

Chapter Two: Establishing the Evidence that the Method of the *Salaf* is the Right Method [in Understanding the Divine Attributes]

Fiazuddin Shuayb

Translated from the Arabic, this second chapter of al-Ghazālī's *Iljām* examines evidence for the correctness of the method of the *Salaf* in understanding Divine Attributes. Al-Ghazālī provides proofs based on revelation as well as human intellect, supporting his epistemology with syllogistic reasoning and examples from the early Muslim community. Ultimately, rejecting the scholastic theological approach of the *mutakallimīn* as 'reprehensible innovation,' his arguments chart a middle course between outright denial and figurative interpretation, accepting the apparent linguistic meaning of Divine Attributes in the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth without inquiring into their metaphysical modalities.

Keywords: Al-Ghazālī; Divine Attributes; *Bidʿa*; Kalām; *Salaf*; Sunna.

The evidence is of two types: rational (*ʿaqlī*) and revelation-based (*samʿī*). The rational proof itself is of two sorts: general (*kullī*) and particular (*tafṣīlī*). The general proof that the method (*madhhab*) of the *Salaf* (early generations) is the right [hermeneutic for the ambiguous proof-texts on Divine attributes] is unveiled through four principles, which are admitted by every rational person.

The first [principle] is that the Prophet—Allah's peace and blessings be with him—is the most knowledgeable of creation regarding the probity of the states of the righteous servants (*ʿibād*; sing. *ʿabd*) vis-à-vis the good of [their fate in] the afterlife. That which benefits or harms in the hereafter cannot be known through experience as can medicine, since there is no domain for the empirical sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-tajribiyya*) save repetitive observation, [which is

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not the case for the former]. Who [besides the Prophet] has returned from that world, having apprehended through direct observation what benefits and harms, and reported on what cannot be encompassed by mere rational analogy (*qiyās al-‘aql*)? The intellect does not have the capacity for that. Thus, rational people have recognized that the intellect neither guides to that which lies beyond death nor leads one to [conclude] the harm of sins or the benefit of obedience, especially to the detail and delimitation as found in divine laws (*sharā’i*). They have unanimously acknowledged that such matters can only be apprehended through the light of prophethood (*nubuwwa*)—a power that lies beyond the intellect and perceives unseen matters of the past and future, which are inaccessible through the acquaintance of rational faculties (*asbāb al-‘aqliyya*). This was among those matters agreed upon by the early sages (*ḥukamā’*), let alone the adepts (*awliyā’*) and elite among the learned (*rāsikhūn*), who focused their attention on learning from the presence of prophethood (*nubuwwa*), affirming the deficiency of all powers beside it.

The second principle is that the Prophet—Allah’s peace and blessings be with him—did inform the people of what was revealed to him regarding the probity of the states of righteous servants in this life and the afterlife. He neither concealed nor withheld anything from them, for he was not sent but to proclaim the revelation. Hence, he was a *mercy to the worlds* (*raḥmat lil-‘ālamīn*) (Q 21:107) and was never faulted in that respect, which is known by necessity, as the contexts of his [different] states demonstrated—from his deep concern for their purification and guidance to his eagerness for their weal here and the hereafter. He did not omit anything that would bring the creatures closer to Paradise and the Creator’s pleasure, guiding, enjoining, and encouraging them in it. He also did not leave out anything that would drag them close to Hell and Allah’s wrath, prohibiting and warning them in both knowledge and deed.

The third principle is that those most knowledgeable about [the Prophet’s] speech and most perspicacious in grasping its reality and mysteries were those who witnessed divine revelation and its descent, lived with him, and accompanied him; indeed, they associated with him night and day. They were zealous about the meanings of his speech, first acting on it and second transmitting it to those after them, while seeking proximity to Allah the Glorified through heeding, understanding, memorizing, and divulging it (this message). They are those the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, had motivated to listening, understanding, memorizing, and practicing [the message], when he said, “May Allah illumine a person who hears my speech and then memorizes and practices it as he heard it.”¹

1. Hadith classed *ṣaḥīḥ* (“sound”). Reported by Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā’ī, Ibn Māja, et al. Alḥmad’s report reads, “May Allah illumine the person

Upon my life, can the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings of Allah upon him, ever be accused of concealing it from them? The status of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings of Allah upon him, is far removed from such a thing! Can those religious elders be accused of having comprehended his speech and attained its aim, while they hid or contradicted it in deed or out of haughtiness, despite their confession of having understood its obligation? No intelligent person will consider such matters.

The fourth principle is that throughout their lives, the *Salaf* (early generations) never called people to examine, investigate, interpret, explain, or be exposed to such [ambiguous] matters (i.e., those concerning Divine attributes). Rather, they strictly censured those who meddled in, inquired into, and discussed them, as we shall relate soon. Had it been part of religion (*dīn*) or a conception of religious knowledge, they would surely have been involved in it night and day, summoned their children and families to it, and made every effort to establish its principles and explain its rules clearer than they did the rules of inheritance and patrimony, for example.

Thus, we know decisively from these principles that what they have said is the truth and that what they have narrated is correct, especially since the Messenger of Allah—peace and blessings of Allah upon him—praised them, saying, “The best of people are my generation, then the generation after them, and then the generation after them.”² He also said, “My nation will be divided into over seventy sects, only one among whom is the saved sect (*al-firqa al-nājiya*).” When he was asked who they were, he replied, “The people of the Sunna and Community (*ahl al-sunna wal-jamā‘a*),” in another narration, “[The path] that I and my Companions are now upon.”³

As for the particular (*tafsīlī*) proof [of the rational evidence] that the method of the *Salaf* is correct, our claim entails the aforementioned premises [discussed in Chapter One],⁴ which are obligatory on the common folk

who hears a speech from us, memorizes it, and conveys it to another person, for perhaps the bearer of understanding (*fiqh*) conveys it to one who has a better understanding than him....” See al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āhādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa* (Riyadh: Maktaba al-Ma‘ārif, 1995), 1:760–61 §404.

2. Hadith classed *ṣaḥīḥ*. Reported by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Māja, al-Tirmidhī, et al. with various phrases. Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āhādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa* 2:312–13 §699.
3. Hadith reported by Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā‘ī, Ibn Māja, et al. with various phrases. Though some scholars have questioned its authenticity, the majority scholarly opinion is that it is *ṣaḥīḥ*. See al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āhādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa* 1:402–14 §203–4.
4. For an overview of *Iljām*, see Fiazuddin Shu‘ayb, “Al-Ghazzālī’s Final Word on Kalām”, *Islam & Science*, 9, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 151–172.

concerning the apparent meanings of the ambiguous traditions. Previously, we explained the proof of each precept, demonstrating its validity. Would that I knew who would oppose our discussion! These precepts are incumbent on every layperson:

1. *al-taqdīs* (“sanctification”) of the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*, i.e., Allah), from corporeality (*jismiyya*) and anthropomorphism (*mushābihat al-ajsām*);
2. *al-taṣdīq* (“affirmation”) and faith in what the Messenger of Allah—peace and blessings of Allah upon him—said [concerning the Divine attributes] and the meanings that he intended;
3. *al-i‘tirāf bil-‘ajaz* (“confession of inability”) to comprehend the [ultimate] reality of those meanings;
4. *al-sukūt* (“silence”) from questioning and delving into what is beyond his (the layperson’s) ability;
5. *al-imsāk* (“refraining”) verbally from altering, augmenting, diminishing, combining, or separating them [from their apparent linguistic expressions];
6. *al-kaff* (“desistance”) of the heart from pondering them while incapable of doing so (*ma‘a ‘ijzih ‘anh*); they should be told, “Contemplate the creation of Allah and not the essence of Allah!”⁵
7. *al-taslīm li-ahl al-ma‘rifa* (“deference to people of gnosis”) among the prophets (*al-anbiyā’*), adepts (*al-awliya’*), and elites among the learned (*al-‘ulamā’ al-rāsikhīn*).

None can refute or repudiate these precepts whose proofs and provisions we have expounded—none among those who discern, let alone the intellectuals and scholars. So [our explanation of them] constitutes the rational (*‘aqlī*) proof.

The revelation-based (*ṣam‘ī*) evidence establishing that the method of the *Salaf* is correct lies in that denying it is an innovation (*bid‘a*), which is reprehensible and misguidance (*ḍalāla*). Delving into the interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of Divine attributes on the part of common folk and the learned is a *bid‘a*. Its opposite is abstaining from the practice, which is a praiseworthy practice (*ṣunna maḥmūda*). Here are its three premises (expressed as a syllogism):

1. Investigation, scrutiny, and inquiry into such matters (the Divine attributes) constitute a *bid‘a*.
2. Every *bid‘a* is reprehensible.

5. This statement perhaps alludes to the hadith of Abū Hurayra, who narrated that the Prophet said, “People shall continue to inquire (into theological matters) until it is said, ‘Allah created the creation, but who created Allah?’ So whosoever comes across something like that, let him say, ‘I believe in Allah, the Mighty, the Exalted!’” Reported by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, et al. See al-Maḥdī, *Mukhtaṣar al-ḥujja ‘alā tārik al-maḥajja* (Riyadh: Awdā al-salaf, n.d.), 2:671.

3. Since every *bid'a* is reprehensible, it follows that the opposite—that is, the prior practice—must be praiseworthy.

These three principles are above dispute; and if they are accepted, it follows logically that the method of the *Salaf* is the correct one.

One might ask, “How do you repudiate someone who refuses to accept that *bid'a* is reprehensible or that investigation of [the Divine attributes] is a *bid'a*? He disputes the first two premises but not the third because of its self-evidence.”

We respond that the proof of the first premise—that *bid'a* is reprehensible—is the Umma's unanimity in condemning *bid'a*, censuring its practitioner (*mubtadi'*), and reproaching anyone identified by it. Hence, it is known by necessity from the *Shari'a*, not by speculation. The Messenger of Allah—peace and blessings of Allah upon him—condemned *bid'a*, as is known by mass-transmitted traditions (*tawātur*), which collectively constitute certain knowledge (*al-ilm al-qat'i*), even though their probity ultimately rests on singular (*āḥād*) traditions, such as is the case of our knowledge of 'Alī's bravery, Ḥātim's generosity, the Messenger of Allah's love for 'Ā'isha—Allah be pleased with her—and the like. These single-transmitted reports in their number reached the level of mass-transmission, precluding the possibility that their narrators lied, although the individual reports themselves are singular and not mass-transmitted. This is the case for such narrations of the Messenger of Allah—peace and blessings of Allah upon him—as “Obligatory upon you is my Sunna (practice) and the Sunna of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs after me. Hold fast to it and beware of newly invented things, because every newly invented thing is a *bid'a*, every *bid'a* is a misguidance, and every misguidance is in Hellfire;”⁶ “Follow but do not innovate [in the religion],”⁷ for surely those before you perished for what they innovated in their religion, abandoning the practices (*sunan*) of their forefathers and articulating their opinions [without

6. Hadith classed *ṣaḥīḥ*. Reported by al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Māja, et al. Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa* 6:526–29 §2735.

7. This is part of a tradition (*athar*) attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd; it is not a Prophetic hadith, as reported in al-Dārimī, *Sunan* (Karachi: Qadīmī Kutub Khānah, 1986), 1:80.

knowledge].⁸ Thus, they were misguided and misguided others;”⁹ “When an innovator (*ṣāḥib bidʿa*) dies, his death is a victory (*fath*) to Islam;”¹⁰ “Whoever goes to an innovator (*ṣāḥib bidʿa*) in order to revere him, he has assisted in the destruction of Islam;”¹¹ “Whoever avoids an innovator (*ṣāḥib bidʿa*), hating him for Allah’s sake, Allah fills his heart with security and faith. Whoever chases away an innovator, Allah will raise his rank by one hundred degrees. Whoever greets an innovator, meets him with good news, or receives him with joy, he has deemed lightly what has been revealed to Muḥammad—peace and blessings of Allah upon him;”¹² “Verily, Allah does not accept the fast, ritual prayer, alms, pilgrimage, minor pilgrimage, jihad, expense, or justice of the innovator (*ṣāḥib bidʿa*), who leaves Islam as an arrow leaves the bow¹³ or as a hair is plucked from dough.”¹⁴ These examples, those permitted by the limitations of length, afford a necessary knowledge (*ʿilm ḍarūrī*), that is, *bidʿa* is reprehensible.

One might state, “We accept that *bidʿa* is reprehensible. But what is the proof for the second premise, that is, that investigating divine predicates

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8. This precise wording is not found in the Hadith literature. What is found to similar effect is the following, narrated by Ibn ʿAbbās and reported by Aḥmad, Ibn Māja, al-Nasāʾī, al-Bahayqī, Ibn Khuzayma, Ibn Ḥibbān, and al-Ḥākim: “O people! Beware of excessiveness (*ghulū*) in religion, for those before you were destroyed because of that.” *Takhrīj al-sunna li-Ibn Abī ʿĀsim*, ed. al-Albānī (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Islāmī, 1980), 1:46–47 §98.
 9. This is part of a *ḍaʿīf* (weak) hadith. Abū Yaʿlā and Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr reported, “This *Umma* shall act on Allah’s Book for a short period and the *Sunna* of the Messenger of Allah for a short period; then they will follow their own opinions. Thus, they will be misguided and misguide others.” Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āḥādīth al-ḍaʿīfa* (Riyadh: Makataba al-Maʿārif, 2000), 7:418–19 §3409.
 10. Hadith classed *mawḍūʿ* (“fabricated”). Reported by al-Khaṭīb and al-Daylamī. Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āḥādīth al-ḍaʿīfa* 6:229–30 §2706.
 11. Hadith classed *ḍaʿīf*. Reported by Ibn ʿAdī, Abū ʿUthmān al-Nujayrimī, et al. Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āḥādīth al-ḍaʿīfa* 4:340–43 §1862.
 12. Hadith classed *mawḍūʿ*. See al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawāʾid al-majmūʿa fi-l-āḥādīth al-mawḍūʿa*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-Islāmī, 1972), 504 §1392.
 13. The phrase “as an arrow leaves the bow” is part of a hadith classed *ṣaḥīḥ* and reported with the following wording: “Some people of my *Umma* who often recite the Qurʾān will leave Islam as an arrow leaves the bow.” Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa* 5:235–36 §2201.
 14. Hadith classed *mawḍūʿ*. Reported by Ibn Māja without the words “as an arrow leaves the bow” as above. Al-Ghazālī here amalgamates two hadiths (one classed *ṣaḥīḥ* and the other *mawḍūʿ*) in a single narration. Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-āḥādīth al-ḍaʿīfa* 3:684–85 §1493.

is a *bidʿa*? For [the term] *bidʿa* is simply a linguistic expression denoting an invention. Did al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/819) not opine that congregational prayer (*ṭarāwīḥ*) [in the fasting month of Ramaḍān] is a *bidʿa*, that is, a praiseworthy innovation (*bidʿa ḥasana*)? Why then did jurists venture into the branches of jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*) and argumentation, innovating terms like “logical incompatibility” (*naqḍ*), “fraction” (*ḥaṣr*), “corruption” (*fasād*), “side” (*ḍalʿ*), “composition” (*tarkīb*), and [so forth, which are associated with] the arts of disputation? Endorsing these things was innovative, for the Companions did not relate any of them—indicating that a [so-called] reprehensible innovation does not nullify a transmitted *sunna* [per se]. Thus, we do not accept that [the inquiry about Divine predicates] displaces an established transmitted *sunna*; rather, [it displaces only the] contingent [precedent] of what the elders [of the early Islamic period] delved into. Whether it was because of their preoccupation with more important matters or because of the security of their hearts in those early days from doubts and inconsistencies, they had no need to delve into such matters. Others who came after them, however, delved into it as the need arose, whereby passions and heresies in the religion occurred to such extent that [the Sunna] was erased and those who embraced it were silenced with arguments! [All of this is proves an argument from historical necessity to take up investigation of the Divine attributes.]”

The answer [to your query] is that what you have mentioned—that a reprehensible *bidʿa* is every innovation that befalls an established Sunna (*ṣunna maʾthūra*)—is true. Furthermore, the *bidʿa* [that we are discussing here in relation to the investigation of Divine attributes] does displace a prior *sunna*, since the *sunna* of the Companions was to prohibit delving into it and to censure those who inquired after it. They emphasized disciplinary action and prevention. Opening the door of inquiry into these issues and delving with the common folk into the flood of problems are contrary to what has been mass-transmitted to us. In the transmission of traditions, this has been soundly narrated from the Companions and mass-transmitted from the Followers (*ṭābiʿīn*), whereby [the conduct of] the *Salaf* [therein] became an incontrovertible proof not admitting doubt or uncertainty, like their mass-transmitted delving into issues of inheritance and mutual consultation on matters of practical legal rulings. This is also decisively known from singular-transmitted (*āḥād*) reports, which in their totality do not admit doubt although they might on their own, as [expounded earlier] regarding the reprehensibility of innovation. One such narration relates that when ʿUmar [bin al-Khaṭṭāb] (d. 23/643), Allah be pleased with him, was asked by someone about two ambiguous verses (*al-āyāt al-mutashābiḥa*) of the Qurʾān, he forthright whipped him. It is also related that someone asked ʿUmar whether the Qurʾān was created (*makhḥlūq*) or not, as Abū Hurayra (d. ca. 108/726)—Allah be pleased with him!—narrated, “I was

sitting with him when he was asked about that, and he was the Commander of the Faithful (*amīr al-mu'minīn*) at the time. He became flabbergasted at his question and seized him by the hand until he brought him to 'Alī (d. 40/660), Allah be pleased with him. He said [to 'Alī], 'O Abū-l-Ḥasan! Listen to what this man says!' 'Alī asked, 'What did he say, O Commander of the Faithful?' The man answered, 'I asked him whether the Qur'ān is created or uncreated.' Thereupon 'Alī—Allah be pleased with him—became speechless and lowered his head. Then he raised it and said, 'Such talk will cause an event in the later times. If I had the authority over his affair, I would have beheaded him!'"¹⁵ This hadith was reported by Imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) from Abū Hurayra. Such was 'Alī's statement in the presence of 'Umar and Abū Hurayra, neither of whom said anything to him (i.e., to censure him) nor [did] any of the [other] Companions who heard of it. 'Alī himself did not know if the question concerned a religious issue, a legal conception of the ruling on the speech of Allah the Glorified, or a request for knowledge about an attribute of the Qur'ān—a miracle indicative of the Messenger's veracity and definite proof of religious ordinances—concerning which the student of knowledge did not deserve such a severe condemnation. Consider ['Alī's] acumen and insight that the question shall knock on the door of tribulation and become widespread toward the end of time, which is the season of tribulations and trials, as in the promise of the Messenger of Allah—peace and blessings of Allah upon him. Consider further the severity of his statement, "If I controlled his affair, I would behead him!" That was an example of those great leaders who witnessed the divine revelation and [its] descent and were thoroughly acquainted with the mysteries and realities of the religion (*dīn*). About one of them, [the Messenger]—peace and blessings of Allah upon him—said, "If I had not been appointed [as a prophet], you would surely have been appointed so instead, O 'Umar!"¹⁶ About the other, he said, "I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate."¹⁷ They would reprimand this type of questioner, but others who came after them became fascinated with *kalām* ("scholastic theology") and disputation—although "even if they spent the like of [Mount] Uḥud in gold, they would not achieve the height of any one of them or [even] half of it!"¹⁸ [The latecomers] believed in tolerating this line of question, plunging

15. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī-l-tafsīr bil-ma'thūr* (Cairo: Markaz Hajar, 2003), 3:465.

16. Hadith classed *maṭwūʿ*. Reported by Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Ḥākim, and others. Al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawā'id al-majmū'a*, 336 §1057.

17. Hadith classed *maṭwūʿ*. Reported by al-Ḥākim, al-Ṭabarānī, and others in various phrasings. Al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawā'id al-majmū'a*, 348 §1088.

18. Hadith classed *ṣaḥīḥ*. Reported by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Bazzār, and Aḥmad who relates it as follows: "Leave my Companions be! I swear

into its answer, permitting it, and thinking they were right and ‘Umar and ‘Alī were wrong. How preposterous! How remote are the achievement and religion of the person who compares angels with blacksmiths, preferring disputants above the Rightly Guided Caliphs and righteous *Salaf*! If it is known decisively that this *bid‘a* is contradictory to the *sunna* of the *Salaf* [then it is prohibited.] And [this] is unlike the delving of jurists into legalistic ancillaries and details; for even if it is a new matter, this is not contrary to the *sunna* of the *Salaf*. Their censure of delving into such [matters] is not reported—indeed, we [only] know of the permissibility of [certain] issues of inheritance due to their dedication to delving into its issues.

As for what has been innovated in the arts of disputation, this is a reprehensible *bid‘a* for the folk who have acquired it. I have discussed its blameworthy aspect in *Qawā‘id al-‘aqā‘id*,¹⁹ one of the books of *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. If the aim of their debate is cooperation in searching for a source of the *Sharī‘a* (i.e., a legal ruling) or apprehending legal rulings, then it is [itself] a practice of the *Salaf*. For they used to consult one another and argue over certain juridical issues, as is reported regarding issues of inheritance per the grandfather, mother, wife, and father, and other such issues. Indeed, if they invented new terms and usages in order to draw attention to their sincere purposes, there is no harm in the expressions; and indeed, it is permissible for one to borrow and use them. If their aim [in disputation] was blameworthy, however, in order to silence opponents with arguments instead of imparting information or compel them to accept an argument instead of gathering information on an issue, then it is a reprehensible *bid‘a* that contradicts the established *Sunna*.

by Him in whose hand is my soul, even if you spent the like of Mount Uḥud or another mountain in gold, you would not attain to their deeds.” Al-Albānī, *Silsilāt al-āḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa*, 4:555–56 §1923.

19. Book II of al-Ghazālī’s *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. See *The Foundations of the Articles of Faith*, trans. Nabih Amin Faris (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, repr. 1999).

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