

11 Points on Hadiths & Hadith Books

By Abdullah bin Hamid Ali

عن محمد بن سيرين: "إن هذا العلم دين فانظروا عمن تأخذون دينكم"

"Verily, this knowledge is religion. So, we careful of those from whom you take your religion."
(Muhammad b. Sirin)

عن عبد الله بن المبارك: "الإسناد من الدين و لو لا الإسناد لقال من شاء ما شاء"

"The isnad is part of the religion. Had it not been for the isnad, anyone would say whatever he pleases."
(Abd Allah b. al-Mubarak)

عن سفيان بن عيينة: "كل حديث مضلة إلا للفقهاء"

"Every hadith is a source of misguidance for all save the jurists."

The first two quotes have grown popular on the tongues of contemporary students of Islam and scholars alike. Both quotes emphasize the importance of preserving and authenticating the content of the Islamic teachings which originate with the Prophet Muhammad. The third and less popular quote, however, underscores the fact that while one may be a reliable vessel for retaining the raw material of prophetic wisdom, that retention is no guarantee that he/she fully or partly understands that wisdom. It is related that the Prophet Muhammad—ﷺ—said, "There are many who carry knowledge to others more judicious than themselves" (*rubba hamili fiqhin ila man huwa afqahu minhu*).

By now, one would hope that it is clear to the Muslim public that having "*asanid*" (verified chains of narration from reliable traditionaries) to a hadith, a book, or ideological tradition does not prove that one has properly understood and mastered what is essential from that hadith, book, or tradition one claims to represent. *Asanid* are also no guarantee that when one speaks as an authority that he is remaining committed to the tradition that has granted him validation. That's not to say that one needs to always cling to what is found in the books. But, it is important for observers to not allow themselves to be swindled or duped by claims of one having "traditional qualifications."

When it comes to Islam, all Muslims agree that the only undisputed source of the Islamic teachings is the Qur'an. Most Muslims all throughout Islamic history have given secondary source status to the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad although hadith scholars often differed about what did or did not constitute a valid "Sunnah." They further differed about the interpretation of both ambiguous verses from the Qur'an and sound hadiths attributed to the Prophet.

Hadith books of varying genres were written throughout Muslim history which collected the attributes, sayings, doings, and approvals given by the holy prophet. The isnad was the only way of corroborating claims made by people living in the earliest generations following the death of Allah's messenger until the campaign came to an abrupt close after a number of centuries, then shifting the focus of the isnad tradition from the preservation of isolated narrations to the preservation of the authenticity of the books that housed the words and deeds of the holy prophet. Among those books were the two *Sahih*s of Bukhari and Muslim, the *Muwatta'* of Imam Malik, and scores of other books.

Naturally, not every book was of equal quality. For the standards of verification differed from one author to another. Despite that, what was clear from the start was that the Imams of the Salaf treated hadiths as nothing more than one of another potential sources of authentic prophetic and Islamic knowledge. In other words, neither the individual hadiths nor the books of "any" author was deemed to be beyond critique, even if they sometimes ruled that the "book" (rather than an author) was "received with acceptance by the Ummah" (*talaqathu al-ummah bi al-qubul*). Such a statement merely meant that one had very little reason to doubt the authenticity of the hadiths found therein, since the books were given so much attention by experts in the field of hadith authentication. That the contents could be verified through various external isnads meant more to the ancients than whether or not the book's authorship was accurately preserved. This is because the aim was to retain the "prophetic teachings", not the teachings of a particular author. And, if it happened that one or more hadiths posed a particular sociocultural or theological challenge, the scholastic approach adopted was to attempt reconciliation in one of three ways: 1) combining narratives (*al-jam'*); 2) abandoning the narrative that less conforms with one's epistemic presumptions (*al-tarjih*); and 3) claiming abrogation (*al-nashk*) after determining the

historical sequence of the narratives. But, under no circumstance did Sunni Muslim scholars dismiss an entire hadith collection on the basis of the book potentially not belonging to its alleged author.

The reason was because it does not follow by logical necessity that simply because a book might not belong to a particular author, its contents must, therefore, be spurious, in full or in part. Nor did any scholar ever claim the contents of a book, in full or in part, to be inauthentic without clarifying what percentage (10%, 20%, etc.) was spurious along with a list of all the evidence corroborating which parts exactly were fabricated and by whom. Once such a claim is made, it is the duty of the claimant to produce his evidence of which particular hadiths are “fabricated” (*mawdu’*), not by those who continue to maintain the books overall authenticity. And, the mere claim of the hadith claiming an “*illah*” (subtle weakness) is insufficient justification for the claim of *wad’* (fabrication) according to hadith scholars. An “*illah*” may make it difficult to prove a suggested binding legal or theological point promoted by the hadith. But, it alone does not necessarily impugn the character (*’adalah*) or reliability (*dabt*) of the narrator. The following is a list of points to consider with respect to doubts raised about a given hadith book’s authenticity. (Note, however, that the focus is not on whether or not a given book was actually written by a particular author because that is not consequential when the concern is for the authenticity of what the alleged author reports):

- 1) Hadith books were never meant for public consumption. They were meant to be studied by serious students with scholars who could help them navigate the problematic contents.
- 2) The proper interpretation of Hadith was never intended to be the job of anyone other than the jurist.
- 3) Scholars have always acknowledged that the supermajority of Hadiths considered reliable for Islamic teachings are paraphrased statements of the Prophet, not his exact words.
- 4) If they are not his exact words, the parts found irreconcilable and offensive to our common sensibilities do not originate with him. They originate with one or more of the narrators.
- 5) But, before a Hadith is rejected, one should be 100% certain that it cannot be reconciled with the Quran and/or reason.
- 6) Books declared “Sahih” collections are ruled as such in light of the fact that their “overall” contents are deemed unproblematic doctrinally. It does not mean that every Hadith needs to be taken as a matter of binding Muslim belief.
- 7) This is why Muslim jurists from the earliest times interacted with Sahih Hadiths as if they were subjected to a sliding scale of relative authenticity and measured degree of certainty. It’s precisely because of this that scholars like Abu Hanifah, Malik, and others could ignore claims of authenticity of Hadiths which clashed with other legal sources and considerations they considered produced greater certainty.
- 8) Because scholars suspected a number of Hadiths in a given collection to be potentially spurious or misquoted or at least conveyed without context, it was easy to continue to work with a given Sahih work while granting it presumptive truth status.
- 9) That a Sahih collection “might” be falsely ascribed to an author, it did not lead them to reject the book wholesale nor claim that its contents were fabricated nor that Hadiths overall were unreliable as a source of Islamic teachings. To do so, would undermine all the knowledge we have of Islam. Other than from the Quran, where else would Muslims learn about the broad guidelines of Islamic history? Or the life of the Prophet? Or our knowledge of extra-Quranic religious doctrine? Or our knowledge of jurisprudence? It is utterly preposterous to suggest that true Islam was transmitted through the books of Islamic jurisprudence, not the Hadith? Did Hadith come from fiqh or vice versa? You cannot have fiqh of fiqh? You can only have fiqh of Hadith? So, fiqh is the proverbial egg from the chicken we call “Hadith.”
- 10) It would logically follow that if the alleged “most authentic book on the face of the earth AFTER THE QURAN” is not reliable, then no other Hadith collection is either. But, how does one prove the unreliability of an entire book? If I can place doubt in your mind that the book was not written by its alleged author, does that prove the book’s “overall” contents are spurious even if the factuality of the contents are verified from sources that predate the book? Of course not. All that can be said is, “This person did not write this book” or simply, “There is doubt about who actually authored the book.” If I discover unreliable narrators in the chains of the Hadiths in some of the books, how do I come by such discoveries? By consulting other books. But, then, what about those books which list the supposed reliable and unreliable narrators? How do I know they’re authentic and also written by the people they are attributed to? Hmm. Who verified their knowledge? What makes them authoritative? How many variants of those books exist? One would literally be obligated to carry out a radical reevaluation of every single scholarly book we consider to be reliable before any of their contents could be taken seriously.

- 11) Doubt over the ascription of certain books to certain authors is not a new issue. It has been around since the beginning of Islam (if not the beginning of recorded history). But, does one need to have 100% certainty of authorship before we accept that the contents of a given work are factual or authentic? I say, no. Our scholars for all of Muslim history have said the same.



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