THE RELIABILITY OF THE TRADITIONAL SCIENCE OF ḤADĪTH: A Critical Reconsideration

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The abstract

A. Introduction

The majority of Muslims believe that hadiths are the carrier and the vehicle of the sunna of the Prophet. Indeed, they are indispensable guide to an understanding of the divine will. As one of the sources of Islamic authority, which is only second in importance after the Qur’ān, the immense corpus of hadith continues to exercise a decisive influence. It has become a source of law and religious inspiration. Islamic scholarship has devoted tremendous efforts to gathering and classifying the hadiths and distinguishing the authentic from the false ones. While the motives of Muslim scholars to study hadith have been decisively motivated by the central role played by hadiths as the source of their law and theological doctrine, the interests of modern Western scholars in the study of hadith literatures have essentially been historical. Similarly, when they study Islamic law, for example, they tend to approach it as a mode of thought rather than as a body of rights, obligations and rules of procedure. In other words, they are not lawyers

2 Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī, Kitāb al-Risāla, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, Cairo, 1358/1940, p. 84;; Muḥammad Muḥammad Abū Zahw, al-Ḥadīth wa’l-Maḥaddithūn, Cairo, 1957/1378, p. 11. There is a discussion about whether the sunna should be classified as ʿilmām rather than ṣaḥīḥ. See William A. Graham, Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam: A Reconsideration of the Sources, with Special References to the Divine Saying or Ḥadīth Qudsi, The Hague, 1977, p. 35.
3 The major collections are: Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Bukhārī (d. 256 A.H.), al-Jāmi’ al-Sahīḥ; Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 261), al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣahīḥ; Abu Dāwūd (d. 275), Kitāb al-Sunna; al-Tirmidhī (d. 279), Sunan, al-Nasā‘ī (d. 303), Kitāb al-Sunna; Ibn Māja (d. 273), Kitāb al-Sunna; al-Dārimī (d. 225), Kitāb al-Sunna.
but students of culture. The Reliability of the Traditional Science of Ḥadīth

One of the problems of Islamic ḥadīth literatures is that their texts were codified much later than the events they narrate. This fact leads to the issue of the missing link between ḥadīth literatures and the events they describe. Historical questions must be asked: To what extent does our ḥadīth literature reflect the actual events it narrates? Does ḥadīth literature provide really transmitted ḥadīths or are these ḥadīths nothing but reflections of interests, which evolved in early Islam? To put it in more technical terms: Do the matn of ḥadīths reflect the actual words of the Prophet or Companions, or do they constitute a verbalization of what, much later, came to be realized as being Prophetic sunna? Do the isnaḍs attached in ḥadīth literature to guarantee the authenticity of the matns represent the genuine lines of transmission, or do they constitute forgeries intended to legitimize statements first circulated at a later time? Does the occurrence of a certain ḥadīth in the canonical collections prove the historicity of its ascription to the Prophet, which would make further research superfluous?

By virtue of the fact that the answer of the above questions needs or deserves more spaces than we have here, it is not possible to deal exhaustively with any of the above question. However, in the brief discussion, an effort has been made to highlight a small part of the questions, i.e., how reliable the methods for determining the authenticity of ḥadīth are.

B. Western Scholarship of Ḥadīth

Since the 19th century, questions about the authenticity, originality, authorship, provenance and the correctness of ḥadīth have appeared, and they have become of central importance to the study of Islam, especially to those concerned with Islamic law. Gustav Weil, for example, suggested that a European critic is required to reject at least half of al-Bukhārī’s sāḥīḥ. The first serious challenges to the authenticity of Muslim ḥadīth literature by Western scholars began with

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Alois Sprenger, who expressed his skepticism about the reliability of hadith as a historical source. This attitude was followed by William Muir, who also maintained a critical attitude toward the authenticity of hadith. European scholarship of hadith culminated in the work of Ignaz Goldziher, whose work was unquestionably the most important critique of hadith in the nineteenth-century. Goldziher was the first scholar to subject the hadith to a systematic historical and critical study. Instead of considering hadith as reliable sources for the rise of Islam, he regard it as invaluable source for the beliefs, conflicts and concerns of the generations of Muslims who came after and put the hadith into circulation. As he himself put it:

"Das Ḥadīth wird uns nicht als Dokument für die Kindheitsgeschichte des Islam, sondern als Abdruck der in der Gemeinde hervortretenden Bestrebungen aus der Zeit seiner reiferen Entwicklungsstadien dienen; es bietet uns ein ungeschriebenes Material von Zeugnissen für Entwicklungsgang, den der Islam während jener Zeiten durchmachte, in welchen er auseinander widerstreßenden Kräften, aus mächtigen Gegensätzen sich zu systematischer Abrundung heraushormt."

Goldziher’s skepticism was adopted by Leone Caetani and Henri Lammens who were of the opinion that almost all the traditions about the Prophet’s life were apocryphal. Other scholars who refused hadith as authentic materials for the historical reconstruction of the time of

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9 Ignaz, Goldziher, Muhammedanische Studien, II, p. 5.


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the Prophet and the first Islamic century are John Wansbrough\(^{11}\) and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook\(^{12}\). Although in Western scholarship Goldziher’s *Muhammadanische Studien* was considered to be the first milestone among Western efforts to depict the history of ḥadīth, he met with criticism from Muslim scholars\(^{13}\). In western scholarship, Goldziher’s book, published in 1890, was not followed by similar studies and remained unrevised in any significant way until Joseph Schacht’s *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* appeared in 1950. Schacht dealt especially with legal tradition and their development.\(^{14}\) His thesis that *isnāds* have a tendency to grow backwards and his “common link theory” have influenced the Western scholars who came after him. Like Goldziher, he assumed that few if any ḥadīth originated with the Prophet. He believed, however, that it was possible by careful study to arrive at a rough estimate of when a particular ḥadīth was put into circulation. Schacht’s approach has been adopted by J. van Ess\(^{15}\) and has been revived in a large scale by G. H. A. Juynboll, even though he differs from Schacht in several significant points\(^{16}\). This is reflected in Juynboll’s method of dating a ḥadīth by invariably posing three questions: Where a certain ḥadīth originated, at what time a certain ḥadīth originated and who may be held responsible for bringing a certain ḥadīth into circulation\(^{17}\). By posing the three questions, in his view, the problems of chronology, provenance and authorship of a certain ḥadīth

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\(^{16}\) G. H. A. Juynboll, ”Some isnād analytical method illustrated on the basis of several women - demeaning sayings from ḥadīth literature” in: *al-Qantara: Revista de estudos arapes, 10* (1989), pp. 343-383; repr. in *Studies on the Origins...; Muslim Tradition,...*
can be assessed. Juynboll’s method of dating a certain hadith by analysing the isnād of a single tradition has become a powerful tool of research. Both Schacht and Juynboll are of the opinion that the common link is the fabricator of hadith. Schacht’s and Juynboll’s method of dating a hadith by analysing the isnād has been subjected to criticism. Perhaps the most significant challenges to their conclusions may be found in Harald Motzki’s works. Unlike Schacht and Juynboll, Motzki is inclined to regard the common links not as the fabricators of hadiths as Schacht and Juynboll do, but rather as the first systematic collectors of traditions who transmitted the hadiths in regular classes of students out of which an institutionalized system of learning developed. Opposition to Schacht’s and Goldziher’s assumptions about the hadiths may also be found in the works of M. Sibā, N. Abbott, M. M. Azami and F. Sezgin. They argue for an early and continuous practice of writing down hadith in Islam. In their opinion the Companions of the Prophet kept written records of hadith, and most of these aḥādith were transmitted in written form until the time they were compiled in the canonical collections. Motzki and Schoeler have also pointed out, what Schacht and Juynboll denied that some hadiths can be dated to

18 Schacht, Origins, pp. 171-172. Juynboll, ”Some-insnād analytical methods”


the first century. However, whether or not they can be ascribed to the Prophet, has not been proved.}

C. The Reliability of ‘Uṣūm al-Ḥadīth

The fact that there were unreliable ḥadīths beside reliable ones was not only and first realized by Western scholars. Muslim scholars were already aware of it at the end of the first century A.H. or even earlier. It can be assumed that the corpus of ḥadīth, which developed in the first century, was a mixture of both reliable and unreliable ḥadīth. As a response to this, early Muslims created a system of evaluating the ḥadīth so that the true and the false might be distinguished. The classical science of ḥadīth criticism consisted of three branches. The first dealt with the riyāḥ, i.e. investigated the chains of transmission to establish the continuity of their constituent links. The continuity of the isnāds was evaluated for missing or unknown muḥaddiths or for stopping at a Companion or Successor and not going back to the Prophet. The second branch was concerned with asmā’ al-rijāl, i.e. provided biographical information on the ruwāt (transmitters) of ḥadīth as a basis for judgments of their reliability. The attention focused on the date and place of birth, familial connections, teachers, students, journeys, moral behavior, religious beliefs, literary output, and date of death. This allowed the determination not only of their reliability but also the contemporaneity and geographical proximity of the transmitters. This helped to determine whether or not the transmitters could have

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24 See note 23.

come in contact with each other. The third branch of Muslim hadith criticism considered the content of a hadith i.e. whether or not it was in accordance with the Qur’an and with hadiths that were considered reliable.

The methods of the muhaddithūn, however, have been subjected to criticism. The objection to their reliability in ascertaining the authenticity of hadith came even from Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) was of the opinion that when traditionists scrutinized religious accounts, they based their judgment only on the bearer of the information. If they were trustworthy, then the information they transmitted was automatically considered to be authentic. Ibn Khaldūn, therefore, believes that the scrutiny of hadith that has been done by traditionists is restricted to the scrutiny of ʿismād alone. The Egyptian writer, ʿAmīd Anīn (d. 1373/1954) seems to agree with Ibn Khaldūn. He states that the traditionists when scrutinizing the hadith, paid more attention to the ʿismād than to the matn. Abū Rayya argues that the muhaddithūn were concerned only with the continuity of the transmission and the character of the transmitters, and they completely ignored the essential content of traditions and they failed to look at the historical evidence. These views of Ibn Khaldūn, ʿAmīd Anīn and Abū Rayya have been refuted by Muṣṭafā al-Sibāʿī, Muḥammad Abū Shuhba and Nūr al-Dīn ʿĪttr. They are of the opinion that the ʿulamāʾ of hadith did not neglect the matn at all. This can be seen in the criteria laid down by the traditionists in which it is stated that the hadith can be regarded to be authentic only if its ʿanād and matn are free from ʿabd al-Sālīm.”

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26 Biographical dictionaries contain an entry for each transmitter. One of the earlier examples of biographical dictionaries is al-Tabaqāt al-Kubrā of Muḥammad ibn Saʿd (d. 230/844), which has some 4,300 entries.

27 Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddima, p. 37.

28 ʿAmīd Anīn, Fajr al-Islām, p. 217-218; Duḥā al-Islām, vol 2, pp. 130-134. Similar to the view of Abū Rayya is that of ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Bāhī. He maintains that the scrutiny of the matn is only considered by the traditionists. This view quoted by Nūr al-Dīn ʿĪttr in al-Madkhal ilā Uṣūl al-Ḥadīth, p. 14.

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This controversy reminds us of the fact that the issue of the reliability and historicity of the hadith is far from being resolved. Although al-Bukhari’s (d. 256) and Muslim’s (d. 261) Sahīhs are regarded as the most reliable works of hadith, nowhere have they directly mentioned the criteria they applied to test the authenticity of hadith. Later scholars, however, have tried to infer al-Bukhari’s and Muslim’s requirements for authentic hadith. It was inferred that the requirements by both of them are the same to a large extent. But to some extent they are different. The conditions they have in common are as follows.

1. The chain of transmission from the first transmitter to the last one must be uninterrupted (an yakūn al-ḥadīth muttaṣil al-isnād). (2) The transmitters must be well known for their tīqa, i.e., ‘adl (righteous conduct) and ḍabṭ (high literary accuracy) from the first tier to the last one (bi-naql al-tīqa ‘an tīqa min awwalīn ilā muntahābūn). (3) The transmitted ḥadīth must be free from ‘illa (defect) and shudūd (irregularness) (saʿīm min al-shudūd wa’l-‘illa). Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ said that if these condition are met by a particular ḥadīth, then it would be considered authentic by the traditionists (ahl al-ḥadīth) without any disagreement.

The essential difference of al-Bukhari’s and Muslim’s requirements for authentic hadith lies in the continuity of the chain of transmission, i.e., the necessity for establishing a meeting between two

33 Quoted by al-Nawawī, Sahīḥ Muslim bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī, Beirut, n.d., vol. 1, p.15.
transmitters. Al-Bukhārī held that a tradition cannot be accepted unless it is known that the transmitter encountered the man whose authority he quotes, even if they met only once (lā būdū min tḥubūt al-liqā‘). The proof of being contemporaries (mu‘āṣara) alone is considered insufficient by al-Bukhārī. Muslim, however, did not require the proof of meeting between them. The proof of being contemporaries is, in his view, enough. 34 In other words, if a non-mudallis transmitter relates a ḥadīth with a word indicating direct contact (ṣamā‘), such as akhbaranā, anba’anā, samī‘tu, etc, both al-Bukhārī and Muslim alike accept the ḥadīth. But in the case that a non-mudallis transmitter relates a ḥadīth from a transmitter with a word which might imply both samā‘ (direct contact) and indirect transmission, such as ‘an julān, etc, then al-Bukhārī and Muslim hold different opinions. While al-Bukhārī requires that the transmitter encounter the informant from whom he transmitted the ḥadīth (‘an’ana) even though only once, Muslim is content with their being contemporaries and only the probability of encounter. As to the transmission of a mudallis with the term ‘an both al-Bukhārī and Muslim reject it if the mudallis’ hearing of the ḥadīth in question is not clear to them. In such a case, both al-Bukhārī and Muslim require the proof of hearing (tḥubūt al-samā‘) for each ḥadīth transmitted by a mudallis. Accordingly, if they provide an isnād of ‘an’anat mudallis they give an additional isnād in order to remove the possibility of tadlīs. 35 Yet the fact that there are, as will be shown, a large number of ḥadīths, found in the Sahīhs of al-Bukhārī and Muslim which were related by allegedly mudallis transmitters, and using the word ‘an, one may wonder how consistent al-Bukhārī and Muslim were in the application of their alleged method. Based on the investigation of the 194 ḥadīths transmitted by Abū al-Zubayr from Jābir found in Muslim’s Sahīh and 43 ḥadīths transmitted by al-Ḥasan al-Ḩāṣimī from different companions found in the Sahīhs of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, I argue that for both al-Bukhārī and Muslim, the terminology of transmission used by the first

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Later traditionists such as Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245), al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774) Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) and others have given definitions of ḥadīth saḥīḥ (reliable ḥadīth). Their definitions, although differ worded, essentially represent what al-Bukhārī and Muslim have allegedly adopted. They can be summarized as follows: (1) Continuity of transmission (2) all transmitters in the isnād must be ‘ādl (3) all transmitters must be dābit (4) isnād and the matn must be free from shudhūdh (5) isnād and matn must be free from ‘illa.36 These requirements will be critically elaborated in the following section.

1. The Continuity of Transmission

It has been stated above that the continuity of transmission is one of the principal requirements for a ḥadīth to be regarded as reliable. The continuity of the chain of transmission means that all transmitters in the chain from the first tier (compiler) to the last one (Companion) have transmitted the ḥadīth in a reliable manner in the light of takammul wa-ada’ al-ḥadīth, i.e., each transmitter in the chain transmitted the given ḥadīth directly from the preceding transmitter, and all transmitters in the chain are thiqa, i.e., ‘ādl and dābit.

To know whether there is continuity of transmission, the biography of each transmitter required careful scrutiny. This scrutiny focused on the transmitter’s date and place of birth and his date and place of death. His behavior and religious belief had also to be evaluated very carefully. This information allegedly helped the critical scholars not only in their attempt to establish the thiqa (reliability) of transmitters, but also to ascertain the probability or improbability of transmitters having come in contact with their informants. With regard to the relation of respective transmitters, the examination of words

connecting the transmitter with their preceding authority were extremely important, because the words used by the transmitters are thought to imply how the given hadith was transmitted. The words often used were sami’tu, ḥaddathānī, ḥaddathānā, akhbarānī akhbarānā, ‘an, anna and so on. These words allegedly implied different meanings, which reflected the various possible relationships between the transmitter and his preceding informant.

In order to be able to grasp any information on transmitters, sources containing biographical information had to be available. One may wonder whether such sources existed when the hadiths were critically collected. Such early books as al-‘Ilal of ʿAlī al-Madīnī (d. 234/ 848), Kitāb al-‘Ilal wa-Ma’rijat al-Rijāl of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241) Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr by Ibn Sa‘d37 (d. 230/844), Tarīkh al-Kabīr of al-Bukhārī (d. 256) may answer this question. Moreover, the appearance of some early critical hadith experts like Shu‘ba b. al-Ḥajjāj38 (d. 160/777), Yaḥyā b. Sa‘īd al-Qaṭṭān39 (d. 198/813), Yaḥyā Ibn Ma‘īn (d. 233/847), ‘Aḥī Ibn al-Madīnī (d. 234/848, al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAḥī al-Karābīsī (d. 245/859), al-Jużjānī (d. 256/870), al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870, Abū Ḥātim (d. 277/890), Ya‘qūb b. Sufyān al-Fasawī (d. 277/890)40, may well suggest that the beginning of hadith criticism were made before the hadiths were collected into corpora claiming to contain only reliable traditions. Another question, which has to be answered, is whether the information on the transmitters available in the biographical dictionaries enabled collectors like al-Bukhārī and Muslim to form a clear judgment about the transmitters’ characters and qualities? As some studies have shown41 the information of the biographical dictionaries enables us to grasp some further information on the transmitters, and reference to it is indispensable for historical reconstruction. Some of their information, however, need to be reconstructed and must be approached critically.

37 Although this book does not specifically deal with al-jarḥ wa‘l-ta’dīl, it is considered to be a reliable source of riḥāl al-hadīth, see Mahmūd al-Tahān, Usūl al-Tabkri̇j wa-Dirāṡat al-Asānīd, p. 153.
38 Ibn Ḥajar, Tāḥbīb, iv, p. 345; Cf. Juynboll, Muslim Tradition, p. 20.
40 For some other names see Juynboll, Muslim Tradition, Appendix IV.
In addition to the continuity of transmission, the reliability (thiqa) of a transmitter is an absolute requirement for an uninterrupted hadith. To be reliable, one must first be ‘adil, i.e. of righteous conduct. In other words, the transmitter’s character must be acceptable from the Islamic point of view. The ‘adil transmitter must not have committed a grave sin nor have been prone to commit minor sins. The scholars of hadith have further specified the requirements for those to be called ‘adil. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī mentions five conditions i.e. fear of God (taqwa), morally well behaved (murū‘a), freedom from guilt for major sins, not performing bid‘a, not being faṣiq. Ibn al-Šalāḥ has mentioned five conditions as well: Muslim, adult (bālīgh), sane (‘aql), behaving morally (murū‘a), not being faṣiq. Thus, ‘adāla is a gift that always keeps someone behaving piously and invariably prevents him from having a bad character. Subsequently, it leads someone be able to tell the truth. One may wonder, however, whether this quality of ‘adl actually prevents someone from making mistakes by the grace of God, because mistakes are not necessarily made consciously.

The transmitter must also be ḍabīṭ, i.e. having high literary accuracy as transmitter. To determine the accuracy of the transmitters, the mnḥaddithūn used at least two methods: consulting the scholars’ judgments about a transmitter and comparing his transmission with other transmissions. These methods are reflected in the statements ascribed to early scholars. Ayyūb al-Sakhtiyānī, a late successor (68-131) is reported to have said for example: ”if you wish to know the mistakes of your teacher, then you ought to study with others as well.”

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“To reach an authentic statement concerning authenticity of tradition, one needs to compare the words of scholars with each other”\textsuperscript{46}. This method of comparing the report of a transmitter with those of others can be found in the basic handbook of classical Islamic hadīth criticism, in Ibn al-Salāḥ’s 

\textit{Muqaddima}. He says:

“Whether or not the narrator is accurate can be ascertained by comparing his material with the narration of sound narrators (thiqāt) who are well-known for their control of their material and their thoroughness. If (1) we find his narration to be in accordance with their narration, even if only in content or (2) we find that his narrations are usually in accordance with their narrations and that he rarely differs from them, then we will know that he is in control of his material and is reliable (dābit). But if we find that he often differs from the sound narrators we will know that he is not reliable and we will not use his hadīth as basis for argumentation. God knows best”\textsuperscript{47}.

By this method of comparison, the muḥaddithūn were allegedly not easily misled by seemingly sound isnāds. Al-Hākim (d. 405/1014) in his 

\textit{Ma’rifat Ulūm al-Ḥadīth} quoted an isnād whose men are all trustworthy, but pointed out that the ḥadīth attached contained inaccuracies. He quoted the isnād Mālik from al-Zuhrī from ‘Urwa from ‘Ā’isha, and said it was false as far as Mālik’s tradition is concerned, although it was handed down by imāms and trustworthy persons. He argued that what is sound is known not only by its transmission, but also by understanding, learning by heart and hearing a great deal. He also argues that other ḥadīths with seemingly sound isnāds can be accepted as free from defect only after discussion with people who have knowledge of the subject\textsuperscript{48}. In the following an example of ḥadīth criticism is given in which a comparison is made between the ḥadīths of different students of one scholar:

Ibn Ma’in (d. 233) went to ‘Affān, a pupil of the great scholar Ḥammād b. Salama, to read the books of Ḥammād to him. ‘Affān asked him whether or not he had read those books to any other students of

\textsuperscript{46} Azami, \textit{Studies in Hadīth Methodology and Literature}, p. 52

\textsuperscript{47} In ‘Abd Raḥīm b. Husayn al-‘Irāqī’s (d. 805) al-\textit{Taqyid wa-sharḥ muqaddimah Ibn al-Salāḥ}, al-Maktaba al-salafiyya, 1996, p. 166

\textsuperscript{48} Cf. James Robson, The \textit{Isnād}, p. 25
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Ḥammād. Upon which Ibn Ma'in replied: ‘I have read those books to seventeen students of Ḥammād before coming to you’. ‘Affān said: ‘By Allah I am not going to read these books to you’. Ibn Ma'in answered that by spending a few dirhām he would go to Baṣra and read them there to the students of Ḥammād. He went to Baṣra to Mūsā b. Ismā'il, another pupil of Ḥammād. Mūsā asked him ‘Have you not read these books to anybody else? He said I have read them completely to seventeen students of Ḥammād and you are the eighteenth one’. Mūsā asked him what he was going to do with all those readings. Ibn Ma'in replied: Ḥammād b. Salamah made mistakes and his students added some more mistakes to his. So I want to distinguish between the mistakes of Ḥammād and those of his students. If I find all the students of Ḥammād making the same mistake, then the source of mistake is Ḥammād. If I find the majority of Ḥammād’s students say something, and some of them say something else, then this mistake was committed by that particular student of Ḥammād. In this way I make a distinction between the mistakes of Ḥammād and those of his students.49 It is evident that by his method of comparison Ibn Ma'in could indeed discover the mistakes of, and to assess the accuracy of, both Ḥammād and his students.50

On the other hand, in practice the ḍabṭ of a transmitter has been mostly determined on the basis of the judgments of scholars. This procedure faces the problem that the judgments of scholars on a

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49 Azami, Studies in Ḥadīth Methodology, pp. 52-53.
50 A similarly method was applied by Iftikhar Zaman. He has succeeded in showing the possibilities of reaching judgments regarding the transmitters of a certain text by scrutinising the variations of the text which are transmitted through different transmitters. To corroborate his theory he has analysed the ḥadīth regarding the Prophet's visiting Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ while the latter was ill. After analyzing the variant versions of the ḥadīth, he argued (1) "The significance of the mass of the textual material known as ḥadīth is best understood and explained in the light of such a science of rijāl (2) Evaluating the factual contents of ḥadīth with the use of such a science will lead to results which are much more reliable than any of the methods modern scholars have proposed for the study of ḥadīth". See Iftikhar Zaman "The science of Rijāl as a method in the Study of Ḥadīth" in Journal of Islamic Studies 5:1 (1994) p. 1. The same method has been used by H. Motzki in his works "Der Fiqh des Zuhri", "Qua vadis", "The Prophet and the Cat", "The Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq".
transmitter often differ. Some scholars, in judging the transmitters, are *mutashaddid* (having a stern viewpoint), some are *mutasāhīl* (lenient) and some others are *mutawassīt* (in the middle). These different attitudes of scholars led to different judgments. The diversity of scholars’ knowledge on a particular narrator led also to the variety of judgments. According to some a transmitter may be *thīqa*, but according to others he may not.

Furthermore, we may wonder how early the method of comparing transmitters’ narrations to determine their accuracy was used and whether it was applied on a large scale. Are the *ḥadīth* collections the result of applying this method? Was the statement ascribed to Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181)\(^51\), an early Muslim scholar of *ḥadīth*, stating “To reach an authentic statement concerning the authenticity of tradition, one needs to compare the words of scholars with other’s” always adopted in early Islam? Was it merely the opinion of a single scholar or a norm generally hold? Was the method, which was adopted by Ibn Ma‘īn, generally practiced in early Islam? These questions lead us to a problematic and controversial issue of research. It seems difficult to imagine that the *ḥadīth* literature, i.e., the classical collections, are the result of such a systematical procedure. Had scholars of *ḥadīth* applied the system consistently from the beginning, many inauthentic *ḥadīth* s had not found their way into the *ḥadīth* collections. Accordingly, it seems justified to ask whether the classical rules of *ʿulūm al-ḥadīth* were applied generally and consistently before this ”science” was established.

Azami is of the opinion that the method of Ibn Ma‘īn was practiced from the beginning of Islam. To corroborate his claim, Azami puts forward some examples. Abū Bakr, ‘Umar b. Khāṭṭāb, Abū Hurayrah and ‘īsha, according to Azami, practiced the method\(^52\). It should be stated, however, that what Abū Bakr and other Companions did to compare the transmission is different from that of Ibn Ma‘īn. Ibn Ma‘īn tried to reconstruct the original text of a *muḥaddith* which had been transmitted through the latter’s students. He did it

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\(^{52}\) Azami, *Studies in Ḥadīth Methodology and Literature*, pp. 53-55.
systematically by collating and comparing as far as possible the transmission of students, whereas Ābu Bakr and other Companions tried to find out the truth of an assertion in an *ad hoc* manner. It was not a systematic procedure of ḥadīth criticism in the way that Ibn Maʿīn did. This might have also been done by everyone else in the same situation. This procedure to find out the truth by asking witnesses was used by the judge. So, Azmi’s claim that both methods are the same kind needs to be reconsidered. It is probably justified to assume that the practice of comparing one transmission with others was inspired very early on, but Ibn Maʿīn’s method as a systematic procedure of ḥadīth criticism was probably only applied in the second century of Islam. The ḥadīth collections do not seem to allow us to be sure, that this method was strictly and generally practiced in early Islam. Had the method been applied consistently, there would have been no forgery and contradictory transmission in ḥadīth literature. Whether or not the compilers of the allegedly authentic ḥadīth collections have applied Ibn Maʿīn’s method can only be tested by a critical investigation of the collections.

With regard to the scrutiny of the narrators’ characters and qualities a number of sources have become available. These books, however, were written later than the persons they describe. Again, we encounter an epistemological problem. To what extent can we lay credence on the information available in the biographical dictionaries (kutub al-rijaḥ)? This question has been answered in different ways. The majority of Muslim scholars regard the books as historical sources, while most Western scholars reject them or are, at best, skeptical about them. Those who reject those sources as not providing historical facts distrust the capacity of the authors of the biographical reports and their collections to judge the character of the ḥadīth transmitters. These biographical sources are, in their opinion, subject to weaknesses and

53 Al-Ṭabagāt al-kubrā by Ibn Saʿd, (d. 230), Tarākb al-kabīr by al-Bukhārī (d. 256), Al-jarḥ wa-l-taʿdīl by Ibn Abī Hātim (d. 327), Usd al-ghābat fi maʿrifat al-ṣaḥāba by Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630), Tabdīl al-kamāl by al-Mizzi (d. 742), Tadhkirat al-hūfūz and Ṣiyar aʿlām al-nubalā’ by al-Dhahābī (d. 748), Al-Īṣāba fi tamyīz al-ṣaḥāba, Tabdīl al-tabdīlī by Ibn Ḥājar al-ʿAṣqalānī (d. 852) Al-isrāʿīl fi maʿrifat al-aṣḥāb by Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. ?), to name only the most important.
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corruption. How is it possible to ascertain the reliability of hadīths on the basis of transmitters whose reliability is uncertain? They even argue that although the muḥaddithūn did their best to get all the relevant information, they could not be sure of what they did, for it is not easy to judge people who have been dead for a long time. Therefore ‘ilm al-rijāl, in their opinion, is only an approximate science.

2. Free from shudhūd

A shādhdh (irregular) hadīth according to al-Shāfi‘ī is a hadīth which is transmitted by a trustworthy transmitter, but contradicts the narration of the people who are regarded as more reliable than him. A hadīth transmitted by only one reliable transmitter and not confirmed by any other transmitters cannot be seen as shādhdh. In other words, the absolute singleness of transmission (fard mutlaq) does not affect the reliability of a hadīth as long as it has been transmitted by a reliable transmitter. In the light of this definition, the well-known hadīth, “actions are (judged) according to their intentions”, is not considered shādhdh, despite the fact that it was related by only one transmitter at each stage: Yahyā b. Sa‘īd from Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Taymi from ‘Alqama from ‘Umar, all of whom are trustworthy authorities. A hadīth is considered to be shādhdh when (1) all of its transmitters are reliable (thiqā), (2) it has more than one transmitter, but (3) its matn or its sanad contradicts other transmissions, which are considered more reliable.


55 Ahmad Khan, Maqālat, I, 27-28, quoted by Daniel W. Brown, Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought, p. 97


57 If a narration that goes against another authentic hadīth is reported by a weak narrator, it is known as munkar (denounced).


59 If a particular hadīth is solely transmitted by abl Makka, or only by abl Madīna, or exclusively by abl Baṣra or Kūfah or by other centre and not transmitted by any other centres, this kind of transmission is called fard nisbī. See al-Suyūṭī, I, pp. 248-251.

60 Syuhudi Ismail, Kaedah Kesahihan Hadis, p. 123.
Al-Ḥākim is stricter in this regard. A shādhdh ḥadīth in his view is that which is reported by only one reliable transmitter, without being confirmed by any other reliable transmitters. In other words, the absolute singleness of transmitter (fard muṭlaq), no matter how reliable he is, causes a certain ḥadīth to have the status of shādhdh. Ibn al-Salāḥ, al-Nawawī and other later scholars are in agreement with al-Shāfīī.

If al-Ḥākim’s view is adopted, many ḥadīths that have been considered by the majority of traditionists to be saḥīḥ might turn out to be not saḥīḥ, because, as Juynboll has rightly pointed out, the general feature of ḥadīth literature is that ḥadīth was generally transmitted by single persons in the generations of the Companions and Successors. It was only after these generations that ḥadīth was massively transmitted. This is not to say, however, that nowhere in ḥadīth collections can we find a ḥadīth that was transmitted on a large scale in the generation of Companion and Successors. Indeed, it is not difficult to find such a ḥadīth. Yet the fact that ḥadīth was allegedly transmitted by a large number of people belonging to the generation of the Companions does not necessarily mean that its ascriptions to the Prophet is trustworthy. It is necessary to investigate whether the ascription of transmitters from the last transmitter (collector) to the earliest one (Companion) are historical. I do not argue against the possibility that later generations mistakenly ascribed ḥadīths to certain Companions or purposely invented them. I only argue against the total rejection of the possibility that there are ḥadīths which go back to Companions. In other words, the claim of each transmitter to have received a particular ḥadīth from his informant must be investigated to establish whether or not it is true. Yet, like many scholars, I argue that if there is conclusive evidence that a particular ḥadīth goes back to two or more Companions and the latter claim to have received the ḥadīth from the Prophet, then their ascription must be regarded as trustworthy.

63 Syuhudi Ismail, Kaidah Kesahihan Sanad Hadis, p. 124.
If the view of al-Shāfi‘ī is preferred, we encounter the question of how much we can trust the transmission line of a single transmitter. This question is closely related to the issue of how we can assess, with some degrees of certainty, the reliability of a transmitter, which has been explained above. In Western scholarship this kind of transmission is known as ”single strand”, and its historical reliability is debated. Juynboll rejected the historicity of such a transmission. In his view, it is historically improbable to imagine that in early Islam a certain transmitter gave his ṣaḥīfās to just one pupil to be copied, and the latter passed them on similarly to just one pupil to be copied and the last mentioned passed them on to another single pupil to be copied again in the same fashion, because in early Islam, according to Juynboll, ṣaḥīfās are described as going from hand to hand, even if there was no formal master-pupil relationship between the original compiler and later transmitters. Motzki interprets the phenomenon of single strands differently. A single strand, in his view, does not necessarily mean that it was the only way, through which the ḥadīth was transmitted. Single strand exclusively means that when spreading ḥadīths, common links or collectors mentioned only one way of transmission. This difference of interpretation will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter.

The traditionists admitted the difficulties of detecting ṣabbdh ḥadīths. This is because the transmitters of an irregular ḥadīth are considered reliable by scholars of ḥadīth, and the transmission seems to be uninterrupted. It can only be discovered after research in depth by, for example, comparing many isnāds and matnṣ of related ḥadīths. Only those who are well-trained and well-versed in the scrutinizing of ḥadīths can detect ṣabbdh ḥadīths.

64 This term is coined by Juynboll.
65 The meaning of this term and how it works will be elaborated in the next chapter.
66 Harald Motzki, ”Quo vadis, Ḥadīth Forschung?”, pp. 45-46.
67 See the following discussion on the concept of „common link“.
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3. Free from ʿilla.

A maʿlūl ḥadīth (defective ḥadīth) is one that appears to be sound at first sight, but when studied more carefully a disqualifying factor becomes obvious. Such factors can be: (1) declaring a ḥadīth musnad when it is in fact mursal, or marjiʿ when it is in fact mauquf; (2) that a transmitter narrated a ḥadīth from a shaykh (teacher) when in fact he did not meet the latter; or attributing a ḥadīth to a certain Companion when in fact it comes from another Companion. This defect can happen not only to the isnād but also to the matn. Only those who are well versed, having excellent memories and are expert of isnāds and matns can distinguish defective ḥadīths from reliable ones. ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. Mahdī (d. 194) even said that in order to be able to reveal a maʿlūl ḥadīth, one needs intuition (ilhām). Ibn al-Madīnī (d. 234) and al-Khāṭib al-Baghdādī (d. 463) said that a defect in the isnād can only be revealed if all isnāds of a particular ḥadīth are collated and analyzed. Being a very complicated branch of mustalah al-ḥadīth, only a few scholars such as Ibn al-Madīnī (d. 234), Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327), al-Khallāl (d. 311) and Dāruqutnī (d. 385) have compiled books about it. Based on the above explanation, it may be justified to say that it is not safe to judge transmitters as reliable or unreliable before checking what they transmit. The judgment, whether or not the transmitter of a particular ḥadīth is reliable, which is solely based on scholars’ judgment without checking it, leads potentially certain sound

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68 A ḥadīth which a traditionist reports from his teacher from whom he is known to have heard (ḥadīths) at a time of life suitable for learning, and similarly in turn for each shaykh (teacher), until the isnād reaches a well-known Companion, who in turn reports from the Prophet, see al-Ḥākim, Maʿrifat ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth, Cairo 1937, p. 17.

69 “Hurried”, i.e., when a Successor says ”The Prophet said...”

70 A narration from the Prophet

71 A narration from a Companion only.


74 Al-Ḥākim, Maʿrifat ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth, p. 113; al-Suyūṭī, Tadrīb al-rāwī, I, p. 252.

*hadiths* to be considered as defective *hadiths* when scrutinized more thoroughly or vice versa.

A *hadith* that does not meet the above mentioned requirements cannot be regarded as reliable *hadith*, and cannot have religious authority.\(^7\)

### D. Some Points to be Reconsidered

If we have a look on the criteria for determining the authenticity of *hadith* coined by Muslim scholars, an intriguing question appears: On what grounds are the criteria based? Did they develop speculatively or were they based on a critical evaluation of *hadith* transmission itself? According to the "science of *hadith*" there were eight forms of transmitting *hadith*: (1) *Sama‘*, i.e., the student attends the lectures of a traditionist, which may take the form of a simple narration of the traditions, or be accompanied by their dictation, either from memory or from a book. The terminology to be used in this kind of transmission was *sami‘tu*, *haddathani*, *akbbaranā*, or *anba’anā*. (2) *Qira‘a*, i.e., the student reads to the traditionists the traditions which have been narrated or compiled by the latter. The terminology to be used were *akbbaranā* or *qara‘tu ‘alā*. (3) *Ija‘za*. That is, to obtain the permission of a scholar to narrate to others the traditions compiled by him. The terminology to be used in this case was *akbbaranā* or *ajā‘anī* (4) *Munāwala*. That is,

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\(^7\) The final verdict on a *hadith* is whether it is *sahih* (reliable), *hasan* (good), *Da‘if* (weak) or *maudū‘* (fabricated, forged). Ibn al-Salah classifies *Hasan hadiths* in two categories: (1) One with an *isnad* containing a reporter who is *mastūr* ("screened", i.e., no prominent person reported from him) but is not totally careless in his reporting, provided that a similar text is reported through another *isnad* as well (2) One with an *isnad* containing a reporter who is known to be truthful and reliable, but is of lesser degree in his memory of *hadith* in comparison to the reporters of *sahih hadiths*. In both categories Ibn al-Salah requires that the *hadith* be free of any *shudhūd* (Ibn al-Salah, ‘Ulūm al-*hadith*, p. 27-28). A *hadith da‘if* is one of discontinuity in the *isnad*, in which case the *hadith* could be *mursal*, *mu‘allaq*, *mudallas*, *munqati‘* or *mu‘dal*. *Maudi‘* (fabricated), is a *hadith* whose text goes against the established norms of Prophet’s saying, or its reporters include a liar. It can also be recognized by external evidence related to a discrepancy found in the dates or times of a particular incident. The division of *hadiths* into *sahih*, *hasan* and *da‘if* was first introduced by al-Tirmidhi (d. 279). This division was not known before him. See Ibn Taymiyya, ‘Ilm al-*hadith*, Beirut 1985, p. 20.
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to obtain the compilation of a tradition together with the compiler’s permission to transmit its content to others. The term to be used in this case was usually *akhbārānī*. (5) *Mukātāba*. That is, to receive certain written traditions from a scholar, either in person or by correspondence, with or without his permission to narrate them to others. The term used in this kind of transmission was *kataba ilayya* or *min kitāb*. (6) *Iʿlām al-rāwī*, that is, the declaration of a traditionist to a student that he received certain specified traditions or books from a specified authority, without giving the student permission to transmit the material. The terms used were *akhbārānī* or ‘*an (7) Waṣṣiya*, i.e., to obtain the works of a traditionist by his will at the time of his death. The terms used were *akhbārānī waṣṣiyatan ‘an or waṣṣānī*. (8) *Wijāda*, i.e., to find certain traditions in a book, perhaps after a traditionist’s death, without receiving them with any recognized authority. The terms used were ”*wajadtu*, ”*qāla*, ”*ukbirtu*, ”*huddithtu*”.

Nevertheless, these terminologies and their meanings are historically problematic, because, as some investigations have pointed out, it seems that in early Islam there was no fixed terminology for the different forms of transmission. In other words, the terms were sometimes used interchangeably. This may reduce the specific meanings of the terms. This does not mean, however, that these terms do not have any historical value. These terms have to be evaluated critically in every scrutiny of a particular Ḥadīth. Furthermore, in imparting and receiving a particular Ḥadīth, the transmitters might have used the terminology, which was usually used for *sama‘*, although they did not receive the Ḥadīth in that way. This might have happened when

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79 See also Harald Motzki, *Die Anfänge*, p. 92-95; Kamaruddin Amin, “al-Albani…”, p. 159-161
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due to the occurrence in the canonical collections of unreliable hadīth and in the light of the above-mentioned criteria, one may wonder whether the criteria of the collectors of kutub al-hadīths were exactly the same as the criteria by which those hadīths are assessed by later scholars. In other words, the above mentioned criteria were developed later than the time when the kutub al-hadīths were compiled. Moreover, a strict and consistent application of 'ulūm al-hadīth to hadīth collections may uncover a large number of unreliable hadīths, which have hitherto been regarded by Muslim scholars as authentic. This fact may lead us to wonder whether the theoretical criteria reflect the earlier practice of hadīth transmission and criticism.

80 For example see, Syuhudi Ismail, Kaidah Kesahihan Sanad Hadis, p. 191-194
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