The “Shearing of Forelocks” as a Penitential Rite

Marion Holmes Katz

In what is probably the most celebrated description of medieval Islamic preaching, the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217) describes the aftermath of a sermon by the Ḥanbalī virtuoso Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200):

Then, after he finished his sermon, he presented tender exhortations and perspicuous verses of the divine Remembrance, at which hearts soared with longing and souls melted with fervor, to the point that a clamor arose and groans were echoed with sobbing. Penitents cried out aloud and fell upon him as moths fall upon a lamp, each one holding forth his forelock so he could shear it and stroke his head, praying for him. Among them were some who lost consciousness and were carried up to him.¹

Despite the fame of this account, little attempt has been made to explain the genealogy or significance of one of its most striking features, the dramatic ritual gesture of offering up one’s “forelock” to be cut off as a sign of penitence.² Ibn Jubayr clearly assumes the familiarity of this gesture, which for him requires no explanation. Nevertheless, it is one that has no clear basis in Islamic law, and it is far from obvious either how it originated or how this particular action came to be a widely-understood public sign of repentance.

Ibn al-Jawzī himself testifies to the extent of his hair-cutting activities in his work on preaching, Kitāb al-qūṣṣās wa-l-mudhakkirīn. In it, the author declares,

I have not ceased to exhort people and goad them to repentance and piety. To the point when I compiled this book, more than one hundred thousand

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² This paper has been a long time in the making; I only belatedly became aware that Prof. Daniella Talmon-Heller has discussed the significance of this practice in her “Charity and Repentance in Medieval Islamic Thought and Practice,” in Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions, ed. Miriam Frenkel and Yaakov Lev (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 269–271. I thank Prof. Talmon-Heller for providing me with this chapter, and hope that this piece will be a worthy supplement to her contribution.
men had repented at my hand; I had cut more than ten thousand long 
locks (tāʾila) of the hair of youths (al-ṣibyān), and more than one hundred 
thousand people had converted to Islam at my hand.3

The penitential cutting of hair was carried on by Ibn al-Jawzī’s grandson, a 
comparably brilliant and popular preacher working in the context of another 
location (Damascus) and another legal school (Ḥanafi). An account of an 
emotional occasion in 603/1206–1207 when Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī wanted to depart 
Damascus for a trip to Hama, only to be mobbed by disconsolate throngs at 
his final appearance, states that “on that day more than five hundred youths 
(shābb) repented and cut their hair.”4

Nevertheless, Ibn Jubayr’s account makes it clear that the “shearing of the 
forelock” (jazzal-nāṣiya) was not particular to Ibn al-Jawzī’s personal follow-
ing. Describing a sermon given in the Prophet’s mosque in Medina by the lead-
ing Shāfiʿī jurist Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Iṣbahānī, he recounts that:

He extended his exhortations until he made souls soar from fear and ten-
derness; the Persians thronged to him proclaiming their repentance with 
reeling minds and bewildered intellects, casting their forelocks before 
him. He called for a pair of scissors and cut them off one forelock at a time, 
and covered the head of the one whose forelock had been sheared with 
his [own] turban. Immediately, another turban was placed upon [Ṣadr al-
Dīn’s] head by one of his Qurʾān reciters or those who were sitting with 
him (julasāʾīh) who knew of his magnanimous tendency in this regard, 
so that they hastened to give their turbans in order to attain the precious 
goal because of [Ṣadr al-Dīn’s] virtues that were well-known to them. He

3 Abū l-FarajʿAbdal-Raḥmānb.ʿAlīIbnal-Jawzī, Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-l-mudhakkirīn, ed. Qāsim 
al-Sāmarrāʾī (Riyadh: Dār Umayya, 1403/1983), 195. The text edited and translated by Merlin 
Swartz has “I cut off the hair of more than ten thousand lax young men,” (al-ṣibyān al-lāhīn; 
emphasis mine), which perhaps suggests that they were repenting of a self-indulgent lifestyle. 
See Abū l-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-l-mudhakkirīn, ed. and trans. Merlin Swartz 
(Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, [1971]), 231.

4 Abū Shāma, Tarājim rijāl al-qarnayn al-sādis wa-l-sābiʿ (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Mālikyya, 
1947), 49; Louis Pouzet, Damas au XIe/xiiie siècle: vie et structures religieuses d’une métropole 
islamique (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1988), 137; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, Mirāt al-zamān fi tārīkh 
Daniella Talmon-Heller, Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 131. See also the 
incident discussed in Talmon-Heller, “Charity and Repentance,” 269–271 (Ṣibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, 
Mirāt, 14:542).