

Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's *Kitāb Ithbāt al-'Ilal*

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It is in the third century after the *hijrah* that mysticism first begins to flourish in the Islamic world. This is the century which produced such great mystics as al-Muḥāsibī, al-Junayd, Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī and al-Ḥalālāj. To this century also belongs al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, who, although perhaps less well known than the others, was certainly the most prolific writer of them all, having written during his lifetime almost 60 different titles. Of these 60, two are particularly well known, and they are *Khatm al-Awliyā'* or *Khatm al-Wilāyah* (the seal of the saints), and *Kitāb al-'Ilal* (the book of reasons) or *Ithbāt al-'Ilal* (the confirmation of reasons), which is the work I should like to discuss now.

Before going into the contents of this work, I should like to say a few words first about the manuscripts of the work.¹ As far as I have been able to determine four manuscripts exist. Actually I should say that there are only three and a half since one of them is not complete as I shall explain later. Now the most accurate² of these manuscripts appears to

¹Since this paper was written Khālid Zahrī has prepared an edition and study of *Ithbāt al-'Ilal* based on the Berlin and Veliyüddin manuscripts. It was published in Rabat in 1998 under the title *Kitāb Ithbāt al-'Ilal*.

²See, however, Khālid Zahrī's description of this manuscript in his edition of *Ithbāt al-'Ilal*, pp. 54-55.

be manuscript No. 3504 in the Berlin Library.³ It dates from about 600 A.H., but unfortunately it is not in very good condition and the last line is missing on a number of pages. It contains 58 folios.

The second manuscript is Haraççioğlu 806 in Bursa.⁴ It contains 26 folios, is dated 714 A.H., and is part of a collection containing a number of other works by al-Tirmidhī.

Another manuscript, Veliyüddin 770, is in Istanbul,⁵ and this manuscript is again part of a collection of Tirmidhī works. It is written in a beautiful hand and is fully vocalized, but in spite of this is nevertheless quite an inaccurate text when compared to the other two manuscripts. It dates from at least the 9th Century A.H.

The fourth manuscript is in Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyah in Cairo, Majāmī' 125, and is dated 608 A.H.⁶ This manuscript actually consists of only parts of *Ithbāt al-'Ilal*, and these have been combined with another work of al-Tirmidhī called *Kayfiyat al-Ṣalāh*. A separate manuscript of this latter work is to be found in the Veliyüddin 770 collection. I have no idea whether al-Tirmidhī himself combined these two works, or whether this is the work of a disciple or a later copyist. I might add here that Brockelmann lists only two of these four manuscripts, the Berlin manuscript and the one in Cairo.⁷

Now to turn to the book itself, we find that it treats what was evidently during al-Tirmidhī's time a rather controversial subject. In fact, al-Dhahabī in his *Tadhkirat al-Huffāz* relates on the authority of al-Sulamī, who was the famous fourth century historian and biographer of Sufism, that al-Tirmidhī was exiled from his native Tirmidh because of his having

³See W. Ahlwardt, *Verzeichnis der arabischen Handschriften der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, Berlin, 1887-1889, Vol. III, p. 275.

⁴See Othman Yahya, "L'Oeuvre de Tirmidī" in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, Vol. III, Damascus, 1957, p. 434.

⁵See *Defter-i Küttübhan-e Veliyüddin*, Dersaadet (Istanbul): Mahmut Bey Matbaası, 1304 (1886), p. 42. See also Khālid Zahri's description of this manuscript in his edition of *Ithbāt al-'Ilal*, p. 55.

⁶See *Fihrist al-Kutub al-'Arabiyah al-Mahfūzah bi-al-Kutubkhānah al-Khudaywiyah*, Cairo, 1888-1893, Vol. VII, p. 177.

⁷See Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1937-1949, Supplement, Vol. I, p. 356. See also Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967-1984, Vol. I, p. 654, where the Berlin and Haraççioğlu manuscripts are mentioned. Microfilms of all four manuscripts are in my possession.

written two books: *Khatm al-Awliyā'* and *Kitāb al-'Ilal*.⁸ Al-Tirmidhī's purpose in writing *Kitāb al-'Ilal*, and this seems to be one of the factors leading to his being exiled, was first to try to demonstrate that all of God's commandments and prohibitions have a cause or reason lying behind them, that is, that God has a purpose in mind when he commands certain actions and prohibits others, and that these reasons or *'ilal*, as he calls them, can be known by men; and then secondly to set down exactly what those reasons are which lie behind God's commandments and prohibitions.

Al-Tirmidhī begins his book by refuting the position of those who deny that these reasons or *'ilal* exist and who maintain that God's commandments and prohibitions are merely a means by which God tries or tests mankind.⁹ Al-Tirmidhī does not deny that God's commandments are a trial or test for mankind, but he asks, is not this testing for the purpose of determining what is in the hearts of men so that they can be rewarded or punished accordingly after the resurrection? Now if the answer to this is "yes," then a reason or purpose behind this testing has been established and consequently the principle that God acts with a purpose or reason in mind. If, on the other hand, the answer is "no," that is, that there is no purpose behind this testing of men, then this answer is contradicted by various verses of the Qur'ān such as the following as translated by A. J. Arberry: 1) And We shall assuredly try you until We know those of you who struggle and are steadfast, and try your tidings (Muḥammad, 31). 2) Do the people reckon that they will be left to say 'We believe,' and will not be tried? We certainly tried those that were before them, and assuredly God knows those who speak truly, and assuredly He knows the liars (al-'Ankabūt, 2-3).¹⁰

Now having shown that God acts with a purpose in mind, al-Tirmidhī takes up the question of how this purpose can be known by man.¹¹ Knowledge, or *'ilm*, he says is of two kinds: exoteric or *ẓāhir* and esoteric or *bāṭin*. Exoteric knowledge is that of the tongue, whereas esoteric knowledge is in the heart. Furthermore, it is this esoteric knowledge which is the useful knowledge or *al-'ilm al-nāfi'*. Al-Tirmidhī here quotes a tradition of the

⁸See Shams al-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-Ḥuffāz*, Hyderabad, 1333, Vol. II, p. 197.

⁹See pp. 67-69 of Khālid Zahrī's edition.

¹⁰See Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London and New York, 1955, Vol. II, pp. 97, 223.

¹¹See pp. 69-78 of Khālid Zahrī's edition.

Prophet which says, “Knowledge is two knowledges, a knowledge in the heart, and that is the useful knowledge, and a knowledge on the tongue and that is the proof of God to the sons of Adam (*ḥujjat Allāh ‘alā banī Ādam*).” Now wisdom or *ḥikmah* is another word for this esoteric knowledge, and it is this esoteric knowledge which includes the knowledge of the *‘ilal* or reasons behind God's commandments and prohibitions.

How then is one to acquire this esoteric knowledge or wisdom? Al-Tirmidhī is very explicit in stating that it is not acquired through reasoning or the arguments of the theologians but rather by a process of self-discipline (*riyāḍat al-naḥs*), that is, the training and control of the carnal self or self which exhorts to evil (*al-naḥs al-ammārah bi-al-sū’*). At this point al-Tirmidhī enters into a short account of his system of psychology. This psychological system is built on three main elements: the first is the carnal self (*al-naḥs*), which is the source of emotions and passions, then there is the breast or *ṣadr*, which controls an individual's actions, and finally the heart or *qalb*, which is the source of this esoteric knowledge, which al-Tirmidhī here describes as a sort of light from God which every individual has in his heart.

Now the heart is situated inside the breast and the breast surrounds the heart. The self, on the other hand, is outside the breast. The self, as I mentioned, is the source of worldly desires and passions, and these desires and passions al-Tirmidhī compares to smoke, which, when the passions are not kept in check, escapes from the self and enters into the breast and fills it. Now this smoke, if it fills up the breast, prevents the heart, which is in the middle of the breast, from filling the breast with its light and knowledge. Thus it is only by controlling these passions that an individual can clear his breast of this smoke and let the light of his heart shine out and fill his breast. It is by means of this light shining out of the heart that an individual is enabled to perceive all sorts of truths which would otherwise be unknown to him. Among these truths are the *‘ilal* or reasons behind God's commandments and prohibitions.

Al-Tirmidhī devotes the rest of the book to a detailed account of these various *‘ilal* which he claims to have come to know by means of this esoteric knowledge in the heart. I should like to close with an example of one of these *‘ilal* as given by al-Tirmidhī in his book. And I have chosen for this the chapter having to do with the purpose behind the *wuḍū’* or ablu-

tions performed before prayer.¹² Al-Tirmidhī states that these ablutions consist of cleansing oneself from all types of excrement or *ḥadath* which pass out of the body. The reason for this, he says, is as follows: Adam, when he was first created and living in the garden of Eden, had an immunity against Satan's entering into the interior of his body. This remained so, however, only until Satan succeeded in tricking Adam into eating of the forbidden tree; because when Adam ate the fruit of this tree Satan was able to enter into Adam's belly along with the fruit. The fruit settled in Adam's intestines where Satan proceeded to cause it to rot. When it eventually passed out of Adam's body it was unclean because of Satan's having touched it, and therefore ablutions are necessary whenever anything passes out of the body from the vicinity of the intestines.

¹²See pp. 86-87 of Khālid Zahri's edition.