The Ingenuity of the Islamic Method’s Assessment of Narrations

by

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An antagonist might say: all the preceding is evidence for the compilation of narrations with their chains of narrators...this is not what we require since it is inconsequential. What we want is evidence that these narrations are authentic. Nothing precludes the possibility that later Muslim generations fabricated as a means to validate their theological beliefs by appealing to the Aḥādīth of the Prophet. Furthermore, Islamic scholars have been extremely lenient with the narrations that reached them. This is in addition to the fact that they generally had a good opinion of the narrators of Aḥādīth. In light of all this, we do not accept these narrations.

The Response to This Is from Different Angles:

First: The very compilation of narrations along with their chains is itself a great feat and one of the uniqueness of Muslims, for neither Jews nor Christians have connected chains of transmission to the Messiah or Prophet Mūsá. Worthy of note also is the fact that one cannot ascertain the authenticity of reports until one has actually complied such chains of transmission, for confirmation (of reports) only comes after such compilation. The role of [Muslim] scholars in gathering this huge trove of reports—including the weak and the fabricated—is not only something to be proud of; it is bedazzling. Indeed, in the compilation of weak and fabricated narrations along with the authentic ones is a great advantage that only those who have experience in historical criticism could appreciate. This is because false narrations tend to expose some of its untrustworthy reporters. These reports expose their identities and assist significantly in determining the authenticity of reports when they contradict; thus, the fabricated ones will be rejected, and the conflicting narration will be accepted if it satisfies the conditions of authenticity.

Secondly: when scholars examine reports in the history of the Prophet from those compilations with chains of ascription, they do not do it with naïve gullibility as claimed by orientalists. Muslim scholars had known centuries before the appearance of orientalism and its schools that the various narrations of prophetic history contain both the weak and authentic. Based on this, Al-Ḥāfiẓ Al-‘Irāqī (d. 806 A.H.) says in his Alfiyah on the history of the Prophet:

وليعلم الطالب أنَّ السينار ... تجمعَ ما صحَّ وما قد أُنكرَا
والقصد ذكر ما أتى أهل السينار ... به، وإنَّ إسناده لم يُعْتَبَرُ

Let the student know that history, Comprises of what is authentic and fabricated,
The intent is to gather what has been said by historians,

Even if the chain of ascription is worthless

In debates revolving around Prophethood, the reports that are considered evidence must fulfill the following five conditions:

1. The trustworthiness of the narrator(s):

The narrator must not be one known to be a sinner; he fulfils religious obligations just as he abstains from prohibitions. He avoids even minor issues that are likely to stain his personality and even permissible things for which the people might belittle the one who does them.

2. Precision:

He must have memorized his reports perfectly or has carefully recorded them in writing.

3. The chain of reporters must be connected all the way through. All narrators must directly report from their source until the chain stretches to the Prophet.

4. The text narrated must not be Shādh (i.e. fringe) in that the narrator must not relate what contradicts a more trustworthy narrator.

5. The text or its chain of ascription must be free of hidden defects that render the Ḥadīth weak.

Thirdly: the scholars of Ḥadīth were the furthest from giving the benefit of doubt to narrators, for the science of Ḥadīth in its judgment on narrators rests squarely on being cautious about narrations. One may even say—if he so desires—that they rather had negative assumptions about narrators and not a preconceived acceptance of their trustworthiness (as claimed). So much so that the Imām and Muḥadīṭ ‘Abdur-Raḥman b. Mahdī said in the second Islamic century:

خصلتان لا يستقيم فيهما حسن الظن، الحكم والحديث

It is not allowed to give the benefit of the doubt of one in two situations: when passing judgment (legally) and in the field of Ḥadīth.¹

This becomes glaring with the following cases:

Translator’s note: This piece was originally written in Arabic and could be found in Dr. Sāmī al-‘Āmirī’s book Barāhīn an-Nubūwwa wal-Radd ‘alā al-Mustashriqīn, pp. 86-95.

¹ Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Al-Jarḥ wat-Taʿdīl, vol. 2, p. 35
a. The unknown narrator: his reports are deemed weak until he is known. This radically differs from the methodology of Christian historians and the methodology of most historians.²

b. A narrator who has a problem of *Ikhtilāṭ* (i.e. gets things mixed up to the extent that it affects the precision of his memory) has the entirety of his reports rejected if the exact date of the commencement of his *Ikhtilāṭ* is unknown because it becomes impossible to distinguish between reports before and after it.⁴

c. If a certain narrator is both censured and certified, most scholars tend towards declaring him a weak narrator⁵ except if the certification was detailed and the censure imprecise or if the censure comes from one known to be extreme in criticisms.

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² Scholars differentiate between *majhūl al-ayn* (a narrator who is entirely unknown and is someone who only had a single person narrating from him) and *majhūl al-hāl* (a narrator who is known but of unknown conduct and character and who is a person that has more than one narrator relating from him but his trustworthiness is unknown and could not be determined from his reports). Reports from both are rejected when there is no convincing corroborating evidence indicating the person is trustworthy. Adh-Dhahabī says:

 فلا حجة في من ليس بمعرف عدالة، ولا انتفت عنه الجهالة

The one whose trustworthiness is unknown cannot be evidence (*Mīzānul-I’tidāl*, vol. 2, p. 234)

³ Al-Ikhtilāt: As-Sakhāwī says:

فسادُ العقلَ وَعَدَمُ انْتِظَامِ الَْْقْوَالِ وَالَْْفْعَالِ ; إِمَّا بِحُرَّفٍ أَوْ ضَرْرٍ أَوْ مَرَضٍ أَوْ عَرَضٍ

A degeneration of the intellect and a disorderliness in speech and actions, whether as a result of senility, injury, sickness or accident (*Fatḥul-Mughīth bi-sharḥ Alfiyyatul-Ḥadīth*, vol. 4, pp. 458-459).

⁴ Ibn Ṣalāh says:

ولا يَقْبَلُ حَدِيثُ مَنْ آخَذَ عَنْهُ بَعْدَ الاِخْتِلاَطِ، أَوْ أُشْكِلَ أَمْرُهُ فَلَمْ يُدْرَ هَلْ آَخَذَ عَنْهُ قَبْلَ الاِخْتِلاَطِ أَوْ بَعْدُهُ

The Ḥadīth of the one afflicted by *Ikhtilāt* is rejected after his *Ikhtilāt* or if it were problematic to determine when a narrator actually related from him (*al-Muqaddima*, p. 195).

⁵ Al-Khaṭīb Al-Baghdādī says:

فَإِنَّ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِ جُمْهُورُ الْعُلَمَاءِ أَنَّ الْحُكْمَ لِلْجَرْحِ وَالْعَمَلَ بِهِ أَ وَلٌى

The position of the majority of the scholars is that the censure is given precedence (*Al-Kifāyah fī Ma’rifat Usūl ‘Ilm al-Riwa‘ah*, vol. 1, p. 336).

An-Nawawī says:

وَفَإِنَّ تَعَارَضَ جَرْحٌ وَتَعْدِيلٌ قُدِّيمَ الْجَرْحُ عَلَى الْمُخْتَارِ الَّذِي قَالَهُ الْمُحْقُوقُونَ وَالْجَمَاعُ
d. The report with a gap in its chain will be deemed weak until the missing link in the chain is determined.

e. If a certain narrator hears a complete book related to him, yet doubts a single particular Ḥadīth but subsequently could not identify which one, he would refrain from narrating the entire book.⁶

The scholars of Ḥadīth were aware that a pious man could fall into grave errors in transmitting narrations because a pious man could either relate reports without precision and accuracy, or he could relate from one who is not trustworthy. Based on this, Imām Ibn al-Qaṭṭān said:

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\text{لم نر أهل الخير في شيء أذن بهم في الحديث}
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We have not seen a field in which the pious people spread lies as they do in the field of Ḥadīth.⁷

Consequently, it had never been the interest of investigative scholars amongst the scholars of Ḥadīth to authenticate the narrations of the pious and religious. Rather, their studies were directed at searching for hidden defects of narrations and narrators without limiting themselves to the piety of the narrator, so as to prevent the weak and fabricated narrations from entering into the accepted Ḥadīth corpus.

**Fourthly:** precision in authenticating Ḥadīth got to a highly surprising level for the scholars of Islam, so much so that they even distinguished between reports coming from

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⁶ Al-Khatīb Al-Baghdādī (d. 463) says:

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\text{إِذَا شَكَّ فِي حَدِيثٍ وَاحِدٍ بِعَيْنِهِ أَنَّهُ سَمِعَهُ وَجَبَ عَلَيْهِ اطِّرَاحُهُ وَجَا}
\]

If he doubts hearing a particular Ḥadīth, it becomes compulsory for him to reject it while other reports in the book remain permissible for him to transmit. However, if he could not identify the particular Ḥadīth, then it is impermissible to transmit anything in that book.

He then gave an example of the statement of Al-Ḥusayn b. Hurayth:

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\text{سَأَلْتُ عَلِيَّ بْنَ الْحَسَنِ الشَّقِيقَيَّ هَلْ سَمِعْتَ كِتَابَ الصَّلاَةَ، مِنْ أَبِي حَمْ}
\]

I asked ‘Alī b. Al-Ḥasan Ash-Shaqqī: did you hear the book of Ṣalāḥ completely from Abū Ḥamzah? He said yes, completely; except that a donkey once brayed one day and a Ḥadīth or part of it was missed, and I subsequently forgot which Ḥadīth it was in the book. Hence, I dropped the entire book. (*Al-Kifāyah fi Ḥilmi Riwāyah*, p. 233-234)

⁷ Muslim, Introduction to Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim
the same narrator. They would not take all of it just as they would not reject all of it. They were rather very selective based on clear scientific principles and would only rule after probing these narrations and comparing them with the reports of sound narrators. Some examples are:

i. The reports of such an individual being accepted if it was only from specific individuals and not all.

ii. Reports of such a narrator are only accepted if it was from a specific city rather than others.

iii. His reports being accepted only if he reported within a certain age limit.

iv. His reports are accepted when corroborated by other narrations and rejected when otherwise.

v. His reports are rejected when he narrates about specific subjects and are accepted in others.

vi. His reports are accepted when he relates from his books where he recorded *Aḥādīth* he got from others and rejected when he relates Ḥadīth from memory.

The scholars who specialize in the critique of narrators distinguish between the various levels of narrators; they did not restrict themselves to the huge dichotomy of trustworthy and weak. Rather, they classified the trustworthy narrators themselves into categories just as they also divided the weak narrators into descending order of weakness. This was done to be able to give preference appropriately when reports contradict each other and to strengthen and support when such reports are corroborative.

The best level for those who have been censured is the status of *layyinul-hadith* (weak in reports) or *fihi maqāl* (he had been criticized); worse than this is one said to be *mardūd al-Ḥadīth* (of rejected reports) or *wāhin bimarrah* (extremely weak); worse than these is one accused of lying or fabrication, followed by one said to be a *kadhdhāb* (compulsive liar) or *waḍḍa’* (compulsive fabricator), and the worst of all is the *akzabun-nās* (worst liar amongst people) or *ilayhi al-muntahá fīl-kazb* (he is the ultimate liar).

As for the levels of those certified, the best of them are the ones described in exaggerated terms: e.g. “most trustworthy of people,” after which comes repeated descriptions of terms of certification e.g. *thiqah, thiqah* (trustworthy, trustworthy), after which is one described as *thiqah* (trustworthy), *thabt* (firm), or *hujjah* (proof)…then we have people below these levels slightly like people described as *lā ba’s bihi* (there’s no problem with him), *sadūq*

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8 An example is if his narrations are seen to support a particular deviation or he is known as one who calls to deviation. This needs more detail than can be afforded here.
(truthful), *mahallu al-ḥadīth as-ṣidq* (his status is that of truthfulness), then the lower levels like one who is described as *yuktabu Ḥadīthu* (his ḥadīth are written) and *yunzarу fīhu* (his ḥadīth are looked at), then *yuktabu Ḥadīthu lil-I’tibār* (his ḥadīth are recorded for consideration).

**Fifthly:** There is a consensus that the narrator who deliberately lies for Islam or to honor the Prophet will have his narrations rejected. In fact, it is established that one who lies in one ḥadīth will have the entirety of his reports rejected. Scholars make no distinction between reports fabricated to strengthen the *Dīn* and those fabricated to attack it. Indeed the existence of valid criticism in the chain or text of a report is evidence for rejecting it irrespective of its subject matter. Scholars rejected the text Bishr b. Ḥusayn Al-Aṣbahānī related from Zakariyā b. ‘Adiy from Anas b. Mālik though there were Aḥādīth related by Al-Bukhārī and Muslim in the text. This is because Bishr is a known fabricator.

**Sixthly:** scholars were never fooled by the state of narrators to the extent that they would say that all their narrations are accepted. They clearly affirmed that the uprightness of a narrator (i.e. his being truthful and his having a sharp memory for memorizing narrations) is not sufficient for authenticating reports, but there must also be a connected chain of transmission without any gap. And the report of a trustworthy narrator is rejected when it contradicts the report of one more trustworthy than him.

**Seventhly:** the fact that the apparent conditions of authenticity for the chain of a Ḥadīth are all present does not prevent the scholars from asserting that the text of the Ḥadīth itself must necessarily be free of deficiencies. The narration of trustworthy reporters will not be deemed authentic if the information it contains is not free of invalidating content. They have a golden principle stated as: the authenticity of the chain does not necessitate the authenticity of the text. Some of the reasons for rejecting a report despite it having a chain of trustworthy reporters or reporters who apparently are trustworthy as mentioned by Ibn Qayyim and others are:

- a. The report contradicting what is established by the senses...part of which is the contradiction of a Ḥadīth with established scientific facts.
- b. The report contradicting what is known of accurate history.
- c. The report contradicting what is multiply-attested from the life of the Prophet.
- d. That the Ḥadīth is such a report that relates a very important issue which would have necessarily been expected to have been reported by a greater number of narrators, yet we only find one person narrating it.

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9 Muhammad Abū Shahbah, *Al-Wasīṭ fī ’Ulūmil-Ḥadīth*, pp. 408-412


11 There must be a compulsory distinction between what fact is and what is erroneously assumed to be a fact. This is a fine terrain. Aḥādīth do not contradict scientific facts which are correct descriptions of natural phenomena. It is not possible that the revelation of Allah contradicts the creation of Allah.
e. That the Ḥadīth directly contradicts the clearly rational⁻ and as a result of speaking about inherently impossible things, it falsifies its own credibility.

f. A contradiction of a categorical stance of the Qur’ān.

g. Ḥadīth being odious.¹³

Eighthly: Skeptics of the preservation of prophetic history claim that those who authenticated its Ahādīth never rejected the Ahādīth that were at variance with both the intellect and science. However, this claim is falsified by the principles of Ḥadīth criticisms as demonstrated earlier. One of the clearest statements of the scholars is:

بما تدفع العقول صحته...ويلتحق به ما يدفعه الحس والمشاهدة

One of the evidences of fabrication is what the intellect rejects…in addition is what is rejected by sense perception and sight.¹⁴

Ibn al-Jawzī says:

فَكل حَدِيث رَأَيْته يُخَالف الْمَعْقُول...فَاعْلَم أَنَّه مَوْضُوع فَلاَ تتكلف اعْتِباره

Every Ḥadīth you see contradicting what is conceivable…know that it is a fabricated Ḥadīth, so do not bother yourself about it.¹⁵

Ninthly: The scholars did not accept out rightly the Ahādīth which glorified the Prophet or established miraculous events indicating the authenticity of his claim to Prophethood. Rather, they also subjected them to investigations, and they were given no preference over others. Al-Imām ibn Al-Jawzī had a section in his book ‘Al-Mawdūʿāt’ (in which he compiled fabricated Ahādīth) with the title: sections (containing Ahādīth) on the virtues of our Prophet.¹⁶

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¹² The clearly rational here refers to rational certainty whose rejection will be impossible. It is not merely a matter of personal taste or feeling. On that note, Ibn Taymiyyah said:

ما خَالفَ الْعَقْلِ الصَّرِيحَ فَهُوَ بَاطِلٌ وَلَيْسَ فِي الْكِتَابِ وَالسُّنَّةِ وَالِْْجْمَاعُ بَاطِلٌ وَلَكِنْ فِيهِ أَلْفَاظٌ قَدْ لاَ يَفْهَمُهَا بَأَوْضَعِ النَّاسِ أوْ يَفْهَمُونَ مِنْهَا مَعْنًى بَاطِلاً فَالْْفَةُ مِنْهُمْ لاَ مِنْ الْكِتَابِ وَالسُّنَّةِ

Whatever violates the clear intellect is false, and there is nothing in the Book, the Sunnah, and the consensus of the scholars that is false except that one finds in it words that some could not understand or perhaps they have a false understanding of. The problem is theirs, not the Book’s or the Sunnah’s (Majmu’ al-Fatāwā, vol. 11, p. 490).

¹³ Ibnul Qayyim, Al-Manār Al-Munifīf Al-Ṣaḥīḥ wal-Ḍa’īf, Al-Kinānī, Tanẓih al-Sharīʿah Al-Marfūʿa’ anil-Akhbār Ash-Shanīʿah Al-Mawdūʿah, pp. 5-8

¹⁴ Ibn Hajar, An-Nukat ‘Alā Ibnuṣ-Ṣalāḥ, p. 845

¹⁵ Ibn Al-Jawzī, Al-Mawdūʿāt, vol. 1, p. 106

¹⁶ Ibid, vol. 1, pp. 279-308
As it is the habit of the scholars of Ḥadīth when they relate narrations having to do with the personality of the Prophet and his miracles, they highlight that which is authentic and not. The mere abundance of chains of transmissions never motivated them into authenticating everything.

**Tenthly:** Muslims right from the time of Prophethood had been transmitting the following Ḥadīth: “whoever deliberately lies against me should prepare his seat in the Hellfire.” These have been related by more than seventy companions, among whom are the ten promised paradise. No other Ḥadīth of the Prophet had been related by this sheer number or even anything close to it. The companions circulated it amongst themselves by teaching and cautioning with it. Its spread amongst the Tābi‘ūn and their students was even greater. This Ḥadīth is one whose spread is very pronounced in a community that cherished truth even before the advent of Islam. A group of scholars understood from this Ḥadīth that one who deliberately lies against the Prophet becomes an apostate. This is the same manner in which the Ḥadīth “may Allah freshen the slave who hears my statements, understands it and transmits it to one who was absent” is widely reported by the companions. The Ḥadīth encourages the transmission of true narrations which spread the message of revelation.

When one studies the Ahādīth that have been authenticated by the scholars of Ḥadīth, he realizes they are not simply trying to paint a concocted unified picture. Based on this, the orientalist Reinhart Dozy held that the problems and contradictions that become apparent in the authenticated Ahādīth with Muslims are evidence that Muslims did not fabricate these reports. It is not the habit of liars to open the doors for debate about what they want to strengthen and beautify.

The methodology of Islamic Ḥadīth criticism encompasses conditions of examining the authenticity of historical reports in the highest of forms (among which are):

1. Appraising the narration: the narration as per the men making up its chain of ascription and the nature of the transmission of the report. Islamic criticism has given importance to the following when considering the acceptance of narrations:

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17 If you yourself search for a report you heard from more than seventy people, you will most likely never find it. This informs us of the extent of the spread of this prophetic ḥadīth.

18 Muhammad b. Ādam, *Sharḥ Alfiyyah As-Suyūṭī*, p. 223

19 Among whom is the Shaykh of the Shāfi‘ite school, Abū Muhammad Al-Juwaynī, the father of Imām Al-Ḥaramayn.

20 This has been narrated by twenty-four companions: ‘Abdul-Muḥsin Al-‘Abād, *Dirāsat Ḥadīth “Nāḍḍara Allah Imra’an sami’a maqālati…”*, *riwāyatan wa dirāyatan*, a published master’s thesis

21 Reinhart Dozy (1820-1883), an orientalist of French origin from Holland. He taught Arabic and History at the university. His works include: *Histoire des Musulmans d’Espagne*

- The truthfulness of the narrator

- The memorization skill of the narrator, whether from memory or written records

- The precision of the narrator

- The personal or sectarian interest of the narrator in relating the report

- The fact that it must be established that the narrator reported directly from his source

- That the source permits the narrator’s reporting from him to others

2. Appraising the contents of what has been narrated: it is not sufficient that the narrator is free from all intellectual, emotional, and character defects; rather, the report itself must be free of:

- Contradicting authentic history

- Contradicting clear intellect

- Contradicting sense perception

- Contradicting what is known of the habit of the Prophet in speech.

These are principles that cover all the angles in a report, and it blocks all possible paths to lies and errors creeping into it.

One may contest: but at times, I see this or that Ḥadīth that has been authenticated by the scholars of Islam violate the intellect or history!

I respond:

This is the last-ditch effort of the contender and the end of his attack. He now attacks the texts of a few Ahādīth whose numbers barely amount to ten. However, he is unable to reject the methodology for the appraisal of thousands of Ahādīth. At the end of the day his objections do not go beyond the attack on the truthfulness of some reports to use that as a means to questioning either all of the purified Ḥadīth heritage, most of it, or a lot of it. And these define the features of the prophetic history the life of the Prophet and the content of his message. Let us agree, for the sake of argument alone, with what they have said on the existence of those reports they reject. So we walk with them to the very end of the stage they intend to drag us to. So what? The greatest reality which no dissenter possesses any iota of reason for rejecting remains that the general picture of the prophetic history with its broad expositions is firmly established. It is so established that no skeptic or doubter has
an iota of evidence to shake its foundation. These broad accounts will end with our interlocutor inevitably agreeing with the fact of the Prophethood of Muhammad since we do not bet the truth of Islam on a few *Ahādīth*—whose truthfulness and authenticity we affirm, despite our opponent seeing otherwise—rather it is a cumulative case of reports that obliges the skeptic to confess that at the end, the general image of the prophetic Sunnah is not dented by doubts in a few narrations or even an outright rejection of such narrations.

We—even when we for the sake of argument agree with the skeptic in some of these reports about prophetic history—do not find the least serious objection to the fundamental principles of the methodology of ruling on *Ahādīth*. In fact, we see orientalists who reject the legacy of such history unable to rise above the criticism of rulings on narrations. Apparently, they have fallen into a pit of investigation and rulings utilizing the weakest tool of criticisms, which in this case, is the intuition of a researcher. Intuition, which is blown by the wind of circumstances to wherever it may wish since it is not established on firm objective principles but rather the remnants of historical artifacts of stones and carvings which neither illuminate a dark path of history nor does it straighten a crooked road. It is instead giving priority to the worse over the best and leaving regulated investigation and fields of seriousness for the straits of delusion.

The indication of history on the Prophethood of Muhammad is tied to the authenticity of the foundational theoretical methodology of authenticating *Ahādīth* and not on the correctness of the application of these principles during research. The possibility of some error in application does not nullify the fundamental basis and general application.