

From Trial (*Miḥna*) to Tribulation (*Balāʿ*): A New Look at Ghulām Khalīl’s (d. 275/888) Inquisition against the Sufis

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Abstract

The execution of al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) and Ghulām Khalīl’s (d. 275/888) inquisition (*miḥna*) against the Sufis have loomed large in the historiography of Sufism. These events are often depicted as instances of anti-Sufi prosecution that fundamentally reshaped Sufism, causing later Sufis to align it more closely with “normative” Islam. While modern scholarship has recently challenged the influence and impact attributed to al-Ḥallāj’s fate, this article expands this critical perspective to Ghulām Khalīl’s *miḥna*, details of which are provided across numerous sources. For the first time, these narratives will be critically examined highlighting problematic aspects that call into question its historicity. More importantly, however, this article looks to the way in which Sufis themselves engaged with and presented this *miḥna* in texts from the third/ninth century onward. Rather than being something to be answered for or contended with, Sufis offered these narratives as examples of tribulation (*balāʿ*) and connected them to a wide array of Sufi concepts, including altruism (*īthār*), forbearance (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), and contentment with God (*riḍā*), among other interpretive frames. This article revisits a core element of the historiography of early Sufism and sheds light on the place of tribulation in the “universe of meaning” of early Sufis.

Introduction

In the third/ninth century, the story goes, Ghulām Khalīl (d. 275/888), a Basran renunciant (*zāhid*) and preacher (*wāʿiẓ*), instigated an inquisition (*miḥna*) against the Sufis of Baghdad that would significantly alter the trajectory of Sufism’s development.¹

1. Richard Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), 1:383–85; Gerhard Böwering, “Early Sufism between Persecution and Heresy,” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. I. J. F. de Jong and Bernd Radtke, 45–67 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 54–56; Alexander D. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 61–62, 83, 93; Christopher Melchert, “The Ḥanābila and the Early Sufis,” *Arabica* 48, no. 3 (2001): 352–67, at 360–62; Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 11–13; Christopher Melchert, “Origins and Early Sufism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, 3–23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–4; Māhir Zuhayr Jarrār and Sebastian Günther, *Doctrinal Instruction in Early Islam: The Book of*

According to one narrative, seventy-odd Sufis were summoned because of their heretical beliefs. Some absconded, others concealed their Sufi activities under the guise of a jurist, and those who were left met their fate at the inquisition. A summary judgment was made, and the Sufis who had been assembled were sentenced to execution. One of the condemned, Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907), rushed forward to be the first to be killed. This act of altruism (*īthār*), in which al-Nūrī offered his own life so that his companions could live just a moment longer, gave the executioner pause. He brought the matter to his superiors, and al-Nūrī was taken to the chief judge (*qāḍī al-quḍāt*) for questioning on matters of faith and creed. Al-Nūrī's answers were so exemplary that the judge praised him and released all those who had been convicted.

This composite narrative of what would come to be known as the Inquisition of Ghulām Khalīl (*miḥnat Ghulām Khalīl*) draws on various anecdotes all transmitted by Sufi figures in the fourth/tenth century and preserved in later texts. To understand why a Basran renunciant would instigate a trial against early Sufis, one must look to Sufism's emergence from a broad and nebulous "ascetic" or "renunciant" milieu that characterized much of Islamic piety in the first two centuries after the Prophet Muḥammad's death.² This new expression of Islamic religiosity coalesced in Baghdad and would become known as Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), but this process was not without problems. As modern scholars have argued, Sufis faced significant persecution, first with Ghulām Khalīl and then with the trial and execution of al-Ḥusayn b. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922). They argue that these events so affected Sufis of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries that they fundamentally altered Sufism's formation, prompting it to align with the prevailing "orthodoxy" for fear of further reprisal.³ Although this argument has predominated in scholarship on Sufi studies,

the Explanation of the Sunna by Ghulām Khalīl (d. 275/888) (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 25–26; Lloyd Ridgeon, *Awhad al-Dīn Kirmānī and the Controversy of the Sufi Gaze* (London: Routledge, 2017), 9–10.

2. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 29–41; Christopher Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," *Studia Islamica*, no. 83 (1996): 51–70, passim; Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 8–10; Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 1–2; Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xiii, 156; Lloyd Ridgeon, "The Origins of Sufism," in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, 3–17 (London: Routledge, 2020), 9–12; Christopher Melchert, *Before Sufism: Early Islamic Renunciant Piety* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 178–84; Alexander D. Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 10–13. Here Knysh provides an update to his prior formulation by calling Sufism an ascetical-mystical stream, deciding to not create a distinction. At the same time, however, Knysh seems to distinguish those ascetic-mystics who preceded Sufism, whom he calls proto-Sufis, from those who came after; see 39n68. Some scholars have called this transition into question. See Gavin N. Picken, "Al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī and Spiritual Purification: Between Asceticism and Mysticism," in Ridgeon, *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, 17–31, at 19–21; Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 19–23; Sara Sviri, *Perspectives on Early Islamic Mysticism: The World of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and His Contemporaries* (London: Routledge, 2019), 30–32.

3. Melchert, *Before Sufism*, 189; Melchert, "Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism," 62–66; Jarrār and Günther, *Doctrinal Instruction*, 26; Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 159–60; Lloyd Ridgeon, "Reading Sufi History through *Ādāb*: The Perspectives of Sufis, Jawānmardān and Qalandars," in *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam*, ed. Francesco Chiabotti et al., 379–402 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 386; Harith Ramli, "Opposition to Sufis in the Formative Period," in Ridgeon, *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, 120–31, at 120–5.

Ahmet Karamustafa and others have argued that not all Sufis were burdened by the legacy of al-Ḥallāj, calling into question the role his execution had in altering the trajectory and historical development of Sufism. This article extends this discussion to the Inquisition of Ghulām Khalīl, which has been understood as an example of “ascetic” (*zāhid*) opposition to the newly emerged “mystical” or Sufi movement.⁴

Despite the important role of this inquisition in Sufi historiography, modern scholars have not critically examined the various narratives of Ghulām Khalīl’s *miḥna* and their modes of transmission. In fact, scholars have been wont to combine heterogeneous details found across the various narratives and to collapse them into one without reconciling differences or contradictions.⁵ The following historical-critical analysis of the extant narratives of the *miḥna* draws attention to significant issues that make corroborating the information found in these narratives difficult, raising doubts about the details of the *miḥna*. More importantly, if this *miḥna* did cause Sufis of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries to shape Sufism into a more palatable form, it would be evident in their engagement with the *miḥna* in their writing. But later Sufis did not, in fact, view this *miḥna* as something to answer for or contend with and instead offered it generally as an example of a tribulation (*balāʾ*) and al-Nūrī’s actions specifically as an instance of altruism. In these texts, *balāʾ* is presented within the rubrics of forbearance (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), and contentment with God (*riḍā*), among other interpretive frames. The goal of this article is not solely to engage with the question of the historicity of the *miḥna* and its role in Sufi historiography. It also redirects attention toward the importance of the *miḥna* as a window into the place of *balāʾ* in the “universe of meaning” of Sufis in the fourth/tenth century and beyond.⁶

The Narratives and Their Content

There are six full narratives of the *miḥna* through different chains of transmission (*isnāds*), and these are presented in Table 1 as Narratives A–H. Of these, one consists of a general description of Ghulām Khalīl’s animosity toward Sufis (Narrative E) and another

4. Melchert, *Before Sufism*, 187–88; Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra: A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam*, trans. John O’Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 4:318–19; Cyrus Ali Zargar, *Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (La Vergne: Oneworld, 2017), 200–202; Josef van Ess, “Sufism and Its Opponents,” in de Jong and Radtke, *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, 22–44, at 25–26.

5. Gerhard Böwering, for example, combines elements from one narrative in al-Sarrāj’s *Lumaʿ*, which does not mention an inquisition or a judge, with a different narrative reporting that the chief judge presided over an inquisition. Böwering then provides additional information about the number of supposed Sufis on trial, which comes from a third narrative. Böwering, “Early Sufism,” 54–55. The same approach can be seen in Carl Ernst’s reconstruction of the inquisition, in which he combines elements from two different narratives. First, he takes al-Nūrī’s statement “I love (*aʿshiqu*) God and He loves me (*yaʿshiqunī*)” from al-Sarrāj’s *Lumaʿ*. Then he, like Böwering, uses a different narrative that mentions the chief judge. Ernst does, however, acknowledge variations among the different narratives. Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 97–101.

6. The phrase “universe of meaning” is taken from Knysh’s illuminating study. Knysh, *Sufism*, 121, 136, 144, etc.

mentions only the tribulation of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī and no *miḥna* (Narrative B); these are included in the list with an asterisk. The narratives are listed chronologically according to the death date of the author in whose work they appear. Details on the transmission of the narratives and their translations are included in the appendix to this article along with attestations of the narratives in later texts. As is evident from the dates of the authors, there is no mention of Ghulām Khalīl's *miḥna* in any extant source prior to Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's (d. 378/988) *Kitāb al-Luma*^c, written nearly a century after the purported events they describe.

Table 1. Narratives of the *miḥna* of Ghulām Khalīl

Narrative	Earliest attestation	Author
A	<i>Kitāb al-Luma</i> ^{c7}	Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988)
B*	<i>Kitāb al-Luma</i> ^{c8}	Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj
C	<i>Al-Faraj ba'd al-shidda</i> ⁹	Al-Muḥassin b. al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994)
D	<i>Al-Mustajād min fa'alāt al-ajwād</i> ¹⁰	Al-Muḥassin b. al-Tanūkhī
E*	<i>Qūt al-qulūb</i> ¹¹	Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996)
F	<i>Tahdhīb al-asrār</i> ¹²	Abū Sa'd al-Khargūshī (d. ca. 407/1016)
G	<i>Ḥilyat al-awliyā</i> ¹³	Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038)
H	<i>Ḥilyat al-awliyā</i> ¹⁴	Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī

There are no other reports of or references to the *miḥna* prior to the mid- to late fourth/tenth century or in later sources, Sufi or otherwise. All the narratives presented here are transmitted through individuals who were known as pivotal transmitters of Sufi material. On the one hand, one would expect such a significant event—the charging of seventy-plus figures with heresy (*zandaqa*) or unbelief (*kufr*)—would have attracted the attention of historians such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), who was likely living in Baghdad at the time of the *miḥna* and wrote disapprovingly about al-Ḥallāj.¹⁵ On the other hand, it is logical for

7. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma*^c, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Ṭāḥā Surūr (Baghdad: al-Maktaba al-Muthannā, 1960), 498.

8. Al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma*^c, 492.

9. Al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj ba'd al-shidda*, ed. 'Abbūd al-Shālījī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1978), 2:156–57.

10. Al-Tanūkhī, *al-Mustajād min fa'alāt al-ajwād*, ed. Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī (Damascus: Maṭbū'āt al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī bi-Dimashq, 1946), 43.

11. Abū Ṭālib Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb fi mu'āmalat al-maḥbūb wa-waṣf ṭarīq al-murīd ilā maqām al-tawḥīd*, ed. Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Raḍwānī (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 2001), 1106.

12. Abū Sa'd al-Khargūshī, *Kitāb Tahdhīb al-asrār*, ed. Bassām Muḥammad Bārūd (Abu Dhabi: Manshūrāt al-Majma' al-Thaqāfī, 1999), 286–87.

13. Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā'* (repr. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), 10:250.

14. The earliest full narrative from Ibn al-A'rābī does not reach us until al-Dhahabī, but it is attested in Abū Nu'aym's *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, 10:249.

15. Rosenthal says that al-Ṭabarī returned to Baghdad sometime after 256/869–70, seven years before the

Sufis or Sufi-adjacent scholars to have been the ones to initially preserve and transmit this type of material. Furthermore, the mid- to late third/ninth century was a chaotic time in Baghdad, which could have caused the omission of this event in historical texts, although Ghulām Khalīl’s *miḥna* started during a period of relative stability during the long reign of the Caliph al-Muʿtamid (r. 256–70/870–92).¹⁶

My analysis of the contents of these narratives will center on Narratives B–H and exclude Narrative A on Sumnūn al-Muḥibb (d. ca. 298/910), which mentions animosity between Ghulām Khalīl and Sufis but no inquisition or trial. It bears mentioning that there are three slightly different versions of Sumnūn’s narrative in three later Persian works: al-Hujwīrī’s (d. 465/1072–3) *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, ‘Aṭṭār’s (d. 586/1190 or 617/1220–1) *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʿ*, and Jāmī’s (d. 898/1492) *Nafahāt al-uns*.¹⁷ Narratives B–G focus on the troubles of al-Nūrī, which is the only element they share, and Narrative C differs radically from the others. The antagonists vary in number and identity, with two narratives, C and F, not mentioning Ghulām Khalīl at all, and apart from al-Nūrī, the protagonists are also different.

Table 2. Protagonists

Individual	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Sumnūn	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
al-Nūrī	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
al-Junayd	X	-	-	X	X	X	-	-
al-Raqqām	-	-	X	X	-	X	-	-
al-Shaḥḥām	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-
Abū Ḥamza	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-
al-Kharrāz	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-
Unspecified Sufis	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X

miḥna. Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 1, *General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 31.

16. Ernst has argued that the political chaos of the time likely explains the trial itself, its rushed nature, and the expedited judgment issued in the case. He points to the fact that four different caliphs reigned within the decade between 247/861 and 256/870. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, 101. Melchert has pushed back against this explanation in “Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism,” 65–66.

17. Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, *The Tadhkiratu’l-awliya*, ed. R. A. Nicholson, vol. 2 (London: Luzac, 1907), 48; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, ed. Mahdī Tawhīdīpur (Tehran: Kitābforūshī-yi Sa‘dī, 1958), 101; ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, ed. Valentin Zhukovsky (Leningrad: Maṭba‘a-yi Dār al-‘Ulūm al-Ittihād Jamāhīr Shūravī Susyālistī, 1926), 173. The accounts of Sumnūn included in the *Kashf al-maḥjūb* and later Persian narratives begin with a lover’s quarrel like that found in *Kitāb al-Luma*, but they end in miraculous ways. The caliph’s tongue becomes tied (*zabānash girift*), and after having a dream that explains why, he releases Sumnūn and is restored to good health. Comparing both the narrative structure and the terms used, it appears highly likely that the versions in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʿ* and Jāmī’s *Nafahāt al-uns* are derived from al-Hujwīrī’s account.

Table 3. Antagonists

Individual	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Ghulām (al-)Khalīl ¹⁸	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	X
Unspecified caliph (<i>khalīfa</i>)	-	-	-	X	-	X	X	-
al-Muwaffaq	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	X
Ismā‘īl b. Iṣḥāq	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
al-Shāh	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-
A judge	-	-	-	X	-	X	-	-
The sultan	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	X
The caliph’s mother	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X
The <i>muḥtasib</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X

A closer look at Narrative C from al-Muḥassin al-Tanūkhī’s (d. 384/994) *al-Faraj ba‘d al-shidda* is warranted given its significant divergence from the others. First, Ghulām Khalīl is not mentioned at all. Instead, the text identifies the main antagonist as “al-Shāh,” whom the editor takes to be Muḥammad b. Ghānim Ibn al-Shāh (d. unknown), the head of the police force (*shurṭa*) of eastern Baghdad. However, a manuscript I consulted has only “al-Shāh” without “Ibn.”¹⁹ The charge is not heresy but unbelief; the protagonist who saves the day is al-Raqqām (d. 321/933), not al-Nūrī; and the method of salvation is a rhetorical display. A further discrepancy is that the *miḥna* is reported to have occurred in 264/877–8.²⁰ Since Ibn al-Shāh was not granted his position until 278/891–2, the chronology poses a problem for the editor’s theory.²¹ All of these details suggest that this narrative may describe not the inquisition of Ghulām Khalīl but a different event. However, the narrative begins with the phrase “When the *miḥna* happened” (*lammā kānat al-miḥna*), indicating that the purported narrator, al-Nūrī, is describing not just any *miḥna*, but *the miḥna*. This phrase also appears at the beginning of Narrative G, transmitted through ‘Umar al-Bannā’ (d. unknown). In addition, the other individual named in Narrative C, al-Raqqām, is also mentioned in Narratives D and F, which were widely disseminated and appeared in many later works.

18. In some instances, his name appears with an “al-” before “Khalīl.” For more on this, see Jarrār and Günther, *Doctrinal Instruction*, 14.

19. Al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj ba‘d al-shidda*, MS Leiden University Library, Or. 61, fol. 88a.

20. The date of the *miḥna* appears in al-Nūrī’s entry in al-Dhahabī’s *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’* where al-Dhahabī quotes ‘Umar al-Bannā’s narrative through Abū Nu‘aym. Interestingly, this date does not appear in the same narrative in Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, ed. Shu‘ayb Arna‘ūṭ et al., 2nd ed. (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1982), 14:71.

21. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Fadl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1967), 10:22.

Even more interesting is the fact that al-Shāh explicitly identifies al-Raqqām as a *ṣūfī*. However, al-Raqqām—that is, Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. ʿImrān al-ʿAbdī al-Baṣrī—was a well-known litterateur (*adīb*) who had no clear connection to the so-called Baghdadi Sufis of the third/ninth century.²² Furthermore, the term *ṣūfī* appears anachronistic in this context, since no third/ninth-century sources use *ṣūfī* to refer to any of the Baghdadi figures whom later scholars have identified as Sufis.²³ There are, then, two possibilities. The first is that the narrative is true. This would require, among other things, a radical retelling of the *miḥna* to omit the involvement of Ghulām Khalīl, and it would mean the existence of a *ṣūfī* identity already in the third/ninth century. The second and more likely possibility is that the narrative is fictional but uses historical characters to enhance the literary impact of the story in al-Tanūkhī’s work.²⁴ Al-Tanūkhī includes the more traditional account of the *miḥna* in his *al-Mustajād* (Narrative D), and it is likely that this was the source for his narrative retelling. All of this renders Narrative C an interesting window on the role of such narratives, fictional or otherwise, and the legacy of al-Nūrī outside explicitly Sufi texts.

The most striking aspect of the characters mentioned in these narratives is the heterogeneity of both the protagonists and the antagonists beyond the central figures of al-Nūrī and Ghulām Khalīl. After al-Nūrī, we find that al-Junayd (d. 297/910 or 298/911) and al-Raqqām appear most often—although Narratives D and F mention al-Junayd only to explain that he shielded himself from scrutiny by claiming an affiliation with legal scholars and not with Sufis. This makes al-Raqqām the second most frequently mentioned figure in the *miḥna* after al-Nūrī. Abū Ḥamza (d. 269/882–3 or 289/902), al-Shaḥḥām (that is, Abū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf b. ʿAbd Allāh, a Muʿtazilī theologian; d. ca. 270/883–4),²⁵ and al-Kharrāz (d. 277/890) are all mentioned only once, albeit never together in a single narrative. Narrative H mentions no Sufi by name, not even al-Nūrī. Furthermore, there are no reports external to these narratives that indicate any of these individuals except for al-Nūrī were put on trial because of Ghulām Khalīl. It is also unclear why al-Shaḥḥām and al-Raqqām would have been brought to trial, as neither of them seems to have had any relationship with al-Nūrī or with any other Baghdadi Sufis.

Al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) reports in his *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ* that Ruwaym (d. 303/915–6) was also implicated in the “calamity (*nūba*) of Ghulām Khalīl,”²⁶ and he repeats the report

22. He is, incidentally, the author of a work titled *Kitāb al-ʿAfw wa-l-iʿtidhār*, which is of the same genre as the *Faraj baʿd al-shidda* by al-Tanūkhī. These works contain stories about trials and tribulations that are then resolved in sometimes humorous or otherwise interesting ways. Al-Raqqām, *Kitāb al-ʿAfw wa-l-iʿtidhār*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qaddūs Abū Ṣāliḥ, 2nd ed. (Amman: Dār al-Bashīr, 1992).

23. The one exception is Abū Ḥamza al-Ṣūfī; however, he appears to be an outlier.

24. For a more detailed analysis of this work as one of literary fiction and its use of historical figures, see Daniel Beaumont, “In the Second Degree: Fictional Technique in al-Tanūkhī’s *Al-Faraj baʿd ash-Shidda*,” *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literature* 1, no. 2 (1998): 125–39. This is also the view of Nouha Khalifa; see Nouha Khalifa, *Hardship and Deliverance in the Islamic Tradition: Theology and Spirituality in the Works of al-Tanūkhī* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 14.

25. For more information on al-Shaḥḥām, see Margaretha T. Heemskerk, *Suffering in the Muʿtazilite Theology: ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s Teaching on Pain and Divine Justice* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 18–19.

26. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, 14:235.

in al-Dhahabī's *Ta'rikh*. This is a surprising claim, as there are reports that Ruwaym gave up *taṣawwuf* when Ismā'īl b. Ishāq (d. 282/896) became the chief judge and made Ruwaym his chamberlain (*wakīl*).²⁷ Indeed, Ismā'īl b. Ishāq is said to have presided over the *miḥna* of Ghulām Khalīl. Even if one were to conclude that Ismā'īl as chief judge did not preside over trials during this inquisition, it is unlikely that Ruwaym would have been implicated in it at a time when he had supposedly already forsaken *taṣawwuf*. Furthermore, Ja'far al-Khuldī, a close disciple of al-Junayd, narrated an extensive report in which al-Junayd chastised Ruwaym for having "hidden his love of the world" (*katama ḥubb al-dunyā*) during his Sufi period before aligning himself with the chief judge and giving up the Sufis' coarse frock in favor of fine silk.²⁸ As for al-Nūrī, al-Dhahabī mentions in his *Ta'rikh al-islām*, citing Ibn al-A'rābī (d. 341/952), that al-Nūrī fled to Kufa after the inquisition. This is confusing, as in al-Dhahabī's *Siyar*, al-Nūrī is reported to have fled to al-Raqqā.²⁹

There is much more biographical information available regarding the narratives' antagonists. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ghālib b. Khālid b. Mirdās Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Bāhili al-Baṣrī,³⁰ known as Ghulām Khalīl, was a popular preacher (*shaykh al-ʿamma*) in Baghdad and a *ḥadīth* transmitter of questionable standards, according to later authorities.³¹ He was originally from Basra, born a client (*mawlā*) of the Arab tribe Bāhila, and subsequently traveled to and resided in Baghdad. Ibn 'Adī al-Jurjānī (d. 365/975–6), in his *al-Kāmil fī ḍu'afā' al-rijāl*, provides some of the earliest information on Ghulām Khalīl's *ḥadīth* transmissions, including various reports about the veracity of his *ḥadīth*. Ghulām Khalīl was identified as someone who stole *ḥadīth*, altered *ḥadīth* to soften the hearts of the people,³² and, according to Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965), was unscrupulous and narrated anything that came his way.³³ Another report claims that the scholar Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 275/889) deemed only two people liars; one of them was Ghulām Khalīl, and Abū Dāwūd feared that he would become the calamity (*dajjāl*) of Baghdad. Ghulām Khalīl is remembered as leading an austere life (*yataqashshafu*)³⁴ and as being an explicit proponent of enjoining the good and forbidding the wrong.³⁵ It is reported that upon his death in 275/888 his coffin was

27. Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, ed. Shu'ayb Arna'ūṭ and Bashshār 'Awwād Ma'rūf (Doha, Qatar: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyya, 2015), 12:14.

28. Al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara wa-akhbār al-mudhākara*, ed. 'Abbūd al-Shālji (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1995), 3:120.

29. Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh al-islām wa-dhayluhu*, ed. 'Umar al-Tadmuri, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1990), 22:67; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'ʿlām al-nubalā'*, 13:282. The confusion is furthered when, later in the biographical entry for al-Nūrī, al-Dhahabī provides a report that begins with "Whoever saw al-Nūrī after his arrival from al-Raqqā..."

30. 'Abd Allāh Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil fī ḍu'afā' al-rijāl*, ed. Māzin b. Muḥammad al-Sarsāwī (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2013), 448.

31. Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh al-islām*, 20:276.

32. Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 448–49.

33. Muḥammad Ibn Ḥibbān, *Kitāb al-Majrūḥīn min al-muḥaddithīn*, ed. Ḥamdī 'Abd al-Majīd al-Salafi (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumay'ī, 2000), 1:165–66.

34. *Ibid.*, 165.

35. Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh al-islām*, 20:276.

carried to Basra, where the markets closed and men, women, and children all came out to pray.³⁶

As for Ghulām Khalīl’s literary production, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990) mentions several works: *Kitāb al-Duʿāʾ*, *Kitāb al-Inqīṭāʿ ilā Allāh*, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāt*, and a *Kitāb al-Mawāʿiẓ*. None of these works survive, but the Zāhiriyya Library holds a manuscript of a work entitled *Kitāb Sharḥ al-sunna* with a complete transmission note (*riwāya*) going back to Ghulām Khalīl, although the work’s authorship is disputed.³⁷ Notably, Ibn al-Nadīm lists Ghulām Khalīl in a section titled “Another Group of *al-Mutaṣawwifa*” (*tāʾifa ukhrā min al-mutaṣawwifa*), along with Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), Faṭḥ al-Mawṣilī (d. 220/835), Abū Ḥamza al-Ṣūfī, and al-Junayd, among others.³⁸ This seems like odd company for Ghulām Khalīl, who is known “for persecuting Sufis (and little else),” as Melchert put it.³⁹

One anecdote suggests the inclusion of Ghulām Khalīl among the *mutaṣawwifa* or as a *ṣūfī* may not be erroneous. Al-Hujwīrī’s narrative of Sumnūn’s tribulations in the *Kashf al-maḥjūb* begins with some background information. Al-Hujwīrī tells the reader that “this Ghulām Khalīl was a hypocritical man. Through trickery and guile, he made himself known to the caliph and rulers with claims of piety and Sufism (*pārsāʾī va ṣūfigarī*).”⁴⁰ The narrative goes on to say that Ghulām Khalīl would malign other shaykhs to the caliph to make him forsake them so that only Ghulām Khalīl’s own position remained. Ultimately, however, it is unclear how to square this report and Ibn al-Nadīm’s inclusion of Ghulām Khalīl among the Sufis.⁴¹

The judge who presided over the *miḥna* in some narratives was Ismāʿīl b. Iṣḥāq, who served as the chief judge in Baghdad for twenty-two years according to al-Dhahabī.⁴² He is named in only Narrative G, from Abū Nuʿaym’s al-Iṣfahānī’s (d. 430/1038) *Hilya*, while Narrative F from Abū Saʿd al-Khargūshī (d. ca. 407/1016) mentions the “chief judge” without a name and Narrative D in al-Tanūkhī’s *Mustajād* mentions only “the judge” (*al-qāḍī*). Ismāʿīl b. Iṣḥāq was widely remembered as an upright judge and was held in high esteem. Of the significant surviving biographical material on Ismāʿīl, three reports are relevant. The first describes a banquet attended by both Ismāʿīl and Ghulām Khalīl at which “Ghulām Khalīl vilified judges, bore testimony against them, and called them people of hellfire.”⁴³

36. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Taʾrīkh madīnat al-salām*, ed. Bashshār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2001), 6:246.

37. Maher Jarrar, “Ghulām Khalīl,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill Online), posted October 1, 2015. For an overview of the various discussions on the authorship of the *Kitāb Sharḥ al-sunna*, including a convincing argument for Ghulām Khalīl as the author, see Jarrār and Günther, *Doctrinal Instruction*, 28–65.

38. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Riḍā Tajaddud (Tehran: Maṭbaʿat Dānishgāh, 1971), 237.

39. Christopher Melchert, “Al-Barbahārī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill Online), posted October 1, 2009.

40. Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, 182.

41. It is worth mentioning that al-Khargūshī cites Ghulām Khalīl, like he does any other authority, narrating a report about a miracle attributed to Duḥaym ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ibrāhīm (d. 245/859–60). Al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 370.

42. Al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh al-islām*, 21:125.

43. Al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, *Tartīb al-madārik*, ed. Muḥammad b. Tāwīt al-Ṭanjī (Rabat: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shuʿūn al-Islāmiyya, 1983), 4:283.

After they left the banquet, Ismā‘īl confronted Ghulām Khalīl about his claims that judges would be among those in hellfire and that they were “companions of the sultan.” Ismā‘īl then asked him why he had gone to the banquet at all, since “they [the companions of the sultan] have kissed your hand and they have kissed mine.”⁴⁴ Although Ismā‘īl’s comments stop short of an explicit condemnation, it seems that Ghulām Khalīl did not think highly of Ismā‘īl b. Ishāq and vice versa. A clearer example of their relationship appears in the next relevant report, first quoted in Ibn Ḥibbān’s *al-Majrūḥīn*:

[Ibn Ḥibbān:] I heard Aḥmad b. ‘Amr b. Jābir in Ramla say, “I was with Ismā‘īl b. Ishāq, the judge, when Ghulām al-Khalīl [*sic*] arrived. While speaking, he said, “Do you remember, O *qāḍī*, when we were in Medina in 224[/838–9] studying [*ḥadīth*]?” Ismā‘īl turned to us and said, “Little by little, he lies—I was not in Medina during that year.”⁴⁵

It is likely on account of this falsehood that Ismā‘īl b. Ishāq deemed Ghulām Khalīl a liar (*kadhhabahu*) in the third relevant report.⁴⁶ The apparent animosity between Ismā‘īl and Ghulām Khalīl adds a problematic element to the *miḥna* narratives, though it does not by itself undermine the *miḥna*’s historicity as a whole.

To reiterate, Narrative C differs radically from all other narratives of the *miḥna*, although the anachronisms it contains suggest that it is a narrative retelling with some fabricated information. None of the narratives agree completely on the identities of either the Sufis involved (with the exception of al-Nūrī) or the antagonists. Three reports point to a problematic relationship between Ghulām Khalīl and Ismā‘īl b. Ishāq, the *qāḍī al-quḍāt* at the time, who is explicitly named in Narrative G and alluded to in Narratives D and F. There is circumstantial evidence that Ghulām Khalīl may himself have been identified as a *ṣūfī* or a *mutaṣawwif*; this evidence includes Ibn al-Nadīm’s listing of Ghulām Khalīl in the category of “another group of *al-mutaṣawwifa*.” The relationships between some of these characters—the judge Ismā‘īl and Ghulām Khalīl, but also Ismā‘īl and Ruwaym—are more complicated than the narratives themselves admit. Moreover, of the figures implicated in the *miḥna*, it is only al-Nūrī and al-Ruwaym, not others, who are associated with the *miḥna* in later biographical notices.⁴⁷ Finally, there are no contemporaneous or later sources that could corroborate the details of these narratives. It is particularly surprising that there are no records of this event in contemporaneous or later historical sources and no mention of it by an individual outside of the Sufi tradition, especially since non-Sufis such as al-Shaḥḥām, a Mu‘tazilī theologian, and al-Raqqām, a well-known litterateur, were among the few individuals explicitly implicated in the inquisition. None of these points directly undermines the historicity of the event, but they raise enough issues to warrant caution in assigning too much weight to the inquisition in the historiography of Sufism.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibn Ḥibbān, *al-Majrūḥīn*, 1:165.

46. Al-Dhahabī, *Ta‘rīkh al-islām*, 20:277.

47. Ibid., 22:67 for al-Nūrī and 23:121 for Ruwaym.

The Miḥna in Texts from the Fourth/Tenth Century Onward

Although some scholars have questioned the extent to which the legacy of al-Ḥallāj influenced later codifiers or synthesizers of Sufism, it is clear that al-Ḥallāj was a controversial figure who, because of his association with Sufism, needed to be dealt with carefully by medieval Sufi authors.⁴⁸ If the *miḥna* of Ghulām Khalīl loomed so large in the minds of Sufis that it fundamentally shaped their self-representation, this impact would likely be evident in the way in which the *miḥna* was recounted in Sufi texts. But a close look at the appearance and framing of the *miḥna* in a wide array of Sufi texts from the fourth/tenth century and beyond paints a different picture. In fact, the *miḥna* is portrayed in two interconnected ways. First, it appears as an example of altruism (*ithār*), demonstrated by al-Nūrī when he selflessly offers up his own life so that his companions may live longer, even if for just a moment. This notion of *ithār* needs to be understood within the framework of tribulation (*balāʾ*), the second lens through which to look at the *miḥna* narratives. The notion of *balāʾ* is an important element in the Sufis' universe of meaning. It is used to explain various Sufi stations (*maqāmāt*) and states (*aḥwāl*), including forbearance, contentment, and gratitude.

In al-Khargūshī's *Kitāb Tahdhīb al-asrār*, the story of the *miḥna* appears as just one of many examples in a chapter on altruism.⁴⁹ Similarly, the story of Ghulām Khalīl and al-Nūrī appears in chapters on generosity and liberality (*al-sakhāʾ wa-l-jūd*) in al-Qushayrī's (d. 465/1072) *Risāla* and al-Ṭurṭūshī's (d. 520/1126) *Sirāj al-mulūk*, as an illustration of al-Nūrī's altruism.⁵⁰ Al-Hujwīrī, in his *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, lists various subgroups of Sufis. As others have argued, it is likely that these categories do not actually reflect self-identified or cohesive groups of Sufis but instead represent al-Hujwīrī's own consolidation of beliefs and practices. Among these groups is "al-Nūriyya," named after al-Nūrī, whose defining characteristic is altruism.⁵¹ In these sources, the *miḥna* of Ghulām Khalīl, or rather the story of al-Nūrī and his experiences of tribulation, exemplifies the importance of altruism. In fact, even in al-Bayhaqī's (d. 458/1066) *Shuʿab al-īmān*, a creedal commentary, the report about al-Nūrī and his experience of the *miḥna* appears under the chapter on altruism.⁵² It is noteworthy that nowhere do these authors suggest that al-Nūrī was a uniquely problematic individual whose legacy needed to be reformed or redeemed to prevent the persecution of Sufis, nor is there any extended commentary on Ghulām Khalīl generally or the *miḥna* specifically.

48. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 81, 138; Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 57–59, 75. Al-Kalābadhī, for instance, quotes heavily from al-Ḥallāj, although he does not mention the latter's name. Al-Sulamī includes an entry for al-Ḥallāj in his well-known biographical dictionary, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, as do al-Hujwīrī and al-Anṣārī in their respective works. Abū Nuʿaym, however, excludes him from the *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*.

49. Al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 286–87.

50. Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, ed. Maḥmūd Ibn al-Sharīf (Cairo: Dār al-Shaʿb, 1989), 419; al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Fathī Abū Bakr (Cairo: al-Dār al-Miṣriyya al-Lubnāniyya, 1994), 1:369.

51. Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, 237.

52. Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-shuʿab al-īmān*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Ḥamīd and Mukhtār Aḥmad Nadwī (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2003), 5:144.

Charting the link between the *miḥna* and the idea of tribulation is more difficult, as there are only a handful of explicit connections. To understand the importance of *balāʾ* in Sufi authors' universe of meaning, one must look more broadly at texts from the third/ninth century and ask: How did Sufis understand *balāʾ* in their texts? How, in their view, were the trials and tribulations of this world to be dealt with, and what did such trials signify? This approach reveals that the *miḥna* of Ghulām Khalīl would have been understood as an instance of *balāʾ* even by authors who did not draw an explicit connection between the two.

In al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, the first mention of Ghulām Khalīl occurs in a chapter dedicated to al-Nūrī in a larger section titled "Explaining Ecstatic Utterances and Phrases That Appear Problematic." In the opening chapters of this section, al-Sarrāj defines ecstatic utterances and goes on to explain why some scholars incorrectly find these utterances problematic. Next, far from an apologetic presentation of Sufism, al-Sarrāj offers a quadripartite typology of knowledge (*ʿilm*) of the *sharīʿa*: knowledge transmitted as tradition (*ilm al-riwāya*), knowledge obtained through the exertion of reason (*ʿilm al-dirāya*), knowledge apprehended through the use of analogy and disputation (*ʿilm al-qiyās wa-l-naẓar*), and knowledge acquired through contemplation of indications of "supersensory reality" (*ʿilm al-ḥaqāʾiq*).⁵³ He devotes nearly an entire paragraph to describing this fourth type as the highest and most noble form of knowledge. Al-Sarrāj explains that should a person make an error, only individuals of the same class of knowledge should be able to question the one who has erred. This is especially true for those who possess *ʿilm al-ḥaqāʾiq*, for, as al-Sarrāj says, it is the end result of all the other forms of knowledge and therefore the purview of a select few.⁵⁴ Therefore, people who find the ecstatic utterances of a Sufi problematic have no right to judge whether the Sufi has erred unless they themselves are Sufis. In this light, one can appreciate al-Nūrī's predicament. Al-Sarrāj thus uses Ghulām Khalīl's harassment of al-Nūrī as an example to highlight the superiority of Sufis over their detractors, who cannot understand this highest form of knowledge.

The most significant aspect of Ghulām Khalīl's accusations of unbelief in this chapter of the *Lumaʿ* is that they are directed solely against al-Nūrī; there is no mention of a *miḥna* or of any other individuals being challenged.⁵⁵ This is just one of three instances mentioned in this section of the *Lumaʿ* in which al-Nūrī finds himself in hot water, so to speak.⁵⁶ The overarching portrayal in these anecdotes is of al-Nūrī as a righteous Sufi who is unjustly charged. This is most evident near the end of the chapter following a notice about the many times al-Junayd was summoned and charged with unbelief and heresy. Al-Sarrāj tells the reader that Sufis' landing in such predicaments is an old phenomenon and that the first to endure such a trial (*imtaḥana*) was ʿĀmir b. ʿAbd al-Qays (d. ca. 50/670) during the time of the second caliph ʿUmar. After recounting the story of ʿĀmir, al-Sarrāj quotes the prophetic

53. Al-Sarrāj, *al-Lumaʿ*, 564.

54. *Ibid.*, 657.

55. *Ibid.*, 492.

56. The other two narratives end with the caliph or al-Muwaffaq, who is erroneously identified as the caliph (*amīr al-muʾminīn*), in tears after hearing al-Nūrī speak. The narrative in which Sumnūn al-Muḥibb is implicated appears in the same section (*kitāb*) on ecstatic and problematic utterances in a chapter immediately following that of al-Nūrī's titled "Accounts of Other Shaykhs Who Were Charged with Unbelief (*Kufr*)."
Ibid., 498.

saying “We are the community of the prophets, those who are the most severely tried...For men will be tested (*yubtalā*) on account of their religion. If they are upright in their religion, the trial will be most severe.”⁵⁷ This connection between al-Nūrī and *balāʿ* is further evinced by an exchange of letters between him and al-Junayd preserved in the Cairo Geniza that focuses exclusively on the issue of *balāʿ*.⁵⁸

The *Trials of the Sufis (Miḥan al-ṣūfiyya)* by al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) contains a chapter titled “Accounts of the Trials of Sufi Shaykhs” with twenty-two anecdotes of the various trials and tribulations endured by Sufis.⁵⁹ Noticeably missing is any mention of al-Nūrī—either his trial, instigated by Ghulām Khalīl, or any of the other problems he faced that are mentioned in other works.⁶⁰ However, the section does contain an account of Sumnūn al-Muḥibb and Ghulām Khalīl that is nearly identical to that found in al-Sarrāj’s *Lumaʿ*. Much of this section seems to have been taken directly from al-Sarrāj’s work, and included in the midst of it all is the same prophetic *ḥadīth* about the righteous being those most often and severely tried.⁶¹ The fact that al-Sulamī, writing a generation after al-Sarrāj, interprets these *miḥan* in the same way demonstrates continuity in fourth/tenth-century Sufis’ understanding of *balāʿ*. To better understand how significant the notions of trial and tribulation were for Sufis, it is instructive to survey briefly an array of Sufi and Sufi-adjacent texts and draw attention to an implicit connection between the inquisition narratives and the idea of *balāʿ*.

Al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) writes that the whole world is a trial,⁶² and he opens his *Kitāb al-Tawahhum* with “Praise be to God, who creates for us tribulations and trials.”⁶³ In fact, al-Muḥāsibī’s oeuvre contains numerous references to *balāʿ*, tied in some instances to the notion of gratitude. In his *Ādāb al-nufūs*, he instructs the reader to “consider every tribulation that has befallen you a blessing, for God has caused someone else to endure a trial that is more severe and worse than that which He has caused for you.”⁶⁴ This stance is repeated in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s (d. 386/996) *Qūt al-qulūb* in the chapter on forbearance, where al-Makkī says that *ṣabr* is the state of tribulations and gratitude is the state of grace, but the former is better because it is more burdensome for the lower self (*nafs*).⁶⁵ Al-Qushayrī

57. Ibid., 501.

58. MS Cairo Geniza, T-S Ar. 41-1. This correspondence was seemingly well known. It is referenced by Abū Manṣūr al-Iṣfahānī in his *Shawāhid al-taṣawwuf*, where he calls al-Junayd’s response strange (*ʿajība*) and mentions that this letter was included among al-Junayd’s epistles (*rasāʿil*). Abū Manṣūr al-Iṣfahānī, *Shawāhid al-taṣawwuf*, MS Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, *Majāmiʿ* 66, fol. 187b.

59. Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Masāʿil wa-taʿwīlāt ṣūfiyya*, ed. Bilal Orfali and Ismāʿīl Ibn Nujayd (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 2010), 55.

60. Al-Sulamī, *Masāʿil wa-taʿwīlāt ṣūfiyya*, 55.

61. Ibid., 56. On the relationship between al-Sulamī’s work and that of al-Sarrāj, see A. J. Arberry, “Did Sulamī Plagiarize Sarrāj?,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 69, no. 3 (1937): 461–65.

62. Al-Muḥāsibī, *Ādāb al-nufūs wa-yalīhi Kitāb al-Tawahhum*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1991), 70.

63. Al-Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-Tawahhum*, ed. A. J. Arberry (Cairo: Lajnat al-Taʿlīf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1937), 5.

64. Al-Muḥāsibī, *Ādāb al-nufūs*, 51.

65. Al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 335, 336–37.

likewise writes that the truly grateful (*shukūr*) show gratitude for their trials, whereas the merely thankful (*shākīr*) show gratitude only for things given to them.⁶⁶ Throughout his exegesis of the Qurʾān, al-Qushayrī explains that those who truly believe will either have their trials be made less burdensome or become freed from them.

In other instances, trials and tribulations are understood through the practice of forbearance. According to al-Makkī's *Qūt al-qulūb*, God praises only those who show forbearance in the face of tribulation and difficulty (*shidda*).⁶⁷ Al-Makkī describes how crowded the doors to paradise will be for those who wish to enter. The door has two sides, and one of these will be dedicated to those who have forbearance, “the people of tribulation in the world.”⁶⁸ Al-Muḥāsibī, in another work, is asked about those who experience the most severe trials, and he responds that they are “those with the most knowledge (*maʿrifa*), those who are strongest in certainty, and those who are the most complete in faith.” He goes on to quote the *ḥadīth* about the prophets being those who are most tried.⁶⁹ In his *Naṣāʾih*, al-Muḥāsibī devotes an entire chapter to being happy with the calamities of the world.⁷⁰ Al-Sarī al-Saqatī, the maternal uncle of al-Junayd, relates that the meaning of *ṣabr* is that one should be the earth that bears the weight of the mountains, humanity, and all things atop it, and that this should not be called a trial, but rather a blessing and a gift from God.⁷¹ In his collection of forty *ḥadīth*, al-Sulamī includes one in which Muḥammad enumerates four qualities that represent the best of the world and the hereafter; one of these is a self (*nafs*) that has forbearance for trials.⁷² Al-Sulamī's *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* contains numerous sayings attributed to various individuals that connect notions of trial and tribulation to forbearance, gratitude, love of God (*maḥabba*), contentment, and so forth.⁷³ Al-Sarrāj quotes Muḥammad b. Sālim's (d. 297/909) tripartite typology of those who have *ṣabr*—*al-mutaṣabbir*, *al-ṣābir*, and *al-ṣabbār*—and declares that the best of the three is the *ṣabbār*, who never wavers or changes course under trials (*balāyā*).⁷⁴

In other instances, trials and tribulations are seen as marks of righteousness. Abū Nuʿaym reports in the *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*⁷ that among the signs of a true aspirant is being thankful for

66. Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 313.

67. Al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 326.

68. Ibid., 328.

69. Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Makāsib wa-l-waraʿ wa-l-shubha wa-bayān mubāḥihā wa-maḥzūrihā wa-ikhtilāf al-nās fi ṭalabihā wa-l-radd ʿalā al-ghāliṭin fihi*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1987), 308.

70. Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Waṣāyā, al-Naṣāʾih, al-Qaṣd wa-l-rujūʿ ilā Allāh, Badʿ man anāba ilā Allāh, Fahm al-ṣalāt, al-Tawahhum*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1986), 10.

71. Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*, 10:120.

72. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Kitāb al-Arbaʿin fi al-taṣawwuf* (Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1981), 6.

73. Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya wa-yālīhi dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1998); for *ṣabr*, see 102, 223, 321, and 359; for *riḍā*, 150 and 195; for *shukr*, 317; and for *balāʾ* in reference to love of God, 241, 251, 348, and 407.

74. Al-Sarrāj, *al-Lumaʿ*, 76.

trials.⁷⁵ Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Maghribī (d. ca. 299/911–2) narrates that of the three types of the elect (*ahl al-khuṣūṣ*), the highest degree is held by those who are inundated with tribulations but who, thanks to their forbearance and contentment, only grow in their love for God and are rewarded with blessings (*niʿam*) and inner knowledge (*bāṭin al-ʿilm*).⁷⁶ Ibn Khafīf (d. 371/982) advises aspirants to hold fast to God, for God will cast down upon them all manner of trials and tribulations, including sickness, preventing the assistance of others, poverty, and inhibiting the heart from remembering God. Overcoming these tribulations will allow them to join the chosen.⁷⁷ Surayra al-Sharqiyya (d. unknown) says that “trials and blessings are both from the same source, save that the righteous ones (*al-ṣādiqūn*) emerge as those who are steadfast when trials befall them.”⁷⁸ In the *Ḥilya*, Abū Nuʿaym includes a saying ascribed to al-Junayd: “There are three types of tribulations: for the perplexed, [trials] are punitive; for the righteous, they are a rectification of their sins; and for the prophets, they are a product of the righteousness of their being selected.”⁷⁹ A similar saying is also attributed to al-Muḥāsibī in the *Ḥilya*.⁸⁰ This sentiment is echoed in the aforementioned *ḥadīth*, in which the prophets are said to be those most severely tried.⁸¹

In his exegesis of Q 25:20, al-Tustarī quotes the following *ḥadīth*: “God protects His believing servant from the world just as a sick person is taken care of by their people with food and drink. God charges believers through trials just as a parent charges their child to do good.”⁸² In relation to Q 29:1–2, he further recounts a story in which angels see that a disbeliever is living an easy life with no trials. God tells the angels to reveal the punishment of the disbeliever, at which point the angels realize that the disbeliever has gained no real benefit from the good things of the world bestowed upon them. Then the angels see a believing servant stricken by worldly trials. God has the recompense of the believer revealed, and the angels understand that what has befallen the believer has done them no harm but instead constitutes a sign of their faith.⁸³

Finally, *balāʿ* is also discussed in connection with the station (*maqām*) of contentment. Al-Muḥāsibī describes the companions of the prophets as exemplary because they are content with trials;⁸⁴ by contrast, the people of the world are tested with wealth and thus

75. Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʿ*, 10:60.

76. *Ibid.*, 195.

77. Ibn Khafīf, *Ibn Ḥafīf aṣ-Ṣīrāzī und seine Schrift zur Novizenerziehung (Kitāb al-Iqtīṣād): Biographische Studien, Edition und Übersetzung*, ed. and trans. Florian Sobieroj (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998), 27.

78. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt aṣ-ṣūfiyyāt*, ed. and trans. Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 246–7.

79. Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʿ*, 10:271.

80. *Ibid.*, 91.

81. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Kalābādhi, *Kitāb al-Taʿarruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf*, ed. A. J. Arberry (repr. Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1994), 148.

82. Abū Muḥammad Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm li-Abī Muḥammad Sahl b. Yūnus b. ʿĪsā al-Tustarī*, ed. Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raʿūf Saʿd and Saʿd Ḥasan Muḥammad ʿAlī (Medina: Dār al-Ḥaram li-l-Turāth, 2004), 113.

83. Al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, 120.

84. Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Waṣāyā*, 80.

become angry when they encounter trials.⁸⁵ In another report, al-Junayd is asked about contentment, and he replies, “You asked about a comfortable life and pleasure...Someone knowledgeable said that the most comfortable life is the life of those who are content with God, for contentment is the welcoming of trials that befall you with strength, happiness, and anticipation for that which has not yet come from God through contemplation and consideration.”⁸⁶ Abū Ja‘far al-Hamadhānī’s (d. 472/1079) *Rawḍat al-murīdīn* contains a report in which al-Junayd explains that “the true devotee (*faqīr*) lives in trial, and all his trials are knowledge.”⁸⁷ Abū al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṣā’igh al-Dīnawārī (d. 331/943) reports that a shaykh said, “Burdensome trials and tribulations come to the one who seeks love of God.”⁸⁸ Aḥmad b. al-Ḥawārī (d. 230/845 or 244/860) tells an aspirant to take poverty as wealth and trials from God as a cure.⁸⁹ These quotations represent just a small sampling from texts written in Sufism’s formative period, roughly the third/ninth to fifth/eleventh centuries. They demonstrate the centrality of the theme of trials and tribulations to Sufi thought in this time period. Although the *miḥna* of Ghulām Khalīl is not often explicitly connected to the notion of *balā’*, it would implicitly have been understood within this framework as a tribulation of this world.

Conclusion

Given the importance of Ghulām Khalīl’s inquisition in scholarship on Sufism’s history, this article has endeavored to apply a historical-critical lens to the extant narratives, highlighting discrepancies that make corroborating the exact details of these narratives difficult. Determining the historicity of the event is beyond the scope of this article, but my analysis shows that there are some problematic aspects to the story. The diversity in the narratives’ details and the instability of the narrative itself warrants reconsideration of the historiographical weight assigned to Ghulām Khalīl’s *miḥna* and its prominence in the history of early Sufism. Importantly, the inquisition does not appear to have been something later Sufis felt they had to answer for or contend with. In this it contrasts with the trial and execution of al-Ḥallāj, whose contested legacy can be seen in the varied ways in which later Sufis grappled with his representation and thought in their texts.

Beyond the question of historiography, an examination of these narratives in later Sufi texts shows that the *miḥna* played a twofold role in the Sufi universe of meaning. First, the narratives often appeared in chapters on altruism (*īthār*) with a focus on the self-sacrificing actions of al-Nūrī. Second, the *miḥna* was viewed as an instance of divinely decreed tribulation. The connection between trials (*miḥan*) and tribulation (*balā’*) is made explicit only in al-Sarrāj’s *Kitāb al-Luma’*, but a survey of early Sufi and Sufi-adjacent texts shows that the idea of tribulation was an essential element of Sufi thought and practice—all

85. Ibid., 81.

86. Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Hilyat al-awliyā’*, 10:280.

87. John Alden Williams, “*Rawḍat al-Murīdīn* of Shaykh Abū Ja‘far Ibn Yazdānyār” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1957), 6.

88. Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 241.

89. Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Hilyat al-awliyā’*, 10:21.

difficulties are tribulations from God, to be dealt with accordingly. On the one hand, instances of *balāʿ* served as an example of occasions when one should respond with forbearance (*ṣabr*) or contentment (*riḍā*) with what God has decreed. And on the other hand, divine trials such as the *miḥna* were to be embraced, for those who are the most righteous are those who are the most exposed to difficult trials, as shown by the prophetic saying that “the prophets are those who are most severely tested.” Finally, it is worth noting that the term *miḥna* likely resonated among early Muslims by evoking the *miḥna* instituted by Caliph al-Maʿmūn (d. 218/833). In this way, the *miḥna* of the Sufis could represent a similar unjust and, ultimately, unsuccessful attempt to persecute the righteous. Broadening the scope of research on Ghulām Khalīl’s inquisition beyond its historiographical role thus opens up new avenues for understanding the importance of the *miḥna* narratives for medieval Sufis and the role of *balāʿ* in early Sufi thought.

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Appendix: Transmissions and Translations

Below is a list of the various narratives of the *miḥna* as well as two narratives that touch on Ghulām Khalīl and his animosity toward Sufis, in general, and al-Nūrī, in particular. Many of these narratives are quoted in later sources, and references to those attestations can be found in the footnotes.

The first two narratives, from al-Sarrāj’s (d. 378/988) *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* (Narratives A and B), do not include any *isnād* or narrator but simply recount the story. This is characteristic of the *Lumaʿ* as a whole. Al-Sarrāj often directly quotes individuals whom he could not have met in person. Narrative A is found in a chapter titled “Accounts of Other Shaykhs Who Were Charged with Unbelief (*Kufr*)” of al-Sarrāj’s *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* in a section devoted to Sumnūn b. Ḥamza al-Muḥibb (d. 298/910–1).⁹⁰

Narrative A

Sumnūn was called “Sumnūn the lover (*al-muḥibb*).” He was described as having a beautiful face, as having sayings about love (*al-maḥabba*), and as being eloquent. I was

90. Al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 498; al-Sulamī, *Masāʾil wa-taʾwīlāt ṣūfiyya*, 55; al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, 173; Ḥaṭṭār, *The Tadhkiratu’l-awliya*, 2:48; Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, 101.

informed that a woman had taken an interest in him and desired him. When Sumnūn learned of this, he expelled her from his teaching sessions (*majlis*). The woman went to al-Junayd and asked, “What would you say about this: a man was my path to God, but God left, and the man remained?” Al-Junayd knew what she meant and did not respond to her but said, “God is sufficient for us and the best protector.” She then offered herself in marriage to Sumnūn, but he refused her.

She knew that Ghulām al-Khalīl disapproved of them [the Sufis]—for he was feuding with them—and she sought him out. She said to him, “These are Sufis (*hā’ulā’i ṣūfiyya*), so-and-so and so-and-so,” and mentioned that they gathered with her every night doing illicit things (*ḥarām*). Ghulām al-Khalīl testified to that and said, “These people are heretics (*zanādiqa*), and their blood is on my hands.” The sultan [*sic*] commanded that they be killed, but God removed that [tribulation] from them, saved them, and set them free.

Narrative B

Narrative B appears in the chapter on Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907) in the *Kitāb al-Luma*.⁹¹

Al-Nūrī lived in the days of al-Muwaffaq, and Ghulām Khalīl disapproved of him. He reported to al-Muwaffaq, who was the *amīr al-mu’minīn*⁹² in those days, that there was a heretic in Baghdad whose blood was licit. “If the *amīr al-mu’minīn* kills him, his blood will be on my hands (*dammuhu ‘alā ‘unuqī*.)” The caliph summoned [al-Nūrī], who was then brought to him. Ghulām Khalīl testified that he had heard al-Nūrī say, “I love (*a’shiqu*) God and He loves me (*ya’shiqunī*.)” Al-Nūrī then said, “I heard God say, ‘He loves them (*yuḥibbuhum*) and they love Him (*yuḥibbūnahū*),’ and *‘ishq* is nothing more than *maḥabba* except that the *‘ashiq* is prevented [from fulfilling his desire] and the *muḥibb* enjoys the object of his love.” Then al-Muwaffaq cried because of the softness (*riqqa*) of his words.

Narrative C

Narrative C is found only in al-Tanūkhī’s (d. 384/994) *al-Faraj ba’d al-shidda* with no later attestations and contains a complete *isnād* that purports to go back to al-Nūrī himself.⁹³

al-Tanūkhī

Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Muẓaffar (d. 388/998)

Abū ‘Umar Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid (d. 345/957)

al-Nūrī

91. Al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma*, 492.

92. Al-Muwaffaq’s brother al-Mu’tamid was the actual caliph in this time period, but al-Muwaffaq is largely considered to have been the de facto ruler.

93. Al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj ba’d al-shidda*, 2:156–57.

Although noteworthy on its face, as discussed earlier, this narrative differs completely from the others and is almost certainly a fictional account.⁹⁴

Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Muzaffar reported to us (*akhbaranā*) that Abū ʿUmar Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wāḥid said that al-Nūrī al-Ṣūfī reported to me, saying:

When the *miḥna* happened, I and a group of Sufis were charged with unbelief (*rumītu anā wa-jamāʿa min al-ṣūfiyya bi-l-kufr*). We were taken and placed in a dungeon for several days. Then we were brought out to al-Shāh,⁹⁵ who was the governor (*wālī*). He wanted our blood to be spilled and strove to make it happen.

He took us out to question us and continuously torture us, bringing us back and forth before the execution. We promised one another that we would not speak until the one in charge freed us.

Al-Shāh said to al-Raqqām, “Are you the one who said: my saying *bismillāh* is an immense amount of light (*lujjatun min nūr*)?” Al-Raqqām was silent in accordance with his promise.

People of power and standing who sought compassion from al-Shāh on our behalf arrived and told him to stop and take more time to investigate what we were accused of.

Al-Shāh then said to al-Raqqām, “You are a *ṣūfī*. Perhaps you allegorically interpreted (*taʾawwalta*) your statement ‘*bismillāh*’ as ‘a light’ and your saying ‘*al-ḥamdulillāh*,’ after you were done, as ‘a light.’”

Al-Raqqām screamed a great scream, saying, “You misspoke (*laḥanta*), O *amīr*!” Al-Nūrī then said, “By God, that made me laugh despite my circumstances at that time.” The *amīr* said to al-Raqqām, “Did you start looking into grammar after [meeting] me until you could distinguish the ungrammatical (*laḥn*) from the [grammatically] correct (*ṣawāb*)?”

Al-Raqqām then said to [al-Shāh], “Watch yourself, O *amīr*, for it is in the word *laḥn* that there is an error, for I meant with my statement ‘*lahinta*,’ meaning ‘You understood’ (*faṭanta*) in the meaning of the Sufis (*bi-maʿnā al-ṣūfiyya*).”

Al-Shāh then said, “How can there be someone in this world who utters something like this and is subjected to [charges of] heresy?” He then released us, and we were freed from the [predicament] we were in and from that which made us wary. We were set free for the flimsiest and most frivolous of reasons (*bi-aḍʿaf al-asbāb wa-aysariḥā*).

94. This narrative has not appeared in previous scholarship on Ghulām Khalīl and the inquisition.

95. Al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda*, 2:156n3; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 10:22.

Narrative D

Narrative D, from another of al-Tanūkhī's works, *al-Mustajād min fa'alāt al-ajwād*, is introduced by "the teacher (*al-ustādh*) Abū 'Alī"—that is, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Muẓaffar (d. 388/998), mentioned in the chain of transmission for Narrative C. This narrative is one of the most oft-repeated in later sources.⁹⁶

The *ustādh* Abū 'Alī said: When Ghulām Khalīl slandered the Sufis with heresy to the caliph (*sa'ā Ghulām Khalīl bi-l-ṣūfiyya ilā al-khalīfa bi-l-zandaqa*),⁹⁷ [the caliph] ordered that they be killed. Al-Junayd concealed himself under the guise of jurisprudence, for he would issue fatwas in accordance with the school of Abū Thawr. As for al-Shaḥḥām, al-Raqqām, al-Nūrī,⁹⁸ and another group [of Sufis], they were seized, and the executioner's mat was unrolled for their execution. Al-Nūrī came forward, and the executioner said to him, "Do you know what awaits you?" He said, "Yes." The executioner responded, "What makes you rush forward?" "I prefer that my friends live for another hour," he said.

The executioner was perplexed and relayed news of this to the caliph, who handed them over to the judge so the latter could acquaint himself with the situation. The judge posed legal questions (*masā'il fiqhiyya*) to Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, and he answered all of them. Then [al-Nūrī] started to speak: "God has worshippers (*'ibād*) who, when they stand, stand for God, and if they speak, speak for God." He continued to say similar things until he caused the judge to cry. The judge sent a message to the caliph, saying, "If these people are heretics, there is not a single Muslim on the face of the earth."

The caliph then ordered for them to be set free, and they were let go.

96. It appears in al-Tanūkhī, *al-Mustajād min fa'alāt al-ajwād*, ed. Kurd 'Alī, 43; al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 419; al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-mulūk*, 1:369–71; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān fī tawārīkh al-a'yān*, ed. Muḥammad Barakat, Kāmil al-Kharrāṭ, and Riḥāwī 'Ammār (Beirut: Dār al-Risāla al-'Ālamiyya, 2013), 16:331; Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *Ṭabaqāt al-awliyā'*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn Shurayba (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1994), 64; Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-awraq*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 2005), 203–4; Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *Ḥadā'iq al-awliyā'*, ed. Yūsuf Aḥmad (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2009), 2:387–89. The following works contain additional material not found in other versions of this narrative: Muḥammad b. 'Alī Ibn al-Azraq and 'Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār, *Badā'ī' al-silk fī ṭabā'ī' al-mulk* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2008), 1:379–80; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmi' al-ghurar*, vol. 5, ed. Dorothea Krawulsky (Cairo: Qism al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya bi-l-Ma'had al-almānī li-l-Āthār bi-l-Qāhira, 1992), 52. However, Ibn al-Dawādārī erroneously places the event in the year 153/770.

97. The most recent edition, by Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī, seems unreliable and has *rafā'a* instead of *zandaqa*, in contrast to Kurd 'Alī's 1946 edition and the two manuscripts I consulted. Compare al-Tanūkhī, *al-Mustajād min fa'alāt al-ajwād*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2005), 26, with al-Tanūkhī, *al-Mustajād min fa'alāt al-ajwād*, ed. Kurd 'Alī, 43; al-Tanūkhī, *al-Mustajād min fa'alāt al-ajwād*, MS University Library of Leipzig, Vollers 590, fol. 23b; and al-Tanūkhī, *al-Mustajād min fa'alāt al-ajwād*, MS al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya, no. 7104, fol. 16a.

98. Both editions as well as the two manuscripts checked for this article have al-Thawrī instead of al-Nūrī, although it is certain that al-Nūrī is meant here.

Narrative E

Narrative E is from the *Qūt al-qulūb* of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996). It does not have an *isnād* and is the shortest of all the narratives.⁹⁹ It does not refer to a *miḥna* but does mention love of God (*maḥabba*) and that Ghulām Khalīl took issue with the Sufi position and censured the Sufis.¹⁰⁰

The theologians (*mutakallimūn*) who have no [experience] of the station of familiarity [with God] (*al-uns*) deny its existence, just as the one who has not tasted love [of God] (*al-maḥabba*) denies it. This is because [the latter] fancies love [of God] to be like the love of created beings (*maḥabbat al-makhlūq*), imagines this love akin to the characteristics of created beings, and considers it to be of the same genus as created things. Such a person would say, “We do not know anything except fear [of God].”

Among those who subscribe to this position [of denying the existence of love of God] is Aḥmad b. Ghālib, known as Ghulām al-Khalīl. He censured al-Junayd, Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz, and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī for their statements about love (*kalāmahum fī al-maḥabba*).

Narrative F

Narrative F comes from al-Khargūshī’s (d. ca. 407/1016) *Kitāb Tahdhīb al-asrār*¹⁰¹ and reaches him from one “Ibn ‘Aṭā’,” or Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn ‘Aṭā’ al-Ādamī (d. 309/922), who was executed for being a companion of al-Ḥallāj and maintaining similar views. This makes Ibn ‘Aṭā’ a witness to the *miḥna* of Ghulām Khalīl, although no *isnād* is included in this work, nor does the name Ghulām Khalīl appear in the narrative.¹⁰² As other scholars have noted, a pared-down version of the narrative from al-Khargūshī’s work appears in the much later *Talbīs Iblīs* of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), which explicitly mentions Ghulām Khalīl. There Ibn al-Jawzī offers a full *isnād* that is absent from any other version of this narrative in other texts:¹⁰³

Abū Bakr b. Ḥabīb al-‘Āmirī (d. 530/1136)
 Abū Saʿd b. Abī Ṣādiq (d. after 462/1068)
 Ibn Bākawayh/Bākūya (d. 428/1037)
 ‘Abd al-Wāḥid b. Bakr al-Warathānī (d. 372/982–3)
 Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Dāwūd al-Dīnawarī (d. 360/971)¹⁰⁴
 Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. ‘Aṭā’

99. Al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1106.

100. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm b. al-Ḥusayn al-‘Irāqī (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1982), 4:340.

101. Al-Khargūshī, *Kitāb Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 286–87; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb Talbīs Iblīs*, ed. Aḥmad b. ‘Uthmān al-Mazyad (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan, 2002), 1036; al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 2:173; al-Bayhaqī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-shu‘ab al-imān*, 5:144; Abū al-Ḥasan b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Nubāhī, *Ta’rīkh quḍāt al-Andalus* (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1983), 35.

102. Not to be confused with Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Aṭā’ al-Rūdhābārī (d. 369/976).

103. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, 1036.

104. Mostly known as Abū Bakr al-Duqqī. Al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-islām*, 26:217–18.

Interestingly, there is an earlier version of this narrative through Ibn ‘Aṭā’, unmentioned in secondary scholarship, in al-Bayhaqī’s (d. 458/1066) *al-Jāmi‘ li-shu‘ab al-īmān*.¹⁰⁵ Al-Bayhaqī’s version is nearly identical to that of al-Khargūshī beyond minor omissions and terminological differences. Like the latter, al-Bayhaqī does not mention Ghulām Khalīl but does name the Mālikī chief judge (*qādī al-quḍāt*) of the time, Abū Ishāq Ismā‘īl b. Ishāq al-Azadī (d. 282/896). This version has an *isnād* that replicates the first three figures in Ibn al-Jawzī’s *isnād* but then goes from al-Warathānī to al-Sulamī:

Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī
 ‘Abd al-Wāḥid b. Bakr [al-Warathānī]
 Muḥammad b. Dāwūd al-Duqqī (i.e., Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Dāwūd al-Dīnawarī)
 Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. ‘Aṭā’

Ibn al-‘Aṭā’ said: Someone slandered (*sa‘ā sā’in*) the Sufis to the caliph, saying, “Here we have some heretics who repudiate the *sharī‘a* (*yarfuḍūna al-sharī‘a*.)” He seized Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, Abū Ḥamza, and al-Raqqām, but al-Junayd concealed himself under the guise of jurisprudence—he would issue opinions according to Abū Thawr’s positions. They were all brought to the caliph, and he ordered them to be killed.

Abū al-Ḥusayn rushed out to the executioner to be killed. The executioner then said to him, “Out of all your companions, you have come first.” Al-Nūrī then said, “In this moment, I wanted to give preference to the lives of my companions over my own.”

The executioner and all those present were surprised, and the former wrote to the caliph. The matter was forwarded to the chief judge (*qādī al-quḍāt*). Al-Nūrī went to the judge and was asked about the basis for legal obligations (*farā’iḍ*), purity (*al-ṭahāra*), and prayer (*al-ṣalāt*). Al-Nūrī answered the questions and then said, “In addition, God has servants who eat through God, dress through God, hear through God, go out through God, and come back through God.”

When the judge heard his words, he cried deeply. He went to the caliph and said, “If these people are heretics, there is not a single monotheist (*muwaḥḥid*) on the face of the earth.”

Narrative G

Narrative G, which is transmitted through ‘Umar al-Bannā’ (d. unknown) without an *isnād*, first appears in Abū Nu‘aym’s (d. 430/1038) *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* in the biography for al-Nūrī.¹⁰⁶ This is the narrative most commonly found in later sources, always quoted through ‘Umar al-Bannā’.¹⁰⁷

105. Al-Bayhaqī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-shu‘ab al-īmān*, 5:144.

106. Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, 10:250–1.

107. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, 14:71; al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-islām*, 22:67; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, 1034; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh madīnat al-salām*, 6:335–36; al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, *Tartīb al-madārik*, 4:288.

In Mecca, I heard ‘Umar al-Bannā’ al-Baghdādī recount that when the *miḥna* of Ghulām al-Khalīl took place and the Sufis were charged with heresy, the caliph ordered them to be seized. Among those whom he seized in a group was al-Nūrī. They were brought into the caliph’s presence, and he ordered them to be executed. Al-Nūrī then went quickly to the executioner to be killed.

The executioner said to him, “What has caused you, out of all your companions, to hasten to your death?” [Al-Nūrī] said, “In this moment, I prefer their lives over my own.” The executioner and those who were present paused the process of killing him, and the matter was raised with the caliph.

The caliph then forwarded the issue to the chief judge (*qāḍī al-quḍāt*); at that time, Ismā‘īl b. Iṣḥāq oversaw the judges. Al-Nūrī went to him and Ismā‘īl asked him about points of law (*masā’il*) concerning worship (*‘ibādāt*), purity, and prayer. He answered and said to [Ismā‘īl], “In addition, God has servants who hear through God, look through God, and go out through God. They respond through God, they eat through God, and they dress through God.”

When Ismā‘īl heard his words, he cried for a long time and then went to the caliph. He said, “If these people (*qawm*) are heretics, there is not a single monotheist on earth,” and the caliph ordered their release. The sultan [*sic*] asked him that day, “Of what do people eat?” He said, “We do not know the causes through which daily sustenance is acquired. We are a people who contemplate (*naḥnu qawm mudabbirūn*).”

He then said, “The one who has arrived at [God’s] affection (*wuddihi*) has become intimate in his proximity [to God] (*anisa bi-qurbihī*). The one who has attained affection (*widād*) has been selected by God from among His worshippers.”

Narrative H

Narrative H comes from Ibn al-A‘rābī (d. 341/952) and is first alluded to by Abū Nu‘aym in his *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* in the biography for al-Nūrī. Abū Nu‘aym writes, “I heard ‘Abd al-Mun‘im b. Hayyān (d. after 380/990–1) recount on the authority of Abū Sa‘īd Ibn al-A‘rābī [the story of al-Nūrī’s] tribulation (*miḥnatahu*) and his disappearance from his brothers (*ikhwānihi*) during the days of Ghulām Khalīl’s *miḥna*,” but he provides no details on the *miḥna* itself.¹⁰⁸ The earliest complete version of Ibn al-A‘rābī’s narrative is found in al-Dhahabī’s (d. 748/1348) *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’* and *Ta’rīkh al-islām*, although the versions in the two works differ slightly.¹⁰⁹ It is possible that Ibn al-A‘rābī had direct knowledge of

108. Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, 10:249.

109. In his work on al-Dhahabī, Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf explains that the *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’* is an abridgment (*mukhtaṣar*) of the *Ta’rīkh* and argues that the latter was written first. The *Siyar* has no additional biographical entries (*tarājim*) when compared to the *Ta’rīkh*, but it does occasionally contain additional reports that are not included in the *Ta’rīkh*. In this instance, it is clear that the version in the *Siyar* is an abridgment of that in *Ta’rīkh*, in terms of both content and format. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf, *al-Dhahabī wa-manhajuhu fi kitābihi Ta’rīkh al-islām* (Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1976), 176–77.

the event despite the gap between the year in which al-Dhahabī says the *miḥna* took place, 264/877–8, and his death date of 341/952. What follows is the version in *Taʾrīkh al-islām*, as it is fuller than that included in the *Siyar*, which paraphrases some of the quotations found in the former.¹¹⁰

Abū Saʿīd Ibn al-Aʿrābī said that these abominations (*shanāʿāt*) were mentioned to him [Ghulām Khalīl]—meaning the immersion of the Sufis (*khawḍ al-ṣūfiyya*) in the intricate aspects of states (*aḥwāl*) that the traditionists (*ahl al-athar*) condemned.

Ibn al-Aʿrābī said that one of the approaches of the Baghdadi [Sufis] was mentioned to [Ghulām Khalīl] along with their position concerning love (*maḥabba*). He kept receiving news about deviance among the people of Basra, who were saying, “We love our Lord, and our Lord loves us (*naḥnu nuḥibbu rabbanā wa-rabbunā yuḥibbunā*). Our fear of Him has gone away because of the power of His love.”

He censured this error with an error similar to but even cruder than it, to the point that he made love of God (*maḥabbat Allāh*) a reprehensible innovation (*bidʿa*). He said, “Love is only for created beings (*makhluqīn*), and fear is better and more appropriate for us.” But it was not as [Ghulām Khalīl] imagined it; rather, love and fear are two of the foundations of faith (*aṣlān min uṣūl al-īmān*)—every believer has them, even if one or the other is stronger in some people rather than others.

Ghulām Khalīl continued spreading stories (*yaquṣṣu*) about [the Sufis] and mentioning them in his teaching sessions (*majālisihi*). He warned against them and goaded the sultan and the general population (*al-ʿamma*) against them, saying, “There are people in Basra who believe in incarnation (*ḥulūl*); others who engage in licentious behavior (*ibāḥa*); and some who believe in such and such,” in order to insinuate [certain things] and to incite [the people].

[This went on] to the point that, Ibn al-Aʿrābī said, it had spread in the mouths of the common people that he [Ghulām Khalīl] had mentioned heresy in association with a group of people from Baghdad. The *sayyida*, mother of al-Muwaffaq, had a liking for Ghulām Khalīl, and likewise the administration (*dawla*) and the people [liked him] for his renunciation (*zuhd*) and his physical austerities (*taqashshuf*).

She ordered the *muḥtasib* to obey Ghulām Khalīl, so he sought them [the Sufis] and sent out helpers to get them and write down their names. There were seventy-odd people; some disappeared, others the people let go—the story concerning this is long—and some were jailed for a time.

110. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, 13:282; al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh al-islām*, 20:277; Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Istighātha fī al-radd ʿalā al-Bakrī*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh b. Dujayn Sahlī (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan, 1997), 637.

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