



The Construction of *Ithbat-bila-Kayf* Theology: An Analysis of Imam Bukhari's Theological Methodology in the Book *Khalq Af'al al-Ibad*

M. Dede Rodliyana¹, M. Rachmatullah Arken²

¹ UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia; dede.rodliyana@uinsgd.ac.id

² UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia; r.arken@uinsgd.ac.id

*Correspondence: dede.rodliyana@uinsgd.ac.id

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Abstract: This study seeks to examine the theological thought of Imam al-Bukhari in his work, *Khalq Af'al al-'Ibād*, amidst the escalation of theological conflicts in the 3rd century AH. The primary focus of this study is to map out the *Ithbāt bilā Kayf* methodology advocated by al-Bukhārī as a response to the *Ta'ṭīl* (denial of attributes) doctrine of the Jahmiyyah and the threat of anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*). This study employs a qualitative method through a descriptive-analytical approach and the technique of content analysis (*content analysis*). This study found that al-Bukhārī constructs a precise theological argument by distinguishing between the actions of servants (*af'al al-'ibād*) as created beings and the Qur'an as *Kalamullāh*, which is not created. The results of the study indicate that al-Bukhārī systematically organised the traditions of the Salaf to affirm the attributes of Allah, including the attributes of *Istiwa'*, Knowledge, and Voice (*Ṣawt*), without engaging in anthropomorphism. This study concludes that al-Bukhārī's theological framework constitutes a model of "Textual Kalam" which forms the foundation of moderate Sunni orthodoxy (*wasatīyyah*), successfully harmonising submission to the text of revelation with the recognition of the reality of creation.

Keywords: Imām al-Bukhārī, Khalq Af'al al-Ibād, Ithbāt bilā Kayf, Athari Theology, Anti-Jahmiyyah.

Abstrak: Studi ini berupaya menelaah pemikiran teologis Imām al-Bukhārī dalam karyanya, *Khalq Af'al al-'Ibād*, di tengah eskalasi konflik teologis abad ke-3 Hijriah. Fokus utama studi ini adalah memetakan manhaj *Ithbāt bilā Kayf* yang diusung al-Bukhārī sebagai respons terhadap doktrin *Ta'ṭīl* (peniadaan sifat) dari kaum Jahmiyyah dan ancaman antropomorfisme (*tashbīh*). Studi ini menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui pendekatan deskriptif-analitis dan teknik analisis konten (*content analysis*). Studi ini menemukan bahwa al-Bukhārī membangun argumen teologis yang presisi dengan membedakan antara perbuatan hamba (*af'al al-'ibād*) sebagai makhluk dan Al-Qur'an sebagai *Kalamullāh* yang bukan makhluk. Hasil studi menunjukkan

bahwa al-Bukhārī secara sistematis mengorganisir riwayat salaf untuk menegaskan sifat-sifat Allah, termasuk sifat Istiwa', Ilmu, dan Suara (Ṣawt), tanpa melakukan penyerupaan fisik. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa konstruksi teologi al-Bukhārī merupakan model “Kalam Tekstual” yang menjadi fondasi ortodoksi Sunni moderat (wasatīyyah), yang berhasil mengharmonikan antara ketundukan pada teks wahyu dan pengakuan terhadap realitas penciptaan.

Kata kunci: Imām al-Bukhārī, Khalq Af'āl al-Ibād, Ithbāt bilā Kayf, Athari Theology, Anti-Jahmiyyah.

1. Introduction

The 3rd century AH was a crucial phase in the intellectual history of Islam, during which theological discourse underwent a sharp escalation due to the clash between revealed texts and rational dialectics. This period was marked by the emergence of various schools of thought seeking to define the nature of God, a development spurred by the movement to translate Greek philosophy into Arabic. As noted by Marshall Hodgson in *The Venture of Islam*, this tension was not merely an academic debate, but touched upon the foundations of political and religious authority (Hodgson, 1974). The Mu'tazilah group, which had once enjoyed the support of Islamic authorities during the era Di tengah pergolakan tersebut, muncul gerakan yang diidentifikasi oleh para ulama hadis sebagai Jahmiyyah, yang dinisbatkan kepada Jahm bin Safwān (696-745 M). Kelompok ini mengusung doktrin *Ta'tīl*, yaitu peniadaan sifat-sifat antropomorfik Allah guna menjaga kemurnian tauhid dari penyerupaan dengan makhluk. Namun, bagi kaum Athariyyah, tindakan ini dianggap sebagai upaya sistematis untuk “meniadakan” keberadaan Tuhan itu sendiri dengan mencabut atribut-atribut-Nya yang telah ditegaskan dalam Al-Qur'an. Watt menjelaskan bahwa ketakutan Jahmiyyah terhadap penyerupaan (*tashbīh*) membawa mereka pada kesimpulan ekstrem yang menafikan sifat bicara, penglihatan, dan keberadaan Allah di atas 'Arsy (Watt, 1973), yang kemudian memicu reaksi keras dari para pembela tradisi nubuwwah.

This conflict reached its peak during the *Mihnah*, a state-sanctioned inquisition that enforced the doctrine that the Qur'an is a created being (*khalq al-Qur'ān*). The caliphate institution during the reign of Caliph Al-Ma'mūn (786–833 CE) established Mu'tazilite theology as the official ideology, forcing

the scholars to submit to the logic that the Word of God is temporal. Melchert (1997) highlights that this event marked a turning point at which hadith scholars had to formulate more sophisticated arguments to defend their beliefs. It was within this context that Imām al-Bukhārī (810–870 CE) lived and engaged with a repressive intellectual reality, in which every theological statement regarding the nature of *kalamullāh* carried grave legal and social consequences for the spiritual safety of its proponents.

Although widely recognised as a hadith scholar through *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Imām al-Bukhārī's theological position within this discourse is highly complex and is often misunderstood. He stands at the crossroads between the defence of strict Athariyyah doctrine and a more nuanced methodological approach. The urgency of this study lies in the need to clarify al-Bukhārī's position, which is frequently caught between accusations from various quarters, both from rationalist groups and from within the hadith scholars' own circles. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, in this regard, describes how the sharpness of al-Bukhārī's thought demonstrates that he possessed a theological depth that went beyond mere collection of narrations (Al-'Asqalānī, 1379 H), whilst maintaining his total commitment to the authority of revelation.

One of the crucial turning points in Imām al-Bukhārī's intellectual journey was the accusation of *Lafziyyah* levelled against him by some contemporary scholars, such as Muḥammad bin Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī (776–857 AH). This accusation claimed that al-Bukhārī believed that human utterances regarding the Qur'an were created beings, a position which at the time was considered to potentially lead to the belief that the Qur'an itself was entirely created. Ignaz Goldziher noted that this debate reflected just how sensitive theological terminology was at that time (Goldziher, 1981). Al-Bukhārī had to navigate his arguments with great care so as not to fall into *Tashbīh* whilst avoiding *Ta'tīl*, an intellectual manoeuvre which he ultimately set out systematically in the book *Khalq Af'al al-'Ibād*.

Studies on Imām al-Bukhārī generally focus on his contributions to hadith criticism and fiqh, whilst his theological dimension is often overlooked. Several scholars, such as Nūruddīn 'Itr, have discussed his hadith methodology extensively; however, in-depth analysis of *Khalq Af'al al-'Ibād* as a theological manifesto remains very limited. In the Western world, the work of Jonathan

Brown, for example, tends to highlight the process of canonisation. Studi ini menawarkan orisinalitas dengan melakukan telaah langsung terhadap teks *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* menggunakan perspektif teologi *Ithbāt bilā Kayf*. Berbeda dengan riset sebelumnya yang bersifat biografis, studi ini membedah bagaimana al-Bukhārī secara metodologis membedah perbedaan antara perbuatan hamba yang diciptakan dan sifat-sifat Tuhan yang abadi. Imām al-Dhahabī (1274–1348 CE) in *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, for example, states that this work is key to understanding why al-Bukhārī emphasised the distinction between the subject who reads and the object being read (Al-Dhahabī, 1985).

The principle of *Ithbāt bilā Kayf* (affirmation without inquiring as to how) is (Al-Dhahabī, 1985).

The principle of *Ithbāt bilā Kayf* (affirmation without inquiring into the manner) is at the heart of the theology espoused by Imām al-Bukhārī. This approach demands full acceptance of all the attributes of Allah as revealed in divine revelation, without likening Him to His creation (*tashbīh*) and without denying their meaning (*ta'tīl*). Harry Austryn Wolfson explains that this approach constitutes an epistemological strategy for addressing the limitations of human reason in comprehending the essence of God (Wolfson, 1976). Al-Bukhārī, in this book, affirms that God speaks and dwells upon the 'Arsh in a real sense, yet the nature of all this lies beyond the capacity of human imagination; consequently, he rejects all forms of crude anthropomorphism (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H).

The primary objective of this study is to comprehensively map out Imam al-Bukhari's theological methodology within the broader discourse of kalām. This study aims to demonstrate that al-Bukhari did not merely follow tradition blindly, but rather constructed a robust argument to refute the denial of divine attributes by the Jahmiyyah. In this regard, the author will specifically analyse the narrative structure in *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād*, one of Imām al-Bukhārī's (1420 AH), which demonstrates how he emphasised that human actions are created, yet the *kalamullāh* they recite is *qadīm*. This aligns with George Makdisi's view regarding the role of hadith scholars in preserving the identity of orthodoxy through the integration of textual tradition and linguistic analysis (Makdisi, 1990).

This study aims to re-establish the position of the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* as a theological faction possessing a valid theological methodology. Often, kalam discourse is regarded as the exclusive domain of the Mu'tazilah or Ash'ariyyah, whereas figures such as al-Bukhārī have laid the foundations for a robust Ash'ari theology. Through an analysis of this work, it is hoped that a new understanding will emerge: that defending the attributes of Allah does not entail falling into the trap of anthropomorphism, but rather constitutes a form of epistemological obedience. As emphasised in the introduction to the *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* in the *taḥqīq* edition by Fahd al-Fuhaid, this work stands as the last bastion of Salafi creed, remaining relevant for study within the context of modern religious scholarship (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H).

This study is a qualitative library research study. Its primary focus is to explore theological thought through written texts that possess historical and religious authority. According to the terminology developed by Western scholars such as John W. Creswell (2014), such studies rely on documents as the primary source of data to capture the essence of past intellectual phenomena. In the context of Islamic studies, this approach aims to delve into the *turāth* to uncover the original intellectual constructs of a figure. Consequently, all arguments presented in this article are based on an in-depth literature review of works relevant to the discourse on *khalq af'āl al-ibād*.

The approach adopted is descriptive-analytical, whereby the researcher not only presents Imām al-Bukhārī's statements verbatim, but also conducts a critical analysis of their background and theological implications. Watt emphasises that understanding classical theological texts requires an analysis of the hidden intentions behind the terminology used to respond to interlocutors (Watt, 1973). Through this approach, the author endeavours to accurately describe al-Bukhārī's arguments in defending the doctrine of *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, and then to analyse how this position formed a unique methodology that distinguished it from the *Mu'tazilah* and *Mushabbihah* factions in the 3rd century AH.

The primary source of data in this research is the book *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād wa al-Radd 'alā al-Jahmiyyah wa Aṣḥāb al-Ta'tīl* by Imām al-Bukhārī. This book is a crucial document that records al-Bukhārī's theological dialectic regarding the nature of human actions and the status of the Qur'an as

kalamullāh. As noted by Fuat Sezgin in *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (Brill), this work represents an early phase of systematic writing in the field of creed by hadith scholars (Sezgin, 1967). The use of this manuscript is of great importance as it contains direct quotations from al-Bukhārī's teachers and reports from the Companions, which form the basis for the legitimacy of the *Ithbāt bilā Kayf* methodology he advocated in the face of the wave of extreme rationalism.

To strengthen the analysis, this study utilises secondary data sources in the form of other credible supporting literature. Furthermore, this research also draws upon modern scholarly works such as *The Canonization of al-Bukhari and Muslim* by Jonathan Brown (2007) and Fuat Sezgin (1967) in *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, to understand the context of the reception of al-Bukhārī's thought within the intellectual history of Islam. This integration of primary and secondary texts ensures that the resulting analysis remains within the appropriate historical framework whilst possessing strong academic relevance in contemporary Islamic studies.

The data analysis technique employed is content analysis of the narrative accounts and logical arguments constructed by al-Bukhārī. The researcher categorised the arguments in the text, distinguishing between text-based arguments (*naqlī*) and simple rational arguments (*'aqlī*) used to refute the Jahmiyyah. Krippendorff (2004) explains that this technique enables the researcher to draw valid inferences from a text to the context of its use. Using this technique, the researcher can deconstruct al-Bukhārī's thought to identify patterns of consistency in his establishment of God's attributes (*ithbāt*) without becoming entangled in attempts to define their modalities (*kayfiyyah*).

2. Results and Discussion

The author's reading and analysis of the book *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* by Imam al-Bukhari reveals several key points, which can be summarised as follows:

Instructions Theological Imam al-Bukhari in the Book of the Creation of the Deeds of Servants

The book *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* was compiled by Imām al-Bukhārī with a structure that combines the tradition of hadith narration (*riwāyah*) and a framework of theological argumentation (*dirāyah*). He begins this book with a

chapter specifically highlighting the deviations of the *Mu'atṭilah*—a term for those who deny the attributes of Allah—in order to establish the contextual urgency of the discourse under discussion. According to Fuat Sezgin in *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, this structure reflects a methodological transition from the purely thematic collection of hadiths towards a more systematic and apologetic genre of theological writing (Sezgin, 1967). Al-Bukhārī organised his text in such a way as to ensure that every theological claim he put forward was supported by a valid chain of transmission, creating a robust dialectic between the text and the context of the age.

The internal structure of this book is divided into several highly functional sub-chapters, ranging from the demonstration that human actions are the work of a Creator, to the affirmation of the nature of the Word of God. Al-Bukhārī compiled hundreds of narrations from the Companions down to the *itba'* and *tābi'īn* not merely as a supplement, but as the building blocks of an authoritative theological legitimacy. Brown (2007) emphasises that al-Bukhārī employed a 'narrative consensus' framework to demonstrate that the Jahmiyyah doctrine constituted a historical anomaly severed from the early Islamic intellectual tradition. When al-Bukhārī cited prominent figures across regions such as Ibn 'Abbās (619–687 CE) (Mecca) and Sufyān al-Thawrī (716–778 CE) (Kufa), al-Bukhārī can in fact be seen as constructing a map of thought that places his theological opponents in an epistemologically marginal position.

Towards the end of his systematic treatise, al-Bukhārī inserts a direct refutation of the arguments of the Jahmiyyah using a more analytical approach, demonstrating his profound understanding of the science of *kalām* without resorting to unfamiliar terms from Greek philosophy. He constructs his arguments step by step, beginning with the affirmation of God's transcendent attributes (*al-ṣifāt al-khabariyyah*) and moving on to technical issues concerning *Lafz* (the recitation of the Qur'an). Melchert (1997) emphasises that the systematics proposed by al-Bukhārī in this work represent a form of "traditionalist rationalism" that was highly advanced for its time, wherein the structure of the hadith tradition was employed to limit the scope for excessive rational speculation. It is this systematic structure that makes

Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād a primary reference distinguishing between the temporal actions of human subjects and the eternal nature of God's speech.

Al-Bukhārī's use of traditions (*athar*) in this book serves as a means of verifying the truth of transgenerational beliefs. He systematically compiled the opinions of scholars from various regions Mecca, Medina, Kufa, and Basra to form a theological consensus (*ijmā'*) against the doctrine of *Ta'tīl* (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Melchert (1997) explains that for the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* group, the continuous historical narrative is the supreme authority that transcends pure rational speculation. Al-Bukhārī positioned himself not as the originator of new thought, but as the guardian of the purity of tradition, organically and methodically linking the text of revelation with the religious practices of the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*).

In the book *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād*, al-Bukhārī establishes a very specific theological boundary by stating that the Essence of God and His Attributes are not created, but that everything that exists apart from God is His creation. He clarifies that whilst the Qur'an is the Speech of Allah, which is not a created being, all forms of human interaction with it—including sounds (*aswāt*), movements (*harakāt*), writing (*kitābah*), and the actions of servants—are created beings. This serves to distinguish between what constitutes the eternal attributes of the Creator and what is of a temporal nature from the perspective of creation; thus, he affirmed that the deeds of servants are created, in accordance with the consensus of the earlier scholars.

This narrative is further developed by including the argument that Allah is the Creator of every creator and of what they create (*Allāha yasna'u kulla sāni'in wa san'atahu*). Al-Bukhārī refers to verses of the Qur'an to demonstrate that Allah creates both human beings and their deeds, so that human actions cannot be regarded as existing independently of Allah's creative power. Within this framework, al-Bukhārī systematically refutes the views of the Jahmiyyah and adherents of *ta'tīl* by establishing that everything other than Allah is a creation, yet maintaining the sanctity of Allah's attributes so that they are not likened to the attributes of His creation (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Sezgin (1967) observes that this distinction is crucial in refuting the accusation that traditionalists fall into the doctrine of incarnation or likening. Al-Bukhārī emphatically states that although humans act in a real sense, the reality of the

existence of such actions lies entirely under the rububiyyah of Allah, the All-Creator.

Al-Bukhārī emphasises that everything in the universe, including human capabilities (*al-kays*) and weaknesses (*al-'ajz*), occurs entirely by the decree (*qadar*) of Allah. In this regard, Al-Bukhārī quotes a hadith of the Prophet to explain that Allah is the Creator of every creator and of the work produced by their hands (*Allāha yasna'u kulla sāni'in wa san'atahu*). Al-Bukhārī, for example, cites several narrations which affirm that human characteristics are not exempt from Allah's decree. One narration from Ibn 'Abbās states: "Weakness and ability are part of destiny (*al-'ajz wa al-kaysu min al-qadar*).” He also quotes a hadith of the Prophet ﷺ via the chain of Ibn 'Umar: "Everything occurs by divine decree, to the extent that weakness and ability (are also predestined) (*كُلُّ شَيْءٍ بِقَدَرٍ حَتَّى الْعُجْزُ وَالْكَيْسُ*) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). This argument is used to refute the Qadariyyah sect, who separate human actions from God's power, for in truth there is not a single work or action of a servant that lies outside the scope of Allah's creation and absolute will.

On the other hand, al-Bukhārī also sought to avoid the extremism of the Jabariyyah by continuing to acknowledge the servant's active role in every action. Al-Bukhārī explains that humans still possess movements (*harakāt*), sounds (*aswāt*), and actions (*af'āl*) that are attributed to them as agents. Al-Bukhārī refers to the principle that every human being is facilitated (*muyassar*) to perform what has been created for them, which indicates that humans do not move like lifeless objects without will. Thus, al-Bukhārī establishes a moderate position, namely that humans are the agents of actual actions, yet the power and creation of those actions remain solely with Allah (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). This construction demonstrates that, in Bukhari's theology, God's sovereignty does not negate human moral responsibility, but rather serves as the primary foundation for the reality of every action that occurs in the universe (Al-'Asqalānī, 1379 H).

The discourse on Kalāmullāh forms the core of the debate in this book, in which al-Bukhārī affirms the attribute of speech (*takallum*) of Allah as an eternal attribute inherent in His Essence. Al-Bukhārī asserts that the Qur'an is the Speech of Allah and not a created being (*laysa bi-makhlūq*), a fundamental principle which he derived from the consensus of the early

scholars (salaf). Al-Bukhārī strongly refuted the Jahmiyyah sect and the adherents of ta'tīl who claimed that Allah does not speak (Inna Allāha lā yatakallamu) or regarded His Speech as something created outside of His Essence. According to al-Bukhārī, if one claims that the Word of Allah is a created being, then consequently the names of Allah such as Ar-Rahmān and Ar-Rahīm (which form part of the Qur'an) must also be regarded as created beings, a view considered a form of disbelief for ascribing temporal attributes to the Creator (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). In the words of al-Bukhārī: Whoever says: 'The Qur'an is a created being,' has claimed that Allah is a created being; Allah says: (In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) Verily, Allah is not a created being, nor is the Most Gracious a created being, nor is the Most Merciful a created being. (Whoever says that the Qur'an is a created being has claimed that Allah is a created being. Allah says: (In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful). Therefore, Allah cannot be a created being, nor can the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful be created beings.)

Furthermore, al-Bukhārī emphasises that the attribute of speech (takallum) is an attribute inherent in the Essence of Allah, as evidenced by the fact that Allah spoke directly to the Prophet Moses. He presents a logical argument that everything in the universe was created through His command, namely "Kun" (Be). Therefore, the Word that serves as the means of creation cannot itself be a created being (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Al-Bukhārī, for example, quotes a rebuttal against the group who deny that Allah spoke to Prophet Moses: "Whoever believes that Allah did not speak to Moses must be asked to repent; if he repents (it is accepted), and if not, he is punished (for his disbelief) (مَنْ زَعَمَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَمْ يَكَلِّمْ مُوسَى فَإِنَّهُ يُسْتَنْابُ، فَإِنْ تَابَ وَإِلَّا فَجِيلٌ)" (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H).

This debate, therefore, aims to purify the doctrine of tawhid by establishing that the Word of God is an eternal attribute originating from Him, whilst the human voice or writing used to convey that Word is only classified as a created entity. Wolfson (1976) notes in this context that al-Bukhārī was very meticulous in distinguishing between al-matlū (that which is recited, namely the Word of God) and al-tilāwah (the act of recitation by humans). For al-Bukhārī, the Qur'an is the Word of God in every sense, yet the physical activity of humans in reciting it is part of the temporal acts of creatures—a distinction that spares him from the pitfall of the innovation *khalq al-Qur'ān*.

In addition to the attribute of speech (*takallum*), al-Bukhārī also devotes a significant portion of his discussion to the attribute of *istiwa'* in relation to Allah. / a1> This discussion appears to be intended to affirm the attribute of *Istiwa'* of Allah upon the 'Arsh as an antithesis to the Jahmiyyah doctrine, which holds that Allah is omnipresent in His essence. In this regard, al-Bukhārī cites narrations stating that Allah is distinct from His creation (*bā'inun min khalqihī*) and is above the seventh heaven (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Al-Bukhārī, for instance, quotes the statement of Ibn al-Mubārak: "We do not say, as the Jahmiyyah do, that He (Allah) is here on earth, but rather that He is established upon the Throne" (We do not say, as the Jahmiyyah have said, that He is on the earth here, but rather He has established Himself upon the Throne). Furthermore, when Ibn al-Mubārak was asked how we recognise our Lord, he replied: "Above His heavens, upon His Throne" (فوق سمواته على عرشه) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 AH).

Al-Bukhārī, when explaining how Allah is in the heavens and separate from His creation, for example, narrated a report from Sulaymān al-Taymī who stated: "If I were asked, 'Where is Allah?', I would answer, 'In the heavens'" (لو سئلت أين الله؟ لقلت: في السماء). He also quotes the words of Ibn Mas'ūd regarding the verse 'Then He established Himself' upon the 'Arsh': 'The 'Arsh is upon the water, and Allah is upon the 'Arsh, and He knows what you do' (العرش على الماء، والله فوق العرش، وهو يعلم ما أنتم عليه) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Watt (1973) explains that this affirmation of a transcendent location is not intended to confine Allah spatially, but rather to preserve the majesty of God's Essence from being conflated with creation. Al-Bukhārī's approach here is *ithbāt* (affirmation) in accordance with the text of revelation without engaging in *takyīf* (inquiring about form) or *tamthīl* (likening to physical objects).

In this book, al-Bukhārī also emphasises that Allah's knowledge is an eternal attribute inseparable from His essence, encompassing everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen. He refutes the extreme view that Allah only becomes aware of His servants' actions after they have taken place. Al-Bukhārī, for instance, quotes Sufyān al-Thawrī's explanation of the verse "He is with you wherever you may be" to affirm that what is meant is His eternal knowledge encompassing all things: "Ma'dān said: I asked al-Thawrī about the verse: {And He is with you wherever you may be}. He replied: (What

is meant is) His knowledge (سَأَلْتُ النَّوْرِيَّ: (وَهُوَ مَعَكُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ} قَالَ: عَلِمَهُ) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H).

Al-Bukhārī uses a verse from the Qur'an (Surah Al-Mulk) to refute the notion that Allah's knowledge of His creatures' actions is in doubt: "Allah has warned regarding the words of His creatures. He says: 'Whether you conceal your words or utter them, verily He is All-Knowing of what is in the hearts. Does He who created not know (what you conceal); and He is the Subtle, the All-Aware?' (أَلَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ خَلَقَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Al-Dhahabī (1985) explains in this regard that al-Bukhārī regarded the denial of the eternal nature of Allah's knowledge as a form of disbelief, as it diminishes the perfection of God. In other words, the acknowledgement of a servant's actions as those of a created being must be accompanied by the belief that Allah has known and decreed those actions within His infinite knowledge.

Al-Bukhārī boldly includes a narration stating that Allah speaks with a voice (*ṣawt*) that is heard by His servants, such as on the Day of Judgement or to the Prophet Moses. Al-Bukhārī explains that the voice of Allah possesses a unique quality that does not resemble the voices of created beings, as its volume is not diminished by distance. He states: "That Allah, the Almighty and Exalted, calls out with a voice (*ṣawt*) that is heard by those far away just as it is heard by those near, and this is not possessed by anyone other than Allah... for the voice of a creature is heard by those who are near but not by those who are far (وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ يُنَادِي بِصَوْتٍ يَسْمَعُهُ مَنْ بَعُدَ كَمَا يَسْمَعُهُ مَنْ قَرِبَ. فَلَيْسَ هَذَا لِغَيْرِ اللَّهِ...) (لِأَنَّ صَوْتِ الْمَخْلُوقِينَ يَسْمَعُهُ مَنْ قَرِبَ وَلَا يَسْمَعُهُ مَنْ بَعُدَ)." Al-Bukhārī also narrated a report concerning the sound of Allah's Word when it descends as revelation, likened to the clinking of chains upon a rock: "When Allah decrees a matter in the heavens, the angels strike their wings in submission to His Word, as though (the sound) were like chains upon a smooth rock... They asked: 'What has your Lord decreed?' They replied: 'The Truth, and He is the Most High, the Most Great' (When Allah decrees a matter in the heavens, the angels strike their ...wings in submission to His Word, as though it were a chain upon a smooth rock They said, 'What has your Lord said?' They said, 'The Truth, and He is the Most 'High, the Most Great) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H).

The question of God's 'voice' has been a long-standing point of debate in classical theological discourse, particularly because rationalists regard sound as

a characteristic of creatures that require physical organs. However, al-Bukhārī adhered to the principle of *Ithbāt bilā Kayf*, which entails affirming the existence of a voice as mentioned in authentic hadith without equating it with the voice of a creature (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Makdisi (1990) demonstrates that this approach, evident in al-Bukhārī's theological stance, constitutes a form of total adherence to the text (*scripturalism*) which is a hallmark of the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* movement in its opposition to philosophical abstraction.

Al-Bukhārī's theological framework as a whole centres on the method of affirming attributes (*ithbāt*) without falling into anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*). He argues that the distinction between the attributes of the Creator and those of creation lies in the essence of their being, not in the terminology used. This book serves as evidence that al-Bukhārī rejected the extremes of the *Mu'aṭṭilah*, who denied attributes out of fear of *tashbīh*, as well as the *Mushabbihah*, who imagined God in a corporeal form. The theological framework in *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* laid the foundations for the future structure of Sunni orthodoxy (Ash'arism, Maturidism, and Atharism). Although technical differences arose later, al-Bukhārī's principle regarding the Qur'an as the Word of God—which is not a created being—remains the defining line separating Sunni Islam from innovation. Goldziher (1981) himself acknowledged that al-Bukhārī's firmness in distinguishing between human actions and the attributes of God was a wise move that saved the hadith tradition from intellectual extinction due to political pressure. This book is not merely a refutation, but a theological roadmap for every seeker of doctrinal purity based on revelation.

Theological and Methodological Arguments of Imām al-Bukhārī

A close reading of the text *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* reveals that Imam al-Bukhari positions his work as a radical antithesis to the doctrines of the Jahmiyyah and the followers of *Ta'tīl* (*Mu'aṭṭilah*). He identifies that the fundamental error of this group lies in the denial of Allah's attributes under the pretext of preserving the purity of tawhid. Al-Bukhārī, for instance, quotes the words of Wahb ibn Jarir to demonstrate that the core of the Jahmiyyah's doctrine is the negation of Allah's attributes which He has established: “The Jahmiyyah are heretics, they merely seek to claim that He has not established Himself upon the Throne” (The Jahmiyyah are heretics; indeed, they merely seek to claim that Allah has not established Himself upon the Throne) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Watt (1973)

asserts that the Jahmiyyah movement sought to abolish the attributes of speech and sight in God, as these were deemed to resemble the attributes of created beings. Al-Bukhārī refutes this by asserting that denying the attributes established by Allah in the Qur'an is, in fact, a form of denial of the very essence of His existence (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H).

Al-Bukhārī frequently used the term *Zindīq* to refer to extreme ideologies that sought to undermine the authority of revelation through deviant rational interpretation. In the author's reading, he cites various hadiths that equate the views of the Jahmiyyah with unbelief, as they are deemed to empty the concept of divinity of meaning (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Therefore, al-Bukhārī radically rejects the claim that this group are defenders of tawhid; on the contrary, he labels them as practitioners of *Ta'tīl* (denial of divine attributes) and *zindīqs*: "These are not the people of tawhid, these are the zindīqs" (They are not the people of tawhid, but rather the zindīqs) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 AH). Melchert (1997) also notes that the use of the label *Zindīq* in the 3rd century AH was a response to the threat of dualism or thought deemed to undermine the orthodox order from within. For al-Bukhārī, this group was not merely holding a different opinion, but had departed from the consensus of the early Muslim community regarding the understanding of the Essence of Allah (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H).

The main findings in this book indicate that al-Bukhārī relies on Qur'anic verses that affirm Allah's functional attributes, such as the attribute of speech (*al-takallum*) and the attribute of dwelling (*al-istiwā'*). He consistently uses *muḥkamāt* verses to refute the arguments of the Jahmiyyah. Al-Bukhārī, for example, quotes an argument from Hammād bin Zayd stating that the attempt to deny attributes (*Ta'tīl*) leads to the conclusion that God does not exist: "إِنَّمَا 'There is no god in the heavens'، 'يَخْلُقُونَ أَنْ يَقُولُوا:" (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Wolfson (1976) notes in this regard that al-Bukhārī's methodology is to let the text speak for itself without subjecting it to the filters of philosophical dialectics. By emphasising the argument that Allah spoke to Moses directly, al-Bukhārī refutes the claim that the Word of Allah is a created being separate from His essence (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H).

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An examination of this manuscript also reveals al-Bukhārī's affirmation that Allah speaks with a voice (*ṣawt*) (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). This finding is supported by the authentic hadiths he cites, which describe Allah calling His servants on the Day of Judgement. Although this is considered controversial by the Mu'tazilah, al-Bukhārī remains consistent with the principle of *Ithbāt*. Al-Dhahabī (1985) explains in this regard that al-Bukhārī ascribes the attribute of sound to Allah without imagining a physical organ, as Allah's voice does not resemble that of any creature.

This finding confirms that al-Bukhārī was one of the pioneers in the development of the 'Textual Kalam' method for the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* group. This method differs from speculative *Kalam* in that its primary focus is the codification of creed based on hadith, yet it is structured using defensive-analytical argumentation. Sezgin (1967) observed that al-Bukhārī's work marked a new era in which traditionalists began to employ systematic writing to defend their doctrines against external intellectual attacks. This demonstrates that the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* possessed intellectual capabilities on a par with their opponents in dialectical discourse.

Throughout the book, al-Bukhārī demonstrates remarkable consistency in the principle of the transcendence of God (*tanzīh*) through the verse "There is nothing like unto Him." However, for al-Bukhārī, this transcendence does not imply the negation of attributes. He establishes the attributes of Allah's face, hands, and knowledge as true realities whose meaning is known but whose nature (*kayf*) is left to Allah (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). Goldziher (1981) notes that this position constitutes a very strong middle ground strategy to avoid the pitfalls of religious materialism. Thus, al-Bukhārī's arguments and methodology in *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* have proven to be the foundation for the formation of a moderate Sunni identity. He succeeded in delineating the boundaries between the Creator and the created without compromising the perfection of God's attributes. The *Ithbāt bilā Kayf* methodology found in this

text remains the gold standard in orthodox Islamic theological discourse to this day.

Discussions regarding the findings in *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* indicate that Imam al-Bukhārī succeeded in establishing a robust theological synthesis between two extremes. On the one hand, he rejected *Ta'tīl* (the negation of divine attributes) advocated by the Jahmiyyah, and on the other, he avoided *Tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) which equates Allah with His creation. The *Ithbāt bilā Kayf* methodology employed by al-Bukhārī constitutes an “epistemological middle way” that acknowledges the limitations of human reason in defining the modality (*kayfiyyah*) of God’s essence (Wolfson, 1976). Through a theological construction that establishes attributes without providing physical descriptions, al-Bukhārī (1420 AH) is essentially preserving the sanctity of God’s transcendence without having to disregard the literal nature of revelation.

One of the crucial points in this discussion is how al-Bukhārī reconciles the omnipotence of Allah with the reality of human actions. Although he asserts that human actions are created (*makhlūq*), he does not subscribe to the doctrine of fatalism (Jabariyyah). Al-Bukhārī holds that Allah creates the capacity and will within human beings, so that humans remain agents (*fā'il*) who are morally responsible (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 H). This position reflects an early attempt to explain the concept of *kasb* (acquisition), which was later developed more systematically by the Ash'ariyyah school within formal kalam discourse (Watt, 1973).

The controversy surrounding *Lafz* (the wording of the Qur'an) faced by al-Bukhārī demonstrates his keen ability to distinguish between the ‘means’ and the ‘end’. In theological discussions, he emphasised that the Qur'an in the Lauh Mahfuz, the one that is recited, and the one that is written, is *Kalamullāh* which is uncreated. However, the spoken voice and the ink on paper are created material elements. Melchert (1997) argues that this distinction is vital for safeguarding orthodox doctrine against attacks by rationalists who employ materialistic analogies to prove that the Qur'an is a created being. This distinction demonstrates that al-Bukhārī possessed a highly precise logical framework in engaging with the dialectics of Islamic theology.

Although al-Bukhārī identifies attributes such as *Yad* (Hand) and *Wajh* (Face), the discussion in this book demonstrates that he was far removed from anthropomorphism. He always included the principle *Laisa Kamithlihi Shay'un* to put an end to speculation. Makdisi (1990) explains that for the *Ahl al-Hadīth* such as al-Bukhārī, using the same terms for God and His creatures does not imply that they share the same essence. These attributes are understood as attributes of perfection whose meaning derives from revelation, not from human biological imagination. This is a form of *Tanzīh* (purification) carried out through textual means, not through rational negation.

Al-Bukhārī's assertion that Allah has a voice (*ṣawt*) became a point of contention that set him apart from the speculative theological school, which tended to regard God's speech as *Kalam Nafsī* (inner speech without a voice). Al-Bukhārī argues that denying the existence of a voice would negate the very nature of communication between God and His Prophet, as mentioned in the authentic hadiths. Al-Bukhārī believed that God's voice is not akin to the vibration of air or the vocal organs of creatures (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 AH; Al-'Asqalānī, 1379 AH). This discussion demonstrates his consistency in prioritising narrative authority over excessive philosophical concerns.

The discussion regarding *Istiwa'* and the existence of God above the heavens in al-Bukhārī's thought serves to emphasise the ontological boundary between the Creator and the created. By establishing that God is above the 'Arsh, al-Bukhārī rejects the notion of pantheism or the inclusion of God's Essence within the universe (*immanence*). Therefore, Goldziher argues that for traditionalists, this concept of spatial transcendence is the easiest way to explain God's majesty to the laity without getting bogged down in confusing abstractions (Goldziher, 1981). This reinforces al-Bukhārī's position in safeguarding the integrity of doctrine from the influence of exoteric thought that blurs the boundaries of creation.

Al-Bukhārī regards Allah's knowledge as an attribute that encompasses every act of His servants before that act comes into being (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 AH). In this discussion, God's knowledge functions not merely as information, but as the foundation for the inscription of destiny in Al-Lauh al-Mahfuz. Al-Bukhārī maintains that anyone who denies the eternity of God's knowledge has, in fact, undermined the very concept of divinity itself (Al-Bukhārī, 1420

H). This focus on God's knowledge aims to provide assurance that although the servant's actions are a new creation, they remain within the absolute control and eternal plan of God.

A discussion of al-Bukhārī's methodology reveals that he regarded *athar* (narratives from the Companions) as the primary instrument for theological verification. For al-Bukhārī, theological truth must have a historical trace that can be accounted for through the chain of transmission. Brown (2007) notes that for al-Bukhārī, a rational argument not supported by the tradition of the salaf was regarded as a dangerous innovation. This indicates that al-Bukhārī's theology is grounded in sacred historical data, rather than in speculative abstractions that often change with the passage of time. Al-Bukhārī's assertion that Allah has a voice (*ṣawt*) became a point of contention that set him apart from the speculative theological school, which tended to regard God's speech as *Kalam Nafsi* (inner speech without a voice). Al-Bukhārī argues that denying the existence of a voice would negate the very nature of communication between God and His Prophet, as mentioned in the authentic hadiths. Al-Bukhārī believed that God's voice is not akin to the vibration of air or the vocal organs of creatures (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 AH; Al-'Asqalānī, 1379 AH). This discussion demonstrates his consistency in prioritising narrative authority over excessive philosophical concerns.

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From the perspective of this discussion, al-Bukhārī’s rejection of the *Mu’attilah* was based on the concern that the denial of divine attributes would lead the faithful towards deism or even covert atheism. If Allah does not speak, does not see, and possesses no attributes, then the connection between the Creator and creation would be severed. As emphasised by Sezgin (1967), al-Bukhārī’s struggle in *Khalq Af’āl al-’Ibād* is a struggle to uphold the “Living God” and the “God who interacts” with His servants. This is a defence of the essence of religion as a means of communication between humanity and its God.

Al-Bukhārī did not become entangled in the complex debate over whether the attributes are identical to the Essence or distinct from it a discussion that was particularly prevalent among the *Mu’tazilah*. He simply established that the attributes of Allah are qualities that properly exist within His Essence. Makdisi (1990) refers to this approach as ‘theological functionalism’, whereby al-Bukhārī focuses more on what Allah reveals about Himself rather than attempting to dissect the metaphysical structure of God in a more subtle manner. This approach has proven to be more stable and resistant to logical criticism than overly speculative theological models.

Discussions regarding the impact of this book demonstrate that al-Bukhārī’s thought served as a prototype for the creed held by the majority of Muslims. The principles he established became a reference for subsequent

scholars such as al-Lalika'i, al-Sabuni, and Ibn Taymiyyah in formulating the standards of orthodoxy. Fahd al-Fuhaid asserts that this book provides legitimacy to the notion that hadith scholars possess a comprehensive theological system and are not merely blind textualists (Al-Bukhārī, 1420 AH). This book succeeded in transforming the hadith movement into an intellectual force capable of engaging in dialectical discourse on the grand stage of Islamic thought.

An analysis of al-Bukhārī's work (1420 AH) reveals that his theological framework in *Khalq Af'al al-'Ibād* strikes a balance between submission to revelation and recognition of the reality of creation. He successfully demonstrates that human actions, being temporal, serve as evidence of the majesty of Allah's creation, whilst Allah's eternal attributes remain untouched by the limitations of His creatures. As noted by both classical and modern scholars, al-Bukhārī's contribution here lies not merely in the preservation of hadith, but in safeguarding the rationality of Islamic creed so that it remains on the clear path of *Wasatīyyah* (Goldziher, 1981).

3. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Imam al-Bukhari's theological framework in the work *Khalq Af'al al-'Ibād* is a manifestation of the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* methodology, which places revelation as the supreme authority above rational speculation. Through a methodology combining the transmission of traditions (*riwāyah*) and in-depth analysis (*dirāyah*), al-Bukhārī successfully demonstrated that the Jahmiyyah doctrine concerning *Ta'tīl* (the negation of attributes) is a historical anomaly with no roots in the tradition of the Companions and *tābi'īn*. The core of his thought lies in the principle of *Ithbāt bilā Kayf*, namely affirming the attributes of Allah as set out in the sacred texts without falling into the trap of anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) or the negation of meaning (*ta'tīl*), thereby preserving the purity of tawhid between transcendence and faith.

One of al-Bukhārī's greatest intellectual contributions is his precise distinction between the actions of the servant, which are of a created nature, and the attributes of the Word of God, which are *qadīm*. By articulating the distinction between *al-tilāwah* (the act of reading) and *al-matlū* (that which is read), he was able to navigate the repressive *Khalq al-Qur'ān* controversy of his time. This finding confirms that, for al-Bukhārī, the temporal reality of

human actions in no way negates the eternity of God's attributes. This perspective offers a theological solution that allows believers to affirm God's active involvement in history without equating His essence with the material elements of His creation.

Furthermore, an analysis of this work reveals that al-Bukhārī was a sophisticated textual theologian who used hadith data as the basis for his analytical arguments. His assertions regarding specific attributes such as *ṣawt* (voice), *istiwa'* (abiding), and *ilmu* of the eternal God demonstrate consistency in upholding the 'Speaking God' and the 'Living God'. This methodology rejects philosophical abstractions that tend to distance God from an interactive relationship with His creatures. Thus, this book is not merely a refutation of the Jahmiyyah group, but a manifesto on how reason must submit to the parameters of revelation in order to attain a correct understanding of the divine essence.

The book *Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād* laid the foundations for the structure of moderate Sunni orthodoxy (*wasatīyyah*). Al-Bukhārī's theological thought has proven to be a bridge connecting textual literalism with a depth of theological meaning that transcends time. The relevance of his thought remains strong in modern religious studies, particularly as a primary reference for understanding the evolution of early Islamic creed. Al-Bukhārī's success in articulating the relationship between the Creator and creation without compromising the perfection of Allah's attributes makes him not only an imam in the field of hadith, but also a mainstay in safeguarding the integrity of orthodox Islamic creed against various forms of intellectual deviation.

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