

The Institute of Asian and African Studies
The Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation

Offprint from

JERUSALEM STUDIES IN
ARABIC AND ISLAM
51 (2021)

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**“WHAT NO EYE HAS SEEN AND NO EAR HAS HEARD”:
TOWARDS A SENSORY HISTORY OF EARLY ISLAM**

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**“WHAT NO EYE HAS SEEN AND NO EAR HAS HEARD”:
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Christian Lange
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Abstract This article studies the *ḥadīth qudsī*, “God said: I have prepared for my pious servants that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived (*‘adattu li-‘ibādī al-ṣāliḥīn mā lā ‘aynun ra’at wa-lā udhunun samī‘at wa-lā khaṭara ‘alā qalbi bashar*)” (Hammām b. Munabbih > Abū Hurayra > the Prophet). After briefly discussing Hammām’s *ṣaḥīfa* and the eschatological narratives found in it, I address the late-antique contexts in which the saying is embedded. I then proceed to propose a chronology, based on an *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, of the various versions in which the saying circulated up to ca. 250 AH. The paper concludes by highlighting the promise of studying the sensory history of early Islam, a history that largely remains to be written.

Keywords Early Islam; paradise; eschatology; *ḥadīth*; senses; sensory history

As proponents of sensory studies have long been arguing, “sensation ... is fundamental to our experience of reality, and the sociality of sensation cries out for more concerted attention from cultural studies scholars.”¹ However, to this day, few scholars have devoted themselves to studying the sensory history of the Islamic world.² It is true that sense denial, or renunciation

¹ Bull, Gilroy, Howes, and Kahn, “Introducing sensory studies,” p. 5. On the gradual emergence of sensory history in cultural studies beyond the Islamic world, see Smith, *Sensory history*, pp. 1-18. I would like to acknowledge the support of the ERC Consolidator Grant “The senses of Islam” (2017-2022, project no. 724951) in the research for, and writing of, this study. I would also like to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers, who generously provided suggestions for improvement of the structure and the argument of this article.

² As noted, *inter alia*, by Smith, *Sensory history*, p. 1. Next to several studies of the visual culture of the Islamic world past and present, and of medieval Arabic optics in particular, there are a number of single studies on the history of the non-ocular senses. See, among others, Jarrar and Jaafar, “It stinks in Basra!”; Frenkel, “Mamluk soundscape”; Fahmy, “An olfactory tale”. There

(*zuhd*), has received substantial attention by several scholars in the past;³ but studies of *zuhd*, it is suggested here, ought to be complemented by more investigations into the many sense-affirming “sensory models”⁴ that were in place in various areas and periods of Islamic history. Towards this end, this article studies two *ḥadīths* relating to the sensory nature of the Islamic afterlife.⁵ On the basis of an analysis of the various versions of these *ḥadīths*, including their chains of transmission (*isnāds*) as well as of the interreligious context (mostly Christian-Muslim) in which these versions arose, the article seeks, first, to show how earlier, late-antique traditions of thinking about the human sensorium were gradually ingested into the growing *ḥadīth* corpus and adapted to Muslim sensibilities; and thereby, secondly, to trace the emergence of a particular and in my view characteristic “sensory model” in classical Islam.

1. Eschatology and *ḥadīth* in early Islam: Hammām b. Munabbih’s *Ṣaḥīfa* revisited

At the beginning of this investigation, it is useful to sketch the contours of eschatological literature in early Islam. The Qur’ān’s great interest in what is in store for humankind at the end of time finds a seamless continuation in the early, pre-canonical Sunnī *ḥadīth* literature. In the *Kitāb al-muṣannaḥ* of Ibn Abī Shayba (Baghdad, d. 235/849), we encounter an elaborate *Kitāb al-Janna* (with 163 traditions) as well as a *Kitāb Dhīkr al-nār* (with 82 traditions). Roughly half a century earlier, Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) includes a *Bāb Ṣīfat al-janna* (with 63 traditions) and a *Bāb Ṣīfat al-nār* (with 59 traditions) in

is, however, little in terms of methodological reflection on Islamic sensory history. For an exception, see Fahmy, “Coming to our senses”. For the sensory history of early Islam, see below, at footnote 99.

³ On the early history of *zuhd*, see now the comprehensive study by Melchert, *Before Sufism*.

⁴ I borrow the concept of “sensory model” from anthropologist Constance Classen. In a programmatic article, Classen speaks of the “sensory model espoused by a society” in terms of a “basic perceptual paradigm”, according to which members of that society “‘make sense’ of the world, or translate sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular ‘worldview’.” See Classen, “Foundations,” p. 402.

⁵ The second of these two traditions, which here is used mainly to support my analysis of the first tradition, has previously been studied by Jorge Aguadé. See Aguadé, “*Inna ‘lladhī ya’kulu*.”

his *Kitāb al-Zuhd*. Going even further back in time, the apocalypse, Day of Judgment, and paradise and hell play a significant role in some of the earliest collections of *ḥadīth* that have come down to us, the so-called “notebooks”, or *ṣuḥuf* (sg. *ṣaḥīfa*). For example, a significant number of the ca. 195 traditions in the *Ṣaḥīfa* of Ibn Lahī‘a (Egypt, d. 174/790), as well as of the 138 traditions in the *Ṣaḥīfa* of Hammām b. Munabbih (Yemen, d. 131 or 132/749 or 750), are eschatological.

In neither of these latter two collections, however, do we encounter a ‘systematic’ eschatology. That is, doctrinally, the *ḥadīths* quoted by Ibn Lahī‘a and Hammām do not complement one another harmoniously. In Ibn Lahī‘a’s *Ṣaḥīfa*, for example, the Prophet is made to declare that “paradise is forbidden for all grave sinners (*ḥarām ‘alā kulli fāḥīsh*)”,⁶ while there is also a tradition in which the Prophet proclaims that “all those who say *lā ilāha illā anta waḥdaka lā sharīka laka wa-inna Muḥammadan ‘abduka wa-rasūluka* enter Paradise”, regardless of their sinfulness.⁷

As regards Hammām’s *Ṣaḥīfa*, the question of its origin and transmission remains disputed. The controversy is well-known.⁸ Content-wise, no scholar has decisively proven that the traditions reported in this compilation do *not* fit in the world of ideas around the year 700 CE, or indeed the second half of the 7th century. In fact, it is not difficult to imagine that Hammām’s eschatological material would have resonated in the milieu of the

⁶ Ibn Lahī‘a, *Ṣaḥīfa*, p. 282 (l. 264).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 287–288 (l. 290–296).

⁸ Gautier Juynboll has declared the *Ṣaḥīfa* to be the “handiwork” of the Yemeni collector ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘āni (d. 211/827), in whose *Kitāb al-Muṣannaf* the *Ṣaḥīfa* of Hammām is related. See Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 29–30. Juynboll problematises the fact that all *isnāds* point back to the Prophet, but his argument mainly revolves around the transmission of the notebook from Abū Hurayra (d. between 57/677 and 59/679) < Hammām b. Munabbih (d. 131/749 or 132/750) < Ma‘mar b. Rāshid (d. around 153/770) < ‘Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827). As Juynboll points out, granting that Hammām’s death date is 131/749, one is required to assume that he reached an excessively old age to be able to serve as a link between Ma‘mar and Abū Hurayra. Juynboll also highlights that Ibn Sa‘d (*Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 5, p. 544) states that Hammām died around 101/720, which would make transmission to Ma‘mar unlikely. Against Juynboll, Harald Motzki has argued for the reliability of ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s transmission, whom in general he considers a trustworthy transmitter. See Motzki, “Review of G.A.H. Juynboll,” pp. 546–548. Motzki admits that the difference in age between Hammām and Abū Hurayra is significant, but thinks it is not impossibly great. He also suggests that the early death date for Hammām in Ibn Sa‘d’s *Ṭabaqāt* is “a copying or editing error”.

“people of paradise” (*ahl al-janna*), the South Arabian tribes that picked up the thread of the Qurʾān’s eschatological enthusiasm, seeking to perform *hijra* to the heavenly Jerusalem during the early days of the Arab conquests.⁹ It is not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that Hammām compiled the *Ṣaḥīfa* and that the traditions in it are old. The following discussion develops a number of arguments further to support this assumption.

Of the 138 narrations included in Hammām’s *Ṣaḥīfa*, eight dwell on paradise and eight on hell, while a further eleven deal with the apocalypse and Day of Judgment. In other words, roughly 15% of Hammām’s material is eschatological. The *Ṣaḥīfa* of Hammām is akin in this respect to the Qurʾān, where the end-time occupies a similarly prominent place.¹⁰ The proportion of eschatological traditions in the comprehensive *ḥadīth* collections of the middle and the end of 3rd/9th century, by contrast, is smaller, as the center of attention shifts to other, mostly legal matters.

The eschatological material Hammām presents is variegated and somewhat quaint, which may be taken as evidence in support of the *Ṣaḥīfa*’s old age. Hammām’s elder brother was Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 114/732), a judge in Ṣanʿāʾ and a celebrated authority on Biblical traditions, whose knowledge of Judaeo-Christian eschatology Hammām is likely to have shared.¹¹ And it shows: Hammām’s collection draws items together from a variety of Biblical and non-Biblical backgrounds, including traditions that display the tendency, which later exegetes and collectors sometimes sought to domesticate,¹² to let the imagination free rein in picturing the two otherworldly abodes, often in outright geomorphic, material and sensory terms.

A couple of examples can serve to illustrate this. The Prophet is reported by Hammām to have stated that “there is a tree in paradise so large

⁹ See van Ess, “Das Siegel der Propheten,” pp. 59-61.

¹⁰ See Lange, *Paradise and hell*, pp. 37, 39.

¹¹ On Wahb, see Khoury, “Wahb b. Munabbih”; Vajda, “Isrāʾīliyyāt”. Two recent studies, the first critical of Wahb’s alleged contribution to 1st- and 2nd-century Islamic literature, the other less so, are Pregill, “Isrāʾīliyyāt”; de Prémare, “Wahb b. Munabbih”.

¹² See, for example, the unwillingness of the exegete al-Māturidī (d. 333/944) to interpret the word *al-kawthar* (Q 108:1) as the name of a river in paradise. Al-Māturidī, to back up his view, refers to the “unfathomability tradition” that is at the center of the present essay. See al-Māturidī, *Taʾwīlāt*, vol. 17, pp. 345-346. See further Gilliot, “L’embarras d’un exégète,” p. 52.

that a horseman cannot pass underneath its shadow in a hundred years,”¹³ which resonates closely with Rabbinic sources such as *Genesis Rabba* (probably written between 300 and 500 CE), where one reads (15:6) that it takes 500 years to journey around the tree of life in paradise.¹⁴ Ibn Abī Shayba, who reprises this tradition, relates that Ka‘b al-Aḥbār (d. between 32/652 and 35/655) explained that: “A young man riding around it would become old before completing the circle.” God, Ka‘b is further quoted as saying, “planted it with His own hand and blew some of His spirit into it.”¹⁵ Ka‘b is well-known in Muslim tradition, as well as in Western scholarship,¹⁶ for his knowledge of Biblical literature, and it is noteworthy that the early Islamic sources, despite him being a Jewish convert, trace a great number of exegetical points to him, particularly in the area of history and eschatology.¹⁷

In another tradition related by Hammām, the Prophet is said to have taught that

paradise and hell argue with each other. Says hell: “My inheritance are the proud and the tyrants.” Says paradise: “As for what I possess, only the downtrodden (*du‘afā’ al-nās*), the stillborn babies (*suqt*) and the simple people (*ghirra*) enter me.” God says to paradise: “You are My mercy. Through you, I show

¹³ Hammām, *Ṣaḥīfa*, p. 21 (no. 5). The tradition also appears in Ibn al-Mubārak, *Musnad*, p. 73 (no. 120).

¹⁴ *Genesis rabba*, vol. 1, p. 122.

¹⁵ See Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 9, p. 132 (*K. al-janna*, no. 30).

¹⁶ 19th-century scholars such as Abraham Geiger saw Ka‘b as a “Kulturträger”, as one of the key figures that provided the emerging Islamic community with a grounding in Biblical traditions. On the role of Ka‘b as a transmitter of Biblical traditions, see Wolfensohn, “Ka‘b al-Aḥbār,” esp. pp. 36-72; Schmitz, “Ka‘b al-Aḥbār; Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur‘ān*, passim; Tottoli, *Biblical prophets*, pp. 89-92. Recent scholarship is more cautious in regard to the historicity of Ka‘b and other early “Kulturträger” (such as Wahb b. Munabbih and Hammām b. Munabbih) and to how much we can actually know about them. As Paul Cobb has put it, Ka‘b is no more than a “ghost in the *isnād* of the conversion of non-Muslim lore into Islamic tradition.” See Cobb, “Virtual sacrality”, p. 45. In later Islamic literature, Ka‘b comes to be considered “the virtual fountainhead of the original Jewish conspiracy that sought to infiltrate and infect Islam from the very time of its origin”. See Pregill, “Isrā‘īliyyāt,” p. 218.

¹⁷ Ka‘b is quoted over fifteen times in the sections on paradise and hell in Ibn Abī Shayba’s *Muṣannaf* (*K. al-janna*, nos. 10, 30, 32, 45, 56, 81, 86, 113, 158, 163; *K. dhikr al-nār*, nos. 2, 12, 23, 46, 56, 60).

My mercy to those servants of Mine whom I wish [to reward].”
 And He says to hell: “You are My punishment. Through you, I
 punish those of My servants whom I wish [to punish]. Each of
 you two, however, has its fill.” As for hell, however, it will be
 filled when God puts His foot [on it] so that it will say: “Enough!
 Enough!” ...¹⁸

This is a particularly dramatic, anthropomorphist tradition, which resonates with Qurʾān 50:30, in which hell proclaims its great hunger on the Day of Judgment.¹⁹ Besides the Qurʾān, there are numerous late-antique parallels in which paradise and hell are imagined as beings gifted with speech, and in which hell complains to God, or groans under His might. For example, the motif of hell groaning is found in the popular 5th/6th-century Gospel of Nicodemus, in which Christ descends to hell to rescue humankind, an event that makes hell exclaim that Christ “drew [the damned] up forcibly from my entrails... my belly is in pain... We are defeated, woe to us!”²⁰ Likewise, in a hymn of Ephrem of Nisibis (d. 373 CE), hell “groans” over the sinners.²¹

Hammām further relates from the Prophet that “a woman shall enter hell on account of a cat that she tied up without feeding it, until it died of starvation.”²² In certain versions of the *miʿrāj*, the Prophet reports that in hell he saw “the Ḥimyarite woman (*al-ḥimyarīyya*), owner of a cat, who tied it [the cat] up without feeding or releasing it”.²³ This points not only to a

¹⁸ Hammām, *Ṣaḥīfa*, pp. 28-29 (no. 52). The tradition appears also in the canonical *ḥadīth* collections. See Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, p. 2187 (*K. al-janna, bāb al-nār yadkhaluhā al-jabbārūn*).

¹⁹ See Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*, p. 67.

²⁰ *Gospel of Nicodemus*, pp. 187-188.

²¹ See Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns*, 61:26. Elsewhere, Ephrem relates that one hears the sound of weeping and gnashing of teeth (cf. Matthew 22:13-14) of the damned from outside of hell. See Ephrem, “Letter to Publius,” p. 340. See also Ephrem, “Eine Rede der Zurechtweisung,” vol. 2, pp. 93, 97.

²² Hammām, *Ṣaḥīfa*, p. 36 (no. 89).

²³ See Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 14, p. 343. Variants are found in Ibn al-Jawzī, *Aḥkām al-nisāʾ*, pp. 302-4 (I owe this reference to Hannelies Koloska, Jerusalem). The tradition played a certain role in Muslim legal discussions concerning the kindness that is due to animals. For the way in which Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223) invoked the *ḥadīth*, see Berkowitz and Katz, “The cowering calf,” pp. 77-88 (I owe this reference to one of the anonymous reviewers). The authenticity of the tradition was disputed: While Ibn Ḥibbān states that the tradition is “sound according to the criteria of

South Arabian but also to an anti-Zoroastrian background, for the contempt towards, and maltreatment of, cats is a feature of ancient Zoroastrianism.²⁴ For several decades in the 6th and 7th centuries CE, the Yemen was co-governed by a Persian governor residing in Ṣanʿāʾ. The Persian garrison intermarried with the local Arab population; their descendants became known, in Islamic times, as the Abnāʾ (“sons”). To what extent this colony retained its Zoroastrian beliefs and practices in later times is unknown, as is the speed with which the members of this colony converted to Islam after the collapse of the Sasanian empire in 628 CE.²⁵ Wahb b. Munabbih is said by some authorities to have been of Abnāʾ origin.²⁶ His brother Hammām may thus have been familiar with Zoroastrian anti-feline sentiments.

In Islam, by contrast, kindness to cats became a sign of piety. The Prophet is remembered for his fondness of cats. Reportedly, he declared them ritually pure, permitting the drinking of water from bowls from which cats had drunk,²⁷ and he forbade the trading in cats for meat.²⁸ According to a *ḥadīth*, though generally considered forged (*mawḍūʿ*), “love of cats is part of the faith” (*ḥubb al-hirra min al-īmān*).²⁹ It also bears mentioning that Abū

Muslim” (*ibid.*), ʿĀʾisha is said to have rebuked Abū Hurayra for transmitting such a frivolous tale. See Schimmel, *Die orientalische Katze*, p. 12.

²⁴ In the Pahlavi translation of the Avestan *Vendīdād* (“The Law against demons”), Zoroastrians are encouraged to kill *xrafstars*, or “noxious creatures”, among which cats are included. See *Pahlavi Vendīdād*, pp. 299-301 (ch. 14.5-6); Boyce, *A history of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, p. 91; Omidšalar, “Cat I. In mythology and folklore”. According to one story, the cat was born from the sexual union between a human female, Jamag, and a demon (*dēw*). See Williams, *Pahlavi Rivāyat*, chap. 8e. The *Bundahishn* declares that the Evil Spirit, Ahriman, created the much-despised wolf in fifteen species, among which is the cat (*gurbag*). See *Zand-Ākāsīh*, p. 189 (par. 23.2); Moazami, “Evil animals,” p. 313. In the 6th century, Greek authors reported an annual Sasanian festival called “the removal of evil”, in which participants killed multitudes of “evil animals” and presented them to their priests. See Agathias, *Histories*, bk. 2, sec. 24; sec. 10, 59. Mary Boyce relates that as late as the 19th century, an annual ritual killing of *khrafstars* took place among the Zoroastrians of Kerman. See Boyce, *A history of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, p. 299. See also Foltz, “Zoroastrian attitudes toward animals”, p. 372; O’Neill, “Art. II.--The Parsees,” p. 42.

²⁵ See Bosworth, “Abnāʾ”.

²⁶ See Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. 6, pp. 35-36 (no. 772).

²⁷ See Motzki, “The Prophet and the cat”; Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 350-351.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁹ Al-Qārī al-Harawī, *Al-barra fi ḥubb al-hirra*, fol. 12r; al-Mubārakfurī, *Tuḥfat al-Aḥwadhī*, vol. 1, p. 263. The Ṣūfī al-Shiblī (d. 334/946) was said to have received divine forgiveness because of the kindness he showed a helpless kitten. See al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, vol. 2, p. 383.

Hurayra, the person from whom Hammām allegedly heard the tradition, was known for his great love of cats, whence the name given to him by the Prophet, which translates as “father of a kitten”.³⁰

2. The unfathomability tradition: Biblical and Islamic versions

Of special interest for the present investigation are two traditions in Hammām’s *Ṣaḥīfa* that problematise the worldliness and corporeality of the afterlife. “The first group to enter paradise,” Hammām quotes from the Prophet, “will have faces like the moon; they will not spit, blow their nose, or defecate; they will have golden and silver utensils and combs, censers of aloe, their sweat is musk.”³¹ Another version of this *ḥadīth*, related in Ibn Abī Shayba’s *Muṣannaḥ* and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s (d. 241/855) *Musnad*, elaborates that musk is emitted by the inhabitants of paradise in lieu of defecation.³² On the one hand, this narration continues the Qur’ānic theme of the concrete worldliness and the material luxury awaiting the blessed in paradise. On the other hand, it softens the impression of unfettered sensualism: While the inhabitants of paradise enjoy physical luxuries, their bodies behave in strange new ways, glowing like the moon and foregoing all need to emit bodily waste by way of the bowels.

This “no-excretion tradition”, to which I will return below, is juxtaposed in Hammām’s *Ṣaḥīfa* with the following tradition, a tradition that henceforth I will refer to as the “unfathomability tradition”. Hammām relates from the Prophet that “God said: I have prepared for my pious servants that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived (*al-‘adatu li-‘ibādī al-ṣāliḥīn mā lā ‘aynun ra’at wa-lā udhunun sami‘at wa-lā khaṭara ‘alā qalbi bashar*).”³³

³⁰ Cf. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, p. 179.

³¹ Hammām, *Ṣaḥīfa*, p. 35 (no. 86). See above, at footnote 5.

³² Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 4, p. 367; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, vol. 9, p. 136. See further al-Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira*, vol. 2, p. 197; al-Majlisi, *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 8, pp. 332, 347, 356, 365.

³³ Hammām, *Ṣaḥīfa*, p. 25 (no. 31).

In the later Muslim literature on the afterlife, this *ḥadīth* is invoked virtually everywhere.³⁴ Here, however, I am exclusively concerned with the trajectory of this tradition from Late Antiquity to the early centuries of Islam up to the third century AH, when the tradition gets fixed, in different versions, in several of the “canonical” collections of Sunni *ḥadīth*. First, about the late-antique parallels. The saying derives from Paul’s first Letter to the Corinthians (2:9-10): “As it is written, what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.” The question of the sources of Paul, that is, which “written” earlier text Paul refers to, a topic about which Biblical scholars have spilled a considerable amount of ink,³⁵ is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, what interests us is how the saying traveled from 1 Corinthians all the way into Hammām’s *Ṣaḥīfa*. I suggest there are several significant stops on the way, that is, moments of adaptation of the saying. There are three such moments: first, that which is “written” becomes the direct utterance of God; second, that which is “prepared” is firmly placed in the eschatological future;³⁶ and third, that which will be “revealed” is declared not only to be unknown, but unknowable.

The first and second of these adaptations are already tangible in the so-called *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, a first- or second-century collection of 114 *logia* attributed to Jesus. According to the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, “Jesus said: I will give you what no eye has seen and what no ear has heard and no hand

³⁴ For a sample of sources referencing the unfathomability tradition after the 4th/10th century, see al-Māturīdī, *Taʿwīlāt*, vol. 17, pp. 345-6; al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, vol. 3, p. 497; al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, vol. 4, p. 31; Ibn al-Kharrāṭ, *ʿĀqība*, p. 313; al-Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira*, vol. 2, pp. 165-166; al-Suyūṭī, *Budūr*, p. 488; al-Lamaṭī, *Ibrīz*, p. 901.

³⁵ See Wilk, “Jesajanische Prophetie”, and the literature mentioned there, especially footnotes 3 to 12. Most scholars assume a connection with Isaiah 52:15, a passage about the Messiah: “He shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.” Also Isaiah 64:3, a passage that praised God’s wondrous interventions in the history of the Israelites, appears to relate closely to 1 Cor 2:9: “Such things had never been heard or noted. No eye has seen [them], O God, but You.”

³⁶ As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article points out to me, it is possible or even “reasonable” to think that in Paul’s letter the saying already carries eschatological undertones. I am unable to decide whether this is the case. What seems clear to me, at any rate, is that the eschatological meaning is gradually and increasingly emphasized in the course of the saying’s late-antique permutations.

has touched and what has not come into the heart of man.”³⁷ Here, the saying has become a divine saying in the first person, the spoken word of Jesus; it is no longer something that is “written”, as in 1 Cor 2:9. Note, also, that the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* unequivocally moves the event announced in 1 Cor 2:9 to the future: Jesus *will* give previously unseen, unheard and untouched things, presumably at the end of time. These things have not been revealed or otherwise given yet. 1 Cor 2:10 (“These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit”) is dropped from the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*.³⁸

Also the Syrian Church Father Aphrahat (d. ca. 345), in one of his homilies (*Dem.* 22:13), stresses that the things unseen, unheard and unimagined will be revealed in the world to come. In heaven, “there are things ... that the eye has not seen and that the ear has not heard, [things] that have not risen up in the human heart. [These] things are not uttered, and no person is able to say [anything about them].”³⁹ In addition to restating that paradise cannot be sensorily experienced or known during human life on earth, Aphrahat apophatically adds the dimension of the impossibility to even say what the blessed will encounter in paradise.

Once the unfathomability tradition is incorporated into the expanding corpus of eschatological *ḥadīth* in Islam, further developments take place and strategies to naturalise it unfold. *Ḥadīth*, the arena of “implicit theology” (van Ess), is the vehicle, or the transformation machine, in which this happens. As I suggest, what we witness, in the form of four different versions of the tradition, each of which comes with a number of variants, is a slow process of ingesting a Biblical tradition into Muslim religious literature. No particular version, however, ever fully imposes itself as the only valid one.

³⁷ *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, p. 115 (no. 17). Cf. Graham, *Divine word*, p. 180.

³⁸ The connection with an eschatological future is also made explicit in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 99a), which refers the subject of the saying to “the world to come”: “As for the world to come, the eye hath not seen, O Lord, beside thee [Isaiah 64:3], what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him.” See *Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 24, p. 671.

³⁹ Aphrahat, *Demonstrationes*, col. 117, 120 (pp. 469-470 in the translation of Adam Lehto, from whom I am quoting and whom I would like to thank for sharing his work and thoughts with me).

(1) The nuclear version of the unfathomability tradition (henceforth: UT):⁴⁰ UT, the version of the unfathomability tradition that appears in Hammām's *Ṣaḥīfa* ("God said: I have prepared for my pious servants that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived" = *aʿdadtu li-ʿibādī al-ṣāliḥīn mā lā ʿaynun raʿat wa-lā udhunun samiʿat wa-lā khaṭara ʿalā qalbi bashar*), is remarkably close in style and vocabulary to the version of 1 Cor 2:9 in the early 5th-century Syriac Peshittā ("As it is written, 'Eyes have not seen, ears have not heard, and human hearts have not conceived of that which God has prepared for those who love him'" = *ʿaynā lā ḥzāt w-ʿednā lā šemʿat w-ʿal lebbā d-bar nāšā lā sleq meddem d-ṭayeb ʿallāhā l-ʿayleyn d-rāḥmīn leh*).

However, three important changes should be registered. First of all, Hammām's version turns a "written" saying into a first-person utterance, as in the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*. Note that in UT, it is not Jesus who speaks, as in the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, but God Himself (*qāla llāhu*). The saying has become a divine saying (*ḥadīth qudsī*), one that can be understood to gesture forward to an imminent eschatological future. In 20th-century *ḥadīth* scholarship, the *ḥadīth qudsī* was, for a long time, regarded as a "late", *ṣūfī*-inspired phenomenon. William Graham, however, has convincingly argued that divine sayings are "an early, even 'primitive' element in Islamic tradition which belongs to the sphere of personal and popular piety... It echoes the Qurʾānic motifs of a heightened eschatological awareness."⁴¹ We see this "heightened eschatological awareness" quite clearly here, in the case of the unfathomability tradition.

Secondly, in UT, an Islamization, or Qurʾānization, of the tradition takes place. The Syriac Peshitta, as seen above, uses the expression "those who love Him" (Syr. *l-ʿayleyn d-rāḥmīn leh*).⁴² UT rephrases this to "my pious servants" (Arab. *ʿibādī al-ṣāliḥīn*). Further, UT uses Arabic *aʿadda* for Syriac *ṭayeb*, which connects the saying to the Qurʾān, where there are several

⁴⁰ Hammām, *Ṣaḥīfa*, p. 25 (no. 31); Ibn al-Mubārak, *Musnad*, p. 73 (no. 121); ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 11, p. 416; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 9, p. 130; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 2, p. 506; al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, p. 445 (K. *al-tawḥīd; bāb qawl Allāh ʿayrīdūna an yubaddilū kalām Allāh*).

⁴¹ Graham, *Divine word*, p. 109.

⁴² Likewise, in the Arabic Bible, we find *alladhīna yuḥibbūnahū*. See in the 3rd/9th-century translation of Paul's letter contained in Ms. Sinai 151, ed. Staal, quoted in Ullmann, *Beiträge*, p. 318: *ka-mā huwa maktūbun: inna al-ʿayna lam tara wa-l-udhuna lam tasmaʿ wa-lam takḥtir ʿalā qalbi al-insānī ma aʿadda llāhu li-lladhīna yuḥibbūnahū*.

instances of God “preparing” (*a‘adda*) things for the believers and the unbelievers (see e.g. Q 4:93, 4:102, 9:89, *passim*).

Thirdly, UT does not include the text of 2 Cor 9:10 (“These things God has revealed to us”), that is, the idea that knowledge about the world-to-come has already been revealed. As in the case of the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* and of the version of the saying transmitted by Aphrahat, this can be interpreted to indicate a certain apophatic gist: Not only has the world-to-come never before been seen or heard, but the world-to-come is *beyond* the senses. In other words, the things in the world-to-come are not only unknown, they are unknowable.

(2) The exegetical version (UT+E):⁴³ The “exegetical version” of the unfathomability tradition places UT in a Qur’ānic, exegetical context: “God said: I have prepared for my pious servants that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard and no human heart has conceived. {No soul knows what joyful sight [*qurraṭ a‘yun*] is hidden away for them} [Q 32:17].” The addition of Q 32:17, in variants of the UT+E version, is attributed to ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652-3?), Abū Hurayra (d. ca. 58/768), or to the Prophet himself. This exegetical contextualization, in my view, achieves two things.

One, it suggests that UT is organically connected to the Qur’ān, that it is part and parcel of the Islamic revelation. Two, the addition of Q 32:17 makes it clear that UT does not mean that the things in store in the afterlife *cannot* be known. Rather, these things are *currently* unknown, or not known yet: “No soul *knows* (*ta‘lamu*) what is hidden away for them”. According to UT+E, it is not the case, as some might have interpreted UT, that paradise is not a place of and for the senses, or in other words, a completely disembodied affair. Rather, sense perception in paradise does take place—but believers have to wait until they experience it in order to “know” it.

The early exegete Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna (d. 198/814) reportedly commented that UT+E “concerns the things that you know without doubt”

⁴³ Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, vol. 9, p. 130; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 2, p. 438, vol. 5, p. 334; Hannād b. al-Sarī, *Zuhd*, vol. 1, p. 49 (no. 2); al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 324 (*K. bad’ al-khalq* 8; *b. mā jā’a fī ṣifat al-janna*), vol. 3, p. 249 (*K. tafsīr al-Qur’ān; bāb qawlihi ffa-lā ta‘lamu nafsun mā ukhfiya lahum*); Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, p. 2174 (*K. al-janna* 2); al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan*, vol. 1, p. 330; al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi‘*, vol. 4, p. 685 (*K. al-janna* 15; *bāb mā jā’a fī sūq al-janna*); Abū Nu‘aym, *Ṣifat al-janna*, p. 135 (no. 109); Ibn al-Kharrāṭ, *‘Āqiba*, p. 313; al-Suyūṭī, *Budūr*, p. 488.

(*fīmā ‘alimta ‘alā ghayr wajh al-shakk*).⁴⁴ Sufyān, who circulated the exegetical version liberally, as we will see below, thus further restricts the meaning of the tradition: the things that are in store in the afterlife are currently unknown only in the sense that nobody knows *exactly*, without doubt, what and how they are. And next to these “unknown” things, Sufyān leaves room for other things that are, in fact, knowable, whether now or in the hereafter. This thought is made explicit in the following version of the tradition.

(3) The *balha* version (UT+B):⁴⁵ Both UT and UT+E presuppose that knowledge about the things to be seen and heard in the afterlife is unavailable, whether *de facto* (UT+E) or *in potentia* (UT). However, to the emerging Muslim community, it must have seemed an inescapable fact that, as recipients of a voluminous divine revelation, in the form of both the Qur’ān and the inspired knowledge of the Prophet, a lot of things *were* in fact known to be seen or to be heard in the afterlife. Eschatological *ḥadīths*, as we saw above, picture women being punished for maltreating their cats; they invoke the noises made by paradise and hell, disputing their respective rank in front of God; etc. *Ḥadīths* about paradise and hell, building on the richly sensory picture of the world-to-come provided in the Qur’ān, give detailed information about how the senses will be stimulated in the afterlife.

A further extended version of UT appears to respond to this paradox: “God said: I have prepared for my pious servants that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived, save that which I have already enabled you to know (*balha mā qad aṭla‘tukum ‘alayhi*).”⁴⁶ This

⁴⁴ See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, vol. 21, p. 119.

⁴⁵ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 2, p. 466; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, p. 2175 (*K. al-janna* 2).

⁴⁶ On *balha* and its use in UT+B, see Lane, *Arabic-English lexicon*, s.v.; Ullmann, *Beiträge*, pp. 309–24. Ullmann (*ibid.*, 312) notes the theory of Arab grammarians that *balha* indicates an exception (*istithnāʾ*), which is how I understand UT+B. Ullmann’s own translation (*ibid.*, 318) of UT+B is as follows: “Ich habe für meine frommen Diener das, was kein Auge gesehen hat und kein Ohr gehört hat und was in keines Menschen Herz gedrungen ist, als einen Schatz bereitet, ganz zu schweigen von dem, was euch zur Kenntnis gebracht wurde.” This puts a slightly different spin on the saying: *balha* here is translated as “in addition to”, “not to mention that which”. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, after discussing various possible meanings of *balha*, settles on the opinion that *balha*, in the unfathomability tradition, means “except”, or “save” (*ghayr*), which coincides with the translation proposed here. See Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Faṭḥ al-bārī*, vol. 8, pp. 516–517. Also the majority of lexicographers quoted by Lane understood *balha* in UT+B in the meaning of *ghayr*,

balha version of the unfathomability tradition (UT+B), like UT+E, comes with a certain number of variants: In some variants, the *balha* extension is an interpretation of the *ḥadīth* proffered by Abū Hurayra or the Prophet,⁴⁷ while in others, it is incorporated into the *ḥadīth qudsī* as the very word of God, becoming *balha mā aṭlaʿtukum ʿalayhi* (“that which I have enabled you to know”).⁴⁸

According to UT+B, we do not know anything about the world-to-come to the exception of that which we already know by means of the knowledge that has reached us from God. What kind of knowledge is this, precisely? One thinks of the Qurʾān first and foremost, and it is possible that certain Muslim audiences of UT+B drew the conclusion that the only knowledge about the sensory aspects of the hereafter was to be found in the Qurʾān, and nowhere else. But the choice for the verb *aṭlaʿa* instead of verbs like *anzala* (“to send down”) or *awḥā* (“to reveal”) is significant: it makes room for knowledge having reached people by way of the Prophet and his *ḥadīth*.

UT+B turns UT on its head while strengthening and elaborating UT+E. While UT suggests that paradise is unfathomable to the senses, perhaps even unknowable in an apophatic way, and while UT+E makes the point that believers do not *currently* know what is in store for them in the afterlife, but will know sensory delights once they reach paradise, UT+E asserts two points: first, believers will engage the delights of paradise and the tortures of hell with their senses, and second, they know parts of it already—through what they have been “enabled to know” by means of the Qurʾān and the Prophetic tradition.

(4) The combined version (UT+B+E):⁴⁹ Finally, there is a version of the *ḥadīth* that combines the exegetical addition and the *balha* extension: “God said: I have prepared for my pious servants [in paradise] that which no eye has

“save”. As for the verb *aṭlaʿa* (Ullmann: “zur Kenntnis bringen”), I follow Rosenthal, *Knowledge*, p. 132, in translating as “to enable to know”.

⁴⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 2, p. 466.

⁴⁸ Al-Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira*, vol. 2, p. 166.

⁴⁹ Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, vol. 9, p. 136; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 2, p. 495; Hannād b. al-Sarī, *Zuhd*, vol. 1, p. 47 (no. 1); al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 249 (*K. tafsīr al-Qurʾān; bāb qawlihi {fa-lā taʿlamu naḥsun mā ukhfiya lahum}*); Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, p. 2174 (*K. al-janna 2*); Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, vol. 3, p. 547 (*K. al-zuhd; bāb ṣifat al-janna*); Abū Nuʿaym, *Ṣifat al-janna*, p. 136 (no. 110); al-Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira*, vol. 2, pp. 165-166.

seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived, save that which I have enabled you to know about (*balha mā qad aṭlaʿtukum ʿalayhi*). {No soul knows what joy is hidden away for them} [Q 32:17].”

3. The unfathomability tradition: *isnād* analysis

On the basis of the above, a relative chronology by which the unfathomability tradition developed suggests itself: UT > UT+E/UT+B > UT+B+E. In this section, I seek to enrich this developmental hypothesis and turn it into something more than a conjecture, by adding *isnāds* to the analysis. When examining *isnāds*, can we say more exactly when the various versions of the *ḥadīth* were brought into circulation? Can the relative chronology be turned into an absolute one? I proceed by studying, first, the *isnād* bundle of all versions combined and then, in a second step, by separately examining the *isnād* bundle of each version.

I am not the first to study the early transmission of the unfathomability tradition. G. H. A. Juynboll discusses the tradition in two separate places in his *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth* (2007). In one place, he identifies the *mawlā* and traditionist Abū Muʿāwiya Muḥammad b. Khāzim (Kūfa, d. 194-5/810-11) as an important launch pad, that is, a “seeming common link” or (S)CL, of the tradition in Muslim circles.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, Juynboll labels the above-mentioned Sufyān b. ʿUyayna (Mecca, d. 198/814) a possible (S)CL of the tradition.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, p. 57. A (S)CL is called thus because there are not many students who transmitted the *ḥadīth* from him as partial common links, only two. See *ibid.*, p. xxi. On Abū Muʿāwiya, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, pp. 217-218.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 610-11. Sufyān died in 198/814, although Juynboll suspects that he actually died later (*ibid.*, p. 568), and that the older date was invented to connect him to old masters. He was purported to have learned with the “two ancient masters” al-Zuhrī and ʿAmr b. Dīnār, in addition to Muqātil b. Sulaymān. He is also known to have collected *tafsīr* traditions. On Sufyān, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 2, pp. 62, 303, 663, vol. 3, p. 99.

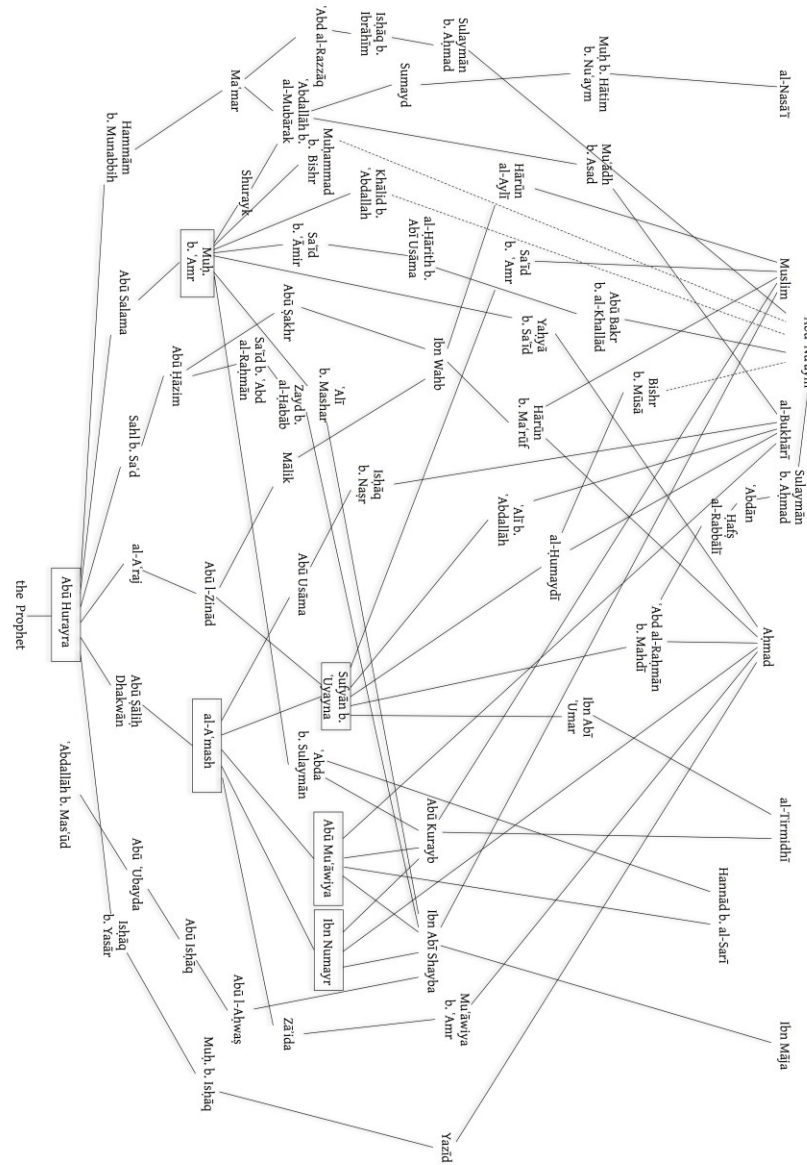


Fig. 1: Isnād tree of the unfathomability tradition, all versions combined

As Harald Motzki and others have noted, a problem with many of Juynboll's *isnād* analyses is that they rely exclusively on the *isnāds* contained in al-Mizzī's (d. 742/1341) *Tuḥfat al-ashrāf*, despite the fact that al-Mizzī does not usually include all *isnāds* of a given tradition. As regards the unfathomability tradition, we can substantially enlarge the *isnād* bundle on which Juynboll built his analysis by adding *isnāds* derived from the *Muṣannaḥ* works of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan'ānī and Ibn Abī Shayba, the *Kitāb al-zuhd* of 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) and the *Kitāb al-zuhd* of Hannād b. al-Sarī (d. 243/857), as well as, importantly, the *Kitāb ṣifat al-janna* of Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038). Combining all these strands results in a "veritable *isnād* bundle" (Fig. 1), to use Juynboll's term.⁵²

Pace Juynboll, we find that there are more common links in this *isnād* bundle than just Abū Mu'āwiya and Sufyān b. 'Uyayna. There are in fact five, or even six: Al-A'mash (Kūfa, d. 147/764 or 148/765), with Abū Mu'āwiya, Sufyān b. 'Uyayna and 'Abd Allāh Ibn Numayr (Kūfa, d. 199/814) acting as partial common links; and Muḥammad b. 'Amr b. 'Alqama (Medina, d. 144/761 or 145/762), with 'Abda b. Sulaymān (Kūfa, d. 187/803 or later) possibly serving as a partial common link.⁵³ This pushes Juynboll's putative dating of the tradition back by at least a generation. Al-A'mash and Muḥammad b. 'Amr, contemporaries of each other, could have interacted and exchanged the tradition, but the fact that they appear both around the same time as common links in the *isnād* bundle suggests that the tradition enters Islamic literature at an even earlier moment, in the first half of the 2nd/8th century, or even in the 1st/7th century. With this in mind, let us now consider the *isnād* bundles of the four versions of the unfathomability tradition separately.

(1) *Isnāds* of the nuclear version (UT): The *isnād* tree of the nuclear version (UT) is too small to allow for inferences about common links. What the tree demonstrates, however, is that UT is recorded primarily in the early

⁵² That is, not just lots of "spiders". See Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, p. xxii.

⁵³ Juynboll states that Muḥammad b. 'Amr was "an apparently convenient target of countless, deep dives launched by collectors who made use of this 'artificial' transmitter in order to create additional *isnād* support for traditions they sought to highlight," in other words that he is "a spectacular example of an artificial CL". See *ibid.*, p. 417. On the phenomenon of an artificial CL, see *ibid.*, p. xxii.

collections: the collections of Hammām b. Munabbih, ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak and ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī, in addition to the collections of Ibn Abī Shayba, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, al-Bukhārī and Abū Nu‘aym (encased in fig. 2). This may be taken as evidence in support of the idea that UT is in fact the nuclear version from which the extended versions derive.

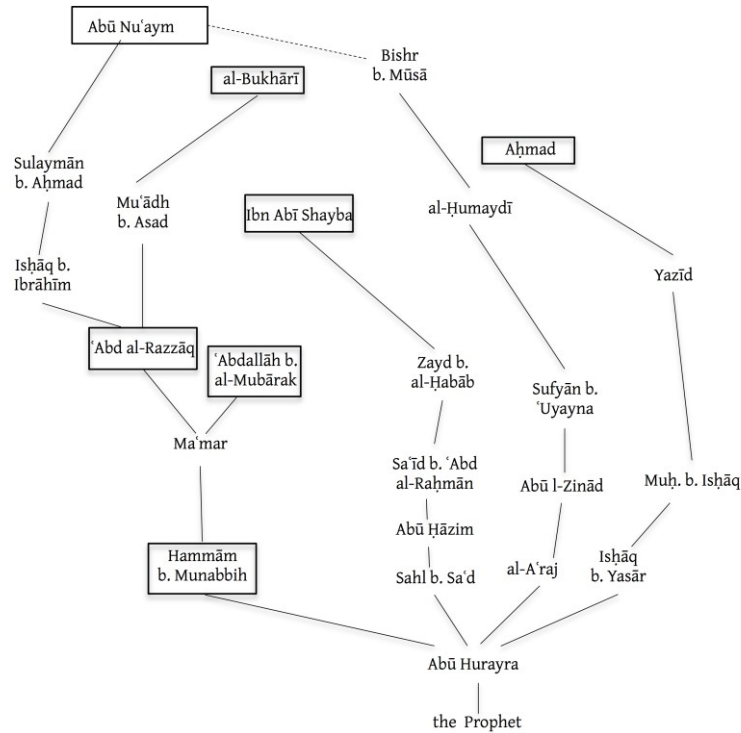


Fig. 2: Isnād tree: UT

(2) *Isnāds* of the exegetical version (UT+E): In the bundle for UT+E, the Kūfan scholars al-A‘mash, Abū Mu‘āwiya and Ibn Numayr do not play a major role. The key role in the transmission of this exegetical version of the tradition is occupied by the two scholars from the Ḥijāz, Muḥammad b. ‘Amr from Medina and Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna from Mecca (encased in fig. 3).

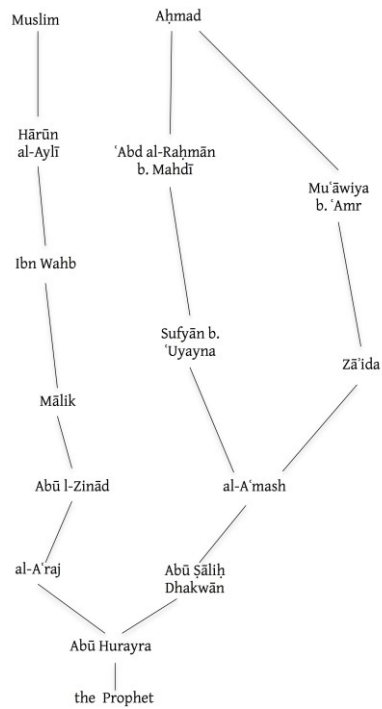


Fig. 4: Isnād tree: UT+B

(4) *Isnāds* of the combined version (UT+B+E): The impression that al-A'mash is instrumental in putting element B into circulation is reinforced by the *isnād* tree for UT+B+E, which again shows al-A'mash (encased in fig. 5) to have had an interest in circulating versions of the *ḥadīth* that include the *balha* extension.

Second, the primary circulator of the exegetical version (UT+E) is Muḥammad b. ‘Amr, active in Medina towards the middle of the 2nd/8th century, followed as a secondary circulator a generation later by Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna in Mecca, making UT+E a primarily Ḥijāzī tradition.

Third, the primary circulator of the *balha* version (UT+B) is al-A‘mash, active in Kūfa towards the middle of the 2nd/8th century. UT+B is primarily a Kūfan tradition.

Fourth, it seems that al-A‘mash’s student, the Meccan Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna, or his contemporaries and fellow-students of al-A‘mash, Abū Mu‘āwiya and Ibn Numayr, should be credited with coming up, towards the end of the 2nd/8th century, with the combined version (UT+B+E) and helping to spread it.

4. Interconfessional aspects

The story of the unfathomability tradition in early Islam is the story of how a Biblical, Jesus-centered narrative was gradually adapted to Qur’ānic and Muslim theological sensibilities and translated into an Islamic format, that of the *ḥadīth qudsī*. Theologically speaking, the development of the unfathomability tradition reflects the emergence of the Muslim doctrine of the sensuality of the afterlife, in contrast to what many Christian and at least a certain number of Jewish writers proclaimed to be a paradise free of the processes of bodily change and corruption, and devoid of sensory stimulation, in particular sexuality.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ For anti-sensory Jewish eschatology, see below, footnote 59. However, in Rabbinic tradition one also comes across depictions of paradise as a banquet, as was already noted by Volz, *Jüdische Eschatologie*, p. 331. More recently, José Costa has written at length about the “material eschatology” of Rabbinic Judaism. See Costa, *L’au-delà*, pp. 287–294. My argument, consequently, concerns Muslim-Christian polemics first and foremost, and Jewish-Muslim polemics only to a lesser degree. This being said, also the Christian paradise of Late Antiquity was not completely disembodied. Augustine was convinced of the material continuity of bodies in the hereafter. However, he also stressed that change in bodies always means decay, which makes it impossible for digestion to take place in paradise. See Walker Bynum, *Resurrection*, pp. 96, 99. Redemption in paradise, for Augustine, is the “triumph over digestion and nutrition”, the “crystalline hardness of heaven”. See *ibid.*, pp. 102, 109. Some late-antique Christian theologians, such as

The Qurʾān paints a robustly sensory picture of the world-to-come, transposing the banquet imagery of Arabic poetry to paradise, complete with agreeable-looking male and female attendants, abundant food and perfumed drinks,⁵⁷ and mirrored in hell by a cynically inverted feast, held around the tree of Zaqqūm and hosted by the dreadful minions of hell, the *zabāniya*.⁵⁸ UT challenges and disrupts this Qurʾānic picture of an afterlife full of sensations, though this does not seem to be a deliberate act of subversion on the part of Hammām, the first known collector of UT. As I concluded above, there is no clear doctrinal agenda in the *Ṣaḥīfa*'s eschatological material. Rather, the inclusion of UT in Hammām's *Ṣaḥīfa* seems serendipitous. It is as if the earliest collections of eschatological *ḥadīth* function like sponges: they suck in and combine traditions from diverse backgrounds: haggadic, Talmudic material, Christian apocalyptic traditions and apocrypha, sayings coined or transmitted by the Syriac Church fathers, Zoroastrian elements, as well as "pagan" material. This happens in parallel with a gradual process by which an Islamic doctrinal identity emerges, and by which converts from various scriptural and non-scriptural communities are assimilated to this emerging identity.

As we noted above, next to UT, also the no-excretion tradition problematises the corporeal, sensory nature of the afterlife. It is instructive to think about how these two traditions may have developed in tandem. The no-excretion tradition, in the version recorded in Hammām's *Ṣaḥīfa* (no. 86), states that the inhabitants of paradise do not defecate, despite their enjoyment of heavenly victuals. Instead, "they will praise God, morning and evening". This reverberates closely with the statement in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 17a) that the righteous in the future world will not eat, drink, or have congress, and instead will "feed on the brightness of the divine presence."⁵⁹ Is the no-excretion tradition a response to a Jewish challenge to

Gregory of Nyssa (4th c.), wrote that genitals or intestines were simply absent in paradise. See *ibid.*, p. 82.

⁵⁷ The scholarly literature on the Qurʾānic paradise is relatively rich. See, e.g., Horowitz, "Das koranische Paradies"; Wendell, "The denizens of paradise"; Neuwirth, "Paradise".

⁵⁸ There are few studies focusing on the Qurʾānic hell. See, however, O'Shaughnessy, "The seven names for hell"; Radtscheit, "Der Höllenbaum"; Lange, "Revisiting hell's angels".

⁵⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 1, p. 102. On salvation as a "spiritual light" in Rabbinic thought, see already Volz, *Jüdische Eschatologie*, pp. 329-330.

the Qurʾānic afterlife? An exegetical elaboration on the no-excretion tradition, found in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s *Musnad* and Ibn Abī Shayba’s *Muṣannaf*, in which the lack of defecation is explained by the miraculous excretion by sweat, does indeed suggest such a Jewish context:⁶⁰

A Jew came to the Prophet and asked him: “O Abū al-Qāsim! Do you claim that the inhabitants of paradise eat and drink there?” And he [the Jew] said to his companion: “If he grants this, I won against him.” The messenger of God responded: “Yes, by Him in whose hands my soul is, each one of them will have the potency of one hundred men when eating, drinking, enjoying sensory pleasures, or having intercourse.” The Jew said: “Those who eat and drink have a need [to relieve themselves] (*takūnu lahu al-ḥāja*).” The messenger of God responded: “When they defecate, it is by a sweat that flows from their skins like the scent of musk. Then their bellies shrink again (*fa-idhan baṭnuhu qad ḍamura*).”

Ibn Ḥanbal, after relating the tradition, tellingly notes that the *ḥadīth* is sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*), its *isnād* including only trustworthy transmitters (*thiqāt*), “despite the fact that al-Aʿmash ‘anʿana it”—the verb ‘anʿana meaning that al-Aʿmash transmitted the *ḥadīth* using the preposition ‘an instead of more highly regarded formulas like *ḥaddathanā* to refer to the authorities from whom he related the tradition. This shines a spotlight on al-Aʿmash, whom we already encountered above as being instrumental in the circulation of UT+B. We will return to this point at the end of this article.

In contrast to the no-defecation tradition and the excretion-by-sweat tradition, UT is rooted in Christian scripture. It expresses a more radical response to the charge of sensualism, by suggesting that—contrary to Qurʾānic evidence—the afterlife is full of things that are not known by, or even amenable to, the bodily senses. One might perhaps even say that, while the no-excretion tradition ignores the problem, and while the excretion-by-

⁶⁰ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 4, p. 367; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 9, p. 136. Cf. above, n. 28. As noted in the introduction to this article, the tradition is studied in Aguadé, “*Inna ʿlādī yaʿkulu*”.

sweat tradition tries to come up with a ‘solution’ to the paradox of nutrition without defecation, UT simply concedes the point, by suggesting that paradise is non-sensory.

Christians, predictably, were quick to criticize the nascent Islamic eschatology for its sensualism. ʿAmr b. ʿAbī Waqqāṣ (Kūfa, d. 103/721-2) and his father, the early convert Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ (Medina, d. 55/675), in which the latter explains that Q 18:103 ({Shall we inform you about the greatest losers in respect to [their] deeds?}) refers to the Jews, “because they belied Muḥammad”, as well as to the Christians, “because they belied paradise (*kafarū bi-l-janna*), saying: ‘There is no food in it, and no drink’.”⁶¹ While the example of Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ demonstrates that the issue may have been alive already in the generation following the death of the Prophet, there are two later moments in early Islamic history around which the controversy appears to coalesce. In the lifetime of Hammām, under the Umayyad ʿAbd al-Malik and his sons and successors, there are several examples of Christian authors from Syria and lower Iraq attacking the sensory afterlife of Islam. An important witness of this polemical tradition is John of Damascus (b. ca. 32/652, still writing in the 110s/730s). In his heresiographical work *De haeresibus*, he mocks Muḥammad’s “frivolous tales” about paradise, including the notion “that in paradise you will have three rivers flowing with water, wine and milk”.⁶² In the Arabic and Armenian versions of the alleged correspondence between Leo III (r. 717-41) and ʿUmar II (r. 717-20), at least parts of which go back to the early 2nd/8th century, Leo rebukes ʿUmar “for saying that the inhabitants of paradise eat, drink, wear clothes and get married”.⁶³ Around the same time, a Christian school teacher in Baṣra is reported to have argued against the Muslim judge of the city, Iyās b. Muʿāwiya (d. 122/740), that if the inhabitants of paradise eat, they must also defecate—the first explicit witness, to my knowledge, of

⁶¹ ʿAmr b. ʿAbī Waqqāṣ, p. 82. Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ’ saying is also related in al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 224 (*K. al-tafsīr, sūrat al-Kahf; bāb hal nunabbiʿukum bi-l-akhsarīna aʿmālan*).

⁶² Quoted in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 487. On John’s critique of the Muslim paradise, see further Hipp, “Die Kamele Gottes”.

⁶³ Quoted in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 495. On Leo III’s correspondence with ʿUmar II, see Thomas and Roggema (eds.), *Christian-Muslim relations*, vol. 1, pp. 376, 381-385; Palombo, “The ‘correspondence’ of Leo III and ‘Umar II’”.

the Christian-Muslim argument about defecation in paradise.⁶⁴

The second moment comes a century or so later, around the turn from the 2nd/8th to the 3rd/9th century, under the rule of Hārūn al-Rashīd and that of his sons. The three “most significant Christian apologists who wrote in Arabic in the first ‘Abbāsī century”,⁶⁵ the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurra (Ḥarrān, b. ca. 740 CE, d. ca. 820 CE), the Jacobite Abū Rāʾiṭa al-Tikrītī (b. ca. 755 CE, d. ca. 835 CE) and the Nestorian ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī (fl. around 800 CE), all took aim at the carnality of the Muslim afterlife. Abū Qurra, bishop of Ḥarrān, in his alleged disputation (*mujādala*) with Muslim theologians in front of the caliph al-Maʾmūn, attacked the belief that men in paradise will be wedded to houris. If God is just, what is the eschatological reward for women to match that of their husbands, he asked.⁶⁶ In his letter “On the proof of the Christian religion” (written ca. 815), Abū Rāʾiṭa al-Tikrītī takes a swipe at those who convert to Islam because of the “sensual delights and comfort” offered by the Muslim paradise. True Christians, Abū Rāʾiṭa maintains, realise that in the afterlife, they will be “like the angels, without food or drink, clothing or marriage” (Mt 22:30; Lk 20:35), and that they will “attain what no eye has seen and no ear has heard, and no human heart has imagined” (*mā lā tarāhu ‘aynun wa-lā tasma‘u bihi udhunun wa-lā yakḥturu ‘alā qalbi bashar*).⁶⁷ Finally, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī rejects the idea of a sensory afterlife in his *Kitāb al-burhān* and *Kitāb al-masāʾil wa-l-ajwiba*.⁶⁸ In the last chapter of his *Kitāb al-burhān*, entitled “On the food and drink of the afterlife”, he insists that the pleasure in paradise is none but the purely spiritual pleasure of angels, a pleasure that, as even his Muslim opponents will admit, cannot be trumped by the coarse enjoyment of sex, food and drink.⁶⁹ In the last question discussed by ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī in his *Kitāb al-masāʾil wa-l-ajwiba*, he argues that sensory pleasures can only be defined negatively, that is, as the

⁶⁴ Wakīʿ, *Akhbār al-quḍāt*, vol. 1, p. 373.

⁶⁵ Griffith, “Comparative religion,” 64.

⁶⁶ Abū Qurra, *Mujādala*, fol. 161b (tr. Bertaina, pp. 400-401). For a discussion of the doubts surrounding the historicity of this encounter, see Griffith, “Reflections,” esp. pp. 156-158.

⁶⁷ Abū Rāʾiṭa, “Risāla,” p. 86 (tr. p. 87). For the dating of this letter, see Keating, *Defending the People of Truth*, p. 79. Also Abū Rāʾiṭa’s relative, the archdeacon Nonnus of Nisibis (d. ca. 870), held the view that the sensuality of the Muslim paradise was what attracted “simple” Christians to convert to Islam. See Griffith, “Disputes with Muslims,” p. 266.

⁶⁸ See Hayek, ‘*Ammār al-Baṣrī*, pp. 88-90, 264-265.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Landron, *Chrétiens et musulmans*, p. 244. See also Hayek, ‘*Ammār al-Baṣrī*, p. 56.

termination of a want (hunger, thirst etc.), which implies that, like wants, they are absent in paradise.⁷⁰

Next, in the anonymous Syriac *Baḥīrā legend*, written after 197/813, we come across what appears to be the first Christian engagement with the excretion-by-sweat tradition. Here, it is claimed that the monk Baḥīrā “had Muḥammad tell his followers of a material paradise full of wine, milk, and honey where every man would have seven beautiful girls and where the excesses of food and drink would simply leave the body like sweat”.⁷¹ The criticism is developed into an elaborate attack by Job of Edessa, written around the same time, in the year 201/817.⁷² In a discussion of “the kingdom of heaven”, Job, a Nestorian philosopher and physician in the time of al-Maʿmūn, states that

about it [the kingdom of heaven], it is written: *No eye has seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of men, the things which God has prepared for those who love him.* This consists in a new life, a supreme delight and happiness, the greatness and the sublimity of which cannot be described with the tongue of the children of Adam. Indeed a thing that does not exist in this world cannot possibly have been heard by the ear, or seen by the eye, or have entered into the heart of man. Knowledge does not comprehend it, nor does man understand it, but God alone.⁷³

Job, who defines the afterlife in purely spiritual terms, opposing the idea of a bodily resurrection, then continues to criticise the idea that actual food is eaten in paradise:

⁷⁰ Quoted in Landron, *Chrétiens et musulmans*, p. 244. See also Hayek, *ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī*, p. 83. The argument is also used by the Nestorian physician and philosopher Abū al-Faraj b. al-Ṭayyib (d. 1044 CE) and the Nestorian theologian Elijah of Nisibis (d. 1046 CE). See Landron, *Chrétiens et musulmans*, p. 245.

⁷¹ *Bahira legend*, p. 272 (§ 16.6). See Roggema, *Legend*, 121-128; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, pp. 87-89. For a thorough, systematic reexamination of the history of early Christian polemics against the Muslim paradise, see now Croq, “Les représentations de l’au-delà,” vol. 2, pp. 185-206.

⁷² For the dating of Job’s text, see Mingana, *Book of treasures*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

⁷³ Job of Edessa, *Book of Treasures*, p. 288 (I have slightly adapted Mingana’s translation of the Biblical quote, CL).

The fact of our eating in a corporeal way involves the thick matter of food, the quantity of which diminishes on the outside through transference, and is added to the body inside... If the digested food were not ejected by the excretory power, or if a change did not take place in the bowels, the odour would become malignant, and there would be suffering emanating from its great quantity, and sometimes also illness. The general consensus of opinion among rational men will not accept the assertion that the body could receive food without an increase to itself, together with the other consequences that we have just enumerated. If it does accept this assertion, it will be only by faith... A man can say anything he wishes in this way!⁷⁴

Over the course of the 3rd/9th century, Muslim theologians became more and more confident in answering such charges. The excretion-by-sweat tradition may in fact have come about in response to the three-fold argument about the necessity for excretion through the bowels, for bodies to increase on the inside as a result of nutrition, and for digestion without excretion causing “suffering”. The tradition, as we saw above, not only develops the ‘solution’ of excretion by sweat, it also explains that the bellies of the inhabitants of paradise, after digestion, shrink again (*fa-idhan baṭnuhu qad ḍamura*). An extended version of the excretion-by-sweat tradition, recorded in al-Nasāʿī’s *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, adds that “there is no suffering in paradise” (*fa-laysa fī al-janna adhan*), as if directly responding to Job’s charge.⁷⁵

Another way to deal with this kind of criticism was to go on the offensive and turn the tables on Christian eschatology. In a *munāzara* text from the first half of the 3rd/9th century, ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī (b. ca. 192/808, d. ca. 240/855), a convert from Christianity, offers the following defense of the Muslim paradise:

If someone should deny the words of the Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace) that in the hereafter are food

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 290. See on this passage, Roggema, *Legend*, pp. 124-125.

⁷⁵ Al-Nasāʿī, *Sunan*, vol. 1, p. 485.

and drink, Christ (peace be upon him) said something similar to his disciples when he was drinking with them. He said to them, “I will not drink of the produce of this vine until I drink it with you again in the Kingdom of heaven” [Matthew 26:29]. So he was declaring that in the Kingdom there is drinking and drink, and since there is drink there, eating and delights there cannot be denied. Luke says in his Gospel that Christ (peace be upon him) said, “You shall eat and drink at my Father’s table” [Luke 22:30]. And John says from Christ (peace be upon him), “There are very many rooms and dwelling places with my Father” [John 14:2]. All this proves the correctness of food, drink, rooms, comfort and reclining on couches facing each other [Q 56:16] in the hereafter; God, great and mighty, says in His book, “They shall have gardens in which are everlasting comfort [Q 9:21].”⁷⁶

Muslim writers also noted that the Christians taught that Adam had eaten, drunk and enjoyed marital relations in the garden of Eden.⁷⁷ The courtier Ḥumayd b. Sa‘īd b. Bakhtiyār (Baghdad, fl. around 215/830), a critic of anthropomorphism and a theologian with sympathies for the Mu‘tazila, wrote a “Book against the Christians, concerning the pleasure and the food and drink in the afterlife, and against all those who deny this” (*K. ‘alā al-naṣāra fī al-na‘īm wa-’l-akl wa-’l-shurb fī al-ākħira wa-‘alā jamī‘ man qāla bi-ḍiddi dhālika*).⁷⁸ Although we know nothing about the content of Ibn Bakhtiyār’s work, we can assume that it included similar arguments.

Perhaps, for writers of a rationalist inclination, attacking Christian teachings was more convenient than straightforwardly defending the wondersome mechanisms of digestion in the Muslim paradise. It is noteworthy that al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868), in his treatise against the Christians,

⁷⁶ The translation of this passage is taken from Ebied and Thomas, *The polemical works of ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī*, pp. 453, 455.

⁷⁷ Thus in a “Muslim pamphlet”, dated to the 3rd/9th or 4th/10th century by Dominique Sourdel. See Sourdel, “Un pamphlet musulman”, at pp. 22 (French tr.) and 31 (Arabic text). Abū Qurra emphasized the fact of Adam’s (monogamous) matrimony in paradise. See Becker, “Christliche Polemik”, p. 438.

⁷⁸ Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 4, pp. 131-132, vol. 6, p. 357.

says nothing about the problem of digestion in paradise and the interconfessional polemics resulting from it.⁷⁹ The closest he comes to dealing with the matter, it appears, is in a passage in the *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, in which he relates that the crocodile is thought to expel its waste through the mouth, where birds pick it up from its teeth.⁸⁰ It is not impossible, al-Jāḥiẓ appears to be saying here, that there can be digestion without defecation. Elsewhere in the *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, he praises the excellence of honey as one of the victuals in paradise (*al-tanwīh bi-l-ʿasal fī al-Qurʿān*), thereby acknowledging that the blessed in paradise eat.⁸¹

Rather than striking a defensive, apologetic posture, in his treatise against the Christians, al-Jāḥiẓ polemicises against Christian sexual impurity and profligacy, their “overruling lusts”.⁸² In another work, al-Jāḥiẓ expresses his astonishment that Christians can believe that “a man who has been seen to eat and drink, urinate and defecate, feel hunger and thirst, dress and undress, grow and shrink, and was killed and crucified, could be a Lord and a creator [...] making the living die and bringing the dead back to life”.⁸³ Christians, according to al-Jāḥiẓ, are bedeviled by a supreme paradox: a divine being urinating and defecating. Why, then, should Muslims even bother to defend such things occurring to ordinary believers in paradise? In sum, al-Jāḥiẓ writes from the confident position of a Muslim theologian arguing ‘down’ to Christians. He is unapologetic about the moderate sensory style of his own tradition, Islam.⁸⁴

The history of the argument about the sensuality of the afterlife continues, both in statements of Muslim writers and of non-Muslim critics in both east and west.⁸⁵ For our purposes here, however, al-Jāḥiẓ can serve as

⁷⁹ Al-Jāḥiẓ’s treatise cannot be dated with certainty but is likely to have been written in the period of al-Mutawakkil’s measures against ‘the People of the Book’. See Pellat, *The life and works of Jāḥiẓ*, pp. 10, 18. Al-Mutawakkil also commissioned Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī to write his refutation.

⁸⁰ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, vol. 2, p. 371. Al-Jāḥiẓ relates this on the authority of *ṣāhib al-mantiq*, i.e. Aristotle. I thank Guy Ron Gilboa for drawing my attention to this passage.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 230.

⁸² Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Fī al-radd ʿalā al-naṣārā*, tr. Finkel, p. 333.

⁸³ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-akhbār wa-kayfa taṣiḥh*, quoted in Pellat, *The life and works of Jāḥiẓ*, p. 38.

⁸⁴ I develop the notion of al-Jāḥiẓ’s “moderate sensory style” in Lange, “Al-Jāḥiẓ on the senses.”

⁸⁵ Among the medieval Arab-Muslim defenders of the corporeality of paradise figure Ibn Ḥazm and Ibn al-Jawzī, while on the Eastern Christian side, mention might be made of Elias of Nisibis

a convenient terminal point, as his death coincides with the period in which the canonical collections of *ḥadīth* were compiled and in which both the unfathomability and the excretion-by-sweat traditions acquired their conventional shape.

5. Conclusion: towards a sensory history of early Islam

In conclusion, let me recapitulate what has been said and propose a model for the gradual development of both the unfathomability tradition and the excretion-by-sweat tradition. The following stages in the development of the argument can be identified:

(1) Before 700: The Qurʾān paints a picture of sensory pleasure and bodily torment in paradise and hell, triggering Jewish and Christian polemics.

(2) Around 700: Jewish and Christian attacks become more frequent and systematic. The expanding corpus of eschatological *ḥadīth* incorporates traditions problematising the sensory dimensions of the afterlife, ingesting a variety of late-antique sources. In this way, 1 Cor 2:9 slips into Hammām's *Ṣaḥīfa* in an Islamized form, that of UT. Simultaneously, the no-excretion tradition emerges.

(3) Around 750: The quick growth of the sensory imagery in the corpus of eschatological *ḥadīth* sparks inner-Muslim discontent with UT. This leads to the development of extended versions of the saying, reaffirming the knowability of the sensory aspects of the afterlife. The exegetical version (UT+E), which I connected to the activity of the Medinan exegete and traditionist Muḥammad b. ʿAmr b. ʿAlqama (d. 144/761 or 145/762), affirms that the sensory phenomena in the afterlife can be known *potentially*, but are not known currently, that is, before the end of time comes about. The *balha* version (UT+B), which I traced to the Kūfan traditionist al-Aʿmash (d. 147/764

(d. before 1046), who wrote a *Maqāla fī naʿīm al-ākḥira*, and Buṭrus al-Sadamantī (Egypt, d. second half 13th c.), whose *Maqāla fī al-ʿitiqād* also addresses the issue. The list of European writers taking aim at the carnality of the Muslim paradise is long, stretching from Petrus Alfonsi (d. after 1116) to Ramon Llull (d. ca. 1315), John Mandeville (d. 1371), Martin Luther (d. 1546), Francis Bacon (d. 1626), Hugo Grotius (d. 1645), and all the way to George Sale (d. 1736) and later figures. For an overview of this polemical tradition, see Lange, *Paradise and hell*, pp. 17-24.

or 148/765), insists on the *factual* knowability of the sensory aspects of paradise, within the bounds, that is, of revealed knowledge (UT+B). Al-A‘mash also appears to have a hand in refining the no-excretion *ḥadīth* into the excretion-by-sweat *ḥadīth*.

(4) Around 800: The second wave of Christian attacks occurs, perhaps triggered by the gradual adaptations of the unfathomability tradition and the introduction of the excretion-by-sweat tradition. The *ahl al-ḥadīth* (to whom belong the two students of al-A‘mash, Abū Mu‘āwiya and Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna) consolidate their response in the form of UT+E+B. Whether of a more traditionalist and anthropomorphist bent like many of the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, like al-A‘mash, Abū Mu‘āwiya and Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna, or of a more rationalist inclination, like Ḥumayd b. Bakhtiyār and al-Jāḥiẓ, Muslim scholars across the board defend the corporeality of the Islamic afterlife.

(5) Around 850: the afterlife is laid out in sumptuous detail in major *ḥadīth* collections such as the ones of Ibn Abī Shayba (Baghdad, d. 235/849), Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (Baghdad, 241/855) and Hannād b. Sarī (Kūfa, d. 243/857). Theologians like al-Jāḥiẓ move from espousing an apologetic posture, responding to Christian criticism, to an active, offensive mode. The doctrine of the sensuality of the afterlife is established as an important cornerstone to distinguish Muslims from Christians and Jews.

This chronology is admittedly still rough, and deserving of several caveats. We should acknowledge that the question of the corporeality and sensuality of the afterlife probably concerned theologians more than the great majority of people, the “simple believers”⁸⁶—although I would like to suggest that the carnality of paradise interested “simple believers” more than Christological intricacies or Trinitarian paradoxes. In Islamic literature, the sensory aspects of the afterlife certainly played a role in genres other than just *kalām* theology. For example, the Baghdad contemporary of Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) writes eloquently about the sensory pleasures to be discovered in paradise. “What no soul knows” (Q 32:17), al-Muḥāsibī muses, is that the resurrected women in paradise will be seventy times more beautiful than on earth.⁸⁷ “Is it not time that you pay me attention?,” he makes a female consort ask her husband in

⁸⁶ On “simple believers”, see Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East*, pp. 41-81.

⁸⁷ Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Ba‘th wa-l-nushūr*, p. 36.

paradise: “I am that which no eye has seen”.⁸⁸ It seems safe to assume that such literary imaginings were directed at an audience that was significantly broader than the one that consumed the sophisticated products of interconfessional *kalām* polemics.

As a further caveat, we must not forget that in regard to the nature of the afterlife, there were differences of opinion *within* the Muslim community, as well as the various Christian churches under early Islam. Writers like Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. ca. 139/757) and Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 298/910?) mocked the fascination of their fellow-Muslims with the material luxury of paradise.⁸⁹ Others, like al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 300/912), held that the sensory pleasures and discomforts experienced on earth were a “model” (*unmūdḥaj*) for the things waiting to happen in the afterlife, which therefore, are knowable in principle; but that *in addition*, things transpire in paradise and hell that are “non-rational and impossible to grasp” (*ghayr maʿqūl wa-lā taḥtamiluhu al-ʿuqūl*).⁹⁰ This was a line of thought later popularized by al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), who argued that the sensory pleasures in paradise are real, but trivial in comparison with the higher joys awaiting the blessed, in particular the vision of God enjoyed by those possessed of true knowledge (*al-ʿarīfūn*).⁹¹ There were also philosophers, like al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), who denied the resurrection of bodies and the corporeality of the afterlife altogether.⁹²

In other words, non-sensory, immaterial conceptions of the afterlife were never absent from Muslim eschatology. Besides, eschatologists, even if they did not want to go as far as to deny the corporeality of the afterlife, were still free to quote the sense-renouncing, nuclear version of the unfathomability tradition (UT), if they so preferred. This was, basically, a question of quoting UT from al-Bukhārī or quoting UT+B from Muslim, as

⁸⁸ Al-Muḥāsibī, *Tawāḥḥum*, p. 68.

⁸⁹ See van Ess, *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 163 (Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ), vol. 1, p. 169, vol. 3, p. 2439 (Ibn al-Rāwandī); Ritter, “Philologika VI”, p. 9 (tr. p. 15).

⁹⁰ Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, vol. 1, p. 106. I am grateful to Sara Sviri for drawing my attention to this work.

⁹¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, vol. 4, p. 31.

⁹² Marmura, “Paradise in Islamic philosophy”; Stroumsa, “True felicity”. See also Lange, *Paradise and hell*, pp. 183–186, and the literature cited therein.

later Muslim scholars well knew.⁹³ However, on balance it was the extended versions, the ones that made room for otherworldly sensations (UT+E, UT+B, and UT+E+B), that came to dominate in the *ḥadīth* corpus and in Muslim eschatology at large, impeding a thorough spiritualisation of paradise in early Muslim theology.⁹⁴

I would also like to suggest that the genesis of the unfathomability and the excretion-by-sweat traditions sheds valuable light on the history of renunciation (*zuhd*) in the early centuries of Islam.⁹⁵ What we see in the gradual development of these two traditions is how renunciation came to be juxtaposed with a decidedly sense-affirming eschatology. Austerity on earth and the belief in an afterlife full of sensory pleasures do not necessarily have to be at odds with each other—“privation here, abundance there”, as Christopher Melchert put it⁹⁶—, and perhaps we should see the pleasures of the Muslim paradise simply as the imagined reversal of renunciatory piety on earth. One may wonder, however, whether an eschatology that accepted or even celebrated sensory religion did not, in the long run, undermine the nexus of sanctity and sense denial that is characteristic of *zuhd*, or whether such an eschatology was not one of the factors that contributed to the rise of a “mild asceticism”, to use Nimrod Hurvitz’s term, in the 3rd/9th century.⁹⁷ The material culture of medieval Islam, as I have argued elsewhere, is deeply infused with paradise imagery.⁹⁸

A final point I want to submit here is that sensory scholarship on early Islam (and indeed on later periods of Islamic history) should broaden its scope and move beyond the occupation with renunciation and sense denial, towards the history of the senses more comprehensively conceived. As for the sensory history of early Islam, recently there have appeared, or are about to appear, a number of studies that examine the visual organisation, the soundscape and the smellscape of the emerging Muslim polity, that is, restrictions imposed on the public exhibition of Christian

⁹³ See al-Ḥumaydī, *al-Jam‘ bayna al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, vol. 3, pp. 98-9; Ibn al-Athīr, *Jāmi‘ al-uṣūl*, vol. 10, p. 494; al-Zayla‘ī, *Takhrij al-aḥādīth*, vol. 3, p. 87.

⁹⁴ I have argued this point at greater length elsewhere. See Lange, *Paradise and hell*, 179-185.

⁹⁵ See Melchert, *Before Sufism*.

⁹⁶ Personal communication, 4 September 2020.

⁹⁷ Hurvitz, “Biographies and mild asceticism”.

⁹⁸ Lange, *Paradise and hell*, 245-278.

crosses and other non-Muslim symbols, regulations of the *adhān* next to, and as against, the sound of the Christian *nāqūs*, and practices of perfuming bodies and sacred spaces in early Islam.⁹⁹ What these studies allow us to see is the process by which what we might term the classical Muslim sensorium gradually emerges. The present study of the biography of the unfathomability tradition contributes to this fledgling, promising field of Islamic sensory history.

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⁹⁹ Patel, “Their Fires shall not be visible”; Bednarkiewicz, “Summoning the believers”; Bursi, “Scents of space”; Lange, “Qur’anic anosmia”. Another, more firmly established line of research, which also belongs here, examines the question of the aural/oral transmission of knowledge in early Islam. See on this, among others, Schoeler, *Genesis*.

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