

Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī
Taṣaffuḥ al-adilla

The extant parts introduced and edited
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Introduction

I

K. Taṣaffuḥ al-adilla is the title of Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī's (d. 436/1044) first theological work, in which he critically reviewed the proofs and arguments (*adilla*) employed in *kalām* theology. After having studied medicine and the philosophical sciences in Baghdad, Abu l-Ḥusayn had attached himself as a student to the famous Mu'tazilī scholar Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī (d. 415/1025) in Rayy. He criticized some of the opinions of his teacher during his lectures, provoking an angry reaction from most of 'Abd al-Jabbār's other disciples, who accused him of espousing heretical thought. He now set forth his criticism systematically and in much detail in writing. Parts of his book were published before its completion and aroused further charges of heresy and even unbelief (*kufr*) as his views seemed to undermine the standard Mu'tazilī proof for the existence of God. Rather than completing the *K. Taṣaffuḥ al-adilla*, he now composed a book on what he considered as the best proofs (*K. Ghurar al-adilla*) as evidence that he upheld the basic tenets of the Mu'tazilī creed. While the new book did not entirely dispel the suspicion among Abu l-Ḥusayn's colleagues that the author was merely covering up his philosophical ideology, the two works eventually formed the foundation of a new school of Mu'tazilī thought, rivaling the school of Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār based primarily on the earlier teaching of Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d. 321/933) and known as the Bahshamiyya. Although much quoted in later works of the new school, Abu l-Ḥusayn's two books are not known to be extant. Extensive fragments of the *K. Taṣaffuḥ al-adilla*, however, have now been found in three manuscripts of the Abraham Firkovitch Collection of literary texts of Near Eastern Jewish communities in the Russian National Library in St Petersburg. Abu l-Ḥusayn's teaching gained early favour among the Karaites in Fatimid Egypt before it was adopted by the Khwarazmian Mu'tazilī scholar Rukn al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. al-Malāḥimī al-Khwārazmī (d. 536/1141) and through the latter's works spread among Mu'tazilī, Imāmī and Zaydī Muslims. While the eleven fragments that could be recovered from two of the manuscripts¹ evidently cover only a small

1 The third manuscript, RNL Firk. Arab. 103, although originally of a high quality, has

portion of the large work, they can provide an insight into the author's aim, method and form in his discussion of the arguments used in contemporary *kalām* theology.

The first six fragments, coming from MS RNL Firk. Yevr. Arab. I 4814, deal primarily with the divine attribute of knowledge. The Mu'tazila held that God was omniscient by His essence (*dhāt*), not by an attribute defined as an entitative being (*ma'nā*) additional to it as maintained by the Ash'arites and other Attributists (*ṣifātiyya*). For the Mu'tazila their definition raised the problem that God's knowledge could be identified with His essence. Abū Hāshim proposed to avoid this implication by stipulating a state (*ḥāla*) of being knowing. This state was caused in God by His essence, while in man it was based on accidents of knowledge (*'ulūm*). Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī, in contrast, defined knowledge as the mere attachment or connection (*ta'alluq*) between the knower and the object of knowledge without the need for a state.² He criticized the complicated method developed by the Bahshamiyya of assigning grounds (*ta'līl*), which involved the concept of accidents (*'arād*) as entitative beings (*ma'ānī*) inhering in bodies and causing their qualities such as motion and blackness. The Attributists, on the other hand, faced the problem that the concept of additional attributes in God such as His knowledge destroyed His absolute unity. They sought to escape this consequence by defining the divine attributes as neither identical nor other (*ghayr*) than His essence. These problematic aspects are raised in Abu l-Ḥusayn's discussion of the proofs (*adilla*) of the Mu'tazila, to whom he refers as "our companions" (*aṣḥābunā*), and the specious arguments (*shubah*) of their opponents. Many of the *adilla* and *shubah* are evidently quoted from Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār's *K. al-Mughnī* to which he repeatedly refers. The parts of the *Mughnī* relevant to the first six fragments are not known to be extant and thus could not be compared. As will be seen, Abu l-Ḥusayn quoted from an earlier version of the text than that available in Yemen whose extant parts have been published.³ 'Abd al-Jabbār revised the early text, in part at least in response to the objections of his brilliant, if argumentative student.

Fragment I begins in the middle of a discussion of a question of assigning grounds (*ta'līl*). The Bahshamiyya held that the likeness of essential attributes

deteriorated to such a degree that no coherent passages of any length could be independently restored from it. It was useful, however, in improving the text of RNL Firk. Yevr. Arab. I 4814 which it largely duplicates.

2 See Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *K. al-Mu'tamad*, ed. M. McDermott and W. Madelung, London 1991, pp. 200-201.

3 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī, *K. al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-'adl*, vols. IV-IX, XI-XVII, XX, ed. Ibrāhīm Madkūr *et al.*, Cairo 1961-1965.

entailed likeness of the essences themselves. Abu l-Ḥusayn points out that in the case involved the negation of an essential attribute does not require the likeness of the essences lacking the attribute. He then questions an argument of “our companions” as to why God’s eternal knowledge does not have to be knowing as God is knowing. He notes a potential objection to the argument and then describes and criticizes three answers he had been given by his colleagues when he raised the objection. A further proof (*dalīl*) is introduced on p. 8: God’s being powerful and omniscient is necessary, and necessary attributes cannot be grounded (*taʿlīl*) in an external matter (*amr munfaṣil*). Abu l-Ḥusayn discusses an actual objection and a potential one.

Fragment II continues the discussion of the same proof. It seems that only one folio of the manuscript written in Hebrew characters is missing between the two fragments.⁴ On pp. 12-13 Abu l-Ḥusayn offers two reformulations of the proof, but concludes that the Attributist opponents can present valid objections. A further proof follows: The way to affirm (the *maʿnā* of) knowledge is on the basis of the desert of the living being (*istiḥqāq al-ḥayy*) to be knowing, while it was possible for him not to be knowing, when all conditions are fulfilled. This way is not available in respect to God’s knowing (because He is necessarily knowing). Therefore it is impossible for Him to be knowing by a *maʿnā*. Abu l-Ḥusayn explains that the proof in this formulation goes back to Abū Hāshim. Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī (d. 369/980) had objected to it and had offered a different formulation. Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār then defended the formulation of Abū Hāshim, suggesting a plausible explanation of its intended meaning. Abu l-Ḥusayn analyzes the underlying argument at length and eventually offers a reformulation, but again concedes that opponents could produce valid objections. The fragment ends with the quotation of a proof by Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʿī (d. 303/916): If God were knowing by a *maʿnā*, He would either know that *maʿnā* or not know it. In the latter case, it would be possible for us humans to know many things God does not know by His essence or by (another *maʿnā* of) knowledge. In the former case, He would not be more likely (*awlā*) to know it by His essence than to know all other things by His essence. If He knew it by another (*maʿnā* of) knowledge, this could lead to an infinity of (*maʿnās* of) knowledge.

Fragment III begins in the middle of a discussion of the hypothetical and the real contrary (*ḍidd muqaddar wa-ḍidd muḥaqqaq*). It is probably part of a proof that the divine attribute of being omniscient could not be grounded in a *maʿnā* since that would require that God’s being omniscient had a contrary in

4 The parallel text in MS RNL Firk. Arab. 103 breaks off on fol. 38a and resumes on fol. 39b.

His being ignorant, as is the case in human knowledge. The advocate argues here that a potential contrary requires the admission of a real contrary. Abu l-Ḥusayn analyzes various objections by the Attributist opponents. A further proof is presented on p. 9: If God were powerful by a *ma'nā*, that *ma'nā* would have to inhere in Him, and it would be impossible for Him to produce substances (*jawāhir*). This is because powers (*qudar*), in contrast to knowledge and will, can only be employed to activate their substrate in the act and, in all their variety, cannot be used to produce substances. Abu l-Ḥusayn dismisses this proof as entirely unsound. He mentions related arguments, leading to the question of whether such an eternal *ma'nā* in God would have to be God, part of God, or other (*ghayr*) than God. Since a *ma'nā*, as an essence, cannot be identical with God, and God cannot have parts, it would have to be other than God yet not co-eternal with Him. This, however, is ruled out by consensus. Abu l-Ḥusayn now examines the definition of otherness offered by Mu'tazilī scholars (pp. 20-22). He agrees with the definition of Abū Hāshim and criticizes those of 'Abd al-Jabbār and of Abu l-Qāsim al-Ka'bī al-Balkhī (d. 319/931). The definition of the latter was preferred by the Attributist opponents because it allowed them to argue that God's eternal attribute of knowledge was not "other than God" since neither of the two could exist without the other.

Fragment IV is separated from III by only one missing folio. It begins, however, with a *shubha* of the opponents who argue that the reality of describing anyone as knowing is that he has knowledge. Abu l-Ḥusayn quotes one of them as arguing that the description of "knowing" must either refer to the essence of the knower or to his having knowledge. If it referred to the essence of the knower, negation of his being knowing would imply negation of his essence. The argument is further developed by the claim that we can order someone to know, meaning to acquire knowledge, and to praise him for doing so, or blame him for failing to do so. This requires knowledge to be a *ma'nā*. Abu l-Ḥusayn objects to this claim, first on the basis of the method (*madhhab*) of the Ash'arite opponent, and then on the basis of two Mu'tazilī views reported by Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār in his *Mughnī*, one by Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Baṣrī and the other anonymous (pp. 24-28). He goes on to examine the divergent answers of Abū Hāshim and Abū 'Alī to the *shubha* and finally gives his own reply. There follows another *shubha* (p. 30): The meaning of someone being knowing in the present world (*fi l-shāhid*) is that he has knowledge. This must also be its meaning in the unseen world (*fi l-ghā'ib*) because the meaning of an attribute cannot differ in the seen and the unseen world. Abu l-Ḥusayn points out that this *shubha* is identical with the previous one except that the opponents base it on linguistic grounds. They refer to the

language experts (*ahl al-lughā*) who say that our statement “knowing” is affirmatory (*ithbāt*), implying an assertion that someone has something real called knowledge. This implication had long been disputed by the Mu‘tazila, and angry exchanges had ensued. Abu l-Ḥusayn quotes at length from the *K. al-Hidāya (Hidāyat al-mustarshidīn)* of the Ash‘arite Qādī Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013),⁵ without naming him, who had insisted that the linguistic usage of the Arabs was divinely sanctioned since the Qur’ān was in Arabic and that the Arabs indeed understood the word *‘ālim* to mean that someone had knowledge. Al-Bāqillānī then commented in an ethnic slur that the Arabs were superior in intelligence and eloquence to “the people of Jubbā and the Khūz”, alluding to the two prominent Mu‘tazilī scholars from Jubbā, Abū ‘Alī and Abū Hāshim and their numerous followers in Khūzistān. Abu l-Ḥusayn responds by remarking that God, in addressing mankind in the language of the Arabs, certainly did not wish to sanction their false beliefs, such as that their idols were gods. He ridicules al-Bāqillānī’s rhetorical flourish as an attempt to emulate the famous Mu‘tazilī man of letters Abū ‘Uthmān (al-Jāhīz) (d. 255/869) (pp. 30-37).

Fragment V begins in the middle of another *shubha* which evidently argued that any characteristic (*ḥukm*) such as being knowing or powerful required a specific cause (*‘illa*), i.e. knowledge or power. If God’s being omniscient and all-powerful were both grounded in His essence, His being knowing and His being powerful would be identical. Abu l-Ḥusayn discusses and refutes various applications of this argument. Another *shubha* is introduced on p. 39: If God were knowing by Himself, His essence would be knowledge because knowledge is what is distinguished from everything else in that the knower knows through it, and it requires him to be knowing. Abu l-Ḥusayn examines and refutes the argument again first on the basis of the principles (*uṣūl*) of the opponents and then on the basis of the principles of the Mu‘tazila. In the course of his discussion of the arguments of the opponents, he mentions one (or some) who maintains that things last by a specific *ma‘nā* of duration (*baqā’*). Following the early Sunnī *kalām* theologian ‘Abd Allāh b. Kullāb (d. 240/855), Abu l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/935) is known to have

5 Of this work, only some fragments are extant none of which apparently containing the parts Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī is quoting from. The Azhar Library (Cairo) houses a fragment dealing with prophecy only (MS *kalām* 21). See *Fihrist al-kutub al-mawjūda bi-l-Maktaba al-Azhariyya ilā 1366/1947*, vol. III, Cairo 1366/1947, p. 337. In the *Maktabat al-Qarawīyīn* (Fez) is preserved a fragment dealing with *qadar* and *tawallud*. See Muḥammad al-‘Ābid al-Fāsī, *Fihris makhṭū‘āt Khizānat al-Qarawīyyīn*, vol. II, Fez 1400/1980, pp. 284-285. See also Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. I, Leiden 1967, p. 609.

taught that God as well as temporal things last through such an attribute of duration, a thesis that was mostly abandoned by later Ash'arite scholars. Abu l-Ḥusayn then refers to "this opponent" who in his book maintained that the *baqā'* of God lasted because of a further *baqā'* which subsisted in God and also caused the eternity of God's other attributes (p. 42). This is recorded specifically of al-Ash'arī.⁶ It is not known in which book he set forth this view.

Fragment VI begins with a proof based on the principle of likeness (*tamāthul*) which asserted that essences sharing an essential attribute must be alike. At the beginning of the fragment, an opponent argues that since God's attribute of being knowing as well as His essence according to the Mu'tazila require Him to know in the same way, they ought to affirm that the two are alike since their effect (*mūjab*) is the same. This would furthermore entail that God's essence is like knowledge. Abu l-Ḥusayn refutes this argument and goes on to discuss various Mu'tazilī arguments that two acts of knowledge (*ilmān*) which are attached to a single thing in the most specific way (*alā akhaṣṣ mā yumkin*) must be alike. The next proof (p. 47) posits that if God knew by a *ma'nā*, it would have to be either a single knowledge act, or more than one, either finite or infinite in number. If he knew by one or a finite number, he would either know all objects of knowledge or not all of them. Since all of these alternatives can be shown to be false, God does not know by a *ma'nā*. Abu l-Ḥusayn examines the arguments concerning the rejected alternatives one by one and frequently notes possible objections. A further proof (p. 56) is based again on *tamāthul*: If God were omniscient by an eternal *ma'nā*, it would have to be like Him. Abu l-Ḥusayn explains that the elaboration of this proof differs according to the doctrine of Abū 'Alī, who describes God's eternity as a distinguishing essential attribute, and the doctrine Abū Hāshim, who describes it as entailed by God's distinguishing essential attribute. The fragment breaks off in the discussion of Abū 'Alī's doctrine.

The remaining fragments (VII-XI) come from MS RNL Firk. Arab. 655, written in largely unpointed Arabic characters and described on the title page as the third part of the *K. al-Taṣaffiḥ*. The chapter headings are preserved in the extant text, and the author at various points explains the arrangement of the presentation. The gaps between the fragments seem to be small.

⁶ See D. Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam*, Paris 1988, pp. 181-182; and idem, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, Paris 1990, pp. 28-29.