

# Authenticating the Sunnah: A Case Study of Ibn Ishāq's Ifk Report

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## Introduction

In the twentieth century, the authenticity of early Islamic history generated much controversy in Western academic circles. Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht were some of the earliest Western scholars who questioned the reliability of Prophetic traditions (hadīth) by purportedly using modern historical methods developed by nineteenth-century German schools of Biblical criticism. One of the main tools of these methods was the process of cross-analyzing various textual sources to determine consistencies and inconsistencies that could reveal a report's reliability. Since then, many modern scholars have pursued this line of thinking, which has generated a lively debate among various schools and scholars taking different positions on the Prophetic history.

Sadly, this debate almost completely ignored historical methodologies that Muslim scholars of hadīth developed over a millennium. Muslim hadīth methodology focused on *isnād* (chain of narration), while Western historical methodology focused on the text (*matn*). As a result, both sides produced varying conclusions about the reliability of Prophetic history and tradition.

This is not to say both methodologies are inherently incompatible. Some useful means can be developed to synthesize both methodologies and to apply them, especially in areas where there has been less scrutiny by the Muslim scholarly tradition, such as the works of *sīrah* (Prophetic biography). In this arena, *isnāds* are frequently absent as a corroborative tool to authenticate parts of that history according to traditional Muslim historical methodology.

This investigation attempts to apply some modern methodologies and approaches of textual analysis and combine them with some dimensions of traditional methodologies of the hadīth sciences to solve a particular historical problem in the *sīrah*. This exercise will hopefully pave the way for innovation in Islamic historical analysis, by combining modern textual analysis with historical methodologies as developed by Muslim scholars. This approach can also strengthen the credibility of Islamic history in general and the reliability of the *sīrah* in particular. For this task, *Khabar al-Ifk* in the *Sīrah* of Ibn Ishāq is the subject of focus and analysis.

The reader must keep in mind that use of modern historical methods in this analysis is largely confined to textual criticism. This is accomplished by comparing various renditions of texts on the same topic to determine the accuracy of the historical incidences reported from this particular angle. Given this narrow focus on textual comparison, this analysis excludes issues of historicity of the various texts, especially in terms of the time gap that exists between the compilers of these texts. These issues would embody a separate project outside the scope of this particular study.

## The Case Study: Ibn Ishāq and the Ifk Report

*Khabar al-Ifk*, or the *Ifk* Report, is one of the Predominant incidences found in the biographies (*sīrah*), both old and new, of the Prophet Muhammad. This lengthy account renders a particular incident involving the Prophet's wife `Ā'isha, and subsequent reactions of the Prophet

and Muslim community. The story proceeds as follows. On the return to Madīnah from a raid, the Prophet's wife 'Āisha, who accompanied him on the journey to and from this battle, lost her necklace in the wilderness while the expedition stopped to take a break. The expedition left before 'Āisha returned from her search. Hoping that someone would realize her absence and return for her, she stayed in her place, only to encounter one of the expeditionary soldiers who trailed the force. He escorted her back to the expedition and then, shortly after the expedition's return to Madīnah, rumors spread that 'Āisha and the soldier engaged in an indecent affair. The rumor persisted for a month, socially paralyzing the Prophet and causing dissension in the community. Finally, revelation came down to the Prophet, vindicating 'Āisha and the soldier, and punishment was handed out to those who bore direct responsibility for disseminating the rumor.

Ibn Ishāq's biography, the oldest complete *sīrah* to reach us, includes one of the most comprehensive accounts of this incident -- one that draws on all the various historical sources on the Prophet's life. This analysis more closely examines Ibn Ishāq's version of this incident, as found in Ibn Hishām's rendition of Ibn Ishāq's biography of the Prophet, and traces the historical sources he used to construct that account. This approach can lead us to discover how much of Ibn Ishāq's account derives from the evidence he possessed and how much of the account reflects Ibn Ishāq's interpretation and framing. Via these means, we can illustrate how historians document history.

### **Historical Sources for Ibn Ishāq's Account of the *Ifk* Incident**

In the Muslim tradition, a method developed to track the list of narrators who narrated the report about the Prophet's lifetime up to the time that the report was officially documented in books. Later generations of Muslims could then authenticate information about the Prophetic period and scrutinize the human sources that provided the information to determine their validity. In his *Sīrah* (biography of the Prophet Muhammad), Ibn Ishāq inconsistently followed this method, but fortunately in this case he does, which allows for this investigation. This is not altogether clear does Ibn Ishāq consistently or inconsistently follow this method with regard to the *Ifk* Report?

Ibn Ishāq named three sources or chains of narration to construct his account. Moreover, Ibn Ishāq declared that his account was a synthesis of all three sources.<sup>[1]</sup> The objective is to see how he constructed his account of this incident from these sources, as his account is a combination of these three narrations (sources) and does not trace the particular passages back to their original sources.

Fortunately, Ibn Ishāq did document the source of his information by providing chains of narrators/transmitters that supplied him with the historical information relevant to his account. One can verify the historical content that might have been furnished by taking these chains of narrations and trying to find them in external sources outside of Ibn Ishāq's biography. Once they are individually tracked down from the external sources, we can see what was said in each one to determine the reliability of Ibn Ishāq's own account and how he used this information furnished to him to construct his own account.

Before doing so, a few methodological concerns must be mentioned. First, the accounts of the *Ifk* incident in the various narrations found in sources external to Ibn Ishāq's biography also contain differences, but this analysis will not call attention to those outside the scope of the investigation.<sup>[2]</sup> This investigation only focus on how this incident is rendered in the three narrations<sup>[3]</sup> as they exist in external sources, and compare and contrast them with Ibn Ishāq's

account. Similarities and differences in these accounts will be highlighted only in reference to Ibn Ishāq's account.

The reader should consider one important caveat. As there are different narrations of the *Ifk* report, there are also various narrators/transmitter of these reports in the various written compilations containing these historical reports (designated here as sources). Yet, as will become evident, compilers like Ibn Ishāq are treated as transmitters of historical reports in the analysis of the various historical narrations used here, because all compilers of historical reports are also, by default, transmitters. However, their role is wider than merely transmitting individual historical accounts, as is the case for transmitters/narrators, since compilers have the added function of collecting many historical accounts and including them in one work. In their act of compiling, they also transmit information, and hence justify treatment of them as transmitters/narrators.

Second, comparison of Ibn Ishāq's account with the three external narrations will only highlight the major differences between narrative renditions of the incident and that of Ibn Ishāq's. Minor differences in wording and small details exist between Ibn Ishāq's constructed account and the accounts offered by the three narrations used as sources, as they are located in external sources. These minor details do not affect the overall plot of the story. By implication, major differences affect the plot of the story. This analysis has narrowed major differences between Ibn Ishāq's account and the three separate narrations, as found in the external sources, to four major categories:

1. Contradictions between reports, where Ibn Ishāq's account contains information contradicted in one of the three external narrations
2. Inconsistencies between reports, where Ibn Ishāq's account contains information inconsistent with the three external narrations
3. Missing information, where Ibn Ishāq's account contains information not contained in the three external narrations
4. Sequence of events, where Ibn Ishāq gives a different sequence of events than? From that found in some of the three external narrations

The next section will compare Ibn Ishāq's account with one of three narrations he used to construct his account.

### **Results of Comparison of Text of Ibn Ishāq's Rendition of *Ifk* Incident with the Narration that Contains al-Zuhrī in Some External Sources**

The very first source Ibn Ishāq lists for his account of the *Ifk* incident is the report he received directly from al-Zuhrī through the following chain: "...al-Zuhrī told us from 'Alqama ibn Waqqāṣ, and from Ṣa'īd ibn Jubayr and from 'Urwa ibn Zubayr, and from Ubaydullāh ibn Abdullāh Ibn 'Utbā...that 'Āisha said..."

The accounts of the *Ifk* incident that ultimately trace back to al-Zuhrī (through the chain of narration displayed above) are numerous, and survey of that literature indicates this source is probably the most widely used in the historical literature when relating the *Ifk* incident.<sup>[4]</sup> For the sake of brevity, this investigation compares Ibn Ishāq's account with al-Zuhrī's<sup>[5]</sup> only as found in two of the most trusted Muslim sources on the Prophet's life: Bukhārī and Muslim's ḥadīth collections.<sup>[6]</sup>

Bukhārī’s renditions of al-Zuhrī’s narration of the *Ifk* incident are found in many places in his ḥadīth collection, but I chose the three narrations cited above because they are the fullest accounts of the *Ifk* incident. They are not, instead, abridgments of al-Zuhrī’s as found in other parts of Bukhārī’s ḥadīth collection. In the case of Muslim, his two al-Zuhrī renditions of the *Ifk* incident can also be considered full accounts in the manner of Bukhārī’s three renditions. When we compare Bukhārī’s full account renditions of the *Ifk* incident with Muslim’s, we can see they are strikingly similar in both form and content. The similarities are so close that even the same words and expressions are used to articulate the story— perhaps not surprising given that these reports all originate from al-Zuhrī.

As we compare Ibn Ishāq’s account with those in Bukhārī and Muslim, we notice a striking similarity in form and content. Likewise, the similarities between the renditions of Ibn Ishāq and of Bukhārī and Muslim of al-Zuhrī’s report on the *Ifk* incident are fairly close, in that the same words and expressions are often used to articulate the story. These similarities in all renditions indicate that the bulk of Ibn Ishāq’s synthesis of the *Ifk* incident relies on al-Zuhrī’s narration. Our two external sources (Bukhārī and Muslim) narrate almost the same account as does Ibn Ishāq, although they only rely on al-Zuhrī’s for the source of information (as their chains of transmission show). This lack of difference despite his use of other sources means that Ibn Ishāq primarily relied on al-Zuhrī’s narration to construct his own account.

Despite these areas of similarity between Ibn Ishāq’s account and Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s narrations with al-Zuhrī in the chain of narration, there are nine areas of difference:

1. While Ṣafwān spoke directly to Aisha when he met her in the wilderness in Ibn Ishāq’s account, ‘Āisha did not speak to him. Al-Zuhrī’s narration in Bukhārī and Muslim emphatically denies that either person directly communicated with the other
2. Ibn Ishāq stated that ‘Āisha moved out of the Prophet’s home to be nursed by her parents before Umm Muṣṭah told her of the rumors, while al-Zuhrī’s narration in external sources said ‘Āisha left the Prophet’s home after she heard the rumors from Umm Muttah
3. Moreover, Ibn Ishāq attributes ‘Āisha’s leaving to the Prophet’s lack of affection for her, while al-Zuhrī’s narration said Aisha wanted to go to her parents’ house to verify the news about rumors concerning her.
4. Ibn Ishāq placed the speech of the Prophet before the Prophet sought advice from Usāma and ‘Alī, while al-Zuhrī’s narration in Bukhārī and Muslim placed the speech after the Prophet sought advice from Usāma and Alī.
5. Ibn Ishāq noted that the Prophet complained in his public speech about men (*rijāl*) who were harming him, while al-Zuhrī’s narration mentions “the man” (*rajulan*). Moreover, in Ibn Ishāq’s account, ‘Āisha named the individuals alluded to in the Prophet’s speech immediately after citing the speech. She said Abdullah ibn Ubay ibn Salūl was the major culprit, along with other figures from his Khazraj clan and Muṣṭah and Ḥimnah. In al-Zuhrī’s narration, ‘Āisha placed a majority (*kibr* or *e*) of the blame on Abdullah ibn Sālūl, but mentioned the others in this context.
6. Furthermore, in al-Zuhrī’s narration, ‘Āisha blamed Abdullah ibn Ubay ibn Sālūl in the earlier parts of her story before the Prophet’s speech -- very different from the context where Ibn Ishāq placed her words.
7. In reaction to the Prophet’s speech, Ibn Ishāq noted that Usayd ibn Ḥudayr? Usayd b. Ḥudayr initially responded to the Prophet’s complaints and persevered in his commitment to deal with those people who harmed the Prophet, even in face of opposition from Ṣa’d ibn ‘Ubādah. Conversely, in al-Zuhrī’s narration Ṣa’d ibn Mu‘āth initially responded to the complaint and

Usayd ibn Hudayr backed Mu'adh's commitment to deal with those problematic individuals when Sa'd ibn 'Ubadah voiced opposition.

8. Ibn Ishāq's account contains a passage that is missing altogether from al-Zuhrī's narration: 'Alī struck 'Āisha's servant Barrīra (*Missing Information*). Yet, in a different narration (not going through al-Zuhrī) of the incident in Muslim's collection, some companions scolded her (*intaharaha*) without mentioning 'Alī's particular.<sup>[7]</sup>
9. Finally, in Ibn Ishāq's account, the Prophet ordered the three companions who spread the rumors -- Muṣṭah, Ḥimnah, and Ḥasān Ibn Thābit -- to be punished for their slander, while al-Zuhrī's narration in Bukhārī and Muslim does not mention this occurrence (*Missing Information*).

As addressed earlier, Ibn Ishāq appeared to rely heavily on al-Zuhrī when constructing his account of the *Ifk* incident, but this does not explain the source of divergences between Ibn Ishāq and al-Zuhrī. Perhaps details in Ibn Ishāq's account originally appeared in al-Zuhrī's account and were altered some time after al-Zuhrī and during the transmission process to Bukhārī and Muslim. Or, Ibn Ishāq may have altered al-Zuhrī's account to suit his own purposes. These scenarios are likely, but we must remember that Ibn Ishāq's version of events relies not only on al-Zuhrī's narration, but also on the renditions of two other sources that contributed elements to its construction.<sup>[8]</sup>

Given this information, these alternative narrations of the *Ifk* incident may explain why Ibn Ishāq's constructed account differs from that of his teacher al-Zuhrī. Perhaps Ibn Ishāq saw evidence in these alternative narrations suggesting that although al-Zuhrī's narration formed the core of Ibn Ishāq's account, it needed some alterations in light of other evidence he possessed. This possibility cannot be determined unless we isolate the other two accounts used by Ibn Ishāq in external sources. We may then discover what alternative information those accounts furnished Ibn Ishāq, and which might have caused his account to diverge from al-Zuhrī's in the mentioned areas. I will consider these issues in the next two sections.

### **Results of Comparison of Texts in Ibn Ishāq's Account of *Ifk* Incident with Narration that Contains Abdullah ibn Abī Bakr as Found in the External Sources**

As we said earlier, it becomes evident when comparing Ibn Ishāq's account with external accounts that contain al-Zuhrī's in the chain of narration that Ibn Ishāq primarily relied on al-Zuhrī in order to chart the plot of the story and in many cases determine the details. However, there are major differences between the two, as discussed above, and we must resort to other sources Ibn Ishāq used to construct his account to determine why Ibn Ishāq diverged from al-Zuhrī's rendering of events. One such source for Ibn Ishāq is the narration of Abdullah ibn Abī Bakr,<sup>[9]</sup> which states, "...Abdullah ibn Abī Bakr from 'Amrah bint Abdul Raḥmān from 'Āisha."<sup>[10]</sup>

This chain, as associated with the *Ifk* incident, appears in al-Ṭabarānī's ḥadīth collection (*Al Mu'jam al-Kabīr*).<sup>[11]</sup> Its narration of the incident resembles those of al-Zuhrī and Ibn Ishāq, although the narration starts by reporting the incident in the third person instead of the first person voice of 'Āisha seen in most other reports examined for this report. One of the transmitters -- presumably 'Amrah who got it directly from 'Āisha -- changed the narrative point of view to summarize the early events of the incident. Later in the narrative, the report changes to 'Āisha's first-person voice.

Although all the reports appear very similar, Abdullah ibn Abī Bakr’s narration is more abridged than those of Ibn Ishāq and al-Zuhrī (as found in Bukhārī and Muslim), which omit some of the episodes, such as the Prophet’s speech and subsequent conflict between the companions. More significant, this narration differs from the al-Zuhrī’s in a few passages, explaining why Ibn Ishāq may have diverged in his account from Bukhārī and Muslim (through the agency of al-Zuhrī). Significant points of difference follow:

1. In al-Ṭabarānī’s narration with Ibn Abī Bakr in the chain,[\[12\]](#) ‘Āisha and Ṣafwān (the soldier) directly communicate with each other while alone in the wilderness. We established that al-Zuhrī’s narration emphatically denies any direct communication, yet Ibn Ishāq chose to portray this incident in a way that at least Ṣafwān speaks to her, while ‘Āisha does not respond to him. Therefore, Ibn Ishāq converges with both the narrations of al-Zuhrī and the narration of Ibn Abī Bakr on one level and diverges on another. He concurs with Ibn Abī Bakr’s narration where Ṣafwān directly spoke to ‘Āisha, and diverges where ‘Āisha did not respond to him. On the other hand, Ibn Ishāq concurs with al-Zuhrī’s account in that ‘Āisha did not speak, and diverges from al-Zuhrī’s account where Ṣafwān did speak to her. Ibn Ishāq therefore took some liberty with his sources to construct the events as he perceived them. However, Ibn Ishāq’s use of one more narration as a source may have tipped the balance in persuading him to construct this part of the incident as he did.
2. In Abdullah ibn Abī Bakr’s narration, the Prophet mentioned in his speech that the culprits in this incident were indeed men (*rijāl*) and not a man (*rajulun*), which corroborates Ibn Ishāq’s account and its divergence from al-Zuhrī’s, and implies that one person was the primary culprit. But unlike Ibn Ishāq’s account, Ibn Abī Bakr’s narration does not quote ‘Āisha as naming these individuals responsible, which appears after the episode of the Prophet’s speech in Ibn Ishāq’s account.
3. Ibn Abī Bakr’s narration, as found in the external sources, has helped explain two of several incongruencies between Ibn Ishāq’s account and his main source al-Zuhrī. However, many points remain unexplained by this narration. My objective is to reach the elements Ibn Ishāq used to construct his account, and so far, several elements seem to be missing. Nonetheless, one narration remains in Ibn Ishāq’s account that may explain his relatively unique approach to events in the *Ifk* incident.

### **Results of Comparison of Texts in Ibn Ishāq’s Rendition of *Ifk* Account and Rendition with Yahya Ibn Abbād ibn Abdullah Ibn al-Zubair in Chain of Narration as Found in External Sources**

The final information source Ibn Ishāq used to formulate his account was a narration by Yahya Ibn Abbād ibn Abdullah Ibn al-Zubair.[\[13\]](#) Its chain of narration is as follows: “...Yahya Ibn Abbād ibn Abdullah Ibn al-Zubair from his father from ‘Āisha.”[\[14\]](#)

This chain, as related to the *Ifk* incident, can also be found in al-Ṭabarānī’s collection of ḥadīth (*al-Mujam al-Kabīr*).[\[15\]](#) Yahya’s narration contains some interesting features. First, it does not propose to give a full account of the *Ifk* incident, because it begins the event from the point where the Prophet seeks advice from Usāma and ‘Alī. Second, this narration abruptly ends after ‘Alī gives his advice to the Prophet[\[16\]](#) with the phrase: “Then he [i.e. the transmitter to al-



Ṭabarānī] narrated the *Ifk* report,” giving the impression that the rest of the story is identical to all other narrations, thus removing the need for mention.

Therefore, this narration will not help resolve the peculiarities of Ibn Ishāq’s account of the *Ifk* incident, given its lack of explanatory information. But further examination of the text’s features reveals that the short conversation between the Prophet, Usāma, and ‘Alī that is cited in this narration most closely resembles the language used in Ibn Ishāq’s account. (For example, compare the Arabic text of Ibn Ishāq’s representation of this episode in the *Ifk* incident with the language used in al-Ṭabarānī’s text for this episode.) All the other narrations (i.e. al-Zuhrī’s and Abdullāh ibn Abī Bakr’ narrations), used by Ibn Ishāq bear less resemblance to the wording of Ibn Ishāq’s account of this episode in the incident. Not only is similar wording used in both renditions, but Ibn Ishāq also used phrases in Yaḥya’s narration, as it exists in the external sources that are not found in the other two narrations. Let us take a closer look at the phrases:

1. In Usāma’s reply to the Prophet’s solicitation of advice on how to respond to this incident, Usāma responded, “This is a lie, and a falsehood.”[\[17\]](#) This phrase appears in both Ibn Ishāq’s account and the stunted narration of Yaḥya and not in the other narration cited above.
2. In ‘Alī’s reply to the Prophet’s solicitation for advice, the phrases used in both Ibn Ishāq’s and Yaḥyā’s renditions are almost identical (compared to the synonymous phraseology and abridged format of his response rendered in the other narrations cited above) with this exception: Ibn Ishāq’s text uses the word *tastakhlif*, meaning in this context to substitute. This term refers to ‘Alī’s earlier mention that women were plenty and thus the Prophet was easily capable of replacing ‘Āisha. Al-Ṭabarānī’s text with Yaḥya in the chain of narration uses the word *tastakhrij*, meaning to extract, when conjoined with the verb after it -- *tas‘al* (question) -- by the conjunction *wa*, perhaps meaning ‘with’ or ‘by’[\[18\]](#) in this context. ‘Alī’s response translates as follows: “Women are plenty, and you (the Prophet) are capable of extracting [the truth] by questioning the servant [of ‘Āisha], for surely she will tell the truth.” ‘Alī’s statement in its Arabic form as represented in al-Ṭabarānī’s collection is ambiguous but the translation above is one possible interpretation of ‘Alī’s words, considering the way these words appear in al-Ṭabarānī’s text and their surrounding context.[\[19\]](#)

What can we establish from knowing these facts about both renditions of this episode of the incident? Given these clear similarities in the texts, Ibn Ishāq most certainly relied on Yaḥyā’s narration for this episode of his account. Because I was only able to locate a truncated version of his narration, it is less certain how else Ibn Ishāq might have relied on this narration to construct his account. This truncated narration does tell us the following about the peculiarities of Ibn Ishāq’s account.

The narration speaks to some of the issues already raised in this investigation. The point where al-Ṭabarānī, later copyists, or publishers of al-Ṭabarānī’s text decided to truncate that narration of Yaḥya diverges little from the point where ‘Alī strikes the servant of ‘Āisha in Ibn Ishāq’s account. If indeed Ibn Ishāq used Yaḥya’s narration to construct this episode in the incident, then Yaḥya’s narration likely did contain some of the elements in Ibn Ishāq’s account that are absent in the other narrations analyzed above. Truncating Yaḥya’s narration in that way gives the strong impression that Yaḥya’s report of that incident does not differ from what had

been already reported about the incident in al-Ṭabarānī's collection, but instead masked a missing piece of the puzzle: 'Alī striking 'Āisha's servant.

Moreover, we should consider that the Prophet seeking advice from Usāma and 'Alī and the subsequent questioning of Aisha's servant represents an entire contiguous episode in the story. This implies that Ibn Ishāq would have taken this entire episode from Yaḥya's narration -- more sensible than just selectively utilizing the parts shown here to have been taken from Yaḥya's narration. This all suggests that Yaḥya's original report of the incident lacked where 'Alī struck 'Āisha's servant, and this part was lost during the truncation of that report. Thus, Ibn Ishāq did not invent this factum out of thin air and in all likelihood got it from Yaḥya's original and complete report.

What further supports this argument is the phrase found in Yaḥya's truncated report in Al-Ṭabarānī's collection: "extract through questioning" (*tastakhrij wa tas'al*). If this is indeed the meaning conveyed by the Arabic text, then it suggests an involved interrogation did occur as is implied by the term *tastakhrij* (extract). The idea that questioning the servant was more involved and possibly contained elements of coercion is further suggested by the narration from Muslim's ḥadīth collection (cited earlier in this paper) in which some of the companions scolded the servant. Either 'Alī or Usāma scolded the servant, because the context shows they were the only two companions present during this entire episode of the story.

External evidence indicates that al-Ṭabarānī's text contained passages of 'Āisha's servant being struck by 'Alī. In his commentary on al-Tirmidhī's ḥadīth collection, Sheikh Mubārakphuri claims that a report through the transmission of Abū Uways in al-Ṭabarānī's collection[20] contains reference to 'Alī interrogating the servant of 'Āisha by striking her.[21] Abū Uways is al-Ṭabarānī's informant in one narration of the *Ifk* incident that contains at the bottom of this chain the following narrators: "...Abdullah ibn Abī Bakr from 'Amrah bint Abdul Raḥmān from 'Āisha." We recall from the earlier part of this paper that this chain was the second source for Ibn Ishāq's account, but there is no mention there of 'Alī striking the servant. However, in weighing Mubārakphuri's statement, we ought to consider this narration might have also mentioned 'Alī's actions but was somehow dropped from the text.

This evidence indicate that the passage about 'Alī striking 'Āisha's servant, as rendered in Ibn Ishāq's account, did exist historically (if not today, then in some other obscure source), which accounts for Ibn Ishāq's version of this episode in the *Ifk* incident. Thus, one more peculiarity in Ibn Ishāq's report is explained, but we are still left with the following unexplained peculiarities: 'Āisha's move to her parent's house and the reason for it; placement of the Prophet's speech in the sequence of events; who responded first to his speech, Mu'ādh or Usayd; whether the main culprits were one or many; and whether the culprits were punished. The external evidence we have considered does not appear to directly resolve these points, so I suggest an explanation in the next section.

### **Further Consideration of the Evidence for Ibn Ishāq's Account**

It is unclear how Yaḥya ibn 'Abbād's narration could help resolve these issues had it been located in its complete form outside of Ibn Ishāq's biography, but it most probably would not have answered when and why 'Āisha decided to go to her parents' house. Yaḥya's narration, as it exists in al-Ṭabarānī's collection, begins when the Prophet sought advice of Usāma and 'Alī. All other narrations in the other sources cited here show this event taking place after 'Āisha's move. Yaḥya's narration would not have offered much information on this issue since it



apparently begins the story at a point after ‘Āisha’s move. Therefore, this element in Ibn Ishāq’s account remains unresolved, given my failure to locate them in the sources that he claimed to have used in constructing his account.

As for the placement of the Prophet’s speech in Ibn Ishāq’s account and its conflict with the placement of the speech in other narrations, Yaḥya’s account likely offered some negative evidence indicating the Prophet’s speech might have occurred before he sought advice from ‘Alī and Usāma, and not afterwards. This would be the case if Yaḥya’s narration, which begins when the Prophet sought advice from Usāma and ‘Alī, did not mention the speech at all. This omission would have indicated to Ibn Ishāq that the episode of the speech, which is firmly established in al-Zuhrī’s narration where Ibn Ishāq derives his own account, could have happened in a sequence different from that of al-Zuhrī’s, whereby Ibn Ishāq took the liberty to resequence events as he saw fit.

But this argument hinges on the speculation that in all other external sources, Yaḥya’s narration of the incident begins in the middle of the incident, as does al-Ṭabarānī’s collection. If this is indeed the case, then Ibn Ishāq likely surmised that the Prophet’s speech happened prior to his seeking advice. But since we cannot be sure how Yaḥya’s report really looked, this argument remains speculative.

As for the inconsistency between Ibn Ishāq’s account and all the other narrations regarding who responded to the Prophet’s speech first<sup>[22]</sup> -- Sa’d Ibn Mu‘ādh or Usayd Ibn Ḥudayr -- the external evidence weighs against Ibn Ishāq’s assertion that it was Usayd Ibn Ḥudayr. Yet, if the external evidence is to be believed over Ibn Ishāq’s assertion, what would have caused this inconsistency? We should remember that Ibn Ishāq places the *Ifk* incident after the raid on Banī al-Muṣṭalaq in the year 6 A.H. -- therefore, after the Battle of the Trench in year 5 A.H. We know that shortly after the Battle of the Trench, Sa’d Ibn Mu‘ādh died. Thus, according to this sequence of events, Sa’d Ibn Mu‘ādh could not have been present at the *Ifk* incident. Ibn Ishāq must have recognized that by including Sa’d Ibn Mu‘ādh in the incident, he would have contradicted his earlier assertion of the death of Sa’d Ibn Mu‘ādh in year 5 A.H. in his biography. He probably chose to ignore this fact in the reports that reached him and instead posited Usayd Ibn Ḥudayr as that person since he existed as a protagonist in that episode. This had to be done to keep his narrative consistent and free of contradiction.

But other historians, such as Mūsā ibn ‘Uqbā, disagreed with Ibn Ishāq about the date of the raid on Banī al-Muṣṭalaq and placed it in year 4 or 5 AH before the Battle of the Trench.<sup>[23]</sup> If this assertion is correct, the other narrators would have seen no contradiction in the placement of Sa’d Ibn Mu‘ādh at the *Ifk* incident in the same way that Ibn Ishāq did. Therefore, we can see the possible reason of the inconsistency that exists between Ibn Ishāq’s account and the accounts given in other sources.

Finally, this investigation addresses the problem of who was responsible for the *Ifk* rumors and whether the responsible persons were punished. What emerges from all the narrations, including Ibn Ishāq’s, is that Abdullah Ibn Ubay ibn Salūl is major culprit in the incident spoken in ‘Āisha’s own words. In this regard, Ibn Ishāq and his supposed sources agree. The question arises about the other two persons whom Ibn Ishāq named along with Ibn Salūl (and a third person, Ḥasan ibn Thābit, who was only implicated later in Ibn Ishāq’s rendition as part of the people who were punished), but are not singled out in the same fashion in the external sources. Apparently the external sources did imply culpability of all four persons involved in the spreading of the *Ifk* report, but these sources implicated them in disparate parts of the narration and not in one passage as Ibn Ishāq had done. This is also evident in the resemblance between

the wording that Ibn Ishāq uses for this passage and the wording of the passages in the external sources that implicated these individuals.

Consequently, Ibn Ishāq took a rather scattered narrative and tried to give it more narrative flow by lumping related parts together. Strengthening the argument, he placed the passage implicating these individuals in his narrative. As we recall, this passage follows the episode of the Prophet's speech to the companions complaining to them about those who did him harm. Therefore, it would seem Ibn Ishāq placed the passage in 'Āisha's words as a hermeneutical device to inform the reader whom the Prophet intended. This peculiarity in Ibn Ishāq's account probably results from his attempt to create a coherent and seamless narrative from the information passed down to him.

Regarding punishing the persons involved in spreading the rumors, the external sources are mysteriously silent. Only Ibn Ishāq's account mentions the punishment meted to three of the four individuals who were directly implicated. We do not know where Ibn Ishāq retrieved this information; certainly none of al-Zuhri's long accounts in the external sources or Ibn Abī Bakr's narration that I have been able to isolate contains this information. The truncated report of Yahya, being one of his sources, might have had this information, or perhaps he used sources that he did not name in his chain.[\[24\]](#)

There remains one last question about Ibn Ishāq's account: If Abdullah ibn Ubay carried the greatest culpability in the *Ifk* incident, as all narrations assert, why, in Ibn Ishāq's account, was Abdullah ibn Ubay not one of the three people punished? The answer may be found in the phrasing of the very last passage of Ibn Ishāq's account, where 'Āisha said the three people spoke openly about it (*afṣahū*), leading us to believe that although Abdullah ibn Ubay was the ring leader of the conspiracy, his underlings were instead caught on the grounds that hard evidence was available to convict them and no such evidence was found to convict Abdullāh ibn Ubay.

### **Remarks on Ibn Ishāq as Historian**

If we want to assess the accuracy of Ibn Ishāq's account of the *Ifk* incident regarding the external sources in Muslim literature, Ibn Ishāq's account seems a fair portrayal of historical information that might have been available to him. As seen in the analysis above, Ibn Ishāq's account does not diverge greatly from the general contours of the story as found in the external sources, and despite gaps in evidence, there seems to be enough historical information outside his biography to corroborate his account. Whether his portrayal of events actually reflects the historical realities of that situation is another question altogether, but it seems least likely from the historical sources examined here that the incident itself, along with its major episodes, is grounded in history.

On the other hand, we can see where Ibn Ishāq played a role in crafting the story by selecting what he wanted from available information to present to the reader -- by sequencing events in his narrative to improve the flow despite evidence to the contrary, and taking liberty to change the evidence he thought inaccurate. This would suggest that Ibn Ishāq was not just a narrator of events, but also a historian who tried to create a sensible picture of what transpired out of seemingly contradictory and inconsistent information that was available.

### **Conclusion**

This study was intended to demonstrate how modern methods of textual criticism can be effectively utilized with traditional *isnād* methodology to further scrutinize Islamic historical content, especially as it relates to Prophetic history. This demonstration did not bring the complete repertoire of tools of *isnād* criticisms to bear in the subject's investigation, but was restricted to information furnished by the *isnāds*. This approach narrowed the investigation to merely identify the sources Ibn Ishāq used to construct a particular episode in Prophetic history, and to examine his reliability as a historian from the perspective of modern methods of textual criticism.

This usage of *isnād* methodology did not utilize its main tools -- information about the reliability of the individual transmitters and the validity of the chains of narration -- to demonstrate the techniques of modern textual criticism rather than the traditional ḥadīth methodology. A fuller analysis of the subject would have brought these factors into play and may have shed more light on the questions raised by this investigation. Nonetheless, this limited use of the information furnished by the *isnāds* in this study helped draw greater focus on the techniques of modern textual criticism and how they may be used to further authenticate Islamic history, without necessarily dismissing the relevance of traditional ḥadīth methodology, as many modern Western historians of Islam have done.

Hopefully, after viewing this demonstration, the reader will be convinced that a harmonization of modern textual criticism and traditional ḥadīth methodology is possible, and that each methodology is not mutually exclusive of the other. Despite the different historical contexts in which each method developed, each of these two methodologies may indeed complement one another. Through their combined use, we may achieve greater accuracy with respect to Islamic history in general and Prophetic history in particular. Future generations of historians specializing in Islamic history will need to forge this harmony through selective and judicious applications of the strengths of each method to the topic of investigation.

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[1] See Guillaume, A., *The Life of Muhammad*. (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.494, for chains of narration and Ibn Ishāq's subsequently constructed report of the incident.

[2] For instance, al-Ṭabṭarānī, Sulaymān, *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr*. (“al-Mu'jam” CD, Third Edition, 2001).has dozens of reports of this incident (spanning approximately 80 pages of Arabic text), some containing the chains of narrators that Ibn Ishāq used in his account, and some containing chains of narrators that are altogether different. Their details differ somewhat in content, but that is not a concern here, due to the limited objective of trying to trace the avenues by which Ibn Ishāq constructed his own account from the three sources that he has cited—not to discover how the multitude of reports of the incident compare with each other.

[3] The three narrations external to Ibn Ishāq are all of the accounts of this story that use the same three chains of narrators as did Ibn Ishāq to construct this incident, and yet appear in other sources.

[4] Al-Ṭabarānī, Sulaymān, *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr* is useful here in showing the many reports (with variant chains of narration) on the Ifk incident that are traced back through al-Zuhrī.

[5] For distinction, one account of the story is attributed to Ibn Ishāq and the other to al-Zuhrī. Even Ibn Ishāq's account derives from al-Zuhrī's as indicated in the above chain of narration. But to facilitate the comparison between Ibn Ishāq's account and accounts of the same story that trace back through al-Zuhrī and are found elsewhere, one account is attributed to Ibn Ishāq and the other to al-Zuhrī. The same naming system applies to the other accounts that use the other two chains of narrators Ibn Ishāq also used to construct his story.

[6] See ḥadīth nos.2661, 4141, and 4750 in Bukhārī's collection and ḥadīth nos.6951, 6952 in Muslim's collection for a list of reports about the *Ifk* incident that are traced through al-Zuhrī by the very same chain of narration delineated above. You will notice in all the chains that the top narrators (i.e. those who come after al-Zuhrī) are different. These names represent transmitters who heard the report from al-Zuhrī (as did Ibn Ishāq) and narrated to those after them until they became canonized in ḥadīth collections like Bukhārī and Muslim.

[7] This narration comes to Muslim through agency of Hishām Ibn 'Urwa, from his father Urwa ibn Zubair and from 'Āisha. This chain presents interesting facts because 'Urwa Ibn Zubair was a transmitter. Also, 'Urwa is one of the four persons from whom al-Zuhrī constructed his account (see the above chain of narration). Thus, we can surmise the likelihood that al-Zuhrī had information about the harsh manner in which Barīra was treated – the servant was either hit or scolded). Somehow, however, that detail is not present in his account as rendered by Bukhārī and Muslim.

[8] See Guillaume, p.494, for other chains of narration that Ibn Ishāq cites as his sources of information about the story.

[9] Ibid., for where Ibn Ishāq listed this narrative chain as one of his sources.

[10] Ibn Ishāq would be at the top of the chain if we looked for the report in his book; or, a series of other transmitters who related the news from Abdullāh ibn Abī Bakr to al-Ṭabarānī would be at the top if we looked in al-Ṭabarānī's collection where the report is canonized.

[11] See pp.111--113, vol.23 of al-Ṭabarānī's collection for this narration of the *Ifk* incident.

[12] This will subsequently be called Ibn Abī Bakr's narration for convenience.

[13] See Guillaume, p.494, where Ishāq cites him as one of his informants.

[14] Once again, the very top of this chain would either contain Ibn Ishāq if we sought the report in his book, or a series of other transmitters who related the news from Yaḥya ibn Abbād to al-Ṭabarānī if we sought al-Ṭabarānī's collection where than the report becomes canonized.

[15] See pp.122-124 in vol.23 of al-Ṭabarānī for this narration.

[16] This advice is roughly the same as found in all other narrations.

[17] Guillaume, p.496; (*Ar. hadha al-kadhibu wa al-baṭil*).

[18] This is known as *waw al-ma'iyah* in Arabic and it implies correlation of action when used between two verbs with implications of causal relations between them. This is different from *waw al-'Adifah*, which is just a mere conjunction meaning 'and.'

[19] Both terms *tastakhlif* and *tastakhrij* are similar in spelling in Arabic and only differ in their endings, so both texts very likely used the same word in their report, but a copyist's error probably led to this minor divergence in phrasing. This can only be discovered if both works are compared to a number of their respective manuscripts to see if such a mistake was the case.

[20] Al-Ṭabarānī had many ḥadīth collections, but Mubārakphuri likely meant the particular collection we have used in this paper. It is the largest and contains this very transmitter in several chains of the 'Ifk incident.

[21] Mubarakphuri, p.33, vol.9. Some of the possible truncating and abridgment of al-Ṭabarānī's ḥadīth collection was probably done by the publishers of the printed edition and not by al-Ṭabarānī or later copyists, because Mubārakphuri was a twentieth-century Muslim scholar who had copies of al-Ṭabarānī's work that contained the mentioned passages. Therefore, despite the centuries of separation between al-Ṭabarānī and Mubārakphuri, copies of al-Ṭabarānī's work existed over the ages with these passages. The modern publisher looks to be the source of this truncation. In the typed text available, this passage was nowhere to be found in the more than 80 pages of reports in al-Ṭabarānī about the 'Ifk incident. Perhaps this passage is elsewhere in al-Ṭabarānī's collection, or Mubārakphuri may have referred to a completely different collection by al-Ṭabarānī.

[22] It was difficult to find a single narration in any account of the 'Ifk incident that has Usayd responding first to the Prophet's request. Therefore, this feature of Ibn Ishāq's rendition is unique.

[23] See discussion in al-'Asqalānī commentary in Bukhārī, vol.7, 536--537.

[24] An Ibn Umar narration in the al-Ṭabarānī's ḥadīth collection states that all four persons were punished, but we cannot be sure whether this narration was available to Ibn Ishāq.