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THE STUDY OF ABU HANIFA'S PERSONALITY AND SCHOLARLY LEGACY

Abstract. *This article examines the life and scholarly legacy of Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man ibn Thabit within the integrated framework of jurisprudence (fiqh) and theology ('aqida). The study analyzes Abu Hanifa's fiqh methodology alongside his theological views, his contribution to the science of kalam, his positions on matters of creed and faith, and the influence his theological school subsequently exercised on the formation of the Maturidi tradition. The article further examines in detail the principal works attributed to Abu Hanifa – “al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” “al-Fiqh al-Absat,” “al-‘Alim wa-l-Muta'allim,” “al-Risala,” and “al-Wasiyya” – their chains of transmission (isnad), the scholarly debates surrounding their authenticity, and the history of their manuscripts and printed editions.*

Keywords: *Abu Hanifa; fiqh; 'aqida; kalam; Maturidism; Hanafi madhhab; al-Fiqh al-Akbar; Companion; Follower (tabi'un); Sunni theology; isnad.*

INTRODUCTION

By decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the systematic study of the scientific, religious, and intellectual heritage of Imam Maturidi and his scholarly successors, the publication of critically annotated translations and comparative texts of their works, and the organized promotion of academic research on these topics were designated as a priority task (Decree No. PQ-4802, 2020). In the history of Islamic intellectual thought, the personality of Abu Hanifa is most frequently interpreted as the founder of a school of jurisprudence. However, a thorough analysis of the primary sources demonstrates that Abu Hanifa was a thinker who played an important role not only in jurisprudence but also in the defense and systematic grounding of Islamic theology. It was precisely through his activities that theological questions first came to

be discussed in a systematic, logical, and evidence-based manner. This article aims to illuminate Abu Hanifa’s scholarly legacy as an inseparable unity of jurisprudence and theology.

In the context of globalization, concepts such as faith (iman), monotheism (tawhid), jurisprudence (fiqh), and speculative theology (kalam) are being distorted under the influence of destructive ideologies. Illuminating these concepts through the scholarly legacies of the great scholars who laid the foundations of the madhhabs therefore acquires a particular importance. Early information about Abu Hanifa is documented in sources such as “Tarikh Baghdad,” “Tarikh al-Islam,” “Siyar ‘Alam al-Nubala’,” “Jawahir al-Mudiyya,” “Manaqib al-Kardari,” and “Kashf al-Asrar” (Qurayshi, 1332 AH).

METHODS

This study employs historical-analytical and source-critical methods. The primary sources include the classical biographical and theological literature alongside the collected edition of Abu Hanifa’s works (Abu Avvod, 2022), modern Uzbek scholarly contributions (Mirzaahmedov, 2017; Oqilov, 2012; Muhammad Yusuf, 2019), and the classical commentaries on “al-Fiqh al-Akbar” (Mag’nisavi, 2018; Mulla ‘Ali Qari, 1998). The analysis proceeds thematically, examining: Abu Hanifa’s biography and intellectual formation; the debate about his engagement with kalam; the question of his authorship of theological treatises; and the transmission, authenticity, and textual history of his five principal works.

RESULTS

Biographical background and intellectual formation. Abu Hanifa’s full name is al-Nu‘man ibn Thabit ibn Zuta ibn Mah ibn Mirzaban al-Taymi al-Kufi. He was born in 80 AH in Kufa, Iraq – one of the major centers of Islamic learning – during the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan. “Abu Hanifa” was a kunya given to him by the people of Iraq on account of his tireless scholarly activity. Given that his era overlapped with the lifetimes of the younger Companions, and that the Companion Anas ibn Malik visited Kufa during Abu Hanifa’s lifetime and the two met, Abu Hanifa is counted among the junior Followers (tabi‘un) (Abu Avvod, 2022:15). Kufa was a center in which

Companions, Followers, and jurisprudential schools were active; the influence of the school of ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud was particularly strong there, and it was precisely this environment that played a decisive role in the formation of Abu Hanifa’s thought (Mirzaahmedov, 2017:95).

Abu Hanifa lived in an era in which various theological sects – the Kharijites, the Jahmiyya, the Qadariyya, the Mu‘tazila, the Mushabbiha, and the Murji’a – were taking shape, and through his theological positions he laid the foundations for the formation of Sunni kalam. The person who first identified his scholarly potential and encouraged him to pursue learning was Abu ‘Amr al-Sha‘bi, and the greatest influence on his development was exercised by Hammad ibn Abi Sulayman, under whom he studied for eighteen years. He also studied under Ibrahim al-Nakha‘i, Masruq ibn al-Ajda‘, Qadi Shurayh, al-Aswad ibn Yazid, and Alqama ibn Qays, and heard hadiths from ‘Ata’ ibn Abi Rabah, ‘Ikrima, and Nafi‘. Among the Companions, the influence of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud, and among the Followers of Hasan al-Basri and Sa‘id ibn al-Musayyab was particularly significant (Oqilov, 2012:45).

The debate on Abu Hanifa’s engagement with kalam. All scholars agree that in the early years of his career Abu Hanifa engaged with kalam. Whether he continued in this direction until the end of his life is, however, debated. Some scholars maintain that he occupied himself with kalam only in the early period and subsequently abandoned it for fiqh. Other scholars counter that the majority of the works reaching us from him consist of treatises devoted to theological questions – including “al-Wasiyya,” written toward the end of his life – and maintain that he engaged with theology and kalam until the very end (Abu Avvod, 2022:34).

Among the narrations supporting the view that he turned away from kalam: according to a narration from his student Zufar ibn Hudhayl (d. 158/775), Abu Hanifa, after reaching a high level in kalam, found himself in difficulty when asked a question on divorce; he recognized that kalam was providing no practical benefit and turned toward fiqh. According to narrations from Abu Yusuf (d. 182/798) and Haytham ibn ‘Adi, Abu Hanifa began with kalam but came to see that its benefit was limited. According to Yahya ibn Shayba, he reflected: “If this were correct and good, the Companions and Followers would not have abandoned it” – and on this basis turned to fiqh. These narrations in the “Manaqib” genre suggest that after a certain point Abu Hanifa abandoned the practice

of kalam. However, this does not fully accord with his general approach in his treatises, where he emphasizes that the most excellent sciences are those studying the divine essence and attributes and refuting the doubts of deniers – defining this as “al-Fiqh al-Akbar” (Muhammad Yusuf, 2019:112).

In “al-‘Alim wa-l-Muta‘allim” he likens kalam to a defensive weapon, arguing that the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Companions had no need for it in their era, but that in later periods the need to defend oneself against theological opponents arose. As al-Ghazali also noted, when the engagement with kalam has as its goal the demonstration of theological truths through rational and textual evidence and the refutation of opponents – its study becomes a necessary obligation. Abu Hanifa’s views on kalam were connected precisely with these considerations (Muhammad Yusuf, 2019:112).

Abu Hanifa’s place in kalam is confirmed by numerous scholars. Al-Shafi‘i (d. 204/820) said: “People are in need of Muqatil ibn Sulayman in tafsir, of Zubayr ibn Abi Salama in poetry, and of Abu Hanifa in kalam.” ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Baghdadi records Abu Hanifa and al-Shafi‘i as the first mutakallimun and founders of madhhabs among the fiqh scholars. Abu Hafs ‘Umar al-Zanjani narrates that Abu Hanifa’s kalam sessions and debates with the Kharijites, Shi‘a, and Dahriyya continued even after his turn to fiqh (Abu Avvod, 2022:36).

The question of Abu Hanifa’s authorship. Abu Hanifa’s views have reached us through two channels: the treatises attributed to him, and views scattered through various books, biographical dictionaries, histories, and fiqh texts (Abu Avvod, 2022:38). Some have claimed – in both past and present – that Abu Hanifa wrote no works at all; among these claimants are certain Mu‘tazilites who attempted to claim him for their school, and some Orientalists who concurred with them. However, it would be wrong to say that the founder of the most widely followed madhhab in the Islamic world accomplished this without a single written work. In his era, works were written down by students on the basis of their teachers’ oral explanations, and Abu Hanifa composed his treatises in precisely this tradition. Historical sources openly state that his books existed: as recorded in “Tarikh Baghdad,” when Abu Muslim al-Mustamliy asked Yazid ibn Harun about Abu Hanifa and his works, the latter replied: “If you wish to learn fiqh, refer to them, for I have not seen a single scholar of fiqh who does not recommend consulting his views” (Oqilov, 2012:55).

“al-Fiqh al-Akbar.” This short and concise work reflects Abu Hanifa’s theological positions, transmitted through various chains of narration. Among these, the narrations through his son Hammad and through his student Abu Muti‘ Hakam ibn ‘Abdullah al-Balkhi are the most celebrated. The Hammad narration is known as “al-Fiqh al-Akbar” and the Balkhi narration as “al-Fiqh al-Absat.” Zahid al-Kawthari (d. 1371/1952) records the isnad of the copy in the ‘Arif Hikmat Library in Medina (no. 226) as: ‘Ali ibn Ahmad al-Farisi → Nusayr ibn Yahya → Muhammad ibn Muqatil al-Razi → ‘Isam ibn Yusuf → Hammad ibn Abi Hanifa → Abu Hanifa (Mag’nisavi, 2018:12). While the majority of Islamic scholars have accepted the attribution of this work to Abu Hanifa, they acknowledge that certain issues in the text had not yet become subjects of scholarly debate in his era. Ahmad Amin accepts the attribution but notes possible later additions. Shibli al-Nu‘mani cites the philosophical terms “jawhar” and “‘arad” and the disproportionately extensive treatment of the createdness of the Qur’an as examples.

Muhammad Abu Zahra argues that discussions such as the distinction between miracles (mu‘jiza), the charismatic gifts of the saints (karama), and the extraordinary deeds of unbelievers (istidraj) – matters discussed by kalam scholars only after the appearance of Sufism – could not have been authored by Abu Hanifa in their present form. Mawdudi similarly notes doubts regarding certain portions while affirming that the sections on the merits of the four caliphs, the status of the Companions, and the definition of faith are free of doubt, as these views appear also in “al-Wasiyya,” “al-Fiqh al-Absat,” and al-Tahawi’s “al-‘Aqida” (Mulla ‘Ali Qari, 1998). “al-Fiqh al-Akbar” has been translated into Urdu, Punjabi, German, and Turkish, and approximately fifteen commentaries have been written on it.

“al-Fiqh al-Absat,” “al-‘Alim wa-l-Muta‘allim,” “al-Risala,” and “al-Wasiyya.” “al-Fiqh al-Absat” was transmitted from Abu Hanifa through Abu Muti‘ Hakam ibn ‘Abdullah al-Balkhi. Its content is also attested in major Hanafi theological works including al-Nasafi’s “al-Tabsira” and Hafiziddin Abu-l-Barakat al-Nasafi’s “al-I‘timad.” Manuscript copies are preserved in the Fatih and Selim Agha libraries in Istanbul, and editions were published in Cairo in 1307/1890 and 1368/1949 (Abu Avvod, 2022:40). “al-‘Alim wa-l-Muta‘allim” consists of forty-three question-and-answer exchanges between Abu Hanifa and his student Abu Muqatil Hafs ibn Sallam al-Samarqandi; the chain of transmission runs through Imam al-Maturidi and the Pazdawi scholars and has been widely accepted (Abu Avvod, 2022:42). “al-Risala” is Abu Hanifa’s letter to

‘Uthman ibn Muslim al-Batti (d. 143/760) of Basra, responding to the charge of Murji’a membership; it is the only work among his treatises considered to have been written in his own hand (Abu Avvod, 2022:44). “al-Wasiyya” is his letter of final counsel to his friends and students, transmitted through Abu Muqatil al-Samarqandi; commentary on the version addressed to his son Hammad was written by ‘Uthman ibn Mustafa under the title “Zubdat al-Nasa’ih” (Abu Avvod, 2022:46).

DISCUSSION

The analysis confirms that Abu Hanifa’s scholarly legacy cannot be adequately understood through jurisprudence alone. His own definition of fiqh as “a person’s knowledge of what is beneficial and what is harmful to themselves” encompasses both its theological dimension (al-Fiqh al-Akbar) and its practical-legal dimension (Fiqh fi-l-Ahkam). When Abu Hanifa spoke of fiqh or its merits, he had in mind not only practical jurisprudence but also kalam. The claims that he paid no attention to kalam are therefore without foundation (Muhammad Yusuf, 2019:118).

The question of the authenticity of his treatises is a genuine and unresolved scholarly problem. The fact that works attributed to him have been mentioned in early Islamic scholarly literature is incontestable. The names of “al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” “al-‘Alim wa-l-Muta‘allim,” and “al-Risala” appear in the writings of Imam al-Maturidi, Ibn Nadim, the Pazdawi scholars, al-Bazzazi, and Katib Chalabi, providing strong evidence for their authenticity in principle (Oqilov, 2012:65). At the same time, the presence in the transmitted manuscripts of certain discussions that appear to belong to a later stage of kalam development raises legitimate questions about later editorial interventions, as documented by Abu Zahra and Shibli al-Nu‘mani (Abu Avvod, 2022:50). The scholarly consensus that the general attribution of the works to Abu Hanifa is established, while the question of specific later additions remains open, represents the most defensible position in the current state of scholarship.

CONCLUSION

Although Abu Hanifa is most widely celebrated as the founder of a school of jurisprudence, he is an eminent scholar who left an important imprint through his contributions to ‘aqida and kalam as well. His influence on the formation of the Maturidi

theological tradition – through his systematic, evidence-based approach to theological questions and his defense of Sunni positions against deviant sects – is documented in the scholarly literature from Imam al-Maturidi and the Pazdawi scholars onward (Oqilov, 2012; Muhammad Yusuf, 2019).

The view that Abu Hanifa wrote no works at all is not supported by the evidence and is scientifically untenable. The principal question is not whether his treatises exist but to what degree the surviving manuscripts correspond to Abu Hanifa’s original texts. When analyzed as a whole, these treatises contain no mutually contradictory positions; however, in some places one encounters concepts and discussions that were not yet in use during Abu Hanifa’s era, making it difficult to attribute all of the content in its entirety to him (Abu Avvod, 2022; Mag’nisavi, 2018; Mulla ‘Ali Qari, 1998). The deep study of Abu Hanifa’s legacy remains a scholarly imperative for the history of Islamic jurisprudence and theology, and for addressing the distortion of religious concepts in the contemporary context of globalization (Decree No. PQ-4802, 2020; Oqilov, 2012).

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