

***Anthropomorphism in Islam: The Challenge of Traditionalism (700-1350)***, by Livnat Holtzman (Edinburgh Studies in Classical Islamic History and Culture, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), xi + 434 pp., ISBN: 9780748689569, £85 (hb)

Traditions with explicit or implied anthropomorphic depictions of the divinity (*aḥādīth al-ṣifāt*) had been a perennial topic in Muslim theology and *ḥadīth* scholarship. Western academic inroads into the field have been mostly limited to passing references or sections in general studies on the theology of the divine attributes in Islam. Now, Livnat Holtzman takes a comprehensive and innovative view on *aḥādīth al-ṣifāt* during the formative and classical age of Sunnī Islam, in her monograph *Anthropomorphism in Islam. The Challenge of Traditionalism (700-1350)*.

In Chapter 1 (pp. 21-67), Holtzman argues that *aḥādīth al-ṣifāt* are fictional narratives. Whereas this aspect of historical reports (*akhbār*, sg. *khbar*) and legal traditions has been demonstrated by Daniel Beaumont and Sebastian Guenther, *aḥādīth al-ṣifāt* have been studied so far as theological not literary units. Without disregarding their hermeneutical significance, Holtzman calls attention to the “literary value of *aḥādīth al-ṣifāt*, their potential to entertain, stimulate, provoke or frighten, their structure, style and language” (p. 21). These aspects should be treated by narratological tools. Modern-day *ḥadīth* analysts will appreciate Chapter 1: It provides them with important tools to canvas the structure and purport of Muslim traditions in general.

In Chapter 2 (pp. 68-119), Holtzman studies several anthropomorphic traditions about the beatific vision (*ru’yah*). Apart from the narratological approach, she uses literary-historical analysis of their chains of transmission (*asānīd*; sg. *isnād*) and texts (*mutūn*, sg. *matn*). The traditions at issue, usually associated with two prophetic Companions, Abū Razīn al-‘Uqaylī (d. ?) and Jarīr ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Bajālī (Kūfah; d. 51/671), are often couched as extensive

sessions of questions and answers that take up different aspects of divine anthropomorphism.

Such a combined *isnād* and *matn* analysis is capable of yielding both relative chronology, within a group of several variant texts, and absolute chronology, when these texts are associated with specific chains of authorities. In its first/seventh- and second/eighth-century sections, Abū Razīn's tradition was carried by unverifiable family *isnāds* comprising only members of the Banū Muntafiq tribe in Iraq. A patchwork narrative, the tradition gained popularity in the third/ninth-century Ḥanbalī circles. The Jarīr al-Bajalī tradition was likely circulated by the Kūfan centenarian *mawlā* Ismā'īl ibn Abī Khālid (b. 49/669-70, d. 145-6/762-4), an illiterate who committed grave grammatical errors in transmission. Below Ismā'īl, the confused *isnād* is populated by exceptionally long-lived transmitters (*mu'ammarrūn*).

In the last section of Chapter 2 (pp. 99-105), Holtzman presents the reader with a captivating overview of the role that Jarīr's tradition played during the political and dogmatic conflict between Ḥanafī and Mu'tazilī rationalists, on the one hand, and traditionalists, on the other, which came to be known as the Miḥnah (c. 218-37/833-52).

Chapter 3 (pp. 120-84) is an original contribution to the study of gestures in anthropomorphic traditions. A rarely visited topic in *ḥadīth* studies, gestures are habitually performed by the main protagonists of traditions. Following David McNeill, Holtzman divides gestures in *ḥadīth* into iconic, metaphoric, deictic, and beat. Holtzman shows how the first type might give rise to anthropomorphic exegesis when a gesture referring to God is understood as iconic, that is, as a direct representation of its divine referent. This chapter includes an insightful prosopographical study on the Baṣran traditionist Ḥammād ibn Salamah (d. 167/784), who was responsible for the spread of many anthropomorphic traditions of dubious authenticity.

Once admitted into the traditionalist curriculum, anthropomorphic *ḥadīth* began to pose theological problems. Chapter 4 (pp. 185-266) follows the tension between the traditionalist reception of such *ḥadīth* and its rationalization by the Ash'arī theologians. Both sides sought to avoid corporealism (*tajsīm*) and anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) by recourse to the famous *bi-lā kayfa* (without [asking] "how") principle, which Holtzman analyzes in impressive detail. Contrary to Henri Laoust's conclusion that *bi-lā kayfa* originated among the third/ninth-century Ḥanbalīs in Baghdad, which continues to be popular in Western academic discourse on Islam, Holtzman shows that it was

articulated by such early traditionalist jurists as al-Awzā'ī (Syria; d. 157/774), Sufyān al-Thawrī (Kūfah; d. 161/778), al-Layth ibn Sa'd (Egypt; d. 175/791), Mālik ibn Anas (Medina; d. 179/795), and Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (Baghdad; d. 224/838), of whom only Abū 'Ubayd belonged to the circle of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. Consequently, an early proto-Sunnī detestation (perhaps of a Medinese origin) of theological debates, especially such debates that could stir controversy about God's attributes, was adopted and expanded on in the third/ninth-century Ḥanbalī and Ash'arī circles (pp. 190-2; 224-5; 234-48).

By the *bi-lā kayfa* principle, Muslim traditionalists countered what they saw as two extreme positions on anthropomorphic *ḥadīth*. At the one extreme were rationalist theologians of various affiliations who advocated figurative interpretation of the divine attributes, which, from the traditionalist standpoint, amounted to their negation (*ta'tīl*). The other extreme was occupied by the crude anthropomorphists, the Ḥashwiyyah, who envisaged God as having bodily parts similar to that of a human being. On the example of Ibn Qutaybah (Iraq; 213-76/828-89), Holtzman shows how, while avoiding purely rationalist explanations, middle-of-the-road traditionalists drew away from the Ḥashwiyya and carefully deployed various exegetical tools in an attempt to reconcile anthropomorphic descriptions of God with human reason.

In this chapter, Holtzman thoroughly discusses the workings of *ḥadīth* censorship (one is tempted to say "Verschiebung"). The tradition about the *raḥm* (the word may be understood as either "kinship" or "womb") that clings to *ḥaqw al-Raḥmān* ("the loin of the Merciful") sounded outrageously anthropomorphic as to be transmitted verbatim. To allay its sensualistic implications, some traditionists and editors omitted the embarrassing reference to God's loin, while others experimented with exegetical approaches. The latter were sometimes inspired by the Ash'arī *kalām*, but occasionally involved bending the semantic boundaries of Arabic figurative speech with the aim of glossing over the embarrassing mention of the "loin of the Merciful" (pp. 230-6).

In Chapter 5 (pp. 267-359), Holtzman turns her attention to the performative aspects of anthropomorphic *ḥadīth*, which was far from confined to the chambers of theoretical study. Based on the theory of "iconic books" as embodiments of spiritual power and societal influence, Holtzman analyzes the role played in the public sphere by

the Qādirī Creed, Ibn Khuzaymah's *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Asās al-taqdīs*, and Ibn Taymiyyah's *al-Ḥamawīyyah al-kubrā*.

Throughout the monograph, Holtzman masterfully navigates her way through the intricacies of theological debates, paying close attention to the teachings of a spectrum of Muslim theologians who addressed the issue of the divine attributes over a period of 650 years. To achieve her research goals, she draws on a multifaceted methodology ranging from comparative analysis of the chains of *ḥadīth* transmission to narratology and the study of scripture as a public-sphere phenomenon. These approaches are applied—separately or in concert—on a wide range of sources, which guaranties the methodological homogeneity of the work and helps it to describe in a precise and nuanced manner the changing scholarly and social perceptions of *ahādīth al-ṣifāt*.

The primary goal of Holtzman's book is to reveal the theological debates behind *ahādīth al-ṣifāt*, which she pursues with impressive clarity and persuasiveness. Less important to her is the question of *ḥadīth* authenticity, which, although occasionally referenced, is not a major topic in the monograph. Thus, Holtzman rightfully points out that, albeit fictional narratives, anthropomorphic traditions have their historical context (p. 23). She, nevertheless, does not delve into the question of authenticity, that is, the degree of reliability of each transmitter along the chain of transmission, and the related issue of historicity, that is, the legitimacy of the tradition's purport to describe events from the lifetime of the original speaker, say, the Prophet.

When dealing with the *ru'yah* traditions in Chapter 2, Holtzman only alludes to the problematic nature of Ismā'īl ibn Abī Khālid's transmission on the authority of Qays ibn Abī Ḥāzim, without drawing a definite conclusion about the unreliability of the chain below Ismā'īl (pp. 98-9). Moreover, the large number of *isnāds* that branch out from Ismā'īl ibn Abī Khālid may be the result of retrospective ascriptions driven by the fame that *ḥadīth al-ru'yah* attained over the course of the Miḥnah and the corresponding impulse of the traditionalist party to demonstrate its wide dissemination, hence, its authenticity.

Holtzman has an impressive command of the Muslim prosopographical literature (*kutub al-rijāl*), which is indispensable in the study of *ḥadīth* transmission. Her only omission is Mughaltāy ibn Qalīj's (Cairo; d. 762/1361) *Ikmāl Tabdhīb al-Kamāl fī asmā' al-rijāl*, a treasure trove with excerpts from many presently lost biographical sources. Citing 'Abd al-Bāqī ibn Qāni' (Baghdad; 265-351/879-962),

Mughaltāy reports that Ismāʿīl ibn Abī Khālid was born in 49/669-70. This information, which is unavailable in the biographical sources studied by Holtzman, bolsters her argument that the Jarīr al-Bajalī tradition is based on a chain of extremely long-lived transmitters, known as *muʿammarūn* (pp. 95-6).

To Holtzman's nuanced categorization of gestures in *ḥadīth*, one may add an important tradition that falls under the rarely attested category of beat. According to many reports, as he answered ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's question about the cryptic Qurʾānic word *kalālah*, the Prophet poked ʿUmar with his finger in the chest or, alternatively, pushed him in his belly (e.g., Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-Masājid wa-mawāḍiʿ al-ṣalāh*, *Bāb Nahy man akala thūm<sup>am</sup>*, no. 78 [567]).

Holtzman translates *munkar*, which is one of the widest-spread categories of disparaged *ḥadīth*, as “rejected” (pp. 94, 103) and “objectionable” (pp. 98, 218, 256 n. 188). While referencing the critical notion that such *ḥadīth* is invalid as a legal argument, these two terms take no notice of the reason for its invalidation, namely, its being unrecognized (or “unknown,” as mentioned in G. H. A. Juynboll's *EF* lemma), either because it differs in some respect from a group of similar traditions or because it is unparalleled in its text or chain of transmission. For the non-specialist reader, it is better to translate *munkar* as “unrecognized, hence objectionable.”

Another term that needs a more precise translation is *akbbār al-āḥād*. Holtzman defines it as “*ahādīth* with few transmitters” (p. 240), but, actually, *khbar al-wāḥid* is an unparalleled report by a single transmitter.

Throughout the monograph, Holtzman transliterates the personal names taking into account only the ʿayn and the *hamzah* while discounting the long vowels and the other specificities of Arabic phonetics. In this manner, she hardly makes a difference between al-Anbārī and al-ʿAnbarī and leaves the reader wondering about the spelling of some uncommon names as al-Birzali and Ibn Battal. Holtzman adheres exclusively to the Common Era calendar and places the notes at each chapter's end. These inconveniences certainly go to the credit of the publisher not the author.

**Pavel Pavlovitch**

*Sofia University St. Kliment Obridski, Sofia-Bulgaria*

pavlovitch@hotmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6725-5302>