

INTRODUCTION
TO
THE STUDY OF HADITH

By
MAULANA MUHAMMAD ALI

AHMADIYYA ANJUMAN ISHA'AT-I-ISLAM – LAHORE
PAKISTAN

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ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF HADITH LITERATURE

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ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF HADITH LITERATURE

Sunnah and Hadīth

Sunnah or Hadīth is admittedly the second source — and undoubtedly a secondary one — from which the teachings of Islam are drawn. *Sunnah* literally means *a way or rule or manner of acting or mode of life*, and *Hadīth* literally means *a saying conveyed to man either through hearing or through revelation*.¹ In its original sense, therefore, Sunnah indicates the practice, and Hadīth the sayings, of the Holy Prophet; but practically both cover the same ground and are applicable to his actions, practices, and sayings, Hadīth being the narration and record of the Sunnah, but containing in addition some prophetic and historical elements. Sunnah is divided into three kinds. It may be a *qaul*, *i.e.*, an utterance or a saying of the Holy Prophet which has a bearing on a religious question; a *fi'l*, *i.e.*, his action or practice; or a *taqrīr*, *i.e.*, his silent approval of the action or prac-

1. Hence the Holy Qur'ān is also spoken of as Hadīth (18:6; 39:23.) The word *sunnah* is used in the Holy Qur'ān in a general sense meaning *a way or rule*. Thus *sunnat-ul-awwālīn* (8:38; 15:13; 18:55; 35:43) means *the way or example of the former people* and is frequently used in the Holy Qur'ān as signifying God's way of dealing with people, which is also spoken of as *sunnat ullāh* or God's way. Once, however, the plural *sunan* is used as indicating the ways in which men ought to walk: "God desires to explain to you, and to guide you into the ways (Ar. *Sunan*) of those before you" (4:26).

tice of another. Any one who studies the Qur'ān will see that the Holy Book generally deals with the broad principles or essentials of religion, going into details in very rare cases. The details were generally supplied by the Holy Prophet, by either showing in his practice how an injunction was to be carried out or by giving an explanation in words. The Sunnah or Hadīth of the Holy Prophet was not a thing of which the need may have been felt after his death, as is generally supposed ; it was as much needed in his life-time. The two most important religious institutions of Islam, for instance, are *ṣalāt* (prayer) and *zakāt* (compulsory charity). Yet when the injunctions relating to them were given, and they are repeatedly met with both in Mecca and Medina revelations, no details were given. *Aqīmu al-ṣalāta* (or keep up prayers) is the Qur'ānic injunction, and it was the Prophet who by his action gave the details of the service. *Ātūz al-zakāh* (or pay the zakāt) is again an injunction frequently repeated in the Holy Qur'ān, yet it was the Holy Prophet who gave the rules and regulations for its payment and collection. These are only two examples. As Islam covers the whole sphere of human activities, hundreds of points had to be explained by the Holy Prophet by his example, action and word. On the moral side, he was the exemplar whom every Muslim was required to follow (33 : 21). The man who embraced Islam, therefore, stood in need of both the Holy Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

Transmission of Hadīth in Prophet's life-time

The transmission of the practices and sayings of the Holy Prophet from one person to another thus

became necessary during the Prophet's life-time. In fact, the Holy Prophet himself used to give instructions with regard to the transmission of what he taught. Thus when a deputation of the Rabi'a came to wait upon him in the early days of Medina, the Prophet concluded his instructions to them with the words : "Remember this and report it to those whom you have left behind" (Mish. I. i.). Similar were his instructions in another case : "Go back to your people and teach them these things" (Bkh. 3 : 25). There is another report according to which on the occasion of a pilgrimage, the Holy Prophet after enjoining on the Muslims the duty of holding sacred each other's life, property and honour, added : "He who is present here should carry this message to him who is absent" (Bkh. 3 : 37). Again, there is ample historical evidence that whenever a people embraced Islam, the Holy Prophet used to send to them one or more of his missionaries who not only taught them the Holy Qur'ān but also explained to them how the injunctions of the Holy Book were carried out in practice. It is also on record that people came to the Holy Prophet and demanded teachers who could teach them the Qur'ān and the Sunnah: "Send us men to teach us the Qur'ān and the Sunnah" (Mus. Ch. Imara). And the companions of the Holy Prophet were fully aware that his actions and practices were to be followed in case an express direction was not met with in the Holy Qur'ān. Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd relate that when Mu'ādh ibn Jabal was appointed governor of Yemen by the Holy Prophet, and was asked as to how he would judge cases, his reply was "by the Book of God". Asked again if he did not find

a direction in the Book of God, he replied, "by the Sunnah of the Apostle of God". The Sunnah was therefore recognised as affording guidance in religious matters in the life-time of the Holy Prophet.

Writing of Hadīth in Prophet's life-time

The popular idea in the West that the need for Sunnah was felt, and that Hadīth was given the force of law, after the death of the Holy Prophet¹ is falsified by the above facts. Nor was the preservation of what the Prophet did or said an after-thought on the part of the Muslims. The companions of the Holy Prophet while translating into practice most of his sayings also tried to preserve them in memory as on paper. The need of the Sunnah, its force as law and its preser-

1. Thus Muir writes in his introduction to *The Life of Mahomet*: "The Arabs, a simple and unsophisticated race, found in the Qur'ān ample provisions for their affairs, social and political. But this aspect of Islam soon underwent a mighty change. Scarcely was the Prophet buried when his followers issued forth from their barren Peninsula resolved to impose the faith of Islam upon all the nations of the earth...Crowded cities, like Cufa, Cairo and Damascus, required elaborate law for the guidance of their courts of justice: widening political relations demanded a system of international equity...All called loudly for the enlargement of the scanty and naked dogmas of Revelation...The difficulty was resolved by adopting the custom (Sunnah) of Mahomet; that is his sayings and his practice as supplementary of the Qur'ān. Tradition was thus invested with the force of law, and with some thing of the authority of inspiration." (p. xxix.) And even a recent writer, Guillaume, writes in *The Traditions of Islam*: "While the Prophet was alive he was the sole guide in all matters whether spiritual or secular. Hadīth, or tradition in the technical sense, may be said to have begun at his death" (p. 13).

vation, are all traceable to the life-time of the Holy Prophet. A special importance was attached from the first to his sayings and deeds which were looked upon as a source of guidance by his followers. They were conscious of the fact that these things must be preserved for the future generations. Hence they not only preserved them in memory but even resorted to pen and ink for their preservation. Abū Hurairah tells us that when one of the Anṣār complained to the Holy Prophet of his inability to preserve in his memory what he heard from him, the Prophet's reply was that he should seek the help of his right hand, *i.e.*, should write them down. (Tr. 39, Ch. *Al-Rukḥṣa fī Kitābat-i-ilm*). This Ḥadīth exists in many forms. Another well-known report is from 'Abdullāh ibn 'Amr : "I used to write everything that I heard from the Holy Prophet, intending to commit it to memory. (On some people taking objection to this) I spoke about it to the Prophet who said, "Write down, for I only speak the truth." (AD. 24, ch. *Kitābat-ul-ilm*). This Ḥadīth is very well-known and exists in thirty different forms with small differences. Still again, there is another report from Abū Hurairah : "None of the companions preserved more Ḥadīth than myself, but 'Abdullāh ibn 'Amr is an exception, he used to write and I did not write" (Bkh. 3 : 39). Anas ibn Mālik states that Abū Bakr wrote down for him the laws regarding alms. (Bkh. 3 : 39). 'Alī had also a saying of the Prophet with him in writing. (Bkh. 3 : 39). In the year of the conquest of Mecca, the Holy Prophet delivered a sermon on the occasion of a man being killed by way of retaliation for some old grievance. When the sermon was finished, a man from among

the people of Yemen came forward and requested the Holy Prophet to have the same written down for him, and the Prophet gave orders to that effect. (Bkh. 3:39). These reports show that while generally Ḥadīth was preserved in memory, it was occasionally, when there was a need for it, reduced to writing. The last-mentioned incident affords the clearest testimony that whatever the companions heard from the lips of the Holy Prophet, they tried to preserve in memory, for how else could an order be given for the writing of a sermon which had been delivered orally.

Why Ḥadīth was not generally written

It is however a fact that the sayings of the Holy Prophet were not generally written, and memory was the chief means of their preservation. The Holy Prophet is reported to have sometimes not liked the writing down of Ḥadīth. Thus Abū Hurairah is reported to have said: "The Prophet of God came to us while we were writing Ḥadīth and said, What is this that you are writing? We said, Ḥadīth which we hear from thee. He said, What a book other than the Book of God?" Now the disapproval in this case clearly states that it was due to the fear of Ḥadīth being mixed up with the Holy Qur'ān. There was nothing essentially wrong in writing down Ḥadīth, nor did the Holy Prophet ever give an interdict against its writing. On the other hand, as late as the conquest of Mecca, we find that the Prophet himself gave orders for the writing down of a certain Ḥadīth at the request of a hearer. He also wrote letters, and treaties were also put down in writing. This shows that he never meant that the writing of anything besides the Qur'ān was

illegal. What he feared, as the report clearly shows, was that if his sayings were written down generally like the Qur'ān, the two may be mixed up, and the purity of the text of the Holy Qur'ān may thus be affected.

Memory could be trusted for preservation of knowledge

Nor was memory an unreliable means for the preservation of Ḥadīth. Even the Holy Qur'ān was safely preserved in the memory of the companions of the Holy Prophet in addition to being guarded in writing. In fact, if the Holy Qur'ān had been simply preserved in writing, it could not have been handed down intact to the future generations. The aid of memory was invoked to make the purity of the text of the Qur'ān doubly sure. And the Arab had a wonderfully retentive memory. He had to store up the knowledge of numerous things in his memory. The beautiful poetry of the pre-Islamic days had been kept intact in memory. In fact, before Islam writing was only rarely resorted to, and memory was chiefly relied on in all important matters. Hundreds and even thousands of verses could be recited from memory by one man. And the reciters would also remember the names of the persons through whom those verses were transmitted to them. Asma'ī, a later transmitter, says that he learned twelve thousand verses by heart before he reached the age of majority. About Abū Damdam, Asma'ī says that he recited verses from a hundred poets in a single sitting. Shi'bī says that he knew so many verses by heart that he could continue repeating them for a month. And these verses were the basis of

Arabic lexicology and even of Arabic grammar. Among the companions of the Holy Prophet there were many who knew thousands of the verses of pre-Islamic poetry by heart. One of them was 'Āishah, the Prophet's wife. The famous Bukhārī trusted memory alone for the retention of as many as six hundred thousand ḥadīth, and many students corrected their manuscripts by comparing them with what he retained only in memory.

Collection of Ḥadīth : First stage

The first steps for the preservation of Ḥadīth were thus taken in the life-time of the Holy Prophet.¹ All his followers were not, however, equally interested in the matter, nor had all equal chances. Every one had to work for his living, while the defence of the Muslim community against overwhelming odds had placed an additional burden on most of them. There was, however, a party of students called the *Ashāb-ul-Suffa* who lived in the mosque itself, and who were specially prepared for the teaching of religion to tribes outside Medina. Some of them would go to the market and do a little labour to earn livelihood ; others would not care

1. Thus Guillaume writes in *The Traditions of Islam* : The Ḥadīth last quoted do not invalidate the statements that traditions were written down from the mouth of the Prophet ; the extraordinary importance attached to every utterance of his would naturally lead his followers who were able to write to record his words in order to repeat them to those who clamoured to know what he said ; and there is nothing at all in any demonstrably early writing to suggest that such a practice would be distasteful to Muhammad" (p.17).

even for that. The most famous of these was Abū Hurairah who would stick to the Prophet's company at all costs, and store up in his memory the knowledge of what the Holy Prophet said or did. His efforts were from the first directed towards the preservation of Ḥadīth. He himself is reported to have said once : "You say Abū Hurairah is profuse in narrating ḥadīth from the Holy Prophet, and you say, how is it that the Muhājirīn (Refugees) and the Anṣār (Helpers) do not narrate ḥadīth from the Prophet like Abū Hurairah ; the truth is that our brethren from among the Refugees were occupied in transacting business in the market and I used to remain with the Holy Prophet having filled my belly, so I was present when they were absent and I remembered what they forgot ; and our brethren from among the Helpers were occupied with work in their lands, and I was a poor man from among the poor inmates of the Suffa, so I retained what they forgot" (Bkh. 34 : 1). Another companion, Talḥa, son of 'Ubaidullāh, is reported to have remarked about Abū Hurairah : "There is no doubt that he heard from the Holy Prophet what we did not hear. The reason was that he was a poor man who possessed nothing and was therefore a guest of the Prophet" (Mk). There is another report from Muḥammad Ibn 'Ammāra : "He sat in a company of the older companions of the Holy Prophet in which there were over ten men. Abū Hurairah began to relate a certain saying of the Holy Prophet which some of them did not know, so they questioned him over and over again until they were satisfied. Again, he related to them a saying in the same manner and he did this over and over again, and I was convinced that Abū

Hurairah had the best memory” (Bq). Another report runs thus : “People used to say in the lifetime of the Holy Prophet that Abū Hurairah narrated many sayings of the Prophet. So Abū Hurairah enquired of one of them as to which suras the Holy Prophet had recited in his night prayers the day before. The man being unable to answer the question, Abū Hurairah named the suras” (Bkh. 21 : 18). It shows not only that Abū Hurairah had a wonderful memory but also that he tried to preserve everything in his memory.

‘Ā’ishah, the Prophet’s wife, was also one of those who tried to preserve the Sunnah of the Prophet. She had a wonderful memory, and was in addition gifted with a clear understanding, and she did not accept anything which she did not understand. There is a report about her according to which “she never heard anything she did not recognise but she questioned about it again” (Bkh.3 : 35). In other words, she did not accept anything even from the lips of the Holy Prophet until she was fully satisfied. ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar and ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās are two other companions who were specially engaged in the work of preserving and transmitting the knowledge of the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth, and so was ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Amr who was in the habit of writing sayings of the Holy Prophet. And besides those who were specially engaged in this work, every companion of the Holy Prophet tried to preserve such of his words and deeds as came to his knowledge. ‘Umar who lived at about three miles from Medina had made arrangements with a neighbour of his to be in the company of the Holy Prophet on alternate days, so that the one reported to the other what happened in his abse-

nce. And most important of all, the Holy Prophet had repeatedly laid an obligation on every one of his followers to transmit his words to others. "Let him who is present deliver to him who is absent" are the concluding words of many of his important utterances. All this affords a clear proof that the work of the preservation and transmission of the Sunnah had begun in the life-time of the Holy Prophet, and this was the first stage in the collection of Hadīth.

Collection of Hadīth : Second stage

With the death of the Holy Prophet, the work of the preservation of Sunnah and of the collection of Hadīth entered as on a second stage. Every case that came for decision had now to be referred either to the Holy Qur'ān or to some judgment or saying of the Holy Prophet, and such judgments or sayings therefore obtained a wide reputation. There are a number of cases on record in which a right was claimed on the basis of a judgment or saying of the Holy Prophet, and evidence was demanded as to the trustworthiness of that saying.¹ Thus there was a double pro-

1. A companion, Qabisa by name, reports that the grandmother of a deceased person came to Abū Bakr and claimed a right in inheritance. Abū Bakr said that he did not find for her any share in the Book of God or the Sunnah of the Prophet, and that he would make enquiries about it from others. In this enquiry, Mughīra gave evidence that the Prophet gave the grandmother one-sixth of the property. Abū Bakr asked him to bring another witness in support of it, and Muḥammad ibn Maslama appeared before Abū Bakr corroborating the evidence of Mughīra. Decision was accordingly given in favour of the grandmother (Tr.27, AD. 18, ch. *Farāids*). Again, Fātimah, the Prophet's daughter, claimed that she was entitled to an inheri-

cess at work ; not only was the trustworthiness of the particular ḥadīth established beyond all doubt, but such ḥadīth also obtained a wide circulation, and from the knowledge of one man it passed to that of many. The particular judgment might not be on all fours with the circumstances of the case, and an analogy might be sought from one or more sayings. Thus the multiple needs of a community which was increasing by leaps and bounds and spreading far and wide and whose needs had increased ten-fold on account of its onward march to civilization brought a large number of ḥadīth, which had been limited to one or a few only, into the light of the day, setting the seal of confirmation on their truth at the same time, because direct evidence of this truth was available at that time.

Yet this was not the only factor that gave impetus to a dissemination of the knowledge of Ḥadīth. The influx into Islam of a large number of people who had not seen the Holy Prophet himself but who could easily witness the wonderful transformation brought about by him, and to whom therefore his memory was sacred in the highest degree, was in itself an important factor that brought about a search of what the great man had said or done. It was natural that every new convert should be anxious to know

tance from the Holy Prophet. As against this, Abū Bakr cited a saying of the Holy Prophet : "We prophets do not leave an inheritance ; whatever we leave is a charity." The truth of this ḥadīth was not questioned by any one, and Fātima's claim was rejected (Bkh. 85 : 3). Such incidents happened daily and became the occasion of sifting the truth of many sayings of the Holy Prophet

everything about the great Prophet who had given quite a new life to a dead world. Every one who had seen him would thus be a centre to whom hundreds of enquirers would resort, and as the incidents were so fresh in the memories of those who had seen him, these were intimated with fair accuracy to the new generation. It must be borne in mind that the wonderful success which Islam achieved within so short a time, and the repidity with which the reputation of the Holy Prophet advanced, were the very reasons which led to the preservation of true facts about him. Not only had he and his religion assumed an unparalleled importance in Arabia within twenty years of the day on which he began the work of a reformer, but within ten years of his death they were the most important world factors and everything relating to him was a matter of discussion among the Arabs and the non-Arabs, among friends as well as foes. If he himself remained in a corner of oblivion for a century or so, and then risen to prominence, probably much of what he said or did would have been lost to the world, and the exaggerations of a later generation would have been handed down to posterity instead of facts. But his case was quite different. From the humblest position he had risen to the highest eminence to which man can rise within less than a quarter of a century, and therefore every incident of his life had become public property before it could be forgotten. Such were the needs of the new times upon which Islam had entered after the death of the Holy Prophet.

Apart from these there was another factor of the utmost importance which gave impetus to the know-

ledge of Hadīth at this stage. To the companions of the Holy Prophet, the religion which he had brought was a priceless jewel ; it was a thing which they valued above everything else in the world. For its sake they had given up their relations, their business, their very homes ; to defend it they had laid down their very lives ; to carry this Divine blessing, this greatest gift of God, to other people was the very object of their lives. Hence a dissemination of its knowledge was their first and foremost concern. In addition to this, the Great Master had laid on those who saw him and listened to his words, the duty of carrying what they saw and heard, to those who came after him. *Li-yubaligh ul shāhid ul ghā'iba* was the phrase which on account of the frequency of its repetition rang in their ears : *Let him who is present carry this to him who is absent.* And they were faithful to the great charge which was laid on them. They went eastward and they went westward and they went northward, and in whichever direction they went, and to whichever country they went, they carried the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. Every one of them who had the knowledge of but one incident relating to the Prophet's life deemed it his duty to deliver it to another. And individual like Abū Hurairah, 'Ā'ishah, 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās, 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar, 'Abdullāh ibn 'Amr, Anas ibn Mālik and many others who had made the preservation of Sunnah the very object of their lives, had become as centres to whom people resorted from different quarters of the kingdom of Islam to get their knowledge of the Prophet and his religion. Their places of residence became in fact so many colleges for the dissemination of the know-

ledge of Hadīth. Abū Hurairrah alone had eight hundred disciples. 'Ā'ishah's house too was resorted to by hundreds of ardent pupils. The reputation of 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās was equally great, and, notwithstanding his young age, he had a foremost place among the counsellors of 'Umar on account of his knowledge of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. Thus the residences of a large number of the companions of the Holy Prophet became the centres for the dissemination of religious learning. And such was the zeal of the new generation for the possession of religious knowledge that students would travel from one place to another to complete their knowledge of the Sunnah, and some of them would travel long distances to obtain first-hand information about one hadīth only.¹ Thus arrangements existed for both, the collection of

1. Bukhārī (3 : 19) records the case of Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh who travelled from Medina to Syria for the sake of a single hadīth. It was a month's journey, as Jābir himself states. Bukhārī's famous commentary, *Fath̄ al-Bārī*, relates several incidents of the same type. Abū Ayyūb Ansārī, for instance, is related to have undertaken a long journey to hear a saying of the Holy Prophet from 'Aqaba ibn 'Amir. Sa'id ibn Musayyab is reported to have said that he used to travel for days and nights in search of a single hadīth. Another companion of the Holy Prophet is said to have undertaken a journey to Egypt for the sake of one hadīth. The zeal of the next generation was equally great. Abul 'Āliyā is reported to have said : "We heard of a hadīth of the Holy Prophet, but we were not satisfied until we went to the companion concerned in person and heard it from him direct. AD relates that Abū Darda was sitting in a mosque in Damascus when a man came to him and questioned about a hadīth, saying at the same time that he had come for no other object but the verification of a hadīth which he (Abū Darda) related.

the knowledge of Ḥadīth in different centres of learning and the spread of it far and wide, through the disciples who gained their knowledge at such centres.

Collection of Ḥadīth : Third stage

With the passing away of the generation that had seen and heard the Holy Prophet directly, the work of the collection of Ḥadīth entered upon a third stage. There were no more reports to be searched from different persons, and the whole of Ḥadīth was now the property of the different teachers who taught at different centres. There is no doubt that there was no single centre at which the whole store of the knowledge of Ḥadīth could be obtained, for the companions of the Holy Prophet had spread far and wide. But in the second stage, Ḥadīth had undoubtedly passed from individual possession into public possession, and therefore in the third stage the whole Ḥadīth could be learned by repairing to different centres instead of searching it from different individuals. At this stage, moreover, writing of the Ḥadīth became more common. The large number of the students of Ḥadīth at the different centres having abundance of material to digest, to which was also added the difficulty of remembering the names of the transmitters, sought the aid of the pen so that the work might be easier. By this time writing had become general and writing material could be obtained in abundance. Moreover, there was now no fear of the Ḥadīth being mixed up with the Qur'ān. It must, however, be borne in mind that at this stage Ḥadīth was written only as a help to memory ; the mere fact that a written ḥadīth was found in the man-

uscripts of a person was no evidence of its trustworthiness which could only be established by tracing it to a reliable transmitter. 'Umar ibn 'Abdul 'Azīz, commonly known as 'Umar II, the Umayyad Caliph, who ruled towards the close of the first century of Hijrah, was the first man who issued definite orders to the effect that written collections of Ḥadīth should be made. According to Bukhārī (3 : 34), Umar ibn 'Abdul 'Azīz wrote to Abū Bakr ibn Hazm : "See whatever saying of the Holy Prophet can be found, and write it down, for I fear the loss of knowledge and the disappearance of the learned men ; and do not accept anything but the Ḥadīth of the Holy Prophet ; and people should make knowledge public and should sit in companies so that he who does not know should come to know, for knowledge does not disappear until it is concealed from the public".¹ The importance of this incident lies in the fact that the Caliph himself took interest in the collection of

1. Guillaume thinks that the issuing of orders by 'Umar II for the collection of Ḥadīth is a later invention. The reason given by him is that no such collection has come down to us, nor is there any mention of it in any other work. But as I have pointed out, the reason for any such collection not being made, if really it has not disappeared, was the shortness of Umar's reign and the indifference of the other Umayyad Caliphs. Another reason given is that the name of Ibn Shahāb al-Zuhri is connected with this order according to another report. But this rather confirms the authenticity of 'Umar's orders, because, as I have pointed out, the orders were circular. Muir is right when he says: "About a hundred years after Muhammad, the Caliph 'Umar II issued circular orders for the formal collection of all extant traditions. The task thus begun continued to be vigorously prosecuted." (Int. to *Life of Mahomet*.)

Ḥadīth, the Umayyads generally having stood aloof in this great work up to this time. Abū Bakr ibn Hazm was the Caliph's governor at Medina, and there is evidence that similar letters were written to other centres. But 'Umar II died after a short reign of two and a half years, and his successor does not seem to have taken any interest in the work. Even if a collection was made in pursuance of these orders, which is very doubtful, no copy has reached us. But the work was taken up independently of government patronage in the next century and this brings us on to the fourth stage in the collection of Ḥadīth.

Collection of Ḥadīth : Fourth stage

Before the middle of the second century, Ḥadīth began to assume a more permanent shape, and written collections of Ḥadīth saw the light of the day. Hundreds of students of Ḥadīth were engaged in the work of learning it in different centres, but with every new teacher and student the work of preserving the name of the transmitter along with the ḥadīth itself was becoming stupendous. Written collections of Ḥadīth had thus become indispensable. The first known work on the subject is that of Imām 'Abdul Mālik ibn 'Abdul 'Azīz ibn Juraij. According to some, however, Sa'id ibn Abi 'Aruba or Rabī' ibn Suhaib has precedence in the matter. All these authors died about the middle of the second century. Ibn Juraij lived at Mecca. Other authors who wrote books on Ḥadīth in the second century are Imām Mālik ibn Anas and Sufyān ibn 'Uyaina in Medina, 'Abdullāh ibn Wahb in Egypt, Ma'mar and 'Abdul Razzāq in Yemen, Sufyān Thaurī and Muḥammad ibn Fudzail in Kufa, Ham-

mad ibn Salma and Rauh ibn 'Ubāda in Basra, Hushaim in Wāsīt and 'Abdullāh ibn Mubārak in Khurāsān. By far the most important of the collections of these authors is the *Muwatta* of Imām Mālik. All these books, however, were far from being exhaustive writings on Hadīth. In the first place, the object of their compilation was simply the collecting of such reports as related to the daily life of the Muslims. Reports relating to a large number of topics, such as faith or knowledge or the life of the Prophet or wars or comments on the Qur'ān were outside their scope. And secondly, every author collected only such reports as were taught at the centre at which he worked. Even the *Muwatta* which, as far as reliability is concerned, comes in the first rank with Bukhārī and Muslim, contains only the hadīth which came through the people of Hijaz. All these works on Hadīth were therefore incomplete, but they were a great advance on oral transmission towards the work of the collection of Hadīth.

Collection of Hadīth : Fifth stage

The work of the collection of Hadīth was brought to completion in the third century of Hijrah. It was then that two kinds of collections of Hadīth were made, the *Musnad* and the *Jāmi*,⁴ or the *Musannaf*. The *Musnad* was the earlier type and the *Jāmi* the later. *Musnad* is derived from *sanad* meaning *authority*, and the *isnād* of a hadīth meant its tracing back through various transmitters to a companion of the Holy Prophet on whose authority it rested. The collections of Hadīth known as *Musnads* were arranged, not according to the subject-matter of the hadīth, but under the

name of the companion on whose final authority the hadīth rested. The most important of the works of this class is the Musnad of Imām Aḥmad Hanbal which contains about thirty thousand reports. Aḥmad was born in 164 A.H. and died in 241 A.H. and is one of the four recognised Imāms. His collection, however, contains reports of all sorts. It is to the *Jāmi'* (lit. *one that gathers together*) or the *Musannaf* (lit. *compiled together*) that the honour belongs of bringing the knowledge of Ḥadīth to perfection. The *Jāmi'* not only arranges reports according to the subject matter, but is also more critical. Six books are recognised by the Ahl Sunna generally under this heading, being the collections made by Muhammad ibn Ismā'il, commonly known as Bukhārī (d. 256 A.H.), Muslim (d. 261 A.H.), Abū Dāwūd (d. 275 A.H.), Tirmidhī (d. 279 A.H.), Ibn Māja (d. 283 A.H.) and Nasā'ī (d. 303 A. H.). The third and the last two are more generally known by the name of Sunan (pl. of *sunnah*). These books classified reports under various heads, making Ḥadīth easy for reference, not only for the judge and the lawyer but also for the ordinary and research student, and thus gave an impetus to the knowledge of Ḥadīth.

Bukhārī

It may be noted here that among the six collections of Ḥadīth noted above, and known as the *Sihāh Sitta*, or the six reliable collections, Bukhārī¹ holds

1. Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il Bukhārī was born at Bukhāra in 194 A.H. He began the study of Ḥadīth when only eleven years of age, and acquired a high reputation for his knowledge of Ḥadīth by the time that he was 16. He had a wonderful memory

the first place. In several respects, while Muslim comes second, and the two together are known as the *Sahīhain* or the *two reliable* books. In the first place, Bukhārī has the unquestioned distinction of being first, all the others modelling their writings on his. Secondly, he is the most critical of all.¹ He did not accept any hadīth unless all the transmitters were reliable and until there was proof that the later transmitter had actually met the first ; the mere fact that the two were contemporaries (which is Muslim's test) did not satisfy him. Thirdly, as regards his *fiqāha*, or judgment and acumen, he surpasses all. Fourthly, he heads the more important of his chapters with a text from the Holy Qur'ān, and thus shows that Hadīth is only an explanation of the Qur'ān, and as such a secondary source of the teachings of Islam.

and the students of Hadīth used to correct their manuscripts by comparing them with what he recited from memory.

1. A modern writer, and one who has made a special study of Hadīth, expresses the following opinion about Bukhārī : "So far as one is able to judge, Bukhārī published the result of his researches into the context of what he believed to be genuine tradition with all the painstaking accuracy of a modern editor. Thus he records even trifling variants in the Hadīth, and wherever he feels that an explanatory gloss is necessary, either in *isnād* or *matn* it is clearly marked as his own." (*Traditions of Islam*, p. 29).

CRITICISM OF HADITH

Method of counting different reports

Before entering in a discussion on the criticism of Hadīth, I wish to remove two misconceptions generally prevailing in the West. The first of these relates to the method of counting Hadīth. A misconception on this point has generally led the European critics to think that when the great collectors of Hadīth, Buākh̄rī and those who followed him, set to work, there was a vast mass of spurious hadīth, and the collectors did not credit more than one or two per cent. of the prevailing mass as genuine, and that these too were taken to be genuine on the slender authority of the reliability of transmitters without any regard to the subject matter of the hadīth. The impression that the vast mass of reports taught at the different centres in the third century was fabricated is based on a misconception. It is true that it is related of Buḫ̄hārī that he took cognizance of 600,000 reports and knew some 200,000 of these by heart. It is also true that his Ṣaḥīḥ contains no more than 9,000 Hadīth. But it is not true that he found the other 591,000 reports to be false or fabricated.¹ It must be clearly understood

1. Writing of Buḫ̄hārī, Guillaume says : Tradition reports that this remarkable man took cognizance of 600,000 Hadīth, and himself memorized more than 200,000. Of these he has preserved to us 7,397 or, according to other authorities, 7,295. If one adds to these the fragmentary traditions embodied in the tarjama, the total is 9,082... When one reflects from these figures

that those who were engaged in the dissemination and study of Ḥadīth looked upon every report as a different ḥadīth when even a single transmitter of the ḥadīth was changed. Let us, for instance, take a ḥadīth for which the original authority is Abū Hurairah. Now Abū Hurairah had 800 disciples in ḥadīth, and the same ḥadīth may have been reported by ten of his disciples with or without any variation. Each of these reports would according to the collectors of ḥadīth form a separate ḥadīth. Again, suppose each of the transmitters of Abū Hurairah's ḥadīth had two reporters, and the same ḥadīth will count, say, twenty different reports, and the number would thus go on increasing as the number of reporters increased. Now at the time when Bukhārī applied himself to Ḥadīth in the first decade of the third century of Hijrah, there were schools of Ḥadīth at different centres, and hundreds of students learned ḥadīth at these schools and

furnished by a Muslim historian that hardly more than one per cent. of the Ḥadīth said to be openly circulating with the authority of the Prophet behind them were accounted genuine by the pious Bukhārī, one's confidence in the authenticity of the residue is sorely tried. Where such an enormous preponderance of material is judged false, nothing but the successful application of modern canons of evidence can restore faith in the credibility of the remainder" (*Traditions of Islam*, pp. 28, 29). And Muir says: "It is proved by the testimony of the collectors themselves, that thousands and tens of thousands of traditions were current in their times which possessed not even the shadow of authority... Bukhārī came to the conclusion after many years, sifting that out of 600,000 traditions ascertained by him to be then current, only 4,000 were authentic" (Intr. to *Life of Mahomat* p. xxxvii).

reported them to others. In a chain of ordinarily four or five transmitters, consider the number of reports that would arise from the same ḥadīth on account of the variation of transmitters, and it is easy to understand that 600,000 ḥadīth did not mean so many reports relating to various subjects but so many reports coming through different transmitters, many of them referring to the same incident or conveying the same subject-matter with or without variation of words. That this was the method of Bukhārī's counting of reports is clear from his book, the *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*, which with the change of even one transmitter in a chain of say four or five transmitters, considers the report to be distinct.¹ What is called repetition in Bukhārī is due to this circumstance.

Reports in biographies and commentaries

The other misconception is however of a much graver nature. European criticism of Ḥadīth has often mixed up ḥadīth with the reports met with in the biographies of the Holy Prophet and the commentaries of the Holy Qur'ān. No Muslim scholar has ever attached the same value to the biographical reports as ḥadīth narrated in the collections above referred to. On the other hand, it is recognized by all Muslim critics that the biographers never made much effort to sift truth from error. Imām Aḥmad ibn Hanbal sums up the Muslim point of view relating to the trustworthiness of the biographical reports, when he

1. "On the other hand, same tradition is often repeated more than once under different chapters (*abwāb*), so that if repetitions are disregarded, the number of distinct Ḥadīth is reduced to 3763" (*Traditions of Islam*, p. 28).

says that the biographies "are not based on any principle," and Hāfiz Zain-ul-Dīn 'Irāqī says that "they contain what is true and what is false." In fact, much of the adverse European criticism of Ḥadīth would have been more suitably levelled at the biographical reports. The same is the case with the reports met with in the commentaries of the Holy Qur'ān which are still more unreliable. In fact, many careless commentators mixed up Ḥadīth with Jewish and Christian stories, and made free use of the latter as if these were so many reports. As Ibn Khaldūn, speaking of the reports in the commentaries, says :

"Their books and their reports contain what is bad and what is good and what may be accepted and what should be rejected, and the reason of this is that the Arabs were an ignorant race without literature and without knowledge, and desert life and ignorance were their chief characteristics, and whenever they desired, as mortals do desire, to obtain knowledge of the cause of existence and the origin of creation and the mysteries of the universe, they turned for information to the followers of the Book, the Jews and such of the Christians as followed their faith. But these people of the Book were like themselves and their knowledge of these things went no further than the knowledge of the ignorant masses...So when these people embraced Islam, they retained their stories which had no connection with the commandments of the Islamic law, such as the stories of the origin of creation, and things relating to the future and the wars etc. These people were like Kab Aḥbār, and Wahb ibn Munabba and Abdullāh ibn Salām and others.

Commentaries of the Holy Qur'ān were soon filled with these stories of theirs. And in such like matters, the reports do not go beyond them, and as these do not deal with commandments, so their correctness is not sought after to the extent of acting upon them, and the commentators take them rather carelessly, and they have thus filled up their commentaries with them" (Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddama*, Vol. I, ch. 'Ulūm-ul-Qur'ān).

Shāh Waliullāh writes in a similar strain :

"And it is necessary to know that most of the Israelite stories that have found their way into the commentaries and histories are copied from the stories of the Jews and the Christians, and no commandment or belief can be based upon them" (*Hujjatullāh*, Ch. I'tisām bil Kitāb).

In fact, in some of the commentaries the reports cited are puerile nonsense. Even the commentary of Ibn Jarīr (the famous historian, Tabrī), with all its value as a literary production, cannot be relied upon as to its reports. Ibn Kathīr's commentary is, however, an exception as it contains chiefly the ḥadīth taken from the reliable collections of Ḥadīth.

Story-tellers

Another thing to be guarded against in a discussion on Ḥadīth is the mixing up of Ḥadīth with stories related by story-tellers. As in every other nation, there had grown up among the Muslims a class of fable-mongers whose business it was to tickle the fancies of the masses by false stories. These stories were either taken from Jews, Christians and Persians, with

whom the Muslims came in contact, or they were simply concocted. The professional story-tellers were called the *quṣṣāṣ* (pl. of *qāṣṣ*, and derived from *qaṣṣa*, meaning *he related a story*), and they seem to have grown up early, for as Rāzī says, the Caliph ‘Alī ordered that whoever related the story of David as the story-tellers (*qaṣṣāṣ*) relate it, (the reference being to the story taken from the Bible as to David having committed adultery with Uria’s wife), should be given 160 stripes, being double the punishment of the ordinary calumniator. It shows that the story-teller had begun his work at that early date. But it must be clearly borne in mind that the story-teller was never mistaken for the reporters of Hadīth, even by the ignorant masses. His vocation, low as it was, was quite distinct. Hadīth was regularly taught in schools in the different centres, as I have already shown. The teachers of Hadīth were in the first instance the well-known companions of the Holy Prophet such as Abū Hurairah, Ibn ‘Umar, ‘Ā’ishah, etc., and their place was later on taken by equally well-known masters of Hadīth from among the *tābi‘īn*, i.e. the successors of the companions. The story-teller, whose vocation was limited to some street corner where he could attract the attention of passers-by, and perhaps gather round him some lazy loiterers, could not aspire even to approach a school of Hadīth. As a writer quoted by Guillaume on p. 82 of his book, says : “They collect a great crowd of people round them. One Qāṣṣ stations himself at one end of the street and narrates traditions about the merits of ‘Alī, while his fellow stands at the other end of the street exalting the virtues of Abū Bakr. Thus they secure the pence of the

Nasibi as well as the Shi'ī and divide their gains equally afterwards." Could such beggars and braggarts be mistaken for reporters of a Ḥadīth by any sensible person? Yet even scholars like Sir William Muir and other famous Orientalists often try to mix up the two, and they speak of these stories as being mixed up with Ḥadīth. It is true that these stories have found a place in some commentaries whose authors had a love for the curious and never gave much attention to sift truth from error, but the *muḥaddithīn*, i.e. the collectors of Ḥadīth, would never accept a story from this source. They knew the story-tellers and their absurdities well enough. The collectors were so careful that they would not accept a report if one of the reporters was known to have told a lie or fabricated a single report,¹ as every European critic of Ḥadīth must admit; how could such people accept the puerile stories of the street story-teller who was known to be following this vocation for collecting a few coins. That there are some incredible stories in even the collections of Ḥadīth is true, but they are so rare that not the least discredit can be thrown on these collections on that account, and the causes which were at work to bring this about were quite different.

European criticism of Ḥadīth

Among all European critics, the prevailing idea is that the Muslim critics of Ḥadīth have never gone

1. In the "Sharh Nukḥbat-ul-fikr", Ibn Hajar, while speaking of *ṭa'n* (i.e. accusation against a transmitter) says that if a transmitter is shown to have told a lie in remitting a ḥadīth or even if he is accused of having told a lie, he is discredited (p 66).

beyond the transmission line, and that the subject-matter of ḥadīth has been left quite untouched. There are also suggestions that even the companions of the Holy Prophet were so unscrupulous that they fabricated ḥadīth, while the strictest Muslim critics of the transmitters are agreed that when a ḥadīth is traced back to a companion of the Holy Prophet, its authenticity is beyond all question. In the chapter on criticism of Ḥadīth by Muslims, Guillaume makes the suggestion that Abū Hurairah was in the habit of fabricating ḥadīth. Thus he says :

“A most significant recognition within Ḥadīth itself of the untrustworthiness of guarantors is to be found in Bukhārī. Ibn ‘Umar reports that Muḥammad ordered all dogs to be killed save sheepdogs. Abū Hurairah added the word *au Zar‘in* whereupon Ibn ‘Umar makes the remark, ‘Abū Hurairah owned cultivated land’. A better illustration of the underlying motive of some ḥadīth can hardly be found” (p.78).

The conclusion is preposterous. In the first place, Abū Hurairah is not alone in reporting that dogs may be kept for hunting as well as keeping watch over sheep or tillage. Bukhārī reports a ḥadīth (No. 1127) in the *Kitāb ul-wakāla* (ch. 41) from Sufyān ibn Abī Zubair in the following words : “I heard the Messenger of God, may peace and the blessings of God be upon him, saying, Whoever keeps a dog which does not serve him in keeping watch over cultivated land or goats, one *qīrāt* of his reward is diminished every day. The man who reported from him said, Hast thou heard this from the Messenger of

God ? He said, Yea, by the Lord of this Mosque.” Now this report clearly mentions watch dogs kept for sheep as well as those kept for tillage, while there is no mention in it of dogs kept for hunting which the Holy Qur’ān allows in plain words (5 : 4). Abū Hurairah’s report in the same chapter preceding the one cited above expressly mentions all these kinds, watch dogs for sheep or tillage and dogs for hunting. It only shows that Abū Hurairah had a more retentive memory. And as regards Ibn ‘Umar’s remark, there is not least evidence that there was any insinuation in it as to Abū Hurairah’s integrity. It may be simply an explanatory remark or the suggestion may be simply this that Abū Hurairah preserved that part of the saying because he had to keep watch dogs for his cultivated land. With all the mistakes that Abū Hurairah may have made in reporting so many ḥadīth and he had an exceptionally retentive memory, no critic has ever questioned his integrity. In fact, the critics of Ḥadīth are unanimous that no companion of the Holy Prophet ever told a lie. Thus Ibn Hajar says in the introduction to his *Isāba* : “The Aḥl Sunnah are unanimous that all (the companions) are ‘*adūl* i.e. truthful.” The word ‘*adāla* as used regarding transmitters of reports means that there has been no intentional deviation from truthfulness. This is not simply due to the respect in which the companions of the Holy Prophet are held, for the critics of the transmitters of Ḥadīth never spared any one simply because he had a place of honour in their hearts. Further on, in the same chapter, Guillaume asserts that independent thinkers in the second and third century not only questioned the authority of Ḥadīth

altogether but that they derided the very system. Here are his words :

“However, there was still a large circle outside the orthodox thinkers who rejected the whole system of Hadīth. They were not concerned to adopt those which happened to fit in with the views and doctrines of the doctors, or even with those which might fairly be held to support their own view of life. So far from being impressed by the earnestness of the traditionists who scrupulously examined the *isnād* or by the halo of sanctity which had gathered round the early guarantors of tradition, the independent thinkers of the second and third centuries openly mocked and derided the system as a whole and the persons and matters named therein.”

And what is the evidence for these sweeping statements ? It is added :

“Some of the most flagrant examples of these lampoons will be found in the Book of Songs, where indecent stories are cast into the form in which tradition was customarily handed down to posterity.”

Thus the independent thinkers of Guillaume who rejected the system of Hadīth and openly mocked and derided the system as a whole are the lampooners mentioned in the concluding portion of the paragraph ! It is rather strange that such a learned scholar should make such irresponsible remarks. The Aghānī, the Book of Songs to which he refers, as if it were a collection of lampoons directed against Hadīth, is an important collection of songs by the famous

Arabian historian, Abul-Farāj 'Alī-ibn-Husain, commonly known as Isbahānī (born in 284 A.H.). I am at a loss to understand why the learned author of "The Traditions of Islam" should look upon it as an attempt to mock and deride the system of Hadīth.¹ There may be some indecent stories connected with these songs but the presence of such stories does not alter the nature of the work which is an historical collection, as indecent stories are met even in the books of the Bible. There is not a word, either in the book itself or in any earlier writing, to show that the collection was made in a spirit of lampoonry. And to draw such a conclusion simply from the fact that along with the songs collected are given the names of those through whom the songs were remitted is to show an entire ignorance of history. It was the common method adopted in all historical writings and collections of the time, as any one can easily see by referring to the historical writings of Sa'd or Tabrī. The object was not to insult the method of transmission of Hadīth ; it was simply adopted on account of its historical value.

1. "The Encyclopaedia of Islam" speaks of Aghānī in the following words : "His chief work, which alone has been preserved, is the great Kitāb-ul-Aghānī ; in this he collected the songs which were popular in his time, adding the accounts of their authors and their origin which appeared of interest to him .. with every song there is indicated, besides the text, the air according to the musical terminology...to these are added very detailed accounts concerning the poet, often also concerning composers and singers, of both sexes. In spite of its unsystematic order this book is our most important authority not only for literary history till into the third century of Hijrah but also for the history of civilization." (Art. Abul Farāj)

Guillaume has also mentioned the names of two great Muslim thinkers, Ibn Qutaiba and Ibn Khaldūn, in this connection, but these great thinkers neither rejected the Ḥadīth system as a whole, nor ever mocked or derided that system and the persons and matters mentioned therein. What these great thinkers have said about Ḥadīth is accepted by every serious Muslim thinker. Ibn Qutaiba, rather defended the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth against scepticism, and Guillaume has himself quoted Dr. Nicholson's remarks with approval that "every impartial student will admit the justice of Ibn Qutaiba's claim that no religion has such historical attestation as Islam.....*Laisa li ummat-in min al-umami asnādun ka-asnādihim.*" Now the Arabic word *asnād* used in the original, and translated as historical attestations, is the plural of *sanad* which means an authority, and refers especially to the reporters on whose authority Ḥadīth is accepted. Thus Ibn Qutaiba claims for Ḥadīth a higher authority than any other history of the time, and the claim is admitted by both Nicholson and Guillaume. In 'the Encyclopaedia of Islam' it is plainly stated that Ibn Qutaiba "defended the Qur'ān and Tradition against the attacks of philosophic scepticism". Ibn Khaldūn also never attacked Ḥadīth itself, and it has already been shown that his remarks apply only to stories which have generally been rejected by the collectors of Ḥadīth.

Canons of criticism of Ḥadīth as accepted by Muslims

There is no doubt that the collectors of Ḥadīth laid special stress on the trustworthiness of the narrators. As Guillaume says: "Inquiries were made as

to the character of the guarantors whether they were tainted with heretical doctrines, whether they had a reputation for truthfulness, and had the ability to transmit what they themselves heard. Finally it was necessary that they should be competent witnesses whose testimony would be accepted in a court of civil law.” More than this, they tried their best to find out that the report was traceable to the Holy Prophet through the various stages. Even the companions of the Holy Prophet did not accept every ḥadīth which was brought to their notice until they were fully satisfied that it came from the Holy Prophet. But the *Muḥaddithīn* went beyond the narrators, and they had rules of criticism which were applied to the subject-matter of Ḥadīth. In judging whether a certain ḥadīth was fabricated or genuine, the collectors of Ḥadīth not only made a thorough inquiry regarding the trustworthiness of the transmitters but also applied other rules of criticism which are in no way inferior to modern methods of criticism. Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz has summarized these rules in the ‘Ujāla Nāfi‘ah, and according to these a report was not accepted under any of the following circumstances :

(1) If it was opposed to recognized historical facts.

(2) If the reporter was a Shi‘a and the ḥadīth was of the nature of an accusation against the companions of the Holy Prophet, or the reporter was a Khārijite and the ḥadīth was of the nature of an accusation against a member of the Prophet’s family. If, however, such a report was corroborated by independent testimony, it was accepted.

(3) If it was of such a nature that to know it and act upon it was incumbent upon all, and it was reported by a single man.

(4) If the time and the circumstances of its narration contained evidence of its forgery.¹

(5) If it was against reason² or against the plain teachings of Islam.³

(6) If it mentioned an incident, which, if it had happened, would have been known to and reported by large numbers, while that incident was not reported by any one except the particular reporter.

(7) If its subject-matter or words were *rakik* (*i.e.* unsound or incorrect) ; for instance, the words

1. An example of this is met with in the following incident related in *Hayāt ul-Hayawān*. Harūn al-Rashīd loved pigeons. A pigeon was sent to him as a present. Qāzī Abul Bakhtārī was sitting by him at the time, and to please the monarch he narrated a ḥadīth to the effect that there should be no betting except in racing or archery or flying of birds. Now the concluding words were a forgery, and the Caliph knew this. So when the Qazi was gone, he ordered the pigeon to be slaughtered, adding that the fabrication of this portion of the ḥadīth was due to the pigeon. The collectors of Ḥadīth on that account did not accept any ḥadīth of Abul Bakhtārī.

2. Ibn ‘Abdul Barr (d. 463) and Al-Nawawī (d. 476) do not hesitate to assail traditions which seem to them to be contrary to reason or derogatory to the dignity of the Prophet.” (*Traditions of Islam* by Guillaume, P. 94.)

3. Examples of this are the ḥadīth relating to *Qadzā ‘Umrī*, *i.e.* going through the performance of the *rak‘āts* of daily prayers on the last Friday in the month of Ramadhan as an atonement for not saying prayers regularly, or the ḥadīth, which says, Do not eat melon until you slaughter it.

were not in accordance with Arabic idiom or the subject-matter was unbecoming the Prophet's dignity.

(8) If it contained threatenings of heavy punishment for ordinary sins or promises of mighty reward for slight good deeds.

(9) If it spoke of the reward of prophets and messengers to the doers of good.

(10) If the narrator confessed that he fabricated the report.

Similar rules of criticism are laid down by Muḥammad 'Alī Qāri in his work entitled *Maudzū'āt* and by Ibn-ul-Jauzī, for which see the *Fath-ul-Mughīth* and by Ibn Hajar for which see *Nazhatul Nazar*.

The Qur'ān as the great test for judging Ḥadīth

In addition to these rules of criticism, which I think leave little to be desired, there is another very important test of judging the trustworthiness of Ḥadīth, and it is a test whose application was commanded by the Holy Prophet himself. "There will be narrators," he is reported to have said, "reporting Ḥadīth from me, so judge by the Qur'ān ; if a report agrees with the Qur'ān accept it ; otherwise, reject it" (Ibn 'Asākir). "The genuineness of this ḥadīth is beyond all question as it stands on the soundest basis¹. That Ḥadīth was in vogue in the time of the Holy Prophet

1. A ḥadīth, however sound the statement it contains and however great the authority on which it is based, is readily condemned as a fabrication by European critics when it does not suit their canons of criticism. Thus Guillaume, after quoting the well-known ḥadīth, which is reported by a very large number of companions—so large that not the least doubt can be entertained as to its genuineness :—"Whoever shall repeat from me that

is a fact admitted by even European critics, as I have already shown, and that the authority of the Qur'ān was higher than that of Ḥadīth appears from numerous circumstances. "I am no more than a man" the Prophet is reported to have said according to a very reliable ḥadīth, "when I order you anything respecting religion receive it, and when I order anything about the affairs of the world, I am no more than a man" (Bkh. Msh. I : 6). There is another saying of his : "My sayings do not abrogate the word of God, but the word of God can abrogate my sayings" (Msh. I : 6). The ḥadīth relating to Mu'ādh, which has been quoted elsewhere,¹ places the Holy Qur'ān first, and after that Ḥadīth. 'Ā'ishah used to repeat a verse of the Holy Qur'an on hearing words from the mouth of the Holy Prophet when she thought that the purport

which I have not said, his resting place shall be in hell," remarks : "A study of the theological systems of the world would hardly reveal a more naive attempt to tread the Sirāt-ul-Mustaqīm" (p. 79). Referring to the same ḥadīth, the same author remarks : "In order to combat false traditions, they invented others equally destitute of prophetic authority" (p. 78) Such irresponsible remarks ill befit a book of criticism. The genuineness of this ḥadīth is beyond all doubt, and it has been accepted as such by collectors of reports. It cannot be denied that there are theological systems whose very basic principles are the concoctions of pious men, but in Islam the very details are matters of history and "pious lies" could not find here any ground to prosper.

1. On being appointed Governor of Yemen, Mu'ādh was asked by the Holy Prophet as to the rule by which he would abide. "By the law of the Qur'ān" he replied. "But if you do not find any direction therein" asked the Prophet. "Then I will act according to the Sunnah of the Prophet," was the reply. And the Holy Prophet approved of it.

of what the Prophet said did not agree with the Holy Qur'ān . The great Imām Bukhārī quotes a verse of the Holy Qur'ān whenever he finds one suiting his text, before citing a ḥadīth, thus showing that the Qur'ān holds precedence over Ḥadīth. And by the agreement of the Muslim community, Bukhārī which is considered to be the most reliable of all collections of Ḥadīth, is looked upon only as *aṣaḥḥ-ul-Kutub ba'da Kitāb illah* or the most reliable of books *after* the Book of God. This verdict of the community as a whole shows clearly that even if Bukhārī disagrees with the Qur'ān, it is Bukhārī that must be rejected and not the Book of God. And as has already been stated at the commencement of this chapter, Ḥadīth is only an explanation of the Qur'ān, and hence also the Qur'ān must have precedence over the Ḥadīth. And last of all, both the Muslim and the non-Muslim historians are agreed that the Holy Qur'ān has been handed down intact, every word and every letter of it, while Ḥadīth cannot claim that purity, as it was chiefly the purport that was reported. All these considerations show that the saying that Ḥadīth must be judged by the Qur'ān is quite in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Prophet, and there is not the least ground for doubting its genuineness. And even if there were no such ḥadīth, the test suggested in it would still have been the right test because the Holy Qur'ān deals with the principles of the Islamic law while Ḥadīth deals with its details, and it is just and reasonable that only such details should be accepted as are in consonance with the principles. And as the Prophet is plainly represented in the Holy Qur'ān as not following "ought save

that which was revealed'' to him (6 : 50 ; 7 : 203 ; 46 : 9), and as not disobeying a word of that which was revealed to him (6 : 15 ; 13 : 15), it follows clearly that if there is anything in Ḥadīth which is not in consonance with the Holy Qur'ān, it could not have proceeded from the Prophet, and hence must be rejected.

How far did the Muhaddathīn apply these tests

Now the question is, did all the collectors of Ḥadīth pay equal regard to the above cannons of criticism? That it could not be so is clear enough. The earliest of them Bukhārī is by a happy coincidence also the soundest of them. He was not only most careful in accepting the trustworthiness of the narrators of Ḥadīth, but he also paid the utmost attention to the last of the critical tests enumerated above, *viz*, the test of judging Ḥadīth by the Qur'ān. Many of his books and chapters are headed by Qur'anic verses, and occasionally he was contented himself with a verse of the Qur'ān in support of his text. This shows that his criticism of Ḥadīth was not limited to a mere examination of the guarantors as every European critic thinks, but that he also applied other tests. The process of criticism was, of course, applied mentally and one should not expect a record of that criticism in the book itself. Similar was the case with the other collectors of Ḥadīth. They followed the necessary rules of criticism but they were not all equally careful, nor did they all possess equal acumen. They indeed sometimes intentionally relaxed the rules of criticism whether in relation to the examination of the narrators or the critical tests. They also made a

difference between ḥadīth relating to matters of jurisprudence and other ḥadīth, such as those that related to past history or to prophecies about the future or to other material which had nothing to do with the practical life of a man. We are clearly told that they were stricter in matters of jurisprudence than in other ḥadīth. Thus Baihaqī says in the *Kitāb-ul Madkhal* : “When we narrate from the Holy Prophet in what is allowed and what is prohibited, we are strict in the chain of transmission and in the criticism of the narrators but when we relate reports about the merits of people and about reward and punishment we are lax in the line of transmission and overlook the defects of the narrators.” And Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal says : “Ibn Ishāq is a man from whom such reports may be taken, *i.e.*, those which relate to *Sira* or life of the Prophet, but when the question is what is allowed and what is forbidden, we have recourse to a (strong) people like this, and he inserted the fingers of one hand amid those of the other,” conjoining the hands and thus pointing to the strength of character of the transmitters. It must, however, be admitted that most of the collectors of Ḥadīth paid more attention to examination of narrators than to the other critical tests, and I think that they were justified in this. Their object was to produce reliable collections of Ḥadīth, and, therefore, their first concern was to see that the Ḥadīth could be reliably traced back to the Holy Prophet through a trustworthy chain of narrators. This part of the criticism was the more essential, as the longer the chain of narrators became, the more difficult would it have been to test their reliability. Other tests could be applied to any ḥadīth at any time, and the

passing of a thousand years could not in any way effect the value of these tests, but the passing away of another century would have rendered the task of the examination of narrators most difficult, if not impossible. Hence the collectors of Ḥadīth rightly focussed their attention on this test. Nor did the work of the collection of Ḥadīth close the door as to further criticism or as to the application of other rules of criticism. The *Muḥaddithīn* contented themselves with producing collections reliable in the main, and left the rest of the work of criticism to be done by future generations. They never claimed faultlessness for their works : even Bukhārī did not do it. They exercised their judgments to the best of their ability, but they never claimed, nor does any Muslim claim on their behalf, infallibility of judgment. In fact, they had started a work which was to continue for generation after generation of the Muslims. If possible, a hundred more canons of criticism may be laid down, but still it would be the judgment of one man as to whether a certain ḥadīth must be accepted or rejected. Every collection is the work of one muḥaddith, and even if ninety nine per cent of his judgments are correct, there is still room for the exercise of judgment by others. Where the Western critic errs is that he thinks that infallibility is claimed for any of the collections of Ḥadīth and that the exercise of judgment by a certain muḥaddith precludes the exercise of judgment by others as to the reliability of a report.

Another point to be borne in mind in this connection is that, however much the collectors of Ḥadīth might have differed in their judgments as to the necessity of

rigour in the rules of criticism, they set to work with minds absolutely free from bias or external influences. They would lay down their lives rather than swerve a hair's breadth from what they considered to be the truth. Many of the famous Imams preferred punishment or jail to uttering a word against their convictions. The fact is generally admitted as regards the Umayyad rule. As Guillaume says : "They laboured to establish the Sunnah of the community as it was, or as it was thought to have been, under the Prophet's rule, and so they found their bitterest enemies in the ruling house" (*Traditions of Islam*, p.42). The independence of thought among the great Muslim divines under the Abbaside rule had not deteriorated in the least. They would not even accept office under a Muslim ruler : "It is well-known," says Th. W. Juyuboll in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* "that many pious independent men in those days deemed it wrong and refused to enter the service of the Government or to accept an office dependent on it" (p. 91).

Different classes of Ḥadīth

Ibn Ḥajar has dealt with different classes of ḥadīth in the *Sharḥ Nukḥbat al-Fikr* at great length. The most important division of ḥadīth is into *mutawātir* (continuous) and *ahād* (isolated). A ḥadīth is said to be *mutawātir* (lit. repeated successively or by one after another) when it is reported by such a large number that it is impossible that they should have agreed upon falsehood, so that the very fact that it is commonly accepted makes its authority unquestionable. To this category belong ḥadīth that have been accepted by every Muslim generation down from the

time of the Holy Prophet.¹ The *mutawātir* ḥadīth are accepted without criticising their narrators. All other ḥadīth are called *aḥād* (pl. of *aḥad* or *wāhid* meaning *one* i.e., isolated). The *aḥād* are divided into three classes, viz., *Mashhūr*, (lit., *well-known*), i.e., ḥadīth which are reported through more than two channels at every stage; '*azīz* (lit., *strong*) i.e., ḥadīth that are not reported through less than two channels; and *gharīb* (lit., *strange* or *unfamiliar*), i.e., ḥadīth in whose link of narrators there is only a single person at any stage. It should be noted that in this classification the condition as to the ḥadīth being narrated by more than two or less than two persons at any stage applies only to the three generations following the companions of the Holy Prophet, i.e., the *tābi'ūn* or *atbā'ul tābi'in*, or *atbā'u atbā'il-tābi'in*. Of the two chief classes of ḥadīth, the *mutawātir* and the *aḥād*, the first are all accepted so far as the line of transmission is concerned, but the latter, i.e., the *aḥād* are again sub-divided into classes, *maqbul* i.e., those which may be accepted, and *marḍūd*, i.e., those which may be rejected. Those that are *maqbul* or acceptable, are sub-divided into two classes i.e., *ṣaḥīḥ* (lit., *sound*), and *ḥasan* (lit., *fair*). The condition for a ḥadīth being *ṣaḥīḥ* or sound is that its narrators are '*adl*, i.e., men whose sayings and decisions are approved or whom desire does not deviate from the right course and *tāmm-ul-dzabt* i.e., guarding

1. There is a difference of opinion as to the number of reporters of the *mutawātir* ḥadīth, some considering four to be the minimum required, others five or seven or ten, others still raising it to forty or even seventy. But the commonly accepted opinion is that it is only the extensive acceptance of a ḥadīth which raises it to the rank of *mutawātir*.

or taking care of ḥadīth effectually, that it is *muttaṣil-ul-ṣanad*, i.e., the authorities narrating it are in contact with each other, so that there is no break in the transmission, that it is *ghair-u-mu'allal* i.e., there is no 'illa or defect in it, and that it is not *shādh* (lit., a thing apart from the general mass), i.e., against the general trend of Hadīth or at variance with the overwhelming evidence of other ḥadīth. A ḥadīth that falls short of this high standard, and fulfils the other conditions but does not fulfil the condition of its narrators being *tāmm-n-ul-dabt*, i.e., guarding or taking care of ḥadīth effectually, is called *ḥasan* or fair. Such a ḥadīth is regarded as *ṣaḥīh* or sound when the deficiency of effectual guarding is made up for the large number of its transmitters. A *ṣaḥīh* ḥadīth is accepted unless there is stronger testimony to rebut what is stated in it. As I have already stated, it is recognized by the muḥaddithīn that a ḥadīth may be unacceptable either because of some defect in its transmitters or because its subject-matter is unacceptable. Thus ibn Hajar says that among the reasons for which a ḥadīth may be rejected is the subject-matter of the ḥadīth. For instance, if a ḥadīth contradicts the Holy Qur'ān or recognized Sunnah or the unanimous verdict of the Muslim community or common-sense, it is not accepted. As regards defects in transmission, a ḥadīth is said to be *marfū'* when it is traced back to the Holy Prophet without any defect in transmission, *muttasal* when its *isnād* is uninterrupted, *mauqūf* when it does not go back to the Prophet, *mu'an'an* (from 'an meaning *from*) when it is linked by a word which does not show personal contact of two narrators, *mu'allaq* or suspended when the name of one or more transmitters is missing (being *munqata'* if the name is missing from the middle, *mursal* if it is from the end).