

WHO IS THE ACCUSED? THE INTERROGATION OF AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL

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In the years 217-218 A.H., the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218) spent most of his time in northern Syria waging war on the Byzantines. In the course of doing battle with old enemies, he felt secure enough to open a new, internal front against the very popular and highly esteemed *muḥaddithūn* (transmitters of anecdotes about the Prophet). Though he was busy with the northern campaign, he found time to write a letter to his governor in Baghdad that set off interrogations that came to be known as the *miḥna* (Inquisition). This initiative was probably the outcome of the advice that the *mutakallimūn* (theologians) gave al-Ma'mūn, and his earnest intention to help them in their decades-long struggle against the *muḥaddithūn* for spiritual supremacy. Over the next fifteen years, numerous scholars were asked about their views regarding the createdness of the Qur'ān. Those who did not state that it was created were subjected to a variety of punishments such as incarceration, torture and loss of stipends. It was only during the early part of al-Mutawakkil's reign (probably between the years 234-237) that this policy ended.

Al-Ma'mūn, his *mutakallimūn* advisers, and their *muḥaddithūn* adversaries realized that the *miḥna* raised more issues than the single article of faith that was being debated. The *miḥna* was also about their ability to disseminate ideas within the Islamic community. Therefore, on the sidelines of the interrogations, a battle over public opinion took place. Persuading and winning over believers depended upon the respect and prestige that each side acquired in the eyes of the public. As a result, both sides wrote about the events in such a way as to justify their conduct. There are indications that already during the *miḥna* itself, the *mutakallimūn* and *muḥaddithūn* put into circulation accounts that would present them in a favorable light and win public support. It is these efforts, in which both sides wrote about the events in a manner that aimed to gain the support of the public and advance their political agenda, that I would like to address in this study.

The *mutakallimūn*'s point of view was elaborated in several essays and letters written during the *miḥna*. Two of these were the *rasā'il* of al-Jāḥiẓ and the letters of al-Ma'mūn.¹ The descriptions and interpretations that appear in these early

¹ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ*, ed. A. M. Hārūn (Beirut); Al-Ma'mūn's letters appear in Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al. (Leiden, 1879-1901), III, 1111-1134.

sources would be reiterated by later non-Sunnī, writers such as al-Ya‘qūbī, al-Mas‘ūdī and Ibn al-Murtaḍā.² Their opponents, the *muḥaddithūn*, articulated a narrative that relied heavily on anecdotes put into circulation by members of Ibn Ḥanbal’s family, Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and Ḥanbal b. Ishāq.³ The main elements of their account were reiterated by Sunnī historians such as al-Dhahabī, Ibn Kathīr, Ibn al-Jauzī and others.⁴

The earliest Western studies about the *miḥna* ignored the *mutakallimūn*’s writings.⁵ In his century-old monograph of the *miḥna*, which is still widely quoted and often serves as the standard account of the event, W. M. Patton used a limited set of sources, all of which described the event in accordance with the Sunnī-Ḥanbalī point of view.⁶ Judging by Patton’s writings, this is not a consequence of an ideological bias but a reflection of the sources that were available at the time.⁷

Recent studies of the *miḥna* continued to take an interest in Sunnī-Ḥanbalī sources, and have arrived at important insights regarding this corpus. J. Van Ess examined works composed during the *miḥna*, or soon after the policy was abandoned, and highlighted several differences within the Ḥanbalī-Sunnī narrative.⁸ Of particular importance is the distinction between al-Ṭabarī’s exposition of the *miḥna*, which ignores Ibn Ḥanbal’s interrogation, and that of Ibn Ḥanbal’s family, which focuses on his conduct during the interrogation and depicts him as a hero who led the resistance to the inquisitors. M. Cooperson’s contribution lies in an exhaustive analysis of the Ḥanbalī narrative.⁹ Following a summary of Ṣāliḥ’s and Ḥanbal’s reports, he presents an elaborate survey of later Sunnī sources that rework the family account and weave new, at times fantastic, elements into this narrative.

An important historiographic shift that these scholars introduced was the integration of non-Sunnī accounts of the *miḥna* into their descriptions and

² A terse exposition of these sources appears in *EP*, «Mihna,» M. Hinds.

³ Interesting insights about these sources in van Ess, J., *Theologie und Gesellschaft in 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra* (Berlin, 1992), III, 456-460.

⁴ Detailed analysis of the Ḥanbalī tradition in Cooperson, M., *Classical Arabic Biography* (Cambridge, 2000), 138-151.

⁵ On the tendency of modern scholarship to ignore Mu‘tazilī sources see van Ess, *Theologie*, III, 462.

⁶ For a survey of Patton’s sources see Patton, W., *Aḥmed ibn Ḥanbal and the Mihna* (Leiden, 1897), 7-9. The only exception is al-Ṭabarī who cites al-Ma‘mūn’s letters.

⁷ For an interesting assessment of Patton’s attitude toward the *miḥna* and the Ḥanbalīs see Makdisi, W., «Ḥanbalite Islam», in M. L. Swartz (ed.), *Studies in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1981), 221-225.

⁸ Van Ess, *Theologie*, III, 452-460.

⁹ Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 117-153.

analyses. This began in a terse survey by M. Hinds, in which he brought forth the non-Sunnī interpretation of Ibn Ḥanbal's interrogation.¹⁰ After an exposition of several non-Sunnī authors such as al-Jāhiz, al-Ya'qūbī, al-Mas'ūdī and Ibn al-Murtaḍā, who claimed that Ibn Ḥanbal capitulated, Hinds states that this «alternative explanation» by non-Sunnī writers is more convincing. J. van Ess and M. Cooperson also mention this inconsistency between the two narratives. Van Ess, like Hinds, sides with the non-Sunnī writers and argues that Ibn Ḥanbal must have admitted that the Qur'ān was created, otherwise he would not have been released, while Cooperson does not express a conclusive position and examines the strengths and weaknesses of each of the accounts.¹¹

The story about Ibn Ḥanbal's purported breakdown is not the only case in which Sunnī and non-Sunnī authors differed on events of the *miḥna*. Another point of contention was the establishment of the *miḥna*. Whereas the Sunnīs place the onus of responsibility on al-Ma'mūn and his conniving advisors, the non-Sunnī writers look at the historical background of the *miḥna* and accuse the *muḥaddithūn* of placing unjust pressure on the *mutakallimūn*.¹² Such discrepancies between two belligerent factions are hardly surprising. What is unexpected in such a battle over public opinion is to come across descriptions that bear a strong resemblance. These similarities raise the question of how each of the sides used the very same kernel of data in a manner that advanced their political agendas.¹³

This study will highlight three events that occurred during the *miḥna* and were described in a similar fashion by al-Jāhiz on one hand, and Ṣāliḥ and Ḥanbal on the other. The first of these is directly related to the spread of the story itself, as it deals with the individuals who had witnessed the interrogation and how they reported the events to the public. The second is about the pressure placed on Ibn Ḥanbal. Did Ibn Ḥanbal succumb to his interrogators, and if so, was this justified in light of the torture he suffered? The third, what did Ibn Ḥanbal mean when he admitted that he did not understand much in *kalām*?

The main purpose of this inquiry is to trace how similar repositories of evidence were woven into different strategies of presentation and as a result supported contrasting political agendas.

¹⁰ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, «Miḥna», M. Hinds.

¹¹ Van Ess, *Theologie*, III, 465; Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 125-128.

¹² For an exposition that depicts how Sunnī and non-Sunnī sources dealt with the establishment of the *miḥna*, see Hurvitz, N., «The *miḥna* as self-defense», *Studia Islamica* (forthcoming).

¹³ The observation that both sides utilize very similar bodies of data yet interpret them in strikingly different ways has been made by N. Hurvitz, *Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and the formation of Islamic Orthodoxy*, Ph. D. Thesis (unpublished), Princeton University, 1994, 226. It is also made by Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 126.

II. COMMON DATA, CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS

[1] TELLING THE STORY

The remarks that Ṣāliḥ, Ḥanbal and their opponent al-Jāḥiẓ make about the crowds that witnessed the interrogation of Ibn Ḥanbal, reflect these authors' views about their side's success or failure. For the Ḥanbalīs, who convey a sense of self-confidence vis a vis the *mutakallimūn*, this episode was another opportunity to tell of Ibn Ḥanbal's heroics: the lone scholar who took on a room full of enemies. In order to buttress this view, they simply write: «When I awoke in the morning a messenger came to me, took my hand and led me into the house. He [presumably al-Mu'taṣim the caliph]¹⁴ was sitting there, and with him was Ibn Abī Du'ād. His [Ibn Abī Du'ād's] companions had already gathered and the house was packed with people».¹⁵

According to this account, the *miḥna* was a public affair. It also hints that the witnesses of this interrogation were for the most part supporters of the *mutakallimūn*. When Ṣāliḥ writes that «the house was packed with people», we learn very little about the people who witnessed the interrogation. The only remark that identifies an individual who was present is that about Ibn Abī Du'ād, the Mu'tazilī *Qāḍī al-Quḍāt*, and the only mention of a group relates to Ibn Abī Du'ād's companions. As we read more of Ṣāliḥ's and Ḥanbal's accounts, we come across several more names, Shu'ayb, Burgūth and 'Abd al-Raḥmān, all of whom were active interrogators who assisted Ibn Abī Du'ād.¹⁶ Thus, we have no hint of any Ḥanbalī supporters in the room and the impression that is created is that if any of them had an opinion on the matter, it was pro-*mutakallimūn*.

The data brought forth by al-Jāḥiẓ corroborates Ṣāliḥ's and Ḥanbal's descriptions. Al-Jāḥiẓ too, mentions that a large crowd was present at the interrogations. He adds some general bits of information about the crowd and notes that they were made up of four groups, «the jurists (*al-fuqahā'*), the theologians (*al-mutakallimūn*), the judges (*al-quḍāt*) and the virtuous (*al-mukhlisūn*)».¹⁷ Whereas designations such as jurists, judges and the virtuous do not tell us much about ideological outlooks, the term theologians (*mutakallimūn*) implies leaning towards Ibn Abī Du'ād's camp. According to al-Jāḥiẓ, the ideological

¹⁴ This is specified in Ḥanbal's account: Ḥanbal b. Ishāq, *Dhikr miḥnat al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal* (Cairo, 1977), 46.

¹⁵ Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad, *Sirat al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal* (Alexandria, 1981), 55. A similar description in Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 46.

¹⁶ On this group of interrogators see Hurvitz, N., *Piety into Power, the Formation of Ḥanbalism* (Curzon, forthcoming).

¹⁷ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il*, vol. III, 292.

affiliation of those present was either unknown or supportive of the inquisitors' outlook.

At this point al-Jāhiz inserts an anecdote that transforms his account from a passing remark to a significant insight about the *mutakallimūn*'s inability to propagate their views among the masses or Ibn Ḥanbal's supporters. Al-Jāhiz informs his readers that before the interrogation began, someone said to al-Mu'taṣim: «Why don't you send for his [Ibn Ḥanbal's] companions so that they will witness his confession, and see with their own eyes his break (from their opinions)..., and they will not be able to deny what he confessed in front of them?». ¹⁸ Al-Mu'taṣim refused.

This remark strengthens the interpretation mentioned above, i.e., that Ibn Ḥanbal probably did not have any supporters in the room while he was being interrogated and tortured. However, it is much more than that – it is an admission of failure in the battle over public opinion.

One of the ways that the inquisitors tried to disseminate their beliefs and give them an aura of religious respectability was to draw statements about the createdness of the Qur'an from *muḥaddithūn* scholars, and make these statements public. An example of this policy was al-Ma'mūn's order to his governor in Baghdad to announce publicly that seven *ḥadīth* scholars, whom al-Ma'mūn had himself interrogated, proclaimed that the Qur'ān was created. Upon their return to Baghdad, the governor arranged a meeting between these scholars and the «experts in the religious law (*fuqahā'*) and senior traditionists». ¹⁹ In the course of this meeting, the *fuqahā'* and senior traditionists affirmed that the Qur'ān was created. This was the first stage of a trickle down effect, in which concentrated pressure was put on a handful of important figures, and after they stated that the Qur'ān was created, their capitulation was made public and assisted the inquisitors in obtaining more statements from less important figures. A similar dynamic was supposed to have taken place in the courts in which the *qāḍī*-s who cooperated and declared that the Qur'ān was created, were expected to interrogate court personnel who worked as legal witnesses. ²⁰ There is evidence that suggests that at the end of this «chain of admission» were the school teachers, who were expected to teach the children in the *kuttāb* that the Qur'ān was created. ²¹

Ibn Ḥanbal was aware of the inquisitors' attempts to convince the general public by publicizing the statements made by the *muḥaddithūn*. He too, ascribed

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 292, 293.

¹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḥ*, III, 1117; *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 32, *The Reunification of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate*, tr. C. E. Bosworth, New York, 1987, 205.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; tr. 204.

²¹ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 81.

a great deal of importance to such statements, and was therefore very critical of the seven scholars who had succumbed to al-Ma'mūn. According to Ḥanbal b. Ishāq, Ibn Ḥanbal remarked: «If they [the first seven *miḥna* victims] had persevered..., the matter [*miḥna*] would have been disrupted. However, because they replied [i.e., acknowledged that the Qur'ān was created] and [since] they are the eminent inhabitants of the city ('*ayn al-balad*), [al-Ma'mūn] dared (*ijtara'a*) [to persecute] the rest of them». ²²

Ibn Ḥanbal interpreted the sequence of events in a manner similar to that of the inquisitors. Like the interrogators, he also thought that it was the social standing of these individuals that made their cooperation with the interrogators so valuable. It was the fact that they were «the eminent inhabitants of the city» that enabled the inquisitors to utilize their statements in the battle over public opinion. Thus, it was the success the inquisitors experienced with the city's leaders that encouraged them to continue with the interrogation.

The case of the «eminent inhabitants of the city» indicates that both sides understood the value of the *muḥaddithūn*'s statements about the created Qur'ān. Since Ibn Ḥanbal was an esteemed member of the *muḥaddithūn*, the outcome of his interrogation was deemed crucial by both sides. It is not clear where and how the inquisitors' plans failed, but it seems that somewhere during the sequence of events that they foresaw, i.e., questioning Ibn Ḥanbal, causing him to admit that the Qur'ān was created and publicizing this statement, matters did not advance as they had planned.

Al-Jāḥiẓ's remark about al-Mu'taṣim's refusal to allow Ibn Ḥanbal's friends and supporters to witness the ordeal and his opinion that if they had, they would not have been able to deny what took place, indicates that after the interrogation Ibn Ḥanbal's supporters rejected the inquisitors' account. Al-Jāḥiẓ's remark was both an admission and explanation of the interrogators inability to convince the public of the events that occurred during the interrogation. His reference to al-Mu'taṣim's decision indicates that from his point of view, the interrogation of Ibn Ḥanbal became a trump card in the hands of the opposition and not an additional step in the promotion of the inquisitors' agenda.

[2] TORTURE AND HEROISM

One of the central components in the accounts that the inquisitors tried to spread was Ibn Ḥanbal's breakdown and confession that the Qur'ān was created.

²² Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 34.

The Ḥanbalīs ignore these insinuations and put forward an account that makes no mention (or denial) of Ibn Ḥanbal's capitulation. It is interesting to note that despite these contradictions, both sides mention that Ibn Ḥanbal was tortured, though their depictions of the torture differ. Whereas Ṣāliḥ emphasized the harsh physical treatment and uses it to explain why Ibn Ḥanbal lost consciousness, al-Jāḥiẓ tried to depict the torture as a minor event that could not have been overly painful.

According to Ṣāliḥ, after three days of debates and arguments, the caliph lost his patience with Ibn Ḥanbal and ordered that he be whipped. Basing his description on what he heard from his father, Ṣāliḥ describes the violence in the following manner:

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «I was seized, dragged and stripped, then he [presumably al-Mu'taṣim] said: "The flogging poles (*'uqabayn*) and the whips (*siyat*)". And the flogging poles and whips were brought».

My father said: «I had come with a hair or two of the Prophet (PBUH), and I bundled them into the sleeve of my shirt. Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm saw the bundle in the sleeve of my shirt and addressed me: "What is that bundle (*misarr*), show me your sleeve"».

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «A hair of the Prophet (PBUH), and one of them went for the shirt to tear it when I was placed between the flogging poles».

[Al-Mu'taṣim] said to them: «Don't tear it, take it off him».

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «I thought that he [al-Mu'taṣim] prevented the tearing of the shirt because of the hair that was in it. Then I was placed between the flogging poles and my hands were tied. A chair was brought and he [al-Mu'taṣim] sat on it, and Ibn Abī Du'ād stood right beside him, and the people that were present stood. One of the people that tied me up said to me: "Hold on to one of the pieces of wood with your hand and brace yourself". I did not understand what he said and my hands lost their grip and I did not grasp the poles during the whipping».

Abū al-Faḍl [Ṣāliḥ] said: «My father, Allāh's compassion be upon him, suffered pain [in his hands] till the day he died».

Then [al-Mu'taṣim] said to the executioners: «Advance». He looked at the whips and said: «Bring other ones», after which he said to them: «Advance».

[Al-Mu'taṣim] said to one of them: «Approach him, hurt him, may Allāh cut off your hand».

[The executioner] advanced, gave me two lashes and withdrew.

Then [al-Mu'taṣim] said to another [executioner]: «Approach him, hurt him hard, may Allāh cut off your hand!»

Then [the executioner] advanced, gave me two lashes and withdrew.

[Al-Mu'tašim] continued to call them one after the other to give me two lashes and withdraw, then he arose, came to me and they surrounded him.

[al-Mu'tašim] said: «Woe unto you, oh Aḥmad, are you going to kill yourself? Woe unto you, answer me so I can release you with my own hands».

One of them [said] began to say to me: «Woe unto you, your Imām is standing right beside you».

'Ujayf said to me [while] prodding me with the hilt of his sword: «Do you want to overcome all of the people?» And Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm said: «Woe unto you, the caliph is standing right beside you!».

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «Then one of them said “Oh Commander of the Faithful, [let] his blood be my responsibility (lit. on my neck)”».

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «Then [al-Mu'tašim] returned and sat on his chair and he said to the executioner: “Approach him, [hit him] hard, may Allāh cut your hand”».

[Al-Mu'tašim] continued to call executioner after executioner who whipped me two lashes and withdrew, and he said: «Hard, may Allāh cut your hand».

Then he stood and came to me a second time, and began to say: «Oh Aḥmad, answer me». 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Iṣḥāq said: «Who among your colleagues has done to himself regarding this matter, what you have done? Yaḥyā b. Ma'in, Abū Khaythama and Ibn Abī Isrā'īl», and he named those who answered [i.e., scholars who cooperated with the inquisitors].

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «[Al-Mu'tašim] said: “Woe unto you, answer me”».

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «I said more or less what I had said to them».

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «[Al-Mu'tašim] returned and sat down, then he said to the executioner: “Hard, may Allāh cut your hand”».

My father said: «I lost consciousness, and when I came to I was in a cell and the fetters had been removed. Someone who was present said to me: “We have put you face-down, and thrown a mat on your back, and administered [medicine to] you”».²³

This blow-by-blow account conveyed several interesting points.²⁴ Its references to minutiae convey a sense of authenticity. Descriptions of Ibn Ḥanbal as he was tied to the poles, the chair that was brought in for the caliph and his

²³ Ṣāliḥ, *Sira*, 63-65.

²⁴ In a survey of the sources that touch on the *miḥna*, van Ess, *Theologie*, III, 452-465, has pointed out (mainly in 456) that the Ḥanbalī accounts present Ibn Ḥanbal as a hero, while other accounts by Sunnī authors, such as al-Ṭabarī, do not. In line with this distinction, this essay concentrates on the rhetorical means that the Ḥanbalīs used to construct Ibn Ḥanbal's heroic image.

commands to strike and hurt Ibn Ḥanbal, the small gestures such as prodding Ibn Ḥanbal with a sword, add up to a sense of tangible plasticity.

Into this assemblage of precise details, Ṣāliḥ inserts an anecdote which seems out of place. He digresses from the descriptions of harsh treatment that Ibn Ḥanbal received to a dialogue about the Prophet's hairs. This shift builds an effective contrast between the powerful, violent rulers and the devoted yet powerless believer who relies on the reliquia of the Prophet to look out for him. It posits the caliph and his executioners who attend to their whips, against the pious *ḥadīth* scholar holds on to two hairs of the Prophet. And the hairs, he believes, improve his situation because they keep the inquisitors from tearing his shirt. This, in light of the subsequent whipping, is a minor detail, but its mere mention creates a striking distinction between the two sides.

Many of the remarks in Ṣāliḥ's account are aimed to convey a feeling that the atmosphere in the room was of violence and danger. In writing about the exchange between al-Mu'taṣim and Ibn Ḥanbal, in which al-Mu'taṣim asked Ibn Ḥanbal if he was trying to kill himself, Ṣāliḥ creates the impression that the physical pressure that was put on Ibn Ḥanbal was so harsh, that it placed him in a life-threatening situation. In ascribing this remark to al-Mu'taṣim, Ṣāliḥ informs his readers that even the caliph, who was hardly pro-Ḥanbalī, admitted that Ibn Ḥanbal was on the verge of death.

A similar rhetoric stratagem, in which Ṣāliḥ ascribes to one of the interrogators a comment that emphasizes Ibn Ḥanbal's heroic stand, appears in the remark by 'Abd al-Raḥmān, who asks «who among your colleagues has done to himself regarding this matter, what you have done?». According to 'Abd al-Raḥmān, Ibn Ḥanbal has undergone torture which no other *muḥaddīth* had experienced. This reiterates Ṣāliḥ's position that Ibn Ḥanbal was meted out harsh, unprecedented treatment.

Depicting Ibn Ḥanbal as the victim of physical atrocities served the Ḥanbalī agenda in several ways. First, it generated admiration among the listeners or readers of the story, and added to Ibn Ḥanbal's aura of heroism. Second, it undermines the potential refutation of *taqīya* that opponents such as al-Jāḥiẓ put forth. Third, descriptions of violence and irreversible damage set the stage for the Ḥanbalī claim that Ibn Ḥanbal lost consciousness due to physical pain. Such descriptions of pain were essential for putting forth the claim that Ibn Ḥanbal lost consciousness.

Al-Jāḥiẓ's account of the torture is fascinating precisely because it is based on similar facts but differs so much in interpretation:

Your master [Ibn Ḥanbal] said: There is no *taqīya* (dissimulation) but in the land of the polytheists. Had he [Ibn Ḥanbal] acknowledged the createdness of the

Qur'ān by way of *taqīya*, then it would be a case of *taqīya* in the land of Islam, and he would make a liar of himself. If what he acknowledged [i.e., the createdness of the Qur'ān] was in good faith (without resorting to *taqīya*) and true, then a cleavage would open between you and him. This [denial of *taqīya*] is based on the fact that he was not threatened by (lit. did not see) an unsheathed sword, nor was he beaten many times, for he was struck only thirty times [with a whip] that had no knots [at its end] (*maqū'at al-thimār*) and disheveled tips (*mash"athat al-aṭrāf*), before he made his admission several times. There was no pressure on him in the session, and his situation was not desperate, nor was he tortured (lit. burdened) with metal, nor did he experience violent threats. When he was challenged with soft words, he answered crudely, when [the inquisitors] were solemn and serious he was frivolous, when they were composed he was lightheaded.²⁵

Al-Jāhīz's main concern was to block any attempt on the part of the Ḥanbalīs to claim that Ibn Ḥanbal's conduct was *taqīya*. The first point he puts forth is that *taqīya* is admissible only outside the land of Islam, when a Muslim's life is threatened by a non-Muslim. Thus, if Ibn Ḥanbal admitted that he actually said that the Qur'ān was created, but then defended himself by arguing *taqīya* because the admission took place when he was under duress, it would be unacceptable. However, al-Jāhīz's discussion of *taqīya* is puzzling because the Ḥanbalīs never resort to such a justification. It may be that in this remark al-Jāhīz was addressing a wider audience, that of the numerous scholars who, unlike Ibn Ḥanbal, succumbed to the inquisitors' demands and put up little or no resistance at all. If al-Jāhīz can demonstrate that Ibn Ḥanbal, who underwent torture, was not in the position to claim *taqīya*, then the rest of the interogees would certainly be prevented from doing so.

Another remark that approaches *taqīya* from a somewhat different angle was the discussion of the whips and the whipping. Al-Jāhīz tries to create the impression that Ibn Ḥanbal was not hurt severely and therefore cannot claim that he was under pressure. According to al-Jāhīz, he did not undergo numerous lashings and the whips themselves were relatively soft and painless. In contrast to the impression that Ṣāliḥ tries to create, al-Jāhīz concludes that Ibn Ḥanbal was not in a life-threatening situation.

The descriptions of Ibn Ḥanbal's torture are a fine illustration of the convergence between al-Jāhīz's and Ṣāliḥ's factual accounts and the divergence

²⁵ Al-Jāhīz, *Rasā'il*, 295-296. For a slightly different translation of this paragraph, see Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 127.

in their interpretations. Both write that Ibn Ḥanbal was tortured by whipping. Yet, al-Jāḥiẓ discusses the whips' ineffectiveness while Ṣāliḥ emphasizes the waves of executioners who flogged Ibn Ḥanbal; al-Jāḥiẓ refers to the torture as a minor incident and comments that Ibn Ḥanbal was not put in a desperate situation while Ṣāliḥ mentions the irreparable damage and incessant pain. For al-Jāḥiẓ, all this led to an argument against *taqīya*, whereas for Ṣāliḥ, it was a component in the heroic image of Ibn Ḥanbal that he was building.

[3] WHO IS THE ACCUSED?

The most interesting case of a similar factual description which evolves into two contrasting interpretations is the dialogue between Ibn Abī Du'ād and Ibn Ḥanbal. According to Ṣāliḥ, this is how the debate developed:

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «On the second day I was brought in to him».

[The Commander of the Faithful] said: «Debate him, argue with him».

[Ibn Ḥanbal] said: «They began to dispute, this one saying this and that one saying that, and I replied to each of them, and when they brought up something of theology (*kalām*), that does not appear in the Book of Allāh nor the Sunna of his Messenger (PBUH) and is without precedent, I said: I do not know what that is».²⁶

Three interesting points can be highlighted in this exchange. The first, al-Mu'taṣim did not pretend to have the intellectual skills to participate in the interrogation, and he asked Ibn Abī Du'ād and his colleagues to debate Ibn Ḥanbal.²⁷ The second, Ibn Ḥanbal admits that a polemical exchange with his interrogators did take place. This is a crucial point because it lays the Ḥanbalīs open to the accusation that Ibn Ḥanbal did engage in *kalām*. Finally, the most important piece of information that appears here, is Ibn Ḥanbal's admission of ignorance. All three points are congruent with al-Jāḥiẓ's account.

Yet, despite the similarities in the basic facts, a close reading reveals how each of the accounts leads to diverse interpretations:

²⁶ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 60. For a somewhat different translation see Hurvitz, 1994, 226; Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 121.

²⁷ On al-Mu'taṣim's conduct during the *miḥna* see Zaman, M. Q., *Religion and Politics Under the Early 'Abbasids* (Leiden, 1997), 112-113.

The last [interrogator] that he opposed, and before whom he refused to admit the truth even though he knew it, was Ibn Abī Du'ād, who said to [Ibn Ḥanbal]: Is it not true that everything is either created or uncreated? [Ibn Ḥanbal] said: Yes. [Ibn Abī Du'ād] said: Is it not that the Qur'ān is a thing? [Ibn Ḥanbal] said: Yes. [Ibn Abī Du'ād] said: Is it not that only Allāh is uncreated? [Ibn Ḥanbal] said: Yes. [Ibn Abī Du'ād] said: Then is not the Qur'ān created?» [Ibn Ḥanbal] said: I am not a theologian (*mutakallim*).²⁸

Although both narratives note that Ibn Ḥanbal conversed with his inquisitors and that he brought the debate to a standstill when he admitted ignorance, they differ in the details. For example, Ṣāliḥ does not specify the exact words that Ibn Ḥanbal and his interrogators exchanged. He does, however, claim that *kalām* was not discussed between Ibn Ḥanbal and his interrogators. What is more, he states that every time that *kalām* was introduced, Ibn Ḥanbal refused to continue the discussion: «When they brought up something of theology (*kalām*)... I said: I do not know what that is». According to Ṣāliḥ's account of the events, Ibn Ḥanbal and his interlocutors conversed about everything but *kalām*. Once *kalām* was brought into the debate, Ibn Ḥanbal refused to address it.

By contrast, al-Jāḥiẓ presents the exchange between Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Abī Du'ād as if it evolved around theology. Although Ibn Abī Du'ād does most of the talking and Ibn Ḥanbal merely replies «yes», this is sufficient to argue that Ibn Ḥanbal participated in a theological debate.

The attention that each account gave to the issue of Ibn Ḥanbal's participation in theological polemics can be explained when placed against the last part of the exchange in which Ibn Ḥanbal says «I do not know». If, as al-Jāḥiẓ claims, Ibn Ḥanbal did participate in a polemical exchange and suddenly said «I do not know», his conclusion that Ibn Ḥanbal was left without an answer in a debate makes sense. Such a sequence of events would do damage to the moral position of Ibn Ḥanbal, who posed himself as critical of the whole theological enterprise. However if, as Ṣāliḥ would have us believe, Ibn Ḥanbal refused to reply throughout the interrogation and did not address theological questions, then admitting lack of knowledge can be understood as his refusal to participate in any discussion of theology.

The question I would like to explore is what Ṣāliḥ and other Sunnī writers meant when they mentioned Ibn Ḥanbal's admission that he did not know how to reply to a theological argument. Placed in the context of other Ḥanbalī

²⁸ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il*, vol. III, 293.

comments on theology and doctrinal manifestos, I get the impression that this admission of ignorance is in fact an accusation. It is an oblique way of saying that theology is not an essential nor an important component of Islamic faith. The Ḥanbalī position towards theology is that its conclusions, be they convincing or not, do not merit inclusion in the body of Islamic articles of faith. They are the result of a human intellectual exercise and therefore, by definition, do not qualify as dogma. Differences of opinion in this area may generate debate, but they do not lead to absolute truths. Furthermore, since none of the opinions is an article of faith, it is legitimate to hold any of the positions and it is illegitimate to punish any of the sides. To put it in Ibn Ḥanbal's words, in one of his exchanges with Ibn Abī Du'ād, he replies: «You have interpreted the Qur'ān and you know best: [however] what you have interpreted [cannot be considered to have divine authority, and therefore] does not warrant jailing or shackling». ²⁹

Ibn Ḥanbal's generosity regarding Ibn Abī Du'ād's ability to interpret the Qur'ān should not mislead us. He compliments his interrogator precisely because the field of knowledge in which Ibn Abī Du'ād is said to be adroit lacks any significance in his eyes. The move from explicit and clear Qur'ānic verses to vague verses which require interpretations is the move from certain dogma, which is the basis of Islamic faith, to human speculation, which does not produce eternal truths. Since interpretations are not articles of faith, it is illegitimate to jail someone who disagrees with an interpretation.

This position, which argues that differences of opinion regarding theology do not warrant incarceration, reappears in Ḥanbalī sources. For example, according to Ḥanbal b. Iṣḥāq, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's uncle spoke with the governor of Baghdad, and said: «Amīr, the position that my nephew espouses does not contradict the revelation, and the difference of opinion is only about interpretation». ³⁰ In this remark Ḥanbal distinguishes between «revelation» and «opinion» and states that the two do not have the same authority. To contradict «revelation» is to go against faith and to put yourself beyond the pale of Islam. To contradict an opinion is merely to open an argument with another believer, and that does not make anyone a heretic.

CONCLUSION

Alongside the torture, threats and interrogations which occurred throughout the *miḥna*, the belligerent sides were engaged in an effort to convince the public

²⁹ Ṣāliḥ, *Sira*, 56.

³⁰ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 43.

that theirs was the just cause that merits support. This battle over public opinion warrants a shift in our attention, from the events themselves to the strategies of presentation that each side employed.

In some instances, this clash led to contrasting descriptions of events. In others, both sides described certain events in a similar manner, but the narrative into which they were woven lead to strikingly different interpretations. These narratives are composed of overt and concealed accusations and analyses. For example, the Ḥanbalīs accused the inquisitors of torturing Ibn Ḥanbal and causing him irreversible damage. This statement, however, was not simply a description of violence and pain. It was also a crucial step in the construction of the Ḥanbalī claim that Ibn Ḥanbal lost consciousness during his interrogation and therefore served as a means to refute the accusation that he conceded that the Qur'ān was created.

One of the central points that the *muḥaddithūn* attempted to make in their narrative was that the *miḥna* was illegitimate. It was unacceptable to jail or punish individuals who disagreed over theological opinions. The *muḥaddithūn* critique was not based on liberal notions of the right of expression, but rather on total disrespect for the theological enterprise. It is from this vantage point that we ought to examine one of the most elusive comments made during the interrogation – Ibn Ḥanbal's admission that he does not know *kalām*. Whereas al-Jāḥiẓ takes this remark at face value and considers it as the ultimate proof that the *mutakallimūn* won the debate, the Ḥanbalīs subvert its meaning. To begin with, we learn from other parts of the dialogue that the Ḥanbalīs did not consider ignorance of theological polemics to be a fault. From their point of view, theological arguments are not articles of faith, hence inability to participate in theological discussions is not ignorance of Islamic dogma.

The distinction that the Ḥanbalīs make between theological enterprise and Islamic doctrine is clearest in their perception of the procedure that leads to true dogma. In Ḥanbalī accounts of the *miḥna*, Ibn Ḥanbal constantly asks his interlocutors to provide evidence from the Qur'ān or Prophetic traditions. The meaning of such a demand is that only such sources as the Qur'ān and Prophetic traditions furnish the believer with Islamic articles of faith. Such a request also implies that theological debates cannot uncover true dogma. The conclusions of human speculation will never equal the explicit statements of holy scripture. Thus, despite the fact that theologians purport to deal with articles of faith, theological inquiry and the body of true articles of faith exist on two separate ontological spheres.

Ibn Ḥanbal's admission of ignorance can also be understood as an accusation. It challenges the socio-intellectual division that the *mutakallimūn* have set up,

according to which there is a small group of individuals who have mastered the intricacies of theology and therefore know the most profound truths about the divine, and the masses who are ignorant of theology and true faith. From Ibn Ḥanbal's perspective, this is a false dichotomy. The fact of the matter is that it is impossible to know anything beyond what is written in the revealed texts. To claim, as the theologians do, that their opinions are in fact absolute truths, is to place transient human speculation on an inappropriate plane. This is merely the illusion of knowledge, and not true knowledge. The real division in society is between those, such as Ibn Ḥanbal, who realize that human speculations are merely ephemeral, and those, such as the theologians, that mistake them for eternal truths. Ibn Ḥanbal's admission of ignorance can therefore be understood as an accusation that the theologians do not understand the scope and contents of Islamic doctrine.

ABSTRACT

The *miḥna* (218-234 H.) was a defining event of Islamic spiritual authority. Its importance was evident to contemporaries, the inquisitors and their victims, and each side recorded the events. This study compares these accounts. It concentrates on three components that appear in both narratives: how each side told the story to the wide public; how they perceived the torture of Ibn Ḥanbal; how they described and understood the dialogue between Ibn Ḥanbal and his inquisitors. Interestingly, the depictions of these events bear a strong resemblance. The aim of this study is to trace how shared factual descriptions end up promoting opposing ideologies.

RESUMEN

La *Miḥna* (218-234 H) fue un acontecimiento definitorio de la autoridad espiritual islámica. Su importancia fue evidente para sus contemporáneos, tanto los inquisidores como sus víctimas, y ambos lados recogieron los acontecimientos producidos. Este artículo compara estas narraciones. Se concentra en tres elementos que aparecen en ambos relatos: cómo cada lado contó la historia a un público amplio; cómo percibieron la tortura de Ibn Ḥanbal; cómo describieron y comprendieron el diálogo entre Ibn Ḥanbal y sus inquisidores. Es interesante señalar que los relatos de ambos lados de estos acontecimientos tienen un gran parecido. El objeto de este estudio es detectar de qué modo las descripciones de hechos comunes acaban apoyando ideologías opuestas.