

Hanbalite Hermeneutics: Beyond Reason, and Between Texts

Among the surprising things we hear from these young ignoramuses is the following: >Ahmad b. Hanbal is not a jurisconsult but a scholar of Traditions=. Now, that is the utmost limit of ignorance! For on his authority there were collected juridical preferences founded on the Prophetic Traditions such as to exceed the competence of the majority among them. On his authority also were collected fine points of law such as cannot be found in the work of a single one among them. Such criticism could be considered only by a heretical innovator, whose heart is split asunder, because of the obscurity of his doctrine and the wide diffusion of the religious knowledge of Ahmad; so that most of the religious scholars say, >My fundamental principles in the roots of the law are those of Ahmad.¹

¹This was Abu >l-Faraj `Abd >l-Rahman ibn >l-Jauzi=s rejoinder to the insulting remarks of the celebrated historian and exegete, Ibn Jarir >l-Tabari who showed skepticism with regard to Ahmad b. Hanbal=s legal acumen. See his *Manaqib >l-Imam Ahmad ibn >l-Hanbal*, ed. M.A. Khanji. Cairo, 1930. See also `Azzam, `Abd Al-`Aziz, *Al-Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal: Hayatuhu wa Makanatuhu fi al-Fiqh wa al-Hadith* Cairo, 2000.

Preference for apostolic traditions known as *hadith* as the preeminent source document for Islamic theology and law is one defining characteristic of Hanbalite thought. And if such be considered a material or evidentiary preference, then preference for the literal word in abstraction over its contextual usage *in situ*, would define Hanbalite hermeneutics.² It is also this very approach to the *sunna* which explains why many in academia consider this school parenthetical at best to orthodox Sunnism. A variety of sources including classical Islamic and contemporary western concur that Ibn Hanbal and his school are best defined by a singular attachment to a literal reading of the Qur=an and the Sunna.³ Whilst Shafi`i is credited with legitimating the use of the rational element in Islamic law, Ibn Hanbal=s main contribution to the law, it is said, was no more than to keep it firmly embedded in as literal an interpretation of hadith material as possible. >l-Shafi`i=s legal doctrine, Schacht tells us, was not satisfactory as far as the Hanbalites were concerned, and this because of the expanded authority he confers in his legal doctrine to human reason (*ra=y*), whereas the Hanbalites preferred Abasing every item of their doctrine on a tradition from the Prophet and often (using) a weak tradition instead of a

²The sunna as one of two material sources of the law, must not be confused with the sunna that refers to the *imitatio Muhammadi* or the Prophet as the perfect model whose every gesture ought to be a guidance for the believer. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali in his opus *Ihya=`ulum al-Din*, 2:300-344, book xx. Tr. Zolondek dedicates the preeminent chapter of this work to the glorification of this form of sunna. He says:

Know that the key to happiness is to follow the sunna and to imitate the Messenger of God in all his coming and going, his movements and rest, in his way of eating, his attitude, his sleep and his talk. I do not mean this in regard to religious observance, for there is no reason to neglect the traditions which were concerned with this aspect. I rather mean all the problems of custom and usage, for only by following them unrestricted succession is possible. God has said: ASay, if you love God, follow me, and God will love you.@(3:29). . . That means you have sit while putting on a trousers, and to stand when winding the turban, and to begin with the right foot when putting on shoes. . .

³One should however, not lose sight of the fact that for the Hanbalites themselves, charges of literalism and the like were in fact badges of honor which they wore with much aplomb. For instance, Ibn `Aqil, a respected Hanbalite himself wrote candidly that Hanbalites accept only the literal (*ma zahara min al-`ulum*) and pointedly avoid the ambiguous sciences (>l-`ulum >l-ghamida) See: >l-Hanbali, Ibn Rajab >l-Dhayl `ala Tabaqat >l-Hanabila ed. H. Laoust and S. Dahan. Damascus, 1951.

strong analogy.⁴ For Ibn Hanbal and his followers both the theology and the law were based on the book of God, the *athar* (sayings or acts of pious men), the *sunan* (standard practices), and sound narratives from recognized men about sound valid traditions (*akhbar*), confirming one another. . .until that ends with the Messenger of God and his Companions and the Followers, and after them the recognized imams (sc. scholars) who are taken as exemplars, who hold to the Sunna and keep to the *athar*, who do not recognize heresy and are not accused of falsehood or of divergence (from one another). They are not upholders of *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *ra=y*, for *qiyas* in religion is worthless, and *ra=y* is the same and worse. The upholders of *qiyas* and *ra=y* in religion are heretical and in error, except where there is an *athar* from any of the earlier reliable imams.⁵

It is thus, this literalism, this doctrinaire traditionalism that even in the early period of Islam came to overshadow the nuances of Ibn Hanbal's hermeneutics⁶, and which in recent times continues to be described as a ferociously anthropomorphist theodicy, a traditionalism so sectarian as to be no longer viable, a spirit of frenzied intolerance, a fundamental lack of social adjustment, and a kind of permanent inability to accept the established social order.⁷ Such

⁴Schacht, Joseph *Introduction to Islamic Law* Oxford, 1968. P.62

⁵Allard, Michel, *Le probleme des attributs divins dans la doctrine d'al at de ses premiers grands disciples*, Beirut 1965 pp.98-101

⁶Thus, one finds that Ibn Hanbal's credentials as a jurist were questioned by the historian Ibn Jarir al-Tabari. By way of explanation he proffered that Ibn Hanbal's was no more than a traditionalist. Makdisi however, argues that Tabari is singling out Ahmad, and laying stress on Ahmad's expertise in the discipline of hadith, he was emphasizing his own expertise in Law. See Makdisi, *Ibn Aqil*. P. 63

⁷H. Laoust Ahmad b. Hanbal *Encyclopedia of Islam* p. 272. Laoust seems to be referring more to the Hashwiya rather than to the Hanbalites, as Hallaq makes clear. But such a distinction between orthodox Hanbalism and heterodox Hashwism is far from clear in the early works: that subsequent Hanbalite scholars such as Ibn `Aqil and Ibn Qayyim were at pains to show the heterodoxy of the Hashwiyya, as opposed to Hanbalite orthodoxy, seems to imply that in their era the distinction, that Hallaq explains, had not yet been recognized. See in this regard W.

charges however, have in the first place served to minimize the pivotal role that Hanbalite played in the formative period of sunni orthodoxy, and in the second, to trivialize the complexities of Hanbalite theology and jurisprudence. Whilst Hanbalite contributions to sunni orthodoxy is not the subject of our inquiry a quick description thereof is nonetheless useful if only to underscore the folly of this benign neglect. Ignaz Goldziher was one of the first scholars to recognize the historical role of the Hanbalites: he, in fact, went so far as to credit them with the construction of sunni orthodoxy=s first thoroughgoing theology.⁸ But I suspect it was Ibn Hanbal =s stoical opposition to Mu`tazilite propaganda during the *mihna*⁹ or the Inquisition, and the torture he endured at the hand of his captors, which had more to do with the widespread acceptance of key Hanbalite doctrines than did the merits of his theology. This Inquisition, which Ma`mun, the Abbasid caliph, launched in 880 c.e. was in reaction to the growing influence of scholarly consensus or *ijma`* over civil society.¹⁰ Whilst scholars such as >l-Shafi`i and Ibn Hanbal,

Hallaq *Law and Legal Theory in Classical and Medieval Islam* Vermont 1994

⁸Goldziher Ignaz, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* Princeton 1981 p. 49

⁹For a full account of the objectives of the Inquisition see: Nawas, John AThe Mihna of 218A.H/880 C.E. Revisited: An Empirical Study@ in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, (1996): .698-708. Patton Walter M., *Ahmed b. Hanbal and the Mihna: A Biography of the Imam including an Account of the Muhammedan Inquisition Called the Mihna* Leiden, 1897. This is a somewhat dated account of the Mihna with factual inaccuracies symptomatic of the assumptions of the era. Also see: Jad`an Fahmi >l-Mihna: Bahth fi >l-Jadaliyyat >l-Dini wa >l-Siyasi fi >l-Islami (Amman, 1989) Lapidus, Ira AThe Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society,@ in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975): 363-385, argues

¹⁰Sunni Islam recognizes the Qur=an and apostolic hadith as the two material sources for Islamic law. Individual jurists then apply their knowledge of these texts to new situations through a process known as *qiyas* to provide appropriate responsa to such situations. In the 8th century c.e. such individual responsa began to be considered virtually infallible if all scholars attested thereto as well. In time, through the efforts of >l-Shafi`i, in particular, this process came to be regarded as the fourth derivative source of the law, and was given the name *ijma*. See, in this regard, C. Snouck Hurgronje, AThe Foundations of Islamic Law@ in *Selected Workss* eds. G.H. Bousquet and J. Schacht (Leiden, 1975); George Hourani, AThe Basis of Authority of Sunni Consensus@ in *Studia Islamica* , 21 (1964) 13-6;; and Wael Hallaq AAuthoritativeness of Sunni Consensus@ in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 18, no. 4 (1986) 427-454

who's ideas undergirded this consensus, were not seditious entirely in their attitude to the day's political authority, they did nonetheless subordinate caliphal authority to scholarly consensus. Ma`mun, who under different circumstances, may well have been considered tolerant, ecumenical even, saw the danger this emerging scholarly consensus posed to his administration, and thus launched a bloody purge against the `ulama, and in particular, against the pious champion of *sunna qua hadith*, Ahmad b. Hanbal. One unintended consequence of the persecution Ibn Hanbal suffered at the hands of Ma`mun, was the transformation of his erstwhile marginal dogma into a pervasively influential theology and jurisprudence that still undergirds Muslim orthodoxy.¹¹ That Hanbalite theology came to personify Sunni orthodox theology is amply demonstrated, I think, by the actions of none other than Abu al-Hasan `Ash`ari (d. 935), eponym of the Ash`arite school, and one time champion of Mu`tazilite theology himself.¹² `Ash`ari publicly abandoned the Mu`tazilites and their doctrines in what he obviously regarded as the most incontrovertible way possible: he declared himself a disciple of Ahmad b. Hanbal.¹³ Thus, although the Hanbalite view was almost always considered >right of center=,

¹¹ It also turned victim into persecutor: after the cessation of hostilities against them the Hanbalites themselves prowled the streets and mosques of Baghdad attacking their opponents, the Mu`tazilites and to a lesser extent, the Ash`arites. This was in many ways also a battle for control of Islam, the religion, one that was waged between the Abbasids and the `ulam~ or religious scholars. Ibn Hanbal and the Hanbalites, while yielding control of the state to the Abbasids, ultimately defended the right of the `ulam~ to sole control of the Qur=an and the sunna. As Lapidus rightly states the Hanbalites Aasserted both a religious authority and a social leadership independent of the state. They created within the Sunni milieu the first Muslim community apart from the Caliphate. I. Lapidus *A History of Islamic Societies* Cambridge 1991 p. 166

¹²The Ash`arite school ultimately emerged as a sort of via media between Mu`tazili rationalism and Hanbalite literalism. For example, on the question of free will they introduced the doctrine of *iktisab* or the notion that whilst God does indeed create good and evil (a Hanbalite position), through the role they acquire as instruments of their actions, human beings, nonetheless, become accountable for their deeds. See in this regard: P. Morewedge, *Islamic Philosophical Theology* New York 1979; L. Gardet *Dieu et la Destinee de l=homme* Paris 1967; J van Ess *Zwischen Hadit und Theologie* Berlin 1975

¹³In doing so, Makdisi tells us, he Awanted to declare in the strongest terms possible his break away from rationalism@, and to place himself Aunder the banner of a leader who, though long absent from the scene, had a

and its piety too extreme for Sunni sensibilities, ultimately, its text centered theology was to leave an indelible impression on all of sunnism.¹⁴

But Hanbalite hermeneutics itself, so celebrated by Hanbalites for its literalism, and so derided by its critics for precisely the same reason, is on closer scrutiny, anything but *sui generis* in its choice of textual evidence, and anything but monolithic and undifferentiated in its interpretation thereof. In his polemical debates, as shown hereunder, Ibn Hanbal were not averse to using rational arguments himself, even in opposition to explicit texts. And in his jurisprudence, too, the Qur=an and hadith material are not just applied literally, or even in the order of their dogmatic value, but rather, in accordance with a complex hermenutical grid that clearly separates his school from all others. We begin with the theological polemics.

name that retained its powerful resonance as a rallying point for Traditionists. Makdisi, George. *Ibn `Aqil*, 63 In his work *al-Ibana Ash`ari* also makes the following comment: > . . .(Ibn Hanbal) is the most excellent imam and the perfect chief, through whom God has brought to light truth and abolished error, made distinct the right path and conquered fallacious innovations of the heretics.@

¹⁴Hodgson Marshall G.S. *The Venture of Islam* vol.i p. 392

That Ibn Hanbal's theology was not quite as literal as its advocates proclaim, and its critics criticize, is clear in one of his works, the *Al-Radd `ala al-Zanadiqa wa al-Jahmiyya*¹⁵, which he penned against Mu'tazilite rationalism, and which is considered one of two fundamental treatises for the study of Ibn Hanbal's dogmatic position.^{16 17} The *Al-Radd* itself is divided into two sections: the first, entitled *Al-Radd `ala al-Jahmiyya* responds to those who believe that the Qur'an contradicts itself in several places, whilst the second entitled *Al-Radd `ala al-Zanadiqa*, debunks Mu'tazilite beliefs, including those in the createdness of the Qur'an,¹⁸ in heaven and

¹⁵ Ibn Hanbal, Ahmad *Al-Radd `ala al-Zanadiqa wa al-Jahmiyya* Cairo 1393. This work has been additionally translated by Morris Seale: *Muslim Theology: a study of origins with reference to the Church Fathers* ix, 137 pp. London 1964, who also used this text to support his argument that Jahm had obtained his ideas from the Greek Church Fathers. An earlier translation was done in 1960 by Gota Vistem who however, used the edition by Ahmed's pupil, `Uthman b. Sa'id l-Darimi *Radd `ala al-Jahmiyya* Cairo 1985. L-Darimi has also written a critique of the Jahmites titled: *Naqd al-Imam Abi Sa'id `Uthman b. Sa'id al-Marisi al-Jahmi fi ma iftara `ala Allah `an wajal min al-tauhid* Riyadh 1998.

¹⁶ According to Laoust, in the *Kitab al-Sunna*, the other important work on theology, Ibn Hanbal re-examines some of the theological questions already raised in the *Radd* and unequivocally defines his own position on all the principal points of his creed. Encyclopedia of Islam 273.

¹⁷ Whilst *Kalam* as a discipline is roundly derided by the Hanbalites as Mu'tazilite theology, it actually appears in their own literature as *usul al-din* or the roots of religion.

¹⁸ The question of the createdness of the Qur'an is in reality, an extension of the argument about the attributes of God. Thus the Mu'tazilites, who denied belief in Divine Attributes, at the same time, denied belief in the eternity of what for Muslims was God's ultimate attribute, the Qur'an which symbolized His Spoken Word. According to Wolfson, one may surmise that from their polemics with Christians Muslims learned two things: firstly, that Christians drew parallels between their own belief in the Word of God as represented by the pre-existent Christ and the Muslim Word of God as represented by the Qur'an. And secondly, that Christians were saddled with the problem of the relation of the pre-existent Christ to the born Christ, and that while the generality of Christians solved that problem by the belief that the pre-existent Christ was incarnate in the born Christ with the result that in the born Christ there were two natures, a divine and a human, there were those who denied such an incarnation, so that in the born Christ there was only one nature, a human nature. Wolfson thus argues from the foregoing, quite convincingly, I might add, that under this influence Muslims themselves raised the question of the relation of pre-existent Koran to the revealed Koran. Also, just as there occurred in Christianity the idea of an incarnation, an enfleshment, of Christ in Christ there occurred in Muslim theology an embodiment of the primordial Qur'an in the earthly Qur'an. See in this regard Harry Wolfson *The Philosophy of the Kalam* Cambridge, 1976 (724).

hell being but allegorical constructs, and in the true meaning of the >throne= verse.¹⁹ Whilst the history and theology of the Mu`tazilites have been well documented through their own literature and those critical of them, the same cannot be said about the Jahmites: Muslim heresiographers speak of, and against, a sect allegedly founded by one, Jahm b. Safwan, who served as secretary to Harith b. Suraij, a local militia leader of eastern Khurasan. It would seem however, that whilst Jahm, the man, existed, the sect named after him was no more than the figment of fertile Hanbalite imaginations. Ibn Hanbal=s work however, it must be admitted, was not the only refutation of the Jahmites: Abu Sa`id al-Darimi (d.895), Ibn Qutaiba, Khushaish (d.867 c.e.), Ash`ari and Ibn Khuzaima (d.924 c.e.) all penned polemical works against them.²⁰

¹⁹This refers to Qur=an 2:255 which reads: God! There is no deity save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overcomes Him. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. Who would be able to intercede with Him save by His leave? He knows that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what He will. His throne encloses the heavens and the earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Revered, the Immense.

²⁰For an overview of the Jahmites, their theology and political behavior during the Umayyad period , see: `Atwan, Hussain, >l-Murjiyah wa >l-Jahmiyyah bi Khurasan fi >l-`asr >l-Umawi, Beirut, 1993. For a classical view of their theology and its refutation see the following: Darimi, `Uthman b. Sa`id, *Al-Radd `ala al-Jahmiyya* Lund, 1960; Abu Muhammad, Ibn Qutaiba *Al-Ikhtilaf fi al-Lafz wa al-Radd `ala al-Jahmiyya wa al-Mushabbihah*, Cairo 1930; Ash`ari, Abu >l-Hasan, `Ali b. Isma`il, >l-Ibana `an >Usul >l-Diyana Beirut, 1994; and Ibn Qayyim >l-Jauziyyah, Muhammad b. Abu Bakr, *Ijtima` >l-Juyush >l-Islammiyya `ala ghazwu >l-Mu`tazilah wa >l-Jahmiyya*, Egypt, 1964. For more information on heresy and heresiographers in general, see Henri Laoust, ALa Classification des sects dans le Farq d=al-Baghdadi and D. Sourdel *Revue de etudes islamiques*, xxix (1961), 19-59; ALa

classification des sects islamiques dans le Kitab Al-Milal d= Al-Shahrastani, *Studia Islamica*, xxxi (1970) 239-48,
and Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schriftums* Leiden 1967 vol. 1, p. 601

The first section comprises of seventeen questions to which Ibn Hanbal provides answers exclusively from the Qur=an itself. The critics of the Qur=an, he says, claim that verses AThat will be a day when they shall not be able to speak (77:35) and AThen, on the Day of Judgement you will dispute (i.e. speak) in the presence of your Lord@ (39:31) contradict each other. With regard to the first verse Ibn Hanbal says: AThis will be the case when human beings are first resurrected: for sixty years they will not be able to speak, nor will they be granted permission to offer pleas in defense.@ Thereafter, they will be allowed to speak, and the first thing they will say is AOur Lord! We have seen, we have heard; now bring us back (to life), so that we may work righteousness.@(32:12) Thereupon, after being granted permission, they will start speaking and disputing, and this is what is referred to in the verse AThen, on the day of judgement you will dispute in the presence of your Lord=, that is during the Reckoning, and when blame is apportioned.@ As further evidence, Ibn Hanbal turns to another verse, 50:28, and says: AThen they will be told >Dispute not with each other in My presence=, trying to convince me; >I have already furnished you with warning.@ The foregoing explanation is clearly devoid of any reference to hadith material as required by Hanbalite hermeneutics. This is undoubtedly because his adversaries, the Mu`tazilites, displayed a notorious antipathy for hadith literature, which in their view was simply unreliable apocrypha²¹; to cite as evidence material based on hadith would have undermined his arguments or even given victory to his opponents. He therefore, resorts to the Qur=an alone for material evidence, and restricts even his commentary of the Qur=anic

²¹As Schacht explains, the Mu`tazilites Abased their system of religious doctrine exclusively on the Koran, and used the method of literal interpretation, together with systematic interpretation, in order to discredit traditions.@ Schacht, *Introduction* 64. Also see: Kippenberg 1983

evidence to the Qur=an itself; a rule of interpretation in Qur=anic hermenutical theory known as *al-tafsir bi al-ma=thur*.²² He does so by chronologizing the eschatological events and stringing together verses that make direct or oblique references to such conversations during the Reckoning. At times he is however, forced to employ rational polemical tools in violation of his own principles. The commentary of 77:35 for instance, is problematic for as required by Traditionist thinking Ibn Hanbal should have--but clearly did not--search for corroborative evidence within the sacred texts themselves. The figure sixty which appears in his commentary lacks scriptural support; this is undoubtedly why later exegetes like Ibn Kathir make no mention of this explanation.²³

That Ibn Hanbal was not averse to using material falling outside the scope of the *ma=thur* category is evident in his response to question six. His interlocutor cites the following verses as evidence of contradictions in the Qur=an: AVerily, one day in the eyes of God is the equivalent of a thousand years in your reckoning@(22:47); AHe regulates affairs from the heavens to the earth which will then rise towards Him on a day the length of which is a thousand years in your reckoning@ (32:5); and A AThe angels along with the Spirit shall ascend unto Him on a day whose length is equal to fifty thousand years.@(70:4) Ibn Hanbal responds to 22:47 saying that it refers to the period in which God created the heavens and the earth and one of its days is equal to a thousand years. As for 32:5, this is the duration, he says, of the angel Gabriel=s descent to the Prophet Muhammad, and to his later ascent. The distance between the heavens and the earth is

²²See in this regard Ibn Kathir Isma`il *Tafsir al-Qur=an al`Azim* 4 vols. Cairo 1937. The introduction is particularly useful as a commentary on Traditionist tafsir methodology. Also relevant is the work by Ibn Taymiyya, Taqi al-Din *Muqaddimat fi Usul >l-Tafsir* Cairo, 1988.

²³Ibn Kathir, Isma`il *Tafsir Ibn >l-Quran >l-`Azim* Jiza, 2000.

the equivalent of a five hundred year journey; thus the descent would take all of five hundred years and so too, the ascent. As for 70:4, it refers to the fact that if any being other than God was to undertake the task of the Reckoning he would not acquit himself in fifty thousand years whereas God will acquit Himself within half an earthly day. Such details as here provided by Ibn Hanbal lack scriptural verification: there is no Prophetic tradition that corroborates his commentary.

That Ibn Hanbal himself, on occasion, was an unwitting proponent of the very heresies he accuses his enemies of is clear in his riposte to Jahm b. Safwan on the question of God's attributes. Jahm, who was executed by the Umayyads on charges of treason in 746 c.e., was a pioneer of sorts, helping the Mu'tazilites formulate what Rahman calls the first thoroughgoing systematic theology in Islam. He strenuously advocated, among other things, an unbending determinism, a belief in the notion of the Justice of God (*ʿadl*), and more importantly for our purposes, the belief that, in real terms, Divine attributes do not exist.²⁴ Thus verses of the Qur'an that depict God as having eternal names and qualities had to be explained away (*ta-wil*) to preserve His pure essence; not to do so was, for them, tantamount to a form of polytheism.²⁵ As Wolfson explains, the argument against the existence of eternal attributes, when examined closely, would seem to fall into two sections: firstly, that any eternal must be a God, and secondly, that the unity of God excludes any internal plurality in God, even if these

²⁴ Rahman Fazlur, *Islam* Chicago 1979, p. 89. For a study of the sources that influenced Muslim Kalam see Van Den Bergh, S., *Averroes Tahafat al-Tahafat*, Oxford 1977.

²⁵ Rahman, *Islam*, p.89

plural parts are inseparably united from eternity.²⁶ As against this, Muslim orthodoxy would not agree to any but a literal understanding of the anthropomorphic and the anthropopathic expressions in the Qur=an and the traditional texts.²⁷ The Jahmite doctrine was thus attacked by those who fought for this crude conception of God@ who posited the *bila kayf*, doctrine of immodality, that briefly speaking, means to believe literally in divine attributes without asking how@. A closer definition of that *Ahow*@, they argued, passes human understanding, and man ought not to meddle with things that have not been rendered subject to his thought.²⁸ In this way they were able to both affirm the orthodox doctrine of the Divine Attributes and also grant a concession of sorts to those who accused them of touting anthropomorphic beliefs (*tajsim*). But a look at Ibn Hanbal=s response to the Jahmites seems to suggest that as opposed to the school with his name, Ibn Hanbal himself, may either have been an adroit polemicist given to rational arguments himself, or a confused theologian guilty of no more than muddled thinking.

²⁶Wolfson, H.A. *A Philosophy of the Kalam* Cambridge, 1976. p. 133

²⁷Goldziher, *Introduction* p.92

²⁸*Ibid.*, p.92

The Jahmites, Ibn Hanbal tells us, pin their dogma about divine ineffability on three verses: AThere is none at all, that resembles Him@ (42:11); AAnd He alone is God, in the heavens and on earth@ (6:3); and ANo vision can comprehend Him; He however, comprehends all vision@ (6:103). On the basis of the foregoing verses they Aclaim that whosoever refers to God as thing, as mentioned by God Himself in His Book, or as mentioned by His Messenger, is an apostate, and an anthropomorphist.@²⁹ When we say that God is a thing they retort >He is a thing like no other.@ We then respond that a thing like no other is described by the intelligentsia as being nothing!³⁰ At this juncture it becomes plain that in reality they believe in nothing and simply avoid disgrace by such public utterances.@³¹ In the first place, Ibn Hanbal is here breaking the *bila kayf* rule: the whole question of divine corporeality is, according to his own rules, *muhdath*, that is, heretical, and thus eschewed in true Hanbalite tradition. In true literalist spirit Ibn Hanbal ought to have side stepped the rational argument by invoking the rule: >such questions are heretical= (*al-su=al`anhu bid`ah*)³² But this rule which is so central to the school

²⁹Ibn Hanbal, *al-Radd*, p20

³⁰Ibid., p.21

³¹Ibid., p.21

³²The doctrine, imputed to Malik b. Anas, the 2nd century eponym of the Maliki school, was allegedly made by the latter in response to a question pertaining to the nature of God=s sitting on His throne. He is said to have responded that >the sitting is known, the >how= is unknown, questions about it are a heresy, and belief in it is obligatory.= (*Al-istiwa= ma`lum, wa al-kayf majhul, wa al-su=al`anhu bid`a wa al-ieman bihi wajib*) This response, taken over by the Hanbalites and turned into dogma, serves to provide a kind of via media between the rationalism (ta=wil) of their adversaries, the Mu`tazilites, and the anthropomorphism (tajsim) of which they themselves were accused. Later Hanbalites however, were sharply divided on this issue; some like Ibn `Aqil, the 11th century theologian accused of heresy responded as follows:

Ideas such as the foregoing are what earned Ibn `Aqil and other Hanbalites the ire of his colleagues. Thus one finds Ibn Rajab, a strict follower of the *bila kayf* rule commenting on the Mu`tazilite leanings of Ibn `Aqil:

Now and again there would appear in his behavior certain signs of deviation from the norms sanctioned by the sunna, as well as metaphorical interpretations of some of the divine attributes; and

was not always uppermost in Ibn Hanbal=s theology, for elsewhere he is quoted as having said:

AHe is indeed a thing like no other.@³³

some of this behavior remained with him to the day he died.

³³Ibn Hanbal, al-Radd, p.26

The discussion on corporeality also includes the nature of the Qur=an: Jahm argues for its createdness by posing the question, ATell me about the Qur=an; Is it a thing?@ Ibn Hanbal responds: If we say it is, then Jahm cites the verse, AIndeed! It is God who created all things!@ and he says: AGiven that you acknowledge that it is a thing, why do you then, not include the Qur=an among the created things?@ Ibn Hanbal responds: ABy God! He has claimed that which allows him to support his own views, whilst people have no similar right to the use of his claim! We say: >In the Qur=an, God did not name His speech as thing, but rather named the object that He speaks of as thing. Have you not heard the statement of the Blessed, the Almighty, AIndeed! Our saying to a thing. . .@ (Nahl: 40) Thus, thing is not His speech but rather that which is (the subject) of His speech.@ Ibn Hanbal then quotes another verse: AIndeed! His command, when He wants a thing. . .@; Again, Thing is not His command, rather it is the thing that He commands.@³⁴

The foregoing would seem to suggest that far from being a mere literalist in his exegesis of the Qur=an and a doctrinaire traditionalist vis-a-vis Hadith material Ibn Hanbal was rather, quite open to *ta=wil* himself, and used it, albeit inconsistently, in his polemics. This ambivalence to *ta=wil* and to the place of hadith in exegesis also emerges in the ideas of his disciples: thus one finds a more sophisticated approach to the problem in the following statement of Ibn `Aqil:

Traditions on the divine attributes fall into three categories: (1) those of which the authenticity is asserted with certainty; they may legally be acknowledged, including their prescriptions; (2) those of which the authenticity has not been asserted with certainty, nor has it been rejected; and (3) those of which the apocryphal nature has been established with certainty; these may not legally be followed in their prescriptions. The traditions on the divine attributes may further be divided into two parts: (1) those of which the metaphorical interpretation is obligatory and (2) those whose metaphorical interpretation is illicit. . .It is foolish and licentious to venture upon the metaphorical interpretations of all the divine attributes that have come

³⁴ Ibn Hanbal, Al-Radd. 26

down in the Traditions and the Qur=anic verses, without sound proof for their validity. All the obscure passages in the Qur=an, the explanation of which is strange, have for God meanings which He alone knows; He has obligated His creatures to give their consent to them. Just as God has obligated them to know the Qur=anic verse whose meanings are clear, He has obligated them also to believe those whose meanings are obscure.³⁵

That there was a view contrary to the foregoing and that this conflict was germane to the evolution of Hanbalite thought well into the 14th century is clear from the following quote taken from Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328)

To know God is first of all to believe in the descriptions which God gave of Himself in His Book, and in the description that His Apostle Muhammad gave of Him, without distortion or negation, without asking how, and without comparison. God knows Himself better than anyone, and better than anyone else, He knows that which is not He. He is sincerer in His words and finer in His discourse than any of His creatures. His apostles were truthful and were considered as such, contrary to those who charge God with things concerning which they are ignorant.³⁶

³⁵G. Makdisi *Ibn `Aqil* p. 102

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 101

The Hanbalites thus, disallowed kalam from the contents of orthodoxy but utilized it for purposes of validating and exonerating orthodox theology itself. Ironically, in doing so, they inadvertently concurred with their adversaries, the Mu`tazilites about the utility of kalam in polemics, that Aone could not reasonably expect to be successful in argumentation with non-Muslims or heretics, unless willing to argue on the basis of premises acceptable to one=s adversary.³⁷ The greater irony, as Rahman rightly points out, is that the foregoing would seem to have also been the very *raison d=etre* for Mu`tazilite kalam: they too were involved Ain a relentless and successful defense of Islam against outside attacks of Manichaeism, Gnosticism and Materialism. . .but they had gone too far beyond the limits which traditional Islam could recognize as valid.@³⁸ That their adversaries, the Hanbalites, were themselves, not entirely blameless of the same transgression is, I hope, clear from the foregoing discussion.

³⁷Ibid., p.73

³⁸Rahman, *Islam*, p. 88

So much for the value of hadith material in Hanbalite theology. To understand the value of hadith material in law, we turn to its usage, and its authority, in light of the so called *nass* rule. The term *nass* has several definitions: in some instances it is used to refer to explicit text, in others, to the medium through which a rule is determined, and in other still, to the two material sources of Islam, the Qur=an and the Sunna; the discussion that follows revolves around the last mentioned definition of this term. For all jurists, including the Hanbalites, it is the Qur=an and the Sunna which constitute *nass*, and these therefore, constitute primary evidentiary material sources in law. Hanbalites, along with all the other schools of law also maintain that the authority of these two sources is conterminous such that the one enjoys no evidentiary privilege over the other.³⁹ But whilst the Hanbalites may indeed, subscribe to the *nass* rule as well, a close reading of their juridical material strongly suggests a distinction between apostolic authority (sunna) which like other schools, Hanbalites consider definitive, even over the Qur=an and hadith material, which they consider less authoritative than the Qur=an. I will illustrate this by way of two examples, one of which pertains to the issue of abrogation (*naskh*) and the other to the issue of the univocal (*zahir*) verses. In Hanbalite jurisprudence, as in almost every other school of jurisprudence, hadith material is the preeminent commentary on the Qur=an which they argue is evidenced from the following verse of the Qur=an itself: 'We indeed, send down the reminder to you so that you may explicate what was revealed to them' (2:198) But whilst this verse establishes an interpretive link between these two sources it says nothing of protocol and

³⁹This rule was at first, applied inconsistently in *kalam* discourse, even by Ibn Hanbal himself, and was transformed into a thoroughgoing juridical premise in the 11th century with a degree of consistency that then became characteristic of Hanbalite theological works such as those of Ibn `Aqil and Ibn Taymiyya. For a synopsis of Hanbalite hermeneutics, see: Ibn Taymiyyah, Ahmed, *Muqaddimat fi Usul >l-Tafsir* Cairo, 1988 See in this regard `Abd al-Khaliq `Abd >l-Ghani *Hujjiyat al-Sunna* in which the author attempts to refute Shatibi=s arguments that the Qur=an is the primary source and hadith material the secondary source of Islamic law. Also see, Shatibi, Abu Ishaq *Muwafaqat fi Usul >l-Shari`ah* Beirut, 1999 .

privilege. Not all commentaries are the same: some may amplify meanings embedded in the primary text, others may abrogate such meanings, and other still, restrict the ambit of such meanings; knowing which is which has occupied the juridical attentions of much of Muslim legal scholarship. For the Hanbalites, as explained by Ibn Qayyim al-Jauzi, textual intersections fall into three categories: firstly, where both the Qur=an and hadith material concur entirely, and where they synergistically enhance their respective texts; secondly, where hadith material explains the Qur=anic intent and acts as a commentary thereto, and thirdly, where hadith material makes obligatory or forbidden acts not mentioned by the Qur=an. For the Hanbalites these are the only legitimate possibilities: As for conflicts (between these two sources) none whatsoever occur. And as for those laws not explicitly legislated by the Qur=an, these have been enacted by the Prophet--obedience to (such legislation) is obligatory and disobedience is impermissible.⁴⁰ Whilst Ibn Qayyim uses the word sunna in this context, he clearly means not the ideal apostolic model that all Muslims are obliged to follow, but rather its approximation as enunciated in hadith material. Contrary to Ibn Qayyim and the Hanbalites, however, the other major schools severely curtail hadith material=s adjudication over the Qur=an, except in one case: in the abrogation of the Qur=an by hadith material.

⁴⁰Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya Shamsuddin, *ʿIlam al-Muwaqqi`in `an Rabb al-`Alimin* Beirut 1973 vol. ii p 307

For Ibn Hanbal himself hadith material cannot abrogate the Qur=an even if such material falls into the *mutawatir* category, for Nothing abrogates the Qur=an except the Qur=an itself, (by way of verses) revealed thereafter.⁴¹ Scholars of hadith methodology distinguish between two primary hadith categories, *mutawatir* and *ahad*: the former refers to a tradition with four or more transmitters in every generation of its transmission and the latter, to any tradition that fails to meet the standards of *tawatir*.⁴² All the other prominent schools of law, including the marginal Zahirite, and most Shafiite scholarsBthough not Shafi`i himselfBmaintain that the Qur=an may indeed be abrogated by a *mutawatir* tradition. Their rationale is that given that both material sources are from God Himself, the abrogation of the one by the other is not improper. The proponents of *naskh* cite as evidence the verse of testamentary disposition (*wasiyya*) which reads: AlIt is prescribed that when death is imminent and you possess wealth that you bequeath same to your parents and your next of kin, in due measure@ (2:180) and which they claim is abrogated by the tradition, ANo heir should be allocated a testamentary disposition.@⁴³ But the Hanbalites assert that just as hadith material lacks jurisdiction to abrogate the text (*alfaz*) or the recitation (*tilawa*) of any given verse of the Qur=an so too is the case with regard to the latter=s laws (*hukm*). And whilst laws may indeed be promulgated based on hadith material alone, abrogation of Qur=anic laws may not. In support of this view they cite the Qur=an: ANy verse We abrogate we replace with one better than or equal to it@ (2:106), arguing that hadith material

⁴¹See *Al-Udda*. Daud al-Zahiri and Ibn Hazm are among the small minority of scholars who maintain that the Qur=an may even be abrogated by an *ahad* tradition. See in this regard Ibn Hazm *al-Ihkam fi Usul al-Ihkam* vol.4 p.617

⁴²For an explanation of the various categories of hadith see Ibn al-Salah, *l-Muqaddima*; al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim*, J. Horowitz, *Alter und Ursprung des Isnad*, in *Islam*, viii (1918), 39ff.

⁴³See in this regard *Sunan al-Tirmidhi* vol. 3 p.290, *Sunan al-Nasa=i* vol. 6 p. 207, and Ibn Hanbal,

is neither better than nor equal to the Qur=an, and therefore not empowered to abrogate the Qur=an. They also cite the following tradition in support of their argument, notwithstanding the several criticisms leveled against some of its narrators: AThe Qur=an abrogates my traditions but my traditions do not abrogate the Qur=an.@⁴⁴ So much for the Qur=an adjudicating over hadith material, but what of the inverse where hadith material adjudicates over the Qur=an? Ibn Hanbal was strongly influenced by his master, Shafi`i in this regard; some in fact, go so far as to say that it was what most attracted him to Shafi`i=s jurisprudence.⁴⁵ The example we examine pertains to the status of canine spittle (*mas=alat wulug al-kalb*): the Malikites regard it as ritually clean, whereas the Hanbalites do not. In light of the Qur=an, using dogs for hunting purposes is perfectly permissible, and the prey thus captured need not be ritually purified, even though it would come into contact with the mouth, and invariably, the saliva of the dog; for the Malikites this is evidence against the dog=s saliva being impure. But the Hanbalites disagree, basing their ruling on hadith material which prescribes a ritual wash for utensils licked by dogs: They argue that such a wash is prescribed only because the saliva of dogs is impure. In support of this view Ibn Qayyim says: AHow could any scholar possibly reject a tradition that complements the Book of God; by (that logic) the traditions that render impermissible concurrent marriages of a woman and her maternal or paternal aunt to the same man, and marriages between people who share a

Ahmad, *Musnad Ahmad b. Hanbal* vol.4 p.186

⁴⁴ Al-Daraqutni, Ali b. `Umar, *Kitab al-Sunan* vol.4 p.145 According to the Hadith scholar al-Dhahabi this tradition is transmitted by at least two narrators who falsified traditions.

⁴⁵ Abu Zuhra, *Ibn Hanbal* 213. In general, the Hanbalite school was strongly influenced by the teachings of al-Shafi`i, if not by those of his successors who established the school itself. Makdisi thus informs of the 11th century Hanbalite theologian and jurist Ibn `Aqil, who, while maintaining a great deal of reverence for Ibn Hanbal nonetheless A. . owes more to Shafi`i than to Ibn Hanbal, although he regarded both with equal veneration. . .His special regard for Shafi`i must have been due to Shafi`i=s creation of the theology that served as an antidote to the theology of the (mu`tazilite) kalam.@ See Makdisi, *Ibn `Aqil*, 74

single wet nurse ought also to be rejected.⁴⁶ The argument itself hinges on whether the univocal verses of the Qur=an can be made specific by an *ahad* tradition. The literal (*zahir*) verse of the Qur=an, in terms of Hanbalite hermeneutics, falls into several subcategories, each of which is said to be made lucid by hadith material primarily. As Abu Zuhra explains, for Ibn Hanbal the univocal Qur=anic text (*al-lafz al-zahir*) appearing in any one of the general (*`am*), the unqualified (*mutlaq*) or the ambiguous (*mujmal*) forms can be made specific (*khass*), qualified (*muqayyad*) or unambiguous (*mufassal*) by a hadith tradition. Thus, all sound (*sahih*) traditions belonging to the *mutawatir* as well as to the *ahad* category may serve to make *zahir* texts specific. For Ibn Hanbal the sunna may indeed, adjudicate over the Qur=an in its commentary (of the *zahir* verses) and in its endorsement of its rulings.⁴⁷ Malik however, along with the Hanafites, rejects the *ahad* tradition=s authority over the *zahir* verses. Thus, in the case of the dog=s spittle, discussed above, he leans towards the univocal verse *Athe animals that you have trained* (*wa ma `allamtum min al-jawarihi*) and away from the tradition that prescribes a ritual wash, arguing that the permissibility of using hunting dogs to procure fallen prey is evidence of the ritual purity of canine saliva. For Ibn Hanbal therefore, the tradition that commands washing after the dog licks utensils (*wulugh al-kalb*) has authority over the univocal verse that Malik cites.

In conclusion, it must be stressed that the foregoing argument hinges not on the authority of the Prophet to explain the Qur=an as such, for all parties agree that as Prophet, he did indeed have this mandate. Rather, the question is one of authority of the textual material that is the vehicle for

⁴⁶Ibn Qayyim, *I`lam* vol.ii 232

⁴⁷Abu Zuhra, Muhammad, *Ibn Hanbal Hayatuhu wa `AsruhuB`Ara=uhu wa Fiqhuhu* Dar al-Fikr al-`Arabi n.d. 213

the transmission of apostolic authority as opposed to the actual authority itself. In other words, the sunna=s authority even over the Qur=an is not in question, rather it is the hadith material through which this sunna is delivered that some scholars consider inappropriate in this regard whilst others do not. For the Hanbalites the Qur=an is in many ways distinguishable from hadith material: it is the uncreated, *ipsissima verba* of God as opposed to hadith material, which whilst also divinely inspired, is nonetheless, the created speech of a mortal. Furthermore, the Qur=an, as opposed to hadith material, may be handled only by those in a state of ritual purity, and finally, it, as opposed to hadith material, is required reading in the daily prayer. Thus, hadith material for the Hanbalites, clearly holds a position second to the Qur=an, and their insistence therefore, that it lacks the authority to abrogate the Qur=an is consistent with this view. But this is then contradicted by their other view, as explained above, that in matters pertaining to theology (*aqida*) hadith material can and does make specific the general verses of the Qur=an.

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