

# Cross My Heart and Hope to Die: A Diachronic Examination of the Mutual Self-Cursing (*mubāhala*) in Islam

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This article examines the development of the ritual of *mubāhala*, a category of oaths and mutual self-cursing, during which two individuals seek to confirm the veracity of their creedal position by appealing to God's curse upon them. Based on a prophetic precedent embedded in Q 3:61 and reported as a challenge purportedly employed by the Companions Ibn Mas'ūd and Ibn 'Abbās, I argue that the practice of resorting to *mubāhala* in the Sunni tradition goes through two main phases of reinvention and legitimation before its reappearance in the contemporary Muslim world. The first phase belongs to the anti-Monist controversies of the seventh to ninth/thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, while the second appears among reformist scholars starting in the late eighteenth century.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last decade, a previously obscure ritual known as *mubāhala* and best described as self-cursing or imprecation has proliferated in the Muslim world. In August 2010, two Saudi scholars, the Shi'ī 'Alī 'Āl Muḥsin and the Sunni Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Barrāk, engaged in a *mubāhala* recorded and subsequently made available on the internet. The video shows these two men, along with a small group of their followers, heading to a desert space outside the King Fahd airport in Dammam. After efforts on the part of their entourage to dissuade the two men from performing the ritual, the two affirm their commitment to their respective creeds and pronounce the curse.<sup>1</sup> This incident came upon the heels of another recorded *mubāhala* between the Egyptian Shi'ī cleric Ḥasan Shiḥāta and the Kuwaiti Sunni cleric Būmishārī over the former's insults of 'Ā'isha, Prophet Muḥammad's wife, which surfaced on YouTube. In these two instances, and others that followed,<sup>2</sup> the ritual invocation of reciprocal self-cursing was generated by Sunni–Shi'ī polemics; however, the phenomenon of resorting to *mubāhala* seems to have spread significantly beyond purely sectarian disagreements.<sup>3</sup> The fallout between the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the founder of the “Civil Islam” movement Fethüllah Gülen resulted in the

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1. “Mubāhalat al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Barrāk wa-l-mu‘ammam ‘Alī 'Āl Muḥsin,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgz9jgrshM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgz9jgrshM). All internet sources were last accessed September 2017.

2. Such as that between the Saudi Sunni Muḥammad al-Kūs and the London-based Kuwaiti Shi'ī Yāsir al-Ḥabīb. “Mubāhalat al-Shaykh al-Kūs ma‘a Yāsir al-khabīth,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=up\\_pdHywiHs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=up_pdHywiHs).

3. A recent *mubāhala* took place between the Lebanese Salafī 'Abd al-Raḥmān Dimashqiyya and the Omani Ibādī Fayṣal al-Rawāḥī over the issue of *visio dei*. “Mubāhalat al-Shaykh al-Rawāḥī al-Ibādī ma‘a Dimashqiyya,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=o72CHO\\_V6xE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o72CHO_V6xE).

latter's challenging the former to a *mubāhala* on December 23, 2013.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Moroccan Salafi scholar ʿUmar al-Ḥaddūshī shirked a *mubāhala* challenge from a fellow Moroccan Salafi poetess who claimed he had falsely accused her of fornication (*qadhif*).<sup>5</sup> More recently, in March 2014, Abū Muḥammad al-ʿAdnānī, a commander in the self-styled Islamic State, challenged to a *mubāhala* his foe, a leader in the Qaeda-affiliated Nusra front known as Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shāmī, in response to the latter's branding members of the Islamic State as Khārijīs. The latter's eventual death was interpreted as God's intervention on behalf of the Islamic State.<sup>6</sup>

This article examines the historical development of summoning God's curse on oneself in hope of affirming a creedal point; the focus here is the emergence of *mubāhala* among Sunni practitioners.<sup>7</sup> The examination of the purported historical precedents shows that modern polemicists employing it and claiming to revive an established practice are refashioning this past to suit their own contemporary needs.

The ritual of *mubāhala* is reputedly derived from a prophetic example enshrined in the verse known as *āyat al-mubāhala* (Q 3:61).<sup>8</sup> In a *mubāhala*, two individuals seek to demonstrate the correctness of their claim via an appeal to God for intervention. The parties invoke the "curse of God" (*laʿnat Allāh*), a conditional fatal self-curse, with the anticipated outcome being the death and eternal damnation of the liar. As illustrated by its alternative name *mulāʿana*, *mubāhala* is a species of imprecation (*laʿn*).<sup>9</sup> It also operates as an oath; indeed, conditional curses share much with oaths, as they involve the resolution of a dispute. The *mubāhala* formula is exceptionally illustrative since it usually consists of an oath along the lines of "I swear that x" followed by the self-curse "God curse me if y."<sup>10</sup>

4. S. E. Cornell, "Erdoğan's Looming Downfall: Turkey at the Crossroads," *Middle East Quarterly* 21.2 (Spring 2014): [www.meforum.org/3767/erdogan-downfall](http://www.meforum.org/3767/erdogan-downfall).

5. "Umm Ādam al-Majāṭī . . . hurūb al-Ḥaddūshī min al-mubāhala," *Islām Maghribī* (November 1, 2013).

6. "The Flood of Mubahala," *Dābiq* 2 (Ramadan 1435/July 2014): 20–30.

7. I have located one report on the use of *mubāhala* within the early Shīʿī community the details of which are too vague to enable any forays into the procedures of the ritual. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Shalmaghānī (d. 322/934) requested a *mubāhala* from al-Ḥusayn b. Rawḥ al-Nawbakhtī (d. 326/938), the third representative of the Hidden Imam. The *mubāhala* stemmed from their disagreement on the representation of the Hidden Imam. The caliphal authorities later executed al-Shalmaghānī as a result of accusations of antinomianism, belief in reincarnation, and claims to divinity. Al-Ṭūsī's account of the event (*Kitāb al-Ghayba* [Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Fajr, 2002], 193) implies that al-Shalmaghānī's execution was a result of the *mubāhala*, but no details on the *mubāhala* ritual are given.

The use of ritual cursing against religious and political opponents in the Khārijī and Shīʿī traditions is beyond the scope of this study. The phenomenon remains largely unstudied in these traditions, especially in the pre-Safavid period. Louis Massignon's study (*La mubāhala de Médine et l'hyperdulie de Fatīma* [Paris: Librairie Orientale et Américaine, 1955]) remains the only overview on the topic. For the relationship between cursing and *barāʿa* (dissociation) in Shīʿism, see E. Kohlberg, "Barāʿa in Shīʿī Doctrine," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 139–75. On the Safavid practice of public cursing, see R. Stanfield-Johnson, "The Tabarraʿīyan and the Early Safavids," *Iranian Studies* 37.1 (2004): 47–71.

8. "To those who dispute with it in this matter after the knowledge which has come to you, say [to them]: 'Come now; let us call our sons and your sons, our wives and your wives, ourselves and yourselves. Then let us pray to Allah and so call down Allah's curse upon the liars.'" Quran translations herein are taken from M. Fakhry, *An Interpretation of the Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings. A Bilingual Edition* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2002).

9. Reports of *mubāhala* challenges consistently show that the two individuals use the radical *l-ʿn* (*naltaʿin*, *natalāʿan*) in addition to *b-h-l* (*natabāhal*).

10. For the overlap between the two and the qualification of curses as "conditional oaths," see E. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London: McMillan, 1926), 492.

## THE POTENCY OF CURSES AND IMPRECATIONS

Muslim scholars define cursing (*laʿn*) as the act of excluding someone from God’s mercy.<sup>11</sup> By uttering the curse, a person unleashes God’s judgment and potentially brings about the eternal damnation of its recipient. Imprecations in the Muslim tradition are, as the philosopher of language J. L. Austin stated, words that “do things.”<sup>12</sup> A curse is an illocution that performs an act rather than merely describes it. Previous studies of medieval European and ancient Near Eastern curses have focused on the applicability of speech act theory to the study of curses.<sup>13</sup> With regard to the Muslim world, there is a paucity of scholarship on curses and imprecations, and nothing has been written on self-cursing.

As described in the hadith corpus, a curse is active and predatory; the mere utterance of a curse formula brings about action, a change in the world. When uttered, a curse has to take effect on something or someone. We are told in a hadith, conveyed by Abū l-Dardāʾ (d. ca. 32/653), that the moment a curse is uttered, it ascends to paradise and, thus, the doors of paradise are irreparably shuttered. Thereupon, the curse returns to earth and if it does not find someone deserving, it alights on the utterer—a number of reports are recounted of animals dying as a result of someone’s curse. One report has a dog dying immediately after a man cursed him for passing in front of him during prayer.<sup>14</sup> Another tradition confirms this reification of the curse—that is, once uttered, it must alight on someone or something. The story relates that a man was perturbed by the wind blowing his cloak, so he cursed the garment. The Prophet then ordered him not to curse it because “whoever curses something undeserving of it, his curse will revert to him.”<sup>15</sup> An incident between two Companions of Muḥammad, ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Masʿūd (d. 32/653) and Abū ʿUbayd al-Thaqafi (d. 13/634), is illustrative of the belief in the potency and contagion of curses. We are told that while Ibn Masʿūd was visiting with Abū ʿUbayd, the latter’s wife cursed her tardy servant girl who was asked to fetch them drinks. Ibn Masʿūd stood up and left the house, ruminating while seated outside: “I fear that if the servant girl had an excuse, the curse would revert and I would be in its path (*fa-akūn bi-sabīlihā*).”<sup>16</sup>

11. See, for example, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, s.v. *l-ʿn*; al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāj sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj*, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth, 1972), 2: 67.

12. Austin classifies the curse as a “behabitive,” “the notion of reaction to people’s behavior and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else’s past conduct or imminent conduct.” Clearly, this classification is based on the understanding of “curses” in the mundane modern sense, as expressions of displeasure and anger. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), 159–60.

13. The most recent treatment of ancient Near Eastern and biblical curses is A. M. Kitz, *Cursed Are You! The Phenomenology of Cursing in Cuneiform and Hebrew Texts* (Winona Lakes, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014).

14. ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī, *Muṣannaʿ ʿAbd al-Razzāq*, ed. Ḥ. R. al-Aʿzamī, 11 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1970–1972), 2: 446. After witnessing a woman curse her camel, Muḥammad ordered his traveling companions to remove their baggage from the camel and to let the animal go because it had been cursed. This report illustrates not only the belief in the potency of curses, but also in their potential for contagion, affecting innocent bystanders.

15. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. Sh. al-Arnaʿūṭ and M. Qurra Ballī, 7 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 2009), 7: 270 (kitāb al-adab, bāb al-nahy ʿan al-laʿn).

16. Abū l-Maḥāsīn Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf b. Mūsā al-Malaṭī al-Ḥanafī, *al-Muʿtaṣar min al-mukhtaṣar min Mushkal al-āthār*, 2 vols. (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, n.d.), 2: 334–35. Al-Ṭūṣī similarly reports on the authority of the Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq that “if two were to exchange curses, then distance yourself from them, because this is a gathering shunned by the angels. Then say, ‘God, do not allow it access to me and place it upon the one who is deceitful in your religion, opposes your friend, and spreads mischief.’” Al-Ṭūṣī, *Amālī al-Ṭūṣī*, ed. B. al-Jaʿfarī and ʿA. A. al-Ghaffārī (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1960), 974. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1110/1699) preserves this report and a number of others that illustrate the predatory nature of cursing, narrating “from Abī ʿAbd Allāh from his father: once the curse leaves its utterer, it goes back and forth between him and the one he cursed to find

Partially as a result of this view of the predatory and contagious character of curses, numerous reports in the hadith and legal corpora exhibit a deep discomfort toward cursing. It is notable that prior to the utterance of the *mubāhala* invocation in the aforementioned recorded performance of *mubāhala* between ʿAl Muḥsin and al-Barrāk, two men from al-Barrāk's entourage attempted to dissuade them from proceeding. One specifically declared that he intended "to fill [the two disputants] with the fear of God" and, accordingly, to remind them of God's retribution.<sup>17</sup> Such attempts are informed by a number of prophetic reports indicative of a dislike, if not prohibition, of cursing, such as one in the most revered canonical books of Sunni hadith, the *Ṣaḥīḥs* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875), that equates cursing a fellow Muslim with murder.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the hadith scholar Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889) reports: "The Prophet said: Do not curse each other with God's curse, nor his wrath, nor hellfire."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the Prophet is reported to have said that those who curse (*laʿānūn*) will not attain the status of intercessors (*shufaʿāʿ*) or witnesses (*shuhadāʿ*) on judgment day.<sup>20</sup>

This disavowal of cursing stands in apparent contrast to the example of the Quran, the Prophet, and his Companions. On two occasions at least, Muḥammad is said to have resorted to imprecations. In the first case, the Prophet cursed others while supplicating (*qunūt*).<sup>21</sup> There is disagreement among religious scholars on whether the intended recipients of said curse were those involved in the persecution of Muslims in Mecca during Muḥammad's residence there, or a man from the tribe of Qurasyh who exposed his buttocks to him, or the murderers of his envoys at Biʿr Maʿūna in 4/625, among others.<sup>22</sup> In another case, Muḥammad invoked the wrath of God against the tribe of Muḍar under unknown circumstances. Both of

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access, otherwise it reverts to its utterer who deserved it. Be mindful when you curse a believer lest it befall you." *Al-Majlisī, Biḥār al-anwār al-jāmiʿa li-durar akhbār al-aʿimma al-aṭḥār*, 110 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Wafāʿ, 1983), 72: 208; 95: 349–50.

17. A similar act of *takhwīf* (putting the fear of God in someone) is strongly recommended if not commanded in the case of *liʿān*. See, for example, al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Umm*, ed. R. F. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, 11 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Wafāʿ, 2001), 6: 720–51; al-Khurashī, *Sharḥ mukhtaṣar Khalīl*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 4: 131–32. Al-Muzanī specifies that before the utterance of the final curse in the proceedings, the judge first says: "I fear that if you were not telling the truth, you will deserve God's curse" (*innī akhāfu in lam takun ṣadaqta an tabūʿa bi-laʿnat Allāh*). If the man persists and attempts to continue the ritual, the judge places his hand on his mouth before letting him proceed. The same is done when a woman performs her part in the ritual. Al-Muzanī, *Mukhtaṣar* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifā, 1990), 313–14.

18. *Laʿn al-muʾmin ka-qatlih*: al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. M. Z. al-Nāṣir, 9 vols. (Jedda: Dār Ṭawq al-Najā, 2001), 8: 26 (kitāb al-adab, bāb man kaffāra akhāh); Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. M. F. ʿAbd al-Bāqī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth, n.d.), 1: 104 (kitāb al-īmān, bāb ghlaz taḥrīm qatl al-insān nafsah); al-Dārimī, *Musnad al-Dārimī*, ed. H. S. A. al-Dārānī, 4 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-Mughnī, 2000), 3: 1526 (bāb al-tashdid ʿalā man qatala nafsah).

19. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 7: 268 (Kitāb al-adab, bāb al-naḥy ʿan al-laʿn). Also, "The Prophet forbade us to curse each other with God's curse or with his anger or with hellfire" (*nahāna rasūl Allāh ṣalla Allāh ʿalayh wa-sallam an natalāʿan bi-laʿnat Allāh aw-bi-ghaḍabihī aw-bi-l-nār*): al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Duʿāʿ*, ed. M. ʿA. ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), 1: 574; idem, *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*, ed. H. al-Salafī (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, 1994), 7: 249.

20. ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, 10: 412. A hadith similar in meaning is found in al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, ed. B. M. ʿAwwād, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb, 1998), 3: 439 (kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila, bāb mā jāʿa ʿan al-ṭaʿn wa-l-laʿn).

21. On *qunūt*, see N. Haider, *The Origins of the Shiʿa: Identity, Ritual, and Sacred Space in Eighth Century Kūfa* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 95–137.

22. Al-Naḥḥās, *al-Nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*, ed. M. ʿA. Muḥammad (Kuwait: Maktabat al-Falāḥ, 1987), 285–89; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fi taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. A. Shākir, 24 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 2000), 7: 199–202.

these narratives are connected ultimately with Q 3:128,<sup>23</sup> which most exegetes interpret as an injunction urging the Prophet to desist from cursing specific individuals. Additionally, to harmonize the two narratives on curses, many scholars argued that the prohibition is against cursing specific individuals, not a categorical prohibition. It is permissible to curse categories of sinners, including “the unjust,” “alcohol imbibers,” or the like,<sup>24</sup> but one should not curse individuals by name, including non-Muslims. At the heart of this stance is no doubt the fraught historical example of ‘Alī, Mu‘āwiya, and their followers cursing each other during and in the aftermath of the first Civil War (35–40/656–661), the Umayyad practice of cursing ‘Alī from the pulpits, and the emergence of the practice of *sabb* or *la‘n* of the Companions.<sup>25</sup> This stance is also partially the result of belief in the possibility of salvation by means of divine grace. A curse has the potential to preclude a sinner from the opportunity to repent and obtain forgiveness.<sup>26</sup>

#### THE PROPHETIC PRECEDENT FOR *MUBĀHALA*

In contrast to the above-mentioned examples of cursing initiated by Muḥammad and abrogated by revelation, his performance of the *mubāhala* was understood to be rooted in the injunction revealed in Q 3:61.<sup>27</sup> The *mubāhala* curse, which has received some scholarly attention, is connected to an event—a challenge between the Prophet and Christians from the South Arabian town of Najrān that took place in Medina in the year 10/632f.<sup>28</sup> Both Sunni and Shi‘i scholars agree that this original *mubāhala* pertained to a debate over the status of Jesus. When Muḥammad’s disagreement with the Najrān delegation reached an impasse, he received the Quranic injunction cited above for the two groups to pray humbly (*nabtahil*) in order to bring the curse of God (*la‘nat Allāh*) on the liars among them. After a respite, the Muslim and Christian delegations met at the Baqī‘ cemetery in Medina, where the Prophet was accompanied by his son-in-law ‘Alī, his daughter Fāṭima, and his grandsons al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn.<sup>29</sup> Afraid of the consequences of the challenge, the Christian delegation refused to participate in the ritual. Instead, it proposed to pay an annual tribute of suits of clothes and coats of armor. Had they risen to the Prophet’s *mubāhala* challenge, we are told, the Christians would have died and taken their seats in hell, and had they left without paying

23. “It is no business of yours whether Allah forgives them or punishes them; for they are indeed evil-doers!” Obviously, this verse was also connected to other events in Muḥammad’s career such as the events at the Battle of Uhūd. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 7: 194–99; M. J. Kister, “O God, Tighten Thy Grip on Muḍar. . . : Some Socio-Economic and Religious Aspects of an Early Ḥadīth,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24.3 (1981): 242–73.

24. B. F. al-Jawābira, *Marwiyyāt al-la‘n fī l-sunna* (Kuwait: Maktabat al-Mu‘allā, 1985). See, for example, Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion of *al-la‘na al-shar‘iyya* in *Raf‘ al-malām ‘an al-a‘imma al-a‘lām*, ed. ‘A. al-Jumayzī (Riyad: Dār al-‘Āshima, 2013), esp. 212–70.

25. See R. Mikati, “On the Identity of the Syrian *abdāl*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 80.1 (2017): 21–43, at 24–25, esp. nn. 12, 13, 14. This view of the power of the curse, and perhaps at times because of it, did not preclude Muslim scholars from harnessing it against those whom they perceived as the enemies of Islam. Niall Christie has noted the use of what he calls “suffixed curses” against the Franks. See his “The Origins of Suffixed Invocations of God’s Curse on the Franks in Muslim Sources for the Crusades,” *Arabica* 48 (2001): 254–66; idem, “‘Curses, Foiled Again!’ Further Research on Early Use of the *Ḥadālahum Allāh* Invocation during the Crusading Period,” *Arabica* 58 (2011): 561–70. The question of cursing non-Muslims comes up in *fatāwā* collections.

26. Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, ed. M. b. ‘A. M. Qāsim, 5 vols. ([Saudi Arabia]: privately printed, 1998), 1: 134–36.

27. “. . . call down Allah’s curse upon the liars.” See n. 8, above.

28. *EI2*, s.v. “Mubāhala” (W. Schmucker); Massignon, *Mubāhala de Médine*.

29. Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī: Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifā, 1959), 8: 95.

tribute, they would have returned to find neither property nor family.<sup>30</sup> Muslim scholars identify a number of other similar instances of Quranic challenges, such as that to the Jews of Medina in Q 2:94–95 and Q 62:6.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, it is the example of Q 3:61, in addition to the hadith tradition contextualizing it, that is seen as evidence of the legality of *mubāhala*.

One of the questions stemming from the prophetic precedent is whether *mubāhala* is solely the Prophet's prerogative or can be practiced by his followers as well. This is particularly the case in light of the above-mentioned discomfort with cursing and the existence of reports that the Prophet forbade Muslims to curse one other in God's name.<sup>32</sup> It must be noted, however, that there is no discussion of its permissibility prior to the seventh/thirteenth century. Some of the first scholars to discuss *mubāhala* include the Ḥanbalī Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who argued that *mubāhala* may be used against dissenters over creedal matters after they have been debated and all possibilities of dialogue have been exhausted.<sup>33</sup> This opinion is corroborated in the initial conversation of the above-noted recorded *mubāhala* between the two Saudi Sunni and Shī'ī scholars, which demonstrates that the interlocutors had reached an impasse in their intra-sectarian dialogue. In addition to its use by the Prophet, *mubāhala* was thus extended from inter-faith to intra-faith dialogue. In fact, as will be seen from the historical examples below, *mubāhala* was and still is typically resorted to during disputes within the Muslim community.

#### LEGAL USE OF THE CONDITIONAL SELF-CURSE, *LI'ĀN*

Despite the general dislike of cursing and imprecations, the Muslim legal tradition does allow for the use of curses, specifically a "May I be damned if I am lying" self-curse (*li'ān*), in cases of accusations of adultery without the requisite four witnesses. The accuser may resort to *li'ān* in order to avoid the requisite punishment of slander (*qadhf*).<sup>34</sup>

*Li'ān* was often used as a means of divorce or separation, unlike *mubāhala*, which meant that Muslim scholars have discussed the ritual and its use extensively, providing a detailed description of its procedure and its consequences. As a result, it provides a useful parallel to *mubāhala*. The *li'ān* ritual is also enshrined in a Quranic injunction.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, *li'ān* consists of an oath of innocence followed by a conditional curse and self-curse. In this case, the imprecation is ritualized and performed before a judge, preferably in a mosque. The ritual requires the judge to ask the husband to repeat four times "I testify by God that I am truthful

30. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ed. Sh. al-Arna'ūṭ et al., 45 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2001), 4: 99; al-Nasā'ī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. Ḥ. 'A. al-Shalabī, 10 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2001), 10: 41.

31. Q 2:94: "Say: If the abode of the Hereafter with Allah is for you alone to the exclusion of all other people, then wish for death if you are truthful." Q 62:6: "Say: O you who have adopted Judaism; if you claim to be Allah's friends, apart from other people, then do wish for death, if you are truthful."

32. See n. 19, above.

33. Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, ed. 'A. b. M. b. Qāsim, 35 vols. (Medina: Majma' al-Malik Fahd li-Tibā'at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 1995), 4: 82. The question of the permissibility of the *mubāhala* remains a source of confusion among Sunni Muslims today. See, for one of many examples of inquiries about its status, <http://islamqa.info/ar/198398>.

34. For a quick and simple overview of differences of opinion regarding *li'ān*, such as the Ḥanafī position that it is part oath, part testimony (*shahāda*) as opposed to purely an oath, see al-Juzayrī, *al-Fiqh 'alā al-madhāhib al-arba'a* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003), 5: 95–105. For an overview of the Twelver Shī'ī view, see al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 104: 174–80.

35. Q 24:6–9. According to *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature, these verses were revealed to address either 'Uwaymir b. al-Ḥārith's or Hilāl b. Umayya's accusation against his wife. The majority of jurists and exegetes lean toward the narration that 'Uwaymir and his wife were the subject of the verse. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 19: 110–15.

in charging her with adultery.”<sup>36</sup> According to al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820), the man is required to point at the woman accused of adultery when uttering the charge.<sup>37</sup> A dramatic warning follows: the judge or his assistant is instructed to cover the imprecator’s mouth after the fourth repetition in an effort to dissuade him from proceeding.<sup>38</sup> *Li‘ān* thus shares with *mubāhala* a gravity, as illustrated by its being considered “worse than stoning.”<sup>39</sup> If the husband chooses to proceed, he makes his fifth and final statement: “May the curse of God be upon me if I am lying.” The wife, in rejoinder, and to drop the charge,<sup>40</sup> performs a public imprecation that replicates the husband’s. The wife says four times: “I testify by God that he is lying in what he has charged me” and in her fifth statement she declares: “May the wrath of God be upon me if he is telling the truth.”<sup>41</sup> Some scholars also specify that the oath- and curse-pronouncer must perform it while standing.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the place of performance is specified—the area between the corner of the Ka‘ba (*rukṇ*) and the nearby Station of Abraham (*maqām*) in Mecca, the pulpit (*minbar*) of the main mosque in Medina, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and venerated places in other cities.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, it is considered preferable for the ritual to be performed on Friday at the time of the late afternoon prayer (*‘aṣr*) in the presence of four witnesses.<sup>44</sup> As will be seen below, both *li‘ān* and *mubāhala* share some ritual elements; moreover, both phenomena are conceptually linked as a form of trial by ordeal, i.e., a submission of judgment to the divinity.

#### THE PRACTICE OF THE SALAF

The legal tradition does not preserve as detailed discussion of the ritual of *mubāhala*. There are, however, examples from the historical tradition and tangential references to examples of debate resolution through recourse to *mubāhala* in hadith and legal works. The first cluster features individuals often regarded as the eponymous fathers of the Muslim legal and exegetical traditions. Their use of *mubāhala* is considered a precedent for later practitioners and proponents of the ritual.

One of the Companions of the Prophet, and an early convert to Islam, ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Mas‘ūd, challenged to a *mubāhala* those who disagreed with him on a legal and exegetical issue, the matter of the waiting period (*‘idda*) after a divorce or death and before remarriage for a pregnant woman. Ibn Mas‘ūd maintained the minority view that because Q 65:4 was revealed after Q 2:234, a pregnant woman’s waiting period before remarriage does not last

36. The fourfold repetition of the oath is explained as a replacement for the missing four witnesses required in a case of adultery. In the event the woman had conceived a child or is pregnant, the man adds, “the child or the pregnancy is the fruit of adultery.”

37. Al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Umm*, 6: 731.

38. The attempt by al-Barrāk’s entourage (n. 1, above) to dissuade the two men in engaging in the *mubāhala* parallels this gesture.

39. ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, 7: 120.

40. The woman’s part of the *li‘ān* ritual is a means to drop the charge of adultery and the subsequent punishment (*ḥadd*). If she refuses to participate in the ritual, then she must submit to the punishment, which for adultery is stoning to death.

41. Aḥmad b. al-Naqīb al-Miṣrī, *Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*, trans. N. H. M. Keller (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1991), 574–75.

42. Purportedly, Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) did not have specific requirements on the manner of the performance of the *li‘ān* ritual; both the husband and wife could perform the ritual while sitting or standing. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. M. Ṣ. al-Qamḥāwī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth, 1984), 5: 139.

43. Al-Shāfi‘ī adds that if the wife is Christian, the husband performs his part of the ritual in a mosque while she performs it in a church or any other place she venerates. Al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Umm*, 6: 726.

44. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth, 1999), 23: 330–36.

fourteen months, but rather ends with her delivery.<sup>45</sup> In order to harmonize his views with that of the majority, later exegetes argued that Ibn Mas‘ūd did not contend that Q 2:234 abrogates Q 65:4; rather that the former specifies the latter.<sup>46</sup>

Like Ibn Mas‘ūd, the Companion ‘Abd Allāh Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687), who is considered the most prominent of the first generation of exegetes and a figure aptly described as “mytho-historical,”<sup>47</sup> challenged unnamed opponents to a *mubāhala* on four separate occasions, primarily over juristic disputes. His challenge was over the interpretation of *āyat al-taḥīr* (Q 33:33). Ibn ‘Abbās interpreted this verse mentioning *ahl al-bayt* as pertaining specifically to the wives of Muḥammad.<sup>48</sup> In another case, Ibn ‘Abbās called for a *mubāhala* over one of the finer points of the practice of *zihār*, an oath through which a man likens his sexual partner to his mother’s back, thereby declaring his sexual abstention from her. Ibn ‘Abbās stated that there is no need for a man who pronounces the *zihār* formula to a slave girl for atonement (*kaffāra*). In this challenge, we are told, he asked to perform the ritual at the Ka‘ba by the Black Stone (*man shā’a bāhaltuhū ‘inda al-ḥajar al-aswad*).<sup>49</sup> Ibn ‘Abbās’s third challenge to a *mubāhala* was provoked by a case involving inheritance laws. Here, he vehemently opposed one of Muḥammad’s scribes and a reputed expert on inheritance, Zayd b. Thābit (d. 45/665f.), in his refusal to identify the paternal grandfather of a deceased person as one of the “fathers” identified in the Quran, who, as a result, would have received a share in his inheritance. Zayd’s position was particularly egregious to Ibn ‘Abbās owing to the fact that the former accepted to categorize the deceased’s grandchildren as children and thus include them in the inheritance.<sup>50</sup>

Ibn ‘Abbās’s most famous case of asking for a *mubāhala* focused on adjustment (*al-‘awl fī l-irth*) when the legally predetermined fractions of the inheritors’ shares exceeded the unit. Due to his demand for a *mubāhala*, the disagreement on whether ‘awl was legally permissible came to be known in the legal literature as “the case of the *mubāhala*” (*mas’alat al-mubāhala*).<sup>51</sup> According to al-Sarakhsī (d. 483/1090), Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), and other jurists, the disagreement stemmed from an inheritance case in which it was necessary to calculate the shares of a husband, a mother, and a full sister of the deceased woman.<sup>52</sup> The gist of Ibn ‘Abbās’s position was that no adjustment was to be made in the division (*al-masā’il lā ta‘ūl*). Rather than increasing the common denominator of the shares, Ibn ‘Abbās favored

45. Al-Māturīdī, *Tafsīr al-Māturīdī: Ta’wīlāt ahl al-sunna*, ed. M. Bāsallūm, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005), 10: 61.

46. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 2: 119; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. I. Aṭfīsh and A. al-Birdawnī, 20 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Maktaba al-Miṣriyya, 1964), 3: 175.

47. H. Berg, “The Isnād and the Production of Cultural Memory: Ibn ‘Abbās as a Case Study,” *Numen* 58 (2011): 259–83.

48. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī l-tafsīr bi-l-ma’thūr*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1993), 6: 603.

49. Al-Shaybānī, *Kitāb al-Aṣl*, ed. M. Būynūkālīn, 12 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2012), 5: 10; Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-Āthār*, ed. A. al-Afghānī (Haydarabad: Lajnat Iḥyā’ al-Ma‘ārif al-‘Uthmāniyya, 1936), 151–52; al-Dāraquṭnī, *Sunan*, ed. Sh. al-Arna’ūṭ et al., 5 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 2004), 4: 493; al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. M. A. ‘Aṭā, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2003), 7: 630.

50. Sa‘īd b. Maṣṣūr, *Sunan Sa‘īd b. Maṣṣūr*, ed. Ḥ. al-A‘zamī, 2 vols. (Bombay: al-Dār al-Salafiyya, 1982), 1: 64; al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 1: 100.

51. Later scholars reconstructed the precise nature of the disagreement from scattered reports on Ibn ‘Abbās’s pronouncements in the *Muṣannaf* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq (10: 254–58) and the *Sunan* of al-Bayhaqī (6: 414), among others.

52. The shares in this case are a half for the husband, a third for the mother, and a half for the full sister. Usually, the inheritance would have been divided into six shares but given that by this calculation one of the heirs would be deprived of his or her full share, the calculation was adjusted to be divided into eight shares. Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1968), 6: 282.

the reduction of the share of the sister.<sup>53</sup> When he was told that his opinion was at variance with the practice established by the caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 12–23/634–644) and approved by the majority of the Companions, Ibn ʿAbbās stated: “I wish that those who oppose me on the matter of the obligatory share (*farīda*) and I would meet and place our hands on the corner of the Kaʿba (*rukṅ*) in order that we supplicate God (*nabtaḥil*) and invoke God’s curse on the liars.”<sup>54</sup> The theologian and jurist al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) provides a version of this report in which the formula Ibn ʿAbbās purportedly uttered in his demand for a *mubāhala* was the same as that reportedly uttered by the Prophet in his challenge to the Christians of Najrān.<sup>55</sup>

Another early example of a reported challenge to a *mubāhala* that served as a precedent for later scholars features the Syrian jurist al-Awzāʿī (d. 157/774). While in Mecca performing his pilgrimage, al-Awzāʿī discussed in a study session with his Kufan peer Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) the matter of raising the hands during prayer (*rafʿ al-yadayn*). The latter justified his view of not raising one’s hands during prayer by referring to a hadith on the authority of the Kufan transmitter Yazīd b. Abī Ziyād (d. 136 or 137/753–55). Al-Awzāʿī retorted by pointing out that Yazīd was known to be a weak transmitter whose reports were contrary to the Sunna—in contrast, al-Awzāʿī relied on a report through a chain of reputedly trustworthy men that included al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742), Sālim b. ʿAbd Allāh (d. 106/725), and his father ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar (d. 73 or 74/692–94)—and then enraged, challenged Sufyān to a *mubāhala*, saying: “Let us go to the Station (*maqām*) of Abraham and curse each other (*naltaʿinu*) to see who is right.” Sufyān is reported to have declined the challenge with a smile.<sup>56</sup>

These cases of *mubāhala* represent a departure from the prophetic *mubāhala*. First, unlike Muḥammad’s challenge to the Christians of Najrān, these cases were exclusively intra-Muslim disagreements. Moreover, the disputes the scholars sought to resolve by means of *mubāhala* were primarily over legal and, to a lesser extent, exegetical interpretations, unlike the prophetic *mubāhala* which involved a fundamental creedal disagreement. Moreover, all three cases of *mubāhala* specified the Black Stone in Mecca and the space between it and the Station of Abraham as the locale of the ritual. In some cases, it was further indicated that the ritual involved placing one’s hand on the Black Stone while uttering the curse. Within Mecca, this space at the Kaʿba, known as *bayna al-rukṅ wa-l-maqām* (between the corner and the station), is particularly sacred. Two stones delimit it, the Black Stone and the Stone of Abraham, described as “two rubies from heaven.”<sup>57</sup> This space also has an eschatological significance: on this sacred spot, the awaited Mahdi will receive the oath of allegiance. As with prayers, oaths and curses performed at this spot are believed to be especially solemn.<sup>58</sup> According to one report, the Prophet restricted oath-taking in this place to important matters.<sup>59</sup>

53. Al-Sarakhsī, *al-Mabsūṭ*, 30 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1993), 29: 161.

54. ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaḥ*, 10: 255. The same statement appears in *Sunan Saʿīd b. Manṣūr*, 1: 61, where it is enlarged with the source of the report, ʿAṭāʾ (d. 114/732), telling Ibn ʿAbbās that if either of them were to die, all wealth would be divided according to their opponents’ opinion, at which point Ibn ʿAbbās asks for a *mubāhala*.

55. Al-Juwaynī, *Nihāyat al-maṭlab fī dirāyat al-madhhab*, ed. ʿA. M. al-Dīb, 20 vols. (Jedda: Dār al-Minhāj, 2007), 9: 142.

56. Al-Bayhaqī, *Sunan*, 2: 117; Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Faṭḥ al-bārī*, ed. M. b. ʿAbd al-Maqṣūd et al., 9 vols. (Medina: Maktabat al-Ghurabāʾ al-Athariyya, 1996), 6: 330.

57. See, for example, the section on “the corner is from heaven” and “those who were buried between the corner and the station,” in ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaḥ*, 5: 38, 119–20.

58. ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaḥ*, 6: 414.

59. *Lā yustahlaf bayna al-maqām wa-l-bayt fī l-shayʾ al-yasīr* (“oaths concerning trivial matters are not to be taken between the station and the house”). Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, ed. R. Ş. Mulḥis, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār

Interestingly, like Muḥammad's challenge, none of the *mubāhala* challenges ended with a performance of the ritual. They appear to be inconsequential verbal threats or conversational curses that these scholars uttered in a moment of heated debate.

Not all of our examples of early *mubāhala* were intended to resolve disputes among scholars—some belong to the world of Abbasid court intrigue. Unlike the cases discussed above, these were not harnessed by later scholars in their defense of the practice. One case takes place in the court of Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170–193/786–809). Having fallen out of favor, the governor of Medina, ʿAbd Allāh b. Muṣʿab al-Zubayrī (d. 184/800), accused Yaḥyā b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥasan (d. 187/803), a Medinan ʿAlid, of attempting to enlist him in a plot against the caliph. In order to clear himself, Yaḥyā challenged Ibn Muṣʿab to a *mubāhala* in the presence of the caliph. After both of them performed two short prayer units (*rakʿa*), Yaḥyā knelt, ordering Ibn Muṣʿab to do the same. He joined his right hand with that of Ibn Muṣʿab and intoned: “God, if you know that I have called on ʿAbd Allāh b. Muṣʿab to dissent”—at which point he placed his left hand on him and pointed to him—“then destroy me with your punishment and abandon me to my own strength and power. If not, then abandon him to his strength and power and destroy him with your punishment. Amen, Lord of the Worlds.” Yaḥyā then asked Ibn Muṣʿab to repeat the same curse formula. That same evening, the latter suffered stomach pain and died.<sup>60</sup>

This example of a *mubāhala* differs on a number of levels from the challenges of Ibn Masʿūd, Ibn ʿAbbās, and al-Awzāʿī. First and foremost, it was highly ritualized. A short prayer opened the procedure, during which the imprecators adopted specific postures: they knelt, each pointed out the other, and they interlaced their hands. The intoned formula was the one eventually adopted in the Shiʿī form of the ritual, which, we are told, was efficacious since ʿAbd Allāh b. Muṣʿab died in its aftermath, proving the legitimacy of the ʿAlid's claim.

Another variation on the *mubāhala* ritual in the context of Abbasid court intrigue is the caliph al-Wāthiq's (r. 227–232/842–847) challenge, in a moment of doubt over continuing the *miḥna*, to the policy's proponents (*urīdu an tubāhilūnī ʿalā dhālika*). In this case, each of the participants specified in his curse formula the manner of his punishment. Ibn Abī Duʿād “called on God to strike him with paralysis in this world, not to mention the torment of the next”; Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Malik al-Zayyāt “called on God to drive iron spikes through his hands in this world”; Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm “called on God to make him stink so badly in this world that his friends and relatives would flee from him”; Najāḥ “called on God to kill him by confining him in the smallest of prison cells”; while Ītākh chose death by drowning in the sea. The caliph ended the challenge by calling on “God to set him on fire if he was wrong.” Conveniently, all of their self-curses came to pass as they described.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to Shiʿī practice, the Sunni ritual of *mubāhala* did not involve actions performed in a specific order, as seen above, beyond the performative utterance of the curse.<sup>62</sup> The Shiʿī tradition also dictates that the ritual be preceded by three days of preparation that

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al-Andalus, 1983), 2: 28. Al-Azraqī notes that murder (*damm*) and wealth disputes (*māl ʿazīm*) are considered non-trivial (*ibid.*). The importance of this locality for oaths is also illustrated by the common expression, “If I were to swear an oath *bayna al-rukn wa-l-maqām*.” See, for example, al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, 4: 19 (kitāb al-walāʾ wa-l-hiba).

60. Al-Suyūṭī, *Tārīkh al-khulafāʾ*, ed. Ḥ. al-Dimirdāshī (Cairo: Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 2004), 212; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. A. Ibrāhīm, 11 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1968), 8: 248–50 (s.a. 176h).

61. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. ʿA. b. ʿA. al-Turkī (Riyadh: Hajar, n.d.), 646–51; ed. and Eng. trans. M. Cooperson, *The Virtues of the Imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, 2 vols. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2015), 2: 434–43.

62. The later Shiʿī jurists al-Majlisī and al-Hurr al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1104/1693) delineate the requirements of *mubāhala* under the rubrics “al-mulāʿana wa-l-mubāhala” and “the desirability of performing *mubāhala* against the enemy and

include fasting and ritual purification. Additionally, the ritual is to be performed in a special prayer space called *jabbān*,<sup>63</sup> preferably between dawn and sunrise. While the parties hold hands, interlocking their fingers, they intone: “God, Lord of the seven heavens and seven realms (*arḍīn*), Lord of the great throne—if so and so has rejected the truth (*jaḥada al-ḥaqq*) and denied it, then bring upon him a reckoning and painful torment from heaven.”<sup>64</sup>

#### “REVIVAL” OF A RITUAL IN AN AGE OF POLEMIC

The second cluster of transmitted *mubāhala* challenges belongs to the period from the seventh to the ninth/thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, in the charged atmosphere of so-called anti-Monist campaigns. The instigators were Ḥanbalī and Shāfi‘ī critics of Sufi Monists, the heirs of the Andalusian Sufi master Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240).<sup>65</sup> As Alexander Knysh points out, the routinization of the polemical discourse over the legacy of Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Monists meant that the polemic reached an impasse and devolved into clichéd formulae and catchphrases.<sup>66</sup> The emergence of the *mubāhala*, in this context, can be seen as an attempt to resolve this deadlock. The ritual was an escape from what had become a formulaic debate.<sup>67</sup>

The first *mubāhala* challenge from this period results from the confrontation between the Ḥanbalī reformer and jurist Ibn Taymiyya and some unnamed individuals who, in his estimation, believed in mystical union (*ittiḥādiyya*). Ibn Taymiyya does not report whether the ritual following the challenge was actually carried out, but he comments that his challenge was justified by the fact that the matter at hand concerned the foundations of faith (*uṣūl al-dīn*), thereby alluding to possible opposition to the practice among scholars. He does not include any detailed discussion of precedent or the legitimacy of the practice,<sup>68</sup> but this is dealt with briefly by one of his devoted students, the Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), in his legal handbook *Zād al-ma‘ād*. Based on prophetic precedent, he asserts that *mubāhala* may be used as a means of resolving debates over creedal issues. He also notes specifically that the Quran does not expressly prohibit the practice.<sup>69</sup> In another work dedicated to refuting what he deems to be the heretical views of Shi‘is, Sufis, and other “non-orthodox” groups, Ibn Qayyim argues for the necessity of using *mubāhala* against those who choose to argue in matters about which they are ignorant—in this case, those who question the hadith corpus.<sup>70</sup> Ibn Qayyim put his theory into practice, possibly emulating his mentor, and challenged those he described as negators (of the divine attributes) (*mu‘aṭṭila*) to

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opponent” respectively. Al-Majlisī, *Bihār*, 95: 349–50; al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, *Wasā’il al-shi‘a* (Qom: Mu’assasat Āl al-Bayt, 1984), 7: 134–36.

63. The specified location of *jabbān* could be either in the desert or the cemetery. I am more inclined to see it as a reference to a cemetery given that in Muhammad’s example, the two parties met in the Baqī‘ cemetery.

64. A similar formulation appears in al-Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 8: 249.

65. On the penetration of Sufism in Mamluk scholarly and lay society, see Éric Geoffroy, *Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers mameloukes et les premiers ottomans: Orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels* (Damascus: IFEA, 1995), esp. 89–107; Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999), esp. 202.

66. Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabī*, 275.

67. I have also noted the emergence of ordeals (sing. *miḥna*); however, an examination of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this essay. See, for example, Ibn Taymiyya’s request of an ordeal by fire to test the claims of Sufi Monists, in Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, 11: 459–68.

68. Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, 4: 82.

69. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Zād al-ma‘ād fi ḥady khayr al-‘ibād*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1994), 3: 561.

70. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawā‘iq al-muḥriqa*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2001), 1: 551.

the stations of supplication (*mawāqif al-ibtihāl*) in Mecca at the Kaʿba (*bayna al-rukn wa-l-maqām*). His appeal to perform the ritual at the Kaʿba has precedence, as we have seen. None of his opponents, however, is reported to have accepted the challenge.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, the Syrian exegete, traditionist, and historian Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) interprets certain Quranic passages as instances of *mubāhala* (Q 2:94–96; 19:75; 62:6) and asserts that experience has proven that God punishes the “lying party” within a year of the performance of the ritual.<sup>72</sup> However, he does not indicate whether this observation is based on his personal experience with *mubāhala* or that of others.

In the ninth/fifteenth century, other scholars—typically, the so-called “defenders of orthodoxy”—harness the *mubāhala* in their polemic in order to discredit their opponents. For instance, the prominent Egyptian traditionist and biographer Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1448) argues that the Prophet’s *mubāhala* challenge to the Christians of Najrān proves its permissibility. In his view, one may use *mubāhala* against an opponent who persists in his position even after given proof that he is wrong. He adduces the precedent of Ibn ʿAbbās, al-Awzāʿī, and an unnamed group of scholars who resorted to *mubāhala* as further proof that the practice is permissible, and notes that experience has shown that a liar who engages in a *mubāhala* meets his maker within a year of the event. Indeed, after the Christians of Najrān refused to engage in mutual cursing, the Prophet stated: “By the one who has my soul in his hands, had we mutually cursed each other, a year would not have passed with any of them still around. God would have destroyed the liars.”<sup>73</sup> Ibn Ḥajar’s conclusion regarding the inevitable demise of the liar in a *mubāhala* was not only based on his interpretation of the hadith corpus, but also on personal experience. In his commentary on *ḥadīth al-mubāhala*, Ibn Ḥajar recounts that he engaged in mutual self-cursing with a heretic (*shakhs yataʿaṣṣabu li-baʿd al-malāḥida*) who died two months later.<sup>74</sup> Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480), a student of Ibn Ḥajar, provides a fuller account.<sup>75</sup> He tells us that as a result of Ibn Ḥajar’s repeated attacks on a Sufi named Ibn al-Amin, one of the latter’s disciples, known as al-Shaykh Ṣafā, threatened to bring the matter to the Mamluk sultan al-Zāhir Barqūq (r. 784–791/1382–89; 792–801/1390–99). In order to avoid the involvement of the sultan and its potential ramifications, in Ramadan of 797/June 1395 Ibn Ḥajar challenged the man to a *mubāhala*, telling him that prominent scholars determined that whenever two individuals perform a *mubāhala*, one of them dies within a year. Ibn Ḥajar asked him to make the following statement: “If Ibn al-ʿArabī went astray, then curse me.” Ibn Ḥajar then stated: “If Ibn al-ʿArabī followed the right path, then curse me.” After these pronouncements, each went his own way. While visiting a Mamluk soldier two months later, in Dhū l-Qaʿda of 797/September 1395, Shaykh Ṣafā felt something crawling on his leg. By the time he arrived home, he had become blind. The following day, he died.<sup>76</sup> According to the account, in the

71. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Kāfiya al-shāfiya fi l-intiṣār li-l-firqa al-nājiya*, ed. M. ʿA. al-ʿArīfī et al. (Mecca: Dār ʿIlm al-Fawāʿid, 2007), 15.

72. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. S. b. M. b. Salāma, 8 vols. (Riyadh: Dār Ṭība, 1999), 1: 331–34, 8: 118.

73. Abū Bakr Ibn Mundhir al-Naysābūrī, *Tafsīr*, ed. S. b. M. al-Saʿd, 6 vols. (Medina: Dār al-Maʿāthir, 2002), 1: 231.

74. Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 8: 95.

75. Al-Biqāʿī, *Tanbih al-ghabī ilā takfīr Ibn al-ʿArabī*, ed. ʿA. al-Wakīl (Mecca: ʿAbbās Aḥmad al-Bāz, n.d.), 149–50. For more on this incident, see the biography of Ibn Ḥajar in al-Sakhāwī, *al-Jawāhir wa-l-durar fi tarjamat shaykh al-islām Ibn Ḥajar*, ed. I. B. ʿAbd al-Majīd (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1999), 1001–2.

76. Al-Taḥī al-Fāsi provides another shorter version of this story in *al-ʿIqd al-thamīn fi tārikh al-balad al-amīn*, ed. M. Ḥ. al-Fiḥqī et al., 2 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 1986), 2: 198.

enactment of the curse, the two parties did not perform any specific gestures but proceeded with a simple exchange of the short curse formula.

According to Ibn Ḥajar's students, even doubting the efficacy of a *mubāhala* leads to dire consequences. Nearly a century later, in a continuation of the disagreement over the status of the legacy of the Monists, the Ḥanafī jurist and son of a manumitted Mamluk Qāsim b. Quṭlūbaghā (d. 879/1474) showed his leanings toward the Monists. As a result, a certain al-Shams al-Sunbātī confronted him, arguing that the death of Ibn Ḥajar's opponent was a lesson (*ibra*) proving the falsehood of the Monists. Ibn Quṭlūbaghā dismissed al-Shams al-Sunbātī's claims and attributed the death of Ibn Ḥajar's opponent to coincidence. His denial of the connection between the *mubāhala* and the death of Shaykh Ṣafā, according to al-Sakhāwī, meant that he himself would be afflicted by the awesome power of the ritual. We are told that as a direct result of his arrogant denial of the efficacy of *mubāhala*, the formerly healthy Ibn Quṭlūbaghā was stricken with urinary retention. No medicine could save him from his illness. Rather than curing him, his medical treatment led to his affliction with another more embarrassing ailment, incontinence. To further his humiliation, and as a clear sign of his reputed error, Ibn Quṭlūbaghā was compelled to wear a glass bottle on his penis to cope with his incontinence.<sup>77</sup>

The above-mentioned student of Ibn Ḥajar, the Syrian Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī, spear-headed the controversy over the legacy of Ibn al-ʿArabī. He focused his attack on the work of the mystical poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235).<sup>78</sup> Possibly in emulation of his teacher, al-Biqā'ī gave his Sufi Monist opponents three options: debate, *mubāhala*, or duel.<sup>79</sup> They did not accept his challenge. At the end of a treatise against Ibn al-ʿArabī and Ibn al-Fāriḍ, entitled *Tanbīh al-ghabī ilā takfīr Ibn al-ʿArabī* (Warning the ignorant about the unbelief of Ibn al-ʿArabī), al-Biqā'ī reiterated his *mubāhala* challenge by cursing those who adhere to Ibn al-ʿArabī's views and, specifically, those who approve of his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*.<sup>80</sup>

The increasing importance of the *mubāhala* ritual in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also finds expression in a treatise devoted to its permissibility and conditions by the theologian and jurist Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawwānī al-Shāfi'ī (d. 918/1522). This work, which was cited by subsequent scholars, especially in the Indian subcontinent, does not appear to be extant.

The second phase in the use of *mubāhala* as a ritual for creedal dispute settlement belongs to the period of Islamic reform movements with a number of *mubāhala* performances arising in Wahhabi and Salafi revivalist circles.<sup>81</sup> In a letter to a fellow scholar from Najd, the eponym of the Wahhabi movement, Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), asked his oponents to provide proof for their claims on a number of issues central to Wahhabi thought based on the Quran, Sunna, or scholarly consensus. He then challenged them to a *mubāhala*, citing the examples of Ibn ʿAbbās and al-Awzā'ī as precedent.<sup>82</sup>

77. Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 12 vols. (Beirut: Manshūrāt Maktabat Dār al-Ḥayāt, n.d.), 6: 186.

78. Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, His Verse and His Shrine* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994), 56–75.

79. For al-Biqā'ī's controversy, see Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabī*, 208–22. On the call for *mubāhala*, see A. Ṣ. Maṣṣūr, *al-ʿAqā'id al-dīniyya fī Miṣr al-mamlūkiyya bayn al-islām wa-l-taṣawwuf* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l Kitāb, 2000), 145–47.

80. Al-Biqā'ī, *Tanbīh al-ghabī*, 149.

81. Frank Griffel, "What Do We Mean by 'Salafi'? Connecting Muḥammad ʿAbduh with Egypt's Nūr Party in Islam's Contemporary Intellectual History," *Die Welt des Islams* 55.2 (2015): 186–220; Henri Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafīyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 369–89.

82. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, *al-Durar al-saniyya fī l-ajwiba al-najdiyya*, ed. ʿA. b. M. b. Qāsim, 16 vols. ([Saudi Arabia]: privately printed, 1996), 1: 55.

A century later, two *mubāhala* calls arose in the Indian subcontinent among Ahl-i Ḥadīth reformers. The Indian reformist leader of the movement in Bhopal, Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1890), mentions in his commentary on al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* that he held a *mubāhala* with an unnamed opponent over the interpretation of divine attributes. He moreover alleges that his opponent died within a year as a result of the *mubāhala*.<sup>83</sup> Khān's participation in the ritual was based on his conviction that *mubāhala* was not a prophetic privilege.<sup>84</sup> Instead, he argues that *mubāhala* is a legitimate practice for Muslims when the debate is characterized by disbelief and obduracy. As proof, he adduces the debates of Ibn Qayyim and Ibn Ḥajar against those he calls "conformers" (*muqallida*). Anyone who argues against the legitimacy of the ritual is ignorant and lacks proof for his position. His remarks point to the existence of a debate about the status of this ritual.<sup>85</sup>

The Ahmadiyya Messiah Mīrzā Ghulām 'Alī al-Qādiyānī (d. 1908) was also reportedly involved in a *mubāhala*.<sup>86</sup> In the Ahmadi account, Mīrzā Ghulām issued in his book *Anjam-e atham* (published in 1897) a *mubāhala* challenge to the Indian scholars who opposed him. His call was largely ignored until the traditionalist-turned-Salafi and Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholar Thanā' Allāh al-Amritsarī (d. 1948), one of the scholars included in the list, took up the challenge.<sup>87</sup> According to his opponents, Mīrzā Ghulām's death approximately one year later from cholera is directly attributable to the *mubāhala* and proof of the falsehood of his interpretation of Muḥammad as seal of the Prophets.

#### CONCLUSION

In a study of curses in the Middle Ages, Lester Little made a connection between social and political upheaval and the revival of rituals of malediction based on biblical precedent.<sup>88</sup> The same holds for the use of *mubāhala* in the Sunni tradition. The first phase of *mubāhala* revival, or "reinvention," was during the period of anti-Monist controversy. It is noteworthy that the scholars then demanding a *mubāhala* were either Ḥanbalī or Shāfi'ī, raising the question as to whether there is a correlation between *madhhab* adherence and willingness to resort to this ritual. The second phase was similarly one during which early modern reformist scholars, traditionalists, and others who saw themselves as heirs to this generation of anti-Monists—e.g., Wahhabis and Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement adherents—contended with one

83. Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, *ʿAwn al-bārī fi ḥall adillat al-Bukhārī* (Aleppo: Dār al-Rashīd, 1984), 4: 562. On the occasion of his pilgrimage, Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān penned a work on the virtues of Mecca. Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, *Riḥlat al-Ṣiddīq ilā l-balad al-ʿatīq* (Qatar: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-Dār al-Shuʿūn al-Islāmiyya, 2007).

84. On Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, see Claudia Preckel, "Islamische Bildungsnetzwerke und Gelehrtenkultur im Indien des 19. Jahrhunderts: Muḥammad Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Ḥān (st. 1890) und die Entstehung der Ahl-e ḥadīṭ-Bewegung in Bhopal," Ph.D. thesis, Ruhr Universität Bochum 2005. For more information on his response to being labeled a Wahhabi by the British authorities, see Seema Alavi, "Ṣiddīq Hasan Khan (1832–90) and the Creation of a Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the 19th Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54 (2011): 1–38, esp. 8–12. More generally on the Ahl-i Ḥadīth, see Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 268–96.

85. Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, *Ḥusn al-uswā bi-mā thabata min Allāh wa-rasūlihī fi l-niswa*, ed. M. al-Khān and M. Sittū (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 1981), 62.

86. Muḥammad Anwar Shāh al-Kashmīrī al-Diyubandī, *Fayḍ al-bārī ʿalā Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. M. B. ʿA. al-Mīrtahī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2005), 5: 140.

87. Both parties dispute the chronology and details of the *mubāhala*. For the Ahmadi account, see <http://www.irshad.org/exposed/mubahalac.php>. For the Sunni traditionalist and Salafi account, see I. I. Zāhīr, *al-Qādiyāniyya: Dirāsāt wa-taḥlīl*, 16th ed. (Lahore: Idārat Tarjumān al-Sunna, 1983), 154–59.

88. L. Little, *Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993).

another. The last phase is represented by the contemporary use of *mubāhala* among strict conservatives and Islamist groups, including ISIS. This phase builds on the anti-Monist and early modern reformist legacy and again arises out of tensions, mainly but not exclusively between Sunnis and Shi'is and between various militant groups active in the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars. The *mubāhala* performances here are largely a refashioning, if not an outright recreation, of a practice with limited precedent seemingly better established in the Shi'ī tradition, for the so-called precedents upon which these scholars are relying were never actual enactments of the *mubāhala* ritual, but non-actualized verbal threats.