

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the second quarter of the tenth century, following the cruel and scandalous execution of the Sufi mystic Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj in Baghdad, a lesser-known man was committed to the insane asylum of that great capital of the Muslim world. The treatment he received, the best available at the time, was little more than crude potions and shackling with chains. During his stay in the asylum he received visitors. “Who are you?” he asked. “We are your friends” came the reply. The man picked up some stones and began to throw them at the visitors. When they fled he shouted after them, “Liars! You claim to be my friends, but you cannot endure my testing!”

That man, Abū Bakr al-Shiblī, was no ordinary person. He was a singular individual of great intensity, spirituality, and perception, of remarkable wit and learning. His illness was, for him, just another stage on his inner journey, his search for the transcendent, for the Reality that lay in and beyond everyday appearance.

But did the events reported in this anecdote really take place? Such stories about Shiblī’s life later became the stuff of legend and folktale. They developed their own momentum and their own luxuriant growth, and in the hands of admirers, disciples, and hagiographers they were added to and changed over the centuries.

We know that he was born into a wealthy family, trained as a Mālikī scholar, “converted” to the Sufi path aged about forty, was a disciple of Khayr al-Nassāj and the famed Junayd, led an unconventional life of strict austerities and discipline, with some bouts of mental unbalance, and died in his eighties in 946. But these are only the bare bones of his exceptional life, and we know few other precise details.

While Shiblī became a prime subject for later hagiography, is it possible that we can come to know more about him, to peel

away the layers of pious tradition and discover the real facts about his life and thought?

Richard Gramlich writes that Shiblī's historical figure soon disappeared after his death under a luminous, legendary idealization that kept developing through the centuries. The traditional biographical details are nearly all anecdotes of unknown historical basis and detached contexts. Sometimes other important figures merely play an ideological role in these anecdotes, their dialogue or questions to Shiblī serving to place his personality and teaching at the center of the narrative.¹

Shiblī's figure shines with contrasting colors: a rigorous ascetic and a corpulent man with an enormous showy beard; capable of extreme self-abasement and unbecoming pride; a great traditionist, esteemed Mālikī scholar and Sufi master but at the same time a madman often needing asylum; witty in his speech but foolish in his conduct. What are we to make of him? Even Junayd, the great master of the Baghdad "school" of Sufis, wavered between stern reproach and the highest praise.²

Having left no writings, his sayings were transmitted orally and eventually found their place scattered among numerous authors. There was no biographer, but the many anecdotes that found their way into later writings form the basis for our picture of him. Yet, as Gramlich notes, it is not the historical biography that is really preserved, though some historical data are revealed, but the nature of his spiritual and intellectual world.³

Why is Shiblī important, and why should we be eager to know his life and sayings? In brief, the answer is that he was an exceptional person, a genuinely spiritual man, a God-centered individual who by example showed the path of intense devotion and the transcendental journey. It is in this way that the various writings that preserve his anecdotes and teachings are not important primarily as historical sources, but as disclosing to later generations the essence of his spirituality, thought, and action.

There are further systematic and genealogical reasons for Shiblī's importance. He is a key figure in the transmission and preservation of the Baghdad "school" of Sufism, usually centering on the "sober" Junayd, but also containing elements of the more unconventional and "intoxicated" mysticism represented by Shiblī. Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 1021), the most important collector of tradition (*ḥadīth*) and Qur'ān commentary (*tafsīr*) for early

Sufism, was a disciple of Abū ʿI-Qāsim al-Naṣrābādī (d. 977–978), a disciple of Shiblī. It is thus no accident that Shiblī's is the longest biography in Sulamī's influential collection of Sufi "lives," the *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (Generations of Sufis). Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1038), another important traditionist and hagiographer, was in turn a student of Sulamī. Abū ʿI-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), author of the most influential text of early Sufism, the *Risāla* (Treatise), following the death of his own master, Abū ʿAlī al-Daqqāq, joined the circle of Sulamī's disciples, which represented the tradition of Iraqi Sufism in Khurasan. ʿAlī ibn ʿUthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. 1070s), author of the first treatise on Sufism written in Persian, the *Kashf al-mahjūb* (Revealing the Veiled), studied under Abu ʿI-Faḍl al-Khuttalī, through whom he is linked to Shiblī and the Baghdad school. These initiatory and genealogical lines are evidence enough to show the importance of Shiblī for the history of Sufism.



In terms of methodology, I do not seek to present a full-scale biography. The sources ranging from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, which are relied on here, are not historical documents as such that allow us to gain solid information on Shiblī's life beyond the basics. They were not written for biographical purposes, but rather to preserve anecdotes of his teachings, sayings, and deeds with a purpose in mind, to show his piety as a model for emulation. R. Stephen Humphreys, writing about Louis Massignon's monumental *Passion of al-Ḥallāj*, states that "In terms of hard facts, we have only a skeleton of al-Ḥallāj's career, and much of what we are told about him is saintly hagiography rather than earth-bound history." Massignon's goal, however, was "not to establish a chronology of al-Ḥallāj's actions, but somehow to penetrate to the core of his spiritual personality, and to see it as a vital response to the totality of his milieu."⁴ The same applies in many ways to Shiblī and the present investigation, and my hope is to capture the essence of his spirituality, though of course I do not pretend to anything like the depth and scope of Massignon's famous work.

Not every possible source has been consulted, only those representative and better-known works from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries. These writings offer different characterizations, and though there are many gaps, the central personality of Shiblī

revealed in these texts usually has a claim to truth. Thus, I hope to present a dynamic and multifaceted portrait of Shiblī, how he was seen by succeeding generations of Sufi and non-Sufi writers from only a few years after his death (Sarrāj) through to the fifteenth century (Jāmī).

Each text is considered separately, its characteristics and qualities, as well as its contribution to our knowledge of Shiblī (in chapters 3 to 13). The value and shortcomings of these works are then considered summarily in chapters 14 and 15. Further aspects of his legacy are discussed in the following chapters, the structure of his sayings (chapter 16), and his relationship with the most famous of his contemporaries, Junayd and Ḥallāj (chapters 17 and 18, respectively). The vexed question of his insanity and how this is perceived particularly by modern scholars is pursued in chapter 19. An analysis of Shiblī's poetry—its style and forms, and examples of his verse—is the subject of chapter 20. Finally, a survey of his Qur'ān exegesis is undertaken in chapter 21, again with many illustrative examples. In this way it is hoped that a rounded picture of Shiblī may emerge by a variety of means, including the anecdotes found in the Sufi manuals and hagiographies, his sayings and poetry preserved in these same works, and his Qur'ān exegesis from Sulamī's early collections.

As mentioned above, my intent is not to produce a comprehensive biography using all the premodern sources. Rather, I seek to offer exemplary and characteristic vignettes from each source, highlighting the differences and the reappraisals of successive generations of Sufi hagiographers. In this way a historically conscious understanding is built up, so we can discern how different generations and communities came to perceive the life and heritage of Shiblī. As for the question of whether we can come to a more informed view of his significance, and perhaps peel away some of the layers of legend and tradition, the following chapters will tell.