

CHAPTER 4

Sufi Contributions to Hadith Commentary

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Several studies examine Sufi contributions to Qur'anic exegesis and the genre of Sufi Qur'an commentaries, but there is a dearth of studies on Sufi contributions to the genre of hadith commentaries. In this chapter I highlight some of the most important contributions to the field of hadith commentaries by Sufis in order to show the different qualities of these commentaries.¹ Of course, many if not most of Sunnī Islam's greatest hadith commentators were themselves initiated into Sufi *ṭarīqas* and were influenced by Sufi thought, but not all of them were seen primarily as Sufis, and their commentaries did not necessarily contain many Sufi themes. In this chapter, I look at major works by those who are strongly identified as Sufis, and whose works show Sufi themes as present if not dominant. In addition, in response to Jamal Elias's questioning of the existence of Sufi Qur'an commentaries as a separate genre,² my survey and analysis leads to the question of whether these hadith commentaries can be classified as a separate genre or if there is a more meaningful way to distinguish these works. I use two stories about a meeting – or perhaps two meetings – between the major hadith transmitter, Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 275/889), and the prominent Sufi figure, Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), to frame and direct this enquiry.

1 A more comprehensive survey, with understandable inaccuracies due to its preliminary nature and large scope, was undertaken by Hasan Kamil Yilmaz in the introduction to his edition and Turkish translation of Qūnawī's *Sharḥ al-arba'īna ḥadīthan*; see Yilmaz, *Tasavvufi Hadīs Şerhleri*. There is also a study by Zayn b. Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn al-'Aydārūs providing examples of *ishārī* (metaphorical/allusory) explanations of hadith from the beginnings of Islam until the present; this study does not make the mistake of assuming that *ishārī* explanations are an exclusively Sufi practice and notes that other scholars have also used them. See al-'Aydārūs, *al-Ma'ānī al-ishāriyya*, 46.

2 Elias, 'Şūfī *tafsīr* Reconsidered'.

The well-known traditionist, Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (d. 576/1180), narrates two stories about the meeting between Abū Dāwūd and al-Tustarī.³ According to one, when al-Tustarī first met Abū Dāwūd, he asked Abū Dāwūd to put out his tongue, which he used to teach the words of Muḥammad, and al-Tustarī proceeded to kiss it, either to honour it or to receive the blessings and light of the hadith. According to the second story of their meeting, a man seeking to receive Abū Dāwūd's great work, the *Sunan*, thought to first take the opportunity to visit the famed al-Tustarī, who was on the way.⁴ Al-Tustarī advised him that even if he received Abū Dāwūd's hadith, in fact even if he became Abū Dāwūd himself, that it would not benefit him unless he acted on his knowledge. The man was hurt by what he thought was a criticism of the life of hadith transmitters, and so he conveyed al-Tustarī's words to Abū Dāwūd when he saw him. Abū Dāwūd asked the man to take him to al-Tustarī, who only showed him the greatest respect. During their conversation, Abū Dāwūd asked al-Tustarī about a hadith that was troubling him because unorthodox sects were using it to defend their doctrine against proto-Sunnī orthodoxy. Al-Tustarī was able to explain the hadith to Abū Dāwūd in a way that removed his concerns and Abū Dāwūd was so grateful that he kissed al-Tustarī's feet out of respect. These stories bring out two important points: (1) that the early Sufis were very closely connected to the hadith transmitters and the proto-Sunnī Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement, and yet remained in some way separate, having identifiably different concerns, and (2) that these Sufis contributed to the explication of hadiths and were respected in this field. I begin with the first point.

Sufis and the Ahl al-Ḥadīth

It is now well known that the early Sufis were closely connected to, and in many cases part of, the proto-Sunnī Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement.⁵ However, not much has been said about the contribution of Sufis to the various fields of hadith sciences and transmission. Many early Sufis were important hadith scholars in the emerging Ahl al-Ḥadīth environment. Among the first was Ibn Abī 'Āṣim (d. 287/900), the *ẓāhirī* (i.e. textualist and anti-rationalist) judge of Isfahan. He came from the earliest group identified as 'Sufis'; namely, the school of Abū Ḥatīm al-'Aṭṭār, which was based in the

3 Al-Silafī, *Faḍā'il Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 33–36; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 15:213–221.

4 This illustrates the close connections and mutual respect between those in hadith circles and Sufis. Among those figures from the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement who went to study with Sahl al-Tustarī, the most prominent is the early leader of the Ḥanbali school, Abū Muḥammad al-Barbahārī (d. 329/941), who spent some years as Sahl al-Tustarī's disciple (see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, 82).

5 Karamustafa, *Sufism*; Dajani, *Sufis and Sharī'a*, 47–61.

grand mosque of Basra, and in which many of the founders of the Baghdadi school of Sufism were educated.⁶ Ibn Abī 'Āṣim wrote more than 300 works of hadith, including a *musnad* of 40,000 hadith, and the very influential *Kitāb al-Sunna*.⁷ Al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 405/1014), the author of the *Mustadrak*, which is one of the most important sources of hadith after the six canonical collections, was known to have been a disciple of at least four major Sufis. These included Ja'far al-Khuldī, al-Junayd's successor as head of the Baghdad circle of Sufis, and al-Kharkūshī (d. 407/1016) the author of *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, one of the earliest extant Sufi works.⁸ Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 438/1040) wrote *Hilyat al-awliyā'*, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa* and a *mustakhraj*⁹ on *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* among other hadith collections, and for fourteen years he held the distinction of having the world's shortest chains of hadith and the largest number of narrations, such that traditionists travelled to him from every corner of the Muslim world.¹⁰ Other Sufis became central figures in the transmission of canonical hadith works, among them, Abū Sa'īd b. al-A'rābī (d. 340/951), who has a key transmission of Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan* named after him, while Abū al-Waqt al-Sijzī al-Ṣūfī (d. 553/1158) has a key transmission of al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* named after him and is also a central figure in the reception of *Sunan al-Dārimī*.¹¹

Regarding works on hadith science and terminology, al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī wrote *Ma'rifat 'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, the earliest known comprehensive work on hadith sciences and terminology; this was followed by multiple works by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) on the subject.¹² Al-Khaṭīb's biographical entries on Sufis reveal the extent to which he revered them, learned from them, sought their blessings, defended them and even visited their graves; among those he was closest to were his teacher Abū Nu'aym and his friend al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1079), author of the Sufi classic *al-Risāla*.¹³ Abū Nu'aym wrote early books on hadith transmitters; namely, *Mu'jam al-ṣaḥāba* and *Tārīkh Iṣfahān*. Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) travelled extensively to learn hadith and studied with al-Dāraquṭnī (d. 385/995), who was seen as the last true master

6 See Melchert, 'Baṣran Origins'.

7 See Melchert, 'Baṣran Origins', 234–240; al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-islām*, 6:461.

8 Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 17: 163–178, 256–258.

9 A *mustakhraj* is an extract or excerpt from a work in which the author seeks alternate chains of narration for the same hadith.

10 Al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat*, 3:1094.

11 This work was written by Abū Muḥammad al-Dārimī (d. 255/869), an important teacher of al-Bukhārī and Abū 'Īsā al-Tirmidhī. Some scholars considered his work as more deserving of inclusion in the hadith canon than the *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah, because Ibn Mājah's collection was known to contain a large number of problematic traditions.

12 On these two authors see Brown, 'A Segment of the Genealogy'.

13 For a survey of al-Khaṭīb's entries on Sufi figures and his relationships with Sufis, see Jamil, 'Traditional Sunnī Epistemology', 262–279.

of hadith criticism. Al-Sulamī left a valuable work of *sū'ālāt* (questions) recording his questions to al-Dāraqūṭnī on hadith transmitters; according to al-Dhahabī, this reveals al-Sulamī's mastery of the subject. Al-Sulamī authored works on Sufism and hadith, and acted as a Sufi guide while also teaching hadith for forty years.¹⁴

The story of Sahl al-Tustarī's warning to the student seeking to receive Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan* from its author serves to remind us that for Sufis, the defining quality was to prioritise worship and internal matters like the purification of the heart over hadith transmission and other outward sciences. However, this did not mean that they did not consider these sciences important. While it is true that some Sufis and ascetics came to see hadith transmission with suspicion for the worldly prestige that it came to signify and for the competitiveness of hadith transmitters over the shortest chains of transmission, many of them, like Ibn Abī 'Āšim, Abū Nu'aym, Ibn al-A'rābī, al-Sulamī, and al-Ḥakīm were able to strike a balance between their dedication to Sufism and their dedication to hadith.¹⁵

Sufis and Hadith Commentary

The first author to write a commentary on a canonical hadith collection was Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī, who wrote commentaries on al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* and Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan*. Prior to his contributions, there were only a handful of works that clarified the meanings of the vocabulary of Mālik b. 'Anas's *Muwaṭṭa'*. Al-Khaṭṭābī's most important teacher of hadith was the Sufi hadith transmitter mentioned above, Abū Sa'īd b. al-A'rābī, author of *Ṭabaqāt al-nussāk*; al-Khaṭṭābī also studied with Ja'far al-Khuldī, head of the Baghdadi circle of Sufis in his time.¹⁶ Al-Khaṭṭābī was not the first to write a full-fledged book of hadith commentary; rather, the first full hadith commentary was written by the mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. c. 298/910) who wrote *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, a commentary on roughly three hundred hadiths he chose himself.¹⁷

Al-Tirmidhī was the first mystic to provide a 'theory or complete system of thought' regarding sainthood, and this is what later Sufis recognised

14 Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 17:247–255. See also al-Sulamī, *Sū'ālāt al-Sulamī li-l-Dāraqūṭnī*.

15 Melchert's 'Early Renunciants' gives a portrait of how ascetics and Sufis withdrew, over time, from the field of hadith transmission, but this picture is incomplete and neglects to consider many major Sufis, such as those mentioned above, who remained dedicated to the transmission and teaching of hadith.

16 Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 17:23–29.

17 See al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl*; the best edition is in 5-volumes, published in Jedda. The 4-volume edition (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1992) appears to be an abridgement by the author himself.

him for.¹⁸ In fact, no one before or after him, until Ibn ‘Arabī, described such a comprehensive worldview, one that encompassed and synthesised metaphysics, cosmology, theology, anthropology, sainthood, mystical experiences, jurisprudence and language.¹⁹ Al-Tirmidhī’s *Nawādir al-uṣūl* cleverly employs around three hundred hadith as doors of entry to various aspects of his worldview. Using the commentary on each hadith, and the supplementary hadiths he narrated in the commentary, he explains his views to the reader. Though he does not use the word Sufi in this work, his hadith commentary was primarily concerned with Sufi themes such as sainthood and inspired knowledge, knowledge of God and metaphysics.²⁰ This book was the first in several ways: it was the first full book of hadith commentary, the first work of hadith commentary on an original collection of hadith (the author’s own – earlier partial commentaries and most commentaries focused on the collections of previous authors), and it was also the first hadith commentary with a specific focus on Sufi matters.²¹ Al-Tirmidhī also wrote *al-Manhiyyāt*, a much shorter work in which he briefly comments on the wisdom behind eight hundred prohibitions in hadith, and explains that not all of these were meant to signify that these actions are forbidden, and therefore destructive to the self, but that many if not most prohibitions were to teach *adab* (propriety), and were intended to prevent people from descending to a lower level than they deserve. While propriety was very important to Sufis, the writings and teachings of al-Shāfi‘ī and Ibn Ḥanbal clearly differentiate between what the *shar‘a* prohibited in order to teach *adab* and what was prohibited because it was sinful.²²

Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī (d. 384/994) was famous for *al-Ta’arruf li-madhab ahl al-taṣawwuf*, his early introduction to Sufism and Sufis. His lesser-known work is a substantial book of hadith commentary, *Baḥr al-fawā’id*, in which he followed al-Tirmidhī’s example and chose his own collection of 222 hadiths to comment on. In this collection, al-Kalābādhī’s primary interest in Sufi themes like love and nearness to God is apparent, and in some cases, he interprets hadiths metaphorically, such that the outward meanings of hadiths refer to inward realities of the soul.²³ The Ḥanbalī Sufi

18 Radtke and O’Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood*, 8.

19 Radtke and O’Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood*, 6.

20 In al-Tirmidhī’s time, the word ‘Sufi’ had not yet gained currency throughout the Muslim world; it referred to particular schools in Basra and then in Baghdad; see Sviri, ‘Ḥakīm Tirmidhī’. Later authors on Sufism, however, rightly considered al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī one of the most influential founders of Sufism in its broader sense.

21 Al-Tirmidhī is also the author of the first known autobiography in Islam, *Budū sha’n al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī*.

22 See Dajani, *Sufis and Shar‘a*, 218.

23 Al-Kalābādhī, *Baḥr al-fawā’id*.

Abū Maṣṣūr Ma'mar al-Iṣfahānī (d. 418/1027) has a similar early commentary. He contributed to the by-then popular genre of forty hadiths and wrote a commentary on his own collection. Before him, al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī had written works on forty hadiths; theirs were intended for Sufi aspirants, with the commentaries appearing only as headings for each hadith. These headings show how the hadiths demonstrated important principles on the Sufi path. Of course, even a short heading serves an important commentarial purpose and should be understood as a commentary, despite its brevity, and al-Bukhārī himself had pioneered the use of section headings to draw out the legal or theological meanings of hadith.²⁴ A final prominent example is Aḥmad al-Rifā'ī's (d. 578/1182) *Ḥālat ahl al-ḥaqīqa ma' Allāh*, which is a compilation, made by a student, of forty lessons given by al-Rifā'ī, each of which began with a hadith he narrated with his own chain back to the Prophet Muhammad.²⁵ Though this work may appear at first to be a commentary on forty hadith, it is in fact a compilation of exhortations and lessons on the Sufi path, taking hadiths as their starting point. While many of these lessons focus on explaining the hadith, some do not interpret the hadith at all.

The above-mentioned examples – apart from al-Tirmidhī's *al-Manhiyyāt* – should be understood for what they really were: books on Sufism. Some were written in the form of short hadith collections with headings, while others took the form of long commentaries, but here hadith commentaries – whether in section headings or long discussions – served as a medium to discuss Sufi ideas.²⁶ *Al-Manhiyyāt* is more a work on the wisdom of the *sharī'a* than it is a Sufi work or a work of hadith commentary per se, though it may rely on al-Tirmidhī's Sufi concept of spiritual insight to explain the wisdom behind the hadiths. Jamal Elias pointed out that the structure of a Qur'an commentary, with its line-by-line format and the Qur'an's changing topics and themes, was not the best way for a Sufi to give a detailed presentation of their ideas; rather a Sufi would find it much easier to set out their mystical views in a treatise where their ideas could be treated fully and coherently in an organised fashion without having to follow the Qur'an's content and structure.²⁷ This problem does not arise in hadith commentaries, in which authors could choose which hadiths they thought would be beneficial to their project and use them as doors to explain their ideas, while at the same time legitimising their teachings by linking them to the hadith.

24 On this topic see Blecher, *Said the Prophet of God*, 111–128.

25 Al-Rifā'ī, *Ḥālat ahl al-ḥaqīqa*.

26 For a more recent example of a book on the Sufi path that employs the medium of a forty-hadith commentary, see Ṣāliḥ al-Ja'farī's *al-Fawā'id al-Ja'fariyya*, which I translated in Dajani, *Reassurance for the Seeker*.

27 Elias, 'Ṣūfī *tafsīr* Reconsidered', 47.

Sunnī scholars long held that the hadiths were inspired to the Prophet Muhammad and constituted a sort of inspiration that complemented the Qur'anic revelation, thus they were almost a second revelation.²⁸ Both the Qur'an and hadith employ many parables, similes and metaphors in their teachings, and so it was only natural for Sunnīs to take some of the Prophet Muhammad's words beyond their literal meanings and give them metaphorical interpretations.²⁹ Al-Kalābādhī, for example, took Muhammad's supplication for health and chastity to also refer to the health of the heart and the importance of avoiding what God forbade. He took the hadith that 'only a believer remains in a state of purity' to refer to outward purity, but also to refer to the purity of the heart; this, he said, is achieved by not looking at anything but God.³⁰ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) famously argued that when Muhammad stated that angels do not enter houses in which dogs live, he wanted his Companions to understand that the light of God will not enter hearts that are filled with bad traits such as rancour, anger, envy and the like; and he explained this without nullifying the outward understanding of the statement.³¹

Some Sufis went beyond metaphorical understandings and treated the hadith in the same way that they treated the Qur'an – by holding that it contained within it layers of meaning that were all intended at the same time, and were accessible to those given success by God. This is not necessarily a Sufi concept, as many non-Sufis also viewed the Qur'an and hadith as containing immense wisdom behind their more immediate outward meanings. The earliest example of such a treatment of the hadith that I have located is that of the Ḥanbalī 'Abdallāh al-Anṣārī's (d. 481/1089) discussion of the 'Hadith of Gabriel', in which the Prophet Muhammad stated that 'excellence (*iḥsān*) is to worship God as if you saw Him **for if you do not see Him, verily He sees you** (*fa in lam takun tarāh fa-innahu yarāk*)'. In the beginning of *Manāzil al-sā'irīn*, al-Anṣārī hinted that if this hadith was read in a certain way it would reveal the basis for the Sufi doctrine of spiritual witnessing of God in the heart, a state that could be attained only through the annihilation of the self. Here al-Anṣārī wants the reader to reread the sentence (specifically that in bold above) with different punctuation than usual: 'if you cease to be, then you will see Him. And verily He sees you' (*fa in lam takun, tarah, fa-innahu yarāk*)!³² This interpretation was a favourite of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī and formed the basis of his

28 On this, see the excellent study of Graham, *Divine Word*.

29 Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī wrote a work on the similes in the Qur'an and hadith: *al-Amthāl min al-Qur'ān wa-l-Sunna*.

30 Al-Kalābādhī, *Baḥr al-fawā'id*, 1:123–124.

31 Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' ulūm al-dīn*, 1:181.

32 Several editions of the work and commentaries on it have been published. Al-Kūrānī quotes the opening section of the book in al-Kūrānī, *al-Amam li-iqāz al-himam*, 113–118.

Kitāb al-Fāna' fī al-mushāhada. It was also favoured by a follower of Ibn 'Arabī named al-Kūrānī who, in his work *al-Amam*, defended this interpretation against Ibn Ḥajar's criticism of Ibn 'Arabī's treatise.³³

This type of interpretation of the hadith assumes that the Prophet intended his words to have a variety of meanings to diverse audiences at the same time, and that he carefully fashioned his words (or God inspired them) in a way that they could carry multiple meanings. This view was taken up and advanced by Ibn 'Arabī and his student al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274). In fact, al-Qūnawī wrote a 'forty-hadith commentary' that contained twenty-nine hadiths, to prove that hadiths carry within them allusions to metaphysical and spiritual realities and secrets that could only be accessed by the Sufis. Unlike the works of al-Tirmidhī, al-Kalābādhī, and al-Rifā'ī, this was not a work of Sufism through the medium of hadith commentary, but was first and foremost a commentary on hadith, designed to show that they contain more depth than meets the eye.³⁴ The motivation for such a treatment of the hadith appears to fall in line with Jamal Elias's discussion behind the motives for 'Alā' al-Dawla al-Simnānī's (d. 736/1336) commentary on the Qur'an. Elias notes that al-Simnānī's first intention was the elucidation of scripture, as he and Sufis like him genuinely believed that the Qur'an (and in our case the hadith) used metaphorical language to refer to a vast (in the case of the Qur'an, infinite) underlying body of knowledge. Elias remarks,

To comment on it, therefore, is not just to explain its subject but to publicly recognise its rhetorical excellence and therefore its beauty. The relationship between beauty and virtue was well established in Islamic aesthetics some centuries before Simnānī was born. As such, one can see that the writing of *tafsīr* for Simnānī would have been an act of piety as much as anything else.³⁵

33 Though al-Anṣārī never spelled out this interpretation, Ibn 'Arabī and al-Kūrānī must be correct in attributing this understanding to him because nowhere does the hadith contain any mention of annihilation or of witnessing God except if read this way. Strangely, Basheer Nafi based his appraisal of al-Kūrānī as a reformer largely on the claim that he rejected this interpretation (see Nafi, 'Taṣawwuf and Reform'). The charitable interpretation of Nafi's claim is to assume he only read the first two sentences of the entire discussion, stopped at al-Kūrānī's quotation of Ibn Ḥajar's criticism, and failed to see that the remainder of the discussion was a rejoinder to Ibn Ḥajar and a defence of Ibn 'Arabī. For a study of how Ibn 'Arabī interpreted the hadith the same way he did the Qur'an see Gril, 'Ḥadīth in the Work of Ibn 'Arabī', 56.

34 For this commentary see Yilmaz, *Sharḥ al-arba'ina hadīthan*, published in his *Tasavvufi Hadīs Şerhleri*. A more recent edition is al-Qūnawī, *Kirk Hadis Şerhi: Sharḥ al-aḥādīth al-arba'īn*. A study of some of al-Qūnawī's commentaries in this work can be found in Hirtenstein, 'The Image of Guidance'.

35 Elias, 'Şūfī *tafsīr* Reconsidered', 52.

Elias gives a second intention for al-Simnānī's work: it was an act of respect for his predecessors; al-Simnānī's work was the completion of an unfinished work by previous shaykhs from his *ṭarīqa*. While al-Qūnawī's commentary was not a completion of a predecessor's work, it was still an act of respect for his teachers, in that it was meant to elevate the status of the Sufis by showing that their piety and spiritual insight gave them a privileged position from which to understand the hidden depth of the Prophet Muhammad's words which non-Sufis could not access. Ultimately, it was his intention to elevate, honour and show particularly the prestige of Sufi shaykhs. Al-Qūnawī was also able, through his commentary, to link the words of Muhammad to the metaphysical doctrines of the Akbarian school of his main teacher Ibn 'Arabī; thus through his commentary he was serving that school.

A prime and influential example of this type of commentary is that of Ibn Abī Jamra (d. 699/1300) who first compiled a popular selection of 297 hadiths from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and later wrote a commentary on them.³⁶ In this commentary, Ibn Abī Jamra sought to reveal the immense wisdom in the Prophet Muhammad's words and actions, drawing out as many points of etiquette, wisdom, intelligence and meaning as he could from each choice of word, every omission and every action, all of which filled the hadith with meaning. In the introduction to his work, he stated that the sayings of Muhammad were so perfect that one needed to attribute to them every possible inference of meaning. Clearly, this was a pious endeavour in the service of the Prophet Muhammad, an effort to explain the perfection and beauty in his words. The difference between this work and al-Qūnawī's is that in this work there are no metaphysical Akbarian interpretations. In fact, there are no particularly Sufi interpretations in this work, except his emphasis on *adab*, which Sufis had long seen as a cornerstone of their teaching. The centrality of *adab* was expressed in the saying 'Sufism is all about propriety (*ādāb*); for every time there is an etiquette and for every station there is an etiquette'.³⁷ The one distinctly Sufi aspect to his work can be seen in the connections that Ibn Abī Jamra identified between each hadith and a Sufi practice or belief; almost all his three hundred commentaries contain one or more points beginning with 'In this hadith there is evidence for the people of Sufism in that ...'

Ibn Abī Jamra's work comes with an appendix of seventy dreams or visions that he or his disciples saw of the Prophet Muhammad praising his commentaries.³⁸ The content of these visions demonstrates what Ibn

36 For the original selection, see Ibn Abī Jamra, *Mukhtaṣar Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*; for the commentary, see Ibn Abī Jamra: *Bahjat al-nufūs*.

37 Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 106.

38 These visions have been published independently as Ibn Abī Jamra, *al-Marā'ī al-ḥisān*.

Abī Jamra and his disciples saw as the most important contributions of his commentaries; according to their view, these contributions were his commentaries on

1. the hadith regarding the slander against ‘Ā’isha, which served to protect her honour and therefore serves Sunnī Islam as a whole;
2. the ‘Hadith of Ibn al-Şāmit’, which the author used to defend the Ash‘arī creed against literalist understandings of God’s attributes, and was described as outweighing all the books of the *fuqahā*;
3. the ‘Hadith of the Nightly Journey and Ascension’, which was praised for its explanation of the benefits of the daily prayer and was described as outweighing all the books of the Sufis;
4. the hadith that ‘this religion is an easy one’, which was seen as a service to the *sharī’a*; and
5. the hadith on the beginning of revelation, which is concerned with the greatness of the Prophet Muhammad himself.

This list shows that Ibn Abī Jamra’s work was not oriented toward Sufis in particular, but rather that it aimed to cover the entire gamut of Sunnī teachings from creed to jurisprudence to Sufism. Furthermore, these visions reveal that Ibn Abī Jamra’s claim to excellence was not necessarily tied to inspiration or insight, as might be assumed of a Sufi, but sometimes related to his mastery of the Arabic language in all its pre-Islamic tribal dialects and variations (such as the dialects of Tamīm, Thaqīf, Ṭaī, and Quraysh), coupled with success (*tawfīq*) from God.

Al-Ḥusayn al-Ṭībī (d. 743/1342) was a direct student of the great Sufi master Abū Ḥafs ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), and was one of his successors and a Sufi master himself. He wrote the first commentary on *Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ* that was compiled by al-Ṭībī’s own disciple al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrīzī, at al-Ṭībī’s behest.³⁹ After the student finished the work under al-Ṭībī’s direction, the master, al-Ṭībī, wrote the commentary. Al-Ṭībī was known as a Sufi, but also as a traditionist, jurist and one of the Muslim world’s foremost grammarians; his *ḥāshiya* on al-Zamakhsharī’s Qur’an commentary *al-Kashshāf* was praised by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha’rānī (d. 973/1565) as the finest *ḥāshiya* on that exegesis (which focuses on grammar), and is still prized as such by Muslim grammarians today. Al-Sha’rānī noted that al-Ṭībī was unique for mastering several fields. He wrote: ‘He [al-Ṭībī] was a traditionist, Sufi, grammarian, *faqīh* [jurist], and *uṣūlī*. It is rare for all these attributes to be combined in one scholar.’⁴⁰ The *Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ* soon became the most important hadith collection in the Indian

39 Al-Ṭībī, *Sharḥ al-Ṭībī*.

40 Al-Sha’rānī, *Laṭā’if al-minan*, 85.

subcontinent and al-Ṭibī's commentary was the basis for its many subsequent commentaries. His work was also heavily used by those who commented on other collections, especially Ibn Ḥajar's commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Sufi perspectives are apparent, but not prominent, throughout his interpretations of hadith. Nonetheless, in the next section we see the significance of this Sufi content. Another such commentary is that of the Sufi traditionist 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1622), the student of the great Sufi 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī, and the author of two biographical compendia of Sufis. Al-Munāwī commented on al-Suyūṭī's hadith compendium *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḡhīr*, and often quoted Sufis like Ibn 'Arabī and al-Qūnawī in his commentary.

The hadith commentary *al-Maknūn fī ḥaqā'iq al-kalim al-nabawiyya* by Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209) stands out from the others in that he conceived his work specifically as a Sufi commentary. He stated that just as there were works like those of al-Khaṭṭābī that explain the exterior (*ẓāhir*) meanings of the hadith, he felt a need for a work that explained its secrets and inner realities (*ḥaqā'iq*). He wanted it to become a reference and guide for Sufis, to link the vocabulary in the hadith with the spiritual truths or realities accessed by the Knowers of God. He stated that his explanations were written in the language and terminology of Sufi shaykhs in order to point out Muhammad's allusions to the divine realities they speak of. He further stated that the ability to draw these meanings from the hadith was possible in direct proportion to the spiritual openings that God gave His saints (*awliyā'*) onto the world of the unseen.⁴¹

Is There Such a Thing as a 'Sufi' Commentary?

In his article 'Ṣūfī *tafsīr* Reconsidered', Jamal Elias questions the accuracy of conceiving of Qur'an commentaries written by Sufis as constituting a separate genre of Sufi commentaries. He argues that these works cannot be conceived of as a genre of their own, because commentaries written by Sufis 'lack a shared structure or identifiable set of concerns that distinguish them from the wider category of *tafsīr* literature'.⁴² Second, he states that the fact that Sufis often resort to allegorical/allusory (*ishārī*) interpretations of the Qur'an does not make their commentaries distinct, because allegorical interpretations are normal in Qur'anic commentary and are not only employed by Sufis. The allegorical interpretations by Sufis are often described as 'esoteric', which is not always accurate, and furthermore, the term esoteric could also be applied to commentaries written by philosophers. Elias did note, however, that 'there is no doubt that identifiable Sufi

41 Baqlī, *al-Maknūn*.

42 Elias, 'Ṣūfī *tafsīr* Reconsidered', 45.

commentaries on the Qur'an exist, both in the sense that there are Sufi themes apparent (even dominant) within them and they are also written by figures strongly and self-consciously identified as Sufis'.⁴³

We should also add that it is expected for an author's background to influence their perspective and limit, expand or shift the scope of interpretations they give to any text. Therefore, the range of interpretations from a scholar with mainly Sufi interests might differ from those of a linguist. For example, with regard to a hadith transmitted by al-Bukhārī, that after a Muslim is buried he will be asked about which God he worshipped, which religion he followed and 'what did you use to say about *this* man [i.e. Muḥammad]',⁴⁴ al-Kirmānī (d. 786/1384) sees this as evidence that Muhammad's spirit will accompany every Muslim during the questioning; by contrast, this explanation does not even appear as a possible interpretation in commentaries that benefited from al-Kirmānī's text but were written by scholars who, like Ibn Ḥajar, were not as strongly influenced by Sufi thought.⁴⁵

In terms of the commentaries described above, we could question the validity of calling these works 'Sufi hadith commentaries' because the exegetical techniques they used were not necessarily exclusive to Sufism. An exception to this would be Baqlī's *al-Maknūn* because it was specifically written to explain every hadith using terms and concepts found only among Sufis. We could also refer to several passages in al-Qūnawī's commentary as Akbarian because they relate the hadith to the doctrines of the school of his teacher Ibn 'Arabī. Similarly, we could say that Ibn Abī

43 Elias, 'Šūfī *tafsīr* Reconsidered', 45.

44 Al-Bukhārī, *Šaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-Janā'iz, Bāb al-mayyit yasma' khafq al-ni'āl.

45 Al-Kirmānī's commentary is the earliest of the four most well-known and influential commentaries on al-Bukhārī, and was regularly quoted by Ibn Ḥajar. Al-Kirmānī's commentary on the Qur'an, *Ḍamā'ir al-Qur'ān*, has been described as a 'Sufi commentary'. While his commentary on *Šaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* does not show an overwhelmingly Sufi influence, this is just a small example of how a scholar's range of interpretations are influenced by their backgrounds and perspectives. A conversation between the Sufi scholar Yūsuf al-Dijwī (d. 1946), whose world-renowned *fatwās* made him the most prominent voice of the Sunnī Traditionalism of al-Azhar in the first half the twentieth century, and his disciple Šālīḥ al-Ja'farī (d. 1979), who became the Imam of al-Azhar and the founder of a Sufi *ṭarīqa* that carries his name, points to the unique nature of al-Kirmānī's explanation and its appeal to Sufis. Al-Ja'farī relates that when he was studying at al-Azhar he attended al-Dijwī's lessons of commentary on *Šaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. In one lesson, al-Dijwī commented on this same hadith – that after a Muslim is buried, he will be asked about which God he worshipped – and when the lesson finished, al-Ja'farī, who had been reading al-Kirmānī's commentary on his own, approached his teacher and mentioned to him al-Kirmānī's interpretation. Al-Dijwī said, 'I had studied the commentary of al-Kirmānī and read that matter in it. Why did you not remind me of it during the lesson so that the people would hear it from me?' (see Dajani, *Reassurance for the Seeker*, 26).

Jamra's commentary is only a 'Sufi commentary' in those passages in which he attempts to prove a Sufi doctrine or practice, while otherwise it is a standard commentary. Al-Ṭibī's tendency to explain the words and actions of Muhammad as based largely on his intense love and longing for God does not itself make it a 'Sufi commentary' even if al-Ṭibī's *taṣawwuf* most probably motivated it.

This brings us to another important consideration, namely, the idea of Sufi concerns and themes. While certain ideas and their associated terms, such as separation (*farq*) and its counterpart bringing together (*jam'*), and the related annihilation (*fanā*) and subsistence (*baqā*), are specifically Sufi, other themes that are strongly associated with Sufism, or are expected to be found in Sufi texts, such as experiential knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*), inspiration (*ilhām*), love (*maḥabba*), nearness to God/saintliness (*walāya/wilāya*), purification of the heart (*tazkiya*) and even spiritual upbringing (*tarbiya*), are not exclusively the concern of Sufis. We should not be surprised to find these ideas mentioned by other Muslim authors, though we are more likely to find them in the works of Sufis. Furthermore, given the place of Sufism in Islamic societies, it was natural for Sunnī Muslims in general to view Sufis as experts in these fields. In fact, if one thing distinguished Sufis from others, it was their prioritisation of these concerns, so it was only natural for them to be seen as experts in these internal matters. This specialisation appears very early in Islam. One particularly illustrative example is the report about the great traditionist and jurist Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778). It was said that when he finished the lessons he gave when visiting Mecca, he said to his students, 'Now let us get up and go to the doctor [of hearts]';⁴⁶ meaning the Meccan devotee Wuhayb b. al-Ward (d. 153/773). Wuhayb's teachings centred on the importance of achieving knowledge of God and certainty in the heart and on the miraculous power of this knowledge and certainty.⁴⁷

Al-Zamakhsharī's Qur'an commentary *al-Kashshāf* is not labelled a 'grammatical commentary on the Qur'an', because grammatical discussions are not its only characteristic, and grammatical analysis is present in almost every Qur'an commentary. But those looking for authoritative grammatical analysis of Qur'anic passages might see *al-Kashshāf* as the primary reference because it devotes particular attention to grammatical discussions and its author was seen as an authority in the field. Al-Bayḍāwī's commentary on the Qur'an is not labelled simply a 'theological/Ash'arī' commentary on the Qur'an, but those wishing for authoritative theological-Ash'arī explanations of certain verses might see it as the primary reference point on the subject. The same could be said about al-Rāzī's commentary regarding Islamic philosophy and al-Qurṭubī's commentary regarding jurisprudence. In the same

46 Abū Nu'aym, *Hilyat al-awliyā*, 8:140.

47 Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 7:198–199; Abū Nu'aym, *Hilyat al-awliyā*, 8:140–161.

way, we could describe many of the hadith commentaries written by Sufis as being focused on metaphorical or allusory interpretations, or as emphasising spiritual matters more than legal or theological ones, rather than claiming that they employed specifically Sufi techniques of exegesis or that the themes they discuss are particular only to Sufis. For Muslim scholars in the tradition itself, the writings of Sufis were often deemed to be particularly helpful regarding certain topics in which they were seen to be authorities; the same could be said of hadith commentaries written by Sufis. I illustrate this point by briefly examining how the hadith commentaries of Sufis were employed and referred to in Ibn Ḥajar's *Fath al-Bārī* and in other important classics.

Ibn Ḥajar's *Fath al-Bārī* contains roughly twenty references to al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's *Nawādir al-uṣūl*. As al-Tirmidhī was an early hadith transmitter, a contemporary of the authors of the canonical collections, he was used as a source of unique hadith transmissions that did not exist in the canon. However, beside his role as hadith transmitter, al-Tirmidhī's own views were quoted, most often in relation to discussions of spiritual topics seen as the specialty of Sufis. To give some examples, Ibn Ḥajar quotes al-Tirmidhī's discussion of the difference between two words given for the human heart (*qalb* and *fu'ād*); in it al-Tirmidhī states that only people of spiritual insight are capable of knowing this difference and of assigning each name to the proper spiritual faculty associated with the heart. Ibn Ḥajar also quoted al-Tirmidhī on topics such as dreams and issues relating to what the spirit experiences after death.⁴⁸

Regarding al-Kalābādhī, Ibn Ḥajar quoted him roughly eleven times, and benefited from him more as a hadith transmitter and general scholar. Some of al-Kalābādhī's hadith narrations included important details that were not preserved in the versions narrated in more famous collections and that Ibn Ḥajar found helpful in clarifying the context and legal implications of the hadiths.⁴⁹ In two cases Ibn Ḥajar relied on al-Kalābādhī's brilliant

48 Al-Qurṭubī's commentary on the Qur'an shows far greater influence from *Nawādir al-uṣūl* than from *Fath al-Bārī*. Al-Qurṭubī quotes al-Tirmidhī more than eighty times, sometimes even quoting lengthy passages or entire hadith commentaries without attribution (such as al-Tirmidhī's 227th chapter in *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, 3:588). Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya not only quoted al-Tirmidhī more than once in *Kitāb al-Rūḥ* in discussions on the life of the spirit after death, but also copied, in an edited format, several chapters from al-Tirmidhī's *al-Furūq* at the end of *Kitāb al-Rūḥ*, and added some of his own chapters following al-Tirmidhī's model.

49 Note that regarding the famous hadith claiming that Muhammad was made to love prayer, women and perfume, the wording of the hadith that was popularised by the theologian Ibn Fūrak, and even more so by Ibn 'Arabī in his *Fuṣūṣ*, is not found in the canonical version in al-Nasā'ī's *Sunan*. Both scholars, but especially Ibn 'Arabī, made much of the hadith's use of the term 'three things', even though this term does not exist in al-Nasā'ī's version and scholars have struggled to find a source for it. However, I have found that this is the wording that al-Kalābādhī has in his *Baḥr al-fawā'id*, 1:113 (third hadith).

ability to reconcile seemingly contradictory hadith reports; this shows that al-Kalābādhi's influence was not as a Sufi but as a scholar. However, in one case Ibn Ḥajar quotes al-Kalābādhi for a Sufi-influenced explanation of how spirits will be able to know or recognise God on the day of judgement. Here, like al-Tirmidhi, we see that Ibn Ḥajar found al-Kalābādhi helpful for his expertise in the fields of hadith and spirituality, the latter of course strongly associated with Sufism.

Ibn Abī Jamra wrote his commentary on a selection from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, and so it would be natural for Ibn Ḥajar to reference it, and he does so, more than 160 times. However, Ibn Ḥajar's treatment of Ibn Abī Jamra shows very clearly that he treats him differently than he treats other scholars, because of the saintliness Ibn Ḥajar believed that Ibn Abī Jamra possessed. Whereas Ibn Ḥajar's sources were introduced simply by their names, Ibn Ḥajar twice described Ibn Abī Jamra as *al-quḍwa* (the exemplar) or *al-imām al-quḍwa*, a distinction he only gave to Ibn Abī Jamra.⁵⁰ Ibn Ḥajar once followed Ibn Abī Jamra's name with the words 'may God allow us to benefit from his *baraka* (spiritual blessing)'; certainly it is notable that Ibn Ḥajar only used this honorific one other time, after the name of al-Junayd, another Sufi.⁵¹ In ten instances, after writing Ibn Abī Jamra's name, Ibn Ḥajar wrote the words 'may God benefit us through him'; by contrast, he only used this expression once for one other person, the saintly scholar al-Nawawī.⁵² Thus, in a markedly clear way, Ibn Ḥajar treated Ibn Abī Jamra differently from his other sources *because* of his Sufism. Ibn Ḥajar's special admiration may have been enhanced by Ibn Abī Jamra's reputation for closely following the Sunna, for his prestige at having a disciple like the esteemed Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Mālikī (the author of *al-Madkhal*, an acclaimed work against religious innovation), and for Ibn Abī Jamra's burial in Ibn Ḥajar's city of Cairo and the love exhibited for the author and his grave by the city's inhabitants. Quite often Ibn Ḥajar described Ibn Abī Jamra's unique ability to extract subtle meanings from the hadith; Ibn Ḥajar used words such as *istinbāṭ* (deduction/drawing out), *illa* (ratio), *ḥikma* (wisdom) and *ishāra* (allusion), some of which could be directly linked to his perceived status as a man of spiritual insight. Ibn Ḥajar quoted Ibn Abī Jamra on matters such as spiritual experiences and the realities of *taqwā* and *īmān* – Ibn Abī Jamra stated that the *fuqahā* interpret Muhammad's description of 'faith's sweetness' in an allegorical sense because they had not experienced it, whereas Sufis knew from experience that faith literally had a sweetness that could be tasted. Ibn Ḥajar also quoted Ibn Abī

50 Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 1:13, 71.

51 Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 2:87; 11:331.

52 For Ibn Abī Jamra, see the following three examples: Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 2:507; 8:480; 9:340; and Ibn Ḥajar mentions al-Nawawī in *Fath al-Bārī*, 1:8.

Jamra on other issues strongly associated with Sufism, issues such as *zuhd* (asceticism), *adab* (propriety), etiquette and good character. These were not the only elements Ibn Ḥajar quoted Ibn Abī Jamra about; on occasion he also benefited from his legal discussions.⁵³

Ibn Ḥajar quotes al-Ḥusayn al-Ṭibī more than 335 times. This large number can be explained by the fact that al-Ṭibī commented on the entire *Mishkāt al-maṣābiḥ*, which covered the same topics as al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, whereas previously mentioned Sufis commented on a far smaller number of traditions, ones they themselves selected as a basis for their own Sufi works. In the case of Ibn Abī Jamra, he commented on his own small selection of hadiths from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and wrote them for the layperson. Al-Ṭibī, as we have also seen, was considered a master in many fields, including grammar, rhetoric (*balāgha*), jurisprudence and hadith sciences, and Ibn Ḥajar made use of his expertise in all these fields. Ibn Ḥajar also relied on al-Ṭibī's ability to extract 'subtleties' and wisdom (*ḥikma*) from the hadith. Al-Ṭibī's interpretations of Muhammad's words and actions often related them to Muhammad's intense love for God, giving many of the passages that Ibn Ḥajar quotes from al-Ṭibī a distinct and easily recognisable nature. Therefore, although al-Ṭibī's commentary is considered the least 'Sufi' commentary – in that it is not an *ishārī* commentary, nor does it employ specifically Sufi terms, or deal with topics unique to the Sufis – al-Ṭibī's quotes in *Fath al-Bārī* are often those that we most immediately attribute to a Sufi.

The discussion above leads us back to the story of the meeting between Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī and Sahl al-Tustarī. In this story, Abū Dāwūd was troubled by how the Qadariyya sect employed an authentic hadith to support their position of complete free will. The hadith in question states that 'Every newborn is born on the *fiṭra* (natural state), and it is his parents who make him a Christian or a Jew'.⁵⁴ Abū Dāwūd expressed his concern and was troubled that the Qadariyya used this hadith as evidence that disbelief and disobedience to God were not predestined, but were brought about by humans.⁵⁵ Al-Tustarī gave his own explanation of the hadith; namely, that children's parents were not able to actually change

53 Muḥammad al-Shinwānī (d. 1233/1817), who held the post of Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar, wrote a *ḥāshiya* on Ibn Abī Jamra's commentary that is often used to teach it. Contemporary neo-traditionalist Sufi institutions of knowledge serving Western Muslims, such as SunniPath (now known as Qibla) and SeekersHub, regularly offer courses based on Ibn Abī Jamra's commentary and al-Shinwānī's *ḥāshiya*.

54 Abū Dāwūd, *al-Sunan*.

55 That this hadith troubled Abū Dāwūd is borne out by his treatment of it in his *Sunan*, 870. There, he chose a longer version, via Mālik b. Anas's *Muwaṭṭa'*, that has the following addition: 'The Prophet was asked what happened to those who died when still young, and the Prophet replied, "God knows best what they would have done if they

their children's original state of *fiṭra*, rather they invited them to their own beliefs through instruction. Ultimately, however, guidance was in the hands of God alone, for the Qur'an told Muhammad that he could not guide whomever he wishes, that only God could do that, and the hadith literature showed that Iblīs (Satan) was not able to misguide anyone, rather he could only entice people to his way. When he heard this explanation, Abū Dāwūd bent down and kissed al-Tustarī's feet. Perhaps this story conveys more than Abū Dāwūd's simple gratitude and respect for al-Tustarī's convincing answer: perhaps it is founded on the belief that al-Tustarī, the famed spiritual guide whose teachings and writings deal with the nature of the human spirit, was seen as especially authoritative in this subject relating to spiritual guidance.

In Sunnī Islam, a division of expertise can be seen very early on; in this division, the explanations of Sufis can be seen as not necessarily having a unique method, but as having a unique authority tied to their perceived specialisation in certain fields related to the heart and spirit, and to the belief that they possessed spiritual insight. Likewise, viewing the tradition from outside it, we could say that it is not accurate to categorise the hadith commentaries of the Sufis as falling within one particular genre, or we could mistakenly assume that there is something inherently unique to their interpretive methods. We could say, however, that just as certain commentaries on the Qur'an and hadith reveal the interests and strengths of various scholars, likewise the Qur'an and hadith commentaries of Sufis reveal the interests and perspectives of each Sufi, and these shaped the range of their interpretations and their choices in commentaries that were often otherwise very different from each other in style and method.

had grown up". Abū Dāwūd then followed the hadith with a narration about Mālik b. Anas being confronted with the same problem of the Qadariyya's use of this hadith; according to this narration, Mālik replied that this additional phrase at the end of the hadith provided the response to the Qadariyya: that God knows people's destinies. It is interesting that this addition was treated as suspicious by al-Bukhārī. In his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Bukhārī's custom was to always give preference to Mālik b. Anas's narrations over all others, and to quote them first on any topic. However, for this hadith, Mālik's narration is completely absent, and is replaced by five others that do not include the addition. This shows that al-Bukhārī treated this addition as a mistake. Muslim also treated this addition with suspicion in his own *Ṣaḥīḥ*; this can be inferred from his ordering of narrations, where he always began with the most authentic narration of a hadith and then followed it with supplementary narrations that may contain anomalous additions or mistakes. While al-Bukhārī and Muslim chose the version of the hadith they thought was more authentic, it is possible that Abū Dāwūd chose this version, despite knowing that it was suspect, because he thought it gave some sort of response, even if not a completely convincing one, to the argument of the Qadariyya.

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