

Heretics and Party-Crashers: Al-Khāṭīb al-Baghdādī's *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl*

Taṭfīl (party-crashing) stories, in addition to being humorous and entertaining, provided a space to explore a number of serious theological and ethical issues. Given their inherent concern with inclusion and exclusion (i.e., who should be admitted to the “party”), they are an especially appropriate vehicle for the exploration of ideas concerning the categorization and exclusion of “heretics,” enacted as part of various efforts to define and control orthodoxy. We will argue that some party-crashing stories presented a plea for more inclusiveness in religion, by subtly invoking the value systems of hospitality, and by emphasizing the impossibility of knowing who will be saved and who will be damned. In the analogy that these stories present, paradise is like a party and God is the host. As Julia Bray writes in her essay “The Physical World and the Writer’s Eye,” “Though medieval Arabic has a vast literature of ideas nakedly expressed as such, it is...highly characteristic of the culture that some of its guiding ideas are not expressed abstractly, but are explored through narrative, or through other forms of representation which are not overtly analytical. A problem raised in one discipline, such as Ḥadīth or theology, may, as we have seen, be debated outside the rules and conventions of that discipline.”¹

Kitāb al-Taṭfīl (The Book of Party-Crashing)² was written in the 11th century by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, known primarily for his scholarship on the hadith and for his biographical compendium, *Ta’rīkh madīnati as-salām* (or *Ta’rīkh Baghdad*), an extensive reference guide to hadith transmitters and scholars of Baghdad. The *Ta’rīkh* is a gigantic conglomeration of data and stories that al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī worked on for most of his scholarly life; it could be that while gathering that material, he began keeping a file of party-crasher stories that then became a book (the *Taṭfīl*). Some of the stories in the *Ta’rīkh* would certainly be at home among those found in the *Taṭfīl*.³

¹ Bray, “The Physical World,” 234.

² Full title: *Al-Taṭfīl wa-ḥikāyāt al-tuḥayliyyīn wa-akhbāruhum wa-nawādir kalāmihim wa-ash’āruhum* (Party-crashing and stories of party-crashers, their anecdotes, and highlights of their speech and their poetry). We will refer to the anecdote numbers provided by al-Jābī in his 1999 edition because they can also be used to look up the equivalent story in Selove’s translation. It should be noted that al-Jābī’s edition is superior for including the stories of drunkenness that other more prudish editions eliminate.

³ For example, in one story, a weaver shows up at Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī’s door and absolutely insists on seeing him. “What’s a weaver got to do with me?” asks Ibrāhīm. But the weaver has made a bet that Ibrāhīm is the greatest of all living singers, and Ibrāhīm agrees to join his party in order to prove him right. It turns out that the weaver can quote lines of poetry that Ibrāhīm is known for singing. It is so surprising that a weaver turns out to be such a gracious, erudite host, that Ibrāhīm and the caliph reward him with 30,000 dirhams (*Ta’rīkh Baghdad*, v. 7, 117-18 (in the entry for Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī). Weavers, considered to be members of a lowly profession, are listed among the party-crasher Bunān’s list of undesirable drinking buddies in Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Taṭfīl* anecdote 180 p. 147.

Most of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's books address the subject of hadith transmission, and his two small works of *adab*, one on misers (*al-Bukhalā'*) and the other on party-crashers, at first glance do not seem relevant to the famous hadith scholar's preferred topic. Nevertheless, hadith play an important role in both books, setting a moral tone by which the remaining anecdotes can be read. In the hadith near the beginning of his book of *Tatfīl*, the prophet Muḥammad helps uninvited people gain access to parties, and the message is clearly that hosts should be generous with hungry, uninvited guests. As we will argue, this plea for generosity likely extended beyond its immediate, literal interpretation.

In his introduction to the *Tatfīl*, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī apologises for not addressing “more suitable topics” or “some other subject [which] could have been more appropriate or pressing.”⁴ This is a standard tone to adopt in presenting a work dominated by *hazl/mazḥ* (joking) as opposed to *jidd* (seriousness); van Gelder analyses several similar cases in his articles, “Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature,” where he describes justifications for the inclusion of jesting in this literature. For example, he shows that al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868) and al-Ābī (d. 1030) (who both dealt with the common theme of party-crashing in their writings), claim that their jesting has a didactic value. Al-Jāḥiẓ uses joking to provide rest and balance for the mind; the saying of ‘Alī quoted by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī in his *Tatfīl* is frequently employed to justify this use of joking: “If minds get tired, just as bodies do, seek out some entertaining information!”⁵ Al-Ābī, by contrast, strives to trick frivolous-minded people into learning something by hiding wisdom and seriousness among his jokes, or at least forcing them to leaf through serious material before they arrive at the jokes.⁶

Although al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī primarily emphasises the benefits of joking in providing rest for the mind (like al-Jāḥiẓ),⁷ we think that like Al-Ābī, he has also been

⁴ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, 43. He goes on to claim that he did it out of loyalty to his friend who asked him a question about a particular anecdote (about al-Jahdamī, described below), but this is surely a thin excuse for writing an entire book on the subject.

⁵ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdote 1, p. 44.

⁶ Van Gelder, “Jest and Earnest part 2,” 170 ff, citing *Nathr al-durr* iii. 9 about tricking frivolous minded people into learning something. Al-Ābī writes that he hopes to make his jest-seeking readers page through serious material before they find the jokes in ii. 9. He also writes here that at the very least, they can learn not to behave like the silly people described in his jests.

⁷ In addition to the quote from ‘Alī mentioned above, he also explains that “resting the mind stimulates the memory,” and cites a hadith in which the prophet Muḥammad explains that it is OK to laugh and joke around after talking about serious matters like heaven and hell, because “there’s a time for this and a time for that.” Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdotes 2-3, p. 44.

sneaky with his *hazl*, tricking us into learning a serious lesson by hiding it in the jokes. Unlike Al-Ābī, however, he does not, according to this interpretation, separate the jesting from the seriousness, but rather hides a serious message in his jesting. As al-Jāhiz puts it, “When joking is intended as something useful... it becomes seriousness.”⁸

This is not to suggest that his book is not really an entertaining and amusing collection of light-hearted jokes about party-crashers. It is possible for the same material, much of which can be found circulating in other collections in different contexts,⁹ to be read as simultaneously serious and funny. One could argue that this tension between opposites is in fact characteristic of medieval Islamic literature; as Shahab Ahmed has demonstrated in his *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*, metaphor and ambiguity are central to the meaning-seeking activity characteristic of literary expressions of Islam. Paradoxical images, for example, of (forbidden) wine-drinking serving as a symbol of the bliss of paradise and communion with the divine, are of fundamental importance, showing that the world as text is a lowly manifestation of the heavenly realm. Selove shows that another party-crasher of Medieval Arabic Literature, the protagonist of the obscene and hilarious *Hikāyat Abī l-Qāsim*, represents man as microcosm with all of its many contradictions—Abū l-Qāsim is simultaneously a trickster and holy man, for example.¹⁰ We will arrive at these lofty/lowly considerations at the end of our article, but must first return to al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s introduction, in which he provides us clue to his more serious intentions.

In this introduction, he says that one story in particular first attracted him to the subject of party-crashing. He writes that a friend asked him about an anecdote concerning an interaction between a party-crasher and a hadith-transmitter, Naṣr

⁸ Translated by van Gelder in “Jest and Earnest” part 1, 88.

⁹ For example, a miser defending his miserliness in al-Jāhiz’s *Bukhalā’* repeats a joke attributed to a party-crasher in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s work as an example of the kind of smooth-talking one can expect from social parasites and as a reason one should not be duped into acts of generosity for such people (*Bukhalā’*, 252). In al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s telling, this joke is included in a chapter about people who facilitate the art of party-crashing (*sahhala lahu l-sabīl*); here a generous or good-natured host responds favourably to the joke that al-Jāhiz’s miser warns against (anecdote 104, pp. 105-106). Similarly, a poem spoken boastfully by a party-crasher in the first person in Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdotes 140 and 152 (pp. 124-125, 134), is used (hypocritically) in the third person to criticise a fellow guest that Abū l-Qāsim accuses of being a party-crasher in *Hikāyat Abī l-Qāsim* (Al-Azdī, *The Imitation*, paragraph number 55). This is also included in Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr’s (d. 1070) chapter on “party-crashers and annoying people” in his *Bahjat al-majālis*, vol. 1, 741-42.

¹⁰ *Hikāyat Abī l-Qāsim: A Literary Banquet*.

ibn ‘Alī al-Jahḍamī.¹¹ In this anecdote,¹² al-Jahḍamī’s well-dressed and eloquent neighbour is in the habit of following him to parties. Because the other party-goers assume that the party-crasher is a friend of the hadith-transmitter, he is always welcomed and treated with respect. However al-Jahḍamī tires of his neighbour’s ruse, and decides to teach him a lesson. When the party-crasher follows al-Jahḍamī to the prince of Basra’s son’s circumcision, just as he reaches for the prince’s food, al-Jahḍamī recites a hadith saying, “He who enters a gathering to which he was not invited and eats their food, enters a thief and leaves a looter.” The party-crasher, not at all cowed, scolds al-Jahḍamī for playing the miser with food that does not belong to him, and points out that a transmitter of this hadith, Durust ibn Ziyād, is considered weak. The party-crasher reminds al-Jahḍamī that there are punishments proscribed for both the thief and the looter, but that the prophet Muḥammad revealed his true feelings on party-crashing when he said, “Food for one is enough for two, and food for two is enough for four, and food for four is enough for eight.” What is more, the party-crasher claims, *his* hadith comes equipped with a sound chain of transmission. Hadith transmitter al-Jahḍamī is ashamed and dumbfounded by the party-crasher’s arguments. In an earlier anecdote, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī speaks in his own voice (a rare occurrence) to point out that al-Jahḍamī’s stingier hadith is transmitted only through Durust ibn Ziyād.¹³ Durust ibn Ziyād is not explicitly listed in the *Ta’rīkh* as one from whom al-Jahḍamī transmitted. However, ambiguously, al-Khaṭīb includes a catch-all “others” (almost an “etc.”) in the list. While this tale is appropriate for the *Tatfīl*, if included in the *Ta’rīkh*, it would undercut the assessment that al-Jahḍamī was a generally reliable transmitter. Therefore, the story, while illuminating, does not belong in the more “serious” biographical dictionary. That al-Jahḍamī would cite a hadith from Durust in this way and in this context is particularly notable because, as al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī makes clear, he knew better.¹⁴

¹¹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, 43. He has a relatively large entry in the *Ta’rīkh Baghdad* (v.15, pp. 389-392) which notes that while he was accused by al-Mutawakkil of being Shi’a (and possibly beaten for it) he was however categorized as a generally reliable transmitter to be found in Muslim’s *Sahīh* and transmitted from by ‘Abd Allah ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.

¹² Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdote 145, p. 126-127. In the *isnād* for this tale (#145) the first person, the judge Abū al-‘Alā’ Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Ya‘qūb al-Wasiṭī, has a five page entry in the *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, v.4, 162-167. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī also cites him frequently, and he appears as an authority numerous times in the work. This is one of the reasons that we conclude that perhaps al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī was gathering the party-crasher stories while working on the *Ta’rīkh*. As a judge he is somewhat suspect as a hadith transmitter (in the pay of the state and all of the pollution that entails) but not suspect enough to be called out. The point is that al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī is relying on at least one of his usual sources for material.

¹³ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdote 33, p. 59.

¹⁴ Durust is listed as a weak and unreliable transmitter in Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, v. 3, p. 209.

The story as it is presented in *al-Tatfīl* is intended to show that despite whatever moral ambiguity the position of the party-crasher may present (after all, the book includes two chapters on people who deem their behaviour rude),¹⁵ the party-crashers are the good guys in this work. Religious arguments (e.g. citations of hadith), can be used to argue one thing or its opposite, for example, they can be used both to exclude and include an outsider. This story, however, suggests that it is better to use hadith and religious scholarship to include (i.e. be generous) than to exclude (i.e. be miserly). In her article “Structure and Organization in a Monographic Adab Work,” Fedwa Malti-Douglas argues that al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī begins his book of misers with sharply condemning hadith, but begins his book of party-crashing in a lighter tone, and that he therefore condemns party-crashing less strongly than miserliness. In her final paragraph, she suggests that deep-seated values of hospitality prevent al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī from dealing too harshly with the character of the uninvited guest.¹⁶ In a later publication, she explains further: “The [*Book of Misers*] of al-Khaṭīb could be said to follow a linear progression, first the presentation of the religious material, followed by the anecdotes, and closing with the practical and specific admonitory material. The religious material placed first could, in a certain sense, be said to substitute for an introduction. By its condemnation of *bukhl* and the *bakhīl* on religious, moral, and ethical grounds, it orients *bukhl* in the moral universe of the reader.” She adds in a footnote that when comparing this to his *Tatfīl*, which, in contrast, “begins with literary and philological introductions,” al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s moral condemnation of the misers as opposed to the party-crashers becomes apparent.¹⁷ We would add to this argument that considered in light of the contents of his *Ta’rīkh*, the *Tatfīl*, far from being a condemnation of party-crashing, is an affirmation of the core value of hospitality broadly imagined.

Chapter four of the *Tatfīl*, which comes before a chapter containing hadith condemning party-crashing (including that cited by al-Jahḍamī), is called “Those of the companions of the prophet (peace be upon him) who crashed parties.”¹⁸ This chapter includes ten stories about people who followed the prophet to a party, but who did not have an invitation. In each story, the prophet draws the attention of the host to the party-crasher, and gives the host the choice of admitting or refusing the uninvited guest. The host always grants the party-crasher admission. The prophet never scolds the party-crasher, but on the contrary ends up helping him gain an invitation. One suspects that the host of the party would feel ashamed to turn the crasher away in

¹⁵ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdotes 33-84, pp. 60-82. Other *adab* collections, like Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr’s *Bahjat al-majālis*, classes party-crashers together with “rude/annoying people” (*al-thuqalā*) (see above, footnote X).

¹⁶ Malti-Douglas, “Structure and Organisation,” 245.

¹⁷ Malti-Douglas, “Structures of Avarice,” 66, n., 58.

¹⁸ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdotes 23-33, pp. 54-59.

front of the prophet of God. In one instance, the prophet has to ask the host three times before the host relents and grants his uninvited wife ‘Ā’isha an invitation. In general, the prophet Muḥammad seems to expect the host to treat the uninvited guest with generosity.

There is evidence in *al-Taṭfīl* that the desert-dwelling Arab, presumably largely untouched by urban ideas, is unfamiliar with the concept of party-crashing. In the first anecdote in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s chapter on those who praise party-crashing, a desert-dwelling Arab (*‘arabī*) overhears some city-dwellers discussing the practice, and asks who these party-crashers (*banū ṭufayl*) are. The city-dwellers explain that they are people who come to a meal uninvited. “My God those are friendly people (*qawm al-kirām*)!” the Arab exclaims.¹⁹ The word that the Arab uses to describe the party-crashers, *kirām*, could be translated as “generosity” or “nobility.” By using this word in reference to the party-crashers, the Arab reveals a lack of understanding of the urban mentality (and miserliness) that views an uninvited guest as an unwelcome guest. On the contrary, the Arab seems not to understand the concept of invite-only parties in the same way, and to view the party-crashers as unusually friendly people for paying unsolicited social calls. He may even perceive the party-crashers as generous for allowing the host to demonstrate his own largesse by serving a greater number of guests. Both Islamic and Arab values hold the virtue of hospitality so high that receiving generosity was nearly perceived as a dishonor. For example, an Arab in al-Jāḥiẓ’s *Kitāb al-Bukhalā*, says “Save me, Lord, from certain blessings,” when his mother received a large dowry.²⁰ As Bosworth notes, “there was a religious aura around almsgiving which communicated itself to some extent to begging itself for...requests of beggars facilitated almsgiving for the believer.”²¹ Acts of generosity augmented the honor and reputation of the host, while the guest’s honour was diminished by his position—therefore, in a sense, the guest was generous to the host, or the beggar to the charitable man.²²

Heretics and Party-Crashers

The implications of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s endorsement of hospitality and inclusivity appear to go beyond polite behavior at a party, however. One important anecdote begins when a party-crasher accidentally joins a group of heretics on their

¹⁹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Taṭfīl*, anecdote 76, p. 79.

²⁰ Colville (trans.), *Avarice*, 173. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bukhalā*, 255. This is quoted in a letter in which a miser defends himself against charges of miserliness in part by arguing that generosity is not as unalloyed a good as people claim, since it tends to oblige the receiver to reciprocate.

²¹ Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underworld*, 12. Also see Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies*.

²² For a discussion of a later period see Trepanier, *Foodways and Daily Life in Medieval Anatolia*, 92-94.

way to be executed by al-Ma'mūn.²³ Seeing them being herded onto a boat, he thinks they are going on a pleasure cruise and slips into their midst. When he discovers his terrible mistake, and is being questioned alongside the heretics that he accidentally joined, he professes to know nothing but "God and the prophet Muḥammad." After al-Ma'mūn decapitates all the heretics, he threatens to punish the party-crasher as well, but Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (d. 839)²⁴ diverts the violence and saves him by distracting the caliph (and "taking the burden of the punishment") by telling his own party-crashing story, in which he himself once crashed a party, and found the host to be extremely generous. Perhaps there is a kernel of truth at the core of the tale. Al-Ma'mūn rounded people up for questioning under threat of execution just before he died;²⁵ among those included were Ibn Ḥanbal and Muhammad ibn Nūḥ who were shipped up to Tarsus to be questioned. Before that in the first round of questioning in the *miḥna*, Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm is ordered to send seven people from Baghdad to Raqqa.²⁶ While al-Ṭabarī does not tell us his source for his information, presumably it was al-Dawraqī.

But readers may recognise this story from the *1001 Nights*, where it is found in the "Barber's Tale."²⁷ Here the Barber, an annoyingly talkative character who calls himself "the Silent One," accidentally crashes the "party"-boat of heretics and subsequently ransoms himself with his own story-telling. One obvious difference here is that in the *Nights* this story is presented as fiction, while in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's version, it is presented as fact (despite the fact that it probably was not). The purpose of the two stories is, however, similar, in that both are motivated by concerns about who gets to be the gatekeeper of knowledge. In the Barber's Tale, the Barber, a "satire of a learned man"²⁸ who babbles about his knowledge of astrolabes, astrology, and medicine, finds his way into the royal court, where he heals a presumed-dead hunchback and is richly rewarded. We can detect the anxiety pervasive in medieval Arabic literature concerning the power of eloquent speech to elevate the lowliest characters to a position of riches and nobility (a theme of al-Hamadhānī's *Maqāmāt*, for instance.)

²³ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Taṭfīl*, anecdote 93, pp. 79-94.

²⁴ Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī was the son of the caliph al-Mahdī and briefly the successor of al-Ma'mūn. He was ill-suited to political life because of his consuming passion for singing and music, and he spent his later years as a court poet and musician.

²⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, 3:1131.

²⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, 3:1116.

²⁷ Lyons, *Arabian Nights*, 1: 217-219.

²⁸ Beaumont, "Mighty and Never-Ending," 157.

In al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's version as well, we are dealing with concerns about the gatekeeping of knowledge, but with a more specific instance: the *miḥna* or caliphal inquisition, in which Abbasid caliphs attempted to gain control over theological discourse. The party-crasher's response in this version of the tale, that he "Knows nothing but God and the Prophet Muḥammad," is one of the responses given by those caught up in the *miḥna* as they tried to dodge the question meant to test their submission to the caliph's authority, "Is the Qur'ān created?". It was Bugha al-Saghīr's comment as well when he transported Ibn Ḥanbal to be questioned by al-Mu'tasim as part of the *miḥna*.²⁹ The statement seems to imply that the inquisition is out of hand because God and the Prophet are the only things that one can be certain about, even if one is caliph. It also boils the Five Pillars down to the Shahada; stripping away everything else, making all other religious expressions/behaviors subsidiary. With the Shahada as the only benchmark by which to judge belief or by which to justify exclusion, the tent becomes very large and inclusive indeed.

Why does al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī talk about the *miḥna* at all, or heretics for that matter?³⁰ We think that it is because it serves the purpose of justifying his own role, as an *'ālim* (religious scholar), indeed as a gatekeeper of knowledge. By the end of the *miḥna* (really the end of Mutawakkil's reign), the *'ulamā'* were the inheritors of the mantle of the prophet. The *miḥna*, as al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī tells it, appears to be a cautionary tale of what happens when the "right-minded balance" of the world is overturned by an upstart caliph, who wrongly assumes this role of gatekeeper. Elsewhere al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī makes his point of view on the wrongheadedness of the inquisition perfectly clear. His description of Aḥmad ibn Naṣr's trial and dreams of Ibn Ḥanbal in Heaven following the trial is unambiguous in laying blame. At the same time, he was quick to criticise those followers of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal who attacked him for his own theological speculations and even accused him of heresy.³¹ His collection of party-crashing stories may subtly denounce those who, in his opinion, wrongly attempt thus to control the definitions of orthodoxy.

The outsiders in his story (the party-crashers, jokingly but explicitly aligned with the heretics) are his sympathetic protagonists. But the real heroes are the hosts whose generosity allows them to include people even if those people are breaking the rules or behaving in a fashion that is somehow beyond the pale. In the story Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī tells to ransom the party-crasher, he himself crashes a party and meets

²⁹ Ṣāliḥ ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Sīrat*, 54. It is worth noting that this would be a typically Murji'a response. The Murji'a, and this stance, were heretical in the temporal context/setting of the narrative, but not in that of the compiler.

³⁰ In the *Ta'rīkh* he provides a rich mine of information on the *miḥna*.

³¹ Malti-Douglas in *Structures of Avarice* (38-39). Also see her "Controversy and its Effects," 121-22, and Sellheim, "Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī." For a taste of why the Hanbalis might have been displeased with him see the *Ta'rīkh*, v.6, p. 101 in the entry for Ibn Ḥanbal which contains a less than flattering assessment of his trial.

with an extremely generous host. This host lets Ibrāhīm, the party-crasher, marry his sister, and he even offers him his mother!³² The host is rewarded by the caliph for his behaviour at the end of the tale, but perhaps more importantly, he is rewarded by fate when the party-crasher that he welcomes turns out to be a noble and talented musician whose presence greatly enriches his life. The implication is that if we act too zealously and stingily as gatekeepers, we risk cutting ourselves off from great rewards, as in stories in which divinities disguised as beggars reward those generous enough to let them in.³³ After all, al-Ma'mūn could have accidentally executed the party-crasher along with the heretics, and Ibrāhīm's story shows that that might have been the equivalent of executing Ibrāhīm himself, since he too was once a party-crasher. Having a hidden imam among us would have a similar effect of making everyone aware of their own ignorance and always on their best behavior.

Party-Crashing and the Unknown

Two anecdotes of the *Tatfīl* tell us that the famous party-crasher Bunān had only one phrase of the entire Qur'ān memorized: a section of verse 18:62 that could be translated as “Give us our lunch!”³⁴ On the surface this appears to be a joke about the fact that party-crashers are obsessed with food, to the point that they could forget everything in the Holy Book except one verse having to do with lunch. But there may be a deeper meaning implied. The line “Give us our lunch” is uttered by Moses in *Sūrat al-kahf*,³⁵ when he asks his servant for a fish to eat. This fish, however, had miraculously escaped into the seas, and when Moses returns to the place that it swam away, he meets the unnamed al-Khiḍr, who goes on to demonstrate to him the

³² Strangely enough, as part of the catalog of their heresy and disrepute, the Qaramita and the Khuramiyya (the followers of Babak) were accused of offering access to their wives to each other as an act of brotherhood and hospitality.

³³ Comparisons to the tale of Philemon and Baucis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are made in the Conclusion of *Ḥikāyat Abī l-Qāsim: A Literary Banquet*. We can also compare this to tales of rulers (e.g. Hārūn al-Rashīd) putting on disguises to check to see that the officials are behaving correctly or to check the word on the street. One could also reference the Qur'anic story of Lut where he welcomes the strangers as guests with hospitality as such an over-riding principle that it leads him to offer up his daughters to the mob in lieu of the angels. Also in Q 51:24-28 Abraham hosts the angels on their way to Sodom and they refuse to eat his food. Initially he exhibits deep concern, as refusal to eat food offered by a host is considered extremely insulting (as noted by editors of the *Study Quran*, p. 1276).

³⁴ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdotes 166-167, pp. 139-140.

³⁵ The Caliph al-Wāthiq had a particular obsession with this Sūra (18), specifically verses 9-22 and 92-99. The first set tells the story of the seven sleepers of Ephesus for whom the Caliph sends a search party. And the second tells of Alexander's wall built to hold out the Gog and Magog. Al-Wāthiq dispatches a team to find it and insure that it is in good repair after having dreamt of a crack appearing in it. The theme of the wall and the uninvited “guest” is thus repeated.

inability of the average person to divine the hidden purposes of God. For example, al-Khiḍr repairs the crumbling wall of some rude townspeople who refused him hospitality, and later explains that this wall in fact hid a treasure that would be discovered in the future by the two orphans to whom it truly belonged. Had al-Khiḍr not repaired the wall, performing a seeming act of kindness for the inhospitable villains of the story, they, and not the deserving orphans, would have found the treasure in the crumbling wall.³⁶ Therefore the line “Give us our lunch,” memorized by the party-crasher, is central to a lesson in the Qur’an that deals with the hidden, unknown workings of the divine. The deceptive nature of appearances, and the at once tricky and generous nature of the Divine, might prove as significant to a party-crasher as does the “lunch” mentioned in this verse.

The phrase “give us our lunch” has been interpreted as the moment that God induced hunger in Moses in order to remind him of the fish that escaped, and thus to return him to the place that it escaped, namely “the junction between two seas.” This liminal place has in turn been interpreted as the intersection of exoteric and esoteric knowledge, and thus the meeting place of Moses and al-Khiḍr. Al-Khiḍr himself is considered a prophet who knows the unknown, and has in this capacity served as a guide to Sufis and mystics.³⁷

In another story about Bunān the famous party-crasher, he travels to Basra (a city with a significant history of mysticism),³⁸ and joins a party-crashing gang. When he attempts to trick this gang out of the profits he gains from sneaking food out of parties, he finds that the party-crashers of Basra know all the hidden secrets of what he ate at this party, and can name every dish he consumed there. He flees Basra in fear, vowing not to return to the land where the party-crashers “know the unknown” (*al-ghayb*). This story strikes us as a humorous reworking of a genre of narrative in which mystics demonstrate their knowledge of the unknown. Compare it to a more earnest tale of the Sufis’ hidden knowledge, found in a Persian biography of the Sufi Saint Abu Sa‘id ibn Abi’l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), in which a judge hears that this Sufi shaykh is preparing to regale his followers with a feast of luxurious foods.³⁹ The

³⁶ Q 18:77, Yusuf Ali’s translation: “Then they proceeded: until, when they came to the inhabitants of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused them hospitality. They found there a wall on the point of falling down, but he set it up straight. (Moses) said: ‘If thou hadst wished, surely thou couldst have exacted some recompense for it!’” This occurs immediately before the story of Alexander and the wall against the Gog and Magog.

³⁷ *Study Quran*, 748-752, specifically citing al-Ṭabṛīsī (d. 1153-54) for the interpretation of “give us our lunch,” and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144) for the interpretation of the “two seas.”

³⁸ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdote 179, pp. 145-146. See Pellat, “al-Baṣra” and Netton, *Private Caves and Public Islands* for Basra as a city associated with mysticism.

³⁹ Our thanks to Paul L. Heck, who provided us with this and many similar anecdotes, adapted from Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 1-76; with corrections and additional materials

judge determines to punish the Sufis for their decadent behavior, but changes his mind when the shaykh demonstrates his startling ability to know the unknown by sending the judge's colleague exactly the type of cake that he had privately determined to buy for breaking his fast. Thus the shaykh proves to his critic, who sought to cast aspersions on his piety, that he (like the party-crashing gang in Basra, and, on a more serious note, like the mystical al-Khidr) in fact knows the unknown. His appearance as a worldly lover of physical pleasure is therefore deceptive, and conceals his special relationship with the Divine.

It is a common theme in medieval Arabic literature and beyond to blend the holy man into the trickster, until one can hardly be distinguished from the other.⁴⁰ In some cases, it is not possible for anyone but God to judge whether such people (e.g. a beggar who attempts to enter a feast in the guise of a holy man) are actually pious or simply affecting piety.⁴¹ As the Qur'an warns us, again in *Sūrat al-Kahf* (18:22) at the end of the story of the seven sleepers, "Enter not, therefore, into controversies concerning them, except on a matter that is clear..." Given our inability to know the unknown, we cannot judge the merit of, for example, an uninvited guest arriving at our party. They may be greedy tricksters, or they may be famous and noble musicians like Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī in the story above (anecdote 93). Or they may be a friend of God, like al-Khidr, who was refused hospitality by the family with the crumbling wall.

Conclusion: Crashing the Party of Paradise

The famous 14th-century mystic Persian poet Ḥāfiẓ wrote, "[Everyone is] a party-crasher (*tufaylī*) of the Existence of Love."⁴² Several stories in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's collection imply that Heaven is a kind of party, and we are all the would-be party-crashers, lucky that God is a generous and indulgent host. For example, in the final text of the collection, a lengthy "official" document on the art of party-crashing commissioned by the pleasure-loving Buyid Amir 'Izz al-Dawla (r. 967 - 978 CE), the following advice is offered: "I command the party-crasher to fear God,

from the complete translation by O'Kane, *The Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness*, 217-218, 302-304. These are translations of the Persian *Asrār al-Tawhīd fī Maqamāt al-Shaykh Abū Sa'īd* (*The Mysteries of Divine Unity concerning the Spiritual Stations of Shaykh Abu Sa'īd*), by Muhammad ibn al-Munawwar.

⁴⁰ Selove covers this topic extensively in the chapter "The Cosmic Crasher," in *Ḥikāyat Abī l-Qāsim: A Literary Banquet*.

⁴¹ The markers and symbolisms of public performances of piety are often difficult to parse. See Reid, *Law and Piety in Medieval Islam*, Chapter 3.

⁴² Thanks to Leonard Lewisohn for alerting us to this verse:

پری و آدمی عشقند هستی طفیل
ب — بری سعادت ی تا ب — نما ارادت ی

the most powerful, the fortified fortress, the unshakable pillar, the lofty mountain, the reinforced defense, the walled garden, and the blessed provision for the day of Resurrection, on which day none but a party-crasher shall obtain provision!”⁴³ Here God is likened to the various parties crashed in the rest of the collection (for example, one anecdote features a “walled garden” scaled by an eager would-be diner).⁴⁴ This document light-heartedly suggests that only through party-crashing will we obtain entry to the walled garden of paradise. Thankfully, like the heroes of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s collection, God is hospitable and indulgent, repeatedly inviting his pious worshippers to “eat and drink” in paradise as their reward.⁴⁵ The Qur’an frequently likens paradise to a banquet, where the blessed recline on couches and indulge in the pleasures of food, drink, fine clothes, and pleasant company.⁴⁶

As Abū l-‘Āṣ writes in a letter to an ungenerous host in al-Jāhīz’s *Kitāb al-Bukhalā* (Book of Misers), “I can only conclude that whoever would choose to reject an attribute that God has ascribed to Himself [meaning generosity], with which He has blessed His prophet and what the Arabs, in common with all other peoples, instinctively applaud, must be a degenerate and an infidel.”⁴⁷ Michael Cooperson reads al-Jāhīz’s *Book of Misers* as containing satires of world-denying ascetics who adhere too fervently to the law (as expressed in the hadith).⁴⁸ If misers are the coyote to the party-crasher’s road-runner, then the party-crashers could demonstrate that we obtain salvation through God’s mercy as a generous host, as much as through our adherence to such laws. And in imitation of God’s mercy and generosity, we should also practice hospitality and inclusiveness for those seeking entry to our parties (literal or figurative), whether we approve of their outward appearance or not. An obvious area for further research in this subject would be al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s book of misers (*al-Bukhalā*); since misers are the literary foils of the party-crashers, a detailed analysis of this book could prove illuminating to readers of his *Tatfīl* and *Ta’rīkh* as well. Parsing works not as isolated acts of authorship but as part of an authorial, even if incomplete, corpus can yield bountiful insights. Furthermore, this approach could be applied to numerous *adab* works whose “author” is in fact more of a “compiler,” but whose authorial intent may be guessed at through a similar analysis of his compilation.

⁴³ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdote 211, p 168. Also see anecdote 168, in which ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb says that the food of wedding parties (the destination of choice for party-crashers) is especially delicious because it has a pinch of the food of paradise in it (p. 141).

⁴⁴ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl*, anecdote 130, p. 117.

⁴⁵ Q: 52:19, 69:24, 77:43. The editors of the *Study Quran* explain that “only through the Grace of God that they could have achieved such a station” (1285).

⁴⁶ E.g. Q: 76:11-22, 56:14-25.

⁴⁷ Colville (trans.), *Avarice*, 154. Al-Jāhīz, *al-Bukhalā*, 226.

⁴⁸ In “Al-Jāhīz, the Misers, and the Proto-Sunni Ascetics.”

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