

How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics Did *Matn* Criticism and Why It's So Hard to Find

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Abstract

Western scholars generally agree that early ḥadīth critics limited their authentication of ḥadīths to examining *isnāds*. The argument that these critics took the *matn* into account has relied on material of dubious reliability or on works produced after the formative period of the Sunni ḥadīth tradition. By providing examples of *matn* criticism from the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries, I prove that Sunni ḥadīth critics did in fact engage in *matn* criticism; and I argue that these critics consciously manufactured the image of exclusive focus on the *isnād* in an effort to ward off attacks by rationalist opponents. By demonstrating a high correlation between the ḥadīths found in early books of transmitter criticism and those found in later books of forged ḥadīth with explicit *matn* criticism, I show that early critics engaged in *matn* criticism far more often than appears to have been the case, disguising this activity in the language of *isnād* criticism.

Keywords

matn criticism, *ḥadīth* criticism, *ḥadīth* forgery, al-Bukhārī, Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *isnād*, *munkar*

Introduction

Western scholars have accepted that early Muslim ḥadīth scholars focused their efforts to determine the authenticity of reports attributed to the Prophet principally on their chains of transmission (*isnād* pl. *asānīd*) and ignored the key component of modern historical investigation: the contents of the reports themselves. Western scholars

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have been entirely justified in this conclusion, as participants in the first four centuries of the Sunni ḥadīth tradition actively touted their obsession with the formal aspects of *isnād* criticism to the exclusion of any noteworthy interest in criticizing the contents of ḥadīths. The efforts of some Western scholars and modern Muslim apologists to prove that early ḥadīth critics did in fact look beyond the *isnād* have thus regularly foundered on the lack of any exculpatory evidence from the early Islamic period.

In this article, I reevaluate our outlook on the methods of Sunni ḥadīth critics in the formative 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries, which encompassed the careers of influential critics such as Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and 'Alī b. 'Umar al-Dāraquṭnī (d. 385/995). First, I will provide examples of early critics explicitly rejecting ḥadīths as fraudulent on the grounds that their contents were unacceptable, proving that content criticism was an established component of their critical arsenal.¹ Second, I will demonstrate that what has appeared to be the critically obtuse edifice of the early Sunni ḥadīth tradition—with its evident inability to perceive glaring anachronism or illogical meanings—does not accurately represent the reality of early ḥadīth criticism. Rather, an indifference to the contents of ḥadīths was an image consciously manufactured by early Sunni ḥadīth critics as an essential part of the cult of methodology they created around the *isnād* in the face of their rationalist opponents. Finally, I will demonstrate that when the Sunni ḥadīth tradition openly began to shift its attention from *isnād* criticism to

¹ In discussions of ḥadīth criticism, the term 'matn criticism' has become conventional for indicating criticism of the text of the ḥadīth (as opposed to criticism of the chain of transmission, or *isnād* criticism). I believe the term 'content criticism' more accurately represents what Western scholars have meant by *matn* criticism, namely the notion that something in the contents or *meaning* of the ḥadīth is problematic. An early Muslim ḥadīth critic could criticize the *matn* of a ḥadīth without ever touching upon its meaning; a critic like al-Dāraquṭnī (d. 385/995) might object to the wording of one narration of a Prophetic tradition because it deviated from a more established version without the problematic narration's meaning differing at all. Of course, the term 'content criticism' here has no relation to the 'content criticism (*Sachkritik*)' employed in New Testament studies. See Jonathan A.C. Brown, "Criticism of the Proto-Hadith Canon: al-Dāraquṭnī's Adjustment of the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no. 1 (2004): 26; Edgar Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 71.

content criticism in the 6th/12th century, ḥadīth critics drew directly on the material that earlier critics ostensibly had criticized for *isnād* flaws. The significant correlation between the material that later critics rejected for content reasons and early *isnād* criticisms suggests that early ḥadīth scholars employed content criticism far more often than would appear.

The State of the Field on Early *Ḥadīth* Criticism: Too Early or Too Late

Western scholars of Islam can hardly be blamed for concluding that early ḥadīth critics focused on *isnād* criticism to the exclusion of content criticism. Indeed, Islamic modernists such as Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and Jamal al-Banna have seconded this Orientalist critique.² It was not until the late 4th/10th century that Muslim scholarship even produced a work devoted to listing forged or extremely unreliable ḥadīths: the *Kitāb al-mawḍū'āt* (Book of Forged Ḥadīths) (now lost) of Abū Sa'īd Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Naqqāsh al-Iṣbahānī (d. 414/1023).³ The earliest extant book on forged ḥadīths is the *Tadhkirat al-mawḍū'āt* of Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Maḥdisī (d. 507/1113). The first systematic discussion and application of content criticism among ḥadīth scholars did not appear until Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's (d. 751/1350) *al-Manār al-munīf fi al-ṣaḥīḥ wa'l-da'īf*. The critical output of Muslim ḥadīth scholars in the formative 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries was confined to the capacious tomes they devoted to identifying and evaluating ḥadīth transmitters (*rijāl*) or examining various narrations of ḥadīths for technical flaws (*'ilal*) not associated with their meanings. Books of transmitter criticism include the *al-Tārīkh al-kabīr*, the *al-Tārīkh al-awsaṭ* and the *Kitāb al-ḍu'afā' al-ṣaḥīr* of al-Bukhārī, the *Kitāb al-ḍu'afā' al-kabīr* of Abū

² Noha El-Hennawy, "In Word and Deed: Reformist Thinker Gamal El-Banna Re-ignites an Age-old Debate: Contesting the Role of Sunnah in Modern-day Islam"; <http://www.egypttoday.com/article.aspx?ArticleId=3351> (last accessed 8/14/06).

³ This work is mentioned by al-Dhahabī in his *Mizān al-i'tidāl*, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), *Mizān al-i'tidāl fī naqd al-rijāl*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bijawī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, [n.d.], reprint of 1963-4 Cairo 'Isā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī edition, citations are to the Beirut edition), 1:119.

Ja'far al-'Uqaylī (d. 323/934) the *Kitāb al-majrūhīn* of Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (d. 354/965) and the *al-Kāmil fī ḍu'afā' al-rijāl* of Ibn 'Adī (d. 365/975-6).⁴ Scholars such as Aḥmad b. Shu'ayb al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915-16), Ibn Manda (d. 395/1004-5) and al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014) did sometimes consciously focus on the forgery (*wad'*) of ḥadīths, but this was done through brief lists of transmitters known to be prominent forgers.⁵

It was the inimitable Ignaz Goldziher who first deduced from this evidence that Muslim scholars investigated reports only “in respect of their outward form[,] and judgment of the value of the contents depends on the judgment of the correctness of the *isnād*.” Even if the text of a ḥadīth is replete with suspicious material, “Nobody is allowed to say: ‘because the *matn* contains a logical contradiction or historical absurdity I doubt the correctness of the *isnād*.” From this Goldziher concludes that “Muslim critics have no feeling for even the crudest anachronisms provided that the *isnād* is correct.” He intimates that the Muslim religious worldview fosters such critical charity, for the Prophet’s divinely granted knowledge of the future explains any anachronisms in his ḥadīths.⁶

⁴ In his study of the *Tārīkh al-kabīr*, Christopher Melchert suggests that the work is not generally concerned with the evaluation of the transmitters it details; a relatively small percentage of entries actually include a rating of the subject. Here I do treat the *Tārīkh al-kabīr* as a work of transmitter criticism because a) it does include evaluations even if they occur in the minority of entries, b) al-Bukhārī’s evaluations of ḥadīths in an entry reflect on the reliability of the transmitter and c) later books of transmitter criticism like the *Kitāb al-ḍu'afā' al-kabīr* (The Great Book of Weak Transmitters) of Abū Ja'far al-'Uqaylī (d. 323/934) treat al-Bukhārī’s *al-Tārīkh al-kabīr* as a major source. See Christopher Melchert, “Bukhārī and Early Hadith Criticism,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001): 12; Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. 'Amr al-'Uqaylī, *Kitāb al-ḍu'afā' al-kabīr*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'ī Amin Qal'ajī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1404/1984), 1:285, 3:345, 4:292.

⁵ Muḥammad b. Ishāq Ibn Manda, *Shurūṭ al-a'imma / Risāla fī bayān faḍl al-akhbār wa sharḥ madhāhib abl al-āthār wa ḥaqīqat al-sunan wa taṣḥīḥ al-riwāyat*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Farīwā'ī (Riyadh: Dār al-Muslim, 1416/1995), 81; Aḥmad b. Shu'ayb al-Nasā'ī, *Kitāb al-ḍu'afā' wa'l-matrūkīn*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Zāyid (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1406/1986), 265 (published with al-Bukhārī’s *Kitāb al-ḍu'afā' al-ṣaghīr*); Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *al-Madkhal ilā ma'rifat al-Iklīl*, ed. Aḥmad b. Fāris al-Sulūm (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1423/2003), 126-44.

⁶ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. S.M. Stern and C.R. Barber (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1971), 2:140-1. Goldziher’s German original, *Mohammedanische Studien*, was

Alfred Guillaume seconded Goldziher's conclusions. "Hadith," he states, "was not criticized from the point of view of what was inherently reasonable and to be regarded as worthy of credence, but from a consideration of the reputation which the guarantors of the tradition bore."⁷ "On the other hand," he adds, "if the subject-matter (*matn*) contained an obvious absurdity or an anachronism there was no ground for rejecting the hadith if the *isnād* was sound."⁸ Later scholars such as A.J. Wensinck, Joseph Schacht, James Robson, von Grunebaum, Fazlur Rahman, G.H.A. Juynboll, F.E. Peters, and Ron Buckley have upheld these conclusions.⁹

Even those Western scholars who do note that Muslim ḥadīth critics heeded the meaning of a ḥadīth when examining its authenticity include only vague allusions to this sensitivity to content.¹⁰ When Western scholars have pursued their discussion of content criticism further, their evidence is either of questionable reliability or concerns sources much later than the formative period of ḥadīth criticism from the 2nd/8th to the 4th/10th centuries.

published in 1889-90. Cf. William Muir, *The Life of Moḥammad* (Edinburgh: George Grant, 1923), xlii.

⁷ Alfred Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Hadith Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 80. Interestingly, Guillaume exempts the great historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) from this generalization because he refused to accept reports he considered impossible regardless of the *isnād*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁹ A.J. Wensinck, "Matn," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Brill CD-ROM 1.0 1999, henceforth *EF*); Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 3; James Robson, "Muslim Tradition: The Question of Authenticity," *Memoirs and Proceedings of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society* 93 (1951-52): 88; Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 111; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 64-66; G.H.A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 139; *idem*, *Studies on the Origins and Uses of Islamic Ḥadīth* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), II:230; F.E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 299, 302; Ron P. Buckley, "On the Origins of Shi'i Ḥadīth," *Muslim World* 88, no. 2 (1998): 167; Shahab Ahmed, "Hadith I: A General Introduction," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, vol. 11 (New York: Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 2003), 444.

¹⁰ J. Robson, "Djarḥ wa ta'dīl," *EF*; Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1991), 71; Tarif Khalidi, *Classical Arab Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1985), 42.

The late Nabia Abbott points out that *isnād* criticism did not establish itself until after the outbreak of the *Fitna* (most likely the Second Civil War) and that prior to that the Companions of the Prophet had relied on content criticism to verify attributions to Muḥammad.¹¹ The evidence that Abbott adduces, however, is problematic. There are indeed famous reports of the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha rejecting Ibn 'Umar's statement that the Prophet warned mourners that a dead relative would be punished for his family's excessive mourning over him because she believed that it violated the Qur'ānic principle that 'no bearer of burdens bears the burdens of another (*lā tazīru wāzirat^{un} wizra ukhrā*) (Qur'ān 53:38).'¹² In another famous report, 'Ā'isha upbraids a Companion who said that the Prophet told the Muslims that their prayer is invalidated if a woman, a black dog or a donkey passes in front of them. "You have compared us to donkeys and dogs!" she retorts. "By God I saw the Prophet (ﷺ) praying with me lying on the bed between him and the direction of prayer...!"¹³ Ibn 'Abbās reportedly objected to Abū Hurayra reporting that the Prophet had said that Muslims must perform ablutions after eating food cooked by fire. Ibn 'Abbās objects, "O Abū Hurayra, are we to perform ablutions from [consuming] oil or heated water!"¹⁴

¹¹ Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Qur'ānic Commentary and Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 75. Content criticism by 'Ā'isha is also used by Fatima Mernissi as evidence of early skepticism towards material attributed to the Prophet; Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1991), 70.

¹² *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-janā'iz, bāb al-mayyit yu'adhdhabu bi-bukā' ahlihi 'alayhi*, cf. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-janā'iz, bāb qawl al-Nabī yu'adhdhabu al-mayyit bi-bā'd bukā' ahlihi 'alayhi*; *Sunan al-Nasā'ī: kitāb al-janā'iz, bāb al-niyāḥa 'alā al-mayyit*.

¹³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-ṣalāt, bāb man qāla lā yaqtā'u al-ṣalāt shay'*; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-ṣalāt, bāb al-ītirāḍ bayn yaday al-muṣallī*.

¹⁴ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-ṭahāra, bāb al-wuḍū' min mā ghayyarat al-nār*. Other reports about early content criticism include the incident in which 'Umar rejected Fāṭima bt. Qays's report that the Prophet had not obliged her ex-husband to provide her with housing and financial report, saying that he would not break with the Qur'ān and what he understood to be the sunna of the Prophet due to an unreliable report; *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-ṭalāq wa'l-li'ān, bāb mā jā'a fī al-muṭallaqa thalāth^{un} lā suknā lahā wa lā nafaqa*. The famous Successor Ibn Sirīn (d. 110/729) is reported to have rejected Abū Ma'shar's claim to be reporting the

This evidence, however, suffers from the same failing as much of the early Islamic historical tradition: we have no surviving documentary evidence of how the Companions approached ḥadīth criticism. Almost all stories about content criticism in the first two generations of the Muslim community come from the mainstay Sunni ḥadīth collections compiled in the mid 3rd/9th century. Earlier material, such as several of the above-mentioned criticisms by ‘Ā’isha, first appears in the late 2nd/8th-century works of al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820).¹⁵ This still does not provide us with an historically reliable picture of content criticism in the fraught era of the Companions. Unfortunately, in terms of its attestation, evidence of content criticism before the generation of critics like al-Bukhārī is contemporaneous with them. Furthermore, stories about ‘Ā’isha rejecting a report attributed to the Prophet due to its objectionable contents do not shed any light on whether or not formative ḥadīth critics like Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) or al-Bukhārī followed suit. These rare reports featuring content criticism by Companions are scattered in the various topical chapters of ḥadīth collections; they are absent in early efforts to outline the ḥadīth scholars’ critical methodology, such as Muslim’s (d. 261/875) introduction to his *Ṣaḥīḥ* or al-Tirmidhī’s (d. 279/892) *Kitāb al-‘ilal*.

While Abbott drew on material that ostensibly predated the development of ḥadīth criticism, other scholars affirming the practice of content criticism in the ḥadīth tradition have relied on evidence that post-dates the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries. John Burton states that “criticism of the *matn* was not so rare as is sometimes claimed,” but the one example he provides comes from the work

judicial rulings of ‘Alī because Abū Ma’shar repeatedly brought him rulings that he knew differed from ‘Alī’s established decisions on issues such as the fate of a slave woman who bears her master a child; Abū Sulaymān Ḥamd al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388/998), *Ma’ālim al-sunan*, 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Ilmiyya, 1401/1981), 4:74.

¹⁵ Abū Ja’far Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933), *al-Sunan al-ma’thūra li’-imām Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mu’ṭī Amin Qal‘ajī (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifa, 1406/1986), 193, 303; Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1420/1999), 4:121-22 (*kitāb al-janā‘iz*, *bāb siyāq akhbār tadullu ‘alā anna al-mayyit yu’adhdhabu bi’l-niyāha ‘alayhi wa mā ruwiya ‘an ‘Ā’isha (r) fī dhālik*).

of the 9th/15th-century scholar al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).¹⁶ In his masterful *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Daniel Brown briefly states that content criticism was not unknown to classical ḥadīth scholars. His footnotes, however, reveal that he relied on a work published in 1960 by Muṣṭafā al-Sibā'ī, which lists fifteen signs of forgery in the contents of a ḥadīth.¹⁷ When we trace the source of these tell-tale signs, however, we find them most exhaustively developed by the early Ottoman-period scholar 'Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn 'Arrāq (d. 963/1556) in his work on forged ḥadīths, *Tanzīh al-sharī'a al-marfū'a 'an al-akhbār al-shanī'a al-mawḍū'a*, and the Mamluk-period scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in his book *al-Manār al-munīf*.¹⁸ These authors in turn derived this list from the earliest Sunni ḥadīth scholar to introduce the notion of formal criteria for uncovering a forged ḥadīth by reference to its contents, the 5th/11th-century ḥadīth master al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071).

In his monumental treatise on the science of ḥadīth collection and criticism, *al-Kifāya fī 'ilm uṣūl al-riwāya*, al-Khaṭīb begins his discussion of forged ḥadīths with the classical rationalist division of reports: (1) reports whose truth is known immediately (*mutawātir*), (2) reports whose falsity is known immediately and (3) reports whose authenticity can be known only after study (the bulk of the ḥadīth corpus). Ḥadīths that are immediately evident as false are identified by one of the following indications: first, they contradict reason (*al-'uqūl*), for example, the statement that no Creator exists. Second, the ḥadīth contradicts the Qur'ān, a widely established precedent of the Prophet (*al-sunna al-mutawātira*) or a report that the Muslim

¹⁶ John Burton, *An Introduction to the Ḥadīth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 169.

¹⁷ Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 113, 164; cf., Muṣṭafā al-Sibā'ī, *al-Sunna wa makānatuhā fī al-tashrī' al-islāmī* ([Cairo]: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya, [1960]).

¹⁸ For other examples of modern scholars deriving the principles for content criticism from Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn 'Arrāq, see Muḥammad Bashīr Zāfir al-Azharī, *Tahdhīr al-muslimīn min al-aḥādīth al-mawḍū'a 'alā sayyid al-mursalīn*, ed. Fawwāz Aḥmad Zamralī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1406/1985), 59 ff.; 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, *Lamaḥāt min tārikh al-sunna wa 'ulūm al-ḥadīth* (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 1404/1984), 117 ff.

community has agreed upon (*ijmāʿ*) as being authentic. Third, the report conveys information that is so essential for Muslims that God would not allow it to be reported by a means other than one that assured its certainty. Finally, a report about some evident, unmistakable event that, if it had occurred, would have necessarily been described via widely transmitted reports.¹⁹

The first two criteria identify ḥadīths that contradict sources that the Muʿtazilite and Ashʿarī schools considered epistemologically certain, namely the precepts of reason, the Qurʾān, established sunna and the consensus of the Muslim community.²⁰ The third and fourth identify ḥadīths that violate principles that Sunni legal theorists also considered epistemologically compelling: God's rules (*al-ʿāda*) for how a Prophet's message and human society in general function.

This formalized epistemological ranking would have seemed very foreign to Ibn Ḥanbal or al-Bukhārī, who shunned rationalist discourse and whose methods of ḥadīth criticism never resembled it. Not surprisingly, al-Khaṭīb's criteria were originally developed by

¹⁹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *al-Kifāya fī maʿrifat uṣūl ʿilm al-riwāya*, ed. Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm Muṣṭafā al-Dimyāṭī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Hudā, 1423/2003), 1:89; idem, *al-Faqīh waʾl-mutaḥḥiqīh*, ed. Ismāʿīl al-Anṣārī, 2 vols in 1 ([n.p.]: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya, 1395/1975), 1:132-3. Ibn al-Qayyim builds on al-Khaṭīb's list, adding to it the contribution of al-Ṣaghānī (d. 650/1252), albeit without mentioning him, who identified certain topics on which one only finds forged ḥadīths; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abū Bakr Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Manār al-munif fī al-ṣaḥīḥ waʾl-dāʾif*, ed. ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 11th ed. (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbūʿāt al-Islāmiyya, 1325/2004), 51 ff.; Abū al-Faḍāʾil al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Ṣaghānī, *al-Mawḍūʿāt*, ed. ʿAbdallāh al-Qāḍī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1405/1985), 4-18. Ibn ʿArrāq paraphrases al-Khaṭīb's list, adding the principle that feeble or preposterous (*rikka*) language or contents are also signs of forgery; ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Ibn ʿArrāq, *Tanzīh al-sharīʿa al-marfūʿa ʿan al-akḥbār al-shanīʿa al-mawḍūʿa* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, [1964]), 1:6-8. This notion of *rikka* as a sign of forgery is found earlier in Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's *Muqaddima*; Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. ʿĀisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1411/1990), 279.

²⁰ Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī (fl. 400/1000), *Kitāb al-awāʾil*, ed. Walīd Qaṣṣāb and Muḥammad al-Miṣrī, 2 vols. (Dār al-ʿUlūm, 1401/1981), 2:119; Marie Bernand, "La Notion de *ʿIlm* chez les premiers Muʿtazilites," *Studia Islamica* 36 (1972): 26. The famous Ashʿarī legal theorist and theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) thus states that one of the requirements for accepting a ḥadīth was "the absence of epistemologically certain contradicting proof (*ʿadam dalīl qāṭiʿi yuʾarīḍuhū*)"; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl fī ʿilm uṣūl al-fiqh*, ed. Ṭahā Jābir al-ʿUlwānī (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 1412/1992), 4:427-8.

Ḥanafī rationalist scholars of the 3rd/9th century and later adopted by the Ash‘arī tradition of epistemology. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) and al-Suyūṭī inform us that al-Khaṭīb adopted these content criteria from one of the founders of the Ash‘arī school, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), one of al-Khaṭīb’s sources in his *al-Kifāya*.²¹ Before al-Bāqillānī, we find the earliest known precedent for this approach to content criticism in the writings of the Ḥanafī judge ‘Īsā b. Abān (d. 221/836). In a work rebutting the controversial Muslim rationalist Bishr al-Marīsī (d. 218/833) as well as al-Shāfi‘ī, Ibn Abān elaborated the three-fold division of reports and stated that the early Muslim community (*salaf*) rejected *āḥād* (non-widely transmitted) reports that either contradict the Qur‘ān or established *sunna* (*sunna thābita*), or describe an event that would have been more widely reported had it really occurred. He also makes the ultimate arbiter for judging the veracity of a report the verdict of reason (*ijtihād*), not the *isnād*.²²

Although he seems to have been largely unknown to early ḥadīth critics, ‘Īsā b. Abān was a member of the Ḥanafī tradition that was anathema to *ahl al-sunna* ḥadīth scholars, had written a rebuttal of al-Shāfi‘ī and upheld that *bête noire* of the *ahl al-ḥadīth*: a belief that the Qur‘ān was created.²³ Al-Khaṭīb may have found al-

²¹ Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *al-Nukat ‘alā kitāb Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. Mas‘ūd ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Sa‘dafi and Muḥammad Fāris (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1414/1994), 361; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrīb al-rāwī fī sharḥ Taqrīb al-Nawāwī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 1426/2005), 213.

²² A large segment of this book has been preserved by the 4th/10th-century Ḥanafī legal theorist Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Jaṣṣās (d. 370/981); Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Jaṣṣās, *Uṣūl al-Jaṣṣās*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Ṭāhir, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1420/2000), 1:504 ff., 2:3-6, 14. For an excellent discussion of Ibn Abān and his approach to Prophetic reports, see Murteza Bedir, “An Early Response to al-Shāfi‘ī: ‘Īsā b. Abān on the Prophetic Report (*khbar*),” *Islamic Law and Society* 9, no. 3 (2002): 285-311, esp. 302.

²³ Ibn Abān was a student of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī and wrote several books on independent legal reasoning (*ra’y*), which prompted the later Shāfi‘ī scholar Ibn Surayj (d. 306/918) to devote a book to rebutting him; Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad b. Ishāq Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385-8/995-8), *The Fihrist*, ed. and trans. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970, reprint in Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1998), 507, 523 (citations are to the Kazi edition); cf. al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1417/1997), 11:158-60

Bāqillānī's rationalist criteria for content criticism appealing in the 5th/11th century, but it is difficult to imagine that earlier anti-*ahl al-ra'y* critics like Ibn Ḥanbal or al-Bukhārī would have looked to Ibn Abān and other members of the *ahl al-ra'y* for methods of content criticism. Moreover, al-Khaṭīb's list of content criticism principles seems out of place even in his own work. Not once does he apply them openly in his *Kifāya*. Nor have I found him reject a ḥadīth based on the criteria he lays out in the *Kifāya* in his analyses of the numerous ḥadīths he identifies as forged in his *Tārikh Baghdād*.²⁴

Modern Muslim scholars have faced the same challenges as their Western counterparts. Their arguments rely either on the historically problematic content criticism of Companions like 'Ā'isha or the list of criteria derived from al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī. In his *A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies*, Mohammad Hashim Kamalī's discussion of the criteria that ḥadīth critics employed consists of a summary of the content-based criteria elaborated by Ibn al-Qayyim and later Sunni scholars.²⁵

(biography of Ibn Abān); al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-i'tidāl*, 3:310; *ibid.*, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 10, ed. Shu'ayb Arnā'ūṭ and Muḥammad Nu'aym al-'Irqasūsī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1412/1992), 440; Ibn Abī al-Wafā', *al-Jawāhir al-muḍīyya fī ṭabaqāt al-ḥanafīyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥulw, 2nd ed., 5 vols. (Gīza: Hujr, 1413/1993), 2:678-80.

²⁴ For example, al-Khaṭīb cites no content problem with the ḥadīth in which the Prophet says, "I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate," merely calling it "a lie"; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārikh Baghdād*, 11:201. For other instances of al-Khaṭīb identifying forged ḥadīths, see *ibid.*, 8:56, 8:162 ("mawḍū' al-matn wa'l-isnād"), 9:47, 9:440, 9:456, 10:356, 11:241. In his identification of forgeries, al-Khaṭīb does occasionally use the death dates of transmitters to prove that they could not have heard a ḥadīth from the source they claim. See, for example, *ibid.*, 3:59; cf. Aḥmad b. Aybak Ibn al-Dimyāṭī, *al-Mustafād min Dhayl Tārikh Baghdād*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1417/1997), 21:41-2. Interestingly, al-Khaṭīb does apply the criterion that a report could not be true if it describes an event that would have been more widely noticed to a *non-Prophetic* historical report: when the famous grammarians al-Kisā'ī and Sibawayh sought the opinion of a group of the Caliph's Bedouin guards to settle a debate, al-Khaṭīb recounts that some accused al-Kisā'ī of conspiring with the Bedouins so that they would provide the verdict he wanted. Al-Khaṭīb, however, notes, "This opinion is untenable, since something like this would not remain hidden from the Caliph, the vizier or the people of Baghdad"; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārikh Baghdād*, 12:104 (biography of 'Alī b. al-Mubārak al-Naḥwī).

²⁵ Mohammad Hashim Kamalī, *A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies* (Markfield, U.K.: The Islamic Foundation, 2005), 194-7. For a similar argument, see Najm 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khalaf,

In a work devoted to rebutting Orientalist accusations that Muslim scholars ignored content criticism, Muḥammad Luqmān al-Salafī invokes the well-worn examples of Companions like ‘Ā’isha.²⁶ He also presents his own list of criteria for content criticism, largely drawn from the works of Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn ‘Arrāq. As examples, however, he draws on ḥadīths criticized by the 8th/14th-century scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).²⁷ Ultimately, he can trace this approach back no further than al-Khaṭīb’s *al-Kifāya*.²⁸ Remarkably, Luqmān al-Salafī and the Indian Ḥamza al-Malībārī have been the only modern Muslim scholars to provide any evidence for content criticism from the early ḥadīth tradition, and we will note their contribution presently.²⁹

Evidence of Content Criticism by *Ḥadīth* Scholars in the 3rd/9th Century

The following are examples of content criticism from 3rd/9th-century works of transmitter criticism.

1. From works of Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870):

- In his entry on the weak transmitter Ḥashraj b. Nubāta (fl. mid 2nd/8th century) in the *Kitāb al-ḍu‘afā’ al-ṣaḡhīr*, al-Bukhārī notes that Ḥashraj narrated the ḥadīth “the Prophet (ṣ) said to Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān, “These are the caliphs after me.”” Al-Bukhārī adds that this ḥadīth is “not corroborated (*lā yutāba’u ‘alayhi*) because ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib said, ‘the Prophet did not appoint any successor (*lam yastakhliḥ al-nabī*).”³⁰

Naqd al-matn bayn ṣinā‘at al-muḥaddithīn wa maṭā‘ in al-mustashriqīn (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1409/1989), 46-7.

²⁶ Muḥammad Luqmān al-Salafī, *Ihtimām al-muḥaddithīn bi-naqd al-ḥadīth sanad^{an} wa matn^{an} wa daḥḍ mazā‘im al-mustashriqīn wa atbā’ihim* (Riyadh: [n.p.], 1408/1987), 311-14.

²⁷ Ibid., 321 ff., 340-4.

²⁸ Ibid., 326.

²⁹ Al-Salafī, *Ihtimām al-muḥaddithīn*, 330 ff.; Ḥamza al-Malībārī, *Nazarāt jadīda fi ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Hazm, 1423/2003), 89 ff., 129-32.

³⁰ Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-ḍu‘afā’ al-ṣaḡhīr*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm

- Discussing the transmitter ‘Awn b. ‘Umāra al-Qaysī (d. 212/827-28), al-Bukhārī notes that some of his ḥadīths are accepted and some rejected (*yu’rafu wa yunkaru*). As an example of his poor transmissions, al-Bukhārī notes that ‘Awn transmitted the ḥadīth “The signs [of the Day of Judgment] are after the year 200 AH (*al-āyāt ba’d al-mi’atayn*).” Al-Bukhārī rejects the ḥadīth because “these two hundred [years] have passed, and there have been none of these signs.”³¹ This criticism is not present in al-Bukhārī’s surviving works on transmitter criticism, but al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) cites it from a lost work, probably al-Bukhārī’s *Kitāb al-ḍu’afā’ al-kabīr* (Great Book of Weak Transmitters).³² We can corroborate that al-Bukhārī did in fact level this criticism at the ḥadīth because the early 4th/10th-century critic al-‘Uqaylī notes that al-Bukhārī rejected it.³³ Interestingly, this ḥadīth was included in Ibn Mājah’s (d. 273/887) *Sunan* and declared authentic by al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī in his *al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*.³⁴

Zāyid (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifa, 1406/1986), 42. Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), *al-Muntakhab min al-‘Ilal li’l-Khallāl*, ed. Ṭāriq b. ‘Awaḍ Allāh b. Muḥammad (Riyadh: Dār al-Rāya, 1419/1997), 218-20.

³¹ Al-Dāraquṭnī, *Ta’liqāt al-Dāraquṭnī ‘alā al-Majrūḥīn li-Ibn Hibbān*, ed. Khalīl b. Muḥammad al-‘Arabī (Cairo: al-Fārūq al-Ḥadīthiyya li’l-Ṭibā’a wa’l-Nashr, 1424/2003), 211-12; cf. Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munīf*, 111.

³² Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ī’tidāl*, 3:306. Al-Dhahabī cites al-Bukhārī’s *Kitāb al-ḍu’afā’ al-kabīr* on several occasions in his *Mizān al-ī’tidāl*; see al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ī’tidāl*, 2:570, 598; 3:311, 313.

³³ Al-‘Uqaylī adds that this report has also been attributed to the Successor Ibn Sīrīn; al-‘Uqaylī, *Kitāb al-ḍu’afā’ al-kabīr*, 3:328-9. This ḥadīth has also been dismissed as forged by the 4th/10th-century Ḥanbalī ḥadīth critic Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad Ibn Shāqlā al-Baghdādī (d. 369/970); al-Dāraquṭnī, *Ta’liqāt al-Dāraquṭnī*, 212; Al-Dāraquṭnī lists the report in his book of *‘ilal* without any content criticism, simply saying that “there is nothing *ṣaḥīḥ* narrated of that tradition”; al-Dāraquṭnī, *al-‘Ilal al-wārīda fī al-ḥadīth al-nabawī*, ed. Maḥfūz al-Raḥmān al-Salafī, 11 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṭayba, 1405/1985-1416/1996), 6:164. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) lists this ḥadīth in his famous *Kitāb al-mawḍū‘āt*, but he blames Muḥammad b. Yūnus b. Mūsā al-Kudaymī (d. 286/899-900 but lived over 100 years) for its forgery; Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Alī Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-mawḍū‘āt*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ‘Uthmān, 3 vols. (Medina: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 1386-88/1966-68), 3:197-98. In his *al-Manār al-munīf*, Ibn al-Qayyim uses this ḥadīth as an example of reports one knows are forged because the Prophet makes predictions about certain dates; Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munīf*, 220.

³⁴ *Sunan Ibn Mājah: kitāb al-fitan, bāb al-āyāt*; Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Mālik al-Qaṭīrī (d. 368/978-9), *Juz’ al-alf dīnār*, ed. Badr b. ‘Abdallāh al-Badr (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā’is, 1414/1993), 423; al-Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* (Hyderabad: Dā’irat al-Ma’ārif al-Niẓāmiyya, 1334/[1915-16]), 4:428; Shīrawayh b. Shahrudār al-Daylamī (d. 509/1115), *Firdaws al-akḥbār bi-mā thūr al-khiṭāb al-mukharraj ‘alā kitāb al-Shihāb*, ed. Fawwāz Aḥmad

- In the biography of ‘Abdallāh b. Hānī Abū al-Za‘rā’ (fl. late 1st/7th century) in the *Tārīkh al-kabīr*, al-Bukhārī says that ‘Abdallāh had quoted Ibn Mas‘ūd that on the Day of Judgment the Prophet will follow Gabriel, Abraham, Jesus (or Moses according to another transmission) as the fourth figure to come forward and intercede with God on behalf of the Muslims. Al-Bukhārī dismisses this ḥadīth, since “it is known that the Prophet said, ‘I am the first intercessor (*anā awwal shāfi*)’ [on the Day of Judgment]. ‘Abdallāh b. Hānī’s ḥadīth is not corroborated.”³⁵
- In his *al-Tārīkh al-awsaṭ* (sometimes referred to as his *al-Tārīkh al-ṣaghīr*), al-Bukhārī provides a critical entry on the transmitter Abū Baḥr Muḥammad b. Faḍā’ (fl. mid 2nd/8th century). Al-Bukhārī notes that Sulaymān b. Ḥarb (d. 224/238-39) had accused Abū Baḥr of selling alcohol and of narrating the ḥadīth “The Prophet (ṣ) forbade breaking apart Muslim coins in circulation (*nahā al-nabī (ṣ) ‘an kasr sikkat al-muslimīn al-jāriya baynahum*).” Al-Bukhārī also quotes Sulaymān as saying “but [it was] al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf [who] minted coins, they did not exist at the time of the Prophet (ṣ).” This ḥadīth appears in the *Muṣannaf* of Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), the *Sunan*s of Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889), Ibn Mājah and other later texts.³⁶

al-Zamrīlī and Muḥammad al-Mu‘taṣim bi’llāh al-Baghdādī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1407/1987), 1:161.

³⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Tārīkh al-kabīr*, 5:120. Cf. al-Uqaylī, 2:314 ff.; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ītidāl*, 2:517. There are many well-known ḥadīths stating that the Prophet is the first intercessor, including one through Anas b. Mālik ← the Prophet: I am the first person to intercede in Paradise, and I am the prophet with the most followers (*anā awwal al-nās yashfā’u fi al-janna wa anā akthar al-anbiyā’ taba’im*); *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-īmān, bāb qawl al-nabī anā awwal al-nās yashfā’u fi al-janna wa anā akthar al-anbiyā’ taba’im*; cf. *Sunan al-Dārimī*: introductory chapters, *bāb mā u’ṭiya al-nabī (ṣ) min al-faḍl*; cf. al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, 9:8 (*kitāb al-siyar, bāb muḥtadā’ al-khalq*). Al-Bukhārī’s sensitivity to this issue is understandable in his context, since both versions of this ḥadīth in al-Tirmidhī’s *Jāmi’* (through Ibn ‘Abbās) and Ibn Mājah’s *Sunan* mention the Prophet’s first place in intercession to stress his superiority or at least parity with Moses, Abraham and Jesus; *Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-manāqib, bāb fi faḍl al-nabī (ṣ)*; *Sunan Ibn Mājah: kitāb al-zuhd, bāb dhikr al-shafā’a*.

³⁶ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Tārīkh al-awsaṭ*, ed. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Luḥaydān, 2 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumay‘ī, 1418/1998), 2:109-10; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ītidāl*, 4:5. Ibn Ḥibbān notes that what few ḥadīths Abū Baḥr transmitted were *munkar*, including the ḥadīth in question (without the explicit content criticism). He adds that both Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Ma‘īn considered him weak; Ibn Ḥibbān, *al-Majrūḥīn*, 2:274. Ibn ‘Adī lists four narrations of this ḥadīth all through the same basic *isnād* and, again, no content criticism. These versions include the additional wording “except due to some fault [in the coin]”; Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 6:2178. Al-Maqdisī lists the ḥadīth in his *Tadhkirat al-mawḍū‘āt*, citing the presence of the weak Abū Baḥr in the *isnād*; Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, *Tadhkirat*

- In his *al-Tārikh al-kabīr*, al-Bukhārī notes in the entry on Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Yuḥannas (fl. late 1st/7th century) that he transmitted one narration of a ḥadīth disseminated by Ḥukayma bt. Umayya, from Umm Salama, from the Prophet: “Whoever undertakes the greater or lesser pilgrimage to the Ḥaram Mosque [in Mecca] beginning at the al-Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem], all his previous sins will be forgiven (*man ahalla bi-ḥijja wa ‘umra min al-masjid al-aqṣā ilā al-masjid al-ḥarām ghufira lahu mā taqaddama min dhanbihi*).” Al-Bukhārī notes that “this ḥadīth is not corroborated due to the Prophet (ṣ) setting [the two places] Dhū al-Ḥulayfa and al-Juḥfa as the stations for beginning the pilgrimage and that he chose to enter the state of pilgrimage (*ahalla*) at Dhū al-Ḥulayfa.” Here it is interesting to note that, although al-Bukhārī rejects the ḥadīth, he offers no criticism of the narrator. This ḥadīth appears in the *Sunans* of Ibn Mājah and Abū Dāwūd, as well as the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal and the *Sunan al-kubrā* of al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066).³⁷
- Although Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā’ī, al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) and Ibn Mājah all narrated from Ṣāliḥ b. Muḥammad b. Zā’ida (d. between 140/757 and 150/767) in their *Sunans*, al-Bukhārī dismissed him as ‘having unacceptable (*munkar*) ḥadīths.’³⁸ In his *al-Tārikh al-kabīr*, al-Bukhārī notes that Ṣāliḥ narrated an unreliable ḥadīth through Sālim b. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar, from Ibn ‘Umar, from ‘Umar, from the Prophet: “Whoever has been greedy [in unfairly hoarding spoils of war], burn his booty (*man ghalla fa’ḥriqū matā’ahu*).” Al-Bukhārī rejects this ḥadīth because the actual report “from ‘Umar is that the Prophet (ṣ) said, con-

al-mawḍū‘āt, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Ḥadarī (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya 1401/1981), 49. The ḥadīth appears through the same basic *isnād* of Abū Baḥr in: *Sunan Abī Dāwūd: kitāb al-tijāra, bāb fi kusr al-darāhim*; *Sunan Ibn Mājah: kitāb al-tijārāt, bāb al-nahy ‘an kusr al-darāhim wa’l-danānīr*; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ Ibn Abī Shayba*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Salām Shāhīn, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1416/1995), 4:536 (*kitāb al-buyū’, bāb fi kusr al-darāhim wa taghyirihā*); Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣbahānī (d. 430/1038), *Geschichte Isbahans*, ed. Sven Dederling (Leiden: Brill, 1931-34), 1:209; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārikh Baghdād*, 6:343.

³⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Tārikh al-kabīr*, 1:161. Al-Dhahabī notes this in his entry on the same person; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-i’tidāl*, 3:622. Al-Bukhārī includes in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* a report in which these points are established (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-ḥajj, bāb farḍ mawāqīt al-ḥajj wa’l-‘umra*). For other instances of this ḥadīth, see al-Dāraquṭnī, *Sunan al-Dāraquṭnī*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Hāshim al-Madanī, 4 vols. in 2. (Cairo: Dār al-Maḥāsīn li’l-Ṭibā’a, 1386/1966), 2:283-4; al-Bayhaqī, *Sunan al-kubrā*, 5:45 (*kitāb al-ḥajj, bāb faḍl man ahalla min al-masjid al-aqṣā ilā al-masjid al-ḥarām*); *Sunan Ibn Mājah: kitāb al-manāsik, bāb man ahalla bi-‘umra min bayt al-maqdis*; *Sunan Abī Dāwūd: kitāb al-manāsik, bāb fi al-mawāqīt*; *Musnad Aḥmad*: 6:299; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1425/2004), 520 (#8544, listed as weak).

³⁸ Al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-ḍu‘afā’ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 62.

cerning taking more than one's portion of spoils: [the booty] is not burned."³⁹ This ḥadīth occurs in the *Sunans* of al-Dārimī (d. 255/869), Abū Dāwūd and the *Jāmi'* of al-Tirmidhī through Ṣāliḥ b. Muḥammad b. Zā'ida. Al-Tirmidhī, however, notes that the report exists only through this one *isnād*.⁴⁰

2. From the *Kitāb al-tamyīz of Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī* (d. 261/875):

The *Kitāb al-tamyīz* of Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj has survived only in part; the full work appears to have been a much larger book that is unique in the history of ḥadīth criticism. Addressed to a junior scholar seeking to understand the justifications for and workings of the science of ḥadīth criticism, the book lays out Muslim's critical methodology with a text-book clarity matched only by the author's lucid introduction to his *Ṣaḥīḥ*. The transparency of Muslim's critical method as presented in the *Kitāb al-tamyīz* explains why this is the only source from which modern Muslim apologists like al-Malibārī and Luqmān al-Salafī have been able to muster examples of early content criticism.⁴¹ The *Kitāb al-tamyīz*, in fact, contains no less than nineteen instances of explicit content criticism. The following is a representative sample:

- Muslim criticizes one version of a ḥadīth narrated by the famous Basran transmitter Shu'ba b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 160/776) because its *isnād* lacks an important link found in other versions and because the report states that the Prophet said 'Amen (*amīn*)' silently in his prayers. Muslim states that "narrations have been widely reported (*tawātarat al-riwāyāt*) that the Prophet said 'Amen' out loud."⁴²
- Muslim criticizes one version of a ḥadīth in which the young Ibn 'Abbās joins the Prophet while the latter is praying, and the Prophet moves Ibn

³⁹) Al-Bukhārī, *al-Tārikh al-kabīr*, 4:241.

⁴⁰) *Sunan al-Dārimī: kitāb al-siyar, bāb fi 'uqūbat al-ghāll; Sunan Abī Dāwūd: kitāb al-jibād, bāb fi 'uqūbat al-ghāll; Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-ḥudūd, bāb mā jā' a fi al-ghāll mā yuṣnā' u bihi.*

⁴¹) Al-Malibārī, *Naẓarāt jadīda*, 89 ff., 129-32; Luqmān al-Salafī, *Ihtimām al-muḥaddithīn*, 330 ff.

⁴²) Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī, *Kitāb al-tamyīz*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-A'zamī (Riyadh: Maṭba'at Jāmi'at Riyāḍ, [1395/1975]), 134.

‘Abbās so that he is standing to the Prophet’s left. Muslim states, “It is the sunna of the Messenger of God (ﷺ) in the rest of the reports from Ibn ‘Abbās that a person praying with an *imām* stands to his right, not his left.”⁴³

- Concerning a series of ḥadīths describing the significance of Chapter 112 of the Qur’ān (*sūrat al-ikhlās*), Muslim states that “the generality of the upright [transmitters] have reported from the Prophet that it is the equivalent of one third of the Qur’ān.” A report by one Ibn Wardān to the effect that it equals one fourth is thus a minority report. In addition, Muslim continues, Ibn Wardān mentions four other chapters of the Qur’ān that are the equivalent of one-fourth of the holy book—a total of five-fourths. This logical contradiction is, in Muslim’s words, “reprehensible (*mustankar*), and it is not conceivable that its meaning is correct (*ghayr mafhūm ṣiḥḥat ma’ nāhu*).”⁴⁴

3. From the *Kitāb al-ma’rifā wa’l-tārīkh of Abū Yūsuf Ya’qūb b. Sufyān al-Fasawī (d. 277/890-91):*

- In his work on the historical development of the Muslim community and its main transmitters of religious knowledge, the *Kitāb al-ma’rifā wa’l-tārīkh*, al-Fasawī includes a section on the transmitter Zayd b. Wahb (d. 96/714-15) in which he notes several problematic reports transmitted by Zayd. In one, ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb asks Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān, to whom the Prophet had confided the names of the hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*), if the Prophet had mentioned the gruff second caliph as one of them. Ḥudhayfa replies, “No [he did not], and I will not inform anyone after you.” Al-Fasawī objects that “this is impossible (*muḥāl*), and I fear that it is forged (*kadhib*).” He adds that ‘Umar is one of the veterans of the the Battle of Badr, who the Qur’ān announced had all attained salvation, and the Prophet had also said that if there were to be another prophet after him it would be ‘Umar.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁵ Abū Yūsuf Ya’qūb b. Sufyān al-Fasawī, *al-Ma’rifā wa’l-tārīkh*, ed. Akram Ḍiyā’ al-‘Umārī, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1401/1981), 2:769; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ītidāl*, 2:107.

4. *From the Aḥwāl al-rijāl of Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Ya'qūb al-Jūzajānī (d. 259/873):*

- In one of the earliest surviving works on transmitter criticism, the *Aḥwāl al-rijāl*, al-Jūzajānī notes a ḥadīth narrated by 'Aṣīm b. Ḍamra (d. 144/761-62) in which Ibn 'Umar states that the Prophet used to perform sixteen superogatory prayer cycles a day. Al-Jūzajānī retorts:

O slaves of God, is it befitting for any of the Companions of the Prophet (ṣ) or his wives to report this [number of] prayer cycles?! For they were with [the Prophet] during their time, and the report from 'Ā'isha (r) is twelve optional prayer cycles, and Ibn 'Umar mentioned ten. And the generality of the umma, or whomever you wish [to cite], have accepted ('*arafū*) that the number of optional (*sunna*) prayer cycles is twelve.... And if someone objects, "How many ḥadīths have been narrated by only one person [and been accepted]?", say, "you are correct, indeed the Prophet (ṣ) would sit and speak a word of wisdom that he might never repeat, and only one man would memorize it from him.... But, according to 'Aṣīm, [the Prophet] would repeat these [sixteen] prayer cycles regularly, so this could not have been confused."⁴⁶

- In the entry on Salm b. Sālim al-Balkhī (d. 196/812), al-Jūzajānī notes that when Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) was asked about the ḥadīth on how lentils were sacralized (*quddisa*) on the tongues of seventy prophets, he replied, "No, not even on the tongue of one prophet! Indeed [lentils] are harmful and cause bloating (*yanfakhu*). Who narrated that?"⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Ya'qūb al-Jūzajānī, *Aḥwāl al-rijāl*, ed. Ṣubḥī al-Badrī al-Sāmarrā'ī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1405/1985), 43-6.

⁴⁷ Al-Jūzajānī, *Aḥwāl al-rijāl*, 208. This hadith also occurs in: Ibn Ḥibbān, *al-Majrūḥīn*, 2:120; Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971), *al-Mu'jam al-kabīr*, ed. Ḥamdī 'Abd al-Majīd al-Salāfī, 2nd ed., 28 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1404-1410/[1984-90]), 22:63 (through an *isnād* without Salm b. Sālim al-Balkhī); Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 3:1173 (entry on Salm b. Sālim al-Balkhī); Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā'*, 11 vols. (Beirut, Cairo: Dār al-Fikr and Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1416/1996), 7:82 ff. (as the words of 'Alī b. al-Ḥasan al-Sulamī); al-Maqdisī, *Tadhkirat al-mawḍū'āt*, 90; al-Daylamī, *Musnad al-Firdaws*, 3:59; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mawḍū'āt*, 2:294-95; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-'itidāl*, 3:253, 313; Mullā 'Alī b. Sulṭān al-Qārī al-Harawī (d. 1014/1606), *al-Asrār al-marfū'a fi al-akhbār al-mawḍū'a*, ed. Muḥammad Luṭfī al-Ṣabbāgh, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1406/1986), 256-7.

Explicit Content Criticism by *Ḥadīth* Scholars in the 4th/10th Century

The following are instances of content criticism from books of transmitter criticism and *ḥadīth* collections written in the 4th/10th century.

1. From the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muḥammad b. Ishāq Ibn Khuzayma (d. 311/923):

- Although only a portion of the book has survived, there is strong evidence that the famous Shāfi‘ī scholar of Naysābūr, Ibn Khuzayma, conducted content criticism in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* collection. The 8th/14th-century scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) quotes Ibn Khuzayma’s criticism of the *ḥadīth*, “Indeed, one of God’s slaves should not lead a group in prayer and pray to God for himself exclusively—for if he does this, he has betrayed [the group] (*lā ya’ummanna ‘abdu^m qaum^m fa-yakhuṣṣu nafsahu bi-dā’wa fa-in fa’ala fa-qad khānahum*).” Ibn Khuzayma objects that, while leading a group in prayer, the Prophet had once made the invocation: “O God, distance me from my wrongs (*Allāhumma bā’id baynī wa bayna khaṭāyāy*).”⁴⁸ If the Prophet limited an invocation to himself alone, it is clearly not a treacherously selfish act. An allusion to this content criticism can be found in the surviving portions of the *Ṣaḥīḥ*, where Ibn Khuzayma includes a subchapter on how the *imām* can say a prayer specifically for himself, “contrary to the unestablished report attributed to the Prophet that [the *imām*] has betrayed them [in doing that].”⁴⁹

2. From the Works of Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (d. 354/965):

- We also find an instance of content criticism in the *ṣaḥīḥ* collection of the 4th/10th-century *ḥadīth* critic Ibn Ḥibbān. Here, the author categorically rejects all *ḥadīths* that describe how the Prophet would bind a rock tightly against his stomach with a cloth to ward off the pangs of hunger while fasting. In one report, the Prophet instructs Muslims not to follow his example in fasting parts of the months before and after

⁴⁸) Badr al-Dīn Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Zarkashī, *al-Nukat ‘alā Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. Zayn al-‘Ābdīn b. Muḥammad Bilā Furayj, 4 vols. (Riyadh: Aḍwā’ al-Salaf, 1419/1998), 2:270.

⁴⁹) Muḥammad b. Ishāq Ibn Khuzayma, *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzayma*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-A’zamī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1390/1970), 3:63.

Ramaḍān consecutively with the holy month: “Indeed I am not like any of you, I am fed and given drink [by God] (*innī lastu ka-ahadikum innī uḥʿamu wa usqā*).” Ibn Ḥibbān explains that any report in which the Prophet is forced to extreme measures by hunger would entail that God had let His prophet go hungry—a notion that contradicts the ḥadīth. Moreover, Ibn Ḥibbān adds that the correct wording of the rock-tying reports is not ‘rock (*ḥajar*),’ but rather ‘*ḥajaz*,’ or the end of the loincloth (*izār*). He adds, “And a rock does not ward off hunger.”⁵⁰

- Ibn Ḥibbān’s compendium of unreliable ḥadīth transmitters, the *Kitāb al-majrūḥīn min al-muḥaddithīn al-duʿafāʾ waʾl-matrūkīn*, contains an entry on Abān b. Sufyān al-Maqdisī (fl. early 3rd/9th century) in which the author notes that Abān narrated two forged reports. One states that “‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ubayy’s incisor was damaged in the Battle of Uḥud, so the Messenger of God (ṣ) ordered him to make an incisor out of gold (*annahū uṣibat thanīyyatuhu yawm Uḥud fa-amarahu Rasūl Allāh (ṣ) an yattakhidha thanīyyat^{an} min dhahab*).” Abān also reported a ḥadīth in which ‘the Messenger of God (ṣ) forbade us to pray towards someone sleeping or in a state of ritual impurity (*nahā rasūl Allāh (ṣ) an nuṣalliya ilā nāʾim aw mutahaddith*).” Ibn Ḥibbān objects that “those two [reports] are forged, for how could the Prophet (ṣ) order making an incisor made of gold when he had said, ‘Indeed gold and silk are forbidden for the males of my umma.’” He continues, “And how could he forbid praying in the direction of someone who is asleep when he used to pray with ‘Ā’isha lying between him and the *qibla*?”⁵¹

Why is Content Criticism so Hard to Find?

In the preceding section, I adduced fifteen examples of explicit content criticism from the formative 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries of the Sunni ḥadīth tradition. Although such examples are very rare, they do establish the existence of content criticism in the early period. They prove that al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Jūzajānī, al-Fasawī, Ibn Khuzayma and Ibn Ḥibbān possessed the critical imagination

⁵⁰ Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī and ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī al-Fārisī (d.739/1338-39), *al-Iḥsān bi-tartīb Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1407/1987), 5:236, cf. 8:109.

⁵¹ Ibn Ḥibbān, *al-Majrūḥīn*, 1:99; al-Maqdisī, *Tadhkira*, 57. Al-Dhahabī and Ibn Ḥajar reject Ibn Ḥibbān’s content criticism of this ḥadīth, saying that Muslim men can use gold for prosthetics; *Mizān al-i’tidāl*, 1:7; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Lisān al-mizān*, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, [n.d.]), 1:21-3.

to examine the contents of a ḥadīth in their attempt to determine its authenticity. Among them, we find a clear awareness of historical anachronism, a sensitivity to logical impossibility and, most prominently, a clear vision of the historical, legal and dogmatic baselines against which individual reports should be judged. Al-Bukhārī ‘knew’ that the Prophet had not appointed a successor, that he would be the first intercessor for the Muslims on the Day of Judgment, and that he had established fixed points for the beginning of the pilgrimage. Al-Bukhārī also reacted skeptically to a report in which the Prophet supposedly predicted events which, if the report were true, would have already materialized. Muslim used the historical ‘reality’ established when ḥadīths had “been widely transmitted (*ta-wātarat*)” or by “the manifest prevalence (*taẓāhur*) of authentic reports from the Messenger of God (ṣ)” to identify and isolate contradictory minority reports transmitted through only one or two narrations.⁵² We can perceive the limits of al-Fasawī’s ‘thinkable thought’ in his refusal to accept that ‘Umar could entertain the possibility of being a hypocrite. Al-Jūzajānī quotes Ibn al-Mubārak plainly rejecting a ḥadīth because it contradicts sense perception and his experience.

Content criticism would seem to be a fundamental component in transmitter evaluation—a purveyor of ḥadīths with unacceptable meanings could be deemed unreliable on the basis of what he transmitted. Ibn ‘Adī often states that the questionable ḥadīths that a certain transmitter narrates “demonstrate that he is unreliable.”⁵³ When asked by a student why he considered the transmitter ‘Abbās b. al-Faḍl al-Anṣārī (d. 186/802) to be unreliable, Ibn Ma‘īn (d. 233/848) replied, “Because he narrates from Sa‘īd, from Qatāda, from Jābir b. Zayd, from Ibn ‘Abbās that the Prophet (ṣ) said, ‘When it is the year such-and-such, such-and-such will happen,’ and that is a ḥadīth with no basis (*aṣl*).”⁵⁴

If these prominent Sunni ḥadīth scholars were able and willing to employ content criticism, why do they seem to have utilized it

⁵² Muslim, *Kitāb al-tamyīz*, 134, 136.

⁵³ Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 2:587, see also *ibid.*, 3:1239.

⁵⁴ Ibn Abī Ḥatīm, *al-Jarḥ wa’l-ta’dīl* (Hyderabad: Dār’irat al-Ma‘ārif al-‘Uthmāniyya, 1360/[1941]), 6:212-13; Ibn Qudāma, *al-Muntakhab min al-‘Ilal*, 300.

so infrequently? If content criticism constituted part of these scholars' critical apparatus, why is it so hard to find in surviving texts of transmitter criticism? To answer this question we must turn to the intellectual milieu of the Islamic Near East in the formative period of Sunni ḥadīth criticism.

The *Ahl al-ḥadīth* and Muslim Rationalists

Few features of Islamic intellectual history are as well known as the conflict between the school of thought that espoused a reliance on material transmitted from the early Muslim community to elaborate Islamic law and dogma (the self-proclaimed *ahl al-ḥadīth*) and those who either favored a more selective use of ḥadīth combined with a reliance on independent legal reasoning (called the *ahl al-ra'y* by the *ahl al-ḥadīth* and generally associated with the Ḥanafī tradition) or those who leaned towards the Hellenistic rationalist tradition (dubbed the *ahl al-kalām*, including the Mu'tazilites and other rationalists such as the Jahmiyya).⁵⁵

Here we will not attempt a taxonomy of these different schools in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries, as we are only concerned with the *ahl al-ḥadīth*'s perception of their adversaries. It is enough to say that these schools of thought had fundamentally different approaches to elaborating Islamic law and dogma, but that their rhetoric and stances were sharpened and exacerbated by their constant, vicious sparring with one another. For their opponents, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* were brainless literalists, clinging absurdly to transmitted

⁵⁵ Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 2:78 ff.; J. Schacht, "Aṣḥāb al-ra'y," *EP*; idem, "Ahl al-ḥadīth," *EP*; Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 1-41; Marie Bernand, "La Notion de 'Ilm chez les premiers Mu'tazilites," Pts. 1 and 2, *Studia Islamica* 36 (1972): 23-46; 37 (1972): 27-56; Josef van Ess, *Zwischen Hadīt und Theologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975); idem, "Ibn Kullāb et la Miḥna," *Arabica* 37 (1990): 173-233; Christopher Melchert, "The Adversaries of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal," *Arabica* 44 (1997): 234-53; idem, "The Traditionist-Jurisprudents and the Framing of Islamic Law," *Islamic Law and Society* 8, no. 3 (2001): 383-406; Eerik Dickinson, *The Development of Early Sunnite Ḥadīth Criticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2-3, 9.

reports whose true meaning they did not understand but over whose *isnāds* they obsessed endlessly. To the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, the *ahl al-ra'y* and *ahl al-kalām* were arrogant heretics who abandoned the documented precedent of the Prophet for the musings of their own frail minds. Each group created a cult of methodology; the *ahl al-kalām* glorified the ability of reason to determine the proper interpretations of the sources of revelation, and the *ahl al-ḥadīth* sacralized the *isnād* as the only means to guarantee a pure understanding of the Prophet's Islam and rise above the heresies of the human mind. Here we will concern ourselves only with the role of the *isnād* and content criticism in this conflict.

As Josef van Ess has shown, Mu'tazilites such as 'Amr b. 'Ubayd (d. 144/761) accepted ḥadīths as a source of Islamic law and dogma but insisted on content criticism as the only suitable means to judge their authenticity.⁵⁶ The Mu'tazilite master al-Nazzām (d. ca. 220-30/835-45) thus gave no credit to the number of narrations or attestations of a ḥadīth; only an examination of the meaning of a report could affirm its authenticity, and "the means of rational proof (*jihat ḥujjat 'aql*) could abrogate (*tansakhu*) transmitted reports."⁵⁷

For the Mu'tazilites and other rationalist groups such as the Jahmiyya, the Qur'ān and human reason were the chief tools for content criticism. As the literal words of God, the legal and dogmatic principles laid out in the Qur'ān provided the ideal criteria for determining the contours of the faith and its community. The rationalists' chief justification for the use of the Qur'ān as a criterion in their debates with the *ahl al-ḥadīth* was a report in which the Prophet states, "When a ḥadīth comes to you from me, compare it to the Book of God, and if it agrees with it then accept it, and if it differs with it, leave it (*idhā jā'akum al-ḥadīth fa'riḍūhu 'alā kitāb Allāh wa in wāfaqahu fa-khudhūhu wa in khālafahu fa-*

⁵⁶ Josef van Ess, "L'Autorité de la tradition prophétique dans la théologie mu'tazilite," in *La Notion d'autorité au Moyen Age: Islam, Byzance, Occident*, ed. George Makdisi et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, c. 1982), 215 ; Abū Muḥammad 'Abdallāh Ibn Qutayba al-Dinawari, *Tā'wil mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhri al-Najjār (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1393/1973), 42-3.

⁵⁷ Ibn Qutayba, *Tā'wil mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, 219.

da'ūhu).⁵⁸ In his 'Epistle on the Rebuttal of Anthropomorphism' (*Risāla fī nafy al-tashbīh*), al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868-69) announces that using the Qur'ān to test the validity of ḥadīths dealing with issues such as God's attributes is an essential part of his school. Mocking *ahl al-ḥadīth* apologists like Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) for attempting to find acceptable interpretations for ḥadīths that rationalists considered problematic, al-Jāhīz concludes that such efforts to evade the Qur'ānic litmus test would invalidate the Prophet's statement that "lies will spread after me, so whatever ḥadīth comes to you compare it with the Book of God."⁵⁹

The second principal criterion employed by Muslim rationalists like al-Jāhīz to determine the authenticity of ḥadīths was reason. Al-Jāhīz explains:

If not for rational discussion (*kalām*), religions would never be upheld for God, and we would never have been able to distinguish ourselves from the atheists (*mulḥidīn*), and there would be no distinction between truth and falsehood, nor a separation between a true prophet and a pretender. Real proof (*ḥujja*) would never have stood out from specious argument (*al-ḥīla*), strong indication from ambiguity.⁶⁰

Even when Mu'tazilites such as Abū al-Qāsim al-Ka'bī al-Balkhī (d. 319/931) began in-depth studies of ḥadīth in order to combat their *ahl al-ḥadīth* opponents on their own terms, content criticism and the role of reason remained central to the Mu'tazilite school. In his work on ḥadīth criticism, the *Qubūl al-akḥbār*, al-Balkhī explains that the requirements for a good ḥadīth are that it accord with the Qur'ān, with the sunna that has been agreed upon by the umma or the early Muslim community, and finally with "the principles of God's justice (*'adl*) and Unicity (*tawḥīd*), which cannot be challenged or changed by anyone." In this final case, he recognizes that ḥadīths

⁵⁸ For extended versions of this ḥadīth, see al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-kabīr*, 12:233; al-Bayhaqī, *Mā' rifat al-sunan wa'l-āthār*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'ṭī Amīn Qal'ajī (Cairo: Dār al-Wa'ī, 1412/1991), 1:117-8.

⁵⁹ Al-Jāhīz, *Rasā'il al-Jāhīz*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, 4 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1384/1964), 1:287. Cf. al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Umm* (Cairo: Dār al-Sha'b, 1968-), 7:250.

⁶⁰ Al-Jāhīz, *Rasā'il al-Jāhīz*, 1:285.

effectively serve as a mere reinforcement (*ta'kid*) of what reason (*'aql*) dictates.⁶¹

For the Mu'tazilites and other, more extreme rationalists, a reliance on the *isnād* to authenticate ḥadīths was preposterous. Ibn Qutayba describes how the *ahl al-kalām* would mock the *ahl al-ḥadīth* for heaping accolades on one another for their knowledge of the different narrations (*ṭuruq*) of ḥadīths without understanding their basic meaning or even their grammar. The *ahl al-kalām*'s mantra was, he said, "The stupider the *muḥaddith*, the more prominent and trusted he is among them."⁶² In a story that appears in a much later Mu'tazilite source, the *Ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila* of Ibn al-Murtaḍā (d. 839/1437), the scion of the school, Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915-16), is asked to evaluate two ḥadīths narrated through the same *isnād*. Al-Jubbā'ī authenticates the first ḥadīth, which prohibits women from marrying their aunts' husbands (*lā tankiḥu al-mar'a 'alā 'ammatihā wa lā 'alā khālatihā*). But he rejects as false the second ḥadīth, in which Adam bests Moses in an argument over predestination by telling him that no one has the right to blame Adam or Eve for their expulsion from Paradise, since God had willed this act of disobedience (this ḥadīth contradicts the Mu'tazilite belief in free will). When his interlocutor asks him, "Two ḥadīths with the same *isnād*, you authenticate one and reject the other?", al-Jubbā'ī replies that the second one could not be the words of the Prophet because "the Qur'ān demonstrates its falsity, as does the consensus of the Muslims and the evidence of reason."⁶³ In his *Ta'wīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, Ibn Qutayba thus finds himself rebutting four general criticisms of ḥadīth by rationalists:

- 1 a ḥadīth contradicts the Qur'ān.
- 2 it contradicts other, established ḥadīths.

⁶¹ Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī al-Ka'bī, *Qubūl al-akhbār wa mā'rifat al-rijāl*, ed. Abū 'Amr al-Ḥusaynī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1421/2000), 1:17. For a discussion of al-Ka'bī's theology and ḥadīth scholarship, see Racha el Omari, "The Theology of Abū al-Qāsim al-Balḥī/al-Ka'bī," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2006).

⁶² Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, 11-12.

⁶³ Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila*, ed. Suzanna Diwald-Wilzer (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, [198-]), 81.

- 3 it is contradicted by rational investigation (*al-naẓar*), which usually involves the ḥadīth having some unacceptable legal or dogmatic implications.
- 4 it is contradicted by rational proof (*ḥujjat 'aql*), which generally means it clashes with some notion of what is acceptable or possible according to the precepts of reason or the basic tenets of the Muslim rationalist worldview.⁶⁴

In their polemics against rationalists, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* lept on this contempt for the *isnād* and reliance on human reason. Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī (d. 430/1038) narrates a report in which the Mu'tazilite 'Amr b. 'Ubayd was presented with a ḥadīth whose meaning he found unacceptable. 'Amr rejects each step in the *isnād*:

If I heard al-A'mash say that [report], I would disbelieve him. If I heard Zayd b. Wahb say that, I would not reply. And if I heard 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd say that, I would not accept it. And even if I heard the Messenger of God (ṣ) say that, I would reject it. If I heard God [Himself] most high say it, I would say to Him: this was not part of the covenant You made with us (*laysa 'alā ḥādḥā akhadhta mīthāqanā*).⁶⁵

In another polemic against 'Amr b. 'Ubayd, al-Dāraqūṭnī reports that the Mu'tazilite had heard the ḥadīth of Bahz b. Ḥakīm that “a man ordered his family, if he died, to burn him and then scatter his ashes on a windy day” so that God could never find him to exact retribution on him for his sins. 'Amr said, “The Messenger of God (ṣ) did not say that!” He continued, “and if he did say it, I would not believe him (*fa-anā bihi mukadhdhib*), and if disbelieving in it were a sin, then I would repeat it!”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, 193 ff. (example of contradiction with the Qur'ān), 123 (example of contradiction with *naẓar*), 204 ff., 326 (contradiction with *ḥujjat 'aql*).

⁶⁵ Al-Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, 12:169-70 (biography of 'Amr b. 'Ubayd); al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-i'tidāl*, 3:278.

⁶⁶ Al-Dāraqūṭnī, *Traditionistische Polemik gegen 'Amr b. 'Ubayd*, ed. Josef van Ess (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1967), 12. For this ḥadīth, see Muḥammad b. Hārūn al-Rūyānī (d. 307/919-20), *Musnad al-Rūyānī*, ed. Ayman 'Alī Abū Yamānī, 3 vols. (Cairo: Mu'assasat Qurṭuba, 1416/1996), 2:119-20; cf. *Musnad Aḥmad*: 4:447; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-kabīr*, 14:426.

For the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, only by submitting oneself completely to the uncorrupted ways of the early Muslim community as transmitted though the *isnād* can one truly obey God and His Messenger. Unlike the *ahl al-kalām*, whom they saw as arrogantly glorifying the capacity of human reason, or the *ahl al-ra'y*, whom they viewed as rejecting or accepting ḥadīths arbitrarily when it suited their legal opinion,⁶⁷ the *ahl al-ḥadīth* perceived themselves as “cultivating the ways of the Messenger, fending off [heretical innovation and lies] from revealed knowledge (*al-ilm*).”⁶⁸

To question the rational acceptability of a report was to allow the human mind too much free rein in defining religion; if a report could be traced to the Prophet, Muslims should hear and obey. Because it clashed with the *ahl al-ḥadīth* position that ḥadīths could abrogate or modify Qur'ānic rulings, the Mu'tazilite ḥadīth instructing Muslims to compare reports attributed to the Prophet with the Qur'ān was uniformly rejected as inauthentic by Sunni ḥadīth scholars.⁶⁹ In the *Sunan* of al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915-16), we find the

⁶⁷ Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, 51-7.

⁶⁸ This attributed to 'Alī b. al-Madīnī (d. 234/849); Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:131.

⁶⁹ These scholars include 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mahdī (d. 198/814), al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), Ibn Ma'īn (d. 233/848), Zakariyyā al-Sājī (d. 307/919-20), al-Dāraquṭnī, al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388/998), al-Bayhaqī, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070), al-Ṣaghānī, Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), and al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497). These scholars levy a host of criticisms against the ḥadīth's *isnād*, declaring it either *mursal*, all its narrations are weak, baseless (*laysa lahu aṣl*), or the forgery of a heretical rationalist (*zindiq*); al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, [n.d.]), 224-5; al-Dāraquṭnī, *Sunan al-Dāraquṭnī*, 4:208-9; al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma'ālim al-sunan*, 4:299; Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-ahkām*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad 'Abd al-'Azīz, 8 vols. in 2 (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Imiyāz, 1398/1978), 2:250-1; al-Bayhaqī, *Ma'rifat al-sunan wa'l-āthār*, 1:117-8; al-Ṣaghānī, *al-Durr al-multaqaṭ fī tabyīn al-ghalaṭ*, ed. 'Abdallāh al-Qaḍī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1405/1985), 43; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-i'tidāl*, 2:302; al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasana*, ed. Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Khisht (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1425/2004), 48. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr sums up the opposition to the report by saying, “Those words were not said by the Prophet according to the scholars of transmission and distinguishing what is reliable from unreliable”; Abū 'Umar Yūsuf Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi' bayān al-'ilm wa faḍlihi*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, [1975]), 495. The only time this ḥadīth finds acceptance among Sunni scholars occurs when it contains the addition of “compare [the ḥadīth] to the Book of God and my sunna”; al-Ḥusayn b. Ibrāhīm al-Jawzaqānī, *al-Abāṭil wa'l-manākīr wa'l-ṣiḥāḥ al-mashāhīr*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan Muḥammad (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1422/2001), 163-4; al-Khaṭīb, *al-Kifāya*, 2:553.

Companion ‘Imrān b. Ḥuṣayn (d. 52/672) instructing new Muslims that the Prophet had said, “Whoever is grieved for [by his family] will be punished [for that mourning] (*man yunāḥu ‘alayhi yu‘adh-dhab*).” When a person in the audience inquires, “A person dies in Khurasan, is mourned for here, and he is punished?” ‘Imrān replies, “The Messenger of God (ṣ) has spoken the truth, and you have disbelieved [in his words] (*kadhhabta*)!”⁷⁰ When Ibn ‘Abbās questioned the coherence of Abū Hurayra’s ḥadīth telling Muslims to perform ablutions after eating cooked food, Abū Hurayra scolded him: “If you hear a ḥadīth from the Messenger of God (ṣ), don’t try to think of examples for it (*fa-lā tadrib lahu mathal^{an}*).”⁷¹ Ibn Qutayba explains that with respect to matters of dogma such as God’s attributes:

We do not resort except to that which the Messenger of God (ṣ) resorted. And we do not reject what has been *transmitted authentically* from him because it does not accord with our conjectures (*awhāminā*) or seem correct to reason... we hope that in this lies the path to salvation and escape from the baseless whims of heresy (*ahwā*).⁷² (my emphasis)

The centerpiece of the ḥadīth scholars cult of the *isnād* has been Ibn al-Mubārak’s famous statement when confronted by ḥadīths forged by heretics (*zanādiqa*): “for me the *isnād* is part of religion; if not for the *isnād*, anyone who wanted could say whatever he wanted. But if it is said to him ‘who told you that?’ he cannot respond (*baqiya*).”⁷³ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj also quotes Ibn al-Mubārak

⁷⁰ *Sunan al-Nasā’i: kitāb al-janā’iz, bāb al-niyāḥa ‘alā al-mayyit*; al-Rūyānī, *Musnad al-Rūyānī*, 1:104; Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 2:732-33; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, 7:300; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-‘itidāl*, 1:577. The word ‘k-dh-b-t’ here could also be read as ‘*kadhhabta* (you have lied),’ but I believe the above translation better suits the context.

⁷¹ See n. 14.

⁷² Ibn Qutayba, *Ta’wīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, 208.

⁷³ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-‘ilal; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: muqaddima, bāb al-isnād min al-dīn* (note: Muslim’s narration is through ‘Abdān from Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Quhzādh and lacks the second part about challenging the person’s source); Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:130; al-Ḥasan b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rāmhurmuzī, *al-Muḥaddith al-fāsil bayn al-rāwī wa’l-rā’i*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Ajāj al-Khaṭīb ([Beirut]: Dār al-Fikr, 1391/1971), 209; al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *Ma‘rifat ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*, ed. Mu‘azzim Ḥusayn (Hyderabad: Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif al-Uthmāniyya, 1385/1966), 8; idem, *Kitāb al-madkhal ilā ma‘rifat kitāb al-Iklīl*, 129;

as saying, “Between us and the [early] community there are props, namely the *isnād* (*baynanā wa bayn al-qawm al-qawā'im ya'nī al-isnād*).”⁷⁴ Ibn 'Adī cites Ibn 'Abbās as saying, “Indeed this knowledge is [our] religion, so incline towards ḥadīths as long as they have *isnāds* to your Prophet (*inna hādhā al-'ilm dīn fa'hibbū al-ḥadīth mā usnida ilā nabīyikum*).”⁷⁵

Only a reliable *isnād* can protect Muslims from embracing material that might be the forgeries of heretics. Al-Shāfi'ī is frequently quoted by the *ahl al-ḥadīth* and later Sunnis as warning, “The person who seeks knowledge without an *isnād* (in another version: who does not ask ‘where is this from?’), indeed, he is like a person gathering wood at night. He carries on his back a bundle of wood when there may be a viper in it that could bite him.”⁷⁶ The cult of the *isnād* became so intense in the self-portrayal of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* that it was reported that Ibn Ḥanbal would not accept the habit of praising God before telling his doctor of any ailments he had without an *isnād* establishing this practice.⁷⁷

Corollary: A Flaw in the *Matn* Necessitates a Flaw in the *Isnād*

In the face of rationalist opponents who upheld content criticism based on the criteria of the Qur'ān and reason, the *ahl al-ḥadīth* touted the *isnād* as the only means by which Muslims could ensure the authenticity of Prophetic reports while avoiding the whims of human reason. To reject a ḥadīth because of what seemed to be a contradiction with the Qur'ān or the precepts of reason was to slip

al-Khaṭīb, *Sharaf aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth wa naṣīḥat ahl al-ḥadīth*, ed. 'Amr 'Abd al-Mun'im Sulaym (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, 1417/1996), 86; idem, *al-Kifāya*, 2:453; idem, *Tārikh Baghdād*, 6:164; Abū al-Ḥasanāt Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī (d. 1886-87), *al-Ajwiba al-fādila li'l-as'ila al-'ashara al-kāmila*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 3rd ed. (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 1414/1994), 21 ff.

⁷⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: muqaddima, bāb al-isnād min al-dīn*.

⁷⁵ Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:156.

⁷⁶ The first clause appears in these two forms. See Abū Ya'lā al-Khalīl b. 'Abdallāh al-Khalīlī (d. 446/1054), *al-Irshād fi mā rifat 'ulamā' al-ḥadīth*, ed. 'Amir Aḥmad Ḥaydar (Mecca: Dār al-Fikr, 1414/1993), 5; Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:124.

⁷⁷ Al-Khaṭīb, *Tārikh Baghdād*, 10:276 (biography of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṭabīb).

from the bonds of religion. If the *isnād* is authentic, the ḥadīth is authentic.⁷⁸ What would be the consequences of conceding, as al-Jubbā'ī claimed, that even if an *isnād* is perfect, the message it transmits may be forged? It would no longer be possible to trust the *isnād*, and the whole cult of authenticity built by the *ahl al-ḥadīth* on the foundation of the *isnād* would collapse.

As the examples of content criticism demonstrate, however, there were some reports whose meanings were patently unacceptable to *ahl al-ḥadīth* scholars like al-Bukhārī and Muslim. How could the *ahl al-ḥadīth* reconcile rejecting a ḥadīth for an unacceptable meaning with their obsession with the *isnād*? Simply put, if there can be no problem in the contents of a ḥadīth with a perfect *isnād*, then a problem in the contents of the ḥadīth *must* mean that there is a problem in the *isnād*. Although he does not follow his argument to its logical conclusion, Luqmān al-Salafī alludes to this while arguing that early ḥadīth critics did not separate *isnād* criticism from content criticism. Authenticating the *matn* of a ḥadīth was the goal of *isnād* criticism, he reminds us, adding perceptively that if a critic like al-Bukhārī found a problematic *matn*, he would explain the problem in terms of the *isnād*.⁷⁹ Ḥamza al-Malibārī agrees that when a critic like 'Alī b. al-Madīnī (d. 234/849) declared that an *isnād* was *ṣaḥīḥ*, it meant that every link in the *isnād* had accurately and honestly reported from the person before him. "So that establishes that the Prophet (ṣ) said [that ḥadīth], and it could never be correct that the *isnād* is authentic and the *matn* weak (*da'if*)."⁸⁰

⁷⁸) Later, many participants in the Sunni tradition would embrace the principle that 'the authenticity of a ḥadīth does not necessarily follow from the authenticity of its *isnād* (*ṣiḥḥat al-isnād lā yalzamu minhā ṣiḥḥat al-ḥadīth*),' since its *matn* might be flawed or contradict more reliable sources. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245), however, reminds his readers that any ḥadīth with these problems would by definition not be *ṣaḥīḥ*, necessarily suffering from some undetected flaw in the *isnād*. For if a *matn* is not *ṣaḥīḥ* then it is "impossible (*muḥāl*)" that it have a *ṣaḥīḥ isnād*; Imād al-Dīn Ismā'il b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Ikhtisār 'Ulūm al-ḥadīth*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1423/2003), 36; Abū 'Amr 'Uthmān b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *Fatāwā wa masā'il Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'ṭī Amin Qal'ajī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1406/1986), 1:174-5.

⁷⁹) Luqmān al-Salafī, *Ibtimām al-muḥaddithin*, 322-3.

⁸⁰) Malibārī, 93.

In the most rigorous Western study of early ḥadīth criticism, Eerik Dickinson stops just short of identifying why content criticism is disguised in the early period. “For the critics,” he states, “the authenticity of a ḥadīth depended on the reliability of its transmitters.” “[I]f a ḥadīth was unauthentic,” he continues, “it was because someone had either distorted or forged it. Therefore, if a ḥadīth was to be rejected, one of its transmitters had to be labeled as unreliable.”⁸¹ Here Dickinson seems to build on John Burton’s insightful but vague comment that a ḥadīth scholar who disapproved of the meaning of a report “might tend more usually” to find a flaw in the *isnād*.⁸²

We should thus not be surprised by the scarcity of explicit content criticism in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries. Perceiving themselves as locked in a bitter conflict with rationalist opponents who insisted that content criticism was the only means by which ḥadīths could be authenticated, *ahl al-ḥadīth* scholars like al-Bukhārī could not concede to their opponents that the examination of a ḥadīth’s contents is an independent venue of criticism. Instead, they reduced content criticism to a mere function of criticizing the *isnād*. A flawed meaning was a symptom of a problem in the *isnād*, not the disease itself. All but two of the above examples of explicit content criticism thus appear in conjunction with *isnād* criticisms.

The Correlation between Early *Isnād* Criticism and Later Explicit Content Criticism

The chief obstacle to any clear understanding of content criticism in the formative period of the Sunni ḥadīth tradition is the ambiguous language that critics like al-Bukhārī and Ibn Ḥanbal employed to assess reports. Their technical vocabulary seems counterintuitive. Whereas most jargons function to communicate meaning clearly within a circle of experts, that of early ḥadīth critics was so vague that even later Muslim ḥadīth scholars expended tremendous effort

⁸¹) Dickinson, *The Development of Early Sunnite Ḥadīth Criticism*, 85.

⁸²) Burton, *An Introduction to the Ḥadīth*, 169.

trying to decipher it.⁸³ A common phrase used by critics in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries to criticize a report attributed to the Prophet, ‘not accepted (*munkar*),’ could mean that the report was reliable but was narrated by only one chain of transmission, that this version of the ḥadīth narrated through a certain *isnād* was unreliable but other authentic versions existed, or that the report was entirely forged.⁸⁴ In this last case, however, even concluding that the term *munkar* denotes ‘forged’ does not necessarily mean that the critic found the meaning of the ḥadīth in question unacceptable. As Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070) would explain, “how many ḥadīths are there with a weak *isnād* but a correct meaning (*rubb ḥadīth ḍa’if al-isnād ṣaḥīḥ al-ma’nā*)?”⁸⁵ When al-Bukhārī

⁸³ The modern Moroccan ḥadīth scholars Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1960) and his younger brother ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī (d. 1993) thus explain a major misunderstanding within the tradition of ḥadīth scholarship: while later scholars like al-Khaṭīb al-Baghḍādī and Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176) used the term *munkar* to mean an extremely unreliable or forged ḥadīth, scholars in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries used to indicate what any narrator, reliable or unreliable, narrated alone without corroboration. The term therefore did not necessarily indicate that the ḥadīth was inauthentic in the eyes of the critic; Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, *Dar’ al-ḍa’if an ḥadīth man ‘ashiqa fa-‘aff*, ed. Iyād Aḥmad al-Ghawj (Cairo: Dār al-Muṣṭafā and Dār al-Imām al-Tirmidhī, 1416/1996), 49-50; ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, *Tawjih al-‘ināya li-ta’rif ‘ilm al-ḥadīth riwāyat^{an} wa dirāya*, ed. Ṣafwat Jawdah Aḥmad (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1423/ 2002), 48.

⁸⁴ ‘*Munkar*’ was etymologically the converse of ‘accepted (*ma’rūf*)’; *Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-ṣiyām, bāb mā jā’a fi-man nazala bi-qawm fa-lā yaṣūmu illā bi-idhnihim*; Zayn al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Rajab, *Sharḥ ‘Ilal al-Tirmidhī*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr ([n.p.]: [n.p.], 1398/1978), 1:409. An early definition of *munkar* comes from Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Bardijī (d. 301/914), who defined it as a ḥadīth known through only one narration; Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, 244. After Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, the term generally denoted a ḥadīth narrated through only one chain of transmission but one of whose narrators was not reliable enough to establish it as reliable. See al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-‘itidāl*, 3:140-1. Ibn ‘Adī reveals the flexibility of the term in the early period when he describes the material narrated by Ja’far b. ‘Umar al-Iblī as “all *munkar* in either their *isnād* or their *matn*”; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-‘itidāl*, 1:561. Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī calls one narration of the famous ḥadīth ‘Deeds are [judged] only by intentions (*innamā al-‘a’māl bi’l-niyyāt*)’ *munkar* even though that Prophetic tradition is generally well established; Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *‘Ilal al-ḥadīth*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifā, 1405/1985), 1:131. In other circumstances, the term *munkar* seems to indicate ‘forged’ or ‘baseless.’ Some reports that al-Bukhārī describes as ‘*munkar*’, Ibn Ḥibbān and al-Ḥākim call ‘*mawḍū‘āt*’; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-‘itidāl*, 2:160.

⁸⁵ Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd li-mā fi al-Muwatṭa’ min al-ma’āni wa’l-asānīd*, ed. Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-‘Alawī and Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Kabīr al-Bakrī, 2nd ed. 26 vols. ([Rabat]:

states that a report narrated by ‘Alī from the Prophet that “I am the abode of wisdom and ‘Alī is its door” is ‘*munkar*,’ we cannot know whether al-Bukhārī objects to the pro-Shiite meaning of the ḥadīth or merely to that particular *isnād*, since the report is also narrated from the Prophet by other Companions.⁸⁶ On its own, then, the term *munkar* could signify either *isnād* or content criticism.

Although very frustrating to Western historians and later Muslim scholars alike, this ambiguity dovetails exactly with the efforts of early ḥadīth critics to conceal content criticism from opponents who sought to legitimize it as the sole means for authenticating ḥadīths. By utilizing technical terms that made content criticism and *isnād* criticism indistinguishable from one another, ḥadīth critics were able to maintain their façade of a total reliance on the *isnād* and their purported boycott of rational criticism.

If we hypothesize that content criticism took place in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries under the guise of *isnād* criticism or ambiguous terminology such as ‘*munkar*,’ one would expect a strong correlation between the ḥadīths mentioned in early books on transmitter criticism and those later listed as forgeries in books of *mawḍū‘āt* when that genre blossomed in the 6th/12th century. Furthermore, if we assume some significant degree of continuity in what Sunni ḥadīth critics considered unacceptable contents, then we should expect that a large portion of the ḥadīths later criticized explicitly for content reasons were early on criticized for transmission flaws or labeled with such generic criticisms as ‘*munkar*.’

Anecdotal evidence supports this hypothesis. In his entry on Ayyūb b. Khālīd al-Anṣārī (fl. early 2nd/8th century) in the *al-Tārikh al-kabīr*, al-Bukhārī notes that Ayyūb narrated from ‘Abdallāh b. Rāfi‘, from Abū Hurayra that the Prophet said, “God created the earth (*turba*) on Saturday.” Al-Bukhārī adds that Abū Hurayra did not hear this ḥadīth from the Prophet, but rather that it was the words

Wizārat ‘Umūm al-Awqāf wa’l-Shu‘ūn al-Islāmiyya, 1402/1982, 1st edition 1387/1967), 1:58.

⁸⁶ Al-Tirmidhī, *‘Ilal al-Tirmidhī al-kabīr*, ed. Ṣubḥī al-Sāmarrā’ī et als. (Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1409/1989), 375. The ḥadīth, for example, appears through Ibn ‘Abbās and Jābir b. ‘Abdallāh; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārikh Baghdād*, 7:182, 3:181.

of the early convert from Judaism, Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 32/652-53).⁸⁷ Since the efflorescence of open content criticism in the 8th/14th century, scholars from Ibn Taymiyya and his students Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) to the Ḥanafī Ibn Abī al-Wafā' (d. 775/1374) and the twentieth-century Moroccan scholar 'Abdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1993) have criticized this ḥadīth for content reasons—how could God have created the earth on Saturday, the seventh day of the week, when the Qur'ān states that God created the earth in six days (Qur'ān 6:54)?⁸⁸

In his *al-Tāriḫ al-awsaṭ* and *al-Tāriḫ al-kabīr*, al-Bukhārī criticizes for *isnād* reasons another ḥadīth that would later become notorious for its objectionable contents. In his entry on Jābān b. 'Abdallāh, he states that the ḥadīth “The child born of illicit sexual relations will not enter Heaven (*lā yadkḥulu al-janna walad al-zinā*)” is not authentic because of two breaks in the *isnād* where the transmitters never met one another.⁸⁹ He rejects another narration of this ḥadīth through the Prophet's wife Maymūna in his entry on Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. 'Amr (d. 145/762-63), again for *isnād* reasons.⁹⁰ This ḥadīth has other narrations as well, but they were also undermined by al-Bukhārī's contemporaries. His teacher 'Alī b. al-Madīnī dismissed a narration of this ḥadīth from 'Uthmān because two transmitters in its *isnād* were unknown, while his student al-Nasā'ī reported widespread disagreement over the reliability of another *isnād* of the ḥadīth through Abū Hurayra.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Tāriḫ al-kabīr*, 1:383. This ḥadīth also appears in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb ṣifāt al-munāfiqīn wa aḥkāmihim, bāb ibtidā' al-khalq wa khalq Ādam 'alayhi al-salām*; al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, 9:5 (*kitāb al-siyar, bāb muḥaddā' al-khalq*).

⁸⁸ Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim al-Āṣimī, 37 vols. (Riyadh: Maṭābī' al-Riyāḍ, 1381-86/1961-67), 1:256-57, 17:235-37; Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munif*, 85-6; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Mufid, [n.d.]), 2:221 (*sūrat al-A'rāf*: 54); Ibn Abī al-Wafā', *al-Jawābir al-muḍīyya*, 4:568; 'Abdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, *al-Fawā'id al-maqsūda fī bayān al-aḥādīth al-shābdhha wa'l-mardūda* (Casablanca: Dār al-Furqān, [n.d.]), 103.

⁸⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Tāriḫ al-awsaṭ*, 1:408; idem, *al-Tāriḫ al-kabīr*, 2:236.

⁹⁰ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Tāriḫ al-kabīr*, 1:140.

⁹¹ 'Alī b. al-Madīnī, *al-'Ilal*, ed. Ḥassām Muḥammad Abū Qurayṣ (Kuwait: Ghirās, 1423/2002), 202-3. *Sunan al-Nasā'ī al-kubrā: kitāb fī faḍl al-'itq, bāb al-ikhtilāf' alā Mujāhid fī ḥadīth Abī Hurayra fī walad al-zinā.*

This controversial ḥadīth subsequently attracted tremendous content criticism. Abū al-Khayr Aḥmad al-Ṭāliqānī (d. 590/1194) recounts that in 576/1180 an energetic discussion about this ḥadīth broke out among students at the Baghdad Niẓāmiyya; a party of the jurists who were present insisted that it was forged because it violated the Qurʾānic principle that “no bearer of burdens bears the burdens of another.”⁹² In his famous *Kitāb al-mawḍūʿāt*, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) asserts that none of the narrations of this ḥadīth are authentic and reaffirms that it violates that venerable Qurʾānic principle.⁹³ Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449), Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497), the Indian Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Fatanī (d. 986/1578-9) and Mullā ʿAlī Qārī (d. 1014/1606) have all repeated this criticism, although some have also tried to advance interpretations of the ḥadīth that eliminated its problematic meaning.⁹⁴

Another ḥadīth that was regularly criticized for *isnād* reasons and would eventually be openly criticized after the 8th/14th century for content reasons is “Whoever says something and then sneezes, what he says is true (*man ḥaddatha ḥadīth^{an} fa-ʿaṭasa ʿindahū fa-huwa ḥaqq*).”⁹⁵ This ḥadīth is frequently mentioned in early books of

⁹² ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad al-Rāfiʿī, (d. 623/1226), *al-Tadwīn fī akhbār Qazwīn*, ed. ʿAzīz Allāh al-ʿUṭrīdī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1987), 2:146.

⁹³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-mawḍūʿāt*, 3:109-11; cf. al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ʿitidāl*, 1:68; 3:619, 623.

⁹⁴ Al-Ṭāliqānī argued that, unlike other Muslims who die as children, this child of adultery would not join its Muslim parents in heaven because its paternity was uncertain. Ibn al-Qayyim states that this child is created from an impure zygote and that only pure, good souls enter heaven. Ibn Ḥajar and his student al-Sakhāwī argue that this ḥadīth assumes that the child would commit the same sin as its parents; al-Rāfiʿī, *al-Tadwīn fī akhbār Qazwīn*, 2:146; Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munīf*, 133; Mullā ʿAlī, *al-Asrār al-marfūʿa*, 362, 370-1; al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasana*, 476; Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Fatanī, *Tadbkirat al-mawḍūʿāt* ([Damascus]: Amīn Damaj, [n.d.]), 180.

⁹⁵ This ḥadīth seems to have no other narrations from the Prophet except via Abū Hurayra → al-Aʿraj → Abū al-Zinād; Abū Yaʿlā al-Mawṣilī, *Musnad Abi Yaʿlā al-Mawṣilī*, ed. Ḥusayn Salīm Asad, 16 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Maʿmūn, 1407/1987), 11:234; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-awsaṭ*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan Muḥammad al-Shāfiʿī, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1420/1999), 5:38 (#6509); Tammām b. Muḥammad al-Rāzī (d. 414/1023), *al-Fawāʿid*, ed. Ḥamdī ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Salafi (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1412/1992), 2:16; al-Bayhaqī, *Shuʿab al-īmān*, ed. Muḥammad al-Saʿīd Zaghlūl, 9 vols.

transmitter criticism with no explicit objection to its meaning. In his *ʿIlal al-ḥadīth*, Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938) reports that his father Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 277/890) said the ḥadīth is “a lie (*kadhīb*).”⁹⁶ Ibn ʿAdī mentions the ḥadīth as an example of the uncorroborated reports transmitted by Muʿāwiya b. Yaḥyā al-Aṭrābulṣī (fl. mid 2nd/8th century).⁹⁷ Later, this ḥadīth regularly appeared in books of *mawḍūʿāt*.⁹⁸ It was Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, however, who declared that this ḥadīth was “refuted by sense perception (*ḥass*).” For how many people have lied while sneezing?⁹⁹ This content criticism has been echoed by al-Zarkashī, al-Sakhāwī, and Mullā ʿAlī Qārī.¹⁰⁰

(Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1410/1990), 7:34, where he notes Ibn ʿAdī’s criticism. The ḥadīth also appears with the wording “If one of you/a man sneezes when saying a ḥadīth, then it is proof of its truth (*idhā ʿaṭasa aḥadukum/al-rajul ʿind al-ḥadīth fa-huwa dalīl ʿalā ṣidqihī/ḥaqq*),” but this version only appears in books of ḥadīth criticism.

⁹⁶ Here it is the *man ḥaddatha*... version narrated by Abū Hurayra; Al-Rāzī, *ʿIlal al-ḥadīth*, 2:342.

⁹⁷ Ibn ʿAdī, *al-Kāmil*, 6:2397. This also appears in Ibn ʿAdī’s entry on ʿAbdallāh b. Jaʿfar b. Nujayḥ, whom he notes Ibn Maʿīn called “a nothing” and whom Ibn ʿAdī insinuates stole the ḥadīth from Muʿāwiya b. Yaḥyā; Ibn ʿAdī, *al-Kāmil*, 4:1497. Al-Maḥdī notes two versions of this ḥadīth in his digest of the ḥadīths found in Ibn ʿAdī’s *Kāmil*, the *Dhakhīrat al-ḥuffāz*; al-Maḥdī, *Dhakhīrat al-ḥuffāz al-mukharraj ʿalā ḥurūf al-alfāz*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Farīwāʾī, 6 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-Salaf, 1416/1996), 1:338 (#352, through Abū Hurayra) and 1:409 (#529, with the wording *ʿaṣḍaq al-ḥadīth mā ʿuṭisa ʿindahu* narrated through Anas b. Mālik).

⁹⁸ Ibn al-Jawzī’s *al-Mawḍūʿāt*, 3:77; al-Ṣaghānī, *al-Mawḍūʿāt*, 18; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ʿitidāl*, 4:140; Ibn ʿArrāq, *Tanzīh al-sharīʿa*, 2:293.

⁹⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munīf*, 51.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Zarkashī, *al-Tadhkira fī al-aḥādīth al-mushtahira*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1406/1986), 328, Mullā ʿAlī, *al-Asrār al-marfūʿa*, 407; al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasana*, 416. Interestingly, a trend in Sunni scholarship has accepted the meaning of this ḥadīth. Beginning with the mysterious early Sufi scholar, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. circa 318/930), it held that sneezing was in fact a guarantor of true speech because sneezing is the breathing of the soul, which is joined to the heavenly realm (*malakūt*). Sneezing allows the soul to contact this realm and therefore what is said after it is true; al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl fī maʿrifat aḥādīth al-rasūl*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1413/1992), 2:65. Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) implies that the ḥadīth is authentic based on its narration in the *Muʿjam* of al-Ṭabarānī; al-Nawawī, *Adhkhār* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1404/1984), 215. Al-Suyūṭī includes the ḥadīth in his *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaghīr*; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaghīr*, 71 (#1082).

Beyond such anecdotal evidence, we find a strong statistical correlation between ḥadīths criticized either for *isnād* reasons in books of transmitter criticism or ambiguously as *munkar*, and the ḥadīths found in later books of *mawḍū'āt*. In a random sample I made of 100 of the 1119 ḥadīths in the earliest surviving *mawḍū'āt* book, the *Tadhkirat al-mawḍū'āt* of al-Maqdisī (d. 507/1113), 95% of the ḥadīths appear earlier in Ibn Ḥibbān's *al-Majrūḥīn*, Ibn 'Adī's *al-Kāmil*, al-'Uqaylī's *al-Du'afā' al-kabīr*, Ibn Abī Ḥātim's *al-Jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl*, his *Kitāb al-'ilal*, the transmitter works of al-Bukhārī (*al-Tārīkh al-kabīr*, *al-Tārīkh al-awsaṭ* or his *Kitāb al-ḍu'afā' al-ṣaghīr*) or al-Jūzajānī's *Aḥwāl al-rijāl*.¹⁰¹

The central role played by earlier books on weak transmitters in al-Maqdisī's method of identifying forged ḥadīths is further evident in another, much larger book he composed: the *Dhakhīrat al-ḥuffāz al-mukharraj 'alā ḥurūf al-alfāz*, in which the author lists all the ḥadīths that Ibn 'Adī had included in his *Kāmil* along with his *isnād* criticisms. Al-Maqdisī notes that Ibn 'Adī had listed these ḥadīths "as proof of the weakness of the transmitter addressed."¹⁰²

In the second earliest book of *mawḍū'āt* to have survived, the *Kitāb al-abāṭīl wa'l-manākīr wa'l-ṣiḥāḥ wa'l-mashāḥīr* of al-Maqdisī's student al-Ḥusayn b. Ibrāhīm al-Jawzaqānī (d. 543/1148-9), the author does not appear to have relied on earlier books of transmitter criticism as much as al-Maqdisī did. The correlation is nonetheless noteworthy. In a random sample I collected of seventy-three ḥadīths from the *Abāṭīl*, 45% appear in the above-listed selection of earlier books of transmitter criticism.¹⁰³ This statistic, lower than what I found in the case of al-Maqdisī, is congruent with al-Jawzaqānī's distinctly independent critical leanings. An austere ḥadīth-oriented Shāfi'ī from Khurasan, he was such a vehement opponent of Shiism that he rejected the widely-held Sunni belief that the messianic figure

¹⁰¹ See al-Maqdisī, *Tadhkira*, starting from ḥadīths #1-81 (76/81); from ḥadīths #536-45 (10/10); from ḥadīths #722-730 (9/9).

¹⁰² Al-Maqdisī, *Dhakhīrat al-ḥuffāz*, 1:189.

¹⁰³ Al-Jawzaqānī, *al-Abāṭīl*, pgs. 32-42; 49-51; 66-74; 87-98; 102-13; 114-25; 129-35; 138-48; 161-8; 196-202; 232-40; 327-39; 353-4 (as this book contains both ḥadīths that the author feels are forged as well as those he feels are authentic, only the ḥadīths he deemed forged are included in this sample).

of the Mahdī will be from the family of the Prophet. Instead, he produced an obscure ḥadīth stating, “There is no messiah except Jesus the son of Mary.”¹⁰⁴ Al-Jawzaqānī’s dismissal of material otherwise considered reliable by mainstream Sunnism explains why his collection contains so many previously unnoticed ‘forgeries.’ Al-Jawzaqānī’s reliance on the transmitter-criticism paradigm, however, is nonetheless obvious in his *Kitāb al-abāṭil*; for every ḥadīth he rejects except one, he justifies his decision by recourse to criticisms of the *isnād* or its transmitters.¹⁰⁵

The *Kitāb al-mawḍū‘āt* of Ibn al-Jawzī, one of the most famous books of forged ḥadīths, continues this trend of reliance on earlier books of transmitter criticism. Because he provides full *isnāds* for all the ḥadīths he judges to be forged, we can see exactly what sources he consulted. In the first volume of the three-volume 1966-68 Medina edition of the work, the *isnāds* of 44% of the ḥadīths that Ibn al-Jawzī rejects lead back directly through the weak transmitter works of Ibn ‘Adī, Ibn Ḥibbān, al-‘Uqaylī, al-Ḥākim or Abū al-Faḥ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Azdī (d. 374/985). This statistic does not even count the ḥadīths that Ibn al-Jawzī criticizes and occurred in these earlier works but whose *isnāds* Ibn al-Jawzī did not trace back to the Prophet directly through the books.

In the first *mawḍū‘āt* book based solely on content criticism, the *Manār al-munīf* of Ibn al-Qayyim, the foundational role of the early books of transmitter criticism is equally prominent. Of fifty ḥadīths that I selected at random from the book, 62% are also found in our afore-mentioned selection of earlier books of transmitter criticism.¹⁰⁶

Of course, what one ḥadīth critic sees as a blatant contradiction between a report and the established tenets of Islam another may easily reconcile. Just because Ibn al-Qayyim considered a ḥadīth that debases blacks to be unacceptable because it did not befit the Prophet, we cannot be sure that Ibn Ḥanbal deemed it *munkar* in

¹⁰⁴ Al-Jawzaqānī, *al-Abāṭil*, 167.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 349.

¹⁰⁶ For the sampled ḥadīths, see Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munīf*, 213-18 of the index of forged ḥadīths (individual ḥadīths only).

the 3rd/9th century for the same reason.¹⁰⁷ The high correlation between books listing forged ḥadīths (*mawḍū'āt*) and the ḥadīths that earlier transmitter books included as exhibits of the weak material narrated by individuals they listed, however, strongly suggests that the authors of the *mawḍū'āt* books treated the books of transmitter criticism as storehouses of problematic ḥadīths. The high correlation between the first book strictly devoted to content criticism and this selection of earlier books of transmitter criticism also strongly suggests that scholars like al-Bukhārī and Ibn 'Adī included an appreciable number of ḥadīths in their books for content reasons (again, this assumes a significant degree of diachronic continuity in what ḥadīth critics considered unacceptable contents).

One might claim that such a correlation between later books of forged ḥadīths and early books of transmitter criticism is meaningless—later critics might have felt that they could only bring overt content criticism to bear on ḥadīths that earlier scholars had already critiqued for *isnād* reasons in their books of transmitter criticism. This is not the case, however, since the authors of *mawḍū'āt* books drew the ḥadīths they criticized on the basis of content from a wide range of respected sources, such as the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal, the *Jāmi'* of al-Tirmidhī and even (although rarely) the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*.¹⁰⁸ Nor did later critics limit themselves only to previously criticized material. Some identified problems in a ḥadīth's contents in spite of an admittedly flawless *isnād*. Discussing the Shiite ḥadīths of one narrator, al-Dhahabī reacts to the ḥadīth “If they take 'Alī as a leader (*wallū*) then he is a guide, guided [by God] (*mahdī*)” by noting that, although the ḥadīth has an established (*mahfūz*) *isnād* in Ibn

¹⁰⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munīf*, 101; Ibn Qudāma, *al-Muntakhab min al-'Ilal*, 66-8.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, al-Maqdisī, *al-Tadhkira*, 135 (where he criticizes the ḥadīth '*li'an yu'addiba aḥadukum waladahū khayr min al-yataṣaddaqa bi-ṣā'*', found in al-Tirmidhī's *Jāmi'*: *kitāb al-birr wa al-ṣīla, bāb mā jā'a fī adab al-walad*). The above mentioned ḥadīth of the Earth being created on Saturday appears in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb ṣifāt al-munāfiqin wa aḥkāmihim, bāb ibtidā' al-khalq wa khalq Ādam 'alayhi al-salām*). For a discussion of the ḥadīths from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* that Ibn al-Jawzī included in his *Kitāb al-mawḍū'āt*, see al-Suyūṭī, *al-Nukat al-badī'āt 'alā al-Mawḍū'āt*, ed. 'Amir Aḥmad Ḥaydar ([Beirut]: Dār al-Janān, 1411/1991), 47, 212, 262.

Ḥanbal's *Musnad*, he cannot accept it. He asserts, "I do not know of any criticism of it, but the report is *munkar*."¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Since the landmark contributions of Goldziher, Western scholars of Islam have generally accepted his conclusion that early Muslim ḥadīth critics looked only at the *isnād* and not the *matn* of ḥadīths to discern their authenticity. When Western and modern Muslim scholars have argued that early critics did in fact take the contents of ḥadīths into consideration, they have relied on material of either dubious historical reliability or imported into the ḥadīth tradition from the fields of speculative theology and legal theory long after the formative period of Sunni ḥadīth criticism in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries.

I am not suggesting that ḥadīth critics like al-Bukhārī or Ibn Ḥanbal were forerunners of the Historical Critical Method. As generations of Western scholars have demonstrated, even the revered *Ṣaḥīḥayn* are replete with anachronistic reports that grew out of the political, legal and sectarian feuds of the first two centuries of Islam. But we need not, and indeed cannot, explain why al-Bukhārī or Muslim saw the contents of one anachronistic ḥadīth as unacceptable while approving of another similarly anachronistic report. The fact that early ḥadīth critics do not seem to have applied content criticism as modern historians would construe it does not mean that they did not apply it at all.

Indeed, the fifteen examples provided here from established texts of the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th century disprove the extreme claim of Goldziher and others. Far from having "no feeling for even the crudest anachronisms provided that the *isnād* is correct,"¹¹⁰ the examples indicate that al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Fasawī, al-Jūzajānī, Ibn Khuzayma and Ibn Ḥibbān were able and willing to practice content criticism. In their work we see a sensitivity to historical anachronism, logical impossibility, limits of 'thinkable thought' and

¹⁰⁹) Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 2:612-3.

¹¹⁰) Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 2:140-1.

a rejection of material that contradicts what they 'knew' to be historically, dogmatically and legally true.

The high correlation (between 45% and 95%) between later collections of forged ḥadīths and books of transmitter criticism from this early period strongly suggests that critics like al-Bukhārī and Ibn Ḥibbān were rejecting ḥadīths for content reasons even when they did not make this explicitly clear. Indeed, content criticism may well have been more of a rule than an exception. These critics' sensitivities to anachronism and logical inconsistency are undeniably attested to in the examples provided, and it seems as unlikely that they could have simply deactivated those critical filters as us modern historians consistently ignoring suspicious contents while conducting our own research. Certainly, a belief in the Prophet's foreknowledge of future events could mitigate the need for content criticism, but at minimum it seems impossible that the examples given in this article represent the *only* instances of content criticism in the early ḥadīth tradition.

The reason why these early critics so rarely made this content criticism obvious is understandable. They felt themselves locked in a terrible struggle with rationalists who mocked their reliance on the *isnād* and saw content criticism as the only true means of evaluating the authenticity of ḥadīths. To acknowledge a problem in the meaning of a ḥadīth without arriving at that conclusion through an analysis of the *isnād* would affirm the rationalist methodology. For this reason, content criticism had to be concealed in the language of *isnād* criticism.

Proving the existence of content criticism in the early period and explaining why it is not more evident complements our understanding of early Islamic legal thought. In his *Ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth* and his *Risāla*, al-Shāfi'ī suggested that it is possible to reconcile two reliable ḥadīths whose meanings seem incompatible.¹¹¹ When the contents of a ḥadīth proved irretrievably incompatible with what al-Shāfi'ī considered the established truth, however, he resorted to criticizing or impugning its *isnād*.¹¹² Like al-Bukhārī and the other ḥadīth critics,

¹¹¹ Al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, 216-17.

¹¹² Al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, 224-5; Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:125.

a problem in the contents of a ḥadīth would have to be blamed on a problem in the *isnād*. In his *Risāla*, al-Shāfi‘ī allows us a brief glimpse of this examination of content. He states that we know the reliability of ḥadīths by examining their narrators, “except for a specific few ḥadīths, whose truthfulness or falsity is demonstrated by the transmitter narrating something *the likes of which could not be* or that contradicts better established evidence” (my emphasis).¹¹³ Eerik Dickinson insightfully divides the Sunni study of the ḥadīth corpus in the early period into two schools: those like al-Shāfi‘ī who sought to navigate its tangles by harmonizing contrasting ḥadīths, and the transmitter-critics like al-Bukhārī who dismissed contrasting evidence by finding flaws in its *isnād*.¹¹⁴ Perhaps these two schools were but facets of the same approach. Just as al-Shāfi‘ī provides us with the earliest list of criteria for reliable ḥadīth transmitters,¹¹⁵ so too did critics like al-Jūzajānī and al-Bukhārī consider the irreconcilable contents of a person’s ḥadīths in their transmitter ratings. In both cases, content and *isnād* criticism were employed side by side.

¹¹³) Al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Risāla*, 399.

¹¹⁴) Dickinson, *The Development of Early Sunnite Ḥadīth Criticism*, 6-7.

¹¹⁵) Al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Risāla*, 369 ff.