

1.3.2 *The Development of the Classic Doctrine of the Attributes*

There had been speculation on particular qualities of God already among the Neoplatonists; the philosopher Abū Ḥāmid al-Isfīzārī summarised Proclus' pertinent thoughts that would be refuted by John Philoponus.¹ The previously quoted Hermetic text that may have been translated by Sālim Abū l-'Alā' mentions *ṣifāt lā bi-ithbāt*, 'qualities not expressed positively', i.e. presumably a *theologia negativa*.² The early theologians' reluctance to make assertions regarding the *māhiyya* by no means always stopped them from applying earthly categories to God; Hishām b. al-Ḥakam did this with his concept of the body,³ and Mu'ammār with his *ma'nā* theory.⁴ On the other hand, this kind of thinking in analogies was often hampered by the sensualism they had inherited from the Iranian environment.⁵ This led Aṣamm to the statement that God was neither a body nor an accident.⁶ It is surely no coincidence that neither Bishr b. al-Mu'tamir nor his pupils, such as Murdār, nor indeed Thumāma evolved a comprehensive doctrine of the attributes.⁷ While the patriarch Timothy in his 40th letter highlighted the Christian trinity before the background that the Muslims conjecture concerning the *ṣifāt*,⁸ he had other exponents of *kalām* in mind, above all presumably Ḍirār, but possibly also Abū l-Hudhayl.

Abū l-Hudhayl represents a turning point. He appears to have been the first to approach the issue by means of a systematic analysis of the Quranic data. It had probably long been known that the scripture contained not only God's 'names' but also attributes: there were statements such as *inna llāh^a 'alīm^u ghaybⁱ l-samawātⁱ wal-arḍ * innahū 'alīm^{un} bi-dhātⁱ l-ṣudūr*,⁹ but besides them others such as *qul: innamā l-'ilm^u 'inda llāh*,¹⁰ or *wasi'a rabbunā kull^a shay'ⁱⁿ 'ilm^{an}*.¹¹ Scholars felt justified in retrieving the nouns, i.e. the attributes, from the 'names', i.e. the adjectives; 'God is knowing' could be interpreted to mean 'God possesses (a) knowledge'. It is important to bear in mind that 'knowing'

1 Cf. Gimaret's edition of the text in: MUSJ 50/1984/247, –6ff.

2 BEO 19/1965–6/75, 5. Assuming this is a genuine text, the early use of the word *ithbāt* is remarkable.

3 See vol. I 421f. above.

4 See vol. III 86f. above.

5 Cf. vol. I 530 and II 453; also III 73 and 79 above.

6 See vol. II 454 above.

7 Bishr b. al-Mu'tamir's ideas on God's will may have been harking back to the distinction between *amr* and *mashī'a* (see vol. III 132f. above).

8 Cf. Griffith in: *La vie du Prophète* 101.

9 Sura 35:38 with numerous parallels; cf. the concordance s. v. 'alīm, and Paret, *Kommentar* 16 on sura 2:33.

10 Sura 67:26; parallels cf. Paret, *Kommentar* 180 on sura 7:187.

11 Sura 6:80; cf. Paret, *Kommentar* 145 on the passage.