

## TWO ABBASID TRIALS: AḤMAD IBN ḤANBAL AND ḤUNAYN B. ISHĀQ<sup>1</sup>

Michael COOPERSON  
University of California, Los Angeles

I. In 220/835, the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Mu‘taṣim presided over a disputation between the *ḥadīth*-scholar Ibn Ḥanbal and a group of court theologians. Ibn Ḥanbal had refused assent to the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’ān, a doctrine which the previous caliph, al-Ma’mūn, had declared orthodox eight years before. Spared execution by the death of al-Ma’mūn, Ibn Ḥanbal languished in prison at Baghdad until a well-meaning relative persuaded the authorities to let him defend himself. The ensuing disputation took place before the caliph al-Mu‘taṣim, who did not share al-Ma’mūn’s penchant for theology. In partisan accounts, each side claims to have won the debate, or at least to have exposed the incoherence of the other position. Yet the caliph does not appear to have decided the case on its intellectual merits. Rather, he merely agreed with his advisors that Ibn Ḥanbal’s stubbornness was tantamount to defiance of the state. Even so, he did not agree to execute him, or return him to prison. Instead, he ordered him flogged and then released.

Modern scholarship has only recently called the conventional account of Ibn Ḥanbal’s release into question.<sup>2</sup> The early Ḥanbalī accounts claim that their imam’s fortitude won the day.<sup>3</sup> Realizing that Ibn Ḥanbal would allow himself to be beaten to death rather than capitulate, al-Mu‘taṣim let him go, an account which later sources supplement with elaborate hagiographic fabrications. The Arabic and Islamic traditions have with very few exceptions adopted this version of events, as have most foreign students of the inquisition. But al-Jāḥiẓ, a contemporary and hostile source, flatly states that Ibn Ḥanbal capitulated; and the Ḥanbalī accounts indeed seem conspicuously interested in dispelling precisely this impression. In recent times, the argument for capitulation has found a profoundly learned exponent in Josef van Ess, who says of Ibn Ḥanbal that «without a confession, they would never have let him go».<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Lital Levy and Mikāl ‘Abd al-Barr for their bibliographic assistance.

<sup>2</sup> For surveys of the primary and secondary scholarship, van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 3: 446-508, and Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 107-53. To the references there should be added Jābirī, *Muthaqqafūn*, 65-115 (I thank Ahmad Alwisha for this reference).

<sup>3</sup> I use the term «imam» here in the Sunni sense of «leading scholar» or «exemplar». The Ḥanbalī sources customarily apply the title to Ibn Ḥanbal (for the justification, see Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1: 12ff), and I will occasionally use it for convenience.

<sup>4</sup> Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 3:465.

*Al-Qanṭara* XXII, 2 (2001) 375-393

The present paper examines the most detailed trial account, that by the imām's cousin Ḥanbal b. Ishāq (d. 273/886), and argues that it provides a plausible explanation for release without a capitulation. This explanation hinges on the conduct of the caliph. I will argue that his behaviour (as described by Ḥanbal) is consistent with the customary role of the caliph in sectarian disputes, that is, with his role as arbiter in disputes between Christians. If this analogy is accepted, al-Mu'taṣim's decision to flog Ibn Ḥanbal and then release him, even without a capitulation, appears perfectly credible. As the Christian parallel will show, caliphs could (and did) act in cases of religious controversy without presuming to settle the theological question at issue. It may seem strange to argue that al-Mu'taṣim decided to treat Ibn Ḥanbal and his opponents as he would a pack of squabbling Christians, but his response to the disputation suggests that this is more or less what he did.

II. In the early 'Abbāsid period, Christian authorities were repeatedly obliged to ask the caliph to intervene in the affairs of their communities. Like their Western counterparts, the Eastern Christian authorities could impose penance on heretics, or excommunicate them. But to scourge, imprison, or execute a contumacious dissenter, they handed him over to the Muslim authorities. Although two 'Abbāsids (al-Mahdī and al-Ma'mūn) took an intellectual interest in Christianity, the caliphs obviously had no right to pronounce on disputed matters of Christian faith. Rather, they accepted the word of the Christian authorities regarding the nature of the offense. Significantly, however, the caliphs exercised their own discretion regarding the nature of the punishment. Moreover, they were free to revoke the penalty they had imposed, and thus in effect to pardon the offender.

The most detailed information about relations between the Church and the caliphate in this period comes from the annals of the Nestorian Church. Again and again, we find the 'Abbāsid caliphs intervening in ecclesiastical affairs, most notably in the election of the patriarch. The caliph al-Saffāḥ, for example, deposed a patriarch who had gained his office by coercion.<sup>5</sup> Al-Mahdī settled another disputed election by interviewing the two candidates and naming the winner; and al-Mu'taṣim, prompted by this Christian physician, threw an election by arresting one of the nominees.<sup>6</sup> The caliphs are also on record as having intervened between patriarchs and their subordinates. When the Jacobite bishop of Baghdad refused to acknowledge the authority of his patriarch, the latter asked al-Ma'mūn to adjudicate the dispute. Despite his

<sup>5</sup> Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34 and 77.

earlier declaration that any community larger than ten persons could elect its own leader, the caliph agreed to depose the bishop (but forbade his excommunication).<sup>7</sup>

As these examples indicate, the caliphs did not intervene on their own initiative, but at the behest of a party to the dispute. In many cases, the instigator was a layman—usually a physician—who had the caliph's ear; and the matter in dispute had little or nothing to do with doctrine as such. Most questions of religious conformity seem to have been dealt with internally.<sup>8</sup> Yet the caliphs did have a stake in maintaining the dignity of the Church. The patriarch was the caliph's counterpart as well as his client, and disrespect for him implied disrespect for his patron.<sup>9</sup> When a caliph was asked to reinforce patriarchal authority, he took such requests seriously, even to the point of enforcing doctrines entirely foreign to Islam. This may have only happened once, and even then the sources are not entirely to be trusted. Yet the records of this one case contain plentiful information—some of it perhaps authentic, and some at least believable to contemporary audiences—, about caliphal responses to disputed matters of Christian doctrine.

The case in question is that of Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 260/873), the celebrated Nestorian physician and translator. The divergent accounts of his run-in with the caliph and the Church can be grouped and summarized as follows.

1a. An account in Ibn al-ʿIbrī's Arabic chronicle stating that Ḥunayn found in the home of a fellow Christian a picture depicting Christ and his disciples, before which was set a votive light. «Why are you wasting oil?», asks Ḥunayn. «That is not the Messiah and his disciples; it's just a picture». At the instigation of his rival al-Ṭayfūrī, Ḥunayn spits upon the picture. His rival denounces him before the caliph al-Mutawakkil and seeks the latter's permission to carry out the appropriate punishment according to Nestorian practice. Ḥunayn is excommunicated and dies the same night, having allegedly poisoned himself.<sup>10</sup>

1b. An account in the same author's Syriac chronicle, similar to the preceding, in which Ḥunayn does not spit upon the icon, and denounces al-Ṭayfūrī as an idolater before the caliph. Nevertheless, it is again Ḥunayn who is excommunicated.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 70. In one case, a patriarch was allegedly called in to settle the affairs of a caliph. When al-Rashīd wanted to remarry his divorced wife Zubayda without observing the usual conditions, Ṭimūṭawūs I devised a false conversion to circumvent Islamic law (*ibid.*, 57-58; Putman, *L'Eglise et l'Islam*, 130-40).

<sup>8</sup> See Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*, 52 and 56.

<sup>9</sup> When the physician Sālmawayh asked al-Mu'taṣim to intervene in a patriarchal election, he did so on the grounds that the other party «has not shown me the respect due me for my attendance upon you, and for the function I have exercised at your court my whole life long» (*ibid.*, 77).

<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-ʿIbrī, *Ta'rikh*, 145.

<sup>11</sup> Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, II: 197-199.

1c. An account given by Ibn Juljul and Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (who discounts it) stating that Ḥunayn humiliated his medical colleague al-Ṭayfūrī in the presence of the caliph. The next day, al-Ṭayfūrī asks Ḥunayn to spit upon a picture of the crucifiers of Christ; Ḥunayn refuses on the same grounds as in (1a) above. Al-Ṭayfūrī denounces him to al-Mutawakkil, who calls in the catholicos (i.e., the patriarch) and the bishops, who in turn «pronounced seventy anathemas upon Ḥunayn in the presence of the congregation, and cut his *zunnār*». The caliph also refuses to have anything more to do with Ḥunayn. The latter is said to have died the same night, either from misery or self-administered poison.<sup>12</sup>

2. Ḥunayn's purported autobiographical epistle, in which he explains that the Christian court physicians resented him for his knowledge of Greek and his high position at court. One of his rivals, Bakhtīshū' b. Jibrā'il, tricks him into spitting upon an icon in the presence of the caliph al-Mutawakkil. The caliph, forewarned that Ḥunayn is an heretic, has him imprisoned. He then consults the catholicos, who regrets that he does not have the temporal authority to punish Ḥunayn; all he can do is excommunicate him until he recants. The caliph orders Ḥunayn to be beaten and incarcerated, and confiscates his property. After some four months, Ḥunayn's rivals at court succeed in persuading the caliph to execute him. The next day, however, the caliph—who has been unwell for some time—has Ḥunayn brought in and asked to prescribe a treatment for his illness. In the presence of the assembled physicians, the caliph reports that Jesus came to him in a dream and asked him to pardon Ḥunayn. The caliph exacts a fine from Ḥunayn's rivals and bestows numerous honors and properties upon him.<sup>13</sup>

All these accounts, including the one attributed to Ḥunayn himself, agree that he ran afoul of his co-religionists because he desecrated an icon.<sup>14</sup> The Nestorian church admits the veneration of icons,<sup>15</sup> and the reasons for Ḥunayn's dissident opinion (if he had one) remain a matter of debate. He may have been influenced by Byzantine iconoclasm,<sup>16</sup> ancient Greek rationalism,<sup>17</sup> or Muslim

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, '*Uyūn al-anbā*', 263-264. The *zunnār* was the characteristic sash worn by Christians.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-270.

<sup>14</sup> The well-known story about Ḥunayn's refusal to concoct a poison and his consequent imprisonment is probably a fabrication designed to exculpate Ḥunayn. It may also be an attempt to clear Bakhtīshū', whom text 2 accuses of slander. Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, one of our sources for the tale, cites a descendant of Bakhtīshū' as his source for it (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, '*Uyūn al-anbā*', 261; cf. 214). *Ibid.*, 144-145, identifies the caliph in question as al-Mutawakkil, who also appears in the desecration stories.

<sup>15</sup> Delly, «Culte»; Griffith, «Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic tract», 58.

<sup>16</sup> Derenbourg, «Traducteurs arabes», 118.

<sup>17</sup> Strohmaier, «Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq und die Bilder», 531.

aniconism.<sup>18</sup> In every account that mentions the desecration of an icon, we are told that the caliph acknowledged the gravity of the offense and consulted the Nestorian patriarch about how to proceed. It may seem odd that Ḥunayn's rivals did not go to the patriarch first. But Ḥunayn was the caliph's protégé, and could not be challenged without appearing to insult the sovereign. For our purposes, in any case, the most important element here is the behaviour of the caliph.

Text 2 provides the most detail on this point. It has also many inconsistencies that cast serious doubt on its reliability.<sup>19</sup> Even so, Strohmaier concludes that the only purpose it could have served is to clear Ḥunayn of charges of blasphemy, and must therefore have been composed soon after his death by one of his disciples. As such, it «provides relatively reliable information on the outward course of the main events as well as on the crucial words spoken by Ḥunayn himself». <sup>20</sup> As for the words ascribed to the caliph, there is no reason to believe them literally. But if we accept that the caliph intervened at all, we are safe in supposing that he must have acted more or less as described in the story; or, at the very least, that the words ascribed to him were credible to 'Abbāsid readers.

The caliph first appears in the story when Ḥunayn's rival Bakhtīshū' kisses an icon in his presence. The following dialogue ensues:

«Why are you kissing it?», asked al-Mutawakkil.

«If I do not kiss the image of the Mistress of the Universe, Master, then whose image should I kiss?»

«Do all the Christians do this?», asked al-Mutawakkil.

«Yes, Master», replied Bakhtīshū', «and more properly than I do now, because I am restraining myself in Your presence. But in spite of the preferential treatment granted the Christians, I know of one Christian in your service who enjoys your bounty and your favors and who has no regard for this image and spits on it. He is an heretic and an atheist who believes neither in the oneness of God nor the afterlife. He hides behind a mask of Christianity, but in fact he denies God's attributes and repudiates the prophets».

«Who is this person you're describing?»

«Ḥunayn the translator», said Bakhtīshū'.

Said al-Mutawakkil, «I'll have him sent for, and if what you say turns out to be true, I'll make an example of him, I'll drop him in a dungeon and throw away

<sup>18</sup> Griffith, «Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic tract», esp. 58; cf. Pelikan, *Spirit*, 105-6.

<sup>19</sup> Rosenthal, *Arabische autobiographie*, 15-19; Strohmaier, «Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq und die Bilder», 530; Cooperson, «Purported Autobiography».

<sup>20</sup> Strohmaier, «Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq und die Bilder», 530.

the key; but not before I've made his life miserable and ordered him tortured over and over until he repents». <sup>21</sup>

In attempting to discredit Ḥunayn, his rival does not confine himself to accusations of iconoclasm, which might seem commendable to a Muslim. Rather, he calls Ḥunayn an atheist and a denier of prophecy. He also hints that the caliph's reputation is suffering because of his client's abominable heresy.

When Ḥunayn arrives at the palace, the caliph tests him. (In one of the story's telltale slipups, he does not investigate Ḥunayn's alleged atheism, only his iconoclasm).

«Ḥunayn, isn't this a wonderful picture?»

«Just as you say, Master».

«What do you think of it? Isn't it the image of your god and his mother?».

«God forbid, Master! Is God Almighty an image, or can he be depicted? This is just a picture like any other».

«So this image has no power at all, either to help or to harm?».

«That's right, Master».

«If it's as you say, spit on it».

I spat on it, and he immediately ordered me thrown into prison. <sup>22</sup>

The caliph then consults the patriarch, who confirms the icon is sacred. The caliph then asks how one should punish a Christian of sound mind who desecrates it. The patriarch says that he «can do nothing, having no authority to punish with whip or rod, nor a deep dungeon to imprison him in». All he can do is excommunicate and anathematize him until he repents, fasts, and disburses alms. Ḥunayn's first person account continues as follows:

After the catholicos had left, the caliph sat awhile marveling at him and his love and adoration for his god.

«This is truly an amazing thing», said the caliph, then ordered me brought in. He called for the ropes and the whip, and had me stripped and spread before him. I was struck a hundred lashes. The caliph then ordered that I be confined and tortured, and that all my furnishings, riding animals, books, and the like be carried off. My houses were demolished and the wreckage was dumped in the river. <sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *'Uyūn al-anbā'*, 266-67.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

Most striking here is that the Muslim caliph has in effect defended the Church's teaching on the veneration of images. Al-Mutawakkil is impressed with the Nestorians' devotion to the icon, and it is quite possible that he and other Muslims conceded some occult power to Christian relics.<sup>24</sup> But his persecution of Ḥunayn can hardly be understood as a judgement in favor of iconolatry. Unlike belief in God and the prophets, veneration of images was a purely Christian practice. Should a Christian reject it, the natural thing for a Muslim to do would be to ask him to embrace Islam. Here, however, the caliph merely expresses his astonishment at Christian practices, and then punishes Ḥunayn out of deference to the patriarch. The latter had hinted that if he could flog Ḥunayn and imprison him, he would. Taking the hint, al-Mutawakkil does both of these things, and confiscates Ḥunayn's property for good measure.

The story has explained why Ḥunayn was punished, and now it has to explain why he was released. We are told that Jesus visited the caliph in a dream and asked him to forgive Ḥunayn. In response, the caliph not only freed him but rewarded him and punished his rivals. The alleged supernatural pretext notwithstanding, it is certainly possible that the caliph had reason to repent his decision. The story says that he was ill, and that only Ḥunayn could cure him. Ḥunayn's friends at court may have intervened on his behalf. Or al-Mutawakkil may have reconsidered the extent to which Ḥunayn's offense merited such harsh reprisal. Of course, he could not admit these considerations without losing face. But a dream vision of Jesus, a higher authority recognized by Christians and Muslims alike, could easily justify his change of heart. Such visions may be topoi, but they were topoi even then, and therein lay their power. One could use them to justify awkward decisions of all sorts, and not necessarily cynically, either. Faced with a difficult decision, one might well convince oneself that Jesus had come to show the way out.<sup>25</sup>

In any event, the result is that the caliph is able to take the initiative. This time, he does not consult the catholicos (or at least, he has not shown doing so). Nor does he ask Ḥunayn to recant. Instead, he concludes, reasonably enough, that the word of Jesus is sufficient. In the dream, Jesus asked him to «pardon Ḥunayn, and

<sup>24</sup> Cooperson, «Purported Autobiography», 246.

<sup>25</sup> Ḥunayn himself allegedly owed his translation job to al-Ma'mūn's dream of Aristotle (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā'*, 259). Dwight Reynolds has reminded me that Ḥunayn's autobiography casts him in the role of Joseph, whose skill in dream interpretation freed him from Pharaoh's dungeon. Nor is our text the only one to plead dream intervention on behalf of Christians. In the time of al-Ma'mūn, the governor of Ḥarrān is said to have razed some newly-built churches but to have ordered them rebuilt as the result of a monitory dream (Fiey, *Chrétien syriaques*, 63).

absolve him of his crime, for God has forgiven him». The caliph is then made to say: «I awoke unable to stop thinking about what Ḥunayn had suffered at my hands, and marveling at the power of his intercessor. Now it is my duty to restore to him what was his». Again, al-Mutawakkil is untroubled by the doctrinal implications of his decision. If Ḥunayn needs to be forgiven, he must have done something wrong; so spitting on an icon is blasphemy, and icons are holy. Of course, the caliph does not say so, and (if we accept any of this as having happened, even in outline) it is hard to imagine that he thought about it at all. Rather, he decided that he needed his client, and so he overrode the Church and restored him to favor, even if doing so meant upholding (albeit unwittingly) the sanctity of the icon.

III. In 219/833, the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn promulgated the creed that the revealed text of Islam had been created in historical time by God. To claim otherwise was to lapse into Christianity, whose adherents profess the co-eternality of the Logos.<sup>26</sup> To ensure that no representatives of the state held this pernicious doctrine, al-Ma'mūn ordered the police prefect of Baghdad to interrogate the judges and witnesses in his jurisdiction and induce them to pronounce the phrase «the Qur'ān is created». <sup>27</sup> When the first round of interrogations in Baghdad encountered unexpected resistance, the caliph ordered the inquisition (*miḥna*)<sup>28</sup> extended to jurists and teachers of *ḥadīth*. Among the scholars brought in for questioning was Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), a pious and ascetic transmitter of *ḥadīth*. He refused to say that the Qur'ān was created, prompting the caliph to denounce him as an ignoramus and threaten him and his fellow dissenters with death. When Ibn Ḥanbal would not relent, the Baghdad authorities dispatched him and a fellow dissenter, Muḥammad b. Nūḥ, to the Byzantine front, where the caliph was on campaign. Before the dissenters could reach him, al-Ma'mūn suddenly died. On his deathbed, he exhorted his successor, al-Mu'taṣim, to continue the inquisition. But the new caliph evidently had other things on his mind. Rather than try the dissenters immediately, he had them sent back to Baghdad. During the return journey, Ibn Nūḥ fell ill and died, leaving Ibn Ḥanbal alone in his defiance of the authorities. Again, however al-Mu'taṣim was content to ignore him. Rather than interrogate him, he let him languish in the commoner's prison of Baghdad for over two years.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> On the Christian parallels, see Pelikan, *Spirit*, 232ff.

<sup>27</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 8: 631-644.

<sup>28</sup> Significantly, Ibn Ḥanbal's trial resembled a disputation (van Ess aptly uses the term *disputatio*) rather than an inquisition. I will nevertheless use the conventional translation here in light of the overall context (that is, al-Ma'mūn's purpose in interrogating the scholars, and his treatment of them during his reign).

<sup>29</sup> Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 33ff.



When Ibn Ḥanbal did eventually come to trial, it was not because al-Mu'taṣim suddenly remembered to take care of unfinished business. Rather, it was because the prisoner's uncle, Ishāq b. Ḥanbal, had intervened with the police prefect to secure his relative's release. Claiming that Ibn Ḥanbal's dissent involved a matter of minor importance, Ishāq urged the prefect to «convene the scholars» to debate with the prisoner. He then visited Ibn Ḥanbal and pleaded with him to soften his stance. When the prefect did «convene the scholars», the imam's family suffered an unpleasant shock. The scholars were not jurists but «men of disputation and dissent», that is, philosopher-theologians armed with logic rather than *ḥadīth*. Their discussions with Ibn Ḥanbal ended with his calling one of them an unbeliever. At that point, the police prefect had no choice but to remand the prisoner for a formal inquisition before the caliph. The confrontation that al-Mu'taṣim had been avoiding for over two years was now inevitable.<sup>30</sup>

To understand al-Mu'taṣim's reluctance to prosecute the case, it will be necessary to glance at the origins of the *miḥna*.<sup>31</sup> In setting the inquisition in motion, his predecessor al-Ma'mūn had acted out of a firmly held conviction that the doctrine of co-eternity was heresy. More specifically, it was a heresy professed by leaders of a popular movement of opposition to the 'Abbāsīd caliphate in general and to him, al-Ma'mūn, in particular. This movement, which claimed the title of *ahl al-sunna wa l-jamā'a*, regarded the 'Abbāsīds as usurpers of the line of succession that had begun with the first caliph and ended with the Umayyad dynasty (overthrown by the 'Abbāsīds in 132/749). The self-proclaimed *ahl al-sunna* also deplored al-Ma'mūn's association with scholars, particularly Mu'tazilīs, who advocated allegorical interpretation of the Qur'ān and relied on logic rather than *ḥadīth*.

What made this movement dangerous was its ability to channel popular resentment against the 'Abbāsīds. Apart from their ideas about the Qur'ān, the people of Baghdad hated al-Ma'mūn because of his conduct during the civil war between him and his predecessor al-Amīn. During the war, al-Ma'mūn's forces had besieged Baghdad and starved and bombarded the city into submission. Afterwards, al-Ma'mūn continued to reign from Khurasan, leaving the former capital to the depredations of the mob. To make matters worse, he nominated as his successor 'Alī al-Riḍā b. Mūsā al-Kāẓim, a member of the house of 'Alī, and

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 43ff.

<sup>31</sup> The following account is based on Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 116-154, 430-446; Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 189-263; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 446-481; Jābirī, *Muthaqqafūn*, 65-115; Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, Ch. 2.

a recognized leader of the Imāmī Shī'a. Appalled, the caliph's 'Abbāsīd relatives set up a counter-caliphate in Baghdad. In response, al-Ma'mūn's partisans renewed their assault on the city. The ensuing chaos sparked collective action on the part of the citizens, who rallied to the slogan of «enjoining good and forbidding evil», in defiance of the caliphate if necessary. Al-Ma'mūn's return to the capital (204/819) brought a restoration of order, but the sources make it clear that the citizens thoroughly despised him. Decimated and impoverished by years of war and mob rule, they rallied eagerly around the pious scholars of *ḥadīth* who taught them, in so many words, that al-Ma'mūn was an usurper and a heretic.

Inspired, for his part, by Ardashīr's exhortation to suppress spontaneous religious movements among the people, al-Ma'mūn had chosen to call his opponents' bluff.<sup>32</sup> Much scholarly debate has revolved around his reasons for choosing the createdness of the Qur'ān (*khalq al-Qur'ān*) as his shibboleth, but the most obvious justification is that it was the one point he stood a chance of winning. As both sides knew, the question could not be established by simple recourse to a proof text. Rather, it was a matter for theological argument. Given al-Ma'mūn's view that he, as caliph, had the duty to determine right belief on behalf of the community, he was within his rights to demand that all believers acquiesce in the results of his deliberations on the createdness of the Qur'ān.<sup>33</sup> Some modern studies have seen his adoption of the *khalq al-Qur'ān* as a purely political move designed to discredit the Sunnī opposition. But there is no need to separate the doctrinal from the political: for al-Ma'mūn, wrong belief and defiance of caliphal authority amounted to one and the same thing.

Al-Ma'mūn's successor al-Mu'taṣim was a man of a different stamp. An enterprising warrior, he displayed no interest in science and philosophy; one account goes so far as to call him illiterate. Unlike al-Ma'mūn, he seems to have had a common touch: one source shows him helping an old man haul his donkey out of the mud.<sup>34</sup> Whatever the truth of such stories, it is clear that he al-Mu'taṣim continued the *miḥna* because his brother had asked him to, not because of any reasoned personal conviction. Brought before him, Ibn Ḥanbal allegedly shamed him into silence by asking whether the court had anything to add to the principles of Islam as explained by the Prophet. But the caliph's advisors —the court theologians<sup>35</sup> whom the new caliph had inherited from al-Ma'mūn— insisted

<sup>32</sup> Steppat, «From 'Ahd Ardashīr to al-Ma'mūn».

<sup>33</sup> Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 140-144; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, passim.

<sup>34</sup> al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, 4: 51.

<sup>35</sup> The Ḥanbalī sources, and much of the modern literature, refer to the inquisitors as Mu'tazilis. But the doctrine of the created Qur'ān was the characteristic position of the Jahmīs, not the Mu'tazilis; and Ibn Ḥanbal's opponents displayed a very un-Mu'tazilī ability to argue *ḥadīth*

that Ibn Ḥanbal was a heretic (*dāll muḍill muḥtadi'*), and so the inquisition resumed.<sup>36</sup>

The text that provides the most persuasive account of subsequent events is that of Ḥanbal b. Ishāq b. Ḥanbal, the imam's cousin.<sup>37</sup> Ḥanbal's father Ishāq was a close associate of the imam, and it was he who intervened with the police prefect to let Ibn Ḥanbal defend himself. Ḥanbal's *Dhikr* consists of first person accounts attributed to Ishāq and to the imam himself; the critical events are narrated almost exclusively in Ibn Ḥanbal's own voice. Oddly, however, Ḥanbal's account is only rarely referred to in later Ḥanbalī sources. Van Ess speculates that the problem lies with Ishāq, whose disastrous intervention may have discredited him and, by extension, his son's collection of reports. Moreover, Ḥanbal's account contains three lines which the modern editor has suppressed because «they contradict the known opinions of Ibn Ḥanbal».<sup>38</sup> Given their placement, these lines would not seem to contain a statement of capitulation.<sup>39</sup> But their contents, whatever they are, along with an admission that the interrogators were at one point able to refute Ibn Ḥanbal on a point of *ḥadīth*, may have made the whole account too problematic to gain popularity. Instead, Ḥanbalīs relied on the account by the imam's son 'Alī, which provides less detail on the critical events.

For our purposes, the obscurity of Ḥanbal's *Dhikr* is reassuring. Were it fabricated to exculpate the imam, it might have enjoyed better success. It is difficult to disagree with van Ess that both of the family reports make a martyr of Ibn Ḥanbal while playing up to the caliph. But if this is hagiography, it is exceedingly restrained. Another early pro-Ibn Ḥanbal account, that of Abū al-'Arab, has Ibn Ḥanbal deliver a sermon as the whips split his entrails open; another, that of al-Sizjī, has the caliph free the imam after receiving an angelic scroll in a dream; and a third (that of Ibn al-Faraj), tells us that the imam was freed when his shredded trousers were miraculously restored during the flogging.<sup>40</sup> By

(van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 3:463-64). Regarding the *miḥna* in general, Jad'ān has convincingly dispelled the impression that the Mu'tazila as such exerted a decisive influence on al-Ma'mūn (*Miḥna*, 47-109).

<sup>36</sup> Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 46ff.

<sup>37</sup> The one published edition is that of Muḥammad Naghsh (1397/1977). It is based on a complete but poorly preserved manuscript from the Egyptian Dār al-kutub (MS 2000) and a partial one from al-Zāhirīya in Damascus. Despite my gratitude to Naghsh for making this source available, I do wish he had not suppressed (by his own admission) three lines of the text. On this see note 39 below.

<sup>38</sup> Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 3: 463; Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 60 n.° 2.

<sup>39</sup> The missing lines are presented as having been spoken before the flogging took place. I have not yet been able to view the original MSS.

<sup>40</sup> al-Tamīmī, *Miḥan*, 438-444; al-Isfahānī, *Ḥilya*, 9:204-5; Ibn Abī Ya'lā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1: 162-167.

comparison, Ḥanbal appears a model of veracity and reliability, which are hardly unusual attributes on the part of one trained in the verbatim transmission of reports. Finally, there is almost no editorializing, meaning that my reading (or any other) must rely on the interpretation of incidental detail rather than on mere acceptance of Ḥanbal's declared opinion. Of course, it is possible that the detail has been planted there to mislead us. But as we have seen, subtlety is not the stock in trade of Ḥanbalī biographers.

Ḥanbal's *Dhikr* and the parallel account by 'Alī agree on the overall course of the trial and on many points of detail.<sup>41</sup> In brief, the inquisitors tried to persuade Ibn Ḥanbal using Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and logic. «First one of them would speak and then another», his cousin reports him as saying. «There were many of them, and I would answer them one at a time. But if anyone used arguments from outside the Qur'ān, the Sunna, or anything I recognized as a proper account, I would say 'I don't know what you're talking about'. So they would turn to the caliph and protest: 'Whenever he's got evidence against us, he pounces; but when we have evidence against him, he stalls'». Ibn Ḥanbal could certainly hold his own on the fields of Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, and seems to have done rather better with logic than he gives himself credit for. But none of it really mattered: for him, the only admissible evidence was an unambiguous assertion of the createdness of the Qur'ān from the Book itself or from the Sunna. Although the interrogators cited several passages in support of their position, they could find no direct statement of it, and had to resort to analogy to make their case. Ibn Ḥanbal thus refused to budge.

It is noteworthy that al-Mu'taṣim did not punish him immediately, as al-Ma'mūn had threatened to do. Instead, he asked the court theologians to continue debating with him. Ignorant of theology, the caliph did not find the inquisitors' arguments convincing. But he probably did understand the rebuttals, which consisted largely of citations from Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. «By God», said the caliph, «he is indeed a scholar of discernment. I wish I could have him here to advise and correct me. If he would only do as I ask, I would release him». He then made a direct appeal to the imam: «Shame on you, Aḥmad! I haven't been able to think of anything but your case it keeps me up at night. If I hadn't found you in the custody of my predecessor, I would have left you alone, and stopped the inquisition altogether».

Evidently aware of the caliph's hesitation, the chief inquisitor, Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād, visited Ibn Ḥanbal in his place of confinement and urged him to recant.

<sup>41</sup> The discussion below follows Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 45-69. Given the relative brevity of the account, I will dispense with page references for most citations.

When Ibn Ḥanbal repeated his demand for evidence, the inquisitor said: «Look, Aḥmad, they won't kill you [quickly] with a sword; they'll beat you to death». One might take the inquisitor's words at face value: he was «concerned» for Ibn Ḥanbal and did not want to harm him. More likely, however, he was beginning to see that making him recant would have great symbolic significance, while killing him would only make a martyr of him. Perhaps, too, he had begun to realize that the caliph might not agree to kill him after all. Besides the sympathetic 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Iṣḥāq, another of the inquisitors had begun to speak to Ibn Ḥanbal respectfully and to intervene on his behalf. On the third day, indeed, the chief inquisitor told Ibn Ḥanbal that the caliph had resolved to flog him severely and imprison him in a cramped cell. This is significant: it means that the caliph had already decided not to kill him, as the hostile inquisitors had demanded.

On the third and last day of his interrogation, Ibn Ḥanbal appealed directly to the caliph:

Why are you asking me to accept their position...? It is an [arbitrary] interpretation on their part, and an opinion they happen to profess. The Prophet forbade us to dispute about the Qur'ān, saying: «Doubting the Qur'ān is unbelief». I am neither a skeptic nor a theologian, but a man who transmits reports [about the Prophet and Companions]. So fear God in your dealings with me, and refer the matter to Him!<sup>42</sup>

According to Ibn Ḥanbal's account, the caliph, who was already reluctant to harm him, fell silent, evidently making up his mind to release him. But the police prefect and the chief inquisitor intervened, urging that he be chastised for his stubbornness: «It would be unwise to let this one go... He has defied two caliphs, and [releasing] him would mean the perdition of the common people».

Here, finally, was an argument the caliph could understand. Moved to anger, he commanded that the defiant scholar be stripped, suspended between two posts, and flogged. After the first few lashes, however, al-Mu'taṣim unexpectedly rose from his seat, approached Ibn Ḥanbal, and asked him to recant. Having no success, he returned to his seat and ordered the lictors to «strike hard». This sequence was repeated twice more. Eventually, Ibn Ḥanbal was struck thirty-three or thirty-four lashes, and lost consciousness. «I hung there limp», he reports, «and [the caliph] must have feared that I was dead. So he ordered me released

<sup>42</sup> Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 60.

immediately. In the meantime I had passed out, and when I came to my senses, I was in a room with my fetters removed». The police prefect and the chief inquisitor conducted the imam out of the palace, pausing to reveal his face to the crowds of onlookers who had assembled on the square and in the streets.

Van Ess, who concludes that Ibn Ḥanbal must have given in, describes the family accounts as attempts to exculpate the imam, whose «loss of consciousness» is an euphemism for the capitulation described by al-Jāḥiẓ and other hostile sources.<sup>43</sup> While one can only with the greatest trepidation venture to disagree with so learned an authority, it is nevertheless noteworthy that the account of Ḥanbal b. Ishāq makes the release seem plausible enough. Moreover, it does so without resorting to the heavy-handed manipulations characteristic of other Ḥanbalī accounts. Indeed, it is persuasive precisely because of the accumulation of incidental details which, taken together, allow for a precise reconstruction of the events in question.

Al-Mu'taṣim, as we have seen, did not understand the arguments of the inquisitioners. During the flogging, he reportedly confessed that he was «perplexed» by the entire case. His only recorded contribution to the debate had been to accuse Ibn Ḥanbal of seeking *ri'āsa*, «leadership», a reference to the activities of vigilantes who called on the people to «enjoining good and forbidding evil». As we have seen, it was caliphal anxiety about popular religious movements that had provoked the inquisition in the first place. But 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ishāq, the most sympathetic of the inquisitors, is described as pointing out that Ibn Ḥanbal had been a loyal subject, «staying at home» and enjoining submission to the authorities (an accurate description of him, if his biographies and responsa are any guide). The remonstrance apparently persuaded the caliph that his prisoner was no rebel. On the matter of the Qur'ān, al-Mu'taṣim probably understood Ibn Ḥanbal's rebuttals, based on familiar texts, far better than the syllogistic reasoning of the inquisitors. In any event, the argument that carried the day had nothing to do with the Qur'ān. Right or wrong, Ibn Ḥanbal had defied two caliphs, and al-Mu'taṣim could hardly let him so scot-free. Even so, Ibn Ḥanbal claims, «he had hoped to release me without a flogging».

After Ibn Ḥanbal's release, a physician sent by the palace described the beating as life-threatening. But this, it seems, was an accident. During the administering of the lashes, al-Mu'taṣim repeatedly left his seat in order to approach Ibn Ḥanbal and urge him to recant. Evidently, he expected that a few sharp blows would soften the

<sup>43</sup> Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 3: 465.

victim's resistance. To this end, he urged the lictors to strike hard, but he interrupted the flogging three times to repeat his entreaty. When Ibn Ḥanbal refused to capitulate, he had no choice but to continue the chastisement. Only when he had reason to think that Ibn Ḥanbal had succumbed to the beating did he order him released.

Besides his evident willingness to call the flogging to an end at any time, al-Mu'taṣim also seems to have taken steps to (literally) soften the blow. According to the Ḥanbalī family accounts, the caliph had inspected the lictor's usual whips and ordered different ones to be brought. The Ḥanbalī sources do not say what sort of whip was eventually used. But another contemporary (and hostile) source, al-Jāḥiẓ, specifies that the whips used were unbarbed, and with frayed tips.<sup>44</sup> Evidently the caliph did not want the beating to be fatal.<sup>45</sup> When Ibn Ḥanbal's recalcitrance forced his hand, al-Mu'taṣim became alarmed. Even Ibn Abī Du'ād, the chief inquisitor, gave up on the idea of killing Ibn Ḥanbal then and there, proposing instead that he be returned to confinement. A later Ḥanbalī source has him argue that letting the imam die inside the palace would only make a martyr of him. Other late sources claim that the caliph and his entourage were afraid of the mob that had assembled outside the palace. Plausible as these claims may be, Ḥanbal b. Ishāq's account offers no support for them (although it does mention the crowd). Rather, it has Ibn Ḥanbal declare that the caliph, «who had more pity» for him than «the whole lot of them», ordered him released.

IV. The difference between the trial of Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, the Nestorian physician and translator, and that of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, the pious *ḥadīth*-scholar, is that the former required the caliph to intervene in a dispute among Christians, while the latter required him to preside over a dispute among Muslims. This would seem to make a great deal of difference. Yet the caliph's conduct in both cases is strikingly similar. The parallels can be listed as follows:

1. Both caliphs were called upon to preside over a doctrinal dispute whose premises were beyond their grasp. (It is noteworthy that in both cases the caliph—competent or otherwise—is by common consent the only authority to whom such disputes can be referred). Both caliphs consulted the relevant experts, who assured them that the accusation was indeed a serious one.

<sup>44</sup> al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il*, 3: 295-296.

<sup>45</sup> It is also possible that the lictors, like the caliph, were reluctant to harm the imam, and so the caliph had to order them to strike hard, if only to maintain appearances. In later years, we are told, one of the lictors suffered a paralysis of the hand, and another sought out Ibn Ḥanbal on his deathbed to ask forgiveness for having flogged him. Although these hagiographic elaborations appear relatively late in the tradition, they may preserve memories of a credible circumstance, namely, that Ibn Ḥanbal possessed an intimidating aura of charismatic piety even in his lifetime.

2. Neither caliph punished the offender as a direct consequence of the latter's opinion as such. Rather, both caliphs did so to maintain their own dignity and authority, and the dignity and authority of the accusers. Al-Mutawakkil penalized Ḥunayn in deference to the Nestorian patriarch, and al-Mu'taṣim punished Ibn Ḥanbal in deference to the theologians and to the legacy of al-Ma'mūn.

3. Both caliphs used the penalty phase to exercise their jurisdiction, albeit in opposite directions. Al-Mutawakkil chose to treat Ḥunayn as he would any client of proven disloyalty and punished him more severely than the catholicos had suggested. Al-Mu'taṣim, on the other hand, used his jurisdiction to impose a penalty lighter than the one his advisors recommended.

4. Both caliphs subsequently decided to mitigate the penalty, again without settling the doctrinal issue at stake. Al-Mutawakkil needed Ḥunayn, and so removed him from prison without asking him to retract his iconoclastic views. (Whether it was the caliph or Ḥunayn's apologists who invoked the dream is irrelevant.) As for al-Mu'taṣim, Ḥanbal's *Dhikr* gives a credible account of his thinking. He suspected Ibn Ḥanbal of seeking *ri'āsa*, but 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ishāq convinced him otherwise. As far as the doctrinal issue is concerned, Ibn Ḥanbal's simple arguments doubtless made more sense to the untutored caliph than those of the inquisitors. Unable to decide whom to believe, al-Mu'taṣim hoped to elicit a nominal concession through torture. When it became clear that Ibn Ḥanbal would not relent, the caliph, fearful of the consequences of killing him on the spot, exercised his discretion and let him go.<sup>46</sup> If this is what happened, it does not mean that al-Mu'taṣim concluded that the Qur'ān was uncreated after all, any more than al-Mutawakkil's release of Ḥunayn meant a vindication of the sanctity of icons. Rather, it means that he could find no good reason of state for punishing him any more than he had already.

5. As a result of (4), both caliphs come off rather well in the sources. Neither the Ḥanbalīs nor the Nestorians abuse the caliphs (at least, not in these texts). This forbearance can be ascribed to prudence on the part of the storytellers, or to a thoroughgoing strategy of representation that uses the caliph to vindicate the hero. If the latter, the sources must be condemned as thoroughly unreliable. On the other hand, the two traditions in question describe the caliph in more or less the same way while having almost nothing else in common. Ḥunayn's story is

<sup>46</sup> It is also possible that al-Mu'taṣim took Ibn Ḥanbal's fortitude as evidence that the Qur'ān was indeed created, or at least that Ibn Ḥanbal had earned the right to say so. Such an attitude is implicit in Ḥanbalī hagiography, which reports that a crowd converged on Ibn Ḥanbal after the flogging to ask him what he said about the Qur'ān. By virtue of his ordeal, the imam can now address the question with unquestioned authority.



the product of a Nestorian courtly milieu, while Ibn Ḥanbal's emerges from Ḥanbalī *ḥadīth*-circles. Anything these two communities could agree on is likely to have had a basis in experience.

From the foregoing discussion of the sources, it should be clear that no single detail of these trials rests on a firm foundation. All one can do is presume that stories about the behavior of caliphs tell us something about the real behavior of caliphs, even when many of the details are wrong. Regarding accounts of court disputations on religion, Sidney Griffith has remarked that «the actual effectiveness of such a sub-genre of apologetic literature presumes in some way the basic verisimilitude of the debate scenario in the Islamic milieu». <sup>47</sup> In the two cases considered above, two caliphs are described as proceeding in similar fashion when confronted with a dispute over doctrine. One imagines that other caliphs would have behaved differently: al-Ma'mūn, for example, would doubtless have been much harsher with Ibn Ḥanbal and more lenient with Ḥunayn. But al-Mu'taṣim and al-Mutawakkil were not theologians, and decided to remain safely within their sphere of competence. Reassuringly, both Nestorians and Ḥanbalīs agree that this is how caliphs behaved. In the case of Ibn Ḥanbal, admittedly, van Ess's explanation is more economical: the imam was released because he capitulated. In light of other evidence (e.g., the account of al-Jāḥiẓ), this explanation may well be correct. Here, I have tried to show that the alternative is plausible also; and more broadly, to have shed some light on the nature of caliphal authority in the early Abbasid period, and on the work of caliphs as judges.

#### WORKS CITED

- BAR H., *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*. Ed. J. B. Abbeloos and Th. J. Lamy. Paris-Louvain: C. Peeters, 1872-77.
- COOPERSON, M., «The purported autobiography of Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq», *Edebiyat* 7:2 (1996), 235-49.
- , *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophet in the Age of al-Ma'mūn*. Cambridge, 2000.
- CRONE, P. AND HINDS, M., *God's Caliph: Religious authority in the first centuries of Islam*. University of Cambridge Oriental Publications n.º 37. Cambridge University Press, 1986.

<sup>47</sup> Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 24.

- DELLY, E., «Le culte des saintes images dans l'église syrienne orientale», *L'Orient syrien*, 1:3: 291-296.
- DERENBOURG, H., «Les traducteurs arabes d'auteurs grecs et l'auteur musulman des aphorismes des philosophes». In *Mélanges Henri Weil*. Paris: Fontemoing, 1898.
- ESS, J. V., *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*. 6 vols. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1991-1997.
- FIEY, J. M., *Chrétiens syriaques sous les abbassides surtout à Bagdad (749-1258)*. Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpusco, 1980.
- GRIFFITH, S. H., «Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic tract on the Christian practice of venerating images». *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105.1 (1985), 53-73.
- , *Theodore Abu Qurrah. The Intellectual Profile of an Arab Christian Writer of the First Abbasid Century*. Tel Aviv University, 1992.
- ḤANBAL B. IṢḤĀQ B. ḤANBAL. *Dhikr miḥnat al-imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Ed. Muḥammad Naghsh. Cairo: Dār Nashr al-Thaqāfa, 1977/1398.
- IBN AL-FARRĀ', IBN ABĪ YA'LĀ, *Ṭabaqāt, al-ḥanābila*. 2 vols. Ed. Muḥammad Ḥamid al-Fiḳī. Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiya, 1371/1952.
- IBN AL-'IBRI. *Ta'riḫ mukhtaṣar al-duwal*. Ed. Antūn Ṣāliḥāmī. Beirut: Al-Maṭba'a al-Kathūlikīya, 1958.
- ABŪ NU'AYM AL-IṢFAḤĀNĪ, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*. Cairo, 1932-38; repr. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'ilmīya, n.d.
- JĀBIRĪ, MUḤAMMAD 'ABD ALLĀH AL-, *Al-Muthaqqafūn fī al-ḥaḍāra al-'arabiya: Miḥnat Ibn Ḥanbal wa-miḥnat Ibn Rushd*. Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-waḥda al-'arabiyya, 1995.
- JAD'AN, F., *Al-Miḥna. Baḥṭh fī jadalīyat al-dīnī wa 'l-siyāsī fī 'l-islām*. Ammam: Dār al-Shurūq, 1989.
- AL-JĀḤIẒ, *Rasā'il al-JāḥiẒ*, 4 vols. Ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn. Cairo: Al-Khānjī, 1384/1964-1399/1979.
- AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, 'ALĪ B. AL-ḤUSAYN, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'dīn al-jawhar*. Ed. Muḥyī al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd. Beirut: Dār al-ma'rifa, n.d.
- NAGEL, T., *Rechtleitung und Kalifat. Versuch über eine Grundfrage der islamischen Geschichte*. Studien zum Minderheitenproblem im Islam 2. Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität Bonn, 1975.
- PELIKAN, J., *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- PUTMAN, H., *L'Église et l'Islam sous Timothée I (780-823)*. Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1975.
- ROSENTHAL, F., «Die arabische autobiographie». *Studia Arabica* 1(1937) 1-40.
- STEPPAT, F., «From 'Ahd Ardashīr to al-Ma'mūn: A Persian Element in the Policy of the Miḥna». In *Studia Arabica et Islamica. Festschrift for Iḥsān 'Abbās on his sixtieth birthday*, ed. Wadād al-Qāḍī. American University of Beirut, 1981: 451-454.

STROHMAIER, G., «Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq und die Bilder». *Klio*, 43-45 (1965), 525-533.

AL-ṬABARĪ, ABŪ JA'FAR MUḤAMMAD B. JARĪR, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa 'l-mulūk*. Ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm. 10 vols. 3rd ed. Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1979.

AL-TAMĪMĪ ABŪ AL-'ARAB MUḤAMMAD B. AḤMAD, *Kitāb al-miḥan*. Ed. Yaḥyā Wahīb al-Jabbūrī. Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1403/1983.

#### ABSTRACT

According to Ḥanbalī sources, the imam (d. 855) did not capitulate to the 'Abbāsīd Inquisition. In modern times, a persuasive argument has been made that he must have done so; otherwise, he would never have been released. Yet a comparison of Ibn Ḥanbal's trial with that of Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 873) suggests that the 'Abbāsīd caliphs, when asked to judge suspected heretics, made their decisions based on reasons of state rather than dogmatic grounds. Against this background, the trial report of Ḥanbal b. Ishāq can be read as a plausible account of why the caliph al-Mu'taṣim might have released Ibn Ḥanbal despite the latter's defiance of the Inquisition.

#### RESUMEN

Según las fuentes ḥanbalíes, el imām Ibn Ḥanbal (m. en 855) no capituló ante la inquisición 'abbāsī. En tiempos recientes, sin embargo, se tiende a pensar que sí debió capitular porque si no, nunca habría sido liberado. Sin embargo, una comparación del proceso de Ibn Ḥanbal con el de Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (m. 873), indica que los califas 'abbāsīes, cuando tenían que juzgar a un sospechoso de herejía, lo hacían más bien basados en razones de estado que en motivos dogmáticos. En este contexto, en la narración del proceso recogido por Ḥanbal b. Ishāq, puede leerse una explicación plausible de por qué el califa al-Mu'taṣim puede haber liberado a Ibn Ḥanbal a pesar de que éste desafiara a la Inquisición.