A CRITICAL STUDY OF ISLAM'S MAGNUM OPUS

A CRITIQUE OF ḤADĪTH

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H*adĭth* lexically means "new". The word *Ḥadĭth* is generally used in Arabic composition as an antonym of *qadĭm*, "old".[1] *"Ḥadatha"* meaning 'to be new, to break the news' is the root verb that morphs to form the noun *Ḥadĭth*. Being originally an adjective, the word derived its use as a noun, meaning 'a piece of news, a report, a tale, or a story', from the importance attached to the Prophetic sayings. This Arabic root bears deep resemblance in both form and meaning with the equivalent root word of the sister language, Hebrew. The Hebrew equivalent of *Hadĭth* is *"Ḥadesh"* (oft written *Khadesh*)*,* meaning 'new moon'.[2] Moreover, the other shades of the word in question also imply the narration of a tale as well as any verbal description. However, after the great codification of the sayings attributed to the Prophet of *Islâm* during the early centuries of Muslim history, the word *Ḥadĭth* lost its dictionary meaning and exclusively became synonymous to the Prophetic Sayings. Thus, no other statement or news can be referred as *Ḥadĭth* anymore. There is a huge chain of Prophetic literature, distributed in various categories pertinent to authenticity, historicity and pedigree, which is called the *Ḥadĭth Literature* or *Ḥadĭth* in collective. The most famous set of various, multivolume *Ḥadĭth* books is known as *Ṣiḥah Sittah,* "the Authentic Six". A statement of *Ḥadĭth,* according to the *Ḥadĭth* scientists, consists of two essential constituents namely, *Isnâd* (a certified chain of guarantors) and *Matn* (received text).[3] These two are, actually, two independent as well as interdependent subways in the mainstream *'Ilm al-Ḥadĭth,* "Science of Prophetic Sayings". *Isnâd* relates to the pedigree of the guarantors appearing in a chain, while the text has to do with each individual's memory and purity of conduct. Therefore, it can be

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[1] Ṣiddĭqĭ, Muḥammad Zubayr, *Ḥadĭth Literature: Its Origin, Development & Special Features*, Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993, p.1

[2] Guillaume, Alfred, *Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Ḥadĭth Literature*, p.10

[3] Ḥasan, Dr. Suhaib, *An Introduction to the Science of Hadith,* Riyadh: Darussalam International Publications, 1996, p.11

substantially suggested that the transmission of a *Ḥadĭth* is incomplete in case it lacks either of the constituents.

Another word employed to describe the Prophetic course is *Sunnah,* "the beaten path". It was a common exercise in the pre-Islamic Arabia that the Arabs would extol the practices of the ancient calling them *Sunnah—*the path of the elders. After the birth of *Islâm*, however, the situation changed altogether and the word solely came to be identified with the practice of the Prophet as carried out during his Prophetic career.

In order to be rendered as *Ḥadĭth,* a certain statement ascribed to the Prophet needs to be in perfect conformity with the content of Glorious Quran. There must be an inherent compatibility between the two. Logically, no such statement that stands in contradiction with Quran, however genuine according to the research methodology of *Ḥadĭth* discipline, can be rendered as a saying of the Prophet. It is but a fact that Quran and *Ḥadĭth* are two—primary and secondary—parts of the Divine Revelation; therefore, any mutual contradiction, according to the foremost step of the falsification test described in Quran,[4] will immediately invalidate the secondary source. It is a general truth that the speech and acts of the Prophet can in no way be in contradiction with the revealed Word of God. When we come to embrace the demonstration of Quran that Prophet Muhammad is not only a true Prophetic-Messenger but also the *final* Envoy of God, we are then under the compulsion of taking the Prophet as an inerrant model and taking the Quranic stance on *Waḥĭ* for granted, that says:

"Nor does he speak out of his own desire. It is but an inspired Revelation sent down to him."

(Najm 53:3-4)

Thus, the standard in the critical judgment of both fundamental sources of *Islâm* is the *absolute* harmony between the literal Word of God, Quran, and the God-filled words and deeds of the Prophet, *Ḥadĭth* and *Sunnah*. Nothing less is acceptable. In case a discrepancy is found between the two, as we clearly see on several

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[4] An-Nisâ 4:82

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instances that an acute contradiction emerges between Quran and the *Ḥadĭth* narratives, it will mar not only the authority of *Ḥadĭth,* but will also cast doubts on the authenticity of Quran and the truth of Muḥammad's Revelation. Whilst being in a situation as such, logically speaking, we will have to throw the incompatible *Ḥadĭth* account overboard. Therefore, we must work out in consensus to determine a commonly acceptable touchstone to reevaluate the genuineness of the whole *Ḥadĭth* corpus. Presently, *Muslim Ummah* witnesses no consensus on these issues. For instance, the stance of the *Muḥaddithĭn* (*Ḥadĭth* scholars) on *'Adhâb al-Qabr* is crystal-clear, as the existing *Ḥadĭth* books strongly advocate this conception and free a pretty big space for it in the bulky literature. However, Glorious Quran holds a view contrary to the belief of the later day doctors of theology and preaches the ideology of 'natural consumption' of the bodies in the graves.[5] Moreover, Quran on a number of issues seems having a completely different over and undertones from that of *Ḥadĭth,* and this very problem, when seen by the early scholars, gave birth to the device of *Taṭbĭq.* Thusly, now all such discrepancies existing between the primary source and the secondary source, Quran and *Ḥadĭth,* are referred to *Taṭbĭq* for a harmonizing solution. In fact, history tells us about the existence of a party of 'Harmonists' within the school of Traditionists, *Aṣḥâb al-Ḥadĭth,* during the second century *Hijrah*.[6] Furthermore, a handsome amount of the canonical *Aḥâdĭth* is anachronistic, scientifically problematic, legendary and sometimes even sacrilegious to the person of the Prophet. Fables and folklores are yet another problem to be found with *Ḥadĭth*. Instead of getting into the details of all individual instances, I would rather simply point to the problems—of course I am not the first one to point it—because an in-depth analysis of the discipline as well as corpus of *Ḥadĭth* will unduly make this work into a "Higher Criticism" of *Ḥadĭth*. However, it can be suggested in brief that the problem being discussed here is real.

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[5] For further analysis on *'Adhâb al-Qabr*, see the chapter on *"Barzakh and Qabr"*.

[6] Guillaume, *Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Ḥadĭth Literature,* pp.69-71

This stance of mine must not be taken for my denial of *Ḥadĭth* as the second authentic and illustrious source of *Islâm*, for I have, as one can see, quoted a goodly number of *Aḥâdĭth* in this book from the major canonical *Ḥadĭth* books. This is not, therefore, an attempt to dislodge *Ḥadĭth,* but simply and exclusively an appeal for the reevaluation, reorganization and revitalization of the extant sacred sayings of Prophet Muḥammad according to the need of the day. This will further lead to a redress of the meaning of individual accounts in line with the device of universal applicability. The stereotypes of the ancient should no more be considered if we really desire to lay the foundations of a progressive Islamic culture. In fact, the recension of the *Ḥadĭth,* one we know as canonical today, was a work of third century AH. Indeed the scholars of *Ḥadĭth* invented critical devices for scrutinizing the enormous number of traditionally known Prophetic Traditions in circulation. The credit goes to them that they did not take *Ḥadĭth* at the face value— however appealing—and went on executing the Higher Criticism of the existing *Ḥadĭth* literature to split fact from fiction. Thereafter, when these reputed scholars were once done with the work of scrutiny, they committed to writing only one-tenth of what they had collected in totality. Their grand enterprise must be appreciated. But we are still required to apply modern techniques of criticism on *Ḥadĭth* as a whole. It is not to suggest that the work of the collectors of *Ḥadĭth* be rendered as null and void and their standards taken to no consideration. They should rather be dedicated the first place in this revitalizing, modern research on *Ḥadĭth* and their methodology should be considered crucial to all subsequent criticisms.

Alfred Guillaume quotes a *Ḥadĭth* from one of the canonical volumes that confirms the author's stance on the adoption of a common standard for the canonicity and acceptability of *Ḥadĭth*. Prophet Muḥammad is recorded to have said in this *Ḥadĭth* as; **"After my death sayings attributed to me will multiply just as a large number of sayings are attributed to the prophets who were before me. What is told you as a saying of mine you must compare with Quran; what is in agreement therewith is from**

me."[7] There is no doubt that the Prophet had anticipated the creation of false, posthumous Prophetic Traditions: thus he strongly warned Muslim Ummah of the menace, saying, **"Ascribing false things to me is not like ascribing false things to anyone else. Whosoever tells a lie against me intentionally, then surely let him occupy his seat in the Hellfire."**[8] Hence, the Prophet himself established an exclusive criterion to examine any given statement alleged to be the Prophet's saying. The interesting thing regarding this standard is that it has one internal dimension—a religio-moral binding on the *Râvi* i.e. 'narrator'—and one external dimension—appeal to the Word of God for embracing compatibility. It is now a binding on the conscience of the scholars of Ummah in particular that all Prophetic Traditions be judged according to this two-dimensional criterion.

It would be interesting to note that the second Righteous Caliph *'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭâb* was most rational—sometimes even skeptical—towards the narration and acceptance of *Ḥadĭth* especially those accounts of the nature of Hebraica.[9] He would not entertain any saying attributed to the Prophet as *Ḥadĭth* until certified by various authentic witnesses, whereas the plausibility of the content was yet another countable factor in his methodology. A third generation doctor of theology *'Āsim al-Nabĭl* who died in 212 AH spoke of the problem of *Ḥadĭth* in unequivocal terms, saying; "In nothing do we see pious men more given to falsehood than in *Ḥadĭth*."[10] A similar opinion was held by many other scholarly personalities, such as *Al-Zuhrĭ* and *Yaḥyâ ibn Sa'ĭd,* during the early phases of the history of *Ḥadĭth* compilation. Since they lived before the canonical collection of the Prophetic Sayings, they had seen the

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[7] Guillaume, *Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Ḥadĭth Literature,* p.53

[8] Ṣaḥiḥ Bukhâri, 23:378, *"Funerals",* narrated by *Al-Mughĭrâ*

[9] *Isra'iliyât*, namely those traditions or, more correctly speaking, fables that were borrowed by the Arabs from the Judo-Christian religion and incorporated into the *Hagiographa* of *Islâm.* The main sources of introducing these Hebraica into *Islâm* were the Jewish converts among whom a few names of import are *Ka'b al-Aḥbâr, 'Abdullah ibn Salâm,* and *Wahb ibn Munabbih.*

[10] Reynold, Nicholson A., *A Literary History of the Arabs,* New Delhi: Purana Books, 2006, p.145

creation of a vast number of pseudo-Prophetic Traditions. This problem continued to exist much later and the coming doctors of *Ḥadĭth* including *Bukhâri, Muslim, Abu Dâ'wūd* and others had to labor really hard to scrutinize hundreds of thousands of *Aḥâdĭth* to pile up their canonical sum. They had to evolve the 'certificate' for each account involving research on individual guarantor, while this technique was ignored by the early doctors including the reverend author of *Muwwaṭṭâ*, *Mâlik ibn Anas*. Nevertheless, the part of the problem is that we cannot still guarantee the authenticity of all canonical accounts, saying, they all have necessarily come from the lips of the Prophet. *Ibn Quṭaibâ*, the author of *Mukhtalif al-Ḥadĭth,* refuses to entertain a big mass of Traditions, especially those originating from the Jewish *Haggâdah* and Christian legends—that is to say the whole Hebraica. *Ibn Khaldūn* followed identically same course concerning *Ḥadĭth* in his *Muqaddimah* and declared that the Judo-Christian converts to *Islâm* were equally ignorant about history as were the Arabs. Nowhere was this problem so clear as in the interreligious transaction. In my judgment, the incorporation of fallacious traditions into Islamic literature borrowed from Judo-Christian Scriptures—with an exception of the retrieval of pre-Islamic Arabian features—bore the problem of *Ḥadĭth* and left a permanent mark on the thought and literature of *Islâm*. These traditions, stories and statements of Judo-Christian origin were mainly accepted into *Islâm* under the century long rule of Umayyads. The current discussion is only to approximate the size of the problem arisen from the mixing of Jewish traditions and Christian legends into Islamic thought that had, originally, nothing in common with the scientific nature of *Islâm*.

An inquiry into the period of Caliphate's radical transformation into monarchy cannot be left out of the account. The regime of Umayyad Dynasty was among the most unfortunate days of the *Ḥadĭth* history together with the succeeding regime of the Abbasids. Although mutually exclusive, they had their own pro-Umayyad or pro-Abbasid techniques to 'recognize' a Prophetic Saying. Reportedly, a good number of Umayyad officials were engaged in the creation and spread of false Prophetic Sayings across the kingdom and the intent behind such a heinous act was to hail the legitimacy of the Umayyad regime and veneration of Umayyads as

a Qureshite tribe. Announcers were sent to the major cities including remote places to narrate certain *Aḥâdǐth* whose subject matter was all but the sanctification of the Umayyad rulers. All such canonical or extracanonical accounts that sanctify Syria, Damascus and the Umayyads are of dubious provenance. It is why that *Ḥadǐth* collectors including Muslim did not accept any accounts bearing the name of certain Umayyad officials in the chain of guarantors. The transfer of the capital of Islamdom from Medina to Damascus was, in fact, the start of this rebellion against the Orthodox *Islâm*.[11] The construction of the Dome of the Rock, as reported by various classical historians whereof prominent is *Ya'qūbi*, was meant to baptize Jerusalem being the new sanctuary for *Ḥajj*.[12] We should do well to bear in mind that *'Abdullah ibn Zubair* was in control of the holiest sanctuaries of *Islâm*, Mecca and Medina, during the Second Civil War (CE 680-92). Umayyads, for having been denied political authority over these places, boasted their own claim for a third sanctuary of equal import due to political reasons. The Umayyad officials, for instance, circulated a forged *Ḥadǐth* in which it was stated on the authority of the Prophet that Muslims should not **'remove the saddles from their mounts (in the honor of a place) except at three mosques'** (*Masjid al-Harâm, Masjid al-Nabvǐ,* and *Masjid al-Aqsâ*).[13] It was the origination of a Syrian, pro-Umayyad *Islâm* that solely attempted to canonize and prolong the dynastic rule of *Banu Umayyah*. The hatred that grew in the Muslim world for Umayyads after *Mu'âwiyah*'s insurrection against the Caliphate

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[11] (a) "Islamdom" converted outright into "Kingdom" i.e. Umayyad Kingdom after the martyrdom of the fourth Righteous Caliph *'Ali* in AD 661. *Ḥasan,* his son, gave in Umayyads renouncing the right to be the fifth elected Caliph. This development, being the first literal disintegration of Muslim Ummah and departure from *Islâm*, sealed off the future restitution of the Caliphate.

(b) The word "Orthodox" is used here in a different context meaning the original *Islâm* brought and preached by Prophet Muḥammad. The same word has been employed in the rest of the book to mean the developed type of Islamic theology held canonical by the mainstream.

[12] Creswell, K. A. C., *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1958, p.17

[13] Brown, Jonathan A.C., *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2009, p.206

of *'Ali* with a follow-up of the assassination of *Ḥussain* by *Yazǐd* was to be doctored employing different methods, especially the (ab)use of the Prophet's name. It was the best effective means to keep the restless masses silent, hence efficaciously used to serve the desired end in the interest of the rulers.

Mega projects of translation of Christian and Greek literature from Greco-Roman languages to Arabic had extremely negative effects on the subsequent development of *Islâm*'s theological thought. Muslims naturally craved for a better understanding of their own religion in the light of newly acquired cognitive standards from the 'People of Book' that was soon to develop a situation analogous to square peg in a round hole. The presence of John of Damascus, poet *Akhtal,* and other Christians at the court of the Umayyads in high offices rendered the situation extremely dangerous for the health of a purely Muslim thought. Christians being well-versed in the Semitic religious history posed a grim threat to *Islâm*'s inherent knowledge, and Muslims in turn, being too naïve in the early history of their religious growth, were ready to take *'Ìsâ* and Judo-Christian Bible as the touchstones for the reconsideration of *Islâm* and its Prophet.

After having dethroned the Umayyads in AD 750, the Abbasids trailed every *Ḥadǐth* narrative that was tagged to the Umayyads. The *Ḥadǐth* scholarship under their regime attempted to confiscate all such Prophetic Sayings that had something to do with the goodwill of the Umayyads. Now, the fresh enterprise that the new dynasty of Caliphs had undertaken was the sanctification of *Banu 'Abbâs,* the family of Prophet's uncle. It was to shift the emphasis of holiness from West to East. *Ḥadǐth* scholarship under them familiarized a different style, especially of diction and theme. Its texture was changed. The treatment of *Ḥadǐth* especially scrutiny was held up under different terms.[14] In other words, *Ḥadǐth* in totality was such a religious venture that could never get to the position to become bipartisan. However, it would be injustice to suggest that these dynastic patronages served no good purpose

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[14] For more study on *Ḥadǐth* under Abbasids, see Guillaume, *Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Ḥadǐth Literature,* chapter 3 *"The Abbasid Period"*

altogether. The systematic revival of *Sunnah* under Abbasids deserves credit. It is this widespread practice of *Sunnah* that we owe our religious life to. Had Abbasids ignored or ruled out to entertain *Sunnah* as system, we would have *Islâm* only in theory today with no developed understanding of the practice.

In a modern approach, we are required to center on the subject matter of a *Ḥadīth* to examine the plausibility, whereas the chain of guarantors must be taken as only subordinate to the subject matter and nature of the text, if that matters. Quran must be the touchstone in the test of the subject matter. Of course, the subject matter of a *Ḥadīth* account is what will ultimately decide the possibility or impossibility of a situation described instead of the repute that each guarantor in the chain bears. This methodology for a modern criticism of *Ḥadīth* is in perfect accordance with the statement of classical historian *Ibn Khaldūn* namely, 'the rule for distinguishing what is true from what is false in history is based on its possibility or impossibility'.[15] If rationally considered, it is a very effective criterion which, because of its scientific nature, is free from all major pitfalls of superstition and mythology. Secondly, employing this technique to *Ḥadīth*, we can also ascertain that the Prophet or any other religious figure has not been made into a legendary character that is essentially impossible in space-time history. What is important in a Prophetic Tradition is its 'inherent reasonableness' and a 'historically plausible' character. Overlooking this methodology in the early days that *Ibn Khaldūn* imminently established, in fact, caused the canonization of the pre-Islamic Arabian and Judo-Christian folklores and fables that formed an indistinguishable part of the *Ḥadīth* corpus, especially, on the issues of creation, early days of human race, prophetic/religious history, eschatology and apocalypse. This fallacious bulk of borrowed traditions was soon to creep into the Quranic commentaries as well, never letting *Muslim Ummah* to recover from the cancer of a mythical history. The discipline of *Sīrah* also underwent much the same problem. *Sīrah* writing fell to the natural craving of the biographers to embellish the Prophet's life with the legends of

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[15] Ibn Khaldūn cited in, Reynold, Nicholson A., *A Literary History of the Arabs,* p.438

Jewish Talmud and Christian New Testament types. The only Islamic discipline that withstood external elements and continued to be pure was *Fiqh,* the Jurisprudence of *Islâm.* There may be a few allegations, but the fact is that nothing was accepted by the *Mujtahidūn* from without when living relatively close to the age of the Prophet. The whole system of Islamic Jurisprudence was derived from Quran and *Sunnah* with an absolute rejection of already developed Greco-Roman jurisprudence. Thus, thanks to the brilliant efforts of early Muslim jurists who got Muslim Ummah a purely Islamic system of Jurisprudence and law originating from the Book of God and the life of the Prophet.

The second part of the *Ḥadĭth* problem is the 'subjective criticism' of the Orthodox scholars. Inasmuch as this subjective technique of the big names of *Ḥadĭth* discipline is taken to accountability, such a citation originating from the canonical bulk is unimpeachable among the Orthodox circles. But outside these circles of Orthodoxy, there is a wide criticism on the whole system of *Ḥadĭth*, whereas there are some who simply throw the whole *Ḥadĭth* corpus overboard. The technique of subjective criticism should have been replaced with a standard of criticism developed through *Ijmâ',* 'consensus', of the scholars of *Ummah* on its very primary stages. However, lamentably, the *Ummah* never found itself that fortunate.

The criticism of *Ḥadĭth* within itself should be divided in two broad classes in a modern approach. These two classes being *Ḍa'ĭf,* "Weak", and *Ṣaḥĭḥ,* "Authentic". All the subsequent categories, according to the nature of the text or certificate being sound or weak, should be classed under the relevant heading. This new approach to *Ḥadĭth* criticism will help modern Muslims tackle the complications found in the discipline of *Ḥadĭth*. This is to suggest that a modern researcher will employ these two terms to get the immediate idea of a *Ḥadĭth* calling it either authentic or inauthentic on the basis of its soundness or weakness. Only the perfect *Ḥadĭth* narrative, in all respects, with no single flaw even, is worthy to be taken as *Ṣaḥĭḥ,* whereas all the rest including *Ḥasan* should be rendered as *Ḍa'ĭf* for further probe.