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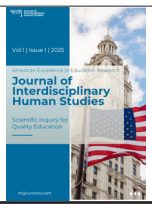

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THE PARABLE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INSTRUCTION: THE PEDAGOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF BENEFICIAL KNOWLEDGE IN AL-ḤAKĪM AL-TIRMIDHĪ'S "AL-AMTHĀL"

Abstract. *The article considers al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's al-Amthāl min al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah not primarily as a treatise on the nature of knowledge but as a work of instruction, and asks why its author chose the parable (mathal) as the form in which to expound his teaching on beneficial knowledge. It is argued that the choice of form is itself part of the argument: because the criterion the scholar proposes is not the subject matter of knowledge but its effect on the heart, on conduct and on other people, that criterion cannot be conveyed by definition alone and requires an image that the learner must complete through recognition. The article analyses the Qurʾanic grounding of the mathal, the way in which the distinction between knowledge of the heart and knowledge of the tongue is built up from a narration and from verse 32 of Sūrat Fāṭir, the four-part scheme that links acting upon knowledge with transmitting it, and the images of the spring, the perfumer and the guiding star by which the scholar describes the bearer of knowledge. The concluding section draws out the implications of this approach for the contemporary teacher.*

Keywords: *al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, al-Amthāl min al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah, mathal, parable, beneficial knowledge, knowledge of the heart, method of instruction, moral upbringing, teacher, pedagogy.*

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of the classification of knowledge in the Islamic intellectual tradition have usually been conducted in terms of subject matter: the sciences are divided into

transmitted and rational, religious and worldly, instrumental and final. Franz Rosenthal has shown that ʿilm became one of the organising concepts of medieval Islamic civilisation precisely because almost every discipline had an interest in defining it in its own way (Rosenthal, 1970). Alongside these divisions by subject matter, however, the tradition preserved a second and much less formalised line of enquiry, in which knowledge is assessed by what it does to the person who carries it. Within this second line the decisive questions are not "what is studied" and "by what method," but "what has changed in the one who knows" and "who else has benefited."

Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, a native of Tirmidh active in the second half of the third/ninth century, belongs to this second line and is recognised as one of the most original thinkers of early Islamic mysticism, above all for his doctrine of sainthood and for his detailed psychology of the heart (Radtke, 1980; Radtke & O'Kane, 1996; Sviri, 2020). Among the many works attributed to him, al-Amthāl min al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah occupies a particular position: its content, its manuscript copies, its modern editions and its translations have been described separately (Azamov, 2023), but the question of why the author expounded his teaching on knowledge in the form of parables rather than definitions has received less attention.

The present article takes up that question. Its aim is to show that in al-Amthāl the form of exposition is inseparable from the content of the teaching, and that the work may therefore be read as a document of instructional method as much as of doctrine. The study proceeds by a close reading of the relevant passages of the work and by relating them to their Qurʾanic grounding.

MAIN PART

The word mathal in the Qurʾanic usage denotes not an ornament of speech but a means of making an intelligible truth perceptible. The Qurʾan itself comments on this procedure and attaches a condition to it:

وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ ۖ وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَا إِلَّا الْعَالِمُونَ

"And these parables We set forth for the people, but none understands them except those who possess knowledge" (Qurʾan 29:43). The verse states two things at once. A parable is addressed to everyone, and in that sense it is the most accessible form of teaching; yet its meaning is grasped only by those who bring knowledge to it. A parable therefore does not transmit a conclusion ready-made: it sets a task, and the hearer completes the act of understanding. This is precisely what distinguishes it from a

definition, which can be memorised and repeated without being understood at all.

This feature of the form corresponds exactly to the difficulty that al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī faces in the subject matter. The criterion of benefit that he proposes does not lie in the content of knowledge, which can be stated, but in its effect upon the knower, which cannot be stated in the same way because it is not a property of the knowledge but a relation between the knowledge and the person. A definition of "beneficial knowledge" would be a statement about knowledge; a parable about beneficial knowledge obliges the hearer to look at himself. The choice of genre is thus an argument in its own right, and the title of the work – "parables from the Book and the Sunna" – indicates that the author takes the two scriptural sources not only as the authority for his doctrine but as the model for his manner of teaching it.

The doctrine itself is built up in stages. Its first element is a narration which the scholar adduces when discussing the point at which knowledge ceases to benefit its possessor:

العلم علمان: علم في القلب، فذاك العلم النافع، وعلم في اللسان، فذاك حجة الله تعالى على ابن آدم

"Knowledge is of two kinds: knowledge in the heart, which is beneficial knowledge, and knowledge on the tongue, which is Allah the Exalted's evidence against the son of Adam" (Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, 1975:217). The contrast between heart and tongue is itself figurative, and reading it as a simple opposition between inward sincerity and outward speech would impoverish it. The heart, in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's psychology, is the seat at which perception, intention and conduct meet; knowledge that has reached it has become a disposition and shows itself without being announced. Knowledge that remains on the tongue has been acquired without being assimilated: it can be recited, defended and taught, and for that very reason it is capable of deceiving both its possessor and his audience. It should be stressed that the term "harmful" here is not a judgement on the content. The same body of knowledge can stand on either side of the line; what changes is the relation of the person to it.

The second element is the scriptural frame within which this relation is placed. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī connects the narration with verse 32 of Sūrat Fāṭir, in which those who have inherited the Book are divided into one who wrongs himself, one who follows a middle course and one who is foremost in good deeds by Allah's permission (Muḥammad Ṣādiq Muḥammad Yūsuf, 2007:V/62). The move is significant for the argument of the present article. The verse speaks of those who have already received the Book, that is, of people who are in possession of knowledge; the difference among

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them lies entirely in what they have done with it. By reading his narration through this verse, the scholar removes any suggestion that the possession of knowledge settles the matter, and shifts the question from acquisition to use. The one who acts upon what he knows corresponds to the foremost in good deeds, and the one who does not corresponds to the one who wrongs himself – wrongs himself, and not his knowledge.

It follows that the familiar opposition between religious and secular learning is not the operative distinction here. Medicine preserves health and treats disease; the natural and exact sciences develop the capacities of the intellect; and each of them can be pursued either responsibly or irresponsibly. What determines the outcome is the purpose for which the knowledge is used and the degree to which the person who holds it understands the responsibility that comes with it.

The third element is the four-part scheme by which the scholar shows that benefit admits of degrees even where the knowledge is beneficial in itself (Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, 1975:286-287). Two criteria are at work: whether a person acts upon what he knows, and whether he transmits it to others. Their combination yields four cases. One who both acts and teaches realises the benefit of knowledge in full, since his conduct authenticates what he says and his teaching widens the circle of those who receive it. One who acts without teaching realises chiefly the personal benefit, although his conduct may still instruct others by example. One who teaches without acting may benefit his students while deriving no benefit himself. One who neither acts nor teaches realises neither, and his knowledge, being unused, may turn into evidence against him.

Two observations should be made about this scheme. The first is that it is a pedagogical rather than a moral ranking. It does not grade persons; it grades the degree to which a given body of knowledge has been allowed to do its work, and it therefore leaves open the possibility of movement from one case to another. The second is that the third case – teaching without practising – is not dismissed. The student is not deprived of what he receives merely because his teacher fails to live by it, and this restraint preserves the authority of instruction itself while locating the loss precisely where it occurs, in the teacher. It is this combination of exactness and generosity that gives the scheme its distinctive character and encourages a positive attitude towards knowledge and towards those who carry it.

The fourth element returns to the form. Having established the criterion, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī does not leave it as a rule but renders it in images, and the images are chosen with care (Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, 1975:31-46). Knowledge is compared to water:

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as water revives the earth, knowledge revives the heart, and acting upon it gives the heart strength. The bearer of knowledge is compared to a spring, to a perfumer and to a guiding star. Each of the three images says something that the others do not. The spring gives without being diminished and without choosing who drinks, which answers the question of whether the teacher loses by teaching. The perfumer benefits those near him by his mere presence, and his influence is involuntary, which describes the second case of the scheme, in which conduct instructs without words. The guiding star is useful only to the traveller who is already going somewhere, and only at a distance, which is an exact figure for the limits of teaching: the teacher cannot make the journey on the learner's behalf. Taken together, the three images give the doctrine of beneficial knowledge a content that the four-part scheme states but cannot convey.

From the point of view of instructional method, several consequences follow for the contemporary teacher. The first concerns assessment. If benefit is measured by effect rather than by content, then a student's ability to reproduce material is at best partial evidence of learning, and a form of assessment that stops there measures the tongue rather than the heart. The second concerns the teacher's own position. In this scheme the teacher is never outside what he teaches: his practice is itself an argument, and the trust that his words command is proportionate to it. The third concerns the manner of teaching. A teaching that proceeds entirely by definitions transmits conclusions, whereas a teaching that uses images, cases and comparisons requires the learner to perform the act of recognition himself. The example of al-Amthāl suggests that the second manner is not a concession to weaker students but a way of teaching what cannot be transmitted in any other form. The fourth concerns the aim of education. If knowledge is held to be complete only when it is both practised and passed on, then the readiness and the capacity to teach others belong to the aims of instruction, and are not an optional addition to it.

CONCLUSION

The reading proposed here suggests that al-Amthāl min al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah should be approached as a work in which doctrine and method are deliberately joined. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī assesses knowledge by its effects – upon the heart, upon conduct and upon other people – rather than by the field to which it belongs, and he expounds that assessment in parables because a criterion of this kind cannot be handed over as a formula but must be recognised by the learner in himself. The Qurʾanic statement

that parables are set forth for all but understood only by those who possess knowledge describes the procedure that the work itself follows.

Within this framework the narration distinguishing knowledge of the heart from knowledge of the tongue supplies the criterion, verse 32 of Sūrat Fāṭir places it within the scriptural account of those who have inherited the Book, the four-part scheme measures how far knowledge has been allowed to act, and the images of the spring, the perfumer and the guiding star give that measure its concrete sense. The resulting conception of teaching is demanding but not severe: it holds the teacher to what he teaches, refuses to let the possession of knowledge stand in place of its use, and at the same time preserves the benefit that students receive even from an imperfect teacher. In this lies the distinctive contribution of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, and in it also lies the continuing relevance of his work for the theory and practice of education today.

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