



المُنقِرُ حَيْثُ

The Reliever

By Ibn Nahwi

Rendered into English
By Suhaib Webb

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ
وَصَلِّی اللّٰهُمَّ سَیْدِنَا مُحَمَّدًا وَآلَهُ وَاصْحَابَهُ أَجْمَعِیْنَ

Ibn al-Nahawi: A Life of Knowledge, Revival, Rejection and Redemption

Ibn al-Nahāwī, also known as Abu al-Fadil, was born in 433 AH in Tozeur, a city in southwestern Tunisia. He excelled in his early religious studies and later traveled to important cities like Qayrawān, Şaqqāfis, and Cairo, driven by his strong interest in learning about Islamic knowledge.

Upon returning to his city, he faced a significant challenge when the governor unjustly took all his belongings. Despite this, Ibn al-Nahāwī courageously demanded his property back, but the governor remained unyielding. Faced with mounting difficulties, he made a pivotal decision in 493 AH to relocate with his family to Sijilmasa, a city in Morocco.

In Sijilmasa, he encountered further obstacles. Initially, he faced opposition at local mosques due to their practice of reserving exclusive spaces. He expressed his frustration by questioning the availability of any open mosques. A more substantial challenge arose when a local leader with authority expelled him from his teaching position within the city's mosques. This resulted from accusations that led to his removal from the educational environment.

هذا لدخولنا م زرفه

"He is introducing us to sciences that are unknown to us."

In the year 494, due to persistent pressure, Ibn al-Nahāwī made another migration, this time to Fez. However, this move did not bring an end to his challenges. His initial obstacle in Fez arose from governmental opposition to Sufism, particularly aimed at Imam al-Ghazzali's significant work, "Ihya 'Ulūm al-Dīn." Because Ibn al-Nahawi had a strong affinity for Sufism and adhered to al-Ghazzali's teachings, he found himself in direct conflict with this stance.

Notably, during this time, 'Ali bin Yūsuf, the ruler of Morocco, issued an order for the burning of al-Ghazzali's works. In the face of this action, Ibn al-Nahawi displayed remarkable courage by openly criticizing this directive. However, his bold stance came at a cost. He found himself in a predicament, facing difficulties as a result of his outspoken opposition.

Ibn al-Nahawi's life journey exemplifies his unwavering commitment to his beliefs and his fearless confrontation of challenges. His story serves as a testament to the pursuit of knowledge and the courage to stand up for one's convictions, even in the face of adversity.

A second challenge paralleled the one he confronted in Sijilmasa: once again, Ibn al-Nahawi found himself prohibited from teaching in Fez due to the content and methodology of his instruction. Scholars in Morocco had embraced the stringent approach of the Murabitūn. These scholars steadfastly adhered to the Maliki school, unswervingly adopting a singular perspective even in instances where alternatives existed. Moreover, their theological stance exhibited an even greater rigidity, encompassing either the ‘Ashari creed or none at all.

Fueled by his brilliance and shaped by the influence of his instructors—upon which I shall soon expound—Ibn al-Nahāwi implemented a teaching methodology that liberated the minds of his students from the confines of the Murābit’s austere pedagogy. At times, akin to his mentors, he ventured to formulate his own viewpoints, even if they diverged from the conventional tenets upheld by the adherents of the Maliki school. Consequently, scholars entrenched in the establishment accused him of deviating from “the tradition,” which led to his exclusion from the teaching sphere. Simultaneously, ardent proponents castigated him for his association with Sufism.

The challenges Ibn al-Nahāwi encountered in his interactions with individuals are deeply ingrained within his literary corpus. Reflecting this, in a particular poem, he expressed his lament:

لبست ثوب الرجا والناس رقدوا
فقمتم أشكو إلى مولاي ما أجد
وقلت ياسيدي يا منتهى أملي
يا من عليه بكشف الضر أعتمد

أشكو إليك أموراً أنت تعرفها
ما لي على حملها صبر وجلد
وقد مددت إليك يدي مشتكياً
”إليك يا خير من مدت إليه يدي

*In robe of hope, I donned, while others lay so still,
I rose and to my Lord, my heart’s distress did spill.
“Oh, my Master, in You, all my hopes are held tight,
On You, my solace rests, to overcome my plight.*

*I lay my troubles bare, to You, their depths unveiled,
I lack the fortitude, scars of battles that assailed.
With open palms, I’ve come, my supplication’s blaze,
To You, O Finest One, my fervent prayer obeys.”*

Beware of misconception: The resistance encountered by Ibn al-Nahawi from certain scholars and the general populace was regrettably misdirected and ill-informed. He did not embody a lost spirit, a rebellious maverick, an unbridled reformist, nor a proponent of deviance. His erudition transcended the grasp of the common, remaining too distilled for widespread assimilation.

Consequently, he functioned as a catalyst to the complacency of “scholars” and the lack of awareness among the masses. Lamentably, our community’s history bears witness to numerous instances of untutored yet charismatic leaders drawing large congregations, while revered scholars endure persecution, denunciation, and dismissal.

Abu ‘Ala al-M’ari wrote,

وَمَرَأً اُجْهًا فَاسِنٌ فَشَتْجُهُ حَتَّى ظَنَنْتُ أَنَّهُ
فَأَجِبًا! مَدَامُ فَضْزَقُصٌ وَوَأَسْفُ! مَظْهَرًا ضَ

When I witnessed ignorance in people spreading wide, I ignored it, until it thought me an ignorant guide. Oh, how astonishing! Many profess to be complete, Alas, how regretful! Imperfections they repeat.

Whether it’s Imams like Abu Hanifa, al-Bukhari, al-Tabari, Ibn Rushd, or Ibn al-Nahwai, our historical narrative is filled with the recurring theme of great scholars facing rejection from their contemporaries, only to be acknowledged and esteemed posthumously by the same people.

Three Profound Influences

Ibn al-Nahwai’s intellectual brilliance was deeply influenced by several mentors, yet three individuals left an indelible mark on him, significantly shaping his perspective toward tradition and pedagogy.

First Influence

Imam ‘Abdullah bin Yahya al-Shiqratasi - Hailing from the same city as Ibn al-Nahawi, Tozeur, Imam al-Shiqratasi emerged as a blossoming scholar. In 429 AH, he embarked on the Hajj pilgrimage, traveling to Medina to pay his respects at the Prophet’s resting place. En route, his deep affection for the Prophet (peace be upon him) moved him to compose a poem in honor of the revered figure. When he reached Medina, he reverently recited the poem while seated near the Prophet’s grave.

صِفَّةُ أَخٍ قَدْ أَصَفَ فِ صَفِّ ... صَفَا دَادٍ بِ شَبِّ وَ دَخِ
*Purest of creation, I’ve reverently described you
with depictions of love, pure and unadulterated*

أَسْأَرَمُ مِنْ مَشَى قَدَمٍ ... مِنْ أَيْرَةِ فَوْقِ أَسْهٍ وَ أَيْجِبِ
*Are you not the most honored creation to walk
on soft ground or traverse through mountains*

After his Hajj journey, Imam al-Shiqratisi paused in Egypt, where he engaged in battles against the crusaders and interacted with fellow scholars. By the time he returned to his homeland, his scholarly prowess had earned him recognition as an expert in language, literature, poetry, prophetic traditions, Islamic jurisprudence, and theology. He undertook the instruction of a significant number of students, including Ibn al-Nahwi. Imam Shiqratisi passed away in the year 466 AH. May Allah bestow His blessings upon him and elevate his status.

Second Influence

Abu al-Hasan, Ali bin Muhammad al-Lakhmi - Imam al-Lahkuhami hailed from Qarawan, a city situated in the inland desert of northern Tunisia. While his birth details remain unrecorded, extensive information is available about his life. He distinguished himself in his studies, eventually attaining the esteemed titles of “the scholar of his era” and “the scholar of Africa.” Despite his achievements, he was not spared from trials. During the “fitna” that plagued the late fifth century, he and many residents were compelled to abandon Qarawan and migrate. He eventually settled in Saqafis, a coastal city on the eastern shores of Tunis. There, al-Lakhmi resumed his role as an educator, instructing students like Ibn al-Nahawi. He excelled in jurisprudence, prophetic traditions, and linguistics. Esteemed scholars such as Al-Qad’i ‘Iyyad and Imam al-Dhahabi lauded him as a scholar of profound erudition endowed with keen intellect. His brilliance was so widely acknowledged that scholars composed verses in tribute to him, underscoring his scholarly stature.

واظب على نظر اللخمي إن له ... فضلا على غيره للناس قد بانا
يستحسن القول إن صحت أدلته ... ويوضح الحق تبياناً وفرقانا

“Pay good attention to al-Lakhmi, for his
superiority to others is obvious
He would accept an opinion when its evidence was strong
clarifying the truth, extensively and clearly

Al-Lakhmi was not solely tied to the Maliki school; rather, he displayed a discerning approach, sometimes embracing viewpoints he considered stronger based on supporting evidence. This disposition led al-‘Iyyad to note that he, “Held opinions divergent from the normative consensus.” His intellectual brilliance and scholarly pursuits were so remarkable that other scholars commented,

لقد مزقت قلبي سهام جفونها ... كما مزق اللخمي مذهب مالك

“My heart was torn to pieces by dry eyes
as al-Lakhmi tore the Maliki school

Al-Lakhmi's affiliation wasn't limited to the Maliki school; instead, he demonstrated a discerning approach, occasionally adopting viewpoints he found more robust with supporting evidence. Al-‘Iyyad observed that he, “Held opinions divergent from the normative consensus.” His exceptional intellectual prowess and dedication to scholarly pursuits were so noteworthy that other scholars remarked,

سألني جماعةٌ مختصَّةٌ را على مذهب الإمام مالك بن أنس، مبيناً لما به الفتوى، فأجبتُ سؤالهم مشيِّراً بـ "فيها" للمدونة، وبـ "الختيار" للنخعي، وبـ "الترجيح" لابن يونس، وبـ "الظهور" لابن رشد، وبـ "القول" للمازري

"A group of individuals approached me, requesting a succinct compilation that imparts the sound legal verdicts upheld by the school of Imam Malik bin Anas. In response, I relied upon the following works: The Mudawanna, the viewpoints of al-Lakhami, the inclinations of Ibn Yunus, the analyses of Ibn Rushd, and the stances of al-Mazari."

Al-Lakhami's explanation of Sahih al-Bukhari and his work, al-Tabsira, captivated Ibn al-Nahawi's interest and led him to become his mentor. When asked by al-Lakhami why he sought his guidance, Ibn al-Nahawi replied, "I have come to transcribe your work, al-Tabsira." Touched by this, Imam al-Lakhami responded,

إنما تريد أن تحملني في كَفِّ إلى المغرب
"You want to carry me in your pocket to the Maghrib."

In essence, Imam al-Lakhami poured his entire erudition into the text, making carrying the work akin to carrying his very essence. Imam al-Lakhami passed away in the year 478 AH, having reached the age of approximately eighty. May God bestow His blessings upon him.

Third Influence

Imam Muhammad bin 'Ali bin 'Umar al-Mazari - The lineage of Imam al-Mazari can be traced back to Mazara, a town and comune in the province of Trapani, located in southwestern Sicily, Italy. While there is some debate, Imam al-Dhahabi and others assert that al-Mazzari's family relocated from Mazzara during the Norman conquest of Sicily, ultimately settling in Mahdia, a city on the northeastern coast of Tunisia. It is within this setting that al-Mazzari is believed to have been born. Alternate accounts, like that of al-Qadi 'Iyyad, propose that al-Mazari was born in Italy, but the former assertion holds greater weight.

Imam al-Mazari was gifted with exceptional talents. He rose to the status of an independent jurist (mujtahid) in religious studies and was also highly esteemed as a reputable physician.

Imam al-Dhahabi wrote,

وكان ممن يفتي فيه كما يفتي في الفقه
"He issued opinions in medicine, just like he did in religious law."

Imam al-Mazzari passed away in 536 AH, leaving behind a profound impact and influence on the region. He authored several significant works and left an indelible mark on notable figures like Ibn Tumart, Ibn Rushd, and al-Qadi 'Iyyad. Despite his criticism of al-Ghazzali, his influence on Ibn al-Nahawi remained profound.

A shared trait among these eminent scholars was an unwavering commitment to truth, propelling them toward intellectual autonomy. While aligned with their respective schools, they were unafraid to let the pursuit of truth guide their path.

After his trials in Fez, Ibn al-Nahawi returned to his hometown and passed away in 513 AH. During this period, his reputation began to flourish, and scholars valued his contributions to Islamic knowledge and service. May Allah bless him, his family, and reward them abundantly.

Ibn al-Nahwai, a repository of knowledge and dedication, wasn't just a scholar, but a meticulous and devoted one. Anecdotes from his contemporaries suggest his supplications were often answered, especially in the face of injustices. While the truth of these stories might be debated, his reputation for exceptional supplications became legendary.

Thus, it was often said,

نعوذ بالله من دعوة ابن النحوي
We seek God's protection from Ibn al-Nahwai's supplications!

Abu Abbas al-Ghabrini described him as,

كان من العلماء العاملين وعلى سنن الصالحين مجاب الدعوة حاضراً مع الله في غالب أمره
A sincere scholar and worshiper, on the way of the righteous, whose supplications were answered and whose life was overcome by the presence of Allah.

Al-Qādi, 'Ali bin Hamād described Ibn al-Nahawi,

كان أبو الفضل ببلادنا كالغزالي في العراق علماً وعملاً
Abu Fadil in knowledge and worship in our lands is ilke al-Ghazzali is to Iraq

Al-Qadi 'Iyaad wrote about him,

كان من أهل العلم والفضل شديد الخوف من الله غالب حاله الحضور معه تعالى
He was a blessed person, intensely fearful of Allah, and most of his time was occupied with Allah's presence."

Those who had the privilege of meeting him and learning from him noticed his unwavering concentration during prayers, his sincere dedication to worship, his balanced approach to wealth, and his exceptional character marked by compassion and empathy. His earthly journey came to an end at the age of eighty-nine, in the year 513 AH. May Allah bless him and illuminate his final resting place.

The Poem

“Al-Munfarija” (The Reliever) is a poetic composition that addresses one of the most significant challenges to faith: the experience of trauma and suffering. Ibn al-Nahwai authored this work not as a mere theoretical exercise, but as a practitioner. Thus, his poem couples a profound theological reflection with the evocative expressions of faith, pain and hope. The qasida likely provided him solace and renewal, just as it continues to do for countless others who followed in his footsteps.

Organizational Framework

The poem starts by addressing the core principles of Islamic belief regarding trials and tribulations. It offers hope to both the intellect and the heart, providing tools to navigate through difficult times. It then delves into a deeper understanding of Allah’s divine plan, wisdom, and overarching omnipotence. This understanding helps us gain knowledge, trust in His decree, and find tranquility in the face of His decisions. The poem concludes by highlighting several concrete acts of devotion that act as defenses against the waves of anguish and sorrow.

I have taken on the task of crafting a metacommentary on this text, and with the grace of Allah, it is ready for publication. It’s important to note that this translation closely follows the Arabic meter used by Ibn Nahwi in the poem. As a result, the translation’s accuracy may be adjusted to retain the inherent poetic ambiguity that characterizes this genre. Interestingly, the Arabic meter used is “khabab,” reminiscent of the sound of a racing horse, reminding us that with Allah *جل جلاله*, we can swiftly overcome any trial.

Suhaib Webb

Washington DC

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الْمَنْفِرُ بِحَيْتِهِ

اُشْتِ دِيَا زَمَةٌ تُنْفِرُ جِي... قَدْ اذْنَلِيلُ كِبَالِ بَلَجِ

Oh (my) trial, Intensify my distress, (unravel thy plight),
For your night beckons the dawn's respite.

وَوَظَّ لَا مِ اللَّيْلِ لَهُ سُرُجٌ... حَتَّى يَغْشَاهُ أَبُو السُّرُجِ

In the dark abyss, a lantern's gleam,
Till the Eternal Lantern's light shall redeem.

وَسَحَابُ الْخَيْرِ لَهَا مَطَرٌ... فَ إِذَا جَاءَ إِلَّا بَانُ تَجِ

Clouds of goodness, shower their grace,
When relief appears, by Allah's embrace.

وَفَوَائِدُ مَوْلَانَا جَمَلٌ... لِسُرُوحِ الْاَنْفُسِ وَالْمُهَجِ

Our master's virtues, abundant and clear,
Soothing hearts and souls, dispelling fear.

وَلَهَا اَرْجٌ مُّحِيٌّ اَبَدًا... فَاقْصُدْ مَحْيَا ذَاكَ الْاَرْجِ

Its fragrance burns, a flame that endures,
Seek the life it brings, embrace its cures.

فَلَرَبَّتْنَا فَاصَالْمَحْيَا ... بِبِحُورِ الْمَوْجِ مِنَ اللَّجَجِ

How oft does life's essence overflow,
Like billows of waves from depths below.

وَالْخَلْقُ جَمِيعاً فِي يَدِهِ ... فَذُو سَعَةٍ وَذُو حَرَجٍ
وَنَزْلُهُمْ وَطُلُوعُهُمْ ... فَعَلَى دَرَكٍ وَعَلَى دَرَجٍ
وَمَعَايِشُهُمْ وَعَوَاقِبُهُمْ ... لَيْسَتْ فِي الْمَشْيِ عَلَى عِوَجٍ

All of creation rests in His hands,
Some in abundance, others in demanding lands.
Their arrivals and departures, in steps they tread,
Their livelihoods and destinies, on paths widespread.

حِكْمٌ نُسِجَتْ بِيَدِ حَكَمَتٍ ... ثُمَّ انْتَسَجَتْ بِالْمُنْتَسِجِ

Wisdom woven by a ruling decree,
Interlaced and spun, with skill and decree.

فَ إِذَا اقْتَصَدَتْ تُمَّ انْعَرَجَتْ فَبِمَقْتَصِدٍ وَبِمُنْعَرِجِ

Immutable proofs bear witness to these the marvels,
Established by the command of time immortal

شَهِدَتْ بِعَجَا تَبَّهَا حُجُجٌ قَامَتْ بِاِ لَأَمْرِ عَلَى الْحِجَجِ

Contentment in Allah's decree is right,
So lean towards its foundation in might

وَإِذَا انْفَتَحَتْ أَبْوَابٌ هُدًى فاعجل لِحِزَا بُنْيَاهَا وَلِج

When the gates of guidance swing wide,
Hasten to uncover its treasures deep inside.

وَإِذَا حَاوَلْتَ نِهَائِيَّهَا فَاحْذَرِ إِذْ ذَاكَ مِنَ الْعَرَجِ

When you seek its ultimate end, Beware,
for deviation is what it intends.

لِتَكُونَ مِنَ السُّبَّاقِ إِذَا مَا جِئْتَ إِلَى تِلْكَ الْفُرَجِ

To be among the forefront when you arrive,
At that moment of relief, strive to thrive.

فُهِنَاكَ الْعَى شُوبَهُجَّتْهُ... فَلِمُبَّتْهُجُولْمُنْتَهَجِ

For there lies life and its joyful embrace,
For the one who rejoices and seeks grace.

فَهِنَاكَ الْعَيْشُ وَبَهَجَّتْهُ فَلِمُبَّتْهُجِ وَلِمُنْتَهَجِ

Ignite your actions when they rest
Because when you move, they move.

وَمَعَاصِي اللَّهِ سَمَاجَتْهَا تَزْدَانُ لِذِي الْخُلُقِ السَّمِجِ

The disobedience of Allah; it is repugnant
Adorned for evil people,

وَلِطَاعَتِهِ وَصَبَاحَتِهَا أَنْوَارُ صَبَاحٍ مُنْبَلِجٍ

and in his obedience, in the dawn's embrace,
Morning's lights shimmer, with radiant grace

وَكِتَابِ اللَّهِ بَيَاضَتُهُ لِعُقُولِ النَّاسِ بِمُنْدَرَجٍ

The Qur'an and its study are clear to intelligent folks

وَخِيَارِ الْخَلْقِ هُدَايَتُهُمْ وَسِوَاهُمْ مِنْ هَمَجِ الْهَمَجِ

The best of people are those who (act on) guidance, and other
than that are insignificant, unworthy of your attention

فَإِذَا كُنْتَ الْمِقْدَامَ فَلَا تَجْزَعُ فِي الْحَرْبِ مِنَ الرَّهَجِ

When you are at the forefront, do not rush,
or waver in battle, due to unrest and confusion

وَإِذَا أَبْصَرْتَ مَنَارَ هُدَى فَاظْهَرِ فَرْدًا فَوْقَ الشَّجَرِ

When you see the signs of guidance, arise,
by yourself and (word) to reach its heights

وَإِذَا اشْتَاقَتْ نَفْسٌ وَجَدَتْ أَلَمًا بِالشَّوْقِ الْمُعْتَلِجِ

When the soul misses something,
it will suffer pain and disturbances

وثنًايا الحسنا ضاحكةً و تمام الضحك على الفلج

Wide, joyous, welcoming smile, laughing
Such that the spaces between the teeth will show°

وعياب الأسرار اجتمعت بأمانتها تحت الشرج

The cloaked secrets are bound and protected
underneath a thick (impenetrable cloth)

والرفق يدوم لصاحبه و الخرق يصير إلى الهرج

Balance constantly leads is companion
While imbalance guides to tribulations

صلوات الله على المهدي الهادي للناس إلى النهج

Allah's peace upon the guided,
who directs people to the straight path



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