

Chapter 2

Livnat Holtzman
(Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan)

“Does God Really Laugh?” – Appropriate and Inappropriate Descriptions of God in Islamic Traditionalist Theology¹

This article is dedicated to Isaiah Goldfeld, my mentor and friend

Introduction

The work *Hādī al-arwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrāḥ* (The Leader of the Souls to the Land of Joy; henceforth *Hādī al-arwāḥ*) by the Damascene theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah (d. 1350) is neither funny nor entertaining. Indeed, a work of seventy chapters, meant to prepare the believers for the horrifying events that will occur on the Day of Resurrection, cannot be funny by any means. However, *Hādī al-arwāḥ* contains many references to laughter. In fact, the verb *ḍahika* (laugh) and its variants and conjugations appear thirty times in *Hādī al-arwāḥ*; the laughter is mostly attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad, but also to God Himself.²

¹ Translations of Quranic verses in this article are taken from N. J. Dawood, *The Koran* (London: Penguin Books 2000, first published 1956), which is a fluent and readable, although quite inaccurate, translation. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, first published in 1964) is an accurate translation written in an archaic language, but I had to use it a number of times. I translated all the other texts in the article from original Arabic sources, unless otherwise indicated. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues Walid Saleh, Jon Hoover, Almog Kasher, and Miriam Goldstein for their helpful suggestions.

² Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr ibn Ayyūb Šams al-Dīn ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hādī*

In *Hādī al-arwāh*, God's laughter is mentioned in a passage, which describes what will happen after the great trial, in which God will determine who inhabits Hell and who inhabits Heaven. The believers, of course, will be rewarded for the good deeds they performed in this world by being permitted to enter Heaven. They will be assembled in a sweet-smelling valley, in which they will see numerous pulpits made of light, pearl, emerald, gold, and silver. Suddenly, a great light will strike them. Lifting up their heads, they will actually see God, looking down at them. "O, inhabitants of Heaven, peace be with you!" — God will welcome them. They will reply: "Our Lord, You are peace, and peace comes from you. Bless you, Your Majesty, the Most Honorable!" And God shall be revealed to them laughing (*yadhaku*).³ In this passage, then, God's laughter is connected to the highest reward possible for the believers: the ability to see God's face. However, the text gives no hint as to the meaning of this laughter. One can safely assume, then, that as a reward for the inhabitants of Heaven, God's laughter is a benevolent laughter, meant to welcome the newcomers.

Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah did not draw the concept of God laughing from his vivid imagination. In fact, the description of this future event, in which the believers will witness God's face and hear His laughter, is based on several *ḥadīths*, which Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah merely paraphrased. As an ultra-traditionalist scholar, he constructed *Hādī al-arwāh* mainly on the Quran and the seventh century orally-transmitted material, which is attributed to the Prophet and his Companions. This material, in the form of thousands of anecdotes, is the Hadith literature, which is consensually regarded almost as holy as the Quran.⁴ In the

al-arwāh ilā bilād al-afrāh, ed. Hāmid Aḥmad al-Tāhir (Cairo: Dār al-Fağr li-l-Turāt, 2003).

³ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hādī al-arwāh*, 307–08.

⁴ Following John Burton's observation, I use "Hadith" (with a capital H) in this article to denote the massive literature of tradition, assembled from thousands of text-units called *ḥadīths* (with a small letter). Because "Hadith" is more or less known in English, it is not accurately transliterated; nevertheless the technical term *ḥadīth*, is. John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), ix. The most concise and clear explanation on the Hadith literature, its authenticity and the major approaches to this literature in western scholarship, is the introduction to: Gautier H. A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill 1969), 1–9. Juynboll's definition of Hadith, which is based on primary sources, is as follows: "The tradition literature of Islam is that which comprises all the sayings, deeds and decisions of the Prophet Muḥammad, his silent approval of the behavior of his contemporaries, and descriptions of his person . . . At first the tradition was committed to memory and orally transmitted from generation to generation until, after the first century of the Hijra (that is, in the eighth and ninth centuries–L.H.), it came to be registered in written compilations." Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature*, 4. There are many introductory sources on Hadith literature. The ones which form a good, challenging, reading are: John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith*, 17–35; Muḥammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Ḥadīth Literature: Its Origins, Development and Special Features*, 2nd revised ed. by Abdul Hakim Murad (1961; Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 1–9, 76–89.

introduction to *Hādī al-arwāh*, Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah explains that the only way for the believers to prepare themselves for the Day of Resurrection, is by studying the Hadith material and drawing from it details on Heaven and the life in the Hereafter. That is what the believers did, so he claims, from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad onward. The same preparation was surely needed for his contemporaries, and that was why Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah decided to assemble the material, which was scattered in various Hadith compilations, organize it, and make it accessible to the readers of the fourteenth century. The spiritual and indeed practical benefits of the Hadith material, on which *Hādī al-arwāh* is based, are further elaborated in the introduction:

When [the believers], who are led to success [by God], will know the Divine wisdom and volition which motivated their creation, they will lift up their heads. They will then realize that the knowledge about Heaven was transmitted to them through an unbroken chain of transmitters that goes back to the Prophet himself. And so they will get ready for what is to come. They will safely march on the Straight Path (*al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*) leading to Heaven.⁵

The teachings of the Prophet, transmitted through an unbroken chain of transmitters throughout the ages and recorded in the Hadith literature are the exclusive source for *Hādī al-arwāh*. Indeed, the Hadith is the only source for the few accounts describing God’s laughter.⁶ The Hadith literature is also the only source for accounts describing the Prophet’s laughter, also generously quoted in *Hādī al-arwāh*. The “laughter” *ḥadīths* quoted in *Hādī al-arwāh* are intended to record the Prophet’s teachings about the Day of Resurrection, occasionally giving some details about the circumstances in which the Prophet conveyed his teachings. Each

⁵ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hādī al-arwāh*, 12. The *Ṣirāt* is “a bridge extended over the midst of Hell, sharper than a sword, and thinner than hair, over which the creatures will pass.” Edward Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon-Book 1*, photo-offset of the edition printed in London (1863–1893; Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), 4:1678. The phrase *al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm* appears in the opening chapter (*sūrat al-fātiḥah*) of the Quran, as a metaphor to the Islamic creed, faith and conduct. “You alone we worship, and You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path” (Q. 1:5–6).

⁶ God’s laughter is not mentioned in the Quran. God is mentioned in the Quran as the Creator of laughter, in a passage which correlates laughter with joy (“It is He who moves men to laughter and to tears.” Q. 53:43). See a discussion in: Georges Tamer, “The Qur’ān and Humor,” *Humor in der arabischen Kultur – Humor in Arabic Culture*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 3–28; here 7–8. Tamer discusses God’s mockery of the enemies of the Islamic community at 17–20. A concise discussion on laughter in the Quran is: Ludwig Amman, “Laughter,” *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAullife (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006), 3 (2003): 146–49 (also available in an online version at: <http://brill.nl/default.aspx?partid=227&pid=23761>; last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010). One of Amman’s interesting observations is that the verb *d-h-k* and its derivatives appear in the Quran only ten times, while the Hebrew equivalents *s-h-q* and *ṣ-h-q* appear 179 times in the Hebrew Bible.

ḥadīṭ was transmitted by either the actual participants in the events, or merely by eye-witnesses to these events.

One such example is the following, transmitted by Abū Bakr (d. 634), the Prophet's closest Companion and the first Islamic Caliph (*ḥalīfah*):

Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq [literally: Abū Bakr the honest] told [the following]: One morning, the Messenger of God woke up and prayed the Morning Prayer. He then sat [for a long time]. In the fore-noon he suddenly started to laugh [until noon]. He continued sitting where he was, and prayed the Noon Prayer, the Mid-Afternoon Prayer, and the Sunset Prayer. During all that time, he did not say a word [beside the words of the prayers], until he prayed the last prayer, which is the Evening Prayer. Then he retired to his family. The people, who were astonished by the Prophet's peculiar conduct, asked Abū Bakr to inquire what this conduct meant. Abū Bakr asked the Prophet, who willingly unfolded the detailed vision that was revealed to him during that long sitting.⁷ What the Prophet saw in his vision was the Day of Resurrection, when all the people were gathered in one plain. While waiting, and obviously worried about their fate, the people asked each of the Quranic prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses) to be their intercessor in the Big Trial, but each prophet refused in his turn, and sent them to the prophet who succeeded him. The people finally went and asked for Jesus' help. They found Jesus busy attending the sick and the lepers, arousing the dead and bringing them back to life. Jesus also refused to serve as an intercessor, and sent them to Muḥammad, to whom he referred as "The Lord of the Descendants of Adam" (*sayyid wuld Ādām*). Muḥammad then assembled a group of virtuous people, the martyrs (*ṣahīd*, pl. *ṣuhadā'*) included, and they interceded for the people, who were waiting for their sentence. After the intercession was completed, God gave Muḥammad and the group of virtuous people the opportunity to put in a good word for the sinners, who were destined to be in Hell: "And so they found a man in Hell, and they asked him: 'Have you ever done a good deed?' He replied: 'No, the only thing I can think of is that I ordered my children to burn my body in fire, when I die, then grind the remains until I become a fine powder, like kohl, and then take me to the beach and scatter me. That way, the Lord of all Beings will not have any power over me.' God asked: 'Why did you do that?' The man replied: 'Because I fear You.' For that God responded: 'Before you are all the possessions of the most powerful king in the world. This is what you shall have, and ten times more.' The man responded: 'Are you making fun of me? You are this king!'" Muḥammad concluded this story to Abū Bakr by saying: "Because of this man, I was laughing from fore-noon [until noon]."⁸

⁷ The vision was told by the Prophet in the past tense, as if the events already occurred. In a way, they did.

⁸ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hādī al-arwāḥ*, 321–22. The *ḥadīṭ* appears in a Hadith compilation of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), the eponym of the Ḥanbalī school, and this was the source from which Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah quoted. Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Ṣākir (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīṭ, 1995), 1:172–75, *ḥadīṭ* no. 15. Because the text is very long, the above version combines accurate translation with paraphrasing. The parts of the text, which are accurate translations, are marked by quotation marks.

Again, as in the above quoted *ḥadīth* on God’s laughter, the text does not explain the meaning of the Prophet’s laughter. Is it because the text is meant for the believers to reflect on the meaning of the Prophet’s laughter, or is it because the meaning of this laughter is obvious to its recipients? A combination of these two questions probably leads us to the right answer. The immediate lesson of this anecdote, which was at least coherent for its initial recipients, is that a great sinner or heretic can be, at the bottom of his heart, a believer, because he fears God and recognizes His sovereignty. Still, the text indeed leads us to reflect on the meaning of the Prophet’s laughter. Does the laughter indicate compassion for the man? Does the laughter express astonishment and enjoyment from this sinner’s belief? Or else, can the Prophet’s laughter signify mockery, perhaps from this sinner’s stupidity, having believed that he can escape God’s wrath by scattering his ashes in the sea? The text in question does not provide any answer to these questions. In order to comprehend the meaning of the Prophet’s laughter in this and in other parallel texts from the Hadith, a close, comparative reading is required. This reading is needed also in order to shed light on God’s laughter, as described in the Hadith.

This article, then, aims at examining the meaning of God’s laughter on the Day of Resurrection in a cluster of *ḥadīths* quoted in the aphorisms and treatises of prominent traditionalist scholars from the ninth until the fourteenth centuries. The traditionalists, whose works I refer to in this article, are mainly from the Ḥanbalī and the Aš‘arī schools.⁹ I will examine the Hadith material on God’s laughter on several levels.

The laughter-*ḥadīths* present direct contact between God and the believers, but also between God and the infidels. God is revealed to the believers, laughing, but He also laughs at the infidels. Through an examination of the relevant Hadith material and the discussions of the traditionalists on this material, another issue emerges: the Prophet’s laughter. Like all Hadith material, the *ḥadīths* on God’s laughter were first and foremost oral texts, transmitted from master to disciples throughout the generations. The first master was, of course, the Prophet. In several recorded texts, we can track down valuable and rare remarks on the way this material was transmitted, meaning the gestures and tone of voice of the *muḥaddith* (the transmitter of *ḥadīths*). Was the Prophet laughing when describing God’s laughter? Did the *muḥaddith* laugh while reciting the *ḥadīths* on God’s laughter to his disciples? Did this laughter call for a comparison between human and divine laughter? These

⁹ The Ḥanbalīs were considered ultra-traditionalists, whereas the Aš‘arīs were traditionalists with strong rationalistic traits. However, there were Ḥanbalīs who used rationalistic argumentations. The most coherent explanation of this issue is by William Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 180–82, 291–97, 317–18.

questions, to the best of my knowledge, have not been discussed in the modern research.

The main theological and ethical problem, which evolved from these texts, was the propriety and impropriety of attributing laughter both to God and the Prophet. The various hermeneutical approaches of the traditionalists to these texts begin with a literal reading and end with a figurative reading. There was also an attempt to read these texts literally, without getting caught in the dangerous pitfall of comparing God to man. It is noteworthy, that the Islamic faith adheres to the concept of a transcendent God, who is different from all existing things. In fact, a Quranic verse which states: "Nothing can be compared with Him" (Q. 42: 11), engendered a prohibition to compare God to His creation.

The inner-polemic which evolved around these texts within Islamic traditionalism also sheds light on the way these texts were read and understood. This raises two questions: Can laughter be defined as one of God's attributes, like His mercy, wisdom, and omnipotence? If the texts describing God's laughter are accepted, should the concept of God's laughter be a part of the Islamic creed? The various approaches of prominent traditionalist scholars towards these *hadīths* are also discussed here. The shift in the traditionalist mainstream view moved from a total acceptance of the texts to admitting their problematics and again to accepting them. This shift will be demonstrated through the views of the leading traditionalists Abū Ya'la (d. 1066), Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 1201), Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), and Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah. Their views reflect the diversity of nuanced approaches to these problematic texts within Islamic traditionalism.

Laughter in Eschatological Texts

In the Quran there is a passage that describes the believers laughing at the unbelievers. Their laughter, which was preceded by the laughter of the unbelievers, indicates mockery:

The evil-doers mock the faithful and wink at one another as they pass by them. When they meet their own folk they speak of them with jests, and when they see them, they say: 'These are surely erring men!' Yet they were not sent to be their guardians. But on that day the faithful will mock the unbelievers as they recline upon their couches and gaze around them. (Q. 83: 29–36)¹⁰

In his discussion of this passage, Georges Tamer remarks that the evil-doers' laughter is sinful, while the believers' laughter is "an expression of their

¹⁰ I did not want to alter N. J. Dawood's beautiful translation, but for the sake of accuracy, the text indeed indicates that both the evil-doers and the faithful laugh (*yadhakūn*), rather than mock.

triumph.”¹¹ This laughter, which will be expressed only on the Day of Judgment, is one of the benefits promised to the believers. “The community of believers plagued in the present time should be comforted by the vision of the eschatological humor guaranteed them in the future.”¹² Indeed, the same aura of superiority, triumph, haughtiness, and gloat is maintained in the *ḥadīths*, which describe God laughing at the infidels and sinners.

As stated above, the few *ḥadīths* describing God’s laughter are part of the Prophet’s teachings on the Day of Resurrection, and they are scattered in various Hadith compilations. The tenth-century traditionalist theologian Abū Bakr al-Āğurrī (d. 971) assembled the eschatological Hadith material in two treatises.¹³ The *ḥadīths* quoted by al-Āğurrī record the dialogues that the Prophet conducted with his Companions (*al-ṣaḥābah*). The material was transmitted by the Companions themselves, who were either eye-witnesses or actual participants in the described dialogues.

Abū Razīn al-Uqaylī (death date unknown), a Companion of the Prophet, reported:

I asked the Prophet one day: “Will each and every one of us see our Lord on the Day of Resurrection? Is there a sign for this in the creation?” The Prophet answered: “Abū Razīn, the fact that each and every one of you sees the moon is in itself a sign for this, is it not?” I replied: “Of course.” The Prophet said: “So, God is the greatest.”¹⁴

Hence, seeing God’s face is part of the believers’ reward in Heaven. Al-Āğurrī understood the following dialogue between the Prophet and Abū Razīn as connected to the reward of the believers, although the text does not explicitly state that it is so. Again, Abū Razīn himself describes the dialogue:

The Prophet said: “Our Lord will laugh because of His servants’ despair, and because He knows that the time for Him to change things is near.” I asked: “Oh, Messenger of God! Does God really laugh?” The Prophet answered in the affirmative. I said: “A Lord (*rabb*) who laughs benevolently shall never deprive us of His bounty.”¹⁵

¹¹ Tamer, “The Qur’ān and Humor,” 9.

¹² Tamer, “The Qur’ān and Humor,” 9.

¹³ The long treatise is: Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Rayyān, 2000). The short one is: Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq bi-l-nazar ilā Allāh ta‘ālā fī al-āḥirah*, ed. Muḥammad Ġayyāt al-Ġunbāz (Riyadh: Dār ‘Ālam al-Kutub li-l-Naṣr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 1986).

¹⁴ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 73–74. This tradition is also quoted in: Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn Ḥuzaymah, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd wa-itbāt sifāt al-rabb ‘azza wa-ḡalla*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Ibrāhīm al-Šahwān (Riyadh: Dār al-Ruṣd li-l-Naṣr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 1997), 179; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 12:481, *ḥadīth* no. 16130.

¹⁵ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 109; al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah*, 294–95, *ḥadīth* no. 638 and no. 639; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 12:481, *ḥadīth* no. 16131. This *ḥadīth* is considered weak not because of its content, but because of its chain of transmitters.

A more prominent Companion, Abū Mūsà al-Ash‘arī (d. ca. 662) transmitted two archetypes of *ḥadīths* on God’s laughter: the good-natured, loving laughter, and the mocking one. The good-natured laughter is mentioned in a quotation from the Prophet:

The Prophet said: “On the Day of Resurrection our Lord, to Him belong glory and greatness, shall be revealed to us, laughing (*yataḡallà dāḥikan*).”¹⁶

In a slightly more detailed version, Abū Musà leads us to an explanation of the reason for God’s laughter:

The Prophet said: “On the Day of Resurrection our Lord, to Him belong glory and greatness, shall be revealed to us, laughing (*yataḡallà dāḥikan*). And He will say: ‘Rejoice, you Muslims! For I have replaced each one of you destined to go to Hell with a Jew or a Muslim’.”¹⁷

The good-natured laughter of God suddenly seems to be very intimidating, not to the Muslims, of course, but to the heretics. It may be even interpreted as an expression of superiority.

The Companions Abū Sa‘īd al-Hudrī (d. ca. 685) and ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd (d. ca. 652) transmitted a detailed account about the people who will be blessed by hearing God’s laughter:

The Prophet said: “God will laugh in the presence of two men. One of the two will be a man who used to get up in the middle of the night, while everyone was asleep, to perform ablution and pray all night. The other man will fight the enemy, after his fellowmen were defeated, but he will keep on fighting, until God will grant him with the martyrdom (*ṣahādah*).”¹⁸

Several Companions, among whom was the prominent Companion Abū Hurayrah (d. ca. 680), transmitted a different version:

¹⁶ Al-Āḡurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah*, 295, *ḥadīth* no. 640.

¹⁷ Al-Āḡurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah*, 295, *ḥadīth* no. 641; Al-Āḡurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣdīq*, 76.

¹⁸ Al-Āḡurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah*, 294, *ḥadīth* no. 637. There is another version indicating that three groups of people will be rewarded with God’s laughter: The ones who are praying in the middle of the night, the ones who stand in lines for prayer (basically, every Muslim who goes to the Friday Prayer in the mosque), and the ones who are positioned in lines on the battlefield. Al-Āḡurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah*, 294, *ḥadīth* no. 636. There is also an explanatory *ḥadīth*: “A man came to the Prophet and asked: Who is the most preferable of all martyrs? The Prophet responded: Those who fight while staying in line, and never turn their faces until they are killed. Those will arrive at the highest of all the gardens, and your Lord, to Him belong might and glory, grant them with His laughter. If He grants a servant with His laughter, then [this servant] will not be judged for his actions [on the Day of Judgment].” Al-Āḡurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah*, 299, *ḥadīth* no. 650. For another variant, see: Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066), *Al-Asmā’ wa-l-sifāt*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥāṣidī (Jeddah: Maktabat al-Sawādī li-l-Tawzī 1993), 2: 408.

The Prophet said: “God will laugh in the presence of two men: one of them killed the other, thereafter both arrived in Heaven. [How is that possible?] The first man fought for the cause of God, and killed the second man. Then God forgave the killer, and also made him fight for the cause of God and die as a martyr.”¹⁹

God’s laughter here is perceived as a reward granted to the believers who perform more good deeds than others: they either pray in an extraordinary way, or die as martyrs on the battlefield.²⁰

Laughter as an Illustration

The Hadith literature is based on numerous reports, transmitted orally from generation to generation.²¹ The traditional Muslim approach regards this literature as a faithful record of the Prophet’s and his Companions’ deeds, sayings, and teachings.²² The traditional Hadith theory roughly divides each text-unit or *ḥadīth* into an *isnād* (a chain of transmitters, which is meant to attest the credibility of the content) and a *matn* (the story itself). However, this division is not clear-cut, as the last link in the chain of transmitters, the narrator, is often the eye-witness to the event which he himself narrates, meaning he is also a part of the “story.” The story itself can also be divided into several parts. For instance, the story can begin with a description of a situation, in which the Prophet did something, continue with a citation of the Prophet’s sayings, and conclude with an exegetical comment of the narrator.²³

Even after the *ḥadīths* were recorded and compiled, they retained their characteristic as an oral literature. G. H. A. Junybol determines: “The force of the

¹⁹ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarīḥ*, 292–93 *ḥadīths* no. 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634; Al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Asmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt*, 2: 401; Ibn Ḥuzaymah, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 569–70.

²⁰ See also a *ḥadīth* stating that, “God laughs because of the despair of his servants.” According to John Renard, in this *ḥadīth*, God is “amused at humanity’s insecurity about something so infinitely certain as divine mercy.” John Renard, “Despair,” *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, 1(2001):521–22.

²¹ The definition of Hadith literature as an oral literature is inaccurate, since from early days, the *muhaddīths* kept records of the material they were entrusted with, and often they read the material out loud to their students. Gregor Schoeler suggests “to avoid such catchphrases as ‘written transmission’ versus ‘oral transmission’ and talk about lecture and teaching practices in early Islam.” Gregor Schoeler, “The Transmission of the Sciences in Early Islam- Oral or Written?,” in: Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, tr. Uwe Vagelpohl and ed. James E. Montgomery (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 28–44; here 41.

²² Siddiqi, *Hadīth Literature*, 13–14.

²³ Cf. R. Marston Speight’s division into: 1) the chain of transmission; 2) the introduction, or setting; 3) the report itself. R. Marston Speight, “Oral Traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad: A Formulaic Approach,” *Oral Tradition*, 4.1–2 (1989): 27–37; here 28.

spoken word has always been great with the Arabs, as it was with the Jews. Note, for example, the important position the poet held in pre-Islamic tribal society because of the force of his poetry. To this, one may add that the Arabs are extremely fond of story-telling; in the earliest days the *quṣṣās* (story-tellers – L.H.) already enjoyed public favor. It is no wonder that traditions acquired a wide popularity with the masses."²⁴ The popularity of the *ḥadīths*, then, almost stood in contrast to their sacredness.

There were several attempts to investigate the narrative elements of *ḥadīths*. One such commendable attempt is an important article by Sebastian Günther, which bases its analysis of several *ḥadīths* on theoretical premises. Günther explains that he considers the individual *ḥadīth* "as a textual entity," and elaborates further: "In order to figure out, firstly, its possible narrativity, all aspects, characteristics and intertwined processes of its narration may be understood within the framework of a 'narrative complex' (in Germ. *Erzählkomplex*). The latter is made up of three basic elements: (A) the narrative act realized in a narrative situation (in short: the process of narrating); (B) The 'narrative text' or narrative discourse, i.e. the substantially existing or present text, the realization of a story as text, the *how* is being narrated (Fr. *signifiant*), or the shaping of a story by its narrator. (C) The 'story' (Germ. *Die eigentliche Geschichte*; Fr. *signifié, histoire*), i.e., the content of the text, or the connection of the events narrated according to their chronological order."²⁵ Günther describes the narrator's (the *muhaddith*) tactics and positions as reflected in the text, and he particularly notices when the narrator assumes "the platform of an alleged reporter or eye-witness," and when he deserts this platform.²⁶

Although Günther elaborates on the technical aspects of transmitting oral literature,²⁷ he neglects a feature which no doubt accompanied the transmission of *ḥadīths*, and that is the transmitter's tone of voice, facial expressions, and body gestures. This neglect was probably dictated by the content of the specific *ḥadīths*, which served as the case-studies for Günther's article. The texts that he examined do not contain any indication of any of these rhetorical features. However, as we will see, these features were sometimes recorded. No doubt that the transmitters of the *ḥadīths* used these rhetorical devices to enhance the messages conveyed in the texts.

²⁴ Junybol, *The Authenticity*, 9.

²⁵ Sebastian Günther, "Fictional Narration and Imagination within an Authoritative Framework-Towards a New Understanding of Hadith," *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature*, ed. Stefan Leder (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 433–71; here 437.

²⁶ Günther, "Fictional Narration," 447.

²⁷ Günther, "Fictional Narration," 463–71.

That hand gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice were an inseparable part of the transmitting process of the Hadith material seems to be an axiom which needs no proofs. Hand gestures are an inseparable part of the phenomenon of human communication, as Michael Argyle observes: “While people speak they make a number of bodily movements, especially with their hands. Many of these are ‘batons’, i.e. movements giving emphasis Many gestures are ‘illustrations’ of the verbal contents: they copy shapes, objects or movements, or have metaphorical meaning”²⁸ From the three categories of gestures that Argyle enumerates in his book, it seems that “illustrators” are the most relevant to our discussion: “‘Illustrators’ are ‘movements which are directly tied to speech, serving to illustrate what is being said verbally’.”²⁹

That speech and illustrators are inseparable is an observation which the ninth century rationalist scholar from Basra, Iraq, al-Ġāhiz (d. ca. 868) already made. In his words: “Gesture and speech are partners.”³⁰ According to al-Ġāhiz, man uses five methods to indicate what he means, or to express his thoughts: speech, gesture (*iṣārah*, pl. *iṣārāt*), counting on fingers or knuckles, writing, and posture or attitude.³¹ The gesture, according to him, is performed “by a hand, head, eye, eyebrows, or knees, when two people draw apart. [The gesture can be performed] by a garment and a sword.”³² Al-Ġāhiz observes, and continues: “The gesture of the gaze, the eyebrows, and other bodily parts, can be of great help when people try to conceal things from one another. If it wasn’t for the gesture, people would not be able to understand subtleties, and they would be quite ignorant about that altogether.”³³ Although al-Ġāhiz refers to the eloquent speech, his words seem to be applicable to all kinds of speech, more so concerning the transmitting of *ḥadīths*.

²⁸ Michael Argyle, *Bodily Communication*, 2nd edition (1975; London and New York: Methuen and Co. 1988), 107.

²⁹ Argyle, *Bodily Communication*, 188, quoting P. Ekman and W. V. Friesen, “The Repertoire of Nonverbal Behavior: Categories, Origins, Usage and Coding,” *Semiotica* 1(1969): 49–67. For an elaboration on illustrators, see: Argyle, *Bodily Communication*, 194–97.

³⁰ Abū ‘Utmān ‘Amr ibn Baḥr al-Fuqaymī al-Baṣrī al-Ġāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Hāngī 1418/1998), 1:78

³¹ Al-Ġāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 1:76. Al-Ġāhiz’s observations, as well as the observation of his successors, are elaborated in: G. E. von Grunebaum, “Bayān,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2000), 1 (1968), 1114–16. Also available in Brill Online; Ed(s). “Ishāra.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, 4 (1978), 113–14. I have found a striking resemblance between al-Ġāhiz’s observations and those of European theorists of the Middle Ages, just from reading the following two sources: Harry Caplan, “Classical Rhetoric and the Mediaeval Theory of Preaching,” *Classical Philology* 28.2 (Apr. 1933): 76–96; here 74, 92–93; J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 69–80.

³² Al-Ġāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 1:78.

³³ Al-Ġāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 1:78.

From the Hadith material itself, but also from works on *uṣūl al-fiqh* (defining the principles of Islamic jurisprudence), it is quite obvious that the traditionalists were aware of a whole bulk of messages and meanings, which could not be conveyed by words. The twelfth century Aṣṣārī theologian Abū Hāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 1111, known in the Medieval west as Algazel) stated: “clarifying the meaning of something can be realized through terminological phrases, but it can also be realized through actions, gestures and symbols, because these are also indicators and clarifiers.”³⁴ Al-Ġazālī called the actions, gestures, or symbols accompanying someone’s words as *qarāʾin*, i.e., conjunctions or annexations. He emphasized that these annexations should be passed on by the transmitters of the texts exactly as they occurred: “As for the gestures, symbols, movements, introductions, and conclusions – all these should not be subjected to exhaustive narrative or to guesses and conjectures. Only an eye-witness can pass it on. Therefore, the Prophet’s Companions who witnessed such an event passed it to their disciples using the most coherent words, or using the annexations on which we elaborated before A thing [or a case] which cannot be uttered in words, should be expressed by those annexations.”³⁵

Al-Ġazālī’s approach represents the total trust and credibility which the traditionalists had for the *muḥadditūn*, the transmitters of the *ḥadīths*. The traditionalists deemed that the *muḥadditūn* treat the material entrusted to them with great care and caution. Because Hadith material was the basis for Islamic jurisprudence, the accuracy of its content was carefully maintained, by conveying every piece of relevant information, including the gestures of the transmitters of the texts. However, as al-Ġazālī admits later, the use of gestures does not necessarily entail an understanding of the uttered words. Sometimes an additional explanation or interpretation is required.³⁶ What al-Ġazālī defines as “annexations” is not necessarily “illustrators,” taking Argyle’s definition, as al-Ġazālī’s definition includes verbal explanations and not just body gestures and facial expressions. Still, al-Ġazālī’s description illuminates the place of body gestures and facial expressions in the process of transmitting the *ḥadīths*.

There were only a few, undeveloped attempts—some dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century—that addressed the existence of gestures in the Hadith discourse.³⁷ The most recent observations were made by R. Marston

³⁴ Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ġazālī, *Al-Mustasfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*, 4 vols., ed. Ḥamzah ibn Zuhayr Ḥāfiẓ, (n.p, n.d.), 3:63. The second part of this sentence is quoted in Sherman A. Jackson, “From Prophetic Actions to Constitutional Theory: A Novel Chapter in Medieval Muslim Jurisprudence,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25. 1 (Nov. 1993): 71–90; here 88, note 28.

³⁵ Al-Ġazālī, *Al-Mustasfā*, 3:30–31.

³⁶ Al-Ġazālī, *Al-Mustasfā*, 3:63.

³⁷ The author of the entry “Ishāra” in the second edition of *the Encyclopaedia of Islam*, draws our

Speight in an article on the variant readings of *ḥadīths*: “It seems likely that transmitters of *ḥadīth* were motivated by a concern to clothe the prophetic dicta in effective rhetorical dress to enhance their religious significance. In doing so they participated in the age-old Middle Eastern literary and rhetorical tradition of preserving in carefully crafted, concise texts, either oral or written, the sayings and actions of famous people.”³⁸ Speight concludes, “that transmitters exercised a degree of literary and rhetorical creativeness in their narration of the *ahādīth* (plural form of *ḥadīth* – L.H.) of which they were the receivers and custodians.”³⁹ Still, he refers solely to the narrative-germ of the *ḥadīth*, i.e. the part which Günther defines as “the story,” and does not address the body gestures of the *muḥaddithūn*. In another important article, Speight enumerates the signs of oral transmission, which are easily traceable in the Hadith literature: “unvarying style, frequent repetition of expressions, emphasis upon action rather than description, conversational tone, atomistic structure, and, above all, the use of formulas as ‘the means of expressing the themes’. . . .”⁴⁰ In this article Speight also refers only to narrative formulas, and does not address other non-verbal features of the transmission.

Nevertheless, “the story” and “the narrator’s platform” in one *ḥadīth* or text-unit, sometimes contain information on the indicators or illustrators accompanying the Prophetic dicta. Surprisingly enough, it is the anthropomorphic Hadith material

attention to the observations of the great scholar Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) on the ritual and symbolic gestures of the Arabs, gestures which go back to remote antiquity. Goldziher indeed noticed the records in the Hadith literature on the use the Prophet made with his index finger (*sabbābah*) during prayer. G. H. Bousquet, “Études islamologiques d’Ignaz Goldziher,” *Arabica* 7.1 (1960): 1–29; here 22–23. Apart from that, Goldziher was also interested in the gesture of affirmation among the Arabs. His views were attacked in a brief article, whose author also quotes from undisclosed Arabic sources. S. S. George, “The Gesture of Affirmation among the Arabs,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 27.3 (July 1916): 320–23. S. S. George also attacked William Wundt, “the father of experimental psychology,” for relying on Goldziher’s observations. Indeed, there are lengthy quotations from Goldziher in Wundt’s work; at least in the small portion of it, which was translated into English. For example, Wundt states, quoting Goldziher: “There are many similar traditions of highly developed systems of sign languages on our planet. Here, particularly, the East offers us a field for observation. Among Islamic Arabs, gestural expression seems to have been a much-used aid to speech, recognized by the philosophers of that people not only as a means to assure understanding, but also as a sentient interpretation of the spoken word (the Prophet himself preferring it).” Wilhelm Wundt, *The Language of Gestures* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1973), 66. See other quotations from Goldziher, *ibid.*, 92.

³⁸ R. Marston Speight, “A Look at Variant Readings in the Ḥadīth,” *Der Islam* 77(2000): 169–79; here 175.

³⁹ Speight, “A Look at Variant Readings,” 177.

⁴⁰ R. Marston Speight, “Oral Traditions,” 27.

that retains indications of bodily gestures, that were used first by the Prophet and then by the transmitters of the material.⁴¹

The following *ḥadīth* is cited in several variations in *Kitāb al-tawḥīd* (The Book of God's Unity) by Ibn Ḥuzaymah (d. 924). The *ḥadīth* is transmitted on the authority of [ʿAbdallāh] ibn ʿUmar, (d. 693; ʿAbdallāh was a Companion of the Prophet, and also the son of ʿUmar, the second Caliph of Islam), and the text records his testimony to an event he witnessed:

One day, the Messenger of God recited the following Quranic verse, while standing on the pulpit: "But on the Day of Resurrection He will hold the entire earth in His grasp and fold up the heavens in His right hand." (Q. 39:67). The Messenger of God said: "He will move His fingers like so (*hā-kadā*). Then God will praise Himself and say: 'I am the most proud, the king, I am the most powerful and generous.' " The pulpit started to shake under the feet of the Messenger of God, until we cried in panic: "It will cause him to fall down!"⁴²

The expression "He moved his fingers like so (*hā-kadā*)" was a common rhetorical device, accompanied by a demonstration of the gesture. The gesture, I assume, was faithfully conducted by the transmitters of this tradition from generation to generation. Regrettably, the nature of this gesture is not elaborated in the text. The following example, also on the authority of ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿUmar, defined the gesture made by the Prophet more clearly:

Someone asked the Prophet on the *Dağğāl* (the Islamic equivalent of the anti-Christ). He replied: "God shall not be concealed from you. God is not one-eyed." He pointed his eye with his hand, and continued: "The Messiah the *Dağğāl* does not have a right eye. His [left] eye looks like a floating grape."⁴³

While reciting the last part of Q. 4:58 ("and God hears all and sees everything"), the Prophet put his thumb on his ear and his forefinger on his eye.⁴⁴ This case caused uneasiness among the later traditionalists. Ibn Taymiyyah, for instance, quotes this account while adding that by performing this gesture, the Prophet's

⁴¹ Several examples are quoted in: Livnat Holtzman, "Anthropomorphism," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition*, eds. Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming in 2010).

⁴² Ibn Ḥuzaymah, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 171. For similar *ḥadīths*, see: *ibid*, 166–73. The *ḥadīth* also appears in: Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* 5:59–60, 138, *ḥadīths* no. 5414, 5608.

⁴³ Ibn Ḥuzaymah, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 114. The same *ḥadīth* appears in: Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Buḥārī (d. 870), *Al-Ġāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, eds. Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Ḥaḍīb et. al. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Salafiyyah, 1980), 4:385 (*Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, *Bāb 17*, *ḥadīth* 7407). For basic information on the *Dağğāl*, see: A. Abel, "al-Dadjdjal", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, 2 (1965), 76–77. According to classical dictionaries, an eye which looks like a floating grape is prominent and conspicuous. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 5:1861.

⁴⁴ Ibn Ḥuzaymah, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 97.

intention was surely to affirm the Divine attributes of hearing and seeing, and not to compare the Creator with His creation.⁴⁵

The descriptions of the Prophet’s laughter in the Hadith literature also fall into the category of gestures accompanying the texts. I will not consider the entire bulk of *ḥadīths* describing the Prophet’s laughter in various occasions and contexts. These were meticulously treated by Ludwig Amman.⁴⁶ I will, however, consider here the texts in which the Prophet’s laughter is an illustrator of God’s laughter.

‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd, the prominent Companion and Quran exegete, who taught Hadith in Kufa, Iraq, told his disciples a lengthy *ḥadīth* on God’s meeting with the heretics and the believers on the Day of Resurrection. ‘Abdallāh of course heard this *ḥadīth* from the Prophet himself. This *ḥadīth* mentions God’s laughter, but more so: from ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd’s version it is clear that the Prophet used to accompany this specific text with laughter. A repetitive *ḥadīth*, each of its parts can be discussed and glossed in depth. Hence, I have dissected it into parts, which are divided by necessary comments. Only the important parts will be translated, while the other parts will be paraphrased. This is what ‘Abdallāh transmitted.⁴⁷

The Messenger of God said: God will gather all the nations, and then He will descend from His throne (*‘ars*) to His seat (*kursī*), which is as vast as the heavens and earth.⁴⁸ Then He will say to them: “Will you be pleased, if each nation is entrusted with what was entrusted to it in this world?” They will reply: “Yes.” And so God, to Him belong might and glory, will say: “Is this an act of justice bestowed upon you by your Lord?” And they will answer: “Yes.” And so, each nation will set out to the deity it used to worship, and various idols will then appear. An idol of the sun will be set for those who used to worship the sun. An idol of the moon will be set for those who used to worship the moon. An image of fire will be set for those who used to worship fire. Whoever worshiped another idol, shall receive his idol. Those who worshiped Jesus, shall receive an idol of Jesus. Those who worshiped Ezra [the Scribe] shall receive an

⁴⁵ Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyyah, *Šarḥ al-‘aḳīdah al-isfahāniyyah*, ed. Sa‘īd ibn Naṣr ibn Muḥammad (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ruṣd, 2001), 136.

⁴⁶ Ludwig Amman, *Vorbild und Vernunft: Die Regelung von Lachen und Scherzen im mittelalterlichen Islam*. Arabistische Texte und Studien, 5 (Hildsheim, Zürich, and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1993), 39–109; here 42–69.

⁴⁷ There are a number of versions to this lengthy *ḥadīth*. I have translated and paraphrased the *ḥadīth* as it appears in the following sources: Al-Āğurri, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 79–82; Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān ibn Ahmad al-Tabarānī (d. 971), *Al-Mu‘ğam al-kabīr*, ed. Ḥamdī ‘Abd al-Mağīd al-Salifī (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, 1984), 9: 416–21, *ḥadīth* no. 9763. I also consulted: Al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Asmā’ wa-l-sifāt*, 2: 66–70, 413, *ḥadīths* no. 641, 989; Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hādī al-arwāḥ*, 328–31. A short version appears in Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, 4:5–6, *ḥadīth* no. 3714. An annotated translation of this *ḥadīth* appeared in: Daniel Gimaret, *Dieu à l’image de l’homme* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 266–68.

⁴⁸ An allusion to Q. 2: 255: “His throne is as vast as the heavens and the earth.”

idol of Ezra.⁴⁹ Suddenly they will hear a voice: “Each nation is required to follow the deity it worshiped in this world.” And so they will be led to the Fire.⁵⁰

Then ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd enters into a very lengthy description of the dialogue between the Muslims and God:

The nation of Muḥammad will remain. They will be asked: “What are you waiting for?” And they will reply: “We have a Lord, but we have not seen Him yet.” “Would you recognize Him if you saw Him?” they will be asked by the same voice. And they will reply: “Yes, there is an agreed upon sign between us and Him.” At that point, the leg shall be bared,⁵¹ and they will immediately prostrate for a very long time, all except a group of people who will remain on their buttocks like young calves.⁵²

Those who could not prostrate are obviously Muslim hypocrites or sinners, whose faith is only a façade. Unlike other idolaters of other nations, the Muslim hypocrites are doomed to humiliation, gradually revealed in this text. This humiliation is symbolized first by mentioning the buttocks of the Muslim hypocrites. As the story continues, their buttocks are mentioned again, in the course of the walk of all humans across the *Ṣirāt* (the bridge extended over Hell), a walk which ‘Abdallāh’s story describes in great detail. First, each Muslim will be given a lamp “which is in accordance with the amount of his good deeds”: some will be given a lamp, as big and steady as a mountain. These Muslims will not have to carry the lamp, which “will run before them.” Some will hold their lamps in their right hand (an indication that they are indeed the righteous), while others will carry their lamps on their toes. While walking, these unfortunate people will cause their lamps to extinguish and light up again. At this point, the sinners or hypocrites will be left behind, when a great wall will be erected to separate them from the believers.⁵³ The group that will be left behind, will cross the very narrow and slippery *Ṣirāt*. Apparently, this bridge will be as narrow as a blade of a sword. This amusing scene probably aroused laughs among its listeners:

⁴⁹ On the role of Ezra the Scribe in the Islamic polemic against the Bible, see Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 50–59, 60–74.

⁵⁰ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 79–80; al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu‘ğam*, 9: 417.

⁵¹ The leg shall be bared is an allusion to Q. 68:42, which prophesizes the encounter between God and the non-believers on the Day of Resurrection: “Upon the day when the leg shall be bared, and they shall be summoned to bow themselves, but they cannot.” Here I quote from Arberry’s translation. Dawood evades the anthropomorphic description, and takes a figurative course: “On the day the dread event unfolds and they are told to prostrate themselves, they will not be able.”

⁵² Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 80; al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu‘ğam*, 9: 418.

⁵³ This description is an allusion to Q. 57: 13: “A wall with a gate shall be set before them. Inside there shall be mercy, and without, to the fore, the scourge of Hell.”

They will cross the *Ṣirāṭ* in complete accordance with the way they acted in this world: some will cross the *Ṣirāṭ* as fast as the wind, while other will be as quick as the lightning. Some of them will be as fast as horses. However, some will crawl on their bottoms, so that at one point their legs will tumble and their hands will suspend [their fall], and at some other point their hands will tumble and their legs will suspend [their fall].⁵⁴

This humorous description reaches its peak when a ridiculous and unfortunate Muslim, who crawled on his bottom, arrives at the gates of Heaven. A lengthy dialogue is conducted between this Muslim and God. The Muslim pleads to enter into Heaven, so he will not see and hear "the whispering of the fire," that is the voice of Hell. God lets him in, but sets the condition that this believer may not ask for anything more than entering Heaven. The believer promises, but as he enters Heaven, he wants to improve his position. First, he is given a place on a step near a tree, but as he realizes that there is a dream-house in an upper level of Heaven, he asks God to be placed in that house.

God will say: "But did you not swear to Me that you will not ask Me anything, but to enter this place?" The sinner will reply: "Please God, allow me to go to this level, and no more." Of course, when he reaches the desired house, he asks for a better one. So God will let him in that house, while the man keeps his silence. God will then say: "What is the matter with you? Why don't you ask me for something else?" The man will then reply: "My Lord, I have asked You and asked You, until I felt quite ashamed. I am also ashamed that I was not able to keep my promise." God will reply: "Would you like me to give you as many riches as the size of the earth, since the day I created until the day I destroyed it, and ten times as much?" The man will reply: "Are you mocking me, You, who is the Glorious Lord?" And God will laugh when He hears what the man says.⁵⁵

According to his disciples, when ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd concluded his words, he burst into laughter.⁵⁶ One of ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd’s disciples elaborates on this laughter:

We realized that each time ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd reached that point, he laughed until his last molar was revealed. We asked him: "You have told us this *ḥadīth* time and again, and every time you have reached this place, you laughed until your last molar

⁵⁴ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 81. In al-Ṭabarānī’s version, the ridiculous appearance of the sinners is enhanced. This elaborate version is obviously meant to draw laughter from the audience: "Some will go over [the *Ṣirāṭ*] dragging their feet. The one, who will be given a lamp to carry on his toes, will crawl on his face. His hands and feet will fall [from the *Ṣirāṭ*] and dwindle, one at a time, so his body parts will be hurt by the fire. And so he will continue crawling, until he reaches [solid ground]." al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu‘ğam*, 9: 418.

⁵⁵ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 81; al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu‘ğam*, 9: 419.

⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu‘ğam*, 9: 419.

was revealed." Ibn Mas'ūd responded: "I have witnessed the Prophet telling this *ḥadīṭ* time and again, and every time he reached this point, he laughed until his last molar was revealed."⁵⁷

After this laughter episode, Ibn Mas'ūd continued to relate the whereabouts of the sinner, who is finally led into a palace carved in a huge pearl, its walls covered with emeralds and rubies. In this palace, his virgin wife awaits him. Her skin is so fair, that the whiteness of her shanks and the redness of her veins are glowing through the seventy dresses that she wears.⁵⁸

In this slightly different version of this *ḥadīṭ*, there are more details about the laughter of 'Abdallāh ibn Mas'ūd:

Ibn Mas'ūd laughed. He then asked [the disciples]: "Why don't you ask me what am I laughing about?" They responded: "What made you laugh?" He said: "That is exactly what the Prophet did. [He told the *ḥadīṭ*] and then he laughed. Then he [i.e., the Prophet] asked: 'Why don't you ask me what am I laughing about?' [Without waiting for our reply], he [i.e., the Prophet] continued: 'I am laughing because God, to Him belong might and glory, laughed when [the sinner] asked: Are you mocking me? God responded: 'I am not mocking you, but I am omnipotent.' And He let the sinner enter Paradise."⁵⁹

The Prophet's laughter in this text, whose authenticity was attested by the traditionalists,⁶⁰ serves as an illustration of God's laughter. The Prophet actually demonstrates the way God laughs. 'Abdallāh ibn Mas'ūd, in kind, demonstrates the Prophet's laughter. From the context of the above *ḥadīṭ*, it is obvious that God's laughter is a positive expression. God is pleased that the sinner at last recognized His omnipotence by calling Him "The Glorious God." God, then, laughs as a sign of His satisfaction.

Still, 'Abdallāh ibn Mas'ūd's text is a bit cryptic, and does not specifically state the meaning of God's laughter. A different version of the *ḥadīṭ*, on the authority of Abū Hurayrah, adds a few words, which shed more light on the meaning of this laughter. The situation is slightly different: in this version, the sinner asks to enter Heaven, even though he promised God that he will ask for nothing, if God saves him from Hell:

He approached the gates of Heaven. When he saw what is inside, he kept quiet for a very long time. Then he said: "My Lord, let me enter Heaven." God replied: "Did you not claim, not to have asked Me for anything else [if I save you from Hell]? Woe unto

⁵⁷ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 82; al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu'ğam*, 9: 419.

⁵⁸ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-taṣḍīq*, 82; al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu'ğam*, 9: 420.

⁵⁹ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī'ah*, 298, *ḥadīṭ* 247.

⁶⁰ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah says: "This is a great and good (*hasan*) *ḥadīṭ*, quoted in all the important Hadith compilations." Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hādī al-arwāh*, 332.

you, human being, what made you break your promise?,” The man begged: “My Lord, do not make me the most miserable of the whole creatures You created.” He continued begging, until God laughed. Laughing in the man’s presence, He let him enter.⁶¹

The meaning of God’s laughter is, then, an expression of His mercy. Adopting this explanation, Aš‘arī scholars interpreted God’s laughter as a metaphor of God’s mercy. Still, the depiction of God laughing, no doubt lovingly, at the strayed sinner who repented, and the dialogue between the two, give the impression of God’s playfulness. No doubt God, the all-Knowing, knows the sinner’s actions in advance. However, He lets the sinner continue begging for His own amusement. Even so, the moral lesson dims the depiction of a playful God. The whole situation is meant to lead the sinner to the correct belief, which he must arrive through his own free will.

In another, more explicit text, the Prophet’s laughter serves again as an illustrator of God’s laughter. This time God’s laughter indicates astonishment, and not mercy:

The *muḥaddith* ‘Alī ibn Rabī‘ah al-Wālibī (death date unknown) told the following tale: “I was the rear man (*ridf*) riding the same camel as ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661; Muḥammad’s cousin and Companion, and the Fourth Caliph) when we arrived at the cemetery of Kufa (in Iraq). ‘Alī said: ‘There is no God but You, Praised be You. Please forgive my sins, because no one can forgive sins, but You.’ He then looked at me and laughed. I asked: ‘Oh, Commander of the Believers, You ask for God’s forgiveness and then you turn to me and laugh?’ He answered: ‘I was the rear man of the Prophet, when we rode in the stony tract of al-Ḥarraḥ [near Medina]. The Prophet then said: ‘There is no God but You, Praised be You. Please forgive my sins, because no one can forgive sins, but You.’ He then looked at the sky, then he turned to me and laughed. I asked him: ‘Oh, Messenger of God, You ask for God’s forgiveness and then you turn to me and laugh?’ And he answered: ‘I laughed because My Lord laughs, when He is astonished [to find out] that His slave knows that only God can forgive sins.’”⁶²

This “story within a story” is fascinating. The dialogue between the transmitter, ‘Alī ibn Rabī‘ah al-Wālibī, and ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, is an accurate reflection of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib’s dialogue with the Prophet. ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib was the rear man and the disciple, but later he became the front man and the master. This lovely anecdote discloses the reason for God’s laughter: He laughs out of astonishment, when

⁶¹ An interesting version of this text appears in Ibn Kaḥfīr’s (d. 1373) work on eschatology. In this version, which is quoted from al-Buḥārī, the sinner continued pleading God, “until God laughed, and while laughing He let the man into Heaven.” Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Abū al-Fidā’ Ibn Kaḥfīr, *Al-Nihāyah fī al-ḥimāh wa-l-malāḥim* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1991), 261–62. See also: al-Buḥārī, *al-Ḥamī‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 4: 204 (*Kitāb al-riqāq*, Bāb 52, *ḥadīth* 6573), 4: 390–91 (*Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, Bāb 24, *ḥadīth* 7437).

⁶² Al-Āḡurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah*, 295–96, *ḥadīth* 642. For other variations, see: *Ibid*, 296–97, *ḥadīths* 643, 644, 645. Also in: al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Asmā’ wa-l-sifāt*, 2: 404–05.

people recognize that He is the one and only benefactor, forgiving, and omnipotent.

Laughter as an indicator of astonishment was one of the theories pursued by Muslim physicians. The celebrated physician, Ishāq ibn ʿImrān (fl. in the second half of the ninth century) emphasized: “Laughter is defined as the astonishment of the soul at (observing) something that it is not in a position to understand clearly.”⁶³ The question whether astonishment can be attributed to God, the all-knower, was answered by later theologians, as will be discussed below.

Improper Laughter and the Islamic Creed

The *ḥadīths* cited previously became a part of the traditionalist dogma. A profession of faith attributed to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), the eponym of the ultra-traditionalist Ḥanbalī school, specifically states:

We believe that God sits on His throne. However, He is not confined to limitations of space. We believe that God sees and hears and talks and laughs and is joyful.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, like other anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Hadith, the *ḥadīths* describing God’s laughter were not glossed. The question, “but how exactly does God laugh?” was obliterated.⁶⁵ The basic traditionalistic approach demanded an acceptance of the contents of these and other anthropomorphic *ḥadīths*. A twelfth-century *muḥaddit* was asked by his disciples, what is the meaning of the Prophet’s saying: “Our Lord will laugh because of His servants’ despair, and because He knows that the time for Him to change things is near.” His answer was very blunt:

This *ḥadīth* is well-known. Transmitting it is a habitual practice. An attempt to discredit its content is an undesired innovation. An attempt to interpret the laughter is hypocrisy and apostasy.⁶⁶

⁶³ Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*, repr. (1956; Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishers 1976), 134. According to Amman, the concept that laughter is caused by surprise (*taʿājjub*) comes from theological discussions, and not from Greek authors. Amman, *Vorbild und Vernunft*, 14–19.

⁶⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*, 436. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal’s creed (one of six) was fully translated by: William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Creeds: A Selection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 33–40.

⁶⁵ This traditionalist approach is called *bi-lā kayfa*, that is: without asking how. Fairly a lot has been written on this approach. See, for example, R. M. Frank, “Elements in the Development of the Teaching of al-Ashʿarī,” *Le Muséon* 104 (1991): 141–90.

⁶⁶ The *muḥaddit* is Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wāḥid (d. 1149). His saying is quoted in a biographical entry dedicated to him in: Abū al-Ḥusayn Muḥammad ibn Abī Yaʿlā (d. 1132; the son of Abū Yaʿlā), *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahāʾ al-ḥanābilah*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad ʿUmar (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ṭāqāfah al-

Others, less rigid traditionalists, hinted that God’s laughter symbolizes God’s grace and good will. A ninth century *muḥaddith* promised his disciples:

Whoever says *al-ḥamdu li-llāh* (Praise be to God) five times, God looks at him. Whoever says *al-ḥamdu li-llāh* a lot, God laughs in his presence. Whoever perpetually says *al-ḥamdu li-llāh*, God orders [the angels]: write it down again and again, forever.⁶⁷

However, to inquire how this laughter is preformed was totally inappropriate. This position is stated in the words of the important traditionalist theologian al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066). As an Aṣḥarī, al-Bayhaqī’s represents a stand which combines traditionalism with rationalism:

The ancients from our school were inspired by these *ḥadīths* to awaken [in themselves and in their disciples] the ambition to do good deeds and works, and [to contemplate] on God’s grace. They were not preoccupied with interpreting God’s laughter. [This was] in conformity with their conviction that God does not possess body organs and articulators. It is impossible to describe Him as baring His teeth or opening His mouth.⁶⁸

In one of the rare remarks he penned himself, Abū Bakr al-Āğurrī determined:

I wish that God leads me and you to the right path of faith and good deeds. You should know, that the People of the True Faith describe God exactly as He describes Himself, as the Prophet describes Him and as the Companions describe Him. This is the way of the learned men. Whoever takes this path will never ask: How [does God laugh]? Rather, he will accept this and believe in this. [He will believe] that God Almighty laughs, because these are the teachings transmitted to us from the Prophet and his Companions. Whoever denies this should be condemned by the People of the True Faith.⁶⁹

In the closing part of the chapter describing God’s laughter in *Kitāb al-ṣarī āh*, al-Āğurrī writes:

These are all the textual evidence, in which we believe. We never ask: How [is it possible]? Since those who transmitted these *ḥadīths* to us, transmitted to us *ḥadīths* about the correct way to perform ablution, and the correct way to conduct prayers, and the correct way to fast etc. All the scholars deemed the entire dicta transmitted by [the Companions] reliable. So beware of he who asks: how is it possible?⁷⁰

Diniyyah 1998), 2: 92.

⁶⁷ Ibn Abī Ya’lā, *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā’ al-ḥanābilah*, 1: 506.

⁶⁸ Al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Asmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt*, 2: 414.

⁶⁹ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī āh*, 292.

⁷⁰ Al-Āğurrī, *Kitāb al-ṣarī āh*, 299.

All the traditionalists were actually referring to the same Hadith material, in which the Prophet's laughter illustrating God's laughter is mentioned. None of the above *ḥadīths* provided any details about God's laughter. However, there were extraordinary *ḥadīths* that took the description of God's laughter a step further. The eleventh century Ḥanbalī theologian Abū Yaʿlā (d. 1066) wrote a treatise on God's attributes, in which he quoted a cluster of *ḥadīths*. Among these *ḥadīths* appears the following version, quoting the Prophet's companion Ġābir ibn ʿAbdallāh (d. ca. 695):

I heard the Messenger of God saying: "On the Day of Resurrection my community will arrive at a hill, placed above all the other nations. Each nation in its turn will be given its idols. Then our Lord will come to us by foot, and say [to the believers]: 'What are you waiting for?' And they will say: 'We are waiting for our Lord.' He shall respond: 'I am your Lord.' They will say: 'If only we could see you!' And then He shall be revealed to them laughing to such an extent that His uvula is seen. After that, they will start following Him."⁷¹

In another version, also quoting Ġābir, the Prophet promises that God will laugh until His uvula and molars are revealed to the Muslims.⁷² The meaning of this laughter is rather perplexing. From the parallel *ḥadīths* describing the same situation, which were quoted above, the laughter of God is a sign of His grace and benevolence, or a sign of His astonishment. However, a laughter which reveals molars like the one attributed to God in the *ḥadīth* quoted by Abū Yaʿlā, has undoubtedly intimidating connotations in Arabic literature. "The war reveals its molars, while the blood of both parties is being shed," and: "The most evil of men laughs while revealing his molars when he sees me" are two examples from Pre-Islamic poetry (from before the seventh century), which indicate that a laughter which reveals molars is ominous.⁷³

The text cited by Abū Yaʿlā conveys an atmosphere of horror, which to some extent contradicts the intended message of this *ḥadīth*. Also, the description of God's laughter in this *ḥadīth* seems to be rather peculiar. Still, Abū Yaʿlā saw it as his duty

⁷¹ Abū Yaʿlā Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Farrāʾ, *Ibtāl al-taʿwīlāt li-ahbār al-sifāt*, ed. Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn Ḥamd al-Ḥamūd al-Naġdī (Kuwait: Maktabat Dār al-Imām al-Dahabī, 1989), 213, 218. The text specifically emphasizes that God has *lahawāt* (uvulae, in the plural).

⁷² Abū Yaʿlā, *Ibtāl al-taʿwīlāt*, 214.

⁷³ These citations are taken from two *qaṣīdahs* (odes), written by two Pre-Islamic poets. The odes appear in one of the most important anthologies of classical Arabic poetry, compiled by the Kufan philologist, al-Mufaḍḍal al-Dabbī (d. ca. 784). Al-Mufaḍḍal ibn Muḥammad al-Dabbī, *Al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, ed. Ahmad Muḥammad Šakir and ʿAbd al-Salām Ḥārūn, 3rd ed. (1942; Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1964), 282 (*qaṣīdah* 74, verse 12), 294 (*qaṣīdah* 77, verse 9). The *Mufaḍḍaliyyāt* were translated to English: Mufaḍḍal al-Dabbī, *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, ed. and trans. Charles James Lyall. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918–1921).

to cite this extraordinary text, because he never doubted the authenticity of this *ḥadīth*. However, elsewhere in his treatise he explained that a literal reading should be applied to this text, without any attempt to interpret it. After citing the *ḥadīth*, he states:

We do not assert [that God has] a laughter which includes the opening of the mouth, and grinning while showing the teeth. We do not assert [that God has] molars and uvula, which are body organs and parts. What we assert is an attribute, even though we do not grasp its meaning. It is precisely the same as we assert [that God has] face and hands; that He hears and sees.⁷⁴

Abū Ya‘lā, then, took three approaches to the text: the first approach is to interpret the molars and uvula literally, meaning God indeed has a mouth with molars and uvula; the second approach is to admit that we do not know the meaning of these body parts, and that we will never attempt to depict them; the third approach is to crown the molars and uvula as God’s attributes. However, Abū Ya‘lā called for both a literal understanding of the anthropomorphic texts and for ignoring the problematic passages. He offered a reading technique which did not interfere with the content of the texts, as much as it did not inquire about the meaning of the texts. An acceptance combined with a certain degree of ignorance is Abū Ya‘lā’s stance.

Elsewhere, Abū Ya‘lā rejected the possibility of a figurative reading, meaning he could not interpret God’s laughter as God’s benevolence, and explained:

This possibility should be rejected, because the text states: ‘He will be revealed to them laughing to such an extent that His molars and uvula are seen.’⁷⁵

The mention of the molars and uvula serves as textual evidence for Abū Ya‘lā, that the laughter is not a metaphor of benevolence. If we continue his train of argumentation, we can say that since benevolence does not have molars and uvula, the laughter is laughter *per se*.

Abū Ya‘lā seemed to be walking on solid ground regarding the peculiar text on God’s uvula and molars. However, his argumentation was not solid, because unlike the other *ḥadīths* describing God’s laughter, the *ḥadīth* that describes the laughter which reveals molars and uvula was considered “feeble” (*ḍā‘if*) by the scholars of Hadīth, not because of its content, but because of a flaw in its chain of transmitters. This designation means that the authenticity of this text and its attribution to either the Prophet or one of his disciples is dubious.⁷⁶ On these

⁷⁴ Abū Ya‘lā, *Ibtāl al-ta‘wīlāt*, 218.

⁷⁵ Abū Ya‘lā, *Ibtāl al-ta‘wīlāt*, 219.

⁷⁶ On the traditional Hadīth criticism and the techniques of examining a *ḥadīth*’s authenticity, see: Siddiqi, *Hadīth Literature*, 107–16.

grounds, Abū Yaʿlā was attacked by the thirteenth century traditionalist Ḥanbalī theologian, Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 1201).

Merlin Swartz described Ibn al-Ġawzī's attack on Abū Yaʿlā in a comprehensive introduction to Swartz's annotated translation of one of Ibn al-Ġawzī's treatises on divine attributes.⁷⁷ Daniel Gimaret also discussed Ibn al-Ġawzī's attack in his book on anthropomorphism in Islamic traditionalism.⁷⁸ Both Swartz and Gimaret knew of Abū Yaʿlā's position only from the citations of his antagonist Ibn al-Ġawzī. The following is a summary of Ibn al-Ġawzī's argumentations against Abū Yaʿlā, which offers a new angle to Ibn al-Ġawzī's position.

Ibn al-Ġawzī was a Ḥanbalī theologian and preacher, but he was also an exponent of figurative interpretation of the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Quran and Hadith. In that sense, he was closer to the Aṣʿarī school than to his own school. Apart from his hermeneutical agenda, he was concerned by the reputation of the Ḥanbalī school as a group of ignorant anthropomorphists. Ibn al-Ġawzī targeted three prominent Ḥanbalī scholars, among whom was Abū Yaʿlā, who "wrote books in which they disgraced this school."⁷⁹ To this end, he composed his treatise *al-Bāz al-aṣḥab al-munqadd ʿalā muḥālifī al-madhab* (The Gray Falcon Which Attacks the Offenders of the [Ḥanbalī] School),⁸⁰ in which he condemned the blunt unsophisticated reading of the texts, which these scholars offered:

They believed that He has a form and a face in addition to His Self. They believed that He has two eyes, a mouth, a uvula and molars, a face which is light and splendor, two hands, including the palms of hands, fingers including the little fingers and the thumbs, a back, and two legs divided into thighs and shanks.⁸¹

According to Ibn al-Ġawzī, the literal approach taken by these three scholars lowered them to the ranks of commoners. Moreover, the blunt anthropomorphic message they conveyed in their sermons attracted a considerable number of commoners, who followed these scholars and their teachings.⁸² As a preacher, Ibn al-Ġawzī was concerned with the low standards of popular preachers, who used

⁷⁷ Merlin L. Swartz, *A Medieval Critique of Anthropomorphism: Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb Akhbār as-Sifāt*. Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science, 46 (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne: Brill, 2002), 46–64.

⁷⁸ Gimaret, *Dieu à l'image de l'homme*, 53–57.

⁷⁹ These three were: Abū ʿAbdallāh ibn Ḥāmid (d. 1012), "his friend," the Qādī Abū Yaʿlā and Ibn al-Zāgūnī (d. 1132). Swartz, *A Medieval Critique*, 135–36, fns. 235–36, elaborates on them.

⁸⁰ Abū al-Faraġ ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Ġawzī, *al-Bāz al-aṣḥab al-munqadd ʿalā muḥālifī al-madhab*, ed. Muḥammad Munīr al-Imām, (Beirut: Dār al-Ġinān 1987). This title is also known as *Daf ʿṣubah al-taṣbīh bi-akaff al-tanzīh*. *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab* resembles Ibn al-Ġawzī's *Kitāb aḥbār al-sifāt*. Although Swartz did a commendable job in publishing the Unicom manuscript of *Kitāb aḥbār al-sifāt*, I preferred to use the Arabic text of *al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, and the translations of this text are mine.

⁸¹ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 34.

⁸² Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 34.

pseudo-*hadīts* or unauthenticated *hadīts* in their sermons. Ibn al-Ġawzī was well-aware of a number of dangers awaiting the preacher: the oral nature of the Hadith literature combined with the exciting atmosphere of a sermon, can easily lead the preacher to say things which do not exactly appear in the Prophetic dicta. Thus, Ibn al-Ġawzī attacked those three prominent Ḥanbalī scholars and preachers for using questionable *hadīts*, and giving the same weight to *hadīts* which were regarded as the most authentic and reliable and to those *hadīts* whose reliability and authenticity were dubious.⁸³ A reckless use of the Hadith material eventually led these scholars to add more descriptions and attributes to God.⁸⁴

In another treatise, which discusses the low standards of preachers and storytellers, Ibn al-Ġawzī was forthright against preaching about God’s attributes and other metaphysical issues to the masses:

It is not suitable for the preacher to discourse on matters relating to theology except to say that the Quran is the uncreated word of God and that the expressions relating to the attributes of God should be allowed to pass just as they were revealed. No matter what may occur to mind with respect to the attributes of God, that He is like such and such, He is, in fact, different “for there is nothing like Him.” It is a well-known fact that the learned men themselves find it impossible to establish a firm position on these matters ... How then can common untutored folk do so since all they ever hear are vain disputations and false doctrines?⁸⁵

Ibn al-Ġawzī’s had a fascinating explanation for the use of anthropomorphic language in the Quran and the Hadith. Rooted in the Islamic tradition of recording and reconstructing the history of ancient heresies, Ibn al-Ġawzī explained that the Prophet needed time in order to introduce the One transcendent God to people who were used to worship material idols. The Prophet had to use an anthropomorphic language when describing God to the new converts to Islam. For example, when they asked him: “Describe Our Lord to us,” the following verse descended from the sky: “Say: God is One.” (Q. 112:1). Ibn al-Ġawzī continues:

Had the Prophet answered, that God is not a body, nor an atom, nor an accident; not tall, not wide, is not in any place, has no dimension, does not move and does not stay . . . they would probably reply: You ask us to worship a void.⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 36–37.

⁸⁴ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 36–37.

⁸⁵ Merlin L. Swartz, *Ibn al-Jawzī’s Kitāb al-Qusṣās wa’l-Mudhakkirīn* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq Éditeurs 1969), 227–28. The above cited text was translated by Swartz. I deleted the transliterated Arabic text, which originally appears in parentheses.

⁸⁶ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 38.

That is why, says Ibn al-Ġawzī, the Prophet answered in the affirmative, when he was asked: “Does God really laugh?”⁸⁷

On the one hand, Ibn al-Ġawzī suggests that the preachers will avoid introducing the anthropomorphic *ḥadīths* to the masses. On the other hand, the scholars must study these *ḥadīths*, using the strictest standards of evaluating the material at hand. For example, the *ḥadīth* “He laughed until His molars and uvula were revealed,” has a flaw in its chain of transmitters, and therefore cannot be considered the most authentic piece of evidence a theologian uses. Furthermore, there is evidence that even Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal himself, the eponym of the Ḥanbalī school, labeled this particular *ḥadīth* as “ugly and offensive.”⁸⁸

Ibn al-Ġawzī then develops two solutions to read the problematic *ḥadīth*. The first solution takes into consideration the way this *ḥadīth* was transmitted by the Prophet. The laughter which reveals molars and uvula is actually the Prophet’s and not God’s. The second solution is to apply figurative interpretation to the text:

... there are two possibilities [to read the text]: the first one, is that the description ‘he laughed until his molars and uvula were revealed’ is attributed to the Prophet, as if he laughed when he reported on God’s laughter. The second possibility is that this is a metaphorical laughter, denoting that God’s kindness is abundant, and His satisfaction is wide.⁸⁹

Ibn al-Ġawzī, then, points out the connection between God’s laughter and the Prophet’s laughter: while transmitting the text describing God’s laughter, the Prophet’s laughter served as an illustrator of this divine laughter. While God’s laughter is metaphorical, denoting His grace and benevolence, the Prophet’s laughter is human and physical:

Laughter which seizes humans is involved in the opening of the mouth. This is inconceivable when ascribed to God. The word ‘laughter’ must be in accordance to the way God reveals His kindness and grace. So, [when the Prophet says]: “I laughed because of my Lord’s laughter,” that means: “I revealed my teeth by opening my mouth, because He revealed His kindness and grace.”⁹⁰

Underneath this sophisticated explanation lies the basic fact, that the Prophet mimics God’s laughter, or demonstrates God’s laughter by his own laughter. This physical gesture is equivalent to comparing God’s laughter to the Prophet’s laughter. But that seems to be acceptable by Ibn al-Ġawzī. The most important thing for him is to figuratively interpret God’s laughter as God’s grace.

⁸⁷ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 38.

⁸⁸ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 90.

⁸⁹ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 90.

⁹⁰ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 89–90.

Completing his attack on Abū Ya‘lā, Ibn al-Ġawzī expresses his disappointment of Abū Ya‘lā’s literal reading, but more so of Abū Ya‘lā’s use of a *ḥadīth* of a dubious source: “By God, even if these *ḥadīths* on the molars were in the two most reliable Hadith compilations, the *Ṣaḥīḥān*, they would have to be rejected, and all the more so because these texts were not substantiated.”⁹¹ And he concludes: “Whoever confirms that God has molars as a divine attribute, has absolutely no knowledge of Islam.”⁹² Ibn al-Ġawzī, then, calls for both a figurative reading of the anthropomorphic texts, and ignoring the texts with the vulgar descriptions of God, such as the description of the laughter which reveals the uvula and molars.

Laughter and Ethos

Stepping aside from the theological implications of the *ḥadīths* describing God’s laughter, we must bear in mind that even the description of the Prophet laughing was not taken for granted. Laughter was considered a problematic human feature, indicating loss of control.⁹³ Numerous textual proofs indicate that the traditionalists were characterized by their aversion to laughter and lightheadedness.⁹⁴ Their idea of pious and solemn behavior did not correspond with the description of the Prophet’s laughter, which reveals molars. Still, they could not ignore the Hadith material which attributed laughter to the Prophet and to God. In order to settle this apparent contradiction with their worldview, the traditionalists had to rationalize the Prophet’s laughter, applying their hermeneutics principles to the *ḥadīths* in question.

As a matter of fact, there are two opposing trends in the Hadith literature: the Prophet laughs; the Prophet does not laugh. These opposing claims can be found even in one text. One such example appears in the encyclopedia for the educated, authored by the Andalusian scholar Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi (d. 940). In a chapter describing the Prophet, which is based on Hadith material, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi

⁹¹ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 91. *Al-Ṣaḥīḥān*, meaning the two sound Hadith collections, were compiled by Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Buḥārī (d. 870) and Muslim ibn al-Ḥaġġāġ (d. 875). See: Siddiqi, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 53–60.

⁹² Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Al-Bāz al-aṣḥab*, 91.

⁹³ ‘Alī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 850) described in his medical encyclopedia: “[L]aughter is (the result of) the boiling of the natural blood (which happens) when a human being sees or hears something that diverts him and thus startles and moves him. If he then does not employ his ability to think in connection with it, he is seized by laughter.” Ibn Rabban continues with a reference to the definition of man as a laughing animal. Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*, 133.

⁹⁴ Christopher Melchert, “The Piety of the Hadith Folk,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34.3 (Aug. 2002): 425–39; here 428.

claims that the Prophet “did not laugh, but smiled.”⁹⁵ In a chapter discussing laughter, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi states that “the Prophet used to laugh until his molars were revealed.”⁹⁶ This statement is also based on Hadith literature. Since Ludwig Amman thoroughly treated the Hadith material describing the Prophet’s laughter and absence of laughter,⁹⁷ I will not repeat Amman’s findings, but rather provide two illuminating examples from one of Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah’s works, *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā fi aġwibat al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā* (Guiding the Bewildered, on Responses to the Jews and the Christians).

Hidāyat al-ḥayārā is one of the renowned works in the field of the Islamic polemic with the Jews and the Christians. In this work, Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah detects textual hints in the Bible, predicting Muḥammad’s arrival and attesting the veracity of his prophecy. Among the textual proofs which Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah presents, the following are two texts: one claims that the Prophet never laughed, while the other claims that he did laugh.

The first text is found the verses in the Book of Isaiah, which according to Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, refer to the Prophet Muḥammad. This is Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah’s reading of Isaiah, 42:1–2:

Behold My Servant, whom I uphold, Mine Elect, in whom My soul delighteth: I have put My Spirit upon him; he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He will not laugh, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.⁹⁸

Evidently, Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah read these verses as a prophecy predicting the arrival of Muḥammad, who is characterized in this text by not laughing and keeping his voice low. Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah did not read Hebrew, and it is unclear which Arabic translation or translations of the Bible he used.⁹⁹ His

⁹⁵ Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi, *Al-Īqd al-farīd*, ed. ‘Abd al-Maġīd al-Tarḥīnī, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah 1983), 5: 4.

⁹⁶ Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi, *Al-Īqd al-farīd*, 8: 91.

⁹⁷ Amman, *Vorbild und Vernunft*, 42–69

⁹⁸ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā fi aġwibat al-yahūd wa-l-naṣārā*, ed. ‘Utmān Ġum‘ah Dumayriyyah (Mecca: Dār ‘Ālim al-Fawā’id li-l-Naṣr wa-l-Tawzī’, 2008), 174. For the polemical use made by Muslim scholars of verses from the Book of Isaiah, viewing these verses as a description of Muḥammad, see Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 75–110. The first verses of chapter 42 in the book of Isaiah, according to Lazarus-Yafeh, inspired a *ḥadīth*, which states that the Bible prophesized, that Muḥammad “will be neither harsh nor coarse nor will he raise his voice in the market streets.” Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 78. On the same *ḥadīth*, see: Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press 1995), 30–35.

⁹⁹ Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah’s primary source for Biblical references is Samaw’al al-Maġribī, a Jewish convert to Islam (d. 1175). However, Samaw’al’s book does not contain a reference to Isaiah 42:1–2. Samaw’al al-Maġribī, *Iḥnām al-yahūd: Silencing the Jews*, ed. Moshe Perlmann (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1964). See also: Moshe Perlmann, “Ibn Qayyim and Samau’al al-Maġribī,” *Journal of Jewish Bibliography* 3 (1942): 71–74. The problem of the Arabic translations of

quotation of Isaiah 42:1–2 in fact reflects a misreading of the Hebrew source, which states: “He will not cry (*lō yisʿāq*),” and not: “He will not laugh.” However, in the Arabic translation that Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah quoted, the Hebrew phrase *lō yisʿāq* is translated to the Arabic *lā yadhku*, meaning “He will not laugh.”¹⁰⁰ This mistranslation can be explained by the phonetic similarity between the Hebrew verbs *yisʿāq* (will cry, will shout) and *yisʿhaq* (will laugh), because the consonants *ʿayn* (in Arabic also *ʿayn*) and *het* (in Arabic *hāʾ*) are pharyngeal. All the same, the Arabic translation of Isaiah 42:1–2, on which Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah based his interpretation, is wrong.¹⁰¹

According to Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, the description of the servant of God who allegedly “will not laugh” alludes to Muḥammad: “The phrase ‘shall not laugh’ corresponds with the Prophet’s description. According to ʿĀʾišah (d. 678; Muḥammad’s beloved wife and a *muḥaddithah*, i.e., a *ḥadīth*-transmitter in her own right), the Prophet was never seen laughing until his uvula was revealed. He was always seen smiling.”¹⁰² ʿĀʾišah’s view reflected the conventional depiction of the Prophet as solemn and self-restraint. As Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah explains: “That

the Bible is discussed by Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 111–129. Lazarus-Yafeh dedicates a place in the discussion to Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah’s knowledge of the Bible. Ibid, 126. For a discussion of the knowledge which Muslim scholars until the thirteenth century had of the Hebrew Bible, see Ibid, 75ff. Lazarus-Yafeh determines that Muslim scholars used only specific lists of Biblical verses. The Muslim scholars combined “purported Biblical quotations” with “an almost literal translation of Biblical verse.” Ibid, 78. For an excellent discussion on a Qurʾān commentator who was very well-read in the Bible, see: Walid Saleh, “‘Sublime in Its Style, Exquisite in Its Tenderness’: the Hebrew Bible Quotations in al-Biqāʾī’s Qurʾān Commentary,” *Adaptations and Innovations: Studies on the Interaction between Jewish and Islamic Thought and Literature from the Early Middle Ages to the Late Twentieth Century, Dedicated to Professor Joel L. Kraemer*, ed. Y. Tzvi Langermann and Josef Stern (Paris, Louvain, and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007), 331–47.

¹⁰⁰ An identical quotation of Isaiah 42:1–2 appears in the book about the Biblical predictions on Muḥammad’s prophetic mission by the Arab scholar of Sicilian origin, Ibn Zafar (d. ca. 1171). Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Zafar al-Siqillī, *Ḥayr al-biṣār bi-ḥayr al-baṣār*, eds. Laṭīfah Šūkrī and Ḥadiġah Abūrī (Rabat: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Abḥāt wa-l-Ḥyāʾ ai-Turāt, 2008), 99. However, it is not clear whether Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah knew Ibn Zafar’s work. It is noteworthy, that although Lazarus-Yafeh quoted *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā* and *Ḥayr al-biṣār* extensively, she did not mention the “misreading” of Ibn Zafar and Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah.

¹⁰¹ The roots *d-h-k* (laugh, in Arabic), *ṣ-h-q* and *s-h-q* (laugh, in Hebrew) are actually variants. Edward Lipinski, *Semitic Languages Outline of a Comparative Grammar*. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta ,80 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 2001), 111–12.

¹⁰² Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā*, 131. See also: ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 797), *Al-Zuhd wa-l-raqāʾiq*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd (Riyadh: Dār al-Miʿrāġ al-Dawliyyah li-l-Naṣr 1995), 265; Muḥammad ibn Yusūf al-Šāmī, (d. 1535), *Subul al-ḥudā wa-l-raṣād fi sīrat ḥayr al-ʿibād*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Wāḥid (Cairo: Laġnat l-Ḥyāʾ al-Turāt al-Islāmī 1997), 7: 191–95.

is because laughing a lot is a result of lightheadedness and stupidity, whereas smiling is an indication of good and intelligent behavior."¹⁰³

Nevertheless, Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah is forced to admit that in the books of the ancients (by which he means the Hadith literature, but perhaps in addition the Judeo-Christian scriptures), there is a reference to the Prophet as "He, the frequent Laughter and the Slayer" (*al-dahūk al-qattāl*).¹⁰⁴ According to Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, the combination of these two epithets means that the Prophet's good nature did not prevent him from being an instrument of punishment in the hands of God. Likewise, his being an instrument of punishment did not cause him to lose his good nature. All the same, the Prophet did not laugh a lot, but acted as was appropriate according to the circumstances. His laughter, claims Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, was an outcome of a well-balanced behavior (*i'tidāl*).¹⁰⁵

Following this line of argumentation, it was easier to accept the *hadīts* which describe the Prophet's laughter. In the traditionalist circles, which perceived laughter as inappropriate, argumentations for the Prophet's laughter paved the way for an acceptance of this human conduct.

A Hermeneutical Approach to God's Laughter

The Prophet's laughter as described in the eschatological *hadīts* is, then, a reflection of God's laughter. The traditionalists needed to extensively process the Hadith material to determine that laughter can be used as an appropriate attribute of God. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), a prominent theologian and jurist—and the mentor of Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah—discussed this issue in one of his theological *responsa*.

Indeed there were several theological attempts which preceded Ibn Taymiyyah's endeavor to explain God's laughter. One such plausible attempt was Abū Sulaymān al-Hattābī (d. 996 or 998). Al-Hattābī claimed that it is impossible to attribute laughter to God, because it is well-known that laughter in humans is caused by pleasure and joy. Therefore, al-Hattābī's suggestion was to see God's laughter in the *hadīts* as a metaphor to the astonishment He arouses in the hearts

¹⁰³ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā*, 131.

¹⁰⁴ There were a lot of speculations on the meaning of the epithet *al-dahūk*. In a *hadīt* on the authority of the Prophet's Companion, Ibn 'Abbās (d. 687), the Prophet's name in the Torah is *Aḥmad al-dahūk*. The traditionalist al-Daḥḥāk (d. 828) connects the name *al-dahūk* with the Prophet's laughter. In an attempt to settle the contradiction between the claim that the Prophet did not laugh, and the *hadīts* claiming that he did, al-Daḥḥāk suggests that the adjective *al-dahūk* means that the Prophet almost always smiled, but laughed until his molars were revealed. Al-Šāmī, *Subul al-hudā*, 1:598; 7:195–97. See also a discussion in Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 88.

¹⁰⁵ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā*, 131. See also, Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 36.

of humans, “so that when they see Him, He makes them laugh.”¹⁰⁶ Before al-Ḥaṭṭābī, Ibn Qutaybah (d. 889) argued that human laughter is caused by astonishment. God’s laughter and astonishment should, therefore, be interpreted not necessarily as God laughing, but as God causing laughter and astonishment in everyone who hears Him.¹⁰⁷

However, Ibn Taymiyyah’s well-argued discussion on God’s laughter intended to break any link between human psychology and God’s actions. He did not wish to retreat to the recourse of figurative interpretation, but to argue that God indeed laughs. To the best of my knowledge, Ibn Taymiyyah’s treatment of God’s laughter has not yet received any attention in modern scholarship.

Ibn Taymiyyah was the spokesman of Islamic traditionalism, but at the same time he used rationalistic arguments to corroborate his traditionalistic world view.¹⁰⁸ In other words, he unequivocally supported the traditionalistic notion of affirming God’s attributes without comparing Him to His creation. In order to do so, Ibn Taymiyyah mounted his rational arguments on the basis of an advanced hermeneutical reading in the Quran and Hadith. Also, he never hesitated to use purely rational arguments, relying on human reason and not necessarily on the scriptures. In fact, in numerous cases Ibn Taymiyyah used the formula “as proves the Quran, Sunna (i.e., Hadith) and human reason.”¹⁰⁹ Ibn Taymiyyah argued that in spite of their common names (living, knowing, hearing, seeing etc.), the divine attributes do not resemble the human attributes.¹¹⁰

As part of his description of the divine attributes, Ibn Taymiyyah also addressed the theological implications of the descriptions of God’s laughter in the Hadith. This discussion was ignited by an elaborate question referred to Ibn Taymiyyah by an anonymous believer, who could be either an actual person, or a literary device which Ibn Taymiyyah used in order to delve into the subject.¹¹¹

The anonymous believer, who seems to be well-versed in Islamic speculative theology (*kalām*) states at the beginning of his question that a consensual premise

¹⁰⁶ Al-Ḥaṭṭābī’s view is cited in al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Asmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt*, 2: 401–02.

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Qutaybah, *Ta’wīl muḥṭalaf al-ḥadīth* (Cairo: Maktabat Zaydān al-‘Umūmiyyah 1925), 266–67. Amman also discussed Ibn Qutaybah’s view. Amman, *Vorbild und Vernunft*, 24–25.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example: Wael B. Hallaq, “Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of God,” *Acta Orientalia* 52 (1991): 49–69.

¹⁰⁹ For example: Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah, *Minhāğal-sunnah al-nabawiyyah*, ed. Muḥammad Rašād Sālim (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, 1986), 5: 99.

¹¹⁰ Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism*. Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science, 73 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 50–51.

¹¹¹ Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah, *Mağmū’at al-fatāwā*, eds. ‘Āmir al-Ğazzār and Anwar al-Bāz (Al-Mansura- Riyadh: Dār al-Wafā’ li-l-ṭibā’ah wa-l-Naṣr wa-l-Tawzī’ and Maktabat al-‘Abikān, 1998), 6: 43–84. Ibn Taymiyyah’s response is also known as “al-Akmaliyyah” (lit. the epistle of God’s attributes of perfection). Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 62–63.

in Islamic theology determines, that it is obligatory to ascribe to God only attributes connoting perfection (*ṣifāt kamāl*), a term which the anonymous believer does not define. He then describes at length a controversy about God's attributes among the different trends in Islam. While the traditionalists, to which he refers as "The People of the Tradition" (*ahl al-sunnah*), affirm the existence of a variety of divine attributes, other trends- like the rationalist Mu'tazilah,¹¹² tend to negate the majority of these attributes by using rationalistic arguments.

The anonymous believer then lists the divine attributes, whose origins are from the Quran, but mostly from the Hadith literature, which "the People of Tradition" affirm: hearing, seeing, life, power, knowledge and speech. Attributes connoting actions are also included in this list: descending, sitting and laughing (*dahk*).¹¹³ However, some of these attributes were rejected by the rationalists, because these attributes implied that God was not perfect. For example, the rationalists negated the existence of love (*mahabbah*) in God, "because love indicates a relationship between the lover and his loved one, but this kind of a relationship between God and His creation indicates imperfection (*naqs*)."¹¹⁴ These thinkers, continues the anonymous believer, also deny the existence of anger (*ḡadab*) and laughter (*dahk*) in God, "because anger indicates that the blood of the heart is boiling, as it seeks revenge. Similarly they deny God's laughter and astonishment, because laughter indicates lightheadedness. [Laughter] happens when something happy just occurs, and when something damaging is driven away."¹¹⁵

The anonymous believer is therefore perplexed, and seeks an answer to the question: what can be defined as attributes of perfection?

Ibn Taymiyyah's more than forty pages response (in the printed edition) begins by establishing two premises. The first premise is that perfection, which in God's case "arrives at the maximum limit of perfection and completeness," is stable and permanent in God. Since God's perfection is permanent, this negates the possibility of imperfection in God's essence.¹¹⁶ This perfection is described in various Quranic verses. For example, "He is God, God is One, the Everlasting

¹¹² For the best discussion on the Mu'tazilah and their approach toward God's attributes, see Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 4:361-424. Also recommended is: Josef van Ess, "Tashbih wa-Tanzih," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Second Edition, 10 (2000), 341-44.

¹¹³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maḡmū'at al-fatāwā*, 6:43.

¹¹⁴ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maḡmū'at al-fatāwā*, 6:43.

¹¹⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maḡmū'at al-fatāwā*, 6:44.

¹¹⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maḡmū'at al-fatāwā*, 6:44.

Refuge” (Q. 112:1-2).¹¹⁷ The expression “everlasting refuge” can be attributed only to He, who is worthy of being described as perfect.¹¹⁸

The second premise is that perfection cannot contain imperfection. Here Ibn Taymiyyah explains, that deducing from our world that God is this and that, is a mistake, because what we consider as perfection, cannot be applied to God. Furthermore, what we consider as imperfection actually defines perfection in God. Ibn Taymiyyah provides only one example to illustrate his point:

If we use the correct terminology, we can say that perfection is that, which does not contain imperfection. If we use the [incorrect] terminology of those who consider what is not imperfect as imperfect, [we can say] that perfection is that, which does not contain a specific traceable imperfection. In other words, one should be extremely careful when describing what is considered perfect in some creatures and imperfect in others. In any case, [there are traits that are] considered imperfect when attributed to God. For example, eating and drinking. The healthy living creature wants to eat and drink, and hence it is more perfect (*akmal*) than the sick creature, who does not wish to eat and drink, because the healthy constitution of the healthy creature depends on his eating and drinking. [The actions] which a creature, who is not entitled to be considered perfect, is capable of doing, are considered imperfect when attributed to the One, Who is perfect. Moreover, the actions [of eating and drinking] obligate that the eating and drinking creature is in constant need of something other than itself, that is, the food and drink that enter its body. This creature also requires that excrement exits its body. Therefore, whoever does not need anything to enter his body, is more perfect than whoever needs such activity. He, whose ‘perfection’ depends on something else than himself, is imperfect when compared to He, whose perfection does not depend on anything other than Himself. And so, what is considered to be perfect for the creatures is considered imperfect for the Creator.¹¹⁹

In sum, Ibn Taymiyyah establishes that there are some actions and attributes which are considered perfect for creatures, and cannot be applied to God or be attributed to Him, since His perfection makes those actions and attributes unnecessary for Him. Of course, continues Ibn Taymiyyah, there are attributes denoting perfection. These attributes are life, knowledge, power, hearing, seeing and speech.¹²⁰

Ibn Taymiyyah then describes other attributes of God that can be interpreted as imperfect. As the anonymous believer defined earlier, anger and laughter – when connected to human psychology – are considered “imperfect” attributes. Thus, these attributes may indicate a quality of neediness in God, which is unacceptable.

¹¹⁷ This is Arberry’s translation.

¹¹⁸ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū’āt al-fatāwā*, 6:45.

¹¹⁹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū’āt al-fatāwā*, 6: 53–54. See a summary of this passage in Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 65.

¹²⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū’āt al-fatāwā*, 6: 54.

Here Ibn Taymiyyah strives to show the perfection in these attributes, but only when ascribed to God.

Whoever acts without being tired is more perfect than whoever acts and eventually gets tired. God created the heaven and earth and what lies between them in six days, without being afflicted by tiredness. On the same level, the Lord has the attribute of knowledge rather than the attribute of ignorance. He has the attribute of potency rather than the attribute of impotency. He has the attribute of life rather than the attribute of death. He has the attributes of hearing, seeing and talking rather than the attributes of deafness, blindness, and dumbness. He has the attribute of laughing rather than the attribute of crying. He has the attribute of joy rather than the attribute of sadness. And as for anger, when this is combined with satisfaction, and hate is combined with love, then it is more perfect than [the state of] the creature who has only love and satisfaction [in his heart], and is incapable of being angry and of hating the reprehensible things which should be hated and condemned.¹²¹

Ibn Taymiyyah's concept of God is a God who both loves and also is full of fury and hatred of various abominations, even directed to people He Himself created. This is in complete accord with the Quranic message. Further on, Ibn Taymiyyah discusses laughter, when attributed to God. His goal is to prove, by using both rationalistic and textual evidence, that laughter is no less an attribute of perfection when ascribed to God.

Ibn Taymiyyah first determines that it is not correct to consider laughter as an indication of lightheadedness. He explains that when we laugh at something which is inappropriate to laugh at, then indeed the laughter is associated with lightheadedness, and thus is considered a reprehensible attribute. However, laughter "in its appropriate place" is a praiseworthy quality, which indicates perfection. Furthermore, if we take two living creatures, one of whom laughs at whatever is appropriate to laugh, and the other does not laugh at all, it is clear that the individual who laughs "is more perfect" (*akmal*) than the other.¹²²

As an example of an appropriate laughter, Ibn Taymiyyah quotes the *hadīth*, in which Abū Razīn asked the Prophet: "Does God really laugh?" According to Ibn Taymiyyah's systematic way of argumentation, the textual evidence is the ultimate proof. However, Ibn Taymiyyah is willing to give more evidence to demonstrate the good qualities in laughter, and more so, to prove that a laughing individual is a superior being. He points as the ideal of healthy life, the Bedouin Arab, who is considered, from as early as the times of the Prophet Muḥammad, to be living in

¹²¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū'at al-fatāwā*, 6: 57. The same idea appears in a brief passage in an epistle entitled "Al-Tadmuriyyah," which Hoover summarizes. However, in al-Tadmuriyyah, Ibn Taymiyya does not elaborate on laughter. Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū'at al-fatāwā*, 3: 54; Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy*, 64.

¹²² Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū'at al-fatāwā*, 6: 71.

the purest and most natural way that God created his creatures. The Bedouin Arab, says Ibn Taymiyyah, sees his laughter as an indication of his good conduct and good nature. Laughter, he continues, is one of the attributes of perfection (*sifāt kamāl*). A gloomy person, who never laughs, should be condemned.¹²³

Ibn Taymiyyah concludes his discussion with the Aristotelian definition of man:¹²⁴

Man is an animal that talks and laughs. What differentiates man from the animal is a quality of perfection. Talking is a quality of perfection, and so is laughter. Whoever laughs is more perfect than whoever does not laugh.¹²⁵

Ibn Taymiyyah here is willing to make the analogy between the human and the divine, in order to prove his point, although his defining principle is never to compare God with humans. In order to avoid the danger of deducing from the human about the divine, he adds a reservation:

However, laughter in us, [humans], is necessary because there is [always] some kind of a flaw in us. But God is infallible.¹²⁶

Finally, he concludes:

The essence of laughter is by all means not connected to any flaw, as our essences, attributes and indeed our existence, are.¹²⁷

The reservation and the conclusion correspond with Ibn Taymiyyah’s argument which argues for the complete unlikeness between God and His creation.

Ibn Taymiyyah’s argumentation for laughter is the peak of the traditionalistic method of arguing. He in fact leads the reader towards the understanding that a figurative interpretation of laughter is hardly needed in order to fully comprehend the meaning of God’s laughter in the Hadith. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, we must bear in mind that it is appropriate to attribute laughter to God. Ibn Taymiyyah comes full circle to the position of the ninth century traditionalists in rejecting any attempt to interpret God’s laughter figuratively. His well-argued paragraph on laughter actually provides a subtle rationalization for the traditionalists’ blunt demand not to inquire about God’s attributes, but to fully and literally accept the contents of the sacred texts.

¹²³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū’at al-fatāwā*, 6: 71–72.

¹²⁴ On Ibn Taymiyyah’s knowledge of Greek philosophy, see: Ibn Taymiyya, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*, trans. Wael B. Hallaq (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

¹²⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū’at al-fatāwā*, 6: 71–72.

¹²⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū’at al-fatāwā*, 6: 72.

¹²⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Maǧmū’at al-fatāwā*, 6: 72.

Conclusion

The *ḥadīths* on God's laughter are a part of the huge bulk of eschatological *ḥadīths*, and as such they are embedded in an atmosphere of horror and fright. However, God's laughter in these *ḥadīths* is an expression of God's grace and benevolence, which are bestowed upon the believers. God's laughter also indicates His playfulness and astonishment.

While orally transmitting these texts which describe God's laughter, the Prophet Muḥammad himself laughed. His laughter was first an illustrator of God's laughter, but it also indicated the Prophet's satisfaction of God's grace and benevolence. The use of actual laughter while transmitting the laughter—*ḥadīths* enabled the proliferation of the concept of a laughing God in both the learned circles and in the popular sermons. Nevertheless, the transmission called for a comparison between human laughter and divine laughter, which is perceived as heresy by the Islamic dogma.

God's laughter became an inseparable part of the traditionalistic dogma since the ninth century. Even so, because laughter was a disputable issue in the traditionalistic circles, the laughter-*ḥadīths* required much processing in order to settle the concept of God's laughter with the concept of a transcendent God. Moving between figurative and literal readings of the texts, the traditionalists labored to rationalize God's laughter without comparing Him to humans.

In one of his theological treatises, Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah rejected figurative interpretation when applied to God's attributes, and claimed that it is unsystematic and inefficient. Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah stated: "Whosoever interprets the [divine] laughter as the [divine] will, merely escapes from one attribute and seeks refuge in another. So why does [this reader] not acknowledge the texts as they are? Why does he violate their sanctity?"¹²⁸ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah also authored a long creed, in which he states: "The Prophet described God as joyous and laughing, and that He holds the hearts of His servants between His two fingers."¹²⁹

No doubt, it was Ibn Taymiyyah's well-argued discussion about God's laughter that enabled Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah to reject the use of figurative interpretation, and to fully embrace the notion of God's laughter, while distancing himself from the unsophisticated literal reading which characterized the teachings of the early traditionalists.

¹²⁸ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Kitāb al-ṣawā'iq al-mursalah 'alā al-ġahmiyyah wa-l-mu'atṭilah*, ed. 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Daḥīl Allāh (Riyadh: Dār al-'Āsimah, 1998), 1:236.

¹²⁹ Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah, *Kitāb al-ṣawā'iq*, 1:220–21.