



"Noble prayer said when standing before kings, known by experience to be beneficial (God most high willing)"
"دعاء شريف يقال عند مقابلة الملوك نافع مجرب إن شاء الله تعالى"

Text Information

Author | Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣbahānī [att.]

Language | Arabic

Period | 11th Century

Genre | Devotional Prose, Vita

Source | Khalidi Library (Jerusalem) MS 214, fol. 59r-61v.

Collection | Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/al_isbahani_prayer_presence_king/

Transcription, translation and introduction by Joshua Mugler.

Introduction to the Text

This text is attributed to Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣbahānī (948-1038), and indeed a shorter version of the story can be found in Abū Nuʿaym's biographical dictionary *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā'* (vol. 9, pp. 78-79 in the Beirut edition), which compiles biographical accounts of many early Islamic figures. This excerpt comes from the section on the foundational early legal scholar Muḥammad al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820), its central character, but has been substantially expanded and modified from Abū Nuʿaym's original version, itself passed down from generations of earlier narrators. Abū Nuʿaym provides full chains of transmission (X said that Y said...) to authenticate each story, although in this version, the initial chain has been abbreviated on the assumption that the reader can seek out Abū Nuʿaym's text for more complete information.

The accounts in *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* emphasize the sanctity of early Muslims, and this one is no exception. The story is placed in the mouth of al-Faḍl ibn al-Rabī' (755-824), one of the most important court officials under the 'Abbāsīd caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809). As al-Faḍl tells the story, he was summoned before the angry caliph one night and asked to produce al-Shāfi'ī for likely torture and/or execution. The reason for the caliph's anger is not stated, but there is a historical nucleus to this event, for al-Shāfi'ī was nearly executed in 803, while he was governor of the rebellious city of Najrān. Different explanations have been given for the scholar's narrow escape, including this account, which attributes his salvation to his pious recitation of a prayer at court. Through another, more complete chain of transmission, al-Shāfi'ī tells al-Faḍl that this prayer was recited by the Prophet Muḥammad during the Battle of the Trench (626-627) and contributed to the Muslims' victory. Note that this connection to the Prophet is not found in *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, where the prayer is simply attributed to al-Shāfi'ī, but the expanded version amplifies its prestige. This text reflects the precarious, yet often luxurious, life of a powerful court official: you may be summoned before the caliph for torture, or you may instead receive more gold than you could ever need. One strategy for dealing with this precarity, as seen here, is to rely on the protection of God and recite this prayer each time the ruler calls your name.

As you read the text, note some of the distinctive features of classical Islamic texts, including:

- The chain of transmission (isnād), already discussed, that provides authority for stories and sayings attributed to earlier figures. This text includes one incomplete chain and one complete chain.
- Formulas of respect placed after the names of important people, such as "God's peace and blessings be upon him" after a mention of the Prophet Muḥammad or "God be pleased with him" after a mention of al-Shāfi'ī.
- Polite forms of address: the caliph is usually addressed as "Commander of the Faithful" (Amīr al-mu'minīn), while others are often called by names derived from their firstborn sons—for example, al-Shāfi'ī is often addressed as "Abū 'Abd Allāh," that is, "Father of 'Abd Allāh."



Introduction to the Source

This version of the prayer story is found only in Khalidi Library (Jerusalem) MS 214, fol. 59r-61v. The manuscript is not dated, but was likely copied around the 15th century. The elaborately decorated title page (the style may indicate that it was produced in Egypt) describes the manuscript's contents as "a compilation that contains aphorisms and testaments and fables by Luqmān the Sage." The texts are a miscellany of popular philosophy, including the "Testament of Pythagoras" and the "Testament of Luqmān," in which ancient philosophers allegedly give final instructions to their disciples before their deaths. The "Fables of Luqmān," highly similar to those of Aesop, are also included. Various other sayings attributed to ancient philosophers appear between these larger texts, along with the inscriptions that were supposedly found on the philosophers' seals. The story of al-Shāfi'ī and his prayer is the final item in the manuscript.

At first glance, the story of the prayer is an outlier in this compilation of texts attributed to ancient philosophers, focusing on specifically Islamic characters and themes as none of the other texts do. However, we may view the entire manuscript as a collection of short texts that would be interesting and beneficial for a court official to know, collected by just such an official (perhaps in Mamlūk Egypt) with money to spend on an ornate manuscript. Pithy sayings attributed to ancient sages and entertaining animal fables with succinct moral lessons would not only be edifying for the manuscript's owner personally, but could be useful bits of knowledge as the owner aimed to impress superiors with erudite conversation topics. This prayer (and its enjoyable frame story) fits perfectly in that court context, and so we might view this manuscript as an anthology in the tradition of *adab* ("etiquette") literature, training its reader in the proper knowledge and protocols for a refined member of the upper class. The context of Khalidi MS 214 thus recasts the text to make it less about the personal sanctity of al-Shāfi'ī, as in *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, and more about the elite readers who might rely on this prayer for protection in a precarious world.

About this Edition

I have transcribed and translated the text from Khalidi MS 214, its only known copy in this form. I have generally maintained the spelling of the manuscript, including frequent omission of the Arabic letter hamzah (ﺀ) that marks the glottal stop, but have standardized the dots on several letters that sometimes appear without them. The manuscript includes a surprising number of short vowel and case markings, but these have been omitted in transcription. There are few punctuation marks in the text, as with most pre-modern Arabic texts, and I have added a few additional periods to help organize the sentences. I have retained masculine language for God to reflect the usage of the Arabic text.

Further Reading

Ali, Kecia. *Imam Shafi'i: Scholar and Saint*. Oneworld Academic, 2011.

- Short biography of al-Shāfi'ī, the main character of this text.

Gutas, Dimitri. *Greek Philosophers in the Arabic Tradition*. Routledge, 2016.

- Collected essays showing some of the ways ancient philosophers were known and used in Arabic.

Kadi, Wadad. "The Humanities through Islamic Eyes: The Beginnings." *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam: Religious Learning between Continuity and Change*, edited by Sebastian Günther, vol. 1. Brill, 2020, pp. 43-58.

- Overview of some important genres of classical Islamic scholarship, including the biographical dictionary.

Mojaddedi, Jawid A. *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Ṭabaqāt Genre from al-Sulamī to Jāmī*. Curzon, 2001.

- Discussion of *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* (especially in chapter 2) and other important Sufi biographical dictionaries.

Orfali, Bilal. "The Art of Anthology in Premodern Arabic Literature." *The Anthologist's Art: Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha'ālibī and His Yaṭīmat al-dahr*. Brill, 2016, pp. 1-33.

- Study of classical *adab* anthologies that may provide some inspiration for the collection of short texts in this manuscript.



Noble prayer said when standing before kings, known by experience to be beneficial (God most high willing)" "دعاء شريف يقال عند مقابلة الملوك نافع مجرب ان شا الله تعالى"

In the name of God, compassionate and merciful

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Hāfiẓ Abū Nu'aym, God be pleased with him, narrated with a chain of transmission from al-Faḍl ibn al-Rabīʿ—the companion of Hārūn al-Rashīd—who said:

روى الحافظ أبو نعيم رضي الله عنه بسنده الى الفضل بن الربيع صاحب هرون الرشيد انه قال

Al-Rashīd sent for me one night, so I went to see him. When I entered before him, I found him with a number of swords and various instruments of torture.

ارسل الي الرشيد ذات ليلة فحضرت اليه فلما دخلت عليه وجدت بين يديه صbare سيوف وانواعا من آلات العذاب

He said, "Faḍl." I said, "At your service, Commander of the Faithful." He said, "Bring me this Hījāzī"—meaning al-Shāfiʿī, God be pleased with him—"this very hour!" And he was enraged.

فقال يا فضل فقلت لبيك يا امير المومنين فقال علي بهذا الحجازي يعني الشافعي رضي الله عنه الساعة الساعة وهو مغضب

So I left, filled with indescribable grief and sorrow because of my love for al-Shāfiʿī—God be pleased with him—on account of his eloquent way with words and his intellect.

فخرجت وبي من الغم والحزن ما لا يوصف لمحبي للشافعي رضي الله عنه لفصاحته وبلاغته وعقله

I came to his door and commanded someone to knock, but he was slow to answer.

فجئت الى بابه فامرت من دق عليه فابطأ الجواب فعلمت أنه يصلي فوقفت حتى فرغ من صلاته

He opened the door and I greeted him and said, "Answer the Commander of the Faithful.

ففتح الباب فسلمت عليه وقلت له اجب امير المومنين.

He said, "To hear is to obey."

فقال سمعا وطاعة.

He renewed his ablutions, did two cycles of prayer, and left, walking until we reached the curtain.

فجدد الوضوء وركع ركعتين وخرج يمشي حتى وصلنا الى الستر

I told him, "Abū 'Abd Allāh, wait here and relax until I call you in." I went in to the Commander of the Faithful, who was still angry.

فقلت له يا ابا عبد الله قف هنا لتستريح الى ان استاذن فدخلت على امير المومنين فاذا هو على حالة غضبه

When he saw me, he said, "Where is the Hījāzī?" I said, "At the curtain." He said, "Command him to enter."

فلما راني قال اين الحجازي قلت عند الستر قال مره بالدخول

So I went out and said to him, "In the name of God."

فخرجت اليه وقلت له بسم الله

He went in, walking serenely, neither dismayed nor frightened nor worried nor uneasy. Then he began moving his lips and his face was illuminated.

فدخل يمشي مطمئنا غير فزع ولا خائف ولا قلق ولا منزعج ثم بدا يحرك شفثيه ووجهه مستنير



When he entered and the Commander of the Faithful saw him, he stood and welcomed him and began kissing him between the eyes. He was happy and said, "Welcome, Abū 'Abd Allāh! Why have you not visited us, when you're in town and I've been missing you?"

He had him sit in his place, sat next to him, and talked with him for a while, then ordered that he be given a huge quantity of gold.

Al-Shāfi'ī—God be pleased with him—said, "I have no interest in it." But he asked him to accept it and kept pestering him, so he accepted it with indifference.

Then al-Rashīd said to him, "Abū 'Abd Allāh, we only summoned you to obtain some blessing from you and to gain an audience with you."

Then he commanded me to return him to his home and to take the gold along.

When we went out, he began to give it to everyone he saw and everyone who asked, left and right, until he arrived at home and none of it remained.

When he had entered his home and was sitting peacefully, I sat before him and said, "Abū 'Abd Allāh, you know my love and affection for you. I saw the anger of the Commander of the Faithful when he first summoned you, then when you went before him, I saw his humility and friendliness, treating you with an honor and deference that delighted me.

I saw you moving your lips when you went in before him, so what else could have calmed his anger and contempt? Teach me what you were saying when you and I went in before him."

He said, "Mālik reported to me from Nāfi', from Ibn 'Umar—God be pleased with him and with them all—that the Messenger of God—God's peace and blessings be upon him—recited it on the Day of the Confederates, so God routed them and gave him victory over them. It is:

فلما دخل وبصر به امير المؤمنين قام اليه واستقبله وجعل يقبل بين عينيه وابتهج به وقال له مرحبا بأبي عبد الله لم لا تزرننا وتكون عندنا فاني اليك مشتاق

واجلسه مكانه وقعد الى جانبه وتحدث معه ساعة ثم أمر له ببذرة من الذهب

فقال الشافعي رضي الله عنه لا رأي لي فيه فسأله ان يقبله والج عليه فقبله غير مكترث به

ثم قال له الرشيد يا ابا عبد الله ما طلبناك الا لننال من بركتك ونحظي بمشاهدتك

ثم امرني ان أرده الى داره وان احمل البذرة بين يديه

فلما خرجنا جعل يعطي كل من رآه وكل من سأله يمينا وشمالا حتى وصل الى منزله وما معه شيء منها

فلما دخل منزله واطمان به الجلوس جلست بين يديه وقلت له يا ابا عبد الله قد عرفت محبتي لك وشفقتي عليك واني شاهدت غضب امير المؤمنين في ابتداء طلبه لك ثم لما دخلت عليه رايت منه من التواضع والتودد والاحلال والاكرام لك ما سرني

وكنت رايتك تحرك شفقتك عند دخولك عليه فبالذي سكن غضبه وسخره الا ما علمتني ما كنت تقوله عند دخولك معي اليه

فقال حدثني مالك عن نافع عن ابن عمر رضي الله عنه وعنهم اجمعين ان رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قراه يوم الاحزاب فهزمهم الله ونصره عليهم وهو



"I seek refuge in God from Satan the damned, in the name of God, merciful and compassionate. 'God testifies that there is no god but him—as do the angels and those with knowledge—upholding justice. There is no god but him, Mighty and Wise. Religion in the sight of God is Islam.'¹

Then he said, I also testify to what he has testified, and I place this testimony as a deposit with God. This testimony is my deposit with God until the day of resurrection.

God, I seek refuge in the light of your holiness, the power of your blessing, the greatness of your purity, the blessing of your majesty, from every harm and malady and the misfortunes of night and day, that the traveler may arrive safely.

Merciful God, you are my help, so I seek help with you! You are my shelter, so I seek shelter with you! You are my refuge, so I seek refuge with you! You are my protection, so I seek protection with you!

You, before whom the necks of tyrants are humbled and to whom those of pharaohs submit!

I seek refuge in you from disgrace before you, from the opening of your veil, from forgetting to remember you, from neglecting to give you thanks. I am in your sanctuary, beneath your wing.

My night and my day, my sleeping and my lying down, my setting out and my traveling, my moving and my resting, my living and my dying, and all of my hours and times, your remembrance is on my lips and your praise covers me.

I testify that there is no god but you, there is no god beside you, there is no one worshiped except you, exalting your greatness, honoring the glory of your face, declaring your eternity and confessing your oneness, affirming that you are above all that the unbelievers and the unjust and the deniers say of you. You are highly exalted above that!

اعوذ بالله من الشيطان الرجيم بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم شهد الله أنه لا إله إلا هو والملائكة وأولو العلم قائما بالقسط لا إله إلا هو العزيز الحكيم إن الدين عند الله الإسلام

ثم قال وأنا أشهد بما شهد به وأستودع الله هذه الشهادة وهذه الشهادة وديعة لي عند الله إلى يوم القيمة

ألهم أعوذ بنور قدسك وعظيم بركتك وعظمه طهارتك وبركة جلالك من كل أفة وعاهة ومن طوارق الليل والنهار إلا طارقا يطرق بخير

يا رحمن اللهم أنت غياثي فبك أستغيث وانت ملاذي فبك ألوذ وأنت عيادي فبك أعوذ وأنت جاري فبك أستجير

يا من ذلت له رقاب الجبابرة وخضعت له أعناق الفراعنة

اعوذ بك من خزيك ومن كشف سترك ومن نسيان ذكرك والإنصراف عن شكرك أنا في حركك وتحت كنفك

ليلي وهناري ونومي ورقادي وظعني وأسفاري وحركاتي وسكناتي وحياتي ومماتي وجميع ساعاتي وأوقاتي ذكرك شعاري وثناؤك دثاري

أشهد أن لا إله إلا أنت ولا إله غيرك ولا معبود سواك تشريفا لعظمتك وتكريما لسبحات وجهك وإقرارا لصمدانيتك واعترافا بوحدانيتك وتنزيها لك عما يقول الكافرون والظالمون والجاحدون تعاليت عن ذلك علوا كبيرا

Critical Notes

Note 1 Qur'an, Āl 'Imrān 3:18-19.



God, protect me from disgrace before you and from the wickedness of your slaves! Pitch for me the pavilions of your preservation and your providence! Generously grant me your blessing, most merciful of the merciful!

اللهم أجرني من خزيك ومن شر عبادك واضرب علي سرادقات حفظك وعنايتك وجد علي منك بخير يا أرحم الراحمين

My God, how can I fear, when you are my hope? How can I be harmed, when my trust is in you? How can I be overcome, when you are my treasure? How can I be defeated, when I rely upon you in all things?

إلهي كيف أخاف وأنت أملّي أم كيف أضام وعليك توكلّي أم كيف أقهر وأنت ذخري أم كيف أغلب وعليك في كل الأمور اعتمادي

I strike the face of every envier who envies, every watcher who watches, everyone unjust and ungrateful, with 'Say: He is God the one, God the eternal, he does not beget and he is not begotten, and there is none equal to him.'"²

ضربت وجه كل حاسد حسد وراصد رصد وطالم كند بقل هو الله أحد الله الصمد لم يلد ولم يولد ولم يكن له كفوا أحد

Al-Faḍl said:

قال الفضل

So I memorized these words from al-Shāfi'ī - God be pleased with him – and I did not stop returning to his house until I had memorized them well, and I never went in before Hārūn al-Rashīd without reciting them and praying them, morning or evening.

فحفظت هذه الكلمات من الشافعي رضي الله عنه ولم أزل أتردد إلى بيته حتى حفظتها حفظا جيدا وما دخلت على هارون الرشيد إلا وقرأتها ودعوت بها بكرة وعشية

By God, I no longer received anything unpleasant from him, he was not annoyed with me for even a day, and he was never angry with me, by the blessing of this noble prayer and the blessing of al-Shāfi'ī, God be pleased with him.

فوالله ما عدت رأيت منه ما أكره ولا حرد علي يوما ولا غضب علي ببركة هذا الدعاء الشريف وبركة الشافعي رضي الله عنه

May the blessing of this noble prayer continue to be upon us and upon the Muslims, amen.

وأعاد علينا وعلى المسلمين من بركة هذا الدعاء الشريف آمين

God's peace and blessings be upon our lord Muḥammad and his family and companions.

وصلّى الله على سيدنا محمد وآله وصحبه وسلم

Critical Notes

Note 2 Qur'an, al-Ikhlāṣ 112.