

Jonathan AC Brown*

The Canonization of Ibn Mâjah: Authenticity vs. Utility in the Formation of the Sunni Hadîth 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 hadîth 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

* Georgetown University.

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 Shâfi'i jurist 'Abd al-Karîm al-Râfi'i (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 (*râbâṭa*) 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'i thus moved to establish the truth value of this ḥadîth by stating that the report appeared in the *Sunan* of Ibn Mâjah (d. 273/887), a book that “the ḥadîth masters have associated (*yugarrinûn*) with the *Sahîhayn* [of al-Bukhârî and Muslim] as well as the *Sunnas* of Abû Dâwûd and al-Nasâ'i, and they have used it as proof” (Al-Râfi'i, 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 ḥadîth. 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-Sîhâh*).” 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 *Sîhâh* as the books compiled by “the foremost *imâms*.” “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 *Sahîhayn* 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 (*ṣîḥha*), 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 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, Sa‘îd 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-Bukhârî (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), Abû Dâwûd (d. 275/889) and al-Nasâ’î (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 ḥadîths 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 ḥadîth scholar, Ibn Razîn al-Saraqusî (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 - *sîḥha* - of the ḥadîths 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 *Sahîhs* (*Sahîhayn*).’ As the influential Shâfi‘î/Ash‘arî jurist and ḥadîth scholar Abû Iṣhâq al-Isfârâyînî (d. 418/1027) stated:

The authenticity of the reports in the *Sahîhayn* is epistemologically certain in terms of their texts (*uṣūlîhâ wa mutânihâ*), 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’wîl sâ’igh*) for the report, we negate his ruling, for the umma has accepted these reports with consensus (al-Subkî, 1992: 4:261).

The notion of *sîḥha* extended to other components of the ḥadîth canon as well. The leading ḥadîth scholar of Baghdad, Abû al-Hasan al-Dâraqutnî (d. 385/995), dubbed al-Nasâ‘î’s *Sunan* a “*Sahîh*,” and al-Khaṭîb referred to al-Tirmidhî’s book as “*al-Jâmi‘ al-sahîh*” (al-Khaṭîb, 1997: 5: 274; 11:396). Although never part of the Six Book ḥadîth canon, Ibn Khuzayma’s collection was also referred to as his *Sahîh* as well. The longevious ḥadîth scholar Abû Tâhir al-Silaffî (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-hall wa al-‘aqd*) from amongst the jurists and ḥadîth masters have accepted, ruling that the basic reports (*uṣūl*) in them are *sahîh*...” (al-Silaffî, 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-Silaffî’s opinion (Brown, 2007: 337).

Muhammad b. Yazîd Ibn Mâjah was born in 209/824-5 and died in 273/887. He penned a *Tafsîr* and *Târîkh*, 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-Fadl Muhammad b. Tâhir 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 *Şahîhayn* and the books of al-Tirmidhî, al-Nasâ'î and Abû Dâwûd (Ibn Hajar, 1994: 166)¹. Our historian of Qazvin, al-Râfi'i, also enumerates this six-book series, as does the Indian Ḥanâfi al-Şaghânî (d. 650/1252), who also adds the *Sunan* of al-Dâraqutnî. Al-Râfi'i's father, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karîm al-Râfi'i (d. 580/1184) had earlier written a digest ḥadîth collection called *Ḥâwî al-usûl 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'i (d. 204/820) (al-Râfi'i, 1987: 1:377; 2:49; al-Şaghânî, 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'rîfat asmâ' al-rijâl*, which identified and rated all the ḥadîth transmitters used in these works. The *Kamâl* subsequently became the basis for the later mainstay ḥadîth transmitter dictionaries, such as Jamâl al-Dîn al-Mizzî's (d. 742/1341) *Tahdhîb al-kamâl* and Ibn Hâjar al-'Asqalânî's (d. 852/1449) refinement of the work, the *Tahdhîb al-tahdhîb*.

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

As earlier scholars had done with the other books of the ḥadîth canon, Abû al-Fadl 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 ḥadîth 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 Hâtim al-Hâfiż, 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 ḥadîths] (*qadr'an yasîr'an*) that had something [problematic] with it (*fîmâ fîhi shay'*)."¹ And he mentioned ten or so ḥadîths along those lines (Ibn Nuqta, 1988: 120).

¹ This was also noted by Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) and Muhammad 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 (*Shurūt 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 (*mazîyya*) 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* (*nawâzil*), broken *isnâds* (*maqâṭîf*), incomplete *isnâds* to the Prophet (*marâsil*) or ḥadîths narrated by impugned transmitters, except for the small number indicated by Abû Zur'a (Ibn Nuqâ, 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: Ahmâd 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-Baghîdâdî, 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-Tanâfîsî (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-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 *Ṣahîh*, al-Bukhârî used only approximately 430 transmitters that Muslim did not. Muslim's *Ṣahîh* 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 *Ṣahîhayn* (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 Qazvin until the late fifth/eleventh century. Al-Khaṭîb al-Baghdâdî includes no biography of Ibn Mâjah and never mentions his *Sunan* in the *Târîkh Baghdâd* or any of his other ḥadîth works. Our first biographical mentions of Ibn Mâjah come, with no surprise, from a fellow Qazvînî: Abû Ya'lâ al-Khalîl b. 'Abdallâh al-Khalîlî. (d. 446/1054). In his biographical dictionary of ḥadîth scholars, *al-Irshâd fî ma'rifat 'ulamâ' al-ḥadîth*, al-Khalîlî cites Ibn Mâjah as an authority on ḥadîth transmitter criticism (interestingly al-Khaṭîb corresponded with al-Khalîlî, but this evidently did not touch upon Ibn Mâjah) (Al-Khalîlî, 1993: 179; al-Baghdâdî, 1997: 13:440). Pride in Ibn Mâjah in Qazvîn was enduring. Writing in the early seventh/thirteenth century, al-Râfi'i still feels it worthy of note that there was a copy of the *Sunan* in the *waqf* of the Dâr al-Kutub in the city (al-Râfi'i, 1987: 3:326). So prominent was Ibn Mâjah's legacy in his native city that al-Râfi'i also pauses to note a great nephew of Ibn Mâjah in one biography in his history (al-Râfi'i, 1987: 3:328-9).

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 azîm*). It is relied on there, and it has many transmissions. The *Târîkh Qazwîn* [of al-Khalîl?] 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-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 *Muntâzam*, 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 *Muntâzam* reveals how minor Ibn Mâjah was in comparison with other canonical ḥadîth 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-Tirmidî'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

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'i's relatively lengthy biography of Ibn Mājah in his history of Qazvin, Abū Zur'a only disapproves of three ḥadīths (al-Rāfi'i, 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-Hāzimī (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 *Muwattā'*) (al-Silafī, 1981: 4:357–8; al-Nawawī, 1968: 4; al-Hāzimī, 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, Salāḥ 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 hadīths. Musfir b. Gharam Allāh al-Dumaynī has produced the *Ziyādāt Abī al-Ḥasan al-Qatṭān 'alā Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Riyadh: Author, 1412/1991), which collects added narrations that were in the recension of Ibn Mājah's *Sunan* from al-Qatṭān, his main acolyte.

He contended that, even if the *Sunan* of ‘Abdallâh al-Dârimî (d. 255/869) contains non-Prophetic hadîths and sometimes hadîths 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 Hajar 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 Hajar explains, “because he alone includes hadîths from transmitters accused of lying and rigging hadîths with other *isnâds* (*sariqat al-ahâdîth*).” “And some of these hadîths,” Ibn Hajar continues, “are only known of via these transmitters, like Ḥâbi'b b. Abî Ḥâbi'b the secretary of Mâlik, and al-‘Alâ’ b. Zaydal...” (Ibn Hajar, 1994: 165-66).

Ibn Hajar’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 hadîth in the book or if one can find no qualified scholar who has ruled on that hadîth, “then one should not attempt to use [that hadîth] 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 hadîth 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 Salâfî hadîth scholar of the twentieth century, Muhammad Nâṣir al-Dîn al-Albânî (d. 1999), states that Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* includes forged hadîths (al-Albânî, 2001: 130). One of his prominent students, the Saudi ‘Abdallâh al-Sâ'd, echoes this. He explains that hadîths found in Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* and not in the other Six Books are often weak (al-Sâ'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 hadîths in it that cannot be used as proof” (al-Kawtharî, 1994: 131). Another modern opponent of Salafism, the Moroccan hadîth 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 hadîth tradition. None of the other Six Books has attracted anything close to such consis-

⁶ Ibn al-Ṣalâh included both Ibn Mâjah’s and al-Dârimî’s *Sunans* as *sâhih* books in an expanded work on the canon, which included all the unique hadîths found in each of the “Seven Books” (Ibn al-Ṣalâh, 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 Tâhir [al-Maqdisî] and those who followed him turned away from counting the *Muwatṭa'* [as part of the canon] in favor of the Ibn Mâjah ['s *Sunan*] only because the Prophetic ḥadîths that the *Muwatṭa'* adds to the Five Books are very few – as opposed to Ibn Mâjah, for indeed its additions are many times the number of the *Muwatṭa'*. 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 *Muwatṭa'*" (al-Sakhâwî, 2003: 1:115).

This is certainly accurate by my count. The *Muwatṭa'* 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-zujâjâ fî 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 *Sahîhs* 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 Ḥanbalî school of law (Ibn Taymiyya: 1:189–90)⁷. Yet the seminal Sunni scholar al-Suyûtî (d. 911/1505) claimed that everything in the collection was "accepted (*maqbûl*)" in scholarly discourse (al-Suyûtî, 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-Ṣalâh (d. 643/1245) needed evidence to support the validity of a controversial supererogatory prayer known as *Salât 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 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 Hajar, 2008: 173).

Conclusion

Although the explanation for the inclusion of Ibn Mâjah’s *Sunan* in the Sunni hadîth 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 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 Hajar 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ABÛ SHÂMA al-Maqdisî, 1978, *al-Bâ‘ith ‘alâ inkâr al-bida‘ wa’l-hawâdîth*, ‘Uthmân Ahmâd ‘Anbar (ed.), Cairo, Dâr al-Hudâ, 126 p.
- AL-ALBÂNÎ Muhammad Nâṣir al-Dîn, 2001, *Al-Tawassul: anwâ‘uhu wa ahkâmuhu*, Muhammad ̄Id al-‘Abbâsî (ed.), Riyadh, Maktabat al-Mâ‘ârif, 157 p.
- AL-BAYHAQÎ Abû Bakr Ahmâd, 1991, *Ma‘rifat al-sunan wa al-âthâr*, Sayyid Kusrawî Hasan (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 7 t.
- BROWN Jonathan, 2007, *The Canonization of al-Bukhârî and Muslim*, Leiden, Brill, 431 p.
- 2009, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, Oxford, Oneworld, 308 p.
- AL-DHAHABÎ Shams al-Dîn, 1988, *al-Mujarrad fî asmâ‘ rijâl Sunan Ibn Mâjah*, Bâsim Fayṣal al-Jawâbara (ed.), Riyadh, Dâr al-Râya, 44 p.
- 1998, *Siyar a'lâm al-nubalâ’* tome 13, Shu‘ayb Arnâ’ût and ‘Alî Abû Zayd (ed.), Beirut, Mu’assasat al-Risâla, 627 p.



- 1998, *Tadhkirat al-huffâz*, Zakariyyâ ‘Umayrât (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1998, 5 tomes dans 3.
- AL-BAGHDÂDÎ AL-KHAṬÎB Aḥmad, 1983, *al-Jâmi‘ li-ikhtilâf al-râwî wa âdâb al-sâmi‘*, Mahmûd Taḥîhân (ed.), Riyad, Maktabat al-Mâ’arif, 3 t.
- 1997, *Târîkh Baghdâd*, Muṣṭafâ ‘Abd al-Qâdir ‘Aṭâ (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 14 t.
- AL-GHUMÂRÎ Aḥmad, 1996, *al-Mudâwî li-‘ilal sharḥay al- al-Munâwî*, Cairo, Dâr al-Kutub, 6 t.
- GOLDZIHER Ignaz, 1971, *Muslim Studies Vol. II*, S.M. Stern et C.R. Barber (trad.), Chicago, Aldine Atherton, 378 p.
- IBN ‘ABD AL-SALÂM ‘Izz al-Dîn ‘Abd al-‘Azîz, 2002, *Musâjala ‘ilmîyya bayn al-imâmayn al-jalîlayn al-‘Izz b. ‘Abd al-Salâm wa Ibn al-Ṣalâh ḥawla ṣalât al-raghâ‘ib al-mubtada‘a*, Muḥammad Nâṣir al-Dîn al-Albânî et Muḥammad Zuhayr al-Shâwîsh (ed.), Beirut, al-Maktab al-Islâmî, 112 p.
- IBN DIHYA ‘Umar b. Ḥasan, 1998, *Adâ’ mā wajab min bayân wad‘ al-wâddâ ‘în fî rajâb*, Muḥammad Zuhayr al-Shâwîsh and Muḥammad Nâṣir al-Dîn al-Albânî (ed.), Beirut, al-Maktab al-Islâmî, 184 p.
- IBN HAJAR al-‘Asqalânî, 1994, *al-Nukat ‘alâ kitâb Ibn al-Ṣalâh*, Mas‘ûd ‘Abd al-Ḥamîd al-‘Adâfî et Muḥammad Fâris (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 384 p.
- 2008, *Bulûgh al-marâm min adillat al-ahkâm*, Abû Mu‘âdh Târiq b. ‘Awâd Allâh (ed.), Beirut, Dâr Ibn Ḥazm, 2008, 560 p.
- IBN AL-JAWZÎ ‘Abd al-Râhîm b. ‘Alî, 1992, *al-Muntaṣam fî târîkh al-umam wa al-mulûk*, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qâdir ‘Aṭâ et Muṣṭafâ ‘Abd al-Qâdir ‘Aṭâ (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 19 t.
- IBN MÂJAH Muḥammad b. Yazîd, 1896, *Kitâb Sunan al-Imâm Muḥammad b. Yazîd Ibn Mâjah*, Cairo: al-Maṭba‘at al-‘Ilmiyya.
- IBN NUQTA ABÛ BAKR Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Ghanî, 1988, *Kitab al-Taqyîd li-mâ‘rifat ruwât al-sunan wa al-masânið*, Kamâl Yûsuf al-Ḥût (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 580 p.
- IBN AL-ṢALÂH Abû ‘Amr, 2006, *al-Anwâr al-lum‘a fî al-jam‘ bayn mufradât al-ṣîhâh al-sab‘a*, Sayyid Kusrawî Ḥasan (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 4 t.
- IBN TAYMIYYA Taqî al-Dîn, n.d., *Majmû‘at al-fatâwâ*, Sayyid Husayn al-‘Affânî et Khayrî Sa‘îd (ed.), Cairo, al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyya, 35 t.
- ISHAQ Muhammad, 1955, *India’s Contribution to the Study of Hadith Literature*, Dhaka, University of Dacca, 270 p.
- AL-KHALÎLÎ Abû Ya‘lâ Khalîl b. ‘Abdallâh, 1993, *al-Irshâd fî ma‘rifat ‘ulamâ’ al-hadîth*, ‘Âmir Aḥmad Ḥaydar (ed.), Mecca, Dâr al-Fikr, 496 p.
- AL-KAWTHARÎ Muḥammad Zâhid (ed.), 1967, *Shurût al-a’imma al-sitta*, Cairo: Maktabat al-Quds, 66 p.
- 1994, *Maqâlât al-Kawtharî*, Cairo, al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya, 639 p.
- AL-MAQDISÎ Muḥammad Ṭâhir and ABÛ BAKR Muḥammad al-Ḥâzimî, 2006,

- “*Shurût al-a’imma al-sitta wa shurût al-a’imma al-khamsa*,” in ‘Abd al-Fattâh Abû Ghudda (ed.), *Thalâth rasâ’il fî ‘ilm muṣṭalah al-hadîth*, Beirut, Dâr al-Bashâ’ir al-Islâmiyya, 199 p.
- MUGHULTÂY ‘Alâ’ al-Dîn, 2007, *al-I'lâm bi-sunnatihî ‘alayhi al-salâm sharh Sunan Ibn Mâjah al-imâm*, Muḥammad ‘Alî Samak et ‘Alî Ibrâhîm(ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 3 t.
- AL-NAWAWÎ Muḥyî al-Dîn Yaḥyâ b. Sharaf, 1968, *al-Taqrîb li'l-Nawawî*, Cairo, Maktabat Muḥammad ‘Alî Ṣubayḥ, 63 p.
- AL-RÂFI’î ‘Abd al-Karîm b. Muḥammad, 1987, *al-Tadwîn fî akhbâr Qazwîn*, ‘Azîz Allâh al-‘Uṭâridî (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 4 t.
- RASHÎD AL-DÎN Faḍlallâh, 1994, *Jâmi‘-e tavârîkh*, Muḥammad Rûshan et Muṣṭafâ Mûsavî (ed.), Tehran, Nashr-e Elborz, 4 t.
- ROBSON James, 1958, “The Transmission of Ibn Majah’s "Sunan"" *Journal of Semitic Studies* 3.2, p. 129-141.
- AL-SA'D ‘Abdallâh “Sharh Kitâb al-Tamyîz,” session 3, lecture from [www.islam-way.com], last accessed 6/3/2004.
- AL-SAKHÂWÎ Shams al-Dîn, 2003, *Fath al-mughîth bi-sharh Alfiyyat al-hadîth*, ‘Alî Husayn ‘Alî (ed.), Cairo, Maktabat al-Sunna, 5 t.
- AL-ṢAGHÂNÎ al-Hasan b. Muḥammad, 1985, *al-Durr al-multaqaṭ fî tabyîn al-ghalâṭ wa yalîhi Kitâb al-mawdû‘ât*, ‘Abdallâh al-Qâdî (ed.), Beirut, Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 68 p.
- AL-SILAFFÎ Abû Ṭâhir Aḥmad, 1981, “Muqaddimat al-ḥâfiẓ al-kabîr al-Silaffî,” in Abû Sulaymân Ḥamد al-Khatṭâbî, *Ma’âlim al-sunan*, Beirut, al-Maktaba al-‘Ilmiyya, 4 t.
- AL-SUBKÎ Ṭâj al-Dîn, 1992, *Tabaqât al-shâfi‘iyya al-kubrâ*, ‘Abd al-Fattâh Muḥammad al-Ḥalw et Maḥmûd Muḥammad al-Ṭanâḥî (ed.), Cairo, Hujr, 10 t.
- AL-SUYÛTÎ Jalâl al-Dîn, *Jam‘ al-jawâmi‘*, 1970, Cairo, Majma‘ al-Buhûth al-Islâmiyya, 29 t.

