Chapter 2
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“Does God Really Laugh?” – Appropriate and Inappropriate Descriptions of God in Islamic Traditionalist Theology

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

Introduction

The work Ḥādī al-arwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrāḥ (The Leader of the Souls to the Land of Joy; henceforth Ḥādī al-arwāḥ) by the Damascene theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Ḡawziyyah (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, Ḥādī al-arwāḥ contains many references to laughter. In fact, the verb dāhika (laugh) and its variants and conjugations appear thirty times in Ḥādī 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 Ḥāmid al’Abdallāh Muhammad ibn Abī Bakr ibn Ayyūb Šams al-Dīn ibn Qayyim al-Ḡawziyyah, Ḥādī
In Ḥādīṣ al-arwāḥ, 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 (yadhakū). 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 hadīts, which Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah merely paraphrased. As an ultra-traditionalist scholar, he constructed Ḥādīṣ al-arwāḥ 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.

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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 hadīts (with a small letter). Because “Hadith” is more or less known in English, it is not accurately transliterated; nevertheless the technical term hadīt, 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 Muhammad, 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; Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, Hadith 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-arwāḥ*, Ibn Qayyim al-Ḡawziyyah 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 Muhammad onward. The same preparation was surely needed for his contemporaries, and that was why Ibn Qayyim al-Ḡawziyyah 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-arwāḥ* 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-ṣīrāt al-Muṣṭaqīm*) leading to Heaven.

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-arwāḥ*. Indeed, the Hadith is the only source for the few accounts describing God’s laughter. The Hadith literature is also the only source for accounts describing the Prophet’s laughter, also generously quoted in *Hādī al-arwāḥ*. The “laughter” hadīts quoted in *Hādī al-arwāḥ* 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

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*hadīt* 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 (*hadīfah*):

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: 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 Muhammad, to whom he referred as “The Lord of the Descendants of Adam” (*sayyid ʾulād ʿĀdām*). Muhammad then assembled a group of virtuous people, the martyrs (*ṣaḥīḥ, pl. ṣuḥadāʾ*) included, and they interceded for the people, who were waiting for their sentence. After the intercession was completed, God gave Muhammad 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!’.” Muhammad concluded this story to Abū Bakr by saying: “Because of this man, I was laughing from fore-noon [until noon].”

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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 Qayyīm al-Ḡawzīyyah, *Ḥadīth al-arwāh*, 321–22. The *hadīt* appears in a Hadith compilation of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), the eponym of the Hanbali school, and this was the source from which Ibn Qayyīm al-Ḡawzīyyah quoted. Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal, *al-Muṣnad*, ed. Ahmad Muhammad Şākir (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 1995), 1:172–75, *ḥadīt* 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 hadīt 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 hadīts 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 Hanbali and the Ašʿari schools. I will examine the Hadith material on God’s laughter on several levels.

The laughter-hadīts 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 hadīts 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 muhaddīt (the transmitter of hadīts). Was the Prophet laughing when describing God’s laughter? Did the muhaddīt laugh while reciting the hadīts on God’s laughter to his disciples? Did this laughter call for a comparison between human and divine laughter? These

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9 The Hanbalis were considered ultra-traditionalists, whereas the Ašʿaris were traditionalists with strong rationalistic traits. However, there were Hanbalis 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 hadits are also discussed here. The shift in the traditionalist mainstream view moved from a total acceptance of the texts to admitting their problematic and again to accepting them. This shift will be demonstrated through the views of the leading traditionalists Abū Ya’lā (d. 1066), Ibn al-‘Awzī (d. 1201), Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), and Ibn Qayyim al-‘Awzīyyah. 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)\(^\text{10}\)

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 (yadhakīn), 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 hadīts, which describe God laughing at the infidels and sinners.

As stated above, the few hadīts 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-Āğurri (d. 971) assembled the eschatological Hadith material in two treatises.¹³ The hadīts quoted by al-Āğurri record the dialogues that the Prophet conducted with his Companions (al-sahābah). The material was transmitted by the Companions themselves, who were either eye-witnesses or actual participants in the described dialogues.

Abū Razīn al-‘Uqayli (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 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-Āğurri 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

¹⁵ Al-Āğurri, Kitāb al-tasdiq, 109; al-Āğurri, Kitāb al-ṣārī īh, 294–95, hadīts no. 638 and no. 639; Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, 12:481, hadīt no. 16131. This hadīt is considered weak not because of its content, but because of its chain of transmitters.
A more prominent Companion, Abū Mūsā al-Ashtarī (d. ca. 662) transmitted two archetypes of hadīts 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 (yatağallā dāhikan).”

In a slightly more detailed version, Abū Musā 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 (yatağallā dāhikan). 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.’”

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 Sā’īd al-Ḥudrī (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 fellows were defeated, but he will keep on fighting, until God will grant him with the martyrdom (ṣahādāt).”

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

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16 Al-Āgūrī, Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah, 295, hadīt no. 640.
17 Al-Āgūrī, Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah, 295, hadīt no. 641; Al-Āgūrī, Kitāb al-tasdiq, 76.
18 Al-Āgūrī, Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah, 294, hadīt 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-Āgūrī, Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah, 294, hadīt no. 636. There is also an explanatory hadīt: “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 who 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-Āgūrī, Kitāb al-ṣarī‘ah, 299, hadīt no. 650. For another variant, see: Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066), Al-ʿAjāʿib wa-l-sīḥāb, ed. ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muhammad al-Hāṣidī (Jeddah: Maktabat al-Sawādī ‘l-Tawzī’ 1993), 2: 408.
“Does God Really Laugh?”

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.”

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.

Laughter as an Illustration

The Hadith literature is based on numerous reports, transmitted orally from generation to generation. The traditional Muslim approach regards this literature as a faithful record of the Prophet’s and his Companions’ deeds, sayings, and teachings. The traditional Hadith theory roughly divides each text-unit or hadīth into an istnād (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.

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

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20 See also a hadīth stating that, “God laughs because of the despair of his servants.” According to John Renard, in this hadīth, God is “amused at humanity’s insecurity about something so infinitely certain as divine mercy.” John Renard, “Despair,” The Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān, 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, Hadith Literature, 13–14.
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 qussās (story-tellers – L.H.) already enjoyed public favor. It is no wonder that traditions acquired a wide popularity with the masses.”

The popularity of the hadīts, then, almost stood in contrast to their sacredness.

There were several attempts to investigate the narrative elements of hadīts. One such commendable attempt is an important article by Sebastian Günther, which bases its analysis of several hadīts on theoretical premises. Günther explains that he considers the individual hadīt “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.”

Günther describes the narrator’s (the muhaddīt) 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.

Although Günther elaborates on the technical aspects of transmitting oral literature, he neglects a feature which no doubt accompanied the transmission of hadīts, 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 hadīts, 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 hadīts used these rhetorical devices to enhance the messages conveyed in the texts.

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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 . . . .”

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’.”

That speech and illustrators are inseparable is an observation which the ninth century rationalist scholar from Basra, Iraq, al-Ḡāḥīz (d. ca. 868) already made. In his words: “Gesture and speech are partners.” According to al-Ḡāḥīz, man uses five methods to indicate what he means, or to express his thoughts: speech, gesture (išārah, pl. išārāt), counting on fingers or knuckles, writing, and posture or attitude. 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.”

Al-Ḡāḥīz 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.” Although al-Ḡāḥīz refers to the eloquent speech, his words seem to be applicable to all kinds of speech, more so concerning the transmitting of hadīts.

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32 Al-Ḡāḥīz, _Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn_, 1:78.
33 Al-Ḡāḥīz, _Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn_, 1:78.
From the Hadith material itself, but also from works on *usūl 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 Aš'arī theologian Abū Hāmid al-Gazālī (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.” Al-Gazālī called the actions, gestures, or symbols accompanying someone’s words as *qrā ḯin*, 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.”

Al-Gazālī’s approach represents the total trust and credibility which the traditionalists had for the *muḥaddītīn*, the transmitters of the *ḥadīths*. The traditionalists deemed that the *muḥaddītīn* 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-Gazālī admits later, the use of gestures does not necessarily entail an understanding of the uttered words. Sometimes an additional explanation or interpretation is required. What al-Gazālī defines as “*annexations*” is not necessarily “*illuminates,*” taking Argyle’s definition, as al-Gazālī’s definition includes verbal explanations and not just body gestures and facial expressions. Still, al-Gazālī’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. The most recent observations were made by R. Marston

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 hadīts: “It seems likely that transmitters of hadīt 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 hadīt — L.H.) of which they were the receivers and custodians.”39

Still, he refers solely to the narrative-germ of the hadīt, i.e. the part which Günther defines as “the story,” and does not address the body gestures of the muhadditūn. 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 hadīt 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 (sabbāhī) 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.


that retains indications of bodily gestures, that were used first by the Prophet and then by the transmitters of the material. The following hadith is cited in several variations in Kitāb al-tawhīd (The Book of God’s Unity) by Ibn Huzaymah (d. 924). The hadith is transmitted on the authority of ‘Abdallah bin Umar, (d. 693; Abdallah was a Companion of the Prophet, and also the son of ‘Umar, 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 (ḥā-ḥadā). 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!”

The expression “He moved his fingers like so (ḥā-ḥadā)” 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 ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Umar, defined the gesture made by the Prophet more clearly:

Someone asked the Prophet on the Dağgal (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 Dağgal does not have a right eye. His [left] eye looks like a floating grape.”

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. 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

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42 Ibn Huzaymah, Kitāb al-tawhīd, 171. For similar hadīths, see: ibid, 166–73. The hadīt also appears in: Ibn Hanbal, Musnad 5:59–60, 138, hadīth no. 5414, 5608.
44 Ibn Huzaymah, Kitāb al-tawhīd, 97.
intention was surely to affirm the Divine attributes of hearing and seeing, and not to compare the Creator with His creation.\textsuperscript{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 hadīts describing the Prophet’s laughter in various occasions and contexts. These were meticulously treated by Ludwig Amman.\textsuperscript{46} I will, however, consider here the texts in which the Prophet’s laughter is an illustrator of God’s laughter.

ʿAbdallāh ibn Maṣʿūd, the prominent Companion and Quran exegete, who taught hadith in Kufa, Iraq, told his disciples a lengthy hadīt on God’s meeting with the heretics and the believers on the Day of Resurrection. ʿAbdallāh of course heard this hadīt from the Prophet himself. This hadīt mentions God’s laughter, but more so: from ʿAbdallāh ibn Maṣʿūd’s version it is clear that the Prophet used to accompany this specific text with laughter. A repetitive hadīt, 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 ʿAbdallāh transmitted:\textsuperscript{47}

The Messenger of God said: God will gather all the nations, and then He will descend from His throne (ʾarš) to His seat (kurṣī), which is as vast as the heavens and earth.\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{48} An allusion to Q. 2: 255: “His throne is as vast as the heavens and the earth.”
idol of Ezra. 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.

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

The nation of Muhammad 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, 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.

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 Širāt (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. The group that will be left behind, will cross the very narrow and slippery Širāt. Apparently, this bridge will be as narrow as a blade of a sword. This amusing scene probably aroused laughs among its listeners:

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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.”
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 Sīrat in complete accordance with the way they acted in this world: some will cross the Sīrat 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].

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.

According to his disciples, when ʿAbdallāh ibn Masʿūd concluded his words, he burst into laughter. One of ʿAbdallāh ibn Masʿūd’s disciples elaborates on this laughter:

We realized that each time ʿAbdallāh ibn Masʿūd reached that point, he laughed until his last molar was revealed. We asked him: "You have told us this hadīt time and again, and every time you have reached this place, you laughed until your last molar

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54 Al-Āgurri, Kitāb al-tasālim, 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 Sīrat] 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 Sīrat] 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-Muʿjam, 9: 418.

55 Al-Āgurri, Kitāb al-tasālim, 81; al-Ṭabarānī, Al-Muʿjam, 9: 419.

56 Al-Ṭabarānī, Al-Muʿjam, 9: 419.
was revealed.” Ibn Mas‘ūd responded: “I have witnessed the Prophet telling this hadīt time and again, and every time he reached this point, he laughed until his last molar was revealed.”

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.

In this slightly different version of this hadīt, 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 hadīt] 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.”

The Prophet’s laughter in this text, whose authenticity was attested by the traditionalists, 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 hadīt, 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 hadīt, 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

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57 Al-Āqīrī, Kitāb al-tasāq, 82; al-Tabarānī, Al-Mu’jam, 9: 419.  
58 Al-Āqīrī, Kitāb al-tasāq, 82; al-Tabarānī, Al-Mu’jam, 9: 420.  
59 Al-Āqīrī, Kitāb al-sarīr, 298, hadīt 247.  
60 Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah says: “This is a great and good (ḥasan) hadīt, quoted in all the important Hadith compilations.” Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah, Ḥādi 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.\textsuperscript{61}

The meaning of God’s laughter is, then, an expression of His mercy. Adopting this explanation, Ašʿarī 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 	extit{muhaddīt} ‘Alī ibn Rabī‘ah al-Wālībī (death date unknown) told the following tale: “I was the rear man (\textit{ridf}) riding the same camel as ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661; Muhammad’s cousin and Companion, and the Fourth Caliph) when we arrived at the cemetery of Kūfah (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-Harrāth (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.’”\textsuperscript{62}

This “story within a story” is fascinating. The dialogue between the transmitter, ‘Alī ibn Rabī‘ah al-Wālībī, 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

\textsuperscript{61} An interesting version of this text appears in Ibn Kāṭīr’s (d. 1373) work on eschatology. In this version, which is quoted from al-Buhārī, the sinner continued pleading God, “until God laughed, and while laughing He let the man into Heaven.” Muhammad ibn Ismā‘īl Abū al-Fīḍa‘ Ibn Kāṭīr, \textit{Al-Nihāyāh fi al-fītan wa-l-ma‘lūmim} (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Imāmiyyah, 1991), 261–62. See also: al-Buhārī, \textit{al-Gāmi‘ al-saḥīh}, 4: 204 (Kitāb al-riqāq, Bāb 52, \textit{ḥadīth} 6573), 4: 390–91 (Kitāb al-tawḥīd, Bāb 24, \textit{ḥadīth} 7437).

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-knowing, was answered by later theologians, as will be discussed below.

Improper Laughter and the Islamic Creed

The hadits cited previously became a part of the traditionalist dogma. A profession of faith attributed to Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), the eponym of the ultra-traditionalist Hanbali 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 hadits describing God’s laughter were not glossed. The question, “but how exactly does God laugh?” was obliterated.65 The basic traditionalist approach demanded an acceptance of the contents of these and other anthropomorphic hadits. A twelfth-century muhaddiṭ 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 hadît 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; Wesport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishers 1976), 134. According to Amman, the concept that laughter is caused by surprise (ta'āğhub) comes from theological discussions, and not from Greek authors. Amman, Vorbild und Vernunft, 14–19.


65 This traditionalist approach is called bi-tā 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-Ash‘arī,” Le Museon 104 (1991): 141–90.

66 The muhaddiṭ is Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wāhid (d. 1149). His saying is quoted in a biographical entry dedicated to him in: Abū al-Husayn Muhammad ibn Abī Yaʿlā (d. 1132; the son of Abū Yaʿlā), Tabaqāt al-fuqahāʾ al-hanābilah, ed. ʿAlī Muhammad ʿUmar (Cairo: Maktabat al-Taqāfah al-
Others, less rigid traditionalists, hinted that God’s laughter symbolizes God’s grace and good will. A ninth century muhaddit promised his disciples:

Whoever says al-hamd li-llah (Praise be to God) five times, God looks at him. Whoever says al-hamd li-llah a lot, God laughs in his presence. Whoever perpetually says al-hamd li-llah, 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 Aš’arī, al-Bayhaqī’s represents a stand which combines traditionalism with rationalism:

The ancients from our school were inspired by these hadīts 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-Ādurī 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-šarī‘ah, al-Ādurī writes:

These are all the textual evidence, in which we believe. We never ask: How [is it possible]? Since those who transmitted these hadīts to us, transmitted to us hadīts 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

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68 Al-Bayhaqī, Al-Asma’ wa-l-sifāt, 2: 414.
69 Al-Ādurī, Kitāb al-šarī‘ah, 292.
70 Al-Ādurī, Kitāb al-šarī‘ah, 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 hadīts provided any details about God’s laughter. However, there were extraordinary hadīts that took the description of God’s laughter a step further. The eleventh century Hanbali theologian Abū Ya’lā (d. 1066) wrote a treatise on God’s attributes, in which he quoted a cluster of hadīts. Among these hadīts appears the following version, quoting the Prophet’s companion Gābir ibn ’Abdallāh (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.”

In another version, also quoting Gābir, the Prophet promises that God will laugh until His uvula and molars are revealed to the Muslims. The meaning of this laughter is rather perplexing. From the parallel hadīts 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 hadīt quoted by Abū Ya’lā, 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.

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

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72 Abū Ya’lā, Ibtāl al-tawālīl, 214.
to cite this extraordinary text, because he never doubted the authenticity of this hadīt. 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 hadīt, 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 hadīts describing God’s laughter, the hadīt that describes the laughter which reveals molars and uvula was considered “feeble” (da’īf) by the scholars of Hadith, 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, Iḥtīāl al-ta’wilāt, 218.
75 Abū Ya’lā, Iḥtīāl al-ta’wilāt, 219.
76 On the traditional Hadith criticism and the techniques of examining a hadīt’s authenticity, see: Siddiqi, Hadith Literature, 107–16.
grounds, Abū Ya'la was attacked by the thirteenth century traditionalist Hanbali theologian, Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 1201).

Merlin Swartz described Ibn al-Ġawzī’s attack on Abū Ya’la in a comprehensive introduction to Swartz’s annotated translation of one of Ibn al-Ġawzī’s treatises on divine attributes.\(^7\) Daniel Gimaret also discussed Ibn al-Ġawzī’s attack in his book on anthropomorphism in Islamic traditionalism.\(^8\) Both Swartz and Gimaret knew of Abū Ya’la’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 Ya’la, which offers a new angle to Ibn al-Ġawzī’s position.

Ibn al-Ġawzī was a Hanbali 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 Aš’arī school than to his own school. Apart from his hermeneutical agenda, he was concerned by the reputation of the Hanbali school as a group of ignorant anthropomorphists. Ibn al-Ġawzī targeted three prominent Hanbali scholars, among whom was Abū Ya’la, who “wrote books in which they disgraced this school.”\(^7\) To this end, he composed his treatise al-Ḩāz al-āshāb al-munqadd al-ūlā muhālīfī al-madhab (The Gray Falcon Which Attacks the Offenders of the [Hanbali] School),\(^8\) 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.\(^8\)

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.\(^8\) As a preacher, Ibn al-Ġawzī was concerned with the low standards of popular preachers, who used


\(^{7}\) These three were: Abū ’Abdallāh Ibn Hāmid (d. 1012), “his friend,” the Qāḍī Abū Ya’la and Ibn al-Ẓā’ūrūn (d. 1132). Swartz, *A Medieval Critique*, 135–36, fns. 235–36, elaborates on them.


\(^{8}\) Ibn al-Ġawzī, Al-Ḩāz al-āshāb, 34.

\(^{8}\) Ibn al-Ġawzī, Al-Ḩāz al-āshāb, 34.
pseudo-*hadīts* or unauthenticated *hadīts* in their sermons. Ibn al-Ḡawzī 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-Ḡawzī attacked those three prominent Hanbali 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. A reckless use of the Hadith material eventually led these scholars to add more descriptions and attributes to God.

In another treatise, which discusses the low standards of preachers and storytellers, Ibn al-Ḡawzī 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?

Ibn al-Ḡawzī’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-Ḡawzī 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-Ḡawzī 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.

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

On the one hand, Ibn al-Ǧawzī suggests that the preachers will avoid introducing the anthropomorphic hadīts to the masses. On the other hand, the scholars must study these hadīts, using the strictest standards of evaluating the material at hand. For example, the hadīt “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 Ahmad ibn Hanbal himself, the eponym of the Hanbalī school, labeled this particular hadīt as “ugly and offensive.”

Ibn al-Ǧawzī then develops two solutions to read the problematic hadīt. The first solution takes into consideration the way this hadīt 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:

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

Ibn al-Ǧawzī, 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.”

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-Ǧawzī. The most important thing for him is to figuratively interpret God’s laughter as God’s grace.

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87 Ibn al-Ǧawzī, Al-Bāz al-ašḥāb, 38.  
88 Ibn al-Ǧawzī, Al-Bāz al-ašḥāb, 90.  
89 Ibn al-Ǧawzī, Al-Bāz al-ašḥāb, 90.  
Completing his attack on Abū Ya’lla, Ibn al-Ġawzi expresses his disappointment of Abū Ya’lla’s literal reading, but more so of Abū Ya’lla’s use of a hadīt of a dubious source: “By God, even if these hadīts on the molars were in the two most reliable Hadith compilations, the Sahīhān, they would have to be rejected, and all the more so because these texts were not substantiated.” And he concludes: “Whoever confirms that God has molars as a divine attribute, has absolutely no knowledge of Islam.” Ibn al-Ġawzi, 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 hadīts 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 Prophet feature, indicating loss of control. Numerous textual proofs indicate that the traditionalists were characterized by their aversion to laughter and lightheartedness. 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 hadīts 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 ʿAbd Rabbihi (d. 940). In a chapter describing the Prophet, which is based on Hadith material, Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi

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91 Ibn al-Ġawzi, Al-Bīz al-ašhab, 91. Al-Sahīhān, meaning the two sound Hadith collections, were compiled by Muhammad ibn Iṣmāʿīl al-Buhārī (d. 870) and Muslim ibn al-Haḡgāg (d. 875). See: Siddiqi, Hadith Literature, 53–60.
93 ʿAlī 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.
claims that the Prophet “did not laugh, but smiled.” In a chapter discussing laughter, Ibn 'Abd Rabbih states that “the Prophet used to laugh until his molars were revealed.” 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, I will not repeat Amman’s findings, but rather provide two illuminating examples from one of Ibn Qayyim al-Quwzviyyah’s works, *Hidayat al-hayârâ fi âğwibat al-yahûd wa-l-nasârâ* (Guiding the Bewildered, on Responses to the Jews and the Christians).

*Hidayat al-hayârâ* 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-Quwzviyyah detects textual hints in the Bible, predicting Muhammad’s arrival and attesting the veracity of his prophecy. Among the textual proofs which Ibn Qayyim al-Quwzviyyah 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-Quwzviyyah, refer to the Prophet Muhammad. This is Ibn Qayyim al-Quwzviyyah’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.

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

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

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

the Bible is discussed by Lazarus-Yafeh, *Interwoven Worlds*, 111–129. Lazarus-Yafeh dedicates a place in the discussion to Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah’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 Qur’ān 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-Biṣṣār’s Qur’ān 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 H. Kraemer, ed. Y. Tzvi Langermann and Josef Stern (Paris, Louvain, and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007), 331–47.


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

Nevertheless, Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah 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-dahîk al-qattâl).\textsuperscript{104} According to Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah, 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-Gawziyyah, was an outcome of a well-balanced behavior (i’tidâl).\textsuperscript{105}

Following this line of argumentation, it was easier to accept the hadîts 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 hadîts 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 jurisprudent—and the mentor of Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah—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 Abû Sulaymân al-Hattâbî (d. 996 or 998). Al-Hattâbî 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-Hattâbî’s suggestion was to see God’s laughter in the hadîts as a metaphor to the astonishment He arouses in the hearts

\textsuperscript{103} Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah, Hidâyat al-haçâra, 131.

\textsuperscript{104} There were a lot of speculations on the meaning of the epithet al-dahîk. In a hadît on the authority of the Prophet’s Companion, Ibn ’Abbâs (d. 687), the Prophet’s name in the Torah is Ahmad al-dahîk. The traditionalist al-Dahîk (d. 826) connects the name al-dahîk with the Prophet’s laughter. In an attempt to settle the contradiction between the claim that the Prophet did not laugh, and the hadîts claiming that he did, al-Dahîk suggests that the adjective al-dahîk means that the Prophet almost always smiled, but laughed until his molars were revealed. Al-Šâmî, Subûl al-huda, 1:598; 7:195–97. See also a discussion in Lazarus Yafeh, Intertwined Worlds, 88.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah, Hidâyat al-haçâra, 131. See also, Rubin, The Eye of the Beholder, 36.
of humans, “so that when they see Him, He makes them laugh.”

Before al-Ḫattābī, 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.

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. 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.” Ibn Taymiyyah argued that in spite of their common names (living, knowing, hearing, seeing etc.), the divine attributes do not resemble the human attributes.

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.

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

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106 Al-Ḫattābī’s view is cited in al-Bayhaqī, Al-Asmāʾ wa-l-sifāt, 2: 401–02.
in Islamic theology determines, that it is obligatory to ascribe to God only attributes connoting perfection (*sifāt 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 (*dahh*).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 (*qadab*) and laughter (*dahh*) 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

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

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 (aknâl) 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 that 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.

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.

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.

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117 This is Arberry’s translation.
118 Ibn Taymiyyah, Mağmû‘ al-ťaťâwâ, 6:45.
120 Ibn Taymiyyah, Mağmû‘ al-ťaťâwâ, 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 accordance 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 hadīt, 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 Muhammad, to be living in

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121 Ibn Taymiyyah, Mağmū‘ łąt-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, Mağmū‘ łąt-al-fatāwā, 3: 54; Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy, 64.
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.

126 Ibn Taymiyyah, Maṣnūʿat al-fatāwā, 6: 72.
127 Ibn Taymiyyah, Maṣnūʿat al-fatāwā, 6: 72.
Conclusion

The hadīts on God’s laughter are a part of the huge bulk of eschatological hadīts, and as such they are embedded in an atmosphere of horror and fright. However, God’s laughter in these hadīts 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 Muhammad 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—hadīts 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-hadīts 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-Ḡawziyyah rejected figurative interpretation when applied to God’s attributes, and claimed that it is unsystematic and inefficient. Ibn Qayyim al-Ḡawziyyah 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?” Ibn Qayyim al-Ḡawziyyah 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.”

No doubt, it was Ibn Taymiyyah’s well-argued discussion about God’s laughter that enabled Ibn Qayyim al-Ḡawziyyah 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.

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