

The Preservation and Authenticity of *Ḥadīth* as a Source of *Sīrah*: A Critique of Robert Spencer's Views on Historicity of Muḥammad (ﷺ)

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ABSTRACT

The account of the deeds and sayings of the prophet (ﷺ) has been carefully preserved since the dawn of Islam. This is what actually led Ernest Renan to believe that “[Islam] was born in the full light of history”, and that the life of Muḥammad (ﷺ) can be known as explicitly as that of any sixteenth century reformer. Notwithstanding, some contemporary writers doubt the historicity of Muḥammad (ﷺ); Robert Spencer is one of them. He is an American author. He is quite famous for his criticism of Islam and the prophet of Islam. He has published twelve books so far. He is a member of Melkite Greek Catholic Church. He contends that Muḥammad's (ﷺ) historical value is in no way greater and more reliable than mythological figures or characters such as Robin Hood and Macbeth.

He maintains that the very idea of subjecting the traditionally accepted account of the life of Muḥammad (ﷺ) and the origins of Islam will be regarded by many Muslims as an affront. To substantiate his argument, he rigorously criticizes the historical value of ḥadīth. He argues that aḥādīth were fabricated and compiled in the third century. He maintains that aḥādīth were concocted much later to be used as weapons in political strife and religious controversies. This paper is an academic attempt to prove that aḥādīth were painstakingly preserved and for that purpose various techniques were employed. Besides, it also sheds light on the reasons for the fabrication of aḥādīth and the ways and means utilized for sifting the genuine aḥādīth from forgeries. Findings of this article suggest that the minute details of the life of Muḥammad (ﷺ) have been scrupulously preserved; hence aḥādīth can be used as a reliable source of *Sīrah*.

Key words: *Historicity, Sīrah, Qur'ān, Ḥadīth, Sunnah, Sanad, Fabrication, Narrator.*

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Introduction

Although Robert Spencer agrees that Muḥammad (ﷺ) has made a tremendous impact on history, yet, in his opinion, it does not furnish irrefragable evidence of the historicity of Muḥammad (ﷺ).⁽¹⁾

He opines that despite its claims as a historical faith, Islam has not undergone significant historical criticism. Likewise, numerous claims are made about Muḥammad (ﷺ) but the veracity of such claims is open to historical scrutiny and analysis.⁽²⁾ He adds that the details about Muḥammad (ﷺ) contained in the Islamic sources are “fictional narratives” not “historical accounts”.⁽³⁾

The question of the real value and worth of *ḥadīth* as a source of reliable information has long been a subject of debate among Orientalists. Robert Spencer, like several other Orientalists, doubts the authenticity of *ḥadīth* and consequently raises serious questions about the historicity of Muḥammad (ﷺ). He says that after a lapse of fourteen centuries, it is utterly impossible to state with certitude

“what is authentic in the mass of information and what isn’t.”⁽⁴⁾

He believes:

“this makes the question of what historical Muḥammad actually said and did well nigh impossible.”⁽⁵⁾

He maintains that Muslims kept no record of the prophet’s (ﷺ) deeds and sayings for the first two centuries. In his words:

“if the canonical account of the origins of Islam is true, then the material in the ḥadīth about Muḥammad’s words and deeds existed, and presumably circulated in Muslim communities, for nearly two centuries before it was finally sifted, judged for authenticity, collected and published.”

He concludes:

“yet there is no indication of this material’s presence.”⁽⁶⁾

Spencer, with reference to Nabia Abbott, contends that Omar (RA) had ordered to destroy *ḥadīth* if there were any.⁽⁷⁾ He puts the question that if Omar (RA) had exhorted the believers to destroy the *ḥadīth* collection then how come Muslims preserved ‘wheelbarrows’ of *ḥadīth* literature against

(1) Spencer, Robert. *Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam’s Obscure Origins* (Washington: Delaware, 2014), 3

(2) Ibid, 5.

(3) Ibid, 7.

(4) Spencer, Robert. *The Truth about Muhammad; the Founder of the World’s Most Intolerant Religion*, (Washington DC: Regency Publishing, Inc, 2001), 25

(5) Ibid.

(6) Robert Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist?*, 68.

(7) Ibid, 69.

the explicit command of the Leader of the believers.⁽¹⁾ With reference to Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, he contends that *Sunnah* of the prophet meant good behavior;

“In concrete term the Sunnah of the prophet meant nothing.”⁽²⁾

In other words, the *Sunnah* did not mean the words and deeds of the prophet (ﷺ).

Emphasis on the Significance of *Ḥadīth*

Spencer argues that the significance of *ḥadīth* was accentuated much later. He writes that it was ‘Abd al-Malik and his successors who emphasized the role of Muḥammad’s (ﷺ) words and deeds as “normative for Islamic faith and practice”. As a result, “The necessity for every Muslim to obey Muḥammad became a central and oft-repeated doctrine of the Qur’an”⁽³⁾ and the hunger for *ḥadīth* gained intensity and Muslim scholars began to traverse the world for the *ḥadīth* of the prophet (ﷺ) to resolve their disputed issues.⁽⁴⁾

Furthermore, Spencer writes that *aḥādīth* have been used as ‘political weapons’. During political turmoil, such weapons were ‘manufactured wholesale’.⁽⁵⁾ In Spencer’s view, many religious scholars

“fabricated aḥādīth in the heat of political and religious controversies that they hoped to settle with a decisive, albeit hitherto unknown, word from the prophet.”⁽⁶⁾

On another occasion Spencer adds, “The various Muslims factions produced a steady stream of *ḥadīth* defending their leaders or attacking their opponents.”⁽⁷⁾ He maintains that it was in the Abbasid Period that some Islamic authorities felt the need “to bring order out of this chaos”.⁽⁸⁾

“This great effort came to full fruition in the next century, with the appearance of the six most important Hadīth collections, none of which date from earlier than two centuries after Muḥammad’s death.”⁽⁹⁾

The value of *Isnād*

As far as the *Isnād* of *aḥādīth* are concerned, Spencer argues that they were forged in exactly the same way as *aḥādīth*.⁽¹⁰⁾ The *ḥadīth*

(1) Robert Spencer, Did Muhammad Exist? 68

(2) Ibid, 70.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid, 72

(5) Ibid.

(6) Ibid, 76

(7) Ibid.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Ibid, 78.

(10) Ibid.

scholars attach great significance to *Isnād* in the matters of *ḥadīth* reliability and authenticity. Agreeing with this, Spencer adds,

“It didn’t matter if a ḥadīth was self-contradictory or absurd on its face; so long as its Isnād chain was clear of anomalies, and it did not contradict the Qur’an, the tradition had no obstacles to being accepted as reliable”.⁽¹⁾

Spencer maintains that

“There are numerous indications that Isnāds were forged with the same alacrity with which matans—that is, the content of the aḥādīth—were invented.”⁽²⁾

Spencer sums up the whole discussion by remarking:

“Ultimately it is impossible to tell whether or not Muḥammad himself actually said or did any of what the traditional Islamic sources depicts him as saying or doing, or even if there was a Muḥammad at all.”⁽³⁾

The following discussion will dwell on the above mentioned criticism of *ḥadīth* vis-à-vis steps taken for preservation of *ḥadīth* during various historical phases, the issue of coinage of *ḥadīth* for political and religious purposes, the use of *Isnād*, and the question of prohibition vis-à-vis writing of *aḥādīth*.

The Preservation of Ḥadīth as a source of Sīrah

The *Sunnah* of the prophet (ﷺ) is unanimously accepted by the Muslims as a source of law and perfect guidance in all walks of life. The Holy Qur’an has accentuated this theme in a number of verses. [al-Qur’ān: 53: 3-4, 16:44, 4:59, 4:80, 59:7, 4:64, 4:65] In view of the significance of the *ḥadīth* of the prophet (ﷺ), a number of ways and measure were adopted to preserve them. The following lines shed light on them.

The companions of the prophets (ﷺ) used to learn the words of the prophet (ﷺ) by heart. The holy prophet (ﷺ) made special du‘ā (prayer) for them. He said:

“May Allah endow vigor on that person who listens to my words and memorizes them and conveys them to others in precisely the same manner as he has heard them.”⁽⁴⁾

The companions eagerly followed this *ḥadīth* and devoted their time and energies to the memorization of *aḥādīth*. A considerable number of the companions left their home and hearth and sought accommodation in

(1) Robert Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist?*, 77.

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) *Ibid.*

(4) Muhammad bin ‘Īsā. *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, Kitāb al-‘Ilm, (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb, 1998), 4/325.

the mosque in order to hear the words directly from the prophet (ﷺ). They are known as *Aṣḥāb al-Ṣuffah*.⁽¹⁾

The Arabs possessed remarkably retentive memories. They used to commit to memorize not only the genealogical history of men and tribes, but they also used to commit pedigrees of their horses and camels to their memories. Hammād, an eminent narrator of Arabic poems, is known to have memorized three thousand and thirty eight poems.⁽²⁾ The Arabs considered it a blemish to write down their poem as it was, in their view, indicative of defective memory. Moreover, they thought that written texts could be manipulated and tampered with whereas memory steers clear of such tampering.⁽³⁾

The zest of the companions for memorization of *aḥādīth* was far greater than that of the Arabs for their poetry because the former deemed the guidance of the prophet (ﷺ) as the reliable source of eternal success. Therefore, they used their memory with meticulous care and caution for memorizing the blessed sayings of the prophet (ﷺ). Abū Hurayrah, the renowned companion of the Prophet (ﷺ) and transmitter of 5374 *aḥādīth*, says that he had divided his night into three parts: in one third of the night he performed paryers, in one third he took rest and in one third he memorized the *aḥādīth* of the prophet (ﷺ).⁽⁴⁾

It is relevant to add on this occasion that prophet (ﷺ) intentionally used to repeat his words three times so that they should get properly settled in the memories of the companions. A *ḥadīth* in Bukhari narrates:

“The Messenger of Allah’s speech was so clear that every listener could understand it easily.”⁽⁵⁾

The prophet (ﷺ) used to speak pretty slowly as a companion reports:

“When he spoke, one could count his words if he wished to.”⁽⁶⁾

Moreover there used to be a particular repetition of words to facilitate memory. A report narrated in Tirmidhī reads:

“He used to repeat the words and sentences which he wanted to be understood very well three times.”⁽⁷⁾

There are scores of *aḥādīth* in which the prophet (ﷺ) has repeated the

(1) Shiblī No‘mānī, *Sīr al-Nabī*, (Maktabah Rahmāniyah), 1/178.

(2) Ziriklī, *Khayr al-Dīn, al-’A‘lām*, (Barut: Dār al-’Ilm, 2002), 2/131.

(3) ‘Alī ibn al-Husayn al-Isfahānī, (Beirut: Dār al-’Ilm li al-Malāyīn, 1980A.D), 611.

(4) Al-Dārmī, Abū Muhammad ‘Abdullah bin. ‘Abd al-Rahmān. *Sunan- al-Dāramī*, Chapter Adab, (Saudia :Dārul Mughnī, 2000), 1/322

(5) Abu Dāwūd, Sulaymān bin Al-Ash‘ath Sijastānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Chapter, Adab, (Beirut: Darul Kitab al-Arabi, 1986A.D), 4/246

(6) Al-Bukhārī, Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad bin Ismā‘īl. *Sahih-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-’Ilm (Beirut: Dār al-Najāt, 1422 AH), 1/21

(7) Muhammad bin ‘Isā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, Chapter, Manaqib, 6/5.

essential message. The following is cited as an example:

While addressing his companions, the prophet (ﷺ) said:

“Don’t you hear? Don’t you hear? Verily austerity and simplicity are a part of faith; verily austerity and simplicity are a part of faith.”⁽¹⁾

Mutual discussion was another way of preserving *aḥādīth*. The companions used to discuss what they learnt from the prophet (ﷺ). They did so in compliance with the teachings and instructions of the holy prophet (ﷺ). A few *aḥādīth* are quoted to this effect:

“The present should convey the message to the absent.”⁽²⁾

“Convey to others (my message), even though if it be a single verse.”⁽³⁾

“May Allah bestow vigor on that person who listens my words and commits them to his memory and conveys them to others in precisely the same manner as he has heard them.”⁽⁴⁾

“Your hear my sayings and others will hear my sayings from you then others will hear from them.”⁽⁵⁾

“A Muslim cannot provide his brother a more useful benefit than giving him a good ḥadīth which had reached him.”⁽⁶⁾

These and similar other sayings of the prophet (ﷺ) whetted the eagerness and enthusiasm of the companions for acquiring and transmitting *aḥādīth*. The prophets (ﷺ) motivated and urged his devoted companions to hold discourse on *aḥādīth* in their gatherings. The word used by the prophet (ﷺ) is *Tadarus* which means teaching each other:

“Tadarus of knowledge for a period of time at night is better than an individual’s spending the whole night in worship.”⁽⁷⁾

Likewise, the prophet (ﷺ) strictly forbade his companion to conceal knowledge. The prophet (ﷺ) says:

“He who conceals beneficial knowledge, will come bridled with fire on Dooms Day.”⁽⁸⁾

Such threats and warnings made it appear to the companions as their indispensable obligation so whenever they met, they discussed the sayings of the prophet (ﷺ) instead of whiling away their times in vain talks. Such frequent debates and discussions played a vital role in

(1) Sunan Abi Dāwūd, Chapter, Adab, 4/246

(2) Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-‘Ilm, 1/21.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī, Bab al-‘Ilm, 6/23

(5) Sunan Abi Dāwūd, 3/321

(6) Ibn ‘Adbul Barr, Abu Umar Yūsuf bin ‘Abdullah, Jami‘-al-Bayān, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2000A.D), 233..

(7) Ibid.

(8) Ibid.

the preservation of *aḥādīth* .

Practice also played an exceeding significant role in preserving *aḥādīth* . The sayings of the prophet (ﷺ) were not meant merely for philosophical debate, they guided the companions in the issues inseparably related to their practical life. The companions learnt to practice. Therefore, the *Sunnah* of the prophet (ﷺ) was not sheer verbal message, it was actually a living fashion, a living custom, a living and a living conduct seen and observed in every sphere of life. Thus practice preserved the prophetic ways of life. One day the prophet (ﷺ) was asked as to as to who is the real scholar, he replied he who acts upon what he knows.⁽¹⁾

The Western critics of *Ḥadīth* generally believe that the *aḥādīth* were transmitted orally until Zuhri wrote them down at the behest of ‘Umar b. ‘Adul ‘Azīz. Robert Spencer holds almost the same view. Some Western critics are of the view that Zuhri’s collection of *aḥādīth* was also lost. This view is perfectly erroneous, betraying serious lack of knowledge about the early history of *aḥādīth*.

It is indisputably true that mere written recording of something does not guarantee its preservation. For instance, the existing Greek Bible contains approximately 200,000 minor and major variants which amply support the premise that mere written recording does not ensure authentic preservation. Quite contrary to the case of the Greek Bible, the holy Qur’an will remain perfectly safe even if all the *Maṣāḥif* are thoroughly exterminated, as millions of the Muslims have consigned to memory either parts or the whole of the holy Qur’an.

However, the prophet (ﷺ) is reported to have exhorted his companions to secure his sayings in written form. Some examples are given as follows:

The prophet (ﷺ) dictated rules about paying *Zakat* on certain kinds of property. These rules regarding the rates of *Zakat* and the assets on which it was compulsory to pay *Zakat* were recorded in a document.

‘Abdullāh Ibn ‘Umar (RA) says the following words about this document known as “*Kitāb-al-Ṣadaqah*”:

“The prophet (ﷺ) dictated the book of Ṣadaqah and was yet to send it to the governors when he passed away. He had attached it to his sword. When he passed away, Abū Bakar acted according to it till he breathed his last. Then ‘Umar acted according to it till he passed away. It was stated in his book that one goat was leviable on five camels.”⁽²⁾

The text of the aforesaid document can be found in Sunan Abī

(1) Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī, Kitāb al-‘Ilm, 2/93

(2) Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī, Abwab al-Zakat, Bāb mā jā’a fī zakat al-ibil, 2/10

Dāwūd. While teaching the *ḥadīth* mentioned in this document, the famous ḥadīth scholar Imām Zuhri used to tell his pupils,

“This is the text of the document dictated by Muḥammad (ﷺ) about the rules of Zakat. Its original manuscript is with the children of ‘Umar (RA). Salim, the grandson of ‘Umar (RA) had taught it to me. I had committed it to my memory. ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abdullāh had obtained a copy of it Salim and ‘Abdullāh , the grandson of ‘Abdullāh . I possess the same copy.”⁽¹⁾

At the conquest of Najrān in the 10 A.H, “Amr Ibn Ḥazm was appointed by Muḥammad (ﷺ) as the governor of Yemen. For the guidance of Ibn Ḥazm, the prophet (ﷺ) dictated a comprehensive book to Ubayī Ibn Ka‘b who passed on the same to Ibn Ḥazm. The book consisted of general rules of Islamic Sharī‘ah namely *Tahārat* (purification), *Ṣalāt* (prayers) *Zakāt* (annual charity tax), *‘Ushar* (tithe) , *Ḥajj* and *‘Umrah* (holy pilgrimage), *Jihād* (battle), *Diyyat* (blood money), administration and education etc. ‘Amr Ibn Ḥazm used to with all issues with reference to this book. After his death, the book got into the possession of his grandson namely Abū Bakar. The same book was taught later by Imām Zuhri. Certain passages from this book can be found the books of *aḥādīth* .⁽²⁾ Similarly, the prophet (ﷺ) appointed ‘Alā’ al-Ḥadhramī and Abū Ḥurayrah (RA) as his emissary to the Zoroastrians of Hajar and dictated certain rules regarding zakat and ushar.⁽³⁾ Likewise, the prophet (ﷺ) appointed Malik Ibn Murrāh and Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal as the governors of Yemen and dictated some rules of Sharī‘ah which they carried in written form.⁽⁴⁾

It is historically established that some devoted companions of the prophet (ﷺ) used to write down the sayings of the prophet (ﷺ) during his life.⁽⁵⁾ It goes without saying that the companions did not report equal number of *aḥādīth*. The number varied: some reported hundreds of *aḥādīth* whereas other hardly reported a *Ḥadīth* or two. The names of the narrators who have transmitted copious traditions are listed below.

In this regard, first comes Abū Ḥurayrah (RA) who, according to Baqī b. Makhlad, transmitted 5374 *aḥādīth*. He is reported to have possessed books of *aḥādīth*. In the succeeding generation, around nine students are known to have written *aḥādīth* from him. Next to Abū Hurayrah is Ibn ‘Umar (RA) who, according to Baqī b. Makhlad reported

(1) Sunan Abi Dāwūd, Ktab-al- Zakat,2/108

(2) Dr. Hamīdullah, Al-wathā‘iq al- Siyāsiyyah,(Beirut: Dārulnif ā’is,1978)104-109

(3) Ibn sa‘d, Muhammad bin Sa‘d, Al-Tabaqāt al-Kubrā, (Beirut: Dar Ṣādir, 1968A.D), 1/263.

(4) Ibid. 1/265.

(5) ‘A‘zamī, M.M Studies in the Ḥadīth Methodology and Literature, (Riyaz: Saudi Arabia, 1977A.D), 25.

2630 *aḥādīth*. There are unquestionable proofs that corroborate that fact he possessed a written collection of *aḥādīth*. Like Abū Hurayrah(RA), Ibn ‘Umar (RA) also had a large number of students out of whom at least eight wrote *aḥādīth* from him.⁽¹⁾

Next to Ibn ‘Umar (RA) comes the name of Anas bin Mālīk (RA) who worked as a faithful servant of the Muḥammad (ﷺ) for about ten years. He transmitted 2286 *aḥādīth* from the prophet (ﷺ). Sixteen students wrote *aḥādīth* from him, though some of them are not considered as reliable narrators by the *Hadīth* scholars. Another transmitter is ‘Ā’ishah (RA) who transmitted 2210 *aḥādīth* and at least three students have recorded *aḥādīth* from her in written form. In addition to them, Ibn ‘Abbas (RA) transmitted 1660 *aḥādīth* from the prophets (ﷺ). Nine of his pupils preserved his *aḥādīth* in written form. Similarly, Jābir bin ‘Abdullāh (RA) transmitted 1540 *aḥādīth* which were written from him by his fourteen students. Next to him comes the name of Abū Sa‘īd Khudrī (RA) who transmitted 1170 *aḥādīth*. Although he was initially not in favor of writing down *aḥādīth*, yet according to the report of Khaṭīb Baghdādī he himself wrote a few *aḥādīth*. Another narrator is Ibn Mas‘ūd (RA) who transmitted 748 *aḥādīth*. His collection of *aḥādīth* was bequeathed to his son.⁽²⁾

Next to him is ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Amr b. Al-‘Āṣ (RA) who transmitted about 700 *aḥādīth*. He would write down the *aḥādīth* during the life of the prophet (ﷺ) and his collection of *aḥādīth* was entitled as Al-Ṣaḥīfah Al-Ṣādiqah. At least seven of his students wrote *aḥādīth* from him.⁽³⁾ ‘Umar (R.A), the second caliph of Islam, transmitted 573 *aḥādīth*. He used to cite *aḥādīth* in his official letters and in this way a considerable number of *aḥādīth* got recorded in a written form. The fourth caliph, ‘Ali (RA) also transmitted 536 *aḥādīth*. At least eight of his students preserved his reports in written form. Abū Mūsa al-Ash‘arī transmitted 860 *aḥādīth*: “Ibn ‘Abbas (RA) had some of his *aḥādīth* in written form. Similarly, Al- Barā Ibn ‘Āzib(RA) used to dictate *aḥādīth* and in this way he transmitted 305 *aḥādīth*. For brevity’s sake, a long list of transmitters is deliberately omitted and it is hoped that the given list will be enough to prove that most of the *aḥādīth* were written down by the companions of the prophet (ﷺ).⁽⁴⁾

The *Aḥādīth* against writing down the *aḥādīth*

Al-Khatīb Al-Baghdādī’s book *Taqyīd al-‘Ilm* offers an exhaustive treatment of this issue. The first part of the book deals with the *aḥādīth* that

(1) ‘A‘zamī, M.M, *Studies in the Hadīth Methodology and Literature*, 26.

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) *Ibid*, 27.

(4) ‘A‘zamī, *Studies in Early Hadīth Literature*, (Saudi Arabia:Riyaz 1977A.D), 34-182

disapproves writing. The *aḥādīth* which prohibit writing down *ḥadīth* are transmitted by Zayd b. Thābit (RA) Abū Hurayrah(RA) and Abū Sa‘īd Khudrī (RA). The *ḥadīth* reported by Abū Sa‘īd Khudrī (RA) has two different versions: one of them is reported by ‘Abd-al-Rahmān b. Zayd who is unanimously regarded as weak by the *ḥadīth* authorities.⁽¹⁾ According to Abū Nu‘aym and al-Hākim, ‘Abd-al-Rahām b. Zayd transmitted even false reports. According to Ibn Hibbān, he deserves to be abandoned. Therefore, we are justified in regarding this version of the *ḥadīth* as unacceptable and untrustworthy.

The same narrator, namely ‘Abd-al-Rahām bin Zayd if found in the *ḥadīth* of Abū Hurayrah, hence that report is equally unacceptable and untrustworthy.

The third *ḥadīth* is transmitted by Zayd bin Thābit (RA). His *ḥadīth* is *mursal*. The reporter from Zayd bin Thābit (RA) is Al-Muṭṭalib bin ‘Abdullāh who did not acquire it from Zayd bin Thābit(RA). It shows that there exists a missing link whose honesty is not known. This renders the *ḥadīth* unacceptable and unreliable. Besides, the *ḥadīth* of Zayd bin Thābit (RA) has two different versions: one version relates the approval of the writing of *ḥadīth* whereas the other version states that the prophet (ﷺ) abhorred it because the written texts consisted of personal views. Therefore, this *ḥadīth* cannot be quoted for proving the prohibition against writing down the *aḥādīth* of the prophet (ﷺ). In this connection, there is only one *ṣaḥīḥ* *ḥadīth* narrated by Abū Sa‘īd Khudrī (RA) according to which the prophet (ﷺ) forbade his companions to write anything from him except Qur’an and also ordered them to erase whatever other than Qur’an was recorded from him.⁽²⁾

The status of this *ḥadīth* is disputed among scholars of *ḥadīth*. The eminent scholar of *ḥadīth* Imām Bukhari says that this is Abū Sa‘īd Khudrī’s (RA) own statement which has been erroneously attributed to the prophet (ﷺ). He further maintains that it was actually prohibition against writing anything on the same sheet with the holy Qur’an. It should be noted that this command was given at the time of the revelation of the holy Qur’an; otherwise there is no cogent reason to prohibit the writing of *aḥādīth*.⁽³⁾ According to the holy Qur’an, the prophet (ﷺ) is a perfect role model for the entire humanity and being so his deeds and conduct should be emulated. During his life, his guidance was sought in different issues

(1) ‘A‘zamī, Studies in Hadīth, 28

(2) Muslim bin al-Hajjāj al-Qushayrī, Al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Zuhd wa al-Raqā’iq, (Beirut: Dar al-Jīl, 1974A.D), 4/2272

(3) ‘A‘zamī, Studies in Hadīth, 28

and matters. In order to guide his officials and governors, the prophet (ﷺ) sent hundreds of letters to different people and different regions.⁽¹⁾

According to Muṣṭafā A‘zamī, the recent research conducted in the field of *aḥādīth* has convincingly proved that almost all the *aḥādīth* were preserved in written form during the life of the companions.⁽²⁾

The companions of the prophet (ﷺ) transferred their knowledge to a large numbers of their students. The students of the companions are known as *Tābi‘īn*. There is ample proof of their having recorded multitudes of *aḥādīth*. The first book of *aḥādīth* which is arranged under subjective headings is *Al-bwāb* by Imām Sha‘bī (b. 19 AH, 103 AH) *Al-bwāb* is divided into several chapters, each chapter containing *aḥādīth* related to various subjects such as *Ṣalah*, *Zakah* etc.⁽³⁾ It shows that a book containing systematically arranged *aḥādīth* appeared in the very first century. Likewise, Imām Hasan Al- Baṣrī (d.110 AH) wrote a book of *aḥādīth* which consisted of explanatory commentaries on various verses of the holy Qur’an. This book also appeared in the first century.⁽⁴⁾

In this era, the official compilation of *aḥādīth* was undertaken at the behest of the eminent caliph ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abdul ‘Azīz (99-101 AH). He dispatched an official letter to every governor of the Islamic state to convene a meeting of all the scholarly personalities amongst the prophet (ﷺ) of the companions of the prophets (ﷺ) in order to write down the *aḥādīth* found with them.⁽⁵⁾

In pursuit of the caliph’s command, the prominent scholars of the age compiled several books of *aḥādīth*. Ibn Shahab al-Zuhrī was one of the pioneers who undertook the sacred task of compilation of *aḥādīth* in this period. The books written during this were later merged in larger books of *aḥādīth*. With the appearance of large and comprehensive books, the small books written by *Tābi‘īn* vanished from the academic scene. However, some manuscripts were carefully preserved. Abū Hurayrah’s student, Hammam b. Munnabbih wrote *aḥādīth* from him. This collection of *aḥādīth* is known as ‘*Al-Ṣaḥīfah Al-Ṣāḥīḥah*’. All the *aḥādīth* of this collection found their way into the succeeding larger compilation of *aḥādīth*. The entire text of ‘*Al-Ṣaḥīfah Al-Ṣāḥīḥah*’ is found in *Musnad-e-*

(1) Mahmūd Ahmad Ghazi, *Muḥādharāt Hadīth*, (Lahore: al-Faisal Nāshirān, 2010), the letter-manuscript has been discovered recently and found in full accord with the text of the letter reported in Bukhari

(2) ‘A‘zamī, *Studies in Hadīth*, 31

(3) Jalāl-ud-Dīn Sayūṭī, *Tadrīb al-Rāwī fi Syarh Taqrīb al-Nawawī*.(Beirut: DārulJeil, 1980), 40

(4) ‘Ajjāj al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Sunnah Qabl al-Tadwīn*,(Beirut: Dār al-fikr,1980), 338.

(5) Ibn Hajar ‘asqalanī,Ahmed bin Alī, *Fath al-Bārī*,(Ciro: Dār al-Hadīth), 1/74

Imām Aḥmad.⁽¹⁾

The original manuscript remained lost for a considerable period of time but in 1954 A.D two of them we found in the libraries of Damascus and Berlin. These manuscripts were edited and published by Dr. Ḥamīdullah. He compared the *aḥādīth* of this manuscript with those of Musnad of Imām Aḥmad and found no significant difference except for a few negligible differences of words which are generally found in two different manuscript of the same book. It substantiates our claim that the smaller books written by Tābi'īn were made part of the larger books of aḥādīth compiled by later generations of the *Muḥaddithīn*.

In the first and second century, the Tābi'īn compiled a large number of books. Following is the list of aḥādīth books compiled by the Tābi'īn in the first century. This section should have formed the focus of this study.

1. Books of Khālid Ibn Ma'dān (d.104)
2. Books of Abū Qilābah (d. 104)
3. The Manuscript of Hammām Ibn Munabbih
4. Books of Hasan al-Baṣrī (21-110)
5. Books of Muḥammad Al-Bāqir (56-114)
6. Books of Mak'hūl from Syria
7. Books of Ḥakam ibn 'Utaybah
8. Books of Bukayr Ibn 'Abdullāh Ibn Al-Ashajj (d.177)
9. Books of Qays Ibn Sa'd (d. 117)
10. Books of Sulaymān Al-Yashkurī
11. Al-Abwāb of Al-Sha'bī
12. Books of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī
13. Books of Abū 'Āliyah
14. Books of Sa'id Ibn Jubayr (d. 95)
15. Books of 'Umar Ibn 'Abdul 'Azīz (61-101)
16. Books of Mujāhid Ibn Jabr (d.103)
17. Books of Rajā' Ibn Ḥaywah (d.112)
18. Books of Abū Bakr Ibn Muḥammad Ibn 'Amr Ibn Haq
19. Book of Bashir Ibn Nahik⁽²⁾

(1) Mahmud Ahmad Ghāzī, *Muḥādrāt-e-Ḥadīth*, (Lahore: al-Faysal Nashran, 2012), 278-283

(2) Abū Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmad, *al-Dhahabī, Tadhkira-tul-Huffāz*, (Beirut: Dārul Kutub, 1998), 1/188, Abul Faḍal Ahmad bin 'Alī, *Tahdhīb-ul-Tahdhīb*, (India: Dā'iratul Ma'ārif Tahzīb-ul-Tahzīb), 2/104, Shaykh ibn Abi Ḥātim, *Muqaddimah al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta'dīl*, (Dā'iratul Ma'ārif 'Usmāniyyah, 1952 A.D), 130, Abd-ur-Raḥmān bin Abī Bakar, *Tadrīb-al-Rāwī*, (Beirut: Dār-al-Tayyiba, 1988A.D), 40.

***Aḥādīth* Books in the Second Century**

The salient feature of the books written in the second century is the subject wise arrangement of a large number of *aḥādīth*. However, some books are found similar to the compilations of the previous century in terms of their subject arrangement. As the list of such books is too long, only a few prominent specimens are cited below.

1. Book of ‘Abdul Malik ibn Abū Jurayj (d. 150)
2. Muwattā of Malik Ibn Anas (93-179)
3. Muwattā of Ibn Abi Zi’b (80-158)
4. Maghāzī of Muḥammad Ibn Is’ḥāq (d151)
5. Musnad of Rabī‘ Ibn Ṣabīh (d. 160)
6. Book of Sa’īd Ibn Abi ‘Arūbah(d.156)
7. Book of Ḥammād Ibn Salamah (d.167)
8. Jāmi‘ Sufyān al-Thaurī (97-161)
9. Jāmi‘ Ma‘mar Ibn Rāshid (95-153)
10. Book of ‘Abdur Raḥmān Al-Awzā‘ī (88-157)
11. Kitāb al-Zuhd by ‘Abdullāh Ibn Mubārik (118-181)
12. Book of Hushaim Ibn Bashīr (104-183)
13. Book of Jarīr Ibn ‘Abdul Hamīd (110-188)
14. Book of ‘Abdullāh Ibn Wahb (125-197)
15. Book of Yaḥyā Ibn Abī Kathīr (d.129)
16. Book of Muḥammad Ibn Suqah (d.135)
17. Tafsir of Zāhid Ibn Aslam (d.136)
18. Book of Mūsā Ibn ‘Uqbah (d.141)
19. Book of Ash‘ath Ibn ‘Abdul Malik (d.142)
20. Book of ‘Aqīl Ibn Khālīd (d.142)
21. Book of Yaḥyā Ibn Sa’īd Anṣārī (d.143)
22. Book of ‘Awf Ibn Abī Jamīlah (d.146)
23. Book of Ja‘far Ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq (d.148)
24. Book of Yūnus Ibn Yazīd (d.152)
25. Book of ‘Abdur Rahman Al-Mas‘ūdī (d.160)
26. Books of Zāydah Ibn Qudāmah (d.161)
27. Books of Ibrāhīm al-Tahman (d.163)
28. Books of Abū Hamzā al-Sukrī (d. 167)
29. Al-Ghrā’ib by Shu‘bah Ibn Hajjāj (d. 160)
30. Books of ‘Abdul Azīz Ibn ‘Abdullāh al- Mājishūn (d. 164)
31. Books of ‘Abdullāh Ibn ‘Abdullāh Ibn Abi Uways (d.169)
32. Book of Sulaymān Ibn Bilāl (d.172)
33. Books of ‘Abdullāh Ibn Abi Lahī‘ah (d.147)
34. Jāmi‘ Sufyān Ibn ‘Uyaynah (d. 198)
35. Kitāb Al-’Āthār by Imām Abū Hanīfah (d.150)

36. Maghāzī by Mu‘tamir Ibn Sulaymān (d.187)
37. Muṣannaf of Wakī‘ Ibn Al-Jarraḥ (d.196)
38. Muṣannaf of ‘Abd-ur-Razzāq Ibn Hammām (136-221)
39. Musnad of Zayd Ibn ‘Alī (76-122)
40. Books of Imām al-Shāfi‘ī⁽¹⁾

The list is by no means exhaustive and mention of several books has been deliberately eschewed for brevity’s sake. Notwithstanding, the list above is adequate to refute Spencer’s assumption that the compilation was not undertaken before third century. Now one can easily understand that recording of *aḥādīth* began in the very life of the prophet (ﷺ) and continued till large and systematic editions of *aḥādīth* appeared. According to M.M. A‘zamī, the books did not perish nor were they destroyed, but they were absorbed and assimilated into the major works of the latter authors. After the appearance and emergence of encyclopedic works, scholars did not deem it necessary to keep the early booklets or books and therefore, such books slowly disappeared.⁽²⁾

The following are available today in printed form:

1. Al-Muwatta by Imām Mālik
2. Kitāb Al-’Āthār by Imām Abū Hanīfah
3. Muṣannaf of ‘Abd-ur-Razzāq Ibn Hammām
4. Al-Sīrah by Muḥammad Ibn Is’ḥāq
5. Kitāb al-Zuhd by ‘Abdullāh Ibn Mubārak
6. Kitāb al-Zuhd by Wakī‘ Ibn Al-Jarraḥ
7. Al-Musnad by Zayd Ibn ‘Ali
8. Sunan of Imām Shāfi‘ī
9. Siyar of Awuzā‘ī
10. Musnad of ‘Abdullāh Ibn Mubārak
11. Musnad of Abū Dāwūd Tayālīsī
12. Al-Radd ‘alā Siyar al-Awuzā‘ī by Imām Abū Yūsuf
13. Al-Hujjah ‘alā Ahl al-Madīnah by Imām Muḥammad Ibn Hasan al-Shaybānī
14. Kitāb al- Umm by Imām Shāfi‘ī
15. Al-maghāzī by Waqidi

Fabrication of *Ḥadīth* : Causes and means of Elimination

There is no gainsaying the fact that things are forged only when their original precious real forms exist. If *aḥādīth* were not precious and important, no one would have fabricated any *ḥadīth* . It is true that different

(1) Tadhkira-tul-Huffāz, 1/88

(2) ‘A‘zamī, Studies in Hadīth, 67

people with different ulterior motives and for obvious purposes fabricated a great number of *aḥādīth*. It is historically true that such fabrications came from both Muslims and non-Muslims. The fabricators can be divided into various categories, depending on their aims and objectives. Among those who falsely attributed words and statements to the prophet (ﷺ) were *Zindīqs* who lacked the audacity to fight Islam overtly. They forged *aḥādīth* under the guise of scholars. These fabricators include Muḥammad b. Sa‘īd al-Shāmī and Mughīrah b. Sa‘d Al-Kūfī: the former was crucified for his treachery. Besides such fabricators, there were some pious people who forged *aḥādīth* with positive intentions. Abū ‘Umar al-Marwazi narrates that Abū ‘Ismah used to quote *aḥādīth* about the virtues of the Qur’an surah by surah. When he was if ‘Ikrama’s students did not possess those *aḥādīth* then how did he get them from ‘Ikrama. It is to be observed here how the erudite scholars of *aḥādīth* used to make cross references to sieve the falsehood from genuine *aḥādīth*. Abū ‘Ismah replied that by so doing he wanted to turn the attention of the people to the study of the holy Qur’an.⁽¹⁾

We agree with Spencer that there were fabricators who forged *aḥādīth* for sectarian reasons. Similarly, we accede to his claim that there were some sycophant people who fabricated *aḥādīth* for the sake of the rulers. In addition, there were pious people who could not exert the required strenuous effort for learning *aḥādīth* with mathematical precision and consequently committed several mistakes in transmission of *aḥādīth*. It is pertinent to quote Yaḥyā b. Sa‘īd al-Qattān, an illustrious second century scholar of *ḥadīth*:

“I have not seen more falsehood in anyone than those who are reputed as pious.”

It is an extremely persuasive proof that the scholars of *ḥadīth* were not in the least moved and impressed by the ostensible piety of narrators.

Scholars who devoted their intellectual energies to the study of *aḥādīth* and spent a great deal of their time with *aḥādīth* developed a special faculty to detect statements and words falsely attributed to the prophet (ﷺ). The example of such scholars is like that of an expert in Shakespearian studies who, by virtue of his profound acquaintance with Shakespeare’s style and diction, can fairly easily say what is Shakespeare’s and what isn’t. However, the scholar depended not merely on their special faculty but also laid down certain logical rules to confirm the genuineness or otherwise spuriousness of the statements attributed to the prophet (ﷺ). Ibn al-Qayyām has laid down the following general rules for the rejection of a *ḥadīth*.

(1) ‘A‘zamī, *Studies in Hadīth*, 69.

1. Any *ḥadīth* containing a highly hyperbolic statement that the prophet (ﷺ) could not have made
2. Any statement rejected by experiment
3. Any statement that contradicted and established *Sunnah*
4. Any statement which the prophet (ﷺ) was supposed to have made in the presence of multitude of companions but they supposedly concealed it.
5. Any statement that does not resemble other statements of the prophet (ﷺ)
6. Any statement that resembles, in its diction and content, the statements of medical practitioners and mystics.
7. Any statement that is in conflict with the absolutely obvious meanings of the holy Qur'an.
8. Any statement couched in an inelegant and inappropriate style.

In addition to these general rules, a foolproof system of *Isnād* is employed to detect fabricated material. The *Isnād* were casually used by the Arabs in pre-Islamic era. But the Arabs did not attach great importance to *Isnād*. They employed *Isnād* system for the transmission of their poetry.⁽¹⁾ In terms of significance, *Isnād* system reached its pinnacle when it began to be used for the transmission of *ḥadīth* so much so that it was declared an integral part of religion.⁽²⁾ It was used to 'extravagant limits' for the purpose of documenting *aḥādīth*. Since the *Sunnah* of the prophet (ﷺ) is a valid source of law in Islam, it was absolutely natural to deal with *ḥadīth* documents with paramount care.⁽³⁾ With *Isnād* there came into existence a sophisticated science of '*Ilm al-Jarḥ wa Ta'dīl*' for the analysis and evaluation of *Isnād*. There are numerable references in *ḥadīth* literature which prove that the narrators of *aḥādīth* were inquired about their sources. One such example is cited here.

Imām Ibn Salabah once came to the Messenger (ﷺ) and said,
 "Muḥammad, your messenger came to inform us....." This was the
 "rudimentary beginning" of the *Isnād* system.⁽⁴⁾

In this connection, Ibn Sīrīn's words are worth noting:

"They did not ask about *Isnād* but when civil war (*Fitnah*) erupted they demanded, 'name your men': 'those who belonged to al-Sunnah, their *aḥādīth* were considered valid and those who were innovators their *aḥādīth* were rejected".⁽⁵⁾

(1) Nāsir al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shi'r al-Jāhiliyyah*, (Beirut : DarulJeil, 1980A.D), 255-267

(2) Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Introduction, 14-16

(3) 'A'zamī, *Studies in Hadīth*, 32

(4) *Ibid*, 33

(5) 'A'zamī, *Studies in Hadīth*, 33

His account bears it out that *Isnād* were used even before *Fitnah* , however after the eruption of the civil war, care and caution in the use of *Isnād* was even more intensified.⁽¹⁾

Scholars of *ḥadīth* possessed impeccably deep knowledge of nearly all transmitters, the number of *aḥādīth* they transmitted and the number of *aḥādīth* confirmed or otherwise not confirmed by other narrators in the Muslim world. The early scholars of *ḥadīth* compiled a large numbers of books on fabricated *aḥādīth* . According to M.M. A‘zamī, Husayn b. Ibrāhīm al-Jauzqānī (d.543) was the first scholar whose work dealt exclusively with spurious *aḥādīth* . For a layman’s study on the subject of fabricated *aḥādīth* , Shukānī’s book *al-Fawā’id al-Majmū‘ah Fi al-Aḥādīth* is sufficient.

As mentioned earlier that traditions were fabricated for political reasons with the purpose to credit or discredit the concerned sects or parities, the scholars of *ḥadīth* , fully conscious of the menace of fabricated stuff, considered it indispensable to separate the genuine traditions from the forged ones. In this connection, the aforementioned book of Shukānī gives the following details about spurious traditions:

42 fabricated traditions about Muḥammad (ﷺ),

38 fabricated traditions about the first three caliphs (RA)

96 fabricated traditions about ‘Ali and Fātimah (RA)

14 fabricated traditions about Mu‘āwiyah (RA).⁽²⁾

It is pertinent to mention that in the same period when compilation of *aḥādīth* was in progress, an extremely sophisticated and systematic criticism was being developed by the scholars in which a variety of tests were designed to authenticate the accuracy and reliability of *aḥādīth* . It is incontestably true that the entire academic history of the world fails to cite parallel to such refined and systematic science of criticism.

In the light of these tests and principles, the *aḥādīth* were viewed and classified into hundreds of categories. The scope of the current study does not allow to provide exhaustive details of the different branches of the *aḥādīth* s sciences and the process of crediting or discrediting a *ḥadīth* , but by casting a cursory glance at thousands of books in this discipline persuades one to conclude that every possible measure to verify the correctness of *aḥādīth* has been taken by the scholars of *ḥadīth* .⁽³⁾

(1) A‘zamī, *Studies in Hadīth*, 33

(2) *Al-Fawā’id al-Majmū‘ah*, 320-408

(3) Taqī ‘Uthmānī, *The Authority of Sunnah*, (Pakistan: Idārāh al-Quran Karachi), 119

Conclusion

Contrary to what Spencer believes as “fictional narratives”, *aḥādīth* provide reliable “historical accounts” about the life of Muḥammad (ﷺ). Through the painstaking efforts of the Muslim scholars, the minute details of the life of prophet (ﷺ) have been meticulously preserved. Spencer claims that if the “historical-critical” method is applied to origins of Islam, little will be discovered to confirm the canonical account of the life of Muḥammad (ﷺ). After this critical-historical discourse on the preservation and authenticity of *aḥādīth*, we need to alter Spencer’s statement a little to harmonize it with the truth. Spencer writes:

“the unreliability of the Ḥadīth makes it impossible to know for certain anything about Muḥammad”⁽¹⁾,

But the fact remains that the reliability of the *ḥadīth* makes it possible to know for certain everything about Muḥammad(ﷺ).



(1) Spencer, Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam’s Obscure Origins, 87