

Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī

Jan Thiele

Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales, Consejo Superior de
Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid, Spain

Abstract

Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī is considered to be an important Muslim theologian, who significantly contributed to the development of Ash‘arite teaching and its consolidation as one of the most influential schools of Sunni *kalām*. *Kalām* is a form of theology which – as opposed to scripture-based approaches – attempts to demonstrate its doctrinal claims by rational arguments and proofs. Al-Bāqillānī belonged to the third generation of Ash‘arites, and he studied with several disciples of the school’s founder. He broadened the conceptual framework of Ash‘arite theology, specifically under the impact of his debates with his intellectual rivals from the Mu‘tazilite school of *kalām*.

Life and Works

Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī was an Ash‘arite theologian, Mālikite jurist, and legal methodologist. He was born in Basra, in most likelihood at the beginning of the 940s. The precise date of his birth is unknown. During al-Bāqillānī’s lifetime, the ‘Abbāsid caliphs remained in titular authority only – in fact, they had lost their actual power. Significant territories of their former state had been ceded to regional dynasties: the Fāṭimids took control over North Africa and Egypt, the Qarmatians over the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and the caliphs in Baghdad delegated their political power to the Būyids, a dynasty of non-Arab soldiers. Although Fāṭimids, Qarmatians, and Būyids were all Shiites, these dynasties had no common agenda, but rather they were political rivals. Only the Fāṭimids and the Qarmatians were in fact religiopolitical movements with an explicit Ismā‘īlī identity, whereas the Būyids were somewhat concerned with adopting a policy of denominational balance. This stance was also of some importance for al-Bāqillānī’s intellectual career.

Al-Bāqillānī studied *kalām* theology with two disciples of the founder of the Ash‘arite school, Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 935–6), namely, with Abū l-Ḥasan al-Bāhilī (d. c. 980) and Abū ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Mujāhid (d. 980–1). In law, al-Bāqillānī studied under the leading Baghdadi Mālikite scholar Abū Bakr al-Abharī (d. 985). Al-Bāqillānī received his formation in *kalām* together with Abū Bakr Ibn Fūrak (d.

1015) and Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāʾīnī (d. 1027). All three became leading representatives of Ashʿarism and contributed to the consolidation and dissemination of the school. While both Ibn Fūrak and al-Isfarāʾīnī moved to Nīshāpūr, al-Bāqillānī was invited around 970–971 to the Būyid court of Shīrāz to teach the son of the *amīr* ʿAḍud al-Dawla (d. 983). This is remarkable because, on the one hand, al-Bāqillānī belonged to the Sunni community, and on the other hand, the Būyids rather tended to patronize Muʿtazilite theology, that is, the major theological rivals of Ashʿarism. However, the administrative and intellectual elite at the Būyid court was a quite pluralistic environment and included an important number of Imāmī Shiites, Zaydīs, Zoroastrians, Nestorians, and Jews. After a couple of years in Shīrāz, al-Bāqillānī moved to Baghdad, where he gave lectures at the al-Manṣūr mosque. At some point, he was appointed judge, and in 982–983 he was even sent on a diplomatic mission to the Byzantine court in Constantinople.

Al-Bāqillānī had several prominent students, including the traditionist Abū Dharr al-Harawī (d. 1043) as well as Abū Jaʿfar al-Simnānī (d. 1052), a Ḥanafite scholar, who became judge in Aleppo and Mosul and an authority in Ashʿarite *kalām*. Several of al-Bāqillānī's students, including Abū ʿImrān al-Fāsī (d. 1037 or 1039) and Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Adharī (d. 1031–2), transmitted al-Bāqillānī's teachings to the North African city of Kairouan, and their study circles significantly contributed to the dissemination of Ashʿarism in the Islamic west (Idris 1953; Fórneas Besteiro 1977–1979; Ansari and Thiele 2018). Al-Bāqillānī died in Baghdad in 1013 (Allard 1965; Ibish 1965).

As compared to his two prominent fellow theologians Ibn Fūrak and al-Isfarāʾīnī, comparatively much of al-Bāqillānī's work has survived to the present day (still, this means that the vast majority of his body of work is missing; see ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd 1993–1994; Gimaret 2009; Schmidtke 2011). These texts include a comprehensive manual of theological polemics, entitled *Kitāb al-Tamhīd* (“The introduction”). It contains an important refutation of Christian beliefs, actually one of the most detailed that has survived from the earlier period of Islam (Thomas 2008). The *Kitāb al-Tamhīd* is dedicated to an *amīr*, in all likelihood al-Bāqillānī's Būyid patron in Shīrāz, and was consequently one of his early works, written around 970. The early dating of the book is coherent with its general style: it actually bears witness to al-Bāqillānī's attempt to systematically organize the teachings of his predecessors. However, systematic coherence remains the main purpose of the work, while it does not contain the more independently minded theories that al-Bāqillānī developed in his mature works (Allard 1965; Gimaret 1970, 1980, 2009; Eichner 2009). A shorter theological treatise that focuses on disputed questions between Ashʿarism and the Muʿtazila circulated under two titles, *al-Risāla al-ḥurra* (“The excellent epistle”?) and *al-Inṣāf fī-mā yajibu ʿtiqāduhu wa-lā yajūzu l-jahl bihi* (“The just treatment of what is obligatory to know and what cannot be ignored”). Much more important and comprehensive in length is his main work in theology entitled *Hidāyat al-mustarshidīn* (“Guide for those seeking right guidance”). Originally, the *Hidāya* must have been a monumental work, comprising at least 16 volumes, but only four have as yet been rediscovered. It is in this text that al-Bāqillānī expounded his original teachings and sometimes revised or further developed a number of al-Ashʿarī's positions, including some he had still defended in earlier works (Gimaret 2009; Schmidtke 2011). An additional later work in theology is a refutation of the doctrines of Ismāʿīlī and Hellenizing philosophy (*falsafa*), entitled *Kashf al-asrār*

fi l-radd ‘alā l-Bāṭiniyya (“Unveiling of the secrets to refute the Bāṭiniyya”) (Ansari and Thiele forthcoming). Al-Bāqillānī also wrote works on the Qur’ān, in which he specifically addressed the scripture’s miraculous nature and its faithful transmission, namely, *I‘jāz al-Qur’ān* (“The inimitability of the Qur’ān”) and *al-Intiṣār li-naql al-Qur’ān* (“The victory of the Qur’ān’s transmission”). A major work in the field of legal methodology, which has partially survived, is the short version of his *al-Taqrīb wa-l-irshād* (“The approximation and guide”) (Chaumont 1994).

Teaching

Al-Bāqillānī did not follow a consistent teaching throughout his life. This is indicated by the reports of later Ash‘arite thinkers on the one hand and corroborated by textual evidence in al-Bāqillānī’s surviving works on the other. It is specifically in his later works that he develops or even revises doctrines and arguments of Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī, the founder and eponym of his school of *kalām*. In addition, al-Bāqillānī contributed to broadening the conceptual framework of the Ash‘arite doctrine.

To a significant extent, al-Bāqillānī developed the system of Ash‘arite doctrines in response to his debates with his intellectual rivals from the Mu‘tazilite school of *kalām*. Yet, he also appears to have been preoccupied with the doctrines of Hellenizing philosophy – something that can be observed in his *Kashf al-asrār*. An additional indication for al-Bāqillānī’s engagement with *falsafa* could be the fact that he appeals to the notion of “necessarily existent” (*wājib al-wujūd*) that was to become a central element in Avicennian metaphysics. Al-Bāqillānī does so in his *Hidāyat al-mustarshidīn*. This work can be thus considered as an early example of a *kalām* text that applies the notion to God and equates it with the meaning of “eternal” (*qadīm*) (Thiele 2016b).

From his rival *kalām* theologians among the Mu‘tazilite school of theology, al-Bāqillānī borrowed the so-called notion of “states” (*aḥwāl*). As we are told by later reports, he only came to adopt it in his later writings, while he expressed his categorical rejection of the theory of *aḥwāl* in his early works. This is actually echoed in his surviving treatises: the *Tamhīd* still contains an extensive refutation of the theory, whereas the later *Hidāya* and *Kashf al-asrār* both appeal to the theory (Ansari and Thiele forthcoming).

The notion of *ḥāl* was introduced into the ontology of *kalām* to conceive of the properties attributed to beings – and more specifically to conceive of the attributes by which God is described. With this concept, *kalām* theologians attempted to overcome an ontology that only admits the reality of actually existing “entities” or “things” (*dhawāt*, sing. *dhāt* or *ashyā’*, sing. *shay’*). Their understanding of “entities” or “things” included God, atoms (*jawāhir*, sing. *jawhar*) – that is, indivisible particles from which bodies can be composed – and accidents (*‘arāḍ*, sing. *‘araḍ*) that inhere in atoms and determine their changeable qualities. Yet, this ontology set significant limitations to the theologians’ metaphysical system: since predications about beings, such as “knowing” or “living,” were not believed to reflect any reality, their system did not provide any coherent framework that allowed to account for how properties of beings can be mentally conceived and known.

In his *Tamhīd*, al-Bāqillānī still considered that there is actually no need to posit

that such predications as “being knowing” or “being living” express any reality in themselves. Rather, he criticizes the Mu‘tazilites’ concept of *ahwāl* as self-contradictory. And, in fact, his objections were not entirely pointless. For the Mu‘tazilites, a central idea behind positing the *ahwāl* was to admit some form of reality that is not described by existence. This allowed for admitting that descriptions of God as eternally “living” or “knowing” reflect an actual reality, yet without positing the existence of some co-eternal entity of “life” or “knowledge” in God – something that could be interpreted as positing multiplicity in Him and that would consequently violate the idea of monotheism. However, as a corollary of their doctrine that only “entities” or “things” can be known, the Mu‘tazilites had to concede that these neither existing nor non-existing *ahwāl* cannot be knowable. This opened the room for one of al-Bāqillānī’s principal points of critique: how is it possible, he asks in the *Tamhīd*, to establish the *ahwāl* as an ontological reality if they cannot be known?

The reason why al-Bāqillānī eventually revoked his rejection of the *ahwāl* was what he must have considered as an incoherence in al-Ash‘arī’s proof for the existence of co-eternal entitative attributes (*ṣifāt*, sing. *ṣifa*) in God – a doctrine that Ash‘arite theologians defended against the Mu‘tazilite denial of such entities. To support his theory, al-Ash‘arī had argued that predications such as “he is living” or “he is knowing” always express the same meaning or truth (*ḥaqīqa*), irrespective of who is subject to predication: if we affirm that man is living and knowing by virtue of entities, namely, “life” and “knowledge,” the same must be true for God. Consequently, we cannot describe Him as eternally living and knowing without affirming a co-eternal entity of “life” and “knowledge” that subsists in Him. Now, al-Bāqillānī objected that this claim can only be valid if “being living” and “life” – and similarly “being knowing” and “knowledge” – express distinct realities. His reasoning behind this was that if “being living” referred to an entity of “life” and “being knowing” to an entity of “knowledge” that subsists in God, al-Ash‘arī’s claim would be circular reasoning, because one would attempt to prove the existence of God’s entitative “life” and “knowledge” by themselves.

Al-Bāqillānī describes the link between the reality expressed by our attributing properties (“being living”) and the presence of entities in the object of predication (“life”) as a reciprocal correlation (*ta‘alluq*). Entities of “life” are the cause (*illa*) for somebody’s “being living,” and, vice versa, somebody’s “being living” is evidence (*dalāla*) for an entity of “life” that subsists in somebody described as “living,” such that they necessarily entail each other. Now positing that “being living” and “being knowing” on the one hand and entities of “life” and “knowledge” on the other hand are distinct realities raised the question of the ontological status of the properties “living” and “knowing.” They could not possibly refer to entities, because this would mean that they are caused by other entities, and this would result in an infinite regress of causal sequences. Al-Bāqillānī therefore appealed to the Mu‘tazilite conceptualization of the properties of beings as *ahwāl*, that is, neither existing nor non-existing realities. He followed the Mu‘tazilites’ analysis insofar as he agreed that *ahwāl* are not entities or things, but he nevertheless rejected the Mu‘tazilites’ conclusion that for this very reason, *ahwāl* cannot be known. Al-Bāqillānī actually argued on the basis of the Ash‘arite school’s epistemology: unlike the Mu‘tazilites, the Ash‘arites denied that which can be known must necessarily be entities. Al-Bāqillānī could consequently conclude that *ahwāl* are knowable and coherently claim that it was precisely by virtue of these *ahwāl*

that things can be distinguished, or, on the contrary, said to be alike (Thiele 2016a, d; Ansari and Thiele 2018).

It was not only in order to resolve problems related to the nature of God's attributes that al-Bāqillānī relied on the theory of *ahwāl*. Rather, the concept was also part of his reflections on the human act, which he developed within the framework of al-Ash'arī's theory. This theory departed from essentially two principles, namely, that (a) God's power is absolute and man's acts must consequently be determined by Him and that (b) even in the absence of freedom of action, it can be rationally established that man is morally accountable for what he does. The latter claim was supported by appealing to our intuition that two types of human acts have to be distinguished: "necessary" acts like shivering, whose omission is beyond our capacity and deliberate decision and acts we do in accordance with our willing and wanting them to happen. These latter acts are denoted by al-Ash'arī as "acquisition" (*kasb* or *iktisāb*). Because "necessary" acts imply our weakness, he argued that the contrary must be true for non-necessary – or "acquired" – acts: they involve the agent's capacity or "power" (*quwwa* or *qudra*) to act. In some instances, al-Ash'arī tied acts performed on account of an instance of "power" to the agent's "will" (*irādā*). That is, only acts that involve our "power" occur in accordance with our will, whereas "necessary" acts like shivering happen against our will. Since both "necessary" and "acquired" acts are determined by God, it was completely irrelevant for al-Ash'arī's conception of moral responsibility that man does not cause his acts to happen. Rather, he considered that nobody can be blamed for his "necessary" acts such as shivering, but that man is responsible for his "acquired" acts, because he performs them voluntarily.

Al-Bāqillānī followed the major lines of this reasoning, but he revised some aspects of the theory of "acquisition." He thereby attempted to achieve a greater coherency of the theory and also to address a number of questions that remained unresolved by al-Ash'arī himself. For example, he explicitly rejects the assumption that our acting intentionally depends in any way on our will being involved. For him, this claim is established by the fact that we sometimes fail to exercise our will – which is always the case with "necessary acts." As a logical corollary, he goes on to argue that our incapacity to do what we want reveals a lack of power. Consequently, the opposite must be true for all other acts: they occur by virtue of man's power.

It was specifically in the *Hidāya* that al-Bāqillānī eventually went a step further and asked about the precise function of man's power in his performing "acquired" acts. Al-Ash'arī had already posited its presence whenever we "acquire" acts, but he contented himself to affirm that there is only conjunction between man's power and his "acquired" acts, while he appears to have denied any correlation between that power and the "acquired" act. Against this claim, al-Bāqillānī posited that man's power really has an effect (*ta'thīr*). He even proposes three different approaches to explaining how our power affects our acting.

His first explanation as to the effectiveness of human power is in line with his conception of the reality that underlies our predications about beings: as mentioned above, he believed that they reflect a *ḥāl* – in the case of agents of "acquired" acts the feature of "being powerful" (*kawnuhu qādiran*). The *ḥāl* is, according to al-Bāqillānī, caused by the agent's power, and it is precisely this feature that distinguishes him from compelled agents, who have no power and are consequently not responsible for their doing. The

mere distinction between powerful agents and others who are not did not, by itself, sufficiently explain why acts created by God should be considered as ours. Al-Bāqillānī addressed this issue by claiming that it is by virtue of their power that agents are related (*yata ‘allaqu*) to their “acquired” acts. He claims that acts do not have to be created by man himself in order to suppose a relation between his power and his acts. Rather, al-Bāqillānī describes the nature of this relation by drawing a parallel to sensual perception, which, as he argues, implies a relation between the one who perceives and the object perceived. This correlation does however not mean that perception causes the perceived object to exist. Finally, al-Bāqillānī adds a further explanation as to how man’s power affects his acting. In this approach, he specifically addresses the question of man’s individual moral responsibility. Here, he appears to be specifically concerned to resolve the logical problem that man can hardly be held responsible for the *existence* of acts if he does not create them himself. Al-Bāqillānī therefore proposes an alternative solution as to what is subject to moral assessment in our acting. He suggests that man determines an attribute (i.e., a *ḥāl*) of his “acquired” acts by virtue of his power and that it is to this very attribute that God’s command, prohibition, reward, and punishment relate (Thiele 2016c).

Cross-References

- Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā’ī
- Kalām
- Metaphysics
- Philosophy, Arabic
- Theology Versus Philosophy in the Arab World

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- al-Bāqillānī. (1947). *al-Tamhīd fī l-radd ‘alā l-mulḥida al-mu‘aṭṭila wa-l-rāfiḍa wa-l-khawārij wa-l-mu‘tazila* (eds.: Maḥmūd Muḥammad Khudayrī and Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Hādī Abū Rīda). Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī.
- al-Bāqillānī. (1957). *al-Tamhīd* (ed.: Richard J. McCarthy). Beirut: Librairie Orientale.
- al-Bāqillānī. (1993). *al-Taqrīb wa-l-irshād (al-ṣaḡhīr)* (3 vols.; ed.: ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. ‘Alī Abū Zunayd). Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla.
- al-Bāqillānī. (2004). *al-Intiṣār li-l-Qurān* (ed.: ‘Umar Ḥasan al-Qiyyām). Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla.
- al-Bāqillānī. (2010). *al-Insāf fī-mā yajibu ‘tiqāduhu wa-lā yajūzu l-jahl bihi* (5th ed., ed.: Muḥammad Zāhid b. al-Ḥasan al-Kawtharī). Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī.

al-Bāqillānī. (n.d.). *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* (ed.: al-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr). Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif.

Secondary Sources

- ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, B. (1993–1994). Muḥāwala bibliyūghrafiyya fī āthār al-Bāqillānī. *al-Mashriq*, 67, 461–490; 68, 153–174.
- Allard, M. (1965). *Le problème des attributs divins dans la doctrine d'al-Aṣ‘arī et de ses premiers grands disciples*. Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique.
- Ansari, H., & Thiele, J. (2018). Discussing al-Bāqillānī's theology in the Maghrib: ‘Abd al-Jalīl b. Abī Bakr al-Dībājī al-Raba‘ī's *al-Tasdīd fī sharḥ al-Tamhīd*. *al-Qanṭara*, 39(1), 127–168. <https://doi.org/10.3989/alqantara.2018.005>.
- Ansari, H., & Thiele, J. (forthcoming). Al-Bāqillānī's *Kashf al-asrār*: An Early Ash‘arite Refutation of Ismā‘īlī and Hellenizing Philosophy.
- Chaumont, É. (1994). Bāqillānī, théologien ash‘arite et usūliste mālikite, contre les légistes à propos de *Yijtihād* et de l'accord unanime de la communauté. *Studia Islamica*, 79, 79–102. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595837>.
- Eichner, H. (2009). *The Post-Avicennian Philosophical Tradition and Islamic Orthodoxy: Philosophical and Theological summae in Context*. Habilitation Thesis, Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg.
- Fórneas Besteiro, J. M. (1977–1979). *Al-Tamhīd* de al-Bāqillānī y su transmisión en al-Andalus. *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos: Sección Hebreo*, 26–28(2), 433–440.
- Gimaret, D. (1970). La théorie des *aḥwāl* d'Abū Hāšim al-Ġubbā‘ī d'après des sources aš‘arites. *Journal Asiatique*, 258, 47–86.
- Gimaret, D. (1980). *Théories de l'acte humain en théologie musulmane*. Paris: J. Vrin.
- Gimaret, D. (2009). Un extrait de la *Hidāya* d'Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī: le *Kitāb at-tawallud*, réfutation de la thèse mu‘tazilite de la génération des actes. *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 58, 259–313. <https://doi.org/10.4000/beo.76>.
- Ibish, Y. (1965). Life and works of al-Bāqillānī. *Islamic Studies*, 4(3), 225–236. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20832805>.
- Idris, H. R. (1953). Essai sur la diffusion de l'aš‘arisme en Ifrīqiya. *Les Cahiers de Tunisie*, 2, 126–140.
- Schmidtke, S. (2011). Early Aš‘arite theology: Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) and his *Hidāyat al-mustaršidīn*, *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 60, 39–71. <https://doi.org/10.4000/beo.384>.

- Thiele, J. (2016a). Abū Hāshim al-Jubbāʿī's (d. 321/933) theory of "states" (*aḥwāl*) and its adaption by Ashʿarite theologians. In S. Schmidtke (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Islamic theology* (pp. 364–383). Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199696703.013.021>.
- Thiele, J. (2016b). Between Cordoba and Nīsābūr: The emergence and consolidation of Ashʿarism (fourth–fifth/tenth–eleventh century). In S. Schmidtke (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Islamic theology* (pp. 225–241). Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199696703.013.45>.
- Thiele, J. (2016c). Conceptions of self-determination in fourth/tenth-century Muslim theology: al-Bāqillānī's theory of human acts in its historical context. *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 26(2), 245–269. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0957423916000035>.
- Thiele, J. (2016d). Ḥāl (theory of "states" in theology). In K. Fleet, G. Krämer, D. Matringe, J. Nawas, & E. Rowson (Eds.), *The encyclopaedia of Islam. Three* (Vol. 2016–5, pp. 67–71). Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30220.
- Thomas, D. (2008). *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004169357.i-392>

Post-Print of: J. Thiele (2019). Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī. In H. Lagerlund (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1151-5_607-1. This work was funded by the Spanish Government's Ramón y Cajal programme (RYC-2015-18346).