

## CHAPTER 7

---

# THE MU‘TAZILITE MOVEMENT (I)

## *The Origins of the Mu‘tazila*

---

RACHA EL-OMARI

### I INTRODUCTION

---

SCHOLARSHIP on the origins of the Mu‘tazila in the early to mid-eighth century CE remains highly speculative and inconclusive.\* After this initial obscure period, the Mu‘tazila flourished as a theological group well into the sixth/twelfth century, passing through both an early phase (see Chapter 8) and a scholastic phase (see Chapter 9). Although the Mu‘tazila saw its decline in the Sunnī world in the sixth/twelfth century, it survived in various forms in Zaydism and Twelver Shi‘ism until later centuries (see Chapters 10, 11, 26, and 27).

We must preface any introduction to the questions addressed here with a brief account of the doctrines of the Mu‘tazila. Once established as a theological school the adherents of the Mu‘tazila distinguished themselves from prior experiments in theology in general and *kalām* in particular (see Chapters 1 through 4) by their steadfast commitment to reason as the basis for theological inquiry; indeed the Mu‘tazila were the strongest exponents of ‘rationalism’ in Islamic theology. This is not the rationalism of the free-thinkers of the Enlightenment, as early nineteenth-century scholars of Mu‘tazilism mistook it to be (e.g. Steiner 1865; cf. Schmidtke 1998: 386–7). Ignaz Goldziher’s inquiry cleared up this misunderstanding of Mu‘tazili doctrine (Goldziher 1910: 117–19; cf. Schmidtke 1998: 387). Aside from inquiries into physics and cosmology (*daqīq al-kalām*) that had minimal dealings with scripture (Pines 1936), the aims of Mu‘tazilī rationalism were theological, and thus could never be fully independent of the dictates of scripture. The Mu‘tazila sought to ascertain and explain God through rational axioms. This included, chiefly, making sense of His attributes as presented in the Qur‘ān, and His actions, mainly understanding what it means for Him to be just. The result of the Mu‘tazilī discussion of

\* I thank Sabine Schmidtke for her feedback on an early draft of this chapter. All errors are mine.

these two topics—unity (*tawḥīd*) and justice (‘*ād*l)—amounted to two of the five principles upon which the Mu‘tazila built their theology. In later writings these two principles were presented as the first two principles that summarize the Mu‘tazilī doctrine. In earlier writings they were presented in a different order: the principle of unity (*tawḥīd*) was the fifth principle, and the principle of justice (‘*ād*l) was the first. The other three principles were as follows in their original order: the second was the principle of ‘punishment and threat’ (*al-wa‘d wa-l-wa‘id*). Because of the Mu‘tazila’s espousal of free will and God’s justice, they held that God does not forgive the grave sinner except through his repentance and that God is obligated to reward the believer. The third principle was that of ‘the intermediate rank’ (*al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn*), by which they deemed that someone who commits a grave sin does not merit the legal category of a believer (*mu‘min*) or an unbeliever (*kāfir*); rather he should be labelled a ‘grave sinner’ (*fāsiq*). The fourth principle was the obligation ‘to command right and forbid wrong’ (*al-amr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*) in any way that one is capable.<sup>1</sup>

The subject of the origins of the Mu‘tazila Movement has been approached from three angles. One concerns the origin of the name Mu‘tazila, what the word means, why it was given to this group, and in what circumstances. A second focus has been on the history of the movement, the early figures of Wāṣil b. ‘Aṭā’ (d. 131/748–9) and ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd (d. 144/761), as well as their relationships to one another and to their disciples. A third angle concerns the extent of intellectual continuity between the doctrines of the period of origin and later Mu‘tazilī doctrines, as attested in the five principles. What follows is chiefly a summary of these approaches in the order outlined here, as it reflects—to a significant extent—the development of scholarship on the subject. These angles were never mutually exclusive and shifted over time, partially in response to the available sources.

The principal limitation has to do with the sources. They are scarce, late, and conflict with one another. The earliest sources date from at least a century after the period of origins, and the evidence they relate ranges widely in its scope and relevance.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore the material in these sources in the form of reports and opinions expresses the differing standpoints of their authors, and cannot be free of their doctrinal biases. The sources can be divided into two main groups: Mu‘tazilī and proto-Sunnī and Sunnī.<sup>3</sup> This division influences, for example, the accounts about the founders of the school: early Mu‘tazilī sources favour Wāṣil as the founder while the proto-Sunnī sources favour ‘Amr.<sup>4</sup> Later Mu‘tazilī sources regard Wāṣil and ‘Amr as equally responsible for establishing the

<sup>1</sup> The early ordering of the principles is attested in the work of al-Ka‘bī/al-Balkhī (d. 319/931) (*Maqālāt*, 63–4). For the late ordering of the principles see the example of al-Mas‘ūdī’s (d. 346/956) listing of the five principles (*Murūj*, 4: 50–60).

<sup>2</sup> Examples of early sources and their divergent scopes are the heresiographical work of the Mu‘tazilī Ja‘far b. Ḥarb (d. 236/850), *Uṣul*, 54, and the literary work of al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868–9), *Bayān*, 1: 14–16, 20–3, 3: 169.

<sup>3</sup> The earliest proto-Sunnī source is Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/889) *Ma‘ārif*. Two other late Sunnī sources are al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), *Farq*, 92, and al-Shahrastānī’s (d. 548/1153) *Milāl*, 31–4. The earliest Mu‘tazilī source to speak about Wāṣil and his contribution is al-Ka‘bī’s *Maqālāt*, 64–9.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the discussion of Wāṣil and ‘Amr in the earliest proto-Sunnī source, viz. Ibn Qutayba’s *Ma‘ārif*, 482–3, 625, to that of al-Ka‘bī’s ‘Dhikr al-Mu‘tazila’ in *Maqālāt*, 64–9.

school.<sup>5</sup> On other points, conflicting reports cannot be decoded by an account of the doctrinal constraints of the sources. This is especially the case regarding the reports of the origin of the name Mu‘tazila, where some Mu‘tazilī sources speak of how little they know of the initial meaning of the term and recount quite different interpretations of it.<sup>6</sup> A summary of the difficulty of the sources would not be complete if we do not also note the fundamental fact that no single work attributed to figures of this period is preserved. All that we have are the mention of titles, and few and scattered mentions of their doctrines that cannot be verified as direct citations or quotations by the professed founding figures.<sup>7</sup> In short, any evidence about the doctrines of the Mu‘tazila from this period remains twice removed in terms of time and genre.

## II THE NAME MU‘TAZILA

The earliest studies of the origin of the Mu‘tazila focus on identifying the origin of the lexical use of the term ‘Mu‘tazila’, the infinitive ‘*i‘tizāl*’ and the verb ‘*i‘tazala*’, in writings from the first/seventh and early second/eighth centuries. Ignaz Goldziher suggested that the original meaning of the movement related to the ascetic and pious tendencies of the founders (Goldziher 1910: 100). He reached this conclusion by first mapping out the various extant uses of the word Mu‘tazila (Goldziher 1887: 196),<sup>8</sup> and then favoured the use of the word Mu‘tazila to describe groups who ‘retire’ or ‘withdraw’, and the noun ‘*i‘tizāl*’ in the expression *kāna madhhabuhu l-i‘tizāl* to refer to a path of asceticism (Goldziher 1918: 207–8). He preferred this meaning for the origins of the Mu‘tazila based on his consideration of the biographical evidence about the ascetic practices of both Wāṣil and ‘Amr (Goldziher 1910: 101). He considered *kalām* tendencies as later developments to the Mu‘tazila, as notions that did not exist at its genesis. Louis Massignon supported an ascetic meaning for the doctrine of the intermediate rank, although he provided little by way of textual evidence to advance Goldziher’s theory.<sup>9</sup> Other than that, Goldziher’s theory of its ascetic origins was not taken up again until Sara Stroumsa’s work, examined below.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), *Amālī*, 1: 165–7, Ibn al-Murtaḍā (d. 840/1437), *Ṭabaqāt*, 36–40.

<sup>6</sup> al-Ka‘bī, *Maqālāt*, 115; al-Maqdisī, *Badʿ*, 5: 142; Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995 or 388/998), *Fihrist*, 201; ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), *Faḍl*, 165–6; al-Jishumī (d. 494/1101), *Sharḥ*, 28b–29a.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. al-Khayyāt’s (d. c.300/913) discussion of Wāṣil’s doctrines (*Intiṣār*, 73–4).

<sup>8</sup> In Goldziher’s earliest mention of the question of the origin of the name Mu‘tazila, he also cites a political meaning of the term ‘Mu‘tazila’ as referring to ‘political dissidents’ (Goldziher 1887: 196).

<sup>9</sup> Massignon labelled the term Mu‘tazila as a ‘voluntary solitude of the heart’, but offered no foundation for this interpretation based on attested semantic usage, and did not explain how his argument is derived from the Mu‘tazilī doctrine of the intermediate rank (Massignon 1975: iii. 189). He did document the connection between the follower of one disciple of ‘Amr and Basran ascetic circles (Massignon 1954: 168).

Goldziher’s approach of mapping out the meaning of the word Mu‘tazila was followed by Carlo Nallino, who expanded on it, but was led to a very different understanding of the origin of the name. For Nallino the genesis of the Mu‘tazila is rooted in what he called the ‘political Mu‘tazila’ who ‘abstained from the internal struggles of the first century’ (Nallino 1916: 447). A group was called ‘Mu‘tazila’ because they abstained (*i‘tizāl*) from giving the oath of allegiance to ‘Alī (r. 656–61 CE) after the death of ‘Uthmān (r. 644–55 CE) (Nallino 1916: 442). Nallino recognized another instance in which a group was called Mu‘tazila, namely when they abstained from giving allegiance to either party; that is, they neither supported the party of ‘Alī nor the supporters of ‘Uthmān (Nallino 1916: 446; al-Ṭabarī, 1:3342). Indeed Nallino explained that during the first part of the second/eighth century, when *‘i‘tazala*’ was used as a transitive verb, it implied abstaining from taking part in public life and in war; when used in relation to two parties in dispute it meant abstaining from joining either party (Nallino 1916: 444).

H. S. Nyberg also located the origins of the Mu‘tazila in a response to the political strife between ‘Alī and his opponents when arguing that the political Mu‘tazila were those who ‘separated from ‘Alī’ (*i‘tazalū ‘Alī*) and ‘took up a neutral attitude in the quarrels between ‘Alī and his adversaries’ (Nyberg 1913–36: 787–8). Nyberg’s translation of the verb *‘i‘tazala*’ as ‘to separate’ reflected the wording of Abū Muḥammad Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī (d. betw. 300/912 and 310/922) in his *Firaq al-shī‘a*, who is the only primary source to trace the origin of the Mu‘tazila to the political Mu‘tazila of the first civil war (Madelung 1965: 30). But Nyberg’s theory about the political origins of the Mu‘tazila differed greatly from Nallino’s initial hypothesis, as Nyberg argued that the official theology of the ‘Abbāsid movement was Mu‘tazilī. This claim was largely facilitated by Nyberg’s interpretation of the doctrine of the intermediate rank as a political response to the strife that plagued the community after the murder of ‘Uthmān (Nyberg 1913–36: 788).

Nallino and Nyberg’s stance that the origin of the name Mu‘tazila lies in political neutrality was revisited by Montgomery Watt, who based it on Wāṣil’s doctrine of abstaining from taking a position on ‘Alī and his opponents, namely the doctrine of *li‘ān*. Watt saw the Mu‘tazila as advocates of political neutrality; however, he did not adopt Nallino and Nyberg’s methods for deriving their conclusion nor did he trace the Mu‘tazila back to the political Mu‘tazila of the first civil war. Indeed, Watt believed that the Mu‘tazila only became a distinct group around the beginning of the third/ninth century (see Section III).

One shared thrust of Nallino and Nyberg’s hypotheses regarding the Mu‘tazila’s political genesis seems to have survived in the works of Wilferd Madelung and Josef van Ess (van Ess 1992: 339). Although in different ways, both reached the same conclusion that the movement had a political genesis. More importantly, they broke with Nallino and Nyberg’s approach to the history of origins by shifting their focus from a semantic treatment of the term Mu‘tazila toward a critical documentation of the history of the movement and its doctrines.

Sections III and IV mainly focus on this approach; Madelung's and van Ess's contributions, which employ the material available for the history of the movement, as tentative as it is, confirm that initial speculation based solely on the semantic uses of the term is no longer tenable.

We must mention one last example of this semantic approach, namely Stroumsa's argument in support of Goldziher's theory of an ascetic meaning, for which she expanded his initial examination of the semantic use of the term *Mu'tazila* (Stroumsa 1990). She argues that a flexible use of the verb '*i'tazala*' and the noun '*mu'tazila*' is attested in the literature of the period prior to the *Mu'tazila*, and this includes the meaning of asceticism. But, she adds, it was only with Wāṣil and 'Amr that the word '*mu'tazila*' became the proper name of the movement. She describes a process of 'diversification' of the word *mu'tazila*, even as other words became technical terms for asceticism (Stroumsa 1990: 273). Underlying Stroumsa's critique of the scholarship on the origins of the *Mu'tazila* is her vision of a larger role for asceticism in the emergence of the early Islamic period, which she believes has been sidelined in favour of political frameworks (Stroumsa 1990: 292–3). While there is much work to be done on the origins of asceticism in order to test Stroumsa's line of inquiry, we must keep in mind her argument, as it resolves one of van Ess's hypotheses about the intellectual-political triggers of the movement, as discussed in Section III.

### III THE MOVEMENT

---

Watt maintained that the *Mu'tazila* started with the figure of Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf (d. 227/842); it was only in the mid-third/ninth century, he states, that Wāṣil and 'Amr were presented as the founders of the *Mu'tazila* (Watt 1948: 61; Watt 1963: 52–4). With the exception of Watt, however, even when scholars disagreed on the nature of the contributions of Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā' and 'Amr b. 'Ubayd, they at least recognized that both had a hand in its genesis. But determining the contributions of these two figures presents difficulties: each one had an independent intellectual profile, and the material available on them is not only scarce but anecdotal. Indeed, this material requires verification and a critical anchoring to the wider picture of historical events of the time. Van Ess undertook this task over the course of several decades (van Ess 1967, 1971, 1975, 1987, 1992). Nyberg had already charted a path into the origin of the movement, especially highlighting the distinct intellectual characteristics of 'Amr and Wāṣil, but his presentation of their biographies was marred by his theory that they had supported the 'Abbāsīd movement (Nyberg 1913–36: 788–9; Nyberg 1957: 125–31). This is a misconception that Madelung corrected, for Nyberg's theory had distorted the biographies of the two men (Madelung 1965: 24–30).

Wāṣil moved to Basra, but remained an outsider (van Ess 1992: 244) and his discipleship under al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) most likely did not occur there (van Ess 1992: 257–8). His early ties to Medina do not necessarily mean that he was a student of Abū

Hāshim, the son of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (d. 81/700–1) (Nyberg 1913–36: 788; Madelung 1965: 31; van Ess 1992: 236, 251–2). Yet his early Medinese connections must have played a part in his pro-‘Alīd stances and his espousal of the doctrine of the *imāma* of the less excellent (*imāmat al-mafḍūl*), by which he deemed the *imāma* of Abū Bakr (r. 632–4 CE), ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634–44 CE), and ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān (with the exception of his last six years) to be valid although these three were not the most excellent, since Wāṣil deemed ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib to be the most excellent for that position (van Ess 1992: 259, 270–1, 273).

Wāṣil’s asceticism was a defining feature of his personality, but it was his outstanding performance in theological debates where he showed his mastery of *kalām* and rhetorical skills (van Ess 1992: 241–3) that attracted attention and followers (van Ess 1992: 253, 254, 259). His lexical talent allowed him to find synonyms for words to compensate for his inability to pronounce the letter R correctly. There is no reason to reject the report that he gave a memorable sermon as a member of the Basran delegation before the Umayyad governor ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (van Ess 1992: 241–2) but its two published versions cannot be considered authentic (Hārūn 1951; Daiber 1988; Radtke 1990; Gilliot 1990; van Ess 1992: 246–8). Wāṣil sent his followers as missionaries (*du‘āt*) around the Muslim world; it is likely that he modelled this on the practices of the Ibāḍīs with whom he had debated in his youth (van Ess 1992: 255). The aim of these missionaries was the dissemination of religion through *kalām*; they relied on their commercial activities to survive, and combined their teacher’s asceticism and rhetorical mastery (van Ess 1992: 310–11). We must recall that Wāṣil was a proponent of free will, a characteristic that he shared with ‘Amr and which, van Ess suggests, allowed him to win followers in a city to which he was an outsider (van Ess 1992: 340–1).

While free will was one component of Wāṣil’s intellectual characteristics, it was at the centre of ‘Amr’s thought (Nyberg 1957; van Ess 1967: 39–45; van Ess 1992: 308). ‘Amr’s contribution to the Qadariyya movement was not as a *mutakallim* but as a traditionist (van Ess 1992: 308) which prompted the traditionists to censor ‘Amr and his students (van Ess 1992: 342). Aside from his contributions as a traditionist and the attention, albeit negative, that his position on free will earned, ‘Amr was not an original thinker or a prolific author; rather it was his asceticism that seems to have left the strongest impression (van Ess 1992: 280, 305), so much so that most of his opponents among the *ahl al-ḥadīth* conceded that he was a pious individual (van Ess 1992: 280–1, 296). Although ‘Amr was not al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s favourite student, his ties to him were significant enough, including his transmission of *ḥadīth* from him, to prompt the *ahl al-ḥadīth* to distance al-Ḥasan from him (van Ess 1992: 297, 302–4). It is important to note that, like al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and the Basrans, ‘Amr was sympathetic to ‘Uthmān and upheld the *imāma* of the most excellent (*imāmat al-faḍīl*) (van Ess 1992: 308). Above all, unlike Wāṣil whose success was defined by his excellence in *kalām*, there is no evidence that ‘Amr was interested in *kalām* (van Ess 1992: 305).

Clearly Wāṣil and ‘Amr both advocated the doctrine of free will and both led ascetic lives. But it was in their shared politics—not their political theology (that is, their views on the *imāma*)—that van Ess saw the initial coherence of the Mu‘tazila movement (van

Ess 1992: 339–40). Both ‘Amr and Wāṣil thought that one of the parties involved in the battle of the camel was culpable, although it cannot be known which party. Their verdict was modelled on the legal verdict of *li‘ān*, in which it is declared that either the man or wife is culpable for adultery but that identifying the culpable one is impossible. Applying this legal model allows one to safeguard the reputation of the companions of the Prophet (van Ess 1992: 272). Furthermore, van Ess goes to great lengths to show that the political neutrality of Wāṣil and ‘Amr was not confined to their judgement about the past, but can also be seen in their attitude to contemporary political upheavals. Thus, Wāṣil and the majority of his followers practised political neutrality in a world of competing political claims (van Ess 1992: 339). ‘Amr’s political neutrality was tied to his sense of social justice and distrust of the ruling elite—by which he distanced himself from those in power (van Ess 1992: 295–6). Van Ess expanded Madelung’s clarification of the reported encounter between ‘Amr and the second ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–75 CE), an encounter that had been misunderstood by Nyberg, and implied a close connection between the two in which ‘Amr acted as a mentor to al-Manṣūr and showed support for the ‘Abbāsids (van Ess 1992: 287–8). Van Ess explains that their encounter rather expresses al-Manṣūr’s apprehension of ‘Amr’s authority as a leader of the Qadariyya in Basra during a time when al-Manṣūr was concerned about the Qadariyya’s participation in the revolt of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (d. 145/762–3) and his brother Ibrāhīm. He argues that these reports show instead that al-Manṣūr was keen to persuade ‘Amr to maintain the political neutrality that he had shown during the turmoil at the end of the Umayyad caliphate (van Ess 1992: 287–94).

For van Ess, political neutrality was the one element that ties Wāṣil to ‘Amr while allowing them to disagree on theological matters and to have different doctrinal priorities (van Ess 1992: 341). Yet van Ess’s view that it is political neutrality that defined the beginning of the Mu‘tazila is complicated by the evidence he notes about the opposing political orientation of the group first labelled Mu‘tazila who participated in the revolt of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya after the death of ‘Amr; it is this group that is said to have formed the kernel of the army that led the revolt (van Ess 1992: 327–8). Additionally, aside from their view on justice (*qālū bi-l-‘adl*), almost nothing is known about the doctrines of these Mu‘tazilites of the revolt (van Ess 1992: 328). But if indeed we must accept this group as Mu‘tazila, then we must also ask: why would the first group (in these sources) to be recognized as Mu‘tazila take a political stance so contrary to the ideals of both ‘Amr and Wāṣil? Clearly much remains unknown, and is needed to explain this contradiction in the very first decades of the movement.

There is one key difficulty in the narrative van Ess weaves of the movement: the issue of the encounter between Wāṣil and ‘Amr, its manner and context. There is ample evidence that they knew each other: Wāṣil was married to ‘Amr’s sister, and they were both weavers. More importantly they both attended the circle of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. Van Ess seems inclined to accept the evidence in the poetry of Ṣafwān al-Anṣarī, that speaks of ‘Amr as a student of Wāṣil (van Ess 1992: 259). Van Ess, however, is reluctant to accept that there was a turning point at the start of the movement, in which ‘Amr converted

to Wāṣil's doctrine after a debate the two held on the doctrine of the intermediate rank (van Ess 1992: 256–7). Based on his analysis of the content of the arguments of Wāṣil and 'Amr, van Ess argues that the latter's views on the grave sinner match those of the Bakriyya, a group of followers of al-Ḥasan that flourished in the second part of the second/eighth century, and were projected back to Wāṣil and 'Amr (van Ess 1992: 257). Van Ess rejects Madelung's defence of the validity of this story based on a work entitled 'About what occurred between him [Wāṣil] and 'Amr b. Ubayd' (*Kitāb mā jarā baynahu wa-bayna 'Amr b. Ubayd*); he believed the work to have circulated around the same time as the report (van Ess 1992: 256; Madelung 1965: 12).

Van Ess thought that it was Wāṣil's intellectual leadership, especially his mastery of *kalām* and his formulation of the doctrine of the intermediate rank (discussed in Section IV), that ushered in the new movement. While 'Amr's contribution was in opening up the Basran community to Wāṣil, who was an outsider (van Ess 1992: 254), doctrinally and intellectually, van Ess argues, he did not contribute to the movement in any innovative manner.

Wāṣil and 'Amr's students held intellectual profiles as divergent as those of their teachers (van Ess 1992: 310). 'Amr's students were mainly traditionists, while the majority of Wāṣil's students were jurists, whose aims focused on religious disputations (van Ess 1992: 302). After the death of their master, Basra was no longer a friendly environment for them, and many left for North Africa (van Ess 1992: 310–12). 'Amr's followers split with the revolt of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, but we have very little information about the moderate followers who did not participate (van Ess 1992: 321). All this leaves yet another gap in the narrative of the movement's origin, this time between the immediate students and the first generation after the early Mu'tazila of the second half of the second/eighth century. The reports that the early Mu'tazilī Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf received the teachings of Wāṣil through 'Uthmān al-Ṭawīl (d. 150/767) cannot be taken at face value (van Ess 1992: 313–14).

Among the threads van Ess pursues in tracing the history of the movement, the one he is most certain about is Wāṣil's contribution as a preacher and his mastery of *kalām*. In reaching this conclusion, van Ess was influenced by early Mu'tazilī accounts of Wāṣil. Later Mu'tazilī accounts incorporated those of the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* that favoured 'Amr as the father of the school in order to distance al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī from any Qadarī connection (van Ess 1992: 260–307).

## IV THE DOCTRINES

Van Ess's work on the history of the movement, as outlined above, disproved earlier less sceptical stances that date the five principles to this period. Nyberg traced the five principles to this period and considered them part of 'Amr and Wāṣil's propaganda (Nyberg 1913–36: 791–2). Madelung also believed that all five principles go that far back, and even

traced their roots, with the exception of the principle of unity, to the thought of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (Madelung 1965: 18). Goldziher believed that it was impossible to trace the five principles of the Muʿtazila back to this period of their origins because he maintained that neither Wāṣil nor ʿAmr practised *kalām* (Goldziher 1910: 101–2). Nallino also denied the dating of the five principles to this period, but he made an exception for the doctrine of the intermediate rank—although he misunderstood its genesis and its content—(Nallino 1916: 448). Despite Watt’s overall sceptical stance about the historicity of a period of origins, he did, however, acknowledge the attribution of the doctrine of the intermediate rank to Wāṣil (1963: 53–4). For different reasons and in different contexts than presented by Nallino, van Ess also accepted that the doctrine of intermediate rank dated to this period (van Ess 1992: 273–4).

Although van Ess’s work on the history of the movement proved Madelung’s positive stance about the early dating of the five principles untenable, he agreed with Madelung’s analysis of the content of the doctrines of the five principles and their contextualization in earlier theological trends (Madelung 1965: 8–23). Madelung’s analysis includes his correction of Nyberg’s misconception about the derivation of the doctrine of the intermediate rank as a statement regarding the battling parties at the first civil war (Madelung 1965: 24–30).

According to Madelung’s explanation, Wāṣil agreed with his predecessors, the Khārijites, the Murjiʿites, and al-Ḥasan in deeming the ‘name’ (*ism*) of someone who commits a grave sin to be a ‘grave sinner’ (*fāsiq*), but unlike them he did not see a ‘judicial regulation’ (*ḥukm*) suitable for application to them. He thus disagreed with the ‘judicial regulations’ (*aḥkām*) of his predecessors with regard to grave sinners. The Murjiʿites upheld the view that despite his grave sin, a sinner remains a believer. The Khārijites believed that a grave sin made a servant an unbeliever. Al-Ḥasan understood the status of the grave sinner to lie between that of a believer and an unbeliever, but in legal terms (*aḥkām*) he considered him equal to a hypocrite. For Wāṣil the regulations of his predecessors had no justification in the Qurʾān, as the characteristics of the unbeliever, believer, and hypocrite do not apply to the grave sinner. Wāṣil believed that the grave sinner, although he is a Muslim, will be punished in hell for eternity (Madelung 1965: 10–11).

Wāṣil’s rejection of al-Ḥasan’s legal ruling of the hypocrite as an interpretation of the status of the grave sinner indicates the degree of their differing epistemologies. Wāṣil’s asceticism, unlike that of al-Ḥasan, carried no suspicion of the world. A suspicion which, in part, led to al-Ḥasan’s preoccupation with the Qurʾānic category of the hypocrite that shaped his understanding of the grave sinner (van Ess 1992: 45). Al-Ḥasan’s asceticism meant that access to God and belief in God had to do with fear of God (Madelung 1965: 12–13). Thus knowledge of God, because it implied fear of God, could not coexist with grave sin. He thus deemed the grave sinner as a hypocrite, someone who does not know God, who is not a Muslim. For Wāṣil, sinful behaviour could coexist with knowledge of God, because knowledge is based on reason (Madelung 1965: 13); someone who commits a grave sin remains a Muslim, since he knows God through reason, but because of his grave sin he will be punished in hell for eternity.

Moreover, although van Ess dated the doctrine of intermediate rank to Wāṣil, he remained sceptical about the presentation of this doctrine in the sources: at least a

century after Wāṣil, the content of the argument became more stylized and later authors may have granted Wāṣil more originality than he deserved (van Ess 1992: 264, 266). Indeed, van Ess maintains his scepticism about other material on Wāṣil, even when he accepts the material attributed to Wāṣil’s epistemology from later projections (van Ess 1992: 261, 276).

## V CONCLUSION

Of the three angles through which the origins of the movement have been approached, the angle focusing on its history yields the most evidence, though it also remains inconclusive. Van Ess, who led the research focused on this angle, was least sceptical about the following conclusions: the beginning of the movement was tied to Wāṣil b. ‘Aṭā’s work as a preacher and theologian; it was Wāṣil who developed the doctrine of the intermediate rank; the spread of his movement was facilitated by the local support of ‘Amr in Basra; and the doctrine of political neutrality that they shared gave identity and unity to the movement. These conclusions, as restrained as they are, however, still give rise to two issues. They do not account for the change in the political orientation of the Mu‘tazila during the revolt of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya. And, given the central role of ‘Amr’s asceticism, and even that of Wāṣil, van Ess’s conclusions do not adequately explain its role in the beginning of the movement. These two issues invite a reconsideration of elements in Stroumsa’s argument that it was asceticism rather than political neutrality that bound Wāṣil and ‘Amr together (Stroumsa 1990: 280–7). But revisiting her argument is only useful if we redefine asceticism as tolerant of different political choices, and not tied to what Stroumsa describes as an apolitical stance. If the historical material allows us to redefine the Mu‘tazila’s asceticism in this manner, then it can account for the political neutrality of both ‘Amr and Wāṣil and the opposite stance of their followers who fought in the revolt of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya. Such a reconsideration of the role of asceticism in the origin of the Mu‘tazila awaits a wider work on the history of asceticism at the time and cannot be undertaken with a re-evaluation of the sources available on the origins of the Mu‘tazila only, though a re-evaluation of these sources would be an important component of such a project. One potentially useful source that merits re-examination in this context is Abū l-Ḥusayn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Malaṭī (d. 377/987), who describes a group that ‘separated’ (*i‘tazalū*) from al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī (d. 49/669–70) in the aftermath of his abdication of the leadership of the community in favour of Mu‘āwiya. This group declared that ‘we shall occupy ourselves with learning (*‘ilm*) and worship (*‘ibāda*).’ This is the reason, al-Malaṭī adds, that they were called the ‘Mu‘tazila.’<sup>10</sup> Of

<sup>10</sup> See al-Malaṭī, *Tanbīh*, 29. Stroumsa notes this passage as additional evidence to corroborate Goldziher’s claims about the ascetic origin of the Mu‘tazila, whose orientation, especially that of ‘Amr, she describes as ‘apolitical’ (Stroumsa 1990: 272 n. 46). An apolitical stance does not, however, necessarily follow from the description of the group called Mu‘tazila in al-Malaṭī’s passage.

course the historical group spoken of here cannot be taken to be the beginning of the Mu'tazila movement. But al-Malaṭī's use of the word *'i'tazalū'* documents two—by now established—key characteristics of the Mu'tazila movement, namely learning and worship, and it ties them to a quietist asceticism orientation that is not a principled commitment to political neutrality. If we accept the evidence of al-Malaṭī as a precedent for the political meaning of the Mu'tazila, we may be able to resolve the apparent contradiction in the political orientation between Wāṣil and 'Amr on the one hand and the supporters of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya on the other.

## REFERENCES

- 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (*Faḍl*). *Faḍl al-i'tizāl wa-ṭabaqāt al-Mu'tazila*. Ed. Fu'ād Sayyid. Tunis: al-Dār al-Tunisiyya li-l-Nashr, 1974.
- al-Baghdādī, 'Abd al-Qādir (*Farq*). *Al-Farq bayn al-firaq*. Ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd. Cairo: Dār al-ṭalā'ī, 2005.
- Daiber, H. (1988). *Wāṣil ibn 'Aṭā' als Prediger und Theologe: Ein neuer Text aus dem 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* Leiden: Brill.
- van Ess, J. (1967). *Traditionistische Polemik gegen 'Amr b. Ubaid*. Beirut: Franz Steiner.
- van Ess, J. (1971). *Frühe mu'tazilitische Häresiographie: Zwei Werke des Naṣī' al-Akbar (gest. 293 H.)*. Beirut: Franz Steiner.
- van Ess, J. (1975). *Zwischen Ḥadīth und Theologie: Studien zum Entstehen prädestinationischer Überlieferung*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- van Ess, J. (1987). *Une lecture à rebours de l'histoire du Mu'tazilisme*. Paris: Paul Geuthner.
- van Ess, J. (1992). *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam* (vol. ii). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Gilliot, C. (1990). 'Review'. *Studia Islamica* 71: 187–8.
- Goldziher, I. (1887). 'Materialien zur Kenntnis der Almohadenbewegung in Nord-Afrika'. *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 41: 30–140.
- Goldziher, I. (1910). *Vorlesungen über den Islam*. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung.
- Goldziher, I. (1918). 'Arabische Synonymik der Askese'. *Der Islam* 8: 204–13.
- Hārūn, 'Abd al-Salām (1951). *Nawādir al-Makḥṭūṭāt*, vol. 2. Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda.
- Ibn al-Nadīm (*Fihrist*). *Al-Fihrist*. Ed. Riḍā Tajaddud. Beirut: Dār al-Masīra, 1987.
- Ibn Qutayba (*Ma'ārif*). *Kitāb al-Ma'ārif*. Ed. Tharwat 'Ukāsha. Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969.
- al-Jāḥiẓ (*Bayān*). *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*. 4 vols. Ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn. Cairo: Maṭba'at Lajnat al-ta'līf wa-l-tarjama wa-l-nashr, 1948.
- al-Jishumī (*Sharḥ*). *Sharḥ 'uyūn al-masā'il*. vol. 1. Ms. Ṣan'ā', al-Jāmī' al-Kabīr, al-Maktaba al-Gharbiyya, *ilm al-kalām* 99.
- al-Ka'bi/al-Balkhī (*Maqālāt*). 'Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyin'. In *Faḍl al-i'tizāl wa-ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila*. Ed. Fu'ād Sayyid. Tunis: al-Dār al-Tunisiyya li-l-Nashr, 1974.
- al-Khayyāt (*Intiṣār*). *Kitāb al-Intiṣār wa-l-radd 'alā Ibn al-Rāwandī al-mulḥid*. Ed. A. Nader and H. S. Nyberg. Beirut: al-Maṭba'a al-Kāthulikiyya, 1957.
- Madelung, W. (1965). *Der Imām al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

- al-Malaṭī (*Tanbīh*). *al-Tanbīh wa-l-radd 'alā ahl al-ahwā' wa-l-bida'*. Ed. H. Ritter. Istanbul: Maṭba'at al-Dawla, 1936.
- al-Maqdisī (*Bad'*). *Kitāb al-Bad' wa-l-ta'rikh*. Vol. 5. Ed. C. Huart. Paris: Leroux, 1916.
- Massignon, L. (1954). *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*. Paris: J. Vrin.
- Massignon, L. (1975). *La Passion de Husayn Ibn Mansūr Hallāj: martyr mystique de l'Islam exécuté à Bagdad le 26 mars 922*. Paris: Gallimard.
- al-Mas'ūdī (*Murūj*). *Murūj al-dhahab*. 7 vols. Ed. Ch. Pellat. Beirut: Manshūrāt al-jāmi'a al-lubnāniyya, 1974.
- Nallino, C. A. (1916). 'Sull'origine del nome dei Mu'taziliti'. *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 14: 429–54.
- Nyberg, H. S. (1913–36). 'Al-Mu'tazila'. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1st edn. Leiden: Brill, vi. 787–93.
- Nyberg, H. S. (1957). 'Amr Ibn 'Ubad et Ibn al-Rawandi, deux réprochés'. In *Classicisme et déclin culturel dans l'histoire de l'Islam*. Paris: Librairie G. P. Maisonneuve, 125–39.
- Pines, S. (1936). *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre*. Berlin: A. Hein.
- Radtke, B. (1990). 'Subhānallāh! Von der Anwendung des Münchhausen-Prinzips in der Philologie'. *Der Islam* 67: 322–59.
- Schmidtke, S. (1998). 'Neuere Forschungen zur Mu'tazila unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der späteren Mu'tazila ab dem 4./10. Jahrhundert'. *Arabica* 45: 379–408.
- al-Shahrastānī (*Milal*). *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*. Ed. W. Cureton. Leipzig: Harassowitz, 1923.
- al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (*Amālī*). *Amālī al-Murtaḍā: Ghurar al-Fawā'id wa-durar al-qalā'id*. 2 vols. Ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm. Cairo: Dār iḥyā' al-kutub al-'arabiyya, 1954.
- Steiner, H. (1865). *Die Mu'taziliten oder die Freidenker im Islām*. Leipzig: S. Hirzel.
- Stroumsa, S. (1990). 'The Beginnings of the Mu'tazila Reconsidered'. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13: 265–93.
- Watt, W. M. (1948). *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam*. London: Luzac & Company.
- Watt, W. M. (1963). 'The Political Attitudes of the Mu'tazilah'. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1/2: 38–57.

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

---

ISLAMIC  
THEOLOGY

---

*Edited by*

SABINE SCHMIDTKE

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of  
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Oxford University Press 2016

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the  
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted  
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics  
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the  
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the  
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016935488

ISBN 978-0-19-969670-3

Printed in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and  
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials  
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.