

As-Sahabah and The Preservation of Hadith

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ABSTRACT

One of the issues raised by Some Orientalists scholars against the validity and the authenticity of Ahadith is that they were orally transmitted for over a century before the proper documentation and compilation processes. They argued further that the Traditions were invented through a chain of narrators down to the Prophet to emphasize either political affiliation or dogmatic doctrine. Put in plain terms, the corpus of the Traditions from the Prophet is alleged to be the product of a large-scale pious forgery that gained momentum in the early second century of Islam. Some Scholars of Hadith have, however, query such postulation. They argued that the Hadith could not have been orally transmitted for over a century without some early written preservation in the first century itself. It can also be added that the availability of literary activities in the Arabian peninsula before the mission of the Prophet Muhammad suggests people's interest in writing and recording of events. That some curious Sahabah recorded the

sayings of the Prophet, therefore, cannot be totally ruled out. This assertion is the main focus of this paper.

Introduction

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

The triangular formula in this verse is very instructive. The role of Allah as the law giver is emphatically stressed. The role of the Prophet as the Teacher of the divine messages, who is expected to give interpretations and detailed information of the golden messages, is equally stated. The recipients (i.e the sahabah) are also encouraged to functionally use their intellect and to ask for guidance from the Teacher, and to formulate their own ideas where the Qur'an and the Teacher are not categorical.

The Prophet's role as indicated in this verse is viewed from different perspectives. The Qur'anic exegetes consider the role as the foundation for the developmental stages of Tafsir.¹ The Jurists view it from the lenses of legal matters, while the scholars of hadith maintain that it was a method of verbal teachings of the sunnah.² This claim, by the muhaddhithun, has attracted the attention of the critics of hadith who argue that such postulation is wrong because the exact words of the Prophet cannot be orally transmitted with accuracy. Abu-

Riyyah, has been promoting this position of recent.³ A close examination of his argument reveals that he lends weight to the views of the orientalist scholars that hadith reflects the viewpoint of the later centuries of Islam and have little to tell about the early part of the century, which they allegedly belong. This assertion shall later be focused in this paper.

Azami has, however, queries the argument that the hadith could not have been orally transmitted for over a century. He says that the misconception about the beginning of the recording of hadith was mainly due to a wrong conception of the Arabic words: “Tadwin”, “Tasnif” and “Risalah”. According to him, a lot of materials in the form of Risalah (booklets) and separate hadith collections existed in the first century itself.³ One can also add here that the availability of literary activities in the Arabian peninsula before the Prophethood of Muhammad suggests people’s interest in writing and recording of events. That some curious Sahabah recorded the sayings of the Prophet, therefore, cannot be totally ruled out. This assertion is the main focus of this paper as revealed in the ensuing sections.

RECORDING OF HADITH –AN ASSESMENT

One of the issues raised by the orientalist scholars against the validity and the authenticity of hadith is that the hadith was orally transmitted for over a century before its compilation into a book form. They argued further that the

traditions were invented through a chain of narrators down to the Prophet to emphasize either political affiliation or dogmatic doctrine. Put in plain terms the corpus of traditions from the Prophet is alleged to be the product of a large-scale pious forgery.⁴

A fact worthy admitting is that the official recordings of Ahadith came at a later stage during the time of ^CUmar Ibn ^CAbdul -^CAziz who ordered a scholar called Abubakar Ibn Hazim to compile a book of hadith for official use.⁵ However, individual compilation predated this official directive. The attempt could be regarded as a modest move geared towards the protection of Ahadith from containing false information, interpolation and the alleged pious forgery. This is evidently clear from the directive itself. 'Ibn Hazim was asked to rely on the collection of Qasim Ibn Abubakar (d. 112A.H) the only survivor among the seven jurists who were the centre of reference on religious matters.⁶ This implied that the jurists themselves relied on personal collections of hadith, which they referred to before arriving at a finale verdict.

It is not the aim of the present study to delve into the biographical notes of the seven jurists of Madinah or to explore the arguments generated by their activities; a more detailed academic work is, in our view, required in this regard. However, their activities as at that time were compelling enough to

invalidate Goldziher's⁷ and Schacht's⁸ claim of "pious forgery" and "fictitious expression" respectively. The jurists, severally and collectively, possessed sound knowledge of Qur'an and science of hadith which placed them at a vantage position of knowing the authentic from the fabricated Traditions. It is even on record that judges used to consult them before certain judicial decisions were made.⁹

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

Abu-said Al-khudri, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that, the Prophet (S.A.W) is reported to have said: " Do not write from me except the Qur'an and whoever has written anything from me other than the Qur'an should erase it."¹⁰

Zayd bn Thabit visited Mu'awiyah and sought information concerning an hadith from him. He (Mu'awiyah) ordered some one to write it. Then Zayd informed him that, "the Prophet forbids us from writing down any of his Ahadith". He then erased it.¹¹

Abu Hurayrah, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that, the Prophet once met us while we were writing Ahadith. He enquired what we were writing. We said, "They are your Ahadith". The Prophet remarked. " A book different from the

book of Allah? Do you know what led the people before you astray? They made other writings along with the book of Allah".¹²

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

The Prophet's disapproval of writing Ahadith most probably meant the writing of the Qur'an and non-Qur'anic materials on the same sheet because that might have led to misunderstanding.¹³

We are inclined to believe that the Prophet was admonishing against mixing the two together as the fear of mixture was real but personal writing could not have been totally prohibited. Furthermore, we discovered that the first hadith cited above which was reported by Abi sa'id al-khudri is said to be weak, because it is categorized as Mawquf.¹⁴ As-salafi¹⁵ has however queried this judgement of Bukhari. He said that Muslim reported the same hadith in the category of Marfu^c. This is not an indication that As-salafi disagrees that the Prophet disapproved the recording of his statements. He only contends the categorization of the hadith as a weak Tradition. He further submitted that the hadith was later abrogated.¹⁶ Besides, this hadith has two different versions. One of them is transmitted by Abdurhman Ibn Sai^cd who was said to be a weak narrator and

used to edit hadith without knowing it.¹⁷ For this reason ‘Ibn Hisham opines that he deserved to be abandoned.¹⁸ The same argument goes for the second narration by Abu-Hurayrah because the same ‘Ibn Said appears in the chain of narrators.¹⁹ And as for the authenticity of the hadith, the author of Tuhfatul-Ahawazi provides the following interpretations, if the hadith to be considered on its merit:

That the recording of the hadith was forbidden during the time of revelation, so that it could not be seen as dovetailing with the Qur’an. And that the Ahdith should not be recorded on the same sheet with the Qur’an, whereas it was allowed on different sheets. Furthermore the hadith in reference was later abrogated by other Traditions that allow its recording.²⁰

Ibn Qutaybah, as quoted by As-salafi,²¹ provides a fourth option that the disapproval was general while the approval was specific permission as could be deduced from the following Ahadith listed by Azami in support of the recording. It should be noted, however, that the Ahadith that shall be considered here are said to have abrogated the hadith against the recording of hadith.²²

Abdullah Ibn Amru Ibn Al-Asi, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that, I said, “O the Prophet of Allah, we used to listen to your statements which we could not memorized, can we then

put them into writings? The Prophet said “all right you could write them”.²³

And from the authority of Ahmad (he reported Ibn Al-asi as having said) “Oh Prophet of Allah, I listen to your speeches, can I write them down? He said Yes, I said “in both state of happiness and anger? He replied “Yes, because, I do not utter any statement except the truth”.²⁴

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

Wahab Ibn Manbah reported from his brother who said he heard Abu-Hurayrah saying that none of the Sahabah reported more hadith than me except Abdullahi Ibn Amru because he used to write and I didn’t.²⁵

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

The hadith on prohibition belong to an earlier period in the life of the Prophet and are abrogated (mansukh) by the later ones

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which carry permission, or alternatively the prohibition was meant only for such companions as were not well trained in the art of writing and did not include those who could write proficiently without fear of distortion. ²⁶

Similarly, Siddiq, in our view, has argued quite reasonably that: The date of one hadith in the sahih of Bukhari, which gives to Abu-sha permission to write down one of his discourses, is dated the year of the conquest of Makkah, a fact which would favour the view that the hadith which allowed the writings of hadith post date those which indicate prohibition. ²⁷

In addition Ibn Amru, a principal actor in the hadith being investigated, was said to have arrived Syria with a camel loaded with several books from which he used to quote. ²⁸ This is an indication that Ibn Amru had other collections with him different from hadith collection. It also apposite to mention that some books were in circulation as at that time such as tribal poems, promissory notes, personal letters and tribal agreements. ²⁹ The book of Daniel was also believed to be in circulation. ³⁰

Furthermore, the Qur'an encourages documentation of events, pacts and business transactions so as to safe-guard them from being forgotten or lost. ³¹ It is an indisputable fact that the sahabah would guard the Prophetic treasure jealously than the worldly materials or documents. Though one is not claiming that the events of 276 months (i e 23 years) were all recorded but a

sizeable number of Traditions were actually recorded. Maurice Bucaille’s claim that not a single collection of hadith was drawn up at the time of the Prophet,”³² in our opinion, should be understood to refer to book collection and not the actual recording of hadith.

THE SAHABAH AND THE RECORDING OF HADITH

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

- (i) **Wa’z:** oral teaching in gatherings.
- (ii) **Khutbah:** prepared sermons for Friday prayers, ‘Eid prayers and on special occasions such as wedding ceremony.
- (iii) **Ta’lim:** special training sessions for his emissaries
- (iv) **Af’al:** his practical demonstrations of the Qur’anic teachings
- (v) **Sunnah:** his own actions based on the interpretation of the Qur’an messages.³³

Though the last two, in our opinion, are identical, one can add the questions, and answers sessions as well as statements made while settling disputes as the sixth and the seventh possible methods respectively. It worth noting that there was no formal system of education as at that time. Circumstances usually dictate the method to be adopted. The second Caliph ʿUmar was reported to have entered into an agreement with an Ansari to compares notes on the Prophet’s teachings when either of them was absent from the Prophet’s circle.³⁴ This reported episode is strong enough to cast doubt on the claim of Abu-Riyyah that ʿUmar used to reject the hadith of other sahabah.³⁵ our contention here is that ʿUmar, like other companions, used to rely on the reports of others, although he could still reject those he considered questionable, especially after the death of the Prophet.

Another point worth stressing is that the sahabah demonstrated great enthusiasm in the dissemination of the Prophet’s word so that they world not be counted among those who withhold knowledge an offence which is strongly condemned in the Qur’an.³⁶ Thus, the sahabah considered oral transmission of the hadith imperative. To accuse the sahabah of pious forgery as Schacht submitted does not conform to the historical reality of the time. Both Goldziher and Schacht contend that the exact words of the Prophet

could not have been memorized; hence its transmission might not be completely free from interpolation.³⁷ This argument was first raised by Goldziher and has since remained an established thesis among some western scholars of Islam.³⁸ The main argument, as Ansari puts it, is that “the Traditions reflect the viewpoints obtaining in the second and third Islamic centuries and (therefore), have little to tell about the early part of the first century to which they allegedly belong”.³⁹ Schacht’s skepticism is more offensive and un scholarly. He says:

Every legal Tradition from the Prophet, until the contrary is proved, must be taken not as an authentic or essentially authentic, even if slightly obscured, statement valid for his time or the time of the companions but as the fictitious expression of a legal doctrine formulated at a later date.⁴⁰

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

None of the sahabah could claim the monopoly of comprehending all the hadith. The Prophet might have uttered a statement or expressed a legal point or practically demonstrated an action which would be witnessed by a few. Those who were present would automatically inform those who were absent.⁴¹

We can deduce from this submission that the sahabah used to compare notes among themselves during the Prophetic era and afterwards. It is not on record that the four guided caliphs, despite their closeness to the Prophet, were always in his company; hence they also asked questions on specific matters from those who were present when a proclamation was made on certain issues.⁴² This deduction however has been challenged by the critics of hadith literature. They are arguing that some notable sahabah were vehemently opposed to hadith narration not to talk of its recording or comparing notes among themselves.⁴³ The names of both the first and the second caliphs are very prominent in this regard. Ahmad Amin states that both Abubakar and ‘Umar opposed the narration of hadith.⁴⁴ his view is based on the following event.

Qarzah Ibn Ka’ab narrated that we embarked on a journey to Iraq ‘Umar escorted us until we reached the place called Harar. He performed ablution by washing each part twice then he said: “Do you know why I have escorted you? We said yes, because we are all companion of the Prophet” he then said “you would come across a group of people who have difficulty in the recitation of the Qur’an, likened to a person climbing the palm tree. Do not narrate any hadith to them because it will confuse them. Perfect recitation of the Qur’an and limit your narrations from the messenger of Allah. Proceed on your journey and I am

with you”. When Qurzah met the people, they enquired about hadith, he then said. “Umar had forbidden us”.

This event is self-explanatory and as such to use it as the basis of preventing the recording of hadith is far-fetched and wishful thinking. Umar had made himself clear. He did not want the people to be confused because of their level of Qur’anic education. It is evident from the episode that if they had perfected their recitation, they would have met the standard considered safe by Umar to allow them to have free access to the hadith. Therefore, to present this event in such a way as to prove that Umar was vehemently opposed to the recording and the transmission of hadith will not in our view, be correct. Another critic, who shares Amin’s submission on Umar is Mahmud Abu Riyyah. He bases his assumption on the fact that Umar was alleged to have prevent the Prophet from writing a book as contained in the following narration.

The Prophet was reported to have asked for a paper to write something on his sick bed. To this Umar said, “the Prophet is in the state of comma, the book of Allah is sufficient for us”⁴⁶

We are tempted to observe that this incident is extremely doubtful. The expression that “the Prophet is in the state of comma” can be interpreted in many ways. It could be that Umar was sympathetic to the Prophet’s poor health rather than opposing him as wrongly claimed by the shi’ah scholars.⁴⁷

It can also be contended that the Prophet was said to be unlettered, how then was it possible for him to write a book while in the state of comma and on the sick bed? In any case this event does not suggest that  Umar was against the recording of hadith. Azami strongly believes that  Umar used to quote hadith in his official letters and in this way many hadith were recorded and transmitted by him.⁴⁸

Furthermore, it is on record that  Umar, during his caliphate, thought of compiling the Traditions but abandoned the idea for fear that the people should keep to them and leave the Qur'an.⁴⁹ This could be regarded as another supportive argument that some companions paid attention to the preservation of the hadith in the same manner they had the Qur'an written down on the available scanty written materials. The fear of mixing the two was therefore the major concern of  Umar in this regard.

The first caliph Abubakar is also alleged to have opposed the transmission and recording of hadith. He was said to have observed that "we have the book of Allah in our midst; you should follow its injunctions."⁵⁰ This argument is not strong enough to attract serious reaction. However, As-Sibai^c quotes an instance which suggests that Abubakar used to reject any hadith narrated by an individual narrator. Instead he used to call other

witnesses. ⁵¹ The incident being referred to, to the best of our knowledge happened once in the case of inheritance as follows:

When a grandmother came to Abubakar asking about her share in the inheritance of her grandson, he replied “I have not found a share for you in the book of Allah and the Prophet did not fix any share for such a case”. He asked the companions whether the Prophet gave a grandmother one sixth. Abubakar asked him whether anyone was with him at such occasion to state as Mughirah had said upon this statement; Abubakar gave the grandmother one-sixth. ⁵²

From this incident, it is unequivocally convincing that Abubakar rather than rejecting hadith laid a solid foundation for the principle of authenticating and disparaging (i.e. *Ilmul-jarh wa ta’adil*). It is also on record that he wrote down about five hundred (500) hadith which he later burnt. ⁵³ The burning could either be a way of discouraging the writings of hadith and the Qur’an on the same sheet or it could be as Azami claimed that at the time of writing he did not know the position of the Prophet on the issue. ⁵⁴ It could also be that he suspected that it contained some hadith related by unreliable people. ⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Despite the thesis and the anti-thesis of recording during the time of the Prophet, it is incontestable that hadith were both orally transmitted and some sahabah had it written down. The

opposing argument that stems from the fact that the Prophet was reported as having frowned at its recording can be disregarded, because if the recording were not in practice, he would not have kicked against it.

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

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

Footnetes

1. M.M Azami, Studies in Early Hadith Literature, Indianapolis, 1978, p9
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Mahmud Abu-Riyyah, Adwau ala sunnatil Muhammadiyyah, Muasasatu '-Ansariyyah Tehran, Iran (n.d). p 51.
5. Muhammad Shadhili an-Nayr "Tarikh Tadwinu-sunnah fil-Qurnayni'l Awal wa Thani in Rabitatu'l Alamu l-Islami, vol 20 (1) p.94.
6. The names of the jurists are as follows:
 - Abu Muhammad sa'id ibn al musayab (d. 112 A.H)

- Al-Qasim bn Muhammad bn Abi –bakar As-sidiq (d. 112 A.H)
 - Urwah bu Zubay-bn al awam (d. 94.A.H)
 - Abu baker bn Abdulraman bn al Harith (d. 112 A.H) Ubayd – Allah bn Abd-Allah (d.94 A.H).
 - Abu Zayd Kharijah Zayd bn Thabit (d.100 A.H)
 - Ayub Suiaman bn Yasar (d. 100 A.H) see RabitatuL Alamul-Islami vol 20 (1)p.93
7. Ignaz Goldziher, Muhammadnische Studien (Muhammadan Studies) Teill, Halle, 1890. the work was reproduced by Olms Hudeshelm in 1961 C.E
 8. Zafar Ishaz Ansari “The authenticity of Traditions: a critique of Joseph Schacht’s Argument e. silentio” Hamdard Islamicus a Journal of Islamic Research and studies Vol. VII No. 2, 1984 p.51.
 9. Muhammad Luqman As-salafi, Assunnah, Hujiyatuha wa makanatuha fil-islam waradd ala Munkinriha. Beirut, 1989, pp169-170.
 10. Azami p.28
 11. ibid
 12. Ibid
 13. Ibid pp.23-24
 14. Ibid p.26

15. As-salafi p.171
16. Ibid
17. Azami, p.28
18. Ibid
19. Ibid
20. Abdur-rahaman Muhammad Uthman Muqadimatu-t-Tuhufatu'l- ahawadhi n.p” pp39-40
21. As-salafi p. 171
22. Ibid
23. Azami p.26
24. Ibid
25. Muhammad Adib salih, Lamhat fi Usuli-l-hadith, AlMaktabu'l Islam, Beirut, 1985, p.58
26. Muhammad Zubayr Siddiq Hadith Literature, Its Origin, Development and Special Features Islamic Text Society Cambridge U.K 1993, pp.25
27. Ibid p.27
28. Abdul Mu'imin Salih, Difa'un Abi-hurayrah Maktabah Nahasah, Beirut 1981 p.21. Also see As-salafi op.cit p. 171
29. Azami pp.1-2
30. Ibid
31. Qur'an 2:282

32. Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, The Qur'an and Science*, Alabela Islamic Publications, Lagos "n.d" p.115.
33. Muhammad Mubarak "Al-hadith fi Ahadin-nabiy in Rabiatalul Alamul-Islami, 1981 Vol, 20:No 1, p.48.
34. Ibid p.51
35. Abu-Riyyah, p.58-59
36. Qur'an 2:159
37. Ansari p.51
38. Ibid
39. Ibid
40. Ibid
41. Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Raful Malam an Aimatil-Islam*, Islamic University Press, AlMadinah, 1989, pp.208
42. Ibid
43. Abu-Riyyah, p.270
44. Ahmad Amin, *Fajrul-Islam*, Maktabah nahadah'l – Misriah, Egypt, 1975, p.210
45. Ibid
46. Abu-Riyyah, p.55
47. The shi'ah scholars maintain that, the prophet was to write down the name of Ali, as his successor. 'Umar was alleged to have prevented him. See Muhammad at

Tijani As-samawi As-shi'ah hum ahalus-sunnah
Muasassatul-fajr, London 1993 p.174-175

48. Azami, p.58
49. Shaykh Aly Al-khafeef, "Sunnah's role in expounding Islamic rules and the refutation of suspicion cast at their authenticity or transmission" in Al-Azhar, journal of Islamic Research, 1966, p.57
50. Abu-Riyyah, p.55
51. As-siba'I p. 20
52. Ibid p.71
53. Azami, p.34.
54. Ibid
55. Ibid