



## **Al-Jahiz on The Virtues of ‘Ali Ibn Abi Thalib and The Limit of *Ijma*’**

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### **Abstract**

The study of al-Jahiz among researchers and historians of the classical Islam has shed more light not only on the man and his intellectual engagement but also on the general Islamic intellectual history, especially in the ninth century Bagdad, the capital city of the ‘Abbasid kingdom. This article examines how al-Jahiz, as an enthusiast debater, dialectician, and polemicist, engaged himself in debates concerning the virtues of ‘Ali ibn Abi Thalib and his caliphate status. This is a literature study of al-Jahiz’s works, complemented by secondary relevant sources. This study reveals that in debating this particular issue which had been highly controversial by his time, al-Jahiz differed from both his fellow Mu‘tazila thinkers and hadith transmitters, and even argued against *ijma*, the consensus argument, which was and is still regarded as undisputed argument by many Islamic law scholars. His intellectual bravery then allowed him to freely articulate his ideas and stand as an independent and original thinker.

### **Keywords:**

Al-Jahiz, ‘Ali ibn Thalib, *Ijma*’

### **Abstrak**

*Kajian terhadap al-Jahiz di antara para peneliti dan sejarawan Islam klasik semakin memberikan gambaran yang lebih luas tidak hanya terhadap sosok ini dan keterlibatan intelektualnya, tetapi juga pada sejarah intelektual Islam secara umum, khususnya yang terjadi pada abad kesembilan Bagdad, sebuah ibukota kerajaan ‘Abbasiyah. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana al-Jahiz, sebagai seorang pendebat, ahli dialektika, dan polemik, terlibat dalam perdebatan-perdebatan seputar keutamaan ‘Ali ibn Thalib dan status kekhalifahannya. Ini adalah studi literatur terhadap beberapa karya al-Jahiz, dilengkapi dengan sumber sekunder yang relevan. Studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa dalam memperdebatkan isu yang kontroversial ini di zamannya, al-Jahiz mengambil sikap yang berbeda dari sesama pemikir*

*Mu‘tazilah, berbeda dari para perawi hadis, serta menentang argumen ijma‘ (konsensus), sebuah argumen yang dipandang tak terbantahkan oleh banyak sarjana hukum Islam. Keberanian intelektualnya memungkinkannya untuk mengartikulasikan ide-idenya secara bebas dan tampil sebagai pemikir yang independen dan orisinal.*

**Kata kunci:**

Al-Jahiz, ‘Ali ibn Thalib, Ijma‘

## Introduction

“You have condemned me for my epistles on the Hashimites, my arguments in favor of them, my thorough examination of their excellence, my presentation of them in the splendid illustration, and my way of conversing them in the perfect trick. You have accused me of deviating from the Mu‘tazila to the Zaydiyya [one branch of Shī‘a Islam] and from moderation in *al-tashayyu‘* [having Shī‘a inclination] to extremism.” (Al-Jahiz 1938).

In the introduction to his celebrated book *Kitab Al-Hayawan*, the Book of the Livings, Abu ‘Uthman ‘Amr ibn Bakr al-Jahiz (d. 868/9)<sup>1</sup> tells us that many of his writings had attracted criticism from different groups (Pellat 1969). Almost all texts that he composed from the humorous *al-Bukhala‘* to the polemical treatise *al-Radd ‘ala Al-Nasara*, says al-Jahiz, were not invulnerable to objections raised by people (Al-Jahiz 1938). It is in this context that he shares with us how his epistles on the Hashimites were similarly condemned, as shown by his own proclamation that I have provided its translation above.

Who probably accused him so badly? Why did they charge al-Jahiz of going astray from what they believe to be the true Mu‘tazila doctrines to Shī‘a (or here called Zaydiyya)? And how did al-Jahiz disagree with them, especially in portraying ‘Alī ibn Abī Thalib (d. 661) and his family? These are the questions that will be particularly addressed in this article.

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<sup>1</sup> To better understand the man, his intellectual endeavors, and his life, see (Pellat 1969).

## The Debates on 'Ali's and His Household's Merits

The historians of classical Islam are familiar with the narrative that after the first civil war (*fitna*) which marked the beginning of enmity and war between 'Ali and Mu'awiyya (d. 680), Muslim society was split into several separate groups, and it is this political clash that gave birth to different Islamic theological camps (Ess 2006; Aditoni 2016; Abû Ḥanîfah fully returns the legitimacy of 'Uthmân b. 'Affân as the third caliph and the superiority of 'Alî b. Abî Ṭâlib merely to the authority of Allah. This concept rejects the Khariji doctrine on the expulsion of the wrong doers (sinful people Zaini 2015). After days of battles that killed a large number of victims in both parties, the two opposing political leaders agreed to stop the war and began the arbitration, *tabkim*. Not all 'Ali's armies, however, consented to this resolution and went further by judging those who accepted the arbitration from both parties are infidels (*kuffar*) because they, according to this group's conviction, did not obey God's law. This group who withdrew from 'Ali's party was in the heresiography called Khawarij, and it is recounted that the Khawarij militants planned to murder both 'Ali and Mu'awiyya although they finally managed to kill the former (Zaini 2015; Saleh 2018; Saniah and Sidik 2020; Sukring 2016; Fazlurrahman 2021; Nasrudin et al. 2021; Sudi Pratikno 2019).  
tampung kepemimpinan umat Islam beralih kepada Imam Ali bin Abi Thalib. Seperti yang termaktub dalam buku- buku sejarah bahwa meninggalnya Khalifah Utsman bin Affan dikarenakan ketidakpuasan sebagian umat Islam pada waktu itu sehingga menyebabkan terjadinya pemberontakan terhadap pemerintahannya. Pada masa Khalifah Ali pun terjadi Perang Unta dan Shiffin. Perang Shiffin yang diakhiri dengan tahkim atau arbitrase telah menyebabkan munculnya berbagai golongan, yaitu Muawiyah, Syiah (Pengikut; Rubini 2018).

After the assassination of 'Ali, Mu'awiyya consolidated his power and founded the Umayyad kingdom in Damascus, a new capital of the

Islamic state. Muslim sources narrate that the Umayyads continued to persecute ‘Ali’s faction, called Shi‘a in heresiography, publicly denounced ‘Ali and his descendants, and prohibited the mass from discussing their merits (Husayn 2021b; Husayn 2021a; Ali 2022). In such a milieu, some later Muslim scholars and theologians were directly or indirectly driven to disapprove ‘Ali’s caliphate in order to validate Mu‘awiyya’s authority and his dynasty. A leading Basran Mu‘tazilite, Abu Bakr Al-Asamm (d. 816/7), for example, is reported to advocate such a view. He argued that Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and Mu‘awiya were the legitimate caliphs because their authorities were established through consensus, while Ali’s caliphate was invalid because he failed to secure such consensus (Husayn 2021b).

Following the fall of the Umayyad kingdom and the rise of the new ‘Abbasid empire, hatred for ‘Ali and his household was still widespread and had penetrated various Islamic schools of thought and law. Somebody who conversed ‘Ali’s special qualities will soon be identified as a sympathizer of the Shi‘a (Royani 2021; Martin 2008; Giv 2016). The prominent jurist and founder of Shafi‘i legal school, Muhammad ibn Idris Al-Shafi‘i (d. 820) is told to compose the following poetry to defend his love of Muhammad’s family, most importantly ‘Ali and his descendants.

“If *rafid* [referring to one branch of Shi‘a Islam called Rafida] is [an act of] loving Muhammad’s household [including ‘Ali and his family], let the people bear witness that I am a Rafidi.” (Al-Shafi‘i 1985).

A few decades later, the renowned hadith scholar and founder of Hanbali school, Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) took extra efforts to elevate ‘Ali’s status among the Proto-Sunnis.<sup>2</sup> In addition to penning his prominent hadith collection *al-Musnad*, ibn Hanbal also devoted a specific treatise that

2 I follow Muhammad Qasim Zaman in using this term. Because the term Sunni was not perfectly established in that era, Zaman prefers to call this group as Proto-Sunnis which later became an inspiration for the more consolidated Sunni groups. Proto-Sunnis that were active in the late 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries saw themselves as the adherents of the Prophet’s *sunna*. See (Zaman 1997).

transmits hundreds of hadith testifying 'Ali's distinction, entitled *Fadhail Amir Al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abi Thalib* (Hanbal 2000). A contemporary of al-Jahiz, ibn Hanbal's attempt to campaign 'Ali's excellence mirrors that 'Ali's status was highly contested by his time among various Muslim communities. It is in this socio-political setting that we can understand why al-Jahiz, for reporting various aspects of 'Ali's and his household's virtues in his epistles on the Hashimites, was accused of converting to a Zaydite, as al-Shafi'i before him a Rafidite.

### **The Consensus Argument and Its Limit**

'Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi (d. 1037) informs us that all Muslim parties agreed on 'Ali's legitimacy as a caliph before the civil war, including the Khawarij although this group argues that 'Ali's caliphate was corrupted and turned to be illegitimate after the arbitration. Some individuals, however, says al-Baghdadi, did not subscribe to the idea of 'Ali's authority as a caliph (Al-Baghdadi 1928). Al-'As amm, as we mentioned earlier, rejects 'Ali's caliphate on the ground that 'Ali failed to gain consensus which is, for al-'As amm, an absolute condition to claim political leadership (Husayn 2021b). Muslim sources demonstrate that after 'Ali's claim for authority in Medina, 'Aisha (d. 678), the Prophet's wife, with Zubayr (d. 656) and Thalha (d. 656) led their Meccan soldiers to fight against 'Ali in the Battle of Camel. Mu'awiyya, for his part, also managed his armies in the warfare against 'Ali. This just shows that 'Ali's caliphate was not approved by his contemporaries. It is Mu'awiyya, al-Asamm maintains, who secured the *umma* consensus in the arbitration, and thus he is the legitimate caliph (Al-Baghdadi 1928).

Although al-Asamm might spent his whole life in Basra, his views on the imamate were far-reaching and nicely articulated in Baghdad by Hisham al-Fuwati (d. ca. 824-7), an important Basran Mu'tazilite who migrated to the capital city of the 'Abbasid state (Ess 2006, Ess 2017). For

his part, al-Fuwati expounds ‘Ali’s failure to gain the *umma* consensus and argues that his claim to the caliphate was unacceptable because it occurred in the civil war, not in a time of calm and order (Al-Baghdadi 1928).

Patricia Crone has discussed another particular view on the imamate as advocated by al-Asamm, al-Fuwati, and their followers and labeled them as Muslim anarchists who ‘held that Muslim society could function without what we would call the state.’ (Crone 2000). In the section of the necessity of the imamate, al-Baghdadi recounts for us that while the majority of Muslim scholars agreed on the necessity of the political leadership, both al-Asamm and al-Fuwati subscribed to the contrary. The imamate could be unnecessary when people can behave morally, says al-Asamm (Al-Baghdadi 1928).

We can suppose that this anarchic political view was relatively prevalent by Al-Jahiz’s time that he decided to author a special treatise to debate the idea. In his *al-Jawabat wa Istihqaq al-Imama*, al-Jahiz emphasizes that it is mandatory for people to elect their *imam*, political leader, to uphold the law in order to maintain social order because humans, al-Jahiz asserts, by nature have the potency to fight each other (Al-Jahiz, n.d.). Al-Jahiz also supports that choosing an *imam* and founding government give benefits not only to worldly life but also to the faith matters as the good social order will allow people to perform their religious duties. Al-Jahiz then quotes the proponent of government that electing an *imam* is compulsory (*farida wajiba*) because the imamate combines the benefits for both the afterlife and this world (*anna al-imama tajma’u shalah al-din wa itsar kbayr al-akhira wa al-ula*) (Sánchez 2011).

If al-Jahiz is both well aware of this anarchic political stance backed up by al-Asamm, al-Fuwati, and its other proponents and driven to refute it, we might accept that he is also equally aware of ‘the consensus argument’ advocated by the same figures and those who agreed with them in invalidating ‘Ali’s caliphate. To reveal al-Jahiz’s attitude to this specific

issue, we will now turn to his other epistle, called *Risala fi Taswib ‘Ali*, which has been excellently examined by José Ignacio Sánchez.

All of al-Jahiz’s treatises that deal with the imamate have been comprehensively examined by Sánchez in his unpublished doctoral dissertation. Sánchez sees that it is a number of epistles on the imamate al-Jahiz’s composed for the seventh Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun, who reigned from 813 until his death in 833, that opened the door of the court for him (Sánchez 2011). Al-Ma’mun was well known for his love to ‘Alids, and it is reported that he initiated public debates about the status of ‘Ali in Islamic history. The caliph even invited scholars from various schools who disapproved ‘Ali’s distinction to debate the matter with him (Husayn 2021b).

It is in this political context which favored ‘Alī and his family that al-Jahiz’s might write both *Risala fi Taswib ‘Ali* and *Risala fi ‘Ali ibn Abi Thalib wa Alibi min Bani Hashim*. Sánchez’s study demonstrates that al-Jahiz’s was well aware of the consensus argument adduced by some critics to argue both against ‘Ali’s right of the caliphate and for Mu‘awiyya’s legitimacy. This argument, al-Jahiz’s argues, is problematic because Mu‘awiyya, although eventually winning the consensus in the arbitration, did not achieve it through a valid way. For al-Jahiz’s, consensus should be reached freely and without the threat of the sword, coercion, and fear, (Sánchez 2011) while Mu‘awiyya reached it after leading his armies to rebel against ‘Ali. When the opponents of ‘Ali emphasized the argument of the social disorder and civil war to depose ‘Ali’s imamate, the same nuanced reasoning was elaborated by al-Jahiz’s to disclose Mu‘awiyya’s invalid approach to securing the consensus.

For al-Jahiz’s, as discussed by Sánchez, the person who is more worthy of the imamate is the one who has precedence in terms of virtue and conversion (*wa-al-imama la tustujabu illa bi-al-taqaddum fi al-fadhl wa-al-taqaddum fi al-sawabiq*) (Sánchez 2011). By declaring this, we might deduce

that for al-Jahiz ‘Ali should be given preference over Mu‘awiyya. The fact that some parties opposed ‘Ali does not damage his merits because virtue, states al-Jahiz, is objectively internal value in itself, and has nothing to do with other people’s recognition or refusal (Sánchez 2011). It is in this framework that al-Jahiz points out the limit of *ijma’*, consensus. Sánchez writes that for al-Jahiz, people reach an agreement (*ajma’u*) on the eminence of the virtuous man (*al-fadil*) because they have found virtue in him, but they do not consider him virtuous because they have previously agreed upon his eminence (Sánchez 2011). In another word, *ijma’* is only a sign (*dalil*) which attests virtue of a man, but is not its source. Therefore, people’s opinions whether they appreciate or deny will never affect virtue. His objection of *ijma’* reminds us of his teacher, Ibrahim al-Nazzam (d. 845), who is reported to reject *ijma’* as an authoritative justification (Al-Ghazali 2017).

It is in this line of reasoning that we can comprehend al-Jahiz’s attempt to list ‘Ali’s and his household’s distinction in his treatise *Risala fi ‘Ali ibn Abi Thalib wa Alibi min Bani Hashim*. Sánchez is true in noticing that in this particular epistle, al-Jahiz does not adopt the dialectical structure where two or more opposing viewpoints are equally presented nor let the readers conclude themselves as he commonly practices in his other works. Instead, he embraces a single voice, and his epistle looks like ‘a ready-made argumentarium to be thrown against the adversary in a discussion’ (Sánchez 2011). To welcome this treatise, let us read it more closely.

### **Al-Jahiz on ‘Ali’s and His Household’s Virtues**

The editor of the treatise, Muhammad Thaha al-Hajiri, considers that the treatise is one of al-Jahiz’s epistles on the Hashimities which attracted criticism that he mentions in the preamble of *Kitab al-Hayawan* as we have seen earlier (Al-Jahiz 1983). Al-Jahiz begins the treatise by discussing that the bases of clashes (*usul al-kbusumat*), such as between Arabs and non-



Arabs, Kufans and Basrans, or 'Adnanis and Qahtanis, are obvious, and these socio-political conflicts are much more destructive for sound reason and morality than the effects caused by theological disputes. One of the consequences of such conflicts is that people begin to position historical figures in order and regard some of them as more superior to others. Al-Jahiz then recounts the polemics between Jews and Christians concerning the status of Jesus. For Jews, al-Jahiz states, Jesus's mother, Mary, is not a pure woman and Jesus is a son of Yusuf al-Najjar, while for Christians Jesus is a manifestation of God in the human body. This story serves as a background to examine the status of 'Ali among Muslims since some of them are in extreme positions. 'Ali's own announcement that the parties who extremely love or hate him will be destroyed (*yabluku fiyya rajulani: mubibb mufrih wa mubghid mufrid*) is cited by al-Jahiz in the very beginning of his discussion (Al-Jahiz 1983).

As he stresses in *Risala fi Taswib 'Ali* that virtues are inherent values, al-Jahiz now begins to catalog special qualities that 'Ali and his family hold. He attributes the following merits to 'Ali.

“The descent is perfect, the origin is noble, the condition is great, the practice is serious, the knowledge is abundant, the eloquence is amazing, the tongue is oratorical, and the breast is expanded..... His morals accord to his descent, and his sayings bear witness to his excellence.” (Al-Jahiz 1983).

In another place, al-Jahiz also mentions 'Ali's four excellence, namely his precedence in converting to Islam, his defense of the Prophet, his [legal] knowledge of the licit and illicit, and his asceticism (Al-Jahiz 1983). In addition to his personal merits, now al-Jahiz highlights that 'Ali is also bestowed with noble genealogy; “his father is Abu Thalib, his grandfather is 'Abd al-Muthalib, his mother is Fatima, his wife is Fatima the daughter of the Prophet, his sons are Hasan and Husayn, his brother is Ja'far, his uncles are 'Abbas and Hamza, etc.” (Al-Jahiz 1983). This argument

is relevant when we consider that the 'Arabs are usually proud of their genealogies and use lineage as a symbol of distinction.

Al-Jahiz's support for the excellence of 'Ali and his family is also based on the eschatological ground where God has prohibited them from receiving alms. This is proof that God has favored them over other human beings. If God, continues al-Jahiz, has equated them with other people, He would not forbid them from receiving charity (*wa law sammabum bi al-nas lamma barrama 'alayhim al-shadaqa*) as other humans are allowed. A saying attributed to the Prophet is also cited here by al-Jahiz where the Prophet is believed to assert that he will inherit two things with which people will not stray as long as they hold them, namely the Qur'an and his family (Al-Jahiz 1983).

Besides these three arguments from personal merits, genealogy, and eschatological basis, al-Jahiz also supports this stance by narrating both historical figures' testimonies, such as testimony from 'Umar, and Arabic poetry which bear witness to 'Ali's and/or his household's merits. Historical knowledge, mentions Jahiz, bears witness to the Hashimites' generosity (*al-jud*), and one of the cited poetry demonstrates that they are the most eloquent speakers among the Qurayshs (*wa abyanubum idza natbaqu bayana*) (Al-Jahiz 1983). This emphasis on generosity (*al-jud*) and eloquence (*al-bayan*) as examples of distinction reminds us to and is in line with his other works, especially his *al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin* where he praises eloquence and his *al-Bukhala'* where he mocks the misers (Al-Jahiz 1998).

If we assess how al-Jahiz deals with this issue of 'Ali and his household's merits, we will find that he endeavors to elaborate on the topic from multi perspectives. In the extracts of the epistle that are available to us, we see how he benefits from a comparative perspective by drawing attention to Jews-Christians polemics as well as cites Qur'anic verses, prophetic hadiths, testimonies from historical figures, and Arabic poetry that support the Hashimites' distinction. However, we have to bear in mind

that these all, for al-Jahiz, are only signs (*dalail*) that bear witness to their excellence, not the source of it. The Hashimites' distinction stems from their essential values, such as the abundance of their knowledge, eloquence in speaking, generosity, and many other honored traits. Moreover, we will better appreciate this al-Jahiz's multi-disciplinary approach when we compare his work with that of his contemporary, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who, in elevating 'Ali's status among the Proto-Sunnis, utilizes only one branch of knowledge, namely hadith. In his *Fadhail Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abi Thalib*, ibn Hanbal transmits hundreds of *riwaya* which favor 'Ali's honor (Hanbal 2000).

### **Al-Jahiz's Controversy and Contribution to the Ongoing Debate**

Now let us return to the questions I posed at the beginning of the article. Who accused al-Jahiz of deviating from the Mu'tazila and approaching the Shi'a? Sánchez's study of *Risala fi Tashwib 'Ali* reveals that the epistle was in part written by al-Jahiz in a polemical engagement with Ibn Hassan, whom al-Jahiz describes as *Mu'tazili Nazẓami* (Sánchez 2011). Ibn Hassan argues that 'Ali's acceptance of the arbitration was a mistake, thereby damaging his authority and casting doubt on his rights to become *imam* (Sánchez 2011). For al-Jahiz, this was not the case because 'Ali had not any other choice but to accept the arbitration as the best solution since it would also allow his armies to gain time (Sánchez 2011). It is Ibn Hassan, says Sánchez, who accused al-Jahiz of acting like a Shi'i extremist (*ghaliya*) (Sánchez 2011).

Although al-Jahiz mentions Ibn Hassan by name in his *Risala fi Tashwib 'Ali*, I deem that he was not the only person al-Jahiz had in mind when penning this epistle. Al-Jahiz's rejection of the consensus thesis in the epistle just indicates that he also responded to al-'Asamm and al-Fuwati who actively advocated the argument. Al-Jahiz's treatise *al-Jawabat*

*wa Istibqaq al-Imama*, as we discussed previously, proves that he was well aware of al-‘Asamm’s and al-Fuwati’s system.

Why did some of his Mu’tazilite colleagues accuse him of approaching the Shi‘a and abandoning Mu’tazila? This question is not easy to answer definitively. One possible explanation is that it is due to al-Jahiz’s excessive defense of ‘Ali and his family as he elaborates in both *Risala fi Tashwib ‘Ali* and *Risala fi ‘Ali ibn Abi Thalib*. As we have read al-Shafi‘i’s story earlier, we will understand that until the early ninth century people who publicly spoke of ‘Ali’s merits would soon be judged as a Shi‘i, and al-Jahiz was not exceptional. Another explanation is related to al-Jahiz’s eschatological argument that God has favored the Hashimites over the rest of humans. If God has given the privilege to one family over others and has not treated humans equally, this will contradict the concept of God’s justice (*‘adl*) which serves as one of the most important Mu’tazila teachings (Ess 2017).

The third question on how al-Jahiz differs from his contemporaries in representing ‘Ali and his family is obvious after we have previously examined his attitude towards the issue. He differs with the Mu’tazili Ibn Ḥassan as the latter blames ‘Ali for accepting the arbitration while the former argues that it was not an error. He also disagrees with both al-‘Asamm and al-Fuwati who argued against ‘Ali’s caliphate on the basis of lack of support, and for al-Jahiz the same argument might also overturn Mu‘awiyya’s authority as he gained the consensus through the invalid way. Consensus, *ijma‘*, is not the source of virtues; it is only a sign to them, and people’s refusal of virtues does not necessarily damage them. After exposing this limit of *ijma‘*, al-Jahiz goes on to articulate that virtues are objectively intrinsic values, and the leaders should be elected based on their special qualities. From here, he broadly discusses ‘Ali’s and his household’s excellence, but unlike Ibn Hanbal who only makes use of a single field of study, al-Jahiz explores it with multi-disciplinary perspectives. By this,

we can appreciate al-Jahiz as an original thinker, creative author, and enthusiastic dialectician.

## Conclusion

The status of ‘Ali’s caliphate had been still a controversial issue by the ninth century of Bagdad. As demonstrated by Sánchez, al-Jahiz, a leading Mu‘tazila thinker, came to prominence in al-Ma‘mun’s reign since he engaged in debating the issue, a topic that attracted the caliph. In contesting the issue at hand, al-Jahiz benefitted from various disciplines and sources, and positioned himself in a different standpoint from many of his contemporaries. In addition, he also treated the concept of *ijma’*, consensus, and showed its limits. The study of this particular thinker also sheds light on the intellectual and theological milieu in the medieval period of Islam.

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