Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, who died in the 241st year of the Muslim calendar, 855 according to the Christian one, is probably one of the most famous Muslims in history. Thanks to him, many came to believe that the only right religion was the one practiced at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad. To keep their community together in this world and gain salvation in the next, Muslims needed to live as the Prophet and his Companions had lived: to eat what they ate, wear what they wore, buy and sell only as they had done. “Is there anything I’m doing wrong?” one of Ibn Ḥanbal’s wives asked him a few days after they were married. “No,” he answered, “except that those sandals you’re wearing didn’t exist at the time of the Prophet” (62.7).

To live as the first Muslims had lived, it was necessary to know as much as possible about them. Reports of their words and deeds were repeated by one believer to another, along with the names of those who had passed these reports on. By Ibn Ḥanbal’s time, a proper report—called a Hadith—was expected to include a list of names beginning with the speaker’s source and ending with the person who had seen the Prophet or a Companion doing or saying whatever it was that one wished to know. After Ibn Ḥanbal was arrested during the Abbasid Inquisition, a well-wisher counseled him by citing the following Hadith:

We heard al-Layth ibn Saʿd report, citing Muḥammad ibn ʿAjlān, citing Abū l-Zannād, citing al-Aʿraj, citing Abū Hurayrah, that the Prophet, God bless and keep him, said: “If any ask you to disobey God, heed him not” (68.4).

What if a seeker could find no Hadith report about a particular question? In that case he might apply his own reasoning to the problem. Yet the scope for undisciplined individual effort was small and growing smaller. In Ibn Ḥanbal’s time, most Muslims no longer believed that they could simply judge as they thought best. For many, it was necessary to take into consideration all related Qurʾanic verses and Hadith reports, and then—using an increasingly complex system of legal reasoning—come up with a rule that seemed best to approximate God’s will. Yet Ibn Ḥanbal himself could not accept this approach. For one thing, the solution was to learn more Hadith reports, in the hope that one or another report would supply the information one needed. In practice, this solution placed great
demands on the learner. The people who happened to know a particular report might be living anywhere in the lands settled by Muslims, and it was necessary to seek them out. On his return from a Hadith-gathering mission to the town of Kufa, Ibn Ḥanbal was accosted by a friend who reproached him for overdoing it:

“Today it’s Kufa; tomorrow it’ll be Basra again! How much longer can you keep this up? You’ve already copied thirty thousand reports! Isn’t that enough?”

[Ahmad] said nothing.

“What if you reach sixty thousand?”

He was still silent.

“A hundred thousand?”

“At that point,” he replied, “a man might claim to know something” (4.20).

Another problem was keeping track of what one was learning. Premodern societies are often described as oral cultures, and premodern people as having extraordinary abilities to memorize vast amounts of material, but not everyone found rote learning easy. Ibn Ḥanbal’s older contemporary al-Shāfiʿī reportedly ingested frankincense to strengthen his memory, to the point that he suffered internal bleeding. Ibn Ḥanbal himself insisted that one write down the Hadiths one learned (13.9). He is described as carrying his notes—organized by topic—into the mosque to teach (26.2) and rummaging through piles of papers to find the report he wanted (26.1).

Even if one learned many Hadith reports, one’s task had only begun. Simply knowing many reports was not enough: it was also necessary to live in accordance with the teachings they contained. For Ibn Ḥanbal, this meant denying oneself the luxuries the Prophet scorned, or had never seen, including chairs and silver vessels (53.3). It was, furthermore, necessary to avoid objects and activities that might have been acceptable in themselves but which were tainted by association with something forbidden or merely suspicious. For example, Ibn Ḥanbal had no way of knowing whether the taxes collected by the government were fairly levied and properly spent. He therefore refused to eat anything offered to him during his visits to the palace, whether as a prisoner or a guest (69.13, 69.25, 73.19–21). He also refused to eat bread or gourds baked in an oven that belonged to his son Ṣāliḥ, who had accepted a gift from the caliph (49.13, 49.20). This horror of ritual pollution was called waraʿ, which seems to have no precise English translation; it is often called “scrupulousness” or “scrupulosity.” In practice, waraʿ meant renouncing luxury, and Baghdad—a famously wealthy and self-indulgent place at the time—had many luxuries to offer. Unlike some
of his associates, Ibn Ḥanbal did not believe in interfering with the pleasures of others. Yet he refused to partake in them himself. Instead, he spent his days in a shabby room, sometimes wondering whether keeping a few coins wrapped in a rag was wrong because it implied doubt that God would provide for him (35.7, 41.17, 79.6).

For Ibn Ḥanbal’s contemporaries, this spectacle was an especially moving one because his austerity was a matter of choice. To judge by their names, many of his fellow Hadith scholars were descendants of mawālī, that is, of non-Arabs who had adopted Islam. Their fathers were traders and craftsmen, with names such as “the leather-worker,” “the draper,” “the maker of vinegar,” and so on. Ibn Ḥanbal, by contrast, was an Arab: he belonged to the people who had given the world the Prophet Muḥammad and the language of the Revelation. Moreover, his family was a prominent one that had helped to bring the Abbasid regime to power. His grandfather had served as governor of Sarakhs, a town that now lies on the border between Turkmenistan and Iran (1.7). Presumably, Ibn Ḥanbal could have used his family connections to obtain a government job (3.5–7). Instead, he chose to seek Hadith. Admittedly, he did accept one of the benefits of inherited wealth: a number of rental properties that supplied enough income to support him and his family (40.1). But he is also described as giving his tenants breaks on their rent on the slightest pretext (42.1). When prices were high, he seems not to have collected rent at all, living instead from the sale of cloth woven by his wife Umm Ṣāliḥ (44.6).

With the benefit of hindsight, we see that Ibn Ḥanbal played a formative role in the movement later called Sunnism. For his followers, being a Muslim meant taking the practice (sunnah) of the Prophet, along with the Qurʾan, as the basis for living one’s life. It meant looking to Hadith—and not, for example, to the words of a living religious guide—as the source of right practice. It meant accepting the succession of caliphs after Muḥammad rather than claiming, as the Shiʿa did, that ʿAlī was the worthiest of the Prophet’s Companions. Finally, it meant rejecting speculation in matters of religion and refusing to discuss matters not spelled out in the Qurʾan or the Hadith.

Ironically, however, Ibn Ḥanbal seems hardly to have been laid to rest before his followers felt compelled to defend their position using the weapons of their adversaries, including theological disputation. Even while he was alive, a rapprochement had begun to take place between Hadith-minded Muslims and the Abbasid regime, which had tried to impose its own top-down, Shiʿa-style
right guidance on the mass of believers. And Ibn Ḥanbal’s associates had already begun collecting the reports and opinions that would become fundamental texts for those who wished to follow his lead in matters of law (which included belief and ritual as well as the areas covered by Western legal systems). From all this activity emerged the so-called Ḥanbalī legal school, of which Ibn Ḥanbal was not the founder, but certainly the inspiration, or at least the figurehead. By taking a stand against Shiʿism, rationalism, and theological speculation, Ibn Ḥanbal helped articulate the positions now held, at least nominally, by the majority of the Muslims now living on the planet.

For someone who does not share Ibn Ḥanbal’s view of the world, his positions may seem stifling, if not frankly repressive. Moreover, the adoration his followers felt for him can seem cloying. Indeed, many of today’s Muslims—including the editor of two prior Arabic editions of this biography—take pains to condemn the cult of sanctity to which Ibn Ḥanbal was subjected. According to the reports in this book, Ibn Ḥanbal could cure nosebleeds (61.2) and drive ants from his house by uttering a prayer (61.1). On the battlefront against the Byzantines, soldiers would pray for his well-being so that God would guide their shots to their targets (19.1). After his death, a light spread from his grave to all the tombs nearby (95.1), and droves of dead men appeared in dreams to say that they had seen him in the Garden (that is, in Paradise) (93.14, 93.16ff.). It is not clear how much of this was actually believed in Ibn Ḥanbal’s own time, but he certainly seems to have been the object of more attention than he wanted. “I wish for something I’ll never have,” he is supposed to have said, “a place with no one in it at all” (54.4).

For many modern readers, it is this element that vindicates Ibn Ḥanbal, at least as a subject of biography. If he is a saint (to use what is, strictly speaking, an inappropriate Christian term), he is one who finds his own sainthood exasperating. Unlike the ethereal creatures of hagiography, Ibn Ḥanbal is not only a man of God but also a husband, a father, and a landlord—possibly the only saintly landlord in world literature. Instead of wrestling with demons, he struggles with the problems of daily life: where to find the money for a cupping (49.18), whether his daughter should be allowed to put clips in her hair (65.9), whether the law permits him to keep butter when the grocer sends it wrapped in leaves of chard (49.24). And, no matter how harsh the choices he eventually makes, he remains convinced that his efforts are never good enough. On one occasion, asked how he was, he launched into a tirade: “How can a man be,” he answered, “with his
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Lord imposing obligations, his Prophet demanding that he follow the *sunnah*, his two angels waiting for good deeds, his soul clamoring for what it wants, the Devil goading him to lust, the Angel of Death seeking his life, and his family asking for money?* (56.6). It is this human frailty, finally, that heightens the effect of the most dramatic episodes in this biography—his imprisonment, trial, and flogging at the hands of the Abbasid Inquisition.

Ibn Ḥanbal did not believe in speculating about matters of religion. For him, if the first Muslims had not addressed a particular question of faith or practice, it was wrong to discuss it. The Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (d. 218/833), on the other hand, not only embraced speculation, he believed himself the best-qualified person to engage in it, and furthermore that his subjects were obliged to accept whatever he might decide. To test the point, the caliph decided to take a position on a problem that could only be decided by the use of reason. That problem was the createdness of the Qurʾan. Al-Maʾmūn’s position was that God had created everything, including the Qurʾan. To claim instead, as many Hadith-men did, that the Word of God was part of Him and therefore eternal too was in effect to be a Christian, or so the caliph insisted. But Ibn Ḥanbal was not one to be persuaded by mere argument. Asked to affirm that the Qurʾan is created, he refused to do so unless his interrogators could give him a verse from the Book itself or a statement by the Prophet saying this was so (69.7ff.).

As Ibn Ḥanbal doubtless knew, to rely on Qurʾan and Hadith alone was to deny the caliph any special interpretive authority. Predictably, al-Maʾmūn threatened to kill Ibn Ḥanbal if he did not recant. What happened next is best read as it is told in the biography; what matters for the purpose of introduction is that the account depicts him as poignantly human and afraid. “I don’t care if they keep me in prison,” he is supposed to have told his friends. “My house is already a prison. And I don’t care if they kill me by the sword. The only thing I’m afraid of is being flogged: I’m afraid I won’t be able to take it” (68.1). Even readers who have little sympathy for his beliefs will, I hope, be able to admire Ibn Ḥanbal—or at least, his literary counterpart—for practicing principled nonviolent resistance to coercive state authority.

In the introduction to his wonderfully informative life of Ibn Ḥanbal, Christopher Melchert explains why he wrote a new biography instead of translating an old one. A medieval biography, he writes, “inevitably presents a medieval point of view”: [rest of the text continues]
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A full time scholar has had the chance to develop a taste for such literature, but most readers would find it grotesque. For example, one chapter of Ibn al-Jawzi’s biography is simply a list of the more than four hundred persons from whom Ahmad collected Hadith. A proper analysis would easily exceed the limits of a normal biography….I doubt it would interest any but specialists.

Moreover, says Melchert, the translation of a premodern work would be too long. For example, al-Dhahabi’s life of Ibn Ḥanbal “would require a good 60,000 [words] and Ibn al-Jawzi’s over 150,000.”

The latter work is the one edited and translated here: the Virtues of the Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal by the Baghdadi Hadith scholar, jurist, historian, biographer, and preacher Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200). Melchert’s estimate of length is remarkably accurate: the present translation of Ibn al-Jawzi’s text comes to about 173,500 words. He is also quite right about the long lists of names. And he does not even mention the chains of transmitters. Like collections of Hadith reports, Arabic chronicles and biographies generally cite their sources by listing all the individuals who transmitted the original account of the event in question. As a Hadith scholar writing about another Hadith scholar, Ibn al-Jawzī seems to have been especially careful to cite all his sources. The result is a book approximately half of which is taken up with isnāds, as the lists of sources are called.

Faced with this mass of material, one might well be tempted to do a partial translation: one that drops the lists of Ibn Ḥanbal’s teachers and students and omits the isnāds that introduce each bit of text. In the present case, however, no such solution was possible. As a matter of principle, the Library of Arabic Literature publishes only full-text translations. In this instance, the wisdom of this policy has been borne out. For Ibn Ḥanbal, the purpose of life was to collect Hadith, and the isnād represented the best hope of learning what one needed to know in order to attain salvation. To drop the lists of people he studied with and taught, or to cut out the chains of transmitters, would be almost willfully perverse: it would represent the very antithesis of everything Ibn Ḥanbal lived for.

At the same time, it is certainly too much to expect readers to plow through this mass of detail. Fortunately, Ibn al-Jawzī seems to have anticipated the problem. For a premodern Arabic book, this one is conspicuously user-friendly: each of the one hundred chapters is listed at the beginning of the work. This unusual feature—a table of contents—allows readers to dodge the chapters that consist of lists and other less-than-stimulating material. I can thus recommend, without unbecoming disrespect to Ibn al-Jawzī, that readers who are not researching
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early Baghdad Hadith-networks skip chapters 5, 11, and 12; that readers not interested in later Ḥanbalī creedal statements skip chapter 20; and that readers who prefer things to keep moving skip, in addition to these, chapters 2, 13, 14, 90, and 100. All readers, furthermore, may take the fact that the isnāds are in smaller print as an invitation to skip them too (though reading them, as Julia Bray has pointed out, can have the very pleasant effect of a litany). With judicious skipping, even a book as big as this should become a manageable read.

Leaving aside the matter of length, this book was not particularly difficult to translate. Unlike some of the other works published in this series, it is not a collection of arguments about a once-burning issue, a guide for specialists in a technical field, or a monument to verbal cleverness. It is a book by and about people who believed in simple truths expressed in simple language—even if some of that simplicity has been lost to us with the passage of time. In a sense, the difficult parts were also the most enjoyable to work on. These include the references to daily life and material culture: everything from “a dried-whey stew full of meat and chard” (38.11) to the galoshes a Turkish general wears as he splashes his way through the mud to Ibn Ḥanbal’s door (73.41). The book is a trove of information on the physical and social world of the third/ninth century, and I hope some readers, at least, will mine its riches.

What I most wish I could have reproduced is the voices. Ibn Ḥanbal’s life is told as a series of reports, each narrated by an eyewitness, or by Ibn Ḥanbal himself. If the words on the page really are transcriptions of speech, each report should represent a distinct voice. In practice, though, there does not seem to be much variation in register, possibly because reports originally narrated in informal Arabic, and perhaps even other languages, have been put into literary Arabic of a more or less uniform kind by one or another of the transmitters (see, e.g., 38.10). Beyond the voices of the eyewitnesses, we also have the voices of all the people they quote. These include everyone from caliphs, judges, and jailors to doctors, grocers, and bandits. Unusually, if all too briefly, we also hear the voices of women (e.g., 61.7) and children (65.9). Here again, though, all of these people seem to be speaking the same sort of Arabic, making it difficult to give them distinctive voices in English.

Another problem was names. As in nineteenth-century Russian novels, all of the important characters seem to have several names, and authors seem to use them indiscriminately. In fact (as in Russian novels) there are reasons why
one name might be used rather than another. In Ibn Ḥanbal’s case, those who write about him usually call him Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (“Aḥmad the descendant of Ḥanbal”), or Aḥmad for short. But his friends, associates, and students called him ‘Abū ʿAbd Allāh, “father of ʿAbd Allāh.” This form conveys both intimacy and respect. Unfortunately, it is easily confused with ʿAbd Allāh, the name of Ibn Ḥanbal’s son. Also, Abū ʿAbd Allāh happens to be the form of address for at least two other figures in the book. After much reflection, I decided to call him Ibn Ḥanbal in the introduction and notes, where it was necessary to refer to him as unambiguously as possible, but in the translation to call him Aḥmad wherever it was necessary to convey warmth or admiration. Of course, the names actually used in the original will be visible to anyone who looks at the Arabic.

As for the many other names that appear in the text, I have occasionally glossed those that seem of interest. Glossed names include those that associate the bearer with a well-known place (e.g., al-Baghdādī, meaning “of Baghdād”) or indicate his (or his father’s) profession (e.g., al-Khaffāf, “maker of boots”). Glosses appear at the first appearance of the name only (though the names that appear in the long lists in Chapters 5 and 12 are neither glossed nor counted as first appearances). All isnāds (lists of transmitters) have been translated in full. I have tried to be as consistent as possible in my choice of equivalents for such terms as ḥaddathanā and ḥaddathanā, but I do not necessarily assume that the transmitters always had something specific in mind, and I have not imposed any particular interpretation of the terms in question. I have been sparing in my use of punctuation on the Arabic side, as the original texts do not use it. For clarity, nevertheless, I have followed al-Turkī’s practice of using a colon before direct quotations. Commas on the Arabic side indicate that a break is called for; as in modern Arabic, they are not used according to the strict rules common in English. To keep the text and translation parallel, I have imposed paragraph breaks, usually at places where the Arabic lacks an explicit connector. Finally, many if not all of the policies described above are violated somewhere, either for some overriding contextual reason or through inadvertence. For the latter I ask the reader’s indulgence.

A final and most pleasant duty is to thank everyone who helped make this translation possible. My greatest debt of gratitude is to Dr. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, who has produced two annotated critical editions of this work. In the course of preparing this edition, I have had recourse to several
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manuscripts of the *Virtues*, but found only a few places where I think the best reading may be different from the one Dr. al-Turki has adopted. On every page I have benefited from his careful lists of variants, his vocalizing of unusual names, and his explanatory notes and references. I have also been impressed with his scholarly integrity and self-restraint, as proven—among other things—by his inclusion of reports that advocate positions he disagrees with.

A full account of the manuscript tradition appears in the note on the text. I am very grateful to Jeremy Farrell, who obtained a copy of the Dār al-Kutub manuscript and solved the technical problems associated with sending me a digital copy. It is a pleasure to thank Saud Al Sarhan for obtaining a copy of the Zāhirīyyah manuscript from Imam Muḥammad ibn Saʿūd Islamic University, and to thank Bernard Haykel for mailing it to me. I would also like to thank Sinéad Ward and Frances Narkiewicz of the Chester Beatty Library for sending me their manuscript of the *Manāqib*.

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taste the dishes that Ibn Ḥanbal ate (or more usually, did not eat). I thank my friends in Malta, especially Annabel Mallia, David Mallia, Olvin Vella, and the people of Senglea, for showing me that some of Ibn Ḥanbal’s language still survives in the most unexpected of places. I am grateful to my wife, Mahsa Maleki, not only for putting up with my many late nights at the office, but also for her help with the name-lists (which proved that pre-modern people were quite right about the helpfulness of reading aloud). Finally, I am indebted to our general editor, Philip Kennedy, for envisioning a project as ambitious as the Library of Arabic Literature, and for generously allowing me to take part in it.