

The Purported Autobiography of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq

Michael Cooperson

University of California, Los Angeles

1. Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq and the Translation Movement¹

Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq al-ʿIbādī or al-ʿAbādī (194–260 or 264 AH/809–873 or 877 CE; on the name see Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa 1965: 257; Strohmaier 1971: 578) was the leading figure in the transmission of classical Greek learning during the early Abbasid caliphate. Ḥunayn hailed from al-Ḥīra, a suburb of Kufa, where his father worked either as a money-changer or, more likely, as a pharmacist. At first Ḥunayn aspired to become a physician. However, his studies took a new turn after a professor, Yuḥannā ibn Māsawayh, expelled him brusquely from the lecture-room (Bar Hebraeus [Ibn al-ʿIbrī] 1958: 144; Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa 1965: 257–58; Anawati 1974: 232). Although a Nestorian Christian like Ḥunayn, Yuḥannā belonged to a prestigious clique of Persian physicians² and apparently felt only contempt for the Arab tradesman's son. Ḥunayn departed in tears, but then (according to a Christian chronicler) “he headed for Byzantine lands, where he remained for two years, mastering the Greek language and accumulating as many works on philosophy and medicine as he could” (Bar Hebraeus 1958: 144; cf. Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa 1965: 262: “he learned the language of the Greeks in Alexandria”). Soon thereafter, says a Muslim biographer, Ḥunayn was spotted in Baghdad reciting Homeric poetry at a gathering of Greek literati (Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa 1965: 259). Then he disappeared again, this time apparently to perfect his Arabic (Bar Hebraeus

1958: 144). After Ḥunayn's return to Baghdad, one of his translations from the Greek made its way to his former teacher Yuḥannā, who declared that the rendering "could only have been produced by someone inspired by the Holy Spirit." After some resistance, Yuḥannā was persuaded of Ḥunayn's authorship, and thereafter showed great favor to his former student (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a 1965: 259).

Ḥunayn recommenced the study of medicine under Yuḥannā and translated Greek for him, correcting previous renderings or translating afresh into Syriac and Arabic using multiple Greek manuscripts whenever possible. He insisted upon rendering the sense, not the form, of the original, and his translations were renowned for their accuracy and readability: "He was a splendid translator. He took the ideas of Hippocrates and Galen, made them clear, and made the best possible summaries of them; he explained the difficult points, and cleared up the confusions" (*ibid.*: 262; see also Rosenthal 1975: 21; on Ḥunayn's translation activity, see, in addition to the works mentioned in Strohmaier 1971, Nutton 1981 and Salama-Carr 1990). By his own account, Ḥunayn eventually translated over a hundred Greek medical works, including all the available texts of Hippocrates and Galen. He also translated works by Plato and Aristotle, rendered the Old Testament into Syriac, and composed over seventy scientific treatises of his own (Bergstrasser 1913, 1925). His son, Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn, became a respected translator of Aristotle.

Ḥunayn's circle of patrons soon expanded to include both Christians and Muslims, who engaged him to translate works on medicine and philosophy. Biographers agree that Ḥunayn's talents eventually brought him to the attention of the Abbasid caliphs, although the details are sketchy. In one account, the caliph al-Ma'mūn, inspired by a dream-vision of Aristotle, engaged Ḥunayn to translate Greek works for him at the *bayt al-ḥikma* (literally, "the house of wisdom/philosophy"; apparently a sort of translation academy); and Ḥunayn is said to have traveled during this period into Byzantine territory to retrieve manuscripts for translation (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a 1965: 259). Another account credits the caliph al-Mutawakkil with setting up Ḥunayn in a sort of translation academy, as well as employing him as court physician (*ibid.*: 262).

2. Accounts of Ḥunayn's Downfall

The most celebrated episode in Ḥunayn's career is his abrupt fall from the caliph's favor. Biographers Muslim and Christian all agree that Ḥunayn fell afoul of the caliphate and was punished, but there is great disparity regarding the details. One account claims that a caliph (supposedly al-Mutawakkil) commanded him to concoct a poison and imprisoned him when he refused. A year later the caliph, who had only been testing him, pardoned and rewarded him.³ All the other sources, however, refer to another (or perhaps the same) incident, concurring that Ḥunayn's troubles began when his fellow Nestorians denounced him to the caliph for having desecrated an icon. Three of these accounts state that Ḥunayn was excommunicated; two add that he died the same night, either from grief or by a self-administered poison.⁴

The most extensive account of the episode, namely Ḥunayn's supposed first-person account, "The Epistle on the Trials and Miseries which Befell Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq," appears in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's biographical entry on Ḥunayn in the *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ* (1965: 264–70). Like the other versions of the event, the epistle leaves itself open to question on a number of counts. It commences with a peevish prologue in which "Ḥunayn" praises himself and denounces his rivals, blaming their machinations (and not his iconoclasm) for his run-in with the caliph.

How could it have been otherwise? How could I not have provoked such animosity, and stirred up so much envy, and set the councils of the great abuzz with slander and abuse? Money was paid to have me killed, those who insulted me were honored, and those who treated me generously were humiliated. Yet all this happened, not because I had offended or ill-treated a single one of them, but because I had risen above them and surpassed them in learning and in labor, and transmitted to them precious knowledge out of languages which they knew poorly . . . or not at all.

"Ḥunayn" then explains that his troubles began when his coreligionist and fellow physician Bakhtīshūʿ ibn Jibrāʾīl tricked him into spitting upon an icon in the presence of the caliph al-Mutawakkil. Bakhtīshūʿ had presented the caliph with a beautifully made icon depicting the Virgin and Child, telling the caliph that

while any good Christian should venerate the icon, a certain courtier (meaning Ḥunayn) did not. Bakhtīshū^c then goes to see Ḥunayn, complaining that the caliph was using the icon to ridicule the Christians. Bakhtīshū^c claims to have desecrated the icon in the caliph's presence to show that such ridicule was unnecessary; to drive the point home, Ḥunayn must go and do the same. "I fell for his stupid trick," says the narrator, "and agreed to follow his advice."

When I entered the caliph's presence, I saw the icon sitting there in front of him.
"Ḥunayn, isn't this a wonderful picture?"
"Just as you say, Your Majesty."
"What do you think of it? Isn't it the image of your God and His mother?"
"God forbid, Your Majesty! Is God Almighty an image, or can he be depicted? This is just a picture like any other."
"So this image has no power at all, either to help or to harm?"
"That's right, Your Majesty."
"If it's as you say, spit on it."
I spat on it, and he immediately ordered me thrown into prison.

The caliph then calls in the Nestorian Catholicos, Theodosius,⁵ who smothers the icon with tears and kisses. He informs the caliph that the desecration of an icon is a grave offense, but that he has no authority to punish the offender.⁶ All he can do is order him excommunicated until he should repent, fast, and disburse his wealth in charity.

After the Catholicos left, the caliph sat awhile marveling at him and his love and adoration for his God. "This is truly an amazing thing," said the caliph, then ordered me brought in. He called for the ropes and the whip, and had me stripped and spread before him. I was struck a hundred lashes. The caliph then ordered that I be confined and tortured, and that all my furnishings, riding animals, books, and the like be carried off. My houses were demolished and the wreckage was dumped in the river. I remained confined in the palace for six months under conditions so appalling that I was transformed into an object of pity to those who saw me. The beatings and tortures were repeated every few days.

After some four months, Ḥunayn's rivals at court succeed in persuading the caliph to execute the prisoner. The next day, however, the caliph, who has been unwell for some time, has Ḥunayn brought in and asked to prescribe a treatment for his

illness. In the presence of the assembled physicians, the caliph reveals that he has had a dream-vision of Christ:

"As all of you know, you left last night under the impression that I was going to execute Hunayn this morning, as I had promised. Last night, I was in too much pain to fall asleep. About midnight, I dropped off, and dreamed that I was trapped in a narrow place, and you my physicians, along with my entire retinue, were far off in the distance. I kept saying, 'Damn you, why are you staring at me? Where am I? Is this a place fit for me?!' But you sat silent, ignoring my cries. Suddenly a great light shone upon me as I lay there, a light that terrified me. And there stood before me a man with a lambent face, and behind him another man dressed in sumptuous clothes. The man before me said, 'Peace be upon you.' I answered his greeting, and he asked, 'Do you recognize me?'

"I said, 'No.'

"He said, 'I am Jesus Christ.'

"I trembled in terror. Then I asked, 'Who is that with you?'

"Hunayn ibn Ishāq.'

"I said, 'Forgive me; I cannot rise to greet you.'

"He said, 'Pardon Hunayn, and absolve him of his crime, for God has forgiven him. Take what he prescribes for you, and you will recover.'"

The caliph takes his medicine, recovers from his illness, exacts a fine from Hunayn's rivals, and bestows numerous honors and properties upon him. "Hunayn" concludes his epistle as follows:

I have recounted all this for no other reason than to remind the wise man that trials may befall the wise and the foolish, the strong and the weak, the great and the small alike; but those trials, although they respect no difference of degree, must never give the wise man cause to despair of that Divine Providence which shall deliver him from his affliction. Rather, he must trust, and trust well, in his Creator, praising and glorifying Him all the more. Praise the Lord, then, Who granted me a new life, and victory over my oppressors, and Who raised me above them in rank and prosperity.

3. Authenticity and Dissimulation

Scholarly opinion has differed regarding the authorship and authenticity of the epistle. Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, our only source for the text, considers it authentic.⁷ G. Bergstrasser, Hunayn's first modern biographer, concurred, adding that the style represents Hunayn's

attempt to imitate literary prose (1913: 10). Later scholars, however, have had their doubts. F. Rosenthal disputes Ḥunayn's authorship, citing the implausibility of the caliph's intervention in the internal affairs of the Christian community, the disproportion of Ḥunayn's punishment to the chastisement suggested by the Catholicos, and the effusive and self-defensive tone of the epistle, uncharacteristic of Ḥunayn's style as known from other works (1937: 15–19). G. Strohmaier dismisses most of Rosenthal's objections, but finds numerous improbabilities in the account itself. Bakhtīshū's plot is implausible, notes Strohmaier, because it depends not only upon Ḥunayn's willingness to desecrate an icon but also upon the caliph's unpredictable reaction to that event. Moreover, "Ḥunayn's" claim in one place that he is innocent of blasphemy contradicts his statement in another that Christ eventually forgave him his offense. Strohmaier concludes that the text was intended to clear Ḥunayn of charges of blasphemy, and must therefore have been composed relatively soon after his death by one of his disciples. As such, it "provides relatively reliable information on the outward course of the main events as well as on the crucial words spoken by Ḥunayn himself" (1965: 530).

Although modern scholarship has offered a number of reasons why Ḥunayn might have held aniconic views, the epistle adduces none of them in his defense. As Strohmaier notes, Ḥunayn's acquiescence to Bakhtīshū's blasphemous suggestion makes it appear that he had no opinions of his own in religious matters (*ibid.*: 529). Bakhtīshū's argument for desecrating the icon is not particularly convincing:

"If we let [the caliph] keep [the icon], and praise it in his presence, he'll never stop dangling it in front of us and saying, 'Look! It's a picture of your god and his mother!' Of course I [spat on it] just so he would get rid of it and stop provoking us with it and making us feel different from everybody else. If someone gives him the idea of using it against us, the situation can only get worse. So, if he calls for you and asks you questions like the one he asked me, the best thing to do is to do what I did. I've gotten the word out to the rest of our friends who might see him, and told them to do the same thing." (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a 1965: 267)

This argument, "Ḥunayn" realizes with hindsight, is "stupid". He represents himself as gullible, but he offers so implausible an account of his motivation that the reader can only agree that the

desecration took place because the real Ḥunayn held aniconic views.⁸ All of the other accounts of his downfall (except the poison story, which ignores icons altogether) explicitly show him disparaging icons. In two of these accounts he actually desecrates one; in the third, he refuses to spit on an image of the soldiers who crucified Christ, saying "They're not the ones who crucified Christ; they're only pictures" (*ibid.*: 264). All indications are that Ḥunayn had aniconic ideas of some sort, and that the exposure of these convictions, advertent or otherwise, led to his being reprimanded by his coreligionists, perhaps not with the active cooperation of the caliph but probably with his permission, since Ḥunayn was a prominent figure at court and therefore in some sense under his protection.

If, as one biographical tradition claims, Ḥunayn learned his Greek in Byzantine lands, he may have been in a position to have learned something of Byzantine iconoclasm. Indeed, H. Derenbourg argues that he was influenced by the pro-iconoclast position of the emperor Theophilus (829–842), during whose reign he was likely to have been in Byzantium, if in fact he was ever there at all (Derenbourg 1898: 118; cited in Strohmaier 1965: 531). However, this is a purely circumstantial argument. As Strohmaier points out, Ḥunayn's position that the icons are "just pictures" hardly reflects the complex Christology of the resolutions of Constantine V's council of 754 (*ibid.*; cf. Pelikan 1974: 91–145). Strohmaier also adduces a passage from Ḥunayn's *Nawādir al-falāsifa* in which it is clear from the author's remarks on the use of images in antiquity that he is willing to grant them only a propaedeutic utility. Strohmaier thus concludes that the source of Ḥunayn's aniconism "is to be sought in Ḥunayn's own thought, which in the course of his translation work was placed in continuous contact with the scientific thinking characteristic of ancient Greek medicine" (1965: 531).

Another probable cause of Ḥunayn's aversions to icons is that mentioned in another connection by S. H. Griffith. In his study of a tract by Theodore Abū Qurra (d. 204–5/820), Griffith offers a characterization of pro- and aniconic impulses in Christian communities under Muslim rule. Abū Qurra upholds the veneration of images, but this, says Griffith, has little if anything to do with events in Byzantium. Rather, "[Theodore's] concern was to shore up the confidence of Christians who were developing a case of iconophobia

due to the attacks against their traditional religious practices coming from Jews and Muslims" (1985: 58). This explanation recalls Bakhtishū's claim (as given in the epistle) that the caliph and his entourage might use the icon as a pretext for ridiculing the Christians.

Griffith's claim that aniconism arose through intercommunal contact is especially plausible in Ḥunayn's case. As a court physician, Ḥunayn would have been in frequent contact with Muslims; his most prominent patrons, the Banū Mūsā, were Muslims. We know that Ḥunayn was asked to convert to Islam (see Haddad 1974). Although he refused, the Muslim milieu appears to have worked its effects on his family: according to one source, his son Iṣḥāq did convert (al-Shahrazūri 1988: 292). Ḥunayn himself may have remained a faithful Christian, but there is no reason to think him immune to the iconophobia denounced by Abū Qurra.

Ḥunayn may have been an iconoclast influenced by Byzantine example, personal or textual; he may have been an aniconic under the influence of a Greek rationalism which reached him directly through the classical texts; or he may have been an iconophobe, swayed by the example—personal and textual—of the Muslims with whom his community lived on such intimate terms. Whatever the case, his alleged autobiographical epistle absolves him of the responsibility for holding any of these beliefs at all. Indeed, the epistle appears to be one of at least two attempts made to clear Ḥunayn, the other being the story that claims he was imprisoned for refusing to concoct a poison. Both the alleged autobiography and the poison story mention caliphal audiences and prison stays of approximately a year, suggesting that they refer to the same incident. If so, the poison story acquits Ḥunayn by ignoring his aniconism altogether and replacing it with altogether different (and unambiguously praiseworthy) principles—the Hippocratic injunction to do no harm and the Christian command to love one's enemy.⁹ The epistle takes a different tack: it admits that Ḥunayn desecrated an icon but adduces an elaborate plot to explain away the offense.

Though skillfully constructed, the epistle conceals inconsistencies even beyond those noted by Rosenthal and Strohmaier. The most conspicuous is the text's unusual narrative form. The first-person

narrator (“Ḥunayn”) describes events which the real Ḥunayn could not possibly have witnessed, namely Bakhtīshū’s first conversation with the caliph and the caliph’s exchange with the Catholicos. The narrator presents these events in vivid detail, including dialogue, even though Ḥunayn was at home on the first occasion and languishing in prison on the second. The narrator does not even quote an eyewitness source, the usual signal of embedded narration in classical Arabic prose. In Genette’s terms, the narrative moves between a nonfocalized (omniscient) narration and internal focalization of the fixed type (i.e., where events are told from Ḥunayn’s point of view), and, because it is supposed to be an autobiography, between the autodiegetic (where the narrator is a character) and the heterodiegetic (where the narrator is absent from the story) (see Genette 1983: 189 and 244–45).

These manipulations allow for the most spectacular effects the story produces: the suspense and the surprise ending. Although the narrator is privileged to travel where Ḥunayn cannot, he does so only when it is necessary, to set the stage for subsequent events. Yet when narrative omniscience would spoil the surprise ending—as in the case of the caliph’s dream—the narrator loses his privilege. For the surprise ending, the caliph takes center stage and informs the reader of what has transpired while the narrator was occupied with Ḥunayn in his prison cell. But none of these manipulations, as effective as they are for certain purposes, fully exonerates Ḥunayn. To accomplish this, the author resorts to a spectacular if problematic device: the caliph’s dream-vision of Christ.

4. Visions of Authority

Regarding the classical Arabic dream-vision, A. Kilito has noted: “Far from being erotic, dreams are a response to heresiographic necessity . . . The sincerity of the dreamer matters little. Rather, such stories invoke the dead to serve the needs of the living” (1985: 92). The figure of Christ serves the epistle’s purpose particularly well. First, He is the offended party: Ḥunayn spat on an image of Him and His mother. Second, He possesses authority in the theologies of both sides, Christian and Muslim, albeit in different ways. For

Muslims, Christ is “a Logos from God, called the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, upright in this world and the next, and among those close [to God]” (Qurʾān 3: 45). Having taken charge of an internal Nestorian matter, the caliph can reverse himself only by referring to an authority acceptable to himself and the Catholicos alike.

The narrator of Ḥunayn’s epistle displays particular ingenuity by casting the caliph as the recipient of the vision. This allows the divine and caliphal pardons to be issued simultaneously: a similar manifestation vouchsafed to Ḥunayn himself, or to Bakhtīshūʿ, might not have swayed the caliph. Just as the caliph must arbitrate among Ḥunayn, his detractors, and the Catholicos, so too must he serve as the recipient of the evidentiary dream.

The caliph’s vision bears comparison with an earlier dream of great consequence for Ḥunayn, namely, the caliph al-Maʾmūn’s dream of Aristotle. According to Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, al-Maʾmūn saw a vision of a dignified and splendid man sitting enthroned in the caliphal audience room. Told that the man was called Aristotle, he asked him a series of questions about the nature of the good. Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa comments:

When al-Maʾmūn had his dream-vision of a radiant old man sitting on a platform and proclaiming, “I am Aristotle,” he awoke and asked about Aristotle, and was told that he was a Greek sage. [Al-Maʾmūn] had Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq brought in, since he could find no one to compare with him as a translator. He asked him to translate the works of the Greek sages into Arabic, and lavished great monies and gifts upon him. (1965: 259)

According to this account, another version of which Ibn al-Nadīm adduces as “the reason why books on philosophy and other ancient sciences have become plentiful in these regions,” the translation movement owes its inception to a supernatural event, and specifically to a manifestation vouchsafed to the head of state (1929: 339). Aristotle appears in the caliph’s dream in his aspect of counsellor to monarchs, as he was to Alexander, as well as in his capacity of heir to the tradition of Socrates and Plato.

The visionary appearances of Aristotle to one caliph and Christ to another set up a link of authority between an originary figure and the head of state. In each case, the caliph accedes to the wishes of his supernatural visitant and extends his patronage to Ḥunayn.

Ḥunayn's career is thus framed by two dreams, each of which establishes a genealogy of authority (like the scholarly *isnād* or "chain of sources") that extends from an originary figure through the caliph down to him. Not only does the second dream spare Ḥunayn's life, it also attests to his skill as a physician: "Take what he prescribes for you," Jesus tells the caliph, "and you will recover." Taken together, the two dreams legitimize Ḥunayn's presence at court, his close relationship to the caliph, and his rise from obscurity to a position rivalling that of the Nestorian physicians of Jundishapur.

Therein lay the rub: the relationship between Ḥunayn and the caliph stood independent of Nestorian authority. Although Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa mentions Ḥunayn's later discipleship under Yuḥannā ibn Māsawayh, his biographical account emphasizes Ḥunayn's independence from his co-religionists. Ḥunayn is expelled from Yuḥannā's lecture-room; he travels alone to Byzantium and Basra to learn Greek and Arabic; and his skill as a translator is credited (by an unwitting Yuḥannā) to direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. In this regard, Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's biography and "Ḥunayn's" epistle are in agreement: both emphasize the antagonism between the lone autodidact and the arrogant clique of Jundishapur. In the biography, for example, one of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's sources recalls what Ḥunayn had to say about his former teacher: "'I remember,' [Ḥunayn] told me, 'what that son of a so-and-so [Yuḥannā ibn Māsawayh] said—that it was impossible for an 'Ibādī [i.e., an Arab Christian] to learn medicine! He should be cast out of the church for presuming to study medicine without having achieved a superb knowledge of Greek!'" The "Ḥunayn" of the epistle expands the scope of the accusation to encompass all his Nestorian colleagues: "All men of culture—regardless of religious affiliation—love me and take my part, and treat me with honor, and receive what I teach them with gratitude, and reward me with many favors. But as for those Christian doctors, most of whom learned from me, and whom I watched grow up—it is they who cry for my blood, even though they could never manage without me!"

With this antagonism in the background, the Nestorian clique (as depicted in nearly all the sources) moved against Ḥunayn by invoking the authority of Christianity against him. Ḥunayn's relationship to the caliph bypasses the Catholicos, and Bakhtīshū's plot

consists in breaking the link to the caliph (and, by extension, to Aristotle) by insisting on the prior claims of another link of authority: the submission Ḥunayn owes to the church. At first, the plan appears to work: al-Mutawakkil is willing to defer to Theodosius' wish that the offender be punished. In the end, however, the caliph proves the weak link in the plot. If the Nestorians concede him the power to punish Ḥunayn, they must also concede him the power to pardon him. As we have seen, the pardon is effected by the intervention of Jesus Christ, the only figure who carries sufficient weight in the respective theologies of both parties.

Finally, the curious matter of the caliph's own attitude deserves further attention. In Bakhtishū's account, the caliph accepts the gift of an icon, is "extremely impressed" by its appearance, and even provides the Catholicos with money to spend on votive oils and incense for it (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a 1965: 266–67). Moreover, the caliph (as the epistle depicts him) displays unwarranted zeal in punishing Ḥunayn's offense. When asked what he would do to an iconoclast, the Catholicos replies that he would excommunicate him and impose penances, mentioning "the whip and the rod" only in passing, and saying nothing about razing his house (*ibid.*: 268; see also Rosenthal 1937).

Because Islam forbids the worship of idols (Qur'ān 22: 30), we might presume that al-Mutawakkil himself would not attribute any sanctity to the icon. However, the text offers no basis to assume that he (or anyone else at that period) thought that an icon and an idol were necessarily one and the same. The relevant Qur'ānic condemnations speak of pagan idols (*aṣnām* or *awṭhān*), not Christian icons (called *qūna* or *ṣūra* in the epistle).¹⁰ As depicted in the text, al-Mutawakkil knows that icons are not Islamic, but this does not mean he assumes they are powerless: the Qur'ān concedes efficacy to other forbidden ritual practices such as the pre-Islamic custom of spitting on knots (113: 5). The historical caliph might well have contemplated the possibility that the icon harbored a potency of some kind, if only over Christians. In any event, the epistolary caliph certainly appears willing to concede such a possibility. He recognizes that the icon is a picture of the Christians' god, not the deity itself (unlike the Qur'ānic idols); he does not condemn the Nestorian iconolatry, he only "marvels" at it; and most surprisingly,

he punishes Ḥunayn for agreeing that the image “has no power at all, either to help or to harm.”

In light of these considerations, Ḥunayn's chastisement takes on a certain resemblance to another early Abbasid trial: the trial (*miḥna*) of the Ḥadīth-scholar Ibn Ḥanbal (219/834). Accounts of this event suggest that the presiding caliph, al-Mu'taṣim, held no strong convictions on the point at issue—the createdness of the Qur'ān. After three days of interrogation and a spectacular flogging in open court, Ibn Ḥanbal appears to have persuaded most spectators that the Qur'ān was uncreated, or more exactly, that his opponents could not establish the contrary. Al-Mu'taṣim arguably treated the trial as exactly that: a test of the truth of the createdness-doctrine, which was to be adjudicated on the basis of Ibn Ḥanbal's fortitude under the lash. Ibn Ḥanbal's own partisans certainly treated the event that way: in one account, they attended the chastisement with tablets in hand, ready to record whatever their *imām* (exemplar) might say regarding the Qur'ān. Instead of compromising the victim's testimony, the torture had the effect (paradoxical to a modern sensibility) of validating it.

In Ḥunayn's case, a caliph is once again compelled to chastise a subject for repudiating a dubious creed. The application of torture “every few days” suggests that Ḥunayn was supposed to recant his iconoclasm. It is almost as if, by torturing Ḥunayn, the caliph and the court will learn whether icons deserve veneration or not. In the event, the caliph's dream-vision answers the question in the affirmative. If Jesus must pardon Ḥunayn for desecrating an icon, icons must be sacred after all. Paradoxically, the caliph—the head of the Muslim community—is the conduit of this revelation. The problematic nature of such an attribution passes unmentioned by the author, or any of the figures in the story. In its concluding and most problematic manipulation, the epistle clears Ḥunayn of iconophobia, but at the cost of making the caliph a spokesman for the veneration of images.

Notes

1. I thank Professors Claudia Rapp and Dwight Reynolds for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2. This "clique" traced its origins back to the Nestorian academy at Jundishapur patronized by the Sassanian monarch Khusraw I. See Bar Hebraeus 1958: 123, 130.
3. Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a 1965: 261, who cites 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Jibrā'īl ibn Bakhtīshū's lost *Manāqib al-aṭibbā'* (written in 423/1032; see *ibid.*: 214); Bar Hebraeus 1958: 144–45, who names the caliph as al-Mutawakkil.
4. Bar Hebraeus 1958: 145, 1872–77, 3: 197–199; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a 1965: 263–64. The chronology of the death stories is compromised because they name al-Mutawakkil as caliph; he died in 247/861, while Ḥunayn lived on until 260/873 or 264/877. See Rosenthal 1937: 17.
5. The Catholicos is the head of the Nestorian ecclesiastical hierarchy. Theodosius held this office from 239–244/853–858.
6. This is because the caliph had exclusive command of the mechanisms for civil punishment. The Catholicos, as head of Ḥunayn's community, can command only penance, while torture, imprisonment, and the like fall under the jurisdiction of the civil authority represented by the caliph.
7. "All such matters regarding Ḥunayn I take to be clearly established and authentic on the basis of an epistle I found Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq to have written about the trials and afflictions he suffered" (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a 1965: 264).
8. At least one reader has been so eager to give Ḥunayn the benefit of the doubt that he has constructed a motivation for him with only tenuous textual support: "[Ḥunayn] recounts the suffering he underwent for having attempted to rescue an icon of the Virgin from the hands of unbelievers, without suspecting the plot [Bakhtīshū'] was hatching against him" (Haddad, 1974: 294). On this reading, Ḥunayn must have thought that desecrating the icon was justifiable as a means of persuading the caliph to relinquish it. However, Ḥunayn and more particularly Bakhtīshū' make no mention of rescuing the icon; and if desecrating it was the proper procedure, it should have worked the (supposed) first time, that is, when Bakhtīshū' tried it.
9. Since the story appears on the authority of Bakhtīshū's grandson (see note 5 above), it may also have been intended to clear Bakhtīshū' of wronging Ḥunayn.
10. Later authorities do of course count Christian devotional objects as *awthān*; for a summary see Ibn Manẓūr n.d., 6: 4765 (s.v. *w-th-n*).

Works Cited

- Anawati, G. C. (1974) "Les médicaments de l'oeil chez Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq." *Arabica* 21: 232–44.
- Bar Hebraeus [=Ibn al-'Ibrī] (1872–77) *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, ed. J. B. Abbeloos and Th. J. Lamy. Paris-Louvain: C. Peeters.

- Bar Hebraeus (1958) *Taʿrīkh mukhtaṣar al-duwal*, ed. A. Šālihānī. 2nd ed. Al-
Hāzimiyya: Dār al-Rāʾid al-Lubnānī.
- Bergstrasser, G. (1913) *Hunain Ibn Isbak und seine Schule*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Bergstrasser, G. (1925) *Hunain ibn Isbaq über die syrischen und arabischen Galen-
Übersetzungen*. Leipzig: Brockhaus.
- Derenbourg, H. (1898) "Les traducteurs arabes d'auteurs grecs et l'auteur
musulman des aphorismes des philosophes." *Mélanges Henri Weil*, 117–24.
Paris: Fontemoing.
- Genette, G. (1983) *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, tr. J. E. Lewin. Ithaca:
Cornell University Press.
- Griffith, S. (1985) "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract on the Christian Prac-
tice of Venerating Images." *JAOS* 105: 53–73.
- Haddad, R. (1974) "Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq apologiste chrétien." *Arabica* 21: 292–
302.
- Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa (1965) *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aʿibbāʾ*, ed. Nizār Riḍā. 2 vols.
Beirut: Dār Maktabat al Ḥayāt.
- Ibn Manzūr (n.d.) *Lisān al-ʿArab*, ed. A. A. al-Kabīr et al. Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif.
- Ibn al-Nadīm (1929) *Al-Fihrist*, ed. G. Flügel. Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Rahmāniyya.
- Kilito, Abdelfattah (1985) *L'Auteur et ses doubles*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Nutton, V., ed. (1981) *Galen: Problems and Prospects*. London: The Wellcome
Institute for the History of Medicine.
- Pelikan, J. (1974) *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*. Chicago: Univer-
sity of Chicago Press.
- Rosenthal, F. (1937) "Die arabische Autobiographie." *Studia Arabica* 1: 1–40.
- Rosenthal, F. (1975) *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, tr. Emile and Jenny Marmor-
stein. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Salama-Carr, M. (1990) *La traduction à l'époque abbaside*. Paris: Didier.
- al-Shahrazūrī, Shams al-Dīn (1988). *Taʿrīkh al-ḥukamāʾ*, ed. A. K. Abū Shuwayrib.
n.p.: Jamʿiyyat al-Daʿwā al-Islāmiyya al-ʿĀlamiyya.
- Strohmaier, G. (1965) "Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq und die Bilder." *Klio* 43–45: 525–33.
- Strohmaier, G. (1971) "Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq al-ʿIbādī." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New
Edition, 3: 578–81.