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Wasiti's Intellectual Heritage

There is nothing known of Wasiti's family other than the small clues his name offers. The name Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Musa al-Wasiti, also known as Ibn al-Farghani, indicates that his father was a man named Musa from the Persian dominated region of Farghana (presently, eastern Uzbekistan and western Tajikistan). His family probably relocated from Farghana to Wasit. Wasit was dominated by the Arabs who founded it in 84/703, but it would have been a comfortable city for migrants from culturally Persian lands to the East. The descendants of the original Persian inhabitants of the town continued to live in the eastern embankment of the city even into Wasiti's day. Persian was spoken in the city. Wasit was also no doubt attractive as a vibrant educational and commercial transportation hub for its surrounding cities. The city was well placed, nearly equidistant between Kufa, Basra, and Ahwaz across land and between Basra and Baghdad on the Tigris, hence its name "Middletown."¹ Students of all the religious sciences sought out and were companions of individual Hadith scholars, and traveled broadly for the sake of study. Wasit attracted many of those students. It was the site of two important Hanbali Ahl al-Hadith schools of Qur'an recitation and Hadith, which produced enormous numbers of reciters and Hadith transmitters.²

The term Ahl al-Hadith can refer to a broad interpretive movement within early Islam or a particular group associated with teachings of Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241/855) within this larger movement. The broader movement was made up of a diverse group of Muslims who shared the conviction that the chief source of religious authority was the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. Although only four schools

of law survive to this day in Sunni Islam, there were in the early period a myriad of schools centered around particular scholars.³ In general, the Ahl al-Hadith Movement opposed the Mu‘tazilites who argued for the primacy of human rationality in this interpretive hierarchy. Those associated with the Ahl al-Hadith Movement distrusted the role of human rationality to different degrees. No one was “antirationalist” in any literal way. Rather, the difference of opinion rested on how human rationality should be brought into play in extracting knowledge from the two primary sources. For instance, those who followed Abu Hanifa felt comfortable using analogies drawn from already accepted interpretations to determine a new application of a verse if there were no sound Hadith or only a singly narrated sound Hadith (*abad*) to rely on for clarification. By contrast, the followers of Ibn Hanbal preferred to take any solitary sound Hadith over risking a possible error in making an analogy. Because of their interpretive devotion to Hadith, some circles of Ibn Hanbal’s followers were known specifically as the “Ahl al-Hadith.” I typically refer to the larger movement in this work, but to distinguish between the two I will use the terms “Ahl al-Hadith Movement” and “Hanbali Ahl al-Hadith.”⁴

Sufis shared the movement’s commitment to the primary authority of the Qur’an, and Sunna and like others in this movement can be distinguished by their particular attitudes toward the nature and scope of supplemental sources of knowledge.⁵ A Sufi may have been a student of any school of interpretation, but as a Sufi would consider direct knowledge of God (*ma‘rifa*) to be a complementary source of knowledge alongside the Qur’an and Sunna. In keeping with the Hadith, “The heart has the last fatwa,” direct knowledge of God gained through experiences of the unseen or inward states of unveiling confirmed and directed Sufi interpretations of the Qur’an and the Sunna.

The followers of the Ahl al-Hadith Movement were deeply concerned with establishing an authoritative continuity between the Prophet’s community and their own transmission of knowledge, which included using the Prophet as their pedagogical model.⁶ George Makdisi writes that early scholars modeled themselves consciously on the community of the Prophet and his companions. He writes, “Just as the Prophet was the leader with followers, each school consisted of a leader, imam, with followers, sahib, pl. ashab.”⁷ Muhammad Qasim Zaman argues that the adherence to the Sunna displayed by traditional scholars served to convey the authority of continuity reaching back to the Prophet’s

community. These scholars believed that they alone represented and guaranteed this continuity.⁸ Scholars were transmitters of what they understood to be the Sunna in both the subjects taught and the manner in which they were taught.

Likewise, the early Sufis also saw their small, diverse teaching communities as variegated reflections of the Prophet's community. The follower of a shaykh was also called a *sahib*, companion, during this period in contrast to the later usage of *murid*, aspirant. The term is not neutral; rather, it is employed with the community of the Prophet and his companions in mind. It is not unusual in later Sufism for shaykhs to claim to be the '*ulama*' of the non-canonical Hadith, "The '*ulama*' (literally, those who have knowledge) are the inheritors of the prophets." Sarraj is already reading it this way by the mid-fourth century. But when he refers to this Hadith in the *Kitab al-luma'* he includes the Sufis alongside the Hadith scholars and the jurists as the inheritors of the Prophets.⁹ Like students of Hadith, Sufis traveled widely for the sake of study. They collected the sayings of the great Sufis in the same way that Hadith students collected the sayings of the Prophet. The Sufi shaykhs, then, can be seen as the transmitters of what they understood to be the Prophet's inward Sunna to his community, whereas the jurists and Hadith scholars, *qua* jurists and Hadith scholars, concerned themselves with the outward Sunna. In imitation of the Prophet, the shaykh would teach through discussion, example, instruction, and daily interaction in the lives of his companions. Likewise, the companions of a shaykh would seek him out for guidance in both spiritual and mundane matters.

A Learned Shaykh

Wasiti was learned in the religious sciences although he never became a professional scholar such as his teacher Junayd or his student Sayyari. Wasiti received his education in the highly regarded institutions of his home town. Wasiti is cited as a transmitter of a Hadith by his contemporary Bashal in *Ta'rikh wasit*. Bashal became the director of Wasit's Hadith school itself.¹⁰ Wasiti's mastery of the Qur'an in his *tafsir* suggests he was a student of Qur'an recitation and interpretation. More significantly, his surviving work on the whole testifies to his theological sympathy with the thought of the Ahl al-Hadith Movement.

The Learned Shaykh in the Biographical Literature

Biographers characterize Wasiti as a deeply knowledgeable and eloquent teacher in the inward science of Sufism who was also learned in the principles of the outward sciences of Qur'an, Hadith, and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Wasiti was learned in the outward sciences, but was not himself a teacher of the Qur'an, a Hadith scholar, nor a practicing jurist such as his teacher Junayd or his own student Sayyari. The only standard biography of religious scholars of the outward sciences to mention Wasiti is *Ta'rikh al-islam* compiled by Shams al-Din Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Ahmad b. 'Uthman al-Dhahabi (d. 748/1347–48).¹¹ All other records of him are found in texts cataloging Sufis and only mention his life after leaving Wasit.

A comparison between Wasiti and Sayyari's entries in the biographical literature clearly marks the difference between what I am calling a learned shaykh and a shaykh who is a professional scholar. Wasiti is consistently described as a Sufi shaykh and a scholar, whereas Sayyari is described more specifically as a Sufi shaykh, a jurist (*faqih*), and a Hadith scholar (*muhaddith*). Sulami writes of Wasiti, "He belonged to scholars of the shaykhs of the Tribe [i.e., the Sufis]. No one spoke on the principles of Sufism as he did. He was a scholar of the principles (*usul*) and the outward sciences (*'ulum al-zahir*)."¹² Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani (d. 430/1038) writes in his *Hilyat al-awliya'*, "He was a scholar of the principles (*usul*) and the branches (*furu'*)."¹³ Dhahabi writes, "He was a scholar of the revealed Law of Islam (*al-shari'a al-islam*) and his language was beneficial."¹⁴

In contrast, Sulami writes of Sayyari, "He wrote down and transmitted many Hadith."¹⁵ Abu Nu'aym describes Sayyari as "the shaykh of the people of Marw, their Hadith scholar, and jurist."¹⁶ Dhahabi writes of him, "In his age, he was the shaykh of the people of Marw in Hadith and Sufism, and the first of those who spoke with them concerning states. He was a jurist, an imam, and a Hadith scholar." Marking a clear distinction between education in Sufism and in the outward sciences, Dhahabi records Sayyari's companionship with Wasiti, then separately lists some of the scholars of the outward sciences from whom Sayyari had received his knowledge. Following that, Dhahabi lists a number of the companions Sayyari taught in the outward sciences.¹⁷

However, Wasiti's entry in Dhahabi's *Ta'rikh al-islam* has no such list of teachers and students of the outward sciences, but does describe

him as one of the greatest students of Junayd and Nuri. In his biographical dictionary of early notable Muslims, *al-Muntazam*, Ibn al-Jawzi does not even describe Wasiti as learned, whereas in Sayyari's case, Ibn al-Jawzi writes, "He belonged to the people of Marw. He was a knowledgeable jurist. He wrote down and transmitted many Hadith."¹⁸

Wasiti's Theological Sympathy with the Ahl al-Hadith

Besides grounding his thought in the Qur'an and Hadith, Wasiti's thought was consistent with many theological positions associated with the Ahl al-Hadith Movement. Wasiti did not share the literalism of the interpretations found among some sympathizers of the thought of Ahmad b. Hanbal. Instead, Wasiti's positions on the nature of the Qur'an and God's attributes are similar to those that would ultimately be associated with the school of his contemporary Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 323/935). Wasiti could not have been influenced by him or have associated with him at that time. Ash'ari's conversion from Mu'tazilism did not occur until 299/912, and the school that grew out of his tradition was not to gain broad influence until long after his death. The positions common between Wasiti and Ash'ari most likely reflect beliefs developing in the wider Ahl al-Hadith Movement that would later be articulated and systematized by Ash'ari and his followers.¹⁹ Moreover, Wasiti's positions were commonly held by other Sufis including his shaykh, Junayd.²⁰

With certain exceptions that will be discussed, all of Wasiti's positions cited below are in accord with the broadly held beliefs of the Ahl al-Hadith and in direct contrast to that of the Mu'tazilites. Unlike the Mu'tazilites, Wasiti holds that God completely determines the actions of His creatures, including their misdeeds. Wasiti contrasts the Mu'tazilites with Pharaoh—infamous for his unwillingness to recognize God's lordship over his own—and gives Pharaoh a favorable review. Wasiti said, "Pharaoh claimed lordship on account of unveiling and the Mu'tazilites claim lordship on account of covering. Because they say, 'What we will, we do. Thus we are the creators for our actions.'²¹ Wasiti does not find the Qur'an to be a created thing, apart from God, as do the Mu'tazilites.

What, do they not ponder the Qur'an (Q 4:82) Wasiti said, "The Qur'an is named the Qur'an because it is an attribute of God. The Qur'an is never separate from Him, rather it is conjoined with Him.

It is called the Qur'an, because the attribute is not separate from what is attributed."²²

As mentioned in the previous saying and also in contrast to the Mu'tazilites, Wasiti considered there to be no distinction between the divine attributes and God Himself. In other words, there is no difference between God and the quality of being God.

The Real knows the one who deviates concerning the names and the attributes and those who make a distinction between the attribute and What is attributed, so He says, "He." There is no distinction between His He-ness and He. If there is no distinction between His He-ness and He, there is no distinction between His names and His attributes.²³

With regard to descriptions in the Qur'an concerning God, Wasiti rejected the literal interpretations that were common in the Hanbali movement among the Ahl al-Hadith, but neither did he resort to the metaphorical substitutions of the Mu'tazilites. For example, concerning God's throne, he makes it perfectly clear that the throne is not a place where God's Essence can be found. But instead of giving it a straight metaphorical meaning, such as "throne equals power," he understands the throne to be an actual manifestation, the meaning of which is power. He explains that the throne is not the place of His power because the Essence is beyond being encompassed by any place including the throne of God.

Lord of the magnificent throne (Q 27:26). Wasiti said, "God makes manifest the throne as a manifestation belonging to His power, not as a place belonging to His Essence since His Essence is withheld from being encompassed by it and taking up a position at it."

The possessor of the glorified throne (Q 85:15). Wasiti said, "He is higher than that which belongs to Him, concerns Him, or is in need of Him. Rather, He makes the throne manifest as a manifestation belonging to His power, not as a place belonging to His Essence."²⁴

This explanation is reminiscent of Ash'ari's position concerning the throne. "Allah existed ere there existed anything. Then He created the

throne and what encompasses it, yet He did not need any place, and after the creation of the place He was just as He had been before.” Likewise, Ash‘ari describes God’s sitting on His throne as a quality, not a literal anthropomorphic sitting, but also not a metaphorical sitting referring to God’s power.²⁵ In commenting on the chapter of *Ikbilas*—one of the key chapters of the Qur’an expressing God’s oneness—he seems to be stating the Ash‘ari doctrine, received through Ahmad b. Hanbal, *bi-la kayf*, “without asking how.” According to the doctrine of *bi-la kayf*, one accepts the literal descriptions of God, such as God having hands and a face, given in the Qur’an, but without asking how it is possible or by saying or what those literal attributions might actually be.

Wasiti said, “[In this chapter] He negates the realities and being encompassed, then He assures him with His words, *and no one is equal to Him* (Q 112:4). There is no allusion to what has no equal from the perspective of how one speaks about that which has no equal and no likeness, except to affirm without whatness and howness of the attributes.”²⁶

While Wasiti was widely learned in the religious sciences, the path of his education led from the outward sciences to the inward. Wasiti’s commentary on the following Hadith suggest that he did not think the outward sciences produced knowledge of the highest order.

Question the scholars with regard to what is lawful and unlawful. *Befriend the Wise* who wayfare by means [of wisdom] on the path of truthfulness and clarity. *Sit with the Great ones* who speak of God, allude to His lordship, and perceive by the light of His nearness.²⁷

Coincidentally, al-Husayn b. Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 309/921) also lived for a time in Wasit (249/863–258/871). Louis Massignon thinks he was an irregular student at the same Hadith school attended by Wasiti.²⁸ One may be drawn to imagine Hallaj and Wasiti meeting up at school with Hallaj directing Wasiti to study what Sarraj calls “the science of the realities of faith.”²⁹ Despite Hallaj’s anti-traditionalist views, he respected the Baghdadi Sufis and might have encouraged Wasiti to study with them.³⁰ But there is no evidence that Wasiti and Hallaj were schoolmates. In any case, after leaving Wasit the surviving reports put Wasiti only in the company of the Sufis.