Fundamentals of Ḥadīth Interpretation

An English Translation of

Mabādī Tadabbur-e Ḥadīth

Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī

Translated by
Tariq Mahmood Hashmi

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Translator's Introduction

The present work by Imām Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, a renowned Pakistani scholar, the author of a nine volume commentary on the Holy Qur'ān entitled *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, besides more than a dozen other books on various important Islamic disciplines, addresses some fundamental questions about the prophetic traditions, generally believed to be the second source of religious knowledge in Islam besides the Qur'ān. The author has taken up the fundamental questions about the prophetic *ḥadīth* including the authenticity of the traditions, the difference between the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth, role of *isnād,* its importance and its inherent limitations, and some basic questions about the process of *riwāyah* (transmission) and *dirāyah* (textual) investigation. He sets forth principles of understanding the *aḥadīth* as well as the methodology of sifting the sound from the unsound reports. It is not, by form and content, an introduction to the Science of Ḥadīth. Iṣlāḥī confines himself to the discussion of a few fundamental issues while presuming a basic technical knowledge of the Science of Ḥadīth at the end of the reader. It is a seminal work in the sense that the author has discussed and highlighted facts which answer many questions on the authenticity of the prophetic tradition – oral, textual (i.e. *aḥādīth*) and practical (i.e. *sunan*) – and their relation to the foundational text, the Qur'ān.

Muslims have always held that the Sunnah is the source of religious knowledge next only, in terms of reliability, to the Qur'ān. However, the question of its authoritativeness and its relation to the Divine text has always been debated among them. Many scholars came to hold that the prophetic tradition consists of the traditions handed down to the subsequent generations by individual-to-individual reports (*akhbār-i aḥād*). Most of the authorities do not distinguish clearly between *ḥadīth* and *sunnah.* Presuming the terms *sunnah* and *ḥadīth* to be interchangeable, the scholars wrestled over the authenticity or lack of it in the prophetic tradition. Subsequently some people took extreme positions in this regard. Iṣlāḥī points out that a group of scholars declared all the *aḥādīth* as spurious tales while another declared

the *aḥādīth* equal to and even overruling the Qur'ān. Those who declared it equal to the Qur'ān in authenticity and historicity did so while admitting it to be *akhbār-i āḥād.* On the other hand those who rejected it altogether rejected something which formed fundamental and inseparable part of the religion transmitted through perpetual adherence of the *ummah* in each generation.

One cannot deny that there has always existed in Muslim scholarship, a vague understanding of the difference between the terms *ḥadīth* and *sunnah,* yet mostly the picture was blurred to admit of any clear distinction. I do not know of any treatise in the entire Islamic literature which so clearly posits this difference between the two and treats both on scales they individually merit, as the work presently before us. Iṣlāḥī tries to show that the most crucial issue and the critical question in major discussions around the interrelationship between the Qur'ān and the prophetic tradition and the authoritativeness and otherwise of *aḥādīth* is resolved through recognizing a clear distinction between what is denoted by the two terms *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*. The author achieves this, in chapter 1, through an analysis of the terms, nature of the concepts denoted by *ḥadīth*, *sunnah*, and mode of transmission of each, and their respective roles in Islamic epistemology. The most crucial findings of Iṣlāḥī include his assertion that the Sunnah does not depend on *aḥadīth* and is derived from the perpetual and consistent practice of each generation of the believers since the Prophet (sws) taught and instituted it in the first generation.

Having distinguished from the Sunnah, which is an absolutely authentic and reliable source forming the fundamental part of the religion, the *ḥadīth* literature can be treated on scientific principles. For example, Iṣlāḥī argues, there is no need to defy reason and declare individual-to-individual reports, whose vulnerability has always remained clear to the Muslim scholarship, as historically equal or superior to the Qur'ān. Similarly there is no need to defy academic principles and recklessly declare all the *ḥadīth* literature as spurious and unreliable. This distinction between *ḥadīth* and *sunnah* proves that the Qur'ān, an absolutely authentic source, does not stand in need of *aḥādīth*, a probable truth. The Book of God and the Sunnah of the Prophet (sws) are the only sources of Islam. The

aḥādīth come next to these sources as very useful record of the prophetic knowledge, explanation of the Qur'ānic text, historic details regarding the formative phase of Islam and the best example set by the Prophet (sws).

The remaining issues including the question of interrelation of the Book and the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth branch from and depend on the confusion regarding the boundaries of the Ḥadīth and the Sunnah. The question whether the Qur'ān depends on the Ḥadīth or vice versa is resolved once it is established that the Sunnah is an independent source which does not rely on *aḥādīth* and that the Sunnah is an absolutely authentic source of knowledge, equal to the Qur'ān as far as the historicity of the sources and their Prophetic origin is concerned. The precepts of the faith of Islam are set out in the Qur'ān in textual form and are complemented by the practices instituted by the Prophet (sws) in the form of the Sunnah. Then, whereas the Qur'ān is the word of God, the Sunnah is the demonstrative form of the religious performance instituted by the Messenger of God. Both these sources emanate from the Prophet (sws) who taught them to the generation of the Companions (rta) who, in turn, by their consensus and perpetual adherence, handed it down to the next generation and so on to our times.

In Iṣlāḥī's view, the relation of the Book to the Sunnah is that of the soul to a body. The body has to adjust according to the soul. It cannot mould or reshape the soul to accord to it. That the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth cannot overrule the commands of the Book has been argued by Iṣlāḥī through rational and received arguments with the help of examples. He terms the belief that Ḥadīth can override the Qur'ān as erroneous. Being clear on the authenticity of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah on the one hand and the probability of the *aḥādīth* on the other, he is able to show that the less reliable source has to be in accord with the more reliable one. This interrelation of the three important sources of religious law in Islam has been explicated in chapter 2.

The above mentioned facts and observations have a direct bearing on the process of *ḥadīth* interpretation. The principles of understanding the *aḥādīth* therefore assume clear and concrete shape. The cornerstone of Iṣlāḥī's approach towards understanding the *ḥadīth* literature is his concept of the overarching authority of the Qur'ān. While introducing the

principle of understanding the *ḥadīth* literature (Chapter 3), the author stresses the importance of the consequences of the interrelation of the Qur'ān, the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth, for Muslim jurisprudence. He highlights the status of the Qur'ān over the rest of the sources and asserts that, being the word of God, a textual evidence of absolute certainty, the Book is the basic criterion of true religious knowledge. A summary of the principles of interpretation of *ḥadīth* literature, that we find emerging in Iṣlāḥī's work is as follows:

a) The *aḥādīth,* which are only probably true, are to be interpreted in the light of the Qur'ān. They are a branch of the root, the book of God. The *aḥādīth* only explicate the themes of the Book. Therefore, the material of the *aḥādīth* must accord to the themes of the Book. For whatever the Prophet (sws) said or did always accorded perfectly to the dictates of the Book. This entails that a student of the *aḥādīth* should look for the basis of the traditions in the Book and understand them in the light of the word of God.

b) Since a *ḥadīth* report is to be seen as the part of a sprawling literature, one has to have comprehensive understanding of the whole corpus and one should interpret the part in the light of the whole. If a report does not fit well in the overall structure it has to be either reinterpreted to make it fit within the whole or has to be regretfully discarded.

c) One also needs to have a good understanding of the language of the prophetic traditions.

d) An interpreter of *ḥadīth* should also remain conscious of the fact that the prophetic traditions always speak in a given context. Losing the trail of the context risks a misunderstanding of the words of the Prophet (sws). There are examples which show that ignoring this fact has sometimes led people to hold what defies the foundations of the religion.

e) Similarly, one needs to appreciate that the Prophet (sws) is not expected to defy reason and the *fiṭrah* (human nature) for the Faith does not contain any element that violates the *fiṭrah* or the human reason. Therefore, the traditions should be pondered over in the light of the dictates of reason and *fiṭrah.* The Book of God itself adduces reason and *fiṭrah* to prove many of its fundamental premises.

Transmitted through individual-to-individual mode of transfer the *ḥadīth* narratives contain all types of reports, sound and the unsound. Therefore, Iṣlāḥī advises caution in accepting a *ḥadīth* report solely on the basis of its *isnād*. Its contents have to be minutely discussed and assessed on various scales. In chapter 4, Iṣlāḥī discusses how it is incumbent to see if the *ḥadīth* under consideration is in accord with the religious taste (*zawq*) of the firm believers and those grounded in its knowledge. Here Iṣlāḥī invokes the valuable contributions of the traditional Muslim scholarship. The taste of the firm believers and established scholars of Islam is important for they are acquainted with the spirit of the religion and the nature of the Prophetic teachings based on their study of the Book of God. Their long and meaningful exposure to the corpus of prophetic knowledge enables them to assess whether a saying attributed to the Prophet (sws) is in line with the disposition of the Prophet (sws) and the essence of the religion. A true believer with a thorough knowledge of the religion can discern whether a statement can issue from the source they are familiar with. Similarly it must not contradict the customary practice of the *ummah* which is always based on the Qur'ān and the Sunnah whose authenticity is not disputed. The Qur'ānic teachings and the known Sunnah both have the overriding authority over the *aḥādīth* reports. Collective reason of the human beings and any definitive argument should also help us discern whether a narrative ascribed to the Prophet (sws) is genuinely attributed to him or not.

It has been accepted by the scholars of the *ummah* from the earliest times that the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws) are not to be subjected to the principles of *isnād* investigation. However, the definition of a Companion has remained under discussion. Chapter 5 defines the term *ṣahābī*. It discusses the rationale of the view that the Companions (rta) are all just and establishes this principle on the authority of the Qur'ān and the prophetic traditions. After discussing the various views held by the earlier authorities, it sums up that only such persons may validly be called *ṣaḥābah* who had availed the company of the Prophet (sws) for a considerably long time and who received training at his hands in religion and morality. Not every person who happened to have occasionally seen the Prophet (sws) or met him once or twice

can be taken as his Companion. This Iṣlāḥī shows through citing the Qur'ānic guidance and prophetic *aḥādīth* on the subject.

The chain of narrators or the *isnād* begins with the name of a Companion (rta) of the Prophet (sws), who claims to have witnessed him say or do anything. It travels through the individuals in the subsequent generations till it reaches one of the compilers. The Muslim traditionists evolved the discipline of *asmā' al-rijāl* (Biographies), one of the sciences of which the Muslims can be genuinely proud of, to help investigate the biographies of the individual narrators on scientific grounds and ascertain whether they are reliable narrators to transmit material which is likely to constitute the part of the Faith. They made sure that the narrators bringing in a report are persons of impeccable moral character, sound memory, followed the religion faithfully, avoided sinfulness and developed a fair understanding of the religion of God. They made sure that the persons involved in the *ḥadīth* transmission had met their authorities whom they quoted. No other nation or religious group matches the Muslim accomplishment in this regard. This, however, does not mean that the discipline of *asmā' al-rijāl* and the methodology of *isnād* criticism were flawlessly applied nor would it be incumbent to accept any *ḥadīth* merely because it is transmitted by the seemingly imposing *isnāds*.

Chapter 6 discusses the value of the *isnād* and its inherent limitations. It stresses that merely a sound *isnād* of a *ḥadīth* is not sufficient proof of its origin. There are other criteria of gauging the authenticity of the traditions which must also be carefully and vigorously applied. Among the possible inherent limitations of the *isnād* is the possibility that the data collected about individuals who lived decades or centuries ago is not always entirely objective. One cannot be sure if the data about a certain personality is absolutely certain or whether it takes into account his beliefs, ideals, moral conduct and ability to receive *aḥādīth* material and transmit them without affecting and altering its meaning. We often form incorrect opinions about the character of contemporary persons in our immediate environment. Therefore, it is not possible to give a conclusive judgment regarding persons living in far off places in remote times. We need to be aware of this limitation of *isnād* investigations. People on whose testimony we rely in the process

of judging the characters were also human beings. They could have been affected by group allegiances, personal opinions and subjectivity. No human is expected to be perfectly free of all types of biases and partiality. It is also important to note that many traditionists did not properly investigate the *isnād* if the *ḥadīth* transmitted by a chain did not pertain to legal rulings. This means that the traditions which discussed the Muslim beliefs and practices, exaltation of certain deeds and condemnation of some others were accepted rather liberally. The *muḥaddithūn* even accepted *aḥādīth* from the heretics, innovators and extremist sects including *shī'īs* (*rawāfiḍ*). It does not need much to explain that the innovators had the motivation to fabricate *aḥādīth*, namely to legitimize their views.

According to Iṣlāḥī, another problem in the process of *ḥadīth* transmission is that of narration by meaning instead of verbatim reporting. This makes it possible that the person communicating the narratives might have failed to properly understand and fully communicate a complex idea. Much subjectivity involves in transmission by meaning.

Chapter 7 takes up this question in detail. It warns the student of *aḥādīth* to remain alive to the fact that it was not possible to narrate everything verbatim and the *ummah* had to rely on the transmission of meaning to make the *ḥadīth* transmission possible. On the other hand there are instances in which the process has caused irreparable damage to the teachings contained in the tradition. Iṣlāḥī demonstrates this by citing a number of examples from the lifetime of the Prophet (sws) himself, in addition to examples from the later generations.

Having studied the major problems in the process of *isnād* criticism and the mode of transmission of *aḥādīth*, the discussion on the correct stance regarding the authoritativeness of *aḥādīth* is relatively easier to grasp.

Chapter 8 surveys the views of the major juristic schools including *ḥanafī*, *mālikī* and *shafi'ī* scholars on the question. It has been mostly acknowledged that the *aḥādīth* are an inconclusive and probable (*ẓannī*) source of knowledge. It does not yield conclusive, certain and immediate knowledge (*yaqīnī*). This does not mean that the individual narratives are worthless. One can rely on *aḥādīth* as a source of religious knowledge after examining them in the light of the teachings of the Qur'ān, the

Sunnah of the Prophet (sws) and dictates of reason and *fiṭrah*. However, conclusiveness is still not the characteristic expected to mark these reports.

Chapter 9 comprises a discussion on the analysis of the causes of *ḥadīth* fabrication. It has been shown that the *aḥādīth* have been fabricated both for pious as well as impious motives. Many pious individuals sought to rely on fabricated traditions to spread virtue and piety. They tried to exhort the believers to do certain good deeds which they considered were being ignored and to warn them of evil consequences of vices. This has not escaped the notice of the vigilant *muḥaddithūn* who discovered this evil and tried to expose the 'pious' fabricators. However, the *muḥaddithūn* did not strictly follow the principles of *jarḥ wa ta'dīl* (investigation into the reliability of *ḥadīth* narrators) while analyzing the *aḥādīth* pertaining to exhortations and warnings. They observed the requisite caution only while investigating legal traditions containing teachings about *halāl wa ḥarām*. Thus the evil of *ḥadīth* fabrication remained operative. The pious fabricators spread the spurious traditions and these found entry even in the major *ḥadīth* works. The *aḥādīth* have also been invented to earn fame and support the innovatory beliefs and practices. Here too the *muḥaddithūn* did not show requisite vigilance. They opted for accepting *aḥādīth* from such innovators who did not openly confess their innovations and did not call others to follow their creed. This again opened the door to innovations on a large scale. Therefore, we can expect a great number of *aḥādīth* in the famous compilations which need to be reinvestigated. This demands that the student of the *ḥadīth* literature shows extra vigilance while relying on a narrative as a basis of any religious issue.

The author concludes his discussions by identifying the primary sources of *aḥādīth* (Chapter 10). He posits that it is extremely important to select the primary sources in any discipline. In the *ḥadīth* discipline, according to him, there are three works which can be considered the primary sources. He includes *Muwaṭṭā* of Imām Malik, *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Muslim and *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Bukhārī in the primary sources. He believes that a study of these books helps the student acquire sufficient knowledge of the discipline and there remains no need to thoroughly study other *ḥadīth* works. Other sources, however,

can be resorted to for additional support and in-depth study of a particular issue.

As the author has stated in the preface, this is a compilation of his lectures on the issues. These lectures were delivered orally and the reader should not expect it to be perfectly structured and well ordered. There are repetitions and redundancies in the text. I have sought to consider this fact in my translation and have tried to omit such repetitions. However, still there is much room to improve the overall structure and to further refine the way these discussions were held and recorded. The reader needs to keep this in mind while studying the book.

The book is not an introductory work and requires basic knowledge of the disciplines. It does not provide explanation of commonly used terms except when it is crucial to a particular discussion. I have tried to explain some terms and concepts in the footnotes. The readers are requested to forward suggestions and improvements in this regards so that the translation can be made more useful. I have also tried to provide proper references and citations to the sources quoted. I have tried to use the commonly accepted terms and to explain them in parenthesis wherever necessary. The most important ones, which are also employed more frequently, are the *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*. The term *ḥadīth*, it should be noted, is used both for individual narratives as well as the corpus of the *aḥādīth*. I have differentiated between the two by putting the term with the capital Ḥ when used in the latter sense. Similarly, the word *sunnah* has been used in two different senses. In the sense of the distinct category of prophetic traditions, it has been put as the Sunnah with a capital S whereas in the sense of a given practice it is mentioned in the lower case. Instead of the *ḥādīths* for plural of *ḥadīth* I have preferred *aḥadīth*, the original Arabic term. It also needs to be noted that the abbreviation (sws) written after a mention of the name of the Prophet Muḥammad (sws) stands for the formula *ṣallallāhu ʻalayhi wa sallam* which means peace be upon him. Similarly the names of the Companions of the Prophet (sws) are followed by the abbreviated form of the formula *raḍī allāhu taʻālā ʻanhu/ʻanhum* which means may Allāh be pleased with him/them. The word Companion/s with a capital C denotes the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws).

I wish to thank all my teachers and friends who helped me accomplish this translation and edit and improve it. Though I cannot mention them all, I feel obliged to thank my friends Jhangeer Hanif, Ronnie Hasan and Junaid Hasan for reviewing the translation and editing and forwarding important suggestions. My thanks are also due to ʻAẓīm Ayūb and all the support staff of al-Mawrid who contributed towards making this book publishable.

Tariq Mahmood Hashmi
Al-Mawrid Lahore
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Preface

Under God's blessing, I have always cherished great interest in the Qur'ān as well as the Ḥadīth. After the death of Imām Farāhī, I felt a strong desire to learn the Ḥadīth from an expert in the discipline the way I learnt the Qur'ān from a master of the Qur'ānic sciences. The Almighty fulfilled this desire of mine. Thus, shortly afterwards, a great scholar of the prophetic *ḥadīth*, Mawlānā 'Abdul Raḥmān Mubārakpurī concluded his teaching and writing services and settled in his hometown, Mubārakpur, situated at a distance of mere two miles from my native town, A'zamgarh. I availed myself of this opportunity and immediately went to him. I requested him to let me benefit from his knowledge and teach me *aḥādīth* of the Prophet (sws).

The Mawlānā probably knew that I, being a graduate of Madrasah al-Iṣlāḥ, had been trained by Imām Farāhī in the Islamic Sciences. He, therefore, said: "You have already learnt a great deal. What is the need of learning more?" He was ready to grant me a formal certificate if I so desired. This was indeed a great honour for me. I, however, intended to learn *aḥādīth*. I did not seek a formal certificate. I, therefore, stated that I was a humble student who did not have the courage to be adorned with such kingly crowns and that I only needed to learn how to properly study and understand the prophetic *ḥadīth*. Having heard this request, he paused for a moment and then said: "In this case I will teach you the book of your choice." Considering that he had taught and written a commentary of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Tirmidhī, I requested him to instruct me in the same work. He consented to my request and handed me an autographed copy of his commentary of the book.

I started studying *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Tirmidhī from the very next day. It was the blessed month of Ramaḍān. As I stated earlier, his home was only a couple of miles from my town. I walked to his house every morning and returned in the evening. During the night, I would study *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Tirmidhī in the light of his commentary on it. During the day, I would spend about two to three hours reading out the book to the Mawlānā. This exercise usually

exhausted me completely but my teacher, in spite of his old age, never showed even a slightest fatigue. May God bless his resting place and raise his status in the afterlife.

I have not narrated this story to express my relationship to this great scholar. Rather I intend to express my interest in this exalted discipline. The above mentioned episode dates back to the first half of the year 1932. Decades have passed since. I have gone through good and bad times. I have cherished different academic engagements during all this time. However, besides carrying out other tasks, I have been constantly serving the prophetic *ḥadīth*. This service has not been a ritualistic one. I have, on the contrary, pursued a very noble cause.

I have believed for a long time that it is not possible for our traditional scholars to confront the challenges facing our religion today. To render this service, only those have to take up the field who are well acquainted with the poisonous modern thought and philosophy, and at the same time, are expert physicians of the remedy of the evil, thorough knowledge of the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth. But the question is: where do we have to look for such people? The institutions that produce scholars in this country be they modern or traditional are barren for this purpose. I believe that the first and foremost step towards remedying this evil is to abrogate the parallel education system. A single, unified education system should be introduced, combining the modern and traditional education systems. This new system should not include, to any degree, the religious disciplines merely as blessings, but, on the contrary, the philosophy and core teachings of the Qur'ān must run through the entire system as its life-blood. This task, however, cannot be undertaken and accomplished by individuals alone and lies within the realm of the government. Ordinary people like me cannot do anything but choose a few able graduates from the same system and guide them to this noble discipline, lead them through a process of refinement and growth and enable them to take the teachings and philosophy of the Qur'ān to the world.

Pursuing this purpose, I focused on two things. First, I started academic and research lectures (*dars*) on the Qur'ān. I also planned a commentary on the Qur'ān based on the coherence in the Book and the corroboratory evidence from its parallels so that the Qur'ānic wisdom and philosophy is brought to the readers and their hearts and minds are satisfied.

Second, I started, in parallel, academic and research lectures on the second source of religious knowledge in Islam, the Ḥadīth. In the beginning, I taught *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim to the college students who were interested in religious learning. Later, I gave lectures on the text of *Muwaṭṭā* of Imām Mālik. Having finished that, I have taken upon myself a lecture series on *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī as well and quite a number of intelligent and religious minded students are regularly attending these lectures.

My work on the Qur'ānic commentary was, with the help of God, completed in the latter part of 1980.This nine-volume commentary titled *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān* has been published. Its initial effects indicate that it will, God willing, fulfil the purpose it was written for. As for my work on the Ḥadīth, it is still confined to lectures. Some friends, however, are trying to get my lectures on *Muwaṭṭā* transcribed and then compiled and prepared for publication. If God wills, this work will soon be accomplished. For the compiled work, I have already had a lecture recorded to be formed into the introduction to the book. Mr. Mājid Khāwar, my dear fellow, has transcribed and compiled it in the form of a manuscript. There is a great difference between a spoken and a written word. It is not easy to transcribe any speech and then produce it in the book form. I have gone through the manuscript and have realized that the readers may find it deficient in terms of arrangement and order, brevity and explanation, and beauty of expression. However, as far as the basic message is concerned, it has been sufficiently preserved and duly conveyed. This last element is the real purpose which must be met. The fine points and beauty of discourse is a secondary element. Readers are encouraged not to attach more than due share of significance to these things.

In this booklet, I have explained all such principles of understanding *aḥādīth* which I believe are fundamental in determining the reliability or weakness of the traditions as well as understanding the *matn* (text). I have myself followed these principles in my explanation of the speech of the Prophet (sws) of God. I have not introduced a single new thing in these. All these principles have been taken from the primary and the most reliable works by the great scholars of the science of *ḥadīth* criticism. These principles are very natural and reasonable. No rational being can deny or reject them. The task of those people

who are accustomed to studying only those *aḥādīth* which support their juristic (*fiqh*) viewpoint is always easy. Such people may not possibly acknowledge the significance of this endeavour and will fail to give any credence to these principles; they may rather feel an aversion to this kind of work, I am afraid. On the contrary, those who intend to gauge and scrutinize all the works in the discipline and present it before the world as a source of religious knowledge must have, in their hands, something that can be acknowledged by all as a criterion.

I have followed these principles in understanding, interpreting, and explaining to the people in my lectures on the major *ḥadīth* works. My concerted efforts are now directed to communicate to other people the good effects this line of study produces. I do not know to what extent my desire will be fulfilled. Yet, however, I am confident in that my efforts are directed at serving the prophetic *ḥadīth*. I will not be, God willing, deprived of the due reward in the long run.

I must now state that if a scholar points out any errors in the present work, I shall amend and correct it. I will gratefully receive such suggestions. However, I am not interested in the comments of those who toe the line of their guides. They profess much love and care for the prophetic tradition but never serve it properly and never devote time for it. Their only academic treasure in the field of the *ḥadīth* studies is what they have heard from their teachers for which their sectarian brothers are ready to die. Such people come up with criticism but their reviews are always devoid of academic strength. I do not have time to read and respond to their criticism.

I finish this preface by expressing my gratitude to the Almighty Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī
Lahore
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Chapter 1

Difference Between Ḥadīth and Sunnah

Generally people take *ḥadīth* and *sunnah* as synonymous terms. This is not a correct impression for there is a great difference between these two terms. Ḥadīth and Sunnah occupy distinct status and different station in the religious knowledge. Taking them as synonyms complicates our perception of the religious knowledge. With a view to understanding *aḥādīth* this difference between the two terms is extremely important to understand.

1.1 Ḥadīth

The term *ḥadīth* is used to denote a saying, act or tacit approval, validly or invalidly, ascribed to the Prophet (sws).

The *muḥaddithūn* (experts in the science of *ḥadīth* criticism) also use the term *taqrīr* for tacit approvals. It means that, in the presence of the Prophet (sws), a believer did something, which the Prophet (sws) noticed but did not disapprove or condemn. Thus, the act done by a believer acquired tacit approval from the Prophet (sws).

The *muḥaddithūn* use another term *khabar* for a *ḥadīth*. It is commonly acknowledged that *khabar* can be true or false. The scholars of the science of *ḥadīth* criticism hold that a *khabar* and, therefore, a *ḥadīth* can be a true report or a concoction. It is on the basis of this premise that the Muslim scholars hold that a *ḥadīth* offers a *ẓannī* (inconclusive/probably true) evidence. It is as though a *ḥadīth* may have many possibilities on the plane of reliability. It can be *ṣaḥīḥ*,[1] *ḥasan*,[2] *dha'īf*,[3] *mawḍū'*[4] and *maqlūb*[5].

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1. A *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth* is transmitted through an unbroken chain of narrators all of whom are of sound character and memory. Such a *ḥadīth* should not clash with a more reliable report and must not suffer from any other hidden defect. (Maḥmūd Ṭaḥḥān, *Taysīr Muṣṭaliḥ al-Ḥadīth,* (Lahore: Islamic Publishing House, n.d.), 33.

2. A *ḥasan ḥadīth* is transmitted through an unbroken chain of narrators all of whom are of sound character but weak memory. This *ḥadīth* should not clash with a more reliable report and must not suffer

For obvious reasons, each of these kinds will be treated differently. They will be given different weight as the source text.

1.2 Types of *Khabar*

The *muḥaddithūn* divide the *ḥadīth*/*khabar* in two kinds, *khabar-i mutawātir* and *khabar-i wāḥid.*

1.2.1 *Khabar-i Mutawātir*

The author of *al-Kifāyah fī 'ilm al-Riwāyah*, Khaṭīb Baghdādī, has defined the *Mutawātir* report as follows:

> A *mutawātir ḥadīth* is reported by such a large number of narrators that cannot be perceived to have jointly forged and narrated a tradition about an issue without a compelling force.[6]

Although the term *khabar-i mutawātir* is in vogue; what it denotes does not exist. Sometimes a *ḥadīth* is believed to be *khabar-i mash-hūr*. But a little research reveals that it has been transmitted by a single narrator in each of first three layers in the *isnād*. Such narratives are reported by a large number of reporters in the third or fourth layer. Similarly, in my opinion, all such narratives which are usually termed as *khabar-i mutawātir* should be thoroughly investigated. If a thorough and exhaustive survey proves them to be *mutawātir,* they should be taken as such; but if they fail the test, they must not be fictitiously termed as *mutawātir* any more. I must also emphasize the point that, in

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from any other hidden defect. (Ibid., 45)

3. A *ḍa'īf ḥadīth* is that which cannot gain the status of *ḥasan* because it lacks one or more elements of a *ḥasan ḥadīth*. (For example, if the narrator is not of sound memory and sound character, or if there is a hidden fault in the narrative or if the chain of narrators is broken). (Ibid., 62)

4. A *mawdū' ḥadīth* is one that is fabricated and wrongly ascribed to the Holy Prophet (sws). (Ibid., 88)

5. It is that *ḥadīth*, in two different narrations of which the names of narrators have been changed.

6. I have referred to this work by Khaṭīb considering that it is a major work in the field. For my personal study, I have read through all the relevant sources but after having gone through all of them, I can say that this is the most important work in this discipline. As far as I could gather, the other scholars also hold a similar opinion about it. (Author)

my opinion, the Sunnah is *mutawātir*. However, it is *mutawātir* in that it has been perpetually adhered to by each generation of Muslims. This *tawātur* is not oral. This issue will fully be explained later.

1.2.2 *Khabar-i Wāḥid*

Khabar-i wāḥid signifies a historical narrative that falls short of yielding certain knowledge. Even if more than one person reports the narrative, that does not make it certain and conclusive truth except when the number of narrators reporting it grows to the level that the possibility of their consensus on forging a lie is perfectly removed. Most of the *ḥadīth* literature consists of individual isolated narratives.

1.3 Categories of *Aḥādīth* according to Authenticity

Khaṭīb Baghdādī divides the individual narratives in the following categories, according to their epistemic value:

- *aḥādīth* which are clearly genuine and acceptable.
- *aḥādīth* which are clear fabrications.
- *aḥādīth* whose status is not clear.

An explanation of all three follows:

1.3.1 Genuine and Acceptable *Aḥādīth*

According to Khaṭīb Baghdādī, the narratives of the following qualities belong to the first category:

- The narratives that contain reports testified by the "human intellect" (*mimmā tadullu al-'uqūl 'alā mūjabihī*) and that which are aligned with common sense.
- The narratives that are a corollary of the Qur'ānic text and the Sunnah.
- The narratives that have been received as acceptable by the *ummah* as a whole.

This should be appreciated that "the acceptance of the *ummah*" means only the acceptance by the part of the *ummah* that has remained pure from the contaminations of religious innovations and blind following. Thawbān (rta) narrates that the Prophet (sws) said:

A group from among my *ummah* will always hold fast to the truth. They shall not be harmed despite being abandoned by some people. They will remain in this state (of steadfastness) till God's decree arrives. (*Muslim*, No: 1920)

1.3.2 Fabricated and Unacceptable *Aḥādīth*

According to Khaṭīb, the second category of the narratives ascribed to the Prophet (sws) consists of *aḥādīth* of the following characteristics:

- The narratives that offend reason.
- The narratives that contradict the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.
- The narratives that discuss issues of prime importance in the religion which require absolute certainty. In such issues the Almighty cuts all possibilities of excuse for the recipients. They are left with no reasonable grounds to reject the teachings reported to them on the ground of historical authenticity. However, the individual narratives fail to provide required certitude of the reported knowledge and are not accepted.
- The individual narratives regarding issues which, by their very nature, demand that they should have been reported by a large number of people are also not acceptable.

According to the Ḥanafī jurists, in the issues of *'umūm-i balwā*,[7] the individual narratives carry no weight. In such issues they prefer *qiyās* and *ijtihād* over this type of individual narratives.

1.3.3 Indeterminable *Aḥādīth*

Narratives that give contradicting directives on a single issue and make it difficult for us to determine the final command in that regard form the third category.

While deciding on the applicability of the directives contained

[7] *'Umūm-i balwā* are the issues which by nature attract attention of the entire community. For example, the number and form of the Prayer (*ṣalah*) by its position in the religion requires that it should be received, practiced and communicated by the entire generation. Such issues are not left on the choice of few individuals.

in this type of *aḥādīth*, only such narratives should be accepted as valid which correspond to and accord with the wording of the collated narratives, textual evidence from the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

1.4 The Sunnah

Literally the word *sunnah* means clear, well trodden, busy and plain surfaced road. The Qur'ān has used this word to connote the way God has always dealt with the nations. It says:

> This is the way God has dealt with the people who passed before you. God's decision is always predestined. (Q 33:38)

> Do they look for anything other than God's way of dealing with the people of old? But you will never find any change in the way of God; nor will you find that God's way will turn off. (Q 35:43)

The word *sunnah* in the discussion of the sources of religion, denotes the practice of the Prophet (sws) that he taught and practically instituted as a teacher of the *sharī'ah* and the best exemplar. This practice is to be adhered to in fulfilling the divine injunctions, carrying out religious rites and moulding life in accord with the will of God. To institutute these practices was, the Qur'ān states, a part of the Prophet's responsibility as a Messenger of God:

> Verily God has shown grace to the believers by sending to them a messenger of their own who recites to them His verses, and purifies them, and teaches them the law and the wisdom; although before his advent they were in manifest error. (Q 3:164)

> You have indeed in the life of the Messenger of God the best example; for those who expect meeting God and the Last Day and remember Him much. (Q 33:21)

The Prophet (sws) set the best example for us in every aspect of life. He not only taught us all religious injunctions and etiquette –that we need to learn and adopt – but also showed us the practice of how to follow and carry out them.

The rejecters of the religious status and authority of the Sunnah hold that the Prophet (sws) was not more than a mere postman appointed to deliver the divine message. Their view is most absurd and baseless. The Prophet (sws) was appointed not only to communicate to the world the Book of God but also to purify the souls and to teach them how to practice the *sharī'ah*. His life is the perfect model for the believers to emulate. It is only by following his example that we can mould our life in accord with the religion of Islam and the dictates of the faith.

1.5 Importance of the Sunnah

The teachings of Islam contained in the Qur'ān consist of core guidance. Details and application of all the injunctions have not been provided in the Book. These things have been left for the Prophet (sws) to explain. The entire edifice of Islam is built on the building blocks of the Sunnah of the Prophet (sws). The Qur'ān, for example, only gives basic directives regarding the ritual Prayer, fast, *ḥajj*, *zakāh* and other rites and rituals. However, none of these directives have been explained in any detail in the Book. So much so we do not find even necessary details regarding, for example, timings and units of the ritual prayer – the most important religious injunction. The case of other worship rituals and directives is no different. For example, the directive to cut the hands of a convicted thief is found in the Qur'ān. Yet we do not know what value of the stolen item renders the theft punishable. Where do we cut the hand from? Questions like these have been explained through the tongue of the Prophet (sws) and his practice. If we set aside the Sunnah we will only be left with principal guidance of the Qur'ān and will remain ignorant as to how they are to be practiced, as it happened with the followers of the religion of Abraham, the so-called *ḥanīfs*. It is reported that they would sit against the walls of the Ka'bah and address God saying: "O Lord, we do not know how to worship You. We would worship You the prescribed way had we known it."[8]

This shows that the Qur'ān can only be clarified and explained with the help of the Sunnah. This is precisely for the same reason the Prophet (sws) said:

8. I have not been able to find the source of this saying attributed to the *ḥanīfs*.

> Beware, I have been granted the Qur'ān and with it something similar to it. (Abū Dāwūd, No: 4604)

This proves that following the Sunnah is as necessary as the Qur'ān. God Almighty sent the Prophet (sws) to make the Qur'ān clear. He is the best exemplar who sets paradigmatic example of the Qur'ānic teachings. He has beautifully fulfilled this function.

So this explains that the Sunnah is to the Qur'ān as body is to soul. Teachings of the Qur'ān are a soul whose observable form is the Sunnah. Both constitute the religion of Islam. Absence of either disfigures the religion and fells the edifice of Islam.

1.6 Mutual Harmony of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah

The Sunnah and the holy Qur'ān are not bound in an accidental interrelation. Their interconnection, on the contrary, is natural and logical. Human life involves innumerable issues in its diverse spheres which cannot be exhaustively recorded in a single book. It requires a whole library of books to record even a part of these issues.

Many things, for example, cannot be explained verbally. They require practical example. Without practical form and example, they do not provide concrete and observable guidance. Such issues, as call for a practical manifestation, cannot even be communicated verbally. Therefore, the holy Prophet (sws) set practical examples in order to clarify them. After the demise of the Prophet (sws), this responsibility was transferred to his Companions (rta). Later, the righteous and pious people of the *ummah*, the witnesses to God on earth, fulfilled this duty. It is incumbent upon the piety and all those who rise to work for the religion of God to carefully observe the Sunnah themselves including things that are not seemingly very important and to teach the generality to adhere to them.

1.7 Nature and Scope of the Sunnah

The Sunnah relates only to the practical aspects of human life. It deals only with the religious practices. Muslim beliefs, history and occasion of revelation of the Qur'ānic verses do not form the Sunnah.

1.8 The Sunnah is not based on *Aḥādīth*

The Sunnah is not based on *aḥādīth* which can either be true or false. The Sunnah, on the contrary, is based on the perpetual practice of the *ummah*. All the Muslim generations, from the Prophet (sws) to us, have followed it without a break.

Historicity of the Qur'ān is established by its generality-to-generality transmission as the word of mouth. The Book has been first transferred from the Prophet (sws) to the generation of his Companions (rta) who passed it on to the next generation with consensus. This process of continuous transmission of the Qur'ān has continued in each generation of the Muslim *ummah* till it has reached us. The Sunnah too has been transmitted through generality-to-generality by practical adherence of the entire generation in each successive layer. We have, for example, not adopted Prayer and *ḥajj* because we have learnt from some individual narrators (*āḥād*) that the Prophet (sws) practiced and taught these worship rituals. We have, on the contrary, followed these practices because the Prophet (sws) performed and instituted them in the generation of the Companions (rta). The successors to the Companions (rta) learnt these from the Companions (rta) and the coming generation learnt from the successors, so on and so forth, till these reached us. The corroboratory evidence for these practices, found in the major *ḥadīth* works, is an additional support for them. If a *ḥadīth* narrative concerning a practice, current among Muslims, accords with the practice of the *ummah,* that is acceptable. If, however, it contradicts any established practice then the *mutawātir* practice of the *ummah* shall prevail. However, we will try to reinterpret the *ḥadīth* contradicting the Sunnah so as it is made in accord with the practice of the *ummah*. If we fail to reconcile between the Sunnah and a particular *ḥadīth*, in any way, we have to abandon the individual narrative for the agreed upon concurrent practice. We prefer the Sunnah over *aḥādīth* because the isolated *ḥadīth* reports are only probably true. The Sunnah, on the contrary, is absolutely true and certain source of religious knowledge.

This fact about the historicity of the Ḥadīth was clear on the Mālikī (Imām Mālik and his followers) scholars. They preferred the practice of the people of Madīnah (*'amal ahl al-Madīnah*) over individual *aḥādīth*. They believed that the practice of the community of the people of Madīnah is absolutely certain. They

usually introduce such a practice as follows: *al-sunnatu 'indanā hākadhā* (the established practice with us is this). The followers of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah do not attach much importance to the individual narratives on this very basis either.

The perpetual practical adherence of the *ummah* in this context is based on the practice of the Prophet (sws), the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*khulafā' al-rāshidūn*), and the Companions (rta) as a community. The Prophet (sws) said:

> It is upon you to follow my practice and that of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. (*Ibn Mājah*, No: 42)

The Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws) were the first recipient of the religion and the first who practiced the religious teachings. They received the religion from the Prophet (sws) and communicated it to the world. That is why their practice is accepted and acknowledged as based on the Prophet (sws). Herds of people that join together to innovate practices and observe them as religious rites, in the present times, are innovators. The Prophet (sws) condemned falsehood, fabrication and *bid'ah* (innovation) introduced into the religion as waywardness leading to Hell.

1.9 A Question to the *Munkirīn-i Sunnah*[9]

Recently a group of people have emerged who admit authority of the Qur'ān and reject the authority of the Sunnah. Their view as well as the logic behind it is incomprehensible. What has made the Qur'ān absolutely authentic is that it has reached us through generality-to-generality as the word of mouth (*tawātur-i qawlī*). Historical authenticity of the Sunnah is established by a similar process, the practical adherence and perpetual practice of the entire generations from the Prophet (sws) to us (*tawātur-i 'amalī*). The intermediary generations of the believers worked as vehicle for the transmission of both of these sources. Having rejected the authenticity of the Sunnah, the rejecters of the Sunnah, cannot validly claim that the Qur'ān is the Book of God received from the

9. These are a group of scholars who do not believe in the authenticity of the Sunnah and hold that the Prophet (sws) could not give any religious rulings in addition to the Qur'ān. In the Indian Subcontinent, the most prominent upholders of this view are Ghulām Aḥmad Pervēz, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, Aslam Jērājpurī etc.

Prophet Muḥammad (sws), for there is no difference between the Qur'ān and the Sunnah as far as historical authenticity and the vehicle of transmission from the Prophet (sws) to us is concerned.

It is, therefore, extremely important to grasp the difference between the term *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*. Disregard for this difference between the two sources has led many people to take the entire corpus of the Sunnah as spurious. They rent asunder the whole edifice of the religion when they noticed that a few individual narratives failed to sustain historical investigation. Initially the rejecters found faults with and cast doubts on the *ḥadīth* literature. These doubts were then extended to the Sunnah itself. This is in spite of the fact that the Qur'ān and the Sunnah are equally authentic and the rejection of either entails negation of the other.

Those alive to the history of the movement of rejection of the Sunnah know that it originated in some questions over a few unexplainable narratives. Later on, the scholars entered polemical debates on the issue and, in the frenzy of hot debate for their position, lost track of the difference between the Ḥadīth and Sunnah. Neither the attackers realized what they were really felling nor did the defenders were aware of what they were defending. They were spending their energies in fighting undefined borders. The debate became an end in itself. This unawareness of the truth caused great harms to both the parties. Subsequently, the claim of the rejecters bordered on the rejection of Islam itself. The defenders of the authority and authenticity of the Ḥadīth, too, by forgetting the difference between the two sources, exposed the Sunnah to serious questions. They rendered the firm bases of the Sunnah vulnerable to the attack of the rejecters.

1.10 Different Paradigmatic forms of a Single Practice

Many people are, likewise, not appreciative of the fact that there could be more than one valid way of performing a single religious practice. Different *sunan* (plural of *sunnah*) can be instituted for a single religious issue. Owing to the failure to appreciate this fact the followers of the Sunnah were divided into different factions, all of which declared each other as rejecters of the Sunnah. Had they viewed the matter justly, they would have easily learnt that the holy Prophet (sws) could have introduced different *sunan* regarding a single issue.

Many *aḥādīth* show that at the occasion of the sermon of the final *ḥajj*, the holy Prophet (sws) took a seat and received the delegations from different tribes. People came to him and sought his guidance regarding their performances of the *ḥajj* rituals. A believer would explain that he had performed a certain *ḥajj* ritual in a particular way. The Prophet (sws) would tell him that there was nothing wrong (*lā ḥaraj*). Still another person would inquire about the status of his method of performing the same ritual which would be different. The Prophet (sws) would tell him that his method of performance was also correct and valid. He did not incur any sin. People continued swarming to him and seeking his decision on the ways they performed certain rituals. The Prophet (sws) invariably approved the practice of all and did not, as far as I know, reject the action reported by any pilgrim.

This shows that all of these pilgrims practiced the *ḥajj* rituals differently. Yet the Prophet (sws) approved of their way of performance. Their acts fell within the acceptable Sunnah. This means that it is acceptable to perform a religious obligation differently while observing the spirit and essence of the ritual or practice. It cannot be termed deviance.

We know that *aḥādīth* give different information regarding the *tashahhud* (reciting certain supplications while sitting in the last part of the Prayer). All *aḥādīth* on this issue have been ascribed to great Companions (rta) with extraordinary insight in the legal matters. Most of these *aḥādīth* prescribe different supplications for the occasion of *tashahhud.* Yet, however, the essence and spirit of all is the same. Let us suppose that someone adopts the wording for the supplication reported by ‘Umar (rta) or Ibn-i ‘Umar (rta) and does not recite what has been ascribed to ‘□’ishah (rta). Would it be appropriate to declare that he deviated from the Sunnah? Certainly not! One can no doubt argue on the authenticity of any of these *aḥādīth* and one can validly declare that this narrative is more authentic than that. One cannot, however, declare any of these supplications a deviation from the Sunnah.

I believe the same is the case of loudly uttering the formula ’*āmīn* after reciting Sūrah al-Fātiḥah (Q 1) or on hearing the *imām* complete the *sūrah* in the Prayer. Similar is the status of folding one’s hands on the chest or letting them fall free in the Prayer. There are ample indicators, rather evidences, proving each an authentic sunnah. Owing to external factors, which

cannot be taken up here for want of brevity, some of these practices got currency in certain cities while others were adopted in some other cities and regions. We cannot exclude any of these from the list of the acceptable normative *sunan*. One can, at best, declare some of these are more stressed (*mu'akkad*) methods of carrying out the relevant ritual. There is no point in rejecting any of these methods for they cannot be validly declared a deviation from normative Sunnah.

Chapter 2

Interrelation of the Qur'ān, the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth

The Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth and the Sunnah are interconnected. Internally, the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth are a body to the soul – the Qur'ān. Apparently, however, the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth provide details to the compact Qur'ān: their interrelation is that of detail and brevity. Both the Qur'ān and the Sunnah are equally important as far as the question of practicing the religion is concerned. We cannot separate the two. Following either is an obligation of equal degree.

The Qur'ān marks the limits and outlines of the picture of believers' life pattern and specifies the boundaries. It leaves the task of colouring and complementing the pattern for the Prophet (sws): it is for the Sunnah to give concrete shape and provide practical form to the believers' life. The Qur'ānic teachings are, therefore, confined to a comprehensive treatment of the principle teachings of Islam. We do not find the requisite details and specifics of any fundamental issue in the Book for which we have to refer to the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth.

The Prayer is the most important worship ritual in Islam. The place of the Prayer in the philosophical foundations of the religion can be gleaned from the Qur'ān. The basic components of this worship ritual as well as its relevance to human life too have been thoroughly discussed in the Book. However, we rely on the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth on the questions of the timings, the form, the recitations and the status (in terms of obligatory and optional) of the Prayer. The Qur'ān only refers to these things. It does not detail them.

Same is the case with the other worship rituals, social affairs, economic issues, political matters, and penal codes. We can form an overall picture of the *sharī'ah* directives concerning these issues as they are mentioned in the Qur'ān. However, it is only the Sunnah that colours and completes the picture. This is not applicable to each and every directive of the Qur'ān. It would be hard to say that we need to turn to the Sunnah in an effort to

understand all the directives contained in the Qur'ān. It is, nevertheless, clear that if any aspect of a directive requires further examination then the only helpful source is the Ḥadīth and the Sunnah.

2.1 Muḥammad (sws) as Teacher of the *Sharī'ah*

The Prophet (sws) did not carry out the task of filling out the outline of life as an additional voluntary service. It was his primary duty as the Messenger of God. His status as a teacher is one of the fundamental aspects of his position as a Messenger of God. This means that whatever he taught and told people is not excluded from his duty as the Messenger nor is it of lesser status than the Book. The Qur'ān clearly says that he was not a mere reciter or communicator of the Book of God; he was a teacher of the Book and its explicator:

> It is He who sent to the unlettered people a messenger of their own who recites to them His verses, and purifies them, and teaches them the *sharī'ah* and the wisdom; although before his advent they were in manifest error. (Q 62:2)

The Prophet (sws) not only explicated the verses containing the Divine directives but also explained the subtle points of *ḥikmah* (wisdom) buried within the Book of God. The following *ḥadīth* refers to this very quality of the Prophet (sws): "I have been granted the Qur'ān and with it something similar to it."[10]

The above discussions show that the Sunnah is equal to the Qur'ān for it enjoys historical reliability of an equal degree. If the Qur'ān has been orally transmitted through generality to generality (*tawātur-i qawlī)*, the Sunnah too has been handed down, practically, through perpetual adherence of the *ummah* with consensus (*tawātur-i 'amalī)*. We cannot grade and set a preference for either and cannot characterize either with relegation or elevation. Both sources are equally important when it comes to the question of following the religion of Islam.

10. Khaṭīb Baghdādī, Aḥmad b. 'Alī Abū Bakr, *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah*, (Hayderabad Deccan: Dā'irah al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyah, 1938), 8.

2.2 Genesis of the Extremist Positions on Authoritativeness of the Ḥadīth

The foregoing discussion shows the natural interrelation between the Qur'ān, the Ḥadīth and the Sunnah. However, during the early history of Islam, narrating *aḥādīth* was an extremely popular activity. This popularity remained ever increasing. This made many insincere people narrate *aḥādīth* without investigating the authenticity of the reports. This gave rise to a huge number of weak *aḥādīth.* Consequently some believers felt disinclined to a ready acceptance of *aḥādīth.* They publically expressed their views regarding the traditions. They would ask people to base their religious views on the Qur'ān only. Various historical narratives detail such discussions. I would, however, confine my discussion to one pertinent historical narrative. This will help us understand how and when extreme positions in this regard originated.

> Ḥasan narrates that 'Imrān b. Ḥuṣayn was once sitting among his Companions (rta). Someone said: "Do not talk of anything other than the Qur'ān." 'Imrān b. Ḥuṣayn asked [those present]: "Bring this man closer to me." The man came near him. 'Imrān said to him: "Suppose you are left only with the Qur'ān. Do you find any information in the Book that explains that the *ẓuhr* and *'asr* Prayers consist of four *rak'āt*, and *maghrib* of three and that you need to recite the Qur'ān in the first two *rak'ah*. Similarly, do you see anything in the Qur'ān guiding us to circumambulate the Ka'bah seven times along with the circumambulation of the Ṣafā and Marwah [while performing *ḥajj* and '*umrah*]?" Then he said: "People learn from us, lest you go astray."[11]

Some other versions of this narrative are relatively fuller detailing the incident further. According to these narratives 'Imrān presented, as examples, some legal punishments and asked his adversaries about their details in the Qur'ān.

At one end of the extreme, we see an aversion towards *aḥādīth*. In reaction to this stance, there stands another group of scholars who showed lack of interest in the Qur'ān. They advocated

11. Ibid., 15.

sticking to *aḥādīth* in the extreme. Some of these people openly declared that *aḥādīth* had to be preferred over the Qur'ān. Makḥūl, in one of his famous saying, tells us: "The Qur'ān is more in need of the Sunnah (*aḥwaj 'ilā al-sunnah*) than the Sunnah of the Qur'ān."[12]

This means that, according to Makḥūl, the Sunnah does not depend on the Qur'ān more than the Qur'ān depends on it. This view gives obvious preference to the Sunnah over the Qur'ān. It is obviously the worst form of exaggeration. This view continued to grow till the point when statements like the following were issued: It has been reported that Yaḥyā b. Kathīr said: "The Sunnah rules over the Qur'ān (*qāḍiyah 'alā al-kitāb*) and the Qur'ān does not rule over the Sunnah (*qāḍiyan 'alā al-sunnah*).[13]

In other words, God forbid, the Prophet (sws) rules over Allah and not the vice versa. One exaggeration no doubt leads to another severer exaggeration; errors always spawn errors.

In fact when *aḥādīth* became a dear commodity in the market, people started presenting worthless statements as Prophetic sayings. A group of scholars reacted to this situation and expressed their disapproval of this practice. They found some zealot followers of their view who, in turn, did not stop before reaching at even worse exaggerations. This phenomenon left us in the state where the Qur'ān and the Sunnah became two opposing and mutually contradicting sources.

One wonders what is the use of the Sunnah in the absence of the Qur'ān? What would be its foundations? We know that the Sunnah is grounded in the Qur'ān. The edifice of the Sunnah cannot be erected in the absence of the Qur'ān, its foundation. The truth of the matter is that both the Sunnah and the Qur'ān are interrelated. The Sunnah is to the Qur'ān as the building is to the foundation or as body is to soul. Another kind of interrelation between the two is that of brevity (the Qur'ān) and detail (the Sunnah). Both spring from the same source, are interdependent and equally indispensable for the believers.

2.3 *Aḥādīth* and the Sunnah cannot abrogate the Qur'ān

God has mercifully continued raising people in the *ummah* who have shown the right path to the believers guiding them out of

12. Ibid., 14.
13. Ibid.

the traps of exaggerating squabblers. When this dispute over the interrelation of the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth arose, the Almighty blessed some individuals with the power to protect and promote a balanced approach. The man who fulfilled this duty in a most beautiful manner is Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the greatest servant of the discipline who excelled in the knowledge of the Prophetic traditions. When such exaggerations regarding the status of the Sunnah, in relation to the Qur'ān, were brought to his notice, he explained the correct view. Faḍl b. Ziyād reports:

> I heard Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal respond to a question about the *ḥadīth*[14] which says that the Sunnah overrules the Qur'ān in the following words: "I dare not say so. However, the Sunnah explicates the Book, defines and explains it."[15]

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal believes that the Sunnah explicates, explains and defines the Qur'ān. A *ḥadīth* or a *sunnah* can never abrogate the Qur'ān. To him, the importance of the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth is recognized. It cannot be denied by a believer. However, the claim that they overrule the Qur'ān is absolutely baseless.

As for *aḥādīth,* they lack soundness in so many ways that they cannot abrogate a conclusive source such as the Qur'ān. The belief that they can abrogate the Qur'ān is absolutely against reason and intellect. I have referred to the inherent weakness involved in the transmission of *aḥādīth* in our discussion on the difference between the Ḥadīth and the Sunnah. This discussion suffices as a referent and repetition would be redundant.

The Sunnah, though not weak in those aspects, too cannot abrogate the Qur'ān. The Messenger of God was never allowed even to introduce the slightest change in the Qur'ānic text. We learn from the history of the Prophetic struggle that the Quraysh refused to accept and believe in the Qur'ān until the Prophet (sws) altered it for them. The Prophet (sws) was commanded by God to respond to this demand in the following words:

> Tell them it is not my right to change it on my own accord.

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14. This can at best refer to the statement ascribed to Yaḥyā b. Kathīr. There is no such *ḥadīth* which may be directly traced back to the Prophet (sws). (Author)

15. Ibid., 15.

(Q 10:15)

The Qur'ān is the word of God. None other than the author can change and alter it. There are no doubt, instances of abrogation in the Book. However, all the changes made in the directives of the Book were introduced by the Author Himself. Both the abrogating and the abrogated verses are part of the Qur'ān. The Messenger was obliged by God to perfectly communicate to the people what was given to him, without altering it. He was obligated to explain to the believers whatever part required an explanation. He could not make the slightest change possible in it. He had no right to change it in spite of all of mankind. If the Messenger is not given the right to alter the word of God, how can we validly give a *ḥadīth* ascribed to him or a *sunnah* attributed to him the right to abrogate the Book.

2.4 Can a *Sunnah* or a *Ḥadīth* specify a General Command of the Book?

Can a *ḥadīth* or a *sunnah* specify and restrict the application of a Qur'ānic verse or not, is another question. By specification (*takhṣīṣ*), we mean restricting application of a general command (*muṭlaq*) of the Book of God in any degree. This question calls for a detailed answer which follows:

i. The specifications affected by *aḥādīth* can be of many degrees and kinds. A *ḥadīth*, in some cases, specifies the application of a general command of the Qur'ān, excluding its application to a matter which the text itself excludes, though subtly. In such cases, therefore, ignoring the subtle indications and including the unintended matter in the application would not be in accord with the principles of interpretation. It would entail negation of the implied meaning and intent of the text. Thus this type of specification is not only possible but desirable. Not only a *ḥadīth* and a *sunnah* but also independent reasoning and analogy can be used to specify the general application of the verses in such cases.

ii. If, however, a *ḥadīth* restricts the application of the Qur'ānic directive and excludes the intended meaning, noticeably implied in the text, this specification would in fact be a new directive replacing the original one. Adopting such a *ḥadīth* then would mean that we consider the new directive to be more forceful than

the clear Qur'ānic injunction. It would not be an instance of simple specification. It would be a clear example of abrogation. We have already observed that it is not possible for even the Messenger of God to cancel the directives of the Qur'ān. This right then cannot be given to the *aḥādīth* ascribed to him.

I intend to further illustrate this point with the help of an example. The Qur'ān commands that the hands of a thief be cut off. The Prophet (sws) said that if someone steals a thing worth less than a quarter of a *dīnār*, then his hands should not be cut. This exemplifies the first type of specification mentioned above. We see this *ḥadīth* affects the application of the verse commanding cutting off hands of the thief. The narrative states that only such thieves may be punished by cutting their hands who steal more than a quarter of a *dīnār*. The related Qur'ānic directive follows:

> Cut the hands of the thief – man (*al-sāriq*) or woman (*al-sāriqah*) – in recompense to what they earned and as an exemplary punishment from God. (Q 5:38)

The narrative that restricts its application to a certain type of thieves follows:

> The hands of the thief may only be cut if he has stolen something worth at least a quarter of a *dīnār*. (*Abū Dāwūd*, No: 4384)

The verse gives a general command. It requires cutting the hands of the thief (*sāriq*). The *ḥadīth* does not allow us to apply the directive to thieves in general. It states that a thief may only be punished if he steals things worth at least equal to a quarter of a *dīnār*. This specification is, indeed, an explanation of the correct and intended meaning of the word *al-sāriq* (thief). The word *al-sāriq* is not applied to the one who picks up insignificant items. *Sarqah* (theft), according to the conventions of the Arabic language, is applied to stealing a secured and guarded asset of considerable value. This *ḥadīth* offers a valid explanation of the original meaning of the word. This specification makes the true intention of the author clear and fixes and defines it. It removes the possibility of apparent ambiguity in the words of the verse.

This is an example of valid *takhṣīṣ* (specification).

'Umar (rta), the second caliph, specified the application of this general command. He exercised personal reasoning and analogy and suspended the application of the directive during the period of drought. He argued that, in such a situation, one might be compelled to commit theft out of irresistible want. This supports my understanding of the issue. I have held earlier that such a specification can be exercised by any *mujtahid* (jurist). This kind of specification will be equal to only a directive reached at through *ijtihād*. However, it must remain clear that the *ijtihād* reached by one of the Rightly Guided Caliphs holds great importance in the religion.

The truth of the matter is that every general statement contains natural restrictions and specifications which are there *ab initio*. Take for example the verse of inheritance. The Almighty says:

> Allah enjoins you concerning your children that the male shall have the equal of the portion of two females; if there are more than two females, they shall have two-thirds of what the deceased has left, and if there is one, she shall have the half; and as for his parents, each of them shall have the sixth of what he has left if he has a child, but if he has no child and (only) his two parents inherit him, then his mother shall have the third; but if he has brothers and sisters, then his mother shall have the sixth after the payment of a bequest he may have bequeathed or a debt. You do not know which of your parents and your children is nearer to you in usefulness. This is an ordinance from Allah: Surely Allah is Knowing, Wise. (Q 4:11)

The general nature of the verse demands that every father inherits property from his sons and every son inherits property from his father. However, there is a general specification implied in it. Thus, the difference in the religion of the deceased father/son or the heir son/father would remove the general nature of the directive. The difference in religious affiliation of the heir and the deceased obstructs the transfer of property as inheritance to the heir. The Prophet (sws) has expressed this specification in the following words:

A believer shall not inherit from a disbeliever; nor shall a disbeliever from a believer."[16]

General application of the Divine command regarding the punishment of cutting off hands of the thief is of the same nature. The relevant Qur'ānic verse apparently commands that the hands of every thief shall be cut off. It does not clearly require that the age and social and mental status of the accused and nature of the theft etc. are to be considered, while implementing the command. Yet, however, the implicit specification in this command of general nature is that the thief who is to get this punishment must be a mature man of sound mental health. Mentally ill persons, for example, cannot be punished. If someone is compelled by sheer need for necessities of life and commits theft, he cannot be punished. Similarly, the value of stolen things should also be assessed. Only the theft of a significant item should be punished. All these are taken as *ab initio* qualifications. The jurists (*fuqahā*) and the Prophetic traditions only make them more explicit for us.

Another example of specification, rather of abrogation, relates to the punishment of adulterers mentioned in the Qur'ānic verse (Q 24:2) commonly referred to as the verse of flogging. Many scholars, based on some *aḥādīth*, restrict the application of the prescribed punishment to the unmarried offenders. The case of the married adulterers, it is held, has been stipulated in a different and severer punishment[17] independent of this Qur'ānic injunction. The wording of the verse, however, does not contain a slightest clue to this discrimination between the married and the unmarried criminals. The verse reads:

Al-zānī and *al-zāniyah*, flog each one of them with a hundred stripes. (Q 24:2)

The words *al-zānī* and *al-zāniyah* do not admit of any qualification. We cannot, therefore, exclude married criminals from the injunction while remaining true to the words of the verse. The verse clearly includes both married as well as unmarried *zānīs*. In the Arabic language, *zinā* is applied to the

16. Ibid., 13.
17. It is held that only the married *zānīs* have to be stoned to death.

sexual intercourse committed out of wedlock by married as well as unmarried persons. The necessary elements of the definition of the word *zinā* apply both to the married and unmarried offenders. Besides, there is no inherent qualification found in this context as is the case with the definition and application of the word *sarqah* (theft) discussed above. There is no textual indication attached with the directive restricting the application of the command to unmarried people only. Therefore, we cannot say that married people have to be given a separate punishment, of stoning to death. This is not an instance of specification. It is rather a clear and explicit example of abrogation. We have already seen that no *sunnah* or *ḥadīth* can abrogate the Qur'ān.

If we try to understand the genesis of this misinterpretation and study the issue in the *ḥadīth* literature we learn that the Prophet (sws) extensively scrutinized the case of *zinā* involving Mā'iz Aslamī. He sought minute and specific details and asked very specific questions regarding the act. He was so direct that the jurists, based on this careful scrutiny and vigorous investigation by the Prophet (sws), could conclude that a judge may use naked, direct and immodest expressions while questioning the accused. I believe that this extensive questioning was done to remove the possibility of using the term in its general sense. It helps a judge to determine that the accused has really committed sexual intercourse, something that merits the prescribed punishment. This scrutiny and investigation into the nature of the act was not carried out to determine the marital status of the offender.

The jurists commonly hold that in the case of a valid instance of abrogation, the abrogator and the abrogated verses occur in succession, i.e., both the injunctions are not casually scattered in the Scripture. This serves to explain that the textual evidences, indicating that a directive is abrogated by a succeeding one, are put beside the abrogated command. They co-occur with the command from its inception. If something is purported to be an abrogator, without the support of such clear co-occurring indicators, then that is not an instance of specification but of abrogation. The conditions to be fulfilled in a valid instance of abrogation in the Qur'ān have been sufficiently explained in the foregoing pages.

Chapter 3

Fundamental Principles of Understanding *Aḥādīth*

We study and ponder over *aḥādīth* to fully benefit from the prophetic knowledge transmitted to the *ummah* in the form of traditions. Proper investigation in and contemplation on *aḥādīth* requires that the researchers in this discipline follow certain fundamental principles. If a researcher attempts studying *aḥādīth* ignoring these principles he will face perplexing questions at every step in this exercise. He would, very likely, lose the straight path. Those intending to steer clear of the danger of losing the true prophetic knowledge will find the following principles helpful in avoiding these dangers. Those taking help from these principles will find the road to understanding *aḥādīth* quite easy.

There are five fundamental principles of understanding *aḥādīth*. A detailed discussion on each follows.

3.1 The Qur'ān is the Measure of Truth

The first and the foremost principle is that the Qur'ān is the real measure of truth regarding *aḥādīth.* In fact, it is the only criterion of truth in all religious matters. While discussing the interrelationship between the Ḥadīth, the Sunnah and the Qur'ān, I have explained that the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth are interrelated as the root is related to its branches or a text is to its explanation. The Qur'ān gives the core guidance forming the religion and the *sharī'ah*. This Qur'ānic guidance is the basis and foundation of the religion while *aḥādīth* explain and detail it.

The Qur'ān has many characteristics. It has many names and attributes of which one name, given to it by the Almighty Himself, is *mīzān* (the criterion/measure). The Qur'ān is the measure of judgment. This means that it works as a judgment over the differences and disputes between the people. It establishes the truth firm and makes it distinct from the untruth. This is the greatest purpose the Qur'ān was revealed to fulfil. It is only the Qur'ān which measures the ideas and views in the

divine scale and decides over the validity of what people ascribe to God. It determines what part of the current religious ideas is the truth from God and what part of these is a human addition mixed with the pure divine guidance. The Qur'ān says:

> It is God Who has revealed the Book with decisive truth, and the balance (*al-mīzān*). (Q 42:17)

> Certainly We sent our messengers with clear arguments, and sent down with them the Book and the balance (*mīzān*) that men may conduct themselves with equity. (Q 57:25)

Considering this very quality of the Qur'ān, it has been given the name *muhaymin* (guardian/criterion). In order to establish justice and equity, we need a balance and a criterion. Almighty God has referred to these two qualities of the Qur'ān in the following verse as well:

> And to you we have revealed the Book with the truth, in confirmation of the [prophesies of] the earlier Scriptures, and a criterion (*muhayman*) over it. So judge between them by that which God has revealed, and do not follow their desires setting aside the truth which has come to you. (Q 5:48)

Everything concerning the religion and the *sharī'ah* has to be measured by this criterion. This is a general principle which covers all the religious matters and sources. When we find a *ḥadīth* which goes against the religion and admits of doubt we have to measure it by the Qur'ān, for the Book rules over it.

Someone may consider *aḥādīth* independent of the measure of the Qur'ān. He may posit that it is not subject to the Qur'ān and it is a judge for itself. He would, however, be forced to adopt as the part of the religion even the narratives which clearly contradict the Qur'ānic teachings. He would be including in the religion that which does not belong to it.

I believe that every such *ḥadīth* as is proved unsound when measured on the scale of the Qur'ān, is either a fabrication or a distortion. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to keep the religion of God safe from the onslaught of such narratives. It is unperceivable, on the scale of reason as well as revelation, that the Messenger (sws) negates or contradicts the commands of the

Almighty God. The scholars of the religious sciences unanimously hold that any *ḥadīth* that contradicts the Qur'ān is a *munkar* narrative. It has to be rejected. I quote the leader of the *muḥaddithūn* and the greatest servant of the Prophetic tradition, Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in this regard. Faḍl b. Ziyād reports:

> I heard Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal respond to a question regarding the traditions which say that the Sunnah overrules the Qur'ān (*qāḍiyatan 'alā al-Qur'ān*) in the following words: "I do not dare say that. However, the Sunnah explicates the Book, defines and explains it.[18]

This means that, according to him, no *ḥadīth* can abrogate the Qur'ān. We acknowledge the status of *aḥādīth*. We do not deny it. However, we hold that the claim that it overrules the Qur'ān is baseless.

3.2 Collating the Narratives on a Single Topic

Just like the Qur'ān, *aḥādīth* too have an overall order and arrangement. We cannot properly understand and interpret a *ḥadīth* without considering the overall structure of *aḥādīth*. The second most important principle of understanding *aḥādīth* is that every *ḥadīth* has to be considered a part of the collective system of the narratives. A part, it is clear, has to be in accord with the overall structure of the whole. Every *ḥadīth* that is not in assonance with the overall structure of *aḥādīth* should be rejected. In solving the problems of opposing and mutually contradicting *aḥādīth*, the collective order of *aḥādīth* will be of immense help to us.

Examples of such isolated inordinations are abundant in the statements of the Sufis. They present their statements as *aḥādīth* and ascribe them to the Prophet (sws) even though these statements neither correspond to the fundamental teachings of the Qur'ān nor accord with the general prophetic teachings. Such baseless traditions, though limited in number, have found their way into the major *ḥadīth* works. It is extremely necessary to analyse and separate them from the true prophetic knowledge.

3.3 Language of *Aḥādīth*

The original language of the *ḥadīth* literature is the standard Classical Arabic even though, unlike the Qur'ān, most of *aḥādīth*

18. Ibid., 15.

have not been transmitted verbatim; ideas have been transmitted rather than words. Nonetheless, the language of *aḥādīth* maintains a high standard. The quality of the language of *aḥādīth* is superior to many other earlier sources. It is extremely important to consider this aspect of the language of the prophetic sayings while pondering over them. By the grace of God, there are many *ḥadīth* collections. Recorded in an early period of oral tradition, the language of *aḥādīth* is nearer to that of the prophetic times. Having acknowledged that language keeps changing and evolving, we need to prefer the traditions whose language is more approximate to that of the time of the Prophet (sws) and the Companions (rta).

In the syntactic and morphological analysis of *aḥādīth*, the judgments of the expert grammarians, lexicographers and acknowledged authorities in the field always prevail. Therefore, while deciding on meanings of difficult words and explaining the complex sentence structures, their interpretations and views have to be preferred over one's personal understanding.

For the serious student of the *ḥadīth* literature, expertise and competence in the language spoken during the time of the Prophet (sws) and the Companions (rta) as well as a taste and flavour for this language are crucial. This can help him differentiate the language of the prophetic time from that of the later times. If a person, engaged in the *ḥadīth* study, fails to understand this difference, it is very likely that he confuses non-prophetic statements with *aḥādīth* of the Prophet (sws). He can even be led to accept the non-Qur'ānic words as the part of the Book of God. A famous *ḥadīth* ascribed to 'Umar (rta) claims that the Qur'ān once included the verse *al-shaykh wa al-shaykhatu idhā zanayā farjumūhumā al-battata* (When an old man and old woman commit extramarital sex, stone them to death). The truth of the matter is that, far from being part of a verse of the Qur'ān, these words do not even match the prophetic language. It is, at best, the language of a non-Arab jurist of the later times.

3.4 Specification and Generalization, Situation and Context, and Nature of Address

Understanding *aḥādīth* requires proper understanding of the instances of specification and generalization, situation and

context, and the nature of address. A proper understanding of the instances of specification and generalization requires that, while explaining the *ḥadīth* narratives, one appreciates where an apparently general statement, actually, deals with a specific case. Similarly, one has to appreciate the points in the text where a seemingly specific command is used in a general sense. *Muḥaddithūn* have discussed these questions in detail. However, this issue is very delicate and one has to remain alive to these facts.

Likewise, understanding the *ḥadīth* literature requires that the student is able to fully appreciate the implications of the textual context as well as context of situation. This is extremely important to understand. Failure to appreciate the proper textual context as well as context of situation gives rise to grave and complex questions leading to unending disputes. Take, for example, the famous *ḥadīth* which says:

> Leaders shall be from among the Quraysh. (*Musnad Aḥmad*, No: 19792)

The majority of the scholars of the third and the later generations committed serious errors in determining the true context of this *ḥadīth*. Literal interpretation of the narrative led them to believe that only the Quraysh could validly rule the Muslims. Evidently, this view puts Islam and Brahmanism on equal ground as far as the political system is concerned. This view clearly ignores that Islam is the first religion aiming to purify the political systems from the evil of Brahmanism.

The primary cause of this error is that the scholars failed to understand the proper context of this prophetic statement. This *ḥadīth* does not give a universal directive governing the political system of Islam. It does not establish the political superiority of the Quraysh for all times. It is, on the contrary, a prophetic judgment on a political dispute that was buried in the minds of a group of the Anṣār (helpers) of Madīnah. This group expected that, after the Prophet's (sws) demise, it was they, not the Quraysh, who truly deserved to be the leaders of the Muslim *ummah*. They based this view on their services to the religion of God. This dispute remained latent in the minds of only a group among the Anṣār during the lifetime of the Prophet (sws). Yet it

found expressions in various ways even during his lifetime. The Prophet (sws) feared that, after his demise, the dispute might cause a great divide within the *ummah*. Sensing this danger, the Prophet (sws) decided to settle the issue during his lifetime. Seen in this light, the prophetic statement means that at that time the people of Arabia would not accept the leadership of any tribe other than the Quraysh. Therefore, immediately after him, the leaders should be elected from the Quraysh. This prophetic decision settled the dispute that arose between the immigrants of Makkah and the Aṇsār of Madīnah right after the death of the Prophet (sws). In the famous meeting of the Saqīfah of Banī Sā'idah, the Aṇsār put forward this claim.

True nature of the words of the Prophet (sws), therefore, is that it was a decision on an implicit dispute on the question of leadership of the Muslims. The Prophet (sws) gave his verdict before the dispute clearly manifested itself. He based his decision on the established political superiority of the Quraysh. He did not adduce eternal racial superiority of the Quraysh over the other nations of the world as is entailed by the usual interpretations of the narrative.

One example of errors resulting from incorrect identification of the context of this prophetic saying follows. The leader of a contemporary Islamic movement, on the basis of this *ḥadīth,* issued a legal opinion (*fatwā*) to the effect that a *sharī'ah* directive can be altered and suspended. In the support of this view he cited the *ḥadīth* above mentioned. He held that though Islam affirms equality as an established moral principle, yet, in the case of the candidacy for caliphate, the Prophet (sws) found this principle inexpedient. He cancelled this principle and declared that leaders shall be from among the Quraysh.[19]

Take still another example. Some tradition contain following words of the Prophet (sws):

> I have been commanded to fight the people until they profess there is no God but Allah. (*Bukhārī*, No: 385)

Apparent and literal meaning of the narrative, disregarding its

19. The author refers to the viewpoint of Abū al-Aa'lā Mawdūdī. See Abū al-A'lā Mawdūdī, *Rasā'il-o-Masā'il*, 22nd ed., vol. 1 (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1990), 64-8.

true context, validates the Orientalists' view that Islam was spread by the sword. It also entails that the war against unbelief that the Prophet (sws) started has to go on till the whole mankind embraces Islam and declares Allah to be the only deity. This is plainly wrong. History falsifies this interpretation. We know that the Prophet (sws) accepted *jizyah* from the People of the Book as well as the Magians (*al-majūs*). He did not force them to say that there is no God but Allah. Similarly all such people who contracted treaties with Muslims, before their subjugation (*mu'āhid/ahl al-ṣulḥ*), were allowed to follow their religion. They too were not forced to convert. We must, therefore, try to discover the true meaning of this narrative. If we consider the word "the people" in the narrative specifically referring to the children of Ismā'īl, based on obvious textual indications, the *ḥadīth* narrative conforms to the teachings of the Qur'ān.

I have explained in my commentary on the Qur'ān the Divine law regarding the Messengers (*rusul*) and their direct addressees. I have explained that sometimes God sends a Prophet (*nabī*) as a Messenger (*rasūl*) to a nation. The Messenger makes his message plain. He establishes his claim by a number of portents and removes all possible doubts on his claim to be a Divine Messenger. If his addressees reject him and his message even after the *itmām-i ḥujjah* (making the truth obvious in a conclusive manner), the rejecters are either struck by God's cosmic punishment and destroyed or, otherwise, punished at the hands of the believers.

It is this way (*sunnah*) of God which this *ḥadīth* explains. It is a historical fact that the Prophet (sws) was primarily sent to the Children of Ismā'īl, who were his direct addressees. Therefore, after *itmām-i ḥujjah* was accomplished by the Prophet (sws), they were left to choose between death and faith. They were not held in bondage nor were they offered to pay *jizyah* and follow their religion.

Similar problematic narratives bearing upon issues of great importance abound in the *ḥadīth* literature. It is, therefore, very important to learn the context of situation of the reported acts and statements of the Prophet (sws). Failure to understand the true context of such narratives has perplexed most of our renowned scholars who badly failed to explain such problematic narratives. They either adopted apologetic attitude with regard to

these narratives or came to hold clearly unfounded views.

3.5 Mutual Harmony of Religion, Human Nature and Reason

The fifth and the last guiding principle in this regard is that the religion does not contradict the dictates of reason and *fiṭrah* (human nature). God has indeed based the teachings of religion on the dictates of *fiṭrah*.

> *Fiṭrah* of God upon which He has modelled the humans. (Q 30:30)

The religion highlights the dictates of reason and *fiṭrah*, shapes them in the form of principles and bases the entire system of human life on it. Hence, it cannot contradict *fiṭrah.* It follows from this that everything that is against reason and *fiṭrah* would definitely contradict the religion.

The entire call of the Qur'ān is based on reason and intellect. The Book pleads to it in the support of its claims. Similarly, *aḥādīth* penetrate our hearts through reason and *fiṭrah*. It does not contain something opposed to reason and *fiṭrah*. If we find any such *ḥadīth* we must investigate and ponder over it in more depth. We shall either appreciate that, previously, we were misinterpreting the *ḥadīth* or learn that the narrative is not sound.

We must also appreciate that, at times, we fail to grasp all aspects of a stated fact. If we fail to fully understand a prophetic statement and we realise that the reason of our failure lies in the limitations of human intellect, we should not hastily brand the narrative as against reason and *fiṭrah*. It entails that if we see that a statement contradicts reason and *fiṭrah*, we should continue contemplating on it till we are able to grasp its meaning or conclude that it lies out of the scope of human mind. If, however, repeated investigation proves that the narrative contradicts reason and *fiṭrah* and there is no way we can reconcile between the two then it must be boldly rejected.

I also want to emphasize that, in this discussion, I do not mean to refer to the understanding and reasoning of those who do not use intellect and reason properly. Nor do I refer to those who make their reason hostage to the desires of their flesh. Their issue should be referred to God for judgment.

3.6 Conclusion

The religion and the *sharī'ah* are not trivial affairs. They command serious consideration. The prophetic sayings form part of the religion of God. To declare that a particular statement is a genuine prophetic saying is a grave judgment. It is a matter of great responsibility. Not everyone is able to discharge this duty. There are no doubt other principles of *ḥadīth* investigation. They too are important for us. However, the ones which I have mentioned above are fundamental. They provide firm and foundational rules to guide the student. It is not possible for one to properly understand and explain *aḥādīth* without taking them into consideration.

Chapter 4

Basic Criteria to Sift the Sound from the Unsound *Aḥādīth*

There are six principles which can help us decide between the sound and the unsound *aḥādīth*. These principles are foundations of the discipline of *ḥadīth* criticism. Taking guidance from these principles makes it easy for us to sift the reliable reports from the unreliable ones. It is extremely important for the student of the *ḥadīth* literature to take help form them and consider them in his effort to properly understand and fully benefit from the prophetic knowledge. Since this is a very delicate issue, I shall try to base my discussion on the prophetic sayings and views of the pious elders (*salf ṣāliḥīn*). I shall not add anything to it on my own. I have already mentioned many important points in the foregoing pages in this regard. Here I intend only to bring such points in a set order and properly organize the discussion so that it becomes clear and observable to the reader.

Khaṭīb Baghdādī is the most important figure among the scholars who dealt with the principles of the science of *ḥadīth* criticism. He has carefully put all the important discussions in his book, *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah*. My discussion here is based on the following chapters of this book:

1. *Bāb fī wujūb iṭrāḥ al-munkar wa al-mustaḥīl min al-aḥadīth* (On the obligation of rejecting the *aḥādīth* which contain *munkar* and improbable things)
2. *Bāb dhikru mā yuqbalu fīhi khabar al-wāḥid wa mā lā yuqbalu fīhi* (Issues which are decided on the basis of the individual narratives and matters which are not affirmed on the basis of such reports)

Khaṭīb has discussed this issue exhaustively. According to him, the following is the first criterion to differentiate between the reliable and the unreliable reports.

4.1 Religious Taste of the Believers and those Grounded in Knowledge

If a *ḥadīth* does not match the taste and understanding of the

believers and of those grounded in knowledge, it should not be accepted. The Prophet (sws) has guided us to this principle as is evident in the following *ḥadīth*:

> [You should accept] a *ḥadīth* [ascribed to me] which your heart finds familiar and it affects your hair and skins and corresponds to the call of your heart and mind for I am ever closer to such a statement than you. When something is ascribed to me which your hearts do not recognize and from which your hair and skins coil and which you find quite remote from your usual disposition [it cannot be my statement] for I am more remote from such a thing than you.[20]

The Arabic word *julūd* (singular *jild*) means skin.[21] In this instance, however, it connotes hair. The word has been used in the Qur'ān in this sense.

> Whereat does creep the hair (*julūd*) of those who fear their Lord. (Q 39:23)

This usage is perfectly conventional and accords with the rules of Arabic language. In Arabic, we can use metonymy. One could speak of a container to refer to what it contains. The word *abshār* is plural form of *bashr* (skin). I believe that the most accurate translation of the word would be "body". Skin covers the body and is a part of it.

Let us now study the sayings of the pious elders on this issue. Rabī' b. Khuthaym says:

> There are *aḥādīth* which give light like that of a clear day. We can easily recognize them [as the sayings of the Prophet (sws)]. There are, however, *aḥādīth* which are shrouded by the blackness of the dead of night. Our hearts are averse to them.[22]

20. Ibid., 430.

21. The narrative just quoted does not contain the word *julūd*. The author, it seems to me, has been mistaken. He either could not provide the narrative which he is speaking of or he failed to notice that the word used in the narrative is *abshār* which is a synonym of the word *julūd*. God knows best.

22. Ibid., 431.

Walīd b. Muslim says:

> I heard Awzā'ī say: "We would hear a *ḥadīth* and present it before our companions just like we present *dīnārs* to a goldsmith in order to learn if they are counterfeit or pure. We accept what our companions accept as genuine and we reject what they reject as defected.[23]

Jarīr expresses his attitude in this regard in the following words:

> Whenever I heared a new *ḥadīth,* I would go to Mughīrah and narrate it to him. Whichever *ḥadīth* he asked me to abandon, I did.[24]

The historical narratives above mentioned bring to light some important points which follow:

First, the question whether a narrative is actually the saying of the Prophet (sws) is to be decided on the basis of its contents also. It is not merely accepted on the basis of an imposing chain of narrators. This exercise of studying and analyzing the *matn* can be carried out by only those who have developed a taste for the prophetic speech. They can, on the basis of their expertise, decide the true *aḥādīth* from spurious fabrications. Such people can, after listening to a narrative ascribed to the Prophet (sws), judge and decide its origin from the effects it creates on their hearts and minds. Such a taste cannot be developed by everyone. It can only be developed by a person whose nature is without blemish, whose perception of the prophetic speech is very sharp, whose mind is pure of absurdities, and who has remained in the company of the Prophet (sws) or, otherwise, has lived in the prophetic speech (*ḥadīth*).

It is important to note that there are people who have not enjoyed the privilege of the company of the Prophet (sws). However, they develop an expertise in the prophetic discourse (*ḥadīth*). They have deep insight and profound understanding of the religion. They make full efforts in training themselves in

23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 432.

these disciplines. Their taste for the prophetic language can be of great help as well. Their understanding of the prophetic language may, in a degree, be inferior to that of the Companions (rta), and indeed this difference is only natural, yet, however, we must appreciate a relevant Qur'ānic statement. The Almighty says that in the later part of the life of this *ummah,* there shall emerge people who will be just like the first generation. (Q 56:13-4) This entails that God raises people of such fine and pure taste, even today, who have command of the prophetic language through God's given knowledge and understanding. They are able to decide the origin of a statement ascribed to the Prophet (sws). They can judge if it is a genuine prophetic saying or not.

Second, every prophetic *ḥadīth* creates an *ihtizāz* (sensation) in the heart of the listener if it is not dead. This *ihtizāz* can be of the nature of glad tiding if the *ḥadīth* gives positive news. It can also be a sense of fear of God if the *ḥadīth* warns of something. This applies to all *aḥādīth*. Similarly, a *ḥadīth* creates satisfaction, conviction and peacefulness (*sakīnah*) if it relates to the category of wisdom (*ḥikmah*). After all, man of pure heart and untainted nature cannot remain unmoved upon listening a *ḥadīth* for it creates a tumult in the inner self of the listener if is not already dead.

Third, it is commonly acknowledged that the language of the Qur'ān is distinctively superior to the ordinary human speech. It cannot be compared to the language of human beings. Similarly, the language of prophetic *aḥādīth* is superior to the language of common men. However, there is a little difference between the Qur'ānic and the prophetic speech. This minor difference between these two sources is only natural. The prophetic speech cannot, after all, match the Divine speech. Still, however, it is an observable reality that the prophetic speech is marked with such depth and vastness, such exaltedness and sumptuousness as cannot be observed in the speech of the ordinary humans. Though one cannot speak such language, yet, however, one can feel and sense it. On hearing a genuine prophetic *ḥadīth* one's heart cries out and witnesses that it must be the word of the Prophet (sws).

The prophetic *ḥadīth,* it should be noted, is not only marked with beauty of thought, it is also adorned with a palpable beauty of expression. However, this beauty can be noticed only by those

who have made themselves acquainted with it. Experts of the language of *aḥādīth* can discern beauty of expression in the prophetic speech even if it is not apparent to the ordinary people. When they find a *ḥadīth* devoid of this characteristic beauty, they can easily understand that the narrative is not genuine. They come to know that it is a piece of stone being passed for a pure gem. Similarly, if they confront a statement originating from someone other than the Prophet (sws), falsely ascribed to him, they can, after listening to it, understand that this is not the speech of the Prophet (sws) even though it contains some beauty of expression. If such a fabrication, being passed as the prophetic saying, is abhorrent to his pure understanding of the religion he rejects it outright. He cannot even imagine that the Prophet (sws) could have uttered something inappropriate.

The Prophet (sws) is the most eloquent of all mankind. Take a look at the supplications ascribed to him. Even man with only a little understanding of and taste for the classical Arabic language can observe the excellence of the prophetic speech in them and appreciate that it originates from the Prophet (sws). Similarly he can appreciate the origin of some parts added to the treasure at a later stage. This line of examination will show that the grandeur, greatness, simplicity embedded in style, and beauty and attraction for hearts are such characteristics of the wise sayings of the Prophet (sws) which cannot be found in the speech of the ordinary people. Such stylistic beauties are the adornment of only the prophetic speech.

In short, a very important tool of deciding between the reliable and spurious *aḥādīth* is the pure taste for the prophetic speech. An obtuse person cannot develop such a taste and understanding nor can this ability be borrowed. This taste is a product of pious nature, firm belief, deep insight and living in the prophetic *aḥādīth*. Those blessed with this taste for and understanding of the prophetic speech can not only spot the beauty of a saying genuinely ascribed to the Prophet (sws) but also the ugliness of the fabrications. A man in the possession of gems would never settle on stones in his assets.

At this point, it would not be out of place to explain that people blessed with this kind of taste for the prophetic *aḥādīth* seldom doubt their judgment. Doubts and uncertainty cannot, however, be ruled out. It is understandable. Such uncertainly and doubts

faced in this exercise, at times, open ways for further understanding. Therefore, a few experiences of this nature, if at all, do not negate the applicability of the relevant prophetic statement mentioned above.

The ability to differentiate the genuine prophetic statement from the fabrications, granted to the true believers and the people of knowledge and understanding, is further explained with the help of the following *ḥadīth*. Abū Hurayrah narrated:

> They [Companions (rta)] asked the Prophet (sws): "O Prophet of God, how would you recognize those among your *ummah* whom you have not seen?" He replied: "Will not some owner of horses with white foreheads and white legs be able to recognize them if mixed with the black ones?" They responded: "Certainly he would." At this the Prophet (sws) said: "Then know that the people of my *ummah* will have white faces and white hands and feet, a product of their habit of ablution." (*Muslim*, No: 249)

In my view, this parable equally applies to the distinction between the speech of the Prophet (sws) and that of other people. The prophetic speech is discernable from a distance provided the observer has a pure taste and inquisitive mind.

4.2 The *Ma'rūf* Practice

The second measure of distinction between the genuine and the spurious *aḥādīth* is the knowledge and understanding of the *ma'rūf* (known and customary practices). This principle is obtained from the following saying of the Prophet (sws):

> Muḥammad b. Jubayr b. Muṭ'im narrates from his father who narrates that the Prophet (sws) said: "If anyone ascribes something to me which is *ma'rūf* and well-known to you, take it [as my statement]. If something which you do not acknowledge as *ma'rūf* is ascribed to me then you should reject it. For I do not utter *munkar* (abhorrent) things nor am I one of those who give *munkar* statements.[25]

This means that if a narrative accords with what is *ma'rūf* then

25. Ibid., 430.

it may be accepted as a genuine prophetic word. If, however, it contradicts what is customary then it should be rejected. In other words, the Prophet (sws) has guided us to keep the religion pure of the undesirable things. He has directed us to judge something presented to us as part of the religion with the help of the established religious teachings. The religion is pure and unadulterated. If the new thing reported to us accords with the earlier established religious teachings in form and spirit then we can accept it as part of the religion. If, however, it does not match them, we should reject it outright. This *ḥadīth* also guides us to the true disposition of the Prophet (sws). The Prophet (sws) says that he does not utter *munkar* things. This means that it is not possible for anyone to ascribe any *munkar* to the Prophet (sws). He cannot be imagined to say good things and then, God forbidding, add *munkar* to them. Whatever he utters is pure. All he says is marked by perfect unity of thought. He does not wander in every wadi like poets. If we are able to defend this unity of the prophetic teachings then satans cannot mix pebbles (i.e. fabrications) in the gems (i.e. true prophetic knowledge). To ignore this unity of the prophetic knowledge and to lose its awareness results in the loss of everything. This clarification from the Prophet (sws) was important, rather necessary. If it is possible to imagine, God forbid, that the Prophet (sws) at times uttered *munkar* things then the *munkars* would surely have constituted a great part of the religion. We would then accept all the *munkar* things ascribed to the Prophet (sws). Similarly, on hearing a *munkar* ascribed to the Prophet (sws), one would be right to claim that the Prophet (sws) stated it.

In this prophetic statement, *ma'rūf*, means the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. The term *munkar* refers to things that do not accord with the fundamentals of the religion, sayings, and directives issued by the Prophet (sws). If we apply this principle to some of the *isrā'īliyyāt*[26] and exegetical narratives, usually held sacrosanct, their assumed status is abolished. Consider, for example, the edified description of earlier Prophets and Messengers of God as depicted by the Qur'ān and sound prophetic *aḥādīth*. Keeping this in mind, let us analyze the condemnable picture of these

26. Ḥadīth reports based on the eastern folklore regarding the Jewish and Christian milieu.

persons emerging from some of the historical narratives. We shall learn that the latter directly hurt the stature of the great Prophets of God including Abraham, Lot, David and Solomon (sws). We consequently learn that all such narratives fall under the category of *munkar*. These are worthy of rejection. Fabrications mixed in the *ḥadīth* literature damage the status of even the Prophet Muḥammad (sws).

Another rather bitter reality is that such *munkar* narratives mixed in the *ḥadīth* literature have caused attacks from the Orientalists on the Prophet of Islam (sws) and the great religious persons. The crime of the Orientalists is nothing more than that they added colour to some weak *aḥādīth*. The original material has thus been provided by the unreliable and careless narrators. They, therefore, must bear the burden of this evil movement.

If we keep in mind this criterion of *ma'rūf* and *munkar* while deciding the sound from the spurious narratives, the fabrications can never deceive us. Guided by this principle, an expert can easily and clearly see that such a narrative contradicts the Qur'ān or it goes against the prophetic practice transmitted through generality-to-generality. On the basis of this observation one should reject them.

4.3 The Qur'ān

In the practice of judging the sound from the spurious *aḥādīth,* the third criterion is the Qur'ān itself. In this regard the Prophet (sws) has been reported to have said:

> Contradictory narratives (ascribed to me) shall soon reach you. Whatever of these accords with the Book of God and my Sunnah originates from me and whatever of it is against the Qur'ān and my Sunnah cannot be my word.[27]

This *ḥadīth* gives us two principles. However, we shall confine our discussion on the status of the Qur'ān as the criterion and leave the Sunnah for the next section. The above *ḥadīth* teaches us to reject any such narrative as contradicting the Qur'ān in any aspect. On the discussion of the interrelationship of the Qur'ān, the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth, we have thoroughly discussed this issue. I explained that in matters of the religion the Qur'ān is the

27 Ibid.

custodian over everything else and a criterion for distinguishing between truth and falsehood. Nothing contradicting it can ever be tolerated. Some extremist *ahl al-Ḥadīth* dare to posit that the Ḥadīth is custodian over the Qur'ān. Their view has been fully refuted in the light of the following saying of the most learned exponent of the Ḥadīth, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal himself. It has been reported:

> I heard Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal respond to a question regarding the traditions which say that the Sunnah overrules the Qur'ān: "I dare not say so. However, the Sunnah explicates the Book, defines and explains it."[28]

While referring to the status of the Qur'ān,[29] as the criterion and distinguisher between the sound and unsound narratives, Khaṭīb Baghdādī writes:

> A *khabar-i wāḥid* (an individual-to-individual report) shall not be accepted if it offends (*manāfāt*) commonsense, *thābit* and *muḥkam* (clear and established) Qur'ānic directives, the known Sunnah, the practice which is as current as the Sunnah and any definitive argument.[30]

The word *manāfāt* employed by Khaṭīb connotes complete negation. Here I shall confine our discussion to the part of the statement that relates to the status of the Qur'ān in this regard. The *aḥādīth* which negate and contradict the Qur'ān are discarded. The reason is that the Qur'ān is the criterion for gauging everything in the religion for it is absolutely authentic and sound. As for the authenticity, it has been transmitted through *qawlī tawātur* (oral or documentary) of the *ummah*. This is why *khabar-i wāḥid,* the probable truth, cannot be acceptable if it goes against the Qur'ān. *Khabar-i wāḥid* can neither abrogate the Qur'ān nor change its directives nor affect its rulings and statements in any way.

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28 Ibid., 15.

29 This statement by Khaṭīb includes other important criteria which are taken up in the following discussions. (Author)

30. Ibid., 432.

4.4 The Known Sunnah

According to the last quoted *ḥadīth,* the treasure of the known Sunnah (*sunnah ma'lūmah*) with the *ummah*, is itself a criterion to judge the sound *aḥādīth* from the unsound ones. Anything contradicting or alien to the Sunnah shall not be accepted. This is because the Sunnah is historically established for it has reached through *tawātur-i 'amalī*. This cannot be affected by something reported as *khabar-i wāḥid*. The Sunnah predates *akhbār-i āḥād*.

Here the reader should refresh what I have mentioned in the discussion about difference between the Ḥadīth and the Sunnah. I mentioned that there could be more than one *sunnah* in a given matter. Mere difference of form is not mutual contradiction. This fact should be fully grasped.

The Sunnah is established by *tawātur-i 'amalī* (continuity of practice). This means that there is no question of its acceptance and rejection. It is known of necessity. However, the scholars have clarified that *khabar-i wāḥid* is fully rejected in certain cases. I have thoroughly discussed this issue under the topic '*ḥujjiyyat* of *khabar-i wāḥid*' (Force of *khabar-i wāḥid*). As has been mentioned above, Khaṭīb Baghdādī too holds that all *akhbār-i āḥād* that contradict the known Sunnah or practices that are followed like a *sunnah* shall be rejected. Similarly narratives that contradict "the practice which is as current as a *sunnah*" shall also be rejected.

By "the practice which is as current as a *sunnah*" the author of *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah* probably means what the Mālikī jurists term as "*al-'amal 'indanā hākadhā*" (our normative way goes thus). It means that a particular practice is customary and is followed by the people perpetually. Such a customary practice, according to the Mālikī jurists, is practically equal to the Sunnah. Something practiced by the community perpetually, must have acquired the Prophet's (sws) approval. On this basis, the Mālikī jurists do not affirm a *khabar-i wāḥid* contradicting a perpetual (*mutawātir*) customary practice in Madīnah refusing to accept it as a satisfactory source to rely on. In like manner, they reject practices current in other centres if found against the Sunnah current in Madīnah. Another analogical case is the stance of the Ḥanafī jurists regarding *khabar-i wāḥid*. In issues which relate to everyday life of the believers, they do not rely on *khabar-i wāḥid*. In such cases, they prefer the views of the scholars based

on personal reasoning and analogy. In matters of *'umūm-i balwa,* they consider conducting *ijtihād* a more careful attitude than following a *khabar-i wāḥid*. This is perhaps because it is easier to mend an erroneously concluded *ijtihād* but extremely difficult to reject something invalidly accepted as a saying of the Prophet (sws) or erroneously practiced as his action.

4.5 Reason and Commonsense

Reason and commonsense (*'aql-i kullī*) functions as the fifth criterion in the practice of sifting the sound from the unsound *aḥādīth*. I have already mentioned the view of Khaṭīb Baghdādī in this regard.

Why are the *aḥādīth* that offend commonsense rejected? I believe that the religion, as explained earlier, is entirely based on reason and *fiṭrah*. It is only the dictates of reason and *fiṭrah* that have been highlighted in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. The Almighty Allah and the Prophet (sws) accomplished *itmām-i ḥujjah* on the people only on the grounds of reason and *fiṭrah*. Those who opposed the religion of *fiṭrah,* following desires of the flesh, were declared as the enemies of reason. In this perspective, there remains no chance for us to accept a *khabar-i wāḥid* that negates the foundation of the religion. Therefore, a *khabar-i wāḥid* contradicting reason must be rejected.

It needs to be appreciated that by reason we do not mean reasoning by a particular individual. On the contrary, it refers to human reason, the greatest blessing of God on man. We know that many people believe in most absurd things and negate most exalted facts. Such are not under consideration. Here we refer only to reason which decides matters absolutely and whose judgments are supported by all those endowed with power to reason in this world. The decision of reason cannot be rejected on the basis of something which cannot be considered the saying of the Prophet (sws) with absolute surety.

It is important to note that the author of *al-Kifāyah* has used the word *munāfāt*. As explained earlier, *munāfāt* signifies complete negation. In some cases, with a little deliberation, one can reconcile between reason and a *khabar-i wāḥid* which apparently negates reason. It should then be accepted as valid. There is nothing wrong in reinterpreting a narrative and making it to accord with reason. The problem, however, arises when we find

a *khabar-i wāḥid* completely contradicting reason while neither of these two accepts reinterpretation to make it accord with the other and nor can either be preferred to the other. In case of a real contradiction, we have to reject one of these two.

If the student finds a prophetic *ḥadīth* incomprehensible, he must not hastily declare that it contradicts reason. If we cannot understand something, it does not mean it contradicts reason. One can, for example, say that he does not understand how water, fire and trees will coexist in Hell. There could be various causes of this lack of understanding on one's part. Therefore, he should not reject the fact as irrational. It can, at best, be held that human intellect lacks power to understand this reality.

A little deliberation will help us see that there is no problem with the fact that Hell will contain fire, water and trees together. This is because we know that God has created trees of fire even in this world. The most powerful kind of fire, electricity, is obtained using water. This we notice in our everyday life. All this confusion ends up with a single point that it is only lack of one's understanding that he cannot comprehend how fire and water shall coexist. There is no real contradiction between the Qur'ānic fact and the dictates of reason.

Let us now take an example illustrative of real contradiction between the two sources of knowledge. The Qur'ān, in one of its rhetorical questions, asks a particular group of people whether God can be expected to treat the pious and the sinful equally. Certainly He cannot be. To hold that it is possible would be an outrageous view. It implies that God's world is sheer injustice. It does not matter to God whether someone is pious and virtuous or sinful and rebellious. He shall treat both equally. This viewpoint obviously contradicts dictates of reason for if we accept that God will not punish the wicked and reward the pious, we question God's justice and, in fact, ascribe injustice to Him.

The truth of the matter is that the Creator and the Sustainer of this world is perfectly Just. This is supported by the numerous phenomena we encounter at every step in this universe as well as in the human self. To hold that God is not Just is to clearly contradict reason. God Himself teaches justice and commands us adherence to it. This is the teaching of all the Messengers of God and what all the Scriptures teach. It is precisely justice upon which the heavens and earth rest. Had there been no justice, the

entire universe would have collapsed and ruined. How can it now be possible that God equally accepts justice and injustice? Only enemies of reason can go as far as to hold that.

4.6 Definitive Evidence

The last criterion used in the practice of sifting the sound from the unsound *aḥādīth* is definitive evidence. Khaṭīb Baghdādī, as quoted above, acknowledges this principle. He has mentioned that no *khabar-i wāḥid* is acceptable if it offends any definitive evidence.

An argument and evidence, received (*naqlī*) or rational (*'aqalī*), is usually a more satisfactory source of knowledge than a *khabar-i wāḥid.* We can never be absolutely certain whether a *khabar-i wāḥid* is validly ascribed to the Prophet (sws). The same conclusion follows from considering this issue in another perspective. We are obliged to follow the prophetic example (sws). Definitive evidence is closer to the Prophet's will and decrees than *khabar-i wāḥid* which is at best probable truth. It is not right to hold that we must prefer a narrative ascribed to the Prophet (sws), however weak, to rational and inferential conclusions. Committing an error in exercising *ijtihād* is safer than following lies. We can revise and correct our view concluded through *ijtihād*. However, if something wrongly ascribed to the Prophet (sws) is recognized as the part of the religion, it will create far reaching problems for which we will have no remedy.

4.7 Conclusion

There are six principles, the guiding criterion, to decide between the sound and the unsound *aḥādīth*. These fundamental principles are:

1. A *ḥadīth* abhorrent to understanding and religious taste of the believers and the pious scholars cannot be accepted.
2. A *shādh* (rare) narrative which does not accord with the customary practice of the Muslims will not be accepted.
3. Narratives which contradict the Qur'ān in any aspect shall be rejected.
4. Narratives which contradict the known Sunnah are to be rejected.

5. Any narrative that contradicts the dictates of reason shall be discarded.
6. Any narrative contradicting the conclusive and definitive evidence and arguments cannot be accepted.

Chapter 5

Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws)

The prophetic knowledge and practice have mainly reached the *ummah* through the Companions (rta), so they acquire a marked priority over the rest of the *ummah.* It is only the Prophet's (sws) Companions (rta) through whom the rest of the people of the world have acquired the entire corupus of the religion of God. Their status and privilege is not shared by anyone coming after them. They alone are the enchanting flowers of the *ummah*. The Qur'ān itself awards them with such a high station. In fact, the importance the *muḥaddithūn* attached to them cannot be debated over even in the absence of the textual proofs of the fact.

5.1 Testimony of the Qur'ān

God Almighty says that the Companions (rta) are the advance party of the *ummah* and the witnesses to God in this world:

> And similarly we have made you a middle nation so that you may be witnesses over the people and the Messenger becomes a witness over you. (Q 2:143)

This verse throws light on two important facts. First, God has put the responsibility of communicating and disseminating His religion on the Prophet (sws). He decreed that the Companions (rta) are responsible for this task after the death of the Prophet (sws). This was their clear and concrete responsibility. It was not an optional religious act they could perform or leave aside on choice. Second, the high status and superiority the Companions (rta) enjoy within the *ummah* owes itself to the fact that they are *shu'adā' lillāhi 'alannās fī al-arḍ* (God's witnesses over the people on this earth). It means that they inherited the prophetic knowledge and practice and stood witnesses to it before the world.

5.2 Testimony of *Aḥādīth*

The status of the Companions (rta), in the sight of the Prophet

(sws), has been preserved in the *ḥadīth* literature. It is clearly mentioned in many prophetic traditions. I quote the following narrative from *al-Kifāyah fī 'ilm al riwāyah*. Ibn 'Abbās (rta) reports that the Prophet (sws) said:

> Whatever has been given to you in the Book of God is obligatory for you. There is no valid excuse for anyone to abandon the Qur'ānic edicts. If the issue facing you is not dealt with in the Book of God, then you have to follow my practice. If you find that there is no such practice of mine to guide you then you should follow what my Companions tell you for my Companions are like stars in the sky; whoever of them you take as a guide, you shall be rightly guided.[31]

This shows that the Companions (rta) are the people who have transmitted the Sunnah of the Prophet (sws) to the world and they themselves are the beacon of light. They are the medium through which the knowledge and practice of the Prophet (sws) has been handed down to the rest of the world. The basis of their exalted status, as the Prophet (sws) pointed out, is that they are the source of guidance for the world.

5.3 *Muḥaddithūn's* Viewpoint

In view of this extraordinary importance of the Companions (rta), the *muḥaddithūn* decided that the principles of character and cognitive analysis of the narrators will not be applied to them. In this regard, the *muḥaddithūn* adopted the guiding principle that all the Companions (rta), without any exception, are reliable. They are above customary analysis in this regard. While deciding whether a narrative ascribed to the Prophet (sws) is reliable and acceptable, an expert has to scrutinize the characters of all narrators in its chain of transmission. Their good and bad have to be vigorously analyzed. It is only after a thorough investigation that a narrative they report is accepted or rejected. Contrarily, the Companions (rta) shall not be subjected to such an investigation.

Once this principle applied to the practice of the transmission of the prophetic *aḥādīth* is accepted, it leads to the question of the definition of a *ṣaḥābī* (Companion of the Prophet). Who is a

31. Ibid., 48.

ṣaḥābī? Would a person who has merely seen the Prophet (sws) and has not enjoyed his company for a considerable time merit to be called a *ṣaḥābī*? Would such a person be exempted from the principles of *jarḥ wa ta'dīl* (the act of affirming or disaffirming the narrators as reliable transmitters)? Would he be considered a beacon of guidance? The *muḥaddithūn* have, quite naturally, differed over this issue and three distinct groups of them emerged:

5.3.1 The First Group

The view of the first group as represented by 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar (rta) follows:

> I have observed that scholars hold that every adult Muslim who met the Prophet (sws), even for a moment, while he understood the religion and found it pleasing can be called a *ṣaḥābī*. However, I believe that the Companions (rta) can be divided into different categories according to *taqaddum fī al-islām*.[32]

By *taqaddum fī al-islām*, 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar (rta) means that all the Companions (rta) are not equal; they are of different religious status and should be put in different categories. Some are of a very high religious status others are in the middle whilst some others hold a low status.

5.3.2 The Second Group

The view of the second group of the scholars in this regard has been represented by Sa'īd b. al-Musayyab as follows:

> We do not consider someone a *ṣaḥābī* (Companion) unless he has remained in the company of the Prophet (sws) for a year or two and has fought with him a couple of *ghazwahs*.[33]

5.3.3 The Third Group

Khaṭīb has recorded the opinion of another scholar. His view represents the third group in this regard. This view, by its nature, criticizes the previous views and points out the true picture of the matter. This view follows:

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32. Ibid., 50-1.

33. Ibid., 50. *Ghazwah* usually refers to the wars in which the Prophet (sws) participated.

> The lexicographers unanimously hold that the word *ṣaḥābī* is a derivation of the root Ṣ Ḥ B. The meaning of the word does not hinge upon the duration of the company. It can equally be applied to company of a very short as well as a long duration. As for the lexicon, the word applies to any such person as blessed with the company of the Prophet (sws), no matter how long. However, it is a known reality that it is customary among the Muslims to refer to a person as a *ṣaḥābī* who has been in the company of the Prophet (sws) for a long time and has been meeting him continuously. Customarily, this word is not used for someone who had a short meeting with the Prophet (sws), or walked along with him a few steps or heard him say something. This entails that we restrict the application of the word to those only who can appropriately be called *ṣaḥābī*. Still, however, the *aḥādīth* transmitted by reliable and trustworthy individuals (among the first generation) shall be accepted even though the narrator has not been blessed with a longer company of the Prophet (sws) and has heard him only once.[34]

The first part of the assertion is quite weak. The scholar holds that the duration of the company has no bearing on the meaning of the word *ṣaḥābī* whatsoever. We know that if somebody accidently happens to confront someone, neither of them is called a companion of the other. Similarly, it is not applied to a person who walks a few steps with us. The word, by its nature, implies company of a longer duration. However, the second part of the statement is very strong. It proves that the great scholars of the past considered the duration of the company of a man before declaring him a *ṣaḥābī* of the Propeht (sws). Besides, he must have rendered services in the cause of the religion. If we consider this fact in our definition of the term *ṣaḥābī* we come to know that the decision of the *muḥaddithūn* regarding the exemption of the Companions (rta) from *jarḥ wa ta'dīl* is justified.

5.4 *Ṣaḥābiyyah* According to the Qur'ān

We have learnt that the *muḥaddithūn* would not subject the

34. Ibid., 51.

Companions (rta) to *jarḥ wa ta'dīl*. They invoked certain Qur'ānic verses which praise the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws). Such verses refer to and praise only those individuals who embraced the religion first of all and stood with the Prophet (sws) in good and bad times. They spent their wealth in the cause of the religion of God and fought the enemies of God in the holy wars bravely. These verses do not refer to those who happened to have seen the Prophet (sws) accidently. While exposing the evil of the hypocrites from among the Bedouin people, the Qur'ān has clearly stated that they had not enjoyed the company of the Prophet (sws) in spite of the fact that they had seen him and vehemently professed belief in him.

An inductive survey of the Qur'ānic verses dealing with the Companions (rta) and their virtues is imperative in this study. We have to ascertain whether the Almighty gives any importance to merely and accidentally seeing the Prophet (sws). We have to see whether it is their long company, help and support that raises their status over the rest of the *ummah*. It may be their endeavours to seek knowledge and get training from the Prophet (sws) that holds the primary importance in this regard. In the foregoing pages I have referred to a verse from Sūrah al-Baqarah (Q 2). It can prove to be a decisive verdict in this regard. The verse tells us that the real significance, the Companions (rta) draw, is grounded in that they received and transmitted the knowledge and practice of the Prophet (sws); they obtained, taught and preached it. This, however, is not possible without relatively long company, full commitment and sincere devotion.

Another relevant verse discusses the devoted Companions (rta) who pledged to give their lives at the prophetic call to *jihād*, even though they were hundreds of miles away from their homes, were not properly armed and were direly exposed to the enemy.

> God became pleased with the believers when they were pledging allegiance to you under the tree. God knew the state of their hearts. And God sent down on their hearts tranquillity and He decreed for them a victory in the near future. (Q 48:18)

This theme has again been repeated in Sūrah al-Tawbah (Q 9)

in the following words:

> Those of the Emigrants and the Helpers who have outreached others and have embraced Islam first of all and the ones who have beautifully followed their example, God is pleased with them all while they are pleased with God. (Q 9:100)

These qualities of the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws) have been mentioned in the following verses of Sūrah al-Ḥashr (Q 59):

> [This is specifically] for those of the needy Emigrants who have been forced to abandon their homes and assets while they were helping the Messenger of God, seeking God's blessings and His pleasure. Such are the real upholders of truth. Those who are already settled in their abodes and are maintaining their faith love those who migrate to them. They do not feel unease at heart for whatever is given to them (the Emigrants). They (the Helpers) prefer them (the Emigrants) over themselves even when they themselves are in need. (Q 59:8-9)

If we carefully ponder over these verses, we learn that they not only establish veracity and justness of the Companions (rta) but also award them an exalted status, both in this and the next world. This quality cannot be shared with them by any other group of people from among the *ummah*. The Qur'ān does not state that this status is granted to them because they happened to have seen the Prophet (sws). Contrarily, their blessed status draws on their outreaching others in accepting the faith. They migrated from their homeland, abandoned their assets and wealth for the cause of Islam and risked their lives in fighting for the cause of God. They sacrificed everything they possessed in helping God's religion and His Messenger. The helpers too participated in this noble cause by sharing their homes and wealth with the Emigrants.

If we keep the above discussion in mind, we can justly claim that the soundest view regarding the position of those who happened to have seen the Prophet (sws) is the one that has been ascribed to ‘□ṣim Aḥwal:

> ‘Abd Allāh b. Sarjis has seen the Prophet (sws). However, he is not a Companion of him.[35]

According to ‘□ṣim, one does not become a *ṣaḥābī* by merely seeing the Prophet (sws). *Ṣaḥābiyyat* does not hinge upon one’s accidental meeting with the Prophet (sws). Thus, about the position of those who merely saw the Prophet (sws), we can, at best, adopt the following careful view ascribed to Shu‘bah:

> Jundub b. Sufyān came to meet the Prophet (sws) and you can say, if you insist, that he has been blessed with the *ṣuḥbah* (company) of the Prophet (sws).[36]

Some other scholars express the true status and position of a person who accidently or rarely met the Prophet (sws) as follows: *kāna lahū ru’yah* [he saw the Prophet (sws)].

5.5 Conclusion

I believe that the opportunity to have seen the Prophet (sws) is a great blessing of God. However, the Qur’ān has not attached any importance to this fact alone. According to the Qur’ān, the high status of the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws), is due to their services to the religion, valour and bravery they showed in defending, upholding and preaching the religion and helping the Messenger of God (sws). The Companions (rta) are categorized and grouped by analyzing the degree and extent of their services to the religion and the Messenger (sws). If it is only seeing the Prophet (sws) that makes somebody his Companion (rta) then the deserters in the battles of Aḥzāb and Tabūk and the hypocrites of Madīnah and those from among the Bedouin, and those who established Masjid-i Ḍarār are no less deserving of this status. These people not only saw the Prophet (sws) but also fought some of the battles with him. They have been spending in the way of God though hypocritically. Yet, the way the Qur’ān condemns their behaviour and rejects their faith is not unclear to anyone, the details of which can be found in Sūrah al-Munāfiqūn (Q 63), al-Tawbah (Q 9) and al-Anfāl (Q 8). As far as the transmission of *aḥādīth* is concerned, we accept

35. Ibid., 50.
36. Ibid.

narrators from all the groups and categories of the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws). Still, however, in the exercise of interpreting *aḥādīth* we may only consider the views, wordings and analysis of the narratives of those Companions who are most prominent and famous for their understanding of the words of the Prophet (sws). For example, Abū Bakr (rta), ‘Umar (rta), ‘Uthmān (rta), ‘Alī (rta), ‘□’ishah (rta), Abū Dardā’ (rta), Mu‘ādh b. Jabal (rta), ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar (rta), and ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās (rta) etc. It is extremely important for the students of the *ḥadīth* literature to appreciate who are more knowledgeable and experts in the *ḥadīth* literature among the first generation of the believers.

Chapter 6

Excellence of the *Isnād* and its Inherent Limitations

Any *ḥadīth* of the Prophet (sws), in its first instance, is reported by, at least, one of his Companions (rta). Passing through the chain of narrators down the subsequent generations, it reaches the compilers of the traditions. The chain of guarantors from the Prophet (sws) to a compiler is called the *isnād*. By the compilers, we mean the individuals from the earlier generations who have, owing to their services to record the oral tradition, become a milestone in the passage of *aḥādīth* from the Prophet (sws) to the subsequent generations. These compilers accomplished an unparalleled task regarding the Muslim tradition. Imām Mālik, Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Imām Bukhārī, Imām Muslim and others belong to this group of the compilers. Since the compilation of the major *ḥadīth* works, the student of the prophetic traditions has no choice but to turn to these sources. It is now only these sources which form an authority on the transmission of the *ḥadīth* literature.

The status, importance and station of the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws) in the chain of the narrators have been discussed in the previous chapter. The Companions (rta) indubitably are ever shining flowers, a source of blessing for this *ummah*. Their reliability is established and cannot be analyzed and criticized unlike other narrators of a *ḥadīth*. Their truthfulness and veracity is acknowledged by all Muslim scholars. The *muḥaddithūn* have set perfectly sound principles concerning the role and reliability of the Companions (rta). The *muḥaddithūn* hold that: *al-ṣaḥābatu kulluhum ʻadūl* (All Companions (rta) are just and reliable). It has been narrated on the authority of ʻUmar (rta) that the Prophet (sws) said:

> My Companions are like stars. Whoever of them you follow, you shall be rightly guided. (*Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ*, No: 6018)

This prophetic testimony entails what the Companions (rta)

report from the Prophet (sws) is true. We must acknowledge that it has been transmitted honestly and sincerely and must not cherish any doubts regarding their reports without a sound proof.

The rest of the narrators in the *isnād,* according to the *muḥaddithūn,* are to be subjected to rigorous critical analysis. Their reliability, truthfulness, scholarly expertise, ability to keep something in memory and religious attitude, in short, everything has to be gauged and analyzed. Views of the experts of the science of *ḥadīth* criticism*,* on each of the narrators, have to be collected and collated. In this exercise, the aim should be to make sure that a *ḥadīth* one accepts as genuine and sound is pure of all possible blemishes. This research was, later on, developed into a mature discipline of science of men (*asmā' al-rijāl*) by the scholars and experts in the science of traditions.

6.1 The *Isnād* and *Asmā' al-Rijāl*

Muslim scholars were fully intent upon safeguarding the treasure of the prophetic traditions. They decided that the narrators of acceptable traditions should be known historical figures. The science of men (*asmā' al-rijāl*) was introduced to fulfil this end. This accomplishment of Muslims is acknowledged as an unparalleled one in the whole human history. No other nation has introduced and established such a science. The Companions (rta), the successors, the successors of the successors, and the people of the later generations living in the third century have been involved in receiving, narrating and compiling the sayings, acts, history and circumstance of the Prophet (sws). The process culminated in a formal compilation of the literature in the form of books in the third century AH. If carefully assessed, the number of persons involved in this process reaches hundreds of thousands. The *muḥaddithūn* recorded the life history of twelve thousand persons who saw the Prophet (sws) in their lifetime. The number of the transmitters from the next generations is many times greater.

Thousands of Muslim scholars devoted their lives in collecting life account of the narrators and categorizing the collected data. They visited every major town and reached every small settlement. They met their contemporaries and collected all available biographical information about the narrators. In their effort to learn about the life histories of the narrators from the previous generations, they met all such people who had possibly

been in contact with them directly or indirectly. The factual data about the life history of these narrators was then collected and critically analyzed to the extent humanly possible. This is how the unparalleled and great science of men (*asmā' al-rijāl*) was developed. Scholars working in this field recorded names, surnames, titles, life history, reliability and truthfulness of all the narrators involved in *ḥadīth* transmission. The views of the great scholars concerning character, memory and understanding of these narrators were also recorded. The status of the narrators, in terms of reliability and truthfulness, was ascertained. They were then categorized in the light of this data. We can safely say that every person who ascribed anything to the Prophet (sws) put his entire life to the rigorous critical analysis of straightforward, uncompromising and unaccommodating critics and in a way faced the final accountability in this very world.

Perhaps, people who should have competed Muslims in this field are the People of the Book. They have, however, failed even to show required carefulness with regards to preserving the Books of God revealed to their Prophets, not to speak of actions and sayings of their Prophets. They have indeed proved to be very careless followers. Even their sacred scriptures do not equal Muslims' works on history. Students of Islamic studies know that every narrative recorded in the Muslims' historical works appends a chain of warrantors. This chain, in turn, is critically analyzed and approved by well-defined principles. As to the People of the Book, even their most sacred books are not recorded that carefully. Though the Gospels are ascribed to some of the disciples of Jesus Christ (sws), yet, the biographical data about their earliest authors is unknown. Identity of the persons involved in transmitting the Gospels from the disciples of Jesus to the earlier compilers is also a mystery. A people who have shown laxity in preserving the word of God cannot be expected to have shown the least care in preserving the sayings and actions of their Prophets and Messengers.

It needs to be appreciated that in the present day, the students of the prophetic *ḥadīth,* in determining veracity and falsity of the narrators, depend solely upon the research work of the pioneering experts in the science of men (*asmā al-rijāl*). It is only in the light of their work that one can, now, ascertain status of the narrators of *aḥādīth*. Soundness or weakness of *aḥādīth*

can only be judged in the light of the data collected, recorded and judged by these authorities. This is because we have been, with the passage of time, left with no means to access the resources of research in this regard other than the works of the pioneers in this field who touched the highest level of scholarship and served the discipline to all possible extent.

6.2 The *Isnād:* one of the Criteria

In deciding authenticity of a *ḥadīth*, *isnād* plays the most important role. Obviously, the first thing to study and analyze in the exercise of judging the status of a *ḥadīth* is the *isnād*. The study of the *matn* (text) comes later. We can only decide the degree of reliability of the narrative in the light of this entire scrutiny.

The above discussion shows that we cannot ignore importance of the *isnād* in the transmission of *aḥādīth*. However, many of the scholars hold that if the *isnād* in a *ḥadīth* is proved sound on the principles of *isnād* criticism, the narrative must be accepted as a genuine prophetic saying. To them, a sound *isnād* always carries a sound narrative. This means that, according to these scholars, a *ḥadīth* has to be declared sound if its *isnād* is reliable for, to them, the soundness of an *isnād* guarantees soundness of the *ḥadīth* transmitted through it. Such extremist position is a mere naivety. I believe that this view eclipses the unparalleled research by the pioneers of the science of *ḥadīth* criticism. This calls for an explanation which follows.

Importance, beauty, intricacies and grandeur of *isnād* as well as its status as a criterion to judge the authenticity and soundness of *aḥādīth* cannot be denied. However, one must remain clear that there are certain inherent limitations in the *isnād.* This makes it incumbent upon a researcher not to rely merely on the *isnād.* He must adopt other principles which can help lead him to the truth. Deciding soundness and weakness of a *ḥadīth* merely on *isnād* is not a satisfactory and certain method. An example can best explain this point. In our efforts to study a tree, we cannot merely rely on our knowledge of its roots. On the contrary, it is only after a thorough study of its stem, branches, leaves, flowers and fruits that we can conclude a comprehensive and sound view.

6.3 First Limitation of the *Isnād*

A little analysis can help us understand the inherent limitations of the *isnād*. The first limitation, for example, is that it is not easy to fully cover religious beliefs, character, knowledge, conduct, relations and dealings of hundreds of thousands of unrelated strangers living in very remote places and time. Certain and definitive knowledge of these facts cannot be obtained. Our research cannot guarantee that we have obtained unblemished knowledge regarding ability of the transmitters to obtain and transmit reports from the Prophet (sws). We do not deny that the pioneering *muḥaddithūn* have accomplished unparalleled tasks. We, however, appreciate that this job is extremely difficult. If we start investigating the character and life of even our contemporaries living in our hometowns and villages, it would not be an easy task, not to speak of researching the lives and characters of people living in remote time and place. With regard to the people who lived centuries before us, the most careful stance we can adopt is that we have collected overall information regarding their lives. Their persons are not unidentified. But our view regarding their life and character cannot be declared as final and conclusive. To declare it final is to show overconfidence in our knowledge and understanding.

The most satisfactory view regarding the life and character of an individual can only be concluded if we ourselves have had dealing with him. This view has been ascribed to ‘Umar (rta), a person of great knowledge and understanding. It has been narrated that once someone praised another person in his presence. ‘Umar (rta) asked the man whether the person in question had been his neighbour. He replied in the negative. Then ‘Umar (rta) asked him whether he accompanied the other person in some business tour. At this too the man replied in the negative. ‘Umar (rta) was surprised.

This anecdote teaches us that we should not bear witness to someone’s character if we are not related to him. We may testify regarding only those with whom we have dealt with. We know our business partners, co-travellers and neighbours but not strangers. We can only be clear about the conduct of those whom we meet daily in the mosque or whom we help and seek help from for we live in common circumstances. No judgment regarding a stranger should easily be passed. Even a very

intelligent person can be deceived at times.

6.4 Second Limitation of the *Isnād*

The second inherent limitation in the *isnād* criticism owes itself to the intricacies involved in the exercise of judging the reliability of the narrators. Every researcher does not know what characteristics should be judged as a negative trait in one's character (*jarḥ*) and what characteristics should invite positive appraisal (*ta'dīl*). Not every individual can decide what characteristics invite criticism and which ones entail approval. What are the foundations of a good character? What are the foundations of a bad one? These things are not so easy to decide. Therefore, not every second person can come to a just decision on the issue. Many examples in the past prove that people have shown laxity in this regard. The pioneers in the science of *ḥadīth* criticism have mentioned such examples. The difficulty involved in this practice can easily be observed by extremism in love and hatred for people, something so common today.

The exercise of *jarḥ wa ta'dīl* requires sound knowledge, profound understanding, sufficient experience and much of brainpower. Our ancestors were humans after all. People were never elevated to the status of angels in any period of human history. We know that the level of moral conduct, knowledge and understanding of the experts of the science of *asmā' al-rijāl* was superior to that of ours. Still, however, they were humans. The information they have provided around the life history of the narrators of *aḥādīth* and their views based on such information cannot be expected to be absolutely neutral. They suffered from human weaknesses like biasness which is inherent in human nature. This biasness we know is reflected in our views both for and against people.

One of the basic qualifications for a person who engages himself in the practice of *jarḥ* (disapproving) is that he should be a balanced personality. The individuals who take upon themselves the task of *ta'dīl* (approving) need to be even more balanced; they need to show more intelligence.

The most careful approach with regards to *jarḥ wa ta'dīl,* a surely difficult task, is that we conclude an overall view of the narrators in a chain of transmission, in the light of the data about their life and character. This general opinion regarding their

character and conduct should never be considered final and conclusive. Consequently, it must not be taken as the only basis of judging the sound and the unsound *aḥādīth*.

6.5 Third Limitation of the *Isnād*

No doubt the experts in the science have generally observed great care, yet they showed laxity in accepting *aḥādīth* from *ahl al-bid'ah* (the innovators) including the *rawāfiḍ* (the extremist Shī'īs). It is obvious that with regards to the issue of innovators – the Shī'ī and *rawāfiḍ* for example – the *muḥaddithūn* have greatly compromised their principles. It has, however, been reported that Imām Mālik showed great care in this regard. Other great compilers and expert jurists including Imām Shāfi'ī, Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah and Imām Muslim, it is clear, did not hesitate from accepting narratives from *ahl al-bid'ah*. The only care they observed was that they did not accept the narratives on the authority of those who not only innovated beliefs and practices but also openly professed their innovations and called upon people to follow them. This means that, to these scholars, it is not unacceptable to take a *ḥadīth* transmitted by an innovator; what makes it unacceptable is an open profession and propagation of one's innovations.

The truth of the matter is that, according to the Qur'ān, *aḥādīth* and the overall teachings of the Prophet (sws), merely innovating something in the religion renders a person unreliable. That an innovator does not profess the innovation he practices is not relevant. The reason for this is that the Shī'ī, *rawāfiḍ*, esoteric and other similar schools are founded on deviance from the true religion. They cannot fulfil their duties to their sects unless they prove their deviant views by mixing untruth with the true teachings of the religion of God. They need to rely on *aḥādīth* in their efforts to bring proofs validating their deviant views. They cannot help committing dishonesty in narrating *aḥādīth*. The sects they belong to are after all based on innovations. They are not based on the received knowledge. They do not merely differ with the mainstream *ummah* over the interpretation of some verses of the Qur'ān or a few *aḥādīth*. They, on the contrary, mostly differ with the *ummah* on the sources of religious knowledge in Islam. If someone is intent upon showing brotherly attitude and establishing positive relations with such people, they may well do so.

However, in matters of religion of God this philosophy of co-existence and tolerance is evidently wrong and unacceptable.

To accept the *aḥādīth* transmitted by the innovators is to open a door of dissension in the *ummah*. It has indeed caused great problems in the past. Merely being an innovator is sufficient proof of one's unreliability as far as the narration of *aḥādīth* is concerned. No one should accept the *aḥādīth* transmitted by a follower of these sects even if he swears by God that he has stated the truth. I believe this is the correct view which accords with the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

6.6 Fourth Limitation of the *Isnād*

The fourth inherent limitation of *isnād* is that major compilers have knowingly shown laxity with regards to the narratives containing exhortations and expressions of excellence of good deeds. They confined rigorous investigation to narratives dealing with the allowable and the forbidden (*ḥalāl wa ḥarām*). Khaṭīb has reported that Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal said:

> When we narrated from the Prophet (sws) something dealing with allowances, prohibitions, practices (*sunan*), and the commands, we applied strict criteria on the *isnād* and when we reported something dealing with the excellence of certain religious deeds, something which neither established nor cancelled a ruling, we showed laxity. We abandoned strict measures concerning the latter category of the narratives.[37]

This shows that the reports which contained some kind of religious rulings were important and crucial. They were put through harder test. Contrarily, the weak and unsound narratives were accepted in exhortations and warnings. The narratives of the latter category were thought to be very useful in calling people to practice religious observances and avoid the forbidden acts. The *muḥaddithūn* believed that these narratives would make the believers adopt piety. Similarly, the narratives on excellence of religious deeds were believed to encourage people on adopting virtue and piety. This notion made the *muḥaddithūn* record such weak and unreliable narratives in their works. We, however, need to analyze if this approach was justified or not.

37. Khaṭīb Baghdādī, *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah*, 134.

An in-depth study and long analysis over the issue have led me to the conclusion that this view of the *muḥaddithūn* proved disastrous. The deviant views, myths and practices of the Sufis and mystics (*ahl-i taṣawwuf*) are a product of laxity shown by the *muḥaddithūn* in this regard. Their acceptance of the weak narratives opened up doors to libraries of weak and unreliable narratives. Such weak reports gave birth to all unfounded religious concepts. People could pick up narratives to support a religious belief they cherished. Thus the "fruits" of the weak narratives did not remain confined to moral and religious improvement. These narratives negatively affected the basic beliefs and fundamental teachings of Islam. This trend, later on, got so current that new practices, beliefs and moral codes were innovated and passed on as part of the religion. The *muḥaddithūn* belatedly realized the encroachment of the mystics and declared it a great wrong to the religion of God. However, damage had already been done. The state of affair was then beyond correction. The *muḥaddithūn* met with a pungent response that they had nothing better to do than to engage in backbiting. The activity of *jarḥ wa ta'dīl* was merely based on backbiting, a *ḥarām* act, they were told. The mystics and the Sufis were not bothered in the least by the findings of the *muḥaddithūn*. The view that the narratives containing directives, *sunan* and *ḥalāl wa ḥarām* should be critically analyzed and the narratives on *targhīb wa tarhīb* may not be rigorously investigated eventually proved wrong, rather poisonous and detrimental.

In reality, the laxity shown in accepting weak *aḥādīth* in certain religious issues resulted in influx of unsound narratives. The books on Sufism are replete with unfounded reports. It is no more a secret that these narratives have disfigured the true religion. It would not be an exaggeration to declare that a parallel concept of the religion has been erected on the mass of fabricated and weak narratives. This concept of the religion finds no basis and support in the practice and teaching of the Prophet (sws) and the rightly guided caliphs.

6.7 Summary

The *isnād* provides one of the fundamental criteria to help us in deciding the soundness or spuriousness of a *ḥadīth*. However, it

is not the only criterion in this exercise because, in spite of its intricacies, beauties, grandeur, and proximity to the ideal, the *isnād* remains short of objective data. It has its inherent limitations which cannot be overcome. It is, therefore, necessary that in order to find the truth, we continue judging the *isnād* and, in addition, use all other natural ways and methods to properly ascertain the true status of *aḥādīth*.

Chapter 7

Riwāyah Bi Al-ma'nā (Transmission by Meaning)

A prophetic *ḥadīth* has two parts, the *isnād* (chain of narrators) and *matn* (text). Therefore, in deciding the soundness or spuriousness of a *ḥadīth,* both *isnād* and *matn* are studied for each holds equal importance. In the process of *ḥadīth* investigation and understanding, the position of neither can validly be denied.

In the previous chapter, I discussed in detail the first part of a *ḥadīth*, the *isnād*. Now I shall take up the *matn*, the actual text of the narratives, and explain some of the weak points in it and shall try to determine methods which can be helpful in reaching the truth in this regard.

We shall start this discussion with an analysis of the process of *ḥadīth* transmission by meaning (*riwāyah bi al-ma'nā*). We will try to ascertain what it means to say that the *ḥadīth* literature is mostly narration of meaning. We will also point out some necessary consequences of this fact. This is important to discuss because most of *aḥādīth* have been transmitted in this very way. They are not verbatim transmission of the word of the Prophet (sws).

It is well known that most of the narratives have preserved the meaning of the original rather than the words. It is not something strange and no rational being can object to that. If it were held absolutely necessary to narrate the traditions verbatim as in the case of the Qur'ān, that would have made it impossible for the Muslims to transmit *aḥādīth* at all. The Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth have different religious status and position in Islam. The mode of transmission of each is, therefore, different. It is necessary to transmit the Qur'ān verbatim. If the same condition was attached to the transmission of *aḥādīth,* that would have made its reporting impossible. We would then have been deprived of a very important source of the prophetic wisdom.

As for the Qur'ān, the angel Gabriel, the Prophet (sws) and the scribes of revelation, all were involved in its initial recording.

The angle Gabriel brought and revealed it to the Prophet (sws). The Prophet (sws) appointed his scribes to write it down. The case of *aḥādīth* is different. The Prophet (sws) always did and said things. He set examples in his deeds and actions. His words contained guidance for the *ummah*. He was indeed doing or saying something all the time. He spoke while sitting, standing, walking, resting, while being in company or solitude, in the bazaar, with his family, at home, in the mosque, during the wars, while journeying; at every moment in every place. He was always stating something or doing a practice, giving tacit or express approval to others' actions in the presence of people. The witnesses to his sayings, actions and tacit approvals reported these things to those who did not witness them so that every Muslim could learn from them. This was necessary because the Prophet (sws) was not only a lawgiver but also a perfect exemplar regarding the observance of religious rulings and practices. His every act, small or big, ordinary or unusual, becomes a model for the Muslims to emulate. The way he turned his face to look at something and the way he took a morsel in his mouth has been emulated by the followers. If witnesses of his sayings and actions were obliged to pass on his sayings verbatim and report his acts exactly, it would have been impossible to transmit this wealth of knowledge. In that case, I am afraid hardly five percent of the total wealth of the prophetic knowledge would have reached us. This would then have caused irrecoverable loss to the Muslim *ummah*.

I believe that this condition was neither necessary nor important in the presence of the basic criterion, the Qur'ān. If, contrarily, the compilation of the Qur'ān remained faulty, that would have destroyed the foundations of every tenet of the religion. The least possible mistake in the process of recording, preserving and disseminating the Qur'ān would have produced greatest harms. On the contrary, any shortcoming in the transmission of *aḥādīth* could be corrected in the light of the firm criteria provided by the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. For the dissemination of the prophetic Sunnah, the only practical process was to preserve his ways, actions, sayings and tacit approvals in the form of traditions. Any defect and shortcoming found in a tradition is corrected by putting it against the criterion of the Qur'ān. This made it possible that most of *aḥādīth* preserve the

meaning of the prophetic sayings rather than words.

7.1 Conditional Allowance of *Riwāyah bi al-Ma'nā*

The author of *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah*, has quoted some *aḥādīth* in the chapter titled *dhikr al-ḥujjah fī ijāzah riwāyah al-ḥadīth 'alā al-ma'nā* (a mention of the proofs for the allowance for the transmission of *aḥādīth* by meaning). These *aḥādīth* show that the Prophet (sws) has given conditional approval of *riwāyah bi al-ma'nā*. It has been reported thus:

> We asked the holy Prophet (sws): "O Messenger of God, our parents be sacrificed for your sake, we listen to your *aḥādīth* but cannot reproduce it exactly." The Prophet (sws) replied: "There is no harm in narrating my sayings this way as far as you do not make the allowable as unallowable and the unallowable as allowable."[38]

This proves that unless a narrator changes the purport of the original prophetic saying, he may opt for *riwāyah bi al-ma'nā*.

A similar saying of the Prophet (sws) has been narrated on the authority of 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd (rta) in the following words:

> Someone asked the Prophet (sws): "O Messenger of God, when you tell us something we do not find it possible for us to narrate it to others verbatim. What should we do?" The Prophet (sws) replied: "You may narrate from me if you can correctly reproduce the meaning of the original statement."[39]

This means that the Prophet (sws) has left it upon the narrator to decide whether he can retain and convey the meaning of the original. This falls in the category of *ijtihād*. This shows that the Prophet (sws) has given a principle allowance to do *riwāyah bi al-ma'nā*.

A study of the accounts of later developments shows that the people engaged in the process of *ḥadīth* transmission have followed this principle. I cite some sayings of the authorities in this field: Wāthilah b. al-Asqā' responded to a question in the following words: "Look, if we narrate a saying by meaning, you

38. Ibid., 199.
39. Ibid., 200.

should consider it sufficient."[40]

Abū Sa'īd narrates:

We would sit in the company of the Prophet (sws) (with a purpose of listening to him). At times, ten people would listen to the Prophet (sws) but not even any two of them could reproduce the saying verbatim. However, all would retain and narrate the meaning of the saying.[41]

Muḥammad b. Sīrīn says:

I would hear a single *ḥadīth* from ten different persons. All would narrate the same meaning in different words.[42]

Ḥasan narrates:

If you are able to reproduce meaning of *aḥādīth* then there is nothing wrong with changing the order of the words.[43]

Shu'ayb b. al-Ḥujāb narrates:

Ghaylān b. Jarīr and I went to Ḥasan. Ghaylān asked him: "O Abū Sa'īd, what should I do if I find someone narrating a [prophetic] *ḥadīth* adding or omitting something and failing to narrate exactly what he learned?" Ḥasan replied: "[It is acceptable.] We may only consider someone a liar if he does so knowingly."[44]

Consider the following fact about Anas (rta):

After narrating a prophetic tradition he would add the following words: *aw kamā qāla rasūl allāh* (or as the Prophet (sws) said).[45]

The above shows that the Prophet (sws) himself clarified that it

40. Ibid., 104.
41. Ibid., 205.
42. Ibid., 206.
43. Ibid., 207.
44. Ibid. 208.
45. Ibid. 206.

is not necessary to narrate a tradition verbatim. The narrator, however, has to reproduce the meaning of the original. In a nutshell, the Companions (rta) and the *muḥaddithūn* have accepted the traditions that were not reported verbatim provided that the meaning of the original was retained.

7.2 Vulnerability of *Riwāyah bi al-Ma'nā*

A competent narrator can, no doubt, sufficiently communicate the meaning of a report without using the exact received wording. If, however, he fails to communicate the message contained in the original, he, at least, can explain the report in his own words. In this manner he actually explicates and explains the original received report. However, there are always chances of error in *riwāyah bi al-ma'nā*.

The inherent weaknesses in this method are obvious. Numerous examples of errors resulting from this mode of narration were detected even during the lifetime of the Prophet (sws). For example many Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws) learnt from him the supplication made before going to sleep at night. Later on, different people reproduced it differently. Some people even changed the meaning of the supplication they had learnt:

> Barrā' b. 'Ādhib (rta) narrates that the Prophet (sws) said: When you go to bed you should make *wuḍū* the way you make *wuḍū* for the Prayer. Then you should lie on the right side of your body and make the following supplication: "My Lord, I submit myself to you. I submit all my affairs to your lordship. I take you as refuge while I dread from your punishment and anticipate your mercy. There is no refuge and safety from you except you. I believe in the Book you have revealed and the Prophet you have appointed as your messenger (*wa bi nabiyyika alladhī arsalta*)." Then the Prophet (sws) said: "If you died while asleep, you shall die on the *fiṭrah* (nature). You should make sure that these are the last words you utter (before your death)." Barrā' (rta) says that he repeated the words as follows: "I believe in the *rasūl* you have sent (*wa bi rasūlika alladhī arsalta*)" [instead of "*bi nabiyyika alladhī arsalta*, the *nabī* you have sent"]. The Prophet (sws) corrected: "No. Say *wa bi nabiyyika alladhī arsalta* (the Prophet *nabī* that you have sent) as ra *rasūl*." (*Bukhārī*, No: 244)

We learn that the Prophet (sws) taught his Companions (rta) the etiquette of going to bed as well as some supplications to be said on the occasion. He asked Barrā' (rta) to repeat the words of the supplication. Barrā' (rta) replaced the words "*wa bi nabiyyika alladhī arsalta* with *wa bi rasūlik alladhī arsalta*. The Prophet (sws) corrected him. Barrā' (rta) had changed the words of great significance. The meaning of the words implied a great religious reality. The words *wa bi rasūlik alladhī arsalta* do not clearly indicate the true status of the Prophet (sws), that he was a *nabī* raised to the status of *rasūl*. I have written extensively on the difference between a *nabī* and a *rasūl* in my commentary on the Qur'ān entitled *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*. Every Messenger of God is a *nabī*. Some *nabīs,* however, are also *rasūl*. The status of the *rasūl* is superior to that of a *nabī*. A *rasūl* is sent as a Divine judge for his people. The fate of his nation is definitely decided herein. His addressees are annihilated in this very world if they do not hearken towards his warnings and admonitions. If, however, they accept his call, they are granted dominion. This is not the case with the mission of a *nabī*. Now consider the words of the tradition which the Companion Barrā' (rta) used wrongly. The words the Prophet (sw) taught him were "*wa bi nabiyyik alladhī arsalta*" (in the *nabī* you have sent as a *rasūl*). These words highlight the true status of the Prophet Muḥammad (sws) while the words "*wa bi rasūlik alladhī arsalta*" do not make this distinction clear. Furthermore, in this phrase the words *alladhī arsalta* are redundant. Contrarily, the same words put in the phrase "*wa bi nabiyyik alladhī arsalta*" give a very profound meaning.

The above exemplifies a case in which the Prophet (sws) himself corrected a narrator about one of his sayings. The Prophet (sws) prompted the narrator because the mistake was serious. It could have led to a misunderstanding concerning a very fundamental philosophical religious tenet. *Riwāyah bi al-ma'nā* can cause other similar or graver differences in the religious directives of practical nature. Consider the following example.

It has been narrated that one day a Bedouin knowingly broke fast during the month of Ramadan. He came to the Prophet (sws) crying. The Prophet (sws) asked him the cause of his distress. He narrated the whole incident. The Prophet (sws) told him how he could atone for the sinful act he had committed. The narrators of

the *ḥadīth* differ greatly over what the Prophet (sws) commanded him to do to atone for breaking the obligatory fast of Ramadan knowingly.

This whole incident has been recorded by Imām Muslim in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* in two different narratives. The first of these narratives is transmitted on the authority of Abū Hurayrah (rta) and the other has been ascribed to ʻĀʼishah (rta). The narrative transmitted by Abū Hurayrah (rta) follows:

> A man came to the Prophet (sws). He said: "I have been ruined, O Messenger of God!" The Prophet (sws) asked him what had ruined him. The man replied: "I have had sexual intercourse with my wife while fasting." The Prophet (sws) asked him whether he had something to buy a slave his freedom. The man replied in the negative. The Prophet (sws) then asked him if he could continuously fast for two months. He again replied in the negative. The Prophet (sws) asked him whether he could feed sixty needy people. He again replied in the negative. Then he sat there. Meanwhile, a basket full of dates was presented to the Prophet (sws). The Prophet (sws) asked him to give away the basket of dates in the way of Allah. At this, he said: "Who would need these more than me! There is no house between these two barren plains of Madīnah needier of these dates than mine." At this the Prophet (sws) smiled such that his teeth could be seen. Then the Prophet (sws) said to him: "Go and feed your family with these." (*Muslim*, No: 1111)

Now consider the wording of a variant transmitted on the authority of ʻĀʼishah (rta):

> The Prophet (sws) said to him: "Give in charity, give in charity." The man explained that he had nothing to give away. Then the Prophet (sws) commanded him to stay there. Then two baskets of food were presented to the Prophet (sws) who commanded the man to give those baskets of food in charity. (*Muslim*, No: 1112)

If someone intends to learn how to atone for the act of breaking an obligatory fast of Ramadan in the light of the narrative

transmitted on the authority of Abū Hurayrah (rta), he would certainly conclude that, primarily, it is freeing a slave. Failing this he has to continuously fast for sixty days and failing that he has to feed sixty needy persons. The narrative transmitted by ʻĀ'ishah (rta), on the contrary, does not put the issue that way. It does not specify anything. According to ʻĀ'ishah (rta), the Prophet (sws) commanded the man merely to give in charity. Some variants of the same tradition do not mention continuous fasting for two months. This shows that the method of *riwāyah bi al-maʻnā* has complicated a very clear issue. This resulted in much wrangling of jurists over the atonement for breaking an obligatory fast knowingly.

The method of *riwāyah bi al-maʻnā* has caused changes in the meaning of many other narratives. Taking this liberty, many people have worded various narratives differently. Many scholastics (experts in *ʻilm al-kalām*) have based some of their erroneous beliefs on these variants of the *aḥādīth* regarding which we do not find a hint in the Qur'ān. Islamic beliefs, it should be appreciated, are based only on the clear Qur'ānic verses and not the *akhbār-i āḥād*.

7.3 Pursuing Verbatim Narration

Sensing the danger of loss in the meaning of the narratives if narrated by *riwāyah bi al-maʻnā*, a group of scholars, from the beginning, held that the prophetic traditions may only be transmitted verbatim. They did not accept *riwāyah bi al-maʻnā*. Imām Mālik was one such scholar who held and promoted this view. He has successfully met this ideal of verbatim narration of *aḥādīth,* at least, in the case of the statements traced back to the Prophet (sws). This ideal is well reflected in his treatise, *al-Muwaṭṭā*. If we read through it we would feel the grandeur of the prophetic speech at many occasions. The truth of the matter, however, is that nobody can fulfil the condition of verbatim narration, no matter how great scholarship he shows and how deep understanding he possesses. This explains why this view could not be consistently practiced later on. Only a few narrators tried to make sure that they narrate traditions verbatim. This view could hold sway had the *ummah* adopted and followed it. Contrarily, the *ummah* has, as a whole, adopted the practice of *riwāyah bi al-maʻnā*. I believe that this approach was correct and

practicable.

7.4 Conclusion

Most of the *ḥadīth* literature consists of the traditions which can only be termed narration of meaning (*riwāyah bi al-ma'nā)*. Naturally it was the only possible means of transmission of tradition. The *ummah* has, collectively, adopted this approach; it was widely accepted and followed. I believe that it is the only correct approach. However, while analyzing the *matn* (text) of *aḥādīth*, we have to consider the implications of the process of *riwāyah bi al-ma'nā* which we have discussed in detail in the foregoing pages so that the demands and prerequisites of a proper research are fulfilled.

Chapter 8

Authoritativeness of *Akhbār-i Āḥād*

The *ḥadīth* literature basically consists of individual-to-individual reports (*akhbār-i āḥād*). It is, therefore, necessary for us to properly grasp the issue of the authenticity of *akhbār-i āḥād*. The unusual importance the Ḥadīth holds as the source of the religion and the *sharī'ah,* requires that we fully appreciate the implications of *akhbār-i āḥād*. The Islamic law of evidence, in most cases, requires that a claim may only be established if two witnesses testify to it. This makes one think whether a narrative transmitted by a single man in each or any of the layer of the chain of transmission gives the kind of knowledge which binds us to accept it without exception. Many *akhbār-i āḥād* are transmitted by a single narrator in each or some of the layers. Do we have to believe that a Muslim cannot go against the teachings of such a narrative? Should an individual, for example, on receiving a *khabar-i wāḥid* (singular of *akhbār-i āḥād*), conclude that he has got the exact command of the Prophet (sws)? Before taking up these issues, it is necessary to define the term *khabar-i wāḥid*.

8.1 *Akhbār-i Āḥād*

An individual-to-individual report (*khabar-i wāḥid*) is a report transmitted by one or more narrators in each or any of the layers of transmitters while short of becoming a *mutawātir* (concurrent) report. This means that *akhbār-i āḥād* include the traditions narrated by a single narrator or more than one in any or all of the layers in its *isnād*. They, however, always remain short of the number that renders a narrative *mutawātir*.

The authenticity of *akhbār-i āḥād* is disputed by *fuqahā* (jurists). A brief survey of the views of the jurists and an exposure to the nature of their difference of opinion follows:

8.2 Mālikī View

Imām Mālik and his followers do not attach any importance to

akhbār-i āḥād against the consensical practice of the people of Madīnah. They consider the practice of the people of Madīnah as the Sunnah of the Prophet (sws) because, according to them, Madīnah was the city of the Prophet (sws) and his Companions (rta). A practice adopted by the habitants of Madīnah with consensus becomes the Sunnah and, as such, it has to be preferred over *akhbār-i āḥād*.

The view that a practice collectively adopted by the people of Madīnah is the Sunnah and is preferable is understandable. However, the Mālikīs are not justified in saying that a practice adopted and adhered to by the Muslims living in other centres is not the Sunnah. This I say because once the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws) settled in other cities, the Sunnah reached there too. It was disseminated among the population in those cities. People living in those centres were well acquainted with the practices. How can then we hold that practices adopted and adhered to by people living in other centres is not the Sunnah?

To hold that the Sunnah in a single issue cannot be different is not tenable. I have already explained, under the discussion in the introduction, that the Prophet (sws) has been reported to have offered a single practice differently. This difference in forms and observances of the practices was communicated to different cities through the Companions (rta). Thus, people living in one centre adopted one form or method while those of other centres adopted a different yet acceptable way. There is nothing strange with observing a single practice differently. Such minor differences can easily spread and be adopted in different centres.

In cases where a practice was offered differently by people in different cities and centres, the majority of *fuqahā* did not seek conclusiveness. They always accepted the possibility that the other ways might also be equally normal. I believe that this is the only correct and rational view. Flesh of many animals, for example, is allowable in the Islamic *sharī'ah*. But there are innumerable kinds of animals. It is not possible to conclusively declare and label status of all of them. Some water animals are considered eatable by people of one locality while the same animals are detested as food by people of other geographical regions while there is no express legal ruling. Keeping in mind the above mentioned principle of the jurists we cannot validly declare such animals *ḥarām.* It would rather be better to hold that

they are not *ḥarām* but we do not like to eat them.

8.3 Ḥanafī View

On the question of authenticity of *akhbār-i āḥād*, the Ḥanafī scholars have adopted a different stance. They do not attach much importance to *akhbār-i āḥād* in matters concerning *'umūm-i balwā* (general and every day human issues).

The Ḥanafīs reject individual narratives in these matters on purely rational grounds. Why a matter, involving the entire community, should be left to be narrated by only one or two individuals, they ask. Therefore, in such issues they prefer *ijtihād* (personal reasoning) and *qiyās* (analogy) over a *khabar-i wāḥid.* For they do not believe that, in this case, the *khabar-i wāḥid* establishes the *sunnah* which rules over *ijtihād* and *qiyās*. In such cases, they give a *mujtahid* (legal expert) the right to use his personal reasoning and conclude a ruling based on analogy. This is because, they believe, the Prophet (sws) himself has taught his followers to use analogy and conduct *ijtihād* in matters regarding which no direct Qur'ānic directive or the prophetic Sunnah is available. The following famous narrative ascribed to the Prophet (sws) contains this teaching:

> The Prophet (sws) asked Mu'ādh b. Jabal (rta) before sending him to Yemen: "How will you judge a dispute presented to you for judgement?" Mu'ādh (rta) replied that he would decide the matter in the light of the Book of God. The Prophet (sws) asked him what if there is no directive in the Book of God concerning the disputed issue. Mu'ādh (rta) replied that he would then decide it in the light of the Sunnah of the Prophet (sws) of God. The Prophet (sws) then asked him what he would do if there is no guidance in the Sunnah too. Mu'ādh (rta) replied that in that case, he would conduct *ijtihād* and that he would exert all his might to reach at a correct conclusion. Having heard this reply from Mu'ādh (rta) the Prophet (sws) struck the latter's chest with his hands and said: "All gratitude is due to God who guided the messenger of His Messenger to something which pleases the Messenger of God." (*Abū Dāwūd*, No: 3592)

Preferring *ijtihād* over *akhbār-i āḥād,* therefore, is a more

careful religious approach. *Ijtihād* is based on the express directives of the *sharī'ah* established by the Prophet (sws) himself. This makes it preferable to do *ijtihād* instead of relying on a *khabar-i wāḥid* about which we can never be sure if it is true or not for any *khabar* can be true or false. Doing *ijtihād,* in this case, corresponds more to the dictates of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

I believe that the above mentioned view of the Ḥanafī scholars is not weak and untenable. However, many people find it unacceptable. They hold that though *aḥādīth* are not perfectly authentic yet it is difficult to prefer *ijtihād* in the presence of a *ḥadīth*. I believe this objection does not hold much water.

Every *ḥadīth* is not that authentic to be preferred over *ijtihād*. *Ijtihād* has a strong religious basis. It earns reward even if one reaches a wrong conclusion through it. Contrarily, the traditions can possibly be a lie that too ascribed to the Prophet (sws), not an ordinary one. This makes it incumbent upon a careful religious scholar to adopt a path that is safer and well-guarded against any possibility of falsehood.

The above is my understanding of the worth of the objection against the Ḥanafī view. However, I do not understand the reason why Ḥanafīs insist on that every matter of the nature of *'umūm-i balwā* should be communicated by a very large number of people. Why should *akhbār-i āḥād* not accepted in such matters? It is possible that an issue falls in the category of *'umūm-i balwā* and it may be related to a very large number of people. Yet, in the case of the prophetic teachings, it can be related to such an aspect of the life of the Prophet (sws) which is not generally accessible. To put it in other words, there could be matters about which the Prophet (sws) did say something or set an example, but his sayings or actions were not observed and reported by a very large number of people. Thus, the problem lies with the mode of communication and not the nature of the act. It can be related to issues which are of utmost necessity in human life yet it could still be communicated by a very few individuals. Familial and marital issues are the examples. These issues cannot be reported and disseminated on a large scale. Though every believer needs to learn the marital affairs and the ways of obtaining purity after one enters the state of impurity (as in having sexual intercourse), yet the prophetic teachings of such issues could only be transmitted by the wives of the Prophet

(sws). Therefore, the narratives ascribed to the wives of the Prophet (sws) like ‘Ā’ishah (rta), Umm-i Salamā (rta), Ḥafṣah (rta) and others should be binding and authoritative for the believers regarding the familial and marital issues be they *akhbār-i āḥād* or *mutawātir*. We may discuss preference of one such narrative over others but we cannot reject them as invalid *aḥādīth*.

8.4 Shāfi‘ī View

Imām Shāfi‘ī very emphatically states that individual narratives are authoritative without exception. He stresses that even a narrative transmitted by a single narrator in each layer of a chain of transmission (*gharīb*) provides definitive authority. He has so extensively written for the authoritativeness of *akhbār-i āḥād* in his works *al-Risālah* and *Kitāb al-Umm* that one wonders why he attaches so much importance to this issue. I acknowledge his scholarship. However, I am afraid the arguments he presents in support of his conclusions are not directly proportional to the importance he attaches to this issue.

I have repeatedly studied and pondered over the narratives which Imām Shāfi‘ī has adduced as evidence to his view on the authoritativeness of *akhbār-i āḥād*. These narratives do not sufficiently prove that *akhbār-i āḥād* are binding. Contrarily, they prove that in deciding the truthfulness or falsehood of narratives the basic factors include the nature of the reported fact, the circumstances and related indicators, and the character of the narrator. Number of narrators is not that important. Sometimes, for example, the nature of the reported fact compels one to believe in it and in some other cases, it is the character of the narrator that is decisive. The related information and (textual or extra-textual) supportive indicators sometimes prove important factors in this question. This means that the primary factor in the question of determination of the truth value of a report is not the number of reporters but the above mentioned factors.

The incidents Imām Shāfi‘ī has quoted include that during the annual pilgrimage offered in the ninth year of the prophetic migration, the Prophet (sws) appointed Abū Bakr Ṣiddīq (rta) to lead the pilgrims as his deputy. Later on, the Prophet (sws) sent ‘Alī (rta) as his representative to read out to the pilgrims the first

few verses of Sūrah al-Tawbah (9) which deal with those of the polytheists who did not honour their covenants with the Prophet (sws). They were told that war would be declared on them after the *ḥarām* months were over. Imām Shāfi'ī holds that 'Alī (rta) was a single man who carried a very important directive. If the individual narrator does not carry any authoritativeness then how could the fate of such a large number of people be decided in the light of the warning issued through him?

I believe that this point is not tenable. The prophetic representatives did not work as narrators nor was the message they conveyed similar to a *khabar-i wāḥid*. The Muslims did not receive and accept their message as a *khabar-i wāḥid*. On the contrary, they were received and perceived as the representatives of the Prophet (sws). Their message was accepted on this very ground. These representatives were sent on a special mission. They were the top leaders of the Muslim community. A messenger is a representative of an authority. Even if a common Muslim were sent as a messenger and representative of the Prophet (sws), his position too would have been weighed as of 'Alī (rta). He would not have been received as a narrator of an isolated report. Rather he would have been received as the messenger and representative of the Prophet (sws).

This position and status of messengers is recognized all over the world. Governments and states appoint their ambassadors, representatives and officials to deal with others on behalf of their governments. Their position is clear to the governments and the subjects living in the states. Their orders and messages are received in the light of their position as the representatives of the government. They possess a defined authority. The concerned people honour their status and authority. What 'Alī (rta) and Abū Bakr (rta) did and said during the annual pilgrimage in the ninth year after Hijrah cannot be equated to a historical report transmitted by an individual. To consider their action as such and to present it as an argument to support the authoritativeness of *akhbār-i āḥād* is not understandable.

While arguing for the authoritativeness of *akhbār-i āḥād,* Imām Shāfi'ī has also alluded to the fact that Muslims accepted the statements of Maymūnah (rta) and 'Ā'ishah (rta) regarding the practices and actions of the Prophet (sws). By this, he intends to make the reader believe that the early Muslims accepted their

statements as authentic only because they held that *akhbār-i āḥād* give conclusive truth. I believe that this argument too does not hold water.

People accepted the information passed on by the wives of the Prophet (sws) regarding marital issues only because of want of such information. It could not be obtained through any other means. People did not accept such information as valid considering it *akhbār-i āḥād*. It was only because the wives of the Prophet (sws) had a direct access to the knowledge regarding these private and personal affairs of the prophetic life. Besides they were appointed as teachers of the Muslims in these issues. They were required to teach people the prophetic way of dealing with those affairs. The Almighty says:

> [O wives of the Prophet], spread the verses of God and the wisdom which is taught in your homes. (Q 33:34)

Therefore, in this connection, the wives of the Prophet (sws) including ʻĀ'ishah (rta) and Maymūnah (rta) acted as the divinely appointed teachers of God's guidance under the divine command in the above mentioned verse of the Qur'ān. They were not acting as narrators of *aḥādīth*. In these affairs, they were the only available authority. Other believers, as I have mentioned above, did not have access to this aspect of the Prophet's life. This shows that the religious guidance in this sphere of life was communicated to people through a special means. This special means of transmission of the prophetic knowledge was adopted so that the prophetic model or practice is made known to the world regarding all affairs including personal, familial and even conjugal. This was necessary because the Prophet (sws) was to provide a model and act like an exemplar regarding all aspects of human life and dealings. The way the wives of the Prophet (sws) fulfilled this obligation needs no explanation. The only thing that suffices as a reminder is that the performance of this duty by the wives of the Prophet (sws) cannot be termed transmission of knowledge through *akhbār-i āḥād*.

All other narratives that Imām Shāfiʻī has presented as proofs to his thesis on the authority of *akhbār-i āḥād* need no separate rebuttal. They also clearly fall in the category of reports which I discussed above and can be interpreted in the light of the above mentioned principles. A study of those narratives will also show

that the aspects of weakness inherent in *akhbār-i āḥād* were not absent from the minds of the people of the first generation. They had, therefore, been trying to remove these weak points. They believed that the religious knowledge could be transmitted through *khabar-i wāḥid* and that such knowledge could not be rejected. However, at the same time, they were aware of the weaknesses of this mode of transmission. This is evident from the famous narrative regarding the inheritance of a deceased grandmother. We learn that a Companion (rta) of the Prophet (sws) reported his knowledge concerning this issue to Abū Bakr (rta) who asked the people if someone shared that knowledge with the narrator in question. At this, one of audience rose and corroborated him. Abū Bakr (rta) was satisfied. The narrative remained a *khabar-i wāḥid* even after corroboration by a second narrator. Yet the corroboration added some strength to it which satisfied Abū Bakr (rta). He did his best to ensure that he received reliable knowledge. If he had been convinced of the authoritativeness of *khabar-i wāḥid,* he would not have sought the corroboratory evidence.

Imām Shāfi‘ī has brought a narrative ascribed to ‘Alī (rta) in this discussion who has been reported to have said that if he heard some narrative ascribed to the Prophet (sws) and he felt satisfied in the report, he would accept it. If, however, he doubted the reported fact, he would ask the narrator to swear an oath and affirm that he was speaking the truth. This proves that ‘Alī (rta) had set two criteria to accept a *khabar-i wāḥid*, personal satisfaction and an oath by the narrator. I believe the real criterion for accepting something is the satisfaction of the heart. While studying the prophetic *aḥādīth,* sometimes we feel the Prophet (sws) must have said or done so. At the same time, there are narratives which are problematic. This forces one to remove the possibility of doubt to the best of one’s extent.

The saying ascribed to ‘Alī (rta) teaches us that a testimony of an individual is not the only criterion of accepting the authenticity of a *ḥadīth*. It is not sufficient to accept something as a prophetic act or saying if it is narrated by a chain of individuals. It is the nature of the reported fact, textual and historical indicators and the person and character of the narrators that help us obtain satisfaction in the reported fact.

8.5 The Principle View

In my opinion, Islam has not tied us with the *mutawātir* facts in every worldly and religious issue. Most of the matters of human life are run on the basis of knowledge reported through *akhbār-i āḥād*. The *sharī'ah* and the *fiṭrah* (human nature) do not require that we may not accept or follow a reported fact unless we are absolutely sure of its certainty and authenticity. Such a requirement would make life impossible. Probable truth provides us with sufficient ground to run the affairs of life. In ordinary human dealings and affairs we accept the reports and narrations by every kind of people, Muslims and non-Muslims, pious and impious. We do not reject someone's report unless we find something solid indicating falsehood. Therefore, in such matters, we have to follow the custom and usual behaviour of individuals without trying to ascertain the religious and moral status of a narrator.

As for the religious issues, the Qur'ānic guidance requires that, if some impious person reports something important to us, we should analyze the issue. The Almighty says:

> Believers, if some impious person reports some news to you, thoroughly investigate the issue. (Q 49:6)

The Almighty commands us to consider personality of reporters as well as nature, indicators and characteristics of the news while deciding on its truth value. If the reporter is not impious (*fāsiq*) then we may not critically analyze the news and the reporter even if he gives important news. If, a *fāsiq* reporter communicates something concerning ordinary matters of daily life we need not critically analyze the report. However, if a *fāsiq* reporter narrates something important then we have to analyse his report and his character. We shall investigate his character and ability; we shall study the nature of the news and its relevant characteristics and indicators. If all these elements favour and corroborate the report then we may accept it otherwise not.

8.6 Conclusion

Akhbār-i āḥād are no doubt a major vehicle of transmission of the prophetic knowledge. However, it would not be right to hold that *akhbār-i āḥād* alone can sufficiently establish the veracity of the reported knowledge. *Akhbār-i āḥād* are not rejected as

unacceptable merely because they are *akhbār-i āḥād*. Rather, they are relied on while being careful regarding different aspects of weakness in them. The scholars, however, must look for ways of eliminating the possibility of error in such reports using all available sources and resources of knowledge. Indicators, analogy, corroboratory evidence, oaths, and all other possible ways of removing doubts and uncertainty involved in such historical knowledge shall be employed. However, *akhbār-i āḥād* shall definitely be rejected if they contradict foundational religious knowledge in Islam. This principle is derived from the Qur'ān and the *mutawātir* Sunnah.

Chapter 9

Causes of Ḥadīth Fabrication

The Muslim *ummah*, in its entire history, has faced many kinds of assaults by enemies of Islam. However, the *ḥadīth* fabrication presented the most severe and unique challenge. The enemies of Islam, in the early phase of Islamic history, decided to damage the authenticity of the unparalleled and unexampled treasure of the prophetic knowledge, if not destroy it altogether. Their efforts, however, were thwarted by the efforts of *imāms* of the science of *ḥadīth* criticism. May Almighty bless the souls of those *imāms* who defended the treasure of prophetic knowledge! They exerted their full efforts in sifting the true knowledge from fabrications. They pointed out the loopholes through which the weak *aḥādīth* were mixed with the sound ones. The intensity of fabrications can be imagined by considering the fact that only a few thousand narratives could pass the test of a set criterion for the sound *aḥādīth* from hundreds of thousands of traditions. This renders it important for us to discuss in detail the motives of *ḥadīth* fabrication and try to ascertain the ways weak and fabricated traditions were included in the sound narratives. We must also understand the nature of this evil. For if a researcher in this field is not fully conscious and well aware of the nature of the evil he can hardly be expected to show the required competence.

9.1 Why were *Aḥādīth* fabricated?

A study of the pioneer works on the principles of *ḥadīth* criticism reveals that there were pious as well as impious motives for fabricating *aḥādīth*. It was not that the fabrications for pious purposes were less harmful. Indeed both have done equal damages to the religion. The fabrications under pious motives have rather proved more detrimental for Islam than the ones concocted under evil designs.

9.2 Pious Fabrications

A thorough enquiry into the issue of *ḥadīth* fabrication reveals

that there are two major pious motives behind fabrication of *aḥādīth*. First, people fabricated *aḥādīth* concerning virtues and excellences of the Qur'ānic *sūrahs* in order to attract people to the Book. Second, with the aim of drawing people to do good and avoid evil, such *aḥādīth* were concocted and circulated which exaggerated rewards of good deeds and punishment for evil ones. All other types of pious fabrications have ramifications of these two motives.

9.2.1 The First Form

People started to fabricate *aḥādīth* with an intention to serve the religion of God. Most of the *aḥādīth* about excellence of reciting any of the Qur'ānic *sūrahs* are examples. The *aḥādīth* forged to attract people towards good deeds (*targhīb*) and warn them about the Last Judgment and the consequences of misdeeds (*tarhīb*) are also examples of this type of fabrications. Such *aḥādīth* tell us that merely reciting a single *sūrah* of the Qur'ān suffices one as a guarantor of success in the Afterlife. If a believer recites a *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, for example, he does not need do anything else to deserve the life of eternal bliss. Thus, these narratives promise extraordinary rewards for a person reciting a single *sūrah*.

One wonders how one merits such lofty rewards by merely uttering words of a *sūrah* without even understanding it. This clearly contradicts the teachings of Islam. The Prophet (sws) is reported to have stated that a believer will be rewarded for what he comprehends in the recitations he makes in the Prayer. The Qur'ān has expressly commanded that the believers should ponder over the Book of God. It has commanded the believers to act upon its teachings. There is no concept of heaping reward or seeking blessings merely through chanting the words of God.

That the narratives regarding the excellence of reciting the *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān are very famous and widely accepted can be gleaned from that Zamakhsharī, a celebrated exegete of the Qur'ān, tries to mention such a narrative at the end of almost every *sūrah* in his commentary on the Qur'ān. This is in spite of his claims to be *mu'tazilī* rationalist. One wonders what becomes of his rationality at this point.

Some experts in the science of *ḥadīth* criticism investigated these *aḥādīth* and discovered a certain fabricator. When asked

why he incurred such a heinous sin, he explained that he noticed people readily learning and following the juristic work of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah. This alarmed him and he decided to concoct *aḥādīth* eulogizing recitation of certain verses so that people might be attracted by the Qur'ān. This motive is obviously pious. Such *aḥādīth* became popular and many great scholars contributed to their spread. The experts in the science, however, always declared them fabrications. As mentioned above, one of the fabricators confessed his crime. These narratives, however, could not meet the objective of the fabricators. People could not be attracted to the Qur'ān. Contrarily, these *aḥādīth* created the erroneous belief that the basic purpose the Qur'ān has been revealed to serve is not to understand and obtain guidance from it but to earn reward by merely reciting it.

9.2.2 The Second Form

Another group of fabricators comprises reformers and pious individuals. Directed by their mystic disposition, they forged a lot of traditions containing warnings of punishment for the committers of certain wrongs (*tarhīb*) and promising rewards of good deeds (*targhīb*). The purpose was to create fear of the Last Judgment in the hearts of people, to make them to perform religious duties and to encourage them to avoid sinful acts. When these fabricators were attacked by the *muḥaddithūn,* they pleaded that they fabricated *aḥādīth* with the intent to call people to virtuousness and to stop them from sinfulness. They should, therefore, not be subjected to the strict criteria of *ḥadīth* acceptance concluded by the *muḥaddithūn.*

The *muḥaddithūn*, instead of countering and rejecting these erroneous views, showed a concessive attitude to these shallow arguments. They practically yielded to the view of the fabricators and subsequently confined their scrutiny to the narratives containing legal directives (*al-aḥkām*). Thus, they let the band to fabricate and spread, as the prophetic word, whatever they liked. The view of the fabricators finally dominated. Their fabrications are diffused through esoteric literature produced by the Muslim Sufis. I have discussed this issue in the chapter "Excellence of the *Isnād* and its Inherent Limitations".

The Sufis successfully put grave misconception in the minds of the *muḥaddithūn*. History proved that the stance of the latter

regarding such narratives was mere naivety. If one reads through the works of the Sufis, one shall learn that they base their innovatory beliefs and notions either on esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses or baseless *aḥādīth*. This practice is not confined to the general class of the Sufis; even the most learned among them take this very path.

No one doubts Imām Ghazālī's scholarship and eruditeness. His work *Iḥyā al-'Ulūm* is one of the best works written on the subjects of *taṣawwuf* and *tadhkiyyah* (purification of the self). However, he is the least careful person among the scholars of the *ummah* in quoting baseless *aḥādīth*.

The fabricators and the concessive *muḥaddithūn* claimed that the weak narratives that they accepted belong to the category of *targhīb wa tarhīb*. They attract people to do good and encourage them to avoid evil. However, the truth of the matter is that these narratives affect all spheres of human life. They even cover the fundamental religious beliefs including the belief in unicity of God (*tawḥīd*) and the Last Accountability (*ākhirah*). It was not, in fact, possible to contain this onslaught. For Islam is a religion, all parts of which are inseparably interlinked. Religious directives and beliefs as well as their philosophical bases and wisdom are inseparably interconnected. Parts depend on the whole. If one part is infected, the whole cannot be saved from the ailment.

We can say that the sayings the Sufis pass as *aḥādīth* affect *tawḥīd,* among other fundamental beliefs, moral theories and Islamic worldview. It strikes even attributes of God Almighty. Thus all the fundamentals of Islam are affected.

The *muḥaddithūn* committed a serious wrong by accepting the weak narratives concerning the *targhīb wa tarhīb*. This opened the doors to disputations over the religion beyond reform. The door to entry for the weak *aḥādīth* let the ideas of Confucius, Buddha and Zoroaster enter the religion. Alien philosophical and esoteric notions and theories assume the form of *aḥādīth* and find their way into the religion of God.

Once this door for the weak and fabricated reports was opened, it became impossible for the Muslims to parry the onslaught. Nobody knew what to do. All believers cannot be expected to develop in the science, act like the most careful critics and sift the weak from the sound *aḥādīth*. Yet, however, it is the duty of

the scholars to appreciate the evil results of the misjudgements of the *muḥaddithūn*.

I believe that the *muḥaddithūn* did it with true intentions. I do not think they committed deliberate wrong. However, it is also true that the laxity they showed corrupted the face of Islam. It has made falsehood dominate all aspects of religious life. Truth was shrouded and concealed under layers of falsehood.

Although the *muḥaddithūn* have stressed care in accepting the weak *aḥādīth* from the pious reformers, this emphasis is meaningless because the *muḥaddithūn* themselves did not make proper efforts to analyze the narratives containing *targhīb wa tarhīb*. Besides, not every narrator could analyze the *isnād* and the *matn.* In the present day, such a work is an insurmountable task. The duty to ferret out the truth is, now, a crown of thorn rarely worn.

9.3 Pious Reformers

Now I will explain, with the help of some examples, the nature of the act accomplished by the pious narrators referred to earlier. To this issue the author of *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah* has devoted a complete chapter entitled "*Chapter regarding avoiding narrating aḥādīth on the authority of individuals who are not persons of sound memory and reasoning (dirāyah) even if they are known for piety and worship*". In this chapter, Baghdādī states that there are people who are famous for their God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and piety. However, they are not reliable transmitters. They cannot remember *aḥādīth* correctly and are not trustworthy narrators. It is not allowable to accept *aḥādīth* narrated by any of them. In this connection, the author recounts many incidents. I intend to present some of the incidents reported by him. This shall help the reader understand how the evil of *ḥadīth* fabrication spread in the guise of God-consciousness. Abū Sulayman, narrated from Rabī'ah b. Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān:

> Among our brothers, there are some [who are so pious and God-fearing] that we believe their prayers [to God] will not be left unheard. [However, they are least trusted.] If any of them bears witness to an ordinary fact we do not rely on their

testimony.[46]

Rabī‘ah means to say that the apparent piety of these characters made people believe that their prayers will definitely be heard by God. They seemed to be very close to God. However, their testimony was not trusted even in insignificant matters of daily life let alone the *ḥadīth* transmission.

Yaḥyā b. Sa‘īd is reported to have said:

> In the *ḥadīth* analysis, I have not seen anything more [deceiving and, therefore,] trying than the pious narrators.[47]

These people are believed to be very pious and God-conscious. However, they are the real *ḥadīth* fabricators. Their apparent position puts a researcher in great trial.

Yaḥyā b. Sa‘īd Qaṭṭān says:

> There are people who I can fully trust regarding a hundred thousand dirham but I cannot trust them regarding even a single *ḥadīth*.[48]

There could, thus, be a person who is trusted for precious assets. He is, however, not trusted as a narrator of *aḥādīth*.

Ibn Abī al-Zanād narrates from his father:

> I met hundred such men in Madīnah who are reliable in every aspect. However, they are not trusted as *ḥadīth* narrators. Concerning them it is declared: “They are not reliable.”[49]

Imām Mālik says:

> I have met seventy such persons near these pillars [in the Mosque of the Prophet (sws)] who ascribed *aḥādīth* to the Prophet (sws). I have not accepted any *ḥadīth* from them. This is in spite of that some among them could be trusted as

46. Ibid., 158.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 159.

in charge of the *bayt al-māl* (treasury). Yet, however, they were not reliable narrators.[50]

I have selected only a few from hundreds of such anecdotes. My purpose is to show that many people have been fabricating *aḥādīth*, ascribing them to the Prophet (sws) and disseminating them considering it a pious deed. Imām Muslim has stated in his introduction to *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* that there were pious people in Madīnah whose tongues glibly narrated fabrications.

The above discussion shows that there are people who are apparently so pious and God-fearing that one does not dare to mistrust their statements. One feels it wrong to doubt their testimony for fear of God. Yet, however, the experts in the science who were very knowledgeable indeed proved that they were unreliable. One must not blindly take anything that people ascribe to the Prophet (sws). The above mentioned statements ascribed to the experts of the science teach us a lesson of a very great import. One regrets to state that people did not hearken to these warnings. What was feared by these great experts, in fact, came true later on. The *muḥaddithūn*, with the only exception of Mālikīs, bought the view that as far as the issue of the *aḥādīth* of *targhīb wa tarhīb* is concerned, they may not show best care and may abandon carrying out rigorous investigation. They confined their scrutiny and required care to the narratives containing legal rulings (*ḥalāl wa ḥarām*). The *muḥaddithūn* surrendered before the upholders of this view perhaps because they could not defeat this evil. They decided, as a principle, to abandon scrutinizing such narratives. This, as has been mentioned above, relieved them from all types of investigation and analysis on such narratives. Fabrications and weak narratives were left to reign supreme in the Muslim beliefs and practices and thus all heresies and innovations fed on them.

9.4 *Ḥadīth* Fabrication for Evil Purposes

The above discusses the pious motives for *ḥadīth* fabrication. People have been engaged in fabricating *aḥādīth* for evil motives as well. Two evil motives for *ḥadīth* fabrications are prominent; first, seeking fame and prominence, and second, introducing innovations in the religion of God.

50. Ibid.

9.4.1 Fabrication for Fame

This is known that in the early period of Islamic history a narrator of *aḥādīth* commanded great respect. No other accomplishment was considered more respectable. The fame that could be earned by merely narrating a single *ḥadīth* was usually unparalleled. *Ḥadīth* narration was, therefore, the most cherished engagement and a very popular vocation. People were greatly attracted to this activity. Those known to have related a *ḥadīth* by a highly valued and rare *isnād* attracted even more love and respect from people. People would throng towards them and would try hard to meet them. Seekers of *aḥādīth* would travel from far off places to visit such people bearing great difficulties. The roads to their hometowns grew busier. These people were respected not only by the students of prophetic *aḥādīth* but also by those of the rich and the rulers who had regard for knowledge and wisdom. They too would express reverence for these persons believed to be possessed of great prophetic knowledge. They too would travel to the hometowns of these teachers of *aḥādīth* despite physical hardships and financial costs. Something that popular and, hence, a source of respect and reverence attracts all kinds of people, pious and evil. Evil people are attracted towards it with a purpose to earn fame and other monitory benefits. This makes it difficult for masses to differentiate between those who seek such a valued thing with purity of intention and those who seek it for mundane purposes.

The author of *al-Kifāyah* has an interesting story to tell us. Someone invented twelve *aḥādīth*. He was a hero. “From where did you obtain those narratives?” it was asked. The man answered: “From someone endowed with this knowledge by the Almighty Allah.” He could not name the source. Of course, there was none. It is obvious that in his fervour to earn false fame, he went as far as to inventing *aḥādīth*. A person, at this stage, tries to have a narrative related. When he fails to obtain a sound narrative, he opts for a weak. If he fails to obtain even a weak narrative, he forges one. He has to possess himself of a *ḥadīth* by hook or by crook.

9.4.2 Fabrication for Innovations

It was the innovators who benefited from inventing *aḥādīth* the most of all. Heretic sects which emerged in the Muslim *ummah*

including Khawārij, Shī'ī, and Murjites[51] are examples. Some of them had political motives too. This made them fabricate *aḥādīth* expressive of the excellence of their beloved leaders and *imāms,* and condemnation of their opponents. They heaped up propaganda material for or against certain individuals. Besides, they had developed certain beliefs divorced from the teachings of Islam. When they intended to mix their heretic beliefs in the Islamic faith they had, to their service, the easiest method of *ḥadīth* fabrication. They disseminated the fabrication in order to make the *ummah* accept their heresies as the part of the religion. This was because they had failed to base their innovations on the Qur'ān. They, therefore, disguised in the form of a *ḥadīth* anything they intended to introduce as part of the religion. In this manner, their heresies became popular for it was easy for the generality to accept anything however removed from religion presented in the form of a prophetic *ḥadīth*.

These people successfully pretended that their heresies were based in the Qur'ān. This too was possible only because some of the exegetes mentioned in their commentaries baseless *aḥādīth* without bothering to investigate their authenticity. The words and expressions of the Qur'ān are twisted to mean something new and baseless. The innovators could not have used the Qur'ān, had the careless exegetes not opened this door for them. For those who interpret the Qur'ān in accord with their heretic beliefs and innovations are thwarted by the Qur'ān itself. Thus, in order to make the Qur'ānic expressions say that which corroborates their beliefs they resort to esoteric interpretation of the text.

Thus, when heretics found it impossible to incorporate their innovations in the religion basing it on the Qur'ān they relied on fabricating *aḥādīth* to be welcomed by great a success. Whatever lies they invented and ascribed to the Prophet (sws) were received by the opportunists and disseminated in the public speedily.

We should not underestimate the fabrications and lies spread in this way. A huge number of fabrications have been incorporated

51. The author of the article on Murjites in *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* writes: "One of the early sects of Islam, the extreme opponents of the Khawārij. The latter thought that a Muslim by committing a moral sin becomes a *kāfir*. The Murji'ah, on the other hand, were of opinion that a Muslim does not lose his faith through sin."

in the Muslim literature. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the number of fabricated *aḥādīth* reaches hundreds of thousands. This can be gleaned from the following reports:

> Ḥammād b. Salamah was heard saying: "The heretics have fabricated and disseminated twelve thousand *aḥādīth*.[52]
>
> Ḥammād b. Zayd narrated from Ja'far b. Sulaymān that he heard Mahdī say that one of the heretics confessed that he had fabricated four hundred *aḥādīth* which gained currency.[53]

If a single fabricator can invent four hundred *aḥādīth* and successfully disseminate them in public, how dangerous would be the collective result of such endeavours by all the adherents of the strayed and heretic sects. Keeping this situation in perspective, we do not find it strange that Imām Bukhārī and Imām Muslim chose a few thousand narratives out of millions of *aḥādīth* in circulation.

9.5 The *Muḥaddithūn* on the Innovators

The *muḥaddithūn* adopted a concessive attitude in response to the efforts of the pious people to disseminate weak and fabricated narratives containing *targhīb wa tarhīb*. Similarly, they adopted a weak stance regarding the forgeries of the heretics. Instead of curbing the evil, their attitude encouraged it.

Imām Mālik, nevertheless, adopted a sound stance in this regard. According to him, it is prohibited to accept a *ḥadīth* narrated by stray people who lead others into error. He adopted such an uncompromising attitude that he did not even consider it allowable to narrate a *ḥadīth* by meaning (*bi al-ma'nā*) and accepted verbatim reports only. The following statement ascribed to him truly depicts his unbending attitude in this regard. He said: "I have met seventy such persons near these pillars [in the Mosque of the Prophet (sws)] who ascribed *aḥādīth* to the Prophet (sws). I have not accepted any *ḥadīth* narrated by them. This is in spite of that some among them could be trusted as in charge of the *bayt al-māl* (treasury). Yet, however, they were not reliable narrators."[54] This was the

52. Khaṭīb Baghdādī, *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah*, 158.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 159.

principle he expressly held and faithfully followed. One may find narratives in his book that do not pass this test. In such cases, one should give him some allowance. He was working in an environment where everyone accommodated falsehood. In such situations, even a very strong person can stumble a little.

Contrarily, Imām Shāfi'ī, Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah and Qāḍī Abū Yūsuf adopted an untenable stance on this issue. These people invented strange and queer arguments to accommodate the narratives by the inventors. Some of them held that no body can be declared non-Muslim even if he adheres to waywardness and interprets the sources according to his whims. This leads to the conclusion, they say, that the *aḥādīth* narrated by him should not be rejected. Thus, according to them, someone offering wrong interpretation of a religious text may not be condemned as a non-believer. This view is obviously weak and untenable. We know that open and clear rejection of Islam is seldom committed. Mostly people take shelter in baseless reinterpretations of the texts. That is why the Shī'ī, Khawārij, Murjites, Qadariyyah and many other sects give a particular interpretation to the texts which accords to their beliefs and personal leanings and then declare it the true form of religion which they profess and follow. We see that, even in this day, many kinds of waywardness are being adopted which are not declared and professed openly. Nor can such waywardness be considered an open rejection of the faith. Contrarily, all such transgressions are incorporated in the religion through reliance on misinterpretation and reinterpretation of the source texts. Therefore, the accommodative attitude our *imāms* showed in response to the evil of the inventors is obviously naïve. These scholars have not fully investigated and properly analyzed the possible consequences and implications of their view.

Some scholars on the other hand differentiate between the innovators who profess their adherence to the innovations they introduce and those who do not openly commit such a transgression. These scholars hold that they would not accept narratives transmitted by a person who calls other people to adopt the inventions in the religion he has introduced or which he adheres to. However, they consider it allowable to accept the *aḥādīth* narrated by such a fabricator who himself adheres to heresies but does not call others to follow it. Thus, according to them, a staunch Shī'ī or Khārijī can narrate acceptable *aḥādīth,* if

he keeps from openly confessing his heresy and calling others to it. A little deliberation shows that this viewpoint is not understandable. For the one who adopts a belief considering it the true religion divulged by God would not narrate anything other than that which corresponds to his personal views. He would only narrate things he hears from his religious leaders. This fact alone renders the stance of the *imāms* untenable.

Another group of scholars held that we may only reject *aḥādīth* by a specific category of the religious innovators. As for other innovators, their *aḥādīth* may be accepted and reported further. These scholars, therefore, accept *aḥādīth* from all innovators with the only exception of a certain group called *rawāfiḍ*. The question, however, is who would decide which group of the innovators is to be rejected and which is to be accommodated. Who carries a meter measuring the level of heresy? I believe we may only set a concrete principle and apply it to all equally. Either all the innovators are unworthy as narrators or they are acceptable.

The concessive attitude adopted by the above mentioned three views gradually got currency. It reigned on the minds of the believers. What is worse is that even the most expert among the *muḥaddithūn* accepted narratives from innovators. This is why the works compiled by these *muḥaddithūn* contain a lot of fabrications and weak narratives. This has made it very difficult for the experts to investigate these narratives afresh and sift the fabrications from the original and the weak from the sound. Khaṭīb Baghdādī quoted ʻAlī b. al-Madīnī:

> Had I rejected the narrators of *aḥādīth* from the people of Baṣrah considering their view on the issue of *qadar* (predestination) and had I rejected the narrators from Kūfah doubting their adherence to *shīʻism,* the *ḥadīth* works would become empty.[55]

In this connection, another scholar, Muḥammad b. Naʻīm al-Ḍabbī says that when he asked Abū ʻAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Yaʻqūb about Faḍl b. Muḥammad al-Shaʻrānī, he replied:

> He is a *ṣadūq*.[56] However, he was one of the extremist Shīʻīs.

55. Ibid., 129.
56. The term *ṣadūq* is applied to those of the narrators who are

> It was asked: "You have accepted his narrative and have reported it in your work "*al-Ṣaḥīḥ*?" He replied: This is because the book of my teacher is replete with narratives transmitted by *shī'ī* narrators.[57]

The teacher here refers to Imām Muslim and the book of the teacher is *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim.

Evil consequences of accepting *aḥādīth* from the *shī'ī* narrators cannot be discussed in detail here. However, one thing must be kept in mind: those who cannot differentiate between the genuine and the fabricated swallow poison taking it to be elixir.

9.6 Conclusion

We can guard the religion only by sound knowledge. The scholars must develop understanding of the basic sources of religious knowledge in Islam, the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. The struggle to safeguard the religion demands firm, sound and uncompromising faith as well as commitment to obtain the true knowledge.

Aḥādīth help us know the genuine Sunnah of the Prophet (sws). The *ḥadīth* literature is the record of the Sunnah. Muslim scholars have indeed put unparalleled efforts to preserve the prophetic knowledge. At the same time, it is also true that endeavours of evil factions to fabricate *aḥādīth* have left their marks on the literature. Fabrication was done for pious as well as evil motives. The *muḥaddithūn* needed to show more care in closing the door for fabricators. Their weak response to fabricators' efforts made it possible for the latter to disseminate fabrications which found way into all the major *ḥadīth* works.

Presently it is incumbent upon every such scholar as specializes in the *ḥadīth* studies to make sure that the *ḥadīth* he is relying on in an issue is actually the word of the Prophet (sws) and is in accord with the Qur'ānic teachings on the issue. It should not be affected by the onslaughts of the innovators.

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considered to be somewhat reliable but not *thiqah* (reliable).

57. Ibid., 131.

Chapter 10

Primary Sources of *Ḥadīth* Study

The Muslim *ummah* has accomplished an unparalleled work. The great *muḥaddithūn* have, even in the early period of Islamic history, to all possible human extent, strove to safeguard the prophetic knowledge, sifted and separated it from the weeds of fabrication. They stored it in reliable compilations. This proves that the *ḥadīth* compilation was done under the firm principles set by the experts in the science. It was accomplished between the middle of the second century Hijrah to the middle of the third. This period can be called the prime youth of *ḥadīth* compilation. It was during this period that the treasure of prophetic *ḥadīth* was recorded in the books. The appearance of the books and written record marks the end of the oral tradition. The books compiled during this period earned acceptance and fame both among common people as well as scholars.

It is a known fact that during the period of oral transmission and narration of the prophetic *ḥadīth*, the practice of fabricating lies and ascribing them to the Prophet (sws) was done on a great scale. I have presented a thorough analysis of the practice of *ḥadīth* fabrication in the preceding chapter. We learned that *aḥādīth* were fabricated for pious as well as impious purposes. Though this evil design was carried out in a systematic way on a large scale, yet, the Muslim scholars, who engaged themselves in the science of *jarḥ wa ta'dīl,* followed the fabricators closely and exposed them. The fabricators were out to carve lies and ascribe them to the Prophet (sws). This they did. However, the tireless efforts of the expert *muḥaddithūn* made sure that such inventions were not included in the prophetic traditions. The satanic fabrications could not become part of the religion of God which generally remained pure of these assaults. The fabrications that were successfully added to the prophetic knowledge are not hidden so as not to be detected by a man of sound knowledge and religious vision. The only condition, however, is that the student of the prophetic traditions and the religion appreciates

his duty to discern falsehood included in the prophetic knowledge. Such vigilance is, in fact, required in every science however mundane it may be in its nature. It is not peculiar to the proper analysis of the prophetic *aḥādīth*.

We know that the *ḥadīth* literature is very vast and spans over thousands of pages making up dozens of works. It is an ocean of knowledge. A very large number of *aḥādīth* was compiled by different people in those times. These narratives were obtained from various sources. Thus, the work accomplished by different scholars in different times cannot be expected to be of the same degree of soundness. All cannot be expected to be obtained from the same source or from different sources of the same authority. This is why the *muḥaddithūn* have categorized the *ḥadīth* works considering the soundness and weakness of the narratives of the *aḥādīth* mentioned in them. They put *Muwaṭṭā* of Imām Mālik, *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Bukhārī and *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Muslim in the first category. These three sources include all types of reliable narratives including *saḥīḥ* (sound), *mutawātir* (concurrent) and *ḥasan* (sound but next to *saḥīḥ)*. The second category consists of the *sunan-i arba'ah* (the four *sunan*) i.e. *Sunan* of Tirmidhī, *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan* of Nisā'ī and *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah. All the *aḥādīth* contained in this group of works are not equally sound. They do not match the authenticity characteristic of the narratives contained in the works of the first category named above. Though we cannot say that the compilers of these books have shown laxity in gauging *aḥādīth* on the principles set by them, yet, however, the narrators of the *aḥādīth* in these books are not meticulous and good memorisers. The scholars of the later generations declared these works as widely accepted by the *ummah* in spite of their weakness. These works too are now considered a source of religious knowledge. There are sound *aḥādīth* in other works which pass the criteria for acceptable *aḥādīth*. These sound narratives contained in various other works of lesser reliability are pearls scattered and mixed in weeds. It is only experts in the science who can make use of them. The *muḥaddithūn* consider the above mentioned books of the first and second category as generally sound and reliable. These books are considered the basic sources. I believe that every work among these has a distinctive features and characteristics.

10.1 Natural Approach of *Ḥadīth* Study

In order to best utilize *aḥādīth,* one has to critically analyse and ponder over the entire corpus of the *ḥadīth* literature. The first thing one must learn in this regard is to appreciate the natural way of studying *aḥādīth*. It is not understandable and natural to start studying *aḥādīth* from anywhere. This removes the use of the whole exercise. One does not gain anything. Take, for example, the study of the Qur'ān. We know that there are various commentaries on the Book. However, there are only three exegetical works that can be termed as the primary and fundamental sources of the Qur'ānic commentary. These include *Al-Ṭabarī*, *al-Kashshāf* and *Tafsīr al-Kabīr*. All other *tafsīr* works have been compiled in the light of these major works. Similarly, in my view, the sound method of understanding *aḥādīth* is that, at first, one selects the primary sources in the discipline. Then, one proceeds on to thoroughly ponder over the narratives contained in these books. He should then be able to grasp everything. If one finds in them something doubtful however tiny, he should mark it. Then one should collate all the material that deals with the issue under study from the entire literature. He would, thus, be able to set before him all the relevant material for study. This way a scholar continues pondering over doubtful narrative until he is able to give a clear and decisive verdict regarding its origin and teachings. This process will not only prove helpful in deciding on the *ḥadīth* in question but also provide the researcher with an opportunity of acquainting himself with the entire corpus of the *ḥadīth* literature.

10.2 The Primary Sources

By the primary sources, I mean works in a discipline that are original contributions. Such works are acknowledged as the foundation and primary source in that particular discipline. It is utterly impossible for a researcher in a discipline to neglect or ignore the view of the primary sources. If he is able to select the proper sources and has thoroughly studied them it means that he has set on the right direction. However, only experts in the discipline may select the primary sources. It is not for a commoner or an initiate to decide which works are primary sources in a given discipline.

What are then the primary sources of the prophetic traditions? Different answers can be given to this question for there is a room to differ over it. After the lifelong study of the *ḥadīth* literature, I have formed the view that the following three works form the primary source in this discipline: *Muwaṭṭā* of Imām Mālik, *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Bukhārī and *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Muslim.

When the student of the *ḥadīth* literature thoroughly studies and critically analyses these three works, he can be said to have studied the primary sources of the *ḥadīth* literature. An in-depth study of these works does not leave the student of the Ḥadīth in need to study rest of the kind.

If we study these three works in such a way that everything is on our fingertips, then we may learn the major difficulties in this discipline. We learn the basic questions in the *ḥadīth* criticism and identify its major problems. We learn which narratives are original prophetic teachings and which ones give rise to doubts and require further research. We can then mark the problematic narratives and discuss them in detail before forming an opinion. Some issues, no doubt, call for a long study and thorough analysis. Such issues will need in-depth analysis. This will take us to study rest of the *ḥadīth* literature.

Suppose, for example, we find a narrative, which creates some doubts in our mind. We will need to look for all the narratives discussing this issue in other works. We will study the chain of narrators of all the relevant narratives. Then we will study the wordings of the different versions. We will also need to observe the difference in the wording of the first narrative and the others. We will try to ascertain to what extant the collated material can prove helpful in solving the relevant questions. As a result, we are forced to study the entire *ḥadīth* literature in order to assess and understand a single narrative. Consequently, we are able to grasp all the works of the *ḥadīth* literature. We also come to learn in what respect a particular *ḥadīth* work is helpful. After going through this process in a couple of issues, we will have enabled ourselves to fully comprehend importance of different *ḥadīth* works.

Why have I given the above mentioned *ḥadīth* works primary importance? I have selected them from the entire literature because the *ummah* has always preferred them over the rest of the compilations. This preference is indeed an acknowledgement

by the *ummah* of the greatness and extraordinary importance of these works. This is not an accidental choice. There are certain solid and understandable reasons for which the *ummah* has preferred these three works over the rest. The reasons which account for this preference for these books are given below. This will also help us understand the salient and distinguishing features of these works.

10.3 Distinguishing Qualities of *Muwaṭṭā*

Muwaṭṭā is the first effort to compile *aḥādīth*. This work earned fame and eternal acknowledgment. The book is attributed to a leading Madinan jurist and *muḥaddith*, Imām Abū ‘Abd Allāh Mālik b. Anas b. ‘□mir (93-179 AH). He compiled this book after carefully selecting one thousand traditions from almost one hundred thousand narratives before him. He took forty years in accomplishing this work. After its completion, he presented it to seventy scholars of repute from Madīnah. Imām Shāfi‘ī is reported to have said that no book is sounder than *Muwaṭṭā* of Imām Mālik except the Qur’ān.[58]

Over one thousand disciples of the said *imām* have transmitted this work from him. This has resulted in differences in the text in various instances. There are thirty known versions of the work of which the most famous is the one transmitted by Yaḥyā b. Yaḥyā Laythī Undulusī.

I believe that the principles of accepting *aḥādīth* which the *imām* has followed in this book are very reliable. This makes his work very distinct. The care he has shown in this process of *ḥadīth* selection becomes obvious to every reader.

The first distinguishing characteristic of the compilation is its comprehensiveness and briefness. In spite of the fact that this is a short work in relation to other works of the kind, it has proved comprehensive and covers all the necessary issues.

The second distinguishing characteristic of *Muwaṭṭā* is that its author has shown great care in taking only verbatim narratives. He adopted a very well balanced approach regarding accepting the narratives which preserve only meaning. He does not, at least, accept a narrative containing the prophetic statement if it is not reported verbatim. He insists that the words of the Prophet

58. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd limā fī al-muwaṭṭā min al-ma‘ānī wa al-asānīd*, vol. 1 (Morocco: Dār al-Nashr, 1387 AH), 76.

(sws) must be reported verbatim. This means that he does not accept a *marfū' ḥadīth* (ascribed to the Prophet (sws) himself) if it is not verbatim transmission of the words of the Prophet (sws). He was so conscious regarding the *marfū' ḥadīth* reports that he even gave consideration to letters, prepositions and particles like *wāw*, *tā*, *bā* etc. in them.

The third distinguishing feature of *Muwaṭṭā* is that its author is more careful in accepting narratives from the innovators than the generality of *muḥaddithūn*. He does not consider it allowable to accept a narrative transmitted by innovators even if they do not confess and invite others to their innovations. He generally declares such to be unworthy and unreliable narrators.

The fourth distinguishing feature of this book is its literariness. It contains highly literary form of the classical Arabic. This helps readers develop the ability to understand the language of the prophetic traditions.

Here it would not be out of place to mention that there still are weak and unreliable narratives in the book. These narratives have not been included by the author himself. They, on the contrary, have been added to the original. Thus, they are mere exceptions to the sound original content of the book. We know that the book has been transmitted from the *imām* by many people and has reached us through many chains of narrators. This made it possible for those on the lookout to incorporate spurious things in the genuine content. Still, however, a scholar with a sound knowledge can easily discern fabrications and weak narratives and distinguish them from sound ones.

It is also important to note that some of the 'Abbāsī caliphs were involved in persuading Imām Mālik to compile this extraordinary work. Their blessed intentions thus have a part in this great accomplishment. Their efforts are really commendable. They intended to make Imām Mālik write a book which could help in curbing the ever-increasing current of juristic differences in the *ummah*.

We learn that during the second century Ḥijrah, the juristic differences among the *ummah* increased. Apprehending the evil consequences of such tendencies, the caliph Abū Ja'far Manṣūr, during his visit to Ḥijāz in the year 148 AH, brought it to the notice of Imām Mālik that juristic differences were increasing among the *ummah*. He apprehended an immanent disorder

arising out of this situation. He requested Imām Mālik that he should be permitted to issue a caliphal decree binding all the people to follow his opinions on juristical matters. Imām Mālik, however, did not approve it. He said that every group follows different *imāms*. Their views are based on the understanding and views of the pious elders. He requested the caliph to leave those people on what they were inclined to follow in these matters. At this response from the Imām, Abū Ja'far Manṣūr kept silence. He, however, did not let go of the thought that the *imām* should compile a book which could work as a basis for the legal code of the country and work as a unifying force for all believers. In 163 AH, he went to offer pilgrimage again. He met Imām Mālik and presented his wish before him. This time, he was persuasive. He presented his view forcefully and in detail. He said: "O Abū 'Abd Allāh, take up the reign of the discipline of *fiqh* in your hands. Compile your understanding of every issue in different chapters for a systematic book free from the extremism of 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar (rta), concessions and accommodations of 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās (rta) and unique views of 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd (rta). Your work should exemplify the following principle statement of the Prophet (sws): "The best issues are those which are balanced." It should be a compendium of the agreed upon views of the Companions (rta) and the elder *imāms* on the religious and legal issues. Once you have compiled such a work then we would be able to unite the Muslims in following the single *fiqh* worked by you. We would then promulgate it in the entire Muslim state. We would order that no body acts contrary to it."[59]

It is said that Imām Mālik fulfilled this wish of the caliph and compiled the *Muwaṭṭā*. He, however, did not agree to the caliphal view that the book should be promulgated as the national law. Historical reports attest that another 'Abbāsī caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd too expressed similar wishes before Imām Mālik who remained unmoved.

Apparently, Imām Mālik thwarted the caliphal wish. He, however, compiled *Muwaṭṭā*, a great favour to the Muslims. He

59. Ibrāhīm b. 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. Farḥūn al-Ya'murī al-Mālikī, *al-Dībāj al-Madhhab fī Ma'rifah A'yān 'Ulamā' al-Madhhab*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Nashr, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), 25.

kept before his eyes the target of removing the juristic differences between the scholars of the *ummah*. He targeted a book that comprehensively treats all pertinent issues.

Shāh Walī Allāh (1703-1763) attached great importance to *Muwaṭṭā* during his efforts to serve the prophetic traditions. It is, perhaps, considering the importance of the work in the *ḥadīth* literature that he penned two commentaries on it written in two major languages of the Muslims in that time, Urdu and Persian. Those exposed to the views and thoughts of Shāh Walī Allāh know that he has exerted his every effort in saving the Muslims from harms of juristic disputes. He intended to bring the discipline of Islamic *fiqh* on a path that helps remove disputes. He pursued the great cause started by Imām Mālik. Taking light from the works of Shāh Walī Allāh and inspired by his blessed wishes I have written the book "*Islāmī Riyāsat Mēn Fiqhī Ikhtilāfāt kā Ḥal*" (Resolving Juristic Differences in the Muslim State).

10.4 The Status of the *two Ṣaḥīḥ*s

A few thousand *aḥādīth* contained in *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī and *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim have been selected from hundreds of thousands of traditions. One can easily understand the level of scholarship the authors of these works showed and the extent of hardships they might have suffered in the process of sifting the sound narratives from a huge mix of fabrications and unsound *aḥādīth*. As a result of the efforts of these great scholars, we find genuine narratives compiled in proper books. All the narratives contained in these books are reported through *isnāds* consisting of reliable narrators in all the layers. Thus, the chain of guarantors of each *ḥadīth* contained in these two books leads us directly to the Prophet (sws). Generally we do not doubt that *isnāds* in these narratives would be suffering from discontinuity or any of the narrators in the chains would be committing *irsāl*[60] or *tadlīs*.[61]

60. When a successor (*tābi'ī*) ascribes a narrative to the Prophet (sws) leaving out the name of the *ṣaḥābī* from whom it is narrated he is said to have committed *irsāl*. Such a narrative is called *mursal*. (al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrīb al-Rāwī,* Ist ed., (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2001), 168.)

61. The practice of deliberately calling the source with a little or rarely known name, surname or appellation to make the *ḥadīth* more

We must appreciate and acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of these *imāms*. Their services, in this discipline, are so great that we shall ever remain indebted to them. Considering the soundness of these two books, the *ummah* has acknowledged them as the most important and primary sources of the prophetic *ḥadīth* from the classical times. Their status is not shared by any other work with the only exception of *Muwaṭṭā* of Imām Mālik. All the other works produced later are a mere imitation of the excellent scholarship exhibited by these two scholars.

It is important to note that Imām Bukhārī and Imām Muslim have not recorded in their books all that can be termed as *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth* by the experts in the science. There is a limited number of narratives which both of these *imāms* acknowledged as *ṣaḥīḥ* yet they did not include them in their compilations. Such narratives are recorded either in the remaining four works usually called *sunan-i arba'ah* or some other compilations.

A group of scholars of the *ummah* acknowledges superiority of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī over *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim while another group attaches more importance to the latter work. The majority considers *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī superior to *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim in status and soundness. However, most of the scholars from the western part of the Islamic world prefer *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Muslim. I believe that both of these works enjoy equal status. Both are equally important. Both have distinctive qualities and features and it is not necessary to prefer one over the other. The truth of the matter is that each is matchless in its own right. Now I wish to explain this point in the following pages.

10.5 Distinctive Qualities of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī

Ṣaḥīḥ of Bukhārī is the work by a great scholar of the *ḥadīth* criticism, Imām Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (194-256 AH). He selected a few thousand *aḥādīth* from five hundred thousand narratives. He spent sixteen years in sifting, selecting, researching on and compiling the traditions in this excellent work. He states that he benefited from more than a thousand teachers and narrators of *aḥādīth*. Almost seventy thousand students learnt this book from Imām Bukhārī.

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attractive is termed as *tadlīs*. Another form of *tadlīs* is when a narrator ascribes a narrative to someone among his peers from whom he has not heard it. (Ibid., 197-200.)

The first distinctive quality of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī is the quality and soundness of the chain of narrators of the selected *aḥādīth.* In this respect, it outmatches all other works with the only exception of *Muwaṭṭā* of Imām Mālik. The criterion Imām Bukhārī set for the analysis and critical investigation of the *isnād* reaches the point of excellence. He has set before him two principle criteria for the sound narratives. First, the lifetime of a narrator should overlap with the lifetime of the authority from whom he narrates. Second, it should be verifiable that narrators have met with their source persons. They should also expressly state that they obtained the narrative from these authorities. Imām Muslim, on the contrary, considers the possibility of the meeting of a narrator with the authority as sufficient proof for his obtaining *aḥādīth* from him. If it can be historically established that the narrator and the authority lived in the same period of time, Imām Muslim would consider it a sufficient proof for their exchange of knowledge. He would not insist that the meeting of the narrator and the authority he quotes should be independently established. Imām Bukhārī, we have seen, insists on the meeting of the narrator and the source. To him, meeting of the both must be established independently or a reliable narrator should expressly state that he obtained *aḥādīth* from a particular authority. Imām Muslim, however, is so much confident on and strongly committed to his view in this regard that he has severely criticised the view of Imām Bukhārī in his introduction to his *Ṣaḥīḥ*. However, a careful analysis of the views of both the scholars would lead one to conclude that the view of Imām Muslim is not well grounded. His confidence in his viewpoint and his severe criticism of Imām Bukhārī's view does not affect the reality of the matter. The view held by Imām Bukhārī is sounder, established and well argued.

The second distinctive quality of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī is that in spite of the fact that the author has benefited from the knowledge of more than a thousand scholars and narrators of the prophetic *ḥadīth*, he accepted the narratives from only those who, according to his knowledge, not only believed in Islam but practiced its teachings. With a theological view, this aspect adds to the prominence of the work. A careful reading of the book shows that Imām Bukhārī has considered this aspect in the arrangement and ordering of the topics. He specifically targeted

rooting out the evil of secession introduced by the Murjites and their brotherly groups.

In spite of his efforts, however, we see that the beliefs held by the Murjites have been practically adopted by the majority of the Muslim world. Importance of practicing the religious teachings has vanished from the Muslim mind. It is considered sufficient for success in the Afterlife that one has faith in the fundamental beliefs of Islam and ceremonially follows some basic commands. Whereas the truth of the matter is that, in Islam, belief is of no use unless it is reflected in one's actions. If beliefs are not corroborated by actions of the believer, they would not avail him anything. Belief without practice is like a dead stem of a tree from which no shoots and branches of good and pious deeds spring. It is only through practical adherence that beliefs of a believer is set firm, nourished and strengthened. It is only practical adherence to the beliefs that is accepted by God. It grants the person excellence and high status in the sight of God. In his *Ṣaḥīḥ,* Imām Bukhārī has fully clarified this fact in the light of the prophetic *aḥādīth*.

The third distinguishing quality of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī is its particular arrangement and ordering of chapters. This expresses the profound knowledge of the author and his understanding of the religion. This has made the book more useful guide in training and nourishing the proper thought and understanding of the religious disciplines. Its excellence, thus, rests in the fact that it moves the heart, stirs the mind and forces the reader into pondering over the fundamental religious issues. Consequently, the book develops proper understanding of the religion in the reader.

10.6 Distinctive Qualities of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim

The author of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim is a great scholar of the third century, Imām Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim b. Ḥajjāj b. Muslim (206-261 AH). He investigated three hundred thousand narratives of which he selected only a few thousands for his *Ṣaḥīḥ*. He was rightfully proud of this great achievement for he showed great care and exerted great efforts in selection and compilation of the material. He would boastfully say that if the *muḥaddithūn* continued writing *aḥādīth* for two hundred years, they would still remain indebted to his work. He claimed that he had not selected

or rejected any *ḥadīth* without thorough investigation.

The first distinctive quality of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim is that the author recorded only such narratives as were reported by two reliable successors from two Companions (rta) which subsequently travelled through two independent unbroken *isnāds* consisting of sound narrators. Imām Bukhārī, as we have seen, has not followed such strict criterion.

The second distinguishing feature of the book is its scientific arrangement of themes and chapters. The author, for example, selects a proper place for the narrative and, next to it, puts all its versions. It is useful in that it collates all the relevant narratives together. A researcher can study and take help from all related *aḥādīth* put at a single place. Imām Bukhārī has, as we saw earlier, not followed this method. He scatters different versions of a narrative and the related material in different chapters. He does not leave the reader with an opportunity to consult them together. This arrangement of the narratives helps greatly in studying the *aḥādīth* which invite doubts and confusions and require great deliberation and in depth study. Consequently, in the exercise of understanding *aḥādīth, Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Muslim offers the best material to the students.

The third distinctive quality of *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim is that the author informs us whose wordings among the narrators he has used. For example he says: *ḥaddathanā fulān wa fulān wallafẓ lifulān* (A and B has narrated this *ḥadīth* to us and the wording used here is by A). Similarly he mentions whether, in a particular *ḥadīth,* the narrators have differed over the wordings even over a single letter of zero semantic significance. He also informs the readers if narrators have differed over a specific quality, surname, relation or any other fact about a narrator in the chain. This proves the trustworthiness, integrity and memory of the author. This helps the student of the prophetic *aḥādīth* to learn who among the narrators was more careful in guarding the language of the earliest authorities.

It needs to be appreciated that Imām Muslim has been accused of showing leniency in accepting *aḥādīth* from the innovators. The same allegation, though in a lesser degree, has been put on Imām Bukhārī. This information can prove helpful in explaining away the problems of some difficult narratives.

10.7 Conclusion

These three books, the primary sources in the *ḥadīth* literature, contain sufficient material of the prophetic knowledge that can be used to base and construct the entire system of the religion. I do not hold that the other *ḥadīth* compilations are dispensable. Yet, however, in our effort to construct a proper structure of the religious teachings of Islam and explain them, these three works, in addition to the Qur'ān- the word of God - can suffice as the source material. No other work on the prophetic *ḥadīth* can equal these works.

A full command over these three works makes one comfortably differentiate between sound and unsound narratives contained in other works. A thorough knowledge of these renders it sufficient for one to merely glance through remaining works. It is no more necessary for the researches to study the rest in equal depth.

Those seeking to ponder over *aḥādīth* have to remain on guard. The condition of alertness and vigilance in studying *aḥādīth* is as important for the student of the prophetic knowledge as in any other discipline. Our great scholars and *muḥaddithūn* have, using their abilities, with utmost perfection and quality, accomplished the task of *ḥadīth* investigation. They have compiled the *ḥadīth* works and established the discipline of *ḥadīth* criticism. The scholars in the present day can improve this discipline in the light of the principles set by the *muḥaddithūn.* They can add to them some other natural principles. The only obligation on the scholars, however, is that they should not think that the process of *ḥadīth* criticism and analysis has been perfected and accomplished fully by these great pioneers and that we have only to study the content of *aḥādīth*. The scholars should, on the contrary, target improving on the accomplishment of these great scholars of the past.