Authentication of Hadith: Redefining the Criteria

Israr Ahmad Khan, London, Washington; International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010, xxiv+188 pages. Notes to p. 204. Bibliography, to p. 207. Index to p. 215.

The book critically examines the thorny issue of Hadith authentication and scrutinizes, by dint of critical scholarship, the standard adopted by the major compilers of hadith for judging the validity of traditions. The author unearths an authoritative blend of facts, theory, and critical enquiry with an engaging insight. The eight-chapter book opens with an introduction that explores the relevance of hadith in Islam, assesses the present Muslims' approach to hadith, among others, and delves into the issue of the authentication of hadith texts. He looks at the criteria used by Muslim scholars to validate traditions and examines them in the light of the extent to which these criteria established the accuracy of the texts.

Finding out if hadith authentication from textual perspective draws any merit, he advances arguments pointing to the incapability of some narrators to care for the accuracy of the statements, textual inconsistencies in reports, 'delusions' of trustworthy reporters, and the possibility of forgery in some hadith texts. With indubitable evidence, Khan indicates that many traditions were not reported in the actual diction of the prophet but in terms of the message. He claims that the freedom to narrate hadith in one's own words has led to difficulties a number of which he cites from highly accredited sources. He minces no words in indicating that several texts of hadith in both Bukhari and Muslim vary from each other not only in lyrics but in their central message. Sometimes, the chain of narrators (*isnad*) can be faultless but the text may be problematic. In this instance, he claims, the commentators attribute it to the narrators blaming it on a "misconception" or "misunderstanding" between them "leaving the matter at that" without "examining the issue carefully"(without examining the text as a probable cause of the problem) having seen nothing wrong with the chain. This, he claims, is why they do not bother about the validity of the text. One realizes at this point that most commentators take for granted that traditions in their hands, by the honesty and, perhaps, the extent of criticalness of the compilers, are unconditionally genuine. They, therefore, position themselves to defend their validity by all possible means among which is the attribute of incoherence to the "misconception" or "misunderstanding" on the side of one of the narrators.

Hadith forgery featured in Islam barely two decades after the prophet and scholars did their best to differentiate it from authentic ones. Despite this, for Khan, it is possible that some traditions regarded as genuine merely due to their *isnad* may not be genuine in textual outlook. Since the *isnad* is impossible to re-examine in our time, for him, that may remain closed but the "door" to examining the text should remain open.

In his introduction, he makes a remarkable appeal that echoes the perceived age-old Muslim academic intolerance that results in the thoughtless rejection of writings that go against the grain("established norms" and perceptions). In hadith scholarship, it is taken as an "established dogma" that "if the chain of narrators is authentic, the hadith is considered authentic regardless of the problem(s) its text may contain"(p.xxiv) while hadith collections of Bukhari and Muslim are unquestionably authentic. While the latter has often been the case, the author over generalizes the former creating the impression that the generality of Muslims accepts traditions merely on the basis of faultless chain of narrators. Yet, many Muslim scholars have long questioned many traditions in even Bukhari and Muslim long before his own publication. For example, al-Daraqutni, in his *Kitab-ut-Tatabbu'*, argues for the weakness of 78 hadiths in Bukhari, 100 in Muslim, and 32 in both all stemming from a criticism of both chains and texts.

He, however, acknowledges Ibn al-Qayyim who, he claims, provides some criteria for examining the texts of traditions among which is the age-old standard that a sound hadith must not contradict the Qur'an. And Ibn al-Jawzi who though does not explicitly declare traditions as invalid based on their texts, yet, the subtitles of his book incline to critique the texts as well as the criteria that established their validity. Khan traces the chronology of and reasons for hadith forgery. The upsurge of political groups in Islam, he claims, led to hadith forgery in support of respective claims of legitimacy, while others forged traditions merely to cause dissension among Muslims. Others, apart from enthusiastic desire to earn livelihood and win state favour, did so due to personal obsession to Allah's course. To buttress all these claims, he cites accredited sources in competent detail which are replete with examples of traditions classified as questionable based not only on the demerit of their faulty *isnads* or confession of the forgers but the texts. In fact, sometimes, a hadith was rejected based on the incoherence of its text to historical happenings and accepted norms apart from the Qur'an, while the chain was not even looked at. His argument is that the Sahabah critiqued both the chain and the text but this was relegated in the 2nd and 3rd centuries which witnessed the compilation of the present "sound" collections and replaced with a criterion that circumferenced a mere scrutiny of the chain.

The theme of the book is specifically covered in chapters three, four, five, six, seven and eight in which he used his 'new criteria' to judge the textual validity of various traditions. One of these criteria is the Qur'an. Using the Qur'an as criterion, he presents an interesting argument about the tradition about Prophet Ibrahim in which he is reported to have lied only three times. He implies that the word *siddiq*, "the paragon of truth", used in the Qur'an for Ibrahim, overrules the validity of the tradition (p.51-52). Supporting this claim, he quotes various scholars like: Ibn Arabi, Qurtubi, on one hand, and Ibn Jawzi, Al-Razi, and Mawdudi, on the other, whose views swing between validity and

invalidity, respectively. That means that some scholars before him had already challenged the tradition and the existing criteria that established its soundness, and this raises the basic question of whether his own effort to question it is original. Again, one observes that Khan seems to miss the point here. Because the problem of Ibrahim's perceived "deception" does not lie in the text of this tradition but in answering the question of whether his denial of his wife, Sarah, at the dominion of Namrud, his complain of sickness when he was not sick, and his attribute of the destruction of the idols (as referred to, for example, by Imam Ibn Kathir's in his *Qasas-al-Anbiya'*) were really lies or whether the story itself is sound. This would have provided effective background to situate the current argument. The criticism of the text of this hadith alone draws no merit; for if the story referred to above is sound(implying that Ibrahim did not tell the truth) then this tradition would do no good if it indicated the other way round. Also, after examining the views of the scholars, Khan falls short of indicating whether it is fabricated or not. One, therefore, wonders about the essence of the textual criticism of the hadith.

In chapter five, the author boldly touches the sensitive tradition on the controversial "stone verse" which is related by both Bukhari and Muslim but with comprehensive detail by Bukhari. It refers to a speech reported to have been delivered by Umar b. Al-Khattab which was sparked-off by a report that reached him indicating that a certain man promised to swear his allegiance to Talhah if Umar died. This speech, without reference to any prior controversy, mentioned that "one of the revelations was the *Ayat al-Rajm* [concerning stoning to death], which we recited, grasped and memorized"(p.101). This "stone verse" saga raises many impenetrable questions. First, what was the circumstance surrounding its revelation? Was it part of the entire Qur'an believed to have been recited to the prophet by Angel Jibril? It is reported that the prophet ordered the arrangement of the Qur'an in its current form; was it accepted as part of it? If the latter is yes, did the prophet order its exclusion? If yes, it calls to question the completeness of the Qur'an in its current form. If no, it means the Sahabah manipulated the content of the Qur'an after the prophet. Yet, such thoughts would be invalid for the Qur'an as it stands now. However, Khan's analysis raises no doubt that some earlier scholars had questioned the soundness of the tradition on the basis of reason as he cites Amin Islahi. Yet, his systematic analysis of the other aspects of the report is very enlightening and contributes reasonably to hadith textual critical analysis.

The book ends with an appraisal of Bukhari's chapter on predestination. For him, the textual outlook of those traditions gives some cause for questioning. He then reappraises the commentaries on those traditions and advances new interpretations based on original methodology hoping to "reassert" their validity. The issue of predestination is a theological one and even Qur'anic verses were quoted and countered by various theological schools, yet, none of them came out with totally reliable stand. Khan's own analysis even

creates further confusion as he indicates that: "the physical and intellectual features of man may be considered fully predetermined"(p.143) shortly after saying that "the concept of predetermination hardly fits into the Qur'anic framework." He also questions the rational for classifying Hadith no.6 (Hadith on children's innocence) among traditions on predestination. Khan also merely explains some of the traditions(e.g hadith nos. 8 and 9(that forbid snatching of others' rights and indicates Allah as the sole owner of all things, respectively)(p.165-7)) without applying any original methodology and this makes one wonder about the essence of their inclusion in his review.

For this reviewer, however, the following questions arise for consideration: do all hadith scholars agree that the *sahihayn* are sound in whole? Do some other scholars consider some traditions in them as weak? Is any one who thinks the *sahihayn* are not sound in totality an innovator? Indeed, scholars like Ibn Kathir and An-Nawawi would say 'yes' to the first question. According to al-Juwayni, if one swears on the pains of divorce that all that is in Bukhari and Muslim is sound, his marriage would be safe. Despite this, al-Daraqutni indicated that a small number may not reach the level of *sahih* and so the second question too is 'yes', even though, these objections are refuted one-by-one by Ibn Hajar and An-Nawawi at the beginning of their *Fath-al-Bari* and *Sharh Sahih Muslim*, respectively. The third question is, obviously, 'no' because it is *wajib* on Muslims to ensure that no lie is attributed to the prophet. Nonetheless, the issue of whether the *Sahihayn* are or not 100% authentic remains contentious, but majority of Muslims including the *Fuqaha'*, generation after generation, have contended that they are.

The book is well referenced. The punctuation of names in the endnotes and bibliography, however, needs serious revision. He places commas as he deems fit. For example, "Muslim, ibn al-Hajjaj...", "Subhi al-Salih"(p.189), "Al-Asqalani, Ibn Hajar, Ahmad ibn Ali [all as one name]" (p.191), "Kamil Muhammad, Muhammad Uwaydah [also as one name]"(p.191), "Malik ibn Anas" (p.191), etc. One wonders which ones are their surnames. Sometimes, perceived surnames come first, while other times it is popular names. Other times, names are arranged normally, e.g. "Malik ibn Anas"(p.191), "Sayyid Qutb"(p.193), "Muhammad Asad"(p.194) and "Ahmad ibn Hanbal"(p.202). Such is the style of citation throughout the endnotes. In the case of note no. 16 of chapter 3, the book's title precedes the names of authors who are identified as editors(p.192). The case of the bibliography is not different. For example one of the Ibn Hajars is cited as "Al-Asqalani, Ibn Hajar, Ahmad ibn Ali"(p.205) while another is simply cited as "Ibn Hajar" with no other name attached. Khan cites three books from the latter in which he only cites a name in the first one while in the other he substitutes the name with a line indicating that they were all by the same author(p.206). This is done in citing other scholars: "Ibn al-Athir" and "Ibn Kathir", etc. The case is, however, different for the author he cites as "Kamil Muhammad, Muhammd Uwaydah"(p.206). The second book by this

same author is cited as "Kamil Muhammad" without the other names creating the impression that they are different authors. Again, the author's surname is Uwaydah not Kamil Muhammad as it is portrayed by Khan. Aside this, Mawdudi is cited as "Syed Mawdudi" in the work(p.53) while in the endnotes and bibliography, it is cited as "Mawdudi, Sayyid Abul A'la,...." Others are not even punctuated at all, e.g. "Hamzah Muhammad Qasim"(p.206). Bibliographies are normally arranged alphabetically but this is not so in Khan's book. This evokes the question of what citation style he used. One, therefore, wonders why Khan, with his level of criticalness and insight, should concede to such a laxity of punctuation inconsistency and citation irregularities after taking on 'brains' like Bukhari and Muslim. Worse of it, that a prestigious publishing house like the International Institute of Islamic Thought should be neglectful to the extent of publishing a book with such unpardonable defects.

Nonetheless, Khan must be commended for daringly sailing through the deep waters of an important religious matter in a thought provoking manner. He shows a high level academic brilliance and truly proves himself to be extremely well-educated on the rudiments of hadith criticism with an appealing insight. His arguments are credible, resounding, realistic, stimulating, and prepare the ground for further exploration into hadith textual criticism. He makes a tremendous breakthrough in hadith textual authentication in modern times in particular and hadith studies in general. The linguistic clarity of the book makes it useful for undergraduate hadith criticism, but its advanced technical reasoning makes it a valuable material for post graduate Hadith studies.

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