

Dreams and Visions in Islamic Societies

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CHAPTER 2

Dreaming Ḥanbalites

Dream-Tales in
Prosopographical Dictionaries*Maxim Romanov*

In Islam, like in many religious traditions, dreams are part and parcel of spiritual life. For centuries, Muslims have taken their dreams seriously, especially those Muslims who belonged to different mystical trends that found their place under the dome of Islam.¹ Here, however, I address the dreams of the Ḥanbalites, a group that for decades has been almost unanimously treated by many students of Islam as the very opposite of Sufism. Nevertheless, despite their differences, the two groups share a fascination with dreams and make extensive use of them in their respective narratives. In fact, some local hagiographies show that a number of rural Ḥanbalī *shaykhs* were treated by their followers as *awliyā'* and miracle workers.² Moreover, even normative prosopographical Ḥanbalī sources are not devoid of what a Saudi editor of *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila* called *al-khurāfāt al-ṣūfiyya*, "Sufi superstitions."³ Examples from both hagiographic and normative sources indicate that it is the very nature of relationship between revered *shaykhs* and their popular following that eventually casts the former as saint guardians of their communities. In other words, being a leader of a popular community, a *shaykh* of any persuasion is very likely to become a local saint. Dreams seem to be one of the mechanisms of the communal process of sanctification. This might be a reason why not all of the dreams passed the above mentioned editor's test of "orthodoxy,"⁴ even though they are quite different from those of the Sufis, the alleged archenemies of the Ḥanbalites.

In what follows I address dreams found in the two major prosopographical dictionaries of the Ḥanbalī *madhhab* that cover roughly five centuries and include slightly more than twelve hundred biographies: *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila* ("Generations of Ḥanbalīs") of *qāḍī* Ibn Abī Yaʿlā (d. 527/1133) and *Dhayl ʿalā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila* ("Supplement to Generations of Ḥanbalīs") of Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1392).⁵ By prosopographical dictionaries, I mean biographical dictionaries in which each individual is presented as part of a particular group.⁶ As a scholar of Islamic historiography put it, "prosopographies make individuals members."⁷ Quite often, individuals in such sources possess no independent importance. The two sources in question contain a number of "biographies" with no biographical information whatsoever and in most cases these biographies are omitted from biographical dictionaries that are not confined to a particular factional group. One of the examples directly related to the topic of this chapter is the "biography" of Sulaymān b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Sijzī, one of Ibn Ḥanbal's companions.⁸ His "biography" consists entirely of a story of Ibn Ḥanbal's interaction with the caliph al-Muʿtaṣim during the *miḥna*, the infamous "inquisition."⁹ The significance of al-Sijzī—who most likely was a commoner¹⁰—lies in his role as transmitter of information about Ibn Ḥanbal.

Both prosopographical dictionaries contain 184 dream narratives with references to dreams and waking visions. Yet some of the dream-tales are repeated and occasionally may involve more than one dream. Overall, dream-tales and references to dreams are found in 95 of 1,259 biographies. Although not comprehensive, my analysis of these narratives has yielded the following results.

First, I address the role of a protagonist—and by protagonist here I mean a person about whom a biographical account is written—in a dream, which varies as follows: (a) he himself had a dream (37 dreams: ~20%); (b) he was seen, mentioned, or alluded to in a dream (127 dreams: ~70%); (c) he transmitted a dream (18 dreams: ~10%). Again, because of the complexity of many dream-tales, these numbers are approximate. Yet, the absolute majority of dreams—127 of 184—are "passive" dreams (i.e., those dreams in which protagonists are dreamt about). Ninety-eight dreams (53%) were seen after the death of the protagonists. What is interesting is that in 62 of 127 dreams, the dreamers are nameless. Most likely, this points to the fact that these dreamers were laity and not the part of the scholarly community. In some cases, especially for the first generation of the Ḥanbalites, even many named dreamers are laymen.¹¹

In biographical accounts, dreams are a part of an auxiliary section, which usually is found after main biographical blocks that include

name, genealogy, teachers, achievements, students, books, dicta, and death. A comment by Ibn Abī Ya‘lā suggests that dreams, especially “passive” ones, are one of the “excellent qualities” (*faḍā’il*).¹² That most dreams are not just a random entertaining element of biographies is supported by the fact that the number of dreams tends to grow together with the importance of a protagonist either for the history of Ḥanbalism in general, or for a particular author. In this respect, Ibn Abī Ya‘lā favored his father, *qāḍī* Abū Ya‘lā (d. 458/1066f),¹³ whose dream section includes six tales (largest after Ibn Ḥanbal); none of the other people in his generation has dream-tales. Ibn Rajab, on the other hand, seems to have favored two particular families—Banū Qudāma of Damascus¹⁴ and Banū Taymiyya of Ḥarrān. Moreover, there are several people who might have been included in these dictionaries solely because they transmitted certain dream-tales.¹⁵

Among 95 biographies with dream-related passages there are only 17 with three or more dreams, totaling 96 passages altogether. Most of these 17 *shaykhs* (the elders of the Ḥanbalī School) are famous Ḥanbalites. In chronological order they are: *imām* Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), Abū Bakr al-Marwadhī (d. 275/888f), ‘Alī b. al-Muwaffaq (d. 265/878f), Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815f), ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Ja‘far, known as Ghulām al-Khallāl (d. 363/973f), *qāḍī* Abū Ya‘lā (d.458/1066f), Abū Ja‘far (d. 470/1077f), Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 513/1119f), Ibn Hubayra (d. 560/1165f), Ibn al-Mannī (d. 583/1187f), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201),¹⁶ ‘Abd al-Ghanī b. Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 600/1203f), plus his brother and two of his sons, Abū ‘Umar b. Qudāma (d. 607/1210f),¹⁷ Fakhr al-Dīn b. Taymiyya (d. 622/1225f).¹⁸

Judging by the dreams found in the biographies of the *shaykhs* just listed, they seem to stress a particular kind of importance of the protagonists, namely, their influence over the rank-and-file members of the Ḥanbalite communities:¹⁹ There are 80 of 96 (83%) “passive” dreams and almost 50% of the dreamers are nameless, which, again, suggests that they did not belong to the ranks of Ḥanbalite scholars.

Based exclusively on the materials of these two sources, the significance of dreams is supported by several passages. First of all, the state of sleep is similar to that of death (Qur’ān 39:42), the ultimate experience during which a believer is taken to the presence of God. The importance of the contemplation of death and resurrection, in this regard, is difficult to overemphasize, especially in the context of admonishing preaching (*wa‘z*) particularly prominent among the Ḥanbalites.

Furthermore, the importance of dreams is confirmed by a number of sayings of the Prophet with which Ibn Abī Ya‘lā begins the

section on dreams in the biography of his father, *qāḍī* Abū Yaʿlā (d. 458/1066f).²⁰ Thus, the dream of a believer is the way God speaks to his servant and, even though prophecy has ended with the prophet Muḥammad, it is in dreams that a believer can receive good tidings from God. In one *ḥadīth* the Prophet also says: "Whoever has seen me in a dream, has seen me in reality, for the Devil does not impersonate me!" Ibn Abī Yaʿlā concludes his "theoretical" introduction with a saying of Ibn Sīrīn: "Whatever a deceased person tells you in a dream is true, for he is in the Abode of Truth."²¹ This statement of Ibn Sīrīn is very important, especially because the prevailing majority of dreams are those in which protagonists are seen by other people, often posthumously.

The last point in this section is that Ibn Ḥanbal himself seems to have been very appreciative of dreams and even bade his companions to transmit a story that happened to one of his followers. During one of Ibn Ḥanbal's gatherings, a man from his neighborhood came to talk to him, but because he was known for sinful behavior, Ibn Ḥanbal refused. The man begged him to listen to a dream he had had, so eventually Ibn Ḥanbal agreed. As the story goes, the man saw the Prophet surrounded by many people, each of them would get up, approach the Prophet and ask him to pray for him or her, and the Prophet would pray for each of them. In the end, the dreamer found himself the only one left, realizing that he was too ashamed because of his sins. Yet the Prophet said: "I will pray for you, for you do not curse any of my followers." The man later woke up realizing that this intercession had occurred despite his transgressions. Upon hearing this, Ibn Ḥanbal instructed his companions to transmit this story and make sure that it be remembered, for it is beneficial.²²

This dream-tale takes us to the next important issue: the social consequences of dreams. Although it might be argued that dreams are personal, many of these dreams had far-reaching consequences both for those who saw them and those whom they concerned. Occasionally, dreams may have detrimental consequences for those seen in them. Thus, some Baghdādī commoner dreamt of the Prophet, who told him that if it were not for *shaykh* Ibn Salāma al-Qurashī (d. 592/1195f), they all would have been in trouble. This dream set off a public agitation in which the *shaykh* found himself startled by crowds of people who grabbed him and started throwing him into the air, while praising him. The shocked *shaykh* could only whisper: "I seek refuge with God from this misfortune! . . . What is [wrong] with these people?"²³

Fear of interrupting someone's dream can influence someone's actions. Thus, *shaykh* Ibn Samʿūn (d. 387/997f) was so appreciative

of the elevated status of dreaming that when one of his companions fell asleep during his admonition session, he did not wake him up. Afraid to interrupt his companion's possible communication with the Prophet, Ibn Sam'ūn suspended his session until his companion woke up. It turned out that his companion did indeed see the Prophet in his dream.²⁴

Seeing God in one's dream must have been a significant proof to others of the elevated status of a dreamer. Thus, a famous Baghdadī preacher, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), saw God in his dreams three times. Nonetheless, scholars continued to criticize Ibn al-Jawzī, which was somewhat confusing to Ibn Rajab; he seems to have considered these dreams a sufficient proof of Ibn al-Jawzī's correctness.²⁵

Aside from these somewhat random but interesting examples, we find that some dreamers were compelled to travel long distances in order to deliver a message. Salama b. Shabīb said:

We were sitting at Ibn Ḥanbal[’s house] when . . . some man came in, greeted [everyone] and asked: “Which one of you is Aḥmad?” Some of us pointed to him. The man said: “I have come from a long way of 1,200 miles over the sea [because] someone appeared to me in my dream and told me: ‘Go to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal[’s home]. Ask for him and you will be pointed to him. Tell him: “God, the angels of His heavens and the angels of His earth are pleased with you!”’ Thus said, he left without asking him about any *ḥadīth* or legal issue.²⁶

Abū Bakr al-Marwadhī transmitted a similar story in which a visitor tells Ibn Ḥanbal that the angels vie with him in piety.²⁷

We also find that some dreamers were compelled to repent of their behavior. For example, Ṣadaqa al-Maqāribī, who had harbored a grudge against Ibn Ḥanbal, saw in his dream the Prophet walking with Ibn Ḥanbal. Ṣadaqa tried to catch up with them but failed. After his resentment of Ibn Ḥanbal was gone, he saw the same dream again and almost succeeded in catching up with them. After this second dream he started telling people that they should follow Ibn Ḥanbal.²⁸ Quite often, dreamers are told to correct their attitudes if they care about their own salvation. There also is a number of dreams in which dreamers are reprimanded for their ill feeling toward protagonists.

Some dreamers change their religious views, but very often the dream itself is followed by some kind of interaction with a person seen or referred to in the dream without which the dream-tale is never

complete. This real-life situation confirms the veracity of a dream and concludes a person's conversion. Quite often, the protagonist is aware of an antagonist's dream (this miraculous awareness is a recurring motif). One of these examples is a dream-tale about Ibn Ḥanbal and the caliph al-Mu'ṭaṣim bi'llāh (r. 218–27/833–42) that took place during the *miḥna* and ended with the caliph's acceptance of the doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān. Al-Mu'ṭaṣim saw a dream (*ru'yā*) in which two lions attempted to tear him apart but two angels protected him. The angels handed him a letter with a description of a dream that Ibn Ḥanbal saw in his prison cell. In the morning, the Caliph summoned Ibn Ḥanbal so that he could tell him what he saw. Ibn Ḥanbal leaned toward the Caliph and asked him in a quiet voice whether he had the letter. The Caliph responded in the affirmative and said that he wanted to hear Ibn Ḥanbal's version. As the story goes, Ibn Ḥanbal says that he saw himself on the Day of Judgment among other creatures. He was summoned before God Almighty and questioned:

- What is the Qur'ān?—another question followed.
- Your speech, O our God,—he said.
- Where did you take it from?—God asked.
- O Lord, 'Abd al-Razzāq informed me,—Ibn Ḥanbal said.

Summoned and questioned in the very same manner, 'Abd al-Razzāq says that he was informed by Mu'ṭammar. Thus everyone and everything in the chain of transmitters is questioned—al-Zuhri, 'Urwa, 'Ā'isha, Muḥammad, Jibrīl, Isrāfil, the Well-preserved Tablet, and the Pen. When God asks the Pen, it responds: "As You spoke, I recorded." God then affirms the veracity of everyone in the chain and concludes with saying "Truth you said, O Ibn Ḥanbal. My speech is not created (*kalāmī ghayr makhluq*)." Upon hearing that, the Caliph repented, honored Ibn Ḥanbal, and ordered him to be brought back home.²⁹

Another dramatic story describes the conversion from Shāfi'ism to Ḥanbalism of Muḥammad b. Nāṣir (d. 550/1155f), the principal teacher of Ibn al-Jawzī. The story starts with Muḥammad b. Nāṣir saying that he had studied at the Nizāmiyya Madrasa long enough to absorb the Shāfi'ī teaching, yet he kept pleading God to admit him to the legal and theological school most beloved to Him:

[Muḥammad b. Nāṣir said]: And when it was the first night of Rajab of the year 494, I saw in a dream as if I entered the mosque of the *shaykh* Abū Manṣūr al-Khayyāf. People crowded in front of the gate [to the mosque] and they

were saying that the Prophet [came to visit] the *shaykh* Abū Maṣṣūr. I entered the mosque and saw . . . *shaykh* Abū Maṣṣūr as he went out of his corner and sat in front of some man. I had never seen anyone more handsome than him [and who looked so close to the] descriptions of the Prophet which were transmitted to us . . . I entered and greeted them. [One of them] returned the greetings, but I was not sure exactly who responded to me because of my astonishment at seeing the Prophet. I sat in front of them and inclined towards the Prophet not asking about anything, not even trying to say anything. Then [the Prophet] told me [three times]: "Hold fast to the school of this *shaykh*!" [Muḥammad b. Nāṣir] said: I swear by God thrice . . . that the Messenger of God told me that three times, each time pointing with his right hand towards the *shaykh* Abū Maṣṣūr. [Muḥammad b. Nāṣir] said: I woke up, my limbs were trembling. I called my mother . . . and told her about what I saw. She told me: ". . . This dream is a revelation [for you], follow it!"

I woke up in the morning and I hurried to [perform the] prayer behind *shaykh* Abū Maṣṣūr. We finished the morning prayer, and as I was telling him my dream, his eyes filled with tears, his heart humbled, and he told me: "Oh my dear son, the school of al-Shāfi'ī is a good [school], so follow it in legal rulings (*al-furū'*), and follow the school of Aḥmad and the people of Tradition (*aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*) in legal principles (*al-uṣūl*)." I responded to him: "Oh my master, I do not want to be of two colors. God, His angels and His prophets are my witnesses [in that] I declare to you that from this day on I will not rely in my belief and practice on any school except for that of Aḥmad in both legal principles and legal rulings." The *shaykh* Abū Maṣṣūr kissed my head [and added]: "May God help you." I kissed his hand [in return].³⁰

However, in order to dream one has to sleep, and this is where we come across the ambivalent status of sleep in general. The Ḥanbali community was founded around pious conduct and "mild" asceticism, as Hurvitz characterized it.³¹ Yet a number of *shaykhs* are reported to have actively abstained from sleep.³² Ibn Bashshār (d. 313/925) is reported to have said: "If there is no way you can longer abstain from food or sleep, then sleep as if you were taking a light nap, and eat as if you were sick [and had no appetite]."³³ Qaḍī Abū Ya'qūb used to

divide his night into three parts: one part for sleep, another one—for devotion, yet another one—for writing about the permissible and the forbidden.³⁴ Yet another *shaykh* used sleep (*nawm*) and forgetfulness of God and His commands (*ghafla*) as synonyms.³⁵

The most interesting examples, however, are found in the biography of the traditionist ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī (d. 600/1203): He would take only one short nap in the night, but most often he would pray straight till the sunrise.³⁶ Despite such an attitude toward sleep, there are eleven dreams (~6% of all dream-tales) in his biography, which Ibn Rajab uses to confirm his elevated spiritual status. In all of these dreams, however, the *shaykh* is not the dreamer but the one who is dreamt about; in a case like this, these “passive” dreams seem a convenient device.

Except for a few instances, the dreams just examined can be divided into three major categories: posthumous ($n=117$), affirmative ($n=35$), and informative ($n=27$). Because there often are two perspectives in a dream—that of a dreamer and that of the one who is seen in a dream—the same dream may fall into two different categories. Besides, some dream-tales may contain two dreams, so, this division is approximate, yet it is precise enough to present a general picture. According to this morphological pattern, each category also may be divided into subgroups.

Posthumous Dreams

This most prominent category comprises dreams in which a person was seen by somebody else shortly after the death of the former. These dreams must have served as an additional confirmation to the community of the professional achievements and elevated spiritual status of the deceased. Our analysis has yielded the following subsets of the posthumous dreams.

- *Mā fa‘ala ‘Ilāh bi-ka*: What has God done to you?

MORPHOLOGICAL PATTERN: Someone, often nameless, sees himself in some place. He or she sees a protagonist in their dream; the dreamer asks the protagonist: “What did God do to you?”; in most cases the protagonist responds: “He forgave me and granted me Paradise”; his response is often followed by various details.

THEMES: Salvation, reward, afterlife, doctrine, intercession.

In many cases, dreamers are given interesting details about what God has granted his servants. Some are granted houses, sometimes with houries; others enjoy the company of angels who serve them; yet others are granted divine permission to continue doing what they did in this life (teaching *ḥadīth*, preaching, reading countless books, etc.), or to do what they desired most of all (e.g., being in the presence of God).³⁷

Sometimes protagonists tell dreamers exactly why they were forgiven and, hence, why some things are important and others are not. Thus, one person barely received God's forgiveness because of his interest in speculative theology (*kalām*). Another was reprimanded by God for transmitting *ḥadīths* from weak reporters only to be forgiven in the end. Often in such dreams traditionalist doctrines are voiced.

‘Alī b. al-Muwaffaq said: I had a Zoroastrian neighbor, named Shāhriyār. I used to offer him [to accept] Islam saying that we follow the right path. Yet, he died confessing Zoroastrianism. I saw him in a dream and asked: "What is the news?" He replied: "Our people are at the bottom of Hell." I asked: "Are there any other people below you?" He replied: "Some of your people." I asked: "From what group of ours?" "[They are those] who believe in the createdness of the Qur’ān," he replied.³⁸

Dreamers also try to learn about the afterlife, for instance whether the dreamer's relatives are saved, what other famous Muslims are in Paradise and how they spend their time there, how painful the tortures of the grave are, etc. Sometimes dreamers find out from the deceased that they were forgiven due to the protagonist's intercession. Thus, a dreamer saw some righteous man after his death who told him that he had been forgiven because of his love for Ibn Ḥanbal. According to another dream-tale,³⁹ the funeral procession of a sinner passed by Ibn Ḥanbal's gathering. The *imām* suggested that they pray for him so that God may forgive his transgressions; the next day some pious woman told Ibn Ḥanbal that she saw that man in a dream. The man told her that as soon as Ibn Ḥanbal had prayed for him, God forgave him his sins. Another dream recounts that Ibn Ḥanbal saved some of those next to whom he was buried from the tortures of the grave.⁴⁰ Some Khurāsānī man, who came to Baghdad to visit Ghulām al-Khallāl's tomb, did so because the Prophet told him in his dream that whoever visits Ghulām al-Khallāl's tomb would be forgiven.⁴¹

All these dreams confirm the protagonists' elevated spiritual status. Very close to this category is a subset of 12 instances in which the authors limited themselves to saying that so-and-so was seen in many good dreams (*TOPOS: ru'iyat lahu manāmāt ṣāliḥa kathīra*).

- On the verge of the protagonist's death (more than ten instances)

MORPHOLOGICAL PATTERN: A dreamer sees (or hears) someone, often unidentifiable; the visitor says that so-and-so passed away; very often, however, the visitor will say some enigmatic phrase or verse of poetry that does not make much sense until the dreamer wakes up and hears about the protagonist's death, hence realizing the true nature of the dream.

THEMES: Prediction, announcement.

Muḥammad b. al-Musabbih heard in his dream that this night Ibn Ḥanbal died and that he should mourn him; several days later he received a letter saying that on that night *qādī* Abū Ya'la died.⁴² Occasionally, these enigmatic announcements are in poetry. So, on the night of Ibn al-Jawzī's death some man dreamt of someone reciting: "By your life, the pulpit has become deserted. And it has become so hard for people to get answers." Later in the afternoon he found out that Ibn al-Jawzī died and realized that this dream was about him.⁴³

Fakhr al-Dīn b. Taymiyya's wife saw some garden-like place, where people were building a tall castle. Two exceptionally beautiful women, who turned out to be houries, told her that this was done for Fakhr. The doors of the castle were closed, however. A month before her husband's death, she saw the same dream again, but this time the doors were open.⁴⁴

Occasionally, protagonists themselves see dreams similar to those just described.

- Visiting a deceased (more than five instances)

MORPHOLOGICAL PATTERN: A dreamer sees someone or a group (the Prophet, some religious authorities, angels) either sitting in the local mosque or heading toward the protagonist's town; he then finds out that they came to pay respects to the protagonist.

THEMES: Funeral and tomb visitation.

One Sufi, Saʿūd al-Ḥabashī, missed the funeral prayer for the deceased *qāḍī* Abū Yaʿlā, which made him very upset. Sometime later he was approached by some unnamed *shaykh* who said that he saw the Prophet accompanied by his Companions. They came from Madina to Baghdad—to the al-Zūzanī cloister, across the Cathedral Mosque of al-Manṣūr—to pay their respects to *qāḍī* Abū Yaʿlā.⁴⁵ In another story, the Prophet and the archangel Jibrīl came to Ḥarrān to pay respects to Fakhr al-Dīn b. Taymiyya.⁴⁶

Sometimes, a dreamer himself performs visitation. Thus, one Ṣanīʿat al-Mulḳ Hibat Allāh b. ʿAlī b. Ḥaydara was on his way to pray for ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī and stumbled upon a certain Maghribī man. He tagged along and told Ṣanīʿat al-Mulḳ that he was a stranger there but that last night he saw in his dream a wide place with a great number of people wearing shiny white garments. He was told that these were angels who had descended from Heavens to pray for ʿAbd al-Ghanī. When he asked how he could find ʿAbd al-Ghanī, he was instructed to wait outside the Cathedral Mosque for a man named Ṣanīʿat al-Mulḳ and then follow him.⁴⁷

Affirmative Dreams

Affirmative dreams are those in which a protagonist receives some message that can be regarded as a confirmation of his lofty spiritual status and religious knowledge. Sometimes this message arrives directly to a protagonist in his own dream, sometimes this confirmation comes indirectly, often via a commoner who tells the protagonist about a dream he or she had about him.

- Direct affirmation (more than 10 instances)

MORPHOLOGICAL PATTERN: Sometimes a dream is preceded by the protagonist's request to see it; the protagonist sees God or some Muslim luminaries; occasionally those seen say something affirmative, but often the protagonist simply enjoys their company; in case of seeing God, the entire dream-tale is often limited to the slight variations of the phrase "I saw the Lord of Majesty in a dream."

THEMES: Confirmation of the protagonist's lifetime status and knowledge.

While in the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, ʿAlī b. [al-]Muwaffaq invoked God: "How long will You be rejecting me? How long will You

be exhausting me? Take me to Yourself and give me some rest!" That night, when he fell asleep, God revealed Himself in a dream and invited 'Alī to His abode.⁴⁸ When al-Nāṣih b. al-Ḥanbalī (d.634/1236f) finished one of his books, he dreamt of the Prophet who greeted him, which he took as a sign of approval.⁴⁹ Another *shaykh* saw the Prophet who brought him good news that he would pass away in accordance with the Sunna.⁵⁰ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya saw Ibn Taymiyya who told him that he had almost reached the elevated status of *shaykhs* like himself.⁵¹

Sometimes protagonists ask directly for confirmation of their knowledge. Ibn Ḥanbal is reported to have seen the Messenger of God in his dream. "Is everything that Abū Hurayra transmitted from you true?" he asked the Prophet. "Yes," responded the Prophet.⁵² Quite often, however, these encounters are just mentioned without any details on what actually happened.⁵³

Occasionally, these dreams bring some kind of relief to dreamers. A mystically minded protagonist was terrified of the caliph for some reason; in his dream he was told to write down some verses that turned out to be a message for him not to be afraid.⁵⁴ Ṭalḥa b. Muẓaffar al-'Althī accompanied his *shaykh* to a high-ranking official. During the audience there were sweets, but none were offered to them. Consequently, his base soul passionately desired them. Later that night, when he was asleep, sweets were brought to him in a dream and he ate his fill. When he woke up, his base soul no longer had any desire for them.⁵⁵ Another dream-tale about 'Alī b. [al-]Muwaffaq tells us that he used to make the *hajj* in a palanquin (*maḥmal*) for years, but once he saw a group of men who were travelling on foot and desired to join them in their endeavor. Exhausted, he was dreaming the following night and saw some slave girls with golden basins and silver vessels who washed his feet. He woke up with no traces of exhaustion.⁵⁶

- Indirect affirmation (more than ten instances)

MORPHOLOGICAL PATTERN: Someone has a dream that somehow emphasizes the protagonist's elevated spiritual status; the dreamer may have had something against the protagonist that provoked the dream, in which case the dream is followed by the dreamer's repentance; a whole set of dream-tales ends with the dreamer's telling his or her dream to the protagonist or the community as a whole.

THEMES: Confirmation of the protagonist's status and knowledge; intercession.

Depending on the perspective, these dreams can be treated either as affirmative—for the protagonists—or as pivotal—for the dreamers (for pivotal dreams, see later), who sometimes have to suffer considerable difficulties to deliver a message to the protagonist.

Dreamers may be told to hold fast on to the protagonist in matters of religion. In the same dreams they are told to communicate a message to the protagonist. I have already mentioned the story of an anonymous man who traveled about twelve hundred miles across the sea to deliver a message to Ibn Ḥanbal.⁵⁷ In another story, *shaykh* ʿImād al-Dīn's wife was told to give her husband a message that he is one of the seven on whom the earth rests.⁵⁸

Occasionally, the dreamer may see a dream in which she or he finds out that the protagonist is a local guardian saint. Thus, a brother of Abū ʿl-Ḥasan al-Zāghūnī (d. 527/1132f) saw three angels in a dream discussing whether to destroy Baghdad. Eventually, they decided against it. One of them said: “[We cannot do this] because there are three [pious individuals in Baghdad]: Abū ʿl-Ḥasan b. al-Zāghūnī, Aḥmad b. al-Ṭilāya and Muḥammad b. *fulān*⁵⁹ in al-Ḥarbiyya.”⁶⁰

Another interesting dream-tale concerning intercession is that of Abū Saʿd b. Abī ʿUmāma al-Wāʿiẓ (d. 506/1112f). Ibn al-Jawzī transmitted a dream that was seen at the time of a quarrel between the Caliph al-Mustarshid biʿllāh (r. 512–29/1118–35) and the Saljūq *sultān* Maḥmūd (r. 511–25/1118–31).⁶¹ In that dream Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal prayed for the Caliph, which helped him to get the upper hand in the quarrel.⁶² What is interesting about this dream is that it demonstrates a fundamental change in the overall attitude of the Ḥanbalī community toward the ʿAbbāsids.

Sometimes dreamers see dreams about protagonists whom they do not like. In these dreams someone often intercedes for the protagonist, leaving the dreamer ashamed of his or her behavior.⁶³ Thus, Abū ʿl-Faṭḥ al-Qawwās (d. 385/995f) was at a *ḥadīth* study group of *qāḍī* al-Muḥāmīlī, but he could not hear well, so he got up and squeezed himself between others to get closer to the *shaykh*. The next day, an unnamed man approached him and asked for forgiveness. It happened that he had reproached the protagonist for doing what he did. He then saw the Prophet in his dream telling him that whoever wants to study *ḥadīth* as if from himself, must do as Abū ʿl-Faṭḥ al-Qawwās does.⁶⁴

Dreamers also may see what fate awaits those who hate pious men. Thus, Saʿd Allāh al-Baṣrī saw Marjān al-Khādim (d. 560/1165)⁶⁵ escorted by two angels—each one of them was holding him by the hand. Saʿd Allāh asked: “Where are you taking him?” “To the Hellfire, [because] he hated Ibn al-Jawzī,” replied the angels.⁶⁶

Sometimes the Prophet sends a dreamer to the protagonist to obtain answers to the questions he may have,⁶⁷ or to become the protagonist's apprentice, as in the quoted dream-tale about Ibn Nāṣir's conversion to Ḥanbalism.⁶⁸ It is interesting that in the early period the Prophet usually answers the questions of dreamers himself, whereas in the subsequent centuries he delegates this function to the *shaykhs* whose memory is still alive among a given community.

Informative Dreams

Informative dreams are the most diverse, yet their common feature is that dreamers receive some kind of message. Sometimes these messages do not imply any radical, socially tangible consequences.⁶⁹ However, sometimes—in the case of pivotal dreams—they are so important that they become turning points in the lives of protagonists. Occasionally, forthcoming events are predicted.

- Pivotal dreams (about ten instances)

MORPHOLOGICAL PATTERN: A protagonist does something that provokes a dream; he is told to change his life; he also may be reprimanded for what he has done.

THEMES: Bidding, reprimand.

Unlike the indirect affirmative dreams in which the dreamer and the protagonist are different people, in these pivotal dreams it is the protagonist who sees a dream. The protagonist may be told to do something. Thus, the Prophet may tell a protagonist to perform a *hajj*,⁷⁰ or give his son another first name.⁷¹ On other occasions, the protagonist is forbidden from doing something, as in the case of Yazīd b. Hārūn whom God forbade to transmit *ḥadīth* from Ḥurayz b. ʿUthmān, because he used to curse ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. Protagonists also may get warnings directly from the Almighty.⁷² Thus, al-Faṭḥ b. Shukhruf saw God who told him: "Oh Faṭḥ, beware lest I catch you neglectful!" Following that dream, al-Faṭḥ b. Shukhruf spent seven years living in seclusion in the mountains.⁷³

Protagonists may be reprimanded for their arrogance. During his last standing at the Mount ʿArafāt, ʿAlī b. [al-]Muwaffaq asked God to bestow his promised reward for performing the *hajj* upon anyone whose pilgrimage had not been accepted. The following night,

he saw God saying: "O 'Alī b. Muwaffaq, you aren't vying with Me in generosity, are you?! For I have already forgiven [them all]."⁷⁴ In another dream-tale, after hearing about the sack of Baghdad, Ibn al-Baqqāl al-Ṣūfī condemned this tragedy in his heart and pleaded to God: "Oh Lord, how could this have happened? There were children, there were sinless!" Later in a dream he received a letter saying that he had no right to question God's deeds.⁷⁵

- Predicting the future (fewer than five instances)

MORPHOLOGICAL PATTERN: The protagonist sees someone who delivers a message about the future or some mystery.

THEMES: Prediction, mystery unveiling.

One person saw al-Khiḍr who informed him that he had ten years left to live; he died after nine, however.⁷⁶ Another one was informed about the failures and the eventual success of Asad al-Dīn Shīrkūh's conquest of Egypt.⁷⁷ Yet another one received a prediction of 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī's forthcoming exile to Egypt.⁷⁸ Likewise, it was revealed to Ibn al-Jawzī that the *wazīr* Ibn Hubayra had not died a natural death but was poisoned by his physician.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Fred Donner wrote that "personality in the characters that populate the Qur'ān's narrations are bleached out, because its focus on morality is so intense. The only judgment about a person that really matters, in the Qur'ānic view, is whether he or she is good or evil, and most characters presented in the Qur'ānic narratives fall squarely on one side or other of that great divide."⁸⁰ Ideal pietists in the Qur'ān are equally righteous throughout their lives from the day they were born until the day they died. This didactic "dehumanization" seems to have had a profound effect on Arabic biographers and prosopographers, especially in the cases of key figures. However, unlike the Qur'ānic prophets, scholars depicted in biographical dictionaries are far too humane, far too much like the other people of their communities. In this case, dreams appear to be a potent device to perfect their images. The bulk of dreams—posthumous and affirmative—in these Ḥanbalī prosopographical sources require no interpretation. They are clear-cut and straightforward; their main function is to affirm the protagonist's

status. As to the posthumous dreams, they are designed to provide the ultimate proof of the protagonist's righteousness. Such a proof is undisputable because it comes directly from the Abode of Truth.

This may explain the relative insignificance of the pivotal dreams in so far as they explain changes in the protagonists' status. Thus, purposefully or not, Ibn Rajab placed the story of Muḥammad b. Nāṣir's conversion to Ḥanbalism in the biographical account of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Khayyāt, the *shaykh* whom Muḥammad b. Nāṣir saw in a dream and was commanded to follow. In all other sources I could find this narrative, it is placed in Muḥammad b. Nāṣir's own biography.⁸¹ Using a pivotal dream as an indirect affirmative one allowed Ibn Rajab to emphasize the loftiness of Abū Maṣṣūr's status. Were he to use it in Muḥammad b. Nāṣir's biography, the effect would have been different.

There is a certain amount of dream-tales that elude our classification. However, the majority fits into the proposed morphological patterns. Even when it comes to nonclassified dreams, they are still composed of topoi that are found in the ones classified here. The fact that the number of these classificatory patterns is quite limited suggests a conscious effort of dream selection based on the dreams' effectiveness for the purpose of perfecting and solidifying the protagonists' status. On the other hand, sharing posthumous dreams about a respected *shaykh* also could have been a way for the commoners to show their respect to the deceased. This practice of popular spontaneous sanctification is still alive: the day after the great Egyptian preacher 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk died in 1996, a large crowd gathered to pay respects to the "star of Islamic preaching." "One man exclaimed that the night before he had had a dream in which he had seen Kishk being escorted up to heaven by a group of angels."⁸²

Notes

1. For the role of dreams in Sufi tradition, see Part II in this volume.
2. See Daniella Talmon-Heller, "The Shaykh and the Community: Popular Hanbalite Islam in 12th–13th Century Jabal Nāblus and Jabal Qasyūn," *Studia Islamica*, no. 79 (1994), 103–20.
3. Note 2 in *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 222. This three-volume edition of *Ṭabaqāt* was prepared for the one hundredth anniversary of the Saudi Kingdom. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Sulaymān al-ʿUthaymīn's extensive commentary easily could have taken the entire volume if printed separately. A good share of this commentary is devoted to explaining away a great number of un-Ḥanbalī

elements that Ibn Abī Yaʿlā—to the editor's bewilderment—included in his dictionary of the Ḥanbalites.

4. See, e.g., note 1 in *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 406.

5. Henceforth, the following abbreviations will be used: *Ṭabaqāt* for Abū al-Ḥusayn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, ed. Dr. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Sulaymān al-ʿUthaymīn, three volumes. ([Riyadh]: al-Mamlaka al-ʿArabiyya al-Saʿūdiyya, al-Amāna al-ʿĀmma lil-Ḥtifāl bi-Murūr Miʿāt ʿĀm ʿalā Taʿsis al-Mamlaka, 1999), and *Dhayl* for ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Aḥmad Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl ʿalā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamid Fāqī, vol. 2 ([Cairo]: Maṭbaʿat al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, 1952).

6. See Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, Themes in Islamic History (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xxv.

7. *Ibid.*, 66.

8. *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 437–43.

9. This “inquisition” was the last attempt of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs to keep the religious affairs under their control. Initiating *miḥna*, the Caliph al-Maʿmūn acted as a proponent of speculative theology and directed his wrath against the traditionalists who despised both the premises and conclusions of speculative theology. A great number of renowned scholars have offered their interpretations of this indisputably crucial event thus making it one of the most complicated issues in Islamic historiography. Major interpretations were elegantly reviewed and analyzed by John Nawas in two articles (see, John A. Nawas, “A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for Al-Maʿmūn’s Introduction of the Miḥna,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 4 (1994); *idem*, “The Miḥna of 218 A. H./833 A. D. Revisited: An Empirical Study,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 4 (1996).

10. The editor of *Ṭabaqāt* provides a useful note with references to five sources where the details on him can be found. However, all of them are Ḥanbalite sources, and, apparently none of them provides details on when al-Sijzī was born or died (cf. Bakr ibn ʿAbd Allāh Abū Zayd, ʿUlamāʾ al-Ḥanābila: *Min al-Imām Aḥmad al-Mutawaffā Sanat 241 Ilā Wafayāt ʿām 1420*, 1st ed. [al-Dammām: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1422 A.H., 2001], #141). Searching electronic libraries of Arabic sources, *al-Muʿjam al-Fiqhī (al-Mojam)* and *Maktabat al-Taʾrikh wa-l-Ḥaḍāra al-Islāmiyya*, I could not find al-Sijzī in any source whatsoever.

11. See, for instance, the editor’s note 1 in *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 223. The editor was not able to locate their biographies in other dictionaries, neither did I searching electronic libraries. About the popular character of the nascent Ḥanbalite community see Nimrod Hurvitz, *The Formation of Ḥanbalism: Piety into Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

12. At the end of a pretty short dream-tales section in Ibn Ḥanbal’s biography, Ibn Abī Yaʿlā writes: “Were we to continue mentioning his excellent qualities and dreams that [were seen] after his death, that would have made the book [very] long; besides it was not our intent to [dwell on] his excellent qualities [here], for we wanted to mention those who transmitted from him. So, whoever wants to look into his excellent qualities let him look into

our book *al-Mujarrad* [fī *manāqib al-imām Aḥmad*, which is] about his excellent qualities" (*Ṭabaqāt*, i, 42). Ibn al-Bannā³ (d. 471/1079) is said to have collected a book of dreams in which Ibn Ḥanbal appeared (*Dhayl*, i, 35).

13. 'f' here means that this is the year of the Gregorian calendar when a Hijrī year started, yet the exact date may fall on the following Gregorian year as well.

14. On some *shaykhs* of this family, see Talmon-Heller, "The Shaykh and the Community: Popular Hanbalite Islam in 12th–13th Century Jabal Nāblus and Jabal Qasyūn," 103–20.

15. E.g., *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 337, 437.

16. Ibn al-Jawzī is also a transmitter of a significant number of dreams in *Dhayl*.

17. A brother of Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223).

18. An uncle of Taqī l-Dīn b. Taymiyya (d. 738/1328).

19. This list of seventeen *shaykhs* with more than three dream-tales differs remarkably from the one found in Laoust's *Ḥanābila* (EI²) which is apparently based on the significance of the written output. On the other hand, all Ḥanbalites from Laoust's article that can be found in Ibn Abī Ya'īlā and Ibn Rajab's works have at least one dream related story in their biographical accounts, often posthumous one.

20. *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 403f.

21. Another story gives us an example of how a nephew, while being between asleep and awake, eavesdropped his uncle's communication with the divine (*Dhayl*, i, 381).

22. *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 338–39. This story and Ibn Ḥanbal's bidding is also a good example of how traditionalists (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) were extending their *ḥadīth*-based worldview by adding piously beneficial precedents to their repository of traditions.

23. *Dhayl*, i, 385.

24. *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 227.

25. *Dhayl*, i, 414.

26. *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 40. For more details on this morphological pattern, see the category of affirmative dreams (indirect affirmation).

27. *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 151.

28. *Ibid.*, 30.

29. *Ibid.*, i, 440–43, this story is found only in the Ḥanbalite sources.

30. *Dhayl*, i, 98–99.

31. Nimrod Hurvitz, "Biographies and Mild Asceticism: A Study of Islamic Moral Imagination," *Studia Islamica*, no. 85 (1997): 41–65.

32. The editor of *Ṭabaqāt* added critical comments to almost all of these instances.

33. *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 118; cf. *ibid.*, iii, 322.

34. *Ibid.*, 361.

35. *Dhayl*, ii, 70.

36. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

37. *Ṭabaqāt*, ii, 145. There are two other dream-tales, however, in which Bishr b. al-Ḥārith takes the place of Ma^ʿrūf al-Karkhī (*Ṭabaqāt*, ii, 85; *Dhayl*, i, 138).

38. *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 130.

39. *Ibid.*, iii, 110.

40. *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 41; cf. *Ibid.*, i, 42; *Dhayl*, i, 139.

41. *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 223; cf. *Ibid.*, i, 60; 159.

42. *Ibid.*, iii, 410.

43. *Dhayl*, i, 429; cf. *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 408, 463; *Dhayl*, i, 288; ii, 280.

44. *Ibid.*, ii, 160–61.

45. *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 403–406.

46. *Dhayl*, ii, 160.

47. *Ibid.*, 31.

48. *Ṭabaqāt*, ii, 143–44.

49. *Dhayl*, ii, 199.

50. *Ibid.*, 263.

51. *Ibid.*, 450–51.

52. *Ṭabaqāt*, ii, 357.

53. *Dhayl*, i, 276, 277, 429; ii, 17.

54. *Ibid.*, i, 303.

55. *Ibid.*, 390.

56. *Ibid.*, ii, 146.

57. This dream-tale seems archetypal; one can find other versions of this dream-tale in Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdad Aw Madīnat al-Salām*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā and Muḥammad ʿAlī Bayḍūn, 1st ed., 14 vols. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya [Electronic Database *al-Muʿjam al-Fiqhī*, 3rd ed., 2001, Qumm], 1996), v, 186 and ʿAlī b. al-Ḥasan Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, ed. ʿAlī Shīrī, 70 vols. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr [Electronic Database *al-Muʿjam al-Fiqhī*, 3rd ed., 2001, Qumm], 1995), v, 315–17. The latter has three versions so that the second is more detailed than the first, and the third is more detailed than the second; in the last two versions it was al-Khiḍr who sent the dreamer on the journey to Ibn Ḥanbal.

58. *Dhayl*, ii, 103.

59. Dreamer forgetting names of one or two of three people he was told about in his dream appears to be one of the dream-tales topoi.

60. *Dhayl*, i, 181; cf. *Ibid.*, i, 8.

61. On their mixed relationships, see Hillenbrand's *al-Mustarshid bi'llāh* (EI²), Bosworth's *Maḥmūd B. Muḥammad B. Malik-shāh* (EI²) and Eric J. Hanne, *Putting the Caliph in His Place: Power, Authority, and the Late Abbasid Caliphate* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007).

62. *Dhayl*, i, 109–10.

63. As one of the examples, see the dream-tale of Ṣadaqa al-Maqāribī above.

64. *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 254; cf. *Dhayl*, i, 17, 29.

65. This Shāfi'ite swore an oath to exterminate the Ḥanbalites, see Abū 'l-Faraj 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Alī Ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Muntazam Fī Ta'rikh al-Mulūk wa-l-Umam (Min 257 A.H.)*, 1st ed., 6 vols. (Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir [Electronic Library *Maktabat al-Ta'rikh wa-l-Ḥadāra al-Islāmiyya*. Version. 1.5 by al-Turāth, Jordan], 1995), x, 213–14.
66. *Dhayl*, i, 429–30.
67. E.g., *Ṭabaqāt*, iii, 218–20.
68. See also *Dhayl*, i, 293.
69. There is a number of dreams in which the Prophet reiterates that the community must follow Ibn Ḥanbal and his school, e.g., *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 8; *Dhayl*, i, 136.
70. E.g., *Ṭabaqāt*, ii, 5; *Dhayl*, ii, 305.
71. *Ibid.*, 70.
72. *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 445.
73. *Ibid.*, ii, 202–203.
74. *Ibid.*, ii, 146. The same story, but with the different protagonist, a famous Sufi Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī, is found in Ibn 'Asākīr, *Tārikh Madīnat Dimashq*, xl, 348.
75. *Dhayl*, ii, 280.
76. *Ibid.*, i, 240–41.
77. *Ibid.*, 308.
78. *Ibid.*, ii, 19.
79. *Ibid.*, i, 285–86.
80. Fred McGraw Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998), 75–76.
81. 'Abd al-Ḥayy ibn Aḥmad Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab ft Akhbār Man Dhahab (Al-Turāth)*, 1st ed., VIII vols. (Bayrūt: Dār Ibn Kathīr [Electronic Library *Maktabat al-Ta'rikh wa-l-Ḥadāra al-Islāmiyya*. Ed. 1.5 by al-Turāth, Jordan], N.D.), iv, 155–56; Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lam al-Nubalā'*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt and Ḥusayn al-Asad, 9th ed., 23 vols. (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risāla [Electronic Library *al-Mu'jam al-Fiqhī*, 3rd ed., 2001, Qumm], 1992 [1413 AH]), xx, 269; idem, *Tadhkirat al-Ḥuffāz*, 4 vols. (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī [Electronic Library al-Mu'jam al-Fiqhī, 3rd ed., 2001, Qumm], n.d.), iv, 1290; Muwaffaq al-Dīn 'Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad al-Maqdisī Ibn Qudāma, *Kitāb al-Tawwābīn*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Arnā'ūt (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya [Electronic Library al-Mu'jam al-Fiqhī, 3rd ed., 2001, Qumm], 1982 [1403 AH]), 232.
82. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, Cultures of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 203.