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The Canonization of Ibn Mâjah: Authenticity vs. Utility in the Formation of the Sunni Ḥadīth 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 ḥadīth sunnite*

Dans l’Islam sunnite, l’autorité doctrinale des « Six Livres » canoniques de hadith repose sur le consensus savant affirmant qu’ils offrent une image fiable de la Sunna du Prophète. Un de ces Six Livres, le *Sunan* d’Ibn Majah, présente toutefois une étonnante exception. Bien qu’il ait été considéré comme l’un de ces Six Livres depuis la fin du XI^e siècle, il a été en permanence

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sévèrement critiqué par les savants sunnites en raison du grand nombre de hadith non fiables qu'il renferme. Comprendre le statut canonique du *Sunan* d'Ibn Majah en dépit de ces critiques, implique donc de reconnaître que le canon du hadith n'était pas seulement basé sur l'authenticité, mais aussi sur la notion d'utilité. Les Six Livres ont pour fonction de limiter le nombre infini de hadith en circulation, et le *Sunan* d'Ibn Majah ajoutait à ce corpus un nombre utile de hadiths absents des autres ouvrages canoniques. Les savants sunnites admettent d'ailleurs que, dans le cas du *Sunan* d'Ibn Majah, l'utilité l'emporta sur l'authenticité dans le canon sunnite.

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

Introduction

In the introduction to the history he devoted to his native city of Qazvin, the famous Shāfi'ī jurist 'Abd al-Karīm al-Rāfi'ī (d. 623/1226) provides a series of Prophetic ḥadīths and sayings of early Muslims that shower the northern Iranian town with accolades. One such ḥadīth 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 (*rābaṭa*) 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 ḥadīths praising certain cities, tribes or sects were myriad – and Muslim scholars knew it. Al-Rāfi'ī thus moved to establish the truth value of this ḥadīth by stating that the report appeared in the *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah (d. 273/887), a book that “the ḥadīth masters have associated (*yuqarrinūn*) with the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* [of al-Bukhārī and Muslim] as well as the *Sunans* of Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī, and they have used it as proof” (Al-Rāfi'ī, 1987: 1:7).

The authority of Ibn Mājah'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 ḥadīth. 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-Ṣiḥāḥ*).” Describing the problem of finding reliable sources for the past in the introduction to his world history, the Persian polymath Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 718/1318) described these *Ṣiḥāḥ* as the books compiled by “the foremost *imāms*.” “All else,” he adds, “remains within the sphere of doubt and hesitation” (Rashīd al-Dīn, 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 ḥadīth canon, the famous *Ṣaḥīḥayn* of al-Bukhārī 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 ḥadīth canon stem from one of the chief functions of the canon: delimiting some selection of ḥadīths, 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 ḥadīth 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 ḥadīth.

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 ḥadīth 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 Muḥammad and his early community permeate Sunni historical formation and identification.

Examining the canonical collections of Sunni ḥadīth, however, we find that authenticity was not a consistent priority. The canonization of Ibn Mâjah's *Sunan* illustrates that the ḥadīth canon was formed in part for reasons other than textual authenticity as defined by Sunni ḥadīth criticism. Although advocates of Ibn Mâjah's *Sunan* lauded its author for his selectivity and critical rigor, luminaries of the Sunni ḥadīth 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 ḥadīth, the book was admitted into the canon not because of its reliability but because it vastly expanded the number of useful ḥadīths in the canonical body.

Odd Man Out: Ibn Mâjah and the Ḥadīth 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, Sa'īd b. al-Sakan (d. 353/964) and Muḥammad b. Ishāq Ibn Mandah of Isfahan (d. 395/1004-5) both mention the four books of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889) and al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915) as agreed



upon references. Ibn al-Sakan went so far as to call them “the foundations (*qawâ'id*) of Islam” (Brown, 2007: 147-8). Although he did not denote them as a canonical unit, the fifth/eleventh-century Shâfi'î 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 ḥadīths in circulation (Al-Bayhaqî, 1991: 1:106). The great systematizer of the Sunni ḥadīth sciences, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādî (d. 463/1071), recommended the following as the first steps in his ḥadīth 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-Baghdādî, 1983: 2:185).

The books of al-Bukhârî, Muslim, al-Nasâ'î and Abû Dâwûd fared 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 ḥadīth 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 *Muwatṭa'*. Like Ibn Ḥazm, he did not note al-Tirmidhî's *Jâmi'*.

The perceived authenticity and soundness - *ṣiḥḥa* - of the ḥadīths 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 *Ṣaḥīḥs* (*Ṣaḥīḥayn*).’ As the influential Shâfi'î/Ash'arî jurist and ḥadīth scholar Abû Ishâq al-Isfarâyînî (d. 418/1027) stated:

The authenticity of the reports in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* is epistemologically certain in terms of their texts (*uṣūlīhā wa mutūnīhā*), 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'wīl sā'igh*) for the report, we negate his ruling, for the umma has accepted these reports with consensus (al-Subkī, 1992: 4:261).

The notion of *ṣiḥḥa* extended to other components of the ḥadīth canon as well. The leading ḥadīth scholar of Baghdad, Abû al-Hasan al-Dâraqutnî (d. 385/995), dubbed al-Nasâ'î's *Sunan* a “*Ṣaḥīḥ*,” and al-Khaṭīb referred to al-Tirmidhî's book as “*al-Jâmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*” (al-Khaṭīb, 1997: 5: 274; 11:396). Although never part of the Six Book ḥadīth canon, Ibn Khuzayma's collection was also referred to as his *Ṣaḥīḥ* as well. The longevous ḥadīth 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 ḥadīth masters have accepted, ruling that the basic reports (*uṣūl*) in them are *ṣaḥīḥ*...” (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 Mâjah 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 Nuqta, 1988: 121). It was only in the late fifth/eleventh century, however, that Ibn Mâjah's *Sunan* became widely recognized. As the great historian of Damascus Ibn 'Asâkir (d. 571/1176) noted, it was the scholar Abû al-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Ṭâhir al-Maqdisî (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 Mâjah to the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* and the books of al-Tirmidhî, al-Nasâ'î and Abû Dâwûd (Ibn Ḥajar, 1994: 166)¹. Our historian of Qazvin, al-Râfi'î, also enumerates this six-book series, as does the Indian Ḥanafî al-Ṣaghânî (d. 650/1252), who also adds the *Sunan* of al-Dâraquṭnî. Al-Râfi'î's father, Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karîm al-Râfi'î (d. 580/1184) had earlier written a digest ḥadīth collection called *Ḥawî al-uṣûl min akhbâr al-rasûl*, which included the contents from the collections of al-Bukhârî, Muslim, al-Tirmidhî, Abû Dâwûd, al-Nasâ'î, and Ibn Mâjah, as well as the *Musnad* of al-Shâfi'î (d. 204/820) (al-Râfi'î, 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 ma'rifat asmâ' al-rijâl*, which identified and rated all the ḥadīth transmitters used in these works. The *Kamâl* subsequently became the basis for the later mainstay ḥadīth transmitter dictionaries, such as Jamâl al-Dîn al-Mizzî's (d. 742/1341) *Tahdhīb al-kamâl* and Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalânî's (d. 852/1449) refinement of the work, the *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*.

Ibn Mâjah's *Sunan* attracted a certain amount of focused scholarly attention. The Mamluk-era Ḥanafî jurist 'Alâ' al-Dîn Mughultây (d. 762/1361) penned the first *sharḥ* on the book that I know of (*al-I'lâm bi-sunnatihi 'alayhi al-salâm sharḥ Sunan Ibn Mâjah al-imâm*) (Mughultây, 2007). Later, the famous revivalist of the Hejaz, Muḥammad Ḥayât al-Sindî (d. 1750 CE), wrote a less formal marginal commentary (*ḥaṣhiya*) on it as well (Ibn Mâjah, 1896) and an Indian ḥadīth scholar composed a commentary in the late nineteenth century (Ishaq, 1955: 146).

As earlier scholars had done with the other books of the ḥadīth 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 ḥadīth 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 Ḥâtîm al-Hâfiẓ, 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 ḥadīths] (*qadr^{an} yasîr^{an}*) that had something [problematic] with it (*fîmâ fîhi shay'*).” And he mentioned ten or so ḥadīths along those lines (Ibn Nuqta, 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 (*Shurûṭ al-a'imma al-sitta*), al-Maqdisî is reported as claiming elsewhere:

And by my life, indeed the book of Abû 'Abdallâh Ibn Mâjah, whoever looks in it knows that man's virtue (*maziyya*) in his [book's] good ordering, plentiful chapters and the small number of repeated ḥadīths. And there are not in the book many ḥadīths with long *isnâds* (*nawâzil*), broken *isnâds* (*maqâṭi'*), incomplete *isnâds* to the Prophet (*marâsîl*) or ḥadīths 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 ḥadīth 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 ḥadīths with Muslim and Abû Dâwûd. All these figures either studied directly with, or relied on as sources of ḥadīths, 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 ḥadīths in the *Sunan* were indeed noted Sunnis: Abû Bakr b. Abî Shayba (d. 235/849) and the hub of ḥadīth 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 ḥadīth network as the authors of the other Six Books. He never mentions hearing from or studying with Abû Zur'a al-Râzî² 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.

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.

Ibn Mâjah's *Sunan* inherited the outsider status of its author⁴. Both Ibn Mâjah and his book were totally unknown outside of Qazvīn until the late fifth/eleventh century. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī includes no biography of Ibn Mâjah and never mentions his *Sunan* in the *Tārīkh Baghdād* or any of his other ḥadīth works. Our first biographical mentions of Ibn Mâjah come, with no surprise, from a fellow Qazvīnī: Abū Ya'la al-Khalīl b. 'Abdallāh al-Khalīlī. (d. 446/1054). In his biographical dictionary of ḥadīth scholars, *al-Irshād fī ma'rīfat 'ulamā' al-ḥadīth*, al-Khalīlī cites Ibn Mâjah as an authority on ḥadīth transmitter criticism (interestingly al-Khaṭīb corresponded with al-Khalīlī, but this evidently did not touch upon Ibn Mâjah) (Al-Khalīlī, 1993: 179; al-Baghdādī, 1997: 13:440). Pride in Ibn Mâjah in Qazvīn was enduring. Writing in the early seventh/thirteenth century, al-Rāfi'ī still feels it worthy of note that there was a copy of the *Sunan* in the *waqf* of the Dār al-Kutub in the city (al-Rāfi'ī, 1987: 3:326). So prominent was Ibn Mâjah's legacy in his native city that al-Rāfi'ī also pauses to note a great nephew of Ibn Mâjah in one biography in his history (al-Rāfi'ī, 1987: 3:328-9).

In his paeans to the *Sunan*, al-Maqdisī 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 Qūhistān, and Māzandarān and Ṭabāristān, a great reputation (*sha'n 'azīm*). It is relied on there, and it has many transmissions. The *Tārīkh Qazwīn* [of al-Khalīlī?] contains mentions of this book that would make even an ignorant person know its value and status (Ibn Nuqta, 1988: 120).

The isolation of the *Sunan* had improved little even decades after al-Maqdisī began promoting the book. In Ibn al-Jawzī'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-Jawzī, 1992: 12:258). The *Muntaẓam* reveals how minor Ibn Mâjah was in comparison with other canonical ḥadīth authors. 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abdallāh al-Karkukhī (d. 548/1154), who came to Baghdad from Herat, receives more attention from Ibn al-Jawzī than Ibn Mâjah. His only hallmark was that he earned his living making copies of al-Tirmidhī's *Jāmi'*, which he had heard transmitted (Ibn al-Jawzī, 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 ḥadīth canon. Part of this

4 In his study of the transmission of Ibn Mâjah's *Sunan*, James Robson notes the relatively restricted number of chains of transmission from the author. He suggests that the *Sunan*, "perhaps because it was so late in being accepted by the community at large, does not have variety of lines of transmission as the other five books."; James Robson, "The Transmission of Ibn Majah's 'Sunan'" *Journal of Semitic Studies* 3, no. 2 (1958): 139. Here I argue the converse: it was, in part, the isolated transmission of the book that prevented it from becoming better known.

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 ḥadīth collections after they were written, Abū Bakr Ibn Nuqṭa (d. 629/1231) of Baghdad builds on Abū Zur'a al-Rāzī's supposed praise for Ibn Mājah. "It should suffice you (*hasbuka*) 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-Maqdisī became more dramatic in later sources. In his biography of Ibn Mājah in the *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, al-Dhahabī reports an addition to the encounter with Abū Zur'a al-Rāzī: the great critic adds that this *Sunan* would obviate many existing books and that there were only thirty or so ḥadīths in it with any weakness in them (Al-Dhahabī, 1998, *Siyar*: 278). In al-Rāfi'ī's relatively lengthy biography of Ibn Mājah in his history of Qazvin, Abū Zur'a only disapproves of three ḥadīths (al-Rāfi'ī, 1987: 2: 49-53).

Alone among the Six Books, however, Ibn Mājah's *Sunan* has consistently attracted prominent critics of its reliability. Many noted ḥadīth scholars omitted the work altogether from their canonical lists, limiting the selection to Five Books. Al-Silafī, Abū Bakr al-Ḥāzimī (d. 584/1188-9) and al-Nawawī of Damascus (d. 676/1277) mention only Five Books: the works of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī (although al-Silafī notes that these are the works Muslims have agreed on after the *Muwatta'*) (al-Silafī, 1981: 4:357-8; al-Nawawī, 1968: 4; al-Ḥāzimī, 2006).

Explicit criticisms have not been rare. In his criticism of heretical innovations that he observed among the Muslims in Syria, Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī (d. 665/1268) states that the *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah is a source of the weak ḥadīths used to justify them. "There are in the *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah a number of weak and forged ḥadīths such as the one mentioned on the virtues of Qazwīn," he remarks (Abū Shāma, 1978: 101).

Al-Dhahabī states that Ibn Mājah was a great ḥadīth scholar (*ḥāfiẓ*) but that "what detracted from the standing of his *Sunan* was the unacceptable (*munkar*) ḥadīths it contains as well as the few clearly forged ones." Al-Dhahabī frankly doubts the reliability of the story of Abū Zur'a positively evaluating the book and disbelieves the statement that it contains only thirty or so problematic ḥadīths. Even if Abū Zur'a truly said that, al-Dhahabī argues, then he must have meant only those ḥadīths that are clearly, indisputably forged. As for ḥadīths that suffer from other flaws, such as ḥadīths 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-Dhahabī considered to be a quarter of the *Sunan*'s contents (Al-Dhahabī, 1998 *Siyar*: 13:279)⁵! Another Mamluk-era ḥadīth scholar, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl al-'Alā'ī (d. 761/1359), even promoted another ḥadīth collection above Ibn Mājah's book as the sixth book of the canon.

5 The Thesaurus Islamicus edition of Ibn Mājah's *Sunan* includes 4,485 ḥadīths. Musfir b. Gharam Allāh al-Dumaynī has produced the *Ziyādāt Abī al-Ḥasan al-Qaṭṭān 'alā Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Riyadh: Author, 1412/1991), which collects added narrations that were in the recension of Ibn Mājah's *Sunan* from al-Qaṭṭān, his main acolyte.

He contended that, even if the *Sunan* of ‘Abdallāh al-Dārimī (d. 255/869) contains non-Prophetic ḥadīths and sometimes ḥadīths with incomplete *isnāds* (*mursal*), its contents are still better verified and less contested than Ibn Mâjah’s. With such advantages over Ibn Mâjah’s book, al-‘Alā’ī argued, al-Dārimī’s *Sunan* is thus “more fitting than it” (al-Sakhāwī, 2003: 1:115)⁶.

Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī is even more doubtful than al-Dhahabī about Abū 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 ḥadīths from transmitters accused of lying and rigging ḥadīths with other *isnāds* (*sariqat al-aḥādīth*).” “And some of these ḥadīths,” Ibn Ḥajar continues, “are only known of via these transmitters, like Ḥabīb b. Abī Ḥabīb the secretary of Mâlik, and al-‘Alā’ b. Zaydal...” (Ibn Ḥajar, 1994: 165-66).

Ibn Ḥajar’s senior student Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) elaborates on his teacher’s criticisms. Of the Six Books, al-Sakhāwī 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 ḥadīth in the book or if one can find no qualified scholar who has ruled on that ḥadīth, “then one should not attempt to use [that ḥadīth] 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 ḥadīth as proof without knowing it” (Al-Sakhāwī, 2003: 1:118).

Criticisms of Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* have continued in the modern period from a variety of camps. The leading Salafī ḥadīth scholar of the twentieth century, Muḥammad Nâsir al-Dīn al-Albânī (d. 1999), states that Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* includes forged ḥadīths (al-Albânī, 2001: 130). One of his prominent students, the Saudi ‘Abdallāh al-Sa’d, echoes this. He explains that ḥadīths found in Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* and not in the other Six Books are often weak (al-Sa’d). The late Ottoman scholar Muḥammad Zâhid al-Kawtharī (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 ḥadīths in it that cannot be used as proof” (al-Kawtharī, 1994: 131). Another modern opponent of Salafism, the Moroccan ḥadīth scholar Aḥmad al-Ghumârī (d. 1960), also notes that a significant number of Ibn Mâjah’s sources are known liars or forgers (al-Ghumârī, 1996: 1:119).

Synecdoche: the Key to Ibn Mâjah’s Canonization

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

⁶ Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ included both Ibn Mâjah’s and al-Dārimī’s *Sunans* as *ṣaḥīḥ* books in an expanded work on the canon, which included all the unique ḥadīths found in each of the “Seven Books” (Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, 2006).



tently negative evaluation from Sunni scholars. Ibn Mâjah's *Sunan*, however, had been accepted as a mainstay ḥadīth 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 ḥadīth scholars provided their own explanations. Ibn Ḥajar explains that:

Ibn Ṭāhir [al-Maqdisī] and those who followed him turned away from counting the *Muwattaʿa* [as part of the canon] in favor of the Ibn Mâjah [ʿs *Sunan*] only because the Prophetic ḥadīths that the *Muwattaʿa* adds to the Five Books are very few – as opposed to Ibn Mâjah, for indeed its additions are many times the number of the *Muwattaʿa*. So they sought by adding the book of Ibn Mâjah to the Five Books to increase the number of Prophetic ḥadīths. 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 *Muwattaʿa* due to the large number of ḥadīths that it added to the Five Books as opposed to the *Muwattaʿa*" (al-Sakhâwî, 2003: 1:115).

This is certainly accurate by my count. The *Muwattaʿa* contains 180 Prophetic ḥadīths (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-Bûṣṭrî's (d. 840/1436) compilation *Miṣbâḥ al-zujâja fî zawâ'id Sunan Ibn Mâjah*, the *Sunan* includes a much greater number, 1,552 ḥadīths, 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 ḥadīths considered admissible in scholarly discourse. The desire to increase the range of ḥadīths scholars could draw on was a natural byproduct of the Islamic scholarly tradition. If scholarly arguments ultimately rested on evidence from the Qurʾân 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 *Ṣaḥīḥs* had exhausted the authentic ḥadīths in circulation were absurd. In response, he packed his *Mustadrak* with approximately 8,800 ḥadīths 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 ḥadīths – even by adherents of the Ḥanbalî 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 (*maqbul*)" in scholarly discourse (al-Suyûṭî, 1970: 1:3).

With its wide range of ḥadīths 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

⁷ Ibn Dihya (d. 633/1235) states that Ibn Ḥanbal never intended his *Musnad* to be used as an unquestioned source of proof texts, since "it is not permitted to use most of its ḥadīths 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 ḥadīth prohibiting it (Ibn Hajar, 2008: 173).

Conclusion

Although the explanation for the inclusion of Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* in the Sunni ḥadīth canon may lie in the added utility it provided, Muslim scholars could not rely on utility as an argument to justify canonicity. Ibn Hajar’s and al-Sakhâwî’s observations about the number of ḥadīths 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 Nuqṭa’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 ḥadīths 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 Hajar and modern Muslim ḥadīth 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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