

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MU'TAZILA RECONSIDERED*

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On several occasions the Zaydī scholar Ibn al-Murtaḍā (d. 840 H) says, introducing the genealogy of the Mu'tazila, that "the tradition from which the Mu'tazilite school is derived is brighter than daylight"! For us, unfortunately, this daylight is somewhat eclipsed. Not only are early sources on the Mu'tazila scarce and inadequate, but the information they yield is often tendentious and contradictory. As a result, the attempts of modern scholars to portray Mu'tazilite history are, at best, speculative reconstructions. The aim of the present study is to survey the available evidence relating to the early Mu'tazila for the purpose of sifting firm fact from mere conjecture. Our chief concern in the following pages will be to elucidate the name "Mu'tazila", to survey the emergence of the Mu'tazila as a movement, and to examine its links with Mu'tazilite Kalam.

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1 *Wa-sanad al-mu'tazila li-madhhabihim awḍaḥ min al-falaq*, *Ṭabaqāt al-Mu'tazila*, ed. S. Diwald-Wilzer (Wiesbaden, 1961), p. 71; *Kitāb al-Munya Wa'l-amal fī Sharḥ al-Milal Wa'l-niḥal*, ed. Muḥammad Jawwād Mashkūr (Beirut, 1979), p. 125:17 = T.M. Arnold, *Al-Mu'tazila* (Leipzig, 1902) (henceforward *Munya*, quoted according to Arnold's edition), p. 5:14. The claim that the *isnād* of the Mu'tazila is better than any other is mentioned already by 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025). The Qāḍī, however, regards this sort of proof as *taqlīd*, and prefers to establish the case of the Mu'tazila on superior decisive proofs (*al-adilla al-qā'i'a*), see *Faḍl al-ʿitizāl wa-ṭabaqāt al-Mu'tazila*, ed. Fu'ād Sayyid (Tunis, 1974), p. 164:25-27.

All the reports about the beginning of the Mu'tazila as we know it revolve around the persons of Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā' and 'Amr b. 'Ubayd. It is, therefore, natural to start our research with these two key figures. Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā', also known as Abū Ḥudhayfa, was born in al-Madīna in the year 80 or 81 H, and died in 131 H.² The precision with which these dates are recorded is unusual for his generation.³ Wāṣil, however, was an unusual individual, and the gossips of his time noted and recorded about him characteristics which do not usually occur in standard biographical works, while the more common details about his life remain unclear. For example, it is uncertain whether he was a client (*mawlā*) of the Banū Ḍabba, of the Banū Maḥzūm, or of the Banū Hāshim.⁴ He was nicknamed "the spinner" (*al-ghazzāl*), and although the sources are unanimous in maintaining that he was not a spinner, they fail both to explain why he was given this designation and to specify his real profession.⁵ His physical appearance, on the

2 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist* (Beirut, n.d.), *Takmila*, I.

3 Cf. J. Van Ess, "Une lecture à rebours de l'histoire du mu'tazilisme", *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 47 (1979), p. 41.

4 Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, ed. Ihsān 'Abbās (Beirut [n.d.]), vol. VI, p. 73-4; al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, p. 1133; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 185.

5 Al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa'l-Tabayīn*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Harūn (Cairo, 1968), vol. I, pp. 32:21 - 34:1; Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī, *Kitāb al-Awā'il*, ed. Muḥammad al-Miṣrī and Walīd Qaṣṣāb (Damascus, 1975), vol. II, pp. 137:9 - 138:1. Van Ess has suggested that Wāṣil was indeed a spinner, but that the Mu'tazila attempted to cover this up, since it was considered a base profession ("Lecture", p. 42). This low esteem, however, was accorded to the weaver (*ḥā'ik*), not to the spinner (*ghazzāl*). The latter, indeed, was considered a praiseworthy occupation for women, and there is no evidence that it was considered a shameful one for men. (R. Brunshvig, "Métiers vils en Islam", *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962), pp. 41-60, and esp. p. 45). The verses referred to by Van Ess (*ibid.*, p. 45) as a proof of Wāṣil's being "un marchand de draps", are, in fact, rhetorical questions the point of which is to emphasize that Wāṣil could *not* have been a merchant. See al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 138:5, 13-17.

It should be noted that a verse of Bashshār b. Burd appears at least in one source with reference to the 'Azzāl, not *Ghazzāl*. One could conjecture that, through a scribal error, an additional diacritical point turned an 'azzāl (in the sense of a Mu'tazilite) into a *ghazzāl*, a spinner. In this case, the words of al-Mubarrad (*al-Kāmil*, ed. W. Wright, Leipzig, 1864, vol. I, p. 546): "*wa-kāna mu'taziliyyan wa-lam yakun ghazzālan*" could be understood as correcting the

other hand, is carefully noted. He was an odd-looking person,⁶ with a remarkably long and twisted neck.⁷ At times he kept silent to the point of being considered dumb,⁸ and when he did speak up, his pronunciation of the consonant *rā'* was painfully ugly.⁹ All in all, he made a unprepossessing first impression.¹⁰ A better acquaintance with him, however, altered this impression dramatically for the better. Our sources vividly convey the surprise, embarrassment and admiration people felt on finding out what lay behind his clumsy, silent exterior.¹¹ Despite his speech defect, he was an eloquent orator, second to none in his time,¹² and his skill in avoiding the problematic *rā'* became legendary.¹³

reading in this way. The bulk of manuscript evidence, however, renders this conjecture unlikely.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the root 'zl in Syriac relates also to spinning. (J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford, 1967, p. 409). If the term *Mu'tazila* was originally connected to spinning, then we could assume a connection between Wāṣil and Syriac-speaking Christianity. I was, however, unable to find any special role played by spinning in the life of Syriac Christians in general or of Syriac monks in particular.

6 "Muḍḍarib al-khalq", see al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 130:7.

7 Jāhīz, *Bayān*, I, p. 22:9 and Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Cairo, 1929), vol. III, p. 145:13-14 (quoting verses by Bashshār b. Burd); al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, II, p. 130:6-7; al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, *Ghurar al-fawā'id wa-durar al-qalā'id* (= *Amālī*), ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (1954), I, p. 165:11.

8 Al-'Askarī, *ibid.*, p. 134:4-5; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 234:5-6; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 18:15, and see n. 17 below.

9 Al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, II, p. 130:13.

10 See the contemptuous remark of 'Amr b. 'Ubayd, Al-'Askarī, *ibid.*, p. 130:6; al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, I, p. 165:11.

11 Al-'Askarī, *ibid.*, p. 130:12; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 234:7-11, 235:4-9; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 18:16-20.

12 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 235:11-12, 238:14-15; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh Baghdad* (Cairo-Baghdad, 1931), vol. XII, p. 175.

13 Jāhīz, *Bayān*, I, p. 24:1; al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, II, pp. 130:13 - 132:8; al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, I, p. 163:11-12; Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī, "*Bāb dhikr al-mu'tazila min maqālāt al-islāmiyyin*", *Faḍl*, pp. 65:2 - 66:5; Mubarrad, *Kāmil*, I, p. 547; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān*, vol. VI, p. 8:19-20; and see Wāṣil's famous *Khuṭba* in 'Abd al-Salām Harūn, *Nawādir al-Makhṭū'āt* (Cairo, 1951), vol. II, pp. 134-136; H.

This laboriously acquired eloquence was not used for artistic or literary ends: Wāṣil was no aesthete. His main interest was religion, in the broad sense of the word. Personally he was a puritan, always piously on guard against temptations. Although he was married, he lived a life of continence.¹⁴ He is known to have shunned money.¹⁵ The money which he inherited or received as a prize was distributed for charity,¹⁶ and, as mentioned above, he practiced prolonged silence. All these restrictions were common among the early *nussāk*,¹⁷ and indeed Wāṣil constantly strove to be counted among those known for their religious observance (*ahl al-dīn*).¹⁸ His piety, however, was not that of the solitary, and he never missed an opportunity to admonish.¹⁹ Thus, when on their first meeting 'Amr made a condescending remark concerning Wāṣil's neck, Wāṣil retorted by reproving 'Amr for finding fault with God's creation.²⁰ On another occasion, when 'Amr lost his temper, Wāṣil sternly warned him against the "devilry lurking in an angry utterance".²¹ Yet despite his sternness he also knew how to win people over, allowing them to feel his equals.²²

This combination of piety with a didactic bent was probably the driving force behind Wāṣil's public activity. What set him apart

Daiber, *Wāṣil ibn 'Aṭā' als Prediger und Theologe* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 23-36.

- 14 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 235:9-10, where Wāṣil is quoted as saying: "*Laysa lī fī al-nisā' hāja*". Both Wāṣil and 'Amr were childless, see *Faḍl*, p. 234:13.
- 15 See his eulogy by al-Asbāt b. Wāṣil al-Shaybānī: "*walā sarra dīnāran walā massa dirhaman*", *Awā'il*, p. 138:4; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 18:9; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 238:8-13.
- 16 *Faḍl*, p. 239:19-22; *Awā'il*, p. 131:1-10.
- 17 See Tor Andrae, "Zuhd und Mönchtum, zur Frage von den Beziehungen zwischen Christentum und Islam", *Le Monde Oriental* 25 (1931), pp. 296-327. I. Goldziher, "De l'ascétisme aux premiers temps de l'Islam", *RHR* 37 (1898), pp. 319-328, rp. *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, p. 164-167 (on silence). See also Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār* (Cairo, 1928), I, *Kitāb al-zuhd*, p. 351.
- 18 See Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 23:12; and see al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 56:20.
- 19 On the early *Zuhhād* and their social involvement see L. Kinberg, "What is meant by Zuhd", *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985), p. 27-44.
- 20 Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 1:9; al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, p. 165:12.
- 21 Al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, p. 164:1-7.
- 22 See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 241:20-22.

from other preachers was the fact that both his intellectual curiosity in all religious matters and his feelings of responsibility knew no bounds. He was careful to give alms only to the pious.²³ When Baṣra's water supply required improvement, Wāṣil offered the honorarium due to him for a *khuṭba* (which he would not touch anyway) for that purpose.²⁴ For a while he used to meet with intellectuals of various religious backgrounds, among them a Manichaean and a Buddhist.²⁵ He is remembered as the first to have grappled seriously with the Buddhist challenge,²⁶ and the first to have written against the various Muslim sects as well as against other religions.²⁷ It is said that he used to spend the night in prayer, stopping frequently to jot down arguments in an imaginary dispute.²⁸

Composed and pious, learned and full of religious fervor, Wāṣil was admired by many. Little wonder that 'Amr was also captivated by Wāṣil's measured eloquence.

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Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr b. 'Ubayd b. Bāb (d. 144 H) was at first a client of Banū 'Uqayl, then of 'Urāda, a clan of the Yarbū' b. Mālik. His grandfather had been a captive from Sind; his father belonged to the despised *shurṭa* in Baṣra.²⁹ 'Amr himself was a student of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110 H), and although the same claim is sometimes made for Wāṣil, it is evident that 'Amr was much closer to al-Ḥasan and much more involved in his "circle" of traditionalists and "Qadarites".³⁰

23 Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 18:6-7.

24 Al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 136:7-10.

25 Both religions of marked ascetic character. See *al-Aghānī*, III, pp. 146:12 - 147:2.

26 Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 21:5-10.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 18:11-18; al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 129:1-5.

28 Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 19:14-16.

29 See, for example, Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 460.

30 As noted already by Wilferd Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* (Berlin, 1965), p. 7. See al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 68:8: "*Wa-huwa* (i.e., 'Amr) *min jillat aṣḥāb al-Ḥasan* (Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī, *al-Ḥūr al-'īn*, ed. Kamāl Muṣṭafā, Cairo, 1948, p. 111:12 reads "*min jublat*").

Al-Ḥasan apparently thought very highly of 'Amr, and called him "the best among the youth of Baṣra";³¹ some of the stories about al-Ḥasan are also told about 'Amr.³² It is said that he prayed all night, and that his forehead carried the mark of constant prostration.³³ For forty years he performed the *hajj* every year on foot, giving his mount to the weaker pilgrims.³⁴ He never laughed, always looked as if returning from his parents' funeral, and behaved as if hell had been created for him alone.³⁵ Even orthodox writers, who miss no opportunity to discredit him as a *Muḥaddith*, do not deny his asceticism.³⁶ Like Wāṣil, he was exceedingly careful in his speech, and was famous for his honesty and sincerity.³⁷ Like Wāṣil, he was a powerful preacher,³⁸ and

compared to *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 65:2: "*Intaqala Wāṣil ilā al-Baṣra, fa-lazima al-Ḥasan*". See also *Tārīkh Baghdād*, p. 166:12 and al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, p. 165:8, where 'Amr is the one who is described as "*min aṣḥāb al-Ḥasan wa-talāmīdhīhī*", whereas Wāṣil is the outsider who pulls 'Amr out of the circle.

- 31 *Al-Ḥūr al-'In*, p. 11:11-12. See also Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 460:10-13. The version which adds: ". . . provided he does not transmit *ḥadīth*" (*Tārīkh Baghdād*, XII, pp. 170, 181:13) is clearly a later orthodox correction. See also 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 245:10 (where 'Amr is called: "*zā'im aṣḥāb al-Ḥasan*").
- 32 See H. Ritter, "Studien zur Geschichte der islamischen Frömmigkeit", *Der Islam* 21 (1933), pp. 1-56, and see below.
- 33 See for instance Al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 68:11; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 243:2-3, and see Q. 48:28.
- 34 Al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 68:10; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 243:2; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 22:9-10. On this ascetic practice see Goldziher, "Ascétisme", p. 318, (= *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 163).
- 35 Al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 69:10-12; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 22:5-7; and see Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn*, pp. 351; 355:17 - 356:2 (on al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī).
- 36 Dhahabī, *Mīzān al-ītidāl fī naqd al-rijāl* (Egypt, 1325 H), vol. II, pp. 294-297; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 440; *Tārīkh Baghdād*, XII, p. 166; al-Dāraquṭnī, *Akhbār 'Amr b. 'Ubayd*, ed. J. Van Ess (*Traditionalistische Polemik gegen 'Amr b. 'Ubayd, zu einem Text des 'Ali b. 'Umar ad-Dāraquṭnī*, Beirut-Wiesbaden, 1967), pp. 9-16. But see *Tārīkh Baghdād*, XII, pp. 174, 179, 182-183, which implies that 'Amr was more interested in debating than in prayer.
- 37 Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 460:11-13; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 246:8-9, 247:19-20, 247:25 - 248:1.
- 38 Contrary to Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 57. See al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, VI, pp. 208 ff., 212; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 247:7-15.

had numerous followers³⁹ who trusted him blindly; they were called "Mu'tazila".⁴⁰ Later orthodox sources endeavor to depict 'Amr as a mere lacrymose epigone of Wāṣil.⁴¹ Mu'tazilite sources, however, do not share this view. They depict 'Amr as a leader in his own right, and since Mu'tazilite writers had no interest in underplaying Wāṣil's role, there is no reason to doubt their evaluation of 'Amr's position in the early Mu'tazila. In an important but oddly neglected passage in the *Maqātil al-Ṭalibiyyīn*, Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī (d. 967), says: "Amr b. 'Ubayd's position among the Mu'tazila was such that he had their full obedience: if he took off his shoe, thirty thousand (*mu'tazilis*) took off theirs."⁴²

There can be very little doubt as to the meaning of the name Mu'tazila when applied to 'Amr's disciples. The verb *i'tazala* means "to withdraw", and in its most common use, as given in the dictionaries and attested in *Ḥadīth* literature, it denotes some sort of abstinence: from sexual activity, from worldly pleasures, or, more generally, from sin.⁴³ 'Amr taught his followers to be "the party which abstains" (i.e., from evil: *al-firqa al-mu'tazila*);⁴⁴ asceticism was their most striking

39 Which explains 'Abd al-Jabbār's careful distinction between those who are "*min aṣḥāb Wāṣil*" and those who are "*min aṣḥāb 'Amr*". See, for instance, *Faḍl*, p. 252:8-10.

40 See al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, VI, p. 21, which describes 'Amr as "*shaykh al-mu'tazila fī waqīhi wa'l-awwal fīhā*".

41 See, for instance, al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayn al-firqa* (Beirut, 1977), p. 98:11-12.

42 *Maqātil al-Ṭalibiyyīn*, ed. Aḥmad Saqr (Cairo, 1949), p. 209:3-4. On the shoe as an instrument which may legitimately be used in administering mild correction to erring Muslims, see al-Malaṭī, *al-Tanbīh wa'l-radd 'alā ahl al-ahwā' wa'l-bida'*, ed. S. Dederling (Istanbul, 1936), p. 29:22 - 30:1.

43 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, s.v. 'zl; Zensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, vol. IV, p. 207.

44 See Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 2:6-14, and al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 2:9 - 3:1 where it is said that 'Amr was the first to encourage his followers to call themselves "Mu'tazila" "*li-annakum i'tazaltum al-zulmā*". The meaning of this *i'tizāl* is explained by a *ḥadīth* which 'Amr used to quote: "my *umma* will split into more than seventy sects, and the most pious and God-fearing among them is the one which abstains" (*abarruhā wa-atqāhā al-firqa al-mu'tazila*). See also 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 166:9-13.

characteristic. They were given the name "Mu'tazila" in reference to their pious asceticism, and they were content with this name.⁴⁵

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The interpretation of the name Mu'tazila as "ascetics" is not new. It was already suggested by Goldziher, who assembled many examples of the use of "Mu'tazilite" in this sense⁴⁶ and pointed out the ascetic character of Wāṣil and 'Amr.⁴⁷ The evidence marshalled by Goldziher is compelling, and his explanation of the name "Mu'tazila", which has since gone out of fashion, deserves to be re-instated. To his interpretation, however, I would like to add the following suggestion: the use of the word *mu'tazila* in the sense of "ascetics" is independent of Wāṣil and 'Amr, and probably predates them. Like the Pharisees

45 See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 165:19-24, 166:1-2; al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, pp. 129:14 - 130:2.

46 I. Goldziher, "Arabische Synonymik der Askese", *Der Islam* 8 (1917), pp. 207 ff., rp. *Gesammelte Schriften* V, p. 410 ff.; *idem*, *Vorlesungen über den Islam* (Heidelberg, 1925²), pp. 94 ff.; see also *idem*, "Islamische Polemik gegen Ahl al-Kitāb", *ZDMG* 32 (1878), p. 353, note 3, rp. *Gesammelte Schriften* II, p. 13. Goldziher concentrated on expressions such as "*rāhib mu'tazilī*" when used as a synonym of "*rāhib munqaṭī*". Other examples, not mentioned by Goldziher, are Judah ha-Levi, *al-kitāb al-Khazarī*, ed. D.Z. Baneth and H. Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 170:2 ("*man itazala wa-tazahhada*"), p. 171:16, ("*al-ītizāl wa'l inqitā' ilā 'Allāh*"); and also al-Malaṭī, *Tanbīh*, p. 28:16, where those who separated (*itazalū*) from al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī after his abduction in favour of Mu'āwiya explain their conduct by saying: we shall devote ourselves to study and worship, therefore they were called "Mu'tazila" (*nashtaghilū bi'l-ilm wa'l-ibāda, fa-summū biḥālika mu'tazila*).

47 Goldziher, *Vorlesungen*, p. 95. It is remarkable that many modern scholars were aware of the asceticism of the founders of the Mu'tazila, and yet saw no connection between this asceticism and the name "Mu'tazila". See, for instance, R. Nyberg, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Mu'tazila"; *idem*, "'Amr ibn 'Ubayd et ibn al-Rawandī, deux reprouvés", in R. Brunshvig and G.E. von Grunbaum, *Classicisme et déclin culturel dans l'histoire de l'Islam* (Paris, 1977), pp. 125-130; Fu'ād Sayyid in the introduction to his edition of *Faḍl al-ītizāl*, p. 12; Van Ess, "Lecture", pp. 45-46, 56, 62.

among the Jews and the anachoretes among the Christians, early Muslim ascetics derived their name from their "withdrawal". The question of whether this parallel usage points to some generic relationship between the Mu'tazila and non-Muslim (probably eastern Christian) ascetic trends would require a separate study.⁴⁸ At any rate, by the first quarter of the second Islamic century ascetics, or even loosely organized groups of ascetics, were called *mu'tazila*. It follows that Wāṣil, 'Amr and their early followers were "Mu'tazilites" before the existence of a Mu'tazila as we know it, and that it was only later, through a process of diversification, that this word became the proper name of a movement, while other words became the technical terms for asceticism.⁴⁹

Furthermore, since it was 'Amr who belonged to al-Ḥasan's circle and whose ascetic traits were more pronounced than Wāṣil's, it is possible that it was 'Amr who brought with him his supporters and the name *mu'tazila* when he decided to join hands with Wāṣil.

The following pages will seek to demonstrate that this hypothesis enables us to gain a better understanding of the various

48 See, however, note 5, above, and note 128 below. On the Pharisees, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), vol. 13, s.v.; on the Anachoretes, see, for example, Hans Litzmann, *A History of the Early Church* (English trans.; London, 1961), vol. IV, pp. 124-133.

49 See al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-maqālāt fī al-madhāhib al-mukhtārāt*, ed. 'Abaskalī (Tabriz, 1371 H), p. 61-3, for whom the statement that there was no *ītizāl* prior to Wāṣil and 'Amr means that it was not a designation for any specific sect (*wa-lam yakun qabla dhālika yūrafu al-ītizāl wa-lā kāna 'alaman 'alā fariq min al-nās*). See also Sayyid's introduction to *Faḍl*, p. 26, and see al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 115:13-14. It should nevertheless be noted that, as a rule, the epithet "*al-mu'tazilī*" is reserved for people who were identified with the Mu'tazilite movement proper. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, for example, is not called a *mu'tazilī*, although al-Khawārizmī (*Mafāṭih al-Ulūm*, ed. G. Van Vloten, Leiden 1895, p. 24), counts the *ḥasaniyya . . . al-muntasibūn . . . ilā al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī* as the first among the Mu'tazila. The verb *itazala*, on the other hand, is more freely used (see note 53 below). S. Pines has pointed to the same process of diversification in the use of the term *kalām*, which, before it came to mean only "theology", was also used in a political context. See "A Note on an Early Use of the Term *Mutakallim*", in G. Baer, ed., *The 'Ulamā and Problems of Religion in the Muslim World* (Jerusalem, 1971, in Hebrew), pp. 18-29.

available items of information about the Mu'tazila, and to develop a more coherent account of its early history.

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It should first of all be noted that at the time of 'Amr's Mu'tazila, other meanings of the verb *i'tazala* are also attested. It can mean any of several kinds of withdrawal, and it may refer to various historical incidents. Refusal to pay the *zakāt* to Abū Bakr,⁵⁰ neutrality at the Battle of the Camel, or at Šiffīn, refusal to be involved in political activity altogether, or, on the contrary, active political dissent – all these are referred to as *i'tizāl*.⁵¹ The temptation to find a way to connect this *i'tizāl* with the Mu'tazilite movement is great. Already al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956) identifies the supporters of Yazīd b. al-Walīd (d. 126 H) with the Mu'tazila of his own days, attributing to them, in a flagrant anachronism, the full-fledged "five Mu'tazilite principles".⁵² Another attempt to reconcile the different pieces of evidence is made by al-Nawbakhtī, who suggests that the Mu'tazila we know descends from "the first Mu'tazila", the followers of Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāš and of 'Usāma b. Zayd, who had adopted a neutral position in the civil war.⁵³

50 See al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-Shī'a*, ed. Muḥammad Šādiq (al-Najaf, 1959), p. 25:2-4, and compare al-Nāshī' al-Akbar, *Uṣūl al-niḥal*, in H. Van Ess, *Frühe mu'tazilitische Häresiographie* (Beirut, 1971), p. 14:14-16.

51 Al-Nāshī', *Uṣūl*, p. 16:15, 17 (the *i'tizāl* of *ahl al-ḥadīth*) and p. 18:4, 8 (the *i'tizāl* of the perplexed), both relate to the civil war, although the first stems from pious reluctance to be involved in real politics. *Uṣūl*, p. 19:13 applies the term *i'tizāl* to the act of the *Khawārij*, as does also Abū Muṭī' al-Nasafī, who speaks of the "*mu'taziliyya min al-Ḥarūriyya*"; see M. Bernand, "*Le kitāb al-radd 'alā l-bida' d'Abū Muṭī' Makhūl al-Nasafī*", *Annales Islamologiques* 16 (1980), p. 77. This last source can not serve as a proof of the politico-religious origins of the Mu'tazila (compare Bernand, p. 48), but only as evidence of the flexible use of the verb.

52 *Murūj*, VI, pp. 20, 31. On the attitude of the Mu'tazila to Yazīd see *Murūj*, VI, p. 32:5-6 and the somewhat obscure passage in 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Fadl*, p. 250:8-9; al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 117:7-11.

53 *Firaq*, p. 25:26. Al-Nāshī', *Uṣūl*, pp. 16:15 - 17:3, also uses the term "*i'tazālū*" about this group, but he does not associate them with the Mu'tazila.

The author of the *Kitāb al-uṣūl* attributed to Nāshī' al-Akbar (d. 293 H) takes a similar course, but for him it is people like Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī and al-Aḥnaf b. Qays al-Tamīmī who "were given the name Mu'tazila in those days", because they were unable to decide which of the two parties was right. Al-Nāshī' remarks in this context that Wāṣil and 'Amr hold the same view, and that they are the leaders of the Mu'tazila, but he stops short of explicitly connecting the Mu'tazila of Wāṣil with that of Abū Mūsā.⁵⁴

At the same time, Muslim authors are aware that during the first few Islamic decades the name Mu'tazila applied to many different groups, and they endeavour to distinguish between a qualified Mu'tazila and the Mu'tazila *tout court*. This is noticeable in al-Nawbakhtī's "first Mu'tazila", which another Shi'ite source calls "those who separated from both parties" (*al-mu'tazila 'an al-farīqayni*).⁵⁵ Al-Nawbakhtī also mentions, alongside "the first Mu'tazila", the *i'tizāl* of al-Aḥnaf b. Qays al-Tamīmī, who, according to him, withdrew "not in the sense of adhering to the doctrine of *i'tizāl* (*lā 'alā al-tadayyun bi'l-i'tizāl*) but in the sense of seeking safety from killing and from the loss of property (in war), and he said to his people: Keep away (*i'tazilū*) from dissension, (for) it is better for you".⁵⁶

The evidence therefore shows that before the appearance of the Mu'tazilite movement the verb *i'tazala* had not yet acquired a single technical meaning. The ascetics, the *zuhhād* and *nussāk* of the time, were referred to as "the Mu'tazila",⁵⁷ but the verb was also employed for other forms of withdrawal. It should also be noted that later writers, including Mu'tazilites, could no longer determine where the

54 *Uṣūl*, p. 17:4-10.

55 Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Kitāb al-Jamal* (al-Najaf, 1368 H), p. 5:7-8. I am indebted to Prof. E. Kohlberg for referring me to this source.

56 *Firaq*, p. 26:4. The same prudent *i'tizāl* is attributed by al-Dīnawarī to 'Amr b. al-Āṣ (*al-Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, ed. I. Kratchkovsky (Leiden, 1912), p. 167).

57 On the development of the terminology and patterns for asceticism around the time of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, see L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1968), p. 165; *idem*, *EI*, s.v. "zuhd", and see note 19 above. On the involvement of the early Mu'tazilites in these circles see Massignon, *Essai*, p. 168.

Mu'tazila got its name.⁵⁸ The etymologies they give should be regarded as not more than informed guesses.

* * *

The turning point in the history of the Mu'tazila is undoubtedly the encounter of Wāsil and 'Amr. As Madelung has noted, Wāsil recorded the event for the benefit of future generations in his book "On what came to pass between him and 'Amr".⁵⁹ Unfortunately the book is lost. It is usually assumed that "what came to pass" between the two refers to their first meeting, in which 'Amr was won over to Wāsil's stand concerning the religious state of the Muslim sinner. The heresiographical reports are of varying length and precision,⁶⁰ but the following outline can be extracted from them: 'Amr presented the view of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, that the Muslim sinner is a hypocrite (*munāfiq*). By means of a series of syllogisms Wāsil convinced him that this view was untenable, and advanced his own theory of the intermediary state (*al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayn*). The Muslim sinner is just that: a sinner (*fāsiq*), and does not deserve the title either of a believer (as the Murjī'a claimed) or of an infidel (as the Khawārij would have it). 'Amr graciously admitted his defeat, the two established their own school, and as a happy end Wāsil married 'Amr's sister. We are also told that the Mu'tazila derived their name from this incident, but as to exactly why the heresiographical literature offers more than one explanation.⁶¹

1. Al-Ḥasan sealed the rupture by announcing: "Wāsil seceded from us (*i'tazala 'annā*)". H.S. Nyberg suggested that this story was an orthodox slander, designed "to rehabilitate al-Ḥasan and brand the

58 See Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 65.

59 Madelung, *Der Imam*, p. 12, n. 20. See Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, *ibid.*; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, VI, p. 11:10-11.

60 See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 234:12, 235:8-10; al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, pp. 165-166; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, pp. 22:18 - 23:16, and compare al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Inūṣār*, ed. H.S. Nyberg (Cairo, 1925), pp. 164:14 - 167:9.

61 For a brief summary of the most common interpretations see G. Monnot, *Penseurs musulmans et religions iraniennes. 'Abd al-Jabbār et ses devanciers* (Paris, 1974), pp. 6-12. I do not understand the etymology offered by Massignon (*The Passion of al-Hallaj*, trad. H. Masson, Princeton, 1982), III, p. 177, n. 33: "a voluntary solitude of the heart" which the sinner acquires.

Mu'tazilīs as heretics".⁶² At first sight the fact that the anecdote appears in Mu'tazilite as well as orthodox sources would seem to lend it some credence and to invalidate Nyberg's suggestion.⁶³ But there are flaws in the story. In order to "secede" from al-Ḥasan's circle, Wāsil would have had to have belonged to it in the first place. But as we have already seen, it is unlikely that this was the case.⁶⁴ The one who belonged to the circle was 'Amr, and indeed in the version given by Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 H) Wāsil is not mentioned, and it is 'Amr's secession that al-Ḥasan deplures.⁶⁵ But even in this version the story is at variance with what we know of the relations of al-Ḥasan and 'Amr. 'Amr, for one, never thought of himself as having broken off with al-Ḥasan: he continued to regard himself as a disciple of al-Ḥasan who was transmitting his teaching.⁶⁶ Yet another version is given by Ibn Durayd (d. 321 H), who says of 'Āmir b. 'Abd Qays: "It is he who separated from al-Ḥasan, so that they were named Mu'tazilites".⁶⁷ 'Āmir, like Wāsil and 'Amr, was known for his ascetic behaviour as well as for his interest in theology.⁶⁸ But it is unlikely that his standing was such as to enable him to launch a new movement by his "separation". The fact that the story is told about him too makes its apocryphal character more transparent.⁶⁹

Nyberg's suggestion should therefore be accepted, with the

62 *EI*, s.v. "Mu'tazila", p. 787. See also W. Montgomery Watt, "The Political Attitudes of the Mu'tazila", *JRAS* (1963), p. 56.

63 Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa'l-nihal*, ed. W. Cureton (London, 1842), p. 33; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 3:12-13; Muṭahhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, *Kitāb al-Bad' wa'l-Tārīkh*, ed. Huart (Paris, 1899-1919), p. 142:5.

64 See above, note 30 and the corresponding text.

65 *Mā'arīf*, p. 243:19; see also 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 166:14-15.

66 Al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 69:8-9. See also Massignon, *Essai*, pp. 200-201.

67 *Al-Ishṭiqāq*, I, pp. 213-214, quoted by Sayyīd, in his introduction to *Faḍl*, p. 16.

68 See Sayyīd, *ibid.*, p. 16.

69 It should also be noted that for all practical purposes there was little difference between Wāsil and al-Ḥasan, and therefore no apparent reason for the breach: al-Ḥasan adopted a neutral position concerning the *fitna* (Massignon, *Essai*, p. 174; Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 56), and as to the hereafter, Wāsil, like al-Ḥasan, acknowledged the existence of only two abodes (al-Shahrastānī, *Milal*, p. 33:16; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 4:5-6).

additional assumption that in later generations the story lost its venom, and became so widespread that even the Mu'tazilites considered it authentic.

2. According to other sources it is not al-Ḥasan but Qatāda who coined the name Mu'tazila when, on seeing 'Amr's group, he asked contemptuously: "What is that Mu'tazila up to?"⁷⁰ This anecdote rings truer than the first one, in the sense that there was indeed some rivalry between Qatāda and 'Amr.⁷¹ It also allows for 'Amr, and not Wāṣil, as the leading representative of the Mu'tazila's break with orthodoxy. Nevertheless, this story cannot be accepted at face value. Qatāda could not have been the one to coin the term Mu'tazila. He may, however, have been one of those who used this word in a derogatory manner, thus helping to establish the somewhat general term as the name of a specific group.⁷²

3. Some writers, in addition to reporting the above anecdotes, try to derive the name Mu'tazila from the dogma of *al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayn* itself. This dogma, says al-Mas'ūdī, is the core of the *i'tizāl*.⁷³ The exact way in which the term is explained depends, of course, on the speaker. The orthodox say that the Mu'tazilites got their name because in adopting Wāṣil's position "they contradicted the consensus".⁷⁴ The Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, claim that their position is the one agreed upon by the consensus of the *umma*, that all other positions are innovations, and that they took the name Mu'tazila "because they avoided all innovations",⁷⁵ or because they avoided "both

exaggeration and laxity".⁷⁶

4. Some scholars read political implications into Wāṣil's theory of the intermediary state. They believe that it relates to the status of the parties in the first civil war, and that it indicates Wāṣil's political stance with regard to the events of his own time. According to al-Khayyāt (d. circa 200 H) Wāṣil claimed that in the war between 'Alī, Ṭalḥa and al-Zubayr, and also in the war between 'Alī and Mu'āwiya, only one of the parties could have been in the right. It follows that the other party was in the wrong, and since it committed a grave sin (*kabīra*) it should be considered to be in the state of *fisq*. Since, however, all the witnesses to this war are biased, we have no way of telling which of the parties was right and which was wrong.⁷⁷ The *i'tizāl*, according to this interpretation, is the refusal both to brand one or other of the parties as infidels, and to justify the conduct of one or other.

This interpretation is in line with one we have already encountered. As mentioned above, some of the meanings of the verb *i'tazala* may have had political connotations. The information given by al-Khayyāt puts this line of thought on firmer ground: here we have not only a use of the word, but also see Wāṣil himself subscribing to this use.

But the evidence demands careful examination. It stands to reason that Wāṣil held some position concerning the civil war: he was not someone who would have no opinion on such a major issue. It is also probable that he discussed the matter with 'Amr, and that the latter was convinced by his arguments: 'Amr admired Wāṣil,⁷⁸ and since he was much less *engagé* than Wāṣil, he is likely to have let Wāṣil decide in such worldly matters. It is also possible that the position Wāṣil adopted was the one described by al-Khayyāt – although Shī'ite (and even Mu'tazilite Shī'ite) writers fiercely deny this:

70 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 166:14-16; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, IV, pp. 85-86; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 4:11-14; al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, p. 167:6.

71 Cf. Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 57 and note 1.

72 See al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 115:13-15; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 166:13, 14-16, and esp. p. 166:27-28: "*Fa-lammā sammawhum bi-dhālika wa-kathura, šara laqaban 'alā mā dhakarnā*".

73 *Murūj*, VI, p. 22:9; al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 115:1-12; see also *al-Ḥūr al-'īn*, p. 204.

74 "*Lammā khālafū al-ijmā' fī dhālika summū al-mu'tazila*", Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 5:7; idem, *Munya*, p. 4:11; 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayna al-firaq* (Beirut, 1977), p. 98:13, and see also p. 18:11 ("*al-Qadariyya al-mu'tazila 'an al-ḥaqq*").

75 "*Li-i'tizālihim kull al-aqwāl al-muḥdatha*"; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 5:6-7; *Munya*, p. 4:11.

76 "*Al-mu'tazila hum al-muḥtaṣida, fa-i'tazalat al-ifrāt wa'l-taqṣīr*", 'Abd al-Jabbār (quoting Muḥammad b. Yazdādh al-Iṣbahānī, d. 230 H), *Faḍl*, p. 165:25. See also al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 115:5-6.

77 Al-Nāshī' al-Akbar, *Uṣūl*, pp. 53-54; Dhahabī, *Mizān*, III, pp. 267 ff.

78 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 67:15-23; *al-Ḥūr al-'īn*, pp. 208:20 - 209:7.

according to them Wāṣil was whole-heartedly pro-ʿAlī.⁷⁹ But we have no indication whatsoever that Wāṣil ever identified his position as *iʿtizāl*.⁸⁰ There are no grounds for believing that Wāṣil encouraged his followers to be *muʿtazilūn* in this sense, or that ʿAmr and his followers added this meaning to their name "Muʿtazila".⁸¹ The writers who connect the name Muʿtazila with Wāṣil's view of the civil wars wrote at least two hundred years after the latter's death. They clearly had no idea of where the name came from, and so they proceeded to associate with it all they knew about the early movement.

* * *

The so-called political Muʿtazila deserves further scrutiny. Nyberg, who was the first to insist on the political meaning of *muʿtazila* (both the name and the movement), argued that "the teaching of Wāṣil on *al-manzila* can only be perfectly understood if we see in it the theoretical crystallisation of the political programme of the ʿAbbasids before their accession to power."⁸² Some of our sources speak of Wāṣil's *duʿāt*, and Nyberg identified them with the bearers of the ʿAbbasid *daʿwa*. According to him, when ʿAmr and his "section of the Qadaris of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* joined the Muʿtazila", they "reinforced the more politically inclined Qadariyya of which Wāṣil was the

79 *Al-Ḥūr al-ʿīn*, p. 205:7-12; al-Baghdādī, *Farq*, p. 100:12-13; Nyberg, *El*, p. 789.

80 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 142:8 ff. (relying on Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī) (d. 915 H) seems to see no connection between the debates over the status of the participants in the civil wars and the name Muʿtazila. Neither does al-Shahrastānī, *Mīlāl*, pp. 33-34, who clearly distinguishes between the dogma of the intermediary state and attitudes to the civil wars.

81 There is, in fact, no mention in our sources of Wāṣil ever having used the terms *iʿtizāl* or *muʿtazila*. As to ʿAmr, there is only one anecdote in which it is implied that he encouraged his disciples to call themselves *al-firqa al-muʿtazila* (see above, n. 44). Madelung (*Der Imām*, p. 30), who sees the *ḥadīth* mentioned in this anecdote as stemming from the earliest, political Muʿtazila, assumes that Wāṣil took the name *iʿtizāl* from this *ḥadīth* and gave it a new meaning. Our sources, however, place this *ḥadīth* not in political, but rather in ascetic circles (Sufyān al-Thawrī), and it is always connected with ʿAmr, never with Wāṣil.

82 Nyberg, *El*, p. 789.

champion".⁸³ The *iʿtizāl* was, according to this view, Wāṣil's creation; it was decidedly political and ʿAmr's role in it was secondary.⁸⁴

Nyberg's political interpretation of the Muʿtazila has been widely accepted,⁸⁵ although his specific application of this interpretation was sometimes subjected to refinements. Thus W. Madelung, W. Montgomery Watt and J. Van Ess rejected Nyberg's identification of the Muʿtazila with the ʿAbbasid *daʿwa*. Wāṣil's *duʿāt*, as we know from a poem of the Muʿtazilite Ṣafwān al-Anṣārī, were much too conspicuous to have been part of an underground movement.⁸⁶ But Watt and Van Ess also read into the term *iʿtizāl* some political meaning. For them, the *iʿtizāl* did not represent an active involvement in political dissent but rather political neutrality, which "the Muʿtazilites have practiced for the first time at a time when, in the spasms of a dying empire, almost everybody took sides in one way or another."⁸⁷ And still more categorically than Nyberg, Van Ess argues that "Wāṣil is the only founder of the Muʿtazila: ʿAmr b. ʿUbayd kept his distance for a long time, until the moment when, after al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's death and before the advent of the ʿAbbasids, he joined the movement."⁸⁸

Both Nyberg's original theory and its modified versions err in ascribing to the whole Muʿtazila the ideas (or the temperament) of only part of it. Wāṣil was politically active (although, as we shall presently see, not necessarily in the service of the ʿAbbasids); ʿAmr was not, and he did not become politically active even after meeting Wāṣil.⁸⁹ ʿAmr

83 *Loc. cit.*

84 Nyberg, *loc. cit.*; *idem*, "Amr ibn ʿUbayd", pp. 126-128.

85 See, for example C. Pellat, *Le milieu baṣrien et la formation de Ḡāḥiz* (Paris, 1953), p. 175; L. Gardet and M.M. Anawati, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane* (Paris, 1981), p. 46.

86 Van Ess, "Lecture", pp. 29, 46; and see Madelung, *Der Imām*, p. 30, and below, p. 287-8.

87 Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 65; W. Montgomery Watt, "The Political Attitudes of the Muʿtazilah", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1963), pp. 55-56. See also H. Laoust, *Les schismes dans l'Islam* (Paris, 1965), p. 53, and Madelung, *Der Imām*, note 77, and see now Daiber (above, n. 13), pp. 15-16.

88 Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 56.

89 See below, pp. 284-5.

can be regarded as politically neutral;⁹⁰ Wāṣil cannot, and he certainly could not have been the sole founder of a movement which had neutrality as its cornerstone.⁹¹ And, as we have already seen, the description of 'Amr as a secondary figure who joined an already existing Wāṣilī Mu'tazila is not corroborated by our sources.⁹²

A paragraph in the Shī'ite work *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn*, which has hitherto attracted little attention, helps elucidate the role of political activity in the formation of the Mu'tazila.

Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā' and 'Amr b. 'Ubayd met at the house of 'Uthmān b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Maḥzūmī, of the people of Baṣra, and they took counsel concerning injustice. 'Amr said, "Who, then, will take over this commission (i.e. the Caliphate), of those who are entitled to it and who deserve it?"⁹³ Wāṣil said, "By God, he who has become the best of this *umma*,⁹⁴ Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥasan, he will undertake it." 'Amr b. 'Ubayd said, "I do not think we should pledge allegiance to, and engage in revolt on behalf of, a man whom we have not tested and whose conduct we do not know."

Wāṣil responded vehemently, trying to demonstrate that there was none better than Muḥammad b. 'Abdallah.⁹⁵

90 Although it would be a mistake to picture his neutrality as a sort of non-alignment. 'Amr's neutrality was non-involvement, which is hardly a positive political stand, but rather a lack thereof. See *Mizān*, III, p. 296.

91 See below, pp. 283-4. Scholars who adopted the political interpretation concerning the rise of the Mu'tazila and its name also admitted that there was a political difference between Wāṣil and 'Amr (See Nyberg, *EI*, p. 787; *idem*, "Amr ibn 'Ubayd", pp. 126-128; Van Ess, "Lecture", pp. 40-65; Massignon, *Passion*, III, p. 152) without trying to reconcile the two facts.

92 See above, pp. 270-1.

93 "Fa-man yaqūmu bi-hādha al-amr mimman yastawjibuhu wa-huwa lahu ahl?"

94 "Khayr hādhihi al-umma."

95 *Maqātil*, p. 293:4-14. On Muḥammad "al-naḥs al-zakiyya", who was known for his *zuhd* and *nisk* (al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, VI, pp. 189-192) see F. Buhl, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh", and J. Lassner, *The Shaping of 'Abbasid Rule* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 69-74. The *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn* is undoubtedly tendentious, and it would be incautious to conclude on the basis of this passage alone that the conference described here actually took place, or that Wāṣil tried to organize a revolt in favor of

Both the position of Wāṣil and of 'Amr can be easily explained. Wāṣil, we are told, was brought up and educated by Abū Hāshim, i.e., 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya.⁹⁶ An over-zealous Shī'ite tradition even presents him as having been brought up by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya himself, although this is chronologically impossible.⁹⁷ At any rate, Wāṣil had a clear sympathy for the 'Alids.⁹⁸ In the argument as to whether only the best of the *umma* (*al-fāḍil*) can be its leader, or whether someone who is less than the best (*maḥḍūl*) may also be given the task, Wāṣil advocated *imāmat al-maḥḍūl*: this allowed him to accept the legitimacy of the first three caliphs while regarding the fourth caliph, 'Alī, as the best of the *umma*.⁹⁹ 'Amr's hesitant answer is also typical: his position was that only the best Muslim (*al-fāḍil*) deserves the *bay'a*.¹⁰⁰ In other words, he had no 'Alid sympathies, and, as the paragraph from the *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn* testifies, he had no inclination to make practical

Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh. Al-Taftazānī's doubts concerning the chronological soundness of the *Maqātil* are, therefore, quite in place. But one can, on the basis of this passage, draw an outline of the impression that the personalities of Wāṣil and 'Amr left on al-Isfāhānī's sources. Hence, Taftazānī's rejection of the *Maqātil*'s tradition, on the assumption that Wāṣil and 'Amr shared the same political view, is difficult to accept; see Abū 'l-Wafā al-Taftazānī, "Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā," in U. Amin, ed., *Etudes philosophiques offertes au Dr. Ibrāhīm Madkour* (Cairo, 1974), pp. 49-50. For the reference to al-Taftazānī's study I am indebted to Prof. J. Van Ess.

96 Al-Balkhī, *Maqātil*, p. 68:3-4; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 164:17-18 and p. 215:1-2. On Abū Hāshim's *i'tizāl* see M. Sharon, *Black Banners from the East* (Jerusalem-Leiden, 1983), p. 112, n.43, and compare al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akḥbār al-Ṭiwāl*, p. 274.

97 As noted already by al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, p. 165:2-3. See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 234:4-5; Al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 130:3-4; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 11:7. See also Shahrastānī, *Milal*, p. 31, and Madelung, *Der Imām*, p. 34.

98 But not for the line revered by the *Imāmiyya*: they were too worldly for Wāṣil's taste; see 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 239:16; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 33; *idem*, *Munya*, pp. 20-21.

99 Al-Nāshī' al-Akbar, *Uṣūl*, pp. 51-52:3; Malaṭī, *Tanbīh*, p. 17:12 ff., and esp. p. 28:10, 22; *al-Ḥūr al-'īn*, p. 205.

100 Al-Nāshī' al-Akbar, *Uṣūl*, pp. 54:6-7, 52:8-20.

concessions, and no desire to be involved in politics.¹⁰¹

We are not told whether at that meeting 'Amr was convinced. What we are told is that at some point "a group of the inhabitants of Baṣra, from among the Mu'tazila, amongst them Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā' and 'Amr b. 'Ubayd and others" went to Suwaiqa, seeking an interview with Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh. They were not received by Muḥammad, but only by his brother Ibrāhīm, yet this was enough to induce the whole group to pledge allegiance to Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh.¹⁰² In another instance al-Isfahānī tells us that Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr himself was in this group, and we can therefore infer that the meeting took place some time before al-Manṣūr could openly claim the Caliphate.¹⁰³ Al-Ṭabarī's report of the same meeting confirms the presence of al-Manṣūr and of a *mu'tazila*, but does not mention either 'Amr or Wāṣil.¹⁰⁴

In fact, it is very doubtful whether 'Amr participated in this plot, and even if he did, his involvement was short-lived. 'Amr respected Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh for his piety, but he did not regard him as the *mahdī*.¹⁰⁵ Years later, after Wāṣil's death and when

101 See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-Rusul wa' l-Mulūk*, ed. de Goeje (Leiden, 1964), ser.3, vol. I, p. 149:5, where 'Amr is reported to have said: "By God, if the *umma* were to entrust me with its affairs, I would not know where to put them" (i.e., to whom to entrust them). In another instance al-Ṭabarī reports that 'Amr was resigned to seeing his *dīn* dwindle away, because he did not trust anyone (*ibid.*, p. 7). This resignation won him the title of "a coward", but even this did not change 'Amr's preference for "the shade and cool water" over the treachery of politics. See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 250:5-8, 14-19, 246:11-13.

102 *Maqātil*, pp. 206, 214, 293; Madelung's contention (*Der Imām*, p. 37, n. 165), that *Maqātil* fails to mention the presence of any Mu'tazilite in this meeting, is incorrect. On Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd Allāh see L. Veccia Vaglieri, *ET²*, s.v., and Lassner, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-87.

103 *Maqātil*, pp. 206-209.

104 *Ta'riḫ*, 3, I, pp. 143, 152. Madelung, *Der Imām*, p. 37, following Nallino, identifies this Mu'tazila as the political (as opposed to theological) Mu'tazila. But the participation of "real" Mu'tazilites like Bashīr al-Raḥḥāl in the revolt of Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd-Allāh (145 H, see below, note 105), indicates that the *mu'tazila* who came to the meeting was practicing *itizāl* on more than one level.

105 See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 226:16.

al-Manṣūr was already caliph, 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥasan wrote to 'Amr to ask his support against al-Manṣūr; 'Amr excused himself.¹⁰⁶ When Muḥammad's brother, Ibrāhīm, was preparing his revolt, some of the Mu'tazila joined him, but 'Amr neither supported him nor turned him over to al-Manṣūr.¹⁰⁷ Al-Manṣūr had great respect for 'Amr; 'Amr, for his part, preferred to keep aloof from him too.¹⁰⁸

The picture of 'Amr's political (or rather, apolitical) behaviour as it emerges from these anecdotes is fairly consistent. The anecdote quoted above about the consultation at the house of 'Uthmān al-Maḥzūmī can therefore be taken as a fair example of the dynamics of political relations between Wāṣil and 'Amr. Despite his admiration for Wāṣil and his closeness to him, 'Amr did not adopt Wāṣil's political views.¹⁰⁹ What brought them together was not a political understanding.

Nor was it political cooperation that kept the movement as a whole together. In fact, any attempt to find a political classification that would fit the whole early Mu'tazila is bound to encounter serious problems. We have seen the Shī'ite, particularly Zaydite, eagerness to claim the Mu'tazila as its own. But al-Mas'ūdī dryly informs us that according to the Mu'tazila anyone can be an *imām*, i.e., the *imām* need not necessarily be a Qurayshite¹¹⁰ (let alone a descendant of 'Alī). Al-Mas'ūdī's information ties in well with the attempt of some scholars to show the existence of a certain affinity between the early Mu'tazila

106 *Maqātil*, p. 209:3. See also *Ta'riḫ Baghdad*, XII, pp. 168-169; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 246:1-6.

107 'Abd al-Jabbār, *loc. cit.*; *Maqātil*, p. 209:3-4; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, III, pp. 461:21-462: 4. Ibrāhīm's revolt broke out a year after 'Amr's death, and al-Manṣūr is reported to have said, "The Mu'tazila did not revolt against me until 'Amr b. 'Ubayd had died" ('Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 228:12). Among the rebels were some Mu'tazilites, although their number was probably insignificant, so that sympathetic writers present them as "*wujūh al-Mu'tazila*". Among them was the militant ascetic Bashīr al-Raḥḥāl, who fought wearing his *izār* of *ṣūf* (al-Balkhī, *Maqālat*, p. 117; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 226).

108 See Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, p. 380:8 ff.; Ibn Quṭayba, *Uyūn*, I, p. 209; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 24:5; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 242:7-13, 249:5-20.

109 As acknowledged even by Nyberg and his "school", see above, n. 91.

110 *Murūj*, VI, p. 24; and see also al-Nāshī' al-Akbar, *Uṣūl*, pp. 63:12-64: 3.

and the Khawārij.¹¹¹ There are, however, some equally important indications of affinities between the early Mu'tazila and the Murj'ā.¹¹² And although the Mu'tazila as a whole accepted the dogma of "the intermediary state", its interpretation by the various Mu'tazilites reveals a wide range of politico-religious views.¹¹³

The political pluralism of the Mu'tazila is epitomized in the question of *imāmat al-fāḍil wa'l-maḍdūl*.¹¹⁴ In his report on the Mu'tazila, al-Nāshī' al-Akbar distinguishes two groups: those who believe that the Muslim community should always have an *imām*, and those who regard the *imām* as dispensable.¹¹⁵ This last group al-Nāshī' identifies as the *Ṣūfiyyat al-Mu'tazila*. The figures listed in this group are not very well known.¹¹⁶ They are described as puritans who objected to the accumulation of personal property,¹¹⁷ and who aspired to a pious Muslim community, different from all other earthly communities. Their view on the *imāma* reflects a refusal to deal with

- 111 See Jāhiz, *Bayān*, I, p. 23, and compare al-Mubarrad, *Kāmil*, I, pp. 546, 547, and esp. p. 446; Nyberg, *El*, p. 789; Bernand, *art. cit.* above, note 51; Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 47, sees a certain resemblance of the Mu'tazila to the Ibādīya. His attempt to see in Wāṣil's *mu'araḍa* to 'Amr "a kharijite tendency", (*ibid.*, p. 53) is, however, mistaken; Wāṣil's argumentation is presented as an *ilzām*, an argument *ad absurdum*, and does not reflect Wāṣil's own opinion.
- 112 Al-Khayyāt, *Intiṣār*, p. 97:13; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, pp. 11:20-21, 15:17-21; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 229 ff. (concerning the connection with Ghaylān); al-Ash'ārī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa-ikhtilāf al-muṣallīn*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1929), pp. 132-139, and compare al-Shahrastānī, *Milal*, p. 33:12 (about faith as a complex of the "qualities of good"); al-Nāshī' al-Akbar, *Uṣūl*, pp. 63:4-64:3 (about their common view concerning the *imāma*).
- 113 See, for instance, al-Nāshī' al-Akbar, *ibid.*, pp. 49-61; Malaṭī, *Tanbīh*, pp. 30:6-14, 32:13 - 33:16; al-Mufīd, *al-Jamal*, pp. 8:17 - 13:2. Al-Balkhī was apparently aware of this political pluralism, and he fidgets in an attempt to reconcile it with the theory that the name Mu'tazila originated from the question of *al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayni* (*Maqālāt*, p. 115:13-15).
- 114 Although, as noted by Van Ess (*Frühe mu'tazilitische Häresiographie*, p. 44), it does not figure in Muslim heresiography among the staple Mu'tazilite dogmas.
- 115 *Uṣūl*, pp. 49-50; see also Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, VI, p. 255-7.
- 116 See Van Ess, *ibid.*, pp. 43-44.
- 117 On *tahrīm al-makāsib* by later Mu'tazilites see, for example, al-Khayyāt, *Intiṣār*, pp. 55:17, 69:8-10, 77:4, and see the following note.

politics altogether. We may assume that this group included the old hard core of the *Mu'tazila*, those who had remained faithful to the Mu'tazila's original character. Their pious, ascetic characteristics now led them to be referred to as Ṣufis, but in fact, using the archaic terminology they would have been called "*Mu'tazilat al-Mu'tazila*".¹¹⁸ The other group, which believed in the necessity of the *imāma*, included both 'Amr (who was committed to *imāmat al-fāḍil*)¹¹⁹ and Wāṣil (who was willing to accept a *maḍdūl*).¹²⁰ As noted above,¹²¹ their difference of opinion in this matter could not have provided a solid ground for political union.

But the union was not meant to be political. Like the *Ṣūfiyyat al-Mu'tazila*, Wāṣil and 'Amr were first of all Mu'tazilites. Even the less austere Wāṣil practiced the *tahrīm al-makāsib*, and since this *itizāl*, this pious asceticism, is the only common denominator of the two figures, it must be assumed that it was at the root of their alliance, as well as of their name.

In order to discover the meaning of this alliance between Wāṣil and 'Amr we have to turn to its product, the early Mu'tazilite movement. Its most notable activity was that of the *du'āt*, the missionaries.¹²² Ṣafwān al-Anṣarī, who describes them in his poem, says that they had a typical outfit: a turban,¹²³ a trimmed garment,¹²⁴ and

- 118 On the beginnings of the Ṣūfī movement see J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 4-5. Van Ess has argued that ascetic tendencies became more pronounced in the Mu'tazila only later, after the revolt of Muḥammad *al-Nafs al-Zākiyya* ("Lecture", p. 66) or from the time of Abū Mūsā al-Murdār (*Frühe mu'tazilitische Häresiographie*, pp. 114-115). As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, however, all our sources draw a picture of an ascetic *early* Mu'tazila, of which al-Murdār would be merely a natural descendant.
- 119 *Uṣūl*, p. 51.
- 120 *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.
- 121 Pp. 283-5.
- 122 See al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 99:8; al-Jāhiz, *Bayān*, I, p. 25:6; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 237:4; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Tabaqāt*, p. 32:4; *Munya*, pp. 19:8 - 20:5; al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 138:7-12.
- 123 "*Imma*", which is compared to birds hovering over their heads, see al-Jāhiz, *Bayān*, I, p. 26:10; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 242:15.
- 124 "*Qaṣṣ huddāb*", Jāhiz, *ibid.*, p. 26:13.

wide rimmed sandals made of two strips.¹²⁵ Their lower lip was shaven,¹²⁶ and their moustache closely cut.¹²⁷ It was not Wāṣil who had fashioned this uniform: there are indications that at least some of these peculiarities were commonly recognized as the signs of asceticism and piety.¹²⁸ We are told that the *du'āt*'s mission kept them away from their families, a trait which, though not necessarily implying continence, is certainly meant to bring to mind the ascetic '*uzla*.¹²⁹ Ṣafwān also praises the *du'āt* for their nightly vigils, and says that their foreheads were marked by constant prostration. We recognize here the old Mu'tazila, 'Amr's people.¹³⁰ But the organizer, the one who launched the movement, was Wāṣil. The *du'āt* were his exclusive concern; he was the one who gave them their instructions, and they showed him total and unswerving obedience.¹³¹

125 "*Li-nā'lihi qibālāni fī rudn raḥīb al-khawāṣir*", *ibid.*, p. 26:14. The two strips of the sandal were considered *sunna*, see *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ . . . lil-Bukhārī*, ed. M. Rudolph Krehl-Th.W. Juynboll (Leiden, 1906), vol. IV, pp. 88-89; Wensinck, *Concordance*, s.v. "n'l".

126 "*Anfaqa maṣlūma*", Jāḥiẓ, *ibid.*, p. 26:14.

127 "*Iḥfā' shārib*", *ibid.*, p. 26:13.

128 Al-Tirmidhī (*Nawādir al-uṣūl fī ma'rifat aḥādīth al-rasūl* [al-Madīna], p. 9:19) enumerates a few characteristics of Christian monks, for whom real seclusion (*'uzla*, 1.18 or *i'tizāl*, 1.16) was too demanding, and who substituted for it false, superficial worldly *zuhd* (II, 22-23). Among these characteristics are the turban (*al-'imma al-ma'tūfa*, cp. n. 123 above), the trimmed garment ("*tashmīr al-thiyāb*", cp. n. 124 above), and the trimmed moustache ("*ḥaff al-shārib*", cp. n. 127 above). Whatever other implications this passage may have, it is clear from it that these external peculiarities were recognizable in the ninth century as signs of *zuhd*, and may have been associated with Christian asceticism. For the reference to this important text I am indebted to Dr. S. Sviri. It may be worth noting that the Mu'tazilite saw no harm in their resemblance to monks (al-Khayyāt, *Inṣiṣār*, pp. 69:11,18 - 70:2).

129 Al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 138:10.

130 See al-Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān*, p. 26:11-12, and note 34 above.

131 Al-Jāḥiẓ, *ibid.*, p. 25:7; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*; *ibid.*, p. 237:14-16 (where 'Uthmān al-Ṭawīl is quoted as saying: "As long as Wāṣil lived, until he died, we did not consider ourselves as having any dominion over ourselves. For he would say to one of us, "Set out to a certain country", and it was impossible to refuse him."

According to Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī (d. after 400 H) Wāṣil was the first to be called *mu'tazilī*.¹³² It is very difficult to accept this statement literally: as we have seen, the assumption that around Wāṣil's time there were other people called *mu'tazila* is more consonant with the available evidence. But certainly one could claim that Wāṣil was the first *mu'tazilī* in the sense that Wāṣil turned the *mu'tazila* into a movement. Before Wāṣil "the Mu'tazila" was a term applied, without much precision, to various kinds of ascetics. It is only after Wāṣil had appeared on the scene (and probably not immediately thereafter), that the name Mu'tazila came to designate one specific movement, holding specific doctrines.

Yet we should not think that Wāṣil's only contribution to the Mu'tazila was his practical talent. He was the one who gave the pious, ascetic Mu'tazila an intellectual twist. 'Amr too was interested in theological questions, such as free will or God's unity.¹³³ But it is to Wāṣil that all the records point as the initiator of kalamic discourse.

This is perhaps not the right place to offer a comprehensive analysis of Wāṣil's *kalām*. We should at least note, however, that in this matter, the cryptic reports to hand corroborate one another, and appear to be authentic. They hardly ever attempt to attribute to him such later developments as "the five principles". Wāṣil developed his own terminology, which appears in various unrelated texts, and testifies to Wāṣil's systematic thought. By way of an example of this systematic thought we can mention the concept of the criteria of knowledge (*awjuh al-'ilm*). Al-Jāḥiẓ mentions four such criteria as Wāṣil's test for the truth.¹³⁴ According to 'Abd al-Jabbār Wāṣil produced the concept

'Uthmān knew this from his own experience (*Faḍl*, p. 241:1-13).

132 *Awā'il*, p. 129:13, and compare *Mīzān*, II, p. 295.

133 Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, VI, p. 212; VI, pp. 234-236.

134 Quoted by al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 129:6-7. Wāṣil's truth does not relate to the correctness or otherwise of legal rulings, as suggested by Madlung (*Der Imām*, p. 15) following S. Pines, *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomlehre* (Berlin, 1936), p. 126, n. 3, although Wāṣil's erudition included also *fiqh*, see 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 236:16. Nor is he talking about the authenticity or otherwise of *ḥadīth*, as suggested by Van Ess ("L'autorité de la tradition prophétique dans la théologie mu'tazilite", *La notion d'autorité au Moyen Age: Islam, Byzance, Occident* (Paris, 1980), p. 213); Rather, Wāṣil is above all concerned

of the criteria for knowledge in a dispute between Jahm b. Ṣafwān and the Buddhists. On this occasion Wāṣil asserted that one way (*wajh*) to know God is by means of the proof by deduction (*dalīl*).¹³⁵ Wāṣil's preoccupation with epistemology is confirmed by the list of his works, which includes the title "a book concerning the way to the knowledge of Truth".¹³⁶ It is probably in this book that he developed his concept of "criteria". Another example is Wāṣil's interest in logical treatment of exegetical problems. We hear that he wrote a book on "*ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*",¹³⁷ and indeed, according to another report, Wāṣil was the first to establish such exegetical rules as the distinction between general and specific verses.¹³⁸ And, of course, his idea of the intermediary state, a brilliant kalamīc solution to a delicate problem, should also be mentioned in this context: both his book on the *manzila bayna al-manzilatayn* and his *kitāb al-tawba* probably dealt with it;¹³⁹ Wāṣil's theoretical, theological interest in this question appears to be undeniable.

These concepts and topics characterizing Wāṣil's thinking are often mentioned in passing in our sources. The first two examples cannot be regarded as conscious inventions, since they are only marginal in the context in which they appear, no special attention being drawn to them. All three are examples of topics peripheral to later kalamīc, Mu'tazilite thought, and they consequently cannot be suspected of being projections of later problems. We must therefore assume that what we are told of Wāṣil's preoccupation with theological matters is authentic.

Van Ess has suggested that "the inclination towards systematic

with true as opposed to false religion, see below, notes 146-147 and the corresponding text, and see S. Stroumsa, "The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature", *Harvard Theological Review*, 78 (1985) pp. 101-114.

135 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 240:18; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 34.

136 "K. *al-sabīl ilā ma'rifat al-ḥaqq*", Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist, takmila* I; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, I, p. 11; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Munya*, p. 215-10.

137 Ibn al-Nadīm, *loc. cit.*

138 Al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, p. 1299-11.

139 Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, IV, p. 11; Dhahabī, *Mizān*, III, pp. 267 ff. On the relevance of the *tawba* to the intermediary state see, for example, Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, VI, p. 22.

theology, which. . . marked the physiognomy of the school, was not due to Wāṣil, and certainly not to 'Amr, but to Ḍirār".¹⁴⁰ According to this interpretation, Ḍirār b. 'Amr (ca. 190 H) went out of favour in the movement, so that his teaching was attributed to Wāṣil. In the same line, an anecdote according to which Abū al-Hudhayl had received from Wāṣil's widow two boxes of books containing her late husband's manuscripts, would be for Van Ess a transparent attempt to bolster Abū al-Hudhayl's authority by inventing for him an acceptable master.¹⁴¹ On closer examination, however, the wording of this last anecdote is not exactly flattering to Abū al-Hudhayl: he is depicted not as the faithful student of the great master, but rather as someone who had no knowledge of his own.¹⁴² It should also be mentioned that according to another report by the same widow, Wāṣil was a prolific writer,¹⁴³ so that the report of two boxes full of his writings is quite plausible. Furthermore, Wāṣil's theological activity is attested in a way which speaks for its authenticity. We thus have every reason to believe that Wāṣil was indeed the originator of the Mu'tazilite Kalam.

Equally genuine was Wāṣil's interest in other religions. His theological system was shaped by the challenge of meeting with adversaries,¹⁴⁴ and his emissaries were encouraged to seek disputations and instructed on how to argue in them.¹⁴⁵ They were calling to "the Truth",¹⁴⁶ or "to God's religion",¹⁴⁷ not only to convert infidels, but also

140 Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 66. W. Montgomery Watt (*Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Edinburgh, 1979, p. 60) also argued that "there is nothing to suggest that Wāṣil or 'Amr had any interest in Greek philosophical conceptions", implying that they were not really interested in theology. In another context, and without referring specifically to the beginning of theological discourse, Watt suggested that Bishr b. al-Mu'tamir invented his relationship to Wāṣil in order to cleanse himself from the accusation of being a Jahmite ("The Political Attitudes", p. 53).

141 Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 39.

142 "*Fa-asā an yakūn jull kalāmihī min dhālika*", 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 241:18-19; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 35; *Munya*, p. 21:13-15.

143 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, pp. 165:11-12, 234:14.

144 See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl*, p. 235:6-7 and notes 25-26 above.

145 Al-Balkhī, *Maqālāt*, p. 67:11-13; *al-Ḥūr al-'īn*, p. 208.

146 Al-Balkhī, *loc. cit.*

147 *Al-Ḥūr al-'īn*, p. 208:6.

to establish belief in Islam on a sound theoretical footing.

We have only vague information about the ways in which the Mu'tazilite *da'wā* functioned. Nevertheless it seems clear that it was the kernel from which Mu'tazilite Kalam grew.

It appears, then, that what drew Wāṣil and 'Amr together was the desire to start a movement of religious and intellectual renovation. The movement had a strong pietistic colouring, introduced by 'Amr and his group of early Mu'tazilites, who also brought with them the name Mu'tazila. The movement also had a strong interest in theology, and it sent emissaries to propagate its theological ideas by means of religious disputation.

* * *

If the picture presented above is accurate, then some current views on early religious development in Islam must be modified.

1. The notion, already common among the Muslim heresiographers, that the various religious movements of mature Islam were already distinct and separate in the early Islamic period, appears to be false.¹⁴⁸ Theology and asceticism, Kalam and Sufism, all emerged from the same milieu.¹⁴⁹ The terms used to describe this milieu, *zuhhād*, *nussāk*, *mu'tazila*, and even *qadariyya*, were vague and were loosely applied to a variety of attitudes.¹⁵⁰ Only later, as specific attitudes became clearly defined and differentiated, did the various

148 That Muslim traditional heresiography tends to view the heresies as distinct from the beginning needs hardly to be demonstrated. As for modern scholarship, see, for example, P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 95, which, while admitting that "there is no intrinsic incompatibility between Ṣūfism and theology", presents the two as emerging from different backgrounds.

149 This was already noted by S. Pines, who suggested that Mu'tazilite Kalam and a dominant Sufi tradition stem from the same school, that of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. See *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. II, p. 788.

150 The most conspicuous example of the use of terms in a vague way is the use of the term *qadariyya*; see, for example, 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Fadl*, p. 167, as opposed to al-Baghdādī, *Farq*, pp. 92-93.

terms become proper names of specific groups and religious movements.

2. The political interpretations of the rise of the Mu'tazila are indeed very appealing. They fit the prevalent basic assumption of modern research (as well as of many Muslim heresiographers) that every religious development in Islam had originally a political meaning.¹⁵¹ A political interpretation of the rise of the Mu'tazila also makes it easier to account for the Mu'tazilite fervour of the 'Abbasids during the *mihna*.

But a political understanding of the rise of the Mu'tazila fails to account for the Mu'tazila itself. It provides no explanation for the transition from a supposedly politically centered movement to Mu'tazilite Kalam. There is moreover no one political platform on which all early Mu'tazilites were united. In fact, one could almost see in the early Mu'tazila a miniature replica of political disagreement in Islam. We are therefore bound to reject the political approach to the problem of the Mu'tazila. As the name of the movement indicates, it grew on ascetic, not on political ground. The Mu'tazilite movement started indeed with Wāṣil and 'Amr, and it was a movement of Kalam.

151 As is implied, for example, by B. Lewis, "Politics and War" in J. Schacht and C.E. Bosworth, eds, *The Legacy of Islam* (second edition, Oxford, 1979), p. 158.