REVIVING THE BALANCE

The Authority of the *Qur'an* and the Status of the *Sunnah*

TAHA JABIR ALALWANI

REVIVING THE BALANCE

The Authority of The Qur'an and The Status of The Sunnah

REVIVING THE BALANCE
The Authority of the *Qur'an* and the Status of the *Sunnah*

•

Taha Jabir Alalwani

Translated by
Nancy Roberts

Contents

Foreword

TAHA JABIR ALALWANI'S *Reviving the Balance: The Authority of the Qur'an and the Status of the Sunnah* studies the position of the Sunnah in Islam and its fundamental relationship to the Qur'an.

The work carefully examines the sensitive issue of the development of the oral and written traditions, the problems scholars faced despite painstaking work verifying the authenticity of reports as well as the character of narrators etc., and the ever growing complexity of a body of narratives, with a labyrinthine shroud of scholastic views, that were making the simplicity and clarity of the Prophet's (ṢAAS)* life, words, and actions, a burgeoning maze of information. Taking the without doubt praiseworthy intention and effort to emulate the Prophet into account, the author nevertheless makes the case that once the Sunnah had been collected, the Muslim community began to neglect the Qur'an in favor of narrations of what the Prophet had done and said on the pretext that such narratives "contained" the Qur'an, and it is with the aim of restoring the relationship between the two that this work has been written. The author stresses that the Qur'an should be given precedence with the Prophetic Sunnah tied inextricably to the Qur'an in a way that allows for no contradiction between the two.

The IIIT has undertaken in recent years to produce abridged versions of its key publications, and this translation is taken from the abridged Arabic edition, *Ishkāliyyah al-Taʿāmul Maʿa al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah*.

We live in an age in which time is at a premium in virtually all spheres of life, including those of writing and production. Copious intellectual, cultural and informational output continues unabated as

---

*ṢAAS – *Ṣalla Allāhu ʿAlayhi wa Sallam*: May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him; said whenever the name of Prophet Muhammad is mentioned or whenever he is referred to as the Prophet of Allah.

part of efforts to keep pace with changes in the public and private spheres alike, while publishing houses and websites vie to provide people with the latest, and most up-to-date information in the easiest, most effective manner. The knowledge economy that now dominates the world requires a process of 'creative adaptation' of information as one of the building blocks of the world community at large, hence the IIIT's series of abridged works. The aim is to help readers benefit from available information as easily, effectively, and efficiently as possible and to further develop their critical faculties so they become better able to contribute to the development of humanity. .

The abridged texts have been written in a clear, easy to read style, and while the essential contents of the original works have been preserved, readers will note that, in the interests of space, the abridged editions contain far fewer endnotes than do the original works. The only notes retained are those needed for clarification or the proper establishment of an idea, since the principle aim of this endeavor is to facilitate rapid absorption of the content being conveyed. Readers who wish to go more deeply into the topics of concern or to find full documentation of quotes may refer to the original works, which contain all necessary citations.

The work is being published to widen discourse, and to clarify the relationship between the Sunnah and the Qur'an. No doubt the subject is a delicate one, but it is hoped that for the most part both general and specialist readers alike will benefit from the perspective offered and the overall issues examined.

Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the translator.

Since its establishment in 1981, the IIIT has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts. Towards this end it has, over the decades, conducted numerous programs of research, seminars and conferences as well as publishing scholarly works specialising in the social sciences and areas of theology, which to date number more than

four hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

We would like to thank the author, translator, as well as editorial and production team at the IIIT London Office, and all those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book. May God reward them for all their efforts.

JANUARY, 2017

Introduction

THE PURPOSE of this book is to clarify the relationship between the Sunnah* – the sayings and actions of the Prophet – and the Qur'an. This relationship, which has been described in disparate ways and from a variety of perspectives based on changing historical circumstances, has given rise to varied forms of knowledge and expertise. This knowledge and experience have, in turn, left their mark on the sciences through which we examine the Sunnah. Earlier and later[1] hadith scholars adopted differing viewpoints and attitudes, while the stances taken by Islamic schools of thought – both juristic and philosophical – on specific types of Sunnah narratives reflected the concrete life conditions of the scholars in question. Similarly, differences over whether to categorize a given narrator as trustworthy or untrustworthy reflected disparate juristic, theological or philosophical principles that might lead some to reject this or that narrator while approving another, to accept this or that hadith while rejecting or reinterpreting those that contradict it, to accept or reject the criteria for criticizing the content of hadith narratives, and so on.

The question of how to approach the Sunnah had not yet arisen during the time of the Prophet, who instructed his followers to emulate him as he adhered to the Qur'an. It was he who showed them how to apply the Qur'an, translating its teachings into concrete behavior and using it as their guide in life. In order to ensure that the Sunnah fulfilled the practical role for which it was intended, the Prophet made a point not to allow the Qur'anic text to be confused with any other. Similarly, he discouraged the Muslim community from preoccupying itself with any text other than the Qur'an, even if divine authority was claimed for it. God has rendered the Qur'an so complete that it contains the entire

---

*For the various senses in which the word *sunnah* is being used in this translation, see the entry for "Sunnah" in the Glossary of Terms.

Islamic religion. It is the Qur'an that provides the explication of everything, while the Prophet's example provides a comprehensive demonstration of how to apply everything taught in the Qur'an.

The Messenger of God was determined not to allow believers' minds and hearts to be occupied by anything that might set itself up as a rival to the Qur'an, or to let their attention be diverted by things far less worthy. Consequently, he warned the Muslim community against writing down, or concerning themselves with, anything but the Qur'an alone.

However, once the Sunnah had been collected, the Muslim community did, in fact, neglect the Qur'an in favor of narrations of what the Prophet had done and said on the pretext that such narratives "contained" the Qur'an. They then abandoned the Sunnah narratives in favor of Islamic jurisprudence on the pretext that Islamic juristic texts tacitly included both the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

In sum, I hope this book will provide answers to the troublesome questions that so frequently arouse controversy or disagreement among those who concern themselves with the study of the Prophetic Sunnah and Islamic tradition.

3

The Qur'an as Creative Source and the Sunnah as Practical Clarification

THE PROPHET forbade his Companions to mix the Qur'an with his own words, and his rightly guided Caliphs wisely adhered to his instructions in this regard. Hence, the relationship between the Qur'an and the Sunnah was set down by God with the utmost precision, and was explained by the Messenger of God with the utmost clarity. The Qur'an is the creative source and revealer of divine ordinances, as well as the explanation of everything relating to them. It is the Qur'an that sets down the general principles and constants of the religion brought by all the prophets.

Muslims have always agreed on the Qur'an's centrality and supremacy. This agreement extends to those who hold that the Sunnah can stand alone as a source of legislation, since what such people propose as the basis for legislation is, upon closer examination, traceable to the universals set forth in the Qur'an itself. Hence, the dual process of establishing and clarifying God's laws takes place through the Qur'an in keeping with God's declarations: "Judgment rests with none but God" (*Sūrah al-Anʿām*, 6:57), and: "We have bestowed from on high upon you, step by step, this divine writ, to make everything clear" (*Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:89).

The Messenger of God recited the Qur'an, followed its teaching, taught it to others, and showed them how to translate its words into a concrete way of life, that is, into an ethical system that would govern their actions, their conceptualizations, their morals, their dealings, and their relationships. Hence, what is referred to as the Sunnah of the Messenger of God is, in reality, a clarification and application of what the Book of God had communicated. Therefore God said:

> But nay, by your Sustainer! They do not [really] believe unless they make you [O Prophet] a judge of all on which they disagree among themselves, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of your decision and give themselves up [to it] in utter self-surrender. (*Sūrah al-Nisā'*, 4:65)

This was because the basis of his decisions would be the rulings of the Qur'an. This fact is stressed as follows in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*:

> And unto you [O Prophet] have We vouchsafed this divine writ, setting forth the truth, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains of earlier revelations and determining what is true therein. Judge, then, between the followers of earlier revelation in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high, and do not follow their errant views, forsaking the truth that has come unto you. Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ. (5:48)

[FIRST]
The Concept of *Waḥy*

In order for us properly to define the concept of *sunnah* and understand the relationship between the Sunnah and the Qur'an, it is essential that we arrive at a precise definition of "revelation" (*waḥy*) as well. Only then will we succeed in avoiding the excessive leniency that has allowed people to classify as "revelation" other than the Qur'an everything passed down on the authority of the Prophet including simply statements attributed to him in narrated reports traced back to his Companions and their Successors. It should be borne in mind that according to *uṣūl* scholars, the Qur'an is defined as "the speech of God, which is to be followed and recited in a reverent, worshipful spirit, whose opponents were unable to meet the challenge to produce the likes of even its shortest surah, and which was thus shown to be beyond the capacity of any mere human being to imitate." As such, the Prophet's only role in relation to the Qur'an was to follow the angel Gabriel in its recitation, and to relate it to others as he had received it.

For the present discussion, *waḥy* will be defined as the divine speech which God sent down from on high into the heart of His Servant, Messenger and Prophet, which opens with *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* and concludes with *Sūrah al-Nās* (thus consisting of one hundred fourteen chapters, or surahs). As for all other statements, actions, or affirmations of others' words or actions attributed to the Prophet, it is unanimously recognized that they emerged based on a variety of considerations. Among the things the Prophet did, some were simply actions that would be engaged in by any human being by virtue of being human; some involved application of the ordinances and principles laid down in the Qur'an; and some he engaged in within the context of his functions as a religious and political leader, judge, mufti, teacher, guide and legislator. Some of these actions will undoubtedly fall into the category of "relativities" that applied exclusively to his personal circumstances and which were appropriate to his and his Companions' specific environment, time and place. Still others, by contrast, must be viewed as the basis for enduring legislation that derives its timeless nature from the Qur'an. Until or unless these distinctions are recognized, there will be ongoing debate over the relevance of the Prophet's life to modern times, and an ongoing failure to determine even where the points of contention lie.

By identifying what "revelation" (*waḥy*) is vis-à-vis the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the affirmation of God's oneness and its implications (*ʿilm al-tawḥīd*), we will be able to clarify a fundamental aspect of the question at hand – how to relate properly to the Sunnah of the Prophet. Then, in the light of this clarification, it will become possible to correct a number of other concepts as well.

1. What is the Meaning of Waḥy?

Al-Iṣfahānī wrote, "The root meaning of *waḥy* is a rapid signal." Since its definition includes the element of speed, the word *waḥy* has been used to describe communication that involves symbol and allusion, nonverbal sounds, bodily gestures, or writing. This sense of the word is found in *Sūrah Maryam*, which tells us that Zakariah came "out of the sanctuary unto his people and signified to them [by gestures] (*awḥā ilayhim*): 'Extol His limitless glory by day and by night!'" (19:11).

Hence, one meaning of the verb *awḥā* is to motion or point. This verb appears in *Sūrah al-Anʿām*, where God states:

> And thus it is that against every prophet We have set up as enemies the evil forces from among humans as well as from among invisible beings that whisper unto one another (*yūḥī baʿḍuhum ilā baʿḍ*) glittering half-truths meant to delude the mind... (6:112)

In *Sūrah al-Anʿām* we read, "And, verily, the evil impulses [within men's hearts] whisper (*yūḥūna*) unto those who have made them their own that they should involve you in argument…" (6:121). The verb *awḥā* as used in such contexts has been viewed as synonymous with the verb *waswasa* used in *Sūrah al-Nās*, which is a prayer for God's protection "from the evil of the whispering, elusive tempter (*al-waswās al-khannās*) who whispers in the hearts of men (*yuwaswisu fī ṣudūr al-nās*)" (114:4-5).

The noun *waḥy* is also, however, used to refer to the message God conveys to His prophets and messengers through a variety of media. The word of revelation might be delivered through a visible messenger who communicates via audible speech; in another situation, the prophet might hear speech without seeing where it is coming from; in still another, the word from God might come in the form of the instinct that tells bees, for example, to build their nests here or there (as in *Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:68), through a dream, or through some other form of inspiration.[1]

Ilhām (inspiration) from a linguistic perspective. The word *ilhām* has been defined as that which comes suddenly to a person's mind. It refers in particular to something that is poured out in abundance, and which comes from God and the heavenly realms. The word *ilhām* has also been defined as the act of casting into the heart something that brings a sense of tranquility, and which God grants to some of His pure-hearted ones. The verb *alhama* is used in *Sūrah al-Shams*, 91:8, which tells us that God has imbued the soul (*alhamahā*) with knowledge of both its moral failings and its God-consciousness. Ibn Sīnā defined the word *ilhām* as "that which the active intelligence casts into the human soul supported by an intense purity, clarity and serenity, and by intense

contact with intellectual principles." In his *Jamᶜ al-Jawāmiᶜ*, al-Subkī defines *ilhām* as "that which is cast into the heart bringing solace and peace, and which God bestows specially upon some of His pure-hearted ones." It could not, however, serve as authoritative evidence given the impossibility of having complete confidence in someone who is not protected from sin in his inner thoughts. The Sufis define it as "transfusion, or breathing into the heart, soul or mind (*al-nafthu fī al-rūᶜ*), and a casting into the heart of a knowledge not based upon evidential reasoning and inquiry." In this connection the Prophet is reported to have said, "The Holy Spirit breathed into my heart" (*inna rūḥ al-qudus nafatha fī rūᶜī*)." As for Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905 CE), he defined it as "a sentiment of which the soul feels certain and whose promptings it follows without knowing whence it has come. It might be likened to a state of hunger, thirst, sadness or delight." Drawing a distinction between inspiration (*ilhām*) and divine revelation (*waḥy*), Rashid Rida (d. 1935) wrote of

> what some refer to as psychological suggestion or revelation (*al-waḥy al-nafsī*), a phenomenon which philosophers have interpreted as a kind of inspiration (*ilhām*) that wells up from within an individual's higher self. Our disagreement with such philosophers centers around the fact that, in our belief, legitimate revelation (*al-waḥy al-sharᶜī*) comes from outside the soul of the prophet, having descended upon him from the heavens rather than having welled up from within him as they suppose. [Our difference with them also] revolves around our belief in the existence of a spiritual messenger who has descended on the Prophet from God. As God declares in *Sūrah al-Shuᶜarā'*: "Now behold, this [divine writ) has indeed been bestowed from on high by the Sustainer of all the worlds; trustworthy divine inspiration has alighted with it from on high upon your heart, [O Muhammad] so that you may be among those who preach in the clear Arabic tongue" (26:92-95). As for inspiration, instinctual behavior (cf. *Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:68), visions in dreams, and Gabriel's delivery of messages to the Prophet by appearing in a particular form, these are spoken of in *Sūrah al-Shūrā*, where we read that "it is not given to mortal man that God should speak unto him otherwise than through sudden inspiration (*waḥyan*), or [by a voice, as it were,] from behind a veil, or by sending an apostle to reveal (*aw an yursila rasūlan fa yūḥī*), by His leave, whatever He wills [to reveal]: for, verily, He is Exalted, Wise." (42:51)

God speaks to the Prophet, saying, "before your time We never sent any apostle without having revealed to him (*illā an nūḥiya ilayhi*) that there is no deity save Me, [and that,] therefore, you shall worship Me [alone]!" (*Sūrah al-Anbiyā'*, 21:25). In so speaking, God is referring to a general kind of revelation, since the recognition of God's oneness and the necessity of worshipping Him is not found only in the revelation granted to God's messengers "endowed with firmness of heart" (*Sūrah al-Aḥqāf*, 46:35). Rather, this is something that can be known through reason and human inspiration just as it can be known through special revelation. What the aforementioned passage is drawing our attention to is that it would be unthinkable for a messenger of God not to realize God's oneness and human beings' duty to worship Him. In a reference to the revelation that came to Jesus Christ, we read in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, "And [remember the time] when I inspired the white garbed ones[2]: 'Believe in Me and in My Apostle!' They answered: 'We believe; and bear You witness that we have surrendered ourselves [unto You]'" (5:111). See also *Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:87 and *Sūrah Ṭāhā*, 20:48.

In reference to the revelation the Prophet had been given, God instructed him, saying, "Follow you what has been revealed unto you by your Sustainer – save Whom there is no deity – and turn your back upon all who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him" (*Sūrah al-Anʿām*, 6:106). Similarly, He said, "We have inspired you, [O Muhammad, with this message:] 'Follow the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God'" (*Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:123).

In *Sūrah al-Anfāl* the word *waḥy* is used in association with the angels: "Lo! Your Sustainer inspired the angels (*awḥā ilā al-malā'ikah*) [to convey this His message to the believers]: 'I am with you !' (8:12)" Elsewhere the Qur'an speaks of God "revealing" to the heavens what their functions are to be, saying, "And He [it is who] decreed that they become seven heavens in two aeons, and imparted unto each heaven its function" (*wa awḥā fī kulli samā'in amrahā*) (41:12). If the revelation being referred to here is addressed to the inhabitants of the heavens, who are not mentioned explicitly, then we conclude that God revealed this to the angels. If, on the other hand, we view the entity to which the revelation was given as being the heavens themselves, then, for those

who consider the heavens to be nonliving it falls under the category of revelation embodied in the laws of the cosmos, and for those who do view the heavens as a living entity, it falls under the category of a spoken command. In *Sūrah al-Zalzalah* we read about the Earth being the recipient of God's revelation or inspiration: "When the earth quakes with her [last] mighty quaking, and [when] the earth yields up her burdens, and man cries out, 'What has happened to her?' – on that Day will she recount all her tidings, as your Sustainer will have inspired her to do (*awḥā lahā*)!" (99:1-5). Speaking to the Prophet about his reception of the Qur'an, God says, "[Know,] then, [that] God is sublimely exalted, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth and [knowing this,] do not approach the Qur'an in haste, ere it has been revealed unto you in full (*min qabli an yuqḍā ilayka waḥyuhu*), but [always] say: 'O my Sustainer, cause me to grow in knowledge!'" (20:114).

During the lifetime of the Prophet, his uncle Abū Jahl began a movement to deny his prophethood. At a later time, al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah headed a movement that aimed to place revelation on a par with non-revelation. Then, following the age of recording and translation there arose groups of freethinkers and atheists along with a variety of philosophical currents. There were those who, for example, discussed the nature of created entities, including human beings, animals, plants and inanimate objects, claiming that such entities had no true existence. Those who held such a view saw no difference between the miracles performed by prophets and the illusions produced by sorcerers and cult priests.

Early members of the Muslim community believed in divine revelation and prophethood as part of their faith in the realm of the unseen. Once they had witnessed the challenge to produce the likes of the Qur'an and it had become apparent how thoroughly inimitable the Qur'an was, they felt no need to explain revelation or to represent it in a way that would be acceptable to the philosophical mind or, alternatively, to those with empirical mindsets of the sort that prevail in our day and age.

2. *Qur'anic and Non-Qur'anic Revelation*

As we saw earlier in *Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:51, God speaks to human beings either "through sudden inspiration (*waḥyan*), or [by a voice, as it were,] from behind a veil, or by sending an apostle to reveal (*aw an yursila rasūlan fa yūḥī*), by His leave, whatever He wills [to reveal]." The "apostle" spoken of here is "the faithful spirit," while the "faithful spirit" who revealed the Qur'an to the Messenger of God has been shown to be the angel Gabriel. The Prophet had been prepared psychologically and intellectually to receive the revelation in some ways that are known only to God. However, we find indications of what these ways were in some verses of the Qur'an, in the form of either a question in the Prophet's mind, a thought that occurred to him, or an aspiration on his part to receive a decisive word from the Qur'an concerning some situation that required a response or decision. As God said to the Prophet when he was seeking clarity on the matter of Muslims' direction for prayer, "We have seen you [O Prophet] often turn your face towards heaven [for guidance]" (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:144). We also know that at one point, one of the Prophet's wives divulged a confidence he had related to her. The Qur'an speaks of this saying, "And lo! [It so happened that] the Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives; and when she thereupon divulged it, and God made this known to him, he acquainted [others] with some of it and passed over some of it" (*Sūrah al-Taḥrīm*, 66:3).

Since the Prophet's function was to convey to others the message he had received from God, he was not permitted to forbid or sanction anything unless he had received God's command to do so. The Qur'anic revelation that was given is what God willed to be included in His Book by way of details, situations and events from the era of revelation. Through the Qur'an we are informed of situations and events pertaining to the period of revelation and the completion of the Islamic religion. God revealed what people need to know about such matters in the recited text of the Qur'an, which He promised to compile, clarify and preserve from all distortion or conflicting accounts until the Day of Judgment (*Sūrah al-Ḥijr*, 15:9).

In this respect the Qur'an differs from all other historical records or accounts, not included in the divine promise, with which people have

tampered in one way or another. *Sūrah al-Najm* reads:

> Consider this unfolding [of God's message], as it comes down from on high! This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded, and neither does he speak out of his own desire: that [which he conveys to you] is but [a divine] inspiration with which he is being inspired (*in huwa illā waḥyun yūḥā*) – something that a very mighty one has imparted to him. (53:1-5)

One might ask: When was the Messenger of God, who was well-known in his community, accused of being deluded? He was never faced with this accusation until he began conveying the words of the Qur'an and announced that he was God's messenger to all people. In the passage just quoted, God defends His messenger against this charge, asserting that the words he is uttering are none other than "[a divine] inspiration with which he is being inspired (*in huwa illā waḥyun yūḥā*)." Being familiar with his accustomed manner of expressing himself, the members of the Prophet's community accused him of straying into error when he began giving voice to the Qur'an. In his defense, God declared that he was neither "deluded," nor was he speaking "out of his own desire."

Some people have interpreted the phrase that reads, "neither does he speak out of his own desire: that [which he conveys to you] is but [a divine] inspiration" as applying to everything the Prophet ever said. However, this interpretation fails to take into account the context of the verse in question. It should be remembered that God is not speaking here to those who believe in the Qur'anic message, telling them that they are obliged to act on every word that came out of the Prophet's mouth. Rather, He is addressing those who are giving the lie to the Qur'an. Nor, on the other hand, does this mean that there is no evidence for the authoritative nature of the Sunnah. As we read in *Sūrah al-Nisā'*, "Whoever pays heed unto the Apostle pays heed unto God thereby" (4:80). The behaviors in which the Messenger of God engaged in his daily life other than those directly related to the Qur'anic revelation were subject to the same human laws to which all other people's behaviors are, although on the highest planes of perfection. The Qur'an makes reference to this in numerous verses addressed

to the Apostle. *Sūrah Āl ʿImrān* (3:161), for example, reads, "And it is not conceivable that a prophet should deceive – since he who deceives shall be faced with his deceit on the Day of Resurrection, when every human being shall be repaid in full for whatever he has done, and none shall be wronged."

In some situations the Messenger of God would do something for which he was corrected by a verse of the Qur'an. In *Sūrah al-Aḥzāb*, for example, God says to the Prophet:

> And lo, [O Muhammad,] you did say unto the one to whom God had shown favor and to whom you had shown favor, "Hold on to your wife, and remain conscious of God!" And [thus] would you hide within yourself something that God was about to bring to light – for you did stand in awe of [what] people [might think], whereas it was God alone of Whom you should have stood in awe! (33:37)

In another situation God said to him, "No [other] women shall henceforth be lawful to you nor art you [allowed] to supplant [any of] them by other wives, even though their beauty should please you greatly -: [none shall be lawful to you] beyond those whom you [already] have come to possess. And God keeps watch over everything" (33:52). The Qur'an specifies the nature of the revelation that God has commanded His messenger to record and convey to others, and whether it includes only the Qur'anic revelation, or other types of revelation as well. God addressed the Prophet in *Sūrah al-Anʿām* with the words:

> Say: "What could most weightily bear witness to the truth?" Say: "God is witness between me and you; and this Qur'an has been revealed unto me so that on the strength thereof I might warn you and all whom it may reach." Could you in truth bear witness that there are other deities side by side with God? Say: "I bear no [such] witness!" Say: "He is the One God; and, behold, far be it from me to ascribe divinity, as you do, to aught beside Him!" (6:19)

This is a testimony from God and from His messenger to the fact that the Qur'anic revelation is the very message that the Prophet had been commanded to convey to people. The Qur'an is the true source of knowledge. Hence, we read in *Sūrah Fāṭir*:

And [know that] all of the divine writ with which We have inspired you is the very truth, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains of earlier revelations for, behold, of [the needs of] His servants God is Fully Aware, All-Seeing. And so, We have bestowed this divine writ as a heritage unto such of Our servants as We chose: and among them are some who sin against themselves; and some who keep half-way [between right and wrong]; and some who, by God's leave, are foremost in deeds of goodness: [and] this, indeed, is a merit most high! (35:31-32)

In defining the divine message and the Prophet's role in it, God said to him:

[You are but entrusted with Our message:] and so We have revealed unto you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the foremost of all cities and all who dwell around it – to wit, warn [them] of the Day of the Gathering, [the coming of] which is beyond all doubt: [the Day when] some shall find themselves in paradise, and some in the blazing flame. (*Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:7)

Elsewhere He said to him:

Thus have We raised you [O Muhammad] as Our Apostle amidst a community [of unbelievers] before whose time [similar] communities have come and gone, so that you might propound to them what We have revealed unto you: for [in their ignorance] they deny the Most Gracious!" (*Sūrah al-Raʿd*, 13:30)

And elsewhere:

Is it, then, conceivable [O Prophet] that you couldst omit any part of what is being revealed unto you [because the deniers of the truth dislike it,- and] because your heart is distressed at their saying, "Why has not a treasure been bestowed upon him from on high?" – or, "[Why has not] an angel come [visibly] with him?" [They fail to understand that] you are only a warner, whereas God has everything in His care. (*Sūrah Hūd*, 11:12)

Hence, the revelation given to the Messenger of God was defined in terms of both quality and quantity such that he could distinguish the parts from the whole. For unlike the revelations the Arab community had inherited prior to it, the Qur'an was recorded and reviewed during

the lifetime of the Prophet and under his supervision. We read in *Sūrah al-Isrāʾ*:

> And they will ask you about [the nature of] divine inspiration (*al-rūḥ*). Say: "This inspiration [comes] at my Sustainer's behest; and [you cannot understand its nature, O men, since] you have been granted very little of [real] knowledge." And if We so willed, We could indeed take away whatever We have revealed unto you (*mā awḥaynā ilayk*), and in that [state of need] you would find none to plead in your behalf before Us. [You are spared] only by your Sustainer's grace: behold, His favor towards you is great indeed! Say: "If all mankind and all invisible beings would come together with a view to producing the like of this Qurʾan, they could not produce its like even though they were to exert all their strength in aiding one another!" (17:85-88)

This passage from the Qurʾan specifies the source from which Muslims draw their religious knowledge and legal rulings, and which God has not willed to "take away." Rather, it is enduring, having been preserved by God's providence. The Qurʾan itself is the divine sign which demonstrates the Prophet's truthfulness. God challenged the Arabs of the Prophet's day to produce something comparable to the Qurʾan, but they were unable to do so. Doesn't this challenge by the Qurʾan alone show that the text that was revealed to the Apostle and which he was commanded to deliver to others is none other than the Qurʾan itself, God's final message?

God has made clear in numerous verses of the Qurʾan that there is no way for us to determine the accuracy of historical reports and narratives dealing with the miraculous unless we have access to a source of knowledge that can be demonstrated indisputably to be of divine origin. After an account of miraculous events in the lives of Mary the mother of Jesus and of Zachariah, Mary's guardian and father of John the Baptist (*Āl ʿImrān*, 3:37-43), God told the Prophet that:

> This account of something that was beyond the reach of your perception We [now] reveal unto you: for you were not with them when they drew lots as to which of them should be Mary's guardian, and you were not with them when they contended [about it] with one another. (3:44)

God warns us not to fabricate lies against Him or to claim to have legal sources to which He has lent no authority. In *Sūrah al-Anʿām* God asks rhetorically, "And who could be more wicked than he who invents a lie about God, or says, 'This has been revealed unto me,' the while nothing has been revealed to him? – or he who says, 'I, too, can bestow from on high the like of what God has bestowed'?" (6:93). Similarly, He warns against following anything but that which has been revealed from on high, saying:

> Means of insight have now come unto you from your Sustainer [through this divine writ]. Whoever, therefore, chooses to see, does so for his own good; and whoever chooses to remain blind, does so to his own hurt. And [say unto the blind of heart]: "I am not your keeper." And thus do We give many facets to Our messages. And to the end that they might say, "You have taken [all this] well to heart," and that We might make it clear unto people of [innate] knowledge, follow you what has been revealed unto you (*mā ūḥiya ilayk*) by your Sustainer – save whom there is no deity – and turn your back upon all who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him. (*Sūrah al-Anʿām*, 6:104-106)

This Qur'anic revelation is the Law which God commanded His messengers, and all Muslims, to adhere to. Any interpretation of this Law must have a Qur'anic basis and be consistent with Qur'anic evidence. Additionally, no such interpretation will be acceptable or valid unless the person offering it is marked by godliness (*al-rabbāniyyah*), a quality that all God's messengers and prophets have exhorted their hearers to cultivate. It was this virtue that God was speaking of in *Sūrah Āl ʿImrān* when He declared:

> It is not conceivable that a human being unto whom God had granted revelation, and sound judgment, and prophethood, should thereafter have said unto people, "Worship me beside God"; but rather [did he exhort them], "Become men of God (*kūnū rabbāniyyīn*) by spreading the knowledge of the divine writ, and by your own deep study [thereof]." (3:79)

Herein lies an affirmation of the fact that the Qur'an contains everything God willed to convey to the created world until the Day of Judgment. God has affirmed this by making clear that the task assigned

to His Apostle was to warn others based on the Qur'anic revelation he had received from on high. As God says in *Sūrah al-Anʿām*:

> Say [O Prophet]: "I do not say unto you, 'God's treasures are with me,' nor [do I say], 'I know the things that are beyond the reach of human perception'; nor do I say unto you, 'Behold, I am an angel': I but follow what is revealed to me." (6:50)

The Qur'an is the sign the Apostle was granted as evidence of his truthfulness:

> And [thus it is:] whenever Our messages are conveyed unto them in all their clarity, those who do not believe that they are destined to meet Us [are wont to] say, "Bring us a discourse other than this, or alter this one." Say [O Prophet]: "It is not conceivable that I should alter it of my own volition; I only follow what is revealed to me. Behold, I would dread, were I [thus] to rebel against my Sustainer, the suffering [which would befall me] on that awesome Day [of Judgment] (*Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:15)!"

Here we have clear evidence that the Messenger of God himself was commanded to convey nothing to people but a single legal source, that is, the Qur'anic revelation containing God's final, eternal message.

God has warned Muslims, and mankind, not to adopt legal texts other than those of the Qur'anic Law, which were recorded during the era of revelation under the supervision of the one to whom the revelation had been given. He has said:

> Hence, do not utter falsehoods by letting your tongues determine [at your own discretion], "This is lawful and that is forbidden," thus attributing your own lying inventions to God: for, behold, they who attribute their own lying inventions to God will never attain to a happy state! (*Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:116)

> So hold fast to all that has been revealed to you: for, behold, you art on a straight way; and verily, this [revelation] shall indeed become [a source of] eminence for you and your people: but in time you all will be called to account [for what you have done with it]. (*Sūrah al-Zukhruf*, 43:43-44)

From the foregoing we may conclude that the explication and

application of Qur'anic teachings that we find in the life of the Prophet, and which came later to be referred to as the Sunnah, are subject to the judgment of the Qur'an, as is the heritage left by all prophets and messengers of God. This is why we find the Qur'an correcting some of the Prophet's actions and applications of Qur'anic teachings, as in *Sūrah al-Anfāl*, where God declares:

> It is not fitting for an apostle that he should have prisoners of war until he hath thoroughly subdued the land. Ye look for the temporal goods of this world; but Allah looketh to the Hereafter: And Allah is Exalted in might, Wise. (8:67)

Elsewhere, when the Prophet had allowed certain fighters to stay back from a military expedition, God chided him, saying, "May God pardon you [O Prophet]! Why did you grant them permission [to stay at home] before it had become obvious to you as to who was speaking the truth, and [before] you came to know [who were] the liars?" (*Sūrah al-Tawbah*, 9:43). These are only some of the passages which demonstrate that it is the Qur'an that stands in judgment over the Prophet's actions. This was one of the ways in which God preserved, protected and corrected His Messenger, which in turn gives us all the more reason to have confidence in the Prophet's explications of the Qur'an. For this reason al-Shāfiʿī wrote saying, "No situation will ever arise for an adherent of God's religion but that he will find, in the Qur'an, a source of guidance relating thereto." In support of this statement he cites the first verse of *Sūrah Ibrāhīm*, which reads:

> Alīf. Lām. Rā. [This is] a divine writ which We have bestowed upon you from on high in order that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Sustainer's leave, out of the depths of darkness into the light: onto the way that leads to the Almighty, the One to Whom all praise is due. (14:1)

(See also *Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:44 and 89, and *Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:52). It follows that the actions and sayings which Muslims are called upon to emulate and which are viewed as divine revelation themselves have their roots in the Qur'an. If something lacks a Qur'anic foundation, it may still be drawn on as a source of wisdom and practical benefit. However, it will not have the character of divinely revealed legislation.

[SECOND]
The Sunnah and the Theory of Elucidation

The theory on which we base our concept of the Sunnah – one that delineates the nature of the relationship between the Qur'an and the Sunnah – we are terming "the theory of elucidation" (*naẓariyyah al-bayān*), where the word "elucidation" (*bayān*) is understood in the Qur'anic sense of clarification and explication. The Sunnah may be thought of as an applied, interpretative elucidation of the Qur'an. As such, it remains within the Qur'an's orbit and under its authority. The Sunnah is never autonomous of the Qur'an; on the contrary, it is inseparable from it.

The example set by the Prophet for the Muslim community is the summation of the life stories of all the prophets who preceded him and the guidance they brought. As God said to him, "Say: 'I am not the first of [God's] apostles; and [like all of them] I do not know what will be done with me or with you: for I am nothing but a plain warner'" (*Sūrah al-Aḥqāf*, 46:9). The actions of God's prophets and messengers embody the practical aspect of the revelations they have received so that their followers can emulate and obey them. As God declares in *Sūrah al-Māʾidah*:

> O People of the Book! Now, after a long time during which no apostles have appeared, there has come unto you [this] Our Apostle to make [the truth] clear to you, lest you say, "No bearer of glad tidings has come unto us, nor any warner": for now there has come unto you a bearer of glad tidings and a warner – since God has the power to will anything. (5:19)

The explanatory role the Prophet was intended to play is described in *Sūrah al-Māʾidah*, where God says:

> And unto you [O Prophet] have We vouchsafed this divine writ, setting forth the truth, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains of earlier revelations and determining what is true therein. Judge, then, between the followers of earlier revelation in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high, and do not follow their errant views, forsaking the truth that has come unto you. (5:48)

However, the Prophet's performance of these functions will only yield the knowledge, wisdom and purity of heart they are intended to if his followers abide by what he taught. As God reminded him:

> But nay, by your Sustainer! They do not [really] believe unless they make you [O Prophet] a judge of all on which they disagree among themselves, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of your decision and give themselves up [to it] in utter self-surrender. (*Sūrah al-Nisā'*, 4:65)

Unlike interpretation (ijtihad), analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) and their subsidiary disciplines, the Prophet's Sunnah is at once both explanatory and binding in nature. As God says in *Sūrah Ibrāhīm*:

> [This is] a divine writ which We have bestowed upon you from on high in order that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Sustainer's leave, out of the depths of darkness into the light: onto the way that leads to the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due. (14:1)

And as He says to the Prophet in *Sūrah al-Naḥl*: "And upon you [too] have We bestowed from on high this reminder, so that you might make clear unto mankind all that has ever been thus bestowed upon them…" (16:44).

1. The Concept of Bayān (Elucidation) as Understood by Imam Al-Shāfiʿī

According to al-Shāfiʿī, the process of *bayān* involves clarification of the Qur'an through its application and interpretation in concrete circumstances. At the height of his conflict with the *Ahl al-Ra'y* (People of Opinion) and his defense of the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (People of Hadith), al-Shāfiʿī interpreted the concept of *bayān* as implying that there is a degree of vagueness or obscurity (*ibhām*) in the Qur'an, which contains passages that are general (*mujmal*) or ambiguous (*mutashābih*) as well as allusion (*kināyah*), figures of speech (*istiʿārah*), metaphor (*majāz*), and ellipsis (*ḥadhf*). It is due to the presence of such phenomena in the Qur'an that it requires elucidation, or *bayān*. Al-Shāfiʿī devoted an entire section of *al-Risālah* to a discussion of the process of elucidation, which he divided into five levels. The first and second levels

involve the Qur'an's elucidation of itself, while the third level includes the ways in which the Messenger of God added specificity to passages of the Qur'an that were general in nature. So, for example, he detailed the command in *Sūrah al-Nisā'* to "be constant in prayer" (4:77) by specifying the number of prayers one is required to pray daily and the times at which they are to be performed.

The fourth level of *bayān* includes the elucidations provided by the Prophet's actions, that is, his Sunnah. The Sunnah makes clear those things which God left it to the Prophet to clarify. Al-Shāfiʿī stresses throughout his discussion that what the Messenger of God elucidated always had its source in the Qur'an. It was in affirmation of this point that he wrote, as mentioned above, "No situation will ever arise for an adherent of God's religion but that he will find, in the Qur'an, a source of guidance relating thereto, be it explicit or implicit." Anything that is not dealt with specifically and explicitly in the Book of God will be addressed through the general, universal principles it sets forth. Al-Shāfiʿī concludes his treatment of *bayān* with a lengthy discussion of its fifth level, which consists of clarifications that take place through linguistic cues, concrete phenomena or indications, and the like. It is here that al-Shāfiʿī helps us to see the relationship between *bayān* and language in particular.

Binding elucidation (al-bayān al-mulzim)
The Qur'an's self-elucidation is undoubtedly the highest level of *bayān*. Therefore, it is essential that Muslims familiarize themselves with it and give it precedence over all other types of elucidation. Of the remaining levels of elucidation, the Prophet's actions, words and affirmations are the only type that is binding on Muslims. The process of emulating the Prophet is related, of course, to belief in his sinlessness, that is, his having been protected by God from the commission of any sin, great or small, throughout his life. After all, if the Apostle was not sinless, then the divine injunction to obey and emulate him would entail a command to commit error and wrongdoing, which is unthinkable. Hence, all verses of the Qur'an that urge us to obey the Messenger of God may be seen within the framework of this structural unity, which commits us to observing both the Qur'an's elucidation of itself and its

elucidation by the Prophet. All other forms of elucidation are said by *uṣūl* scholars to be the subject of disagreement. Hence, assuming they can be classed as valid forms of elucidation, they are non-binding in nature.

2. *Bayān as Understood by Uṣūl Scholars*

Imam al-Rāzī divided what he termed "generalities in need of elucidation" (*al-mujmal al-mubayyan*) into a number of categories. He then treated the second of these categories under a number of different headings, one of which was "types of texts which require elucidation" (*al-mubayyan wa aqsāmuhu*) as well as the types of elucidation (*aqsām al-bayānāt*). He also devoted a discussion to the question of how to rank that which requires elucidation (*al-mubayyan*) vis-à-vis that which elucidates it (*al-mubayyin*). A study and analysis of al-Rāzī's discussions shows that he made numerous additions to the theory of elucidation as set forth by Imam al-Shāfiʿī. Nevertheless, one senses a gap between that which requires elucidation – the Qur'an – and that which elucidates it – the Sunnah – because of the extent to which the theme of moral accountability dominates the juristic mindset. The majority of *uṣūl* scholars held that even an action unaccompanied by speech could be considered a means of elucidating the Qur'an, the question then being whether or not such an action constituted a basis for a legal ruling applicable to morally accountable individuals. For details on the four points of view taken on this question, see al-Rāzī's *al-Maḥṣūl fī ʿIlm al-Uṣūl*.

The complexity of the ensuing debate reveals the confusion that came to surround the concept of *sunnah*. Nevertheless, scholars' conversations were interspersed increasingly with the notion that the Sunnah revolves around the Qur'an, since that which elucidates (in this case, the Sunnah) should not go beyond or take precedence over that which is being elucidated (the Qur'an).

3. *The Word Bayān as a Technical Term*

The purpose in elucidating the Qur'an is to minimize disagreements over how it is to be understood and thereby help people to apply it more effectively (cf. *Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:44). As we have seen, this elucidation

takes place through actions, words and the act of approving this or that idea or action (cf. *Sūrah al-Māʾidah*, 5:15). However, there are rules to which the process of elucidation must adhere. For example, it must not change the essential meaning of what is being elucidated or introduce anything extraneous into it.

The role played by the Qurʾan in relation to the legacies left by earlier prophets is to affirm whatever truth they still contain, and to purge them of whatever distortion or manipulation they had been subjected to. Hence, the Seal of the Prophets was assigned a dual task: (1) to bring the "unlettered" Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula ("unlettered" in the sense of having no scripture of their own) into the fold of "the people of the Book," that is, those communities who possess a holy writ, by giving them the Qurʾan, and (2) to show the Jews and Christians how the Qurʾan conveys the truths found in earlier revelation through a corrective rereading of the legacy brought by earlier messengers and prophets.

Through the noble life he lived, the Messenger of God modeled the best possible way to preserve the prophetic heritage on the practical level and to apply the Qurʾan's teaching to day-to-day reality. Hence, God has tirelessly preserved His final revelation for His own glory. As He said to the Prophet in *Sūrah al-Qiyāmah*: "Move not your tongue in haste, [repeating the words of the revelation:] for, behold, it is for Us to gather it [in your heart,] and to cause it to be read [as it ought to be read]. Thus, when We recite it, follow you its wording [with all your mind]" (75:16-18), and in *Sūrah al-Ḥijr*: "Behold, it is We Ourselves who have bestowed from on high, step by step, this reminder, and behold, it is We who shall truly guard it [from all corruption]" (15:9). Just as God involved no other being in revealing the Qurʾan, He involved no other being in its preservation. In this way there came to be a single, authoritative point of reference for human beings in the Qurʾan.

As the final revelation, the Qurʾan enjoys primacy over not only the legacy left by earlier prophets; it also enjoys primacy over the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. As we have stated before, the Qurʾan eliminated the distortion and falsification to which the heritage brought by previous prophets had been subjected by correcting uninformed interpretations and presenting the message anew in a true,

purified form. However, in order for this process to reach completion, we must take one further step.

[THIRD]
Examining the Sunnah in Light of the Qur'an

By examining the Sunnah in light of the Qur'an, my intention is to follow in the footsteps of the majority of Muslim scholars from al-Shāfiʿī to Imam al-Shāṭibī (d. 790 AH 1388 CE), as well as those who came after them, who held that every reliable, well-authenticated Sunnah must have its origin in the Qur'an. Al-Shāfiʿī wrote in *al-Risālah*:

> Since God required the Prophet to follow what He had revealed to him, …the Sunnah could not possibly be in conflict with the Book of God. On the contrary, the Sunnah would be consistent with the Book of God by applying or clarifying the meaning that God had intended to convey through the Qur'an…..The Sunnah of the Messenger of God will never be in conflict with the Book of God. Rather, it elucidates it, both in its generalities and in its specifics ... The elucidation of the specific and the general alike falls under the category of exegesis … Every practice established by the Messenger of God will be consistent with the Book of God, either as a concrete application of an unambiguous text or as a God-given clarification of something stated in the Qur'an in general terms.

Some scholars have divided hadiths into three categories based on the nature of their relationship to the Qur'an. The first category consists of hadiths that are in full agreement with the Qur'an, and which Muslims are obliged to emulate. The second category consists of hadiths that add something to the Qur'an, and which Muslims are also mandated to emulate. The third category consists of hadiths that conflict with the Qur'an, and which are to be rejected.

Most scholars of the Hanafite school made examination of the Sunnah in light of the Qur'an the foundation of their hadith criticism. Al-Sarakhsī (d. 286 AH/899 CE), for example, divided discontinuity in historical reports into two types: (1) discontinuity in wording by which he meant hadiths classified as *mursal*, and (2) discontinuity in meaning. Al-Sarakhsī then went on to explain that what he meant by discontinuity in meaning was for a hadith to be in conflict with the Qur'an.

Such a hadith would not be acceptable, nor would it be a valid basis for action, whether the verse in question is general in meaning or specific, and whether or not it is subject to more than one interpretation.

Al-Sarakhsī arrived at his conclusions based on both authoritative tradition (*al-naql*) and reason (*al-ʿaql*). As for the authoritative tradition, it consisted in the Prophet's statement that "every condition not found in the Book of God is invalid, since the Book of God is truer [than any other sources]." Al-Sarakhsī interpreted the phrase "every condition not found in the Book of God" to mean every condition which conflicts with the Qur'an. He also cited the Prophet's saying:

> After I am gone, you will have numerous accounts of things I said and did. If someone attributes some action or saying to me, compare it to the Book of God. If it agrees with the Book of God, accept it and know that it is from me. If it conflicts with the Book of God, reject it, and know that I had had no part in it.

Al-Sarakhsī's rational argument centers around a process of comparing the Qur'an to the report vis-à-vis its reliability, since the Qur'an is known to be fully trustworthy, whereas there is uncertainty surrounding whether a "solitary" hadith (*āḥād*) can be reliably traced back to the Messenger of God. When it is impossible to adopt both the report and the Qur'anic text, one must adopt the more certain and abandon what is subject to doubt. The same principle applies to both specific rulings and general principles. A general principle is a binding source for legal rulings in the area it addresses just as a specific text is. The same is true with respect to texts that can support more than one interpretation depending on the context, and those that can support only one interpretation and whose meaning is unambiguous without the need for clarification from the context. The reason for this is that the text of the Qur'an is of certain reliability, while the text of a hadith can never be deemed devoid of uncertainty due to the possibility that it was narrated not verbatim, but only paraphrased in terms of its overall meaning.

The text of the Qur'an enjoys greater reliability than a solitary report (*khabar āḥād*) based on the Qur'an's being classed as *mutawātir* that is, something that has been handed down through such a large

number of narrators that it would have been impossible for them to conspire to deceive. Hence, if a solitary report conflicts with the Qur'an this indicates clearly that it has been fabricated.

Stressing the importance of examining hadiths in light of the Qur'an and the most widely circulating, well-recognized Sunnah, al-Sarakhsī praised Hanafite scholars for following this approach, saying:

> These two approaches to hadith criticism are based on significant knowledge and provide an effective means of preserving the religion. For unjustified innovations and caprice have their origins in the failure to examine solitary reports in light of the Qur'an and widely circulating sunnah narratives. There are people who have treated the Sunnah as authoritative despite the existence of uncertainty as to whether it actually originated with the Messenger of God, and even though it does not provide certain knowledge. Such people then proceed to interpret the Qur'an and the widely circulating sunnah narratives in light of such dubious reports. In so doing, they turn things on their heads by making the follower into the leader, and by treating that which lacks certainty as their foundation. As a consequence, they fall prey to whim, caprice, and harmful religious innovation no less than those who reject any solitary hadith for the mere reason that it is not *mutawātir* ….By contrast, those of our scholars who give each kind of evidence its proper weight are on the right path. These scholars treat the Qur'an and the widely circulating sunnah narratives as their authoritative foundation, interpreting solitary reports, which are of less certain reliability, in light of them. That which agrees with the widely accepted narratives, they accept; that which they find no mention of in either the Qur'an or the widely circulating sunnah narratives, they also accept and require people to follow; and as for that which conflicts with the Qur'an and the Sunnah, they reject it.

Among those who held the same view as the Hanafites, albeit with slight differences, was Imam Mālik, whose approach was similar to that of the jurists of Iraq who weighed solitary reports against the Qur'an. Jurists of the Malikite school deduced from their imam's practice that he gave precedence to the apparent meaning of the Qur'an over the Sunnah, especially if the Sunnah came into conflict with some other standard, such as analogical reasoning or the practice that prevailed among the people of Madinah, and on this basis he rejected a number of hadiths. Imam al-Shāṭibī also supported the Hanafites'

insistence on the need to weigh hadiths against the Qur'an, and made mention of the fact that the earliest, most respected Muslim scholars had done the same.

As for hadith transmitters and others who attributed to the Sunnah as much authority as they attributed to the Qur'an, if not even greater authority, they did not weigh hadith narratives against the Qur'an. On the contrary, they vehemently denounced this practice, since they denied the mere possibility that any authentic hadith could conflict with the Qur'an in the first place. In expression of this point of view, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH/1064 CE) wrote:

> It would be impossible for an authentic report to conflict with the Qur'an to begin with. Every such report should be viewed as an authoritative source of Islamic law, since it will either be (1) an addition to what is in the Qur'an, providing an explanation of general statements found therein, or (2) a specification of exceptions to general rules set down in the Qur'an. There is no third possibility.

It appears that in the view of Ibn Ḥazm and those of his ilk, when God told the Prophet that he was to "make clear (*li tubayyina*) unto mankind all that has ever been thus bestowed upon them…," (16:44) this meant that the Prophet was to clarify what had been revealed in the Qur'an *through the Sunnah*. In fact however and as I have shown, what the Prophet was being told to do was to clarify the Qur'an through the Qur'an itself, by reciting it and teaching people its meaning.

In support of their position, hadith transmitters cited a particular hadith which indicates that the practice of comparing hadith narratives to the Qur'an is not required. Ibn Mājah (d. 273 AH/887 CE) related on the authority of al-Miqdām ibn Maʿdi Karib al-Kindī that the Messenger of God said:

> A time is coming soon when a man sated with worldly comforts will relate something I said or did. And he will say, "We have the Book of God among us [as a source of authority]. Whatever we find to be permitted therein, we declare permissible, and whatever we find to be forbidden therein, we declare prohibited. [However,] whatever the Messenger of God has forbidden, God Himself has forbidden."

According to al-Khaṭṭābī, this hadith warns us not to depart from practices established by the Prophet that are not mentioned in the Qur'an. This was in response to sects such as the Kharijites and the Rafidites, who clung to the apparent meaning of the Qur'an and ignored sunnah practices that served implicitly to elucidate the Qur'an. As a consequence, they fell into confusion and error. Al-Khaṭṭābī states:

> This hadith indicates that there is no need to examine a hadith narrative in light of the Book of God. Rather, whatever can be demonstrated to have been done or said by the Messenger of God serves, by itself, as authoritative evidence.

However, a statement such as this reflects serious confusion between what has, and what has not, been demonstrated to be reliable and trustworthy. As we have quoted al-Shāfiʿī and others as saying, a truly well-authenticated report of an action or statement by the Prophet cannot, in fact, conflict with the Qur'an. Ibn Mājah also relates on the authority of ʿUbayd Allāh ibn Abī Rāfiʿ, on the authority of the latter's father, that the Messenger of God said:

> Let me not find any of you sated with worldly comforts and, when presented with something I have commanded or forbidden, saying, "I do not know [whether this is valid or not]. Whatever we find in the Book of God is what we follow."

As for the hadith cited by those who hold that we *are* obliged to weigh hadith narratives against the Qur'an, hadith transmitters judge it to be weak. In fact, they hold that such hadiths are forgeries. In this connection, al-Khaṭṭābī quotes Yaḥyā ibn Muʿīn as saying, "This hadith was forged by atheists."

The hadith transmitters saw the practice of weighing the Sunnah against the Qur'an as dangerous because they feared it would lead to an abandonment of the Sunnah altogether and dependence on the Qur'an alone. Al-Khaṭṭābī wrote, "This is the opinion of people who have no share in the religion, and who have departed from the unanimous consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the Muslim community." In so saying,

al-Khaṭṭābī associated this point of view with the teachings of the Kharijites and the Rafidites. In defense of Imam Aḥmad [ibn Ḥanbal], Ibn al-Qayyim approves the hadith transmitters' view, saying:

> If everything that is required by the Sunnah but not required by the Qur'an were viewed as an abrogation of it [the Qur'an], then most of the practices established by the Messenger of God would be rendered null and void. People would say, "This is an addition to the Qur'an and should not be accepted or adhered to." However, this is precisely what the Messenger of God said would happen, and which he warned against.

The Kharijites, the Rafidites and other sects who were contemporary to this debate failed to reconcile their respective points of view. Jurists among the People of Opinion then introduced an additional barrier to acceptance of hadiths being weighed against the Qur'an. This barrier was termed "additions to the text," as these jurists rejected some hadiths simply because they contained legal rulings not found in the Qur'an. Such extreme positions aside, the idea of weighing hadiths against the Qur'an is a perfectly sound one; it is not an illegitimate innovation or later addition to the religion. On the contrary, the notion was in circulation during the days of the Prophet's Companions and was applied by both those who passed down numerous hadith narratives and by those who did not. At the same time, it should be noted that they did not compare hadiths to the Qur'an in all cases, but only in those situations where the reliability of a particular hadith had been called into question.

Shaykh Muhammad Abu Zuhrah (d. 1974) wrote:

> From this you will see that jurists representing the People of Opinion, who would not accept a hadith until they had examined it in light of the unambiguous verses of the Qur'an which require no elucidation, relied for their methodology on the Companions themselves, including Abū Bakr, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, ʿĀʾishah and others. Since these scholars modeled their approach on that of the Companions, they cannot be viewed as innovators in the negative sense of the word. On the contrary, they were "followers." The idea itself is a sound one, and controversy over it only arose due to particular circumstances and divergent ways of understanding it. This may be seen in the fact that the hadith transmitters themselves treated it, in practice, as fundamental to hadith criticism, and held that if a hadith

contradicted something found explicitly in the Qur'an, this indicated that the text of the hadith had been forged.

Methodological Difficulties in Dealing with the Sunnah

As we have seen, the task of formulating the relationship between the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah with the requisite accuracy and precision presented a major challenge to Muslim thinkers, and it continued to raise numerous questions. Some scholars held that the Sunnah could be an independent source of Islamic legislation. As an outgrowth of this position, jurists and *uṣūl* scholars concluded that the Sunnah was the second source of Islamic legislation, the first source being the Qur'an. They then set about constructing their intellectual legacy based on the distinction between 'definitive' (*qaṭʿī*) and 'presumptive' (*ẓannī*). The Qur'an, being definitive in nature, ranked first as a source of legal rulings, while the Sunnah, being largely presumptive in nature, ranked second.

At the same time, some scholars referred to the Qur'an and the Sunnah as *al-waḥyayn*, or "the two divine revelations," the only difference being in the areas of inimitability (*iʿjāz*), and unquestionability (*taʿabbud*). The Qur'an was seen as having been revealed word for word, and the Sunnah as having been revealed on the level of meaning, but not literal wording. The verses of the Qur'an thus served as the basis for a challenge to others to produce something equal to them – a challenge no one was able to meet – whereas the Sunnah was seen to lack this quality of inimitability. Hence, it was held that the Qur'an must be recited verbatim, precisely as it was revealed, whereas it was permissible to narrate the Sunnah in paraphrase.

Conceptualizations such as these yielded a number of dangerous outcomes, for example, the assertion that the Sunnah and the Qur'an might contradict each other, in which case they would have to be reconciled via abrogation, alternative interpretations, or by some other means. This attitude led some to imagine or suppose that the only distinctions between the Qur'an and the Sunnah were merely formal, having to do with wording and status. In this way, the meanings of the Qur'an came to be so intimately associated with the historical context in which the Sunnah came into being and the interpretations linked

with that context that it was believed that such interpretations could never be changed or breached. Consequently, it was deemed impermissible to explore any ways of understanding the Qur'an other than those that prevailed during the lifetimes of the Prophet and the first generation of Muslims.

Any understanding that can lead to the mistaken belief that the Qur'an is relative in nature rather than being a changeless document that accommodates all times and places should be avoided as a dangerous perspective. It does no good to speak of the general nature and inclusivity of the Qur'anic discourse if, at the end of the day, the Qur'an is going to be viewed as a relative text whose meanings are determined by time and place, since the upshot of this perspective is that the Qur'anic text is incapable of either accommodating or transcending the historical process of change. Such an outlook involves a disregard for the Qur'an-Sunnah relationship set forth in *Sūrah al-Naḥl*, where God says to the Prophet:

> And upon you [too] have We bestowed from on high this divine writ for no other reason than that you might make clear unto them all [questions of faith] on which they have come to hold divergent views, and [thus offer] guidance and grace unto people who will believe. (16:65)

> We have bestowed from on high upon you, step by step, this divine writ, to make everything clear. (16:89)

In the same vein God addresses the Apostle in *Sūrah al-Naml*, saying:

> [Say, O Muhammad:] "I have been bidden to worship the Sustainer of this City – Him who has made it sacred, and unto Whom all things belong: and I have been bidden to be of those who surrender themselves to Him, and to convey this Qur'an [to the world]." (27:91-92)

Verses such as these make it clear that the pivot and source of the message the Apostle was given is the Qur'an itself, and that the task of Prophethood was to deliver and elucidate this message and to present a concrete application of its values and precepts that people could emulate in all ages and places. There is no need for people to reconstruct this application, and if they imagine themselves required to do so, they

are mistaken. However, until we have precise definitions that enable us to discern the subtle differences between the Qur'an and the Sunnah, there will be serious confusion among Muslims as to where their "authoritative points of reference" truly lie.

Islam's intellectual history in the areas of jurisprudence and hadith scholarship, among others, is replete with notions that have not been well understood and which, as a consequence, have obscured the nature of the Qur'an-Sunnah link. Among these notions are, for example, that "the Sunnah stands in judgment over the Qur'an," that "the Sunnah abrogates the Qur'an," or that "the Qur'an needs the Sunnah more than the Sunnah needs the Qur'an." All imprecise and irresponsible statements indicate how seriously the relationship between the Qur'an and the Sunnah has been distorted in people's minds.

Filled as it is with references to specific individuals and to concrete events and situations for which it is easy to find counterparts and analogues in later generations the Sunnah has proved to be more accessible than the Qur'an as a source of input for the process of inferring rulings from juristic particulars. This fact has, unfortunately, reinforced the notion of a separation between the Sunnah and the Qur'an.

Matters have been further complicated by attempts to challenge the authoritative status of the Sunnah or to undermine its importance. By undermining the Sunnah's importance, however, we undermine the complementary relationship between the Sunnah and the Qur'an.

1. *Difficulties Relating to the Legacy Left by Uṣūl Scholars*

Many contemporary Muslims have only a vague understanding of the various tasks that were involved in the Prophet's mission and the distinctions among them. The process of defining the boundaries among these tasks is a challenging one that requires thorough, in-depth study. The leading *uṣūl* scholars, who have made numerous statements about the variety that marked the Apostle's mission, have recognized the distinction between the kinds of actions and behaviors the Prophet engaged in simply as a member of society in keeping with his inborn human propensities, and the things he did in his capacity as Prophet, Messenger, teacher, religious leader, ruler, and the other functions he

performed. However, they have not applied the same rigor in their treatment of the Prophet's statements.

Furthermore, *uṣūl* scholars made no distinction between the words and actions of the Prophet that were legislative in nature, and those that were not. When discussing Sunnah-related topics on which their respective imams had stated positions, they would modify the positions taken by hadith transmitters to agree with those of their imams, while accepting hadith transmitters' definitions for terms such as *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic), *ḥasan* (good), *mashhūr* (famous), *muᶜallal* (defective), *mudallas* (concealed), and *muᶜanᶜan* (containing the conjunction ᶜ*an* in its chain of narration). At the same time, they classed the various types of sunnah practices indiscriminately as "legislative." Even those spontaneous actions or statements of the Prophet that could be shown to have been performed or uttered out of simple habit, or in his capacity as a human being like other human beings, were treated as implicit sources of legislation.

Moreover, by promoting the view of the Sunnah as an independent source of authority alongside the Qur'an, such scholars opened the door to rulings that might be viewed as frivolous or unnecessary. Thus, for example, if a statement by the Prophet indicated that a given action was more or less neutral, it was classed as 'permissible' (*mubāḥ*). This stance led to a prolonged debate over the matter of permissibility (*ibāḥah*), the question being: Is something deemed permissible based on a legal ruling, or based on a rational judgment? The majority of these scholars insisted that permissibility is based on a legal ruling, and listed 'permissibility' as the fifth juristic category into which they classified actions. The list then became: (1) obligatory (*wājib*), (2) forbidden (*ḥarām*), (3) recommended (*mandūb*), (4) reprehensible (*makrūh*), and (5) permissible (*mubāḥ*). By classing permissibility as a legal ruling rather than a rational judgment, these scholars restricted the issue to that of demonstrating that a given hadith narrative was authentic. If this could be demonstrated, the matter was considered settled, since every hadith narration was assumed, *ipso facto*, to be a kind of legislation.

2. *The Juristic Method and its Dominance Over Approaches to the Sunnah*

Given the exclusively juristic focus on the Qur'an and the Sunnah as sources of legal rulings, Muslims began losing sight of the fact that, taken together, the Qur'an and the Sunnah are intended to build up human society and help us achieve a prospering civilization. Hence, there is a need to highlight the non-juristic aspects of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which have not received the requisite attention.

For those engaged in formulating juristic rulings, the Sunnah was a more accessible reference than the Qur'an because it dealt directly with events, individuals and situations for which it was easy to find counterparts and analogues in later times. This fact further reinforced the notion of a separation between the Qur'an and the Sunnah, both of which were increasingly read and interpreted from an atomistic perspective that caused scholars to lose sight of the overarching structural, thematic and functional unity between them. This development served in turn to entrench the notion of a hierarchy between the Qur'an and the Sunnah which jurists upheld based on a forged hadith narrated on the authority of Muʿādh ibn Jabal.[3]

This hierarchy is based on a set of mistaken assumptions. The first of these is that the verses of the Qur'an are finite, whereas the number of situations and cases that might conceivably face human beings is infinite. But, we ask, how can the verses of the Qur'an be finite when God has said, "We have bestowed from on high upon you, step by step, this divine writ, to make everything clear" (*al-Naḥl* 16:89)? The two subsequent verses mention universals such as justice, kindness, generosity and faithfulness to one's word, which serves to show how the Qur'an encompasses everything that has happened, or ever will happen, among human beings. God has told us explicitly, in fact, that He has neglected nothing in the Qur'an (*al-Anʿām* 6:38).

The second mistaken assumption is that Muʿādh would only have looked for rulings in the Sunnah after despairing of finding what he was looking for in the Qur'an. Such an assumption runs contrary to the complementary relationship God established between the Qur'an and the Prophet's practical application of its teachings. Another problematic assumption of relevance here is that one only engages in ijtihad

when one finds no ruling on the issue in question in either the Qur'an or the Sunnah. We know from abundant evidence in Islamic legal sources that human beings' foremost duty is to know God. However, such knowledge begins with rational investigation, followed by examination of the Prophet's claims and the miracle he was given, and ending with acknowledgment of and faith in what he brought.

When we realize this fact, we discover that most of the controversy that raged of old and which rages still, over the authority and autonomy of the Sunnah as a source of Islamic legislation and whether the Sunnah stands in judgment over the Qur'an or vice-versa has grown out of our limitations as human beings, who have to investigate and digest the more important things before going on to the less important ones. Someone might object at this juncture that someone who engages in ijtihad to resolve a question first gathers all the relevant hadiths at his disposal; he then sifts, classifies and studies them, determining which of them have abrogated others and which have been abrogated, which are of unqualified validity and which require qualification, which are general and which are specific, which are broad and which are narrow, and so on. This being the case, the reading being done is comprehensive. Why, then, is it described as being partial?

The answer to this question is that when we speak of a comprehensive or inclusive reading, we are not speaking of the approach described above. For although it may appear at first glance to be comprehensive and inclusive, it does not revolve around the universals of the Sunnah and the Qur'an as a whole. Rather, it revolves around a universal value as it applies to a particular situation or juristic inquiry. A comprehensive, inclusive reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah is, by contrast, the discovery of overarching, unchanging values through an investigation of the Revelation's overall content and aim and human beings' purposes in relation to the entire cosmos. The overarching, unchanging values to which I am referring include for example the oneness of the Divine (*al-tawḥīd*), the need for self-purification (*al-tazkiyah*), and the goodness of progress and prosperity (*al-ʿumrān*). They also include the values of justice, freedom, and the fulfillment of human needs from the most basic material necessities to the level of more abstract, spiritual and esthetic needs. Recognition of these governing values leads naturally to

the formulation of regulatory principles, the disclosure of unstated assumptions, and the identification of methodological determinants such as philosophical premises and assumptions.

Interpretations founded on the juristic model alone may have contributed to a failure to discern the need for a comprehensive approach that views particular situations and Qur'anic verses within the broader context of the overarching principles found in the Qur'an.

3. Isnād Methodology in Isolation

Isnād-based methodology has been viewed by some as an unrivalled means of demonstrating a hadith's authenticity and reliability. This view is based on the assumption that there is nothing about the actual content of a hadith that would render it inauthentic or unreliable. If this assumption is correct, then if the *isnād* is judged to be sound, nothing more needs to be said about the hadith in question. However, when the content of a hadith is critiqued based on exacting, knowledge-based criteria established by hadith transmitters themselves, these criteria can be fruitfully integrated with and complemented by *isnād*-based criticism. We then begin to see the Sunnah not as a collection of disjointed texts, but, rather, as a means of applying the values and teachings of the Qur'an.

The confidence placed in *isnād*-based methodology was based on the assumption that the Qur'an's unassailable authority was derived from its having been transmitted by significant numbers of reliable narrators from one generation to the next. In fact, however, the Qur'an had been preserved from within by God Himself so that no falsehood could infiltrate it regardless of how many, or few, individuals had been involved in transmitting its text. Hence, such external factors had nothing to do with the degree of reliability that could be attributed to the Qur'an, the completeness with which it had been preserved, its infallibility, or its definitiveness.

Would that hadith scholars, like many jurists, had committed themselves to the use of both methodologies. In this case, they would have first examined the *isnād*, or chain of transmission, to determine how reliable and authentic it is. They would then have subjected the *matn*, or main body of the hadith to rigorous standards of authenticity and

reliability based on the governing values of Islam – the oneness of the Divine (*al-tawḥīd*), self-purification (*al-tazkiyah*), and progress and prosperity (*al-ʿumrān*). In this way, the two methodologies would have been allowed to complement one another and evolve together over time and as a consequence, we could have avoided the huge controversy that has arisen over what have come to be known as 'disputed hadiths,' or over the notion of 'authoritativeness' (*al-ḥujjiyah*) itself. Nor would we have witnessed the emergence of wayward sects such as those who refer to themselves as 'Qur'anists' (*al-qur'āniyyūn*) when, in fact, a true 'Qur'anist' would never spurn or judge the Sunnah based merely on his or her own thoughts, desires, or whims, keeping the parts that strike his fancy and rejecting that parts that he finds objectionable.

Most of the disagreements current today are a result of our having neglected one of these two methods of hadith criticism. There are some who adopt the *isnād*-critique method and who, if a hadith's chain of transmission is shown to be authentic, refuse to critique its *matn* since, in their view, the hadith has "passed muster" and nothing remains to be done. Others, by contrast, ignore the *isnād* altogether, since it makes no difference to them whether the hadith under scrutiny was passed down by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Ṭabarānī, Ibn Mājah or whoever else. They simply critique the text of the hadith against the requisite criteria without regard for its chain of transmission. Others, by contrast, bypass these criteria, which no one has developed since the end of the first four centuries AH, and subject them instead to standards which others might view as capricious, arbitrary and subjective and, therefore, lacking in any academic or intellectual value. Needless to say, this is a practice that no self-respecting scholar should ever fall into.

The only way to resolve the present impasse is to undertake a thorough critique and analysis of both *isnād* and *matn* criticism. Both methodologies should be evaluated in light of the knowledge that was available during the historical periods in which they emerged. A study should be undertaken of hadith transmitters' use of these methodologies, whether separately or together, which hadiths were subjected to only one methodology and not the other, these methodologies' historical evolution, and the periods in which their use and development by jurists and *uṣūl* scholars were halted or interrupted. The study and

analysis of specific texts might also facilitate the reappraisal and refinement of these methods.

The Authoritativeness of the Reporting of the Sunnah

The Authoritativeness of the Sunnah

IN ITS CAPACITY as the binding elucidation of the Qur'an through the words and actions of the Prophet as heard and witnessed by the first generation of Muslims, the Sunnah is viewed as authoritative by necessity, and this authoritativeness is beyond dispute among Muslims everywhere. However, controversy has arisen over the authoritativeness of the Sunnah *as reported*. The question is: Should a communication or report concerning an action or statement by the Prophet be granted the same legal status as the action or statement itself? Can such a report or communication be the basis for a binding legal ruling originating with God?

The Muslim community would agree unanimously that God is the sole Lawgiver and Governor, and that the authority to promulgate laws for human beings is one manifestation of His divinity. Hence, when we affirm the authoritativeness of the Prophet's Sunnah and Muslims' obligation to recognize this authority, we are acknowledging implicitly that in order to be truly authoritative, a report or communication of something the Prophet did or said must be shown beyond reasonable doubt actually to have been done or said by him. This does not mean, however, that the Prophet himself was the source of his own authority, or that he was the actual promulgator of the laws he established through this words and deeds.

So how is it that obedience to the Prophet can be said to be tantamount to obedience to God? Since God requires us to obey the Apostle, as when He states in *Sūrah al-Nisā'*, "O you who have attained to faith!

Pay heed unto God, and pay heed unto the Apostle" (4:59; see also 5:92, 47:33 and 64:12), does this not mean that the Apostle is a ruler as well, and that the commands and prohibitions which he issues are not from God, but directly from him? When God commands us to "pay heed unto the Apostle," He is commanding us to do whatever the Prophet tells us to do. From these observations we might derive two principles. The first is an obligation imposed by God to surrender to the Apostle, while the second is the obligation to act, which is imposed by the Apostle. Therefore, one might conclude, the Apostle is a ruler in his own right.

Not so, however. Rather, the Ruler requiring action in obedience to the imperatives issued by the Apostle is God alone; the Prophet is merely the conduit through which the imperatives come. The words, "pay heed unto the Apostle" mean that if the Apostle issues a command or a prohibition, it is God who requires the Muslim to do what the Apostle has commanded or to refrain from what he has prohibited. An example of such a situation is the Prophet's statement: "When the sun crosses the meridian at your location on earth, I require you to perform the noon prayer." Were it not for God's command to obey the Apostle, his injunctions would not be binding upon us. For although he may appear to be a ruler and commander in his own right, the actual Ruler and Commander is God alone.

[FIRST]
The Authoritativeness of the Sunnah and Reports
Thereof in the Generation Contemporary to the
Prophet, and the Narrative Generation

Muslim scholars agree that the validity of the use of a hadith narrated on the Prophet's authority in support of a religious doctrine or legal ruling depends on two things. The first is the ability to demonstrate with certainty that the account in question did, in fact, originate with the Messenger of God. And the second is the ability to demonstrate that the account in question was passed down from the Messenger of God in an unquestionably reliable manner. The first condition applies

to all generations without exception. As for the second condition, it applies only to those generations that rely on accounts that have been passed down from person to another – that is, the generation of the Companions' Successors and all generations since. The "narrative generations" include the Companions who had not yet reached puberty at the time of the Messenger of God's death. As for the Companions who were adults during the Prophet's lifetime, some of them may have heard the Prophet say certain things with their own ears, or seen him perform certain actions with their own eyes. In such cases, the second condition cited above would have no relevance, since the person citing the statement or action had witnessed it directly. As for those who were the Prophet's contemporaries but who were not present in Madinah at the time of a given incident, they would have needed to verify their occurrence through accounts they had heard from eye witnesses. So in this sense, they would be in the same position as the Companions' Successors and those who succeeded them.

The validity of narratives passed down on the authority of the Prophet has been the subject of significant disagreement among Muslim scholars, who have held widely divergent views on the method by which one needs to verify that a given hadith was actually passed down on the Prophet's authority. According to some scholars, no method can guarantee with even a reasonable degree of certainty that a given account about the Prophet's sayings or actions is accurate and reliable. Consequently, they deny the validity of acting on anything that has been passed down on the Prophet's authority. Such scholars essentially reject all reports about the Prophet's words and deeds, not because they actually believe that the Prophet did not do or say these things, nor because such reports have no use as evidence in argumentation, but, rather, because the accuracy and reliability of such reports cannot be proven. Our purpose here is not to detail these debates or to argue in favor of one view or another. However, we have alluded to them briefly in the hope of clarifying to readers that these disagreements have not revolved around the authoritativeness of the Sunnah itself.

Leading Jurists and Their Approaches to the Sunnah

The following presents a brief look at the approaches taken to the

Sunnah by six Muslim scholars: Imam Abū Ḥanīfah, Imam Mālik, Imam al-Shāfiʿī, and Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal from the Sunni schools, and from among the Shiites, Imam Zayd ibn ʿAlī, and Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq.

1. *Imam Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150 AH/767 CE)*

Abū Ḥanīfah was accused of violating the Sunnah, although he denied the charge. When Abbasid Caliph Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr wrote to him saying, "Word has it that you place higher priority on analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) than you do on the hadiths!" Abū Ḥanīfah replied:

> It is not as you have heard, O Commander of the Faithful. Rather, I work first on the basis of the Book of God. I then turn to the Sunnah of the Prophet and, after this, to the legal rulings issued by Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and ʿAlī. Lastly, I look at the legal rulings issued by the other Companions of the Prophet. Only if there is disagreement among these do I resort to analogical reasoning. And God remains exalted above His creatures.

In the Hanafites' view, a hadiths that has not gained wide circulation (and has thus not been classified as *mashhūr* or *mustafīḍ*) is of only tentative value. As such, it neither specifies what is stated generally in the Qur'an, nor qualifies what the Qur'an has stated in absolute terms.

Abū Ḥanīfah would reject a solitary hadith (*āḥād*) if: (1) its content was in conflict with the overall message or apparent meaning of the Qur'an; (2) it contradicted other, widely circulating hadiths; (3) the narrator of the hadith was not a jurist or scholar of Islamic jurisprudence; (4) the narrator, after passing on the hadith, acted in a manner contrary to the hadith's content; (5) it dealt with punishments or means of atoning for serious offenses, since such measures lose their validity if they are subject to the slightest doubt, and the narrator may have lied or been mistaken in what he said; (6) some of the pious early Muslims had challenged its reliability; and (7) it had ceased to be employed in argumentation due to disagreement over it among the Companions. (The last condition was sufficient basis for rejection of a solitary hadith by some early Hanifite scholars, and most later ones).

2. *Imam Mālik (d. 179 AH/795 CE)*

Based on a reading of Imam Mālik's works, scholars of the Malikite school concluded that he had given the apparent meaning of the Qur'an priority over the Sunnah. In this respect Mālik was in agreement with Abū Ḥanīfah except in cases where the hadith in question was supported by something else. If such support was available, the hadith could be understood to provide specification for something stated generally in the Qur'an, or qualification for something stated by the Qur'an in absolute terms. For example, if a hadith was supported by the recognized practice of the Muslim community in Madinah (as in the case of the hadith prohibiting the consumption of fanged predators), it was to be deemed valid and acted upon. In his book, *al-Muwāfaqāt*, al-Shāṭibī listed a set of questions in relation to which Imam Mālik had given recognized human interests (*al-maṣlaḥah*) or other general principles priority over other considerations. On this basis he dropped solitary hadiths, since he viewed the principles he had adopted as being of indubitable certainty, whereas the hadith he had rejected, he viewed as providing tentative certainty only.

At the same time, Mālik accepted hadiths classified as *mursal* as well as so-called *balāghāt*, and even cited them as the basis for legal rulings, even though it was he who had been so exacting in his criteria for deciding which narratives to accept as valid. Mālik would approve hadiths with broken chains of transmission if he had heard them from someone whom he trusted and whom he had chosen precisely because he qualified as a reliable source based on Mālik's stringent list of criteria for trustworthiness. The demanding process by which Mālik vetted the men from whom he would accept hadiths in the first place gave him confidence in the accounts they related to him. His decision to approve hadiths with broken chains of transmission was thus based on personal considerations, and not only on methodological ones.

Mālik stipulated that a solitary hadith could only be rejected based on evidence of definitive certainty; he also stipulated that the hadith in question not be supported by any other evidence (in the form of a well-authenticated text or principle). If these two conditions were not met, a solitary hadith could not be rejected simply because it only had one narrator. Moreover, definitive evidence can only be rejected if it is

opposed by some other piece of evidence which is equally, or more, definitive than the evidence in question. It bears noting here that Mālik understood the Sunnah to consist of practices of the Prophet's Companions. He observed, for example, that when ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz wanted to spread knowledge of the Sunnah, he ordered the collection of the legal rulings that had been issued by the Prophet's Companions.

The Qualitative Classification of Mālik's Statements in Al-Muwaṭṭa'

Imam Mālik sometimes used the term *sunnah* in *Al-Muwaṭṭa'* in a sense close to that given for it in Arabic lexicons, that is, in the sense of a plan or a method. However, when he used it to refer to actions and statements attributed to the Apostle, he would accompany it with expressions that had become more or less obsolete in juristic circles. In particular, he tended to marshal a plethora of superlatives, describing the practices he was citing in clarification of this or that Qur'anic verse as "the best thing I have ever heard.," "…the most remarkable ruling ever made…" and the like. Hence, it is apparent from the rather flowery expressions Mālik introduced into his usage of the term that he was not employing the word *sunnah* in a formal or technical sense, since such language was more or less unheard of in juristic writings.

As for the matter of consensus (*al-ijmāʿ*), Imam Mālik makes reference to it both indirectly, as when he speaks of "that which is agreed upon" (*al-amr al-mujtamaʿ ʿalayhi*), or "things about which there is no dispute" (*alladhī lā khilāfa fīhi*) and directly, as when he states his belief that his book reflects "the consensus of the Muslim community in Madinah" (*ijmāʿ ahl al-madīnah*). As used by Mālik, then, the term *ijmāʿ* refers not to some general consensus of the Muslim community everywhere but, rather, specifically to that of the community in Madinah. As for the phrases "that which is agreed upon" (*al-amr al-mujtamaʿ ʿalayhi*) and "things about which there is no dispute" (*alladhī lā khilāfa fīhi*), Imam Mālik uses them when reasoning from the Qur'an. Therefore, Mālik's understanding of the term *ijmāʿ* cannot easily be equated with the understanding of it which developed subsequently among *uṣūl* scholars. He defines *ijmāʿ* specifically as the

consensus of the Muslim community in Madinah, since it was they who had inherited the Sunnah of the Prophet and passed it down in their turn to others. The Madinan community was more knowledgeable than anyone else of the rulings that best reflected the Prophet's legacy and the sources from which these had been derived. Consequently, Mālik set out to collect the hadiths that had been passed down by the Madinans and the fatwas that had been issued by the Companions who were residents of Madinah and who had lived during the period when the Qur'an was revealed. He then recorded these in *Al-Muwaṭṭa'*.

3. Imām al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204 AH/819-820 CE)

As discussed in Chapter Three, al-Shāfiʿī devoted an entire section of his book *Al-Risālah* to the five levels of the process of *bayān*, or elucidation of the Qur'an.

In addition, al-Shafiʿī stipulated rigorous conditions that had to be met in order for a solitary hadith to be deemed acceptable. These conditions were as follows: (1) The narrator must be trustworthy, known for his piety and honesty. (2) He must understand the events that occurred well enough that he can either word them in more than one way, or pass on the account verbatim, exactly as he heard it. (3) He must have memorized the narrative in the written form in which he possesses it. (4) He must actually have heard the account from the person he claims to have heard it from. (5) The hadith must not contradict some other hadith on the same topic which has been passed down by trustworthy people of knowledge. (6) The previous conditions must be met at every level of the *isnād* reaching all the way back to the Prophet, or to a Companion or one of his Successors.

It should be remembered that the debates raging in al-Shāfiʿī's time between the People of Opinion and the People of the Hadith had produced a good deal of confusion in relation to the way in which the concept of *sunnah* was understood and employed. As we observed earlier in the writings of Imam Mālik, the People of Opinion would only accept a hadith if it was (a) classified as *mashhūr*, (b) the subject of unanimous agreement among scholars (*mujmaʿ ʿalayhi*), and (c) consistent with the practice of the Muslim community in Madinah. The

People of Opinion would reject any solitary hadith which failed to meet these criteria or which conflicted with the apparent meaning of the Qur'an. In defense of the People of the Hadith, al-Shāfiʿī marshaled evidence to demonstrate that the Sunnah could serve as a valid basis for Islamic legal rulings even if it was in the form of solitary hadiths, provided that the individual who had passed the hadith down could be shown to be trustworthy. The evidence cited by al-Shāfiʿī was compiled in *Al-Risālah*, while his debates with his opponents are recorded in *Al-Umm*.

The intellectual skirmish that took place between al-Shāfiʿī and his challengers marked the beginning of the shift in which the Sunnah ceased to be understood in its original sense and came to be defined as the hadiths and reports narrated by hadith transmitters in keeping with specific criteria. Al-Shāfiʿī emerged so victorious from this battle that he was dubbed "defender of the Sunnah."

4. *Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH/855-56 CE)*

According to Ibn al-Qayyim, Imam Aḥmad viewed the Sunnah as the second half of the primary source of Islamic teaching, that is, the Qur'an. The wisdom in this position is easily discernible, since the Sunnah is what elucidates and completes the Qur'an. Therefore, there should be no contradiction between them, and if there appears to be some conflict, it will be subject to resolution. Moreover, Imam Aḥmad more than once expressed the view that Muslims should seek enlightenment about their religion through the Sunnah.

As a hadith transmitter Imam Aḥmad was keen to write his *Musnad* to be a guide to people. He wrote nothing in the field of jurisprudence, nor did he dictate anything on this topic to his students. In fact, he was unwilling for anything to be passed down on his authority in this area. However, his students persuaded him to let them pass on his thoughts in the area of jurisprudence, and he may well have spent his younger years approving what was passed down and verifying the correctness of its attribution to him.

The majority view among Muslim scholars has been that solitary hadiths are acceptable as the basis for practice, but not as the basis for belief or doctrine. However, Imam Aḥmad accepted solitary hadiths as

the basis for belief as well. Nor did he require the narrators from whom he received accounts, whether orally or in writing, to fulfill the stringent conditions that had been set by Abū Ḥanīfah and Mālik. At the same time, he established a rule according to which he was sometimes lenient in relation to the *isnād* and sometimes strict. In this connection he wrote, "If the hadith in question has to do with virtuous actions and the reward they bring, I am lenient with its *isnād*; if, however, it has to do with religious duties, prescribed punishments and means of atonement, I am strict."

Imam Aḥmad only included in his *Musnad* accounts narrated by individuals whom he deemed trustworthy, upright, God-fearing and truthful. He would only reject a hadith due to criticism of its content if it was in conflict with some other hadith judged to be authentic; however, he did not require that a hadith be compared to the Book of God. Rather, he viewed the Sunnah as explanatory of the Qur'an and its meaning. In a letter to Musaddid ibn Musarhid al-Baṣrī, he wrote:

> We define the Sunnah as the accounts that have been passed down on the authority of the Messenger of God. The Sunnah explains the Qur'an by clarifying its meanings. The Sunnah is not to be approached through the use of analogical reasoning, nor is it to be understood, whether via reason or on the basis of whim or fancy. Rather, one is simply to follow it, leaving personal desire and caprice behind.

In Imam Aḥmad's day, hadiths were classed as either well-authenticated (*ṣaḥīḥ*) or weak (*ḍaʿīf*). A third category included hadiths classed as good (*ḥasan*), as well as weak hadiths which, if they had been passed down via multiple lines of narrators, had been raised to the status of 'good.' According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the first person ever known to have divided hadiths into the three classes of well-authenticated, good and weak was al-Tirmidhī. Explaining what he meant by these terms, al-Tirmidhī defined 'good,' or *ḥasan*, as a hadith with multiple lines of narrators, none of whom had ever been accused of lying, and which was not inconsistent with any other hadith which had already been approved as trustworthy. By weak, or *ḍaʿīf*, he referred to a hadith whose transmitter had been accused of lying and was not good at memorizing. If a hadith had been narrated by an unknown individual, it was

feared that he might be untruthful or weak at memorization. However, if the narrator was in agreement with some other narrator from whom he had not transmitted his account, it could be concluded that if he had transmitted an untruth, it was not done deliberately.

Imam Aḥmad's *Musnad* contains weak hadiths because, in keeping with the practice of his contemporaries, he wanted to include in his compilation everything that had been narrated on the authority of those of his generation. He thus compiled everything he received from the narrators of that period, and only rejected an account if he had proof that there was another, already approved, hadith that conflicted with it. In other words, as we are told by his son ʿAbd Allāh, Imam Aḥmad would not reject anything he had received unless there was a related hadith that refuted it.

Imam Aḥmad was known never to give analogical reasoning priority over a hadith, even if it was a weak report, as long as he had no evidence of its being forged. On this point he was in agreement with his teacher, al-Shāfiʿī, who had held that in dealing with hadiths there is no room for personal opinion. However, Imam Aḥmad went even further than al-Shāfiʿī, who had not been willing to recognize any weak hadiths whatsoever. So, while [al-Shāfiʿī] gave [sound hadiths] priority over opinion, [Aḥmad] gave them priority over analogical reasoning as well]. In clear contrast to Aḥmad's and al-Shāfiʿī's approaches – and particularly that of Aḥmad – Abū Ḥanīfah and Mālik are known to have given priority to analogical reasoning over solitary reports.

As an example of how these scholars decided what hadiths to accept or reject, let us take the hadiths classified as *mursal* by way of illustration. Hadiths classed as *mursal* were among the types of hadiths that had been used in legal argumentation. Such hadiths were defined in two different ways. Hadith transmitters used the term *mursal* to describe a hadith whose chain of transmission is unbroken as far as one of the Companions' Successors, who then attributes the hadith directly to the Messenger of God without mentioning the name of the Companion through whom he received the hadith in question. Jurists of that era, by contrast, used the term *mursal* to describe any hadith whose chain of transmission was not continuous all the way back to the Messenger of God, whether the break was at the point of a Companion or anywhere else in the transmission process.

The authoritativeness of hadiths classed as *mursal* as the basis for legal rulings has long been a subject of disagreement among Muslim scholars. The majority view among the jurists who established the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence (Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik, al-Shāfiʿī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal) was that such hadiths were admissible as evidence in favor of legal rulings. Some of them admitted such hadiths without exception; others even placed them on a par with well-founded hadiths (*musnad*). Still others gave them a lower status than well-founded hadiths, and still others, while placing them on a level lower than that of well-founded hadiths, laid down conditions for their acceptance. It is in this last category that we find al-Shāfiʿī.

5. *Imam Zayd Ibn ʿAlī (d. 122 AH/740 CE)*
The Zaydite school vis-à-vis the Sunnah: Solitary hadiths
According to the Zaydite school, solitary hadiths provide only tentative certainty. Consequently, they can be relied on as a basis for practical rulings, but not for doctrine. When reasoning from evidence, the Zaydites view solitary reports as lower in status than both the Qur'an and hadiths classed as *mutawātirah*. As for all other hadiths, they can lend specificity to general statements in the Qur'an. The reason for this is that specifying or restricting the meaning of a text is not the same as abrogating it but, rather, is a form of application. On this point, the Zaydites hold a position similar to that held by al-Shāfiʿī, who views specification simply as a form of elucidation. We read in *Al-Kāshif* that:

> solitary reports cannot be relied upon in relation to the fundamentals of the religion, definitive principles of jurisprudence, or principles of Islamic Law, because these things require full certainty, whereas solitary reports yield only partial certainty.

Zaydite conditions for narrators of solitary reports
In order for a report to be deemed trustworthy by the Zaydites, the following conditions must be met by its narrator: (1) The narrator must be reputable and trustworthy, though it is not necessary that he be a Zaydite or a descendent of the Prophet. (2) The report must not relate to an obligation that is required of all morally accountable individuals,

since obligations of this nature must be announced and passed on publicly and, therefore, must be transmitted via a report that is *mutawātir*, not solitary (*āḥād*). (3) Although the Zaydites do not stipulate that priority be given to accounts narrated by a Zaydite, an account narrated by ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib would nevertheless be accorded higher status than an account attributed to any of the other Companions. (4) The Zaydites accept hadiths classified as *mursal* as long as the Successor in its chain of narration is trustworthy. If he was a mujtahid, his account will be given more weight than if he was not. This is the view of Abū Ḥanīfah and Mālik. As for al-Shāfiʿī, he would accept a hadith that was *mursal* on two conditions, while Aḥmad would have deemed it weak. (5) A narrator who was a *faqīh*, or scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, would be accorded greater reliability than one who was not.

6. *Imam al-Ṣādiq (d. 148 AH/765 CE)*

Overall, the Twelver Shiites seem to agree to a significant extent with the Shafiites' approach to the principles of jurisprudence. Imam al-Ṣādiq stated, "In the Qur'an, God sent down clarification of all things. He left out nothing that His servants might need. Hence, no one can say, 'If only such-and-such had been revealed in the Qur'an….'" In *al-Kāfī*, al-Killīnī (d. 319 AH/941 CE) wrote:

> Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṣādiq said, "If you find that a hadith is supported by the Book of God or by something said by the Messenger of God, accept it. Otherwise, what you have already been given is more worthy of trust."

The Twelver Shiites also accept as valid the statement attributed to the Prophet:

> If you are told that I said a certain thing, compare the account to the Book of God. If it is consistent with the Book of God, then I said it, and if is not consistent with the Book of God, I did not say it. How could I go against the Book of God through which God Himself has guided me?

This hadith in paraphrase form is found in *al-Kāfī*. Imam al-Ṣādiq taught his students to identify the Qur'anic basis for whatever hadith they encountered saying, "If I narrate a hadith to you, ask me where it

is supported in the Qur'an." It is clear, then, that Imam al-Ṣādiq viewed the Qur'an as the foundation for everything, and the Sunnah as that which clarifies the Qur'an.

The Twelver Shiites are divided into two camps on the matter of whether to accept solitary reports. Earlier Twelver Shiite scholars rejected such reports unless they were accompanied by unassailable evidence that the report could be attributed to the Messenger of God or to the infallible Imam. However, the majority of Twelver Shiite scholars recognize solitary reports, with some of them stipulating that the report must have been passed down by two or more narrators. On this point these scholars have adopted the view of Imam ʿAlīṢ, who insisted that in order for him to accept an account, it had to have been passed down by two or more narrators on the Prophet's authority.

The Twelver Shiites' acceptance of solitary reports also requires that: (1) the narrator be a Twelver Shiite, and (2) the person on whose authority the account was passed down also be a Twelver Shiite. Hence, if a Twelver Shiite transmits a solitary report on the authority of individuals who are not themselves Twelver Shiites, it will not be accepted as valid. The Twelver Shiites thus accept only those accounts that have come down through the descendants of the Prophet.

[SECOND]
The Hadith Sciences: 'Narrative' and 'Knowledge'

The study of hadiths is comprised of two branches – narration-based hadith science (ʿIlm al-hadith riwāyatan) and understanding-based hadith science (ʿilm al-hadith dirāyatan) – under which all knowledge of hadiths can be classed.

1. *What is Meant by the Word 'Science' (ʿIlm)?*
The concept of ʿilm rests on four principles: (1) strict adherence to method, (2) objectivity, or academic integrity, (3) the ability of the discipline's principles and premises to accommodate new developments, and (4) its capacity for self-renewal. Every discipline must be willing to monitor and revise its own discourse by critiquing it, discussing it, and

adjusting it in light of facts and events. If the results it is yielding are inconclusive, this indicates a flaw in its method. The scientific spirit is embodied in an ongoing effort to pursue truth, and science can only advance through critique and revision, since it does not always rest on solid ground. As for the dictionary definition of the word ʿ*ilm*, generally translated as 'science,' it is synonymous with knowledge (*maʿrifah*) and understanding (*fahm*). If knowledge is marked by certainty, it is referred to as ʿ*ilm*.

Philosophers have used the word ʿ*ilm* to refer to the formation of an image of something in the mind; as such, it is a level of perception, other levels being, in descending order, surmise (*ẓann*), suspicion (*shakk*), and illusion (*wahm*). The opposite of ʿ*ilm* is ignorance (*jahl*), whether compound (in which the ignorant person thinks himself to be knowledgeable) or simple (in which the ignorant person knows himself to be ignorant).

This plethora of definitions and differences aside, ʿ*ilm* may be identified as perception or understanding, the realities perceived or understood, or the abilities and skills acquired by the individual engaged in the act of perceiving or understanding.

a) The First Sunni Scholars to Compile ʿIlm of Various Types

- Al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Rāmihramzī (d. 360 AH/971 CE) in his book entitled, *Al-Baḥth al-Fāṣil bayn al-Rāwī wa al-Wāʿī*, which was preceded by a number of works on the same theme.
- Al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 405 AH/1014-1015 CE), who wrote a book entitled, *Maʿrifat ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth* in which he listed fifty types of ʿ*ilm*. However, the book was never edited into final form.
- Abū Naʿīm Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430 AH/1038-1039 CE), who added to al-Ḥākim's book but did not do full justice to the topic.
- Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 AH/1071 CE), who compiled rules of narration in his book *Al-Kifāyah*, and the protocols associated with narration in *Al-Jāmiʿ li Ādāb al-Rāwī wa al-Sāmiʿ*. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī devoted a written work to virtually every one of the hadith sciences, and all those who came after him were indebted to his works in this area. His successors include al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, who

wrote *Al-Ilmāʿ ilā Maʿrifat Uṣūl al-Riwāyah wa Taqyīd al-Samāʿ*, and Al-Miyānjī, author of *Mā Lā Yasaʿu al-Muḥaddith Jahlahu*.

- Abū ʿAmr ʿUthmān ibn al-Ṣalāḥ al-Shahrazūrī (d. 643 AH/ 1245-1246 CE), who brought together the works of his predecessors in his book, ʿ*Ulūm al-Ḥadīth*. Better known as *Muqaddimat ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, this work became the object of intense study. Commentaries on it were written and abridged versions of it were composed, with some opposing it and others defending it. Al-Shahrazūrī's work became the mainstay of hadith study for those who came after him, including al-Zarkashī (d. 794 AH/1392 CE), al-Zayn al-ʿIrāqī (d. 806 AH/1403-1404 CE), and Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852 AH/1448 CE). Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's work was abridged by al-Nawawī (d. 676 AH/ 1271-1272 CE) in his books *Al-Irshād* and *Al-Taqrīb*. It was summarized by Ibn Jamāʿah (d. 734 AH/1333-1334 CE) in *Al-Manhal al-Rawī*, by Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 AH/1373 CE) in *Al-Bāʿith al-Ḥathīth*, and by al-Bulqīnī (d. 805 AH/1402-1403 CE) in *Maḥāsin al-Iṣṭilāḥ*.

- Al-Zarkashī wrote a book known as *Istidrākāt ʿĀʾishah ʿalā al-Ṣaḥābah*, which is a significant contribution to the discipline of text criticism.

- Other abridged works dealing with the terminology employed by Sunni scholars include *Al-Iqtirāḥ* by Taqī al-Dīn ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd (d. 702 AH/1302-1303 CE) and *Nukhbat al-Fikr* by Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, who also wrote a detailed commentary on this work known as *Nuzhat al-Naẓar*.

b) ʿIlm as Understood by the Twelver Shiites

The first to compile knowledge from the Twelver Shiite perspective was al-Rāmihramzī, followed by Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī and Aḥmad ibn Ṭāwus (d. 673 AH/1274 CE), who established new Twelver Shiite terminology as it related to the division of hadiths into the three categories of *ṣaḥīḥ*, *muwaththaq*, and *ḍaʿīf*.

In the area of understanding-based hadith study we have ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Ḥusnī, who wrote *Sharḥ Uṣūl Dirāyat al-Ḥadīth*, also known as *al-Dāyah fī ʿIlm al-Dirāyah*. Another scholar who worked in this area was Abū Manṣūr Bahāʾ al-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī, who wrote *Al-Wajīz fī ʿIlm Dirāyat al-Ḥadīth*. Commentaries were written on this

work by Hasan al-Sadr (*Nihāyat al-Dirāyah*) and Muḥammad Bāqir al-Dāmād (*al-Rawāshiḥ*). However, most of the Twelver Shiites' writings in the area of understanding-based hadith study took the form of chapters in books on the fundamentals of jurisprudence, or introductions to books on Islamic jurisprudence.

c) The Zaydites

Apart from minor differences, most Zaydite terminology was based on that of Sunni scholars. Among Zaydite hadith scholars we have Ibn al-Wazīr al-Zaydī (d. 840 AH/1437 CE), whose work entitled *Tanqīḥ al-Anẓār fī ʿUlūm al-Āthār* was explained by Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl, known as al-Amīr al-Ṣanʿānī, in his *Tawḍīḥ al-Afkār*. Al-Ṣanʿānī is also known for his *Subul al-Salām* and *Thamarāt al-Naẓar*, where he discussed the criterion of uprightness and good repute (ʿadālah) which hadith transmitters require a narrator to meet in order for his accounts to be deemed acceptable.

Ibn al-Wazīr penned another book entitled, *Al-ʿAwāṣim wa al-Qawāṣim fī al-Dhabb ʿan Sunnat Abī al-Qāsim*, and he summarized the former work in *Al-Rawḍ al-Bāsim*, which contains wide-ranging studies on hadiths and hadith-related terminology from the Zaydite point of view. Another relevant work by Ibn al-Wazīr is his *Qaṣab al-Sukkar Naẓmu Buḥūth Nukhbat al-Fikr li ibn Ḥajar*.

2. Narrator-Based Hadith Study (ʿIlm al-Ḥadīth Riwāyatan)

Early scholars defined the field to which we refer here as 'narrator-based hadith science' as "a discipline which concerns itself with the way in which hadiths are traced back to the Messenger of God, with an emphasis on their narrators' precision and moral character and a description of their chains of transmission (as *muttaṣil*, 'continuous,' *munqaṭiʿ*, 'broken' and the like). This discipline might also be referred as 'the fundamentals of hadith' (*uṣūl al-ḥadīth*) on the pattern of 'the fundamentals of jurisprudence' (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). As for later scholars – those who came after al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 AH/1071 CE) – they defined it as "a discipline that treats the transmission of sayings, actions, and attributes attributed to the Prophet, including sayings and actions of others to whom he lent his approval. Such actions include

even gestures and times of stillness while waking or sleeping." Later Shiite scholars also replaced the phrase "the Prophet" with "the infallible one" (*al-maʿṣūm*).

The difference between these two definitions inheres in the fact that the earlier one takes as its subject the characters of hadith narrators without regard for the content of the accounts they narrated. The only exceptions to this rule were situations in which the content of the hadith might shed some light on the narrator's character. As for the later definition, it focuses on the content of the accounts transmitted about the Prophet. In sum, then, earlier scholars' focus of study was the characters of hadith narrators, while the focus of later scholars was the character of the Prophet. The scholar credited with establishing narrator-based hadith science was Ibn al-Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124 AH/742 CE), who drew on everything that might help him to ascertain the strength or weakness of narrators' characters so as to determine whether their accounts should be accepted or not.

As for whether one was required to learn this science, the ruling was that given the existence of a good number of individuals with the capacity to acquire this skill, it would be deemed a collective duty, whereas it would be deemed an individual duty for those persons gifted with ability in this area, since the aims and benefits of such a discipline are evident.

3. *Understanding-Based Hadith Study (ʿIlm Ḥadīth Dirāyatan)*

Earlier scholars defined the field to which we are referring as understanding-based hadith study as "the discipline which concerns itself with the meaning being conveyed by the words of hadith narratives based on the rules of the Arabic language, the principles of Islamic Law, and the character of the Prophet." Its topic of study was the hadith narratives themselves; the sources on which it drew were Arabic morphology, grammar and the like, as well as the principles of jurisprudence. The discipline had been established by the Companions of the Prophet, who had studied his life, witnessed his words, actions and character traits and had then communicated these things to others as a means of elucidating the Qur'an and showing how to apply its teachings and emulate the Prophet. The Companions verified the accuracy

of what they transmitted through a process of mutual correction which laid the groundwork for the method of text criticism that was developed by those who came after them. This discipline made it possible to determine, with reasonable or complete certainty, that the account in question was acceptable without qualification, acceptable given certain conditions, or unacceptable; in other words, whether it was fully authenticated (*ṣaḥīḥ*), weakly authenticated (*ḍaʿīf*), or inauthentic, that is, forged (*mawḍūʿ*).

Later scholars defined *ʿilm al-ḥadīth dirāyatan* as "a discipline by means of which one ascertains the character of both the narrator and that which is narrated so as to determine whether the account should be accepted or rejected." Based on the foregoing, one will see that the definition offered by earlier scholars allows for the study, critique and analysis of the text of a hadith so as to determine whether it is inconsistent with the Qur'an, the well-authenticated Sunnah, sensory experience, or any other known constant. All these matters are included, for earlier scholars, in the definition of 'understanding,' or *dirāyah*. As defined by later scholars, the discipline involves melding the study of the narrator with that which is narrated. Consequently, "narrator" and "understanding" are almost treated as one and the same thing. It may be for this reason that these scholars devoted most of their efforts to the study of chains of transmission and narrators' characters, and lent only secondary attention to text criticism. If the chain of transmission was judged to be sound, rarely was any effort expended on critiquing the hadith's content. Hence, a hadith's acceptance or rejection hinged primarily on its *isnād*.

However, critiquing the text of a hadith is just as important as, if not more important than, critiquing its chain of transmission, especially given the fact that many hadiths have been narrated in terms of their overall meaning rather than word for word. In fact, both earlier and later scholars laid down criteria for text criticism which can be induced from their writings and employed as the foundation for a methodology in which the two approaches – *isnād* criticism and *matn* criticism – complement and reinforce each other. If there is a flaw in the text (*matn*) of a hadith, this is more likely than not related to a flaw in one or more links of the chain of transmission (*isnād*) unless the same account

was passed down through an additional, fully sound, line of narrators. Therefore, if a flaw appears in the *matn*, the hadith scholar will need to undertake a thorough, painstaking review of all the narrators who transmitted the account. As for the actual process of text criticism, we shall have more to say on this below.

At this point one might ask: Is it possible to view narrator-based and understanding-based hadith study as a single discipline? As we have seen, earlier scholars tended to view them as two separate fields of inquiry, each of which makes a distinct contribution to the researcher's final conclusions and the decision whether to accept or reject a hadith. Among later scholars, by contrast, we observe a tendency to combine the two lines of inquiry. This merger produces a kind of overlap which, in these scholars' view, is necessary given the interrelated nature of the conclusions one reaches. Nevertheless, I personally prefer the approach adopted by the earlier hadith scholars, who maintained a separation between narrator-based critiques and understanding-based critiques. My reason for this preference is that by maintaining this separation or distinction, we make it easier to employ the two approaches in a balanced and sound manner. As the saying goes, "Too many cooks spoil the broth." For as we have seen, the merger of these two approaches has often resulted in two much weight being given to *isnād* criticism at the expense of *matn* criticism.

4. *Division of Hadiths into the Twin Categories of Mutawātir and Āḥād*

For later Sunni hadith scholars, the Arabic terms *ḥadīth*, *athar*, *khabar*, and *sunnah* are synonymous, all of them referring to a report of something the Prophet or one of his Companions or their Successors said, did, or approved. This being the case, these four terms include not only hadiths attributed specifically to the Prophet (*marfūʿ*), but, in addition, those classified as *mawqūf* (attributed to a Companion) and *maqṭūʿ* (attributed to a Successor). Some scholars defined hadiths strictly as accounts that pertained to things said or done by the Prophet himself; hence, their definition excluded accounts that could be described as *mawqūf* or *maqṭūʿ*. Others, by contrast, held that an account referred to as an *athar* was, by definition, *mawqūf*. Some defined a hadith as

something that relates specifically to something the Prophet said or did, and a sunnah as one that relates his words, actions, approval of others' words and actions, and character traits.

As for the Twelver Shiites, they defined all four terms above as referring to "an account that relates something which the Infallible One said or approved," where the title "the Infallible One" (*al-maʿṣūm*) could refer either to the Prophet or to one of the twelve imams. The term 'the Infallible One' might also be applied to someone who had been a companion to an Imam, or to a companion to one of his companions. As for the word *qawl*, it referred to "an action or approval on the part of the Prophet," and "an action on the part of an Imam." For most scholars, the term *qawl* is synonymous with the words *khabar* and *athar*, although the words *athar* and *khabar* might be used to refer to "that which was said or done by the Infallible One or by someone else." For these scholars, the term *ḥadīth* might refer to something someone had said, and the term *sunnah* to an action or the approval granted to something someone had done or said. The term *khabar* might be used to refer only to accounts describing the actions or words of someone not considered to be infallible, and the term *athar* to refer to a narrative passed down on the authority of an Imam or a companion.

a) Hadiths Classified as Mutawātir

Hadith scholars have differed over the definition of the term *mutawātir*. Some hold that whether a hadith is *mutawātir* depends on the number of narrators. Imam Ibn Ḥajar wrote:

> A hadith may be classed as *mutawātir* if it meets the following four condi-tions: (1) The number of individuals who narrated the account is so large that it would be virtually impossible for them to have colluded in deceit. (2) All individuals in the chain of narration are of equally unquestionable integrity. (3) The last individual in the chain of transmission physically witnessed the action or heard the statement in question. (4) The account in question conveys genuine knowledge to those who hear it.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī defined the term *mutawātir* as referring to reports "which have been transmitted by a sufficiently large number of

people that, upon seeing them, one would know that it would have been impossible for them to have agreed amongst themselves to lie."

The question, then, is: How can we expect to acquire meaningful knowledge from a report simply because it was passed down by a certain unspecified number of people? And on what basis can we determine how large this group of people has to be in order for it to be impossible for them to collude in deception? One cannot help but note, moreover, that all the proposed definitions of *mutawātir* revolve around the notion of lying and deliberate deception, whereas none of them makes any mention of the possibility of error, illusion, forgetfulness and the like, to which even the most trustworthy narrator could fall prey.

Scholars have never settled amongst themselves on the number of narrators required for a report to be classified as *mutawātir*, with some specifying three as the minimum, and others specifying as many as 1,500! Each number proposed is based on the conclusions these scholars have drawn from relevant texts or situations. With reference to scholars' speculations on the number of narrators required for a hadith to be *mutawātir*, Indian scholar Abdul Hayy Lucknawi (d. 1304 AH/1887 CE) wrote:

> All such statements and their like are invalid. The more correct view, put forward by numerous hadith scholars, is that the classification of *mutawātir* does not require a hadith to have been transmitted by a particular number of narrators. Rather, what matters is that it convey certain knowledge.

In the view of thinkers such as Lucknawi, the classification of a hadith as *mutawātir* has to do with one's reason, emotions and sense of trust or confidence in what an account is saying. After reviewing the various points of view on the number of narrators required for a hadith to be termed *mutawātir*, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 605 AH/1209 CE) stated:

> None of these restrictions and qualifications has anything to do with the question at hand. You might say: "If you define knowledge based on the fulfillment of a certain, undefined quota of narrators, you will not be able

to argue from this against an opponent." And to this I reply, "We do not argue in favor of certain knowledge on the basis of reports classed as *mutawātir*, that is, based on a requisite number of narratives that is not even specified. Rather, as we have explained, the matter of whether one may gain certain knowledge has to do with one's perceptions."

Is it Possible for a Report to be Truly Mutawātir?

Hadith scholars have disagreed as to the possibility of a report's being *mutawātir*. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, for example, held that only rarely would one find a report that qualifies as *mutawātir*. In his *Muqaddimah*, he wrote, "If someone were asked to produce an example of a hadith that is *mutawātir*, he would be hard pressed to find one." However, as hadith scholar al-Bulqīnī (d. 805 AH/1403 CE) noted, "An account might qualify as *mutawātir* in relation to matters of undisputable certainty even if it would be difficult or impossible to produce a chain of transmission." In *Nuzhat al-Naẓar*, al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn Ḥajar quotes the aforementioned statement by Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, after which he comments:

> His [Ibn al-Ṣalāh's] claim that it is difficult to produce hadiths that are truly *mutawātir* is incorrect, as is the claim made by others that such hadiths do not exist. Such claims grew out of a lack of familiarity with the many paths of narration, narrators' lives and circumstances, and the character traits which necessitate that we rule out the possibility that they would have colluded in deceit.

Ibn Ḥajar preceded his earlier statement in *Nuzhat al-Naẓar* with the words:

> The conditions a hadith must meet in order to be classed as *mutawātir* are obscure in the source (that is, in *Nukhbat al-Fikr*), because they are not among the themes investigated by the science of *isnād*. For the science of *isnād* deals with a hadith's authenticity or inauthenticity so as to determine whether it is a valid basis for action given its narrators' characters and the formulations used in passing on accounts (such as, "So-and-so informed us," "So-and-so related to us," "We learned on the authority of so-and-so," and the like). In the case of a hadith classed as *mutawātir*, by contrast, no investigation is made into its narrators' characters; rather, it is to be acted upon without such an investigation.

The Claim that no Hadith Qualifies as Mutawātir

In the introduction to his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ibn Ḥibbān wrote saying:

> All hadiths [concerning things said and done by the Prophet] must be classified as *āḥād*, or solitary reports; that is to say, none of them is *mutawātir*. For no report has been passed down by two narrators of good repute, each of whom heard the account from two other narrators of good repute, each of whom, in turn, heard it from two other narrators of good repute and so on all the way back to the Prophet. Given the impossibility of such a scenario, it must be concluded that all hadiths are solitary reports, that is, not *mutawātir*.

b) Āḥad, or Solitary Reports

Based on a specified set of criteria, Sunni scholars divide *āḥād* reports into two categories: acceptable (*maqbūl*) and unacceptable (*mardūd*). Those that are deemed *maqbūl* can be used as the basis for Islamic juristic rulings that Muslims are obliged to act on, and they are viewed as yielding speculative certainty. Moreover, Muslims' obligation to act on them stands regardless of whether or not there is external evidence demonstrating their validity.

Both well-established later Twelver Shiite scholars and the Zaydites agree with Sunni scholars that *āḥād* reports are a valid basis for binding Islamic legal rulings even if they lack external evidence in their support. In fact, most beliefs that are viewed as being essential tenets of Islam are based on reports that yield only speculative certainty, and we have no statements by any of their imams to the effect that reports yielding only speculative certainty are not to be acted upon. Indeed, both hadith transmitters and *uṣūl* scholars have acted on such reports themselves, and a good many imams indicate that they should be acted upon, as we find, for example, in the hadith compilation of al-Kulaynī (d. 329 AH/941 CE) and al-Ṭūsī's *Al-Istibṣār*.

As for later scholars, the majority of them held that *āḥād* reports should be rejected and not acted upon if they lack external support. In fact, al-Murtaḍā tells us that later scholars were unanimously in favor of not relying on such reports as a basis for Islamic legal rulings. The most well-established scholars among them saw this as a weakly supported position. However, those who did rely on such reports as

evidence for legal argumentation stipulated that in order for them to be the basis for action, they had to be listed in what they deemed authoritative Shiite works. Such works would have to include other, more strongly attested reports that were not in conflict with them. A hadith included in an authoritative Shiite work could be relied on even if its narrator was not well-reputed and even if the hadith was *ḍaʿīf*, *mursal*, *mawqūf*, *munqatiʿ*, *muʿallal*, or *muḍṭarib*, since it was deemed sufficient that scholars had accepted it based on its having a continuous chain of transmission, and its being free of inconsistencies with hadiths of established authenticity or other flaws. Earlier scholars applied the term *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) to every report that was supported by evidence recognized as authoritative, including fulfillment of these conditions.

Solitary Hadiths Yield Only Speculative Certainty

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī devotes a passage in *Al-Kifāyah* to a refutation of "the dubious claim that a solitary hadith communicates certain knowledge." He then goes on to say, "Solitary hadiths are not acceptable in relation to aspects of the religion which morally accountable individuals are required to know and act upon… However, they are acceptable for use in relation to matters that do not require certainty." Al-Manāwī states in this connection, "Contrary to the majority opinion according to which solitary accounts afford no knowledge of any kind, Imams al-Ghazālī, al-Āmidī, Ibn al-Ḥājib and al-Bayḍāwī hold that a solitary hadith can provide certain knowledge if it is accompanied by external evidence."

Uṣūl scholar al-Shanqīṭī (d. 1393 AH/1973 CE) states, "A solitary hadith provides no knowledge under any circumstances even if the narrator is of good repute, and whether or not it is supported by external evidence. This is the view of the majority of discerning thinkers, although there are some who hold the opposite opinion." As for al-Shāṭibī, he stated, "It is clear that a solitary hadith yields no definitive certainty."

According to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, "If a solitary hadith deals with matters relating to the fundamentals of the religion, it holds no validity, since matters such as these require definitive certainty, whereas a solitary hadith provides only tentative certainty." Al-Bāqillānī (d. 403

AH/1013 CE) wrote, "Jurists and scholastic theologians have agreed to term every report that fails to provide certain knowledge as a solitary report, and this regardless of whether it was narrated by a single individual or a group." Al-Dhahabī (d. 749 AH/1348 CE) wrote in *Tadhkirat al-Ḥuffāẓ*, "This gives us all the more reason to provide numerous lines of narrators for hadiths in order for them to be elevated to the status of reports that afford genuine knowledge, since a single narrator might be affected by forgetfulness or a flight of fancy." As for al-Nawawī (d. 676 AH/1277 CE), he states in *Al-Taqrīb*:

> If a hadith is said to be authentic, this does not necessarily mean that it is indisputably certain… According to Shaykh Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, any hadith included in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of either al-Bukhārī or Muslim is most definitely authentic, and yields definitive knowledge. However, this point of view is disputed by the majority of well-established scholars, who hold that any hadith which is not *mutawātir* affords only tentative knowledge.

After quoting Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ in the introduction to *al-Minhāj*, his commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, al-Nawawī states:

> What the Shaykh states here is in contrast to the view held by the majority of well-established scholars, who hold that the hadiths found in the compilations of Muslim and al-Bukhārī which are not *mutawātirah* yield only tentative certainty, since they are solitary reports… Despite the Muslim community's unanimous agreement on the necessity of putting the contents of these two hadith collections into practice, they do not necessarily agree unanimously that these hadiths are traceable with definitive certainty back to the Messenger of God. Ibn Burhān al-Imam, for example, disagreed vehemently with those who adopted Shaykh [Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's] perspective.

In a similar vein, al-Bazdawī (d. 480 AH/1087 CE) stated, "As for the claim that we can acquire certain knowledge through solitary hadiths, it is without foundation, being refuted by logic and common sense. The reason for this is that a solitary report inevitably entails probability, and that which entails probability cannot be fully certain. Whoever denies this to be the case exposes his own foolishness and ignorance." Al-Ghazālī voiced a similar position, saying, "A solitary report does

not provide certain knowledge. This is necessarily the case, since we do not believe everything we hear. If we believed everything we heard and we happened to hear two conflicting stories, how could we reconcile the two opposites?"

The quotations above are a mere sample of the numerous statements that have been made by well-established scholars in affirmation of the intuitively obvious fact that solitary reports yield only tentative knowledge.

5. *Methodological Differences Between Earlier and Later Hadith Scholars*

One can observe a clear difference on the levels of both method and terminology between early hadith scholars – generally identified as those who preceded and were contemporaries of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī – and later hadith scholars, that is, those who came between al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 AH/1071 CE) and al-Ḥāfiz ibn Ḥajar (d. 852 AH/1449 CE). What this tells us is that the hadith sciences were engaged in by two major groups, each of which was marked by its own distinctive methods, concepts and academic protocols. The first of these groups was marked by a practical bent, while the second adopted a theoretical approach.

Earlier scholars, who approached the hadith sciences from a practical point of view, were the major hadith critics. It is this group that bequeathed us most of our modern sources of information on hadith scholarship during that era, whose foremost works were *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* and *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. The distinctive feature of this era, which spanned approximately the first five centuries AH, is that its scholars only received and circulated hadiths via direct oral transmission.

As for the later group of scholars, their approach to the hadith sciences was to extract and define terminology found in existing writings. These later scholars also formulated rules of hadith criticism based on the practices of their predecessors. Unlike that of their forebears, the later scholars' work was marked by a reliance on written materials for the transmission of hadiths rather than direct individual narration. This later period also witnessed the development of logical principles derived from Greek philosophy, which exerted a deepening influence

on the Islamic legal sciences as a whole, and, in particular, on definitions and distinctions.

The various differences between earlier and later hadith scholars touched upon both understanding-based and narrator-based hadith study. These differences impacted the definition of the phrase 'hadith science' itself as a technical term, as well as all hadith-related terminology and the legal rulings to which it gave rise. The changes that had been witnessed in the field of hadith study resulted in a fair degree of confusion in the methods its scholars were employing. Such confusion went deep, in fact, affecting nearly all of the principles and foundations on which later scholars based their endeavors.

The early hadith critics had a perspective on narratives and narrators that set them apart from everyone who came after them. For one thing, the accounts they worked with were derived from actual eyewitnesses. Hence, their work was based on direct contact with hadith narrators, as a result of which they could familiarize themselves with these narrators' characters and circumstances. Consequently, they possessed a thorough understanding that was not available to later generations. In addition, when arriving at judgments about this or that narrator, they refrained from adhering to unbending rules. Rather, and unlike those of their successors, their assessments were founded upon a consideration for specific circumstances and conditions. They did not have a single rule which they applied to situations in which there was a contradiction between a hadith with a continuous chain of transmission and another with an incomplete one, or between a hadith that was traceable all the way back to the Prophet and another attributable only to one of the Companions, or when there were additions to, or omissions from, a given hadith, and this regardless of whether it was done by one narrator or more than one. Rather, all judgments were subject to surrounding contexts. They might reject an addition made to a hadith account by a trustworthy narrator even though it was not in conflict with the account narrated by someone else. Conversely, in a case involving a choice between a hadith with a continuous *isnād* and another with an incomplete *isnād*, they might rule in favor of the hadith with the continuous *isnād*; however, they might rule in favor of a hadith with a discontinuous *isnād*, or an account someone had traced

to a weak narrator if the surrounding evidence indicated that what he had done was right.

Consequently, their method tended to be quite selective, a fact which is made clear by al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795 AH/1393 CE) in his work entitled *Sharḥ ʿIlal al-Tirmidhī*. One also notes that earlier scholars' assessments of narrators tended to be relative rather than absolute. Thus, for example, even if the hadith master Shuʿbah ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 160 AH/777 CE) or someone else said that a given narrator was trustworthy or weak, this was not a once-for-all verdict that required one to accept, or reject, everything he had narrated. Rather, the judgment would be applicable to a specific case, circumstance, or hadith. Scholars might declare a hadith weak due to an error the narrator had committed even though, generally speaking, they saw this narrator as trustworthy. Or, conversely, they might deem a hadith to be authentic in some respects, despite its overall weakness, while at the same time remaining skeptical of other hadiths related by the same narrator.

The prevalence of this phenomenon may help to explain the inconsistencies one observes in the narrator assessments offered by a single imam such as, for example, Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn, whose book *Al-Tārīkh* is full of illustrative examples. However, the appearance of inconsistency actually results from our own ignorance of the circumstances on the basis of which the narrator in question was being assessed. Similarly, by the end of the fourth century AH, it had become difficult, if not impossible, for hadith scholars to familiarize themselves with narrators' life circumstances now that hadith study took place only through books.

The aforementioned facts raise questions about the objectivity and reliability of the rules, criteria, terms and definitions that were laid down by later hadith scholars. Those who articulated these principles had to engage in a good deal of interpretative work in their attempt to make sense of the numerous statements they had inherited from their predecessors on narrators and narratives. They lacked knowledge of the specific circumstances that had surrounded the formulation of such statements; hence, they disagreed over how to interpret them, and derive principles and rules from them. For, as we have seen, most of the

statements by earlier hadith scholars were relative in nature and, as such, incomprehensible apart from the circumstances and situations to which they were a response. Nevertheless, later hadith scholars formulated rigid rules, criteria and definitions. They then proceeded to assess the rightness or wrongness of their predecessors' words against these standards, and classified the hadiths they had passed down as authentic or inauthentic based on their own criteria and in light of their own circumstances rather than those of the scholars whose work they were evaluating.

[THIRD]
The *Uṣūl* Method's Influence on Later Hadith Scholars

Imam al-Shāfiʿī was the first scholar to write on the subject of the fundamentals of Islamic jurisprudence in his book *Al-Risālah*, a work that testifies to his mastery of the Sunnah and its related disciplines. Yet, although al-Shāfiʿī was highly critical of scholastic theology and theologians, the method adopted by his followers who wrote on the fundamentals of jurisprudence was heavily influenced by scholastic theology. In fact, his students' approach to the classification of Islamic jurisprudence came to be known as "the scholastic theological method" which came to be associated specifically with the Shafiite school of juristic thought. This method was also employed by the Malikite and Hanbalite schools; however, it was the Shafiites who first initiated its use in writings on the fundamentals of jurisprudence.

It should be remembered in this connection that the scholastic theological method relies on Greek logic in resolving issues relating to the principles of jurisprudence and standardizing juristic rules, and that *uṣūl* scholars view the Sunnah of the Prophet as the second source of Islamic legislation. Moreover, the scholastic theologians' practice of studying the Sunnah based on concepts and terminology borrowed from Greek philosophers and logicians opened up a chasm between theory and practice in the hadith sciences, much like the wedge that *uṣūl* scholars had driven between jurisprudence and its principles.

Hence, beginning with the field of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and its principles (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), the Islamic sciences overall – including, of course, the hadith sciences – came to be weighed down with the accretions of Aristotelian logic and philosophy.

Examples Illustrating the Disparity Between the Approaches Adopted by Earlier and Later Hadith Scholars

According to Burhān al-Dīn al-Buqāʿī (d. 855 AH/1451 CE), "Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ combined the methods of *uṣūl* scholars and hadith scholars who, unlike scholastic theologians and *uṣūl* scholars, had no fixed rules for establishing the trustworthiness of a narrator or narrative."

In a discussion of types of flaws that might come to light in a hadith, contemporary hadith scholar Ḥamzah al-Malībārī quotes Imam al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 405 AH/1014 CE) as saying: "The proof for us lies solely in [a narrator's] knowledge, understanding, and ability to memorize." Al-Malībārī goes on to say:

> The phenomenon of eclecticism – that is, the practice of mingling the methods of jurists, *uṣūl* scholars, and hadith scholars – complicated matters in a significant way. The first book to adopt this dual method was *Al-Kifāyah fī ʿUlūm al-Riwāyah* by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī. This method then became standard practice among later scholars, who filled their books with citations of the opinions of scholastic theologians and *uṣūl* scholars, along with the arguments given by each group, to the point where these thinkers' opinions drowned out the voices of hadith critics themselves.

As for Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, he tells us that:

> Al-Ḥāfiẓ Abū Bakr al-Khaṭīb (i.e., al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī) wrote an excellent book entitled, *Tamyīz al-Mazīd fī Muttaṣil al-Asānīd* (On Distinguishing Among Additions Made to Hadiths with Continuous Chains of Transmission) which is divided into two parts. In the first part, he rules that it is valid either to mention additions that have been made to a hadith's chain of transmission, or not to mention them. In the second, he rules that such additions should be rejected… al-Khaṭīb is inconsistent here. On one hand, he mentions in *al-Kifāyah* that people disagree concerning differences among narrators with respect to whether or not they trace their accounts back to the Messenger of God. However, none of their points of

view comes from early scholars who knew the Qur'an well. Instead, they come from the books of scholastic theologians. In addition, he favors the view that an addition made [to a hadith's text or chain of transmission] by a trustworthy narrator is to be accepted unconditionally. This view, in which he is supported by scholastic theologians and numerous jurists, contrasts with the position he took in his book, *Tamyīz al-Mazīd fī Muttaṣil al-Asānīd*, for which he was criticized by some jurists and hadith scholars who had agreed with the position he took in *Al-Kifāyah*.

Commenting further on the writings of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, al-Ḥāfiẓ al-ʿAlā'ī (d. 761 AH/1359 CE) wrote saying:

Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, who steered a middle course between hadith scholars and *uṣūl* scholars, divided additions to hadiths into three types. However, in relation to such additions, appeal should be made to hadith critics alone. Indeed, this matter lies at the heart of their specialization, and only their approach can be relied upon in determining which additions to hadiths are acceptable and which are not. The authority of these critics is derived from their broad memorization of hadiths, their understanding of their content, and their knowledge of the circumstances surrounding their narration… It has been made clear by those knowledgeable in the field of hadith study that there are innumerable ways in which to argue for a hadith's authenticity, and that there is no set criterion on the basis of which all hadiths can be judged. Rather, each hadith has to be argued for individually. This argumentation is to be engaged in by experienced, discerning researchers with knowledge of a hadith's many lines of narrators and forms of narration. This is why early hadith scholars did not make blanket judgments. Rather, their view differed depending on what they found in any given hadith. And God knows best.

According to al-Malībārī, "According to a group of leading scholars of jurisprudence and its fundamentals, an addition made by a trustworthy narrator to a hadith or its chain of transmission should be accepted unconditionally." This is the position that was taken by Shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 675 AH/1277 CE) in his writings. However, it is a questionable view. Take, for example, a hadith which is traced back to a single source, or original narrator, but which is narrated in one way by a group of trustworthy hadith memorizers, and in another way by a solitary narrator known to be less precise and skilled

at memorization than the aforementioned group. This solitary narrator has included additions that conflict with what was narrated by the group. How, then, are we to accept such an addition? This question becomes especially pointed if these narrators' shaykh is one who, like al-Zuhrī and others of his ilk, collected and preserved his hadith narratives. For in such cases it might be said: If the shaykh had narrated the hadith, it would have been heard by students of his who had memorized vast numbers of hadiths. And if they had heard it, they would have passed it on themselves, and would not have allowed it to be forgotten or neglected. In this and similar situations, it would seem most likely that the narrator who included the addition is in the wrong.

This line of reasoning is adopted by al-Shāfiʿī in *Al-Umm*, where he discusses the addition included by Mālik and others to a hadith concerning the freeing of a slave.[1] According to al-Shāfiʿī:

> the narrator [who introduced the addition] is in error, unlike those who have memorized more and better than he has. He may also have erred by including something which is shared in common with the other narrators' account, but which he did not memorize on their authority. It should be borne in mind here that the group in question represents a larger number of people than this one individual. Hence, an addition which goes against an account narrated by others, who have memorized more and who outnumber the person who narrated said addition, should be rejected.

Hence, it can be concluded from Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's writings as they relate to the weakness in a hadith that the decision whether to accept an addition to a hadith as valid depends on the contextual evidence. Al-Malībārī states in this connection:

> The contextual evidence will differ from one hadith to the next. There is no one criterion against which all hadiths can be measured. Nor is it simply a matter of whether a single trustworthy narrator has contradicted a group of trustworthy narrators, or a narrator deemed to be more trustworthy. The only people who are qualified to evaluate the quality of the evidence, what it means, and its scientific dimensions, are hadith critics. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ refers to this point when he speaks of "additional evidence which alerts the knower (al-ʿārif) in this regard," where the term ʿārif, or 'knower,' refers specifically to the hadith critic.

Two other types of hadiths that relate to additions made by reliable narrators are referred to as *shādhdh* ('irregular') and *munkar* ('unacknowledged'). Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ divides the category of *shādhdh* into two types. The first type is an individual hadith that conflicts with another hadith related by a trustworthy narrator, while the second type is a hadith which, although related by a weak narrator, does not conflict with the account of some other narrator. The first type includes hadiths related by a trustworthy narrator and whose content conflicts with the account of someone viewed as a more qualified memorizer. This conflict may take numerous forms, one of which is an addition to, or deletion from, the hadith's chain of transmission, its main text, or both. If a narrator adds to the hadith something that was left out by someone who would have been in a better position to memorize the account in question, the hadith belongs to the first type of *shādhdh* mentioned above. If, on the other hand, the narrator who includes the addition is in a better position to have memorized the account than the narrator who left it out, then the hadith is classed as authentic, or *ṣaḥīḥ*. This indicates clearly that before validating an addition to a hadith account made by a trustworthy narrator, we must consider the factors and circumstances that qualify the narrator in question to have memorized the hadith accurately.

Consequently, al-Ḥāfiz ibn Ḥajar draws a close connection between the matter of whether a hadith is classified as irregular, or *shādhdh*, and additions made by a trustworthy narrator. He states:

> Hadith critics stipulate that in order to be authentic, or *ṣaḥīḥ*, a hadith must not be classed as *shādhdh* (irregular), where the term *shādhdh* describes an account which, although it was related by a trustworthy narrator, is contradicted by the account related by someone known to be more accurate at memorization, by a group, or by someone more scholarly. The question is then: Should such a hadith be deemed authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*), or irregular (*shādhdh*)? In such a case we have no choice but to recognize the contradiction between unconditional acceptance of an addition made to hadith by a trustworthy narrator and stipulating that no authentic hadith can be classed as irregular, or resolve the difference between the two forms of the hadith.

It will be seen from the foregoing that hadiths over which there is

disagreement due to additions made by a trustworthy narrator, whether to the chain of transmission or to the main text, are included in the category of 'irregular,' or *shādhdh*, if the additions resulted from error or misperception. Hence, not every addition made by a trustworthy narrator can be accepted as valid. Commenting on this matter, al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn Ḥajar notes that whereas hadith scholars stipulate that in order to be judged authentic, a hadith cannot also be deemed irregular, *uṣūl* scholars accept additions which might be viewed as irregular by hadith scholars. In explanation of this difference in approach, al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn Ḥajar suggests that in his discussion of weaknesses in hadiths, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ relied on concepts derived from hadith scholars rather than stating his own point of view, whereas in his discussion of irregular hadiths, he may have lent greater weight to the views of jurists and *uṣūl* scholars. And God knows best.

[FOURTH]
Narrator Evaluation: Objectivity and Subjectivity

The Definition and Scope of This Science

The discipline which in Arabic is termed ʿ*ilm al-rijāl* (literally, "the science of men") concerns itself with the circumstances and characters of hadith narrators with a view to deciding whether to accept or reject their accounts. Given the many factors which have a bearing on whether an account should be accepted or rejected, this science branched into numerous subdisciplines. These subdisciplines dealt with topics such as: the history of births and deaths; names, agnomens and titles; genealogies; countries and travelogues; shaykhs and their pupils; narrator assessment; ways of differentiating between narrators when, for example, names are the same but refer to different people, names are written without voweling and are thus liable to be misread or confused with each other, and so on; identification of weak vs. trustworthy narrators, and others.

The topic with which this science concerns itself is whether a given narrator's accounts are to be accepted or rejected. The term "narrator" (*al-rāwī*), although masculine in form, includes both men and women;

hence, the term *ʿilm al-rijāl* is non gender exclusive. This discipline is by no means self-contained or autonomous; rather, it is a branch of historiography which examines the history of a particular class of people. We read in *Miftāḥ al-Saʿādah* by Ṭāsh Kubrā Zādah that: "this discipline is, in one respect, a branch of history and, in another respect, a branch of the hadith sciences." The discipline of history concerns itself with human beings and time in general, whereas *ʿilm al-rijāl* concerns itself with narrators in particular: with their characters, the times in which they lived, their travels, and their lifespans.

Who Were the Prophet's Companions?

Early researchers into the characters of narrators exempted from examination those whom they termed 'Companions' of the Prophet, since they deemed everyone belonging to this category as individuals of such integrity that there was no need to inquire into their moral rectitude.

Hadith scholars defined the Companion of the Prophet as "anyone who met the Prophet, believed in him, and died a Muslim." According to these scholars, the act of meeting the Prophet referred to in the definition above includes any meeting whatsoever, if even for a single moment. The definition of Companion thus does not require the person to have spent a year or more with the Prophet, or to have taken part in warfare under his leadership. By contrast, hadith scholar ʿĀṣim al-Aḥwal (d. 140 AH/757 CE) stipulated that the person must have been a Companion of the Prophet in the more commonly accepted sense of the term; this condition is likewise stipulated by *uṣūl* scholars. There are, in addition, numerous other definitions of the term, a discussion of which space does not permit.

Uṣūl scholars themselves differed over what the term 'Companion' meant. Some defined it as referring to anyone who had seen the Prophet, without having been with him for a significant period of time, and without having narrated accounts on his authority. Others stipulated that in order to be referred to as a Companion, the individual had to have seen the Prophet and been with him for a long time, even if he narrated no accounts on his authority. Still others defined the term

Companion exclusively as someone who had spent a significant period of time with the Prophet and received knowledge on his authority.

In order for someone to qualify as a Companion of the Prophet, he or she had to have died a Muslim; hence, the term does not apply to someone who saw the Prophet and believed in him, but died a non-Muslim. Some scholars, such as al-Nawawī and al-ʿIrāqī, included among the Prophet's Companions those who, during his Prophetic calling, were youths who had reached an age of sufficient discernment that they could understand and engage in intelligent discussion; included in this group were individuals such as the Prophet's grandsons al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, Maḥmūd ibn al-Rabīʿ, and others. As for youths who had not yet reached the age of discernment, their accounts were not recognized as authoritative, but were classified as *mursal* even though they were honored with the title of Companion. Al-Bukhārī defined the Companions as "all Muslims who saw the Prophet." This definition is rejected by many jurists based on the two verses from *Sūrah al-Munāfiqūn* which read:

> When the hypocrites come unto you, they say, "We bear witness that you art indeed God's Apostle!" But God knows that you art truly His Apostle; and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed false [in their declaration of faith]. They have made their oaths a cover [for their falseness], and thus they turn others away from the Path of God. Evil indeed is all that they are wont to do. (63:1-2)

The hypocrites referred to here were residents of Madinah who claimed to be Muslims and who had seen the Prophet. However, they secretly waged war on the Islamic message and conspired against the Muslim community. The Qur'an thus warned them and threatened them with banishment from the presence of the Messenger of God, saying:

> Thus it is: if the hypocrites, and they in whose hearts is disease, and they who, by spreading false rumors, would cause disturbances in the City [of the Prophet] desist not [from their hostile doings]. We shall indeed give you mastery over them, [O Muhammad] – and then they will not remain your neighbors in this [city] for more than a little while. (*Sūrah al-Aḥzāb* 33:60)

How is a Given Individual Shown to Have Been a Companion of the Prophet?

Someone can be said to have been a Companion of the Prophet if one or more of the following conditions are fulfilled: (1) There is an account deemed *mutawātir* that bears witness to such companionship – such as the account relating the Prophet's declaration to ten of his Companions, who are mentioned by name, that they would be among the inhabitants of Paradise. (2) There is a widely circulating account bearing witness to this companionship. (3) There is a statement confirming the fact by someone else who was known to be a Companion of the Prophet. (4) There is a statement by a Successor judged to be trustworthy based on someone else's endorsement. (5) A claim to such companionship was made by someone who lived during the Prophet's lifetime and who, being known for his upright character, would not have lied.

The Uprightness of the Companions

Sunni scholars, as well as some Zaydite scholars and some of the Muʿtazilah, held that all of the Prophet's Companions, including those who took part in the uprisings that took place during and after the assassination of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān in 35 AH/656 CE, were upright. According to this view, such individuals could be classed among the Prophet's Companions even if they had committed serious sins. On the other hand, some scholars held that the characters of the Prophet's Companions needed to be investigated just as those of other hadith narrators did. According to another view, all of the Companions were upright until the time when divisions arose among them; if, however, the account in question was narrated after this point in history, a Companion's character would be subject to investigation just as any other narrator's character would be. In the view of still others, any account narrated by a Companion following these events should be rejected, since one of the two sides had to have been in the wrong; however, which of them was wrong is not known for certain. And lastly, there are those who hold that we should accept hadiths narrated by a Companion following these events if it is individual in nature, since our basic knowledge of the Companions is that they were upright; hence,

we have no proven basis for suspecting them of immorality, and such a suspicion cannot be confirmed given evidence to the contrary simply because we know that one, as yet unidentified, side of the conflict was in the wrong.

The Study of the Companions

Not all of the Companions were equally knowledgeable about the things the Prophet had said and done. In this connection, Masrūq wrote, "I have sat with Muhammad's Companions, and I found them to be like depressions in the ground where rainwater collects. Some of these are so small that their water would suffice only one man. Others, somewhat larger, would suffice two men. Others, being medium-sized pools, would suffice one hundred men. And still others, the size of ponds or lakes, would suffice the population of an entire land." Ibn Khuzaymah (d. 311 AH/923 CE) acknowledged the possibility that the Companions could forget some hadiths, saying:

> The Companions of the Prophet may have shortened some of the stories from the Prophet's life when they narrated them, while in other cases they may have related events with perfect accuracy. Some of those who heard the reports may have memorized some of the events, but not all of them, and they may have forgotten some of the report after memorizing it.

So, if this could happen to the Companions themselves, what should we expect from others?

In the course of discussing how to assess the knowledge possessed by one of the Companions, Ibn Ḥazm stated:

> His [a Companion's] knowledge can be ascertained through one of two means. The first is the number of accounts he narrates and the number of fatwas he issues. And the second is the degree to which the Prophet pressed him in to his service. For the Prophet would certainly not have employed someone with no knowledge. Hence, these are the principle witnesses to the breadth of someone's learning.

[FIFTH]
The Terminology Employed in *ʿIlm al-Rijāl*

Is there a systematic method for assessing narrators' characters that was shared by earlier and later scholars? If so, what technical terms were used in this process, and how were they used by earlier and later scholars? And lastly, what indicators will help us to arrive at the correct assessments?

1. *Systematic Rule Formulation vs. Subjective Interpretation in Narrator Assessment*

Early hadith critics frequently differed in their assessments of a single narrator. In fact, the same narrator might be given varying assessments by one and the same critic. In response, later scholars often read their own interpretations into earlier scholars' statements and terminology in a misguided attempt to reconcile what they saw as inconsistencies. This occurred despite the fact that an experienced, knowledgeable, trustworthy critic was sure to have had reasons for reaching different conclusions about the same narrator in different situations. For example, the critic's judgment concerning a narrator might be influenced by something else he had heard from the same narrator. Commenting on this sort of situation, al-Muallimi (d. 1966 CE) wrote in *Al-Tankīl*:

> A hadith collector might ask about a given narrator, and then judge him based on what he knows about him overall. He might then hear another hadith transmitted by the same narrator and arrive at a judgment in which he is prone to take another position. As a result, there appears to be some contradiction among his various statements. And as a matter of fact, this is what happened with Dāraquṭnī, whose *sunan* and other works contain numerous examples of this phenomenon. He might even convey two or three different verdicts of his own, imagining each of them to be absolute.

Elsewhere in *Al-Tankīl*, al-Muʿallimī wrote:

> What a hadith collector says about a narrative grows out of two processes. The first involves making inquiries about the narrator and reflecting on both his personal character and the hadiths he has narrated; from this the

researcher derives an overall picture of the narrator and his work. The second involves absorbing this overall picture and employing it as a broader framework in the context of which he draws conclusions about this or that particular hadith related by the narrator in question.

The first process leads to a judgment that might be termed 'absolute' in the sense that it will not be challenged by some other judgment unless the scholar's interpretation of things has changed. As for the second process, it may involve a shift in the scholar's perspective with regard to his assessment of a particular hadith. Suppose, for example, that the scholar's general observation about the narrator is that he is "truthful, but with a tendency to imagine things." If the scholar then discusses the narrator in the course of examining two different hadiths of his, we might well observe differences in the scholar's assessments from one hadith to another. Illustrating this phenomenon with particular examples, al-Muʿallimī cites a situation in which the assessment of a given narrator is not entirely clear. A hadith critic presents his personal assessment of the narrator; however, the things he says about the narrator differ from one situation to the next or one time to the next.

After mentioning a number of scholars in the field of hadith study and narrator assessment before the time of Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn (d. 233 AH/848 CE), al-Dhahabī wrote:

> Another leading scholar in the field of narrator assessment was Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn, who was once asked about various hadith narrators by ʿAbbās al-Dūrī, ʿUthmān al-Darāmī, Abū Ḥātim and a number of others. He answered each of these men based on his personal interpretation. As he spoke, his opinions and his ways of expressing himself about certain narrators differed, just as the interpretations and opinions of jurists and other mujtahids had differed. For in fact, the critics who express the most widely varying opinions on a given narrator are the ones who engage in the most ijtihad in this connection; they are also the ones who have written the most about hadith narrators, and the ones who are asked the most questions about them. And it was to this group of scholars that both Ibn Maʿīn and Dāraquṭnī belonged.

In fact, one even finds situations in which a critic expresses two different opinions on the same hadith. One of these opinions will be

influenced by the circumstances of the hadith's narrator, while the other will be influenced by the manner or tone of the person who asked him for the opinion, or the setting in which the question was asked. The questioner might have a stern demeanor and thus appear to want the critic to be strict in his assessment, which will in turn color the assessment he receives. Ibn Rajab's commentary on al-Tirmidhī's *al-ʿIlal al-Kabīr* includes an account related by ʿAlī ibn al-Madīnī, who said:

> I once asked Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd about Muhammad ibn ʿAmr ibn ʿAlqamah. He replied, "Do you want me to be lenient, or stern?" "I want you to be stern," I told him. Then he said, "He is not the man you want. He used to say, 'Our shaykhs are Abū Salamah and Yaḥyā ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥāṭib.'"

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī wrote in *al-Kifāyah*:

> Critics' views on narrators are puzzling and convoluted. A critic, having heard something uncomplimentary about a given narrator, may stop citing his hadiths even though what he heard may not justify rejecting this narrator's accounts or doubting his integrity. If the narrator is alive, then the hearer may view what he has done to be preferable in hope that the narrator will exercise self-restraint and refrain from actions that would reflect a weakness of character. If the narrator is no longer living, the person who related the hadith on this narrator's authority should be placed in the same class as the narrator himself. Others hold that it is more apt to take precautions for the religion's sake by investigating to see whether other, similarly suspicious reports, have been circulated. After all, it is human nature to reveal one's virtues and conceal one's vices. However, if someone should act in an unseemly manner, one should beware that he might act in a similar manner in some other situation. This is why ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said, "If someone acts well toward us, we place our confidence in him, and his inward intentions are of no concern to us. But if someone acts badly toward us, we will not trust him or believe what he says even if he protests that his intentions were good."

In his book entitled *Al-Taʿdīl wa al-Jurḥ*, al-Bājī (d. 474 AH/1096 CE) stated:

> The critic who has deemed a narrator to be upright may say, "So-and-so is trustworthy," yet without meaning by this that the hadiths related by the

narrator in question can be used in legal argumentation. Or he might say, "So-and-so is acceptable," by which he means that the hadiths related by the narrator in question can be used in legal argumentation. A critic might be asked about a virtuous, pious man who is more or less reliable in his accounts and who is being compared to weak narrators. Someone asks, "What is your opinion of so-and-so and so-and-so?" To which the reply comes, "He is trustworthy," by which he means that he is more trustworthy than the individuals to whom he is being compared.

After providing numerous examples of the phenomena he has described and citing evidence for his statements, al-Bājī explains: "What this shows is that the statements such critics make reflect the questions they have been asked and differ accordingly, and will be based on the comparisons among those being asked about." Similarly, a narrator might be deemed to have a faulty character because of something which, had it been done or said by someone else, would not be a basis for such an assessment due to the person's overall reputation for virtue and knowledge. Al-Bājī concludes his discussion with the words:

> Therefore, the words used by critics in their negative or positive assessments of narrators need to be interpreted by those who have a good understanding of their intentions and aims. The only persons who have such an understanding are those with specialized knowledge about this sphere of inquiry. As for those who lack such expertise, they are in no position to understand critics' words however they see fit.

Commenting on this field of study, contemporary scholar Shaykh Hassan Abd al-Mannan states:

> It first needs to be understood that the decision as to whether a hadith is well-attested or weak is a matter of interpretation. As such, it tends to depend on how one conceptualizes things. Specifically, it depends on an investigation of lines of narration and of the other hadiths related by the same narrator. A given narrator might, in the view of Aḥmad and Abū Ḥātim, for example, be viewed as unreliable, whereas al-Bukhārī, Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn and others might disagree with this assessment. All of these scholars may have investigated the hadiths in question, but on the basis of differing criteria. Similarly they may have adhered to inconsistent methods. In fact, the hadith scholar concerned might judge a hadith to be well-attested

or weak without revealing the proof on the basis of which he made this judgment, a phenomenon of which there are numerous examples.

2. *Observations on the Science of Narrator Assessment (ʿIlm al-Rijāl)*

We tend to assume that the circumstances of narrators were well known to hadith critics from the time when narrations began to be passed down. However, the establishment of the science of narrator assessment was delayed by more than 160 years. In his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muslim quoted Ibn Sīrīn (d. 115 AH/733 CE) as saying:

> They [hadith collectors] did not used to ask about an account's chain of transmission. When the great uprising took place, people said, "Name your narrators for us." Then, if the narrator was found to be orthodox, his hadiths were accepted, whereas if he was found to be an innovator, they were rejected.

Discussing the beginnings of the science of narrator assessment, Ṣāliḥ ibn Muḥammad al-Baghdādī (d. 293 AH/906 CE) tells us that

> the first person to pose the topic of narrators' characters was Shuʿbah ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 160 AH/777 CE). He was followed by Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd al-Qaṭṭān (d. 198 AH/813 CE), who was succeeded by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH/855 CE) and Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn (d. 233 AH/847 CE).

However, the method employed in investigating narrators differed from one critic to another. Yaʿqūb ibn Shaybah once asked Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn, "Do you know of any Successor who picked and chose his narrators the way Ibn Sīrīn did?" "No," he replied, shaking his head.

[SIXTH]
Loopholes in Narrator Assessment Methodology

1. *Falsification (al-Tadlīs) and Falsifiers (al-Mudallisūn)*

The dictionary definition of the Arabic verb *dallasa* is to engage in deceit by concealing a flaw or fault. As a technical term in the field of

hadith study, the verb refers to a narrator's act of concealing a fault or flaw in an account in order to mislead the hearer. As such, it is an act of cunning and duplicity which has been widely condemned by hadith scholars.

Despite the fact that the practice of hadith falsification was alarmingly widespread among narrators in general, and among those of Iraq in particular, books written on narrator assessment contained descriptions of no more than one hundred such hadith falsifiers. An examination of writings on hadith falsifiers reveals that they number approximately one hundred thirty. If we subtract those who were only probably falsifiers, the number comes to around one hundred twenty. If we then subtract those narrators who were judged to be weak for some reason other than hadith falsification, there remain no more than seventy-five. These seventy-five were the only narrators whose hadiths were accepted by early hadith scholars only on condition they stated explicitly that they had heard a hadith from a specific person by saying, "My shaykh related to me….," "So-and-so related to me," etc. So, does this number include all narrators who engaged in hadith falsification? Most certainly not.

Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 423 AH/1071 CE) stated in *al-Tamhīd*: "There is a great deal of hadith falsification among the narrators in Kufah." Similarly, Shuʿbah ibn al-Ḥajjāj wrote, "The only narrators I have encountered who do not engage in hadith falsification are ʿAmr ibn Murrah and Ibn ʿAwn." For this reason, Imam Mālik dubbed Iraq "the hadith mint," since hadiths were produced there for public circulation the way money is produced in a mint! Not only this, but hadith falsification was practiced by the imams themselves, and by those who narrated on their authority! Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181 AH/797 CE) stated, "Baqiyyah ibn al-Walīd would be an excellent hadith transmitter were it not for the fact that, instead of using the name by which a narrator is well-known, he uses this person's agnomen ("Father of so-and-so" – Abū Fulān) and, instead of using the agnomen by which the narrator is best known (Abū Fulān), he uses the person's regular name (So-and-so, son of So-and-so)." Ibn al-Mubārak went on to add that a certain narrator "had been relating hadiths to us for years on the authority of someone known as Saʿīd al-Waḥḥāẓī, only for us to discover much

later that the person from whom he was passing on his accounts was ʿAbd al-Quddūs (whose hadiths were unanimously viewed as untrustworthy)." Other examples also make clear how difficult it was to detect hadith falsification even among individuals who were one another's contemporaries.

2. *Lying*

The number of false hadiths continued to proliferate as time went on. Shuʿbah ibn al-Ḥajjāj wrote, "No one has examined existing hadiths as rigorously as I have, and I have discovered three-fourths of them to be lies." If we trace this phenomenon back in time, we find (as have other hadith scholars) that it began in the days of the Prophet's Companions! ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān commented, "People relate things about the Messenger of God that I have never heard of before!" In a similar vein, Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān once wrote a letter saying:

> It has come to my knowledge that some men among you relate narratives that are not consistent with the Book of God, nor have they come down to us on the authority of the Messenger of God. Such men are ignorant!

As for al-Bukhārī, he wrote in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* with his own chain of transmission:

> Ḥamīd ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān told me that he had heard Muʿāwiyah, speaking of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, say to a group of Qurayshites in Madinah, "He [Kaʿb] was one of the most truthful hadith narrators to relate accounts on the authority of People of the Book. Yet despite this fact, we cannot rule out the possibility that he may have passed on lies without intending to."

3. *Obscurity of the Narrator*

Hadith scholars deem a hadith weak if its chain of transmission contains the name of a narrator judged to be obscure.[2] However, the criteria on the basis of which it was decided whether a narrator was obscure or not differed from one period to another and from one place to another. Consequently, the same hadith might go from being judged authentic to being judged weak, and back again. In this connection, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal stated, "A narrator who has been deemed obscure

will no longer be deemed thus if it is learned that an imam related hadiths on his authority. However, an imam might relate a hadith on the authority of someone who is not trustworthy." After quoting examples of such hadiths, Ibn Rajab commented:

> The fact that a trustworthy person relates a hadith does not mean that the person on whose authority he related it is himself trustworthy. For we know that many trustworthy narrators such as Sufyān al-Thawrī, Shuʿbah, and others, have related accounts they received from weak narrators.

4. *Provinciality*

Provinciality is a kind of prejudice or bigotry. If a critic is found to have been influenced by such prejudice or bigotry, his assessment of hadiths will be invalidated, and this regardless of whether he has deemed them to be authentic or inauthentic, and whether he has deemed a narrator to be strong or weak. Nevertheless, Wakīʿ ibn al-Jarrāḥ said, "There is no one from our region that we deem to be upright." As for Sufyān ibn ʿUyyaynah, he stated, "If one is looking for reliable hadiths and chains of transmission that will inspire confidence in people's hearts, let him take his accounts from the people of Madinah." Conversely, al-Zuhrī wrote, "Never have I seen a people more prone to sever the ties of Islam than the people of Makkah." When ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Mahdī was asked about the hadiths related by narrators from the Levant, he replied with a dismissive gesture of the hand, while Abū Sulaymān al-Juzjānī (d. 823/1422 CE) denigrated the people of Kufah for being Shiites and for their habit of swindling others.

5. *Sentimentality*

Sentiment has nothing to do with knowledge. Unfortunately, however, it has colored many a critic's assessment of both narrators and hadiths. Imam Mālik, for example, grew very fond of Ayyūb al-Sakhtiyānī (d. 131 AH/749 CE) and declared him to be a trustworthy narrator, saying, "Whenever the Prophet is mentioned, he weeps most pitifully. Hence, seeing his immense reverence for the Prophet, I began writing down his accounts." Conversely, al-Nasā'ī (d. 303 AH/915 CE) refused to transmit accounts narrated by Imam Aḥmad ibn Ṣāliḥ due to the latter's

refusal to relate accounts directly to him.3 If space permitted, we could cite numerous other examples of situations in which sentimentalism has tainted the better judgment of otherwise outstanding religious scholars.

6. *Imitation*

A number of hadith critics who were unfamiliar with narrators' circumstances and characters simply parroted their associates' opinions and assessments of such narrators. Some of these critics then retracted opinions they had voiced earlier after having the opportunity actually to know the people they had been speaking about. The master of hadith critics, Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd, used to imitate others in denouncing Rawḥ ibn ʿUbādah (d. 205 AH/821 CE) even though, without knowing his name, he had found Rawḥ ibn ʿUbādah to be a trustworthy narrator so that, in effect, he had made one person into two. Imagine…

7. *Juristic and Scholastic Denominationalism*

Differences among juristic schools or denominations have nothing to do with whether a given hadith account should be accepted or rejected, especially when the hadiths in question are not promoting one school or denomination over another. Alas, however, it was precisely this sort of difference of opinion that impacted scholars' assessment of particular hadith narrators. Abū Ḥanīfah stopped transmitting hadiths on the authority of ʿAṭāʾ ibn Rabāḥ (d. 114 AH/732 CE) because he had issued a legal ruling in favor of temporary marriage (*zawāj al-mutʿah*), and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal stopped transmitting hadiths on the authority of ʿAlī ibn al-Madīnī (d. 234 AH/849 CE) and everyone who had cooperated with the Mutazilah authorities in the theological inquisition carried out against those who, like Aḥmad, held the view that the Qurʾan was created. And the list goes on. Given the extremes to which the People of Hadith went in the proliferation of hadith narratives, inter-denominational battles, and hadith falsification and forgery, some hadith experts began pining for "the old days" before the Islamic heritage had been glutted with hadith narratives of every shape and size. In this spirit we find Sufyān al-Thawrī saying, "Would that I had never involved myself in any of it [i.e., in the collection of hadiths], be they favorable toward me, or unfavorable!"

8. *Fraudulent Claims for and Against Hadith Narrators*

Hadith narrator assessment, whether negative or positive, should be governed by integrity and objectivity rather than by personal inclinations. However, the course of events in the field of hadith criticism has been otherwise. Al-Shāfiʿī related that Sufyān al-Thawrī once told Shuʿbah, "If you should criticize Jābir al-Juʿfī, who is a Rafidite, then I shall criticize you…"[4] Perhaps this is what led Shuʿbah to say once, "If I passed hadiths on to you from none but reliable narrators, I would only pass them on to you from a very small number." Similarly, al-Qaṭṭān stated, "If I passed on hadiths from none but those narrators I approve of, there are only five from whom I would pass them on," to which Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd added, "If I put the narrators whose accounts I pass on to the test, I would pass them on only from a very few."

<center>

[SEVENTH]
Narrators' Memory

</center>

Hadith scholars divide memory (*ḍabṭ*) into two types. The first is *ḍabṭ al-ṣadr*, literally, "preservation of the chest," which refers to memorization – preservation – of things stored in one's mind or heart, and the second is *ḍabṭ al-kitāb*, literally, "preservation of the book," which refers to the ability to memorize and preserve accounts that have been recorded in writing. Now, we know that no matter how advanced a person is at memorization, his or her memory will still be subject to error. He or she could still forget, imagine things, have a lapse of attention, be confused, or undergo some change. Fearful that he would forget the revelation, the Prophet kept repeating it until God said to him, "Move not your tongue in haste, [repeating the words of the revelation:] for, behold, it is for Us to gather it [in your heart,] and to cause it to be read [as it ought to be read]" (*Sūrah al-Qiyāmah* 75:16-17).

1. *Ḍabṭ al-Ṣadr (Preservation of What is in the Mind,*
   That is, Unwritten)

Hadith collectors acknowledged that their accounts sometimes contained errors. Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn once said, "Whoever claims not to have

made any errors is a liar." As Sufyān al-Thawrī put it, "Hardly anyone can avoid making mistakes," and, "If we were determined never to relate an account to you unless it was exactly as we had heard it, we would not relate to you a single one." There are two types of hadith-related situations on which the act of forgetting has a bearing. The first category includes things one forgets without noticing that one has forgotten them, (this type accounts for most cases). The second category includes situations in which a narrator relates an account, and then forgets it until he is reminded of it by others who do remember it. If a narrator has had a lapse of memory, there is disagreement over whether or not to accept his account, with some accepting it and others, such as the Hanafites, rejecting it. One hadith that falls into this category states, "If a woman marries without her guardian's consent, the marriage will be null and void." Another is the hadith narrated by Abū Hurayrah concerning reaching a legal verdict based on a single witness and an oath.

In sum, errors are bound to occur in the transmission of at least some oral accounts, a fact which may lead to the appearance of contradictions in the contents of various hadiths. Some of these contradictions are easily detected, while others are not, which brings us to the topic of paraphrased accounts.

2. *Narratives Passed Down in Paraphrase*

Passing down a hadith in paraphrase form involves substituting some words of the narrative with synonymous terms. There have been differing views on this practice. Imam Mālik held that it was not permissible to paraphrase hadiths that were traced back to the Messenger of God for fear that those who did so would be liable for the punishment due to someone who lies about the Prophet. In the view of Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī, it is a practice that was permissible only to the Companions of the Prophet. The majority view, however, holds that it is permissible to paraphrase accounts with unambiguous meanings by translating them into other languages, since it is good to explain the law of Islam to the peoples of the world in their native tongues. As for paraphrasing hadiths in Arabic, it is held to be permissible for those who have a solid grasp of the hadiths in question. However, it is not permitted in cases

where the text contains homonyms, general concepts, and ambiguous and comprehensive terms.

Hadith scholars are in agreement that most accounts that have been passed down have been narrated in paraphrase. This is why ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was so insistent on the importance of a precise understanding of any account that was narrated, since the narrator might use terms which he believes to be synonymous with those in the original account, or which he thinks to be identical in meaning to what the Prophet said. Ibn Sīrīn said, "I might hear a given hadith from ten people, every one of whom narrates it in a way different from all the others, yet the meaning remains the same." He also said, "Anas ibn Mālik narrated few hadiths on the authority of the Messenger of God. But when he did relate a hadith from the Prophet, he would say: 'Or, as he said…'" Qatādah quoted Zirārah ibn Abī Awfā as saying, "I have met several of the Prophet's Companions, who spoke of him in different terms, yet conveyed the same message."

There is unanimous agreement among scholars that someone who is ignorant of the meaning of what he is transmitting should not be allowed to narrate the hadith in question in paraphrase form, and that those who did allow hadiths to be narrated in paraphrase only allowed it on certain conditions. In this connection, al-Māwardī wrote:

> If you have forgotten how the original hadith was worded, you may paraphrase it. Since you have taken responsibility for both the words and the meaning but find yourself unable to convey one of the two, you must therefore convey the other, since failure to do so might entail suppression of a legal ruling which you are obliged to communicate. If, on the other hand, you have not forgotten the original wording, you are not permitted to convey it in any but these words, because the Prophet's way of speaking was more eloquent than anyone else's.

Describing the qualities a narrator must have, al-Shāfiʿī wrote:

> A narrator of hadiths must be genuinely pious and known for his honesty. He must understand the account he narrates and be aware of which words would, if used, change the account's meaning. [Otherwise], he must relate it exactly as he heard it, and not in paraphrase form. Someone who paraphrases an account without knowing which words would change its

meaning has no assurance that he will not portray the forbidden as permitted, whereas if he relates it word for word, there will be no danger of his changing its meaning.

As we have seen, then, al-Shāfiʿī held that one may only paraphrase a hadith if one understands it so thoroughly that there will be no danger of distorting its meaning.

3. *Preservation of Written Sources of Hadiths (Ḍabṭ al-Kitāb)*

We have thus far been discussing the preservation of oral accounts; we now turn to the preservation of written accounts, which were likewise subject to being corrupted through additions, deletions or other changes. Books were most frequently tampered with by their authors' relatives, close associates and students – without their knowledge, of course. Authors whose works are known to have been tampered with include the Iraqi hadith collector and scholar, ʿAlī ibn ʿĀṣim ibn Ṣuhayb, Kufan hadith scholar Sufyān ibn Wakīʿ al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn al-Ḥāfiẓ, Sufyān al-Thawrī, Abū Muqātil al-Samarqandī, Ibn Abī Maryam, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ṣāliḥ, and Shuʿbah ibn al-Ḥajjāj. The errors that occurred were of the type that most people would be unable to detect, such as the omission or addition of a diacritical mark that would change the meaning of a word entirely, failure to include the letter hamzah, and so on.

<div align="center">

[EIGHTH]
Isnād Criticism vs. *Matn* Criticism

</div>

Hadith scholars who engaged in *isnād* criticism – criticism of a hadith's chain of transmission – did so essentially in service of the *matn* – the body of the hadith. Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH/1350 CE) wrote in his book, *Al-Furūsiyah*:

> Let it be known that the authenticity of a hadith's *isnād* is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the authenticity of the hadith itself. Rather, in order for a hadith to be deemed authentic, a number of other conditions must also be met. These are: (1) its *isnād* must be authentic, (2) it must be free of weaknesses, (3) it must not be either irregular (*shādhdh*) or

unacknowledged (*munkar*), and (4) its narrator must be known not to have contradicted other, trustworthy narrators or introduced variations into their accounts.

1. *Putting the Isnād to the Test of Academic Inquiry*

Given the foregoing facts, the question arises: How credible is the *isnād* in question, academically speaking, when judged in light of the various factors which impact such credibility, such as: the assessment of the narrator's character, knowledge of narrators' and scholars' dates of birth and death, the science of ʿ*ilal al-ḥadīth*, that is, the various weaknesses to which hadiths are subject, careful examination of the lines of narrators included in the *isnād*, and external textual evidence?

If we reflect for a moment on the idea of relying entirely on our examination of a hadith's chain of transmission, including the characters of its narrators, as a basis for determining the authenticity of a hadith attributed to the Messenger of God, we will see that we have placed ourselves in a dangerous situation, since we are no longer allowed to determine a hadith's authenticity based on its actual content by comparing it to that of the Qur'an – the only text that we know to be free of error. However, this kind of comparison is precisely what the Prophet's Companions engaged in.

The question that needs to be asked here is: What led hadith scholars onto this slippery slope – the method of hadith criticism that relies on the study of chains of transmission and narrators' characters – when the most we can derive from this method is tentative judgments on such narrators and their accounts? Is it not sufficient for us to appeal to the authority of the Qur'an itself – which God sent down as a confirmation of previous revelations and a measuring rod by which to assess them – when seeking to arrive at such conclusions? Did the original Muslims place their faith in the Qur'an and follow the guidance it had provided based on an inquiry into the character of the Prophet? Or was it, rather, the Qur'an itself which served as the proof of the Prophet's truthfulness and the validity of his claims? The hesitation to measure not only hadiths and other historical reports and narratives but, in addition, opinions, ideas, and various interpretations, against the Qur'an is simply a sign of the kind of mental paralysis that has

afflicted Muslims, who have for centuries remained shackled to the evidence afforded by hadiths' chains of transmission. Such hesitation is also an admission that because of our lack of freedom to appeal to the Qur'an, we are no longer able to sift through and properly scrutinize this vast accumulation of narratives.

The leading Companions, such as Abū Bakr, and ʿUmar and the Prophet's wife ʿĀ'ishah, were well aware that assessment of narrators' characters was not the true criterion on the basis of which to accept or reject hadith accounts. They realized that such decisions had to be based on the Qur'an, and on the hadith accounts that they knew with certainty to be trustworthy and reliable. This decision-making process required that they examine the actual content of the hadiths, and not just their chains of transmission. Focusing on hadiths' contents and comparing them to the teachings of the Qur'an would provide a kind of natural protection against allowing falsehoods to infiltrate the Sunnah. Only this approach would be consistent with the Qur'an's edict found in *Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt*: "O you who have attained to faith! If any iniqui-tous person comes to you with a [slanderous] tale, use your discern-ment, lest you hurt people unwittingly and afterwards be filled with remorse for what you have done" (49:6). What believers were urged to verify was not a person's character but, rather, the report they had received, and the only way to verify the truth or falsehood of claims relating to the religion would be to check them against the Revelation they had at their disposal, the Revelation that had been preserved by God Himself, and against the Sunnah they had been given as a way of clarifying and applying this Revelation. This is not to say that we should reject the *isnād* as a means of hadith verification. However, examination of the *isnād* is meant to be merely a first step in the process of sifting through hadiths, the second step being to measure the conclu-sions reached through the first step against the yardstick of the Qur'an. If the contents of a hadith with an acceptable *isnād* are confirmed by the Qur'an, it will stand; otherwise, it should be eliminated. What hap-pened, however, was that the first step was allowed to expand until it took up nearly all of hadith collectors' time and energy, and the Sunnah was taken captive by *ʿilm al-rijāl*, the science of narrator assessment.

By advocating this approach I am not, like some, issuing a call to abandon the hadith collections that have come down to us. Such a step would be unacceptable according to both the teachings of the Qur'an itself and the demands of academic inquiry. At the same time – bearing in mind the need for our approach to harmonize with both Qur'anic imperatives and the scientific method – we must not view the hadith collections we have been bequeathed by Islamic tradition in a hierarchical fashion, considering some to be "authentic" and others "more authentic." Rather, it should be remembered that every one of them contains both authentic and inauthentic hadiths.

In fact, the whole concept of "authenticity" (*aṣaḥḥiyyah*) has been clothed in such sanctity that it poses a danger to Muslims' intellectual soundness, since it prevents us from thinking for ourselves. The claim that there is a book, or set of books, that is "the most authentic" after the Book of God is symptomatic of the methodological crisis into which Muslim thinkers entered as they allowed their thinking to be taken captive to the inviolability of the *isnād* and the written tradition. After all, the Qur'an did not acquire its respected position because it had been transmitted via well-authenticated lines of narrators but, rather, because the One who had sent it down took it upon Himself to preserve and protect it, saying, "Behold, it is We Ourselves who have bestowed from on high, step by step, this reminder, and behold, it is We who shall truly guard it [from all corruption]" (*Sūrah al-Ḥijr*, 15:9).

If we consider any book comparable to the Qur'an, this indicates a flaw in our ability to distinguish between what it means for the Qur'an to be well-authenticated, and what it means for historical reports to be well-authenticated. The Qur'an receives its authentification from within itself, not from those who passed it down. The authentication of historical reports, by contrast, must take place based on whether they are confirmed by the Qur'an.

The scholars who recorded the Sunnah compilations which have come down to us made no claims to have critiqued the contents of the accounts they contained. Nor did the author of any of the Sunnah collections claim to have compared hadiths one by one to the contents of the Qur'an. Their task had been limited to the collection of hadiths via the science of narrator assessment. Moreover, although some of

them referred to what they had collected as "well-authenticated" (ṣaḥīḥ), they were defining the term "well-authenticated" in terms of the criteria they themselves had adhered to in their processes of collection and selection. For if they had been striving for absolute reliability, how could the same report be deemed "well-authenticated" by one scholar, and "weakly authenticated" by another? This could occur because the hadiths contained in these "well authenticated" compilations had not been subjected to both *isnād* criticism and *matn* criticism. After all, these very compilations also contain reports that have been classed as "strange" (*gharīb*), that is, as hadith one tier of whose chains of transmission contained only one narrator. If we were to compare reports in this category with the Qur'an, we would be certain to find disparities and contradictions between them. Indeed, not a single *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith compilation is free of reports belonging to this category.

2. *Matn Criticism (Hadith Text Criticism)*

As we have stated, it is essential that we not simply critique a hadith's chain of transmission (*isnād*), but its text (*matn*) as well. This is the case whether the *isnād* in question is "high" (*ʿālin*) or "low" (*nāzil*),[5] *ḥasan* or less than *ḥasan*. There are three reasons for the urgency of hadith text criticism:

One: Al-Shāfiʿī stated in *al-Risālah* that:

> every practice for which the Messenger of God established a precedent was in agreement with the Book of God. If it was a practice that had been ordained explicitly in the Book of God, then it was in perfect conformity to what had been ordained. If it had been stated in general terms in the Book of God, the practice of the Prophet provided further clarity on God's authority… The Messenger of God was a native speaker of the Arabic tongue who lived among Arabs. As such, he might say something which he intended to be applied generally; he might also say something specific which he intended for only specific application…If something was prohibited in general but allowed in specific situations, these exceptions would not cancel out the general prohibition. Similarly, if something was allowed in general but prohibited in specific situations, these exceptions would not cancel out the general allowance.

Al-Shāfiʿī, who was dubbed the Champion of the Sunnah, points in

the passage just quoted to types of hadith narratives whose meaning he could only determine by subjecting their texts to a thoroughgoing critique and analysis as to how they were narrated, and how transmitters received them and passed them on.

Two: Based on these and other statements made by al-Shāfiʿī, many hadiths had been passed down in paraphrase form. Additionally, many hadiths had, for one reason or another, passed undetected through the porous sieve of the highly subjective *isnād* methodology.

Three: Critiquing a hadith's *matn* helps to uncover hidden flaws in the *isnād*; it may also help to attenuate the effects of subjectivity on *isnād* assessments. By "subjectivity," I refer to the judgments issued by numerous hadith scholars deeming this or that hadith trustworthy or untrustworthy based on nothing but the scholar's personal opinion of the narrator and his attitude toward the narrative in question. This can be seen in the tendency of al-Shāfiʿī and others to use phrases such as, "I was told by the trustworthy...," "I was told by someone I would not accuse...," and the like, which makes it difficult to view the scholar's assessment of the hadith concerned as an impartial evaluation resting on precise, objective data. Moreover, as was noted by the late Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (d. 1958), among other researchers in the fields of narrative-based and understanding-based hadith study (ʿilmay al-riwāyah wa al-dirāyah), those who recorded biographical information about hadith narrators did not write down the dates of narrators from Makkah, and particularly not those of Madinah; hence, here was confusion in their transmissions. When it came to the dates of narrators from Iraq and the Levant, however, they did write them down.

In sum, only a combined critique of a hadith's text (*matn*) and its chain of transmission (*isnād*) will afford us a reasonable level of certainty in our assessment of the hadith's validity and reliability.

3. *Criteria for Hadith Text Criticism*

Although standards for hadith text criticism have received some consideration from hadith scholars, they have received the most attention from jurists and *uṣūl* scholars. In fact, it has been reported of virtually every leading *uṣūl* scholar, jurist, and mujtahid that he rejected some accounts that hadith scholars had deemed reliable. Similarly, we have

hadiths that were approved and applied by some *mujtahids* but rejected by others, who then – on the basis of this rejection – reached contrary conclusions on relevant issues. Such scholars raised issues relating to the critique and interpretation of the hadiths in question, and of this we have countless examples.

An examination of the various standards these scholars left for us in the area of hadith text criticism yields a list of nineteen basic criteria which, if not fulfilled, require a hadith to be rejected. These criteria are as follows:

1. It must not conflict with the explicit, unambiguous import of the Qur'an, the well-authenticated Sunnah, or necessary tenets of the religion.
2. It must be consistent with sensory experience and what we know of the observed world.
3. It must not conflict with established scientific knowledge or natural laws.
4. It must not be counter-intuitive or conflict with indisputable evidence or established experience.
5. It must not be inconsistent with established scientific knowledge in the fields of medicine, astronomy, and the like.
6. It must not be marked by a weak linguistic style that falls short of the standards of eloquence established by the Prophet, who has been described as "the most eloquent speaker of the language of *ḍād* the world has ever known." It must also be devoid of terms that were not in circulation during the lifetime of the Prophet.
7. It must not promote immoral behavior inconsistent with Islamic law.
8. It must not contain superstition or nonsense.
9. It must not promote allegiance to a particular school of thought, sect or tribe.
10. It must not conflict with firmly established historical facts and events, or with archeological evidence acknowledged by experts in the field to verify such events and the time of their occurrence.
11. It must not recount significant events that have been witnessed publicly on the authority of just one or two individuals.

12. It must not conflict with fundamental Islamic doctrine on the divine attributes – those attributes which *must* be predicated of the Divine, those that *cannot* be predicated of the Divine. and those that *may* be predicated of the Divine; similarly, it must not conflict with fundamental Islamic doctrine with respect to what must, what must not, and what may be reasonably said about God's honorable messengers.

13. It must not promise a tremendous reward for some trivial act, or threaten a severe punishment for a minor offense.

14. The narrator must not have stood to gain personally from relating the account in question, nor have related it under some external influence.

15. It must not promote belief in doctrinal or philosophical teachings taken from bygone religions or civilizations.

16. There must be no irregularity or serious weakness in the hadith's text or chain of transmission.

17. It must not have been rejected by the leading Companions or have been a subject of dispute among them. If it was, this would indicate that it was not viewed as authentic by the Companions themselves. And if the account was not viewed as well-authenticated during the Companions' day, there would have been no reason to view it as such thereafter.

18. It must not have happened that, after the account had been attributed to a given narrator, this narrator denied having related it.

19. It must have been passed on in exactly the words in which the original was phrased, without omissions or additions.

As may be seen, some of these conditions have to do with the narrator; most, however, have to do with the narrative itself: its content and wording. Moreover, the list is open to further additions. One also notes that these conditions draw upon numerous approaches, including the historical, the juristic, the linguistic, the scientific, the analytical, and the sociological. This is not surprising given these hadiths' multidimensional nature. Moreover, by welcoming the contributions of these various fields of inquiry, we can help to purge the *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections of accounts that have not been borne out by a comprehensive critique methodology.

Hadith scholars should be in the forefront of those who adopt the use of this type of methodology. We have no reason to fear that the application of these approaches will do the Sunnah any harm. Rather, we should pursue this endeavor with confidence rather than leaving work on the Sunnah to those who imitate contemporary Western schools of criticism and counter-criticism that end up deconstructing everything. Muslims' thinking has been plagued by many an errant idea, and the invading hordes keep flooding in. Hence, we need to cling as never before to the Book of God and to the clarification provided in the Sunnah of the Prophet, for this alone may be our salvation.

I urge my colleagues and all students of the sciences of Islamic law and written tradition to learn and teach this methodology, to enrich and crystallize it, and, in so doing, to thwart the efforts of those who call for reliance on "the Qur'an alone" but who are the farthest possibly cry from being supporters of the Qur'an. Rather, they have fallen under the influence of modernist philosophies and tools of textual criticism. Such people suppose that the Muslim community knows nothing of this type of criticism when, in reality, Muslim scholars have engaged in numerous forms of this discipline over the centuries, with some of them (such as *isnād* criticism and the narrative-based and narrator-based methodologies) having been unique to Muslim academics.

In the face of modern deconstructionist thought, hadith scholars need to reexamine the mistaken notion that "the hadith sciences" are a world unto themselves rather than being part and parcel of the broader sphere of academic inquiry. Just as jurists have sometimes failed to carry out their functions properly because they have not been well-versed in the hadith sciences, we find that the *Ṣaḥīḥ* hadith collections were infiltrated by accounts which, had it not been for some hadith scholars' lack of expertise in the sciences of jurisprudence and practical life issues, would never have acquired the status they did.

Hence, the approach taken to the hadith sciences needs to be an integrated one that takes careful consideration of the *isnād* and the *matn* of each narrative within the broader context of juristic issues and the ongoing social, economic, intellectual and spiritual challenges presented by the world in which Muslims live their daily lives.

This work studies the position of the Sunnah in Islam and its fundamental relationship to the Qur'an. The author carefully examines the sensitive issue of the development of the oral and written traditions, the problems scholars faced despite painstaking work verifying the authenticity of reports, the character of narrators, etc. and the ever growing complexity of a body of narratives that were making the simplicity and clarity of the Prophet's life, words, and actions, a burgeoning maze of information. Taking the praiseworthy intention and effort to emulate the Prophet into account, the author nevertheless makes the case that once the Sunnah had been collected, the Muslim community began to neglect the Qur'an in favor of narrations of what the Prophet had done and said on the pretext that such narratives "contained" the Qur'an. Eventually they then abandoned the Sunnah narratives in favor of Islamic jurisprudence on the pretext that Islamic juristic texts tacitly included both the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It is with the aim of restoring the relationship between the two that this work has been written, that is, the Prophetic Sunnah must be tied inextricably to the Qur'an in a way that allows for no contradiction or conflict between the two, to avoid misapplication and abuse of hadith, and to meet the requirements and challenges of a new age.

Dr. Taha Jabir Alalwani (1935– 2016) was a graduate of Al-Azhar University and an internationally renowned scholar and expert in the fields of Islamic legal theory, jurisprudence (fiqh), and uṣūl al-fiqh. He authored numerous works and was a member of the OIC Islamic Fiqh Academy, and President of Cordoba University in Ashburn, Virginia, United States.

IIIT

COVER IMAGE © SHUTTERSTOCK