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Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr al-Ḥāfī A Case Study in Biographical Traditions (1)

I. Introduction

This paper examines how Ḥadīth-minded and Sufi biographers represented their respective heroes. Authors in both traditions made assumptions about why Ḥadīth-scholars or Sufis should exist at all, and then compiled testimony about representative members of each group. In the course of centuries of expansion, revision, and re-contextualization, the life-stories of the early exemplars underwent complex and often surprising transformations. In the case of Ḥadīth-scholars and Sufis, these transformations resulted from changing conceptions of heirship to the Prophet and of the proper relationship between the different groups of heirs.

Biographies possess particular importance for cultural history inasmuch as they exemplify characterization – the process by which culture represents persons. Admittedly the term "characterization" is more usually applied only to fictional characters. From a historian's viewpoint, certainly, a difference must exist between fictional characters and represented real persons (2). Moreover, believing Muslims may join historians in insisting that the heroes of classical biography possess particular moral significance precisely because of their having actually lived and acted in

(1) I thank Professors Wolfhart Heinrichs and Roy Mottahedeh for their comments on the research upon which this study is based, and Professors A. Kevin Reinhart, Michael Cook, Tayeb El-Hibri, and Christopher Melchert for their many insightful comments on drafts of this paper. Any errors of fact or interpretation are of course my own.

(2) For a critical survey of social history based on biographical literature, see R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History. A Framework for Inquiry*, revised ed. (Princeton, 1991), 187-208.

the past. But as long ago as 1734, the Puritan divine Jonathan Edwards ruefully conceded that no matter how true or important a story may be, it differs in no intrinsic or self-evident way from a pure fantastication. "A person by mere nature... may be liable to be affected with the story of Jesus Christ, and the sufferings he underwent, as well as by any other tragical story : he may be the more affected with it from the interest he conceives mankind to have in it : yea, he may be affected with it without believing it ; as well as a man may be affected with what he reads in a romance, or sees acted in a stage play (3)". So indistinguishable are the two forms, says Edwards, that the reader can recognize a story as true only by divine grace. Once textualized, in other words, all persons are created equal.

Working from a secularized versions of the same argument, modern historians have made the application of narratological analysis to historiography a familiar procedure. This procedure appeals particularly to the student of classical Arabic biography for two reasons. First, despite a number of vividly depicted imaginary personages, classical Arabic literature appears to have been far more concerned with real people. Despite its variety and profusion, however, classical Arabic biography all too often fails to meet the expectations of modern readers in search of "psychological insight" or "well-rounded characters". Obviously the biographers were aiming at something else, and a detailed account of the premises and techniques of representing persons, real or not, offers the best hope of discerning what their aims might have been.

Second, any diachronic survey of biographical entries on prominent persons reveals a curious fact : generation after generation of biographers, all ostensibly committed to a high ideal of documentary accuracy, produced quite divergent versions of the same life. Clearly the biographers' own preoccupations, whether spiritual, polemical, or aesthetic, had a decisive influence upon their representations of the human subject (4). While this is necessarily true for any literary tradition, classical Arabic biography offers an unusually massive amount of documentation for it : one thousand years of dictionary entries and monographs, often treating the very same (albeit extremely large) set of persons. Given this

(3) Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light", in *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harold P. Simonson (New York : Ungar, 1970), 71.

(4) Studies of biographical development include Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Controversy and its effects in the biographical tradition of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī", in *Studia Islamica* 46 (1977) : 115-131 ; Yūsuf Rāġib, « Al-Sayyida Nafīsa, sa légende, sa culte et son cimetière », *Studia Islamica* 44 (1976), 61-86, and 45 (1977), 27-55 ; Josef van Ess, "Ibn al-Rēwandī, or the making of an image", *al-Abhath* 27 (1978-79), 5-26 ; Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint : Ibn al-Fāriḍ, his verse, and his shrine* (Columbia, S. C., University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

profusion of biography, it seems almost perverse to restrict the search for "characterization" to the relatively small corpus of outright fiction.

This study will examine the premises and techniques that shaped two particular biographical traditions. It aims at neither a belletristic appreciation of the biographers' prose style nor at an evaluation of the historical accuracy of the claims the writers make. Rather, this paper explores the ways in which the representation of two particular exemplars varied with the preoccupations of their biographers, changed across centuries, and succeeded in encoding at every stage a particular conception of how "representative men" (in Thoreau's phrase) should comport themselves on earth and in heaven.

Of the mass of anecdotes that constitute biography, many emphasize the hero's virtues by explicit or implicit comparison to representatives of competing traditions. I have chosen to examine the life stories of two contemporaries each of whom represented a distinct human ideal : the Ḥadīth-scholar and legist Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (164-241/780-855) and the renunciant Bishr b. al-Ḥārith al-Ḥāfī (c. 152-227/c. 766-841). Because of their temporal, physical, and spiritual proximity, these two men were often compared, meaning that the reader can examine biographers' depictions not only of their respective heroes (whether scholar or mystic) but of the "rival" hero as well. In Ibn Ḥanbal's case, my account will pay particular attention to the techniques his biographers used to vindicate his performance in the Inquisition, a formative event in the development of the self-definition of the *'ulamā'*. In Bishr's case, my account will trace his miraculous transformation from Ḥadīth-scholar to saint, a transformation brought about by the Sufi biographer's insistence upon retrojecting the presence of their community a century or more into the past. The concluding section will examine how biographers in both traditions represented the relationship between the two exemplars. Stories involving both men, surprisingly frequent in the biographies of each, place the greatest stress (in both senses of the word) upon the self-definition of their communities and upon the conventions of representation that governed the activities of their biographers.

II. Collective Identity and Biographical Practice

In his discussion of the legality or real-estate transactions in Baghdad, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī reports that scholars who consider the region usurped (*dār ghaṣb*) have forbidden the buying and selling of lots there. Al-Khaṭīb reports that a woman living in Baghdad sent her son to ask permission to sell a house she had inherited. "Son", she said, "go to Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr b. al-Ḥārith and ask them about it, because

I do not like making decisions they might disapprove of". According to the son's report, both men agreed that the house could be sold but not the lot. "I returned to my mother and informed her of this, and she did not sell the lot (5)". One might well consult the celebrated Ḥadīth-scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, "the champion of the Sunna and the senior figure of his community (6)" about such a matter, but the mother's insistence on asking Bishr's opinion as well provokes some curiosity. Bishr b. al-Ḥārith, known as "al-Ḥāfī", "the barefoot", had studied Ḥadīth and possibly jurisprudence as well, but subsequently renounced formal study and withdrew into a life of pious seclusion (7). According to various accounts, the Baghdadīs knew him as a ragged, half-starved man who accepted no students or petitioners. Yet al-Khaṭīb's report suggests that he shared Ibn Ḥanbal's status as arbiter of ethics in the city of Baghdad.

Al-Khaṭīb's account is one of many depicting the two famous pietists as concurring in a judgement or, more often, deferring to each other in matters of conduct. In one case, Ibn Ḥanbal declined to answer a question regarding scrupulosity on the grounds that he ate Baghdad produce, that is, food tainted by the usurpation of the land where it was grown : "If I were Bishr b. al-Ḥārith", said Ibn Ḥanbal, "I would be fit to answer you. He would eat neither the produce of Baghdad nor any food from the Sawād (8)", i.e., "he is more scrupulous than I". Just as frequently, Bishr defers to Ibn Ḥanbal. In one account, Bishr was asked "What softens the heart ?" and replied with a Qur'ānic verse : "Do hearts not find peace in the remembrance of God ?" (13:28) The questioner then admitted that he had already posed the same question to Ibn Ḥanbal, who replied that eating ritually permitted foods softens the heart. Bishr then declared Ibn Ḥanbal's response a better one (9).

Opinions are less cordial, however, when a third party compares the two men. Bilāl al-Khawwāṣ reports meeting the prophet al-Khiḍr in a dream and asking him about the relative status of Bishr al-Ḥāfī and Ibn Ḥanbal. Al-Khiḍr replied that when Bishr died "he left no one like himself behind", implying that Bishr must have been superior to Ibn Ḥanbal, who was still alive at the time of the mystic's death. Of Ibn Ḥanbal himself, al-Khiḍr says only that he was "a truthful man (10)". Naturally, Ibn Ḥanbal's biographers reverse the order of precedence. Ibn Ḥanbal's

(5) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071), *Ta'rīkh Baghdād* (Cairo, 1931), 1:4.

(6) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 3:336.

(7) See Maher Jarrar, "Bišr al-Ḥāfī und die Barfüßigkeit in Islam", *Der Islam* 71 (1994), 191-240, esp. p. 192-193 on the importance of Ḥanbalī transmitters of his *akhbār*.

(8) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādi, *Ta'rīkh*, 1:6.

(9) *Jā'a bi'l-aṣl* : "He got to the heart of the matter". Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), *Manāqib al-imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Cairo 1349/1931), 196-197.

(10) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 9:187.

son, for example, praises his father's fortitude by calling him superior to Bishr al-Ḥāfī : his father "bore solitude better than anyone. Even Bishr, for all his spiritual attainment, could not bear solitude for long ; he would go out visiting an hour here and and hour there (11)".

This insistence upon comparing Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr appears to have arisen from a perceived awkwardness in the two men's presence together in Baghdad. As their life stories will show, Ibn Ḥanbal engaged the world, while Bishr renounced it ; and these respective preferences may have set limits upon the degree to which either man could wholeheartedly admire the other. This Weberian characterization of the relationship in fact reformulates an element of the classical Arabic biographers' notion that the two men belonged to different traditions of heirship to the Prophet Muḥammad. Taking their cue from the Prophet's dictum that "Those who know (*'ulamā'*) are the heirs of the prophets", biographers stated or assumed that the survival of the Muslim community depended upon the ongoing performance of those tasks the Prophet performed in exemplary fashion during his lifetime. In the late fourth/tenth century – that is, over a century after the death of Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr – biographers began to classify "those who know" into groups (*ṭā'ifa*, pl. *ṭawā'if*, among other terms), and to assign to certain of these groups a share in the Prophet's legacy. In the biographical works that arose in conjunction with these schemes of classification, Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr sometimes appear together – both are Ḥadīth-scholars, for example, or saints – and in other cases not. The extent to which the two men came to represent divergent styles of piety depended on the extent to which a given biographer held the claims of the respective *ṭā'ifas* to be not only different but mutually competitive or even exclusive.

Biographers and theorists offered various accounts of how the community as a whole was to divide the Prophet's labors. Al-Sarrāj divided "those who know" into the three categories of Ḥadīth-scholars, jurisprudents, and Sufis (12), while Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī listed the "men representing the aspects of religion" into the five categories of caliph, jurisprudent, Ḥadīth-scholar, Qur'ān-reader, and renunciant (*zāhid*) (13). It is no accident that these two master plans, both of which grant equal status to the Sufi *ṭā'ifa*, were proposed by Sufi theorists. One has the impression that the proliferation of etiological narratives for the various scholarly and/or sanctified *ṭā'ifas* owes something to the Sufi biographers' attempts to carve out a place for themselves in a hierarchy unselfcons-

(11) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 9:183.

(12) Abū Naṣr 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī (d. 378/988-89), *Kitāb al-luma' fī l-taṣawwuf*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (London, 1914 ; repr. London, 1963), 2-12.

(13) Cited in Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), *Talqīḥ fuhūm ahl al-athar fī 'uyūn al-tawārīkh wa l-siyar*, ed. M.Y. Tūnkī al-Brelvī (Delhi, n.d.), 382-384.

ciously dominated by Ḥadīth-scholars and legists (14). Despite their demands for equal standing, however, the Sufi biographers did not hesitate to use their subjects as sticks to bash their fellow heirs the Ḥadīth-scholars, as our examination of Bishr's biographies will show.

As employed in these schemes of classification, the term "*ṭā'ifa*" refers both to notional communities and to social entities, classical writers assuming – either by conviction or for convenience – that the two were one and the same. Having ordered their subjects on the basis of scholarly and other communitarian affiliations, biographers justified such affiliations with "charter myths" (15) tracing the community's origin to Divine and prophetic mandate. These myths of origin formed an armature for the writing of life-stories, and the resulting biographical texts leave the impression that *ṭā'ifa* – affiliation was both conscious and exclusive. For the third/ninth century, however, any such characterization smacks of back-projection on the part of the biographer. (16) For example, Bishr al-Ḥāfī does not appear to have called himself an heir of the Prophet, but his Sufi biographers did label the saints – of whom, they claim, Bishr was one – heirs and "knowers", thus imputing to the mystic a *ṭā'ifa* – consciousness he gives little evidence of having possessed (17).

According, then, to their later biographers, scholars such as Ibn Ḥanbal claimed heirship because they preserved and disseminated the Prophetic Sunna as recorded in the Ḥadīth, while Sufis such as Bishr claimed to have inherited the Prophet's esoteric knowledge or at least his role

(14) On the self-characterization of the legists (admittedly based on later sources), see A. Kevin Reinhart, "Transcendence and Social Practice : Muftīs and Qāḍīs as Religious Interpreters", *Annales islamologiques* 27 (1993), 5-28, esp. 9-10, where the legists are described as dividing the community into the two simple blocs of the learned and unlearned, the former of course being the heirs of the prophets.

(15) On this term see Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (New York, 1926), esp. 19, 36-59.

(16) Discussing manifestations of self-awareness among practitioners of the various fourth/tenth-century intellectual disciplines, Wolfhart Heinrichs notes : "By back-projection, combined with a keen interest in *awā'il* 'firsts ; they create the impression that the same kind of compartmentalization with which they were faced already obtained a hundred and more years earlier, when in fact there are a number of indications that in this formative period the exchange of ideas between disciplines was of a much more common occurrence". W. Heinrichs, "Contacts between Scriptural Hermeneutics and Literary Theory in Islam : The Case of Majāz", *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* 7 (1991/92), 253-284, at 255.

(17) On the self-definition of the "Sufis", see A.M.M. MacKeen, "The Ṣūfī-Qawm movement", *Muslim Word* 53:3 (1963), 212-225 ; and most recently Christopher Melchert, "The transition from asceticism to mysticism at the middle of the ninth century C.E.", *Studia Islamica* 83:1 (1996), 51-70 ; note esp. his discovery (p. 69-70) of al-Junayd's classification of Muslims into three groups, "those who have chosen ritual worship and fear (*al-'ibādāt wa-al-takhawwuf*)... those who have chosen renunciation, longing, and austerity (*al-shud wa-al-taqashshuf*)", and "those who have chosen poverty and Sufism (*al-faqr wa-al-taṣawwuf*)".

as the exemplar of perfect piety. Although not necessarily irreconcilable, these two mandates and the premises that supported them produced – in some biographers'minds at least – a sense that the representatives of the different *ṭā'ifas* must inevitably regard one another with suspicion and compete with one another for the allegiance of their contemporaries. At the same time, however, the necessary coexistence of the *ṭā'ifas* in the social world appears to have militated against any conclusive literary resolution of the questions that divided them. In fact, the mature biographical tradition, exemplified by such figures as Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038) and Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), became quite adept at finding or adapting anecdotes ([18]) that encoded complex relationships of mutual deference among representatives of the two *ṭā'ifas* in question.

III. Ibn Ḥanbal

Ibn Ḥanbal, his biographers write, devoted himself from an early age to the study of Ḥadīth and acquired a lifelong reputation for poverty and humility. "I possessed nothing but a sack for my books", he said describing his period of study in Kufa. "I would lay the sack on top of a brick, and sleep with my head on the sack". He also outstripped his fellows in memorizing Ḥadīth : "[My teacher] would often recite ten Ḥadīths [in a row], and I would memorize them. When he got up and left, [the others] would ask me to dictate them all back, and I would" ([19]). Ibn Ḥanbal not only memorized a million Ḥadīths along with their isnāds, but strove to make his life conform in every detail to their prescriptions. "I have never written down a Ḥadīth of the Prophet without putting it into practice," he is supposed to have said. "Once I came across a Ḥadīth to the effect that the Prophet had himself cupped and paid Abū Ṭayba one dinar ; so when I had myself cupped, I paid the cupper a dinar", probably too much to pay for a cupping ([20]). When Ibn Ḥanbal bought a concubine,

(18) *Akhbār* : I shall not be dealing directly with the issue of relationships between eyewitnesses, transmitters, and compilers, as raised by Stefan Leder in a number of studies ; the reader will nevertheless note that the types of variations in the reports cited here parallel Leder's characterization of the narrative tradition. See Leder, *Das Korpus al-Haitam ibn 'Adī (st. 207/822). Herkunft, Überlieferung, Gestalt früher Texte der akhbār-Literatur* (Frankfurt, 1991) ; "Features of the Novel in Early Historiography : The Downfall of Xālid al-Qasrī", *Oriens* 32 (1990), 72-96 ; "Frühe Erzälungen zu Mağnūn : Mağnūn als Figur ohne Lebensgeschichte", in *XXIV. Deutscher Orientalistentag (1988)*, ed. W. Diem and A. Falaturi (Stuttgart, 1990), 150-161. On the narrative structure of *akhbār*, see also M. Daniel Beaumont, "Hard-Boiled : Narrative Discourse in Early Muslim Traditions", *Studia Islamica* 83:1 (1996), 5-31.

(19) Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, ed. S. al-Arna'ūṭ et al (Beirut 1304/1982), 11:186.

(20) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 179.

he had her change her name to Rayḥāna, the name of one of the Prophet's concubines (21). He even attempted to bring his every casual utterance into conformity with the Sunna, refusing for example to say "Praise God" when asked about his poor health – until Bishr al-Ḥāfī sent him a message explaining that the Companions did not consider the expression to be a complaint (22).

In spite of his conspicuously successful emulation of the Prophet, Ibn Ḥanbal – according to the biographical sources – lived in a state of almost constant self-recrimination and despair. In one such account, a neighbor describes the squalor of his dress and the morbidity of his temperament :

> I went into the entryway and found [Ibn Ḥanbal] sitting on the dirt floor. The dye in his hair had run, and I could see the white roots of his hair. He was wearing a small and soiled *karāmīs* waist-wrapper and a coarse shirt with dirt on the shoulder and sweat-stains on the collar.
>
> I asked him a question about scrupulosity and the acquisition of merit. No sooner had I asked the question than I saw his face fall and assume a sorrowful expression, as if he were disgusted with, and sorry for, himself, so much so that it pained me to watch him.
>
> As we were leaving, I said to someone who was with me, "Some days he seems so dissatisfied with himself" (23).

Two distinct considerations explain the presence of accounts such as this. First, Ibn Ḥanbal's ambitious project is doomed to failure because he cannot fully emulate a man who himself emulated no one. The Prophet lived spontaneously, and spontaneity by definition lies beyond the reach of imitation. The imām's (24) much-documented self-abasement, self-deprecation, and depression appear natural enough responses to failure of his project. Second, as Ibn Ḥanbal's contemporaries appear to have furtively conceded, the complete success of the his project would broach the scandalous possibility that he could come to replace the Prophet. This possibility, though blasphemous, was not literally unthinkable : a scholar of the next generation, Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, mentions an "ignoramus" who, envious of the praise heaped upon Ibn Ḥanbal, said of his followers : "Ibn Ḥanbal is their prophet" (25). As if in acknowledgement of this dreadful possibility, Ibn Ḥanbal himself reportedly condemned those who recorded his opinions in writing, fearing (as H. Laoust expresses it) that his *ra'y* (personal opinion) "might then

(21) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 178-179.

(22) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 177.

(23) *Mā arābu yantafi' bi-nafsihi ayyāman.* Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 209.

(24) "The imām" : a conventional designation of prominent Sunnī scholars, and a common cognomen of Ibn Ḥanbal's. I will use it here in exclusive reference to him, except in notes 50 and 107, where (capitalized) it refers to the Shī'ī figure.

(25) Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 11:305.

replace the principies of conduct traced by the Kur'ān and the Sunna" ([26]). Apart from the historical reality or psychological plausibility of Ibn Ḥanbal's morbid self-criticism, its appearance in biography serves the strategic purpose of emphasizing that, appearances to the contrary, he never actually succeeded in attaining his object.

His biographers could theoretically have made the same point by citing a few instances of Ibn Ḥanbal's failure to live up to the Prophet's Sunna. But classical Arabic biography functions by accumulating anecdotes each of which presumably stood alone once and could conceivably do so again. His biographers could not document a conspicuous failure on Ibn Ḥanbal's part without providing the imām's detractors with a denigrating anecdote for their anti-Ḥanbalī arsenal, or indeed without providint their own enemies with cause to impugn the sincerity of their affiliations ([27]). Accounts of the imām's self-deprecation resolve the dilemma by suggesting that he must indeed have failed in some matter of faith or practice, but cleverly leave the lapse of commission or omission to the reader's imagination (while simultaneously conferring upon Ibn Ḥanbal the additional virtue of humility). Asked to pray on behalf of a crippled neighbor, Ibn Ḥanbal is said to have exclaimed, "Rather she should pray for us !" ([28])

Having thus forestalled the disturbing possibility of Ibn Ḥanbal's attainment of perfect emulation, his biographers proceed to catalogue his exemplary virtues in exhaustive detail. Ibn al-Jawzī, for example, provides exactly the sort of information about Ibn Ḥanbal that Ibn Ḥanbal himself sought out about the Prophet, including not only his opinions on matters of faith and practice but his habits of speech, eating, and dress. We are told, for example, that Ibn Ḥanbal believed that faith can increase or decrease, that the doctrine of the created Qur'ān constitutes unbelief, and that the anthropomorphic verses are not to be interpreted allegorically ([29]). We are also told that he wore yellow shoes, depilated himself at home instead of at the bathhouse, and patched his clothes in colors that did not match ([30]).

(26) H.Laoust, "Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal", *EI2*, 274. Ibn Ḥanbal's condemnation of any attempts to record his opinions places the responsible biographer in a difficult position. Ibn al-Jawzī lamely argues that although Ibn Ḥanbal forbade anyone to commit his pronouncements to writing, "God decreed that they be recorded and organized and spread far and wide" (*Manāqib*, 194).

(27) On the consequences that allegedly befell al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī for failing to call Ibn Ḥanbal a *faqīh*, see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntazam*, ed. M. A. 'Aṭā et al. (Beirut, 1412/1992), sub anno 463, and Malti-Douglas, "Controversy", 121-122.

(28) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 296. In the event, he did pray, and the woman was cured.

(29) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 153, 154, 156.

(30) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 256, 247, 256.

Ibn Ḥanbal's conspicuous emulation of the Prophet might have sufficed to make him an exemplary if not actually intimidating representative of his *ṭā'ifa*. But at least one source frankly attributes the imām's exemplary status to the admiration accorded him in the wake of his performance during the 'Abbāsid Inquisition (*miḥna*) over the createdness of the Qur'ān. "I always hear people speaking highly of Ibn Ḥanbal and granting him precedence over [the Ḥadīth-scholars] Yaḥyā b. Ma'īn and Abū Khaythama", said his colleague Abū Zur'a. "It was never that way before the Inquisition ; after he was tried, however, his reputation knew no bounds" (31).

During the persecutions initiated by the Caliph al-Ma'mūn in 218/833, Ibn Ḥanbal refused to uphold the doctrine of the created Qur'ān, insisting that his opponents provide evidence for it from the Book itself or the Prophetic Ḥadīth. After a thirteen-month imprisonment and three days of interrogation before al-Ma'mūn's successor al-Mu'taṣim, Ibn Ḥanbal was flogged in open court. Although the *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Ḥanbal's contemporary Ibn Sa'd states that the imām never capitulated (32), the bulk of early evidence weighs against him. The Mu'tazilī al-jāḥiẓ, for example, characterizes Ibn Ḥanbal as a stubborn and prevaricating ignoramus who recanted after a few blows of the whip ; and a younger contemporary, the philo-'Alid historian al-Ya'qūbī, describes the imām as giving in to a facile version of the statist argument that the caliph is entitled to propound new dogma (33).

In any event, Ibn Ḥanbal was released, but apparently stopped teaching Ḥadīth (34). Eventually the Caliph al-Mutawakkil lifted the Inquisition, reversed the regime's position on both the Qur'ān and the imām, and plied Ibn Ḥanbal with gifts and requests that he come teach the Caliph's sons at Samarra (35).

On the assumption that the imām had never capitulated, biographers glorified him as the savior of the faith :

(31) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 337-338.

(32) Muḥammad b. Sa'd al-Zuhrī (d. 230/845), *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Beirut, 1377/1958), 7:354, with additions by later hands in Ibn Ḥanbal's entry.

(33) 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), "Min Kitābihi fī khalq al-Qur'ān", in *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ*, ed. 'A.-S. M. Hārūn (Cairo, 1399/1979), 3:285-300, at 295-296 ; Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb (d. 284/898), *Ta'rīkh al-Ya'qūbī* (Beirut, 1379/1960), 2:472.

(34) This happened either immediately after the Inquisition, or in 227/842, i.e. during the reign of al-Wāthiq. If the former, it may have been a condition of his release (something the Ḥanbalī sources would not tell us). The sources for the latter date state that Ibn Ḥanbal stopped at his own initiative after being reported to the still-ongoing Inquisition (Christopher Melchert, personal communication).

(35) On the Inquisition see W. M. Patton, *Aḥmed Ibn Ḥanbal and the Miḥna* (Leiden, 1897) ; D. Sourdel, « La politique religieuse du caliphe abbaside al-Ma'mūn », *Revue des études islamiques* 20 (1962) ; W. M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh, 1973), 175-79, 280-85 ; I. Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development

> Ibn Ḥanbal was persecuted for the sake of God Almighty, but persevered, for the sake of His Book, but triumphed, and for the sake of the Sunna of the Prophet, but emerged victorious. He spoke forthrightly, and revealed the truth ; he shone in his words, and provided a meet example. He triumphed over scholars, and crushed the mighty. How he stands out among the truthful, and how close he is to the ancients (36) !

To make such claims plausible, the Ḥanbalī biographical tradition had to stuggle mightily to vindicate its hero's performance under the lash and to explain why he was released if he had never capitulated. At stake was the relationship of the *ṭā'ifa* of Ḥadīth-scholars to that of the caliphs, themselves heirs of the Prophet (37) and, to al-Ma'mūn's mind at least, possessors of *'ilm* (knowledge) (38). If the Ḥadīth-scholars' claim to the Prophetic inheritance was to survive against that of the caliphs, the Ḥanbalī biographers had to come up with a version of events that explained the imām's release.

Such versions were not long in coming. Within two generations of Ibn Ḥanbal's death, we find an account of the flogging attributed to one Abū 'Imrān according to which the imām was beaten until the whips "split open his midriff, and the entrails spilled out". The Caliph (called "the enemy of God" in this account) along with his judge Ibn Abī Du'ād ("the heretic") then leave the palace, only to be accosted by a mob enraged by reports that Ibn Ḥanbal is dead. Fearing revolt in the provinces, the Caliph releases the imām, who has not capitulated (39).

The more restrained accounts attributed to Ibn Ḥanbal's son Ṣāliḥ and his nephew Ḥanbal b. Isḥāq have the imām himself claim that he lost consciousness during the flogging. These accounts also help vindi-

of Early Islamic Society", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975), 363-385 ; G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges : Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1981), 1-9 ; W. Madelung, "The Vigilante Movement of Sahl b. Salāma al-Khurāsānī and the Origins of Ḥanbalism Reconsidered", *Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (1990), 331-337 ; M. Hinds, art. "Miḥna", in *EI2* (implies that Ibn Ḥanbal probably capitulated), and sources cited ; J. A. Nawas, *Al-Ma'mūn : Miḥna and Caliphate* (Nijmegen, 1993).

(36) Ibn Abī Ya'lā al-Farrā' (d. 526/1133), *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, ed. M.Ḥ. Fiqī (Cairo, 1371/1952), 12-13.

(37) In his supplement to the Ḥadīth of Anas, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī holds the caliph parallel to the *faqīh*, the *muḥaddith*, the *muqrī'*, and the *zāhid* (Ibn al-Jawzī, Talqīh, 383-384) ; and al-Suyūṭī numbers the caliphs among the fourteen *ṭā'ifas* (Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī [d. 764/1362], *Ta'rīkh al-khulafā'*, éd. M. D. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd [Cairo, 1371/1956], 3-4).

(38) For two different views on the caliph's religious authority see Tilman Nagel, *Rechtleitung und Kalifat. Versuch über eine Grundfrage der islamischen Geschichte* (Bonn, 1975) ; and Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph. Religious authority in the first centuries of Islam* (Cambridge, 1986). For references to *'ilm al-awwalīn* and *'ilm al-ghayb* possessed by the early 'Abbāsid caliphs, see al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, ed. M. D. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Beirut, n.d.), 3:361 (al-Rashīd), 404 (al-Manṣūr), 424 (al-Ma'mūn).

(39) Abū al-'Arab Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Tamīm al-Tamīmī (d. 333/944-945), *Kitāb al-miḥan*, ed. Y. W. al-Jabbūrī (Beirut, 1403/1983), 438-444.

cate the imām by embedding excerpts from the createdness-debates in the narrative, excerpts in which Ibn Ḥanbal refutes his opponents' arguments for the creation of the Qur'ān. The family accounts furthermore depict the Caliph as hesitant to harm the imām, a significant difference in attitude from Abū 'Imrān's vilification of the ruler and his entourage (40).

The biographer Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, an early source for the Ṣāliḥ-account, also mentions a report by one Ibn al-Faraj, who claims to have witnessed the flogging from the first row of spectators (41). According to Ibn al-Faraj, the police chief succeeded in convincing both the Caliph and the imām that the other had recanted. As if to overdetermine his explanation for the Caliph's decision to release the imām, Abū al-Faraj mentions the displeasure of the Khurāsānī generals (associates of the imām's father), the mob at the gates, and – most importantly – the miracle of the trousers.

> I was watching Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal as the blows fell on his shoulders. He was wearing trousers held up with a cord. The cord broke and the trousers slipped down. I noticed him move his lips, and the trousers were restored.
>
> [Later] I asked him about this and he said, "When the trousers slipped I said, "God, my God and Lord, you have stood me in this place ; so do not expose me in public view". Then the trousers were restored (42)".

Here the *ṭā'ifa* has resorted to a tale of divine intervention to support its claim that in the struggle between the two heirs of the Prophet, Caliph and Ḥadīth-scholar, God stands on the side of Ibn Ḥanbal and, by extension, on the side of his *ṭā'ifa* and its claims to authority.

As the Ḥanbalī biographical tradition grew more sophisticated, some of the conspicuously unlikely or inglorious elements in these accounts were quietly dropped. Abū 'Imrān's account, with its intestinal ruptures and perambulant caliphs, is never heard of again. Ṣāliḥ's account, with its theological glosses and general verisimilitude, served as the basis for the later accounts of the Inquisition, although such biographers as Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Maqdisī, al-Maqrīzī also drew upon such elements of Ibn al-Faraj's account as helped them make sense of the awkward fact of the imām's release. One report, attributed to two eyewitnesses and reproduced in al-Maqdisī's biography of the imām, takes the masterful step of linking the miracle to the appearance of the mob at the gates :

(40) Abū al-Faḍl Sāliḥ b. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 265/878), *Sīrat al-Imam Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. F. 'A. Aḥmad (Alexandria, 1401/1981) ; excerpted in Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 9:197-204 ; Ḥanbal b. Isḥāq (d. 273/886), *Dhikr miḥnat al-imam*, Ḥanbal (Cairo, 1977).

(41) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 9:204ff.

(42) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 9:206.

> We saw Aḥmad [Ibn Ḥanbal] raise his face to the sky and move his lips. He had hardly finished his prayer when we saw a golden hand emerge from under his sash and restore it to its place by the power of Almighty God. At that the common people raised an outcry (*fa-ḍajjat al-'āmma*) and prepared to storm the palace, and [the Caliph] ordered him released (43).

The later biography by al-Maqrīzī juxtaposes this account with a streamlined version of an old report attributed to the police chief himself, whose testimony makes it explicit that the miracle, and the spectators' reaction to it, frightened the Caliph into releasing Ibn Ḥanbal :

> By God, I witnessed the day Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal was flogged and his trousers rose after dropping, and retied themselves after coming loose. I have never seen a day more momentous/difficult for (*a'ẓam 'alā*) al-Mu'taṣim than that one. By God, if he hadn't stopped the flogging, he (44) would not have been able to leave the place alive (45).

Two narrative techniques – the insertion of a conjunction (*fa* –) in the first account, and the shift in perspective in the second – establish connections between heretofore isolated units of pro-Ibn-Ḥanbal testimony, ultimately producing a narration of causally linked and mutually confirming events and impressions.

Further additions to the Inquisition-tale spell out the most important implications of the imām's defiance. To demonstrate that Ibn Ḥanbal himself realized what was at stake and that he acted with the conscious intention of setting an example, Ibn al-Jawzī (among others) includes a report of how the imām's colleague al-Marrūdhī tried to dissuade him from subjecting himself to the Inquisition. "Go outside", Ibn Ḥanbal tells him, "and take a good look". Outside the palace al-Marrūdhī finds a innumerable crowd of people carrying writing-sheets, pens, and inkwells, all waiting to write down the imām's opinion on the createdness of the Qur'ān. "Can I mislead all those people, Marrūdhī ?" asks Ibn Ḥanbal. "I will kill myself before I do that (46) !"

A second important element of the eventual Ḥanbalī concensus is its exculpation of the caliphate. Soon after his flogging, Ibn Ḥanbal is said to have characterized his resistance to the Inquisition as follows : "By God, I have done my best. I never meant to win or lose ; all I want to

(43) Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqdisī (d. 600/1203-04), *Miḥnat al-Imam Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. A.A. Al-Turki (Giza, 1987), 109.

(44) Either Ibn Ḥanbal or (more likely, I think, given the context) the Caliph, because the mob would supposedly have lynched him.

(45) Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441-42), *Manāqib Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, excerpted in Patton, *Aḥmed Ibn Ḥanbal*, 110.

(46) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 329-330.

do is come out of this even ([47])". After the quiet disappearance of Abū 'Imrān's frankly anti-'Abbāsid account, a similar accommodationism becomes the norm in Ḥadīth-minded accounts of the Inquisition. Al-Subkī, for example, argues that the Inquisition constituted an aberration from the otherwise praiseworthy conduct of the 'Abbāsid caliphs, who were led astray by "evil scholars" (*'ulamā' al-sū'*) ([48]). This argument exonerates Ibn Ḥanbal (who, as late as the ninth/fifteenth century, was in some circles still assumed to have capitulated ([49])) as well as the caliph, whose monopoly on coercion in service of the faith is acknowledged and affirmed ([50]).

Despite their success in saving Ibn Ḥanbal's reputation and supporting his claims against the Caliph, narratives of patent implausibility met with the stern disapproval of rigorist biographers. Al-Dhahabī, for example, criticizes his predecessor al-Bayhaqī for citing the trouser-tale "without daring to point out its undependability ([51])". Saving Ibn Ḥanbal by the seat of his pants solved the problem of the Inquisition, but the use of the miracle-tale constituted a transgression of the conventions of Ḥadīth-minded biography, which – at least as embodied in the rigorism of al-Dhahabī – deplored the attribution of miracles to scholars. Ibn al-Jawzī's *Manāqib* mentions numerous miracles (*karāmāt*) attributed to the imām, but al-Dhahabī calls such tales *munkara*, "reprehensible" as well as "unlikely". At most, al-Dhahabī is willing to concede that such exaggerations may arise from praiseworthy motives and that they serve to "cheer the heart of the believer ([52])". Curiously, Ibn al-Jawzī himself

(47) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 9:206. The imām is apparently quoting 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who on his deathbed said of his caliphate : *"Wadidtu anna dhālika kafāfun lā 'alayya wa-lā lī" Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. M. T. 'Uwayḍa (Cairo : Lajnat Iḥyā' Kutub al-Sunna, 1393/1973), 6:110 (= bāb al-manāqib, no. 3304).

(48) Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'īya al-kubrā* (Cairo, n.d), 1:217-219.

(49) Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. al-Murtaḍā (840/1437), *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila = Die Klassen der mu'taziliten*, ed. Susanna Diwald-Wagner (Wiesbaden and Berlin, 1961), 122-125, where the caliph and his advisors are the heroes, and Ibn Ḥanbal the misguided and evasive opponent of a teaching upheld by at least twelve generations of scholars, Ḥadīth-scholars, caliphs, ascetics, and other authorities.

(50) This compromise contrasts sharply with the intransigence of the Twelver Shī'ī biographers, who in their accounts of confrontations between the caliphs and the Imāms consistently represent the 'Abbāsid caliphs (including the purportedly philo-'Alid al-Ma'mūn) as treacherous and bloodthirsty tyrants. See, e.g., Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 381/991), *'Uyūn akhbār al-Riḍā* (Najaf, 1390/1970), 2:241 ; 244-53.

(51) *Mā jasara 'alā tawbiyatihā*. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 11:256. The biography by Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1065-66) survives only in extracts in 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr's (d. 774/1373) *Al-Bidāya wa 'l-nihāya* (Cairo, 1351-8/1932-9), 10:325-343.

(52) Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 11:353.

(outside the *Manāqib*) expresses reservations about miracle-tales and the propriety of mentioning them in biographies (53).

Whatever its propriety, the attribution of miraculous manifestations to Ibn Ḥanbal breaks down one of the barriers between the conventions for representing Ḥadīth-minded exemplars and those for representing saints, and it is no accident that the earliest extant biographical entry on the imām that attributes miracles is the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* of Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, who recognized no distinction between the two categories of men. According to Abū Nu'aym, both a Ḥadīth-scholar like Ibn Ḥanbal and a renunciant like Bishr al-Ḥāfī are equally saints (*awliyā'*), and the *Ḥilya* contains biographies of both of them (54). The *Ḥilya* also initiates the tradition of comparing the two men, a tradition that was to continue uninterrupted until modern times. To understand the bases and results of this comparison, one must first determine how it was that Bishr, who abandoned the study of Ḥadīth and made every attempt to drop out of sight altogether, came to have the privilege of sharing narrative space with Ibn Ḥanbal.

IV. Bishr al-Ḥāfī

Bishr b. al-Ḥārith, like Ibn Ḥanbal, began his career as a simple scholar of Ḥadīth. According to Ibn Sa'd, Bishr came to Baghdad from Marw and heard a great deal of Ḥadīth from prominent transmitters. He taught a little as well, and some accounts even place Ibn Ḥanbal among those who heard him transmit (55). "Then", says Ibn Sa'd, Bishr "devoted himself to the worship of God and withdrew from people, transmitting no Ḥadīth (56)". This did nothing to stop numerous early authorities from mentioning him primarily if not exclusively as a Ḥadīth-scholar. At the same time, passing references indicate that he had attained a reputation for exemplary piety : "His proclivities to asceticism, his covert renunciation (*zuhd*) and scrupulosity (*wara'*), and the narratives thereof, are too

(53) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (Hyderabad, 1936-1938), 1:4 ; *Naqd al-'ilm wa l-'ulamā' aw Talbīs Iblīs*, ed. M. A. al-Khānjī and M. M. al-Dimashqī (Cairo, 1340), 412 ; *Ṣayd al-Khāṭir*, ed. M. al-Ghazālī (Cairo and Baghdad, n.d.), 25-34.

(54) See Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 9:161-233 (Ibn Ḥanbal), 8:336-360 (Bishr), as well as Ibn al-Jawzī's criticism of Abū Nu'aym for making Ibn Ḥanbal a Sufi (*Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, 1:3-4). Ibn Ḥanbal, says Ibn al-Jawzī, "had no idea of any such thing", i.e., of Sufism. For uses of Ibn Ḥanbal in Sufi aphoristic literature, see Leah Kinberg, "What is meant by *zuhd*", *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985), 27-44, at 38 and 41 (where the imām proposes yet another tripartite division of the believers).

(55) See, e.g., Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb* (Hyderabad, 1325), 1:444.

(56) Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 7:342.

well known to warrant plunging into a description of them here", says Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī, who includes him in his *Thiqāt* (57).

Some two hundred years after his death, the "narratives of his asceticism" began to appear in the literary tradition, and have continued to accumulate ever since. The Bishr of the later sources does far more than retire into pious seclusion. By the fourth/tenth century, his scrupulosity reaches the point that his finger twitches spontaneously in the presence of forbidden food (58) ; by the fifth/eleventh, he can walk 160 miles in a single afternoon on an errand of mercy (59) ; by the eleventh/seventeenth at the latest, he can walk on water (60). Mere attendance at his funeral, we are told, sufficed to guarantee salvation (61).

How did this transformation begin ? Some 150 years after Bishr's death, theorists such as al-Kalābādī and al-Sarrāj began staking out a role for a *ṭā'ifa* called the Sufis. Al-Sarrāj explicitly numbers them among the "knowers" and "heirs of the prophets" ; al-Kalābādī even says that they "have understood on the authority of God" (*fahimū 'an Allāh*), that is, not on the authority of (*'an*) some mortal source, as in the case of the Ḥadīth-scholars (62). Both authors place Bishr among the Sufis, and al-Sarrāj ascribes to him a number of pious pronouncements and exhortations (63). Soon after, in the fourth/tenth century, Sufi biographers began writing histories of the *ṭā'ifa*, histories consisting of the biographies of its members (64). The introductions to such works as are extant follow the theorists in using a variety of Qur'ānic verses and Prophetic Ḥadīth to expound the doctrine of a sanctified elite. The biographical entries proper use the sayings of the early Sufis – among them Bishr – to support the *ṭā'ifa*'s collective claim to authority. Al-Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt*, the earliest extant biographical work on Sufis, claims that the Sufis (or

(57) Ibn Ḥajar Al-'Asqalānī, *Tahdhīb*, 1:445. Bishr appears in Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī's (d. 354/965) *Thiqāt* (Hyderabad, 1973), 8:143, but not in his *Mashāhīr 'ulamā' al-amṣār* (ed. M. Fleischhammer [Wiesbaden, 1959]), which contains no Baghdādī with a death date later than 204 or 205.

(58) Al-Sarrāj, *Luma'*, 45.

(59) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:353.

(60) 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Munāwī (1022/1613-1614), *Al-Kawākib al-durrīya fī tarājim al-sāda al-ṣūfīya*, ed. M. Ḥ. Rabī' [Cairo, 1357/1938], 1:209.

(61) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:80. Cf. Jacqueline Chabbi, "Fuḍayl b. 'Iyāḍ, un précurseur du Ḥanbalisme", *Bulletin d'Études orientales* 30 (1978), 331-345. As will be evident, Bishr's evolution from Ḥadīth-scholar to ascetic to Sufi exactly parallels Fuḍayl's.

(62) Al-Sarrāj, *Luma'*, 3-4 ; Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Kalābādhī (d. 380 or 385/990 or 995), *Al-Ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣwwuf*, ed. A. J. Arberry (Cairo, 1934) ; ed. M. A. al-Nawāwī (Cairo, 1980/1400), 26 (page references are to the latter edition).

(63) Al-Sarrāj, *Luma'*, 195, 200, 207, 255 ; al-Kalābādhī, *Ta'arruf*, 36, 39-40.

(64) My exposition thus deals with the literary use of a Sufi master narrative as a template for writing biographies of early figures, not with the changes in self-conception among the early figures themselves (for which see Melchert, "Transition").

"saints" ; he uses the two interchangeably) have taken up where the prophets left off (65). The saints, implicitly, have "Ḥadīth" of their own, which al-Sulamī calls *ḥikāyāt* ("direct quotations") ; each biographical entry includes not only a Prophetic Ḥadīth related by the saint but a number (usually twenty) of his own *ḥikāyāt* (66). Having included Bishr in the first *ṭabaqa* ("generation") of Sufis, al-Sulamī supplies him with the required twenty *ḥikāyāt* (67). This creation of articulate "generations" some two centuries before the biographer's own time signals the *ṭā'ifa's* determination to project its existence into the past. By linking the *ṭā'ifa'* charter myth to the lives of historical individuals, al-Sulamī's work provides a narrative armature for the new *ṭā'ifa*, and, eventually, a framework for Bishr's retrospective sainthood.

Al-Sulamī provides the forum for another operation critical to the construction of the *ṭā'ifa* : the assertion of Sufi superiority at the expense of the other competitors for the Prophetic legacy. Al-Sulamī's Sufis denounce not only Ḥadīth-scholars but Qur'ān-readers, as in this statement attributed to Aḥmad b. Abī al-Ḥawārī :

> The Qur'ān-memorizers astound me ! They recite the speech of God – how can they sleep at night, or occupy themselves with anything of this world ? If only they understood what they were reciting, and grasped it truly, and delighted in it, and thrilled to the sound of it in their own ears, they would so rejoice in the gift and the guidance they had been given that they would never sleep. (68)

Perhaps because of his withdrawal from Ḥadīth circles, Bishr in particular became the mouthpiece for anti-scholarly sentiment not only in biographies by such Sufis as Abū Nu'aym al-Isfahānī but even in works by general biographers such as al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī. "Pay the alms-tax on Ḥadīth !" Bishr is supposed to have said : "For every two hundred [you relate], put five into practice (69) !" Abū Nu'aym even attributes to Bishr the following counter-etiological narrative :

> I heard Abū Naṣr Bishr b. al-Ḥārith say in reference to learning and scholarship : Unless it is put to [pious] use, then it is better to leave it alone...

(65) Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiya*, ed. N. D. Sharība (Cairo, 1953), 1ff.

(66) These pronouncements, like the Prophetic Ḥadīth, contain maxims of good conduct, either by direct command or in the form of generalities ; expressions of the speaker's preferences or emotions, with ethical implications ; enumerations of people blessed or cursed ; and cryptic predictions. The authoritativeness of these statements presumably derives from the "knowledge through God" spoken of by the theorists and biographers, and would seem to be at least theoretically equal to that of the Prophetic Ḥadīth.

(67) Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 227ff.

(68) Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 102.

(69) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:336.

> He went on to say that the Prophet conveyed [knowledge] to his Companions, who clung to it, preserved it, and acted in accordance with it. They in turn conveyed it to others – whose learning he praised – and who conveyed it in their turn to others. Abū Naṣr [Bishr] mentioned the three *ṭabaqāt* [generations], and then said, "And now knowledge has fallen to a crowd who use it to earn a living (70)".

This capsule history of scholarly piety begins with premises with which the scholars would agree but then strikes at the legitimacy of their *ṭā'ifa* by attaching a different ending to the story.

Like his fellow Sufis, however, Bishr attacks only the students of Ḥadīth, not the Ḥadīth itself: "The blot upon Ḥadīth is the people who study it (71)!" Bishr's particular objection is to making money by teaching Ḥadīth, or in general to putting one's knowledge to some worldly purpose. One report has him begin to recite a Ḥadīth, then interrupt himself saying "God forgive me! It has reached me that 'so-and-so related to me on the authority of so-and-so' is one of the gates leading to worldly gain". In another report he proclaims: "No one should mention any Ḥadīth in a situation where he has some worldly need and [can use the Ḥadīth] to help him get what he needs (72)".

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, though himself a Ḥadīth-scholar, follows Abū Nu'aym in attributing to Bishr stinging criticism of the Ḥadīth-folk. He cites Bishr's warning to 'Ubayd al-Warrāq: "'Ubayd! Beware *'ḥaddathanā'* ["He related to us; introducing a Ḥadīth], for there is a certain sweetness to it. You have said 'ḥaddathanā and people wrote it down, but what ever came of it?" (73) Ḥadīth, Bishr says, has become just another means for attaining worldly ends; he cannot imagine how its students, or those who memorize it, will be saved; nor why those who memorize it do so at all. He prays God to make him forget all the Ḥadīth he has ever memorized, and hopes to bury his books while he can. Ḥadīth is "no weapon by which to gain the Next World, nor is it proper preparation for the grave" (74). Certainly some Ḥadīth-scholars (including Ibn Ḥanbal) also disapproved of accepting money for teaching Ḥadīth, but statements such as Bishr's go far beyond what even the most scrupulous scholar could concede.

Birsh's anti-Ḥadīth sentiments appear to have accumulated with time; al-Sulamī does not mention them, and the later biographers do. Indeed, the most direct articulation of them appears in a speech credited to Bishr by the tenth/sixteenth century Sufi biographer al-Sha'rānī: "O evil

(70) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:340-341.
(71) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:345.
(72) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:339
(73) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:71.
(74) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:71.

scholars ! You are the heirs of the Prophets ; they bequeathed knowledge to you, but you have weaselled out of living by it ! You have made your learning a trade to live by. Aren't you afraid to be the first into the Fire ?" (75) That is, Bishr accepts the scholars as fellow heirs, but charges them with dereliction of duty.

Having been a conspicuously renunciant Ḥadīth-scholar was not enough to make Bishr a good Sufi. To serve the purposes of his biographers, Bishr had to reject his former affiliation as well. This does not make his later persona entirely fictive : his piety and asceticism (attested by the sensible Ibn Sa'd) doubtless made him one of the exemplars upon which later theorists came to base their ideal of Sufism, and his break with the Ḥadīth-scholars may have seemed emblematic of the Sufi struggle to constitute its own independent genealogy of authority. Once the ideal crystallized, however, it could be used as a template for the writing and rewriting of Bishr's life story independent of the sources. Having already constructed handy lists of saintly attributes (76), biographers could use their lists to describe Bishr as they imagined he must have been, certainly an easier task than writing about him as he was. Indeed, within a century of al-Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt,* biographies of Bishr begin sprouting apothegms, speeches, manifestations, and miracles, all without visible roots in the antecedent tradition.

Among the most popular accretions was the tale of Bishr's conversion. In one of its recensions, the tale makes explicit what in Ibn Ḥanbal's case could only be uttered by a detractor, namely, that the hero's heirship to the Prophet has brought him dangerously close to sharing the latter's august station :

> I heard someone ask Bishr b. al-Ḥārith : "How did your career start ? – because it's as if your name among the people were the name of a prophet".
>
> He said : "It was by the grace of God. What can I tell you ? I was a hooligan (*'ayyār*) and the head of a gang (77). I was crossing [the street] one day and noticed a piece of paper in the road. I picked it up and found there 'In the Name of the Merciful and Compassionate God.' I wiped it off and put it in my pocket.

(75) 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565), *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Cairo, n.d.), 1:63.

(76) For such a list see Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 1:5-17.

(77) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī cites Bishr's uncle as saying : "Bishr was born in one of the villages of Marw... He used to run with a gang (*yatafattā*) in his youth, and was wounded" (*Ta'rīkh*, 7:67). However, Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) calis Bishr *min abnā' al-ru'asā' wa l-kataba*, "descended from notables and scribes" (Wafayāt al-a'yān, ed. I. 'Abbās [Beirut, 1968-72], 1:275) ; similarly, al-Dhahabī (Siyār, 10:474) cites al-Sulamī as saying that "Bishr was descended from chiefs" (*kān Bishr min awlād al-ru'asā'*). The two claims need not be contradictory. On Lapidus'view ("Separation") of ninth-century Baghdad politics, the sympathy between Bishr and Ibn Ḥanbal would have arisen from their Khurāsānī ties ; but see the response by Madelung in "Vigilante Movement".

I had two dirhams with me, which were all I owned, and I went to the perfumers and spent [the dirhams] on a bottle of scent, which I rubbed on the paper.

"That night I fell asleep and dreamed that someone was saying to me : "Bishr b. al-Ḥārith ! You have lifted Our Name from the ground and perfumed it, and We shall exalt your name in this world and the next !"

"Then everything that happened" (78).

In this account, Bishir saves the name of God from being trodden upon in the public road, in return for which God promises to exalt his name in this life and the next. But Bishr, like Ibn Ḥanbal deplored his worldly fame : in a letter to his uncle, he describes his notoriety as "a great calamity indeed (79)". As his biographers represent him, Bishr feared – despite God's promise – that present fame would bring him future grief. "The man who wants people to know him", one of his sayings runs, "will never taste the sweetness of the next world" (80). Terrified of losing Paradise, Bishr avoided the company not only of admirers but of people in general ; and when he could not avoid them, refused to engage them in conversation. Like Ibn Ḥanbal, however, he could not escape his fame, even in the unlikeliest of places.

[Ayyūb al-'Aṭṭār :] One Friday, Bishr and I left the congregational mosque and passed through the alley of Abū al-Layth, where there were children playing [ball] with coconuts. When they saw Bishr they cried, "Bishr ! Bishr !" snatched up their coconuts and scampered away.

Bishr stood still a moment, then said, "What heart could bear such a thing ? I shall never set foot in this alley again until I meet my Maker !" (81)

Sufi biographers used such anecdotes to flesh out the picture of a saintly Bishr, a characterization that both illustrated and legitimized the existence of the *ṭā'ifa* of Sufis. While al-Sulamī (in the *Ṭabaqāt*, at least) hardly ever establishes a context for the *ḥikāyāt* he attributes to his subjects, later biographers tend to show Bishr and his contemporaries in concrete and often quotidian situations such as "leaving the mosque one Friday", a detail that subtly reinforces the Sufi biographers' contention that good Sufis were first and foremost observant Muslims. Bishr's reaction to the children's awe of him emphasizes his aversion to notoriety and, whether intentionally or not, also illustrates his characteristic reaction to uncomfortable situations : he avoided them. An Ibn Ḥanbal might have used his reputation to sway his fellows in the direction of right belief and practice (which the imām, in spite of his aversion to

(78) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:336. Cf. Chabbi, "Fuḍayl", 332-333.
(79) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:342.
(80) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:343.
(81) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:77.

fame, often did), but Bishr instead vows never to set foot in the alleyway again. One has the impression that biographers described Bishr's flight from the world with approval. Only during the events of the Inquisition, as we shall see, did anyone challenge the propriety of Bishr's non-engagement with the world.

V. The Comparison

Ibn Ḥanbal attained a painful notoriety by succeeding all too well – although never perfectly – in his aspiration to emulate the Prophet as completely as possible and by defying the 'Abbāsid imposition of the doctrine of the created Qur'ān. Bishr attained an equally painful notoriety by striving to renounce the world ; his feats of self-denial – like Ibn Ḥanbal's – provoked the admiration of his contemporaries, which in turn drove him into an more extreme (and more admirable) seclusion. Ibn Ḥanbal at least took consolation in having stood against tyranny for the sake of right belief, while Bishr could claim to have demonstrated that the Ḥadīth-scholars did not enjoy a monopoly on righteousness.

In all their similarities and differences, the two men correspond remarkably well to Weber's two types of ascetics, the "inner-worldly ascetic" and the "world-rejecting mystic" (82). In Weber's formulation, the inner-worldly ascetic (Ibn Ḥanbal) regards himself as "the elect instrument of God", whose quest for merit consists in opposing the almost irretrievably corrupt institutions of the world. On the other hand, the world-rejecting mystic (Bishr) regards himself not as the instrument but as the "vessel" of God ; he flees mundane interests altogether in search of "rest in [G]od and in him alone" (83). Weber's account is particularly illuminating because it treats not only the two types of "religious virtuosos", but their perception of each other. The ascetic tends to regard the mystic's state of contemplation as "indolent, religiously sterile, and ascetically reprehensible self-indulgence", while the mystic deplores the ascetic's ethical struggles as "a perpetual externalization of the divine in the direction of some peripheral function" (84).

(82) Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, tr. E. Fischoff (Boston, 1991), 166-183 ; cf. Melchert, "Transition", p. 52 ; idem., "The Piety of the Hadith Folk", paper delivered at the 30th annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, November 22, 1996.

(83) Weber, *Sociology*, 166-173.

(84) Weber, *Sociology*, 171. See also Chabbi, "Fuḍayl". Bishr, a contemporary of Ibn Ḥanbal, cannot be called a "precursor" of Ḥanbalism ; but he and the imām were in broad agreement on the "Ḥanbalī" convictions Chabbi attributes to Fuḍayl. Given this agreement, Bishr, Ibn Ḥanbal, and their partisans would have been especially sensitive to any differences in opinion or emphasis.

Ibn Ḥanbal on various occasions spoke disapprovingly of certain contemporaries later termed Sufis, among them Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, al-Sarī al-Saqaṭī, and al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī. But as Henri Laoust has pointed out, it was ***kalām*** (theosophical speculation) and not "Sufism" that Ibn Ḥanbal most objected to ([85]). Regarding the imām's relationship to al-Muḥāsibī, for example, Ibn al-Jawzī says when the latter "made certain statements in the field of ***kalām***, Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal cut off relations with him" ([86]). Ibn Ḥanbal does not appear to have found any ***kalām*** to object to in Bishr's statements. He did, however, reproach him for neglecting the most elementary form of social engagement : "Had he married", said the imām of Bishr, "his career would have been perfect" ([87]). Bishr's opinion of Ibn Ḥanbal seems to have at least equally benign and in many cases positively enthusiastic, as we shall see. However, the mystic's constant denigration of adīth-scholarship (referred to above), particularly because of the worldly orientation of its practitioners, signals his rejection, if not of Ibn Ḥanbal himself, at least of a major constituent of the latter's style of piety ([88]).

Had Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr represented the only two heirs of the Prophet in Baghdad, they may well have pursued a more acrimonious line of interchange. However, it appears that the presence and activities of a third *ṭā'ifa*, that of the caliphs, provoked something of an entente between the two ; and, perhaps more importantly, provided biographers with a standard for comparing the two men. For biographers as well as (apparently) the protagonists themselves, the decisive event proved to be the Inquisition.

The sources agree that Bishr supported the doctrine of the uncreated Qur'ān. On the subject of those who capitulated to the Inquisition, he is supposed to have said : "They should have let their hair be soaked with blood rather than give in" ([89]). He is also shown telling the story of how Ibn Ḥanbal refused his interrogators' request to copy the sentence "God is the Lord of the Qur'ān". "If he had", says Bishr, "he would have given them what they wanted" ([90]). But all this is retrospective : no evidence exists to show that Bishr ever expressed his support for Ibn Ḥanbal during the year *before* the flogging.

(85) Henri Laoust, "Le ḥanbalisme sous le caliphat de Bagdad", *Revue des études islamiques* 27 (1959), 67-128, at 70-71.

(86) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 186. See also Josef van Ess, *Die Gedankenwelt von Ḥārit al-Muḥāsibī* (Bonn, 1961), esp. 9-11.

(87) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:74.

(88) One cryptic account nevertheless appears to show Bishr blanching at Ibn Ḥanbal's nitpicking over Ḥadīth ; see al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:77-78.

(89) Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 11:323.

(90) Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 11:258.

Furthermore, a recurrent report specifically mentions Bishr's decision not to intervene *during* the flogging. The report states that when news of Ibn Ḥanbal's ordeal reached Bishr's associates, they asked him to intercede on the scholar's behalf, but he refused. Most significantly, it also documents the renunciant's apparent concession of the prophetic legacy to the scholar. The most complete version of the report runs as follows :

> When Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal was flogged, the students/associates (*aṣḥāb*) of Bishr b. al-Ḥārith said to him, "Abū Naṣr, if only you would appear publicly and say that you are of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal's opinion".
>
> He said, "Do you want me to stand where the prophets stand (*aqūma maqāma 'l-anbiyā'*) ? Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal has stood where the prophets stand !" (91)

Bishr concedes that Ibn Ḥanbal's defiance of the Inquisition is the work of prophets, work that he – Bishr – can never perform. His description of Ibn Ḥanbal alludes to the idea that it is the prophet's task to confront tyrants, as Moses confronted Pharaoh (92). His comparison of Ibn Ḥanbal to a prophet therefore amounts to a ratification of the imām's claim to authority on the basis of his figurative descent from Muḥammad, and by extension, of the claims of the whole *ṭā'ifa* of Ḥadīth-scholars on the basis of their status as repositories of the Prophet's Ḥadīth and conspicuous adherents to his Sunna. It also reflects poorly on the claims of the caliphs, who as *khulafā' Rasūl Allāh* could make their own claim to "standing where the prophets stand".

Unwilling to engage himself in the affairs of the world, Bishr refused to make a public statement in support of Ibn Ḥanbal. Whether out of contrition or conviction, however, Bishr later expressed lavish admiration of Ibn Ḥanbal's steadfastness under torture. "He was placed in the furnace", says Bishr, "and emerged a chunk of red gold (93)". In one report, Bishr is even shown deploring his own passivity : extending his

(91) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 117-118. Ibn 'Asākir's version runs : "[Bishr] was asked : "Shouldn't you have done as Aḥmad [Ibn Ḥanbal] did ?" He responded : "You want me to stand at the level of the prophets (*martabat al-nabīyīn*), but my body is not strong enough. May God guard Aḥmad before him, behind him, from above and below, and on his right and left" (*Ta'rīkh*, 1:34).

(92) A Prophetic Ḥadīth states that "the best *jihād* is righteous speech before an oppressive ruler" (Ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Musnad*, ed. A.M. Shākir [Cairo, 1373:1954] 5:251, 256, and cited by al-Dhahabī in his biography of the imām, *Siyar*, 11:233). However, this is presumably true for any believer, not only for prophets, meaning that Bishr has no excuse. A. Kevin Reinhart has pointed out that the *'ulamā'* used the term "*maqām al-anbiyā*" to refer to the status of the legist when he delivers a ruling or opinion (see Reinhart, "Transcendence", 9-10). Given the early date of Bishr's supposed statement, however, it is unlikely that he meant by "those who occupy the Prophet's place" the *'ulamā'* in the later, technical sense of the term.

(93) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 170.

leg, he is supposed to have exclaimed, "How ugly this leg is without a fetter upon it in defense of that man (94) !" Another account, which appears only in Ibn al-Jawzī's biography of Ibn Ḥanbal – not, that is, in any of Bishr's own biographies – takes this idea a step further :

> [Abū Ḥātim :] On the day Aḥmad [Ibn Ḥanbal] was flogged, I said, "I'll go and find out what happened to him". I arrived early and found an old man saying, "God, strengthen him ! God, help him !" He continued like one distraught, saying "[Tell me] if [Ibn Ḥanbal] capitulates, and I'll go in and take his place".
>
> Someone came out and said, "He didn't capitulate".
>
> "Thank God !" said [the old man].
>
> "Who is that ?" I asked someone.
>
> "Bishr b. al-Ḥārith", I was told (95).

The anecdote does not specify the source of Bishr's distress : is he supposed to be feeling pity for Ibn Ḥanbal, remorse over his own failure to be there with (or instead of) him, dread of a flogging should he carry out his promise, or anguish because he knows he never will ? The historical Bishr may have felt some or all of these emotions. At any rate, members of his adopted *ṭā'ifa* at one time or another seem to have felt all of them. Yet all these expressions of solidarity did little to improve some people's opinion of Bishr. His comments from the sidelines, however appreciative, could not efface the memory of his passivity. The remarks of one Muḥammad b. Muṣ'ab al-'Ābid summarize the anti-Bishr point of view : "Any one lash that fell upon Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal for the sake of God is greater than [all] the days of Bishr b. al-Ḥārith (96)".

Accounts such as this tip the moral scales heavily in favor of the *ṭā'ifa* of Ḥadīth-scholars. However, biographical traditions shirked unambiguous declarations of the superiority of one *ṭā'ifa* over another. If nothing else, the recalcitrant presence of the rival *ṭā'ifa* in the real world would have made any purely literary settlement appear contrived and unrealistic. The mouthpiece for the Ḥanbalī counter-concession to the Sufis is Ibn Ḥanbal himself : instead of berating Bishr for staying at home, the imām responded to Bishr's praises by characterizing the mystic's approval as the standard by which his actions are to be judged : "Ibn Ḥanbal learned of [Bishr's praise], and said 'Praise God Who caused our deed to gratify Bishr' (97)". More subtly, Ḥanbalī biographers appear to

(94) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 119.

(95) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 336. No other report places Bishr so close to the site of the flogging. Calling him a *shaykh* is at any rate accurate enough ; Bishr would have been over sixty years old in 219/834.

(96) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 173.

(97) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 117.

have used the example of Bishr to justify the imām's suspicious refusal to teach Ḥadīth after the Inquisition. Complaining that people pester him constantly to recite Ḥadīth, Ibn Ḥanbal is shown declaring that "the right way is that of Bishr b. al-Ḥārith", referring to Bishr's well-documented refusal to teach (98). In a more general vein, biographers of both men show the scholar praising the mystic as "a man who has planted a spear in the earth and sat upon the point, leaving no room there for anyone else (99)", and even as one of the seven great saints of the age (100). Not to be outdone in the exchange of compliments, Bishr is said to have proclaimed : "Who am I compared to Abū ʿAbd Allāh [Ibn Ḥanbal] ? He is more learned than I (101) !", an admission itself likely to have endeared Bishr to the Ḥadīth scholars. Such instances of mutual admiration eventually accumulated to the point where even the Ḥadīth-minded rigorist al-Dhahabī declines to pronounce in favor of one man over the other. "I say : Bishr is great, as Ibn Ḥanbal is great (*Bishr ʿaẓīm al-qadr ka-Aḥmad*). We do not know the weight of deeds, only God does (102)".

Strangely enough, an early Sufi report implies that Bishr did have a right to intercede on Ibn Ḥanbal's behalf. According to al-Sulamī, one of al-Ma'mūn's chief judges quoted the Caliph as saying : "There remains in this town no one before whom one need be abashed except for that *shaykh*, Bishr b. al-Ḥārith (103)". Al-Ma'mūn's expression of deference to the mystic implies that had Bishr actually challenged him or his successor al-Muʿtaṣim, he might have been able to sway one or the other from his heretical course. No such event occurred, and it is difficult to imagine how it could have been managed, but within the world constructed by the biographical tradition – a world governed by a system of checks and balances among representatives of different *ṭā'ifas* – this report, juxtaposed with later reports from both the Sufi and scholarly traditions, implies transitive and circular relationships of deference among the competing *ṭā'ifas*. The Sufi defers to the Ḥadīth-scholar, who in turn submits

(98) Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 11:258.

(99) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:73.

(100) *Rābiʿu sabʿatin min al-abdāl.* Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:72. Ibn Ḥanbal may have thought himself one of the *abdāl* too : when asked where one should look for them he replied : "If not among the Ḥadīth-scholars, then I don't know where" (Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 181). Cf. Melchert ("Transition", p. 58, note 38), who implies that *abdāl* meant (only ?) "the most saintly traditionists".

(101) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 119.

(102) Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 11:201.

(103) Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 40 (quoting Yaḥyā b. Aktham) ; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:72.

to a beating at the hands of the Caliph, who in turn confesses that he feels abashed before the Sufi ([104]).

A later report from the Sufi tradition illuminates the relationship between the Sufi and scholarly *ṭā'ifas*, at least as it was imagined by biographers. This report brings one of Bishr's three sisters – identified in some accounts as Mukhkha – who is shown following the practice of many Baghdadis by asking Ibn Ḥanbal's opinion on a matter of pious practice :

> It is related that [Mukhkha] went to see Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal and said, "In our household we make our living spinning [cotton] at night. Often the torches of the Banū Ṭāhir – the Baghdad authorities – pass by as we're sitting on the roof, and we spin a length or two in the torchlight. Do you declare this permitted for us, or forbidden ?"
>
> He said, "Who are you ?"
>
> She said, "Bishr's sister".
>
> "O family of Bishr ! May I never be deprived of you ! I always hear the purest scrupulosity from you ([105]) !"

Mukhkha's question relates to the permissibility of using illumination provided by an unjust governor ([106]), suggesting that the "family of Bishr" concurred with Ibn Ḥanbal in looking askance at the authorities even when the latter (unintentionally) provide a public service ([107]). The report confirms that Sufi scrupulosity, like its Ḥanbalī counterpart, carried with it a whiff of anti-regime sentiment (albeit much subtler than in

(104) A late and curious report shuffles the terms of this relationship. The report states that Bishr "attained such high degree that al-Ma'mūn asked Ibn Ḥanbal to intercede for him and seek permission for him to visit [Bishr], but [Ibn Ḥanbal] refused" (Zakariyā 'al-Anṣārī [d. 926/1520], *Sharḥ al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya* [Damascus, n.d.], 1:88 ; Al-Munāwī, *Kawākib*, 1:208). This flies in the face of the historians' consensus that al-Ma'mūn and Ibn Ḥanbal never met (a fact biographers attributed to the Imam's pious hope that no such meeting would ever occur) ; moreover, al-Ma'mūn was hardly one to ask a favor of Ibn Ḥanbal, whom he considered an ignoramus (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, ed. M. A. F. Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1389/1976], 8:641-642). Nevertheless, it illustrates that biographers and readers had come to regard Bishr, Ibn Ḥanbal, and al-Ma'mūn less as historical individuals than as exemplars of their respective *ṭā'ifas*. For later (prescriptive) formulations of these relationships, see Louise Marlow, "Kings, Prophets, and the 'Ulama in Mediaeval Islamic Advice Literature", *Studia Islamica* 81:1 (1995), 101-120.

(105) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 8:353.

(106) I am indebted to Prof. Aron Zysow for this interpretation. Other versions use a different *wajh*, removing the anti-regime element : Ibn Ḥanbal tells her she should sell her yarn at different prices if there is a difference between the yarn spun in the torchlight and that spun in the moonlight (Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, 2:290 ; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, 1:276).

(107) Similarly, the Twelver Shī'ī biographical tradition represents Sufis as colluding in Imāmic disapproval of the caliph's authority. See, e.g., Ibn Bābawayh, *'Uyūn*, 2:239-40, where 'Alī al-Riḍā looks on approvingly as an unnamed Sufi castigates al-Mamūn for misusing public funds and hints to the Imām that he (the Sufi) sympathizes with the plight of the Prophet's descendants.

'Aṭṭār's diverting fictions about ninth-century mystics rebuking the 'Abbāsid caliphs). Like Bishr's admiration for Ibn Ḥanbal in the wake of the Inquisition, this report hints at a tacit agreement between the Ḥadīth-scholar and the Sufi regarding the low moral standing of the regime.

More importantly, the Mukhkha-tale reveals how adept the biographical tradition had become at constructing tales that encoded complex relationsphips of mutual deference. Mukhkha's concern for a fine point of scrupulosity reveals the extent of her – and by extension her brother's – personal adherence to the Sunna, while her visit to Ibn Ḥanbal demonstrates the family's deference to his authority in matters of religion. At the same time, her appearance saves Bishr from having to defer to the imām in person, an act which would unambiguously settle the question of heirship to the Prophet in favor of the Ḥadīth-scholars. Ibn Ḥanbal vindicates Bishr's style of piety while allowing the mystic to preserve that air of cryptic sanctity without which the Sufi *ṭā'ifa* would be unable to compete with – or complement – the attainments of the scholars.

This preoccupation with establishing inter-*ṭā'ifa* cordiality appears even in the postmortem dream-tales, commonly cited by biographers as evidence for their subjects sanctity. In a typical report, Abū 'Abd Allāh b. Khuzayma, after hearing of Ibn Ḥanbal's death, falls asleep and sees the imām swaggering through Heaven. "Why are you walking that way ?" he asks, and Inb Ḥanbal responds : "This is how the servants walk in Heaven". He adds that God has forgiven him, placed a crown on his head, and given him sandals of gold, "all because [I] said that the Qur'ān is the uncreated speech of God", referring to the Inquisition. Ibn Khuzayma then inquires what has become of Bishr. Ibn Ḥanbal replies : "Bravo for Bishr ! I left him in the presence of the Almighty, before a laden table, with the Almighty facing him and saying, 'Eat, you who never ate ! Drink, you who never drank ! Enjoy, you who never knew anjoyment ([108]) !"

This account confirms what the deference-anecdotes have already suggested : that Ibn Ḥanbal, and by extension the *ṭā'ifa* of Ḥadīth scholars he represents, acknowledge Bishr's piety, and by extension, the propriety of his Sufi *ṭā'ifa's* claim to authority ; and that Bishr, in turn, accords Ibn Ḥanbal and his colleagues the same respect. Dream-tales such as this one provided biographers an opportunity to reconcile the claims of the two *ṭā'ifas* and affirm the rightness of both styles of piety. After all, the Prophetic legacy and the *ṭā'ifa*-system that grew up around

(108) Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, 9:190 ; cf. al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 19. The reader will have noticed the importance of food in the biography of both men – justified, perhaps, in view of Adam's fall from Paradise for the tasting of a fruit (Qur'ān 7:20-22 ; 20:120-121). Notably, it is men who behave this way ; cf. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast : The religious significance of food to medieval women* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1987).

it presumably existed only for the benefit of the earthbound community of believers. Once dead and in Paradise, the representatives of the various *ṭā'ifas* should find themselves quit of their obligation to stand as living exemplars for any particular style of piety. Ibn Khuzayma's dream-tale appears to depict just such an outcome. Althought Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr each gained Paradise in his own way – the former by defending the Qur'ān against the Inquisition, and the latter by rejecting worldly pleasures – their immortal souls need no longer feel the constraint of their former allegiances. Indeed, the dreamer reports that Ibn Ḥanbal's soul approves of Bishr, and we may assume that Bishr's soul reciprocates the imām's generous sentiment.

Not all post-mortem dream-anecdotes evince this sort of accommodationism. In many cases, biographers used them simply to affirm the rightness of the way of life espoused by their respective exemplars. In such cases, dreamers, biographers, or both, insisted on importing into Heaven the same standards they found, or wished to find, on Earth. In the case of Bishr, two reports claim that he carried his renunciation with him even into the afterlife. When asked by a dreamer how he found Paradise, Bishr in one account replies "I miss my crust (109)", and in another, "[God] realized how little I value food, so He granted me the privilege of gazing upon His gracious countenance instead (110)". As for Ibn Ḥanbal, dreamers place him in the role of guard at the gates of Paradise, thereby extending his earthly role as the standard of right belief. Numerous reports already affirm that Ibn Ḥanbal's approval or disapproval constituted a sure index of a believer's fate in the afterlife, and conversely that "one's opinion of Ibn Ḥanbal works as a test to distinguish the Muslim from the heretic (111)". After the imām's death, accordingly, a dreamer reports a vision of a Resurrection Day when only those carrying Ibn Ḥanbal's signet-ring are permitted to cross the bridge to Heaven. Another reports that Heaven is guarded by four horsemen : the angels Jibrīl, Mīkā'īl, and Isrāfīl, and Ibn Ḥanbal : "God has given [Ibn Ḥanbal] the banner and put him in charge of the Garden of Eden, to admit only those he loves (112)".

The tendentious nature of such reports makes them subject to the same constraint that governs the earthbound anecdotes, namely, to avoid any direct statement that the salvation of one *ṭā'ifa* necessarily implies the salvation or damnation of another. We are not told, for instance, whether Ibn Ḥanbal admitted Bishr into Heaven, or whether

(109) Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh*, 7:80.
(110) Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, 1:65.
(111) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 491-495.
(112) Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 446-447.

Ibn Ḥanbal was allowed to join Bishr in his contemplation of the countenance of God.

This silence arises from the same reticence that kept biographers from showing the two exemplars together when in life. Any one of the necessary constituents of the anecdote – the physical setting, the placement of the actors, the forms of address used – would necessarily encode, and amount to a declaration of, the superiority of one man over the other. Should one man, for example, visit the other, he would thereby concede to him a higher rank. While the biographer could then balance the scales by declaring that the host immediately rose respectfully in greeting, the situation after that – i.e., the depicted interchange between the two exemplars – would ramify into a sort of narrative chess game where every move by one side would have to be precisely counterbalanced on the other. As we have seen, biographers preferred to depict the relation of the two exemplars as taking place entirely through intermediaries. Even Ibn Khuzayma's report, which depicts both men as saved, places each in a different part of Paradise. Once deceased, Muḥammad's heirs act out a resolution each only hinted at while on earth : that both paths will indeed lead to salvation. Yet in biographies written by mortal men, the two exemplars almost never appear in the same place at the same time, even in Paradise ([113]).

VI. Conclusions

According to the "divisions of labor" proposed by fourth/tenth-century theorists and biographers, the Ḥadīth-scholar Ibn Ḥanbal and the renunciant Bishr al-Ḥāfī belonged to two distinct *ṭā'ifas* or communities of "knowers" and heirs of the Prophet. However, the two men had enough in common to make any such categorization somewhat arbitrary. Both were students of Ḥadīith and both were conspicuously renunciant, such that the fifth/eleventh century biographer Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī saw no impropriety in including both of them in his catalogue of saints (*awliyā'*). But as the *ṭā'ifas* became gradually better defined as literary and social entities, biographers labored to emphasize the distinctiveness – and, explicitly or implicitly, the superiority – of one *ṭā'ifa* over the other. This competitive self-awareness manifests itself in the shifting

(113) There are two exceptions, both supernatural. In one, the mystic Āmina, mysteriously transported from Ramla, visits the ailing Bishr ; when Ibn Ḥanbal arrives on the same errand, she prays for them both (Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rīkh*, 2:48). In the other, the narrator dreams that Bishr sees Ibn Ḥanbal marching at the head of a procession, and rises to greet him (al-Maqdisī, *Miḥna*, 140). Each report gives precedence to a different man, but both reports place both men among the sanctified elite.

construction of biographical entries, including selection and presentation of sources ; suppression, modification, and invention of anecdotes ; and stylistic effects, particularly the relations established between individual reports or sets of reports within the entry. In Ibn Ḥanbal's case, biographers took pains to establish that he never capitulated to the Inquisition, a claim practically indispensable to the *ṭā'ifa's* collective self-respect, but one that demanded sophisticated manipulation of the documentary evidence. In Bishr's case, biographers had to prove that their subject was a "knower" and a Sufi even though the man died at least half a century before either term had the technical meaning the biographers and theorists had in mind.

In the course of these rewritings, biographers on both sides exploited the presence of a rival exemplar. Ḥanbalī biographers, for example, emphasized Bishr's failure to intervene on Ibn Ḥanbal's behalf during the Inquisition ; and Sufi biographers, although they dared not impugn Ibn Ḥanbal directly, used Bishr as a mouthpiece for stinging criticisms of the Ḥadīth-establishment. In each case, the denigration of the rival *ṭā'ifa* served to shore up the home *ṭā'ifa's* claim to authority.

At the same time, biographers used rival exemplars as anecdotal figures in accounts that encoded complex relationships of deference among representatives of the different *ṭā'ifas*. For every subtle dig placed in the mouth of Ibn Ḥanbal or Bishr, one also finds an expression of admiration or concession of superiority. To some extent, this accomodationism owes its existence to the recalcitrant presence and proximity of the rival *ṭā'ifa*, such that any purely literary assertion of incontestable superiority would be not only unconvincing but divisive. Moreover, both scholars and Sufis tacitly disapproved of their fellow-heir the caliph. Much of the mutual admiration attributed to Bishr and Ibn Ḥanbal occurs in the context of the caliphal Inquisition, which the mystic deplored in word and the scholar defied in deed.

The various additions, suppressions, and manipulations biographers performed upon the life-stories of their heroes cannot be dismissed as simple revisionism. More precisely, the variety and subtlety of this particular kind of revisionism leaves the reader with the impression that there was nothing simple about it. The gradual development of biographical discourse, however tendentiously motivated, took place in accordance with complex and shifting convictions about the proper representation of historical persons and the proper role of the collectivities to which they belonged. To apply the term "characterization" to this process is not to minimize the historical reality or significance of the personalities in question, but rather to acknowledge that the depiction of real persons is as rule-governed as the depiction of imaginary ones. To take the recalcitrant detail of an individual's lived experience and rewrite it in light of grand theories of social order and personal salvation is as

much a literary enterprise as creating characters out of whole cloth. The fact that more may be at stake in the case of real people makes biography all the worthier of our attention.

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