

THE PRESERVATION OF HADITH

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Abstract

Hadith, as a colophon of the Qur'an, attracts divergent comments. Its oral transmission over a century, in particular, is a subject of various academic polemics. The main objection of some critics is that the Ahādith could not have been orally transmitted over a century with great accuracy. Furthermore the existence of two opposing views that are attributed to the Prophet, as far as the recording and the preservation of hadith is concerned, also generate heated debate. Both the opponent and the proponent capitalize on some of these Traditions which are contained in As-Sihahu Sitta. In spite of the authenticity of the two opposing set of Traditions on the recording of hadith, this paper argues in favour of the conservation of the hadith during the Prophetic era by lending weight to the great enthusiasm that was displayed by the Sahābah, individually and collectively, in the recording and the preservation of hadith. It is this effort by some curious Sahābah, that forms the kernel of this paper.

Introduction

(We sent them) with clear signs and scriptures. And we have sent down unto you (also) the message; so that you explain clearly to people what is sent for them, and that they may give thought to it. Q 16:44

The triangular formula in this verse is very instructive. The role of Allah as the lawgiver is emphatically stressed. The role of the Prophet as the Teacher of the divine messages, who is expected to give interpretations and detailed information of the golden messages, is equally stated. The recipients (i.e. the *Sahābah*) are also encouraged to functionally use their intellect and to ask for guidance from the Teacher.

The Prophet's role as indicated in this verse is viewed from different perspectives. The Qur'anic exegetes consider the role as the

foundation for the developmental stages of *Tafsir*.¹ The Jurists view it from the lenses of legal matters, while the scholars of *hadith* maintain that it was a method of verbal teachings of the *sunnah*.² This claim, by the *muhaddithūn*, has attracted the attention of the critics of *hadith* who argue that such postulation is wrong because the exact words of the Prophet cannot be orally transmitted with accuracy. Abu-Riyyah, has been promoting this position of recent.³ A close examination of his argument reveals that he lends weight to the views of the Orientalists that *hadith* reflects the viewpoint of the later centuries of Islam and have little to tell about the early part of the century, to which they allegedly belong. This assertion shall later be focused in this paper.

Azami has, however, queried the argument that the *Ahādith* could not have been orally transmitted for over a century. He says that the misconception about the beginning of the recording of *hadith* was mainly due to a wrong conception of the Arabic words: “*Tadwīn*”, “*Tasnīf*” and “*Risālah*”. According to him, a lot of materials in the form of *Risālah* (booklets) and separate *hadith* collections existed in the first century itself.⁴ One can also add here that the availability of literary activities in the Arabian peninsula before the Prophethood of Muhammad suggests people’s interest in writing and recording of events. That some curious *Sahābah* recorded the sayings of the Prophet, therefore, cannot be totally ruled out. This assertion is the main focus of this paper as revealed in the ensuing sections.

Recording of *Hadith* –An Assessment

One of the issues raised by the Orientalists against the validity and the authenticity of *hadith* is that the *hadith* was orally transmitted for over a century before its compilation into a book form. They argued further that the Traditions were invented through an assumed chain of narrators down to the Prophet to emphasize either political affiliation or dogmatic doctrine. Put in plain terms, the corpus of Traditions from the Prophet are alleged to be the product of a large-scale pious forgery.⁵

A fact worthy admitting is that the official recordings of *Ahādith* came at a later stage during the time of ^CUmar Ibn ^CAbdul –^CAziz who ordered a scholar called Abu-Bakr Ibn Hazim to compile a book of *hadith* for official use.⁶ However, individual compilation predated this official directive. The attempt could be regarded as a modest move geared towards the protection of *Ahādith* from containing false information, interpolation and the alleged pious forgery. This is evidently clear from the directive itself. ‘Ibn Hazim was asked to rely on the collection of

Qasim Ibn Abu-Bakr (d. 112A.H) the only survivor among the seven jurists who were the centre of reference on religious matters.⁷ This implied that the jurists themselves relied on personal collections of *hadith*, which they referred to before arriving at a final verdict.

It is not the aim of the present study to delve into the biographical notes of the seven jurists of Madina a more detailed academic work is, in our view, required in this regard. However, their activities as at that time were compelling enough to invalidate Goldziher's⁸ and Schacht's⁹ claim of "pious forgery" and "fictitious expression" respectively. The Jurists, severally and collectively, possessed sound knowledge of Qur'an and science of *hadith* which placed them at a vantage position of knowing the authentic from the fabricated Traditions. It is even on record that judges used to consult them before certain judicial decisions were made.¹⁰

Another reason that the critics of *hadith* adduce is that certain *Ahādith* forbid the recording of *hadith*. Azami identifies three Traditions that are prominent in this regard. They are as follows.

Abu-Sa'īd Al-khudri, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that, the Prophet (S.A.W) is reported to have said: "Do not write from me except the Qur'an and whoever has written anything from me other than the Qur'an should erase it."¹¹

Zayd ibn Thabit visited Mu'awiyah and sought information concerning an *hadith* from him. He (Mu'awiyah) ordered someone to write it. Then Zayd informed him that, "the Prophet forbids us from writing down any of his *Ahādith*". He then erased it.¹²

Abu Hurayrah, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that, the Prophet once met us while we were writing *Ahādith*. He enquired what we were writing. We said, "They are your *Ahādith*". The Prophet remarked. "A book different from the book of Allah? Do you know what led the people before you astray? They made other writings along with the book of Allah".¹³

Azami investigates these *Ahādith* in a more polemical discourse. He argues in favour of recording of the *hadith* and concludes that:

The Prophet's disapproval of writing *Ahādith* most probably meant the writing of the Qur'an and non-Qur'anic materials on the same sheet because that might lead to misunderstanding.¹⁴

We are inclined to believe that the Prophet was admonishing against mixing the two together as the fear of mixture was real but personal writing could not have been totally prohibited. Furthermore, we discovered that the first *hadith* cited above which was reported by Abu Sa'īd al-khudri is said to be weak, because it is categorized as *Mawqūf*.¹⁵ As-salafi¹⁶ has however queried this judgement of Bukhari. He said that Muslim reported the same *hadith* in the category of *Marfu'*. This is not an indication that As-salafi disagrees that the Prophet disapproved the recording of his statements. He only contends the categorization of the *hadith* as a weak Tradition. He further submitted that the *hadith* was later abrogated.¹⁷ Besides, this *hadith* has two different versions. One of them is transmitted by 'Abdu-Rahman Ibn Sai'd who was said to be a weak narrator and used to edit *hadith* without knowing it.¹⁸ For this reason Ibn Hisham opines that he deserved to be abandoned.¹⁹ The same argument goes for the second narration by Abu-Hurayrah because the same Ibn Sa'īd appears in the chain of narrators.²⁰ And as for the authenticity of the *hadith*, the author of *Tuhfatul-Ahawazi* provides the following interpretations, if the *hadith* is to be considered on its merit:

That the recording of the *hadith* was forbidden during the time of revelation, so that it could not be seen as dovetailing with the Qur'an. And that the *Ahādith* should not be recorded on the same sheet with the Qur'an, whereas it was allowed on different sheets. Furthermore the *hadith* in reference was later abrogated by other Traditions that allow its recording.²¹

Ibn Qutaybah, as quoted by As-salafi,²² provides a fourth option that the disapproval was general while the approval was specific permission as could be deduced from the following *Ahādith* listed by Azami in support of the recording. It should be noted, however, that the *Ahādith* that shall be considered here are said to have abrogated the *hadith* against the recording of *hadith*.²³

Abdullah Ibn 'Amr Ibn Al-'Asi, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that, I said, "O the Prophet of Allah, we used to listen to your statements which we could not

memorize, can we then put them into writings? The Prophet said “all right you could write them”.²⁴

And from the authority of Ahmad (he reported Ibn Al-[°]Asi as having said) “Oh Prophet of Allah, I listen to your speeches, can I write them down? He said Yes, I said “in both states of happiness and anger? He replied “Yes, because, I do not utter any statement except the truth”.²⁵

The two Traditions indicated that [°]Amr ibn Al-[°]Asi used to write down the *hadith*. This points to the Prophet’s approval of the practice. And to further consolidate the principle of tacit approval, [°]Amr ibn Al-[°]Asi enquired from the Prophet whether to quote him in every circumstances and the Prophet answered in the affirmative. The *hadith* of Abu-Hurayrah, on the other hand, made some categorical statements on the recording of *hadith*.

Wahab Ibn Munnabah reported from his brother who said he heard Abu-Hurayrah saying that none of the *Sahābah* reported more *hadith* than me except [°]Abdullah Ibn [°]Amr because he used to write and I didn’t.²⁶

It should be re-emphasized here that the *hadith* analysts, as mentioned earlier, have explained these seemingly contradictory *Ahādith* in many ways. Ibn Qutaybah, for example, is of the view that:

The *Ahādith* on prohibition belong to an earlier period in the life of the Prophet and are abrogated (*mansukh*) by the later ones which carry permission, or alternatively the prohibition was meant only for such companions as were not well trained in the art of writing and did not include those who could write proficiently without fear of distortion.²⁷

Similarly, Siddiq, in our view, has argued quite reasonably that:

The date of one *hadith* in the *Sahīh* of Bukhari, which gives a companion the permission to write down one of his discourses, is dated the year of the conquest of

Makkah, a fact which would favour the view that the *hadith* which allowed the writings of *hadith* post dates those which indicate prohibition.²⁸

It is also apposite to mention that some books were in circulation as at that time such as tribal poems, promissory notes, personal letters and tribal agreements.²⁹ The book of Daniel was also believed to be in circulation.³⁰

Furthermore, the Qur'an (2:282) instructs on documentation of events, pacts and business transactions so as to safe-guard them from being forgotten or lost. It is an indisputable fact that the *Sahābah* would guard the Prophetic treasure jealously than the worldly materials or documents. Though one is not claiming that the events of 276 months (i.e. 23 years) were all recorded but a sizeable number of Traditions were actually recorded. Maurice Bucaille's claim that not a single collection of *hadith* was drawn up at the time of the Prophet,"³¹ in our opinion, should be understood to refer to book collection and not the actual recording of *hadith*.

The *Sahābah* and the Recording of *Hadith*

The companion as earlier observed formed the coterie of the Prophet's students. They received and assimilated the teachings of the Prophet for onward transmission to the later generation. The teaching method adopted was memorization, while some recorded some *hadith*. Muhammad Mubarak has, however, identified five ways for the dissemination of the Prophet's teachings during his lifetime as follows:

- (i) *Wa^cz*: oral teaching in gatherings.
- (ii) *Khutbah*: prepared sermons for Friday prayers, *'c*ld prayers and on special occasions such as wedding ceremony.
- (iii) *Ta^clim*: special training sessions for his emissaries
- (iv) *Af^cāl*: his practical demonstrations of the Qur'anic teachings
- (v) *Sunnah*: his own actions based on the interpretation of the Qur'an messages.³²

Though the last two, in our opinion, are identical, one can add the questions and answers sessions as well as statements made while settling disputes as the sixth and the seventh possible methods respectively. It is worth noting that there was no formal system of education as at that time.

Circumstances usually dictate the method to be adopted. The second Caliph ʿUmar was reported to have entered into an agreement with an *Ansari* to compare notes on the Prophet’s teachings when either of them was absent from the Prophet’s circle.³³ This reported episode is strong enough to cast doubt on the claim of Abu-Riyyah that ʿUmar used to reject the *hadith* of other *Sahābah*.³⁴ Our contention here is that ʿUmar, like other companions, used to rely on the reports of others, although he could still reject those he considered questionable, especially after the death of the Prophet.

Another point worth stressing is that the *Sahābah* demonstrated great enthusiasm in the dissemination of the Prophet’s word so that they would not be counted among those who withhold knowledge an offence which is strongly condemned in the Qur’an (2:159). Thus, the *Sahābah* considered oral transmission of the *hadith* imperative. To accuse the *Sahābah* of pious forgery as Schacht submitted does not conform to the historical reality of the time. Both Goldziher and Schacht contend that the exact words of the Prophet could not have been memorized; hence its transmission might not be completely free from interpolation.³⁵ This argument was first raised by Goldziher and has since remained an established thesis among some Western scholars of Islam.³⁶ The main argument, as Ansari puts it, is that “the Traditions reflect the viewpoints obtaining in the second and third Islamic centuries and (therefore), have little to tell about the early part of the first century to which they allegedly belong”.³⁷ Schacht’s skepticism is more offensive and unscholarly. He says:

Every legal Tradition from the Prophet, until the contrary is proved, must be taken not as an authentic or essentially authentic, even if slightly obscured, statement valid for his time or the time of the companions but as the fictitious expression of a legal doctrine formulated at a later date.³⁸

The possibility of an individual assimilating all the teachings of the Prophet is however very remote. The view of Ibn Taymiyyah, in this regard, could be considered to be accurate. He says:

None of the *Sahābah* could claim the monopoly of comprehending all the *hadith*. The Prophet might have uttered a statement or expressed a legal point or

practically demonstrated an action which would be witnessed by a few. Those who were present would automatically inform those who were absent.³⁹

We can deduce from this submission that the *Sahābah* used to compare notes among themselves during the Prophetic era and afterwards. It is not on record that the four guided caliphs, despite their closeness to the Prophet, were always in his company; hence they also asked questions on specific matters from those who were present when a proclamation was made on certain issues.⁴⁰ This deduction however has been challenged by the critics of *hadith* literature. They are arguing that some notable *Sahābah* were vehemently opposed to *hadith* narration not to talk of its recording or comparing notes among themselves.⁴¹ The names of both the first and the second caliphs are very prominent in this regard. Ahmad Amin states that both Abu-Bakr and ʿUmar opposed the narration of *hadith*.⁴² his view is based on the following event.

Qarzah Ibn Kaʿab narrated that we embarked on a journey to Iraq. ʿUmar escorted us until we reached the place called Harar. He performed ablution by washing each part twice then he said: “Do you know why I have escorted you? We said yes, because we are all companions of the Prophet”. He then said “you would come across a group of people who have difficulty in the recitation of the Qurʿan, likened to a person climbing the palm tree. Do not narrate any *hadith* to them because it will confuse them. Perfect recitation of the Qurʿan and limit your narrations from the messenger of Allah. Proceed on your journey and I am with you”. When Qarzah met the people, they enquired about *hadith*, he then said. “ʿUmar had forbidden us”.⁴³

This event is self-explanatory and as such to use it as the basis of preventing the recording of *hadith* is far-fetched and wishful thinking. ʿUmar had made himself clear. He did not want the people to be confused because of their level of Qurʿanic education. It is evident from the episode that if they had perfected their recitation, they would have met the standard considered safe by ʿUmar to allow them to have free access to the *hadith*. Therefore, to present this event in such a way as to prove that ʿUmar was vehemently opposed to the recording and the transmission of *hadith* will not, in our view, be correct.

Another critic, who shares Amin's submission on 'Umar is Mahmud Abu Riyyah. He bases his assumption on the fact that 'Umar was alleged to have prevented the Prophet from writing a book as contained in the following narration.

The Prophet was reported to have asked for a paper to write something on his sick bed. To this 'Umar said, "the Prophet is in the state of comma, the book of Allah is sufficient for us" ⁴⁴

We are tempted to observe that this incident is extremely doubtful. The expression that "the Prophet is in the state of comma" can be interpreted in many ways. It could be that 'Umar was sympathetic to the Prophet's poor health rather than opposing him as wrongly claimed by the *shi'ah* scholars. ⁴⁵ It can also be contended that the Prophet was said to be unlettered, how then was it possible for him to write a book while in the state of comma and on the sick bed? In any case this event does not suggest that 'Umar was against the recording of *hadith*. Azami strongly believes that 'Umar used to quote *hadith* in his official letters and in this way many *hadith* were recorded and transmitted by him. ⁴⁶

Furthermore, it is on record that 'Umar, during his caliphate, thought of compiling the Traditions but abandoned the idea for fear that the people should keep to them and leave the Qur'an. ⁴⁷ This could be regarded as another supportive argument that some companions paid attention to the preservation of the *hadith* in the same manner they had the Qur'an written down on the available scantily written materials. The fear of mixing the two was therefore the major concern of 'Umar in this regard.

The first caliph Abu-Bakr is also alleged to have opposed the transmission and recording of *hadith*. He was said to have observed that "we have the book of Allah in our midst; you should follow its injunctions". ⁴⁸ This argument is not strong enough to attract serious reaction. However, As-Sibai^c quotes an instance which suggests that Abu-Bakr used to reject any *hadith* narrated by an individual narrator. Instead he used to call other witnesses. ⁴⁹ The incident being referred to, to the best of our knowledge happened once in the case of inheritance as follows:

When a grandmother came to Abu-Bakr asking about her share in the inheritance of her grandson, he replied

“I have not found a share for you in the book of Allah and the Prophet did not fix any share for such a case”. He asked the companions whether the Prophet gave a grandmother one sixth. Abu-Bakr asked him whether anyone was with him at such occasion to state as Mughirah had said upon this statement; Abu-Bakr gave the grandmother one-sixth.⁵⁰

From this incident, it is unequivocally convincing that Abu-Bakr rather than rejecting *hadith* laid a solid foundation for the principle of authenticating and disparaging technically called *‘Ilmul-jarh wa ta‘adil* by the *hadith* experts. It is also on record that he wrote down about five hundred (500) *hadith* which he later burnt.⁵¹ The burning could either be a way of discouraging the writings of *hadith* and the Qur’an on the same sheet or it could be as Azami claimed that at the time of writing he did not know the position of the Prophet on the issue.⁵² It could also be that he suspected that it contained some *hadith* related by unreliable people.⁵³

Conclusion

Despite the thesis and the anti-thesis of recording during the time of the Prophet, it is incontestable that *Ahādith* were both orally transmitted and some *Sahābah* had it written down. The opposing argument that stems from the fact that the Prophet was reported as having frowned at its recording can be disregarded, because if the recording were not in practice, he would not have kicked against it.

The second argument worthy of consideration is the fact that every society has certain norms, values handed down through generations. The existing generation is its custodians for onward transmission to future generations; such values are generally not recorded in book form but are largely orally transmitted. The non-availability of document facts on such values does not invalidate their existence. This argument goes for the *Ahādith*. Islam as generally acclaimed, changed the social norms of the Arabs. People continuously imbibe the culture from the primary source which the *hadith* symbolizes. Despite the claim of the critics of *hadith* on the non-availability of writing materials, the *hadith* were preserved and jealously guarded by the companion of the Prophet. It could be further observed that even if writing materials were available, the recording would be a very difficult task. This is because to comprehensively record the actions, utterances and tacit approvals of a political and religious leader during his lifetime will be a futile exercise.

The Prophet did not train a particular community but the whole of humanity. The fact that proper official documentation of his teachings was made in the second and the third century of Islam does not in any way suggest pious forgery or fictitious expressions. The conclusion that can be drawn from the scholastic polemics on the recording of *hadith* is that, it was initially discouraged on fears that the *hadith* might be confused with the Qur'an texts. Later when such fear was no longer entertained, the Prophet permitted the recording of *hadith*. Indeed, *Hadith* records are beneficial to mankind in general and the Muslims in particular today as they will be everlastingly beneficial to all.

Notes and References

1. M.M Azami, *Studies in Early Hadith Literature*, Indianapolis, 1978, p.9
2. *Ibid*
3. Mahmud Abu-Riyyah, *Adwau ʿala sunnatil Muhammadiyyah*, Muasasatu –Ansariyyah, Tehran, Iran (n.d). p 51.
4. Azami, p.9
5. *ibid*
6. Muhammad Shadhili an-Nayr “*Tarikh Tadwinu-sunnah fil-Qarnayn al Awal wa Thani in Majallah Rabitalul ʿAlamil-Islami*, vol 20 (1) p.94. Also see Abu-Riyyah’s *Adwau*...p.271
7. The names of the jurists are as follows:
 - Abu Muhammad Saʿid ibn al musayab (d. 112 A.H)
 - Al-Qasim ibn Muhammad ibn Abi –Bakr As-Sidiq (d. 112 A.H)
 - ʿUrwah ibn Zubayr ibn al ʿAwam (d. 94.A.H)
 - Abu-Bakr ibn ʿAbdur Rahman ibn al Harith (d. 112 A.H)
 - ʿUbayd – Allah ibn ʿAbdullah (d.94 A.H).
 - Abu Zayd Kharajah ibn Zayd ibn Thabit (d.100 A.H)
 - Ayub ibn Sulaiman ibn Yasar (d. 100 A.H) see *Majallah Rabitalul ʿAlamil-Islami* vol 20 (1)p.93
8. Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammadnische Studien* (Muhammadan Studies) Teill, Halle, 1890. the work was reproduced by Olms Hudeshelm in 1961 C.E
9. Zafar Ishaz Ansari “The authenticity of Traditions: a critique of Joseph Schacht’s Argument e. silentio” *Hamdard Islamicus* a Journal of Islamic Research and studies Vol. VII No. 2, 1984 p.51.
10. Muhammad Luqman As-Salafi, *Assunnah, Hujiyatuha wa makanatuha fil-islam waradd ʿala Munkinriha*. Beirut, 1989, pp169-170.
11. Imam Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Abdul-Hamid Siddiqi, (trans), Dar al-Arabia, Beirut, “n.d” Vol. 4 p.1543
12. Abu ʿUmar Yusuf Ibn Abdul-Bar, *Jamiʿi Bayanil ʿIlm*, Maktabatul ʿIlmiyyah, Madina, “n.d”, vol.1,p.76
13. *Ibid* pp.23-24
14. Azami, p.23
15. As-salafi, p.170

16. *Ibid*
17. *ibid*
18. Azami, p.28
19. *Ibid*
20. *Ibid*
21. ^oAbdur-Rahman Muhammad ^oUthman *Muqadimatu-t-Tuhufat al- Ahawadhi* “n.p” pp39-40
22. As-salafi p. 171
23. *Ibid*
24. As-Salafi, p.167, Also see *Sunnan Abi Daud (Hadith 3646), Sunan Darimi (vol.1 Hadith 125), Musnad Ahmad (Vol.2, Hadith 162, 192 and 207)*
25. *Ibid*
26. Muhammad Ibn Isma^oil al-Bukhari, *Sahihul-Bukhari*, Abdul-Hamid Siddiqi (Trans), Dar al-Fikr “n.d”. Vol. 1, p. 86.
27. Muhammad Zubayr Siddiq, *Hadith Literature, Its Origin, Development and Special Features Islamic*, Text Society Cambridge U.K 1993, pp.25-26
28. *Ibid*
29. Azami pp.1-2
30. *Ibid*
31. Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, The Qur’an and Science*, Alabela Islamic Publications, Lagos “n.d” p.115.
32. Muhammad Mubarak “Al-hadith fi Ahadin-nabiy in *Majallah Rabiatalul^oAlamil-Islami*, 1981 Vol, 20 (1), p.48.
33. *Ibid* p.51
34. Abu-Riyyah, pp.58-59
35. Ansari p.51
36. *Ibid*
37. *Ibid*
38. *Ibid*
39. Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Raf^oul Malam^o anil Aimatil^oAalam*, Islamic University Press, Al-Madinah, 1989, p.208
40. *Ibid*
41. Abu-Riyyah, p.270
42. Ahmad Amin, *Fajrul-Islam*, Maktabah An-Nahadah al – Misriyyah, Egypt, 1975, p.210

43. Al-Bukhari, *Sahihu al-Bukhari*, vol. VII, 389
44. Ibid, vol. IV, 1
45. The Shi'ah scholars maintain that, the Prophet was to write down the name of 'Ali, as his successor. 'Umar was alleged to have prevented him. See Muhammad at Tijani As-Samawi *As-shi'ah hum ahalus-sunnah* Muasassatul-fajr, London 1993 pp.174-175
46. Azami, p.58
47. Shaykh Aly Al-khafeef, "Sunnah's role in expounding Islamic rules and the refutation of suspicion cast at their authenticity or transmission" in *Al-Azhar*, journal of Islamic Research, 1966, p.57
48. Abu-Riyyah, p.55
49. Mustafa Husni As-Siba'i *As-Sunnah Wa Makanatuha Fit-Tashri' al-Islami* "n.p" p. 20
50. Muhammad ibn 'Abdul-Baqi Az-Zurqani, *Sharh Az-Zurqani 'Ala Muwatta Al-Imam Malik*, Sharkatul Quds li nashr, Cairo, 2003, vol.3, p.168 for fn 52
51. Azami, p.34.
52. Ibid
53. Ibid