Chapter Title: To Grieve or Not to Grieve? The Ambivalence of Ḥuzn in Early Sufism

Chapter Author(s): Riccardo Paredi

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TO GRIEVE OR NOT TO GRIEVE?
THE AMBIVALENCE OF ḤUZN IN EARLY SUFISM

Riccardo Paredi

The present paper traces the concept of ḥuzn — variably translated as “sadness,” “grief,” “sorrow,” or “affliction” — in the early development of Islamic thought. It begins with an examination of how the term is used in the Quran and the canonical hadith corpus, proceeds through the time period of the early renunciants and proto-Sufi and Sufi authors, and ends with the second half of the fifth/eleventh century. At first glance, the Quranic “do not grieve!” (lā taḥzan) seems to stand in stark contrast to early Sufi teachings on sadness, the latter being a necessary trade (ṣināʿa) of the wayfarer (sālik) and the noblest act of devotion (afḍal al-ʿibāda). The question then arises, what should the believer do? To grieve or not to grieve?

**Huzn, one Emotion among Many**

Huzn, like such similar concepts as khawf, farah, and ghadab, denotes an inward emotional state, and is often mentioned in the Quran and in later Islamic texts. It is not to be confused with its usage in other contexts as a recitational or musical technique, or with its possible external manifestations. Before proceeding, let us clarify what precisely is this inward state. What is huzn? To answer this question, we briefly turn to the field of lexicography and etymology. Confronting what Louis Massignon describes as the multiple degrees of freedom of the Arabic language, we begin here with huzn’s semantic root (ḥ–z–n). The *Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic* records one of the earliest uses of this root (ḥazan, defined as grief—ghamm), in 230 CE (~404 H), in a poem attributed to Salīma b. Mālik b. Fahm al-Azdī. In “classical” lexicographical reference works such al-Furūq al-lughawiyya by Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskari (d. c. 400/1010), *Lisān al-ʿarab* by Ibn Manṣūr (d. 711/1311), and *K. al-Taʿrīfāt* by ʿAli b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), huzn is defined as grief (asaf) dealing with real things and especially what has passed (mā fāta)—i.e., unpleasant events that have happened—or on account of an object of love that has gone away. It is an endurable emotion located in the heart (fuʿād); it is more intense than hamm (often translated as “affliction”) and an intensification (takātuf) of ghamm (also “grief” or “distress”). Finally, a glimpse into other nuances of the semantic root ḥ–z–n might give us further insight: huzn designates “roughness,” denoting a hard

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2. Does huzn correspond to one of the six basic emotional states of humanity suggested by Ekman (i.e., anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise)? See Paul Ekman, *Emotion in the Human Face* (Los Altos, California: Malor Books, 2013). There is no academic agreement upon the definition of our object of study (i.e., emotion, and specifically “grief”) and the history of emotions in Islamic scholarship is still much undeveloped. See the recent contribution to the field by Julia Bray and Helen Blatherwick, eds., “Arabic Emotions: From the Qurʿān to the Popular Epic,” *Cultural History* 8, no. 2 (2019). Here we rely on Bauer’s “tentative working definition of emotion,” which she applies to the Quranic text: “An emotion is a feeling, universal in nature, but which has learned elements that affect its expression, the triggers for it, and the meanings attributed to it. Despite these cognitive elements, an emotion is not the result of a rational process of thinking, and often involves a physiological response. Emotions are a means of social communication, and as such they are related to language and structures of social power.” Karen Bauer, “Emotion in the Qurʿān: An Overview,” *Jurnal of Qurʿānic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017): 1–30.


ground, rugged mountains, a rough spirit or creation—in this case, the opposite of “plain,” “flat,” “smooth” (sahl). As Stephan Guth points out, it is difficult to establish the (causal?) relationship between the sides of this double, two-fold value of the Arabic root of ḥuzn as “rough ground” and “to be(come) sad.” Nevertheless, if ḥuzn originally designated distress caused by a rocky terrain, then Arabic would be the only Semitic language to have preserved this primary value.9

Quranic ḥuzn

Moving on from this etymological prelude and from late lexicographical definitions in “classical” lexicographical references, it is based on the Quranic text that the majority of Islamic concepts like ḥuzn take shape. As Karen Bauer puts it, it is Revelation (waḥy) that moulds a new community of believers through new emotional ties and plots woven into its basic eschatological message.10 The root ḥ–z–n is mentioned forty-two times in the Quran, in three derived forms and thirty-five times in a negative form (lā taḥzan/ū).11 This leads Bauer to conclude that “the main message about grief in the Quran is that one should not grieve, because God relieves grief;”12 taking as an example the stories of Maryam, Yaʿqūb, and Umm Mūsā. On the other hand, the nuanced conclusions of Mahshid Turner’s The Muslim Theology of Huzn shed a more positive light on our emotion.13 Notably, her Izutsian approach14 highlights the strong relational meaning between ḥuzn and khawf (paired seventeen times in the Quran). Thus, Quranic ḥuzn is predominately portrayed as an undesirable emotional state that the believer should obviate. In fact, the true believer should not dwell and cannot actually dwell in it if he possesses faith (īmān), especially in Divine decree (qadar). The Quranic formula “do not grieve,” mainly directed by God to the believer, is indeed prevalent, and God is never explicitly said to give grief, while He is often said to relieve believers of it.15 By contrast, secret conversations (najwā) originating from Satan, grieve the believers (Q 58:10). Surely, as Turner underlines, ḥuzn felt in trials or ḥuzn as a tool for guidance—especially in Prophetic narrations—might lead to positive outcomes. However, Quranic ḥuzn remains ontologically “rough,” undoubtedly linked with loss, being instrumental to higher spiritual achievements.16

14. A method of semantic analysis first utilized by Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993) that approaches the terms and concepts of the Quran as they stand in relation to each other to define the semantic boundaries of these terms through an internal analysis of the text itself. Such analysis aims at mapping out the ethical and ontological worldview of the Quran. See Atif Khalil, Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism (Albany: University of New York Press, 2018), 23 ff.
15. As Lane notes, following the comment of al-Rāghib al-İsfahānī (fl. before 409/1018) in his al-Mufradāt fi gharīb al-Qurʾān, the imperative lā taḥzan/lā taḥzanū does not actually denote a prohibition of becoming sad since sadness does not come by the will of man (ikthiyār). It must be interpreted as: “do not acquire (mā yūrith al-ḥuzn wa-iktisābuhu) sadness.” However, Lane himself notes that this is “not in every case admissible.” Edward William Lane and Stanley Lane-Poole, An Arabic–English Lexicon (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), 562.
**Ḥuzn in Canonical Hadiths**

If ḥuzn has a role in Prophetic narrations as well, how did the Prophet deal with it? Limiting our analysis to the canonical hadith corpus—i.e., *al-kutub al-sitta*—we may safely conclude that the value of ḥuzn as an emotional state does not essentially diverge from the Quranic use: ḥuzn is an exquisitely inner emotional state largely associated with death, satanic inspirations, sins, and hellfire—i.e., the place of ḥuzn ilā ḥuzn. Moreover, hadith sources indicate that ḥuzn is an undesirable emotional state from which the Prophet himself sought refuge. Thus, true believers and friends of God do not grieve. However, a positive connotation of ḥuzn timidly emerges from the hadith corpus: nothing is purposeless or unavailing in God’s creation, and ḥuzn is no exception. Although ontologically negative, it leads to positive outcomes; it strengthens the believer’s patience and it provokes God’s mercy, “purifying” the believer: “A believer is never stricken with ḥuzn unless God will expiate his sins as the leaves of a tree fall.”

### Ḥuzn in zuhd Works from the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th Centuries

Building on this scriptural understanding, we may now proceed to investigate ḥuzn through the vastness of early zuhd literature, an essential transition point between the first/seventh century (the milieu of Revelation) and the development

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17. As done with the Quranic text, we only consider the mentions of the root ḥ - z - n and not any other root denoting grief in the hadith corpus.

18. In the hadith corpus, ḥuzn is definitively portrayed as an internal emotion (felt at the level of the heart) although sometimes this internal grief is externalized, being visible on the face (see, for instance, al-Bukhārī 1299). On this internal/external relationship, Juynboll affirms that “for every point of view expressed in the debate traditions could be adduced, from harsh Prophetic commands to contain oneself to the Prophet openly weeping [. . .] In the final analysis, restraining oneself and keeping grief hidden is the preferred conduct.” G. H. A. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Hadith* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 135.

19. Muhammad shed tears and his heart was grieved for the loss of his son Ibrāhīm (al-Bukhārī 1303) on the deathbed of his companion Sa’d b. ‘Ubaydā (al-Bukhārī 1304) and for the deaths of Zayd b. Ḥāritha, Ja’far b. Abī Tālib and ‘Abd Allāh b. Rawāha (Abū Dāwūd 3116–3122); he also grieved after the death of Wāraqa b. Nafīl, when the Divine Inspiration weakened (al-Bukhārī 4953). Finally, Muhammad’s saddest appearance occurs after the death of the qurrā’ (al-Bukhārī 1300). The Prophet is not the only one to grieve: some hadiths report Anas b. Mālik’s intense grief (shiddat al-ḥuzn) over those who had been killed in the Battle of al-Ḥarra (al-Bukhārī 4906); the companions of the Prophet were overwhelmed with grief and distress on his return from al-Hudaybiyya (Muslim 1760); and Fāṭima’s ḥuzn is also mentioned (Ibn Maja 1689). Generally speaking, ḥuzn is predominantly present in the chapters on funerals (K. al-Janāḥi) of the hadith corpus, but it can also be traced to sections on food, drink, and medicine: for instance, the gruel known as *talbīna* gives comfort to the aggrieved heart and it lessens grief (al-Bukhārī 5417).

20. Muslim 2263.


22. A common narrative on zuhd is presented in variation on the following hadith directly attributed to the Prophet: “O God! I seek refuge in You from affliction (ḥamn) and grief (ḥazn), from incapacity and laziness, from cowardice and miserliness, from being heavily in debt and from being overpowered by (other) men.” See, for instance, al-Nasāʾī 5449.

23. Numerous hadiths evoke the Quranic passages that urge one not to grieve (lā taḥzan/ū): Muhammad comforts Abū Bakr, telling him not to grieve, although pagans were pursuing them; and the believer should not dwell in ḥuzn if God is with Him (al-Bukhārī 3652). Among the lā taḥzan/ū passages, the most quoted is Q 10:62, on the friends of God (awliyāʾ Allāh), followed by Muhammad’s explanation that these awliyāʾ will be envied by prophets and martyrs on the day of the resurrection and they will not grieve when [other] people will grieve” (Abū Dāwūd 3527). This passage receives much attention in ascetic and Sufi literature, both for its subject (the awliyāʾ) and its eschatological value.


of later Sufi doctrines. Our analysis takes into consideration zuhd works of the second/eighth century by ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), Muʿāfa b. ‘Imrān al-Mawsili (d. ca. 185/801 or 204/819) and Waki’ī b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 197/812) as well as works from the third/ninth century by Abū Bakr b. Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), and Hannāb b. al-Sārī b. Muṣ‘ab (d. 243/857). What does this zuhd literature tell us about zuhd?30

First, zuhn is differently represented in these works: some authors reserve an entire chapter or section for it, like Ibn Mubārak’s Bāb al-bukā‘ wa-l-huzn in what is deemed to be the earliest extant zuhd work, the K. al-Zuhd wa-l-raqā‘īq, or like Waki’s al-Huzn wa-faḍluhu in his K. al-Zuhd, while other writers treat it less systematically.

Second, zuhn, as with all other aspects in this literature, should be read in light of the dunyā/ākhirah dichotomy: sadness of/for this world and sadness of/for the hereafter are incompatible (lā ajma‘) and inversely proportional.31 On one hand, this world, with its passions (shahawāt) and its inhabitants, is a source of sorrow.32 Thus, the true believer cannot but be in this world in prolonged grief and reflection33 (we note here the strict relationship between tafakkur and zuhn).34 On the other hand, God may reward zuhn (like Ya‘qūb, whose grief earned him a reward


30. Given the vast bibliography, the treatment of zuhn in zuhd works by itself would require an independent study that could also take into consideration later texts where zuhn is quoted with different intensity. For instance, zuhn is barely quoted in K. al-Zuhd al-kabīr b. Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḫayyā‘ (d. 301/913); in Zuḥhād al-thamāniya mini al-tābi‘in, attributed to ‘Alqama b. Marthad (d. 120/737–738) following Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938) version; and in al-Fawā‘id wa-l-zuhd wa-l-raqā‘īq wa-l-marāthi by Ja‘far al-Khuldi (d. 348/959). On the other hand, it is abundantly quoted in Kitāb fi ma‘na l-zuhd wa-l-maqlūd wa-l-falāt al-zāhidin b. Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḫayyā‘ (d. 340/951) and in K. al-Zuhd al-kabīr by Abū Bakr al-Ḫayyā‘ (d. 340/951) in K. al-Zuhd al-kabīr (Beirut: Dār al-Bāṣā‘ir al-Islāmiyya, 1991). For instance, in Asad b. Mūsā’s (d. 212/827) K. al-Zuhd, in the K. al-Zuhd within the Ṣaḥīh of Muslim (d. 261/875), and in al-Marwūdhi’s (also, al-Marzawi; d. 275/888) al-Wara‘, where zuhn is only reported once, quoting Q 9:40.

31. Zuhn is not omnipresent in all minor zuhd works of the third/ninth century. It is absent, for instance, in Abū Bakr’s K. al-Zuhd, in the K. al-Zuhd within the Ṣaḥīh of Muslim (d. 261/875), and in al-Marwūdhi’s (also, al-Marzawi; d. 275/888) al-Wara‘, where zuhn is only reported once, quoting Q 9:40.


33. For instance, Mālik b. Dīnār (d. around 127/744–5 or 130/747–8) affirms: “As much as you grieve for this world, and as much as you grieve for the hereafter, the concern for this world will leave your heart,” (Ibn Ḥanbal n. 1864).

34. For instance, Abū al-Dārā‘ (d. early 30s/650s?) stresses the detachment from people and from one’s own self to avoid sorrow (Ibn Abī Shayba n. 36647); similar sayings can also be traced in Ibn Ḥanbal (Ibn Ḥanbal n. 713–772) and in Ibn al-Sārī b. Ibn al-Sārī (Ibn al-Sarī n. 599).

35. Remembrance of death (dhikr al-mawt) (Ibn al-Mubārak n. 260–266) is associated with a positive zuhn that does not corrupt the heart, while even a short moment of worldly lust might bring long sorrows (Ibn al-Mubārak n. 286 and 850; Ibn al-Sarī n. 499). Prophets, too, developed this idea. For instance, Muhammad is reported to have said: “Indeed, renunciation in this world relieves the heart and the body. Indeed, desire of/in this world prolongs affliction and sadness,” (Ibn Ḥanbal n. 51), while ʿIṣā, depicted as a sorrowing traveler in such zuhd works, is reported to have commented on Q 10:62, stating that the friends of God grieve instead of rejoicing from what they gain from this world (Ibn Ḥanbal n. 339).

36. Abū Mūsā al-Asʿārī (d. ca. 48/668) affirms that from this world only comes zuhn and fitna. (Ibn al-Jarrāḥ n. 66). Similarly, al-Ḥasan al-ʿAsbārī (d. 110/728) affirms that the believer does not feel anything but sadness in this world (Ibn al-Mubārak n. 123). Al-Hasan himself later states that humble hearts do not grieve because they don’t attach importance to this world nor to its people (Ibn al-Mubārak n. 397).

37. See Ibn Mubārak, n. 209. Also Sufyān al-Thawri (d. 161/778) affirms that reflection (tafakkur) on this world leads to sorrow and that “sadness is to the extent of one’s foresight,”—i.e., on this world (Ibn al-Mubārak n. 128–167).
equal to that of one hundred martyrs) or, at least, He can relieve it (as in the case of Ibrāhīm, whose sorrow for being the only worshipper on earth was relieved). Moreover, ḥuzn has different positive outcomes: it prevents the corruption of the heart (Mālik b. Dinār affirms: “A heart without sorrow is like a ruined house”) and it augments virtuous action (“Affliction and grief augment good deeds while sin and ingratitude augment bad deeds”). In another anecdote, abundance of ḥuzn is something to hope for. In a saying attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās (d. around 68/686–8), sadness caused by trials is equal in virtue to joy brought on by blessings: the first generates patience while the latter engenders gratitude. Thus, in the zuhd literature, ḥuzn can be, at the same time, the best devotion to God or the sign of doubt in one’s faith, a hellish punishment and an increaser of good deeds. Where does this ambiguity come from? It is caused by the direction of ḥuzn—i.e., the ultimate locus of our sadness. Thus, as stated by Ibrāhīm b. Adhām (d. 161/777–8), the same exact emotional state of ḥuzn can be counted for us (lanā) or against us (ʿalaynā), depending on where we want to direct it, on the intentional orientation towards the focus of the emotion.

Third, in regard to the topic of ḥuzn, one cannot ignore the impact of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who later became the most influential prototype of the grieving ascetic, “honoring spiritual sorrow.” He is often described as being of long and constant sorrow (atwal al-ḥuzn). He famously said, “The believer should wake up and retire for the night overtaken by sorrow,” and “God was never better worshiped than by constant sorrow.” Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s teachings have been constantly reported in the vast majority of zuhd works, definitively shaping a more positive perspective on ḥuzn as a major characteristic of the true believer and the best act of worship (afḍal al-ʿibāda). His overwhelming presence may bias our understanding of the importance of ḥuzn for other contemporary zuhhād, causing us to overemphasize the role of this concept in Islamic piety. However, we can safely affirm that

38. Ibn Abī Shayba n. 35293.
40. “A heart (qalb) in which there is no sorrow (ḥuzn) is like a ruined house (bayt kharib),” (Ibn Abī Shayba n. 36684). Similarly, we read in Ibn Hanbal: “A heart without sorrow is like an abandoned house: it will go to ruin,” (Ibn Hanbal n. 1870).
41. Ibn Ḥanbal n. 392, attributed to Ṭāfṣīr b. Ţādīn (d. between 127/745 and 129/747).
42. Ibn Hanbal n. 1757.
43. Ibn Abī Shayba n. 35798.
45. The sorrowful pietism of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī is well known. However, as Suleiman Ali Mourad states, we must consider with caution his sayings, sermons, and anecdotes, bearing in mind the crucial role that the perceived reputation, image, words, and practices of al-Ḥasan played in the later development of Islamic thought (an observation that applies to most of the early ascetic figures that were later incorporated in a predominant Sufi narrative). See Suleiman Ali Mourad, Early Islam Between Myth and History: al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H/728CE) and the Formation of His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship (Leiden: Brill, 2006). For a general overview, see Mun‘im Sirry, “Pious Muslims in the Making: A Closer Look at Narratives of Ascetic Conversion,” Arabica 57 (2010): 437–454.
46. Ibn al-Mubārak n. 278 and 989.
47. Ibn al-Mubārak n. 126.
49. Feryal Salem stresses the hadith traditions on smiling and interacting with a cheerful face as a form of charity towards other fellow believers, reporting four sayings that wish to counterbalance an exaggerated sorrowful portrayal of the early Muslim community. In particular, these sayings would reflect the composure of the Prophet rather than his sadness. Salem, The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunni Scholasticism: ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunni Identity in the Second
sadness is indeed predominant in zuhd works and enjoys more attention, value, and virtue than its opposites—i.e., joy and happiness and their possible external manifestations, laughing and smiling. A renowned saying attributed to the Prophet should suffice: “Indeed, God dislikes joyful people; indeed, God dislikes cheerful people; indeed, God detests all overweight people and He dislikes the people who eat opulent food; indeed, God loves all sorrowful hearts.”

Lastly, ḥuzn in zuhd literature calls for empathy, following the idea that the believer’s emotion should mirror the emotions of other believers.\(^{51}\) Such an idea evokes the important role of shared/sympathetic emotions in forming (religious) communities, an idea that will accompany ḥuzn throughout Sufi sources.\(^{52}\)

Before concluding our investigation of zuhd literature, we add to this variegated corpus the K. al-Hamm wa-l-ḥuzn by the Baghdadi adīb, traditionist, and muṣannif Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894),\(^ {53}\) who chronologically follows the texts analyzed thus far and to whom we owe the most systematic and important collection of sayings (one hundred seventy-nine) on hamm and ḥuzn in the first two centuries and a half of Islam. The work aims to cover every Islamic personality related to or reporting on ḥuzn, from the prophets (Muḥammad—who himself is described as being in constant sorrow and everlasting reflection\(^ {54}\)—Ādam, Yaʿqūb, Dāwūd, ʿĪsā, and Mūsā) up to Ibn Abī al-Dunyā’s contemporaries. Beyond the well-established ḥuzn–farāḥ/dunyā–ākhānah dichotomy,\(^ {55}\) the positive portrayal of sadness and its virtues is clear and well supported both by teachings and living examples\(^ {56}\) (for instance, pious people enduring the sorrow of all creatures—i.e., ḥuzn al-khalaq).\(^ {57}\) It is beneficial for the person who prays;\(^ {58}\) it leads to reflection and self-control.\(^ {59}\)

\(^{50}\) “The Prophet of God was continuously in sorrow, in everlasting reflection, without rest (jald) from the prophets (Muḥammad—who himself is described as being in constant sorrow and everlasting reflection)—Ādam, Yaʿqūb, Dāwūd, ʿĪsā, and Mūsā) up to Ibn Abī al-Dunyā’s contemporaries. Beyond the well-established ḥuzn–farāḥ/dunyā–ākhānah dichotomy, the positive portrayal of sadness and its virtues is not only restricted to joy or cheerfulness, but also contemplates emphatic sadness and communal weeping too (Ibn al-Mubārak n. 662).

\(^{51}\) The number of sayings depicting sorrowful people as models of imitation (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 34, 52, 53, 76, 110, 125–128, 139–147). On the importance of ascetics and proto-Sufis’ ethos as a criterion for recognition, reliability, and influence, see Feryal Salem, The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunni Scholasticism.

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\(^{55}\) On the sorrow of (all) creatures, see Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 41, 43, 132. In his work, we encounter all the previous sayings of the-Hasan al-Ḥajjār and new anecdotes often further exaggerating his sadness (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 21, 22, 35–37, 42, 45, 93, 171, 175).

\(^{56}\) See Arin Shawkat Salamah-Qudsi, Sufism and Early Islamic Piety: Personal and Communal Dynamics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

\(^{57}\) This idea can be traced back to the Prophetic example, where the Prophet is reported to have said: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 2). Thirdly, ‘Āʾisha reports that the Prophet said: “If the sins of the servant increase, he would not talk unless needed, “ (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1). In the second saying, Muḥammad affirms: “Indeed God loves all sorrowful hearts.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 1).
and to proximity with God;\(^6\) and it is propaedeutic both for good deeds (increasing them) and for bad (facilitating forgiveness and regret).\(^6\)

The idea of sadness as an amplifier of good deeds is often expressed by a suggestive metaphor: sorrow as fertilization. An early saying runs: “Prolonged sorrow in this world is fertilization \((tālqīḥ)\) for good deeds.”\(^6\) Similarly, Mālik b. Dinār states: “For everything there is a seed \((lāqāḥ)\), and indeed this sorrow is a seed of good deeds.”\(^6\)

Finally, \(ḥuzn\) represents a primary, cathartic drive: it ripens the \(nafṣ\), polishes the heart, and elevates the believer,\(^6\) as in the words of Bishr b. al-Ḥārith (d. 227/841 or 842): “Sadness is a king that only inhabits a purified heart, and it is the first level \((dārājā)\) of the hereafter.”\(^6\) Being so positive, it is no surprise that a servant like Fuḍayl b. ʿIyāḍ (d. 187/803) is reported to have advised others to actively request it.\(^6\)

\section*{\(ḥuzn\): From Proto-Sufism to Classical Manuals}

In this last section, we explore proto-Sufi and Sufi literature’s treatment of \(ḥuzn\). Fatemeh Lajevardi, in her \textit{Encyclopedia Islamica} entry on \textit{bukāʾ}, affirms that “from the very beginning, Sufi authors, or authors with Sufi inclinations, have always paid particular attention in their writings to the subjects of fear \((khwāf)\), sadness \((ḥuzn)\), and weeping \((bukāʾ)\).”\(^6\) However, while both \(khwāf\) and \(bukāʾ\) have entries in the \textit{Encyclopedia of Islam}, \(ḥuzn\) does not, although it appears in various manuals of Sufism and is the subject of numerous \textit{falsafa} treatises.\(^6\) Indeed, from the

\begin{itemize}
\item [\(6\)] Good deeds: Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 17, 18, 23; bad deeds: Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 28, 30, 81. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā also approaches \(ḥuzn\) “medically”: Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 68–71, 97–101. He also reports sayings on the well-established relationship between \(ḥuzn\) and the recitation of the Quran: Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 87, 137, 151–154. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 167. In later works, this saying is often attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Asbārī. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 33. See also: “Nothing polishes hearts as much as sadness \((ḥuzn)\), nothing enflames them more than the ḍhūr” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 50). Similarly, God reveals to Mūsā that ḥamm and ḡammad clean the heart (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 131). Dreams \((manām)\) play an important role in establishing such virtue (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 38, 40). Eventually, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Awzāʿī (d. 157/774) affirms that sorrowful people reach the second highest degree (of closeness to God? Of devotion?), right behind the first, which pertains to the ʿulumāʾ (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 161).
\item [\(6\)] Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 162.
\item [\(6\)] Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 159. The day Fuḍayl b. ʿIyāḍ died, it was said: “Today sorrow left the Earth,” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 149). Importantly, \(ḥuzn\) cannot be separated from other emotional states or attitudes \((tawba, tālqīḥ, bukāʾ)\) nor from other believers’ emotional states in a sort of common emotional tie. Although \(ḥuzn\) and \(bukāʾ\) are obviously intertwined and often quoted together, it is important to emphasize that this relationship is not unavoidable. \(Bukāʾ\) is certainly the most common externalization of \(ḥuzn\) (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 78). However, as an external phenomenon, it is not easily interpreted and can acquire different meanings and values. Al-Ḥasan differentiates between weeping of the eyes and weeping of the heart, preferring the latter (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 123). Weeping out of sadness is sweet, while weeping out of fear is bitter (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 74). Weeping is said to bring solace and to dissipate \(ḥuzn\) (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 73, 77), although concealing sadness in one’s heart is more important (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 65, 66). Interestingly, we might suggest that sadness, especially when externalized, seems to hold a “community character.” Sufyān b. ʿUyayna (d. 107/725) states: “If a person in this umma who is overcome with sadness weeps, God Almighty will pardon the entire umma because of his tears.” (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā n. 76).
\item [\(6\)] As we shall analyze the finely “psychological” approach of proto-Sufis and Sufis, we at least mention that, especially from the third/ninth century, the topic of \(ḥuzn\) also received a remarkable amount of attention in the field of \textit{falsafa}. Above all, al-Kindī’s (d. ca. 256/873) \textit{Risāla fi-l-ḥīla li-dafʿ al-aḥzān}, the earliest Arabic text in the \textit{consolatio} genre, deeply influenced later authors in its treatment of \(ḥuzn\), such as Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934), Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925 or 323/935), and Ibn Sinā (d. 428/1037).
teachings on sadness of the proto-Sufi Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (ca. d. 185/801) in the second/eighth century until Saʿīd Nūrsī’s (d. 1379/1960) “theology of ḥuzn” in the thirteenth/twentieth century, ḥuzn permeates Sufi teachings.69

A short time before Ibn Abī al-Dunyā wrote his work on ḥuzn, another master and precursor of the Classical Sufis70 was exploring the richness of the human soul, carrying reflections on ḥuzn from a zuhd-centered to a more Sufi-centered perspective. We are referring to Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), who noticeably was influenced by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s teachings. In two of his works, in particular, Ādāb al-nufūs and K. al-Qaṣd wa-l-rujūʿ ilā Allāh, he frequently provides advice on how to obtain sadness, and he delineates its defining features and spiritual benefits (especially in overcoming passion).71 As Picken observes, “maintaining and incalculating grief into the nafs is a major goal in al-Muḥāsibī’s system of purifying the soul from the negative quality of its appetites.”72 For al-Muḥāsibī, the quality is an intrinsically valuable and necessary element for the full flourishing and refinement of the soul. His insights into how to educate the nafs not only help underscore the positive instrumental value of sadness, but also they are echoed in later Sufi texts.73

**Ḥuzn in “Classical” Sufi Manuals**

We conclude our investigation of ḥuzn by focusing on teachings extrapolated from fourth/tenth- and fifth/eleventh-century self-conscious normative Sufi literature.74 Although many of the sayings and anecdotes overlap, each of these works lay a new “sediment of meaning” over ḥuzn. Ḥuzn is practically absent in the two seminal works of Sufism: K. al-Lumaʿ by al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī (d. 378/988) and K. al-Taʿarruf by al-Kalabādhī (d. 380/990 or 384/994).75 Nevertheless, in the same period,


70. As Alexander Knysh states, he can safely be considered one of the major exponents of the mystical and ascetic tradition that flourished in Baghdad in the second part of the third/ninth to the early fourth/tenth centuries, although he never described himself as a Sufi. See Knysh, Islamic Mysticism: A Short History, 47–48.

71. Ḥuzn can also be traced in other works. See Al-Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī, Ādāb al-nufūs, ed. Majdī Fatḥī al-Sayyid (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1991), 126–127; al-Ḥārith b. Asad, al-Muḥāsibī, al-Ṭ. al-Qaṣd wa-l-rujūʿ ilā Allāh – B. man anāha ilā Allāh – Fahm al-salāt – al-Taʿarruf, ed. Abal-Qādir Ahmad ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1988), 302–304. Constant sorrow is propaedeutic; it educates and purifies the soul, and contrasts with Iblīs, who seeks the destruction of the believer’s heart. See Al-Muḥāsibī, Ādāb al-nufūs, 49–51. Ḥuzn is nearly always coupled with hamm, and they both are associated with repentance (tawba), regret (nadāma), vigilance (ṣayaqqaq), and hunger (jūʿ), and it is said that it kills desires (raghbha) and passions (ṣahawāt). Al-Muḥāsibī often referred to hunger as a similar purifier, a juxtaposition that can be later found in Abū Qāsim al-Qushayrī’s (d. 465/1072) Risāla, where the chapter on sadness is immediately followed by the chapter on hunger.

72. As Picken observes, he can safely be considered one of the major exponents of the mystical and ascetic tradition that flourished in Baghdad in the second part of the third/ninth to the early fourth/tenth centuries, although he never described himself as a Sufi. See Knysh, Islamic Mysticism: A Short History, 47–48.


74. Al-Muḥāsibī sometimes refers to ḥuzn as a maqām. However, the division between ʿahwāl and maqāmāt is practically absent in al-Muḥāsibī’s works. Later Sufi authors defined ḥuzn as a maqām (like al-Ḥujwīrī, d. between 465/1072 and 469/1077) or as a hāl (like al-Qushayrī).

75. As a master, we find ḥuzn in the teachings of Rābiʿa, see Rkia Elaroui Cornell, Rābiʿa From Narrative to Myth: the Many Faces of Islam’s Most Famous Woman Saint, 139 ff.
Similarly, ḥuzn is barely quoted in the K. al-Taʿarruf; the only significant appearance can be traced in al-Nūrī's (d. 295/907) description of ecstasy (waḥīd) as a flame that agitates (tafakkur) the body with delight (bukāʾ) and sadness (ḥuzn).  

Beyond the ‘classical’ zuhd association and the exaggerated sadness of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī,80 al-Makkī noticeably recalls the necessity of sorrow for true repentance (tawba) and its positive value when remembering someone’s sins.81 On the other hand, ḥuzn has a negative connotation if the believer is actually grieving for temporary miseries or for what has passed, it being a sign of little faith and a “veil of discontentment.”82 Interestingly, in two of the many maxims attributed to the Prophet, there is a clear stress on how to avoid sorrow, especially through faith.83 Thus, it is evident that the connotation of ḥuzn in the whole compendium ultimately depends on its function for the believer: it can be actively requested by the servant in prayer and given by God,84 representing a station (maqām) or an effect of other stations,85 or on the contrary, it can be considered a sign of disobedience and, even more, a crime for the gnostic (ʿārif).86

Progressing into the fifth/eleventh century, both Abu ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulami’s (d. 412/1038) Tabaqāt al-sāfiyya87 and Abū Nuʿaym al-Isfahānī’s (d. 430/1038) Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyāʾ88 not only sum up all the facets of ḥuzn that we have previously encountered, but also standardize and canonize them, defining Sufi archetypes. In both works, we trace the double value of ḥuzn (laka and ‘alayka)89 and we further note the predominant juxtaposition of ḥuzn with khawf, for things that pass or that will come (Abū Nuʿaym 2:14). The Muslim’s fear of worldly things he loves (Abū Nuʿaym 3:244, 4:61, 5:292), desires (Abū Nuʿaym 6:288) or needs (Abū Nuʿaym 3:134, 7:370);90 See, for instance, the evolution of his sadness in al-Makkī 1:381.

82. Al-Makkī 1:24, 125, 3:314.
86. Al-Makkī 1:392.
87. Al-Makkī 1:392.
88. Al-Makkī 1:392.
89. Al-Makkī 1:392.
accordingly to an emotional plot traceable to the Quranic text: ḥuzn is said to be the sign of fear; a loss in sadness brings a loss in fear. Sāri al-Saqaṭī (d. c. 251/865), describing ten stations (maqāmāt) of the fearful believer, indicates al-ḥuzn al-lāzīm as the first one.⁹⁰

This last saying brings us to a second observation: in these works, ḥuzn timidly tries to find its place in Sufi wayfaring (sulīk). For example, Būnān al-Ḥammāl (d. 316/928) states that ḥuzn and ḥubb pertain to the maqām in the second of the seven heavens. Other Sufi sayings stress the interplay of ḥuzn with other states or stations, such as qabḍ, shukr, shawq, and jūʾ, which will later find a more stable standardization.⁹¹

For his part, Abū Nuʿaym definitively canonizes another aspect of ḥuzn that will later prove influential: its relationship with bukāʾ. Its evidently hagiographic tone, its hyperbolic praises, and its focus on manifest, external piety result in an institutionalization of the sorrowful ascetic-Sufi,⁹² often overlapping with the profile of the bakkāʾūn.⁹³

We finally turn to al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya fī ʿilm al-taṣawwuf⁹⁴ by al-Qushayrī, among the most popular of Sufi manuals.⁹⁵ The powerful novelty of al-Qushayrī’s treatment of ḥuzn lies both in content⁹⁶ and in form: content-wise, ḥuzn is described and canonized as a hāl and one of the necessary attributes of the Sufi wayfarer, “speeding” him towards God;⁹⁷ form-wise, al-Qushayrī’s treatment of ḥuzn is

and detached even from people (Abū Nuʿaym 6:345). To this world pertain long sorrows (Abū Nuʿaym 5:164, 6:172, 6:198, 6:267, 8:631), similar to Hell (Abū Nuʿaym 4:485, 4:215, 8:184). In sum, as Shaqīq al-Balkhī states, the zāhid should rejoice at being deprived of everything (Abū Nuʿaym 8:60). Sadness for such deprivation is something that God never taught them (Abū Nuʿaym 5:4).

90. Al-Sulamī n. 40 and 158; Abū Nuʿaym 8:207, 9:289 and 10:118.

91. On Būnān al-Ḥammāl, see al-Sulamī n. 255. On shawq, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859 or 248/862) affirms that constant sorrow is one of the signs of burning desire for the Beloved (Abū Nuʿaym 9:342); on shukr, Abū Nuʿaym 6:158; and on jūʾ, Abū Nuʿaym 10:67 and al-Sulamī n. 372. In this emotional plot, the elements that strengthen khawf and ḥuzn are tafakkur and tadhkūr (al-Sulamī n. 61, 123 and 336). For the sake of completeness, the voice of al-Shibli on ḥuzn seems to be a discordant one, giving priority to joy rather than sorrow (al-Sulamī n. 263).

92. Abū Nuʿaym definitively institutionalizes the sorrowful ascetic/Sufi. See, for instance, the description of ʿUtbā al-Ghulām’s (d. 167/783) sorrow, which is said to be “like the one of al-Ḥasan” (Abū Nuʿaym 6:226). The hagiographical purpose brings many admirative descriptions for (exaggeratedly) grievous people (Abū Nuʿaym 1:85, 1:142, 2:131, 4:372, 6:165, 6:169, 6:267, 8:361), similar to Hell (Abū Nuʿaym 4:65, 4:215, 8:184). In sum, as Shaqīq al-Balkhī states, the ḥuzn al-lāzīm is said to be a state (ḥāl) while in al-Hujwīrī’s Kashf al-maḥjūb, ḥuzn is a station (maqām) and specifically the station of Dāwūd. See ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī, Kashf al-maḥjūb, ed. and trans. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1911), 371. In this latter work, the treatment of ḥuzn is less systematic and evidently less extensive than in the Risāla.
authoritative and systematic, and it will be highly impactful: he shows how Sufi perspectives on ḥuzn are well-grounded in the Quran and the Sunna, and he claims and stresses the unanimous consensus of Sufis around ḥuzn’s virtues, functions and features.  

Thus, al-Qushayrī’s Risāla has proven to be a turning point for many Sufi concepts, and sadness is no exception: ḥuzn has acquired an official role in the whole Sufi experience.  

Sediments of Sadness

To conclude our investigation, we move back to the etymological richness of ḥuzn—i.e., considering ḥuzn as rugged ground (ard hazna or arḍ ḥazniyya) composed of sediments of meaning. In describing this emotion, we have followed a chronological line—i.e., from the Quranic text until the second half of the fifth/eleventh century.  

Textual evidence brings us to the conclusion that all the works analyzed here have attempted to “make sense” of ḥuzn, going beyond the Quranic major consolatio theme. Surely, the believer should not grieve, because God relieves grief. However, sadness is a basic and necessary component of life. It has played a role in the lives of Yaʿqūb, Umm Mūsā, Maryam, and even in Muḥammad’s and other prophets’ lives. Thus, every author has added layer over layer of meaning, adding sensus (in its etymologically double entendre, both “meaning” and “direction”) to ḥuzn. First, they directed ḥuzn towards the “hereafter event,” thus giving it the right direction, which in turn gives meaning to every worldly affair; second, they focused on the positive outcomes of ḥuzn—on its functions, its “virtuosity.” Sediment after sediment, ḥuzn ʿalā ḥuzn, the believers’ perceptions of ḥuzn have slowly changed and have been “sensified” to the point that a detestable event could be considered as a Divine gift (the mystical state—ḥāl)—i.e., a virtuous emotion.

See, on the divergences: Abdul Muhaya, Maqāmāt (stations) and Aḥwāl (states) According to al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwīrī: A Comparative Study (PhD diss., McGill University, 1994).

98. “People have lengthily discussed ḥuzn. All of them say [. . . ] Indeed, ḥuzn for/of the hereafter is praiseworthy, while ḥuzn for/of this world is not praiseworthy,” (my italics). Once again, the object of ḥuzn determines its positive or negative value as evident in two different sayings of Abū ʿUthmān al-Ḥīrī: the latter considered sadness, in all its aspects, a virtue (fadila) and a surplus (ziyada) for the believer, rectifying (tamḥīṣ) him. However, he also states that sadness is a virtue as long as it is not caused by sins (al-Qushayrī 1:267 ff).


100. Surely, Sufis have integrated zuhd materials into their teachings and, in turn, zuhd literature has drawn nearly all its vocabulary from the Revelation. However, conceptual history does not lie only on a diachronic evolution; rather, we also have to consider Reinhart Koselleck’s “layers of time”—i.e., the unfolding of history along several different but coexisting sediments of time which hold diverse features in terms of duration, speed, and intensity, where the singular (unique) and the recursive event are related. See Reinhart Koselleck, Sediments of Time on Possible Histories, ed. and trans. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford: California Stanford University Press, 2018). ḥuzn—this rugged ground that causes sorrows—is hence composed of the interplay of these sediments of time. Moreover, a map of the works analyzed might also help us understand why certain authors have placed stress on particular “emotional plots.”

101. “An emotion able to tap into moral value, or even the driving and sustaining force of the moral virtues.” See Kristján Kristjánsson, Virtuous Emotions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 31.
Similar to al-Muḥāsibī’s teachings that urge one to instill grief in one’s naṣṣ in order to educate it to virtues, ādāb al-nuṣūṣ can be seen, especially in its early stages, as a process of sensitization to proper emotions, thus overlapping emotional and ethical development. In this perspective, ḥuzn is both the hard ground that needs to be cultivated (worldly ḥuzn) and the seed, the fertilization (talqīḥ) through which this cultivation will be possible (hereafter ḥuzn). Thus, sadness is healed by more meaningful, “fruitful” sadness—i.e., sadness with/in the right sensus:


It is remarkable that this Sufi tendency to “sensify” ḥuzn somehow overlaps with contemporary psychology scholarship. In his 2018 article on “the quiet virtues of sadness,” Lomas identifies three major virtues of sadness, characterized by instrumental and intrinsic usefulness. First, instrumental sadness, as a protection from prompting disengagement, echoes detaching oneself from unattainable goals as the purely ascetic/philosophical approach to ḥuzn; second, in its intrinsic value, sadness can be an expression of care, such as a manifestation of longing, which recalls Dhū al-Nūn’s concept of shawq ḥazīn, or compassion, and eliciting care (as in the sayings stressing the emotional bonds between believers—the “mirror” of the other believer); third, sadness is intrinsic to flourishing—i.e., as a moral sensibility or an engendering psychological development—through shifting one’s locus of concern outwards to other people, which clearly recalls al-Muḥāsibī’s approach and the idea of sorrow as the seed of good deeds (for God and for others).

To conclude, as this brief comparison has shown, ascetics and later Sufi writers recognized sadness as a necessary component of a sincere devotional life, moulding a rough ground into a fruit-bearing soil to the point of exclaiming, in the words of Mālik b. Dīnār: “Indeed, sadness has ripened me!”

102. We stress the virtuosity of ḥuzn in the early stages of wayfaring. In fact, ḥuzn, as a virtuous emotion closely associated with fear as well as remorse over past sins, could also become a vice in relation to the soul’s effacement in God (i.e., in later stages) since it reflects an excessive preoccupation with the self, as in the saying of al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899) on the necessity of abandoning weeping upon arrival (See Khalil, Repentance and the Return, 100).


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