

The Major Turning Points in the Life of Imam Abu Al-Ḥasan Al-Ash'ari (260 AH – 324 AH)

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Abstract

Imam Abu Al-Ḥasan Al-Ash'ari went through significant intellectual and doctrinal phases throughout his life, each shaped by and responsive to the historical context of his time. While his father was a follower of Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah (Mainstream Sunni Islam) in the Shafi'i school and entrusted his son to prominent Shafi'i scholars, his mother's marriage to a leading Mu'tazili (Rationalist or Isolationists) scholar led Al-Ash'ari to adopt Mu'tazili theology for the first forty years of his life. After a period of deep internal conflict and reflection, torn between the misguidance of Mu'tazilism and the clarity of Sunnism, he eventually emerged as one of the foremost defenders of Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah. Embracing a path of moderation and balance, he authored numerous works refuting Mu'tazili doctrines and other opposing theological views.

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Introduction

This research explores the life of Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ashari, the founder of the Ashari school, focusing on the transformations he underwent through two key stages: his period of adherence to Mu'tazilism and his eventual renunciation of it. These doctrinal shifts are clearly reflected in his evolving theological thought, which sparked significant intellectual and doctrinal debate, later echoed in the Islamic West, where the Ashari school found a prominent stage. It is also important to note the divergence between the founding figure himself—Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ashari—and later Asharite scholars.

The central question this study seeks to address is: *What were the intellectual and theological transformations that Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ashari experienced throughout his life? And how did these transformations shape the development of the Ashari school?*

To gain a deeper understanding of these complex issues, it was necessary to return to the most important primary sources that deal with the life and thought of Imam Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ashari, including modern scholarly studies that have stirred much academic debate. Some works, particularly Ibn Asakir's *Tabyin Kadhīb Al-Muftari*, strongly support the traditional narrative and defend the imam's legacy. Others reject Ibn Asakir's arguments in favor of Al-Ashari, while a third group attempts a balanced reconciliation, avoiding both blind allegiance and outright opposition. A notable example is Jalal Musa, whose critical academic analysis, while rigorous and constructive, does not dismiss the theological methodology introduced by Al-Ashari—one that breathed life and strength into Sunni doctrine, helping to preserve it among the Muslim majority amidst the intellectual and doctrinal threats confronting the faith of the individual believer.

1. Who is Imam Al-Ashari?

A. His Name and Lineage:

According to the book *Al-Tabyin*, his full name is Abu Al-Hasan Ali ibn Isma'il ibn Ishaq ibn Salim ibn Isma'il ibn Abd Allah ibn Musa ibn Bilal ibn Abi Burdah ibn Abi Musa Al-Ashari.² However,

² Ibn Asakir, Abu Al-Qasim Ali ibn Hasan ibn Hibat Allah, *Tafseer Kidhb Al-Muftari fi Ma Nasaba Ila Imam Abu Al-Ḥasan Al-Ash'ari*, edited by Muhammad Zahir Al-Kawthari, Dar Al-Fikr, Damascus, 1399 AH-1979 CE, 2nd ed., p. 34. See: Abdul Qader Muhammad Al-Hussein, *Imam Ahl Al-Haq Abu Al-Ḥasan Al-Ash'ari*, Al-Mashriq for Books, Damascus, 1431 AH-2010 CE, 1st ed., p. 13.

Al-Subki disagreed, attributing his lineage instead to Ibn Mubashshir.³ Yet, Ibn Asakir refutes the authenticity of this attribution, stating that it was a fabrication by Al-Ahwazi, who claimed that Al-Ashari's followers abandoned him due to this alleged lineage—since this “Bishr” was supposedly of Jewish origin. Ibn Asakir strongly condemns this claim, calling it “a lie from its originator and delirious slander filled with false accusations”.⁴

Even if we assume, for argument's sake, that the Jewish lineage were accurate, Al-Ahwazi seems to have forgotten that Islam does not judge based on origin or ancestry, especially if the person in question is a believing and pious Muslim. Many of the Prophet's companions did not have purely Arab origins—such as Bilal the Abyssinian and Salman the Persian—yet Islam embraced and Arabized them. Moreover, Abu Al-Hasan's lineage is clear and firmly linked to the noble Companion Abu Musa Al-Ashari, so where exactly does a Jewish lineage factor in?

As for his descent from Abu Musa Al-Ashari of Yemen, it is well-established and undisputed. Ibn Asakir elaborates on the virtues of the people of Yemen and the gentleness of their character, even citing prophetic traditions that support this. Among them is the hadith in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) discusses the verse:

“Then Allah will bring a people He loves and who love Him” (*Al-Ma'idah* 5:54). The Prophet (peace be upon him) said to Abu Musa Al-Ashari:

“They are your people, O Abu Musa—the people of Yemen.”⁵

The Prophet (peace be upon him) frequently praised Abu Musa Al-Ashari in many hadiths. He said about the Asharites:

“When they ran short of provisions during expeditions, or when food became scarce for their families in Madinah, they would gather what they had in one cloth, then divide it among themselves equally in one vessel. *They are of me, and I am of them.*”⁶

B. His Birth and Upbringing:

Abu Al-Hasan was born in Basra, Iraq, in the year 260 AH, though some sources suggest 270 AH.⁷ The more reliable date, however, is the first. He studied and was raised in Basra, where his

³ Taj Al-Din Abu Nasr Al-Subki, *Tabaqat Al-Shafi'iyyah Al-Kubra*, vol. 3, edited by Mahmoud Muhammad Al-Tanahi and Abdul Fattah Muhammad Al-Hilu, Dar Ihya' Al-Kutub Al-'Arabiyyah, p. 347.

⁴ Al-Subki, *Tabaqat Al-Shafi'iyyah Al-Kubra*, vol. 3, p. 374.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-49.

⁶ Reported by Imam Al-Bukhari in *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 2/880.

⁷ Shams Al-Din Al-Dhahabi, *Tarikh Al-Islam wa Wafayat Al-Mashahir wa Al-A'lam*, vol. 4, edited by Bashar Awwad Ma'ruf, Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, 1424 AH-2003 CE, 1st ed., p. 494. See: Abdul Shafi Muhammad Abdul Latif, *Malamih 'Asr Imam Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari 260 AH-330 AH*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on “Imam Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari,” vol. 1, Dar Al-Quds Al-'Arabi, Cairo, 1431 AH-2010 CE, 1st ed., p. 25.

grandfather Abu Musa had settled in the year 17 AH, appointed as governor by the Caliph Umar ibn Al-Khattab. He came from a family deeply rooted in knowledge and religion—his father was a devout Sunni, committed to the tradition of Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah, and a follower of Hadith-based orthodoxy. Before his death, he entrusted his son to the care of prominent scholars of Hadith and jurisprudence in the Shafi'i school, such as Zakariyya ibn Yahya Al-Saji and Abu Al-'Abbas Ahmad ibn 'Umar ibn Surayj, a leading figure among the Shafi'is. The latter played a key role in opening the doors of critical reasoning and teaching dialectical debate, and was known for his excellence in both fiqh and kalam (theology).⁸

A turning point in Abu Al-Hasan's educational journey came with his mother's marriage to Muhammad Al-Jubba'i, the leader of the Mu'tazilah at that time. As a result, Abu Al-Hasan was raised in Al-Jubba'i's household and studied directly under him. He also studied the jurisprudence of Imam Abu Hanifah, as was common among the Mu'tazilites—most of whom followed the Hanafi school, while some adhered to the Shafi'i.⁹

Later, Abu Al-Hasan moved to Baghdad, where he continued his studies. According to Ibn 'Asakir in his book *Tabyin Kadhib Al-Muftari*,

*"He was from Basra but settled in Baghdad, where he remained until he died in the year 324 AH, according to the most reliable account..."*¹⁰

The author adds that Abu Al-Hasan combined religious nobility with noble lineage, a rank inherited from his ancestor Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari, and passed down through his descendants.¹¹

2. Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari the Mu'tazilite

Muhammad ibn Ishaq, quoting Al-Balkhi, stated that the Mu'tazila were given this name because of a dispute concerning the status of those who committed major sins while still performing prayer. The various theological and political sects differed in how to describe such individuals: the Khawarij considered them *disbelievers and polytheists*; the Murji'ah saw them as *believers and Muslims*, though morally corrupt; the Zaydis and Ibadis deemed them *ungrateful for divine blessings (kuffar ni'ma)* and *immoral*, but not polytheists or believers; while the followers of Al-Hasan Al-Basri labeled them as *hypocrites and sinners*. In response to these conflicting views, the Mu'tazila chose to reject all such positions and adopt a

⁸ Abdul Shafi Muhammad Abdul Latif, *Malamih 'Asr Imam Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari 260 AH-330 AH*, p. 44.

⁹ Abdul Qader Muhammad Al-Hussein, *Imam Ahl Al-Haq Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari*, p. 18.

¹⁰ Ibn Asakir, *Tafseer Kidhb Al-Muftari*, p. 36. See: Abdul Shafi Muhammad Abdul Latif, *Malamih 'Asr Imam Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari 260 AH-330 AH*, p. 63 and beyond.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

middle stance. They agreed with the consensus that such individuals were *immoral (fussaq)*, but refrained from labeling them as *disbelievers, believers, hypocrites, or polytheists*.¹²

It is commonly agreed that the term Mu'tazila originated from Al-Hasan Al-Basri (21 AH – 110 AH), who used it to describe his student Waşil ibn 'Ata' when the latter left his circle in the mosque, setting up his own corner with his followers. Al-Hasan reportedly remarked, "*Waşil has withdrawn from us (i'tazalana Waşil)*," and from that moment, Waşil and his followers came to be known as the Mu'tazila.

Thus, the Mu'tazila emerged as a theological school within Islam, flourishing during the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. They were heavily reliant on pure rationalism in interpreting Islamic doctrine, drawing influence from foreign philosophical currents, which led them away from the orthodoxy of Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah. Various names were attributed to them, including: *Mu'tazila, Qadariyya* (Advocates of Free Will), *'Adliyya* (Advocates of Divine Justice), *Ahl Al-Adl wa Al-Tawhīd* (Advocates of Justice and Divine Unity), *Al-Muqtasida* (The Moderates), and *Al-Wa'idiyya* (those who emphasize divine punishment). Their school was founded on five core principles:¹³

- a) Tawhīd (Divine Unity)
- b) 'Adl (Divine Justice)
- c) Al-Wa'd wa Al-Wa'id (Divine Promise and Threat)
- d) Al-Manzilah bayn Al-Manzilatayn (the Intermediate Position)
- e) Al-Amr bi Al-Ma'ruf wa Al-Nahy 'an Al-Munkar (Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong)

Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari was thoroughly trained in the Mu'tazilite doctrine and methods under Al-Jubba'i, remaining committed to this path until the age of forty. By that time, he had become a master of 'ilm Al-kalam (Islamic speculative theology),¹⁴ so much so that he would often represent Al-Jubba'i in scholarly assemblies and debates whenever his teacher was unable to attend. Through these engagements, Al-Ash'ari deeply immersed himself in Mu'tazilite thought and became a prominent figure within the school.

However, he stood out from others by his sound reasoning and natural disposition, seeking the truth without prejudice. His inner confusion grew steadily, especially when the questions he posed to his teachers during lessons were left unanswered or inadequately addressed. He continued

¹² Muhammad ibn Ishaq Al-Nadim, *Al-Fahrist*, vol. 1, edited by Rida Tajaddud, unpublished, p. 201.

¹³ Abdul Qader Muhammad Al-Hussein, *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁴ Abdul Qader Muhammad Al-Hussein, *Imam Ahl Al-Haq Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari*, p. 33.

this search for truth with great thirst, often praying to Allah **to** guide him to the right path—the one that Allah Himself willed and approved.¹⁵

Some may dispute the claim that he remained a Mu'tazilite for forty full years, but such doubts often overlook that he was raised in a Mu'tazilite household. Thus, if we exclude his early childhood years, the actual period during which he can be accurately described as a Mu'tazilite may be less than forty, though the general consensus of narrators supports the approximate duration.

4. His Renunciation of Mu'tazilism

At the age of forty, a time traditionally associated with intellectual and spiritual maturity, Al-Ash'ari's doubts and questions intensified regarding many theological issues that Mu'tazilism failed to resolve, particularly those he posed to Al-Jubba'i and other Mu'tazilite scholars.¹⁶ He gradually began to adopt a new path of thought and contemplation, eventually seeking to reconcile the deeply divided positions of traditionalist scholars (jurists and hadith scholars) on one side, and the Mu'tazila on the other.

He withdrew from public view for fifteen days, spending time in deep reflection and prayer. Then, on a Friday, he ascended the pulpit of the mosque, announcing the cause of his absence: he had been caught between competing claims of truth and falsehood, unable to find clarity. He proclaimed that through divine grace, he had been guided to abandon Mu'tazilism and return to the fold of Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah.

He then authored several works, including *Al-Luma'* (The Flashes), in which he refuted the Mu'tazila, and another titled *Kashf Al-Asrar wa Hatk Al-Astar* (Unveiling the Secrets and Tearing the Veils), among others.¹⁷ Upon reading these works, the Hadith scholars and jurists of the Sunni tradition embraced his ideas, recognized his scholarly merit, and adopted him as a leading figure—eventually identifying their entire school with his name.

Meanwhile, the Mu'tazila denounced him, slandering him and fabricating lies, likening him to a converted scripture scholar who denounces his former religion. But this backlash did not deter him; on the contrary, it only strengthened his conviction in the truth he had found.¹⁸

Following his return to Sunni orthodoxy, Al-Ash'ari sought knowledge from renowned Sunni scholars and Hadith authorities, including:

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

¹⁶ Ibn Asakir, *Tafseer Kidhb Al-Muftari*, p. 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁸ Abdul Qader Muhammad Al-Hussein, *Ibid.*, p. 35.

- Abu Khalifa Al-Jumahi (d. 305 AH), a respected Hadith scholar. Al-Dhahabi described him as “trustworthy, honest, eloquent, and widely traveled; he lived to be over a hundred years old”.¹⁹
- Ibn Surayj, also known as Abu Al-'Abbas Ahmad ibn 'Umar ibn Surayj Al-Baghdadi (d. 306 AH), a major Shafi'i authority who explained and summarized the school's doctrine. He narrated from students of Al-Shafi'i such as Al-Za'farani, Al-Duri, and Al-Sijistani.²⁰
- Al-Imam Al-Hafiz Zakariyya ibn Yahya Al-Saji (d. 307 AH), a Hadith expert from Basra. Al-Ash'ari learned from him how to articulate the creed of the Hadith scholars and the Salaf, and narrated several Hadiths from him.²¹ Al-Saji had been a guardian to Al-Ash'ari since the death of his father, at which point he had been entrusted to his care. After his Mu'tazilite phase, Al-Ash'ari returned to the influence of such Sunni scholars, with Al-Saji being one of his most prominent early mentors.²²
- Al-Muqri' Muhammad ibn Ya'qub Al-Basri (d. after 330 AH), a Qur'an reciter and scholar who studied under Muhammad ibn Wahb Al-Thaqafi and Abu Al-Za'ra' Abd Al-Rahman ibn 'Abdus, among others. He narrated Hadith from Al-Sijistani and taught students such as Ibn Ashtah and Ibn Khashnam Al-Maliki. He was known for his mastery of the recitation of Ya'qub Al-Hadrami, and was regarded as just, trustworthy, and insightful. Al-Ash'ari heard from him and quoted him in his Qur'anic exegesis.²³

5- Reasons for Al-Ash'ari's Shift from Mu'tazilism:

There are various opinions and many accounts regarding the reasons behind Imam Al-Ash'ari's shift from Mu'tazilism, especially considering that he spent the first part of his life as a Mu'tazili, and was even one of their leading figures. Some of these reasons include:

A- The Vision of the Prophet (PBUH) in a Dream:

In another narration by Imam Al-Ash'ari, he said: "The reason for my return from Mu'tazilism and turning to examine their proofs and expose their corruption was that I saw the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) in my dream... [the vision]."²⁴

¹⁹ Imam Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari, *Risalatul Ila Ahl Al-Thughr*, edited by Abdullah Al-Junaidi, Maktabat Al-Uloom wAl-Hikmah, Madinah, 1422 AH-2002 CE, 2nd ed., p. 83. Also: Shihab Al-Din Abu Al-Falah ibn Al-Imad, *Shadharat Al-Dhahab fi Akhbar Man Dhahab*, vol. 4, edited by Abdul Qader Al-Arna'out, Dar Ibn Kathir, Damascus, Beirut, 1410 AH-1989 CE, 1st ed., p. 27.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 83-84.

²¹ Shams Al-Din Al-Dhahabi, *Tadhkirat Al-Huffaz*, vol. 3, edited by Abdul Rahman ibn Yahya Al-Ma'limi, Da'iratu Al-Ma'arif Al-Uthmaniyyah, 1374 AH-1954 CE, p. 709.

²² Imad Al-Din ibn Kathir, *Tabaqat Al-Shafi'iyyah*, vol. 1, edited by Abdul Hafiz Mansour, Dar Al-Madar Al-Islami, 2002 CE, 1st ed., p. 203.

²³ Ibn Asakir, *Tafseer Kidhb Al-Muftari*, p. 35.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

The narration of the vision has been widely discussed by historians and writers, with some affirming it and defending it, especially Ibn Asakir, followed by Al-Suyuti and Al-Dhahabi. This viewpoint has been adopted by some researchers who did not deny it and considered it a reason for Al-Ash'ari's transformation and change of school of thought. Among them is Hamouda Gharaba, who states: "It is highly likely that the vision was the direct cause of this transformation, but I believe it was a reflection of what Al-Ash'ari felt within himself in terms of psychological and spiritual struggles."²⁵ This view is shared by Ahmad Ajiba, who argues that denying the truthfulness of the dream is unreasonable. Fouqiya Hussein also emphasizes that the vision played a significant role in the transformation, even suggesting it was the sole cause, citing the hadith in which the Prophet (PBUH) said: "Whoever sees me, has seen the truth."²⁶ There are many hadiths regarding righteous dreams, and both ancient and modern scholars have extensively commented on their authenticity.

However, some scholars have denied the vision of Al-Ash'ari seeing the Prophet (PBUH) in a dream, arguing that it is fabricated and a product of imagination. Among these is Jalal Musa, who states: "This long narration – which we have presented here – has been analyzed to show the extent of its fabrication. The one who fabricated this vision specifically chose the month of Ramadan and the Prophet's appearance to the Imam, especially on the Night of Qadr, in order to give the story credibility, as this month and night are considered sacred, making it more likely to be accepted as true."²⁷ Musa seems to engage in a kind of debate with Al-Ash'ari, following his style of opposing the Mu'tazilites, arguing: "It is well-known that Al-Ash'ari opposed the Mu'tazilites' interpretations of verses and feared their approach, but the narrative wants to affirm the vision of Allah. This is a matter that, if allowed by the ear, would be opposed by reason. If the Prophet (PBUH) agreed with his opinion on establishing the vision and permitted it both mentally and spiritually, why did Al-Ash'ari remain silent until the second ten days of Ramadan, only to question him about what he had done and to turn to the books of hadith and Quranic exegesis, which is totally contrary to what we know of Al-Ash'ari's keen interest in the science of theology?" Thus, the author enters into an argument with Al-Ash'ari to disprove the vision.

In addition to Jalal Musa's rejection of the narration, there are others who also reject it, considering it to be a product of imagination. For example, Ali Al-Maghribi states: "Al-Ash'ari's followers, as found in the *Books of Sects and Classes*, weave fabricated stories with the aim of adding

²⁵ Abu Al-Ḥasan Al-Ash'ari, *Maqtu'at Majma' Al-Buḥūth Al-Islamiyyah*, Cairo, 1393 AH-1973 CE, p. 64.

²⁶ *Asbab Tahawul Al-Ash'ari 'an Al-Mu'tazilah*, p. 185.

²⁷ Jalal Muhammad Musa, *Nash'ah Al-Ash'ariyyah wa Tatwurah*, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Lubnani, Beirut, 1982 CE, p. 173.

a sense of sanctity to this transformation, as if it came by divine command and is in accordance with what the religion teaches, initiated by the Prophet (PBUH)."²⁸ However, Muhammad Ramadan Abdullah did not fully accept the position of Al-Ash'ari and his followers. He argues that it is difficult to believe that a belief system that lasted forty years could change overnight because of a vision, stating: "This is not a valid reason for knowing what is true or false."²⁹

Some scholars have not denied the possibility of the vision but question certain details that diminish its credibility. In this regard, Ahmad Sabhi says: "The vision may have some basis, but not in the manner and style presented in the narration."³⁰

B- Al-Ash'ari's Debates with Al-Jubba'i and Others:

There are many issues and dilemmas that Imam Al-Ash'ari faced, for which he did not find answers from his teacher, Al-Jubba'i. This situation led him to doubt and question the Mu'tazili school. Perhaps the event that pushed Imam Al-Ash'ari to oppose them and ultimately shift his stance were the debates with the Mu'tazili scholar, Al-Jubba'i, from whom Al-Ash'ari learned the principles of the Mu'tazili school. Whether it was the debates between Al-Ash'ari and Al-Jubba'i or those between Al-Jubba'i and other theologians, Al-Suyuti narrates in *Al-Tabaqat* an important exchange that took place between the Mu'tazili leader and Al-Ash'ari regarding the issue of the best possible outcome for a servant. He recounts:

Al-Ash'ari said to him: "O Sheikh, what do you say about three: a believer, a disbeliever, and a child?"

Al-Jubba'i responded: "The believer is among the people of high ranks, the disbeliever is among those who are doomed, and the child is among the saved."

Al-Ash'ari then asked: "If the child wanted to rise to the ranks of the believers, would it be possible?"

Al-Jubba'i replied: "No, he would be told that the believer attained this rank through obedience, and you do not have the same."

Al-Ash'ari asked: "What if he said, 'I have not fallen short, and if I were to be revived, I would perform acts of obedience like the believer'?"

²⁸ Ali Abdul Fattah Al-Maghrabi, *Al-Firaq Al-Kalamiyyah Al-Islamiyyah Madkhal wa Dirasah*, Maktabat Wahbah, Cairo, 1415 AH-1995 CE, 2nd ed., p. 269.

²⁹ Muhammad Ramadan Abdullah, *Al-Baqilani wa Ar'uhu Al-Kalamiyyah*, Matba'at Al-'Umah, Baghdad, 1986 CE, p. 87.

³⁰ Ahmed Ajeebah, *Asbab Tahawul Al-Imam Al-Ash'ari 'an Al-Mu'tazilah*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on "Imam Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari," vol. 1, p. 182.

Al-Jubba'i replied: "Allah would say to him: 'I knew that if you had remained, you would have sinned and been punished. Therefore, I took your benefit into account and caused you to die before reaching the age of accountability.'"

Al-Ash'ari responded: "What if the disbeliever said, 'O Lord, You knew his situation as You knew mine. Why did You not consider my benefit, as You did his?'"

At that point, Al-Jubba'i fell silent.³¹

This debate is based on the Mu'tazili belief that it is obligatory for Allah to consider the best interest of the servant, and Al-Ash'ari challenged this principle.

They also narrated another debate in which a man asked Al-Jubba'i: "Is it permissible to call Allah 'wise'?"

Al-Jubba'i responded: "No, because 'wisdom' is derived from 'restraint,' and restraint means prevention, and prevention in the case of Allah is impossible."

Al-Ash'ari said to Al-Jubba'i: "According to your reasoning, Allah Almighty cannot be called 'wise,' because this name is derived from the wisdom of the bridle, which is the metal piece used to restrain the horse (in the mouth of the horse to control its gallop) to prevent it from escaping. This is supported by the poetry of Hassan ibn Thabit:

*(We judge with the verses of poetry when we are insulted,
And we strike when blood is mixed.)*

Meaning, we prevent insults with verses of poetry. Another poet says:

*(O people of Hanifa, restrain your fools,
I fear for you that I may become angry.)*

This means, prevent your fools. Since the word is derived from prevention, and prevention in the case of Allah is impossible, you must refrain from applying the term 'wise' to Him."

Al-Jubba'i found no response to this, so he asked Al-Ash'ari: "What do you say?" Al-Ash'ari replied: "I accept 'wise' but I do not accept 'rational.' The way I derive Allah's names is through legitimate textual evidence, not linguistic analogy. I accept 'wise' because the scripture permits it, and I reject 'rational' because the scripture forbids it. If the scripture had permitted it, I would have accepted it."³²

Thus, these debates and questions that occurred between Al-Ash'ari and his teacher provided the field in which his confusion revolved. At the same time, they gave Al-Ash'ari the justification to

³¹ Al-Subki, *Tabaqat Al-Shafi'iyyah*, vol. 3, p. 356.

³² Al-Subki, *Tabaqat Al-Shafi'iyyah*, vol. 3, p. 358.

take a path different from that of his teacher, even a path completely different from the school of thought he had adhered to for the first forty years of his life. Here, we find that Abdul Rahman Badawi combines both aspects—the vision and the debate—and considers the proof of the vision to be that confusion for which Al-Ash'ari found no answer from his teachers. The vision was, therefore, an inspiration from Allah, a divine guidance to help him resolve this confusion, especially as he had deeply immersed himself in the teachings of the Mu'tazila and reached its pinnacle. He often asked his teachers questions but could not find satisfactory answers.³³

It is striking that in the book *Al-Tabyeen* by Ibn Asakir, who strongly defended Imam Al-Ash'ari, there is a detailed account of the vision, presented as the basis and cause for Al-Ash'ari's shift from the Mu'tazila to Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah. However, he mentions his debate with his Mu'tazilite teacher in just one line, saying: "...and his return during the lifetime of his teacher, Al-Jubba'i, and his debate with him after his clear return."³⁴ This suggests, contrary to other accounts, that this debate occurred after his shift from Mu'tazila, implying that it was not the cause of his return.

This debate is mentioned differently by the Mu'tazilite scholars after Al-Ash'ari. Some mention it in their responses to the Mu'tazila but do not mention its origin, such as Al-Baghdadi, Al-Juwayni, Al-Isfara'ini, Al-Shahrastani, and Al-Ghazali. Others, like Al-Taftazani and Ahd Al-Din Al-Iji, mention it in its original form. Overall, scholars' comments about it vary, and Ahmad Ajeeba summarizes them as follows:

- Some scholars commented on the debate without confirming whether it actually took place.
- Others were skeptical and said that its very mention cast doubt on its authenticity.
- Some argued that it was not the cause of Al-Ash'ari's shift from Mu'tazila.
- Some believed it happened after he had already shifted away from Mu'tazila.³⁵

The one who most strongly rejected all the previous narratives about Al-Ash'ari's shift from Mu'tazila, presenting his scientific explanations according to the requirements of precise academic research and methodology, free from emotion and bias, is Jalaal Musa with his valuable study on the origins and development of Ash'arism. He rejects all the stories narrated by the Ash'ari scholars

³³ Abdul Rahman Badawi, *Madhahib Al-Islamiyyin*, Dar Al-'Ilm lil-Malayin, Beirut, 1997 CE, p. 497.

³⁴ Ibn Asakir, *Tafseer Kidhb Al-Muftari*, p. 40.

³⁵ Ahmed Ajeebah, *Asbab Tahawul Al-Imam Al-Ash'ari 'an Al-Mu'tazilah*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on "Imam Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari," vol. 1, p. 199.

about the reasons for their master, Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari's departure from Mu'tazila and his return to Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-Jama'ah, from the vision story to the debates and the incident of his entering the mosque and publicly announcing his departure from Mu'tazila. All of these, in his view, are fabricated stories meant to undermine the Mu'tazila, especially their leader, Al-Jubba'i. Jalaal Musa offers logical explanations that are more in line with reason and presents alternative causes mentioned by some researchers, especially Ahmad Amin, though these are considered more historical than logical, particularly when he discusses the circumstances Imam Al-Ash'ari was living through. However, Jalaal Musa believes Ahmad Amin, in his view, follows the orientalist, who attribute Al-Ash'ari's shift to his character and his notable skill in argumentation and opposition.³⁶

6- Imam Al-Ash'ari's Adoption of Moderate Thought:

Imam Al-Ash'ari's shift from Mu'tazilism was not as swift as has often been promoted through the story of his fifteen-day absence, followed by his public appearance in the mosque, throwing his books onto the people in which he refuted the Mu'tazila.³⁷ It is illogical, regardless of how eloquent a person may be, to write all those refutations in such a short period, especially since he was addressing a school that had long been distinguished by its use of reason and logic in negating and proving issues that not only involved secondary matters but even foundational ones. Refuting them required significant effort and deep knowledge of the intricacies of their doctrine. Even if Imam Al-Ash'ari had this capability, it would still have required sufficient time. However, the result was that Imam Al-Ash'ari left behind his previous Mu'tazilite beliefs after divine guidance and Allah's grace.³⁸

Some Examples: A- The Creation of the Qur'an:

Imam Al-Ash'ari responded to the Mu'tazila on the issue of the creation of the Qur'an, stating that if they meant the word, recitation, and writing, then this was acceptable. However, to deny Allah's eternal attribute of speech was not permissible.

He also responded to the "Hawashiyya" (literalists) and those who rejected reason in favor of transmission, saying they were correct if by "eternal" they meant the attribute inherent in Allah, but they could not deny the creation of the words and recitation.³⁹

B- The Vision of Allah in the Hereafter:

³⁶ Jalal Muhammad Musa, *Nash'ah Al-Ash'ariyyah wa Tatwurah*, p. 173 and beyond.

³⁷ Ibn Asakir, *Tafseer Kidhb Al-Muftari*, p. 39.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Mustafa Al-'Atas, *'Aqidat Al-Imam Al-Ash'ari Madhhab Al-Sawad Al-A'zam min Al-Muslimin fi Al-Usul*, Dar Al-Usul, Republic of Yemen, 2004 CE, p. 56.

Imam Al-Ash'ari supported the Mu'tazila's position of denying a specific direction and image but argued that they must accept an unknown "how" in reference to the vision of Allah. He also adopted the literalists' view that believers will see Allah without specifying "how," but they should not insist on the image or anything implying change.⁴⁰

C- Reason and Revelation:

The Ash'ari school followed a middle path between the Mu'tazila and the literalists, neither abandoning revelation like the Mu'tazila nor discarding reason like the literalists.⁴¹

The Ash'ari scholars have extensively elaborated on Imam Al-Ash'ari's belief, portraying it as a representation of moderation and balance, free from extremism or laxity. This is further illustrated in some of the issues he addressed, as discussed by Mustafa Al-Attas from the book *Al-Tabyeen* by Ibn Asakir, which compares Ash'ari beliefs to other theological doctrines. He states:

- As for the Mu'tazila and the Jahmiyya, they denied and nullified certain divine attributes, such as knowledge, power, hearing, sight, life, and will.

- The literalists opposed them by affirming Allah's knowledge, hearing, and sight, but they anthropomorphized these attributes as they relate to creatures. Imam Al-Ash'ari followed a middle path by affirming these attributes for the divine essence while maintaining that they were free from any resemblance to the attributes of created beings, for Allah is unique and there is nothing like Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.

- Jahm ibn Safwan believed that humans were incapable of initiating any actions (humans are compelled in their actions).

The Mu'tazila opposed this by claiming that humans have complete freedom to act (humans are free in their actions).⁴²

Imam Al-Ash'ari took a middle position, saying that humans cannot initiate actions but can "acquire" them, rejecting the idea of total causality and affirming the ability to acquire.

- The Najariyya (Najarites) believed that Allah is everywhere without being in a place or direction.

The literalists, on the other hand, defined the direction and place, asserting that the throne was the place of Allah and He is sitting upon it.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴¹ Mustafa Al-'Atas, *Aqidat Al-Imam Al-Ash'ari*, p. 57.

⁴² Mustafa Al-'Atas, *Aqidat Al-Imam Al-Ash'ari*, p. 65.

Imam Al-Ash'ari adopted a middle ground, stating that Allah existed before the creation of place, creating the throne and the chair, and did not need a place, just as He was before the creation of space.

- One of the most well-known views of the Mu'tazila was the issue of the creation of the Qur'an, claiming it was a created, invented entity.⁴³

The literalists held that everything between the two covers of the Qur'an is eternal and uncreated.

Imam Al-Ash'ari stated that the Qur'an is the eternal speech of Allah, unchanging, uncreated, and not invented, while affirming that the letters, sounds, colors, shapes, and all that exists in the world are created.⁴⁴

- The Mu'tazila, Jahmiyya, and Najariyya said that faith is created.

The literalists said that faith is eternal.

Imam Al-Ash'ari, taking a middle path, said that faith consists of two types:

1. Faith in Allah, which is eternal, based on the verse: "The faithful, the guardian."
2. Faith of creation, which is created, as it originates from humans, who are rewarded for their sincerity and punished for their doubt.

Imam Al-Ash'ari, with his new approach that connects reason and revelation without excess or neglect, followed the path of the *Kullabi* school, which was present during the time of the trial (the Mu'tazila and Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal). The *Kullabi* school used reason as a tool to refute the falsehoods of the Mu'tazila and defend the Sunnah. Imam Al-Ash'ari found in the *Kullabi* methodology the ideal way to achieve moderation, especially since scholars were divided into two groups: those who blindly followed transmission (mainly Hanbalis) and those who excessively relied on reason while neglecting transmission. The former were labeled "literalists," and they represented an opposing faction to the Mu'tazila, who excessively relied on reason without revisiting or considering transmission. This led to chaos and division, obscuring the Sunnah in the extremes. Imam Al-Ash'ari introduced a new method to reconcile the different factions, advocating for a balanced approach between defending the divine law and avoiding the excesses of those with corrupted beliefs. He did not bring anything entirely new but rather strengthened the ideas of Imam Al-Shafi'i and the *Kullabi* school, emerging as a pioneer of moderation and balance, as evidenced by his many works in refuting every opposing or negating view.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 66.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion:

Imam Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari went through several intellectual and doctrinal phases in his life, each of which had its own impact on him and was influenced by the circumstances surrounding him. He was born into a family of knowledge and religion, following the Sunni creed, as his father was a follower of this school. When his father passed away, he entrusted his son to some prominent scholars of hadith and jurisprudence who followed the Shafi'i school, including Zakariya ibn Yahya and Ibn Suraij, among others. However, the marriage of his mother to the prominent Mutazilite scholar "Al-Jubai" became a major turning point in Al-Ash'ari's life. Under the guidance of his stepfather, Al-Ash'ari embraced the Mutazilite school of thought and spent his early years immersed in its teachings, becoming a prominent figure within the Mutazilite movement. He even took on the role of representing his teacher in public debates and discussions.

When he reached the age of forty, a profound change occurred, one that shocked the Mutazilites and their scholars. A leading figure among them, who had once been their staunchest defender, became one of their fiercest opponents. Al-Ash'ari, who had once staunchly defended Mutazilite principles, rejected them and began to refute their doctrines, using the same methods of debate and dialectic that he had once employed to support them. This transformation, which saw him abandon Mutazilism and vigorously oppose its ideas, marked another significant phase in his intellectual journey.

The change in Al-Ash'ari's thought, particularly after his shift from Mutazilism to Sunni orthodoxy, was evident in both his approach and style. He rejected the Mutazilite rejection of traditional texts, instead advocating for a balanced approach that integrated reason and revelation to defend the sound faith of the Muslim community. Through this, he established not a new school of thought, but a fresh path that sought to preserve the integrity of the Sunnah from deviation and misguidance, while simultaneously encouraging intellectual engagement and reasoning, in line with the spirit of the Qur'an.

It seems that Al-Ash'ari was influenced by Imam Al-Shafi'i, who was also a pioneer in the science of theology (Ilm Al-Kalam), and who did not reject Kalam (discourse) but rather advocated that it should align with the Qur'an and Sunnah, clarifying the essentials of faith during times of fitnah (trial or crisis). Since Al-Ash'ari was a follower of the Shafi'i school, it is not surprising that he took his Shafi'i mentor as an example to follow.

In terms of the spread of Al-Ash'ari's doctrinal approach, the situation changed over time. While many scholars followed Al-Ash'ari's methodology, some were influenced by the Mutazilite ideas or distanced themselves from them entirely, eventually finding solace in Sufism. This shift led

to changes in some of the ideas and doctrinal preferences, illustrating how thoughts and trends evolve with the changing environment and circumstances, as each individual is a product of their surroundings.

In summary, Imam Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari represents an intellectual figure who underwent profound doctrinal and theological transformations that shaped his life and work. By combining reason and revelation in his defense of Sunni orthodoxy, he emerged as a pioneer in promoting moderation and balance in Islamic thought. His legacy continues to influence the intellectual landscape of Islam, emphasizing the importance of preserving the Sunnah while also encouraging thoughtful reasoning in understanding religious texts.

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