

Even If It's Not True It's True: Using Unreliable Ḥadīths in Sunni Islam

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Abstract

Sunni Islam is at heart a cult of authenticity, with the science of ḥadīth criticism functioning as a centerpiece designed to distinguish authentic attributions to the Prophet from forgeries. It is thus surprising that even after ḥadīth scholars had sifted sound ḥadīths from weak, mainstream Sunni Islam allowed the use of unreliable ḥadīths as evidence in subjects considered outside of the core areas of law. This majority stance, however, did not displace minority schools of thought that saw the use of unreliable ḥadīths as both a danger to social morality and contrary to the stated values of Islamic thought. This more stringent position has burgeoned in the early modern and modern periods, when eliminating the use of weak ḥadīths has become a common call of both Salafi revivalists and Islamic modernists. This article explores and traces the history of the various Sunni schools of thought on the use of weak and forged ḥadīths from the third/ninth century to the present day.

Keywords

ḥadīth, forgery, weak ḥadīths, Salafism, Islamic law

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In which of these ways can the lie be useful to the god? Is it because of his ignorance of the past, making fiction as like truth as possible?—That would be ridiculous.

– Plato, *Republic* 382d

And I seek refuge with God against attributing to the Messenger of God (ﷺ) what he did not say....

– Ibn Ishāq introducing the text of the Prophet's first *khutba* in Medina¹

The Islamic religious tradition is at heart a cult of authenticity. The Qur'ān rebukes earlier communities for adulterating their revealed books, an iniquity from which God avows to shield the Muslims by assuring the perpetual protection of the final revelation.² Yet it was not the Qur'ān but the Prophet's Sunna that would be the great item of contention in debates over authenticity among Muslims. The Sunni study of ḥadīths emerged from a widespread recognition that countless ḥadīths were being falsely attributed to the Prophet,³ and the *raison d'être* of the science of ḥadīth criticism was "sorting the sound ḥadīths from the weak."⁴

It therefore seems stridently dissonant that, even after the authentic wheat had been separated from the chaff, mainstream Sunni scholars from Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) to Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245) explicitly permitted using unreliable ḥadīths provided they did not pertain strictly to the core topics of law or dogma and were not unquestionably forgeries.⁵ How could such an approach coexist with a stated devotion to

¹ Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. Jamāl Thābit and Muḥammad Maḥmūd, 5 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1419/1998), 2:108.

² Qur'ān 2:75, 15:9.

³ Shu'ba b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 160/776) is quoted as saying that three-fourths of the ḥadīths he came across were forgeries; Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Jāmi' li-akhlāq al-rāwī wa ādāb al-sāmi'*, ed. Muḥammad Ra'fat Sa'id, 2 vols. (Mansoura: Dār al-Wafā', 1423/2002), 2:307.

⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: introduction, *bāb wujūb al-riwāya 'an al-thiqāt*; 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ismā'īl Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī, *Sharḥ al-ḥadīth al-muntaqā fi ma'b'ath al-nabī al-muṣṭafā*, ed. Jamāl 'Azzūn (Sharja: Maktabat al-'Umarayn al-'Ilmiyya, 1420/1999), 45-46.

⁵ James Robson, "Ḥadīth," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2009; Brill Online) (henceforth

authenticity or with the dictate, phrased in a much-cited Prophetic ḥadīth, that “Whoever narrates a ḥadīth from me that he sees is a lie then he is among the liars”?⁶

In light of this seeming contradiction, it should not surprise us that the picture is much more complex than first appears. When we scan the full depth and breadth of the Sunni ḥadīth tradition we see that the practice of accepting weak ḥadīths was not uniformly accepted by all. It was contested across the centuries by a number of leading Muslim scholars who sensed its incompatibility with the core commitment to textual authenticity. Nor was the majority group of Sunni scholars who espoused the selective use of weak ḥadīths oblivious to its ideological inconsistencies. They understood that arguments were required to reconcile using unreliable ḥadīths with the overarching values of Islamic thought.

This article traces the various stances and schools of thought on the use of weak and forged ḥadīths in Sunni Islam from the third/ninth century until the present day. The different stances reflect the various priorities of scholars as well as their contrasting conceptions of truth. Did the pedagogical duty of Muslim scholars to improve the practice

EF); Jonathan P. Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 76; Michael Lecker, “Wāqidi’s Account on the Status of the Jews of Medina: a Study of a Combined Report,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 54, no. 1 (1995): 23-4. Newby notes the same laxity towards reports of miracles proving Muḥammad’s prophethood; Gordon Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 14. Several Arabic-language studies have been produced on the subject of using weak ḥadīths, such as Ashraf Sa’id’s *Hukm al-‘amal bi’l-ḥadīth al-da’if fi faḍā’il al-a’māl* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sunna, 1412/1992) and Māhir ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s *al-Ḥadīth al-da’if asbābuhu wa aḥkāmuhu* (Mansoura: Dār al-Yaqīn, 1423/2002). By far the most useful is ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Khuḍayr’s *al-Ḥadīth al-da’if wa hukm al-ihtijāj bihi* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Minhāj, 1425/2005). The Yemeni scholar ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mu‘allimī (d. 1966) mentioned that he had a book on the subject in draft form; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mu‘allimī, *al-Anwār al-kāshifa li-mā fi kitāb Aḥwā’ ‘alā al-sunna min al-zalal wa’l-taḍlil wa’l-mujāzafa* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1405/1985), 91. In addition, the Moroccan traditionalist polymath ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī (d. 1993) stated that he intended to devote a work to the subject, as has Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr. I have not found any indication that any of these works have appeared in published form; ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, *al-Ḥawī fi al-fatāwā*, ed. Ibrāhīm Aḥmad Shihḥāta (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li’l-Turāth, [n.d.]), 131; Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr, *Manhaj al-naqd fi ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*, 28th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu’āṣir, 1428/2007), 294.

⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: introduction, *bāb wujūb al-riwāya ‘an al-thiqāt*....

of the masses justify using effective stories even if they were not factually true? Or should Muslim scholars prioritize the authenticity of the Prophet's teachings as a body of literal truth regardless of any limitations this might place on pietistic utility? What were the social and ideological consequences of choosing between these priorities? Muslims have debated these questions within their own diachronic republic of letters from the third/ninth century until today.

In the pre-modern period, the acceptance of unreliable ḥadīths was the dominant position among Sunni scholars. Only a small cadre of scholars rooted in the Ḥanbalī schools of Baghdad and Damascus protested. They cited as their objections the 'heretical' religious innovations excused by unreliable ḥadīths, how using them betrayed the scholarly responsibility to preserve the Shariah in its pure form, and the concomitant corruption of the public's ability to assign the proper moral weight to actions.

In the early-modern and modern periods, objections to the selective use of weak ḥadīths intensified with two unprecedented phenomena. First, influential eighteenth-century revivalist scholars placed scriptural authenticity at the forefront of their clarion call for a return to the authentic ways of the Salaf. Second, modernist rationalism and concern over practices deemed superstitious made Islamic modernists like Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) sensitive to the impact of weak ḥadīths on the compatibility of Islam with the modern world. Moreover, Orientalist historical criticism made Muslim scholars aware of the extrinsic consequences of the acceptance of unreliable ḥadīths on the defensibility of their worldview. Conversely, modern defenders of the classical, pre-modern Sunni tradition upheld its hallmark laxity on unreliable ḥadīths as part of a resistance to reformist movements.

Corroborated Ḥadīths and Non-Prophetic Material

It has already been noted that in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries Muslim jurists from the *ahl al-ḥadīth* derived legal rulings from ḥadīths that did not live up to their accepted standards of *isnād* authenticity.⁷

⁷ See Jonathan Brown, "Did the Prophet Say it or Not?: Literal, Historical and Effective Truth in the Sunni Ḥadīth Tradition," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 2

Ahl al-ḥadīth scholars like Ibn Ḥanbal and Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889) did not consider this practice a betrayal of their commitment to adhering closely to the authentic Sunna of the Prophet. Rather, they accepted ḥadīths with lackluster *isnāds* because the reports either had other *isnāds* bolstering them, were backed up by the accepted practice of respected jurists or because there was no other textual evidence on that legal issue. These are not the species of ḥadīths that we are concerned with here, since *ahl al-ḥadīth* jurists believed that these ḥadīths were in fact reliable representations of the Prophet's Sunna (or at least the most reliable evidence for which one could hope).

Nor are we addressing the transmitted material that we so often find in ḥadīth books but which are not themselves reports attributed to the Prophet. Ibn 'Adī (d. 365/975-6) reported that Ibn Ḥanbal stated that "three types of books have no bases (*uṣūl*) [as reports from the Prophet]: works on the campaigns of the Prophet and the early conquests (*maghāzī*), apocalyptic reports (*malāḥim*), and Qur'ānic glosses (*tafsīr*)."⁸ The term *uṣūl* here is ambiguous, but later scholars like al-Khaṭīb al-Baghḍādī (d. 463/1071) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) interpreted the statement as meaning that most reports in these three genres either had *isnāds* that did not originate with the Prophet or had no *isnāds* at all.⁹ Indeed, if we open a book such as the *Kitāb al-fitan* of Nu'aym b. Ḥammād (d. 228/842) we find that most of its apocalyptic contents are ascribed to the Companions 'Abdallāh b. Salām, 'Abdallāh b. 'Amr

(2009): 276 ff. Many of the ḥadīths used in the books of substantive law by the Sunni schools are not *ṣaḥīḥ* according to the standards of Sunni ḥadīth critics. Hence, we find the Shāfi'ī legal scholar Ḥamd al-Khaṭṭābī's (d. 388/998) stating that most of the ḥadīths used by jurists are only *ḥasan* in their rating; Abū Sulaymān Ḥamd al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma'ālim al-sunan*, 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, 1401/1981), 1:6. The Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī (d. 744/1343) compiled a book listing the weak or baseless ḥadīths frequently cited by jurists. See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī al-Maqdisī, *Majmū' rasā'il al-ḥāfiẓ Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī*, ed. Ḥusayn b. 'Akkāsha (Cairo: al-Fārūq al-Ḥadītha, 1427/2006), 89-112. This may be the same work that 'Abdallāh al-Ghumārī refers to as *al-Mi'yār* by an unknown 8th/14th-century author, although al-Ghumārī feels that the author is Ibn al-Mulaqqin (d. 804/1401); 'Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *al-Istīṣqā' li-adillat taḥrīm al-istimnā'* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1972), 38.

⁸) Abū Aḥmad 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil fī ḍu'afā' al-rijāl*, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1405/1985), 1:128; al-Khaṭīb, *Jāmi'*, 2:195.

⁹) Al-Khaṭīb, *Jāmi'*, 2:195; Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū'at al-fatāwā*, ed. Sayyid Ḥusayn al-'Affānī and Khayrī Sa'id, 35 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyya, [n.d.]), 13:196 (from the *Muqaddimat al-tafsīr*).

b. al-‘Āṣ, or to the prominent early Jewish convert to Islam Ka‘b al-Aḥbār (d. ca. 32/652). Similarly, the majority of early *tafsīr* reports consisted of sayings from early scholarly figures such as Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687-8) or Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722).

Muslim ḥadīth critics were thus consciously lax in sifting through these reports, eager to preserve any material that was not of great consequence but still might be useful in providing details or filling in interpretive gaps. Al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066) cites the seminal ḥadīth critic Yahyā b. Sa‘īd al-Qaṭṭān (d. 198/813) as prescribing, “Be lax in taking *tafsīr* reports from people that you would not trust in [Prophetic] ḥadīths,” giving as examples al-Layth b. Abī Sulaym (d. 143/760-1), Ḍaḥḥāk b. al-Muzāḥim (d. 105/723) and Muḥammad b. al-Sā‘ib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763). Al-Qaṭṭān explains that “those are not praised for their ḥadīths, but their *tafsīr* should be written down.”¹⁰ These reports were seen as separate genres from the legal ḥadīths with full *isnāds* (*musnadāt*), which al-Khaṭīb calls “the source of the Shariah from which legal rulings are derived.”¹¹

An Early (Near) Consensus

So far we have discussed ḥadīths that suffered from flawed *isnāds* but whose reliability nonetheless enjoyed some form of buttressing. By the mid third/ninth century, however, a near consensus had emerged

¹⁰ Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā’il al-nubuwwa*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mu‘īṭī Qal‘ajī, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1405/1985), 1:36-7.

¹¹ “*Aṣl al-sharī‘a wa minhā yustafādu al-aḥkām*”; al-Khaṭīb, *Jāmi‘*, 2:216. Al-Khaṭīb admits that *tafsīr* reports include *aḥkām* material and can affect legal rulings. But he says that in cases in which scholars rely on less than reliable transmitters (for example, those whose memory or consistency have been impugned), they are only accessing their information on the readings of the Qur’ān, not their legal (*musnad*) material; ibid., 2:220. For example, Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna kept a copy of Muqātil b. Sulaymān’s *Tafsīr* with him. When he was asked why he used the work of this controversial figure, Sufyān replied that he did not transmit *tafsīr* reports through Muqātil but that “I use it as supplementary indication (*astadillu*) and seek help from it (*asta’inu*)”; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārikh Baghdād*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1417/1997), 13:164 (bio of Muqātil); cf. Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 6:2422 (here the editor reads *siyar* instead of *tafsīr*). For examples of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 277/890) and Abū Zur‘a al-Rāzī (d. 264/878) distinguishing between *musnadāt* and *tafsīr* reports, see al-Khaṭīb, *Tārikh Baghdād*, 6:350 (bio of Ishāq b. Rāhawayh), 7:194 (bio of Ja‘far b. Muḥammad), 13:432 (bio of Abū Ma’shar al-Sindī).

among *ahl al-ḥadīth* scholars that even ḥadīths with weak *isnāds* and no buttressing could be used as long as they did not directly concern legal rulings (*ahkām*).

Sunni ḥadīth critics and jurists of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries advocated relaxing authenticity requirements for topics such as manners (*adab*, *raqāʿiq*) or exhortatory (*targhib*) and dissuasive (*tarhib*) homiletics. One genre in which much license was granted was 'the virtues of actions (*faḍā'il al-a'māl*)', or descriptions of what sort of reward or punishment awaited certain deeds in the Afterlife. Al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014) quotes the formative Basran ḥadīth critic 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Maḥdī (d. 198/814) as stating:

If reports are related to us from the Prophet concerning rulings and what is licit and prohibited, we are severe with the *isnāds* and we criticize the transmitters. But if we are told reports dealing with the virtues of actions (*faḍā'il al-a'māl*), their rewards and punishments [in the Afterlife], permissible things or pious invocations, we are lax with the *isnāds*.¹²

'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Maḥdī's student, the famous Ibn Ḥanbal, held the same position.¹³

Ahl al-ḥadīth scholars did not advocate using ḥadīths they *knew* were forged for such purposes or espouse a reliance on *isnāds* with proven liars in them. As Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938) explains in his formative *Introduction* (*Taqdima*), the lackluster material used for instilling "goodly manners (*al-ādāb al-jamīla*, *raqāʿiq*)" and "exhortatory preaching (*mawā'iz*, *targhib wa tarhib*)" still had to come from

¹² Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, 4 vols. (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1917-1925), 1:490-1 (*kitāb al-du'ā' wa'l-takbīr*); al-Khaṭīb, *Jāmi'*, 2:134. A similar statement is also attributed to Sufyān al-Thawrī; Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:160.

¹³ Al-Khaṭīb, *al-Kifāya fī uṣūl 'ilm al-riwāya*, ed. Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm Muṣṭafā al-Dimyāṭī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Hudā, 1423/2003), 1:399. The relatively late attestations for this quote from Ibn Ḥanbal are corroborated by his treatment of certain transmitters in his *'ilal* and *rijāl* works. For example, Ibn Ḥanbal said of al-Naḍr b. Ismā'il al-Bajalī that "we have written [ḥadīths] from him, but he is not strong. His ḥadīths are considered, but only in *raqāʿiq*"; Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-'Ilal wa ma'rifat al-rijāl*, ed. Waṣī Allāh 'Abbās (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1408/1988), 126; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, 13:436. It is reported that Ibn Ḥanbal placed Ibn Ishāq in this category; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *Uyūn al-athar*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Ḥadītha, 1977), 1:17; 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Rajab, *Sharḥ 'Ilal al-Tirmidhī*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn 'Itr, 2 vols. ([n.p.]: [n.p.], 1398/1978), 1:74.

transmitters who were “sincere (*ṣadūq*),” although they might err frequently. Of course, no such material could be used in law.¹⁴

Ahl al-ḥadīth scholars considered matters of legal rulings to be a special preserve of critical stringency. Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) said that only transmitters well-known for their knowledge of the specific details of ḥadīths can be cited for “the licit and prohibited.” “For other than that [topic,]” however, “there is no problem [with taking] from normal teachers (*al-mashāyikh*).”¹⁵ Al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820) states in his *Risāla* that “ḥadīths on what is permitted and prohibited are the loftiest of matters and the most unworthy of any kind of uncertainty (*ẓinna*).”¹⁶

This theory seems to have been borne out in practice. The one third/ninth-century ḥadīth collector who consistently rated the reliability of his ḥadīth selections, al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), provides us a glimpse of how a ḥadīth critic treated different topics. In the legal chapters on tithing (*zakāt*) in his *Jāmi‘*, al-Tirmidhī describes only 17% of the ḥadīths as suffering from some lack of corroboration (*gharāba*). His chapter on fasting (*ṣawm*) includes 17% as well, and his chapter on inheritance (*farā‘id*) only 7%. The chapters on non-legal matters show a marked increase in the percentage of ḥadīths that al-Tirmidhī himself acknowledges as problematic: apocalyptic strifes (*fitan*)—35%; the virtues of various early Muslims (*manāqib*)—52%; pious invocations (*da‘wāt*)—50%; and manners (*ādāb*) 27%.

The advantage of this laxity in criticizing ḥadīths used for the virtues of actions and exhortatory/dissuasive preaching was that it allowed for employing more colorful and affective reports. As we have discussed elsewhere, it was the ‘effective truth’ and pedagogical utility of such ḥadīths that made their use so appealing.¹⁷ A ḥadīth stating that “There are seventy-(three) types of usury (*ribā*), the least of which is equivalent

¹⁴ Ibn Abī Hātim al-Rāzī, *al-Taqdima* (Hyderabad: Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif al-‘Uthmāniyya, 1371/1952), 6. This position is attributed to Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797); idem, *al-Jarh wa’l- ta’dil*, 6 vols. (Hyderabad: Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif al-‘Uthmāniyya, 1360-72/1941-53), 2:30-31; cf. Ibn Rajab, *Sharḥ ‘Ilal al-Tirmidhī*, 1:73.

¹⁵ Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:160; al-Khaṭīb, *al-Kifāya*, 1:398.

¹⁶ Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Risāla*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Ilmiyya, [n.d.]), 394.

¹⁷ Brown, “Did the Prophet Say it or Not,” 279 ff.

to a man having sex with his mother” was criticized in its various permutations, but both Ibn Mājah (d. 273/887) and al-Ḥākim included it in their widely-respected compilations.¹⁸ The utility of this report for condemning usury can easily be imagined. An appreciation for such pedagogical utility is clear in Ibn Ḥanbal’s remark about popular preachers in general: “How useful they are to the masses, even if the mass of what they narrate is untrue.”¹⁹

Mainstream Institutional Sunnism

The general acceptance of weak ḥadīths in areas not directly related to law, and especially in the virtues of actions, continued as Sunni Islam

¹⁸ Muḥammad b. Yazīd Ibn Mājah, *Sunan: kitāb al-tijārāt, bāb al-taghlīz fī al-ribā* (from Abū Hurayra → Sa‘īd al-Maqburī); al-Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak*, 2:37 (from Ibn Mas‘ūd → Masrūq). Various narrations of the ḥadīth were criticized in: Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. ‘Amr al-‘Uqaylī, *Kitāb al-ḍu‘afā al-kabīr*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mu‘ṭī Amīn Qal‘ajī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1404/1984), 2:257-8; Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *‘Ilal al-ḥadīth*, ed. Sa‘d ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥumayyid and Khālīd ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Juraysī (Riyadh: Maṭābi‘ al-Juraysī, 2006), 3:614 (#1132). It was considered an outright forgery by many scholars; Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ‘Uthmān, 3 vols. (Medina: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 1386-88/1966-68), 2:245; ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn ‘Arrāq, *Tanzīh al-sharī‘a al-marfū‘a ‘an al-akhbār al-shanī‘a al-mawḍū‘a* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, [1964]), 2:194; Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Fatānī, *Tadhkirat al-mawḍū‘āt* (Beirut: Amīn Damaj, [1960]), 139. Al-Suyūṭī considered it reliable; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-La‘ālī al-maṣnū‘a fī al-aḥādīth al-mawḍū‘a*, ed. Ṣalāḥ Muḥammad al-‘Uwayḍa, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1417/1996), 2:129. Al-Albānī considers it *ṣaḥīḥ*; Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa*, 7 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 1415-22/1995-2002), 4:488 ff. (#1871). Cf. Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *al-Zawājir ‘an iqtirāf al-kabā’ir*, ed. ‘Imād Zakī al-Bārūdī (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyya, 2003), 1:494-6; cf. Abū Bakr Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt, 7 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1409/[1989]), 4:448; ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī, 2nd ed., 11 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1403/[1983]), 8:314; cf. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Bulūgh al-marām min adillat al-aḥkām*, ed. Abū Mu‘ādh Ṭāriq b. ‘Awaḍ Allāh (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1429/2008), 298. Interestingly, the maverick Shāfi‘ī scholar al-‘Izz b. ‘Abd al-Salām (d. 660/1262) stated that he had not found evidence sufficient to declare *ribā* a grave sin (*kabīra*); Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi‘iyya al-kubrā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥalw and Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanāḥī, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Hujr, 1413/1992), 8:249.

¹⁹ “*Mā anfa‘abum li’l-‘amma wa in kāna ‘āmmat mā yuhaddithūn bihi kadhib*”; Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 2 vols. in 1 (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Anwār al-Muḥammadiyya, [n.d.]), 1:151.

matured into its institutional form in the late fourth/tenth and early fifth/eleventh centuries.

One of the earliest authors of systematic treatises on the science of ḥadīth, the Khurasani scholar al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, cites the above report of Ibn Maḥdī on laxity in *isnāds* as the “method (*madhhab*)” he will follow in presenting ḥadīths in his chapter on pious invocations (*du‘ā*) and supererogatory praising of God (*al-tasbīḥ*) in his voluminous ḥadīth collection *al-Mustadrak*.²⁰

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, who picked up the mantle of al-Ḥākim’s work and established the foundations for the Sunni ḥadīth sciences, includes a chapter on “Strictness in Legal Ḥadīths and Laxity in the Virtues of Actions” in his *al-Kifāya fī uṣūl ‘ilm al-riwāya*, in which he presents the reports of early Sunnis like Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna (d. 196/811) and Ibn Ḥanbal affirming this policy. He writes, “It has been quoted from many of the Righteous Forbearers (*salaf*) that it is not permitted to transmit ḥadīths concerning permissibility and prohibition except from those who are free of accusation, far from suspicion.” “But as for the ḥadīths of exhortatory preaching (*targhīb*), homelitics (*mawā‘iz*) and similar things,” he adjoins, “it is allowed to record them from the other transmitters.”²¹

Writing in Lisbon at the same time as al-Khaṭīb, the great Mālikī²² ḥadīth scholar Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070) notes criticism of a ḥadīth concerning the forgiveness of sins at Hajj: on the Day of ‘Arafa God forgives the pilgrims, on the night of Muzdalifa the merchants, on the day of Minā the camel drivers, and anyone who seeks forgiveness at the last pillar for stoning the Devil. Although Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr admits that this ḥadīth is narrated at one point only by an unknown transmitter,

²⁰ Al-Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak*, 1:490-1.

²¹ Al-Khaṭīb, *al-Kifāya*, 1:398; cf. idem, *Jāmi‘*, 2:133.

²² Another outstanding Mālikī ḥadīth scholar of the seventh/thirteenth century, Ibn al-Qaṭṭān al-Fāsī (d. 628/1231) of Marrakesh, is also quoted as allowing the use of weak ḥadīths in the virtues of actions but not in law. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī provides a quotation to this effect from Ibn al-Qaṭṭān’s *Bayān al-waḥm wa’l-iḥām al-wāqī‘ayn fī kitāb al-Aḥkām*. However, neither I nor Muṣṭafā Abū Sufyān, who inspected all the printed editions and available manuscripts of the *Bayān*, have been able to find this quote in the book; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *al-Nukat ‘alā kitāb Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. Maṣ‘ūd ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-‘Adafī and Muḥammad Fāris (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, [1414/1994]), 126; Muṣṭafā Abū Sufyān, *Arā’ Ibn al-Qaṭṭān al-Fāsī fī ‘ulūm muṣṭalah al-ḥadīth* (Rabat: Maṭba‘at al-Ma‘ārif al-Jadida, 2002), 24.

generally a fatal flaw in terms of reliability, he explains that “the People of Knowledge continue to be permissive (*yatasāmiḥūn anfusahum*) in narrating [reports on] pious wishes (*al-raghā'ib*) and virtues (*al-faḍā'il*) from anyone. They were strict only on ḥadīths dealing with legal rulings.”²³

One of al-Ḥākim's acolytes in eastern Iran, the great Shāfi'ī scholar Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, repeats Ibn Mahdī's approach to weak ḥadīths in his work on the proofs of Muḥammad's prophethood (*Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*). Al-Bayhaqī explains that there are two types of weak ḥadīths. The first species, those narrated by individuals known for forgery, are not used for any purpose. The second type, those deemed unreliable due to less serious flaws such as a transmitter suffering from a lackluster command of his material (*ḥifẓ*), cannot be used in law but can be employed in *tafsīr*, exhortatory preaching and detailing the campaigns of the early Muslim community (*maghāzī*).²⁴ In fact, in the unmatched volume of books that al-Bayhaqī produced, many of them ḥadīth collections, he regularly included ḥadīths dismissed as unreliable by leading ḥadīth critics.²⁵ In his collection of reports on the branches of faith (*Shu'ab al-īmān*), al-Bayhaqī reiterates that “the scholars of ḥadīth have been lax (*tasāhala*) in accepting what has appeared concerning pious invocations and the virtues of actions as long as no one in the *isnād* was a known forger.”²⁶

²³ Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd li-mā fi al-Muwatta' min al-ma'ānī wa'l-asānīd*, ed. Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-'Alawī and Muḥammad 'Abd al-Kabīr al-Bakrī, 2nd ed., 26 vols. ([Rabat]: Wizārat 'Umūm al-Awqāf wa'l-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyya, 1402/1982), 1:127.

²⁴ Al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*; 1:33-34, 36-7.

²⁵ This has been the cause of great argument. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī argued that al-Bayhaqī had stated explicitly that he never included forged ḥadīths in any of his books. As a result, al-Suyūṭī treated any ḥadīth drawn from al-Bayhaqī's works as ‘weak (*ḍa'if*)’ at worst. Later scholars, like the Indian Zafar Aḥmad al-Tahānawī (d. 1974), acted on al-Suyūṭī's cue. This has occasioned criticism of al-Suyūṭī from the modern Moroccan ḥadīth scholar Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1960), who stated that in reality al-Bayhaqī “includes forged ḥadīths in great numbers” in his works; al-Suyūṭī, *al-La'ālī al-maṣnū'a*, 1:19; Zafar Aḥmad al-Tahānawī, *Qawā'id fi 'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 3rd ed. (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 1392/1972), 111-114; Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *al-Mughīr 'alā al-aḥādīth al-mawḍū'a fi al-Jāmi'* *al-ṣaghīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Rā'id al-'Arabī, 1402/1982), 9.

²⁶ Al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-īmān*, ed. Muḥammad Sa'id Basyūnī Zaghlūl, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990), 2:372.

This stance received its most authoritative stamp in the famous ḥadīth manual of the Damascene scholar Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (who adds an extra emphasis prohibiting the use of weak ḥadīths in matters of creed as well) and in the landmark work of the most influential scholar of the next generation, Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277).²⁷ In his famous commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, al-Nawawī explains that ḥadīth scholars have allowed laxity on matters other than legal rulings (*aḥkām*) because these ḥadīths “have sound bases (*uṣūl ṣaḥīḥa*) established in the holy law (*al-sharʿ*), known to its scholars.”²⁸

In his widely-copied and now widely-published collection of pietistic invocations drawn from ḥadīths, *al-Adhkār*, al-Nawawī affirms that one can act on weak ḥadīths as long as they are not clearly forged and concern non-legal matters like the virtues of actions. In fact, al-Nawawī encourages people to act on any ḥadīth they encounter on the virtues of actions: “Know that it is incumbent on whomever hears something from the virtues of actions to act on it at least once so that [the promised reward] can apply to him... based on the saying of the Prophet (ṣ) in the ḥadīth, its authenticity agreed upon, ‘If I ordered something for you then do what you can of it...’”

Interestingly, al-Nawawī introduces a new notion as well: that one can act on weak ḥadīths even on issues of law provided that this action stems from a private desire for supererogatory obedience—“if in that one is being cautious.” For example, if a weak ḥadīth discourages certain types of sales or marriage, then one can refrain from engaging in these out of piety.²⁹

The mainstream Sunni position of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and al-Nawawī was echoed by leading Shāfiʿī scholars of the Late Sunni Tradition: their contemporary in Baghdad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīm al-Mundhirī (d. 656/1258) in his famous *al-Targhib wa al-tarhib*, the Damascene compiler Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), the Cairene ḥadīth scholar Zayn al-Dīn al-ʿIrāqī (d. 806/1404), the Damascene Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn

²⁷ Abū ʿAmr Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. ʿĀisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1411/1990), 286.

²⁸ Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1407/1987), 1:240.

²⁹ Al-Nawawī, *al-Adhkār al-muntakhab min kalām sayyid al-abrār* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1420/1999), 7-8.

(d. 842/1438), the argumentative Cairene al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480) in his defense of Muslims using material drawn from the Bible, the leading Meccan jurist Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1566), and his peer among the leading authorities in Shāfi'ī law, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459).³⁰ The greatest defender of this position was no less a figure than Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), who reiterated al-Nawawī's position that one can act even on weak ḥadīths in matters of law "if it is done out of caution."³¹ He reminds us that, like the purview of *maghāzī*, weak ḥadīths are also acceptable in matters of history and *sīra*. He thus justifies employing them as his chief exhibit of evidence that the parents of the Prophet attained Paradise despite dying before the coming of Islam.³²

Leading Ḥanafī scholars of the Late Sunni Tradition also espoused the standard Sunni stance, adding the clause that an action can be declared legally recommended (*mustaḥabb*), but not required, on the basis of weak ḥadīths. The prominent Egyptian Ḥanafī jurist Kamāl al-Dīn Ibn Humām (d. 861/1457) asserts the recommended status of performing ablutions after carrying an enshrouded body for burial. He bases this on a ḥadīth that he acknowledges is considered weak by most

³⁰) 'Abd al-'Azīm b. 'Abd al-Qawī al-Mundhirī and Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *al-Muntaqā min kitāb al-Tarḥīb wa al-tarḥīb* (Cairo: Dār al-Wafā', 1413/1993), 1:96; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 6, ed. Shu'ayb Arnā'ūt and Ḥusayn Asad (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1419/1998), 6:184; Zayn al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥīm b. al-Ḥusayn al-'Irāqī, *al-Tabṣira wa'l-tadhkira*, 3 vols. in 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, [n.d.], reprint of the 1353/[1935] Fez edition, edited by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-'Irāqī al-Ḥusaynī), 1:291; Wālid Saleh, "A Fifteenth-Century Muslim Hebraist: Al-Biqā'ī and His Defense of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qur'ān," *Speculum* 83 (2008): 646, 650; idem, *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and Introduction to al-Biqā'ī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Muḥammad Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Dimashqī, *al-Tarjīḥ li-ḥadīth ṣalāt al-tasbīḥ*, ed. Maḥmūd Sa'īd Mamduḥ (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 1405/1985), 36; Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *Fath al-mubīn li-sharḥ al-Arba'īn*, ed. Ḥasan al-Mudābighī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1398/1978), 28, 32; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī, *Qalyūbī wa 'Umayra sharḥ Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qalyūbī wa 'Umayra 'alā sharḥ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī 'alā Minhāj al-ṭalībīn*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, [1981]), 1:56.

³¹) Al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrib al-rāwī sharḥ Taqrīb al-Nawawī*, ed. 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Abd al-Laṭīf (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turāth, 1426/2005), 230.

³²) Al-Suyūṭī, "al-Ta'zīm wa'l-manna fī anna abaway Rasūl Allāh fī al-janna," *Silsilat Maṭbū'āt Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya* 50 (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1334/[1915]), 2.

scholars. He rejoins, however, that “legally recommended status (*al-istiḥbāb*) can be established by a weak ḥadīth provided that it is not forged.”³³ The great Ḥanafī champion of Mecca, Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī (d. 1014/1606) states that weak ḥadīths “are acted on in the virtues of actions by consensus.” Like Ibn Humām, he holds that this entails the permissibility of declaring an action recommended (*mustaḥabb*) on the basis of weak ḥadīths.³⁴

The Ḥanafī scholar responsible for transporting the intensive study of ḥadīth from the Hejaz to India, the Indian ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Dihlawī (d. 1052/1642), upheld the standard Late Sunni position of al-Nawawī.³⁵ The lexicographer and Indian immigrant to Cairo Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791 CE) did as well.³⁶ Although not a noted jurist in his own right, the Ottoman intellectual Kātib Chelebī (d. 1067/1657) strikes a similar tone in his fascinating treatise *Mizān al-ḥaqq fī ikhtiyār al-aḥaqq*. He advises preachers giving the Friday sermons that “[t]here is no harm in relating weak traditions that may not be canonically authentic.”³⁷

A number of prominent scholars from the *sui generis* world of Yemeni Zaydism and Zaydī converts to Sunnism also upheld the mainstream Sunni position. Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 840/1426) of Sana’a followed Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ in his manual on the ḥadīth sciences, repeating the standard stance on using weak ḥadīths outside of legal or creedal issues (such as God’s attributes).³⁸ The leading Zaydī scholar of his day, Ṣārim al-Dīn

³³ Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Ibn Humām, *Fath al-qadīr*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1389/1970), 2:133 (*faṣl fī ḥaml al-janāza*). Ibn Ḥanbal is reported to have said that there are no reliable ḥadīths to this effect; Ibn Ḥajar, *Bulugh al-marām*, 73.

³⁴ In his massive ḥadīth commentary, the *Mirqāt al-maṣāṭih*, Mullā ‘Alī qualifies his position by stating that using a weak ḥadīth is allowed only if it does not contradict *ḥasan* or *ṣaḥīḥ* ḥadīths; Mullā ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Qārī, *al-Asrār al-marfū‘a fī al-akḥbār al-mawḍū‘a*, ed. Muḥammad Luṭfī Ṣabbāgh (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1406/1986), 305; idem, *Mirqāt al-maṣāṭih*, ed. Jamāl ‘Aytānī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2001), 2:206.

³⁵ ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Dihlawī, *Muqaddima*, ed. Sulaymān al-Ḥusayn al-Nadwī (Lucknow: Dār al-‘Ulūm li-Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’, [1984]), 87-88.

³⁶ Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Bulghat al-arīb fī muṣṭalah āthār al-ḥabīb*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 2nd ed. (Aleppo: Maktabat al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmiyya, 1408/1988, added to *Qafw al-athar fī ṣafw ‘ulūm al-athar*), 190.

³⁷ Kātib Chelebī, *The Balance of Truth*, trans. G.L. Lewis (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), 148.

³⁸ Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Wazīr, *Tanqīḥ al-anzār fī ma‘rifat ‘ulūm al-āthār*, ed. Muḥammad Ṣubḥī Ḥallāq and ‘Amir Ḥusayn (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1420/1999), 185-

al-Wazīrī (d. 914/1508), states that Muslim ḥadīth critics must be impartial and stringent in reports on legal rulings, “as opposed to ḥadīths on virtues; with them one can be somewhat forgiving.”³⁹ The Indian Ocean trader and scholar Muḥammad Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 1931) was an odd confessional amalgam, whose veneration of the Family of the Prophet blurred the lines between Sunnism and Shiism. He notes in his critique of Sunni treatment of advocates of the Prophet’s family that Sunni scholars claim to be lax in dealing with ḥadīths on virtues of individuals as opposed to *ahkām*, but they are ruthlessly critical of ḥadīths on the virtues of the Family of the Prophet.⁴⁰

Reconciling Dissonance in the Mainstream Sunni Position

It is important to emphasize that no Sunni scholar permitted, under any circumstances, the use of a ḥadīth he *acknowledged* to be a patent forgery.⁴¹ The Prophet had clearly stated in a revered ḥadīth that

6; idem, *al-Rawḍ al-bāsim fī l-dhabb ‘an sunnat Abī al-Qāsim* (Sanaa: al-Maktaba al-Yamaniyya, 1985), 127.

³⁹) Šārim al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Wazīrī, *al-Falak al-dawwār fī ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth wa’l-fiqh wa’l-āthār*, ed. Muḥammad Yaḥyā ‘Azzān (Ša‘da: Maṭba‘at al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1415/1994), 22.

⁴⁰) Muḥammad Ibn ‘Aqīl al-Ḥaḍramī, *al-‘Atb al-jamil ‘alā abl al-jarḥ wa’l-ta’dīl*, ed. Ḥasan al-Saqqāf (Amman: Dār al-Imām al-Nawawī, 1425/2004), 159.

⁴¹) A contrary idea, that ‘even if it’s not true it’s true,’ was upheld by the enigmatic Sufi al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 285/898-318/930) in his *Nawādir al-uṣūl*. He accepts the attribution of truth or guidance to the Prophet even if he did not say them. The Prophet, he explains, preceded the person presenting such teachings with the same message, in its *aṣl* if not in the details. “So if what is said is right and acceptable to those acquainted with truth, then it is a saying of the Messenger (ṣ), whether he really said it or not, and we must believe it.” This is based on a controversial ḥadīth, appearing in its earliest known form in al-Ḥakīm’s book: *idhā ḥuddithtum ‘anni bi-ḥadīth yuwāfiq al-ḥaqqa-ṣaddiqūhu wa khudhū bihi, ḥaddathu bihi aw lam uḥaddith*.” This ḥadīth is universally rejected as extremely weak or forged by Sunnis, including al-Uqaylī (d. 323/934), al-Dāraquṭnī (d. 385/995), Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Ḥazm, al-Dhahabī, al-Shawkānī, and ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997). See al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-Uṣūl*, ed. Aḥmad al-Sāyih and al-Sayyid al-Jamīl, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Rayyān, 1988), 1:351, 361; Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāsid al-ḥasana*, ed. Muḥammad al-Khisht (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1405/2004), 48; al-Uqaylī, *Kitāb al-Du‘āfā’ al-kabīr*, 1:32-3; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 1:258; ‘Alī b. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-ahkām*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, 8 vols. in 2 (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Imṭiyāz, 1398/1978), 2:251; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-i‘tidāl fī*

“Whoever lies about me intentionally, let him prepare for himself a seat in Hellfire.”⁴²

This unequivocal ban on using ‘forged’ ḥadīths, however, had little practical consequence. The category of ‘forgery (*wadʿ*)’ represented only the far end of the spectrum of ḥadīth unreliability, and there was no consistent distinction between ḥadīths considered ‘forged’ and ‘weak’ ḥadīths.⁴³ Ratings differed considerably between scholars; the above-mentioned ḥadīth equating usury with incest was considered a forgery by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), Ibn ʿArrāq (d. 963/1556) and others but authentic by al-Ḥākim. Even if a scholar had substantial doubts about whether the Prophet had said a statement, he might still only consider the ḥadīth ‘weak’ and thus within the purview of application.

Furthermore, in Sunni ḥadīth discourse after the 400s/1000s, in order to raise a ḥadīth from the status of ‘forged (*mawḍūʿ*)’ to that of ‘weak (*ḍaʿīf*)’, all a scholar had to do was present an argument that it had some ‘basis (*aṣl*)’ from the Prophet. This was accomplished by locating one narration that could be rated as merely ‘weak’, often by buttressing it with other weak narrations or with the corroboration of Companion opinions.⁴⁴ Although the ḥadīth “Wiping one’s neck

naqd al-rijāl, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Bijawī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, [n.d.], reprint of 1963-4 Cairo ʿĪsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī edition), 1:265; 3:547; Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawāʿid al-majmūʿa fī al-aḥādīth al-mawḍūʿa*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Muʿallimī and Zuhayr Shāwīsh, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1392/[1972]), 280-82; ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, *Lamaḥāt min tārikh al-sunna wa ʿulūm al-ḥadīth* (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbūʿāt al-Islāmiyya, 1404/1984), 87. Interestingly, Ibn Mājah included a similar ḥadīth in the introduction of his *Sunan* but seemingly intending it to be understood as magnifying the Prophet’s words rather than as al-Ḥākim suggested: “*lā aʿrifanna mā yuhaddathu aḥadakum ʿannī al-ḥadīth wa huwa muttakiʿ alā arikatihi fa-yaqūlu iqraʾ qurʾānān mā qīl min qawl ḥasan fa-anā qultubuʾ*”; *Sunan Ibn Mājah: muqaddima*, bāb 2.

⁴²⁾ For clear condemnations of using material known to be forged, see al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:185-6; Imād al-Dīn Ibn Kathīr and Aḥmad Shākīr, *al-Bāʿith al-ḥathīth sharḥ Ikhtisār ʿulūm al-ḥadīth* (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 1423/2003), 66; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. ‘Abd al-ʿAzīz Bin Bāz and Ayman Fuʾād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1414/1997), 1:266.

⁴³⁾ As the famous ḥadīth scholar of Baghdad, ‘Abd al-ʿAzīm al-Mundhirī (d. 656/1258), noted, many scholars had included ‘forged’ ḥadīths under the rubric of ‘weak’ ones; al-Mundhirī, *al-Muntaqā*, 1:96.

⁴⁴⁾ Some scholars, like al-Mundhirī, did not believe that weak ḥadīths when grouped together could be considered reliable; al-Qārī, *Sharḥ sharḥ Nukhbāt al-fīkar* ([n.p.]: al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 1392/1972), 71-2.

[during ablutions] is protection from fetters [on the Day of Judgment]" had commonly been rated a forgery and "not from the speech of the Prophet,"⁴⁵ Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī' argued that it was only 'weak'. He pointed to a Companion statement with the same meaning in the works of Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 224/838). Moreover, he argued that a version of the ḥadīth existed in the *Musnad al-Firdaws* of al-Daylamī (d. 558/1163) that was 'weak' and not forged, so the ḥadīth was acceptable in the virtues of actions.⁴⁶ The ḥadīth "Askalon is one of the two queens, from which God will resurrect seventy thousand on the Day of Judgment with no account..." had been declared a forgery by numerous scholars, in part because it belonged to the suspect genre of ḥadīths chauvinistically praising certain cities.⁴⁷ Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), however, argued that the problematic transmitter in the ḥadīth's *isnād* was not sufficiently unreliable to merit the rating of a forgery, and that the ḥadīth was thus admissible on the virtues of actions (or, in this case, of a place).⁴⁸

One device for excusing the presentation of unreliable ḥadīths was providing its *isnād* as a certificate absolving the scholar from seeming to misrepresent the Prophet. From the time of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī onward, mainstream Sunni scholars held that one may include a dubious ḥadīth in one's works provided that one includes the ḥadīth's *isnād* for evaluation by the reader.⁴⁹ This shifted the responsibility of determining the ḥadīth's authenticity to the reader and served as Muslim scholars' chief tactic for reconciling their commitment to authenticity with their rampant collection of unreliable ḥadīths in works like *Musnad al-Firdaws*.

⁴⁵ Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ḍa'īfa wa'l-mawḍū'a*, 2nd ed. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1420/2000), 1:167 ff. (#69).

⁴⁶ Al-Qārī, *al-Asrār al-marfū'a*, 305; Shīruwayh b. Shahrudār al-Daylamī, *Firdaws al-akḥbār*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1418/1997), 2:244 (#5628).

⁴⁷ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Manār al-munīfi al-ṣaḥīḥ wa'l-ḍa'īf*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 12th ed. (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 1425/2004), 117.

⁴⁸ Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Qawl al-musaddad fī al-dhabb 'an Musnad al-imām Aḥmad* (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, 1401/[1981]), 27.

⁴⁹ Brown, "Did the Prophet Say it or Not?," 281-2.

Voices in the Wilderness

Allowing the use of weak ḥadīths outside of the areas of “prohibition and permissibility” was not upheld unanimously, nor were the dissenters from this mainstream position minor names by any means.

The most salient opponent of using weak ḥadīths for any purpose was none other than Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī (d. 261/875).⁵⁰ In an introductory chapter of his famous *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muslim discusses the obligation to uncover flaws in ḥadīths and alert others to them. Ḥadīth scholars must commit themselves to this task due to their weighty responsibility of guiding the masses aright. He says about remaining silent on unreliable ḥadīths:

There is great danger in this, since the reports concern the issue of religion. For indeed they contain permission, prohibition, affirmative and negative commands, exhortation and dissuasion (*targhib wa tarhib*). So if their narrator is not a mine of truth (*ma’din li’l-ṣidq*) and trust, and then someone narrated it, knowing this [flaw], but did not clarify [that flaw] to others who were ignorant of this, he would be sinning in that act, cheating (*ghāshsh*)⁵¹ the masses of Muslims, since it is not certain that some who heard these reports would not act on them....”⁵¹

Unfortunately, we have no surviving statements from al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) on this issue.⁵²

⁵⁰ This position is also attributed to the famous ḥadīth critic of Baghdad, Yahyā Ibn Ma’īn (d. 233/848), who Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (d. 659/1261) notes rejected using weak ḥadīths in *ahkām* and non-*ahkām* equally; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *Uyūn al-athar*, 1:21. This attribution may result from a statement attributed to Ibn Ma’īn by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī: on the Day of Judgment “it would be preferable to me to have one of the people be my opponent for doubting him and setting him aside [as a transmitter] than to have my opponent be the Prophet, who would say, ‘A ḥadīth reached you from me, and it struck your heart that it was an error, so why did you narrate it?’”; al-Khaṭīb, *Jāmi’*, 2:134. However, al-Khaṭīb’s *Tārikh Baghdād* also includes a statement attributed to Ibn Ma’īn that, when asked about the *maghāzī* scholar Abū Ma’shar al-Sindī (d. 170/787), he said “weak, but his ḥadīths on *riqāq* can be recorded. He was an illiterate person, and one should fear narrating his legal (*musnadāt*) ḥadīths”; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārikh Baghdād*, 13:432 (bio of Abū Ma’shar).

⁵¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: muqaddima, bāb al-kashf ‘an ma’āyib*.... Interestingly, the modern scholar Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr claims that Muslim actually upheld the mainstream opinion allowing the use of weak ḥadīths; Ibn Rajab, *Sharḥ ‘Ilal al-Tirmidhī*, 1:76.

⁵² Al-Bukhārī’s surviving writings include no mention of his position on weak ḥadīths. The Yemeni scholar Ibn al-Wazīr reported that al-Bukhārī did not believe in acting on *ḥasan*

Truly a voice in the Andalusian wilderness, the maverick Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) also rejects using weak ḥadīths on any subject. He notes that some Muslims allow taking as evidence ḥadīths that have in their *isnād* someone criticized for forgery or heedlessness or whose standing is unknown (*majhūl al-ḥāl*), but that he does not allow this for any purpose.⁵³ The categorical rejection of using weak ḥadīths has also been incorrectly attributed to the famous traveler and Mālikī scholar of Marakkesh, Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1145).⁵⁴

or *ḍaʿīf* ḥadīths in matters of prohibition and permission; Ibn al-Wazīr, *Tanqīḥ al-anzār*, 72. Later scholars held that al-Bukhārī categorically prohibited the use of weak ḥadīths (with no mention of *ḥasan* ḥadīths). This was reported by the Salafī scholar Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914) and the traditionalist Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952); Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, *Qawāʿid al-taḥdīth fī funūn muṣṭalah al-ḥadīth*, ed. Muḥammad Bahjat al-Bayṭār (Beirut: Dār al-Nafāʾis, 1427/2006), 116; Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt al-Kawtharī* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1428/2008), 47. Other scholars like Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī concluded that al-Bukhārī had allowed using weak ḥadīths in matters other than law. He notes that perhaps al-Bukhārī included the ḥadīth “Be in this world as if you are a stranger (*kun fī al-dunyā kaʿannaka gharīb*) in his chapter on pious sensibility (*al-riqāq*) despite its solitary narration by an impugned transmitter because it was “as if al-Bukhārī were not strict on it because it is a ḥadīth of exhortation and dissuasion”; Ibn Ḥajar, *Hady al-sārī*, ed. Muḥammad Fuʾād ʿAbd al-Bāqī and ʿAbdallāh Ibn Bāz (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1418/1997), 615. This conclusion was upheld by the modern ḥadīth scholar ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda; Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī, *Zafr al-amānī sharḥ Mukhtaṣar al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-furjānī*, ed. ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbūʿāt al-Islāmiyya, 1410/1989), 185.

⁵³ Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal fī al-milal waʿl-ahwāʾ waʿl-nihāl*, 5 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat Muḥammad ʿAlī Ṣabīḥ, [1964]), 2:84.

⁵⁴ His categorical rejection of using weak ḥadīths has been repeated in numerous sources; Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī, *Fath al-mughhith bi-sharḥ Alfīyyat al-ḥadīth*, ed. ʿAlī Ḥusayn ʿAlī, 5 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sunna, 1424/2003), 1:350. The Saudi scholar Dr. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Khuḍayr, however, has shown that Ibn al-ʿArabī’s advice in his work *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* that his students study only *ṣaḥīḥ* ḥadīths is contradicted by one of his later writings, his commentary on al-Tirmidhī’s *Jāmiʿ*, the *ʿAridat al-aḥwadhī*. Discussing al-Tirmidhī’s inclusion of an admittedly weak ḥadīth on the etiquette of praying for someone who has sneezed, Ibn al-ʿArabī states that “it is recommended that it be acted on because it is a prayer (*duʿā*) for well-being”; al-Khuḍayr, *al-Ḥadīth al-ḍaʿīf*, 263 ff.; Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat ʿĪsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1387/1967), 2:580; idem, *ʿAridat al-aḥwadhī*, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, [1992]), 10:205, see also 5:201-2.

The School of Ibn al-Jawzī: Consequences and Ideals

The most conscientious acknowledgment of the social consequences of promulgating weak ḥadīths comes from Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201). The leading Ḥanbalī scholar and preacher of Baghdad in his day, Ibn al-Jawzī was enmeshed in the religious life of the city and the masses who attended his lessons.⁵⁵ Concerns over irresponsible preachers, their use of unreliable stories and the heretical ideas they spread were powerful motives in Ibn al-Jawzī's writings. His collection of forged ḥadīths, the *Kitāb al-Mawḍū'āt*, was the most voluminous work of its kind yet produced. His later work on preachers and preaching, the *Kitāb al-Quṣṣāṣ wa'l-mudhakkirīn*, laid out the proper guidelines for religious homelitics.⁵⁶ In his works, Ibn al-Jawzī vents his anxieties over the effects of unreliable ḥadīths on society, most specifically on people's ability to assign moral weight to actions:

How many complexions have become yellow with hunger, and how many people fall asleep flat on their faces out of wandering in pious travel (*bi'l-siyāha*)? How many have forbidden to themselves what is permitted, and how many have abandoned the transmission of religious knowledge (*ilm*), claiming that they are resisting the desire of their souls to do so? How many a person has orphaned his children by asceticism while still alive, and how many have turned away from their wives, not fulfilling their obligations to them, leaving them neither single nor women with a master?⁵⁷

These are not empty concerns, Ibn al-Jawzī reminds us; such cases of neglect would come before judges in court.⁵⁸

Ibn al-Jawzī identifies the genre of exhortatory and dissuasive ḥadīths as the crux of this problem. Using weak or forged ḥadīths that promise outrageous rewards or punishments for actions "ruins the scales of the

⁵⁵ For an example of this, see Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. R.J.C. Broadhurst (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 229-33; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣāṣ wa'l-mudhakkirīn*, ed. Merlin Swartz (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1986), 147.

⁵⁶ An apparently similar work, *Āfāt al-wu'āz*, was written by another Iraqi scholar contemporary with Ibn al-Jawzī, Ishāq b. Aḥmad al-Maghribī (d. 600/1203); al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'iyya al-kubrā*, 8:127.

⁵⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū'āt*, 1:32.

⁵⁸ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣāṣ*, 113.

significance of actions (*yufsidu mawāzīn maqādir al-a'māl*).⁵⁹ He complains, for example, that some storytellers tell of a prayer called *Ṣalāt al-Khuṣamā'* (Prayer of Disputants) that nullifies all sins. "And there is nobody for whom this prayer does not make it a light matter to steal and then pray these two *rak'as* to remove what he has done."⁶⁰ The potential pedagogical benefit of such reports thus pales in comparison to their negative influence on the moral senses of the community.

In addition to this argument from consequence, Ibn al-Jawzī pursues a parallel line of argument: the idealistic responsibility of preventing 'lying about the Prophet of God.' Regarding a forged ḥadīth on the virtues of reading *Āyat al-Kursī*, Ibn al-Jawzī rebuts the defense that using it is done in a good cause. "A goodly usage must be legally legitimate (*mashrū'*), so if we know that it is a lie then its usage is no longer licit (*kharāja 'an al-mashrū'iyya*)."⁶¹

Ibn al-Jawzī also rails against scholars who transmitted unreliable ḥadīths and excused themselves merely by including the *isnāds* for the reader to evaluate on their own. This is absurdly irresponsible when dealing with the masses, Ibn al-Jawzī fumes:

Is [such a scholar] not like someone who pays with a counterfeit coin and conceals it? For indeed most people cannot distinguish a forgery from an authentic [ḥadīth], so if a master ḥadīth scholar presents a ḥadīth, it does not occur to people's hearts but that he has used it as proof because it is authentic.⁶²

Ibn al-Jawzī's school of thought on the use of weak ḥadīths proved influential in the century after his death. In particular, it dominated the debate surrounding the controversial supererogatory prayer known as *Ṣalāt al-Raghā'ib* (Prayer of Things Desired), whose advocates justi-

⁵⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū'āt*, 1:98.

⁶⁰ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣās*, 103.

⁶¹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū'āt*, 1:245. Ibn al-Jawzī did, however, include weak and even forged ḥadīths in his myriad writings. In some cases, such as his belle lettres writings, this was done for humorous purposes. See, Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhhār al-ḥamqā wa al-mughaffilīn*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Abū al-'Abbās (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Sīnā, 1990), 72; idem, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū'āt*, 1:100.

⁶² Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Taḥqīq fī aḥādīth al-khilāf*, ed. Mas'ad 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Sa'danī and Muḥammad Fāris, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1994), 1:464.

fied it by referring to a set of weak and forged ḥadīths.⁶³ While residing in Cairo, the well-travelled Andalusian scholar Ibn Diḥya (d. 633/1235) wrote a treatise condemning the practice.⁶⁴ The work draws markedly on Ibn al-Jawzī, whom the author had met in Baghdad and dubbed “the knight of the pulpit (*fāris al-minbar*).”⁶⁵ Echoing Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Diḥya bemoans how men neglect their duties and families, following forged ḥadīths like “[w]hoever dedicates forty days to God, the springs of wisdom will appear from his heart upon his tongue.”⁶⁶ He repeats his teacher’s words exactly in denying the legitimacy of any good sought by attributing to the Prophet something that he did not say.⁶⁷

In a novel contribution, Ibn Diḥya raises the standard for attributing ḥadīths to the Prophet higher than his teacher by removing intentionality from the description of ‘lying about the Prophet of God’. He cites a version of the Prophet’s famous ḥadīth describing those who lie about him that lacks the intention qualification, meaning that even accidentally attributing a forged ḥadīth to the Prophet carries the threat of Hellfire. Ibn Diḥya warns that “caution in narrating from the Prophet

⁶³ This prayer first appeared in the early fifth/eleventh century in Jerusalem. Al-Ghazālī presents a ḥadīth mandating it in his *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. The Prophet is quoted as saying that “No one who fasts the first Thursday of Rajab (*mā min aḥad yaṣūmu auwal khamīs min rajab...*)” and then performs the following prayer will be denied his wish: twelve *rak’as* between the Evening and Night prayers, saying Sūrat al-Qadar three times then Sūrat Ikhhlāṣ twelve times during each *rak’a*; upon completing these *rak’as*, one prays upon the Prophet seventy times, then prostrates and says ‘*Sabbūh al-quddūs rabb al-malā’ika wa’l-rūḥ*’ seventy times, then prays for God’s mercy; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1358/1939), 1:202; cf. Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Bā’ith ‘alā inkār al-bida’*, ed. ‘Uthmān Aḥmad ‘Anbar (Cairo: Dār al-Hudā, 1978); 35, 41-2; ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām, *Musājala ‘ilmiyya bayn al-imāmayn al-jalīlayn al-‘Izz b. ‘Abd al-Salām wa Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ ḥawla ṣalāt al-raghā’ib al-mubtada’a*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī and Muḥammad Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1423/2002), 39.

⁶⁴ For a description of the mild controversies surrounding Ibn Diḥya, see al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma’rūf and Muḥyī Hilāl al-Sirḥān, vol. 22, 4th ed. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1406/1986), 389-395.

⁶⁵ Abū al-Khaṭṭāb ‘Umar b. Ḥasan Ibn Diḥya, *Adā’ mā wajab min bayān waḍ’ al-waḍḍā’in fī rajab*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh and Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1419/1998), 87.

⁶⁶ Ibn Diḥya, *Adā’ mā wajab*, 18; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū’āt*, 3:144-5.

⁶⁷ Ibn Diḥya, *Adā’ mā wajab*, 63. Ibn Diḥya uses the same phrase in a lost work *Mā jā’a fī shahr sha’bān*; see Abū Shāma, *al-Bā’ith ‘alā inkār al-bida’*, 36.

(ṣ) is obligatory” and that “narrating [ḥadīths] without an established *isnād* and assured authenticity (*maʿrifat al-ṣiḥḥa*) is prohibited.”⁶⁸ Ibn Diḥya thus categorically condemns the use of weak ḥadīths.

The famous scholar and preacher of Damascus (and Cairo), ʿIzz al-Dīn Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām (d. 660/1262), also built on Ibn al-Jawzī’s criticisms of the weak and forged ḥadīths used to justify the *Raghāʾib* prayer. Among the harms of allowing this prayer, he writes in a short treatise on the subject, is that scholars acting on forged ḥadīths or allowing others to do so “give the masses the false impression that [the practice] is among the rites (*sunan*) [of the Prophet].” A scholar thus “becomes one who lies about the Messenger of God through his actions (*bi-lisān al-ḥāl*), which can be equivalent to doing so in words (*lisān al-maqāl*).” Moreover, the scholar becomes instrumental in the masses’ misrepresenting the Prophet, “and being a means to lying about the Messenger of God (ṣ) is not permitted (*al-tasabbub ilā al-kadhib ʿalā rasūl Allāh lā yajūzu*).”⁶⁹

In his more general treatise condemning heretical innovation in religion, the Damascene Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī (d. 665/1268) quotes at length from his teacher Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām and from Ibn Diḥya, reiterating the statement that it is not permissible to facilitate lying about the Prophet.⁷⁰ Abū Shāma describes one of his teachers in Damascus who was respected for his virtue and knowledge but who would hold ḥadīth dictation (*amālī*) sessions in the mosque during which he would recite weak ḥadīths on the virtues of prayer and fasting during the month of Rajab. Abū Shāma takes this scholar to task, faulting him for falling into the trap of those who feel one can be lax on ḥadīths on the virtues of actions. He explains that this is an error, and that one can never recite unreliable ḥadīths without alerting listeners to their flaws.⁷¹

Writing a few decades after these early Mamluk-era scholars and building on their work, the Mālikī reformist of Cairo Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 737/1336) articulated a similar position on the use of weak ḥadīths in his discussion on the *Raghāʾib* prayer. Although not formulated as a general rule, Ibn al-Ḥājj states that weak ḥadīths such as those on this

⁶⁸ Ibn Diḥya, *Adāʾ mā wajab*; 25-6, 74, 147.

⁶⁹ Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām, *Musājala ʿilmiyya*, 37-38.

⁷⁰ Abū Shāma, *al-Bāʾith*; 35, 45, 55-6.

⁷¹ Abū Shāma, *al-Bāʾith*, 75.

prayer can be acted on only in supererogatory worship and only as long as this is done privately and not habitually.⁷²

Ibn al-Jawzī's critique of scholars narrating weak ḥadīths with the justification that they were accompanied by their *isnāds* also resonated after his death, especially among Salafī scholars. Although he subscribed to the mainstream Sunni position on weak ḥadīths, al-Dhahabī seems also to have sensed its potential harm. He notes that it is "a major principle (*aṣl kabīr*) that one should refrain from spreading weak or unacceptable ḥadīths about virtues (*faḍā'il*), beliefs and pious manners (*raqā'iq*)."⁷³ He rigorously critiques earlier ḥadīth collectors like al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī (d. 430/1038) and Abū Bakr Ibn Mandah (d. 395/1004-5) for filling their various writings with countless forged and weak ḥadīths without notifying the reader about their falsity.⁷⁴ The Yemeni reformist Ibn al-Wazīr also objects to the unrealistic assumption that one's readers are qualified to evaluate the *isnāds* of ḥadīths. "There are so few scholars who can investigate *isnāds*," he adds, "so what about non-scholars?"⁷⁵

Not of all of Ibn al-Jawzī's students shared his strong view on condemning weak ḥadīths. Even his most famous Ḥanbalī student did not demonstrate the marked concern over weak ḥadīths found in the works of Ibn Diḥya and others. Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223) of Jerusalem authored what has remained the most comprehensive work on Ḥanbalī law and its proofs, the *Mughnī*. In it, he states concerning the supererogatory prayer known as *Ṣalāt al-Tasbīḥ*⁷⁶ that if a worshipper wishes he can act on the weak ḥadīths describing it. "Authenticity (*ṣiḥḥa*) is not required for that optional worship (*nawāfil*) and the virtues of actions," he notes. However, Ibn Qudāma stops short of the

⁷² Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, [1990]), 4:250, 258-9. For his reliance on Ibn al-Jawzī, see *ibid.*, 4:278.

⁷³ Al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-ḥuffāz*, ed. Zakariyyā 'Umayrāt, 4 vols. in 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1419/1998), 1:15-16.

⁷⁴ Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-i'tidāl*, 1: 111; *idem*, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 17, ed. Shu'ayb Arnā'ūt and Muḥammad Nu'aym 'Araqsūsī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1419/1998), 41.

⁷⁵ Ibn al-Wazīr, *Tanqīḥ al-anzār*, 177.

⁷⁶ The *Ṣalāt al-Tasbīḥ* consists of 4 *rak'as* in which one says '*subḥāna Allāh wa'l-ḥamd lillāh wa lā ilāh illā Allāh wa Allāh akbar*' fifteen times at each point of inflection in the prayer. Al-Dāraqutnī (d. 385/995) and Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Madīnī (d. 581/1185) both wrote books on this ḥadīth; Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn, *al-Tarjīḥ*, 42-3, 46.

total confidence in using weak ḥadīths that characterized the mainstream Sunni position. He reminds the reader that weak ḥadīths cannot bestow the legal status of ‘recommended’.⁷⁷

The School of Ibn Taymiyya: the Qualitative Unity of Legal Rulings

Ibn al-Jawzī’s legacy did, however, resonate with the neo-Ḥanbalī revival of Ibn Taymiyya. Like Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Taymiyya’s stance on the use of weak ḥadīths was governed by concerns over preventing the ideological crime of lying about the Prophet. Following Ibn al-Jawzī’s treatment of popular preachers, Ibn Taymiyya compiled a collection of forged ḥadīths that frequently appeared in their sermons. Wise words have been spoken by many in history, Ibn Taymiyya acknowledges, but this heritage need not be attributed to Muḥammad. The core commitment of Muslim scholars is to preserve the textual authenticity of the Prophet’s Sunna: “Much speech has sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) meaning. But one cannot say ‘from the Messenger’ for what he did not say.”⁷⁸

Ibn Taymiyya also introduced a novel notion to discussion on the topic: the qualitative unity of legal rulings. The mainstream Sunni position described above, especially that of Ḥanafī scholars like Ibn Humām, conflated ḥadīths on the virtues of actions, exhortatory/dissuasive ḥadīths and ḥadīths establishing actions as legally recommended—all lay safely outside the realm of ‘the forbidden and permitted.’ Ibn Taymiyya, however, draws a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, ḥadīths on the virtues of actions and exhortation/dissuasion, and on the other hand, ḥadīths labeling an act legally recommended. The

⁷⁷ Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Mughnī*, ed. ‘Abdallāh al-Turkī and ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Ḥalw (Cairo: Hujr, 1406/1986), 2:552.

⁷⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Aḥādīth al-quṣṣās*, ed. Muḥammad Luṭfī al-Ṣabbāgh (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1408/1988), 91. Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī echoes this idea: “and the ḥadīth scholar (*muḥaddith*) concerns himself only with the wording (*laḥẓ*), otherwise how many ḥadīths there are about which it is said ‘it has no basis’ or ‘forged’ but its meaning exists in the Qur’ān or the Sunna”; Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, *al-Maṣnū‘ fī ma‘rifat al-ḥadīth al-mawḍū‘*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 6th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyya, 1426/2005), 172; See also Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *al-Mudāwī li-‘ilal al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḡhīr wa sharḥay al-Munāwī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1996), 1:214-15.

status of legally recommended (*istiḥbāb*), Ibn Taymiyya notes, is a Shariah ruling that requires a Shariah proof, “and whoever reports from God that He likes an act with no legal proof has established in religion what God has not given permission for, just as if he had established something as required or forbidden.”

Ibn Taymiyya argued that when Ibn Ḥanbal and others had accepted using dubious ḥadīths (as long as they were not forged), what they were intending was limited to the virtues of actions and exhortation/dissuasion. These two fields described only the amount of reward/punishment that one would receive from God for actions whose legal status was already established.⁷⁹ This is analogous to a merchant, Ibn Taymiyya explains, who is certain he will earn profit but does not know how much. If his expectations prove too high, he suffers no harm since he earns profit anyway.⁸⁰ He concludes, “In summary, [weak ḥadīths] are narrated and used in exhortation and dissuasion but not in establishing legal recommendation (*istiḥbāb*).”⁸¹

Ibn Taymiyya insists on the strength of this position in the course of his argument against seeking the intercession of saints, although the boldness of his claim is undermined by the many scholars who upheld the mainstream Sunni position above. “No one among the imāms,” he claims, “has said: it is permitted to make something required or laudable (*muṣtaḥabb*) on the basis of a weak ḥadīth. Whoever said that has broken with consensus (*ijmāʿ*).”⁸²

Ibn Taymiyya also turns the notion of due diligence through providing the *isnād* on its head. He interprets Ibn Ḥanbal’s laxity on narrating questionable ḥadīths as an encouragement to record all ḥadīth versions

⁷⁹ A Ḥanbali scholar who upheld Ibn Taymiyya’s position on weak ḥadīths, Ibn Muflīḥ (d. 763/1362), argued that there are in fact two recorded opinions from Ibn Ḥanbal on the issue: the famous one, which allows the use of weak ḥadīths in the virtues of actions, and another that does not; Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad Ibn Muflīḥ al-Maqdisī, *al-Adāb al-sharʿiyya*, ed. Shuʿayb Arnāʾūt et al., 3 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1996), 2:279, 289-90.

⁸⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿat al-fatāwā*, 18:43-44, 46. See also *ibid.*, 20:145 (Ibn Taymiyya’s *Rafʿ al-malām ʿan al-aʿimma al-aʿlām*).

⁸¹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿat al-fatāwā*, 18:46.

⁸² Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿat al-fatāwā*, 1:191. Here Ibn Taymiyya cites al-ʿIzz Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām’s “famous *fatwā*” on the issue of intercession. For examples of weak ḥadīths used to justify seeking the intercession of saints, see *ibid.*, 1:191 ff.

for possible use in cataloging and identifying weak reports, not so that they could ever be acted on.⁸³

As we shall see, Ibn Taymiyya's writing on the use of weak ḥadīths was highly influential. Like Ibn Qudāma earlier, however, some later Ḥanbalīs would nonetheless uphold the mainstream Sunni position of laxity. One such figure was Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1392), who rejected Ibn Taymiyya's Salafī call to reject *taqlīd* as well as his stance on weak ḥadīths.⁸⁴

Although there is no evidence that the Andalusian jurist Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) was directly influenced by the works of Ibn Taymiyya, his lengthy treatise on heretical innovation (*bid'a*) reflects Ibn Taymiyya's qualitative unity of legal rulings. Like earlier scholars, al-Shāṭibī states that promoters of heresy justify their ideas through "their reliance on weak, baseless ḥadīths, which are falsely ascribed to the Messenger of God (ṣ), and which are not accepted by the scholars of ḥadīth as fit to be built upon."⁸⁵

Like Ibn Taymiyya, he allows using weak ḥadīths to encourage people to engage in a ritual by assigning eternal benefits to it, provided that the ritual has been otherwise "established by authentic means" and that the weak ḥadīth in question is not forged. One cannot admit weak ḥadīths, however, on practices that contradict principles of religious law (like Islam's ban on monasticism)—"exhortation on such matters is not correct"—or to establish practices that fall under general mandates (such as prayer) but are not justified in their details by sound ḥadīths (such as the *Raghā'ib* prayer). Specifying a certain day or time with some virtue above others, al-Shāṭibī explains, entails a "legal ruling," which can come only from a ḥadīth rated *ṣaḥīḥ* or *ḥasan*, the latter being accepted due to its close proximity to *ṣaḥīḥ* ḥadīths.⁸⁶ Emphasizing the qualitative unity of legal rulings, he exposes as faulty the claim that authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) proof texts are required only in matters

⁸³) Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū'at al-fatāwā*, 18:45-46.

⁸⁴) Ibn Rajab, *Sharḥ 'Ilal al-Tirmidhī*, 1:74; idem, "al-Radd 'alā man ittaba'a ghayr al-madhāhib al-arba'a," in *Majmū' rasā'il al-ḥāfiẓ Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī*, ed. Ṭal'at al-Ḥulwānī, 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Fārūq al-Ḥadīthiyya, 1423/2002), 616-38.

⁸⁵) Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Mūsā al-Shāṭibī, *Kitāb al-I'tisām*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, [197-]), 1:224.

⁸⁶) Al-Shāṭibī, *al-I'tisām*, 1:225, 229-30.

of prohibition (*tahrim*) and obligation (*wujub*) but not of recommendation or discouragement. "This is an arbitrary distinction (*tahakkum*) with no proof. Rather, there are five [injunctive] rulings (i.e., obligatory, recommended, permitted, discouraged and forbidden)...."⁸⁷

Al-Shāṭibī notes that using weak ḥadīths presents a paradox for the science of ḥadīth criticism:

And if it were the evident practice of the people of Islam to accept all ḥadīths coming from everyone, there would be no point in their setting up [the system] of approving or impugning [transmitters], which they have all agreed on, or in requiring an *isnād*.... For the heart of the matter is that it be most probable (*yaghliba 'alā al-ẓann*) without any doubt (*bilā rayba*) that the Prophet (ṣ) actually said that ḥadīth so that we might depend on it in the Shariah and use it as basis for laws.⁸⁸

In the case of weak ḥadīths, he continues, "it is not highly probably (*yaghlibu 'alā al-ẓann*) that the Prophet (ṣ) said them, so one cannot base a ruling on them."⁸⁹

The Amendment of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī

Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, often referred to by Muslim writers only by his honorific 'the ḥadīth master (*al-ḥāfiẓ*)', represented what Franz Rosenthal called "the final summation of the science of ḥadīth."⁹⁰ Although he continues to cast a commanding shadow over the Late Sunni tradition to this day, Ibn Ḥajar was, in fact, skeptical of some of its more popular and mystical excesses. He allowed only an austere celebration of the Prophet's birthday,⁹¹ and was frequently cast as a doubting Thomas in Sufi hagiographies.⁹² Ibn Ḥajar's stance on the use of weak ḥadīths thus consists of a conservative adjustment to the mainstream Sunni stance in light of objections initiated by Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Taymiyya.

⁸⁷) Al-Shāṭibī, *al-I'tisām*, 1:231.

⁸⁸) Al-Shāṭibī, *al-I'tisām*, 1:225.

⁸⁹) Al-Shāṭibī, *al-I'tisām*, 1:225.

⁹⁰) Franz Rosenthal, "Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī," *EP*.

⁹¹) N.J.G. Kaptein, *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 63-4.

⁹²) See, for examples, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb b. Aḥmad al-Shaʿrānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. Sulaymān al-Ṣāliḥ (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1426/2005), 419, 451.

Ibn Ḥajar's senior disciple Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) explains that his mentor allowed the use of weak ḥadīths only on the virtues of actions and then only on three conditions:

- 1) that the ḥadīth not be "severely weak," such as a report narrated by a known forger
- 2) that the ḥadīth "be subsumed under a general principle (*aṣl 'āmm*)" of the Shariah and that no more reliable evidence exist contradicting the ḥadīth in question
- 3) that the person acting on the ḥadīth not believe it to be authentic, "so that what the Prophet did not say is not attributed to him"⁹³

Al-Sakhāwī seems to be reporting these three criteria from Ibn Ḥajar's brief foray into the question of the *Ṣalāt al-Raghā'ib*, in which he lays out these ideas.

It is Ibn Ḥajar's third condition that represents a unique contribution to our debate. Although Ibn Ḥajar mentions as an inspiration Ibn 'Abd al-Salām's strong condemnation of facilitating lying about the Prophet, no one before him so succinctly required that acting on weak ḥadīths not be misconstrued as attribution to the Prophet. Ibn Ḥajar's opinion bears traces of Ibn al-Ḥājj's concern about the implications of publically acting on weak ḥadīths as opposed to private devotion. Ibn Ḥajar requires that a person acting on a weak ḥadīth "not publicize it, so that he does not act on a weak ḥadīth and make Shariah (*yashra'u*) what is not law, or so that some ignorant people not see him and think that it is *ṣaḥīḥ*."⁹⁴

⁹³ Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Qawl al-badī' fī al-ṣalāt 'alā al-ḥabīb al-shafī'*, 3rd ed. (Medina: al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, 1383/1963), 257; cf. idem, *Fath al-mughhith*, 1:351. We saw earlier that Ibn Ḥajar defended the use of the weak ḥadīth "Ashkalon is one of the two queens..." based on admitting the report under the rubric of the virtues of actions. This discussion occurs in a work defending ḥadīths criticized as forged in the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal. Here, Ibn Ḥajar states that it is "widespread" to use weak ḥadīths as long as they do not pertain to law. Ibn Ḥajar thus seems to be taking advantage of the mainstream Sunni position for the purposes of his argument while upholding stricter standards in other works; Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Qawl al-musaddad*, 11-12.

⁹⁴ Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Tabyīn al-'ajab bi-mā warada fī faḍl rajab*, ed. Samīr Ḥusayn Ḥalabī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1408/1988, addended to idem, *Quwwat al-ḥijāb fī 'umūm al-maghfirah li'l-ḥujjāh*), 11.

Interestingly, Ibn Ḥajar demonstrates sensitivity to the qualitative unity of legal rulings but advances this unity to a new level: all religious actions and beliefs fall under the rubric of the sacred law and require the same caution. His three conditions thus apply to using weak ḥadīths on any matter: “And there is no difference between acting on ḥadīths of legal rulings or virtues, since all is sacred law (*sharʿ*).”⁹⁵

As we shall see, Ibn Ḥajar’s amendment has carried great weight. It did not, however, completely displace the mainstream Sunni position of scholars like al-Nawawī and Mullā ‘Alī Qārī’. Although he reverently refers to Ibn Ḥajar as the “Shaykh of Islam,” al-Suyūṭī sets aside his stance in favor of the mainstream one. Ibn Ḥajar’s strictures, he explains, were not sufficiently endorsed by earlier pillars of ḥadīth studies like Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ.⁹⁶

Weak Ḥadīths in the Early Modern and Modern Periods

Ibn Ḥajar’s amendment to the mainstream Sunni position has proven influential among scholars in the early modern and modern periods.

The Ḥanafī ḥadīth scholar of Lucknow, ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī (d. 1887), provides the most extensive treatment of the debate over using weak ḥadīths, tracing it from the early Islamic period until his day and outlining the various schools of thought. He does so first in his *Zafar al-amānī*, a commentary on the technical terms of ḥadīth criticism, and in a later work of short responses to germane issues, the *al-Ajwiba al-fāḍila*. Al-Laknawī rejects the categorical prohibition on using weak ḥadīths as unsubstantiated but also dismisses the mainstream Sunni position as “silly latitudinarianism (*tawassu’ sakḥīf*).”⁹⁷ He notes, like Ibn Taymiyya, that weak ḥadīths should be allowed for the virtues of actions because even if the report is untrue it still

⁹⁵ Ibn Ḥajar, *Tabyīn al-‘ajab*, 12. The editor has read this phrase as “*idhan li-kullin sharʿun*.” I think it is more likely “*idh al-kullu sharʿun*” and have translated it as such.

⁹⁶ Al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrīb al-rāwī*, 1:230. See *ibid.*, 1:53 for a reference to Ibn Ḥajar as *shaykh al-islām*.

⁹⁷ Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī, *al-Ajwiba al-fāḍila li’l-asʿila al-‘ashara al-kāmila*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1423/2003), 53.

encourages Muslims to perform deeds already mandated as laudable.⁹⁸ Also like Ibn Taymiyya, he rejects the mainstream Sunni position that legal recommendation does not involve establishing a new ruling but rather points out only the virtue of an action. *Istihbāb* is a legal status, so how can it be established with a weak ḥadīth?⁹⁹

Al-Laknawī ultimately upholds a modified version of Ibn Ḥajar's three conditions for the use of weak ḥadīths, adding that it is permitted only if no other more reliable evidence exists on the issue. Unlike Ibn Ḥajar and Ibn Taymiyya, however, al-Laknawī sees in the condition of a weak ḥadīth falling under an "established principle of the Shariah" a narrow window for establishing legal recommendation (*istihbāb*). If there is no more reliable evidence on an issue and no *ṣaḥīḥ* or *ḥasan* ḥadīth contradicts it, then a weak ḥadīth can render an act legally recommended.¹⁰⁰ Al-Laknawī notes that this circumstantial exception reflects the methodology of early Muslim scholars like al-Tirmidhī, who in some instances derived legal recommendation from a weak ḥadīth because it was backed up by Companion opinions.¹⁰¹ This renewed acceptance of ḥadīths as influential in legislation probably stems from the revivalist atmosphere of Indian ḥadīth scholarship in the wake of the career of Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi (d. 1762), who called for a revitalized reverence for ḥadīths and the interpretive methods of the early Muslim generations.¹⁰² Al-Laknawī's argumentation has proven influential, underlying the position of the influential modern Syrian ḥadīth scholar Nūr al-Dīn 'Itr of Aleppo.¹⁰³

Ibn Ḥajar's amendments also define the stance of the famous Syrian Salafī Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914). Although al-Qāsimī quotes at length those sections of Muslim's introduction to his *Ṣaḥīḥ* which condemn the use of weak ḥadīths in any way, he implies that the mainstream Sunni position of allowing them outside of legal rulings is more

⁹⁸ Al-Laknawī, *Zaḥar al-amānī*, 186.

⁹⁹ Al-Laknawī, *Zaḥar al-amānī*, 191; idem, *al-Ajwiba al-fāḍila*, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Laknawī, *Zaḥar al-amānī*, 198-199; idem, *al-Ajwiba al-fāḍila*, 55.

¹⁰¹ Al-Laknawī, *Zaḥar al-amānī*, 187.

¹⁰² Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 37.

¹⁰³ Nūr al-Dīn 'Itr, *Manhaj al-naqd*, 294.

appropriate.¹⁰⁴ This is “the relied upon opinion of the imāms,” although he adds that “the most qualified scholars (*muḥaqqiqīn*)” apply Ibn Ḥajar’s three conditions.¹⁰⁵

The maverick Moroccan traditionalist ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī (d. 1993) issued a *fatwā* on the issue of using weak ḥadīths, responding that it is allowed outside of legal rulings (*aḥkām*). He notes this is the “majority” position. He adds, however, that Ibn Ḥajar’s three conditions apply.¹⁰⁶ Al-Ghumārī also concedes, at least partially, the qualitative unity of rulings. He explains that, although the virtues of actions and exhortation do not entail legal compulsion, they are nonetheless part of God’s binding “address (*khiṭāb*)” to humanity.¹⁰⁷

Al-Ghumārī invokes the permissibility of using weak ḥadīths in the course of his argument for the impermissibility of masturbation. Although the ḥadīths explicitly prohibiting this act and threatening its perpetrator with Hellfire are all weak, he admits them as evidence because they are only providing apotreptic threats for an action already prohibited implicitly by the Qur’ān.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Al-Qāsimī, *Qawā'id al-taḥdīth*, 114 ff.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Qāsimī, *Qawā'id al-taḥdīth*, 117-19. At another point in the book, al-Qāsimī makes a statement reminiscent of the qualitative unity of legal rulings. Speaking of groups who allowed forging ḥadīths for *targhib* and *tarhib*, he states that this is prohibited, “for *al-targhib wa al-tarhib* are among the legal rulings (*al-aḥkām al-shar'iyya*)”; *ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *al-Ḥāwī fī al-fatāwā*, 127-29; *idem*, *al-Khawāṭir al-dīniyya*, 2 vols. in 1 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1425/2004), 2:121.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *al-Ḥāwī*, 134; *idem*, *Afḍal maqūl fī manāqib afḍal rasūl* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1426/2005); 8, 79. In another small work, al-Ghumārī rebuts those who try to use laxity on *faḍā'il* ḥadīths to excuse unreliable ḥadīths on the Prophet’s virtues. “Even if *faḍā'il* are treated with laxity,” he explains, “the *faḍā'il* of the Prophet (ṣ) are only via well-known and established [narrations] out of fear of intentionally lying about him...”; *idem*, *al-Rasā'il al-Ghumārīyya*, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt ([Beirut]: Dār al-Jinān, 1411/1991), 130.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *al-Istiṣqā' li-adillat taḥrīm al-istimnā'*, 35. As a subordinate argument for using these weak ḥadīths, al-Ghumārī also refers to his older brother Aḥmad’s statement that, although in theory Muslim scholars rejected the use of weak ḥadīths for law, they regularly acted on them in practice (see below); *ibid.*, 37.

Modernist Salafīs and Eliminating Superstitions¹⁰⁹

The Modernist Salafism of Arab scholars like Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) sought to reconstitute the primordial Arab Islam of the Prophet’s time in the face of Western encroachment.

In its tone and content, this vision of a purified Islam was a modernized faith stripped of many elements considered irrational or superstitious in the eyes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European thought.¹¹⁰ Along with Indian reformists like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), ‘Abduh and Riḍā emphasized the centrality of the Qur’ān, reinterpreted through modern scientific means. They sought to marginalize or restrict the vast and eclectic ḥadīth corpus, rife as it was with the anthropomorphisms and Aristotelian cosmology so anathema to late nineteenth-century Modernism.

Modernist Salafīs saw Sufism and popular religious practices in particular as the forces that had steered the Muslim community away from the Islam of the pious early Muslims (Salaf) into benighted ignorance and backwardness. Although not objecting to Sufism as personal piety and a means to communal organization, scholars like Riḍā rejected its rampant attribution of miracles to saints, non-canonical rituals and mystical interpretations of scripture. Sufism was seen as the gate through which foreign elements such as Greek theosophy and Near Eastern fables had penetrated Islam.¹¹¹ Modernist Salafīs identified ḥadīths

¹⁰⁹ It is interesting that, despite the nearly universal agreement that weak ḥadīths are inadmissible for substantive legal rulings, several modern Muslim writers have emphasized that *muftīs* should not reference them in *fatwās*. Such scholars include Jād al-Ḥaqq ‘Alī Jād al-Ḥaqq, the Egyptian Grand Muftī (d. 1996), and the Moroccan scholar ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ghumārī (d. 1995), who mentions this in a book rebutting Dr. ‘Abdallāh Kānūn, who claimed that a *muftī* can use a weak ḥadīth to reply to a question if he feels it suits the situation. This discussion may refer to *muftīs* citing a weak ḥadīth because it succinctly or convincingly sums up their ruling, even though the ruling itself is based on far sounder evidence; Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 239; ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ghumārī, *Naqd al-maqāl fī masā’il min ‘ilm al-ḥadīth wa’l-fiqh wa’l-uṣūl* ([Tangier]: [n.p.], [n.d.]), 144.

¹¹⁰ For the most definitive treatment of ‘Abduh and Riḍā, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); 130-60, 222-44.

¹¹¹ Albert Hourani, “Rashid Rida and the Sufi Orders,” *Bulletin d’Études Orientales* 29 (1977): 231-41.

falsely attributed to the Prophet and stories from Jewish lore (*isrāʾīliyyāt*) as the media by which Muslims legitimized these foreign influences.¹¹² Like Ibn al-Jawzī centuries earlier, in part it was the perceived social cost of these inauthentic practices and the forgeries legitimizing them that alarmed Modernist Salafīs.

In Egypt, influential reformists like ʿAbduh, the Shaykh al-Azhar Maḥmūd Shaltūt (d. 1963) and the Cairo University jurist Muḥammad Abū Zahra (d. 1974) consistently targeted popular religious traditions like the specific prayers, fasts and group liturgies commemorating festivals other than the two Eids. Such popular observances included prayers and fasts marking the middle of the Islamic month of Shaʿbān, when, according to spurious ḥadīths, God fixes people's lifespans and sustenance for the coming year. These reformist scholars rejected such practices because they found no authentic ḥadīths justifying them.¹¹³ Even an Azhar scholar critical of some of the early reformists' Occidentalism, Ḥusayn Aḥmad al-Marṣafī (d. 1889), recognized the social cost and backwardness of much of the specious material propagated by Muslim preachers. He complained that religious storytellers had sown the social ills of dishonesty and unemployment by spreading forged ḥadīths and "irrational stories." Reports characterizing God's forgiveness in inaccurate and excessive terms, for example, encouraged people to sin without fear of accountability.¹¹⁴

Modernist Salafīs pinpointed the ḥadīth tradition as a historical weak spot of Islamic thought. Although his most vehement criticisms targeted *isrāʾīliyyāt*, Rashīd Riḍā also took up the banner of purging weak and forged ḥadīths from the corpus of Muslim literature. In his journal *al-Manār*, he devoted a discussion to the weak ḥadīths found in al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* and how they had been

¹¹² For ʿAbduh's and Riḍā's take on ḥadīth, see Jonathan Brown, *Hadith* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 251-56; Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); G.H.A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

¹¹³ Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *Fatāwā* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1403/1983), 191-92; Muḥammad Abū Zahra, *Fatāwā al-shaykh Muḥammad Abū Zahra*, ed. Muḥammad ʿUthmān Shabīr (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1426/2006), 109.

¹¹⁴ Al-Ḥasan al-Marṣafī, *Ruʾya fī taḥdīth al-fikr al-miṣrī* (with text of the *Risālat al-kalim al-thamān*), ed. Aḥmad Zakariyyāʾ al-Shalq (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li'l-Kutub, 1984), 75-8.

used to justify baseless rituals.¹¹⁵ He rejected the acceptability of including unreliable ḥadīths in any ḥadīth work, asking rhetorically how a scholar as devoted to the Sunna as Ibn Ḥanbal could have knowingly included forged material in his books and cast doubt on the authentic legacy of the Prophet.¹¹⁶ Riḍā's student Maḥmūd Abū Rayya (d. 1970) quotes his teacher as asserting that acting on weak ḥadīths and narrating them "has opened upon this *umma* a gate of extremism (*ghuluww*) in religion and the increase of straining rituals of worship that contradict the ease of Islam, to the extent that they have been made religious rites." This despite the fact, Riḍā complains, that most people fall short of carrying out their most basic requirements such as the daily prayers.¹¹⁷

Abū Rayya seconds his teacher's evaluation of using weak ḥadīths in his scathing attack on the traditional Sunni science of ḥadīth criticism and the place of ḥadīths in Islamic law, the *Aḍwā' 'alā al-sunna al-muḥammadiyya* (1958). In a lengthy chapter devoted to undermining the reliability of Abū Hurayra as a ḥadīth transmitter, Abū Rayya identifies him as the genesis of the flawed distinction between ḥadīths dealing with prohibition/permission and those on other topics. It was Abū Hurayra, he argues, who improperly quoted the Prophet as saying, "If you do not make licit something prohibited or prohibit something licit and have conveyed the general meaning [of the ḥadīth] then there is no harm [in narrating it]."¹¹⁸ The true teachings of the Prophet concerning transmitting his words, Abū Rayya counters, were epitomized in the famous ḥadīth guaranteeing Hellfire to those who lie about Muḥammad.¹¹⁹ Yes, many scholars allowed the use of weak ḥadīths on

¹¹⁵ Rashid Riḍā, "al-Aḥādīth al-mawḍū'ā fī kitāb al-Iḥyā' wa riwāyatuhā," *al-Manār* 12 (1909): 911-12. For Riḍā's *fatwā* against marking the middle of the Islamic month of Sha'bān with specific rituals, see *al-Manār* 6 (1903): 824.

¹¹⁶ Rashid Riḍā, "Bāb intiqād 'alā al-Manār Ka'b al-Aḥbār wa Wāḥb b. Munabbih," *al-Manār* 27, no. 8 (1926): 611.

¹¹⁷ Abū Rayya quotes Riḍā's editorial notes on an edition of Ibn Muflīh's *al-Ādāb al-shar'īyya*, which I have not been able to locate; Maḥmūd Abū Rayya, *Aḍwā' 'alā al-sunna al-muḥammadiyya* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ta'līf, 1958), 79.

¹¹⁸ This report is generally understood as indicating permission to transmit the gist of a ḥadīth as opposed to its exact wording.

¹¹⁹ "idhā lam tuḥillū ḥarām^m wa lam tuḥarrimū ḥalāl^m wa aṣabtum al-ma'nā fa-lā ba's"; Abū Rayya, *Aḍwā'*, 164,

the virtues of actions, but “the senior imāms prohibited that.” Here he relies on the writings of Ibn Taymiyya as proof.¹²⁰

Like Riḍā and Abū Rayya, Maḥmūd Shaltūt also railed against *isrāʾīliyyāt*, especially those included in the genre to which he devoted most of his writing: Qurʾānic commentary (*tafsīr*). Instead of removing weak and forged ḥadīths found in Qurʾānic commentaries, Shaltūt complains, many Muslim scholars “have spread copiously (*aghdaqū*) their evil upon the people and upon the Qurʾān.” This was a gross dereliction of duty, since “it was more befitting [these scholars] to set up a barrier between [these reports] and the people that would spare them anxiety (*balbala*) on those issues connected with the Unseen....” Scholars should have shielded the Muslim masses from bizarre and unreliable ḥadīths, since people have, “by their nature, a fixation with hearing and reading bizarre reports (*gharāʾib*).” This fixation only distracts the masses from “any useful reflection on those Qurʾānic verses dealing with beliefs, ethics and goodly actions.”¹²¹

Muḥammad al-Ghazālī¹²² (d. 1996), the influential Egyptian Azharī who followed in Shaltūt’s footsteps, echoed his teacher’s criticisms of weak ḥadīths. In two wildly popular books (the *Sunna al-nabawiyya bayn ahl al-fiqh wa ahl al-ḥadīth* has gone through at least fourteen editions, *Turāthunā al-fikrī* at least nine), al-Ghazālī identifies the social repercussions of unreliable ḥadīths. “Indeed, clouds of weak ḥadīths have obscured the cultural horizons of Islam...,” he laments, just as authentic ḥadīths have had their meanings perverted or been misapplied.¹²³ He notes how in the modern period weak and forged ḥadīths affect beliefs, society, politics and law. “Indeed, I can say that this comes at the cost of those purifying truths that the carrier of the greatest message brought.” Thus, unreliable ḥadīths should not be allowed to inform

¹²⁰ Abū Rayya, *Aḍwāʾ*, 266-67.

¹²¹ Shaltūt, *Fatāwā*, 56.

¹²² For a useful study of al-Ghazālī, see Haifaa G. Khalafallah, “Rethinking Islamic Law: Genesis and Evolution in the Islamic Legal Method and Structures. The Case of a 20th Century ‘Alim’s Journey into his Legal Traditions: Muhammad al-Ghazali,” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2000).

¹²³ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya bayn ahl al-fiqh wa ahl al-ḥadīth*, 11th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1996), 143. It is worth noting that in this work al-Ghazālī states that he had read and appreciated al-Qaraḍāwī’s *Kayfa nataʾamaluhā maʾa al-sunna al-nabawiyya*; ibid., 73.

“the principles of education, traditions and hallmarks of society that are heeded by public opinion and are held as signs of Islam’s truth and objectives in life...”¹²⁴

In a later work, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, al-Ghazālī further follows Shaltūt in emphatically rejecting the use of weak ḥadīths and reports in *tafsīr*. In fact, al-Ghazālī suggests that al-Azhar convene a taskforce to purge *tafsīrs* of weak and forged material.¹²⁵ Commenting on the general practice of earlier Muslim scholars’ including weak and forged ḥadīths in their collections, al-Ghazālī quips that scholars like Ibn Ḥanbal seemed to have compiled rough drafts of their ḥadīth works and then died before they could purge them of baseless lore.¹²⁶

Although he insists that weak ḥadīths have no place in the realms of law or creed, al-Ghazālī does allow for some use in areas already well established by the Qur’ān and Sunna. “It is permitted to take heed of weak ḥadīths on peripheral issues or where they provide additional points on what has been already established by respected proofs from the Book of God and the Sunna of His Messenger. This has been the way of our scholars in the past...”¹²⁷ Al-Ghazālī was a noted reformist in the vein of Riḍā and Shaltūt, but he was also a very popular writer. The utility of weak ḥadīths for weaving compelling prose may have proven too appealing for him to advocate a blanket prohibition on their use.

In his 1964 classic on the exemplary life of the Prophet (since republished numerous times), *Fiqh al-sīra*, al-Ghazālī defends this limited use of weak ḥadīths against the attacks of Traditionalist Salafis who categorically rejected them (see below). As a response to criticisms of the ḥadīths he had used in early editions of the book, al-Ghazālī invited the leading Traditionalist Salafī ḥadīth scholar Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999) to include his comments on the reliability of these ḥadīths as footnotes in the second edition. Responding to al-Albānī, al-Ghazālī notes that he has been as strict as possible in using only reliable ḥadīths. Since, however, the reader may encounter instances where al-Albānī grades a ḥadīth as weak, al-Ghazālī explains his method: “a

¹²⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya*, 79.

¹²⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, 8th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003), 126-28.

¹²⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, 147.

¹²⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya*, 79.

ḥadīth could be weak according to the preponderance of the ḥadīth scholars, but I may look at its *matn* and find that its meaning is totally in accordance with a verse of the Book of God or a report from the *ṣaḥīḥ* Sunna, so I see no harm in reporting it.” Al-Ghazālī allows this, “since [the ḥadīth] has not brought anything new in the realms of law or the virtues [of actions] (*faḍā’il*), nor has it added anything but an explanation to what has already been established by the certain bases (*uṣūl*) [of Islam].” This is in accordance, al-Ghazālī adds, with the established methodology of Sunni scholars.¹²⁸

Traditionalist Salafism and the Total Rejection of Weak Ḥadīths

The most vociferous rejection of using weak ḥadīths in the early modern and modern periods comes from the Traditionalist Salafī school of thought. Rooted in the teachings of revivalists like Muḥammad Ḥayāt al-Sindī (d. 1750) and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī, Salafī thought influenced scholars like ‘Abduh and Riḍā by foregrounding the works of Ibn Taymiyya, rejecting rigid loyalties to schools of law and casting the light of suspicion on popular Sufi practices. In turn, the Modernist Salafism of Riḍā directly influenced later Traditionalist Salafīs like al-Albānī, who began his work as a ḥadīth critic when he read Riḍā’s *al-Manār* article on the weak ḥadīths in the *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*.¹²⁹

A prominent feature of the eighteenth-century revival and reform movements was a call for returning to the Qur’ān and the Sunna instead of excessive loyalty to existing schools of law. This entailed an enhanced focus on the study of ḥadīths as the primary means of accessing the Sunna directly.¹³⁰ Renewed interest in ḥadīths in the eighteenth-century

¹²⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Fiḥ al-sīra*, 4th ed. (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘āda, 1384/1964), 9-11. Al-Ghazālī praised al-Albānī and the Moroccan polymath ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī as “among the firm pillars (*al-rāsikhīn*)” on matters of ḥadīth; al-Ghazālī, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, 145.

¹²⁹ Al-Albānī, “*Tarjamat al-shaykh al-Albānī—Nash’at al-Shaykh fī Dimashq*,” lecture from www.islamway.com, last accessed 6/3/2004.

¹³⁰ For the place of ḥadīth in the eighteenth-century revival and reform movements, see John O. Voll, “Foundations of Renewal and Reform: Islamic Movements in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John Esposito, 509-48 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); idem, “Hadith Scholars and Tariqahs: an Ulama Group in the 18th Century Haramayn and their Impact in the Islamic World,” *Journal of African and Asian Studies* 15 (1980): 264-73; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 37;

matured into an effort to recreate the critically stringent methods of early ḥadīth critics like al-Bukhārī and Muslim. This resulted in a resurrection of the schools rejecting the use of weak ḥadīths.

We see an increased unease with the use of weak ḥadīths in the writing of the eighteenth-century Salafī revivalist of Sana'a, Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī (d. 1768). Like the earlier Yemeni scholar whom he held in high regard, Ibn al-Wazīr, al-Ṣan'ānī disapproves of recording or citing unreliable ḥadīths with the excuse that their *isnāds* are available for evaluation. Such an excuse is untenable, he argues, since neither the masses nor the majority of scholars are qualified to examine *isnāds* for authenticity.¹³¹ Noting the mainstream Sunni position on accepting weak ḥadīths, al-Ṣan'ānī suggests that the ḥadīth "Whoever narrates a ḥadīth that he sees is a lie then he is among the liars" means that using a questionable ḥadīth depends on whether or not one thinks it more or less likely that the Prophet said it. Here he cites the early ḥadīth scholar al-Dārimī (d. 255/869) instructing his student al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) that uncertainty about the details of a ḥadīth and its *isnād* does not entail 'lying about the Prophet.' This warning applies only to serious doubts about a ḥadīth having any basis in Prophetic speech. As a corollary, if it is more likely that a ḥadīth does not come from the Prophet, then it should not be used at all.¹³² Like Ibn Taymiyya, al-Ṣan'ānī excludes the use of weak ḥadīths from admission as proof for legal recommendation but not for the virtues of actions and exhortation.¹³³

It is the Yemeni scholar who studied with the generation of al-Ṣan'ānī's students, Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), who interpreted the qualitative unity of legal rulings as a blanket prohibition on using weak ḥadīths. In his compilation of forged ḥadīths, al-Shawkānī

Ahmad Dallal, "The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought 1750-1850," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (1993): 347-8; Basheer Nafi, "The Teacher of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb: Muḥammad Ḥayāt al-Sindī and the Revival of the *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*'s Methodology," *Islamic Law and Society* 13, no. 2 (2006): 208-41; Jonathan Brown, *Hadith*, 256 ff.

¹³¹ Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī, *Tawḍīḥ al-afkār li-ma'ānī Tanqīḥ al-anzār*, ed. Ṣalāḥ Muḥammad 'Uwayḍa, 2 vols. in 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1417/1997), 2:62.

¹³² Al-Ṣan'ānī, *Tawḍīḥ al-afkār*, 2:54.

¹³³ Al-Ṣan'ānī, *Tawḍīḥ al-afkār*, 2:82-3.

rejects the distinction between virtues (*fadā'il*) and legal rulings in the mainstream Sunni position:

Indeed all the Shariah laws are on the same footing (*mutasāwiyat al-aqdām*), no difference between them. None of them can be established except by evidence that suffices as proof (*hujja*). Otherwise it would be falsely attributing (*taqawwul*) something to God that He did not say. It would carry the known punishment....¹³⁴

Al-Shawkānī's thought on employing weak ḥadīths directly influenced the most prominent Traditionalist Salafis after him. The founding figure of the Indian *Ahl-e ḥadīth* movement, Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1890) of Bhopal, mentions al-Shawkānī reverently in his collection of Prophetic invocations, the *Nuzul al-abrār*. Khān follows al-Shawkānī in rejecting weak ḥadīths in legal recommendation, virtues and exhortation/dissuasion. "The correct, inevitable stance is that legal rulings are all on equal footing, so it is not befitting to act on a ḥadīth until it is deemed *ṣaḥīḥ* or *ḥasan*...."¹³⁵ In his *tafsīr* work, the *Fath al-bayān*, Khān rejects the mainstream Sunni laxity on using weak reports for *tafsīr* purposes as well.¹³⁶ The great Egyptian Salafī ḥadīth scholar and judge Aḥmad Shākīr (d. 1958) also echoed al-Shawkānī's position, as did 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mu'allimī (d. 1966), a Yemeni ḥadīth scholar who worked as an editor for the Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya publishing house in Hyderabad.¹³⁷ The late Lebanese 'ālim Ṣubḥī al-Ṣāliḥ similarly rejected

¹³⁴ Al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawā'id al-majmū'a*, 283. In his *Nayl al-awṭār*, however, al-Shawkānī says that a large number of weak ḥadīths taken together can establish the legitimacy of a form of supererogatory worship, "especially in *fadā'il al-a'māl*"; idem, *Nayl al-awṭār sharḥ Muntakhab al-akḥbār*, ed. Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Ra'ūf Sa'd and Muṣṭafā Muḥammad al-Hawwārī, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1398/1978), 3:330 (*Bāb mā jā'a fī al-ṣalāt bayn al-maghrib wa'l-ṣubḥ*).

¹³⁵ He writes after al-Shawkānī's name "*quddisa sirruhu*"; Muḥammad Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, *Nuzul al-abrār bi'l-ilm al-ma'thūr min al-ad'iya wa'l-adhkār* (Istanbul: Maṭba'at al-Jawā'ib, 1301/[1884]), 6-8; cf. idem, *Fath al-bayān fī maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-'Āshima, 1965-), 1:23. For a useful work on Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, see Saeedullah, *The Life and Works of Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan, Nawab of Bhopal* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1973).

¹³⁶ Khān, *Fath al-bayān*, 1:18.

¹³⁷ Aḥmad Shākīr, ed., *al-Bā'ith al-ḥathīth*, 76; al-Mu'allimī, *al-Anwār al-kāshifa*, 91. For a useful study of Shākīr, see Ron Shaham, "An Egyptian Judge in a Period of Change: Qāḍī Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākīr, 1892-1958," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 3 (1999): 440-55.

completely the use of weak ḥadīths. Not only does the body of *ṣaḥīḥ* and *ḥasan* ḥadīths suffice the Muslims, he argued, but “we do not feel in our souls a belief in the reliability of weak ḥadīths. It is, after all, for that reason that we graded them as weak.”¹³⁸

The most forceful and articulate rejection of using weak ḥadīths for any purpose comes from the most iconoclastic and influential Traditionalist Salafī scholar of the twentieth century: the Syrian Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999).¹³⁹ Like Modernist Salafīs, al-Albānī identifies the causes of many superstitious and baseless beliefs as weak and forged ḥadīths.¹⁴⁰ He notes the arguments of scholars for the permissibility of seeking intercession with God (the *bête noire* of Salafīs) by invoking the Prophet or saints: that weak ḥadīths allowing these are admissible as proof because “weak ḥadīths are acted on as long as their flaw is not severe and they concern matters of exhortation and dissuasion.” Al-Albānī objects furiously that the question of the permissibility of seeking intercession is clearly a matter of legal permissibility/prohibition, not one of exhortation/dissuasion. Even weightier than a mere issue of law, the question of intercession is a theological one. In fact, it involves “explicit associationism (*shirk*).”¹⁴¹

Building on the treatment of using weak ḥadīths by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī and Aḥmad Shākir, al-Albānī explicitly rejects those who claim consensus (*ijmāʿ*) on allowing the use of weak ḥadīths in the virtues of actions. He cites as evidence the objections of titans like Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj as well as lesser figures like Ibn Ḥazm. After presenting Muslim’s rejection of weak ḥadīths, al-Albānī asserts, “And this, by God, is what I believe (*wa hādhā adīnu Allāh bihi*), that weak ḥadīths are not to be acted on at all (*muṭlaq^{an}*), not in virtues, not in things legally recommended (*mustaḥabbāt*) and not in any other things.”¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Ṣubḥī al-Ṣāliḥ, *ʿUlūm al-ḥadīth wa muṣṭalaḥuhu*, 24th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li’l-Malāyīn, 2000), 212.

¹³⁹ For a discussion of al-Albānī’s life and career, see Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 321 ff.; Kamaruddin Amin, “Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī on Muslim’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*: A Critical Study of his Method,” *Islamic Law and Society* 11, no. 2 (2004): 149-76.

¹⁴⁰ Al-Albānī, *al-Tawassul: anwāʾuhu wa aḥkāmuhu*, ed. Muḥammad ʿĪd al-ʿAbbāsī (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 1421/2001), 21.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*; 101, 115, 133.

¹⁴² Al-Albānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḡīr*, 1:50.

He quotes al-Shawkānī verbatim on the qualitative unity of rulings—all *aḥkām* are “on equal footing (*mutasāwiyat al-aqdām*).”¹⁴³

In his critical recension of al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Jāmi’ al-ṣaḡhīr* and Yūsuf b. Ismā’īl al-Nabahānī’s (d. 1932) additions (published 1969-74), al-Albānī notes Ibn Ḥajar’s three requirements. He astutely demonstrates, however, how these conditions effectively prohibit the use of weak ḥadīths completely. First of all, the requirement that a person know that the ḥadīth is not extremely weak or forged requires either a strong grasp of ḥadīth criticism or consulting an expert, both of which are rare in the modern period. Moreover, people who claim to follow the three requirements for weak ḥadīths frequently violate this rule. Since they have little experience with ḥadīth criticism, whenever someone knowledgeable in ḥadīths warns them of a ḥadīth’s weakness “they immediately fall back on the principle claimed here that ‘weak ḥadīths are acted on in the virtues of actions’, and if you mention this first requirement (i.e., that it not be very weak or forged) they fall silent without speaking a word.”

As for the second condition—that the weak ḥadīth be subsumed under some general principle of the Shariah, in that case it is really the principle that is being acted on, not the ḥadīth. Here, al-Albānī explains, the ḥadīth’s role is “formal, not actual (*ghayr ḥaqīqī*)....” As for the third condition, al-Albānī comments that “I have learned that the vast majority of those who act on weak ḥadīths in virtues do not know their weakness, and this is against the aim [of the condition].”¹⁴⁴ Here al-Albānī’s objection centers on an unprecedented insight: why would people who heard a preacher citing exhortatory ḥadīths act on them if they did not think the Prophet said them?

In a lengthy quotation, al-Albānī also resurrects al-Shāṭibī’s remarks about the contradiction between the Sunni commitment to textual authenticity and the use of weak ḥadīths. He asks rhetorically ‘what is the point of ḥadīth criticism’ if we employ reports that the science rates as unreliable.¹⁴⁵ The categorical prohibition on using weak ḥadīths as

¹⁴³) Al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-dā’ifa*, 1:653-4.

¹⁴⁴) Al-Albānī, *Ṣaḡhīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-ṣaḡhīr*, 1:52-5. Cf. al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-dā’ifa*, 1:651.

¹⁴⁵) Al-Albānī, *Ṣaḡhīḥ al-Tarḡīb wa’l-tarḥīb*, 3 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif, 2000), 1:60.

articulated by al-Albānī has resonated amongst other leading Traditionalist Salafī ḥadīth scholars as well, such as the Saudi ‘Abdallāh al-Sa’d.¹⁴⁶

The Traditionalist Salafī rejection of using weak ḥadīths has proven one of the shibboleths of that school of thought. Beginning with Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, Traditionalist Salafī scholars have generated a genre of works devoted to sorting weak from sound ḥadīths in the mainstay ḥadīth books of the Sunni tradition. Khān composed his *Nuzul al-abrār* to summarize earlier books on pious invocations (*adhkār*), like that of al-Nawawī, but to purge them of any unreliable attributions to the Prophet or Muslim saints and leave only prayers from the Qur’ān and the authentic Sunna.¹⁴⁷ Al-Albānī composed a series of books identifying the weak ḥadīths found in famous works such as al-Mundhirī’s (d. 656/1258) *al-Tarḡhib wa’l-tarḥīb*, al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Jāmi’ al-ṣaḡhīr*, al-Bukhārī’s *al-Adab al-mufrad* and finally the canonical Four *Sunans* of Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā’ī and Ibn Mājah.¹⁴⁸

This rejection of weak ḥadīths forms part of the larger Traditionalist Salafī epistemological vision, which divides ḥadīths into sound ones (*ṣaḥīḥ*) that merit inclusion in religious discourse and weak ones (*ḍa’īf*) that do not. Scholars like al-Albānī conceive of this division as reconstituting the epistemology of the early *ahl al-ḥadīth*, who described ḥadīths as ‘weak’ or ‘sound’ until the appearance of the intermediate *ḥasan* rating in the late third/ninth century. Unlike scholars such as Ibn Ḥanbal who allowed acting on corroborated ‘weak’ ḥadīths, al-Albānī would classify such ḥadīths as *ṣaḥīḥ*. Authenticity and actionability are corresponding features in al-Albānī’s view. This two-fold division of ḥadīths has attracted the ire of many non-Salafis, who see

¹⁴⁶ Al-Sa’d states that “the correct stance is that weak ḥadīths cannot be used in *ahkām* or *faḍā’il*”; ‘Abdallāh al-Sa’d, “Sharḥ *al-Muqīza* Part 4” lecture from http://www.islamway.com/?iw_s=Scholar&ciw_a=series&series_id=487, last accessed 12/02.

¹⁴⁷ Khān, *Nuzul al-abrār*, 4.

¹⁴⁸ See al-Albānī, *Ḍa’īf al-Adab al-mufrad* (Jubayl, Saudi Arabia: Dār al-Ṣiddīq, 1994); idem, *Ḍa’īf Sunan Abi Dāwūd* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1408/1988); idem, *Ḍa’īf Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1411/1991); idem, *Ḍa’īf Sunan al-Nasā’ī* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1411/1990); idem, *Ḍa’īf Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1988); idem, *Ḍa’īf al-Tarḡhib wa’l-tarḥīb*, 2 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif, 1421/2000); idem, *Ḍa’īf al-Jāmi’ al-ṣaḡhīr* ([Damascus]: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, [1969-]). See also from al-Albānī’s student Muqbil b. Ḥādī al-Wādī’ (d. 2001), *al-Ṣaḥīḥ al-musnad min asbāb al-nuzul* ([n.p.]: al-Jāmi’a al-Islāmiyya, [n.d.]).

it as dismissing the long-standing Sunni division of ḥadīths into the three levels of *ṣaḥīḥ/ḥasan/ḍaʿīf* and the mainstream acceptance of acting on weak ḥadīths. Such critics view the division of the Four *Sunan* into weak and sound ḥadīths as preposterous. The authors of these great collections, they contend, included ḥadīths that were either authentic on the basis of their *isnād*, bolstered by communal practice, or reliable enough to be used in non-legal fields. All the contents were applicable in one realm or the other.¹⁴⁹

The Traditionalist Salafī school of al-Albānī has also strongly influenced the controversial and popular Egyptian scholar Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, whose writing on weak ḥadīths combines Modernist and Traditionalist Salafī concerns.¹⁵⁰ In his landmark work *Kayfa nataʿāmalu maʿa al-sunna al-nabawiyya*, he notes that weak ḥadīths have been allowed on the virtues of actions according to certain conditions, “but many [Muslims] have badly exploited their use and have gone astray from the straight path and contaminated the pure well-spring of Islam.” Like Riḍā and al-Albānī, he remarks that “books of preaching, manners (*raḡāʾiq*) and Sufism are replete with this type of ḥadīth,” as are *tafsīrs*.¹⁵¹ Al-Qaraḍāwī seconds al-Albānī’s conclusion that Ibn Ḥajar’s three conditions effectively prohibit using weak ḥadīths and praises al-Albānī’s works identifying weak ḥadīths in mainstay ḥadīth collections.¹⁵²

Like Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Qaraḍāwī emphasizes the social cost of utilizing weak ḥadīths in public religious discourse. He writes that, even if ḥadīths used in exhortation/dissuasion create no legal rulings, they nonetheless inform an aspect of the public religious worldview. Conscious that his observation is a departure from the legacy of most pre-modern Sunni scholars, al-Qaraḍāwī insists on his observation “even if our earlier imāms never noticed this.” He calls on the reader to

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Maḥmūd Saʿīd Mamduḥ, *al-Taʾrīf bi-awḥām man qaṣṣama al-Sunan ilā ṣaḥīḥ wa ḍaʿīf*, 6 vols. (Dubai: Dār al-Buḥūth, 1421/2000), 1:9-177; Gibril Fouad Haddad, *Sunna Notes I* (Turkey: Aqsa Publications, 2005), 100-4; ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, ed., *Ẓafar al-amānī*, 186.

¹⁵⁰ For excellent studies on, and contextualization of, al-Qaraḍāwī, see Bettina Gräf and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, eds., *Global Mufti: the Phenomenon of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī* (London: Hurst & Co., 2009).

¹⁵¹ Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa nataʿāmalu maʿa al-sunna al-nabawiyya* (Herndon, VA: International Institute for Islamic Thought, 1990), 34-5.

¹⁵² Al-Qaraḍāwī; 67, 76, 80; idem, *al-Muntaqā min kitāb al-Tarḡīb wa al-tarḥīb*, 1:59.

appreciate “what [using such ḥadīths] entails in terms of ruining the relative status (*al-nisab*) that the all-wise Lawmaker assigned to obligations and acts.” “Each act—commanded or forbidden,” he continues, “has its own weight or ‘cost (*siʿr*)’ in the eyes of the Lawmaker in relation to other acts.” It is not permitted, he concludes, for us to exceed the proper ‘cost’ assigned to an action by God in the Qurʾān and authentic Sunna.¹⁵³

Al-Qaraḍāwī sees the pulpit and popular religious celebrations as the most dangerous domains for the abuse of weak ḥadīths. He urges Friday preachers to use only relied-upon books of ḥadīths and to avoid the weak and forged, “which have become, tragically, the trade goods of many *khaṭībs* and religious guides.”¹⁵⁴ At one celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, al-Qaraḍāwī bemoans, he heard the preachers use only two non-weak ḥadīths!¹⁵⁵

A Surprising Ally: Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī

In the twentieth century, the fiercest intellectual opponent of both the Modernist Salafism of ʿAbduh and Riḍā and the Traditionalist Salafism of al-Shawkānī was Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952).

An Ottoman subject of Circassian extraction, al-Kawtharī rose to high levels of Istanbul’s religious bureaucracy before fleeing the nascent Turkish Republic in 1922 and settling soon thereafter in Egypt. Possessed of a peerless command of the breadth and depth of the Sunni scholarly heritage and a razor-sharp tongue, the vehemently pro-Ḥanafī, pro-Ashʿarī, pro-Sufi al-Kawtharī penned countless articles and booklets against those he perceived as abandoning the classical institutions of *madhhabs*, speculative theology and Sufism.

In the light of his vehement beliefs, it is al-Kawtharī’s stance on the use of weak ḥadīths that constitutes perhaps the only position that he held in common with his Salafī opponents. He upholds Ibn Ḥajar’s three conditions, stating that various great ḥadīth masters across the centuries had affirmed them.¹⁵⁶ Al-Kawtharī goes on, however, to

¹⁵³ Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa nataʾamaluh*, 78.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 61-2; cf. 67.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 68.

¹⁵⁶ Al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt*, 46.

support the categorical rejection of using weak ḥadīths advanced by Muslim and al-Shawkānī (he also attributes this position to al-Bukhārī). He notes, “They have a strong argument on that issue that cannot be ignored (*wa lahum bayān qawī fi al-mas’ala lā yuhmalu*).” Al-Kawtharī further buttresses the categorical rejection of weak ḥadīths by attempting to neutralize the statements of Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Mahdī allowing it. These scholars allowed for laxity in transmitting and recording weak ḥadīths, he argues, not using them as proof, “as appears evidently to those who look into their statements.”¹⁵⁷

Al-Kawtharī reveals the reason for his unlikely agreement with his Salafī opponents: the dangers of Orientalism. Discussing a report of the caliph Abū Bakr supposedly ordering a female prisoner to be drawn and quartered, al-Kawtharī lambastes the great Shāfi‘ī ḥadīth scholar of Baghdad al-Dāraquṭnī (d. 385/995) for including it in his *Sunan* without alerting the reader to its unreliability. He explains, “And some scholars, the horizons of whose thought are narrow, have offered opportunities to the likes of Goldziher to attack Islam and Islamic history by their silence on the disastrous narrations they transmit.”¹⁵⁸ Those scholars who take the permissive mainstream Sunni stance on using weak ḥadīths, al-Kawtharī warns, are “destroying a garrison to build a hut.”¹⁵⁹ No pedagogical good resulting from them can outway the liabilities they create. In a later essay, al-Kawtharī cautions Muslims to be careful about which reports they feature in the biographies of the Prophet and the early Muslims. Western Orientalists, he warns, exploit these stories to cast Islam in a foul and backward light. Even Ibn Ishāq’s renowned *Sīra*¹⁶⁰ cannot be cited uncritically, since its author relied on unreliable ḥadīth transmitters.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 47.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 55.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶⁰ Of course, in criticizing some of Ibn Ishāq’s inclusions in the *Sīra*, al-Kawtharī was not breaking new ground. This had been done by Ibn Hishām in the third/ninth century in that author’s recension of the *Sīra*, which removed stories like the Satanic verses and a report that the Prophet considered suicide after his first encounter with Gabriel; A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad*, 16th ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003); 106, 166.

¹⁶¹ Al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt*, 339.

Defenders of the Late Sunni Tradition

In the face of Modernist and Traditionalist Salafism, one Muslim school of thought has upheld the mainstream Sunni position of al-Nawawī and al-Suyūṭī. Scholars falling in this camp generally identify with the Late Sunni Tradition: a guild-like allegiance to the Sunni schools of law, the Ashʿarī school of speculative theology and Sufi brotherhoods. Such scholars proclaim that it is precisely the pre-modern dimensions of Islam so reviled by the Salafis that mark Islam's true path. The mainstream Sunni position on accepting weak ḥadīths has been a hallmark of Late Sunni Traditionalists, who cite what they claim as the consensus of pre-modern Sunni scholars on the issue as evidence.

In the early modern period, in fact, using weak ḥadīths took on a baroque tone among Late Sunni Traditionalists. The rector of Egypt's Azhar Mosque, the jurist and theologian Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Bayjūrī (d. 1860), allowed weak ḥadīths even in the lofty realm of theology. Explaining that "weak ḥadīths can be acted on in the virtues of actions" in the context of God's names and attributes, he attempted to justify this unprecedented laxity by distinguishing between the theology of belief and theology of action. Al-Bayjūrī asserted that Muslims can derive information about God's attributes from weak ḥadīths provided these ḥadīths do not affect belief about God (*sic!*) but only influence their acts.¹⁶²

The Indian Ḥanafī scholar Zafar Aḥmad al-Tahānawī (d. 1974) also takes the permissive Sunni stance in his *Qawā'id al-ḥadīth*.¹⁶³ His position constitutes part of his rebuttal of Indian Salafis, who accused the Ḥanafī school of law of denying Prophetic ḥadīths the respect they deserve. Al-Tahānawī's argument for the unconditional use of weak ḥadīths outside of law serves as a plank in a larger argument that the Ḥanafī school has always heeded ḥadīths, even those with lackluster *isnāds*, within their broader legal framework of analogical reasoning.¹⁶⁴

Other early modern and modern proponents of the mainstream Sunni position have included the Ottoman judge and ḥadīth author

¹⁶² Al-Burhān Ibrāhīm al-Bayjūrī, *Ḥāshiyat al-imām al-Bayjūrī 'alā Jawharat al-tawḥīd*, ed. 'Alī Jum'a (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1427/2006), 154.

¹⁶³ Al-Tahānawī, *Qawā'id al-ḥadīth*, 92 ff.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 95-110.

Yūsuf al-Nabahānī (d. 1932) and the great Syrian ḥadīth scholar and editor ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997).¹⁶⁵ The contemporary American, English-medium traditionalists Hamza Yusuf of the Zaytuna Institute and Gibriel Fouad Haddad (based in Brunei) also argue for the mainstream Sunni acceptance of weak ḥadīths against Salafī opponents.¹⁶⁶

Another brother from the maverick Ghumārī family deserves special mention due to his *sui generis* status. Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1960), ‘Abdallāh’s (see above) older sibling, would seem clearly aligned with the Late Sunni Tradition in his devoted defense of Sufism and an adoration for the Family of the Prophet that bordered on Shiism—he argued that ‘Alī was the best and most knowledgeable of all the Prophet’s Companions and that Fāṭima was the first *quṭb* and “source of all mystical knowledge (*manba’ al-ma’ārif*).”¹⁶⁷ In his methodology, if not in his stances, however, Aḥmad al-Ghumārī closely resembled the traditionalist Salafīs he so despised. He fiercely rejected the “heresy of *taqlīd*” and asserted that the true Muslim scholars were the ones who “had no *imām* other than the Messenger of God and no *madhhab* other than his law.”¹⁶⁸

In his book-length argument that the preferred position in the Mālikī school of law was that Muslims should pray holding their hands in front of them and not at their sides, Aḥmad al-Ghumārī takes the mainstream Sunni position that weak ḥadīths are admissible in debating issues of *faḍā’il* and legal recommendation.¹⁶⁹ However, his argument does not stem from any distinction between these light matters and the high burden of proof required for prohibition and obligation. Instead,

¹⁶⁵ Al-Albānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 3rd ed, 2 vols. (Riyadh: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1408/1988), 1:39. Al-Nabahānī’s introduction to his *al-Fatḥ al-kabīr*, a three-volume addendum (including approximately 4,400 ḥadīths) to the *Jāmi’ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, is included in al-Albānī’s edition; ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, ed., *Zaḥar al-amānī*, 182 ff.

¹⁶⁶ Haddad, *Sunna Notes*, 100-4; Shaykh Amin al-Mazrui, *The Content of Character: Ethical Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad*, trans. Hamza Yusuf ([n.p.]: Sandala, 2005), 54-7.

¹⁶⁷ Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *Al-Burhān al-jalī fī taḥqīq intisāb al-ṣūfiyya ilā ‘Alī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, [n.d.]); 24, 77.

¹⁶⁸ Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *al-Ajwiba al-ṣārifa li-ishkāl ḥadīth al-tā’ifa*, ed. ‘Adnān Zuhār (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1423/2002), 65.

¹⁶⁹ Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *al-Mathnūnī wa’l-battār fī naḥr al-‘anīd al-mi’tḥār al-tā’in fīmā ṣaḥḥa min al-sunan wa’l-āthār* (Cairo: al-Maṭba’a al-Islāmiyya, 1352/1933), 174.

Aḥmad al-Ghumārī reveals his true ‘Salafī’ colors by bypassing the historical body of Islamic legal thought to return to the methods of the early scholars. He explains that the founding Muslim jurists and their early schools of law regularly accepted weak ḥadīths in even the weightiest problems of law. If one actually examines the ḥadīths that the *madhhabs* originally used as their proof texts (*aḥādīth al-aḥkām*), al-Ghumārī notes, as much as one-half of them are unreliable from a strict *isnād* perspective. These ḥadīths had been accepted as proofs because they seconded *qiyās* or were corroborated by practice or consensus.¹⁷⁰

Conclusion

The Muslim debate over the use of unreliable ḥadīths forms part of a perennial discourse on the nature of truth in scripture and historical writing: is truth in scripture and history defined by a correspondence to reality or by serving some utility? Does a guardian class have the right to make this decision on the nature of truth for the masses, and can this class indulge superficial falsehoods for the sake of advancing more profound truths? This ancient and more global discussion requires a forum larger than an article for discussion.

From an Abrahamic comparative perspective, the Judaic and Christian traditions have also grappled with the tension between a demand for utility and the primacy of textual authenticity.¹⁷¹ Neither tradition,

¹⁷⁰ Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *al-Mathnūnī wa’l-battār*, 180.

¹⁷¹ As articulated by voices like Maimonides (d. 1204), the Judaic tradition distinguished between the paramount place of the legal interpretive tradition (Halakha) as opposed to the less essential body of homiletic and exegetical literature (Aggada). In the Disputation of Barcelona in 1263, the famous rabbi Nachmanides (Ramban) (d. 1270) faced a Christian opponent, Pablo Christiani, who used stories from *midrash* to argue that Jewish scripture provided evidence that Jesus was the messiah. Nachmanides responded that material from the *midrash* is not as authoritative and reliable as Jewish law and that it is not compelling evidence in substantive arguments. In the Christian scriptural tradition, we find varied attitudes on the use and acceptability of the Old Testament ‘Apocrypha’, those fifteen books that were included in the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate but not in the Hebrew Bible. Medieval Catholicism viewed these books as part of the Biblical canon, since St. Jerome (d. 420) had included them in his Vulgate. During Peter Abelard’s (d. 1142) trial for heresy, for example, one clerical participant quoted the Apocryphal *Book of Susanna* as an argument

however, developed a system as elaborate as that of Sunni Islam. Its grading of the admissibility of proof texts according to authenticity and assigning them to tiers of religious discourse is unique to my knowledge.

Early Sunnis allowed ḥadīths whose authenticity they doubted into discourse on manners, preaching and history because they saw these subjects as falling outside the true purviews of religion: law and ritual. Sunni orthodoxy generally accepted this laxity due to the supreme pedagogical utility that many of these unreliable ḥadīths, often colorful and compelling, offered. It was not until the sixth/twelfth century that significant objections rose. Ibn al-Jawzī and those influenced by him saw that it was precisely the effects that these non-legal ḥadīths had on public religious behavior and practice that necessitated rejecting them. Moreover, the mandate of the Shariah was holistic, and the duty to preserve it in its pure form admitted no distinction between laws and preaching.

The scholarly trend that rejected the use of weak ḥadīths was rooted in the reformist wave that appeared among Sunni scholars in the Ayyubid and Mamluk realms in the seventh/thirteenth century and achieved its pinnacle in the landmark works of Ibn Taymiyya. The twin reformist missions of eliminating popular heresies and returning to the scriptural purity of early Islam reemerged in force with the eighteenth-century movements of revival and reform.

to give Abelard a chance to explain his views. In 1546, the Catholic Council of Trent officially validated the 'Apocryphal' books as part of the Bible. With its core focus on scripture, Lutheranism and its branches have been less receptive of the Old Testament Apocrypha. Although he did not reject them as misguided or forged, in his translation of the Bible Luther placed these books in a liminal area between the Old and New Testaments. He introduces them as "Apocrypha, that is, books which are not held equal to the Sacred Scriptures, and nevertheless are useful and good to read." Medieval Christian theologians were generally much laxer on stories involving the lives of saints and not involving principles of faith; Ramban, *Writings and Discourses Volume II*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shiloah Publishing, 1978), 669; H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 242; Peter Abelard, "Historia Calimatatum," in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin Classics, 1974), 83; *Book of Susanna* 48; George H. Tavard, "The Catholic Reform in the Sixteenth Century," *Church History* 26, no. 3 (1957): 281; Frank C. Porter, "The Apocrypha," *Biblical World* 8, no. 4 (1896): 273; Hoppolyte Delehaye, *The Work of the Bollandists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1922), 119.

It is thus no surprise that the categorical rejection of using unreliable ḥadīths gained new ground in this period. It achieved unprecedented success in the modern period, when both Traditionalist and Modernist Salafis embraced the blanket prohibition on unreliable attributions to the Prophet. Traditionalist Salafis saw the acceptance of weak ḥadīths as part of Muslims' failure to preserve the sound scriptural foundations of Islam. Modernist Salafis viewed the body of weak ḥadīths as the seedbed of irrational superstition. Eliminating them was an easy step towards producing a more streamlined scriptural basis for Islam. Moreover, these unreliable ḥadīths carried a high social cost, threatening the Muslim community's ability to assign proper priorities to elements of belief and action. The sense that weak ḥadīths were a liability in the face of Modernity and Western expectations alarmed even al-Kawtharī, a scholar who despised the Salafī reformist mission more than anyone.

Not all schools of modern Islamic thought, however, have cracked down on unreliable ḥadīths. Late Sunni Traditionalists have continued to uphold the classical, mainstream Sunni acceptance of weak ḥadīths. Just as rejecting them became a hallmark of the Salafī attack on the institutions of pre-modern Islam, so have defenders of those institutions embraced the acceptance of weak ḥadīths as a sign of loyalty to them.

Appendix: Books of *Faḍā'il al-a'māl* and *al-Targhib wa al-tarhib*

- Ibn Zanjawayh, Ḥumayd b. Makhlad (d. 251/855-6), *Kitāb al-tarhib wa'l-targhib*¹⁷²
- Ibn al-Sunnī, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad (d. 364/974), *Faḍā'il al-a'māl*¹⁷³
- Abū al-Shaykh 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad al-Iṣbahānī (d. 369/979), *Thawāb al-a'māl*¹⁷⁴
- Ibn Bābawayh al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, *Thawāb al-a'māl wa 'iqāb al-a'māl*¹⁷⁵

¹⁷²) Brown, *Hadith*, 35.

¹⁷³) Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 1:198.

¹⁷⁴) Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf al-sāda al-muttaqīn sharḥ Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, [1973]), 1:453. Al-Dhahabī notes that this book was five volumes; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, ed. Shu'ayb Arnā'ūṭ and Akram al-Būshī, vol. 16 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1419/1998), 278.

¹⁷⁵) (Mashhad: Majma' al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyya, 1408/[1988]). I owe this citation to Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *al-Āmāl al-mustazrifā 'alā al-Risāla al-mustazrifā*, ed. Fātiḥa Būla'ish al-Tijānī (Beirut: Dār al-Biyāriq, 1422/2001), 117.

- Ibn Shāhīn, ‘Umar b. Aḥmad (d. 385/996), *al-Tarḡhib fī faḍā’il al-a‘māl wa thawāb dhālik*¹⁷⁶
- Al-Bayhaqī, Abū Bakr Aḥmad (d. 458/1066), *al-Tarḡhib wa’l-tarḡhib*¹⁷⁷
- Al-Ashqar, Abū Maṣṣūr Maḥmūd b. Ismā‘īl al-Iṣbahānī (d. 514/1121), *al-Tarḡhib*¹⁷⁸
- Al-Madinī, Abū Mūsā Muḥammad b. ‘Umar (d. 581/1185), *al-Tarḡhib wa’l-tarḡhib*¹⁷⁹
- Qawwām al-Dīn Ismā‘īl b. Muḥammad al-Iṣbahānī (d. 535/1140-1), *al-Tarḡhib wa’l-tarḡhib*¹⁸⁰
- Al-Maqdisī, Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn (d. 643/1245), *Faḍā’il al-a‘māl*¹⁸¹
- Al-Mundhirī, ‘Abd al-‘Azīm b. ‘Abd al-Qawī (d. 656/1258), *Kitāb al-Tarḡhib wa’l-tarḡhib*
- Al-Dimyāṭī, Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Mu‘min b. Khalaf (d. 705/1306), *al-Matjar al-rābiḥ fī thawāb al-‘amal al-ṣāliḥ*¹⁸²
- Al-Nasafī, Abū Barakāt ‘Abdallāh b. Aḥmad (d. 710/1310), *Faḍā’il al-a‘māl*¹⁸³
- Al-Yāfi‘ī, ‘Abdallāh b. As‘ad (d. 768/1368), *Faḍā’il al-a‘māl*¹⁸⁴
- Al-Burhānpūrī, Muḥammad b. Yār (d. 1698 CE), *Tarḡhib al-ḥasanāt wa tarḡhib al-sayyī’āt*¹⁸⁵
- Al-Jurāfī, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad (d. 1898 CE), *al-Tarḡhib wa’l-tarḡhib* (incomplete)¹⁸⁶
- Al-Kāndahlawī, Muḥammad Zakariyyā’ (d. 1982 CE), *Faḍā’il al-a‘māl*¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁶ Ed. Ṣā’il Muṣliḥ al-Wā’il (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1995).

¹⁷⁷ Al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-huffāz*, 3:219.

¹⁷⁸ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, ed. Shu‘ayb Arnā’ūt, vol. 19 (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1406/1986), 429.

¹⁷⁹ Muḥammad Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Dimashqī, *Majmū‘ fīhi rasā’il al-ḥāfiẓ Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Dimashqī*, ed. Mish‘al b. Bānī al-Muṭayrī (Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1422/2001), 141.

¹⁸⁰ Ḥājjī Khalifa, *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1429/2008), 1:418.

¹⁸¹ Ed. Ghassān ‘Isā Muḥammad Harmās (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1987).

¹⁸² Ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī and Aḥmad al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1992).

¹⁸³ Khalifa, *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, 2:511. The ms. is in the Princeton Library.

¹⁸⁴ Noted in editor’s introduction to Ibn Shāhīn, *al-Tarḡhib*, 1:69.

¹⁸⁵ Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-A‘lām*, 16th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li’l-‘Ālamīn, 2005), 7:135.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 1:248.

¹⁸⁷ *Tahqiq al-maqāl fī takhrīj aḥādīth Faḍā’il al-a‘māl*, ed. Laṭīf al-Raḥmān al-Bahrā’ijī (Dubai: Maktabat al-Ḥaramayn, 1425/2004).