

Dissertation (HPRS7007) - MA Islam in the Modern World

The Satanic Verses Incident: An Assessment of its Authenticity through *Sirah-Maghazi*,
Isnad, and *Matn* Criticism

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Abstract

This dissertation will assess the authenticity of the controversial incident in the Prophet Muhammad's biography known as the Satanic Verses incident. The incident calls into question the Islamic theological principle of *ismat al-anbiya*, known as God's divine protection of the Prophets, especially in the preservation and propagation of revelation. This has led many scholars to reject the incident, while others have accepted it.

An examination of existing literature reveals a gap in detailed discussions regarding the methodologies used to arrive at these conclusions. Therefore, this dissertation looks to bridge this gap by analysing the incident through three classical Sunni hadith criticism methods. These methods include *sirah-maghazi* reports analysis, *isnad* criticism, and *matn* criticism.

This research found that *sirah-maghazi* report analysis lacks the epistemic capacity to determine the authenticity of hadith. As such, it is unable to determine the authenticity of the incident. It was necessary to evaluate this method due to its frequent usage when citing this Satanic Verses incident.

As for the application of *isnad* criticism to the incident, it has identified narrator discrepancies in every channel through which the incident has been reported. Additionally, it has revealed that there is no eyewitness for the incident in any of the *isnads*. Finally, the *matn* criticism method has found that the incident is in conflict with established theological principles derived directly from the Quran and other well-known hadith.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the incident does not meet the standards of an authentic hadith in light of the three methods mentioned above. However, further

research is required in light of other hadith assessment methods, as this research has not considered the *Sufi*, *Shiah*, modern Muslim and Western academic hadith assessment methods.

Introduction

Islamic theology does not afford the hadith corpus, unlike the Quran, immutability or the guarantee of divine protection (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p.150). Consequently, hadith scholars developed authentication methods from the early days of Islam to distinguish an authentic hadith from a forged report (Brown, 2009, p.4).

Qissat al-Gharaniq (the story of the cranes), more commonly known as ‘the Satanic Verses incident,’ a term coined by Muir (1861, p.152), has been a topic of contention, causing some scholars to reject it on theological grounds (Ahmed, 2017, p.9), while other scholars have accepted it such as Ibn Hajar (d.1449) (2000, p.558). This research will look to provide a detailed application of three epistemological tools- the *sirah-maghazi* report analysis, *isnad* criticism, and *matn* criticism methods- to provide a grading of the incident for future research.

The research will predominantly use a qualitative textual and historical analysis. This paper does not aim to discuss the concept of hadith being invalid; rather, it assumes that hadith yields epistemic value.

What is the Satanic Verses Incident?

As the primary focus of the research is the authenticity of the Satanic Verses incident, rather than providing a detailed account of the various reports of the incident, only the key points of contention and relevant details of the incident will be summarised.

As such, it has been reported that after witnessing his people turning away from the message of God, the Prophet Muhammad wanted God to reveal something to him to reconcile with his tribe (Al-Tabari, 1988, pp.107-111). It was on this occasion that God revealed Surah 53. He began reciting the Surah until he reached verse 19, “Have you

thought upon al-Lat and al-'Uzza and Manat, the third, the other?" when Satan cast upon his tongue the following words, "These are the high-flying cranes; verily their intercession is accepted with approval" (Al-Tabari, 1988, p.108).

The details vary from narration to narration; however, the outline remains the same (Ahmed, 2017). Moreover, some versions of the incident suggest that it was in fact Satan who had recited the verses, which were only audible to the non-Muslims (Ahmed, 2017, p.124). The Prophet and the Muslims were unaware of the verses until later on.

The Theological Implication

The Satanic Verses incident appears to conflict with the theological principle of *ismat al-anbiya*, understood as God's divine protection of the Prophets (Ahmed, 2017, p.9). While there are some differences among Muslim scholars regarding the scope of this protection, they unanimously agree that these Prophets are protected from error in delivering God's message (Ahmed, 2017, p.9). Consequently, Ahmed (2017, p.10) has suggested that the two cannot be accepted simultaneously.

This theological principle has been derived from multiple verses of the Quran itself. God has guaranteed to protect and preserve the integrity of the Quran in *Surah* 15:9, 41:42, and 53:1-4. Therefore, when it is implied that Satan was able to cast verses upon the tongue of the Prophet without his knowledge, the theological implications directly question the preservation of the Quran from corruption and the Prophet's inability to differentiate revelation from the words of Satan. Theoretically, if Satan was able to cast his speech on the tongue of the Prophet, there is no guarantee that this did not occur on other occasions. It is for this reason that Ahmed (2017, p.9) has argued that early scholars

had no choice but to reject the incident altogether. This demonstrates the theological challenges that would occur for Muslims if the incident were considered authentic.

Before delving into the methodology of this particular method of hadith assessment, it is essential to define a few crucial Arabic words. Firstly, there is the oft-used word *hadith*. Its Islamic technical meaning comprises the Prophet's documented speech, actions, interactions, tacit approvals (Ali, 2022, p.39), and his physical description (Azmi, 2002, p.5). Hadiths were investigated for authentic attribution to the Prophet through various methods developed by the scholars (Makarim, 2025, p.47).

Subsequently, a hadith is generally made up of two components. The first is the *isnad*, a list of transmitters through whom the hadith has reached the documenting scholar; in other words, a chain of narration (Azmi, 2022, p.36). As for the second component, it is the actual text of the hadith, referred to as the *matn* of the hadith.

Finally, this research is divided into three sections, one section for each method, followed by the conclusion. Each section will evaluate the method of assessment, which will then be followed by its application to the incident where possible.

Section 1: *Sirah-Maghazi* Reports Analysis

The first of the three hadith methods is that of *sirah-maghazi* reports analysis. The word *sirah* is generally used for the genre which discusses the life of the Prophet (Sertkaya, 2022, p.1). As for the term *maghazi*, it is used for the Prophet's military expeditions. *Maghazi* is also used interchangeably with *sirah*; hence, the term *sirah-maghazi* here.

Since *sirah-maghazi* reports were not used for jurisprudence, scholars had no objections to merging various reports to produce a more complete biography of the Prophet (Sertkaya, 2022, p.8). It presented the Prophet's life chronologically, filling historical and contextual gaps not addressed in the hadith literature (Makarim, 2025, p.44-45). Additionally, *sirah-maghazi* reports also provided a religious, moral, and educational factor for their readers (Bozkurt, 2021, p.13).

The early documentation of *sirah-maghazi* reports was initiated by scholars who were experts in hadith and history (Mujani, 2012, p.960). When transmitting hadith or history, they would begin by narrating the chain of narration, followed by the text of the report, as will be discussed in the coming sections. Nonetheless, when they would transmit *sirah-maghazi* reports, the standards of transmission and acceptance of reports were relaxed and made flexible, as opposed to relating hadith about law or theology. This, of course, brought about its own challenges.

Hadith and *sirah-maghazi* reports are regularly used hand-in-hand when it comes to the study of Islamic history; however, there are vital differences between the two (Makarim, 2025, p.45). Importantly, as opposed to Hadith, *sirah-maghazi* reports were compiled from varying sources, many of which would not satisfy the strict conditions of an authentic hadith (Makarim, 2025, p.45). This meant that the works on *sirah-maghazi*

contained a mixture of authentic and inauthentic reports, putting their authority into question (Makarim, 2025, p.45).

Moreover, an examination of the genre suggests that there is no standardised methodology for determining which reports are to be included. Rather, there appears to be a spectrum of scholarly approaches, as will be discussed below. As such, two important *sirah-maghazi* works will be examined here: the compilation of Ibn Ishaq (d.768) and al-Tabari (d.923) to further elaborate this method.

1.1 Ibn Ishaq

Ibn Ishaq has been counted amongst the most influential *sirah-maghazi* writers. Ibn Ishaq's book about the Prophet's biography is considered to be a primary reference in this genre (Bozkurt, 2021, pp.12-13). Despite receiving criticism from the hadith scholars, his contribution to the genre was considered unparalleled (Mujani, 2012, p.962).

While only a portion of the book has survived (Bozkurt, 2021, p.13), a revised version of the work by Ibn Hisham (d.833) has survived in its entirety. Ibn Hisham's revision includes abbreviations, explanations, and changes to the text of Ibn Ishaq. He explained that the original work included matters which were embarrassing to mention, offensive in nature, and untrustworthy reports, as noted by Bozkurt (2021, p.13).

This now brings us to the discussion of Ibn Ishaq's methodology for his book. Guillaume (d.1965), the translator of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*, explains that the Medinan period is methodically documented in chronological order (Ibn Ishaq, 2004, p.xviii-xix). As for the Meccan period, Guillaume states that no effort was made to ensure the accuracy of the reports. It does, however, appear that Ibn Ishaq was very much aware of this. Ibn Ishaq would frequently demonstrate his cautiousness when narrating questionable sources by beginning such reports with phrases such as 'it is alleged' and the like, indicating the

possibility of it being false or that he holds an open mind regarding it. According to Robson (1956, p.454), Ibn Ishaq's usage of such phrases for the Meccan period makes it feel almost legendary in nature.

Evidently, he has included authentic and questionable reports in his work. Moreover, Ibn Ishaq uses the *isnad* system in his work sparsely (Robson, 1956, p.451). At times, he suffices by only quoting his direct authority, sometimes taking it further back, at times to the companion or even the Prophet. Although this makes it difficult to ascertain the source of his reports, it has been argued that the reports in question were so well-known that there was no need to provide an *isnad* for them (Robson, 1956, p.452). With the absence of a clear methodology provided by Ibn Ishaq, such an argument becomes challenging to accept, as one is unable to differentiate a well-established report from untrue reports.

When concluding an incident or transmitting conflicting reports, Ibn Ishaq often uses the phrase 'God knows best what happened' (Robson, 1956, p.455). Robson (1956, p.456) has suggested that this is demonstrative of Ibn Ishaq's apprehensiveness regarding the reports, meaning that he would not accept a narration without questioning it. Whilst this may be true, this remains speculative as no methodology has been stipulated by Ibn Ishaq.

Legendary, miraculous, and conflicting reports have been included in his work (Bozkurt, 2021, p.27). Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian accounts have also been incorporated in the book (Sertkaya, 2022, p.4). Despite alluding to the dubious nature of some reports, Ibn Ishaq had no objections to including these types of reports. In contrast, these types of reports do allow for an insight into the historical context of that time and the types of reports in circulation.

As for the Satanic Verses incident, Ibn Ishaq (2004, p.217) has not provided an *isnad* for the incident. While the incident is situated in the Meccan period of the book, Ibn Ishaq has not followed the report with any implicative phrases, making it impossible to determine his thoughts about its authenticity. It is possible, however, that Ibn Ishaq has not provided an *isnad* due to it being a well-known incident, not in need of corroboration. On the other hand, Ibn Hisham (1990), the editor of Ibn Ishaq's book, has not included it in his book. This, of course, does not conclusively imply that he rejected the incident. Rather, at the very least, he found it to be problematic.

1.2 Al-Tabari

The second work of concern here is that of al-Tabari (d.922) entitled *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-Muluk*. Sertkaya (2022, p.7) has described it as the most important work of Islamic history. In this work, al-Tabari has attempted to document the chronological history of the world, including the biography of the Prophet. This portion of the book was warmly welcomed as it became a primary reference for later *sirah* scholars.

However, much like Ibn Ishaq's work, al-Tabari's book was criticised for containing unsubstantiated and extraordinary reports (Sertkaya, 2022, p.7). Unlike Ibn Ishaq, al-Tabari has explicitly explained the methodology that he uses in the book. In the introduction, al-Tabari (1989, pp.168-171) states that he will be documenting every report that had reached him about the beginning of times until its end. Relying upon traditions and reports, each of them will be attributed to its transmitter, ultimately creating a chain of narration.

Before concluding the introduction, al-Tabari (1988, pp.170-171) prepares his readers to expect reports in his book, transmitted by figures of authority of the past, which are baseless, with no epistemic value. Absolving himself of blame, Tabari concludes the

section by making it clear that he should not be blamed for such information; rather, those who transmit it are at fault. Consequently, he has only transmitted what he had received.

It is evident from al-Tabari that the authenticity of reports was not of concern to him. Therefore, authentic, dubious, and even forged transmissions have been documented by al-Tabari. It is for this reason that he has been accused of “historicising legend” (Sertkaya, 2022, p.7). This naturally made later Muslim historians sceptical when referencing his book.

Unlike his other work, the exegesis of the Quran, al-Tabari intentionally refrains from assessing the reports he has included in the book (Sertkaya, 2022, p.7). The justification of such an approach is that he is merely cataloguing any report that has reached him, as it would be expected from a historian. It is almost as though al-Tabari is leaving the responsibility of verification and authentication to the reader.

Now, bringing the discussion to the Satan verses incident, unlike Ibn Ishaq, al-Tabari (1988, pp.108-111) has mentioned two slightly varying reports with their *isnads*. Interestingly, al-Tabari mentions Ibn Ishaq in one of the *isnads* and two further authorities beyond him. Whereas Ibn Ishaq has not listed any authority from whom he had received the report. Additionally, al-Tabari (2010, pp.230-234) has included approximately nine reports of the incident in his exegesis of the Quran, including the report of Ibn Ishaq.

Al-Tabari does not explicitly confirm or reject the incident. Rather, according to Arif and Kurjum (2020, p.348-349), al-Tabari takes a more nuanced approach. Whilst Al-Tabari abstains from directly attributing it to the Prophet as an authentic hadith, or any eyewitness for that matter, he demonstrates his acknowledgement of the historical existence of the incident. He does, however, begin the discussion in the exegete with the

Arabic phrase '*qeela*' (Al-Tabari, 2010, p.230), meaning that it has been said. This can be suggestive of al-Tabari thinking of the reports as being questionable.

1.3 Method Evaluation

The scholars of *sirah-maghazi* works did not restrict their reports to complete *isnads* (Ahmed, 2017, p.29). The majority of reports in these categories of work were *mursal*; in other words, they only reach the successors who are the second-generation Muslims (Ahmed, 2017, p.29). In other words, the *isnad* does not trace back to an eyewitness or companion of the Prophet. This type of report will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

Secondly, they would include reports that were narrated by ambiguous, untrustworthy, or even unknown narrators. Lastly, these scholars would often combine a number of similar reports to create a single narrative, making it impossible to trace any specific portion of the narrative to its original authority.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned conditions would not withstand the criteria of *isnad* criticism. However, due to their undeniable existence in the *sirah-maghazi* literature, and without which a significant amount of the material would be dismissed, the hadith scholars were seemingly forced to introduce a concession for them (Ahmed, 2017, p.30). Effectively, it consisted of relaxing the *isnad* standards when it came to reports with no legal or creedal implications. Flexibility in the reports of *sirah-maghazi* has led scholars to question the reliability of such pieced-together classical works (Sertkaya, 2022, p.8). They argued that it became the reason for unsubstantiated reports being included and embraced by later Muslims and non-Muslims, making it a cause of contention among scholars.

Another objection made against these types of reports is the exaggerated nature of pre-Islamic traditions found within them (Sertkaya, 2022, p.9). These can be seen in the reports related to battles and the life stories of significant historical figures. In turn, it is argued that reports of a similar nature, be they mythical or apocryphal, have been inserted into the *sirah-maghazi* literature.

On the other hand, scholars have discussed the complementary relationship between hadith and the *sirah-maghazi* literature. The study of hadith without the contextual guidance of the *sirah-maghazi* literature has the potential for hadith to be understood ahistorically (Makarim, 2025, p.46). Events and laws may be understood or derived incorrectly. Similarly, the isolated study of the *sirah-maghazi* literature has the risk of allowing unreliable material to be included in the works and, therefore, its study along with hadith is able to provide a verification system. Hence, there is a need to combine the two approaches to avoid methodological reductionism.

Hadith reports aim to be prescriptive and authoritative, and *sirah-maghazi* serves to be descriptive and contextual. The *sirah-maghazi* literature documents “educational, inspirational and narrative value” (Makarim, 2025, p.48) content in order to strengthen the understanding of revelation and the identity of the Muslims. It attempts to make the Prophet’s life more relatable to the Muslims after his death. Likewise, while *sirah-maghazi* reports are not utilised for law, they can offer epistemic value in understanding the objectives of Islamic law (*Maqasid al-Shariah*) and the principles of justice used by the Prophet during his lifetime (Makarim, 2025, pp.51-52). Overall, the *sirah-maghazi* literature has preserved the early memory of Muslims, especially the reports that were being circulated, and allowed access to historians to controversial reports with limited censorship.

This does, however, come with its own challenges. It has allowed for problematic reports to be quoted and used as established history or fact. This is much more evident if the methodology of the scholars of *Sirah-Maghazi* works is not considered when quoting from them, or the scholar has not explicitly mentioned their methodology of documenting reports. The Satanic verses incident can serve as an example for this, as it continues to be quoted as an established episode of early Islamic history for two fundamental reasons. The first being its mere documentation in the early *sirah-maghazi* literature. Secondly, later authors have argued that early historians, such as Ibn Ishaq and al-Tabari, would have only included them in their works if they deemed it to be authentic, which appears to be speculative. This is demonstrated below.

According to Magnusson (2007, pp.1-3), the most plausible reason for the return of the Muslims who had migrated to Abyssinia in early Islam is the Satanic Verses incident. It is Magnusson's (2007, p.3) claim that both Ibn Ishaq and al-Tabari "unequivocally accepted Muhammad's recitation of the Satanic Verses as the reason the Muslims left their African refuge."

Magnusson (2007, p.4) has further argued that had it not been true, no Muslim would have created such a story, nor would any reputable Muslim scholar have entertained it. Moreover, he states that had it been of questionable sources, Ibn Ishaq and al-Tabari would not have included it in their works. Armstrong (2007, p.57) and Spencer (2006, pp.78-83) have also made a similar argument. This is not a valid argument; rather, it is a more nuanced discussion as discussed above. The incident being placed in the Meccan period without an *Isnad* casts doubts on Ibn Ishaq's narration. As for al-Tabari, he has included any and all reports that he had received, irrespective of their reliability, also making it questionable. Therefore, transmission does not necessitate endorsement.

Spencer (2006, p.83) further invokes the Mutazilite Quranic exegete al-Zamakhshari (d.1143) as an authority who has accepted the incident. However, other exegetes, perhaps more authoritative, have rejected the incident, such as Ibn Kathir (d.1373) (1999, p.441), al-Qurtubi (d.1273) (2006b, p.424), and al-Razi (d.1210) (1981, p.51). Al-Zamakhshari (2009, p.699), unlike the three aforementioned exegetes, has not provided any epistemological reasoning for his inclusion of the incident, despite its contentious nature in early Islam.

Ahmed (2017, p.23) has made an interesting observation. As the *sirah-maghazi* reports do not aim to serve the same purpose as that of hadith, whether it be establishing a principle of theology or to derive law, there is no apparent reason to assess them in the same manner. Since they serve different functions, they should have their own method of assessment. However, there does not appear to be a specific method used to assess *sirah-maghazi* reports, nor has Ahmed suggested a method. Therefore, until such a method is developed, *sirah-maghazi* reports will continue to be subjected to hadith assessment methods.

To conclude, the *sirah-maghazi* method does not possess the epistemic capacity to evaluate the authenticity of a report; rather, by design, its utility is to document the reports of the past descriptively and make them available for later generations. Therefore, the Satanic verses incident cannot be explicitly evaluated by using the methodology of the *sirah-maghazi* scholars alone, although there are indications of its unreliability when examined in light of the methodology of the transmitting scholars.

Section 2 – *Isnad* Criticism

The second of the three methods of hadith assessment that will be discussed and evaluated is that which is known as *isnad* criticism. The discussion of *isnad* criticism is very lengthy, allowing the hadith scholars to write voluminous books about the topic. As such, only those topics which are directly relevant to the evaluation of the Satanic verses' incident will be discussed.

2.1 Background

Hadith authenticity has been one of the key challenges for the hadith scholars since the early days of Islam (Hallaq, 1999, p.75). Approximately two decades after the Prophet's death, hadiths were being fabricated and were being falsely ascribed to the Prophet in the thousands (Khan, 2010, p.xx). The hadith scholars attempted to filter the fabricated from the authentic; however, it was impossible to ensure absolute accuracy despite all their efforts. There has been much speculation around the root causes of individuals fabricating hadith, which is not of concern to the current discussion.

Ibn Sirin (d.110), a highly decorated scholar of the second generation, has commented that the investigation regarding the source of a hadith did not begin until the early Muslims' civil war (Khan, 2010, p.30). The investigation comprised identifying and evaluating the transmitters and the method of transmission of the hadith. It was approximately half a century after the Prophet migrated to Madinah when the *isnad* of hadith began to take a significant role in hadith verification. By the end of the century, the hadith scholars had developed a fully functioning science which collected detailed biographies of the transmitters of hadith (*ilm asma al-rijal*). These biographies would then be used to investigate the authenticity of the hadith by evaluating the transmitters in the chain, hence, *isnad* criticism. If the *isnad* was deemed to be authentic, then almost

on all occasions the attached *matn* would also be considered authentic. This concept requires further discussion, which will be addressed in the next section. If, on the other hand, there were any issues found in the *isnad*, the *matn* too would be graded as either weak or even fabricated.

Scholars who were engaged in the authentication of hadith can be thought of as critical historians or investigative journalists who are attempting to ascertain the reliability of their sources (Ali, 2022, p.48). So, when a transmitter claimed that the Prophet did or said something, these investigative scholars would employ a rational method to determine the credibility of the statement: investigate the source of the information (Ali, 2022, p.49). Based on the credibility of the source, the hadith would then be placed in one of two categories. The first of the two is a *mutawatir* hadith, which yields definitive knowledge, and the second is an *ahad* hadith, which is probabilistic in nature (Ali, 2022, p.49).

Ali (2022, p.49) has further discussed three primary categories of an *ahad* hadith. Firstly, there is the *sahih* (authentic) hadith category, which possesses a high probability in its attribution to the Prophet. The second category is called *hasan* (good) hadith which is a level below Sahih with probable sureness in its attribution. The final category is *da'if* (weak) hadith, meaning that the probability of its attribution is questionable although not impossible. Each category is then further divided into subcategories based on the strength of the hadith (Ali, 2022, p.49). For example, if two hadith with independent *isnads* share a common *matn* or theme, their probability of attribution will rise (Hallaq, 1999, p.81).

2.2 Methodology

This section will discuss the criteria that are assessed to determine the authenticity of a hadith. Essentially, the hadith scholars investigate five criteria of the *isnad* for every

hadith (Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri, 2006, p.5). Three of the five criteria appear to be linked to the *isnad*, with the remaining two related to the *matn*.

2.2.1 *Sahih* Hadith

Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri (d.1245) (2006, p.5) explains that for a hadith to be graded as authentic (*Sahih*), firstly, it must possess a continuous chain of transmission. In other words, the *isnad* needs to be traced back to the final authority (Azmi, 2022, p.68), which would be the Prophet in most cases, with it occasionally being a companion, without any missing link. The second criterion requires each transmitter to be upright and of righteous conduct (Al-Shahrazuri, 2006, p.5). Azmi (2002, p.64) has explained this to mean that the character of the transmitter is Islamically acceptable. Therefore, if anything un-Islamic is observed from them will inherently disqualify them from being of righteous conduct. The third criterion is that each narrator can transmit the hadith precisely as they received it from the authority before them. These three criteria are directly related to the transmitters.

As for the remaining two, they are in connection with the *matn*. Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri (2006, p.5) states that the hadith must be free from any anomaly (*shadh*) and hidden defects (*mu'allal*). A *shadh* hadith is explained as an isolated narration in which a transmitter's hadith contradicts another hadith which has either been transmitted by a larger number of narrators of equal status, or the isolated hadith contradicts the narration of a transmitter of higher reputation (Azmi, 2002, p.68). As for a hadith with a hidden defect, this criterion has been explained by way of an example. Suppose there is a narrator who transmitted a hadith back to the Prophet which meets all the above criteria, while a larger number of narrators report the same hadith as the statement of a companion and not the Prophet. This would be indicative of the hadith attributed to the

Prophet having a hidden defect, the mistaken attribution to the Prophet in this case. This, of course, can only be identified by the bona fide scholars of hadith.

2.2.2 *Hasan* Hadith

According to Al-Shahrazuri (2006, p.17), the vast majority of hadith fall under this category of hadith. Having researched all the scholarly discussions surrounding this category, he has concluded that there are two types of *hasan* hadith. The first type is the *isnad*, which has a narrator whose suitability as a narrator has not been established. Conversely, there is no information, such as intentionally lying about hadith or adopting un-Islamic practices, to disqualify the narrator's hadith. Moreover, there are other similar hadith which corroborate the hadith with the ambiguous narrator. Thus, making the hadith acceptable based on corroborating hadith, which also removes the possibility of anomalies and hidden defects.

The second type of *hasan* hadith is when the identity, truthfulness and honesty of a narrator in the *isnad* is well established. However, the narrator is deficient in their retention and exactitude when transmitting a hadith. This is in addition to the default criteria of the hadith being free from anomalies and hidden defects. In a *hasan* hadith, the criteria of integrity and precision of the transmission are deficient, meaning that it does not meet the standards found in a *sahih* hadith (Al-Shahrazuri, 2006, p.18). Any hadith which does not meet the criteria of either *sahih* or *hasan* is considered to be *da'if* (weak) (Al-Shahrazuri, 2006, p.24).

Having understood the criteria of *isnad* criticism, the next discussion will be regarding the tool that is used to evaluate the transmitters in the *isnad*: the science of *Jarh wa Ta'dil*.

2.2.3 The Science of *Jarh wa Ta'dil*

With the inception of the *isnad* system, the unique science of *Jarh wa Ta'dil* also came into existence (Azmi,2002, p.37). This is a science which directly deals with ascertaining the reliability of narrators in an *isnad* (Ali et al., 2015, p.284). Its primary objective is to determine if the hadith of any given transmitter is acceptable or not (Nida et al., 2024, p.208). It will either clear the narrator of any faults and render them acceptable, or it will reject the narrator. Two fundamental qualities of the narrators were investigated for their hadiths to be acceptable: their uprightness and precision in transmission (Ali et al., 2015, p.286).

Conversely, scholars such as Ibn Hajar (2011, p.83) have composed a criticism checklist. The presence of any point would disqualify a narrator as reliable. Five are in relation to the integrity of the narrator, while the remaining five are to do with the precision of transmission. The ten criticisms are as follows: intentionally transmitting fabricated hadith, being accused of lying, likewise, they are known for lying in their day-to-day interactions although it is not evident in their transmission of hadith, excessive transmissional mistakes, negligence in precision, public transgression/sin which does not reach the level of disbelief, narrating based on mistaken assumption, contradicting more reliable hadith narrators, the credibility of the narrator is unknown, involvement in innovation which contradicts the established norms of the Prophet, and lastly weak memory.

The hadith scholars had, based on the criteria above, investigated the transmitters of hadith, which they later documented into dedicated works (Ali et al., 2015, p.286), becoming more prominent from the second half of the third century of Islam (Siddiqui, 2009, p.9). There were multiple scholarly approaches in their documentation of their

findings. Some dedicated their work to only documenting transmitters whom they considered to be weak in narration; others dealt with only reliable transmitters, etc. These works would include the biographies of the narrators, findings of their investigations, and reasoning for the conclusions. As could be expected, these works would later become invaluable to hadith scholars, more so for later scholars who did not meet the narrators themselves. The result of this process would have produced narrator dictionaries. It is for this reason that Nida et al. (2024, p.210) have considered the science of *Jarh wa Ta'dil* to be the most important epistemic tool in practising *isnad* criticism. Finally, if, after investigating a narrator, the scholars are in disagreement regarding the status of a narrator, the rejection of the narrator would be favoured as a means of precaution (Arif & Kurjum, 2020, p.356).

2.3 Method Evaluation

This section will not consider the evaluation of *isnad* criticism from modern sceptical approaches. Much has been written for and against such an approach. For this paper, the evaluation will be based on its epistemic methodology and application.

2.3.1 Strengths

Evidently, there are several strengths to the *isnad* criticism method. One of the most important strengths of the *isnad* criticism method would be the fact that it had been developed for the sole purpose of providing a standardised methodology for determining the authenticity of hadith, the credibility of the narrators, and limiting the amount of forged hadith being inserted into the hadith corpus. As Brown (2009, p.29) stated, it “was a solid first line of defence against forgery.” Anyone who claimed to possess a hadith was required to evidence their claim with an *isnad*. If they were not able to provide an *isnad*, it would not be accepted.

The *isnad* criticism method further created the platform for hadith authentication through the method of corroboration (Brown, 2009, p.29). To determine the reliability of a transmitter, the scholars were able to compare the narrator's hadith with the students of the same authority from whom they had received the hadith. This made it easier to identify discrepancies and filter out fabricated hadith.

By cross-referencing death dates, geography and the phrases used by the narrator at the time of transmission, the scholars were able to determine if any given *isnad* possessed a missing link or if it was contiguous. Through the *isnad* criticism method, the scholars were able to determine if a narrator had genuinely met and studied with their authority (Brown, 2009, p.89). This was as important as transmitter reliability, because if it was concluded that there was a missing narrator in the *isnad* whose status is unknown, the hadith would be rejected. Conversely, if a narrator's hadith was successfully corroborated, it would elevate the credibility of said narrator.

Another strength of the *isnad* system, at least theoretically, is the potential to reconstruct earlier sources (Motzki, 2005, pp.242-243). The *isnad* system is informative of the history of the text before its documentation into formal works. The titles and the names of the respective authors of works and compilations from the first two centuries have reached us in the writings of later scholars. While these ancient works are not directly available to us, there is the possibility of reconstructing and recovering some of their materials through the *isnad* system. Through the investigation of the *isnad* of some works, if an early common transmitter is identifiable, it is possible to reconstruct their reports. For example, looking through al-Tabari's history work and al-Baladuri's (d.892) *Futuh al-Buldan*, scholars were able to identify portions of Ibn Ishaq's materials which, otherwise, have not reached us directly from him. This method of source reconstruction has been

accepted by historians of early Islam; however, there remains some contention in its application as discussed by Motzki (2005, p.243).

2.3.2 Limitations

There are, nevertheless, several limitations with this method of hadith assessment. Despite the importance of the science of *Jarh wa Ta'dil* in the *isnad* criticism method, there is a level of subjectivity intertwined in its application. As highlighted by Goldziher (1966, p.143), the reliability of a narrator is “subject to the taste and subjective judgement of the critic.”

Some hadith scholars were unable to separate their personal biases or preconceptions in their judgement of a narrator (Brown, 2009, pp.86-87). For example, the scholar Al-Juzajani (d.1070) was well known for his disdain for Shiism. When he would reject a narrator based on their being a heretical Shiite, other scholars would consider this evaluation with caution. On the other hand, Ibn Adi' (d.976) was a more objective *isnad* critic who would base his evaluation on hadith corroboration. It has been noted of him that on many an occasion, he had overturned the judgement of earlier scholars, stating, “I have not found uncorroborated reports among his hadiths” (Brown, 2009, p.87). Hence, despite the method of *isnad* criticism being theoretically standardised, it can be very much subjective in its application.

Additionally, the investigating scholars who have documented their findings, such as al-Bukhari (d.870), Ibn Abi Hatim (d.938), Ibn Hibban (d.965), and the like, would have to rely on second, third, and fourth-hand information. This was more so for narrators whom they had not personally met. They would have to rely on and make a judgment based on the information that was available to them. Based on the above discussion, if the documenting scholars did not have the relevant information at hand, which would allow

them to differentiate between personal biases and fact, they would run the risk of misjudging narrators.

Moreover, Nida et al. (2024, p.212) have discussed three classifications for the hadith scholars who would investigate the narrators in an *isnad*. Firstly, there is the group of scholars who were swift in giving a negative (*Jarh*) judgement based on negligible errors which do not affect the overall authenticity of the hadith. Secondly, some are too relaxed in their judgement. The last group is those who take a more balanced approach. They are neither too harsh nor too relaxed in their appraisal of a narrator. This is, nevertheless, demonstrative of the subjective nature of its application, dependent on the nature of the investigative scholar.

Disagreements regarding a narrator's credibility remain a limitation of the *isnad* criticism method. At times, narrators were considered credible by a group of scholars, while others would reject them. A prime example of this would be Abu Hanifah (d.767). Al-Bukhari (1986, p.240) and Al-Nasai (d.915) (1985, p.212) have both declared him weak in Hadith due to weak memory.

On the other hand, Ali Ibn al-Madini (d.849) has stated that Abu Hanifah is reliable (Ibn Abd al-Barr, 1994, p.1083). This was also corroborated by Yahya bin Ma'een (d.847), as quoted by Ibn Abd al-Barr (1997, p.197). Such conflicting gradings made it difficult for later scholars to ascertain the reliability of a narrator.

Furthermore, in addition to hadith fabrication, *isnad* fabrication was not uncommon for a number of reasons. Forgers would either attach their own *isnads* to a hadith which was not transmitted through that chain, or they would fabricate completely unprecedented chains (Brown, 2009, p.75). The transmission of hadith was a method of gaining authority

and credibility, and in the absence of a valid *isnad*, the easiest solution was to fabricate one.

Other reasons would include increasing the authenticity of an existing hadith through the process of corroborating *isnad* (Brown, 2009, p.75). A final motivation for fabricating *isnad* was to produce an elevated *isnad*, reducing the number of transmitters between the fabricator and the Prophet. Such short-chained hadith were given a particular value by hadith collectors from the tenth century onwards, motivating the production of such forged *isnad*.

It can now be understood as to why scholars such as Hallaq (1999, pp.88-90) and Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri (2006, p.5) have likened the *isnad* system to a probability scale. The more criteria of the *Sahih* category a hadith meets, the higher the probability of its attribution to the Prophet. With the fabrication of hadith and *isnad*, it becomes very difficult to guarantee, beyond a reasonable doubt, that a hadith, more so an Ahad hadith, is truly from the Prophet. Perhaps, it is for this reason Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri felt the need to clarify that an authentic *isnad* does not necessitate that the attached *matn* is of sound nature. Similarly, an inauthentic *isnad* does not mean that the *matn* is completely false; rather, there is the possibility of it truly being from the Prophet.

A final challenge that occurs within the *isnad* criticism method is that of *tadlis* (concealment). *Tadlis* can be summarised into two approaches. The first approach is a narrator concealing the identity of their immediate authority and narrating the hadith from an authority above (Nawaz, 2024, p.51). This could have been done for several reasons, such as the direct authority of the narrator being a weak narrator or that the authority above is more famous and well-known, and to narrate from them directly would elevate their status.

The second method in which *tadlis* was exercised was a narrator giving the false impression that they had received hadith from a scholar whom they had met (Nawaz, 2024, p.53). However, in reality, they had not received that hadith from the scholar. Equally, some narrators gave the impression of meeting and receiving certain hadith from authorities that they had, in fact, never met.

In summary, while the *isnad* criticism method provides a robust method of narrator evaluation, it is not free of limitations. In the absence of modern technology, this method was revolutionary for the early hadith scholars. Its method was adopted universally by anyone who wanted to narrate hadith. Even the disingenuous chose to manipulate the system, as opposed to rebelling against the system.

2.4 *Isnad* Criticism and the Satanic Verses Incident

This section will comprise applying the *isnad* criticism method in the four narrations selected in the introduction. The *matn* attached to each *isnad* will not be discussed here. Due to space constraints, this section will not be discussing the narrators that have been generally considered credible. Rather, this section will aim to discuss those narrators in the five *isnads* which do not meet the standards of *sahih* or *hasan*.

The *isnads* will be presented here in the original form as documented by the collector of the narration. If there is a need for any clarification, this will be supplemented with the reconstruction and additions of Shahab Ahmed (2017).

2.4.1 The narration of Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandi (d.983)

A reconstruction of the *isnad* of As-Samarqandi (1993, p.400) in his Quranic exegesis, along with supplementary clarifications from Ahmed (2017, p.227), is as follows:

(1) al-Khalil bin Ahmad al-Sijzi al-Samarqandi (d.979) → (2) Ibrahim bin Muhammad bin Mattuway al-Isbahani → (3) Ja'far bin Zayd al-Tayalisi al-Baghdadi → (4) Ibrahim bin Muhammad bin 'Ar'arah al-Basri al-Baghdadi → (5) Abu Asim al-Nabil bin al-Dahhak bin Makhlad al-Makki al-Basri → (6) Ammar bin al-Aswad al-Makki → (7) Saeed bin Jubayr → (8) Ibn Abbas (d.687).

According to Ahmed (2017, p.227), in the name Ja'far bin Zayd al-Tayalisi, the usage of Zayd is an orthographic error. Rather, the correct name is Ja'far bin Muhammad al-Tayalisi al-Baghdadi. Secondly, the name Ammar bin al-Aswad should have been read Uthman bin al-Aswad, another orthographic mistake.

This *isnad*, according to Ahmed (2017, pp.8-9), is the only *isnad*, out of the fifty *isnads* that he has identified, that meets the criteria of a *sahih* hadith. The remaining forty-nine *isnads* are defective in one way or another. He has further stated that, by and large, all scholars have, after its initial appearance in al-Samarqandi's exegesis in the fourth century, let it go by unnoticed or have not commented upon it (Ahmed, 2017, pp.8-9). However, an examination of the *isnad* has revealed three potential *isnad*-related discrepancies as detailed in the following subsection.

2.4.1.1 First Discrepancy: Al-Khalil bin Ahmad al-Sijzi al-Samarqandi

The first authority in the *isnad* is al-Khalil bin Ahmad al-Sijzi al-Samarqandi. Ahmed (2017, p.228) has correctly highlighted the qualifications of al-Khalil al-Samarqandi as the judge of Samarqand and a Hanafi jurist. Nonetheless, Ahmed has not cited any phrase of credibility as a hadith narrator. This does not appear to be unintentional.

There is very little written about al-Khalil in the narrator dictionaries regarding his career as a hadith narrator. Having analysed several narrator dictionaries, the following can be deduced about him: (1) He was the *Shaykh* of the Hanafis of his era, (2) possessed an

advanced knowledge of jurisprudence, (3) travelled extensively in the pursuit of learning, (4) was known for poetry, and (5) an *Imam* in every field of knowledge (Al-Tha'alibi, 1983, p.387; Ibn Abi Awfa, 1993, p.177; Ibn Qutlubugha, 1962, p.27).

Although al-Khalil al-Samarqandi's scholarship is recognised by later scholars, none of them has made an explicit comment about his status as a hadith narrator. Ibn al-'Adim (d.1262) (n.d., p.3374), on the other hand, and Ibn Kathir (2010, p.322) have mentioned his involvement with hadith in passing. As for Ibn Kathir, he stated that al-Khalil possessed an advanced knowledge of jurisprudence and hadith. Whereas Ibn al-'Adim (n.d., p.3374) has mentioned that al-Khalil settled for a short while in Nishapur as a hadith teacher. The silence of some scholars and the passing comment of others do not necessarily constitute an endorsement of credibility as a hadith narrator. Hence, to consider the *isnad*, at first glance, as *sahih* is difficult.

Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri (2006, p.85) has a lengthy discussion about narrators who are found in a similar situation to this. As such, he explains that when there is an unknown narrator in the *isnad*, there are three possible scenarios. For the purpose of the discussion here, only scenario number two is of concern. Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri explains that when the internal integrity of a narrator is unknown, meaning a thorough assessment of the person for the purpose of determining their credibility as a hadith narrator is not available, yet they are generally known to be an externally upright person, there are two scholarly opinions regarding their hadith.

The first of the two opinions is that the hadith will be rejected (2006, p.85). While the second opinion, which Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri appears to favour, is that the hadith will be accepted. This opinion has been attributed to some of the Shafiite scholars. Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri further cites the precedent of earlier hadith compilations in which certain

narrators had been included about whom it would not be possible to ascertain their internal integrity.

The issue, as highlighted here, is that this appears to be the opinion of a minority of hadith scholars, albeit that Ibn al-Salah is among this group. This is suggestive that the majority view of the hadith scholars is that the hadith is not to be accepted, although Ibn al-Salah has not explicitly stated this. Nevertheless, when applying this principle to al-Khalil al-Samarqandi, there is the possibility of al-Khalil being endorsed as a credible narrator or being rejected. It does appear that Ahmed (2017, pp.227-228) has taken the same stance as Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri, though he has not gone into this discussion. For clarification purposes, the rejection of a narrator's hadith is not always indicative of them being a bad or corrupt person. Rather, it would be based on one of the ten criticisms outlined by Ibn Hajar (2011, p.83) as discussed earlier.

2.4.1.2 Second Discrepancy: Muhammad bin Ali al-Muqri al-Baghdadi

The second discrepancy, which can also be mitigated, is that Ahmed (2017, p.225) has identified a similar *isnad* as the one above, however with an additional narrator between (2) Ibrahim bin Muhammad bin Mattuway al-Isbahani and (3) Ja'far bin Zayd al-Tayalisi al-Baghdadi. This narrator is Muhammad bin Ali al-Muqri al-Baghdadi who, as admitted by Ahmed (2017, p.226), is damaging to the *isnad* due to his reliability being unknown. Therefore, that second version of the *isnad*, does not meet the standards of *sahih*.

Ahmed (2017, p.227), has argued that the *isnad* without the additional narrator is reasonable, as there was the possibility of Ibrahim al-Isbahani and al-Tayalisi to have met in Iraq, more so, when the former had travelled to Iraq. Moreover, in the footnotes, admittedly, Ahmed (2017, pp.227-228) further argues that the presence of Muhammad al-Baghdadi serves no purpose in the second chain other than to weaken it. He further

suggests that when an opponent of a hadith wanted to discredit it, they would insert an unreliable narrator in the *isnad* to weaken it. This can be a valid argument, as it was not uncommon for hadith scholars to travel, seeking elevated *isnad*.

Nevertheless, the opposite can also be argued. If it can be argued that an unreliable narrator can be inserted into an *isnad* to weaken it, it is not unreasonable to assume that an unreliable narrator has been removed to strengthen the *isnad*. Nonetheless, it does raise questions about the integrity of the *isnad*.

2.4.1.3 Third Discrepancy: Ibn Abbas

The final authority in the *isnad* is the cousin of the Prophet, Ibn Abbas. It is assumed, as suggested by Magnusson (2007, p.1), that the first Muslim migration from Makkah to Abyssinia occurred in the year 615, only to return a few months later, during which time the Satanic verses incident supposedly occurred. If it is believed that this event occurred around this period of time, during the early days of Islam, there will be a chronological discrepancy. This discrepancy is directly connected to the *isnad* and the incident.

According to Ibn Hajar (1995, p.122) and his predecessor, al-Dhahabi (1982, p.332), Ibn Abbas was born three years before the migration of the Prophet from Makkah to Madinah. The migration of the Prophet took place approximately in the year 622. Consequently, Ibn Abbas would have been born three years prior, in the year 619. This would mean that there is a four-year gap between the incident and the birth of Ibn Abbas. Therefore, it would be chronologically impossible for Ibn Abbas to be an eyewitness to the incident. Although the wordings of the narration suggest that Ibn Abbas was present during the incident, as it begins with Ibn Abbas stating that the Prophet recited such and such verse. As it was impossible for Ibn Abbas to be an eyewitness, he must have received the narration from someone who may or may not have been an eyewitness to the incident.

Nonetheless, there is a missing link in the *isnad* whose credibility as a hadith narrator is unknown. This, of course, will disqualify the narration from being *sahih*. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the footnotes of the edited print of al-Samarqandi's (1993, p.400) Quranic exegesis by Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyyah have noted a similar objection. The editors' objections to the incident included the absence of Ibn Abbas at the time of the incident. This is of particular interest as Ahmed (2017, pp.227, 321) has cited the same copy of the work; however, he has not acknowledged or discussed this objection. Perhaps, it is for these reasons that later scholars did not afford this particular narration any additional attention. This will be discussed in further detail in section 2.5.

2.4.2 The first narration of Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari

Al-Tabari (1988, p.108; 2010, p.231) has included the following *isnad* in his history and Quranic exegesis. The *isnad*, including Ahmed's (2017, pp.44-45) reconstruction, reads as follows:

(1) Muhammad Ibn Humayd al-Razi (d.862) → (2) Salamah bin Fadl al-Razi (d.806) → (3) Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Madani → (4) Yazid bin Ziyad al-Madani (d.748-758) → (5) Muhammad bin Ka'b al-Qurazi al-Madani (d.735).

Ahmed (2017, pp.45-48, 75) has discussed that the first three narrators in the above *isnad* have been criticised by the hadith scholars for one reason or another. For the sake of brevity, the appraisal will be primarily taken from the biographical dictionaries of al-Dhahabi as they generally compile and summarise the statements and judgements of earlier scholars.

Below is an appraisal of the narrators:

- (1) Muhammad Ibn Humayd al-Razi: the first narrator in the *isnad*. Several scholars have discredited Ibn Humayd as a narrator based on his being a known liar, whereby one scholar commented that he had not seen a more skilled liar than Ibn Humayd (Al-Dhahabi, 1995b, pp.126-127). Additionally, he was known to switch the *isnad* of one hadith with another and so on. Essentially, this can be treated as *tadlis*.
- (2) Salamah bin Fadl al-Razi: he was the direct student of Ibn Ishaq. He was recognised for his scholarship in the *sirah-maghazi* genre; however, it was quite the opposite when it came to hadith narration. Scholars such as Ibn Rahwayh, the teacher of al-Bukhari, al-Nasai, and the like considered him a weak narrator, although there was a minority group who did accept him as credible (Al-Dhahabi, 1995c, pp.273-274). As for the scholars who have discredited him, they have not provided any specific reason for the judgement, other than a comment from al-Bukhari which noted that some of Salamah's hadith would include objectionable content.
- (3) Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Madani: the author of the *Sirah* work discussed in section one. Regarding the credibility of Ibn Ishaq, the hadith scholars are extremely divided (Al-Dhahabi, 1995b, pp.57-62). The likes of Ahmad bin Hanbal, Ibn Maeen, and Ali bin al-Madini, who are revered as authorities in the narrator criticism arena, have deemed Ibn Ishaq as a credible hadith narrator. Conversely, al-Nasai, al-Daraqutni, and the like have weakened him as a narrator, with some considering him an excessive liar or, at the least, accusing him of lying.

Interestingly, al-Dhahabi (1995b, pp.57-62) has considered Ibn Ishaq to be a reliable hadith narrator. He is, in al-Dhahabi's opinion, deficient in memory, and therefore, whatever he has narrated alone, without corroboration from other narrators, is objectionable. However, al-Dhahabi has criticised him for including objectionable material in his *sirah* work. Furthermore, to his credit, Imam Muslim, the compiler of

Sahih Muslim, has used the narrations of Ibn Ishaq as secondary evidence on five occasions.

Nevertheless, having met at least one of the criticism points on Ibn Hajar's checklist, either being a liar or being accused of lying, disqualifies the *isnad* from being *sahih*.

Additionally, Muhammad bin Ka'b al-Qurazi al-Madani, who died in the year 108 after the Prophet's migration, was not an eyewitness of the incident. Therefore, similar to the first narration, at least one person is missing in the *isnad*, if not more individuals.

2.4.3 The second narration of Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari

This narration, unlike the previous one, can only be found in al-Tabari's (2010, p.233) Quranic exegesis. The *isnad*, along with Ahmed's (2017, p.139) invaluable additions, reads as follows:

(1) Yunus bin Abd al-'Ala → (2) Abd Allah bin Wahb al-Misri → (3) Yunus bin Yazid al-Ayli → (4) Muhammad bin Shihab al-Zuhri → (5) Abu Bakr bin Abd al-Rahman bin al-Harith.

This *isnad*, according to Ahmed (2017, p.139), is *sahih mursal*. The term *sahih mursal* is indicative of an authentic chain up to a *tabi'i*, the generation after that of the Prophet's companions. The validity of *sahih mursal* reports will be discussed in the next session.

Nevertheless, regarding Yunus bin Yazid al-Ayli, the majority of hadith scholars, including al-Dhahabi (1982b, pp.298-300), have considered him to be a credible narrator. There have been, nonetheless, a minority group of hadith scholars who have criticised him. Waki' has stated that Yunus bin Yazid al-Ayli possessed a weak memory, and others have alleged that he would make excessive mistakes when narrating from al-Zuhri. It does

seem that al-Dhahabi (1982b, pp.297) felt that these criticisms were not enough to discredit him, as he has considered him to be reliable.

In addition, the same issue which was highlighted for the previous two narrations remains. This *isnad* also does not reach back to an eyewitness, so most surely there are missing narrators in the chain.

2.4.4 The third narration of Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari

The final *isnad* to be analysed in this section is also found in the Quranic exegesis of al-Tabari (2010, p.232). The reconstructed *isnad* with Ahmed's (2017, p.147) additions reads as follows:

(1) Muhammad bin Abd al'Ala al-San'ani al-Basri → (2) al-Mu'tamir bin Sulayman al-Basri
→ (3) Daud bin Abi Hind al-Basri → (4) Abu al-'Aliyah al-Basri.

This narration too has been graded as *sahih mursal* by Ahmed (2017, p.147). There does not appear to be any criticism made against any of the narrators in the *isnad*. However, the narration remains *mursal*, not connected back to an eyewitness.

In conclusion, from the analysis of the four *isnads* above, it is clear that no *isnad* is impeccable. What is of greater concern up to now is that none of the fifty narrations identified by Ahmed (2017) can be traced back to an eyewitness. Therefore, the next section will explore the validity of a *sahih mursal isnad*.

2.5 The Validity of *Mursal* Hadith

Ibn Salah al-Shahrazuri (2006, p.39) has defined a *mursal* hadith as a narration wherein a *tabi'i* narrates a hadith directly from the Prophet without identifying the intermediary narrator in between. There is also the possibility of multiple unidentified intermediaries in between. It may be a companion or another *tabi'i*. Essentially, the credibility of the

unidentified narrator is unknown in the case of a *tabi'i* (Ibn Hajar , 2011, p.78). Hence, the *isnad* of such a narration will be considered disconnected.

The occurrence of such an omission was not done out of malice or ill intent, as opposed to *tadlis*; rather, it was done at a time when hadith scholars were not expected to provide an *isnad* for narrating a hadith (Brown, 2009, p.91). The early scholars, when discussing legal issues, would casually narrate hadith from the Prophet without an *isnad*, which were later documented by their students as they had uttered them.

Regarding the validity of a *mursal isnad*, Ibn Salah al-Shahrazuri (2006, p.40) has stated that the opinion of the majority of the hadith scholars is that a *mursal* hadith is generally considered to be a weak hadith and cannot serve as evidence unless it can be corroborated with other fully connected hadith. However, some scholars have not agreed with this based on some nuanced discussions beyond the scope of this discussion (Dad & Shafiq, 2014, pp.24-28). For example, Abu Hanifah and Malik have accepted the *mursal* narration of a reliable narrator, even in the absence of corroborating evidence.

There is one form of *mursal isnad* which is of relevance here, and that is the omission of a narrator by a companion, often referred to as *Mursal al-Sahabi* (Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri, 2006, p.41). In other words, a companion of the Prophet narrates from the Prophet something which they themselves did not witness or hear. Rather, they received it from someone unidentified in the *isnad*. Regarding such an *isnad*, it is believed that a companion would only narrate Prophetic hadith from another companion and not from a *tabi'i* (Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri, 2006, p.41). In light of this understanding, such an *isnad* will be treated as a fully connected *isnad*. This is also because a companion in the Sunni hadith sciences is believed to be always upright, not subject to the rules of narrator criticism.

In conclusion, if the isnad is *mursal* due to a *tabi'i* omitting his immediate authority, the hadith will be deemed weak and cannot be used as evidence in religious affairs without further corroboration. If, however, a companion is omitting another companion, the isnad is acceptable.

Now, turning the attention back to the narrations above. The three hadith of al-Tabari discussed above are the *mursal* hadith of three *tabi'*. Therefore, without the corroboration of a connected chain, they cannot be considered *sahih* or used as evidence in religious matters. There, now, remains the discussion about the *mursal isnad* of Ibn Abbas. Putting aside the possible issues with the *isnad* above, as discussed in discrepancies one and two, can the supposedly connected *mursal isnad* of Ibn Abbas corroborate and strengthen the remaining *mursal isnads*? It appears that Ibn Hajar thought so.

Ibn Hajar (n.d., p.114), after discussing a host of different *isnads* and confirming them all to be *mursal*, including a version of Ibn Abbas, has stated that the *mursal isnads* strengthen one another. Furthermore, Ibn Hajar (2000, p.558) has stated that the multiple isnads are an indication of there being a foundation of the incident. Therefore, according to Ibn Hajar, it appears that the incident can be assumed authentic.

Al-Albani (d.1999), an ardent rejector of the incident, has responded to the claims made by Ibn Hajar. Al-Albani (1996, p.38) has argued that the principle evoked by Ibn Hajar, that multiple channels of transmission strengthen each other, is not unrestricted. Rather, there are certain conditions for the application of this principle which Ibn Hajar has, according to him, overlooked. Al-Albani (1996, pp.39-40) has argued that not all weak hadith are the same. Weakness can come about for different reasons, such as weak memory, being *mursal*, a narrator being accused of fabricating hadith, anomalies in the

hadith, etc. Certain types of weakness can be overlooked when there are multiple channels of transmission for a particular hadith, while others cannot be excused.

Al-Albani (1996, p.40) addresses the hadith of Ibn Abbas, not through the *isnad* of al-Samarqandi as discussed above, but rather he discusses the *isnad* containing Muhammad al-Baghdadi. He reasons that the *isnad* contains a weakness that cannot be excused, as all the different chains that lead to him are extremely weak to the point where they cannot strengthen one another. Al-Albani (1996, p. 38-40) had adopted such a stance from Ibn al-Salah.

Moreover, Al-Albani (1996, p.40) acknowledges that there are four *isnads* which are *sahih mursal*, including the two above. It is his opinion that all other *isnads* are defective. Al-Albani, much like the majority of hadith scholars, has taken the position that *mursal* hadith are not acceptable due to the anonymity of the narrator or narrators between the *tabi'i* and the Prophet (1996, pp.41-44).

Al-Albani (1996, p.44) further develops a supporting argument for the above against Ibn Hajar. As there is at least one, if not more, unidentified narrators, there is the lingering possibility of them being weak. Furthermore, there is no method of ascertaining the level of weakness. So, it may be something that can be overlooked by corroborating *isnads*, or it could be something more severe, disqualifying it from strengthening other narrations and being strengthened by others. Therefore, a *mursal isnad*, for Al-Albani, cannot be evidence in religious matters.

Additionally, al-Albani (1996, p.43) has made an interesting observation, which he has ascribed to al-Shafi'i. The notion of *mursal* *isnads* strengthening one another can only be possible if it is established that each *tabi'i* in their own *isnad* had studied under different teachers. By doing this, it would be possible to ensure that all the *tabi'is* are not

transmitting the hadith from the same narrator. For if it were to be the same unidentified narrator, it would not be able to strengthen one another. As such, the *tabi'is* for the four *sahih mursal* isnads discussed earlier are contemporaries of each other with the possibility of sharing a common source for their narration. Hence, disqualifying the possibility of the *mursal isnads* supporting one another concerning the incident (Al-Albani, 1996, p.45).

Al-Albani has gone to great lengths to disprove the Satanic verses incident and, in the process, refute Ibn Hajar's claims. Al-Albani, however, does not address or acknowledge al-Samarqandi's supposed *sahih isnad* to Ibn Abbas. Consequently, he does not engage with the topic of *mursal al-Sahabiy*.

2.6 Concluding Observations

If the *isnad* of Ibn Abbas is genuinely considered to be *sahih*, this would warrant the need for further clarification for, perhaps, the most important question. Despite there being approximately fifty *isnads*, albeit with some overlap, the absence of a single eyewitness to this supposed extraordinary incident is of concern. The different narrations are in agreement that it had taken place in public, where the followers of the Prophet and non-Muslims were present and all performed prostration in unison. It also became the topic of discussion in Makkah. Moreover, if the news of such an incident was able to go from Makkah to the migrant Muslims in Abyssinia, it would not be unreasonable to assume that there must have been a documented eyewitness statement. Or at the very least the name of an eyewitness, be it a Muslim or a non-Muslim. If, however, much like the other isnads, al-Samaqandi's *isnad* is not *sahih*, the burden of answering the question of a named eyewitness can be reduced.

It is evident from the discussions in section two that the isnads, at least for the four analysed above, can be criticised. It is only after applying a few technical principles that some of these criticisms can be mitigated to a limited extent.

Section 3 – *Matn* Criticism

The third and final method of hadith assessment is *matn* criticism. This method is used to evaluate the authenticity of a hadith based on the content of the text, independent of, at least in theory, the *isnad* (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p.146).

3.1 Background

The topic of *matn* criticism has been a topic of debate amongst Muslim and non-Muslim scholars (Brown, 2012, p.357). Theoretically, this method of hadith authentication can allow the hadith scholars to evaluate and, if need be, reject a hadith based on textual discrepancies, even if the *isnad* is found to be impeccable (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p.146). Ibn Qayyim (2007, p.186) and Ibn al-Jawzi (1997, p.141) have further corroborated this, stipulating that due to textual reasons a hadith can be rejected despite an authentic *isnad*. Nevertheless, it is Khan's (2007, p.51) observation that Ibn al-Jawzi is reluctant to declare a hadith weak or fabricated unless he is able to identify some deficiency in the *isnad*.

Ismail et al. (2014, p.156) believed that *matn* criticism can be traced back to the time of the Prophet's companions. For example, it is reported that Aishah rejected a hadith which suggested that a person's prayer is invalidated if a woman, black dog, or donkey passes in front of them (Brown, 2008, p.149). Aishah rejected the hadith by citing her personal experience, whereby the Prophet would pray in the home while Aishah was lying in front of him, in the direction of prayer.

Although *matn* criticism did exist in some form during the earliest days of Islam, Brown (2008, p.149) is not convinced that it was common practice. The earliest reports of *matn* criticism can be found in the works of al-Shafi'i in the second century. Moreover, these are very few in number and scattered across the hadith corpus, making it very challenging for later scholars and historians to assess how common it was. Additionally, there are no

records of any method adopted by the Companions when practising, albeit rarely, *matn* criticism (Brown, 2008, p.149).

In practice, the default method of hadith assessment has been, certainly in premodernity, the *isnad* criticism method. As such, it is Khan's (2010, p.xvi) observation that *matn* criticism was not given any serious attention as an epistemic tool for hadith assessment. The passing down of hadith from one generation to another after the death of the Prophet meant that the *isnad* was getting longer (Siddiqui, 2009, p.1). This caused the scholars to pay more attention to its continuity and assessing the narrators.

This sentiment was also echoed by Goldziher (1966, pp.140-141). He observed that the value of the content of a hadith was entirely dependent on its *isnad*. Provided that the *isnad* satisfied the conditions of authenticity, hadiths that contained clear contradictions were deemed acceptable and of epistemic value. Criticising the hadith scholars' lack of engagement with *matn* criticism, Goldziher (1966, p.141) has stated that they would accept a hadith that contained "the crudest anachronisms provided that the *isnad* is correct." Likewise, he has argued that hadith scholars were prohibited from rejecting an *isnad* due to logical or historical contradiction in the *matn* (Goldziher, 1966, p.141). Hence, in his view, the *isnad* was always given priority over the *matn*.

This observation is further strengthened by the fact that there does not appear to be any hadith compilation based on *matn* verification in addition to the existing authentic *isnad*-based collections (Khan, 2007, p.51). At most, it can be observed that there are some limited comments regarding the content of individual hadith.

The statements of Goldziher have caught the attention of contemporary Muslim scholars who have attempted to refute his claims. Consequently, it has been argued that Goldziher and other Western scholars had only reached this conclusion due to a limited

understanding of the hadith assessment tools of the early hadith scholars (Yaakob, 2023, p.58). As such, contemporary scholars have highlighted two foundational methods of *matn* criticism, as shall be discussed shortly.

Nevertheless, this does seem to be a methodological shift in the modern era. According to Ali (2022, p.50), *matn* criticism in the modern world has been given equal, if not more, priority as a hadith assessment tool than *isnad* criticism.

3.2 The Two Principal Methods of *Matn* Criticism

Abdullah (2025, p.359) has suggested that the practice of *matn* criticism can be divided into two fundamental categories. The first of the two is what he describes as *isnad*-based *matn* criticism, and the second is content-based *matn* criticism. It is the second category that is of the main concern in this paper.

3.2.1 *Isnad*-Based *Matn* Criticism

This is the evaluation of the *matn* by comparing it with other similar hadith, looking for inconsistencies or contradictions. This method of *matn* criticism aims to safeguard the wider meaning of the hadith, while tackling minor discrepancies. This is, according to Azmi (2002, p.57), the most utilised method of *matn* criticism by the hadith scholars.

This category of *matn* criticism, according to Abdullah (2025, p.358), is a more comprehensive examination of the content of the hadith than the textual analysis used by historians. The hadith scholars were expected to investigate for interpolation, anomalies, and scribal mistakes through comparison. A simple example of this would be an unreasonable addition of wordings or something significant missing in the *matn* of a hadith which has been narrated through multiple independent channels.

According to Ismail et al. (2014, p.152), this method of *matn* criticism is also able to assist in ascertaining narrator reliability. Comparison can be made of any given narrator and any arising developments in their narrations during different time periods, the narrations of students from a common teacher, the comparison of oral transmission with documented narrations, etc. (Ismail et al., 2014, p.154).

Furthermore, Azmi (2002, p.69-70) has stated that if a person were to fabricate a hadith and also attach a flawless *isnad* to it would certainly be found out. This method of *matn* criticism would compare the narrations of the students of the common teacher. If only one student is found to be narrating a particular hadith which the remaining students of the same teacher do not, this would be indicative of the hadith being problematic.

3.2.2 Content-Based *Matn* Criticism

The second category, on the other hand, deals with the content of the *matn* against established religious maxims, independent of the *isnad* (Abdullah, 2025, p.359). Abdullah (2025, p.360), as it appears, feels compelled to make a disclaimer when discussing this category of *matn* criticism. He clarifies that if, after applying the content-based *matn* criticism, the discrepancy is attributed to the *isnad* and not the *matn*, it does not undermine the practise of *matn* criticism. Rather, it is a demonstration of their thoroughness in inspecting the hadith. It can be assumed that such a disclaimer is only warranted when hadith scholars were hesitant in problematising the *matn* of a hadith. And therefore, it was more reasonable for them to question the reliability of the *isnad*, as opposed to the *matn*.

As opposed to *isnad* criticism, content-based *matn* criticism does not appear to have a universally agreed-upon list of criteria. Consequently, the scholars have differed amongst

themselves regarding the criteria by which a hadith would be assessed in *matn* criticism. Below is a comprehensive criteria list taken from early and contemporary hadith scholars.

It is believed that there were three primary criteria used by the Companions for *matn* criticism (Khan, 2010, p.39). Firstly, the hadith should not contradict the Quran. The Companions believed that the Quran and the hadith were ultimately from God, inspired to the Prophet and, therefore, they were inherently coherent. So, if any hadith contradicted the Quran, it would be rejected. Additionally, Khan (2007, p.52) suggests that the Quran be the primary arbiter to determine the reliability of incoherent hadith. As the Quran is the God-given *al-Furqan*, the criterion, it has the capacity to determine what is the truth and what is not. Therefore, if a hadith, despite it being ascribed to the Prophet, is in conflict with the Quran, it must be rejected.

Secondly, if an unknown or less well-known hadith opposed a highly well-known hadith, it too would be problematised (Khan, 2010, p.40). And, finally, if a hadith contradicted reason, this would also be rejected. The concept and usage of reason in *matn* criticism will be discussed shortly. Nonetheless, these three criteria appear to be the primary criteria that the majority, if not all, hadith scholars who have discussed *matn* criticism have included.

The eleventh-century hadith scholar, al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d.1071) (1938, p.17), has drawn the following list when discussing the signs of a corrupt or forged hadith. He states that it is a hadith which either contradicts: (1) reason or the intellect, for example, denying the existence of God, (2) the Quran, (3) *mutawatir* (mass transmitted) practice, or (4) the Muslims are in agreement of its rejection, or (5) the hadith contains vital religious instruction which would be binding upon every legally accountable Muslim, yet, it is not transmitted in a manner which would produce certain knowledge, or (6) the

hadith contains details of a momentous event, however, it is not transmitted in a manner that reflects its significance. This is indicative of its falsity, as it would be normally expected that the event is transmitted through multiple independent channels.

Al-Daymuni, as cited by Khan (2010, p.39), has identified seven criteria that have been employed by the early hadith scholars. A number of these criteria overlap with the aforementioned list and, therefore, will not be repeated here. As for the criteria that do not overlap with the above are as follows:

(1) Comparing similar hadiths – in other words, the early scholars would compare the *matn* of similar hadiths to identify textual inconsistencies (Khan, 2010, p.41). They would search for (a) insertions which are believed to be from one of the narrators and for whichever reason transmitted as the statement of the Prophet. (b) Confusion – when similar hadiths have contradicting meaning. In such a case, the conflicting hadiths will be all deemed unreliable. (c) Inversion – when the order of the words of a hadith has been mixed up. (d) Mispronunciation and (e) additional wordings (Khan, 2010, p.42). (2) Free from unfamiliar words and meanings (Khan, 2010, p.42). (3) Conflict with established religious principles. (4) Free from absurdities and impossibilities. (5) Contradicts established history – whereby a hadith contradicts a fact of history (Khan, 2007, p.67).

Rizapoor et al. (2023, p.135) have also noted that if the hadith contained language or behaviour that would be considered out of character for the Prophet would be a sign of inauthenticity. In other words, the hadith should generally be in conformity with the well-known characteristics of the Prophet. Conversely, a hadith's reliability can be reinforced with the assistance of external sources such as applying reason, historical reports, etc.

Furthermore, Rizapoor et al. (2023, p.135) have also advocated that the context, time period, and intended audience be taken into consideration. The epistemic purpose of the

hadith also plays a vital role, such as whether the hadith is related to legal rulings, creed, or moral guidance. Finally, whether the hadith was intended for a specific group of people or the general mass (Rizapoor et al., 2023, p.135).

Building on the above, Khan (2007, p.68) has proposed a further criterion which he has titled 'moderation.' He describes that Islam demonstrates a moderate approach in all matters. Therefore, exaggerated matters attributed to Islam in the reports may suggest that the report is unreliable or fabricated (Khan 2007, pp.68-69). For example, the Quran usually provides generic information about reward and punishment in Islam. However, there are many hadiths that will expand on these two concepts, going into disproportionate minute details that appear to be exaggerated (Khan 2007, p.68). Catovic (2012, p.159) has concurred with this criterion, stating that these are unbelievable statements that the Prophet could not have said.

Ibn Qayyim (d.1350) (2019, pp.36-57) has also listed several criteria along with examples for the recognition of fabricated hadith, all of which directly relate to the *matn*. The unique criteria that he has included in his list are: (1) That which has been rejected by empirical observation. (2) A hadith which is crude in wording and invites ridicule. (3) Any hadith which suggests that the Prophet publicly acted in the presence of the Companions; however, they all agreed to conceal it. (4) Any hadith which prophecies the occurrence of an event on a specific date. (5) The language of the hadith resembles the speech of the physicians or the mystics more than that of the Prophet.

It is evident that, while there are overlaps in some of the fundamental criteria, scholars over time have developed their own criteria. While all the criteria require textual investigation and comparison to some extent, one of the seemingly unanimously agreed-

upon criteria for *matn* criticism requires further clarification and qualification. That is the use of the intellect or independent reasoning in *matn* criticism.

3.2.3 The Intellect/Independent Reasoning

It was the opinion of some hadith scholars that if there is an apparent conflict between a hadith and the intellect, it is due to one of two reasons. Either the intellect is deemed unsound, or the hadith is inauthentic (Rizapoor et al., 2023, p.135). As such, the link between the intellect and revelation has been a topic of contention among the Muslim scholars for centuries. This can be summarised into two primary approaches.

The first approach, which Rizapoor et al. (2023, p.135) have called the balanced approach, is that there is no conflict between reason and revelation. Rather, they work in harmony with each other. However, the intellect must be applied within the linguistic and fundamental boundaries of the revelation.

On the other hand, the second approach will prioritise independent reasoning if there is a conflict between the two (Rizapoor et al., 2023, pp.135-136). They argue that the intellect facilitates the acceptance and understanding of revelation. This method was adopted by the Mutazilite scholars (Rizapoor et al., 2023, p.136). In the discussion of hadiths conflicting with reason, they have several diverging opinions. Some contended that such a hadith needs to be completely rejected. Others held the belief that such a hadith will be rejected if it pertains to creed but can be acceptable in other religious matters. It has been the observation of Rizapoor et al. (2023, p.136) that several contemporary scholars have adopted such an approach and have rejected many hadith due to them being in conflict with reason. There has been, as could be expected, a lot of pushback from classical and contemporary Muslim scholars regarding this issue.

Several questions would require clarification if the intellect were given sole authority in *matn* criticism. Firstly, which intellect is qualified or possesses the necessary level of comprehension to make this judgement (Rizapoor et al., 2023, p.147)? What may be clear to one person may not necessarily be so clear or accessible to another. Likewise, what criteria are to be used in the assessment process?

Rizapoor et al. (2023, p.147), who appear to be opponents of the second approach, have further argued the consequences of there not being any set framework for the intellect to navigate within. They contend that if it is left to every individual to determine for themselves their own criteria for *matn* criticism, it will not only stop at rejecting hadith; rather, it may even lead some to reject Quranic verses. For instance, how would the ungoverned intellect view the miraculous virgin birth of Christ as recorded in Surah 19?

Subsequently, it has been argued that the intellect alone cannot be depended upon as the ultimate source in the determination of religious matters. Rather, it needs to be developed in a manner which is within the boundaries of Islam (Kamri et al., 2014, pp.148-149). This is argued because, according to Kamri et al. (2014, p.149), the intellect is susceptible to external influences such as human desire, which has the capability to impede a person's rational reasoning faculties. In such a case, the intellect will not possess the required objectivity to determine what is right and wrong. Therefore, the intellect is in need of a navigation system to keep it within the acceptable bounds. This navigation system, as suggested by Kamri et al. (2014, pp.147-148), is one of the primary goals of the Quran.

The renowned Ibn Khaldun (1981, p.582) has discussed the limitations of the intellect. He posits that the intellect is unable to grasp several religious teachings, including the unseen, life after death, the nature of prophethood, etc. and, therefore, cannot be used as the final authority. This suggests that the intellect needs to be governed by some sort of

principles when evaluating religious matters such as transmitted knowledge, the Quran, etc.

There is also the issue of prejudice. If the intellect is biased or sympathetic to a certain narrative or understanding, it will not be able to objectively assess the *matn* of a hadith (Khan, 2007, p.62). It would be impractical to assume that an agnostic person's *matn* criticism would yield the same results as that of a Muslim scholar. Each person will be operating in their own paradigm with diametrically opposite epistemic frameworks. Factors, such as age, location, culture, upbringing, education, etc., will have shaped the intellect and worldview of a person.

Consequently, the hadith scholars have stipulated the condition of sound reason. Khan (2007, p.62) has defined sound reason as "a critical and analytical faculty governed by the Islamic principles of loyalty and accountability to Allah, God-consciousness, justice, honesty, truthfulness, sincerity, and deep knowledge of the *Shari'ah's* major and minor objectives."

Some scholars have even challenged the notion that some of the Companions had exercised independent reasoning, such as Aishah as mentioned earlier. Rather, they argue that the companions had arrived at this conclusion in light of stronger opposing evidence, not exclusively through independent reasoning (Rizapoor et al., 2023, p.146).

Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that exclusive independent reasoning will not be a sufficient epistemic tool to determine the authenticity of hadith. Rather, a more balanced approach is needed, where the intellect is complemented with other assessment tools such as *isnad* criticism and comparative evaluation. Such an approach would be rather fruitful in issues that reason alone is unable to reach (Yaakob, 2003, p.59), as outlined by Ibn Khaldun earlier.

3.3 *Matn* Criticism Hidden in Plain Sight

Although, as detailed earlier, the hadith scholars had set out criteria for the commission of *matn* criticism, its application was not common practice. Their ultimate priority remained *isnad* criticism. Interestingly, it is Brown's (2008, p.153) observation that al-Khatib does not appear to have explicitly applied any of his criteria when assessing and ruling numerous reports as fabricated in his *Tarikh Baghdad*.

Moreover, early hadith scholars viewed their rationalist counterparts who, much like themselves, deemed it reasonable to evaluate a hadith in light of the Quran and human reason, as a threat (Brown, 2008, p.171). In the effort to minimise, if not eradicate, the involvement of independent reasoning, the hadith scholars presented *isnad* criticism as the only method of hadith assessment. Perhaps it is for this reason that there seems to be a sense of hesitancy in carrying out *matn* criticism by the early hadith scholars.

Although there have been modern attempts to revive the practice and formalisation of *matn* criticism, it has received criticism as it is not believed to be a true representation of early hadith scholarship (Abdullah, 2025, p.361). Rather, as demonstrated by Brown (2008), there are a handful of explicit examples that can be found which do not appear to be enough to establish a normative practice among the hadith scholars. Abdullah (2025, p.364) has stated that some contemporary scholars have attempted to explain this lack of visibility. Firstly, in opposition to the rationalists, they would conceal their practice of *matn* criticism within the context of *isnad* criticism, thus making it less visible.

Other reasons include the preference for reconciliation and explaining away any inconsistencies instead of clear *matn* criticism, etc. (Brown, 2012, p.363-364). The scholars would frequently ask their readers to search for an exonerating meaning before

rejecting the hadith based on *matn* criticism. Al-Suyuti has stated that the hadith which cannot be reconciled must be false.

Furthermore, the hadith scholars would employ ambiguous phrases in what appears to be an attempt to disguise *matn* criticism (Brown, 2008, pp.173-175). This is more so when the *isnad* meets all the required criteria for authenticity. For example, one phrase frequently used by the 9th and 10th hadith scholars was the term *munkar* (Brown, 2008, p.174). Loosely translated as 'rejected,' this phrase contained multiple layers of implications. It could either imply that the hadith is authentic, however, only has one channel of transmission, that this particular version with its *isnad* is inauthentic while other versions of it are authentic, or that it is fabricated. In the absence of clarification, naturally such terms caused confusion for Western and later Muslim scholars (Brown, 2008, p.175).

3.4 Method Evaluation

According to the hadith scholars, the process of *matn* criticism is not an easy task; hence, it was exclusively reserved for the most learned among them (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p.146). This, however, does not account for its minimal explicit application. Despite it being suggested that the early hadith scholars were disguising *matn* criticism in the form of *isnad* criticism or technical phrases, it is evident that scholars who were suggesting the criteria, such as al-Khatib and Ibn Qayyim, were not in the habit of conducting *matn* criticism independent of *isnad* criticism. Brown (2008, p.162), having identified fifteen cases of *matn* criticism, has admitted that they are very rare to find.

As discussed earlier, it was Goldziher's (1966, pp.140-141) claim that the content value of a hadith was based on the authenticity of the *isnad* even if the content of the hadith was made up of contradictions and historical anomalies. Brown (2008), while acknowledging

this criticism, has attempted to respond to this observation by demonstrating the usage of *matn* criticism during the third and fourth centuries. However, none of the cases appears to be content-based *matn* criticism. They are all embedded in *isnad* criticism.

One of the greatest challenges of *matn* criticism is its intrinsic subjective nature (Brown, 2012, p.358), especially when applied without any parameters. Sunni Islam was constructed to avoid this very reason, to subordinate the intellect to revelation. Despite this challenge, *matn* criticism has the potential to provide the opportunity to continue assessing hadith in the modern world, a door which, according to many, has been considered closed (Khan, 2010, p.xx).

Although the early hadith scholars had made great effort to separate the authentic from the inauthentic hadith, they could not guarantee that inauthentic or fabricated hadith were not transmitted as authentic (Khan, 2010, p.xx). For example, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, one of the six canonical hadith collections, is believed to have contained approximately ninety fabricated hadith. Consequently, even if the door to *isnad* criticism is considered closed, the door to *matn* criticism needs to remain open. This is perhaps the only method available to further identify any problematic hadith.

While the above is theoretically plausible, the scholars would have to develop a set of universal criteria by which the *matn* can be assessed. Without such criteria, there remains the possibility of subjective assessment. Catovic (2012, p.158) has posited that the absence of a universal approach to *matn* criticism may be rooted in the scholar's fear of being conclusion-driven or biased in their understanding of a hadith. On the other hand, Catovic (2012, p.158) has further stated that the science of *isnad* criticism was considered relatively more objective (Catovic, 2012, p.158). Its approach and the application of its

principles would allow for a gradation of the hadith regardless of the investigating scholar's own understanding of the hadith.

The usage of *matn* criticism by an untrained critic, much like those who have invoked *sirah-maghazi* reports without considering its methodology, can be detrimental in its conclusion. If a person is not well-grounded in their knowledge of hadith narrations, the Quran, the Arabic language, etc. may authenticate something which may be a clear contradiction of established religious norms and vice versa. This would, of course, make this a highly sensitive epistemic tool that would require an expert to use, as noted by Abou El Fadl (2001, p.146).

3.5 *Matn* Criticism and the Satanic Verses Incident

Diverting the discussion back to the Satanic Verses incident, there have been several assessments of the episode in light of the *matn* criticism method. The criteria with which the *matn* of the Satanic Verses narrations have been assessed have all yielded the same result. In other words, in each case the process has yielded that the narrations are in opposition to established religious norms. The discussion below is not by any means an exhaustive list.

As alluded to earlier, early hadith scholars until recent times have preferred to offer alternative explanations or reconcile a hadith before engaging in *matn* criticism. One such interesting reinterpretation of the incident is offered by the Deobandi scholar al-Kashmiri (d.1933). Al-Kashmiri (2005, pp. 520-521) suggests that there is a possibility of misattribution of the verses to the Prophet or Satan. It is not uncommon when there is a gathering of people that there will be many people speaking. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that while the Prophet was reciting the *Surah*, one of the attendees had recited the Satanic Verses which was then misattributed as the recitation

of the Prophet. In this way he believes that the incident is no longer conflicting with the established religious norms.

Nevertheless, the first critic to assess the *matn* of the incident in this discussion is the eighth-century Andalusian scholar, al-Qadi Iyad al-Yahsubi (d.1149). Al-Yahsubi (2009, pp.595-608) has dedicated a subsection to the assessment of the incident in his proclaimed work *Ash-Shifa Bi Tarifi Huqooq al-Mustafa*. An ardent opposer of the incident, Al-Yahsubi has criticised the narrations from several angles, including both *isnad* and *matn* criticism.

To begin, Al-Yahsubi (2009, p.596) argues that the incident contradicts the well-established doctrine of *'Ismah* and the Prophet's supposed wishfulness for the praise of the idols. The latter, in al-Yahsubi's opinion, is a blasphemous act which would constitute disbelief. Moreover, this can also be categorised as 'out of character' for the Prophet, as one of his primary missions was to eradicate idolatry. Surely, this compromise would have become a significant obstacle in his overall mission throughout his prophetic career.

Al-Yahsubi (2009, pp.597-598) has also highlighted irreconcilable discrepancies between the varying wordings of the reports. Some of the reports relate that the Prophet was in prayer when the incident had occurred, while others suggest that he was addressing the crowd when the people had gathered around him. Some state that the Prophet was overtaken by sleep during the incident. Other versions explicitly mention that the Prophet recited the verses only to forget them later, while other narrations assert that they were vocalised by Satan. This, evidently, is a fundamental point of concern. If it is assumed that the verses were uttered by Satan, and not the Prophet, many of the objections can be reconciled a lot more easily than if the Prophet had recited the verses. There would be no

theological objections. Nevertheless, in addition to *isnad* criticism, al-Yahsubi has used such *isnad*-based *matn* criticism arguments to reject the incident.

The second assessment presented here is that of the controversial figure of the last century, Sayyid Qutb (d.1966). According to Qutb (2009, p.230), the least fabricated version of the incident is that which has been reported by Ibn Abi Hatim, the report which alleges that the verses were recited by Satan and not the Prophet. While Qutb does not comment on the *isnad* of this particular version, it is evident that he considers this report to be the least fabricated as it removes any theological objections. Nonetheless, Qutb has unmistakably concluded that the incident is a fabrication as he goes on to highlight several *matn*-related issues with all the versions of the incident.

Much like al-Yahsubi, Qutb (2009, p.232) also contests the possibility of the Prophet uttering such words or his desiring to make any compromise for the Quraysh. Furthermore, he argues, the incident is in contradiction to the Quranic promise of the Quran's preservation from distortion as outlined in Quran 41:42. The next argument he poses is that of context. The entire *Surah*, he argues, demonstrates the errors of the idolater's beliefs regarding the idols and, therefore, a clear contextual contradiction. Accordingly, he states that the Arabs possessed a fine sense of language, and had this incident been true, they would have sensed the incoherence of the verses, identifying a flaw in the context.

Following on from Qutb's contextual observations, Sinai (2011, pp.10-11) has attempted to meaningfully reinsert the Satanic verses back into the *Surah* after verse 20 as mentioned in the reports, before its supposed exclusion. He suggests that there are two possible reconstructions. Accordingly, Sinai (2011, p.11) rejects both forms of reconstruction, explaining that it simply does not make sense. As for the first

reconstruction, it is the insertion of the Satanic verses after verse 20. In this reconstruction, God is rejecting any deities other than Himself by rejecting the possibility that He has any female offspring. While the Satanic verses contradict this by confirming multiple deities who can intercede with God.

The second reconstruction hypothesised by Sinai (2011, p.11) suggests that the current verses 21 and 22 were not originally a part of the *Surah*. It was only after the removal of the Satanic verses that these verses were added. In this reconstruction, the following verses reprimand man for his desires, which is understood to be the idolaters' belief in the three goddesses mentioned in the verses before the Satanic verses. This is also contradictory as the idols are supposedly praised in the first instance, while further on man is rebuked for believing in them, an irreconcilable contradiction. Therefore, Sinai (2011, p.11) concludes that the "verses are apocryphal and were not originally part of the sura."

On the other hand, a discrepancy in the timeline has been argued by Ahsan (1980, p.91). He posits that the initial migration of the Meccan Muslims to Abyssinia took place in the 5th year after prophethood, indicating that the Satanic verses' incident must have occurred not too long after that. As such, *Surah* 17:73-75 were supposedly revealed, according to some versions of the event, to reprimand the Prophet's utterance of the Satanic verses. Ahsan argues that these verses of *Surah* 17 were not revealed until after the *Miraj* incident of the Prophet, which occurred 2 or 3 years before he migrated to Madinah. This would imply that there was a period of 5 to 6 years between the Satanic verses' incident and the revelation of *Surah* 17:73-75.

According to this calculation, Ahsan (1980, p.91) argues that either God was unaware of the Satanic verses for this period of time or that, for some unknown reason, God decided

to remain silent despite them contradicting the message of the Quran. However, the suggested period of revelation for *Surah* 17:73-75 cannot be corroborated in the major works of Quranic exegesis such as al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and al-Qurtubi. Moreover, Al-Qurtubi (2006a, p.133) has reported that Ibn Abbas has suggested that the verses were, in fact, revealed at a much later date, nine years after the migration.

The second alleged discrepancy highlighted by Ahsan (1980, pp.91-92) is in relation to the supposed reassurance of the Prophet after the incident by God in *Surah* 22:52. Again, Ahsan argues that the verses, according to the Quranic exegetes, were revealed approximately eight or nine years after the incident, in the first year after the Prophet's migration. This would imply that the Satanic verses were not detected for a substantial period of time. However, Ibn al-Jawzi (2002, p.947) in his exegesis has stated that there is a scholarly difference of opinion about the location of its revelation, with an opinion of Ibn Abbas explicitly stating that the *Surah* was revealed in Madinah, with the exception of four verses including the verse in question here. These verses were revealed in Makkah, and therefore this discrepancy does not appear to hold up.

Consequently, it can be observed that Ahsan's timeline arguments do not hold up. However, much like the above, Ahsan (1980, p.92) has made a further contextual argument. He states that it is inconceivable that God would be praising the idols in one instance, only to discredit them later. Moreso, in verse 23, where it explicitly states, "They are but names which you have named, you and your fathers, for which God has revealed no authority."

It is, therefore, evident that when subjected to *matn* criticism, the narrations are problematic at the least. It has met many of the criteria to warrant it being rejected, such as contradicting the Quran, the Prophetic mission, linguistic and contextual issues, etc. It

is for these reasons that Arif and Kurjum (2020, p.348) have concluded that when the Satanic verses' incident is holistically approached, it will lead to the rejection of the incident. They have also suggested that such an approach is not only indicative of its weakness, but rather that it may be false.

Conclusion

This research aimed to determine the authenticity of the controversial Satanic Verses incident in light of three premodern hadith assessment methods, namely *sirah-maghazi* reports, *isnad* criticism, and *matn* criticism. After evaluating each method, they were applied to the Satanic Verses incident in an attempt to determine its authenticity.

The first method was that of *sirah-maghazi* reports. This research has found that ultimately this method does not provide the epistemic capacity to authenticate or weaken reports. However, it was necessary to evaluate this method due to its frequent usage when it came to citing the Satanic Verses' incident. The second method evaluated and applied was the *isnad* criticism method. According to the findings of this research, there does not appear to be a single impeccable *isnad* which meets the criteria of *sahih* and, that there is not a single eyewitness in the fifty narrations identified by Ahmed (2017). The final method was the *matn* criticism method. This method has revealed several recognised disqualifying criteria set by the hadith scholars. Consequently, it concludes that the incident is inauthentic.

Convincingly, it is evident that these methods, with the exception of *sirah-maghazi* reports, conclude that the Satanic Verses' incident does not meet the classical Sunni hadith standards of *sahih*, and therefore, must be evaluated as *da'eef*. In other words, the probability of the Satanic Verses' incident having taken place is less likely but cannot be ruled out definitively.

Subsequently, it can be observed that *isnad* and *matn* are complementary to each other when applied side-by-side. The results are more robust, leaving little room for objection from traditional hadith scholarship as suggested by Ismail et al. (2014, p.152) and Rizapoor et al. (2023, p.135).

One of the major limitations of this research is that it has only considered two methods out of a plethora of premodern and modern methods, leaving a large scope for further research in to the authentication of the Satanic Verses' incident. This research has not considered the *Sufi*, *Shiah*, modern Muslim and Western academic hadith assessment methods.

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