

Written and oral aspects of an early Wahnābī epistle

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Abstract

Epistles of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahnāb, the founder of the Wahnābī movement in eighteenth-century Najd, are preserved in profusion in Wahnābī sources. One of them is a short epistle, clearly intended for a lay audience, that sets out basic Wahnābī dogma in terms of four principles (*qawā‘id*). This epistle is preserved by Wahnābī sources in several different versions; none of them are dated, making it hard to establish how the text evolved over time. The present study is based on two dated external witnesses to the text of the epistle. One is taken from an unpublished Baṣran refutation of 1745, and is translated here. The other is found in a Yemeni chronicle under the events of the year 1212/1797f. Thanks to these two fixed points, it is possible to construct a plausible account of the evolution of the text over the intervening decades. From this it is clear that while written transmission played a significant part in the evolution of the text, some of the more dramatic changes are the result of oral intervention. Moreover the role of orality is confirmed by evidence suggesting the extensive use of the epistle in oral settings, an illustration of the strong concern of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahnāb to spread his message among the laity.

Keywords: Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Qabbānī, Laity, Luṭf Allāh Jaḥḥāf, Monotheism, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahnāb, Orality, Polytheism, Wahnābism, Written transmission

Introduction

In his monograph on the idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam, Gez Hawting makes the following observation: “Probably the clearest understanding from within Islam that the Quranic attacks on the *mushrikūn* and *kuffār* were directed at people who regarded themselves as monotheists is manifested in the writings of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahnāb (d. 1206/1792)”.¹ One short work in which Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahnāb displays this understanding with relentless clarity is an epistle setting out four basic principles (*qawā‘id*). In the version of the epistle that will concern us most, these principles relate consistently to the polytheists of the time of the Prophet. To sum them up in a few lines, the first principle is that the unbelievers against whom the Prophet fought believed God to have created the world and to control all aspects of it. The second is that they

1 G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: from Polemic to History* (Cambridge, 1999), 63, with a translation of a typical passage from one of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahnāb’s many works.

believed in lesser beings only because of the closeness of these beings to God. The third is that they prayed to the righteous only to get closer to God themselves. The fourth is that they did at least worship God alone when they were in dire straits. The clear implication is that if the Prophet fought the unbelievers of his day, despite the limited nature of their polytheism, then how much more must it be the duty of the believers of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s time to fight their polytheistic contemporaries, whose unbelief is as bad or worse. My concern here is not, however, with the theological content of the epistle but rather with the roles of writing and orality in the differentiation of its text and the practical uses to which it was put.²

There are many texts of the epistle to be found in Wahhābī sources – I have collected over thirty – but the version I translate here comes from outside the Wahhābī tradition. It dates from as early as 1158/1745 – about the time when Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb formed his alliance with Muḥammad ibn Sa‘ūd, and in consequence moved from ‘Uyayna to Dir‘iyya where they established what we call the first Sa‘ūdī state. The version is found in a Princeton manuscript containing five short works composed or copied by a contemporary Shāfi‘ite scholar of Baṣra, Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Qabbānī.³ The last of these works is an anti-Wahhābī tract by Qabbānī himself;⁴ he gives it the title *Naqḍ qawā‘id al-ḍalāl wa-rafḍ ‘aqā‘id al-ḍullāl*,⁵ and states that he completed it (*farighu minhu*) on 22 Jumādā I, 1158⁶ – that is, on or about 22 June 1745. Embarrassingly, I was unaware of the existence of this codex at the time I wrote on the origins of Wahhābism.⁷ Later stumbling on Mach’s catalogue entries for this and another anti-Wahhābī work contained in the same codex,⁸ I started to use the text of the epistle as an exercise for students taking my graduate seminar. This led one of them, Samer Traboulsi, to edit and publish the other anti-Wahhābī text found in the manuscript – a very early refutation of Wahhābism

2 I have given talks related to this paper in three settings: in the Islamic Studies Lecture Series at Georgetown University on 4 November 2010, at the Columbia University Seminar on Religion and Writing on 29 January 2013 and at a colloquium on Controversial Figures in Islamic History at the University of Leiden on 9 February 2013. My thanks are due to Emma Gannagé, Dagmar Riedel and Petra Sijpesteijn for inviting me, and to all who commented on my talks.

3 For this manuscript, namely Princeton, Yahuda 3788, see R. Mach, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts (Yahuda Section) in the Garrett Collection, Princeton University Library* (Princeton, 1977), p. 62 no. 686, p. 140 no. 1601, p. 155 no. 1796 and p. 225 nos 2635–6; S. Traboulsi, “An early refutation of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s reformist views”, *Die Welt des Islams* 42, 2002, 377–9. For Qabbānī’s Shāfi‘ite allegiance, see Yahuda 3788, ff. 27b.4, 60a.20.

4 Yahuda 3788, ff. 41b–63a.

5 Yahuda 3788, f. 42a.3.

6 Yahuda 3788, f. 63a.19. Qabbānī describes the copy as an autograph (*tamma l-kitāb bi-qalam mu‘allifihī*, f. 63a.23); the date on which he made our copy could in principle be later than the date on which he finished the work, but the other items in the volume show Qabbānī at work between 1156/1744 and 1159/1746 (see Traboulsi, “Early refutation”, 377–9). The first folio of the manuscript, which is not part of the first item, bears a note that seems to be dated Sha‘bān 1160/1747, although unfortunately the year could also be read as 1260/1844.

7 M. Cook, “On the origins of Wahhābism”, *JRAS* Third Series, 2, 1992, 191–202.

8 Mach, *Catalogue*, 225 nos. 2635–6.

composed by an Egyptian scholar resident in Mecca and writing in 1156/1743, a couple of years before Qabbānī composed his *Naqd*.⁹

Qabbānī's *Naqd* deserves a study in its own right, and is to receive it from Traboulsi. Here, our concern is solely with its value as a witness to the text of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's epistle, which it is Qabbānī's objective to refute. He begins by informing his readers that an ignorant, misguided man (*raġul jāhil ḡāll*) called Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb has appeared (*qad kharaja*) in 'Uyayna – in the region of Yamāma, the land of the liar Musaylima.¹⁰ This man claims absolute *ijtihād*, and declares the entire Muḥammadan community to be in error (*ḡallala al-umma al-Muḥammadiyya bi-asrihā*).¹¹ Qabbānī goes on to say that in the present year – which he specifies as 1158 – an epistle of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's had reached “our land” (*bilādunā*, in other words Baṣra); he had written it as a way of discriminating (*lil-tafriqa*) between Muslims and polytheists, claiming it to be based on four principles (*qawā'id*). Qabbānī then follows a standard commentarial format: he quotes the text a few lines at a time, overlines the quotation and proceeds to refute it.¹² There is no indication that he omits any passages. Some years ago I collected the scattered quotations into a continuous text and prepared this edition for publication, but it has yet to appear. Here, instead, I provide a translation.

Translation

This translation of Qabbānī's text of the epistle is only lightly annotated. No systematic comparison is attempted with other texts of the epistle, but I make occasional reference to a Wahhābī version that is close to Qabbānī's.¹³ I take a few

- 9 This is the text published in Traboulsi, “Early refutation”, 391–405.
- 10 Qabbānī clearly thinks of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb as in 'Uyayna, not Dir'iyya (compare the address *yā ahl al-'Uyayna*, Yahuda 3788, ff. 44b.11, 46b.2, 57a.8 and cf. 42b.5). This suggests that the move to Dir'iyya as a result of the alliance with Muḥammad ibn Sa'ūd had either not yet taken place or was not yet known to Qabbānī. The date of the move is in fact uncertain: in the Bombay lithograph of Ibn Ghannām's chronicle it is dated “around 1257” (*fī ḡudūd sanat sab' wa-khamsīn ba'da l-mi'atayn wal-alif*), where 1257/1841f is presumably a copyist's error for 1157/1744f (Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḡat al-afkār* (Bombay, 1337), II, 4.20); Fākhirī dates it to the beginning of either 1158/1745 or 1159/1746 (*al-Akhhbār al-Najdiyya*, ed. 'A.Y. al-Shibl (n.p. n.d.), 106.1, and see the editor's footnote thereto); and Ibn Bishr gives 1158/1745f (*'Unwān al-majd fī ta'rīkh Najd* (Riyadh, n.d.), I, 15.14; but the editor of Fākhirī in his footnote quotes 1157/1744f from a manuscript of Ibn Bishr's work). Within this range, from 1157/1744 to 1159/1746, the fact that Qabbānī in *Jumādā I* of 1158/1745 thought of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb as still in 'Uyayna is a reason to favour a relatively late date for the move. It also casts doubt on the statement of Ibn Bishr that it was *after* his move to Dir'iyya that Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb began to send out his epistles (*thumma inna l-shaykh kātaba ahl al-buldān*, *'Unwān al-majd*, I, 14.17).
- 11 Yahuda 3788, f. 41b.10. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb himself denies any claim to *ijtihād* in an early epistle (Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḡat al-afkār*, I, 146.5).
- 12 He describes his polemic as a *sharḥ* (Yahuda 3788, f. 42a.1), though it is a uniformly hostile one.
- 13 'Abdallāh ibn Sa'd al-Ruwayshid, *al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb fī l-ta'rīkh* (Cairo, 1984), II, 9–11. I know of two other Wahhābī printings with texts identical or very close to Ruwayshid's.

liberties with tenses to make clear the distinction between the unbelievers of the time of the Prophet and the polytheists of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s own day, and I omit the standard blessings that often – but by no means always – follow mention of God and the Prophet. Also omitted is the initial invocation of the name of God, but this omission is Qabbānī’s.¹⁴ For Quranic verses I make extensive use of Arberry’s translation.

§1. Here are four principles mentioned by God in the unambiguous (*muḥkam*) part of His Book through which a man may come to know the confession that there is no god but God and distinguish between Muslims and polytheists. So reflect on them with your whole heart and attend to them with your understanding, for they are of great benefit.

§2. The first [principle] is that God mentions that the unbelievers of the time of the Messenger of God, whom he killed and whose property he deemed licit, used to affirm that only God creates, without the participation in this of any angel close [to the Throne] or prophet sent [with a message], and that only God provides sustenance, that only God raises up and puts down, that He alone is the lord of the heavens and the Earth, and that all the prophets and the righteous (*ṣāliḥūn*) are His slaves, subject to His power and will. Once you understand that this was understood by the unbelievers and that they did not deny it, [then] when a polytheist asks you for proof of it [i.e. of the fact that the unbelievers affirmed that only God creates, etc.], recite to him His words regarding the unbelievers: *Say: “Whose is the earth, and whoso is in it, if you have knowledge?” They will say: “God’s.” Say: “Will you not then remember?”* – the two verses (Q. 23:84f). And God says in the Sūra of Yūnus: *Say: “Who provides you out of heaven and earth, or who possesses hearing and sight, and who brings forth the living from the dead and brings forth the dead from the living, and who directs the affair?” They will surely say: “God.” Then say: “Will you not be godfearing?”* (Q. 10:31).

§3. When you have understood this [principle] thoroughly – but where is anyone who understands it? Most people do not understand it! Then get to know the second [principle], which is that despite their knowledge of what has already been stated, they believed in angels, prophets and saints (*awliyā’*) for the sake of God (*min jihat Allāh*) on account of their closeness to Him. When the polytheist has trouble accepting (*tabā’ada*)¹⁵ this [principle], and says, “How can it be that the unbelievers loved the saints and the righteous because of their closeness to Him, and believed in them?”, then recite to him His words regarding those who believed in the angels: *Upon the day when He shall muster them all together, then He shall say to the angels, “Was it you these were serving?” They shall say, “Glory be to Thee! Thou art our Protector, apart from them; nay rather, they were serving the jinn; most of them believed in them”* (Q. 34:40f). And He said regarding belief in prophets: *The Messiah, son*

14 He opens his quotation of the epistle with the words *qāla ba’da l-basmala* (Yahuda 3788, f. 42a.10).

15 Presumably in the sense of *istab’ada*.

of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away; his mother was a just woman; they both ate food. [Behold, how We make clear the signs to them; then behold, how they perverted are! Say: “Do you serve, apart from God, that which cannot hurt or profit you? God is the All-hearing, the All-knowing] – the two verses (Q. 5:75f).¹⁶ And He said regarding belief in saints: *Those they call upon are themselves seeking the means to come to their Lord, which of them shall be nearer; they hope for His mercy, and fear His chastisement. [Surely thy Lord’s chastisement is a thing to beware of]* – the verse (Q. 17:57).

§4. When you have understood this principle, namely that they drew near to the righteous on account of their nearness to God, and the polytheist says to you: “I seek [blessings] only from God, but I look to [attain] closeness [to God] by having recourse to them and calling upon them”, then understand the third [principle], which is that God mentions in His Book that the unbelievers did not call upon the righteous except in seeking nearness to God {and seeking [their] intercession [with God]; this apart, they affirm that only God directs the affair, as already stated}.¹⁷ So when the polytheist asks for the proof of this, then recite to him: *They serve, apart from God, what hurts them not neither profits them, [and they say, “These are our intercessors with God”]. Say: “Will you tell God what He knows not either in the heavens or in the earth?” Glory be to Him! High be He exalted above that they associate]* – the verse (Q. 10:18). And He says: *And those who take protectors, apart from Him – “We only serve them that they may bring us nigh in nearness to God”* (Q. 39:3).

§5. Once you understand this major point (*mas’ala*), and realize that (*tahaqqaqta anna*) the unbelievers knew these three points and affirmed them – the first that only God, alone without companion, creates, provides sustenance, puts down, raises up and directs; the second {that they seek nearness through the angels and prophets because of their nearness to God and their righteousness, and the third}¹⁸ that they know that benefit and harm are in the hand of God but want from the prophets and angels nearness to God and intercession with Him – then reflect thoroughly on this, and come back to it again and again, for how few are those on earth who know it, especially those who lay claim to knowledge!

§6. Once you understand and are in wonderment, then get to know the fourth point, which is that the unbelievers who [lived] in the time of the Messenger of God did not associate [other beings with God] all the time; rather, sometimes they did so, and sometimes they were

- 16 When the text has “the verse” or “the two verses” after a Quranic quotation, I supply in square brackets any part of the verse or verses not quoted.
- 17 A line has been lost in Qabbānī’s text through haplography: the missing passage begins *wa-ṭalab*, and immediately following the lacuna the text resumes *fa-idhā ṭalab*. I supply the missing line from Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 10.20, placing it in curly brackets.
- 18 This is a second case of the loss of a line by haplography in Qabbānī’s text: the missing passage begins with *annahum*, and immediately following the lacuna the text resumes with a second *annahum*. I supply the missing line from Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 11.4.

monotheists, abstaining from calling upon the prophets and the righteous. For when they were doing well, they called upon them and believed in them, but when they were afflicted by harm, pain and adversity, they left them and worshipped God exclusively, recognizing that the prophets and the righteous cannot confer benefits or inflict harm. If anyone denies that the original unbelievers [of the time of the Prophet] sometimes worshipped God exclusively, then recite [to him] His words: *And when affliction visits you upon the sea, then there go astray those on whom you call except Him* (Q. 17:67). And He says: *When some affliction visits a man, he calls upon his Lord, turning to Him; [then when He confers on him a blessing from Him he forgets that which he was calling to before and sets up compeers to God, to lead astray from His way. Say: “Enjoy thy unbelief a little; thou shalt be among the inhabitants of the Fire”] – the verse* (Q. 39:8). This person who belongs to the people of the Fire is the one who at times worships God exclusively and at times seeks the help of (*yankhā*)¹⁹ the prophets and the angels; He says: *Say: “What think you? If God’s chastisement comes upon you, or the Hour comes upon you, will you call upon any other than God if you speak truly?” [No; upon Him you will call, and He will remove that for which you call upon Him if He will, and you will forget that which you associate with Him] – the two verses* (Q. 6:40f).

§7. These are four points that God has mentioned in His Book, so reflect on them with great thoroughness, and go over them in your mind again and again; if you understand them, you will be in wonderment.

The epistle now continues in Qabbānī’s text with material not to be found in any of the Wahnābī versions I have seen:

§8. So these are four principles of great benefit that [God] has stated in a manner clear and evident to the knowledgeable and the ignorant [alike], supplying parables in such a way that none of the polytheists can deny that God has stated this and made it plain. Yet the polytheist will answer: “All this is correct, and I affirm it, but I don’t ascribe partners to God!” When he says that, here are four further points which people witness [for themselves], male and female [alike]. The first [set of] principles are stated by God in His Book, and they are a matter of faith in the unseen; but these [next] four are not a matter of the unseen; on the contrary they are things that people see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears.

19 This verb, which is replaced by *yukhliṣu li-* in Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 11.24, is one of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahnābī’s colloquialisms. It appears again in §9 below, and see, for example, Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḍat al-afkār*, I, 229.12 (*nakhā*), 229.24 (*yankhawna*). The sense of the verb in a secular context is to invoke someone’s honour in an appeal for his assistance (see P.M. Kurpershoek, *Oral Poetry and Narratives from Central Arabia* (Leiden, 1994–2005), V, 314f; the word is by no means confined to Najd – see the references in C. Holes, *Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabia* (Leiden, 2001–05), I, 515). This fits the context of the continuation of Q. 39:8 better than *yukhliṣu*.

§9. The first is that in our time there are people who seek the help of (*yankhā*) Shamsān, Ḥusayn, Idrīs, Tāj and their like,²⁰ call upon them in safety and danger, and make vows to them, asking them to relieve their troubles and supply their needs. It is already clear to you that God has stated that the unbelievers in the time of the Messenger of God used to call upon the angels, prophets and the righteous when in safety but when in danger would worship God exclusively. So the polytheists of our time are worse from two points of view: from the point of view that the original [unbelievers] used to believe in the prophets and angels, whereas these [believe] in Shamsān, Idrīs and their like; and from the point of view that the original unbelievers were sometimes polytheists – in conditions of safety – and sometimes monotheists – in conditions of danger – whereas the unbelievers of our time are always polytheists, in both danger and safety. Someone who is sometimes a polytheist and sometimes a monotheist is less bad than someone who is always a polytheist, and does not alternate it with monotheism.

§10. The second point is that those who are believed in – Shamsān and his sons and Idrīs and his sons, when the polytheists come to them with votive offerings (*nudhūr*), and tell them that they called upon them in dire straits and found relief through them – receive them and treat them warmly. Some of them [Shamsān, etc.] inform them [the people who made the vows] of the vows before they [the people who made the vows] inform them [Shamsān, etc.], having been informed of this by devils.²¹ And this second [point], namely that the idols (*tawāghīt*) [Shamsān, etc.] that are in Kharj²² have no objection (*yardawna*) to this, can be denied only by someone who denies [the reality] of the sun at midday.

§11. The third [point] is that we and they – both sides – declare the other to be unbelievers. There are those who say: “The people of the ‘Āriḍ²³ have apostatized and become unbelievers.” They have denounced us (*naqalūnā*)

20 For a brief account of the cult of Tāj, a popular saint living in Kharj in southern Najd, see Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḍat al-afkār*, I, 8.3, and cf. II, 8.19. The others mentioned here are doubtless saints of the same ilk. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb refers to these cults in his writings but tells us little about them (thus for Tāj, see, for example, I, 84.14, 168.16; for Shamsān, 84.13, 145.19, 156.21, 168.16, 181.4, 200.17, 201.22 and 231.3; for Ḥusayn, 202.17; for Idrīs, 168.16, 200.17, 202.17 and 231.3; for the cult of the saints of Kharj in general, 190.12, and cf. 184.6, 227.15). Qabbānī himself speaks respectfully of *al-shaykh Ḥusayn wal-shaykh Idrīs wal-sayyid Shamsān* (Yahuda 3788, f. 58b.2). An early epistle written by an enemy of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in Riyadh, Sulaymān ibn Muḥammad ibn Suḥaym, states that Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb had declared certain local descendants of the Prophet (*sāda ‘indānā min āl al-rasūl*) to be unbelievers because they accepted votive offerings (*li-aḡl annahum ya khudhūna l-nudhūr*, I, 143.23). See also ‘A.S. al-‘Uthaymīn, “al-Rasā’il al-shakḥsiyya lil-shaykh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb”, *al-Dāra*, 7/3, 1982, 74f, to which I owe some of these references, and U.M. Al Juhany, *Najd Before the Salafī Reform Movement: Social, Political and Religious Conditions During the Three Centuries Preceding the Rise of the Saudi State* (Reading, 2002), 154.

21 This sentence is quoted again by Qabbānī, Yahuda 3788, f. 57b.12.

22 A district in southern Najd.

23 The district in central Najd where ‘Uyayna and Dir‘iyya are located.

to Mecca and to the rulers (*ḥukkām*). And we claim that they are unbelievers, meaning [both] the one who worships and the one who is worshipped. This is the third [point], namely the cutting off of relations and the enmity that is between us; it is well known among [both] monotheists and polytheists, and not denied by any of them.

§12. The fourth [point] is that some people in the ‘Āriḍ, in line with our opponents (*ma‘a ḥādhihi l-tā’ifa ‘alaynā*), claim that we are in error, and that we have declared Muslims to be unbelievers.

§13. If you reflect on the four [points] mentioned by God in His Book, and then reflect on the four that you see with your own eyes, the matter will be clear to you. And God knows best.

Chronology

If we trust the narrative sources, no dogmatic epistle of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s could have been written, or at least made public, earlier than 1153/1741, since it was not until the last month of 1153 that his father died,²⁴ and it was only then that he manifested his cause.²⁵ Nor could any of his epistles have been composed later than 1206/1792, the year of his death. That leaves us with a window of just over half a century within which our epistle could have been written – an undesirably wide one for historical purposes. The epistle itself is not dated in any text I have seen. Equally, the numerous Wahhābī printings of the epistle provide no help. They are late – the earliest I know is from 1895²⁶ – and they never tell us about the manuscripts on which they must proximately or ultimately be based, let alone the dates of those manuscripts. An earlier printing, accompanied by a French translation, appeared in the *Journal Asiatique* in 1848,²⁷ but this is still much too late for our purposes. An older time capsule is the version preserved in his chronicle by the Yemeni historian Luṭf Allāh Jaḥḥāf (d.1243/1827f) under the events of the year 1212/1797f;²⁸ but even this still misses the lifetime of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb by a few years. Qabbānī’s text is thus the only one that helps us directly with the chronology of the epistle, and it helps

24 Fākhīrī, *al-Akḥbār al-Najdiyya*, 104.8.

25 Ibn Bishr, *‘Unwān al-majd*, I, 8.22 (*thumma a‘ lana bil-da‘wa*).

26 This is a lithograph volume entitled *Majmū‘at al-tawḥīd*, published in Delhi, and containing writings of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and others; our epistle appears twice, at 9–11 and 34–6. The date of publication does not appear in my copy but is given as 1895 in A.S. Fulton and A.G. Ellis, *Supplementary Catalogue of Arabic Printed Books in the British Museum* (London, 1926), col. 629a.

27 “Le déisme des Wahhabis expliqué par eux-mêmes. Mémoire extrait du manuscrit des voyages de Mirza-Mohammed-Ali-Khan, dernier ambassadeur de Perse en France, publié et traduit par M. Alexandre Chodzko”, *Journal Asiatique* fourth series 11, 1848, 179–82 (text), 182–6 (translation), drawn to my attention by Samer Traboulsi. While on his way to India by sea the ambassador met a Wahhābī who had a copy of the epistle, and was able to make one for himself (see 175, 178.19). Uniquely, this version turns the four principles into five. The edition is poor and the translation worse.

28 Luṭf Allāh Jaḥḥāf, *Durar nuḥūr al-ḥūr al-‘īn*, ed. ‘A.M. ‘A.F. al-Ra‘awī (San‘ā’, 2004), 653–6, likewise drawn to my attention by Samer Traboulsi. What Jaḥḥāf tells us about how he came by this text is of considerable interest, and I will return to it below.

dramatically by showing that it cannot be later than 1158/1745, about four years after Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb embarked on his mission.

Qabbānī also helps us with the chronology of the differentiation of the text. As already indicated, the epistle is found in several different versions;²⁹ all are recognizably texts of the same epistle, but in some cases they may have little in common beyond the basic structure and ideas – even the choice of Quranic verses varies considerably. Qabbānī’s text, if we leave aside the second part of the epistle that occurs nowhere else, is close to what I call the “rare version” among the Wahhābī texts (represented by three printings out of a total of thirty-four that I have collected);³⁰ there are many points of difference, but they are divergences, mostly minor, within the same basic text. Of much more frequent occurrence is the “common version”.³¹ Here, there are two standard textual types; for a reason I will come to, I label these the *aghlaḥ* type (thirteen printings) and the *a’zam* type (nine printings).³² Alongside these standard forms of the common version – and closer to them than to the rare version³³ – we also encounter what I call “deviant” versions. These share the overall argument and structure of the types just described, and in some places echo their wording, but elsewhere diverge extensively and include material that has no counterpart in them. They come in two distinct forms, which I label the “first” and “second”

29 I discuss this variation in more detail in my unpublished edition of the epistle.

30 For printings of the rare version, see A.M. al-Ḍubayb, *Āthār al-Shaykh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb: sijill bibliyūjrafī li-mā nushira min mu’allaḡātihī wa-li-ba’ḍ mā kutiba ‘anhu* (Riyadh, 1982), 28 nos 25–7 (Ḍubayb gives this version the title *Arba’ qawā’id dhakarāhā llāh fī muḥkam kitābihī*, reflecting the way the text begins). For the printing of the rare version cited in this article, see above, n. 13. It is worth noting that the comparison of Qabbānī’s text with the rare version makes it clear that in the first part at least he did not at any point falsify his original for polemical purposes, or deliberately suppress anything.

31 For an extensive but incomplete list of printings of the common version, see Ḍubayb, *Āthār al-Shaykh*, 25–7 nos 4–19 (Ḍubayb calls this version the extended one, *al-risāla al-muṭawwala*, and those of the texts he lists that I have seen are all of what I call the common version), and 27f nos 20–24 (Ḍubayb calls this the “summary” version, *al-risāla al-mukhtaṣara*, and I classify it as a deviant form of the common version). This leaves some further items in Ḍubayb’s list that look as though they might be texts of our epistle but in fact seem not to be (29 nos 28–30, 34–5).

32 An example of the *aghlaḥ* type is to be found in a collection of writings of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and others with a title that begins *Hādhihi thalāthat al-uṣūl wa-adillatuhā wa-yālīhā Shurūṭ al-ṣalāt wa-wājibātuhā wa-arkānuhā wa-Arba’ qawā’id* (Cairo, 1340), 24–7; an example of the *a’zam* type is included in a volume containing writings of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and others entitled *Majmū’at al-tawḥīd* (Damascus, 1962), 72–7 (all further references to *Majmū’at al-tawḥīd* are to this volume). There are, however, some indications of contamination between the two types. As a rule, the *aghlaḥ* type is characterized by an interpolation explaining that there is good and bad intercession (*shafā’a manfiyya*, *shafā’a muthbata*; for the use of these terms by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, see his *Kitāb al-tawḥīd alladhī huwa ḥaqq Allāh ‘alā l-‘abād*, ed. A.M. Shākir (Cairo, 1974, 45.1). Thus the interpolation is found in Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and others, *Hādhihi thalāthat al-uṣūl*, 25.12, representing the *aghlaḥ* type, but it is absent from *Majmū’at al-tawḥīd*, 74.8, representing the *a’zam* type. Yet there are also texts of the *a’zam* type that contain the interpolation (see, for example, Ruwayshid, *Imām*, I, 340.18), suggesting contamination.

33 But again there are indications of possible contamination (see below, nn. 48, 51–3).

deviant forms;³⁴ beyond them is what I call the “doubly deviant version” (the various deviant texts are represented by nine printings in all).³⁵ At the same time, it is easy to find parallels to the ideas and wordings of our epistle elsewhere in the considerable corpus of writings left by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.³⁶ These ideas were, after all, central to his doctrinal concerns, and like most of us he tended to repeat the same thing in similar ways. What Qabbānī does for this textual chaos is to establish with certainty that the rare version is early. Meanwhile, Jaḥḥāf’s testimony at least fits comfortably with the hypothesis that the common version, to which his text belongs,³⁷ was a subsequent development – but one completed at the very latest within a few years of the death of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. In what follows I will assume that the common version is indeed later than the rare version.

The role of writing in the textual differentiation of the epistle

Did writing play a part in the textual differentiation of the epistle? Without any doubt it did so.

One obvious example is the role of haplography in generating two omissions in Qabbānī’s text, one in §4 and the other in §5, where in each case I supplied the missing line from the rare version.³⁸ Of these haplographies the second was definitely the work of an upstream copyist, very likely one working for Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in ‘Uyayna. We know this because Qabbānī at this point remarks acidly of his opponent: “He was unable to state the third point, and mentioned only two points”.³⁹ The first omission could in principle be the work of Qabbānī himself, but it could equally be that of the same copyist upstream of him. In fact, we can pronounce the second possibility more likely for two reasons. First, the amount of text lost is about the same in each case, giving us a line length

34 For an example of the first deviant form, see Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 16–18. For an example of the second, see *Majmū‘at al-tawḥīd*, 19–22. The text published in “Le déisme des Wahhabis” is related to the first deviant form (compare the use of *akhaff* at 182.6 and in Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 18.23; and compare “Le déisme des Wahhabis”, 179.13 with Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 16.11).

35 For an example of the doubly deviant form, see Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 13–15. This form is closest to the texts of the second deviant form but still differs extensively from them in wording, and includes many more Quranic verses.

36 For example, such parallels are to be found in a responsum of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s in Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḍat al-afkār*, I, 228.20, 228.25, 229.14, 229.22 and 230.16. This text as a whole is definitely not a version of our epistle, and does not share its structure. There is, however, an epistle of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s that briefly deploys the basic ideas of our epistle in a familiar four-principle structure (Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 94–6). The relevant passage (*ibid.*, 95.3) fills a little under a page of the epistle, and is preceded and followed by material that bears no resemblance to our epistle; even in the passage that concerns us the wording is distant. Nevertheless, this passage is clearly related to our epistle, and perhaps ancestral to it.

37 Specifically it is an example of the *aghlaḥ* type (Jaḥḥāf, *Durar*, 656.3).

38 This kind of haplography occurs when two successive lines begin or end with the same word (*ṭalab* in the first case and *annahum* in the second), and the eye of a tired or feckless scribe skips from the first to the second.

39 Yahuda 3788, f. 44a.11 (*‘ajaza ‘an bayān al-mas’ala al-thālitha hunā wa-lam yadhkur illā mas’alatayn*). In fact, of course, Qabbānī had the third point in the text in front of him; it was the second point that had gone missing.

compatible with the hypothesis that the two instances arose from a copyist's misreading of the same manuscript. Second, the fact that the two cases of haplography are not far apart makes possible a further test. If we take a rough measure of the length of either of the two lines that have been lost, and another of the intervening text, and divide the first length into the second, the result is compatible with there having been five lines of text in the miscopied manuscript between the two lines that the copyist accidentally dropped.⁴⁰ It follows that, as might be expected, the copy that reached Qabbānī was itself a copy.

There is also a possible case of haplography in the other direction. In Qabbānī's text a passage near the beginning of §3 runs: "then get to know the second [principle], which is that despite their knowledge of what has already been stated, they believed in angels, prophets and saints for the sake of God on account of their closeness to Him (*li-ajli qurbihim minhu*). When the polytheist has trouble accepting this [principle], and says, 'How can it be that the unbelievers loved the saints and the righteous because of their closeness to Him (*li-ajli qurbihim minhu*), and believed in them?', then recite to him His words regarding those who believed in the angels. . . ." For this, the rare version has only: "The second principle: it is that they believe in angels, prophets and saints because of their nearness (*li-ajli qurbihim*) to God; God says regarding those who believe in angels. . . ."⁴¹ The repetition of *li-ajli qurbihim minhu*, if both instances came at the beginning or end of a line, would be an invitation to haplography. Perhaps the text of the passage in the rare version results from a combination of haplography on the part of one scribe and a subsequent attempt to make sense of what was left on the part of another.

Another example of the role of scribal error is found at the start of §6. In Qabbānī's text it begins felicitously: "Once you understand and are in wonderment, then get to know the fourth point (*fa-idhā fahimta wa-ra'ayta l-'ajab fa-'rif hīna'idhin al-mas'ala l-rābi'a*). The rare version, however, reads: "Once you understand this and are in wonderment, then get to know and realize (*fa-'rif wa-ḥaqqiq*)". The modern editors then start a new paragraph with the heading: "The fourth point: . . ."⁴² This dangling "get to know and realize", with no object for the verbs, is awkward and alien to the style of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb;⁴³ *ḥaqqiq* must surely be a misreading of the *hīna'idhin* of Qabbānī's text.

A final example relates to the common version. As mentioned above, there are two standard types of this version, and a convenient diagnostic for

40 Conversely, the hypothesis would have been in serious trouble if the two dropped passages had been of clearly unequal length, or if the ratio of the length of the intervening text to the length of the dropped lines had not been a whole number or very close to it.

41 Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 10.6.

42 Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 11.9. The other two printings of the rare version are identical at this point, suggesting that no more than one of these three printings can have been based directly on a manuscript.

43 We find him using the form *taḥaqqaqta* but with a following subordinate clause (*idhā taḥaqqaqta annahum muqirrūn bi-hādhā*, Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḍat al-afkār*, I, 75.9; *idhā taḥaqqaqta anna lladhīna qātalahum rasūl Allāh...*, 82.24; *fa-idhā taḥaqqaqta anna ba'd al-ṣaḥāba...*, 89.6; and see the beginning of §5 in Qabbānī's text, and Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 11.1).

identifying them is whether they use *aghlaẓ* or *a'zam* in stating the fourth principle. Specifically, the context here is an unfavourable comparison of the contemporary polytheists with those of the time of the Prophet: “The fourth principle is that the polytheists of our time are worse in polytheism than the original ones”, where the word I translate as “worse” is *aghlaẓ* in one type and *a'zam* in the other.⁴⁴ The two words are similar enough in the Arabic script that the likely source of the divergence is a misreading of one for the other.

In short, such examples show that the sloppiness of copyists can explain minor divergences between texts of the epistle. But it cannot explain the wholesale differences in wording between the rare and common versions, even leaving aside the deviant and doubly deviant forms.

The role of orality in the textual differentiation of the epistle

It is thanks to Jaḥḥāf that we know for a fact that there was oral transmission of the epistle. In introducing his text he remarks that he has reproduced it entire, although he has not seen the written text (*aṣl*) of the letter.⁴⁵ As we will see later, he had in fact obtained his text from visitors from 'Asīr who had learnt it orally and had it by heart. Just what effects transmission by these 'Asīrīs had on his text is hard for us to say because, like Jaḥḥāf, we do not have the precise text of the epistle as it reached 'Asīr; there are nonetheless a couple of places where the text is defective in ways that might reflect unsophisticated oral transmission.⁴⁶

But the key role of orality in the differentiation of the text is probably not oral transmission but rather oral composition. Let us consider a passage from the statement of the first principle. According to §2 of Qabbānī's text, the unbelievers of the time of the Prophet “used to affirm that only God creates, without the participation in this of any angel close [to the Throne] or prophet sent [with a message], and that only God provides sustenance” (*kānū yuqirrūna annahu lā yakhluqu illā Allāh lā yushārikuhu fī dhālika malak muqarrab wa-lā nabī mural wa-annahu lā yarzuqu illā Allāh*). In the parallel passage in a text that exemplifies the common version, we read that they “were affirming that God is the creator and sustainer, the giver of life, the giver of death, the one who confers benefit, the one who confers harm, who directs all matters” (*kānū muqirrūna anna llāh huwa l-khāliq al-rāziq al-muhyī al-mumūt al-nāfi' al-dārr alladhī yudabbiru jamī' al-umūr*).⁴⁷ The opening words of the two passages have enough in common that the difference could be due to written transmission (*yuqirrūna* against *muqirrūna*); but soon they diverge so widely that they share little beyond the basic idea. The simplest explanation of this divergence

44 For *aghlaẓ*, see, for example, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and others, *Hādhihi thalāthat al-uṣūl*, 27.4; for *a'zam*, see, for example, *Majmū'at al-tawḥīd*, 76.11.

45 Jaḥḥāf, *Durar*, 653.7.

46 Thus in one place the common version as given in the *Majmū'at al-tawḥīd* reads: *fa-idhā 'arafa anna llāha khalaqaka li-'ibādatihi fa-'lam anna l-'ibādāta lā tusammā 'ibādātan illā mā'a l-tawḥīd* (73.1). In Jaḥḥāf's text, we have only: *fa-idhā 'arafa anna l-'ibādāta mā tusammā 'ibādātan illā mā'a l-tawḥīd* (*Durar*, 653.19). The passage omitted begins with *anna* and the text resumes with it, but it is too short to make a line in a manuscript.

47 *Majmū'at al-tawḥīd*, 73.10.

is that Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb himself was responsible for it. In other words, he had in his mind the framework of the epistle, but he might dictate it to his scribes with different wordings on different occasions. He was, after all, engaged in a far-flung literary propaganda effort without the benefit of a printing press. His situation is not unlike a contemporary professor giving the same lecture using different words from one year to the next.

There are also some very deliberate editorial changes that we can plausibly attribute to Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb.

One significant change is the enlargement of the introduction. That of Qabbānī's version (§1) is bare and functional, whereas that of the common version is expansive – typically the best part of a page – and not without rhetoric.⁴⁸

Another change, and a more substantive one, is a revision affecting the second and third principles. As we have seen, in Qabbānī's version these principles are as follows:

- (2) The polytheists believed in lesser beings only because of the closeness of these beings to God (§3).
- (3) The polytheists prayed to the righteous only to get closer to God themselves (§4).

In the common version, by contrast, they are:

- (2) The polytheists prayed to unspecified lesser beings only to get closer to God themselves.
- (3) Different polytheists worshipped different things, but it made no difference.⁴⁹

The second principle of the rare version has thus been dropped, the third principle has moved up to take its place and a new principle now occupies the place of the third. A plausible explanation is that the old pair were a bit too similar for comfort, since both are concerned with being close to God. Of course there is a difference – in the second principle it is the lesser beings who enjoy this proximity, whereas in the third it is the polytheists who aspire to it. But the similarity could easily have been confusing for simpler souls; even Qabbānī was confused, not realizing which principle was missing from his text of the epistle.⁵⁰ Moreover the new third principle is polemically effective.

A further editorial change, this time a stylistic one, is the elimination in the rare version of the transitions between principles that are a characteristic feature of Qabbānī's text, and their replacement with a straightforward listing of the

48 As, for example, *Majmū' at al-tawhīd*, 72.10–73.9. Oddly, in the second deviant form and the doubly deviant form we find only a very brief introduction: *fa-hādhihi arba' qawā' id min qawā' id al-dīn, yumayyizu bi-hinna l-Muslim dīnahu min dīn al-mushrikīn* (*Majmū' at al-tawhīd*, 19.11); *hādhihi arba' qawā' id min qawā' id al-dīn, yumayyizu bi-hinna l-Muslim bayna madhhab al-muslimūn min madhhab al-mushrikīn* (Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 13.16).

49 To spell this out, the Prophet encountered the devotees of a variety of cults, ranging from the worship of angels, prophets and saints to that of trees and stones, sun and moon, but he fought all of them without distinction (see, for example, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and others, *Hādhihi thalāthat al-uṣūl*, 26.2, and *Majmū' at al-tawhīd*, 74.9).

50 See above, n. 39.

principles. Thus in Qabbānī's text the transition from the second to the third principle has the form: "When you have understood this principle, namely that . . . and the polytheist says to you . . . then understand the third [principle], which is that. . ." (§4). By contrast, in the rare version the third principle is introduced in this way: "The third principle: it is that God mentions in His Book. . .".⁵¹ Perhaps associated with this change is the dropping of the sentence with which Qabbānī's text rounds off the presentation of the four scriptural principles (§7).⁵²

Of course, the largest editorial change of all takes place between Qabbānī's text and the rare version: it is the dropping of the continuation of the epistle that we find only in his text (§§8–13). If there was any reason to think of this as a late change, we might seek to explain it as a deletion of material that was no longer relevant thanks to the success of the Wahnābī cause. But given the absence of any trace of this continuation in the Wahnābī sources, it seems more likely that the change was an early one. The best explanation might then be that Ibn 'Abd al-Wahnābī felt that his second set of four points was just not very effective: the idea of four empirical points to match four scriptural points is elegant, but the actual execution is not. The continuation could thus have been an early experiment that went nowhere. The deletion nevertheless created a problem: it left the rare version without any explicit comparison of the unbelievers of the time of the Prophet with the contemporary polytheists. As we have seen, this deficiency is made good in the common version through a reworking of the fourth principle to make the point that the polytheism of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahnābī's time is worse than that of the time of the Prophet.⁵³

But are such revisions necessarily oral? Could Ibn 'Abd al-Wahnābī not have had a written text in front of him and, for example, marked these changes in the margin for his copyists to implement? In the case of the deletion of the continuation this was surely what took place, since the first part of the epistle in the rare version remains so close to Qabbānī's text. But in the case of the changes that take us from the rare to the common version, this is unlikely. Marginal changes, however drastic, would leave blocks of intervening text intact; but what we actually find is that divergence in wording is pervasive. Though I have not examined it closely, the distant relationship between the deviant texts and the standard (*aghlaẓ* and *a'ẓam*) types of the common version might have to be seen in

51 See Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 10.18. Likewise, compare the openings of §3 and §6 with Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 10.6 and 11.11. Oddly, such transitions reappear in what I call the first deviant form of the common version (see Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 17.17, 18.2, although there is no transition here between the third and fourth principles; such a transition does appear in the text published in "Le déisme des Wahhabis", 181.20). These parallels suggest contamination. Note also that the dangling *fa-'rif wa-ḥaqqiq* of the rare version looks like a misconstrued residue of the transition found at the beginning of §6 in Qabbānī's text (see above, n. 42).

52 For its absence in the rare version see Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 11.28. Note that a concluding sentence, though a quite different one, appears in the deviant form of the epistle that contains the transitions just mentioned (see Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 18.21).

53 Oddly, the doubly deviant form shares with the rare version the absence of this contrast (see, for example, Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 15.12).

the same way. The role of orality in the shifting text of the epistle is clearly a major one.

Writing and orality in the use of the text

Before we come to the role of writing and orality in the use of the epistle, it may be worth emphasizing a rather obvious point: this is a text composed for the laity, not for scholars. The language and ideas are simple, there are no technical terms⁵⁴ and only the Quran and (in the third principle of the common version) a single tradition from the Prophet are quoted.⁵⁵ By contrast, when Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb writes for his peers, he regularly cites earlier scholars.⁵⁶ This does not, of course, tell us whether he intended our epistle only for the literate laity, or for all and sundry.

Turning now to the question of the written and oral use of the epistle, its use as a written text is not in any doubt. Qabbānī tells us how an epistle composed by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb reached Baṣra (*wa-qad waṣalat ilā bilādīnā. . . minhu risāla waḍā‘ahā. . .*).⁵⁷ Jaḥḥāf explains how the text of the epistle he himself knew only from oral sources originally reached ‘Asīr: the local chieftain Abū Nuqṭa, a Wahhābī convert, sought help from ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Muḥammad ibn Sa‘ūd (ruled 1179–1218/1765–1803), asking him for a written text for the doctrinal instruction of his people (*wa-sa’alahu kitāban fīhi ta‘līm al-nās amr al-i‘tiqād*).⁵⁸ More generally, the chronicler Ibn Bishr tells us that after his move to Dir‘iyya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb began to send out epistles (*thumma inna l-shaykh kātaba ahl al-buldān*).⁵⁹

But this did not preclude the oral use of the text. Let us first note an interesting feature shared by Qabbānī’s text and the rare version: they contain stage directions for oral performance. Thus §2 instructs the monotheist: “when a polytheist asks you for proof of it, recite to him His words regarding the unbelievers. . .”. In §3 he is told: “When the polytheist has trouble accepting this, and says, ‘How can it be that the unbelievers loved the saints and the righteous because of their closeness to Him, and believed in them?’, then recite to

54 The obvious technical terms for Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb to deploy would be *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya* and *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya* (see Hawting, *Idea of idolatry*, 63). He uses them frequently (see, for example, Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḍat al-afkār*, I, 228.18, 229.4), and he provides a simple explanation of them in a short catechism written for the laity (*Talqīn uṣūl al-‘aqīda lil-‘amma*, in Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb et al., *Majmū‘at al-tawḥīd al-Najdiyya*, (Cairo, 1375), 257.22; for other printings of this text, see Ḍubayb, *Āthār al-Shaykh*, 38f nos 92–4 and 96–9). At the end of Jaḥḥāf’s text of the epistle, the informants report a passage of their lesson (*dars*) that likewise explains the two terms (Jaḥḥāf, *Durar*, 656.7). Yet our epistle makes no use of them, except that the second deviant form makes mention of *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya* in its statement of the first principle (*Majmū‘at al-tawḥīd*, 19.13).

55 For this *ḥadīth* of Abū Wāqid al-Laythī, see, for example, *Majmū‘at al-tawḥīd*, 76.3.

56 For the scholars whose views Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb cites in such writings, see the survey in Cook, “On the origins of Wahhābism”, 198–201.

57 Yahuda 3788, f. 41b.14.

58 Jaḥḥāf, *Durar*, 653.6. For Abū Nuqṭa, see B. Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: the legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkānī* (Cambridge, 2003), 62.

59 See above, n. 10.

him His words regarding those who believed in the angels...". In §4 we read: "So when the polytheist asks for the proof of this, then recite to him...". In §6 we find: "If anyone denies that the original unbelievers sometimes worshipped God exclusively, then recite [to him] His words...". And in §8 we have: "Yet the polytheist will answer: 'All this is correct, and I affirm it, but I don't ascribe partners to God!' When he says that, here are four further points..." In these passages lay people are being told how they too can join in the doctrinal fray, using apt Quranic quotations to block the moves made by polytheists. But how seriously should we take this? The very fact that these instructions appear only in Qabbānī's text and, somewhat reduced, in the rare version means that they are uncommon;⁶⁰ this could be another early experiment later discarded.

It is at this point that Jaḥḥāf's contribution is of unusual value. He does something the Wāḥḥābī sources never do: he provides us with a dash of ethnography. He tells us, on the authority of his 'Asīrī informants, how the epistle was actually put to use in a Wāḥḥābī community: "They related that Abū Nuqṭa would be in session every morning. The tribes, chiefs, jurists, and administrators would be present and would listen to what he read⁶¹ to them in the regular observance (*wird*) which they call the 'lesson' (*dars*), and the hearers would memorize it, so that in his lands there did not remain anyone – old or young, man or woman, free or slave – who did not have it by heart, reviewing it with him (*'araḍahu 'alayhi*) and vying in giving it his entire attention".⁶² After reproducing the text of the epistle, he comments: "You will not find one of these people – young or old, learned or ignorant – who does not know it and teach it to his family, and to whoever of his fellow-humans (*ahl al-arḍ*) he is able to call to it".⁶³ The programme is clear: every lay person is to be instructed and, just as in Qabbānī's text and the rare version, he or she is then to go on to instruct others.

It is conceivable that Abū Nuqṭa's use of the epistle was idiosyncratic and innovative, but it is more likely that what we see here was standard Wāḥḥābī practice. If that is so, then the conclusion must be that while the text of the epistle was indeed copied and distributed in writing, there was also a potentially much larger system of oral distribution, very likely extending well beneath the lower boundary of literate society. It is in the nature of our written sources for Wāḥḥābī history that they scarcely give us a glimpse of this grassroots orality in action.

60 For the relevant passages in the rare versions, see Ruwayshid, *Imām*, 9.20, 10.21, 11.17. As pointed out to me by Daniel Stolz and Amin Venjara in my graduate seminar, no such wordings are found in the common version. Note also that the introductory sections of both the *aghlaḥ* and *a'zam* types lay particular emphasis on the need for the addressee himself to escape from the net of polytheism (see Ibn 'Abd al-Wāḥḥāb and others, *Hādhihi thalāthat al-uṣūl*, 24.11, and *Majmū'at al-tawḥīd*, 73.6).

61 The verb used is *talā*, which could indicate either reading from a written text or reciting from memory.

62 Jaḥḥāf, *Durar*, 653.8. The term *dars* appears again, in the mouth of the informants, at 656.7 (*thumma naqūlu ba'da hādihā fī l-dars...*).

63 Jaḥḥāf, *Durar*, 656.15.

And yet we should probably not be surprised. In one of his letters Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb writes to the addressees: “Tell them that a man has the duty of instructing his family and household [about the need for monotheist activism]; this is a more stringent obligation than teaching ablutions and prayer”.⁶⁴ What is significant here is not what Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb would like to see but what he takes for granted: that men are in fact instructing their families about their basic ritual duties. With this we can compare a remark of Burckhardt’s that in Najd “the Wahabys have established schools in every village, and oblige the fathers of families to superintend the instruction of their children”.⁶⁵ Nor should we necessarily think of this as altogether exceptional in the pre-modern world. The ancient Israelites had a similar duty: “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children. . . . And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates” (Deut. 6:6–9). Yet more striking is the prophecy of Jeremiah: “And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord” (Jer. 31:34). Here the prophet takes it for granted that in the Israelite society of his day, every man was indeed teaching his neighbour and his brother.

Appendix

I give here two further examples of the usefulness of external sources in putting constraints on the dating of the works of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.

Qabbānī in his *Naqd* twice quotes a passage in which Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb detects an element of polytheism in the *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* of the seventh/thirteenth century poet Būṣīrī, in a verse relating to the intercession of the Prophet at the resurrection.⁶⁶ In introducing his first quotation of the passage, Qabbānī attributes it to a “first epistle” of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.⁶⁷ And indeed the passage is found in a known epistle of his.⁶⁸ There are in fact three further passages that Qabbānī quotes from the same epistle.⁶⁹ This shows that this “first

64 *Mu’allaḡāt al-Shaykh al-Imām Muḡammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb*, ed. ‘A.Z. al-Rūmī et al. (Riyadh, n.d.), V, 323.2. I owe my knowledge of this passage and that cited in the next note to Nadav Samin (see his “The dark matter of tribal belonging: genealogical representation and practice in Saudi Arabia”, PhD dissertation, Princeton, 2013, ch. 2).

65 J.L. Burckhardt, *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahābys Collected During his Travels in the East* (London, 1831), I, 250.

66 Yahuda 3788, ff. 47a.23, 55a.21. For the verse in question, see Būṣīrī, *Dīwān*, ed. M.S. Kaylānī (Cairo, 1955), 200.9=R. Basset (trans.), *La Bordah du Cheikh El Bouṣiri: poème en l’honneur de Moḡammed* (Paris, 1894), 131 verse 163. For more on Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s concern with this issue, see Traboulsi, “Early refutation”, 386.

67 Yahuda 3788, f. 47a.21 (*fī risālatihi al-ūlā*).

68 Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 67.1. This epistle is quite long (59–68) and, as Qabbānī says, the passage comes near the end (*fī ākhirihī*, Yahuda 3788, f. 47a.22). For other printings. see Ḍubayb, *Āthār al-Shaykh*, 57 nos 225–7.

69 A passage quoted at Yahuda 3788, f. 43a.1 (introduced as *qawluka fī risālatika al-ūlā*) is found in the text published by Ruwayshid at 64.7; one quoted at f. 47a.21 (immediately preceding that relating to Būṣīrī) is to be found at 62.1; and one quoted at f. 57a.22 (introduced with *fī l-risāla al-ūlā*) at 65.26.

epistle” of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, like ours, dates from no later than 1158/1745.⁷⁰ It is worth noting that this earlier epistle differs strikingly from ours in the absence of systematic structure.

Qabbānī is not alone in helping us in such ways. An eastern Arabian scholar, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Afāliq al-Aḥsā’ī, wrote an anti-Wahhābī epistle to ‘Uthmān ibn Mu‘ammar of ‘Uyayna which cannot be later than 1163/1750, the year in which Ibn Mu‘ammar was assassinated.⁷¹ It quotes passages from an epistle that turns out to be a well-known tract of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s, the *Kashf al-shubuhāt*.⁷² We can infer, then, that this tract cannot have been composed later than 1163/1750.

It is a pity that Ṭandatāwī in his attack on Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb does not quote any of his writings.⁷³

70 In fact the current research of Bernard Haykel and Samer Traboulsi on the two refutations of Wahhābism written by Qabbānī before he refuted our epistle demonstrates conclusively that the “first epistle” was already known to Qabbānī in 1155/1742f (for these earlier refutations, see Traboulsi, “Early refutation”, 382).

71 Ms. Berlin, Pm 25, ff. 56a–73b. For this epistle, see W. Ahlwardt, *Verzeichniss der arabischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1887–99), II, 477 no. 2158; E. Peskes, *Muḥammad b. ‘Abdalwahhāb (1703–92) im Widerstreit: Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte der Wahhābīya* (Beirut, 1993), 57; Cook, “On the origins of Wahhābism”, 200 n. 88.

72 Compare Ibn ‘Afāliq, *Risāla*, ff. 64b.17, 66a.8, 68b.12, 69b.1, 70a.5, 70a.20 and 71a.9 with the text of the *Kashf al-shubuhāt* in Ibn Ghannām, *Rawḍat al-afkār*, I, 74.13, 75.11, 74.20, 84.2, 84.11, 84.16 and 84.21 respectively. There are numerous and sometimes serious divergences that would merit a detailed comparison, and one passage quoted by Ibn ‘Afāliq (*Risāla*, f. 65b.1) seems not to be found in the *Kashf al-shubuhāt* but does appear in the text referred to by Qabbānī as the “first epistle” (Ruwayshid, *Imām*, II, 65.13).

73 See Traboulsi, “Early refutation”, 383f; as Traboulsi points out, he does not even mention his antagonist’s name.

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