpetuate his honor)—with a gift that his [i.e., the person’s] means can afford.

Now, when I desired to be part of his company and follow the great majority in upholding the customs of the Vernal Equinox, and yet my circumstances prevented me from gifting him some worldly gift befitting his noble treasury, and I saw instead that wisdom was the most meritorious thing to seek and the most magnificent gift with which one might be honored—this being especially true of divine wisdom, and in particular that [wisdom] which is a religious wisdom, and which, moreover, discloses a secret that is among the most abstruse secrets of wisdom and religion: namely, the disclosure of the purpose contained in the particular letters that open several of the chapters of the Quran...

I therefore composed a monograph concerning it and made it my gift of the Equinox to him. For indeed, the most meritorious of gifts is guidance, and the noblest of presents is wisdom. I have placed my trust in the solicitude it would find in the soul of my master—the Shaykh the Leader, the Sayyid—may Allah perpetuate his honor.

I have divided this epistle into three chapters:

1. The First: On the order of existents and an indication to the propria of each rank within them.
2. The Second: On demonstrating how the [arcane] letters indicate them [i.e., the ordered existents and their propria].
3. The Third: On the intended meanings [of the arcane letters]. And with Allah lies all providence.

Chapter One: The Order of Existents and an Indication to the Propria of Each Rank Within Them

He, Mighty and Glorious be He, is the Originator of all originations, and the Initiator of all things. He is an Essence for Whom it is impossible to be multiplicitous, changing, spatial, or subsistent, whether by virtue of something in His Essence or disparate to His Essence. Nor is it possible for any other existence to exist at His echelon of existence, let alone exist above Him. Likewise, there is no existence besides Him of which He is not the benefactor of its existence or subsistence, let alone that He Himself benefits from the existence of anything else besides His Own Existence. Indeed, He alone is absolute truth (*al-ḥaqq al-maḥḍ*), absolute munificence (*al-jūd al-ḥaqq*), absolute good (*al-khayr al-ḥaqq*), absolute knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-maḥḍ*), absolute power (*al-qudrah al-maḥḍah*), and absolute life (*al-ḥayāh al-maḥḍah*), yet without any of these vocables signifying a distinct meaning separately in its own right. Instead, according to the philosophers, the intention of all these [vocables] is a single meaning and a single essence. Furthermore, it is impossible that there be, within His Essence, any sort of matter; or that any sort of potentiality intermix with Him; or that any of the Attributes of His Magnificence, be they essential or active, defer from Him [whether essentially or chronally].

Now, the first [echelon/rank] to originate from Him was the Realm of the First Intellect (*‘Ālam al-‘Aql al-Awwal*). This realm, in sum, comprises ten existents, all of which subsist without material substrates, and which are free of any potentiality or preparatory receptivity. Pure Intellects and Dazzling Forms, it is not of their nature to experience change, be multiplicitous, or occupy space. All of them yearn for the First Truth (*al-Ḥaqq al-Awwal*), for His emulation, and for the manifestation of His Commandment, standing ever in His proximity, and delighting ever in the intellectual affinity (*al-qurb al-‘aqlī*) of a timeless aeon (*sarmad al-dahr*) while existing [with Him] in a single relation (*nisbah wāḥidah*).

Then comes the Psychic Realm (*al-‘Ālam al-Nafsi*). It comprises a large sum of intelligible essences (*dhawāt ma‘qūlah*) which are not entirely extricated from the matter of material entities, but which instead drape themselves with matter in a specific way. Their matter consists of celestial determinate matter (*mawādd thābitah samāwiyyah*), and for this reason they are the most meritorious of all material forms. They [i.e., these celestial, intelligible essences] administrate the celestial bodies (*al-ajrām al-falakiyyah*), and through them the elemental bodies (*al-‘unṣuriyyah*) as well. They possess, within their very natures, a level of change and a level of multiplicity, though not at the absolute level. They are all pining lovers (*‘ushshāq*) of the Intellectual Realm, and for each [intelligible essence] there is a number among their totality connected, through a relation, to one of the Ten Intellects. Thus, it [i.e., the Psychic Realm] is the Realm of the Universal Imaginal Form (*‘Ālam al-Mithāl al-Kullī*), imprinted in the essence of its Asomatous Origin (*Mabda’ih al-Mufāriq*) and acquired from the Essence of the First Truth.

Then comes the Realm of Nature (*‘Ālam al-Ṭabī‘ah*). It comprises the faculties which pervade [material] bodies, and which are draped entirely in matter. These faculties perform the essential motions and rests within them [i.e., material bodies], and they elevate them through substantial entelechies (*al-kamālāt al-jawhariyyah*) [acquired] by way of subjugation (*‘alā sabīl al-taskhīr*). These faculties are all active.

After that comes the Corporeal Realm (*al-‘Ālam al-Jismānī*). It divides into ‘aethereal’ (*athīrī*) and ‘elemental’ (*‘unṣurī*). The proprium of the aethereal is its spherical shape and motion (*istidārat al-shakl wa al-ḥarakah*), the complete drowning of its form within matter (*istighrāq al-ṣūrah li al-māddah*), and the vacuity of its substance from any conflicting matter (*khuluww al-jawhar ‘an al-māddah al-muḍaddah*). The proprium of the elemental is its preparatory receptivity to varying shapes (*al-ashkāl al-mukhtalifah*) and changing states (*al-aḥwāl al-mutaghāyirah*). Whenever matter is divided between two conflicting forms [i.e., shapes and states], then whenever one exists *in actu* (*bi al-fi‘l*), the other exists *in potentia* (*bi al-quwwah*). Moreover, neither existence [i.e., form] is a timeless existence (*wujūdan sarmadiyyan*), but instead a choral existence (*wujūdan zamāniyyan*).² Its [i.e., the corporeal material body’s]

² If either form were timeless, the matter could not accept any other form besides the timeless one, since time is the measure of incipient change. (Cf. al-Kindī, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*)

principal activity arises from the celestial potentiality mediated by the celestial motions (*al-quwwah al-samāwiyyah bi tawassuṭ al-ḥarakāt*); its ultimate perfection is always preceded by potentiality; and whatever qualities are first within it by nature are last in nobility and merit. Moreover, every one of the abovementioned faculties has a consideration in essence (*ʿtibār bi dhātih*), and a consideration in relation to its subsequents which come into existence because of it (*ʿtibār bi al-iḍāfah ilā tālihi al-kāʾin bihi*).

The relationship of all the secondary realms to the first realm, from a perspective of shared property (*al-shirkah*), is a relationship of origination.³ With more nuance, however, it is the Intellect in particular which holds the relationship of origination [with the First Principle].⁴ Then, once it comes to stand as an intermediary between it and the tertiary realms (*al-thawālith*), there arises within it the relation of Command (*amr*), and the soul is included therein along with it. Thereafter comes the relation of Creation (*khalq*). As for elemental things, insofar as they are generated and corruptible, theirs is the relation of generative existentiation (*takwīn*).

Origination belongs specifically to the Intellect, and Command emanates from it to the Soul. Creation belongs specifically to natural existents and encompasses them all, while generative existentiation belongs specifically to those among them that are generated and corruptible. Moreover, because existents, according to the most universal division, are either animistic or corporeal, their universal relation to the True Principle is that He is the One to whom belong Creation and Command. Thus, Command pertains to everything endowed with perception, while Creation pertains to everything subject to governance and subjection.

This, then, is our intended purpose in this first chapter.

³ In other words, the first realm (the Intellectual Realm) and all other realms share in the fact that they are both fundamentally originated by Allah, the First Principle.

⁴ Although all realms trace their origins to Allah, the Origin Point of Existence, the philosophers held that only the Intellectual Realm, and particularly the First Intellect, was actually, truly originated by Allah directly. The rest of existence was then existentiated by the facilitation of the First Intellect and the nine Intellects thereafter. This belief owes itself to the philosophers' principle: 'an essentially singular thing can generate nothing but another singularity.' Based on this principle, God, being a singular (read: non-multiplicitous) essence, cannot generate anything truly multiplicitous, so He generates only the First Intellect, itself a singular essence, and then multiplicity arises from the aggregates of singular essences, only from the notional considerations within them.

Chapter Two: On Demonstrating How the [Alphabetical] Letters Indicate Them [i.e., the Ordered Existents and Their Propria].

Of obvious necessity is that:

1. If one wishes to signify these [existential] ranks by means of [alphabetical] letters, then the first of the letters in the ancient alphabetical order (*al-tartīb al-qadīm*)—that is, the ‘*Abjad Hawwiz*’ (أبجد هوز) order—should signify the First [Existent: Allah], and each letter following it should signify whatever follows Him [in existential rank].
2. Whatever [letter] indicates these meanings insofar as they are essences in themselves should have priority over whatever [letter] indicates them insofar as they are relational [to one another].
3. The meaning resulting from a relation between two of them [i.e., two essences] should be signified by the letter that results from the multiplication of the first two letters, one by the other—in other words: [the new letter has its own numerical value resulting] from the multiplication of the *numerical values* of the [former] two letters.
4. Whatever numerical product acquires from the multiplication must be signifiable by a single letter actually employed for that signification, like ي, which results from multiplying ب by ه. On the other hand, a resulting product signifiable only by two letters—e.g., يه, which results from multiplying ج by ه—is to be discarded, because it is ambiguous and may give the impression that each of ي and ه possesses a signification independently in itself. This ambiguity occurs whenever two letters are brought together despite each of them possessing its own idiosyncratic signification.
5. The letter signifying a[n existential] rank under its own aspects—by means of a preceding rank—should be a letter resulting from the addition of the letters belonging to both ranks.

Once this has been established:

ا (1) ought to signify the Maker, Majestic and Glorious be He; ب (2) the Intellect; ج (3) the Soul; and د (4) Nature. This is when they are considered as essences in themselves.

Thereafter: ه (5) [also] signifies the Maker Most High; و (6) the Intellect; ز (7) the Soul; and ح (8) Nature. This is when they are considered in relation to that which lies beneath them.

Then there remains ط (9) for prime matter (*hayūlā*) and its realm; it possesses no existence in relation to anything beneath it. Thus exhausts the rank[s] of [numerical] units.

[Thereafter,] Origination—the relation of the First [Existent] to the Intellect, the Intellect being an essence and not a relation—is signified by ي (10), since it results from multiplying ه by ب [5 x 2]. As for the relation of the Creator to the Soul, or of the Intellect to the Soul, there is no number signified by a single letter: for ه multiplied by ج [5 x 3] gives يه [10 + 5], while و multiplied by ج [6 x 3] gives يح [10 + 8].⁵

Command—the relation of the First [Existent] to the Intellect considered relationally—is signified by ل [30], since it results from multiplying ه by و [5 x 6]. Creation—the relation of the First to Nature considered relationally—is signified by م [40], since it results from multiplying ه by ح [5 x 8], for ح signifies Nature insofar as it is relationally considered. Generative Existentiality—the relation of the Creator to Nature considered as an essence—is signified by ك [20], since it results from multiplying ه by د [5 x 4].

The aggregate [i.e., sum (not product)] of the two relations of Command and Creation—that is, the ordering of Creation through the mediation of Command, namely ل and م [30 + 40]—is signified by the letter ع [70]. Likewise, the aggregate of the two relations of Creation and Generation—namely م and ك [40 + 20]—is signified by س [60]. The aggregate of the two relations belonging to the extremities of existence—namely ل and ك [30 + 20]—is signified by ن [50]. The aggregate of the

⁵ As explained previously, these products are problematic because the letters “yā”, “hā”, and “ḥā” already have their own essential significations, and thus they cannot viably serve as products without changing their essence entirely, or amalgamating with other letters, which themselves have their own essential signification. In turn, the isopsephy of Avicenna does not incorporate the numerical values of 15 or 18.

relations of Command, Creation, and Generation—namely ك، م، ل [30 + 40 + 20]—is signified by ص [90].

The encompassment of the totality within Origination—that is, ي multiplied by itself [10 x 10]—is ق [100]. It is likewise obtained by adding ص and ي [90 + 10].

Finally, the return of this totality to the First, He who is the Principle of all things and their End, insofar as He is both First and Last—that is, both efficient cause and final cause, as has been explained in our *Metaphysics*—is signified by و [200], which is twice ق [100 x 2].

Thus concludes our intended purpose in this chapter.

Chapter Three: On the Intended Meanings [of the Arcane Letters]

Once this has been established, I say:

The signification of **الم** is an oath by the First, the Possessor of Command and Creation.

The signification of **المر** is an oath by the First, the Possessor of Command and Creation; He who is the First and the Last, Command and Creation, the Efficient Principle and the Final Principle, all together.

The signification of **المص** is an oath by the First, the Possessor of Command and Creation and the Initiator of all [things].

The signification of **ص** is an oath by Universal Solitude.

The signification of **ق** is an oath by Origination insofar as it encompasses all things through the mediation of the Origination that extends to the Intellect.

The signification of **كهيعص** is an oath by the relation obtained between **ك**—the realm of Generative Existentiality—and the First Principle. First, there is the relation of Origination, namely **ي**. Then Creation, through the mediation of Origination, becomes, by the occurrence of relation and in virtue of that relation, Command, namely **ع**. Then comes Generative Existentiality through the mediation of Creation and Command, namely **ص**. Thus, between **ك** and **هـ** there must necessarily be:

1. First, the relation of Origination;
2. Then the relation of Creation and Command;
3. And then the relation of Generation, Creation, and Command.

يس is an oath by the First Emanation, viz. Origination, and by its last, viz. Generation.

حم is an oath by the natural world insofar as it falls within Creation.

ح عسق is an oath by that which is signified by the mediation of Creation in the existence of the natural world through Creation: by joining it with Command, through the relation of Creation to Command and the relation of Creation to Generation, such that it takes from the former and conveys to the latter. Through this, the universal Origination encompassing all the worlds is completed. For when the worlds are taken collectively, they have no relation to the First other than universal Origination, which is signified by ق.

طس is an oath by the hylomorphic realm (*al-‘ālam al-hayūlānī*) insofar as it falls within [the ladder of existential] Generation.

طسم is an oath by the hylomorphic world insofar as it falls within Creation, which encompasses Generation, and by Command insofar as it falls within Origination.

ن is an oath by the world of Generation and the world of Command, that is, by the aggregate of ك and ل.

It is utterly impossible that these letters should possess any signification other than this. Beyond this, however, there are mysteries that require oral transmission.

May Allah, Exalted is He, prolong the life of the Shaykh, the Emir, the Sayyid; may He bless him in the favors He has bestowed upon him; and may He make me among those granted success in repaying his benefactions, through His grace and the abundance of His mercy.

All Praise is deserved only by Allah, and may benedictions and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. Providence comes only from Allah, Glorified and Exalted is He.

Thus completes the Equinoctial Treatise, and to Allah belongs all praise and all gracious favor.