



ḤALLĀJ, ABU'L-MOĠĪṬ ḤOSAYN

ḤALLĀJ, ABU'L-MOĠĪṬ ḤOSAYN b. Manṣur b. Maḥammā Bayzāwi, popularly referred to in Persian literature as “Manṣur-e Ḥallāj,” controversial Arabic-speaking mystic from Fārs, whose execution has been considered a major turning-point in the history of Islamic mysticism (b. Ṭur, Fārs Province, ca. 244/857, d. Baghdad, 309/922; [Figure 1](#)). Ḥallāj has become one of the best known Sufis of his generation to Western readers through the pioneering studies of Louis Massignon (1883-1962). Massignon devoted his academic career to pursuing his deep, personal interest in Ḥallāj, completing the edition of manuscripts of his works (see below) as well as numerous studies based on a wide variety of primary sources. The most famous of the latter is his four-volume study of the life, works and legacy of Ḥallāj, entitled *La Passion de Husayn Ibn Mansûr al-Hallâj* (Paris, 2nd ed., 1975). Although highly interpretative in parts, as a result of the importance of the subject for Massignon’s own spiritual odyssey (see Basetti-Sani, tr. Cutler; Buck), nonetheless this study serves as a convenient source for a broad outline of the traditional portrait of Ḥallāj’s life (see Massignon, 1975, I, esp. pp. 59-73; tr. Mason, I, pp. 21-33).

Born in Ṭur, on the eastern fringes of Bayzā, the grandson of a Zoroastrian, Ḥallāj moved to Wāseṭ on the Tigris in his early childhood, when his father, a cotton-wool carder (*ḥallāj*), decided to relocate closer to the textile centers in that region. He thus received his traditional education in this town,



memorizing the Qur'ān by the age of twelve. Since Ḥallāj wrote exclusively in Arabic, he probably lost any knowledge of Persian he may have already acquired at Bayzā due to this relocation.

Ḥallāj is said to have become a disciple of the Sufi Sahl Tostari (d. 283/896) when he was about 16 years old, four years prior to being invested with a Sufi robe (*kerqa*) by 'Amr b. 'Oṭmān Makki (d. 291/904) at Basra. While settled there, he also married the daughter of Abu Ya'qub Aqṭa', with whom he had 3 children. Both Makki and Aqṭa' were followers of Abu'l-Qāsem Jonayd (d. 297/910), whom Ḥallāj is said to have met himself in Baghdad. His encounters with Jonayd, who is commonly associated with a “sober” approach to Sufism, are related in popular anecdotes which depict Ḥallāj as being “intoxicated” in contrast to him (e.g. Hojviri, p. 235). Ḥallāj's period of residence in Basra coincided with the Zanj rebellion, to which he became linked through his brother-in-law, Moḥammad b. Sa'id Karnabā'i, a major proponent. This may partly explain why he was often accused of being an extremist Shi'ite.

Ḥallāj left Basra after the collapse of the Zanj rebellion to perform the minor pilgrimage to Mecca (*omra*), after which he stayed in the precinct of the Kaaba for a retreat, having vowed to maintain silence and fast for a year. On his return home, Ḥallāj started to speak openly about his experiences and convictions, as a result of which he was disowned by Aqṭa' and attacked by Makki. He then decided to relocate to Tostar and began to preach to popular audiences, encouraging them to find God inside their own souls, for which he is often remembered as “the carder of innermost souls” (*ḥallāj al-asrār*). He preached without Sufi garb and made use of vocabulary familiar to the local Shi'ite population, which probably contributed to perceptions that he was a Qarmathian missionary (*dā'i*) and not a Sufi. It was probably on account of local opposition that he took his preaching to Khorasan and Transoxiana for the next five years. On his return, the now well-known Ḥallāj made his second pilgrimage, this time accompanied by hundreds of disciples. In Mecca, he was accused by his father-in-law, Aqṭa', and his associates of sorcery and of making a pact with the jinn, subsequent to which he set off on another long journey, this time to India and Turkestan.

Ḥallāj eventually settled in Baghdad, and in around 290/902, he made his third and final pilgrimage to Mecca. He is reported to have prayed aloud at the Station of 'Arafāt for God to make him more lost and despised in the world like an infidel. Although this can be regarded as typical of the sentiments of Sufis seeking complete annihilation in God to the point of worldly degradation and



censure (*malāmat*), Massignon has interpreted the prayer as the expression of Ḥallāj's desire to be a sacrifice for atonement on behalf of all Muslims (see Massignon, I, pp. 67, 265-67; tr. Mason, I, pp. 26-27, 219-23).

On returning to Baghdad, Ḥallāj built a model of the Kaaba at his home for private worship. There are also many accounts of him wandering the streets of the city during this period, proclaiming similar sentiments to his prayer at 'Arafāt, and thus inciting anger and outrage in his fellow citizens. According to the earliest account, it was also during this time that Ḥallāj uttered, at the teaching circle of the Sufi Abu Bakr Šebli (d. 334/945), "I am the Truth" (*anā'l-ḥaqq*), the most notorious of all theopathic utterances (*šataḥāt*) recorded in the history of Sufism. However, versions emerging only decades subsequent to this account report that it was uttered to Jonayd in private (Massignon, I, pp. 168-72; tr. Mason, I, pp. 126-29). This *šatḥ*, the actual historical circumstances of which remain unclear, has become almost inseparably associated with the execution of Ḥallāj in popular tradition. This must be at least in part due to the fact that in each of the early attempts to contextualize it, the response to the *šatḥ* from Šebli, or Jonayd, alludes prophetically to Ḥallāj's future execution for making such an utterance (*ibid.*).

The time when Ḥallāj was living in Baghdad was one of considerable political conflict. In 296/908, a group of Hanbalite traditionalists attempted unsuccessfully to introduce reforms by installing Ebn al-Mo'tazz as caliph, a reign which was to last no more than a single day. This was followed by another Sunni uprising in the following year, which included this time the participation of Ḥallāj. Having already made numerous enemies in Baghdad through his open style of preaching, display of miracles and shocking behavior, Ḥallāj fled to safety in Ahvāz. But he was arrested there three years later and brought back to Baghdad to be imprisoned. He was apparently charged at this point with claiming divinity and preaching incarnationism (*ḥolul*). A sympathetic vizier managed to cause the trial to collapse, but he received the punishment of being pilloried as an agent of the Qarmathians, followed by imprisonment.

Ḥallāj was imprisoned for some nine years, mostly at the court, where he had a number of influential supporters. He composed many of his writings during this period, some of which seem to have been responsible for provoking his second trial, after a hostile deputy vizier showed them to the caliph, al-Moqtader. Although there are conflicting accounts, a popular report relates that the pretext for condemning him to death was a passage in which he



advocated the building of replicas of the Kaaba for those unable to go to Mecca to perform Hajj (Massignon, I, pp. 592-94; tr. Mason, I, pp. 546-47; see also Ernst, pp. 106-110). On 24 Du'l-qa'da, Ḥallāj received a thousand lashes, had his feet and hands cut off, and was eventually hanged to death on the gibbet. His corpse was burned and the ashes poured into the Tigris. His students apparently fled eastwards to Khorasan.

The ritual of pilgrimage is thus particularly prominent in the traditional biography of Ḥallāj; the three occasions when he performed the Hajj himself in Mecca each mark significant turning points in his life story, and he is said to have been eventually condemned to death for advocating its performance locally in an effort to make it accessible to all. Two lengthy journeys in the opposite direction also account for significant portions of Ḥallāj's adult life, which makes detailing the events precisely, and identifying the contemporaries whom he could and could not have met, highly problematic.

Ḥallāj has left a relatively small body of works. His main work, the *Ṭawāsin* (ed. Massignon, 1913), consists of eleven reflective essays, in which he frequently employs line diagrams and cabbalistic symbols, in what seems to be a determined struggle to convey profound mystical experiences which he could not express in words. A small collection of poetry has also been attributed to him (*Diwān al-Ḥallāj*, ed. Massignon, Paris, 1931), and there is a collection of biographical reports which transmit anecdotes about him and his recorded utterances (*Aḵbār al-Ḥallāj*, ed. Massignon, 3rd ed., Paris, 1957).

Ḥallāj is remembered most of all for making the theopathic utterance “*anā'l-ḥaqq*,” even though this expression of total annihilation such that only God remains to say “I” (see BAQĀ' WAFANĀ') is not recorded in any reliable manuscript of his writings (Massignon, I, pp. 170-71; tr. Mason, I, pp. 128-29). The sentiment that this utterance expresses is nonetheless in accord with much of the content of Ḥallāj's works (see especially *Ṭawāsin*, p. 23, where he compares himself with Moses' burning bush), which are replete also with expressions of longing to become completely obliterated in God. This includes an early use in Arabic of the image of a moth (*farāṣ*) circling around a lamp (*meṣbāḥ*) and burning itself away (ibid., pp. 16-17), which would later become one of the most common symbols in Persian Sufi poetry.

Ḥallāj is also renowned for having identified closely with and glorified Satan. In by far the longest essay of the *Ṭawāsin*, the “*Ṭā-sin al-azal wa'l-eltebās*,” he depicts Satan as the most sincere and uncompromising of monotheists for



refusing to bow in obeisance to anyone but God, even when ordered by Him to do so before Adam with the threat that he would be cursed as punishment for disobedience (*Ṭawāsin*, pp. 41-55). This glorification of Satan became popular among many Persian Sufi authors influenced by Ḥallāj, including most famously Aḥmad Ġazālī, ‘Ayn-al-Qożāt Hamadāni and Ruzbehān Baqli (qq.v.; see EBLĪS II; Awn, 1983).

The classical works of Sufism which were composed in the century and a half after the execution of Ḥallāj were influenced perceptibly by this event, though it would be an exaggeration to suggest that they were written simply as a response to it. One of the most obvious indications of the affect of the controversy over Ḥallāj is his complete omission from the biography collections of Abu No‘aym Eṣfahāni (d. 430/1038) and ‘Abd-al-Karim Qoṣayri (d. 465/1072). As well as leaving out Ḥallāj, Abu No‘aym’s ten-volume collection of over 600 biographies also begins with a polemical introduction condemning the doctrine of incarnation, albeit without naming any of its proponents (Abu No‘aym, I, p. 4; see Mojaddedi, p. 43). While Qoṣayri omits Ḥallāj from the biographical section of his *Resāla*, nonetheless he quotes him several times in the manual section of the same work, suggesting that he was concerned about the harm his reputation could do if he were to be listed as a hero of the Sufi community, rather than his actual ideas. Qoṣayri’s omission of Ḥallāj is in fact the most glaring difference between his biography collection and Solami’s *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣufiyya*, on which it is based (*ibid.*, p. 104). The relatively brief and inconspicuous entry on Ḥallāj in the latter work begins with a reference to the controversy over his legitimacy, acknowledging that “most Sufi shaikhs have rejected him,” although it names only those who accepted him, including Solami’s own teacher Abu Bakr Naṣrābādhi (Solami, p. 308).

It was left to ‘Ali Hojviri (d. ca. 465/1072) to begin openly the process of the rehabilitation of Ḥallāj in the Persian Sufi tradition. The lengthy biography devoted to him in Hojviri’s *Kaṣf al-maḥjub* is taken up almost entirely with defending him from criticism. Hojviri claims that his condemnation is partly due to a case of mistaken identity with “another Ḥosayn ibn Maṣṣur Ḥallāj” who was his contemporary (Hojviri, p. 190), and partly due to the notoriety of a group who call themselves the “Ḥallājiān” and attribute their own heretical doctrines falsely to the innocent Ḥallāj (p. 192).

The process of glorifying Ḥallāj was accelerated considerably by Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221), who included a relatively long biography of him at pride of place, the very climax, of his *Taḍkerat al-awliā’* (ed. Este‘lāmi, pp. 583-95).



Although this biography is based largely on what Hojviri had already provided, 'Aṭṭār makes a couple of significant additions. He defends directly the utterance “*anā'l-ḥaqq*,” arguing that it does not warrant the amount of condemnation it has attracted if one compares it with similar statements that have been made by others (ibid., p. 584), and he includes an imaginative narrative describing Ḥallāj's execution, according to which it was for making this particular utterance that he was sentenced to death (ibid., p. 589). This narrative contains motifs that would become associated closely with Ḥallāj in Persian poetry, such as fearless self-sacrifice (ibid., p. 590), eagerness to ascend the gibbet and die in order to return to God (ibid., pp. 592-93), and celebration at his own bleeding and the approach of death (ibid.). It has also inspired the efforts of artists to depict his hanging in miniature paintings (e.g., see fig. 1).

'Aṭṭār himself includes many references to Ḥallāj in his works of poetry, including a well-known anecdote in which Ḥallāj is described as smearing his face with blood so that his increasingly pale complexion while hanging on the gibbet should not be misinterpreted as a sign of fear (*Manṭeq al-ṭayr*, 1969, vv. 2287-98; tr. Darbandi and Davis; see also the similar version in his *Elāhi-nāma*, vv. 2120-2136; see further, Massignon, 1941-46b; 1963). Rumi includes many references to Ḥallāj in the *Maṭnawī* (ed. Este'lāmi, VII (Index), p. 95), including some specifically to the utterance *anā'l-ḥaqq* (ibid., VII (Index), pp. 20-21), such as: *bud anā'l-ḥaqq dar lab-e Maṣṣur nur / bud anā'llāh dar lab-e Fer'un zur*, “Maṣṣur's “I am the Truth” was purest light, But Pharaoh's “I am God” claimed his own might” (II, v. 307). The most well-known Persian verse that alludes to Ḥallāj, however, is the following *bayt* from a ghazal by Ḥāfez: *goft ān yār k'az-u gašt sar-e dār boland / jormeš in bud ka asrār hoveydā mikard*, “He said, ‘That friend for whom the noose was raised / His crime was giving secret truths away’ “ (p. 288, v. 6).

Ḥallāj's popularity and status as Sufism's most celebrated martyr has continued to flourish up to the present day in Persian literature and Sufism (see e.g., Nurbakš, 1994). Over the course of the centuries, his depiction in Persian literature has also shaped significantly the image of Ḥallāj among the poets and Sufi authors of Central Asia, Anatolia and the Indian subcontinent, among others (see Massignon, 1941-46a; Schimmel, 1962). Before Massignon's research, Ḥallāj had in fact already attracted the interest of European scholars, who established the belief that he was secretly a Christian. In the light of this, a major achievement of Massignon's efforts was to present Ḥallāj in the context of Islamic mysticism, the tradition to which he actually belonged. The



attention given to him by modern Western scholars seems to have helped inspire a revival of interest in the story of Ḥallāj's life and his poetry among Arab authors too, as demonstrated most famously by the poet Ṣalāḥ 'Abd-al-Ṣabur's play, *Ma'sāt al-Ḥallāj*, or "The Tragedy of Ḥallāj" (Beirut, 1965; tr. Semaan, Leiden, 1972).

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