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The Canonization of Ibn Mâjah: Authenticity vs. Utility in the Formation of the Sunni Ḥadîth Canon

Abstract. In Sunni Islam, the canonical ‘Six Books’ of hadith derive their authority as doctrinal references from scholarly consensus on their reliability as representations of the Prophet’s Sunna. One of the Six Books, the Sunan of Ibn Majah, however, presents a bizarre exception. Although it has been considered part of the Six Book collection since the late eleventh century, it has been consistently and severely criticized by Sunni scholars for the large number of unreliable hadiths it contains. Explaining the canonical status of Ibn Majah’s Sunan despite these criticisms requires recognizing that the hadith canon was based not only on authenticity but also on utility. The Six Books served to delimit the countless numbers of hadith in circulation into a manageable form, and Ibn Majah’s Sunan added to this canonical body a useful number of hadiths not found in the other Six Books. Sunni scholars themselves acknowledged that, in the case of Ibn Majah’s Sunan, utility trumped authenticity in the Sunni hadith canon.

Keywords: Hadith, Ibn Majah, Canon, Forgery

Résumé. La canonisation d’Ibn Mâjah : authenticité vs. utilité dans la formation du canon du ḥadîth sunnite


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**Mots-clefs** : Hadith, Ibn Majah, Canon, Forgerie

### Introduction

In the introduction to the history he devoted to his native city of Qazvin, the famous Shâfî’î jurist ‘Abd al-Karîm al-Râfi’î (d. 623/1226) provides a series of Prophetic ḥadîths and sayings of early Muslims that shower the northern Iranian town with accolades. One such ḥadîth reads:

> The horizons will be opened for you in conquest, and a city called Qazvin will be conquered by you. Whoever takes up armed camp (râbaṭa) there for forty morns will receive a column of gold in heaven, crowned with a ruby dome with seventy gates, at each door a mate from among the famous heavenly beauties.

Of course, forged ḥadîths praising certain cities, tribes or sects were myriad – and Muslim scholars knew it. Al-Râfi’î thus moved to establish the truth value of this hadith by stating that the report appeared in the Sunan of Ibn Mâjah (d. 273/887), a book that “the hadith masters have associated (yuqarrinûn) with the Ṣaḥîḥayn [of al-Bukhârî and Muslim] as well as the Sunan of Abû Dâwûd and al-Nasâ’î, and they have used it as proof” (Al-Râfi’î, 1987: 1:7).

The authority of Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan stemmed from its canonical status. Specifically, it was widely considered to be one of the ‘Six Books’ (al-kutub al-sitta), a selection of works which Sunni Muslim scholars have regarded as authoritative references for hadith. This canon was not rigidly fixed, with some scholars acknowledging only a ‘Five Book’ canon. Often this shifting five-to-six-book canon was referred to merely as “The Authentic [Books] (al-Ṣiḥâḥ).” Describing the problem of finding reliable sources for the past in the introduction to his world history, the Persian polymath Rashîd al-Dîn (d. 718/1318) described these Ṣiḥâḥ as the books compiled by “the foremost imâm[s].” “All else,” he adds, “remains within the sphere of doubt and hesitation” (Rashîd al-Dîn, 1994: 1: 9-10).

As we have discussed elsewhere, a canon, a set of texts considered authoritative by a certain community, need not be immune to criticism or rigidly fixed in its scope (Brown, 2007: 20-46). Criticism of the centerpiece of the Sunni ḥadîth canon, the famous Ṣaḥîḥayn of al-Bukhârî and Muslim, was normal in the pre-modern period and has continued, with much greater controversy, in the modern
period (Brown, 2007: 300-331). The flexible boundaries of the Sunni ḥadîth canon stem from one of the chief functions of the canon: delimiting some selection of ḥadîths, whatever various scholars might consider its definitions to be, as a synecdoche for the Prophet’s boundless Sunna as a whole (Brown, 2007: 335-358). The case of Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan introduces a new element into discourse on the ḥadîth canon. With this book we see that the utility of making a synecdochic delimitation of the Sunna supersedes the normally paramount emphasis on the textual authenticity of ḥadîth.

In general, canons form when a community authorizes a selection of texts to fulfill certain needs. This empowerment depends on some authorizing ethos to compel community members to venerate the canon, such as claims of a divine origin, the eminent wisdom of the author, the mandate of the people or some certainty about historical preservation. In the Sunni Islamic tradition, the formation of the scriptural canon took place through the rhetorical diptych of divine revelation and historical authenticity: Muḥammad was God’s chosen messenger bringing His final religion, and the Muslim community had accurately preserved the text and teachings of the Prophet in history. Canonical works such as the Uthmanic Quran and the Six Book ḥadîth canon all derived their authority from the combination of divine/Prophetic origins and textual authenticity as established by the Sunni science of transmission criticism. The language of textual authenticity (ṣiḥḥa), right guidance and absolute submission to the transmitted revelatory teachings of Muhammad and his early community permeate Sunni historical formation and identification.

Examining the canonical collections of Sunni ḥadîth, however, we find that authenticity was not a consistent priority. The canonization of Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan illustrates that the ḥadîth canon was formed in part for reasons other than textual authenticity as defined by Sunni ḥadîth criticism. Although advocates of Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan lauded its author for his selectivity and critical rigor, luminaries of the Sunni ḥadîth tradition across the centuries have lambasted the book for the unreliability of its contents. According to the testimony of influential participants in the Sunni study of ḥadîth, the book was admitted into the canon not because of its reliability but because it vastly expanded the number of useful ḥadîths in the canonical body.

Odd Man Out: Ibn Mâjah and the Ḥadîth Canon

Five of the six books of the famous Sunni ‘Six Book’ canon – all of them except Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan - rose to prominence during the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries in the Islamicate heartlands of the Nile/Oxus region. The famous scholar of Egypt, Saʿīd b. al-Sakan (d. 353/964) and Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāq Ibn Mandah of Isfahan (d. 395/1004-5) both mention the four books of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), Abû Dâwûd (d. 275/889) and al-Nasāʾī (d. 303/915) as agreed
upon references. Ibn al-Sakan went so far as to call them “the foundations (qawā‘īd) of Islam” (Brown, 2007: 147-8). Although he did not denote them as a canonical unit, the fifth/eleventh-century Shāfi‘ī scholar of Nishapur, Abû Bakr al-Bayhaqî (d. 458/1066), stated that the six collections of al-Bukhârî, Muslim, Abû Dâwûd, al-Nasâ‘î, al-Tirmidhî (d. 279/892) and Ibn Khuzayma (d. 311/923) had identified the bulk of the authentic hadîths in circulation (Al-Bayhaqî, 1991: 1:106). The great systematizer of the Sunni ḥadîth sciences, al-Khaṭîb al-Baghdâdî (d. 463/1071), recommended the following as the first steps in his ḥadîth study curriculum: first, mastering the esteemed books of al-Bukhârî and Muslim, then the collections of Abû Dâwûd, al-Nasâ‘î, al-Tirmidhî and Ibn Khuzayma (al-Baghdâdî, 1983: 2:185).

The books of al-Bukhârî, Muslim, al-Nasâ‘î and Abû Dâwûd faired equally well to the west in al-Andalus. These works ranked in the first or second tier of Ibn Ḥazm’s (d. 456/1064) listing of the best collections of reports from the Prophet and the early Muslim community (Ibn Ḥazm was famously ignorant of al-Tirmidhî’s Jâmi‘) (al-Dhahabî, 1998: 3:231). The Andalusian Mâlikî hadîth scholar, Ibn Razîn al-Saraqusṭî (d. 524/1129), echoed this choice and digested the contents of these mainstay books into one compilation. To the books of al-Bukhârî, Muslim, al-Nasâ‘î and Abû Dâwûd he added the foundational Mâlikî text of the Muwaṭṭa‘. Like Ibn Ḥazm, he did not note al-Tirmidhî’s Jâmi‘.

The perceived authenticity and soundness - ṣiḥha - of the hadîths in these collections played an obvious role in garnering them respect. Al-Bukhârî’s and Muslim’s books were of course known as the ‘Two Ṣaḥîhs (Ṣaḥîḥayn).’ As the influential Shâfi‘î/Ash‘arî jurist and hadîth scholar Abû Isḥâq al-Isfarâyînî (d. 418/1027) stated:

The authenticity of the reports in the Ṣaḥîḥayn is epistemologically certain in terms of their texts (uṣûlihâ wa mutûnihâ), and no disagreement can occur concerning them. If disagreement does occur, it is over the transmissions and narrators. Anyone whose ruling disagrees with a report and does not provide some acceptable interpretation (ta‘wil sâ‘îgh) for the report, we negate his ruling, for the umma has accepted these reports with consensus (al-Subkî, 1992: 4:261).

The notion of ṣiḥha extended to other components of the hadîth canon as well. The leading hadîth scholar of Baghdad, Abû al-Ḥasan al-Dâraquṭnî (d. 385/995), dubbed al-Nasâ‘î’s Sunan a “Ṣaḥîḥ,” and al-Khaṭîb referred to al-Tirmidhî’s book as “al-Jâmi‘ al-ṣaḥîḥ” (al-Khaṭîb, 1997: 5: 274; 11:396). Although never part of the Six Book hadîth canon, Ibn Khuzayma’s collection was also referred to as his Ṣaḥîḥ as well. The longeuvous hadîth scholar Abû Ṭâhir al-Silafî (d. 576/1180), who was born in Isfahan but spent over sixty years of his life in Alexandria, stated in his introduction to Abû Dâwûd’s Sunan that it was one of “the Five Books that the ‘People who Loosen and Bind’ (ahl al-ḥall wa al-‘aqd) from amongst the jurists and hadîth masters have accepted, ruling that the basic reports (uṣûl) in them are ṣaḥîh…” (al-Silafî, 1981: 4:358). Denying the contents of these books, in fact, is the equivalent of placing oneself outside of the Abode of Islam and into the Abode of War (dâr al-ḥarb) in al-Silafî’s opinion (Brown, 2007: 337).
Muḥammad b. Yazīd Ibn Mājah was born in 209/824-5 and died in 273/887. He penned a Tafsīr and Tārīkh, but it was his Sunan which won him fame (Ibn Nuqṭa, 1988: 121). It was only in the late fifth/eleventh century, however, that Ibn Mājah’s Sunan became widely recognized. As the great historian of Damascus Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176) noted, it was the scholar Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī (d. 507/1113), who spent most of his life in Iran and greater Syria, who first denoted a Six Book canon that added the Sunan of Ibn Mājah to the Ṣaḥîḥayn and the books of al-Tirmidhî, al-Nasâʾî and Abū Dâwūd (Ibn Ḥajar, 1994: 166) 1. Our historian of Qazvin, al-Râfiʿī, also enumerates this six-book series, as does the Indian Ḥanafī al-Ṣaghânî (d. 650/1252), who also adds the Sunan of al-Dāraquṭnî. Al-Râfiʿī’s father, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Râfiʿī (d. 580/1184) had earlier written a digest hadîth collection called Ḥāwî al-uṣûl min akhbâr al-rasûl, which included the contents from the collections of al-Bukhârî, Muslim, al-Tirmidhî, Abū Dâwūd, al-Nasâʾî, and Ibn Mājah, as well as the Musnad of al-Shâfiʿî (d. 204/820) (al-Râfiʿī, 1987: 1:377; 2:49; al-Ṣaghânî, 1985: 20).

It was the Six Book canon that became the standard unit for analysis after the sixth/twelfth century. ‘Abd al-Ghanî al-Maqdisî (d. 600/1203) chose this as the subject of his biographical dictionary al-Kamâl fî maʿrifat asmâʾ al-rijâl, which identified and rated all the hadîth transmitters used in these works. The Kamâl subsequently became the basis for the later mainstay hadîth transmitter dictionaries, such as Jamâl al-Dîn al-Mizzî’s (d. 742/1341) Tahdhîb al-kamâl and Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalânî’s (d. 852/1449) refinement of the work, the Tahdhîb al-tahdhîb.

Ibn Mājah’s Sunan attracted a certain amount of focused scholarly attention. The Mamluk-era Ḥanafī jurist ‘Alâ’ al-Dîn Mughulṭây (d. 762/1361) penned the first sharḥ on the book that I know of (al-Iʿlâm bi-sunnatihi al-salām sharḥ Sunan Ibn Mâjah al-imâm) (Mughulṭây, 2007). Later, the famous revivalist of the Hejaz, Muḥammad Ḥayât al-Sindî (d. 1750), wrote a less formal marginal commentary (ḥâshiya) on it as well (Ibn Mâjah, 1896) and an Indian hadîth scholar composed a commentary in the late nineteenth century (Ishaq, 1955: 146).

As earlier scholars had done with the other books of the hadîth canon, Abû al-Faḍl al-Maqdisî builds a case for including Ibn Mâjah’s work on the basis of its reliability. He refers the reader to the vaunted Sunni hadîth critic Abû Zur’a al-Râzî (d. 264/878). He writes:

I saw [written] in an old book in Rayy a story written by Abû Ḥâtim al-Ḥâfīz, known as Khâmûsh, that Abû Zur’a al-Râzî said, “I looked through the book of Abû ‘Abdallâh Ibn Mâjah and did not find in it except a small amount [of hadîths] (qadm waṣīr waṣīr) that had something [problematic] with it (fîmā fihi shay’).” And he mentioned ten or so hadîths along those lines (Ibn Nuqṭa, 1988: 120).

1 This was also noted by Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) and Muḥammad Zâhid al-Kawtharî (d. 1952) (Goldziher, 1971: 2: 241; al-Kawtharî, 1967: 7-8).
Although this does not appear in his treatise on the requirements used by the authors of the Six Books (Shurūṭ al-a’imma al-sitta), al-Maqdisī is reported as claiming elsewhere:

And by my life, indeed the book of Abū ‘Abdallāh Ibn Mājah, whoever looks in it knows that man’s virtue (maziyya) in his [book’s] good ordering, plentiful chapters and the small number of repeated ḥadîths. And there are not in the book many ḥadîths with long isnâds (nawâzîl), broken isnâds (maqâṭî’), incomplete isnâds to the Prophet (marâsîl) or hadîths narrated by impugned transmitters, except for the small number indicated by Abû Zur’a (Ibn Nuqṭa, 1988: 120).

But if, as al-Maqdisî argues, the value and virtues of Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan are so manifest, why did the book take so long to earn a place in the ḥadîth canon?

To a large extent, Ibn Mâjah existed outside of the network of scholars who produced and acclaimed the other Six Books. The canonical books of al-Bukhârî, Muslim, al-Tirmidhî, Abû Dâwûd and al-Nasâ’î all formed part of a single and tightly-knit universe. The scholars who produced them not only worked within an interconnected web of student/teacher relationships, they all also belonged to the nascent ahl al-sunna wa al-jamâ’a movement. Muslim and al-Tirmidhî studied extensively with al-Bukhârî and saw him as their primary mentor. Al-Tirmidhî also studied ḥadîths with Muslim and Abû Dâwûd. All these figures either studied directly with, or relied on as sources of ḥadîths, two leading lights of the early Sunni movement: Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and Ishâq b. Râhawayh (d. 238/853). Abû Dâwûd, al-Nasâ’î and al-Tirmidhî all studied with leading Sunnis such as Abû Zur’a al-Râzî and (except or Abû Dâwûd) Ibrâhîm al-Jûzajânî (d. 259/873). Al-Nasâ’î studied with Abû Dâwûd as well as (according to some) al-Bukhârî (Brown, 2007: 55, 96; al-Baghdâdî, 1997: 9:56 ff.).

Ibn Mâjah, however, proved far more isolated and foreign to this network. The two scholars who served as his most prolific sources of ḥadîths in the Sunan were indeed noted Sunnis: Abû Bakr b. Abî Shayba (d. 235/849) and the hub of ḥadîth study in Qazvin, ‘Alî b. Muḥammad al-Ṭanâfisî (d. 233/847-8). Otherwise, however, Ibn Mâjah was not as well integrated into the same Sunni ḥadîth network as the authors of the other Six Books. He never mentions hearing from or studying with Abû Zur’a al-Râzî or al-Jûzajânî, and his Sunan is the only one of the Six Books never to draw on Ishâq b. Râhawayh. He never mentions al-Bukhârî, Muslim, al-Tirmidhî or Abû Dâwûd. In his famous Ṣaḥîḥ, al-Bukhârî used only approximately 430 transmitters that Muslim did not. Muslim’s Ṣaḥîḥ used about 620 that al-Bukhârî excluded (Brown, 2007: 84). In a work on Ibn Mâjah’s transmitters, on the other hand, Shams al-Dîn al-Dhahabî (d. 748/1348) finds an amazing 1,939 transmitters who were used by Ibn Mâjah in his Sunan but not by al-Bukhârî and/or Muslim in the Ṣaḥîḥayn (Al-Dhahabî, 1988) 3.

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2 Al-Khalîlî states that Ibn Mâjah did hear from Abû Zur’a al-Râzî, but I have found no evidence of this (al-Khalîlî, 1993: 227).
3 The editor adds 356 other transmitters not included in a missing part of the manuscript of the book.

In his paeans to the *Sunan*, al-Maqdisî admits its highly localized appeal:

> And this book, even if it has not become widespread among the majority of jurists, indeed it has in Rayy and its environs in the Jabal and Qûhistân, and Mâzandarân and Tabâristân, a great reputation (*sha’n ‘aţîm*). It is relied on there, and it has many transmissions. The *Ṭârîkh Qazwîn* [of al-Khalîlî?] contains mentions of this book that would make even an ignorant person know its value and status (Ibn Nuqṭa, 1988: 120).

The isolation of the *Sunan* had improved little even decades after al-Maqdisî began promoting the book. In Ibn al-Jawzî’s (d. 597/1201) history of the central Islamic lands in the late sixth/twelfth century, the *Muntaẓam*, we find only a brief biography for Ibn Mâjah noting that he wrote a *Sunan* amongst his other works (Ibn al-Jawzî, 1992: 12:258). The *Muntaẓam* reveals how minor Ibn Mâjah was in comparison with other canonical hadîth authors. ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Abdallâh al-Karkukhî (d. 548/1154), who came to Baghdad from Herat, receives more attention from Ibn al-Jawzî than Ibn Mâjah. His only hallmark was that he earned his living making copies of al-Tirmidhî’s *Jâmi‘*, which he had heard transmitted (Ibn al-Jawzî, 1992: 18:92-3).

### The Canonical Culture of Ibn Mâjah and its Discontents

In the first decades of the seventh/thirteenth century we see that Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* was gaining increased acceptance as part of the ḥadîth canon. Part of this
acceptance was the construction of a canonical culture around the book that celebrated its reliability as a representation of the Prophet’s Sunna. In his biographical dictionary of those scholars who had transmitted major hadith collections after they were written, Abū Bakr Ibn Nuqṭa (d. 629/1231) of Baghdad builds on Abū Zur’a al-Rāzi’s supposed praise for Ibn Mājah. “It should suffice you (ḥasbuka) that a book be shown to Abū Zur’a and that he say something like that after looking at it and evaluating it” (Ibn Nuqṭa, 1988: 120). The original accolades reported by al-Maqdisî became more dramatic in later sources. In his biography of Ibn Mājah in the Siyar a’lâm al-nubalâ’, al-Dhahabî reports an addition to the encounter with Abū Zur’a al-Rāzi: the great critic adds that this Sunan would obviate many existing books and that there were only thirty or so ḥadîths in it with any weakness in them (Al-Dhahabî, 1998, Siyar: 278). In al-Râfî’î’s relatively lengthy biography of Ibn Mājah in his history of Qazvin, Abū Zur’a only disapproves of three ḥadîths (al-Râfî’î, 1987: 2: 49-53).

Alone among the Six Books, however, Ibn Mājah’s Sunan has consistently attracted prominent critics of its reliability. Many noted ḥadîth scholars omitted the work altogether from their canonical lists, limiting the selection to Five Books. Al-Silafî, Abû Bakr al-Ḥâzimî (d. 584/1188-9) and al-Nawawî of Damascus (d. 676/1277) mention only Five Books: the works of al-Bukhârî, Muslim, al-Tirmidhî, Abū Dâwûd and al-Nasâ’î (although al-Silafî notes that these are the works Muslims have agreed on after the Muwaṭṭa’) (al-Silafî, 1981: 4:357-8; al-Nawawî, 1968: 4; al-Ḥâzimî, 2006).

Explicit criticisms have not been rare. In his criticism of heretical innovations that he observed among the Muslims in Syria, Abû Shâma al-Maqdisî (d. 665/1268) states that the Sunan of Ibn Mājah is a source of the weak hadiths used to justify them. “There are in the Sunan of Ibn Mājah a number of weak and forged ḥadîths such as the one mentioned on the virtues of Qazwîn,” he remarks (Abû Shâma, 1978: 101).

Al-Dhahabî states that Ibn Mâjah was a great ḥadîth scholar (ḥâfiẓ) but that “what detracted from the standing of his Sunan was the unacceptable (munkar) ḥadîths it contains as well as the few clearly forged ones.” Al-Dhahabî frankly doubts the reliability of the story of Abû Zur’a positively evaluating the book and disbelieves the statement that it contains only thirty or so problematic ḥadîths. Even if Abû Zur’a truly said that, al-Dhahabî argues, then he must have meant only those hadiths that are clearly, indisputably forged. As for ḥadîths that suffer from other flaws, such as hadiths that are too weak to be used as proof in legal discussions, then there may be as many as 1,000 in the book – what al-Dhahabî considered to be a quarter of the Sunan’s contents (Al-Dhahabî, 1998 Siyar: 13:279)5! Another Mamluk-era hadith scholar, Ṣalâh al-Dîn Khalîl al-‘Alâ’î (d. 761/1359), even promoted another hadith collection above Ibn Mâjah’s book as the sixth book of the canon.

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5 The Thesaurus Islamicus edition of Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan includes 4,485 ḥadîths. Musîr b. Gharam Allâh al-Dumaynî has produced the Ziyâdât Abî al-Ḥasan al-Qaṭṭân ‘alâ Sunan Ibn Mâjah (Riyadh: Author, 1412/1991), which collects added narrations that were in the recension of Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan from al-Qaṭṭân, his main acolyte.
He contended that, even if the *Sunan* of ‘Abdallâh al-Dârimî (d. 255/869) contains non-Prophetic ḥadîths and sometimes ḥadîths with incomplete isnâds (*mursal*), its contents are still better verified and less contested than Ibn Mâjah’s. With such advantages over Ibn Mâjah’s book, al-‘Alâ’î argued, al-Dârimî’s *Sunan* is thus “more fitting than it” (al-Sakhâwî, 2003: 1:115)⁶.

Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalânî is even more doubtful than al-Dhahabî about Abû Zur’a’s statement praising Ibn Mâjah. He states that the story is inauthentic due to a break in the transmission of the report. It is Ibn Mâjah’s book that it brings up the tail of the canon, Ibn Ḥajar explains, “because he alone includes ḥadîths from transmitters accused of lying and rigging ḥadîths with other isnâds (*sariqat al-aḥâdîth*).” “And some of these ḥadîths,” Ibn Ḥajar continues, “are only known of via these transmitters, like Ḥabîb b. Abî Ḥabîb the secretary of Mâlik, and al-‘Alâ’ b. Zayd al…” (Ibn Ḥajar, 1994: 165-66).

Ibn Ḥajar’s senior student Shams al-Dîn al-Sakhâwî (d. 902/1497) elaborates on his teacher’s criticisms. Of the Six Books, al-Sakhâwî singles out Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* as the book with which one has to exercise extreme caution when using. If one is not qualified to evaluate the reliability of each ḥadîth in the book or if one can find no qualified scholar who has ruled on that ḥadîth, “then one should not attempt to use [that ḥadîth] as proof, or he will be like a wood collector at night (i.e., not know what he is gathering), and he may use a false ḥadîth as proof without knowing it” (Al-Sakhâwî, 2003: 1:118).

Criticisms of Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* have continued in the modern period from a variety of camps. The leading Salafî ḥadîṭh scholar of the twentieth century, Muhammad Nâṣir al-Dîn al-Albânî (d. 1999), states that Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* includes forged ḥadîths (al-Albânî, 2001: 130). One of his prominent students, the Saudi ‘Abdallâh al-Sa’d, echoes this. He explains that ḥadîths found in Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* and not in the other Six Books are often weak (al-Sa’d). The late Ottoman scholar Muhammad Zâhid al-Kawtharî (d. 1952), a rabid opponent of Salafism, agrees with his opponents on this count. He states, “It is well known that *Sunan* Ibn Mâjah has ḥadîths in it that cannot be used as proof” (al-Kawtharî, 1994: 131). Another modern opponent of Salafism, the Moroccan ḥadîth scholar Aḥmad al-Ghumârî (d. 1960), also notes that a significant number of Ibn Mâjah’s sources are known liars or forgers (al-Ghumârî, 1996: 1:119).

**Synecdoche: the Key to Ibn Mâjah’s Canonization**

Such criticisms are severe indictments from leading lights in the Sunni ḥadîth tradition. None of the other Six Books has attracted anything close to such consis-

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⁶ Ibn al-Ṣalâḥ included both Ibn Mâjah’s and al-Dârimî’s *Sunans* as *ṣaḥîḥ* books in an expanded work on the canon, which included all the unique ḥadîths found in each of the “Seven Books” (Ibn al-Ṣalâḥ, 2006).
tently negative evaluation from Sunni scholars. Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan*, however, had been accepted as a mainstay ḥadîth collection ostensibly because of its “soundness” as a representation of the Prophet’s Sunna. How then do we explain the canonical status of the work?

Muslim ḥadîth scholars provided their own explanations. Ibn Ḥajar explains that:

*Ibn Ṭâhir* [al-Maqdisî] and those who followed him turned away from counting the *Muwatta’* [as part of the canon] in favor of the Ibn Mâjah [’s *Sunan*] only because the Prophetic ḥadîths that the *Muwatta’* adds to the Five Books are very few – as opposed to Ibn Mâjah, for indeed its additions are many times the number of the *Muwatâṭa’.* So they sought by adding the book of Ibn Mâjah to the Five Books to increase the number of Prophetic ḥadîths. And God knows best (Ibn Ḥajar, 1994: 166).

Al-Sakhâwî seconds his teacher, saying that “they put it [the *Sunan* of Ibn Mâjah] before the *Muwatta’* due to the large number of ḥadîths that it added to the Five Books as opposed to the *Muwatta’*” (al-Sakhâwî, 2003: 1:115).

This is certainly accurate by my count. The *Muwatta’* contains 180 Prophetic ḥadîths (out of 1,861 reports in the 2000 Thesaurus Islamic Foundation edition) that are not contained in the other Six Books (178 if one excludes Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* in that group). By comparison, according to al-Bûṣîrî’s (d. 840/1436) compilation *Miṣbâḥ al-zujâja fi zawâ’id Sunan Ibn Mâjah*, the *Sunan* includes a much greater number, 1,552 ḥadîths, not found in the other Six Books.

Beginning with al-Ḥâkim al-Naysâbûrî (d. 405/1014), Sunni scholars have exhibited consistent concern over increasing the number of Prophetic ḥadîths considered admissible in scholarly discourse. The desire to increase the range of ḥadîths scholars could draw on was a natural byproduct of the Islamic scholarly tradition. If scholarly arguments ultimately rested on evidence from the Qur’ân and Sunna, the need for more and more proof texts would grow as scholarly arguments and positions multiplied through the centuries. In his voluminous *Mustadrak*, al-Ḥâkim argued that claims that al-Bukhârî’s and Muslim’s Ṣaḥîḥs had exhausted the authentic ḥadîths in circulation were absurd. In response, he packed his *Mustadrak* with approximately 8,800 ḥadîths that he claimed met the standards of authenticity established by the two revered scholars (Brown, 2007: 155 ff; 2009: 42). The *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal had long been acknowledged as containing many weak and even forged ḥadîths – even by adherents of the Hanbalî school of law (Ibn Taymiyya: 1:189-90) 7. Yet the seminal Sunni scholar al-Suyûṭî (d. 911/1505) claimed that everything in the collection was “accepted (maqbûl)” in scholarly discourse (al-Suyûṭî, 1970: 1:3).

With its wide range of ḥadîths not found in the other Six Books, Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* provided a great marginal benefit to Muslim scholars. When Ibn al-Ṣalâḥ (d. 643/1245) needed evidence to support the validity of a controversial supererogatory prayer known as *Ṣalât al-Raghâ’ib*, which first was practiced in Jerusalem

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7 Ibn Dihya (d. 633/1235) states that Ibn Hanbal never intended his *Musnad* to be used as an unquestioned source of proof texts, since “it is not permitted to use most of its ḥadîths as proof” (Ibn Dihya, 1998: 147).
in the fifth/eleventh century, he turned to Ibn Mâjah (Ibn ‘Abd al-Salâm, 2002: 54). For modern debates over whether or not Muslim women can lead mixed congregations in prayer, Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan is the only source of a hadîth prohibiting it (Ibn Ḥajar, 2008: 173).

**Conclusion**

Although the explanation for the inclusion of Ibn Mâjah’s Sunan in the Sunni ḥadîth canon may lie in the added utility it provided, Muslim scholars could not rely on utility as an argument to justify canonicity. Ibn Ḥajar’s and al-Sakhâwî’s observations about the number of hadîths that Ibn Mâjah added to the canon were insightful *ex post facto* explanations, not justifications. As we have seen with al-Maqdisî’s and Ibn Nuqta’s arguments for the value and canonicity of the Sunan, it was the paramount value of authenticity that held the key to admission into the canon. That later recensions of Abû Zur’a’s accolades for the book feature the number of hadîths that he found problematic reduced from thirty to three demonstrates how the canonical culture surrounding the Sunan morphed to maximize the book’s claims to authenticity.

Yet the criticisms of al-Dhahabî, Ibn Ḥajar and modern Muslim hadîth scholars also demonstrate how tenuous the claims about the authenticity of the Sunan’s contents have always been. As the medieval Muslim analysts’ observations about the marginal ‘value added’ of the Sunan suggest, the intellectual community who canonized Ibn Mâjah prized authenticity but required utility. The Sunan’s canonical status exists in the charitable and dissonant space that Muslim scholars permitted to achieve the latter at the cost of the former.

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