

Does the Hadith have a Solid Historical Basis?

[Hadith / Traditions](#)



And among men are those who purchase idle HADITH (tales) without knowledge to mislead (men) from the Path of God, and make a mockery of it (God's Path) [Quran, Luqman (31): 6]

The Holy Quran is unquestionably the Divine Book of Islam. However, Muslims with some exceptions regard the Hadith as Islam's second essential source. The Hadith and related literature[1] has greatly influenced Muslim beliefs and practices. However, all Muslims should dispassionately ask themselves this critically important question: Is the Hadith reliable enough as religious guidance? It is time this question was settled decisively for all of us, for if there is some doubt about the authenticity and credibility of the Hadith, the influence it exerts on Muslim beliefs and practices cannot be regarded as wholly welcome, if not totally unwelcome.

Indeed many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have questioned, and in contemporary times, are questioning, the historicity and authenticity of the Hadith. All Muslims should pay attention to what they have said or are saying. No doubt they represent the minority voice, most often due to the suppression of their views in the existing politico-religious conditions in Muslim countries. But the opinion of the majority is not always true. In fact, our Prophet was exhorted not to follow those who have no knowledge [Jathiya (45): 18], and he was specifically urged not to follow the majority, as they follow nothing but conjecture without any knowledge, and do nothing but lie:

If thou (O Muhammad) followed the most of those on earth, they would have led thee far astray from the path of God. They follow naught but conjecture; and they do naught but lie." [An'am (6): 116]

The reader may ask a Muslim: Exactly when and how did the Hadith come? The usual answer is most likely to be: "I do not know." The time when the Hadith compilations surfaced – particularly those in which Muslims have come to believe - is an important factor to be reckoned with, as it should have important implications for its religious significance for Muslims. It is striking that the compilations Muslims believe in appeared with a long time gap after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad – mostly during the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. (third and fourth centuries Hijrah or A.H.), i.e., between 220 and 270 years after the Prophet's death. The long time gap and other factors (see below) inevitably give rise to the question whether the Hadith literature is reliable enough. All Muslims, even including those who champion the Hadith, accept the fact that after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, false hadith reports about or attributed to

the Prophet Muhammad “mushroomed” into hundreds of thousands. The compilations that were made more than two centuries after the Prophet’s death were done after sorting through mountainous piles of individual hadith reports. Bukhari, for example, made a selection of some seven thousand traditions (including repeated ones) out of reportedly six hundred thousand he found in circulation – roughly one out of every one hundred. That means that he discarded all but a tiny fraction of the hadith in circulation as false. This factor alone leaves open the question whether his selection has been foolproof. A similar question is true of the other compilers, too. It is time the true character or status of the Hadith in terms of its trustworthiness got properly reevaluated by every Muslim, for it is important for every Muslim that he relies on what is really fully reliable, and not on something that has a fragile basis.

The authenticity and veracity of the Hadith can be critically appraised along different lines – from a perspective as to whether there is any theological sanction for the Hadith, according to whether there is a solid or sound historical basis, and according to whether the hadith texts meet certain objective criteria such as whether they are consistent with the Quran, basic reason and historical and scientific truths. The author has attempted to cover all these issues in a book under preparation. Here only the historical basis of the Hadith is critically examined.

The Historical Basis of the Hadith

The historical basis of the Hadith is at best tenuous. Some of the historical points such as (1) the prohibition of the Prophet himself on hadith writing, and honoring of the same position by his immediate followers, (2) the long time gap between the Quran and the Hadith, and the accompanying lack of proper records of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet, and (3) flawed oral transmission due to weakness of the human sources, including their imperfect memories add well to effectively dismiss the Hadith altogether. To this list one may add (4) the influence of the ruling regimes, of people with wealth and power of the time, and of the disputing theologians on hadith collection, recording, selection and compilation, and finally (5) the weakness of the criteria used to judge authenticity of individual hadith texts.

The Position of the Prophet and His Immediate Followers

Historical evidence, if there is any, appears to be that the Prophet himself was against the reporting of his own sayings and practices, and his four close companions who became Caliphs after him upheld the same position. Kassim Ahmad notes: “Notwithstanding the conflicting versions of hadith that say otherwise, historical facts ... prove beyond any shadow of doubt that there were no hadith collections existing at the time of the Prophet's death. History also proves that the early caliphs prevented the dissemination or recording of hadith.”[2]

The ulama take it for granted that the Prophet gave his blessing to the collection and writing of his hadith. Mazhar Kazi reports that in his farewell address the Prophet declared, “Convey to others even if it is a single verse from me.”[3] This is taken as a go-ahead for hadith dissemination. However, the statement here more meaningfully appears rather to point to the revealed Quranic verses, not his own words, since he was the messenger of God’s message and mercy for the whole universe [Qalam (68): 52; Anbiya (21): 107], and his message, which was nothing but the Quran, needed to be conveyed to all mankind.

The available evidence is rather compelling that the Prophet forbade collection and writing of his own words except the Quran and left clear direction that if anyone has collected and recorded such statements, these should be erased. This is evident from one hadith narration included in Muslim that reads as follows:

Abu Sa'id Khudri reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: Do not take down anything from me, and he who took down anything from me except the Quran, he should erase that and narrate from me, for there is no harm in it and he who attributed any falsehood to me-and Hammam said: I think he also said: "deliberately" -he should in fact find his abode in the Hell-Fire (Sahih Muslim, Book 042, Chapter 17, Number 7147).[4]

There are other similar hadith reports, e.g., one from Abu Dawud, and another from Taqiyid by al-Baghdadi confirming the Prophet's prohibition on hadith writing and direction for erasure of any hadith.[5] The ulamarecognize and accept the Prophet's prohibition on hadith recording, but brush aside this prohibition by expressing the view that it was applicable for an initial period when the Quran was being revealed to avoid a possible mix-up of the Quranic verses with the Hadith. However, this sort of reasoning is unconvincing, since the Prophet did not explicitly mention this and since there is no evidence that the Prophet ever withdrew or cancelled his earlier discouragement of any hadith recording. Evidently, the Prophet was aware of the dangers of writing down Prophetic traditions beside the words of God and, as Guillaume reports, the Prophet did caution against hadith writing as such writings led people astray before.[6] Some may point out that taking recourse to the Hadith to prove that the Prophet gave no authority for the Hadith and that he rather discouraged it could be considered fallacious. Yet it does give the message that if the hadith about the Prophet's prohibition on hadith writing is true, as it seemingly was, there remains no genuine basis for the rest of the Hadith literature to stand validated.

Whatever historical reports we seem to have about the position of the Khulafai-Rashidun (the Righteous Caliphs) on the Hadith suggest that they also discouraged its compilation. According to one report, the first Caliph Abu Bakr burned his own notes of hadith (said to be some 500), after being very uneasy about these notes.[7] "According to Jayrajpuri, because the Companions (of the Prophet) so often disagreed with one another Abu Bakr forbade the collection of hadith." [8] Caliph Umar cancelled his initial plan to compile hadith, apprehending its possible adverse impact in the form of neglect of the Book of God – the Quran.[9] During his caliphate, "the problem of hadith forgery was so serious that he prohibited hadith transmission altogether." [10] Umar reportedly also arranged for burning of all available hadith. The position of Uthman and Ali also appears to have been lack of any overt effort to collect any hadith for dissemination purposes.

Hazy or conflicting historical reports about developments in the early period of Islam notwithstanding, the fact remains that there were no written records of hadith during the Prophet's lifetime and during the rule of the four Caliphs. This is despite the fact that "several documents of the Prophet, such as the Medina Charter or Constitution, his treaties and letters, had been written on his orders." [11] This amply proves the point that if the Prophet had wished, he could have made arrangements for recording of his Hadith as a separate religious document, just as he did in the case of the Quran. The stark fact is that he did not wish such recording, and

his discouragement of hadith recording was honored by the four Caliphs, and remained in force apparently for some thirty years after the Prophet's death, but was ignored later. According to one report, a hadith in Abu Dawud, the Ummayyad ruler Mu'awiya wanted a hadith to be written in the presence of one of the Prophet's most noted scribes Zayd ibn Thabit, but when Zayd ibn Thabit reminded him of the Prophet's prohibition on hadith writing, he (Mu'awiya) erased it.

As Iqbal notes in his seminal work *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, even Abu Hanifah, regarded as "one of the greatest exponents of Muhammedan Law in Sunni Islam ... made practically no use of ... traditions", even though there were collections available at that time made by other people no less than thirty years before his death. Nor did he collect any hadith for his use, unlike his peers Malik and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. Thus, according to Iqbal, "if modern Liberalism considers it safer not to make any indiscriminate use of them [traditions] as a source of law, it will be only following [the example of Abu Hanifah]." [12] "In reaction to a situation [where huge numbers of forged hadith reports were in circulation] that was virtually out of control, Abu Hanifa approached hadith with the assumption that very few could be proved sahih[authentic]." [13]

The Long Time Gap and the Lack of Proper Records of the Prophet's Sayings and Deeds

We already noted that the Hadith surfaced more than two centuries after the Prophet's death, which *ifso facto* means a long time gap between the Quran and the Hadith. This long time gap raises questions of reliability for the Hadith that can never be satisfactorily resolved. Muslim and non-Muslim historians and scholars all point out that there were no written records of the Prophet's sayings and deeds during the first century after his death, and not much hadith writing – and not any hadith book that gained respectability later on by the Muslim community at large during the long two centuries after the Prophet's death. [14] The Hadith literature that gained recognition such as that collected and compiled by Bukhari, Muslim, etc., came more than two hundred years after the Prophet's death, and they were all based on oral transmission from generation to generation through chains of transmitters (isnads) numbering seven to even one hundred in the chain. A Herculean feat! Isn't it? But hold your breath. Even written records of the past traditions were not good enough. As the historian MacDonald notes that one danger in written records "was evidently real ... the unhappy character of the Arabic script, especially when written without diacritical points, often made it hard if not practically impossible, to understand such short, contextless texts as the traditions." [15] "There was fierce opposition to the written records of traditions for a long time also on the theological ground that this would lead to too much honoring of the traditions and neglect of the Quran, a fear that was justified to a certain extent by the event." [16]

The compilers of hadith (the muhaddithun), "no matter how dedicated, were simply too distant from the time of the Prophet, and forgery had become too rampant for authentic hadith to be recovered." [17] Some anecdotes of the muhaddithun suggest that they could not prevent forged hadith from being circulated even in their own names. [18] Since the Hadith is known among Muslims as the words of the Prophet Muhammad and accounts of his deeds, it is quite natural that it would have a special sentimental value and appeal to them, especially to those who are unwary and unsuspecting believers. Unfortunately, however, the enemies of Islam and pseudo-Muslims who deliberately wanted to mislead Muslim believers and wanted to sabotage the

propagation of true Islam have abused this sentimental value by attributing false statements or reports either to God or to His Prophet right from the Prophet's lifetime. Evidence that there were such people who directed their efforts to diverting attention from the mainstream Islam and to causing dissension and divisions in the Muslimummah even during the Prophet's lifetime is provided by the Quran itself in the following verses:

And there are those who put up a mosque by way of mischief and disbelief, and in order to cause dissension among the believers, and as an outpost for those who fought against God and His messenger before. They will indeed swear: 'Our intention is nothing but good'; but God beareth witness that they are certainly liars. Never stand there (to pray). A mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety is more worthy of your standing therein, wherein are men who love to purify themselves. God loveth those who purify themselves. [Tauba or Baraat (9): 106-107]

Here it refers to some people who put up a mosque to cause dissension among Muslims. Such people were evidently not well-meaning Muslims. Thus forgers had been active even during the Prophet's lifetime. Forgery had been rampant during the caliphate of the Prophet's immediate successors, and it "only increased under the Umayyads, who considered hadith a means of propping up their rule and actively circulated traditions against Ali and in favor of Mu'awiya. The Abbasids followed the same pattern, circulating Prophetic hadith which predicted the reign of each successive ruler. Moreover, religious and ethnic conflicts further contributed to the forgery of hadith." [19]

It was during the rule of the Abbasids that Hadith compilation making a mark for the later Muslims was done in earnest. The first such compilation in the third century Hijrah was by al-Bukhari, who died in 257 A.H., whose book contains, as already mentioned, a selection of some seven thousand traditions (including repeated ones) out of reportedly six hundred thousand he found in circulation. Another contemporary compilation was by Muslim (d. 261 A.H.), which contains some four thousand selections out of some three hundred thousand. Other four compilations included in the so-called authentic six and written more or less towards the end of the third century Hijrah are by Abu Dawud as-Sijistani (d. 275 A.H), Ibn Maja (d. 303 A.H), at-Tirmidhi (d. 279 A.H) and an-Nasa'i (d. 303 A.H), which "deal almost entirely with legal traditions, those that tell what is permitted and what is forbidden, and do not convey information on religious and theological subjects." [20] The compilations accepted by the Shiites came even later.

The big question is why did the compilations come after such an inordinately long lapse of historical time after the Prophet's death? Kassim Ahmad legitimately asks: "Why was the official compilation not made earlier, especially during the time of the righteous caliphs when the first reporters, i.e., the eye witnesses, were still alive and could be examined?" [21] Because of the long time gap, one can hardly be sure beyond any shadow of doubt that the accounts are genuinely those of the Prophet Muhammad. How can one be so certain that the chain of narrators through the oral transmission has been successful in transmitting the same message ad verbatim from generation to generation, when even in the same generation, or say, even in the same year or month or day, people are often found unable to exactly reproduce one's utterances? Even in the current electronic age, news reporters often find it hard, without proper recording, to

reproduce the exact texts of what speakers say in their speeches. Even today, sometimes there are conflicting news reports of the same event, which may not be intentional lies on the part of the reporters. Note also that noticeable differences can be found in the compilations done by the different compilers – a factor that can also raise a question of credibility of the compilations.

Flawed Oral Transmission Due to Weakness of the Human Sources, Including Their Imperfect Memories

Thus the manner in which hadith was preserved and transmitted raises a lot of questions. Since hadith was preserved and transmitted primarily orally, both by default and design, the transmission process was as good as the human sources involved in the process. (The oral transmission was preferred to written records by the hadith scholars, because written records to be credible required to be directly attested to by living transmitters of hadith who could vouch for their credibility.) The question is: was this transmission process reliable enough to give assurance that what we get as words or reports of deeds of the Prophet are genuinely those of the Prophet?

According to the nineteenth century great Indian Muslim thinker-reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the transmitters of hadith (rawis) often engaged in transmitting hadith according to the sense rather than the exact words of the Prophet. This widespread practice resulted in textual variations among traditions on the same subject, “differences that go well beyond the wording and affect the meaning. As a result, he contends, one can be sure in very few instances that traditions accurately portray the Prophet’s words and actions, even if they can be shown to have originated during his lifetime.”[22]

Also note that hadith reports originating from all narrators do not command the same credibility. Hadith reports that are reported to have originated from two of the companions of the Prophet, Anas b. Malik and Abu Huraira are especially suspect. Anas lived long (about hundred years), because of which it was convenient for hadith forgers to list him as an originator.[23] “Aisha criticized Anas for transmitting traditions although he was only a child during the life of the Prophet.”[24] Aisha was reported to have criticized also Abu Huraira, and she was joined in this criticism by Ibn Abbas.[25] Abu Huraira was originator of a very large number of hadith texts (more than 5000), even though he converted to Islam in less than three years before the Prophet’s death. According to some reports, the second Caliph “Umar called Abu Huraira a liar,”[26] and reprimanded him for his questionable conduct. During Mu’awiya’s rule, he reportedly lived in his palace in Syria.[27] His memory was poor, but the Bukhari compilation provides reference to his poor memory being miraculously cured by the Prophet (Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 1, Book 3, # 119, also repeated at Vol. 4, Book 56, Number 841, also repeated by another narrator with a somewhat different text at Vol. 1, Book 3, # 120), a claim that looks rather suspicious. And legitimately, a question also arises: how sure can one be that the later transmitters (who are known as Rawis, some of whom were Tabiun, i.e., companions of the companions of the Prophet or Tabi-Tabiun, i.e., companions of the Tabiun) in the chain of narrators (isnad) attributed hadith texts to the original companion of the Prophet accurately without any mistake, even with full good intentions? Any mistake made by anyone of the narrators of any hadith in the chain (isnad) involved would necessarily make its transmission flawed, and its accurate attribution to the Prophet difficult.

There are even some hadith texts in Bukhari that suggest that even the Prophet used to forget things (Sahih Bukhari, Volume 1, Book 5, Number 274, also Vol. 1, Book 8, # 394)! Surely the less reliable human agents involved in hadith transmission were more likely to forget and make mistakes. Is not the hadith transmission a reflection of too much dependence on human memory and that also covering several generations? There was undoubtedly too much dependence on human memory, and the authenticity of hadith breaks down on this count alone. The Hadith definitely relies on too many unproven assumptions, and thus can hardly claim authority.

The Influence of Power Struggles and Theological Rivalries on Hadith Writing

Hadith writing was actively promoted by the Umayyad and Abbasid rulers. According to a historical tradition, Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 742 A.D.) was the first individual to record (in writing) the hadith, but under duress – under orders from Caliph Hisham, “who became the first traditionist to violate the Prophet’s prohibition on recording hadith in writing. Al-Zuhri is reported to have said: ‘We disapproved of recording knowledge [meaning hadith] until these rulers forced us to do so. After that we saw no reason to forbid Muslims to do so.’”[28]

About the power struggles and theological rivalries that led to forging of hadith in circulation, MacDonald notes:

[T]he Umayyads, who reigned from A.H. 41 to A.H. 132 [and who cared little for religion], for reasons of state, ... encouraged and spread—also freely forged and encouraged others to forge—such traditions as were favorable to their plans and to their rule generally. This was necessary if they were to carry the body of the people with them. But they regarded themselves as kings and not as the heads of the Muslim people. This same device has been used after them by all the contending factions of Islam. Each party has sought sanction for its views by representing them in traditions from the Prophet, and the thing has gone so far that on almost every disputed point there are absolutely conflicting prophetic utterances in circulation. It has even been held, and with some justification, that the entire body of normative tradition at present in existence was forged for a purpose.[29]

One example of hadith fabrication given by Goldhizer is that by Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik also known as Malik b. Anas[30], who was an important collector of hadith is as follows:

“When the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik wished to stop the pilgrimages to Mecca because he was worried lest his rival 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr should force the Syrians journeying to the holy places in Hijaz to pay him homage, he had recourse to the expedient of the doctrine of the vicarious hajj to the Qubbat al-Sakhra in Jerusalem. He decreed that obligatory circumambulation (tawaf) could take place at the sacred place in Jerusalem with the same validity as that around the Ka'ba ordained in Islamic law. The pious theologian al-Zuhri was given the task of justifying this politically motivated reform of religious life by making up and spreading a saying traced back to the Prophet, according to which there are three mosques to which people may take pilgrimages: those in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. .. An addition which, apparently, belonged to its original form but was later neglected by leveling orthodoxy in this and related sayings: 'and a prayer in the Bayt al-Maqdis of Jerusalem is better than a

thousand prayers in other holy places,' i.e. even Mecca or Medina. Later, too, 'Abd al-Malik is quoted when the pilgrimage to Jerusalem is to be equated with that to Mecca.'[31]

About questionable hadith authentication, modern Iranian-American scholar Reza Aslan comments in his newly published book as follows:

By the ninth century, when the Islamic law was being fashioned, there were so many false hadith circulating through the community that Muslim legal scholars somewhat whimsically classified them into two categories: lies told for material gain and lies told for theological advantage. In the ninth and tenth centuries, a concerted effort was made to sift through the massive accumulation in order to separate the reliable from the rest. Nevertheless, for hundreds of years, anyone who had the power and wealth necessary to influence public opinion on a particular issue – and who wanted to justify about, say, the role of women in society – had only to refer to a hadith which he had heard from someone, who had heard it from someone else, who had heard from a Companion, who had heard it from the Prophet.[32]

Thus according to Aslan, one basic reason behind the distorted Prophetic traditions was that those who took upon themselves the task of projecting Islam – “men who were, coincidentally, among the most powerful and wealthy members of the ummah – were not nearly as concerned with the accuracy of their reports or the objectivity of their exegesis as they were in regaining the financial and social dominance that the Prophet’s reforms had taken from them.”[33]

The Novel Criteria Used to Judge Authenticity of the Hadith

The Hadith believers boast of certain criteria that were used by the compilers to screen out fake hadith and select authentic hadith. Euphemistically, they have labeled such criteria as “the science of the hadith” (ilm al-hadith or, Ilm al-Jarh wa al-Ta'dil - the science of accepting and rejecting narrations). Unfortunately however, on close scrutiny, the criteria used could never prove to be foolproof to establish undisputed authenticity of the hadith texts. This is evident from the very fact that even after such screening, numerous false hadith texts still remain in so-called Sahih Bukhari and other Sahih Hadith books - texts that are “vulgar, absurd, theologically objectionable, or morally repugnant.”[34] These criteria, as an anonymous writer aptly remarks, are:

“a system of guidelines which numerous scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim alike, have clearly shown to be seriously inadequate - if not a complete farce, as these standards are broken on numerous occasions in even the 'best' collections of hadith. This of course makes the authenticity of the hadith dubious at best - a situation with serious ramifications for the Islamic sharia, and the religion of Islam as a whole” [when, of course, understood in terms of the Quran and the Hadith together].[35]

The criteria relate to isnad or chain of hadith narrators and matn or hadith text. However good such criteria look on paper, they are grossly inadequate for the following reasons:

- Presence of subjective elements involved, most obviously, subjective judgments by the individual hadith compilers about the character of the numerous narrators, which cannot be vouched as infallible;
- The multiplicity of narrators involved and the huge number of hadith texts involved running into hundreds of thousands, which raise the feasibility question of how it was possible to undertake such a massive exercise of meticulously flawless screening for both the narrators of the contemporary period (contemporary with the hadith compilers) and narrators of past several generations, and for the hadith texts;
- Possibility of human error committed by the narrators involved due to memory or other problems;
- Observed biases of the compilers in their choice of narrators and choice of texts; and
- Flaws in the criteria themselves.

The basic question that needs to be judged first is that it is the compiler like Bukhari, Muslim, etc., who is judging the character and qualifications of the narrators, and his judgment could easily go wrong. It is beyond anybody's comprehension how it was possible for one to ascertain with one hundred percent accuracy that a narrator had not lied or not made any unintentional mistake in stating things, even if he was known to be pious or virtuous by some traditional standards. As Jayrajpuri aptly notes, "Honesty and dishonesty are internal qualities which cannot be known with any certainty by observers. As a result, ilm al-rijal [the science of men] is only an approximate qiyasi (science), and one can never be absolutely certain that one's judgment about a transmitter is correct." [36] Also, as Sayyid Ahmad Khan appropriately notes, "it is difficult enough to judge the character of living people, let alone long dead. The muhaddithun [hadith compilers] did the best they could, but their task was almost impossible" [37], especially when the transmitters involved were so numerous and the period covered was so large.

The criteria of classical hadith judgment are subject also to criticism that there was always the possibility of forging of the chain of transmitters, and such forging, according to some reports, took place on just as large a scale as the forging of contents. For forgers, there was always a great incentive to attribute reports to most trustworthy authorities. [38]

And how could one be fully certain that the narrator fully remembered what he had heard from another narrator and that any of the narrators involved in the chain had not made even the slightest mistake in communication, and there was absolutely no communication gap between the narrator who narrated a certain story and the narrator who heard the story? There was almost always the possibility for human error, even assuming that the narrators had all the good qualifications and good intentions? It is a proven fact that we find most people not able to exactly reproduce statements made by others. We also know that the compilers had biases in their choice of narrators and both the compilers and the narrators had biases in their choice of hadith texts, motivated by political and theological grounds. One critic cites that a hadith originating from Abdullah bin Omar was rejected by Bukhari, although the basically same hadith narrated by Abu Huraira was accepted, and although many other Hadith texts from Abdullah bin

Omar were accepted by Bukhari.[39] In a nutshell, there were too many unknowns and uncertainties as well as biases involved in the selection process of so-called authentic hadith, which it could not be humanly possible to resolve fully satisfactorily by people like Bukhari. As Kassim Ahmad appropriately notes:

However accurate the methodology of the isnad, the scholars first started talking about it and started writing it down only about 150 - 200 years after the deaths of the very last tabi`i tabi`in. This means that when the research to establish the isnad got started, none of the Companions, the succeeding generation or the generation coming after them were available to provide any kind of guidance, confirmation or rebuttal. Therefore, the authenticity of the statements cannot be vouched for at all.

It is not our intention to say that Bukhari, Muslim and others were fabricators. However, even students of elementary psychology or communication will testify that a simple message of, say, 15 words will get distorted after passing through only about five messengers. (Our readers are welcome to try out this experiment). Keep in mind that the hadith contains thousands of detailed and complex narrations — everything from ablution to jurisprudence. These narrations passed through hundreds of narrators who were spread out over thousands of miles of desert, and spanned over two to three hundred years of history. All this at a time when news traveled at the speed of a camel gait, recorded on pieces of leather or bone or scrolls in a land that had neither paper nor the abundance of scribes to write anything down![40]

Kassim Ahmad further notes: “It stands to reason that the hadith writers depended on much story-telling to fill in the blanks. Many ‘authentic’ narrators whom the hadith writers allude to in their chains of isnad were wholly fabricated names.”[41] Ahmad also notes that it was “preposterous and impossible” for Bukhari to have meticulously considered over six hundred thousand hadith texts to pick his authentic 7,275 hadith texts in his lifetime in an age when the camel journey was the only available means to cover long desert distances.[42]

Some of the matn criteria that were used are flawed or too weak on grounds as follows:

1. One criterion is that a text should not be inconsistent with other texts of hadith. This criterion is weak as even if a text is not inconsistent with other hadith texts, all such texts could be simultaneously wrong.
2. Texts prescribing heavy punishments for minor sins or exceptionally large rewards for small virtues were rejected. But this involves value judgments of what are too heavy and what are too large. And it is the compiler’s judgment! There are serious instances of violation of this criterion (one glaring example is Hadith-suggested punishment for apostasy by killing, though the Quran allows full religious freedom).
3. Texts referring to actions that should have been commonly known and practiced by others but were not known and practiced were rejected. This criterion is flawed; it does not guarantee the veracity of the text about the Prophet.

4. Most importantly, the criterion such as that the hadith texts should not be contrary to the Quran, and reason or logic is found to have been flagrantly flouted in numerous cases. Many scholars have demonstrated that numerous hadith texts do in fact contradict the Quran, or do not stand to reason or logic, or scientific truths.

As hadith critics have legitimately pointed out, the hadith collectors were mostly concerned with theisnad criteria, and in the process they neglected most the matn criteria. Otherwise, how could they compile traditions that were clearly absurd or simply unacceptable according to the point of view of the Quran. Thus the so-called criteria used to authenticate hadith are flawed and simply inadequate to the massive task. They rather mask or camouflage the real character of the Hadith and thus mislead unsuspecting Muslims.

Conclusion

It can be reasonably concluded from the foregoing analysis that the Hadith literature does not have a sure and solid historical foundation. The Hadith stands on no sound ground to claim authenticity and authority, and as such it loses significance as any reliable religious guidance. As historians think, the Quran provides a more accurate account of what the Prophet Muhammad said and did. Sir William Muir[43]and Alois Sprenger[44] were the first Western scholars to question the reliability of the Hadith literature as a historical source.[45] As Muir rightly contended, “the Qur’an alone represents a reliable source for Muhammad’s biography”, and it accurately portrays “his own thought”:

“The Coran [Quran] becomes the groundwork and the test of all inquiries into the origin of Islam and the character of its founder. Here we have a store-house of Mahomet’s own words recorded during his life, extending over the whole course of his public career, and illustrating his religious views, his public acts, and his domestic character.”[46]

Indeed the Quran itself bears witness that the Prophet said nothing of religion out of his own desire [Najm (53): 3], and that all that he said for religious guidance was Divine revelation contained in the Quran itself:

It is the SAYING of an Honored Messenger.

It is not the saying of a poet; little it is that ye believe.

Nor is it the saying of a soothsayer; little it is that ye heed.

It is a Message revealed from the Lord of the Universe. [Haqqa (69): 40-43]

If we are to discover an Islam of justice, compassion and mercy and progress, we need to understand it solely in terms of the Quran. Any attempt to understand it both in terms of the Quran and the Hadith is bound to result in a distorted message, which confounds rather than guides. Ideas that encourage fatalism and discourage individual initiative and enterprise, corrupt religious practices, block progress and modernization, encourage intolerance, violence and terror, extol the virtues of aggressive jihad against other communities, and demonize and weaken

women's position in society - all come from the Hadith.[47] The conventional interpretation of Islam, which depends much on the Hadith, dominates and guides most Muslims, which is, unfortunately, to put it quite appropriately in the words of a contemporary writer, "not far different from that of the terrorists but without the justification of violence" - an interpretation that "serves to suppress individual creativity and innovation" and risks Muslims becoming "a permanent global underclass." [48]

[1] Other alleged sources of Islam are the Qiyas and the Ijma. Qiyas refers to comparative or analogical deduction in a particular case derived from the analogy of similar cases. Qiyas is used to provide parallels between similar situations or principles when no clear text is found in the Quran or Sunnah. Ijma, regarded as the fourth source of law, originated from Muhammad's reported saying, "My community will never agree on an error." This came to mean that a consensus among religious scholars could determine permissibility of an action. The Fiqh literature is an anthology of Islamic law or jurisprudence derived from the Hadith sources. The reader should note that this author does not believe that Islam should be understood by any other book except the Quran, which only brought Islam and perfected Islam [Maidah (5): 3].

[2] Ahmad, Kassim, Hadith: A Re-Evaluation, Translated from his original book in Malay Hadis — Satu Penilaian Semula by Monotheist Productions International, Tucson, Arizona, U.S.A. 1997, © Copyright Kassim Ahmad, 1996, first published in 1986. Available in the internet under www.submission.org or "The Computer Speaks: God's Message to the World, Quran, Hadith and Islam", p. 91. Also available in the website: free-minds.org.

[3] Mazhar U. Kazi, A Treasury of Ahadith, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, (Abul-Qasim Publishing House), 1992.

[4] Note, however, that characteristically of many Hadith narrations, which in isolation or in relation to other Hadith narrations may look inconsistent or confusing, this full Hadith is also confusing. While the first part speaks of the prohibition of the Prophet on Hadith writing and his call for its erasure, the second part denies this in the same breath by stating that narration from the Prophet was all right so long as it was not false.

[5] Reported in Akbarally Meherally, Myths and Realities of Hadith – A Critical Study, available on the web site www.mostmerciful.com/hadithbook.

[6] Guillaume, Alfred, The Traditions of Islam, Pakistan 1977, p. 15; cited in "Hadith as a Source of Historical Information", website: borishennig.de.

[7] Rahim, M. Abdur, The History of Hadith Compilation (in Bengali), p. 290, quoted by Jamilul Bashar, "Sangsker" (in Bengali, means Reformation), published by Young Muslim Society, New York, 2002, pp. 11.

[8] Muhammad Aslam Jayrajpuri, *Ilm-i-hadith*, Lahore, n.d., p. 2; cited in Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 1996 (Paperback 1999), p. 86.

[9] Source: same as in the previous endnote, p.12.

[10] Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 96.

[11] Ahmad, Kassim, 1997, op. cit., p. 51.

[12] Iqbal, A. M., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, First Indian Edition 1997, p. 137.

[13] Al-Shibli, *Sirat al-Numan*, Lahore, n.d. Trans. Muhammad Tayyab Bakhsh Badauni as *Method of Sifting Prophetic Tradition*, Karachi, 1966. p. 179; cited in Daniel W. Brown, 1996 (Paperback 1999), op. cit.. p. 114.

[14] Early books of Hadith writing are the *Muwatta* of Malik ibn Anas who died in 179 A.H. that related to legal matters, and the *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who died in 241 A.H.

[15] MacDonald, Duncan B., *Development of Muslim Theology Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory*, (George Routledge and Sons), London, 1903, p. 76.

[16] MacDonald, Duncan B., 1903, *ibid*, pp. 76-77, emphasis mine.

[17] Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 96.

[18] Jayrajpuri, *Ilm-i-hadith*, p. 16, cited in Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 96.

[19] Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 96.

[20] MacDonald, Duncan B., 1903, op. cit., p. 81.

[21] Ahmad, Kassim, 1997, op. cit., p. 51.

[22] Cited in Daniel W. Brown, op. cit., 1996 (paperback 1999), p. 88; emphasis mine.

[23] Juynboll, G.H.A, *Muslim Tradition - Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith*, 1983, p. 145. Also cited in *Hadith Authenticity: A Survey of Perspectives* (by anonymous author), at website: <http://www.rim.org/muslim/hadith.htm>, or at <http://www.rim.org/muslim/islam.htm>.

[24] Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 86; citing an example of mutual vilification among the Prophet's Companions cited by Mawdudi, taking from Ibn Abd al-Barr, *Jami*.

- [25] Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 86.
- [26] Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 86.
- [27] Mustafa, Ibrahim, Hadith and the Corruption of the Great Religion of Islam, undated, website: <http://www.submission.org/had-corruption.html>, pp. 9-10.
- [28] Ibn Sa'd, Tabaqat, II, ii, p. 135; cited in Azami, Studies in Early Hadith Literature, Beirut, 1968; repr. Indianapolis, 1978, p. 285; cited in Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 92.
- [29] MacDonald, Duncan B., 1903, op. cit., pp. 77-78; the expression in brackets is mine.
- [30] Malik b. Anas (716-794 A.D.) is recognized as the founder of one of the four juristic divisions of Sunni Muslims. He was a major collector of hadith.
- [31] Goldhizer, Muhammedanische Studien., 2 vols., Leiden, 1896. Trans. by S.M. Stern as Muslim Studies, 2 vols., London, 1967, p. 45; also cited in Hadith Authenticity: A Survey of Perspectives (by anonymous author), at website: <http://www.rim.org/muslim/hadith.htm>, or at <http://www.rim.org/muslim/islam.htm>.
- [32] Aslan, Reza, No god but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam, Random House, New York, 2005, p. 68.
- [33] Aslan, Reza 2005, ibid, p. 68.
- [34] Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 95.
- [35] Cited in Hadith Authenticity: A Survey of Perspectives (by anonymous author), at website: <http://www.rim.org/muslim/hadith.htm>, or at <http://www.rim.org/muslim/islam.htm>, p. 9; the expression in parentheses is mine.
- [36] Jayrajpuri, Ilm-i-hadith, pp. 22-23; cited in Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 98.
- [37] Ahmad Khan, Maqalat, I, pp.27-28; cited in Brown, Daniel W., op. cit., 1996 (paperback 1999), p. 97; emphasis is mine.
- [38] Jayrajpuri, op. cit, p. 26; cited in Brown, Daniel W., 1996 (paperback 1999), op. cit., p. 98.
- [39] Cited in Hadith Authenticity: A Survey of Perspectives (by anonymous author), at website: <http://www.rim.org/muslim/hadith.htm>, or at <http://www.rim.org/muslim/islam.htm>, pp. 3-4.
- [40] Ahmad, Kassim, 1997, op. cit., p. 67-68
- [41] Ahmad, Kassim, 1997, op. cit., p. 68.

[42] Ahmad, Kassim, 1997, op. cit., p. 70.

[43] Author of The Life of Mahomet and the History of Islam to the Era of Hegira, 4 vols., London, 1861; repr. Osnabruck, 1988. First serialized in Calcutta Review 19, (January- June 1853): 1-8. Also cited in Daniel Brown, 1996, op. cit.

[44] Sprenger, Alois, "On the Origin of Writing Down Historical Records among the Musulmans", Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal 25.(1856), 303-329, 375-381; Cited in Daniel Brown, 1996, op. cit.

[45] Brown, Daniel, 1996, op. cit., p. 21.

[46] Muir, William, The Life of Mahomet and the History of Islam to the Era of Hegira, 4 vols., London, 1861; repr. Osnabruck, 1988, I, xxvii; cited in Daniel Brown, 1996, op. cit., p. 35.

[47] Such points are covered and documented in a book under preparation by the author.

[48] Viorst, Milton, "Puritanism and Stagnation" in Khaled Abou El Fadl (ed.), The Place of Tolerance in Islam, Beacon Press, Boston, 2002, pp. 27-28.

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